

SPLINTERS OF GLASS

MARY ROSENBLUM

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ere's a tense and fast-paced adventure that takes us to Europa for a deadly game of cat and mouse beneath its frozen surface, a game where a second's indecision or a moment of carelessness can make the difference between life and an especially horrible death...

One of the most popular and prolific of the new writers of the nineties, Mary Rosenblum made her first sale, to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, in 1990, and has since become a mainstay of that magazine, and one of its most frequent contributors, with almost thirty sales there to her credit. She has also sold to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Pulphouse*, *New Legends*, and elsewhere.

Rosenblum produced some of the most colorful, exciting, and emotionally powerful stories of the nineties, earning her a large and devoted following of readers. Her linked series of "Drylands" stories have proved to be one of *Asimov's* most popular series, but she has also published memorable stories such as "The Stone Garden," "Synthesis," "Flight," "California Dreamer," "Casting at Pegasus," "Entrada," "Rat," "The Centaur Garden," "Skin Deep," "Songs the Sirens Sing," and many, many others. Her novella "Gas Fish" won the *Asimov's* Readers Award Poll in 1996, and was a finalist for that year's Nebula Award. Her first novel, *The Drylands*, appeared in 1993 to wide critical acclaim, winning the prestigious Compton Crook Award for Best First Novel of the year; it was followed in short order by her second novel, *Chimera*, and her third, *The Stone Garden*. Her first short story collection, *Synthesis and Other Stories*, was widely hailed by critics as one of the best collections of 1996. She has also written a trilogy of mystery novels under the name Mary Freeman. Her most recent book is a major new science fiction novel, *Horizons*. A graduate of Clarion West, Rosenblum lives in Portland, Oregon.

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He wouldn't have seen her arrive if his board hadn't broken down. He wouldn't have known. Qai stepped back against the carved-ice facade of a tea vendor's stall, holding his narrow board like a silver shield in front of him. He caught only a glimpse before she vanished among the passengers disembarking from the monthly shuttle, as they hurried across the gangway to the Ice Palace arrival dock with its tiny customs gate. Most scattered quickly, IDing their way through the "resident" gate, moving with the purposeful skimming strides of travelers returning home. Only a couple of newbies. You could always tell them by the way they walked,

high-stepping in slow motion in the thirteen-percent earth-normal gravity—as if walking on a waterbed. And they panted. The nano—red cell transfusions didn't really make up for the low atmospheric pressure and minimal oxygen of Europa's sea-level ice caverns. And of course, they looked up to the vast arch of the Ice Palace dome, its natural ice walls flickering with rainbows in the broad-spectrum light of the Lamp, veined with multicolored moss. Everyone felt it, first time on Europa... the enormous weight of the ice shell pressing down on them.

Then the crowd thinned and he saw her clearly: Gerta. Her hair shone like spun gold. Just as he remembered. The tiny hardness of the polished am-monite pendant beneath his ice suit and therms seemed to dig into his flesh. He covered it with a palm, instinctively. As if it might call her to him.

She had not changed, after all these years.

That was... bad.

She turned as if she had felt the pressure of his stare. Before those blue, blue eyes could pierce his shield, Qai fled around the corner of the tea stall, slipping into a narrow alley, a natural fissure that wandered away from the dome, lined with small shops carved into the ice; low-end food vendors, mostly, selling gray moss tea and sea soup. Get the board fixed, pick up the supplies he needed, and get out, he thought. Do it fast.

She only had one reason to be here.

Him.

Blue moss netted the walls of the fissure, its soft glow brightening as the reflected light from the Ice Palace faded. Finally the alley widened out into the little plaza where Karina had her shop. Starfish lamps shed a soft, silvery light on each side of the carved arch of her doorway, streaking the rough floor of the plaza with dark shadows. A sweeper raked the traffic-polished ice rough for traction, a hunched figure with matted gray hair beneath a gray hooded ice tunic and leggings patched with something that looked like fabric from an EVA suit, maybe an asteroid miner's castoff.

Karina had the only shop on the plaza with lamps. Qai slipped beneath the ornate twined-kelp carvings above her door, wishing briefly that Karina's shop were too poor to afford starfish. But even if Gerta had spotted him she had to clear customs and that was an intricate and complicated dance of bargaining and bribes on the Snow Queen, the Free Port of Europa. She would be lucky if she got through in this day period, and considering it was nearly a meal hour, she'd probably be stuck, forced to share a lavish and hospitable dinner only to pay for the privilege as she tried to clear her luggage.

He'd be out in the ice by then.

"Hey, ice-boy." Karina looked up from the innards of a board lying belly up on her workbench, pulling off her microgoggles. The crimson fiber lights woven into her rows of braids glowed red as blood. "Long time no see." She laughed, her white teeth glittering in her ebony face. "It occurs to me, ice-boy, that I should build a little planned obsolescence into your circuitry. If the only way I get to see you is when your board breaks."

"You busy, Kar?" He tried to keep any trace of urgency out of his voice.

"Why the hurry?" Her eyes narrowed and a hint of anticipation curled the edges of her full lips.

He should have known he couldn't fool Kar. Let her choose between gossip and sex and she'd pick gossip every time. "I spotted a vein of rose moss." He jerked his head vaguely poleward. "I'm afraid Zorn saw me leav-ing. I wouldn't put it past him to try sniffing out my back trail, dig it out himself. You know Zorn." He jerked his shoulders in an angry shrug. "He's a claim jumper. But I didn't dare stay long enough to dig in and register the site. The power plant was draining." He slapped the board. "Barely made it back as it was."

"Nobody's seen rose for a hundred days." Karina's smile broadened. "But you got the nose, ice-boy. One day you're gonna tell me how you always find the best moss, right?" She spun away from the workbench, her slender arms slipping under his tunic, sliding around his rib cage, her lips rising up to capture his. "I love secrets," she breathed into his mouth. "You know I'll charm it out of you eventually. And you'll love giving it up to me." Her long, strong fingers played his vertebrae like a virtuoso, walking downward to his hips, around and down...

"After." He swallowed a groan, caught her wrists. Pushed her away. "Don't lose me this rose, Kar. Or I won't be able to afford you."

"Huh." She spun away, lights flashing in her braids. "You don't buy *me*, honey. Not even with rose moss money. The board work you pay for."

"I didn't mean that." He put his hands on her shoulders, felt lean muscle and bone beneath the slick thermal fabric of her tunic. He dug his thumbs into the muscles along her shoulder blades, heard her deep-within hum of pleasure as he kneaded the knots out of the muscles. "You know I didn't." He licked the back of her neck, tasting her skin, sweat, the bristling short hairs beneath her braids. "Fix this quick so I can get that rose before Zorn sniffs it out and then we'll celebrate."

"You're so persuasive," she purred, twisting her head back to grin at him. "Okay, ice-boy, clear the decks." She shrugged him off, grabbed his board, and slung it lightly onto the workbench. Opened its access panel with a tap of her finger,

pulling the microgoggles onto her face as she bent over the circuitry, probing with a long, tapered fingernail biowired for testing.

Qai held his breath. He had enough credit to buy a new board if he had to.

“Bad regulator chip is all.” Karina pushed the goggles up onto her forehead. “Got one in stock, so no biggie.” She stepped over a stack of board shells to pull open drawers in her storage wall. “Got it.” Ten minutes and she was done, closing up the smart-plastic hull as she straightened. Rose on tiptoes to kiss him. “Go get that rose.” She winked. “Then we celebrate.”

He pulled her into his arms, mouth covering hers, kissing her hard, so hard that he tasted blood as they separated. Because he might never...

Don't think that.

“We'll celebrate.” He pretended not to see her surprise and the questions rising in her eyes, grabbed his board before those questions could turn to words. And left.

Forever?

Don't think that.

He hit Ah Zhen's Commodities over on the far side of the Palace, his order already packed into his sled, a blue bullet shape waiting in the hangar like a lost dog...

Earth thoughts. Qai shook himself.

Her fault.

He paid Ah Zhen, numbers counting down in his head. If they hadn't made her stay for a fancy meal, if she'd been tough enough to say no and get out...

She'd be out in the corridors right now.

He hooked the sled to his board, slipped his foot into the shoe, and activated the stabilizer field. He ramped up the power and felt the satisfying, bone-humming vibration of power beneath his feet. He toed the board into motion, sliding easily through the corridor, swinging out into one of the narrow natural cracks that veined the ice all around the Ice Palace, lined with residence holes, cheap shops, sex cribs, and a few pricey freelancers like Karina. Tourists didn't go here, and only the natural glow of the embedded moss lighted the irregular space. A hundred meters ahead, a main drill cut spinward and crossed a big fault that ran three hundred clicks without narrowing. A hundred good secondary faults crossed it. He could be well into the

ice in a matter of hours. And because his blood had adapted and was augmented by the nano, he could go high, well above sea level where a tourist couldn't breathe. Out of reach.

Not that it would save him. Not if she had managed to trace him here. *They* would be watching her. They knew where to look, now.

A shadowy figure emerged from a side corridor up ahead, one that led straight from the Ice Palace.

No.

But he knew it was her. Toed the board and it jumped sideways as he leaned into a sharp arc. But she anticipated his evasion and dashed straight into his path, her face a pale oval turned up to his. He kicked the board hard, heard his voice yelling, the sled skidding against the stabilizer's failing grip, dragging his board slantwise.

He hit her.

The edge of the board caught her high in the chest with the sound of an ice ax hitting sludge ice. She flew backward in Europa's minimal G, hitting the wall, sliding along it for meters.

Leaving streaks and flecks of blood. Qai kicked the board into a hard brake, leaped over the skidding sled as it banged into the wall, and skimmed down the corridor in long, flat strides, slamming both palms into the wall to kill his momentum as he reached her, dropping to his knees.

She breathed. Qai let his breath out in a rush even as his fingers probed gently, feeling for the grate of broken bones, wincing at the instant swell-ing where the sled had struck her, above her small, flat breasts. She had cut her scalp right at the hairline when she hit the wall, and blood gleamed on her face, purplish in the moss-light. Her left collarbone had broken. He felt the small irregularity, checked her shoulders, arms. Didn't find any other breaks, just cuts and scrapes from the rough ice of the wall. Chewing his lip, he rocked back on his heels, thinking hard. As a visitor with a visa chip, she'd get care in the Ice Palace, at the visitors' enclave. But if he brought her there, they'd detain him until she regained consciousness. Just in case he himself had assaulted her or she wanted to press charges. Tourism brought in precious credit and tourists were highly protected. Moss miners were not.

He checked her pulse again. He could leave her here and someone would find her. What she would say about the accident, he didn't know. It would be enough.

As Qai started to stand, a flicker of motion at the far reaches of his vision caught his eye, a shadowy figure, nearly invisible in the dim moss-glow. He recognized matted gray hair and the hood of a ragged tunic. The sweeper. From

Karina's plaza.

They had followed her, had been working hard while she slept her way up from the platforms, in hibernation in her shielded cocoon. Probabilities spun through his head. If he was accused of killing a tourist, the Ice Palace would sic all of Security on him. They'd start with Karina because too many people knew about them.

Their methods were... efficient.

Karina wouldn't know enough to survive the questioning, he guessed. Even as these conclusions clicked into place, he was heaving Gerta's uncon-scious body onto the sled, securing it with a spare cargo net, arranging her arm so that the collarbone wouldn't take too much stress. Leaping onto his idling board, he toed it into motion, then kicked up the speed. Leaning for-ward, frigid corridor air whipping tears into his eyes, he fought the erratic tug of the overloaded sled as it tried to pull him into the wall. He didn't dare slow down. The sweeper wouldn't be working alone. He'd have someone on a board. And they'd be armed. They had the power behind them to bring a weapon onto the Snow Queen and get away with it.

He passed a narrow natural ice-crevice patched with yellow moss, began counting as another crevice flashed past on his right. Four... five... he caught a faint whiff of sulfur and moisture, risked a nanosecond glance behind, saw nothing. He'd have to stay low, near sea level. Gerta couldn't take the ultra-thin atmosphere nearer the surface. Qai kicked the board into a slewing turn, braced himself for the jerk of the sled, hoped that she was still unconscious, crouched and rode the board as it bucked, stabilizers whining with strain.

With a centimeter to spare, he made the turn, the sled straightening out behind him, barely kissing the wall as he accelerated down the natural. Blue and green moss patched this one without even a streak of yellow, fill-ing the narrow, wandering natural with a thick, oppressive twilight. Qai took the first secondary fissure antispinward that didn't feel like a dead end, turned north, then spinward, weaving a random path through the fissures that webbed the ice, stretching his senses to the limit, praying that he didn't run out of width before he crossed a big natural. He was lost now, really lost, but that's what it would take to lose their pursuers.

A faint, shimmering hum tickled his awareness. Purple moss. It only grew in naturals that opened to sea, where an upwelling brought warmer water up from the deep vents, exhaling warm, oxygen-laden air into an ice cavern. He eased the board into the narrow fissure, the rippled texture of the ice here glowing a soft blue that slowly darkened to purple. Ahead, open water gleamed like a gash, black as the night between the stars. The natural fissure widened, wall smoothed and pocked from the upwelling warmth and moisture. A wide shelf of smooth ice ringed the open upwell. This was an older, stable upwell then. The cavern had probably reached its mature and stable size and the likelihood of ice falls would be minimal. Qai let his board drift

to a halt on the flat and shut it down. As the hum of its power plant faded, the sounds of the Snow Queen filled the thick quiet; the lap and suck of the sea, the deep groan of the ice itself, and the rich, contemplative song of the moss.

Qai stepped off the board, his legs trembling now. Squatting on the ice, forehead against his knees, he drew a long slow breath. Another. Focused on the wandering song of the moss. Yes, this cavern was stable.

“Wilmar?”

He started at her whisper. “Gerta.” What do you say? Hello? “Hello.” He almost laughed because it was so... inappropriate. “I hoped you’d still be out. I’m sorry.” He straightened stiffly, his muscles aching with the after-effects of adrenaline.

“I can’t believe... I found you.” She gasped.

“You’ve got a broken collarbone.” He stumbled to the sled, released the webbing that held her. “I’ll give you something for the pain as soon as I can. Here.” He slid an arm beneath her shoulders. “Slide off easy. Your ice suit should keep you warm long enough for me to get things set up.”

“Wil? How can you be so...” She gasped again as he eased her off the sled and onto the ice. “How can you act so ... so matter-of-fact?”

“I’m not. Just give me some time, okay?” He yanked the main webbing off the sled, tossed it aside. He let himself sink into the familiar routines of setting up camp, inflating the tent, setting up his cookpad, dropping the filter’s tube into the midnight sea. As he leaned over the water, a Milky Way of tiny golden stars whirled in slow motion deep within the blackness. Starfish. Way down. Briefly mesmerized, Qai watched the slow spiral of the thousands of distant creatures spinning out their lives in the warm, European sea. Then, without warning, they vanished.

Eaten. All at once. Qai shivered. The filter bottle was filling up. He pulled it out of the sea, tipped the liter of clear, drinkable water into his teakettle, and set it on the cookpad. Instantly the droplets of water on its outer surface sputtered into steam. While the water was heating from the focused micro-wave beam, he found his packet of dried rose moss, measured a generous pinch into his mug. Then he rose, scanning the soft walls and ceiling of the domed space in the purple-lavender glow of the moss.

“What are you doing, Wil?”

He flinched at his name. “I’m Qai now, all right? I’m looking for young purple moss. It stimulates healing... it’s almost as good as enhanced healing in a hospital.” He spied a magenta-purple tracery of a new growth, pulled his ice knife from its sheath and dug a palmful of delicate threads from the spongy ice. The kettle was

boiling. He dumped the fresh moss on top of the powdered rose, poured steaming water into the mug, and watched the moss dissolve into a dull lavender liquid. He added a heaping spoon of precious sugar crystals, lifted all the way from the orbital platforms. Hesitated, then added another.

“I’m cold.” Gert sucked in her breath as she sat up.

“I need to put a sling on your arm. You have tried moss before, right?” Although it was unlikely she was one of the rare homozygous allergies.

“Of course. Everyone has tried it at least once.” She sounded defensive.

“Drink this.” Qai knelt beside her with the steaming cup. “It’ll make you stop hurting and it’ll start the healing process.”

She took the cup awkwardly with her left hand, her face paling as the broken collarbone ground. “Damn, it hurts.” She sniffed the mug. “Smells like sulfur.”

“Everything smells like sulfur here.” He smiled in spite of himself because ... she was Gerta. Still. “In case you hadn’t noticed.” And fresh moss tasted bad even to him after all his years here. “It’s got some rose moss in it too. That blocks pain perception.”

“Rose moss?” She blinked. “That’s more precious than anything, on Earth. People take it to dream.”

“Drink it.”

She blinked at his tone, but sipped the brew. Made a considering face, but the heavy lacing with expensive sugar worked. She lifted her good shoulder in a tiny shrug and drank it all. Gagged a bit, swallowed hard, and took a deep breath. “Why did you hit me?” She peered at him over the rim of the mug, breathing too fast in spite of the nano—red cells sucking oxygen out of the air in her lungs.

“Because you ran in front of me, and in case you haven’t noticed, this is an ice world with minimal gravity.” He sighed. “I couldn’t just slam on the brakes. Why did you run in front of me?”

“To stop you.” Her blue eyes narrowed.

Ice blue. That memory surfaced with the feel of a kick to the gut. That’s what he would have called the color of her eyes. But ice had so many more colors. Now it seemed simplistic, a child’s word. But then... he had been a child. “Why did you come here?”

“To find you.” Tears finally gathered in the corners of those blue eyes. “I

didn't believe it. When they said you'd stolen proprietary information, when they said you'd committed murder and sold out to a competing company. That just isn't you!" Her voice dropped. "And I knew you weren't dead. Even when they said you were."

Yeah, a part of him had known always that she could not be fooled.

"What happened, Wil? Why did you come here?"

"Let's get into the tent." He eyed her critically. "You're shivering and those tourist-weight ice suits aren't really meant for living out here."

"Wil...Qai. This is such a trivial conversation." She lifted her chin, her eyes already bright with the rose moss's effect. "Just stop it. Tell me what really happened."

"I will." The weight of that promise settled like stone onto his shoulders.

He turned his back on her, unsealing the tent and touching the heat to life. The embedded fibers would keep the small, domed shelter a comfortable ten degrees Centigrade. That would be too cold for her, he thought, remembering back across the years to his first months on the ice, when he never seemed to be warm, never seemed able to catch his breath. He touched the illumination strip to life, leaving it muted, so that it filled the insulated space with a soft glow like yellow moss. Then he retrieved his med kit from the sled, along with an ice spike and mallet. On the way back to her, he detoured to the edge of the open water, hammering the spike into the ice and pulling his longline pouch from a suit pocket. Gouging a wad of purple moss from the ice, he molded it into a wad in his mouth, barely noticing the rich, sulfurous tang. The protein chains toughened and contracted as they reacted to his alkaline saliva, and he baited the three-pronged hook with the gumlike wad, dropping it into the lightless water.

The weights pulled it down and the bait vanished almost instantly as it sank into the rich world of life below the ice. He filtered more water, and put his little cookpot onto the heating mat to boil. Gerta was drowsing by the time he reached her side, her eyes glittering with moss dreams beneath half-closed eyelids. As he knelt beside her, she smiled at him, with a sleepy waking-up smile that wrenched him back across the years and wrung him with pain. He looked away for a moment, drew a deep breath. "I need to immobilize your arm." He let the breath out, putting her into the context of ice, cold, the heavy, sulfurous sea air. "It's going to hurt some."

"That's okay." She sat up, her lips tightening only a bit. "I can see why that stuff costs so much. Somebody said you can get addicted."

"I don't know." He smiled. "I've never tried to not use it." He touched the med kit's lid, selected "collarbone, simple fracture" from the extensive menu. The lid

shimmered, projecting a holo of a woman applying a microfiber sling to a man's arm. He had remembered the procedure correctly. He found the wafer-thin packet of splint fabric in the kit and unfolded it. Wrapping it so that it supported her right arm, he touched the control disk, sending a tiny charge through the fibers so that they stiffened, becoming resilient enough to restrict movement of her arm without the rigidity he'd use for something like a broken leg. She caught her breath once or twice as he worked, but held still, her muscles relaxed. Even when he cleaned her cuts and scrapes with antiseptic, she didn't flinch. The scalp cut had stopped bleeding, at least. He sealed the cut closed with liquid skin.

Gert. Her name meant "warrior." And he smiled. It fit her so well. "Why don't you get into the tent." He resealed the med kit. "It's warm by now."

She got to her feet and crawled awkwardly into the tent. "Cozy." She sat cross-legged on the insulated floor, illuminated by the light strip's glow. "Batteries?" She looked around. "No solar power here, that's for sure." She giggled. "I feel drunk."

"You're not used to the moss, that's all. Here's some water." He put the filter bottle down beside her. "I'm going to go cook us some dinner." He frowned. "Did you get all your inoculations before you left the Ice Palace?"

"I did." She looked up at him. "So I can have dinner with you and the nano in my gut will inactivate all the nasty things that would give me the runs. I feel like I must be about half nano by now. This is so crazy." She laughed giddily. "I search for you for nearly a decade, finally find you, and we sit down and have dinner just as if we were camping out on the tundra. It's even just as cold." Her lips trembled. "Do you even have a reindeer stashed away? Do you remember Whiskers?"

"I... I do." He leaned forward suddenly, impelled by the weight of the past that wrung his soul, kissed her lightly on the forehead. Then he fled the tent, fled the memories that fluttered like shadowy bats.

Outside, the moist-sulfur scent of the sea banished the yesterday-bats and he pulled up his fish line. Luck smiled. A fat blue-slug squirmed mindlessly on the end of his line, the hooks embedded firmly in its thick, gelatinous flesh. Good thing Gerta couldn't see it, he thought as he sliced it free of the hook. The severed pieces squirmed on the ice, humping blindly across the pebbled surface with surprising speed. He scooped them up and dropped them into the boiling water. They disintegrated instantly and he added a handful of dried yellow moss, turning the simmering mess an off-green that he suspected would not appeal much to Gerta.

He tidied up the sled, covering it neatly with the cargo net, rebaited his hook, and dropped it back into the water with fresh moss bait. The blue-slug had already digested the original bait. Organisms on Europa were highly efficient at absorbing energy. Any energy. Finally, the slug stew was ready and he had run out of reasons

to delay. He set the pot on the ice long enough to cool it to eating temperature, then carried it into the tent along with two spoons.

Gerta was sitting with her back against one wall, her head tilted back. He could see the passage of years in her face, like faint shadows. She was fifty now, ten years older than he. She straightened as he entered. Tears gleamed in the corners of her eyes, but she blinked them away silently as he set the pot on the floor. "I'm afraid it's not going to seem very tasty." He handed her his spare spoon. "I used to buy stuff like garlic essence, curry, spices like that, to sort of hide the taste when I first came here." He shrugged. "It costs a fortune to lift that stuff out here, though, and now the moss. .. tastes fine."

"Golden spoons." She turned it over in her hands, slid a finger along the edge of the wide bowl. "I saw it everywhere in the main port."

"It's sort of like fool's gold on Earth," he said lightly. "Sulfur and iron. Some of the sea life secrete it."

She didn't answer, merely dipped the spoon into the green sludge, lifted it to her lips and sipped at it. Made a face. Sighed, and dipped a flail spoon, wincing a bit as she slurped it down. "Does *everything* smell like sulfur here?"

"Pretty much. It drives the energy web. The scientists think that oxygen is a latecomer. It's slowly changing the ecosystem, but it lets us live down here. At least at sea level."

"I don't know if I'd call this living." She drew a deep breath, shook her head. "I feel like I'm half suffocated, like I can't get enough air."

"Yeah, the oxygen content is pretty thin. Eventually, your body gets used to it... you just grow a lot more red blood cells to help out the nano-cells." He scooped up stew, finding himself hungry, but then it had been a full ten-hour since he had eaten last. He had meant to eat with Karina. Closed his eyes briefly, praying to the faceless gods of infinity that his pursuers were too busy looking for him to bother with her.

"You always loved the winter ice." Gerta spoke dreamily, spooning up more stew. "Is that what brought you out here? Is that why you call yourself Qai?" She half smiled. "They call Europa the Snow Queen on the platforms, I found out. They told me she's a cold, evil queen, that she draws the scum of the solar system, that no law can touch anyone here."

"I'd say she draws the misfits and the renegades," Qai said lightly. "The ones that don't fit into the more organized societies. And believe me, we have rules here, even if they aren't laws."

Gerta put her spoon down and faced him, all moss-dream gone from her blue gaze in an instant. “What really happened, Wil? Did she steal your soul? This Snow Queen? Did a splinter of the mirror of evil enter your eye? And did you think I’d care?”

“You always loved that story.” He fixed his eyes on his spoon. “Yes, that’s why I chose Qai for a new name.”

“World Council Security contacted me,” she went on doggedly. “They told me that you stole registered experimental software, you killed some-one to do it, they had a warrant for your arrest. They said you were hiding, would possibly contact me while you were waiting to sell it.” Her voice trembled. “I wouldn’t have turned you in. Didn’t you *know* that?”

Sweating in his ice suit, Qai pulled the tunic off over his head, stripped off his gloves, and wriggled out of the overall bottoms. He tossed the wad of silken ice fabric aside and sat down cross-legged in his therms. “What are you doing now?” He spoke gently. “When you’re not on Europa looking for me?”

“Me?” She blinked. “I’ve been head of the Education Committee for the World Council. For five years now.”

“That was your dream.” He smiled. “Congratulations.”

“This isn’t about me. Wil... what happened?”

He sighed again. “Did they show you a warrant? Of course they’d have one,” he said as she nodded. “They weren’t from the World Council.” He lifted a hand as her brow furrowed. Smiled gently. “You can look like anything or anyone if you spend enough credit. You can have all the right credentials. Yes, a splinter of that fairy-tale mirror did get stuck in my eye, Gertrude.” He shivered as he said her full name out loud. “I opened my eye and let them put it there. The software was experimental all right. It was clever nanoware. It turned me into a... a very efficient computer virus. A human one.”

“That kind of nanoware is illegal.”

“You’re getting it.” He nodded, smiling. “I realized what the information I was harvesting had to mean. And I decided...” He ran out of words. He wasn’t a hero, wasn’t a patriot. It just felt... wrong. Deeply wrong.

“Oh, my God.” She was staring at him, the gold spoon bending in her white-knuckled clutch. “You were running? Wil!” It came out a cry of pain. “Why didn’t you let me know? I would have helped you...”

He shook his head. “I took the nano voluntarily,” he said harshly. “For very

good pay, by the way. It's illegal to enter into that kind of transaction, Gerta. No excuses. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life with a super-vision collar around my neck." And... it would have destroyed her dream of a Council committee chair. Because they had been lovers. The Council was very, very conservative about connections among its highest officers. It would have tainted her forever, her defense of him. "How did you find me?" He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, so that red and orange webbed the blackness behind his eyelids. "Nobody has a real name or his-tory here."

"It was a postcard." She laughed, a short, harsh note. "A colleague of mine has a wayward son. And he bought a one-way to Europa. The ultimate act of rebellion." She laughed again. "Or maybe he has his own splinter of that evil mirror. But he sent her a holo clip of the Ice Palace. She was showing it around, mad at him, sort of proud of him too, I think, for doing something, even if it was just to book transport out to the most godforsaken hole in the solar system. And as I was looking at the holo I saw... you." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I recognized you in a second."

Officially, tourists were supposed to ask... read that: *pay*... for permission to record locals. Qai closed his eyes. But of course they didn't bother. And he hadn't noticed the holographer. That's partly why he avoided the Ice Palace, he thought bitterly. Because of the occasional tourists and their frenzy of record-ing. He was the epitome of the patched-and-scruffy Europa moss miner.

"How can you live here?" Gert hunched her shoulders. "I'm not claustro-phobic but it gets to me... stuck down here under miles of ice. It's awful." She flicked the rim of the cookpot with one fingertip. "Everything stinks, there's no real light, is there? Just that weird glow. I'd go crazy."

"Yeah, you probably would." Qai pried the spoon from her hand, dropped it into the crusted pot along with his own. "You loved the tundra too." He smiled. "But it was the horizon you loved, as I recall."

"So what did you love?" One blond eyebrow rose.

"The quiet voice of the land." He ducked out of the tent, instantly cold in his therms, scooped seawater into the pot and left it for the voracious little microswimmers to scour clean. They'd have it spotless long before the water froze.

She was sitting up straight when he ducked, shivering, back inside. "How can you stand it out there in your underwear?"

"It's pretty warm underwear."

"You can come home." Her eyes blazed with triumph. "I have the power, Wil. I haven't been coasting, you know. I've built a very solid power base in the

Council.” She was speaking quickly now; her avalanche of logic de-signed to overwhelm any argument he might offer. It was so... *Gerta*. For the first time, tears clenched the back of his throat.

“Yes, you’ll be punished, Wil, but I can arrange it so that you’re under my official supervision. I have the pull. And that means you’ll be, under the World Council’s authority, so you don’t have to worry about any kind of retaliation from your employer, and—”

“Gerta... stop.” He took her face between his hands, the heat of her skin scorching his palms as he leaned across the distance between them. Her fingers brushed his throat, and, with a small cry, she tugged the pendant from beneath his tunic.

“The ammonite. The one I gave you for your birthday.” Tears glimmered in her eyes as she took his face between her palms. Her breath smelled of Europa’s sea, but her skin, as his lips closed on hers, tasted of Gerta. He groaned softly with memory as her mouth softened beneath his, their bodies melting together, the gulf of years and cold gone in a heartbeat, so that he smelled the cold tundra wind as he rolled onto her, careful of her splinted arm, his mouth and hands remembering yesterday as she arched beneath him. They drowsed after, and he pulled his ice suit over to cover her, curled around her to keep her warm in the air that was warm to him, too cold to her.

He lay on his side, his arm across her splinted arm lightly, remembering nights so long ago, the moss singing softly in his head, in his blood. Rose, purple, yellow, scarlet, he let the voices wash him away, into the ice, spreading his awareness through the veins of the Snow Queen so that he beat with the measure of her heart, breathed with her...

...woke to claws, started upright, head full of vague dreams of tundra grass.

“You scared me.” Gerta let go of his hand, pulled his ice suit tunic around her shoulders. “You didn’t wake up.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled, stretching. He faked a yawn, trying to calm her.

“Your eyes were... were white. Rolled clear back.” She edged away from him. “I pinched you. Really hard. You didn’t even twitch.”

“I was just asleep.” He smiled, but she retreated a few centimeters more. A vague burn on the back of his bare hand drew his eye. Two tiny red crescents seeped blood. “You pinched hard,” he said dryly. “We need to go.”

“Go where?” She pulled farther away, good arm folded protectively across her chest. “It was like you were dead. What was that?”

Qai closed his eyes briefly. “Let me tell you about the moss.” He opened his eyes, gave her a lopsided smile. “Jupiter’s magnetic field here changes direction every five and a half hours. That creates some... interesting effects. Mostly it affects the oceans—that’s how the original explorers guessed that Europa had water under the surface. The pole changes position every time the field changes.” He smiled grimly at her. “But it affects every living creature on the planet too. Most especially... the moss.”

“The moss?” She looked at him uncertainly.

“Moss is an Earth term.” He shrugged. “Because it’s fuzzy-looking, I guess.” He smiled. “Although I think all Earth moss is green. The stuff here isn’t moss.” He studied her blue, warrior eyes, so appropriate to her name. “Think of the moss as neurons,” he said evenly.

That took a couple of seconds to sink in and then her eyes widened. “But...”

“Oh, it’s more plant than animal, although I don’t think either really apply to European life.” He laughed softly, although he felt bleak inside. “But yeah, they’re like neurons.” He waited for her to catch up.

“But it’s everywhere... the ice.” She waved vaguely at the walls of the tent. “So you’re saying... the planet... thinks?”

“Oh, no,” he said. “But the moss is aware. And... I can hear it sing. Well, that doesn’t really describe it. . .it’s not a sound.” He sighed. “I don’t think we have a word for it.” He closed his eyes briefly, wanting with a visceral ache to *show* her, to share it with her, that wordless *awareness*, that immensity, that vast, enormous sense of boundless *time*. He opened his eyes and tried to smile. “I think the software I’m carrying does it... nobody else I know has ever said that they’re aware of the moss voice. It’s... beautiful.” He shook his head, frustrated. The words didn’t exist to describe it, she wasn’t going to understand, and there wasn’t time.

“I can use it,” he said crisply. “I can become aware of what’s in the ice around me. And we’ve been followed.” He began to pull on his ice suit as he spoke. “I suspect they managed to chip you somehow. They must have decided that I had contacted you or that you are simply a better guesser than they are.” He pulled his ice boots on. “We need to start running, Gerta. I don’t think they’ll let you live if I leave you behind. Even if I hadn’t told you, they’d worry that I had.”

“You’re talking about the corporation that manufactured the nanoware.” Gerta’s eyes widened with comprehension.

“That’s why I brought you out here instead of to the Ice Palace and the hospital. One of them was right behind me.” Dressed, he unsealed the tent, letting in

a chill breath of sea. “We can’t really lose him, but if I can get you back to the Ice Palace, you can check into the tourist hostel there and take the next transport downside. If you’re careful, you can avoid them. Just make sure you’re always in a very public place and don’t let strangers get close to you.” He did a quick mental calculation as he slid through the tent opening. “The next transport stops here day after tomorrow. After that, I don’t think another one is scheduled for three tendays. Getting you there in time will be cutting it close, but I think we can do it if most of the naturals I know are still open.” He slithered backward through the opening of the tent before she could voice the protest rising in her eyes.

Outside, he pulled up his handline, released the purple and orange slug that had digested the bait, and coiled up the line, stowing it and the polished-clean cookpot on the sled. Gerta was crawling out of the tent, awkward with her bad shoulder.

“You’re coming back to Earth with me.” Still on her hands and knees, she looked up at him. with those warrior eyes. “I wasn’t kidding when I said I could fix things. It won’t hurt my career, Wil, and I won’t leave you here in this frozen hell.”

“I really wish you’d call me Qai. Touch that red spot on the tent, will you? That deflates it.” He skidded the board into position in front of the sled. “We’re going to have to run high. The upper ice shifts all the time and maps are pretty useless. And the oxygen pressure is low.” He hesitated. “You’re going to be pretty uncomfortable, but so will our shadow, if he’s not native.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Gerta said grimly.

The tent had finished deflating. He folded it, slipped it into its case, and webbed the load down on the sled. “Here.” He handed her an energy bar from his emergency rations. “It should taste a little better than the stew last night, anyway.”

“It doesn’t,” she mumbled with her mouth full.

He took the time to filter his bottles full although the back of his neck tingled with threat. The stranger’s presence he’d detected while he was listening to the moss had been huge and loud. Translate that as “close.” But they wouldn’t have time to stop and melt ice to filter for drinking while they were running.

“I can’t believe I’m carrying a chip.” She finished the last bites of the bar. “How could someone do that?”

“Oh, it’s easy. You probably ate something. Toss the wrapper into the water.”

“Littering?”

“Feeding. Watch.”

She tossed the crumbled wrapper into the dark water. The surface erupted instantly, boiling like water in a cookpot. The wrapper seemed to melt away in moments, like a flake of ice on a cookpad.

“What happened?” She stared at the now-smooth water.

“Think of that ocean as one huge appetite.” He cinched the webbing down tight. “Let’s go.”

“What if we fall in?”

“Just don’t.” He stepped onto his board. “Stand behind me and put your arms around my waist. Remember when we used to ride your Uncle Tor’s big old Clydesdale? Remember how we had to kind of be the same body or we pulled each other off? Just do that. If we start going fast, close your eyes. You’ll flinch as things rush at you and we might go over. Boards are very responsive.”

“Okay.” Stress tightened her voice. “Let’s hope you’re wrong about all this.”

Qai kicked the board into start mode. It surged slowly forward as the sled energized, lifting smoothly. He banked into a long curve along the end of the upwell. Their pursuer was behind them. Qai studied the melt-polished walls, searching for a good-sized natural leading up. He spied a likely one, a little narrow for a board towing a sled...just as something smacked into the ice wall beside them. Grains of ice stung his face and he caught a glimpse of orange as he heeled the board hard into the natural. Bless Gerta, she had melted to him, her balance shifting with his so that the board didn’t even wobble. No more time to be picky. He toed the speed up, leaning forward to counter the nose’s rise as the sled dragged at it, praying that this was a good choice as they shot through the blue-green dusk of the moss-lined crevice.

“What happened?” Gerta shouted over the rush of their passage.

“Dart.” He leaned into a branch as the natural forked, heading antispinward, toward the Ice Palace. The sled touched the wall and the board shied. For a moment their balance hung by a thread, then he caught it, Gerta balancing flawlessly with him, and they sped down the narrow natural in near-darkness now, because this was a new opening and the first tracteries of blue-green moss had barely established.

“It’s dark,” she yelled.

“Can’t risk the floods.” He leaned forward, squinting to make out the path of the natural, watching for fractures, for fallen chunks of ice. New nat-urals like this could be unstable, could shift and close in an instant. “These cracks channel light for

hundreds of meters. We hope he takes the wrong branch. Hang on.” He kicked the board into a hard brake, the towline slack-ening for an instant before the sled braked. Got to tell Karina that his syn-chro was off, he thought as the board kissed the wall of the new branch, the sled hitting it harder. The board slewed wildly and he fought for control as the side-to-side sway slowly damped out. Behind them, ice dust drifted in the blue-green twilight, the heavier particles dropping in slow motion to the floor. Damn. Talk about leaving a sign. A fairly wide natural opened on the left, new enough that no moss yet illuminated the narrow gap. A desper-ate choice, but hopefully their pursuer would think he was desperate. He slewed the board so that the sled caught the far edge of the opening. More ice exploded from the wall, drifting like a thin veil where the side branch met the main natural.

Perfect. He strained his eyes in the near-darkness. If he was lucky... if another leftward branch opened.

It did, not a dozen meters farther down the natural they were traveling. Qai slowed the board this time, eased the sled into the new corridor, so narrow here that they had less than a half meter of clearance on either side of the board. This was an older rift. Traceries of blue-green moss laced the walls, providing just enough light to spot any ice falls ahead. He sped up, blessing their luck.

“What are we doing?” Gerta murmured in his ear.

“He’ll see the dust drifting and think we took the last natural.” Qai hoped. “If he’s scanning you, we’re heading in about the same direction as that natural so he may be fooled into taking it.” That would give them more time to get lost in the maze of cracks and crevices up here. By the time he backed out of the decoy and found the right natural, they would have had time to make a lot of turns and he’d have a much harder time tracking them.

They were moving fast again, now, and the natural was leading surfaceward. He felt Gerta’s shuddering breaths but there was nothing he could do about the air except hope the natural led back down before she passed out. Even he was breathing faster. Qai kept his eyes fixed on the dim limit of visibility, watching for a fall of ice that might block the path. So far so good. They passed another natural, wide enough for the sled. Again, Qai slowed and veered just enough to catch the edge of the opening a glancing blow, this time with the board. Gerta clung to him as it skidded sideways. Behind them, more ice chips swirled in the disturbed air of their passage.

If he knew ice, Qai thought, their pursuer would stop to read the pattern of the settled dust and he’d know they’d cruised on by. If he was a hired assassin, brought to the Queen for this job, he wouldn’t know to do that. “Hang on,” he murmured and toed the board up to speed. “Next opening to the right we take,” he said.

The natural straightened and widened. The younger rift must have caught the

tip of this older natural and now they were getting into the main run. The moss thickened, streaked with yellow and pink species so that the light brightened. Qai toed more speed and leaned forward, Gerta moving with him as if they had merged into a single body. They were going to make it, he thought exultantly. He could put a lot of distance between them while their pursuer stopped to check side branches for traces of their passage. They'd have time to get back to the Ice Palace ahead of him.

A wide opening yawned on the left, a new run, the walls where it had broken into this older crevice fractured and buckled. Shards of ice tumbled out across the main crevice and only a few thin patches of moss offered feeble light.

In the depths of that darkness... something moved.

Qai looked, the board rocking, nearly losing his balance. Sudden light flared, blinding him. A board's front flood. He wrenched himself straight on the board, stomped it up to top speed. "Hang on," he yelled, his stomach knotting.

So much for luck. Their pursuer had taken the bait, but the decoy natural had connected up to this one. What were the chances? He tasted bile, bent forward, the board rocking with its speed, his eyes fixed on the dim edge of vision. An ice fall coming up. Low enough to get over but... "Hang on tight!" He held his breath, watching the tumble of dirty ice speeding toward them... twenty meters... ten... Now! He stomped the nose of the board down, felt Gerta's weight pushing him, then kicked the heel down, leaning forward desperately as the nose leaped up, palm slapping it to keep it from flipping over, cutting the towline loose at the same time. Freed of the sled's drag, the board bucked and he nearly went off, felt Gerta catch her balance, steady him. Then he had his balance back again, slowed, and sneaked a look back.

Miraculously, he had timed it just right. The towline had yanked the sled's nose down and then up just before he cut it loose. It hit the top of the natural and rebounded wildly. Light flashed across the gleaming walls of ice as it either hit their pursuer or he tried to avoid it and hit the ice fall.

He skidded into the next opening they passed, no time to worry about finesse now. Now it was a matter of luck again, and speed. He toed the board's flood, no point in worrying about giving himself away now. All they could do was *go*. Ahead, the natural angled off to the right. Qai fought the board into a hard bank, struggling to stay aboard as it bucked across fragments of shattered ice. Fresh, a part of his mind noticed as they arced into the branch. Ice walls flew past and suddenly... vanished. Utter darkness swallowed the flood beam and Qai caught a gleam of distant ice. Then they were falling.

A cavern. They had burst out into the open space above an upwell. If they landed in the sea... Gerta screamed, her arms locked around him as they fell. Desperately, Qai toed the board to full power. It wouldn't hold them above water,

but with luck, if their angle of descent was shallow enough, they might skip across the surface for a few dozen meters.

If the angle was too steep...

The board slammed upward against the soles of his feet and the flood splashed across distant walls of shimmering ice, crusted with flowers of frozen condensation. Wisps of vapor swirled around them. They kept their balance... barely. The board slammed the surface again and water sprayed up this time. The wall loomed closer. Close enough. Another slam and Gerta's balance faltered. Another. She was falling...they were falling...The board flipped and Qai released the toeholds, bracing himself for the shock of icy sea, his mind a black wail of despair.

His shoulder hit ice and he tucked his head without thought, rolling, then flinging out arms and legs to stop his momentum. Slid to rest on his face in darkness, the metallic taste of blood in his mouth, his face burning where he had scraped the ice. "Gerta?" He spat out ice. "Gerta!" The flood had gone out, but the faint glimmer from a thin tracery of yellow and orange moss allowed him to make out the walls of the cavern rising up from the narrow shelf they had crashed on.

Luck. He drew in a shuddering breath. The board had almost slowed enough to drop into the water. "Gerta?"

A soft moan came from his left and Qai sagged with relief. He started to crawl toward the sound, the pocket suddenly turning as pain lanced through his left side. He'd broken something...his left shoulder, felt like. His eyes were adjusting to the moss glow and he spotted her, half a dozen meters from where he'd landed, sprawled facedown less than a meter from the water. He fumbled his headlamp from his ice suit pocket, slipped it on. The soft wash of light from the small flood turned the blood on her face crimson. Ice crusted her hair and her hood had come loose. The cut on her forehead had reopened. He brushed the ice out of her hair with his good hand and wiped the blood from her face with an antiseptic cloth from the tiny emergency aid pack in his suit. Her eyelids fluttered and she groaned.

"We made it." Relief flooded him as her blue eyes focused on his face. Pupils the same size, so no head injury...not a serious one anyway. "Try moving," he murmured.

"I think..." She sucked in a breath and winced. "I don't think anything new got broken." She eased herself into a sitting position. "What happened to your arm?"

"My shoulder." The med kit was back on the sled. He looked up to where the soft glow of the moss vanished into darkness. "This is a young cavern," he murmured.

“How can you tell?”

“Look how sharp all the edges are, and how narrow and steep it is.” He tilted his head and the lamp’s weak beam faded into the deep darkness above them. “Yellow and orange moss are the first ones to grow in a new cavern and there’s hardly any here. No blue-green at all, so this is really new.”

“Is that a problem?” She tilted her head at him.

“Not compared to others.” He didn’t laugh because it would hurt. Slabs and shards of fractured ice lay in piles at the base of the cavern wall, and in many places, the black water lapped sheer, vertical surfaces. Qai shivered at how lucky they had been. Only a few narrow sections of fractured ice shelved the open water. A slightly different trajectory would have dumped them into the water. He swung the lamp’s beam around their narrow sanctuary, spotted the board, upended against the wall. “If we can find a natural and get out of here, we might be okay.”

“Might.” Gerta’s voice was dry. “I don’t like that word.”

Qai lurched to his feet and made his way over to the board. It had shut itself down and he said a small prayer to the Snow Queen’s icy heart as he touched the power on. They wouldn’t make it back to the Ice Palace on foot without the supplies on the sled. The board hummed to life and relief nearly buckled his knees. “I’ll upgrade that ‘might’ a bit.” He shut the board off, frowning. “Be quiet. Come over here. Quick.” He illuminated the ice at her feet as she crossed the narrow shelf. “Help me hide the board. Try not to make any sound,” he murmured.

“What’s wrong?”

“He followed us.” The sled trick had slowed him down but that was all.

Between them, one-armed, they managed it, piling chunks and thin fracture-slabs of ice to mask the board. It wouldn’t fool a moss miner, Qai thought grimly, but their hunter’s choice of the decoy fissure suggested that he wasn’t a moss miner.

The moss sang a song of motion that hummed through his flesh as the man and board slid toward them through the ice. The sled trick had had the unintended effect of saving their pursuer from making the same mistake they had and plunging over the lip of the natural. It made him wary. Qai felt his caution through the moss as he slid to the brink of the natural they’d blasted over.

Their luck was still bad.

He stood on the lip of the natural, a shadowy figure barely discernible in the dim moss glow. “I see you.” His voice came to them, warped by the ice walls. “You

have no options. Step out and I'll make it a clean kill." He paused. "Make me chase you down and it will not be an easy passage, Wilmar."

"If you let her go..." Qai winced as she dug her nails into his arm. "I will."

Ice sprayed their faces and Qai rolled away from it, dragging her with him.

Qai scanned the pocket, looking for a safe pathway down to their level, hoping it didn't exist. But it did. Yeah, you could just make it from fracture to fracture; enough ice shelf jutted out to support a board's impeller field. A local would be wary. Even as he looked, their pursuer slid over the lip of the natural and started down, as if he had tracked Qai's stare. He wasn't a local, wasn't wary at all.

Desperately, Qai looked for another hiding place. But the bottom of the pocket was made up of sheer walls and a few ice falls... no crevices or narrow naturals to shelter them. Their pursuer had some sort of scanner.

"This is the end, isn't it?" Gerta's face looked waxen in the feeble moss light. "There's no way out, is there?"

He couldn't lie to her, say the false, brave words that the assassin would turn into dust in moments. The assassin skimmed across the final ledge of ice, skipped over a narrow expanse of open water... and was on the ledge. He skimmed toward them slowly, his face goggled and invisible within the hood of his ice suit. "I wonder what you did." His voice echoed from the sheer walls. "They're paying me enough. It must have been good. Or you pissed off the wrong person." His goggles tracked them as he glided by, piv-oted his board at the far end of the shelf.

Beside him, Gerta's panting breaths emerged in brief puffs of vapor. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

"I brought him here, didn't I?" Gerta kept her eyes fixed on the ice-suited figure as he drifted his board across the ledge.

"You didn't know." The assassin had turned at the end of the shelf. Yeah, an amateur on a board. He made it move okay, but without the fluid econ-omy of someone who knew what he was doing.

"Final offer on the easy way out." The assassin raised his voice. "The darts are loaded with a neurotranc. It'll leave you paralyzed but conscious." A razored edge of anticipation colored his tone. "I can enjoy my work. Your choice." He toed the board around, aimed straight at them.

Without warning, Gerta leaped into motion.

"No," Qai yelled, grabbing at her. He missed, his gloved fingers scraping her

suit.

She charged toward the board and the assassin slewed it only slightly, aiming his weapon almost casually. Qai didn't hear a sound, but Gerta stumbled and lost her footing. Her body tumbled almost in slow motion, sliding finally to rest in a spray of ice crystals.

The assassin hovered his board above her limp body, checking. Then he slewed his board around clumsily and toed it straight at Qai. He leaned forward, assurance etched in every line of his body. Qai jerked his head from side to side, pantomiming panic, turned, and crouched as if in a desperate attempt to hide. He could almost feel the assassin's triumph as the board hummed into maximum speed.

Show-off, Qai thought. He twisted into a spin, the flat plaque of ice he'd selected gripped in both hands. With all the strength in his muscles, he unwound, skimming the plaque on a straight, flat trajectory at the onrushing board. One chance. His feet came off the ground with the force of his throw and he skidded to his knees, his eyes glued on the board.

It flew ruler-straight, dead-on at the nose of the board. A local would have simply ducked it. The assassin ignored it. As the plaque intercepted the impeller field, the board bucked. Caught by surprise, the assassin lost his balance briefly and the board slewed out of control as he overreacted. It bucked again and then nosed straight up. With a cry, the assassin grabbed wildly for the edges, his foot slipping out of the shoe. The board flipped and he fell.

Qai raced toward him, pulling his ice knife from his suit. Before he could reach the assassin, the man skidded across the condensation-slick shelf and splashed into Europas black sea. He surfaced at once, screaming, grabbing the ledge, then letting go to claw at his exposed face. And sank.

Qai turned away, shuddering at the sounds erupting behind him. If the man was lucky, one of the big eaters would take him quickly.

Gerta lay still and limp on the ice, her breathing light and regular, her muscles slack. Out cold. Qai stood over her for a moment, a tide of memory washing through him. Sun. Tundra grass and reindeer. Making love on a soft-tanned skin on the tangled grass with the scent of northern summer and Gerta's skin dizzying him. Tears stung his eyes. When had he last wept?

He couldn't remember.

She was right. The Snow Queen had frozen him.

* * * *

He coupled the assassin's board behind his, and lashed Gerta to it one-handed. It only took a few hours to reach the Ice Palace. Karina helped him without question. She put Gerta to bed in her own bed at the back of her shop and steeped the fresh rose moss he had stopped to gather into a potent tea. "I hope she's worth this small fortune, ice-boy." She stood on tiptoes to kiss him lightly on the lips. Her dark eyes searched his. "You going to tell me the truth, one day?"

"Not here."

Karina raised one eyebrow. "Where then?" When he didn't answer, she laughed, a rich sound that always warmed him in a way mere heat could never do and handed him the pot of potent rose-moss tea.

He took it in to where Gerta slept. She was coming out of the drugs. Her eyelids shivered with REM sleep, and as he dripped the tea between her lips, she swallowed reflexively. He fed her tea until her breathing deepened and slowed and her skin showed the telltale flush of deep rose-moss euphoria. When he judged the dose to be high enough, he set the pot aside and gently arranged her on her side, the way she had always slept when they'd shared a bed, her right arm tucked beneath the pillow, top knee bent, snuggled deep into the covers. He combed her hair back, a bittersweet tide rising in his chest. "Don't you remember?" he murmured. "How we always argued about that story, how I always wondered if Kai maybe hadn't wanted to stay, if the Gert in the story really had been right to drag him home?" He smiled, touched her cheek with one fingertip. "You were so sure she did the right thing. But I fell in love with the Snow Queen, Gerta. I'm sorry. You were wrong about the mirror. It was evil, yes. But that splinter let me see the Snow Queen's beauty. I belong to her, now." He pulled the covers up over her shoulder and tucked her in tenderly.

Karina was waiting for him in her shop, her eyes bright with questions. But she said nothing, merely kissed him again, and this time it wasn't light and it wasn't brief, and the pain from his broken shoulder vanished entirely. "What if I taught you to mine moss?" he breathed as the kiss ended.

"I think I might like that." Karina's white teeth blazed in the dim light of her shop. "I've thought I might like that for a while, ice-boy, but I figured you had to do the offering. Your lover, the Snow Queen, let you go finally?"

"No." He wouldn't lie to her. "But that doesn't mean I can't love you too." He kissed her again, pushed her gently away. Then he reached into the open neck of his thermos and pulled out the tiny stone memorial of a creature that had lived on another planet, so many millennia ago. He slipped the braided chain over his head. "Tell her you took it off as a memento. Just before you pushed my body into the sea. With as much moss as I fed her, she's going to believe anything you tell her, and if you tell her just as she's waking up, she'll remember seeing it herself." And

she would grieve, but the people who wanted his death would listen for her belief and her grief and hear it. Karina would be safe until she got out into the ice.

“Get yourself set up and start out looking for moss.” He ran his fingers lightly over her light-braided hair. “I’ll meet you.”

“How will you know when I leave?” Karina tilted her head. “How will you find me?”

“The Snow Queen will tell me. She’s not a jealous lover.” He kissed her one last time and left, slipping out of the shop and into the soft glow of the corridor, heading for Cass, the board seller, to trade the rest of the rose moss he’d gathered for a new outfit. Then he’d visit the healer, get his shoulder taken care of. He could heal out in the ice, waiting for Karina. “Thank you, Gerta,” he murmured. “For letting me see what I needed to see.”

Beyond the bright and artificial light of the Ice Palace, the moss sang to his blood, and his blood answered.

* * * *