

INTO THE STORM

Klerdrienne shielded her eyes as best she could, doing everything to protect them from the ice and snow. Her hands burned as ice pellets crushed against her face, attacking her with relentless force.

The snowstorm had come out of nowhere. She knew about these violent storms, but she had been hoping she wouldn't encounter one. So much for that. One moment, the gentle snow sat in large drifts across the landscape, giving way beneath her feet as she made her way through it. But then, in the blink of an eye, it all changed. The wind picked up, whipping everything into a frenzy, ice pellets crashing down from the sky with frozen fury. She strained to see through it, but the snowstorm created a wall that made sight nearly impossible.

The storm, she thought, wiping moisture away from her face. It is too bad. I should turn back. I need to turn back.

But there was nowhere to go. Out here in the frozen tundra, one could easily get lost, wandering aimlessly forever until they eventually froze to death. The glowing, blue path was the only thing keeping her on track, so she focused on it. To turn back now would only be giving herself over to the storm.

Klerdrienne stopped. She needed to rest. Her legs ached. Pushing against the wind and snow was taking its toll on her stamina. Just when she thought she had a sense of which direction it was coming from, it would change, blasting her from the other side instead. The old gods of the north were certainly active tonight – and they were angry.

The Frost Gem was the only thing keeping her alive, but even its power was being tested. These winds were cold enough to freeze the blood solid of any creature foolish enough to get caught out in them. The snow was waist-deep at some parts, threatening to bury anyone who lost their balance. The Frost Gem protected her, but if the storm got any worse, even it wouldn't prevent the inevitable.

She was cold. So very cold.

Klerdrienne stumbled, catching herself before falling face-first into the snow. The slick ground made it difficult to regain her footing, and she almost fell again. She couldn't see more than a few feet in any direction. The snow and ice blocked nearly all lines of sight.

What am I doing out here? Her mind cried out. The path of blue stardust

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was fading from view. She strained to keep her eyes on it, not wanting to lose it for even a second. If she did, she would surely wander off into the darkness. At that point, she would be as good as dead in the elements.

Klerdrienne tripped again, catching herself at the last possible moment. The wind howled in her ears, raising an icy battle cry. She braced herself against it, feeling shards of ice slash against the soft skin of her cheeks.

She was utterly exhausted. It felt as if she'd been wandering for hours with no clear direction. If she could just see where she was headed, she could at least get a sense of where she was. But she couldn't. Everything had disappeared around her, abandoning her out in the midst of this intense blizzard...

...everything, that is, except the blue star. For some reason, no matter how far she walked, no matter how badly the storm raged on, it never left her, shining overhead like a beacon. It seemed like it was following her, watching over her, always giving her that last, faint glimmer of hope when all was lost. Here, in the middle of this horrible snowstorm, it was her only ally.

Klerdrienne sank to a knee, feeling her body press into the deep snow. It beckoned to her, wrapping her in its cold embrace, waiting for her to lay down. She wanted nothing more than to do just that – to lay down, shut her eyes, and give herself to the cold and wind. She was born from the ice. It only made sense that she would die with it as well.

No! Her inner voice screamed. That is just the Chill Demons talking! You cannot let them take you! Get up! You have to get up!

The Chill Demons were voices that were said to blow along the icy winds of Elandera's northern regions. They looked for creatures lost out in the storms, singing to them, asking them to lay down and remain here with them forever. At least, that was what young ones were told so they would never wander out into these frozen wastelands. The Chill Demons didn't actually exist – their *voices* were simply hallucinations brought on in the final moments before death. But Klerdrienne felt like she could hear them now, their melodic words like a gentle song on the gusting wind. It brought about a sense of peace and euphoria that was undeniable.

Come to us. Lay here with us. We will protect you, keep you safe from the cold. We will keep you warm forever and ever. Warm with us, forever and ever...

Warm. That was all Klerdrienne wanted right now. She had the power of the Frost Gem, but even it could only do so much. She was far too cold, far

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too tired. She needed warmth. The voices promised it. All she had to do was give herself to them, and she would finally be warm again.

No, you foolish fairy! Her mind shrieked, giving her a mental smack. You are not going to die like this! Think of everyone who is counting on you! You cannot let them all down! You will not!

Klerdrienne's eyes flashed open. She was lying on the ground, half-buried in snow. Another few moments, and she would have been gone. She gave her head a shake, trying to regain her senses. She needed to get back to her feet, needed to keep moving. That was where the path led. That was where she would reach the Phashani Mountains. The Icelight Crystal would be there. She was sure of it.

Klerdrienne stood back up, shivering from the snow. Something had given her renewed strength. She needed to use it. With everything she had, she pulled her feet from the snow, prepared to follow the glowing path as far as she needed to...

Klerdrienne blinked. No, it couldn't be. The glowing, blue path was gone. She snapped her head around, looking in all directions, hoping she had just missed it. But all she saw was blowing snow and ice.

Somehow, the storm had gotten even worse. Klerdrienne looked up into the sky, searching for the blue star to give her hope. But even it had abandoned her in her time of need.

"No!" She yelled, her voice immediately taken by the howling winds. "No! Please, no!"

Through sheer desperation, she lunged forward, fighting through the snow to find the path again. Without it, she was lost, left to the mercy of the Chill Demons. It had to be around here somewhere. She needed to find it. It was her only chance of survival.

Klerdrienne was so focused that she didn't notice the sound of the ice cracking until it was already too late. Before she could react, it broke away beneath her feet, plunging her down beneath the cold depths.

Water colder than she had ever experienced rose up around her, threatening to freeze her solid. Klerdrienne twisted and turned, trying desperately to find which way was up. Chunks of ice brushed against her, scraping her skin, threatening to drag her further down.

It took every ounce of strength she had, but Klerdrienne finally managed to surface. Gasping for air, she pulled herself back onto the shore, her fingers clawing for every inch.

She rolled onto her back, coughing and choking until she could barely

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breathe. Her wet clothes clung to her, freezing against her skin. Even the Frost Gem no longer offered any protection. She was completely defenseless, lost with nowhere to turn. She could feel her very life force draining from her body.

This was it. She could give no more. Klerdrienne laid on her back, watching the snow blow all around her. As she looked up into the dark sky – the dark, *starless* sky – she knew she had failed. But for some reason, that didn't matter. Perhaps the wind had finally frozen her brain, but she was completely at peace. The Chill Demons would be here any moment. They would come and take her away, but she was more than okay with that.

At least they will keep me warm, was the last thing she remembered thinking. *They will keep me warm, forever and ever...*

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The group came upon her long after she had lost consciousness. They approached slowly, carefully, not sure what it was lying there in the snow.

The leader held up a firm signal, telling the others to stay where they were. If this creature was hostile, he could deal with it. No sense in risking their safety.

The snow packed down beneath his large feet. At least the winds were finally dying down. That was good. Whatever creature would allow themselves to get caught out in a storm like that had nothing more than a death wish on their mind.

Reaching the lifeless body half-covered in a snow drift, he peered down at the sight before him. He had to make sure that his eyes weren't playing tricks. Could it be? The Scouts had been right – there *had* been something moving around out here in the storm last night. But he hadn't expected *this*.

He took a moment to examine the body. It was a Gem fairy! Even though he had never seen one before, there was no doubting it. But what was she doing all the way out here, in the middle of the Yatarha Tundra?

It didn't matter. She was in trouble. That much he could tell, just by the color of her half-frozen skin.

Bending down, he pressed his ear to her chest, listening for any signs of life. It took him a minute, but then he heard it – the faintest thrumming of her heart beat. She was alive, but barely.

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“Get over here, all of you!” He yelled, hearing his deep voice echo across the snow. “You’re not going to believe what I’ve found! But she’s in trouble! Hurry, we don’t have much time!”

The others came without hesitation, their shadows pushing through the blowing snow. He looked back down at the fairy, using his claws to start digging her out.

“It’s okay now,” he said, not sure if she could even hear him. “We’ve got you. You’re going to be fine.”

He only hoped they weren’t already too late.