

Chapter 3

On the Eve of a Blizzard

“I CANNOT agree to this, H’aanit. It’s too dangerous.” Olberic’s face was grim – but that was only natural. The party was in the Frostland town of Stillsnow. Just as the name suggested, the town was blanketed year-round in a layer of silver-glittering snow, but the blizzard raging outside was unusual in its ferocity even for the Frostlands. The windows of the lodge, which should have assuredly been more than sturdy enough to withstand a snowstorm, rattled perilously, and the view outside, even though it was nighttime, was nothing but pure white as far as the eye could see. Yet amidst the fierce snow, H’aanit was determined to search for Ophilia.

“I knowe ’twill be dangerous – but I do not intende to doen anything rash, nor am I without preparation.” H’aanit’s voice was strained, but still possessed of a certain firmness. Hers certainly was not the voice of someone who had lost their cool.

“But...”

“’Tis no trouble for me to followen Linde’s tracks, even if they be faint, and the place is not so far from here.”

It was a few hours ago that the party had been separated from Ophilia. Snow began to fall as they left the white forest behind and were making their way back to Stillsnow, and although the distance wasn’t particularly far, their vision was stolen in an instant. Disoriented by the harsh snowfall, Ophilia took a wrong step, lost her balance, and slipped away from the rest of the group.

Ordinarily, it would be a given for ever-attentive Ophilia to proceed with caution and certainty, even in such harsh conditions. Yet for the past several days, she had been clearly wracked by some kind of worry, and it had begun to tinge her behavior with a certain lifelessness – ultimately culminating in her slip and fall. H’aanit had rushed over in an instant and stretched out her arm, but couldn’t get ahold of Ophilia’s arm. With a blank expression on her face, as though she herself wasn’t quite sure what was happening, Ophilia disappeared into the snow in the blink of an eye.

As her companions rushed to find a way to rescue her, the one who acted with

the greatest clarity of purpose was none other than the snow leopard Linde. H'aanit exchanged a brief glance with her companion and understood what Linde meant to do at once. Some food, alcohol, and the other bare necessities to endure the bitter cold were strapped to Linde's body before she, too, disappeared into the snow, determined to follow after Ophilia.

Unfortunately, as long as the party was unable to properly get their own equipment and supplies in order, it was too dangerous to remain in the middle of the blizzard any longer. There was nothing else for them to do but make the trek back to Stillsnow.

"Linde haileth from the Frostlands," H'aanit said as she donned her pelts and laced snowshoes to her boots. "Even amidst a blizzard such as this, 'twould be a trifle to finden her quarry. I've no doubt she is fast at Ophilia's side by now – but whether she is unharmed is a separate question, indeed." H'aanit cast her gaze towards the snowstorm on the other side of the window. "In conditions such as these, the danger that she maye freeze to death only groweth, and Linde's tracks willen growe harder to finden. If we are to searchen after her..."

Cyrus, who had remained silent until now, interjected, "I see. The time to follow after her is now, while we can still hope for both her safety and finding Linde's tracks,"

"...Just so." H'aanit nodded. Olberic's expression remained severe, and he let out a groan.

"Still, it's dangerous for you to travel alone. Perhaps it would be better to have someone else accompany you..."

"I'm not so sure of that, Olberic." Cyrus laced his fingers together before the fireplace. "Someone like H'aanit, a hunter from S'warkii, might be accustomed to navigating the middle of a blizzard like this, but I don't know if we can say the same of anyone else. I'm sure a knight of Hornberg has some experience traveling through snow, but I doubt you've had to weather a snowstorm like this – am I right?"

"...It's as you say." Olberic sighed. H'aanit imagined that was precisely the cause for his concern – Olberic was the only member of their party with experience commanding troops, and that made him all the more inclined to take up the role of opposing any rash movements as a matter of principle. On the other hand, it was as Cyrus said. H'aanit was more than accustomed to pursuing a target through even the worst conditions; she hadn't imagined the day would come where being forced to handle all her master's countless unreasonable requests would come in handy like this. She hardly wanted to suggest that bringing anyone else would just get in her way, but there was no denying that for something so time-sensitive, she would prefer to be able to move as lightly as possible.

As the party continued to mull over the best course of action, the door opened with a *bang*, and snow-bearing wind entered the lodge room along with Primrose, shivering even while bundled up in her coat. As she dusted the snow from her hair with a grim look on her face.

"We had a chat with the people at Arianna's brothel – they said once the storm calms a little more, they could arrange a carriage for us."

"But at this rate, it's hard to say when exactly that'll be," Therion added, entering a little after Primrose, as he shut the door behind him. H'aanit thought over their predicament once more and finally said,

"There's no need for worry, Olberic. 'Tis heartening to knowen your concern, but I am not one to acten rashly – rather, I am all too often one to advisen others against doing so. Should I determine it too perilous to proceeden, I shall returne at once."

"...Very well." Olberic finally nodded, defeated. "But please don't do anything risky, H'aanit. You know the saying – the tiger bites he who chases after rabbits."

"Thou wouldst really level such a proverb at a hunter of S'warkii?"

Ceding the fireside to Primrose and Therion, Cyrus chuckled. "Speaking of proverbs, Olberic, perhaps 'teaching Bifelgan his own trade' would be more appropriate?" Olberic could really do nothing in response to that but let out a long sigh and shake his head, conceding at last, before allowing the corners of his mouth to slacken into a small smile.

"Quite right. Godspeed, H'aanit – we'll leave Ophilia to you."

At last fully dressed to keep the cold at bay, H'aanit, voice muffled by the pelt covering her mouth, replied, "Of course."

"H'aanit!" "Miss H'aanit!" Before H'aanit could walk out the door, she was stopped by Alfyn and Tressa calling from behind. "Ya never know what could happen out there – lemme give you some salve for frostbite, okay?"

"And here's a hearthstone! If you get too cold, you can use it like a hot water bottle!"

"My thanks to you both." H'aanit nodded and accepted their parting gifts before opening the door and stepping outside. Throwing herself into the middle of the snowstorm, awaited by her companion and her partner, she, too, melted into the silver-tinted landscape before long.

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When Ophilia Clement awoke, she found herself lying upon the rugged surface of a rock face. She reflexively shrank into herself, her coat (or any coat, for that matter) insufficient to keep the bitter cold at bay. Her consciousness still hazy, she surveyed her surroundings to realize she was in the middle of a cave.

"That's right... on the way back to Stillsnow, I..." A full, throbbing pain began to spread throughout her body like a light bruise. Pressing a hand to her forehead, she struggled to recall clearly what had happened to her. "I, fell...? Right, I missed my footing..." Ophilia cursed her own carelessness – they had been traveling along a snowy road, and in the middle of a blizzard to boot. Even if she'd been restless, even if she'd been distracted, she should have known better than anyone among her companions how dangerous moving through such a snowstorm could be.

But it was no time for her to be throwing herself a pity party. Her worries were far from cleared, but what she needed to focus on now was making it back to the party alive. Odds were they were already back in Stillsnow and more than likely

worried about her. She'd like nothing more than to return at once, but it would be foolish to try and blindly rush back into the middle of the blizzard.

What Ophilia needed to do now was to get her bearings and get a clearer picture of her situation. With her vision obscured by the snow, she'd probably slipped and fallen to the side of the main road from a decent height – luckily, without sustaining any serious injuries.

Inwardly expressing her gratitude for the protection of the Sacred Flame for shielding her from peril, Ophilia looked around her once more. There was one more person besides the Flamebringer deserving of her thanks:

"Just who carried me here, I wonder...?" She'd fallen into the snow, which is what had let her escape with only bruising. If she'd been left there for much longer, though, her body temperature wouldn't have been able to hold; the fact that she now found herself in this cave was the only reason she'd avoided hypothermia or frostbite. As Ophilia cast her gaze around in search of her savior, it landed upon a large, shifting shadow – a decidedly inhuman shadow. A nervous chill shot down her spine. Her adoptive father had often told her stories of the monstrous snow leopards found in the Frostlands. They were said to live in great numbers along the trail to the Whitewood, and Josef's fairy tales about them had always terrified a young Ophilia.

Luckily, she spotted her staff not too far away. Stiffening her face and putting on a dignified brave face, she managed to retrieve it. Trying not provoke the beast into lunging at her in an instant, she slowly backed away from the shadow in an attempt to maintain some distance.

"Grrr..."¹

"...!" That was unmistakably the low growl of a monster. Ophilia's eyes reflexively widened at the figure of the pure white beast now emerging from the shadows. "Y-you're...!"

"Grrrrrr..."²

"L-Linde...!? Linde, is that you...!?" She couldn't contain her disbelief at this sudden, unexpected appearance. Linde – the snow leopard H'aanit kept at her side as her partner. She resembled the monstrous variety of snow leopard, to be sure, but small differences could be found in things like the shape of her ears. Most telling was the small leather bag wrapped around the neck of the beast before her; the bag, inscribed with the mark H'aanit placed upon all of her possessions, eliminated all doubt that this was indeed Linde. "Linde!!" Overjoyed at her reunion with one of her companions, Ophilia rushed to Linde's side and threw her arms around her neck. The warmth of her body heat could be felt through her soft fur, flooding Ophilia with relief. "Oh, thank you! You saved me...!"

"Ghuu..."³ Linde purred softly. Ophilia wasn't exactly fluent in Snow Leopard, but she could tell at least that it wasn't a noise of displeasure. She then untied the

¹JP: Gururu...

²JP: Gurururu...

³JP: Guuu

leather bag fastened to Linde's neck and checked its contents. Inside she found a small amount of food and alcohol, tools for starting a fire, et cetera.

"Then H'aanit must have packed this for me..."

"..." Linde seemed to surmise what she meant upon hearing H'aanit's name. She made a gesture something akin to a nod. *What a clever girl*, Ophilia thought. She'd never had the occasion to try and communicate one-on-one with Linde like this before, but as she interacted with her, Ophilia understood there was a kind of meaning to her every action.

"Thank you and H'aanit both so, so much." With her nervousness beginning to untangle, Ophilia smiled sweetly before retrieving a piece of flint from the leather bag. Just when it occurred to her she didn't have any firewood, she spotted some dry sticks and twigs – Linde must have gathered them while Ophilia had been unconscious. She was able to get a fire going in no time.

She couldn't be sure when the snowstorm would relent, but it would be safe to wait a little while longer like this; still, they needed to figure out their next move before their modest provisions ran out.

"...Linde, are you hungry?"

"*Gauh*⁴."

"Hmm... is that a yes or a no?" Ophilia smiled faintly, bemused. She still couldn't quite be sure how much she understood of what she said. H'aanit was regularly communicating with Linde; Linde understood everything H'aanit indicated, and H'aanit didn't have any problem interpreting what Linde was thinking. Still, that didn't necessarily imply that a snow leopard could have a total grasp on human language. The communication between H'aanit and Linde was born of their bond, not of a shared language. Even if the ways in which the two expressed themselves were different, they could overcome the barrier of species between a human and a snow leopard and understand each other completely. Ophilia couldn't help but envy them a little thinking about it. *Still, it's not as though Linde dislikes me*, she thought, gazing at the leopard lying right at her side.

She remembered the time, just after the party arrived in Stillsnow, when she and H'aanit had exchanged some words while watching the local children pet Linde. Ever since she'd first laid eyes on Linde, Ophilia couldn't help but want to try stroking her coat – after all, it looked so soft and so warm... But she had thought that Linde wouldn't permit it from anyone but H'aanit, so she'd always kept that desire in check. When H'aanit told her that Linde liked nothing more than to be stroked and groomed, she was shocked – and immediately afterwards pet Linde to her heart's content. And naturally, since she had the opportunity now...

"Your white fur really is so pretty. I can see why you're so proud of it," Ophilia said as she stroked under Linde's chin. The large snow leopard closed her eyes and purred, apparently enjoying herself. She was still unsure how much Linde knew what she was saying, but she certainly looked somehow boastful. The two

⁴JP: Gau

continued to pass the time together for a little while longer, Ophilia running her finger's along Linde's soft, warm fur, and Ophilia gradually felt herself beginning to relax before the campfire.

In truth, Ophilia didn't have the time to be leisurely enjoying herself. If it were possible, she'd like to race to Whispermill at once and extract the true intentions of her childhood friend – a girl she considered her own sister. Indeed, that burning desire was exactly what had thrown her mind into such disarray and distracted her to the point of slipping from the road back to Stillsnow. But with things being as they now were, there was nothing to be gained in getting impatient and rushing herself into further anxiety. Knowing that actually helped to calm Ophilia further.

"I've never had the chance to spend the time alone with you like this before," Ophilia murmured as she continued to pet Linde, "but I'm actually also from the Frostlands, just like you. Staring into a fire on a cold night like this brings back memories from when I lived in Flamesgrace."

"..." Linde lifted her head ever so slightly and looked at Ophilia.

"Well, I suppose you've never lit a fire for yourself. But I'm sure looking at the snow all piled up reminds you of home, too, right?" Still not knowing if anything was getting across, Ophilia kept speaking to Linde.

Ophilia was born in the Riverlands, but Josef had taken her in when she was five years old, and she'd been raised in the Frostlands ever since. The streets of Flamesgrace, blanketed year-round in glittering snow, was unmistakably "home" to Ophilia. She'd heard from H'aanit that Linde also came from the Frostlands. It was hard to imagine a beast with that kind of white coat faring well in any other region, so it wasn't all that surprising.

"I wonder, how did you and H'aanit get to know each other in the first place? Raised like siblings under H'aanit's master... Hehe, it's almost like Lianna and me." While Ophilia kept petting her head, Linde looked up at Ophilia with only her eyes. Ophilia hadn't necessarily meant anything by that last comment at first, but she found herself whispering, "It really is just like Lianna and me..."

When Josef had taken in Ophilia as a war orphan, he'd raised her as nothing less than family in Flamesgrace. H'aanit, too, saw her master Z'aanta as a kind of father figure, and just as Ophilia had always had Lianna by her side, H'aanit had always had Linde. Ophilia found herself once again feeling jealous of the two – that they were able to journey by each other's side.

As Ophilia kept stroking the top of Linde's head, she noticed her ears suddenly twitch.

"What's wrong, Linde?"

"*Gwauh*⁵." The snow leopard growled curtly and got up. Ophilia was able to gather that the noise wasn't one of warning, at least. Linde's gaze was directed towards the entrance of the cave, and Ophilia naturally followed suit.

⁵JP: Gau

“Ophilia! Linde! Aren gyt⁶ there!” Along with the yell, a large noise could be heard from beyond the snowstorm.

“*Gau!*⁷” Linde growled, as though in reply, and Ophilia joined her.

“H’aanit!”⁸ The woman herself, covered in snow and wrapped in furs to protect from the cold, entered the cave and lowered the cloth covering her lower face to reveal a gentle smile.

“‘Tis a relief to see thee safe, Ophilia.”

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Translator’s Notes

⁶OKAY. look. when else am I going to get to use the old english second person dual pronoun git/inc/incr/inc

⁷JP: Gau (distinct from Gau)

⁸Does Ophilia refer to H’aanit by anything than just her name? Trying to preserve the distinction that Ophilia says H’aanit-san and H’aanit says just Ophilia, but it’s not a huge deal lol