

Frozen Star 107

Chapter 107: Roads Beneath the Gray Sky

[POV Liselotte]

Morning in Averis dawned silent and solemn, with a faint mist clinging to the cobbled streets and softening the sharp edges of the white towers of the Polus Empire. The midday bells had yet to chime when we gathered in front of the inn The Morning Star, our packs secured tightly and the provisions neatly divided among the three of us.

The city had not fully awakened to its daily rhythm. Only a few particularly early vendors were arranging their stalls in the main squares, and heavy transport wagons rolled past with their distinctive metallic rattle against the polished stone avenues.

Leah paid the kind innkeeper with a genuine smile and a final, “Thank you for your hospitality,” while I awkwardly adjusted the straps of my pack and tried with all my might to push away the lingering images of the dream that had haunted me during the night.

But my efforts were in vain.

The vivid memory of the young woman encased in ice refused to fade as ordinary dreams did. Her serene face remained etched in my mind with unnatural clarity—sharper and more enduring than any nightmare. With every step I took beyond the inn’s threshold, I could still feel her closed eyes watching me from some faraway place that did not belong to this tangible world.

Leah’s practical voice snapped me abruptly back to the present.

“I’ve secured a reliable wagon to take us west,” she announced, tightening the buckle of her leather belt with habitual precision. “The local guildmaster personally recommended this route. It’ll take us straight to the Fractall Plains in about two days’ travel—assuming the weather stays stable.”

Chloé added dryly, her mental voice as sharp as ever: “Assuming that ‘reliable driver’ you mentioned doesn’t decide to take one of those ‘shortcuts’ humans are so fond of. You know how that usually ends.”

“In this particular case,” Leah replied, visibly satisfied, “we’ll be the ones driving. That way we have complete control over the route.”

The wagon waiting for us was modest in appearance but remarkably sturdy in build. It was crafted from dark wood reinforced with iron, covered by a thick gray canvas that promised to shield us well from the biting cold and cutting wind. The horses harnessed to it—two strong beasts with dappled white coats—breathed columns of steam into the frozen morning air.

“Well,” I murmured as I took my seat beside Leah at the front, “then... we’re officially bound for Whirikal.”

“At last,” she said with a small but genuine smile, giving the reins a gentle flick to set the horses moving down the cobbled road.

Chloé settled comfortably among the secured bags of provisions in the back, resting her head atop a folded blanket. “Wake me only if something explodes violently... or if new food appears.”

The rhythmic clatter of the wagon wheels against the stone road blended with the distant chime of the empire's magical clocks marking the hour precisely. The characteristic skyline of Averis slowly faded behind us, replaced bit by bit by vast frozen fields and distant mountain peaks marking the western frontier of Polus territory.

For a long and introspective while, none of us spoke.

The silence that fell among us wasn't uncomfortable, but it was heavy—dense with unspoken thoughts. I gazed at the horizon, following absently the shapes of skeletal trees coated in glimmering frost. Each vibration of the wagon, each sway, echoed faintly the dream still pulsing in my memory—the endless ice, the whispering wind, the voice that called my name.

"You're unusually quiet today," Leah said at last, her eyes never leaving the winding path ahead. Her tone was calm and measured, but it carried a touch of sincere concern she rarely allowed to surface. "Are you feeling all right, Lotte?"

"Yes," I answered too quickly—too defensive to sound convincing.

She shot me a sidelong glance, the kind that pierced through any pretense I could muster. "Are you sure? Because since we left the inn this morning, you've seemed... somewhere else entirely. Even Chloé's noticed."

"Indeed," came Chloé's mental voice from the back without her even lifting her head. "And that says a lot, considering I've deliberately spent half this trip napping peacefully."

I exhaled sharply, somewhere between a sigh and a suppressed laugh, trying to downplay the concern. “Really, it’s nothing serious. I’m just more tired than usual. The teleportation from yesterday still has me a bit disoriented, that’s all.”

Leah didn’t look fully convinced but, thankfully, didn’t press further. She simply nodded, accepting the answer for now, and returned her attention to the snowy path ahead. The morning wind tugged lightly at a few loose strands of her brown hair.

The wagon climbed steadily along a mountain road that skirted a chain of steep cliffs. In the distance, the pale winter sun was rising weakly, painting the wide sky in soft gray tones. The long shadows of the bare trees stretched across the frozen ground, creating ghostly silhouettes that seemed to watch us pass in silence.

I, however, could hardly focus on the landscape.

Every crunch of the ice beneath the wheels, every sudden gust of frozen wind against my face, brought back the same unmistakable sensation—the same cold presence I had felt in the dream. The mysterious woman frozen in eternal ice, the bright blue crystal upon her still chest, her fragile voice whispering my name...

Who was she, truly?

Why did my magic resonate so strongly at the mere memory of her?

Was it a message? Or a warning?

I shook my head, trying to physically scatter the intrusive thoughts, but they returned again and again, echoing in the hollow chambers of my mind. The sensation was so hauntingly real I could have sworn the cold from that dream still clung to my skin, ancient and unyielding—a part of me now.

Leah began to hum softly, a folk tune meant to break the thick silence. Her low, warm voice contrasted beautifully with the cutting wind from the north.

“You know,” she said after a pause, “there’s something different in the air around here. And I don’t just mean the cold. It’s as if this entire land... breathes differently. The mana feels like it vibrates at another frequency altogether.”

I nodded absently, pretending to listen while half my thoughts remained trapped in that icy dreamscape. “Yes... it feels denser. Colder—on a fundamental level.”

“Cold,” she repeated slowly, tasting the word. Then she smirked faintly. “Funny that you would be the one to say that. Ever since you revealed that ancient power back in Kreston, the air around you has never really felt warm again.”

I froze, unable to respond.

Leah immediately noticed and softened her tone. “I didn’t mean that as a bad thing, Lotte. It’s just... clear that whatever dwells inside you is growing stronger, more present, with every passing day. And so are you—even if you don’t see it yet.”

I said nothing. I couldn't.

Because deep down, I feared she was completely right.

The wagon's steady rumble filled the quiet that followed. Chloé turned slightly on her nest of blankets, watching us with one golden eye half-open. "Whatever it is you're brooding over, don't face it alone this time, Lotte. We've already learned the hard way that silence solves absolutely nothing."

"I know," I murmured, a faint, sad smile tugging at my lips. "I just... need to understand it first. To process it on my own."

And with that, the subject died quietly in the cold air.

For the rest of the morning, none of us spoke again about it. Leah focused on guiding the horses through the increasingly winding mountain path as snow began to fall—soft, slow flakes blanketing the landscape in a delicate, ethereal veil. Chloé soon drifted back to sleep, her steady breathing blending with the rhythm of the wheels.

I kept my gaze fixed on the horizon, where the pale sky and white earth met in a seamless blur of light.

But in the inner landscape of my mind, that horizon kept merging with the frozen world of my dreams—the golden-haired woman encased in ice, her pale lips forming my name in a whisper ancient and haunting, and the bright blue crystal pulsing faintly upon her silent heart.

None of it felt like an ordinary dream. I knew it with absolute certainty.

And as our wagon rolled steadily westward, beneath a vast gray and silent sky, I felt once more that the winter within me—that dormant, ancient power and heavy inheritance—was awakening again.

Slowly.

But unstoppable.

As though something ancient... or someone lost to time... was calling out to me from beyond the eternal ice.