

Frozen Star 161

Chapter 161: When Dawn Comes After the Abyss

[POV Liselotte]

Dawn arrived without announcement.

There was no glorious beam of light, no sudden shift in the air. Only a slow, grayish clarity filtering through the cave entrance, as if even the sun hesitated to look upon that place again.

I opened my eyes with a heavy body, every muscle protesting at the slightest movement. The rocky ground was cold, but I no longer cared. After everything we had endured, the simple act of waking up still felt like a small miracle.

Chloe was still awake.

She sat near the entrance in her human form, ears alert and tail swaying slowly from side to side. She watched the outside world with a calm focus, different from the tense vigilance of before. It was as if she now perceived the world in layers I could not yet fully understand.

Leah slept beside me.

Her breathing was steadier than the night before, though her face still showed deep exhaustion. She had given too much of herself in far too little time.

I sat up carefully so as not to wake her.

“Everything quiet?” I asked softly.

Chloe nodded without fully turning around.

“Yes. Nothing came close during the night.”

I moved closer and sat beside her. From there, the view outside showed a forest unlike the one from days before. It was still damaged—burned trees, torn earth—but that constant pressure was gone, the feeling that something was watching us.

“Do you sense anything strange?” I asked.

Chloe tilted her head, thoughtful.

“No danger. But... movement. Distant. The world is still settling after what happened.”

I sighed.

“I wish, just once, things would simply calm down.”

Chloe smiled faintly.

“That’s not really how your life works, Lotte.”

I let out a small, tired laugh.

“No. I suppose it isn’t.”

Movement behind us made us turn. Leah was beginning to wake. She sat up slowly, pressing a hand to her temple.

“My whole body hurts,” she murmured.

“That’s a good sign,” I said. “It means you’re still here.”

Leah gave me a weak smile.

“How reassuring.”

Chloe stood and walked over to her.

“How do you feel about your magic?”

Leah closed her eyes for a moment, focusing.

“Empty... but not broken. I’ll need time. A lot of it.”

“We’ll have it,” I said. “We’re not leaving this place until you’re better.”

Leah nodded, grateful.

Not long after, the murmur of the cave began to change. More footsteps. More voices. Daylight forced people to move, even when they weren’t ready.

I stood and walked toward the central area of the shelter.

Some soldiers were awake, sitting or lying back with fresh bandages and hollow eyes. Others remained unconscious. The villagers moved with quiet efficiency, handing out water and something resembling warm food.

Alistair was still alive.

That was the first thing I checked when I saw him. He was awake, pale, eyes open and fixed on the cave ceiling.

I approached slowly.

“Commander,” I said.

He turned his head toward me with effort.

“Lotte...” he murmured. “You’re still alive.”

“I could say the same.”

A shadow of a smile crossed his face.

"I suppose that means... you succeeded."

"We stopped the elemental," I replied. "Marcus... didn't survive."

Alistair closed his eyes for a moment.

"I didn't expect him to."

Leah came closer as well, leaning on her staff.

"Marcus was telling the truth," she said. "About the duke."

Alistair opened his eyes again.

"I suspected as much."

I frowned.

"You knew?"

“Not for certain,” he replied. “But Arven trusted him too much. And Arven wasn’t naïve.”

That made something click in my mind—and at the same time, made everything feel darker.

“What happens now?” I asked.

Alistair took a deep breath.

“When this comes to light... the kingdom will tremble.”

Leah pressed her lips together.

“And us?”

“You...” Alistair looked at both of us. “You’re already in the middle of it. Whether you want to be or not.”

I turned to Chloe, who was watching from a few steps away.

“I suppose there’s no turning back.”

Chloe nodded.

“There hasn’t been since we set foot in this forest.”

The rest of the morning passed in healing, counting losses, and uncomfortable silences. There were no celebrations. No true relief. Only the feeling of having survived something that should never have happened.

By midday, Leah sat beside me again.

“I’ve been thinking...” she said.

“That’s never a good sign.”

She looked at me, tired.

“Marcus was right about one thing. The kingdom is rotten at certain levels.”

I didn’t answer right away.

“And if what he said is true...” she continued. “This won’t end here.”

I looked at my hands. They still bore marks from the ice I had summoned.

“No,” I said at last. “It won’t end here.”

Chloe joined us.

“Then we must prepare.”

Leah looked at her.

“For what?”

Chloe met her gaze calmly.

“To choose which side we’re on.”

The silence that followed was heavy—but not uncomfortable.

I knew then that this was the true beginning of something far greater.

Not a mission.

Not an escort.

Not a coincidence.

But a decision.

And even though I still didn't know what shape it would take...

For the first time, I felt that I wouldn't have to face it alone.