

Frozen Star 25

Chapter 25: An Expected Opponent

[POV Liselotte]

Suddenly, a sharper scream, one of genuine panic, rose from the left flank, the more weakly defended side.

"Here! They've climbed up here!"

I ran, dodging fallen bodies —some familiar, too many familiar— jumping over a puddle of something dark and sticky.

A group of three bandits, taking advantage of a blind spot where the palisade was lower, had managed to climb up unnoticed in time.

They were already inside, fighting hand-to-hand against a pair of our defenders who were being forced back, overwhelmed.

One of the intruders, a man as broad as a barrel wielding a rusted but deadly double-bladed axe, turned toward me as he sensed my arrival.

His small eyes lit up with recognition and hatred.

"For you, bitch!" he roared, and swung a vertical blow with all the weight of his body behind it.

The air whistled.

I ducked at the last moment, feeling the wind of the blade pass mere inches above my head, and countered with a fluid movement, a low thrust aimed at his unprotected abdomen.

The tip of my sword met resistance, then a deep puncture.

The man screamed—a mix of pain and surprise—and lost his balance.

I pushed him with my shield, not with brute force, but using the inertia of his own uncontrolled movement, and I saw him roll off the edge of the platform, disappearing with a scream abruptly cut short as he hit the ground below.

And then, as I straightened up, panting, with the taste of fear and blood in my mouth, I saw him.

Him.

Standing about ten paces away, in the midst of the chaos, as if a bubble of silence surrounded him.

The tall bandit, greasy-haired and rat-eyed—the one who had fled weeks ago after the initial ambush, the one who had seen his leader fall.

The one who had sworn vengeance with a look that still burned in me.

He didn't look like a mere bandit now.

He wore hardened leather armor, better than the others, and in his hands was no axe, but a knotted staff topped with a dark stone that absorbed the light from the nearby flames.

Magic.

Corrupted magic.

"We meet again, little heroine!" he shouted with a crooked smile that stretched his dry lips, revealing yellow teeth.

His voice was a screech over the din of battle, but I heard it with dreadful clarity.

"This time you won't run! This time I'll make you suffer like you made my friends suffer!"

"And it will be the last time you see me" I replied, raising my sword, feeling the familiar weight of the steel, an anchor in the maelstrom of horror.

My voice sounded colder than I felt.

There were no more words.

He raised the staff.

The dark stone at its tip ignited with a sinister glow, vomiting a sphere of green and black fire that whistled through the air like a cursed bullet.

Instinct made me turn, but not enough.

The orb hit my left arm, just above the elbow, where the leather armor was weaker.

The pain was immediate, searing, as if my arm had been plunged into molten metal.

A sharp cry, more of surprise and rage than fear, escaped my lips.

The charred skin, the stench of burnt flesh, the wave of nausea.

He charged immediately after, taking advantage of my vulnerability, not with the staff, but with a long dagger he pulled from his waist with the other hand.

We traded rapid, furious blows.

I, compensating for the pain in my left arm with shorter, more defensive sword movements.

He, pressing forward with brute and desperate force, his attacks wild but effective in their ferocity.

His dagger tore through the fabric at my shoulder, the cold touch of metal brushing my skin.

A shoulder blow made me stagger.

And then, with surprising speed, he twisted the staff and struck me on the jaw with the hard wooden handle.

A metallic taste in my mouth.

The world spun violently.

I fell backward, my sword slipping from my numb hand, rolling across the wooden floor.

Dazed.

The pain in my jaw throbbed in sync with the burned arm.

Blurred vision.

All I could see were his worn boots approaching, the sickly glow of the stone on his staff rising again, ready for the final blow.

His twisted smile widened, a rictus of anticipated triumph.

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And something inside me broke.

Or, more precisely, something that had long been cracked, holding back immense pressure, finally burst.

It wasn't a thought. It was a visceral reaction, a primal force born at the very edge of the abyss.

A wave of cold so intense, so absolute, it made the night's icy wind seem pale, erupted from my core—from a place I didn't know existed.

I raised my right hand, the only one I could still move, instinctively—not to shield myse

If, but to stop him, to reject that threat, that hatred, that corrupt fire.

In that moment, the world... slowed.