

Frozen Star 28

Chapter 28: A Bittersweet End

[POV Liselotte]

I lay among debris and bodies, unable to move.

The pain in my leg was a living entity that had taken over me, pulsing with every beat of my racing heart.

I tried to sit up, to push with my arms, but a wave of nausea and vertigo knocked me down again, panting, black spots dancing before my eyes.

I couldn't get up.

The helplessness, more bitter than ever, flooded me.

I had failed. Again.

"LOTTE!" Chloé's voice reached my ears, distant, drowned out by the noise, but filled with a panic I had never heard from her before. Panic for me.

I crawled.

Every inch was torture, a fire racing through my broken leg and up my spine.

Dust and splinters embedded into my hands.

But I saw something.

A meter away, sticking out from a pile of debris, the broken tip of a spear.

Splintered wood, but still with several inches of sharp point intact.

A weapon. My last weapon.

With a scream that was half pain, half determination, I dragged myself toward it.

I grabbed it.

It was heavy, awkward.

But I held it in both hands, ignoring the pain in my left arm.

I poured everything I had left—my hatred, my desperation, the strange cold still echoing in my veins—into that movement.

It wasn't a clean throw, nor a powerful one.

It was a clumsy gesture, full of agony, a final impulse from the ground.

The broken spear left my hands.

It struck—not with force, but with just enough precision—at the spot where the creature's armored neck met its head, right beneath the lower edge of its giant, rotating blue eye.

It wasn't a deep blow, but it hit a sensitive spot.

The monster shrieked.

A high-pitched, screeching sound, completely unlike its previous roars.

A sound of surprise and pain.

It reared up on its hind legs, its massive shadow outlined against the blazing sky, its blue eye spinning frantically.

It thrashed violently, trying to shake off the annoying shard.

And in that sudden motion, the dark rider, absorbed in his triumph and in my fall, lost his balance.

There was no scream—just a brief swirl of black mist as it was thrown off.

And then he fell.

He fell like a dark rag doll, gracelessly, from a height of three meters, hitting the debris-covered ground with a heavy thud.

Chloé didn't hesitate.

Like a golden, blood-soaked lightning bolt, she launched from the still-thrashing monster's back toward the fallen figure.

The dark mage rose with surprising speed, the mist around him swirling in fury.

He raised a hand, and a whirlwind of emerald fire erupted from his fingers, roaring toward Chloé.

But she was already moving.

Her wolfish agility carried her to the side in an impossible leap, the fire's heat scorching her fur.

The momentum of her dodge carried her straight toward him.

She jumped.

Not with claws—but with her mouth open, bared fangs gleaming in the firelight.

The leap was perfect, the trajectory flawless.

Her powerful jaws closed not on his arm, nor his leg—but directly on the face hidden beneath the misty hood.

There was a horrible crunch, bone breaking under the pressure of her bite.

A choked, muffled gurgle.

The black mist surrounding the mage thrashed violently, like a wounded animal.

Then it began to dissipate, losing shape and substance.

The ember eyes flickered once, fiercely.

Then they went out, like coals thrown into water.

The body beneath the robes collapsed, lifeless.

Chloé stepped back, spitting out bits of cloth and something dark and viscous, her golden eyes locked on the corpse with savage satisfaction.

Without its rider, without the will guiding it, the wounded monster seemed to deflate.

The shriek turned into a pitiful whimper.

It faltered, its blue eye spinning aimlessly, losing its intelligent glow.

Then, with a shudder that ran through its entire massive body, it collapsed to one side.

It fell like a crumbling mountain, with a crash that made the ground tremble beneath our feet.

The impact raised a cloud of dust and ash that darkened the air even more.

The silence that followed was brief but absolute.

Then, like rats fleeing a sinking ship, the remaining bandits—those who could still move, who had witnessed the fall of their monster and leader—broke ranks.

The cry of RETREAT! wasn't issued by anyone in particular, but echoed from dozens of throats at once.

They threw down their weapons, turned, and fled blindly toward the safety of the forest.

Pursued by some of our defenders who, reborn by the sudden victory, harassed them with shouts and the few remaining projectiles.

The battle, the long night of horror, was over.

What remained was the cost, the pain, the smoldering ruins, and a silence heavy with loss...

...and a bittersweet relief.

[POV Chloé]

When the colossal beast fell, a tremor ran through the earth like a final sob.

The air, already thick with smoke, dust, and the sweet-salty scent of blood, filled with a cloud of ash that made me cough, tearing at my already sore throat.

But I didn't stop.

I couldn't.

A single thought, a single name, pounded in my skull in time with my racing heart: Lotte.

I had seen the broken spear fly, seen the impact, the monster's shriek, the dark rider's fall.

I had done what I had to do, what my deepest instinct demanded.

But then, in the chaos of the collapse, I lost sight of her.

Where she had been, now there were only rubble, smoke, and the motionless mass of the fallen monster.

"Lotte!" I cried, my voice a hoarse howl lost among the groans of the wounded and the crackle of fires
"LISELOTTE! ANSWER ME!"

I ran.

Looking for a glint of her leather armor, her chestnut hair—any sign.

The smoke stung my eyes, the dust mixing with the blood on my fur, forming a foul crust.

Panic grew with every second I couldn't see her.

"Over here! Chloé, here!" Elara's voice, weak but clear, guided me.

She was kneeling beside a pile of beams and shattered tiles, her face pale beneath the grime, pointing to a space between the debris.

I lunged toward where she pointed.

And there, buried to the waist under splintered planks and rubble, I saw her.

Liselotte.

My Lotte.

Her armor was dented and torn, her gambeson ripped in multiple places.

Her face, always so expressive, was covered in a mask of gray dust, dry and fresh blood from a cut on her temple, and cold sweat.

Her chest rose and fell, but the movements were shallow, rapid, barely perceptible.

Like a dying sparrow.

The breath she exhaled formed small white clouds in the cold night air, but she seemed... weak.

Far too weak.

I moved to her side, gently pushing aside a piece of wood that touched her arm.

The words tumbled out of me, a mix of relief and terror.

"Lotte... Lotte, it's me. Chloé. Open your eyes. Please."

"Look... look, we did it. We drove them out. The monster... the mage... fallen. It's all... all over."

Her skin was ice-cold.

Too cold, even for the chilly night.

A cold that didn't come from the outside.

She blinked slowly.

Her eyes, normally so full of life and resolve, opened halfway.

She looked at me, but didn't seem to see me.

Her gaze was clouded, lost somewhere far away, beyond the smoke, beyond the pain.

"Don't... don't fall asleep" I pleaded as I reached for her hand.

But her hand... it was frozen.

As if she had been holding snow for hours. A cold that burned.

"I'm... tired" she whispered, her voice a thread of air, almost inaudible over the crackling of a nearby fire
"So... cold."

Her gaze grew even more unfocused.

Her eyelids, heavy as lead, began to close.

"Lotte, no. LOTTE!" I shook her hand gently, panic turning into pure anguish "Look at me! Stay with me!"

But she no longer heard me.

Her breathing grew even more shallow, almost imperceptible.

Her eyes closed completely.

An unnatural, unsettling peace settled over her features.

And then, I looked down.

To the ground where she lay.

The earth around her... wasn't earth.

It was covered by a fine layer of white, gleaming frost that spread from her body like an oil slick, slowly advancing over the rubble, the splinters—even over my own paws, where a biting cold began to gnaw at me.

Tiny ice crystals, delicate as frost flowers but pure, iridescent white, sprouted from the frozen ground, growing before my eyes, forming intricate patterns around her motionless body.

The frost didn't stop on the ground.

It climbed.

Slowly, inexorably, like a serpent of ice, it crept up her arms, covering the wounds, the blood, the dirt, with a white, glistening shroud.

"Lotte..." my voice was barely a whisper, frozen with terror and awe "What... what are you...?"

But the words died on my lips.

She was beyond questions now, beyond

sound.

Submerged in a depth I could not reach.

The frost continued its relentless advance.

It covered her chest, her neck, her already pale face.

The ice crystals grew thicker, forming a translucent layer, like a frozen crystal sarcophagus sculpting itself