

## Frozen Star 30

Chapter 30: At the Awakening of Winter

[POV Liselotte]

I woke up... changed.

It wasn't a sound or a touch. It was as if silence itself had exhaled. As if an invisible membrane between two worlds had gently torn, and my consciousness, which had been floating in that realm of eternal ice, was pulled back to an anchor of flesh and bone.

The weightlessness of the crystal castle vanished, replaced by a slab of reality pinning me to the ground. Every muscle, every broken bone, every open wound screamed its existence with sharp, clear pain.

A rough gasp escaped my cracked lips, filling my lungs with air that smelled of ash, blood, and wet earth. The scent of survival.

"Lotte!" The voice was a strangled cry, broken by something deeper than smoke.

Chloé...

I turned my head with an effort that left me trembling. My eyes slowly focused: the night still hung heavy above us, now dotted with shy stars.

And there, her face streaked with mud where tears had cleaned the grime... she was there. Her golden eyes, always so fierce, were bloodshot and swollen. She looked at me as if I'd just come back from the dead.

"You're awake..." she whispered, leaning closer. "By all the old and new gods... you're breathing."

I tried to speak. Only a crack escaped my throat.

"Where...?" I managed to utter, my voice the sound of a rusted door creaking open.

"In the plaza" Chloé answered, following my gaze across the devastation: houses reduced to charred wooden skeletons, mounds of rubble, figures moving like ghosts among the ruins, the dark red of dried blood staining the earth

"Or what used to be the plaza. We brought you here when... when that happened. When you were covered in ice. We thought..." Her voice broke. She rested her head against mine, her warm breath a contrast to my still-cold skin. "We thought you'd gone, Lotte."

Frozen.

The memories returned in a flood: the frost rising like a silent army, ice flowers blooming around me like a deadly shroud, the woman of milky light, her words carved into my soul...

"Don't fight the storm. Become the snowfall. And give it the shape of your heart."

It hadn't been a dream. I felt the power now, not as an uncontrollable river threatening to drown me, but as a deep, glacial lake at my core. Contained. Waiting.

"Chloé... " I said, forcing out every word, but with a new clarity. "I'm fine. Truly."

She pulled back sharply, a bitter laugh mixed with another sob escaping her.

"You lie worse than a bandit with a noose around his neck!" she exclaimed, pointing at my body with her head. "Broken leg. Left arm burned to the bone. A cut on your temple that needed ten stitches. And you... Lotte, you were as cold as the stone of an abandoned tomb. The healer said it was a miracle your heart kept beating... if it still beats like it should."

"And them?" I asked, scanning the shadows beyond the ruins, searching for enemy torches. Would they return?

Chloé followed my gaze, her expression hardening.

"They fled" she confirmed, with fierce, weary satisfaction. "When the black beast collapsed, it hit hard. But when you... when you became that monument of ice in the middle of the battlefield... it shattered their will. I saw it in their eyes, even as they ran. They were afraid. As if they'd seen something

forbidden. Something sacred and terrible. They didn't even try to recover their wounded. They just vanished into the forest like cockroaches."

"Did they chase them?" The thought filled me with sudden anxiety. Risk more lives?

Chloé nodded, her gaze fixed on the dark edge of the forest.

"Uren, Elara, and seven others. The best we had left standing. They left hours ago. They know every path, every natural ambush point in the woods. They weren't going to let them regroup, catch their breath... or attack other villages."

"We're waiting. All of us. No one sleeps. No one can." Her voice dropped to a rasping whisper. "In the meantime... we're burying our dead. Twenty-three. The gravely wounded... too many. The healer is doing what he can with needles and bitter herbs."

I saw the weight crushing her shoulders. The guilt. The responsibility. The price of survival.

I tried to sit up again, driven by the need to share that burden, to be her equal. But my leg screamed with such sharp, blinding pain that stars danced in my vision. A groan escaped my lips.

"Stay down!" She lay on top of me to hold my body down, but not harshly. "Elara was very clear before she left: 'Don't let her move that leg even if she screams, Chloé. Or she'll lose it.' And I won't be giving any explanations afterwards either" She tried to say it playfully, but couldn't.

I looked around, truly looked, beyond the pain and worry. The village was an open wound. Smoke still rose from some beams. The stench of death and ash was omnipresent. Hunched figures moved debris with slow, hopeless movements.

A group of children, far too quiet for their age, huddled around a weak brazier, their pale faces and wide eyes reflecting the flames. A woman sobbed silently, hugging a mud-stained blanket covering a shape far too small...

A vast emptiness opened in my chest. We weren't heroes. We were bloodied survivors, surrounded by irreparable loss.

And then, I saw it.

Little Ben, the baker's son, ran past with a water jug bigger than him, carrying it to where his father lay with a hastily bandaged arm. When he saw my eyes open, he froze. His eyes, once full of terror, lit up with a flicker of pure, fragile relief. "Miss Lotte!" he murmured, and a fleeting smile appeared before he ran on.

An older woman, the weaver, looked up from where she was binding her teenage grandson's arm. Our eyes met. She said nothing. Just nodded slowly, once. A gesture of gratitude and recognition heavier than any speech.

Hope hadn't died. It breathed, wounded but alive, in the small gestures of those who remained.

And inside me, the cold... was no longer a forced guest, a storm on the brink. It was a conscious presence. A vast power, yes, but now I felt its edges, its depth, its... potential. A tool carved from the

very ice of my soul. A promise of protection. A warning to anyone who dared threaten this new beginning.

"Lotte... " Chloé's voice was a rough whisper, loaded with an emotion too complex to name. "You're not alone. You never will be. I... I'm here. In the cold, in the fire, in the shit. Always."

Her loyalty, raw and absolute, was a balm warmer than any fire. I reached for her face. My fingers were cold, but no longer deadly. I caressed her soft fur slowly. The intention, the commitment in that gesture, was unmistakable.

"Never was" I whispered, and this time my voice was clearer, with a new resonance, like snow crunching under a boot.

A fresh breeze, carrying the sharp, clean scent of distant pines, swept through the devastated plaza. It brushed my skin, bringing a shiver... but also a sense of cleansing renewal.

I looked up, following its path.

Against the dark velvet sky, the first snowflakes began to fall.

They were no threat. No omen of death.

They were the sky's tears of relief.

A silent blessing.

The first brushstroke of my new power on the canvas of the world.

Soft. Deliberate. Beautiful.

Moments later, Uren and the others who had gone to chase the bandits returned bringing very good news.