

## Frozen Star 31

### Chapter 31: Echoes of the Absent

[POV Liselotte]

Two days.

It had been two days since I woke up.

Two days in which the snow had kept falling, soft and steady, as if the sky itself were trying to shroud the village ruins in a veil of silence. It was no longer a threat, but a symbol. And though my body remained broken, I was still alive.

My leg was still splinted, my arm bandaged, but I could sit. And I did, in front of the cold hearth of the former town hall, now turned into an improvised gathering place and shelter.

They had set me up near what remained of the communal hearth, four charred walls and a roof partially patched with hides and branches, now the beating heart of survival.

A fire crackled at the center, casting light on faces marked by loss and strain.

It was there, among the scent of bone broth and exhausted hope, that we found it—while digging through an old satchel recovered by the villagers from one of the bandits' bodies. A map.

"Does this help at all?" Chloé asked, as we carefully unrolled the yellowed parchment over a plank resting on my knees. It smelled of dust, time, and ancient damp.

With hands that still trembled slightly, I spread it out, and the known continent unfurled before me. Mountain ranges jagged like fangs, rivers winding like blue veins, kingdoms marked with faded crests... My mind, starved for reference points, for a path home, devoured the details. Until the emptiness struck.

"No..." The word left me like a frozen sigh, an echo of the cold still slumbering in my chest.

"What is it?" Chloé leaned in, her warm breath brushing my ear.

"This... this is only a fragment. Half, maybe". My finger, cold despite the nearness of the fire, traced the map's edge, where a line cut off the rest of the continent.

"The kingdom... Whirikal... it's not on the map". I pointed to where the parchment ended. "It should continue past here."

The discovery stabbed through me like ice. Had the castle in my dream, the woman of frost, only shown me my power—or the unfathomable vastness of my exile too?

The distance became tangible, an abyss measured in absences of ink and parchment. And the power within me... remained silent, unreachable, as if that link to my lost origin were the key I could not turn.

How could I summon winter again, not knowing what I had done the first time? The weight of uncertainty, heavier than any bandage, settled on my shoulders.

Chloé watched my expression, reading the desolation in it.

"And now?" she asked, her voice low but steady. She wasn't questioning. She was seeking direction.

My gaze, desperate, scanned the map northward, fleeing the void that marked my loss. And there, written in bluish ink that still shimmered faintly, a name emerged like a beacon.

Glarien Village. Next to it, clear symbols: a water source, two crossing roads, and... a small stylized sun over a mountain. The sacred symbol. Healers.

A temple, perhaps. Or protection. A place to heal, to rest, to ask questions. Maybe a place to find more complete maps, tales of far lands, clues to the way home.

The decision crystallized within me, cold and clear as the ice from my dream.

"We head for Glarien" I said, raising my voice just enough for nearby figures to look up. Uren, leaning on his hammer now used as a cane. Elara, bandaging a child's arm. Finn, resting with closed eyes. Tired faces, watching.

"Glarien?" Uren asked, his voice a gravelly grunt. "Are you sure, girl? It's a journey. And not all of us..." His eyes swept over the wounded on stretchers, the small children.

This was where the scene had to be born. I straightened in my makeshift seat, ignoring the sharp twinge in my leg. They needed to see conviction, not pain.

"We can't stay" I said, my voice growing stronger, rising into the expectant silence of the shelter.

"This land is saturated with death and ash. Rebuilding here... would take generations we don't have. Winter is truly coming, and without solid walls, without storage..."

I let the image form in their minds: snow turned to shroud, the cold killing slowly.

"Glarien has water, open roads, and this" I pointed to the sacred symbol on the map as Chloé held it high for all to see. "A sacred place. It means help. Healers. Maybe protection. A place to heal our wounds, regroup our strength... and plan."

I saw doubt on some faces, fear of the unknown, exhaustion that begged to stay and grieve. But then, Maren, the weaver, whose leg was gravely injured, stood with effort. Her eyes, red from weeping but dry now, locked onto mine.

"My daughter..." her voice trembled, but was clear. "My Alina... she believed in you. She said she admired the way you fought those bandits". A tear escaped, but she wiped it away with fierce resolve. "If you say Glarien is our next step... my daughter and I will follow you there."

It was like breaking a dam. Finn stood up, limping but steady.

"Me too! I'll carry what I can!" he shouted, lifting a half-empty sack.

"We've little left to lose but the chains of this pain " murmured Elara, stroking the head of the boy she'd just bandaged. "My bow and arrows follow you, Lotte."

"My arms are still good for pushing a cart" grunted Uren, tapping his hammer-staff gently on the ground. "And my hammer, if the road needs clearing."

One by one, faces turned toward me. Not with the euphoria of victory, but with the solemn determination of those choosing to live against all odds. A murmur, low but unanimous, rippled through the room: "With you, Liselotte." "We go to Glarien." "Wherever you go."

Chloé, at my side, gave me a brief gesture—just a look, a nod—but it said more than a thousand words: See? You're not alone. You never were.

Emotion, a warm and piercing knot, rose in my throat. They weren't soldiers. They were the wounded, the orphaned, the widowed, the old. A tattered people. And they were choosing me—the frozen stranger—as their compass. The weight was immense. Sacred.

"Then we prepare" I said, my voice barely a whisper choked with feeling, but all heard it. "We leave at dawn. Everything we can carry: food, water, blankets, tools. Help those who can't walk. We'll make stretchers, use the cart..."

Within the hour, the shelter transformed. The air of passive despair lifted, replaced by tangible purpose.

Tasks were divided with a kind of efficiency born of hardship: some gathered sparse provisions, others reinforced stretchers with blankets and sticks, children helped fold clothes or fill skins at the nearby stream under watchful eyes.

It was a choreography of survival—broken, but coordinated. A village, literally, rising and moving.

When the first pale glimmer of dawn began to tint the eastern snow, the caravan was ready. A procession of mourners and fighters. I couldn't walk.

Chloé and Uren helped lift me into the simple cart they'd prepared: fresh straw for cushioning, several thick blankets, and a small sack at my feet with the essentials.

From that improvised seat, I looked back at the charred skeleton of what had been our home, our battlefield, our graveyard.

Where so many dreams had died. And where, against all odds, something new—fragile but stubborn—had taken root: a community united not only by loss, but by a shared belief in the road ahead.

We had repelled the attack and won the fight... but still, we had to leave. It felt more like losing.

Chloé would pull the carts with her back. Finn, loaded like a pack mule but with his head held high, took one side. Elara, bow slung over her back, guarded the rear. Maren walked beside the cart, her hand resting briefly on my good leg—a silent gesture of connection.

Chloé clicked her tongue. The cart creaked and moved. The first step beyond the ruins. Then another. And another.

The sky remained overcast, a pearl-gray mantle, but without the oppressiveness of battle clouds. And the snow, faithful, kept falling in silent flakes. No longer a veil for grief, but a cloak for the journey—a quiet witness to our departure.

We weren't heading toward my home. Whirikai remained a ghost on an incomplete map, an echo in my heart.

But we were heading toward Glarien. Toward a reprieve. Toward a possibility. Toward what, with each shared step, with each look of trust cast my way, began to feel not like a destination, but the next chapter of a home built not from stone—but from loyalty and persistent snow.