

Frozen Star 44

Chapter 44: The Broken Girl

[POV Liselotte]

The world burned around me in a chaos of green fire, steel, and tearing screams. Yet, in that hell, the only thing that existed for me were those grotesque chains. Black iron, streaked with red veins that pulsed with a sick rhythm in time with the battle, radiated an unnatural heat.

My hand trembled, but not from the fear that should have paralyzed me. It was a tremor driven by something deeper, strange, and primal. As if every fiber of my being had always been destined to touch those cursed bars.

“Help...”

The voice whispered again from within the darkness of the cage. A thread of sound, fragile as the finest glass, brittle as a forgotten promise. But it was enough. Enough to ignite a bonfire of determination in my chest. It was human. It was real. It was life, trapped in the heart of death.

Without thinking, without calculating the risks, I drove my sword with all my strength into the first link of the infernal chain. The blade screeched harshly, as if striking living, enraged stone. A burst of green sparks leapt out, burning the leather of my glove and leaving a bitter smell of ozone. The metal didn't give, but a thin, shining groove was left marked on its black surface.

A demonic laugh, deep and resonant like thunder in a cavern, rumbled dangerously close. I raised my eyes just in time to see one of those monsters of shadow and fire lift its twisted weapon, its glowing coal

gaze fixed on me. Death descended in a dark arc. But a flash of pure light, a bolt of white magic launched by an anonymous adventurer behind me, pierced the demon with a hissing shriek. I didn't look back to thank them. I just gritted my teeth, gripped my sword with both hands, and with a gasp that was half effort, half curse, I struck again into the same crack.

The second blow widened the fissure. The third made a red glow well up brighter, like trapped lava. The fourth, desperate and final, broke the link with a dry, violent crack that rang out like a gunshot. The released energy hurled me backward, throwing me onto the dirty snow. The smell of burnt iron and corrupt magic filled my lungs.

The chains fell away with a sound that was half funeral bell, half tormented sigh of relief. The entire cage shook, as if an invisible weight, a containment of centuries, had suddenly been released.

And then, at the center of that dark prison, I saw her.

She was hunched, her body folded in on itself at painful angles, as if she had been stuffed there carelessly, like a broken doll after the cruelest game. Her hair, long and tangled, fell in dirty waves down to the frozen floor of the cage. But even under the grime, the ash, and the crusts of dried blood, it glimmered with a pearly reflection, a pale gold as beautiful as moonlight trapped in abandoned strands of silk.

Her skin was a canvas of suffering, withered and covered in purplish, yellow bruises, and fine scars like threads of silver. Her wrists, thin and fragile, were raw flesh, deeply marked by the shackles that still hung from them, the ballast of her captivity. And her eyes...

They hardly seemed like eyes. They were empty, dim, like glass fogged by a cold breath. They looked at me without seeing, lost in an unfathomable distance.

“Hey, girl...” I murmured, the word slipping from my dry, cracked lips, barely an incredulous whisper in the midst of the uproar.

She blinked. Very slowly. A weak, mechanical movement, like an automaton about to wind down. But it was enough. It was the tiny spark that lit the hope that something still remained inside that broken shell.

The cage door creaked open under my push. I lunged inside, ignoring the residual heat of the bars or the stench of confinement. I wrapped my arms around her, enveloping her fragility. Her body was light, terribly light, as if only fine bones held up that consumed figure. She smelled of perpetual darkness, of dungeon damp, of accumulated despair.

“Easy... easy, you’re not alone anymore,” I whispered against her filthy hair, though I didn’t know if my words could pierce the wall of her trauma.

Her head, powerless, fell on my shoulder with a dead weight. Like the head of a doll whose string had broken.

“Lotte! The entire camp is surrounding you! We must get out of here, now!” Chloé’s roar was a gale of terror and impotent fury, a sound that tore me more deeply than any demonic howl.

I clutched the unconscious girl against my chest, feeling the faint flutter of her heart against mine. I drew a deep breath, dug my feet into the bloodstained snow, and took the first staggering step out of the cursed cage.

The outside world greeted me like a raging ocean of pure chaos. Demons of shadow and fire clashed against the adventurers in a whirlwind of steel, flashing magic, and agonized screams. The remaining orcs fled in a rout or were swept away, insignificant before the superior fury. The whole camp was destruction and death.

But at that crucial moment, only one goal existed, one beacon in the storm—get her out. Get her out of that hell.

I moved forward, stumbling, across the trampled, muddied snow, dodging fallen bodies and puddles of unnamable fluids. The unbearable heat of the green flames licked my face, drying my tears before they could fall.

The girl in my arms swayed with each forced step, her breathing so weak, so shallow, that the faint movement of her chest was barely noticeable. Each ragged gasp was an incredibly thin thread of life, that could break with the next step, the next scream, the next explosion.

Suddenly, a massive orc, covered in others' blood and with fangs stained red, cut off my path. His heavy axe dripped still-steaming viscera. He roared, a cornered, furious beast, and raised the bloodied blade to bring it down on us.

I couldn't let go. I couldn't draw my sword. I couldn't do anything but hold her tighter against me and close my eyes, waiting for the cold impact of steel.

But before the blade descended to cut our lives short, a silver flash sliced through the air. A spear, hurled with superhuman force and precision, pierced the orc's neck with a wet, sickening sound. The creature dropped to its knees, choking on a gush of dark blood, then collapsed.

An adventurer, his face marked by a scar that crossed his cheek, lit eerily by the green fire, appeared like a ghost from the curtain of snow and smoke. "Run, girl! Take her far from here!" he roared hoarsely, ripping his spear from the corpse and immediately hurling himself at the next threat, a charging demon.

I nodded fiercely, though I doubted he could see me in the confusion. There was no time. I just pressed on, dodging, stumbling, running, with my heart pounding in my throat like a terrified bird.

I don't remember how I made it. The details blur in a haze of adrenaline, fear, and iron determination. I only know my legs moved as if possessed, guided by pure instinct of survival that transcended thought.

I dodged blows that grazed my scorched cloak, slipped between bodies locked in mortal combat, crawled beneath fallen logs and the dancing shadows cast by the green bonfires. It was a macabre dance, a waltz with death, toward the only direction I knew as refuge: our original lookout post.

When I finally crossed the invisible line of the perimeter where the D and E ranks held their tenacious guard, halting every attempt at enemy escape, the very air seemed to change. It felt less dense, less heavy with corrupt magic and death's breath.

I recognized the fallen tree, the massive trunk against which Chloé and I had leaned hours earlier, watching. Now it was a bulwark, an improvised refuge that, in that moment, became my salvation and hers.

I dropped to my knees behind the natural cover, gasping so violently I thought my lungs might burst from my chest. With infinite care, as if handling the most precious and fragile object in the world, I laid the girl upon the relatively clean snow, improvising a crude bed with my torn, scorched cloak.

Chloé appeared at my side in an instant, her silver-white fur stained with dark mud and perhaps something else. Her lunar eyes, usually serene or mocking, burned into me with scorching intensity.

“Are you completely insane?” Her voice was a whip. “You almost died! You dragged us to the very edge of the abyss for... her!” Her gaze flicked briefly to the inert figure on the ground.

I ignored her. All my attention was fixed on the pale face before me. My hands, still trembling from exertion and adrenaline, moved with instinctive gentleness, carefully brushing away the filthy, tangled strands from her angelic face, now freed of its worst grime.

Her skin was ice-cold to the touch, like winter marble. I searched for her pulse at her thin wrist, and barely found it: a weak, irregular drumming, like the flutter of a dying bird.

“You’ll be fine... Easy now, you’re safe,” I murmured, more for myself than for her, trying to force calm into my broken voice.

Then, her eyelids, unbelievably pale, stirred. They opened just a slit, revealing again those empty eyes, but now with a glimmer of... consciousness? Recognition? Her cracked lips parted. A whisper escaped, so faint, so worn, that I had to lean in until my ear nearly touched her mouth to catch it.

“...Light?”

The word, simple and devastating, pierced me like a dagger of ice. It was the voice of someone who had lived too long in absolute darkness, who had forgotten the very meaning of clarity.

“Yes,” I answered in a thread of voice, taking her bony, cold hand between mine, trying to transmit some of my warmth. “You’re in the light now. I promise, never... never again will you return to that cage.”

A sudden crack, too close, made me lift my head like a spring, my heart clenched.

From the snowy thicket just meters away, a limping orc, wounded at the side, had followed our trail. His axe, stained dark red, gleamed greedily under the dim light filtering through the trees. His small, bloodshot eyes fixed not on me, but on the fragile, vulnerable figure of the golden princess lying on the ground. A deep growl, charged with sinister intent, rumbled from his throat, freezing my blood.

I leapt up, placing my body as a living shield between the orc and the girl. My body shook, not only from cold or fear, but from sheer exhaustion.

I couldn’t fight. Not with her defenseless at my feet. And I couldn’t leave her. Not after everything.

The orc roared, a beastly sound of anticipated triumph, and charged, raising his axe for the killing blow.

A sharp, swift whistle cut through the icy air. A solid thunk. An arrow embedded itself forcefully in his left eye. The orc howled, a sound of surprise and bestial pain, spinning on himself. Another arrow, shot in quick succession, struck his neck, dropping him backward into the snow with a dull thud.

A pair of adventurers emerged from the thicket like benevolent ghosts. One, with his bow still taut, slowly lowered the weapon. The other, wielding a short sword, looked at us first in surprise, then in quick recognition upon seeing my silver insignia and the charge I was protecting.

The orc died convulsing before he could rise.

The air I hadn't realized I was holding rushed back into my lungs in a deep, trembling gasp.

It was better to stay here, in everyone's sight to ask for help, than to run blindly into the unknown.

I curled back beside her, leaning against Chloé, who remained alert as a silver statue. With careful movements, I brushed away the snow beginning to gather near her face, shielding her with my body from the cutting wind and from any unseen gaze or threat. The two adventurers flung themselves back toward the battle's edge, vanishing into the mist of war.

I could do no more. I could only kneel there, in the relative calm of the perimeter, and gaze toward the heart of the camp turned battlefield. Demons, nightmare shadows, and men—figures of desperate

courage—fought beneath the spectral glow of the green flames. It was like witnessing an infernal tapestry woven in real time with threads of blood, fire, and shadow.

My lips moved without my command. Forgotten words, childish prayers I hadn't spoken in years, slipped out in a trembling murmur, barely audible over the distant roar.

"Gods... whoever can hear... stop this. Please... let it end soon... Let there be no more tearing screams... let no more innocent blood be spilled..."

I didn't know if anyone, anywhere beyond the smoke and pain, was listening. Perhaps no one was. Perhaps my pleas vanished into the freezing wind. But I couldn't stop praying. I couldn't fall silent.

Because if the war unfolding before my eyes was an open hell on earth, the fragile life breathing at my feet, the broken doll I had rescued from the very heart of the fire, was the living, beating proof that there was still something worth begging mercy for. Something worth yearning for the dawn.

And as long as her thin chest rose and fell with that barely perceptible rhythm, as long as that thread of life did not break, I would keep praying. Even if only to ask that the night end. For the dawn, at last, to come.