

Frozen Star 45

Chapter 45: The Princess

[POV Liselotte]

Silence did not fall all at once. It slid in, slow and heavy, like a damp woolen shroud over the smoldering remains of the forest.

First came the final chorus of the slaughter, the last demonic roars, breaking into wails of agony before extinguishing into a whisper of black smoke.

The desperate orders of the veterans turned into groans of bitter victory, into sighs of relief that sounded like surrender.

The metallic clamor of swords lost strength, clashed a few more times—weakly—and then faded, leaving only hollow echoes that were swallowed among the charred trees.

Finally, the obscene crackle of the green flames was smothered, drowned by the snow that began to fall again, heavier, more insistent, as if the heavens themselves, ashamed, tried to cleanse with pure white the stain of horror we had sown.

When the last burning shadow vanished, consuming itself until nothing remained but a trail of greasy ash, the only sound left was the ragged gasping of the survivors.

They were human breaths, rough, burdened with a weariness that went beyond the physical. They were the sounds of men and women broken, yet alive. Clinging to the simple miracle of still breathing.

I did not take my eyes from the motionless figure lying in the snow at my feet, sheltered by the weak barrier of a fallen trunk.

The girl's hair, that pale, pearly gold, spread like a dirty, ruined halo around her face, which looked sculpted in white wax. Yet her chest still rose and fell. A slight, almost imperceptible movement, a fragile, irregular rhythm that clung to existence with a heartbreaking tenacity. Life. Against all odds, against the very logic of the hell that had imprisoned her, she was still breathing.

"...It's over," murmured Chloé, her voice hoarse, spent, as if she too had fought every blow, dodged every claw in that nightmare battlefield. "At least. For now."

I found no words to reply. Relief and horror tangled too tightly in my throat. Instead, I extended a trembling hand, bloodied and dirty, and gently brushed aside a strand of that dimmed gold. Then, with careful movements, I adjusted the folds of my scorched and torn cloak around her body, building a fragile shelter against the cold that was beginning to bite once more.

It was time to leave. To abandon that cursed place.

The road back to Glarien was not a triumphal march. It was a slow, painful parade of specters dressed in the rags of their courage.

The adventurers who still managed to stay upright moved with the heaviness of sleepwalkers.

They dragged the wounded they could, their moans a constant, wrenching refrain. They lifted the fallen lighter ones with rough tenderness, those whose lives had already gone out, whose last journey would be upon the shoulders of their companions.

They walked at a slow but steady pace, a silent procession toward the faint glow of the town glimmering in the distance. No one celebrated. No one raised a voice in victory song. Triumph was a hollow word, a bitter consolation when every glance at the ground met the print of a boot beside a dark pool that no longer froze, or the glint of a shattered insignia upon the immaculate snow. Victory tasted of loss and smelled of a funeral pyre.

I walked beside Chloé, my hand resting on her back, finding some stability in a world still swaying.

On her back, now stained with soot and earth, we carried the girl. We had placed her with the utmost care, as if she were blown glass, using strips of leather and cloth torn from my own gear to secure her fragile body and prevent it from jolting too violently along the way. She did not protest. Not a single whimper. She didn't even open her eyes. Her silence was louder than any scream.

Every few steps, I leaned my head down, holding my breath, to check that faint rise and fall in her chest. And every time I confirmed it, a knot of anguish loosened briefly in my throat—only to tighten again, stronger, with the next doubt. Would she survive the journey? What was left of her inside that shattered shell?

Chloé did not speak a single word throughout the trek. But I felt the tension in every one of her muscles, in the way her ears swiveled at every sound, in the stiffness of her back beneath my hand.

We arrived at the gates of the Adventurers' Guild well into the night, when the moon was a pale coin behind a veil of clouds and the snow covered us like a band of ghosts returning from the underworld. Our bent, weary silhouettes must have been a spectral sight.

The great oak doors swung open before we could knock, as if those inside had felt our approach.

Naele was the first to come out, her usual composure shattered by urgency. A dark blue cloak flared behind her like the wings of a night bird, and her eyes—always so calculating—now shone with a mixture of immense relief and mounting alarm as they scanned our group.

“By the heavens, you did it! You returned!” she exclaimed, her voice a pitch higher than usual. But then her sharp, expert gaze fell upon the pale, inert figure resting on Chloé's back. All color drained from her face, leaving it as white as the snow itself.

Her expression transformed into a mask of horror and deep disbelief.

“Who... who is she? What... what have they done to her?” Her words were nearly a whisper, heavy with a dread that went beyond physical wounds.

With many calloused, trembling hands, we carried the stranger inside, into a side chamber where the guild's stretchers were already waiting for the expedition's wounded. The air reeked of strong antiseptic, of medicinal herbs, and of tension.

Naele, with fierce concentration, began to examine her. Her hands, though firm, were delicate. She applied minor diagnostic spells that flickered with pure white light across the girl's translucent, battered skin, her lips moving silently as she read the flashes of vital energy.

It was in the midst of that silence—broken only by the distant groans of other wounded—that the girl herself spoke.

“...Leah.”

The word was a thread of sound, rough and dry from disuse and pain, like sandpaper against wood. But it was clear. Undeniable.

Naele froze mid-movement, ointment still in hand. Her fingers hung suspended in the air.

The voice, a little stronger, pressed on from deep within her exhaustion. “My name... is Leah.”

Naele leaned in, so close her face hovered only a hand's breadth from the young woman's. Her own lips trembled visibly, as if she were uttering an ancient prayer or a forgotten curse. “...Leah?” Her voice was a broken thread of silk. “Leah of Whirikal?”

The girl's eyelids, unbearably heavy, lifted. Just for an instant, a slow, agonizing blink. But it was enough. Beneath the grime and exhaustion, beneath the fogged glass of suffering, a glimmer broke through. A fragment of memory, of an ancient nobility etched deep into her soul. Recognition.

“Yes.”

The single, simple word fell in the room like thunder rolling through a clear sky. The sound struck Naele as if physically, making her recoil as though seared by hot iron.

She raised a trembling hand to her mouth, her eyes wide, the whites visible around her irises. “The princess...” she stammered, her voice choked with awe. “The lost princess of Whirikal... The rumors... the rumors were true...”

Whirikal. The name rang in my mind like a funeral bell. The kingdom where I had been born, where my family dwelled.

And now, its royal blood, its lost heir, its princess of legend... breathed, shattered yet alive, on a guild stretcher before me.

Before my numbed thoughts could begin to process the avalanche of implications, memories, and fears, the great double doors of the guild hall burst open with a crash that shook the wooden walls and rattled the jars on their shelves.

A tall, imposing figure, wrapped in a thick black wool mantle trimmed with silver thread that gleamed under the torches, strode through the threshold. His advance was solemn, commanding a space that seemed to bend around him.

His face was weathered by a thousand battles and a thousand hard decisions, his features sharp and unforgiving, framed by a short, well-kept beard peppered with gray like frost upon stone.

But it was his eyes that demanded immediate, instinctive respect: steel-gray, piercing, scrutinizing. The eyes of a man who had not only seen death, but had read the darkest secrets in men's hearts.

"Just in time, am I not?" he declared, his voice deep and resonant, a voice that did not need to rise to fill every corner of the hall, like the drumbeat before war.

"The princess of Whirikal, the lost jewel of the crown... found not in a castle of legend, but in this godsforsaken border outpost."

His gaze, unrelenting, fixed first upon Leah, lying vulnerable on the stretcher, absorbing every detail of her state with terrifying speed. Then that same gaze, heavy as stone, shifted and settled upon me. Piercing, weighing, judging.

The adventurers present—even the wounded—bowed their heads instinctively, a gesture of profound respect. The man's very presence demanded reverence and silence.

Naele, still pale, turned toward him, recovering some of her usual composure. "Guildmaster... We did not expect your arrival so soon."

The man—the supreme leader of all the adventurers in the region, perhaps beyond—did not avert his eyes from me.

“It seems,” he said, each word adding a new weight upon my shoulders, “that we have much to discuss.”