

## Frozen Star 121

### Chapter 121: Words of the Heart

[POV Liselotte]

The afternoon slipped by between slow snowflakes and a calm that smelled like home.

When we returned from the guild, the snow had already covered the stone path that led to our house. The air was so cold that every breath looked like a little ghost escaping from our lips. Even so, the smoke rising from our chimney looked like a warm beacon in the middle of the endless white.

My mother was the first to greet us. She was standing at the door, wearing her apron, her cheeks flushed from the kitchen fire.

"At last!" she exclaimed. "I was about to go looking for you."

Leah smiled faintly. The tiredness in her eyes was clear—the same one she'd been carrying since we left the castle. My mother noticed it immediately.

"Go upstairs and rest, dear," she said gently. "The room's the same as yesterday—the one in the corner."

Leah hesitated for a second, as if she didn't want to seem like a burden. But finally, she nodded.

"Thank you, Mrs. Andrea."

"No 'Mrs.' Here, you're family."

I watched her climb the stairs, with Chloé following her halfway down the hall before turning back and curling up beside the fireplace, closing her eyes with an almost human sigh.

Silence returned, broken only by the crackle of the fire and the soft tapping of the wind against the windows.

My mother turned to me and smiled.

"Help me bake some cookies. Claire's already working on the dough."

"Cookies again?" I said, trying to sound amused.

"Yes. There's no problem that can't be fixed with sugar and flour."

I smiled, and followed her into the kitchen.

The warmth of the oven was like an embrace. The table was dusted with flour, cookie cutters shaped like stars scattered around, and a small golden mountain of dough sat in the center. Claire's nose was speckled with flour, her face full of exaggerated concentration for someone who was only cutting out cookies.

"Lotte!" she said when she saw me. "Can we go to the forest today?"

"Only if you don't stay at the entrance this time."

My mother burst out laughing.

"That was when I was six!" protested Claire, crossing her arms.

"It wasn't just once," I reminded her.

She huffed, but couldn't hide her smile. And for a moment, everything felt normal again.

We got to work. My mother kneaded the dough with strength, I shaped it, and Claire decorated the cookies with crystal sugar. The smell began to fill the house— butter, honey, and a touch of vanilla. Outside, the wind howled, but inside, the world was warm and golden.

A while passed without anyone speaking. Only the sound of the fire, the creak of the oven, and the soft scrape of the spatula on the dough. Until my mother broke the silence.

"Lotte," she said suddenly, without looking at me. "Why do you worry so much about that girl?"

The air seemed to stop.

Claire looked up. I froze mid-motion, the spoon halfway to the bowl.

"Why do you ask?"

"It's not an accusation," she said calmly. "I just... I've been watching you, daughter. Since you came back, I've seen how much you've changed. You're always with Leah, you worry if she eats, if she's warm, if she doesn't talk much. It's like you carry her whole life on your shoulders."

I went still. I looked at the dough in my hands, as if I could hide an answer there.

"At first," I began, "I thought it was just my responsibility."

My mother and sister stayed quiet. The fire crackled, filling the spaces between my words.

"When I found her in that forest," I went on, "she was alone, hurt, with no clear memories. I only wanted to do my duty as an adventurer and save her. Nothing more. But then..."

I swallowed hard.

"Then she started looking at me in a way I'd never seen before. As if she couldn't understand why someone would want to stay by her side without asking for anything in return."

My voice trembled, just a little.

"That's when I realized something. No one had ever protected her before without expecting something back. No one had ever given her a home, or a sincere promise. And... I couldn't stand it."

My mother watched me in silence, with that look that mixes tenderness and wisdom.

"So you made yourself a promise," she whispered.

I nodded.

"Yes. I promised myself that I'd never let her feel alone again. That if the whole world forgot her, I wouldn't. Even if I had to face the gods or the king himself... I won't let her suffer again."

The words came out firmer than I expected. Claire set her spoon down.

"Lotte... that sounds like something a heroine would say," she said—half joking, half serious.

"I'm not a heroine," I shook my head. "Just... someone who knows what it feels like to be alone."

The silence grew heavier.

My mother came closer and placed her hand over mine. Her skin was warm from the oven.

"Not all bonds need blood to be family," she said softly. "If your heart chose her, then there's nothing wrong with protecting her."

A lump rose in my throat.

"I know. But sometimes I'm afraid..." I admitted. "Afraid that when she regains her place—when the kingdom recognizes her again—she won't need me anymore."

My mother smiled, a sad and sweet smile all at once.

"Lotte, people don't forget the one who reached out to them in the dark. Maybe one day she'll take another path... but that doesn't erase what you did for her."

Claire chimed in, wiping flour from her nose.

"Besides, if she dares to leave without saying goodbye, I'll trap her with a sticky-cookie spell."

We all laughed. The air breathed again.

Still, a part of me hurt. Because I knew my mother was right. People change. Time changes everything. But meanwhile... while we were still under the same roof, while the smell of cookies filled the house, and the snow kept falling outside, I would protect her. No matter what.

We finished the first batch and set them on the table. Steam rose in small golden clouds. Claire grabbed one before it cooled and yelped.

"Hot!"

My mother laughed so hard that even Chloé perked up an ear from by the fireplace.

"I warned you," I said, laughing too.

For a few minutes, everything was simple. Laughter, the scent of sweet bread, snow tapping against the glass. I wished I could have frozen that moment in time.

But then, something made me turn.

A shadow in the doorway of the kitchen.

Leah.

She stood there, wrapped in a blanket, her loose hair falling over her shoulders. Her eyes—clear as river ice—watched us silently.

"Leah..." I whispered.

She said nothing. She just walked slowly toward the table. My cheeks burned. How much had she heard?

My mother pretended not to notice. She smiled and turned to the oven.

"You arrived just in time. The cookies are perfect."

Leah blinked, surprised, and nodded.

"They smell... incredible."

"Try one," said Claire, pushing one toward her.

Leah took it between her fingers, still warm, and bit it gently. For an instant, her eyes shimmered.

"They're... delicious," she murmured.

My mother smiled.

"The secret is butter and love."

Leah lowered her gaze, but her smile was real.

"Thank you for... letting me stay here."

"Don't thank us," said Andrea. "This is your home too, for as long as you want it to be."

I couldn't take my eyes off her. There was something different in her face—a mix of tenderness and sadness that tightened my chest. Her gaze met mine for a second, and I understood that she had heard everything.

Everything.

My promise. My fears. My words.

She said nothing. She just held my gaze for a moment longer, then looked away and took another bite of her cookie. But on her lips, almost imperceptible, was a smile.

One that was born not from relief, but from understanding.

The fire kept crackling. Outside, the snow fell in silence. Inside, life went on between soft laughter and the scent of toasted sugar.

When Leah finished her cookie, she came closer to me.

"Thank you, Lotte," she said, barely a whisper.

I didn't know what to say. I just nodded.

And then, something in her eyes told me what her words didn't dare: I'm not alone anymore.

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That night, while everyone slept, I went down to the kitchen to put away the leftover cookies. The moon shone through the window, lighting up the flour-dusted table and the scattered cookie cutters. Everything smelled like home.

Chloé lifted her head from her corner.

"You can't sleep," she said in my mind.

"No," I replied, stroking her back.

"Leah heard everything."

"I know."

Chloé yawned.

"She doesn't seem upset."

"No," I said, glancing toward the stairs. "I think... she's relieved."

The wolf curled up again.

"Then everything's fine."

Maybe it was. For the first time in a long while, I felt something settle inside me. That the promise I'd made wasn't a burden, but a truth we now shared—the three of us.

The world outside was still frozen. But inside that small house, beneath a roof that smelled of bread and warmth, something had been lit.

A spark that, even in the middle of winter, would never stop burning.