

Frozen Star 136

Chapter 136: The Price of Silence

[POV Liselotte]

The dawn of the second day arrived without a single ray of sunlight.

The sky above the eastern forest was wrapped in a thick layer of clouds, so gray they looked forged from lead. The air smelled of stale moisture, wet leaves, rotting bark. And although no visible threat moved around us, the atmosphere felt heavy, as if the forest itself were breathing against our skin.

It was a strange silence—one that carried tension in every branch.

We walked behind the last carriages as ordered, with Leah in the middle, Chloé on her left, and me on her right. We had advanced in silence for hours, hearing only the horses' hooves and the grinding of wheels against the damp soil.

"I don't like this," Chloé whispered mentally. "Something has been wrong since we woke up."

Leah felt it too. Her posture was rigid—too rigid—as if she were holding her breath.

"It's not just the presence from before," she murmured. "Something new approached at dawn. It's not a demon... but it's not human either."

Before I could ask, a sharp whistle cut through the air.

"Get down!" I screamed.

A rain of arrows fell from both sides of the path. The soldiers at the front lifted their shields, but we, who were behind the caravan, had no such protection. I grabbed Leah by the arm and rolled with her just as arrows buried themselves in the ground inches from our bodies.

Screams erupted instantly.

"Ambush!"

"To arms!"

"Protect the carriages!"

Chloé jumped to her feet, throwing herself in front of the nearest carriage to shield it with her body. I drew my sword while still low to the ground and searched for the source of the attack.

We saw them almost at the same time: shadows moving through the trees, fast, coordinated.

Bandits.

A lot of them.

"Thirty!" Leah counted with trembling breath. "There are thirty!"

"Too many for a casual ambush..." I muttered.

They hadn't come for coin.

They had come for whatever the caravan was carrying.

For the artifact.

The soldiers at the front reacted quickly, forming a shield wall. But to my surprise—and immediate fury—instead of advancing backward to defend the rear...

They retreated.

They pulled back toward the carriages.

Leaving us behind.

"What are they doing?" Chloé snarled. "They're abandoning us!"

There was no time to shout at them.

The bandits were already upon us.

Three of them leapt from the trees straight at us. Two more burst from the bushes wielding machetes. Four others closed off the path behind us.

"Ten each," Leah said, trying to sound calm, though her hands shook. "We can handle that... right?"

I inhaled.

"Of course we can."

And the fight began.

One bandit charged straight at me, screaming as he raised his sword. I lunged forward and clashed my blade against his, knocking it aside. My body reacted before my mind, trained by months of combat. I turned, slammed my shoulder into his chest, and threw him back. Another attacker came at my flank; I raised my sword and blocked him just in time.

The impact vibrated through my wrist.

"Lotte, watch out!" Leah shouted.

I stepped back just as a third bandit hurled a dagger from the right. The blade grazed my cheek, slicing the skin. Warm blood mixed with the cold breeze.

But I couldn't stop.

My vision narrowed into lines, into movement. My body acted on instinct. A diagonal strike. A pivot backward. A quick parry. I knew there were ten of them, but I had no time to count.

My breath burned.

My heart thundered.

And still...

"This is too easy!" Chloé roared from the left.

Her transformed body—bigger, stronger, closer to that of a sacred beast—was a whirlwind. She crushed two bandits at once, slammed them into the ground, then spun with a swipe that disarmed another.

Leah remained in the center. Her spells were quick, concise, precise. She didn't summon large explosions; she couldn't. Not without drawing attention from more than bandits.

But that didn't make her any less lethal.

"Lux Minor!"

Five spheres of light formed around her staff and shot forward like projectiles. They struck the arms and legs of the bandits surrounding her, breaking bones, diverting weapons, knocking enemies down.

Her magic wasn't flashy.

It was surgical.

Efficient.

Controlled.

But still...

There were ten of them.

And they wanted us dead.

"Lotte!" she suddenly yelled.

I sensed the danger a second too late.

A bandit lunged at me from behind, a curved blade raised. I barely had time to turn. I saw the blade fall toward my neck. I wouldn't block in time.

Then—

A flash.

The talisman Ronan had given us lit on my chest like a star and shattered into countless particles of light. The blade struck an invisible barrier and exploded backward, sending the bandit to his knees.

The attack meant to kill me... dissolved.

"One life less spent," I muttered, shaking.

The bandit tried to rise, but I drove my sword through him before he could.

"Focus!" Chloé barked. "There are still many left!"

And she was right.

The bandits were clumsy but numerous. They attacked in groups of three or four, trying to surround us, separate us, overwhelm us with numbers.

But we were used to fighting together.

Leah raised a barrier when they tried to split us. Chloé leapt in front of me when a machete nearly cut my leg. I stopped two enemies who were about to attack Leah from behind.

A perfect triangle.

A rhythm we knew by heart.

The problem was... we couldn't maintain it forever.

One of my opponents grabbed my arm after taking a slash and, despite bleeding heavily, threw me against a tree. Pain surged down my back. I spat blood, forcing myself up through ragged breaths.

The forest rang with screams.

With steel.

With tension.

And within all that noise... I heard something else.

Laughter.

Mockery.

I turned.

The adventurers from the other groups...

The soldiers...

Were huddled near the carriages.

Watching us.

Waiting.

They weren't helping.

They weren't moving.

And some were even pointing at us, laughing among themselves, as if watching us fight for our lives were some kind of entertainment.

Traitors.

Cowards.

Rage filled me—hot, sharp, uncontrollable.

But I couldn't go to them.

Not yet.

I had to survive first.

I rejoined the fight.

One by one, the bandits fell.

Chloé moved like a storm.

Leah maintained the magical flow.

I cut and blocked, cut and blocked, until my arms screamed.

"Three left!" Leah shouted.

"I've got them!" Chloé growled.

She lunged at the last enemies. One tried to run, but she bit into his arm and threw him down. Another tried to spear her, but Leah pushed him back with a gust of wind. I broke through the guard of the last one, finishing him cleanly.

When the final body fell, the forest fell silent again.

Only our ragged breathing filled the air.

Chloé bled from a deep cut on her hip.

Leah's lip was split, her brow torn.

My hand trembled though I tried to hide it.

But we had won.

Thirty bandits.

Just the three of us.

I wiped the blood from my face, inhaled sharply, and began walking toward the caravan, an anger burning in my chest so strong it made my vision tremble.

I was going to scream at them.

Confront them.

Demand an explanation.

How they dared.

How they could call themselves protectors.

How they could abandon us like that.

They saw me coming.

Some adventurers stepped back.

Others crossed their arms defiantly, as if they had any right to judge us.

"You...!" I began, my voice shaking with fury.

But a warm hand grabbed my arm.

Leah.

She shook her head.

"It's not worth it," she whispered, barely audible.

"They left us! We could have died!" I protested.

"And yet we didn't," she answered with a serenity that made no sense after what we had just lived.
"That hurts them more than anything we could say."

I froze.

She was trembling too.

But it wasn't fear.

It was dignity.

"If we shout," she continued, "they'll get what they want: to make us seem unstable, emotional, dangerous... different."

"That's not fair..."

"Nothing here is fair," she said. "But we won't hand them weapons to use against us."

Chloé approached, pressing her head gently against my shoulder.

"Leah's right, Lotte. They've already chosen to see us as enemies. Nothing we say will change that... but our actions will."

I swallowed hard.

The rage burned inside me.

Accepting such injustice hurt.

Being forced into silence hurt even more.

But I wasn't only the sword of our group.

I was Leah's shield.

I took a deep breath.

Closed my eyes.

Lowered my head.

"Fine," I whispered. "Let's go."

Leah smiled faintly.

A tired, broken smile... but real.

We returned to our position without another word.

The soldiers stared as if they didn't understand how we were still standing.

The adventurers pretended not to see us, as if what had happened were normal.

But I saw something in their eyes.

A mix of fear and shame.

They knew what they had done.

And they knew we knew.

The caravan moved again, slowly.

The tension didn't fade.

Nor did the forest stop watching us.

But as we walked, Leah murmured:

"Lotte... when this is over... we're going to show them who I really am."

I looked at her.

Her eyes burned with fire.

"Yes," I replied. "We'll do it together."

And we kept walking—wounded, silent—

but more united than ever.