

## Frozen Star 137

### Chapter 137: Cracks on the Road

[POV Liselotte]

Night had fallen over the camp like a blanket too heavy to shake off. It still smelled of dry iron, rancid sweat, and the snow stirred during the fight that afternoon.

The bandits' attack had been fast, brutal, and above all, revealing.

Not of their strength... but of the cowardice of those who marched with us.

After Leah stopped us from causing a scene in front of the soldiers, we returned to our small space beside one of the last wagons. A weak fire burned in the embers, and only a few adventurers lingered nearby, tending their weapons or sharing jokes that weren't remotely funny.

The three of us sat in silence at the edge of the forest.

My knuckles were still tense.

I could feel the heat of the battle... but not physical pain: rage.

Pure, heavy, insistent rage.

Leah was cleaning her staff with more delicacy than necessary.

Chloé, in her human form, had her arms crossed, watching us both with an expression somewhere between alert and worried.

No one spoke.

Until I couldn't hold it anymore.

"This was stupid," I spat, my voice dry, as if the words were coming from some sharp corner inside me.

Leah lifted her gaze, surprised by my tone.

"Lotte... we can talk later. You're tired."

"It's not tiredness," I said through clenched teeth. "It's anger."

She frowned slightly but stayed silent.

The fire in front of us popped a spark into the air, as if trying to break the quiet.

“I can’t believe,” I continued, “that they just backed off like that. All of them. B-rank adventurers, trained soldiers... and they left us alone against thirty bandits!”

Leah took a deep breath. I knew that kind of breath—her way of searching for patience.

“Lotte, we survived. That’s the point. Nothing happened.”

“That’s not the point,” I snapped before she finished. “The point is that they were supposed to fight with us. That’s the mission. The escort. Not five people hiding behind us waiting for us to clear the path.”

Chloé narrowed her eyes, glancing between us, measuring the terrain, holding back words so as not to make things worse.

“They did it on purpose,” I muttered, feeling the words burn. “They wanted to see if we could handle it. Or if Leah was a threat. Or if—”

“Lotte,” Leah interrupted. “Enough.”

She didn't say it loudly, nor aggressively—just... tired.

And that made me stop.

She set her staff aside carefully and looked at me directly.

"Not everyone sees us as equals. We've known that since before leaving Whirikai," she said slowly. "We knew this would happen sooner or later."

"Not like this," I replied. "I never imagined they'd abandon us on purpose."

"Maybe it wasn't on purpose."

Something in me exploded.

"Do you really believe that? After how they've looked at us since the first day?"

Leah pressed her lips together.

"Lotte, this is a dangerous mission. Things don't always go—"

“I’m not talking about ‘things’,” I said, pointing at the adventurers laughing on the other side of the camp. “I’m talking about people. Decisions. Their decisions.”

She held my gaze, not backing down.

“It’s useless to get angry about what we can’t control.”

“And what can we control?” I shot back. “Accept everything with our heads down as if we were trash? Let them use us? Let them look at you like you’re a monster?”

She tensed. I saw the sting in her eyes.

And seeing it made me regret the words—but it was too late.

“I’m not a monster,” she said, her voice trembling but firm.

“I know that! I didn’t say you were one. I said they—”

“Then don’t speak for them,” she snapped. “I’ve heard enough of what they think. I don’t need to hear it from you too.”

The words hit like a blow straight to the chest.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Well that’s how it sounded.”

My breath quickened. Frustration boiled in me, mixed with the weight of having touched a wound Leah still didn’t know how to close.

“Leah... you—”

“I don’t want to fight you, Lotte,” she murmured, looking away.

“Neither do I. But you’re acting like nothing happened. Like it doesn’t matter!”

She looked at me again, but now there was something new in her eyes.

Not anger. Not sadness.

Pain.

“It matters. Of course it matters,” she said softly, with a sincerity so clean it hurt. “But if I get angry every time someone looks at me like a mistake... I won’t be able to go on. I need to move forward. I need... to breathe.”

“And I don’t?” I replied, unable to hold it back.

“You too,” she said gently. “But you have a home to return to. A family. A name no one questions. I... have a portrait in a castle and a rumor saying I don’t exist.”

I froze.

The fire cracked between us.

“And when you say ‘how they look at us’... all I hear is ‘how they look at me’, because they don’t look at you that way. Only at me.”

That one broke something inside.

I clenched my fists.

“Maybe... maybe you’re right,” I admitted, lowering my gaze slightly. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t care. It doesn’t mean I don’t want to help you. That I don’t want—”

“I don’t need you to protect me from my own memories,” she whispered. “I just need you to be here... with me. Not in front. At my side.”

Silence.

Long. Painful. Cold.

Chloé sighed, exasperated.

“This is going the wrong way. A very wrong way.”

Leah stood up slowly.

“I don’t want to keep talking. I’m too... full. And so are you.”

I swallowed hard.



“Are you... angry at me?”

She hesitated.

“I don’t know what I am.”

That hurt more than a yes.

And she left.

She walked toward the edge of the camp, where the firelight no longer reached the snow, where the night was thicker.

I watched her go, feeling an emptiness open in my chest.

Chloé sat beside me.

“Lotte.”

"I don't want to talk," I said.

"Well, I do," she replied without hesitation. "What you said... it hurt her. And you know it."

I closed my eyes.

"I know."

"The truth is, you're right in your part. And Leah is right in hers."

She leaned forward. "But you're not fighting the adventurers. You're fighting something Leah fears. Something that hurts her from before she even met you."

"I know that," I murmured. "But I don't want to watch her bow to them."

"She didn't," Chloé replied. "She stopped you so you wouldn't lose something important."

"What thing?"

“Yourself.”

My throat tightened. My eyes burned—not with sadness... but with helplessness.

“I shouldn’t have said what I said.”

“Then go fix it.”

“She doesn’t want to talk.”

“Then wait. But don’t stay stuck here.”

She was right.

But I couldn’t move.

Not yet.

Then I heard laughter.

Loud. Mocking.

The B-rank adventurers were nearby, smoking by the fire. One of them stared at us.

“What’s wrong with the little princesses? Did they fight?”

“They look like a married couple,” another added. “Or worse, two brats who lost their toy.”

Laughter.

Ugly and sharp.

Rage climbed up my throat.

I stood instantly, ready to—something violent, I didn’t even know what.

Chloé grabbed my arm.

“Lotte. No. Don’t you dare.”

“Why not?” I said, my voice trembling. “I’m sick of them. Sick of their jokes, their stares—”

“Because that’s exactly what they want.”

Then Commander Alistair’s voice cut through the air.

“Silence!”

The laughter stopped immediately.

He approached with firm steps. His presence was always cold, but this time there was something different.

Something calculated.

He looked at the adventurers with disdain.

“Do you think this is a tavern? Or have you forgotten that tomorrow we continue through enemy territory?”

The adventurers lowered their eyes.

“Forgive us, commander.”

“I don’t care about your apology,” he said, before allowing a faint, strange smile to appear on his face.

His gaze slid toward Leah, who was still at the edge of the forest, her back to the fire.

“But I do expect you to understand,” he added in a tone I didn’t like,

“that you should not provoke someone you cannot face.”

The adventurers swallowed hard.

And for the first time, I realized something:

The commander wasn’t defending Leah.

He was measuring her.

Testing her.

Watching how far she could be pushed before breaking.

And that—more than the mockery, more than the cowardice of the others—made something boil inside me.

Chloé murmured:

“Do you see it now?”

Yes.

I saw it clearly.

The bandit attack wasn't a coincidence.

Their retreat wasn't either.

The commander's silence during the fight... even less.

It had all been a test.

A social, emotional, psychological trap.

For Leah.

And I had let myself be dragged exactly where he wanted.

I stood up abruptly.

"Where are you going?" Chloé asked.

"To apologize."

"And if she doesn't want to talk?"



“Then I’ll stay until she does. I’m not repeating the mistake of leaving her alone.”

Chloé smiled faintly.

“Go.”

I nodded.

And I ran toward the edge of the forest.

Toward Leah.

Toward the person I had hurt without meaning to.

Toward the only one I could not afford to lose on this journey.

Because if I learned anything today...

It wasn’t about the bandits.

Or the adventurers.

Or the demons hiding in the woods.

It was this:

The real cracks don't open in battle.

They open between those who walk together.

And I wasn't going to let a crack open between us.

Never.