

Frozen Star 147

Chapter 147: Shadows That Whisper in the Night

[POV Liselotte]

The cave slept.

Or at least it tried.

The campfires had dwindled into reddish embers that flickered like tired eyes among the improvised shelters. The breathing of children and elders filled the air with a soft murmur, as if the mountain itself exhaled through them. Moisture slid down the rock walls, dripping at irregular intervals that blended with a distant sigh, the rustle of a sack, or the scrape of a blanket.

Silence in a camp is never true silence.

It feels more like a muffled whisper of life held back, tense, waiting.

I was supposed to be sleeping.

But my eyes were only closed.

My breathing, slow and measured.

My body, still beneath the coarse blanket.

My awareness, awake.

Too awake.

There was a sound that didn't belong to the cave. A faint one, almost imperceptible, but constant... a dragging step, a soft creak, something approaching with care. It wasn't the restless noise of a child turning in their sleep. Nor a soldier shifting position. This sound had intention.

Chloé, at my feet, breathed steadily. But her ears were tense, stiff, fully upright.

And Leah, sleeping beside me, twitched the fingers of one hand as if her body sensed the tension before her mind did.

I forced myself to keep my chest still, breathing as if nothing could affect me.

As if I were still asleep.

The sound stopped a few meters away.

It stayed there.

Waiting.

Then a voice came.

“Marcus.”

A male whisper, low, almost a restrained growl.

“Come. Everyone’s asleep.”

The answer came immediately, and my skin prickled.

“Sure.”

Marcus.

A cold knot formed in the pit of my stomach.

The footsteps moved toward a side passage of the chamber. Very slowly, I raised my head a few millimeters—just enough to see. Chloé opened one golden eye, glanced toward the darkness, then closed it again as if still asleep.

I listened.

With all my soul.

The steps stopped at a safe distance from most of the survivors. Marcus spoke first, his tone tense, almost anxious.

“How many soldiers are still in condition to fight?”

The other replied:

“Around sixteen. The rest are injured or exhausted. But the newcomers... they might be useful.”

My heart stopped.

Marcus let out a breath, like someone finally releasing a burden too heavy to hold.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to talk about.”

A silence.

They were close enough that I could hear their boots scrape the stone.

“Now that we have reinforcements...” Marcus continued, “we could use them to break through to the east. The demons don’t know them. They won’t recognize them.”

My blood froze.

“You want to use them as bait?” the soldier said—not horrified, just surprised.

“If they stay here with us, we’ll all die,” Marcus answered bluntly. “The caravan is already delivered. They’ve done their part. But we... we need to survive. We have civilians, children, injured. If we send a group ahead... making noise, distracting them, drawing the demons to follow...”

The soldier finished:

“...the rest of us could escape to another town without being noticed.”

A dull buzzing started pounding behind my ears.

Marcus murmured:

“It’s that... or wait for the demons to return and find us trapped like rats.”

“I understand.”

A silence.

Then the soldier added:

“It’s a good idea.”

The blow I felt in my chest was physical.

Marcus lowered his voice, but I heard him anyway.

“No one else can know. Not yet. First I need to see how many of the new soldiers are actually capable of running.”

My blood boiled.

My jaw clenched so hard I thought my teeth might crack.

“So we prepare tomorrow,” the soldier said.

“Without them noticing.”

“Exactly.”

They slowly walked away, toward another chamber. I listened until their steps completely faded.

Then I opened my eyes.

All at once.

Rage surged up my throat, raw and burning.

I sat up with a sharp movement, forcing myself to stay quiet. My legs trembled when I tried to stand, but I kept my balance.

I was going to follow them.

I was going to confront Marcus right now, drag him by the collar if I had to.

I was going to—

A soft voice stopped me.

“Lotte.”

I turned.

Leah was sitting up, looking at me with tired but lucid eyes. Her hair fell in dark waves over her shoulders, lit faintly by the orange glow of the embers. Her tone was calm—too calm for the tension boiling inside me.

“Lie back down.”

“What...? How can you...? Did you hear—?” I whispered.

“All of it.”

The word fell between us like a stone into water.

Before I could respond, Chloé rose with a silent stretch, her movements fluid and elegant. Her fur bristled slightly, showing she was far from calm. She walked to me, pressed her head against my side, and let out an almost inaudible growl—a warning full of meaning.

“Chloé heard it too,” Leah said. “She expected it.”

“She expected it?” I repeated, disbelief staining my whisper. “You knew?”

“I didn’t know it would happen so soon,” Leah corrected as she adjusted her cloak over her legs. “But Marcus had a strange look while we checked the supplies. I’ve seen that look before.”

“What look?”

“The look of someone who has already decided to sacrifice one group to save another.”

I couldn't answer.

The cave felt narrower, as if the walls were closing in. I placed a hand on my chest, trying to contain the pressure burning in my throat.

“They want to use us,” I finally said. “Use us as distraction animals. As bait.”

“Yes,” Leah replied without hesitation.

“And you want me to... go back to sleep?” My voice cracked slightly. “Just like that?”

Leah extended her hand toward me.

“Lotte. Listen.”

But I was too shaken to listen.

Too furious.

Too betrayed.

“They could’ve said something! They could’ve been honest! We’re not idiots, Leah. We know this place won’t survive another attack.”

“That’s exactly why,” Leah said, still calm. “We gain nothing by provoking them now.”

I clenched my fists.

“And what if they try to put the plan into action tomorrow? What if they really mean to hand us over like sacrifices?”

“If they try,” Leah said, “we won’t allow it. But we can’t fight in this state. Look at your hands, Lotte.”

I looked.

They were trembling.

With anger.

With exhaustion.

With restrained fury.

Chloé sat beside me, placed a paw on my feet, and looked at me with those golden eyes that always pierced straight through me. It was a simple gesture, but it spoke volumes: calm, wait, think.

I breathed.

Once.

Twice.

Until I managed to nod.

Leah relaxed her shoulders slightly, as if she'd been holding her breath.

“Lie down,” she said. “We can’t let them suspect we know. If Marcus thinks we’re unaware... he’ll grow careless.”

“You want us to wait... and act later?”

“Yes.”

A pause.

“Lotte... we’re not alone. I won’t let them use us.”

Chloé growled softly, approving.

I slowly sat back down on the blanket.

“I don’t like this,” I muttered.

“I don’t either,” Leah replied.

I lay down, though my body resisted every second.

I stared into the darkness where Marcus had vanished.

My heart hammered.

My thoughts were blades.

“Leah.”

“Yes?”

“If they try anything tomorrow...”

The mage closed her eyes, exhaling a thin breath.

“I know.”

“Then... are we prepared?”

Leah opened one eye, a faint blue glint in the dark.

“Always.”

Chloé curled against my side, her warm body shielding my legs. The cave once again filled with the murmurs of sleeping breaths. But it was no longer a refuge.

It was a trap.

A nest of shadows and secrets.

And as my eyes slowly closed, I knew the real battle hadn't begun yet.