

## Frozen Star 23

### Chapter 23: The Long Night

[POV Liselotte]

The night descended like a slab of lead upon the world. It was not a gradual dusk, but an abrupt fall, a deliberate extinction of the light.

There were no stars to dot the velvet black sky; the moon, that eternal witness, had hidden behind an impenetrable shroud of clouds, refusing to illuminate what was to come.

It was an absolute, suffocating darkness, an absence of light that seemed to absorb every last breath of hope. A darkness without mercy.

From atop the wall rebuilt with sweat, blood, and desperate tenacity, the world seemed to hold its breath.

Below, the forest that had so often been refuge and path became a vast, immobile shadow, frozen by a supernatural silence. Not the furtive flutter of a night bird, nor the whisper of a leaf dragged by a nonexistent breeze.

Only that silence. A dense, tangible silence that weighed on the ears like soaked cotton and, paradoxically, hurt.

It was the silence of the predator lurking, of fear clotted in throats, of the countdown to the inevitable.

The wind, when it blew, brought no freshness, but a chill that sank to the bone, a foretaste of winter or of the abyss.

And with it, an ancient, primordial certainty, thick as tar, slipped through the cracks of the palisade. A sour, penetrating smell that clung to the palate: the metallic scent of blood not yet spilled, mixed with the fetid damp of mud stirred by countless feet, and something more... the rancid perfume of accumulated violence.

War.

The unmistakable scent of war, which had once soaked these lands and now returned, ravenous.

I gripped the hilt of my sword tightly until the rough wood carved grooves into my palm. A fine tremor, almost imperceptible, ran through my fingers.

It wasn't the shiver of fear, not this time. It was something deeper, fiercer: rage. A pure, crystalline rage that boiled in my veins like molten metal.

This village, these smoking houses barely rebuilt over the ashes of the past, these streets that were just beginning to know the steady footsteps of children again... this was not just a place on the map. It was a home.

A home to which, with nails and teeth, with shared tears and laughter, we had restored its soul. We had planted hope in barren soil, had woven a community from the tear.

And now, those shadows lurking in the forest meant to devour it once more, reduce it to rubble and ashes, to a bitter memory.

No.

I would not allow it. Not while a trace of life remained in my body.

I lowered my gaze, mentally tracing the defenses we had cobbled together in desperation and cunning.

Traps hidden under a deceptive blanket of leaf litter: deep pits with sharpened stakes at the bottom, ready to swallow the unwary; trapdoors that would unleash a rain of fire-hardened wooden spears; jars of cooking oil and resin patiently collected, strategically placed, awaiting only a spark to become curtains of devouring fire.

Each trap was a silent prayer, an act of faith in our survival.

The village itself breathed a sepulchral silence. No light was seen in the windows, no child's cry heard.

The families, the elderly, the weakest, were hidden in the deepest cellars, in forgotten basements we had reinforced, huddled in the darkness, holding their breath, embracing one another in the shadows.

Only a few souls, including Chloé and me, remained on the surface. Twenty fighters scattered along the palisade, hidden behind sandbag parapets or crouched on watch platforms.

They weren't soldiers. They were the blacksmith with his powerful arms, the young goat-herding girl with a now fierce gaze, the farmer who knew every furrow of his land, the teenager just beginning to glimpse adulthood.

Armed with what they had: sharpened sickles, heavy hammers, hay forks turned into improvised spears, even a cast-iron skillet clutched tightly.

Tools of daily life turned into instruments of death.

There was fear, yes. I sensed it in the air, an acidic smell that mingled with the forest. I saw it in the tension of clenched jaws, in the whiteness of knuckles wrapped around weapons.

But above the fear, as palpable as the cold stone beneath my feet, there was determination. A will of iron, carved from past suffering, to defend the piece of land that gave them identity.

To no longer be displaced, humiliated, decimated.

We waited. The minutes dragged like drops of resin—heavy, endless.

Every distant creak in the forest, every sigh of the wind, made hearts jump in chests. The darkness was an accomplice, amplifying the sounds of the imagination. Was it a bird? A snapped branch? Or...?

Tension was a steel wire stretched to its limit, about to break.

Chloé was by my side, still as a bronze statue, her senses extended to the maximum, scanning the darkness.

Her breathing was the only constant sound, a slow and deep rhythm trying to calm my own, which raced.

"Do you think they'll come tonight?" I finally asked, my voice hoarse from tension and the cold air, not taking my eyes off the indistinct horizon where the forest merged with the sky.

"I don't think so" Chloé replied at once, firm, without the slightest hesitation, her voice a deep whisper cutting through the darkness like a dagger.

I wanted to say something, but Chloé continued before I could.

"I know. They're here. I feel them. I smell their rot. I hear the creaking of their armor beneath the underbrush. They're holding their breath, like us. But their hunger... their hunger screams."

Her words were an icy dagger driven into my gut. They confirmed the visceral certainty already nesting inside me.

The icy wind, as if obeying Chloé, then brought a stronger gust, laden with that ancient, heavy certainty.

The sour smell of rusted iron and mud soaked in something worse than water intensified, engulfing us. War.

It was no longer a possibility, it was a tangible, fetid presence crawling toward us from the heart of the forest.

Until we heard it.

It wasn't a sudden sound, but a vibration that began in the feet, climbed up the legs, and settled in the chest before reaching the ears.

A deep, low ululation. Not human. Not any known animal. It was the sound of the earth being torn open, of a primordial wound opening at the very heart of the forest.

A howl that froze the blood more efficiently than the wind.

"Lights!" shouted a sharp voice, laden with panic, from the western end of the wall.

And then, like cursed stars rising from the earth, they appeared.

Torches.

First a dozen, flickering orange dots dancing in the darkness like demon eyes.

Then fifty, forming a sinister line advancing with deliberate slowness.

Then more than a hundred, maybe two hundred, a river of fire flowing toward us, illuminating the nearest trunks with its sickly glow, revealing dark and twisted forms moving among them.

The forest, our old neighbor, was lighting up with the enemy's fire. A controlled blaze of evil advancing relentlessly.

And with that fire came the sound that had stalked within the silence.

Footsteps. First scattered, like the heavy drops of a rain that announces a storm. Dull thuds against the ground.

Then they multiplied, accelerated, fused into a growing murmur, an ominous whisper.

And then, without warning, they became a continuous thunder, a muffled and constant rumble that made the planks of the palisade vibrate beneath our feet.

It was the sound of a tide, a tide of flesh, steel, and hunger, breaking against our fragile shore of wood and will.

And then... the roars.

Not just the initial ululation, but a cacophony of bestial, defiant cries, thirsty for blood. Roars that tore the night apart, that responded to the fire, that heralded the carnage.

"TO YOUR POSITIONS!" I shouted, and my voice, strangely calm amid the rising chaos, rang out over the din, a call to resistance, a final cry of defiance before the abyss.

The long night, the night we all feared, the night we had tried to ward off with labor and hope, had begun.

Its shadow, long and cold, spread over us, and only the edge of our weapons and the hardness of our hearts could face it.