

Frozen Star 43

Chapter 43: The Cage in the Heart of Fire

[POV Liselotte]

The very air was torn apart.

It was not an orcish roar, that guttural and earthy sound. It was a thunder born in the bowels of a forgotten abyss, a sound that displaced reality. So deep that it vibrated in my molars, in the marrow of my bones, making the layer of snow beneath my boots crack as if the earth itself shrank in terror.

The camp, already turned into a hell of clashing steel, torn screams, and the acrid smell of blood and sweat, darkened all at once. Not because of clouds, but because of a presence that absorbed the light.

The central bonfire, until then a pyre of orange flames, flared with supernatural violence. The flames stretched like claws, turning into a spectral, poisonous green that illuminated faces with cadaverous pallor. And from that unholy glow, like souls escaping from an infernal forge, emerged the silhouettes.

They were not orcs. They were nightmares made flesh.

Tall bodies, unnaturally slender, like elongated shadows cast by a perverse light. Their skin was of a deep black, not matte, but wet, like freshly polished onyx under the moon. Beneath that dark surface, incandescent veins pulsed with a reddish-orange glow, like rivers of lava trapped beneath basalt.

Their eyes... eyes without pupils, without whites, only perfect spheres of carbuncle red, burning and empty. They wielded weapons that seemed carved from obsidian and nightmare: twisted blades, tips that did not reflect light but devoured it, leaving trails of darkness in their wake.

Demons.

The word fell into my mind like a block of lead, freezing my blood.

The constant murmur of the adventurers, that hum of concentration and effort, shattered to pieces. It turned into screams of disbelief, into howls of sudden pain, into curses drowned by terror.

The familiar clang of swords against orcish axes was replaced by a new sound, sharp and hopeless: the shiiing of high-quality steel striking something infinitely harder, denser, as if they were swinging their weapons against mountains of molten iron.

“Hold the formation! Shields up!” roared a veteran of rank C, his voice a thunder trying to master the storm, but it was already too late. Fear, that insidious worm, had already pierced the armor of their discipline, sowing cracks through which darkness seeped.

I watched, paralyzed, my eyes wide as plates, unable to look away from the carnage. My breath was a knife of ice tearing my lungs apart from within. These were not orcs, strong beasts but of flesh and bone. These were... something else. The rank C adventurers, heroes whose deeds filled taverns and whose scars were medals of honor, fought against them. And still, they fell back. They staggered.

I saw one, a human colossus in gleaming plate armor, swing his greatsword with a cry of total effort. A descending slash that had split troll skulls, a blow meant to divide the demon from head to pelvis. The dark creature did not even dodge.

It raised a bare hand, black as tar, with veins of fire. Its long fingers, ending in obsidian-sharp claws, closed around the blade with a metallic snap, dry and final.

And then, with a careless motion, like one snapping a dry branch for the fire, it broke the tempered steel.

The answer was a lightning bolt of darkness. A punch that tore through the air with a sinister whistle. The warrior's helm, thick forged steel, sank as if it were wet clay beneath a hammer. There was no scream.

Only a ghastly, hollow crunch, and the body, suddenly lifeless, collapsed like an empty sack, the blood not even having time to stain the snow before the infernal heat evaporated it.

A stifled cry, high-pitched, animal, escaped my throat.

"They are no opponents, Lotte..." Chloé's voice was like a low growl, vibrating, but not of fear. It was rage. Pure, primal rage, the fury of the cornered wolf watching its pack slaughtered. "They are true demons. Blood of the Abyss. The orcs... they were just the bait, the lure to draw us here. These... these are the reapers that followed behind."

I tried to tear my eyes away from the feast of death, from the horror that shredded the best as if they were straw dolls. My instinct cried to search for a way out, to hide, to survive. But then my gaze, sweeping the chaos in search of an impossible escape, locked onto it.

At the very heart of the camp, surrounded by the green bonfires casting grotesque, dancing shadows, and the tents of hide and bone beginning to scorch and blacken, there was a structure that did not fit. It was not a tattered tent, nor an improvised altar of blood-stained stones. It was a cage.

Small. Far too small for the scale of horror around it. Barely large enough to hold a crouched adult man, or perhaps something smaller. But it was built with a precision that froze the blood. Thick bars, blacker than night, that seemed made of the same material as the demons' weapons.

And anchoring it to the frozen ground, chains. Not crude iron, but intricate links, as thick as my arm, glowing with a dull reddish gleam, as if an inner fire consumed them slowly. A glow that spoke of ancient, dark, binding magic.

And inside... just a glimmer. A fleeting movement, a whisper of shape in the shadows. Something that twisted, or perhaps only breathed, too quickly to recognize, but enough to freeze the air in my lungs.

It was not a storeroom. It was not a trophy. That cage was the core. The focal point of all this display of horror. A premonition, sharp as Chloé's claw, pierced my insides, lighting a flame of terrifying certainty: what they kept there, bound and chained, was the reason why the brutish orcs and the elegant demons shared this frozen hell. The secret motive for their march into human lands. The very heart of the infection that threatened to poison Glarien.

A nearby demon, with a careless swing of its dark arm, hurled two adventurers who tried to flank it. Their bodies hit the ground with a dull crunch, far away. The cage vibrated with the impact, the reddish chains clinking with a discordant, metallic sound. And for an instant, a fleeting heartbeat of frozen time, the green flames of the nearby bonfire lit up the inside of the black bars.

They reflected what looked like... a face.

Human.

The sight pierced me like a spear of pure ice, stabbing through the center of my chest, stopping my heart.

“LOTTE!” Chloé’s mental roar was a gale of panic and desperate fury. “NO! For all that is sacred, you cannot—! It’s a trap! Whatever is in there is the bait, the poison, something worse than all this death together! If you break those chains, you free not a prisoner, but the very devil that commands them!”

But my feet... my feet were already moving.

Before my mind could weigh the suicide, before fear could anchor my muscles, something deeper, more visceral, had taken control. I lunged forward, toward the heart of the green fire, toward the black cage.

The world narrowed to a tunnel. To the dark bars. To the fleeting vision of that human face trapped in hell.

Each step was a challenge hurled into Death's maw. An orc spear, wielded by a trembling hand, grazed my cheek, leaving behind a trail of icy air and fetid breath. A green flare, unleashed by a demon battling a mage, scorched the edge of my cloak, filling my nostrils with the stench of burnt wool and sulfur.

An adventurer, his face twisted by terror, shouted something at me, his words lost in the deafening din, before being swallowed by the tide of clashing bodies and disappearing.

The snow crunched beneath my boots, but I no longer felt its biting cold. I did not feel the fear that should have paralyzed me. Only a magnetic pull, irresistible, toward that throbbing prison at the camp's center. A magnet pulling at my soul more than my legs.

"Lotte, damn your obstinacy, LISTEN!" Chloé's mental cry was a howl of pure anguish. "We must leave—"

Her words were ice darts, but they bounced off an armor of blind determination I hadn't known I possessed.

The battlefield faded. The agonized screams, the beastly roars, the metallic clashes, the unbearable stench of blood, entrails, and corrupt magic... all blurred, receded, as if sinking beneath the waters of a turbulent sea.

Only the cage existed.

Only that throbbing secret, trapped in blackness and fire, at the very heart of the hell they had unleashed upon the forest.

And when I was close enough, when the heat of the green flames licked my face and the reddish glow of the chains painted my skin a sickly hue, when I reached out my trembling hand, not to the bars but to the first burning link of the chain... I heard it.

It was not the thunderous roar of a demon.

It was not the torn scream of a dying man.

Not even Chloé's whisper, now reduced to a hum of powerless panic.

It was a voice.

Human.

Soft.

Fragile as glass about to shatter.

Barely audible above the din, but resonating in the absolute silence of my focused soul

“Help...”