

Frozen Star 49

Chapter 49: Lessons of Life

[POV Liselotte]

The cutting cold of the winter morning pierced my skin like fine needles, but nothing compared to the fire burning inside me.

A fire fueled by rage, frustration, and a deep sense of injustice. I had been walking aimlessly for what seemed like hours. My hands, wrapped in worn gloves, were clenched into fists so tight my knuckles hurt. Each exhale formed fleeting, agitated clouds in front of my face, ghostly mirrors of my inner turmoil.

Chloé trotted at my side. She had remained respectfully silent most of the time, though I could feel the weight of her amber gaze on me, scrutinizing, analyzing, waiting. Finally, it was her voice that broke the circle of my obsessive thoughts.

“Do you plan to keep walking in circles until the sun decides to abandon us and the moon inherits this frozen silence?”

I growled, a guttural sound carried away instantly by the wind. I didn’t want to talk, to reason. I just wanted to walk until exhaustion defeated the anger.

“Lotte.” Her tone changed, becoming firmer, a sharp reminder of her presence. “This isn’t taking you anywhere. You’re only feeding the storm inside you. You need to calm down.”

"I'm trying," I replied aloud, and the words came out harsh, steeped in a bitterness that surprised me. "I've been trying ever since I crossed that damned door. But every time I close my eyes... every time I remember her empty gaze, those poisoned words... I feel the blood boiling again in my veins."

"She's wounded, Lotte," Chloé insisted, her patience a deliberate counterpoint to my fury. "Deeply wounded. Not only in her body."

"That doesn't give her the right to treat me as if I were one of her captors!" I exploded, and my voice burst out, shaking loose a handful of snow from a nearby branch. "I didn't put those chains on her! I didn't lock her up! I risked everything to get her out of there! And what do I get in return? Contempt. Distrust. As if my compassion were counterfeit currency."

Chloé didn't respond immediately. We advanced several more meters, our steps marking a discordant rhythm. The cold air cleansed my lungs but not my spirit. Finally, her voice returned, softer but no less firm.

"And since when do you need a 'right' or permission to do what your heart dictates is right? You helped her because something inside you, something pure and stubborn, drove you to do it. Not because you expected a crown of flowers or a poem in your honor. You did it for her, not for her gratitude."

I bit my lower lip hard, nearly drawing blood. I couldn't deny the truth in her words, but they hurt in a different way, deeper. They hurt my pride.

She then stepped ahead, crossing my path and stopping in front of me, forcing me to halt. Her powerful figure, her frosted fur glistening under the pale light, was a barrier of reality. Her wolf's eyes, wise and ancient, looked at me with an intensity that pierced through my anger.

"I admit it hurts," she said, and her voice was surprisingly gentle. "I admit her words were like daggers of ice, and they pierced deeply. But tell me, Lotte, with all the honesty you have left... what did you expect to find in the eyes of someone who has spent not days, not months, but years in a cage, feeling how every sunrise could be the last? Did you expect a smile of relief? A whispered 'thank you' with tears of joy? An embrace like a long-lost sister?"

"I expected..." I stopped, my voice breaking, feeling the words stuck in my throat, mixed with anger and a rising shame. "I expected that at least she could see I was different. That she could trust me. Just a little. Just enough not to look at me as if I were the next jailer."

Chloé tilted her head, a gesture that in her was at once curious and profoundly judgmental.

"Trust? In ten minutes of conversation? After five long years of darkness, pain, of betrayals probably unspeakable? Lotte, be honest with yourself. If you had gone through what she did, if your days and nights had been a hell of loneliness and fear... would you blindly trust the first face that showed up, no matter how kind it seemed? Or would your instinct scream it's another trap, another cruel game before the final blow?"

I lowered my gaze. The burning fury that had consumed me began to subside, not by extinction but by suffocation, smothered under a wave of cold, uncomfortable understanding. A bitter shame rose in my throat.

"I don't know," I admitted in a whisper the wind nearly carried away. "Maybe not."

She then leaned closer and brushed the back of my hand with her cold muzzle. The gesture was surprisingly tender, a comforting contact in the cold.

“Then give her time. It’s not you, with all your haste and need for validation, who can dictate how long it takes for such a deep wound to heal. The time to heal is hers, not yours. Your job is not to rush her, but to be there when she’s ready.”

Her words, simple and laden with an undeniable truth, pierced me more deeply than any reproach. I took a deep breath, a conscious effort to release some of the tension knotted in my shoulders, my jaw, my soul.

“Maybe... maybe you’re right,” I admitted in a murmur, the last resistance abandoning my body, leaving me feeling empty and tired. “But I need... I need to think far from there. I don’t want to go back to the guild right now. Not with her there, not with that gaze.”

Chloé inclined her head in a gesture of acceptance. There was no more discussion.

“Then let’s go back to the temple. There, the walls know how to keep secrets, and silences are allies, not enemies. Perhaps among the candles and ancient stones, you’ll find not only calm but also the answers your heart is desperately searching for.”

I nodded, this time without protest. It was a plan. A refuge.

The temple rose before us as it always had: serene, impassive, a bastion of gray stone against the fleeting nature of the world and its dramas. Its tall columns seemed to hold not only the roof but the very weight of the winter sky. As we passed through its solid wooden doors, the air changed.

The dry cold of the outside was replaced by a still freshness that smelled of old beeswax, of extinguished incense, and of peace accumulated over centuries. The light filtering through the tall stained glass windows was dim, mostly blues and grays, painting the marble floor with cold-colored patches that looked like calm waters.

The silence here was of another quality. Not the empty silence of the winter forest, nor the silence laden with whispers and tensions of the guild. It was a deep, contemplative silence that invited you to lower your voice and listen to the beating of your own heart.

Iram welcomed us at the entrance to the main nave. His face, a map of fine wrinkles telling stories of years of service and listening, lit up with a soft, knowing smile at seeing us. His eyes, the color of wet earth, looked at me with a calm that was balm in itself.

"Liselotte," he said, and his voice was as serene as the setting, a deep murmur resonating just enough. He inclined his head slightly in a gesture of welcome. "The wind brings echoes of storm around your name. You come with your heart at war, and the battle is written in your eyes."

I felt the blush rise to my cheeks, a mixture of shame and relief at being understood without long explanations.

"Does everyone already know... over there?" I asked, avoiding his piercing gaze.

“Not everything,” he replied, and his smile widened a little, softening the wrinkles around his eyes. “But the walls of the guild have always been thin for important secrets.”

I sighed, defeated, and lowered my gaze to my feet, beginning to form small puddles on the cold stone floor.

“I don’t know what to do,” I confessed, and the admission hurt me, but it also freed me a little. “I feel... lost. And angry. And terribly wronged.”

“Then you’ve come to the right place,” he said calmly. “Confusion and anger are frequent guests within these walls. Sit, and let’s talk. Give your emotions a place to rest, and perhaps they’ll find their own way.”

I followed him to a small side room, an intimate niche lit only by the quiet flicker of several thick candles on a simple stone altar. We sat on a bench of wood polished by time and use, facing the altar. The flame of the candles reflected in Iram’s serene eyes.

He observed me for a long moment, unhurried, as if he were reading the shadows dancing behind my own eyes. Finally, he spoke, his voice a thread of smoke in the stillness.

“Tell me everything.”