

Frozen Star 76

Chapter 76: In the Pits of Silence

[POV Liselotte]

The darkness of the cave engulfed us immediately, a heavy, suffocating shroud that seemed to absorb not only the light but also the sound, drowning even the echo of our own footsteps against the rocky floor. The stench we had perceived at the entrance intensified with every step deeper we ventured, becoming so thick and penetrating that it clung to the palate and left a metallic, bitter aftertaste on the tongue that was impossible to ignore. The air inside the cavern was dense, damp, and heavy, charged with an almost living quality that made every breath require conscious effort, as if the cave itself were breathing with us, sharing this claustrophobic space.

We advanced with extreme caution, keeping a tight formation that allowed us to guard all flanks. Our shadows stretched grotesque and elongated under the faint light of the torch Leah had conjured with a mere gesture of her hand. The flame flickered uneasily, as if struggling against the darkness that sought to consume it, revealing rocky walls covered in whitish lichens that seemed to move with a life of their own beneath the torch's orange glow, creating optical illusions that tested our senses.

It did not take long before we found the first unmistakable traces of the tragedy that had taken place here. An iron helmet, dented and split cleanly in half, lay abandoned against the wall like the empty shell of some metallic insect. A little farther on, a solitary boot, still with its lace tied in a carefully knotted bow, but without the foot that should have inhabited it—an image disturbing in its absence. A few meters beyond, we found a shield broken into nearly perfect halves, its emblem now unrecognizable under the thick layer of dried blood that covered it like a second, dark, brittle skin.

I stopped in front of a dark puddle that reflected the flickering light of our torch, showing the unsettling viscosity of a liquid I instinctively knew was not water. The blood had not yet completely coagulated, its surface still slightly shifting, which made me gag. A chill crawled down my back like a worm of ice, a primal warning screaming that we should leave at once.

“They were here,” I murmured, and my voice sounded strangely muffled and distant, as if the cave were swallowing it before it could reach my companions’ ears.

Leah swallowed with audible difficulty, pressing her lips so tightly they whitened around the edges. “And they didn’t leave this place. This is where their search ended.”

Chloé pushed her muzzle forward, ears completely flat against her skull, her whole body taut like a bowstring ready to snap. Her mental voice reached us, grave and sharp as the edge of a blade. “Farther ahead there is more. Remains. Corpses. The slaughter took place in the central chamber.”

We followed her in sepulchral silence, heavier than any armor, the air becoming more unbearable with every step, each breath a battle against the smell of death and decay. And then the shadows opened, and we saw them—the images that would forever burn into our memory.

A small clearing within the cave, a natural chamber carved by the patient erosion of centuries, was strewn with bones and torn bodies, ravaged with violence too brutal to comprehend. The men the village chief had sent lay there in various stages of decomposition, some unrecognizable, reduced to little more than heaps of flesh and rags, others still preserving enough of their original form to distinguish hands clenched around weapons that had proven utterly useless against what had hunted them. The surrounding rock was stained with layers of dried blood, overlapping like a macabre mural narrating the staggered violence of what had happened, each layer representing a brutally stolen life.

I brought a hand to my chest, struggling to contain the nausea rising through my throat like an acid tide, while with the other I steadied myself against the cold cave wall. “Gods, what horror...”

Leah turned her gaze away for a moment, her torch trembling visibly in her hand as if it too shared the horror coursing through us. “They died fighting. They defended themselves to the end, but it wasn’t enough.”

Chloé let out a low, continuous growl, her fur completely bristled like a field of silver thorns, her tail stiff and still. “We are not alone here. Something is watching us from the deepest shadows.”

And then we heard them, and we knew she was right.

A heavy sound, like enormous wings dragging lazily against the stone, a sound that belonged to no creature I knew. A low, deep scrape that resonated through the thick air like the heartbeat of a monstrous being that pumped malice instead of blood. Two colossal shadows emerged at the back of the chamber, far too large, far too unnatural to belong to anything that should exist in this world.

From the darkness came two figures that barely fit in the cave, forced to hunch beneath the low ceiling. Nightmarish demons.

Their bodies were tall and disproportionate, with black membranous wings that brushed the walls on either side, shedding fine dust whenever they moved. Their claws gleamed under the torchlight with an unnatural metallic sheen, sharp as freshly honed blades, and their red eyes burned like embers in the gloom, fixed on us with an intensity that froze the blood in my veins. The air around them thickened, charged with a hatred so palpable that my skin prickled from pure survival instinct—a primal reaction to a predator far above us in the food chain.

One of them opened its mouth with exaggerated slowness, revealing rows of jagged, uneven teeth like broken stalactites, and a guttural growl reverberated throughout the cave, so deep it made the stones beneath our feet vibrate and shook us to the bone.

“They smell fresh...” it said in a harsh, rasping voice, as if speaking from a pit filled with gravel and broken bones, each word an assault on the ears.

“Too bold to walk into our nest,” added the other, its words dripping with cruel mockery that promised prolonged pain and suffering, its scarlet eyes gleaming with intelligent malice.

Leah raised the torch with one hand and with the other formed a fiery circle that glowed with growing intensity, ready to be hurled at any moment. “Lotte...” she whispered, without taking her eyes off the beasts for even an instant, her entire focus on the threat before us.

I already had my sword in hand, my breathing heavy and ragged, my heart hammering against my ribs as if trying to shatter them. “I know. I’m ready.”

Chloé stepped forward, placing herself between us and the creatures, her fangs fully bared and gleaming, a continuous growl that thundered like muted storm clouds in my mind. “Then let us fight. We won’t give them the satisfaction of seeing us run.”

The demons stepped forward in unison, their wings scraping the ceiling and dislodging small stones and dust, their claws raking the cave floor with sounds that made my skin crawl and reminded me this was real, that there was no waking from this nightmare. At that precise moment, the tension that had been swelling like a wave on the verge of breaking finally burst into an eruption of action and violence.

And the battle began—a deadly dance in the cave’s darkness, with death itself as a silent, pleased spectator.