

Frozen Star 80

Chapter 80: Shadows in the Rest

[POV Liselotte]

The bustle of the guild was so warm and enveloping that, for a fleeting yet precious instant, it almost felt like an impenetrable refuge against the threats of the outside world. After the intense meeting with Maelor, an attendant led us back to the main hall, where life pulsed with an energy that violently contrasted with the solemnity of the private chamber we had just left. The long solid oak tables were overflowing with adventurers of every rank and imaginable origin, sharing exaggerated tales, steaming food, and strong liquor with the carefree familiarity of those who had faced dangers together and lived to tell the tale.

The wood of the tables, darkened by years of use, was scarred by the marks of mugs being slammed down, spilled drinks, and the incisions of daggers absentmindedly stabbed during lively conversations. The air was heavy with the intoxicating aroma of freshly poured beer, crusty bread pulled straight from the oven, and thick cuts of perfectly roasted meat seasoned with aromatic herbs that perfumed even the farthest corners of the vast hall.

Leah dropped onto one of the long benches with an audible sigh that seemed to come from the very depths of her being, pressing her forehead to the cool surface of the table as if all the tension accumulated over the last few days had suddenly concentrated on her shoulders. Chloé, who had never been particularly discreet about her presence, settled beside us with the proud and imposing bearing of an ancestral guardian, inevitably drawing curious glances, whispered comments, and even a couple of admiring whistles from young adventurers who clearly had never seen a wolf of her size and elegance before.

“If they keep staring at me like I’m a carnival attraction, I’ll start charging admission for every look,” Chloé transmitted with her mental voice, sarcasm dripping with genuine annoyance that made me smile despite my constant vigilance.

I couldn't help but laugh softly as I scratched the spot behind her ear I knew she liked, though my eyes never stopped methodically scanning the hall, evaluating every face, every gesture, every gathering that might pose a potential threat. Amid all the noise and seemingly genuine cheer, part of me remained irredeemably alert, unable to fully relax after what we had experienced in the depths of that cursed cave.

A sturdy waiter with muscular arms and a stained apron brought us a wooden tray laden with dark rye bread, aged cheeses with a pungent aroma, and a thick stew steaming temptingly in deep bowls. Leah lifted her head as if the scent itself were a miraculous elixir capable of bringing her back to life, and immediately began to eat with such genuine enthusiasm that it drew a tender, protective smile from me.

"Slow down," I warned, giving her wrist a light tap when she nearly choked on a chunk of crust too big. "We didn't survive winged demons and blood circles just for you to choke on a piece of bread that's too hard."

She laughed, though still with her mouth half full, a sound that went straight to my heart.

"It's been days since I ate anything worthy of being called decent food, Lotte. This is a feast fit for the gods, and I plan to enjoy it properly."

As I watched her eat with that mix of ravenous hunger and simple joy, I made sure to keep a protective barrier around her, watching that no one got too close without good reason. The adventurers at the table next to us, a group of hardened types with visible scars and well-kept weapons, kept casting sidelong glances our way—not all of them malicious, but more than one carried that calculating gleam I knew all too well after my weeks in the Guild, eyes that measured coldly, weighing whether someone might be easy to deceive, trick into a rigged bet, or, in the worst case, something far more sinister.

Leah, visibly tired and her face still pale from the magical effort unleashed during the battle in the cave, was far too tempting a target for anyone with shady intentions. And I wasn't about to let anyone take advantage of her momentary vulnerability.

My attention suddenly fixed on a tall, broad-shouldered man who rose from his seat at a nearby table with a cup of wine in hand and began walking in our direction with deliberate steps. His stride was slow, but not from drunkenness—rather that of someone who measured every step, every gesture, with calculated confidence that immediately put me on high alert. He wore a longsword at his hip despite his civilian clothes, and his eyes, half-narrowed and scrutinizing, locked onto Leah with an intensity I didn't like at all.

Without taking my eyes off her, still absorbed in her meal as if it were the only thing that mattered in the world, I straightened slightly in my seat, shifting my position to have a better attack angle if necessary and resting one hand casually but firmly on the hilt of my sword. The man noticed my silent warning gesture, our eyes locking in a brief moment heavy with unspoken tension. Though he curved his lips into a crooked smile meant to appear reassuring, he casually changed direction and returned to sit among his companions as if he had never intended to approach.

Chloé let out a barely audible growl that only I could catch amid the general commotion. “That one was coming with bad intentions. Good eye catching it so quickly.”

I nodded subtly, feeling the adrenaline slowly ebbing through my veins. I had already learned in my first weeks among guilds that not everyone bearing an insignia was truly a comrade. Most were simply survivors chasing their own gain, and the dangerous secrets we carried after our discovery in the cave could be far too tempting a prize to fall into the wrong hands.

Leah raised her gaze toward me, noticing the rigidity still tensing my shoulders and the way my eyes continued sweeping the hall.

"Everything okay?" she asked softly, her voice tinged with a concern that touched and alarmed me all at once.

"Yes," I answered, deliberately softening the tension in my voice so as not to worry her unnecessarily. "Everything's fine. Just eat peacefully and regain your strength. I'll take care of watching the rest."

She frowned for a moment, as if wanting to protest or insist on sharing the watch, but in the end, with a sigh of understanding resignation, she turned back to her plate. She knew, without needing words, that there was no need to argue—that in this shared silence she accepted my protective care just as I accepted without question her devastating strength when she hurled herself against the impossible with her blazing magic.

We spent the next hour in a strange yet comfortable balance, each of us tacitly playing a role in our small trinity: Leah regaining physical and emotional strength with every nourishing bite, Chloé savoring the juicy bones with scraps of meat the waiter kindly brought after a generous extra payment, and me—always watching. Always scrutinizing every nearby conversation that might hold hints of interest about us, every suspicious movement near our table, every shadow passing the main door as a harbinger of possible trouble.

Because even though the hall was full of sincere laughter and mugs clashing in cheerful toasts, I couldn't forget, not for a second, that outside, not so far from these cozy walls, there were dark caves inhabited by nightmare demons, dismembered bodies arranged in ritualistic patterns, and cursed swords that seemed to throb with a corrupt life of their own. And even in this hall full of life and apparent camaraderie, I felt in my very marrow that those shadows we had awakened could reach us at any time, under any disguise.

"You're too paranoid, Lotte," Leah murmured, guessing my thoughts with that keen perception she sometimes displayed, as she offered me a piece of her bread smeared with honey. "No one's going to attack us in the middle of a guild full of people."

I took the piece of bread with a gesture of thanks, but without ceasing to watch the hall from the corner of my eye. —“Maybe you’re right, and maybe I am paranoid. But I’d rather be paranoid and have the three of us arrive together in Whirikal within a year than trust too much and end up missing one of us because of a mistake I could have prevented.”

She stayed silent for a long moment, looking at me with a mix of tenderness and sorrow that made me feel both vulnerable and strong at the same time. Then, a soft, understanding smile curved her lips, and that simple gesture reminded me with dazzling clarity why I tried so hard to keep us safe—why I bore this constant vigilance that sometimes drained me to the bone.

Because if she fell, if Chloé vanished, if any one of us did because of my negligence, the world would lose far more than simple adventurers. It would lose pieces of light in the growing darkness we had begun to uncover. And that was a price I was not willing to pay—not today, not ever.