

Frozen Star 122

Chapter 122: A Forest Full of Memories

[POV Liselotte]

The morning rose with a pale, cold light—the kind that seems reluctant to fully wake. Frost covered the windowpanes like a thin veil, and the fireplace still held a few embers from the night before. When I opened my eyes, I heard Claire humming a song in the kitchen—a soft, old melody my mother used to sing to chase away winter's silence.

"Lotte," she said, peeking her head through the door. "Could we go to the forest today? Just for a little while. Not too far in."

I stretched and smiled, still a bit sleepy.

"Sure. If Mom lets us."

"I already asked," she said proudly. "She said as long as you're back before lunch, you can go."

I went downstairs. Leah was at the table, sipping hot tea, her loose hair falling over her blue cloak. Chloé, curled up next to the fire, lazily twitched an ear when she heard us.

"Are you going out?" Leah asked when she heard Claire.

"To the forest," I said. "Just a walk."

Leah lowered the cup.

"Can we come with you?"

Chloé opened her eyes.

"A bit of fresh air won't hurt us," she added in our minds.

Mom looked at us from the kitchen, smiling, her hands covered in flour.

"Take scarves. And don't go past the frozen river."

"Yes, Mom," I replied automatically.

And just like that, we went out together.

The forest was the same... and yet different. The bare branches rose like bony fingers toward the sky. The ground crunched beneath our feet, covered in a thin layer of new snow. The air smelled of pine, frozen water—and memories.

We walked along the narrow path, between tall trees that seemed to listen. Claire walked ahead, hopping over roots like stepping stones.

And there, right where the moss stayed green even in winter, the world stopped for me.

This place.

This exact place.

Years ago, I had come here alone to practice magic. Shortly after, they told me I had no mana. That I would never be able to cast a spell. That day, something inside me shattered. I remember staying here, alone, until night fell.

The memory hit me like a cold gust of wind.

"Lotte?" I heard Claire's voice, distant. "Are you coming?"

I blinked. The world returned. I noticed they had walked a few meters ahead. Leah was looking at me from the path, silent worry in her eyes.

"Sorry," I said, hurrying my steps.

Claire puffed her cheeks.

"You fell behind again."

"I was just thinking."

Leah lowered her gaze but didn't say anything. She seemed to understand without asking.

The path kept going, narrower now, until it opened into a small clearing where the trees parted and sunlight filtered through the branches, painting golden spots across the snow.

Claire sat on a rock.

"Lotte," she said suddenly, "what's it like to be an adventurer?"

I paused. Chloé raised an eyebrow with playful solemnity. Leah turned to look at me, surprised and curious.

"Why do you ask?" I said.

"Because... I always dreamed of it. But you know what it's really like. I want you to tell me."

I looked at Leah and Chloé. They both gave me a look that said: answer her.

I sat beside Claire.

"Being an adventurer... is many things. It's walking until your feet hurt, eating hard bread for days, sleeping in stables or in the rain. It's fighting, being afraid, sometimes running. But also..." I smiled. "It's watching sunrises in places no one knows. Helping people who don't even know your name. And laughing until your stomach hurts once the danger has passed."

Claire's eyes sparkled as she listened.

"And you, Leah?" she asked suddenly.

Leah blinked.

"I..." she looked down at her hands, still covered by wool gloves. "Everything was new to me. I didn't know how to cook, or light a fire. Lotte taught me how to use a rope, Chloé taught me how to listen to the wind. I fell into frozen rivers. I got lost in three different forests. And..." she pressed her lips together, but smiled. "I also learned how to laugh after all of it."

Claire laughed.

"And you, Chloé?"

The wolf yawned with elegance.

"My story includes more bones and less drama. But there was this one time," she said proudly, "when Lotte tried to cook soup and nearly set half the tent on fire."

"That was a spice explosion, not a fire!" I protested.

Leah covered her mouth so she wouldn't laugh too loudly.

"Or when Leah thought a raccoon was a lost magical creature," Chloé added.

"It had a cape!" Leah defended herself.

"Because you put it on," I said, laughing.

Laughter filled the clearing. The gentle wind carried it through the branches, and for a moment... I felt peace.

After a while, we kept walking. The branches cracked under our feet. Claire gathered pinecones, giggling as Chloé gave her "professional" hunter instructions.

I walked a little behind, watching them.

And I thought:

This forest once saw me break.

But today... it sees me different.

I'm not alone.

Leah walked beside me. Sometimes our hands brushed by accident, and neither of us pulled away.

Claire walked ahead, humming.

Chloé kept watch over the trees, with the calm of someone who finally feels no fear.

The world was still frozen. Snow, cold, old memories.

But inside me, there was something warm.

Something burning.

Family.

Friendship.

And the silent wish to never let go of those hands.

—

The sun was lowering, tinting the forest with golden light.

Claire turned around, smiling.

"Lotte, do you think I could be an adventurer too someday?"

I looked at her.

"Yes. But not because you're strong. Because you see what others don't. Because you know how to laugh... even when it's cold."

She lifted her chin, proud.

Leah glanced at me from the side.

"And you?" she whispered. "What do you see... now?"

I took a deep breath.

"I see... that sometimes, the places that hurt can also heal you. If you come back with the right people."

Leah lowered her gaze—but smiled.

Chloé stepped closer and murmured in our minds:

"And I see the snow is starting to smell like cookies again."

We laughed.

And we walked back home, leaving four parallel footprints in the snow.

Four.

Never one alone again.

