

## Frozen Star 135

### Chapter 135: Beneath the Gaze of the Deep Forest

[POV Liselotte]

The road to the east had always carried a solemn air, almost too silent for the number of travelers who usually passed through it. But that morning, when we officially joined the caravan we were meant to escort, the silence felt different: dense, expectant... and filled with invisible eyes.

The sun had barely risen between the mountains when we arrived at the meeting point. The cold of dawn still bit at our skin, and small white clouds escaped our lips with every breath. The soldiers were already in formation, their rows so perfect it looked as if they had spent the night standing there.

The caravan—five large reinforced carriages—was surrounded by metal shields driven into the snow to strengthen the defense in case of a surprise attack.

At first glance, it was impressive.

And at the same time... intimidating.

"There are more than a hundred," I murmured, counting mentally.

"One hundred fifteen," Leah corrected softly. "One hundred fifteen soldiers, four groups of B-rank adventurers, and two groups of rank C. All equipped... for a war."

Chloé, beside me, sniffed the air with distrust.

"They don't like that we're here. I've felt it since we set foot in this camp."

I didn't need her to say it. I had already seen it.

Every step we took among the lines, gazes spearheaded us. Some sharp like blades, others cold, others openly hostile. But none of them kind.

And every one of those eyes had a clear target:

Leah.

You could see it in the way whispers trailed behind us, in how they looked away only to look at her again—at the girl walking beside me with her head held high, but fingers tense around her staff.

Rumors had arrived before we did.

The false princess.

The impostor.

The demon's puppet.

The lie that had become a shadow on her back.

I took her hand without thinking. She didn't look at me, but she squeezed it for a second. A tiny gesture, almost imperceptible... but enough to keep her steady.

We reached the front of the camp, where a tall man in full armor and a royal army cloak waited for us. His expression was stern, aged by years of service. A scar crossed his left cheek, and his eyes were the kind that measure... the kind that judge.

"You are the ones recommended by Master Ronan," he said without greeting.

"Yes. Liselotte, Leah... and Chloé," I answered, keeping my tone neutral.

He immediately shifted his gaze to Leah.

One second.

Two.

Three.

Only the wind dared to speak.

Finally, he said, "I was already warned. That you would come. And that—" he paused longer than necessary "—I was to treat you as official members of the escort."

A wave of murmurs rose behind him.

Leah didn't lower her gaze. She stayed upright, though her hands trembled slightly.

"I am Commander Alistair," he continued. "Commander of the adventurers for this mission. The orders are clear: we will reach the eastern border in ten days without deviating from the main route. Delays will not be tolerated. Reckless decisions will not be tolerated. And above all—" his eyes sharpened like daggers "—no one is to act on their own."

That last part was directed at us. Everyone knew it. Everyone felt it.

"Any questions?" he asked coldly.

"None," I replied, forcing my voice to remain steady.

"Good. Present yourselves to the other groups. Then take position at the rear of the convoy. From this moment on... you are under my direct command."

We nodded.

And then it began.

The adventurer groups were gathered by rank. B-rank carried silver-stitched insignias; C-rank, bronze. All eyes locked onto us as we approached.

Some with curiosity.

Most with disdain.

One of the B-rank leaders, a bulky man with a massive war hammer, stepped forward.

"So you're the ones 'protected by Master Ronan'," he said mockingly.

"We're adventurers like any other here," I replied, trying not to fall for the bait.

He chuckled under his breath.

"And the princess?" he gestured toward Leah with his chin. "Is she coming to... bless the path?"

A few laughs broke behind him.

Leah clenched her jaw. Chloé growled—a low, threatening sound.

I stepped forward.

"We're a team. If you have a problem with one of us, you have a problem with all of us."

He stopped. Looked at me. And for a moment, his smile faded.

Then he clicked his tongue and turned away.

"Just don't become a burden," he muttered. "I don't want to lose men over an illusion."

Leah said nothing. But I saw her shoulders tighten. I saw the light in her eyes—one she had regained in Whirikai—dim again.

I moved closer and touched her arm.

"Don't give them that power," I whispered. "They know nothing. And they don't deserve to see you fall."

She breathed deeply. Nodded.

"I know... but it hurts."

Of course it did. Not only because of the lies. But because every insult was a reminder of her past, her loss, her stolen identity.

And the fear that she might never recover her place.

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When we finally took our position at the end of the convoy, soldiers whispered openly.

"They say a demon took her form..."

"Her eyes change when she's angry..."

"A knight swore he saw her floating..."

"Her magic isn't human..."

Every word was a knife.

But the worst was:

"They say the real princess died years ago. That this one is just an echo crafted by demons."

Leah looked down. I clenched my fist.

"They're ignorant," I said. "That's all."



She didn't answer. But her silence spoke louder than any words.

When the captain gave the order, the caravan began to move.

The wheels creaked against hardened snow. The horses marched forward, kicking up little white clouds. The wind blew from the east, carrying a strange smell... the smell of ancient moisture, of rotting wood—like the forest was watching us from the shadows.

For the first hours, no one spoke.

Only the sounds of travel filled the air: chains brushing metal, hooves striking ice, armor clinking.

And still, something else moved. A sensation. A presence.

Or maybe it was just my imagination.

"Do you feel it?" Chloé whispered mentally.

"Yes," I answered in the same channel. "Something is following us."

Leah felt it too. It showed in her shorter breaths, in how her fingers brushed her staff every few seconds.

Something was there. Just out of sight. But there.

The eastern forest had always been feared by travelers.

But today...

Today it felt alive.

A few kilometers ahead, a scout returned at full gallop, his face pale.

"Captain! There are markings on the trees! They're not from common beasts!"

The captain frowned.

"Markings of what type?"

The scout swallowed hard.

"Demonic markings."

A brutal silence fell over the entire convoy.

Soldiers muttered.

Adventurers stopped joking.

And Leah froze.

"Recent?" Alistair asked.

"Very recent. I'd say... from this morning."

The captain clenched his jaw.

"Maintain formation. No one strays. And if you see anything... DO NOT attack without my order."

I wish that had reassured us.

It didn't.

If demons had been here hours ago...

If they were watching us...

It meant they knew we carried something.

Something they wanted.

The magical artifact Master Ronan had mentioned.

We didn't know what it was.

Nor why it was so important.

But the demons knew.

Leah breathed deeply.

"They're close," she whispered. "I can't sense them clearly... but I know they're watching."

"We'll be fine," I told her.

She looked at me with eyes full of more fear than she allowed others to see.

"Will we, Lotte?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't lie to her.

As we advanced, the trees closed around the path. Their branches formed natural arches like claws, and the sunlight barely filtered through the dark leaves. The air grew colder, damper.

More... unsettling.

Soldiers kept their shields ready. Adventurers stayed close to the carriages. And every step felt heavier.

Chloé noticed it first.

"Something's moving to our right," she said. "Something big."

Her tone wasn't panicked. But it wasn't softened either.

Leah looked at the trees.

"Three... no—" she frowned "—four presences. Not human. They move too coordinated."

I gripped my sword.

The cold metal reflected the gray sky—giving me a moment of grounding.

"Demons?" I asked.

Leah didn't answer right away.

Finally, she said:

"I'm not sure. But... they smell like the darkness I felt that day in the forest. Before they took me."

Her words chilled me worse than the wind.

The convoy's steps became slower. Heavier. Tenser.

And although no attack came that morning...

We felt the gaze.

We felt the intent.

We felt something breathing with the forest, waiting, stalking.

Soldiers whispered prayers. Some adventurers drank preventive potions. Others clenched their weapons so tightly their knuckles turned white.

But the worst came when the wind changed direction.

A scent drifted from the east. A scent I knew too well.

Demonic blood. That bitter, metallic essence...

The kind you never forget.

Leah stopped. Her eyes widened.

And I knew she felt it too.

"Lotte..." she whispered, voice trembling. "We aren't following the forest."

The wind blew again, carrying a murmur, a whisper, an echo.

"The forest... is following us."

I felt something invisible brush the back of my neck like a cold touch.

Chloé growled, fur standing on end.



The soldiers didn't sense it yet.

Nor the adventurers.

But we did.

Because we had been in the darkness before.

Because we had felt that breath.

Because we knew the shadow moving through the trees...

Was not ready to attack.

Not yet.

It was only waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

The journey had barely begun.

And we were already being hunted.