

## Frozen Star 140

### Chapter 140: When the Forest Closes the Paths

[POV Liselotte]

The fourth day since our departure dawned with a sky so gray it looked like lead. The air was still, heavy, as if winter itself were holding its breath. Even the horses—usually restless at daybreak—stood tense, ears twitching at every distant crack from the forest.

I walked in silence beside Leah and Chloé. Our reconciliation had brought us closer, yes... but also more alert. Something in the atmosphere had changed since the bandit attack. The soldiers were quieter. The adventurers stiffer. And the forest... the forest seemed to tighten its shadows around the path.

It felt like walking through the throat of a sleeping beast.

“Something isn’t right here...” Chloé murmured in my mind.

“I know,” I replied.

Perhaps Leah felt it too, because she had kept her staff in hand the entire morning, even though she didn’t need it. Her eyes swept the trees every few steps. Tension carved itself into her shoulders.

By midmorning, it happened.

The convoy stopped abruptly—so suddenly that we nearly crashed into the cart ahead of us.

Commander Alistair moved to the front, and we followed.

What we saw sent a shiver crawling up my arms.

Three enormous logs blocked the road completely. They hadn't fallen; they had been placed. Their ends were so smooth it looked as if they had been cut with a single titanic blade.

"This wasn't an accident," Leah whispered.

And she couldn't have been more right.

The scouts inspected the surroundings, but found no human tracks. Only deep marks on the wood—burned claw-like grooves. Marks no northern animal could have made.

"Demons?" I asked Chloé mentally.

"I don't know. But this was done fast. Very fast."

The captain ordered the logs moved, but even fifty soldiers couldn't budge them. It was as if they weighed twice what they should—as if the forest itself wanted to keep them there.

Leah approached one of the logs and placed her hand on it. She withdrew almost instantly, inhaling sharply.

"It smells like magic," she murmured. "Concentrated darkness."

Chloé growled.

"This is a warning."

I looked toward the trees. In the deeper shadows, I could swear something moved.

"We must retreat," Alistair ordered. "We'll take the northern detour."

And we did.

The caravan slowly turned around, flanked by soldiers on each side. Everyone kept their weapons ready. The air was so tense that a single sigh could have startled half the convoy.

It took almost an hour to return to the previous fork.

But when we arrived...

Everyone froze.

There, blocking the way back, were three more identical logs. Cut with the same precision. Placed in the same way. And just as heavy.

A deathly silence swallowed the convoy.

"This is impossible..." one soldier murmured.

"It couldn't have been humans..." whispered another.

"They're enclosing us," Leah said, swallowing hard, pale.

A knot tightened in my stomach.

We weren't just trapped.

We were being herded.

Pushed.

Cornered.

And to make matters worse... the forest felt restless. The wind had completely died. The branches didn't sway. Not a single bird sang.

It was far too similar to the silence before a demon attack.

The captain gathered soldiers and adventurers into a tense circle.

"We will not enter the forest. Maintain formation and stay sharp. Scouts will watch the perimeter. No one wanders off."

And thus began the waiting.

Hours passed.

Hours in which the forest did nothing but stare at us.

Or so it felt.

I felt an invisible pressure on my neck, as if someone were breathing just behind me.

Chloé paced in circles, fur bristling.

“They’re close,” she kept repeating in my mind. “They’re not showing themselves... but they’re here.”

Leah sat beside me, her staff resting across her legs. Her hands refused to stop trembling. And something in her eyes—something deep—was shifting. As if the memories of her captivity were pushing their way back to the surface.

“Leah... breathe,” I whispered. “We’re not alone.”

She took a deep breath but didn’t answer.

The sun began to set. The cold sharpened, cutting like a blade.

Soldiers lit torches. Adventurers sharpened weapons. Horses stomped the ground nervously.

And yet... nothing happened.

Nothing.

No attack.

No sound.

No shadow.

That silence was the worst of all.

Two hours after nightfall, some soldiers began whispering that it was better to force their way through. Others wanted to retreat on foot. Others were convinced the forest was cursed.

That was when it happened.

A branch snapped. Far away.

Everyone tensed their weapons.

Another crack. Closer.

And from a dark cluster of bushes, a hunched figure emerged.

Soldiers raised spears. Mages prepared spells. I gripped my sword's hilt.

The figure lifted his hands, trembling.

"W-Wait! I'm not an enemy!"

It was a man. Thin, wrapped in furs, with a gaunt face. His beard was tangled, his eyes sunken, as if he hadn't slept in weeks.

He fell to his knees as soon as he reached the torchlight.



“By the gods... I thought I’d never find anyone...”

Alistair stepped forward, hand on his sword.

“Who are you?”

The man’s breathing was ragged.

“My name is Orlan. I was a scout with a patrol in this region. We were ambushed... weeks ago.”

Leah stepped forward.

“Ambushed by what?”

The man lifted his gaze. His eyes were filled with terror.

“Demons.”

A murmur of horror rippled through the camp.

A cold shiver slid down my spine.

“We saw them three weeks ago...” Orlan whispered, barely able to speak. “Patrolling at night. Moving between the trees. Marking the forest. As if they were... preparing something.”

Chloé stiffened.

“How many...?” the commander asked.

Orlan’s voice cracked.

“Too many.”

Silence swallowed us whole.

Orlan drew a painful breath.

“I saw their shadows walking between the logs. I saw them dragging bodies. And I heard... I heard laughter. Not human. Not from this world.”

His lips trembled.

“The forest isn’t safe. It hasn’t been for weeks. You... you need to leave. Now. Before night falls completely.”

The wind blew for the first time in hours.

A slow gust. Cold. Like icy fingers brushing the skin.

I felt something behind me. Not a sound. Not a physical presence.

Something deeper.

A predator’s awareness settling on its prey.

Leah grabbed my hand, trembling.

“Lotte...”

And I could only whisper back:

“I know.”

Because even before the forest fell silent again...

Before the torches flickered in unison...

Before the last ray of sunlight sank into the night...

We already knew.

We were not alone.

The forest... was not empty.

And whatever lived among the trees...

Had finally awakened.

And it had found us.