

## Frozen Star 143

### Chapter 143: Path

[POV Liselotte]

The forest still smelled of cold ash.

Only a few minutes had passed since the demons had been reduced to fragments of shadow, but the sensation of danger still clung to the ground, as if the trees themselves trembled at the memory of what had taken place. Yet now, the only things truly audible were tired breaths, unsteady steps, and the faint murmur of the survivors trying to convince themselves they were still alive.

I remained seated beside the fallen trunk where I had laid Leah down. Her head rested on my lap. Chloé, her fur no longer bristling but her gaze still sharp, stayed close, sniffing the air for any lingering trace of darkness. The wind lifted strands of her wolf mane while her ears twitched with unease.

Leah slept deeply. It wasn't a peaceful sleep: now and then her brow twitched or her fingers moved slightly, as if she were still fighting inside her mind. She had used everything—every drop of energy, every fragment of her mana. And now her body demanded silence.

I should have been resting too. My chest still ached from the impact of the demons that had passed through me, a cold sensation that still coiled inside like a venomous trail. But I couldn't sleep. Not while the others gathered just a few meters away, forming a circle where the tension was almost visible.

The soldiers had lifted their fallen comrades and placed them in a small, grim line. Very small. Only seven. When we departed, they had been nearly three times that number.

The adventurers weren't much better off. Many were injured. Some trembled, unable to look at the forest without feeling something still moved between the shadows. But what stood out the most wasn't fear. It was guilt. Rage. And despair.

Alistair stood in front of them all, posture straight, eyes tired but sharp. He had lost many under his command. Yet he still acted like a pillar among ruins.

I could hear fragments of the argument. Sharp tones. Rising anger.

"...this was madness," said one of the adventurers, a rank-B archer. "We were told it would be a difficult transport, not a demon ambush!"

"And what did you expect me to do?" answered a mage. "Let everyone die without casting anything?"

"That's not the point!"

Alistair raised a hand, trying to maintain order, but he only managed a moment of silence.

"The point," he said firmly, "is that we have a mission to complete. We've gone too far to turn back."

The archer laughed without humor.

"Too far? Look at them, Alistair. Look at us. Half the group is dead. The other half is injured. And you want us to keep escorting that damn caravan like nothing happened?"

"It's what we were entrusted to do."

"Then let the King do it himself!" another adventurer snapped.

Alistair clenched his jaw. I knew him well enough to understand it wasn't from anger. It was from fear. A different fear from ours. We feared the demons. He feared the capital.

"Listen," he said, lowering his voice as if revealing a secret. "If we return... we won't be greeted with honors or compassion. This mission is... too important. We won't be allowed to fail."

A heavy silence followed.

I knew that tone. It belonged to someone who knew far more than he could admit.

"What are you saying?" one of the adventurers asked, voice empty.

Alistair took a deep breath.

"That we will be punished. Severely. Perhaps... exiled. Perhaps worse."

A murmur of horror rippled through the group.

Chloé lifted her head and growled softly. Even asleep, Leah curled slightly, as if her body sensed the tension in the air.

I stroked her arm, watching the group from a distance. I knew that sooner or later I would have to get up. But not yet. One more minute. One more breath. For her.

One adventurer—a burly swordsman with a scar on his chin—stepped forward.

"Then you're forcing us to die here."

"I'm not forcing you to do anything," Alistair replied, exhausted. "I'm asking you to fulfill your duty."

"Duty doesn't feed the dead," the man spat.

A murmur of agreement followed.

And then I understood what was coming. The group was crumbling. The adventurers, used to choosing their own jobs and abandoning them when things turned too dangerous, were on the verge of giving up. And the soldiers... the soldiers were bound by oath and by law.

For them, there was no choice.

Chloé looked at me, head tilted.

"They're about to break," she growled.

"I know."

Leah took a deeper breath in my lap, as if she wanted to wake but lacked the strength. Her skin was still cool, but her face had more color than before.

It was enough.

Carefully, I lifted her—not all the way, just enough to shift her so I could stand.

"Chloé," I whispered, "help me take her to the caravan."

She nodded without question.

While the adventurers continued arguing, we rose quietly. Chloé cleared a path among the scattered bodies, sniffing for any lingering demonic trace. Nothing. It was safe for now.

We reached the caravan—four carts drawn by nervous horses still shaken from the battle. One was damaged but usable. The cargo was untouched inside reinforced boxes. Despite everything, the mission was still viable.

I placed Leah inside the main cart, on soft sacks that would serve as an improvised bed. She murmured something faintly but remained asleep.

Chloé settled nearby, watchful. Her ears twitched like sensitive antennas picking up the slightest sound.

I took a long breath.

I couldn't wait for the adventurers to decide our fate.

I grabbed the reins of the first horse, calmed it with steady strokes, and began moving the caravan forward, away from the battle site.

The sound of wheels over earth made several heads turn.

Then an adventurer shouted:

"What are you doing?!"

I didn't answer. I didn't need to. The caravan had to keep moving. The mission had to continue—with or without them.

Leah had risked her life. Chloé and I as well. We hadn't come this far to die waiting for a group that would argue until nightfall.

Alistair saw us and went completely still. His eyes, full of exhaustion, responsibility, and a hint of relief, met mine. He said nothing. But he gave the slightest nod.

A silent signal.

The adventurers, however, didn't react so calmly.

"They're insane," the swordsman growled. "You'll die alone!"

"You almost died a moment ago," the archer added.

"And what do you expect? That you continue like nothing happened?" the mage asked.

Then another adventurer—a woman with a spear—stepped forward, her voice heavy with frustration.

"And if we continue... for what? So we can be killed at the border? So no one is even left to tell what happened here?"

Another voice yelled:

"I don't want to continue! I quit this damn mission!"

A chorus followed.

"Me too!"

"It's not worth it!"



"We're not soldiers!"

It was like watching a dam break.

Chloé placed a paw on the edge of the cart, looking back. Her tail lowered slightly, almost with pity.

"They're terrified," she said. "And they're right."

I took a breath. It wasn't my place to judge. They had all fought. They had all lost.

"Let them go," I answered softly.

The wheels rolled on a few more meters. The soldiers watched, torn between the adventurers and the caravan. They were caught between two duties: survival... and the law.

Alistair ended the chaos.

"Silence!" he thundered.

Everyone fell quiet.

"Adventurers who wish to withdraw... do so. Your contract allows it. I have no authority to force you." His gaze darkened. "But know this: the capital will not protect you. And if you believe they will understand what happened here... you are deeply mistaken."

The silence that followed was suffocating.

"Even so," the spearwoman said at last, "I'd rather that than die in the middle of the forest."

Many nodded.

One by one... the adventurers began gathering their things. Slowly. Quietly. Some cried. Others looked hollow. Others simply exhausted.

And without another word... they headed south again. Toward the capital. Toward what they believed would be a lesser punishment than continuing.

I watched their figures fade among the trees. I wondered if any would reach the city alive. Not because enemies lurked nearby, but because the weight of their choices might crush them long before the road.

Alistair looked at his men. Some seemed tempted to follow the adventurers. Others trembled. But none stepped forward.

They couldn't.

"Soldiers," he finally said, voice firm though tired. "Escort the caravan. Now."

The few who remained formed up—clumsy, wounded, but obedient. Discipline was the only thing holding them up.

Chloé settled at my side on the cart's seat, posture protective.

"We're alone again," she murmured.

"We're never alone," I said, glancing back at Leah sleeping. "Not while she's with us. Not while you're with me."

Chloé let out a soft huff—something like a lupine smile.

Alistair took the lead. The soldiers spread out around us, though their formation was only a shadow of what it once had been.

The caravan moved.

Slowly. Painfully. Silently.

We had lost almost everything. But there was one thing we could not afford to lose. Not now.

The road.

And as the forest opened before us like a dark veil... I understood that this journey would mark the fate of us all.

Those who were.

Those who returned.

And those of us who continued forward, even when everything suggested we should have stopped.