

## Frozen Star 144

### Chapter 144: The Calm Before the Last Step

[POV Liselotte]

Three more days of travel might not sound like much... but after what we had lived through, they felt like an eternity suspended between fear and hope. The wheels of the caravan creaked over the damp earth, moving along a path that grew narrower between wind-twisted trees. And although the forest still seemed to watch us with its unmoving shadows, the truth was that we hadn't faced another demonic attack.

Not a single ambush.

Not a roar.

Not a whisper between the branches.

But that didn't mean we had been safe.

"This place still smells strange..." Chloé growled in my mind as she walked by my side, her silver-gray back brushing against my hand. "Not like before... but still bad. Or old."

I gently stroked her neck.

"I know. Easy. We're almost there."

"That's exactly why I'm not calm," she growled back.

I couldn't argue with her.

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That first day after the attack had been the worst. The lack of sleep, the blood still fresh on the ground, the stunned soldiers counting how many companions were missing... half the convoy had been wiped out. The adventurers, at least, were still the majority, and most of them had proven far more resilient than the soldiers.

But since then, during the following days, even though we didn't encounter any demons, we did find other things.

Paths blocked by trunks that looked sliced by giant blades.

Deer corpses split open from the abdomen, as if hunted for sport.

Foxes without eyes.

A bear without a single drop of blood left in its body.

And more burned symbols on the trees.

Twisted markings.

Signs that looked like letters...

But not from any human language.

Leah analyzed each one, getting close only long enough before retreating again.

“They’re peacebreakers...” she murmured on the second day, her voice nearly gone. “A type of harassment rune used by lesser demons to weaken the morale of a caravan.”

Alistair didn’t contradict her. In fact, he listened with unusual respect—something he would’ve never done before the attack. Before, he treated her like a burden. Now he looked at her as if she were the only possible light in the middle of that forest.

Maybe she was.

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“Captain, it’s been hours without finding new symbols,” one of the soldiers said by mid-afternoon of the third day.

“And I hope it stays that way,” Alistair replied without taking his eyes off the road. “Keep your guard up. I don’t want a single mistake now that we’re so close.”

Leah walked beside me, holding her staff in one hand. Her eyes looked tired but also steadier. Ever since she cast that spell—since she wiped out the demons in a single burst of light—something had changed in her. Almost imperceptible... but there.

More confident.

More determined.

More awake.

And, at the same time, carrying a new weight on her shoulders.

"How do you feel?" I asked softly.

She glanced at me before answering.

"Better. My head still hurts a bit... but I can focus. I couldn't sleep knowing we're only hours away."

She gave me a faint smile. I returned it, though something twisted inside me.

The forest was slowly opening ahead of us. The trees grew farther apart, the light filtered better, the air felt less... heavy. I could feel the end of the road. I could see the exit between the leaning trunks.

But the knot in my stomach didn't go away.

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Alistair had sent three soldiers ahead at dawn the previous day. A small group, silent and fast, able to scout without drawing attention. Neither Leah nor I wanted anyone to risk themselves. But the captain insisted. He even claimed that if there was an ambush waiting for us, they would be the only way to avoid walking straight into death.

"If they return before dusk, we'll have a picture."

“If they don’t... we’ll have an answer anyway.”

But that was something he didn’t say aloud.

I only thought it.

The fact that they still hadn’t returned was not a good sign.

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“Are you worried?” Leah asked.

“Yes.”

“About the scouting group?”

“Yes.”

“And about the other thing...?” she added, lowering her head slightly.

“That too.”

She didn’t ask anything else.

Chloé lifted her muzzle and sniffed.

“Something ahead smells like metal and dirt... I don’t know if that’s good.”

I looked toward the distance. A valley was beginning to take shape. Low mountains, open grasslands... and if I focused, I could distinguish what looked like an old bell tower.

The destination village.

Just a few more hours.

My heart skipped a beat.

Not from excitement.

But from warning.

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The convoy stopped briefly upon reaching a wider clearing. The few wagons left formed an open circle while Alistair checked the map.

Leah sat on a rock. I leaned against a fallen log. Chloé lay beside me, watching every shadow between the trees.

"We're almost there," Leah said. "I thought this moment would feel different."

"More joyful?"

"More... safe."

I nodded slowly.

"I know."



She lowered her gaze to her staff.

“What do you think we’ll find there, Lotte?”

My answer took a few seconds.

“I don’t know. But I think the worst isn’t over yet.”

Chloé growled approvingly.

“Finally, something sensible.”

“Chloé...” I sighed.

“What? I’m just telling the truth.”

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When the convoy resumed its march, the tension was no longer silent; it was almost physical. Every soldier walked with tense shoulders, every adventurer kept glancing toward the forest as if expecting something to leap out from between the branches. Even the horses had raised manes and restless eyes.

We had been walking for almost an hour along a wider road when I approached Leah. Her expression was serious, focused on a distant point we couldn't yet see.

"Alistair trusts you more now," I said plainly.

She blinked, surprised.

"Ah...?"

"Since the attack... he believes in your decisions. In your strength."

She lowered her gaze.

"I only did what I had to."

"Yes. But not everyone can say the same."

Leah smiled a little, shyly.

“And you? Do you trust me?”

“Always.”

A faint blush warmed her cheeks.

Chloé snorted.

“Too much human affection. Makes me itchy.”

“Shh, just rest...” I whispered.

“Mhm. Rest... with one eye open.”

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When the sun began to set behind the trees, the landscape finally changed. The treeline opened abruptly, and the forest remained behind us like a dark, dense wall. Before us stretched a sloping meadow bathed in the last orange tones of the day.

And there, at the far end of the valley, almost like a gray shadow, was the village.

Small.

Isolated.

With smoke rising from two chimneys and a central tower shaped like an old bell tower.

We were so close I could feel the fresh air coming down from the hills. The wind swept away the metallic smell of the forest and replaced it with the scent of wheat and damp stone.

But my heart did not ease.

Quite the opposite.

“Chloé...” I whispered.

"I know," she growled. "Something's strange over there. Something... still."

Leah frowned.

"Still?"

"Still like... dead. But not dead. I don't know how to explain it."

I understood perfectly.

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Alistair raised his hand to halt the group.

"Caravan, halt!"

The soldiers obeyed. The adventurers too.

The captain stared toward the distant village. His eyes calculated, analyzed, distrusted.

“Something wrong, sir?” one soldier behind him asked.

Alistair didn’t answer immediately.

At last he said:

“The scouting group should have been back last night. Or this morning. Or a few hours ago... but they haven’t returned.”

He adjusted the sword at his belt.

“And I don’t see any movement in the village. None. No farmers. No animals. Not even fresh smoke.”

Chloé dragged her claws across the earth.

“Then they’re not alone.”

I turned to Leah. She was staring at the horizon—but not like the others. Her gaze was fixed on something deeper. Something only she could sense.

“Leah...?”

She narrowed her eyes, as if trying to decipher a hidden sound.

“Lotte...” she whispered. “Get ready.”

My stomach dropped.

“Why?”

She swallowed.

Her hands tightened around her staff.

“Because what’s coming... isn’t silence.”

The wind blew then—cold like a predator’s breath. The grass bent toward us. The sky darkened just slightly, as if an invisible cloud passed in front of the sun.

And my heart knew before my mind accepted it.

The forest hadn't let us go.

It had only allowed us to move forward.

To bring us exactly to this point.

To the entrance of the valley.

To the gates of the destination village.

To the edge of the next danger.

Leah lifted her gaze toward the horizon, toward the tower rising in the distance.

"Lotte..." she murmured, more serious than ever. "Something is waiting there."

I turned to her.



“Then you get ready too.”

She nodded.

I took a deep breath.

Chloé stepped forward, fur bristling.

And so, with the village before us, the forest behind us, and an unseen danger between both...

I knew the worst hadn't even begun.

But I also knew one thing.

I wasn't going to turn back.