

Frozen Star 40

Chapter 40: Tracks in the Frost

[POV Liselotte]

The promise of the epic promotion exam had melted away like snow in the sun, leaving in its place a cold, compact disappointment.

I had dreamed of beasts roaring challenges beneath stormy skies, of desperate races through rocky canyons, even of the peculiar torment of escorting some capricious noble through muddy trails.

But Naelle, with her enigmatic smile and eyes that seemed to read more than they said, handed me only a scroll. Its contents resonated in the guild's expectant silence like a sigh.

"Track and investigate strange tracks seen in the Eastern Forest. Identify creature, direction, and behavior. Do not engage unless in self-defense."

Boring. Safe. The perfect road, paved with tedium, toward the higher rank. A sigh escaped my lips, misting the frosty morning air.

"Or the perfect road for boredom to devour your hours and ambition," Chloé's voice echoed in my mind, tinged with a mental yawn I could almost feel in my own bones. Her spectral figure, a phantom of silvery fur only I could clearly see, stretched lazily beside me.

"I prefer tedium to rot, Chloé," I replied quietly, stroking the pommel of my dagger. "As long as those tracks don't lead me to another half-eaten goat picked at by crows, I'll be fine. A winter stroll, nothing more."

The Eastern Forest, beneath the freshly fallen snowfall, was a transformed kingdom, a gothic cathedral carved in ice and silence. Every pine branch, every delicate tree, bore a crown of immaculate snow bending its limbs toward the frozen earth.

The silence was not absence, but a dense, oppressive presence, turning each crunch of compacted snow under my leather boots into an indecent burst, a cry profaning the white sanctity.

Chloé, at my side, her white-silver fur blending into the landscape like a spirit of frost, moved with stealth, her ears swiveling like radars.

The tracks appeared soon, like sinister promises etched on the white canvas, deep, wide as plates, and spaced with strides impossible for any human or common animal I knew.

I knelt, forgetting the cold biting at my knees through the leather. My gloves scraped softly along the defined edge of an impression.

"Oval shape..." I murmured to myself, breath forming fleeting clouds. "Four claws, pressed with force... as if they wanted to pierce the very earth. The weight..." I mentally calculated the depth, comparing it with bears hunted in the past. "Far above a rutting male bear. Much heavier."

“The smell, Lotte...” Chloé’s voice tensed like a bowstring, all previous laziness gone. “It clings to the air. Not the sweet stench of carrion or animal musk. It’s... cold ash. Old, rancid smoke. And beneath... iron. Filthy, rusted iron, like dried blood in an abandoned smithy.” Her silver nose wrinkled, showing white fangs in a gesture of revulsion.

We followed the trail, a dark ribbon of revelations winding under the shadow of hooded trees. We avoided stretches where virgin snow concealed frozen puddles—treacherous traps.

The deeper we went into the frozen heart of the forest, the more the signs multiplied beneath our feet. A single solitary track split into two parallel paths.

Then, like an infection spreading, three, four, five sets of footprints appeared. The pattern, now undeniable, drew an unsettling truth: this was not a lone beast. It was a pack. A coordinated march.

The first warning was not visual, but olfactory. The wind, once clean and sharp, carried with it a poisoned gift: smoke. But not the white, almost friendly smoke of pinewood burning in a hearth.

This was dense, gray as grief, greasy, clinging to the palate and smelling of burnt refuse and something worse. I crouched instinctively, crawling behind a holly bush whose frost-glazed leaves glittered.

Chloé pressed against me, a tense, living warmth at my side, her silver fur bristling fully, making her seem larger, fiercer, though a vibration of pure fear ran through her body. I peeked out just enough to capture the scene beyond the grove.

It was... a tumor on the pristine landscape. A camp, yes, but forged with primal brutality. The tents were not canvas, but thick, tanned hides, possibly from massive B-rank creatures or higher, stretched over frames of long bones and axe-split logs, not sawn.

Open bonfires, fed with green wood that wept that greasy, gray smoke, formed an imperfect circle around a cleared central space. And there, moving with a heaviness that spoke of brute strength, were they.

Figures that made young oaks seem small. Greenish skin, like moss on damp stone, shading toward gray in some. Shoulders as broad as barrels, torsos covered in scars and muscles taut under leathery skin.

They carried weapons that were extensions of their violence: double-bladed axes with stained handles, crude spears tipped with blackened, nicked iron. Orcs. The word fell like a block of ice into the pit of my stomach.

“No!” Chloé’s cry cracked like a whip of pure panic. “Retreat, Lotte! Now! Neither you, nor I, nor ten of us prepared could take on even one of those monsters! That is death breathing!” Her body trembled against mine, a living reminder of our fragility.

I counted with the speed of fear. Fifteen visible, perhaps twenty. Some wore crude, riveted armor plates over their skins, deformed metal barely covering vital points, others relied only on their sheer mass and leather-thick hide.

And in the center of the ring of fire and trampled mud... a huge, ominous lump, covered with heavy, stained tarps, secured with thick chains that glimmered faintly in the firelight. What treasure or terror was hidden there?

I memorized every detail with the precision of someone who knows their life depends on it: the chaotic yet naturally defensible arrangement of tents, their numbers, weapons, the viciously carved symbols on crudely joined wooden shields—a bloody claw, a stitched-shut eye.

Then, the retreat. A millimeter at a time. Each movement, an eternity suspended in the frozen air. Each potential crunch, a death omen. I felt my heart hammering against my ribs like a terrified bird, cold sweat on my nape despite the frigid environment.

Chloé moved like a silver shadow, glued to my heel, her anxiety a constant hum in my mind. Until the forest swallowed us again, thick and protective, and distance became a precarious shield.

The return to the Glarien Adventurers' Guild was a race against twilight and the shadows that now seemed to lurk in every corner.

Naele, behind her polished oak counter, was methodically recording in a large ledger when I burst in, still panting, cheeks flushed from cold and effort. Chloé remained tense.

“Large... strange tracks...” I began, trying to tame my breathing. “In the Eastern Forest, toward the Silent Hills...”

Naele barely looked up, her quill suspended above the parchment. But when the key word—the one that changed everything—fell from my lips, her reaction was instant, glacial.

“Orcs.”

Her quill froze mid-air. The faint clink of the ink vial being set down rang like a bell in the sudden silence. All trace of expression fled her face, leaving a mask of polished stone. Her eyes, sharp as daggers, locked on mine without blinking.

“Repeat,” she ordered, her voice a thread of cold steel. “Every detail. Leave nothing out.”

I did. With a clarity that surprised me, I unraveled the tapestry of horrors I had witnessed: the tents of hide and bone, the oily smoke, the estimated number, the deformed musculature, the crude yet lethal weapons, the sinister symbols, the mysterious chained cargo...

Naele listened, unmoving, only her fingers, laced atop the counter, showing a white-knuckled tension. She nodded once, a barely perceptible movement. Then, without another word, she turned and disappeared through the door leading to the guild’s inner rooms, a sanctuary reserved for the high ranks.

The murmur began then, a buzz of restless wasps among the adventurers present. Orcs? This close? Impossible. But my expression, the pallor of my face, the urgency in my voice, swept away doubt.

Naelle returned before the murmur could turn into open alarm. Three figures followed her, veterans whose silver and gold insignias gleamed even in the dimness, faces marked by scars and experience, eyes that had seen too much and now weighed my words with deadly seriousness. In her hands, Naelle carried a coarse wool pouch that jingled unmistakably as she set it firmly before me.

“This is for you, Liselotte,” she said, her voice regaining a more usual tone but still carrying a new weight. The sound of silver and gold coins inside was a sweet melody, an absurd counterpoint to the threat I described.

But what she placed next on the polished oak counter stole my breath: a badge. Not the modest bronze I wore, but silver. Gleaming, cold, engraved with the guild’s emblem—a sword crossed with a scroll.

“Rank E, Liselotte,” Naelle announced, and a reverent silence fell over the hall. “What your eyes saw and your courage brought back... is information of incalculable value for Glarien’s safety. Today you have done more than many do in years of service.”

A wave of heat, a mix of pride, disbelief, and lingering fear, ran through me. In my mind, I felt the lupine equivalent of a satisfied smile and a deep sigh.

“Told you, greenleaf. Sometimes tedium hides sharper teeth than the fiercest beast.” Chloé’s gaze brimmed with deep pride, tinged with that “I told you so” only an eternal companion can convey.

But Naelle wasn’t finished. Her tone now was that of a general before battle, slicing the air like a finely honed blade.

“And now,” she continued, her voice rising to be heard in every corner of the crowded hall, “sit. Here. In front of the map.” She pointed to a chair by the large central strategy table, where a huge map of the region was already spread out, marking the Eastern Forest with crosses.

“Spread the word!” she ordered the onlookers. “Summon all party captains. All veteran adventurers of Silver rank and above. Immediately!”

The murmur erupted then into a cacophony of astonishment and concern. Boots pounded the wooden floor with urgency, doors opened and slammed, voices shouted names and ranks into the cold outside.

Soon, the guild’s great hall—once a place of laughter, wagers, and exaggerated tales—transformed into an improvised war council. Weathered faces, some famous, others feared, gathered around the map. Calloused hands pointed at routes, forests, mountain passes. Deep voices exchanged grim theories, told stories of past orc raids, assessed forces. The scent of stale ale was replaced by the acrid smell of ink, tense sweat, and contained fear.

I had gone to take my promotion exam and had returned, unknowingly, having lit the short, crackling fuse of what could very well be war. The echo of orc footsteps now resonated not in the snow, but in the heart of Glarien, and their sound was the roll of a funeral drum.