

## Frozen Star 42

### Chapter 42: The First Onslaught

[POV Liselotte]

The night had slowly yielded to dawn, not with the song of birds, but with a heavy, expectant silence, as if even nature itself held its breath.

The Eastern Forest, which I had so often imagined as a white refuge of frost-covered branches, was now a field of anticipated execution.

Beneath the blackened canopy, among pines standing tall like spears, snow crunched under the boots of dozens of adventurers. The air reeked of oil on freshly sharpened weapons, of damp leather, and of repressed fear.

I was among them, my silver insignia pinned to my chest like an unwanted beacon. My fingers couldn't stop clutching the hilt of my dagger, as if my grip on its metal were the thread keeping me bound to reality.

At my side, Chloé walked in silence, her silver fur blending with the frozen mist. Her eyes gleamed with a steely light.

"Do not tremble, Lotte. The forest can smell your fear. And so will the orcs if you let it escape."

I didn't answer. My lips were sealed by the frost of dread.

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The rank C veterans advanced at the front, heavy as boulders, their armor barely gleaming in the dimness. Behind them, the Bs, lighter, more agile, ready to exploit any breach.

We, the Ds and Es, spread out through the thicket like broken shadows, watching escape routes, hidden paths, natural traps. We were the invisible net that was meant to close in if anything tried to flee.

The plan was clear, repeated so many times at the guild that I could recite it even in my sleep:

First. The vanguard would storm in from the west, breaking through the central line.

Second. The rearguard would press from the south, dividing their attention.

Third. We, the perimeter, would be the hidden teeth of the trap.

At the center, the orc camp. That tumor of smoke and hardened hide, that hive of violence I had seen with my own eyes.

The horn sounded.

A deep, ancestral bellow that split the frozen air and turned dawn into a battlefield.

The rank C warriors advanced like a wall of steel and leather, shields raised, spears ready. Their boots kicked up waves of snow that looked like frozen foam.

Orcish cries erupted from the camp, guttural, raw, heavy with animal fury. The bonfires flared suddenly, as though they had scented blood before even seeing it.

The clash was brutal.

The first orc to emerge from the circle of hides and bone was a mountain of muscle, his yellowed tusks gleaming with saliva. He wielded a mace made from the femur of some creature and a deformed block of iron.

The impact against the vanguard captain's shield resounded like thunder on the snow. The vibration shook me even from a distance.

Then, chaos exploded.

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From my hiding place on the northern flank, barely fifty meters from the camp, I watched as the ranks broke into individual clashes.

Swords against axes. Shields against spears. Blood against snow.

The orcs were bigger, stronger, but the adventurers had strategy, numbers, and experience. Human shouts mixed with guttural roars, the air already thick with iron and smoke.

“Close the line!” a veteran roared.

“Back, back, damn it!” another screamed as his arm was torn off and hurled into the air like a broken toy by an orc.

Chloé growled low, the sound vibrating in my chest. “Do not drop your guard. We are no match for that.”

My eyes followed every detail, every movement. My heart pounded like a drum.

Then I saw him.

An orc, taller than the rest, clad in riveted plate armor and a crooked helmet, turned toward our position. His gaze pierced the thicket where we lay in wait.

His roar split the air like lightning. And he began to charge.

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“Positions!” I shouted, more to myself than to the others.

Three rank D adventurers stationed with me on the perimeter raised their crossbows and bows. Projectiles hissed through the frozen air.

Two arrows sank into his chest, barely slowing him. The crossbow bolt lodged in his shoulder, drawing a furious roar.

But he did not fall.

He kept coming, a hurricane of flesh and steel.

We met him in the snow. I darted to the side, dagger in hand, searching for a weak point. The stench of ash and blood engulfed me, nauseating.

Chloé leapt first, a silver flash against the green hulk. Her fangs sank into his forearm, tearing a roar of pain from him. The orc shook his arm violently, as if she were nothing but a brittle branch.

I seized the instant.

I lunged at his back, driving my dagger between two plates of twisted metal. The blade bit into flesh, and hot blood surged out like a dark spring.

The orc spun, his hand striking me hard. The blow hurled me into the snow, ripping the air from my lungs. The world turned into a whirl of white and red.

I heard the others shouting, weapons clashing, Chloé's snarl.

I forced myself upright, staggering, my mouth full of blood and snow. And then I saw his eyes.

Black, like bottomless pits. And in them... a strange spark. Something that was not just rage, but hunger.

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The battle raged on. The flanks burned with chaos. The orcs did not flee: they regrouped, roared, resisted like a living wall.

Commands rang out through the trees.

“Drive them toward the frozen river!”

“Don’t let them reach the hills!”

But it wasn’t that simple. Each orc that fell left two or three adventurers wounded in its wake. The snow, once pure, was now stained red.

My arm trembled, the dagger slipping with blood—some mine, some theirs. Chloé panted beside me, her fur streaked with cuts and mud.

“Don’t think of surviving, Lotte. Think of moving forward. One more. Just one more.”

The roar of another orc forced us to turn. More were coming, from the center, as if the initial number had only been an appetizer.

And in the middle of the camp, beneath the chained tarps... something stirred.

A tremor rippled through the ground.

It wasn't only orcs they were keeping there.