

Chapter 15: The Winter Realm

Stig led them away from the Silverspiral, his cloak whispering over the moss as the path climbed and dipped through the woods. The trail wound like a quiet river among trunks that rose taller with every turn. As daylight faded and night began to creep in, he searched for a place to make camp. Before long, he found a small clearing a few dozen feet off the trail and suggested they rest there for the night.

Stig handed his threadpack to Robert and Lisa to unpack food, bedrolls, and other supplies while he walked the perimeter, murmuring words into the air that Lisa could not understand. She did not ask, but assumed they were protective incantations of some kind. Theo gathered dry wood from around the clearing and built a fire, while Nyra sat on a fallen log in the dimming light, poring over several aged scrolls.

They ate by the fire and spoke quietly about their journey so far: about the Hourglass Root and the other Tools, about Chronovare and the nature of Feylock, and about the Winter Realm and the realms that might follow. As the night deepened, Lisa's eyes grew heavy. One by one, they lay upon their bedrolls, each drifting into sleep beneath the hush of the trees.

Lisa woke to the soft sounds of Stig putting out the fire. Nearby, Theo and Nyra sat together at the edge of camp, the Hourglass Root in Theo's hands, talking quietly as they ate dried fruits and nuts. She sat up and stretched, noticing- as usual- that Robert was still sound asleep. Rising, she brushed the leaves from her cloak and walked over to join Theo and Nyra. They spoke for a while about the Hourglass Root, its weight and glow, until Stig finished packing and moved to rouse Robert.

Robert rubbed his eyes and groaned. "You ever dream your breakfast fights back?" he muttered. "The eggs were rolling after me like tiny white soldiers, and the bacon was chasing me through a kitchen with a fork." He shook his head. "By the way, what is there to eat?"

Before long, Robert was fed as well, and they began their journey to the Winter Realm.

At about mid-day, they turned onto a new path that led towards a small mountain range in the distance. Its tops were white, breaking into a coal grey sky. Lisa could feel the transition as they came upon a line of immensely large white pine trees. At first the air only cooled, then it thinned and sharpened until each breath felt like a small sip of frost. The light above softened from gold to pewter as clouds thickened, the sky lowering until it seemed to brush the crowns of the trees.

"We have entered the Winter Realm." Stig announced.

Lisa noticed the changes as they walked onward. The moss had lost its deep hue, fading to a pale shade dusted with rime. Ferns lined the path, their fronds slightly curled as if bracing against the cold. Frost laced every surface; jagged ice traced the tree trunks like veins of crystal, and icicles hung from the evergreen branches, frozen mid-drip. The air had grown colder, carrying the clean, fresh scent of winter with hints of pine. Light scattered across the whitening ground, where a thin layer of powder deepened with each step, crunching softly beneath their boots.

She observed the scars next. A trunk split cleanly down the center, its heartwood blackened as if frost and flame had met and neither would yield. Char clung to its bark. A stretch of ground gouged into a long trench, ice around it seamed with tiny fractures. The scent in the air changed with it, no longer only resin and cold, but a bitter, metallic tang that did not belong to winter.

“Something tore through here,” Robert muttered, drawing his cloak tighter.

Stig’s tone was grave. “Feyshard Wraiths.”

Theo glanced back at him, unsettled. “Those creatures that attacked us with Asha?”

Stig slowed his step to investigate one of the damaged trees. “Yes. It seems they have been through here. It seems perhaps this happened a few days ago, however we should still be cautious.”

The path rose toward a ridge where the forest thinned and the sky opened, a pale dome lit by a motionless aurora, a sweep of green and violet held in place as if the night had been painted across daylight. Snow fell, first a few wandering flakes, then more, yet each seemed to drift at half its proper speed. The silence gathered about them, not the gentle hush of snowfall, but a stillness that pressed at the edges of thought.

Lisa slowed at a shattered pillar of ice that must once have been a limned sculpture, the shards glittering faintly with embedded light. She touched one with a gloved finger. The shard was not cold so much as numb. When she lifted her hand, the light inside the ice dimmed.

They crossed a narrow saddle of stone and descended into a glade ringed by towering pines. Their branches curved inward and met, forming a vaulted canopy of green shadow. At the center stood a tremendous stone dais half-buried in snow, its surface carved with spirals and sigils that seemed to shift when seen from the corner of the eye.

He waited there as if he had always been part of this place, and the glade had revealed him only when they were quiet enough to see. Asterwyn, Guardian of Winter. Silver hair drifted about his head like a slow tide, though no wind touched it. Robes of frost and midnight blue moved in soft folds, and snowflakes circled his shoulders in a patient dance, never settling. His eyes were pale as moonlight on ice, and within them lay a tenderness that made Lisa’s chest ache.

“Welcome to the Winter Realm, Stig and company,” he said, his voice as soft as falling snow yet carrying quiet authority. “You come at a time of great stillness and loss.” His pale gaze lingered on the blackened trunks and gouged ice.

Stig stepped forward. “We have seen some of the damage upon entering the realm.”

“The Wraiths descended not two days ago,” said Asterwyn. “Just before they came, I was visited by a Seeker named Asha at nightfall. She sought information about three young humans- and about you, Stig. I told her I had nothing to share, and that you had not been here in at least a year. She did not believe me. She insisted I was trying to protect you. I refused to speak with her further, for she carried a foul aura, and I ordered her to depart my realm. She grew angry, but left.

The next morning, at daybreak, the Wraiths came.”

Lisa’s stomach tightened. She remembered the shriek of the Wraiths, their hollow eyes and the way the air had twisted around them. To think they were still hunting her and the others sent a cold weight through her chest.

Stig bowed his head. “I am sorry this has happened. I knew the danger would grow for us, yet I did not imagine Asha and the Wraiths would be so bold as to strike a Seasonal Realm.”

“They came not only to search, but to destroy.” Replied Asterwyn. “They carried blades of corrupted Feylock, forged to wound the very marrow of time. We met them with song and ice and memory, and they did not prevail. But their passing left hollows. Silence, death and decay clings where they struck.”

He looked over the travelers. “Stig and I have known each other for many years, and Nyra I have met, though only once. So tell me, who are you three young humans whom this Asha seeks, and why does she seek you?”

Stig gave Asterwyn a brief account of all that had occurred since he had first taken the three travelers under his guidance. Asterwyn listened with steady attention as Stig spoke of his battle with Asha and the Wraiths.

“So, Chronovare has returned from the shadows. I have felt the distortions in Feylock within my Season, yet none could confirm my suspicions. As it seems, these disruptions were already growing because of human activity on Earth.”

Lisa noticed Asterwyn’s gaze linger on the two brothers, then on her, his expression thoughtful. When his eyes met hers, she asked, “What are these distortions or disruptions? How do you feel them?”

Asterwyn turned to face her. “Chronovare’s return stirs the deep flow of time itself. I feel it in the frost that forms and melts within the same breath, in snows that fall upward and never land. Such things are not nature’s choice but fractures in her rhythm. Yet it is not only his doing. From your world, I sense confusion. The seasons arriving late, the warmth lingering too long. The pulse of Earth falters, and through the veins of Feylock, that imbalance echoes here.”

Lisa bowed her head, feeling a great sadness come upon her. She wanted to ask more, but Asterwyn continued on, as if sensing her feelings. “Dear young one, do not fret. Come- all of you. We have stood rooted to this spot like a stand of old hemlock trees gathering snow. We can discuss more over a fire and warm meal and drink.”

Asterwyn led them to a terrace carved into the mountainside. Beyond it, hills and crystal forests unfolded, and a waterfall hung like frozen glass with a thin ribbon of flowing water still whispering beneath. A low oval table of stone awaited them, heated from within and surrounded

by chairs that warmed Lisa's body as she sat. In the center of the table, a small fire blazed, golden-blue and steady.

As they took their seats, a group of polar bears arrived, walking upright on their hind legs and carrying silver trays piled high with food and drink. Lisa startled for a moment, unsure whether to move or speak, until she realized the bears' movements were calm and deliberate, almost ceremonial. One of them bore a bandaged wound across its shoulder.

"Asterwyn," she said softly. "Did the bears fight against the Wraiths?"

"Yes," he replied. "The entire realm rose to defend this inner sanctum. Bear, fox, wolf, eagle—every living creature that could stand and fight joined the battle beside me."

The bears placed the trays upon the table, and receded back into the woods.

The Winter Realm's food offerings were more flavorful and delicious than Lisa could have imagined for such a cold place. They ate Snowflake Root—glowing thin slices that warmed the chest, Everfrost fruit that melted like honeyed pine, and Glacierbread with silver butter that shimmered. Solacewine was poured into crystal cups, its taste soft with plum and sage, a drink that settled the body into peace.

Robert was very pleased. He remarked, "If this is what winter tastes like, I might stop complaining about the cold."

The sun began to set and the meal came to an end as the quiet murmur of conversation faded. Asterwyn looked toward the horizon where the last of the sunlight trembled above the frozen trees. "Time here has not flowed purely for many cycles," he said. "Long before the Wraiths came, I felt the imbalance creeping through Feylock. It began as a subtle quiver, a hesitation between moments. Days folded upon themselves. Snow would fall, vanish, and fall again, as though Winter were caught between breaths. At times, warmth seeps in and melts the icicles before their time. That comes from your world's unrest—the pulse of Earth faltering."

He paused, his eyes dimming. "Then Chronovare's servants deepened it. The Wraiths tore open what was already fragile, and now there is much healing to do. It will take all of my strength to set it right. It will take time, though time itself here is disrupted and confused. That makes the task all the more difficult."

Lisa glanced at Theo, who rested a hand over his cloak where the Hourglass Root lay hidden. His expression was distant, thoughtful.

Theo met her gaze. "I can try," he said, as he pulled the Root out and placed it upon the table gently "though I am not sure how, or even what I am meant to do. When Asterwyn spoke about healing and time, the Root grew warm against me, and I felt a tingling down my spine. I cannot explain it, but it feels as though the Root is *searching*."

Asterwyn regarded the object with quiet interest. "Tell me, Nyra, what is this Hourglass Root you speak of?"

Nyra inclined her head slightly. "It is an ancient fragment of living time, responsive to emotion and memory. When held by one who resonates with its rhythm, it can attune the flow of moments and mend distortions where time has faltered."

Asterwyn's gaze shifted to Theo, calm and intent. "Perhaps that is its purpose. The Root carries harmony within its essence. If its bearer can align with the rhythm of a realm, even for a moment, it can help time remember how to flow as it once did."

Nyra looked between them. "Then this is the place," she said. "Here, where time loops and falters, Theo can help it find its rhythm again. The Root responds to memory and emotion- two forces that remain steady within him."

Asterwyn rose, his robes whispering like drifting frost. "Come," he said softly. "There is a place not far from here where the Realm listens."

He led them down a broad path lined with snow-laden pines. The air grew quieter with each step, as if even the wind paused to watch. Soon they reached a wide clearing encircled by stone and evergreen, where a great fire burned within a circular pit carved from ancient ice.

Lisa felt the warmth long before they reached it. The fire's light shimmered white and blue, steady and unchanging. Around it stood low stone seats dusted with snow, and along the outer ring, small alcoves where figures could sit to meditate or offer prayers.

Asterwyn turned to them. "This is one of the sanctuaries of Winter," he said. "A heart of the Realm. The fire you see has burned since the Season's first dawn. No wood has ever been placed upon it, and yet it endures. It burns not to consume, but to remember."

He gestured for them to sit. The fire's glow caught in his silver hair, and for a moment, it seemed that time itself leaned closer to listen.

They seated themselves around the fire. Its light moved across their faces like slow water. Asterwyn lowered his head in reverence, and the others followed his lead.

Nyra turned to Theo, her voice calm but intent. "Let the Root listen," she said. "The Realm is wounded, its rhythm unsteady. Do not command it. Simply open yourself to what it already remembers. And this time, speak your memory aloud. Share it. Let the Realm hear you through Feylock, through this place of reflection and prayer. Offer it a moment of pain, and of healing."

Lisa watched Theo close his eyes, the Hourglass Root glowing softly in his hands. When he spoke, his voice was calm but distant, as though he were remembering something far away.

"It was the first winter after our mother passed," he said. "Her birthday in January. Robert, my father, and I stood by the half-frozen stream behind our house. The air was sharp and clear, our breath rising in soft silver clouds. Beneath a thin sheet of ice, the water still moved, slow and steady."

“My father crouched near the bank, brushing frost from a stone. He said, ‘Even in the coldest days, the river keeps going. It doesn’t stop- time keeps moving underneath. You just have to learn to see it.’

“Robert picked up a stone and skipped it across the surface. It cracked through the ice, and we watched the ripples spread in widening rings before fading into the reflection of the pale winter sky. None of us spoke for a while. We just listened to the faint trickle beneath the frozen silence and the quiet rhythm that kept the world turning.

“Then Robert started talking about how Mom wanted to build a snowman on her last birthday. I remembered how we built it, dressed it in Dad’s old coat. We went on for a while, taking turns talking about her, tearing up a bit.”

He hesitated, eyes still closed. “It was the first time we’d spoken about her like that since those first months. And even though the air was freezing, we felt warm, standing there together. It felt like something had finally begun to heal.”

For a moment, no one moved. The only sound was the low crackle of the eternal fire. Then the flames began to shift. They rose higher, scattering sparks that drifted into the air like tiny stars, changing hue from blue to gold to pale green. The scent of frost deepened, clean and sharp as morning air.

A soft hum rippled through the ground beneath Lisa’s boots, not a vibration but a rhythm, slow and deep, as if the ground itself remembered a forgotten heartbeat. Snow began to fall, light and steady, each flake glowing faintly before fading as it touched the ground.

The Hourglass Root pulsed brighter in Theo’s hands, threads of amber light reaching outward in delicate strands that intertwined with the falling snow. Around them, the trees seemed to breathe- their branches flexing with a whisper of wind. And then above them, the aurora burst into a sweep of color that filled the sky. Waves of green, violet, and gold unfurled across the heavens, rippling like silk in the wind.

Lisa watched, breath held, as time seemed to find its rhythm again. The air moved. The snow drifted at its proper pace. Even the fire steadied into a perfect circle of light.

Asterwyn stood, eyes half-closed, as if listening to something only he could hear. The falling snow gathered in his hair and on his shoulders, but melted before it could rest. His voice was low when he finally spoke.

“I can feel it,” he said. “The rhythm has returned. The frost no longer clings in fear, and the wind moves without hesitation. The trees will mend their wounds, the creatures will wake from their stillness. Time breathes again within this Season.”

He turned his gaze to Theo, and a faint light shimmered behind his pale eyes. “You have done well. Through memory and heart, you have shown Winter how to heal.”

Nyra spoke, her tone soft with wonder. "I can feel the alignment," she said. "The distortion has quieted. The threads of Feylock move evenly again. Well done, Theo!"

They rose together as snow fell in steady silence, glinting faintly as though lit from within.

Asterwyn led them back along the path toward the terrace, where the stone table still waited. The fresh snow crunched softly beneath their boots, and the air carried the faint scent of fresh pine and chestnut.

When they reached the table, it had already been set once more. Steam rose from silver pots that had not been there before, carrying the scent of spiced cocoa, dark tea, and a brew that smelled faintly of roasted grain and pine. Small cups awaited them, their rims dusted with crystals of sugar that caught the firelight.

They took their seats again. Lisa cupped her hands around one of the warm vessels and breathed in the sweetness of chocolate and spice. The taste was rich and soothing, like melted snow touched by sunlight. Robert savored his drink with an approving sigh. "Now this," he said, "is how winter should always be."

They once again took up conversation until the lateness beckoned for rest.

Asterwyn guided them to a cave of smooth crystal veined with blue and silver. At its heart, a basin glowed with an amber fire, radiating steady warmth throughout the large room. Fur-soft blankets lined the ground. The aurora filtered through the ceiling in green and violet washes. Lisa laid down upon her blanket and wrapped herself into a cocoon, and as she fell asleep, she noticed Stig and Nyra in the corner of the room, looking through scrolls and having a discussion that she could not hear.

Morning came as a wash of silver light across the terrace. Lisa stirred beneath the fur-lined blanket, the air still cool against her skin. One by one, the others woke and stretched, their breath faint in the chill.

They returned to the stone table where they had dined the night before. Asterwyn was already there, waiting beside it. Steam rose from ceramic bowls filled with silvery-blue porridge that shimmered in the light, topped with dried winter berries and delicate slivers of something crisp and translucent, like frozen petals, but warm to the bite.

The meal was simple yet comforting. As they ate, the aurora still traced faint ribbons of color through the sky, unwilling to fade even in daylight.

When they had finished, Asterwyn walked with them to the edge of the forest. "Travel on," he said. "And when you return to your world, may winter remind you that even in stillness, life continues beneath the frost."

Through the falling snow, the glade opened ahead. Two immense white pines shifted aside as though stirred by his words, revealing a path lined with frost flowers in hues of azure and crimson, alive and blooming despite the cold.

Stig took the lead and called for the others to follow. They turned to look back once more, but Asterwyn was already fading, the snow thickening around him until his shape became a gentle storm of light and wind that drifted away into the trees.