

Frozen Star 145

Chapter 145: Beneath the Ruins

[POV Liselotte]

The silence in the village was the kind of silence that crushes the air.

Not the natural quiet of an abandoned place, but something denser... something that seemed to watch us from the broken shadows between the collapsed houses.

“The entrance is clear,” Alistair said as he raised his hand to signal us to move forward.

Clear wasn’t exactly the right word.

It just meant nothing was moving.

I took a deep breath and tightened my grip on my sword, even though I knew it would do little if demons were nearby. Leah walked beside me, holding her staff close to her chest. Chloé moved ahead of us with her back arched and tail low, her ears flicking in all directions.

The village had a name... but it no longer mattered.

Because what stood before us was not a village.

It was the shell of what one had once been.

The first street was filled with debris. Entire walls had collapsed, leaving split stones and splintered wood. Doors had been torn off, windows shattered, roofs caved in. The wind lifted dust that smelled of burning, though there were no signs of recent fire.

"This... doesn't look like a recent attack," Leah murmured.

"Nor an old one," I added. "Something... in between."

As if the disaster had happened days ago, but the fear was still hanging in the air.

Alistair walked ahead with a deep frown, observing every detail. The soldiers followed behind, some trembling, others silent, others bearing stone-faced expressions.

"Captain..." one of them said. "Should we... announce our presence?"

“No,” Alistair replied immediately. “If anything alive is still here, it already knows we arrived. And if anything dead remains... better not call it.”

I swallowed.

“Great,” Chloé said sarcastically, still sniffing around. “I just love being welcomed by invisible things.”

“Chloé...” I whispered, but she just snorted.

We moved along the main street. Every step echoed faintly, as if the ruins absorbed the sound. I could imagine how this place had once been: children running, carts carrying flour, voices in the windows.

But now...

The silence weighed. The absence hurt. The shadows stretched too long.

“Do you see anything?” I asked Leah.

She shook her head.

“No... but I feel something. I don’t know what. It’s like there’s loose magic in the air. Broken magic.”

Her words made the air feel colder.

We reached the central plaza. The fountain was broken in two. The water was gone, leaving only dark moss. There was a notice board with torn papers. And on one side... remains.

Human remains.

Not whole bodies.

Just fragments.

Hands.

Clothing.

Dry stains.

Hair stuck to the stones.

I covered my mouth. Even the soldiers stepped back.

“What... happened here?” Leah whispered.

“An attack,” Alistair said, his voice more a forced statement than a conclusion. “But not a normal one. This wasn’t done by bandits.”

“Nor by common demons,” Leah added.

Chloé growled.

“Whoever it was, they ate everything. And didn’t clean up.”

One of her ears twitched sharply to the right.

“Someone was here recently,” she said suddenly.

“Alive?” I asked.

“Maybe. But not human. It smells like... wet stone. Earth. Mold.”

I clenched my jaw.

“A demon,” Leah said.

“Yes,” Chloé replied without hesitation. “But small. Like it was inspecting the area, not fighting.”

That was worse.

Alistair crouched next to some marks on the ground—long, twisted lines like drag traces.

“Blood?” a soldier asked.

“No. Dry mud,” the captain said, touching it with his fingers. “But mixed with something else.”

Leah knelt beside him.

“It’s coagulated magic,” she murmured. “The trace of a portal or rupture... but very faint.”

She stood abruptly.

“This is bad. Very bad. No one should be opening portals in a human village.”

“Who would do that?” I asked.

“Someone who wanted to take someone,” she answered.

I froze.

“Take...?”

Leah nodded slowly.

“Not everyone died here.”

Chloé sniffed toward a side street, then shook her head.

“This way.”

We followed her. The wolf moved quickly, nose close to the ground. Her tail stayed low, alert, and every so often she released a short growl. We climbed up a narrow street lined with destroyed houses. In one of them was a broken door... and several human footprints in the dirt.

“Recent footprints,” Leah said. “Very recent.”

“From the advance soldiers?” I asked.

“Not all of them. Too many,” Alistair said. “These belong to people from the village.”

“People alive?” I asked.

“Perhaps they were when they left these marks.”

I stepped ahead. Far in the back, almost hidden under overgrowth, was a fallen plank and beneath it, a torn piece of military uniform.

I picked it up.

It belonged to one of the soldiers who were supposed to receive the caravan.

The same soldiers who never arrived.

“They were here,” I said to Alistair.

He nodded.

“And they didn’t die here.”

Leah looked down at the footprints.

“They left... hurriedly. Not fleeing. But moving together.”

“To where?” I asked.

She pointed toward the northern forest.

“There.”

Chloé was already sniffing in that direction.

“The trail continues. Many people walked that way.”

“In a hurry?” I asked.

“No. In fear.”

We followed the path out of the village. The trail was narrower, full of broken branches. As we continued, the footprints multiplied: boots, small shoes, even drag marks from wheels.

“They took a cart,” Alistair said, surprised. “Why flee silently? Why not wait for reinforcements? Why—?”

“Because they couldn’t,” Leah interrupted.

“How do you know?”

She breathed deeply.

“Because I can feel it. There was something here they couldn’t face. Something that forced them to abandon the village... but didn’t follow.”

Chloé growled harder.

“Yes. It smells like dried human fear... and something else.”

“What else?” I asked.

“Smoke. Old. From torches.”

“So they brought light with them?” I said.

“Yes. A lot of it.”

The trail led us into a new forest—not as dark as the previous one, but strange. Tall trees with white bark, pale leaves, glowing moss. The air was fresh, almost too fresh.

“This forest...” Leah murmured. “It has magic. But... neutral magic. Not demonic.”

“A protected forest?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Then that’s good,” I said.

“Not necessarily,” she replied.

After half an hour, we reached a more hidden area where the path widened slightly. Several logs had been moved intentionally, forming a barely visible trail.

“This is human work,” Alistair murmured. “They wanted to hide their tracks.”

“From the demon?” I asked.

“From whoever attacked the village,” Leah said.

Chloé lifted her head, sniffed deeply... and her eyes widened slightly, as if she had found something important.

“I smell them,” she said. “Many. More than ten. More than twenty.”

I froze.

“People?”

“Yes. Alive.”

The tension in my shoulders loosened—just a little.

“So the soldiers... survived.”

“Many did,” Chloé said.

“Are they close?” I asked.

“Yes. Very close. But...”

“But what?”

Chloé tilted her head.

“There’s something else. It smells like wet stone... but not like a demon. I’m not sure.”

Leah tightened her grip on her staff.

“It might be the cave.”

“Cave...” I repeated. “There’s a cave?”

The wolf nodded with her snout.

“Just ahead.”

And then we saw it.

Between the trees was a large rock formation that seemed part of the landscape, but as we approached, a dark entrance revealed itself. It wasn’t an open cave. It was a narrow passage sloping downward.

An extinguished torch lay at the entrance.

A second one, broken.

Human marks on the ground.

Alistair knelt beside them.

“The footprints end here.”

Leah looked around.

“Then they entered willingly. They weren’t dragged.”

I nodded.

“They were seeking refuge.”

“And they found it,” Chloé added.

“How do you know?” I asked.

The wolf sniffed again.

“Because I smell food, human sweat... and... babies.”

I froze completely.

“Babies...”

“Yes. There are families inside.”

Alistair opened his eyes in surprise.

“So many survived...?”

“Enough,” Leah said, letting out a relieved breath. “Thanks to the town’s soldiers.”

“Then the mission isn’t lost,” the captain said. “Not entirely.”

I stepped closer to the cave entrance.

The darkness inside seemed to breathe. But it wasn’t an evil breath. It was warm.

Alive.

Human.

“Leah...” I whispered.

“Yes?”

“Be ready.”

She tightened her staff.

“Why?”

I looked at the entrance. The ground. The distant echo of human voices whispering for quiet. The recent marks. The warm air drifting out.

Because this was the end of the road.

Or the beginning of the next one.

“What we find inside...” I finally said, “...is going to change everything.”

Chloé stepped forward, her gray fur glowing in the faint light.

“Then let’s go in.”

I nodded.

And together, we crossed into the darkness.