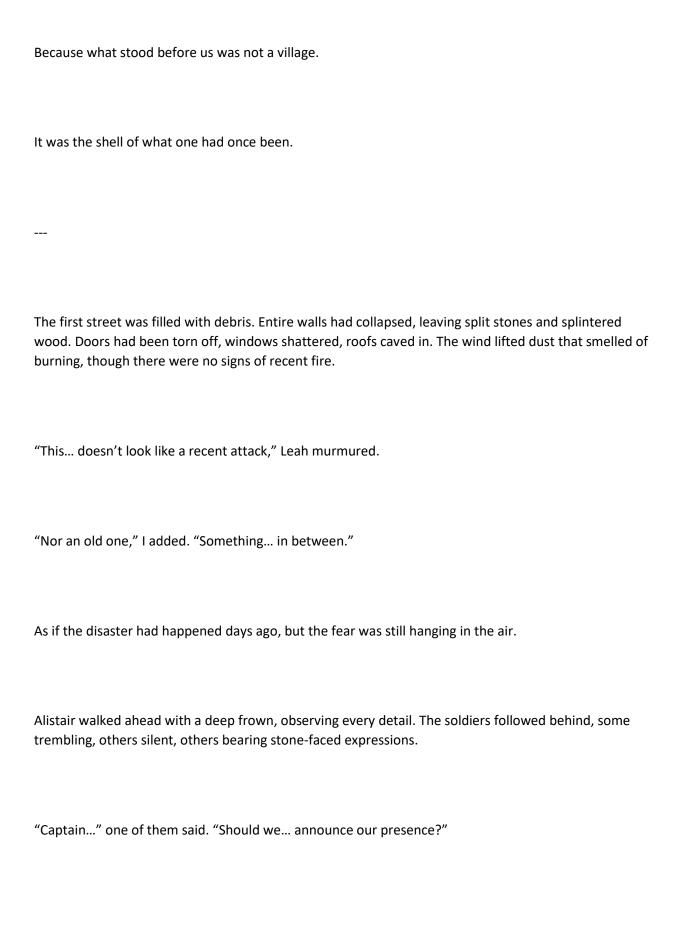
## Frozen Star 145

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.



"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.
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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.

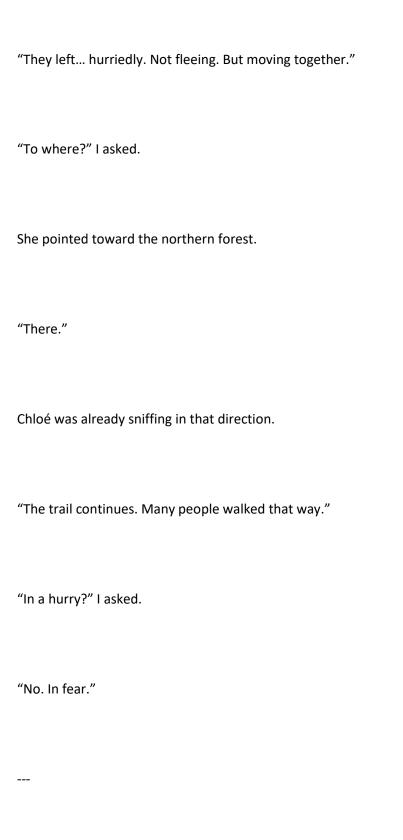
Dry stains.
Hair stuck to the stones.
I covered my mouth. Even the soldiers stepped back.
"What happened here?" Leah whispered.
"An attack," Alistair said, his voice more a forced statement than a conclusion. "But not a normal one. This wasn't done by bandits."
"Nor by common demons," Leah added.
Chloé growled.
"Whoever it was, they ate everything. And didn't clean up."
One of her ears twitched sharply to the right.



"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."



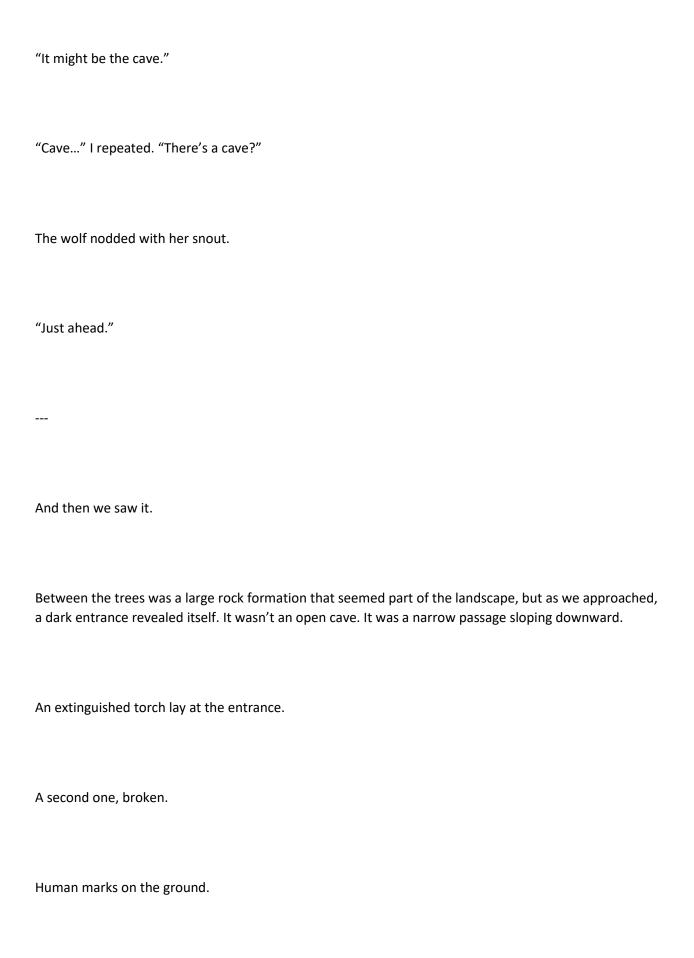


We followed the path out of the village. The trail was narrower, full of broken branches. As we continued, the footprints multiplied: boots, small shoes, even drag marks from wheels.
"They took a cart," Alistair said, surprised. "Why flee silently? Why not wait for reinforcements? Why—?"
"Because they 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.

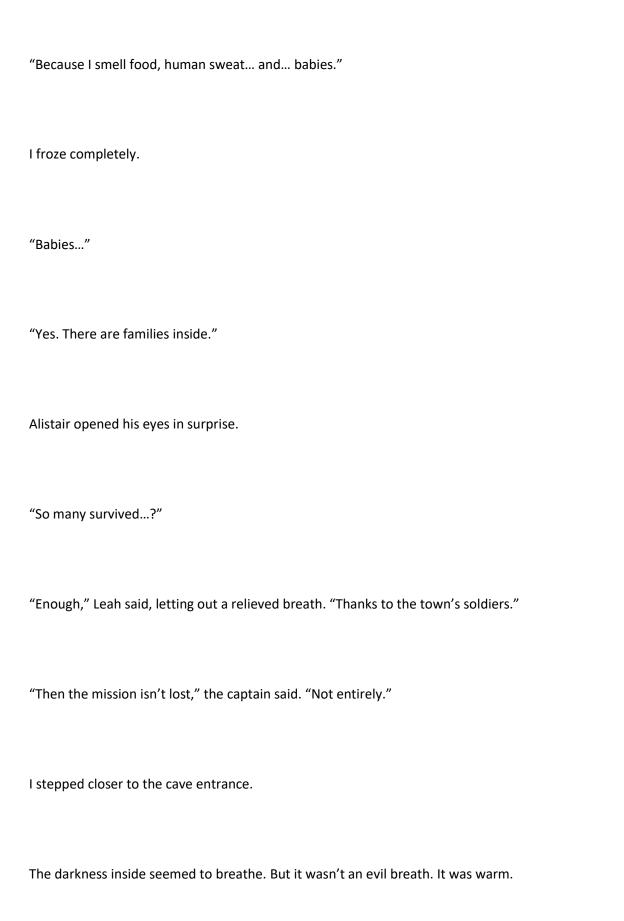
"Smoke. Old. From torches."
"So they brought light with them?" I said.
"Yes. A lot of it."
The trail led us into a new forest—not as dark as the previous one, but strange. Tall trees with white bark, pale leaves, glowing moss. The air was fresh, almost too fresh.
"This forest" Leah murmured. "It has 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.



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.



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.