

Frozen Star 146

Chapter 146: Beneath the Breathing Mountain

[POV Liselotte]

The first step inside the cave greeted me with a silence different from the forest's.

A heavy, damp silence—thick, close—like the walls themselves were breathing beside my face. The faint glow from our lamps barely pushed the darkness back, revealing a stone corridor descending in soft curves.

I smelled wet earth. Burnt-out smoke. Human fear clinging to the air.

My body was still exhausted from the last battle. And though Leah walked beside me, steady and quiet, her breathing told me she was as tired as I was... or worse. Chloé walked ahead with the torch in her jaws, ears perked, every muscle ready to react to the slightest suspicious sound. Her presence kept me anchored to my sanity.

Behind us, the soldiers marched in complete silence. And Alistair, as always, stayed in the rear—watchful, sharp-eyed, never truly resting.

As we descended, the darkness shifted, stained by faint orange glimmers.

Not natural light—recognizable instantly.

Small flames, tired flames... flames kept burning far too long.

One more turn, and the cave opened into a wide chamber.

My heart tightened.

People. Dozens of them.

Villagers, children, elders, wounded soldiers—some wrapped in blankets, others shivering beside tiny campfires. Makeshift tents built from torn house fabrics. Hollow faces, exhausted bodies—some eyes empty, some holding a hope so fragile it looked ready to snap.

When they saw us enter, all conversation died instantly.

A woman in light armor stood so quickly she nearly fell.

“Th—the banner...! Alistair! We thought you’d died!”

The captain stepped forward. His voice was heavy, worn, but firm.

“Not for lack of attempts. Who’s in charge here?”

The woman pointed toward a man sitting near the back. Bandage around his forehead, military coat torn, one leg stiff as he walked. But his eyes—sharp, alert—were very much alive.

“I am,” he said, approaching with difficulty. “Marcus Hildren, second in command of the garrison.”

When he reached us, his gaze swept over our group as if trying to confirm we were real.

“The caravan...? Did you bring it?”

Leah nodded before I could answer.

“It’s outside. Intact.”

A murmur ran through the chamber.

A soft wave of relief.

One that hit my chest like a collective exhale.

“Thank the heavens...” whispered an elderly man by a fire.

But Marcus’s eyes, though relieved, still held despair beneath the surface—thinly hidden, never fully leaving.

“Come,” he said. “We must register everything before distributing it.”

We followed him to a wider area where an improvised table had been assembled from broken crates. He set a lamp down and released a trembling breath, as if removing a weight from his soul.

“Before we begin... you need to know what happened.”

My fingers tightened around my belt. Leah straightened slightly. Chloé let out a low growl—not of hostility, but warning.

“We imagined something after seeing the village,” I murmured.

Marcus shook his head.

“No. You didn’t.”

“It was fast,” he began. His voice sounded like worn stone.

“Too fast. When the demons appeared, our weapons... didn’t work. None of them. Our blades passed straight through their bodies, as if they had no substance.”

My skin prickled.

“Like the ones we fought...” Leah murmured.

“They were immune to physical damage?” I asked.

“Completely.” Marcus closed his eyes for a moment. “Only the mages could slow them down. Slow them, not kill them.”

His jaw trembled.

“The first line died in minutes. Whole houses were covered in a black substance... corrosive. We still haven’t identified it.”

I remembered the smell. The sound. The bodies...

A cold shiver crawled down my spine.

“How did you escape?” I asked.

Marcus swallowed hard.

“We didn’t escape. We were forced out. And there were sacrifices.”

The nearest fire flickered as if leaning toward him.

“A group of twenty volunteers stayed behind. Mages from the eastern district, together with a few civilians. They took magical tools with them to slow the demons enough for us to flee.”

“Magical tools?” I repeated, glancing at Leah.

She stepped forward.

“Marcus, what were they like? What did they do?”

“Small cylindrical devices,” he explained. “Dark metal, runes. You activated them by slamming them into the ground. They produced light, illusions, magical noises... things that disoriented or delayed the demons.”

I looked at Leah.

“What exactly are those magical tools?”

She sighed, exhausted.

“Devices crafted by mana artisans. They store magic inside—pre-made spells. Useful when you’re too tired to cast real magic... or when the mage is drained.”

“Like you now,” I whispered.

She shot me a sideways glance, cheeks slightly flushed.

“Yes... like me.”

Then she faced Marcus again.

“How many survivors made it out?”

“Around eighty,” he replied. “Out of three hundred...”

The air seemed to freeze for a moment.

Finally, Alistair stepped forward.

“Did the demons... follow you?”

Marcus slowly shook his head.

“No. They stopped. As if something called them back. As if they received another order.”

My stomach twisted.

“So it wasn’t a random attack,” I murmured.

“No. They were searching for something.” Marcus looked each of us in the eyes. “Or someone.”

After a quiet, tense moment, Marcus turned toward the cave entrance.

“We should bring the caravan in. What’s inside might save our lives.”

We followed him outside. The cold forest air hit my face, but after the cave’s pressure, it almost felt welcome.

The caravan was still there. Untouched. Still protected by its seals.

I breathed out in relief.

So many days.

So many corpses.

So much danger.

And it was still whole.

“All right,” I said, taking Chloé’s torch and stepping toward the first crate. “Let’s begin.”

We worked for hours.

Bags of grain, barrels of purified water, reinforced bandages. Simple magical weapons, small communication crystals, tools, thermal blankets.

Chloé helped by carrying small crates and dragging medium ones with a calm, steady strength. I stroked her head between trips.

“Thank you, Chloé.”

She pressed her forehead against my leg before returning to work, tail swaying softly.

Leah inspected the magical items, checking each seal, each rune, each lock. I could see her fighting exhaustion, but also how much she cared about doing everything right.

Marcus took notes quickly, hands trembling but efficient.

“With this,” he said at last, examining one of the major crates, “we can survive for a couple of weeks. And if the demons return... we’ll have some defense.”

Leah let out a long breath and set a tablet aside.

“We can help more tomorrow.”

“Yes...” I said, stretching my back. “Enough for today.”

As we stepped back toward the cave, Marcus lifted a hand.

“Thank you... for everything. Without you... I don’t know what would have happened.”

I shook my head gently.

“We’re completing a mission. And helping those who need it.”

Leah gave a faint smile.

“Tomorrow... we’ll see what to do.”

The cave felt warmer now. Campfires flickered, children slept, elders murmured prayers. Others simply stared at the wall, as if afraid to close their eyes.

We found a space between two improvised tents. Leah practically collapsed onto a blanket, exhausted. I sat beside her, feeling my muscles finally give in. Chloé lay at our feet, resting her head on my legs, still vigilant.

“Leah.”

“Hm...?” she murmured without opening her eyes.

“I have a bad feeling. Something tells me tomorrow... will be important.”

She sighed.

“I feel it too.”

I slowly lay down on the blanket, one hand resting on Chloé’s soft fur.

The nearby fire pulsed like a tired heart.

As my eyes closed, I had the strange sensation that the shadows inside the cave were breathing with us.

And that was how the day ended, in pain, relief, and the foreboding of something we still couldn’t name.