

Frozen Star 148

Chapter 148: The Five Necessary Lights

[POV Liselotte]

The cave was so silent that my own heartbeat seemed to crash against the stone walls. The air still smelled of smoke, sweat, and burnt herbs—a constant reminder that this shelter had been improvised in the middle of a disaster. But it wasn't just the smell keeping my nerves stretched tight as wires; it was the sensation, that almost invisible pressure, that something in that silence was out of place.

Chloé was the first to move. Her right ear tilted to the side with a small tremor, and then she jerked her head sharply, sniffing the air. Her yellow eyes shone for a moment, reflecting the light of the nearby fire.

"Something's wrong," she murmured softly, barely a whisper. The lupine tension in her tone was enough for me to sit up.

I pushed myself upright, though my legs still ached from the journey and the exhaustion piling up. Leah, who had been dozing beside me wrapped in a blanket borrowed from the survivors, opened her eyes the instant she heard Chloé.

"Did you sense another demon?" Leah asked, her face pale from lack of sleep.

Chloé shook her head, though her fur bristled.

“No... this is different. Footsteps. And voices. But they don’t want to be heard.”

I stood up, grabbed my sword out of habit—even though it was useless against demons or artifacts—and followed Chloé out of our little corner. The inside of the cave was calmer than the night before. Some survivors slept in piles of blankets, others remained awake, staring into nothing or leaning against the walls, trembling from fatigue or uncertainty.

As we advanced a few meters, we heard a murmur, a whisper threading through the gaps in the rocks like an inappropriate breeze.

Marcus.

And he wasn’t alone.

We stopped beside a natural bend in the cave. Ahead, two figures spoke in hushed voices, thinking themselves hidden. I recognized the silhouette of the soldier Thom, one of those who escaped with the survivors. Marcus looked around nervously before lowering his voice even more.

“We have to finish what we started,” he said. “If we keep waiting, there will be nothing left to save.”

The soldier replied with a rough whisper. “But if we do it without the newcomers noticing... we might have a chance.”

“You don’t understand,” Marcus growled. “It’s not just about surviving. We need to activate the artifact. It’s the only way to stop those things if they come back. But we need to get it out of here and take it to the village. That’s where it can work.”

Chloé let out a soft, barely audible growl.

A chill ran down my spine.

Marcus continued, “We need five mages to activate it. We have two here. The newcomers brought three more. And from what I heard... that Alistair can handle some basic magic. That gives us the exact number.”

I froze.

Chloé clenched her teeth, her breathing sharp.

“I don’t like this,” she murmured.

It wasn’t that they wanted to use Leah. Or the other mages. It was how they talked.

The urgency.

The desperation.

As if this wasn't a plan, but an obligation forced on them by something bigger.

Leah appeared at our side, still sleepy but alert. "What are they saying?" she whispered.

I explained in short.

Her eyes widened. "They can't be serious..."

"They are," I replied. "Chloé and I heard enough."

Marcus and Thom continued deeper into the cave. Chloé shifted forward as if to follow them, but I raised a hand to stop her.

"It's better if they don't notice us. Let's go back."

She growled softly, frustrated but obedient. Leah nodded as well, though clearly unsettled.

We returned to our spot. Leah wrapped herself again in her blanket but didn't close her eyes. Chloé curled beside her in guard position, gaze fixed on the darkness. I sat down, unable to relax a single muscle as the conversation replayed endlessly in my mind.

Morning came without any of us sleeping properly.

The cave awakened with murmurings, clumsy footsteps, and hoarse voices. A group of soldiers prepared rations; another repaired blankets or checked weapons. The survivors moved with the sluggishness of people who had not yet escaped the grip of terror.

Marcus appeared near the entrance, speaking with Captain Alistair.

"We need to activate the artifact," he said loudly, no longer attempting secrecy. "If we leave it here, it'll be useless. We must bring it back to the village, to the central point where it was found. It's the only way to save whoever's left."

Alistair crossed his arms, serious, and cast a glance toward us, as if sensing we were listening.

"We already discussed this," he replied. "We know the artifact could repel those creatures. But we need five mages, and we only have four confirmed."

“We have the three who came with you,” Marcus insisted. “Plus our support mage. That makes four. And you yourself admitted last night that you can channel a basic flow.”

Alistair clenched his jaw. “That doesn’t make me a competent mage. I’m lucky if I can light a torch without burning my fingers.”

“But it might work,” Marcus said. “And we don’t have another choice.”

Leah stepped forward almost without thinking. I followed immediately. Chloé walked beside her, fur tense.

“What exactly is going on?” I asked. My voice sounded colder than I intended.

Alistair turned to us.

“Lotte. Leah. Chloé.” He nodded respectfully before sighing. “You’ll want to hear this as well.”

Marcus wasted no time:

“The magic artifact we recovered from the village is an ancient relic. We don’t know who created it, but its purpose is clear: to seal breaches and stop demons from entering. It’s a containment barrier.”

Leah frowned. "Why would a village like that even have something like this? It's not common."

Marcus exchanged a look with the soldiers beside him.

"Because... that village was more important than it appeared. They'd found traces of a partial dimensional rift. Not a full breach, but a fissure. Tiny, barely noticeable. The artifact was meant to contain the energy until the Order came to examine it."

"But the demons came first," I said.

"Exactly." Marcus took a deep breath. "And when they came, they overwhelmed us quickly. Normal weapons couldn't harm them. Only magic could. Just like the ones that attacked you."

Leah pressed a hand to her chest, no doubt remembering.

"So their attackers and ours were the same type."

"Yes," murmured Alistair. "And that means one thing: there's more than one fissure."

My blood ran cold.

Marcus continued, "The artifact needs to be activated before it's too late. If the fissure grows... it won't just be this village. They could appear across the entire region."

Leah breathed deeply, processing every word. "So you need five mages to stabilize it."

"Yes."

"And you want me to be one of them."

"We want you to be the fourth," Marcus clarified. "Alistair would be the fifth."

Alistair raised an eyebrow. "I said I'm not sure if I can."

"You can," Marcus insisted.

At that moment, Chloé stepped forward, jaw tight.

"And why not activate it here? Why take it back to the village? You saw how it is."

Marcus shook his head quickly.

“The artifact doesn't work just anywhere. It needs to resonate with the remains of the original fissure. It can only be activated where it was built to function.”

Leah let out a tired sigh.

“How far is that point exactly?” she asked.

“One hour from here,” Alistair replied. “At the center of the village. Near what used to be the plaza.”

We went silent for a few seconds.

The ruined village.

The bodies.

The smell of death.

Blood dried on the stones.

Going back there wasn't something I liked. But I understood.

Marcus clapped his hands to gather the mages and soldiers.

"We need all five prepared and the artifact ready for transport. Handle it with extreme care."

Alistair rubbed a hand through his hair. He looked more exhausted than all of us combined, yet his eyes still held a determination I hadn't seen before.

Leah watched him for a moment before turning to me.

"Lotte... we don't have another choice."

"I know."

She could do this. Leah hadn't hesitated once since we began this mission. If anything had changed since the attack, it was that she had found a strength in herself even Alistair seemed to notice.

Chloé surveyed the other soldiers again, sniffing the air. "I don't like this," she said softly.

“What do you feel?”

“They’re nervous. Too nervous. Some of them are... hiding something.” She narrowed her eyes. “And Marcus... he doesn’t smell like the others. He smells like... pressure. Like someone hiding real fear.”

“We all have fear,” I replied.

“Not that kind.”

Her words unsettled me. Chloé rarely misread her senses.

Alistair called over the three mages who had traveled with us, along with the surviving support mage.

“We’ll form the team once we’re ready,” he said. “Leah, rest a bit. Lotte, you too. We don’t know what we’ll find in the village. And if something goes wrong... we’ll need you alert.”

Leah gave a tired laugh. “After all this, do you really think I’ll sleep?”

“Try,” he replied.

Chlo   led us back to our spot, though her eyes remained sharp, scanning the soldiers who paced tensely with tightened jaws and restless hands.

Leah collapsed onto the blankets. I sat down beside her, rubbing my cold hands.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes.” She gave me a small but genuine smile. “This time... I feel like I can do something important. Something that will truly help people.”

Chlo   exhaled, a lupine sigh.

“I’ll go with you until the very end,” she said. “I’m not leaving you two alone in that cursed village.”

I turned to her, smiling faintly. “You never have.”

“And I’m not starting now.”

The three of us sat in silence for a moment, listening to the echoes of the cave, the soldiers’ steps, and the distant wind creeping in from the entrance.

Then Marcus's voice rang out:

"Alistair, get them ready. We leave in a few hours."

Leah shut her eyes and exhaled deeply.

I, however, watched the dark corridors of the cave and felt something moving within them. Something that wasn't demon or artifact.

A feeling.

A silent warning.

As if the shadows themselves wanted to tell us that even if we sealed one breach...

...there were other things inside that cave that were not meant for the light.