

Frozen Star 149

Chapter 149: The Heartbeat of the Artifact

[POV Liselotte]

Dawn had only just begun to show itself when the group set out. The cave was now behind us, a fragile refuge clinging to the mountainside with trembling fingers. A thick silence accompanied our departure; neither the soldiers nor the younger survivors dared to wish us luck aloud. It was too early for hopes of any kind.

I walked beside Leah and Chloé. The wolf-girl strode with a steady pace, though every few meters her ears twitched like antennae, catching sounds the rest of us couldn't hear. Leah held a small leather pouch where she carried her piece of the magical catalyst. The other four mages each carried a fragment of the main artifact, transported in pieces for the journey.

"Are you sure you can handle that?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"I'm fine," Leah said with a tired smile. "It's lighter than it looks."

"That doesn't make it any less terrifying."

Leah let out a short huff of laughter. "Believe me, Lotte. I've seen far more terrifying things in the past two weeks than a glowing stone shard."

Chlo   glanced back at us, her yellow eyes sharp in the dim morning light.

“Don’t let your guard down,” she warned. “The forest still smells... uneasy.”

“Demon uneasy?” I asked immediately.

“No.” Her muzzle tightened. “Human tension. Worry. Something expecting to happen... but not happening.”

I tried not to let the shiver running down my back show. The path to the village was the same one we had taken the day before, but the sensation now was different. Heavier. As if the trees were holding their breath just to listen to us pass.

Alistair led the march with Marcus at his side. The two spoke in low voices, only fragments reaching us.

“...we need to align them...” “...if the breach activated because...”

Behind them, the mages walked carefully, protecting the fragments. At times their hands glowed faintly blue or green, hints of the magic they were using to stabilize them.

“Do you feel like something’s following us...?” Leah murmured.

“Yes,” I answered without hesitation. “Since we left.”

Chloé tilted her head. “Something is trailing us from a distance, but it’s human. And scared.”

“A survivor?”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes narrowed. “Doesn’t smell like blood or demonic infection. Just... fear and damp earth. And it’s not coming closer.”

There was no time to dwell on it. As we walked, the village appeared between the trees, silent and devastated just like before. But seeing it in morning light made everything worse.

The remains of the burned houses were black lines against the pale brightness. Shadows stretched long inside the hollow spaces where walls used to be. The smoke—though faint—still clung to the air. And the smell...

That metallic, rancid smell we knew far too well.

I swallowed hard, fighting the nausea.

“We’re almost there,” Alistair said without slowing. “The activation point is in the central plaza. Don’t stray.”

We stepped through the ruins with heavy steps. Every corner seemed to watch us. Every fallen wall seemed to hold the echo of a scream.

When we reached the plaza, I recognized the place. It had once been the heart of the village: a wide open area surrounded by the remains of market stalls, a destroyed fountain, and the stone pedestal that had once held... something. Now, a massive crack split its base.

Marcus inhaled deeply and pointed at the pedestal.

“There.”

The mages began unpacking the artifact fragments. Each piece gave off a faint glow, as if containing a tiny heart beating slow and deep.

Leah watched everything with a mix of awe and fear.

“How are we going to assemble it?” she asked.

“The structure responds to magic,” Alistair said. “It’s not mechanical. It will... align itself when the five of you are connected.”

“That sounds way too easy,” I muttered.

“It’s not,” Marcus said immediately. “Once it starts, it will draw in residual energy from the breach. There may be tremors. Magical echoes. And, hopefully, nothing else.”

Chloé growled. “‘Hopefully’ doesn’t sound reassuring.”

Marcus didn’t deny the tension in his voice. “We have to do this. There’s no alternative.”

The mages formed a circle around the pedestal. Leah stood among them, beside the surviving mage Brynna; the two young mages who had come with us, Sorin and Meryn; and finally Alistair himself, who took the last position with an expression mixing determination and resignation.

The artifact assembled itself in the center of the circle. I watched from a few meters away, my hand on my sword even though I knew perfectly well that weapon would be useless against most things we could encounter.

The structure rose slowly as it assembled, like segments of dark crystal drawn together by an unseen force. It formed a prism with ancient engravings that lit up with a rhythmic pulse.

“This... is incredible,” Leah whispered.

“Focus,” Alistair ordered. “When Marcus gives the signal, channel your mana into the engravings. No more, no less.”

Marcus stood behind the pedestal, holding a ritual knife. It wasn’t a weapon—more like a measuring or guiding tool carved from bone and metal.

“Everyone ready,” he said.

The mages nodded.

Alistair turned his head toward me and Chloé.

“If something happens, withdraw with the other soldiers.”

“I’m not leaving Leah here alone,” I said.

“Nor am I,” Chloé added with a low growl.

Alistair seemed ready to argue but stopped. Finally, he nodded.

“Fine. But don’t interfere. If something goes wrong with the magical flow, you could make it worse.”

“I understand.”

Marcus raised the ritual knife.

“Begin!”

The air changed immediately.

A vibration ran through the ground, climbed up my legs, and reached my chest. It wasn’t a physical quake—it was something different. Something... alive.

The lights on the artifact activated in a precise order:

From blue to violet.

From violet to white.

From white to an ethereal gold.

The mages lifted their hands at once, as if guided by an invisible force. Leah took a deep breath and closed her eyes. I could feel the mana flowing from them into the prism.

A hum filled the air.

"It's activating," Marcus murmured.

Around me, the soldiers tensed. Some lifted their weapons, others stepped back instinctively. Chloé positioned herself in front of me, partly shielding me with her body, ready for anything.

"You okay?" I called to Leah from outside the circle.

She opened one eye.

“Yes. I can feel it responding... like it’s... listening.”

The ground vibrated again, this time with a stronger pulse.

A luminous crack extended from the pedestal toward the destroyed fountain.

“That wasn’t there before,” I said.

“No. It’s the fissure resonating with the artifact’s energy,” Marcus replied without looking away.
“Everything is going as it should.”

I wasn’t so sure.

The air grew heavy, as though breathing required more effort. A metallic scent spread suddenly, mixing with smoke and moisture.

“Something’s coming,” Chloé warned, ears stiff. “Not demons... but something charged with energy... like the air is walking.”

My fingers tightened around the hilt of my sword.

“Marcus,” I said quietly. “Is this normal?”

“Yes,” he replied. “The released energy attracts echoes, magical residue, bodiless forms. But they’re harmless.”

“Are you sure?”

“Not completely.”

I didn’t like how sincerely he said it.

The prism began to rise. Only a few centimeters, but enough for several soldiers to gasp. The lights intensified to near blinding.

“Focus!” Alistair shouted.

Leah gritted her teeth, her magic shining a pale blue. Brynna glowed gold. Sorin and Meryn emanated green and red. Alistair was the faintest, but his presence closed the circle.

“We’re doing well,” Marcus said. “Keep the flow steady.”

But then...

The prism changed rhythm.

The pulse—once slow and steady—began to accelerate.

Thump.

Thump.

Thumpthumpthump.

A frantic heartbeat.

Wind burst outward, forcing me to shield my face. Chloé dug her claws into the ground to avoid being pushed back.

“Is that normal?!” I yelled.

Marcus didn’t answer.

Because he didn't know.

Leah gasped.

"Something's pulling at us!" she shouted. "It's not just energy... it's... a force!"

"Keep your balance!" Alistair commanded. "Don't break the circle!"

The soldiers staggered back, some falling. A shadow—or something like dark mist—formed around the artifact, as if the breach were responding from the other side.

The sky above the plaza darkened instantly, and a deep sound—like a massive sigh—echoed from beneath the earth.

Chloé snarled, baring her fangs.

"Something is down there!" she yelled.

The chills crawling up my spine confirmed she wasn't imagining anything.

“Marcus!” Alistair barked. “We need to stabilize it now!”

“I’m trying—!”

And right then, the artifact exploded in light.

Not a physical explosion, but a burst of pure magic that forced me to shut my eyes.

The mages screamed in unison.

The wind roared like the plaza would be torn apart.

The pedestal shook beneath the floating prism.

And when I opened my eyes...

The artifact was suspended above the circle, turning slowly, as if it had awakened from a thousand-year slumber.

Silence fell abruptly.

Only the ragged breathing of the mages remained... and the heartbeat of the artifact, now steady. Controlled.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Marcus lowered his shoulders, smiling in disbelief.

“We did it...”

Leah was trembling, but still standing. Her hands glowed with lingering magic.

Alistair looked on the brink of collapse, yet carried himself with the dignity of a captain.

I stepped forward.

“Is it... working?”

Marcus nodded.

“Yes. The artifact is active.”

Chloé sniffed the air.

“Something changed,” she said. “The environment... isn’t as contaminated anymore.”

“Then...” I began.

But Marcus raised a hand.

“Don’t celebrate yet. There’s one last step.”

“What step?”

“Anchoring the barrier.”

I froze.

“What does that mean?”

“Now that the artifact is active, the breach will react even more strongly. We must seal it immediately. And for that...”

Marcus looked down.

At the glowing cracks spreading across the plaza like shining veins.

“...we need to continue.”

With the artifact awakened.

The breach breathing.

And us standing in the center of a ruined village... just before the true challenge began.