

Frozen Star 158

Chapter 158: Echoes Among the Bodies

[POV Liselotte]

The smoke had dissipated, but the smell of ash still hung in the air like a reminder of what we had just destroyed. The faint morning light filtered through the remains of collapsed houses and piles of rubble, casting long shadows over the blackened ground. My whole body ached, but I knew we didn't have time to stop.

"We have to look for survivors," I said, still struggling to catch my breath.

Leah nodded, leaning on me as she pushed herself to her feet. Her face was pale. Even after absorbing the mana stone earlier, it was clear her reserves were almost empty. Chloe walked toward us—in her human form—shaking her long white hair, her wolf ears upright and alert, her tail swaying slowly behind her.

"I'll listen for anything unusual," she said in a serious tone. "Now that the elemental is gone, sounds are easier to distinguish."

It amazed me how calm she looked after the battle. Her human form didn't take away any of her fierceness; if anything, it intensified it. Every time her blue eyes moved over the ruined landscape, I felt like she sensed things I couldn't even imagine.

We began walking through the remnants of the fight.

And then we saw them.

The bodies.

Many of them.

Bodies of the soldiers who had come with us—some burned by the elemental's attacks, others crushed by the rocks it had absorbed and launched. They all lay in impossible positions, as if the chaos of their final moments had frozen them into tragic tableaux.

My throat tightened.

"What... a disaster..." I whispered.

Leah lowered her gaze, her lips trembling.

"We couldn't save them..."

Chloe remained silent. She just kept walking, studying every corner with her gleaming pupils. I didn't think she was looking for survivors. I thought she was looking for confirmation.

Making sure nothing else was moving.

We passed by a young soldier—one I vaguely remembered helping with the preparations for the artifact. His shield was still raised, as if he had tried to protect someone else.

He hadn't survived.

I knelt down beside him and placed a hand on his chest.

"I'm sorry..." I murmured. "We couldn't... stop Marcus earlier..."

A wave of guilt crashed over me. Marcus had deceived them. Betrayed them. And even then... it was impossible to ignore that we also hadn't arrived in time to prevent this massacre.

"Let's keep going," Leah said softly. "We can't stay here. There might still be someone alive."

We stood and kept moving.

The silence in the village was unsettling. Only the crackle of embers, the dripping of broken pipes, and the wind shifting the ashes broke the stillness. Chloe walked ahead, sniffing the air from time to time or tilting her head to listen to distant sounds.

She was the one who said:

“There’s someone up ahead. Breathing... very weakly.”

We ran.

Lying between two fallen wall fragments, we found a body. He was face-down, his armor shattered in several places. His blue-and-black cape was burned, and a thin trail of blood marked the ground beside him.

“It’s Alistair!” I exclaimed, recognizing the dark hair and the distinctive plates of his uniform.

We knelt immediately. Leah examined him with trembling hands.

“He’s not dead,” she said with relief. “His wounds are serious, but... not fatal. He’s breathing slow and deep.”

Chloe leaned in to help turn him carefully. As she did, something fell from inside his armor and hit the ground.

A letter.

Crinkled, burned at the edges, but still sealed.

“What is this?” I asked, picking it up.

Leah frowned.

“Does it have a seal?”

It did. A symbol. The caravan’s. The escort unit’s. Their commander’s.

“It’s from Arven...” I murmured.

At the mention of his name, a strange jolt ran through my mind.

Arven...

What did I really know about him?

Leah gestured for me to open it.

I did, carefully.

Inside was a letter written in firm, elegant handwriting. There were bloodstains—whether from Alistair or from Arven himself, I couldn't tell.

I read aloud.

“Alistair, I leave all the soldiers in your care. I will return after handling an urgent matter in the rear. Trust Marcus. He is a prodigy of the kingdom, one whom very few can truly understand. He will know what to do. Do not hesitate to follow his instructions.”

I fell silent.

Leah's eyes widened.

“What...? Trust Marcus?”

Chloe clenched her jaw.

“That makes no sense. Marcus had lost his sanity long ago. Arven must have noticed.”

“Or he didn’t want to notice,” I said softly.

Or worse:

What if Arven wasn’t in his right mind?

Leah shook her head slowly.

“Something doesn’t add up, Lotte. None of it.”

I stored the letter away. We couldn’t leave it behind.

Then Leah stared at me.

“Lotte... when was the last time you saw Arven with the escort?”

I paused.

And thought.

But the more I searched my memory... the more empty space I found.

“On the first day,” I said, a chill creeping down my spine. “When he introduced himself. When he said he’d be in charge.”

“And after that?”

“After that...” I swallowed. “I never saw him again.”

Leah tilted her head.

“Didn’t that feel strange to you?”

"I would've noticed," I replied automatically... but even as I said it, I knew it was a lie. My mind had a gap there. A perfectly carved gap where Arven's memory should have been.

"It's like... like I didn't care to remember him," I murmured. "Like he was never important."

Chloe approached slowly and placed a hand on my shoulder.

"That's not normal, Lotte."

"I know..." I said, trembling. "But I don't know why."

Silence stretched between the three of us.

Alistair breathed painfully. We couldn't move him yet, but we couldn't leave him unprotected either.

Chloe straightened and looked around.

"There are no more demons. We can take him to the shelter in a few minutes. But before that..."

Her tail twitched slightly, tense.

“We need to make sure there are no more survivors. Or more dead.”

Leah nodded.

“And after that... we’ll have to look for answers.”

I said nothing.

Because right then, looking at the letter in my hand and feeling the emptiness in my mind when I tried to think about Arven...

I felt something very close to fear.

Not of the elemental.

Not of Marcus.

But of something deeper.

Something that had started long before we came to this village.

We continued our search through the nearby area, walking among ruins, charred soil, and lingering flames. We didn't find any more survivors. Only bodies. Some unrecognizable.

Leah looked worse and worse. And so did I.

"This... shouldn't have happened like this," she murmured, stopping to cover a soldier's body with a piece of cloth. "If Arven knew Marcus was in charge, he should have been clearer. He should have left instructions. He should have... done something."

"Maybe he couldn't," I said.

"Or maybe he didn't want to," Chloe replied from several meters ahead, without turning around.

Her tone made me shiver.

Once the area was checked, we returned to Alistair. His wounds had stopped bleeding, but he was still unconscious. Chloe lifted him herself, surprisingly gently, as if her strength had no limits.

"I'll carry him to the shelter," she said. "You two watch the surroundings."

"Are you sure you can carry him alone?" I asked.

Chloe turned her head, her white hair falling over one shoulder.

"I'm much stronger like this than in my wolf form. Don't worry."

I followed close behind, but I couldn't stop watching her from behind: human but not human, moving silently and with unwavering steadiness... with a presence that seemed to fill the air.

Sometimes I forgot who Chloe really was.

Or what she was.

But in moments like this, I remembered.

We reached the shelter where the other survivors had been hiding. Not many. Barely a dozen. They rushed out, shocked to see us carrying Alistair, but immediately helped us improvise a stretcher and place him inside carefully.

Leah checked his wounds again.

“He’s going to live,” she finally said, collapsing to her knees in exhaustion. “But he’ll take time to wake up.”

I nodded silently.

Chloe sat beside me, still alert, her ears twitching every few seconds to catch any sound.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

I stared at the letter in my hand.

“Look for answers.”

Chloe rested her head on my shoulder.

“We’ll be with you.”

And for the first time since we defeated the elemental...

I breathed without pain in my chest.

Because I knew I was surrounded by those I could truly trust.

Not Marcus.

Not Arven.

But Leah.

And Chloe.

Just the three of us.

Against whatever came next.