

## Frozen Star 159

### Chapter 159: The Refuge That Still Breathes

[POV Liselotte]

The return to the cave was not a glorious retreat.

It was a silent flight, burdened with bodies, wounds, and a fatigue that had seeped deep into our bones.

Chloé walked ahead of us with steady steps, carrying Alistair's unconscious body as if it weighed nothing. In her human form, with her white ears tense and her tail rigid behind her, she looked more like a guardian than a fighter. Her arms held the commander carefully, without hesitation. Blood soaked part of her clothing, but she did not slow down.

Leah walked beside me, leaning on her staff. Every so often she stumbled, and I caught her before she could fall. Her breathing was uneven, and her skin was pale—almost translucent beneath the dim light filtering through the trees.

I was at my limit.

Not because of physical pain—though it was there—but because of the constant pressure of knowing that if something went wrong now, we had nothing left to respond with.

The forest remained silent. A different silence than before. Not the tense calm that precedes an attack, but a heavy muteness, as if even the shadows were exhausted.

When we finally saw the cave entrance, a lit torch confirmed that it was still occupied.

“We’re almost there,” I murmured, more to myself than to the others.

Chloé didn’t respond, but she adjusted her grip on Alistair and picked up the pace slightly.

As we entered, the murmur hit us at once.

Voices.

Moans.

Orders whispered under breath.

The unmistakable sound of someone holding back pain.

The cave was full.

Several villagers moved back and forth, some with bloodstained hands, others heating water or mixing ointments. Torches were fixed into the rock, and smoke drifted slowly toward the uneven ceiling.

And on the ground...

Soldiers.

Too many.

Some were conscious, teeth clenched and eyes glassy. Others lay motionless, covered with blankets up to their chests. Armor lay shattered, burned, or warped, as if struck by forces no one could stop.

“By the gods...” I whispered.

A woman from the village hurried toward us when she saw Chloé carrying Alistair.

“Here!” she said. “Put him here—quickly.”

Chloé knelt carefully and lowered the commander onto a pile of blankets. The movement was gentle, almost reverent, but when she released him, her hands were stained red.

“He’s alive,” she said firmly. “Badly wounded, but alive.”

Two people immediately knelt beside Alistair, checking his bandages and pressing down on wounds that were still bleeding.

Leah leaned against a nearby wall, breathing heavily.

“The soldiers ran straight here...” she said quietly, taking everything in. “As soon as the elemental appeared, they must’ve realized they couldn’t stay in the open.”

I nodded slowly.

“Yes. It was the most logical choice.”

Chloé remained standing, observing the scene. Her ears moved constantly, picking up sounds I could barely perceive.

“And they were lucky,” Leah added, her voice heavy with exhaustion. “Marcus was too stubborn. If he had attacked the cave first, he would’ve forced the soldiers to defend the civilians... and that would’ve been the end.”

A knot formed in my stomach.

“Yes,” I said. “No one would’ve survived.”

The woman who seemed to be coordinating the healers approached us.

“You were in the village?” she asked. “Did you see what happened to... to that thing?”

“It no longer exists,” I said. “But the cost was high.”

The woman closed her eyes for a moment, as if gathering strength.

“Then... at least that part is over.”

A murmur spread through the cave. Some soldiers looked up; others let out a trembling breath.

Chloé crossed her arms.

“How many seriously wounded?”

“Six,” the woman answered without hesitation. “Three are stable. The others... we’re trying to keep them alive.”

Chloé nodded.

“That’s enough to survive the night.”

The woman looked at her with curiosity, pausing briefly on her ears and tail, but said nothing. No one was in a position to question anything right now.

I stepped closer to Alistair again. His face was pale, slick with cold sweat. His breathing was labored, but steady.

“You carried him the whole way...” I said softly to Chloé.

She glanced at me.

“I wasn’t going to leave him there.”

That was all she said.

Leah joined us and watched the commander for a few seconds.

“He must’ve made it here before losing consciousness,” she said. “If he’d collapsed in the forest...”

“I know,” I replied.

A young soldier, his arm bandaged, knelt beside Alistair.

“I’ll keep watch over him,” he said. “I won’t leave him alone.”

I nodded.

“Thank you.”

I turned to Leah.

“First, we need to recover,” I said firmly. “We’re not in any condition to decide what comes next.”

Leah didn't argue. Her shoulders sagged a little more.

"Yes..." she murmured. "I know."

Chloé leaned her back against a nearby rock.

"This place is safe for now," she said. "There are no signs of hostile magic nearby."

That allowed me to relax—just a little.

We moved deeper into the cave, where a resting area had been prepared. It wasn't comfortable, but it was dry and protected.

I let myself sink down against the wall. The exhaustion hit me all at once, as if my body had been holding itself together through sheer will alone.

Leah sat beside me almost immediately.

"I'm sorry..." she whispered. "I couldn't do more."

I looked at her.

“You did everything you could,” I said. “And because of that, we’re still alive.”

Chloé sat down in front of us, legs crossed. Her tail swayed slowly—a sign she was staying alert without unnecessary tension.

“Rest,” she said. “I’ll keep watch.”

“Chloé...” I began.

She lifted her gaze and met my eyes.

“Trust me.”

I smiled, exhausted.

“Always.”

I leaned back, closing my eyes for the first time since everything had ended. The distant murmur of the cave, the muffled groans, and the crackle of fire blended into a steady noise that—against all odds—calmed me.

Before sleep claimed me, a thought lodged itself in my mind.

Marcus had told the truth.

Arven had trusted him.

And far too many pieces still didn't fit.

But that would come later.

For now...

We had survived.

And for the moment, that was enough.