

## Frozen Star 71

### Chapter 71 Shadows in the Grass

[POV Liselotte]

The fifth day of travel dawned with a deceptive serenity. The sun lazily climbed the horizon, bathing the endless meadows in a golden light that seemed to promise peace and tranquility. The morning breeze caressed the tall grasses, creating silver waves that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Our carriage advanced with steady rhythm, the familiar creaking of its wheels over the hardened earth forming a monotonous yet comforting melody. Steed, our loyal horse, flicked his ears with satisfaction, enjoying the morning ride.

Everything seemed perfect, harmonious, like a carefully composed painting. But I have learned that sometimes the most absolute calm is only the silent prelude to the storm.

It was Chloé who detected it first. I noticed how her stride became more rigid, how her ears pointed forward instead of moving freely with the sounds of the field. Her fur, usually soft and relaxed, bristled along her back as if an electric current had shot through it. She halted abruptly, emitting a low, guttural growl I had never heard from her before.

"Stop" she ordered, her voice resonating clear and urgent in my mind. "Something is coming. We are not alone."

Leah pulled the reins immediately, her eyes scanning the horizon with sudden alertness. Steed snorted nervously, striking the ground with his hooves as if he felt the same invisible threat Chloé had sensed. I

leapt down from the carriage in one fluid motion, my hand instinctively reaching for my sword's hilt. Leah descended behind me, and I could already see sparks of fire dancing around her fingers, ready to become full flames.

The wind shifted suddenly, carrying away the meadow's whisper and bringing with it a new scent, acrid, metallic, with a stench of rot that raised the hairs on my neck. That was when we saw them.

From between the hills emerged dark figures, moving with terrifying synchronization. Six beasts of imposing size, their bodies covered in black scales that gleamed with obsidian reflections under the sunlight. Their eyes burned like living embers, and from their open jaws escaped a thick, corrupted vapor that seemed to poison the air around them. They were Garmoths, hunting creatures of which I had only heard in whispers around campfires. In packs, they could wipe out entire caravans, leaving nothing but bones and nightmares in their wake.

"Six against three" said Leah, and I noticed how a fierce smile spread across her lips. Confidence gleamed in her eyes, replacing the initial fear. "Exactly the perfect number for a practice exercise."

"In fact, they chose wrong when they picked us" Chloé growled, her deep voice vibrating in the air. She stepped forward, placing herself between us and the creatures, her fangs gleaming terribly under the sunlight. "We will show them why they should never have left their dens today."

The creatures roared in unison, a sound that seemed to tear the very fabric of reality. The earth shook under their paws as they began their charge, and I knew the battle had begun.

---

The first Garmoth lunged straight at me, moving with deceptive speed for its size. I felt the familiar surge of power run through my arm as I unsheathed my sword, the metal glowing with a faint light only I could see. I waited until the very last second, calculating the distance, and when it was about to reach me, I sidestepped with the grace Kaelen had taught me. The creature's claw swept past my face by mere inches, and the clash of my blade against its scales sent a vibration coursing through my entire arm. I held firm, using its momentum to drive my sword into the soft gap beneath its jaw. The creature let out a strangled sound, more surprise than pain, before collapsing heavily to the ground.

The second came immediately after, trying to ram me with the brute force of an enraged bull. I clenched my teeth, waiting for the exact instant, and when it was a step away from impact, I leapt aside in a movement that carried me just out of its path. I swung my blade in a perfect arc, feeling the steel slice cleanly through its flank, finding the weak spot between the scales. Its roar of agony was lost to the air as it fell heavily, its body convulsing before going still.

Two down. My breathing was quick but controlled. My body remembered every lesson, every movement practiced to exhaustion in the Guild's yard.

---

At my side, Leah raised both hands with a determination that filled me with pride. A fiery circle flared between her palms, glowing with the intensity of a miniature sun. A Garmoth leapt at her, claws outstretched and jaws drooling, but Leah met it with a burst of flame that engulfed its entire body in a deadly embrace. The creature shrieked desperately, a sound that cut into the soul, as it fell wrapped in fire that consumed it until only a heap of smoldering ashes and the acrid scent of charred flesh remained.

The fourth monster tried to circle her, moving with surprising stealth to approach from behind. But Leah turned with a speed that would have been impossible weeks ago, her lips whispering a short but powerful incantation. A spear of pure fire burst from her palm and pierced the Garmoth straight through the chest with surgical precision. The impact was so violent it lifted the creature from the

ground for an instant before it crashed down, lifeless, its smoking body sprawled across the now-scorched grass.

Leah's smile shone fierce and proud when our eyes met.

"Did you see that, Two to nothing for me" she said, and although there was boasting in her words, there was also truth.

---

Meanwhile, Chloé was a storm of silver and fury in motion. Her muscles rippled with every leap, her coat gleaming under the sun as if made of solidified moonlight. She faced the last two beasts with a ferocity that reminded me why wolves were respected and feared in equal measure.

The fifth Garmoth opened its jaws wide, trying to trap Chloé between dagger-like fangs. But she slid beneath its maw with agility that seemed to defy physics, and with a thunderous roar that shook my bones, she tore open its throat with a bite that ripped flesh, tendon, and bone alike. The creature collapsed in violent convulsions as thick, dark blood soaked the grass, staining it black.

The sixth and final monster tried to retreat at the brutality of its companion's fall, a flash of something like fear gleaming in its ember eyes. But Chloé gave it no chance to escape. With an impossible leap that lifted her above the creature, she landed on its back, sinking her fangs into its nape and tearing with terrible force until the beast collapsed like an empty sack, its life extinguished in seconds.

Chloé raised her head, her muzzle stained with the dark blood of her enemies, and unleashed a victorious howl that echoed across the valley. It was not merely a cry of triumph, but a warning to anything else that might be listening, we were the hunters now.

---

Silence returned abruptly, broken only by the sound of our ragged breathing and the faint crackling of the flames still dancing at Leah's fingertips. The six beasts' corpses lay scattered around us, grotesque sculptures of death upon grass stained with blackened, charred blood.

Leah looked around, assessing the battlefield, and exhaled deeply as she lowered her hands, letting the remaining flames fade away.

"That was... easier than I expected" she admitted, her voice carrying both surprise and satisfaction.

"That doesn't mean we should lower our guard" I said, wiping my sword with a cloth I pulled from my pack. "But it does show that we've grown. Much more than we may have realized."

Chloé approached us, still panting but with her head high and pride gleaming in her golden eyes. "A few months ago, an encounter like this would have been our end" she said, her mental voice laden with an emotion she rarely showed. "Today, it was only... a warm-up. A reminder of how far we've come."

I couldn't help but laugh softly at her comment, though her words were deeply true. We were the same people, yet we were completely different. Fire had refined us, ice had strengthened us, and shadows had taught us to see the light in a different way.

The three of us exchanged glances, with the beasts' bodies lying around as silent witnesses to our transformation. We were no longer the trembling apprentices who had entered the Guild with fear and uncertainty. Now we were warriors, bound by a pact sealed not with words, but with actions and shared sacrifices. United by a power we barely began to understand, but which we already knew how to wield with skill.

And as the wind began to carry away the metallic stench of blood and the sweet scent of scorched grass, I knew deep within my being that this world would place ever harsher trials before us. Demons, dark creatures, perhaps even enemies that walked in human form.