

## Frozen Star 75

### Chapter 75: The Threshold of Stench

[POV Liselotte]

The morning of our departure dawned with a tranquility that felt almost like a deliberate gift from fate. The sky was clear, a pale and luminous blue that promised a pleasant day of travel. The fresh air carried the scent of freshly baked bread drifting from the village square, where the first stalls were beginning to open for the day. We said our goodbyes to the innkeeper, a woman with a wide smile and eyes wrinkled by kindness, who insisted we take some extra cookies for the road. A few villagers we recognized from the fair greeted us warmly, wishing us a safe journey with such sincerity that for a moment I doubted the dark rumors we had heard.

Corcel seemed revitalized after the days of rest, his coat gleaming under the morning sun, his ears twitching curiously toward every new sound. Chloé moved at our side with steady, purposeful steps, as if she instinctively knew the respite was over and that what awaited on the road would be very different from the fair full of colors and aromas we had left behind.

The northern path greeted us at first with the same peaceful calm we had enjoyed in previous days: green hills swaying gently in the breeze, scattered trees offering generous shade, and the distant sound of birds whose songs gave the impression that all was perfectly right with the world. But as we advanced, almost imperceptibly at first and then with increasingly unsettling clarity, the atmosphere began to change.

The first signs were subtle: marks on the ground that did not match the usual passage of carts. Deep wheel ruts that ended abruptly, as if the vehicles had been dragged violently or overturned with excessive force. Soon after, we began to find fragments of broken wood, shattered axles bearing fractures that spoke of immense pressure, torn fabric tangled among the tall grass like linen phantoms carried by the wind—or by scavenging animals we sensed but could not see.

Farther along, the road revealed more concrete and disturbing evidence: a yoke split cleanly in two, still stained with dried blood that clung like dark crusts against the pale wood, and the remains of a grain sack violently ripped open, its contents scattered as if the earth itself had rejected them—or as if someone, or something, had desperately searched within.

Leah frowned, her gaze shifting restlessly from side to side, assessing every detail with an intensity she had learned during our training. “This isn’t just a bandit ambush,” she murmured, her voice carrying a somber certainty. “Something else happened here... something much worse.”

Chloé sniffed the air repeatedly, her ears flattening back against her skull, and a low growl escaped her throat—a sound I had never heard from her before. “Old blood,” she conveyed, her mental voice weighted with an alert that sent shivers racing across our skin. “And fear. The stench of terror seeps into the earth like a scar that never heals.”

The silence of the road became suffocating then, broken only by the monotonous crunch of our carriage wheels rolling over gravel. The breeze, once fresh and carrying the perfume of wildflowers, now seemed to bear a whisper of rot—a subtle yet insistent warning nature itself appeared to be sending us.

And then we saw it.

At the roadside, nestled between two rocky formations that jutted out like gray fangs against the sky, yawned the dark mouth of a cave. It was not particularly large or imposing, but the shadow spilling from within seemed denser than the mere absence of light, as if it absorbed the day’s brightness around it. The air wafting from its depths carried an unbearable stench—acidic and heavy, like rotting flesh mixed with rusted iron and something else, something indefinably wrong. Instinctively, I pressed a hand to my nose, but even pinching my nostrils shut failed to block the nauseating odor that seemed to permeate every particle of air around us.

I stopped dead, clutching the reins tightly. “No,” I said, my voice sounding firmer than I felt. “I’m not going in there.”

Leah looked at me, her eyes burning with that familiar blend of curiosity and stubbornness. “Lotte, don’t you see? This must be the source of what they spoke about in the village. The missing group, the rumors of demons on the road... everything points here. If we don’t find out what’s happening, more people will vanish.”

“And what if whatever happened inside was enough to wipe out six armed men?” I shot back, gritting my teeth until my jaw ached. The memory of the fairground rumors pierced like thorns in my mind, tangled with the images of destruction we had seen along the way. “Going in there blind is a death sentence, not an act of bravery.”

Chloé watched us both, her fur completely bristled, her golden eyes glowing with an inner light in the dimness that pooled around the cave’s entrance. “The stench is strong,” she said, her mental voice grave and stripped of its usual playfulness. “There are corpses inside... and something else. Something that shouldn’t be here. I don’t like this place. But we can’t pretend we didn’t see it and simply move on.”

Leah took a determined step toward the dark opening, the wind stirring her blond hair as the shadows seemed to pull her in like a magnet. “I didn’t come this far to turn my back on whatever’s causing harm,” she said, her voice firm, without a trace of tremor or doubt. “Not after everything we’ve been through to reach this point.”

I stood in silence for a long moment, my heart pounding against my ribs as if trying to escape my chest. Part of me—the part that still remembered the paralyzing fear of my first days in this world—wanted to turn back, to return to the village and warn them to close the road forever. But another part, the one forged by blows and hard lessons in a world that spares neither ignorance nor cowardice, knew that sooner or later we would have to face whatever lurked in that cave. Because if not us... then who?

I tightened my grip on my sword's hilt, feeling the familiar chill of metal against my fingers, recalling every lesson, every blow, every moment of doubt I had overcome. "All right," I finally said, my voice lower than I intended but heavy with renewed determination. "But we don't lower our guard for an instant. We stay together, watch each other's backs, and at the first sign of real danger, we retreat. Understood?"

Leah nodded, the faintest smile tugging at her lips—not one of joy, but of shared resolve. "Understood."

Chloé stepped forward, her muscles tense beneath her silver fur, each stride silent and calculated like a predator preparing either to hunt or to be hunted. "Together," she told us, and the word resonated in our minds like a vow.

And so, with the unbearable stench wrapping around us like a second skin and the cold shadow of the cave swallowing the daylight, we crossed the threshold together.

Sorry for posting so late, I've been very busy.