

Frozen Star 78

Chapter 78: The Circle of Blood

[POV Liselotte]

The echo of the battle still rumbled in my bones like a distant drum, even though silence had returned to seize the chamber. The smoldering bodies of the demons, deformed and monstrous even in death, filled the air with an unbearable stench that was a nauseating blend of burned flesh, rusted iron, and advanced rot. Leah's torch crackled weakly in her hand, its small and nervous flame flickering as if even the magic itself doubted whether it should keep illuminating this cursed place that clearly rejected light.

I forced myself to take a deep breath, ignoring the metallic and bitter taste that permeated every particle of air, and lifted my gaze toward my companions. Leah was visibly exhausted, leaning against the rocky wall with her face pale, smeared with sweat and soot, yet still firm in her stance, her eyes burdened with the residual tension of combat but also with unbreakable determination. Chloé was limping slightly from the blow she had taken, but her posture remained upright and proud, her fangs still stained with the thick, dark blood of the fallen enemies, her golden eyes scanning the darkness stretching beyond our position.

"We have to keep going," I murmured, my voice sounding rough and broken, as if the cave itself wanted to devour the words before they could leave my lips.

Leah turned her face toward me, her eyebrows arched in genuine surprise. "Keep going? After this? After nearly dying against these monsters?" She gestured broadly at the demonic corpses lying around us, her tone loaded with disbelief and exhaustion.

"Yes," I replied, tightening my grip on the hilt of my sword, which still felt like an extension of my arm. "We came here to find out what really happened to the missing men, to uncover answers. If we stop

now, we'll have only seen half of the truth—the violent part but not the cause. And... something in my gut tells me that the worst, the truly terrifying, is still deeper inside, waiting in the darkness.”

Chloé tilted her head slightly, her ears twitching, her golden eyes faintly glowing in the gloom like tiny beacons. Her mental voice reached us, clear and grave, heavy with a certainty that left no room for argument. “Lotte is right. The stench... it doesn't come only from these freshly dead bodies. Further in, there is something else, something that's been here for much longer. Something far worse than these guardians we've just defeated.”

The silence that followed her words was as heavy as the air itself, dense, humid, and burdened with the weight of a decision that could cost us our lives. Leah closed her eyes for a moment, breathing deeply as if savoring for the last time the relatively clean air of this chamber before committing to advance. When she opened them again, she nodded slowly, a resigned gesture that spoke louder than words.

We moved forward.

The tunnel stretching beyond the battle chamber was noticeably narrower, forcing us into single file and to move with extreme caution, our shoulders nearly brushing the walls. The walls were covered with damp moss and pale lichens that glowed with a sickly, ghostly sheen under the wavering light of our fire. The uneven, slippery ground bore dark stains that were no longer just the remnants of recent bloodshed—they were true dried rivers that had once flowed from the depths within, staining the rock a deep dark red, almost black, as if the cave itself had bled during some terrible moment of the past.

Every step was a chilling reminder that we were entering a place no sane person should tread, a place desecrated by a presence that defied all natural comprehension.

After a stretch that felt eternal, each second heavy with tension and anticipation, the tunnel finally opened into a larger chamber, nearly perfectly circular in shape. The moment I crossed the threshold, I froze, and a violent shiver raced down my spine like a surge of pure ice.

“By all the gods...” I whispered, the words slipping from my lips before I could contain them.

The air here was different, qualitatively distinct—thick and heavy like molasses, charged with such a penetrating stench of death and advanced rot that it provoked immediate retching I barely managed to suppress. The scene before our eyes was worse, infinitely worse than anything my mind could have conjured in my darkest nightmares.

The missing men were here. Or what was left of them after what had clearly been a systematic, ritualistic desecration.

Their bodies had been methodically dismembered and carefully arranged around the chamber in a kind of macabre, geometrically precise circle. Arms and legs stretched at calculated angles, heads positioned to face the center with expressions frozen in eternal agony, torsos opened and hollowed as though they were mere offerings on a nightmare altar. The flesh, already in advanced decay, oozed a thick, dark liquid whose stench made every breath a conscious punishment.

Leah lifted a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide with a mixture of horror and morbid fascination. “No...” she murmured, her voice barely more than a thread above the oppressive silence. “This wasn’t just an attack... this was a ritual. Someone... or something... did this with purpose.”

And then I saw it, and I knew she was right.

At the precise center of the circle, where all the parts of the mutilated bodies seemed to point like the hands of a macabre clock, there stood a mound of coagulated blood rising like a small dark hill. It wasn't a mere puddle or accidental accumulation—it had clearly been gathered and piled there deliberately, forming a thick, almost solid heap that still gleamed faintly in the dim light, a dark, oily red that seemed to move on its own.

Emerging from that mound of horror was a sword.

It was a long, slender weapon, ancient and alien in appearance, its blade blackened as though forged of iron corroded by centuries of neglect, yet it glowed faintly with a sinister inner light that made it seem alive, aware. The air around it vibrated faintly, an almost imperceptible but undeniable oscillation, as if it breathed or pulsed with its own malevolent energy.

Chloé growled low, instinctively stepping back a full pace, her fur bristling completely. Her mental voice came grave and sharp, heavy with a predator's instinct rarely displayed with such intensity. "Don't touch that. It shouldn't be here. That sword... it's not human, not of this world. Its mere presence pollutes the air."

I felt a visceral chill looking at it. There was something hypnotic and repulsive about its presence, as if the entire cave, all the horror we had witnessed, had been built and organized specifically to sustain and feed that cursed object. A part of me, small but insistent, wanted to approach, to stretch out my hand, to touch the hilt that seemed to call to me... but another part, stronger and primal, screamed with the same clarity as the most basic survival instinct, warning me that to do so would be an irrevocable mistake.

Leah shook her head quickly, as if clearing away an intrusive thought, her breath uneven. "No... we can't stay here any longer. This place is an altar of blood. And if that sword is what I think it is, it could be linked to something far, far worse than these demons we just faced."

I nodded, unable to look away from the cursed weapon, feeling as though it was staring back at me, as if it knew my name and all my deepest secrets.

“We don’t touch it,” I finally said, my voice trembling but firm in its decision. “We are not fools. We don’t know what it is, nor what power it holds, nor what it might unleash if disturbed. We’ll report it to the next guild. Let the experts, those who study such things, handle it. We are not the ones to deal with this.”

Chloé growled again, lower this time, a somber confirmation. “The wisest thing you’ve said today, Lotte. Let’s get away from here.”

Leah let out a nervous laugh that sounded more like a stifled sob on the edge of panic. “Never thought I’d say this, but I completely agree with Chloé. Let’s get out of this damned place. Now.”

We turned as one, almost fleeing that infernal chamber without caring about the noise we made. As we retreated through the narrow tunnel, I felt the sword’s presence still seared into the back of my neck, like an invisible gaze following us even as we left, a conscious attention that knew we had been there.

When we finally emerged outside, daylight greeted us like a divine balm after perpetual darkness. The fresh, clean air, laced with the scent of grass and damp earth, filled my lungs with a renewing strength that nearly brought me to tears of relief. For a moment, I simply stood there under the open, infinite sky, breathing deeply as though I had just surfaced from the depths of the ocean after nearly drowning.

Leah dropped to the ground cross-legged, exhausted but relieved, covering her face with both hands as if trying to erase the images burned into her memory. Chloé shook off the dust and stench of the cave with a heavy, deliberate huff, her ears still tense and pointed toward the entrance as though expecting something to follow us out.

“To the next guild,” I finally said, my voice firm though my hands still trembled slightly. “We’ll report everything exactly as it happened. The demons, the men... and that cursed sword. We cannot hide this; it would be a terrible irresponsibility.”

Leah lifted her gaze, her face still pale but with renewed determination. “No. We won’t hide anything. The world has to know what’s lurking in those tunnels, what someone—or something—is doing there.”

Chloé raised her head to the sky, her eyes shining with a mix of restrained rage and solemn warning. “Then let’s hurry. Because whatever was summoned or fed there... hasn’t finished its work. It’s only waiting.”