

Frozen Star 79

Chapter 79: Ever Closer

[POV Liselotte]

The way back to the main path was a silent, almost solemn transit, as if we were walking through an invisible veil separating the normal world from the nightmare we had left behind. None of us spoke a single word during the first hours, as if words themselves were fragile entities, incapable of piercing through the tangible weight pressing down on our shoulders and souls.

The cave and its macabre contents still spread like a sticky shadow in our minds, a dark stain that could not be washed away by the simple light of day. Even with the sun bathing the green fields and rolling hills with its comforting warmth, the memory of the bodies arranged in that circle of death haunted us with every breath, and the image of the dark, pulsing sword seemed engraved with fire on my eyelids, appearing each time I closed my eyes.

Chloé was the first to break the silence that weighed like a slab, transmitting her mental voice with a grave tone that vibrated with restrained concern. “I don’t like having left it behind without doing anything else, but it would have been a monumental stupidity to touch it. Even so... I feel that thing, that sword, hasn’t forgotten us. It will remember us.”

I swallowed with difficulty, gripping Corcel’s reins harder than necessary, feeling the rough leather against my palms. “It’s not our responsibility to destroy it, nor do we have the knowledge to do so. But we do have to warn those who might understand it. That we did right. It’s the only thing we could do.”

Leah, marching by my side with her gaze lost on the horizon, pulled the map from her backpack with hands still showing a slight tremor. She spread it over her knee, trying to smooth the wrinkles of the aged paper with the back of her hand. Her voice, though firm, still carried a tone of deep weariness that went far beyond mere physical exhaustion. “According to this map... Whirikai is still more than a year’s

journey away if we keep heading north without significant detours. A whole year.” She paused, and in her eyes I saw an ancient pain flicker at the mention of her lost home. “But...” Her fingers slid across the parchment to a point marked with darker, precise ink. “The city of Kreston is much closer. Barely two days away if we keep a good pace and don’t encounter more... obstacles.”

“Kreston...” I repeated softly, savoring the name as if it were a protective spell. I had heard talk of that city in guild whispers before starting our journey, a prosperous settlement at a vital crossroads of trade routes, with one of the largest and most respected adventurers’ guilds in the entire northern region.

Leah nodded seriously, folding the map with careful movements. “If we go there, we can deliver the report officially and safely. It’s the right thing, what we must do. And besides...” Her voice dropped a tone, heavy with a vulnerability she rarely allowed herself to show. “We could use a truly safe place to rest. Away from caves and... circles of blood.”

Chloé snorted, shaking her ears vigorously as if to drive away imaginary flies. “Rest and eat. Both equally. I refuse to endure more days with the smell of corpses stuck in my fur without a good hot meal and a decent bed.”

Her comment, so practical and down-to-earth, managed to pull a small smile—almost forced but genuine—from my lips. It was a tiny relief amidst the accumulated tension, a reminder that life, with its simple needs, carried on despite the shadows we had faced.

The journey to Kreston passed without major incidents that could compare to the horror of the cave, though the apparent calm of the landscape felt fragile, like thin glass about to shatter under the slightest pressure. The roads were noticeably less traveled than I would have expected for main trade routes, and the few merchants and travelers we encountered seemed hurried, their nervous eyes scanning every

shadow, hands firmly gripping reins or weapon hilts. Rumors of bandits and demons had clearly spread faster than our wheels, sowing a palpable caution in the air.

When we finally spotted Kreston's walls at dawn on the second day, after a night of incomplete watch and restless dreams, the air felt lighter to me, almost welcoming. It was an imposing walled city, with watchtowers rising like stone fingers toward the sky and colorful banners fluttering high above, defying the wind. Even from a distance, one could sense the constant movement that denoted an important hub: caravans of goods entering and leaving through well-guarded gates, groups of soldiers in gleaming armor patrolling the access points with alert gazes, and the characteristic bustle of a place where people and merchandise from all corners converged.

We entered through the southern gate after patiently waiting in the long line of travelers, carts, and riders. The guards, though attentive and professional, seemed less tense than those of the previous village—perhaps accustomed to the constant flow and to filtering real threats from mere excessive precautions. Once inside the walls, the contrast with the solitude of the road was overwhelming, almost dizzying; the streets overflowed with life and activity. Merchants shouted their products in friendly competition, children ran laughing carefree between the stalls, and aromas of freshly baked bread and exotic spices floated in the air like a promise of normality. For a brief but precious moment, I almost managed to forget the smell of death and the vision of the cursed sword we had left behind.

But only for a moment. The reality of our mission struck me again like a dull blow.

"To the guild first," I said, setting the course with renewed determination as I guided Corcel through the cobbled streets. "This cannot wait even one more day."

The Adventurers' Guild building in Kreston was impossible to miss, a structure that silently dominated one of the city's main squares with its authority. It rose broad and solid, built of gray stone and dark oak beams, with the guild insignia masterfully carved into a massive wooden panel above the double doors reinforced with wrought iron. Crossing the threshold, sound enveloped us immediately like a warm wave—the constant murmur of dozens of voices conversing, the rhythmic clinking of beer mugs, the crackle of parchment, and the tap-tap of nails fixing new contracts onto the crowded notice boards. The place was alive, vibrant with an energy both familiar and alien after our recent ordeal.

And yet, stepping inside carrying the knowledge of what we had witnessed made me feel as though we were bringing an invisible storm into a sunny day, like bearers of a plague only we could see.

We pushed through the crowd of adventurers, mercenaries, and onlookers until we reached the main counter. A receptionist with chestnut hair tied into a flawless bun and a professional expression greeted us with a mechanical smile that did not reach her eyes.

"Welcome to the Kreston Guild. How may I help you today?"

Leah exchanged a quick glance with me, a silent communication passing between us in an instant, before stepping forward. "We have urgent information that must be recorded and delivered directly to the superiors. It's about multiple disappearances along the northern road and... confirmed demonic activity."

The receptionist's professional smile vanished instantly, replaced by an expression of serious attention. Her eyes hardened, and without asking unnecessary questions, she nodded curtly and quickly led us down a side hallway away from the main bustle, into a small enclosed room with heavy oak doors. There, she indicated we wait on austere chairs beside a bare table.

"Someone will attend to you shortly," she said before leaving, closing the door behind her with a decisive click.

A few minutes later, which felt like hours, the door opened to admit a man of imposing stature and piercing gaze. He wore the insignia of rank A embroidered in silver thread on the chest of his leather jerkin, and a well-healed scar cut across his chin, disappearing beneath the collar of his shirt. His mere presence in the room commanded respect and authority. He introduced himself in a voice deep as distant thunder as Maelor, one of the highest-ranking officers in Kreston's guild hierarchy.

"I was told you have a report of delicate nature," he said bluntly, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Start from the beginning. Leave out no detail, no matter how insignificant it may seem."

And so we did, taking turns in the telling as we had alternated our attacks in the cave.

We meticulously described the destroyed road, the scattered remains of plundered caravans, the membranous-winged demons with burning eyes that guarded the cave's entrance, the desperate battle in which we nearly lost our lives fighting side by side. And finally, with voices faltering slightly at the memory, we recounted the circular chamber, the dismembered bodies arranged with ritualistic precision, and the dark, pulsing sword at the center of the circle of coagulated blood. We left nothing out, though every word stirred deep within me the disgust, fear, and helplessness I had tried to leave behind with the cave.

Maelor listened without interrupting, his frown deepening further as our account advanced toward its culminating horror. When we finished, he remained silent for a long while, drumming calloused fingers on the wooden table's surface, his eyes fixed on some distant point beyond the room's walls.

"What you describe..." he murmured at last, his voice carrying a tone it hadn't before, a grave and worrisome quality that chilled the blood. "...is considerably more serious than even our most pessimistic

reports suggested. Demons of that size and power organized so close to vital trade routes... and a blood altar with an unidentified artifact of clearly malevolent nature. Damn it.”

He lifted his gaze toward us, his eyes sharp and piercing as spearpoints. “You did well not to touch that sword. If it is what I begin to fear it might be, not only would it have cost you your lives instantly. It could have cost much more—far more than this city is prepared to pay.”

Leah swallowed audibly, her hands gripping the edges of her seat. “What... what do you think it was exactly? That sword?”

Maelor shook his head with a slow, heavy motion. “I don’t know for sure yet, and it wouldn’t be wise to speculate without further evidence. But I will immediately dispatch an elite rank-A group to investigate and, if possible, contain the area. You have done your duty—and beyond. The guild will handle the rest from now on.”

I relaxed slightly at those words, a long, trembling sigh escaping my lips, though the weight on my chest did not disappear entirely. At least, we were no longer the only ones carrying the burden of that terrifying secret.

Maelor rose to his feet, his bulk filling the small room. “For now, rest. Find lodging, eat, recover your strength. You’ve rendered a valuable service not only to this guild but to the safety of the entire kingdom. But be prepared,” he added, his gaze turning even more intense. “What you found in that cave... may be only the first crack, the first symptom of something larger and darker brewing in the shadows.”

His words remained embedded in me like sharp blades as we left the room and returned to the bustle of the main hall. Outside, the guild’s life carried on in its noisy, carefree rhythm, as if nothing had changed.

And yet, I knew, with a certainty that froze my soul, that our journey was only just beginning, and that the shadows we had uncovered were but the prelude to an oncoming storm.