

## Frozen Star 118

Chapter 118: Where Home Still Burns in Winter

[POV Liselotte]

The door to my house opened with a familiar soft creak. The smell was the first thing that struck me... juniper broth, toasted bread, damp firewood burning in the fireplace. It was as if time hadn't passed at all, as if the years outside these walls had only been a distant dream. A knot formed in my throat.

"Lotte?" I heard a voice from deeper inside.

My heart stopped.

Hurried footsteps echoed on the wooden floor. And then, I saw him.

My father, Carl.

He had aged. His hair, once chestnut, was now streaked with grey. His hands—the same hands that once held swords, that taught me how to throw knives when I was just a girl—were trembling. His eyes, wide open, looked as if they couldn't believe what they saw.

"Lo...tte?" he repeated, almost breathless.

I smiled, though my lips trembled in the attempt.

"Hi... Dad."

I don't remember when I dropped my bag or when my legs moved. I only know I ran. And so did he.

The embrace was warm. His arms wrapped around me so tightly it was hard to breathe for a moment. I felt his chest tremble against my cheek. And then... his tears.

"I thought you were dead..." he whispered, voice broken. "That the world... had taken you forever..."

I wanted to answer, to tell him I never stopped thinking about them, that I imagined this moment every night. But I couldn't. Emotion closed my throat. All I could do was hold on tighter.

Soft footsteps behind him made us turn slightly.

My mother was there.

Andrea.

She still wore her apron, a wooden spoon in hand. Her dark hair was tied back, flour dusted on her cheeks, as though she'd been kneading dough just moments before the world changed for her.

The spoon fell to the floor.

"No..." she whispered. "It can't be..."

Her hands flew to her mouth. Tears welled in her eyes so quickly she didn't even blink.

"Mom..." I said, barely audible.

She ran.

She clung to me as if I might vanish if she let go. Her crying was silent at first, like a whisper, but soon her shoulders began to shake.

"My girl... my girl... my girl..." she repeated over and over.

I cried too.

I couldn't hold it back.

I didn't want to.

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Minutes passed. Or maybe hours. I don't know. Everything blended together: the warmth of home, the smell of bread, the tears, the trembling laughter. Until a small voice broke the moment.

"Lotte?"

I turned.

Claire.

My little sister.

She was no longer the child I left behind. She was twelve now, almost thirteen. Her chestnut hair fell in soft waves, and her eyes—big and winter-sky blue—looked at me with disbelief... and fear.

"Is it really... you?" she asked in a thin voice.

"Yes," I said, opening my arms. "It's me."

She hesitated. Then suddenly, she ran to me.

She threw herself into my arms. I felt her small body tremble. She held onto me like the world would break if she let go.

"I missed you!" she cried into my chest. "Every day! I thought you'd never come back!"

"I missed you too," I whispered, stroking her hair. "Every day, Claire. Every day."

Behind me, I heard Chloé's calm, slightly awkward voice speak in my mind.

"Lotte... Should we... come in?"

I gently stepped back from my family, wiping away my tears.

"There's someone... I want you to meet."

Everyone looked up. Then, standing at the doorway, were my two companions.

Chloé.

Her silver fur glimmered in the warm light. Her golden eyes, watchful and serene, rested on my family. My father stepped back, startled. Claire gasped.

"Is that... a wolf?" she exclaimed.

"Not just that," I said softly. "She's my friend. My companion. Her name is Chloé."

Chloé inclined her head slightly. Her voice echoed in our minds, clear and gentle.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. I have been by Lotte's side when she could not return home."

My mother pressed a hand to her chest.

"She speaks... in my head?"

My father, former adventurer, stood alert—but not hostile. Respectful.

"Thank you," he said to Chloé. "For protecting my daughter."

Chloé's tail swayed slightly.

"There is no debt," she replied. "She saved me as well."

Then, behind her, Leah appeared.

She wore her blue cloak, though the hood hung loosely. Her golden hair reflected the firelight. She looked... fragile. Not like a princess. More like a lost child.

She lowered her head.

"I'm sorry for intruding... I'm Leah."

My father frowned, confused.

"Are you... a friend of my daughter?"

Leah seemed to want to disappear.

I stepped forward, standing beside her.

"She is Leah. We travelled together. She saved my life more times than I can count."

Silence.

Then, my mother—warm and gentle as always—stepped closer.

"Then... you're welcome here," she said. Her eyes were curious, but without judgment. "Come in. It's cold outside."

Leah's eyes widened.

"Really...?"



"Really," my mother smiled.

And the ice in Leah's eyes began, just barely, to melt.

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The fire crackled softly in the hearth. My hands were still trembling slightly as I held a cup of hot tea. Claire hadn't left my side, her head resting against my arm, as if afraid I would vanish if she blinked.

My father watched quietly. He didn't speak often, but he never stopped looking at me, as though trying to memorize every part of my face.

"Where were you all this time?" he finally asked.

I took a breath.

"It's... a long story."

"We have all night," my mother said gently, placing warm bread on the table.

Chloé lay curled near the fire, like a silver shadow. Leah sat beside me. She didn't speak. She only listened. Her cloak still draped around her shoulders. She looked out of place... yet strangely safe.

So I told them.

Everything.

How I woke in that ruined temple. How I met Leah. How we found Chloé. I told them about beasts, burned villages, demons, cold, wandering without direction. I spoke of fear. Of hunger. Of tears.

And of hope.

My mother cried silently as she braided my hair, like she used to when I was a child.

My father listened with his fists clenched... and eyes glistening.

Claire... never let go.

When I finished, silence filled the room.

Until my father stood. He walked toward Leah.

She tensed.

He knelt before her.

"Thank you," he said, his voice rough. "For bringing my daughter home."

Leah blinked, startled. No one had ever said that to her before.

"I... just did what I thought was right," she murmured.

"And that's enough," my mother added, smiling softly at her.

Something inside Leah broke—not from pain this time—but like a wall falling.

For the first time since I met her... she smiled.

A small smile.

Fragile.

Real.

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The night stretched on.

We talked. We laughed a little. We cried a little more.

My mother made more food than we could eat. My father added more logs to the fire. Claire fell asleep on my arm, clutching my sleeve.

In that moment, watching the fire reflected in Leah's eyes and Chloé's fur shimmering softly...

I understood.

This.

This was the home I had been searching for.

Not a cradle of stone.

Not a throne of ice.

This.

With its imperfect warmth.

With its cracks.

With tears and laughter intertwined.

This was home.

And as the snow continued to fall outside, silent and soft, I knew that although the world beyond these walls remained cruel...

Here, in this little house by the southern wall...

Winter, for the first time in a long while, didn't hurt as much.