

## Frozen Star 19

Chapter 19: Blood on the Ashes

[POV Liselotte]

There was no time to think. Not even to feel fear.

As soon as we crossed the breach in the wall, the world became an abyss of horror: fire, smoke, blood. The air burned in my lungs, and the stench of scorched flesh hit us with the violence of a living nightmare.

And then, the beast smelled us.

Its head rose slowly among the corpses, unnaturally slow, as if savoring the moment. Its snout was soaked in still-steaming guts, and its eyes... they glowed with a sick, red light—burning like coals in the darkness.

It growled. Low, guttural, deep. The ground cracked beneath it. The sound was ancient. Primal. A judgment.

I felt Chloé bristle beside me.

"It saw us" I whispered, throat tight with fear, as I drew my sword.

"We're not alone..." she murmured, ears twitching, alert.

Then I saw it. It wasn't just the beast.

Human shadows moved between the smoldering ruins of the homes. Dark figures, stripped of honor, wearing stained armor and empty eyes. They weren't fighting the beasts. They were commanding them. Controlling them.

'Dark mages...' I could barely breathe. But hatred burned in my chest.

One of them saw us. He pointed with a hand deformed by black tattoos.

"There! The girl and the wolf! I want both alive!"

And then, chaos.

Three ran at me. Others went for Chloé. Spears, nets, swords—all at once. No warning, no honor, no mercy. The beasts roared like they were enjoying the show. As if we were prey, but not the main course.

The first one wielded a mace. He raised it with brute strength. I dove to the side—my sword moved like it had a will of its own. I slashed his side. He didn't fall. He screamed, spat at me, charged again.

The second one was fast. Smaller, with a curved dagger. He slid like a shadow through the ruins, and before I could raise my guard, I felt a slash burn across my arm. Blood soaked me in seconds.

The third hit me from behind.

I fell. My sword flew from my hand. His knee pinned me to the ground.

"Is this it? A little girl playing hero?" he sneered, reeking of sweat and death.

Chloé roared on the other side of the field with a fury that shattered my soul. I saw her tear out a beast's throat with her fangs. But another slammed into her, and they rolled across the dirt. She cried out. A howl of pain, full of rage.

"CHLOÉ!" I screamed, struggling under the man's weight.

He laughed. He drew his dagger.

My hand found a broken spear.

And I reacted.

With a feral cry, I shoved him backward with my legs. He tumbled into burning debris. The flames engulfed him. He screamed like a pig being slaughtered. The smell of burning flesh made me gag.

I staggered to my feet, panting. My wounded arm trembled. So did my legs.

No time.

The dagger man was coming again. I blocked poorly. The hit to my leg dropped me to one knee. My bones cracked. I bit back a scream.

"Lotte, behind you!" Chloé cried in my mind.

I turned just in time to see the mace coming again.

Too many.

Too many.

They weren't monsters. They were humans.

And they were worse.

I forced myself to move, but I was too slow. A strike to the ribs left me breathless. I coughed blood. Still, I raised my sword.

One laughed.

"Die, you damn brat!"

I lunged. Not from skill—from instinct. My sword pierced his chest just as his slashed open my side. We both fell.

The world blurred with smoke, noise, and blood. My blood.

I wiped my face. Blood. Dirt. Tears.

Chloé was still fighting. Hurt, yes. But invincible. She'd brought another one down. A rain of arrows whistled by. One of the bandits flanked her. Another raised a bow.

"Chloé!" I screamed, watching the archer pull back his bowstring.

She turned. She saw it too.

And she jumped in front of it.

The arrow struck her side. A clean hit. Superficial. But the cry she let out froze my soul.

I didn't think. I ran.

The archer reloaded. My sword flashed. His life ended with a single slash.

I collapsed beside Chloé.

She was bleeding. But not how I feared.

"You're okay..." I whispered, voice cracking, petting her bloodstained fur.

She whimpered, but her eyes were fixed on mine. Steady. Alive. Unbreakable.

Around us, the field had gone still.

The beasts: dead.

The bandits: fallen... except for one. The last one, running.

"Should we go after him?" I gasped.

Chloé perked an ear. Shook her head.

"Not today."

My body gave out. I dropped beside her. My hand still gripped my sword's hilt. Her head rested on my lap, warm. Trusting.

"We made it..." I whispered. Barely audible.

It wasn't a victory.

We didn't need one.

We were alive.

And that... for today, was enough.