

Frozen Star 20

Chapter 20: Reassembling the pieces

[POV Liselotte]

Dawn brought no comfort. Only clarity.

The battle was over, yes. But what remained... wasn't victory.

Only ruins.

I sat beside Chloé for hours, not speaking, not moving. She didn't sleep, but her breathing had calmed. The arrow wound was shallow, though her fur was stained with blood. She licked her side with annoyance, and from time to time, looked at me as if asking: Now what?

I didn't have an answer.

Parts of the village were still burning. The surviving houses were either charred or cracked. Bodies everywhere—humans, beasts, bandits. Some unrecognizable. Others... too human still, as if they slept beneath the smoke.

And then we heard it.

Footsteps. Human voices. Whispers. At first, we tensed. We thought more bandits were coming. But no.

They were the survivors.

First one, then two... then a dozen. Men, women, children. Faces smeared with ash and fear. They walked like ghosts, trembling, many still holding tools instead of weapons.

An old man approached us with a broken staff. He stared at me for a long time. His voice was rough, like grinding stones:

"Was it you who fought?"

I didn't know how to answer. I nodded.

Chloé slowly stood, still weak. Some backed away when they saw her—she was a wolf, after all. But no one ran.

"They helped us..." whispered a young woman with a baby in her arms. "I saw them. From the cellar where we were hiding. They killed the beasts... and those monsters."

An old woman fell to her knees and cried. No one comforted her. No one needed to. Everyone was broken.

The strongest among them began to search the bodies. To recognize them. To grieve in silence. One by one.

"There's a part of the village that wasn't touched" said the old man again, pointing north. "The houses near the mill... the flames didn't reach them."

I looked at Chloé. She nodded. No need to speak.

"Chloé" my voice trembled at first, but then it grew. "We'll go together. We'll help however we can."

It took the whole morning to cross the village. Not in a straight line, but weaving through ruins, searching for trapped survivors, dragging bodies, covering them. Some men made stretchers from broken doors. Others used blankets.

Chloé helped where she could. With her strength, she moved beams no one else could. Her nose sniffed through rubble carefully, searching for signs of life.

Most were just bodies.

But not all.

A little girl was pulled from a brick trap. She didn't cry but clung tightly to a broken doll. She didn't speak. She just hugged me.

A boy, barely able to walk, had defended his younger sister with a rusty fork. They both survived. Barely.

Every saved face was a miracle. Every body found, another weight on our backs.

By noon, we were almost forty.

The untouched sector wasn't without scars. It hadn't been hit by fire, but by fear. Still, there were full walls, doors, clean wells.

The old man, Uren, as he introduced himself, organized his people without raising his voice. Some women set up an outdoor kitchen. A few men searched the abandoned houses for blankets, pots, medicine.

I didn't give orders. I just helped.

I washed wounds. I bandaged. I carried stones.

My sword, now sheathed, felt like a weight of guilt.

"Aren't you going to rest?" Chloé asked telepathically, approaching with a branch of flowers in her mouth.

"Later."

"Later is always too late" she said, dropping the flowers in front of me.

"And you?"

She licked her bandaged paw and huffed.

"I can't stay still either. There are still dead who haven't been mourned."

The ceremony took place at sunset.

Those who couldn't be identified were wrapped in sheets. The rest... each family took care of their loved one. There was silence, not of emptiness, but of respect. The kind of shared pain that needs no words.

Some prayed. Others sang. A group built a pyre near the river.

I didn't pray. I didn't know if the gods of this world listened to foreigners like me. But I whispered a quiet "thank you." One for each.

And in my chest, where once there had been only fury and fear... something else grew. A commitment.

I couldn't change the past.

But I could shape what was to come.

When all was done, the night fell without a moon.

We slept on blankets spread over the ground, near the fire. Chloé lay beside me, like a living shield.

I stayed awake for a long time, watching the flames. The embers looked like fallen stars. Or perhaps the souls of those who had left.

Uren sat next to me in silence. He handed me a cup of black tea.

"Some say you were sent to us" his voice low, without judgment.

"I'm no one."

"You're someone who stayed to fight. That's enough."

I didn't know what to say. Silence lingered.

"And you?" I asked. "Why didn't everyone flee?"

"Because this is our home. And sometimes... losing it is not an option."

Home...

The following days were nothing but work. Constant. Relentless. But necessary.

We raised tents. Repaired roofs. Planted fast-growing crops: radishes, herbs. Used what remained of the central warehouse. Everything was rationed. Even emotions.

People began to warm up to Chloé. First with caution, then with respect. Some children even played with her. She pretended to growl, but she protected them.

They treated me like a leader. I didn't want it. I didn't ask for it. But I understood they needed it.

So I accepted.

I assigned tasks. I listened. I embraced those who had lost everything. My hands stained with blood again—but this time, it was to heal, not to kill.

Each day was exhausting.

Each day was worth it.

Rebuilding was slow, but steady. Some houses were reinforced with fresh wood from the forest. Others built with hardened mud.

Groups formed. Some hunted. Others cooked. Chloé escorted those leaving the safe perimeter. I always went with her.

One time, in the forest, we found wagon tracks. A bandit had escaped. But we didn't have the strength to chase him. Not yet.

We returned to the village with full baskets and lighter hearts.

At night, while watching the stars from the roof of a newly repaired house, Chloé spoke into my mind:

"Do you regret not running?"

"No. And you?"

"Me? I'm a wolf. I'd only regret not fighting."

"Do you think it was worth it?"

She didn't answer immediately.

"There are children sleeping without fear tonight" she finally said. "That's enough for now."

I rested my head against her side.

"I want to stay. Until they can stand on their own."

"And after..."

"After... I'll keep walking. But this time, knowing I left something behind. Something good."

The stars twinkled, indifferent and eternal.

But beneath them, that night, there was hope.

And that... was more than I ever had before.