

## Frozen Star 21

### Chapter 21: Echoes in the Mist

[POV Liselotte]

Five days had passed since the last pyre.

Five sunrises without attacks. Without screams. Without blood.

Five days that felt like years.

Life was returning, but like someone coming home after a long journey: tired, clumsy, uncertain.

The air still smelled of smoke and damp earth, but also of warm soup, freshly cut wood, and children's laughter. Reconstruction wasn't only of homes—it was of the soul of a village that refused to die.

I walked the perimeter every day. Not just to make sure everything was alright, but because I needed to move.

My body still felt the weight of the battle. The wounds had closed, but they left scars that ached when the wind changed direction.

Chloé never left my side. Sometimes she went ahead, sniffing the air, investigating sounds. Sometimes she walked beside me, like a white shadow that refused to vanish.

"The forest is restless" she told me one night, in my mind.

"Humans?"

"I don't know. Something... similar."

I frowned. I had learned to trust her instincts more than my own. She heard what I couldn't. Saw what I missed.

"Do we keep watch?"

"Not yet. Just... listen."

And that's what we did.

That night, the silence was heavy. Not empty. A contained murmur, a wait. The kind of calm that comes before thunder.

The next morning brought clouds. Heavy. Gray. Not of rain, but of omen.

While helping to raise a shed near the old market, I noticed that several birds had left the area. A small detail, but in the forest, everything meant something.

Chloé returned early from patrol. Her fur was bristling.

"I'm not the only one who's sniff around the village."

"Beasts?"

"Probably some trained by humans. At least five. They didn't approach. But they left tracks. They're watching."

I stood upright, fists clenched.

"Do you think it's the bandits that escaped?"

"I don't know. But they're watching us."

"Then we must prepare for whatever may come" I said as we rushed to the village center.

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Calling a meeting in this village wasn't done with a bell. It happened through glances, heavy footsteps, and the echo of a firm voice asking for attention without raising its tone.

We gathered at dusk in front of the mill.

"They're likely watching us" I said plainly. "I don't want to scare anyone, but I'd rather you be alert than regretful."

A murmur ran through the crowd. Someone asked if we should flee.

"No" I said. "There are children here. Wounded. People who can barely walk. Fleeing is not an option. But resisting... is."

"Will you protect us again?" A young man asked, one who had lost his father in the last attack.

"Yes. But... Chloé and I can't do it alone anymore."

I looked him in the eyes. He looked down. He understood.

That night we organized a guard schedule. Chloé and I took the first shift.

The sky was overcast. Not a single star dared to shine.

"Are you scared?" she asked.

"No. Just... angry."

"You can take it out on them."

We laughed. Quietly. With shared sorrow.

At midnight, we saw them.

Shadows between the trees. Just a couple. Watching. Waiting.

They didn't approach.

Chloé growled low.

"They won't attack tonight. They want to know how many of us are left."

"Then we'll give them the wrong idea."

The next morning, I showed up armed. Hair tied up, sword clean.

Chloé followed me. The children ran to hug her. I spoke to the adults.

"We're going to make it look like we're more than we are. Fires lit in different houses. Groups walking around armed. Tools that look like weapons."

"We don't have enough supplies, and you want to waste them? I knew we shouldn't trust a girl" someone muttered.

I just smiled and explained my plan.

"We need time. To recover. To prepare. If they think we're many, they won't attack right away."

The village understood.

We became actors.

The shadows didn't come closer. I didn't know why. But they stayed watching in the dark.

And that scared me more than anything.

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Three days later, they arrived.

Not as bandits. Not as killers.

As messengers.

One of them appeared at the edge of the village. Unarmed. With two others.

Chloé and I went to meet them.

"We come in the name of the Black Mark " one said. His voice was too soft.

"We're not interested in any deal" I replied.

"We offer none. Only a warning. This village lies within our lord's territory. You have seven days to submit and surrender everything. Or it will burn again."

Silence.

"We already burned" I said. "And we're still here."

The man smiled.

"Don't regret it later."

They left.

And left their threat clinging to our souls like a shadow.



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[POV Chloé]

That night, Liselotte cried.

Not in front of everyone. Not like a leader.

But alone in the cave, where even the fire couldn't warm the fear.

"What if I can't save them?"

I approached. Placed my snout on her hand.

"Then we'll die trying."

She laughed through her tears.

"You're terrible at comforting."

"I'm a wolf. Not your mother."

She hugged me. Tightly.

And that night, in her embrace, I felt the weight of the world.

I didn't say it. But I already knew.

The real battle hadn't even started.

And even so...

As I watched her sleep, I remembered the last few days.

Liselotte struggles to sleep lately.

She pretends to be tired, lies down early. But I know she only closes her eyes so others don't worry. Her mind won't quiet. I can feel it. It hums like the forest before a storm.

I watch her in the darkness. The moon outlines her silhouette gently. There's mud under her nails and a healing cut on her neck. Her dress is no longer a dress. It's a story stitched in rags.

But her gaze...

Is still the same one that saved me from the asphalt long ago, in another world.

"I'm going to protect you."

She smiles in her sleep. Maybe she heard me. I hope so.