

Frozen Star 54

Chapter 54: Under the Shadow of the Master

[POV Liselotte]

The guild's training yard was a bare, functional square of worn stone, enclosed by high walls that had been silent witnesses to generations of would-be heroes.

It was designed to contain everything—the cries of exertion, the metallic clash of swords, the splintering of wooden practice weapons, and the dull thuds of bodies hitting the ground.

That morning, however, the air carried not its usual scent of sweat and dust, but a tense, electric expectation. The Guild Master—whom I heard whispered today by some as Kaelen—had summoned us at dawn. A handful of grim-faced veterans watched from the galleries, their arms crossed, their stares impassive. This was no spectacle; it was an evaluation. And he did not want unnecessary witnesses.

“Today,” his voice rang out, grave and sharp as the edge of an axe, “words and intentions end. They become this.” He struck his palm lightly with a massive wooden training sword. “I want to see your strength. I want to see what you are truly made of. You, Liselotte. And your companion, Chloé.”

A cold, tight knot formed at the base of my throat. It wasn't exactly fear; it was that abrasive mixture of vibrating nerves and iron determination that comes before battle—the storm you know is about to break. At my side, Chloé made no sound, but she stepped forward silently.

Her jet-black fur, usually so matte, seemed to absorb and return the greyish light of dawn, and her eyes, two deep pools of luminous blue, locked on Master Kaelen with an intensity that felt almost tangible.

“Against you... both of us?” I asked, my voice rougher than usual, scarcely able to believe the scale of the challenge.

“Against me,” he confirmed, crossing his arms over his broad chest. His stance was that of an ancient oak, immovable. A faint smile—not mocking, but pure certainty—tugged at his lips. The smile of a man who had faced dragons in their lairs and returned to tell the tale. “And don’t worry,” he added, the tone almost paternal, which somehow made it even more terrifying. “I don’t intend to kill you. I only want to measure the depth of the water before we dive in.”

I swallowed hard, the sound absurdly loud in the expectant silence. The uneven stone floor seemed to tilt slightly beneath my boots, but I forced my fingers, already stiff from the morning cold, to clench tightly around the grip of my practice sword. The rough wood was an anchor in a world that suddenly felt unsteady.

Chloé’s voice echoed in my mind—our way of speaking to each other. ‘Focus on now, Lotte. Don’t think about beating him. That’s a fantasy. Think about enduring. Learning. Surviving the next breath.’

I gave the slightest nod, a gesture only she would notice. Master Kaelen did not take an elaborate combat stance. He simply drew his own wooden sword with a whisper of displaced air. There was no countdown, no shouted command to begin. The battle started in the space of a heartbeat.

Chloé was lightning. A streak of living darkness that lunged at his right flank with a speed that would have torn out the throat of any normal man. I surged almost in unison, charging toward his left, my blade aimed at his side, trusting the pressure of a two-pronged assault to force an error, an opening—anything.

It didn't work.

It was like trying to topple a mountain with insect bites. The Master swung his weapon in a motion fluid, economical, and devastatingly forceful. The impact against Chloé's side sounded like an axe striking wood. She was hurled sideways, rolling across the gravel with a scatter of stones, but rose almost immediately, a low, furious growl rumbling in her chest. The ease, the near-indifference with which he had repelled her, chilled my blood.

I seized on his apparent distraction and slashed, my blade cutting a lateral arc toward his arm. Kaelen didn't retreat. On the contrary, he stepped forward—into my swing. His wooden sword tangled with mine in a wrist-flick deflection that seemed to cost him less effort than lifting a cup. The vibration of the impact rattled up my arm into my shoulder, a dull, electric pain that nearly pried open my fingers.

'Lotte! Watch out!' Chloé's mental shout was a spike of adrenaline in my brain.

The Master spun on his heels with grotesque agility for a man his size and, somehow, slipped into the blind spot between us, as if he had anticipated and orchestrated every move from the start. His presence in the yard was crushing—not only for his palpable physical power, but for the absolute, unshakable certainty with which he dominated every inch of terrain, every variable of the fight.

We tried again. A different tactic. Chloé leapt high, arcing through the air, claws bared with primal savagery, aiming for his face and shoulders. At the same time, I crouched low, sweeping my sword toward his ankles, hoping to bring him down.

He blocked Chloé's strike with his leather-clad forearm—a move that would have shattered another man's bone—and in the same fluid turn, his elbow smashed into my sternum. The air burst from my lungs with a painful whoosh, the world spinning as I staggered back, vision flashing. In that instant of my

weakness, I saw him catch Chloé by the throat with his free hand, halting her momentum as easily as one might still a wayward pup.

“Too predictable,” he declared, his voice calm, almost instructive, and tossed her aside with controlled brusqueness. She landed awkwardly, skidding across stone, but again she rose, this time shaking with impotent fury.

I dragged myself upright into a fighting stance, gasping. My body burned, every muscle protesting, and frustration, hot and bitter, stabbed like a dagger in my mind. And then, in the middle of that suffocating storm of rage and scarce air—it happened.

The air around me changed. It grew heavy, dense. A frozen breath, not from the winter dawn, welled up from deep in my chest, from a well I hadn’t known existed. It coursed through my veins like antifreeze, alien and yet intimate, racing into my arm with painful urgency, pouring into the wooden sword clenched in my numb fingers.

The blade began to frost over with a thin, intricate layer of white ice, crackling outward with the sound of tiny shattering crystals. A ghostly mist of cold, pale vapor rose from the sword and my arm, spiraling upward into the leaden sky.

Master Kaelen froze. He lowered his sword slightly, his eyes—always calculating—narrowing, studying the phenomenon with sharp, intense curiosity.

I could barely breathe. The cold wasn’t external; it was me. A glacial river pulsing beneath my skin, desperate for release, ravenous to be expressed.

“Interesting...” he murmured, the word heavy with meaning, hanging in the frigid air. For the first time in the fight, he stepped back. Half a step—just a shift of weight—but it was retreat. Recognition.

Chloé, sensing the shift, recovered with a guttural growl that was more than animal sound—it was a promise of violence. When she lunged again, something fundamental had changed. The shadow cast beneath her paws wasn’t passive; it stretched unnaturally, a smear of living ink slithering toward the Master’s feet, defying the dawn’s logic. Her blue eyes no longer just glowed; they blazed with an inner fire no wolf of this world had ever held.

Kaelen pivoted to meet her, his body taut with focus. He caught her claws with flawless precision, but this time, his brow furrowed for a fleeting instant of pure, concentrated perplexity.

“A common wolf does not manifest... this,” he muttered, his voice low, nearly lost, but I caught it. It was doubt—the first crack in his wall of certainty.

I surged forward then, driven by the frozen torrent boiling inside me. My sword, now rimed and deadly, whistled through the air. Kaelen intercepted with his own, but when ice-coated wood struck plain wood, it wasn’t a mere clack.

It was a muffled, booming blast—a pulse of pure cold expanding from the point of impact. The air fractured, and a perfect circle of thick, crunching frost spread across the yard’s stones at our feet, crackling audibly.

The force of the clash flung us apart. I staggered back, gasping, my whole body trembling from exhaustion and the shock of the uncontrolled power that had seized me. Chloé landed several meters away, her chest heaving violently, unnatural shadows rippling and contracting like restless black water beneath her.

Master Kaelen stood firm at the center of the icy circle, his wooden sword still in hand. He did not look tired, not even short of breath. But his eyes no longer bore the smug superiority of before. Now they burned with something different: genuine interest, critical reevaluation—and perhaps, just a spark of respect.

“Good,” he said at last, the word falling like a final verdict. Slowly, he lowered his weapon until its tip rested on the frost he had not created. “That’s enough for today.”

The icy aura cocooning me began to dissipate, the inner cold receding into a distant, unsettling memory in my bones, leaving me breathless, hollowed out by exhaustion.

Kaelen regarded us both, his gaze shifting from me to Chloé and back again, dissecting, analyzing, peeling away every layer of what he had seen.

“Liselotte,” he declared, his voice now weighty with new gravity, “that ice... it was no accident, no reflex of fear. It was a flare. A glimpse of something sleeping in your blood—something that demands awakening and, more importantly, mastery.” Then he turned, his gaze heavy and probing as it fell on Chloé, whose eyes still held that unsettling glow. “And you, wolf-companion... It seems the shadows answer to you. You weave darkness as others weave cloth. You are no simple beast. There is something more within you. Something old. Something that, today, bared its fangs.”

Chloé gave a low, almost warning growl, and looked away toward the frozen ground—but she did not deny it. She couldn’t. The proof was etched in the frost at my feet, in the living shadows still coiling lazily around her.

“I will train you both,” Master Kaelen concluded, his voice once more steady as stone, but now with a deeper purpose. “Not just for the journey ahead, to dodge blades and read maps... I will train you to

master the storms you carry within. Because if you don't—if you let them grow unchecked..." He paused, his gaze merciless. "You won't need demons or orcs to destroy you. You'll manage that yourselves, with the very power that surfaced today."

A silence fell over the yard, heavy as a mantle of lead. My fists clenched, knuckles white, my entire body shaking uncontrollably, unable to tell if it was from the cold knot of fear in my gut, or from the faint, intoxicating, terrifying spark of exhilaration I had felt when unleashing that power.

The only thing I knew with absolute certainty in that moment was that the superficial training was over. The real journey—the one into the shadows of our own selves—had just begun.