

Frozen Star 55

Chapter 55: Training Begins

[POV Liselotte]

Dawn was only a whisper of pale light on the horizon when Master Kaelen gathered us once more in the heart of the training yard. The air, cold and still, smelled of damp earth and the last embers of the night's fire.

On the stone slabs beneath our feet, irregular patches of frost stubbornly persisted, ghostly reminders of the power that had erupted from me the day before. They were like white scars upon the gray skin of the yard, and every time my eyes fell on them, a shiver ran down my spine.

I hadn't slept. Or rather, I hadn't rested.

Kaelen waited for us in the center of the yard, his imposing figure as motionless as a statue carved from shadows and determination. His arms, crossed over his chest, looked like pillars of rock dressed in leather. His dark eyes, deep as wells of night, scrutinized Chloé and me with an intensity that left no room for excuses or pretense. There was no indulgence in that gaze, only the cold evaluation of a blacksmith examining raw metal before thrusting it into the fire.

"Today," he announced, and his voice, deep and cutting, shattered the morning silence like an axe splitting wood, "your true training begins." He paused deliberately, letting the words sink into us.

“Forget brute-force exercises, mechanical repetitions, the war games that novices play. Anyone with half a brain and a shred of discipline can achieve that. What you need... is something far deeper. You must learn to tame the beasts you carry within.”

His gaze, heavy as a slab, landed on me first. I felt the lingering cold in my bones stir, as though answering a call.

“Your ice, Liselotte,” he said, each word a hammer blow on my conscience. “It is like a blood inheritance. A lineage. And above all else, it is dangerous. A double-edged weapon that can protect you—or destroy you. If you do not learn to understand it, to feel it, to govern it... one day, when you need it most, it will turn on you and consume you from the inside out, leaving you as little more than a hollow statue of ice.”

Then, he turned his head toward Chloé. She didn’t lower her gaze—on the contrary, her ears flattened against her skull, and a low growl, almost inaudible, vibrated in her chest. Her blue eyes, usually so serene, shone with a fierce, defiant light.

“And you, wolf,” Kaelen continued, his tone relentless. “Those shadows that crawl at your feet... they do not move out of whim, nor from some trick of the light. Something dwells within you. Something ancient and powerful, sleeping a restless sleep. It answers to your rage, to your instinct to protect, to your iron will. You hide it, deny it, lock it away... but it is there. And today, I saw it stir.”

Chloé growled again, louder this time, a clear warning of her displeasure. Her voice emerged, tense and sharp as a claw: “I am not a specimen to dissect. I won’t let anyone tear away what I am, to name something that belongs only to me.”

But I, bound to her by a link that transcended words, felt the whirlwind of emotions beneath her mask of fury. There was nervousness, a stab of fear of the unknown she carried within, and a fierce determination to protect her identity—whatever it was.

Before I could form a response, or Kaelen could speak another word, a different voice—higher, broken by weakness yet filled with indomitable stubbornness—echoed from the archway leading to the side galleries.

“Then teach me as well.”

We all turned in unison. Leah stood there in the threshold, wrapped in a dark cloak far too large for her frail figure. She leaned against the stone to keep herself upright, but her posture was straight, defiant. Her hair, the color of dawn’s pale light, fell over her shoulders like a faded mantle. And her eyes... her eyes burned with an intensity that transformed her mortal pallor into a kind of spectral, formidable beauty.

Kaelen frowned, a crack of irritation in his mask of impassivity. “This is not your place, princess,” he said, and the title sounded like a reprimand, not an honor. “Your body is still a ruined temple. Recover first, and then you may train.”

Leah didn’t flinch. She took one step forward, then another, unsteady but irrevocable, until she stood before our small group. The morning breeze toyed with the frayed edges of her cloak. “You said there would be no crowns or privileges here,” she replied, her voice a thread of air but edged with steel. “You said if I wanted to fight, I would learn from the mud. Well then, Master Kaelen... here I am. In the mud. Keep your word. Teach me.”

The silence that followed was so dense it could be felt physically. Kaelen watched her as a hawk watches a mouse that suddenly bares its teeth, with a mix of curiosity, disbelief, and the beginnings of respect. The veterans in the galleries, until now silent spectators, leaned slightly forward, drawn by the unfolding drama.

At last, Kaelen sighed. It was not a sigh of defeat, but the deep, weary sound of a man accepting an inevitable challenge. "Very well," he conceded, and his voice regained its stone-hard weight. "If you insist on stepping into this forge, then you too will be struck by the hammer. But remember my rules—there is no room here for feigned weakness. Here, all bleed, all break, and only those with the right spirit rise again, stronger than before. Understood?"

"Understood," Leah answered without hesitation. And for the first time since I had met her, I saw her pale lips curve into something like a smile. Not of joy or amusement, but of pure, raw defiance. It was the smile of someone finally taking the reins of her own destiny, no matter how painful it might be.

Kaelen nodded once, then raised a hand toward the wrought-iron brazier burning nearby. The embers, which moments earlier had merely smoldered weakly, suddenly flared as though stirred by an invisible wind. The flames rose, dancing with a voracious, living ferocity, painting flickering shadows across our faces.

"Then you will begin with the most basic—and at the same time, the deepest," he declared, his voice taking on an almost ceremonial tone. "To feel the flow. Magic, princess, is not a parlor trick. It is not a free gift to use and discard. It is the primordial river, the invisible current that runs through the world and, if you know how to listen, through you as well. If you cannot feel its tide, its rhythm, its cold and terrible beauty... you will never, ever be able to drink from it."

Leah watched him, entranced, her fragility forgotten for an instant. Kaelen extended his palm toward the flames without touching them. The fire responded instantly, leaning toward him as though recognizing its master, forming an arc of living fire between his hand and the brazier. "Focus," he ordered, his voice now a hypnotic whisper. "Close your eyes. Do not force anything. Just breathe. Deep. Slow. And listen. Not with your ears... listen with your blood. With your bones. With the echo of your soul."

Leah obeyed. She closed her eyes, her long pale lashes brushing against her hollow cheeks. I watched her shoulders rise and fall with a trembling breath.

For long, tense seconds, nothing happened.

Only the crackle of fire and our held breaths. Until... the air around Leah began to change. It grew heavier, vibrant, as if saturated with some invisible static energy. The flames in the brazier flickered erratically—at first subtly, as if hesitating, then more forcefully, wavering between flaring with fury and dying in a sigh of smoke.

Then I saw it. A glimmer. Faint, trembling, like the first light of a star being born in twilight. A pale blue glow, the color of an ancient glacier, emerged around Leah. It was not a perfect halo, but threads of cold, liquid light winding from the center of her chest, seeking connection with the world around her, flickering irregularly but undeniably real.

I held my breath. Even Chloé had gone utterly still, watching.

Kaelen nodded, a barely perceptible movement of his head. “There it is,” he murmured, his voice thick with a grim satisfaction. “Asleep. Bound and gagged by years of darkness and pain. But not dead. Not entirely.” He lowered his hand, and the flames returned to normal, as though an invisible thread had been severed. “We will awaken it, princess. Heartbeat by heartbeat, breath by breath. And it will be as painful as being born anew.”

Leah opened her eyes. She was panting softly, and for the briefest instant—just a flicker—I saw the shine of unshed tears within them. Not tears of weakness or self-pity. They were something far deeper and more devastating—the brutal, overwhelming spark of hope she thought forever lost.

Master Kaelen stepped back, drawing the three of us into his gaze. We stood there, three fractured souls, on a frozen yard beneath a sky barely beginning to lighten. “Good,” he said, and his voice was now the sound of an anvil ready to receive metal. “From this moment on, the three of you will train under my supervision. Liselotte, you will tame your ice until it answers your will and not your fear. Chloé, you will learn to understand your shadows. And you, Leah, before you even think of casting a spell, you will learn to breathe in unison with magic, to feel it as you feel your own heart.”

His words fell upon us not as instructions, but as chains of tempered steel, as oaths carved in fire and ice. They were inescapable. The air of the yard suddenly grew thick with a new and overwhelming gravity. We were no longer a fugitive princess, a novice adventurer, and her wolf. We were three projects. Three weapons in the making. Three storms about to be harnessed.

I looked at my own hands, still clean, but in my mind I saw them covered in that cruel, beautiful frost that had burst from me. I looked at Chloé, who now stared at the ground, her shadow still but unsettlingly deep. And finally, I looked at Leah, still standing, trembling yet unyielding, the last vestige of that blue glow fading around her clenched fists.

We were three. Different. Wounded in ways deep and incomparable. Incomplete.

But in that moment, under Master Kaelen’s unflinching gaze, I understood the raw truth hidden in his words. The training ahead was not against distant demons, nor against bandits on dusty roads. The fiercest battle—the one that would decide whether we survived or were destroyed—would not be fought on any external battlefield.

It would be fought within ourselves.

And that war, the most intimate and terrible of all, had just been declared.

