

## Frozen Star 57

### Chapter 57: The Echo of Shadows

[POV Chloé]

I watched Lotte from my position outside the circle of ice, every muscle in my body taut like a bow ready to fire. My instinct, always alert, screamed inside me, urgent and powerless. To see her struggle against that inner power that consumed her, to fall to her knees with her arms numbed by ice, to rise trembling and try again and again—it tore me apart in a way no physical battle ever had.

Every icicle that sprouted from the ground made me hold my breath, every muffled cry of pain from her echoed in my own bones. I wanted to intervene, to leap into that damned circle, to place myself between her and that power that seemed intent on devouring her, as I had always done. As I had promised to do. But this... this was a battle I could not fight for her. This war was intimate, personal, and I was nothing more than a spectator trapped behind an invisible barrier.

When Kaelen finally released her from her trial, I lunged toward her before her legs could completely give way. I slid under her arm, allowing her to lean on my back, her trembling, frozen weight distributed across my shoulders. Allowing her to share my warmth, my strength, while the spasms in her body gradually subsided. Her skin was icy to the touch, far too cold to be human, and she smelled of freshly formed frost, of exhausting effort, and that metallic scent of raw power that now seemed to permeate her.

"You're fine," I whispered, rubbing my muzzle softly against her arm, imparting warmth where I could. "You did it. You survived. That's all that matters now."

She didn't respond with words, not even with a coherent thought, but her hand, pale and marked by faint lines of frost, buried itself in my fur and clung with a desperate strength that spoke louder than any speech. And that— that simple act of holding on to me—was answer enough. It was an anchor.

Then my turn came. Master Kaelen's gaze fell on me, heavy and inexorable.

He approached, and with the tip of his wooden sword, which suddenly seemed carved from darkness itself, he traced a new circle on the ground, right next to the one that still bore the remnants of Lotte's ice.

This time, it was not runes of frost or fire that etched the stone, but complex, twisted symbols that looked like skeins of pure, interwoven darkness, as if the sword's very shadow had solidified. As he completed the circle, a cuirass of dark flames erupted from the runes—not fire, but tangible, vibrant, ravenous shadow—forming a ring of palpable blackness that enclosed me within, cutting me off from Lotte, from Leah, from the world I knew.

"Wolf," said Kaelen, and his voice sounded different within the confines of my circle, deeper, more resonant, as if vibrating at a frequency that echoed in the oldest, most hidden parts of my being. "Your shadows are not mere tricks of light, passive reflections of your form against the sun. They are not illusions. They are an extension of something deep that dwells within you. If you refuse to look at it, if you turn your back on it out of fear or pride, it will swallow you alive from the darkness you deny, because denial is the best fuel for that kind of fire. Today you will face it. Today it will cease to be a whisper at your back and take a name."

Inside the circle, the outside world seemed to blur, its colors dulling, its sounds muffled into a distant murmur. The air smelled of damp forest earth, of eternal night, of ancient secrets guarded beneath stone. I felt something within me—something I had always kept under strict control, behind reinforced mental locks—stirring, stretching, curiously alert in this environment that was at once a prison and a mirror.

"Close your eyes," ordered his voice, which now seemed to come from all directions. "And this time, don't listen. Feel. Darkness is not emptiness. It is the greatest presence of all. Find the one that dwells within you. Not the one the moon lends you. Yours."

I closed my eyes, and it was like plunging into deep, unknown waters. The darkness behind my eyelids was not the usual kind; here it was thick, viscous, alive. And in its infinite depth, I felt It. The Presence. That which had always been there, since my earliest conscious memories—a familiar yet alien weight at the very edge of my awareness, an ancient force that whispered in moments of blind rage or mortal danger, offering more power, more protection, at a price my instinct had always told me not to pay.

"Call it," said Kaelen's voice, floating in the darkness like a glowing ember drifting in a black river. "Do not summon it like a demon. Do not beg it like a god. Claim it. It is yours. It always has been."

I breathed deeply, filling my lungs with the shadow-laden air, and for the first time, instead of turning my mind away from that Presence, instead of reinforcing the locks, I turned toward it. I opened.

It was like opening a floodgate I could not close, that I did not want to close.

The shadow beneath my paws stirred violently, not like an inert projection, but like a living, liquid extension of my own being, a second skin made of concentrated night. It lengthened, stretched with terrifying fluidity, writhing like tentacles of intelligent ink that responded to the hesitations of my will. For one glorious, intoxicating moment, I felt immense, untamed power flowing through me, obedient to a desire I had not even put into words. I could feel its cold, silky texture, its infinite potential to protect, to hide, to defend... or to harm.

But then, like a warhorse that senses the slightest hesitation in its rider, the shadow twisted. My ancestral fear, my deeply ingrained resistance to this power, seeped into our fledgling connection like

poison. The shadow bucked, ceased to be an extension, and became a separate, enraged entity. It rose as a solid, black wall before me and then, with perverse intelligence, lunged.

It was not an external attack. It was not Kaelen testing me. It was me attacking myself with my own runaway power, my own dark reflection turned against me.

I hit the stone floor with a dull thud, struggling against that darkness that seemed intent on swallowing me, wrapping me, drowning my essence in its own. My paws scrabbled desperately, my claws scraped the stone uselessly, but it was like fighting a swamp of my own making—every movement sank me deeper. The darkness smothered my growls, absorbed my strength, my will. I howled, a raw, animal sound, but it was lost in the absolute blackness, devoured before it could be born.

"Chloé!" I heard Lotte's voice, distant, muffled, heavy with terror that pierced my heart, but I could not respond. I had no voice. No air.

Finally, through the fog of my panic, the sharp, clear strike of Kaelen's wooden sword against the ground cut the connection like a blade. The shadow dissolved instantly like smoke carried off by sudden wind, leaving me gasping on the cold floor, my fur bristling, my heart pounding against my ribs like a runaway drum of panic.

"See?" he said, implacable, his figure looming over me. "You deny it, you fear it, and it will devour you. Because it sees you as a threat to its existence, to its right to be. There are only two options when that door is opened: domination or submission. And submission always ends in digestion."

I rose slowly, with difficulty, my legs trembling like reeds. Rage burned in me, a dull, hot fury—not at him for his harshness, but at my own weakness, at that visceral fear that had overtaken me and made me fail. I bared my fangs in pure, raw frustration, a low growl tearing from my throat.

"Again," I snarled, my wolf's voice rough, defiant, desperate.

Kaelen nodded once, and in the depths of his eyes I thought I saw—or perhaps only wished to see—a spark of something that might have been approval.

The shadow stirred again at my paws, restless, expectant. This time, I remained still. Not tense, not rigid, but still. I breathed deeply, scenting the heavy air, recalling the feeling of pure power, of intimate connection, before panic had poisoned it. Instead of resisting, instead of fighting the tide, I opened myself to it.

I allowed the Presence to flow through me, observing it with respect, with caution, but without the blinding terror of before. The shadow stretched, responding to my new state of mind, forming complex structures: sharp spears of dusk, shields of woven darkness, walls of solid night. But when I tried to harden them, to hold them firm with defined purpose, my doubt—that lingering residue of mistrust—leaked again into the connection, and the forms shattered like black glass, dissolving into useless shadow-dust.

Frustration overwhelmed me, bitter and sharp. A howl tore from deep within my throat, a sound of pure, impotent rage that resounded throughout the courtyard, a primal lament that even made the impassive veterans in the upper galleries visibly flinch.

"I can't do it, Lotte!" The cry was a whip of despair, a bottle thrown into the sea of our connection. "It hurts! It's like taming a hurricane! It's too much!"

There was a pause, a silence that stretched a second too long. Then, her response came—not as a sound, but as a warm, solid certainty that settled at the center of my mind, a beacon in my private storm. "Because you think you're alone in this. Because you believe this power is something alien you

must subdue. You're not. It isn't. I'm here. Not to fight for you, but to remind you who you are. Accept your power, Chloé. It isn't a hurricane. It's the tide of your own blood. It's part of you, as I am. Let it flow. Trust."

Her words, her unwavering faith in me, acted like an anchor cast into turbulent waters. My ears twitched, clearing my mind of doubt, and I drew a deep breath, allowing her mental presence, her calm, to intertwine with mine, strengthening me, reminding me of my own center. For the first time since the trial began, I did not feel alone before the abyss.

And the shadow responded differently.

Instead of fragmenting or rebelling with redoubled force, it rose, obediently, taking a new shape. It was not an act of domination, but of cooperation. It became thick, solid, firm, yet malleable. No longer a rebellious substance struggling against my will, but a fluid extension of it. It formed a dark, impenetrable wall before me, still, serene, awaiting instructions.

Kaelen, without warning—as was his way—attacked. His wooden sword moved with speed that defied sight, a swift, powerful lateral strike meant to break my nascent defenses, to test their solidity.

The impact against the wall of shadow resounded in the courtyard like a muffled thunderclap, a wave of pure force that made the air vibrate and shook me to my bones. The shadow rippled, absorbed the energy of the blow with surprising elasticity, and held firm, intact. Not a crack of light pierced its blackness.

I gasped, astonished at the effectiveness of my own defense, at the sensation of control blossoming in my chest. A smile of pure wonder and instinctive triumph spread across my wolfish face, baring my fangs in a challenge that now felt genuine. I had done it. Not perfectly, not with the mastery of one who

has dedicated lives to this art, but I had done it. I had done it. I had not fought against the shadow; I had allied with it.

Kaelen lowered his sword, his expression impassive, but nodded slowly, a gesture of acquiescence that from him was worth more than any cheer.

"A beginning," he said, his voice returning to its usual tone, but in his eyes, for the first time, I thought I saw the faintest glimmer of something very much like silent praise. "Only a beginning. You will remember this day when the darkness speaks to you in its own voice. I hope by then you will have learned how to answer it."