

## Frozen Star 58

### Chapter 58: The First Breath of Magic

[POV Leah]

I watched their trials with my heart clenched in a fist of ice and anxiety. Every spasm of Liselotte's pain, every growl of Chloé's frustration, resonated in me like a direct blow.

Watching them fight, fall, and rise was like glimpsing my own immediate future, a brutal mirror of the fears gnawing at me inside. What awaited in the depths of my being? What monster had the darkness of my confinement created, waiting its turn to emerge and claim what remained of me?

When it was finally my turn, a tense silence took hold of the courtyard. My legs shook violently, threatening to collapse beneath me on the spot. Kaelen, with an almost casual gesture, extinguished the circles of fire and ice.

The blazing runes faded, and the frost melted with a sigh, leaving only the central brazier burning, its orange flames dancing like mocking tongues against the grayish paleness of dawn. Those flames seemed incredibly alive compared to the deadness I felt inside.

"Sit here," ordered Kaelen, his voice slightly softer than with the others, but no less relentless. He pointed to a spot on the bare ground, directly in front of the fire.

I obeyed, letting myself fall more than sitting gracefully. The impact of the cold ground against my bones sent a shiver through me. I placed my trembling hands on my knees, trying to hide their agitation, to conceal the storm of panic and doubt raging within me.

“Breathe,” said his voice, emerging from the shadows beside me. “Not to calm you. To feel. Feel the river I spoke of. Not the icy torrent of hers,” he nodded slightly toward Liselotte, who watched with eyes wide in concern, “nor the wolf’s deep darkness. Your own. The well from which, in another life, you drank without thinking, as you breathe air.”

I closed my eyes, feeling utterly ridiculous. A river? A well? Inside me, there was only a vast, resonant void, an exhaustion that went beyond the physical, seeping into the soul. A cold, dry desert where once, in the most distant and hazy memories of my childhood, there had been... something. Something that years in the cage, constant fear, and silent despair had dried up, stolen, sealed beneath layers of ice and stone.

I breathed deeply, as instructed. And again. And once more. I forced air into my lungs, hoping to feel something, anything. But there was nothing but the acrid smell of greenwood smoke, the penetrating cold of the ground through the thin fabric of my pants, the fast, weak sound of my own heart—a terrified little bird beating against the bars of its ribs.

“Focus on the fire,” his voice suggested, a guide through my inner darkness. “Do not look at it. Feel it. Its warmth. Its life energy. Not to steal it. To remember. To awaken the echo of that within you.”

I directed all my attention, all my being, toward the brazier. I tried to visualize the flames not as light, but as life. I tried to feel their warmth on my face not as a simple thermal sensation, but as a caress of pure energy. I struggled to imagine a river of fire flowing through the world, through the cracks of the earth, and, by extension, through me.

And then, something profoundly strange happened.

Instead of feeling warmth, of sensing the energy I longed for, I felt... the opposite. A deeper, more terrifying emptiness. A cold that had nothing to do with temperature. A ravenous hunger, an insatiable abyss within my own chest, yearning to be filled, seeming to consume the energy around it in a desperate attempt to sate itself.

The brazier's fire flickered violently, as if struggling against a gust of invisible wind. The flames stretched, twisted in agony, and then, with a final, crackling, pitiful sigh, went out completely, leaving only a mound of smoking coals and a jumble of gray ashes that seemed to mock me.

I opened my eyes, a cold, paralyzing horror seizing me. I had destroyed it. I had killed it. My mere presence, my empty essence, had extinguished life, had devoured light. I was not a bearer of power; I was a parasite, a black hole that consumed all.

"I failed," I whispered, my voice broken, unrecognizable, laden with shame and despair so deep it threatened to drown me. "It went out. Just for... being here."

Kaelen shook his head, his eyes never leaving the smoking coals, studying them as if they held a secret. "To extinguish is also power, princess," he said, his voice curiously neutral. "A power as valid and ancient as to ignite. The ability to deny, to extinguish, to create a void. But that power is useless to you, a dirty, self-destructive weapon, if you cannot reignite what you extinguish. If you do not learn to control the hunger you create." He crouched then, coming to my level, his gaze intense, piercing, yet not accusatory. It was the gaze of a teacher seeing a fundamental error, not a failure.

"The first step is not to fill the well by force. It is, first, to accept that it is empty. And then, to know, to truly believe, that it can be filled again. Do it again."

I swallowed hard, tears stinging my eyelids, threatening to spill and drag away the few remnants of my dignity. I closed my eyes again, feeling more lost and alone than ever. How? How was I supposed to do

it? There was nothing inside me. Only echo and dust and the persistent cold of years of confinement. I was a broken vessel, trying to hold water.

Minutes passed like eternity. I sank into frustration, into the silent, burning anger at my own impotence. So much that I had demanded to be here, that I had challenged Kaelen, that I had sworn not to be a burden! And I could not even make a single spark appear! I was a pathetic farce! A ridiculous child playing at being something I never would be—

Then, at the climax of that self-destructive fury, at the very core of my helpless rage, I felt it.

It was not a river. Not a well being filled.

It was a heartbeat.

One alone. Tiny, weak, flickering. Like the flutter of a dying bird in the vast, indifferent darkness within me. It came from a place deeply hidden, behind layers of fear, behind unbearable pain, behind years of darkness and despair. A place that had remained sealed and forgotten.

And it was not warmth. Not the fire I had tried to summon.

It was... cold.

But a cold completely different from Liselotte's. Not icy and sharp, not invasive or devouring. Calm, clear, tranquil. Like the winter sky on a clear night of full moon. A cold that did not take, but... preserved. That clarified.

I clung to that heartbeat, to that tiny, fragile sensation, with all the strength of my desperation. I followed it, ignoring everything else—the cold of the ground, the smell of ash, the presence of others. I no longer tried to “do” magic. I no longer tried to force anything. I only tried not to lose that fragile thread of... of something. Of life. Of my life.

And then, without me commanding it, without me even asking, a light flickered.

Not in my mind. In the real world.

I opened my eyes, breathless.

There, dancing on the palm of my trembling hand, was a single spark.

It was not orange or red like the flames of the brazier. It was pale blue, almost white, fragile as the finest crystal, flickering and inconsistent, like a tear from a star about to go out. But it was tangible. Real. It emitted a soft light that illuminated my pale fingers, and a serene cold, not painful, radiated from it.

I stared at it, and an emotion so vast, so overwhelming, swept through me that I almost extinguished it out of sheer shock. It was pure awe. It was a triumph so deep it hurt. It was the first glimmer of something I had believed dead and buried forever—not just the power, but hope itself.

My lips curved into a smile I hadn't felt in years, a genuine smile—not of carefree joy, but of profoundly moved recognition, born from a place that was not pain. Hot, silent tears clouded my vision, but I did not move, did not breathe, for fear of snuffing out that tiny, perfect miracle.

Kaelen leaned slightly to observe the blue spark, and in the austere corners of his severe mouth, for the first time, I saw something resembling a true, if minimal, smile of satisfaction.

"That," he said, his voice grave but with a hint of what might have been pride, or perhaps just the recognition of a duty fulfilled, "is your first true breath of magic, Leah of Whirikai. Not a learned trick, not a reflection of fear. A genuine breath. The first of many. Keep it here." He touched the center of his chest. "Remember this sensation, this taste. It is the seed. Small, yes. But from it can grow all that comes after."

The spark flickered one last time, as if bidding farewell, and vanished, consumed by the effort of existing. But the sensation in my palm, the echo of its cold light in my eyes, the memory of its tranquil beat, remained. It was not much. It was not an army, nor a powerful spell.

But it was a beginning.

My beginning.