

Frozen Star 59

Chapter 59: The Anvil

[POV Master Kaelen]

I watched them from the center of the courtyard, where the chalk circles were beginning to blur under the first drops of morning dew. The three, gathered once more, formed a picture of exhausted transformation. Fatigue weighed on their shoulders like invisible cloaks, bending their backs and clouding their gazes, yet still, in the depth of their eyes, something new burned: a fire of freshly kindled understanding, flickering but tenacious.

Liselotte stood, though barely. A fine tremor, like that of a leaf in the breeze, ran through her limbs. But there was a serenity in her face that hadn't been there before, the weary peace of one who has looked into the abyss and negotiated an unstable truce. She had touched the edge of that glacial power without letting it destroy her, had felt the icy current of her inner river and, against all odds, survived its onslaught. For a first time, it was a monumental achievement, a first step on a path that few dared to tread.

The wolf, Chloé, breathed heavily, her fur still bristling in places, as if the shadows she had summoned had left an electrostatic charge in her being. But in her wolf eyes, always so expressive, there was no longer only the animal reflection of fear or defense. There was acceptance. She had faced the darkness within her—not as an invader, but as a part of herself she had denied for far too long—and had forced a precarious truce, a rudimentary but fundamental understanding. It was not victory, but the first round of a battle that would last a lifetime, and she had won it.

And the princess... Leah. She held herself up by will more than by physical strength, fragile as the finest crystal, pale and sweating, but with a core of tempered steel I had sensed from the beginning, hidden beneath layers of trauma and weakness. In her hands, still clasped together as if seeking comfort, a faint blue glow seemed to cling, the ghost of her spark. She had found not power, but her seed: a glimpse of light in the crushing darkness of her own void. It was pure potential. It was fragile hope, the most dangerous and valuable of all.

"Today," I said, and my voice sounded rougher than usual, rasping like stone against stone. It was the voice of a man who had seen too many ideals shatter against the hard ground of reality, too many promising talents extinguished under the first true trial. "You did not defeat anything that matters in the grand scheme of things." I let the words, harsh, settle. I saw Liselotte clench her fists, Chloé lower her head slightly, Leah harden her already rigid posture. "You did not achieve feats bards will sing in taverns, nor deeds that change the course of wars. You merely scratched the surface of what you are capable of, like children scraping with their nails the frost from a winter window."

My eyes, veterans of a thousand battles and hundreds of trainings, swept over their young faces, marked by physical strain and spiritual upheaval. I read disappointment in some, exhaustion in all. But also, beneath it, a spark of that stubbornness necessary to carry on.

"But you scratched," I stressed, pausing so the weight of the simple action could fall upon them. "And that, that is already more than most who pass through this courtyard achieve in an entire lifetime of complacent training and empty meditations. Today you met no one's expectations... except my most basic one: you did not give up."

I walked toward them, my boots echoing on the silent stone. I stopped at a distance that allowed me to see not only their expressions but also the residual glimmers of their powers, those energetic signatures now surrounding them like a restless aura. At the tips of Liselotte's green hair, tiny frost crystals formed and melted, a reminder of her bond with the cold. Beneath Chloé's paws, the shadows seemed deeper, denser than usual, trembling slightly like a sleeping beast. And around Leah's hands, that faint blue glow, like the echo of a distant star, still clung, refusing to fade completely.

"You are three different metals," I declared, my voice recovering its tone of instruction, of evaluation. I gestured with a tilt of my chin, a motion I had long ago stripped of emotion. "Cold and brittle as newly formed steel, able to cut like a razor or shatter with a poorly placed strike." My gaze locked on Liselotte, and she held it, defiant despite her exhaustion. "Dark and adaptable as shadow-iron that absorbs light, able to be forged into impenetrable armor or into a prison without bars." My eyes shifted to Chloé, whose ear twitched in recognition of the description. "And fragile as the finest glass, transparent and vulnerable, but with the potential to focus the sunlight with such brutal intensity that it can set

continents aflame.” Finally, I looked at Leah, whose fragility was as evident as her potential. “Three materials. Three possible destinies.”

“Raw metals,” I continued, the hardness returning to my tone. “Defective. Impure. Filled with inclusions of fear, cracks of pain, veins of misunderstood pride.” I paused deliberately, letting the words, harsh but undeniably true, sink into their flesh and spirit. I saw them digest them, some with bitterness, others with resigned acceptance. “The world does not need more raw metal. It needs weapons. It needs tools. It needs guardians.”

My arms, crossed, tensed. “But on the anvil, under the constant, precise blow of the hammer, subjected to the fire that purges impurities, you can become something more. You can be forged into weapons that defend kingdoms, into legends that inspire generations... or you can break into a thousand useless shards, discarded into the scrap heap of those who tried and failed.” I looked each one in the eyes, ensuring they not only heard but understood the rawness of the choice. “The fire of the anvil does not forgive. The hammer does not pity. It only transforms. Or destroys.”

My voice lowered then, adopting a graver, more personal tone, the tone I reserved for the most crucial warnings, the ones I wished with all my soul never to have to give, but that my duty forced me to speak.

“And power,” I said, and the word resonated in the courtyard’s silence like a clapper striking a bronze bell, “power always, always demands a price.” I let silence claim the space for a long moment, allowing the weight of the assertion to settle into their bones. “You do not yet know what yours is. The frost Liselotte summons can freeze not only her enemies but the heart that harbors it, turning her into a statue of ice as perfect as it is unfeeling. The darkness Chloé wields can cloud not only the battlefield but the mind that calls it forth, until she no longer remembers the light of day or the face of a friend. And the light Leah touched today, pure as it may be, can scar not only wounds but the very hands that try to mold it, burning them to the bone if not treated with the respect it demands.”

I saw understanding, mixed with a new fear, gleam in their eyes. Good. Fear was as valid a teacher as courage. Sometimes, more.

“Remember it,” I concluded, my voice returning to its normal volume, but not to softness. “When power whispers temptations to you, when it promises glory in exchange for a piece of your soul. Remember it.”

Without another word, I turned. The echo of my footsteps as I left was the only sound that broke the heavy silence I had left behind. My work here, for today, was done. I had shown them the path, opened the door to their own abysses, and made them see the beasts that dwelled within. Now the true work began, the dirty, painful, and profoundly lonely work of taming those beasts, of negotiating with them, of integrating them—or being devoured by them.

And I would be there, in the days and weeks to come, with my relentless hammer and unyielding anvil, watching every blow, every spark, every tremor. To ensure they were forged into weapons worthy of trust, into tools capable of changing a kingdom’s fate—or to clear away the remnants if they shattered in the attempt. Because the world ahead, with its lengthening shadows and ancient threats, would have no mercy for the weak, nor time for the hesitant. And my duty, my heavy and ancient duty, was to ensure they were ready to face it.

Even if the forging process had to break them along the way.