

Frozen Star 60

Chapter 60: Progress

[POV Liselotte]

Time lost all meaning within the high stone walls of the guild. Days melted into an endless succession of gray dawns, suns veiled by the smoke of the forge, and nights haunted by the pain of overstrained muscles.

I don't know if weeks or months passed; I only remember the constant chill of the flagstones under my feet, the taste of sweat and blood on my cracked lips, and the relentless hammering of Master Kaelen's voice, echoing louder and clearer than the strike of any weapon against the anvil.

Rest was an illusion. At night, when I collapsed beside Chloé in the room we shared, every muscle screamed in protest, my joints creaked like green wood, and even in dreams my hands remained curled into tight fists, as if refusing to release the grip of an invisible sword. In the adjacent bunk, Leah often stifled cries of pain beneath her sheets, but when the first light of dawn filtered through the window, she was already up, dressed, her gaze fixed on the door—a silent determination that bound us together in an unspoken pact. We rarely spoke of it, but her stubbornness was a fire that warmed the three of us.

My own training became an epic battle against the invisible—against my own nature.

"Your problem isn't scarcity, but waste," Kaelen said, watching me with hawk-like eyes as I tried, hands trembling and outstretched, to conjure a flawless shard of frost without freezing my fingers to the bone. "You have an ocean inside you, girl, but you try to dive in all at once and drown. Control the flow. Don't let the power use you; you must use it."

It was a painfully true statement. Each time I invoked the ice, I felt a glacial tide surging through my senses, a torrent threatening to burst my veins from within.

The consequences were brutal and varied: some days ended with blood trickling crimson from my nose onto the artificial snow I created; others left the tips of my fingers purple and numb for hours; once, the cold struck me so hard I fell backward, black stars dancing before my eyes before consciousness slipped away for what felt like endless seconds.

But drop by drop, I learned.

At first, my creations were formless, chaotic blocks—ice sculptures that collapsed under their own weight. After what felt like hundreds of failed attempts, I managed to forge a crude dagger, its blade dull and jagged, which held its form for only three heartbeats before melting into a puddle at my feet.

And yet, it was a victory. The next was a thin wall, curved concentrically like a shield, that withstood the impact of a stone Kaelen hurled before shattering into a thousand shards. It wasn't perfect, but the Master gave a slight nod, an almost imperceptible gesture worth more than any ovation.

The day I conjured a spear of ice sharp as a needle, kept its form long enough to brace it, and hurled it into a straw dummy, piercing the center with a satisfying crack, I knew something inside me had changed forever.

Chloé fought her own war on a battlefield just as harrowing. I could feel the echoes of her frustration through our bond, a current of rage and helplessness so intense at times it broke my focus.

The shadows she wielded were capricious, fickle entities. Some days they stretched obediently from her paws like living whips of darkness, coiling with deadly precision around the wooden posts Kaelen placed as targets. Other days, they fragmented into useless tatters, a haze of black smoke good for little more than partial cover.

“Your fear gives them flavor, and they feed on it,” Kaelen spat on a particularly bad day, after a tendril of shadow had lashed back at her, clawing her side. “You fear them, and that fear makes them rebel. Stop seeing them as the enemy. They’re as much yours as your claws.”

She answered with a furious growl, a sound torn from the depths of her throat. At night, sometimes, her howl of frustration tore through the silence of the dormitory. But she never surrendered.

The turning point came at dusk. Exhausted after hours of training, Kaelen launched a surprise strike at her with his practice staff. With no time to dodge, Chloé reacted on instinct. The shadow at her feet rose—not as a shield, but as a solid, defined arm, black as pitch, intercepting the blow with a dull thud. The surprise nearly broke her concentration, but the shadow held for one crucial second before dissipating. It wasn’t a wolf’s weapon. It was something new, something other.

From that day on, her training became a relentless struggle, a fierce negotiation with the darkness inside her. And, inch by inch, she was winning ground. She learned to mold shadow not only into weapons but into a cloak of camouflage, blending into the cracks of walls, almost invisible to the untrained eye.

Leah, meanwhile, walked the opposite path. We fought to contain excess; she fought to kindle a spark.

Kaelen subjected her to long, grueling meditation sessions before the brazier, sometimes beneath the blazing sun, other times in a fine drizzle. I watched her pale, tremble, sweat until her tunic was soaked through, lips dry and cracked. Her body, still frail, seemed on the verge of breaking at any moment. But always, always, she returned the next day, her gaze burning fiercer than before.

Her progress was the slowest, but also the most miraculous. From a flickering blue spark, she nurtured a wavering flame no larger than a coin. The first time she held it steady in her palm for ten breaths, I saw a silent tear carve down her dirty cheek.

One day, after a particularly exhausting exercise of mine, I leaned against a wall, rubbing my arm where a poorly aimed ice thrust had left a deep cut, bleeding slowly. Leah approached, her expression solemn.

“Let me see,” she said, her voice a wisp of air.

Before I could protest, she brought her hands close to the wound. The small blue flame reappeared, but this time it didn’t dance wildly. It hovered over the cut, and a serene coolness—not the cutting cold of my ice, but soothing—spread across the skin. The bleeding stopped instantly, and the flesh began to knit together, leaving only a faint pink line. It wasn’t full healing, but the relief was immediate and overwhelming. We looked at each other, both stunned by what she had achieved.

And then came the day of her true breakthrough. Kaelen had spread a wide layer of frost across the training yard. “Ignite it,” he commanded Leah.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and this time, it wasn’t a flame that emerged. It was a whip-crack of blue fire, pure and focused, erupting from her outstretched hands and striking the ice with a hiss. Not an explosion, but a controlled, ferocious combustion that melted the frost in seconds, leaving the ground dry and steaming.

The silence that followed was absolute. Chloé and I exchanged stunned looks, speechless. Kaelen, standing to one side, regarded the steaming ground and then Leah, who was panting, her eyes glowing with a bluish light.

“That,” he said, and for the first time I heard something resembling praise in his rough voice, “is no longer a whisper. It’s a declaration.”

Thus our time passed, measured in drops of sweat, in tears dried by the wind, in small triumphs and resounding failures.

There were moments of utter despair, muffled cries into pillows, urges to throw the towel into the fire and flee far away. But there were also short, ragged laughs, stolen in brief breaks while sharing a piece of bread. There were companionable silences at dusk, staring at the first stars, comforted by the simple presence of the others—knowing that although each of us was battling our own demons, we were not alone on the battlefield.

And at last, I understood why Kaelen called this “the Anvil.” It wasn’t just for the pain of the blows, nor the fire of the forge. It was because he was hammering us, shaping us, reforging us again and again, like flawed metals purging their impurities under relentless strikes. The choice was simple, and terrible: break under the pressure, or emerge as the weapon the world needed us to be.

One morning, after a series of exercises that left the three of us sprawled on the stone ground, panting, bruised, and filthy, the Master planted himself before us. He studied us for a long moment, his gaze probing every detail of our exhaustion.

“You are no longer the same ones who came to this yard,” he finally said, his voice neutral but heavy with meaning.

I managed to lift my head, a titanic effort. Chlo   was licking a shallow wound on one of her forelegs. Leah lay flat on her back, eyes half-closed, chest heaving.

“You’ve changed a great deal...”

And for the first time since this ordeal began, I believed his words. We weren’t finished warriors, not even close. But we were no longer the same. The anvil had changed us. And it was only the beginning.