

Frozen Star 61

Chapter 61: Streets

[POV Liselotte]

The city smelled of freshly baked bread, fresh herbs, and smoking firewood.

It was strange, almost disorienting. After weeks of breathing only the air heavy with sweat, cold metal, and the acrid smoke of training braziers, that warm, profoundly homely aroma struck me like an unexpected and slightly painful caress.

The constant murmur of merchants haggling, the metallic clatter of horses' hooves on cobblestones polished by use, and the sharp laughter of children darting between adults' legs and market stalls seemed to belong to another planet, to a life far away and alien to the universe of iron discipline, pain, and scars we inhabited behind the guild's walls.

Leah walked at my side, her figure wrapped in a dark wool cloak that seemed to absorb the faint light of the autumn afternoon. She was no longer the broken, ethereal girl we had dragged out of that cursed cage. Her steps, though still measured and careful, now carried a new firmness, a silent determination in every stride.

Her eyes, the color of a winter sky, no longer remained fixed on the ground, blinded by fear or the memory of pain; now they wandered, with cautious yet genuine curiosity, over the stone facades weathered by time, the banners of minor guilds fluttering in the damp wind, the wilted flower bouquets hanging from some wooden balconies.

Chloé followed closely behind us, her wolf silhouette an elegant, alert blot of darkness among the colorful bustle. Her gait was so silent she seemed to glide rather than walk, yet her presence did not go unnoticed. Children stopped to point at her with trembling fingers of fascination, and more than one tugged insistently at their mother's sleeve, whispering excitedly about the "great silver wolf with moonlit eyes." She ignored them with dignity, but I noticed her ears pricking slightly, catching every sound, evaluating every potential threat in this new environment.

"It's been... years since I saw something like this," Leah murmured suddenly, her voice so low it almost vanished into the hum of the street.

I turned my head toward her, surprised by the spontaneous remark. "What do you mean?" I asked, softening my tone so as not to scare away the moment.

She let her gaze drift toward a group of young tailor apprentices heatedly debating the hues of brightly colored fabrics laid out at a stall. There was a distant glow, almost nostalgic, in her pale eyes.

"People. Simply... living. Without bars on the windows. Without chains on their ankles. Without that constant fear that makes you watch every shadow..." she said, then gave a slight shrug, as if ashamed of the rawness of her own confession. "It's... strange. Like watching a play from the front row, knowing you no longer have to act in it."

I didn't reply right away. I felt it was one of those rare moments when words were unnecessary, where the only thing you could offer was the simple act of walking beside her, sharing the silence without letting it turn uncomfortable or heavy.

We walked a few more steps, weaving through the crowd. A street vendor, with a grease-stained apron and a smile that lit up his whole face, waved skewers of sizzling meat high over a portable brazier. The

juices dripped onto the coals, releasing a smoky, spiced aroma that made my stomach audibly growl. Without thinking twice, I stopped.

“Come,” I said to Leah, with a smile that came to me naturally. “Let’s try one.”

She arched an eyebrow skeptically, an expression that suited her, adding a hint of personality to her still too-pale face. “Here? In the middle of the street, like... like commoners would?”

The way she said it carried not a shred of contempt; it was pure bewilderment, the genuine perplexity of someone for whom the simple act of eating in the street was as foreign as flying. Her princessly protocols, buried under years of horror, peeked through in a way both pathetic and oddly touching.

“Yes, right here,” I insisted, gently taking her arm and pulling her toward the stall with an impulse I hoped was contagious. “It’s part of... living.”

Chloé moved a few steps ahead, sniffing the air with visible and undisguised interest, her tail swaying in a soft rhythm.

The vendor, a plump man with flour-dusted arms up to the elbows, greeted us with an even broader smile upon seeing our interest. “For the ladies and the noble beast! Two skewers, or shall it be three?” he asked, winking conspiratorially at Chloé.

“Three, please,” I replied without hesitation, pulling a few coins from my pouch.

Within seconds, I held a steaming skewer of juicy meat seasoned with herbs and caramelized onions. The heat seeped into my fingers through the rough cloth wrapping it, and the aroma, intense and promising, made me sigh with anticipation. I handed one to Leah.

She took it with the caution one might use to hold an unknown, potentially dangerous artifact. She studied it for a moment, its structure, its simplicity. Then, with almost ceremonial slowness, she brought it to her lips. She took a small, cautious bite, and as she chewed, something changed in her expression. Her eyes, once distant, widened slightly, and a spark of genuine surprise lit her gaze.

“Well?” I asked, unable to contain an amused smile at her reaction.

“It’s... good,” she admitted, and the sheer simplicity of the phrase, the almost childlike way she said it, was so disarming and honest that I couldn’t help but let out a brief, sincere laugh.

Chloé, meanwhile, wasted no time on protocol. She devoured hers in two precise, efficient bites, then licked her fangs with such obvious satisfaction that the vendor burst into a deep, contagious laugh. “By the gods, that wolf eats with more joy than many mercenaries with gold pay!”

Leah and I exchanged glances, and for the first time, I saw a shadow of a smile, faint and fleeting, cross her lips. It wasn’t full, it wasn’t certain, but it was there. Like the first green sprout after a merciless winter.

We kept walking, savoring our skewers as we let ourselves be carried along by the human current. The sun was beginning to dip, painting the slate rooftops and smoke-filled chimneys with golden and orange hues.

“You know?” Leah said suddenly, looking at what was left of her skewer as if it held the answer to a deep riddle. “This shouldn’t... please me. After all, it’s not a delicacy worthy of... well, of anything, really. I shouldn’t feel anything at all. I thought there wasn’t much left to feel.” She paused, searching for words with quiet urgency. “And yet...”

She stopped, frowning, as if the phrase she wanted to articulate was too heavy, too vulnerable to be spoken aloud in the middle of the street.

“And yet, with you, with both of you,” she continued, forcing the words, “I feel that... that maybe, just maybe, there’s still something of me worth saving. Something beneath all the dust and cold.”

The skewer halted halfway to my mouth. An unexpected knot formed in my throat. I swallowed hard, my chest tight with the weight of such a raw, profoundly sincere confession. They weren’t words of flowery gratitude, but the trembling recognition of a spark of life where once there had only been darkness.

I didn’t want to ruin it with a clumsy remark or an easy attempt at comfort. There were no words big enough for that. So I simply nodded, with a slight inclination of my head, and kept walking beside her, savoring not only the spiced, juicy meat but also the fragile yet precious certainty that Leah, against all odds, was allowing a tiny but vital crack to open in the wall of ice around her.

And in that instant, amid the city’s welcoming bustle, the warmth of shared food, and Chloé’s silent presence at our backs, I felt that maybe—against all hope and all logic—there was a possible future for all of us. Not an easy one, nor a gentle one, but one worth continuing to fight for.