

Frozen Star 70

Chapter 70: Among Hills and Skies

[POV Liselotte]

The fourth day of travel dawned with a clarity that seemed to wash the soul. The sky stretched like an infinite vault of deep blue, barely dotted with cottony clouds that floated with lazy elegance. The carriage moved at a steady rhythm, its wheels softly creaking over the hardened dirt path that wound between hills dressed in emerald green. After the intensity of the weeks of training and the emotional farewell, that calm rhythm felt almost medicinal, as if the earth itself were offering us a necessary respite before facing the challenges that surely awaited further ahead.

Chloé trotted alongside our horse, a noble chestnut animal named Steed by Leah, who insisted that every living being deserved a proper name. The silver wolf moved with that feline grace that always amazed me, her fur shining under the sunlight like polished metal. Leah and I shared the inside of the carriage, we had learned to take turns at the reins, although I confess she showed greater skill with animals than I did.

The morning breeze entered through the open windows, carrying with it the intoxicating aroma of wildflowers and the distant perfume of pines that grew on the slopes of the hills. It was a scent of freedom, of open spaces, of horizons stretching beyond what the eye could grasp.

At noon, we decided to stop our journey. The road opened into a small natural clearing between two hills, and a crystal-clear stream ran a few meters away, its cheerful murmur inviting us to rest. Steed snorted with evident relief when Leah gently pulled on the reins.

"This looks like a good place to rest and let him drink" I commented, stepping down from the carriage and stretching my legs with a sigh of satisfaction.

Leah nodded, skillfully unhooking Steed to lead him to the water. "Yes, and it will do us good too."

We approached the stream, and the sight we found stole my breath for a moment. The water ran over stones polished by time, so transparent that I could see every pebble on the bottom, every glint of mica sparkling beneath the surface. The sun reflected on the water, creating dancing patterns of light that seemed made of pure magic.

I knelt on the shore and scooped water into my hands, bringing it to my lips. The liquid was cold as ice but sweet like no water I had ever tasted before, with a clean flavor that seemed to wash away not only thirst but also the weariness of the road.

"It is delicious" I commented, and Leah, curious, imitated me. Her lips curved into a small but genuine smile as she tasted the water.

"I had forgotten how refreshing stream water can be" she murmured, gazing at the crystal liquid as if it held some ancient secret. "In the cage, the closest thing was a metal bowl that always tasted of rust and despair."

Chloé came closer and drank directly from the stream, her pink tongue capturing the water with lupine efficiency. She then raised her head with drops gleaming on her muzzle like tiny diamonds, and shook her fur with energy, splashing both of us and provoking laughter that echoed in the tranquil air.

After filling our canteens and making sure Steed had drunk enough, we spread a blanket over the soft grass and brought out some of the provisions Naele had so carefully packed. Brown rye bread, a wedge of cured cheese that released an intense and delicious aroma, dried fruits that tasted of summers past and, as a special gift, honey cookies that still preserved their sweet scent despite the days of travel.

"Look at this" I said, holding one of the cookies toward the light. "Naele swore she did not want to act like a worried mother, but she made sure to give us the most nutritious food possible."

Leah let out a brief but luminous laugh. "I saw her placing these cookies in the package with a gesture as careful as if she were preparing a banquet for royalty. I think, deep down, she adopted the three of us."

"She will admit it when we return" I replied, cutting the cheese into equal portions. "With precise statistics of how many times we used each medicinal herb and how many cookies we ate each day."

As we ate, the conversation flowed into unexplored territories, far from the topics that usually occupied our thoughts. Leah recalled a festival from her childhood in Whirikai, where paper lanterns were released into the night sky until the stars seemed to compete with the earthly lights.

"My grandmother helped me make mine" she recounted, with a nostalgic smile. "She said each lantern carried a secret wish to the gods. Mine always asked the same thing, that my brothers would let me train with them."

I shared the time I tried cooking on my own when I was younger and almost set my house's kitchen on fire. "The smoke was so thick that the neighbors thought I was practicing black magic instead of making a simple soup."

Chloé told us her memories of when she was a pup chasing butterflies in the meadows near her pack, the warm and protective feeling of sleeping curled up against her siblings under a starry sky, the first time she caught her own prey.

"Butterflies?" Leah raised an amused eyebrow. "I could never imagine you running after something so fragile and delicate."

Chloé huffed softly, and reminded us of the image of Leah during her first magic lessons, clumsily stumbling while trying to conjure a simple flame and ending up with soot on her face. I couldn't contain my laughter.

"Chloé!" Leah protested, although the smile dancing on her lips betrayed that the teasing didn't really bother her. "That wasn't fair, I was just starting."

The rest of the afternoon passed in shared laughter, trivial anecdotes, and comfortable silences that did not need to be filled with words. We did not talk about demons, nor wars, nor lost kingdoms. For a few magical hours, we allowed the world to shrink to these endless meadows, to these hills that seemed to caress the sky, and to the quiet company of those who had consciously chosen to walk together.

When the sun began its descent, painting the sky in golden, orange, and deep purple tones, we lazily gathered our things. Leah reattached Steed with a skill that surprised me, her hands moving confidently on the straps and buckles.

"Where did you learn to do that?" I asked, watching her.

"My brothers had horses" she replied, with a shy smile. "Sometimes they let me help them in the stables, when they were in a good mood."

As we settled back into the carriage, this time with Leah taking the reins first, I observed my companions under the twilight light. Leah was focused but serene, her hands holding the reins with confidence, her eyes fixed on the road opening before us. Chloé ran beside us, her silver silhouette standing out against the grass darkening into shadow, an elegant and powerful phantom in the landscape tinted with dusk.

And I... I allowed myself to feel a gratitude so deep it nearly stole my breath. Because for the first time in a long time, the journey was not a heavy burden to drag nor a desperate escape. It was a beginning, a true start, a new chapter we wrote ourselves, with every choice, every shared laugh, every mile we traveled together.

As the carriage began to move toward the next hill, bathed in the last rays of the setting sun, I knew with absolute certainty that this was only the beginning. A bright and promising start, under a vast sky that seemed to whisper that countless wonders were still left to discover, and that we would do so together, as we had always promised.