

Frozen Star 72

Chapter 72: Under a Shadowless Sky

[POV Liselotte]

The sixth day of travel dawned with a purity that seemed designed to wash away any trace of the battle from the day before. The sun rose over the horizon, bathing the world in a golden light that made every drop of dew shine like a tiny jewel. The tall grass swayed gently with the wind, forming silver waves that stretched as far as the eye could see, elegantly concealing any remnants of the violence that had taken place in that very spot barely twenty-four hours earlier.

The carriage moved at an almost meditative pace, its wheels squeaking occasionally as they rolled over stones half-buried in the dust of the road. Corcel, our noble equine companion, seemed livelier than ever, his mane flowing in the wind as if the fresh air of the open meadows had renewed not only his physical strength but also his spirit. At his side, Chloé trotted with a light, elastic step, her tail swaying with an almost playful rhythm I had rarely seen from her during our days of training.

Leah, sitting beside me on the driver's seat, stretched her arms with an exaggerated yawn that ended in a carefree smile.

"You know what the best thing is about having beaten those creatures yesterday?" she asked, her mischievous expression making her eyes sparkle with a hint of mischief.

"That we're still alive to tell the tale," I replied, adjusting my grip on the reins even though Corcel seemed to know exactly where he was supposed to go.

“Well, yes, that’s obvious,” Leah laughed, making a theatrical gesture with her hand. “But also...” she rummaged through the backpack resting at her feet and pulled out a small leather pouch tied with a cord. With skillful movements, she untied the knot and revealed its contents: clusters of red berries so bright they looked like freshly polished gems.

“You seriously found time to pick berries in the middle of the fight?” I asked, unable to hide my incredulity.

“Of course not!” Leah protested, pretending to be offended though the smile never left her lips. “I picked them right after, when we stopped to check our packs were intact. Remember what Naelle told us? Always be on the lookout for extra provisions along the road. They’re sweet, nutritious, and barely take up any space.”

I took one of the berries between my fingers and popped it into my mouth. The outer skin gave way under slight pressure, releasing juice that burst across my palate with a first sharp tang that quickly turned into a lingering, pleasant sweetness. Leah watched me with an expression of overblown pride, as though she had slain a dragon instead of foraging for wild fruit.

“They’re not bad,” I admitted, taking another couple of berries. “Though I must say I still prefer those honey biscuits Naelle packed so carefully for us.”

“Those are for emergencies!” Leah retorted in an exaggerated solemn tone as she carefully put away her prized treasure, tying the cord with special care as if it contained the crown jewels.

Chloé, who had been listening to our conversation through our bond, let out a raspy chuckle that echoed in my mind. “By Leah’s standards, ‘emergency’ means ‘I get hungry every two hours.’”

The mental comment was so precise and unexpected that we both burst into laughter, which the wind carried across the valley, mingling with the sounds of the waking countryside.

We continued our way, leaving behind the site of the battle and venturing into a landscape ever more open and luminous. The path began to ascend gently, winding among hills that rose like green waves frozen in time. As we gained altitude, the air grew fresher and cleaner, filled with the scent of countless wildflowers that painted the slopes with patches of yellow, violet, and white.

By midday, we reached the top of a particularly tall hill that offered a panoramic view that quite literally took my breath away. From our vantage point, we could see the green hills stretching out in all directions like a living velvet sea, broken here and there by patches of dark forest and the silvery flashes of lakes and streams that mirrored the sky like natural mirrors. Flocks of migratory birds crossed the sky in shifting patterns, their wings catching the sunlight in fleeting sparkles.

We decided to stop there for our midday rest. While Leah busied herself unhitching Corcel and making sure he had water and some forage, I spread a blanket over the soft grass at a spot that offered the best view. Chloé disappeared briefly into the vegetation, returning shortly after with her fur slightly damp from the dew that still clung in shaded spots.

We laid out our provisions: coarse rye bread, a wedge of cheese that had grown sharper with the days of travel, pieces of dried meat for Leah and me, and a bowl of fresh water for Chloé, which she drank with elegant leisure.

The conversation flowed naturally, touching on light and trivial topics that felt incredibly meaningful in that moment of peace.

"If you could have a house anywhere on the continent," Leah asked as she bit into a piece of bread with cheese, "where would you put it?"

I thought for a moment, letting my gaze wander across the panorama stretching out before us. "Maybe somewhere like this. A high hill where I could see everything around me. A quiet place where the world seemed to stop for a moment."

Leah nodded, chewing thoughtfully before answering. "I'd choose a bustling city," she said, and her eyes lit up with enthusiasm. "With markets full of colors and aromas, music on every corner, and different food to try every day of the week."

Chloé, who was resting beside us with her head on her forepaws, spoke calmly through our mental bond. "I'd choose a deep, ancient forest. Trees so tall they'd touch the sky, rivers so clear you could see your reflection perfectly, and enough space to run for days without finding the end."

We looked at one another, and the laughter that followed was warm and genuine. We were so different in essence and desires, and yet there we were, sharing the same road under the same endless sky.

The afternoon advanced with golden slowness. We resumed our journey with Leah taking the reins first while I leaned against the edge of the carriage, watching the clouds form and reform into impossible, ever-changing shapes. Chloé ran alongside us, and at times disappeared into the tall grass that grew beside the road, only to reappear meters ahead as if playing at guiding us through territory she seemed to know instinctively.

At one point, Leah began to sing softly a melody I recognized as a popular song from Whirikai. Her voice was clear though somewhat timid at first, but it gained confidence as the song went on. The lyrics spoke of a traveler searching for his home among the stars, a metaphor that resonated deeply with me. It

wasn't technically a perfect performance, but it was filled with warmth that went straight to my heart, and soon I found myself humming the chorus along with her.

Chloé, amused by our impromptu duet, commented mentally: "You lack harmonic coordination, but at least your effort is scaring off the birds that were considering stealing our provisions."

Leah threw a mock-offended glance at the silver wolf, and I couldn't hold back another laugh that seemed to come from a place within me that had been silent for too long.

As the sun began its descent, transforming the sky into a palette of intense golds, pinks, and oranges, we found a clearing by the roadside that seemed made for camping. A cluster of trees provided shelter from the wind, and a small stream nearby ensured fresh water. While Leah tended to Corcel, I lit a small campfire whose crackling flames seemed to join the chorus of the sunset.

We sat around the fire, sharing what was left of our provisions while watching the sky gradually transform into a velvet mantle studded with countless stars that looked close enough to touch.

That night, there were no plans to make, no strategies to discuss, no worries to dissect. Just three travelers sharing stories and comfortable silences under an open sky that seemed to hold all the possibilities of the world, savoring the simple yet profound feeling that, at last, we could fully enjoy the road we had chosen.

It was a simple moment, without grandeur or pretense, but perfect in its simplicity. And in the stillness of that starry night, I understood that these moments—the ones that would never appear in bards' songs or historians' chronicles—were the ones that truly gave meaning to the whole journey.