

Frozen Star 86

Chapter 86: Before the Step

[POV Liselotte]

The call of our names still echoed in my ears as a guild attendant led us into the side passage that opened directly to the arena's main gate.

The blazing sunlight streamed through the wrought-iron grates, casting long golden stripes across the worn stone floor.

Every step we took toward that final exit seemed to drag along the invisible weight of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of eyes and expectations already waiting anxiously on the other side.

I could hear, with terrifying clarity, the constant roar of the crowd seeping through the stone walls like an enraged sea.

It grew louder with every quickened beat of my heart.

My hands sweated uncomfortably inside the leather gauntlets. The sword that had always felt like a natural extension of my arm now seemed strangely heavy and clumsy, as if my own body was trying to convince me I wasn't truly ready for what awaited.

Leah walked silently at my side.

Her shoulders were visibly tense, her lips pressed into a thin, pale line.

I noticed with concern how her fingers trembled slightly as she adjusted the strap of her component pouch for the third time—a nervous tic that betrayed her inner turmoil.

“Lotte...” she suddenly whispered, her voice barely audible over the distant thunder of the crowd.

“I can’t tell if I’m more excited or more terrified. Both feelings mix inside me like two raging rivers.”

I glanced sideways at her, catching the nervous spark flickering in the depths of her blue eyes.

I wanted to answer with something comforting, some wise word to calm her fears.

But the only thing that left my lips was the raw, naked truth.

“I feel the same. I’m afraid, Leah. Terribly afraid.”

She let out a short, trembling laugh, nothing more than a physical release of the tension inside her.

“Well, at least I can take comfort knowing I’m not completely alone in this feeling.”

Chloé, walking a step ahead with her usual steady gait, suddenly stopped and turned her head toward us.

Her golden eyes gleamed like burning embers in the dim passageway.

Her mental voice struck into our minds with the firm weight of well-forged steel.

“Do not be ashamed of that fear. Fear itself is useful—it is an ancestral tool. It sharpens the senses, keeps the hunter alert, prepares the body for action.

What we cannot allow, under any circumstance, is for that fear to control us or dictate our movements.”

Her words pierced into my chest like an anchor of stability in the sea of doubts.

Leah drew in a deep breath and straightened her back with visible effort, as if Chloé’s voice alone had restored a vital part of her lost composure.

I paused in the passage for a moment, closing my eyes tightly.

I felt my racing pulse pounding in my temples, cold sweat running down my neck beneath the helmet, and the thick, dusty air of the tunnel filling my lungs with each conscious breath.

“We’re going out there together,” I whispered, more to myself than to them, like a personal mantra.

“And no matter what happens out there in that arena, we’ll stay united until the very end.

Just like yesterday in training. Just like we’ve always done since this journey began.”

Leah clasped my hand with surprising strength, ignoring the cold metal of the gauntlet between our skins.

“As long as you’re still standing and fighting, I will be too. I don’t care what we face, I don’t care how powerful our opponents are.”

Chloé moved forward again, her silver fur glimmering faintly in the dim light.

Her voice returned to us with a tone I had rarely heard from her before—a warm, almost protective note.

“Then let us decide this here and now, before we cross that threshold.

We do not enter as three separate fighters sharing one goal.

We enter as a pack, as a single organism. If one of us falls, the other two will immediately be there to lift her back up.

That is our true strength. Our undeniable advantage.”

The roar of the crowd suddenly swelled, an ear-splitting ovation announcing the imminence of our match.

The massive iron gate began to rise with a prolonged metallic screech that chilled my blood.

Blinding sunlight flooded the tunnel, dazzling and merciless in its intensity, washing over us completely.

We looked at each other one last time before crossing that final threshold.

Leah smiled at me—brave, though her lips still trembled faintly.

I nodded, gathering the cold determination I had barely managed to forge deep within myself.

Chloé inclined her lupine head in mutual recognition, her sharp fangs bared in a silent but unbreakable promise.

And then, in unison, we took the first step into the dazzling arena.

We carried with us not only our earthly weapons and arcane powers, but also the sacred pact we had just sealed in the protective shadows of that passageway.

The fear was still there, anchored deep in my gut.

But it no longer mattered—it no longer dictated our actions.

Because we were three.

We were a pack.

And together, we would face whatever destiny chose to place in our path.