

## Frozen Star 88

### Chapter 88: Between Fire and Breath

[POV Liselotte]

The deafening roar of the crowd still thundered in my ears even several minutes after we had left the arena.

The cool, shadowy hallway that led us back into the guild building felt like an improbable refuge after the blinding sun and the overwhelming intensity of the battle we had just endured.

Yet my body still visibly trembled with the last echoes of adrenaline. Every muscle shook with its own memory of strain, and my heart stubbornly refused to return to a calm, steady rhythm.

A guild attendant in immaculate uniform silently handed us a heavy jug of cold water and several coarse linen towels to wipe away the sticky sweat and golden dust that clung to us after the fight.

We drank with almost animal-like eagerness, the refreshing liquid sliding down like a burning balm through our parched and sore throats.

Chloé briefly licked the side of her foreleg in a meticulous gesture before shaking out her dust-stained fur with the innate dignity of one who would never admit exhaustion or vulnerability before strangers.

We felt no desire to return immediately to the assigned inn.

The city's constant bustle still pulsed with the electric energy of the tournament, and a small restaurant hidden in a quiet side street seemed the perfect choice to recover far from curious eyes.

Its dark wooden walls creaked softly with every step, and the comforting aroma of hot stew filled the air completely, wrapping the whole place in a homelike warmth that invited rest.

We sat at a secluded table near a small window.

The owner, an older man with a kind face and calloused hands, saw our dust-stained weapons and battlefield-worn appearance and asked no unnecessary questions.

He simply placed before us a steaming plate of stewed meat with vegetables, freshly baked bread that gave off a heavenly aroma, and three generous glasses of light, sweet mead.

Leah was the first to break the heavy silence that had settled among us.

Her voice was still a little shaky from lingering tension, but it carried a deep conviction.

"We won... we did it. But it wasn't perfect. Not even close to perfect."

I glanced at her sideways, studying her expression.

Her slender fingers tapped unconsciously against the wooden table, betraying a reflective impatience.

“What do you think went wrong, specifically?” I asked, though I already guessed much of her answer from how the fight had unfolded.

She drew in a deep breath, as if gathering courage to say something difficult.

“My control of fire. Yes, it was precise most of the time, it did its job. But there was a critical moment—my third projectile—where I risked you too much, Lotte. If you had misstepped or retreated a second later... that fire could have hit you directly.

I need to develop more control, absolute mastery. It’s not enough to hit the target. I have to do it without putting you—or any of us—in unnecessary danger.”

I nodded slowly, recalling the sensation of searing heat brushing my left cheek, the faint smell of singed hair lingering afterward.

It had been too fine a line—an almost invisible thread between a daring strategy and utter disaster.

“What matters now isn’t that it happened,” I said, “but that you recognize it and analyze it. For the next round, we have to sharpen our synchronization until it’s instinctive—until our movements become natural extensions of one another.”

Chloé lifted her head from the bowl of hot broth she had been served on the floor.

Her mental voice rang in my mind with unmistakable clarity, leaving no room for doubt.

“And I must admit something too, painful as it is to my pride. I charged too directly, too frontally, against that spearman.

It worked, yes, I achieved my goal. But in my rush, I left my entire right side exposed. If that man had had a more cunning ally or a secondary weapon, a single well-placed strike could have taken me out of the fight instantly.

We cannot afford such defensive gaps—not against opponents who will not hesitate to exploit them.”

The mental image her words conjured struck me with a sudden chill.

A single well-aimed spear, a thrown dagger, anything—and our formation would have been fatally broken in seconds.

“Then,” I said with a deep sigh that seemed to rise all the way from my boots, resting my tired elbows on the table, “we have at least three critical points to improve.

I must learn to withstand heavier blows without losing balance in my guards. Leah must refine her aim and control even further under maximum pressure. And Chloé must calculate more precisely when a frontal attack is strategic and when flanking and surprise should take priority.”

Leah nodded firmly, chewing a piece of bread while her eyes shone with the obsessive, analytical spark she always showed when immersed in tactical reflection.

“We can compensate for our individual flaws with smoother, more constant communication. We need clearer signals—faster ones.

Lotte, I need you to give me at least half a second’s notice when you’re about to open a gap in your defense for my attacks.

And Chloé... if you’re about to make a decisive move, I need to feel your intent before it happens—even if it’s just a flicker in your gaze or a shift in your stance.”

Chloé let out a low, vibrating growl that made the table’s legs tremble slightly.

But it wasn’t a sound of displeasure or refusal—it was clearly tacit approval.

“I can do that. I can learn to signal my offensive intentions. My natural advantage has always been stealth and surprise, but within a team dynamic, total secrecy becomes a risk.

You will have my warning—my clear signal—before every decisive move I make.”

I studied them both in silence for a long, meaningful moment.

The comforting heat of the stew filled my lungs with its aromatic steam, and a warm, solid certainty spread through my chest.

Yes, we had made mistakes—several, and significant ones.

Yes, we were still far from the methodical, almost mechanical perfection of teams like the Iron Brothers, or the chillingly seamless coordination of the hooded mages.

But we also had something they likely didn’t—or had sacrificed in their pursuit of efficiency.

A flexible, adaptable will.

A genuine capacity to learn from every blow taken, from every second of combat lived.

The ability to turn each mistake into a lesson for the next battle.

I raised my glass of mead with a hand still stained with drying sweat and dust.

“To our first step in this tournament. It wasn’t perfect—it was far from it. But it was enough to carry us forward.

And to all the steps that will follow—steps that will be better, sharper, stronger.”

Leah smiled wearily but sincerely, lifting her glass with a clumsy motion born of fatigue.

“To us. To the pack we’re forging.”

Chloé needed no physical glass to take part in the toast.

She only inclined her lupine head in solemn acknowledgment, her golden eyes glowing with a ritual-like intensity that transcended words.

We clinked our glasses together with a soft, discreet chime—a sound insignificant compared to the thunderous roar still echoing from the main arena just a few streets away.

And yet, for the three of us, in the intimacy of that small restaurant, that little sound sealed a pact stronger and more enduring than any fleeting victory or temporary trophy.

It was the unbreakable commitment to keep moving forward together—correcting our flaws, growing with every experience, improving with every challenge overcome.

Because we knew it with clarity that admitted no doubt: the first round had been only a threshold, an introduction to what was coming.

The true trial, the truly formidable opponents, the battles that would decide whether we reached our goal or fell in the attempt—

All of that was only just beginning.