

Frozen Star 92

Chapter 92: Beneath Ashes and Light

[POV Liselotte]

The thunder had ceased, but its echo remained, embedded in my bones — a dull vibration that persisted long after the last fragment of celestial fire had vanished.

The arena, once a golden and solid expanse, was now a nightmare lunar landscape.

Smoking craters dotted the surface, surrounded by deep furrows carved by the fury of flame and shards of molten stone that glowed faintly with an orange gleam — like dying embers refusing to fade.

The air, heavy and thick, smelled of hot iron, of shattered magic's ozone, and of sand vitrified by the intense heat.

And above all, it smelled of silence.

The deafening roar of the crowd, once a wall of sound, had vanished entirely.

Only a motionless multitude remained — frozen, thousands of pale faces and wide eyes, as if the entire coliseum, from the lowest tier to the grand balcony, were holding its collective breath, waiting to see if the world would reassemble itself.

I rose slowly, a sharp, stabbing pain slicing through my ribs with every shallow breath.

My sword lay halfway between me and the center, half-buried in the blackened sand, warped and charred by the heat, its edge now useless.

Chloé was a few meters away, completely covered in a thick layer of gray dust, her beautiful silver fur turned dark and dull with ash.

Her breathing was ragged but steady, and the amber glow of her eyes searched for me through the haze of smoke.

Leah... Leah was on her knees, head bowed, her characteristic blonde hair undone, hanging in loose, tangled strands over trembling shoulders.

Her whole body shook faintly, almost imperceptibly, from the colossal magical strain she had endured.

The crimson glow of her residual mana still flickered weakly at her fingertips, like the last faint sparks of a dying fire.

“Leah...” I murmured, dragging myself toward her through the hot sand. “Can you hear me?”

She lifted her head slowly, every movement betraying utter exhaustion.

Her eyes, usually so alive, were dimmed and veiled with fatigue, but for an instant they lit up — a brief flash — upon recognizing my silhouette.

“I think so...” she said, her voice so hoarse it was almost a rough whisper. “Though I feel exactly like a full-grown dragon ran me over, turned around, and decided to do it again just for fun.”

Chloé let out a short, guttural growl in the link of our minds, her tone a mix of deep weariness and grim satisfaction.

“If a dragon were responsible for this spectacle, I’m certain it would be just as dead and scorched as that shield.”

Following her gaze, I looked around.

The members of Crimson Tempest lay scattered, fallen or completely unconscious, their bodies and crimson leather armor coated in a fine, even layer of gray ash — like memorial statues of their own defeat.

The warrior’s massive shield had been cleanly split in two, the archer’s bow reduced to a heap of smoldering splinters, and the leader’s twin blades lay embedded in the ground, inert and stripped of their former electric gleam.

The woman herself, still conscious, was breathing heavily, her once-fierce face now streaked with soot and trails of dried blood.

She didn't seem to have the strength to even curse her fate.

She just lay there, staring up at the clear sky with an empty expression that mixed sheer disbelief with total resignation.

A familiar magical hum cut through the charged air, and the announcer's amplification spell filled the coliseum again, breaking the spell of silence.

His voice, usually brimming with triumphant energy, now sounded shaky and almost incredulous.

"T-this... this is... simply astounding! The arena has been completely destroyed! Never before in the long history of the Kreston Tournament has anything remotely like this been witnessed! The winners are... Liselotte, Leah, and the silver wolf, Chloé! Team Silver Pack officially advances to the next round!"

The audience, which had remained in petrified, overwhelming silence, suddenly erupted into a cacophony of deafening screams — a thunderous ovation that seemed to make the very foundations of the ancient coliseum tremble.

Some shouted our names with unrestrained fervor, others simply screamed, unleashing the adrenaline and awe from the magnitude of the spectacle they had just witnessed.

But among the cheers and roars, there was also an undercurrent — a ripple of fear spreading like wildfire.

We had won, that was undeniable, but the visible, tangible cost of that victory bordered on total devastation — and no one could ignore that.

“The following matches will resume in no less than thirty minutes!” continued the announcer, forcing a spark of enthusiasm back into his trembling voice. “The organizing guild has requested this time to conduct urgent repairs to the structural damage in the arena!”

Structural repairs.

The phrase struck me as so absurd and surreal that I almost laughed bitterly.

There was no arena to repair — only a field of smoldering ruins and deeply scarred earth.

Leah tried to stand, bracing her hands on her knees, but her legs, treacherous, immediately gave out beneath her.

I hurried to catch her, wrapping my arm around her waist and feeling the fragile weight of her exhausted body through her robe.

“Let’s rest,” I said firmly, my gaze shifting toward the tunnel exit. “Now. Before you get another idea and decide to blow up half the coliseum too.”

She managed a weak, playful smile — a flicker of her old spirit.

“No promises. You never know when a dramatic touch might come in handy.”

The stone tunnel leading away from the battlefield felt darker and colder than ever, and the abrupt contrast with the blinding light and scorching heat outside made me blink several times, disoriented.

The still, cool air of the underground corridor tasted like new life, like distance — and a deep relief from the chaos we had just left behind.

Each step we took left a marked trail of ash and black dust behind us — a trace of our battle.

When we finally emerged into the guild’s inner corridor, brightly lit by magical torches, several assistants and attendants immediately surrounded us, their faces astonished, their gazes unsure where to rest.

Some offered damp, cool towels with trembling hands, others simply stood there in awkward silence, unsure whether to congratulate us warmly or fear us and keep their distance.

A young healer apprentice, her apron spotless and her eyes wide as saucers, approached with hesitant steps and a look that was an indistinguishable mix of pure admiration and visceral fright.

“Are... are you all right? Do you need a healer? Your magic... it was... incredible!”

Leah, leaning almost entirely on me, barely managed to nod, too drained to form complex words.

“Incredibly exhausting, yes. That’s for sure.”

They guided us to a small, austere side room reserved for combatants, where we could rest away from the crowd’s eyes.

The stone floor was covered with simple rugs and worn cushions.

In a corner, on a low table, a jug of cold water beaded bright droplets across its glazed ceramic surface.

We sat there — the three of us — without speaking a single word for several long, heavy minutes, listening only to the sound of our own breathing as it slowly steadied, and to the distant murmur of the coliseum.

It was Chloé who broke the silence first, her voice echoing in the privacy of our minds with a measured, grave tone, stripped of her usual sarcasm.

“What you did was madness. A calculated madness, no doubt — but madness all the same. If those flames from the sky had fallen a few meters closer, you would’ve reduced us to ashes along with them. There would’ve been no difference between us and our enemies.”

Leah, her head still resting in her hands, let out a soft, tired, slightly broken laugh.

“I know. I thought that, with terrifying clarity, as they fell. Every millisecond. But it worked, didn’t it? We’re here, and they’re not.”

“It worked,” I replied — though my tone wasn’t victorious or euphoric, but deeply reflective, heavy with the weight of the experience. “But only barely. By a hair.”

I looked down at my own hands, stretched before me — blackened with soot, scratched, and still faintly trembling.

The adrenaline that had carried us was gone, and what remained was the cold, leaden weight of exhaustion and shock.

“I’ve never seen a technique like that, Leah. Not even in the ancient grimoires I studied in the library. It’s unlike anything.”

“Because it doesn’t exist in any grimoire,” she murmured, finally lifting her gaze, revealing a crooked, slightly embarrassed smile.

“It was pure improvisation. I took the framework of a simple elemental delay spell — apprentice-level — and forced it. I inverted it. In pure theory, the energy should’ve dispersed into the air, dissolved into the wind... but the sky... the sky decided otherwise. It decided to help me in a different way.”

I stared at her for a long moment, sensing in her words and exhaustion something more — something hidden between the folds of her explanation.

It wasn’t just magic — not entirely.

There was something else in what she had invoked, something that brushed against the ancestral, the forbidden — a tacit, dangerous pact between her inner fire and something vast and indifferent in the heavens that had answered with unrestrained, glorious violence.

Chloé growled again, a low rumble of discontent reverberating through my skull.

“That kind of primordial energy shouldn’t be summoned lightly. Fire that comes from the sky never listens to human commands, no matter how much it’s pleaded with. It only consumes. And today, luckily, it consumed our enemies.”

Leah nodded slowly, and for the first time since the battle had ended, her playful smile faded entirely, revealing a serious, worried expression.

“I know. I felt it in my blood. For a moment — a brief but infinite instant — it was as if something, an ancient and vast consciousness, looked at me from above, through the veil of my spell. Something I couldn’t comprehend in the slightest — and don’t even want to try to understand.”

Silence filled the small room again, but now it was a different silence — heavy, loaded with the weight of an uncomfortable truth.

The faint breeze from the hallway stirred the coarse fabric curtains at the entrance, bringing with it the distant, muffled echo of the coliseum, where the guild's magical workers were no doubt racing against time, using powerful reconstruction enchantments to make the arena usable again.

"We won," I said at last, breaking the tension with a deep sigh that hurt my chest. "And, more importantly, we survived. That's all that matters today. The only thing we should remember."

"For now," Chloé corrected immediately, her tone heavier than ever — like a stone slab.

"Every victory, especially one as resounding and destructive as this, draws the attention not only of admirers, but of those watching from the shadows, waiting for their moment. And after the display of power we just gave... the Faceless must have already noticed us. Not as mere participants, but as a target of interest."

Leah lifted her gaze to look at the wolf, then at me.

Her eyes, though still dimmed, now gleamed with unshakable resolve.

"Then let them look. Let them watch all they want. If they truly want to find us — after this, they'll know exactly where to look."

The silver wolf let out a low, prolonged growl — a sound that was half solemn warning, half resigned approval.

And I, between the two of them — feeling Leah's warmth on one side and Chloé's fierce loyalty in my mind — felt a shiver that came not from residual exhaustion or lingering fear, but from a cold, immovable certainty settling deep within me.

Chloé was right.

Leah's fire hadn't just marked a victory in a tournament — it had drawn a blazing beacon, a pillar of smoke rising above Kreston, announcing our position, our power, and our presence to anyone who knew where to look.

We stayed there, in that quiet room, for a long while, drinking cool water from the jug and letting the fatigue slowly dissolve in our muscles, savoring the bitter sweetness of survival.

Outside, the coliseum still echoed with distant voices, shouted orders, and the rhythmic hammering of reconstruction magic repairing the scars of our battle.

Life, stubborn as ever, continued on — the tournament would resume soon.

But something — something deep and fundamental — had changed forever in the air of Kreston.

Even here, in the heart of the guild, the air still smelled of ash.

And I knew, with a conviction that chilled my blood, that somewhere in a dark corner of the city — behind white, impassive masks — the Faceless were smiling.