

Frozen Star 93

Chapter 93: Invisible Strings

[POV Liselotte]

The bustle of the coliseum was a persistent murmur in the distance. A faint echo of the chaos we ourselves had created. In the guild's resting chamber, the calm was so thick it could almost be touched. It weighed on our shoulders like a damp blanket. The air smelled of cold stone and dried sweat. Also of the fresh water from the jug we had emptied between the two of us.

Leah had rested her head against the cold stone wall. Her eyes were closed, but I knew she wasn't asleep. Her fingers toyed with a loose strand of her blonde hair. That blonde that looked like pale gold against the dimness of the room. Chloé slept curled in a silver coil near the door. Her breathing was slow and steady. A comforting rhythm within the stillness.

I ran my fingers through my own green hair. The ends were tangled and dusty. A reminder of how close we had come to disaster.

We had survived.

That word echoed in my mind again and again. Survive. It had physical weight. It was felt in every aching muscle. In every breath that cost a little more than usual. In the eloquent silence stretching between us.

The sound of hurried footsteps suddenly broke the stillness. A guild assistant, with a wooden tablet floating magically before him, appeared at the door. His gaze was nervous. It scanned the room and settled on us with a mix of curiosity and fear.

“Ladies of the Silver Pack team,” he said, his voice trying to sound firm but cracking with anxiety. “The tournament council has decided that your next match will take place tomorrow at noon. The main arena will need more time than expected to be fully restored.”

He glanced at us sideways. His fingers drummed on the tablet. Maybe he expected a complaint. Maybe he feared Leah might summon another meteor right there.

“You may stay to watch the remaining battles from the royal balcony, or retire to rest. The guild will cover your lodging and meals for tonight.”

“Thank you,” I replied. My voice came out rougher than I expected. As if there were still grains of sand caught in my throat.

The man nodded quickly. He bowed his head in an almost reverent gesture and disappeared as swiftly as he had come. The sound of his footsteps faded down the stone corridor. Silence returned to the room. But now it was a different kind of silence. Kinder. Less heavy.

Leah opened one eye. The dim light of the room reflected in her iris.

“Tomorrow then,” she murmured. Her voice was a thread of sound.

“Yes,” I nodded. “One more day to breathe.”

“And to eat,” she added. She let her head fall to the side with a sigh that aimed to be theatrical but betrayed her real exhaustion. “Because if I don’t eat something soon, I’m seriously going to start considering biting the next assistant who dares interrupt our rest.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. It was brief. Dry. But it tasted of genuine relief. A moment of normalcy in the middle of chaos.

“Let’s go then,” I said, standing up. My joints protested with a dull ache. “Before the guild ends up with a scandal about magical cannibalism.”

The streets around the coliseum were brimming with life. It was as if the entire city had decided to gather here. Makeshift stalls lined up like mushrooms after rain. They sold steaming food and commemorative trinkets. The smells blended into a chaotic, intoxicating symphony. Spiced meat sizzling on open grills. Freshly baked bread with its scent of home. Caramelized fruits gleaming under the sunset light. Bitter beer spilling over tin mugs.

People were still talking about our fight. We couldn’t take three steps without hearing fragments of conversations following us like shadows.

“...Did you see that fire fall from the sky? For a moment I thought it was the end of the world...”

“...they say it was forbidden magic. The kind they don’t teach anymore...”

“...those girls... the one with wheat-gold hair and the other, the one with emerald hair... they don’t look entirely human, do they?”

Leah walked beside me. She had covered herself with a hooded cloak borrowed from the guild. But her blonde hair escaped from the edges. It shone like ripe wheat under the golden light of dusk. Despite her evident exhaustion, she wore a small smile on her lips. It wasn’t a smile of pride or vanity. It was something simpler. More genuine. The satisfaction of being alive. Of having made it through.

I felt the breeze play with my green strands. As if reminding me how uncommon this color was in Kreston. How many gazes fell upon me when I thought I was invisible.

We stopped before a small stall. The kind that only existed during tournament days. A kind-faced woman with soap-scented hands served hot stews in clay bowls.

“Sweetroot stew with northern herbs,” she announced as she saw us approach. Her eyes wrinkled at the corners. “Revives even the dead, or so the grandmothers of my village say.”

Leah looked at her with a weak but sincere smile.

“Perfect,” she said. “I think that’s exactly what I need. Though I hope I’m not close enough to death to find out.”

We sat at an improvised table on the street’s edge. It was made of old barrels and a worn plank. Two steaming bowls were placed before us. The stew was thick and golden. It gave off a warm scent of roasted garlic and toasted herbs. Steam rose, promising to comfort the soul.

We hadn't eaten anything decent since morning. The first spoonful was almost a religious experience. A miracle of flavor and warmth spreading through my chest. For a while, neither of us spoke. The noise of passersby. The distant laughter of drunkards. The sizzle of oil in a nearby pan. All that filled the companionable silence between spoonfuls.

It was Leah who broke the silence. Her voice was low. Almost a sigh.

"You know what I thought when I saw the flames fall?"

I looked at her, surprised by the introspective tone. By the vulnerability in her words.

"I thought we wouldn't make it," she continued. Her eyes weren't looking at me. But at something distant. Something only she could see. "I thought that would be our end. That I would die watching the whole sky collapse over us. And somehow that didn't scare me as much as it should have."

I didn't know what to say. The words stuck in my throat, along with the bite of stew that suddenly tasted like ash.

She smiled. A faint gesture. Sad and beautiful at once.

"It didn't scare me because you were there," she whispered. "I don't know if it was your calm... or the way you look danger straight in the eye as if you've seen it all before. But I didn't feel fear. Just a kind of absurd peace. A tranquility that made no sense."

I lowered my gaze. Toyed with the wooden spoon between my fingers. Felt its rough texture. Its insignificant weight. My green hair fell forward, forming a curtain between us.

"It wasn't calm," I confessed, my voice so soft the wind nearly carried it away. "It was fear too. But not for me."

She looked at me then. Suddenly. With an intensity that made all the noise of the market dissolve. The voices turned into a distant murmur. The world shrank to this table. To this moment. To her eyes. So alive. So full of something I didn't dare to name.

"For me," she murmured. It wasn't a question. It was a certainty. As if she could read my soul better than I could.

I nodded. A slight movement of my head. "I couldn't let you fall," I said. And it was the simplest and most complex truth I'd spoken in a long time. "Not after everything we've been through together. Not after everything we've been to each other."

There was a long silence between us. A space where no more words were needed. Where everything important had already been said. The wind moved the fabrics of the nearby stalls. The light from the magic lamps danced on the golden surface of the stew. The sun began to sink behind Kreston's towers, painting the sky in deep oranges and violets.

Leah was the first to break the stillness. She set the spoon aside with a soft clink against the wood. Her blonde hair seemed to absorb the last rays of sunlight.

“Do you ever think about who we were before we came here?” she asked, her voice contemplative.
“Before all this. Before the tournament. Before we were a team.”

“Too often,” I replied, surprised by my own honesty. “And every time it feels further away. As if those people belonged to another life. Another reality that no longer fits us.”

“I suppose we all change,” she said. She smiled sideways. A smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “I, for one, used to only know how to destroy things. Now I can destroy them with style. And with a paying audience to watch.”

I laughed. A genuine laugh that rose from my chest. And she laughed with me. Truly. For the first time in days. A clear, bright sound that mingled with the noise of the market. For a moment, everything felt lighter. More bearable.

We finished eating when the sky had become a violet tapestry speckled with the first twinkling stars. The city lights were starting to ignite one by one. Like fireflies in the growing dusk. Chloé, who had remained in a deep sleep through the entire walk and dinner, emerged in our minds with a lazy mental yawn.

“Have you finished socializing, or should I keep pretending I’m asleep?”

Leah rolled her eyes. But she was amused. I could tell from the curve of her lips. From the playful glint in her gaze.

“Keep pretending,” she replied softly. “It brings us peace to know at least one of us is actually resting.”

“Very well,” the wolf replied. Her teasing tone was softened by an underlying warmth. An affection she didn’t always show openly. “But tomorrow, when the gong sounds, I want both of you alive and in one piece. Or I’ll have to find a new pair of reckless humans who don’t know when it’s time to rest.”

“We promise,” I said. And Leah nodded beside me, laughing again. Her laughter was a sound I wanted to keep forever.

The walk back to the inn was quiet. The streets were slowly emptying. Merchants packing their goods. The last drinkers singing off-key songs in the taverns. Magic lanterns flickering with their bluish, ghostly light. A warm breeze blew from the south. It carried the scent of the river. Of fresh water and wet algae. Of the city alive and breathing.

Our room at the inn was simple. Two narrow beds. A window overlooking a narrow alley. A crystal lamp floating in the air at the room’s center. It cast a soft yellowish glow, stretching shadows across the plastered walls.

Leah dropped onto her bed without even taking off her dust-covered boots. Her arms spread wide, as if embracing the feeling of rest. Her blonde hair fanned out on the pillow, forming a pale halo.

“Sleep has never felt so sacred,” she murmured toward the ceiling. Her eyelids already heavy.

I watched her from my own bed. My green hair contrasted against the white sheet. My breathing was slow and deep. Her expression was calm. Relaxed. There was something profoundly different about her that night. She wasn’t the brilliant, reckless mage. She wasn’t the strategist calculating impossible risks.

She was the person behind all that. With her endless fatigue. Her quiet strength. Her heart beating beneath her ribs. A heart that surely beat in the same fast rhythm as mine.

“Leah,” I called softly. Almost a whisper.

“Mmm?” she replied, not opening her eyes.

“Thank you.”

She slowly opened her eyes. Tilted her head on the pillow to look at me. Her blonde hair spilled like liquid gold across the white fabric.

“For what?” she asked, her voice hoarse with exhaustion.

“For not giving up out there,” I said. The words came clumsy, but I needed to say them. “For believing we could make it. Even when everything around us was burning. When there was nothing left to hold on to.”

Her smile was so faint I barely saw it in the dim light. A ghost of an expression.

“That goes both ways, Lotte,” she whispered.

Then, half-asleep, she murmured something else. Something that burned itself into my soul.

“I don’t know what I’d be if you weren’t by my side. I don’t want to know.”

I didn’t reply. I couldn’t. Emotion sealed my throat. I just watched her. Watched her eyelids close completely. The rhythm of her breathing grow deep and steady. Her body sink into the mattress, surrendering to sleep.

In silence, I rose. Crossed the room in a few steps. Reached a hand toward the floating lamp. Touched it with my fingertips. Felt the smooth, warm glass under my skin. With a simple thought, I extinguished it.

Darkness filled the room at once. A soft darkness, cushioned by the faint moonlight filtering through the window.

Outside, Kreston’s murmur remained alive. The city never fully slept. But inside this small, simple room, everything was still. There were synchronized breaths. Two souls finding a moment of peace amid the storm.

And for the first time since the tournament had begun—since the white masks had appeared in our lives—I allowed myself to close my eyes, knowing that despite all the danger, despite the uncertainty of tomorrow... I wasn’t alone in the dark.