

Frozen Star 94

Chapter 94: Dawn

[POV Liselotte]

Dawn arrived with the softness of a golden thread slipping through the coarse fabric curtains. The room of the inn was still steeped in shadow, tinted by the cool, bluish light of early morning filtering timidly through the half-open window. The air smelled of freshly baked bread rising from the kitchen below and of distant rain, a promise of cleansing that had not yet arrived. In the deep quiet of the morning, I could clearly hear the distant murmur of preparations at the coliseum—rhythmic hammering, short shouted orders, the metallic and familiar echo of swords and armor being checked and adjusted. It was the sound of the war to come, a reminder that rest was over.

I sat up slowly, feeling every muscle protest. My body was a map of dull aches, reminding me that the night's rest had been only a brief parenthesis—enough to keep us standing, but not to erase the marks of the previous battle. Leah was still in her bed but not asleep. She lay on her side, watching with half-closed eyes as the first golden light of the sun began to slowly paint the opposite wall. Her blonde hair, tousled from sleep, gleamed like pale fire against the white pillow.

"Good morning," I said, my voice still thick with sleep.

"Good would be if absolutely everything didn't hurt—and some things I'm sure don't even belong to me," she replied, her tone half genuine complaint, half stifled laughter. "But I suppose that means we're still alive. So I'll take it."

I smiled, feeling the gesture tug at my sore facial muscles. "Definitely alive. And apparently with all our parts."

Chloé was still sleeping deeply, curled tightly by the door as if standing guard even in her dreams. Her broad chest rose and fell in a slow, steady rhythm. Every so often, one of her pointed ears twitched slightly, catching some distant sound from her dreams. The sight stirred in me an unexpected wave of tenderness. It was strange and moving to think that this silver wolf—so fierce and lethal in battle—could look so innocent and vulnerable at rest, with a front paw covering her muzzle and a faint, almost imperceptible rumble of air escaping between her closed jaws.

We dressed in silence, with the efficiency of those who have repeated the ritual many times. I carefully inspected my sword, wiping the last traces of dust and soot from the leather-wrapped hilt with a soft cloth. Leah put on her traveling cloak, meticulously adjusted the leather gloves that protected her hands when channeling raw magic, and checked one by one the runes engraved on her magic bracelet, her fingers tracing the grooves with absolute focus. We didn't speak much during the process, but the lack of words wasn't uncomfortable. There was a tacit rhythm in our movements, a practical harmony forged and perfected through shared time and experience.

We went down to the inn's main hall. The place was almost empty at that early hour—only a pair of sleepy merchants murmuring about routes and prices, and a boy wiping tables with a rag, yawning every now and then. The intoxicating aroma of freshly baked bread and melted butter filled the warm air of the room.

We ordered something simple and comforting: dark rye bread, a bowl of seasonal fruits, and a large pitcher of hot herbal tea. We sat by the window, from where we could see the sky lightening above the towers and spires of Kreston. The silence that spread between us was comfortable, deep—as if both our hearts, after so many battles fought side by side, had finally learned to beat at the same calm rhythm.

Leah broke a piece of bread with her fingers and dipped it thoughtfully into her cup of tea. "You know something funny," she said after a moment, her voice low but clear.

"What's that?" I asked, watching how the morning light illuminated her profile.

“Before I met you, before forming this team, I used to think battle days were the emptiest ones. The hollowest.”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Empty?”

“That’s right. Full of fear, without any real purpose beyond immediate survival. It was just waiting to kill or be killed, with nothing to give meaning to either outcome. But with you... I don’t know, everything seems to have a different shape. A texture. As if even the deepest fear had a meaning, a place where it belongs.”

I looked at her, and for a long second, I didn’t know what to say. There was a deep and touching truth in her words, but also something more—something harder to define. A quiet, resilient warmth that had slipped between us without asking permission, weaving our fates together in a way that could no longer be undone.

“Maybe,” I said at last, choosing my words carefully, “it’s because you’re not fighting alone anymore. Because the purpose is no longer just to survive, but to protect the one beside you. That gives shape to everything. Even to fear.”

She smiled—a serene, pure smile that faintly reflected in the window glass. “Yes. Maybe that’s exactly it.”

Silence settled over us again, but it wasn’t empty or awkward. It was the eloquent silence of two souls who had learned to understand each other on a level too deep to constantly need words.

I ran my fingers along the rough edge of my ceramic cup, feeling the warmth of the tea. “Today will be different,” I murmured, more to myself than to her. “Not just because of whatever enemy we face. I feel... something in the air. A different tension. As if the pieces on the board were finally starting to move in ways we can neither control nor predict.”

Leah nodded slowly, her gaze lost in the urban horizon outlined against the ever-brightening sky. “I’ve felt it too. That same sensation. As if every step we take, every breath, is bringing us inevitably closer to something big. Something final that we can’t avoid or escape.” Then, after a loaded pause, she added with a faint smile that couldn’t hide the seriousness of her words, “But if I have to walk toward the unknown—toward that big and probably terrifying something—I’d rather do it with you. At least I know that if the sky decides to fall on our heads again, you’ll know how to lift me up.”

I couldn’t help returning her smile, though I felt my chest tighten with an emotion far stronger and more complex than simple camaraderie between warriors. “And if the ice covers us again—if darkness tries to freeze our hearts,” I replied, holding her gaze, “you’ll always know how to spark a flame strong enough to melt it all.”

Our eyes met and held. For a few seconds that felt eternal, the outside world vanished completely. The inn, the city, the tournament—all disappeared. It was a silence charged, electric, deep—filled with all the things we didn’t dare say aloud but that were there, tangible, pulsing fiercely in the narrow space between our hands on the table. The low hum of the hall, the clinking of dishes, even the constant murmur of the morning wind outside—all of it became distant and unimportant.

Until a familiar voice, laced with unmistakable irony, interrupted the bubble of calm.

“Are you two going to keep staring at each other all day, or am I going to starve to death here without tasting a bite?”

Chloé had woken up. She stood at the dining room's threshold, her back arched in a perfect stretch and her ears perked and alert. Her golden eyes shone with a mix of annoyance and pure amusement.

Leah burst into spontaneous, liberating laughter that shattered the moment's tension like glass. "Good morning to you too, grumpy one. Always so dramatic."

"Good morning," I replied, holding back a laugh of my own. "You arrived just in time. We were thinking of leaving you a piece of hard bread as a trophy for your patience."

The wolf snorted with such exaggerated indignation that it was clearly fake, and padded closer on silent steps, sitting on her haunches beside our table. "A piece of bread isn't breakfast—it's a direct insult to my dignity. If I'm supposed to go out there again and risk my precious fur, I need fuel worthy of the effort. Something substantial."

Still smiling, Leah handed her a generous chunk of her own bread, slathered with an extra layer of butter. "Here you go, oh insatiable beast. Eat and hush. And please don't choke—we still need all your heroism and precise bites today."

Chloé looked at her with that particular glint—half mockery, half deep affection—that only she could pull off. "As long as you don't decide again that the celestial architecture needs urgent renovation and drop the whole sky on the problem, everything will go reasonably well. Or so I hope."

Leah pretended to ponder the idea with exaggerated seriousness. "Hmm... I don't know. I can't promise anything. You never know when a shower of stars might substantially improve the situation."

All three of us laughed in unison. It was a brief moment—fleeting as the flutter of a bird’s wings—but of crystalline purity. A suspended instant in time, where easy laughter mingled with the comforting scent of hot tea and the golden sunlight that finally poured freely through the window, bathing everything in warmth.

When we stepped out of the inn, the city was already buzzing with the frantic energy characteristic of tournament day. Street vendors shouted their wares, children darted between adults’ legs waving colored flags, and the deep, resonant sound of the coliseum gongs began to fill the air—calling fighters and spectators alike. The sky was a clear, pure blue without a single cloud, and the morning wind carried the distant, ever-growing roar of the gathering crowd.

As we slowly made our way through the throng toward the coliseum, Leah walked beside me and, in a seemingly casual gesture, brushed the back of her hand against mine. It was a light, fleeting, almost accidental touch—but it was enough to make me hold my breath for a whole instant. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t look at me. Neither did I. There was no need. The message had been sent and received—a small point of contact, an anchor amid the crowd.

Chloé, a few steps ahead clearing the way with natural authority, turned her head over her shoulder, her ears angling back to catch our sounds. “Are you two coming on your own, or do I have to drag you both across the ground to get there on time?”

“We’re coming,” Leah and I answered in unison—and upon hearing our synchronized voices, we glanced at each other, and a knowing, warm smile bloomed on both our faces.

The great entrance gate of the coliseum loomed before us, imposing and gleaming under the morning sun. The magical repairs done overnight had been miraculous—the arena that yesterday looked like a lunar landscape of craters and debris now appeared clean, compact, and uniform, shining innocently under the light. But we all knew—we felt it in our bones—that beneath that polished, renewed surface, the scars of our battle were still there: invisible yet indelible, waiting for their moment to remind us of their presence.

Leah took a deep breath, lifting her chin with determination.

“One more day,” she said—and it was only three words, but they contained an entire universe of meaning.

“One more day,” I echoed, my voice steady, a reflection of her own resolve.

Chloé stepped forward, standing right before the shadowed threshold leading inside. Her fluffy tail swayed with a gentle ripple, like a war banner unfurling in the wind.

“Then,” she said, and her mental voice rang clear and powerful in our minds, “let’s make this particular day worth the effort. Every second of it.”

We crossed the gate together, our shadows merging into one as we passed from the outer sunlight into the tunnel’s dimness.

The roar of the crowd, held back until that moment, enveloped us at once like a living wave—a tangible wall of sound made of thousands of voices. And then, the blinding light of the arena sun fell upon us—hot and familiar.

At that precise instant, suspended between the thunderous roar, the caress of wind on my face, and the metallic scent of sand and sweat, I knew with absolute certainty that whatever happened in there, we were not walking into battle as three separate fighters.

We were one force. One will. One pack.

And the dawn over Kreston—with its golden light and its promises yet to be fulfilled—became for us something far greater than the beginning of another day of competition. It was the dawn of our destiny, forged in fire and steel.

And we were ready to face it—together.