

Frozen Star 98

Chapter 98: Veins of Shadows

[POV Liselotte]

The sky over Kreston dawned covered in a metallic gray. There was no wind. No birds. None of the cheerful bustle of the previous days. Only that thick, expectant silence that precedes disaster. From our room in the inn, I could hear the muffled roar of the crowd filling the coliseum. It was a sea of voices blending into an uneasy, continuous murmur.

It was the day of the semifinals.

The air was charged with magical energy. It was tangible—like electricity on the skin. As I adjusted the strap of my sword, I could feel the hum of my own mana. It responded to that invisible tension that filled the city. Leah was putting on her channelling gloves with mechanical movements. She remained silent. Chloé, by the door, watched with narrowed eyes. Her breathing was deep and controlled. She looked like a predator gauging the wind before the hunt.

“Today won’t be a normal fight,” the wolf said mentally. Her voice shattered the silence of the room. “They don’t play by the same rules as the rest.”

Leah raised her gaze toward me. She nodded slowly. “I don’t need to smell it to know. Those from the White Veil... they don’t seem human.”

I closed my fingers around the hilt of my sword. I took a deep breath, feeling the familiar cold in my chest. “We’ll find out soon.”

The coliseum was an ocean of noise as we crossed the tunnel into the light. Thousands of spectators roared as they saw us appear. The sun filtered through the gray clouds, bathing the arena in a pale, ominous glow. Across from us, on the other side, they were already there. The Bearers of the White Veil.

They stood still. Motionless. Perfectly aligned.

Their robes were of a white so pure that they reflected the light in nearly blinding flashes. The faceless masks seemed to stare directly into our souls. They made no gesture. Showed no visible breath. Not a single tremor. Only that unnatural stillness that froze my blood to the bone.

The master of ceremonies tried to sound enthusiastic. But his voice carried a tremor that even the amplification spell couldn't hide.

"Semifinal number one! Silver Pack versus the Bearers of the White Veil!"

The gong echoed through the air.

And everything changed in an instant.

The White Veil didn't charge. Didn't shout. Gave no sign of initiating the battle. They simply vanished.

The air vibrated as if the world itself had taken a deep breath. And suddenly, they were all around us. Four white figures moving like echoes. Impossible to follow with the eyes.

“Back!” shouted Leah. She extended both hands urgently. A circular wall of fire enveloped us instantly, creating a perimeter of heat that momentarily cut off the ambush.

Two of the figures stopped right at the edge of the flames. The temperature dropped immediately. The air grew so cold that vapor condensed above the burning sand. It was as if winter itself had descended upon us.

I moved to the side, channeling my mana to the surface. The ice responded quickly. It formed over my left arm and spread along the blade of my sword. The steel emitted a cold blue glow. “If we can’t reach them, defending ourselves won’t matter,” I muttered under my breath, and struck.

My blow sliced only empty air.

One of the figures reappeared right behind me. I didn’t turn—just dropped to the ground and rolled. I felt an invisible slash cut through the air where my neck had been a second before. The danger had been a hair’s breadth away.

“Lotte!” Leah screamed. Her voice rang sharp. She unleashed a torrent of concentrated fire that struck the figure squarely. For an instant, the heat distorted its silhouette, revealing a human body beneath the robe. But immediately, the white garment rippled, and the figure dissolved into the air—reappearing several meters away, unharmed.

Chloé leapt at that precise moment. A silver flash slamming into the second enemy with full force. She tackled it straight into the sand. The figure fell without making a single sound. But a thick, dark cloud burst from its robes, spreading around us like an ink stain.

“Careful!” Leah shouted at the top of her lungs. “That’s not ordinary smoke!”

Her warning came too late. I breathed in by reflex. And instantly, I felt the poison invade me.

It wasn’t like a normal toxin. It was liquid magic—cold and heavy. It ran through my lungs like black ice. It spread through my blood like a frozen current. My muscles tensed all at once—and then... weakened beyond control. My strength drained out through my skin. It was as if life itself were being siphoned away.

Chloé stumbled upon landing. Her breathing grew ragged and forced. “I can’t move my legs properly!” she growled mentally, her voice broken and distant.

Leah fell to her knees in the sand, gasping painfully. “It’s... an ether drain... they’re absorbing life energy... not mana—life...”

My sword, which moments before glowed with icy power, began to darken. The frost melted, dripping as liquid onto the hot ground. Every movement cost me twice the effort. Every breath burned inside my poisoned lungs.

One of the White Veil lifted its right hand calmly. Between its fingers, a sphere of fire began to form. It wasn’t natural fire. It was a dense, red and black flame, rotating upon itself with a low, steady sound—like a heartbeat in the dark.

Leah, trembling, tried to stand. “No... I can’t... stop it...”

“Stay back,” I told her. I could barely keep myself upright. My legs trembled under my own weight.

I tried to focus what little energy I had left. I wanted to form a protective ice barrier. But the magic resisted. It was unstable and weak. The air vibrated with the heat of the enemy spell. The sphere grew to the size of a war shield. It roared with a malignant, living hunger.

The White Veil took a step forward and aimed the sphere directly at me. Its voice then echoed inside my mind—dry, hollow, and utterly devoid of emotion.

“You are the echo that must be silenced.”

And it unleashed its final attack.

The black and red fire cut through the air like a living bolt. Even the wind hissed at its corrupt passage. I didn’t have time to move. My body was slow. My energy almost spent. The only thing I saw was the incandescent reflection approaching—engulfing everything in its path.

Leah screamed my name from afar.

And the entire world burned in a blinding light.