

Frozen Star 112

Chapter 112: Close to Home

[POV Liselotte]

Dawn found us crossing an open valley covered by an endless blanket of snow. The morning mist rose slowly, forming silver threads that danced above the frozen ground. The cold and silent air carried that clean scent that only exists in the days before a winter storm.

The road descended gently toward the lower plains. Far ahead, on the horizon, the walls of Whirikai could already be faintly seen—tall, ancient, and imposing, just as I remembered from my childhood memories. The distance wasn't great. Leah had calculated that if we kept a steady pace, we would reach the city in two days.

Two days.

After so long away.

After everything that had happened since the day I fell into the teleportation trap meant for Princess Leah.

"Can you believe it?" I said, unable to hide the smile rising to my lips. My voice broke the serene silence of the morning.

Chloé, trotting beside me with her fur dusted in fine snowflakes, lifted her head and let out a soft mental purr.

“Two more days and you’ll be home again. I’d bet my nose that your parents are waiting for you with a table full of warm bread and that soup you always talk about.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I hope so. My mother, Andrea, used to make a herb soup whenever we returned from winter trips. She said it helped the body remember where it belonged.”

Chloé tilted her head thoughtfully.

“How curious. I never thought humans needed to remember where they belong.”

“Sometimes we forget,” I said softly, gazing at the white horizon and thinking of my family—my father Carl tending the inn, my mother Andrea in the kitchen, my younger sister Claire helping with the guests.

The sun was slowly rising, painting the sky a pale amber. Behind us, Leah kept the wagon steady, her hands firm on the reins. Her shoulders were tense, and her gaze fixed ahead seemed more distant than usual.

I watched her for a moment. Her expression was hard to read. Since dawn, she had spoken very little, which, coming from her, was a sign that something was wrong.

“Leah,” I called, turning around on the seat. “Are you all right?”

She blinked, as if pulled from deep thought.

“Yes,” she answered immediately—too quickly to be believable. “Just tired, that’s all.”

Chloé snorted softly.

“You’re a terrible liar, Leah.”

The princess disguised as a sorceress let out a brief laugh, though without true joy.

“Maybe. But it’s nothing serious, I promise.”

Her tone was gentle, yet her eyes betrayed a concern she didn’t dare voice. Several minutes passed in silence before she finally spoke honestly.

"I suppose I'm nervous," she admitted, still looking at the road.

"Why?" I asked, curious.

Leah took a deep breath, as if searching for the right words.

"It's been years since I set foot in the castle of Whirikai," she said at last. "More than I'd like to admit. I left on that journey never imagining I'd end up kidnapped by that demon. And now, returning after all this time..."

Her words hung in the frozen air.

"Will your family be waiting for you?" I asked gently.

"Yes," she said slowly. "In the east wing of the castle, near the watchtowers. My father always expected me to follow royal protocol, and my mother wanted me to become a perfect diplomat." A sad smile crossed her face. "They both expected me to fulfill my duties as a princess. But everything changed after the kidnapping."

"You left as one person and return as another," Chloé whispered.

"Exactly," Leah replied in a fragile voice. Her fingers unconsciously tightened around the reins. "I left thinking I could live up to everyone else's expectations. And now, going back there after so many

years—after everything I’ve lived through, after learning who I really am now...” She shook her head, eyes on the horizon. “I don’t know how they’ll react when they see how much I’ve changed.”

I stayed silent for a moment, letting the wind speak for us. Then, softly, I said,

“Maybe they don’t need to react in any special way. Maybe they just need to see you alive and safe. Sometimes the return itself is already a miracle.”

Leah looked at me, surprised for a second. Her lips curved into a half-smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“If only it were that simple, Lotte. But the royal court of Whirikai isn’t a place where things are easily forgotten—especially a royal kidnapping.”

Her tone made me think. There was a weariness in her voice that came not from the body, but from the weight of her title.

Chloé jumped onto the back of the wagon, curled up on the blankets, and said mentally,

“Then we’ll make your return worth it. And if the royal court doesn’t welcome you properly, well... we can always show them our fangs.”

Leah laughed—truly laughed this time—and the mood lightened.

“Thank you, Chloé. I hope it won’t come to that, but it’s comforting to know I have you both.”

The rest of the day passed in an almost strange calm.

The landscape changed little by little—the snow grew denser, the paths narrower, bordered by towering firs. The sun hid behind violet clouds, casting an icy glow over the world.

At dusk, we stopped beside a half-frozen stream. Leah lit a small fire, and Chloé curled up near me as we watched the embers dance in the cold air.

“What’s the first thing you’ll do when we arrive?” Chloé asked dreamily.

I smiled, staring into the flames and thinking of my modest home.

“I suppose I’ll visit my parents’ inn. I want to see if the old apple tree in the backyard is still alive. Then...” I hesitated for a second, “I want to walk across the north bridge—the one that crosses the Frysten River. From there, you can see the entire castle covered in frost at sunrise. I used to think it looked like it was made of crystal when I was a child.”

“Sounds beautiful,” murmured Chloé, closing her eyes.

Leah, sitting across from us, watched the fire in silence. Her expression was serene, but her fingers nervously played with a silver pendant around her neck—a jewel that betrayed her royal lineage.

“And you, Leah?” I asked with a gentle smile. “What will you do when we reach the castle?”

She looked up, surprised, and took a few seconds before answering.

“I don’t know,” she finally admitted. “Maybe find somewhere to stay for a couple of days before facing the royal court. I need time to remember how to walk among protocols and formalities.”

Chloé glanced at her sideways.

“Royal coward.”

Leah arched an eyebrow with dignity.

“Diplomatic prudence.”

They stared at each other for a moment and then, at the same time, burst into laughter that shattered the tense air. I ended up laughing too, unable to resist.

For a few seconds, everything was simple again. Just three travelers sitting by the fire under a frozen sky, with the promise of home waiting in the distance. A kidnapped princess returning to her throne, and a simple inn girl who had accidentally taken her place in an extraordinary adventure.

When the fire began to die out, I lay back on my cloak, staring at the heavens. The stars twinkled faintly, blurred by mist, and a cold breeze brushed my face.

I closed my eyes and whispered softly, almost like a prayer,

“Two more days.”

I felt Chloé curl up beside me, warm and quiet, while Leah lay down on the other side, her silhouette outlined by the dying glow of the fire.

And in that serene silence, between snow and wind, I realized that the return wouldn't just be a journey to my humble family home.

It would also be Leah's return to her throne and responsibilities.

Two different worlds converging on the same destiny.

And perhaps, the beginning of something none of us were ready to face.