

Frozen Star 114

Chapter 114: Return to the White City

[POV Liselotte]

The constant crunch of the wheels over compacted snow was the only sound accompanying us for several minutes after crossing the outer walls. As the cart advanced, the urban landscape of Whirikai unfolded before us with a beauty that felt almost dreamlike.

The streets were paved with polished pale stone, and the buildings—with their pointed roofs and carved facades—looked as though they had been sculpted from frozen marble. The air carried a blend of scents: wrought iron, ceremonial incense, and freshly baked bread. Even in the heart of winter, the capital teemed with life: merchants in thick cloaks sold their goods from steaming stalls, children played in frost-lined alleys, and guards patrolled with martial discipline.

“I don’t remember Whirikai being this vibrant,” I murmured, genuinely astonished.

Leah, her face partially hidden beneath her hood, gave a faint smile.

“It’s the city that never sleeps,” she said softly. “Winter only enhances its beauty—and multiplies its dangers.”

Chloé sniffed the air with visible curiosity, her golden eyes gleaming beneath the falling snow.

“It smells of many packs, of old history... and far too many human laws.”

Leah let out a short, restrained laugh.

“You’re not wrong.”

Despite the majestic atmosphere that filled every street, there was an undercurrent of tension. Guards watched every unfamiliar face with meticulous scrutiny. The air carried a sense of constant vigilance, as if the entire city were waiting—for something, or someone.

The Adventurers’ Guild of Whirikal rose in the lower plaza, an imposing building of bluish stone columns and an iron gate engraved with magical symbols. At its entrance, a small statue of an ice dragon guarded the archway, surrounded by protective runes that emitted a faint vibration in the air.

Crossing the threshold, warmth enveloped us immediately. Dozens of adventurers from different regions chatted lively, browsed missions, or studied sprawling maps. The sounds of clinking mugs, heavy boots, and rustling paper filled the spacious hall.

Leah walked straight to the main counter. The receptionist—a middle-aged man with tied-back hair and weary eyes—regarded her with quiet curiosity.

“Good afternoon,” she said with practiced courtesy. “We need to send an urgent message to Kaelen, master of guild.”

The man nodded and took out a sealed form.

“Name of the sender?”

Leah hesitated for the briefest instant before answering.

“Leah...” Her eyes flicked toward me briefly, then she continued with a firmer voice, “Leah Alba Whirikal.”

The man froze. For a moment, he seemed unable to process what he’d just heard. Slowly, his eyes widened, and the quill slipped from his fingers, striking the counter with a dull sound.

A short but heavy silence spread through the hall. Some adventurers turned their heads; others began whispering to each other.

With calm, innate grace, Leah wrote the letter by hand, informing them of our arrival in the capital and requesting the official registration of our return, along with the formal closure of our journey. When finished, she sealed the envelope with blue wax and the royal emblem on her ring.

“Thank you,” she said simply. The clerk barely managed a clumsy bow.

When we stepped outside, the light of midday had changed. The snow was falling harder, and the air smelled of cold metal and restrained anticipation. Yet before we could take more than a few steps toward our cart, the situation shifted abruptly.

A detachment of royal guards appeared at the end of the street. At least a dozen, all clad in blue cloaks and silver armor that gleamed like mirrors. Their movements were perfectly synchronized—pure military precision.

“By order of the Royal Council, halt!” shouted the captain, a dark-haired woman with a stern, sculpted face.

Before we fully understood what was happening, they surrounded us with calculated precision. Their crossed spears formed a tight semicircle around us. Two of them extended their hands toward Leah, clearly intent on escorting her.

“What does this mean?” I demanded, stepping forward instinctively.

One soldier raised a hand in warning.

“Stand back, foreigner. The princess is to be taken to the castle immediately.”

Chloé stepped forward at once, baring her fangs with a low, guttural growl.

“Touch her, and I’ll tear your hands off.”

“Chloé, enough,” Leah said firmly.

Her tone silenced everyone instantly. She stepped forward, gently pushing aside the spears surrounding her.

“They come with me,” she declared with serene authority. “I will not take a single step toward the castle without my companions.”

The captain hesitated. Duty and protocol demanded refusal, yet Leah’s presence—her bearing, her voice, her gaze—was impossible to defy. Finally, she nodded stiffly.

“As you wish, Your Highness. But you must all come at once.”

Leah turned toward us, her royal-blue cloak billowing elegantly in the winter wind.

“Come.”

And so we did.

The group began moving along the main avenue toward the heart of the city. As we walked, passersby began to stop, one after another. Some leaned out from windows, others left their shops. The murmurs grew rapidly.

“Is it really her?”

“The princess! The princess has returned!”

“Leah Alba Whirikal is alive!”

Within minutes, a crowd had gathered along both sides of the street. Men, women, children, the elderly—all watched with faces filled with astonishment, tears, and pure disbelief. Some bowed deeply; others simply stared as if witnessing a living miracle.

Leah walked in silence, though I could feel her growing unease. Her breathing was tight, and her steady gait seemed burdened by invisible weight. The crowd hailed her with reverence—but in her eyes, I saw something closer to fear than royal pride.

I walked beside her, keeping curious onlookers at bay. Then, without warning, Leah reached out and took my hand.

Her cold leather glove brushed my fingers and intertwined with them in a gentle yet unyielding grasp.

I looked at her in surprise. She said nothing. Her gaze remained fixed ahead, but the pressure of her hand spoke volumes—she needed something real, something familiar, something untouched by the cold perfection of this city now claiming her as its rightful heir.

Chloé walked close by, utterly silent, ears pricked and golden eyes scanning the crowd.

When we crossed the silver bridge leading to the castle gates, the roar of the crowd began to fade, replaced by the solemn toll of palace bells.

Leah never released my hand for the rest of the walk.

And as the massive gates of Whirikal Castle opened before us with a deep, resonant groan, I understood with piercing clarity that although she had returned physically to her ancestral home, the true challenge of her reign was only just beginning.