

Frozen Star 117

Chapter 117: Where Ice Hurts

[POV Liselotte]

The doors of the throne room opened with a deep sound that echoed through the entire corridor, as if a thousand frozen echoes awoke at once. The air, heavy with incense and ancient magic, hit my face like an invisible wall. Leah squeezed my hand one last time before stepping forward; I could feel her pulse racing beneath her apparent calm.

We entered.

The hall was immense, larger than I remembered. High arched ceilings, stained glass windows blue as ice crystals, columns carved with stories of ancient battles. And there, at the far end, on a white dais, the twin thrones of Whirikal.

The king.

The queen.

My heart skipped a beat.

The king, with his gray hair like frost, stood rigid on his seat. His gaze was cold, heavy. It was not the father Leah had described to me: warm, firm, protective. It was something broken, hardened by time and pain.

The queen... was like a mirror made of delicate ice. Her face retained the beauty Leah had described — silver hair, pale blue eyes— but there was something shattered in her gaze. An old wound. A grief that had never healed.

The nobles murmured around us, like expectant crows. I felt their eyes piercing the backs of us.

Leah let go of my hand and stepped forward alone. Her steps were confident, though I noticed her fingers trembled slightly. She bowed with elegance.

“Father. Mother. I have returned.”

The silence that fell was brutal.

The king barely moved, his blue eyes narrowed with caution. The queen furrowed her brow softly.

“Who dares speak that name in this place?” —the queen whispered, her voice fine but sharp.

Leah raised her head, surprised.

“It’s me... Leah. Leah Alba Whirikal. Your daughter.”

The murmur among the nobles grew louder.

The king stood fully. His steps descending the stairs sounded like hammer strikes.

“What kind of mockery is this?” —his voice was so cold it hurt. I shivered.

“No... it’s not a mockery,” Leah took a step forward—“I was kidnapped... ten years ago. By a demon. But I survived. I returned.”

The king looked at her, not with emotion, not with joy, not even doubt.

Only distrust.

“My daughter is dead,” he said slowly—“The Council declared her deceased. I will not allow demons to take her face to tempt our faith.”

Leah froze, stunned. I stepped forward, but Chloé stopped me mentally.

Let her. This is her moment.

Leah took a deep breath.

“Father... do you remember the garden of the north wing? The frost flowers I planted with mother when I was seven?... The silver pendant you gave me when I learned my first spell? I still have it...” —and she took it from her chest, hanging from a thin chain.

The queen pressed her lips together. For a second, her eyes glistened. But she didn’t speak.

The king didn’t move.

“Demons steal memories. They copy voices. They copy faces. Even emotions. What proof do you have that you are my daughter?”

Leah faltered. I had never seen her like this.

“I have a scar...” —she whispered—“On my right ankle. I got it climbing the west wall when I was nine.”

She barely lifted her skirt, revealing the scar. It was true. I had seen it myself before.

The king didn't blink.

The councilors leaned toward him, whispering. Some nobles muttered "illusion... impostor... demonic trick..."

The queen stood.

"Enough," she said. She walked toward Leah. Her steps were soft, but each resonance on the frozen marble hurt like a broken heartbeat.

She stopped in front of her.

Her mother.

Barely an arm's length away.

Leah looked at her with eyes so full of hope it hurt me.

"Mother... it's me."

The queen took her chin gently. She studied her closely. Her fingers brushed her cheek. For an instant... I saw love. I saw doubt. I saw a mother finding her daughter.

But then... her gaze changed.

It hardened.

She lowered her hand.

“You are not my daughter,” she whispered, stepping back as if it burned—“My daughter would never return with a talking monster and a commoner at her side. My daughter... is dead.”

Leah froze. Her face went white. I saw her lips tremble.

The king spoke again, his voice like a verdict.

“Guards. Take them out. And do not dare to speak this deception again.”

Everything moved very fast.

The guards surrounded us. Chloé growled, showing her fangs. I took Leah's hand. She didn't cry. She didn't breathe, almost. She walked like in a broken dream.

The enormous doors of the hall closed behind us with a dry, definitive sound.

The echo of the throne was behind us.

Outside the castle, the snow fell softly. The world went on. People walked. No one knew that Leah's heart had shattered into a thousand pieces.

We walked aimlessly.

On the marble bridge, Leah stopped.

She tried to speak. She couldn't.

And then... she simply fell to her knees.

I knelt with her. I wrapped her in my arms. I felt her tremble.

“They didn’t recognize me...” —she whispered, barely audible—“Not a single one...”

“They will,” —I said—“I promise. And if they don’t... I will. Always.”

Her fingers clutched my coat. Her forehead pressed against my shoulder. The tears that hadn’t fallen in the hall... came out now. Hot. Painful. Real.

Chloé approached silently. She pressed her flank against us.

And there, under the gray sky of Whirikal, while distant bells kept ringing unaware of the truth...

Leah cried.

And I held her, knowing that, even though the kingdom had rejected her... I never would.

The wind struck the marble bridge, swirling small snowflakes around us. Leah still clung to my coat as if letting go would tear her apart. Her shoulders shook, not from the cold, but from something much deeper.

“Let’s go from here,” —I whispered, gently stroking her golden hair—“You don’t have to prove anything today. No more.”

Leah didn’t respond, but she nodded slightly, as if any word could make her collapse again. I stood, helped her to her feet. I felt her weight, light, fragile, as if the wind could carry her away.

Chloé moved a few steps ahead of us in silence, though her mind resonated in mine.

“They shouldn’t have looked at her like that, Lotte.”

“I know.”

“I want to rip their throats out.”

“I know. Me too.”

We crossed the bridge. Behind us, the white palace with its cold towers and statues of dead kings. The bells kept ringing in celebration of a miracle... while that miracle was expelled by her own parents.

We passed through the royal gardens. The crystal lilies grew still under the snow, reflecting the gray sky. Leah looked at them, and her eyes dimmed even more.

“I used to hide flowers here...” —she whispered, pointing to a small frozen fountain—“Mother got angry because I always ended up dirtying my dress.”

“She was a child,” —I replied—“You had the right to get dirty.”

She didn’t answer.

We left the gardens, passed through the great ornamental gate, guarded by dragon statues. No one stopped us. No one asked anything. To them, we were just three figures in the snow: a commoner, a talking wolf... and an impostor.

The town spread before us, with its stone streets and frost-covered rooftops. Some people turned to look, intrigued by Leah’s vacant expression, her royal clothes, the strange aura around her... but no one dared speak.

We walked.

Not a word came from Leah’s lips for minutes that felt eternal.

Only when we left behind the central square and its ice statues did I hear her murmur:

“And... now what am I, Lotte? If I’m not a princess... if I’m not a daughter... what am I?”

It hurt me. Physically.

“You are Leah,” —I said— “The Leah I met in that ruined temple. The one who fought with me against demons. The one who saved strangers without asking for anything in return. That is more than any title.”

Leah lowered her gaze. A single tear rolled down her cheek and disappeared at the edge of her cloak.

We kept walking.

The castle was behind us. The market bustle appeared slowly. There were vendors announcing hot bread, children running after a dog, blacksmiths hammering steel. The world... went on as if nothing had changed.

But for Leah, everything had changed.

Chloé guided us through quieter alleys, between dark wooden houses, extinguished lanterns, and frozen clothes hung between windows. The smell of coal, soup, freshly baked bread... filled the air.

Leah clung to my arm without saying a word.

“We’re almost there,” —I said— “My house is near the south wall. It’s small... but warm. You’ll like it.”

“I don’t want to be a bother.”

“You’re not a bother.”

“I don’t want to be a burden.”

I stopped. I turned to her. I took her shoulders.

“Never, do you hear me? You are never a burden to me.”

She looked at me... as if she didn’t know what to do with those words.

Finally, she nodded.

Chloé stopped a few steps ahead, turned her head, and barely wagged her tail.

“We’re here,” —she said through the mind—“At least to the street.”

The street was narrow, cobblestoned, silent. Extinguished lanterns, snow accumulated on rooftops, closed curtains behind fogged glass. At the end, leaning against the wall, there was a small wooden house with a slanted roof and an old chimney that still sent a thread of smoke to the gray sky.

My home.

I stood still for a few seconds, looking at that familiar door, with its small protective symbol carved against spirits. I remembered my childhood, the smell of herb soup, my mother’s hands braiding my hair by the fire... and felt a knot in my throat.

I turned to Leah. I smiled.

“This is it.”

She blinked, as if slowly returning from the void. She looked up. She observed the little house. Small. Modest. Far from marble and gold. Yet... something in her expression changed.

“Can I... really go in?”

“Always.”

I took her hand.

Chloé gently pushed the door with her head.