

Frozen Star 36

Chapter 36: Routes and Decisions – The Winter Path

[POV Liselotte]

The return to the temple was like sinking into a warm stone cell. Inside, the air smelled of consecrated firewood burning low in the great central hearth, and of the sharp, almost medicinal aroma of dried herbs hanging in bunches. A dense, welcoming calm that clashed violently with the icy whirlwind stirring in my chest.

Chloé was curled at the feet of the nearest stone bench to the fire's warmth. As I crossed the threshold, her ears lifted before her head did, swiveling precisely toward me. Her golden eyes, reflective like ancient coins in the gloom, scrutinized me. Words weren't needed. The bond between us, forged in blood and snow, thrummed like a taut string.

"The book? Did it show you paths or abysses?" Her mental voice was velvet brushing over my mind, warm and familiar, but with an edge of barely hidden concern.

I breathed deeply, trying to quiet the cold. The weight of the forgotten book, of the history of the "chosen," still lay heavy on my soul like a slab. But now there was another burden—more tangible, more urgent.

"More than paths or abysses... a destiny. Our destiny" I answered, my voice rougher than I expected. I approached the heavy oak table near her. On its surface, polished by time, I laid out with only slightly trembling hands what I had obtained that afternoon.

It was a map. Not the hopeless fragment found in the ruins, but a larger piece, carefully drawn on well-cured parchment that smelled of centuries-old dust, iron-tinged ink, and the stubborn dampness of cellars.

I had gotten it from old Kaelen, the one-eyed cartographer whose shop was a labyrinth of scrolls and rusted astrolabes. A map worth trusting.

"Look" I said, my fingers tracing the precise lines that shaped mountain ranges like dragon spines, rivers like blue veins, forests shaded in deep green ink. My finger rested on a tiny point at the far north. "Glarien, where we are now". I moved my finger, crossing distances that felt like abysses, toward the very heart of the continent.

There, surrounded by mountains drawn with aggressive shadows and a broad river like a silver serpent, a patch of blue and gold ink shone with a name that stopped my heart:

WHIRIKAL.

Seeing it written like that, with such cartographic elegance, gave it a brutal, merciless reality. It wasn't just a hazy memory, a dream of home. It was a place. Concrete. Distant. My home. Where the castle halls had once rung with my childhood laughter, where I learned to wield a wooden sword before a steel one, where my mother braided my hair at dawn and my father told me legends of heroes beneath the stars... and where, perhaps, news of the lost daughter was still awaited. The pang of longing was so sharp I nearly crumpled the map in my fists.

"It's... beyond known horizons" observed Chloé, her mental voice now a grave whisper, sensing the emotional tremor running through me. She didn't say "far." Her lupine mind understood distance in days of hunting, in scents fading on the wind. And this distance was monstrous.

"'Far' is too small a word" I murmured, forcing myself into the coldness of calculation. Tracing the most direct trade route, marked with a faded red line, I mentally counted plains, treacherous mountain passes, rivers to cross, cities to avoid or pass through... "A year. An entire year traveling by carriage, with luck. And that's if the roads are safe, if winter doesn't close the passes with deadly blizzards, if bandits or... worse things..."

The image of our fractured group, the barely healed, Finn with his reckless enthusiasm and Heron with his persistent limp, pressed into my mind. I couldn't drag them across a hostile continent as penance for my longing. I wouldn't be their walking tomb.

"We can't leave, Lotte. Not like this. Not now". Chloé rose in a noiseless leap, her fur glinting in the firelight. She walked around the table, her tail brushing the edge of the map like a living shadow.

She stopped before me, her golden eyes fixed on the bronze badge on the table, crudely engraved with an , the lowest guild rank.

"Your magic... is a frozen river behind a cracked dam. To fight like that on the road, without control..." She didn't finish. She didn't need to. She had seen what unbridled power could do, and what it cost to restrain it. Out there, without time to understand it, it would be an ice bomb in my own hands.

"I know" I nodded, my voice loaded with a new determination, cold and sharp as my sword's edge. I tore my gaze from the name burning on the parchment. "I don't want to return home as a ghost, as a half-starved survivor dragging my scars. I want to return... strong. Capable. With my power not as a curse, but as a shield. As a sword. With resources, with allies, with a reputation that opens doors, not one that draws raiders."

I looked at the F badge with disdain, but also with a renewed sense of purpose.

"That's what the guild is for. For this."

Chloé gave a low, approving growl.

"Then we forge that strength here. Mission after mission. Small, big, dirty, glorious. Every coin earned is a nail for the journey."

A strange relief, mixed with the fierceness of commitment, flooded me. She was right. This wasn't giving up—it was preparing to leap with steady feet.

I rolled the map with reverent care, as if it contained not just geography but the seed of my oath. The parchment crackled, a dry sound in the temple's silence.

"Yes" I confirmed, the weight of the decision settling on my shoulders not as a burden but as armor beginning to be tempered. "Missions. Training. Mastering this mana... understanding why it's ice"

My hand rested on my sword's hilt, seeking the familiarity of steel.

"And when we're ready... when every wound is closed, every coin counted... then yes. Then we go home. To Mom, Dad, and Claire."

"And I'll be at your side" Chloé's voice resonated in my mind, not as an echo but as a solid presence, a wall of loyalty to lean my back against.

In every step of this path. In every mission. In every night beneath foreign stars. To the gates of your snow castle. Always.

The fire in the hearth crackled, throwing a brief rain of sparks toward the darkness of the high ceiling. Outside, behind the misted stained glass, the night kept falling—slow, relentless—covering the world in a mantle of expectant silence.

But within me, where the map of Whirikal burned in memory and the promise of growth rang like a hammer on an anvil, I watched the road opening before me. And I was ready to forge myself in the journey.

The road home wouldn't begin tomorrow. It began now, here, in the stillness of the temple, with the first syllable of an oath forged in cold and will. The route was drawn. The decision, carved in ice.

Only the walking remained.