

Frozen Star 46

Chapter 46: Decisions Under Fire

[POV Liselotte]

The silence in the healing hall was so dense and heavy it could be touched, an invisible wall that smothered even the faintest sigh.

No one dared to move, to adjust a piece of armor, or to breathe deeper than strictly necessary.

The Guildmaster's presence did not merely fill the space; it dominated it, an anvil of invisible authority that crushed the air, making even the most hardened veterans lower their gaze, studying with grave intensity the cracks in the wooden floor.

His eyes, the color of clouded steel, remained fixed on me, and though he had not spoken another word, I felt his gaze probing every one of my thoughts, weighing each of my doubts.

Naele was the first to defy that oppressive silence, though her voice, usually so firm, now wavered like a candle about to be extinguished in a snowstorm.

"Master... it is not an unfounded rumor, not a mirage. She herself confirmed it with her last conscious breath. Leah of Whirikal... the lost princess has been found."

The man nodded with deliberate slowness, a movement that seemed to carry the weight of centuries of history. He walked with a grave step to the cot where Leah lay, so pale she nearly blended with the white sheets. His tall, powerful shadow fell over her, not as a threat, but as an ancient wall, dark and impenetrable.

“I knew her mother, Queen Anya, at a summit of kingdoms some time ago,” he said, his voice so low it was almost a whisper, yet it cut through the air like a knife and reached every corner with clarity. “She had that same look... that fragility of fine glass on the surface. And the same strength of tempered steel beneath. A dangerous combination. They are completely alike.”

The memory carved harsher lines into his face. Then, he turned on his heel toward the rest of us, and his voice became the sharp strike of a hammer on an anvil.

“The discovery of the princess of Whirikal changes everything. The pieces on the continental board have shifted. She cannot, must not, remain here as just another adventurer.”

A murmur, like waves breaking, rippled through the hall—a mix of wonder, disbelief, and the cold shiver of fear that comes with great responsibility.

Chloé, beside me, let out a low growl only I could hear, her voice sharp as the edge of a newly whetted dagger.

“I knew it. They’ll stop seeing the broken girl. Now they’ll see only a symbol. A banner to raise or to tear down. The person is gone.”

I clenched my fists at my sides, nails biting into my palms through the gloves, but I did not look away from Leah. From the person.

“And what do you intend to do with her?” I asked, and my voice sounded strangely firm, as if it belonged to someone else, someone unafraid of the man before me.

The Guildmaster held my gaze, and in his gray eyes there was no room for compassion, only for raw reality.

That is what we must determine. Princess Leah is the direct descendant of Whirikai’s royal bloodline. Her return from oblivion could be the catalyst to unite the scattered northern kingdoms against the demonic threat... or the spark that ignites the bloodiest war this continent has ever seen for its vacant throne.

Naele, regaining some of her characteristic composure, stepped forward with a serene but unyielding gesture.

“With all due respect, Master, we cannot simply hand her over like a diplomatic parcel. If this news leaks without the strictest control, it will draw bandits hungry for bounty, the very shadows that once imprisoned her... and neighboring kings whose ambition far surpasses their loyalty. This guild is a bastion, not a throne room.”

The Master nodded once, sharply.

“Exactly. That is why, for now, she remains under the absolute custody and protection of this guild. From this moment, her safety is our highest priority. Her life is worth more than all those present in this hall combined.”

A silence even heavier followed that declaration, weighted with the unspoken oath of every soul there. From the bronze-ranked novice to the scarred veteran, we all understood the enormity of that mandate.

I lowered my gaze to Leah. Her fragile breathing, the faint tremor of her lashes against her sunken cheeks, seemed to contradict every lofty word. To me, she was not a banner, nor a political symbol, nor a piece on a board. She was a girl who had been broken. Someone who had suffered so much that even uttering her own name had been a titanic feat.

A princess, I thought, with a knot of conflicting emotions tightening my throat. And I... I too came from Whirikai. From its shadows. From its secrets.

The Guildmaster turned back to me, as if he had heard the echo of my most private thoughts.

“You were the one who found her. You were the one who, against all logic and survival instinct, chose to carry her through hell and bring her back. That choice, that act of reckless valor—or unfathomable folly—makes you responsible.”

His words fell upon my shoulders like chains forged from the same steel as his voice.

“Responsible...?” I managed to murmur, disbelief breaking through the awe his presence inspired.

“Yes.” His gaze was relentless, carved from granite. “The bond forged on the battlefield does not break easily. She will trust you, your face, before any stranger no matter how well-meaning. That is why, Liselotte,” he said, and my name sounded like a sentence in his mouth, “you and your wolf companion will be her immediate guardians. Her first and last line of defense.”

A surge of pure, protective indignation burst from Chloé.

“Guardians? Is he joking? We’re barely Silver rank! He’s painting a target on our foreheads for every assassin, mercenary, and demon on this damned continent! This is a death sentence for all three of us!”

I did not answer Chloé. My chest burned with the fire of raw terror, but beneath it, like a cold, underground current, flowed a strange, inevitable sensation: that of destiny closing around me, as inexorable as the tide.

Naele, however, intervened again, her voice a bridge of reason stretched across the abyss of the Master’s decision.

“Master, at least grant them time. They need to train, to strengthen, to learn the basics of VIP protection... They cannot bear the burden of a kingdom on their shoulders without the tools, knowledge, and support they need. It would be sending them to the slaughter.”

The Master crossed his arms over his chest, his piercing gaze appraising me once more, measuring my resolve like a general sizing up a raw recruit before sending them to the front line.

“They will have it. The guild will not abandon the princess... nor those I have chosen to protect her. They will receive all the support they need: training, resources, information. But the decision is made. The responsibility has been yours since the moment you carried her back across the perimeter in your arms.”

At that precise instant, Leah, as if even in the depths of unconsciousness she could feel the colossal weight of the decision that had just forever changed the course of our lives, stirred weakly on the cot. A faint moan slipped from her pale, cracked lips. Her thin fingers clenched the sheet. Her lips moved, forming a word no one else in the hall, lost in the tension, seemed to notice.

I leaned over her, my hair falling like a curtain on either side of my face, pressing my ear close to her mouth. The sound was as faint as a moth’s wings, but I recognized it instantly.

“...Light.”

The same word, the same desperate longing she had whispered to me amidst fire and death. The same flicker of humanity in the darkness.

Without thinking, I reached out and wrapped her fragile, icy hand between mine. A small, intimate gesture. A tacit promise amid the storm to come.

The Guildmaster turned away, his dark cloak billowing behind him, and addressed the others present, his voice regaining the commanding tone all obeyed.

“Tomorrow, at dawn, in the war room. We will discuss strategy, movements, countermeasures. This must not leave these walls under any circumstances. The fate of kingdoms—and perhaps of the continent itself—depends on the custody of this secret.”

And with those words, which rang like an edict carved into stone, he left the hall. The door closed behind him with a sharp, final sound like the slam of a cell.

The silence left in his wake was, if anything, even heavier, laden with unanswered questions, unspoken fears, and a future that had suddenly become vast and terrifying.

I remained by the cot, one hand still holding Leah's, the other clenched into a fist against my thigh.

My heart was split in two—on one side, the silent promise I had made to this broken soul in the snow; on the other, the terrible, overwhelming weight of the responsibility we had just inherited.

We were no longer just adventurers.

We were guardians. The human shield of a princess.

And the night, suddenly, seemed infinitely darker.