

Frozen Star 47

Chapter 47: A big decision

[POV Liselotte]

The guild, that night, was not the same place as always. There were no laughs, no clinking of cups toasting over well-earned spoils, no music from a tired lute accompanying the murmur of trivial conversations.

The entire building breathed a suffocating gravity. The hallways seemed longer, the doors heavier. Every shadow stretched as if it wanted to swallow us whole.

After the Guild Master left, many dispersed in silence. Some went to the healing rooms, others sank into wooden chairs, their gazes lost, as if they feared closing their eyes and seeing once more the faces of the fallen.

I, on the other hand, could not turn my thoughts away from Leah.

She had been left in one of the most protected rooms in the guild, surrounded by protective enchantments. Naelle had stayed by her side, tending to her wounds with an almost maternal care.

I remained in the hallway, unable to move too far away.

Chloé, at my side, brushed me with her flank. “You don’t have to carry all this alone,” she said.

“I know... but I need answers.” My voice was barely a whisper.

The image of Leah haunted me: her fragile body, skin like wax, lips dry as withered petals, and that pearl-like hair, dulled by dirt and years of captivity. It wasn't only compassion that kept me there. It was an uncomfortable certainty, like a dagger stuck deep in my conscience: she was tied to Whirikai, and therefore, to me.

I could not ignore it.

When finally the door opened and Naele stepped out, I intercepted her.

“I need to speak with you.” My voice came out firmer than I expected.

Naele studied me for a few seconds. Her eyes, as clear as the surface of a calm lake, scrutinized me with a judgment that didn't wound, but didn't forgive either. Then she nodded and gestured for me to follow her into a more secluded room, far from curious ears.

The room was small, with a worn oak table and two high-backed chairs. A brazier kept the place warm, though the fire crackled weakly, as if it shared our exhaustion.

I sat across from her. Chloé lay down near the door, attentive but silent.

Naele placed her hands on the table, fingers interlaced. Her face was rigid, marked by tension, but in her eyes shone a weight far older than this night.

"You want to know who Leah is."

"I already know who she is." I breathed deeply, swallowing the knot in my throat. "What I want to know is why she was there. Why a princess of Whirikai was found in a cage guarded by demons."

A dense silence settled between us.

Naele lowered her gaze to her hands. It was clear she was weighing carefully every word before letting it out.

"It's not a secret to those of us who have been in the guild for years," she began in a low voice, "but it is something almost never spoken aloud. Nearly five years ago, Princess Leah was kidnapped."

I felt my blood turn to ice. Though I had suspected it, hearing the confirmation was like receiving a direct blow to the chest.

"Almost five years...?" I repeated, incredulous.

Naelle nodded slowly.

“She was ten when she disappeared. Still a child, though they had already begun preparing her for royal duties.”

She paused, took a deep breath, and then continued:

“The event shook Whirikai to its very core. No one truly knew how it happened. Some say it was the work of traitors within the court. Others that bandits kidnapped her and sold her to the highest bidder. And there are those who claim the demons themselves wanted her, for reasons we still do not understand.”

I laced my fingers tightly over my knees, digging my nails into my skin until it hurt.

Whirikai. My kingdom. My childhood home. I remembered the pale stone walls, the banners waving high, the plaza always alive with merchants and nobles. I remembered hearing of the princess, a distant rumor, almost like a tale. But never... never did I expect to find her.

“Why was nothing ever said to the rest of the continent?” I asked bitterly. “Why did no one outside Whirikai know of her disappearance?”

Naelle looked straight at me then, with a mixture of hardness and compassion.

“Because Whirikai could not afford to show weakness.” Her words were a cold poison that made me swallow hard. “Had it been known that the rightful heir was lost, the neighboring kingdoms would have pounced like hungry wolves.”

Chloé let out a low growl. “Politics. Always politics. Humans let their own die before baring their throat.”

I pressed my lips shut, not answering her.

Naelle leaned forward a little, lowering her voice further.

“There were attempts to find her. More than people imagine. Secret expeditions were sent, spies, even mercenaries... None returned with clear answers. Some never came back at all. Others returned with stories impossible to prove: that they had seen her taken beyond the mountains, that she had been delivered to dark sects, that she was moved to lands where even maps dare not name.”

She fell silent for a moment, her eyes clouded by a shadow of pain.

“But never did we imagine she had fallen into the hands of demons.”

A shiver ran through me. Remembering the black cage, the burning chains, and that face lost in the gloom twisted my stomach.

“Five years... imprisoned.” My voice cracked into a whisper. “Five years without seeing the sun.”

Naelle closed her eyes for a moment, as if to contain a shudder.

“What we saw today... what you found... is only the surface of a much deeper horror. We don’t know what they did to her, nor what they intended. But the fact that they kept her alive all this time means she had value to them.”

Her gaze hardened as she said it, as if fearing what those words implied.

I lowered my head, fighting nausea. It wasn’t hard to imagine what being “valuable” meant to demons. I didn’t want to think it, but images slipped unbidden into my mind: Leah used as an anchor for some ritual, her blood mixed with dark magic, her will broken until she was nothing but an empty shell.

And yet, she survived.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to raise my gaze again.

“What will happen now?”

Naelle held my gaze, and for the first time I saw a flicker of insecurity in her.

“The Master won’t say it aloud, but we all know what it means: Princess Leah is the key to the future of Whirikal. Her return can rebuild that kingdom’s unity... or drag it deeper into discord.”

I fell silent. My mind was a storm.

Whirikal. The place where I was born, where my family still lived. The kingdom that had lost its heir and now recovered her from the jaws of hell.

And I was caught in the middle.

Chloé broke the silence, her voice vibrating with strength.

“Lotte. This isn’t only her destiny. This will drag you along too. Do you understand?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

Naelle, after a moment, softened her tone.

“I know what you’re thinking. I know what you feel. But listen to this: she is broken, Liselotte. You cannot expect her to rise tomorrow as the princess she once was. What she needs now is not a throne, but someone who will see her as a person.”

That last sentence struck me hard.

I saw her again in my memory, with that faint whisper, calling herself Leah. As if she needed to remember, as if in the midst of chains and darkness she had clung to her name so as not to disappear completely.

"I..." My voice faltered, but then I found a thread of certainty. "I will protect her. No matter what comes."

Naelle observed me closely, and in the end, nodded.

"Then be prepared. Because protecting Leah will mean facing not only demons, but kings, nobles, and the very gears of power itself."

Silence once more filled the room, heavy as a slab.

I rose from the chair, my legs trembling slightly. Before leaving, I turned back to Naelle.

"Thank you for trusting me with this."

She nodded, weary.

“It isn’t trust, Liselotte. It is necessity. And perhaps... hope.”

When I returned to the hallway, Chloé stretched and followed me. Her eyes shone in the dimness.

“So?” she asked.

“Five years, Chloé... five years in a cage.” My voice broke as I said it.

She nudged me with her muzzle, a firm gesture. “Then let those five years not define the rest of her life. If you decide to carry this, I’ll be with you. As always.”

I bent down and wrapped my arms around her neck, burying my face in her rough, warm fur.

“Thank you...”

The snow kept falling outside, silent and eternal. But in that moment I knew nothing would ever be the same again.