

Frozen Star 48

Chapter 48: The Princess Awakens

[POV Liselotte]

Dawn timidly filtered through the tall windows of the guildhall. Outside, the snow had ceased its relentless dance, allowing a pale, cold glow to bathe the dark wooden beams of the ceiling.

The silence reigning was not as dense and solemn as the night before, but it still carried a tangible weight, as if the very walls were holding their breath, afraid of awakening too soon the echoes of battle and the whispers of decisions made in the late hours of the night.

I was posted by the doorway of the room where Leah rested.

I had spent most of the night there, sitting on the cold stone floor, my back against the wall and my legs drawn to my chest.

Sleep had refused to come; instead, my thoughts spun in vicious circles, entangling themselves in unanswered questions and in the weight of a responsibility that pressed like a slab upon my shoulders.

Chloé dozed beside me, her wolf's body forming a patch of silver and white in the dim corridor. Though sunk in a light rest, every now and then she would open an amber eye and cast me a glance filled with unease and a silent question.

“You should try to rest, at least a little,” she whispered to me in one of those lucid moments. Fatigue clouds the senses and muddles judgment.

“I can’t,” I whispered back, my eyes fixed on the dark wood of the door that separated me from the sleeping princess. “Not... not until I can speak with her. Until I know she’s truly all right.”

And it was at that precise moment that I heard it. Not a loud sound, but a subtle alteration in the rhythm of silence emanating from the room.

A slight movement, the nearly imperceptible rustle of sheets adjusted by a restless hand, the air cut by a breath that grew a little deeper, a little more aware, than the shallow, feverish breaths of the previous hours.

I stood up at once, my stiff muscles protesting the sudden movement after hours of stillness. My hand rested on the doorknob, hesitating for a second, before I pushed it open with extreme caution.

The room was bathed in a gray, diffuse light that seemed to soften the edges of the furniture and shadows. Leah lay in the center of the bed, sunken among pillows and covered by several thick wool blankets.

Her face, though still gaunt and pale, no longer bore the spectral, waxen quality of the night before. Now it looked like human skin, fragile and translucent, yes, but alive, warm, marked by the silent struggle of someone fighting to return from a very dark place.

Her eyelids, incredibly pale, fluttered. Then, slowly, they opened. Two spheres of light blue, emptied by suffering, almost gray, stared blankly at the ceiling for an instant, disoriented, before their clouded focus cleared and settled on me, standing in the doorway.

I recognized her in that first instant of lucidity, not in her features, but in her expression. It was the deeply repressed fear of someone for whom opening their eyes had not always meant finding relief, but sometimes, another layer of nightmare.

I stepped forward, into the room.

"You're awake," I said, and my voice sounded harsh to my own ears, worn by disuse and tension.

She observed me without replying at once. Her gaze was not empty, but heavy, laden with an ancient caution and with something more than mere physical exhaustion. It was weariness of the soul.

I drew a heavy wooden chair closer to the bed and sat at her side, keeping a distance I hoped was respectful and not threatening.

"I'm Liselotte," I began, doubting how much I should reveal. But truth seemed the only proper thing. "It was I... who pulled you out. From the cage."

A dense, icy silence spread between us. Not an awkward silence, but one laden with unspoken meanings, of horrible memories floating in the air like toxic smoke.

Leah blinked with deliberate slowness, as if each movement required monumental effort.

When she finally spoke, her voice was not the broken, ghostly whisper of the night before. It was clear, though dry, rough from dehydration and disuse, and it carried a cutting hardness, like the edge of hidden, shattered glass.

“And do you expect me to thank you?”

The phrase, cold and direct, struck me with the force of a physical slap. There was no gratitude, no relief, not even curiosity. Only bitter distrust.

I swallowed with difficulty, struggling to tame the storm of emotions her words stirred within my chest.

“No,” I answered, forcing myself to stay calm. “I don’t expect thanks. I just... wanted you to know you’re not alone here. That there’s someone at your side.”

She tilted her head barely a fraction, a tiny gesture steeped in skepticism so profound it bordered on insolence.

“They all say that at the start. ‘You’re not alone. I’m here. You can trust me.’” Her voice took on a flat tone, like one repeating an empty, worn-out mantra. “Pretty words. Hollow. Because in the end, always, always they leave. Faces change, promises vanish into the wind, and I remain where I always am, in a cage, waiting for the next shift of guards.”

I wanted to protest, to tell her it wasn't true, that Chloé and I were different, that we were here for her, not for what she represented. But the words died in my throat before they could be born.

There was something in the depth of her gray-blue eyes, an absolute frozen void, the kind of desolation forged only when hope has been betrayed and shattered too many times, until there is nothing left to believe in.

"You're not the only one who's suffered," slipped from me, sounding sharper and more defensive than I had intended. It was the exhaustion, the frustration of being unfairly judged, the wound of my desperate action being received with such coldness.

She stared at me, unblinking, and on her pale, cracked lips curved a dry, twisted smile devoid of any warmth or humor. It was an almost cruel grimace.

"Really?" she said, and her voice dripped with acid skepticism. "Are you going to compare your suffering with mine? To equate your battles with my captivity?"

I tensed in the chair. I didn't know if it was extreme fatigue, the built-up tension of recent days, or the stinging injustice of her words, but something inside me, a spring held taut for too long, snapped all at once. A hot, bitter anger began to boil in my veins.

"Don't compare me to them," I retorted, my voice rising several tones, trembling with a rage I could no longer contain. "Don't lump me in with the monsters who locked you up and chained you. I risked my life to get you out of there. I could have died! I nearly died! I didn't do it for a reward or for... for duty. I did it because it was right."

Leah did not flinch. She held my burning gaze with glacial coldness, as if my emotional outburst were a pathetic, predictable spectacle.

“And now what, then?” she asked, her tone pure weariness. “Do you want me to bow before you in eternal gratitude? To proclaim you my savior and follow you like a loyal dog for the rest of my days? Is that the payment you expect for your ‘righteous act’?”

My breath grew ragged and harsh. I felt the muscles of my hands and arms tighten painfully, with a primal urge to strike something, to scream. A shameful, furious heat rose up my neck, flushing my cheeks.

“No!” I exploded, and my voice cracked, betraying me, revealing the wound her words had carved. “I don’t want any of that! I just wanted... I only hoped... that you could trust. A little! Just a little trust!”

The silence following my outcry was unlike the earlier ones. Not heavy or laden with hidden meanings.

It was sharp, cutting, like the space between two blades clashing and holding in deadly balance without moving an inch. Two wills, two pains, locked in a mute duel.

Finally, I could endure no more. I shot up from the chair, its legs scraping the stone floor with a shrill screech that rang obscenely loud in the room’s silence.

“Forget it,” I said, my voice now a thin, flat thread, a slab of ice covering the lava of my fury. “Forget I said anything.”

Without waiting for a reply I knew would not come, I turned on my heels and crossed the room in three strides. My hand clenched tightly around the doorknob.

“Lotte...” Chloé’s voice sounded cautious, a last attempt to halt my flight, to bring sense into the situation. “Wait. She didn’t mean...”

But I wasn’t listening anymore. I couldn’t. I flung the door open in a sharp motion and stepped into the cold, empty hallway, slamming it shut behind me, as if I could trap inside those four walls the bitter disappointment and searing anger.

My steps carried me quickly, almost running, through the guild’s silent corridors to the main exit. I pushed open the great wooden doors, and the icy air of the winter morning struck my face with a clean, purifying violence, a frozen slap that scoured the skin but could not soothe the fire within.

I walked aimlessly across the freshly crushed snow, my ragged breath forming fleeting clouds before me, my burning eyes refusing to release the tears of frustration pressing behind them.

Only ten minutes had passed since Leah’s eyes had opened, and already I felt that the glacial weight of her distrust and bitterness had managed to crack something inside me, something I had thought unbreakable.

At that moment, surrounded by an immaculate landscape of white and silence, I could not clearly discern at whom my fury was aimed, at her, for her icy rejection, or at myself, for having naively expected anything different.