

Frozen Star 51

Chapter 51: I'm sorry

[POV Liselotte]

The air inside the room seemed to have solidified, so still and heavy that each of my breaths sounded like an exaggerated sigh in the middle of an empty temple.

I felt the knot of anxiety in my stomach tighten with every cautious step I took across the wooden planks, until the soft creak of the door closing behind me left me completely immersed in that eloquent silence. I was trapped in it, and also, somehow, freed.

Leah lay exactly where I had left her, wrapped in the nest of thick blankets, her fragile figure barely lifting the fabric. Her skin still held that translucent pallor that spoke of a deep convalescence, but it no longer had the cadaverous, melted-wax tone of the previous night.

Her eyes, that bluish gray that seemed to filter all the light it touched, locked on me the instant I crossed the threshold. They showed no surprise. Nor the open hostility from before. Only... a glacial calm, deliberate, like the perfectly smooth surface of a frozen lake about to crack.

I breathed deeply, searching my mind for the words I had mentally rehearsed during the walk back. But before my mouth could shape the first sound, it was her voice, low and rough from disuse, that cut through the silence.

“Before you say anything... I’m sorry.”

I froze, my boots no longer creaking against the floor. The declaration was so dry and direct that for a moment I doubted I had heard it correctly. Leah's voice lacked warmth, melody, the sweetness of a sought-after apology. It was raw, simple, like a smooth, cold stone placed between us, a peace offering made of the most basic matter.

"You... you're sorry?" I asked, unable to fully disguise the caution that tinged my voice. The memory of her words, sharp as blades, still echoed in my ears, and part of me, the wounded part, shrank, expecting a trap.

"Yes," she replied without looking away, without blinking. Her frankness was disarming. "I shouldn't have spoken to you like that." She paused briefly, her thin fingers stirring slightly against the wool of the blanket. "I thought about it... after you left. I'm not sure how long I was asleep or awake afterward, but... your words stayed here." She placed a trembling hand on the center of her chest, over her heart. "Hurting, but echoing. They made me think. And I realized that the target of my anger wasn't you."

I remained silent for a long moment, surprised by that unexpected and austere openness. The ember of anger that had burned in me for hours was still there, hot and vibrant, but now it was smothered by a faint relief, a wave of something that felt very much like hope.

"I'm sorry too," I murmured, taking another step toward the bed, reducing the physical distance that mirrored the emotional one. "I was unfair in expecting... in demanding something you couldn't give me. I lost my temper. I wanted you to trust me with a selfish urgency. I suppose that... I got carried away by the relief of seeing you alive and forgot that the wounds we can't see are the ones that take the longest to heal. That they don't heal with one night's sleep or pretty words."

She arched one of her pale brows slightly, a small, almost imperceptible gesture, but on her motionless face it was equivalent to an ovation.

“At least you understand now,” she said, and her tone was not reproachful, but one of simple, cold acknowledgment.

I sat on the edge of a wooden chair nearby, dragging it gently so as not to break the fragile and precious balance that was beginning to form in the space between us. The creak of the wood seemed amplified in the room’s silence.

For a moment, neither of us said anything. Only the steady, hypnotic crackle of the logs in the fireplace filled the air, painting dancing shadows on the walls. The sound was... comforting. A reminder that the world kept moving outside this room, outside of our intertwined pain.

Finally, I decided to take a chance, to test the waters in less mined territory. “Do you... want us to talk about something else?” I proposed, keeping my voice soft, neutral. “Something that has nothing to do with... cages. Or chains. Or battles.”

Leah’s expression tensed almost immediately, her lips pressed into a thin line. The proposal clearly made her uncomfortable, like offering her an elegant dress to wear over scars. But, after a few seconds of tense consideration, in which I could see the internal struggle in her gaze, she nodded with a nearly imperceptible movement of her head.

“Alright,” she conceded, her voice barely a rough whisper.

“Tell me something you like,” I continued, choosing my words with the care of someone walking across a freshly frozen lake. “Something simple. Anything.”

She looked at me with deep skepticism, as if the question were an elaborate trap, a cruel game with hidden rules. But then, a sigh escaped her lips, a sound that seemed to carry the weight of years of silence.

“Flowers,” she said at last, the word sounded strange, out of place, like a precious, forgotten object pulled from a dusty chest.

It surprised me. It wasn’t the answer I expected. “Flowers?” I repeated, seeking confirmation.

“Yes.” Her thin, pale fingers interlaced atop the rough surface of the blanket, as if seeking containment. “Before... I used to slip away to the private gardens in the palace’s north wing. There was a hidden corner, right where the wall was cracked by the growth of an old vine. There grew some white lilies, wild, that no one tended. They pushed their way through the stones.” Her voice, for the first time, lost some of its icy edge, taking on a distant, dreamy tone. “I liked to sit there, even if just for a stolen minute. The smell was... unlike anything else in the palace. Fresh. Clean. Pleasant. It didn’t smell of politics or duty.”

A small, genuine smile escaped my lips without permission. “I have something like that too,” I confessed, the memory surfacing with surprising clarity.

“When I was a child, I used to sneak away to climb a huge oak tree behind my family’s house. It wasn’t a palace, just the home of well-off merchants, but that tree... from its highest branch, I could see almost the whole capital of Whirikai spread out like a living map. The tiled roofs, the streets, the people like ants... It made me feel that the world was infinitely bigger and freer than it seemed from the ground.”

She blinked slowly, processing my words. “Whirikai?” she asked, and there was a spark of genuine interest in her tone, a faint flicker in the coldness of her eyes.

I nodded. "Yes. I was born there too. I grew up among its cobbled streets, breathed its air, ran through its markets."

"I see." Her lips curved ever so slightly, sketching what might have been the ghost of a smile, a gesture so faint it disappeared almost instantly, but it had been there. "What a curious coincidence."

"Perhaps not so much," I replied softly, seeing an opportunity and clinging to it. "I suppose that both of us, in very different ways, share roots in the same soil. Even though the paths life forced us to take were... radically opposite."

Silence descended over us again, but this time its quality had changed. It was no longer uncomfortable or tense. It felt... contemplative. Expectant. As if a thin layer of ice had begun to melt, allowing the water beneath to flow slowly.

"What else did you like?" I asked, venturing a little further, navigating these newly thawed waters with extreme caution.

Leah remained quiet, her gaze lost somewhere on the opposite wall, as if rummaging through a chest of long-buried memories, dusting off treasures she thought were lost.

"Music," she said at last, and her voice sounded a little softer, more vulnerable. "In the palace's east wing, near the maidservants' quarters, there was an old lyre. One of the maids, Elara, knew how to play it. Sometimes, in the afternoons, when duties eased, she would sit and her fingers... made magic. I never learned to play it, I was trained for other things. But listening to those melodies, even from afar, through the walls... it helped me sleep. It drowned out other noises."

"I learned a little," I confessed, the memory of long, boring afternoons of forced practice coming back to me with surprising clarity. "Though I must admit I wasn't very good. My mother used to sigh in frustration."

"At least you had the option to try," murmured Leah, and the icy tone returned to her voice for an instant, a blast of winter wind that reminded me the thaw was partial, fragile.

I stayed quiet, taking the blow without flinching. It was a necessary reminder. The wall still stood, tall and thick, but now I had glimpsed what lay on the other side: not a void, but an abandoned garden, full of withered but not dead memories.

"Do you want me to play something for you?" I asked impulsively, the idea springing forth before I could stop it. "If I can get a lyre, I mean."

Leah looked at me then as if I had just suggested something strange. It was an expression of complete and utter bewilderment, mixed with a hint of incredulity. But, significantly, she didn't say no. She didn't mock me. She didn't reject me.

"Maybe," she replied after a pause that felt eternal. "When... when you have a lyre nearby." It was a tiny concession, a thread stretched across the abyss.

I nodded, storing that small and precious victory in a safe place within my chest. It was a "maybe." It was more than I had an hour ago.

That was when she, to my absolute surprise, took the initiative.

"I... also want to ask you something," she said, and her voice had a new tone, of cautious curiosity. The question caught me completely off guard, piercing me with unexpected frankness. "Why did you do it? Take me out of that cage, risk your life... I mean. Why?"

The question hung in the air between us, heavy with genuine weight. It wasn't an interrogation, but a real search for understanding. I drew breath, searching for the answer not in what sounded good, but in the bare truth in my heart.

"Because it was the right thing to do," I began, the words flowing slowly. "But not only for that. When I saw you there, locked away... something in your gaze, in your fragility, reminded me of myself. Of my own fears, of my own cages, though they were different. I thought about what it would be like to lose everything, absolutely everything, even your own name. And I knew, with a certainty that burned inside me, that I couldn't leave you behind. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself, nor look at myself in the mirror every morning, knowing I had abandoned you to that fate."

Leah lowered her gaze to her clasped hands, hiding her eyes. The silence that followed was deep, but not uncomfortable. It was a silence of digestion, of reflection. I could almost hear the hum of her thoughts, the internal struggle between entrenched distrust and the spark of a truth that resonated.

Finally, when she raised her gaze again, her eyes met mine, and in their grayish-blue depth I saw something new, something that hadn't been there before: it wasn't trust, not even close, but it was the acknowledgment of a possibility.

"I'm not ready to trust you," she said, and her words were clear, hard, but devoid of the animosity from before. It was a statement of fact, not a weapon.

“Not yet. The path to that is... long. And full of shadows.” She paused, then added, so quietly I almost missed it, “But... maybe... someday. That door... maybe it isn’t sealed forever.”

A spark of hope, small but indomitable, lit a flame in the center of my chest. It wasn’t the explosion of joy I might have once naively dreamed of. It was something more modest, more real: the first ember of a fire that could, with care and patience, grow to warm the cold between us.

“That,” I said, and my voice sounded suspiciously thick with emotion, “is more than I expected. And it’s enough.”

And for the first time since I had seen her in that cage, surrounded by fire and darkness, I felt that the wall of ice protecting her wasn’t impenetrable. That it had a crack, tiny, almost invisible, but through which, if I stayed close and patient, the light could seep in.