

Frozen Star 52

Chapter 52: Paths

[POV Liselotte]

The conversation with Leah had taken on a strange rhythm, a fragile calm that seemed to rest upon invisible threads. She didn't smile—far from it—but there was in her voice a tone different from the absolute ice of before. A faint crack, as if air could seep through the walls of her inner prison, allowing, timidly, the person who had existed before the cage to peek through.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed in that contemplative silence, interrupted only by the hypnotic crackle of the fireplace and the faint, muffled murmur drifting in from the hallway. Then a different sound, foreign to our bubble of truce, shattered the stillness: the metallic, dry, decisive clack of the doorknob being turned from outside.

The door opened with a slow yet relentless motion, revealing the imposing figure of the Guild Master. His silhouette stood massive and defining against the dark wooden frame, absorbing the dim light of the room. His hair, a blend of jet-black strands and dignified silver streaks, fell across his broad shoulders with a nonchalance that was itself a declaration of authority. His eyes, a brown so deep they seemed bottomless wells, scrutinized the room with a weight that made the very air feel denser.

"I hope I am not interrupting a crucial moment," he said, his voice like the rubbing of two smooth stones: deep, rough, and heavy with the patience of decades slowly forged.

I rose from the chair immediately, almost by instinct, straightening like a soldier before her general. Leah, in marked contrast, merely adjusted her position slightly among the blankets, pinning him with her gray-blue gaze—cold and calculating now.

There was no surprise in her eyes, only a distant recognition, almost resigned, as though she had always expected that someone with authority would eventually intrude to reclaim the space and redefine her reality once more.

“No, Master,” I answered, bowing my head in a gesture of respect that felt genuine. “We were only... talking.”

He nodded with measured slowness, a deliberate motion, and stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him with a muffled, final thud that seemed to seal the chamber’s fate. He strode toward the empty chair nearest the fireplace and sat, the ancient wood groaning under his weight in protest. Leaning forward, he rested his leather-clad elbows on his knees, his large, calloused fingers interlacing. His gaze, intense and inescapable, fell on me first, evaluating, before sliding toward Leah, taking in her fragile form with absolute seriousness.

“Decisions have ripened in the shadows and admit no further delay,” he declared bluntly, his voice filling the room like the roll of a funeral drum before battle.

The weight of his words, so raw and direct, made me stand even straighter, spine taut. Leah blinked, a spark of alert curiosity lighting in her eyes, though she remained expectantly silent.

“Decisions?” I asked, my throat drying slightly, hands clenched at my sides.

The Master nodded once, slowly, emphasizing the gravity of his words.

“Yes. The attack in the coliseum was no casual skirmish, no mindless outburst of beasts. It was a calculated move, a demonstration of strength and, more importantly, of knowledge. A signal as clear as smoke on a windless day: they know more than we believed. And if in the midst of that chaos a cage such as the one you found appeared... then the whispers claiming the princess of Whirikai still breathes will cease to be mere tavern rumors. Soon they’ll run like wildfire, reaching the ears of wavering allies and eager enemies alike.”

Leah’s shoulders stiffened under the weight of the blankets, a rigid line of resistance running through her frail body. Her pale, cracked lips pressed into a thin, white line of determination, and I could see the restrained fury—ancient and profound—glinting like sharpened ice in her eyes, though she wisely kept her voice silent.

“What are you suggesting, Master?” I asked, though part of me, the part that had grown up in Whirikai’s shadows and knew its games of power, already sensed the answer. I felt it like a cold stone in the pit of my stomach.

“That neutrality is no longer a luxury we can afford. That waiting for the demons to strike next is to sign our own death warrant,” he said, with the unshakable calm of someone who had spent days and nights weighing each syllable of this fate. His eyes, those dark wells of experience and authority, bore into mine with almost physical intensity. “That is why, in six months, when winter begins to yield its reign to spring, you will set out for Whirikai.”

My lips parted—a protest, a question, a plea caught in my throat. But he raised a large, scarred hand, halting my words before they were born.

“You will not go at the head of a squadron of shining steel. You will not go with guild reinforcements bearing banners. You will not even join a merchant caravan under false tales. It will be a journey of shadow and stealth.” He paused, his gaze slowly turning toward Leah, who watched him with the stillness of a gazelle sensing a predator. “It will be only you... the princess,” he said, and the title rang as both honor and monumental burden, “and your wolf companion. No one else. A thread of three against the entire skein of darkness.”

The air in my lungs seemed to freeze, crystallizing into a sharp stab of cold. My thoughts became a whirlwind of chaotic images: rain-slicked roads, ambushes in dark passes, moonless nights spent sleeping with one eye open, and the vast, endless stretch of land between me and the home I had fled.

“Undercover...?” I whispered, the word escaping my lips like a frosted breath, as I struggled to order the storm of fear and duty threatening to devour me.

“Yes. Absolute discretion. Move like the wind, leave less trace than a ghost. If the demons, or any who serve them, learn of your destination and your precious charge ahead of time, you won’t even reach the first crossroads. You’ll be a footnote in a chronicle of disappearances.”

The room sank into a silence so heavy I could hear the pounding of my own blood in my ears. My mind now boiled with terrifying clarity: hostile landscapes, unseen enemies, and the crushing weight of a mission that could change the fate of kingdoms.