

Frozen Star 62

Chapter 62: A Page in the Life of the Princess

[POV Liselotte]

The sun was beginning its descent, bathing the streets in a golden light that seemed like honey spilling over the rooftops. We had spent the afternoon at the market, getting lost among stalls of aromatic spices and exotic fabrics, enjoying an unusual respite from our rigorous training.

Now we walked through quieter alleys, where the bustle of the market faded into a distant echo. Chloé followed a few steps behind, her presence silent yet reassuring. Her eyes scanned every shadow with professionalism, though her relaxed posture suggested she detected no immediate threats.

Leah walked beside me, wrapped in her cloak as if seeking refuge within its folds.

I sensed something different about her that day, a vulnerability she usually kept hidden beneath layers of ice and mistrust. Her hands, concealed under the fabric, fidgeted nervously with something I couldn't see.

"Everything all right?" I asked, breaking the silence that had grown between us.

She nodded, but her gaze remained lost on the horizon, where the last rays of the sun stained the clouds orange and purple. "I'm just thinking."

"About what?"

A sigh escaped her lips, clouding the increasingly cold evening air. "How strange this is. To walk freely through streets I don't know, without chains, without armed guards watching my every move."

"It's your right," I replied, feeling the weight behind her words.

"Rights are abstract concepts when you've lived so long without them," she murmured, and for the first time since I'd known her, there was no bitterness in her voice, only a deep sadness that seemed to resonate in every syllable.

We stopped at a small natural overlook where the alley opened up to offer a view of the city sloping down toward the harbor. The first lantern lights were beginning to flicker on, twinkling like fireflies in the growing dusk.

It was then that Leah began to speak, her voice so low it almost got lost in the evening breeze.

"I have three older brothers."

I turned to her, surprised by the sudden confession. Her face was half-hidden by her hood, but I could see the tension in her jaw.

"They were always... the heirs. The strong ones. The ones who trained with swords and learned the intricate dances of politics. I was..." She paused, and an ironic smile appeared on her lips. "The little one everyone wanted to protect. The girl who needed to be sheltered from the world and its dangers."

She fell silent for a moment, as if doubting whether to continue.

"My grandparents lived in a city near Whirikal's capital. Whenever they could, they'd take me there for visits, though really it was more like a sweet kidnapping than anything else." A spark of nostalgia lit her eyes, fleeting as a firefly's glow. "They spoiled me endlessly. My grandmother baked cakes, and my grandfather told me stories of when he was a prince and how he met her. They said the youngest always had to be indulged, as if it were their duty to make up for what my brothers, busy with training and duties, couldn't give me."

The wind brushed our faces, carrying with it the distant aroma of freshly baked bread from some nearby bakery. Leah shivered, though I wasn't sure if it was from the cold or from the memories.

"The day I was kidnapped..." She swallowed hard, her voice cracking. "I was on my way to visit them. They had sent a special carriage, with the family emblem carved into the doors. My grandparents were waiting for me. They had my favorite dessert ready, a strawberry-filled cake only my grandmother knew how to make. And I... I never arrived."

A knot formed in my throat. The image was too vivid, too cruel in its simplicity—a table set with love, the warm laughter of two elders awaiting their granddaughter, and the empty chair that would never again be filled.

Leah clutched the cloak against her chest as if trying to contain physical pain. "During the first months in the cage, I comforted myself thinking at least they were safe. That they wouldn't have to see me... like that. But with time, that hope turned into torture. Because I don't know if they're still alive. The guild..."

She shook her head, and her eyes burned with restrained frustration. "They don't have much information about Whirikai. What comes takes months, even years. And most of it is rumors mixed with propaganda. I don't know if my brothers are still fighting, if my grandparents are still waiting, if even..." She cut herself off, pressing her lips so tightly they turned white.

Just then, a bell began to toll in the distance, marking the start of curfew. Its deep, melodious peal seemed to vibrate in harmony with Leah's pain.

I placed a hand on her shoulder, saying nothing. Her body tensed at first, as always when we touched on the subject of her past, but after a few seconds she didn't pull away. For the first time, she allowed the contact to last longer than an instant.

Chloé spoke to me in a whisper, grave and calm: "She's still bound to what she lost. Don't judge her. She's learning to breathe again."

I nodded slightly, understanding the meaning behind the warning. It wasn't about pity, but about recognizing that every wound has its own time to heal.

Leah lifted her gaze toward the sky, where the first star dared to appear among the purple-stained clouds. "What I hate most," she whispered, her voice laden with contradictory emotions, "is not knowing. Having no certainties. The cage... the captivity... at least there I knew what I was: a prisoner. But now... now I'm free, and yet I don't know what remains of everything I loved. How am I supposed to move forward when I don't even know what I left behind?"

Her voice broke on the last word, but she didn't cry. No. Her eyes, steel-gray, remained dry, defying any sign of what she considered weakness. Yet in their depth I could see the reflection of a pain so immense it seemed capable of swallowing the light of the stars that were beginning to appear.

"Freedom hurts differently than captivity," she went on, speaking more to herself than to me. "In the cell, the enemy was clear. Now... now the enemy is my own thoughts, the doubts that eat me from the inside, the nightmares that don't end when I wake."

I watched her profile illuminated by the dim evening light and felt how that wall of ice she had built around herself was beginning to show not only cracks but whole passages revealing the depth of her pain. She wasn't the impenetrable fortress she pretended to be, but a survivor carrying the weight of a lost kingdom and a shattered family.

"Whirikal wasn't perfect," she murmured, as if confessing a forbidden secret. "It had its divisions, its conflicts. But it was ours. The snow-covered mountains surrounding the valley... in winter, they looked like sleeping giants wrapped in white mantles. And on summer nights, the sky filled with shooting stars. My grandfather used to say they were the spirits of our ancestors, watching over us."

For an instant, I could see it—a fairytale kingdom wrapped in mist and mystery, a place that now existed only in the memory of those who had loved it.

"We'll return soon," I said softly. "That's why we train, isn't it?"

Leah looked at me, and for the first time I saw something like hope flicker in her eyes, fragile as glass. "Yes. Or maybe I'm just a fool clinging to ghosts."

"Sometimes ghosts are all we have," I replied. "And that doesn't make them any less real."

She nodded slowly, and her posture relaxed a little. "My grandparents... if they're still alive, they must be very old. Sometimes I wonder if they'd even recognize me. The girl who left isn't the woman I've become."

"They would recognize you," I affirmed with conviction. "Love isn't erased by time."

A companionable silence stretched between us, broken only by the whisper of the wind and the distant murmur of the city. Shadows lengthened, merging into one another, and the street lanterns began to light up one by one, like beacons guiding us home.

"You're not alone," I finally said, my words simple but filled with a certainty I felt down to my bones.

She looked at me, with a mix of disbelief and weariness. And, after a long moment, she nodded. A small, ambiguous acceptance, but real. It wasn't the end of her pain, but perhaps the beginning of something new, the possibility of sharing the burden she had carried alone for so long.

"Thank you," she murmured, and though the word was almost inaudible, it resonated in the twilight air with the strength of a vow.

We continued walking in silence, our shadows stretching and merging across the cobblestones. Chloé joined us, walking at my side, and for an instant, our three silhouettes formed an oddly united image against the backdrop of the falling night.

For the first time, I was certain that Leah wasn't just someone to protect. She was someone who, in time, might learn to protect us too. And maybe, just maybe, she would find a way to honor her people

and her family not with mourning and pain, but with the quiet strength of someone who dares to live again.

The stars multiplied above, silent witnesses to our fragile understanding. And in the distance, the city breathed with its steady rhythm, oblivious to the echoes of Whirikai resonating in the heart of one of its newest