

Frozen Star 64

Chapter 64: My heroine.

[POV Leah]

The rain had ceased hours earlier, but its echo lingered in the air, a watery whisper that wrapped the night in a mantle of tranquility. In the darkness of the shared bedroom, every sound seemed amplified—the deep, steady breathing of Chloé, the occasional creak of the wooden beams adjusting to the night's cold, and the faint murmur of the wind brushing against the windowpanes.

But above all, I could hear the soft rhythm of Liselotte's breathing from the adjoining bed. That sound had become my anchor on the darkest nights, the tangible reminder that I was no longer alone in my captivity.

Closing my eyes, I let memory take me back to the hours before, to that moment in the courtyard when the world seemed to crumble at my feet. Kaelen's words still echoed in my ears, each one a sharp knife slicing through the fragile armor I had worked so hard to build.

They have suspended the search.

They are no longer looking for you.

They have declared you dead.

Each phrase was a direct blow to the heart, a confirmation of my worst fears. Through all these months of imprisonment and then freedom, I had clung to the idea that somewhere, someone was still searching for me. That my family, my people, had not forgotten the lost princess of Whirikal.

And in an instant, that fragile thread of hope snapped.

I remembered the hollow emptiness that washed over me, as if the very ground opened beneath my feet to swallow me whole. The same feeling I experienced on the first day in that cage, when I realized no one was coming to rescue me.

But then something different happened.

Liselotte came closer. Not with pity, not with empty compassion, but with a serene determination that seemed to counter the storm raging inside me. Her hands took mine, and instead of the instinctive rejection I always felt at contact, I found comfort.

And then her embrace.

Gods, her embrace.

It wasn't the protective hug of my brothers, which always made me feel fragile and vulnerable. It wasn't the condescending hug of my grandparents, who treated me like a child to be coddled. It was different—firm, steady, yet never suffocating. She held me without crushing me, gave me refuge without making me feel weak.

For the first time in years, I allowed someone to see me break. And instead of exploiting my vulnerability, Liselotte became a wall against which I could finally rest the weight I had carried for so long.

A part of me—the part that had survived years of captivity—panicked at this surrender. I had sworn never to lower my guard, never to trust enough to let myself be hurt again. And yet, there I was, trembling in her arms, letting her see me at my most fragile.

And the most extraordinary thing was that she did not judge me. She didn't try to minimize my pain or rush me through it. She simply stayed, holding me, reminding me that I was alive, that I mattered, that even if an entire kingdom had stopped searching, she had not forgotten me.

I opened my eyes in the darkness, directing my gaze toward where she slept. I couldn't see her clearly, but I knew every line of her face by memory. I had studied it for countless hours, marveling at the person who had burst into my life like a ray of light in perpetual darkness.

I remembered the day she rescued me. The smell of mold and despair in my cell, the metallic sound of locks breaking, the growls of orcs falling beneath her blade. I had been curled in a corner, having seen too many false hopes to believe this one was different.

But then she knelt before me, and her eyes... her eyes showed neither pity nor morbid curiosity. They showed recognition. As if instead of seeing a filthy, broken prisoner, she saw a person. An equal.

"Come with me," she had said, extending her hand. It wasn't a command; it was an invitation. A choice.

And against all logic, against every survival instinct screaming at me to distrust, that it was another trap, I took her hand.

It was the best decision I've ever made.

Since then, Liselotte has become my fixed point in a universe that lost its center long ago. She is my anchor when memories drag me into dark waters, my lighthouse when I lose myself in labyrinths of pain and rage.

Chloé, too, is a constant and reassuring presence. Her quiet strength, her calm way of observing the world—it reminds me of the mountains of my homeland, impassive and unshaken by the storms battering their slopes. But with Lotte it's different. With Lotte there is a connection that transcends companionship, even friendship.

I smiled faintly in the darkness, feeling an unusual warmth spread inside my chest. It was a feeling so alien, so long forgotten, that I barely recognized it. Hope.

Not the fragile, desperate hope of before, which depended on rescue or on returning to a home that might no longer exist. But a different hope, quieter, more resilient. The hope that no matter what had happened in Whirikal, no matter if my family had declared me dead or simply moved on, I could build something new here.

Not as the lost princess of Whirikal, but simply as Leah. The Leah who could conjure fire even if it came with struggle. The Leah who was learning to trust again. The Leah who had a heroine who chose her every day, with every embrace, every word of encouragement, every glance that told me I was enough, just as I was.

A noise from her bed made me hold my breath. I heard her shift, mumbling something unintelligible in her sleep before settling again and continuing to breathe steadily.

My smile widened. Even asleep, she watched over me, in her own way.

Closing my eyes, I allowed memories of Whirikal to come—not as the painful ghosts that once haunted me, but as what they truly were. Memories of a past time, of a life that was no longer mine.

I saw the snowy peaks of the mountains surrounding the valley where I grew up. The sound of temple bells ringing in the cold morning air. The aroma of my grandmother's honey-and-nut cookies, always baked whenever I visited.

For the first time, these memories did not tear my heart with longing. Instead, they cradled me with bittersweet tenderness, reminding me that even though that life was gone, I had lived, I had loved, I had been happy.

And I could be happy again. In a different way, in a different place, with different people, but I could be.

The lesson was clear now. It wasn't about desperately clinging to a past that might no longer exist, but about honoring it by fully living the present. Carrying forward the best of Whirikal—the love of my family, the strength of my people, the beauty of its landscapes—in my heart, and sharing it with those who had chosen me as I had chosen them.

With Lotte. With Chloé. Even with gruff Kaelen, in his rare moments of almost-kindness.

I breathed deeply, feeling the air fill my lungs, feeling my body relax against the mattress. The weight I had carried for so long—the weight of expectation, of duty, of loss—felt lighter now. It hadn't vanished completely, but it no longer crushed me.

I opened my eyes once more, looking toward where Liselotte slept.

"Thank you," I whispered into the darkness, so soft it was barely a breath. "For seeing me. For saving me. For being my sister in this world I still don't always recognize, but am learning to love because of you."

As if she had heard me, she murmured again in her sleep, turning toward me. Her profile was outlined against the faint moonlight seeping through the window, serene and strong.

And in that moment, I knew that no matter what the future might bring—the battles we would have to fight, the challenges we would face—as long as we were together, as long as we had each other, I would find the strength to keep going.

Not as the princess of Whirikal. Not as the freed prisoner. But simply as Leah. Liselotte's sister. Kaelen's student. Chloé's companion.

It was enough. More than enough.

It was everything.

With that certainty lulling me like a lullaby, I finally surrendered to sleep, feeling peace spread through me like the warmth of the first spring sun after an endless winter.

And for the first time in a very, very long time, I dreamed peacefully.