

Frozen Star 124

Chapter 124: Voices of Home and a Challenge

[POV Liselotte]

The afternoon fell slowly, the sky painted in shades of orange and violet that shimmered over the snow. Smoke rose from the chimneys in calm spirals, and the scent of damp wood mixed with that of freshly baked bread. In the kitchen, my mother was finishing dinner while Claire played with Chloé near the fire.

Leah and I had spent most of the day reviewing the guild's reports and the details of Kaelen's letter, but there was still something we needed to understand — something only my father could explain.

Carl was in his workshop, just behind the house. The rhythmic sound of the hammer echoed through the cold air. When we pushed the door open, a wave of heat and the smell of molten metal enveloped us.

"Dad," I said carefully as I stepped inside, "do you have a minute?"

The hammer stopped mid-swing. My father looked up, his face covered in soot, a smile peeking through his beard.

"For you two, I always have time," he replied, setting the piece down on the anvil. "What's going on? Did the guild reply already?"

“Yes,” I said, showing him the letter. “Kaelen sent it. He recommended us for the Rank A advancement trial.”

Carl’s eyes gleamed with surprise and pride.

“Well, that’s quite the achievement. Not everyone makes it that far... and certainly not at your age.” Then, his tone turned more serious. “Do you know what the trial involves?”

Leah shook her head.

“They said each group receives a different mission, but they didn’t explain further.”

My father nodded slowly, wiping his hands with a blackened cloth.

“That’s right. Every trial is unique, and the Council assigns missions based on the team’s skills and history. It’s not just a test of strength or magic... they also judge your reasoning, prudence, and courage.”

I crossed my arms.

“Have you ever seen one of those trials?”

Carl let out a short, weary laugh.

“Not in person. But when I was young, I met a group who went through it. Four high-ranking adventurers, all upper Rank B. Their task was to rescue a merchant held captive in an ogre settlement north of the Yuren Hills.”

Claire, who had quietly peeked in, widened her eyes.

“Ogres? Like the ones in the stories?”

“Worse,” Carl said with a grim smile. “Big, organized, and smart enough to set traps. But here’s the hardest part: the guild ordered them not to fight. Under any circumstances. They had to sneak in, free the merchant, and escape without being detected.”

Leah frowned.

“No fighting... not even if they were attacked?”

“Exactly,” he said. “It was a mission of stealth and strategy, not combat. If the ogres noticed them, they failed automatically. And from what I heard, even one misplaced crunch in the snow could summon an entire horde.”

I fell silent.

The sound of the furnace fire and the hiss of metal seemed to make his words even heavier.

“Did they succeed?” I finally asked.

Carl gave a faint smile.

“Yes. But they came back wounded, exhausted... and with the eyes of those who had learned how fragile life can be in a single night. One of them said that, even without drawing a sword, it was the hardest mission he had ever faced.”

Leah tightened her grip on the edge of her cloak. Her breathing slowed.

“If our trial is like that...” she murmured, “I don’t know if we could do it.”

“We could,” I interrupted. “We’ve done it before. Maybe not the same way, but we’ve already overcome things that seemed impossible.”

Carl chuckled, a low, affectionate sound.

“That’s what I wanted to hear. Still, don’t underestimate the trials. They don’t just test skill... they test your mind. Some fail not because of weakness, but because of fear or doubt.”

Claire looked up at her father, curious.

“So, what should they do?”

Carl leaned forward, resting one arm on the anvil.

“Train. Sharpen your reflexes. And most of all, learn to understand each other even better. A group that truly knows one another moves as one. If you can do that, no test will be impossible.”

Chloé, who had been lying near the door, lifted her head and said telepathically:

“Sounds like someone wants to train under the snow again.”

Leah smiled tiredly.

“As long as we don’t go back to falling into frozen rivers.”

"I promise I won't push you this time," Chloé replied with feigned innocence.

My father burst out laughing.

"That reminds me of when you, Lotte, tried to learn archery and ended up breaking the stable window."

I blushed.

"I was eight!"

"And had terrible aim," added Claire, laughing.

The air grew lighter. Fear melted away between laughter and memories.

Even so, my father's words lingered in my mind.

It's not a test of strength.

It's a test of judgment.

That night, after dinner, we stayed by the fire.

Leah read Kaelen's letter once more in silence, as if she wanted to engrave every word into her memory.

Chloé slept curled up on the rug, and Claire was drawing in her notebook — a sketch of the “mysterious ogre group.”

I watched the flames dance and thought about everything we had been through — the destroyed villages, the battles, the losses... and how, despite it all, we were still here.

“Lotte,” Leah said suddenly, breaking the silence, “aren't you afraid?”

I looked at her.

“Of course I am. But I won't let fear decide for me.

It already did once... and I almost lost everything I love.”

She lowered her gaze. The firelight reflected in her eyes, giving them a golden glow.

“I’m afraid too,” she admitted. “But when I think that you’ll be there... and Chloé... then I feel like I can try.”

I leaned a little closer to her.

“We’re not going to try, Leah. We’re going to do it.”

Her smile was small but real.

“Alright.”

Later that night, when everyone was asleep, I stepped out onto the porch.

The air was sharp, but the sky was clear — full of stars.

Each one twinkled like a distant promise.

I heard footsteps behind me. It was my father.

“Can’t sleep, huh?”

“Not really,” I admitted.

Carl crossed his arms, gazing out at the snowy horizon.

“You’ve always been like that,” he said with a smile. “Thinking too much before every step. But that’s what makes you a good adventurer. You don’t just fight; you understand what you’re protecting.”

I stayed quiet for a moment, then murmured:

“Dad... do you think we’ll be able to do it?”

He looked at me, serious, his eyes glowing with that steady warmth that always seemed to pierce through my doubts.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But if anyone can, it’s you. Because you don’t fight for fame or gold. You fight for something much stronger — the promise of never leaving anyone behind.”

The silence of winter wrapped around us.

And for a moment, I felt his words hang in the air, mingling with the smoke from our home.

When I went back inside, Leah was asleep by the fire, holding Kaelen’s letter as if it were a charm. Claire breathed peacefully, and Chloé murmured dreams under her breath.

I sat beside them.

And I understood that, no matter how hard the trial would be, as long as we stayed together, fear could never break us.

Dawn would come soon.

And with it, the first day of our training toward Rank A.