

## Frozen Star 132

### Chapter 132: The Weight of the Ascent

[POV Liselotte]

The morning dawned in silence, as if the world was still unsure whether to shake off the frost of dawn. I got dressed without saying much; Leah was quiet too, though not distant. More like... focused. As if everything we talked about last night had settled in her chest, giving her a different kind of calm.

Chloé accompanied us to the edge of town, stretching with a loud yawn.

"Let me guess," Claire murmured while tying her coat. "You're going to the guild?"

I nodded.

"Today we'll request the ascension mission."

She smiled, though worry lingered behind it.

"Don't come back late."

Leah hugged her, and together we walked toward the guild building.

The air was cold, but not unpleasant. It felt more like a warning. As if winter itself wanted to remind us that the decisions made today would shape the path we'd walk tomorrow.

The guild door opened with its usual creak. Inside, the atmosphere was warmer: old wood, chimney smoke, and the smell of wet leather brought in by adventurers.

Several faces turned toward us. Some curious, others recognizing us. Rumors had been spreading for days. Rumors about our ascension request. About Kaelen. About the demons. About the king's ritual.

But Leah held her head high. And so did I.

We approached the counter. The receptionist, a woman with tightly tied reddish hair, looked up and offered a small smile.

"Lotte. Leah. I was expecting you to come."

Leah blinked.

"So soon?"

The receptionist checked a few documents.

"The guildmaster approved your request this very morning. He said it was better to speak with you directly before assigning the details."

My stomach tightened.

It was already decided.

"Can we see him now?" I asked.

"Of course." She stood and pointed to a wooden staircase in the back. "His office is on the second floor, third door to the right. He's waiting for you."

Leah and I exchanged glances.

Then we went upstairs.

Every step felt quieter than the last. The second floor was almost empty, except for a few windows letting in a pale gray light.

The indicated door was slightly open.

I knocked softly.

"Come in," a deep voice replied.

We walked in.

The man behind the desk looked as though he'd been carved from old timber. His hair was dark gray, tied in a thick braid. Short beard, half-closed eyes, alert. His arms were like beams, marked with scars that told stories from long before I was born.

He stood when he saw us.

"So you're Lotte and Leah," he said with a small, almost imperceptible smile. "Finally."

Leah nodded with a respect she rarely showed.

"Guildmaster, it is an honor—"

"No titles here," he interrupted, raising a hand. "My name is Ronan. Just Ronan. If you're going to ascend to Rank A, you'll need to get used to speaking at the same level as everyone else. We're adventurers, not courtiers."

I nodded.

"Then thank you for receiving us, Ronan."

A satisfied grunt left him.

"Kaelen talked a lot about you. Too much, I'd say. The old man spoke as if he were watching a pair of talented monsters being born."

Leah blushed slightly.

So did I. It was strange hearing that from Kaelen.

Ronan took a thick parchment, unrolled it, and placed it on the table.

"This will be your ascension mission to Rank A. And I need you to listen with absolute attention. Not a single detail can be overlooked."

We straightened instinctively.

"It's an escort mission," Ronan said, tapping a map of the kingdom spread across the table. "It will depart from the capital of Whirikal... and must reach this point"—he traced the eastern border, where the map darkened with irregular lines—"The journey will take more than two weeks."

Leah frowned.

"A military caravan?"

Ronan shook his head.

"Not exactly. It's a royal caravan... but the contents aren't military. Though they could change the course of the war."

My heart skipped a beat.

"What does it carry?" I asked.

Ronan fixed me with absolute seriousness.

"I can't tell you. The orders come directly from the capital. Not even the regular escorts know. And you shouldn't know either. The only thing I will say... is that it's a magical artifact. One that could tip the balance against the demons, if it arrives intact."

Leah opened her mouth to ask more, but Ronan stopped her with a gesture.

"No. I won't give details about the object, its nature, or its function. The less you know, the better. The enemy has eyes and ears everywhere. And I won't risk any information leaving this room."

I swallowed hard.

The tension grew.

"There will be danger, then," I said.

"A lot," Ronan replied without sugarcoating anything. "Rank A is not decorative. Demons have been moving in the eastern frontier. Bandits too. And there are rumors... rumors of new creatures, mutated by dark mana. No one knows what they are yet."

A chill ran down my spine.

Leah squeezed my hand slightly.

Ronan observed us carefully.

"Kaelen trusted you. He said you were ready. I... trust his judgment. But understand this mission may cost you your lives."

He said it without drama.

Without embellishment.

Just as a fact.

A fact we had to accept if we wanted to advance.

I took a deep breath.

"We accept."

Leah nodded too.

Ronan smiled faintly, satisfied.

"Good. Then I have something for you."

He bent down and pulled out a small black wooden box. He opened it with care, revealing two circular talismans made of silver-colored metal, each engraved with an ancient symbol.

"These talismans are advanced protection charms, made with runes from the Helexia college," he explained. "They will absorb one single lethal attack. Just one. And then they'll become useless. But that 'one'... could be the difference between living and dying."

Leah looked at them in reverence.

"Runes from Helexia? That's... that's extremely old magic."

"And extremely expensive," Ronan added, crossing his arms. "I'm not giving them to you for decoration. I'm giving them because the capital wants to ensure this mission doesn't fail."

I took mine. The metal was cold, but it vibrated faintly, as if breathing.

Leah took hers as well.

"When must we depart?" I asked.

"Tomorrow at dawn." Ronan rolled up the parchment and put it away. "Go home, prepare whatever you need. Sleep. Tomorrow... you won't have time to rest."

His gaze softened, barely.

"Do not doubt. Do not look back. And trust each other. In all my years as an adventurer, I saw too many teams break from fear. You two... don't seem like that kind. Keep it that way."

Leah lowered her head.

"We will."

I nodded.

"Thank you, Ronan."

He lifted his hand, dismissing us.

"Go. And may the moon guide you in what's coming."

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When we left the office, the hallway felt longer than before. As if every step brought us closer—inevitably—to something bigger than ourselves.

Leah stopped for a moment, gripping her talisman.

"Lotte..." she murmured, "this isn't just an ascension test anymore."

I looked at the closed door behind us.

"No. It's the first step toward the war."

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

And neither of us stepped back.

We left the guild together, under the cold midday light.

The wind blew from the north, stirring the old snow. And for the first time since hearing the prophecy... I felt the world was turning forward, not downward.

"Let's go home," I said. "Tomorrow everything begins."

Leah took my hand.

"Together. Always."

And we walked toward the place where, just the night before, we promised never to give up.

Winter was still there, watching us.

But it no longer stopped us.

It pushed us forward.

Toward dawn.