

## Frozen Star 134

### Chapter 134: Under Eyes That Won't Accept Us

[POV Liselotte]

Northern winter had a strange way of measuring time.

Not by days or hours, but by how many logs burned in the fireplace, how many loaves of bread Mom baked to keep us warm, and how many layers of frost appeared on the windows at dawn.

During those three days, the house moved with that slow, steady rhythm of preparation.

But beneath all of it... a silent tremor ran through each of us.

The three days before the mission passed as if the world were holding its breath.

A breath it knew it would soon have to release.

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Three days before the journey

Day 1

The morning after receiving the mission, Leah woke up early.

Not because she wanted to... but because she simply couldn't help it.

I found her in the yard, barefoot on the snow, letting the cold bite her skin as she practiced the breathing technique Kaelen had taught her.

"It's dangerous to stand there without boots," I said, crossing my arms.

"The cold helps me focus my mana," she replied without opening her eyes. "It makes it clearer."

I watched her for a few seconds.

Magic danced around her like faint vapor.

The air condensed into thin lines that vibrated with each exhaling breath.

She looked fragile... yet unbreakable at the same time.

Chloé lay beside me, grumbling.

"If she gets sick, I'm carrying her all the way to the capital," she huffed in my mind.

"Don't worry," Leah said with a tiny smile. "I won't get sick."

And she didn't.

When she finished, she walked toward me.

"Lotte... do you think we're ready?"

"We're alive," I answered. "And we keep moving forward. That makes us more than ready."

I don't know if she believed me.

But at least... I saw her breathe a little easier.

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Day 2

My day began with the metallic sound of my sword striking the training post.

It wasn't like sparring with Leah.

This was repetition.

Discipline.

Sharpening instincts until they became instinct alone.

Every strike carved a small circle of snow around me.

One.

Two.

Three.

At strike thirty-seven, my arm began to tremble.

At strike sixty-two, sweat was already sliding down my spine.

“Don’t punish yourself,” my father said behind me. “You’re training, not surviving.”

“It’s the same, isn’t it?” I asked, not stopping.

“No.”

He took my sword gently. “Surviving is improvising. Training is shaping that improvisation so that the day you need it... it doesn’t break.”

I finally stopped.

“Do you think... this mission will be that dangerous?”

Carl took a deep breath and looked straight at me.

“I don’t know what you’re going to face. But an artifact requiring this much escorting... isn’t something a common thief would want.”

His eyes hardened.

“It means the demons want it.”

Surprisingly, I didn’t feel fear.

I felt certainty.

“Then we’ll protect it,” I said.

My father smiled with a strange mix of pride and worry.

“I expected nothing less.”

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Day 3

Mom and Claire spent the entire day packing as if we were leaving for months, not weeks.

“It’s just in case,” Mom repeated while stuffing medicinal herbs into little cloth bags. “Everything is always just in case.”

Claire ran around with a list in her hand.

“Map checked! Purified water! Signal crystals! Food for five days! More food for eight! More food in case of the ‘just in case’!”

Chloé helped with whatever she could...

which wasn’t much, because her idea of “helping” was sitting on top of the cloak Leah was trying to fold.

“Chloé...” Leah pleaded. “That’s my new cloak. That— Chloé, get off! You weigh like a giant rock!”

“I’m warming it for you,” Chloé answered mentally. “I don’t want you leaving while feeling cold.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

The house filled with noise, footsteps, little arguments, unexpected hugs, and silences that weighed too much.

And in those silences... we found the truth of what it meant to leave.

It wasn’t just a mission.

It was a step toward the future of the kingdom.

Toward the beginning of a war.

Toward the truth of who we were.

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The day of departure

We left home before dawn.

Fresh snow covered the road with a silvery blue glow.

The city's torches still burned, but the light of morning grew slowly—timid, soft, as if it too didn't want us to leave.

Mom hugged us once more.

Claire cried with no shame.

"Promise you'll come back!" she demanded with red eyes. "I want you safe! I want you whole! I want you here!"

"We'll come back," I said—though a part of me knew I couldn't fully promise that.

But I said it.

Because I needed to.

Leah hugged Claire tightly.

"I'll return," she whispered. "I promise you."

Then we walked away.

And the house faded behind us... like a lighthouse we would return to burdened with more wounds than victories.

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When we arrived at the escort camp

I had never seen anything like it.

The meeting point was a snowy valley east of Whirikal, where the first sunlight barely touched the tents arranged in a circle.

Royal banners waved on every post.

Soldiers in immaculate armor cleaned their weapons, checked harnesses, organized formations.

One hundred soldiers.

Four groups of B-rank adventurers.

Two groups of C-rank adventurers.

And us.

Three adventurers who, on paper, didn't belong.

Three girls whose stories had turned into rumors.

Three people who had been stared at with doubt more times than I could count.

When we arrived, the soldiers looked at us.

And the murmurs began.

“There they are...”

“The ones from the guild...”

“Isn’t she the one they say a demon copied?”

“What are they doing here?”

“They accepted them for a rank A mission?”

“Isn’t it dangerous to have them near the artifact?”

Leah lowered her gaze.

A reflex.

A painful habit.

I moved closer to her.

“Ignore them,” I said.

But she listened.

I could feel it.

The rumors clung to her like shadows.

The kidnapping.

The disappearance.

The imitation.

The demon princess.

Not an official title, but it spread like wildfire among people who needed a simple explanation for something terribly complex.

The captain was studying a map with two sergeants.

When he saw us approach, he lifted his head.

A tall man, gray-haired, skin hardened by northern cold.

His armor was hand-polished, not a single dent.

Not young, but solid—like a shield carved from stone.

He looked us up and down without a word.

I inhaled deeply.

Leah did too.

“We’re the adventurers assigned by the guild,” I said, stepping forward.

The captain held our gaze for a few seconds.

Then frowned.

“Liselotte Carl and Leah...?”

He paused.

“Leah Alba Whirikal.”

The second name fell like silent thunder.

Soldiers stiffened.

The adventurers behind him too.

They knew that surname.

They knew that story.

Leah swallowed, but didn't step back.

The captain finally nodded.

"Good. The mission confirmed it. You're part of the escort."

But the tension radiating from him was clear.

"I trust you because the guild trusts you"—not "because I want to."

"I'm Captain Arven Thorne," he said, hitting his chest with a closed fist— a short military salute.  
"Commander of this escort. I'm responsible for the artifact's safety. You'll be responsible for your performance during the march."

"We will," I answered.

He studied my expression as if trying to confirm my words.

Then spoke with a bluntness that surprised me.

“I don’t care what the rumors say. Whether they’re false or true.

I only care about this:”

His eyes sharpened.

“If you pose a risk to the mission... or to the artifact... I’ll remove you from the convoy without hesitation.”

Leah clenched her fists.

I stepped forward.

“We won’t be a risk,” I said, cold and firm. “We’ll be an advantage.”

Arven held my gaze.

For a moment, I thought he might argue... but he didn’t.

“We’ll see on the road,” he finally said. “Set up your things. We leave in one hour.”

As we walked to the adventurers’ section, the whispers continued.

“That’s the girl who lived with demons...”

“They say she can use dark magic...”

“What if she’s a spy?”

“Has the guild gone mad accepting them?”

“Where’s the real princess?”

“She’s probably dead...”

Leah lowered her head again.

And something ignited inside my chest.

Anger.

An old, familiar anger.

The anger of seeing Leah cry silently more times than any of these people could imagine.

I turned.

“If you have something to say, say it to her face!” I shouted.

The camp froze.

A hundred eyes turned toward me.

Cold wind sliced through the silence.

Then... a voice rose from the crowd.

“So it’s true.

You’re the impostor.”

Leah flinched as if struck.

I clenched my jaw.

“Leah is not an impostor,” I said, my voice sharp as frost. “She’s a survivor. And she’s here to help protect the artifact that might save this kingdom.”

A soldier scoffed.

“And who says we can trust a ‘survivor’ who lived with demons for years?”

Leah stepped back.

I stepped forward.

“I do,” I said. “I say you can trust her.

And if anyone has a problem with that...

come say it to my face.”

The tension snapped tight.

But no one stepped forward.

Because for the first time... Leah lifted her head.

With fire.

With courage.

With the identity she would someday claim without trembling.

“Lotte,” she whispered. “It’s enough.”

I exhaled.

She was right.

It wasn't time to fight.

Not yet.

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One hour passed too quickly

The wheels of the wagons were reinforced with steel and stability runes.

The crates were sealed with high-security magic.

And at the center of the convoy...

The artifact carriage.

Sealed.

Guarded by ten elite soldiers.

Protected by magical barriers that vibrated faintly in the air.

Each rune glowed a deep blue, almost breathing.

Leah stared at it without blinking.

“I can feel it...” she whispered. “That object is... immense. It’s beating. Like... it’s not just a weapon. Like it’s... something alive.”

A shiver ran down my spine.

The captain raised his voice.

“Move out! Formations ready! Clear the path east!”

Wheels rolled.

Soldiers marched.

Adventurers took position.

And we...

We moved to the right flank, just behind the central carriage.

Leah inhaled deeply.

"Lotte..."

"Yes?"

She looked at me with that unique blend of fear and bravery.

"Whatever happens on this mission... don't leave me alone."

I held out my hand.

“Never.”

She took it.

The road to the east stretched before us.

White.

Cold.

Uncertain.

And in silence...

the mission that would change our destiny began.