

THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Chapter 10: Days of Travel

We had left the capital five days ago.

The carriage moved slowly along paths that became less and less marked, where the trees closed in over us as if they wanted to hide us from the sky.

The air was fresh and damp, full of the sounds of nature: the crunch of branches under the wheels, the songs of birds, the murmur of the wind among the leaves.

Bren, the driver, had warned us that this day would be the last with good terrain.

Starting tomorrow, the road would become steeper, rockier, and we would sometimes have to walk alongside the carriage to lighten it. So Dad decided we would camp before nightfall.

"Tonight you will sleep under the stars, Lotte" he said with a smile. "It will be a good opportunity to teach you the basics of outdoor life."

It was not the first time I had slept away from home, but it was the first so far away, so surrounded by the unknown.

The forest had a wild beauty that sometimes became unsettling. Sunlight barely filtered through the foliage, creating shadows that seemed to move on their own. But I stayed firm. This was the path I had chosen.

We stopped near a clearing where a stream ran. Mom and Claire began unloading the backpacks from the carriage while Dad inspected the surroundings.

Soon we began setting up camp. Dad asked me to help him pitch the tent.

"The first rule for camping" he said while placing the stakes "is to observe the ground. Never set your tent in a hollow. If it rains during the night, the water will accumulate there and you will have a swamp inside your sleeping bag."

I nodded, trying to memorize every word. The tent was smaller than I imagined, but apparently enough for the four of us if we squeezed in a little.

Then came the fire.

"Now let's see if you remember what I taught you" said Dad, throwing me a small hunting knife and a flint stone. "I want you to prepare the fire this time."

I knelt beside the dry branches. Dad had shown me how to do it during our training, but doing it in real conditions was different.

I failed several times, but finally, a spark jumped and the fire began to breathe.

"I did it!"

"Well done" said Dad, patting me on the shoulder. "It's not just about strength. It's patience, technique... and some stubbornness."

Mom cooked soup over the fire with water from the stream and a bit of dried meat, onion and roots we had bought in the last village.

The aroma that came from the food as it cooked made my mouth water. Claire didn't stop talking during the entire dinner, telling how beautiful the forest was, though she said at night the trees looked like monsters.

When we finished eating, I walked a little away to sit on a rock and look at the sky.

It was clear, full of stars. I never got tired of seeing that sky.

In my previous world, the city lights hid most of the stars. Here, it seemed like each one had something to say.

Dad sat next to me after a while.

"What do you think?"

"That it is beautiful... but also strange."

"It is" he nodded. "But as long as you have your sword, your mind clear and a reason to keep going, no forest can scare you."

Then he taught me to identify some sounds: the steps of a deer, the song of an owl, the creaking of branches caused by the wind versus that made by an animal.

I was surprised how detailed everything was. I realized that Dad was not only strong with the sword, but with all of himself.

"And remember" he said "in nature, there are no small mistakes. Sleeping poorly covered can kill you. Eating an unknown plant too. So don't rush. Observe. Learn."

That night we all slept together in the tent. Mom hugged me on one side, Claire on the other. The warmth of their bodies, the rhythm of their breaths, made me feel safe.

That night, for the first time in a long while, I dreamed of a possible future. A future where I was not just a girl without magic. A future where I could be strong. Where I could protect.

Where I could be free.

Something that unfortunately was not in my near future. A few days later something I least expected happened.

"Claire! Mom! Dad! Where are you?..."

"Where am I?..."