

THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Chapter 7: Where Hope Sleeps

We returned home after the battle with Gared. The adrenaline still pulsed through my veins, mixed with the confusion of what had just happened.

I really never thought I could land a hit on a warrior like him.

But beyond pride, I was overwhelmed by a strange mixture of fear and hope. Had it just been luck? Or was... something else awakening inside me?

The door creaked as we entered. As soon as I stepped inside, Mom's arms wrapped around me like a warm blanket in the middle of a storm. Her embrace was strong, trembling, but it conveyed her care and love.

"Lotte!" she cried. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? Let me see!"

Her voice was full of worry. She touched my arms, my face, looking anxiously for any scratch or mark. Mom had always been like that: a shield of tenderness and constant fear.

"I'm fine, Mom" I replied with a shy smile. "Nothing happened to me."

At that moment, Dad walked in with a big smile on his face. His boots stomped loudly, and his voice, as always, rang out with contagious joy.

"Don't worry, darling!" he told Mom. "In fact, she landed a hit on Gared!"

Silence fell immediately. Mom froze, processing the words. Then her eyes widened.

"What? Seriously!?"

"That's right! Our daughter is a true genius!"

"This calls for a celebration!" Mom suddenly exclaimed, full of energy.

Dad laughed heartily as he rushed to the pantry.

"Set the table! Today we celebrate the victory of our dear Liselotte!"

The house burst into motion. Claire, who had followed us silently, hurried to set the table while Mom cooked and Dad pulled out bottles of mead. Dad's adventurer companions, gathered on the porch, were promptly invited.

The table filled with hot dishes: hare stew, freshly baked bread, aged cheese, and fresh fruit. The aroma filled the air, and for the first time in a long while, I felt everything was alright.

Laughter began soon. Dad recounted the scene from the battle as if it were a legend. His words were exaggerated, but no one interrupted him.

"And then, when Gared jumped with his sword in the air, Lotte moved like lightning! Bam! Straight to the chest!" he said, making dramatic gestures.

"Liar!" I laughed. "I barely touched him, and it was on the arm."

"That doesn't matter! You touched him! That's more than many ever do" said one of Dad's adventurer friends, a man who fought with a large mace named Brom.

"Cheers to Lotte!" they all shouted, raising their mugs.

Claire looked at me with a gentle smile.

"I'm proud of you, sister" she whispered. "Maybe this is just the beginning."

My heart pounded. Not because of the feat itself, but something deeper... a spark crackling inside me.

Then, as I bit into a piece of bread, Mom spoke. Her voice was calm, like someone tossing a stone into a lake and watching the ripples.

"Today at the inn, I heard something interesting..."

Everyone turned to her.

"Some adventurers spoke of a witch in a nearby village. They say she can use magic... without mana."

The air seemed to freeze.

"What? Without mana?" I repeated, feeling the ground tremble beneath my feet.

"Yes. And not only that. Apparently, she teaches people without mana... to use magic, and she's become quite well known for it."

The words fell like thunder. Everyone went quiet.

"Is that possible?" Claire asked, frowning.

"I've heard rumors before" said Brom. "Old stories. But no one's confirmed them."

"Maybe..." I began to say, barely a whisper. "Maybe that means I..."

"Could use it too?" Dad said, finishing the sentence for me.

My hands trembled. A witch. Magic without mana. Could it be that I had a chance? That my destiny wasn't set in stone?

That night, after the meal ended and the lights were out, I lay staring at my ceiling. The warmth of the celebration still surrounded me, but my mind was far away.

"If it's true... I must find her," I thought.

Because for the first time in a long while, a word began to take root in my soul.

Hope.

And then, the door to my room slowly creaked open.

The moonlight filtered through the window, casting a small silhouette at the threshold.

A small figure, with big, moist eyes, timidly peeked in.

"Sister... Can I sleep with you?" Claire asked in a tiny voice that barely broke the silence of the night.

I smiled and sat up slightly, extending a hand toward her.

"Of course, Claire. Come here."

She didn't hesitate for a second. She crossed the room and slipped under my sheets, curling up beside me. Her body trembled slightly from the cold, or maybe from some worry lingering in her mind.

We stayed silent for a few minutes, listening to the wind rustling the trees and the creaking of the wooden house.

I felt her calm breathing next to me, her warmth. Then, her voice broke the quiet again.

"Sister... do you really want to use magic that much?"

That simple question pierced my heart like an arrow. I didn't answer right away. In the darkness, my thoughts were clearer. Did I want it? Was it truly that important to me?

"Yes..." I finally admitted, with a sincerity that surprised even me.

Claire stayed silent, but her body tensed a little. She wanted to say something. I knew it. And just as her lips parted to speak, I gently interrupted her, as if I already knew what she was going to say.

"But even without magic... I have everything I want close to me, Dad, Mom... and you, Claire." I hugged her a little tighter. "Even if I can't use magic, as long as I'm with you all, I'll be happy."

Claire didn't respond with words. She just snuggled closer to me.

And in that stillness, I knew she understood. Because sometimes, my family's love is stronger than any magic.

And that night, among shared sighs and heartbeats, I fell asleep with a peaceful smile.