

THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Chapter 8: The Journey

The first ray of sunlight slipped through the window, soft and golden, casting faint shadows over the sheets. I tried to move, but something—or rather, someone—had me completely pinned down.

Claire.

She was sleeping soundly beside me, her arm wrapped tightly around my waist with surprising strength for someone so small.

My legs were also trapped, tangled with hers, as if she were afraid I'd escape during the night.

Her cheeks were flushed from the warmth of the bed, and in her dreams, she murmured things like:

"Cake... more honey... tart..."

A smile formed on my face. Claire had the habit of sleep-talking, especially when she dreamed of food. And while her words were funny, what filled my chest the most was something else.

Peace, love, a deep tenderness. Claire was an essential part of my life, and having her close each morning was one of the greatest blessings this new world had given me.

I watched her for a few more minutes, unhurriedly, savoring that moment of calm. But then, Mom's voice broke the silence from the kitchen:

"Lotte, Claire! Breakfast time!"

Claire slowly opened her eyes, blinking sleepily. Her grip loosened, and realizing where she was, she suddenly sat up.

"Sister?" she mumbled, still half-asleep.

"Come on, Claire. Mom is calling us" I told her gently.

She got up, wobbling, and walked toward her room to change. As usual, she bumped into the doorframe with a dull thud.

"Ouch!"

"Claire... how many times have I told you to pay attention?" I said, holding back a laugh.

"Wuuu... yeah..." she replied, scratching her forehead.

I dressed quickly, washed my face with cool water, and went downstairs. Claire was already there, her hair still messy, but with the innocent smile that always lifted my spirits.

The kitchen smelled of freshly baked bread. Mom had prepared a delicious breakfast: tomato soup, chopped fruit, and warm bread with honey. Herbal tea steamed in the cups, filling the room with a warm, comforting aroma.

But something wasn't right.

Dad.

He was already sitting at the table, but he wasn't saying a word. He didn't greet us as usual, nor did he joke about Claire's insatiable appetite. His arms were crossed, his gaze fixed on his cup.

Breakfast began in silence. Mom talked with Claire about the garden, about how well the flowers were growing this year. I barely took a bite, worried by Dad's expression. Something was troubling him. And it wasn't just fatigue.

"Sister! Today Mom is taking me to the plaza" Claire suddenly announced.
"She said we could watch the performers and buy pastries."

"That's right, Lotte" said Mom. "Don't you want to come with us? The weather's nice. We could walk a bit and clear our minds."

Our inn was in the capital of the kingdom of Whirikai, a country with centuries of history. Its architecture was a blend of glorious past and vibrant present.

Cobblestone streets, plazas full of musicians and merchants, the grand castle in the distance with its pointed towers... It still felt like a dream to live here.

It wasn't my original world, but every corner of this city reminded me how far I had come.

I was about to answer, but then Dad spoke. His voice came so suddenly that I almost dropped my cup.

"Lotte."

I looked at him, surprised.

"Dad?"

"I know how much you want to use magic" he said in a serious tone, straight to the point. "Even if you say it doesn't matter anymore, I know it does. Deep down... you still long for it."

My stomach tightened. His gaze was firm, but not harsh. It was as if he were trying to reach the deepest part of me.

"I... it doesn't matter anymore" I lied.

"Don't say that" Mom intervened, setting down her cup. "Don't be afraid to admit what you feel."

"I'm not afraid" I replied, more defensively than I intended.

Dad leaned toward me, fingers interlocked.

"We don't want to see you extinguish that fire inside you just because someone else said you couldn't use it."

His words touched a very old wound. It still hurt to remember the day at the temple, the silence of the crystal, the examiner's verdict.

"Why are you telling me this now?" I asked, my throat tight.

"Because yesterday... I made a decision. One that could change everything."

Dad stood, went to his room, and returned with a rolled-up map. He spread it across the table, flattening it with a water jug so it wouldn't close. His finger pointed to a mountainous area north of the kingdom.

"Salikar. A small town not too far from the capital's forest. According to what your mother heard... that's where the witch who can use magic without mana lives. And who teaches others to do it."

Silence fell.

My heart started pounding faster. That story... could it be true?

"You mean... we're going?" I asked, my voice trembling.

Dad nodded.

"Yes. If you're willing, we'll leave in a few days. I'll go with you."

"And Claire... Mom?"

"We'll go with you of course" Mom said with a gentle smile. "There's no way we'd let you go alone."

Claire beamed with joy, ran up, and hugged me tightly.

"We'll go together, sister."

"Yes..." I nodded, still in shock.

I spent the rest of the day preparing what we'd need. Part of me was nervous, another part excited. For the first time in a long while... I felt hope.

I didn't know if that witch could really teach me. I didn't know if it was all just a tale. But I had to find out.

I had to try.

Because if there was even the slightest chance I could use magic...

...I wasn't going to let it slip away.