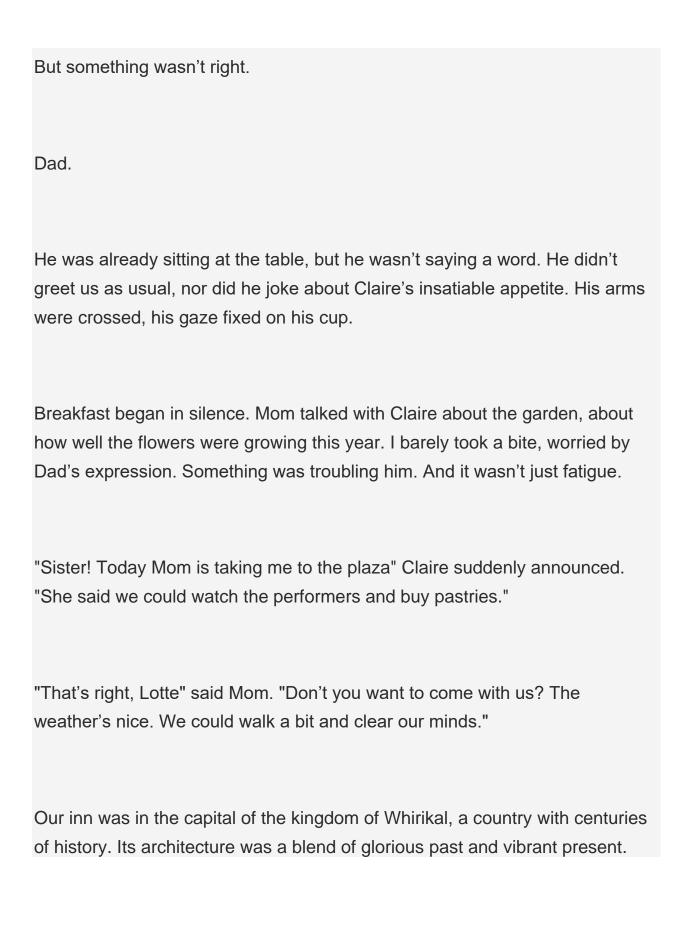
THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

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:

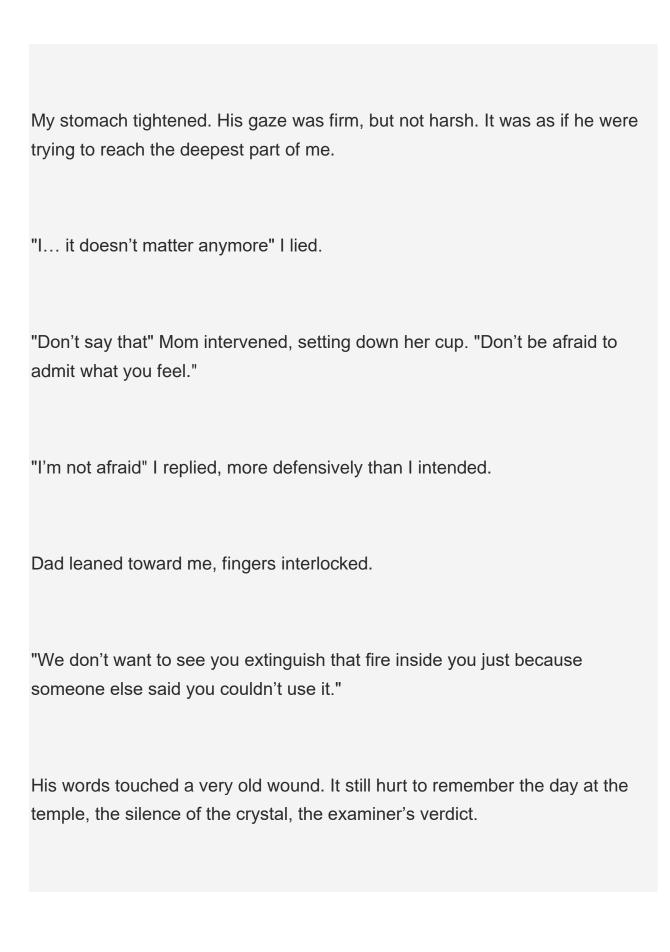
"Cake... more honey... tart..." A smile formed on my face. Claire had the habit of sleep-talking, especially when she dreamed of food. And while her words were funny, what filled my chest the most was something else. Peace, love, a deep tenderness. Claire was an essential part of my life, and having 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 teasteamed in the cups, filling the room with a warm, comforting aroma.



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."



"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.



I had to try.
That to try.
Because if there was even the slightest chance I could use magic
I wasn't going to let it slip away.