

THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Chapter 11: A Separation

"Mom... Dad... Claire..."

The words escaped my lips like a torn whisper, barely held by the breeze passing through the trees. A silent wind, indifferent. Each leaf seemed to watch me, unmoving, as reality wrapped me in its cruelty.

I was alone.

Too alone.

And everything... everything had happened in a matter of seconds.

"Where am I?"

The forest stretching around me was like no other I had ever seen. The trees were tall, with black bark and leaves purple like dark wine. The air was dense, humid, as if each breath wanted to get stuck in my chest. And the worst... was the silence.

An abnormal silence. No birds, no insects, no natural creaking of the world.

It was as if this place didn't want me here.

A tremor ran through me. It wasn't the cold... it was something deeper. Fear. Confusion. And a sadness so intense I felt like I would break from within.

I had to remember. I had to stay firm.

[Two hours earlier]

The carriage moved slowly, swaying slightly over uneven ground. Mom and Claire slept, embraced under a blanket. Dad was on the driver's seat, guiding the horses as the sun descended over the horizon. Everything was calm.

Too calm.

I also started to feel strange. My eyelids were heavier than usual. It wasn't the usual tiredness. It was a deep drowsiness, almost forced, as if something invisible was draining my energy.

That's when I noticed.

Dad. Through the small window that connected the front with ours, I saw him sway, his shoulders falling forward.

"Dad! Wake up!" I shouted, alarm vibrating in my throat.

He blinked, dazed.

"What's wrong... Lotte?"

"Something is making us sleep! It's not normal! Wake up!"

As if my voice had pierced an invisible veil, his expression changed instantly. He reacted instinctively, forming a sphere of water that he splashed onto his face without hesitation.

The splash woke him up completely.

"Thank you... for waking me" he gasped, shaking the water from his beard.
"But... why aren't you asleep?"

He looked at me quickly. I could see understanding in his eyes.

"I see... you're barely standing."

I nodded weakly. The world was spinning. Then, without warning, a ball of cold water hit my face.

"Ah!" I choked—

"Better?"

"Yes... yes, thank you Dad."

There was no time to talk. Dad braked the carriage sharply. The screech of the wheels tore the air. He jumped down and ran to the back.

But just then...

A white light, intense as the sun, emerged from the ground and engulfed the carriage.

A light that rejected everything. That consumed everything.

"Lotte! Get out of there, now!" shouted Dad, his voice filled with an urgency I had never heard before.

He ran to open the door, but stopped suddenly. He extended his hand... and hit something invisible. A barrier. Impassable.

"Dad!" I screamed, crawling toward him.

I reached my hand through the door. I expected to find something solid that would stop me, but no... my arm passed freely through the threshold. I could get out. He couldn't get in.

Realization struck like lightning.

I had to get the others out.

"Claire!" I shouted while shaking her body.

She murmured something incoherent, barely conscious. I picked her up with all the strength I had left and threw her toward Dad.

She fell into his arms like a rag doll.

Mom was still unconscious. I crawled to her, my muscles trembling. I tried to lift her... impossible. Then I pushed. Once. Again. I screamed. I cried. I begged.

And finally... with one last desperate effort, I got her through the door.

She fell next to Dad, who held her while trying to wake her.

I ran toward the exit, toward freedom, but...

An invisible barrier. Cold. Unyielding.

"No... no, no, no...!" I sobbed, hitting with my fists, scratching the air.

"Dad! I can't get out!"

I saw the terror on his face. The same terror I felt when I knew this... this wasn't a simple spell.

"Damn... it's too late!"

"What's happening?"

"It's a teleportation spell" he explained, panting. "I don't know where it takes you... but I'll find you! I promise!"

"Dad! I don't want to go! Don't leave me!"

Tears blurred my vision. My fingers slipped into nothing, my legs gave out. Despair filled my throat.

"I'm sorry... Lotte... I'm so sorry..."

His voice trembled. Dad... the strong man, the adventurer... cried.

I rushed to the back of the carriage. I took the sword he had given me. The one that represented his faith in me. I hugged it tightly. I also grabbed some food, water, a blanket. Whatever I could.

The light intensified. It surrounded me.

I saw Claire clinging to mom, crying my name. Mom still dazed. Dad pounding the barrier with bloody fists, screaming.

And then...

Everything turned white.

Silence.

And now I'm here.

Alone.

In a forest I don't know. In a place where not even the birds dare to sing.

But I have my sword. I have Dad's promise. And I have my will.

And if they are looking for me... then I will also look for a way to return to them.