

THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Chapter 12: Solitude in the Strange Forest

'Where am I?'

That was the first question that escaped my lips when I woke up. The place where I opened my eyes looked nothing like the landscapes we had traveled. I was no longer in the safety of the carriage, nor under mom's warm gaze, nor near Dad's protective arms.

The forest stretching around me was an aberration of what I knew. The trees were colossal, their trunks black as coal and their leaves a deep purple that seemed to absorb the light. There was no wind, but the leaves swayed slightly, as if breathing. The air was humid, dense, with a metallic smell that stuck to the tongue. Every breath cost more than it should.

Dad's sword was still in my arms. I had held it so tightly that my fingers were numb. But there it was. Its weight brought me some sense of safety, of sanity. I wasn't completely alone.

I also carried part of the supplies I managed to grab from the carriage before being transported. Hard bread, some dried meat, a piece of cloth, a half-filled bottle of water and a blanket. Nothing more. And nothing less.

I didn't know how much time had passed since the teleportation. It could have been minutes... or hours. The only thing I knew was that the sky was starting to turn deep orange. Night would soon fall.

"The first thing is to find a place to sleep."

My inner voice sounded clearer than expected. I was afraid, yes, but I had also learned from Dad not to let fear paralyze me.

I knew the insects in this world were dangerous. Some as big as mice, others as poisonous as a snake. Without magic to heal me, a single bite could mean the end. So I had to prevent getting bitten. I walked slowly, looking for plants, dry bark, anything I could use as natural repellent. In my previous world I had read that certain smells repelled mosquitoes, like incense, citronella... but here I had no certainty. Only intuition.

While gathering branches and leaves, I regretted not having learned more about survival. Sometimes I had joked about camping skills being useful... never imagined how literal that would become.

I had no tent. Only the blanket that covered me and the sword on my belt. Dad always slept in the carriage while we used the tent. He said he preferred the sky over his head... I never understood why until today.

With no shelter, the best idea I had was to climb a tree. High branches, away from the ground, would protect me from insects and animals. But that meant I couldn't light a fire up there. So I prepared a fire pit below, a few meters from the trunk, to keep the night creatures away.

Trying to light the fire was another test. My hands trembled, my stomach growled, and the night was approaching too fast. I used Dad's method: scraped the stone against the knife, made sparks, blew until I was almost hyperventilating. When I finally saw the flame rise, small but steady, I couldn't help but cry in relief.

The sun had already set by the time I managed to keep the fire going.

I didn't have enough water. And my clothes... a long dress mom had made for me, woven with so much love. It covered my arms, my neck, my legs. It was warm, but not ideal for forest travel. Still, I wrapped myself with the blanket and climbed the tree. I carefully extinguished the fire, covering it with dirt, just like Dad taught me. I couldn't risk starting a fire.

The branches creaked under my weight. I sat as high as I could, back against the trunk, and hugged my knees. I tried to keep my eyes open... but fatigue was stronger. My eyelids fell heavily.

“Please let there be no insects...”

“Mom... Dad... Claire...”

The tears came without warning. I slowly slipped into sleep, among sobs. I never imagined I would be separated from them this way. Never.

Dad had promised he'd find me. And I believed him. But I also knew that with little Claire, they couldn't stray far from the roads. What if something happened while looking for me? What if... they weren't looking?

The fear wasn't just of being alone.

It was of being forgotten.

[Hours later]

I opened my eyes at the first glow of dawn. The sky was still gray, but darkness was fading.

I sat up quickly, alarmed. I checked my arms, legs, neck. I didn't feel any bites, itching or pain.

"I'm okay..." I whispered.

But I wasn't. Not really.

My stomach growled loudly.

"I'm hungry..."

I took the small piece of bread and chewed it slowly. It was dry, hard, but still food. I had to ration it. At most, it would last a week.

“I need more supplies.”

I clumsily climbed down from the tree. My body ached, my muscles protested. I walked in a straight line, hoping to find water. The sun rose slowly, accompanying me in my silent journey.

I collected herbs as I went. Rubbed some on my skin to test for toxicity. Luckily, nothing happened. I kept them.

The ground was uneven, and the farther I went, the more my legs hurt. I couldn't keep carrying so much weight. I had to leave some branches behind. The only thing I never let go was the sword.

At noon I stopped. I was exhausted. Sweat soaked my forehead, and my feet didn't want to move. I leaned against a large rock and let myself fall.

I remembered our lunches at home. Mom's soup. Claire's laughter. Dad's stories. Each memory was a knife, but also a reason to go on.

A single tear slid down my cheek.

"God..." I muttered, gritting my teeth. "When did I become such a crybaby?"

"I'll be back. I promise."

I took a handful of herbs and started chewing them. They were bitter, almost unbearable. I swallowed with my eyes closed. It didn't matter. Surviving was all that counted now.

And if I had to learn to live in this strange, nameless forest... then I would.

For them.

For me.