

THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Chapter 13: Footprints in the Twilight

[POV Liselotte]

Several days had passed... or weeks? Time had turned liquid, impossible to measure. In the forest, days melted into nights in a constant cycle of survival. There were no voices, no paths, no signs of humanity. Just me... and the silence.

The forest was a world unto itself. The trees were so tall they barely let light through, and their dark bark oozed thick sap, as if they bled shadows. The purple leaves, shining under the dew, seemed to move when you weren't looking, whispering secrets to each other that I would never understand. The ground creaked unevenly, as if something moved beneath it. As if the forest was breathing.

Sleeping became a matter of strategy. I learned to build makeshift platforms among the branches, reinforced with bark and interwoven twigs. Before climbing up, I lit a small fire at ground level. The smoke kept the insects away, and the fire... the fire was an illusion of safety.

My body was no longer the same. My hands were rough, calloused. My legs marked with cuts and bruises. The long dress I had worn when we left... was now a battle rag, torn at the knees, with only one strap and stained with mud, dried blood, and soot. And still, I kept it. It was the last hug from mom.

Each day began with the same routine: track water. I heard the rustle of leaves and imagined streams. Sometimes I found them. Little threads of water between thick roots, cold as crystal. I knelt and drank with my hands, whispering thanks. Other times, it was only the wind.

Food... food was another hell. I became a botanist out of necessity. I learned to tell what could kill from what only tasted bad. I chewed leaves to test their bitterness. I waited. If my stomach didn't turn, I kept eating. Roots, mushrooms, strange fruits with acidic flesh and violet seeds... everything was a roulette of hunger and pain.

Dad's sword, though heavy for my child's body, was my only companion. I spoke to it. Whispered my fears to it. Sharpened it with smooth stones, recalling every word Dad had taught me during training. I used it to cut, defend myself, even dig. It was his legacy. My invisible shield.

And then he came.

The bear.

It wasn't like the bears in books. This one was a giant, nearly two meters at the shoulder, with bluish-gray fur that blended with the morning mist. His eyes were two glowing coals, his breathing, a restrained roar. He didn't give me time to think.

He was sniffing the spot where I had cooked meat the night before. He saw me. Roared.

Fear froze me for a second. But I couldn't run. I couldn't climb. It was him... or me.

I grabbed the sword with both hands, my legs trembling.

He leapt at me.

I dove to the side, rolling between roots, and managed to slash his side. Not deep. But enough to make him bleed. That enraged him.

He charged again. I ran between trees, turned sharply, hid behind a trunk. He slammed into it head-on. The tree shook.

He was too strong.

I thought of Claire. Of Mom. Of Dad. Of never seeing them again.

And that gave me courage.

I lunged at him as he turned. I barely dodged him. I slashed the tendon in his back leg. He fell, roaring with rage.

I seized the chance. Climbed up his back like scaling a living mountain, held onto his fur with my free hand, and drove the sword into his neck with all the strength I had.

The blood gushed out, hot. It drenched my face.

The bear shuddered. Tried to lift me. But collapsed slowly, with a deep moan.

I fell with him. My body trembled. I cried. I couldn't stop crying.

Not just for him. For me. For what I had become.

For days, I fed on his meat. Cooked it with dry branches, preserved it however I could. His hide became my cloak. His fat, my fuel. He was my enemy... and my salvation.

Every night I spoke to the sky.

"Dad... Mom... Claire... I'm still here. I'm still breathing. I'm still fighting."

And then, one dawn, I saw it.

A footprint.

Small. Human. Slim. Fresh.

It wasn't mine.

My heart pounded.

I ran. Without thinking. Without preparing anything. I ran, following those footprints that vanished among roots and mud.

I ran with a hope I hadn't felt since the day I disappeared.

I ran like a child.

And for the first time, I didn't feel alone.