

THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Chapter 9: The Journey Begins

Five days passed in a blink. One after another, like leaves carried by the wind.

Mom didn't rest for a moment, making sure everything was ready for the journey: from food to gear, from blankets to scrolls with alternate routes in case of bad weather or difficult terrain.

On the first day, we went to the market, and I was surprised at how organized Mom was.

She didn't just buy dried meat, she chose the ones with the least fat content, as they lasted longer.

She bought wheat, barley, dried fruit, and honey cookies, all designed to provide energy with little weight. Every purchase was calculated, every coin used wisely.

She even hired a merchant to get medicinal salt, useful for treating wounds and preserving food. Claire and I ran behind her with bags, trying to keep up. It was exhausting, but exciting.

"Mom, are we really going to be away for that long?" I asked while she wrapped a packet of rice.

"Yes, sweetie. Two weeks there, two weeks back. And probably a month, maybe two, in Salikar" she answered without stopping. "So we must be prepared."

I kept thinking. Two months. Maybe three. That was a long time.

What would the days away from home be like? What would it feel like to sleep under different skies, in unfamiliar places?

We also rented a carriage, a sturdy, covered one, with enough space for four people and supplies.

Dad would drive it, seasoned by years of travel and rough roads from his days as an adventurer. He had scars on his hands, but an easy smile. He said he had carried all sorts of people in his wagon along with his group.

"Good luck" said the merchant who rented us the cart with a laugh. "Never underestimate the roads. Sometimes, the roads are more dangerous than the destination itself."

There was something in his words that made me think.

We were four travelers: Dad, Mom, Claire, and me. Two adults, two children. Claire and I were physically weaker, so we planned multiple stops to rest, eat, and if necessary, find shelter.

The journey would be long, exhausting, but Mom insisted every detail be considered.

The night before departure I barely slept. I stared at the ceiling of my room, hugging the blanket Claire had embroidered for me with Mom's help.

I thought about everything we were leaving behind. Our home. The smell of the kitchen. The warmth of the oven. The sunrises in the backyard.

My chest ached... but I also felt a fire burning inside. Expectation. Hope. Fear.

The morning of our departure was calm, not a cloud in the sky. Claire and I were the first to climb into the carriage.

We wore light cloaks, and each had a small backpack with personal items. I carried a notebook to record what I saw, a handkerchief from Mom, and a small mirror.

"Sister, what are you thinking about?" Claire asked, sitting next to me.

I sighed.

"Nothing... just anxious to leave."

"Mom and Dad are taking a long time..."

"I'm sure they'll be here soon. Want to play something while we wait?"

"Yes! Let's play the clapping game!"

So we spent over an hour laughing, singing silly songs, and playing hand games. Time flew until, finally, Mom and Dad appeared.

Dad was carrying something wrapped in cloth, with a strap. At his hip hung a sword.

"What's that, Dad?" I asked curiously.

He approached with firm steps. He looked at me with that expression he only used in important moments, when he wasn't just my father, but also my teacher.

"Lotte" he said. "You've proven your talent. Your skill. But now it's time to show your courage and responsibility."

He unwrapped the cloth.

A sword, small, elegant. Its blade gleamed in the sunlight, casting glints on the carriage walls. The hilt had carved patterns, almost floral. It was a work of art.

"Is this... for me?"

"Yes" he replied, carefully placing it in my hands. "There are many dangers on the road. Not just wild animals. Also thieves, bandits, creatures lurking in the woods. If something happens... if Mom or Claire are in danger... I want you to have the strength to protect them."

My hands trembled as I received it. Not from fear. From emotion. From the weight. The weight of a promise. Of a responsibility.

The blade was about fifty centimeters long. For an adult, it was almost a dagger.

But for me, it was perfect. I felt its balance. Its edge. Its purpose.

"It's beautiful..." I whispered.

Dad nodded.

"It was forged by one of my former companions. We thought it was time to give it to you."

Claire looked at me with sparkling eyes.

"Sister! You look like a real knight!"

I laughed, and with a mix of pride and humility, I sheathed the sword in the belt Dad had also given me.

"Thank you, Dad. I promise to use it only when necessary."

He nodded. And without another word, we all climbed into the carriage.

And so the journey began.

A journey that, without knowing it then, would lead me to meet those for whom I'd give my all, and who would push me to reach the greatest heights.