

THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Chapter 14: Shadows on the Path

The sun was already high when, startled by the roar of the wind and the distant song of some bird, I felt my pulse quicken at the nape of my neck.

I had followed the footprints for hours: small, feminine steps, as if another adolescent heart was also struggling to return home.

Those footprints now led into a narrow path through the thicket, where the trees formed an almost impenetrable tunnel.

"Almost there..." I whispered with dry lips. "I'm on the right track. Almost there."

My steps pushed me to walk faster. Every crackling branch under my boots reminded me I was no longer alone in this voracious forest.

Still, my mind kept dreaming of a reunion that was beginning to take shape on my horizon.

Suddenly, the air changed: it smelled of stale smoke and sweat. A laugh tore through the silence. I turned my head and glimpsed a clearing not far away. Carefully, I advanced through the underbrush. I saw extinguished fires and armor scattered on the ground: the remnants of an improvised camp.

And there was the group.

Six men dressed in rags, weathered faces, armed with daggers, hand axes, and worn-out bows.

And...

Before I realized it, they had surrounded me with ease, completely blocking the path.

"A brat... looks like we've found something interesting" grunted one of them, flashing a smile of splintered teeth. "Tonight's going to be fun."

My sword rested at my belt, but my fingers trembled. My heart pounded in my temples. Run? Fight? The weight of that steel screamed at me not to surrender.

"Don't come closer..." I tried to keep my voice steady.

"Silence!" spat the biggest man. "We're taking you to camp. You're still young, but your face is pretty. You'll make an excellent toy."

His accomplices approached with ropes and sacks. A bow was drawn, aimed directly at my chest.

In that moment, memories of Dad flooded in: his advice, his faith in me. I felt cold sweat down my back. I stepped back... and the world echoed with my cry:

"Don't come any closer!" I shouted, crossing the sword in front of me.

The most aggressive of them lunged with an axe. I turned and blocked the blow with the hilt, making him growl. The sound of steel against axe rang out like a battle cry.

I ran to a tree and used a branch to propel myself; I dodged another strike and, with a deep slash to his arm, managed to disarm him. Blood and fury. The man writhed, dropping his weapon.

Others lunged with knives. I defended myself with everything I had learned: blocks, feints, quick slashes. I felt the weight of the steel and the lack of breath, but I didn't give up an inch.

And then I noticed something strange: none of them used magic. Although their bodies radiated an average amount of mana and affinity, it was clear they had never learned to channel it properly. They were brutes, unable to use their mana.

That gave me a chance. Or so I thought.

A third bandit managed to corner me against a dead log. He raised his dagger to deliver the final blow. I closed my eyes, expecting the cold of the metal...

Then I heard it: a deep, prolonged howl.

The bandit hesitated, as if the sound pierced through him. I opened my eyes and looked toward the clearing's entrance. A silhouette stood out in the gloom: an enormous wolf, with white fur, claws the size of daggers, and blue eyes.

The bandits backed away in fear, dropping their weapons. I had never seen an animal so large and majestic. Its chest rose with a soft pant, but its gaze... its gaze was so pure and fierce it seemed to rule the forest.

The wolf howled again, calling me. It was as if it recognized me. My knees trembled; my pulse returned to my throat.

The bandit tried to flee, but the wolf leapt with impossible speed: in an instant, he had the man in his jaws. A bloodcurdling scream. Then, silence.

The others looked at each other in horror. One by one, they fled down the path I had come, leaving me alone with my savior.

The wolf approached slowly. Its aura wasn't threatening, but protective. I remembered the promise I made to Dad: not to give up. I reached out a hand. Tentative, trembling.

"Thank you..." I whispered. "Thank you for saving me."

The wolf howled one last time, as if sealing a pact. Then, it turned its head toward the dark heart of the forest, as if inviting me to follow.

And without thinking, I followed the wolf. My steps grew lighter. For the first time, I felt no fear.

I felt hope.

Because under that sky of purple leaves, amid shadows and dangers, an unexpected ally showed me that there were still forces of nature on my side.

And while the leaves whispered my name, I knew I was not alone in my quest to return home.

