

THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Side Chapter: The True Objective

[POV ???]

That damn meddling family ruined my plans.

Everything was measured, calculated, prophesied. The carriage was supposed to pass along that deserted road. No one else. Just the princess, her hidden escort, and the royal envoys escorting her back to the capital.

But no. There they were.

A common family. A mother, a father, two girls. Laughing, traveling as if they were simple merchants. A mistake, an accident, a piece that wasn't supposed to be on the board. And yet, they were the ones who destroyed the entire operation.

Coincidence?

I don't think so.

Not when one of the girls possesses a level of mana that puts even the princess to shame. Not when she reacts to the spell as if she had foreseen it. Not when she manages to break the magical formation from within by her own actions.

Who was that girl?

Was her presence a slip of fate? Or is someone pulling the strings from a deeper layer of the board?

I don't know. And I don't care.

I wasn't created to question. I was created to follow orders.

The Demon King made it clear: capture the princess of Whirikai. If that fails, eliminate everything in your path. The mission comes above all. Even my life.

And I will complete that mission.

Even if I must destroy villages. Even if I must sacrifice years of planning. Even if I must give up my soul.

Because that is the only reason I still exist.

[POV Carl]

The silence after the light ripped my heart out.

I could still feel the warmth of her small hand in mine. The echo of her voice calling me “Dad” as if in that cry she expected me, as always, to protect her.

But this time... I couldn't.

I failed.

I knelt beside the empty carriage, trembling. The teleportation circle had already faded, leaving only a faint smell of ozone and air distorted by magic. Andrea lay unconscious in my arms, and Claire... my little Claire... clung to her mother, eyes flooded with tears.

"Where's Lotte?" she repeated over and over. "Where's my sister?"

I couldn't answer her.

Because I didn't have a damn answer.

My daughter... my warrior. The girl who grew up without magic but with a will of iron. Who learned to wield a sword when others still played with dolls. She had vanished before my eyes. And I didn't stop it.

I'm a former adventurer. I've faced monsters that freeze you with fear, crossed cursed jungles, survived ambushes by magical assassins. But nothing, nothing had prepared me for this.

For failing as a father.

My fists pounded the ground, again and again. They bled. I didn't care. My scream drowned in the indifferent wind. I cursed. I cried. I begged the sky for a second chance.

"Why her?!" I roared. "Why not me?!"

Andrea stirred. She was slowly waking up. Claire was still whimpering, murmuring her sister's name between sobs. I forced myself to calm down. I had to be strong. For them. For her.

"I will find you" I whispered, clenching my teeth in fury. "I swear on my life, Lotte. Even if I have to search every dark corner of this world. Even if I must face the gods. I will bring you back."

I couldn't protect you this time. But it won't happen again.

Then I heard it.

The rumble of hooves.

I looked to the road and there, like a vision from another world, appeared a procession of horses, soldiers, golden banners fluttering in the wind. A covered, elegant carriage, with the symbol of royalty proudly engraved: a golden lion roaring among laurels.

The guards marched with perfect discipline. Their armor gleamed. But they said nothing. They didn't look at us. They passed us by as if we were ghosts. As if we didn't exist.

And inside the carriage.

There she was. The princess.

Then I understood.

We were not the real target of all this.

Someone wanted to kidnap her.

And we... we were just collateral damage.

An error to someone greater. A piece sacrificed to save the queen of the board.

And from the top of a hill, hidden in shadow, I saw him.

A dark figure, outlined against the grey sky, watched from the hilltop. His silhouette was imposing, almost unreal. Enormous wings spread from his back, extending like a pair of dark clouds about to devour the daylight. His eyes shone intensely, like burning coals in the twilight.

And he was watching.

Not the horizon, not the landscape. No. He stared with fierce intensity at the royal carriage that approached slowly along the road. His attention was so absolute, so focused, that I felt it like a spear piercing my chest.

The world spun around me. My legs gave out without warning and everything went black.

I fell.

I don't know how long I was unconscious.

But when I opened my eyes again, the world was no longer the same.

The first thing I felt was the smell. Blood. Burned wood. Hot metal. The air was thick, almost unbreathable. I sat up with difficulty, my muscles ached, my head pounded. The sound... there was no sound. No birds, no horses, no screams. Only absolute, terrifying silence.

Then I saw it.

Piles of shattered armor scattered across the road. Some still had bodies inside. Others were empty, as if they had been disintegrated from within. There was blood everywhere. Dark, thick stains covering the stones of the path, dripping from nearby trees. It was a battlefield... no, a massacre field.

And in the center of it all, the royal carriage.

Or what was left of it.

It was completely destroyed. The wheels shattered, the wood splintered, the symbol of the royal lion torn as if a beast had clawed through it.

My hands trembled. Every part of me screamed to run. To run and not look back.

But then I turned my face, guided by an instinct stronger than fear.

"Claire... Andrea..."

My heart stopped a second before beating wildly.

There they were.

Inside the overturned carriage, covered in dust and blood, but breathing.
Unconscious... but alive.

I crawled to them with the last strength I had, pushing aside debris and broken wood.

"Thank you..." I whispered, my voice breaking. "Thank you, gods..."

I still didn't understand what had happened. Who that figure was. Why he let me live... or why he destroyed everyone else except us.

But I didn't care.

Not now.

I could only think of keeping them safe.

I could only cling to them as if my soul depended on it.

And in silence, among death and the remains of what had once been a royal mission, I embraced my family.

Side Chapter 2: The Kidnapping of the Princess

The same day Liselotte disappeared...

Princess Leah was returning from her first official journey. Her father, King William, had sent her to visit her grandparents, former monarchs who had retired in a village east of the capital. Her older brother had made the same visit at the age of twelve, as royal tradition dictated, and now it was her turn.

Leah adored her grandparents. During the days she spent with them, she enjoyed stories of the past, homemade meals, and afternoons in the gardens of the old rural castle. It was a trip she thought she would remember forever.

[POV Leah]

"Clive, how much longer until we're home?"

"A few more hours, Your Highness" answered my personal guard, always with that dry tone of his.

"Ugh! You're so boring, Clive! I've done nothing for hours!"

"Patience is a virtue, Princess" he replied without taking his eyes off the window.

I crossed my arms. The carriage was comfortable, but unbearably slow. Even with Clive inside, talking to him was like talking to a wall.

Then a deafening noise shook the ground.

BOOM!

The carriage came to a sudden stop. Clive lunged toward the window.

"What was that?"

"Clive, tell me what's going on!"

"A rock... huge... fell from the sky right in front of us. No... this isn't natural..."

Clive's face went tense. Outside, the murmurs of soldiers turned into chaos. Horses neighed, hooves clattered, and orders were drowned in screams.

"Princess, come with me. Now."

We stepped out just in time to see it.

A figure floated in the sky, imposing, with wings black as night and glowing, cruel eyes. It had long claws, and its smile... its smile was pure evil.

A demon.

"Well well... so this is the human princess of Whirikal. A brat... I don't know why they sent me for you."

"Enemy sighted! Defensive formation!"

Clive stepped in front of me. The soldiers surrounded the demon instantly. Swords were raised. The command echoed:

"Attack!"

They charged. Brave... but desperate.

"Toys? How disappointing" the demon muttered, raising one hand.

The swords didn't pierce his flesh. They bounced off as if against an invisible wall.

"Is this all the royal guard has?"

With a single step, the demon unleashed a shockwave that sent everyone flying—everyone but Clive.

"Oh? Still standing? Curious. And without divine blessing..."

"I won't let you take the Princess!"

Clive, trembling with fury, managed to graze the demon. Just a scratch.

"A scratch... not bad" the demon said. "But enough."

He snapped his fingers.

In an instant, Clive's head was separated from his body.

"CLIVE!" I screamed with all the force in my soul.

His body—my guard, my friend—fell at my feet.

The remaining soldiers attacked with their last strength.

"Princess, run!"

But I couldn't move. I was just a girl before an ancient monster.

"No worries. You won't die. They told me to take you alive. You'll just... sleep for a while."

"Sleep?"

"My lord hasn't awakened yet. But he will soon. And you'll be part of his plans."

With a wicked grin, he took out a red crystal. He threw it to the ground, and from it emerged a winged creature—like a floating manta ray—that wrapped around me and forced me onto its back.

"No! Let me go!"

"Princess. Your fate is sealed."

And so, without being able to resist, I was dragged into the sky.

From the creature, I saw the fallen soldiers. I saw Clive. I saw a man still alive helping civilians near another carriage.

A small hope.

But as we flew, the demon muttered:

"They don't need her anymore? Then what do I do with her?"

He fell silent, listening.

"Huh? Four years? Fine. We'll leave her with Glanc. She won't last, but that's not my concern."

"Why...?" I asked with barely a whisper.

"There were... unforeseen events. Don't ask, girl."

I couldn't say anything else.

I just hugged myself, trembling.

The sky darkened as the demon carried me toward a place I didn't know.

And all I could do... was hope to survive.