THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Side Chapter: The True Objective

[POV ???]

That damn meddling family ruined my plans.

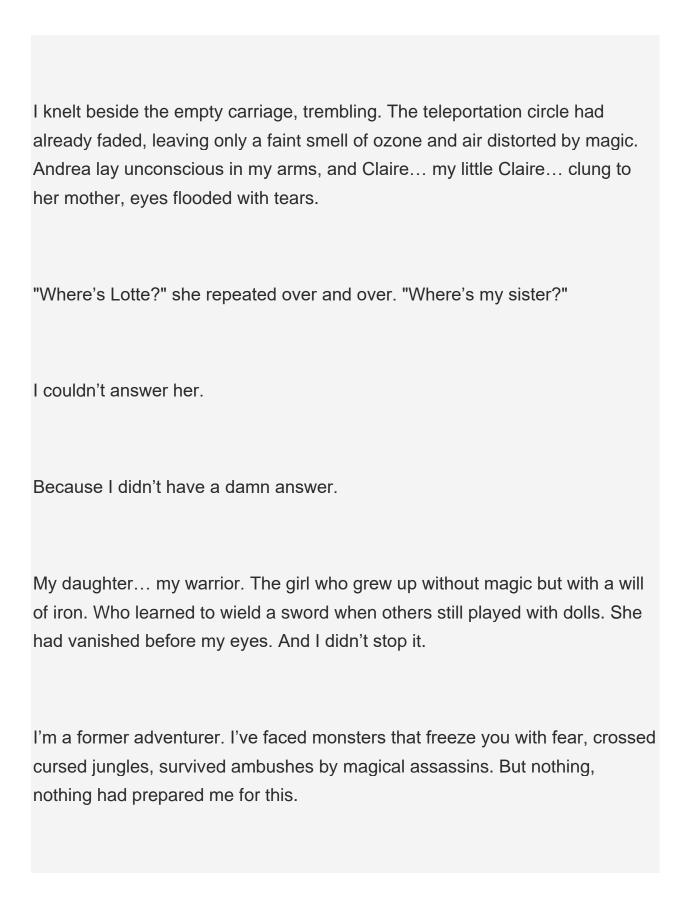
Everything was measured, calculated, prophesied. The carriage was supposed to pass along that deserted road. No one else. Just the princess, her hidden escort, and the royal envoys escorting her back to the capital.

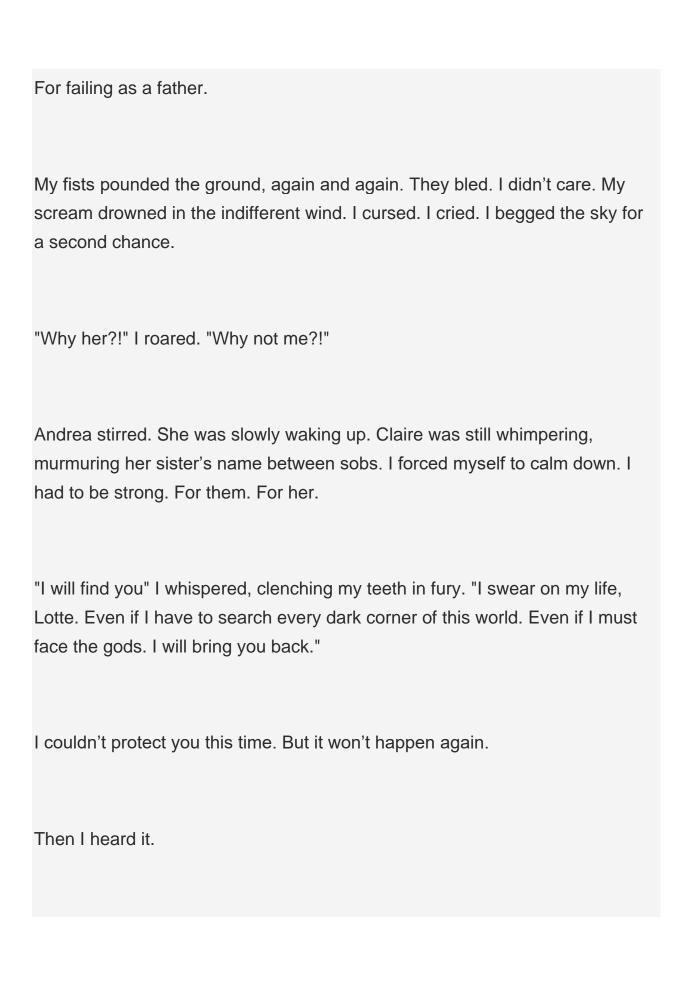
But no. There they were.

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 Whirikal. 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.

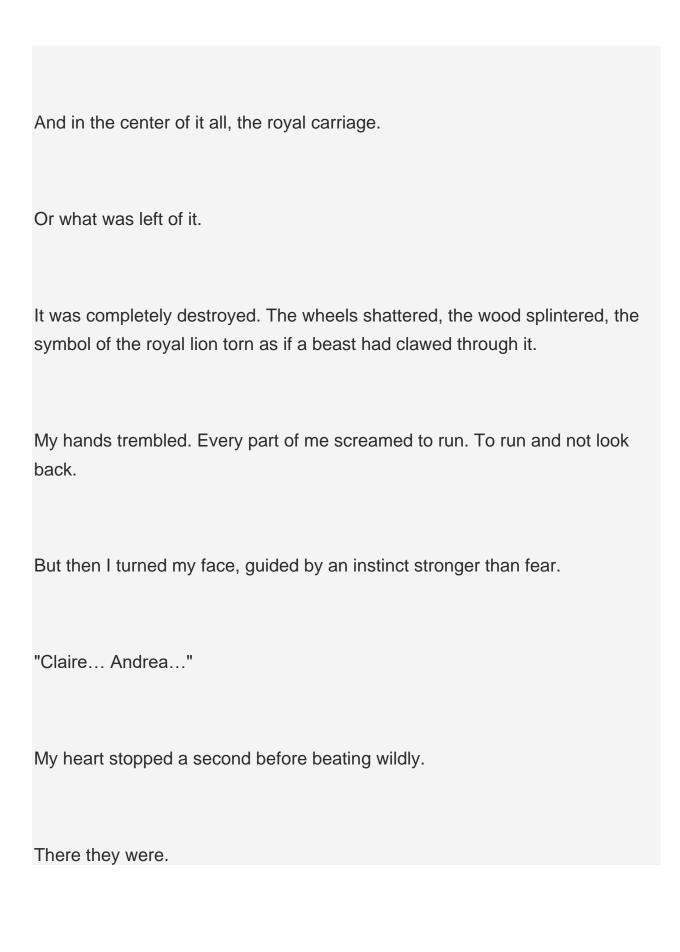


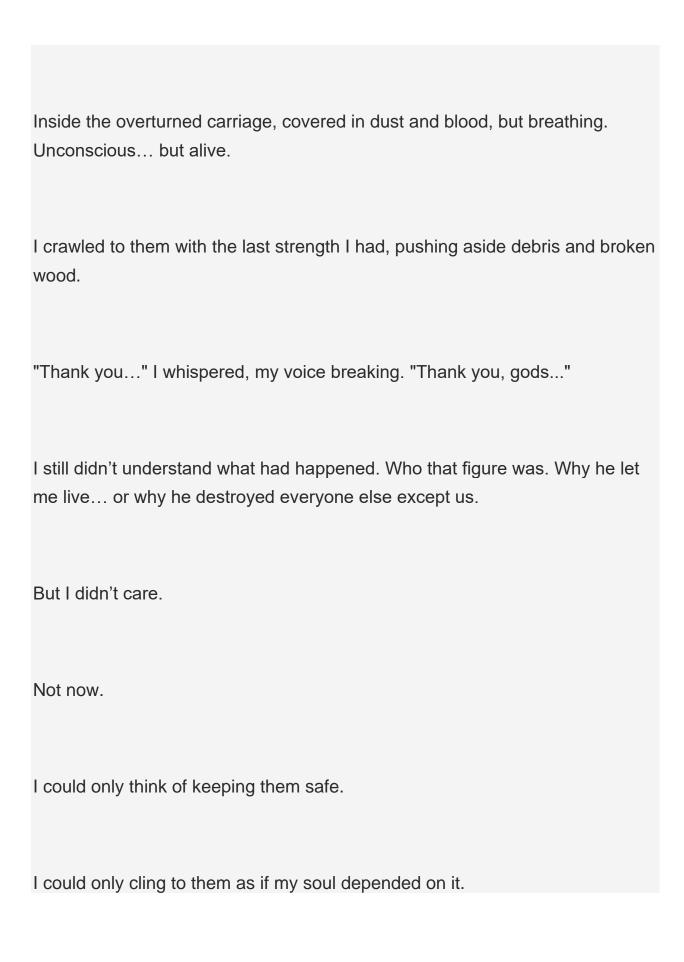


The rumble of hooves.
I looked to the road and there, like a vision from another world, appeared a procession of horses, soldiers, golden banners fluttering in the wind. A covered, elegant carriage, with the symbol of royalty proudly engraved: a golden lion roaring among laurels.
The guards marched with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

