THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

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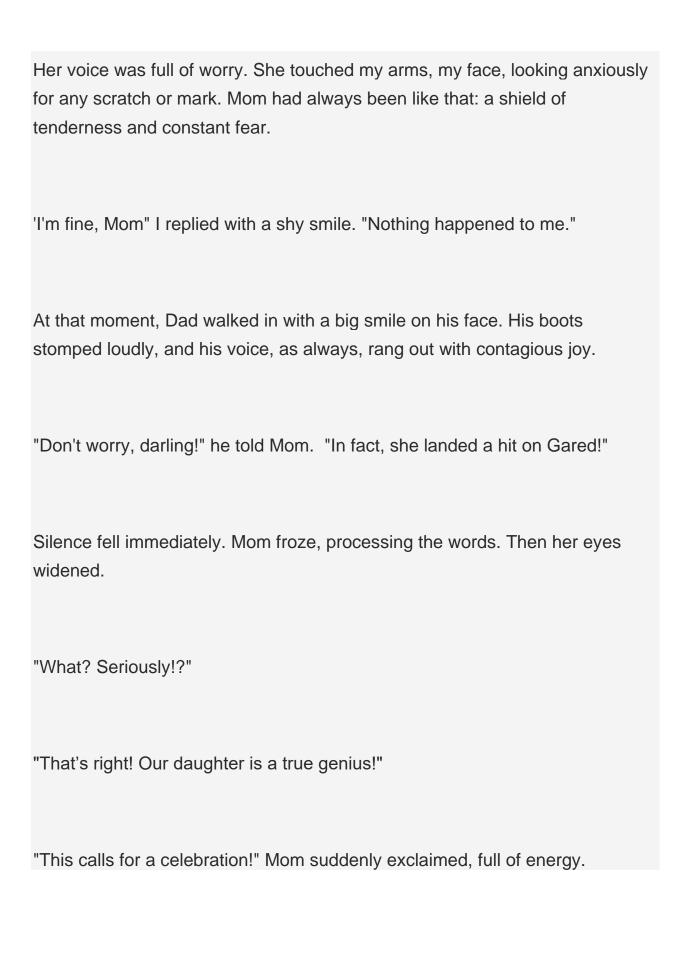
We returned home after the battle with Gared. The adrenaline still pulsed through my veins, mixed with the confusion of what had just happened.

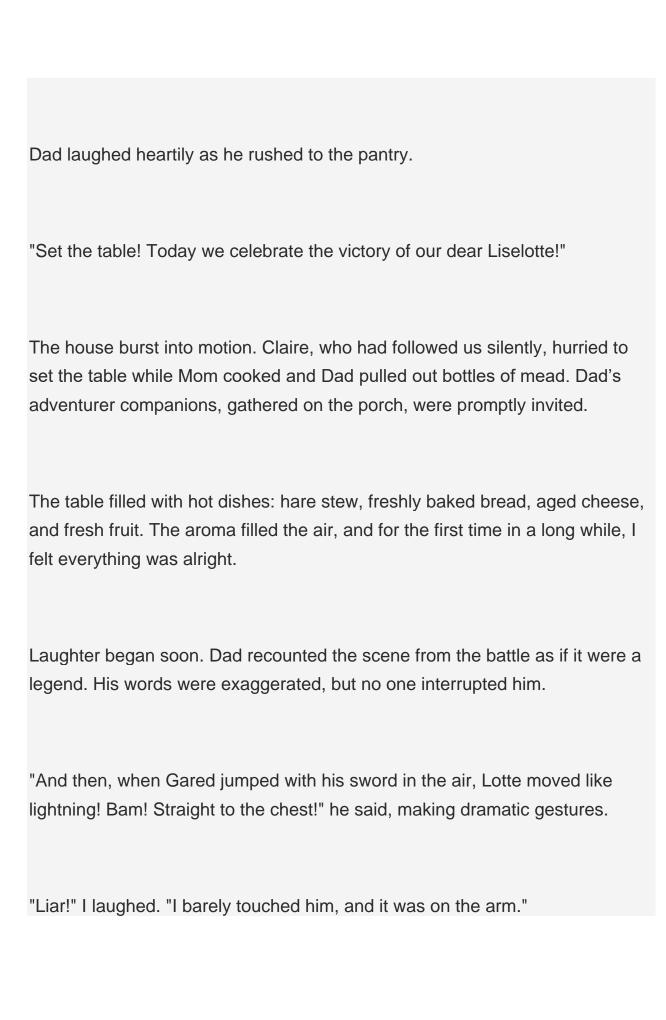
I really never thought I could land a hit on a warrior like him.

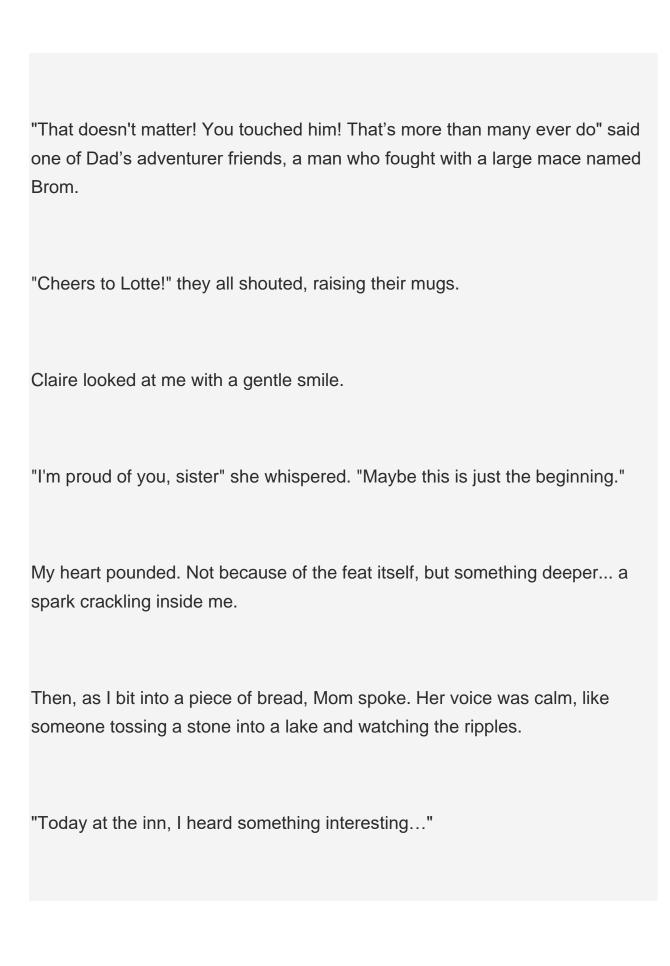
But beyond pride, I was overwhelmed by a strange mixture of fear and hope. Had it just been luck? Or was... something else awakening inside me?

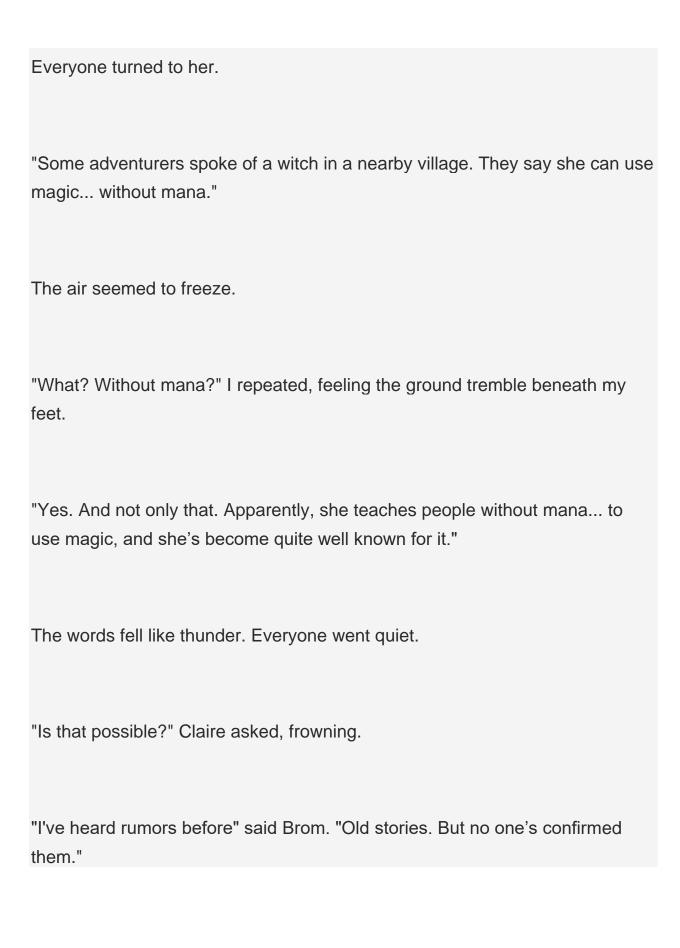
The door creaked as we entered. As soon as I stepped inside, Mom's arms wrapped around me like a warm blanket in the middle of a storm. Her embrace was strong, trembling, but it conveyed her care and love.

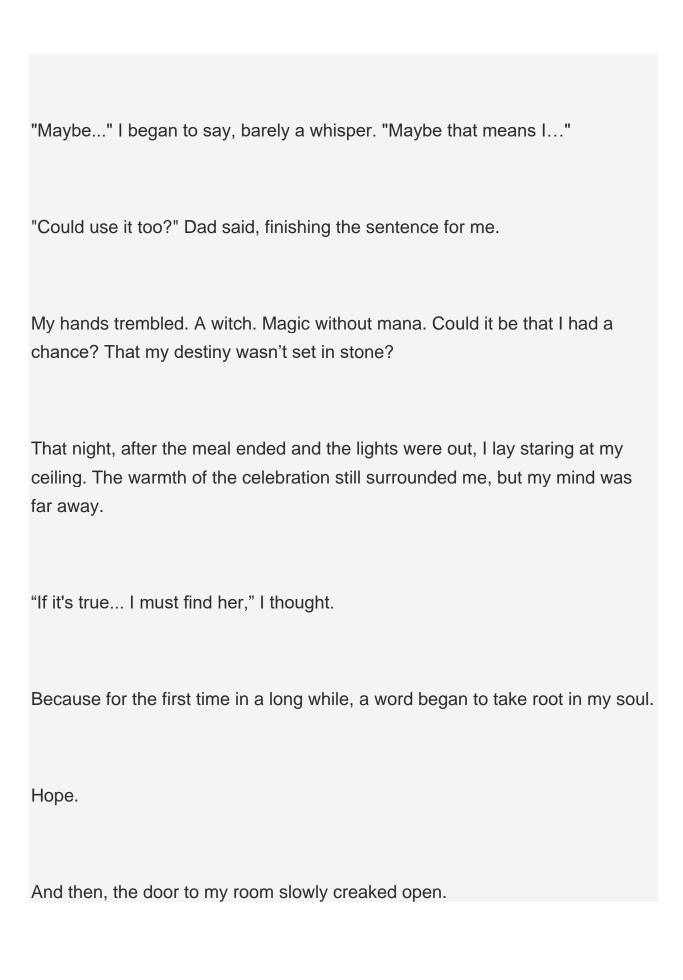
"Lotte!" she cried. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? Let me see!"

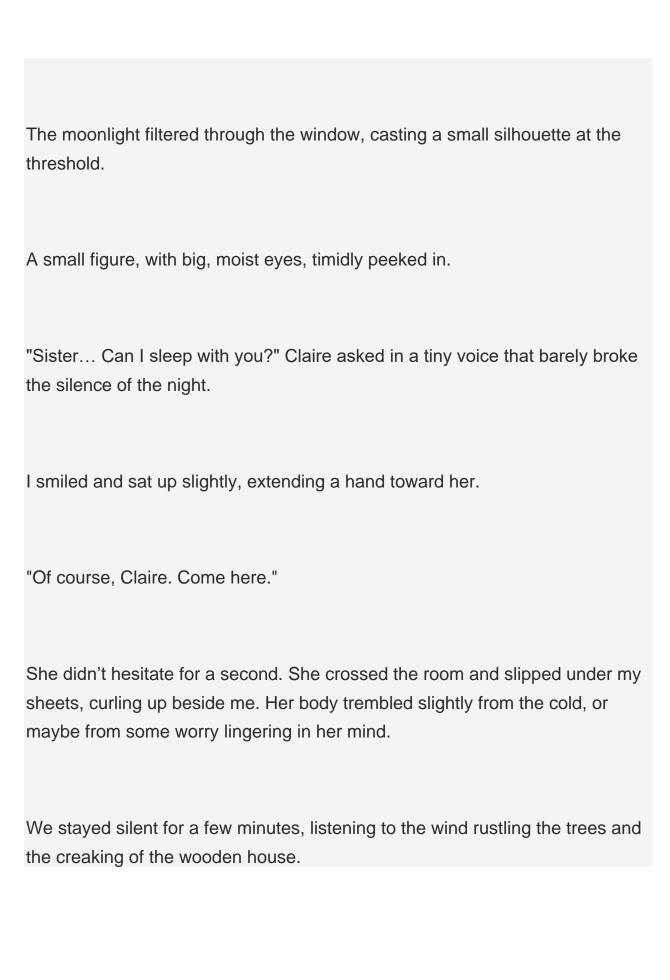












I felt her calm breathing next to me, her warmth. Then, her voice broke the quiet again.

"Sister... do you really want to use magic that much?"

That simple question pierced my heart like an arrow. I didn't answer right away. In the darkness, my thoughts were clearer. Did I want it? Was it truly that important to me?

"Yes..." I finally admitted, with a sincerity that surprised even me.

Claire stayed silent, but her body tensed a little. She wanted to say something. I knew it. And just as her lips parted to speak, I gently interrupted her, as if I already knew what she was going to say.

"But even without magic... I have everything I want close to me, Dad, Mom... and you, Claire." I hugged her a little tighter. "Even if I can't use magic, as long as I'm with you all, I'll be happy."

Claire didn't respond with words. She just snuggled closer to me.

And in that stillness, I knew she understood. Because sometimes, my family's love is stronger than any magic.

And that night, among shared sighs and heartbeats, I fell asleep with a peaceful smile.