

Casting Nets

The river wound like a silver ribbon through the valley, its waters dark and swift. Along its rocky banks, an aging fisherman named Edran sat mending his nets. Once, he had been the finest fisherman in the village. Now, he rarely cast his nets at all.

He told himself it was because the river had changed, that the fish were no longer as plentiful as before. But deep down, he knew the truth. He had lost faith in his own hands.

One evening, as Edran sat by his boat, stitching frayed cords, a stranger approached — a young woman in a simple cloak, carrying a wooden staff.

"Are you the fisherman who once caught a hundred fish in a single cast?" she asked.

Edran chuckled. "Once, perhaps. But not anymore."

"Why?"

"The river is not what it was," he said. "I cast my nets for years, and now I pull them back empty. I see no reason to try."

The young woman tilted her head. "Perhaps you are looking in the wrong place."

"There is no right place," Edran muttered. "The river gives, then it takes away."

She walked past him and knelt by the water's edge, watching the current. "Then why do the otters still swim?" she asked. "Why do the herons still wade?"

Edran frowned.

"Because they do not decide in advance what the river will give," she continued. "They simply go where the fish are."

She stood and dusted off her cloak. "Let's make a wager, fisherman. I will choose a place to cast the net. If nothing comes of it, I will leave. But if we catch something, you must admit that the river has not abandoned you."

Edran grumbled but agreed.

She led him upstream to a part of the river he had never fished before — where the water was deeper and swifter.

"This is foolish," he said. "Fish do not gather where the current is strong."

"Throw the net," she said.

He hesitated. But something in her gaze — calm, unwavering — made him obey. He cast the net wide, letting it sink into the current.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then —

The net pulled tight.

Edran's breath caught as he grabbed hold. The weight was immense, the net thrashing with movement. He pulled with all his strength, his arms burning. The young woman stepped forward, gripping the rope beside him.

Together, they dragged the net to shore.

Inside — gleaming in the moonlight — were more fish than Edran had seen in years.

He staggered back, staring in disbelief. "Impossible..."

The young woman smiled. "Not impossible. Just unexpected."

Edran looked from the fish to his hands — hands he had believed useless.

The problem had never been the river.

It had been where he chose to cast his net.

As the night deepened, the young woman sat beside the fire, roasting one of the fish they had caught.

Edran sat across from her, thoughtful.

"I stopped fishing," he admitted, "because I gave advice once that led another man to ruin. I told him to invest in trade, and he lost everything. I told myself after that my judgment could not be trusted."

The young woman pulled a piece of cooked fish from the fire and handed it to him.

"Perhaps you were wrong," she said. "But tell me — before that mistake, how many times was your advice right?"

Edran hesitated. "Many."

"And did the river punish you for the one mistake?" she asked.

He looked at the fish beside him. He had given up on the river, but the river had never given up on him.

"Perhaps," he said slowly, "I was casting in the wrong place in more ways than one."

She smiled.

The next morning, before she left, Edran did something he had not done in years.

He cast his net — again.

And this time, he did not decide in advance what the river would give.

— *William Zeitler*

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