

Outcast of the Flame

In a small, isolated village nestled in the shadow of a great mountain, there lived a man named Karun. Karun was the Light Steward, a role passed down through generations. Each evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, he would walk the cobbled paths, lighting the village lanterns one by one. At dawn, he would retrace his steps, extinguishing them with care. The lanterns were more than mere tools to push back the darkness; they were symbols of safety, community, and continuity. For decades, Karun performed his task with unwavering diligence, ensuring the village never fell into shadow.

The villagers respected him, though few truly knew him. Karun's life was solitary, his days shaped by his sacred duty. Karun was further isolated from the villagers by the rhythms of their lives: he worked under the stars, tending the lanterns while the villagers slept, and he slept while they labored under the sun. He spoke little and lived simply in a modest hut on the outskirts of the village. None of this even registered in Karun's mind, however: beneath his quiet demeanor lay a deep, abiding devotion to his role. "The light must never falter," he would say, though no one had ever seen him falter either.

One fateful evening, a shadow passed over the village. A sickness had swept through the valley, leaving many bedridden and fevered. The village healer, at her wits' end, mentioned a rare herb rumored to grow high on the mountain. Without hesitation, Karun volunteered to fetch it. "The light will guide," he said, as if to himself, and began the climb.

The mountain loomed vast and silent, its rocky paths treacherous under the faint glow of his lantern. Hours passed as Karun ascended, his steps sure but heavy. Near midnight, as he searched among the crags for the elusive herb, a faint, otherworldly glow caught his eye. It seemed to seep from the very rock itself, pulsing with a rhythm that felt alive. Entranced, Karun followed the light to the mouth of a hidden cave.

Inside, the air was thick with ancient energy, neither hostile nor welcoming, but vast and unknowable. The walls shimmered with a luminous, shifting glow that seemed to defy earthly explanation. As Karun stepped deeper into the cave, the light enveloped him. A warmth, intense but not scorching, poured into his chest, filling him with a profound sense of connection and disorientation. He felt as though the universe had been planted within him, its infinite mysteries now alive in his heart. And then, as quickly as it had begun, the light receded, leaving Karun kneeling on the stone floor, trembling and transformed.

When he returned to the village the next day, clutching the precious herbs, the people barely recognized him. His eyes gleamed with an unearthly light, and his movements, once deliberate and predictable, now carried an unsettling fluidity. He spoke in riddles and truths that seemed both profound and maddening. The villagers, who had always found comfort in his steady presence, grew uneasy.

"The stars are not still," he told a farmer one evening. "They weave their dance in silence, waiting for you to join." The farmer walked away, bewildered and vaguely unnerved.

Karun's once-unfailing dedication to his duties began to waver. Some nights he would forget to light the lanterns entirely, instead sitting by the river, lost in meditation. Other times,

he would climb onto rooftops to trace the constellations with his finger, murmuring incomprehensible verses. The villagers whispered among themselves, their unease growing into frustration.

The elders convened a meeting to decide his fate. “Karun has been our Light Steward for decades,” one said, “but he is no longer the man we knew.”

Another elder nodded solemnly. “The lanterns cannot be left unlit. What use is a steward who has lost his purpose?”

And so, with heavy hearts, they stripped Karun of his title. His belongings were packed into a small bundle, and he was cast out of the village. The children watched from doorways as he walked away, his luminous eyes almost glowing faintly in the dusk.

For months, Karun wandered aimlessly. Villages he passed shunned him for his strange demeanor and cryptic speech. Hunger became his constant companion, and the fire within him, once a source of awe, turned into a burden he could neither understand nor extinguish. He often sat beneath the stars, questioning why the light had chosen him and what purpose it served if it only brought isolation.

One day, in a barren wasteland where even the wind seemed weary, Karun stumbled upon the crumbling ruins of a temple. Its arches, though weathered by time, bore carvings of flames and stars that felt hauntingly familiar. Inside, he found a group of weary travelers who introduced themselves as the Seekers of the Secret Fire. Their faces, lined with equal parts hope and despair, brightened as Karun recounted his story.

“You are the Light Bearer,” one whispered, tears streaming down her face. “The one we’ve awaited for generations.”

The Seekers explained that they had long searched for the prophesied bearer of the eternal flame, a figure who would guide them to rekindle the sacred fire and restore light to the darkened corners of the world. For the first time since his transformation, Karun felt understood. Among the Seekers, his riddles were not madness but revelations. His luminous eyes were not a curse but a sign of divine favor. The fire within him, which had isolated him from his old life, now made him indispensable to his new community.

Over time, Karun and the Seekers rebuilt the temple, transforming it into a sanctuary for lost travelers and a beacon of hope in the wasteland. Karun taught them to meditate by the light of the stars, to listen for the silent rhythms of the universe. In turn, the Seekers helped him understand his own transformation, teaching him that the fire within him was not meant to be contained but shared.

Years later, a wanderer from Karun’s old village stumbled upon the temple. Recognizing the Light Steward, now garbed in robes that shimmered like flame, the wanderer was overcome with emotion.

“Karun,” he said, “your absence left our village in chaos. At first, we despaired. But in time, we learned to create lanterns that required no steward at all. We adapted, and in doing so, we found abilities we didn’t know we had. Perhaps your leaving was the spark we needed.”

Karun listened silently, a faint smile on his lips. He had long since learned that every flame has its place, and not every fire can burn where it was first lit. As the wanderer departed, Karun turned back to the temple, where the Seekers waited for him by the sacred flame. Together, they tended the light, ensuring it would never falter, not just for themselves but for anyone who might find themselves lost in the darkness.

— *William Zeitler*
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