

The Burden and the Bucket

 ysienne had served for decades as Abbess of the Crystal Spheres,
a sanctuary high in the clouded cliffs
where oracles hummed harmonic truths into polished bowls of light.

But lately, something was amiss.

"I have taught what can be taught,"
she whispered one morning to the wind.
"But there are knots in me no chant can loosen.
Burdens no meditation can mediate.
Too much... has built up."

So she descended.

Down the winding path.
Through the foggy forest.
Into the ordinary world of things and smells and mud.
And at last, into a disheveled village.

The villagers pointed her to a man
who "handled what others preferred not to discuss."

She found him behind a cottage, loading barrels onto a cart.

A sign on the side read:

Olaf's Outhouse Pumpin' — Dung Dun Rite!

The old man wore a brimmed cap and smelled of... well... don't ask.

"You're Olaf," she said, nostrils beyond numb.

He nodded. "That's me.
You the one who sent the message?
Something about feelin' stuck?"

She hesitated. "Metaphorically, yes.
I'm feeling like I can hardly move anymore."

Olaf squinted at her.
Then he plopped down on the hub of his wagon wheel.

"Well," he said.
"What's on your mind?"

So she took a breath, and began.

She spoke of wisdom given and wisdom withheld.
Of burdens carried and secrets kept.

Of layers of teaching and understanding
— and how heavy it had all become.
Of the ache beneath it all.

"People leave things with me," she said.
"Griefs, hopes, longings.
I thought I was a sacred vessel.
But I think I've become a forgotten storeroom.
And now... it's too full."

Olaf nodded.
Then tapped the side of one of the barrels.

"Y'know what this is?" he asked.

She blinked. "Refuse?"

"Nope," he said. "It's yesterday's good food."

She frowned.

"Folks live their lives.
They take in good things
— stuff, beliefs, habits.
Things that made sense — then.
But now?
They just pile up.
And you gotta get it out.
'Cause if you don't empty it..."

He leaned in.
"It starts to back up and rot."

She looked at the barrels with new eyes.

"But you... haul... waste."

"Lady," he said with a grin,
"you hold on to everything,
you'll make yourself sick.
Even food's gotta finish its journey.
If you stop poopin', you're in a world o' hurt,
and you best haul your butt to the healer in a heapin' hurry!"

He stood up and scratched himself.

"You wanna git unblocked?
Empty your bucket."

She looked at him for a long moment.
Then smiled.
And nodded.

"Thank you," she said.

He hitched the barrel to the cart and whistled.

"That'll be a gold coin, if you please."

— *William Zeitler*

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