

The Cup of Fire

orin was mending fishing nets when he heard the first shouts of anger. He turned toward the square and saw Marek storming forward, fists clenched. Marek, whose rage had been boiling for weeks after his younger brother was found murdered along the road.

A crime with no culprit. Not even any clues.

And now, a foreigner had arrived.

Sorin's stomach tightened. The village was already a tinderbox. They had no answers, no justice — only a wound that had no place to go.

Marek pushed into the crowd. "What are you doing here?" His voice was like a hammer on stone.

The stranger did not flinch. He was tall, wrapped in a tattered cloak, his face calm but unreadable.

"I am only passing through."

Marek laughed once, sharp and bitter. "Through? No, you came to spy. You came to see if we were weak."

Sorin took a step closer. This was dangerous. He knew Marek well — he'd seen him break a man's ribs in a drunken fight.

The stranger tilted his head. "Do you always greet travelers with such welcome?"

Marek's hand went to his belt.

The blade flashed in the afternoon light.

"Tell me why you're here," Marek growled, "or I'll cut the words out of you."

The moment coiled tight. This is it, Sorin thought. One move, and there will be blood.

And then the stranger did something no one expected.

He knelt.

Before Marek. Before the crowd. Then, slowly, he reached into his pack and pulled out a wooden cup.

And, without a word, he filled it with water.

A flicker of confusion crossed Marek's face. "What the hell are you doing?"

The stranger lifted the cup.

"Do you see the water?" he asked, his voice calm as the wind before dawn. "It is clear now."

Then, with a sudden movement, he plunged his hand into the cup and stirred wildly.

The water churned, clouded with silt and debris.

"This is your rage," he said. "This is what you bring with you."

Marek's breath was ragged. His fingers flexed on the knife.

The stranger set the cup on the ground.

And waited.

Sorin felt the whole village hold its breath.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

And then — slowly — the water began to settle.

The mud drifted downward. The water became clear again.

The stranger looked up. "If you want to see clearly, you must let the water still."

Marek's grip tightened — and for a moment, Sorin thought he would strike anyway.

Then something eased in his face. Slowly he relaxed his grip and put the knife away.

The village exhaled.

Marek turned and walked away, without a word.

One by one, the villagers followed. The fire had not caught. The moment had passed.

Sorin looked at the stranger. "How did you know that would work?"

The stranger picked up the cup, swirled the water once, and smiled.

"I didn't," he said.

And he drank.

— *William Zeitler*

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