

The Lantern of Danger

The people of Brindleford walked past the old shrine every day without giving it much thought. It had once been the pride of the village, but generations had passed since anyone visited it except the caretakers who dutifully polished its threshold and swept its steps of fallen leaves. Inside hung a brass lantern, blackened with age, its glass chimney warped by centuries of weather. According to village lore, it would ignite only in the hour of great danger. According to everyone under the age of sixty, it was a charming relic from a superstitious age.

Keren, apprentice to the lampwright, found the whole thing unbearable. It wasn't the superstition he objected to; it was the imprecision. If the lantern was meant to warn the village, why hadn't it ever lit? Was danger truly absent, or had they simply clung to a false comfort? These questions threaded through his thoughts like briars. The elders offered only placid smiles, which irritated him more than a scolding would have.

His apprenticeship gave him just enough expertise to be dangerous. He knew how lanterns were built — how they breathed, how they fed their flames. He could not accept that this soot-choked artifact held any real power. And beneath his irritation was something quieter: a faint, persistent unease he refused to name. So, late one night, after too much stewing and not enough sleep, he stole it.

The shrine door protested with a long sigh as he pushed it open. The lantern was heavier than he expected, almost stubborn in his hands, but he carried it through the sleeping village to his workshop. He intended to disassemble it, reveal its emptiness, and finally quiet the itch in his mind.

Under lamplight he examined every inch of it. No flint. No wick. No oil. No secret compartments. Just metal and glass. He felt vindicated. "Nothing but old stories," he murmured, touching the frame as if to console it.

The flame burst to life the instant his fingers brushed the brass.

Keren yelped and nearly toppled from his stool. The fire burned clear and steady, impossibly bright. It gave off no heat, no smoke. When he waved his hand through it, the flame flowed around his fingers like cool water.

He tried to snuff it out with cloth, then sand, then by plunging the whole lantern into his water barrel. The flame persisted, flickering almost playfully. Near dawn he surrendered, too exhausted to think. He left the lantern on his workbench and stumbled to bed.

Sleep offered no refuge. Through the cracks beneath his door the strange light seeped into his room, not illuminating objects but truths. In the corner where he tossed broken lamps he would "fix later," he saw the face of his first teacher — the one he'd abandoned without farewell when he found a better apprenticeship. At the foot of his bed he saw Mara, the friend whose trust he had betrayed for ambition's sake. And overhead, in the rafters, he saw all the little evasions, the timid gestures, the shabby choices that had quietly shaped his days.

By sunrise his heart felt scraped raw. Panicked, he carried the lantern back to the shrine and shoved it inside. "Take it," he whispered, as if the old walls might swallow it. But when he turned to leave, the lantern stood at his heels, steady and patient.

It was then he realized the truth: the lantern had not flared to warn the village. It had flared to warn *him*. Not of disaster in the sky, but of the quiet catastrophe of drifting through a life of moral poverty. The unexpected hour had come, not as doom, but as a summons.

Keren sat on the shrine steps, lantern beside him, morning light soft on the stones. He closed his eyes, took a trembling breath, and asked the question he had avoided for years.

"What must I see?"

The lantern flickered once, as if in answer, and began its quiet work of illumination. And Keren understood that the danger had never been "outside" at all, but in the shadowed recesses of his own soul.

— *William Zeitler*

2025 November 20

© 2025 William Zeitler. Originally published at GrailHeart.com

