

The Wager

No one saw the Stranger arrive.

One autumn morning, as mist unspooled itself from the hills, he was simply there — seated at the dry edge of the old fountain, scribbling in a thick, weather-stained book. His boots were worn, his coat dark and plain. He neither begged nor bargained. He only watched, listened, and wrote.

The fountain hadn't flowed in years. A ring of moss circled its base like a faded crown, and children were forbidden to climb it, though some did anyway. But no one touched it now. Not with the Stranger there.

At first, the villagers kept their distance. But time softened suspicion into curiosity. Some approached. They found him polite, if not exactly friendly. When asked who he was, he replied,

“One who sees the silence.”

When asked what he wrote, he said,

“The names of those who are ready.”

Ready for what, he would not say.

Still, people came. They told him their regrets, their small dreams. He never interrupted. Only once did he ever offer anything unasked.

That one was Lira.

She came near midnight, cloaked in a shawl too thin for the wind. Her hands trembled, but not from the cold.

She had lost much. Her father to fever that took him in three days. Her brother, pressed into a war no one believed in, came home in a box sealed with wax. Her mother followed them to the Far Shore not long after.

Lira did not cry when she spoke. Her voice was flat, low, like someone who had buried too many things and forgotten where.

“I want power,” she said.

The Stranger looked up, but said nothing.

“Not for revenge,” she added. “Not even to gain some worldly advantage. Just... so I never feel helpless again.”

He closed his book.

“That's a holy thing to want,” he said. “But the sacred never comes cheap.”

“I have nothing left to pay.”

He studied her for a moment. Then, gently, he reached into his coat and withdrew a small, square object wrapped in faded linen.

"Then take this," he said.

She frowned. "I don't understand."

He unwrapped it. A mirror, no larger than her palm. Its frame was blackened silver, etched with runes too faint to read. The glass shimmered faintly, as if it remembered light even when none was there.

"Look," he said.

Lira took the mirror and stared into it. What she saw was not her face, not exactly. It was her — but not as she was.

In the mirror, her face shifted.

In one image, she stood tall and beautiful — but cold-eyed, armored in charm and elegance, surrounded by people who obeyed her but did not love her. Power without intimacy. Prestige without peace.

In another, she was aged and ragged, eyes hollow, muttering curses to ghosts. Still bitter. Still alone. Her strength had calcified into suspicion; her pain had hardened into armor no one dared approach.

In a third, she saw something so luminous it made her wince: a self formed of sorrow transmuted into grace, eyes like hearthlight in winter. A fire that warmed but did not burn. A healer. A guide. A mother to none — and to all.

Other images flickered at the edges of the glass. Blurred, unchosen, waiting.

She lowered the mirror.

"That one," she whispered. "That's the one I want to be." The Stranger nodded.

"Then you must make a wager."

"With whom?"

"Not with me. With the mirror."

"What's the price?"

"Everything you still cling to. Every story that begins with 'I can't.' Every statement that begins with "I am this or that" which isn't true. Every fear that keeps you smaller than the shape your soul wants to take. You'll have to lose things again — safety, certainty, your name in some circles. But what you'll gain..."

He paused. "That part is never mine to promise."

Lira was quiet. The night wind stirred the hem of her shawl.

“If I fail?”

“You will,” he said. “But only sometimes. And only at first. What matters is that you keep walking.”

She looked down at the mirror again. Its surface had stilled, now showing only her own weary face, but softer somehow.

She wrapped it in the linen and tucked it against her chest.

When she looked up, the Stranger was gone. The fountain, dry for decades, now held a shallow pool of clear water.

Lira returned to her cottage. She said nothing of what had passed.

But the next day, she visited the widow who never left her house. The day after that, she stood between two men arguing in the square and said one quiet thing that stopped them both. She began tending the graves no one else would clean. And when asked why, she only said:

“Because someone must.”

Each night, she looked into the mirror. Some nights it was kind. Other nights, it showed her things she did not want to see. But she never turned away. Instead, she took them to heart.

And when travelers came and asked if the village had a wise woman, they were pointed toward the girl with fire in her bones and a mirror in her pocket — one who, long ago, had made a wager worth everything.

— *William Zeitler*

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