

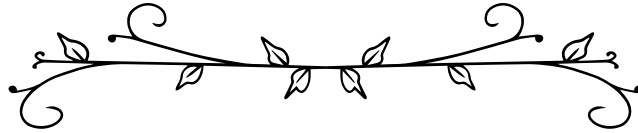
THE GOLDEN CAULDRON



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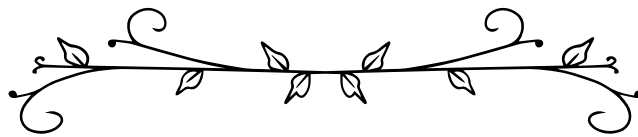


THE GOLDEN CAULDRON



The Wise Woman of the Valley settled deeper into her old chair by the fire, her voice soft as woodsmoke.

"Listen well, children. This is a tale about a vessel that gave too much..."





In a quiet valley where the hills rolled soft as fresh bread dough and the wind sang low and stubborn, there once lived a little golden cauldron. He was not large, nor proud, nor loud. No taller than a milk pail, his sides glowed with a warm, honest shine.

When he was clean and cared for, the most wonderful things happened. Fevers melted like morning mist. Old pains loosened their grip. The sick drew in deep breaths and walked back into their lives again.

The Witch who tended him used only two humble herbs, gathered with reverence under moonlight or at the first blush of dawn. Silverleaf, thin and shimmering, grew on the shaded side of ancient oaks. Honeyroot, thick and golden, was dug from sunlit meadows. Together they danced in the warm water — silverleaf whispering rest, honeyroot singing rise.

Word of the little cauldron and its gentle magic spread far beyond the valley, and so the people came.





The first was a sickly boy, thin as a winter reed. "Please," he whispered, "I still have a life to lead." The Witch smiled with kindness, added a handful of silverleaf and honeyroot, stirred the pot over a gentle fire, and spoke the old healing words. Soon the boy was running through the meadows like any other child.

More followed — the frail, the fearful, the quietly desperate — each carrying their own burden. The Witch never turned anyone away. She stirred and whispered and healed with patient hands, until she no longer noticed how the shine on her little golden friend had begun to fade.

The people came like rivers that had forgotten the sea. Day after day, night after night, the cauldron worked. The steam that once rose sweet and true now curled crooked and tired. The heat carried a faint, pleading note. His golden sides grew dull as old moonlight. Yet the cheering of the crowd was loud, and the Witch's heart was full of their needs, so she did not hear the small warnings.

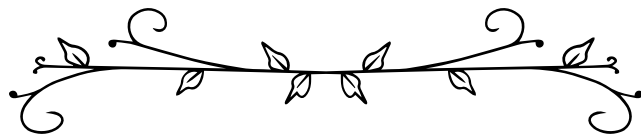
Until one grey morning, the magic turned.





The same water that once soothed now stung the throat. The steam that had eased lungs now made them heavy. Those who had called the cauldron a miracle now called him cursed. "It is broken," they said. "It is sick. It is not what it was." With disappointment heavier than anger, they carried the little cauldron away and left him beneath a thorn bush at the edge of the village, where the wind forgets names and only fallen things gather.

There he lay, cold and quiet, making small trembling sounds like metal weeping in the night.



Many moons passed.

Then one soft evening an old Witch came wandering through the valley — older still, with slow steps and eyes that had seen many winters come and go. She felt a lonely hum beneath the skin of the world and followed it through grass and silence until she found him: ash-stained, thorn-hidden, and ashamed.

The old Witch did not gasp or scold. She knelt, brushed the leaves gently from his sides, and whispered,





"Oh, little one... you were never meant to carry it all alone."

She lifted him with care, not as a tool, but as something precious that had held its breath far too long. Back at her small hearth deep in the woods, she lit no demanding fire. Instead she cooled the embers, washed him slowly with rainwater and soft cloth, listening to every silent tale of weariness he carried. For many quiet days she let him rest empty and still, so he might remember that being useful is not the same as being alive.

In time — slow, kindly time — the gold returned. Not louder than before. Not brighter than the sun. Just... right. Warm and steady once more.

When the village folk came again, humbled and hopeful, the cauldron did not pour himself out until he cracked. He healed when it was time to heal, and he rested when it was time to rest. The old Witch saw to it with wise and gentle measure, using silverleaf and honeyroot as they were always meant to be used.





And from that day on, the valley remembered a quiet, fireside law:
Even gold must be cleaned.
Even magic must breathe.
And even that which heals the world must sometimes be allowed to
stop,
lest it forget how to heal at all.

