



THE GREAT EXCHANGE

A mysterious figure, cloaked in tattered garments, came upon the small village of Draven, nestled in a deep valley and concealed within an ancient forest. Draven was steeped in peculiar traditions, where time seemed to have a different rhythm. At the heart of the village, looming like a sentinel of forgotten tales, stood a tall, broken mirror. This mirror had been fractured long ago under mysterious circumstances, and its shards had become the most cherished possessions of every villager.

Each shard, once part of the shattered mirror, held a significance far beyond its material form. They were more than mere fragments of glass — they were identities, encapsulating the very essence of each person. The villagers would often be seen gazing into their own shards, believing that the reflections held within would reveal their truest selves. But as they clung to these fractured remnants, an insidious illness began to take hold, spreading slowly and unrelentingly throughout the town, draining life from its very core.

The stranger gazed upon the shattered mirror with deep sorrow etched on his face. He addressed the villagers, his voice filled with conviction and urgency, delivering a message that seemed almost incredulous to their ears: *"The images reflected in these broken shards do not reveal your true selves. They are the source of your slow destruction."*

They stared at him, puzzled and offended. He went on to say, *"I can restore this mirror to its former beauty. If you allow me, you will see your true reflections. I am the only one who can restore it."*

His words stirred fear and anger. Why would they surrender their most valued treasures, their identities, to a mere outsider? *"Leave us!"* they cried. *"We do not want your help!"*

Day after day, the mysterious figure stood before the shattered mirror, pouring out his heart to anyone willing to listen. He painted vivid pictures of a life where the mirror would be whole again, free from the affliction that had marred its surface. He spoke of how the mirror's reflection would once again reveal its true essence, not in fractured pieces but in the flawless entirety of its restored form. But his impassioned pleas fell on indifferent ears.

As he continued to speak, the townspeople's animosity swelled. They huddled together, weaving malicious tales about the enigmatic stranger. Some whispered that he coveted their shattered fragments to wield power over them, while others insinuated that he aimed to

obliterate their very identities. Their resentment festered, warped by the dread of losing the only semblance of significance they believed they possessed.

One night, under the cover of darkness, the villagers hatched a plan. They would be rid of him for good.

The next morning, the stranger stood before the mirror again, speaking softly, *"Give me your shards, and I will make you whole."*

But instead of listening, the villagers surged forward, each clutching their shard. In a frenzy, they descended upon him, stabbing him with the jagged pieces of mirror. His blood stained the ground as he fell, surrounded by the crowd. One by one, each villager attacked him with their own shard, their fury consuming them. The stranger didn't even try to resist. He died before them; his lifeless body crumpled on the village square.

As he breathed his last, the town became shrouded in an eerie darkness. It was as if the sun had been stolen from the sky. The villagers, who had briefly felt a sense of wicked triumph, were now suddenly retreating to their homes, overwhelmed with fear and dread.

For three days, the village was shrouded in unexplainable darkness. No one ventured outside.

On the third day, the sun slowly reappeared, cracking the horizon over the Eastern mountain. The villagers ventured cautiously back to the square. They expected to find the stranger's gruesome body, but instead, they found something else, something impossible.

The stranger's body was gone, but the mirror stood gleaming in the sunlight, an exquisite sight restored to its former glory. Not a single crack or shard marred its surface.

The villagers were speechless as they gazed upon it. They tentatively approached the mirror one by one and stood in astonishment at their unbroken, undistorted reflections. For the first time, they beheld themselves unbroken.

Some of the villagers were overwhelmed to the point that they began to drop their shards from the old mirror, which still held traces of the stranger's dried blood. Others were overcome with fear at the sight of the flawless mirror, turning away and grasping their old shards even tighter. A few adamantly refused even to cast even a glance at the mirror.

In the days that followed, the inhabitants of Draven wondered about the stranger's true identity and why he had come to their village. The illness that had been troubling the village since the breaking of the original mirror no longer affected those who gave up their shards, but it was never enough to convince the rest to surrender their obsession with their tiny, jagged reflections.

The stranger had disappeared, but some were certain that when they gazed into the new mirror, they could still see his reflection and were convinced he had never truly left them.