

The Honest Woodcutter

Raghav's axe fell into the deep lake. He remembered waiting. He remembered water glowing. He remembered a spirit offering him golden, silver, and finally his own iron axe. He remembered being rewarded.

That was the version he held on to.

He walked home with the axes. The forest felt wrong. Paths he knew for years seemed to bend in unfamiliar ways. The air smelled like wet stone. He ignored the rising pressure in his chest.

At home he placed the axes down. The golden one reflected the room as if he were standing a little to the left of where he actually was. The silver one felt warm, like someone else had been holding it. The iron one dripped once onto the floor even though it was completely dry.

That night he woke standing outside the hut with no memory of leaving his bed. His feet were cold and wet. He had no explanation. He sat awake till sunrise.

By morning he could barely recount the moment his axe had fallen. The memory kept flickering, splitting into different versions that did not match. Spirit. No spirit. Glow. No glow. Reward. No reward.

He walked back to the lake, clutching only the iron axe. He needed to see it again. He needed the scene to settle into a single truth.

The lake was still.

The surface was smooth enough to reflect him perfectly. Too perfectly. The reflection showed him holding the axe in both hands, but he was holding it in only one. He stepped back. The reflection did not.

For a moment he forgot to breathe.

Then the reflection smiled.

A quiet ripple expanded from where its foot should have touched the water.

Raghav dropped the axe.

What happened next is not in the story.

The lake never returned it.

And neither did he.