

## The Lantern Without a Flame

Night settled slowly over the Hidden Leaf Village, not with darkness, but with a soft gray calm that felt unfinished. Lanterns were hanging in the streets as always, yet one lantern near the Academy refused to glow. Children whispered about it during the day, and adults avoided looking at it when evening arrived. Naruto Uzumaki stood in front of that silent lantern, scratching his head, feeling an unfamiliar tightness in his chest. - This thing is broken, right Naruto said, poking the lantern gently. - Or is it just being stubborn. Sasuke Uchiha leaned against the wall nearby, arms crossed. - It is not broken. I checked it earlier. There is no flame inside. Sakura Haruno knelt beside the lantern, examining the metal frame. - Lanterns are supposed to hold light. This one feels... empty. Naruto frowned. Empty was a word he understood too well. The lantern reminded him of days when he felt invisible, when no one expected him to shine. He straightened up, eyes focused. - Then we find the flame, Naruto said with sudden determination. - Everything that is meant to glow has something missing, not gone forever. Their search led them through quiet streets, past training grounds where echoes refused to linger. The village felt like it was waiting for something kind to happen. Near the old storage hall, they found Iruka Umino sitting alone, holding a small scroll. - Iruka sensei, Naruto called out. - Do you know anything about a lantern with no flame. Iruka looked up slowly, a gentle sadness in his eyes. - That lantern appears when hope grows tired. Long ago, it was lit by shared courage, not fire. Sakura tilted her head. - Shared courage. Yes, Iruka said. - When people believed in each other without being asked. Naruto clenched his fists. Belief was powerful. He had learned that the hard way. They returned to the lantern, now surrounded by a few curious villagers. Children held onto their parents, watching silently. Naruto stepped forward, heart pounding. - This lantern does not need matches, Naruto said loudly. - It needs us. Sasuke raised an eyebrow but stepped closer anyway. Sakura followed, placing her hand on the lantern frame. One by one, villagers joined them. No one spoke. They simply stood together. Naruto closed his eyes and remembered every moment someone had trusted him, even when he failed. He spoke again, voice steady. - I believe in this village. I believe in all of you. A soft warmth spread through the lantern. Not bright, not loud, but real. A gentle light appeared, steady and calm. Gasps filled the air, followed by quiet smiles. - It is glowing, a child whispered. Iruka nodded. - Because someone spoke first. Naruto opened his eyes, stunned by the light. He laughed, rubbing the back of his head. - Guess even lanterns need encouragement sometimes. The village slowly returned to life. Lanterns glowed, footsteps echoed again, and the night felt safe. As Naruto walked home, he glanced back once more at the light. He did not feel empty anymore. And the lantern never went dark again.