

For three hundred years, we built the bridge one stone at a time.

No one could remember why exactly.

And by the time my family was chosen to place the final stone, forgetting had become part of the tradition.

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**The whole village came out for it.**

Flowers woven through the bridge railings, candles burning along the ravine's edge despite the wind, children climbing onto their fathers' shoulders to watch. The bridge itself was beautiful just as old things always are. It was worn smooth by centuries of weather, every stone placed by a different hand in a different year, the whole of it somehow more than the sum of its parts.

My mother cried when our name was drawn. They were good tears though, proud tears, for this was an honor we couldn't pass up. Nobody had ever passed it up.

I held the stone in both hands. It was grey granite, heavier than it looked, our family name carved into its face by the village mason. I tried to feel what everyone else seemed to feel. I'd grown up listening to them worship these stones every year when a new family was chosen.

Instead, I felt eyes on my back. When I turned, at first I could only see the crowd that was pressed around me, all their faces so bright with celebration. But the uneasy wouldn't leave so I kept searching. Until I found the pair of eyes watching me. *Old Maren of Bell Hollow.*

She stood at the crowd's edge, apart from everyone else, her face the color of old ash. Old Maren had outlived everyone's certainty of her age. When I spotted her, she turned toward the bridge, her wrinkles deepening with worry, then look back at me.

And shook her head, but only just once. It was so subtle that I would've missed it had I not been watching.

Before I could do anything though, the crowd surged forward, swallowing Old Maren from my view. My father pulled me away, guiding me to our designated spot in front of everyone, and helped guide my hands still holding the stone toward the final gap in the bridge's railing. The countdown from ten thrummed in my ears, but it was a blur of noise, distant despite being so close behind me.

Mother hugged father, crying so openly, so joyfully as the bridge became complete. Father was ecstatic and I knew by heart he was boasting to anyone nearby about us now being the topic of the town.

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It was the inscription that found me.

Later, while the celebration swirled around the bridge and someone had produced a fiddle, I crouched at the base of the final stone to see how it sat against the others, to make sure it wasn't about to fall out of place. And there, carved into the underside where no one would see it unless they knelt as I was kneeling, were the words.

One stone. One year. Until the bridge is whole.

Then return what was borrowed.

The words seemed so simple, yet the more I read them, the less sense they made.

Until the hand touched my shoulder and I startled badly, nearly toppling over from the fright.

Old Maren crouched beside me, her knees trembling in protest. Though her knobby fingers rested on my shoulder, her eyes remained on the inscription. As a child, I'd thought she looked like the witches my friends and I whispered about. Up close, she didn't look frightening at all.

"You know the rhyme," she nodded at the inscription even though I knew it wasn't what she was referring to.

I could barely hear her over the celebration around us.

"Stone by stone and year by year," I recited, my eyes on the inscription as well.

"That's not all of it," she closed her eyes, her pale lips moving soundlessly for a moment as if she was trying to gather her thoughts, to remember words that she might not have spoken for a very long time. "Stone by stone and year by year, build the bridge but do not fear. When the final stone is laid, pray the debt has first been paid."

The fiddle played behind us, people laughing and no doubt dancing to the melody that floated through the air. No one paid us any mind now.

"The debt," I repeated.

"Your ancestors didn't build Bell Hollow, girl. They escaped something. Crossed from somewhere else and destroyed the crossing behind them." Old Maren opened her eyes to look directly at me, her usual cloudy gaze so clear at that moment. "But they'd made a bargain before they ran. Three hundred years of safety for their descendants. And at the end of it - the bridge would be rebuilt, and the debt repaid."

"What debt?"

She shifted her gaze back to the bridge and then looked behind us at the celebration in full bloom, not a worry on any of their faces. "All of it," Old Maren finally spoke, her voice almost too quiet even for me to hear. "Everything we were given."

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**The knocking came at midnight.**

Three times, as the fog rolled up from a ravine that had never had a bottom and certainly had never had another side. But now it did.

The bridge didn't stop at Bell Hollow's edge anymore. It continued into the white, and the footsteps that came through the fog were unhurried and absolutely certain of their welcome.

The figure that emerged was tall and so pale I had to question if it had ever seen sunlight before in its life. But it was so beautiful all at the same time. Like a long winter where snow crystals lined tree branches and over fence railings, sparkling when the sun hit it just right. Its clothing moved like the fog itself, and its eyes, when they found mine across the empty bridge, were the color of ash.

The figure stopped at my family's stone and looked down at it for a long moment before looking back at me. "The bridge," it said, its voice neither cruel nor kind. "Will you honor the debt?"

I looked around Bell Hollow. At the people I had grown up with, those I called friends, and even my parents. No one was celebrating now with this newcomer's arrival, all eyes on it. No one wore a smile and laughter no longer existed.

For three hundred years our crops rarely failed and children survived illnesses that neighboring towns had become wrought with their spirits from. There had been war and disasters of every kind, but we always endured. We thought it was luck.

The grief came first, so very overwhelming that it was hard to breathe. Then the anger, fast and bright, at ancestors who had made a bargain in desperation and then simply... forgotten to tell anyone about it. They'd let the why of it dissolve into song and celebration and the comfortable amnesia of generations to follow.

"What does honoring it mean?" I questioned. "What exactly?"

The figure tilted its head, almost curiously. "The gift returns to us. Your village becomes what it would have been without it. Mortal. Ordinary."

"No one dies tonight?"

"No one dies tonight that was not already dying," it paused for a moment. "You will simply stop being protected."

I turned back to Bell Hollow. To all the faces who still watched in silence, no one sure of what to say or do now, our annual celebration entirely soured.

I faced the being, who by now had drifted closer, wanting an answer before it could leave again. "I honor the debt."

It stopped in front of my stone and looked down at it again before up at me, holding out its hand. I looked back at my parents one more time, my mother's lips parted slightly, eyes wide, shimmering with unshed tears that weren't of pride now. Turning back to the ancient being, I reached out to place my hand into its and the fog swirled around us.

Leaves began to curl, browning at their edges, and the air grew stale, bitter cold. And with the frost came the memories I had forgotten from so long ago.

It had been three hundred years since I made the bargain, and now it was time for me to return home.