

THE TOLL  
(excerpt)\*

By

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The Elder Man nearly broke his front teeth when he collapsed, face first, onto the wooden platform. He had been running far too fast, and the bridge seemed to materialize from nothing, as if the heavy fog could no longer keep its existence a secret.

Cursing, he rose and collected his meager possessions, most of which did not entirely belong to him. He had little time to gather them—a flask of wine, a bit of rope, and a small, gray, drawstring pouch filled with gold coins he had squirreled away over the course of many years. Stowing everything back into his worn knapsack, he instinctively felt for the long Persian dagger in his belt, only to spy it resting on the very first plank of the bridge just ahead of him. He cursed again and retrieved the dagger, but did not sheath it. He stood petrified as he gazed out along the massive, dream-like length of the bridge.

From what his old eyes could determine, the bridge had no finite end. It was like an immense beast disappearing into the horizon. The Elder Man shivered. He knew his pursuers were less than a day behind him; the biting chill creeping down the length of his spine kept him grounded.

“Do you wish to cross?” said a slow, soft voice.

The Elder Man let out a sharp gasp. He whirled around, the dagger slashing through the curling mist; however, his eyes only met the calm gaze of a stranger.

The man was notably tall and almost too thin to even pass for living. But his face was ageless. His skin had the translucent quality of light shining beneath a frozen pond.

“Do you wish to cross?” he asked again.

The Elder Man eyed the newcomer, his thumb caressing the black inlaid handle of the dagger. “And what if I do?” he replied. “Are you the keeper of this bridge?”

The Bridgeman nodded. “That I am.”

“Is there a toll?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“That is up to you. Whatever you feel is of equal value, I shall accept.”

The Elder Man quickly sheathed his dagger. “I carry nothing of any great worth.”

“You need not decide now,” said the Bridgeman. “The toll is always paid at the end.”

“You mean after I have crossed?”

“Yes.”

At this, the Elder Man became impatient and more than a little wary. “What game is this?”

“No game.” The Bridgeman’s voice was still soft and measured.

“And what if I choose not to use your bridge? What if I simply go around? Pray, answer me this.”

“You may go around if you wish. That would be a seven-day journey.”

The Elder Man winced. “And to cross the bridge?”

“About two.”

The Elder Man sighed and lowered his eyes to the ground. In his mind, he heard the mother’s scream, the father sobbing. And he could hear the heavy rhythm of horses’ hooves, the furious roars of the hunters. He looked up at the Bridgeman.

“I suppose I have no other choice, then.” He paused. “Are you the only one manning this toll bridge?”

“Yes.”

“Are you coming with me to ensure that I pay?”

“No.”

“But how will you know, then?” the Elder Man snapped with growing irritation.

“I shall know. You will pay me directly the next time we meet.”

The Elder Man scoffed. He decided that the Bridgeman was quite insane, and he had no intention of handing over what little he had to a lunatic. Without another word, he left the Bridgeman where he stood and stalked off along the bridge.

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