

The Broken Bridge

THE FALL AND ATONEMENT

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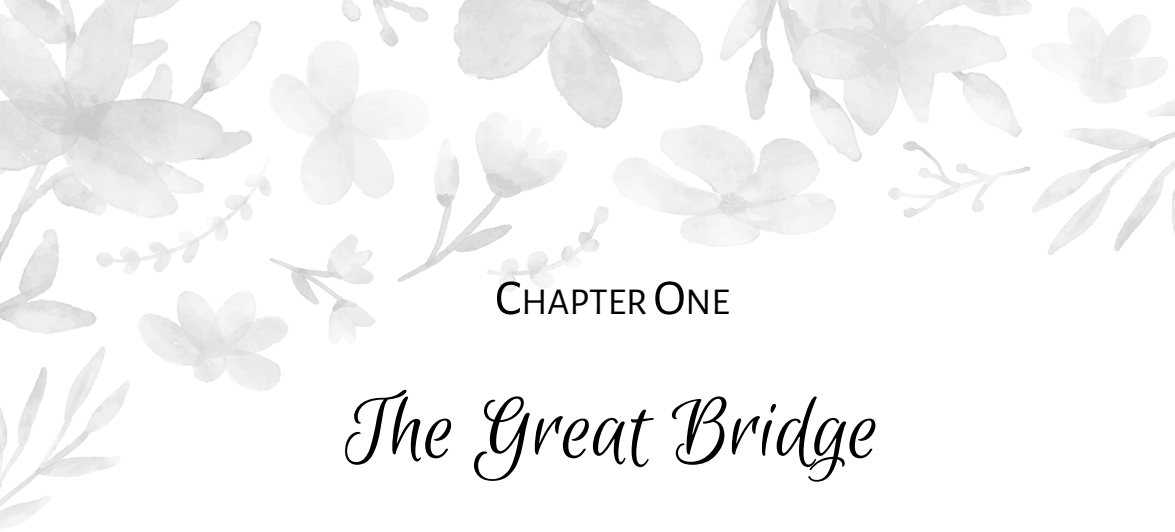
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CHAPTER ONE

The Great Bridge

WHERE TWO SHORES BECOME ONE

Fidel was on a mission to find his bride-to-be. Tomorrow at midday, he and Verita would be wed at the very center of the Great Bridge. But first they needed to discuss final plans with Harmonia, who arranged all the sacred ceremonies and was known throughout both shores as a harmony weaver. That meant crossing the bridge from his home in Eastlight to Westshore, where Verita awaited him.

As he approached the Great Bridge, familiar laughter echoed across the gleaming stone archway. He clutched a small wooden box containing Verita's wedding gift, weaving through the crowd with quiet confidence. Weathered hands from years of tending orchards belied his twenty-two years. His unruly black hair was barely tamed despite his attempts to control it.

The moment he stepped onto the Great Bridge, morning light danced across the stone beneath his feet. Ahead, he could see the central plaza, where intricate mosaic tiles caught the light, and where merchants from both sides of the Vitae River had displayed their wares in a brilliant tapestry of colors. The elders always said that true strength wasn't in stone or steel, but in lives bound tightly together. Fidel felt that truth humming beneath his feet as the bridge vibrated, alive with community.

"Make way for the bridegroom!" called out Abundus, whose fruit stand overflowed with perfect specimens from the eastern orchards. He tossed a ripe pomegranate to Fidel,

who caught it one-handed without breaking stride, his deep brown eyes crinkling with an easy smile.

“A gift of fertility for your wedding feast!” Abundus grinned. “They say a good wife is one of life’s rarest treasures; don’t lose her.”

Fidel’s ears reddened as nearby shoppers applauded and offered their blessings.

A few steps ahead, an elderly man from Westshore struggled with a heavy crate of pottery. Without hesitation, a young man from Eastlight helped lift one end. As they carried it together toward the western side, the youth asked earnest questions about the glazing technique, and the elder’s weathered face lit up as he shared his knowledge.

The bridge vibrated slightly beneath them, not from weakness, but from the rhythm of hundreds of feet moving in unity. It was said in both towns that nothing pleased the Creator more than neighbors living in peace. The Great Bridge was a marvel—so vast it would take a man a full half-hour to walk from shore to shore at a steady pace. Designed for far more than mere crossing, it was the hub for culture and community, for trade, and for teaching the young.

“Is that gift for Verita?” called Clementia, the elderly weaver whose nimble fingers worked threads of gold and azure into patterns that told stories of the two towns’ shared history. “Come now, let an old woman admire it!”

Fidel hesitated, then carefully opened the box to reveal a pendant of polished amber, inside which sat a perfect white flower that bloomed only on the western shore where Verita lived. The crowd leaned in and sighed appreciatively.

“The Eternus bloom,” Clementia breathed, her eyes bright with recognition. “It’s a symbol of love that never fades.”

“They say love like that must be touched by the Creator,” added Sapientia, granddaughter of the bridge’s chief architect, her voice filled with reverence.

Fidel nodded. “She deserves something that won’t wither. Nothing less.”

He closed the box and tucked it securely into his vest pocket. His gaze drifted westward, where the bridge stretched across the river toward the place his beloved awaited.

As Fidel continued westward, laughter drew his attention to children playing on one of the wide promenades. A girl with the distinctive braided hair of Westshore clapped her hands in rhythm while a boy in the earth-toned tunic of Eastlight tried to match her pattern. When he stumbled over the sequence, she patiently started again, their different accents blending into shared giggles.

Nearby, two scholars debated in friendly conversation. “But surely the eastern method of crop rotation yields better results in sandy soil,” one argued. The other nodded thoughtfully. “Perhaps. Yet our western terracing prevents erosion. What if we combined them?”

The ancient architects had designed this Great Bridge not merely as a crossing, but as a living heart where two communities could become one. People often marveled at the structure’s beauty, but Fidel knew the true wonder wasn’t the bridge itself; rather, it was the unity it provided. The old proverb etched on the cornerstone came to his mind: *In the eyes of the Maker, no one is foreign; only family not yet met.*

As Fidel continued his walk, he noticed a young woman—slight, pale, eyes cast downward—standing half-hidden behind the weaver’s stall. Her fingers fidgeted with a loose thread at her sleeve, and when an elder greeted her kindly, she only nodded and stepped farther back.

“Timidia, the weaver’s daughter,” Sapientia murmured quietly to Fidel. “Poor child can barely speak above a whisper. Sweet soul, but always afraid of being seen.”

Fidel nodded, moved by the contrast. In a community so full of laughter and light, Timidia seemed like a shadow cast by something unseen.

As the sun approached its zenith, Fidel saw the communal kitchen bustling with activity. A young mother approached with empty hands, worry creasing her brow. Before she could even speak, an elderly baker pressed a warm loaf into her arms and quietly slipped dried fruit into her basket. No one tallied their share or kept a silent score. In this place, giving was its own reward.

Benigna chopped vegetables from her eastern gardens while singing harmonies with Concordia, who kneaded dough made from western wheat. The Creator, they believed, had blessed each shore with unique gifts; not so they would boast, but so they would bless.

“Will Verita join us for the midday meal?” asked Benevolus, the elder whose name matched his kind nature.

“She’s meeting with the ceremony attendants at Harmonia’s studio,” Fidel replied. “Harmonia herself is designing our ceremony.”

“A fitting choice,” Benevolus nodded. “Is it not Harmonia who weaves harmony between hearts, creating ceremonies that unite souls as surely as the bridge unites shores?”

As if summoned by their conversation, Fidel spotted Harmonia herself approaching, her ceremonial sash flowing with each graceful step. Her eyes, sharp with precision, softened when she smiled.

“Fidel, I was hoping to find you,” she called out.

“And I was just looking for you,” replied Fidel. “Do you know where I might find my bride-to-be? We were wanting to discuss final plans for the wedding with you.”

“Verita is in my studio. She has shared the most wonderful ideas for your ceremony. The symbolism of joining hands at the exact center point—where east meets west in perfect balance—it’s inspired!”

Fidel smiled, thinking of his beloved. “Trust Verita to see the deeper meaning in the ancient design of the bridge.”

“The bridge merely reflects what was always intended between your hearts,” she replied. “Two sides, one foundation. That’s how the bridge stands. That’s how love endures.”

“Come,” she said, motioning toward her studio, “Verita waits, and there are decisions about tomorrow that require both bride and bridegroom.”

As they crossed onto the western shore and approached Harmonia’s studio, Fidel paused at the threshold, his hand frozen on the door handle as his breath caught in his throat.

Inside, Verita stood examining architectural drawings spread across a broad table, her profile illuminated by golden light streaming through tall windows. She moved with unconscious grace, her fingers tracing the elegant lines of the bridge’s design with the same reverence she might show a sacred text.

For a moment, Fidel forgot how to breathe. At nineteen, she was radiant—not just beautiful, but luminous, as though the Creator had poured extra light into her very being.

Harmonia, sensing the quiet weight of the moment, offered Fidel a warm smile. “I’ll be in the archive room,” she whispered. “Take your time.” She stepped through a side doorway, leaving Fidel alone in the golden-lit stillness.

Verita looked up, sensing Fidel’s presence, and their eyes locked across the room. Time seemed to suspend itself.

“Fidel,” she whispered, his name falling from her lips like a prayer. The truth of her nature shone in her gaze—straightforward, unwavering, pure—but now he saw something more. Wonder. The same breathless amazement that had stolen his voice.

He stepped toward her, still speechless. Her eyes never left his, and he could see his own awe reflected there.

“You’re...” he began, then stopped, shaking his head with a soft laugh. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?” she asked, though her voice was barely above a whisper.

“Make me forget every word I’ve ever learned,” he said. “Make me feel like I’m seeing the sun rise for the first time.”

A blush bloomed across her cheeks, but she didn’t look away. Instead, she moved toward him with that same unconscious grace.

“And you,” she said, reaching up to touch his face with trembling fingers, “make me understand why the poets write about love as if it were something alive, something that could steal your breath and give it back transformed.”

Verita moved into Fidel’s embrace, and for a moment, neither spoke; their embrace said more than words. They simply existed together in the warmth of love.

“I visited the Hall of Records today,” Verita said at last. Uncle Aldric had always encouraged her scholarly pursuits—wisdom that had guided her since he took her in as an orphaned child. “I found something remarkable in the ancient texts.”

She led him to a scroll carefully unfurled on a side table. “Look at this inscription from the original bridge drawings.”

Fidel’s eyes widened as he read: *When division threatens to separate what belongs together, remember this bridge. What love joins, nothing can divide.*

“Our wedding tomorrow,” Verita whispered, “will be another thread in the tapestry that began long ago.”

Fidel slid his hand into his pocket and gently touched the wooden box containing the amber pendant, suddenly certain that their union was somehow part of a larger design.

“Let’s take a walk to the spot where tomorrow we become husband and wife,” Fidel said, after they had spoken with Harmonia about last-minute wedding plans.

The afternoon had grown long as they made their way from Harmonia’s studio, and evening shadows began to stretch across the bridge. Her chestnut hair caught the fading light, weaving threads of copper and gold through the loose curls that framed her face. Nothing false ever crossed her lips. Her name, Verita, wasn’t just a title, it was the essence of who she was.

When she was eight, Verita had watched her beloved grandfather promise to return from a trading journey “before the harvest moon.” She waited at their garden gate every evening, but he never came home—he had started a new family in a distant village. That night, through her tears, young Verita made a vow: she would never leave anyone waiting on a lie.

“Tomorrow feels too distant,” she said, her fingers interlacing with his.

Fidel nodded, studying the firm line of her jaw. His own broad shoulders relaxed in her presence, the constant vigilance he maintained as guardian of the eastern orchards unnecessary when they were together.

Fidel had learned about vigilance early. His father, Gamiel, had been full of grand promises but had courted half the village behind his mother's back. When Fidel was twelve, his father simply disappeared, leaving only a note about "needing freedom." Young Fidel had made his own silent promise: whatever else he became, he would not be a man who broke faith.

"The stars will refuse to set tonight," he agreed, drawing her closer.

They paused at the exact center of the bridge as the sun set and the first stars appeared. Beneath them, the Vitae River shimmered nearly a hundred feet below, its surface catching the evening stars like scattered coins. Neither seemed able to release the other's hand.

"I should return home, it's getting dark," Verita whispered, though she made no move to leave. "My family has prepared the ceremonial garments."

"And my father expects me for the blessing meal," Fidel replied, equally motionless.

Verita's eyes searched his face in the fading light. "Sometimes I try to imagine what my life would have been without you," she said softly, "and I can't. It's like trying to imagine the bridge without its keystone."

When she finally stepped back, the space between them seemed to protest the separation.

"Until tomorrow," Verita promised. "When we meet again, it will be to never part."

"Signal me like usual when you get home," Fidel said.

Verita nodded, then stepped to the edge of the bridge where she kept her lantern. "Always."

They each turned toward their own distant shore. From his vantage point, Fidel could still see both shores at once, their entire world held together by this singular bridge. Tomorrow, they would be joined—just as surely, just as beautifully—as the two shores were bound by stone and sacred design.

When Fidel arrived home, he scanned across the river. Soon, a gentle arc of light swept across the darkness from her shore—the signal for "safe." Then came their practiced sequence: a loop and two brief flashes meaning "home well," followed by the familiar curve that meant "love."

He raised his own lantern in response: a quick zigzag for “glad,” then their special signal—a slow figure eight meaning “forever bound,” and finally the arc for “love.”

From across the water, her reply came: three brief pulses for “tomorrow,” a triangle for “joy,” and the double curve for “always.”

Their rich communication had begun when Verita’s uncle Aldric taught her the traditional signals used by bridge watchmen. During their courtship, she had taught many of these patterns to Fidel, creating a language only they shared.

As their final signals faded into the night, a strange stillness settled over the valley. The ever-present chorus of night birds fell silent. Even the gentle lapping of the river against the bridge’s foundations seemed to hush, as if the very earth were holding its breath.

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CHAPTER TWO

When The Earth Shook

FOUNDATIONS UNDONE

The first tremor struck mid-morning, as Fidel and his parents were preparing to leave for the wedding ceremony on the bridge. His mother screamed. His father tried to shelter her. Fidel dropped to his knees. Something had changed in the world. The air itself seemed to congeal, pressing against his skin with unnatural heaviness. A metallic taste coated his tongue, and his ears popped as if he'd descended rapidly from a great height.

The familiar scents of their home, the cedar shelves and stone floors, were suddenly overlaid with something acrid and foreign, like sulfur rising from deep beneath the earth. Even before the ground began to move, Fidel's body recognized the wrongness: every hair standing on end, his stomach hollowing with instinctive dread. He felt it before he heard it, before the ground began to shudder beneath his home.

Then came the noise; a deep, guttural groan from far below the earth, as if the foundations of the world itself were shifting. The sound vibrated through his bones before reaching his ears, a primordial bass note that seemed to liquefy his insides and turn his legs to water. Objects crashed from shelves; walls cracked as if lines drawn by an invisible hand.

"Creator save us," his mother gasped from the doorway ... her face pale from fear.

Fidel stumbled outside. He could see the bridge in the distance, shaking, swaying and starting to crumble.

The second tremor came stronger than the first, and with it came a strange, crawling darkness that seemed to flow over the stones. Dust billowed upward, catching in his throat and stinging his eyes. The crawling darkness moved unlike natural shadow; it seemed to drink the light, spreading like spilled ink across surfaces it touched, leaving behind a residue that dulled the once-vibrant colors of the mosaic tiles.

The air filled with a cacophony of sounds: the high-pitched whine of stone grinding against stone, the percussive crack of splitting wood, the desperate screams that seemed to come from everywhere at once, and beneath it all, that continuous, terrible groaning from the earth itself.

The third tremor ripped a jagged scar across the heavens. For a terrible instant, the bridge stood frozen in the gash of unnatural light, its graceful arc suspended in broken fragments. Then the center collapsed, stones tumbling into the suddenly violent waters below.

The Vitae River, which just that morning had carried gentle merchant vessels and laughing children, now raged with unnatural fury. Where peaceful passenger barges had just ferried families between shores, treacherous whirlpools now swirled with deadly force. The calm current that had welcomed all travelers was gone, replaced by churning rapids that devoured everything they touched. No boat could survive such waters; no soul could cross what had become a liquid barrier as impassable as any mountain.

With the chaos came something else, a feeling Fidel had never experienced before. A tightness in his chest. A desperate fear. A voice inside him that whispered, *Save yourself first.*

As the dust began to settle, the morning light revealed a world forever changed; not just by physical destruction, but by an invisible poison that had entered creation itself, breaking something fundamental within human hearts. It became clear that the terrible tragedy went far beyond a crumbling bridge and a raging river; the crumbling and raging had entered the human heart and behavior.

Midday revealed the full horror of what had happened. A cloying mist hovered over the churning waters, thick with the dust of pulverized stone. The stench of wet debris, disturbed riverbed, and something else, something coppery and primal, hung in the air. Birds that normally sang remained eerily silent, as if even they understood that something fundamental had been broken.

The only sounds were human weeping and shouting, punctuated by the hollow, rhythmic thudding of debris still occasionally breaking free to fall into the river below. Each impact added to the churning of the water; a visual echo of how their world would become turbulent, chaotic. The bridge's once-graceful arc was now a jagged wound across the sky. Bodies floated face down in the churning waters; men, women, and children who had been crossing when the center gave way.

"Elinor! ELINOR!" A man pointed to the body of a young woman on the rocks below. "My daughter ... she was delivering bread to the west side..." Two others pulled him back from the edge of the broken bridge as he sobbed.

His cries joined the chorus of anguish that rose from both shores. Merchants dropped their crates and fell to their knees, staring across the river in disbelief. A husband called out a name that echoed unanswered across the divide.

Near the eastern shore, a woman knelt over the broken body of her husband, pulled from the wreckage that had washed up on the bank. "We were married for sixty-three years," she cried to no one in particular, stroking his still face. "Not once did we speak harshly to each other. Not once." Her tears fell onto his cold cheeks. "What will I do now? What will I do without you?"

Yet even as grief consumed them, something darker began to stir. The earthquake had not only cracked stone and timber—it had fractured something within human hearts themselves.

On the west side, a man sprinted toward the edge of a massive sinkhole, clutching a coil of rope, his eyes locked on his wife, who clung to a crumbling beam lodged deep in the rubble below. "Hold on, Marta!" he called, bracing to lower the rope.

Before he could drop it down, another man yanked the coil from his hands. "No—I need this! My son's trapped down there!" He pointed to a small figure wedged beneath broken concrete just yards away. "Give it back!" the first man shouted, lunging for the rope. "She was first! Marta was first!"

They wrestled for the rope, both men's faces contorted with a desperation that bordered on savagery—a look unthinkable in their peaceful community just hours earlier.

While they fought, the woman lost her grip and vanished into the darkness below, and the boy's faint cries were silenced beneath shifting rubble.

As the immediate shock began to fade, something deeper started to crack within them. Where once every need was met with open hands, now eyes narrowed in calculation. A woman turned her back on a weeping stranger. Two men argued over who had the right to scarce supplies. A merchant, watching the disaster unfold, quietly raised his prices—not out of need, but opportunity. If others would suffer, he reasoned, he might as well profit. This was no mere collapse of stone—it was the beginning of distrust, division, and self-preservation.

Elder Pax moved among the grieving, his weathered face drawn with confusion as much as sorrow. “Before today, we knew nothing of fear, nothing of division, nothing of self-preservation,” he murmured. “How could such perfect harmony shatter so completely?”

He paused, watching the churning waters with ancient eyes. “My grandmother spoke of old legends,” he said to those gathered near. “She said the Vitae River rages when the heart of the land is broken, and will not calm until it is mended by a great sacrifice of love.” He shook his head slowly. “I thought them merely stories to frighten children into kindness.”

Fidel moved through the chaos in a daze, one thought pounding in his mind: Verita. Had she been crossing already? Was she among the bodies in the water? Or buried under rubble? Or was she on the western shore, as unreachable as if she had passed beyond life itself?

Fidel and his parents returned home, thankful to be alive, but terrified to find out who wasn't. They began to sift through what was left of their home. As he stepped over shattered beams and broken tiles, something caught the light, a glint half-buried beneath a pile of broken stone. He knelt and brushed it free with trembling hands. It was the wooden box.

The hinges were bent, the surface scratched, but when he pried it open, the pendant lay unharmed inside. The amber caught the morning light, and the Eternus bloom, impossibly, still shone white and perfect, unharmed by the disaster.

Fidel's breath caught. In a world unmade, here was proof that something had endured. Love. Truth. The promises they made. Whatever else had fallen, this had not.

He pressed the pendant to his heart. “You're alive,” he whispered. “You have to be.”

The gap between the shores seemed to widen with each passing moment. The opposite bank, once so familiar it felt like an extension of home, now appeared as distant and foreign as the far side of the moon. Children born after would never understand what was lost; the perfect harmony, the natural unity, the effortless communion that had defined life before the catastrophe.

"All my children were on the west side visiting their aunt, uncle and cousins," a gray-haired woman sobbed into her hands. "All four of them. Now I cannot reach them. I cannot even know if they live."

Harmonia worked tirelessly, directing efforts to comfort the grieving and organize memorial services for the fallen. But even her gentle wisdom could find no words for such destruction. "It's as if something has entered the very hearts of the people," she murmured, watching neighbors argue over scarce supplies. "Some corruption I cannot name."

As the day went on, the true scale of the catastrophe was revealed; not just the bridge, but buildings in both communities had collapsed. Landmarks were destroyed. The perfect order of their world had shattered in an instant, leaving chaos in its place. The physical chasm in the bridge was merely the visible manifestation of a deeper rupture—one that had opened within human hearts, creating for the first time the terrible possibility of choosing self over community.

"Verita!" Fidel's voice grew hoarse as he called across the impossible gap. "Verita!"

Only his echo answered, mocking his desperation.

His agony and despair drove him to the ruined eastern edge, eyes straining for any glimpse of her on the far shore. The ache in his chest had become a sharp physical pain; a hollowness that threatened to consume him from within. They had never been separated before, not like this. The absence of her felt like the absence of his own heartbeat.

"Have you seen a young woman with chestnut hair? Her name is Verita." He asked everyone he passed, his words increasingly desperate. "She was to be my bride today."

Some shook their heads sadly. Others were too lost in their own grief to answer.

As twilight approached, Fidel made his way to the eastern shore, to the highest point where he could look across the widened river to the western shore, now lit by countless fires and torches. Were they mourning there as well? Did they have their own

memorials, their own missing? Was Verita among those lighting lanterns, searching for him as desperately as he searched for her?

Fidel sank to his knees, overcome. His prayers to the Creator, once flowing naturally as breath, now churned like a raging river in his mind. The Creator seemed suddenly distant, as if the earthquake had widened not just the physical gap across the river, but some spiritual chasm in humanity as well.

In place of prayer rose something new and terrible; doubt, anger. Had the Creator abandoned them? Had the bridge fallen because of some cosmic punishment? Or worse, had their perfect world been merely an illusion all along, now stripped away to reveal a harsher truth beneath?

Yet something in Fidel resisted. The meaning of his name, Faithful, had never felt more like a challenge than it did now. Faithful to what? To whom? To Verita, certainly. But also to something larger, something that the fallen bridge had once embodied but had not created; a unity that existed before the first stone was laid.

Fidel rose to his feet, took a torch from its holder, and began to wave it in the patterns Verita had taught him. Not random gestures of desperation, but the deliberate signals from Uncle Aldric's Night Watchmen's Code. A slow arc—the signal for “safe.” A pause. Then another arc, this one traced with trembling hands—“love.”

Nothing. The western shore remained silent, giving no sign that anyone had seen his desperate message.

He tried again, this time with the double curve for “always”—their most sacred signal. Again, nothing. The vast distance mocked his efforts, swallowing his light as completely as the earthquake had swallowed their world.

Yet something in Fidel refused to surrender. Whether Verita lived or had perished in the collapse, whether she could see his signals or had drowned in the raging river, he would continue sending his message into the darkness.

As the night deepened, Fidel realized that this flickering conversation with emptiness might become his only connection to hope itself. If she lived, someday she might see. If she didn't...at least the darkness would know he had not stopped calling her name.

The night wind shifted, carrying with it terrible sounds: fragments of weeping, the crash of structures still collapsing. Beneath it all ran the river, once a gentle presence at the heart of their joined communities, now a violent barrier that seemed determined to forever keep apart what belonged together.