

RUST & RESTRAINT

THE ROADS BETWEEN



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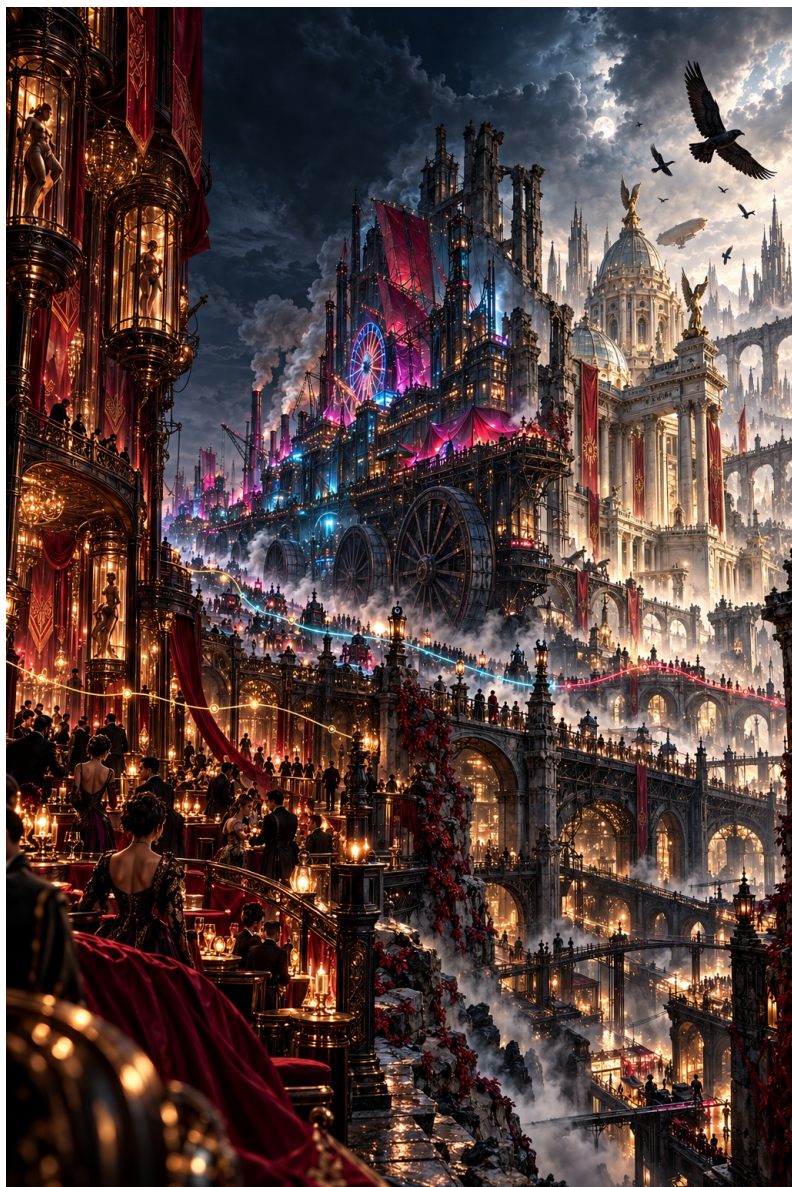
THE ROADS BETWEEN

A journey through the places that still hold

The bright side of the crack

From the west balcony the Capital looked as though it had been built for a celebration that had gone on too long. Glass domes rose over the exhibition streets. Their brass ribs caught the morning and carried it down to red banners, balconies, and the upper decks of a wheel turning behind the grand hall. A tram crossed a bridge that had once been part of the fair. There were people in the cafes before the lamps had fully gone out. Daro could see why the city called itself the Gem.

Then he turned the map in his hands and looked through the break in the western facade. Beyond the last gilded cornice, an entire quarter stood roofless. New walkways had been fixed between old walls so people could still cross it. Some of the windows below were lit. Others opened onto the sky. Steam from a public bath drifted across a collapsed arcade and hid the undercity vents along the canal. The damage was old enough to have become a route, and not old enough to be forgotten.



The rebuilt crown throws its shadow across a quarter no one has restored.

Iva came up the balcony stairs carrying a narrow metal case. She set it on the parapet away from the drop. The case held gauges, a few spare contacts, and a piece she had taken out of their wagon's coupling that morning. Its working edge had worn

unevenly. The wagon could make the western road, she thought, but she would not ask it to carry the same load across the dry channel without a better part. Black Weir made sleeves of the right kind. It was two stops away, if the stops were still there.



The bright edge of the city ends in masonry that still remembers the break.

'You have the routes?' she asked. Daro had three sheets: a municipal line to the last tram, a trader's account of the land beyond, and a river survey that had gone out of date before he was born. They agreed only for the first twelve miles. He showed her the place where the drawings separated. She took the trader's sheet because it showed the grade of the road. Daro kept the others. Neither called the bundle a map yet.

They were going farther than either had gone before: through Black Weir to Ironhold's working harbor, across to Far Shore, over the salt, and up toward the mountain country. Daro wanted to learn which of those names still belonged to usable roads. Iva wanted to know what the roads asked of a machine and the people who kept it moving. They had no charter from the Capital. They had hired Pel and her wagon as far as Ironhold. The supplies and the time they could spare were their own.

The fair roof

A covered market occupied the old fair's Hall of Inventions. An enormous model of the moon hung above stalls selling onions, wire, salvaged lenses, and repaired shoes. One of its continents had fallen off and been painted on a panel beneath it. Over the western doors a clockwork procession of inventors still stepped out every hour, though the fourth figure had lost an arm. The children waiting for it counted the figures aloud and shouted when the broken one appeared.

Iva had come for a coupling insert. At the first counter the vendor laid out a polished ring in a velvet tray. Its teeth looked clean in the hall light. He said it had been cut to the old standard. Iva fitted her gauge into it and felt it rock. She held the ring beneath a side lamp. Two teeth had been built up with a bright filler, then ground down to hide the join. Under a short load the repair might hold. Under a sustained pull it would heat and change shape. The vendor knew she had seen it. 'It works for a light cart,' he said. She asked him to label it that way. He put it back in the tray without changing the card while she

watched.



The first station keeps water, charge, and shelter under an old exhibition roof.

At the next counter, a keeper with oil on her cuffs showed Iva a rougher insert and the sheet on which its dimensions had been taken. It was too small for their wagon, but its metal had a

sound edge. The keeper had sent its mate to Black Weir for a final cut. If it was ready when they arrived, they could buy it there and pay her only for the stock. She wrote the stock number and took nothing in advance. Iva bought a small length of packing material and the keeper's directions to the sleeve maker.

Daro watched the moon turn slowly above the counter. The fair had promised a city of marvels. In its shade, a woman with stained cuffs was giving them a route to a particular person who could finish a particular part. He put her name beside Black Weir, with the stock number under it. Outside the hall, a boy had scratched three short strokes and a curve low on the doorframe. Daro knew the mark from the undercity lanes: water past the next turn, with a warning that the first tap did not run. He looked down the street. The municipal map showed both taps as working.

Beyond the last lamp

They loaded the wagon in a yard beneath the tram arch. Iva put the heavier tools over the axle and the drinking water where they could reach it without opening the freight. Daro carried the maps in a weatherproof case on the front seat. The driver, a woman called Pel, had carried both people and machine parts west before. She counted the water and asked if they meant to sleep beyond the Capital's lamp line. They did. She added a shutter for the wagon's small side light. If they left it shining after dusk, they would be seen long before they could see anyone approaching.

The repaired quarter accompanied them to the outer gate. New apartments rose inside the shells of exhibition hotels. Beneath one bridge, a community kitchen served breakfast through an old ticket window. A vast pavilion farther out remained open to rain. Its marble floor had been stripped for other repairs, leaving the foundations like teeth. People still crossed on a timber path whose boards showed the marks of

many boots. Iva knew the Capital's survival had been built from its losses. From the wagon, she could see how much of the loss had been left in place.



At the counter, a coupling is worth only what the next road can use.

At the gate a road worker revised Daro's first sheet. A culvert had settled after the last storm; vehicles were using a narrower farm track until a crew could brace it. She drew the diversion in pencil. Daro asked when the farm track had last taken a loaded wagon. 'This morning,' she said, and pointed to the wheel marks. She did not certify the crossing after another hard rain. Pel took the sheet and walked to the wagon's rear tire. It was worth knowing where the weight would ride.

The lamps diminished one by one. When the last one vanished behind a rise, the Capital remained as a glow on the underside of the clouds. They camped beside a culvert with a red pane set into its wall, a mark for a shelter entrance beneath the road. Someone had chalked a cant sign there too: a cup with its base open, meaning ask before drawing water. Pel found a person inside tending a filter and paid for three vessels. Daro copied

the mark, its location, and the price. The filter keeper crossed out the municipal water symbol on his sheet. The public tap above had failed months ago.

At night the wagon's metal cooled with small ticking sounds. Far off, beyond the dark farms, a second light moved along the horizon. It rose and dipped, then held steady, too broad for a single vehicle. Pel saw it when she came back from closing the water tins. 'That's going to cross our road,' she said. Iva looked at the coupling case beneath her seat. They had expected to reach the next town before needing a workshop. The road might bring one to them first.

The city arrives in pieces

They heard Ride & Sin before sunrise. Bass passed through the ground in regular pulses, under a brighter run of brass and the scrape of heavy transport. From the ridge the three of them watched a procession pull a town across the flats. Storefronts rode armored carriers with their shutters fastened. A great wheel stood over the center of the movement, its rim lit even in daylight. Magnetic crawlers swept the deployment lanes ahead, gathering loose metal before the first hauler arrived. Behind them, crews set plate over the deepest ruts.

The moving city did not roll intact across the country. It folded, traveled, and opened again. Daro could recognize some of its streets from a route drawing, but their positions changed with every deployment. A row of painted booths went past on separate vehicles. A brass flower atop a security carrier turned toward the ridge. Its petals opened around a weapon, then closed when a rider at the perimeter signaled that the wagon had stopped.



Ride & Sin arrives after dark, unfolding a city while its wheels are still on the road.

The rider met them where the trade lane crossed their route. His helmet reflected the wheel and made it look as though he carried a smaller one on his face. He said the lane would close

while the carriers moved through. They could wait until the convoy had passed, or enter with the traders and leave by the west exit once the ground crew had laid it. Pel asked how long. The rider looked at the moving line and gave an estimate, then a wider one for anything that broke. Iva liked the second number better.



Arrival is announced by work, sound, and the ground moving under the wheels.

Green lamps marked the trade approach. Their posts were being carried forward by workers who lifted them as the lane

changed. Daro saw how a traveler might swear the lamps had lied. Pel kept the wagon still until a ground worker waved them between two crawlers. A child in goggles stood on the rear deck of one machine sorting recovered brass from copper. The child called down a price correction to an adult beside it, who took the piece back and put it in the right bin. There were people of every age under the music, doing the work that let the spectacle arrive safely.

As they entered, the bass became a pulse through the wagon floor. An enormous painted facade passed them on a carrier with its balconies folded against the walls. Its lamps spelled out a promise of pleasure, though the people walking beside it had dust in their mouths and grease on their sleeves. Iva watched the nearest axle take a rough patch. The carrier slowed, a worker checked the plate, and the line resumed. Ride & Sin had come to life by thousands of such small permissions.

A load behind the lights

The trade yard opened under a temporary canopy. Stalls assembled around the wagons while a high stage unfolded farther in. Daro went toward a board showing the night's lanes, and Iva followed the sound of a mechanic striking a hot bracket once, waiting, then striking it again. A hauler carrying part of an arcade had developed play at a steering joint. Its crew had set the frame on a stand. Music from the wheel covered most of the conversation, but Iva could see the driver showing where the steering answered late.

The mechanic was a narrow man in a cream shirt with its sleeves tied back. He asked Iva why she was watching. She showed him her own worn coupling edge and the rough stock number from the fair keeper. He recognized Black Weir's mark. He did not offer to cut the part for her in a yard full of moving freight. Instead he let her help measure the hauler joint under its actual weight. The same bit of looseness looked harmless while the wheel was raised; with the carrier resting on it, the

joint shifted far enough to take a finger. They blocked the frame before touching it again.

A seller two stalls over offered a universal repair sleeve. He opened a case of bright metal rings and claimed one would fit any old shaft. Iva set her gauge against the nearest ring. It would fit three diameters loosely and none precisely. The mechanic asked the seller what load he guaranteed. The seller named a small cart. The arcade hauler weighed more than ten. No one bought the sleeve for it. The driver sent for the correct stock from a nearby carrier, and the stage lost an hour of setup while they waited.



Trade happens beneath the machinery while the route is still being decided.

Pel had bought them space in a public yard for the delay. Daro found a folding map of Ride & Sin there, printed on stiff paper with strips that could be moved from one alignment to another. Its maker, a woman in a dark blue coat, showed him the date of the current configuration. By dawn the printed exit would be wrong. She wrote the west departure lane on the blank edge and told him to ask again when the carriers turned. He bought the map because it told the truth about its own

limits.

After dark the city glittered. The wheel carried passengers above a field of lights. Music came from three directions and met badly, then beautifully, at the turn to a food court. Iva ate beneath the stage and saw the cream-shirted mechanic emerge after the repaired hauler took its first loaded circuit. The driver had signed the work sheet. The joint would be inspected at the next stop. The show opened late. To the people climbing the wheel, it had never been in doubt.

Daro had bought two tickets before asking Iva. She looked at the stair to the wheel, then at the repaired hauler beyond the stage. The mechanic had signed off for the night. The wheel's crew was still checking each gondola at the loading step. She let Daro take her case and climbed aboard. Below them Pel sat at a food stall with her sleeves rolled up, laughing at something the map seller had said. Iva could not hear it. She had spent the day watching things fail to fit; for once, she allowed a machine to carry her without opening its housing.



Above the wheel train, supper and music continue while the road moves below.

At the top the moving city was a pattern of bright islands. Between them lay acres of unlit freight, fuel carts, folded roofs, crews eating beside their work, and a ring of sentries looking outward. Beyond the last light was the dark road to Black Weir.

Daro unfolded the map seller's paper against his knee. None of its strips matched this view from above. Iva took the sheet and folded it closed. 'You can put it away for one turn,' she said. He did. Under them the musicians found one another's tempo, and the stage lit a red curtain from behind. The curtain rose on an empty platform. A singer appeared among the audience instead, close enough to make the whole yard turn.

Iva had heard people call Ride & Sin a distraction for those rich enough to waste a night. From the wheel she could see the sleeping tents of its mechanics and drivers. Its pleasure took labor, and its labor bought pleasure for people who had spent the day hauling walls. She thought of the kitchen workers they had passed beneath the Capital bridge. If they met again, she would tell them about the singer, not the coupling. Daro leaned over to see the curtain open fully. He was smiling at something he could not draw. For a few minutes she stopped keeping count of what they had spent to get here.

At the bottom, a ground worker asked Daro for the ticket stubs. He had tucked them inside his route book, and he hesitated before handing them over. The worker laughed. The stubs were for the night's count, she explained; the ride did not need his names or his map. Daro handed them to her. Iva kept the sound of his surprised laugh when they crossed the yard toward Pel. In the morning they would have to find a west exit that moved. Tonight the city had given them a view that would not hold still long enough to own.

The road chooses another show

In the morning the west exit was on a different side of the yard. Daro's printed map showed a street where a carrier now stood. He found the woman in the dark blue coat dismantling her stall. She moved his paper strips to the new alignment and pointed him toward the lamps a crew had just planted. The city was turning south after this deployment. Their road went west to Black Weir. For a few hours they could travel alongside its freight, but then the lanes would divide.

Pel drove past the wheel as its gondolas were locked for movement. Close up, the paint around the hub had worn away. Workers checked every pin while a band rehearsed somewhere behind a closed facade. A little girl carried a tray of breakfast to the security crew. The brass flower's petals were shut. Across the yard the stage folded down, cables gathered in loops, and a street that had held hundreds of people the night before became an interval of flattened earth.



A record travels farther than a promise, though neither moves the city by itself.

At the fork a sign had been fixed to a freshly driven post: **BLACK WEIR, WEST**. The smaller line below it warned of a damaged channel crossing. Daro asked a passing carrier driver which approach remained firm. The driver had taken the north

bank two days earlier with a heavy load, but he would not speak for the culvert after the recent rain. He drew the sound stretch on Daro's sheet and marked where he had stopped. Pel checked the sky and made the choice to keep the ridge instead of dropping to the channel early.

The convoy turned south. Its lamps and music went with it, though a low vibration remained for a while in the road under their wheels. Ride & Sin had not solved their coupling. It had given Iva a clearer measure of what a poor fit could cost. She tucked the fair keeper's stock number behind her gauge. At Black Weir someone would have to cut the sleeve, and she would have to judge it against the load they intended to carry.

Daro watched the moving lights diminish. The Capital's glow was gone behind them. Ahead, the dry channel looked like an easy straight line until its banks interrupted the road. On the sheet in his lap he had three departures from the same place: a printed west exit, a woman's correction that morning, and the lane their wheels had actually taken. He drew the third one last.

The channel from above

The dry channel kept appearing beside the road and then falling out of sight. From the ridge it looked broad and simple, a white floor between dark banks. At each descent the view broke into cuts, old spillways, and sections of masonry that had settled at different angles. Pel took the north approach the carrier driver had marked. She stopped at the damaged crossing and walked out along the stone before asking the wagon to follow. The culvert was sound under its center and loose at one edge. She put Iva on the bank to watch the rear wheel and carried it through without touching the damaged side.



The empty riverbed is the largest structure in the town.

Black Weir stood beyond a water gate that no longer crossed a full river. The town had grown around the gate machinery, lifting workshops into its old service galleries and running narrow bridges between the banks. When the upper reservoir released, water came through in a hard temporary rush. Most days the channel showed its bottom. Workers kept both possibilities in mind; a cart parked on the floor could be lost by supper if someone upstream opened a valve.

The fair keeper's stock number led them to a sleeve maker named Nera. Her shop was built in the shadow of a great wheel that turned only during a release. Nera had the rough stock on a bench, with the finished piece still attached to a test arbor. She had not cut it to the Capital's written dimensions. She wanted to see the worn coupling from the wagon and how its housing sat under load. Iva had expected to buy the part and leave by morning. Nera showed her a place to park over a service pit and told her the gate crew had the pit for the next hour. After that, the wagon could be theirs.



A broken causeway still decides how freight reaches the Works.

Daro went to find out when water would pass. The town's public board showed an afternoon release and a request from Ironhold for a repaired vessel coupling. The request was two days old. A team had carried its separated housing inland from

the harbor, paying for priority on the same machines Nera needed for Iva's sleeve. Black Weir had work for both road and sea. It had one cutting head of the required size.

One machine, two claims

The gate crew reached Nera's pit late. A lower leaf had failed to travel its full distance, and the crew had to check the bearing before the afternoon release. Their forewoman, in a blue leather apron, apologized for the delay without offering to shorten the inspection. Pel had already unloaded what Iva needed. The wagon could wait. On the bench beside it lay the Ironhold coupling housing, long enough that its end projected into the walkway. It belonged to a vessel due to leave for Far Shore. Its sleeve had been scored by heat and cut free.

Nera measured Iva's worn insert and the empty seat on the wagon. The seat was no longer round. She could cut a new ring to the largest diameter and force it home, or build a narrower sleeve with a removable shim. The latter could be checked and replaced on the road. It would take longer and consume a piece of stock she had set aside for the Ironhold job. Iva asked to see the vessel's figures before choosing. Its housing required the longer stock but not the short shim. They were competing for machine time, not for the same final part.



Hands repair the pieces that the dry mills can no longer make whole.

At the gate, the forewoman called for a pause in the release. Daro watched workers hold the lower leaf while one crawled into an access well. She came out with a crushed brass washer on the end of a tool. The leaf could move with the washer gone, but it would strike its stop too hard. Nera carried over a blank of the same thickness and turned its face on a smaller machine. For half an hour the workshop made a water-gate part instead of either traveler's order. A man waiting with freight complained about the delay. The forewoman pointed to the empty channel below his cart and asked where he would put it when the water arrived.

They tested the leaf through one full travel, then opened the release. Water hit the lower gates with a noise that made speech useless. Pel and Iva stood above it beside the wagon. The wheel under Nera's shop began to turn. On the far bank, a line of people moved their laundry and tools farther from the channel. A river could be intermittent and still govern a town.

A fit that can be answered for

Nera worked on the vessel housing first because its return cart had to reach Ironhold before the evening road closed. Iva held the measure while Nera cut. When the sleeve seated, they turned it on a bench shaft and brought it under a sustained test load. The temperature climbed, then steadied a little above Nera's preferred line. She stopped the drive and took the sleeve out. A burr at the oil passage had escaped the first inspection. She cut it away and repeated the test. The second line stayed below the limit. On the work sheet she recorded both runs. Nothing about the first failure vanished because the second had passed.

Iva guided the wagon over the pit. Nera's short sleeve seated with the shim and could be withdrawn without damaging the housing. Pel drove the wagon slowly against the yard's resistance brake. Iva listened from below while Nera checked the temperature. At the third pull the old edge of the housing clicked against the new shim. Nera took a finer shaving from the contact point and set it again. They made six pulls before the sound stopped. The wagon had lost most of the day and gained a repair whose size and limit Iva now knew.



Water control remains a daily job even after the river has gone.

The Ironhold cart left with the vessel housing and Nera's work sheet. A larger crate of return tools went with it: borrowed gauges, a shaft fixture, and a heavy clamp that the harbor needed back. Nera put a smaller case inside, wrapped in cloth. It held worn gauge jaws and copied measurements for a tank shop across the water. She showed Daro the recipient mark and asked him to see that the case got to Far Shore. Its contents would be listed at Ironhold with the larger crate; he wrote the detail on his own sheet as well. No one asked Iva to claim the vessel's job was finished. It still had to be installed on a real shaft at the harbor.

That night Pel went over the wagon with Iva. The repaired coupling held its new temperature mark. They checked the wheel patch kit and the axle, then folded the pit receipt into the tool roll. From the service gallery the released water looked black under the town's lamps. Daro saw how the shop, the gate, and the road had borrowed the same afternoon from one another. He drew Black Weir on his map as a junction of duties, not simply a place to buy a part.

Ironhold's smaller harbor

The road to Ironhold crossed ground that had once carried freight in both directions at once. Now weeds grew through half the lanes. The active side narrowed as it reached the coast, passing warehouses with their upper floors open to weather. Pel kept to the marked pavement. At the last inland check she showed Nera's wagon receipt; the road worker saw the repair date and waved them through. They arrived with the sea low and the working harbor busy.



The inland route descends into the only working basin among broken piers.

Ironhold's outer piers reached into black water without meeting a vessel. Some had lost their heads to storms. Others had been dismantled deliberately so their sound metal could be used in the inner basin. A dry dock stood open beside the approach. Workers removed plates from a hull that had been judged beyond repair, bracing each exposed rib before cutting away the next. Iva watched a length of steel descend on a crane. Salvage was not the same as collapse; the difference was the person who knew what still held the frame.

The active basin could take one vessel of the Far Shore line at a time. Its captain was at the engineering bay when Daro arrived with Nera's note. The coupling housing from Black Weir

lay beside the open drive, clean and tagged. The ship mechanic, a woman with a burn scar across her sleeve, had inspected the work sheet and wanted to know why there were two temperature traces. Iva showed her the burr location. Together they set the housing in place, turned the shaft by hand, and checked the oil passage. Then they ran the drive at low power while the mechanic watched her own gauge. The repair made at Black Weir now belonged to the ship's operating record.



Low tide exposes both the repairs and the damage they have not reached.

A porter saw them leave the bay and asked if they were the travelers with the return tools. He wore a dark coat over a faded waistcoat and carried a tally slate tucked under one arm. The crate had been entered as one piece of freight. Daro showed him the smaller case inside and the recipient mark in Far Shore. The porter added a delivery line before the crate went into the hold. He said that at the other end the count would be made again. Daro believed him. A harbor was a place where weight and destination both had to be true.

What can cross

Pel brought the wagon to the cargo scale. The first loading plan would have required the vessel to drain part of its reserve and shift a heavy trade case out of the forward hold. The captain refused both changes. The crew found a lower place for the wagon on the freight deck, provided its loose stock came off. Pel had expected the crossing to be a separate bargain. She had booked herself and a small return load on an inland freight carrier; she did not intend to sail. The wagon was hers, but she could extend its hire to Iva and Daro beyond her own driving contract. She made them read the condition sheet while she was still there.

They took the personal tool roll, the route papers, the wagon, and four sealed cans of water. A case of redundant fittings would have had to go where the cans now stood. Iva unpacked it and kept only the small pieces she could justify by size and use. Pel would send the rest toward the Capital on the freight carrier with her return load. Daro counted the cans twice. The last place with dependable water lay behind the harbor, and the next port would assign its own amount. The scale did not care whether a can held water or wishes. The people choosing did.



A hull in the dry dock gives up steel before it gives up a voyage.

The porter's slate divided their cargo from Black Weir's return tools. He watched the wagon lashed near the centerline and sent the heavy tool crate below. Iva checked the lashing on the wagon, but the deck officer corrected where she stood. She stepped to the safe side and let the crew finish the job. On land she knew the weight; on a vessel the same weight could move under her feet. She asked the officer to show her the mark that would reveal a shifted line at sea. He did.



The working deck carries people across trades as well as water.

Pel found them at the departure gate. She handed Iva the coupling receipt and a packet of dry cloth she had saved from the discarded fittings case. 'For the next thing that has to stay clean,' she said. Daro thanked her for the road and asked

whether she would take his revised sheet back to the fair keeper. Pel said she would, provided he had written which section he had actually traveled. He showed her. She smiled once and folded it into her coat.

The horn sounded across the basin. Pel went up the shore ramp while Iva and Daro crossed to the vessel. From the deck, Daro could see the dry dock's braced skeleton, the broken piers, and the smaller harbor that continued to work among them. Their wagon waited under its lash; their water stood beside it. The ship's drive began to turn. Beneath the deep engine beat, Iva felt for the finer vibration of the sleeve they had watched take shape in Black Weir.

The harbor falls away

By the time the harbor's signal light separated from the shore, the vessel had already taken on the shape of its load. It rode low at the bow. The porter who had moved the last crate watched the waterline rather than the shrinking piers. Iva and Daro stood beside four sealed cans of their own water. The cans had cost them room for a case of spare fittings. At Ironhold the choice had felt wasteful. On the open crossing, they were the only cargo they did not regret.

Behind them, broken approach roads ended above black water. The living basin was a smaller brightness cut into a coast built for more ships than it could now receive. The dismantled hull in the dry dock remained visible for a few minutes, an open frame under work lamps. Then the angle of the shore concealed it. The vessel's engine had a regular beat; beneath it, the coupling repaired at Black Weir carried a finer vibration through the deck.



Departure begins with the weight of cargo, fuel, and an uncertain crossing.

The porter put a palm against a stanchion. He was listening to the machinery, not testing the sea. He asked who had watched the sleeve go in. Iva said she had turned the shaft herself when the housing was installed at Ironhold. He nodded, as though the

answer gave him something useful, and went aft to speak with the mechanic.

Weight

A noise like a dropped tray came from the cargo well. It was followed by a scrape, then by voices that stopped being conversational. The vessel rolled. The crate holding Black Weir's return tools had shifted against its lash. Its weight was on the wrong side of a narrow passage. The mechanic ordered the drive reduced while the crew checked what had moved.

The crew made the passengers wait beside a painted ring on the deck while the freight officer checked the other lashings. Daro could see the return-tool crate through the open hatch. The rope around it was intact. Its deck cleat had moved a finger's width in the timber. A sailor laid her own finger against the old mark and called the movement to the officer. She did not try to cover it with a new knot. If the cleat had lifted, the floor below the crate needed looking at as well.

The porter went below with her. He came back carrying one of Nera's heavy clamps, its handle wrapped so that it would not strike the rail. The crew could divide the crate into two lighter loads, but the smaller case addressed to Mara at Far Shore had been packed inside it. Daro brought out the freight sheet and found the line he had made the porter add in Ironhold. The porter traced it with a dirty nail. 'Then we open it in front of you and put every piece back on the slate.' He called for a second witness from the crew. By the time the clamp and two gauges were tied separately, each bore a paper strip with the crate's number. The little case remained sealed. The altered weight was entered on both copies of the manifest.

Iva watched the sailor lay a temporary backing plate beneath the raised cleat. It would carry the reduced load to shore; it was not a repair for another voyage. The officer chalked a limit on the timber and sent the porter to the captain with the new distribution. A sailor showed Daro where to stand while the

crew drew the lighter crate back by inches. They set a second line and made the load answer to the hull again. Daro had thought a manifest described things already decided. Here its correction was part of deciding where the vessel could safely put its weight.

The engine returned to its former beat. The finer vibration did not. Under sustained strain the coupling housing had grown hot. The sleeve still fit, the mechanic said, but it was passing more heat than she wanted. She opened the access panel and let Iva see it. There was no fracture to point to. The mark on the metal had darkened. That was enough. She could run at reduced power and reach the headland later, or spend the remaining reserve to make the earlier tide and hope the heat held steady.

The captain asked for the arrival notice. Far Shore had one working landing and a gate that could refuse them at the wrong hour. Speed would not help without a berth. The porter compared the tide marks on the chart with what he had seen on his last crossing. The paper was sound. The shore might have changed. The captain asked the mechanic to name a setting the sleeve could hold, then told the radio desk to prepare a signal about their changed approach.

The mechanic needed a second reading before she would name a speed. She set Iva at the accessible gauge and asked the porter to count the shaft's revolutions against a small brass clock. For ten minutes the vessel ran slow enough for the swell to push at its side. The temperature rose, paused, then rose again by less than the width of the scratched line. Iva wanted to call that steadiness. The mechanic put a clean mark beside the old one and made them wait another ten. Only then did she say they could hold the reduced setting. She wrote the conditions on the work sheet Nera had begun two towns away.

Daro carried the signal to the radio desk. Its operator asked whether they were declaring distress. 'A reduced drive and a changed arrival,' Daro said. The operator repeated those words

back before sending them. The difference mattered: a distress call would turn a harbor crew from another vessel, while an unreported late arrival could leave this one outside the gate with a hot housing and too little power to hold its place. Far Shore acknowledged the signal without assigning a berth. The captain chose the slower approach. It cost them an hour and preserved power they might need at the gate. They had been heard. They had not yet been admitted.

At supper the passengers ate in two sittings because a table had been cleared to hold the gauges from the shifted crate. The porter brought Daro the amended tally to sign. Outside, the coast was an uneven dark edge, its old towers appearing only when the cloud thinned. Iva kept the temperature strip in her pocket until the mechanic asked for it. She had watched this sleeve cut, fitted, and warmed under load. The vessel still belonged to the crew who would decide how far to trust it.

The other landing

During the night watch, lights appeared on the coast. For a moment they looked like a harbor. As the vessel drew nearer, the pattern resolved into windows above a drowned street. A tower leaned behind the frontage. No lamp burned at its foot. The porter said people still used the upper road in fair weather, though there was no landing there now. Iva and Daro watched the place pass without asking who once lived behind the windows.



A guarded headland holds one working landing against a damaged coast.

Farther around the headland a single working beacon answered their signal. Its light touched a cable, then the top of a wall, then a tram line climbing away from the water. The vessel waited outside the gate. A boat came out to count passengers and cargo before any line was thrown ashore. The keeper aboard it asked about the repaired coupling because the signal had reported a reduced drive. The captain showed her the heat mark. She recorded it, assigned a berth, and named the power they could draw while tied there.



The new land arrives as a gate and a question, not a promise.

The gate opened just wide enough for the vessel. Beyond it, the city was neither the dead frontage nor the bright promise Iva and Daro had imagined from the sea. A porter waited to separate tram deliveries from freight bound for the guarded

road. Iva and Daro carried their water over the gangway. Pel's wagon remained in the quay yard for the supervised freight road to the upper land gate the next morning; its shipping receipt traveled with them. Three cans were still sealed. The weight of the opened one felt different where someone had measured what the city could spare.

The gate keeps count

The landing keeper made no promise of a berth beyond the one she had assigned. She pointed to a painted line on the quay. The tool crate, the remaining water, and Iva and Daro had to be on the land side of it before the tide changed. The wagon was weighed separately and held for the morning freight passage. A tram car waited above the port, its cable disappearing between two repaired towers. Beneath the line lay an older road, broad enough for the cargo wagons of another age. Its middle span was missing. Scaffolding in the gap had grown a second color of rust.

A porter in a faded blue waistcoat checked the return tools against the Black Weir note. He found a smaller case packed inside the large one. 'On the outer count, but not on the tram delivery line,' he said. Iva opened it. Inside were worn gauge jaws and three sheets of measurements. Nera had put them there for a shop beyond the sea. They had no sale value. The porter checked the recipient mark and added a delivery line. That allowed the case to ride the tram while the wagon followed the freight road.



A cable tram climbs the coast where the older route has failed.

The porter put his mark beside the correction and kept a copy. A wrong delivery line could hold the jaws for days. Iva and Daro chose to carry the case through the city and meet the person who needed it.

The road that ends

The tram climbed past the old road in short, audible pulls. It had seats for people and a narrow platform for permitted loads. Heavy freight took a longer guarded way inland. From the car Iva and Daro saw the drowned frontage they had passed at night. In daylight the upper windows were plain stone. Some had curtains. The buildings had not all been abandoned when the quay failed; people had found ways to remain above the flood. The city's repaired wall bent behind them, choosing higher ground and leaving those buildings outside its easy protection.

The blue-waistcoated porter, who had taken the same car, noticed where they looked. He named a woman there who kept

a stair safe for deliveries, and a family that had moved when the pumps could no longer justify the current. A signal tower still worked on the headland. The rest was a collection of repairs with no single owner. Daro asked whether the wall would ever reach it. 'Ask the people who would have to maintain that wall,' the porter said.



The canal landing and gate let the city choose what enters.

At the upper station the tram stopped for a maintenance crew. A frayed guide roller had been removed from its bracket.

One worker held the load while another set the new bearing. Passengers waited inside the car. They could see the hands, the tools, the pause in a city's movement. When the cable ran again, nobody cheered. The porter lifted the measurement case and led Iva and Daro down a street laid beside the foundation of an older, wider one.

A useful address

The recipient's shop had no sign. It sat behind a public tank, where anyone bringing a failed valve would find it eventually. The keeper, Mara, had a silver measuring clip on her cuff. She opened the case and recognized the jaws at once. She asked after the worker who had sent them. Iva said Nera had been working when they left, and that her sleeve had held through the hand-turned installation test at Ironhold. She could not say whether the dry gate at Black Weir had survived its next release. Mara accepted what Iva knew and left the rest unfilled.

She laid the sheets beneath a lamp, then brought out a housing from under her bench. The marks corresponded to a pressure assembly for Far Shore's upper tank. A replacement could be made here, but its receiving face could not be cut until someone checked a line in the installed machine. Iva and Daro offered to take the old gauge back on a future crossing. The woman wrote dimensions on their copy and told them where the civic table would meet that evening. There they could learn whether a return passage was likely. They could hear what the people at the tank thought most urgent.

Outside, water moved through a gate small enough to look ordinary. Mara took a reading, compared it with yesterday's mark, and wrote down a discrepancy. Across the road a repaired wall met a broken one without disguising the seam.

The civic table

By supper the measurement case had gone to the upper tank shop, but its weight had followed Iva into the room. The civic table was set in an old assembly hall whose roof had been repaired in three kinds of metal. A line of warm lamps showed each seam. Beneath them sat porters, water workers, a tram mechanic, two people from the land gate, and several travelers who had found a place by bringing news. No one presided. Whoever had the question put it where everyone could hear.

Daro brought their route copy. He had spent the afternoon trying to make its straight line inland agree with the road reports pinned beside the hall door. On the newest report the line bent twice around a basin marked safe on the older sheet. He set both papers on the table. 'Which one do we pay attention to?' he asked.

'The one with the date,' said a woman in a work coat. She held a spoon against the page before Daro could fold it. 'And after you leave the last station, the ground. Somebody has been driving around the west crust because a wheel went through. The report says nothing about the road past the second shelter.' She was the keeper from the upper tank. Her measuring clip still held to her cuff, silver against dark cloth. 'That silence is not a straight line.'

The room gave them the rest without making it sound like a favor. The water at the first shelter had been tested. The next source was uncertain. The tram was running, but the coastal road would not take heavy loads before the next set of bridge shoes arrived. Ironhold's last vessel was tied up for a heat check. A merchant said she had bearings for sale. The tank keeper asked what sizes. The merchant named two. Neither fit the pressure assembly beneath the city, and everyone went back to eating.

A porter from the outer stair asked Mara whether the tank could spare a second evening flush. The line above the drowned

frontage had run brown after the last tide. Mara said the crew had taken a sample and would post a result in the morning. She would not spend a measured tank on the flush before they knew whether the line needed cleaning or its intake needed closing. The porter lived above that line. He did not thank her for making him wait; he asked where the sample notice would be put. Mara told him the public tap and wrote his stair number beside the test. Iva saw how little water a fair answer could produce.



The civic table is a place where strangers become known by what they carry.

Daro copied the road marks with their dates and the names of the people willing to stand behind them. He left the merchant's unfit bearings off his list.

When the table broke up, the tank keeper walked with them to the street. Beyond the hall, two lines of lamps climbed the wall at different angles. One had been put in for the tram; the other followed a public stair used by people who lived outside the repaired gate. A child ran down the stair with an empty jug, passed a uniformed water worker, and called her by name. Daro had marked the stair as a service access on his copied plan. He turned the paper over to add what he had seen. The keeper watched, but did not tell him where the child lived. A single encounter gave him a stair, not a household.

At the public tap Iva filled the cup she had carried from supper. She had spent the crossing worried about four cans of water. Here a city argued over finger-width discrepancies while people drew a cup at a time from a line that still worked. 'Someone will ask us to carry something inland,' Daro said. No one had done so yet. Iva knew he meant the route was already uncertain enough without a load that would consume their water margin. She handed him the cup. 'We can weigh it first. If it costs us the water, we say no.' He drank, then gave it back. Neither of them liked the answer, which was why they could use it.

They found their lodging above a cobbler's shop. The owner had braced a cracked stair with a piece of tram rail. From their window they could see the repaired wall ending at the drowned quarter, its new stone abrupt against blackened old masonry. Daro laid out his three sheets: the harbor chart, the dated road report, and the map he had corrected at the table. He had drawn the public stair in blue, with a note that he had seen one child use it after dark. Iva noticed that he had left the district beyond the wall unfilled. 'You asked about it on the tram,' she said. 'I did,' he answered. The porter had given them names and a working signal tower, but not a reason to color every remaining house as safe.

In the morning Iva would go to the gate to read the installed wear. Daro would ask what the salt road had done since the last report. The city's lamps stayed on while they slept. Somewhere below, the public tap shut and opened again.

The small discrepancy

The keeper asked Iva to come to the water gate in the morning. She wanted another pair of eyes on the gauge from Black Weir, not a visiting mechanic to take charge of Far Shore's machine. Iva agreed to look and said exactly what she could do: read wear, test travel, and describe a fit she had seen made. The keeper accepted that as a smaller and more valuable promise.

At first light the canal was quiet enough to hear each opening of the gate. A worker released water to the public tanks. Another watched the level on the upstream side. The keeper showed Iva the difference between what the mechanism indicated and what their separate mark on the stone said had passed. It was little more than a finger's width across the face of a tank. That was why it had survived several shifts. Each person who found it had been able to say the next person would settle it.

Iva removed nothing. She put the worn gauge jaws against the accessible housing while the keeper held the light. One corner of the face had been polished by a load that should have reached it evenly. On Black Weir's copied sheet the wear lay on the opposite side. The parts were kin, not twins. 'If you cut to these numbers,' Iva said, 'you will make a clean new piece for a crooked old seat.'



The market keeps its prices local and its repairs visible.

The keeper took the sheet back and added a line for an installed measurement. She called the worker at the other mark over to see it. No one had lost face. The record now described a problem someone could solve. They ran the next release with a person at each level mark and wrote down the difference again. It had not gone away. It had stopped being invisible.

At the shift change the outer-stair porter returned for the posted sample. Mara showed him the clear vial and the written reading, then told him the intake had carried silt and would be closed for cleaning after the night release. His stair would use the lower tap until morning. He objected to the distance; his mother could not manage it. Mara gave him the number of the water cart already assigned to the upper streets and asked the relief worker to add the stair. The porter waited until the worker wrote it down. Then he went home with his empty vessel. Iva had watched Mara make a decision that would follow her past the shop door.

At the end of the shift the keeper asked what Iva and Daro intended to carry inland. Their wagon had arrived at the upper land gate by the supervised freight route that morning. Daro showed her the route report. She asked whether they had room for a sealed bearing assembly bound for the salt shelter. It would not save Far Shore a public embarrassment. It would put a dry pump back in service where a traveler might need water. Iva said they would look at the weight before they answered.

What a passage costs

The assembly was smaller than Daro expected and heavier than Iva had hoped. It rested in a crate with slotted handles, wrapped against dust and salt. A card carried the shelter's name, the maker's measurements, and a test signature. Iva checked the last line. The part had been run under load. This was not a promise packed in a good box.

Mara offered payment in water and charge at the city's land gate, enough to replace what they would spend getting the crate to the first station. The remaining road was their risk. Daro asked where that water came from. It was the service reserve for a city shipment that could not leave this week. Mara showed them the line in the gate ledger and entered the proposed transfer under her own name. Daro remembered the porter waiting for his stair to be served. Mara said the cart assigned there would still run; if that promise failed, the porter knew which desk to come to. She did not ask them to take her word for it. Daro copied the ledger line. One city vehicle was repairing the coastal approach. Another had to move the next shipment from the harbor. Neither could take the crate inland now.

Iva set the bearing on the scale with their water cans. She measured the wagon's remaining margin, then shifted two cans aft of the axle to balance the part set near the front. The balance held. The price was not in the weight alone. They could take one extra day's water, or the part, without changing the

axle and the route. At the civic table they had heard that the second shelter's supply was uncertain. Daro laid his hand on the unfilled space beside the cans.



A working water gate makes the city answer for what it uses.

'We can decline,' the keeper said.

That changed the room. Iva had expected to be argued into virtue, and she had already prepared to resent it. Instead she asked where the first station had made its last verified report. Three days ago. She asked who at the salt shelter knew the assembly was coming. A mechanic named Oren had requested it. She asked whether the city would give them a written release if the crust made delivery impossible. The keeper wrote one before Iva finished the question: turn back, cache at a staffed shelter, or bring it home. Do not drive people onto unsafe ground to satisfy a cargo line.

Daro read the release aloud, then read the payment line. They accepted. At the gate the water was counted into their own cans while Mara and the gate worker checked it against the service ledger. A charger attended the board while their reserve rose. Mara kept the ledger copy; Daro kept the release with its turn-back terms. The porter on the outer stair could still ask her about the cart.

A market under a broken roof

The last market of Far Shore occupied a hall outside the repaired wall. Its west side had fallen years ago. Merchants kept their benches on the sound floor and faced the opening so they could see weather coming across the plain. A woman sold boiled eggs beside a table of cable couplings. Two children carried a spool between them. Nobody had made the ruin picturesque; it was useful because it still kept rain off the work.

Daro looked for a wheel patch. Iva looked at every pump part she could see. The market had more of them than she expected, and almost none would fit the salt shelter's installation. The error in a part's size was often smaller than the width of a fingernail. She found a set of shims that would give Oren room to correct such an error. The seller knew where they had come from and what heat they had already seen. Iva bought them because of that account, not because the metal was bright.



A market occupies a ruined hall because the roof still holds.

A road seller offered Daro a new route sheet with the west crust drawn in as passable. Its ink was fresh. He compared the printed date with the marks he had taken from the civic table. The sheet had been copied from an earlier season and stamped again by someone whose office had not walked the road. The seller pointed to the seal. Daro pointed to the dated report of a wheel lost in the crust. They left with the older sheet and the newer witness marks.

Outside the hall, a small convoy from the salt arrived carrying a single empty tank and a passenger whose boots were white to the knees. She said the first shelter's pump was working slowly. No one asked her to tell the whole crossing while she stood in the sun. The woman drank water, sat down, and then described where the wind had moved the marker posts. Daro corrected his copy once more. His pencil had worn to a stub before they left the market.

The last maintained roof

The first station had once been a ceremonial stop on a road built for more travelers. It had a clock face above the shelter and no hands. Beneath it, a board carried charge from an array of panels and a patched line that disappeared toward Far Shore. The keeper sold nights by space and charged equipment by the condition of the board. The wagon reached it after dark, when the exposed land beyond had become a strip of pale ground under the moon.

Iva asked to clean a contact that sparked when the station keeper joined their charger. He opened the whole cabinet before she touched it. One wire had been replaced in copper, another in a pale braid that looked too fine for its job. She asked where the current could still be live. He showed her. Only then did she lay a tool against the dirty contact. The spark stopped. The keeper marked the repair on his board and reduced the charge fee by what he thought her work had been worth. She did not bargain with him over the exact measure.

The station's common room filled after the last caravan lamp came in. The keeper put a pot of salt greens and barley on the stove. He had saved the last fresh onion for the night when his sister's cart returned, and when the cart did not come, he cut it anyway. Two drivers argued gently over whether the onion belonged in the pot or should be eaten raw with the flatbread. A girl in a coat much too large for her said her aunt would have chosen the pot. That settled it. Iva ate at the end of the bench, close enough to the stove to feel the heat through her boots.



A waystation buys a night of shelter, not a safe journey.

The girl was learning the station's accounts. She could read the battery board, but she preferred the weather notebook, whose old pages held pressed petals from a season she did not remember. On tonight's page she drew the wind's direction with

a blunt pencil. The keeper made her add the hour. 'If you leave out when, it becomes a story,' he said. She considered this, then drew the clock without hands above the shelter and wrote the hour beneath it. Daro smiled. She asked to see the part of his map that included the station. He let her add the little room behind the stove, where stranded travelers slept when the beds were full.

When he turned the sheet around, the girl caught his wrist. 'That room isn't on the board outside.' The keeper looked over. The extra bed was for people already at his door when the wind closed the road, he said. If it appeared as a public lodging place, travelers might arrive expecting a roof the station could not promise. Daro had drawn the room in the same dark pencil as the road. He erased its doorway on the outward copy. On the sheet he kept for himself, he put the girl's name beside the drawing and a question mark where a published mark might go. She watched until the eraser crumbs were off the table. Only then did she return to her weather notebook.



At the basin edge, the road loses its reliable surface.

There was no music from the distant fair here. Someone tapped the rhythm of an old hauling song on the table, and the others came in on the refrain without agreeing on the verses. The roof answered the wind with a loose sheet of tin. Iva could

have tightened it in ten minutes. The keeper said he left it that way because, when it changed pitch, he knew to bring the washing in from the line. She put her tool back in its roll.

Daro spread the route sheets on a table while the others slept. The original line, the city's report, and the salt woman's account could all be true at different times. He made a map of decisions rather than a map of promises. At the first post, test the ground. At the black stone, turn east if the west crust has opened. At the low shelter, ask who crossed last. If there was no one to ask, stop while they still had water to turn back.

The station keeper saw the bearing crate and recognized Oren's mark. He knew the mechanic, but he had not heard from the second shelter in two days. A broken relay was one possibility. A failed pump was another. He offered to hold the crate if they wanted to leave it here for a later carrier. Iva looked at the release Far Shore had given her. The right to stop was real, and so was the shelter waiting for a part. 'We go to the first post,' she said. 'Then we decide again.'

The edge of white

They left before sunrise. The station roof receded first, then the low buildings, then the last dark seam in the road. A post beside the track had been reset with clean bolts. Beyond it, nothing stood high enough to cast a useful shadow. The salt was not uniformly hard. Some stretches rang under a wheel. Others took its weight without a sound, which was worse. Iva walked ahead with a rod and marked the places where the crust gave too easily.

Daro rode beside the bearing crate. He had wrapped his route sheets in cloth to keep the powder out of their folds. At the first post they found two older sets of tire marks and one fresh line of narrow tracks heading east. The west branch was almost smooth. They tested it anyway. The rod broke through without meeting a firm layer. Daro crossed out the official straight line. There was no satisfaction in being right about the road's failure.



An active track crosses a vast basin beside an older, broken line.

The east turn added distance. It also put a low ridge between them and the worst wind. They could see the remains of an elevated line far away, its surviving spans like a sentence with words removed. Past it lay the high country. Far Shore had vanished behind the morning glare, but the part it sent was still in the wagon. The city's water rode beside it. The cans knocked softly against their restraints. Daro could count what they had left by sound. The bearing crate stayed still beside them; at the next shelter, someone was waiting for what it held.

At midday the wind moved. Iva stopped the wagon before the white ground ahead disappeared into white air. Daro counted their cans and the hours back to the station. The first decision had brought them here. It did not bind them to the next. He folded the map, waited for Iva to finish probing the edge of the track, and listened for a vehicle coming out of the haze.

The cart in the haze

The vehicle came out of the white air at walking speed. Two people rode on a narrow maintenance cart with new marker posts strapped along one side. Their lamps were still lit in full daylight. The driver stopped when she saw Iva's rod planted at the edge of the track. She looked at the wagon behind it, then at the sky. 'You'll want the lee before this closes,' she said. The second worker had already climbed down to test the ground under the cart's front wheel.

Daro showed them the west branch crossed out on his sheet. The driver did not ask to see the seal at the bottom of the page. She asked when he had tested it. 'This morning.' She nodded and put a short line beside the date. The workers had lost two posts in the night's wind and were restoring only the track they had used to reach him. It led to a ridge of black stone, then bent back toward the second shelter. She could tell them the ridge was sound. She would not speak for the crust beyond it.



The crossing is measured by the work of staying on the route.

Iva asked if they were returning to Far Shore. They were. The storm had already taken one post farther east, and the driver would not spend the afternoon chasing a line she could no longer see. They offered to lead the wagon as far as the ridge

before turning. No one asked for payment. At the ridge they would need to choose their own next ground.

The maintenance cart made a slow dark mark across the salt. The wagon followed at a distance. At the last post the second worker drove an iron foot through the crust until it met stone. He wired a small lamp above it. Iva watched the wire twist under his hands. The lamp could burn for two nights, perhaps three. It did not make a road. It made one decision visible to a traveler who arrived later.

A wheel through white

The ridge carried them for an hour. On its far side the live track returned to pale ground, though the old elevated line still pointed straight toward the mountains. Daro found the first of the shelter's black cuts in the stone and marked it against the maintenance worker's fresh post. The signs agreed. A little farther on, the wagon's rear wheel pressed through a surface that had supported every wheel before it.

Iva felt the axle drop and called a stop before Daro could add power. The other rear wheel remained on hard ground. She put a board under the wagon's step and reached the fallen side by that path. Beneath a thin roof of salt was wet gray material that closed around the tire. Pulling in a straight line would bury it. The bearing crate lay above the trapped wheel. Its weight was no longer a calculation made on a scale in Far Shore; it was the first thing they had to lift.



Travelers move a load through weather that ignores the map.

They moved the water cans to the safe side, then the part, then the tool case. Daro hated the minutes spent setting valuable cargo on a ridge where wind could fill its seals. Iva hated the sound of the axle taking their weight while they

worked. They laid two boards and used a jack under the firm half of the frame. When the tire rose, she saw a split at the edge of its patch. It had not caused the fall, but it would not survive another one.

Daro found the new patch bought at the market. He kept it flat under his coat while Iva cleaned the rim. The wind came in sudden sheets, forcing grit into every opening. She put the patch on once. There was no spare for a second attempt. They pulled the wagon onto the boards, took them up in reverse order, and loaded only after the axle sat square on sound ground again.

By then the light had changed. Their planned camp was still reachable if they moved without another stop. Iva did not trust the repaired tire at that pace. Daro counted their cans. They could spend a night on the ridge and still reach the shelter with enough water to return if its pump was dead. The release from Far Shore let them turn back now. He folded it and put it away. They chose the ridge.

The low shelter

A lamp answered them after dark. The second shelter was built into a cut below the old viaduct, with a roof low enough that the wind passed over it. Someone had hung canvas in the entrance to keep the white powder from the living space. A young worker lifted the edge and looked first at their water cans. Only then did he see the mark on the bearing crate. 'Oren,' he called into the shelter, and a voice inside told him to let them through.

Oren had the pump opened on a workbench made from the door of a freight car. The failed bearing lay beside it, its running face blue at one edge. He recognized the assembly Far Shore had sent, but he did not reach for a wrench. He asked how it had traveled. Iva described the fallen wheel and showed him the crate's seals. They opened it together. The part was dry. Its test card was still readable.

The new bearing entered the housing until the last fraction of its travel, then stopped. Daro saw Iva put a finger on the lip and knew she had found what she feared: the installed face was not true. The shims from the ruined market lay in her tool roll. She had bought them for a possible error smaller than a fingernail. Oren took their measurements, selected one, and made a witness mark where it would bear. Iva held the lamp while he fitted it. Neither pretended the shim had made the old machine new.

They turned the pump by hand through its full motion. Oren listened at the housing. Then he started the drive at low power and let it run while everyone watched the temperature mark. The shelter's supply line shuddered. Water came through in bursts, stopped, and then settled into a continuous flow. The young worker filled a measuring vessel, not a drinking cup. Only when Oren had read the level twice did he open the public tap.

Daro brought their cans forward. Oren filled them to the amount written on the delivery note and offered no more than he could account for. It was enough. Iva wanted to know whether the part would hold. 'Tonight it is holding,' he said. He wrote the operating temperature on the card, copied the shim size, and sent the record back with them. The job had been delivered. The consequence of the job would be measured over the next days, by people who stayed.

A woman waiting with two narrow jugs stepped aside for the young worker. He filled a cup, drank too quickly, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. She cuffed him lightly for making everyone else watch. 'He was born here,' she told Iva, as if that explained why the first cup belonged to him. 'He has never seen the sea he keeps hearing about.' The worker protested that he had seen it in a book. She said a book had never made his boots wet.

Behind the pump room, the shelter's sleeping alcoves opened around a low central table. Someone had painted a blue band around each doorway to show the height of a flood long before

the salt hardened. Oren's mother kept seed jars on the highest shelf, though the ground outside would grow nothing. She traded the seeds onward to travelers bound for soil. When Daro asked why she lived here, she set a jar down and looked at him until he heard the question he had actually asked. Her daughter ran the night lamp. Oren worked the pump. The young worker was her grandson. 'Where else would I be tonight?' she said.

They ate lentils with a little preserved lemon. Iva heard the pump through the wall, steady now, while Oren's mother tried to teach the young worker a card game with half the cards missing. They had made new rules for the absent suits. Oren lost twice and accused them of inventing one rule after the hand had been dealt. The argument lasted longer than the meal. Iva had been carrying the bearing across the salt as if one sound machine waited at the end of the journey. Here it made possible another ordinary evening, and the room had gone on being a room while it was broken.

The unused circle

Before climbing to the lookout, Iva found Oren beneath the shelter with the young worker who had opened its door. The pump had run all night, and Oren had set a clean vessel under the return joint. It held a shallow spoonful of water. That was less than the amount he had collected before the new bearing went in, but it was not nothing. Iva held the lamp while he wiped the joint and waited through another cycle. The worker called each pulse from the public tap above. At the fifth, a bead formed under the collar. Oren put the vessel back without tightening a hot machine to make the bead disappear.

He showed Iva the operating card. Its temperature line had stayed level for six hours. Its leak line would have a number as well. The replacement could bear the shaft while a separate joint still needed work. Far Shore's part had solved the failure they had brought it for; Oren would send a request for a seal when the relay carried his message. Iva asked whether the

travelers at the tap needed to know. 'They need the amount I can give them,' he said, 'and the next crew needs this.' He took the card to the public board and posted the day's allowance beside the reading. The young worker carried the measured vessel back to the bench.

Daro came from the upper stairs while Oren was copying the reading. He asked how a traveler leaving Far Shore would know that the pump had started again. Oren pointed to the outgoing report tray, empty because the last relay had gone before dawn. The next cart would carry the card west if it could make the ridge. Daro offered the date of their own passage through the viaduct for the castle archive. Oren gave him a copy, with the leak and temperature on separate lines. The pump was working today. They had learned the difference between that sentence and 'water here' by having to carry their own.

By the time they climbed to the lookout, the storm had passed and distance had returned in layers. From the shelter's upper rail Daro could see the viaduct, the first dark rise of the mountains, and an enormous circle far to the south of the living road. Broken service lanes ran toward it. Nothing moved on them. At the center stood a squat tower with its top removed. White lettering on a remaining wall named a moon base.

He had seen the circle on maps, sometimes drawn as a destination and sometimes as a blank. From here it was a place built by people who expected arrivals. The pad had a ring of gates and a road wide enough to carry something much larger than the shelter's wagons. There were no rockets and no route to the moon in anything Oren kept. The station above might still exist; the ground below offered no way to test it.

Iva came up with the pump card in her hand. Daro pointed out the circle. She looked at it for a while, then back at the repaired wagon tire. 'We can't reach the pass on a photograph,' she said. She was not mocking the lost ambition. She understood why a builder would want the road to lead beyond the sky. But Oren had people due at the shelter before evening,

and the tire needed another check before they climbed.

On his map Daro marked the circle as seen, not visited. He drew no line from their route to the pad. That distinction mattered more to him after the civic table. A mark could travel farther than its maker; the next person might mistake possibility for a usable road. He set the date beside it and put the map away.

The broken line

The viaduct stood on piers taller than the shelter. Its missing spans made the old straight crossing unusable, but a service way survived along part of its lower frame. The road now climbed to that way, crossed two repaired bays, dropped to a shelf of rock, and returned to the structure farther up. A board at the first bay showed weight classes, the last inspection, and a number to signal if a vehicle could not clear the turn. Iva checked the wagon against the smallest class. It passed on the scale. The bend at the far end was another matter.

They carried the bearing's empty crate through first, with their water and the tool cases. Then Daro brought the wagon on while Iva watched the rear tire. The metal frame of the viaduct transmitted every change in load as a faint answer under their boots. Below it, the salt floor looked smooth from height, concealing the place where they had spent an afternoon freeing one wheel. The second bay narrowed toward a turn against the inside rail.

At the far turn the rear tire stopped against the inside rail. Daro had not struck it hard, but he could not advance without rubbing away the patch they had made on the salt. Iva called him to hold the brake. There was room to back half a wagon length, with one wheel close to a gap in the decking. She asked the bridge keeper, who had been watching from the signal post, to stand at the outer rail. He carried a short red flag and a whistle. The three agreed on their signals while the wagon was still motionless: one call to stop, two to reverse, a raised flag for

a clear tire. None of them would improvise a wave at the edge of a drop.



The viaduct survives in pieces above country that no longer supports a straight road.

The first reverse took them only as far as the new rail shoe. Its bolt heads made the wheel climb. Iva put one of their boards against the shoe and made Daro wait while she checked that its far end rested on metal, not on air. The bridge keeper saw the board take weight, raised his flag, and Daro backed over it. From the driver's place he could see the old straight viaduct continuing across the gap. It would have taken less than a minute if its spans had remained. This living turn took twelve. When the wagon finally stood on the shelf, Iva collected the board and found a fresh scrape along its edge. They left the bridge keeper their date and tire class before going on.

On the rock shelf beyond, another traveler waited with a pack animal and a small cart. She had been held by a broken rail on the upper bay and had already sent the signal. She asked whether they had come from Far Shore and whether the low shelter had water. Daro told her when the pump had begun to run and what Oren had recorded. He did not call it fixed for the season. She wrote down the date before taking her cart toward the lower crossing.

The encounter lasted less than a minute. They had brought a part over the salt. Oren had installed it. Now the first reliable report of its operation was moving back across the broken line in someone else's pocket. Daro looked at the empty crate lashed to their wagon.

The gate above the ruin

The high castle appeared before the road could reach it. At first Iva could see only towers, their silhouettes old enough to make the newer signal mast look temporary. Then the climb revealed the broken district below the outer wall. Roofless buildings occupied terraces where people must once have lived close to the pass. A cable ran through the dry moat and entered a gatehouse that had been rebuilt around it. The stone above the cable glowed warm in the last light.

A freight car held the approach while the bridge crew cleared a load coming down. They waited among travelers whose cargo ranged from sacks of grain to a sealed case with a cooling line. Daro kept his map open at the last station mark. The road beyond the gate led toward the walled green valley, but the castle controlled the passage and the records by which travelers would be known there.



The fortress commands the one practical passage through the ridge.

The guard at the outer desk examined the empty bearing crate and asked why they still carried it. Iva showed Oren's temperature card. The guard read the maker's measurements, the delivery mark, and Oren's new line. 'What will the crate do beyond the pass?' he asked. Daro answered that it would return to Far Shore if a vessel made the next crossing. The guard wrote it as return cargo, not trade stock. He treated the tools separately, asking which were for use on the road and which could be sold.



The approach threads ruined stone before the working gate appears.

It took longer than a glance at a seal. It also gave each object a status that could be challenged later. Iva watched a second guard lead a traveler aside to explain a mismatch without taking his case away. The traveler opened it himself. For all its

walls and questions, this gate had left a person room to answer.

When the bridge cleared, the wagon entered under a tower older than its machinery. The wind dropped at once. Beneath the sound of hooves and wheels ran a low steady vibration from somewhere deep in the mountain. Daro folded the salt map. The next part of the journey would be measured by different instruments.

A city inside the wall

The vibration changed as the wagon passed under the second arch. Outside, it had been one note beneath the stone. Inside, Iva could hear a sequence of loads: a low turning weight, a short answering tremor, and the thinner hum of a line carrying power up the hill. She asked Daro to stop at the first public court. A clock over the passage showed that they had arrived before the evening closure. Beneath it, a display gave the state of the north lift, the water head, and the road through the pass. None of the lights was ornamental.

The castle was larger on the inside than its towers had promised. A market occupied the old parade ground, with roofs stitched from canvas of different ages. A woman in a red work coat carried a crate of copper contacts past a family in festival clothes. A boy in a school sash ran toward a bakery whose oven vent rose through a slit once meant for arrows. The guard at the outer desk had called it a castle. The people who lived here had made a city in its walls.



A bridge carries the road where the cliff gives it no other choice.

Daro went to the route office while Iva found a place to set the wagon. They agreed to meet at the public cistern in an hour. A painted line led him through a vaulted hall, but the route desk had been moved to a newer room cut into the rock. In the hall's

alcoves stood old statues with their faces worn smooth. Cable trays crossed the ceiling above them, fitted so they could be reached by ladder. The builders had left both eras visible. He could see where a bolt had been set last week into stone worked centuries earlier.

At the desk, a clerk gave him a numbered place and asked for the dates of the last two crossings. Daro laid out his map and Oren's pump card. The clerk did not stamp the map on sight. She put a transparent route sheet over it and brought a lamp close. On the castle sheet the lower salt track ended at a red bar. The bar carried a closure date three weeks old. Daro's fresh line passed straight through it.

'We walked that line,' he said. 'The ridge was sound when the maintenance cart led us to it. The crust after the ridge was not.' He showed where their wagon had fallen and where they had camped instead of pressing on. The clerk pointed to the red bar. A surveyor had found a split there in the last cycle. She had no notice that it had been reopened. If she changed the public route on his word, the next wagon might enter after the lamp failed. Daro asked her to leave the closure in place and attach his account as a dated passage. She looked up at him for the first time. 'That I can do.'

The archive keeps its doubts

A route witness worked at a long table behind the desk. He wore a pale green shirt with its cuffs rolled above ink marks on both wrists. He asked Daro to begin at the western station and say only what he had seen. When Daro repeated the maintenance driver's claim about the ridge, the witness set it on a separate line. When he reached the pump, he passed Oren's card to a reader and copied its figures rather than Daro's memory of the sound. At the unused landing circle, he wrote 'sighted from lookout.' Daro waited while he added 'access untested.'

The record took most of the hour. One machine compared their account with a survey stored before the split. It found the high viaduct still marked as open to heavy vehicles. Their hired wagon had barely made the lower service bend, and the traveler coming the other way had reported a broken rail above. Daro insisted the upper bay be flagged for a new inspection. The witness made a call to the bridge desk. A voice answered with the work number of the rail crew and an estimate for their return. Only then did the machine change the route display to a warning.



At night, signal light reveals how old the castle is and how recently it was repaired.

Daro wanted to know who would see the note at the next station. The witness turned the screen toward him. Travelers would see the closure first, then a dated report of a successful passage and a warning about the crust. Survey teams would see the location and the source of each claim. Oren's operating temperature was linked to the shelter, where it belonged. No screen announced that the pump would run tomorrow. It was an archive large enough to remember a road and still modest

enough to admit that a road changed.

A duplicate of Daro's account could go to the valley gate. The witness asked permission before sending it. Daro read the short version. It included the broken tire and the night on the ridge, but omitted the cargo inventory and the number of water cans they had carried. He authorized that copy. The witness gave him a receipt with a reference number and a blank line for a later correction. If Oren sent new figures, the next person could add them without erasing the first night.

At the cistern Iva found Daro standing under the public display. The warning for the upper bay appeared while he watched. He showed her the receipt. 'You got them to close the bridge?' she asked. 'A crew was already going,' he said. 'They made the warning visible.' A different light came on for the water head. It dropped one mark, returned, and held. Iva heard the mountain's machinery behind it. The city had enough instruments to look sure of itself. Its workers were listening for the small ways it might be wrong.

Below the old defenses

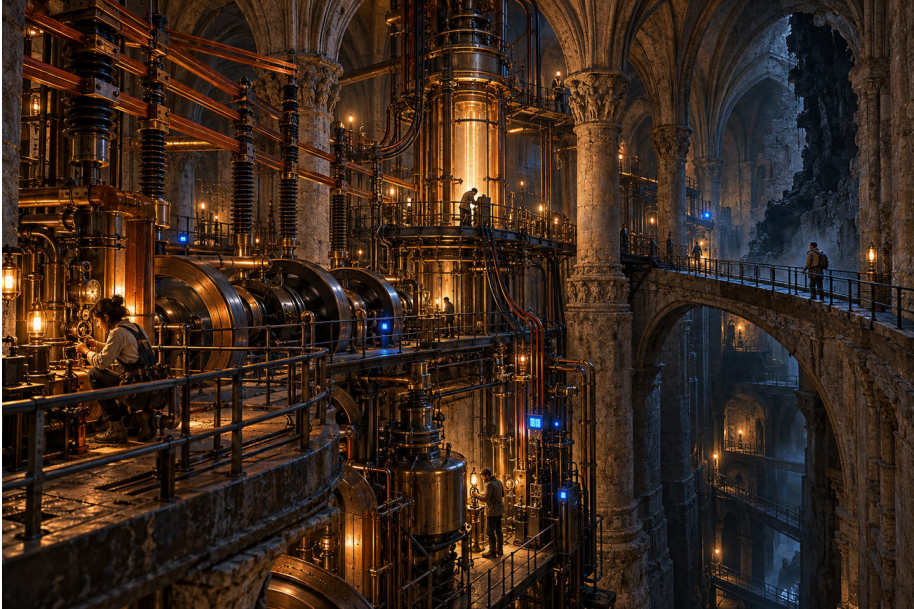
Their lodging was in the lower ward. A stone stair descended beside a lift shaft into the district they had seen from the approach. The roofless terraces lay outside the wall, but people had rebuilt the protected rooms below them. Light gathered under a web of short bridges. A tailor had stretched bright orange cloth between two columns. Across the lane a woman repaired a radio with the back removed, letting a child turn its tuning wheel until a voice came through the hiss. Nobody here dressed as a guard or a monk. The stone gave them shelter, and they filled it with the ordinary work of staying.

The innkeeper took their payment for a room and a place for the wagon. She asked Iva to park away from a drainage grate because the night flush would cover the wheel hubs. Iva checked the tire once more. The patch held, but its outside edge had collected salt. She washed it with a measured cup and

rubbed the wet grit from the rim. In the courtyard above, someone played a bright stringed instrument that fought the machinery's bass and then found a rhythm with it.

A child came to watch her work. He wanted to know whether the circle beyond the salt really led to the moon. Iva said there was a landing pad and an old sign. She had seen both from a shelter lookout. She had no vehicle that could leave the ground. He considered this and asked whether the pad had a kitchen. Iva laughed before she could stop herself. 'It might have had one.' The child went away with that answer, satisfied by a practical possibility rather than a promise.

Daro returned with bread, vegetables from a heated wall garden, and two folded notices. The north lift would take vehicles at dawn; the outer road would close for a cable change at midday. They could leave early or wait until the following morning. Iva wanted to see the source of the vibration before choosing. The innkeeper knew a public gallery over the plant and gave them directions. 'Go before shift change,' she said. 'Then you can hear it work.'



The oldest vault carries machinery no one mistakes for a spell.

She noticed the station room on Daro's open sheet while he folded the notices. 'There are rooms like that here,' she said. 'An address is useful to the person already in trouble. It can be a promise the rest of us didn't make.' He told her the station keeper had asked him to keep its sleeping room off the public route. She asked whether he had written down the request. He had. She nodded, took their dishes, and left them with the question.

Iva waited until the innkeeper had gone. 'How much of this goes in the book?' she asked. Daro had imagined a map that a traveler could take from the Capital to the valley. He opened it to the salt. It showed the low shelter and the place where their wagon had sunk. It also showed Oren's pump and the first station's battery board, each with a mark in his private shorthand. 'The road, the warnings, the places to ask,' he said. Iva tapped the pump mark. 'Then why is that on the same sheet?'

He said a maker needed to know where a part had gone. She said Oren did, and Far Shore did. A stranger buying a route book did not need the depth of the shelter's water line or the hour its keeper left the tap unattended. Daro put his pencil down. He had watched a false route sheet travel under a seal; he had not considered how a true drawing could travel beyond the people who understood it. 'I can keep an operating copy for the stations,' he said. 'And ask what they will let me print.' Iva did not thank him for agreeing. She had not asked for a favor. 'Ask before it leaves the desk,' she said.

They spent the next hour separating their pages. Daro copied the west crust with its dates and the last safe turn. He marked the first station as staffed but did not draw the room behind its stove. The low shelter stayed a public destination with a warning to confirm its water before crossing; the pump's service detail went on a folded sheet for Oren and the route office. Iva checked that neither copy made a road out of the unused landing circle. The archive already held his dated account. Now they had two maps on the table, with different readers in mind. When they left for the gallery, Daro carried them in separate pockets.

The monastery of machines

The gallery sat above a shaft large enough to swallow the market court. Its upper arch was carved with saints whose names had faded; beneath them, the lift hung from cables as thick as a person's arm. Turbines turned in chambers cut farther into the mountain. Banks of cooling fins rose like organ pipes behind iron grilles. Across the shaft, technicians moved on narrow balconies in coats of mustard, blue, and silver, each color denoting a station rather than a rank. Some carried tools; one carried a tray of supper cups to the night crew.

At the gallery rail an older technician described the plant to a group of schoolchildren. The old castle had held a pass and a reservoir. Later builders had bored deeper, brought water

under pressure through the mountain, and stored power in flywheels behind the west wall. The newest controls sat in a room above the turbines, where a failed sensor could be reached without stopping the wheel it watched. Nothing in the explanation resembled a spell. From the road below, Iva thought, it would look exactly like one.



The archive is cold because keeping it readable costs power.

At the third load the north lift clicked against the rail. Iva turned toward it. Across the shaft a technician in blue had

already raised a hand to the control room. The colleague beside her brought a sensor to the gallery rail and set its trace beside the lift's service sheet. A bracket had been replaced that morning; its expansion under load had not yet been checked from this side. The older technician stopped his explanation to the schoolchildren and let them watch the diagnosis from behind the safety line. No one needed a visitor to discover the fault. Iva listened because the crew had made their method visible.

The technician told Iva what the trace showed, then asked whether the sound carried differently from the loading court below. She had heard it only from the gallery and said so. His colleague reached the bracket with a lamp. It was sound but close enough to the rail to touch as the metal warmed. She put a witness strip between them. The next descent marked it. The crew took the lift out of passenger service for the evening and sent walkers by the old ramp. Their cargo run could leave at dawn if the bracket was reset and inspected overnight. Iva accepted the conditional answer. The crew knew this machine in a way she could not; they had let her see the evidence without pretending her hearing completed it.

On the way out, Daro stopped before a narrow window overlooking the ruined outer terrace. A line of small houses had been built inside the footprint of a fallen hall. Farther down, the cable from the dry moat disappeared under a field of weeds. The high towers were beautiful from the salt; from this side he could see the missing city whose stones they had used. The plant kept the pass alive. It had not brought every roof back.

The pass asks a price

At dawn the lift carried them to the north road. The bracket had been reset, its mark logged, and an inspector rode the first trip with an ear pressed to the rail. Iva watched him nod to the operator before the wagon was allowed aboard. The ascent placed the broken terraces below them and the mountains level with the towers. A signal line crossed the pass on poles that looked fragile against the cliffs. At the top, a second desk controlled passage toward the valley.

The official there had the duplicate of Daro's report. He said the valley kept its own road and did not accept an outside route stamp as a permit. The castle could certify their arrival, their load, and the state of the pass at departure. It could send a message ahead. The valley would decide whether to open. He offered to forward the salt account as useful evidence of the road behind them. Daro had already approved that part. He would not authorize the castle to send their private inventory. The official crossed a box on the form and handed it back for review.

There was a charge for the lift and a separate deposit for a borrowed signal unit required on the upper road. Iva tested the unit before accepting it. Its battery took a charge; its emergency switch sent a reply from the next mast. The seal on its case was unbroken. She paid the deposit and kept the test strip. Daro paid the lift charge. Neither amount purchased entry to the green country. It bought a safer chance to ask at its gate.

They reached the last castle tower by late morning. Beyond it the mountain fell away into a basin unlike any country they had crossed. Green terraces stepped down around a river. Orchard rows caught the light inside a perimeter wall, while the outer slope was gray and wind-cut. Water channels shone under narrow bridges; watch stations followed the wall's bends. The fields were tended so closely that the whole place seemed made by hand. Beyond the basin the waste resumed. Its green was not a sign that the world had healed. It was a territory kept alive at

enormous effort.



The central hall runs on practiced labor as much as advanced systems.

A traveler with a cart of empty seed trays rested by the lookout. She had come from the valley and was waiting for the castle's cable run to take her back down the other side. Daro

asked how long its outer gate stayed open. She told him the hours, then warned that the water allotment had been tightened after a dry week. Visitors would be assigned a room and a use of the public taps if admitted. Her own return was assured by a valley mark on the cart. She did not offer to vouch for strangers she had met on a ridge. Daro thanked her for the hours and wrote them down.

The woman waited for the cable run with her seed trays stacked beneath a cloth. One tray held a few grains of pale soil caught in a corner. The green basin below looked effortless from this height, a single field of color in a country of broken stone. Daro had drawn its wall with one continuous line. He asked the woman whether he could mark the public gate and the water desk on a copy for travelers. She showed him where the desk had moved after a low-water season and where visitors were kept out of the seed terraces. He put a gap in his clean line for the gate, then another for a closed service arch. His map had become less beautiful and more likely to bring someone to the right door.

A bell from the upper mast interrupted them. A cart coming down had stopped at a blind bend; its driver had seen a loose stone move across the road. The castle desk held the next load while a pair of workers went to test the slope. Iva and Daro waited with the woman beneath the tower's awning. She kept her trays in shade. The old cliff face beyond the signal poles wore a lattice of modern anchors, each one marked with the year it had been set. A stone small enough to fit in a palm could close a passage built for an army.

The workers returned with the stone in a canvas bag and a report that the anchored face had not moved. They had found a new runnel above the bend where melting frost had carried loose material down. The official marked the bend for inspection after dusk and allowed light wagons through at walking pace. The seed-tray woman put the bag of stone beside her wheel while she tightened the cloth around the trays.

'They'll show it to the people who have to mend the drain,' she said. The castle kept the evidence until someone could tell whether the little failure would repeat.

Iva watched the cable cage rise from the lower station. It carried a work crew in bright shirts and a crate of small parts. At the castle the crew had heard a bracket click, tested it, and stopped passenger service before it broke. Iva had learned by watching them. In the valley she would be a visitor, unable to distinguish a healthy orchard from one living on its last reserve. 'You can tell them we fixed a wagon,' she said to Daro, 'but don't make me their answer to everything with a wheel.' Daro looked up from his paper. 'I'll tell them what you saw,' he said. 'You can tell them what you will do.' The cable cage passed over the final support. The woman with the trays gathered her cloth and went to meet it.

The green gate

The road descended through two checks before it reached the wall. At the first, a tower counted vehicles and sent the count ahead. At the second, a sluice crossed beneath the track. Iva could hear water running under a locked cover. A guard asked them to put the wagon on a platform, where its weight registered against the load sheet from the castle. The difference was the water and food they had used since dawn. No one opened the tool cases.

The valley gate stood under a roof of glazed tile that had survived in fragments and been repaired in plain metal. Vines grew against the inside face of the wall, kept away from the hinges. On the outside, wind carried dust through bare thorn. Daro gave the clerk his name, the castle departure receipt, and the short salt account he had authorized. She read the route note but placed it to one side. 'Why come here?' she asked.



Beyond the wall, the only lush basin is finite, cultivated, and defended.

Daro had prepared an answer about roads, stations, and the map the book would eventually make. He looked past her at a row of people waiting to collect water at the public channel. A woman was arguing with an attendant over a cracked vessel; the attendant brought her another without increasing the measure. Behind them, green trees made a dense line of shade. 'We came to learn how this place is kept,' he said, 'and where a traveler may go after leaving it. We can stay outside if the answer is no.'

The clerk asked Iva whether she intended to work on any valley equipment. 'Only if someone asks and I can inspect the job first.' She set her tool case on the desk but did not open it. The clerk wrote that answer next to the tools, then explained the visitor terms: two nights in the receiving ward, a measured water allowance, no entry to the inner reservoir or seed houses without a local guide, and a departure time to be chosen before the second evening. The road beyond the valley was under survey and might not take a wagon. Admission would not make it passable.



The contrast begins at the gate: ruined outer ground, living inner terraces.

Iva read the terms aloud while Daro checked the numbers. They could decline and return to the castle, or enter under the limits written there. Daro asked whether their departure route could change after they had seen the survey. The clerk said yes, if they told the gate before taking the road. Iva signed for the wagon and the borrowed signal unit; Daro signed for their lodging and water. The clerk stamped the paper and sent a runner to assign the room.

When the inner leaves of the gate opened, the first breath of air smelled of wet soil. Iva saw a patch of moss growing where the repaired metal met the old tile. Above it ran an insulated cable, its conduit turned carefully away from the vines. Daro left his map folded. They had reached the green place. He wanted to see the people who maintained it before drawing its lines.

The receiving ward

The runner led them along a channel no wider than a person could jump. Water moved swiftly under a screen of fine brass. On the far bank, a crew lifted fallen leaves from another screen and weighed the basket before emptying it. Daro could see orchards above the channel, but the path stayed in the receiving ward: a strip of rooms, workshops, and public courtyards between the inner terraces and the wall. Visitors could live here without entering the seed houses or the reservoir. The distinction was built into the paths.

Their room overlooked a narrow garden where beans climbed a trellis of salvaged cable. A number was painted on the tap, and the water allotment on their admission paper matched it. Iva filled their drinking vessel, leaving the rest for evening. The water tasted of stone and a faint mineral bitterness. Across the court, a family rinsed clothes in a basin and carried the used water to a covered trench. Nothing disappeared down an open drain.

A guide named Sen arrived before supper to explain the ward. She wore a yellow scarf, a work apron sewn with small pockets, and boots whose soles had been repaired twice. The gate had sent her because Daro had asked about the road beyond. She could show them the public survey board in the morning. She could also take them through the outer growing terraces, provided they did not enter the reserve plots. Daro asked whether that was a security rule. 'It is a seed rule,' she said. 'We cannot replace every crop after a careless visitor brings a blight through the fence.'

At supper the ward served greens, beans, and a small portion of preserved fish. The fish had come from a settlement beyond the basin, traded for valves made in the valley machine shop. Iva looked at the stamped brass on the table's water vessel. Here, too, the old world had left tools. The valley had built its green life with them, then learned to make some of its own. In the orchard dusk, the wall hid the gray country so completely

that she could understand why a child might mistake the valley for the whole world.



The gardens are infrastructure as well as beauty.

After supper Sen took them through a public court that smelled of damp brick and crushed mint. Families had brought

small clay pots to a long table. Each pot held a cutting or a few seeds, with a strip of paper naming who had grown it and what had happened to the parent plant. The gathering was neither a market nor a ceremony. A woman wanted beans that climbed in shade. A man with a bad knee offered plum cuttings if someone else would carry them up to the upper tier. Children traded paper labels until Sen made them put each one back with its pot.

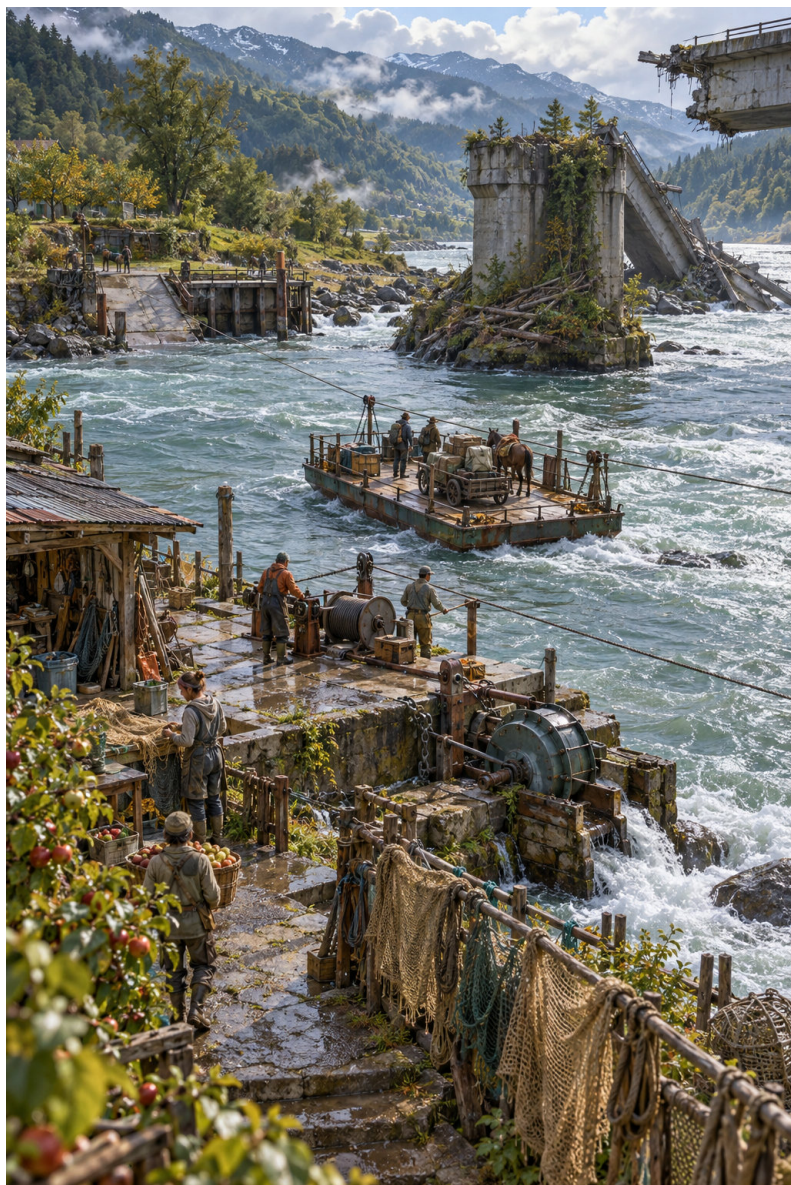
Sen kept a tray of bitter herbs behind the guest rooms. She had grown them from cuttings her brother had carried through the east gate after his first survey season. He was out on the road again, and the tray was a promise she could maintain without promising his return. She gave Iva one leaf to taste. Iva bit down and made a face; Sen laughed hard enough to lean against the table. Daro reached for a label to record the plant. Sen told him its valley name, then said that it traveled under three others. He wrote them all, with her name beside the first.

At the far end of the court, a resident asked whether guest pots would be allowed at the next exchange. Sen said the committee had not decided. Last year an uninspected cutting had brought scale insects into a citrus row, and the growers still disagreed about whose work had been lost. The woman was annoyed by the delay. She had a nephew outside the wall who had saved a pear from a hard country and wanted the seed tried here. Sen did not call either concern foolish. She showed Daro the covered table where arrivals could leave sealed samples for inspection. The nephew's pear could come as far as that table. Whether it could take root was a decision people inside would have to live with.

The cost of green

Sen took them out before the sun reached the upper terraces. They passed citrus trees trained low against stone and beds covered in pale netting. Pipes fed each tier from a manifold with a numbered valve. Beside every valve hung a board showing when it had opened and how much water had gone through. Farther down, workers moved shade cloth over seedlings by hand. Nothing in the basin grew because someone had simply let it grow.

A patch of trees stood brown among the green. Sen said the roots had taken salt from a damaged lower channel the previous year. They had closed that branch, cut back the affected trees, and spent months cleaning the soil in stages. Some of the orchard might recover. No one had cleared it for a prettier view from the road. The dry crowns remained visible from the receiving ward, a warning about the cost of one hidden leak.



Water passes through measured channels before it reaches a household.

Iva asked to see the channel repair. Sen brought her to a fenced inspection point where a young pipe worker was measuring a joint. He wore a bright blue shirt over protective sleeves and had copper wire wound around one wrist. Through

the viewing grate Iva saw a lining of old ceramic, then a new collar assembled from narrower pieces. The worker described the fit in patient detail. The part was sound at the day's pressure but had to be checked after each night flush. Iva did not offer to improve it with an unfamiliar tool. She asked what measurement would make them replace it. He showed her the mark on the gauge and, without prompting, the spare collar laid out in a dry box.

Daro followed Sen to a lookout above the terraces. Outside the wall the soil broke into dusty ribs. Inside it, irrigation channels divided the land into measured lengths, and pollinating insects moved through the orchard. The contrast could be seen from miles away, but from the wall he could see the human scale: a worker adjusting shade for three rows, a child carrying a count board, another worker resting in the narrow strip of shelter behind a cistern. The wall had kept things out. The people had kept things going.

At the public board a notice announced a reduction in bathing water for visitors. Someone beside it had posted the latest reservoir figure and the expected change after the next rain. There was no forecast of rain. Sen said the valley had traded for water once, during a worse season. It had also turned away freight it could not support. 'We are strong enough to be particular,' she said. 'That is not the same as having more than we need.'

A line still being drawn

The survey board stood under a covered arcade with a view of the east gate. Daro found the road out of the valley traced in three colors. Black meant inspected stone or packed ground. Amber meant a track had been used within the last month but not measured for their wagon's load. A thin white line ended at a river crossing where a bridge had once stood. Beyond it, no mark continued. The absence did not mean the land ended. It meant the valley would not claim a road there.

The surveyor on duty spread a fresh sheet over the board. A team had returned the day before with measurements from the first amber stretch. The ground held a light cart; its switchback was too tight for a long wagon unless the driver unhitched at the turn. Their wagon could be taken through, slowly, if the weather held and they carried boards for the rear wheel. Past that turn, the river's western bank had changed after a slide. The team would go again in two days. Daro asked for the raw readings and got a copy at the public price. The surveyor circled the points she had witnessed and left the others attributed to the team.

Iva studied the bend. She had made a worse turn on the viaduct, but that structure had offered a rail and a signal number. The east road had none. They could travel as far as a stone shelf before deciding whether to continue, and there was a safe place to reverse. She asked whether the valley needed a return load from any station beyond the river. The surveyor said a relay house on the near bank expected valve seals. Its courier had missed the last scheduled delivery when the road shifted. The seals would fit in a case smaller than their empty bearing crate.

Daro heard the offer before it was made. They were travelers, not a freight service. The surveyor agreed. She could tell them where the house was and what it needed. The relay house could ask them directly if they chose to go that far. No one put a case on their wagon at the board. Daro marked the shelf and the known turn in his map. He left the river blank until they could see it.

The night measure

On their second evening, a bell sounded twice from the inner reservoir. The receiving ward quieted without closing its doors. Sen came to their courtyard with a lantern and asked them to come to the public channel. Water had fallen below the predicted line by a small amount. The night crew was checking every branch before the next release. Visitors could watch from the walkway. Iva followed because the slight drop had come after the morning's repair reading, and she wanted to understand whether the two were connected.

At the channel the young pipe worker held a lamp to the collar. Its gauge was steady. Another crew had found a gate farther upstream that had not fully seated after the afternoon flush. The lost water had gone into a holding basin and could be pumped back, though the pumping would draw power from the valley's stored reserve. Sen told a gathering of residents what had happened and what the crew intended to do. A woman asked whether the outer terraces would lose their morning turn. 'Not if the return pump holds,' Sen said. 'We'll post the measure before the first valve opens.'

Daro watched the worker put the gate through its travel and stop it short of the old hard point. A second person checked the seal from the opposite side. When they restarted the return pump, its rhythm reached the walkway through the soles of his shoes. It reminded him of the castle's lower court. Two places with different walls had made the same wager on people able to notice a small change in a machine.

The morning board gave the result: most of the water recovered, some lost, outer terraces delayed one hour. The figures were ordinary and disappointing. No one had saved the valley in a single night. Iva folded the board's scrap copy into her tool roll because it showed how the gate and pump were connected. Daro recorded the delay beside the date. In a book about roads, he thought, it mattered that the green place also had to decide what moved first.

A request at the east gate

Before their allotted departure time they returned to the east gate. The relay house courier was there, waiting with a case of valve seals. She had heard that the road survey had reached the stone shelf. She asked whether they were traveling to it. Daro said yes, if the first bend remained sound. She showed them the case, its weight, and the note from the relay keeper. Delivery would be acknowledged at the house. If the road turned unsafe, they could bring it back and owe no charge. She needed the seals, but she did not ask them to promise the river.

Iva opened the case with the courier and inspected the packing. The seals were separated by dry cloth and pinned so they could not rub against one another. She fitted the closed case in their empty bearing crate, braced it with a wedge, and shook the crate once. Nothing moved. The courier wrote the outer crate's identifying scratch on the note. Daro kept one copy; she kept another for the gate. This was a small cargo. It gave the next road a human destination.

Sen joined them as the wagon was weighed. She had brought two boards cut to the length Iva had requested for the switchback. The valley machine shop had used them as templates for a repair and no longer needed them. Iva paid for the wood. Sen asked Daro for a copy of the map after the river survey, if they reached the relay house and returned by another route. He said he would send what he had seen. He did not promise a finished line where none yet existed.

The gate clerk checked their water vessels against the departure allowance and returned the admission papers with an exit date. The castle's borrowed signal unit remained theirs until they crossed the upper mast on the way back, or until a valley courier took it there. They chose to carry it. A valley signal did not reach beyond the first shelf, and they would need to know exactly where its reply stopped. The clerk opened the outer leaves.

The valley smelled of wet earth behind them. Ahead the road descended into pale grass and exposed stone. From this side the wall looked less like a fortress built to display power and more like an instrument drawn around a living thing. A gate could close. A road could be left unfinished. Inside the boundary, people had chosen to spend their water on trees and strangers for two nights. Daro looked back once before the curve hid the orchards.

The shelf beyond

A half mile from the wall they passed a former orchard behind a low retaining wall. Its trunks had been cut above the grafts; the new shoots were dead and silver. A narrow channel ran past the place on the way to living rows inside the valley, but the branch that had once turned outward was capped with metal. Iva touched the cap. It was clean enough to have been inspected recently. Daro wanted to mark the orchard as a ruin. A child from the valley was there gathering the fallen wire ties into a cloth bag. She said her aunt had pruned the trees until the branch was closed. Now she collected the ties before winter runoff carried them into the lower drain. Daro put 'former orchard' beside the road, dated what he had seen, and left the reason for the closure unclaimed.

The first black section of the east road held the wagon without complaint. At the amber boundary Daro got down and compared the surveyor's distances to the rocks beside him. The team had placed small copper tabs where the track narrowed. Their dates were current.

A wagon had turned around here since the survey crew's visit. Its tracks made a broad arc across the verge and ended back toward the gate. Iva checked the width against their own axle. The other wagon had been narrower. That was evidence of a possible reversing place, not permission to use the same turn. She walked the outside edge with a board in her hand, found where gravel covered soft soil, and chose to turn only at the

stone shelf if they had to retreat. Daro added the distinction to his private sheet before they began the switchback.

Iva walked the switchback before bringing the wagon through. One edge had loosened in the night. She used a board to spread the rear wheel's load, then moved it forward by hand while Daro held the brake. They made the turn on the first attempt, but only because they took longer than the survey sheet's estimated travel time.



A departure is small when the place behind it is large enough to stay.

At the stone shelf the valley signal unit answered the west mast once, weakly. Daro wrote the reply and its time beside the date and looked east. The relay house stood on the near side of the river, a low roof under an old transmission frame. A person had hung a blue cloth from the frame, perhaps to be seen by the missing courier. Beyond it, the far bank showed fresh raw earth where the slide had taken the approach to the old bridge.

They stopped on the shelf long enough for the axle to cool. Iva laid a hand against the patched wheel and counted to ten. It was warmer than its mate but not hot. The board that had carried it through the bend showed another long scrape. They could still use it on the return, provided they did not mistake it for a bridge across loose ground. Daro copied the signal's single reply and its time into the route notes. Beyond the shelf he tried once more at the next copper tab. The unit gave a brief click with no answer. He did not draw a communications line to the relay house on the strength of one sound.

Below them the river had made two channels around a gravel tongue. An old causeway reached the near bank and stopped where fresh pale stone lay across its approach. Someone had moved a few rocks into a footpath, but no wheels had gone that way. Daro looked for a post with a recent date and found none. Iva proposed leaving the wagon on the shelf and walking the seals down. It would spare the tire, but it would also leave their water and the vehicle unattended for several hours. From the shelf they could see a narrow wagon track descending to the relay house on sounder ground. They tested the first length, marked a place to turn back, and took the wagon down slowly. The blue cloth above the house was still visible each time the track bent away.

They could reach the house before evening and still return to the shelf by daylight if its keeper knew no safer crossing. Iva checked the patched tire and the boards once more. Daro checked the courier's note. The blue cloth lifted in the wind, a sign of someone waiting in a place the map could only partly

describe. The wagon moved on toward it, carrying seals, water, and a line that had not yet been earned.

At the blue cloth

The relay house stood beside a river that had changed its mind. The old bridge reached halfway across and stopped in the air. A recent slide had filled the near approach with pale stone. On the other bank, a section of road remained visible between weeds and a line of old power poles. It was impossible to tell from here whether the road still went anywhere.

The keeper came out before the wagon reached the door. She wore a copper-brown coat with a strip of blue cloth tied at one cuff, the mate of the signal above the roof. She had put the cloth up for the courier, she said. No one had come from the valley for nine days. Daro introduced himself and Iva and showed her the delivery note. He told her which road sections they had driven, where the valley signal had stopped answering, and where they had relied on someone else's survey. She invited them in before she asked for the case.

Inside, the house smelled of hot dust and boiled grain. A long table held a map under clear glass. The inked road from the valley ended at the stone shelf, just as it did on Daro's copy. Beyond the river, lines from three different years ran toward different settlements. A row of empty sockets along the wall belonged to a radio system still connected to the mast above them. The set on the table worked only when its storage cell had enough charge. Today it did not.

The keeper opened the case with Iva. The valve seals were dry and the identifying scratch on the outer crate matched the courier's note. She signed both copies. Iva asked which valve needed them. The keeper took her below the house to a small pumping room. Its outlet fed the cistern, the wash basin, and a public tap outside. The old seals had not failed outright. Water gathered around a flange during the night run; the keeper caught it in a tray and returned it to the cistern each morning.

She showed Iva the tray with its shallow mark. They fitted one new seal, brought the pump slowly up to pressure, and watched the flange through a full cycle. A second seal went into the house stock. The rest would go to the next working house when a courier came.

At dusk a woman arrived on foot from the east bank, her boots wet to the ankle. She had crossed above the broken bridge where the river narrowed, using a footline that could not bear a wagon. The keeper gave her water before opening the map. The woman carried two dates: the last day a supply cart had reached her settlement, and the day she had walked this bank. She could speak for the footline that afternoon. She could not speak for a wagon road. Daro wrote her dates beside her name and left the line beyond the river unjoined.

They ate at the long table. The keeper asked whether they would take the empty seal case back to the valley. Daro said they would. They could return with the signed note and the survey they had made themselves. Iva had measured the pump and the switchback; the keeper gave them a copy of her overnight water record to carry west. The east-bank woman asked for a different mark: a small blue line on the public copy so someone approaching the relay could see where to ask about the footline. Daro drew it in the margin, away from the wagon route.

The east-bank woman leaned across the table. The blue line ended at the relay house. She approved that much. She would tell a walker where to find the footline in person after seeing the river that day; she did not want an old mark sending wagons to the broken bridge. The keeper brought out a second sheet used by the houses and survey crews. On that one the woman marked the upstream approach and the place she had tied the rope, then dated it. Her mark could be carried to the valley desk with her name. The public sheet would tell travelers whom to ask.

Iva checked the two pages before Daro folded them. She had seen him erase the station room, then insist on preserving the salt closure at the castle. Here he left a line deliberately unfinished. 'Will people call this a map?' she asked. He thought of the fair's moon with one continent painted on a board beneath it. 'They'll have to,' he said. 'It's the only one I can answer for.' The keeper laid the signed seal receipt on top of the service copy for them to carry west. The keeper set a weight on the unfinished edge while the river sounded beyond the wall.

Before sleeping, he went outside. From the house he could see the cloth at the mast, the river catching a thin band of light, and the remnant of the bridge. Behind him the valley wall was hidden by the folds of ground. It would be easy to draw a single confident road across all of it. He had come this far because other people had shown him where their confidence ended. He went back in and set his map beside the signed delivery note.

In the morning Iva checked the patched tire. The keeper filled their vessels within the house's allowance, and the east-bank woman took the footline home. Daro folded the map with the blue margin showing. They turned the wagon toward the valley, carrying the used seal, the keeper's water record, and a line they had earned as far as the relay house. The patched tire took the first bend without a sound.



The road continues beyond the places this book can name.

The receiving desk

The return over the switchback took most of the following day. Iva laid the boards under the rear wheel again and found that one copper tab had loosened since their outward passage. Daro wrote the new condition beside the old date. At the valley gate the clerk checked their water vessels, logged the signed delivery note and empty seal case, and sent their report to the survey board. Sen met them there while the evening count was being posted. The east-bank woman's name was on the service copy, her mark tied to one afternoon's river level. On the public sheet, blue ink ended at the relay house and instructed a traveler to ask there about a crossing on foot. Nothing invited a wagon to the broken bridge.

The surveyor compared Daro's road distances with her team's readings. She accepted the new note about the copper tab because both travelers had seen it that day. She put the relay keeper's signed receipt in the delivery ledger and copied the footline onto the working sheet with its date. Sen wanted the public request point posted at the east gate. The surveyor held the page against the board to see whether its blue line could be mistaken for a route across the river. She moved the legend closer to the relay house, and Daro agreed to the change. The clerk would post that copy in the morning; the service copy stayed behind the desk for the next survey crew.

Iva gave Sen the empty case for the courier and asked when the survey crew would go east. After the water count and a fresh look at the slide, Sen said. From the receiving ward the orchard lights had begun to come on, one row at a time. Daro watched the surveyor write the date above his two sheets. He had brought back a place to ask, a record someone could use, and the stretch of road on which his own wheels had stood. Tomorrow the posted map would belong to the people who had to answer for it.

