We Don’t Answer the Cold

Extended synopsis • Naria Khan

Three days before the last train leaves Aulden, railway engineer Elnai Senn writes *empty* on the shelter inspection sheet. Her supervisor tells her fresh heating glass is on its way, but if she leaves that word on the page, the shelter will close and the hospital patients will have nowhere warm to spend the night. Elnai crosses it out and signs. By the time Captain Caiven Kest comes for the last locomotive, families are freezing on the platform and her signature is still there to say they have somewhere to go. While her sister Lume loads six coaches with neighbours, Elnai takes the train south against orders and gives Caiven a hand aboard.

Lume knows his name. Six years ago, she was still crossing the bridge at Hemfall when Caiven ordered the rails cut to stop the Nacre reaching the far bank. Sixty-three people died, and Lume lost a leg. When she asks whether he knew people were still crossing, he tells her he did. Now the Nacre is following their train, tracking the warmth through the iron and learning the voices of the people aboard. Elnai needs Caiven because he knows the line ahead. As they work together, she begins to want him beside her for reasons of her own, though Lume has given her no reason to think she’ll ever forgive him.

At a foundry, Elnai sees Aulden’s name crossed off a row of empty glass cradles. The director sent the shipment south after Elnai certified that the shelter was ready. A foundry worker shows her something worse. The authorities have been charging glass with heat taken from people in hospital wards. Inside one shard, a woman keeps trying to wet her lips, and when the worker touches the frame, the woman turns her face towards her.

At the next reception yard, officials offer passage to the workers they need while their families wait behind. Elnai has promised the passengers they’ll get through together, but when she challenges the director, the director produces her certificate. In front of the families who trusted her, Elnai admits she knew the racks were empty when she signed. Caiven orders the guards to clear the exit and is stripped of his command. The train gets away with the families still together, but Marn, the guard who counted them aboard at Aulden, dies in the escape.

By the time they reach the harbour, Caiven has asked Elnai to share a house with him. They’ve got as far as discussing a kitchen table. With too few boats to carry everyone to the island of Eshara, Lume and the harbour crew winch the coaches across the bridge while Elnai takes the engine out along a pier to draw the Nacre after her. For a while it follows. Then the heating glass in the island hall answers the engine, and people who have made it safely across begin turning back towards the voices.

Elnai presses her bare palm to the copper contact in the cab, and the Nacre turns towards her living warmth. When she hears Lume’s childhood voice, her hand lifts barely an inch before she sees a strand of white reach back towards the hall. She puts her hand down again. Caiven offers to take her place, but with his injured leg he can barely manage the ladder, and the pier is already giving way. Elnai sends him to the release lever. At Hemfall he ordered the cut while people were still trying to cross. This time he waits for Elnai to raise her lamp twice, and even then he looks back at the ladder, hoping she’ll take it. She wants to. Then she sees a woman in the hall lifting a child towards whatever is calling. Elnai tells him to cut. The rails drop, the Nacre turns fully towards the engine, and the pier goes under with Elnai still aboard.

At the inquiry, Lume testifies that her sister gave the signal herself. She also tells the truth about the certificate, though she could let the authorities take all the blame. Caiven admits that he heard voices at Hemfall and left them out of his first account because he wanted to keep his command.

Six months after the crossing, the survivors run their first passenger train. Caiven visits Lume for tea, and she finally asks whether her sister was happy. He tells her about the kitchen table. Then a salt box on the shelf gives a tap, and from the glass salvaged from the pier comes Elnai’s voice. “Off the hose,” she says. Caiven remembers where his boot was that morning. Lume remembers being too far down the platform to hear. When the latch clicks, she catches his sleeve. They stand together until the light goes, and the box stays shut.