We Don’t Answer the Cold

Short synopsis • Naria Khan

Railway engineer Elnai Senn signs off on Aulden’s unfinished shelter so the hospital patients can stay indoors while the town waits for its heating glass. But the glass never comes, and now the captain sent to collect the last train has orders to take it south empty. While her sister Lume fills six coaches with neighbours, Elnai starts the engine. Only after she pulls the captain aboard does Lume recognise his name. Six years ago, Caiven Kest ordered the rails cut at Hemfall while people were still crossing the bridge. Sixty-three people died, and Lume lost a leg.

As the train heads south, a presence called the Nacre follows its warmth along the rails, calling to passengers in voices they love. Elnai comes to trust Caiven and falls in love with him, even as she learns what her own signature cost the people aboard. Because she marked the shelter ready, the authorities sent Aulden’s glass to the coast. When those same officials offer refuge to the skilled workers alone, Elnai admits to the families that she signed with the racks empty. Caiven orders the guards to let everyone through and loses his command.

At the harbour, Lume helps winch the coaches across to an island while Elnai draws the Nacre away with the engine. But the island’s heating glass draws it back, and the only warmth Elnai has left to offer is her own. She presses her palm to the copper contact in the cab. When she lifts it even an inch, the Nacre turns towards the people Lume has just brought to safety. Elnai keeps her hand down and signals Caiven to cut the rails. He does, and the pier collapses beneath her. Elnai goes into the water with the engine.

Six months later, Lume and Caiven are drinking tea when a piece of glass salvaged from the pier speaks in Elnai’s voice. “Off the hose,” it says, just as she did the morning Caiven planted his boot on the hose she’d mended. Lume was at the other end of the platform that morning. She catches his sleeve, and together they leave the box closed.