Chapter 1

I was underneath the last train out of Aulden when they decided it would leave without us.

From under the train I had a fine view of two boots. One was planted squarely on the hose I’d just replaced.

“Would you mind?” I said. The boot moved closer. “Off the hose.”

“Sorry.”

Once he stepped back, I got the clamp to catch. Cold water was running down my neck and I could smell onions frying in the station kitchen. I’d been under here since five. If he wanted anything else from me, he could bring it on a plate.

“Are you Senn?”

“Pass me the long spanner.”

He crouched and put the handle of the right spanner into my hand. That improved my opinion of him a little.

“Thank you. Yes.”

“How long before she can run?”

“Who’s asking?”

“Someone who needs her to.”

That covered most of Aulden. I tightened the clamp, gave it a pull and rolled out into the weak morning light.

The man offered me his hand and I took it, grease and all.

Something brushed the back of my neck. I ducked, then looked up under the engine.

“Wick. Get down.”

A black face appeared between the copper pipes. Six white-tipped paws, all hanging on. I’d tried pulling him out of the casing once. He’d bitten me, waited for me to change hands and bitten the other one.

He dropped onto my shoulder, warmed his paws against my collar and stared at the stranger.

“An inspection assistant?” the officer asked.

“Head of department.”

Wick leaned forward to sniff the officer’s immaculate collar, decided against him and tucked his nose beneath my hair.

The glass on a sivren’s back kept the colour of every hearth it had slept beside. Wick’s showed amber from our kitchen, rose from Lume’s stove, and a bright yellow near the tail from the summer fire my father used to build in the yard. I had not seen that fire in seven years. Sometimes I held Wick to the light just to look at it.

“He’s not allowed in the cab,” I said.

He almost smiled. “I won’t tell.”

Wick chose that moment to climb inside my coat.

The officer smiled properly when he saw the black mark I’d left on his glove. I liked what it did to his mouth and was still looking when he asked which coupling held the passenger coaches to the engine.

He tucked the dirty glove away and I caught sight of the brass bars on his collar.

“You’ll want Mr Fenward,” I said. “Station office. The door with all the men outside it.”

“I’ve seen Mr Fenward.”

Behind him, the platform was full of people pretending not to be frightened. They had been coming in since dawn, carrying the things they could not bear to lose. A woman I knew slightly from the grocer’s had brought a clock almost as large as her son. The boy stood under it in the shade while she argued with a porter. Saeli Rill had three sacks of flour and a child asleep across the top one. Someone’s chickens objected to everything.

Above the platform roof, the Skyseam showed through the cloud. The weather tables gave us three more days before the shadow of those broken stones fell across Aulden, but I’d already mended three frozen pipes before dawn.

At the far end, Lume was chalking names on a board. She had got herself a chair, a table and authority over two men twice her size. One was holding the board. The other was being sent to find a second chair.

“The coaches stay on,” I said. “Half an hour for the casing, then we can let those people aboard.”

When he didn’t answer, I looked at him again. “What?”

“The passenger service has been withdrawn.”

Behind him, Saeli eased a sack of flour off the barrow without waking her boy. She’d found a place for it beside the coach door.

“Withdrawn where?”

“The Compact needs the engine at Aumet. We’re returning with the empty heat cradles.”

“We’re going through Aumet.”

“You were.”

I gave him time to tell me about the other engine coming up behind us. He stood there with one clean glove on.

“And the passengers?”

“Mr Fenward has instructions for the town shelters.”

“I mend those shelters.”

His eyes moved past me towards the station roof, where a strip of copper flashing had peeled up in last night’s wind.

Three days ago I’d written EMPTY across the velith racks on the north shelter inspection. The old glass was still warm against the backs of my fingers. Leam, Father would have called it. Not enough to get a drop of hot water out of the pipe, though it would do to warm your hands if you had nothing else. Fenward brought the sheet back. There was fresh glass on the way, he said. Leave that word there and the Compact would close the shelter. Where did I propose we put the people from the hospital tonight?

So I’d crossed out the line about the empty racks and put my name beside READY FOR FIRSTSHADE.

The glass hadn’t come. Yesterday I’d passed the shelter twice, and the second time I’d crossed the road.

If he turned the sheet over he’d see where I’d pressed too hard. You could read EMPTY with a fingertip.

“You know the main store’s empty?” I asked. “We’ve had the wards on half-charge for a week. You know that?”

“I know what was reported.”

“Then somebody ought to take you down there.”

He held my gaze without a trace of pleasure. I wished there had been; it would have made the next part easier.

“The foundry supplies heat to the southern settlements,” he said. “They’ve lost two engines north of Underne. If this one doesn’t get through—”

“Put the cradles in with us.”

“The extra weight will use the reserve before Laum Rise.”

“No, it won’t.”

“On the scheduled line, with the viaduct restrictions—”

“Have you weighed my train?”

He glanced down at the locomotive. “Is she yours?”

The name on the tender said COIL COMPACT RAIL SERVICE in flaking white letters. Underneath, my father had painted AZHEN in yellow. Azhen was an old hill word for the coal that stayed red under a bed of ash. I had repainted the letters every spring and left the rest to peel.

“I’m the one underneath her.”

A bell rang from the office. Not the departure bell. Fenward’s little brass handbell, which he used when he wanted everybody to stop what they were doing and attend to the greater importance of his.

The officer turned towards it.

“Don’t announce it yet,” I said. “Let me speak to him.”

“He has his instructions.”

“So do I.”

I pushed past him before he could ask whose.

Fenward was on the office step with a paper in one hand. He was wearing his fur hat indoors again. The porter beside him stared at the floor.

“You cannot withdraw a train when the people are standing on the platform,” I told him.

He drew breath, saw the officer coming up behind me, and let it out with relief.

“Captain. Perhaps you could explain.”

“He has.”

“Then you understand the necessity.”

“How much velith have you got in the shelter?”

“That is not the question under consideration.”

“It’s the one I’m asking.”

Fenward looked beyond me. People were beginning to come closer. Saeli had lifted Nio off the flour and was carrying him on her hip; at six he was far too big for it, but she held him as though someone might take him away.

“Our stores are sufficient for the immediate period,” Fenward said.

The waiting room had a black hearth-mark above its door. With any heat left next door in the shelter it should have shone dull gold. Fenward stood beneath it and talked.

Lume’s crutch struck the paving behind me. “How immediate?” she asked.

He made the mistake of turning towards her with his patient face. “Miss Senn, I assure you—”

“Yesterday the hospital sent us their spare blankets. They said they wouldn’t need them because they were closing. Is the hospital wrong, or are you?”

The captain was watching Lume. His eyes went briefly to the wooden foot beneath her skirt, then back to her face. He did it quickly, but I saw. I always saw.

“There is no cause for alarm,” Fenward said.

From the other end of the platform came a sound like a glass being drawn along a table.

I turned.

Beyond the goods shed, the signal arm had gone white.

It was a small thing to look at. A strip of iron, a red wooden board, the clouded morning behind it. Frost on a signal was nothing remarkable in Aulden. We scraped it off until our fingers ached.

But this frost was moving upwards.

It climbed the post against the rain, branching as it went. The red disappeared. A droplet hung under the signal arm and lengthened into a clear needle.

The captain said, very quietly, “Get everyone away from the fence.”

Fenward was still looking at his paper.

“Now,” the captain said.

Marn, who had been checking the rear couplings, lifted a girl off the railing by the back of her coat. Her father protested until the iron beside his hand cracked.

The platform erupted.

I caught Saeli by the sleeve before she was knocked sideways. Nio woke and began crying with the furious incomprehension of a child who had been promised somewhere warm.

“Inside,” Fenward shouted. “Inside the waiting room.”

The captain was already moving towards the goods crossing. He pulled a short axe from the emergency box on the wall.

“Where’s your northern isolation joint?” he called to me.

“Past the shed. Under the red cover.”

He ran.

I should have gone with him. I knew which bolt had rusted and where to give it a knock. But I’d seen the frost on the waiting-room windows. It was on the inside.

“Lume.”

“I see it.”

“Keep them on the platform. Away from the fence. Get Marn.”

“What are you doing?”

I was already running back towards the engine.

*

Anlow had his head inside the firebox door, looking for a dropped pin.

“Out.”

He backed away so fast he struck his head. “Ow. What?”

“Get her hot.”

“You said not until the casing—”

“I’m doing the casing.”

He looked over my shoulder. The colour left his face, which had always seemed impossible under all that soot.

“Is that?”

“Yes. Coal first. Don’t open the sun-vault yet.”

I climbed into the cab. The Azhen smelled of oil, old wool and the sharp warm sweetness of charged velith. There was a mug under the driver’s bench, half a biscuit on a ledge and a length of copper coil I had been meaning to fit since last month. My father’s little maker’s plate was screwed beside the pressure gauge. He had engraved his name crookedly and blamed the tool.

Ahead of the firebox, behind its grille, six coaches’ worth of summer lay in the iron cradle. Bottled noon, we called a rack of velith that colour. As an apprentice I’d liked saying it. Now I looked at the amber rods and tried to reckon how much of somebody’s long bright afternoon I could afford to spend on the next hill.

I took off the side panel and reached for the new casing.

Anlow began shovelling. Outside, Fenward’s bell rang and rang. “Did he say we could go?” Anlow asked.

“No.”

The shovel stopped.

“Elnai.”

“We’ve been told to leave the passengers.”

He looked towards the window, where Saeli had a hand over Nio’s ears. Nio was still crying, and she was trying to quiet him, for Fenward perhaps, or for the cold, or because she did not know what else to do.

Anlow put another shovelful in. “All right,” he said.

I fitted the casing. One screw would not seat. I tried again, pressed too hard and felt the driver slip, grazing my knuckle.

“Oh, for—”

Blood ran into the seam.

I took my hand away. Breathed. There was time to do it properly or there would be no time for anything. The second attempt caught.

Outside came a heavy metallic crack. The frost on the nearest rail stopped advancing.

The captain had broken the isolation joint.

He returned at a walk, carrying the axe in his left hand. His right glove had torn. Blood showed through the split, although he did not appear to notice. He stopped by the cab and looked up at me.

“How soon?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Five would be better.”

“I could lie about it.”

He wiped the axe on a patch of wet grass. “Is there another iron connection to the north?”

“Telegraph wire. Fence. Water main’s clay once it leaves the yard.”

“Have someone cut the wire.”

“Marn!” I shouted.

Our freight guard raised a hand. I pointed; he understood and went for the cutters.

The captain put the axe back in its box. Behind him, Fenward was trying to shepherd the crowd towards the waiting room. Lume stood in the doorway and would not move.

“That break won’t hold it all day,” the captain said.

“I know.”

“It can come through the ground. Slower, but it will.”

“I know that too.”

He rested his good hand on the cab rail. I had to make myself look at his face rather than the torn glove.

“Listen to me. If you try to take the coaches, you’ll be stopped at the lower points. There’s a military trolley coming up. The line is closed to civilian traffic.”

“You’ve just cut our northern line. You want us to stay here?”

“I want to get authority for the extra load before you run into an armed blockade.”

“From whom?”

He glanced at the telegraph wire Marn was pulling down.

Marn gave the wire one last pull. It landed in a coil on the ballast.

“How long?” I asked.

He did not pretend to misunderstand. “I can’t give you a time.”

Anlow shut the firebox. Heat moved against my back.

The captain looked at the pressure gauge, then at the coaches, then at me. I checked the bare copper where it came through the floor. The dial could tell him whether we could move, not what the engine had left warm. For a moment I thought he would climb up and help.

Instead he said, “Keep the engine here. I’m going to the points.”

He left before I could answer.

Lume reached the foot of the cab as he went down the platform. She had retrieved her chalkboard and was holding it under one arm.

“Well?” she asked.

“He wants permission.”

“How encouraging.”

“I need you to find Othen. Put people who can’t manage steps in the second coach. The first still has that gap in the floor.”

She studied my face. Then she held out her chalkboard. “You can give that to Marn.”

“Lume—”

“I’m doing the loading. You do the engine. If you have time to tell me which carriage is fit for a stretcher, go and mend the carriage.”

I took the board.

Her mouth twitched. It was not much of a smile, but it helped. “Do we actually know where we’re going?” she asked.

“South.”

“I had worked out that bit.”

Beyond her, the people on the platform were watching us. Some were neighbours. Some had walked down from villages I had never visited, wearing shoes tied with string. A man stood with his wife’s spectacles in his hand while she searched the front of her coat for them.

The Azhen gave a little shudder. Steam hissed from the open drain.

“Eshara,” I said. “After that, they have boats.”

Lume nodded once and turned to the crowd. “Leave the heavy furniture,” she called. “Children with the people they came with. If you need help, tell me. If you’re helping, listen to the person you’re helping.”

Fenward started towards her.

I leaned out of the cab. “Mr Fenward.”

He looked up, red-faced and furious.

“You’re welcome to a seat.”

“You have no authority to offer—”

“Then you’d better stand.”

Anlow laughed and tried to swallow it. Fenward heard him anyway.

I put my hand on the regulator and felt the engine gathering beneath my feet. “Open the coach valves,” I told him. “Let them feel it’s warm.”

Chapter 2

Stealing a locomotive was easy if you had the key. Stealing one with six coaches and a platform full of neighbours took rather more persuasion.

Every house in the basin had a hearth-mark by the door, and on my way to work I’d passed a dozen that had gone dark. I’d even knocked at one house to tell them theirs was out. As if the people sitting in the cold needed me to come along and tell them.

In the second coach Nio was sitting on the lid of a laundry basket. The lid hummed.

“You’ll squash him,” I said.

“He chose me,” Nio said.

“He chooses anything warm.”

“I fed him a raisin.”

“He’ll never leave you now.”

Wick opened one eye. His little back shone through the shirts, all those remembered fires sitting in a basket that could have been mistaken for rubbish. I gave Nio a look of immense severity.

“If anyone asks, he’s authorised freight.”

Nio got off the lid. One white-tipped paw came out, felt along the wicker for another raisin and withdrew.

Mr Issen’s wife had got herself and their son aboard, but Mr Issen remained on the paving with both arms round his clock case, insisting that it had belonged to his grandfather. Marn offered to take the face and works out. Mr Issen said he would sooner have his own heart removed. Marn, who had not slept, asked whether that would make him any lighter.

“Put it in the freight coach,” I called.

Lume turned her head.

“Just the clock,” I added.

“That’s how it starts.”

“We have room.”

She lifted two fingers. Two things I had allowed aboard since telling her to organise the loading. I went back to the cab before she could find a third.

In the cab doorway I caught sight of her fingers behind her back, still raised. It was how we used to keep score under the supper table when Father was telling a story. One finger for a man saved, two for a horse. If the horse came out of it better than the man you could sometimes make Lume choke on her tea.

When I put up a third, she had to turn her face to the chalkboard.

Amber from the sun-vault lay across Anlow’s boots. His shadow crossed the grille as the shovel went in, and for a moment the toes of his boots went dark. Every stroke spent a little more bottled noon. He’d tied his scarf round the handle to save the blister on his palm.

“Gloves,” I said.

“Can’t feel the handle.”

“You’ll feel it less with no skin.”

He looked as though he might argue, then found the gloves.

My own hands were shaking. I put them behind the gauge where he would not see.

Under the driver’s bench was a letter from the Eshara tideworks, still folded in its blue envelope. Last spring they had offered me six months repairing the sea engines.

I had said no. I’d written a sensible reply about obligations in Aulden, then kept the offer where I could find it every time I needed a spare fuse.

I could have left on an ordinary passenger train. Now I was taking a stolen one to the same city, with half my neighbours in the coaches. I pushed the letter farther back with my boot and checked the pressure again.

I had driven this engine to Eddal with ore, timber, sheep and once a travelling company who paid for the passage by performing a tragedy in the waiting room. I had never taken her over Laum Rise with a full passenger load. I had never taken her anywhere with men waiting to stop us.

Outside, a woman in a blue shawl asked if the journey was safe.

Lume said, “It’s warmer than here.”

The woman climbed aboard.

I watched the woman find a seat, then looked back at the dial. Of course the needle hadn’t moved. I’d checked it thirty seconds ago.

Marn swung himself onto the footplate, breathing hard.

“All six on. Brake’s joined. Nalle says if you forget her bag again, she’s leaving me.”

“I forgot it once.”

“She’s had seven years to consider the matter.”

Grease on his cheek, Nalle’s red waistcoat hanging off him as usual. She always knitted it a size too big. “Give it a year, Elnai,” he used to say, drawing the wool tight across his narrow chest. I’d been giving it a year since I was fifteen.

He went back to the rear coach for the brake test. I applied and released the brake at his signals, then waited until he came forward again.

“All the way through,” he said.

“Did you see the captain?” I asked.

“At the lower points with young Arlen. The lieutenant. They’ve got the trolley across the running line.”

I looked down the platform. Beyond the station, the rails curved past the old grain shed and disappeared into the cutting. We would not see the trolley until we were nearly on it.

“Can we use the goods road?”

Marn made a face.

“The catch point’s locked.”

“It’s been locked since my father died. The key’s in the kitchen drawer.”

“Fenward has it.”

Of course he did.

I stepped down from the cab.

“Keep her below the red,” I told Anlow.

“Where are you going?”

“To ask nicely.”

Fenward had retreated to his office. Through the window I could see him putting things in a leather case. A photograph, a small silver dish, a bottle he usually kept behind the railway timetables. The shelter arrangements were apparently complete.

When I knocked on the glass, he made a gesture suggesting I should go away.

I went round to the door and opened it.

“The goods road key.”

“I am making a record of your actions.”

“Make it on the train.”

“You will be charged with theft of Compact property, endangering passengers and obstructing the essential supply of—”

The window cracked behind him.

A pale line ran from one corner of the glass to the other. We both looked at it. Fenward’s mouth remained open, but the rest of his sentence did not arrive.

The isolation joint had bought us less time than I had hoped.

I held out my hand.

He took a ring of keys from his pocket. “This is under protest.”

“Bring your case.”

I left before I could say anything about the people still standing outside.

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Marn ran ahead with the key. I watched his red waistcoat vanish beyond the grain shed and wished, violently, that my father were alive.

He would have been appalled. He would have told me there was a way of doing things and an order in which to do them. Then he would have gone down to the points with Marn, because being appalled had never stopped him mending anything.

“Ready?” Anlow asked.

I looked back along the coaches.

As the doors began to close, Othen was still on the step of the second coach, medical bag in one hand, trying to help his husband get a folded stretcher through the doorway. Saeli had got Nio to a window, and Lume was working her way along on her crutch, checking who was still outside.

A porter gave me the loading signal.

Lume did not.

At the far end of the platform, an old woman was coming towards us with a dog on a lead. She was moving as fast as she could. The dog did not understand; it kept stopping to sniff the same patch of grass.

“Wait,” I said.

The pressure needle crept up.

Beyond the station wall, frost spread through the branches of an apple tree. Leaves fell in bright brittle pieces. It was too early in the year for bare branches. There should have been fruit still hanging from the southern side.

The woman dropped the lead and held out both arms.

Lume passed her crutch to a man behind her and went down the platform rail, using it to steady herself. The man hesitated, then followed and offered his arm. Together they got the woman up the step. A little boy retrieved the dog.

Lume looked towards me.

I opened the regulator.

The Azhen moved reluctantly. Couplings tightened one after another with a series of knocks that travelled through my boots. A face appeared at a window, then another. People who had been crying stopped to watch the platform slide away.

I kept our speed down. Marn would need time to throw the goods points, then come back to the train.

The locomotive reached the grain shed.

On the running line ahead, the military trolley sat exactly where he had said it would. Four soldiers stood beside it. The young lieutenant had a hand on his pistol. The

captain stood in front of him, looking past us towards the frost advancing over Aulden station.

He raised both arms.

I shut the regulator and held the brake lightly. We slowed.

To my left, Marn heaved the goods lever over. The blades settled against their rail. He stayed bent over the lock as our front wheels took the turn.

The captain shouted something, but the hiss of the drain drowned him out.

“What?” Anlow called.

The captain pointed beyond the grain shed.

I saw the goods gate.

It had been chained shut across the road. Two thick wooden bars, not enough to stop an engine, quite enough to bounce beneath the wheels and put us off the rails if we hit them badly.

Marn was still at the points. He had not seen it.

I pulled the brake harder.

The front of the train checked, but the coaches behind it shoved us on.

The hose was sound and the gauge was answering, so the trouble was behind us. A valve had shut somewhere, cutting off the rear brakes.

“Hand brake,” I said.

Anlow dropped the shovel and went to the wheel.

The captain ran.

He caught the cab rail with his left hand and put one foot on the moving step. His right hand slipped. For one dreadful second he hung beside the wheel, his shoulder level with the axle.

I caught the back of his coat. “Anlow!”

My apprentice let go of the brake wheel long enough to seize his arm. We hauled him onto the footplate. He struck the floor on one knee, got up and pushed past me towards the opposite window.

“Signal your guard,” he said. “Rear brake.”

I pulled the whistle twice, short and sharp.

Marn looked up. I waved both arms backwards.

He understood. He abandoned the points and ran alongside the coaches.

The goods gate filled the window.

The captain took a pin from the tool rack and jammed it into the hand-brake wheel where Anlow could get more purchase.

“Again. Both of you.”

We turned it. Metal shrieked under the cab.

The Azhen stopped with her front buffer pressed against the gate.

For a moment all I could hear was steam.

Then Anlow said, “I think I’ve been sick.” He looked down at his boots. “No. Not yet.”

The captain stepped back and leaned against the cab wall. A dark patch spread across his right glove.

I could still feel the weight of him in my hand. His coat had torn at the shoulder where I had pulled it.

“Why was the brake shut?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Find out.”

“I was going to.”

He nodded, accepting the rebuke without wasting time on it.

Marn appeared outside, breathing in painful little jerks.

“Fourth coach,” he said. “Someone tied a sack to the valve. It shifted when we started and pulled it right round. It’s open now.”

“Test it,” the captain told me.

I did, while Marn watched the blocks draw against the wheels. He gave me a hurried nod.

The lieutenant was coming towards us, pistol still in its holster but his hand on it.

“Captain! Stand clear.”

“Arlen, get the chain off the gate.”

The young man stopped.

“Sir?”

“The chain. Now.”

“Those people are—”

“I can see the people.”

Behind the trolley, the rails began to whiten.

Arlen looked down. He let go of his pistol and ran to the gate.

The captain turned back to me.

“You will do exactly as I say until we are clear of the yard.”

“You can tell me where the line is. I’ll drive.”

He looked at the pressure gauge. At Anlow, white-faced beside the fire. At my hand still gripping the brake.

“Fine.”

The gate swung open.

I released the brake slowly. This time, when the engine moved, I felt every inch of it.

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As we turned out of the yard, the military trolley drew level on the running line. Arlen was aboard again. Its little motor rattled past us and away towards the main-line cutting. Our longer loop took us round the mill pond, past the row of houses where smoke had stopped coming from the chimneys.

My house was the third one. The back door had never fitted properly. There was bread dough in a bowl under a cloth on the kitchen table. I had put it to rise before dawn, telling myself we might be home by supper if the evacuation was delayed again.

I watched the roofs until the curve took them away.

The captain had stayed aboard. There had been several moments when he could have stepped off, and I was not sure whether I was relieved or angry that he had not taken them.

He stood behind my shoulder, holding the route board Marn had brought from the guard’s van. Close enough that I could smell wet wool, iron and the faint soap smell under both. I had been awake since four. This was an inconvenient thing to notice.

“Ease her at the culvert,” he said. “The eastern support shifted last week.”

“Was anybody going to tell us?”

“I just did.”

I eased her.

The wheels rang over the culvert. Below us, the stream still ran brown and quick between its stones. For that alone I wanted to stop and put my hands in it.

Anlow opened the firebox. Warm light touched the captain’s face.

“You need that hand seen to,” I said.

He looked down as though the blood had come as a surprise.

“In a minute.”

“There’s a doctor in the second coach.”

“When we’re through the cutting.”

I knew that tone. I’d used it myself often enough when I meant to go on finding another cutting.

Marn came forward at the next slow stretch. He reported a bruised shoulder, two broken cups and one very indignant chicken. Lume was checking everyone with Othen. Nobody had been thrown out. The old woman’s dog was asleep.

“Mr Fenward?” I asked.

“First coach. Telling people he arranged it.”

Anlow looked over his shoulder. “Can we put him out?”

“No.”

“At a station.”

“Still no.”

The captain made a sound that might have been a laugh, but when I looked he was studying the route board.

Marn noticed him properly for the first time. Something changed in his face.

“Sir,” he said, without warmth.

He inclined his head.

Marn remained where he was. I had known him most of my life; he had never been a man who struggled to find something to say. Now he seemed to be holding several things in his mouth and choosing none of them.

“Go back to Nalle,” I told him. “Have something to eat. We’ll need you at the viaduct.”

He looked at me, then at the captain.

“Elnai.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I’ll send Lume.”

He went.

The line opened ahead, running between dark firs. Aulden was hidden behind us. Beneath the wheels, the rails were wet and black, and for a few miles we had no one to argue with but each other.

“I need the route to Eshara,” I said. “Every restriction. Every place they might stop us.”

“That depends on whether you’re going to listen.”

“I slowed for the culvert.”

“You did.”

He set the board on the ledge beside me.

“Then we start with Laum Rise.”

Chapter 3

Lume came to the cab carrying two mugs and the expression she used when she had already heard an answer and intended to make me say it anyway.

Wick followed at her heel with a coil of blue sewing thread caught round his middle. Lume bent to untangle him.

“I’ve told him to stop stealing it.”

“He has the makings of a competent railway officer.”

She wound the thread into a loose collar and tied the ends well away from his throat. He sat still for that. Wick would suffer anything from Lume as long as her hands were warm.

“You remember Mum’s blue thread?” she asked.

“I remember you putting it in the stove.”

“I was four. I thought you could warm it back to the colour it used to be.”

“You set fire to the stool.”

“And you said Mum would be furious.”

“I knew she would.”

Mother had sat on the good end of that stool for nine years afterwards. Neither of us had ever confessed. I could still make Lume laugh just by kicking one leg short under the table.

“Tea,” she said.

I reached for one.

“This one’s yours. The other’s Anlow’s.”

“I wasn’t going to give it away.”

“You generally do.”

She climbed the last step carefully. The railway steps had been made by somebody who expected everybody’s knees to bend at precisely the same height. I moved the tool chest so she could sit without being asked whether she wanted to.

She looked at the captain.

He had taken off his torn glove. Othen had bandaged the hand during a water stop, and a clean strip of linen showed against the dark cuff. He stood by the open window, letting us have what little space there was.

“Your name,” Lume said.

He looked at her, then at me.

“Caiven Kest.”

I set my tea down.

Anlow kept shovelling. He’d been thirteen at Hemfall and living on the far side of the basin, so the name meant less to him. It was the silence that made him stop.

“Captain Kest,” Lume said. “Blackspan.”

“Yes.”

The engine pulled steadily beneath us. There was a loose screw in the window catch; it rattled whenever we passed over a joint. I had been meaning to tighten it for months.

I looked at the hand I had used to pull him onto the train.

“You should have told me.”

“I should.”

“Before.”

“Yes.”

I wanted him to argue. If he’d tried to tell us we were mistaken, I’d have had something to push back against.

Lume rested her tea between both hands.

“Did you cut it?”

His eyes did not move from her face.

“I gave the order.”

“We were still coming across.”

“I know.”

“You knew then?”

He took a little time with that. I watched him taking it.

“I knew there were people north of the span. I was told the Nacre had reached the upper junction. Director Thel ordered the line severed. I could see frost on the western supports. I thought if we waited, it would reach the southern bank before we could break the link.”

I had seen the Hemfall casualty list on the workshop wall. Under the names someone had written sixty-three in pencil, as if the number might need correcting. The Compact had removed the list when it repainted the office. I remembered where it had hung.

“That isn’t what she asked,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “I knew.”

Lume stared down into her tea. Outside, a deer stood between the firs and watched us pass. Its coat was still brown. I remember being annoyed with it for looking so ordinary.

“Sixty-three,” Lume said.

“Yes.”

“The report said fifty-eight for months.”

“Five of the missing were declared dead later.”

“I know. I helped write their names.”

Caiven lowered his eyes.

There had been a little hall at Hemfall where they put the survivors. I had walked there from Aulden with a bag of clothes for my sister, certain that anyone who could demand clean stockings through a messenger could not be badly hurt. Lume had been nineteen then, very nearly twenty. She had looked at the stockings and laughed until she cried.

She’d taken the wool from the second stocking to darn the first. When I cried she sent me out to wash my face.

Now she sat in my cab with the cup held level, although her hands were trembling.

“Were you punished?” she asked.

“No.”

“Did you ask to be?”

His mouth tightened. “No.”

I could hear Anlow breathing behind me.

“Why not?” I asked.

“I told myself I’d made a necessary decision. Then I told myself staying in the Corps meant I could prevent it happening again.”

“And did you?”

He looked out at the carriages behind us.

“Not in Aulden.”

I wanted to tell him to get off. The gravel service path ran right beside the line, and he had a coat, a pair of boots and a commission. He could walk south and explain necessity to whoever he found.

Instead I checked the pressure, because the needle was moving and nobody else was looking at it.

“Anlow. A little less.”

The boy adjusted the fire.

I hated having to do that. Hated the engine for continuing to need things while Lume was sitting there. Hated that Kest, of all people, had been the one to notice the goods gate.

“Elnai,” Lume said.

I looked at her.

She knew what I was thinking. She always did when it would have been most useful for her not to.

“We need to know about the bridge.”

“Lume—”

“We’ve got people asleep back there. They don’t know how angry you are.”

I turned to Caiven. “Can you get us across Laum Rise?”

“I can tell you what was safe three days ago. We’ll have to inspect it when we get there.”

“And the lower line?”

“Closed after a landslide. The branch round the western shoulder hasn’t been maintained.”

“You could have said yes.”

“It wouldn’t have been true.”

I let go of the regulator. My palm had left a damp mark on the wood.

“You give me the route information. You tell me when you don’t know. You don’t issue an order to anybody on this train without speaking to me or Lume.”

He nodded.

“Say it.”

“All right. I’ll speak to you.”

“And when we reach people who can take you off my hands, you go to them.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It is.”

Lume took a sip of her cold tea.

“You can stop looking at my leg,” she told him. “It hasn’t grown back since the last time.”

Colour rose under his skin.

“I’m sorry.”

“Yes. Well.” She set the cup down and picked up her crutch. “Othen needs clean water. There’s a child vomiting in the third coach, and her mother keeps trying to give her onions.”

“Onions?” I asked.

“She’s run out of everything else.”

I closed my eyes for a second.

“Take it from the drinking tank. Tell Anlow how much.”

“I know which tank, Elnai.”

She went down the steps without giving me a chance to help.

I watched until she reached the coach door. Then I put the brass-capped pencil I’d signed the shelter sheet with in the drawer beneath the gauge.

Anlow noticed. “That’s not where you keep pencils.”

“It is now.”

*

We stopped that evening in a cutting lined with candlemoss.

Candlemoss grew in the seams of the rock, pale green when sunlight reached the cutting and honey-coloured when the Skyseam shadow moved over it. My father used to bring a piece home for the kitchen window. It always died within a week. He said it was homesick, which was more comfortable than admitting he did not know how to keep it alive.

The cutting had a shallow spring, shelter from the wind and no buildings to draw warmth from the engine. We took water through a canvas hose while Marn and Anlow checked the couplings. Each had to be examined by hand. I checked the fourth coach’s valve myself, twice.

The woman who had tied her bag to it stood beside me.

“I didn’t know,” she said.

“I know.”

“The handle was just there.”

“You weren’t to know.”

She hugged the little bag to her chest, but I could still see the corner of a picture frame poking through a split in the seam.

I softened my voice.

“We’ll put a guard round it. You did the right thing telling Marn.”

She nodded and got back aboard.

Caiven was unloading a box from the tender. He worked with his left hand when he could, helping the right only when he thought no one was looking. The box held spare lengths of brake pipe and a pair of rail shoes.

“Leave those,” I said. “They go under the bench.”

“I’m checking what we have.”

“Ask.”

He put the box down.

I’d told him to ask about orders, not objects. We both knew it, which rather limited what I could say next.

“What do we have?” he said.

I listed the tools. He listened, occasionally asking for a size or whether a part was sound. He did not touch anything else.

At the last box he said, “Do you have a second jack?”

“At home.”

“Then we’ll need timber.”

“For what?”

“The western alignment at Laum Rise. If the sleeper beds have lifted, we can’t put a jack under both sides at once.”

I looked up at the trees above the cutting. Thin firs, growing out of rock. Poor timber, but better than pretending we had another jack.

“We can take a few while we’re here.”

He looked towards the passengers. “I’ll ask who knows an axe.”

I almost said that I did. There were pipes to inspect, a tired apprentice to feed and an entire train waiting for me to do something useful. I could not also cut down the trees.

“Marn does,” I said.

“I’ll ask him.”

I watched him walk away with the axe from Aulden. He had taken it out of the emergency box before we left; I had not noticed when. It looked small in his hand.

I went to find my sister.

She was in the second coach, sitting opposite a woman whose husband had stayed in Aulden to fetch his mother. There had been no sign of either of them when we left.

“There might be carts,” the woman was saying.

“There might.”

“He said there would be.”

Lume took her hand.

I stood in the doorway, holding all the things I had intended to say, and felt ashamed of them.

After a while Lume came out. We sat on the steps with our feet on different levels, looking at the glow in the rock.

“I didn’t know who he was,” I said.

“I know.”

“Marn recognised him.”

“Marn kept the newspaper. I only saw the picture once. Bad likeness.”

She picked at a loose thread on her cuff.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“I’ve been on a train all day. My stump’s sore. That woman’s husband probably isn’t coming. Which bit?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologising for him.”

I had not known that was what I was doing.

She leaned her shoulder against mine, very briefly.

“I don’t want to talk to him again tonight,” she said.

“You don’t have to.”

“I also don’t want you walking into a ravine because you refuse to listen to him.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“You don’t usually plan the stupid part.”

“I just want to get you somewhere warm,” I said.

“I know. You’ve been wanting that since Hemfall.”

I looked at the wooden foot beside my boot. I had gone to Hemfall with a bag of stockings and here I was, six years later, still bringing the wrong thing.

“Would you rather I didn’t?”

“I’d rather you remembered I live with it all the time. You only have to look at it.”

Lume knocked her shoulder against mine again. Not an apology. She wasn’t sorry.

“Now tell me about the engine. Not the leg. The engine.”

From the trees came the sound of an axe. Three blows, a pause, another two. I could see Marn’s red waistcoat among the branches. Caiven stood below him, keeping the falling timber from sliding into the cutting.

“I pulled him onto the train,” I said.

Lume followed my gaze.

“He was falling?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then.”

She reached for her crutch. “Come and eat before Saeli gives your share to somebody who asks.”

*

The food was barley, onions and a little dried beef cooked in the station kettle we had stolen along with the train. Saeli served it with the authority of a woman who had spent twenty years preventing people from touching bread before it cooled.

Caiven waited until everybody else had a bowl.

He sat on the other side of the fire, which we kept low and screened with a sheet of tin. A small ordinary fire was a weaker lure than the sun-vault, but none of us wanted to advertise our stopping place.

“Why did it come so early?” Anlow asked.

He was looking at me. I was thirty and his employer, which apparently qualified me to explain the weather.

“We don’t know.”

Caiven looked up from his bowl. “The northern mines opened a new seam last month.”

“You think it came out of there?” I asked.

“I think the first three reports were from the mine roads. After that it followed the freight line.”

“They’ve been digging there for years,” Marn said.

“Not that deep.”

Beyond our little circle the candlemoss shone steadily. I tried to imagine a crack under the mountain, cold waiting inside it. It was worse than the white branches outside Aulden because I could imagine putting a hand into such a crack without knowing.

“Can it get ahead of us?” I asked.

“On another connected line. Or if we stop long enough.”

“Can it hear us?” Anlow asked.

Caiven rubbed his thumb along the edge of his bowl.

“It follows heat. Sometimes it follows a pattern after the heat’s gone. Nobody agrees on what to call that.”

I thought of the regular beat of the wheels and the steady pulse from the sun-vault.

“We’ll change the firing.”

“That may help.”

May. It was an honest word. I disliked it very much.

Later, when everybody had gone back to the coaches, I took the first watch. Caiven offered to share it. I sent him to sleep.

The rails behind us lay black in the lantern light. Somewhere far up the cutting an animal moved through the brush and was still.

I took out the spanner and tightened the loose window catch.

It was the smallest thing on the train that needed doing. When it was finished, I sat down and listened to the quiet.

Chapter 4

By morning, somebody had stolen my boots. I found them beside the little stove in the guard’s van, stuffed with dry cloth. One insole was missing.

Wick had it folded under Nio’s chin. The boy lay asleep on the bench with his mouth wide open and one palm resting on Wick’s back, so I had to ease a finger in under the wool.

“Let them sleep,” Saeli said.

“I paid for that.”

“So wake him up and tell him he owes you.”

I took my finger back. The amber on Wick’s spine brightened with the boy’s breath. Three notes came out of him, the last one flat. Father used to whistle like that when he wanted me out from under his feet.

Saeli kept cutting bread without looking up.

“My boots,” I said.

“They were dripping,” she said.

“I knew where they were.”

“And now you know where they are.”

I sat down to put them on. One heel was lower than the other, but the leather was warm. I’d forgotten how good it felt to put a foot into something that didn’t immediately make it colder.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Eat that.”

She handed me the heel.

Through the van window I could see Caiven and Marn walking the length of the train. Caiven was pointing out something beneath the second coach. Marn crouched to look, then said something that made him shake his head. Neither was smiling, but they were talking.

“How’s Nio?” I asked.

“Offended. The dog got a blanket and he didn’t get an extra one.”

“The dog’s smaller.”

“I explained that. He’s considering getting smaller.”

The bread tasted faintly of smoke. I ate all of it, even the hard edge, while Saeli pretended not to watch.

We left the cutting as the sky began to lighten. Beyond the trees the country opened into rough pasture on black basalt shelves, low stone walls and farms built with their backs to the northern shade. The Skyseam ran above the ridge, a broken black stroke across the pale morning. Smoke rose from two chimneys. At the third the door stood open, banging gently in the wind.

I wanted to stop.

We could not stop at every house. I knew it before Caiven said anything, and resented him for standing near enough to see that I knew.

“Marn’s watching for signals,” he said.

“I heard him.”

He moved away from the window.

The sun-vault had a simple regulator: an iron sleeve that exposed more or less of the charged velith to the warming coil. Every few minutes the gauge demanded a little

more, and Anlow adjusted it with the confidence of somebody who had been doing the same job for four years.

Father had taught me to read the sun-vault before he’d let me drive. It was easier to waste the charge when you were frightened. A wider opening felt like doing something.

This morning I made him wait longer, then open it wider for a shorter time.

“She doesn’t like that,” he said.

“She’ll manage.”

“The needle keeps wandering.”

“Let it. Give it a beat before you touch it again.”

He gave me an unhappy look. I wished I could tell him it was an experiment someone had already performed safely, with proper instruments and no passengers.

At the next level crossing, we passed a stone trough filled with ice. A tellik sat on the lip, puffed so round it looked ridiculous. Then it fell into the trough.

I shut the regulator.

Caiven was at the window before I spoke.

“Where?”

“The crossing.”

The iron gate behind us shone white. Frost climbed its bars, gathering at the curved top, and for a second I saw a shape like a long animal lowering its head.

We were moving away from it. That was what I told myself. We were moving, the track ahead was clear, and I knew this descent.

The frost reached the rail.

“Close the summer sleeve,” Caiven said.

Anlow looked at me.

“Do it.”

He turned the wheel. The amber glow narrowed to a thin line and vanished.

The cab cooled almost at once.

We coasted down the long slope, carrying enough pressure to keep the brakes working but no fresh surge from the glass. The engine sounded wrong. Without Anlow feeding her, without the familiar click of the sun-regulator, I could hear a small knock in the left bearing that I had not noticed before.

“How long?” I asked.

Caiven leaned out, watching the rail behind us.

“Until it loses the pulse.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

He brought his head back in.

“Then we’ll have to spend heat faster than I’d like.”

That was my job he had just described. I found I preferred it to reassurance.

At the bottom of the slope, the line crossed an old mine spur. The points had been lifted years ago, but the disused track still came down from the mountain and met our rails through a rusty connecting plate.

The plate was white.

Ahead of us, frost spread across the crossing.

“We’re not stopping there,” I said.

“No.”

“Anlow, hold the sleeve shut until I tell you.”

When the wheels hit the frost the engine skidded sideways, an inch at most, but I felt it in my teeth. I held the brake steady. One good wrench now and I’d put us off the track.

The first coach followed. Then the second.

A woman screamed behind us.

“Stay on,” I said, to the train, to the wheels, to anything that might listen.

The Azhen found the rail again.

We ran through the crossing and out across a strip of open ground. I looked back. Frost streamed along the mine spur, down towards the junction, gathering where our wheels had passed.

The cab window clouded at its lower edge.

Caiven took a hammer from the rack and struck the little iron strip joining the window frame to the outside handrail.

“What are you doing?”

He struck it again. The strip snapped. White crystals fell onto the footplate and lay there without melting.

He swept them into a shovel and flung them out.

“It touched the frame.”

I stared at the broken strip that had been holding a corner of the window in place since before I was born. A small, harmless repair. A way in.

“Check the other side,” I said.

Anlow did, using a wooden handle this time.

*

We ran cold for nearly an hour.

By the end of it, Feth had come forward with a message from Othen: the old people were shaking too hard to drink, and a woman with a fever had stopped answering questions.

“We have to open the heat,” I said.

Caiven did not argue.

“Short bursts. Unevenly.”

I wanted a precise instruction. Half a turn for six breaths, a minute shut, then another half. Something I could teach Anlow and trust to happen while I looked at the line.

There was no such instruction. That was the point.

I took the sun-wheel myself.

Warmth entered the coil. The glass deepened from amber to gold, and the pipes began to tick as they expanded. Anlow stood close enough to take over if I asked him.

We climbed out of the hollow. Frost no longer followed in a visible line, but it had settled on the wheels, the couplings, the lower edges of the coaches. Little white feathers lay on the outside of the glass.

I opened the sleeve, shut it, waited. Opened it again.

My shoulders started aching.

Caiven watched the line while I watched the heat. Once, when my hand cramped, he steadied the wheel without turning it. His bare left hand covered mine for perhaps two seconds.

I pulled away as soon as I could manage the grip.

He said nothing.

It would have been pleasant if I could have disliked every part of him.

At noon we reached a broad patch of sunlight. The clouds had thinned enough to show a watery blue, and the frost on the carriage windows began to melt from the top down.

Marn gave the all-clear signal from the rear.

I let Anlow take the wheel and climbed down at the next water tower to look at the bearings.

The left one was hot.

“Of course you are,” I told it.

Caiven crouched beside me.

“Is that bad?”

“It’s not ideal.”

“You say that when things are bad?”

“I say something else when they’re worse.”

He waited while I opened the oil box. The felt pad had twisted. It was the sort of small fault that could ruin a whole axle if you were busy enough to ignore the noise.

I corrected it, then sat back on my heels.

My hands were filthy. My tea was still in the cab. There were five hours of daylight left and a viaduct ahead of us, and for a moment I wanted to be on the platform complaining about a clock.

Caiven offered me a clean piece of rag.

“Where did you get that?”

“Your sister.”

I looked up sharply.

“She gave everyone a task,” he said. “Mine was finding cloth.”

“Did she speak to you?”

“Enough to tell me that my coat lining would do if I didn’t find something else.”

I looked at the rag. A piece of shirt, soft from years of washing.

“Did you?”

“Find something else? Yes.”

I took it.

Across the line, passengers were being allowed down in small groups to stretch their legs. Lume had stationed herself beside the second coach with a chair she refused to sit in. Othen was looking at the woman with the fever. Saeli held Nio’s hand while he examined a dead beetle on the ballast.

Caiven watched the child for a moment, then turned away.

“The sea,” I said.

He looked back. “Lume told everyone we were going to Eshara. I told her they had boats. Is that enough? Does it cross water?”

“Fresh water. I’ve seen it freeze a stream uphill.”

I remembered the tellik in the trough and regretted asking.

“Salt water?”

“There was an outbreak on the north coast four years ago. The harbour master opened the sea sluices. It broke apart where the water was moving.”

“And where it wasn’t?”

“Ice on the salt pans was thick enough to walk on.”

“So we can’t throw a bag of salt at it.”

“I wouldn’t want that to be our only plan.”

I rubbed the grease off my fingers.

Eshara was a city on an island, joined to the mainland by a movable bridge. I had never seen it. My father had brought back a picture once: tall buildings, a crooked harbour, blue water under a bridge that could swing aside to let ships through. I had kept the picture over my bed for a year, until a leak in the roof made the ink run.

“They’ll let us in,” I said.

Caiven was quiet.

“They’ll have to,” I added.

He looked towards the passengers. “We should get there before they decide they’re full.”

*

That afternoon we changed the firing again.

Anlow stopped trying to find a pattern in the intervals and began to go by the gauge, the grade and the cooling pipes. When I told him he was getting good at it, he tried to look unimpressed and missed the firebox with a shovelful of coal.

“That bit needs work,” I said.

Caiven was looking at the copper coil beneath the bench.

“Condenser?”

“Spare. It’s meant to stop the brake reservoir losing so much water.”

“Why haven’t you fitted it?”

I looked at him. “Because the engine’s always needed something more urgent.”

“May I?”

He pointed to the coil, waiting this time. I nodded.

He checked the fittings and asked Anlow for a length of hose. Then he sat on the cab floor and began assembling a temporary return. I corrected the angle of one elbow. He changed it without arguing.

For half an hour we worked in a silence that had nothing to do with Hemfall.

It was a relief. I did not want it to be.

Near dusk, Laum Rise came into view.

The viaduct crossed the valley in a pale curve, too far away for me to make out the rail. Below it, dark water moved between walls of rock. There were clouds in the valley, caught lower than the bridge, so that its middle arches seemed to stand on nothing.

When I crossed it as a passenger at eight, I spent most of the journey with my face pressed to the window, demanding to know why we could not stop in the middle and look down.

Now I could see a wagon lying on its side near the northern approach.

Caiven put the coil down.

“Stop before the signal,” he said.

The signal showed clear. I stopped.

Chapter 5

The overturned wagon had spilled a load of iron chairs across the approach. Not the sort anyone could sit on: heavy castings for fastening rail to sleepers. They lay in the snow like broken jaws.

I stopped far enough back to leave room for the coaches, set the brake and climbed down.

“Stay here,” I told Anlow.

“I can help.”

“You are helping. Keep the heat steady. Irregularly steady.”

“That makes no sense.”

“You know what I mean.”

He did. He gave me the look I deserved and turned to the firebox.

Caiven waited at the front buffer with a lantern. Night had fallen in the valley, although a little grey remained above the mountain. I took my tool bag and followed him towards the wreck.

The wagon’s wheel had gone through the trackbed. Beyond it, the eastern rail dipped, rose and vanished under a mound of stone.

“We can clear the chairs,” I said.

“The support’s moved.”

He crouched beside the broken sleeper and held the lantern low.

I could see daylight through a gap that should have been filled with masonry. Not daylight exactly. The last of the sky, reflected off water a long way beneath us.

Below the arches, the Oris-bound river cut through a valley of salt-white stone. It had worn that groove for longer than there had been a rail to cross it, and it was still taking pieces of the bridge away.

My stomach went unpleasantly light.

“How much?”

“Enough.”

I stood up.

Across the valley, the railway continued into a cutting on the southern side. The distance looked almost walkable. You could imagine going over with a rope, carrying the children, bringing the old people across one at a time. Then you looked down and remembered how large a human being became when you had to lift one.

“There’s the west road,” Caiven said.

I turned towards it.

Laum Rise used to have two tracks, but the western one had been turned into a maintenance road when the new quarry line opened. The viaduct was part of the old basalt way, from before the Compact laid iron over every pass it could charge for. The gauge was the same. What you noticed from the cab was how close the edge came to the wheels, especially where whole lengths of the stone wall had gone.

“We’d need to reach it.”

“The crossover’s behind the train.”

“The points were spiked.”

He lifted the tool bag from my hand. “You have a hammer.”

I took it back.

“We’ll inspect it first.”