Sidings

Stories from the world of The Meridian

Volume I

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Four stories from the world of The Meridian

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I

Dead Letters

—— ○ ——

The letter was sealed with blue wax and paid for in advance.

These were both good signs.

Wax meant the sender did not want the message read on the way, which was reasonable and, to Pip's mind, showed a proper understanding of the world. Paying in advance meant the sender did not expect the recipient to argue about the price, which showed an even better one.

The woman who gave it to them stood beside the tea-car counter with one gloved hand resting on a walking stick she did not appear to need. She had come rearward from somewhere better. You could tell by the gloves, which matched, and by the way she looked at the benches before sitting on none of them.

"Carriage Fourteen," she said. "Upper tier. Compartment Six. Mr Vale. Into his hand."

Jem turned the letter over. There was nothing on the back except the seal: a plain thumb of blue wax pressed flat with no crest in it.

"Reply?" he asked.

"No."

"Waiting charge if there is."

"There won't be."

Jem looked at Pip. Pip looked at the woman's gloves.

People who said there would not be a wait had generally arranged one. This was not dishonesty. It was the failure, common among adults and nearly universal among paying adults, to understand that other people's time continued to exist when they were not looking at it.

"Four chits," Jem said.

The woman put five on the counter.

"Into his hand," she said again.

Pip took the letter.

It was heavier than one sheet and lighter than three. The paper was good. Not Gazette good, which came apart at the folds if you read the same article often enough, but First good: thick, close, and smooth under her thumb. It carried no perfume. People in the First Carriages did not scent important letters. They scented unimportant ones so everyone knew they could afford to waste flowers on paper.

"Mr Vale," Pip said.

The woman had already turned away.

Jem swept the five chits into his pocket. "Fourteen," he said. "Could've asked six."

"You did ask four."

"That's how I know."

They left the tea car at a run.

— ○ —

Jem and Pip had been carrying messages since Jem was eleven and Pip was nine, which meant that by now they had been entrusted with several marriages, two separations, nine debts, a recipe for preserving turnips, and more urgent requests for clean socks than the dignity of human life would seem to permit.

They did not read letters.

They read names, carriage numbers, door marks, delivery instructions, and the faces of the people who paid them. They read whether a corridor was open to them, whether a guard was bored enough to object, whether

a kitchen door would be quicker than a public stair. They read the train through the soles of their feet: the hard honest judder of the open carriages, the smoother plates of the middle, the softened vibration forward where carpet and money had entered into a joint agreement not to admit that the whole world was shaking.

But they did not read letters.

Mostly this was because letters were sealed. Partly it was because being known as runners who read their messages would leave them known as children who used to be runners.

They moved forward through the Meridian.

Carriage Sixty-Eight was washing day and had sheets strung across half the passage. Jem went low. Pip went sideways. Carriage Fifty-Nine had a stove plate being carried through it by four men who had agreed on the destination but not on which of them was in charge. The tea car smell gave way to soap, then hot metal, then the market's layers of fruit, sweat and singed flour. At the front-middle offices, voices lowered without anyone having issued an instruction. Beyond them, the train began to pretend it was not a train.

The brass was polished. The lamps did not swing. Doors shut with a padded certainty that made Pip suspicious of them. Even the vestibules between carriages were better sealed, their floor plates covered so nobody had to see the iron shifting underneath.

At Carriage Fourteen a uniformed guard looked at the letter, looked at Jem, and then looked past both of them for the adult who ought to have explained their existence.

Pip held out the delivery chit.

"Compartment Six," she said.

The guard examined the chit for long enough to establish that he could read. Then he moved aside.

"Service stair," he said.

The public stair was three paces nearer. The service stair was narrow, uncarpeted, and smelled faintly of boiled linen. It brought them to the same

upper corridor by a door designed to suggest that people emerged from it only when required.

Jem waited until the door had closed behind them.

"Wouldn't want our feet using the expensive stairs."

"Your feet aren't clean."

"Neither are yours."

"Mine know it."

The upper corridor went on in a hush of dark carpet and pale wall panels. In Carriage Seventy-Four, sound travelled because there was nowhere else for it to go. Here it vanished into cloth, wood and doors thick enough to keep one life from leaking into the next. Pip could hear the train underneath, but only just. It was like hearing someone breathe in another room.

Compartment Six had a brass number, a bell pull, and no answer.

Pip knocked.

They waited.

Jem knocked harder.

They waited in the particular way of people being paid to wait, which is to say resentfully and with close attention to the passage of time.

"Mr Vale?" Pip called.

Nothing moved inside.

There was a tray on the carpet beside the door. A covered bowl, a small loaf, a folded napkin, cup and pot. The arrangement was neat except for the fact that it was cold.

Jem crouched and put two fingers to the pot.

"Yesterday's."

"Could be this morning."

"Cold."

"Things go cold."

"Not this cold."

Pip looked back along the corridor. There was another tray on a slim table by the service door. That one held a bowl giving off steam. Someone was still delivering meals, then. Someone was also not collecting the old ones quickly enough to prevent questions, although this part of the train had been

built on the general principle that questions could be prevented by making them impolite.

Jem reached for the bell pull.

The door opposite opened.

Only a hand appeared at first, narrow and brown, with a ring on the smallest finger. Then a woman looked out. She was perhaps sixty. Pip had learned not to guess ages in the First Carriages, where faces were better fed and worries were given private rooms in which to do their work.

"You can stop," the woman said.

Jem's hand remained near the bell pull. "Delivery for Mr Vale."

"Yes."

"Into his hand."

The woman's eyes went to the blue seal.

"That won't be possible."

Jem straightened. "When's he back?"

The woman looked toward the service door. Then toward the public stair. She did not look at Compartment Six.

"He is not coming back."

Pip felt the letter alter in her hand. It did not become heavier. It became the kind of thing weight was no longer useful for measuring.

Jem said, "Moved carriage?"

The woman looked at him properly then. He was fifteen, narrow as a rail, wearing a coat with one cuff longer than the other because the coat had belonged to three people before him and none of them had agreed about arms. Pip knew the look. Adults gave it when deciding how much truth a child counted as.

"Mr Vale died four days ago," she said.

The train moved under the carpet.

Jem glanced at the meal tray. Pip did not. She had already seen it.

"Four days," Jem said.

"Quietly."

It was not an answer to anything he had asked. It answered several things anyway.

"Who do we give this to?" Pip asked.

The woman drew her door closer around herself. "I couldn't say."

"Family?"

"I couldn't say."

"Office?"

This time the woman's pause was smaller.

"They have not been informed."

Jem looked down the corridor, as if the office might be crouching behind one of the decorative tables waiting to be informed in person.

"Someone's ordering his meals."

"His account remains open."

"Dead men don't eat."

"No," said the woman. "But accounts do."

Her face had tightened. Not with anger. With the strain of having said more than she had intended and less than she knew.

Pip asked, "Was he given to the wilds?"

The woman's fingers closed around the edge of her door.

"You should go."

"We were paid to put it in his hand," Jem said.

"Then you cannot earn your fee."

"Paid in advance."

For the first time, something almost like approval touched the woman's face.

"Then you have earned it already."

She shut the door carefully. First Carriage doors did everything carefully. It was how they made refusal look like administration.

Jem and Pip stood outside Compartment Six with the cold meal at their feet and the sealed letter between them.

From the service stair came the small clean sound of china touching china. The next meal was on its way up.

— ○ —

They did not run rearward at first.

Running attracted notice when there was no obvious reason for it, and the First Carriages disliked obvious reasons almost as much as they disliked notice.

They walked down the service stair. The guard did not ask whether Mr Vale had received his letter. He had admitted a delivery. What happened after admission belonged to another part of the system, and systems worked best when each person could point to the exact place where their responsibility had ended.

In Carriage Twenty-Eight they stopped beside a warm pipe where the corridor divided around a freight lift. People passed without looking at them. This was one of the advantages of being young, poorly dressed and stationary near a wall: adults assumed you were waiting for another adult to become responsible for you.

Jem held out his hand.

"Give it here."

Pip tucked the letter inside her coat.

"Why?"

"We open it."

"No."

"He's dead."

"I heard."

"So it isn't his anymore."

"That isn't how things work."

"How do you know?"

Pip did not answer. Jem leaned back against the pipe. It hummed through his shoulders, a note too low to hear cleanly.

"Somebody sent it," he said. "Somebody doesn't know."

"Maybe they do."

"Then why send it?"

"Maybe they don't know they know."

Jem frowned at her. "That's not a thing."

It plainly was. The upper corridor had been full of it.

He held his hand out again. "Could say who gets the room. Could say who gets his chits. Could say why they're pretending he's alive."

"Could say happy birthday."

"Four days dead and still eating soup. You don't want to know?"

Pip wanted to know so badly that the wanting had become physical. It sat behind her ribs, sharp and hot. She wanted to break the blue wax with her thumbnail. She wanted the good paper to unfold and the private words to become available to her. She wanted, for once, not merely to carry the knowledge of other people past her body like freight.

Jem saw it.

"They tell us nothing," he said. "They give us the outside and keep the inside. Walk this there. Take that back. Don't ask. Don't look. Use the service stair."

"They pay us."

"For our legs."

"Our legs are good."

"That's not the point."

"It is when they're paying by carriage."

Jem pushed away from the pipe. "You know what I mean."

She did. That was why she had made the joke. Jokes were useful things when a truth arrived before you had somewhere to put it.

"They think we don't count," he said. "That woman told us because who are we going to tell? That guard didn't ask because he won't remember our faces. Someone's keeping a dead man's account alive and we're meant to carry the edge of it home and know our place."

"Opening it won't change our place."

"Might change what we know."

"Then we'd be what they think we are."

He stared at her. "What?"

Pip took the letter out. The blue seal had picked up a thread from the lining of her coat. She wound the thread around one finger and lifted it free without breaking the wax.

"Hands," she said. "Feet. Little things you send where you don't want to go. Can't trust them, but they don't matter enough to worry about."

"Exactly."

"No. If we open it, exactly."

Jem's expression changed. Anger left it first. Hurt remained, which was worse, because anger gave you something to push against.

"So doing what we're told makes us people?"

"Doing what we said."

"We said we'd give it to him."

"We said we'd carry it sealed."

"Nobody said that."

"They put wax on it."

"Wax isn't words."

"It is if you're not trying to be stupid."

He looked away.

A clerk passed them carrying three ledgers bound with a strap. His gaze touched the letter, their coats and the warm pipe, and slid onward. He had seen a pair of runners having an argument. This was ordinary. The fact that they were arguing over a dead man's unopened correspondence did not alter their outline.

Pip lowered her voice.

"We can tell someone."

"Who?"

That was the difficulty. The train contained thousands of people and very few someones.

"The office."

"The office that doesn't know he's dead?"

"The meal people."

"They're being paid not to know."

"The woman who sent it."

"No name."

Pip turned the envelope over again, though no name had appeared while they argued.

Jem said, "Could take it back to the tea car tomorrow. See if she comes."

"She won't."

"Probably not."

They stood with that.

The train had rules for undelivered freight. It had rules for unpaid fares, unclaimed bunks, spoiled grain, blocked pipes and livestock born between stations. Somewhere there might even be a rule for a letter addressed to a man who remained alive in the accounts and nowhere else. But the rule would be in an office, and the office had not been told there was a question.

Jem held out his hand one last time.

Pip gave him the letter.

He weighed it. One sheet, perhaps two. A dead man, a living account, a woman with matching gloves, a neighbour who knew how to shut a door. All of it fitted behind a thumb's width of blue wax.

He put his nail under the seal.

Then he stopped.

Pip did not say anything. There are moments when speaking is only a way of trying to own somebody else's decision.

Jem took his nail away.

"Five chits," he said.

"Four for the run."

"One for the wait."

"There was a wait."

"Told you."

He handed the letter back.

They ran home.

— ○ —

By Carriage Fifty-Nine, the corridor had remembered noise.

By Sixty-Eight, it had remembered smells.

By Seventy-Four, the train had stopped pretending that lives could be kept from leaking into one another.

The carriage opened around them: three-high bunks fading into stove smoke and laundry, voices crossing in mid-air, a baby objecting to sleep

on constitutional grounds. Someone had burned onions. Someone else was insisting they were meant to be that colour. Old Satterly breathed from behind his curtain with the slow authority of weather. Doss was stirring a pot of stew and defending the space around it with a wooden spoon.

Nobody asked where Jem and Pip had been.

This was not because nobody cared. It was because they had come back.

Jem counted the chits twice on an upturned crate. Pip sat beside him with the letter inside her coat. Their knees touched because there was not enough room for principles to have separate seats.

"What do we do with it?" Jem asked.

Pip looked along the carriage. At the curtains that were not walls. At the hands passing bowls. At all the people who knew when not to ask and all the things they knew because of it.

Above them, the pipe hummed. Forward, somewhere beyond sixty carriages of doors, desks, kitchens, carpets and people each holding one small part of the truth, Mr Vale remained officially entitled to supper.

Pip took an empty tea tin from beneath the crate. It contained two buttons, a bent key, and a receipt for a parcel whose owner had changed trains before it arrived. Things that had failed to reach where they were sent but had not, for that reason, stopped belonging to someone.

She put the letter inside.

Jem fitted the lid.

Doss shoved two bowls of stew at them without asking whether they had money. Pip took one. Jem took the other. Around them Carriage Seventy-Four went on being loud, and close, and impossible to keep anything from for long.

The seal remained unbroken.

II

What Powers the Train

—— ○ ——

I. The Junction

The junction beneath the floor of Carriage 38 had been rattling for three weeks, and Mira had made a private decision about it.

She could have fixed it on the first morning. She had the tools, the experience, and — more importantly — the intuition. The intuition was the part of the job nobody trained you for and nobody paid you extra for. After eleven years of crawling through the service tunnels under the floors of The Meridian, you started to know what a junction was supposed to sound like, the way a singer knows a wrong note before she knows why it's wrong. The junction at 38 was wrong. It rattled in the wrong key.

But Mira had not fixed it on the first morning, because the rattle was *interesting*. She had filed an interim report — *Junction 38-C: rattling. Source to be identified. Estimated repair: pending investigation.* — and Kettering had grunted at the form and stamped it and put it in the cubby-hole with the others, because Kettering did not read interim reports unless someone was bleeding or something was on fire.

That had been the first morning. This was the morning of the twentieth, and Mira had a notebook full of times and pressures and chalk-marks, and she was beginning to think the rattle was not, in fact, a rattle.

She was lying on her back in the crawl-space beneath the carriage floor with her head torch pointed up at the bracket. Above her, six inches of pressed metal away, someone in Carriage 38 was walking. Mira had learned the carriages by their footfalls in the way some people learn neighbourhoods by their birds. Carriage 38 was working middle: bunks for the train clerks, a small shared kitchen, a cobbler who repaired good boots quietly and bad boots loudly. The footfalls overhead were unhurried. Probably the clerk who limped. Probably on her way to the kettle.

Mira pressed her wrench against the bracket and listened.

The rattle came on a count of four. Tick, tick, tick, *tick* — and the *tick* was the wrong one. Slightly louder, slightly longer, slightly off-rhythm. As if something were pushing back against the train's motion at four-second intervals from a place that should not have anything in it to push.

She wrote *4s, again* in her notebook in pencil, because pen smudged in the heat down here. The notebook was small, soft-cornered, wrapped in waxed paper she'd cut from a butcher's parcel and folded around the cover. The pages were full of timings and pressures and a small running map drawn over weeks, line by line, in chalk transcribed to ink in the workshop at the end of each shift. The map did not match the schematic.

That was the part she had not told anyone.

She slid out from under the carriage on her elbows and got to her feet, bent at the waist. The service tunnel was four feet high — taller in some places, shorter in others, built for the kind of bodies that had been doing this work for the kind of time that made the official height irrelevant. Mira walked it bent at the waist with the practised gait of a woman whose lower back had given up complaining. She was thirty-four. She had been bent at the waist for a living since she was twenty-three. Her vertebrae had a settled relationship with the train.

The next junction along was 38-B, which behaved itself, and after that 38-A, which behaved itself even more aggressively — *too quiet*, Mira had

written in the notebook three weeks ago, and underlined it twice, and then crossed it out, because she didn't want Kettering reading it and asking her what she meant.

She didn't know what she meant. That was the problem.

She put her hand on the duct that ran along the ceiling of the service tunnel — *ceiling* being a generous word for what was in fact the underside of someone's kitchen — and felt the four-second push. The duct was warm. The duct was supposed to be warm. The duct ran forward, toward the front of the train, and according to the laminated schematic on the wall of the workshop, the duct ended six carriages ahead, at a service wall.

Her hand could feel where the push was coming from. It was coming from past the service wall.

Mira wiped her hand on her trousers, which were already so impregnated with grease that they had stopped accepting more, and went up to the workshop.

II. The Map

The maintenance workshop on The Meridian sat in a low-ceilinged carriage between the freight cars and the laundry, where it had been since before anyone could remember. It smelled of oil, hot tea, and a particular kind of damp that came from being permanently downwind of three thousand pairs of wet socks. The walls were hung with tools: spanners in long racks ordered by gauge, hooked poles for clearing blockages, the long rubber-handled prybars that crews called *peacemakers* because of the way they ended arguments with seized bolts. A schematic of The Meridian's underside was pinned to one wall, laminated, edges curling. It was almost certainly out of date. Nobody knew when it had last been updated, because the person who had updated it was, by every available account, dead.

Kettering sat at the desk under the schematic, drinking tea from a tin mug and reading a list. Reading was a slow process for Kettering. It involved a great deal of staring at the paper, occasional muttering, and the regular

consultation of a small pencil-stub he kept behind his ear, which he used for adding ticks beside the lines he was sure he understood.

He looked up when Mira came in.

"Thirty-eight again."

"Thirty-eight again."

"Still rattling."

"Still rattling."

He grunted and ticked something on the list. "You want help?"

"Not yet."

He grunted again, in a different register, which was Kettering's way of saying *suit yourself*. Then he said, "Soren's looking for you."

"What for."

"Couldn't say. Probably wants to swap a shift."

Mira did not respond, which Kettering correctly interpreted as agreement, and went back to his list.

She crossed the workshop to the long bench against the rear wall, where her things sat in their patch of claimed territory: two wrenches, a hooked pole shorter than the standard one because she was only five foot four and the standard one was for people six feet, the head torch with the battery she kept forgetting to replace, a small box of chalk pieces, and a folded paper square that was a tracing of the schematic on the wall.

She unfolded the tracing. She unfolded her notebook. She compared the two.

The tracing showed the duct ending at a service wall between Carriages 32 and 31. The service wall was annotated *forward of here engineering*, in the small, laboured handwriting of someone who had laboured to make the words small. Beyond the service wall, the schematic showed nothing. Not blank space — *nothing*. The paper simply ran out of detail and gave way to the laminated edge.

Mira's notebook showed the duct continuing. She had traced its warmth with her hand for three weeks now, junction by junction, sliding her body forward beneath the carriages on her elbows and her hips, marking the duct's progress in chalk and writing the chalk-marks down. The duct turned

slightly at Carriage 35, where a coupling she didn't have on the schematic produced a small extra loop. The duct narrowed at 33. The duct continued past the service wall.

This was the part she could not show Kettering, because Kettering was not paid to look at the schematic and would not have a productive opinion about anything that disagreed with it. Kettering's job was to keep the chits flowing and the workers fed and the junctions unstuck. The schematic was for engineers, who were a different class of person and worked in a different carriage and were, as far as anyone in maintenance could tell, never seen.

Mira folded the tracing back into a square. She folded the notebook back into its waxed paper. She put both into the inside pocket of her coat, which was where she kept things she did not want anyone to ask about.

Soren came in then, because Soren had a sense for arrivals. He was forty-something, comfortable, missing the top half of one ear in a way that he had three different stories about and would tell whichever one he thought you'd find most amusing. He was a good worker in the sense that he completed his jobs and a poor one in the sense that he never finished them earlier than he had to.

"Mira."

"Soren."

"Swap me Sevenday morning. I've got something."

"What something."

He grinned. "Personal something."

"No."

"Birdie's having a thing."

"Then go to Birdie's thing on your own time."

"That *is* my own time. I'm asking you to swap me yours."

Mira looked at him. Soren had a face that was very hard to refuse, mostly because it had spent decades practising on people who had failed to refuse it. She had, over eleven years, become extremely good at refusing it.

"No," she said again, with the particular flatness she'd developed for Soren, and went back down to the tunnels.

III. The Hatch

The boundary of her authorisation was a hatch.

Officially it was Hatch Forward Seven — *FH-7* on the schematic, *the seven* in workshop conversation, *that thing* in conversations after a few cups of grog when nobody could be bothered to be specific. It was a metal hatch about the size of a large suitcase set into the bulkhead between Carriages 32 and 31, where the service wall was. It had a wheel on the front. Above the wheel, a brass plate had once been bolted to the bulkhead. The bolts were still there. The plate was not, having been removed at some point in the train's long history by someone who had presumably had reasons. A faint outline showed where it had been, and the outline showed *FORWARD OF THIS POINT — ENGINEERING ONLY*, ghosted into the metal by a century of paint and oil.

Mira had passed Hatch Forward Seven more times than she could count. Forward Seven was where the maintenance crew's authorisation ended; it was also, conveniently, where the warm ducts and the busy junctions ended, because everything past Forward Seven was — officially — handled by engineering. The hatch was kept closed. Whether it was locked was something Mira had never tested, because testing it would have constituted, in the strict reading of her work order, a breach of authorisation, and a breach of authorisation cost a worker their shift bonus, which was paid in chits and which she had been saving up for eight months toward a private bunk in the middle carriages and which she was very much not prepared to lose.

This was what she told herself, anyway, on the morning she stood in front of Hatch Forward Seven and put her hand on the wheel.

The wheel turned.

It turned with the small protest of metal that hadn't been turned in a long time but was capable of it. It turned smoothly enough that whoever had last greased it had done a thorough job. Mira noted this. Then she noted that *whoever had last greased it* was not, strictly speaking, a category of person who should exist, because nobody on her crew had authorisation past Forward Seven and engineering, as far as she or anyone she knew could tell, lived in a different part of the train and did not come down here.

She let go of the wheel.

She looked back along the service tunnel. Empty. The bulbs in their cages swung gently with the train's motion, casting their slow shadows against the walls. Somewhere behind her, three carriages back, Soren was arguing pleasantly with the cobbler about the price of a heel. She could not hear the argument, but she could imagine it with high accuracy, because Soren had been having approximately the same argument with the cobbler for years.

She took the notebook out of her coat. She turned to a fresh page. She wrote, in pencil:

Forward Seven, twenty-second day. Wheel turns. Hatch warm. Duct continues past wall. Going to look.

Then she put the notebook away, because she did not want to be carrying anything she couldn't explain if anybody official came down here in the next half-hour. She put her wrench away too, for the same reason. She kept the head torch and the chalk.

She turned the wheel. The hatch opened.

The air on the other side was warmer.

This was the first thing she noticed, and she noticed it because of how her crew talked about the engine. The engine was at the front of the train, was unimaginably hot, was guarded, was the source of the train's motion, and was — this had been told to her seriously, by an old fitter the year she joined, with the air of a man passing on a piece of folk wisdom — *not your business*. Hot meant forward. Mira knew this in her body. The air past the hatch was warm in a way that meant she was not going backwards.

She crouched and stepped through.

The tunnel beyond was the same tunnel. This was, in its own way, the first surprise. She had expected it to be different — narrower, or wider, or finished in some other metal, or in some other state of repair. It was not. It was the service tunnel, going forward, the same as it had been on the other side of the hatch. The same bulbs in the same cages. The same gritted-mesh floor. The same overhead pipes, the same ducts, the same faint smell of oil and pipe sweat. The only difference was that the duct she had been tracing

— the warm one — continued, carrying its four-second push, on toward the front of the train.

She closed the hatch behind her. She did not lock it, because she did not know whether it had been locked when she found it, and she had a strong professional aversion to changing the state of anything she didn't have a record on.

She walked forward, bent at the waist, with the head torch on its lowest setting because it was a little brighter down here than it should have been and she wanted to know why.

The bulbs were on.

This was the second surprise, and it was the surprise that made her stop walking and stand very still under one of them and look up at it. It was a perfectly ordinary caged bulb. It was burning, perfectly ordinarily. Somebody had changed it within the last few months — she could tell by the tone of the glow, which was the slightly crisp tone of a bulb that hadn't yet gone soft with use. Somebody, in other words, had been down here recently. Recently enough to change a bulb. Recently enough to grease a hatch wheel.

Mira had thought — *had assumed*, and she was annoyed with herself for assuming — that whatever was past Forward Seven would be abandoned. The forbidden territory of imagination. The shut-off, the sealed-up. Engineering, she'd told herself, must work somewhere else. Engineering must come down here once a year if at all. Engineering must — and here her imagination had stalled, because she'd never met an engineer and didn't actually know what they did.

The bulbs were on. The bulbs had been changed recently. Somebody worked here.

She walked forward.

IV. Forward of Seven

The tunnel continued for what, by her counting of the carriage joints overhead, was four full carriages.

Four carriages of service tunnel, indistinguishable from her own, with bulbs on and ducts warm. The footfalls above changed in character — she was beneath the front-middle now, where the lower-tier first-carriage staff lived, the under-stewards and the kitchen porters and the boys who brought the coal up to the boiler-rooms in the dining cars. The footfalls were quicker here. More purposeful. People who'd been told what time they were due somewhere.

Then the tunnel widened.

It widened into a small workshop.

A workshop. There was no other word for it. A bench along one wall, with tools racked above it — wrenches and prybars and hooked poles, the same shapes Mira had on her own bench in her own workshop, but older. Some of them looked very old. The grips were leather, in places, where her own had rubber. There was a small stove plate, cold. A tin mug on it, empty, but rinsed clean. A folded cloth that smelled, when she got close enough, of soap. The floor had been swept.

There was a chair.

Mira looked at the chair for some time. The chair was a perfectly ordinary maintenance-workshop chair, the kind made by stripping the back off a regular chair so it could be carried more easily through narrow tunnels. There was a folded coat over the back of it. There was a notebook on the seat.

The notebook was open.

It was open, Mira realised, to a fresh page, and the fresh page had the faint gloss of a page that had been turned to and waited at, the way you turn to a fresh page in your own notebook when you know you'll be writing on it shortly and want to save the half-second.

Somebody was working here. Somebody had been here this morning. Somebody had stepped away.

She did not pick up the notebook. She would have wanted, very much, for somebody not to pick up *her* notebook in *her* workshop in her absence, and her sense of professional courtesy was the steadiest thing she had. She looked at the open page from a respectful distance. The handwriting was

small, neat, and old — not in age but in style, the kind of script that had been taught somewhere at some point that nobody taught anything anymore. The page recorded times, pressures, and a junction number she didn't recognise. *J/27/F-3*, it said. Something about 27. Forward 3.

She wrote *J/27/F-3* in her own notebook in pencil, because pencils smudged less than memory.

"Hello," said a voice behind her.

Mira did not jump, because she had been bracing for something for an hour, and the something had finally arrived, and bracing converted to recognition rather than fright. She turned around slowly, with her hands visible.

The man in the doorway was old. Not catastrophically old — not in the way of Old Satterly in Carriage 74, who had been dozing through the train for as long as anyone could date — but properly, comfortably old, with white hair cropped short and a face that had been weathered into a permanent expression of calm consideration. He was wearing a maintenance coat that had been mended so many times that the original fabric was a minority partner in the garment. He was holding a kettle.

"Hello," said Mira.

"You came through the seven."

"I did."

"Hatch warm?"

"Greased."

He nodded, as if this was the right answer. "I do it every two months. The bearings dry out."

Mira said nothing, because she was waiting for him to ask why she was there. He didn't. He walked past her — not warily, but with the ordinary calmness of a man whose workshop had been entered by a guest who had not yet been offered tea — and put the kettle on the stove plate. He turned a small dial. The plate began, quietly, to heat. The kettle was made of the same kind of tin as the cobbler's kettle, six carriages back. It was the kind of kettle Mira had been seeing all her life.

"Tea?" he said.

"Yes."

"Sit."

She didn't, immediately. She wanted to ask three or four things first. She wanted to ask them in the right order, and the right order was not yet obvious. She stood near the chair without sitting in it.

He looked at her over his shoulder. "Sit," he said, more gently. "It's a long way back. You'll want to be sitting."

She sat.

V. The Conversation

He gave her a tin mug of tea, sweet, the same tea Birdie made in the tea car six carriages behind her own and a thousand carriages, apparently, behind his. He sat on a low stool that he pulled out from under the bench. He blew across the top of his own mug. The kettle ticked on the stove plate as it cooled.

"Bellan," he said.

"Mira."

"Mira from where?"

"The middle workshop. Carriage forty-eight."

"Long walk."

"Twenty-two carriages," she said, before she had thought about whether to be precise.

He smiled, slightly. "Long walk."

She blew on her tea. He drank his.

After a while she said, "I've been mapping a duct."

"Mm."

"It runs forward past Hatch Forward Seven."

"Yes."

"It's not on our schematic."

"No."

"There's a junction at Carriage thirty-eight that rattles on a four-count. I can feel the push down the duct. I think it's coming from somewhere this side of the wall."

He nodded. He drank his tea.

She waited. He drank his tea. After a while she realised that he had agreed with everything she'd said and was not going to volunteer anything beyond that, because he did not have a category in his head for *visiting maintenance worker who has tracked an anomaly across twenty-two carriages*. He was treating her the way a competent man treated any other competent person who had walked into his workshop. He was waiting for her to tell him what she needed.

"I want to know what's on the other end," she said.

"Of the duct?"

"Yes."

"Forward."

"I know it's forward. *What's* forward?"

He thought about it. He had a way of thinking about questions that involved looking at the ceiling for a moment and then looking back down, as if the question and the answer were filed in different parts of the carriage and he had to fetch each one in turn.

"My junctions," he said. "Then the junctions of the next worker."

"Who's the next worker?"

"Couldn't tell you."

"You don't know them?"

"No reason to. We have different junctions."

"You've never met."

"I haven't."

"Where do your junctions stop?"

"Where his start. I think." He sipped. "If it's a him. Could be anyone."

"How far is that?"

"Mile and a half forward of here, give or take."

"And then his stop somewhere?"

"Presumably."

"And there's another one after that?"

"Presumably."

Mira held her mug in both hands. The mug was warm. The tea was good.

"Bellan," she said. "What's at the front?"

He looked at the ceiling again. He looked back. "The front of the train, I imagine."

"Have you been there?"

"I've been forward."

"How far?"

"As far as my line goes."

"You've never gone past your line."

"No reason to. I'd be in someone else's section. They'd ask what I was doing."

She said, very carefully, "Do you know what powers the train?"

He looked at her. The look was not unkind. It was the look of a man being asked, by a guest, the question he had not been asked before, and finding that he didn't have an answer prepared, and being neither alarmed by this nor moved to manufacture one.

"The engine," he said.

"Yes. But what *is* the engine?"

He thought.

"The engine," he said again, with the slow consideration of a man who is doing his best, "is the thing that drives the train. I don't go to the engine. I clear the lines. I oil the pivots. I keep the ducts clean. I file my chits. The engine's the engine. Whatever drives it drives it. My job's the lines. Not the line's reasons."

He said it without performance and without irony. He said it the way a farmer might say *the sky's the sky*.

She drank her tea.

After a while she said, "Who pays you?"

He smiled, properly, for the first time. The smile was small but very warm. "The chit comes through the cubby every Tenday. I sign for it. I take it to the chit-counter at the back of forty-five, which I'm told is run by a woman

called Ekka, who pays out in coin. I've never met her. She has my number. The coin spends fine."

"So you don't know."

"I know the chit comes."

"Doesn't it bother you," she said, not because she expected an answer that would help, but because she wanted to ask the question, "that you don't know who decided you should be down here?"

He thought about this for the longest time he had thought about anything she'd said.

"It used to," he said eventually. "When I was younger. I asked. I asked the man before me. He'd asked the man before him. The man before him had asked the man before *him*. None of them had been told. They'd all decided, by the time they got to my age, that the job was the job, and the question was a different job, and nobody was paying anyone to do the question."

"And that was enough?"

"It wasn't enough. It was sufficient. Different word."

She nodded slowly. She had heard, in eleven years of maintenance, a great many people say things that were true. She had not, before this morning, heard anyone be quite so precise about it.

He drank the last of his tea.

"Your rattle," he said.

"Yes."

"Junction thirty-eight-C?"

"Yes."

"It's the third pivot. There's a pivot inside the casing nobody knows about because it's not on your schematic. You go in through the side plate. You can do it from your end, but you'll need a thinner pole than the standard one. I'll lend you mine."

She stared at him. "How do you know that?"

"Because I had the same rattle on Junction Forward-Six-C four years ago," he said, "and I asked a man older than me what to do, and he told me. The pivot in your casing is the same as the pivot in mine. They were made at the same time, by the same shop, probably for the same reason. Whoever

built this train liked to build the same junction in two places when one would have done."

"Why?"

"Couldn't tell you."

He stood. He took down a pole from his rack — a hooked pole, thinner than the standard, with a leather-wrapped grip worn shiny in the shape of a hand that was not Mira's hand. He passed it to her, handle first.

"Bring it back when you're done," he said.

"How?"

"Through the seven. I'll be here. I'm always here on Twoday."

He saw her to the doorway of the workshop. He didn't see her any further, because the tunnel was the tunnel and she could find her own way. She stopped just past the door and turned around.

"Bellan," she said.

"Mira."

"Has anyone ever come the other way?"

He thought.

"Not in my time," he said. "There's a hatch forward of here. I've never opened it. Reason being it's not my hatch."

He raised a hand, briefly, and went back to his bench.

Mira walked twenty-two carriages back, with the borrowed pole over her shoulder and the notebook in her coat and the faint taste of sweet tea still on her tongue.

VI. The Return

The pivot was where Bellan had said it would be.

She found it in the late afternoon, after Soren had gone to Birdie's thing and Kettering had gone to the stocktake meeting that nobody enjoyed and the workshop was empty except for the slow sway of the schematic against the wall. She slid under Carriage 38 with the borrowed pole, fed it carefully through the side plate, found the third pivot — small, hidden, and of a kind

that wasn't on any drawing she'd ever seen — and freed it with three turns of the wrist.

The duct stopped pushing.

She lay on her back in the crawl-space and listened. The four-count was gone. The rattle was gone. Above her, six inches of pressed metal away, the clerk who limped passed by on her way to somewhere, and her footfalls were unhurried, and the train moved on at the speed it had always moved at, and Junction 38-C was as quiet as Junction 38-A.

She slid out. She went up to the workshop. She filed her report.

Junction 38-C: rattle resolved. Internal pivot, accessible via side plate. Required thin-gauge pole. Repair complete.

Kettering came back from the stocktake with the resigned look of a man who had spent the afternoon counting wrenches, and read the report, and ticked it, and put it in the cubby for outgoing.

"Took your time," he said.

"I wanted to be sure."

He grunted approvingly. "Bonus this week, then."

"Yes."

He looked at her for slightly longer than usual, because Kettering was not stupid and had been doing this for longer than Mira, and could tell, in the way old foremen could tell, that something about her had moved a half-inch from where it had been the morning before. He didn't ask. Asking wasn't his job either.

"Get some food," he said. "You look thin."

"I'm not thin."

"You look it from over here."

She went and got food. She sat in the canteen between two haulers who were arguing about the price of grog and a girl on her first week who looked like she was going to cry into her stew. Mira ate her stew. She ate it slowly. She thought about the shape of the conversation she had had that morning, the way it had not gone where she had expected it to go, the way Bellan had treated his own ignorance as the sturdy professional fact that it was. She had walked into his workshop expecting to find an answer and had instead found

a man whose entire working life was the management of an absent answer, and the management had been so calm and so competent that the absence had begun, in the hours since, to feel less like a hole and more like the shape of the room.

The girl on her first week sniffed.

"It gets easier," Mira said, without looking at her.

"Does it?"

"After a while you stop noticing it."

The girl took this for kindness, which was generous of her, because Mira had not entirely meant it as kindness. She had meant it as the truth as she understood it that afternoon. She went back to her stew.

That night she lay in her bunk in the middle carriages and opened the notebook. She turned past the chalk-marks and the timings and the careful map of a duct that had been wrong on her schematic. She turned to a fresh page. She thought for a long time. The bulb above her bunk hummed its small bunk-bulb hum, and the train rolled on under her in the long unconscious rhythm she had been falling asleep to for eleven years, and she found that the question she wanted to write down was not the question she had walked into Bellan's workshop with.

She had walked in wanting to know what powered the train.

She wanted, now, to know who had decided that nobody should know.

It was a different question. It was a much larger one. The first question was a fact, somewhere, that you could in principle find. The second was a structure — a long quiet decision, made before her grandmother's grandmother, that had laid down the lines of who could go where and what they were allowed to look at and what counted, in the end, as their job. Somebody had drawn that line. Somebody had drawn it in such a way that the people in maintenance maintained the maintenance, and the people in engineering engineered the engineering, and nobody — apparently *nobody* — was paid to stand at the front of the train and ask why.

She wrote, in pencil:

Someone built it this way.

She looked at the line for a while. She did not underline it. Underlining felt like the kind of thing she would have done a year ago, when she had still believed that some sentences were more important than others. She had, since this morning, started to suspect that the important sentences were the ones you wrote down once and then carried.

She closed the notebook. She wrapped it in its waxed paper. She put it under her pillow, because that was where she kept it, and turned off the bunk-bulb.

The train rolled on.

Somewhere five miles forward, a man called Bellan was rinsing a tin mug in a workshop nobody on her crew knew existed, and somewhere five miles forward of *him* there was, presumably, another workshop, with another worker, with another mug, who had also, presumably, decided that the job was the job and the question was a different job. And somewhere forward of all of them there was the engine. Whatever the engine was. Whatever it ran on. Whoever — and Mira thought this carefully, because it was the part that mattered — *whoever* had decided, a very long time ago, to put a series of small competent men and women in a series of small competent workshops between the engine and the people who lived on the train, and to pay each of them in chits that arrived through a cubby, and to make sure that none of them ever met.

She thought about it until she stopped thinking about it.

She slept.

In the morning she went back down to the tunnels and unstuck a duct under Carriage 41, which had a perfectly ordinary blockage and rattled in a perfectly ordinary key, and she filed her report, and she got her chit, and she returned Bellan's pole on Twoday with a tin of biscuits, which he accepted with the particular gravity of a man who had not been given a tin of biscuits in some time, and they drank tea, and they did not speak of the question, because the question was not the kind of thing that needed speaking of between people who both knew it was there.

The Meridian moved on at the speed it had always moved at. The bulbs in their cages swung. The footfalls overhead went to their kettles and their

cobblers and their kitchens and their bunks. Junction 38-C stayed quiet. Mira's notebook filled, slowly, with the timings and the chalk-marks of an ordinary working life, and on the inside of the back cover, where she did not look at it often but did not need to, the line stayed where she had written it.

The train kept moving.

It always had.

Somebody, a long time ago, had made sure of that.

III

The Station Keeper

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I. The Tide

You could see the Meridian coming for the better part of an hour before it arrived, which was one of the small mercies of living at Tarnhalt and one of the reasons the town had survived as long as it had.

The plain to the south was flat enough that a person standing on the water-tower gantry could watch the smoke first, a smudge low against the sky that might have been weather if you didn't know better, and then the long dark line under it that resolved, over the course of forty minutes, into a thing the eye could not take in all at once. Ilsa Brae had been watching it arrive for fifty years, first from her father's shoulders and then from the gantry on her own feet, and she had never once managed to see the whole train at the same time. You saw the engine carriages, blunt and high and giving off the particular shimmer of forward heat. You saw the front carriages behind them, and the middle, and then your attention got tired the way it got tired counting a flock of birds, and somewhere back along the line the train simply went on being there without your help, curving away across the plain until

the rails took it behind the low hills to the east, where — Ilsa had confirmed this once, as a girl, by walking out half a day to look — it was still going.

The town called it the tide. This was not poetry. Tarnhalt was a practical place and had no use for poetry that didn't also do a job. The train came in like a tide, four hours of it, and then it went out, and the town arranged the other fourteen months of its life around the gap. Children were conceived in the weeks after a stop and born before the next one. Debts were reckoned in trains rather than years — *I'll owe you three trains for that roof* — because a train was a unit everyone understood and a year was a thing that happened to other places. The reeve was elected one stop and confirmed the next. The dead were counted between trains and committed to the ground before the rails brought witnesses who might ask after them.

And the water went out, and the coal went out, and Ilsa Brae countersigned the books.

That was the job. People who didn't have it assumed the keeper's job was the water, because the water was the thing the train wanted and the thing the town sold, and the great gravity tank above the platform was the largest object in Tarnhalt that nobody lived in. But the water mostly looked after itself. The tarn up the valley filled the tank by a pipe that had been laid before anyone's grandmother, and the tank emptied into the train by a spout the size of a man, and Ilsa's contribution to this was a painted rod she lowered into the tank to read the level, which was the entire science of the town reduced to a stick with marks on it. The water was simple.

The books were the job.

Every loop, when the train stopped, a clerk came down from it carrying the freight manifest — what the Meridian was carrying as it passed, consignment by consignment, the train declaring its load to the polity whose track it stood on. And every loop Ilsa took the manifest into the station house and checked it against her own tally, which she had made by walking the length of the stopped train with a piece of chalk and counting. Two records of the same train, made by two people who did not work for each other, which had to agree before she would put her name to the toll. It was the only place on the whole vast circuit of the Meridian's existence where the train's

account of itself was checked against an account kept by someone the train did not pay.

Ilsa did not think about this often, because thinking about your job in those terms was a good way to start doing it badly. But it was true, and on some level below the level she used for the work, she knew it was true, and it was the reason she kept her books the way she kept them, which was perfectly.

She was fifty-three years old. She had kept the books for twenty of those years on her own name and helped her father keep them for fifteen before that, and in all that time the manifest and the tally had disagreed exactly four times, each time by an honest amount — a clerk's slip, a miscounted car, once a consignment of timber that had genuinely been stolen between one town and the next and which the discovery of, at Tarnhalt, had caused a small and satisfying scandal three carriages deep. Four disagreements in thirty-five years. Ilsa was proud of this the way you could only be proud of something nobody would ever thank you for.

On the morning the tide came in for what would turn out to be the strangest loop of her life, she stood on the gantry and watched the smoke resolve into the line and the line resolve into the train, and she felt nothing in particular except the old satisfaction of a thing arriving on schedule. The schedule, for a train that visited once every fourteen months, was necessarily approximate. But the Meridian was three days inside the window, which for the Meridian was punctual, and Ilsa climbed down the gantry ladder with her chalk and her tally-board and her father's habits in her hands, and went to meet it.

II. Four Hours

The thing nobody who lived on a train understood about a station stop was that the town had been preparing for it for fourteen months and the town had four hours.

Everything happened at once and everything had a place. The water spout swung out and married itself to the train's intake and the tank began

its long measured fall, which Ilsa would read off the painted rod at the start and the end and book the difference. The coal was already staged in barrows along the platform, because you did not make a train wait for coal, and the haulers — half the able bodies in Tarnhalt — ran it up the loading ramps into the domestic bunkers while the train's own crew counted it in. Fresh things went up: the autumn root crop, the dried fish from the tarn, the few sheep the town could spare, carried up squealing in the indignant way of sheep who could tell they were changing worlds. Manufactured things came down: bolts of cloth, a crate of lamp-glass, news in the form of a fat bundled run of the train's own Gazette, a year of it at once, which the town would read across the following year like a serial.

And the people. Almost none, this being Tarnhalt, but always some. A handful boarded — the year's crop of the young and restless, paying their passage in coin or labour, going off to be middle-carriage nobodies in a city that moved. Fewer came down. The ones who came down were always worth watching, because a person who got off the Meridian at Tarnhalt had either chosen the smallest possible life or had had a life chosen for them, and you could usually tell which by the luggage. This loop there was one: a thin man with a clerk's stoop and a single case, who stood on the platform for a long moment looking back up at the train with an expression Ilsa knew well, the expression of a person discovering that the thing they had been put off of did not look back. She would learn his name later. The town absorbed such people the way still water absorbs a stone, with a small disturbance and then none.

But all of that was the town's business, and the town knew how to do it. Ilsa's business was the manifest, and the manifest came to her, as it always did, in the second hour, carried by the train's freight clerk.

Except that the freight clerk was wrong.

For nine loops it had been a man called Hessom, soft and tired and grateful for tea, who had the manifest copied out in a hand Ilsa could read upside down across the desk and who always pretended to be surprised by the tariff and never actually was. Ilsa had been looking forward to Hessom the way you look forward to a colleague you only see once a year and have

therefore never had time to dislike. This loop the manifest was carried by a young woman in a pressed coat who introduced herself as Renn — no, that was a name from somewhere else; the woman said a name Ilsa didn't retain — and who was correct in every particular and warm in none, and who set the manifest on the desk squared to the edge and stood while Ilsa read it, which Hessom had never done. Hessom had always sat down.

"Hessom?" Ilsa said.

"Reassigned," said the clerk, in the voice of someone who did not know and had not asked and considered the asking faintly improper. "I have his book."

She did have his book. That was the thing Ilsa would turn over later, in the long months, the way you turn over a tooth that has come loose painlessly and is therefore more worrying than one that hurts. It was Hessom's book — the same ledger, the same ruled columns, the train's record carried forward unbroken from clerk to clerk the way these things were. The hand was different. The book was the same. Everything reconciled.

Ilsa read the manifest the way she always read it, which was twice: once down the consignments for sense, and once up the tariff column for money, because the town did not pay her to be interested in cloth but it did pay her to be interested in the toll. Down: grain, cloth, lamp-glass, salt, the long dull middle of any freight list, the bolts and crates and barrels of a moving city restocking itself. Up: the tariff figures, the chargeable weights, the running total she would check against her tally and put her name beneath.

It footed. The manifest's total matched the manifest's lines, added straight, no slips. She made her tally agree with it car by car — she had chalked the train an hour before, walking its length in the cold with her board, and the cars on her board matched the cars on the list, the same count, the same order. Manifest and tally agreed. The toll was the toll. There was nothing to query and three minutes in which not to query it, because the first warning bell had gone and the haulers were clearing the ramps and a station stop did not wait for a keeper's sense that something was missing.

She signed. Iron-gall ink, her father's pen, the countersignature that bit into the card and aged into it and could not be lifted later by anyone wanting

to pretend she hadn't. She kept the town's duplicate, as she always did, the carbon-flimsy the polity was entitled to and almost never looked at. The clerk took the train's copy, squared her coat, and went back up into the Meridian without tea.

The second bell. The third. The spout swung clear and the tank stood at the mark Ilsa had read and booked. The couplings took up their slack down the whole impossible length of the train with a sound like a thought travelling, and the Meridian leaned forward into its own weight and began, very slowly and then not slowly, to leave.

The town stood on the platform and watched the tide go out, because you always did, because the alternative was to turn your back on it and nobody could. The thin man with the single case watched it longest of all. And somewhere in the middle of watching, with the engine heat already gone south and the rear carriages still sliding past and the chalk-dust still on her fingers, Ilsa Brae felt the small cold thing she had been not-feeling for an hour finally arrive, which was the certainty that she had read something twice and that one of the two readings had been wrong, and that she had signed it.

Then the last car went behind the eastern hills, and the rails sang and stopped singing, and the fourteen months began.

III. The Duplicate Books

The station house at Tarnhalt was one long stone room with a stove at one end and the books at the other, and between them a desk, a kettle, and as much of Ilsa Brae's life as had happened indoors. The books were kept in oilcloth in a press against the back wall: thirty-five years of manifests in the town's flimsy duplicate, and behind them, in a separate press her father had built and never explained, the older books — his predecessor's, and the one before that, back to a first volume in a hand so faded it was more a rumour of a record than a record. Tarnhalt kept everything. It was the town's only real wealth that the train couldn't carry off, and the keepers had hoarded it the way the poor hoard paper, because you never knew.

It took Ilsa eleven days to find what was wrong, and she found it because she had nothing else to do and twenty years of habit telling her where to look.

She had read the manifest twice on the day and it had footed both times, and that was true, and it remained true, and the truth of it was the problem. A list that foots is a list that agrees with itself. It tells you nothing about whether it agrees with the world, or with last year's list, or with the list it used to be. For that you need another list, kept by someone else, somewhere else, and Tarnhalt — alone on the whole circuit, as far as Ilsa knew or would ever know — had one. It had thirty-five years of them.

She laid the new manifest beside the last one, the duplicate from fourteen months before, and she went down them line for line.

The consignments did not match, of course, because no two loops carried the same freight; a train is a town and a town's larder changes. The grain was different, the cloth was different. That was nothing. But near the bottom of every manifest she had ever signed, in the place where the chargeable freight gave way to the small tail of declared-but-untolled cargo — the bonded goods, the through-carried, the consignments the train declared as aboard but did not land and so did not pay on — there had always been a line. Second from the foot. The same five characters of reference every loop, in every clerk's hand, back through Hessom and back through the man before Hessom and back, when she fetched the older books with a candle and her reading-glasses and a feeling she did not have a name for, through her father's hand and his predecessor's and into the rumour-faded first volume itself.

Bonded, sealed, through — nil.

The same reference. And against it, every loop, for as far back as Tarnhalt had kept paper, the same weight.

Not approximately the same. The same. To the quarter-hundredweight, loop after loop after loop, decade upon decade, a single heavy figure that never moved. Ilsa sat with the candle and the glasses and the long row of identical numbers running back into the dark of the press, and the thing that disturbed her was not large or dramatic. It was professional. She had handled freight her whole life and she knew, the way a maintenance worker

deep in the same train knew a junction by its wrong note, that nothing real weighs the same twice. Grain takes up damp. Cloth sheds. Coal is never quite coal. A consignment that arrived at the same weight every loop for a hundred years was not a consignment. It was a number that had decided to be a weight.

And on the manifest in front of her — the new one, the footed one, the one she had signed — the line was not there.

It was not crossed out. That was the part she would come back to and back to, in the dim afternoons, when Sefa had gone home and the stove had burned low. A crossed-out line is a record of a change. It says: there was a thing here, and now there is not, and here is my mark to tell you so. There was no mark. The line was simply gone, and the lines below it had moved up to close the gap, and the total at the foot had been re-added without it, and it footed — it footed perfectly — because someone had taken the trouble to make it foot. You could only see that the line had ever existed if you had the line. If you had kept the old book. If you were the one place on the circuit that kept the old book.

Ilsa Brae put her father's glasses down on her father's desk and sat for a while in the cold with the proof in front of her that something had been removed from the world's account of itself so carefully that the only evidence it had ever been there was a duplicate the train did not know she kept.

Then, because she was a keeper and not an adventurer, she made tea.

IV. Nil

"It paid nothing," said Reeve Tamm.

Tamm was the town's head and had been for six trains, which was a long time, and he was good at it in the way that mattered, which was that he kept Tarnhalt boring. A boring town was a surviving town. An interesting town was one the bandits heard about, or the train decided to route around, or the wider world took notice of, and Tamm had spent his whole tenure making sure that nothing about Tarnhalt was worth a single sentence anywhere it might be repeated. He sat in the station house with Ilsa's books open in front

of him and the long row of identical weights under his thumb and he was not, Ilsa could see, going to be any help, and she could also see that he was right not to be, which was the most annoying kind of person to deal with.

"It paid nothing," he said again. "Bonded, through, nil. We never tolled it. It's been on the book a hundred years and it never put a single chit in this town's hand, and now it's off the book, and it still won't put a chit in our hand, because there's nothing to toll. Where, in all that, Ilsa, is the part that's our business?"

"It's wrong," said Ilsa.

"It's wrong," Tamm agreed. He was a fair man. He did not pretend she was wrong about the wrongness. "It is plainly wrong, and it is plainly none of ours. The two of those things sit together more often than you'd like. The line cost us nothing and its leaving costs us nothing, and the only thing it could possibly cost us is whatever it costs to be the town that wrote to the Conductor's office about a discrepancy in the Conductor's own freight that the Conductor's own clerks footed clean and signed."

"I signed it too."

"You did," said Tamm, not unkindly, "which is the one part of this I'd undo if I could. But you signed a thing that footed, on the day, in the time you had. No one will fault you for that. They will fault you — they will fault *us*, this town, this water, this stop — if you send our largest ratepayer a query implying its books are kept by a thief or a ghost." He closed the press, gently, the way you close a door on a sleeping animal you would rather not wake. "We are a tank and a coal-heap and a hundred and forty people, Ilsa. The Meridian is a city. You don't audit a city. You sell it water and you wave it off and you are very, very glad it comes back."

He was right. That was the trouble with Tamm; he was almost always right, in the narrow, load-bearing way of a man responsible for a hundred and forty lives strung along a single set of rails in raider country. Curiosity was a luxury good and Tarnhalt could not afford it. Ilsa had known that before he came and she would know it after he left, and she had not actually expected him to say anything else. She had told him because the discrepancy was the town's, on paper, and the town's head was entitled to know, and

because telling no one at all about a thing like this was how a person started keeping it the way the train kept it — sealed, bonded, nil.

What she did not tell Tamm, because it was not a town matter and there was no column for it, was the arithmetic she had done the night before, on the back of a spoiled tally-sheet, which she had then burned in the stove because it frightened her and she did not entirely know why.

She had added up the water.

Twenty years of it, off her own books, the long measured fall of the tank read off the painted rod every loop and entered in her own hand. And the coal, which she also booked, the domestic bunkers topped off barrow by barrow to feed the kitchens and the wash-houses and the boiler-rooms that kept a city's worth of people from freezing. She knew those figures the way she knew her own name, and she had never once, in fifty years of watching the tide come in, thought to ask the question that any child could have asked and that the town's whole survival depended on no one asking.

It was not enough to move it.

It was a town's worth of cooking and washing and warmth, and it was nowhere near, not by any reckoning a person who had spent her life weighing things could perform, enough to drive a thing that long across a continent and back on a fourteen-month loop and arrive three days inside the window. She provisioned the Meridian's *kitchens*. She had never, in fifty years, provisioned the thing that moved it. Nobody had. She was the one person on the whole circuit positioned to know exactly what the train took on at the one place it stopped to take anything, and what she knew, now that she had finally added it up, was that the Meridian did not run on anything she had ever loaded. It did not run on anything Tarnhalt had. It had never bought its motion here, or — she suspected, with the cold flat certainty of someone reading a level off a stick — anywhere.

Whatever moved the train, it brought its own.

She had burned the sheet. Some books you keep and some you keep by burning, and that one she had kept the second way, which is to say she would never forget it and would never write it down again. It was not a town matter. It went in no column. It was the kind of thing that, if you let it, stopped

being a fact you knew and became a thing you lived inside, and Ilsa had a tank to gauge and a town to feed and a press full of honest books, and she did not have the luxury of living inside it.

But she kept the duplicate. She always kept the duplicate. And in the long blue evenings of that loop, with the stove ticking and the plain dark outside and the next tide fourteen months south of her, she taught young Sefa to keep it too.

"Why two books?" Sefa asked, the way the young ask questions, expecting them to have answers. Sefa was fifteen and clever and would have the keeping after Ilsa, if the town and the rails and the wider world left her alone long enough to grow into it. "If the train's book is right and ours is right, they say the same thing. Two books that say the same thing is one book and a waste of paper."

"They say the same thing nearly always," said Ilsa.

"Then why keep ours."

"For the time they don't." Ilsa turned the new manifest so the girl could see it, and laid the old one beside it, and did not point to anything, because pointing would have been teaching her the answer instead of teaching her to keep. "We don't keep the book because anyone reads it. Nobody reads it. The reeve hasn't opened that press in six years and he opened it this loop only because I made him. We keep it so that when the train's account and ours fall out of step — and one loop, girl, in your keeping or your daughter's, they will — there are two. So that the disagreement *exists somewhere*. So that there's a place in the world that remembers the sentence was longer before they closed the gap."

Sefa looked at the two manifests for a while, and was clever enough not to ask the next question, which was *what gap*, and Ilsa was grateful for that, because she did not have an answer and did not want to hear herself fail to give one.

V. The Restoration

The thin man with the single case turned out to be called Mr Adwell, and he had been a middle-carriage records clerk on the Meridian for thirty years until, by his own cheerfully vague account, he had "added something up that didn't want adding," after which he had found himself, with great politeness and no actual accusation, holding a working passage that was somehow no longer valid and standing on the platform at Tarnhalt watching a train decline to look back at him.

Ilsa gave him work. The town could always use a hand who could read a column, and Adwell could read a column the way a musician reads a stave, fast and without seeming to look, and he settled into Tarnhalt the way such people did, with relief disguised as resignation. She liked him. She did not ask him what he had added up. She had a fair idea that asking was how he had got here, and she had no wish to be the second person to make that mistake.

But once, in the spring of that loop, with the two of them taking the inventory of the coal-heap against the wind, he said, without being asked, "They don't change a footed book."

"What?"

"On the train. The clerks." He spoke the way a man speaks about a place he has been put out of and still, despite everything, knows better than anyone left in it. "You hear about an error and you correct it forward — you put a note in the next entry, you carry the fix down the column where everyone can see you fix it. You never go back and make a closed page foot a different way. It can't be done honestly. Anything that's been signed and totalled, you leave it, even when it's wrong, *especially* when it's wrong, because the record of the error is worth more than the error costs." He tallied a barrow without appearing to count it. "If a page ever changed under me — really changed, clean, no mark — I'd not have gone looking for who. I'd have gone looking for somewhere very far away. I expect that's roughly what I did."

Ilsa said nothing, and booked the coal, and thought about it for the rest of the loop, which had a great deal of rest to it.

The tide came back in fourteen months to the rough day, the smoke and then the line and then the train, three days inside the window, punctual as

the Meridian counted punctual. The water spout swung out and the tank began its fall and Ilsa read the painted rod and the haulers ran the coal and a fresh crop of the young went up and nobody came down, and in the second hour a clerk came to the station house with the manifest.

It was not the pressed young woman. It was a man Ilsa had never seen, ordinary and tired and grateful for the tea she gave him, who sat down to drink it the way Hessom used to, and Ilsa found that she resented him for the comfort of it, for being exactly the right kind of clerk fourteen months too late.

She read the manifest twice. Down for sense, up for money. And near the bottom, second from the foot, in the place where the chargeable freight gave way to the bonded tail, the line was there.

Bonded, sealed, through — nil. The same five characters. The same weight, to the quarter-hundredweight, the heavy unmoving figure she could have written from memory and had, in fact, written from memory, more than once, in the long loop, to be sure she still could. The line was back. It had moved the lines below it down again to make room, and the total at the foot had been re-added with it, and it footed — it footed perfectly — because someone had taken the trouble to make it foot.

Ilsa sat with the new manifest and the tea going cold and understood, slowly, the full shape of what had been done to her, which was nothing. Which was the elegance of it. She fetched the duplicate from the loop before — the one without the line, the one she had signed, the one she had proof was wrong because she could lay it against a hundred years of the line being present — and she laid the three of them in a row: the old loop with the line, her loop without it, the new loop with it back. And anyone who looked, anyone who came after, anyone the town ever showed its honest hoarded books to, would see two manifests with the line and one without, in the middle, in Ilsa Brae's hand, under Ilsa Brae's bitten iron-gall signature.

The error was hers now. The record agreed with itself again across the gap of her one anomalous loop, the way a pond agrees with itself again across the place a stone went in, and the stone was at the bottom and the

surface was smooth and the only sign anything had ever broken it was a single keeper's duplicate that now read as a single keeper's mistake.

She had not been threatened. No one had come for her in the night the way the town's old stories said things sometimes came, out of the wilds, for people who saw too much. No clerk had said a word that could be repeated. Nothing had been done to Tarnhalt at all, except that its books had been brought, gently, patiently, across a continent and back and fourteen months of waiting, into line with the books that mattered more — the ones kept somewhere forward, by someone or something she would never see, who had all the time the world had and used it the way the tarn used the valley, filling every low place, finding every gap, closing smoothly over everything that tried to stay a hole.

She signed the new manifest, because it footed and the bell had gone and there was nothing to query that she could afford to query. She kept the duplicate. She had a small row of them now, three deep, the only place in the world where the sentence was on record as having once been shorter.

The tide went out. The town watched it go. Mr Adwell watched it longest of all, the way the put-off always did, and then he turned, before the last car was behind the hills, which was sooner than most of them managed, and went back to the coal-heap, because he had decided what the train was a long time ago and had no further questions he was willing to be heard asking.

VI. The Keeper's Habit

Sefa took the keeping eleven years later, which was a good age for it, old enough to be patient and young enough to have the eyes for the painted rod in poor light. By then the bonded line had ridden second-from-the-foot on every manifest through eight more loops, the same five characters, the same unmoving weight, dull and present and tolling nothing, and Ilsa had stopped expecting it to vanish and had not — quite — stopped watching to see if it would.

She did not tell Sefa the whole of it. There was no whole of it to tell, which was the truth she had made her peace with: she had a row of three duplicates and a piece of arithmetic she had burned and a sense, lived-in now and worn smooth, that the train carried something it did not weigh and ran on something it did not buy and kept books that were corrected by a hand no honest clerk would own, and that all of these were the same fact seen from three sides of a thing she was never going to be allowed to walk around. She had not solved it. She had not tried very hard to, after the first loop, and she did not think the not-trying was cowardice, though she had examined it for cowardice more than once in the long evenings and could not be entirely sure. Tamm would have called it sense. Adwell, who was in the ground by then, committed quietly to the plain between two trains, would have called it survival. Ilsa called it keeping. You did not have to understand a thing to keep an honest record that it had happened. The two jobs were different jobs. Nobody was paid to do the first one. Somebody had to do the second, and the somebody, here, at this tank, on this stretch of rail, was her, and would be Sefa, and would be whoever Sefa taught.

"Why two books?" she had Sefa ask her, once, formally, the way her own father had had her ask him, so the answer would be in the girl's mouth and not only in her ears.

"For the time they fall out of step," Sefa said.

"And when they fall out of step. When the train's book and ours disagree, and you take it up the column to be sure, and you're sure. What do you do?"

"Keep both," said Sefa. "Sign honest. Tell the reeve, who'll tell me to leave it. Leave it." She paused, because she was clever, and clever was a thing you could not train out of a keeper and would not want to. "And keep both."

"And keep both," said Ilsa.

She climbed the gantry one more time, on the day she handed over, an old woman now with the chalk-dust worn into the lines of her hands past any washing, and she watched a tide come in that she would not have to book. The smoke, and then the line, and then the train, the great impossible length of it that the eye gave up on somewhere in the middle and that went on being there without her, curving away across the plain and behind the

eastern hills, where it was still going, where it had always still been going, where it would go on going long after Tarnhalt was a name in a press of books nobody read.

It was a sentence the town read once every fourteen months. Somewhere in it, nine loops back, a word had been taken out and the gap closed up so smoothly that only the keeper who had written down every reading could tell the sentence had ever been longer — and even she could not say what the word had been. Only that it had weighed the same every time, which nothing real does. Only that it had paid nothing, which is how a thing stays invisible. Only that when she had caught it, it had waited, and come back, and made her the liar instead, with the unhurried thoroughness of water finding the bottom of a tank.

She did not underline any of this, even to herself. Keepers do not underline. Underlining is for people who believe some entries matter more than others, and a keeper learns young that you cannot know, when you make an entry, which one the future will need — that the dull line tolling nothing at the foot of the page is exactly the kind of thing that turns out, a hundred years on, to be the only thing on the page that was ever true. You keep all of it, level and equal and honest, in iron-gall that bites the card and will not lift, against a day you will not live to see, for a reader who may not come.

You keep the book so the disagreement exists somewhere.

Ilsa Brae climbed down the ladder for the last time, and gave the girl the painted rod, and went to make tea.

The tide went out. It always did.

Somewhere forward, behind the heat, something closed smoothly over the gap, and kept its own books, and did not look back; and the train carried south whatever it was carrying that it did not weigh, the way it always had, toward wherever it was that the rails, still going, were still going.

IV

The Alighting

—— ○ ——

The ruling had taken less time than the loading of a coal tender, which Teff thought, even at the time, was about right. A man could spend eleven years building a claim to four feet of bunk and a hook for his coat, and the unbuilding of it took a clerk the length of one read-through and the Conductor's office the length of a stamp.

He stood on the platform at Bauch's Crossing with his bag at his feet and worked out, the way he worked out loads, that he had perhaps forty minutes. Not because anyone had told him forty. Because the water tower was a third drained, the second coal chute had stopped running, and the gangs had moved from putting things on to taking things off, which on a four-hour stop meant the train was thinking about leaving. He had loaded and unloaded this halt nine times in his life — nine times he could be sure of — and the rhythm of a stop was in him the way the rhythm of the track was in everyone, a thing the body knew before the mind was asked.

The train sat beside him.

He had never seen it like this. That was the part he had not been ready for, and he had thought he was ready for most of it. You lived your whole life inside a thing and you pictured it, when you pictured it at all, as corridors

and curtains and the particular stain on the ceiling above your bunk. You did not picture it as *this* — a wall of matte brown and faded cream going away from you in both directions until it stopped being a train and became a fact of the landscape, like a cliff, or weather. He turned his head one way and the carriages ran forward and got smaller and were still carriages where his eye gave out. He turned the other way and the same. Somewhere up the front, too far to make out, was the engine he had never seen, that nobody he had ever met had seen, going about whatever it did. From in here — *out here* — you could see how much of it there was to not understand.

It did not look like home. That was the second thing he had not been ready for. It looked enormous and busy and entirely uninterested in him, which, he understood now, it had always been. The not-being-interested had simply never been pointed at him before.

— ○ —

A gang foreman walked the platform calling tallies and did not look at Teff, because a man with a bag at his feet and no work in his hands was either waiting to board, which was not the foreman's business, or had been put off, which was even less so. The platform was busy in the particular way of a stop — everyone moving with the flat haste of people on a clock, sacks and crates and a squealing line of sheep going up a ramp, somebody's child being counted twice and crying about it. Train-folk and town-folk doing the brief loud commerce of the tide, and none of it touching him, who had been one kind of person an hour ago and was now neither.

He went through the bag once more, crouched over it, because there was nothing else to do with his hands and because a man can look like he has a purpose if he is sorting a bag.

It was not much. He was surprised, and then not surprised, by how little it was. A second shirt. The coat, which was on him. A knife. A tin cup, dented, that had been his as long as the bunk had. A whetstone. A folded square of oilcloth. Three chits, which were Meridian chits and would buy him, here, a hard look and a question about where he'd got them. A bootlace, spare.

He had owned, an hour ago, a life that felt like a considerable thing to carry, and here it was, and a strong child could have run with it.

Someone had brought the rest of it down to him — Doss-from-the-next-bunk-but-one, who guarded her own four feet like a dog and had, without a word, gathered his and walked it to the door while the enforcer waited, because there is a kind of person who will fight you over a kettle for a decade and then do the one decent thing at the end as if it were nothing, as if it were not the only thing. She had handed him the bag at the top of the steps and said, "Mind yourself," which from Doss was a speech, and gone back inside before he could find anything to say that wasn't stupid. He was glad, now, that he hadn't found it. There was no thing to say that wouldn't have been stupid.

He had been right about the bunk. That was the thing he kept arriving back at, the way the tongue keeps arriving back at the gap where the tooth was. He had been right. The bunk had been his by every measure a person could hold in their hands — eleven years of it, the hook he'd screwed in himself, the give worn into the boards in the shape of him. It had been his by everything except the paper, and the paper said the bunk had been reassigned, and the paper was new, and the man it named had a cousin in the allocations office, and that was the whole of it, that was the entire mechanism, laid out plain once you stopped shouting long enough to see it.

And he had not stopped shouting. That, he could admit now, on the platform, with the cold coming up through the soles of his boots, was the part that had actually cost him. Not the bunk. You could lose a bunk. People lost bunks. What you could not do was sit down on the disputed bunk and refuse to rise, and keep saying *it's mine, it's mine, ask anyone*, until saying it was a bigger thing than the bunk had ever been — until it wasn't a man and a bunk any more but a man and a ruling, and a ruling that bent for a man who made a scene was no longer a ruling, and could not be allowed, because the next thousand people watching would learn the wrong lesson from it. They had not put him off for being wrong. They had put him off for being unable to be wrong. The system had looked at him very steadily and done precisely what it said, on the card, in dark-red ink, that it would do.

He could not even say it had been unjust. That was the worst of it, sitting in his chest like a swallowed stone. It had been entirely just. It had simply also been the end of his life, and he had not known, until this moment, that those two things were allowed to be true at once.

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The bell went forward — he heard it, the departure bell, three carriages of it passing the news rearward in a ripple — and the platform changed the way a held breath changes. The ramps came up. The last of the town's people stepped back behind the white line they kept here, painted on the stone, that he had crossed a thousand times without thinking because he had always been on the right side of it.

He had felt this from inside more times than he had felt anything. The first long shudder as the couplings took up their slack, carriage telling carriage telling carriage. The build. The floor finding its purpose under your feet. From inside it was the most ordinary thing in the world, so ordinary you stopped feeling it by your second day, the way you stop hearing your own heart.

From the platform it was a thing of terrible size moving.

It did not lurch, from out here. It *gathered*. The whole brown-and-cream length of it leaned into motion all at once and began to slide, and the sliding had a weight to it you could feel in the stone under your boots, in your teeth. The windows went past him. He had not thought about the windows. They went past at walking pace and then faster than walking, lit squares with people behind them not looking out, because why would you look out, there was nothing out here but a town you'd be gone from in a minute and a man on a platform you didn't know. A child's face, briefly, pressed to the glass, looking at the sheep. The tea car — he knew the tea car by the steam at its vent — slid by warm and yellow-lit and gone. The warmth went by him in a long bright row and did not stop, because it was not for him, it was forward and it stayed forward, the way warmth on a train always had.

Nobody on the gangway, because there was no gangway; this was not that kind of leaving. But he found he had the old rule in his head anyway, the

one everyone carried — *don't look back* — and he understood, standing still while the thing he loved poured itself past him into the west, that the rule had never been about the danger of falling. It had been about this. It had been a kindness dressed as a safety instruction. *Don't look back, because there is nothing back there you can use, and looking will only teach you that.*

The last carriage came. He knew it for the last by the red lamp and the blunt iron of the rear coupling, the back of the train, a thing almost no one ever sees because almost no one is ever standing behind the whole of their world watching it leave. It passed him. It got smaller. The sound of it thinned out from a pressure into a noise into a suggestion of a noise, and then the track was just two cold lines going away to a point, the way they did in every picture of a train anyone ever drew, and he was standing at the point, which he had not previously understood was a place a person could stand.

It did not look back. It had never once, in the whole history of itself, looked back, and it was not going to start for him.

— ○ —

The town let him stand there for a while. He was grateful for that, later, when he understood it had been a courtesy and not an oversight — that Bauch's Crossing had watched a great many people stand at the end of the platform and had learned that there was a length of time a person needed, and that it was rude to interrupt it, and rude to let it go on too long.

The ground would not hold still.

That was the thing nobody warned you about, because the people who could have warned you were on the train and didn't think about it, and the people who knew it didn't ride trains and assumed you knew. His whole life — the whole of the life he could remember, which began, when he reached back for it, in a carriage, a low warm hum and a swaying he had taken for the natural state of the world — his whole life had happened on a floor that moved. His body had spent every one of its years making the small constant adjustments that kept a person upright on a thing in motion, ten thousand corrections an hour, so deep in him he had never once felt himself make one.

And now the floor didn't move. And his body kept correcting for a sway that wasn't there, kept bracing against a lurch that never came, so that he stood on the dead-still stone of Bauch's Crossing and felt, distinctly, seasick — pitched and rolling on ground that a child could see was not moving at all. He put a hand out and there was nothing to put it on. He had been put off the train, and the train had taken the motion with it, and left him this: a man swaying alone on solid ground, his body grieving in the only language it had.

Far back, under the seasickness, something else stirred — a thin, formless thing, the sort of feeling everyone carried and nobody examined, a sense of having come from somewhere that was not the train, somewhere before the carriage and the hum. It surfaced for a moment in the unfamiliar stillness, the way silt lifts when water finally stops moving. Then it settled again, useless, telling him nothing, the way it always had. There was no somewhere. There was the train, and now there was here.

— ○ —

Her name was Saar, and she kept the book.

She came down the platform when the standing-time was over — an old woman, square, in a tarred coat that had stopped being any particular colour, with the unhurried walk of a person who has never in her life needed to catch a train. Bauch's Crossing smelled of pitch and woodsmoke and the river it sat across; a timber town, he'd have guessed, even if he hadn't known, by the stacks and the saw-noise and the particular black under everyone's nails. She stopped in front of him and looked at him the way you'd look at a delivery, assessing, not unkind.

"Off the brown one," she said. It was not a question. "Ticket or no ticket?"

"No ticket," said Teff. The words came out of him like teeth.

She nodded as if he'd confirmed the weather. "Thought no. They don't put off the ticketed ones here; they ship them on to somewhere with a magistrate." She had a ledger under her arm, a great soft-cornered thing fat with years, and he understood with a small cold drop that he was about to go into it. "We get the other kind. The ones a train's done with." She said it

without weight, a woman naming a category she'd named a thousand times. "Alighted, we call you. Sounds gentler than it is. Means: got down, and the train went on."

"I didn't get down," said Teff. "I was —"

"I know what you were." Not sharp. Just done, already, with the part where the man explains. "Everyone I write in this book was right about something. You can tell me which thing you were right about, if you like, while I take your name. It passes the time and it does no harm." She opened the book against her forearm and licked a pencil. "But I'll tell you now so you're not waiting on it: there's no one here it would help. The town's got no quarrel with the train and no power over it and wouldn't use the power if it had it, because the train comes back, and a town that the trains stop trusting is a town that dies of it. So we don't take sides. We just take *people*." She looked up. "Name."

He gave it. He watched her write it, the pencil small in a hand made for axes, and watched himself become a line in a book in a town he had stopped at nine times and never once seen, a line under a long column of lines, each of which had been a person who was right about something, and got down, and was written in.

It should have been the worst moment. He had braced for it to be the worst moment. But there was something in being written down — in being, even as a line, even in a stranger's book, *recorded as having arrived somewhere* — that the swaying stillness had not prepared him for. The train had unwritten him. Here was a hand writing him back in. It was not much. It was a line in a ledger and a category that sounded gentler than it was. But it was a thing that knew he was here, which was more than the two cold rails to the west could say.

"There's a shed," Saar was saying, "and there's work — timber doesn't shift itself, and you've the look of a man who's shifted things. The work's hard and the pay's in coin you'll have to learn the worth of, and the first winter is the one that decides whether you stay a person or stop. Most stay. Some don't. The ground'll keep feeling wrong for a month or two; it does for all of you, I don't know why, and don't ask me to, I only keep the book." She

closed it. "Next train through here's not the brown one. Brown one won't be back for the better part of two years, and it won't know you, and you'd need a ticket you've no way to get. So don't stand on the platform for it. People do. It's the saddest thing I see, and I see a lot." She tucked the ledger back under her arm. "You hear me?"

"I hear you," Teff said.

He did not entirely. But he heard the shape of it, the way you hear a stop coming before you can name how you know.

She left him to walk up himself, which he supposed was another courtesy, the last of the standing-time. He picked up the bag — the whole of a life, light as a sack of bootlaces — and he turned his back on the rails, and the turning was the hardest physical thing he had ever done and looked, to anyone watching, like a tired man simply walking off a platform.

The ground swayed under him and did not move. He went up into the town that was, now, the place he lived, and tried to understand it, and could not yet, and walked anyway, because the alternative was standing still, and standing still, here, was the one thing that felt worst of all.

Afterword

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The books of this world follow the mainline: one plot, one mystery, the long forward pull. But a train the size of The Meridian carries more lives than any one story can visit, and most of them are not waiting for a protagonist. They are running messages, clearing junctions, keeping books, loading coal — working, in other words, and the work is where the world is kept.

The four stories in this volume were written in the gaps between the novels, each following someone the timetable never mentions. They stand alone. No prior reading is required, and nothing here will spoil the books — though the books run somewhere behind each of these pages, the way the Conductor's footfalls pass overhead while a maintenance worker lies listening in the dark.

They obey one rule the novels also obey: the world's great questions — what powers the train, who laid the track, why the schematics never quite match the tunnels — are brushed against, never answered. A side story's job is to add a question, not to retire one.

Further volumes will follow as the sidings fill.

— *S.F.*