Shattered World: Tides of The East

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Shattered World: Tides of The East

by DylanJ10000

Summary

Nearly eight years after the apocalypse began, the United States is no longer a collection of isolated settlements fighting simply to survive. Roads are reopening. Railways stretch across continents. New governments are rising from the ashes of the old. Entire cultures have formed in the spaces history left behind.

As Buck, Eddie, and the generation that rebuilt the Southwest finally earn the peace they've spent years fighting for, Christopher Diaz finds himself stepping into a very different world than the one his parents inherited.

The apocalypse is no longer about surviving the end of the world.

It's about discovering what comes after.

Chapter 1: Book One: The Courier Road



Post-Fall North America: Regions & Capitals are listed.

June 19, 2029

The road east out of Alabama had three names, depending on who you asked. The old maps still called it I-20. The traders out of Talladega called it the Courier Road. The riders coming up from San Antonio had started calling it the Eastbound Line, mostly because no one could agree on anything better and half of them liked watching the other half complain.

Chris didn't care what they called it. A road was a road. What mattered was whether it held.

He drove with one hand low on the wheel and the other braced against the open window frame, letting hot June air push into the cab. It smelled like pine sap, dust, old asphalt, and rain that hadn't fallen yet. Somewhere south of the highway, thunder rolled low across the trees, still far enough to ignore and close enough that he kept checking the sky. The clouds were building fast. They did that out here. One minute, the world was all white heat and cicadas. The next, the sky split open and every dirt track became mud deep enough to swallow a tire. Chris had learned that somewhere outside Abilene, after spending six hours digging his truck out of a washed-out service road with a shovel, a broken license plate, and language Eddie would've pretended not to hear. The memory brought a faint smile with it. The road took it back a moment later.

The truck rattled beneath him, old suspension complaining as the front wheels rolled over another split in the pavement. The highway had been patched in places, not officially, just with whatever people had on hand. Gravel. Packed clay. Scavenged asphalt laid down uneven and dark against the sun-bleached gray. Someone had dragged a fallen pine off the shoulder and left the branches piled beside the ditch, needles browning at the edges. Not fresh. Two days old, maybe three.

Chris slowed anyway. The highway stretched ahead in broken pieces, two lanes visible where kudzu hadn't crawled across the shoulder and started taking back the world. The median was gone under high grass. Beyond it, the westbound lanes had cracked badly enough that saplings grew through the seams, their thin trunks bending under summer leaves. No other vehicles. That didn't mean the road was empty.

Chris checked the mirror. Behind him, pavement cut back through the trees, quiet and heat-warped. No dust. No movement. No rider trailing him. No wagon. No patched truck with bad intentions. On the far shoulder, old warning paint marked the rusted back of a mileage sign: three black slashes and the word *NOISE*, half-peeled by rain. Someone had wanted travelers to remember that gunfire still carried farther than sense. He watched a few seconds longer before turning forward again.

The route marker appeared a quarter mile later, nailed to an old pine near the shoulder, high enough that floodwater wouldn't reach it and low enough for a rider to spot from the road. Three white lines crossed inside a rough circle, painted by hand, the edges uneven where the brush had dragged. Chris eased off the gas. Not because of the symbol. Because of the nail. It was too clean. The wood around it hadn't weathered. The metal still caught the light. Whoever had put the marker there'd done it recently, maybe that morning, maybe the day before.

The painted circle was wrong, too. Not enough that someone passing fast would catch it. Not enough that a tired traveler would question it after hours on the road. But Chris had seen the real mark in San Antonio, painted over the entrance to the depot Ravi and Switch had claimed out of an old municipal bus yard. He'd seen it burned into crate lids, stamped on route sheets, scratched into the side of a water barrel outside a waystation near the Brazos. Three lines crossing a circle. Not touching the edge. This one did. Chris let the truck roll another twenty feet before stopping. The engine idled beneath him, rough and familiar. Heat shimmered over the hood. Somewhere in the trees, insects screamed loud enough to make the quiet underneath feel deliberate. He looked at the marker again, then past it.

A narrower road branched off to the right, half-hidden by brush. Not a proper road anymore. Maybe once. County route, service road, access track. The kind of road old maps still insisted existed because no one had been alive to update them when the asphalt broke and the woods came back. Fresh tire tracks cut through the dirt at the mouth of it. Two sets. One in. One out. Chris breathed out through his nose. “Nope.”

He reached over to the passenger seat and picked up the folded route sheet beside his canteen. The paper had been copied by hand at the San Antonio depot, ink smudged where Switch had tapped the page with grease-dark fingers and told him which roads were worth trusting. *Stay north of Montgomery if the rain’s bad.*

Don’t cut through Atlanta unless you’ve got a death wish. If anyone tells you there’s a clean road through Anniston, they’re lying, selling something, or both. Charleston route’s opening up, but it isn’t settled yet. Keep your head on. Chris had looked up at her then, one eyebrow raised.

Switch had only grinned and tapped the page again. “*Don’t give me that look*. I’m not burying another rescue party because *someone* thought a shortcut sounded charming.”

“I wasn’t planning on taking a shortcut.”

“Good. Then my job here is done.”

“Your job was handing me a map.”

“And look how much *safer* the map got once *I* started talking.”

He could still hear Ravi laughing from somewhere behind the counter, where he'd been arguing with a man from Austin about whether two sacks of coffee counted as mail, cargo, or attempted bribery. Chris glanced down at the route sheet again. The marked road to Douglasville stayed straight for another twelve miles before bending northeast. No right turn. No feeder road. No alternate route marked by an Express symbol nailed up with a shiny new nail. He set the paper down. “Nice try.”

The truck rolled forward. He kept it slow this time, eyes moving between the false marker, the trees, the ditches, and every patch of grass deep enough to hide someone waiting for an engine. His right hand dropped from the window frame and settled near the pistol holstered beneath his jacket. Not on it. Near it. There was a difference. Nine months ago, he might not have known that. Nine months ago, he'd still measured danger by what it did to his pulse. By the heat in his chest. By the way fear grabbed the back of his neck and made his whole body listen. Now, fear had gotten quieter. It rode beside him, familiar and unwelcome, pointing things out.

New nail. Wrong mark. Fresh tracks. Someone wants you off the main road. Chris listened. He drove past the turn. For half a mile, nothing happened. The road stayed empty. The trees stayed still. The false marker disappeared behind him, swallowed by distance and summer haze. The storm muttered again to the south, closer now, and a damp gust pushed through the open window hard enough to stir the loose papers on the passenger seat. Chris let his shoulders loosen.

Then he saw the horse.

It stood in the ditch ahead, reins tangled around a leaning road sign, one stirrup hanging crooked against its flank. Its head jerked up as the truck approached, ears pinning back. Sweat foamed along its neck. The saddle had slipped sideways, and one of the bags strapped behind it'd torn open, spilling paper across the grass.

Chris hit the brake. The truck stopped hard enough that the supplies in the back shifted with a dull thump. For a second, he only stared. The horse sidestepped hard, hooves sinking into the

soft edge of the ditch. It tried to pull free, panicked by the engine, but the reins held. The old road sign creaked under the strain.

Chris killed the engine. The quiet rushed in. Not silence. Never silence. Cicadas. Wind. The ticking heat of the engine. The horse breathing hard. Far off, thunder. Somewhere in the brush, water dripped from leaves though it hadn't rained yet. Chris opened the door but didn't step out. He listened. At first, there was nothing. Then—*a sound*. Small. Human.

He turned his head. On the far side of the ditch, half-hidden by grass and the shadow of a broken guardrail, someone moved. Chris's hand found the pistol. The figure shifted again, and this time he saw the courier bag first. Brown canvas. Short strap. One corner dark with blood. Then a hand, fingers clawing weakly at the dirt. Then a face. A kid. Fourteen, maybe. Young enough that something in Chris's chest pulled tight before he could stop it. Sweat-plastered hair. Split lip. One eye swollen nearly shut. A strip of cloth tied badly around his upper arm, soaked through red. He lay half on his side, breathing in shallow, panicked pulls that hitched every time he tried to move.

Chris didn't get out. Not yet. His eyes moved past him. The guardrail was bent outward. Too cleanly. The grass around the boy had been flattened in a wide pattern, not just where a body had fallen. The courier bag had been placed where it could be seen from the road. The horse was tied badly enough to look panicked but well enough that it wouldn't break free. And the blood. There was blood on the boy. There wasn't *enough* blood on the road.

Chris swallowed. "*Damn it.*"

The boy saw him. His good eye widened. For one second, he looked relieved. Then terrified. He shook his head once. Barely. *Don't.*

Chris looked at the trees. Pine trunks. Kudzu. A shallow drainage cut running parallel to the road. Too many places to hide. Too many angles. Too much green between him and whoever was watching. The smart thing was to drive. He knew that. He could back up, turn around, find another route, reach Douglasville by dusk if the storm held off. He could report the false marker. Tell the next settlement there were bandits working the road. Send help if anyone had help to *send*.

The boy made a small sound, bitten off almost immediately. Chris looked back at him. His fingers curled in the dirt. He was shaking. Not acting. Not enough. Chris sat there with his hand on his gun and the door open beside him, feeling the heat, smelling rain, watching a trap breathe in front of him. Then he stepped out of the truck.

He kept his pistol low against his thigh, hidden by the angle of the door. "Hey," he called, voice even. "Can you hear me?" The boy's mouth trembled. He tried to speak. Nothing came out.

Chris took one step away from the truck, then another. The road felt too wide around him. Every instinct he'd built over the last nine months pressed hard against his ribs, telling him to move faster, move slower, get down, get back in the truck, draw, run, wait. He did none of it.

He watched the trees. Watched the ditch. Watched the boy. “I know,” he said quietly, though he wasn't sure whether he meant the injury or the trap or the apology already forming in the boy’s eyes. “Just stay still.” The boy’s lips parted. This time, sound came out.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. Chris stopped.

The woods moved. Not much. Just enough. A rifle barrel slid out from behind a curtain of kudzu, dark and steady, pointed at the side of his head. Another appeared near the ditch. Then a third, behind the horse. Chris let out a slow breath. “*Yeah*,” he muttered. “I know.”

The man with the red scarf made Chris walk first. That told him *plenty*. People who had *real* control usually put captives in the middle, boxed in where every gun could reach them and every mistake could be corrected before it became expensive. Putting him in front meant they wanted distance between him and the boy. It meant they were more worried about what Chris might do for someone else than what he might do for himself. It also meant at least one of them had looked at him and decided his leg made him manageable.

Chris let them think that. The shotgun stayed behind his right shoulder, close enough that he could feel the man’s attention more than the barrel itself. Two rifles walked wide, one on either side of the road, boots whispering through the grass and gravel. A fourth bandit dragged the boy up from the ditch with a fist twisted in the back of his shirt, ignoring the sharp, strangled sound that tore out of him when his injured arm shifted wrong. Chris stopped. The shotgun clicked.

“Keep *walking*.”

Chris looked back slowly, not enough to look like a threat, enough to let the man see his face. “He can’t walk like that.” The man’s eyes narrowed. Up close, he was older than Chris had first thought. Forties, maybe. Weathered skin, dark stubble, a scar cutting through one eyebrow. Not starving. Not desperate. Too clean for someone living hand-to-mouth on bad luck. His shirt was sweat-stained and his boots were muddy, but his shotgun was oiled and his belt held more shells than a hungry man wasted carrying.

“Then he can *crawl*.”

The boy’s good eye flicked toward Chris, wide and wet and terrified. Chris held the bandit’s stare for one second longer than was smart. Then he nodded once, like he'd accepted the answer, and turned forward again. He didn't accept it. He put it away.

The bandit with the red scarf wasn't careless. Cruel, yes. Comfortable with it. But not *stupid*. That made him more dangerous than the others. The one dragging the boy was younger, bigger, broad across the shoulders and eager in the way men got when they wanted someone to notice their strength. The two riflemen moved differently from each other. One kept

scanning the trees, nervous enough to expect trouble from outside the trap. The other watched Chris’s hands.

Good.

Let him.

Chris kept his hands visible, palms open, fingers loose. He walked with a faint unevenness he didn't bother hiding. The long drive had stiffened his right side anyway, and the storm pressure had settled into his joints with a dull, familiar ache. If they wanted to read that as weakness, he wasn't going to correct them.

Behind him, one of the bandits climbed into the driver’s seat of his truck. Chris heard the door creak. Heard the man rummage through the cab. Heard paper shift, then the hard clack of the glove compartment opening. His jaw tightened before he could stop it.

The red-scarf bandit noticed.

“Something precious in there?”

Chris kept walking. “If you break the latch, it sticks.” The man laughed. “That all?”

“It’s annoying.”

“Hear *that?*” the man called back. “Don’t break his latch. Wouldn’t want to be *rude*.”

A few of them laughed. The boy didn't. The narrow side road swallowed them within a hundred yards. The air changed under the trees. The heat didn't ease, but it thickened, turning wet and close as the road dipped away from the old highway and ran along a shallow stretch of swampy ground. Pine gave way to cypress and sweetgum, their roots pushing up through mud and standing water. Spanish moss hung in gray strips from the branches. Mosquitoes gathered in whining clouds. Somewhere deeper in the green, something splashed once and went still.

Chris counted turns.

Right off the highway. Shallow bend left. Broken culvert. Two downed signs, both stripped clean. A patch of road where water had eaten the asphalt from underneath and left it sagging at the middle. They weren't far from the main road yet, but the trees made it feel farther. That was the *point*, probably. A truck could disappear down here without *anyone* on the highway seeing where it went. The boy stumbled behind him.

This time, Chris didn't stop. Not because he didn't *want* to. Because the big one dragging him had already shifted his grip, and Chris heard the shotgun lift a fraction behind him. One bad moment now would get the kid hit or shot before Chris could do anything useful. So he walked. He listened instead.

The boy was breathing too fast. Not enough air, too much pain, maybe panic. The bandit dragging him favored his left leg. The nervous rifleman kept stepping around puddles instead of through them, which meant he cared about noise or snakes or both. The one watching

Chris’s hands had a habit of clearing his throat before he spoke, and Chris heard it twice before the man finally said, “You sure about taking him back to the house?” Red Scarf didn't answer right away. Chris kept his eyes forward.

“You got a better idea?”

“Truck’s enough. Supplies too. Could leave them.”

“*Could*.”

The silence after that wasn't empty. It'd weight. The rifleman cleared his throat again. “Just *sayin'*. Road’s getting busy.”

“That’s why we’re not *standing* on it.” Red Scarf’s voice stayed easy, but something underneath it cooled. “And I don’t like leaving people alive who can describe my face.”

The boy’s breathing hitched. Chris kept walking. There it was, then. Not ransom. Not yet. Not unless they found something in his truck worth changing their minds over. For now, he and the kid were loose ends with pulses.

The road narrowed again, curving around a stand of trees before dropping toward a sagging wooden bridge. It crossed a black ribbon of water too sluggish to be called a creek and too narrow to be a river. The bridge boards had been patched with mismatched planks, some old, some recent, all of them soft-looking under the damp. A dead raccoon lay bloated in the mud below, flies lifting and settling along its ribs.

Chris stepped onto the bridge and felt the boards shift beneath his boots. Not rotten through. Weak, though. The big bandit behind him cursed as the boy dragged his feet over the first plank. “Move.”

“I’m *tryin'*,” the boy said, voice thin.

It was the first real sentence Chris had heard from him since the apology. Younger than fourteen, maybe, if fear had stripped his voice down. Or maybe fourteen exactly, caught in that miserable space where the world expected work from him before his face had finished growing into itself. Chris didn't look back. “Step on the boards near the edge,” he said. The shotgun jabbed his shoulder hard enough to make him stumble half a step. “Nobody asked you.” Chris recovered his balance and kept his hands open. “Middle’s soft.” For a second, nobody moved.

Then one of the riflemen muttered, “He’s right.” Red Scarf made a low, irritated sound. “Fine. Edges.” They crossed slower after that. On the far side, the road turned from broken asphalt to packed dirt, then to two muddy tracks cut through low ground. Water glimmered between the trees in shallow pools. The smell changed again, heavier now—mud, rot, fish, old gasoline, damp wood. Chris’s truck came behind them a few minutes later, tires grinding over the bridge. Whoever was driving it took the boards too fast.

Chris heard the bridge groan. He hoped it dropped the truck into the creek. It didn't. The stilt house appeared after another bend, rising out of the swamp like something the water had tried

to swallow and failed to finish.

It might've been a fishing cabin once. Maybe a hunting shack. Maybe someone’s half-illegal weekend place before the Fall, built up on wooden pilings over black water and mud, with a slanted metal roof and a screened porch sagging at one corner. Now sheets of corrugated metal had been nailed over the windows. A rope ladder hung beside a warped staircase. Empty fuel cans sat in a pile near the steps. Two rusted vehicles were parked under a lean-to made from scavenged signs and blue tarp, and a third sat deeper in the trees with its hood up like an animal left to die.

Chris’s truck rolled in behind them and stopped near the shack. That bothered him more than the guns. The truck was his. Not because he'd owned it long enough to get sentimental, though he'd. It *was* his Abuelo's truck, from before the Fall, after all. Rather, because it carried everything that made the road possible. Fuel. Water. Tools. Spare parts. Ammunition. Medical supplies. Maps. May’s letter. The route sheet from San Antonio. The small box of things he didn't need every day but couldn't afford to lose.

A bandit jumped down from the cab with Chris’s keys looped around one finger. Chris watched them swing. Red Scarf watched Chris watching.

“That’s a good truck.”

“It complains a lot.”

“*Most* useful things do.”

The man nodded toward the space under the house. “Put 'em in the pen.” The pen wasn't a pen. It was worse, in the way improvised things often were.

Someone had dragged two livestock gates under the house and wired them between the pilings, then reinforced the gaps with chain-link fencing, hog panels, and pieces of old storm shutter. The floor wasn't a floor so much as a narrow strip of warped boards laid over mud and shallow water. A rusted padlock held the gate shut. A length of chain wrapped through one of the pilings and around the frame, thick enough to look intimidating from a distance.

From up close, Chris saw three problems with it before they shoved him inside. The lower hinge was rusted nearly through. The left piling had gone soft at the base. The chain was strong, but whoever had wrapped it'd chosen the wrong angle.

Good.

The big bandit pushed the boy in first. He hit the boards hard, catching himself with his good arm and choking on a cry when his bad one struck the gate. Chris moved before he thought about it, one step forward, and the shotgun came up behind him.

“Easy.”

Chris stopped. The boy curled in on himself, shaking. Red Scarf leaned close enough that Chris could smell tobacco on him. “You really *do* have a problem.” Chris looked at the boy.

“With people bleeding on the floor?”

“With thinking you get a *vote*.”

The man shoved him into the cell. Chris let the momentum carry him farther than it needed to. He hit one knee, caught himself with both hands, and felt the boards flex beneath him. Pain flashed up his leg, bright and mean, but he kept his face still. Behind him, the gate slammed shut. Chain scraped. The padlock clicked.

For a few seconds, nobody spoke. Rain began to fall. Not hard. Not yet. Just the first fat drops ticking against the metal roof above them, slow and uneven. The sound echoed under the shack, turning the space smaller.

Red Scarf crouched outside the gate, shotgun balanced across his knees. “Here’s what’s gonna happen. My boys are going to see what you brought us. If you’re lucky, maybe there’s enough in that truck to make this quick.” The boy made a small, broken sound. Chris didn't look away from the man. “And if there isn’t?” Red Scarf smiled. “Then we get *creative*.” Chris nodded once, like that was useful information. It was. The man’s smile faded a little.

“You’re calm.”

Chris shifted back onto his heels. “Would *screaming* help?” One of the bandits behind him laughed. Red Scarf didn't. His eyes narrowed again, studying Chris with more attention than before. That wasn't ideal. Chris had preferred being underestimated. Underestimated people got room to work. Interesting people got watched. Red Scarf stood. “Search him again.” The big bandit opened the gate just enough to step inside. Chris let him come.

He kept his hands loose, head slightly bowed, weight angled like his right leg hurt worse than it did. The bandit grabbed his jacket first, rough hands patting down the pockets with more force than skill. He found the obvious things because Chris had left them obvious: a folded pocketknife, a half-empty matchbook, a coil of thin wire, two loose cartridges, a strip of dried meat wrapped in cloth.

He missed the shim sewn into the inside seam of Chris’s left cuff. He missed the narrow blade tucked flat inside the worn leather of Chris’s boot. He missed the fact that Chris had shifted half an inch when he stepped close, enough to put the bandit between him and the shotgun outside.

Not time yet. The bandit shoved him back and stepped out, holding up the pocketknife like a prize. Red Scarf looked unimpressed. “That it?”

“That’s it.”

Chris kept his face blank. The man stared at him another moment, then turned away. “Watch 'em. If either one starts making noise, shut 'em up.”

The gate locked again.

Footsteps moved overhead. The shack creaked as men climbed the stairs and crossed the porch. Chris heard his truck door open again. Heard supplies being dragged out, boxes opened, metal tools dropped hard on wood. A few seconds later, someone whistled.

“*Boss,*” a voice called. “You’ll wanna see this.”

Red Scarf glanced back once before heading for the truck. Chris waited until his boots were on the stairs before moving to the boy.

“*Hey*.” His voice dropped low, quiet enough not to carry past the rain and the noise overhead. “Look at me.”

The boy was curled against the far side of the pen, face pale, breath coming too fast. Up close, he looked even younger. Fourteen, definitely. Maybe recently. Dirt streaked his cheeks where tears had cut through it, and he kept one hand clamped over the soaked cloth on his arm like pressure alone could hold him together.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again.

“I know.” Chris eased closer, slow enough not to spook him. “What’s your name?”

The boy swallowed. “Eli. Eli Wescott.”

“Eli. I’m Chris.”

“I didn’t—” His breath hitched. “They said they’d *shoot* me if I didn’t—”

“I know,” Chris said again, firmer this time. “You were bait. That’s not the same thing as helping them.”

Eli stared at him, like he wanted to believe that and didn't know where to put it yet. Chris nodded toward his arm. “Can I look?” The boy hesitated, then loosened his grip.

The cut was ugly but not arterial. Deep enough to keep bleeding, shallow enough that panic had probably done almost as much damage as the blade. Whoever had wrapped it'd done a terrible job, either because they didn't care or because they wanted him bloody enough to sell the trap. Chris pressed two fingers above the wound, checking the flow, then pulled the knot tighter. Eli sucked in a breath and bit it down hard.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“It isn’t. But you’re doing fine.” Chris glanced toward the gate, then the pilings, then the soft left post half-swallowed by mud. “How many?”

Eli blinked. “What?”

“Bandits. How many did you see?”

“Six. Maybe seven. I don’t know. They grabbed me yesterday.”

“Where?”

“West road. I was comin' from Douglasville. Headed to Talladega.”

“Courier run?”

Eli nodded, shame flashing across his face. “Small route. Just letters and a medicine order. I’ve done it before.”

“How many times?”

“Three.”

Chris looked at him for a beat, then nodded. “That’s three more than most people.” Eli’s mouth trembled again, but this time it didn't break. Above them, someone laughed from inside the shack. Another voice cursed. A box hit the floor hard enough to shake dust loose from the boards over their heads. Chris looked up and saw the bottom of his own tool roll through a gap in the planks, unrolled across the floor above like they were picking meat off a carcass.

His jaw tightened.

Eli noticed. “That your truck?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

Chris looked back down at him. “You apologize a lot.”

“I got you caught.”

“No.” Chris shifted closer to the gate, letting his fingers brush the lower hinge as if he were only steadying himself. Rust flaked under his thumb. “*I* got me caught. There’s a difference.”

Eli stared at him. “Why?” Chris looked through the gate toward the swamp, where rain dimpled the black water and something moved beneath the surface with a slow ripple. He thought about the question. The easy answer was because the kid had been hurt. The truer answer was harder to say to someone who'd only known him for the worst ten minutes of both their days.

“Because you were still bleeding. That made you real,” Chris said finally.

Eli didn't answer.

Chris turned his wrist, testing the give in the hinge again. Not much. Enough, maybe, with time. The chain wouldn't break. The lock would take too long. The post was the answer. Soft

wood, bad angle, weight in the wrong place. Whoever built the pen had wanted it to look strong. They'd not cared whether it actually was. That was going to cost them.

Rain struck harder overhead, drumming against the metal roof. The storm had arrived properly now, turning the world beyond the shack gray and close. Good and bad. Bad for driving. Good for noise. Good for cover. Good for men who thought rain meant captives stayed where they were put.

Chris slid his left thumb along the inside seam of his cuff and felt the edge of the shim. Eli watched him, confusion cutting through the fear. Chris put one finger to his lips. Above them, Red Scarf’s voice rose through the floorboards.

“Well, hell,” he said, pleased now. “Looks like our boy’s got friends in *important* places.”

Chris went still. A second later, paper unfolded overhead. *May’s letter.* Eli looked at him. Chris kept his eyes on the gate. His voice, when it came, was barely louder than the rain.

“We’re leaving before they finish reading that.”

Chris waited until the laughter overhead covered the first scrape of metal. The shim slid free from his cuff with a soft tug, thin and flat and easy to miss unless someone knew exactly where to look. Eli stared at it like Chris had pulled a miracle out of his sleeve instead of a piece of scavenged steel filed down against a motel sink somewhere west of Waco. Chris shook his head once, barely, and the boy pressed his lips together hard enough to keep whatever question was trying to climb out of him from making noise.

Good.

Questions could wait. Breathing could wait. Panic could wait. The only thing that mattered right now was the gate, the rain, the men above them, and May’s letter unfolding in hands that'd no right touching it.

Chris crouched beside the lower hinge and pretended, for anyone glancing down through the slats, that he was checking Eli’s bandage again. The boards overhead were warped enough to leave gaps, but not wide ones. Movement showed through if a person knew to watch for it. Hands. Shadows. The flash of a boot crossing above. Rain helped, drumming against the metal roof and dripping from the edges of the house in uneven streams, but rain didn't make people blind.

It just made them lazy.

Above them, Red Scarf read aloud in a mocking drawl. “*Christopher*, I hope this reaches you before you decide to vanish into another state without tellin' anyone where you’re headed.” A few of the bandits laughed. Chris’s fingers tightened around the shim. Eli looked at him, then up, then back again. His face had gone pale beneath the bruises. Chris kept his voice low. “*Don’t listen*.”

“That’s your letter.”

“I know.”

“They’re *readin'* it.”

“I *know*.”

That was the problem. He knew *exactly* what they were reading. He knew the shape of May’s handwriting, the pressure of it where the pen had dug harder during the parts she'd been trying to make sound casual. He knew the line about Washington. The one about Columbia’s ministers being easier to impress once May had a route ledger in one hand and three months of San Antonio delivery receipts in the other. The one about Charleston Depot needing riders willing to take ugly roads without pretending they were safe.

He knew the line near the end, too. Chris pushed the memory down and worked the shim into the hinge seam.

The hinge wasn't the lock. That mattered. Locks made people feel safe. Hinges did the work. The padlock on the gate was heavy, old, and probably still functional enough to waste time. The hinge, though, had spent too many summers breathing swamp air and too many storms sitting half-wet under a house no one maintained. Rust had eaten into the pin. The bracket had pulled away from the gate frame by the width of a fingernail. Not much. Enough, maybe.

Chris pressed the shim down and felt the first gritty shift of metal. Eli sucked in a breath. Chris froze. The footsteps overhead paused. For three seconds, the whole swamp seemed to hold its breath with them. Rain ticked against the roof. Water dripped into the mud below. Somewhere under the house, a frog croaked once, then went silent.

“What was that?” someone above asked.

Chris moved before Eli could panic. He slid closer, gripped the boy’s wrist, and pressed two fingers over the tightened bandage like he'd been checking the wound the whole time. Eli understood half a second late and let out a thin, shaking sound that wasn't entirely fake. Chris raised his voice just enough to carry. “He’s *bleeding* through.”

A boot scraped overhead.

“Then tell him to *quit*.”

Chris looked up through the boards. He couldn't see the speaker’s face, only the shadow of legs and the underside of his own tool roll spread across the floor. “You want him alive or not?”

Silence.

Then Red Scarf’s voice, amused again. “Listen to that. Polite 'lil hostage thinks he’s the *doctor*.”

“I know pressure dressing,” Chris said.

“I’m sure you know all *sorts* of things.”

Chris didn't answer. After a moment, the boots moved away. Eli’s breath shook out of him. Chris leaned close. “If you’re going to make noise, make it *useful*.” The boy swallowed, eyes huge, and nodded. Chris went back to the hinge.

This time, he worked slower. The shim scraped rust from the seam in tiny increments, each movement hidden under the rain, under footsteps, under the bandits arguing over what parts of his supplies were worth keeping and what could be sold. Someone found the spare ammunition. Someone else found the sealed tin of coffee Buck had shoved at him before he left Page with the solemn expression of a man sending medicine into a war zone. Chris heard the lid pop open and closed his eyes for one brief second.

Then he opened them and kept working. The first hinge pin shifted. Not out. Not enough. But it moved. Chris changed angles, braced one shoulder against the gate, and pressed the shim deeper. His right knee sank into the mud between the warped boards. Cold water soaked through denim and into the brace beneath, turning the ache in his leg sharp. He ignored it. Pain was information. Later, it'd be a problem. Right now, it was just another thing happening.

“Chris,” Eli whispered.

Chris didn't look up. “What?”

“There’s one under the stairs.”

That made him look.

Eli nodded toward the far side of the pen, where the underside of the staircase dropped into shadow. At first, Chris saw only hanging moss, stacked fuel cans, and the dark line where the house’s pilings disappeared into black water. Then the shadow shifted.

A pair of boots.

Someone standing half under the stairs, out of the rain, close enough to watch the pen if he bothered to turn his head. Not Red Scarf. Too small. The nervous rifleman, maybe, the one who'd stepped around puddles and cleared his throat before speaking. He'd his back partly turned, shoulders hunched against the damp, rifle angled down but still in his hands.

Chris held still. The guard scratched at his neck, spat into the mud, and looked toward the vehicles. Not watching them. Not yet. Chris eased the shim free and shifted his weight away from the hinge. The plan changed shape in his head, quick and cold. The gate would open, but not silently. The hinge needed one hard pull, maybe two. The guard would hear that if he was close. Better to make him hear something else first.

Chris looked at Eli’s courier bag, tossed just outside the gate where the bandits had dropped it after emptying the obvious pockets. Brown canvas. Blood on one corner. Strap cut nearly through. Too far to reach by hand.

But not too far for the chain.

Chris curled his fingers around a loose tail of wire twisted through the lower panel. It'd been wrapped badly, the cut end left sticking inward where it could catch skin. He bent it back and forth twice until the metal weakened, then snapped off a six-inch length. Eli flinched at the sound, but the rain swallowed most of it.

Chris hooked the wire through the gate, caught the strap of the courier bag on the third try, and dragged it close enough to reach. Eli's face tightened. "There's nothin' in it. They took it."

"I don't need what was in it."

The boy blinked.

Chris pulled the bag through the gap and checked the buckle. Brass. Bent, but solid. Better than the shim for leverage. He worked the strap free, slid the buckle into his palm, and looked toward the guard again.

"When I tell you," Chris whispered, "you make noise."

Eli went very still.

"What kind of noise?"

"Scared."

"I *am* scared."

"Then use it."

Eli stared at him for one beat, then nodded. Chris returned to the hinge. The buckle fit poorly into the gap, too wide at first, until he angled it sideways and wedged the corner beneath the lifted edge of the bracket. He pressed down. Nothing. He shifted, put more weight through his left arm, and pressed again. The gate frame creaked. The guard under the stairs turned his head.

Chris whispered, "*Now*."

Eli screamed.

Not loud enough to sound planned. Loud enough to sound like a hurt fourteen-year-old finally losing the last thin thread of control. He curled around his arm and kicked once against the warped boards, making the pen rattle in a way that covered the second, harder crack from the hinge bracket. The guard swore and stepped closer. "*Shut up*."

Eli kept going, breathless now, half sob and half panic. Chris pushed down with everything he'd. The lower hinge tore free from the rotten wood. The gate dropped half an inch. The guard heard that. His rifle came up. "*Hey*."

Chris moved.

He grabbed Eli by the back of the shirt and yanked him away from the gate just as the guard stepped into view. The rifle barrel slid between the bars, too close, angled wrong for a clean shot but close enough to make the next second matter. Chris caught the barrel with both hands, shoved it sideways, and drove his shoulder into the loosened gate.

The upper hinge screamed. The gate buckled outward. The guard fired. The shot cracked under the house, deafening in the close space. Wood exploded from one of the pilings behind Chris. Eli cried out and hit the boards. Overhead, every footstep stopped at once. Chris twisted the rifle hard.

The guard held on.

For half a second, they fought through the gap in the broken gate, mud under Chris's boots, rain in his eyes, the rifle trapped between them. Then Chris slammed the stock down against the remaining hinge bracket. The impact jarred the guard's grip loose. Chris ripped the rifle forward, not enough to take it, enough to pull the man off balance.

The guard stumbled into the gate. Chris drove his knee into the broken frame. The upper hinge gave. The gate slammed outward into the guard's legs, taking him down into the mud with a wet, ugly sound.

"*Run,*" Chris snapped.

Eli didn't move.

Chris grabbed him under his good arm and hauled him up. Pain flashed across the boy's face, but his feet found the boards. Above them, men were shouting now, chairs scraping, boots hammering toward the stairs.

The guard in the mud reached for the rifle. Chris got there first. He brought the stock down against the man's temple once. Hard. The guard went slack. Not dead, probably. No time to check. Chris scooped up the rifle, shoved Eli toward the shadow behind the fuel cans, and pulled the boy down with him as the first bandit appeared at the top of the stairs.

"*Where are they?*" someone shouted.

Chris pressed a hand over Eli's mouth before the boy's breathing could give them away. Eli shook beneath his palm, wide-eyed and rigid, but he didn't fight. *Good kid.* Boots thundered down the stairs. One man hit the bottom and saw the broken gate. "*They're out!*"

Chris waited. The man took two steps toward the pen. Chris waited one more. The bandit turned, rifle lifting. Chris fired from under the stairs. The shot caught the man in the chest and threw him back against the piling. He hit the mud on his side and didn't get up. Eli jerked against Chris's hand. Chris leaned close to his ear. "Don't look."

More shouting erupted above them. Red Scarf's voice cut through it, sharp now, all amusement gone. "*Find 'em!*" Chris checked the rifle by feel. Bolt-action. One fired. Maybe four left, if the guard had loaded it properly. Maybe less, because people who built bad cages often counted badly too. His pistol was still somewhere in the truck or in someone's belt. His

truck was thirty feet away through rain, mud, open ground, and men who'd just realized their captives weren't where they'd left them.

He needed the truck. He needed Eli hidden. He needed Red Scarf alive long enough to know where the keys were. Another bandit came down the stairs slower than the first, shotgun raised, eyes searching the broken pen instead of the shadows beneath the steps. Chris recognized the big one who'd dragged Eli from the ditch. Broad shoulders. Bad temper. Too confident in his size.

Chris shifted the rifle. The bandit saw the movement. He fired. Buckshot tore through the fuel cans stacked beside them, punching metal with a sound like hail on tin. Eli screamed behind Chris's hand, and gasoline poured across the mud in a sharp, chemical rush.

Chris fired back.

The rifle kicked hard against his shoulder. The bandit spun and slammed into the stairs, one hand clapping over his side. He didn't fall. Big, then. Stubborn. Chris worked the bolt, but the man was already raising the shotgun again. A sound came from the swamp. Low. Wet. Hungry. Everyone froze for the wrong half second. The gunfire had drawn something. Chris didn't wait to see what.

He grabbed Eli and shoved him toward the far side of the shack, away from the gasoline spreading through the mud and the wet rasp dragging closer through the rain. "*Move*."

This time, Eli moved.

They scrambled through the narrow space beneath the house, ducking under crossbeams, slipping in mud, rainwater pouring off the roof in sheets beyond the pilings. Behind them, the wounded bandit shouted, and another shot blasted into the dark where they'd been. Wood splintered. Something snarled from the waterline, closer now.

Chris pushed Eli behind a stack of old crab traps near the back corner of the house. "Stay down. If *anyone* comes through there who isn't me, throw that at their face and run for the trees." Eli looked at the rusted trap, then at him. "What about you?" Chris checked the rifle again. Two rounds left. Maybe.

"I'm getting my truck back."

He didn't wait for the boy to answer. Chris moved before the bandits could settle, before they could understand the shape of the problem, before Red Scarf could turn chaos back into control. Rain hammered the roof. Gasoline spread under the stairs. A bloater dragged itself out of the black water near the broken pen, waterlogged and gray, one arm missing below the elbow, its jaw working around a sound that made the hair on the back of Chris's neck rise.

The wounded bandit on the stairs saw it first. He screamed. Chris ran for the truck. Chris made it six steps before the truck door opened.

The bandit who'd been tearing through the cab climbed out with Chris's pack in one hand and May's letter in the other, rain plastering his hair to his forehead. He was younger than Red

Scarf, maybe mid-twenties, narrow-faced and sharp-chinned, with the restless look of someone who thought speed could make up for judgment. He saw Chris coming through the rain with the stolen rifle in his hands and froze for half a second too long.

Chris fired.

The shot cracked across the yard, swallowed almost immediately by thunder. The bullet hit the truck door beside the bandit’s ribs, close enough to make him flinch backward and drop the pack. Close enough to tell him the next one wouldn't miss if Chris had time to aim. Not close enough to kill him, because Chris still needed to know where the keys were and because May’s letter was in his other hand. The bandit ducked behind the open door. “*He’s at the truck!*” Chris worked the bolt and kept moving.

The yard under the stilt house had become chaos. Rain came down hard now, turning dust to black mud and hammering the roof loud enough to distort distance. The wounded bandit on the stairs was trying to crawl away from the infected dragging itself through the broken gate, one hand pressed to his side, shotgun lost somewhere under the steps. The thing in the mud pulled itself forward with its remaining arm, jaw working, throat giving that wet, ruined rasp Chris had heard too many times to mistake for anything else.

Another ghoul answered from deeper in the swamp. Of course. Gunfire did that. Chris reached the truck as the bandit behind the door tried to swing Chris's pistol up. Chris slammed the rifle stock into the edge of the door, driving it back into the man’s shoulder. The bandit cursed, stumbled, and Chris caught his wrist with his left hand, twisting hard until the pistol dropped into the mud. The man swung at him with May’s letter still clenched between two fingers. That was a mistake. Chris drove his elbow into the man’s throat.

The bandit folded with a choked sound, and Chris ripped the letter from his hand before it hit the mud. He shoved it inside his jacket without looking at it, grabbed his pack from the ground, and kicked the fallen pistol under the truck where no one could reach it easily. His keys weren't in the ignition anymore. He checked anyway. Empty. Of course. He looked through the rain toward the shack.

Red Scarf stood at the top of the stairs. He'd Chris’s keys looped around one finger. For a second, neither of them moved. Then Red Scarf smiled. Chris hated him for that more than was useful.

The smile said the man understood leverage. The keys. The truck. The boy hidden somewhere beneath the house. The letter now tucked back against Chris’s chest. The mudder crawling through the yard. The storm closing over everything. Red Scarf looked at all of it and saw a board with pieces still left to move.

“You’re a busy 'lil thing,” he called.

Chris raised the rifle.

Red Scarf stepped back behind the porch post before Chris could fire. The bullet took a chunk out of the railing instead, splinters flashing pale in the rain. Empty. The rifle clicked dry when Chris worked the bolt again.

Red Scarf heard it. So did Chris.

“That’s *unfortunate*,” Red Scarf said.

Chris dropped the rifle and moved.

A shot tore through the rain where he'd been standing, punching into the truck’s rear panel. Chris ducked behind the front fender, pulled the narrow blade from his boot, and dragged his pack closer with one hand. The pack was soaked, half-open, and lighter than it should've been. He didn't have time to check what was missing. He needed a weapon, keys, Eli, and enough room to get both of them out before the swarmers turned the yard into a feeding pen.

Something slammed against the far side of the truck. The bandit he'd hit in the throat was still moving. Chris heard the man gagging, scrabbling through mud for the pistol under the truck. Chris crouched lower, caught the man’s wrist as it slid beneath the chassis, and drove the boot blade down through the back of his hand into the mud.

The bandit screamed. Chris wrenched the knife free, grabbed his pistol himself, and checked it by feel. *Loaded. Safety off. Custom grip. Mud-ruined maintenance. Good enough.*

“*Chris!*” Eli’s voice cut through the rain from under the house, thin and terrified.

Chris looked toward the sound. One of the riflemen had found him. Eli was backing away from the crab traps, one hand clamped uselessly over his injured arm, while the nervous bandit advanced with his rifle up and his face pale. He kept glancing toward the bloater near the broken pen, toward the wounded man on the stairs, toward the swamp. Too much happening. Too much noise. Too many directions. Nervous men fired too soon. Chris came around the truck and aimed the pistol.

“Hey.”

The bandit turned. Chris shot him in the shoulder. The rifle went off as the man fell, the shot blasting into the mud a foot from Eli’s leg. Eli flinched back so hard he hit one of the pilings. Chris crossed the yard in three strides, grabbed the fallen rifle, and kicked it away before the bandit could reach for it again.

“Stay down,” Chris told him.

The bandit clutched his shoulder, teeth bared. “Go to hell.”

“Busy.”

Chris turned to Eli. “You hit?” Eli shook his head too fast. “No. No, I—”

“Good. *Move*.”

They'd almost reached the truck when Red Scarf fired from the porch. The shot caught Chris high across the left arm, not clean, not deep enough to drop him, but hot enough to tear a sound out of his throat before he could swallow it. He staggered, shoved Eli down behind the truck bed, and returned fire twice without aiming well enough to do more than drive Red

Scarf back behind cover. His arm burned. Not useless. Bleeding. Later problem. Eli stared at the blood spreading through Chris’s sleeve. “You’re shot.”

“Grazed.”

“That’s *still* shot.”

“Argue later.”

Something hit the truck from behind. Chris turned, pistol up, and saw the first swamper drag itself against the rear tire, fingers scraping at rubber, mouth open. Its skin had gone gray-white from water, bloated in places, torn in others, clothes hanging in strips from a body that'd probably been dead longer than the road had been marked. Another one stumbled out of the cypress beyond the lean-to, slower but upright, one leg dragging through the mud.

Eli made a small, strangled sound. Chris shot the one at the tire through the head. The pistol jammed.

“Of *course*,” Chris snapped.

He shoved the gun into Eli’s good hand without thinking. The boy stared at it. “It’s broken.”

“Clear it.”

“What?”

Chris grabbed him by the wrist and pulled his hand down before the second biter could draw his attention away completely. “Tap. Rack. Try *not* to point it at me.” Eli’s breathing turned sharp, but his fingers moved. Clumsy, scared, but trained enough to know the motion once someone named it. The bad round flipped into the mud. The slide snapped forward.

Good.

Chris took the pistol back and shot the second biter when it came within ten feet. Red Scarf whistled from the porch.

“Well, *damn*,” he called. “You really *are* full of surprises.”

Chris looked up through the rain. Red Scarf had moved down three steps, shotgun in one hand, keys still looped in the other. He was watching Chris now without any amusement left in his face. Behind him, another bandit appeared in the doorway with a rifle, but he looked less interested in shooting Chris than in watching the swamp. More feral sounds had started up beyond the trees, pulled by gunfire and blood and the low animal panic of men realizing the place they'd chosen for a hideout had teeth.

“Keys,” Chris said.

Red Scarf laughed once. “You’re not in a position to negotiate.” Chris shot the bandit in the doorway. The man dropped out of sight. Red Scarf’s expression changed. There. Finally. Chris kept the pistol trained on him. Rain ran down his face, into his eyes, under his collar.

His left arm throbbed with each heartbeat. Eli crouched behind him, shaking so hard Chris could hear his teeth click.

“*Keys*,” Chris said again.

Red Scarf lifted the shotgun. Chris fired first. The bullet hit Red Scarf in the thigh. He shouted, buckled, and grabbed the railing hard enough to stay upright. The keys flew from his hand, arcing bright through the gray rain before landing in the mud near the bottom of the stairs.

Chris moved for them. Red Scarf moved too.

Wounded or not, he was fast. He came down the last steps with the shotgun swinging low, not aiming now, using it like a club. Chris ducked the first strike, caught the second on his forearm, and pain burst white through the fresh graze. The pistol slipped in his wet grip. Red Scarf drove into him shoulder-first, and both of them hit the side of the truck hard enough to rock it on its suspension.

Eli shouted something. Chris couldn't hear it over the rain and the blood rushing in his ears. Red Scarf shoved the shotgun across Chris’s throat. Chris got one hand between the barrel and his windpipe, boots sliding in mud, bad leg threatening to buckle under the angle. Red Scarf was heavier, stronger, and furious now, his face inches from Chris’s.

“Should’ve kept drivin',” the man hissed.

Chris drove his knee into the wound in Red Scarf’s thigh. The man screamed. Chris wrenched sideways, broke the pressure across his throat, and slammed the pistol up under Red Scarf’s ribs. He fired once. Red Scarf went still. For a second, he stayed upright, eyes wide, mouth working like he'd one last clever thing to say and couldn't find the breath for it.

Then he slid down the side of the truck and collapsed into the mud. Chris stood over him, breathing hard. He could see the man was still breathing, or struggling to, at least. The yard had gone strange around the edges. Rain. Smoke. Blood. Mud. The swampers still moving closer through the rain. Eli crying somewhere behind him without seeming to know he was doing it. Chris’s own heartbeat pounding so hard it made his vision pulse.

He lowered the pistol. Not done. Never done until they were moving. Chris bent, snatched the keys from the mud, and wiped them once against his jeans. His hands were shaking now. He let them. Shaking hands still worked.

“Eli.”

The boy looked up from where he'd crouched near the rear wheel, face streaked with rain and dirt, eyes fixed on Red Scarf’s unconscious body.

“Don’t look at him. Look at me.”

Eli dragged his gaze up.

“Get in the truck.”

“What about—”

“Truck. *Now*.”

That got through.

Eli scrambled for the passenger door, slipping once in the mud before catching the handle. Chris moved around the front, scanning the yard as he went. The wounded bandit near the stairs had stopped moving. The nervous one was still alive, curled around his shoulder and making a thin, keening sound. The one with the ruined hand had dragged himself halfway under the truck and passed out or died there. Chris didn't check which.

Another grayskin stumbled out from behind the lean-to. Chris shot it, then cursed when the pistol clicked empty. He threw it into the cupholder, climbed in, and shoved the key into the ignition. The engine turned once. Coughed. Didn't start. Chris stared at the dashboard.

“No,” he said.

Eli made a tiny sound beside him. Chris turned the key again. The engine coughed harder, caught for half a second, then died. Outside, something hit the side of the truck.

Chris closed his eyes for one breath, then opened them and listened past the rain, past Eli’s breathing, past the stiff scraping at the door. Fuel pump. Starter. Battery. Flooded? No. The bandit had been rummaging through the cab. Maybe he'd knocked the fuel cutoff switch. Maybe he'd pulled something under the dash. Maybe the truck, offended by theft and gunfire and swamp mud, had chosen the worst possible moment to be dramatic.

Chris reached under the dash with his right hand and felt for the toggle he'd installed after Abilene. Still off. Of course. The bandit must've hit it with his knee. Chris flipped it back, turned the key, and the truck roared to life. Eli let out a broken laugh that sounded almost like a sob. Chris threw the truck into reverse.

“Hold on.”

The truck lurched backward, tires spinning in mud before catching. A mudder disappeared under the rear bumper with a wet crunch. Chris backed hard around the lean-to, clipped one of the rusted vehicles, and spun the wheel toward the track out. The bridge waited somewhere beyond the bend, weak and slick and very possibly worse after the rain. Eli grabbed the dash with his good hand. “There’s another one!”

Chris saw it. Saw two. Saw more shapes between the trees, drawn slow and hungry toward the noise. He hit the gas. The truck surged forward through mud, past the broken pen, past the stilt house, past Red Scarf lying half in the rain. Chris didn't look back. He couldn't afford to. The road narrowed ahead, water rising in the ruts, trees clawing close on both sides.

Behind them, the shack vanished into gray rain and swamp-dark trees. Eli twisted in the passenger seat, still staring back. Chris kept both hands on the wheel.

“Eyes forward,” he said.

The boy turned slowly. Chris drove.

The bridge looked worse from this side. Chris had noticed the sag on the way in, the soft middle boards and the mismatched planks nailed down by people who'd cared more about crossing once than crossing safely. In the rain, it looked narrower, darker, slick enough that the headlights barely caught the edges before the road dropped toward it. Water ran across the boards in thin sheets, carrying mud, leaves, and pale curls of rotten bark down into the black creek below. Eli made a sound beside him, small and strangled. “Is that the bridge?”

“Yeah.”

“It didn’t look like that before.”

“Rain does that.”

That wasn't comforting. Chris knew it wasn't comforting. He didn't have a better answer. The truck hit the first board hard enough to make the whole frame shudder. Eli grabbed the dash with his good hand, fingers white-knuckled against cracked plastic. Chris kept the wheel steady and aimed for the edge, not the middle, tires bumping over the narrow line where the support beams should've been strongest. Should have been. The bridge groaned under them, old wood complaining beneath the weight of truck, supplies, mud, rainwater, fear. Behind them, something crashed through the brush. Eli twisted to look.

“Eyes forward,” Chris said.

The boy snapped back around. The bridge dipped under the rear tires. For one horrible second, the truck felt like it was sinking instead of rolling, the engine growling as the wheels fought for grip. Chris eased off the gas, then pressed again, just enough. Too much power would spin them sideways. Too little would leave them sitting in the middle of rotting planks with biters in the rain behind them and bandit bodies drawing every ghoul in the swamp.

The far boards rose under the headlights. Chris held his breath without meaning to. The truck lurched off the bridge and back onto mud. Eli let out a sound that might've been a laugh if it hadn't broken halfway through.

Chris didn't let himself answer it. Not yet. The track ahead was worse now, rutted deep by the truck’s first pass and filling fast. The windshield wipers dragged across the glass in uneven arcs, smearing rain and swamp grit into the headlights’ glare. Branches scraped the doors. Water slapped beneath the chassis. Once, the back end slid toward the ditch, and Chris corrected hard enough that pain snapped bright through his left arm. He hissed through his teeth. Eli noticed. Of course he did. “You’re bleedin'.”

“*Still* grazed.”

“There’s a lot of blood for *grazed*.”

“You want to argue about definitions or watch the road?”

Eli swallowed and looked forward again. *Good kid.* Chris drove until the swamp track opened back onto the false side road. He didn't slow at the turn. He took it too fast, the truck fishtailing through wet dirt before the tires caught broken asphalt. The old highway waited beyond the trees, wider and lighter even under the storm, and for the first time since he'd stepped out of the truck for the boy in the ditch, Chris felt the shape of escape settle into something real.

Not safety. Safety was a word people used when they wanted the road to be nicer than it was. Distance, then. Distance would do. They burst out of the tree line onto the main road, the false route marker flashing past on the right. Chris caught one glimpse of it through the rain —*the wrong circle, the clean nail, the stupid confidence of it*—and nearly stopped. Nearly. The thought came sharp and satisfying: *rip it down, break it, throw it into the ditch where no one else would follow it.*

Then Eli shivered beside him, and Chris kept driving. The marker could wait. The living couldn't.

He drove east for two miles before he let himself check the mirror properly. No headlights. No riders. No truck behind them. Just rain slanting across the road and the wavering gray line of pavement disappearing behind a curtain of water. The storm had swallowed the side road. It'd swallow tracks too, eventually, if the mud moved enough. Good and bad. Good because no one could follow easily. Bad because anyone else coming west would've no warning except the false marker and whatever was left of the horse. The horse. Chris’s grip tightened on the wheel.

“Was it yours?” he asked.

Eli blinked, still too pale, still breathing too fast. “What?”

“The horse.”

The boy looked out the side window, rain blurring the trees into dark streaks. “No. Mine was smaller. Brown. Her name’s Penny.” His throat worked. “They shot her when they grabbed me.”

Chris said nothing.

There were things people said because silence felt cruel, and there were things silence held better than words. Eddie had taught him that without meaning to. Buck had taught him the opposite, mostly by trying every word in the world until one finally helped. Chris had picked up pieces from both of them and still got it wrong half the time. For this, he stayed quiet.

Eli wiped at his face with the heel of his good hand, smearing rainwater, dirt, and tears across his cheek. “She was my uncle’s. I wasn’t supposed to take her past the west road.”

“Why did you?”

“Medicine order.” Eli’s voice got smaller. “Mrs. Bell’s baby’s been sick. Talladega had fever reducers. Douglasville didn’t.”

Chris glanced at him. The boy stared at the dashboard like it could save him from saying more.

“They took the box,” Eli said. “The one with the fever reducers. It was in my bag.”

Chris looked back at the road. For a few seconds, the only sound inside the cab was the rough drag of the wipers and the rain ticking hard against the roof. Then Chris eased his foot off the gas. Eli turned toward him. “What're you *doin'?*”

“Going back.”

The boy stared. “Back where?” Chris gave him a look.

Eli’s face drained. “*No*.”

“Yes.”

“There were *walkers*.”

“I know.”

“And bandits.”

“They’re occupied.”

“They might still be alive.”

“Some of them probably *are*.” Chris checked the mirror again, then turned the truck around in a wide, careful arc across the cracked highway. “That doesn’t mean they’re *organized*.”

Eli gripped the dash again, panic sharpening his voice. “You said you were gettin' me *home* first.”

“I was.”

“*Chris*.”

The way he said it made Chris look at him. Not angry. Not accusing. Scared in a way that'd finally run out of room to hide. Chris softened his voice without letting the truck slow. “Kid, that medicine was *why* you were on the road.”

“Mrs. Bell can send someone else.”

“Through the *same* road?”

Eli didn't answer.

“We’re not staying,” Chris said. “We’re not looking for a *fight*. We go in fast, grab what matters, and *leave*. You stay in the truck unless *I* say otherwise.”

“What if you don’t come back?”

Chris looked through the windshield, where the false marker came back into view through the rain. “Then you drive east until you hit Douglasville.”

“I don’t know how to drive a *truck*.”

“You’re about to learn enough.”

They passed the false marker and turned back onto the side road.

This time, Chris stopped before the trees fully swallowed them. He put the truck in park, took the pistol from the cup holder, and grimaced at the mud packed into the slide and around the trigger guard. The bandit had thrown it under the truck, and the swamp had done the rest. Chris popped the magazine, cleared the chamber, and worked with fast, economical movements, wiping mud away with the edge of his shirt and a strip of cloth from the floorboard. It wasn't a proper cleaning. It was barely a road cleaning. It was enough to keep the weapon from killing him by being stupid at the wrong moment.

Eli watched, pale and silent. Chris checked the barrel, cleared grit from the feed ramp with the corner of the cloth, reloaded, and racked the slide twice. The action felt rough, but it moved. Good enough. He handed Eli the rifle from the floorboard. The boy stared at it like it might bite him.

“You said you’ve done courier runs,” Chris said.

“That doesn’t mean I shoot people.”

“I’m not *asking* you to shoot people.”

“Then why are you givin' me a rifle?”

“Because if something dead gets to the window, you point this at its head and pull the trigger.”

Eli swallowed.

Chris held his gaze. “Only if you have to.” After a second, Eli nodded and took it. The side road looked worse the second time. Rain had filled the tire ruts, and the trees leaned close enough that branches scraped both sides of the truck as they drove. Chris kept the headlights low and killed them completely before the final bend, letting the gray storm-light guide the last stretch. The stilt house appeared through the rain like a bad memory that'd not had the decency to fade. It wasn't quiet. That was the first good sign.

Floaters, swampers, and grayskins moved under the house and around the broken pen, drawn by blood, gunfire, and the bodies the swamp hadn't yet claimed. Chris counted four in motion before the truck stopped behind a screen of trees. One dragged itself near the stairs. Another

lurched against the lean-to, hands slapping uselessly at the side of a rusted truck. A third bent over something in the mud. The fourth wandered in slow circles with half its face gone, following sounds no living person was making anymore. Eli made a small, sick sound.

Chris put the truck in park. “Stay here. Doors locked. If I yell, you slide over and drive.”

“I just *told* you I don’t know *how*.”

“Straight road out. Don’t hit trees.”

“That’s *not* drivin'.”

“It’s enough for a crisis.”

Eli looked like he wanted to argue, but Chris was already out of the truck. The rain hit him cold after the cab’s trapped heat. His arm throbbed. His leg ached. His throat hurt every time he swallowed. He kept low, pistol in both hands, moving through mud and brush toward the lean-to. The closest walker turned at the sound of his boots, mouth opening around a wet rasp. Chris waited until it came within six feet before firing once through the forehead.

The pistol cycled.

Good.

He moved faster after that. The medical kit was near the stairs, half-open where someone had dropped it. Chris grabbed it first. Then Eli’s courier bag, dumped beside a crate of stolen goods. Letters. Route notes. A small cloth-wrapped box marked in careful handwriting: BELL—FEVER. Chris shoved it into the bag and slung the strap across his chest.

One of the dead-heads lurched from behind the stairs. Chris shot it, stepped around the body, and went for the supplies.

He didn't have time to be delicate. He took what he could carry and what the truck could swallow fast: *ammunition from a damp crate, three rifles, two shotguns, a tin of loose cartridges, canned food, bandages, antiseptic, a roll of clean cloth, two fuel cans that were blessedly not empty, a box of matches, Eli’s medicine order, Chris’s maps, his spare filters, the coffee tin, and every sealed letter he could find with a route mark on it.* Stolen mail mattered. People waited on letters. Sometimes they waited longer than they could afford.

A shot cracked from inside the shack. Chris dropped behind the rusted van. For a second, he thought bandit. Then he heard the scream. Not human enough anymore. One of the ghouls had gotten inside.

Chris stayed where he was, breathing hard, listening. Another shot. A crash. Red Scarf’s voice, raw and furious, swearing from somewhere above. Alive, then. At least for the moment. Chris glanced toward the truck. Eli was visible through the rain, rigid in the passenger seat, rifle across his lap.

Chris lifted one hand. *Stay*. Eli stayed. Chris grabbed the last fuel can and backed toward the truck. He could leave. He *should* leave. Then he looked at the false-marker boards stacked

beside the porch, the extra route signs, the stolen courier bags, the cage under the house, the bodies in the mud, and the shack itself—*dry enough inside to shelter the next set of bandits if any of them crawled back here later.*

No. Not this one.

Chris set the fuel can down, unscrewed the cap, and splashed gasoline across the stacked signs first. Then the stairs. Then the porch supports. Then the pile of canvas and crates beneath the overhang. The rain fought him, thinning the fuel as soon as it hit, but not enough. Not with the dry tarp under the lean-to. Not with the old paper, oil rags, and scavenged cloth packed in crates along the wall.

The thing inside slammed into something hard enough to shake the porch. Red Scarf shouted again, weaker this time. Chris struck a match. For half a second, the flame trembled in the rain, tiny and stubborn between his fingers. Then he dropped it.

The tarp caught first. Fire crawled blue-orange across the gasoline sheen, then snapped up into the stacked signs and old cloth. Heat pushed back against the rain. Smoke rolled under the porch, dark and sharp, filling the space beneath the house as flames climbed the supports. Chris ran. Eli had the passenger door open before he reached the truck.

“You set it on *fire?*”

“Yes.”

“With them inside?”

Chris threw the supplies into the back and shoved the fuel cans behind the seat. “They had *choices*.” Eli looked toward the burning shack, face caught somewhere between horror and understanding. Chris climbed in, started the truck, and reversed hard through mud. The shack burned behind them, smoke flattening under the rain before rising in dirty sheets through the trees. The grayskins turned toward the heat. One stumbled straight into the flames beneath the porch and kept walking until fire climbed its clothes. They were almost to the bend when Eli whispered, “Chris.”

Chris followed his gaze. Red Scarf stood in the road. Not alive. Not anymore. He'd made it down from the porch somehow, or fallen, or crawled, or died halfway through trying, while Chris was busy with lighting the match. Now he stood crooked in the rain, one leg buckled where Chris had shot him, shirt dark with blood, head tilted at an angle no living person held for long. His red scarf clung wetly to his throat. His mouth opened.

The sound that came out wasn't a word. Eli stopped breathing. Chris stared at him for one second, then shifted the truck into drive.

“Don’t look away,” he said.

“What?”

“If you’re going to remember him, remember *this* part too.”

Chris hit the gas. The truck slammed into Red Scarf hard enough to throw him under the bumper. The body disappeared beneath the hood with a wet, final crunch. Eli flinched but didn't close his eyes.

Good.

Chris kept driving. The bridge held a second time. Barely. By the time they reached the main road again, the rain had begun to thin, and the burning shack was nothing but a dark smear of smoke behind the trees. Chris stopped long enough to rip the false marker from the pine and throw it into the ditch. Then he got back in the truck, checked Eli’s bandage, checked his own, and pointed them east. Neither of them spoke for a while.

The road unspooled ahead, wet and gray, reflecting the broken light between storm clouds. Eli held the recovered medicine box in his lap with his good hand, fingers curled around it like someone might still try to take it away.

“Mrs. Bell’s baby,” Chris said after a while. “How bad?”

Eli swallowed. “Bad enough they sent *me*.” Chris nodded once. That was answer enough. They drove east for another twenty minutes before the first signs for Douglasville appeared, hand-painted boards nailed to posts and trees. DOUGLASVILLE EAST. LITHIA BRIDGE QUESTIONABLE. ATLANTA ROAD CLOSED AFTER DARK. One sign had been shot through twice. Another had a newer board nailed beneath it, the paint fresher, the letters steadier.

COURIER BOARD AT SOUTH GATE.

Eli sat up straighter. “That’s ours.”

“South Gate?”

“Yeah. If the bridge holds, it’s maybe fifteen minutes.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then it’s an hour around.”

“Of *course* it is.”

They found the bridge still standing, though water lapped high against its supports and someone had posted a watchman beneath a sheet-metal lean-to on the near side. He stepped out with a rifle when the truck approached, then lifted one hand when he saw Eli through the windshield. His face changed so quickly Chris knew the boy had been missed.

Good.

That mattered more than Chris wanted to think about. By the time they reached Douglasville’s south gate, three people were waiting in the rain. The settlement had been built out of an old shopping center and the blocks around it, ringed with salvaged fencing, concrete barriers, sheet metal, and the bones of cars stripped down and welded into

barricades. Gardens filled the old parking lot. Watch platforms stood on the roof. A painted sign over the gate read DOUGLASVILLE in blue letters, with a smaller board beneath it: *LEAVE YOUR TROUBLE OUTSIDE OR DECLARE IT PROPERLY.*

Chris slowed.

Eli leaned forward, pressing his good hand to the dash. “That’s my mom.” Chris stopped the truck before the gate. The woman in the middle didn't wait for permission. She ran through the rain the second the wheels stopped, one hand pressed to her mouth, the other reaching for the passenger door before Eli had even managed to open it. Two men followed close behind her, one older with a gray beard and a shotgun, the other younger and furious in the way people got when terror hadn't found somewhere to go yet.

Chris got out slowly, hands visible. The older man’s shotgun came up halfway. Fair. Chris kept his voice even. “He needs a doctor. Arm’s cut. Maybe bruised ribs. He’s lost blood, but he’s awake and talking.”

Eli’s mother pulled him out of the truck and into her arms, careful and not careful at all. Eli made a broken sound, half pain and half relief, and buried his face against her shoulder like he was much younger than fourteen. She held him anyway, rain running down both of them.

The younger man looked at Chris’s bloody sleeve, then at the mud on the truck, then at the rifles and fuel cans in the back. “What happened?” Chris glanced toward Eli. The boy lifted his head just enough to look back at him.

“Bandits,” Chris said. “West road. False marker. Swamp shack off the old side route. It’s burned now. Rotters, floaters, mudders, whatever you all call them, around here.”

The older man’s face hardened. “How many?”

“Bandits? Six or seven. They’re not using that road again.”

The younger man stared at him. Chris didn't have the energy to soften it. Eli’s mother looked up then, eyes red, one arm locked around her son. “You brought him home.” Chris shifted his weight, suddenly more aware of the blood cooling under his sleeve and the mud drying on his jeans than he'd been while anyone was shooting at him. “He told me where home was.” That wasn't an answer. It was the only one he'd.

Eli pulled back enough to shove the medicine box toward the younger man. “For Mrs. Bell. Fever reducers. They'd it, but we went back.” The younger man’s anger changed shape. Not gone. Redirected. He took the box like it weighed more than it did and disappeared through the gate at a run. The older man lowered the shotgun. “Come inside. We’ll patch that arm.”

Chris looked at the gate, the watch platforms, the people gathering under awnings and doorways, the courier board visible just inside with papers flapping under a strip of oilcloth. He looked east, where the road kept going beyond Douglasville, wet and gray and waiting.

“In a minute,” he said. “First, I need a hose.”

The older man blinked. “A hose?” Chris nodded toward the truck’s fuel gauge. “Bandits took my cans. I got some back, but not enough. If you’ve got anything dead with gas left in it, I can trade.”

For a second, no one spoke. Then Eli, still tucked against his mother and shaking so badly she'd to hold him upright, let out a small, exhausted laugh.

“Told 'ya,” he said, voice muffled. “He’s a courier.”

Chris looked at him. Then at the road.

“Not *yet*,” he said.

Douglasville did *not* make Chris barter for fuel. He tried anyway, because road habits were hard to put down and because accepting help without offering something in return still felt too close to owing a debt he hadn't agreed to carry. The older man with the gray beard only looked at him over the rim of a dented fuel can and told him, very calmly, that anyone who brought a missing child home with the medicine that child had nearly *died* trying to deliver could stop insulting the town by reaching for trade goods.

Chris closed his mouth.

The man grunted like that settled it and waved two younger workers toward the truck. Within minutes, they'd a hose running from a dead county maintenance vehicle parked behind the gate, one of its doors missing and its hood permanently propped open with a broom handle. The gas came slow, dark through the tubing before it cleared, and Chris watched with the exhausted focus of someone who'd spent too long measuring distance in gallons.

“It’s not much,” the older man said.

“It’s fuel.”

“It’s *old* fuel.”

“Truck’s old too. They can complain together.”

The man huffed once, not quite a laugh, and handed the can off when it filled. “Name’s Amos Barrow. Eli's my grandson.” Chris took it with his good hand. “Chris.”

“I *gathered*.” Amos nodded toward the gate, where Eli had disappeared with his mother, the medicine box, and half the town’s attention. “Boy hasn’t said much that *wasn’t* your name since they got him inside.”

Chris looked away first.

Douglasville was smaller than Page, smaller even than some of the route towns Chris had passed through on the way east, but it'd the same stubborn architecture of survival: walls built from whatever had been available, gardens in places no one before the Fall would've thought to plant anything, watch platforms above storefronts, laundry strung beneath awnings, children being shooed away from gates by adults who were trying not to look scared in front of them. The old shopping center at the heart of town had been turned into everything at once. Clinic. Storehouse. Meeting hall. Workshop. Courier board. Chapel on Sundays, apparently, judging by the hand-painted sign near the old nail salon.

It was messy. It was alive. Chris liked it more than he expected to.

“Doctor’ll want that arm, and since she has my wife, I know that for a *fact*,” Amos said.

“It’s fine.”

Amos gave him a look that was old enough to have survived too many versions of that sentence. “Didn’t ask.”

Chris considered arguing.

His arm throbbed. His throat hurt. His leg had stiffened so badly since getting out of the truck that the first few steps toward the clinic were going to be ugly no matter how much pride he tried to put on top of them. He handed Amos the fuel can. “Fine.”

The town doctor worked out of what'd once been an urgent care at the end of the shopping center, its front windows reinforced with plywood and storm shutters, the old glowing sign above the door stripped down to the metal frame. Inside, it smelled like antiseptic, rain-damp clothes, boiled water, and the faint medicinal bitterness of herbs drying from strings along the back wall. A woman in her sixties with silver hair braided down her back pointed Chris to a chair before he made it three steps inside.

“Sit.”

Chris sat. She cut the makeshift bandage off his arm with small scissors and made a sound in the back of her throat. Not alarmed. Not impressed. Irritated, mostly.

“You call this wrapped?”

“Temporary.”

“That means *no*.”

“It stopped most of the bleeding.”

“So does losin' *consciousness*, if we’re settin' the bar on the *floor*.”

Chris shut up.

The doctor’s name was Alma Barrow, which Chris learned when someone pushed through the curtain to tell her the baby’s fever had started to come down. For the first time since he'd

walked into the clinic, her face changed completely. The sharp, practical lines softened. Her eyes closed for half a second, and one hand pressed flat against the counter like the news had taken weight out of her knees.

Then she opened her eyes, looked back at Chris’s arm, and snapped the mask of town doctor right back into place.

“You went back for the medicine.”

Chris watched her thread a needle. “Eli said they took it.”

“Most people would've kept drivin'.”

“Most people weren’t already halfway there.”

She gave him a dry look. “I’m too old to pretend that made sense.”

“It made enough.”

Alma cleaned the graze properly after that, which meant painfully. The bullet had torn a long, ugly track along the outside of his upper arm, shallow enough to be lucky and deep enough that luck still needed stitches. Chris fixed his eyes on the far wall while she worked, counting jars on the shelf instead of breaths. Dried yarrow. Alcohol. Bandage rolls. Feverfew. Penicillin, labeled in careful black marker and locked behind glass. Someone had painted small blue flowers around the cabinet frame, probably years ago, probably to make the clinic look less like a place people came to bleed.

It didn't help much.

“You’re goin' to feel this,” Alma said.

“I figured.”

“That means don’t move.”

“I figured that too.”

The first stitch pulled fire through his arm. Chris didn't move. By the fourth, Alma glanced at his face. “You’ve had practice.”

“Unfortunately.”

She tied off the thread and reached for a clean wrap. “You have people lookin' for you?” Chris thought of Page. Of Buck and Eddie. Of letters folded and forwarded through depots that still felt too new to trust completely. Of May in Washington, writing like she could build a road out of stubbornness and ink. “Not *nearby*.”

Alma heard the part he didn't say and let it sit. When the curtain opened again, Amos stepped through with Chris’s Beretta resting on a folded cloth in both hands. For one second, Chris only stared. The pistol looked wrong because it looked *clean*.

The mud was gone from the slide, from the trigger guard, from the rail beneath the barrel. The stainless finish had been wiped and polished until it caught the clinic’s lamplight in soft lines. The black grip panels had been cleaned out around the screws and checkering, the wood trim oiled just enough to bring back the warmth in it. Even the green-and-gold S.T.A.R.S. medallions set into the grips looked brighter than they'd in months. Amos held it out grip-first. “Found it on the floorboard. Figured it deserved better than *swamp mud*.”

Chris took it carefully. The weight settled into his hand, familiar as his own bones.

“Thank you.” His thumb brushed over the green medallion before he could stop it, tracing the raised star beneath the glassy enamel. “Haven’t seen it this clean in a little over a year.”

Amos’s eyebrows lifted. “You’ve had it *that* long and let it get that dirty?”

“Today was *unusual*.”

“Mm.” Amos didn't sound convinced. “*Pretty* piece.”

“It works.”

“Pretty things can work.”

Chris looked at the pistol again. “Yeah.” He didn't explain where he'd found it. Didn't explain the crate in the abandoned checkpoint, the oiled cloth, the way Jace had laughed himself breathless over the reference while Chris insisted he carried it because it was reliable. He didn't explain that *most* things he owned had stories attached now, and he was tired enough that any one of them might start pulling loose if someone tugged too hard.

Instead, he checked the chamber, checked the magazine, and set the safety before sliding the Beretta back into its holster. Alma finished wrapping his arm and tied it off with more force than strictly necessary. “No heavy liftin' for a week.” Chris looked at her. She looked back.

“Fine,” she said. “Try not to get shot again before supper.”

“*That* I can probably manage.”

“*Probably*,” she repeated, unimpressed.

Amos snorted.

Chris flexed his fingers, testing the wrap. Tight but not too tight. Professional. Better than anything he'd've done one-handed in the cab. “How’s the Bell baby?” Alma’s expression shifted again, softer and more tired. “Fever’s comin' down. Not out of trouble yet, but better. Without those reducers, tonight would've been worse.”

“Good.”

“That all you’ve got?”

Chris glanced up.

“You burned down half a swamp to get that medicine back,” she said. “*Good* seems a little light.”

Chris rested his hand on his knee. “Good is what I was *hoping* for.” For a moment, Alma only looked at him. Then she nodded, once, like she'd decided not to push.

“Eli?” Chris asked.

“Shaken. Bruised. Cut up. Scared half out of his skin.” Alma tied off the last strip of bandage and began cleaning the tray beside her. “Otherwise *fine*.”

Amos leaned back against the counter. “Also thinks you hung the moon.”

Chris blinked. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“He watched me almost get both of us *killed*.”

“Fourteen-year-old boys are *terrible* judges of character,” Alma said.

“Noted.”

Amos nodded toward the front of the clinic, where voices moved low behind the curtain. “He’s tellin' *anyone* who’ll listen you knew the trap was there and walked into it *anyway*.” Chris winced. “That sounds worse when someone else says it.”

Alma’s eyes sharpened.

He corrected himself before she could say anything. “That sounds *irresponsible*.”

“It *was*.”

“It worked.”

“Those aren't the same thing.”

Chris had no good argument for that, so he didn't try one. The curtain opened a few minutes later, and Eli’s mother stepped in.

She'd changed out of the rain-soaked shawl she'd been wearing at the gate, but her hair was still damp, and her eyes were red in a way that'd nothing to do with the weather. Up close, Chris could see the resemblance between her and Eli in the shape of the mouth, the stubborn set of the chin, the way she looked at the room once before settling on him like she needed to make sure every exit and every injury had been accounted for.

“I’m Tamara Wescott, Eli's mother,” she said.

Chris stood because it felt rude not to. Alma immediately pointed at him. “Sit down.”

Chris sat.

Tamara almost smiled. Almost. “Eli’s sleepin'.”

“Good.”

“He asked if you were still here before he passed out.”

Chris looked down at his hands. “I was waiting on fuel.”

“You were *waitin'* on stitches.”

“Also that.”

She stepped farther inside, fingers worrying at the edge of her sleeve. “My father said you’re headed east.”

“Charleston, eventually.”

“For courier work?”

Chris hesitated. “Maybe.”

“Eli told me about San Antonio. About the depot there.”

“He got all that out before sleeping?”

“He got a lot out.” This time, Tamara did smile, but it broke quickly. “He said if he ever wanted to be a real courier, you told him to go there.”

Chris rubbed his thumb once against the seam of his jeans. “If he ever wants the job after today, San Antonio’s a decent place to learn. Ravi and Switch know what they’re doing. Tell 'em Chris sent him.” Amos made a thoughtful sound. “That name mean somethin' there?”

“Enough to get him yelled at properly.”

“That’s *useful?*” Tamara asked.

“More useful than being praised badly.”

She looked toward the curtained doorway, where Eli was somewhere beyond it, asleep or pretending to be. “He won’t stay here after this.”

No one answered right away. Outside, rainwater dripped from the clinic roof into a barrel below the window. Voices moved through the settlement, quieter now that immediate panic had given way to the work that came after it. Fuel. Medicine. Watch reports. Someone swearing about the west road. Someone else crying softly where they thought no one could hear.

Tamara folded her arms tight across her chest. “Douglasville used to be far enough east that the worst of Gulf Country didn’t reach us unless we went *lookin'* for it. That’s changing. Roads are openin'. People are movin'. Bandits are followin' the movement.”

Chris listened.

“I can’t keep him from wantin' the road,” she said. “I tried. His father would've tried harder, but he’s not here, and Eli has always had more *courage* than sense.”

“That’s not rare at fourteen.”

“No.” Her eyes settled on him. “But courage gets children *killed* when no one teaches 'em what it costs.”

Chris felt that land somewhere under his ribs. Tamara drew a breath. “Would it be a burden if he rode with you to Charleston?”

Chris looked up.

Amos went very still beside the counter. Alma didn't look surprised. That meant this had been discussed before Tamara walked in, or at least considered long enough that the shape of it already existed between them.

“He’s fourteen,” Chris said.

“I know how old my son is.”

“Charleston’s not close.”

“Neither is *Talladega*, apparently.”

Fair.

Tamara's voice stayed steady, but Chris could hear the work it took. “There’s a depot there. *Real* work. Older couriers. People who know the longer routes. If he stays *here*, he’ll keep taking small runs because people need medicine and letters and because he thinks bein' useful means sayin' *yes* before someone older can stop him.” Chris looked toward the curtain.

“I’m not *tryin'* to get rid of him,” Tamara said, quieter now.

“I didn’t think that.”

“I’ll follow as soon as I can. There are things to settle here. My sister’s family. The house. Mrs. Bell’s baby isn’t the only one who needs help. But Charleston is safer than this border, or at least safer in ways I understand.”

Chris thought of what May had written about Charleston. Old money. Harbor routes. Formal councils. A depot that needed riders badly enough for the news to reach San Antonio. Safer, maybe. Not simple. Not harmless. But different. Different could be enough.

“Does Eli know you’re asking?”

“No.”

“He should.”

“He will.” Tamara's voice softened. “But if you say no, he doesn’t need to know I asked.”

Chris looked down at his wrapped arm, then at the polished Beretta resting secure in its holster, then toward the door where the road waited beyond Douglasville’s walls. He'd gotten used to being alone because there'd not been much choice. Alone meant fewer people to protect. Fewer arguments. Fewer voices in the cab when the nights got too long and the silence started sounding like old memories. It was easier, sometimes.

It was also exhausting.

He thought of Eli in the ditch, shaking his head because he knew exactly what kind of trap he'd become. He thought of the boy holding the medicine box like a lifeline. He thought of San Antonio, of Switch tapping the route sheet, of Ravi laughing behind the counter, of May’s letter telling him there might be a place for him if he wanted one. Maybe places weren't the only things people found on the road. Chris looked at Tamara. “If he wants to go, I’ll take him.” Her face changed so quickly he'd to look away.

“I can’t promise it’ll be safe,” he said.

“I know.”

“I *can* promise I won’t treat him like extra baggage.”

“That’s what I’m askin'.”

Chris nodded once. “Then yeah. He can ride with me.” Amos exhaled, long and quiet. Alma patted Chris’s bandage with more gentleness than she'd used before, then ruined it by tightening the knot one last time. Chris winced.

“For the road,” she said.

“Of course.”

Tamara looked toward the curtain again, and this time the smile stayed, fragile but real. “He’ll be *unbearable* when he wakes up.” Chris thought about Eli calling him a courier at the gate, about the way the boy had laughed even while shaking apart, about the empty passenger seat that'd been empty for most of nine months. He let himself smile back.

“I could use the company."

Eli woke up angry. That was better than scared, Chris thought, though not by as much as Eli probably believed.

The boy came out of the clinic room with his arm freshly wrapped, his face still bruised, and his mouth set in a hard line that looked too deliberate to be natural. Someone had found him dry clothes from a donation bin or a cousin or a neighbor who'd outgrown them last year. The shirt hung loose at the shoulders, and the pants had been cuffed twice above his boots. He looked smaller without the road dust and blood, which made the stubborn lift of his chin do more work than it should've.

Tamara walked behind him with one hand hovering near his back, close enough to catch him if he swayed and far enough away that he could pretend she wasn’t. Amos followed with a leather tool roll tucked under one arm and a shotgun in the other. Alma came last, wiping her hands on a towel like she'd personally argued Eli back into one piece and expected everyone to understand how little patience she'd left for foolishness.

Chris stood beside his truck near the south gate, pretending he hadn't been watching the clinic door for the last ten minutes.

The fuel cans had been refilled. Not full, but enough. Someone had stacked extra water behind the driver’s seat, along with a paper sack of food, two clean bandage rolls, and a jar of something Alma had called salve in a tone that suggested Chris would regret not using it. Amos had checked the tire pressure, tightened a loose bracket under the rear bumper, and cleaned enough swamp mud out of the wheel wells that the truck no longer sounded like it was chewing gravel every time Chris moved it.

Douglasville had given him more than he'd asked for. That sat uneasily under his ribs. Eli stopped a few feet away from him. “My mom says I’m goin' with you.” Chris glanced past him to Tamara. She looked tired enough to break and determined enough not to.

“Your mom asked if I could take you to Charleston,” Chris said.

Eli’s eyes narrowed. “That’s not the same thing.”

“No.”

“Did you say yes?”

“I said if you wanted to go, I’d take you.”

For a second, Eli’s expression shifted. Not relief. Not exactly. Something sharper and younger, gone almost as soon as it appeared. Then he looked down at the ground, scuffed one boot against the wet pavement, and tried to sound like his voice hadn't changed. “I wanna go.”

Tamara closed her eyes for half a second. Chris saw it and looked away. There were some kinds of courage nobody clapped for. Letting a child leave because staying was starting to look more dangerous than the road was one of them.

“Then we need rules,” Chris said.

Eli looked up fast. “I know how to follow rules.” Amos made a sound that said the opposite. Eli shot him a look. Amos didn't appear moved. Chris leaned back against the truck, careful with his stitched arm. “First rule: *if I tell you to get down, you get down*. You don’t ask why. You don’t look around first. You don’t decide you know better because you saw something interesting.” Eli’s jaw tightened. “I’m not *stupid*.”

“Didn’t say you were.”

“You kind of *did*.”

“No. I said interesting things get people killed.”

Alma nodded once, approving of that at least. Eli looked like he wanted to argue and knew he'd lose. “Fine.”

“Second rule: *you tell me before you’re too hurt, too tired, too hungry, or too scared to think straight.*”

“I’m not gonna complain the whole *way*.”

“That’s not what I said.” Chris held his gaze. “Road doesn’t care if you’re trying to be tough. It just uses whatever you don’t admit.”

That landed. Eli looked away first. Chris softened his voice a little. “Third rule: *you don’t touch a weapon unless I hand it to you, or something dead is close enough that not touching it is worse.*” Amos shifted the shotgun to his other hand. “He knows basic safety.”

“Basic safety and road panic aren’t the same thing.”

“No,” Amos said after a beat. “They're not.”

Eli’s face flushed, but he nodded. Chris studied him for another second, then opened the passenger door. “Fourth rule: *if your mother tells you goodbye, you listen.*” Eli froze. Tamara’s composure cracked for the first time.

Not much. Just enough that her mouth trembled before she pressed it flat again. She stepped forward and took Eli by the shoulders, turning him toward her. For a second, he resisted the way fourteen-year-old boys resisted softness when other people might see it. Then whatever was holding him upright gave way, and he folded into her arms. Chris turned toward the courier board. He didn't need to watch that.

The board had been mounted beneath a strip of corrugated plastic near the gate, its notices protected from the rain by oilcloth and two rusted clamps. Most were local. Talladega medicine run delayed. Lithia bridge unstable after heavy rain. Atlanta road closed after dark. Missing goat, answers to Mercy or possibly doesn't answer to anything, don't chase into drainage ditch. A newer sheet had been tacked to the bottom corner in careful block letters.

CHARLESTON DEPOT SEEKING RIDERS, DRIVERS, CLERKS, AND ROUTE SCOUTS. EXPERIENCE PREFERRED. COMMON SCRIPT REQUIRED. LETTER OF INTRODUCTION HELPFUL. REPORT VIA LOWLAND SOUTHWEST APPROACH OR

SAVANNAH ROAD. Below that, someone had drawn the three-line circle properly. Chris stared at it longer than he meant to. May’s letter had made the thing feel possible. San Antonio had made it feel practical. Douglasville made it feel necessary.

Behind him, Tamara murmured something too low for Chris to hear. Eli answered once, voice rough. Alma said something sharper, probably because the boy had tried to wipe his face with his injured arm. Amos cleared his throat like a warning shot and then stepped up beside Chris.

“You’ll want the Savannah road after Macon,” Amos said.

Chris looked at him. “Not straight east?”

“Not unless you want trouble with every flooded bridge between here and *Augusta*.” Amos nodded toward the board. “South road runs longer, but it’s watched better. Lowland patrols have been pushin' west along the trade line. Still thin, but better than nothin'.”

“Bandits?”

“Always.”

“Rotters? Floaters? Mudders?”

“*Always*,” Amos repeated. “But fewer in the open country. Worse near the old towns. Don’t sleep in churches unless you clear the cellar. Don’t trust a free ferry. Don’t take work from anyone who pays before they tell you what they’re payin' for.”

Chris glanced at him. “You were a courier?”

“No.” Amos’s mouth twitched. “I was a sheriff's deputy for twenty-six years.”

“*Long* time ago,” Amos folded his arms, shotgun resting in the crook of one elbow. “Before Douglasville. Before Eli. Before the world got meaner than it used to be. Used to shoot a lot better, too.”

“You still shoot *fine*,” Alma called without looking over.

Amos smiled. “See?”

Chris did.

“You know Charleston?” Chris asked.

“Enough to know Eli will learn more there than here.” Amos looked toward his grandson, and the humor left his face. “Enough to know Tamara’s right, even if none of us like it.”

Chris nodded.

Amos reached into his coat and pulled out a small oilcloth packet tied with twine. “For the road.” Chris didn't take it right away. “You already gave me fuel.”

“Town gave you fuel. I’m givin' you this.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re taking my grandson east, and I don’t like trustin' men without handing them something useful first.”

That made enough sense that Chris took the packet. Inside were two small tins of gun oil, a folded cleaning cloth, a bore snake, three spare magazines that didn't match his Beretta but might trade well, and a narrow brass punch wrapped in waxed paper. Practical. Valuable. The kind of gift that said more than the person giving it wanted said out loud.

“Thank you,” Chris said.

Amos nodded once. “Keep that pistol cleaner than you brought it in.”

“That was unusual too.”

“You have a lot of unusual days?”

Chris tucked the packet into his pack. “Recently?”

Amos hummed, unconvinced.

Eli came back a few minutes later with red eyes, a packed canvas bag, and the hard expression of someone daring the world to mention either. Tamara followed with another bundle, this one wrapped in oilcloth and tied tight. She handed it to Chris instead of Eli.

“Food. A change of clothes. His papers. A letter for Charleston Depot, if they care to know who’s arrivin'.”

Chris took it. “They’ll care.”

“You know that?”

“No.” He set the bundle carefully behind the seat. “But I can make it *sound* like they should.”

Tamara studied him, then gave the smallest laugh. It broke as quickly as it came, but it was there. Alma stepped up next and pointed at Eli. “No runnin'. No liftin'. No pretendin' your arm is healed because it stopped hurting for ten minutes.”

Eli sighed. “I *know*.”

“You know *nothin'*. That’s why I’m sayin' it.”

Chris looked away before Eli could see him smile. Alma turned the same finger on him. “And you. Change that dressing tomorrow mornin'. If it smells wrong, looks wrong, or you start feelin' feverish, find a doctor and don’t attempt to out-stubborn infection. Infection wins.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She narrowed her eyes, like respectful agreement was somehow suspicious. Then she reached into her apron pocket and handed him a small folded paper. “Names of three clinics between here and Savannah. One’s reliable. One’s tolerable. Avoid the third one if anyone recommends it.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s an idiot with laudanum and confidence.”

Chris folded the paper into his jacket. “Avoiding him sounds wise.”

“It's.”

Eli climbed into the passenger seat slowly, trying not to wince and failing. Chris watched without offering help, because Tamara was watching too and because Eli needed to get in under his own power if he was going to leave with any dignity intact. Once he was settled, he held the canvas bag on his lap like armor. Tamara leaned through the open door and cupped his face in both hands.

“You write from Charleston.”

“I'll.”

“Not when you *remember*. Not when someone *reminds* you. First day.”

“I'll.”

“And you *listen* to him.” Her eyes flicked briefly toward Chris. “If he tells you to duck, you *duck*. If he tells you to run, you *run*. If he tells you not to be brave, you listen *hardest*.”

Eli swallowed. “I know.”

“Say it like you mean it.”

“I’ll *listen*.”

Tamara kissed his forehead, quick and fierce, then stepped back before either of them could make it harder. Chris closed the passenger door once she was clear and walked around to the driver’s side. Amos stood beside the gate with the shotgun resting against his shoulder. Alma had one arm wrapped around Tamara, her face set in that same stern, breakable line Chris recognized from too many parents saying goodbye to people they couldn't follow. He climbed into the truck. For a moment, neither he nor Eli spoke.

The cab felt different with the second bag behind the seat, the second breathing body beside him, the faint smell of clinic soap and rain-soaked clothes replacing the sour ghost of swamp mud. Chris adjusted the mirror, then stopped when he saw Eli staring straight ahead with his jaw clenched.

“You okay?”

“Yes.”

Chris waited.

Eli lasted three seconds. “No.”

“That’s allowed.”

The boy’s hands tightened around the bag. “I thought I wanted to leave.” Chris looked through the windshield at the open gate. “You can want something and hate the part where it starts.” Eli blinked hard. Chris started the truck.

The engine caught rough, then settled. People stepped back from the gate. The road beyond Douglasville waited wet and gray under the thinning rain, leading east through pine woods, broken pavement, and whatever came after the next bend. Eli looked at him. “Do I call you boss?” Chris almost stalled the truck.

“Absolutely *not*.”

“Sir?”

“*Please* don’t.”

Eli’s mouth twitched. “That bad?”

“People start calling me sir, I start looking around for my *dad*.”

That, somehow, made Eli smile for real. Chris shook his head and put the truck in gear. “Chris is fine.”

“Okay.”

They rolled through the gate. Chris lifted one hand from the wheel as they passed Amos, Alma, and Tamara. Amos nodded. Alma pointed two fingers at her own eyes, then at Chris, a warning and a blessing in the same gesture. Tamara stood very still until Eli lifted his good hand against the window.

Then Douglasville began to fall behind them. Eli stayed turned around until the gate disappeared behind the curve of the road. Only then did he face forward, eyes bright and terrified and stubborn all at once. Chris kept the truck steady.

“First lesson,” he said.

Eli wiped his face quickly. “What?” Chris nodded toward the road ahead. “*Never* trust a clean nail.” The boy looked at him for a second. Then, despite everything, he laughed. It was small. Shaky. Gone almost as soon as it arrived. But it was there. Chris drove east.

For the first few miles out of Douglasville, Eli kept looking back.

Chris didn't tell him to stop. The road curved through wet pine and broken pavement, past old subdivisions swallowed by kudzu and fields where rainwater stood silver between rows of new corn, and every time the truck rounded another bend, Eli twisted in the passenger seat like the town might still be there if he checked quickly enough. It wasn’t. Douglasville disappeared the way places did on the road: first the gate, then the watch platform, then the last roofline, then only the idea of it sitting behind them with people Eli loved still inside.

The boy faced forward eventually. He did it like it cost him something. Chris kept both hands on the wheel and let the silence ride with them. The rain had thinned to a steady mist, soft enough that the wipers squeaked if he ran them too fast and thick enough that leaving them off turned the windshield into a blur. The world smelled washed-out and green, the storm pulling heat out of the road in slow waves. Somewhere beyond the trees, water rushed through a drainage ditch swollen past its banks.

Eli shifted the canvas bag on his lap. “How long until Charleston?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Roads. Weather. Fuel. Bridges. Whether anyone else decides to get creative with fake route markers.”

Eli looked down at his bandaged arm. “Right.” Chris glanced at him, then back to the road. “If everything holds? Four days, *maybe* five. Longer if we have to swing south around bad crossings.”

“That’s *all?*”

“You sound disappointed.”

“No, I just…” Eli’s fingers picked at the edge of his bag. “I thought it'd be farther.”

“It *is* far.”

“Not *continent* far.”

Chris huffed softly. “Give it time. The road likes adding distance when you’re not looking.” That earned him a small glance, not quite a smile. Eli looked young in the gray light, bruised and hollow-eyed and trying so hard to sit like someone who belonged in a courier truck that it made Chris’s chest ache in a place he didn't want to name. Fourteen was too young for the road. Fourteen was too young for bait in a ditch, for blood in the rain, for watching a man reanimate in a red scarf and learning not to look away.

Fourteen had also been old enough, after the Fall, for all kinds of things nobody should've asked of a kid. Chris knew better than to pretend otherwise.

“First *real* rule,” he said.

Eli straightened immediately, like someone had pulled a string through his spine. “I thought the clean nail was first.”

“That was more of a life philosophy.”

“Oh.”

“First real rule: *if you don’t know what to do, you say that*.”

Eli frowned. “That’s a rule?”

“It's *now*.”

“Sounds easy.”

“It won’t be.” Chris guided the truck around a stretch where water had cut across the road, tires hissing through the shallow wash. “People hate admitting they don’t know something. Makes them feel stupid. So they guess, and then everyone else has to survive the guess.”

Eli’s mouth tightened. Chris saw it land and almost regretted the wording. Almost. Then he remembered the false marker, the medicine box, the bandits’ pen under the shack, and decided regret could wait.

“That wasn’t about you,” he said.

“Kind of was.”

“No. You took a route you’d done before for medicine someone needed. That’s not the same as guessing because you didn’t want to ask.”

Eli stared through the windshield. “I still should’ve *waited*.”

“Maybe.”

The boy looked at him, surprised. Chris kept his eyes on the road. “I’m not going to lie to make you feel better. Maybe you should’ve waited. Maybe the baby gets worse while you wait. Maybe the riders your mom wanted never show. Maybe they do, and you get there clean. Road doesn’t give you the answer sheet after.”

Eli was quiet for a long moment. “Then how do you know if you did the right thing?”

“You don’t always.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yeah.”

The truck rolled past the remains of an old rest stop, its picnic shelters sagging under vines, its bathroom doors spray-painted with warnings old and new. A black arrow had been painted

over the entrance road, pointing east, with the words ***NO WATER — INFECTED IN BUILDING*** beneath it. Someone had added a smaller note below that in white: ***CHECKED JUNE 3. STILL TRUE.*** Eli leaned forward slightly to read it. “Do people really update signs like that?”

“*Good* travelers do.”

“Bad ones?”

“Bad ones make *clean nails*.”

This time, the smile came easier. Not happy, but present. Chris counted it as progress. He reached over and tapped the folded route sheet where it sat between them. “Second rule. *You’re* on map duty.”

Eli blinked. “Me?”

“Unless there’s *another* junior courier hiding under the seat.”

The boy glanced down automatically, then caught himself and flushed. Chris pretended not to notice.

“What do I do?”

“Start by finding where we are.”

Eli picked up the route sheet carefully with his good hand. It took him a second to unfold it without jostling his bad arm, and Chris slowed a little so the truck’s bumps wouldn't make the job harder than it needed to be. The paper had been marked and remarked in several hands now: Switch’s blocky warnings from San Antonio, Chris’s small notes in the margins, Amos’s fresh pencil line angling toward the Savannah road, a circle around a crossing south of Lithia where Douglasville’s watchman had said the bridge still held if the river behaved.

“We left South Gate,” Eli murmured, more to himself than Chris. “Passed the Lithia road. Didn’t take it. We’re on—” He tilted the paper, squinting. “*This one?*”

Chris glanced over. “Why that one?”

“Because the sign said no water at the rest stop, and there’s only one rest stop marked before the old county line.”

“Good.”

Eli looked up fast, like the word had caught him off guard. Chris kept driving. The boy looked back down, but his shoulders changed. Not relaxed. Not close. But the tight, braced shape of him loosened by a fraction, and he leaned over the route sheet with more focus. “Then we should hit a creek bridge in maybe two miles.”

“Maybe.”

“Why *maybe?*”

“Because maps are promises made by people who aren’t standing at the bridge anymore.”

Eli considered that. “That sounds like something my Gran would say.”

“Your grandmother sounds terrifying.”

“She *is*.”

“Good.”

For a while, the work carried them. Eli read the route sheet. Chris corrected him when he jumped too fast, asked questions when he got close, and let silence stretch when the boy needed to think. They marked the creek bridge when they reached it, still standing but with debris caught high along the rail. Eli noted the water level in the margin after Chris told him what mattered: not just whether the bridge held now, but whether it'd hold after another storm, whether driftwood was pressing against supports, whether the road dipped before or after, whether a wagon could turn around if the answer was no.

By the third marker, Eli had stopped asking whether he was doing it right every thirty seconds. By the fourth, he caught the problem before Chris said anything.

“That board’s old,” Eli said.

Chris eased off the gas. “Which one?”

“*There*.” Eli pointed with the rolled edge of the route sheet. “On the fence post. The paint’s faded wrong. It says east crossin' open, but the newer mark underneath says use south track.”

Chris slowed enough to see it properly. The boy was right. The older sign had been left up, maybe forgotten, maybe ignored. Beneath it, someone had carved a newer mark into the wood, a shallow arrow pointing south with the three-line circle cut beneath it. Real this time. Crude, but real.

“Good catch.”

Eli tried not to look pleased. *Failed.* Chris turned south. The road narrowed there, dipping through a stretch of low woods where rainwater gathered in the ruts and frogs scattered from the truck’s tires. The air coming through the open window turned cooler, damp with creek water and moss. Eli held the route sheet against his knee, thumb pressed to their last mark, his focus so fierce that Chris could almost see the fear being pushed aside by the shape of a job.

That was why he'd given it to him. Not to make him useful. To give his hands somewhere to put the shaking.

“Did someone teach you like this?” Eli asked suddenly.

Chris looked at the road. “Like what?”

“Rules. Signs. What to look for.”

Chris thought about Eddie teaching him how to clear a room with words gentle enough to make it sound like a game until it wasn’t. Buck teaching him how to fix things by taking them apart too confidently and learning on the way down. Bobby teaching everyone that preparation was just another form of love. Athena teaching entire rooms to sit straighter by walking into them. Hen teaching him that panic and urgency weren't the same thing. Chim teaching him that humor worked best when it kept your hands steady instead of hiding what they were doing.

“A *lot* of people,” he said.

“Couriers?”

“Not mostly.”

Eli waited, clearly hoping for more. Chris let him wait. The boy lasted longer this time before filling the silence. “My uncle taught me the Talladega road. He says roads are like people. You trust them until they give you a reason not to, and then you *never* trust them the same way again.”

“Your uncle and your grandmother should write a book.”

“Nobody would read it. They’d argue with every page.”

Chris smiled faintly. “Sounds like family.” Eli looked at him then, more carefully. “Do you have one?”

“A family?”

“Yeah.”

Chris’s hands settled more firmly on the wheel. The road ahead bent left through trees, and he followed it, buying himself a few seconds he didn't really need. “Yeah.”

“Back west?”

“Mostly.”

“Where?”

Chris huffed softly, not quite a laugh. “*That’s* a longer answer than you think.” Eli looked interested now, the map temporarily forgotten in his lap. “I’ve got four days, *maybe* five.”

That was fair.

“Texas first,” Chris said. “I was born there. El Paso. But I *mostly* grew up in LA before the Fall. After that, Desert View for a while, then Page.”

“Page?”

“Arizona. Southwest Alliance territory.”

“That’s home?”

Chris watched the wet road unwind ahead of them. “Yeah.”

“Who’s there?”

“My dads. My little brother. A lot of people who'd object to being left off that list.”

Eli blinked. “Dads?”

“Two of them.”

“*Oh*.”

Chris glanced at him.

“Yeah. Eddie’s my dad. Buck’s my other dad.”

“And your brother?”

Chris’s mouth softened before he could stop it. “Theo.” Eli noticed. “You miss 'em.”

“A lot.”

“Do they know where you are?”

“*Generally*.”

Eli gave him a look that was almost brave enough to be skeptical.

Chris sighed. “I write.”

“How often?”

“Often enough.”

“That sounds like *not enough*.”

Chris glanced at him. Eli looked immediately back at the map. *Smart kid.*

“Probably not enough,” Chris admitted after a moment.

The answer seemed to surprise both of them. Eli softened a little. “My mom’s going to make me write the *first* day.”

“Good.”

“She told you that too?”

“She didn’t need to.”

The road climbed out of the low woods and back toward a strip of higher ground where the pavement improved enough for Chris to bring the truck up to speed. The storm had moved east ahead of them, leaving the sky torn open in places, sunlight breaking through in pale sheets that turned the wet road silver. For the first time since Douglasville, the air felt less like something pressing down on them and more like something they might move through.

Eli noticed it too. He rolled the window down another inch and let the damp wind hit his face.

“So what did you do?” he asked.

Chris glanced over. “When?”

“Since you left.” Eli looked down at the route sheet like he was trying not to sound too eager. “You said nine months.”

Chris considered giving him the short version. Drove. Helped where he could. Got shot at more than anyone back home needed to know. Slept badly. Learned roads. Missed people. Kept moving. It'd've been true. It wouldn't have answered the question.

“Bounced around,” Chris said finally. “Did odd jobs. Hauled supplies. Helped people who needed it. Got into trouble a healthy amount of times.”

“Healthy?”

“Enough to stay *interesting*. Not enough to *die*.”

Eli looked unconvinced by that math.

“I stayed with a friend this spring,” Chris added. “Lara. She and June have a farm near Texarkana.”

“Texas?”

“Border of Texas and Arkansas, close enough. I was there a few months.”

“Why’d you leave?”

“Same reason I left everywhere.”

“Which is?”

Chris looked at the road, then at the eastbound line ahead of them. “Wanted to know what was next.” Eli sat with that for a moment. “And your friends are couriers?”

“Some of them.”

“The San Antonio people?”

“Switch and Ravi built the depot there. They’re part of why the southern routes are working at all. Nate operates out of San Antonio most of the time now.”

“Nate?”

“Friend of mine. One of the originals, if this Express thing ever gets official enough to have originals.”

“And Parker?” Eli asked, because apparently he'd been listening to every name people had said in Douglasville and filing them away.

Chris smiled faintly. “Parker usually runs between Page and Cascadia. Arizona to the Pacific Northwest.” Eli’s eyes widened. “*That’s* continent far.”

“Yeah.”

“By himself?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes with Nate, when their routes line up.”

“They’re together?”

“Yeah.”

“That must be hard.”

Chris thought about Parker’s last letter, all swagger and weather complaints and one careful line about missing Nate more on the easy days than the dangerous ones, because danger kept his hands busy. He thought about Nate’s neat route notes from San Antonio, the places where his handwriting tightened around any mention of Cascadia, as if putting Parker’s name on paper made the distance behave.

“Probably,” Chris said. “But they’ve been through worse.”

Eli looked out the window. “*Everybody* says that.”

“Says what?”

“*Been through worse.*”

Chris didn't answer right away. The road hummed under the tires.

“Sometimes it’s true,” he said. “Sometimes people say it because they don’t want to admit *this* is bad too.”

Eli turned that over quietly. A few miles later, Chris reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a folded letter. The paper was worn along the creases, not as soft as May’s yet, but opened often enough that Eli noticed. Chris hesitated before handing it over, then decided he'd started this and might as well keep going.

“This one’s from Dad. Few weeks ago.”

Eli took it carefully, like letters from fathers might break differently than route sheets. “Can I?”

“Parts of it.”

The boy unfolded it, eyes moving over the first lines. Chris kept his attention on the road and let Eddie’s handwriting sit between them. *Mijo,*

Buck says I’m supposed to start with something encouraging instead of asking whether you’re eating enough, sleeping enough, checking your leg, checking your truck, and not taking unnecessary risks. So: we’re proud of you. We miss you. Please eat enough, sleep enough, check your leg, check your truck, and stop taking unnecessary risks before Buck writes the next letter himself and somehow makes it longer.

Eli snorted before he could stop himself. Chris smiled. “*That’s* my dad.”

“He sounds like my mom.”

“He’d probably like that.”

Eli kept reading, slower now.

Theo stole Buck’s boot yesterday and hid it in the pantry. We found him sitting behind the flour sacks, very proud of himself, chewing on the lace like a feral raccoon. Buck says you were never this much trouble. I told him you were quieter about it, which isn't the same thing. Theo’s still talking more every week. Still wary with strangers, but he’s getting bolder at home. Wild, honestly. I’ll take wild over the silent little boy we met any day.

Chris’s throat tightened in a way that'd nothing to do with the graze on his arm. Eli’s voice softened as he read the next line.

Visit soon. Or write where you're long enough for us to come find you ourselves. We know you’re at Lara and June’s farm right now, and I’m giving you until the end of the month before I start asking whether Texarkana has decided to keep you.

Eli looked up. “He really would come find you?”

“Yeah.”

“From Arizona?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s…” Eli looked back down at the letter, smiling a little. “That’s *nice*.”

“It’s *threatening*.”

“Still nice.”

Chris couldn't really argue with that. Eli folded the letter carefully and handed it back. “Why'd you leave?” Chris slid the letter back into his jacket, beside May’s. For a moment, the cab felt full of all the people who'd written him, all the places he'd left, all the roads he hadn't taken yet.

“I wanted to explore,” he said.

“That’s it?”

“That’s enough.”

Eli looked unconvinced.

Chris let out a quiet breath. “A lot of my friends left before me. May went to Columbia. Jace too. Parker and Nate started running routes. Harry went north. Denny went towards New England. Ravi and Switch built San Antonio into something that actually works. The world *kept* getting bigger, and I kept hearing about it secondhand.”

“So you left.”

“*Eventually*.”

“What changed?”

Chris thought of Theo again, sticky hands and stolen boots and Buck’s exhausted smile in the margins of Eddie’s letters. He thought of Eddie standing at the truck in Monument Valley, trying not to make goodbye heavier than it already was. He thought of home no longer feeling like something that'd collapse if he stepped away from it.

“Theo came along,” Chris said. “My little brother. Buck and Dad had someone at home who needed them. Not in a *bad* way. Just…” He searched for the right words and found them slower than he wanted. “It felt like they were *okay*. Like I wasn’t abandoning them by wanting to see what else was out there.”

Eli watched him quietly.

“And you?” Chris asked before the silence could turn too pointed. “Why courier work?”

Eli looked back at the map, thumb tracing the road line. “People notice when you bring what they need.”

Chris glanced at him.

The boy shrugged with one shoulder. “Not in a bad way. Just… Douglasville’s *small*. Everybody knows who fixes engines, who grows tomatoes, who can shoot straight, who makes good bread, who talks too much. I wanted to be useful somewhere that wasn’t just my street.” Chris nodded slowly. That, he understood.

“Useful is good,” he said. “Just don’t let people spend you like supplies.”

Eli looked up.

“Third rule?”

“*Sure*.”

The boy looked down and wrote it in the margin of the route sheet before Chris could tell him he hadn't meant literally. Chris decided not to stop him. A few miles later, Eli picked up the route sheet again. “Next marker should be near an old church.” Chris made a face before he could stop himself.

Eli noticed. “What?”

“Long story.”

“Bad?”

“Usually.”

They drove on with the window cracked, the map open, and the road bending east beneath a sky still deciding whether it was finished raining. Eli kept one finger on the route line. Chris kept one eye on the trees. Between them, the silence felt different now. Not comfortable, exactly. Not yet.

But no longer empty.

Chris called the stop an hour before dark. Eli looked up from the route sheet so fast the paper slid off his knee. Outside the windshield, the road kept going: two narrow lanes of cracked asphalt bending through pine and low, wet brush, the western sky opening in bruised strips between the trees. The rain had finally quit. Everything still shone with it.

“*Already?*” Eli asked.

“Already.”

“We still have light.”

“That’s why we’re stopping.”

Eli frowned like Chris had handed him a problem with the answer written backward. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to use it?” Chris slowed the truck before a break in the roadside trees, eyeing the narrow track beyond it. Old service road, maybe. Not maintained, but not swallowed either. The mud at the mouth held wagon ruts, deer prints, and one set of boot marks softened by the day’s rain. Nothing fresh enough to make his hands tighten on the wheel.

“It makes sense to use enough of it to pick where we sleep,” he said. “Not enough to find out what a ditch looks like after sunset.”

“I’m not tired.”

“You’re fourteen, injured, and running on *spite*.”

Eli opened his mouth. Chris glanced at him. Eli shut it again.

“Tired people make *bad* decisions,” Chris said, turning carefully off the road. Branches scraped along the truck’s side with a sound like fingernails over canvas. “*Scared* tired people make worse ones. *Hungry* scared tired people start inventing plans that sound *brilliant* for about six seconds.”

“That happen to you a lot?”

“Enough.”

The track dipped through brush and rose into a small clearing half-hidden behind a stand of loblolly pine. It'd probably been a utility pull-off once. Gravel showed through the mud in patches. An old concrete culvert cut under the track at the far side, the ditch below it running brown and quick with stormwater. Someone had camped here before, but not recently: a blackened ring of stones, a rusted food tin, two lengths of twine tied between trees and left to sag. Chris didn't like other people’s camps. He liked this one better than pushing into dusk.

He drove the truck in a slow circle first, checking the tree line, the ditch, the angle back toward the road. Eli watched him do it without asking. Good. Then Chris parked with the nose pointed toward the track out, wheels straight, enough room to move if they'd to leave fast.

“Truck faces out,” Eli said.

Chris cut the engine. The sudden quiet landed heavy around them. “Why?”

“So we don’t have to turn around if something comes in.”

“Good.”

Eli tried not to look pleased and only halfway succeeded. Outside, the evening smelled like wet pine needles, creek mud, and the sour green rot of leaves left too long under water. Cicadas had started up somewhere high in the trees. Farther off, a bird called once, then again, sharp and annoyed. Normal sounds, Chris told himself. No shuffling in the brush. No scrape of a boot on gravel. No low, wet animal noise from anything that'd once been human. He sat for three breaths before opening the door. Eli grabbed his bag immediately.

“Leave that.”

“I can carry it.”

“You can carry it *after* I look around.”

“I can help look around.”

“You can sit in the truck and not waste your grandmother’s work she spent, patching you up.”

Eli’s jaw tightened, but he stayed put. Chris stepped out with the Beretta loose in his hand. He moved the perimeter first, slow and practical: tree line, ditch, culvert, old fire ring, the sagging twine, the brush behind the truck. He crouched by the boot prints at the track mouth, pressed two fingers to the mud beside them, and found the top layer soft and undisturbed from the last rain. Old enough. Not harmless, but old enough. When he came back, Eli had the passenger door open and one boot on the ground.

“I waited,” he said quickly.

“I can see that.”

“Mostly.”

“*Also* that.”

Eli climbed down with care that looked forced. His face had gone pale around the mouth by the time both feet hit the ground, but he set his shoulders like he expected Chris to comment and had already prepared to resent it.

Chris didn’t.

He opened the back of the truck instead. “Camp order. Water first. Food second. Weapons third. Sleeping after.”

“Why water first?”

“Because if we’re lower than I think, everything else changes.”

Eli nodded, then reached for one of the heavier jugs with his good hand and too much confidence. Chris caught the handle before the weight pulled it fully off the truck bed. Eli froze. For a second, neither of them moved. The jug hung between them. Eli’s injured arm had jerked against his side on instinct, and pain flashed over his face before he smothered it.

“Small one,” Chris said, keeping his voice even.

“I had it.”

“You had half of it and a bad idea.”

Eli’s ears went red.

Chris set the heavy jug down himself, then nudged a smaller canteen toward him. “Count. Don’t haul.” The boy stared at the canteen like it'd insulted him.

“Counting is work,” Chris said.

“It doesn’t feel like work.”

“That’s because nobody bleeds dramatically while doing it. Usually.”

Eli’s mouth twitched despite himself. Chris took the win and kept moving.

They built the camp in pieces, none of them romantic. No fire, because smoke carried and the woods were damp enough to make it obvious. No unpacking more than they needed, because anything taken out had to be found again in a hurry. Chris put the medical kit behind the passenger seat where Eli could reach it from inside. The recovered courier bags stayed locked under the tarp. Ammunition moved into two smaller boxes instead of one heavy one. Food was dinner only: hard bread, beans from a jar Alma had shoved at them, dried apple, and a strip of smoked meat Chris cut thin enough to make it last.

Eli made a face at the cold beans.

“Problem?” Chris asked.

“No.”

“That was a *loud* no.”

“I just thought road food would be more…”

“Cooked?”

“I was going to say *excitin'*.”

“Cold beans are exciting if you’ve had worse beans.”

“Have *you?*”

Chris thought about a winter camp outside Barstow, a dented tin of something greenish, and Buck declaring with terrible confidence that expiration dates had become more of a suggestion after civilization ended.

“Yes,” he said.

Eli studied him. “You looked *haunted* just now.”

“I *was*.”

That got an actual smile out of him, small but real. They ate sitting on opposite sides of the truck bed, the tailgate left up and the tarp half-pulled back. Chris kept his Beretta within reach. Eli kept glancing at the tree line, then pretending he hadn’t. The light kept draining out of the clearing in slow layers, gold to gray to blue. Under the pines, shadows gathered earlier than they did on open road.

Chris counted water aloud, then made Eli repeat it back. They marked what they'd used. He checked the route sheet and added the camp location in pencil: *service pull-off, east of*

Douglasville route, hidden from road, water in ditch not safe without boil/filter, old signs of use, no fresh tracks as of dusk. Eli leaned close to watch. “You write all that down?”

“If someone else needs to stop here, they should know what they’re stopping in.”

“What if bad people find the note?”

“Then they know there’s bad water and no supplies.”

“What if they know people stop here?”

“Then people should know bad people might know.”

Eli looked down at the route sheet. “That’s a lot of knowin'.”

“Welcome to courier work.”

The boy absorbed that with a seriousness that made him look younger, not older. Chris pretended to focus on repacking the pencil. After dinner, he checked the weapons. Not because he expected trouble. Because expecting trouble was less useful than being ready for it. The Beretta first, magazine out, chamber clear, then loaded again. The rifle from the truck rack. The shotgun they'd recovered from the shack, cleaned enough by Amos to be trusted but not enough for Chris to like it yet. Eli watched every motion.

“Granddaddy says people are too casual with guns now,” Eli said.

“Amos is right.”

“He says a gun isn’t a personality.”

“*Definitely* right.”

“He says if you point one at something, you better know whether you’re tryin' to scare it, stop it, or kill it, because those aren’t the same thing.”

Chris paused, then nodded. “Your grandfather and I'd get along.”

“He’d pretend not to.”

“That also sounds right.”

The smile faded from Eli’s face as quickly as it'd come. He looked toward the road, though the road could no longer be seen from the clearing. “Do you always camp alone?” Chris slid the shotgun back into place. “Usually.”

“Do you like it?”

The easy answer was yes. The safer answer was sometimes. The honest answer sat somewhere in the dark between the trees, complicated and quiet.

“Sometimes,” Chris said. “Sometimes it’s nice not having to explain what I’m doing. Sometimes it just means nobody’s around to tell me when I’m being an idiot.”

Eli considered that. “Do you listen when they do?”

“Occasionally.”

“That means *no*.”

“It means *occasionally*.”

The boy looked skeptical in a way that reminded Chris painfully of several people at once. Night settled fully while they finished. Chris strung no line, hung no lantern, lit no fire. He put one low lamp on inside the cab, shielded by a folded shirt so it gave just enough glow to see shapes and not enough to turn the truck into a beacon. Eli kept trying to find another task. He folded the tarp twice. Moved the canteen three inches. Checked the passenger door latch, then checked it again.

“You’re done,” Chris said.

“I can take first watch.”

“No.”

“You said I need to learn.”

“You learn worse unconscious.”

“I’m not goin' to fall *asleep*.”

Chris looked at him. Eli lifted his chin. There was pride in it, and fear under the pride, and under that something raw enough that Chris didn't want to press too hard. The kid had been dragged into a bandit trap, tied up, hurt, rescued, stitched, sent away from home, and handed a future before the blood had dried on the old one. If sitting up for a little while made him feel less like cargo, Chris could give him that.

“Twenty minutes,” Chris said.

Eli blinked. “Really?”

“Sitting watch means sitting. Not pacing. Not proving anything. You listen, you look, you tell me if something changes.”

“What counts as something?”

“New sound. Sudden quiet. Light where there wasn’t light. Movement that doesn’t match wind. Smell of smoke. Engine noise. Voices. Anything that makes the back of your neck smarter than the rest of you.”

Eli nodded too fast.

Chris sat on the ground with his back against the rear tire, close enough to intervene, far enough to let the boy pretend this was his watch. Eli perched on the open passenger seat with his feet on the running board, blanket around his shoulders, bandaged arm tucked close. The low lamp painted one side of his face amber and left the other in shadow.

For the first five minutes, he watched like a statue. For the next five, his head dipped twice and snapped back up. Chris said nothing. The woods breathed around them. Water moved in the ditch. Cicadas whined and pulsed. Once, something small moved through the leaves, quick and low, and Eli went rigid until a possum waddled into the edge of the clearing, regarded the truck with deep offense, and vanished under the brush.

“Possum,” Eli whispered.

“Good identification.”

“I knew that.”

“I said good.”

“Oh.”

Silence returned.

Then Eli said, very quietly, “I keep seein' him.”

Chris didn't ask who.

Eli’s fingers had curled into the edge of the blanket. “The guy with the red scarf. Not when he grabbed me. After. When he… *when he got up again*.” Chris kept his eyes on the trees. “Yeah.”

“I know he’s dead.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean I *know*. I saw the truck hit him. I heard it. I know he can’t just—” Eli stopped, breathing through his nose. “But every time the woods move, my head thinks it’s him. Like he’s still comin'.”

The clearing seemed to hold its breath around the admission. Chris looked at him then. Not fully. Just enough. Eli was staring past the windshield now, eyes fixed on nothing, face too still.

“That happens,” Chris said.

Eli swallowed. “To you?”

“Yeah.”

“Still?”

Chris thought of white rooms. Metal tables. Water closing over his head in dreams years after the Pacific had let him go. The sound of dead-head hands on a door. The shape of his father’s body between him and danger when Chris had been too young to understand that parents could be terrified too.

“Sometimes,” he said.

Eli’s shoulders lowered a fraction, like the answer had given him permission to be less ashamed. Chris shifted, resting one forearm on his knee. “Try something. Name five things you can see.”

“What?”

“Five things. Real ones. Here, not back there.”

Eli looked at him like this was either a test or a trick. Then he looked around the clearing.

“Truck,” he said.

“More specific.”

He frowned. “Headlight. Right one.”

“Good.”

“Your boot. The water jug. Pine tree with the broken branch. The possum’s tail before it went under the brush.”

“Good. Now four sounds.”

Eli listened. His breathing still shook, but less. “Cicadas. Water. Wind. You.”

“Me?”

“Your jacket moves when you breathe.”

Chris went still for half a second, then huffed softly. “Good catch.”

“Is this a courier thing?”

“It’s a being-a-person-after-bad-things thing.”

Eli looked down at his lap.

“Count breaths next,” Chris said. “In for four if you can. Out for six. Don’t fight your head. Give it a job.”

The boy tried. The first breath hitched. The second came easier. By the fifth, some of the locked panic had drained out of his face, leaving exhaustion behind.

“What if it doesn’t stop?” Eli asked.

“Then you write it down.”

“What happened?”

“What happened. What you know. What you don’t know. What you did after. Sometimes your head keeps replaying because it’s trying to turn it into information.”

“Does that work?”

“Not always.”

Eli gave him a tired look. Chris shrugged. “I’m not going to lie to make you feel better, remember?”

“Right.” Eli rubbed at his face with his good hand. “But sometimes?”

“Sometimes.”

The answer seemed to be enough. Or maybe Eli was too tired to argue with it. His eyelids dipped again and stayed down a beat too long.

“Watch is over,” Chris said.

“It hasn’t been twenty minutes.”

“You’re asleep while correcting me.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Convincing argument. Get in the truck.”

Eli obeyed this time, clumsy with fatigue. Chris helped him only when the injured arm made the blanket catch awkwardly on the door. He did it without comment, and Eli accepted it without looking at him. Progress again. Small, but there.

Once the boy was settled across the passenger side with a bedroll bunched under his head, Chris passed him the route pencil and a torn scrap from the back of an old supply list.

“If your head starts running again,” he said, “write. If you can’t write, wake me.”

Eli blinked up at him through the dim cab light. “Aren’t you stayin' awake?”

“Yes.”

“Then how'd I wake you?”

“By interrupting my very important sitting.”

Another small smile. Fainter this time. Sleep already pulling at the edges of it.

“Chris?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for stoppin'.”

Chris rested one hand on the open door frame. For a moment, the answer caught somewhere behind his ribs.

“Get some sleep,” he said.

Eli’s eyes closed. He fought it for maybe ten seconds, pride making a last stand and losing badly. Then his breathing evened out, one hand still curled around the scrap of paper he hadn't used. Chris eased the door mostly shut, leaving it cracked for air, and stood beside the truck until his own eyes adjusted fully to the dark.

The clearing had settled. The road beyond the trees stayed empty. The possum didn't return. Somewhere far off, too distant to matter yet, a dog barked twice and went quiet. Chris listened until the silence after it felt normal. Only then did he take May’s letter from his jacket.

The paper was softer than his dad's now, worn thin at the folds from too many nights like this one. He didn't need the lamp for the first lines. He knew them. He knew the shape of May’s handwriting, the impatient slant of it when she got excited, the places where she'd pressed too hard with the pen because some idea had outrun her hand. Still, he unfolded it carefully. Inside the truck, Eli shifted once in sleep and went still.

Chris sat back down against the tire, letter held low where the shielded cab light barely reached it. The words waited. Washington. Columbia. Charleston. Depot shortages. Route registries. Work if he wanted it. No pressure, which from May usually meant a great deal of pressure wrapped in plausible deniability.

He looked east, though the trees hid everything beyond the clearing. That morning, Charleston had been a direction. By nightfall, with a sleeping fourteen-year-old in his truck and recovered mail under the tarp, it felt less like a maybe and more like a place the road had already chosen for him. Chris smoothed May’s letter over his knee and began again at the top.

November 27, 2028

Chris,

I'm writing this from Washington, which still feels like the wrong word for what this place is. The Republic of Columbia has a capital in the same way a half-built truck has an engine: technically true, frequently loud, and only functional because several exhausted people refuse to let it die.

We made it here with the ARKs intact. I'm putting that near the top because I know you, and because I know Eddie, and because if I start with politics you'll both decide I'm avoiding the important part. The ARKs are safe. Vincent is safe. Jace is safe. I'm safe. No, Jace hasn't become less dramatic. If anything, proximity to federal-style paperwork has made him worse.

Columbia is interested in the ARKs. Incredibly interested. Not in the Summit way, before you start reading between lines I didn't write. They understand what they're looking at. They understand how badly the old world failed to protect people from science done behind locked doors. Vincent has made certain conditions very clear, and somehow managed to do it in a room full of officials without being arrested, exiled, or politely shoved into a supply closet.

The current plan is George Mason University. Columbia forces have taken the campus and are working with Vincent to establish a facility there to house the ARKs properly. Not a bunker. Not another black-site miracle factory. A real scientific institution, or at least the foundation of one. Technologically advanced, ahead of its time, and, if Vincent has anything to say about it, ethically bound in writing before anyone plugs in a single machine.

He is insisting the science stay public. As public as it safely can be, anyway. I don't need to explain the exception to you. Some details stay protected because people like us know exactly what happens when the wrong information reaches the wrong hands with enough ambition attached.

Columbia is also sending forces west toward Cascadia to recover any unused FOB materials from the Bastion. Daniel is helping coordinate from that end. The hope is to recreate some of what the Summit could've been if it'd deserved the faith people put in it. Better this time. Cleaner. Accountable. I know that sounds optimistic. I'm aware. I'm choosing the word anyway.

They're also working on getting ex-Summit Biologics and Medical staff transferred out of Bastion custody and transported here. Carefully. With screening, records, and enough armed supervision to satisfy everyone who remembers what those departments helped build. In a few weeks, if the road and politics behave, Columbia intends to make a move on Walter Reed and establish a proper medical institute there.

So yes. The East is moving.

And because the East is moving, everyone has remembered at once that people can't rebuild a continent by shouting across broken telephone lines and hoping a rider with a good horse happens to be going the right direction.

This is where you're going to roll your eyes, because I'm about to admit that Parker and Nate accidentally gave me an idea.

I started hearing more about their runs after we got settled here. Not just the dramatic parts, though there are plenty of those because apparently neither of them can travel three hundred miles without turning into a story someone tells at a gate. I mean the workload. The way people are already relying on them. The way a route becomes real because enough people trust the person carrying it.

Then I heard what Switch and Ravi were doing in San Antonio. A depot. An actual depot, even if it started as a practical solution held together with salvage shelves, route boards, and Ravi's terrifying ability to make tired people follow a filing system. They were bartering and paying people in supplies to carry messages and goods along shorter legs. Not heroes. Not legends. Workers. Couriers.

That got my brain moving.

Columbia jumped on it faster than I expected. They're calling it the Continental Express. Working name, technically. I think it'll stick. It sounds official enough for politicians and useful enough for everyone else, which is the rarest kind of name.

Jace has been conscripted into establishing the first major depot in the Republic. I use conscripted because he complained for nine full minutes, then immediately started reorganizing the proposed route registry because the draft system was, and I quote, "a crime against both language and survival." He is in his element. Pray for the clerks.

Word is spreading. The Northeast Commonwealth is curious. The Riverlands are curious too, though I haven't heard anything solid from either yet. Curious isn't commitment. Curious is still better than silence.

The Lowland Confederation is adapting its own depot out of Charleston. You probably know the broad outline by now: most of the former southern states, more formal than the western routes, very proud of being functional, and extremely aware of how much influence comes from controlling roads, ports, and paper. Charleston has printing capacity, ship traffic, inland routes, and the kind of old-city vanity that makes it want to be indispensable.

Their problem is staffing. They have riders and local runners, but not enough people trained for longer courier work. Not enough road sense. Not enough people who can read a bad sign, argue with a checkpoint, keep a ledger dry, and survive the difference between a dangerous road and a polite room full of dangerous people.

If that is still true by the time this reaches you, and if you decide to head that way, it might be worth following up on. I'm not telling you to go. Read that twice before you accuse me of engineering your life from the opposite coast. If you want work, Charleston may have work. If you want to keep moving, keep moving. If you want to go home, go home. Choosing matters.

There's also a new paper out of Charleston: The Charleston Courier. Up-and-coming, from what I hear. They want some kind of relationship with the Express, though nobody has defined what that means yet, which naturally means three different people are already arguing about it. They're gathering stories from across the Eastern Core. That is what people are calling the East Coast now, apparently. The Eastern Core. It sounds like a geography teacher got trapped in a treaty negotiation, but I admit it is useful.

The Courier will probably branch west sooner rather than later. Papers like roads. Roads like papers. Everyone wants information until it says something inconvenient about them.

Write when you can. More specifically, write an actual location when you can. "Somewhere east" isn't a location, no matter how spiritually accurate it feels. Eddie and Buck are being

admirably restrained, which means their restraint has an expiration date. I'm not threatening you. I'm documenting a predictable parental weather pattern.

Tell Theo hello when you write home, because I'm assuming you're writing home. Tell yourself hello too, while you're at it. You have a tendency to report events like you're not one of the people they happened to.

The world is getting bigger again. Try not to disappear inside it. —May

Jace says "improvisational competence" isn't a courier classification, even if you personally embody the argument for creating it.

May's letter was dated November 27, 2028. Chris knew because he'd checked the date too many times, as if it might change if he caught it in the right light. It hadn't. The ink still said November. The creases still held seven months of travel, rereading, weather, and careful folding. The paper had gone soft at the edges, worn almost cloth-thin where his thumb always found the same place. Eli hadn't noticed that part when Chris mentioned it earlier.

Or maybe he'd been too tired, too sore, and too busy trying not to think about Red Scarf getting up in the rain. Either way, Chris had let the implication stand longer than he should've. *A few weeks ago,* he'd said about Eddie's letter. May's was older. *Much* older.

Seven months old, written *just* under two months after Chris left Page. Back then, leaving had still felt like a raw place he kept pressing because he couldn't decide whether it hurt or proved something. Eddie probably remembered the date too clearly. Buck probably pretended not to count from it. Chris had driven away with his truck, his leg that still punished him in bad weather, too many people's worry packed around him, and the fragile, guilty relief of wanting the world anyway.

Now he sat against the rear tire in a roadside clearing east of Douglasville, the letter open low over his knee, the cab light shielded behind a folded shirt so it wouldn't throw brightness into the trees.

The woods stayed quiet around him. The truck ticked softly as the engine cooled. Inside the cab, Eli slept curled awkwardly against the passenger door, blanket pulled high over one shoulder, the scrap of paper still trapped under his fingers.

He looked younger in sleep. Less determined. More breakable. Chris glanced toward the track out, listened until the dark gave him only water, insects, and wet leaves, then looked back down at the letter. He didn't read every line this time. He didn't need to. He knew where the sentences bent.

May had written from Washington, or what people were starting to call Washington again because nations needed capitals and capitals needed names more stable than their buildings. She'd described the Republic of Columbia with the kind of irritation that meant she respected

it: *half-built, loud, overburdened, functional only because exhausted people refused to let it fail.*

She'd opened with the important part. The ARKs were safe. Vincent was safe. Jace was safe. May was safe. That line still tightened something under Chris's ribs, even now. May, Vincent, and Jace had gone east with the ARKs carrying more future than any one convoy should've been trusted with. He'd known pieces of what came next from her later letters: Columbia's interest, Vincent's conditions, Jace's increasingly theatrical war against bad administration. But this had been the first one that made the new shape of it feel real.

Columbia wanted the ARKs.

Not in the Summit way, May had written, and Chris had stopped there the first time he read it. He'd needed to. There were phrases that opened doors in his head whether he wanted them opened or not.

Summit. Facility. Biologics. Protected details. Public science. White rooms. Locked doors. Science treated like salvation until it needed bodies. His own name buried in files written by people who'd never loved him. Even now, months later, Chris flexed his hand once before moving on.

May had written about George Mason University. Columbia had taken the campus and started working with Vincent to establish a facility there for the ARKs. Not a bunker. Not another black-site miracle factory. A real institution, or the foundation of one, with rules written before anyone plugged in a machine. Technologically advanced. Ahead of its time. Ethically bound, if Vincent had anything to say about it. And Vincent did. Chris trusted that more than he trusted most things.

Not completely. He wasn't built for completely, not with Summit ghosts still living under his skin. But enough. Enough to believe Vincent would rather burn his own work than let another Summit rise wearing cleaner language.

May had said Vincent was insisting the science stay public. As public as it safely could be. Certain details stayed protected, because people like them knew exactly what happened when the wrong information reached the wrong hands with enough ambition attached. Chris knew that fact, intimately. His own name was among it. No explanation needed.

The letter had gone on to talk about Cascadia and the Bastion, about Columbia sending forces west to obtain unused FOB materials, about Daniel helping coordinate from that end. The hope, May had written, was to recreate some of what the Summit infrastructure could've been if it'd deserved the faith people put in it.

Better this time. Cleaner. Accountable. Chris had stared at those words the first time until they stopped looking like words and started looking like a dare. Seven months later, he still didn't know if the world could build something that advanced without making it cruel. He knew people who'd try. He knew people who'd lie about trying. Sometimes history felt less like a teacher and more like a trap with better handwriting.

But May had chosen optimism in ink. Vincent had chosen conditions. Jace had chosen forms, probably with violence in his heart and a pen in his hand. That'd to count for something. Chris turned the page, though he knew the next part nearly as well. The East was moving, May had written.

George Mason. Walter Reed, if Columbia's push went right. Ex-Summit Biologics and Medical staff transferred from Bastion custody under screening, records, and armed supervision. Science, medicine, infrastructure, politics, all of it shifting at once while roads tried to keep up.

And because the East was moving, everyone had remembered that people couldn't rebuild a continent by shouting across broken telephone lines and hoping a rider with a good horse happened to be going the right direction. That was where Parker and Nate came in.

Chris could almost hear May's reluctant annoyance at admitting they'd inspired her. Their road work had become too large to ignore: the mileage, the danger, the increasing workload, the way communities started planning around a route once they trusted the person carrying it. Then word had reached her about Switch and Ravi's solution in San Antonio: *a depot, an actual depot, born out of salvage shelves, route boards, payment in supplies, and the terrifying practicality of tired people making something work because the alternative was worse.*

Not heroes. Not legends. Workers. Couriers. That'd gotten May's brain moving. Columbia had jumped on it. The Continental Express, she'd called it. A working name, technically. She'd thought it'd stick. Chris looked toward the truck bed, where recovered courier bags sat locked under the tarp.

Back in November, the Continental Express had been a name in May's letter. By June, people were painting false versions of its marks on roadside boards because even the lie had become valuable. That was how fast the world moved when it wanted something badly enough. That was how fast people learned to exploit it.

Jace had been conscripted into establishing the Republic's first major depot. Chris still smiled at May's phrasing. Conscripted meant Jace had complained loudly, then reorganized the entire route registry because bad structure offended him more than responsibility did. He was probably terrorizing clerks across Columbia by now. Maybe improving their survival odds while doing it.

Word had spread from there. The Northeast Commonwealth was curious. The Riverlands were curious. Curious wasn't commitment, May had warned, but curious was better than silence. Then there was Charleston. The Lowland Confederation was adapting its own depot out of the city, drawing on ports, inland routes, printing capacity, and all the old-city vanity that made powerful places want to be indispensable. May had described the Lowlands as formal, functional, proud, and extremely aware of how much influence came from controlling roads, ports, and paper.

Chris had read that line in November and thought, distantly, that it sounded like trouble in a nicer coat. Now he was driving toward it. Their problem had been staffing. Riders, local runners, not enough trained couriers. Not enough road sense. Not enough people who could

read a bad sign, argue with a checkpoint, keep a ledger dry, and survive the difference between a dangerous road and a polite room full of dangerous people. Chris’s gaze moved to Eli again.

The boy slept on, one hand still clenched around the little nightmare note he'd written and hidden as if shame made it private. Fourteen. Injured. Determined. Exactly the kind of person a desperate depot might praise for being brave before anyone asked whether he'd slept through the night without seeing a dead man stand up. Chris didn't like how quickly that thought put an edge in him.

May had told him Charleston might be worth following up on if he ever headed that way and if the staffing problem still held. She'd also insisted she wasn't telling him to go. He remembered the wording because it'd irritated him enough to become permanent.

If you want work, Charleston may have work. If you want to keep moving, keep moving. If you want to go home, go home. Choosing matters. Chris had read that in Texas. Then again outside New Orleans. Then somewhere in Alabama with rain hammering the roof so hard he could barely hear himself think. Choosing mattered. He believed that. It just didn't always feel as clean as May made it sound.

Now Tamara had asked him to take Eli to Charleston. Amos had cleaned his gun. Alma had stitched his arm. The recovered mail was under his tarp. The road report in his notebook needed a board, a depot, someone who could turn one person’s mistake into everyone else’s warning.

Charleston was no longer a theoretical dot on the eastern edge of May’s letter. It was a destination with a sleeping kid attached. The letter had mentioned the Charleston Courier too. A new paper, up-and-coming, hungry for a relationship with the Express before anyone had defined what that relationship should be. Gathering stories from across the Eastern Core, which was apparently what people were calling the East Coast now. Chris had agreed with May in what it sounded like, but it was useful.

The Courier would branch west sooner or later. Papers liked roads. Roads liked papers. Everyone wanted information until it said something inconvenient about them. Chris had seen the name once since then, printed at the bottom of a copied notice pinned near a depot board. Sharp type. Confident language. A little too pleased with itself, maybe, but useful. Warnings, market notes, fragments of politics from places that'd once been states and now called themselves other things.

A paper that wanted the Express made sense. Information liked company. It also liked leverage. The last part of the letter had been personal enough that Chris still sometimes skipped it and then felt guilty for skipping it. *Write an actual location. Somewhere east isn't a location.*

Eddie and Buck’s restraint has an expiration date. Tell Theo hello. Tell yourself hello too. You have a tendency to report events like you're not one of the people they happened to. That line had annoyed him the most because it was accurate. Chris looked away from the page.

The clearing stayed still. The ditch kept carrying stormwater through the dark. A breeze moved through the pines, lifting the wet, green smell of the woods. He thought of Theo as he'd been when Chris left in September: small, wary, still deciding what safety meant when adults weren't just people who moved you from one place to another. Then he thought of Eddie’s newer letter, Theo behind the flour sacks with Buck’s boot, proud as anything and chewing through a lace like victory had a taste.

Seven months. Long enough for a kid to get bolder. Long enough for a working name to become paint on signs. Long enough for Chris to cross half a continent and still feel, some nights, like he'd only just left the driveway. The final line of May’s letter sat in his memory without needing the page.

The world is getting bigger again. Try not to disappear inside it. Chris let out a quiet breath. Then Eli made a small, distressed sound in his sleep. The letter folded down at once. Chris rose, careful with his bad leg and quieter because of it, and opened the passenger door slowly enough that the hinges only whispered.

Eli’s face had gone tight again. His good hand clutched the scrap of paper so hard it'd crumpled in his fist. His lips moved without sound.

“Eli,” Chris said, low. “You’re in the truck.”

The boy flinched awake, eyes wide and unfocused. Chris stayed where he was. Not too close. Not looming. One hand on the door frame, the other visible.

“Right headlight,” he said.

Eli dragged in a breath.

“Water jug. Broken pine branch. My boot. Your blanket.”

The boy’s eyes moved, catching each thing as Chris named it. His breathing hitched once, then steadied by degrees.

“Red Scarf?” Chris asked.

Eli swallowed. “Dream.”

“Where are you?”

“Truck.”

“Where’s the truck?”

“Camp. East road.”

“Good.”

Eli rubbed his face, embarrassed even half-asleep. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for waking up.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your important *sittin'*.”

The joke came out thin, but it was a joke. Chris accepted it for what it was. “My sitting is *very* resilient.” Eli’s mouth twitched. He looked down at the crumpled scrap in his hand. There were three words written on it in uneven pencil. *He got up.* Chris saw them before Eli folded the paper closed. He didn't comment.

“Try the breaths again,” Chris said instead. “Then sleep.”

“You’re still readin'?”

“Finished.”

“May?”

Chris glanced at him, surprised. Eli looked drowsy and pale in the dim light. “You said the other one was from your dad. The old one’s probably May. People keep sayin' her name like she *started* somethin'.”

“She *did* start something.”

“Is Charleston in it?”

Chris looked down at the folded pages in his hand.

“Yeah,” he said. “Charleston’s in it.”

“New letter?”

“Old one.”

“How old?”

Chris hesitated.

Then, because tired people made bad decisions and dishonest ones made worse habits, he said, “Seven months.” Eli blinked at him. “Seven *months?*”

“It was written in November. Took a while to reach me. I’ve had it since spring.”

“And Charleston was already in it?”

“Yeah.”

Eli absorbed that, then nodded like this confirmed a private suspicion. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Just… if a place keeps showin' up for seven months, maybe the road’s been pointin' longer than you wanted to admit.”

Chris stared at him for a second. Eli’s eyes were already closing again. “My grandmother would say it better.”

“I bet she *would*.”

The boy fell back asleep before Chris could decide whether to be annoyed or impressed. Both, probably. He eased the door mostly shut again and returned to the tire. The night had deepened while he was up. Clouds moved over the narrow slice of sky above the clearing, hiding most of the stars. In the ditch, water kept running toward some lower place it didn't need to name. Chris slid May’s letter back into his jacket with Eddie’s.

The two papers fit together there, different weights against his chest. One old enough to show how long the road had been arranging itself. One new enough to remind him that home hadn't stopped reaching after him.

Once, that'd have felt like being pulled in half. Tonight, it felt more like being located. He took out his route notebook next. The pencil was dull, but it held. Chris braced the paper on his knee and started with the facts because facts were safer than feelings and more useful in the morning.

Road report: false Express marker west of Douglasville. Bandit trap operating from swamp shack south of route. Hostiles neutralized. Shack burned. Recovered courier bags and assorted mail. One local courier minor rescued alive. RD infection confirmed in deceased hostile after reanimation. Recommend warning board at Douglasville, Lithia south track, and next registered depot. Approach former marker site with armed escort only.

He paused, listening. The woods gave him water, insects, wind. Normal. Chris added one more line. *False marker was clean enough to fool a trained local minor under pressure. Update route-sign standards before expansion.* He stared at that for a moment, then underlined *before expansion* once. May would appreciate that. Jace would probably turn it into three forms and a terminology dispute.

Inside the truck, Eli slept with the blanket pulled to his chin, the crumpled nightmare note tucked under one hand and the route sheet under the other. Responsible for someone else’s road, Chris thought, and felt the weight of it settle without drama. He'd taken people places before. He'd rescued strangers. He'd carried supplies, warnings, letters, names.

This was different. Not because Eli was helpless. He wasn’t. Because Chris had seen the exact moment the boy’s life had bent toward the road and had put his own hand on the turn. He closed the notebook and looked east again.

Charleston waited beyond days of wet roads, river crossings, warning boards, polished rules, and whatever trouble the Lowlands dressed up as civilization. May’s letter made it sound like infrastructure. Tamara had made it sound like hope. Eli made it sound like a test Chris hadn't agreed to take and was already grading himself on. The road didn't care what he called it. It went on anyway.

Chris settled back against the tire, Beretta within reach, letters against his chest, notebook closed on his knee. He'd sleep later, in pieces. For now, he watched the dark until the dark became familiar. By dawn, he would have a report to deliver, a kid to train, and a city ahead that'd been waiting in the margins for seven months.

Dawn came gray and cold through the trees. Chris woke before the light fully changed, because sleeping on the road was never really sleeping. It was more like agreeing to be unconscious in short, negotiable installments. His back hurt from the ground. His bad leg had stiffened overnight. The graze on his arm pulled under Alma’s stitches when he shifted, sharp enough to make him pause and quiet enough that he didn't swear. Inside the truck, Eli was still asleep. That was the first thing Chris checked.

The boy had folded in on himself during the night, knees drawn awkwardly, blanket twisted around one foot. His injured arm was tucked close to his chest. The crumpled scrap of paper had escaped his hand and landed on the floorboard, writing turned down. The route sheet, somehow, remained under his elbow like he'd decided to guard it in his sleep. Chris watched him for a moment longer than necessary. Then he looked away.

The clearing smelled different in the morning. Less hidden. Damp pine, cooling mud, old ash in the abandoned fire ring, the faint metallic tang of the truck. Water still moved through the ditch beyond the culvert, quieter now that the night runoff had eased. Birds started up one at a time, testing the air like they'd been waiting to see whether anything else had survived the dark. Normal sounds. Chris stood slowly and let his leg remember how to be useful.

He checked the perimeter first. The track out. The boot prints softened further by dew. The brush line. The ditch. No new marks in the gravel. No fresh cigarette ends, no drag signs, no branches broken at the wrong height. The possum had left tiny prints near the food tin and nothing else had followed it.

Good.

He came back to the truck and started the morning inventory before waking Eli. Water. Food. Medicine. Fuel. Ammunition. Mail. Route notebook. May’s old letter and Eddie’s newer one still in his jacket, both safe. By the time he'd finished, the sky beyond the pines had brightened from iron to dull silver. Eli woke when Chris opened the driver’s door. He came awake fast, which told Chris too much.

The boy jerked upright, hit his injured arm against the seat back, and hissed through his teeth before he could pretend he hadn’t. His eyes searched the windshield, the tree line, Chris, the open door, and only then seemed to understand where he was.

“Morning,” Chris said.

Eli blinked hard. “I wasn’t asleep.” Chris looked at the blanket tangled around both of the boy’s boots.

“Convincing,” he said.

Eli frowned down at himself. “How long was I out?”

“Most of the night.”

“You should’ve woken me.”

“For what?”

“Watch.”

“You took watch.”

“For like ten *minutes*.”

“It was a *very* educational ten minutes.”

Eli gave him a look that'd have worked better if his hair hadn't been smashed flat on one side. Chris reached into the cab and picked up the fallen scrap from the floorboard. He didn't turn it over. He held it out, blank side up. Eli’s expression changed. Not much. Enough. He took it quickly and folded it into the pocket of his jacket. “Thanks.”

“How’s the arm?”

“Fine.”

“Try again.”

Eli hesitated. “Sore.”

“Bleeding?”

“No.”

“You checked?”

“I can tell.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

Eli exhaled like Chris had personally invented inconvenience. “No. I didn’t check.”

“Then we check.”

“Now?”

“Unless you’ve scheduled an infection for later.”

The boy’s mouth twitched despite the irritation. “You *always* like this in the mornin'?”

“This is me being pleasant.”

“*Oh*.”

“Careful. You’ll hurt my feelings.”

“Do you *have* those before breakfast?”

Chris paused, then pointed at him. “That was *almost* good.” Eli looked startled by the praise, then pleased, then embarrassed that he was pleased. Chris let him have all three without comment. The bandage came next.

Chris made Eli sit on the running board while he unwrapped Alma’s work. The wound looked angry but clean, the edges pulled tight, no fresh bleeding beyond a small stain where Eli had jerked in his sleep. Chris cleaned it anyway, efficient and gentle in a way he didn't draw attention to. Eli watched the trees instead of the wound.

“You going to pass out?” Chris asked.

“No.”

“That wasn't a challenge.”

“I’m not.”

“Good.”

Eli swallowed. “Does it look bad?”

“It looks like you tried to lift a water jug with stitches less than a day old.”

“So *bad*.”

“So *preventable*.”

“That’s not better.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be.”

Eli sighed at him, but some of the tension left his shoulders when Chris wrapped the clean bandage back into place. Then Chris checked his own stitches by feel, because trying to see the graze properly would require more twisting than the wound deserved. It hurt. It wasn't bleeding. Good enough.

Eli noticed anyway.

“Yours okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You checked?”

Chris looked at him. Eli looked back, almost smiling. Chris decided he'd earned that one. “Enough.”

“That sounds like *not enough*.”

“Breakfast,” Chris said.

“Avoiding the question.”

“Correct.”

They ate standing near the tailgate: more hard bread, dried apple, the last of the cold beans because Chris refused to carry an open jar farther than necessary. Eli complained less this time, either because hunger had improved the food or because he was learning which battles not to pick. Chris counted both possibilities as progress. After breakfast, Eli tried to reach for the heavier supply box again. Chris didn't even look up from tying the tarp. “No.” Eli froze. “I didn’t *do* anything.”

“You thought loudly.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Neither is reopening your arm.”

The boy folded his good hand into a fist at his side, then released it. “I can *work*.”

“I know.”

“Then give me somethin' real.”

Chris stopped tying the tarp. There it was: not just pride, not just stubbornness. Need. Eli had woken in a strange clearing with a nightmare note in his pocket and home already behind him. If Chris treated him like glass, the boy would either crack from shame or cut himself proving he could. So Chris gave him work.

“Water,” he said.

Eli straightened. “I thought I *couldn’t* haul.”

“You’re not hauling. You’re *checking*. Count the full canteens. Count the partials. Mark what we used last night. Then tell me whether we need to filter before noon or if we can wait until the next clean source.”

Eli blinked. “How do I know?”

“Math.”

“I *hate* math.”

“Math is how you avoid dying of confidence.”

“I hate that *more*.”

“Good. It’ll stick.”

Chris handed him the pencil. Eli took it like it weighed more than the water jug.

“Food next,” Chris continued. “Same thing. Count what we have. Keep travel food separate from trade goods. If it’s medicine, it doesn't go under food. If it’s medical, it stays reachable. If you bury the fever reducers under a sack of cornmeal, Alma will appear in your dreams and judge you.”

Eli made a face. “She *would*, too.”

“Exactly.”

“What else?”

“Inspect the tires.”

The boy looked toward the truck. “For what?”

“Nails. Glass. Cracks. Low pressure. Mud packed where it shouldn’t be. Anything caught in the tread. Don’t put your bad arm under anything. Don’t crawl where I can’t see you.”

“That’s a lot.”

“You wanted real.”

Eli nodded once, serious now. “I can do that.”

“I know.”

Again, the answer caught him off guard. Chris watched him start with the water. Slowly at first, then with more focus as the shape of the work settled around him. Eli lined canteens by the rear tire, counted under his breath, frowned when he lost track, started again without being told. He wrote the numbers in the margin of the route sheet in cramped pencil.

Chris packed the rest of camp while the boy worked. Not quickly. Not carelessly. They weren't fleeing, and that mattered. A clean departure told the body there'd been a choice here. They'd stopped. Slept. Checked. Left. No panic required. When Eli finished the water count, he brought the route sheet over with the solemnity of a formal report.

“We have enough until midday,” he said. “If we don’t waste any. The ditch water is bad unless we filter and boil, but you said no unnecessary fire, so we should wait unless the next source is worse.”

“Good.”

Eli looked down at the paper. “I guessed on how much you drink.”

“How much did you guess?”

“Less than me.”

“Why?”

“You forget.”

Chris opened his mouth. Closed it. Eli’s expression turned wary, like he was bracing to be told he'd overstepped. Chris took the route sheet and checked the numbers. They were rough, but not bad. More importantly, the boy had noticed something real.

“Good catch,” Chris said.

Eli’s shoulders lowered.

“*Also* rude,” Chris added.

“But good?”

“Unfortunately.”

That earned him a small smile. The food count went faster. The medicine organization took longer because Eli wanted to know what everything did, and Chris answered what he could. Fever reducers. Antibiotic ointment. Bandage rolls. Suture kit, not for touching unless there was no one better. Alcohol. Clean cloth. Two small bottles from Alma labeled in handwriting sharp enough to suggest the bottles knew better than to leak.

“What’s this one?” Eli asked.

“Pain tincture.”

“Why didn’t you take it last night?”

“Because I was on watch.”

“Why didn’t I?”

“Because you fell asleep before complaining enough.”

“I can complain now.”

“Tempting offer.”

Eli looked almost offended. “I’m serious.”

“So am I. If the pain’s bad, you tell me. If it’s manageable, we keep you clear-headed until we’re on safer road.”

“How do I know which it is?”

“Can you think?”

“Yes.”

“Can you move without wanting to throw up?”

“Yes.”

“Can you stop being irritating?”

“Probably not.”

“Manageable.”

Eli snorted, then tried to hide it by turning toward the tires. By the time the sun broke fully through the clouds, the camp had disappeared into the truck. No loose wrappers. No extra tracks if they could help it. No food left for animals or people. Chris scattered the cold ashes in the old ring even though they'd not used it, habit more than necessity.

Eli stood beside the front tire, hands on his hips, studying the tread with the grave concentration of someone inspecting a bridge.

“This one has a cut,” he said.

Chris came over. The cut was shallow, a scrape along the outer rubber where a branch or bit of metal had kissed it without biting deep. Not a problem yet. Worth marking.

“Good eye.”

“Is it bad?”

“Not yet.”

“That means maybe later.”

“Most things mean maybe later.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“Good. Comfort makes terrible tires.”

Eli stared at him. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

“It might by lunch.”

“No, it won’t.”

Chris smiled despite himself and marked the tire in the notebook. They pulled out a little after sunrise. The service track spat them back onto the road with a wet crunch of gravel under the

tires. Morning light made the broken asphalt look cleaner than it was. Mist lifted in pale sheets from the ditches. Somewhere beyond the trees, a rooster crowed like it'd survived the end of the world out of spite and now intended to make that everyone else’s problem. Eli settled into the passenger seat with the route sheet already open.

He looked exhausted. Pale under the bruises. Still sore enough that every bump made his mouth tighten. But there was a steadier shape to him now, built out of tasks and numbers and the simple fact that morning had come without Red Scarf walking out of the trees. Chris let the truck roll east.

“Next lesson,” he said.

Eli’s head came up. “Already?”

“You wanted real work.”

“I didn’t say *constantly*.”

“Courier work is *very* inconsiderate.”

The boy adjusted the route sheet with his good hand. “*Fine*. What’s the lesson?”

“A courier’s job isn’t just carrying a letter.”

Eli waited.

“It’s making sure the next person has better information than you did.”

The sentence quieted the cab. Eli looked down at the route sheet, at the water count in the margin, the camp note from last night, the marked bridge debris, the false sign warning Chris had written in harder pencil than the rest.

“So if I write somethin' wrong,” he said slowly, “someone else could get hurt.”

“Yes.”

Chris didn't soften it. Eli’s fingers tightened on the paper.

“But if you write something *right*,” Chris said, “someone else might make it through because you noticed what mattered.”

The boy breathed in. Held it. Let it out.

“That’s a lot,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Do you think I can do it?”

There was the real question. Not in the words, exactly. In the way Eli didn't look at him when he asked. In the way his voice tried to sound casual and failed. Do you think I can be useful.

Do you think what happened means I shouldn’t. Do you think I’m cargo. Do you think Charleston will laugh me out of the depot if I walk in with stitches and a story I can’t tell without shaking. Chris kept his eyes on the road.

“Not today,” he said.

Eli went very still. The deflation was immediate and painful to watch. His shoulders drew in. His gaze dropped to the route sheet like he should've known better than to ask. Chris let it sit for one breath. Only one.

“Today you’re alive, listening, and learning,” he said. “That’s the start.”

Eli didn't answer. Chris glanced over then. The boy’s mouth was pressed tight, but not the same way it'd been before. Less hurt. More like he was holding onto the second sentence before the first one could crush it.

“Nobody worth trusting becomes a courier because someone hands them a bag and calls them brave,” Chris said. “You learn roads. You learn people. You learn when to move and when to stop. You learn how not to make your fear somebody else’s problem. You learn how to be wrong before wrong gets expensive.”

“That sounds like a long time.”

“It should.”

Eli swallowed. “But you think I can start?”

“You already did.”

This time, the quiet in the cab held something different. Outside, the road climbed onto higher ground, leaving the wettest woods behind. The trees thinned enough for morning to fall across the pavement in pale bands. Old fence lines appeared in the brush, half-collapsed and furred with vines. A mailbox leaned at the edge of a driveway that led nowhere visible, its red flag still raised after years of waiting for a world that no longer came every afternoon.

Eli watched it pass.

“That’s sad,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Do people ever use old mailboxes for route drops?”

“Sometimes.”

“How do you know which ones?”

“Marks. Local agreements. Depot notes. Or you don’t, and you leave it alone.”

Eli nodded and wrote something in the margin.

“What are you writing?” Chris asked.

“*Don’t trust lonely mailboxes*.”

Chris considered that.

“Not official language,” he said.

“But true?”

“Unfortunately.”

The boy’s smile came easier this time. They drove another twenty minutes before the road offered its first test. It came at a split near a stand of old pecan trees, where a smaller track peeled south and the main road bent east around a washed-out shoulder. Three boards had been nailed to a post at the fork. One was old enough to be gray. One had been painted over twice. The newest was a narrow strip of tin wired below the others, its markings scratched through soot and mud.

Chris saw the answer before they reached it. He slowed anyway. Eli leaned forward, route sheet forgotten in his lap.

“Main road’s bad,” he said.

“Why?”

“Shoulder’s washed out.”

“What else?”

Eli studied the post. “The old board says east is open. But it’s old. Same problem as yesterday. The painted one says bridge passable for horses and foot traffic. Not trucks. The tin says south track rejoins after…” He squinted. “*Three* miles? Maybe four. There’s a depot mark, but not a full one. Local route?”

“Good.”

“So we take south.”

“Why not risk the bridge?”

Eli gave him an incredulous look. “Because we’re in a truck.”

“And?”

“And if the bridge is only passable for horses and foot traffic, then a truck makes us the warnin' someone else writes later.”

Chris felt a small, unexpected warmth under his ribs.

“*That*,” he said, “is the lesson.”

Eli looked back at the sign, trying not to glow. Failed again. Chris turned south. The track was narrow but passable, rutted through red clay and bordered by weeds tall enough to brush the truck doors. It led them past an old church with its steeple broken clean off, white paint peeling in strips, windows boarded from the inside. Chris kept his face neutral because Eli had already caught one reaction to churches yesterday and didn't need another excuse to ask questions.

A fresh mark had been carved into the fence post near the churchyard gate. Eli spotted it first.

“There,” he said, pointing. “Real marker. South track clear as of… I can’t read the date.”

Chris slowed.

“June 12,” he said after a glance.

“That’s recent.”

“Recent *enough*.”

Eli wrote it down.

The churchyard slid past, headstones tilted under wet grass, names softened by weather. Chris kept one eye on the boarded windows and one on the road. Nothing moved behind them. Nothing scratched. Nothing pressed pale fingers through a crack in the wood.

Still, the place had the wrong kind of quiet. Not wanderers, maybe. Just old grief with walls around it. Eli felt it too. He stopped writing until they'd passed the gate.

“Granddaddy was right,” he said after a while.

“About what?”

“Churches.”

Chris glanced at him. Eli looked back at the route sheet very quickly. Smart kid. The south track rejoined the main road three and a half miles later, exactly where the tin marker had promised. Eli marked the distance with a satisfaction so careful it almost made Chris laugh.

Then Chris pulled onto the shoulder and stopped.

Eli looked up. “What?”

“Route note.”

“Now?”

“Before we forget what mattered.”

Eli straightened. “You want me to write it?”

“Clean copy. Official-style. Short enough someone can read it fast. Clear enough they don’t have to guess.”

The boy’s fingers tightened around the pencil. “About the fork?”

“Start with the false Express marker west road. Then add this bypass.”

Eli went still. Chris watched him without turning fully. The false marker wasn't just information. It was the place where Eli had gone from courier’s grandson with a medicine bag to bait in a ditch. Writing it down meant touching it with both hands.

“You can dictate if you need to,” Chris said.

Eli shook his head once. Too fast, maybe, but not empty.

“I can write it.”

“Okay.”

Chris let the engine idle. The road ahead stayed empty. Morning warmed slowly through the windshield. Eli braced the route sheet against a folded map and began. His first line came out cramped and crooked. He crossed out two words, frowned, and started again lower on the page.

Chris didn't help until asked. It took longer than it needed to. That was fine. Finally, Eli held the sheet out. Chris read it. *False Express marker west road beyond Douglasville. Bandit trap. Route burned out. Recovered mail taken east. Don't approach alone. Armed escort recommended.*

Below that, in slightly steadier script: *Fork near old pecan stand: main east bridge marked foot/horse only. Trucks use south track. Rejoins main road after approx. 3.5 miles. Clear as of June 13.* Chris read both notes twice.

“Good,” he said.

Eli let out a breath that sounded like he'd been holding it since Douglasville.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Too long?”

“A little.”

Eli’s face fell.

“But clear,” Chris added. “Clear matters first. Short comes with practice.”

The boy nodded, absorbing that like it was something he could use. Chris handed the sheet back. “Add one more thing.”

“What?”

“False marker was convincing.”

Eli’s pencil hovered.

“Why?”

“Because if someone reads bandit trap, they might think only an *idiot* would fall for it.”

Eli looked at him sharply. Chris kept his eyes on the road ahead.

“They need to know it was *clean*,” he said. “Good paint. Good placement. Close enough to real to fool someone who knew the route under pressure. That matters.”

Eli looked down at the page. For a second, Chris thought he might not write it. Then the pencil moved. *False marker looked real. Good paint, good placement. Check all new signs against local boards.* The words sat there, simple and brutal and useful. Eli stared at them.

“It wasn’t just me,” he said quietly.

“No.”

“But it was still *my* route.”

“Yeah.”

The boy nodded once, like both answers hurt and both were necessary. Chris put the truck in gear. They drove on. The road east widened by degrees as the morning grew, the rougher tracks feeding back into patched pavement, the patched pavement finding old painted lines beneath mud and weather. Eli kept the route sheet open on his lap. Every so often, his good hand drifted to the pocket where he'd put the nightmare note, but he didn't take it out. He watched the markers instead. At the next split, he identified the real one before Chris slowed.

“There,” he said. “Three-line circle under the arrow. Fresh cut, not painted. Date mark on the side. Whoever did it used the same knife pattern as the churchyard post.”

Chris checked. He was right.

“Good,” Chris said.

Eli sat a little straighter. Not proud exactly. Or not only proud. Something steadier than that. A start.

The road changed before the map said it should. Chris noticed it first in the shoulders. Less washout. Fewer places where rainwater had eaten the asphalt down to gravel and left the lane crumbling in uneven bites. The old painted lines were still faded, still broken by years of weather and neglect, but someone had cleared the worst of the storm debris from the ditches and cut back the brush where it crowded the curves. Every few miles, a fresh stake stood near the shoulder with a strip of tin nailed high enough for wagon drivers to see.

Not safe, exactly. Maintained. That was different. Eli noticed it after the third marker. He'd been quiet since the route note, not in the hollow way from yesterday, but with the focused silence of someone sorting new information into places it could fit. His route sheet lay open across his lap, weighted by his good hand. The pencil moved every time a sign, bridge, or roadside warning gave him something worth keeping.

“This road’s better,” he said finally.

“Yeah.”

“Like *actually* better. Not just less terrible.”

Chris glanced at the next curve, then the trees beyond it. “Don’t get sentimental. Better roads just let bad decisions travel faster.” Eli looked over. “You practice sayin' things like that?”

“No.”

“So they just happen?”

“Unfortunately for everyone.”

The boy huffed, close to a laugh, and went back to the map. He looked better with work in front of him. Still pale under the bruising, still moving carefully around the injured arm, but not drifting loose in his own head. Chris knew that trick. Give the fear a job. Make the hands useful. Let the body learn, one ordinary task at a time, that the worst thing wasn't currently happening.

The road carried them southeast through wet pine and abandoned subdivisions, then into country that'd started rebuilding itself with more intention. Fence lines stood straighter. Fields showed rows of corn and beans instead of only scrub. A water tower had been repainted with a blue band around its middle, the mark clean enough to be recent. Near a crossroads, three old traffic signs had been bolted to a new wooden frame and painted over with arrows: *MACON ROUTE*, *SAVANNAH ROAD*, *LOWLAND TRADE APPROACH*. Eli leaned forward to read all three. “Lowland?”

“Western edge of their influence,” Chris said. “Not the Confederation proper yet, depending on who’s drawing the line. But close enough that people start acting like the rules can hear them.”

“Is that bad?”

“It’s useful.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It's. Just not the one you wanted.”

Eli made a face, but his attention had already moved to the roadside. A wagon came into view ahead, broad-wheeled and canvas-covered, moving in the same direction under the pull of two sturdy horses. The wagon wasn't alone. Three riders bracketed it, each wearing a dark green armband over the sleeve and a short coat too clean to have been slept in beside a ditch.

Chris eased off the gas before they got close enough to spook the horses. The rear rider looked back. Then looked longer. Chris couldn't blame them. His truck looked exactly like what it was: road-worn, mud-caked, patched with parts from at least three other vehicles, carrying extra fuel, recovered mail, weapons, and one injured fourteen-year-old trying very hard to sit like a professional. In friendlier country, that got curiosity. Near controlled routes, it got assessed.

“Don’t stare,” Chris said.

Eli immediately stared less naturally.

“That was worse.”

“I’m *tryin'*.”

“Try quieter.”

The rider lifted one hand, palm down, not a greeting so much as a question. Chris answered with two fingers off the wheel and kept the truck slow, giving the wagon plenty of room. No sudden speed. No reaching. No friendly wave big enough to be mistaken for distraction.

The wagon driver glanced back as they passed. Older, broad-faced, hat pulled low against the damp. A trade badge hung from the wagon bench, stamped tin catching pale light: scales inside a rope circle. The riders wore rifles in saddle scabbards and sidearms openly, but not carelessly. Their horses were groomed. Their tack was polished. Even the mud on their boots looked recent and specific, as if it'd been authorized. Eli waited until they'd pulled ahead before breathing properly. “Were those guards?”

“Road escort. Trade wagon, probably registered.”

“How can you tell?”

“Armbands match. Badge on the wagon. Nobody shot at us for coming up behind them.”

“*That’s* your standard?”

“It’s a good start.”

Eli twisted just enough to look back without making it obvious. “They dress nice.”

“Cleaner than *us*, anyway.”

“A *lot* cleaner than us.”

“Careful. You’ll hurt the truck’s feelings.”

“Does the *truck* have feelings before breakfast?”

Chris pointed at him without taking his eyes off the road. “Don't reuse my material against me.”

“Is that *another* rule?”

“It is *now*.”

Eli smiled down at the route sheet, then wrote something. Chris didn't ask. He'd a suspicion the margin of that map was becoming less official by the mile.

The farther they drove, the more the road announced that someone was trying to make it belong to a system. Directional markers were painted in the same hand or under the same rules, even when the posts themselves were scavenged from old signs and fence rails. Warning boards stood at crossroads instead of being nailed wherever a traveler had found space. Some used symbols Chris recognized from western routes: water quality, rotter/gray presence, walker count, bridge weight, depot relay. Others were Lowland-specific, more formal and less forgiving. Declare arms. Register trade. No night passage beyond marker without escort.

At a widened stretch near an old gas station, half the building had been converted into a checkpoint shed or road office. Nobody manned it when they passed, but the windows had been repaired with mismatched panes, and the pump island had been cleared of weeds. A board under the old price sign listed notices in neat columns, protected from the weather by a sheet of salvaged plexiglass. Chris slowed enough for Eli to read.

“Charleston Depot hirin' riders and route clerks,” Eli said, voice sharpening with interest. “Junior apprentices considered by sponsor letter or local recommendation.”

Chris kept his face neutral. “Write it down.”

“I'm.”

The pencil moved fast, then slowed as Eli reached the next notice. “Recovered courier bags must be turned over at registered depot or road office. Tamperin' with sealed mail punishable by… *that word’s smudged*.”

“Fine. Labor. Confiscation. Depends who’s doing the punishing.”

“That seems vague.”

“Vague law is just a weapon with polite grammar.”

Eli looked at him. “You definitely practice.”

“Read the next one.”

Eli leaned closer to the glass as they rolled past. “False route signs reported west and northwest approaches. Verify new markers against registered boards. Travel in pairs where possible.” His voice changed on the last words, not much, but enough.

“Keep going,” Chris said quietly.

Eli swallowed. “Stolen courier bags. Reward for information. Charleston Courier seeking regional accounts of road conditions, depot failures, route hazards, and reconstruction efforts. Submissions accepted by relay packet at participatin' offices.” Chris watched the road beyond the gas station instead of the board. “*There* it is.”

“The paper from May’s letter?”

“Yeah.”

“They want stories about depot failures?”

“They want stories people will *read*.”

“Is that bad?”

“It can be useful. It can also make everyone involved defensive enough to do something stupid.”

Eli considered that with the grave expression of a person discovering there were more ways to be dangerous than holding a gun. “Papers are like roads?”

“How do you mean?”

“People use them to get somewhere. Doesn’t mean they’re safe.”

Chris glanced at him.

Eli looked immediately down at the route sheet. “Too much?”

“No,” Chris said. “That one works.”

The boy tried to hide how much that pleased him and failed in a quieter way than before.

They left the gas station behind. The road widened for several miles, following the old highway through scrubby farmland and small settlements that'd learned to defend themselves without looking like forts. Watch platforms stood behind barns instead of on top of gates. Fences were repaired with wire and old bedframes. Laundry hung in one yard, bright against the gray day. People looked up as the truck passed: a woman carrying a bucket, two kids chasing a goat away from a cabbage patch, a man on a roof patching shingles with flattened sheet metal.

Nobody waved. Nobody ran. That counted as welcome, out here. Eli watched it all with the tense curiosity of someone seeing a future he hadn't known to picture. Douglasville had been small enough that everyone’s business knew everyone else by name. This was different. Farms linked by road marks. Wagons under escort. Notices copied from office to office. A world rebuilding in pieces, each piece formal enough to make Chris uneasy.

“Do you think they’re safer?” Eli asked.

“Who?”

“People here. Lowland people.”

Chris passed a sign warning of a washed culvert two miles ahead, then a second sign correcting the first with newer paint. “Safer roads. Sharper rules.”

Eli wrote that down.

“That wasn’t a route note.”

“Still useful.”

“Is it under official language or things my grandmother might steal?”

“Both.”

Chris decided not to argue with Alma from a distance. Near midday, they passed the first proper Lowland trade post. It'd grown around an old feed store and a church parking lot, protected by a timber fence and a ditch that'd been dug recently enough for the clay banks to show raw red. A gate stood open, but two armed attendants watched everyone who entered. Beyond them, Chris saw wagons, a mule team, stacked crates under tarps, and a line of people waiting at a board where notices had been pinned in straight rows.

One of the attendants lifted a hand toward the truck, not stopping them, only measuring. Chris lifted two fingers again and kept moving. Eli waited until the post fell behind them. “Why didn’t we stop?”

“We don’t need trade. We have enough fuel for now. And I don’t want to explain the mail, the guns, your arm, my stitches, and the truck to someone who isn’t actually making us explain it yet.”

“But don’t we have recovered mail?”

“Some of it is bound east. Some of it needs a registered depot. That was a trade post, not a depot.”

“How do you know?”

“No Express board. No courier mark on the gate. No route office sign. Lots of trade badges, no mail seal.”

Eli turned that over, then marked something on the sheet. His handwriting had started smoothing out when he wrote observations that didn't hurt.

The sky cleared in pieces as they drove. Heat rose off the road in damp waves, waking the smell of clay, grass, and old oil from the pavement. The truck’s engine settled into a steady growl. Chris kept one hand loose on the wheel and the other near enough to shift if the road changed under them. It still might. Better-maintained didn't mean predictable. Sometimes it only meant a washout had been repaired by people confident enough to miss the next weak point. A mile past the trade post, they found proof.

The warning board came first: *CULVERT DAMAGE AHEAD — SINGLE FILE — NO WAGONS AFTER RAIN*. Below it, someone had added a fresh strip of tin with three slashes and a date from the day before. Chris slowed. The road dipped where a creek cut under it, the old culvert reinforced with new timbers and packed clay. It'd hold the truck if he kept centered and didn't stop.

Probably.

“What do you see?” Chris asked.

Eli leaned forward. “New repair. Mud on the right shoulder. Water under the road, but not over it. The left side looks higher.”

“And?”

“If we go too far right, the shoulder might give.”

“Good.”

Chris took it slow. The truck rolled down into the dip, tires crunching over packed clay. For a few seconds, the right side sank deeper than he liked, and Eli went silent in the passenger seat. Chris kept the wheel straight, gave the engine just enough pressure, and felt the repair hold beneath them. Then they were up the other side. Eli breathed out.

“Still better roads?” Chris asked.

“Better doesn’t mean good.”

“There you go.”

The boy wrote that down too. They hit the next settlement after noon. Not a town, exactly. More like the ghost of one someone had taught to stand again. Brick storefronts along an old main street. Upper windows boarded or patched with shutters. A clinic sign repainted over a former dentist’s office. Two water barrels under a public notice that read *BOIL UNLESS MARKED BY POST PHYSICIAN*. A depot arrow had been painted on the side of a bank building, pointing toward a side street, but the mark was yellow instead of white and crossed by a diagonal bar.

Eli frowned at it. “Closed?”

“Suspended,” Chris said. “Or temporary. Depends on the local code.”

“Should we check?”

Chris watched a pair of men outside the bank turn toward the truck. One wore a vest too clean for the street. The other had a shotgun broken open over his forearm, not aimed, not idle either.

“No.”

Eli followed his gaze and went quiet. The men watched them pass. Chris kept the truck steady, neither slow enough to invite conversation nor fast enough to look like flight. The side street beyond the bank held two wagons and a closed board under canvas. Not worth stopping. Not with Charleston ahead and Eli beside him.

At the far end of town, three notices had been pasted to an old bus shelter. Chris slowed for the road sign. Eli read the notices anyway.

“Missing travelers reported on Savannah approach,” he said. “Stolen bags. Charleston Depot hirin'. Charleston Courier requests accounts of… *wait, another Courier notice?*”

“Paper’s ambitious.”

“They’re *everywhere*.”

“That’s usually what *ambitious* means.”

Eli looked back at the shelter as it slipped behind them. “Do you think the missin' travelers are connected to the false signs?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s it?”

“We don’t have enough to make it more than *maybe*.”

“But you’re *thinkin'* it.”

Chris kept his eyes on the road. “I think a lot of things. Most of them don’t deserve to become conclusions.” Eli went quiet, then wrote that down in the margin.

“That one either?” Chris asked.

“*Especially* that one.”

Chris had to fight a smile. The day stretched after that, heat thickening, clouds burning off, the land opening and closing around them in alternating bands of field, pine, and small settlements tied together by a growing web of signs. Cleaner coats appeared more often. Hats with shaped brims. Gloves on riders who weren't trying to keep warm. Trade badges at belts

and collars. People carried themselves differently near the road here, like presentation had become part of survival.

Eli noticed.

“Everybody looks dressed up,” he said.

“Not everybody.”

“More than back home.”

“Lowlands like visible order.”

“Visible order?”

“Clothes, badges, posted rules, clean signs. Things that tell you who belongs, who’s allowed to ask questions, who gets listened to first.”

Eli looked down at his own muddy pants, bandaged arm, and borrowed jacket. “So we look bad.”

“We look like we came from the road.”

“Is that different?”

“Depends who’s looking.”

That kept him quiet for a while. Chris didn't fill the silence. He'd his own unease to manage. Bandits made sense in the worst way: hunger, cruelty, opportunity, fear, greed. A man with a gun in a swamp shack was dangerous, but the danger announced itself if you knew how to look. Places like this hid their blades in process. A stamped passage note. A polite question asked twice. A rule nobody explained until after you broke it. A clean coat could cut as deep as a dirty knife if the person wearing it'd enough authority behind them.

He missed, briefly and sharply, the brutal honesty of bad roads. Then he thought of Eli in the ditch and let the thought go. Late afternoon brought them to the largest road sign yet. It stood at a three-way junction where the pavement improved into something almost smooth, the shoulder reinforced with crushed stone and drainage ditches cut straight on both sides. Two flags hung limp from a crossbar: one green with a white rope circle, the other blue-gray with a stylized harbor gate. Beneath them, black letters had been painted with careful precision across a broad white board.

LOWLAND CONFEDERATION TRADE APPROACH Below that, smaller: *DECLARE ARMS AT REGISTERED DEPOTS. SEALED MAIL TO BE PRESENTED UNOPENED. NIGHT TRAVEL BY PASSAGE NOTE ONLY.* Eli read it aloud, slower with each sentence. Chris stopped the truck before the sign, engine idling. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

The road ahead looked better than any road they'd taken since leaving Douglasville. Wider. Straighter. Watched, if not visibly. The trees had been cut back twenty feet from the shoulder, leaving a clear line of sight in both directions. New mile markers stood at even intervals. In

the distance, a rider moved along the opposite lane, posture straight, coat dark against the pale road. Civilization, Chris thought, and didn't trust the word. Eli shifted in the passenger seat. “Are we supposed to declare arms now?”

“At registered depots,” Chris said. “Not signs.”

“And we have sealed mail.”

“Yeah.”

“And injured people.”

“Technically two.”

Eli glanced at him. “You’re countin' yourself?”

“Only for paperwork.”

The boy looked back at the sign. His face had gone careful again, but not afraid in the same way. This was a new kind of fear, one that didn't have red scarves or swamp shacks attached. Rules. Depots. People who might decide whether he was apprentice material or just a rescued kid with a good story and bad timing.

“Safer roads,” Eli said quietly.

“Sharper rules,” Chris finished.

Eli nodded once, then wrote the phrase in the margin beneath the Lowland sign, this time without trying to hide it. Chris put the truck back into gear. The road opened ahead of them, clean and pale under the late sun, leading east toward Charleston, the depot, the paper, the Lowland coast, and whatever counted as trouble when people had enough time to polish it first.

Chris drove on.

The checkpoint appeared at the river.

Chris saw the line of wagons first, three of them backed up along the shoulder where the road sloped toward a repaired bridge. Beyond the wagons, the Oconee moved broad and brown under the late afternoon light, swollen from the week’s rain and fast enough to carry whole branches in its current. The old bridge hadn't survived the Fall intact. Half of it was original concrete, stained dark and cracked along the edges. The rest was timber, steel plate, and stubbornness, with a guardhouse built onto the western end like someone had decided the bridge itself needed a jaw.

Eli lowered the route sheet without being told. “*That’s* official.”

“Looks that way.”

“Do we stop?”

“We stop if they *tell* us to stop.”

A bell rang before they reached the wagons. Not loud, but sharp enough to cut through engine noise and river water. One of the guards stepped into the road with a hand raised, dark coat buttoned despite the heat, green armband wrapped tight around one sleeve. A rifle hung from a strap across their chest. Not aimed. Ready. Chris eased the truck down to a crawl, then stopped with both hands visible on the wheel.

“Don’t talk unless I *ask* you to,” he said quietly.

Eli went rigid. “I know.”

“That wasn’t because you’re stupid. It’s because nervous people explain too much, and people with authority like turning extra words into extra *problems*.”

The boy swallowed and nodded once. The guard approached the driver’s side, eyes moving over the truck before they ever reached Chris’s face. Mud on the doors. Blood on the patched sleeve of his jacket. Rifle rack. Fuel cans. Tarped cargo. Eli’s bandaged arm and too-still posture in the passenger seat. The guard’s expression didn't change, which told Chris they'd either seen worse or been trained not to show when they hadn’t.

“Afternoon,” the guard said. “State your business at Oconee crossin'.”

“Eastbound passage,” Chris said. “Taking recovered mail and a rescued local courier to Charleston Depot.”

The guard’s eyes flicked to Eli. “Rescued from *what?*”

“Bandit trap west of Douglasville. False Express marker. Swamp shack south of the road. Hostiles neutralized. Mail recovered.”

The words landed with different weights. False Express marker got the guard’s attention. Mail recovered sharpened it. Hostiles neutralized made the second guard by the bridge look over from the wagon they were inspecting.

“Names,” the first guard said.

“Christopher Diaz.”

The guard looked up from their slate. It was a small reaction. Too small for Eli to catch, maybe. Not small enough for Chris to miss.

“Diaz,” the guard repeated.

“Yeah.”

“Origin?”

“Page, Southwest Alliance. Most recently Douglasville.”

The guard wrote that down, slower than before. “And the passenger?” Eli inhaled like he'd been waiting for the question and terrified of it at the same time. Chris answered before the boy could spill half of Douglasville into the road. “Elijah Wescott. Douglasville local courier trainee. Fourteen. Injured during the trap. His family requested transport to Charleston Depot for apprentice intake if available.”

“Family names?”

“Tamara Wescott. Amos Barrow. Alma Barrow.”

That got a different kind of recognition. The guard’s pencil paused. “Alma Barrow the physician?” Eli moved before he could stop himself. “My grandmother, yes. She stitched him and me."

"Good woman," the guard said. He wrote the names down on his documentation. Chris decided he liked them a little. Not enough to relax. Enough not to make things harder on purpose.

“We've recovered courier bags under the rear tarp,” he said. “Sealed mail unopened. Some local packets may be bound for routes west of Charleston. I need a registered depot or road office to turn them over properly.”

“You’ll turn them over for inspection here first.”

“Seals stay intact.”

The guard met his eyes. The river moved under the bridge behind them, loud over stone and timber. Around them, the wagon line had gone attentive in the way people did when someone else’s trouble might delay their own.

“Seals stay intact *unless* we have cause,” the guard said.

“Then you can look at the bags.”

“Step out slowly.”

Chris did.

He opened the door with his left hand, keeping his right visible, and climbed down without reaching near the Beretta. His leg protested when his boot hit the road. He ignored it. The guard saw that too, because of course they did.

“Injured?”

“Graze. Stitched. Not relevant unless you need me to sprint.”

“I prefer *no one* sprint at checkpoints.”

“Then we agree.”

A second guard came over from the bridge. Older, darker-skinned, with silver at the temples and a constabulary badge pinned beneath the green armband. Their coat was cleaner than the road deserved. Their boots weren't. Chris marked that distinction immediately.

“Problem?” the older guard asked.

“Recovered mail from a reported false-marker trap,” the first guard said. “Driver identifies as Christopher Diaz out of Page. Passenger is Eli Wescott, Douglasville. Alma Barrow's grandson.”

The older guard looked at Chris, then Eli, then the truck. “*That* is a crowded sentence.”

“It was a *crowded* day,” Chris said.

The older guard’s gaze came back to him, measuring without obvious hostility. “Open the rear.” Chris moved slowly to the back of the truck, aware of every weapon pointed near him without being pointed at him. He untied the tarp and folded it back to show the courier bags, the recovered medicine crate, the weapons wrapped separately, the food, fuel, and supply boxes. Eli stayed in the passenger seat because Chris hadn't told him otherwise, though the boy’s attention felt like a physical weight between Chris’s shoulder blades.

The older guard stepped close enough to inspect but not touch. “These bags were stolen?”

“Yes.”

“From whom?”

“Multiple couriers, looks like. Some seals *western*. Some *local*. I haven’t opened them.”

“But you took 'em.”

“From bandits who were using a kid as bait and stockpiling stolen mail.”

“That is not the same as authority to transport sealed packets.”

“No,” Chris said. “It’s the reason they aren’t still in a shack with dead men.”

The first guard’s pencil stopped moving again. The older guard held Chris’s gaze a moment longer, then looked back into the truck bed. “Fair enough. Not sufficient, but *fair* enough.” They checked the seals without breaking them. One by one. Slow enough that Chris had to lock his jaw against the urge to hurry them. The sun pressed heat into the back of his neck. The river smelled like mud and storm runoff. Somewhere in the wagon line, a horse stamped and jingled harness metal. Eli lasted almost three minutes before cracking.

“The fever reducers are for a baby in Douglasville,” he said from the cab.

Chris looked up.

Eli went pale. “Sorry.”

The older guard turned. “Recovered fever reducers?” Chris exhaled through his nose. “Medicine crate. Some already delivered back to Douglasville. Remaining supplies are separated. Inventory from Amos and Alma Barrow is in the side pocket.”

“Passenger may step out,” the older guard said.

Chris didn't like that. Eli started moving anyway, careful but too fast. Chris gave him one look, and the boy slowed before his boots touched the road.

“Arm,” Chris said.

“I know.”

“Then act like it.”

Eli straightened with a flash of irritation that did more for his color than the morning had. The older guard watched the exchange, then held out a hand. “Inventory.”

Eli looked to Chris.

Good.

Chris nodded once.

Eli retrieved the folded list from the side pocket and handed it over. “Gran wrote the medicine part. Granddaddy wrote the rest. I copied the route note this morning, but Chris checked it.”

“*Did* he,” the guard said, unfolding the papers.

“Yes.” Eli swallowed. “The false marker looked real. Good paint, good placement. It wasn't just—” He stopped.

Chris saw the moment he almost said *it wasn't just me*. So did the older guard, maybe. The guard looked down at the route note instead of making Eli finish. “This *your* handwritin'?”

“Yes.”

“Clear enough.”

Eli’s whole face changed. Chris pretended not to see because the boy would hate him for seeing too much. The older guard read the note again, then passed it to the first guard. “Copy the false-marker warnin' for the board. Full text. Add armed escort recommendation. Mark

Douglasville west approach and south swamp track as hostile-cleared but unverified after burn.”

The first guard nodded and started writing. Something in Eli’s posture shifted, small and almost invisible. His words were becoming a warning someone else would read. Not the whole thing. Not enough to fix what'd happened. But something.

The older guard handed the inventory back to Chris. “We’ll take local packets for Oconee and west-bank farms. Charleston-bound bags stay with you under passage note. You'll present all remainin' sealed mail at Savannah Road office or Charleston Depot, whichever you reach first. Don't open. Don't trade. Don't use as proof of employment.”

“Wasn’t planning to.”

“People plan many things badly.”

“That keeps coming up.”

This time, the older guard did smile, faint and brief. “Arms?” Chris named them. Beretta. Rifle. Shotgun recovered from the shack. Ammunition count approximate but honest. Knife. Eli’s small blade, which made Eli flush when Chris included it.

“Declare again at Charleston,” the guard said. “They'll care more than I do.”

“*That’s* comforting.”

Eli made a small sound that might've been a cough hiding a laugh. The first guard tore a sheet from a pad, stamped it with a hand press from their belt, and passed it to the older guard. The stamp left a green rope circle around the word *OCONEE*. Below it, the guard wrote in sharp, compact script.

“Passage note,” they said, handing it to Chris. “Valid to Savannah Road office by tomorrow night or Charleston Depot by direct route. Notes recovered mail, declared arms, injured passenger, and hostile false-marker report. If stopped, present this *before* you start explainin'.”

Chris took it. “Appreciated.”

“Also advice.”

Chris waited.

The older guard looked past him toward the bridge, where the road narrowed into the repaired span and then opened east on the far bank. “Don't assume the Lowland road is safer because it is cleaner. The rules protect people who *know* how to use them. They also protect people who know how to *hide* inside them.” Chris slid the passage note into his notebook. “I’ve noticed.”

“Notice harder near Charleston.”

That was interesting.

Chris kept his voice even. “Any particular reason?”

“Many particular reasons. Most of them above my authority to discuss and below my interest in becoming quoted by the Charleston Courier.”

Eli glanced up at the newspaper name. The guard noticed. “You’ll see their notices everywhere. Read them. Don’t mistake readin' for trusting.”

“They’re connected to the Express?” Eli asked before Chris could stop him.

“They'd like to be connected to anything that moves information faster than a rumor,” the guard said. “That includes the Express. That doesn't make 'em wrong. It makes 'em *interested*.”

Eli nodded slowly, storing that away. The older guard looked back at Chris. “Charleston Depot is takin' apprentices by sponsor letter or recommendation, if that's why you're going. They're also takin' too many people too fast because pressure travels downhill and the depot is at the bottom of several hills. If the boy is yours to speak for, speak carefully.” Eli stiffened. “I can speak for myself.”

“Good,” the guard said. “Learn when *not* to.”

Eli opened his mouth, closed it, and looked furious at how useful the advice was. Chris liked the guard a little more.

“He has family,” Chris said. “I’m transport, not parent.”

“No one said *parent*.”

“I know what people mean when they say *yours*.”

The guard studied him for a moment. Not offended. Not apologetic either. “Fair correction.” The words were simple. They landed better than Chris expected. The first guard returned with two local packets separated from the recovered bags and logged onto a slate. Chris watched the seals transfer, watched the notation, watched where they placed them in a lockbox inside the guardhouse. The process mattered. Maybe more than the people here understood. Maybe exactly as much.

When everything was logged, the older guard stepped back. “Cross slow. Stay center. Don't stop on the timber span. If a bridge hand signals, follow the signal, not your instinct.”

“Understood.”

“And Diaz?”

Chris paused with one hand on the driver’s door. The guard’s expression had gone unreadable again. “If you're the Christopher Diaz connected to the western ARK convoy rumors, do

yourself a favor and don't confirm that at every checkpoint between here and Charleston." The air seemed to still around the truck. Eli looked at Chris. Chris looked at the guard.

"Rumors get names wrong," he said.

"Often," the guard agreed.

"Then I guess it depends which rumors you mean."

"That answer'll serve you better than the truth in many rooms."

Chris held their gaze a second longer, then nodded once. "Thanks for the advice."

"Wasn't advice," the guard said. "It was a *road condition*."

Chris almost smiled.

He got back into the truck. Eli climbed in after him, quiet now in a way that'd nothing to do with fear of the bridge. Chris started the engine, waited for the bridge hand to wave the next wagon through, then followed when signaled. The bridge creaked under them.

Not dangerously. Not quite. The timber span took the truck's weight with a low groan, steel plates rattling under the tires. River light flashed through gaps where new planks met old concrete. Eli sat stiff beside him, route sheet clutched but unread. Chris kept the truck centered. Halfway across, Eli said, "Western ARK convoy rumors?"

"Not on the bridge."

Eli looked like he might argue, then glanced down through the timber gap at the brown water moving fast below them. "After the bridge."

"Maybe."

"That means *yes* with extra steps."

"That means I'm driving over a repaired bridge in a truck full of mail and declared weapons."

"*Right*. After the bridge."

Chris didn't answer, which wasn't the same as agreeing and unfortunately close enough that Eli seemed satisfied. They reached the far side without the bridge collapsing, which Chris considered an underrated kind of success. The eastern guard waved them forward, and the road opened beyond the river into cleaner gravel, better drainage, and a line of signs pointing toward Savannah Road and Charleston beyond it.

Chris didn't stop until the checkpoint had shrunk behind them and the river noise had softened into distance. Then he pulled onto the shoulder near a stand of young pines and let the engine idle. Eli turned toward him immediately. "*Are* you connected to western ARK convoy rumors?"

Chris rested both hands on the wheel. There were several answers he could give. Short ones. True ones. Useless ones. The kind that kept a kid curious enough to make worse guesses later.

“May, Vincent, and Jace went east with the ARKs,” Chris said finally. “You know that part from the letter.”

“Yeah.”

“*Before* that, the ARKs were tied up in things that involved my family, Cascadia, and the Summit. A *lot* of people did a lot of work to keep them out of the wrong hands.”

“And you?”

Chris looked through the windshield at the road ahead. “I was one of the people the wrong hands had already *touched*.” Eli went quiet. *Good kid,* Chris thought. *Maybe too good, because he didn't ask the obvious question.* Not yet.

“Some details are protected for a reason,” Chris said. “Not because people deserve lies. Because certain truths can become instructions if they’re handed to the wrong person.”

Eli looked down at the route sheet. “Like false markers.”

Chris glanced at him.

“Not the same,” Eli said quickly.

“No. But closer than I’d like.”

The boy nodded, serious again. “So at checkpoints, you *don’t* say yes.”

“At checkpoints, I answer the question they’re actually *allowed* to ask.”

“That sounds complicated.”

“Welcome to sharper rules.”

Eli looked back toward the river, though the bridge was hidden by trees now. “The guard knew your name.”

“The guard knew enough to warn me not to make my name easier to use.”

“Is Charleston going to know too?”

Chris thought of May’s letter, Columbia, the ARKs, George Mason, Vincent making science public and certain details stay buried. He thought of Charleston Depot hungry for couriers, the Charleston Courier hungry for stories, Lowland officials hungry for control, and a city where names could travel faster than people if they'd the right mouth behind them.

“Maybe,” he said.

Eli didn't like that answer. Chris didn't either.

“Then what do we do?”

Chris put the truck back into gear. “We keep our paperwork clean, our story shorter than our facts, and our mail sealed.”

“That’s the plan?”

“That’s the start of one.”

Eli considered it, then picked up the pencil. “Should I write that down?”

“No.”

He wrote something anyway. Chris let him. The road carried them east, away from the river and deeper into Lowland order. Behind them, the checkpoint copied Eli’s warning onto a board. Ahead of them, Charleston waited with a depot, a newspaper, polished rules, and people who might already know enough of Chris’s name to make trouble out of it. For the first time since Douglasville, the road felt less like distance and more like approach.

The passage note got them through two smaller stops before sunset. Chris didn't like how quickly the paper changed people’s faces. Without it, the truck drew narrowed eyes, hands drifting toward weapons, questions shaped like accusations. With the green Oconee stamp unfolded and presented before he said more than three words, the same people became brisk instead of suspicious. Not friendly. Not careless. But the note gave them a place to put him in their system, and once people had a place to put you, they were less likely to invent one with teeth.

By late afternoon, the road bent toward a waystation built around an old county maintenance yard. The original chain-link fence had been reinforced with timber panels and sheet metal, leaving gaps wide enough to see through but narrow enough to make climbing inconvenient. A water pump stood near the gate under a painted sign that read *FILTERED BY ORDER OF SAVANNAH ROAD OFFICE*. Beyond it were three sheds, a stable line, two fuel drums under lock, and a notice wall so crowded with paper that it looked like a tree had learned bureaucracy.

Eli leaned toward the windshield. “Is that a depot?”

“Waystation,” Chris said. “Maybe a road office. Not big enough for a real depot.”

“But it has a board.”

“Boards are cheaper than depots.”

A woman at the gate stepped out with one hand raised and the other resting near the baton at her belt. No rifle visible, but Chris saw the shotgun propped inside the booth and the second watcher on the shed roof with enough time to decide not to look directly at them.

He stopped where the woman indicated, window already down, passage note ready. Her eyes went to the Oconee stamp first. Then the truck. Then Eli. Then Chris.

“Long-road passage?”

“Eastbound to Charleston,” Chris said. “Recovered mail under note. Declared arms. Injured passenger. Oconee copied our false-marker report.”

The woman took the note and read it with the speed of someone used to deciding whether paper was useful or decorative. “You stoppin'?”

“Water, board, maybe ten minutes.”

“No overnight without sign-in and fee.”

“Not planning to overnight.”

“Plans change after dark.”

“I try not to let them.”

She looked at him for a moment, then handed the note back. “Park by the pump. Weapons stay holstered or in the vehicle. Board copies are two chits unless official warning. Water is one chit per full canteen after the first. If you have current road hazard from Oconee, clerk may waive the copy fee.”

“Appreciated.”

“Appreciate *after* the clerk agrees.”

Chris drove where she pointed. Eli waited until the engine was off before asking, “Do we have chits?”

“Some.”

“How many?”

“Enough to learn why counting trade money is *tomorrow’s* lesson.”

Eli made a face. “*More* math?”

“Survival has a theme.”

The boy unbuckled carefully, slower now without being reminded. That was progress too, even if he looked annoyed about it. Chris took the route notebook, the Oconee note, and Eli’s

clean false-marker copy from the cab. He left the recovered mail locked under the tarp. The roof watcher saw him check the tie-downs. Good. Let them see he knew the mail mattered.

The waystation yard smelled like horse sweat, wet rope, boiled coffee, and damp paper. A wagon team stood under the stable lean-to while two drivers argued quietly over harness repair. Near the pump, a little girl filled a bucket under the supervision of a man with a ledger tucked under one arm. Nobody looked idle. Even the people resting did it with one eye open, their bodies turned toward exits, notice boards, or whoever seemed most likely to ask for payment. Eli took it in with open fascination. Chris leaned closer without looking at him. “*Less* staring.”

“I’m *observin'*.”

“Observe like you’re not collecting evidence for a trial.”

Eli tried. He improved by maybe ten percent. The clerk’s window had been cut into the side of the largest shed, with a counter made from an old door and a sheet of oilcloth tacked above it to keep rain off the forms. Behind the counter, a young man with round glasses copied figures from one ledger into another. He didn't look up until Chris set the Oconee passage note on the counter.

“Board copy?” the clerk asked.

“False Express marker warning. Oconee crossing copied it for their board. We were told the fee might be waived for current road hazard.”

“*Might* is doing a lot of work.”

“Usually does.”

The clerk read the note, then Eli’s copy, then looked over the top of his glasses at Eli. “You wrote this?”

Eli straightened. “Yes.”

“You witnessed the marker?”

The boy’s throat moved. “Yes.”

“And the trap?”

Chris’s hand settled on the counter before Eli could answer too quickly. Not a grab. Not a warning anyone else would read as one. Just enough.

“He witnessed enough,” Chris said. “Oconee accepted the report.”

The clerk glanced at Chris’s hand, then at the passage note, then decided he liked paperwork more than confrontation. “Current hazard. Fee waived.” He took Eli’s copy and pinned it to a cleared space near the top of the board outside the window. A woman waiting with a parcel stepped aside to read it. Then one of the wagon drivers came over. Then the man with the

water ledger. The warning was only pencil on paper, but attention gathered around it fast. Eli watched like he was trying not to breathe too loudly.

Chris kept his voice low. “That’s what information does when it’s useful.”

“People believe it?”

“People decide whether it matches what they already know. Belief comes after.”

Eli nodded, eyes still on the board. Chris bought water, first canteen free and the rest paid for because the clerk didn't consider a false-marker warning generous enough to hydrate a truck. Eli took over the count without being asked, marking full and partial canteens while Chris filled them. He used his good hand, kept his bad arm close, and only winced twice. Chris counted that as another improvement and didn't mention it. They were almost finished when Eli drifted toward the far end of the board.

Not far. Three steps. Close enough that Chris could catch him by the collar if something went wrong, though the thing most likely to go wrong was Eli reading himself into trouble. The board held road notices, trade rates, warnings about fever in two inland settlements, a hand-copied list of depot needs, and several printed sheets with the same masthead at the top.

The Charleston Courier.

Eli touched the edge of one without removing it. “Chris.” Chris tightened the last canteen cap and came over. The paper had been folded, rained on, dried, and pinned flat again. Its left corner was torn away, taking part of the date and the byline with it. The masthead remained crisp enough: *black letters, ambitious and slightly ornate, the kind of type that wanted to look older than the institution using it. Beneath it, the article headline had been underlined by at least three different readers.*

RESPECTED FAMILY MAINTAINS PRIVATE DISPUTE AS WESTERN APPROACH LOSSES MOUNT Chris read the first column without touching the page.

The article was careful in the way sharp things were careful. It didn't accuse anyone directly. It quoted unnamed household representatives, road clerks, merchants, and one anonymous depot worker who claimed that the official explanation for a missing member of a prominent Charleston family had changed twice in the last month. A runaway, some said. A family dispute. A private matter being dressed up as public concern by rivals. Others whispered about smuggling ties, blackmail, route tampering, stolen correspondence, and debts traveling under cleaner names.

No reporter name remained. If there'd been one, the torn corner had taken it. Eli read more slowly beside him, lips moving without sound. Chris kept reading. The second column shifted from society trouble to roads. Missing travelers on the Savannah approach. Stolen courier bags. Reports of route signs altered or replaced along western feeder roads. A question, phrased politely enough to survive a censor and pointed enough to draw blood: whether depot failures were accidents of expansion or the cost of powerful families treating public routes as private tools.

That was a dangerous sentence. Chris respected it immediately and distrusted it just as fast.

“This is about the false signs,” Eli said softly.

“Partly.”

“And stolen bags.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think it’s connected to what happened to me?”

“Maybe.”

Eli looked frustrated. “You say *maybe* a lot.”

“Because maybe keeps people alive longer than deciding too early.”

He leaned closer to the article, tracking the phrases that mattered. Western approach. Savannah feeder. Charleston Depot understaffed. Families applying pressure. Courier bags missing before they reached registered boards. Whoever had written this knew enough to be useful and not enough to be safe. Or knew exactly enough and was pretending otherwise.

“What's the Courier?” Eli asked.

“Newspaper out of Charleston.”

“May’s letter said they wanted to work with the Express.”

“Apparently they also like making enemies.”

Eli looked at the headline again. “Are newspapers dangerous?” Chris thought about old-world news vans outside scenes Eddie hadn't wanted him near. He thought about rumors moving faster than horses, about Columbia officials reading reports, about the guard at Oconee warning him not to confirm his own name too easily. He thought about ink making private grief public and public danger harder to bury.

“Only when they’re doing their job,” he said.

Eli considered that, then nodded like it belonged in the same category as roads, guns, and polite guards. Chris looked for a loose copy. There were none. The pinned paper belonged to the board, and taking it'd make him the kind of person who removed warnings after benefiting from them. He went back to the clerk window instead.

“Do you have spare copies of the Courier sheet?”

The clerk didn't look up from his ledger. “Two chits.”

“For a damaged old issue?”

“For a printed Charleston sheet on a road where everyone wants news from Charleston.”

“One chit.”

Now the clerk looked up. “This isn't a market.”

“Everything with a price is a market.”

The clerk seemed pained by the logic. “Two chits.”

“One chit and a copied Oconee passage update on the culvert repair east of the bridge. We crossed today. Road held for a loaded truck if centered. Right shoulder soft.”

The clerk hesitated. Chris waited.

“One chit,” the clerk said, “and the culvert note in *clean* handwriting.”

Chris looked at Eli. Eli already had the pencil out. The clerk gave them a cleaner copy after Eli wrote the culvert note carefully enough that the man inspected it twice and found no immediate reason to complain. The byline on this copy hadn't been torn away so much as blurred by water damage, ink feathered into a dark smudge where the name should've been. Good enough. No name to remember. No person attached yet. Just an institution making noise in a city Chris was driving toward.

Chris folded the paper and slid it into the route notebook behind the Oconee passage note.

“Why keep it?” Eli asked as they walked back to the truck.

“Because Charleston Depot may care that the same problems are showing up in print.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then I want to know that too.”

The answer seemed to trouble Eli more than comfort him. They loaded the water and checked the tarp before leaving. Chris felt the roof watcher’s eyes on them until they reached the gate. The woman there marked their passage note with a small slash in blue pencil and warned them that the next safe overnight was a formal waystation twelve miles east. After that, the road became better but less forgiving about who stopped where after dark.

“*Better but less forgiving,*” Eli murmured once they were back on the road.

“Don’t write that down.”

He wrote it down. Chris let him, mostly because arguing would only make it more memorable. The sun had dropped lower by then, turning the road gold where it slipped through the trees. Shadows stretched long across the shoulder. Every sign looked sharper in that light, every posted rule more deliberate. The Courier sheet sat in Chris’s notebook like a second passage note, not official but weighty in its own way. Eli was quiet for nearly a mile. Then he said, “If the article is right, somebody important might be usin' the roads wrong.”

“Maybe.”

“Or somebody wants people to think that.”

Chris glanced at him. “Also maybe.”

“Or both.”

“Usually a safe bet.”

Eli looked down at the route sheet, then at the notebook where the newspaper was tucked away. “That feels *harder* than bandits.”

“It is.”

“Because you can’t just shoot an article.”

“You shouldn’t shoot most problems.”

“But some problems?”

“Some problems are actively trying to *eat* you.”

Eli absorbed that distinction with the solemnity it deserved. The road ahead curved through a stand of pines where the trunks grew close and straight, their shadows striping the windshield. Chris watched the gaps between them, watched the shoulder, watched the sky turning amber through the branches. Nothing moved wrong. No figures between trees. No pale hands at the edge of the ditch. No sound beneath the engine except insects, tires, and Eli’s pencil moving once more over paper.

“What *now?*” the boy asked.

“Now we reach the overnight before dark, sign in without starting a fight, and keep our story simple.”

“And if someone asks about the Courier article?”

“We read it on a board. That’s all.”

“And if someone asks about the false marker?”

“We have a report copied at Oconee and posted at the waystation. That’s all.”

“And if someone asks about you?”

Chris kept his eyes on the road. The question sat between them with more weight than Eli probably intended. Not because it was new. Because every mile east made it less hypothetical.

“Depends what they ask,” Chris said.

Eli nodded slowly, then wrote nothing for once. The road carried them on through the late light, toward cleaner signs, colder rooms, and a city where trouble had learned to print itself

before anyone drew a gun.

The formal waystation looked safer than it felt. Chris saw the lamps first, warm squares of light hung from iron hooks along a timber fence, each flame shielded behind glass instead of left to gutter in the wind. The road widened before the gate, gravel raked into neat lines that the day’s traffic hadn't fully ruined. A painted sign arched over the entrance in careful Lowland lettering: *MARLBORO ROAD HOUSE — REGISTER BEFORE DUSK*. Beneath it, in smaller print, someone had added: *ARMS DECLARED. FEES POSTED. NO EXCEPTIONS BY NAME.*

Eli leaned forward in the passenger seat. “That looks like an inn.”

“Road house,” Chris said.

“Is that different?”

“Usually means they charge you before proving it.”

The boy glanced at him, but the attempt at humor didn't pull Chris’s attention off the gate. Two attendants stood there in matching brown coats with green piping at the cuffs. Not guards, exactly. Not soldiers either. Their rifles were racked behind them instead of carried, which might've meant the road house trusted the fence, or that the people with guns were positioned where travelers couldn't see them.

Chris assumed the second.

The yard beyond the gate held more order than any place they'd stopped since leaving Douglasville. Wagons were parked in marked rows. Horses stood under a stable roof with feed sacks stacked on pallets beside them. A pump had been roofed over. A kitchen shed vented woodsmoke through a metal pipe high enough to carry the smell above the yard. The main house itself had been built from an old motel and a newer timber hall, its cracked stucco patched, windows shuttered, porch swept clean. People moved through it with purpose and a visible awareness of being watched.

Eli’s face changed in the lamplight. Not relaxed. Not exactly. Impressed. Chris understood the reaction and distrusted it immediately. A gate attendant stepped to the driver’s side as Chris stopped. “Evening. State destination and lodging request.”

Chris handed over the Oconee passage note before answering. “Charleston Depot. One night if you have space. Water, a place to park the truck, no stable needed. Declared arms and recovered mail under passage note.” The attendant read the note, then looked past him at Eli. “Injured passenger?”

“Yes.”

“Physician on-site until supper bell. Extra fee if treatment is requested.”

“Bandage check only if needed.”

“All injuries noted at entry.”

Chris kept his expression still. “Then note it.” The attendant did, writing in a narrow ledger balanced against the gatepost. “Names.”

“Christopher Diaz. Eli Wescott.”

The pen paused on Diaz for half a beat. Less than Oconee. More than nothing. Chris noticed. The attendant didn't comment. “Arms?” Chris listed them again: *Beretta, rifle, recovered shotgun, ammunition, knives*. The attendant wrote each item without visible judgment and tied a green paper tag around the truck’s side mirror when finished. Eli watched the tag flutter. “What’s *that* for?”

“Declared vehicle,” the attendant said before Chris could answer. “Don't remove it inside the yard. Don't carry long guns into the house. Sidearms remain *holstered*. Any discharge inside the fence is grounds for expulsion, fine, *or* detention depending on circumstance and injury.”

“That happens enough to have a *rule?*” Eli asked.

The attendant looked at him. “*Everythin'* posted happened enough to have a rule.” Chris almost liked that answer. He drove where they were directed, into a parking row between a canvas-covered wagon and a battered delivery truck painted with the faded name of a bakery that'd not existed for a decade. The wagon driver looked up as they pulled in, saw the green tag, the mud, Eli’s bandage, and Chris’s face, then looked back down at the harness strap they were mending. Polite, Chris thought. Not uninterested.

They signed in at a desk just inside the timber hall. The room was warmer than the yard and smelled of soap, lamp oil, cooked greens, and people trying not to smell like the road. A long counter separated guests from clerks. Behind it, shelves held ledgers, stamped tags, folded blankets, and a locked cabinet with a painted medical cross. A notice above the desk listed fees in clear columns: lodging, cot, floor space, vehicle berth, water, meal, bandage change, message copy, late arrival penalty. Eli read the list with widening eyes. “They charge for floor space?”

“They swept it,” Chris said.

The clerk behind the counter didn't smile. “And guard it.”

“Also that,” Chris said.

The clerk was a woman in her sixties with iron-gray hair pinned tight at the nape of her neck and a black ribbon tied around one wrist. She wore no visible weapon. Chris found that less reassuring than if she'd worn two.

“Passage note,” she said.

Chris handed it over.

She read Oconee’s stamp, the arms declaration, the false-marker notation, and the line about recovered mail. Then she looked at Eli. “Age?”

“Fourteen,” Eli said.

“Speak only for direct questions unless the account concerns your injury or property.”

Eli’s spine stiffened. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. You learn quickly or you look like you do.”

Chris set a small stack of chits on the counter. “One vehicle berth. Two floor spaces if you have them. One meal each. Water refill. No message copy.”

“Recovered goods?”

“Sealed mail under passage note. Medicine and supplies inventoried from Douglasville recovery. Personal effects. Trade goods minimal.”

“List sealed mail count.”

“Not opening bags to count packets.”

“*Bags*, Mr. Diaz. Not packets.”

Chris held her gaze for a moment, then gave the number. She wrote it down. “Vehicle may be inspected if there's complaint or discrepancy.”

“Understood.”

“Sidearms declared. Long guns remain in vehicle unless called by road alarm. No alcohol for the minor. No dice tables for the minor. No credit extended to west-road independents without sponsor mark.”

“Wasn’t asking.”

“Most rules are for people who weren't askin' until they were.”

Eli looked like he wanted to write that down and knew better than to reach for the pencil. The clerk stamped their entry on a small card and slid it across the counter with two blanket tokens. “Floor space in the side hall. Meal bell in fifteen minutes. Physician can look at the arm before supper for one chit or after for two.”

“Before,” Chris said.

Eli turned toward him. “I don’t need—” Chris looked at him. Eli stopped. The clerk watched that exchange with professional neutrality. “*Wise boy.*”

“I stopped talkin',” Eli muttered.

“That's often where wisdom *begins*.”

Chris decided he liked her less than the Oconee guard and possibly respected her more.

The physician was set up in what'd once been a motel office, now cleared of everything but a table, a cabinet, two chairs, and a lamp bright enough to make Eli squint. He was younger than Chris expected, maybe late twenties, with tired eyes and sleeves rolled to the elbow. He checked Eli’s bandage, complimented Alma’s stitches with the wary reverence of someone who knew her name, cleaned the irritated edges, and told Eli not to lift anything heavier than a cup unless he wanted the wound reopened on purpose for being difficult. Eli looked betrayed. “On purpose?”

“Medical exaggeration,” the physician said. “Usually effective on teenagers.”

“Noted,” Chris said.

“You too,” the physician added, pointing at Chris’s arm.

“Mine is fine.”

“That is what everyone says before becomin' my problem after supper.”

Eli looked deeply vindicated.

Chris paid the extra chit and submitted to the bandage check because hypocrisy was apparently expensive in the Lowlands. His graze was fine, which the physician confirmed with unnecessary satisfaction after cleaning it anyway. By the time they left, the supper bell was ringing across the yard.

The dining hall had long tables, mismatched chairs, and rules painted above the serving window. Pay before second helping. No weapons on tables. No politics shouted after bell. No private disputes settled indoors. The food was better than cold beans by enough that Eli briefly forgot to be wary: rice, greens, a thin stew with actual meat in it, and cornbread cut into squares small enough to remind everyone scarcity still existed. He stared at the tray. “This is real food.”

“Don’t sound surprised. It’ll raise the price.”

Eli lowered his voice immediately. “This is moderately acceptable food.”

“Better.”

They sat near the wall, because Chris liked walls behind him and exits where he could see them. The hall was busy but controlled: wagon drivers, two road wardens, a family traveling under escort, three people in merchant coats with matching lapel pins, and a pair of young riders who looked like they were trying very hard not to look impressed with themselves. Conversations stayed low, but not low enough to be private. Eli ate like someone had reminded his body it was allowed to want things.

Chris let him get halfway through the stew before speaking. “Polite doesn’t mean safe.” Eli looked up with bread in his hand. “I didn’t say it did.”

“Your face did.”

Eli tried not to smile and failed into his cornbread. Chris kept his voice quieter. “This place is safer than a ditch. It has food, walls, rules, people on watch. That matters. But rules tell you what people were forced to admit happens. They don’t tell you what still happens quietly.” Eli’s expression sobered. “Like the clerk askin' about the mail bags.”

“Like that. Like who gets credit. Who gets believed. Who gets charged extra. Who gets to call something a private dispute when other people are bleeding from it.”

The boy looked toward the nearest merchant table. “The article.”

“Maybe.”

“You really do say that a lot.”

“Still useful.”

The hall shifted around them as the door opened and a new group came in from the yard: *two women in travel coats too fine for the road, one older man with a cane, and a guard carrying himself like he'd been hired to be visible*. Their arrival changed the room without raising its volume. Conversations paused, altered course, resumed with cleaner edges. Eli noticed. “Who are *they?*”

“People everyone else noticed.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Best one I've.”

The older man with the cane spoke briefly to the clerk from the front desk, who'd appeared at the dining hall entrance as if summoned by status alone. A table near the hearth emptied with impressive speed. Nobody ordered them to move. They simply moved, trays gathered, chairs shifted, the space made available like water finding a lower channel. Eli watched, fascinated and uneasy. “Did they *pay* for that?”

“Probably not in chits.”

At the merchant table behind them, a woman laughed softly. “Charleston money spends before it leaves the pocket.”

Chris didn't turn.

The man across from her answered in a lower voice, but not low enough. “Careful. Half the room still thinks sayin' their names attracts weather.”

“*Weather* has better manners.”

“Not lately.”

A chair creaked. Someone leaned closer. “Is it true the family pulled another notice from the Depot board?”

“*Tried* to. Courier printed it before the ink dried.”

“The Courier prints *anythin'* that bruises a drawing room.”

“And yet everyone reads it.”

Eli went very still. Chris kept eating slowly, eyes on his bowl, listening without looking like he was listening. The woman with the soft laugh continued. “My cousin came through Charleston last week. Said the Depot clerks are drownin'. Columbia-backed expansion, Lowland contracts, inland riders, port packets, private family correspondence dressed up as public priority. Everyone wants a courier until the courier carries the wrong truth.”

“*Or* loses the right letter,” the man said.

“Stolen,” someone else corrected. “That has the word this week.”

“Convenient word.”

“Less convenient than *runaway*.”

A hush followed that, brief but noticeable. The man with the cane at the hearth table didn't turn, but his guard did. Only slightly. Enough. The merchant woman lowered her voice. Chris caught only pieces after that. Respected family. Gala. Fundraiser. Harbor house. Public loyalty. Private panic. The Charleston Courier asking questions about names that didn't like being placed beside route tampering, debt, and missing correspondence.

No one said the missing person’s name. Or if they did, they did it too softly for Chris to hear. Good, he thought. Or not good. Safer for now. Eli leaned closer over his tray. “That’s the article.”

“Eat.”

“They’re *talking* about it.”

“And the guard heard them talking about it, so eat like you didn’t.”

Eli looked toward the hearth, then quickly back to his food. He ate a bite of cornbread with the concentration of someone performing innocence under pressure. Chris would've found it funny if the room hadn't felt like a map where every line was political.

More fragments drifted through supper. Charleston Depot was hiring anyone with road sense and losing half of them to better-paying private contracts before training finished. Old families were donating to courier infrastructure while demanding priority access that no one wanted to put in writing. Columbia’s Continental Express made merchants hopeful, local authorities cautious, and people with private messengers nervous. A fundraiser was planned

in Charleston within the week, supposedly for depot relief and road safety, though the merchant woman implied that public generosity made excellent cover for private damage control.

Eli absorbed too much of it. Chris could see the questions stacking behind his eyes. He waited until they'd returned their trays and stepped back into the cooler air of the yard before allowing one.

“One question,” Chris said.

Eli looked offended. “One?”

“You have twelve. Pick the best one.”

The boy thought hard, which Chris appreciated. “Why would old families be nervous about the *Express?*” Not the question Chris expected. Better than the question he expected. They walked toward the truck under the line of shielded lamps. Beyond the fence, night had thickened against the road, turning the trees into a black wall. Inside the yard, everything was gold light, swept gravel, and people pretending the fence made the dark irrelevant.

“Because control over messages is control over what people know,” Chris said. “If you have private riders, you decide *what* moves and *who* sees it. If the Express works, more people get access to the road. More letters go through *systems* instead of *favors*. More warnings reach boards before somebody important can *bury* them.”

Eli frowned. “That sounds good.”

“It *is*, unless you were using the old way to keep power.”

“So the Express makes enemies by *existin'*.”

“A lot of useful things do.”

They reached the truck. The green declaration tag still fluttered from the mirror. Chris checked the tarp, the mail ties, the fuel caps, and the chalk mark the yard attendant had placed on the rear tire to prove the vehicle belonged in its berth. Nothing disturbed. No new marks. No cut straps. He still checked twice. Eli watched. “Do you think the missin' person is connected?”

Chris looked at him.

“That was my second question,” Eli admitted.

“Then you owe me a chit.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Convenient.”

The boy waited.

Chris sighed. “Maybe. The article wants people to think so. The gossip wants people to think so without being blamed for saying it. Neither one proves anything.”

“But it matters.”

“Probably.”

“*Probably* is worse than *maybe*.”

“Usually.”

Eli looked toward the main house, where light moved behind the shutters and voices rose in brief waves when the door opened. “Charleston sounds complicated.”

“Charleston sounds like it's had too much time to practice.”

The floor space in the side hall cost exactly what the clerk promised and offered exactly what the words meant: a place on swept boards between a wall and a row of other travelers’ blankets. Chris chose the spot closest to the exit but not directly beside it, because obvious choices attracted obvious attention. Eli lowered himself carefully onto his blanket, moving like the day had finally caught up with every bruise at once.

“Arm?” Chris asked.

“Sore.”

“Head?”

Eli hesitated. “Loud.”

“Five things?”

The boy looked around the dim hall. “Door latch. Your boot. Lamp hook. Blue blanket. Crack in the floorboard shaped like…” He stopped, then glanced at Chris. “*Not* a face.” Chris narrowed his eyes. “Careful.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“You approached dangerous territory.”

Eli smiled faintly, then yawned so hard it looked painful. Chris settled with his back against the wall and the Beretta holstered under his jacket, allowed by the rules as long as it stayed there. Around them, the side hall quieted in stages. Boots taken off. Blankets shaken out. Low voices. Someone coughing into a cloth. The creak of the main house settling. Outside, a horse stamped once, and a yard attendant murmured something soothing. It should've felt restful. It didn't.

Maybe that was the polished floorboards. Maybe the fee list. Maybe the way the room adjusted itself around status without anyone admitting it'd. Maybe the article folded in his notebook, the Oconee guard’s warning, the green tag on the truck, the clerk writing his name

too carefully. Chris had slept in worse places with more comfort, because danger on the road usually had the decency to smell like smoke, rot, rain, or blood.

Here, danger smelled like soap and lamp oil. Eli’s breathing evened out beside him. Not instantly, but close enough. Exhaustion took what fear couldn't defend. Chris stayed awake. Through the wall, muffled by timber and distance, music started somewhere in the main house or beyond it. Not loud. A fiddle, maybe, or a mandolin. Then laughter, softer than the kind people used around campfires, shaped for rooms where listeners mattered. Carriage wheels passed outside the fence on the road, iron rims over gravel, then faded east toward Charleston.

Chris sat in the dim hall with his back to the wall, letters against his chest, passage note in his notebook, and a sleeping fourteen-year-old at his side. The road had been hard to survive. Charleston, he was beginning to think, might be harder to read.

Morning brought salt into the air. Chris noticed it before the road changed, before the trees thinned and the ditches widened into tidal cuts that flashed silver between the grass. The smell slipped through the cracked window under the usual damp pine and engine heat, sharp and briny, threaded with marsh rot and sun-warmed mud. It didn't belong to the roads he'd been driving for months. It belonged to edges. Places where land gave way and pretended that wasn't surrender. Eli noticed a mile later.

He'd been quiet since they left the road house, still waking up in stages, hair smashed flat again on one side and clean bandage bright under his rolled sleeve. The formal waystation had fed him, charged him, impressed him, and frightened him in ways he hadn't fully sorted. He kept the route sheet open, but his pencil had slowed. Some mornings, Chris knew, the body spent all its energy pretending it'd rested.

Then Eli lifted his head and sniffed the air.

“Is that the *ocean?*”

“Tidewater,” Chris said. “Ocean’s still farther.”

“But close?”

“Close enough to *smell*.”

Eli rolled the window down another inch, ignoring the way the humid air immediately curled the edge of the route sheet. “I’ve never smelled it before.”

“The ocean?”

“Anythin' like that.”

Chris glanced over. Eli was trying not to look amazed and doing a bad job of it. That, at least, Chris didn't correct. Some things were worth looking young for.

The road east had changed overnight while they slept behind fences and rules. Or maybe they'd crossed some invisible line after dawn, one not marked by a checkpoint because everyone who belonged here already knew where it was. The pines gave way in pieces to live oaks and wetland scrub, their limbs hung with Spanish moss that moved in the morning breeze like torn gray cloth. Tidal creeks cut through the low ground on either side of the road, some crossed by new plank bridges, others by old concrete culverts marked with Lowland weight signs. Marsh grass grew tall and gold-green beyond them, bending toward water Chris couldn't always see.

Traffic thickened by degrees. Wagons with cleaner canvas. Riders in shaped hats. A pair of oxen pulling stacked barrels marked with a harbor seal. Two road wardens sitting straight-backed under dark coats despite the heat. A covered carriage passed westbound with curtains drawn, escorted by three mounted guards whose polished tack caught the sun. The driver didn't look at Chris’s truck. The guards did. Eli watched the carriage until it disappeared behind them. “People still have carriages?”

“People still have a lot of things if they protected them hard enough.”

“That sounded judgmental.”

“It was observant.”

“Your observations have opinions.”

“So do *yours*. Mine just have more experience.”

Eli looked like he wanted to argue and then remembered he was too busy staring at the marsh. The light had gone wide and wet over everything, reflecting off standing water, tin roofs, and the pale gravel shoulder. Even the road signs looked cleaner here, painted in dark green and white, mounted straight, their lettering precise enough to feel less like help and more like instruction.

The first Charleston sign appeared at a split bordered by two live oaks. *CHARLESTON DEPOT — REGISTER ALL LONG-ROAD ARRIVALS* Beneath it, three arrows pointed down different approaches: *FREIGHT YARD, SOUTH OFFICE, HARBOR ROAD*. Eli sat up straighter. “That’s us.”

“South Office, probably.”

“Why not Freight Yard?”

“Recovered mail, injured passenger, possible apprentice intake, road report. Clerks first. Cargo second.”

“I’m not cargo.”

“That was the point.”

Eli absorbed that, then looked down at his papers. Tamara’s folded note sat tucked into the route sheet, already softened by how many times he'd checked it without opening it. The Oconee passage note was in Chris’s notebook. The Courier clipping was behind it. The false-marker report had been copied twice now and would need to be handed over in full at Charleston.

They were arriving with more paper than they'd left Douglasville with. That felt appropriate and ominous. The next sign came half a mile later. *COURIERS SEEKING CONTRACTS REPORT TO SOUTH OFFICE* Below it: *DECLARATION OF ARMS REQUIRED BEFORE DEPOT ENTRY* Eli read that one aloud, voice tightening a little at *declaration*. “We already declared at the road house.”

“We declare *again*.”

“How many times?”

“Until people stop asking *or* we leave the Lowlands.”

“That seems slow.”

“It’s not about efficiency. It’s about making sure every office gets to feel involved.”

Chris paused.

Then he pointed at the road ahead. “Map.” Eli smiled down at the paper, pleased with himself in a way that was becoming less fragile by the hour. They passed a patrol post at the next bend. Not a full checkpoint, just a raised platform beside the road with two wardens under a canvas shade and a signal bell hanging from the rail. One warden marked the truck in a ledger as they passed. The other watched Eli too long, then Chris, then the green declaration tag still tied to the mirror from the road house.

Chris kept the speed steady.

“Last instructions before the depot,” he said.

Eli’s shoulders squared. “Okay.”

“Let me talk *first*.”

“I know.”

“Answer direct questions *honestly*. Don’t volunteer extra unless it concerns your injury, your family note, or your own route report.”

“Right.”

“*Don't* exaggerate the bandit story.”

Eli looked offended. “I wouldn’t.”

“Good. Also don’t shrink it to make people comfortable. Say what happened. Not more. Not less.”

That landed differently. Eli looked down at his bandaged arm, then at the route sheet. “Not more. Not less.”

“Keep Tamara’s note ready. Keep the route report separate from personal papers. If someone asks what you want, say apprentice intake or junior courier training, not work, not a bag, not whatever sounds brave in the moment.”

“Apprentice intake or junior courier trainin',” Eli repeated.

“And if someone promises you a fast route by sunset, you look at me before answering.”

Eli frowned. “They’d do that?”

“A desperate office might. Or a stupid one. Or someone who wants a kid eager enough to say yes before reading the road.”

The boy’s mouth tightened. “I’m not *that* eager.”

Chris glanced at him.

Eli held for maybe three seconds. “I’m less *that eager* than I *was*.”

“Better.”

The road dipped onto a causeway after that, marsh opening wide on both sides. Water gleamed between the grass, and white birds stood on thin legs in the shallows like scraps of paper someone had placed there deliberately. The air grew heavier, warmer, full of salt and insects and distant harbor smoke. For the first time, Chris saw masts beyond the trees: a crowded line of them, thin and dark against the bright morning haze.

Eli saw them too.

“Ships,” he said.

“Looks like.”

“Real ships?”

“Unless Charleston built fake masts for atmosphere.”

“Would they?”

Chris thought about everything he'd heard over the last two days. “Maybe.” Eli laughed, then looked startled by the sound, like he hadn't expected it to come out of him that easily. Chris let the laugh sit in the cab without teasing him for it.

The causeway ended at a busier stretch of road where harbor-bound traffic merged with depot traffic and local carts. A boy younger than Eli guided goats along the shoulder with a switch. Two women in gloves argued beside a wagon stacked with sealed crates. A man in a linen coat rode past on a dark horse, eyes sliding over Chris’s truck and away again once he'd decided what category of trouble it belonged to. Flags hung from a roadside office: Lowland green, harbor blue-gray, and beneath them a newer white banner marked with a rope circle and three crossing lines.

The Express mark. Real, clean, official. Eli went silent. Chris slowed with the traffic.

“There it is,” he said.

Eli swallowed. “Yeah.”

“Still want this?”

The question came out quieter than Chris planned. Maybe because they were close enough now that it'd stopped being theoretical. Maybe because he'd spent the last few days teaching Eli how not to spend himself like supplies and now had to let him walk toward a place that might do exactly that if no one stopped it. Eli looked at the banner for a long moment.

“Yes,” he said.

Then, after a beat, more honestly: “I *think* so.”

Chris nodded. “Good answer.”

“It doesn’t sound like one.”

“It sounds like you’re thinking.”

The boy held Tamara’s note between his fingers. “What happens after intake? If they take me.”

“Training. Safer runs, if they’re responsible. Older couriers watching you. Copy work. Board work. Probably carrying messages inside the depot until someone trusts you not to sprint into a swamp because a sign looked official.”

Eli winced, but not as badly as he would've yesterday. “And writing my mom.”

“First day.”

He nodded, folding the note carefully again. “What'll you do?” Chris looked ahead, where the road curved toward a rise. Beyond it, the masts thickened. Rooflines began to break through the trees: slate, tin, white-painted wood, brick darkened by heat and rain. A church steeple lifted over the haze, then another farther off. The city wasn't fully visible yet, but its gravity had already reached the road.

“Find the depot,” Chris said. “Hand over the recovered mail. File the road report. Ask about work.”

“Courier work?”

“Maybe.”

“And the Courier?”

Chris felt the newspaper folded in his notebook like a small, printed weight. “*Maybe* find out why a paper is making so many people nervous.”

“That sounds like trouble.”

“Most useful questions do.”

Eli considered that, then looked toward the city again. “You think May knew?”

“Knew what?”

“That you’d end up here.”

Chris huffed softly. “May knows a lot of things. She also guesses loudly and calls it strategy.”

“But *did* she?”

The road climbed the rise before Chris had to answer. Charleston appeared ahead of them in pieces, then all at once: *church steeples and harbor masts, white columns behind iron fences, brick warehouses near the water, rooftops shining wet under the morning sun.* Smoke lifted from chimneys and cookfires. Flags moved in the humid breeze. Beyond the city, the harbor flashed bright and restless, crowded with boats that made the whole place look less like a settlement and more like a promise someone had armored. It was *beautiful*. Chris hated that he noticed.

Eli stopped pretending not to stare. His mouth parted slightly, eyes wide, all the careful courier posture falling away for one unguarded second. He looked fourteen. Injured and exhausted and far from home, yes, but also fourteen and seeing a city rise out of marsh light like something from a story people had kept telling because they needed it to be true. Chris let him have that too.

The road ahead narrowed into ordered lanes, signs directing traffic toward the depot, harbor, market, and residential districts. A patrol rider moved along the shoulder. Somewhere beyond the nearest buildings, a bell rang once, then again, carrying over the damp air. The city answered with wheels, voices, hoofbeats, gulls, and the low, constant sound of a port alive enough to make trouble inevitable.

Chris kept the truck pointed toward the depot road, May’s letter in his jacket, Eddie’s folded beside it, the Oconee passage note in his notebook, and a junior courier trying very hard not to look scared in the passenger seat. Charleston waited ahead. So did the kind of trouble that wore clean clothes and called itself civilized.

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