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In SR 1417, when the Shire still keeps its quiet habits by bells, odd signs begin to gather where the Brandywine shoals thin at Sarn Ford. Crows count at dusk. False cairns gleam where no ferryman set them. A reed speaks three short notes to ears that are not hobbit ears.

# Prologue: The Quiet Ledger

The bell at Michel Delving counted the hour with its plain, homely note, and the sound went down the chalk lanes and along the green shoulders of the White Downs like water being poured. Maralda Bunce, who minded the numbers for the Mayor and kept certain quiet tables for the Mathom-house besides, shut the office window against the drift of dust and turned a heavy ledger toward the light. There was no hurry; there seldom was, not by the bells; yet something in the neat columns asked for second seeing.

It was only leaf and lading on the page: farm names, cart weights, the small give‑and‑take of Shire life, and then, beside three bales bound for Longbottom stores, a mark she did not recall setting eyes on before. It was not a letter as hobbits write, nor a tidy figure. The wax next to the clerk’s neat hand had been pressed with a broad palm, and the string that had bit the seal showed a thread of black and green, twisted together. The clerk had copied it faithfully in the margin with his best pen, as clerks do when they are not certain whether to name a thing or only notice it.

“A buyer’s seal,” Maralda said to herself, and said nothing more, for talking to an empty room sets bad habits at the door. She set her finger to the tally, then to the next, and saw the same sign upon a second leaf‑lot, and once again a fortnight later. Three is a crowd in a ledger, when two would be chance.

Outside, the Mathom-house kept its cool even in late sun. The steps were worn by years of small feet and careful hands, and within lay those considered trifles that are only trifles to the unknowing: old buckles and bounders’ staves, a shard of painted thing from the Tower Hills, a child’s toy cart made of ash and iron nails black with age. It was a place for memory, not meddling. Maralda liked it so, and yet the sound of crows at evening, which had grown louder of late over the Downs, came back to her as she stood in the doorway and watched the square.

A carrier from Waymeet had brought, with his bread and news, a Ranger’s word two days past: travellers on the Greenway went now in twos when they could; a pack of wolves was heard some miles south and once seen at distance, and a light on the downs had burned late on a wind‑spite night. Such tales drifted in and out like market smoke; the Shire, being itself, folded them into talk and set the kettle on. Still, there was the mark in the book, and the string’s odd colour, and the way crows turned at dusk as if counting hedges. Small things, each; yet small things add.

Maralda dipped her pen and began a tidy note on square paper. She did not write what she suspected; she only set down what was before her eyes: three bales with a broad‑handed seal and black‑and‑green twine; dates; the names of carters who had touched the goods; the clerk’s initials; the matter stored by the bells at Longbottom. She sanded the page, blew the grit, folded it once, and tied it up with a sliver of red thread such as the Mathom-house used to mark “to be saved.”

There was a young fellow north in the Greenfields who had a mind like a well‑kept drawer, where you might put a thing and find it again in spring without fuss. He had turned up last year with an arrowhead and a tale that proved older than the telling, and the Mayor, who listened more than he let on, had seen fit to see him twice since. Maralda put his name on the outside, Tolman Noakes (though most called him Tolly), and added, after a pause, only this: by bells, if you please. She liked the way his notes kept to plain truth and left room for a neighbour’s sense.

She stepped out under a sky thinning toward evening, and the square smelled of dust and apples. A crow cut the air over the White Downs and slid east. The bell in the Mayor’s office sounded again. Maralda locked the ledger in its drawer and the note in her pocket, and went down the steps of the Mathom-house, where the stone is dipped in the middle by so many years of careful feet.

# Chapter 1: Mist on the Water

Fog lay thin as milk over The Water and drew in among the rushes till every stem wore a little halo. Tolly walked light along the Bywater Road with a basket on his arm and a letter from Auntie Wierdy tucked in his jacket, for cousins in Hobbiton must not be left without their share of pickled beets once the fields were emptied. It was a tidy morning after harvest, when the earth smells friendly and the lanes remember wheels.

He was not in a hurry, being a hobbit and no post‑runner, yet his feet went of their own accord to the bend where the lane skirts the pool. There the mill turned slow, and a chill came up from the water that made him pull his collar close and look, as he always did, for the big trout that held the shadow under the willow. The trout was there, and with it a scatter of fallen leaves that lay like small boats trembling in place. A crow called from The Hill and another answered from over Bywater way, so that the morning seemed to have a question and then an echo.

Tolly set down the basket on a clean stone and breathed the fog. The smell was of wet wood and old sacks and the faint sweetness of crushed apple. He thought of Auntie Wierdy’s stove and how she said, when the kettle went off at the wrong time, that bells in the Shire kept better hours than folk; and he smiled. There was kindness in a lane that met you the same each day, even if you had changed without noticing.

On the far side of the pool a reed stirred though no wind had yet come, and a thin note sounded that might have been a bird if it had not repeated in just the same way a moment later. Tolly straightened, listening. A reed‑whistle can be a game, and boys will call one another across water for the trick of it; but this was not quite a game’s call. It made three short sounds and then none. After a little, a boat‑hook knocked softly against wood, and the note came once more, as if asking.

He knew the tricks of the water as well as hedgerows, and he knew as well that a hobbit alone at morning should play no games with shadows. So he cleared his throat and said nothing, and the nothing was answer enough. The reed stilled. A small shape—perhaps only a duck, perhaps only a bundle of cut reeds—moved against the bank and was quiet.

“Whoever you are,” Tolly said at last, very mild, “you’ll get no fish by calling them.” Then he took up his basket and went on.

By the Haygate Stone, which keeps the memory of a field‑gate that stood there before his grandfather’s grandfather was a lad, he met Tomberic Greenback bringing a sack of barley on a barrow that had known better years. Tomberic greeted him with a lift of the chin and a grin that was all good nature.

“Morning to you, Tolly. Fog’s had a penny’s worth and left the rest,” he said. “Smells of apples yet.”

“And damp wool,” Tolly answered, for he had pulled his collar twice since the bend. “Are you bound for Hobbiton or the Dragon?”

“The mill first, the Dragon second, the road third, if the barley fetches what it ought,” Tomberic said. “There’s talk on the Greenway and I like to chase talk when my legs are free. Word is, travellers go in twos now, where once they went in ones for thrift. Some call it caution, some call it market talk to make things dear.”

“And what do you call it?”

“I call it a sign to keep a straight face and one eye open,” Tomberic said cheerfully. “There’s no call for a stir here, mind you. Only… well, crows count better than I do, and there’s more of them of an evening.”

They stood by the stone a moment, and the fog parted to show the pool lying grey and calm, with the mill‑tail making a faint lace where it ran. Tolly told him of the reed‑whistle and the soft knock of wood, and Tomberic’s grin went smaller but did not leave.

“Boys, or a fellow who likes to fish too early,” he said. “Or else a message for ears that aren’t yours or mine. I’ve heard a reed used for calling at night on the Greenway (three quick and one slow), but that was a winter ago and south of here. Best leave it to settle like silt. If it clears, you see bottom; if not, there’s no use muddying it.”

“I’ve no mind to muddy anything,” Tolly said. “Only I think I’ll step by Michel Delving in a day or two. I’ve a question or two of my own for the Mathom-house, and a person there who knows how to count.”

“Maralda Bunce,” Tomberic said promptly. “She can count how many peas there are in a pod without opening it. You give her my best.”

Tolly nodded. He liked the way she made numbers into neighbourly sense and never dressed facts up for fair‑days. He could see, as if already there, her square hand setting a date in a corner and a sliver of red thread laid through it to say: to be saved.

They parted with good will. Tolly took the lane toward the Dragon and delivered Auntie’s beets to his cousin’s door, where he was drawn in to eat a heel of bread and cheese by the fire and to be told, as is the manner of cousins, that he looked thinner and taller and more like his father and when did he plan to settle down and would he take a pot of jam home? He submitted with patience and pockets improved, and at last came out again to the road, which had lost its first grey and taken on the weak gold that comes when the sun remembers its work.

He walked on past the pool and the mill, past The Hill with its well‑kept gardens, and turned aside to the stiles that look toward the fields. Leaves freckled the path. The Water flowed with the particular sound it has when harvest is done: as if the stream itself were full of straw and old stories. A waggon crossed the bridge with a rattle and a shout; smoke went up from Bagshot Row in three thin lines. None of it was strange, and that was a comfort.

At the stile nearest the hay meadows he paused again, for another crow called, lower now and nearer, and a second answered from the far hedge. He was not one for seeing omens in ordinary things, but he had learned, of late, to set a small mark in his mind beside such turns. He took out the stub of a pencil and a scrap of folded paper (for he kept small notes now, having found it wiser to trust a scrap than a memory when a year or more might come between the finding and the need) and he wrote: crows at dusk count; reed‑whistle, three short; soft knock on wood; no answer given; Haygate Stone; Tomberic’s talk of twos on the Greenway. He put the paper away and felt a little foolish for the care, and then not foolish at all.

At noon he ate under a hedge with his back to the sun and crumbs on his jacket, and a dog from the next field came to see if crumbs were the sort that travel. Tolly shared as far as manners allowed and sent the dog off full of opinions. When he stood, he looked once more at the water and saw a bit of twine caught on a snag—a twist of black and green. He reached with a stick and drew it in.

It was not much: a short length of cord such as might bind up a small parcel or a folded cloth. The colours were bright even with wet; the twist held tight. He rubbed it clean on his sleeve and turned it in his fingers. Plenty of twine in the Shire is brown or plain; some is dyed, where a tidy housekeeper likes a colour to tell a bundle by. But he thought of Tomberic’s talk, and of the reed‑whistle, and how the boat‑hook had knocked only once.

He put the twine with his pencil. “A thing found is a thing to be remembered,” Auntie Wierdy said, usually about lost buttons. He meant to remember it.

Toward evening he came again to the pool. The fog had gone and the water lay bare, showing the posts along the bank. The miller stood in his doorway wiping his hands and called a good‑evening. A boy ran past with a loaf under his arm and the world seemed just as it had always been, which is to say, worth keeping.

He crossed the bridge and took the road toward the Downs, meaning to sleep at a cousin’s in a lane off the Bywater Road and set out for Michel Delving in the morning. As he passed the Haygate Stone in the late light he set his hand upon it, as he had done since he was little, and he thought, not quite in words: gates keep things in and out, but there are gates you only feel when you are walking, and you know you have gone from one thing to another. He had a sense that he had put his foot on such a threshold.

In the falling light a crow came down to the field a little way off and picked among the stubble. It lifted its head as if listening to something not for him and then flew toward the east. Tolly watched it go, then turned his face toward the Downs and the quiet house where there would be stew and talk and a blanket, and a seat by the door where he could write down what he had seen before sleep.

# Chapter 2: Lanterns at the Hay Gate

The hedge at Hay Gate was high as a house and thick with thorn, and the lane there narrowed so that a cart and a walker must mind their manners when they met. By sundown the leaves on the quickset shone like small coins, and the westering light lay along the road as if someone had spilled honey and left it. Tolly and Tomberic came up the last rise with their breath steaming faint as milk, and they could hear the Brandywine farther off than the eye could reach: a broad hush, as of a giant sleeping.

Two Bounders kept the post at the gate that day, with staves polished by years of hands and a cooking‑pot that smelled of onions and rosemary. They were civil, and kindly to folk who came with bread to share, which Tomberic, being Tomberic, produced from his sack almost before greetings were done.

“Evening to you,” said the elder, a square fellow with hay in his hair and patience in his jaw. “If you’ve come for a look over the hedge, know that we keep watch both ways these days. It’s a fine evening for it, and not so fine either.”

“We came to bring what we have and take what tidings there are,” Tomberic said, and Tolly added that they would pass on any word to Michel Delving if asked, for he meant to go there soon enough.

“There’s word to be weighed,” the Bounder allowed, and looked past them toward the hedge as one listens to a kettle that has not yet begun to sing but will. “There’s been calls on a reed at odd times along the hedge and once by the ferry path: three short, like lads play, but not made like lads play it. Once there came an answer faint and far, as if over water. We did not go to it.”

“Good,” said another voice, courteous and low.

He had been there, close as the gate‑post, and yet neither hobbit had marked his coming. Tall, spare, with a cloak the colour of dust and oak shade, he stood with a certain stillness that made even the quick leaves hold their noise a little. His face was weathered like the posts along the ferry and his eyes were the clear grey that water sometimes has under evening.

“Good,” he said again. “A call not meant for you is not a summons for you.” He bowed a little, as a Ranger will when he wants to put a hobbit at ease. “Peace to the Hay Gate. I am Nathron. My company has the southern watches by courtesy of your folk.”

“And ours by courtesy of yours,” the Bounder said, and bowed in the Shire way: not deep, but warm. “We keep our lanes; you keep the lines beyond; and we pass the word when it is fit to pass.”

“Then let us pass it plain,” Nathron said. “The Greenway is troubled of late: smoke on the downs, travellers robbed near the hollow south of the old hedge‑oak, and a pack of wolves heard on nights when the river breathes east. We have held Sarn Ford since before your grandfathers’ time, but there are more eyes against our fire than there were, and some of them count well.”

“Count?” said Tomberic.

“Crows count,” Nathron answered, half smiling. “And men that make use of them do, too. As for the river: there are signs of testing where the gravel is kind and the shoals lie sly. False cairns set and set again. A ferrystone shifted on another stream not far from here. Knots tied of reed and cord to mark an hour.”

Tolly felt the small weight of twine in his pocket as plainly as if it had tugged there. He did not show it. He looked from the Ranger to the hedge and back, and thought of rules that live in a man even if no one has written them. “If a reed calls,” he said, “and it is not for us, we make no answer. If a light is shown over water, we do not show one back unless it is to warn. If someone we do not know asks the ford by night, we send them by day, with company.”

“Those are good rules,” Nathron said. “Write them down if you keep a book, and give them to the next watch. As for lights: keep your lanterns hooded and near the ground, and never let one hang still in the wind. Those who count from a distance take heart from tidy signals.”

“We have no book,” the Bounder admitted, “only memories and a chalk mark on the gate‑post now and again. But a book can be begun as easy as bread, if someone brings the flour.” He looked at Tolly as if the flour might be in his pocket beside the twine.

“I have a pencil,” Tolly said. “Sometimes I have more sense than that.” He smiled, and the men smiled back, and the hedge rustled with a wind that had woken while they stood speaking. He thought of Maralda’s flat board and her red thread and how such rules sit best when a square hand teaches them to walk.

They shared onions and bread and a ladle of stew, and while they ate a small horn sounded far to the south: two low notes, as if the player had no wish to wake anything that might be sleeping between. All the faces turned toward the sound and then toward Nathron. He did not stir except to set his bowl down on the gate‑post.

“Not for us,” he said after a breath. “And too far besides. Yet the wind carries oddly along the riverbeds in this weather. Hear and mark; go and chase not.”

“We can do that,” the Bounder said. “We are hobbits, after all.”

“And we,” said Nathron, “are Rangers. We are too few to chase shadows with our feet when our eyes may do. But I will not lie: you may see more nights like this than you would wish before the year has turned twice.” He looked at the hedge again, not as if expecting an enemy to come out of it, but as one considers the line between two fields: which side wears which crop and how the weather will take them.

“There is a stone at the ford,” he said then, “set by those who knew the river before my father’s father watched it. It keeps faith when the water runs low. We call it the ferrystone. If anyone tells you to move such a stone or marks it with a mark that is not ours, mark that man in your minds instead, and tell us by the next bell.”

“How do we tell you by the next bell?” Tomberic asked. “We’ve no runner faster than a good stew, and the road is long.”

“Leave a token at the willow with the forked crown two fields down the ferry path,” Nathron said. “A split stick bound with two strands only: brown twine if you have it, not bright. Our men pass it at dawn and dusk. Or else go to the old stile by the hollow lane before the Downs and edge the top rail with a notch. We carry the rail’s story in our heads as a smith carries heat in his hand.”

“That is a good way,” Tolly said. “We have no wish to speak more names into the air than a body needs after dark.”

The Ranger inclined his head. “Names have work to do and to rest from. Keep yours where they belong.” He reached into his cloak and drew out a small square of oiled cloth. Inside, folded small, were two scraps of cord: one plain, one a twist of black and green.

“If you see cord such as this,” he said, touching the coloured twist, “do not stir it where it lies. Note it if you can; take a matching piece if there is one loose. But leave the place as quiet as you found it, and tell us. There are buyers to the south who send hands to take what they have not sown. Some have long memories and tidy habits.” He looked at the Bounders then, plain and without scorn. “Your folk have long memories too. Keep them.”

“We will,” the elder Bounder said. “We were given a land to mind, and we mind it.”

The light fell while they spoke, so that the hedge turned black as a ship’s side and the lane grew narrow and friendly. A bat came out and wrote quick words on the air and was gone. Nathron took from the post a small hooded lantern, lit it with a flint, and showed how to shade the light with the hand for a warning without beckoning. Tomberic tried it and made a face when he nearly burned his knuckles; the Bounder laughed out of the side of his mouth and then did the same mistake and laughed at himself.

“That is the way,” Nathron said. “Better to burn a knuckle than to hang a star for men to steer by who have no right to a star. Keep your lamps low, and keep your bells.”

They spoke then of watches and bells and who should sit by night and who by dawn. The Bounders had their own turns and the miller’s boy brought word of who could be spared, and Tolly wrote it neat as he could on a folded paper with his pencil, which scraped like a cricket in the quiet. He did not set down more names than were needed; only what a gate must know to be a gate.

One of the younger Bounders, perhaps to keep his hands steady while he trimmed a wick, sang under his breath, and the others caught the tune lightly without making a show of it:

We keep to the hedge with our lanterns held low,  
We listen to water and count as we go;  
If whistles should call us, we give them no sign,  
We walk by the bells and we keep to the line.

When all was said for the evening, Nathron took up his cloak and stood a moment with them at the hedge, not quite in the lane and not quite out of it. “If rumour comes,” he said, “that a grey pilgrim passed along the Greenway this week, pay it respect and let it pass. He has his own errand and we ours, and both run toward the same weather.”

“We have a care for weather,” the Bounder said. “And for guests who go by our doors, whether they knock or only leave good sense behind them.”

“Then we understand one another,” Nathron said. He lifted his hand in farewell, a gesture like brushing away a cobweb, light and clean—and was gone between one breath and the next, with only the small hush that follows a bird’s rise to show where he had stood.

Tolly and Tomberic walked a little way down the lane to where the hedge thinned and you could see, if you stood on a stone, the far gleam of the river under the first stars. The air smelled of cut thorn and cooling earth. Somewhere a horned owl called once and then no more.

“Well?” Tomberic said.

“Well,” Tolly said. “I think I shall go on to Michel Delving tomorrow by the bells, and then south. It isn’t my business to chase shadows. But if there are marks on our stones and knots in our reeds, I would see them with my own eyes, and I would write them down for the day when folk forget what we saw.”

“You will have stew first,” Tomberic said firmly. “And then you can keep faith with stones and reeds. There’s no use keeping faith on an empty stomach.”

“Auntie would say as much and more,” Tolly agreed. He tucked his pencil away, along with the coloured bit of twine, and felt the weight of both not as a burden but as a promise. The hedge breathed like a sleeping thing; the lane held its darkness well. They turned back toward the gate, where the pot still gave off the last of its onion smell, and the Bounders’ talk went on in an easy murmur that meant the night was beginning as it should, with watchfulness and with ordinary things.

# Chapter 3: Leaf and Ledger

By bells the sheds of Longbottom were waking to their business. The air in the Southfarthing has a leaf‑smell after harvest that sits close to the ground, rich and a little sharp, and the barns there are set with wide doors and low windows to keep the wind where it ought to be. Men and women in plain coats moved quietly, stacking and sorting, and there was that kindly clatter of useful work which is better than music when a day is young.

Tolly and Maralda came along the lane with their cloaks folded over their arms, for the sun had already taken hold. It had been a day to the west and a day again to the south since the Hay Gate, and in Michel Delving the note had found its way cleanly from pocket to hand. There had been no fuss about it. Maralda had listened more than spoken, as was her way, and then said only: “Let us look at the hands that write, and at the strings that bind.” So they had set out, taking the road by bells, and now stood at the barn paling while a steward counted bales and a boy chalked figures on a board.

“Good day to you,” Maralda said, when the count paused. “We are not here to meddle nor to buy. We are keeping a small tally of our own and would be beholden for a look at yours.”

The steward had the broad, even manner of a Shire man whose work is taken seriously and who knows the neighbours by name and habit. He was careful, and careful men are sometimes glad to show their carefulness. He made them welcome to the office shed, where a table stood under the window and the ledger lay with a smooth stone upon its half‑turned page.

It was a tidy book. Maralda ran a finger down the lines without touching the ink, and Tolly read with her, saying nothing. The clerk here wrote a small, round hand, patient and legible, the sort of hand that remembers last year while it sets down today. Tolly liked a room where paper lay quiet and in order; such places steady the breath without asking. On the open page were the usual honest things: farm names, weights, and marks for weather and waggon.

“If you will allow,” said Maralda, “we would turn back a fortnight.”

“Allow, and welcome,” said the steward. “There’s pride in neat pages, and no harm in more eyes so long as they belong to friends.”

They turned back together. It is a pleasant feeling to read where work has gone well and numbers sit straight. Then, at the third page, Maralda’s finger rested, and she looked at Tolly without turning her head; it was the sort of look two careful readers share when a line asks for a better answer. He matched her quiet, liking how her silence opened other mouths. In the margin beside three entries, a small space had been left, and in that space the clerk had copied a sign: a broad‑handed seal impression and a twist of black and green indicated by two neat strokes of the pen and a note: “foreign buyer’s string.”

“We had thought that curious,” the steward admitted, when Maralda asked nothing but waited for him to speak. “A new party sent by a friend of a friend, so we were told. We do not sell leaf to strangers, not out of the barns and not on a casual day. But there are bales that are traded between folk we know, and sometimes a sign travels further than a man, for a season, when the roads are unsettled.”

“And the hand that wrote the sign?” Maralda said softly.

“Our own clerk copied it,” said the steward, “for the comfort of memory. The seal itself came and went upon the string. The lots went lawful from our shed to a regular name. We do not alter our ways on account of knots, but we do take notice.”

“So do we,” Tolly said, and took from his pocket the short length of coloured twine he had fished from The Water. He set it on the table, and it looked small there, hardly worth the talk of it. The steward’s eyes sharpened, all the same.

“That is the string of which I spoke,” he said. “Or its twin.”

“There is no need to name the man who carried it,” Maralda said. “If the leaf went by a regular road, and the measure was honest, the matter is not of names but of ways. Has there been any word, beyond the usual, of wagons halted, or questions asked at odd hours?”

“There is talk on the Greenway,” the steward allowed, “but Longbottom does not trade by that path. We send west or north within the bounds, and the rest is other folk’s risk. Still and all, twice in a week a fellow I did not know came to ask when our bells were kept and whether any ferry south ran after dusk. He did not speak ill; he spoke too smooth.”

Maralda nodded and turned the pages forward again, until she stood at the day’s line. “We shall keep our own little list, with your leave,” she said, and at his nod she took from her satchel a square of paper and a pencil, and copied the three occurrences of the seal‑mark, their dates, the weight of the lots, and the name of the regular buyer whose men had taken them.

“We will not copy the name,” she added, before the steward had time to draw breath. “We remember it. The paper will go to the Mathom-house, and names there are written only when they must be.”

“That is well,” said the steward. “A barn can do its work more peaceably when names are kept like tools: taken out for the job and put away sharp.”

They left the office and walked the length of the sheds. Here and there a bale lay open, not to tempt a thief but to let the air through for an hour. The cords were plain brown, as a rule, and the knots were the kind a man can tie in the dark without counting. On a bench by the door a coil of cord sat half‑used. Tolly touched it with a finger and thought of the coloured twist in his pocket; his finger came away clean with tar from the other chapter of his mind, where the Hay Gate and the Ranger’s talk lay side by side.

“We shall go now and not trouble your routine,” Maralda said. “If a fellow with easy talk calls again, you might tell him that the bells are kept at their hours, and that lanterns are trimmed low at the hedges.”

“He will hear that,” said the steward. “And perhaps he will hear also that the Bounders are of a mind with the Rangers this year.”

They went down the lane between sheds and pasture until Longbottom lay behind them like a low, well‑swept hearth, and the road turned toward the Brandywine. The day was warm without weight; there were bees on the hedge and a dog asleep in a patch of shade. It would have been easy to forget the coloured twine in Tolly’s pocket and the tallies in Maralda’s hand. Yet there is a way that things gather when a year is turning: small marks line up as surely as waggon‑ruts, and the mind, if it is honest, cannot help but follow them.

“The hand that copied the seal,” Tolly said after a while, “was not the same as the hand that wrote the lines. It was closer‑set, and the strokes fall a little forward.”

“You have better eyes than I thought, or better memory,” said Maralda. “Yes. The clerk made a neat model of another man’s press. And the note he added—‘foreign buyer’s string’—that word ‘foreign’ sits oddly in his usual run. It is not a word he writes often. He thinks it when he must, not when he is idle.”

“Do you think the regular buyer knows he carries another man’s sign?”

“I think the regular buyer knows what he must to keep his wagons going and his promises kept. If another hand leans upon his trade, he will feel the weight before he names it. That is often the way.”

They sat a little while on a stile and ate what they had brought: bread and a sliver of cheese, apples from a hedge‑tree that Tolly had shaken with a stick, and a handful of nuts. Maralda made a small packet of the copied tallies and bound them with red thread: the mark the Mathom-house used for “to be saved,” and put them where the fold of her satchel would hide the colour. Tolly took out his notebook and set down only what could be trusted to paper: three dates; three bales; the twist of string; a man’s smooth questions about bells and ferries; the look of the steward’s eyes when the twine lay on the table. It pleased him that her red thread and his pencil kept the same sort of order without fuss or flourish.

“There is a thing I do not like,” he said, not to spoil the food but because the thought would keep knocking. “The seal itself did not stay; only the clerk’s copy of it. That is another kind of not naming.”

“Yes,” said Maralda. “But it leaves a shape in the mind, and shapes in the mind are sometimes safer than names on a page. If there is a hand behind this, it will write again; men who like tidy marks cannot bear to leave none.”

When they went on, the lane fell a little toward a low place where water stands in winter and rushes take hold by summer’s end. There, where a cartwheel had gouged the mud some days past, Tolly saw a faint print of a boot with nails set wider than a Shire cobbler would place them. It was old, already softening, and might have been a waggoner from out of the bounds who had come north on an honest errand. He noted it without speech and went on.

By bells they came to a small copse where a side path ran down toward a narrow meadow and the river beyond the folds of land. There were traces of feet along that path, light and careful, more than a day old. At the edge of the copse, where a man might stand out of sight and yet look toward the sheds, a low stone had been set up at some time past to prop a gate that was no longer there. On that stone, in a notch the size of a thumb, a crumb of tar had lodged. Tolly touched it and took it between finger and thumb. It stained like smoke.

“We carry fire with us, without knowing it,” he said. “It leaves marks in unlikely places.”

Maralda looked at the small stain as if it were a letter in a strange tongue. “And the river carries what is set upon it,” she said. “Let us keep our bells and our low lights, and give this to men whose task is to stand where we ought not.”

“Nathron,” Tolly agreed. “And the Hay Gate, for courtesy’s sake.”

“And the Mathom-house,” said Maralda, “for memory’s.”

They turned back then, not to chase shadows but to keep the day’s promises. When they came again to the steward’s door, Maralda asked for a clean scrap and set down one line for his board: “If you see coloured cord or a seal not your own, leave the knot uncut and send word by bells.” The steward read it and hung it beside the chalked weights with a pin. He did not ask for names; he nodded as a man nods when a proverb proves itself under his hand.

By the time the sun leaned west, they were on the lane again, and Longbottom’s sheds were growing quiet in their orderly way. The bells of the farmsteads answered one another with their small iron voices. Tolly walked more slowly than he had come, because the mind walks slower when it carries more than it set out with, and because a day well‑used ought not to be hurried into the next.

# Chapter 4: Road Through Green Hills

The road lifted and fell like the back of a sleeping beast, and the fields on either hand were dappled with stubble and late daisies. In the Green Hill Country the lanes run close to the hedges, so that a walker has the company of leaves and the smell of earth, and the views open suddenly—pasture giving to ridge, ridge to a pocket of beech and holly, then another fold of land beyond.

Tolly walked with Tomberic and Maralda in the steady pace that suits a day’s going, not too quick for talk and not so slow as to make a worry of it. Each had a small pack. Tomberic carried his barrow’s rope coiled across a shoulder because rope is a friendly thing that often proves more clever than a plan. Maralda had her satchel with the square papers and the red thread tucked out of sight. Tolly had his notebook, a pencil, and the short twist of coloured twine in a wrap of cloth so it would not fret itself loose.

They had left the barns by bells and turned their faces toward the Green Hills, meaning to take the by‑lanes that keep to the folds and bring a traveller into Tookland by afternoon. The weather held kind; a wind ran lightly over the grass and the crows kept to their own business, counting furrows without troubling honest folk.

“We will not hurry,” Maralda said, “for we carry no message that a man must sleep on the ground to deliver. But we will not dawdle either. It is better to come to a place in good time and learn its habits than to reach it late and wish you had eyes like a cat.”

“I have only the eyes I was given,” Tomberic said cheerfully. “But I can keep my ears tidy. If a reed so much as thinks of singing, it will find me ready.”

“It is not the reeds that think,” Tolly said, “but the men who set them to it.” He said it without heat. The day did not ask for it.

They came to a stile where the lane crossed between two small meadows, and there they sat to take bread and cheese, because food in the open tastes as if it had been grown for the purpose. From the stile the Green Hill Country lay like a sea with slow waves, and on a far fold there was a glimpse of chimneys that might be Tuckborough, and the line of the Great Smials under the grass like a whale well hidden.

“We shall pass by Tookland without ceremony,” Maralda said, “for our errand is not to stir hospitality but to keep to the road. Yet it does a heart good to see the land thick with houses and orchards. It reminds one what gates are for.”

“To keep flocks where they belong,” Tomberic said, “and friends in kindness, and mischief out.”

“And to remind the feet which way is home,” Tolly added.

When the bread was gone and the apples were finished to their pips, Tomberic set a tune to humming, and Tolly, who had been thinking a verse for three fields now, gave it words. They walked again, and the lane took their feet like a well‑worn shoe, while the green banks held their song close and friendly:

With a pack on our backs and the bell after noon, We keep to the green lane and we mark by the moon; The hedge is our neighbour, the stile is our friend, We follow the fields till the fields make an end.

We keep to the left where the thorn makes a row, We nod to the brook when its waters run slow; If whistles would call us, we give them no sign, We walk by the bells and we keep to the line.

The verse was not much, but it had a good foot to it, and the road went easier while it was sung. Maralda’s mouth held a small smile that meant approval without praise. A farmer in a cart waved and smiled and called that it was a proper day for getting somewhere without fuss. They waved back and kept their step.

After noon the ridge lifted more steeply, and they took the rise in silence, saving breath. At the top they could see long, down the country to where the folds lean toward the south and the road, if you follow it far enough, will find the Brandywine and the ford. Clouds made slow shadows; in the distance a hawk hung, a small dark point that said the air was steady.

“What we do first when we reach the ford,” Maralda said, “is listen. There is a way that water keeps a history if you give it quiet. Then we will learn how the Rangers read their lines, and we will not say that our way is better even if the Shire way is dearer to us. We have come to help, not to teach a man his own trade.”

“Learn first, help second,” Tomberic said. “I can keep that in a pocket where it will not shake loose.”

“And write what the pocket forgets,” Tolly said, tapping the notebook.

They passed a field where sheep had left their soft prints in the dust and a shepherd’s pipe sounded a tune with three notes and a turn that made Tolly think of the reed at Bywater. He did not say so. There is no good in sticking the mind’s finger into every old sore to see if it aches. Instead he counted the posts of the hedge for a time and found a small comfort in the even numbers.

Towards Tookland the hedges grew higher and the gates broader, for the Tooks like tidy boundaries and room to turn a cart. A child on a wall watched them go by and asked if they were bound for the great hill. Tomberic said they were bound for a place further than that, but that if the child had a mind to walk, there were blackberries still hidden in the shady corners where the sun does not reach by late afternoon. The child grinned and slid down; a clatter of feet and a small shout went up from the ditch, which told its own tale.

They did not go into Tuckborough, though the lane would have carried them to a neat green with an inn where a man could waste an hour without repenting. They kept to a by‑way that skirted the back of the Great Smials, where the grass on the long hill takes the light as if it had been polished by years of children rolling. The wind had the smell of crushed thyme and sun‑warmed turf.

“There is a comfort in places that have learned to be themselves and need no teaching from anyone,” Maralda said. “If trouble comes, it should find such places standing as they are.”

In the late light the three of them set down their packs for a little while under a hawthorn that grew out of the bank, and shared the last of the bread. Tomberic produced, with a flourish entirely out of proportion to the size of the thing, a small twist of salt and a crumb of cheese he had been saving. “For courage,” he said.

“Courage likes a crust to stand on,” Tolly said. He looked south where the land gentled into distance. Somewhere beyond those folds lay the willow‑holts and the gravel bars and the stone that keeps faith when the water runs low.

“Our aims, so we do not forget them when the business begins,” Maralda said, and she held up a finger for each: “First, to learn the ford’s habits—the shoals, the channels, the ways the wind lays the scum and the crows behave at dusk. Second, to keep the Shire’s courtesy: we name little, we mark much, we leave no more trace than a footprint by morning. Third, to bring back a record plain enough that a Bounder or a Mayor or a child can understand what was done and why.”

“Fourth,” Tomberic added, “to keep stew between the three of us when we can, because thinking goes thin when bellies do.”

“That is not an unwise fourth,” Maralda said gravely, though her eyes were friendly.

They took the road again as the sun turned honey‑coloured on the ridge tops. The crows that had kept to themselves in the morning now made small parliaments on the furrows and rose and settled as if agreeing on ordinary matters. Now and then a pair would wheel and turn the line of a hedge as if following a rule. It may have been nothing but crows being crows. It is often so. But Tolly set a little mark in his mind and in his notebook, no bigger than a fly’s foot, to remember where he had seen it.

Before the light failed they reached a farm lane where a cousin of Tomberic’s worked a yard with neat stacks and a well‑swept path. Hospitality was offered and accepted in the Shire way, which is to say with thanks and without fuss. They sat by the door and told only what was courteous to tell, and heard in return the usual country talk with one or two strands that ran south: a waggon that had gone astray for half a day; a dog that barked twice at nothing and would not be pleased with any man’s answer; a scrap of black and green thread caught in a hedge where no parcel should have been carried.

Maralda put nothing on the table but a proverb and a smile. Tomberic traded news of the Hay Gate for news of the barley price. Tolly, when there was quiet, asked to see the caught thread. It was no more than a hair of colour, too small to argue with. He thanked the farmer and left it where it was.

By candle the three sat a moment with their packs half‑open and the day’s notes spread like playing cards. They said little. There is a time for talk, and there is a time to let talk settle and be the ground on which you will stand in the morning. At last they closed their books and set their things in order and lay down on pallets near the hearth. Outside, the night gathered itself with the sound of a cart somewhere far, and a barred owl called once and then forgot its purpose.

Tolly lay awake a little, counting his breath and the beats between the small household sounds. He did not think of wolves, though there might be some far south, nor of horns, though a man could hear such a thing on a wind if he wished hard enough. He thought of the ferrystone, which he had not yet seen and which felt, even so, like a promise kept by other men before him, set in the water to be faithful when men were not looking. Then sleep came as it does to those who have walked far enough and eaten their bread and kept their notes.

# Chapter 5: First Watch at the Ford

At first light the river wore a faint skin of mist, and the willows hung their pale leaves as if listening. Sarn Ford lies broad and quiet when it is in a friendly mood, the water drawing itself thin over the gravel so that the ground shows through like a well‑washed stone floor. Tolly stood where the bank makes a small shelf and felt the chill in his ankles, though his boots were dry. Tomberic was a few paces off, and Maralda behind them with her satchel closed, as one closes a book before the reading starts. Nathron came without show, as the evening had promised he would, and the morning took account of him without haste.

“We begin,” the Ranger said, “by letting the ford speak. The river keeps two kinds of tale: what lies under it, and what men lay upon it. If you learn the first, you are less often fooled by the second.”

He led them down to a place where the bank had been trodden by careful feet, and there a low blind of brush and turf crouched among the willow roots. It smelled of old leaves and faint smoke and iron kept oiled; it was a good smell for such a place, and it put no hurry in him.

“Sit here when you are not walking,” Nathron said to Tolly and Tomberic. “Keep your lantern hooded at night and your patience unhooded by day. Count the beats between a ripple and its echo on the bank: that tells you more than it seems to. Watch the ferrystone, there.” He pointed toward the middle reach, where a squat, dark head showed when the water drew thin and went shy when a cloud’s shadow crossed. “It is set upon a low bed. When the river rises with a wind from the west, you will hear a change in its voice: a rougher whisper. If a man has shifted such a stone, he will not have shifted the bed beneath it. The voice betrays the meddler.”

Tolly listened. Rivers have names and moods; he had always known that in a Shire way, as one knows the difference between a kettle’s business and a pan’s. Now he tried to hear as Nathron heard. The water made small speakings: a chuckle where it met a root, a hiss where it slipped a narrow place, a thin lace sound over the shallows beyond the stone. He made a mark in his book: ferrystone voice (fair, thin), ripple to bank (two heartbeats), wind: west by a little.

“These bars here,” Nathron went on, drawing a line in the damp with a willow switch, “take the weight of a skiff if a fool tries them when the river is sulking. But a clever man will test where the pebbles lie new and where the sand is darker. Here, and here: you see?”

“I see,” Tolly said; Tomberic nodded. Maralda’s pencil made a quiet scratch. She angled the square so that his eye could take the line as he heard it.

They walked ankle‑deep in clean cold just where the current would not pull a hobbit off his feet, and Nathron showed them the difference between a mark the river writes for itself and a mark men press upon it: a scuff where a pole had bitten too sharply; a notch on a post with tar in the grain; a place where cairn pebbles were too white by half. He said little and asked them to say what they saw, and so they learned twice.

“And when you are wrong?” Nathron asked suddenly, when Tolly had said that a faint V on the water argued for a shallow log and not a skiff.

“Then I say so as soon as I know it,” Tolly answered. “Better to be plain and put the right word in its place than to call the wrong one friend.”

“Good,” said the Ranger. “The river is generous to men who will amend themselves.” Maralda’s glance was brief and kind; the pencil kept its pace.

They took the blind for an hour, with Tomberic on the shelf below to watch the lower shallows where a man might pass if he did not care whether his knees were wet. The sun lifted and made the mist pale and then thin, and the willows stood more clearly one by one, like people in a crowd when the talk quiets.

Then a wake showed on the far side, so small a man might have named it a fish’s pride, but longer than a fish and set upon the water with a deliberateness that did not befit a creature without a thought for maps. Tolly’s pencil stopped. The wake came forward a yard’s breadth, then faded to nothing, then came again. A faint tap answered it from somewhere, wood to wood, not branch to branch.

Tomberic shifted, and Nathron’s hand, without looking, made a quiet stay‑sign. Maralda drew a slow breath as one takes a thread through a stubborn cloth.

The wake went over a patch where the gravel lies bright. There it told on itself, drawing a curved shadow where the light bends upon a hull. Not much of a hull: no more than a skiff. Tolly’s mouth went dry in that silly way the body has of taking the water away from a man when the world offers him little else to drink. He looked to Nathron.

“You will watch,” said the Ranger, “and not answer. You will count.”

Tolly counted the beats between the small tap and the little push of water on the willow root below the blind. He made a mark: tap to push, four. The skiff (if skiff it was) kept to the far shallows where a man who knew the ford would not try it when the river had altered its temper by so much as a day’s wind. It seemed to learn this truth late. The wake wavered, turned, and came upon a shoal with that modest insistence by which water persuades wood. A sound came then that is half complaint and half confession: the cry of a rope that has taken a load wrong.

“Hold,” Nathron said, and there was no danger yet in it, only the steadiness with which he named things. “Do you smell it?”

Tolly lifted his head. There is a tar smell in any place where boats keep their skin safe, but this was fresher than the post’s grain and closer than the blind’s oiled leather: a new sharpness, like a hearth rekindled after days of letting the ash lie.

“Tar, new,” Tolly said softly.

“Aye,” said Nathron. “And rope—hear it?”

This time the sound was only the chafe of fibres on a hard edge; it had more shame than complaint in it. Tolly put his hand on the post in front of the blind and felt where the grain had been bruised some while ago by an oar’s edge. He left his hand there, and when the small shove of water came up from the shoal he felt it through the wood: a faint tremor, like a cat walking upon a board out of sight.

“He will back her out,” Nathron said at last, “and he will tell himself that he has learned the ford. He has only learned the shoal. That is something, but it is not the thing he thinks it is.”

They watched the water clean its small disorder. The wake faded; a crow flew over and let fall a single call that had no meaning beyond itself; the ferrystone’s whisper kept to its thin voice. Tomberic climbed up to the blind and grinned without showing teeth.

“Near to a lesson for someone,” he said.

“For us too,” said Maralda, and wrote one line on her square paper: “Do not answer taps. Count them.”

They went down then to the post and looked at its oar‑scar. In the groove a faint thread of fibre had lodged, just a hair, pale as old straw. Tolly took it carefully on the point of a splinter and set it on a bit of paper to fold. He touched the tar without smearing it and wrote the hour against the touch.

“If you must leave a token,” Nathron said as they walked the bank, “set it where a man who knows to look will find it and a man who is greedy for knowing will pass it by. The fork‑crown willow will take a split stick at dusk. The hollow lane rail will take the notch you were shown. Use one or the other, not both, unless you wish to tell too long a tale.”

“One tale per day,” Tomberic said, “and let it be short.”

“Short and true,” Nathron agreed.

Through the morning they walked the ford’s edges and took its measure in their heads. Tolly made small neat drawings that would never show a stranger the ford but would show him, tomorrow, whether what he saw had changed. He learned to set his eye on a point of foam and walk it to the bank in thought, then look for the place where it must reach if his thought was honest. He was sometimes wrong by two paces, sometimes by one, and once by none; and he wrote those numbers down too, for truth keeps its own tally.

Toward noon a wind came low along the water and made the ferrystone’s voice rougher by a hair. Tolly heard it, and Nathron, without praise or chiding, tipped his head the same way and then went on reading the bars. In a quiet place where the shoal runs in like a tongue, there were three small pebbles too bright, set in a little row. Tolly looked and looked away and then looked again.

“Those stones did not wash here,” he said at last.

“No,” said Nathron. “Men’s hands. Take nothing; move nothing. The river will speak plainly enough to men who listen, if other men do not keep shouting over it.”

They ate bread in the blind and drank from a bottle that had been in the river a while to be cool. The day widened. Maralda slept like a cat for ten minutes with her hands folded; Tomberic told a small story about a fish he had not caught, which is the safest kind to tell; Tolly sat with the pencil dull in his fingers and breathed the smell of willow sap and water and a little tar, and thought how the Shire had many voices and this was one of them that few heard on purpose.

In the afternoon they walked the bank toward the token willow and set a split stick with two turns of plain brown twine, just as they had been bid. No more and no less. Then they took the hollow lane and stood by the old stile. Tolly ran his finger along the top rail and felt the old notches the Rangers knew by heart, and put none of his own there. There is a pride in not over‑telling.

On the way back a shepherd’s dog barked at them in the ordinary way of dogs. A heron rose and made three slow strokes and settled again. The day never made a drama of itself, and yet it went nearer to the bone than any tale told by a fire.

“We will come again by dawn,” Nathron said at last, when the light went from white to honey along the willows. “You will hear other voices in the river when the night has had its say. If there is a skiff that loves to test stones, it may come again after dark. You will still not answer it; you will still count.”

“We will count,” Tolly said.

They left the ford by the same path that had brought them, and at the fork‑crown willow they saw that the split stick was as they had left it, neither disturbed nor misunderstood. At the hollow lane there was nothing to say, and so they said nothing, which was also a good word.

At the small house where the watch kept its changes there was stew, and a place on a bench, and no more talk than a man needs who has kept his eyes open since dawn. Tolly laid the rope fibre on a clean page and put the page under a slate. He wrote the river’s small numbers again, not to be clever but to be sure. Maralda slid a spare square to the edge of his slate and left it there. Tomberic, who had a habit of whistling without thinking, did not whistle that night. Maralda tied her square papers with red thread and set them where smoke would not find them.

Before sleep Tolly went out and stood a little while where he could hear the river without being seen. Far off an owl called. Closer, a reed clicked in a way that might have been a beetle or a boy’s foolishness. He did not answer. He counted to ten and then to ten again, and when he had reached his own good number, he went inside and barred the door as a man does for custom as much as for safety. The water went on with its talking, which, being honest talk, did not need a reply.

# Chapter 6: False Cairns

By sundown the willows along the ford had the colour of old brass, and their leaf‑backs showed pale where the light lay low. Tolly and Tomberic walked the edge of the willow‑holt in that quiet which comes when a day has done most of its work and is pleased with itself. Maralda kept a little way behind with the square papers ready, for the river had voices she meant to set in order once they had listened to them long enough.

They had left the watch‑house after the bell, when the stew‑pot had been put aside and the small talk put away like a spoon. The token at the fork‑crown willow stood as they had left it; no notch at the hollow rail spoke any new word. The river’s thin talk ran on. The ferrystone’s whisper kept fair.

“We will look to the bars above the bend,” Tolly said, “where the gravel seems to change its mind twice between one willow and the next.” It was not a command; it was only the sort of sentence that minds make when they have begun to take a place inside themselves as if it were another room at home.

They went by a shallowing where a brown bird skittered; they crossed a small runnel and came to a tongue of gravel that ran out as if to taste the current. Here the pebbles were mixed, river‑worn, river‑coloured, save for three neat stones that sat brighter than their neighbours and in a line that could be seen from a little way off if one were the sort to look for such things.

“White by half,” Tomberic said softly.

“And set to be seen,” Tolly answered. He crouched and did not touch them. “A cairn should grow by the hand that remembers a place, not by a stranger’s guess. These are too clean for this bar, too tidy for this mood of water.”

Maralda knelt and set her paper against a flat stone and drew the line as it lay, with the willows behind and the shallow beyond. She did not make a map that a stranger could use; she made a memory that a neighbour could keep. She marked the brighter stones with a small star and the river’s slower colour with a wash of pencil. Tolly liked the way her hand kept to what helped and left the rest to good sense.

“It is a little thing,” she said, “but little things add.”

They followed the bar to where it swung back toward the bank, and there, just at the place where a skiff’s pole might reach for help when the bottom fell away a hand’s breadth too soon, a stake showed with a smear of tar upon its grain. The tar was not old; it had the sharpness of a pot warmed again after being left to cool. On a snag nearby, a twist of something dark clung and shivered in the faint air.

Tolly drew out his splinter and lifted the scrap. It was no more than the ragged edge of a cloth that had once turned water (tarred or waxed), torn where thoughtless hands had pulled too quick. He laid it on Maralda’s paper and let it sit a moment in the last light before she folded it away in a small packet and tied it with a single turn of red thread.

“The cairns point over this,” Tomberic said, toeing the bright stones without moving them. “A fool might steer by them and ground his bow; a clever man might set them there to learn what fools will do. Either way they are not ours.”

“Nor the river’s,” Tolly said. He looked along the bar and down the reach to the ferrystone. “And yet we will not set our will against them with our hands. There’s courtesy in letting a wrong show itself before we name it wrong to the men who must hear.”

“So we will let our pencils move where our hands will not,” Maralda said. She drew the three bright marks again, and the raised point where a fourth might be set if a hasty man wanted his line to carry further. “And when we come back by morning, we will see whether any hand has been busier than ours in the night.”

They went further along the edge of the willow‑holt to another small bar that sat like a sleeper’s lip under the willows’ shade. Here, too, were stones that did not belong: a tiny pyramid no higher than a hobbit’s thumb, set where a pole‑tip would like to try its luck. Tolly put his hand to the water and felt the shape of the current with his skin (an old game in streams at home, turned to use now), and then took his hand away and shook the drops off with care so none should fall upon the wrong place and make a muddle in a small world.

“This one is new‑set,” he said. “The sand beneath shows the print of the finger that pressed it. The river has not yet had its say.” Maralda looked once and nodded, and Tolly felt the small steadiness that comes when two minds agree without needing to be clever about it.

Tomberic bent close, then drew back without touching. “I would not rebuild a lie,” he said, “and I will not topple a stranger’s tale when I can write a truer one beside it.” He turned to Maralda. “Set it down as it lies.”

“Set down, and with the hour,” Maralda said. “And we will add the river’s voice, which cares nothing for lies when it has a mind to speak.”

They made their way back toward the bend where the willow‑roots grip, taking the shore between the bars so as not to leave steps upon the shapes they meant to remember. Tolly took his bearings by three ordinary things: a knotted root, a weed with a torn leaf, and a brown pebble with a streak of pale running through it like a string of cream. He drew them quickly in the corner of a page and wrote the numbers a Ranger had taught him: paces to the ferrystone, paces to the fork‑crown willow, paces to the blind. He did not know if his numbers would match another man’s, but they would match his own tomorrow, and that was the beginning of knowing.

When the light leaned lower they sat for a little in the blind, listening. A crow came to a willow and stood a moment with its head sideways, then went along the reach without making a penny of noise. A reed clicked twice to itself. None of it asked for an answer.

“If we had a mind to set a warning where a warning would do most good,” Tomberic said after a while, “we might lay three plain stones of the river’s own colour over near the safe run and let a fool puzzle the difference. But perhaps that is two tales in a day.”

“One tale per day,” Tolly said, remembering, and the remembering pleased him. He did not know when a Ranger’s rule had begun to feel like something a hobbit could keep in his pocket along with a string and a bit of chalk, but that was how it sat with him now.

They rose when the first chill came up from the gravel and walked once more past the bright stones without altering them. At the stake where the tar had stained the grain, Tolly touched the smear with the back of a fingernail and sniffed it. The scent was still sharp under the willow smell.

“Write it: tar new at low stake,” he said. “And here,” he pointed with the splinter, “weed caught below the mark, turned back toward the bar as if dragged. That argues a pull the other way.”

Maralda wrote, and under the line she put a small thought: “Three bright stones do not make a ford unless the river agrees.” It was the sort of sentence that keeps itself when a man finds it again in a paper years later and wonders how he knew it then.

On their way back they went by the fork‑crown willow and looked to the split stick they had left; a small change showed in the twist of the twine that only eyes that had tied it would have seen. Nathron’s men had read it and put it back with a half‑turn that said “we have your word.” Tolly smiled and untied the half‑turn and made the stick as it had been.

“Tomorrow,” he said, “we will stand in a new place and see if the stones have stood to their insolence. If they have not, the man who set them may be setting another mischief. If they have, we will have another line on our paper, and a better reason to bring our neighbours to stand and listen.”

“And we will bring no more than a pencil and a proverb,” Maralda said, folding her papers away.

“And a pocket for rope ends,” Tomberic added, “in case a fibre chooses to turn up where it ought not.”

They walked back in a good quiet with the willows at their shoulders and the shallows talking small. The day had not given them a skiff to scold nor a man to catch by the sleeve, and that was as well. It had given them a little packet with a scrap of tarred cloth in it, a drawing of bright stones set where they did no honest work, and a few more small numbers in a book.

“It adds,” Tolly said, and if he had been the sort to count more finely, he would have said that the adding made a shape that looked more and more like a hand.

# Chapter 7: Knots on the Reeds

At first light the ford wore a pale veil, and the reed beds stood with their heads tipped as if they had slept badly and were thinking better of it. The ferrystone showed truer than last evening, a thumb higher over the lace of water, and its voice was thin as a thread pulled tight. Tolly stood with his notebook shut, because there is a kind of listening that takes two hands, and counted the heartbeats between the little hiss on the shallows and the soft push on the bank below his knee.

“Two and a breath,” he said at last.

“As yesterday,” Maralda answered. She had the square papers ready but did not yet open them. “Let us not write until the ford thinks we deserve a line.”

Tomberic went a little way along the reed bed and crouched. The light caught on a length of cord that someone had wound about a bundle of reeds, not in the manner of a tidy thatcher but as if the reeds themselves were the paper for a message. The cord was plain brown; the knots were not what a Shire boy would tie to fasten a lunch bundle nor what a ferryman would make with cold hands when logic fails and habit saves him. They were purposeful.

“Look here,” Tomberic said, quiet, and Tolly came to his elbow. “There is a single overhand, then two together tight, then a little space, then a loop that has not been drawn hard. That is not to keep reeds from splaying.”

“No,” Tolly said. “That is to say ‘one, two, wait’ to someone who knows where to look. The loop is a mouth kept ready to speak.” He looked along the margin where scattered reeds had drifted against the bed. Three more bundles lay in a loose row; each had a cord with a small pattern. He did not touch them. “Take the shapes with your eyes and set them on your paper,” he said to Maralda, who had come up behind them and was already drawing the first cord in careful small lines.

“If a man wished to mark an hour,” she said, “he might tie a pair to stand for the bells, then leave a space for the time between, and let a loop speak: ‘when the water looks so and so, bring the skiff’.”

“Or, if he wished to tell his friend which of the bars to try,” Tomberic said, “he might set a bundle at each with a different mouth on the cord, and the friend would count ‘one, two’ and choose by the loop.”

“We will not guess too far,” Tolly said, though he could feel the shape of the idea in his fingers like a string that wants pulling. “We will write what is under the eyes and keep the rest for later.” He sounded more like Maralda than he knew, and that pleased her.

They worked along the reed bed while the sun made gold of the tips and picked out the faint lines where water has gone and come again. Maralda drew the knots as they lay, each on a little square with a mark for the distance between one bundle and the next. She wrote the river’s condition beside the drawings: “light out of west; ferrystone whisper high; foam‑speed even.” Tolly said the words aloud once, to hear them. He did not know if he would always have Maralda’s numbers beside him; he wanted to carry them better in his head, the way a man carries a good proverb without needing to look for it.

At the third bundle a change showed: the cord had a twist of colour. Not the black‑and‑green of the buyer’s string, but a thread of green only, faint, as if someone had tried to make a cousin to the true thing and had not had the knack.

“That is meant to be seen by a careful man,” Tolly said. “And to be missed by a tired one.”

“Set it down as an error or an experiment,” Maralda said, drawing the faint stripe as a pale line. “There are men who like neatness more than sense. They will love knots for the sake of knots and forget that rivers are not obliged.”

“The river will answer them in its own time,” Tomberic said. He stood and looked over the bed to the ferrystone. “Does it seem to you that the stone’s face carries a stain lower down on the upstream side than it did?”

Tolly narrowed his eyes. He had made a little sketch of the stone the day before with two notches on the bank as sights to make sure of where his eye would be when he drew it again. He took the paper out and held it at arm’s length and looked from paper to stone and back. The stain lay a finger lower in the drawing than on the stone itself. He did not feel proud; pride is poor company when a mistake wants owning.

“My drawing was hasty,” he said. “Or the light was other. The voice is the same, and that is better proof than the stain.” He set this down as plain as it was, and Maralda did not praise him for the honesty because honesty should be as common as bread.

They came then to a place where the reed bed gave way to a little beach of clean sand. Here someone had stood and sorted cords by length and mood; there were cut ends tramped into the damp and a mark of a heel that had no Shire feel. The nails were set wider in the leather than a Westfarthing man carries; the point under the big toe was pressed deep as if the foot had braced against a pull.

“The same sort as by Longbottom’s old gate‑prop,” Maralda said quietly. She did not make a story of it; she set it beside the other things they knew, as you lay a tool back in a drawer.

“If you were to tell a man to come by night and test the shallows,” Tomberic said, looking downriver, “and you had not seen the ford yourself, you might bid him make a little line of bright stones and knot the reeds with these silly mouths and trust that the river would do the rest.”

“And then the river would teach you that it is older than your string,” Tolly said. He crouched to examine a loop that had been pulled into a long oval, then let go. It had been made by fingers that did not know this water, and the water had answered by turning the knot just so and no more. “Here is a word I can read: ‘someone guessed and the river forgot the answer by morning’.”

They took breakfast late by the blind: bread gone dry at the edges, a bit of cheese, and water in a bottle that had rested in the ford till it was cool. While they ate, a crow came and sat on a stump of willow near the blind and looked at them sideways. When Tomberic crumbled his crust, the bird sidled nearer, and from the reeds a small thin man, the sort you might call a tramp if you were unkind and a traveller if you wanted to keep your doors open, rose and made as if to pick the crumbs from under the bird with two fingers.

“Mind your luck,” Tomberic said mildly, “the crow found its dinner first.”

The man grinned without teeth and made a little bow with his shoulders. “I mind the river,” he said. “It minds me. The crows do as they please, and the river does as it pleases, and I do as I must.” He took no more than a few crumbs, and he did not come nearer than a man with courtesy will; then he drifted off along the shallows, where a fellow could pick up a stick for fuel and not leave a mark anyone would bother about.

“He fed the crow without feeding us a story,” Maralda said softly. “All the same, set a dot for the sighting. Those that live near rivers learn things they do not say because the river does not like to be talked over.”

They returned to the knots. Tolly began to see a primer in them: single knot to call attention; double knot for the bells; loop loose to mean ‘wait on the look of the water’; loop tight to mean ‘set off now’; a little tuck of tail under itself to say ‘choose the left bar’. He spoke no more than needed; Maralda set the primer on paper and added “uncertain” where a guess would be a guess and no more.

“We will only carry what we would be willing to defend in front of the Mathom-house board,” she said at last, binding the squares with red thread and putting them away from damp. “The rest is talk for the road.”

“And for the Ranger,” Tolly said. “He will know which of these mouths are the ones a man would speak and which are nonsense.”

By mid‑morning the wind turned a little into the ford and made the ferrystone whisper lower. Tolly heard it and found, to his small inward gladness, that his ear placed the change as surely as the pencil wrote it. The knots meant less to him then than the stone did; the stone had an older grammar.

They walked the line of the reed bed once more to see if any hand had moved what they had left. A bundle had gone from the place with the faint green thread; the sand there was scuffed as by a heel and a pole‑tip. Another bundle had been retied; the double knot had become three small pulls that told no tale. Tolly wrote this, and beneath it he put a plain hope: “those who count from afar have been made to count again.”

When the sun came up to the place where men begin to think of dinner even if there is none in their satchel, they made their last round to the ferrystone. Tolly set his sights again on the notches he had marked and drew the stone afresh. The stain on the upstream face lay where it had, and the voice was the same. He wrote, “stone faithful; sight amended.” It pleased him to put the error under the right word where he could see it next time and not tell it again by accident.

“We have enough for a day,” Maralda said at last. “If we add more, we will only be moving sand with a spoon to see whether the water dislikes our spoon.”

“And I dislike a sandy spoon,” Tomberic said cheerfully. He looked downriver and shaded his eyes. “No skiff this morning. Perhaps last night’s lesson stuck.”

“Lessons often do,” Tolly said, “when they are given by stones.”

They left the ford by the path that keeps a man’s boots from the worst of the damp and paused by the fork‑crown willow to set a split stick with two turns of plain twine. On the top turn Tolly made a little twist that meant “primer found; not yet believed”. He did not know whether that was a Ranger’s word, but it was a hobbit’s, and it would be read by men who knew how to read such things.

Back at the watch‑house, he spread the squares on the table and wrote a single line on the sheet that held the day’s notes: “Reed‑knots likely code; examples copied; ferrystone voice constant; bundles moved by unseen hand.” Maralda set her packet in the box that held the red‑threaded things. Tomberic hung the kettle and put two extra sticks to the fire because counting takes more out of a man than walking.

Outside, the river ran on in its old manner, which is the best way for a river to run when folk must sleep near it without worry. The crows made a mild muster and then turned their backs to the wind. Nothing extraordinary happened, which is a sort of grace. The day had begun with knots and ended with stew, and between the two there was enough honest work to keep a mind from inventing adventures that were not needed.

# Chapter 8: Wolf-Sign at Dawn

Mist lay in long stripes over the shoals, and the ford had the listening hush of a place that has kept confidences in the night and is not yet ready to speak them. Tolly stood with Tomberic by the higher edge of the water where a man can see across without stepping into the cold. Maralda came behind with her papers held flat against the morning air. Nathron looked south and did not hurry the day.

“The river has had another of its quiet works,” he said at last. “We will see what men and beasts have had of theirs.”

They walked down to the shelf below the blind and set their eyes across the ford to the south bank. There the willows grow lower, and the land pulls back to a strip of reed and bare shore. On a tongue of wet sand, dark with night water, a pattern showed as the light came level: four pads and a fifth print like a small thumb set off to one side; long; the nails pressed; the stride a hand broader than a shepherd’s dog would ever make.

“Wolves,” Tomberic said under his breath.

“Wolves,” Nathron agreed. He narrowed his eyes. “One at least with a heavier head. The mark lies deep under the toe. That can be an old dog with a bad habit; it can be something worse. Either way, they have not crossed.”

Tolly had the sense of a line drawn like a gate in air across the water. The ford itself stood for that line: a strip where men had kept manners longer than any of them could remember. He set his pencil down and counted the paces in his head from the ferrystone to the prints, though his paces would not cross them. Counting settled the mind.

“There,” Maralda said quietly, “on the margin of the tongue. A scuff as from a dragged thing and a feather’s mark.”

It was no more than a goose‑feather caught on the edge of weed, black and grey, but it lay near a place where the wet had a colour that did not belong to river water at dawn. There was no drama in it; there seldom is in sign read rightly. Nathron looked and let his breath out once.

“A kill across the night,” he said. “Not on our side; not our flocks. Crows will know already. Men will know before noon.”

He did not call for any horn or haste. Instead he brought from his cloak a length of twine and showed Tolly a knot that was not on the reed primer: a small, tight turn set back upon itself that meant “double the watch by dawn and dusk”. Tolly made it, then unmade it, then made it again without looking at his hands. He would tie it later at the fork‑crown willow.

The light rose. On the south bank the prints ran in a half‑circle where a cautious beast will test the smell of a place, then broke into a stride that led away along the reeds. One print lay larger than the others, long and deep at the toe. Tolly did not name it with any name that boys like to trade round a hedge. He wrote only: “one great print among wolves; may be only weight; may be worse; still beyond.”

They went along the ford’s edge to where the shoals thin and the water makes little cards of light on the sand. Here a faint sound came up the river, hardly more than the memory of a sound: a man’s voice carried and caught, not the common talk of a labourer starting late, but a line half‑sung and half‑spoken, with a weight of old words and weather in it. Tolly felt the hair lift on his arms as if the dawn had turned colder.

It was not much, no more than four lines broken to the breath, and they only heard them because the wind was kind and the singer had not meant to sing loud:

Over reed and river the watch is kept; Wolves on the wold are by warning met; Quiet at the crossing, the counted hours; Stones keep the story when speech has no power.

The voice fell away. Tolly looked at Nathron, who gave the smallest nod a man can give and still mean yes.

“A comrade to the south,” he said. “He minds his edge as we mind ours. Carry the sound as you would carry a proverb: use it when it fits; do not borrow it for songs at a fire.”

They turned back to their own work. The reed bundles below the blind had shifted since yesterday; two were gone; one had been tied again carelessly so that the loop spoke nothing. The bright cairn‑stones on the upper bar still lay where they had, patient in their wrong. The ferrystone’s voice was lower by a finger, and that, more than any knot or print, pressed a little weight into the day.

“Time,” Maralda said, not as a scold but as a measuring. “Men who count from afar grow bold when the river grows easy. They will try their shoals when the water sits flatter.” Tolly trusted her measures more than his own impatience and let the day take its pace.

“Then we will sit flatter still,” Tomberic said, “and make our figures shorter. No long tales; only the numbers that let a neighbour see what we saw.”

They ate a bite by the blind: bread and a piece of dried apple. While they ate, three crows came down to the south bank and stepped round the prints in a way that made Tolly think of men in a market, each wanting his share and each pretending, for a moment, to be above such wants. The birds lifted away together and went east.

“Tell the Bounders by bells,” Nathron said, “that our day watches double at dawn and dusk until the river tells another tale. Tell them also that we will not answer any reed unless we can name the mouth that blew it.”

“We can carry that,” Tolly said. He tied the small, tight turn he had learned and set it in his pocket as if it were a real thing and not a trick of cord.

After a last round for changes (none, save for one smear of tar turned dull where the water had washed it thin), they stood a moment without talk. It is good for three people to learn to stand quiet together without any of them thinking the others are idle.

“We have what we came for this morning,” Maralda said. “Wolf‑sign across; river lower by a hair; knots untrustworthy; cairn‑line patient in its wrong. We will say no more to ourselves than that, and we will say only what is needful to those who must hear.”

They left by the path that climbs toward the old stile. At the fork‑crown willow Tolly set the split stick and tied the small, tight turn. He added, below it, a plain loop, loose enough to mean “wait on the look,” because the river had asked for waiting more than for running. Then he stepped back and looked once at the ford and once at the south bank, and let the picture fix itself in his head where stone and water live longer than talk.

Back at the watch‑house, the kettle grumbled. Tolly wrote the morning in a few lines: “Across the ford: wolves; one larger print; kill‑sign old. Ferrystone voice lower. Two reed bundles gone; one retied to no sense. Bright cairns unmoved. Token set: watch doubled at dawn and dusk; wait on the look.” He put the paper under a slate and set the slate where steam would not fret it.

Tomberic mended a strap that had thought to part company with its buckle. Maralda tied her packet with red thread. Nathron stood at the door and looked south for a time that could have been a minute or could have been ten, and then he looked at them and smiled the way a man smiles when three small tasks have been done cleanly and there is nothing clever left to spoil them.

“Keep the watches,” he said. “We will do likewise.”

# Chapter 9: Countersigns and Courtesy

The bell at the Hay Gate spoke the hour with the dry, homely note that sits well on a hedged lane. The Bounder post smelled of onion skins and old rope, and a kettle steamed on the low fire as if work were another sort of weather to be made bearable by warmth. Tolly came up the rise with Tomberic, and Maralda a step behind with her square papers put away, for it was a morning for talk, not measuring.

The elder Bounder, broad, hay in his hair, patience in his jaw, raised a hand. “There’s been no trouble since last night,” he said, “unless you count a boy who thinks three notes on a reed a clever way to fetch a loaf from his mam without crossing the lane. We gave him a chore and he forgot his music.” His eyes shifted to Tolly’s pocket with a small question. “And your folk?”

“We heard a lay from the far bank at first light,” Tolly said, “and saw wolf‑sign on wet sand. Our watch doubles at dawn and dusk until the river has another tale. We brought no names and no horns.”

“You brought your wits, then,” said another Bounder, younger and eager, with the quickness of a man who has not yet had enough quiet mornings to learn that quiet is a comfort. Even as he spoke he turned his head toward the hedge, where a thin note sounded as if the wind had found a hollow reed. It came three times in a row, neat as too‑tidy numbers.

The young Bounder took one pace toward the ferry path. Tomberic did not put a hand on him; he only said, the way an uncle might, “By bells, lad.”

The Bounder stopped. The elder’s face did not change, but his hands moved without fuss to take the younger’s staff and set it back against the post where it belonged.

“That will be our first countersign,” the elder said, as if he were deciding that a field would do better with beans than with barley. “Not a password to be shouted, but a reminder: by bells. We do not answer strangers by river, not now.”

“And the second,” Maralda said, “may be a lantern lesson set in words, so it can travel by paper to the next watch: ‘lantern low, never still’. It says two things plainly and tells nothing to a nose at the hedge.”

“Write them,” the elder said. “And write them as proverbs, so a man feels foolish forgetting what his grandsire would have known.”

They went into the lee of the hedge where the wind was less, and there, with the bell quieting, they made a list that would pass the Bounder post without need of explanation and would not hang tidy signs where tidy eyes could count them. They kept it short:

• By bells: no answers to unknown reeds; meet by day. • Lantern low, never still. • One tale per day: split stick or notch, not both. • Name little; mark much.

“A man can carry four in his head and not lose his way between kettle and gate,” the elder said. “If we make twelve, they will be dropped like peas on a floor.”

“Four will do,” Tolly said, “if we add a way of saying ‘friend’ when friend comes late. Something not too neat.”

They did not choose a call‑and‑answer; they chose a manner of speaking. If a man came after dark and said, “The hedge kept me,” the Bounder on duty would answer, “The lane will mend it,” and no more need be said. It was a Shire way of being careful, and to any ear that did not understand it would be a neighbour’s talk about thorns and mud. Nathron, who had come up quiet at the bell and now stood with his hands folded as if he had always been there, nodded once and let the word settle.

“If you will write that on your square, Maralda,” he said, “we will carry it along the ford in our heads. We do not love passwords. We love remembering how neighbours speak.”

“The rota,” the younger Bounder put in, eager to be useful and to make up for his one pace toward the reed. “We can keep dawn and dusk with two and a lantern between, if the miller’s boy can be spared and Tom Cotton from up the lane will stand the afternoon.”

“Set it,” the elder said. He looked to Tolly. “Write us the hours plain, and do not put more names on paper than you must. We will hang it where the old notices go and we will take it down when the moon changes.”

They worked a little while with a stick of chalk on a smooth board hung by the gate. Maralda wrote neat as ever, because neatness is its own sort of courtesy. Tolly watched the steadiness of her hand and felt the board become more trustworthy under the chalk. The rota was ordinary: names, bells, and whether a man would keep a lantern or a staff. The only new mark was a small dot beside dawn and dusk that meant “count before you answer”. No outsider would know to look for it; no neighbour would miss it once told.

When they had done, Nathron gave them a quiet piece to carry. “There are men who like signals to be clever,” he said. “We do not want clever. We want what a hobbit can keep in his coat when he is tired and still be a good neighbour.” He looked at the younger Bounder not unkindly. “If a reed calls three times at night, it is asking for a fool. Do not be the fool.”

“I will not,” the young man said. “By bells.” He said it as if he were tasting a word that would suit him for years.

A lad from the mill came with a paper under his arm and an ink‑horn in his hand, sent by the mayor’s office to ask what new notices were to be seen to. Maralda gave him a copy of the four lines in her small, clerkly hand with the heading “for courtesy and watch”. The heading mattered; men obey better when a thing is named in a manner that does not prick their pride.

“There is one more matter,” the elder Bounder said, and his eyes went to the hedge again. “Some folk do not mean harm, but they like to carry tales as if they were real work. If we speak too much of wolves in the same breath as the ford, we will have half the lanes drunk on fright by nightfall.”

“Then speak little of wolves,” Nathron said, “and much of watch. Wolves go where the land pleases them, and we do not tell them our business by crying about it. We tell our friends only what they can carry without stumbling.”

They took their tea from the kettle and sat on the low bench while the road went on with its usual business. Two carts passed with their axles singing; a waggon from Nobottle rolled by and the driver lifted a hand as if to scrape the sky of any clouds that might trouble him later. The bells in the far lanes answered one another as they so often do, like cousins talking across a field.

A Bounder from the north stile arrived with a tale that would have been naughty if it had not been so small: a pair of lads with a reed and a dare. He was given an onion to take home to his wife and no more. Rules work best when they do not make too big a meal of boyhood.

Near noon, a fellow who smelled of damp leather and road dust came to the gate and asked, very politely, whether a ferry ran for folk with business to the south when the sun lay high. He had a careful way of not saying anything wrong that said enough. The elder Bounder gave him the manner one gives to a stranger who might have a cousin in the Shire and might not.

“Our ferries run by day for folk we know,” he said. “If you have business that can be done by daylight, you can do it by the Brandywine Bridge and you will find your friends waiting for you there as well as anywhere. By bells.”

The man thanked him in a tone that asked for nothing more and went away. He had not crossed; he had not learned any tidy thing that would carry; he had been shown enough courtesy to make impertinence harder another time.

“That is the way,” Nathron said, when the dust of the man’s boots had settled. “Make ordinary doors heavier and leave no open windows for spies to creep through.”

They pinned the paper with the four lines to the post and made a second copy for the miller’s board and a third for Michel Delving. Maralda wrote a fourth to keep in the Mathom-house box, with the day’s bell marked on it and a note in the margin: “Hay Gate: countersigns agreed with Rangers; dawn/dusk double watch; reed whistles not answered; lanterns low.” She bound it with red thread: to be saved.

Before they left, Tolly and the elder Bounder walked the short distance to the fork‑crown willow and looked at the split‑stick token. Tolly adjusted the twine by a hair, to say “message read,” and put in the knot he had learned for “watch doubled” that morning, tight enough to mean business and loose enough to be pulled with one hand if the tale changed by evening.

“When this is all done,” the elder said, almost to himself, “and the year turns to other matters, these small ways will still be good ways. I do not know what is coming, but I know we will be better neighbours for having kept our manners.”

“That is what we are keeping,” Tolly said. “The ford is a river matter. Courtesy is ours.”

They returned to the post. Tomberic had written the rota in chalk with a steadier hand than usual and a little pride in the neatness, though he would not admit it. The younger Bounder had started peeling the onions before being asked. Nathron stood at the edge of the hedge with his head turned to the south and the sort of stillness that makes birds forget a man is there.

“Keep the watches,” he said, when they had made their last read of the paper to be sure no word would be misunderstood by a man in a hurry. “Keep the proverbs too.”

They went away by the lane that runs beside the quickset and turns toward the Green Hill Country. It was an unremarkable walk in the best sense; they said little, and what they said was all courtesies to one another, to the road, to the work yet to be done. By bells at the next farm a child’s voice was reading the rota aloud to an older cousin with great seriousness, and that was the best sign of the day: that the words had gone into a small head without frightening it.

# Chapter 10: The Tally and the Map

By sundown Longbottom’s sheds had the quiet of a day that has put away its tools. The steward received them with the same even manner as before and set the ledger on the table under the window. There was dust in the long light; it showed the air’s small business and then forgot it. Maralda laid three packets on the table and untied them: the pages of copied tallies, the square sheets of reed knots with their distances and river conditions, and the bar drawings with the brighter stones marked in a neat hand. Tolly added the tarred scrap in its paper and the small rope fibre set under a slate.

“We have brought you what we were able to see without meddling,” Maralda said. “We have left what we could have touched where the river left it. Now we must speak the shape of it plain, so that the Mayor and the Mathom-house may keep a memory that is not muddled.”

The steward put his hand to the ledger. “Begin with the book,” he said. “A man sleeps sounder when the numbers come first.”

Maralda turned the pages to the three entries marked in the margin. “These,” she said, tapping the copied signs in her own packet, “and the thread on the string that Tolly found. We will not name the men who carried the bales. The lots were lawful, and the roads between neighbours will not be improved by gossip. Yet the marks repeat enough to be more than fashion.”

“Aye,” said the steward. “Three is a crowd in a ledger. I will not deny it.”

Tolly opened the knot pages. “These cords,” he said, and he held one sheet at arm’s length so the steward could see the simple lines drawn as knots, “lay on the reed beds along the ford. Some were retied by morning. Some had a loop kept loose as if to say ‘wait’. Some had two pulls together as if to mean ‘by bells’. We do not claim to know all the mouths such knots can make. We say only that they were set to be read.”

He laid, beside the knots, the drawing of the bar where the brighter stones sat in a little line. “These stones would carry a fool into shallows. They would carry a clever man to believe he had learned the ford when he had learned a shoal. Either way, they are not this river’s manner.”

Maralda took up her pencil. “If we must write the shape of it for a board,” she said, and her voice had the clerk’s steadiness that good paper deserves, “we might set it so.” She wrote as she spoke, and the steward watched the words land. Tolly did too, and liked how her sentences made room for a neighbour to stand inside them.

“One: There have been knots tied on reeds under the ford’s willows which do not serve any simple thatcher’s or ferryman’s purpose. They repeat across mornings. Two: There is a line of stones brighter than the bar that holds them, placed so that a skiff might test a wrong path. Three: There are tallies on certain leaf bales carrying a waxed palm mark and a twist of black and green that is not this barn’s habit. Four: Fresh tar and a rope fibre have been found at places that fit the pattern of a skiff grounding and backing off.”

She paused and looked at them. “Five,” she said more softly, and then she set the words down because words must be put down when they are ready, “taken together, these are consistent with someone testing the ford and its approaches by means that can be read at a distance. We do not say who. We do not say from where. We say only that a mind is at work where the river has a right to be left to its own lessons.”

The steward breathed out and put both hands flat on the table as if to feel the wood remember what had been laid on it. “You have not written more than you can carry,” he said at last. “That sits well with me.” He looked at the fibre and the tarred scrap, then at the knots again. “A man can be shown a wrong way by tidy things. Our folk are good folk. They like tidy. We will teach them to like courtesy more.”

Tolly turned, at that, to the window. The light in the yard had gone more yellow. A boy dragged a broom along a threshold in lines that would have pleased any Mayor and any aunt, and Tolly liked him for it and trusted him more when he imagined the boy reading the four lines posted at the Hay Gate and remembering them as if they had been told at his own table. It is easier to keep faith, he thought, when the keeping sits in short words and a steady hand.

“We will carry a copy to the Mayor’s office,” Maralda said, “and bind one for the Mathom-house, and leave one here for the barn that it may speak when you are busy. If any man comes asking when bells are kept and whether ferries run for strangers at noon, your answer remains what it has always been. Only the paper now stands beside it and remembers when you are away.”

The steward smiled as a man smiles when something he has done every day is shown to be a better thing than he knew. “You will have tea before you go,” he said. “It is a poor clerk who writes on an empty stomach.”

They drank tea and ate a heel of bread and a slice of apple and spoke of weather and of a cow that had put its head through a hedge and then thought better of it. Then they rose and went up the lane toward the ford, taking the path that climbs to the low rise from which a man can see the water lie on its gravel like a cloth on a table. The last of the sun made the shoals show in pale cards; the ferrystone kept its small voice under the wind’s breath.

“It looks quiet,” Tomberic said. “It may not be.”

“Quiet is a way a place prepares to tell you something,” Tolly said. He laid the knot pages and the bar sketch side by side on the grass and put a small stone at each corner. Maralda set the tally sheet above them. They made no more than three hands of paper, and yet it had the feel of a map without names, the sort a man makes to remember the order in which things spoke to him.

“We will write the sentence that carries the weight,” Maralda said. She had a fresh square. “The ford and its approaches have, of late weeks, shown signs that men have tested and marked them in ways that can be read by sight and cord. These signs do not serve the river’s safety. We will continue to read and to write, and we ask our neighbours to keep the watches, not to answer unknown calls, and to remember that courtesies are better than tidy signals.” She read it back without flourish. “It is a dry sentence,” she added, “and that is its strength.”

On the road behind them a Ranger came at an easy walk. He had the dust of a day on his boots and the patience of a man who has had both kindness and trouble in equal measure. He greeted them by name and gave them the Greenway tidings in the manner of someone setting a dish on a table so that no one will knock it over by surprise.

“Two travellers were waylaid near the hollow south of the hedge‑oak,” he said. “They went on their way by morning with lighter packs and bruised opinions. We kept the news between the stones and ourselves. There is no use giving fright to folk who do not go that way.”

“And no one came by here with a tale about it,” Tomberic said. “That is a good sign.”

“Good,” the Ranger agreed. “Let it stay good. Keep your tokens short. If you must tell a day’s tale, choose split stick or notch, not both.”

“We have chosen,” Tolly said. “And we have chosen to add only what a Mayor or a Bounder can carry without tripping.” He tapped the sentence Maralda had written. “This will go to Michel Delving tonight by bells.”

The Ranger nodded, and his eyes went to the shoals and the reed beds where the bundles lay or did not, and then down to the bar where the small bright stones had been seen. “We have marked these places in our heads,” he said. “If your men at the Hay Gate must call us, they can do so by leaving the word at the fork‑crown willow. We will not be far.”

They stood together for a space and said nothing. A heron lifted from the far margin and went over without haste. The ferrystone whispered; the wind turned the pages just enough for Tolly to put his hand on them. It was the sort of quiet that stays with a man when he has gone home and finds his own door and his own kettle and his own chair.

“We will take the lower path,” Maralda said at last. “It is shorter to the road, and the paper will get to the Mayor sooner.”

“Go with water at your back and courtesy in your mouth,” the Ranger said, and turned downriver on his own business.

They carried the packet to a farm by the lane where the carrier from Waymeet liked to sit a little and hear news worth hearing. He read the dry sentence twice and said that it was good to be told enough and no more. He promised to be in Michel Delving by bells and to leave the paper at the Mayor’s office with the clerk whose hand was best at neat notices.

When they were alone again, Tomberic walked a little way off and stood with his back to the hedge and his face south. “I am not a man for grand reckonings,” he said when he came back, “but I can see that a loaf goes farther when people stop giving slices to passers‑by at night. If neighbourliness means lending stew and not giving away doors, I can keep neighbourly till winter.”

“That is the point,” Tolly said. He took up the knot pages and the bar drawing and shook them once to send any grass seed off. “We are mending the way we talk to one another as much as we are mending the ford. The ford will look after itself when we stop making easy things for tidy men to count.”

They went down into the lane as the light mellowed and the first kitchen smells began to steal out of doors and hedges. The river’s voice was too far now to be heard, but it seemed to walk with them in the way a word stays with you when you have learned it properly for the first time. At the corner where the lane turns, Maralda tapped her packet of papers so that they sat square in her satchel.

“When we are old,” she said, “and some child asks us how we kept a small place safe when the world beyond began to walk with heavier feet, we will show them that sentence and the little sketches. We will not tell them long stories. We will make a pot of tea and point at the words and say, ‘This was enough’.”

“Enough for now,” Tolly said, looking toward the ford where the last light lay on the water, “and more tomorrow.”

# Chapter 11: The Moved Stone

At first light a pale chill lay on the gravel, and the ford seemed to have slept and woken with a thought it had not finished. The ferrystone showed dark in the middle reach; its whisper lay lower than yesterday by a little, as if the wind had been talking to it in the night and they had reached an agreement. Tolly stood with the water at his boots and watched the thin lace over the shallows beyond the stone.

“We will not move it,” Nathron said quietly, as if answering something Tolly had not said aloud. “But we will learn whether another hand has tried.”

They set their sights on the notches that Tolly had marked on the bank to keep his eye honest, then walked down to the edge where a man can test without making a fool of himself. Tomberic waded to mid‑shin with a pole and felt gently for the shape the river wrote beneath the water. He did not jab; he listened with his hands.

“Here the bed shelves,” he said. “There is a bite where there was none last week.”

“Voice first,” Nathron said. He stood with his head tipped a fraction. “Hush, and hear it.”

Tolly heard the change when the wind came a little from the west. Not much; a rasp under the whisper, like linen drawn across a stone. He wrote, “west wind; ferrystone roughened,” and then, because it mattered, he wrote the numbers for the beats between a ripple and its echo on the bank. They were one shorter than the day before.

“Something touches what should not be touched,” Maralda said. “Not a hand, but the reach of a hand.” She pointed to a peel of clean sand up‑stream of the stone that had not been there yesterday. “A pole has poked there, and poked again.”

They did not go to it. Instead Nathron took the pole from Tomberic and went a little lower, to the beginning of the bad channel they had mapped by eye and ear. “If a skiff came here by night and thought itself clever, it would ride this tongue until the river made it confess.” He pressed, and the pole sank a hand‑breadth into a place that had no business being soft. He did not smile. “There,” he said. “That is a lie waking up.”

Tolly set his heel to a shallow groove on a post that had once been struck and laid his hand upon the grain. “If someone tries the bad way this morning, the post will tell us sooner than our eyes,” he said. “It speaks up the wood.”

They watched. The day brightened by degrees. The reed beds were quiet except for a moorhen giving its brief remark and forgetting the matter. Then, very small at first, a wake formed high in the far shallows: a cautious line set down as if by someone persuading himself that this was knowledge and not guessing. Tolly’s mouth went dry in the same foolish way as before; he did not mind it; he counted.

The wake came on until it reached the place where a man who knew the ford would have turned for the right run. It did not turn. It drew a neat curve toward the tongue of soft sand that Nathron had found. The pole under his hand gave the smallest shiver.

“Hold,” Nathron said, and put his other hand on the pole as if to keep it from talking too loud. “Let the river mind him.”

There was the muffled cry that rope makes when strain comes where it should not, and then the low scrape of wood on small stones that have no wish to be moved. Tolly felt it up the post, a little shudder that ran to his wrist. He did not speak. A memory flickered—old crackle in rafters, a night when strain had sounded before flame—but it passed like a moth against a window, leaving only the good habit of caution. In the wake there came a murky bloom where the sand lifted; then the line wobbled and held.

“Now he learns,” Tomberic said, “what a map is not.”

For a long half‑minute nothing changed. Then the line backed water in a cautious, shamefaced way and sought a safer place with little pushes. When it had gone three yards up‑stream of its mistake, it turned with ill grace to the proper run and went by on the far edge, keeping quiet as such things do when they hope no one has seen them.

“We will see what he leaves behind,” Nathron said. They waited until the water had cleared of its temper, then went down together to the post.

In the old groove was a fresher scrape, pale against the weathered wood. In the grain a new smear of tar lay dull, not glossy, as if rubbed rather than spilled. Below the waterline a single rope fibre had caught and held. Tolly lifted it on the point of his splinter and set it on a paper. He touched the tar and set the hour against it.

“Shall we move the bright stones now?” Tomberic asked. His tone was even, not heated; he had learned the ford’s manners.

“Not yet,” Nathron said. “We will tell the men who must hear, and we will come back with them. A stone moved in the right spirit is still a stone moved, and we will not give a clever fool an excuse to call us meddlers.”

“Then we will write the place more plainly,” Maralda said. She made a tracing in small of the post’s scar and put the rope fibre beside it and marked the line of the tongue that had tricked the skiff. “If we must show it to a Mayor, he will have what he needs to understand without walking in water. If we must show it to a Ranger, he will see without being told much.”

They tested once more, not to boast but to be sure. The pole found the soft again, a finger nearer to the ferrystone than before. The stone’s voice kept its roughness when the west wind breathed. Tolly wrote the numbers and the compass of the breeze and felt, for a moment, an odd steadiness, as if the world grew more itself when you listened honestly to it.

“You have learned the ford,” Nathron said to him, not as praise but as law. “Not all of it. Not forever. Enough for this morning.”

They left the post and went by the fork‑crown willow. Tolly set a split stick in the cleft and bound it with two plain turns; below that he put the small tight turn that meant “double the watches by dawn and dusk,” and below that again a loose loop to say “wait on the look.” He did not make a tidy row of clever signs. He made the few a man could read while the kettles sang.

At the Hay Gate the Bounders read the chalk‑board rota with its small dots at dawn and dusk and nodded as men nod when the day knows what it is about. Tolly showed them the tracing of the post scar and the bit of fibre through the paper. The elder Bounder put his hand on the board as if to feel the hardness of what was being asked of him.

“We will keep by bells,” he said. “We will not be tidy for strangers.”

“That is the good word,” Tomberic said. “A tidy thing can be counted from a hedge.”

They took the packet with the tracing and the notes up to Michel Delving by the road that saves a man’s boots, and by the time the sun thought of the west the clerk at the Mayor’s office had a neat copy of the morning’s work and Maralda’s plain sentence from the day before to set beside it. It was not a story that would put boys on barrels to shout; it was not meant to be. It was enough to keep doors shut at the right times and lanterns low.

When they returned to the ford in the long light, the river made cards of brightness over the shoals as if nothing in the world had ever been tested or found wanting. The ferrystone whispered to itself. Somewhere a dog barked twice in a distant yard, then found better things to do. They stood together a little, then went to their suppers by different paths with the sense that the day had put one more honest line on the map in their heads.

# Chapter 12: Fog Intercept

By sundown the ford wore a muffler of fog that drew itself low along the shallows and left the banks bare. The willow under the slight bend threw a long, ragged shadow over the slack water; from there a man could look across and down the mid‑ford without showing much of himself. Nathron stood a pace back from the edge with his cloak turned so that the grey showed and not the brown. Tomberic had the shuttered lantern cradled like a loaf still warm. Maralda set a flat stone on her knees and laid out a folded square for notes. Tolly counted quietly under his breath, not out of nerves but to give the river its numbers before the night tried to take them.

“We do as we said,” the Ranger murmured, not to command but to settle the talk. “Lantern low, never still. No answers to unknown reeds. If a signal cannot be named, it is not ours.”

“Aye,” Tomberic said, soft as bread broken. “One swing only, and that a poor one.”

The ford has a way of speaking if you humour it. When the water slips over the thin ribs of gravel there is a hiss that tells of small stones and then, after a heartbeat or two, a gentle push against the near bank. Tolly liked to put a measure to such things; it made the world more willing to be read. He counted the span between hiss and push as the fog gathered and thinned again in slow breaths. The ferrystone told the same tale it had told at noon but in a lower voice, as if a cloth had been laid over its tongue.

“Wind’s turned a touch east,” Maralda said. “Smell it.” She lifted her chin and then looked to her page. “I’ll mark it down and the half‑quarter by the bells.”

From the south there came, faint and needling, a reed call: three short notes as boys make when the ice is thin and they want to look brave. The sound sat on the fog a moment and slid away. No one moved. A crow, somewhere beyond sight, clacked once and then again as if reckoning a sum. Tolly put a small tick on his own scrap—nothing written but a mark and the count beside it.

“Hold to our own light and our own proverbs,” Maralda said quietly, more to the page than to any of them. “By bells. By day. Name little, mark much.”

The reed spoke again, not quite the same; a hair slower as if a different mouth had it now. From farther off there came the faintest tap, not wood on wood but something like it, dull as from a wet stick against a post. Nathron’s eyes narrowed, then eased. “They test,” he said. “They think numbers will make them owners.”

“We can spare them a wrong number,” Tomberic said, and let the joke die where it lay. He eased the shutter back a finger to be sure of the hinge and then closed it again.

They had chosen their bar in daylight, walking the line of stones with boots in the damp and eyes for where the fog would take a light and set it down wrong. A harmless shoal lay above the true run, a place that showed teeth at low water and only smiled when the river rose. If a skiff turned its nose to that smile in fog, the worst would be a scrape and a scold from a rope.

“On your count,” Nathron said, never above the size of the place.

Tolly listened again. Hiss. One‑two. Push. He let the measure take him twice more, and at the third he touched Tomberic’s sleeve. The lantern breathed once as the shutter cracked and a small, low light drew a crooked line no higher than a hedge‑pig’s back along the fog. It shivered, as if unwilling to be a beacon, then winked shut. Tolly smelled hot oil and felt the night lean to listen.

A beat, and then another, and then there was the faintest change on the far face of the ford as if something darker than dark had turned its side. A wake showed without a boat to own it, just a smear of gloss where the water smoothed, and then the soft rasp of a rope drew along some hidden edge. The sound went to the bone the way such sounds do when a man’s mind has learned them by a hard lesson.

“There,” Nathron said—not pointing, only setting the word in the air where each could lay a sight to it. “They’ve taken the smile.”

A horn spoke far to the south, not bold, just two low notes that kept their own counsel. The fog shifted with the sound as if the river had breathed. Three crows rose together from the invisible margin and flapped off east in a shape that looked almost like a hand opening and closing. The wake slowed where the bar grew shallower, and a dull scrape came, then a sigh as from a rope eased when a man decides he will rather save the cord than the day.

“No pursuit,” Nathron said, and the words did not need agreeing. The Shire’s side was a gate you did not throw wide for curiosity.

When the water settled the four of them stepped down to the mid‑ford where a rag of tar had blacked a splintered stake. There a small thing showed under the thin skin of flow: a neat packet caught in a snarl of root and reed where the willow’s toes went to drink. The packet was wrapped in waxed cloth and bound once with plain cord, once again with a thin thread of black and green, which made Tomberic’s mouth tighten without any speech. He set his knife to the cord but did not cut it; instead he slid the loop whole over the end and set it on Maralda’s flat stone.

“Chain of hands,” Maralda said. She dried her fingers carefully and took out a length of red thread from her satchel. She tied it with a tidy turn above the old knot. “Sight and copy first; open later where a table keeps its temper. We do not rummage on the bank.”

Tolly worked the tar scrap free with a stick and set it by. It was the size of a man’s thumb and carried a grit of sand and one pale hair from a rope laid in tar too hastily. He wrote without fuss: “By sundown; fog; one swing lantern low; wake on smile; two‑blast horn far south; crows three east; tar rag with grit; pouch recovered at willow root; thread black‑and‑green; cord plain; red thread added; no pursuit.” He did not put guess to paper. He had learned that guesses breed when fed and then they run about the house.

“Let me see your times,” Nathron said. He looked down the line of Tolly’s figures and nodded once. “Good. The ferrystone lost half its voice at the last breath before your swing. They were already within their own count. We did not catch them; we turned them.”

Fog makes distances feel like lies. For a while it seemed as if the south bank drew closer and then slipped away although no one moved. Maralda tucked the packet into a cloth and numbered it plainly: 12 on one corner, the day sign beside, the hour by bells. She looked toward the willow crown. “Set the token, Tolly,” she said, and there was the smallest warmth in the way she said his name, as if a count kept truly were a kindness done. “We have said what we would say to this watch.”

At the fork‑crown willow a man who knows the craft can make the branch say small things to those who know how to hear. Tolly took the split stick and set it in the place where the bark parted naturally. Beneath the split he tied a plain loop loose enough to mean “wait on the look.” Above it he set the small tight turn Nathron had taught him for “double the watch by dawn and dusk,” though that knot had been given already after the wolf‑sign; better to speak twice than not at all when the river sits lower. He stepped back and checked that nothing shouted to an idle passer‑by.

“By bells,” Tomberic said, as if making a toast none of them wished to drink twice. “We carry the packet by bells in the morning. No talk on the road.”

“No talk at all to those who do not need it,” Nathron answered. “Name little. Mark much. If someone calls with a reed, be stone.”

They went the length of the bank within the willow’s shadow and checked where the mid‑ford deepened to the knee. The water made a lace that the eye could read once the lantern’s breath had been forgotten. Twice Tolly caught sight of a smear in the sand where a skiff’s nose had pressed testing, light and uncommitted, as a fox puts a paw to a stile. The smears told him someone south would be mending a rope tonight and not boasting of his seamanship to any master.

They did not pry the packet. Maralda only weighed it in her palm and listened to its small hush, as if whatever lay inside had its own wish to be quiet. She wrapped it again in a square and set it at the bottom of her satchel where the red thread showed. “If it is more cord and knots, we shall know their manner better,” she said. “If it is paper, we will copy without flourish and keep the hand entire. Either way, the Mayor will have a plain sentence and the Mathom-house a thing numbered and clean.”

“And the watch?” Tomberic asked.

“Keeps,” Nathron said simply. “We will be two at the first light, three if the fog holds and the river keeps her cloth on. If they count us, let them count wrong.”

The fog, which had thickened after the horn, began to draw back from the shoals as if the river were bored with being that careful. From somewhere up the Greenway a cart’s rattle came faint over the low ground, and a dog barked twice at nothing anyone wished to chase. The willow leaves made a dry whisper. Tolly found he was hungry though he had done nothing but listen and write; that is the way of certain kinds of work.

They took their bite near the watch‑house: a heel of bread shared into four, and a bit of cheese that had travelled well in a pocket. When the crumbs were brushed off the flat stone, Tolly wrote the clean ledger lines that would sit under steam until morning. Maralda held the board steady without being asked; their fingers kept politely to the corners while the pencil spoke for both:

“By sundown fog lay low. Lantern one swing low near mid‑ford; no steady light shown. Unknown reed calls ignored. Wake took shoal; scrape heard; horn two blasts far south. Three crows rose and went east. Recovered: tar rag with grit; one wax‑cloth packet with plain cord and black‑and‑green thread; red thread added; contents unopened. Token: tight turn set; loose loop below. Wind east a hair; ferrystone low by a finger. No pursuit.”

He set the page under the slate in the corner where steam did not fret it and tied his pencil to the shelf with a bit of string, having learned how pencils love to roll away when a man’s back is turned. Maralda set the cup by his elbow and, without making a business of it, said, “Well counted,” in the tone one uses for work that need not be praised to be valued.

“We should sleep while the river does not mind us,” Maralda said. “Dawn is a tidy teacher when a man is not woolly.”

“I’ll take first while the fog finishes its fuss,” Tomberic offered. “Wake me when the kettles on the south begin to pretend there were never any kettles there.”

Nathron smiled at that and took the hinge of the door in his hand. “Wake him when the hush changes,” he said. “A watch that hears its own habits keeps better than one that listens for someone else’s music.”

Tolly stepped out one last time to the line where the willow shadow ended. The ford lay quiet and older than their little tricks, and he felt the smallness of what they had done and the rightness of it both together. The water had its old paths; the stones had their uses; their work was only to keep the tale of them from being bent by men who counted at the wrong hour. He put his palm to the bark and thought of Auntie Wierdy who would have said that mending a thing before it tears is the laziest labour any sensible person should strive for. He smiled at the thought and went in.

The night did not turn into a song. It turned into the kind of quiet that gives back small answers to those who ask in the proper voice. Somewhere south a bird called once and thought better of it. The fog slipped and gathered and slipped again. The river kept the ford. That was all, and enough.

# Chapter 13: The Deserter’s Tale

After harvest the ground holds a friendliness it does not keep in spring: the stubble is short, the paths remember feet, and the air near the water smells faintly of straw gone sweet with damp. They made their fire in the lee of the blind where the willow hides a man from both banks. The flame was low and steady; the pot gave up a quiet steam. Tomberic minded the stew and the shuttered lantern, setting the light on the earth so it would throw no tale over the river. Nathron stood where a watcher can see the ford without seeming to challenge it. Maralda laid her square paper on a board and set out the red thread. Tolly sharpened his pencil and wrote the date by bells.

“We keep our rules even at a fire,” Maralda said, not as a school‑marm but like one who does a job in the order that saves trouble. “Hands shown. No names asked if none are offered. We do not boast of blades. If a man comes near hungry, we feed him first.”

“And we say nothing that is not for him,” Nathron added. “A courtesy is not a confiding.”

For a time there was only the sound of stew ticking and the river’s old breath. Then the reeds gave a small movement that belonged to men and not to otters. A shape stood just beyond the circle of warmth, a man wrapped in a poor cloak with the dark of the bank on it. He did not come on with any swagger. He lifted his empty hands and kept them lifted.

“Evening,” Tomberic said, as one says to a neighbour on a lane. “There’s heat enough if you’d steal a little. Stew as well, though it’s only the sort that minds its manners and stays in the pot.”

The man moved closer by a small step and turned his face so they could see it. He was not old. He had the look of long wet days and little sleep. His boots, where the firelight found them, showed wide nails set in a pattern that would leave prints a Bounder could pick from a dozen.

“I am not asking for your names,” Nathron said, and in saying so he gave ease. “Nor will we put any on you if you have a mind to keep your own.”

“No names,” the man answered. His voice had a flat weariness in it that comes when a man has walked beside fear long enough to be friendly with it. “Only food, if you’ll spare it. And perhaps, to tell a thing, if telling is allowed by your rules.”

“Eat first,” Maralda said, and passed him a bowl and a heel of bread. He sat on his heels, careful, the steam working its warmth back into his hands.

When he had eaten a few spoonfuls and taken his breath in better measure, he looked up. “I came from south of the river. I was hired by men who did not wish to be named, who themselves answered to others they called ‘the new masters.’ They paid in coin and in a promise of dry work later, which was a lie. The work was to set stones bright as buttons along a line under the shallows, to cut a reed and tie knots in it according to a pattern, and, when the water sat low, to nudge a mark‑stone so that it would speak different by a finger.” Maralda glanced at Tolly then, a quick look of approval for the way he had let the man’s breath come right before asking him for any truths worth having.

No one said the word that lived between them for the mark‑stone. If a thing has a name near a ford, you do well not to call it too fondly aloud.

“Knots?” Tolly said, keeping his tone plain. He caught the smallest tilt of Maralda’s head—let him set the pace—and kept his question narrow. “How tied?”

The man set the bowl down and, with his hands open where all could see, he began to show simple things with the stew string. “One knot only, at the end: attention. Two together: by the bells. A loop left loose: wait on the look. A loop drawn tight: go. The tail tucked back on itself: choose left when the water runs fretted. Two tails set like a fork: choose right.” He did not look up while he tied; his fingers knew the talk better than his tongue did.

Tomberic nodded once. “That is a language we have started to learn.” He did not say from whom. “What of stones?”

“Bright ones, rounded,” the man said. “Not big. A line from the willow’s toes off into the wrong shallows. They are set by day with a child’s game and a pocket; set and set again if hands come along and put them down differently. We learned to press a finger into the top of the little cairn, so we could tell the last hand that touched it.”

Maralda had begun to write, one word at a time, not a stream. “Who reads the knots?” she asked gently.

“Boats,” he said. “Men who do not own them, borrowing river craft that belong to no man present. A horn sometimes when the turn is made. Two notes mostly. Once three. We were told to mark the hours so a skiff would find its way by counting instead of looking.” He took another mouthful as if ashamed of his own words.

“You were told by whom?” Nathron asked, with no edge.

“A fellow with a smooth hand,” the man said. “He made a mark in wax with the flat of it, broad as if it were a shovel. He wore a twine of black and green in his cuff. He said the new masters like tidy numbers and the Shire keeps poor books.” His mouth pulled, not quite a smile. “I have seen poorer books and kinder men than those.”

Maralda looked at Tolly, not to ask a question but to share the thought that both of them had: black and green; broad‑handed wax; ledger talk. She took a small breath and set down only, “broad palm in wax; black‑and‑green thread; smooth hand.”

“Why are you here?” Tomberic asked. “A man does not come to a watch‑fire for the view.”

The man looked toward the river though the ford lay dark. “I am not fit for their sort of tidy. They asked for a thing too neat for me: a nudge on a stone that was not ours to touch, and a counting of a day’s watches as if a river were a clock to be wound by strangers. There was talk of a theft to cover a look. I am not brave. I do not want blood. I walked until the water told me where to stop.” He held out his hands again as if to prove he had come empty.

“There is another reason,” Nathron said, kind and grave. “You are hungry and you are tired of being told to carry numbers that are not yours.”

The man nodded once, quickly.

“We found a packet,” Maralda said after a small pause that let the stew mark time. “Waxed cloth. Plain cord, and another thread of black and green. We did not open it in the fog. We will copy what must be copied and keep the hands whole. If there is a map or a mark‑list in it, it will answer plain questions without any man needing to put names to his fear.”

At that the man reached into his poor cloak very slowly and brought out a scrap half the size of a hand wrapped in greased paper. He held it as a child holds a hot chestnut, shifting it from one finger to the next. “I was told to carry this to the man with the smooth hand, then to wait for a rope at a certain hour. If I gave it to him, I would be given a dry place and a blanket. I have had dry places and blankets before.” He looked down. “I would rather have a good rule and an honest stew.”

“Put it on the board,” Maralda said softly. She added a twist of red thread to the scrap and to the packet both. “Sight first.” She set Tolly’s pencil where his hand could find it without searching, an unnecessary kindness that has a way of keeping courage from leaking out of a man.

Nathron cut the wax with a small knife that looked as if it had cut more leather than meat. Inside lay a thin strip with lines and little dots like beads, and marks that looked like chickens’ tracks until a man let the ford live in his head while he stared. Then the lines sat down where they belonged and the dots made a shape a skiff would be glad to see in fog. A small scrap of twine was pinned there too, not with a needle but by tar gone hard.

“This wants a plain sentence,” Maralda said, already shaping it. “A line of bright stones set to a wrong bar; knots on reed meaning hours and turns; a mark‑stone to be moved by a finger; skiff to count instead of look; horn two notes at turning.” She copied the strip in square hand, no flourish, each dot set where a man who had never seen this ford might lay a boat and think he was clever. Then she folded her copy and tied it with red thread, and the original she wrapped again without touching the ink.

Tolly wrote what paper cannot always hold: the smell of tar, the feel of thin cloth that has seen too much wet, the way a man’s eyes go slack with long watching and then catch at a common kindness as a hand will catch at a rung. But when he came to his ledger lines he kept them short: “After harvest; bank fire by blind. Stranger fed. Confirms knot primer: end=attention; double=bells; loose loop=wait; tight loop=go; tail‑tuck=left; fork=right. Cairn line bright stones; finger press on top. Broad palm in wax; black‑and‑green thread. Packet and scrap copied; originals sealed. No names.”

“What will you do by first light?” Tomberic asked the man, not as a test but as one neighbour to another who has come into a scrape and must come out of it.

“Walk,” he said. “Not on the Greenway. I will keep to hedges until my boots stop talking. I will not blow any reeds I do not own. If a man asks me who feeds me, I will say the Shire kept its pot where anyone decent might ask for a spoon.”

“There is a stile half a mile west where the hedge is kind to tired men,” Nathron said. “Cross there. Keep the river on your left until the dawn makes it brass. There will be no watch past the fork‑crown willow until the second bell; if you are gone by then, you will be your own again. Take nothing that looks tidy and set for your hand.”

The man stood as men stand who remember suddenly that standing is a thing bodies can manage. He set the empty bowl down with care and bowed a little in a manner that did not belong to his clothes. “I am sorry,” he said, and the words broke nothing. “Thank you.”

Tomberic gave him a crust wrapped in a bit of cloth and looked away while it changed hands. No one followed him out of the ring of warmth. The reeds moved once more and settled.

They sat quiet while the pot made its last small talk. Maralda sanded her copy and tied it; she marked both the packet and the scrap with a neat 13 and a red sliver. “Mayor and Mathom-house get their copies,” she said. “Your folk get theirs,” she added, with a look to Nathron. “We keep our words: name little, mark much.”

“And tomorrow,” Tolly said, “we go by bells to the Hay Gate. It is time that ferry rules were plain and posted.”

“Plain words keep fools from cleverness,” Tomberic said, and smiled into his cup. Maralda touched the corner of Tolly’s page with one finger. “Your way of asking left him stronger than he came,” she said, not as praise but as a fact to be kept.

They put the fire down to coals and drew the blind’s brush a little closer for the night. The river’s old breath went on, steady and without favour. A man had eaten and gone; a small plan had lost a tooth; a better rule had begun to take its shape beside a bank that had outlived more plans than men remember. That was a good night’s work, and not a thing to boast over.

# Chapter 14: Bounders’ Compact

By bells the lane to the Hay Gate was already busy with the kind of business that looks like idleness to men who have not kept a hedge: a boy with chalk in his pocket and orders to count posts; an old Bounder rubbing a staff with oil and telling it the news; a cart that had decided to wait outside the gate until its creak would not sound like an interruption. The hedge there, quickset and stubborn, kept its face as if nothing in the world could ask it to move. The post stood like a good neighbour who has learned when to talk and when to listen.

Tolly came up with Tomberic and Maralda as the first bell finished its plain speech. Nathron had beat them to the place and stood a little aside, not in the doorway but not in the brush either, as a man does when he wants to be part of a thing without making it his. The elder Bounder, square as a gate‑post and patient as a stone, nodded to each in turn and then looked at the chalk he held as if it were a kind of oath.

“By bells,” he said, so that the time lived in the work. “We will make our rules as plain as bread and post them where a passer‑by can take a slice without any spice spoiling it.”

Maralda unrolled the copy she had written in square hand. She had tied it with a sliver of red thread so that whoever took it up after today would know it was part of a chain and not a scrap torn off a sack. “These are the words we have lived by in fact,” she said, “and now we live by them in ink.”

She read while the chalk waited:

1. No answering of unknown reeds. If a call cannot be named, it is not for us.
2. Lantern low, never still. Keep light near the ground; do not hang a steady flame where it can be counted.
3. Day escort for strangers who ask the ford; none sent by night.
4. Double watches at dawn and dusk while the river sits lower.
5. One token tale per day: brief, factual notes for the next watch.
6. Name little, mark much. Keep courtesy with strangers; keep details for the ledger.
7. No moving of stones or cairns without joint action agreed at the post.

“Put them up,” the Bounder said, and the boy set to his chalk with a pride that did not look like pride until a man knew boys. He chalked the rota board with the dawn and dusk dots and wrote “By bells” across the top in letters like fence rails. Tolly added a neat hand to the lower right for the token line: “tight turn = double watches; loose loop = wait on the look.” He tied a sample string to the corner so that a Bounder could learn with fingers as well as eyes.

Tomberic went with a second Bounder to the ferry path and checked the ferrystone’s voice where it took the river on the cheek. It gave the same low talk it had given two days past, no more, no less. They looked to the jetty as well, and there the missing net that had set tongues jangling was found safe enough, folded and hung to dry under the small lean‑to. The ferryman’s boy, who had meant no trouble and had not liked being thought the cause of any, went pink and promised to tie a red rag on anything hung out of place next time. Tomberic clapped his shoulder and said that honest work is its own apology when a man hears it.

At the post the elder Bounder took up the chalk again and wrote a small line beyond the rules: “Mayor and Mathom-house copies made; Ranger copy kept.” Maralda handed over two fair copies, each marked with red thread. She kept the third for Nathron’s folk. “Plain words and short,” she said. “So short that a man who means to twist them will find himself with nothing to hold.” Tolly caught the brief smile she kept for good chalking and said nothing, which kept it theirs.

“We keep our side,” Nathron said. “Our watches double at dawn and dusk until the river tells another tale. If a light is shown across water, we will make no answer. If a man comes by night asking your ford, we will say day is the only safe road.”

“And we will say it with a cup in hand,” the Bounder added, “for a man can swallow a rule easier with stew than with a shout.”

They walked the length of the hedge and fixed where the chalk would hang, where the board would keep dry, where a tired man could read without stooping. Tolly set the split stick at the fork‑crown willow in the hollow lane as they had agreed—tight turn above, loose loop below—so that the message lived both in words and in wood. Maralda pinned a small square near the rota with the ferry rules: ferrystone check by first bell and by last; bars cleared only after freshet and only by joint hands; any twine or cord found to be brought to the post and marked, not pocketed as useful string.

While they worked, a reed call came from beyond the hedge, not loud and not very artful: three quick and a slow, as if someone had learned a tune without knowing what song it belonged to. The boy looked up, hungry for the doing of a thing. The elder Bounder put a hand out, not to stop him from courage but to teach him what kind of courage this was.

“By bells,” the Bounder said, and that was the countersign agreed. The boy swallowed his answer and kept his chalk. The call came again, and nothing in the Shire moved to own it. After a little, the call went away and left only the sound of a waggon far off and a dog who believed in news that was not there.

“You see,” Nathron said, with a softness that did not talk down to the boy. “Some work is done by standing still at the right hour.”

The boy nodded and returned to his letters, and they were better for the pause.

By second bell the board stood tidy, the rota dots were set, and the copies were folded for their errands. Tomberic shouldered the service copy for Longbottom. Maralda wrapped the Mayor’s and Mathom-house copies together with their red tie; the Bounder tucked the post copy into its slot behind the board. A matching copy hung at the ford overlook.

They did a last small round to see that nothing said more than it should. The rules were plain; the tokens quiet; the hedge unremarkable to anyone who loved only loud things. The lane had the look of a place that had always known good sense, and only today had decided to write it down. Maralda looked at the small dots beside dawn and dusk and at the neat line Tolly had put on the slate and said, low enough for him alone, “This will hold when we are elsewhere.”

“Keep the watches,” Nathron said, as he had said before. He meant it as a farewell and a promise both.

“We will,” the elder Bounder answered. “And when the bells speak, we will listen, and when a reed speaks that is not ours, we will let it talk to itself.” He looked at Tolly with a wry turn of the mouth. “You write down the day in your tidy way. I will teach the boy to spell ‘lantern’ without making six letters do the work of seven.”

Tolly laughed, which is good for rules when they are new. He wrote his short lines on the slate where they would dry unbothered: “By bells: rules posted at Hay Gate. Rota chalked; dawn/dusk dots set. Ferry rules pinned: ferrystone by first and last; bars by joint hands; cord found to post. Missing net found and marked. Unknown reed calls ignored. Tokens set at fork‑crown willow. Copies made for Mayor, Mathom-house, Rangers. No names.”

The day stood up to full height and the lane took on its ordinary talk again—cart‑creak, gate‑click, the light scuff of a dog deciding whether to be important. The board with its neat letters looked like any other bit of Shire sense: something you might pass a hundred times and only half see until the day you needed it. That is the right way for such things. They should be there, and be read, and then be forgotten in the way that makes them part of the lane.

# Chapter 15: Night of Small Courage

By bells the fog had thinned to rags along the ditch, and the lane by the Hay Gate kept its ordinary sound: a cart’s patient creak somewhere beyond the turn, a dog that believed in duties, the small talk of leaves. The post stood in its place with the board hung dry and the chalk tied to it by string. Tomberic checked the lantern shutter by touch and then set the light on the ground where it made a small puddle that did not quarrel with the dark. Tolly looked to the token at the fork‑crown willow and found the tight turn still true and the loose loop as they had left it.

The elder Bounder stamped his feet once, not from cold but to let his body know the hour. The boy with the chalk watched him and did the same and then tried to look as if he had not. Nathron stood a little back from the gate where his cloak read as brush to anyone not expecting a man. Maralda had her board and square page; the red thread made its small statement. In the lantern’s low shine Tolly saw a thin glint along her pencil and felt the watch grow steadier for it.

“Hear the hedge,” the Bounder said to the boy in a voice that did not scold. “There’s the whisper of leaf on leaf; there’s the rub of reed; and there’s the sound a man makes when he tries to borrow either. That last one never quite learns its manners.” He tipped his head. “Listen for the wrong politeness.”

The boy shut his eyes and stood with his hand on the post. The lane had its layers: the long hush of the river too far off to see; the nearer murmur of wind gathering itself and letting itself go; the very near breath of the hedge with small endings and small beginnings in it. He swallowed, and the Bounder, seeing it, smiled into his collar where the boy could not mistake it for laughter.

“By bells,” the Bounder said, comfortable with the countersign as if it had been born in his mouth. “We keep quiet unless the hedge tells us different.”

The cart that had been creaking beyond the bend came on slow, a grey pony with a mind of its own and a wheel that liked the verge too well for safe going. Tomberic walked out into the lane with the lantern held low so that the light lay along the ruts and not up into the fog, and he turned his wrist till the puddle of light showed the ditch’s mouth like a sleepy eye. The pony, seeing sense, edged away from the soft bank; the driver raised his hat and gave a word of thanks that did not travel far. The lantern went down again and the road kept its quiet. The boy watched all this as if it were a trick, then seemed to understand it was only care with a handle on it.

A reed called beyond the hedge: three quick and then a slow, neat enough to be learned but not clever enough to be born of the place. The boy’s head came up. He looked to the Bounder and then to Tomberic, who did no more than set his palm down as a man might calm a good dog.

“By bells,” Tomberic said, as if he were reminding himself of a shopping list. No one moved. The call came a second time and found no playmate. After a little the reeds rubbed together in a way that belonged to weather alone.

“That was the wrong politeness,” the Bounder said, very low. “Real reeds ask the wind’s leave; false ones forget the order of things.” The boy nodded as if he had been shown how to sharpen a knife without wasting steel.

Later a soft knock came from the hollow lane beyond the gate, not on wood quite, more like a stick thinking about making up its mind. The Bounder did not answer it. He rolled the chalk in his fingers and made a dot beside the dusk mark on the rota, then put the chalk back without drawing any more attention to bravery than was healthy. Somewhere a little way off a small creature made the sound hedgehogs make when they wish the world would choose a bed and lie in it. A shape that might have been a man moved where the hedge dips, then chose the far side of choosing and went away.

A man came up the lane with care, hat in hand before he reached the light. He had dust on his cuffs and sleep in the corners of his eyes, the honest kind. He asked for the ford in the way of someone who has been told to ask and hopes to be refused gently. They set him by the little pot and gave him stew, and he warmed his hands on the bowl as if that warmth would carry a short distance into his thoughts. “By day,” Maralda said, “with company if company can be spared. We do not make the river into a trick.”

He said he had come from a cousin’s house where talk had run longer than the candles and he had thought to make the ford by starlight and save himself a walk at sun‑up. He laughed at himself and agreed it was the sort of saving that spends more than it keeps. He ate, and the tightness in his face eased, and, because the stew did not ask for any man’s honour to be measured by a spoon, he decided to want the thing they offered rather than the thing he had been told to want. He would sleep in a hay‑house that had kept travellers before him and cross by bells when the ferrystone spoke plain.

“No names,” Nathron said, and the man nodded, not as if he had been granted a favour but as if a weight had been lifted that he could not have named. He offered to leave a penny for the stew; Tomberic told him a good word for the Bounders would keep better than coin.

Tomberic took a slow turn to the board and back, not to show himself but to show that stillness has a backbone. The boy, who had been hungry for a chase he could not have named, watched and learned that sometimes a gate is kept by patience and not by arms. Nathron, seeing the learning happen, said softly, “Men who hurry to be seen lose more than they find. A watch that can be seen without being counted is the best kind.” The boy did not say he understood; he only set the chalk in its notch and stood a little straighter.

“Refresh the token,” Maralda said when the second bell counted. Tolly set the tight turn anew and touched the loose loop without changing it. He showed the boy once how to make the tight turn with his own fingers and then unmade it so the boy could make it again without looking. The knot sat tidy as a small promise. Maralda watched the lesson without a word and gave Tolly the smallest nod a ledger‑minder can spare for good practice. Tolly wrote short: “By bells; calls ignored; soft knock unanswered; one traveller fed, sent by day; lantern low to road only; token refreshed; no pursuit.” He put the slate where steam would not fret it.

Near dawn the hedge changed its sound the way a room does when a sleeping man turns over and means to wake. The fog strips went thin as lace and then were gone. The cart creaked past and gave a friendly rattle at the post. Dew picked out the thorns like a row of tiny lanterns where no man had hung them. A rook crossed low and swore at the morning, then thought better of it and went to find company. The boy yawned and tried to turn it into a cough and failed. The elder Bounder said, “That will do,” and the watch handed itself over cleanly without clever speeches. Tomberic covered the lantern and shouldered his rope. Maralda tied a red sliver on the posted copy to mark the night’s small change of rota. Nathron looked south a last time and seemed satisfied by the river’s plain face.

It had been a small night. Small nights, if a man stacks enough of them, make a long wall. They left the lane as they had found it: hedge kept; gate minded; board hung; chalk tied; token set. The day would see the ford as it always was to folk who had no business for fog or signals, and that was the point.

# Chapter 16: Dismantling the Lines

At first light the ford wore a colour that is not a colour so much as a patience: the pale between night and day when stone keeps its own counsel and water seems to think about itself before moving. The willow‑holt stood with its toes in the slow shallows and its crown ragged like a farmer’s hair on a busy morning. Nathron was already there, quiet as a stake set long ago. Two Bounders came by the hollow lane with sacks over their shoulders and hands that smelled faintly of oil and chalk. Tomberic had a coil of rope that did not intend to be used for any brave thing. Maralda carried her flat board and a roll of square paper. Tolly came last, because he had stopped to look once at the ferrystone in the grey and listen to its voice.

“At first light,” Nathron said, as if naming an old custom. “No shouting, and nothing done that a man could not call maintenance if asked.” He smiled with a corner of the mouth. “The river remembers good manners better than ceremonies.”

“We will tidy what was untidy,” the elder Bounder answered. “And put the chalk where it belongs.” He lifted the sack and the smooth clack inside told of small bright stones waiting to be bagged in their turn.

They walked the ford’s edge in a bent line, keeping to the willow’s shadow where the bank allowed. The ferrystone showed its knuckled back by a finger more than yesterday; the water over the ribs made a lace like old linen. Tolly set his measure in his head: hiss, one‑two, push; then the shorter span where the bar narrows and the sound tightens.

“Read me your times,” Nathron said. Tolly spoke the counts and the little changes, and the Ranger matched them with his own. “Good,” he said. “Your numbers and the river’s are on speaking terms.”

At the willow‑holt the wrong bar showed itself with the insolence of a man who has borrowed another’s hat and thinks it fits him. A string of bright stones lay like beads in a line that had no business being there. Thumb‑marks marred the small caps on two of the little cairns. Farther out, where the water lifted and laid itself down again, a single pebble too fair for this reach winked and then drowned and then winked again.

“We take them as they lie,” Maralda said. “No making a lesson of it for the wind.”

Tomberic set his rope and waded to the knee where the bar lifted. He did not lift the stones with drama. He set them in the sack as if they were misplaced buttons from a good coat and each worth the bother of saving. The Bounder on the near bank held the mouth for him and counted softly, because counting calms the fingers and leaves the mind clear.

Tolly worked along the nearer edge with a small stick and a steadiness he had learned this last year: small touch to a finger‑pressed cap; look for the print of the last hand; drop the cap into the sack if it told the wrong tale; let the river keep as much of itself as it could. “Here,” he said once, and Maralda stepped in to see a smear of tar gone dull on a low stake. She wrote: “tar, old; smear thin; not fresh; still tells a habit.” She took a flake with the tip of a knife and set it on her board and tied it with red thread in case a man asked a small question later that needed a small proof.

“We will keep to the craft of tidying,” Nathron said. “No show.” He lifted one bright stone between finger and thumb as if apologising to the river for having to move it at all, then dropped it into the sack and watched the water rub away its borrowed shine.

Where the bar ran out toward the deeper run there was a point of sand that had tried to be clever and taken the shape of a nose. A small twig leaned there, not by wind but by a hand that had wanted a sign without a cairn. Tomberic looked, then shook his head. “We’ll lean a twig the other way where the true run begins,” he said. “Not a trap; a help for eyes that belong to us.”

The work made a rhythm before any of them named it. Tolly liked rhythms because they put gentleness into tasks that could grow sharp if a man did them all out of his mind and not out of his body. Maralda saw it too, and because hobbits will sing when a job finds its stride, she hummed and then gave words to the hum, soft so that only those who belonged to the ford could hear:

With a sack by the stone and the dawn on the bar, We set what is ours where our own markers are; Keep low, keep slow, Let the river know.

With a hand to the rope and a mind to the line, We gather the bright and we leave what is fine; No boast, no blow, Let the river flow.

Tomberic grinned at the rhyme’s good foot and did not try to make it louder. The elder Bounder’s mouth moved as if he were keeping time with a proverb. Nathron, who did not sing, inclined his head the way a man does when a thing is done in its proper key. Tolly kept the count; her tune found it and made it kinder.

They followed the wrong bar to its timid end and found one last bright pebble tucked where a skiff’s nose would scrape if it kept to the false count. Tomberic reached, and Tolly set his hand under Tomberic’s wrist without thinking, to steady the move so the river would not be given any excuse for a fuss. The pebble came free and showed a bit of cord tar‑stiffened and stuck under it. Tolly lifted it with the stick and held it out.

“Plain cord,” he said, “but it learned bad habits.”

Maralda set it on the board and tied a red thread to it. She wrote: “cord, plain; tar‑touch; likely from stake; found at bar end.” Then she drew a quick map: before, with the bright line and its thumb‑capped tops; after, with the bar shown as the river had always preferred it. Her hand made no flourish. She set small marks to show where the twig would lean at the true run.

They came again to the ferrystone and stood where its rough back took the early light. Tolly read it with his fingers and thought of the nights when false numbers in fog had tried to teach it a new song. “It keeps its voice,” he said. “A finger lower than yesterday’s noon, not much. No scrape fresh.” He did not say, as he had in his pocket notebooks, that the stone felt like something that would rather be left to its old work than asked to learn a cleverness by strangers.

“Set your twig,” Nathron told Tomberic. “Small, and where a ferryman would expect to find a friend. No more.”

Tomberic chose a length of willow no thicker than a pencil and leaned it with the point set landward, just where the true run takes a mind to gather itself. It looked like something a thoughtful man might have left without wanting thanks.

They bagged what should never have been set and took a last walk along the water. The sacks felt oddly heavy for a thing so bright and so little. The elder Bounder hoisted his and laughed under his breath. “Stones,” he said, “are like words: light when you throw them about, and much heavier when you pick them up again where they ought not to be.”

“Before and after,” Maralda said, showing her two small drawings side by side. “This is enough for the Mayor and for Mossfoot’s ledger. The rest we can keep in our hands and our habits. If a man asks what we did, we can say we tidied the ford and checked the bar and set a twig for the ferry’s sake. All true.” She met Tolly’s eye a moment, as if to say that numbers and neighbourliness had kept step.

“And if a man asks whether we meant to spoil anyone’s numbers,” the Bounder said drily, “we can say we prefer apples to sums.”

“Then we should have an apple,” Tomberic said, and produced two from whatever corner of his gear apples live in when Tomberic travels. He gave them out without making a show of charity. Men work better when their mouth remembers sweetness as well as caution.

They took the sacks by the hollow lane so that any eye on the far bank would see nothing that looked like a parade. At the fork‑crown willow Tolly set the split stick true and changed the knot: no tight turn this time, for the doubled watches belonged to fog and a lower river; the loose loop remained for “wait on the look,” and beneath it he tied a simple straight tie meaning only “all watches as posted.” He showed the boy, who had come up from the post with a pair of nimble hands, how to make that one without thinking too hard about it, and the boy made it and unmade it once with a solemnity that was comic and proper at the same time.

Back at the board the elder Bounder took his chalk and wrote a line that kept its back straight: “At first light: bar cleared of bright stones; cord/tar to post; twig set at true run; ferrystone steady; rota window posted.” He marked two dots for the hours when the joint work had been done, and put the chalk back. Nathron scribed the same on his small strip in a spare hand.

The sacks, two of them, were emptied into an old grain bag and tied off. “We’ll give these pretties to a garden path where they can be trod on and forget they were ever meant for mischief,” the Bounder said. “They can shine where shining belongs.”

“And the cord?” Maralda asked.

“Post keeps it,” Nathron said. “Red thread on it to say it belongs to telling, not to use. If a cousin asks for string, he can have something that never thought to know tar.”

They went once more to the water because it is wise, when you mean to leave a thing alone, to look at it after the last hand is off it. The river said nothing notable; the ferrystone kept counsel; the willow leaves made their dry whisper. A crow came down to the far bank, stepped about foolishly, and then lifted away east with an air of being late for a meeting no one else attended.

“That is enough,” Nathron said. “If there are men who think to set sums against our habit, they will find emptier fingers and stones that have convinced themselves to be honest. Keep your compact and your courtesy, and they will have less to count.”

Tolly wrote the clear ledger lines before the day warmed: “At first light; wrong bar cleared; finger‑press caps removed; bagged bright stones; tar‑smear thin; plain cord with tar‑touch bagged and red‑threaded; twig leaned at true run; ferrystone steady; token set: watches as posted.” Maralda read them and added one small word with her pencil, “joint,” before “hands,” and he liked that better than any longer sentence. Then, because he could not help it and because a ledger need not be deaf, he added on his scrap: “Work done in the manner of mending; river left to its old road.” He folded the scrap where it would not show to anyone who cared more for numbers than for roads.

By the time the sun admitted to being up, the ford looked as it had looked for years: a place with a habit and no appetite for being clever. The men looked as men do who have done work that will make little noise now and save much noise later. They parted with courtesy and small jokes about apples and chalk. The willow‑holt, relieved of its borrowed trinkets, moved very slightly in a breeze and seemed to be thinking of nothing that a ledger would need to hold.

# Chapter 17: Keep the Watches

After harvest the light comes up like a man clearing his throat: modestly, and with a mind to get on. The lane by the Hay Gate held a coolness under its hedge where dew had set its quiet work, and the board at the post took the morning without warping. The boy with the chalk stood on tiptoe to test it, as if stubbornness could be measured by a finger’s push. Tomberic lifted the stringed chalk down and showed him how to take its measure at the top rail and at the bottom, and to trust the middle if both behaved.

Tolly came from the ford with a bit of willow rind clinging to his sleeve and the look of a man who has been listening to water. Maralda had two square copies under her arm, tied with red thread, and a third tucked in, because it is good practice to have one more than the number of hands promised. Nathron stood already with the elder Bounder, both reading the rota board with the sort of attention that makes any board hold itself straighter.

“After harvest,” the Bounder said to nobody in particular, as if the season itself were a helper whose back had earned a word. “A lane likes its rules best when the work is in, not in a drought or a crush.” He tapped the compact with one knuckle. “We will take these down to the ford overlook next and let their letters teach that board to stand up as tidy as this one.”

“We’ll bring spare string for the chalk,” Tomberic said. “Chalk strings think themselves great travellers.” “We will carry the copies together by bells,” Maralda said to Tolly, as if it were the most natural sharing of weight in the world.

They went by the hedge path that keeps a man in friendly company with thorns to the small rise from which the ford can be counted stone by stone. The overlook was only a patch of sward with a view, a post set by a thoughtful Bounder some year or other, and a plank screwed into it that had done duty as a board and then thought better of it in rain. Maralda looked at the plank and at the knots that showed where rain had found a home; then she spread her clean copy and smoothed it as if smoothing a child’s hair.

“We will not make more show here than sense,” she said. “But we will write the same short words so that a man’s eyes do not have to change their gait between the posts.” She pinned the copy with two small tacks at the top and one at the bottom and tied the chalk as at the Gate.

The ferryman came up from the bank with his coat over one shoulder and a look that had more sleep than suspicion in it. He nodded to the Ranger and the Bounder and to the hobbits as to neighbours whose habits he had learned and approved of in the main.

“We’ve a knot to teach you,” Tolly said, holding the cord as one offers a useful tool and not a trick. “Tight turn for doubling dawn and dusk; straight tie for all watches as posted; loose loop for wait on the look. No secret to any of it, only a way to keep the mouth from outrunning the hands.”

The ferryman watched once, then twice, and made each of them without looking and with the sort of economy that belongs to men who live with ropes. “That will do,” he said. “I can tie talk as well as any man if it keeps a boat off a bar.” He looked at the board, at the brief lines, and at the chalk’s string. “And I will put that string right if it frays, for it irks me to see a thing fall apart for want of a penny’s care.”

They stood a moment together, six figures looking down at the ford where the ferrystone wore its familiar face. A breeze set the willow leaves trembling and laid a cheap gloss on the shallow patch where the wrong bar had been persuaded to pretend a channel. It failed at pretending now, like a story a boy is tired of telling but keeps for the pleasure of saying he has a story.

“No new cairns,” Nathron said. “No fresh tar on the low stakes.”

“No reeds answered,” the Bounder added, half to himself, writing it with his own voice so the day would keep the note.

From the south a rider showed, slow and courteous. He came without hurry, as men come who have learned that being thought dull is another way to keep a thing safe. He had the habit of Rangers about him, but he was not Nathron or any other of the small company that had kept watch at hand. He saluted, then took a folded strip from his coat and held it with two fingers so that both the giving and the keeping were modest.

“A message relayed,” he said, “from the watches farther south. Keep the watches.” He did not say more, and he did not look as if he would, but there was a hint of a smile about his mouth that had more weather than jest in it. “Said to come by a grey pilgrim, courteous and in haste, who prefers that good rules do the walking without him.”

“Then we will not make him walk here,” the Bounder said, grave and pleased. He took the strip and pinned it for a day below the compact so that the words would have a chance to sink in, even though no one present was likely to forget words so simple.

Tolly wrote the line on the ledger square in the same hand as the rest, for a ledger is a place where short things belong. “Message relayed from south: Keep the watches.” He did not add any name to that, for the name mattered less than the keeping.

They went down again by the bank to where the ferry plank should be checked after a freshet, and Maralda ran her hand along the wood as if it were a creature that could sulk if ignored. “No cracks that matter,” she said. “A scrub of sand and a dab of tar when the day is good and hot.” The ferryman agreed; he would do it without any posting to tell him so.

On the way back to the Gate they met two young Bounders coming the other way, each with a staff that looked older than its owner. The boy with the chalk introduced the second as if he were introducing a dog he was proud of because it learned to sit. He taught the tight turn with a satisfaction so tidy it almost tidied the knot by itself.

“If you tie it with your eyes looking elsewhere,” Tolly said, “you will have it when a man thinks to count your fingers and finds only your courtesy.”

The new boy laughed with that lightness a person has when he learns something neat without being made to feel the lesson was a penance. He tied the knot again without looking, then unmade it so it would not be wasted and clapped the chalk boy on the shoulder as if he had been shown where the good blackberries were.

Toward noon a single traveller came off the Greenway spur with a pack that had been tied and untied more times than it had been carried and with an anxious way of looking at his own bootlaces. He asked after the ford and whether a man might cross at his own wit if his wit were willing to learn. They gave him water and the sort of talk that does not fence a man in but shows him where the hedges stand. He ate a bite and decided he would, in fact, like to see how a ferry looks in daylight. The Bounder noted the time on the board: a dot and a short word, “escort,” nothing about the man that would follow him past the ford into any tales he did not wish for.

“We are doing little things,” Tomberic said, leaning against the post as if leaning were a craft. “Little things are the kind that do not need to be done all over again if you do them in time.”

“And they keep a certain sort of man from thinking he is a hero when he is only tidy,” Maralda returned, which was as near as she came to teasing. She tied a red sliver to the edge of her second copy and passed it to the Bounder. “Mayor’s copy and Mathom-house copy will carry tonight. Tomberic can bear the service copies. If anyone wishes to see how a rule looks when tied, he can ask the ferryman. He has learned to tie talk.” Tolly steadied the strap of her satchel while she worked, and neither spoke of it.

They took the fork‑crown willow on the way back and stood a moment with the habit of men who like to check a thing when they have told themselves they were finished checking for the day. The split stick token sat quiet. Tolly touched it, untying the tight turn it did not need now, leaving only the straight tie for “all watches as posted.” Below it the loose loop for “wait on the look” was left alone, because waiting is a thing a gate does whether men write it down or not.

“That is what an ordinary day looks like when it behaves,” Nathron said, not to claim it but to remember it. “If it changes, your boards will tell you. If it does not, your boards will become pieces of the lane, which is the highest honour a board can hope for.”

They sat in the shade a short time, because men who keep lanes must let lanes keep them from time to time, and Tolly wrote out two new clean copies of the compact on square paper, each tied with red thread and labelled in the corner in a neat hand: “Hay Gate post—file; ford overlook—file.” He made sure the thread’s ends were short so they would not catch on the board and give a passer‑by a reason to fuss with them. Maralda took a last look and slid one copy into Tolly’s satchel without comment, keeping the other for her own. It is a small thing, to divide paper, and a large one when it forecasts work shared.

In the afternoon a crow‑flight came east and counted the lines of hedge without drawing much attention; it was ordinary counting, more like a man who checks his pockets before leaving a house than like an auditor. The birds dropped out of sight one by one and then rose again when it suited them. The ferrystone kept its old voice, a hair lower by evening and then steady.

At day’s end they walked together as far as the chalk road where talk is expected to be brief and neighbourly. Nathron took the path south with the other Ranger who had brought the brief message; the Bounders turned back along the hedge; the ferryman went down to see to his oars. Tomberic touched the posted board, which is an odd habit to pick up but not a disrespectful one, and grinned as if the wood had answered him.

“We keep the watches,” he said.

“We do,” the Bounder said. “And we keep them in a way that makes no song and shortens no man by being kept.”

Tolly looked once more down the lane toward the ford, and the picture that came to him had no drama in it: only a plank, a stone, a willow, a line of water with its own loyal talk, and a board with plain words. He thought of the day when such boards might be taken for granted or taken down, and he did not hurry to pick one of those thoughts. He set his hand to the post and felt the grain. Memory is a kind of watch, he thought, and he had work enough to do at both.

# Chapter 18: The Ford Holds

Morning had the look of metal rubbed thin over the river. The ford lay plain; the shallows stitched their small white thread where the ribs showed, and the ferrystone kept its knuckled back the height it ought. Tolly crouched at the ford overlook and set his palm on the old post to feel whether the day had a tremor in it. It did not. He counted the hiss and the push the way a man says grace before eating, from good habit and not from fear.

“Steady,” he said, when Tomberic came up with a coil of rope that had no ambition. “A finger lower than yesterday’s noon, maybe, but not so as to give a proud skiff any reason to strut.”

Maralda noted it without flourish. “Steady,” she wrote, and put a small bar under the word to show the river’s tone rather than its measure. The boy with the chalk, promoted in his own mind to keeper of boards, stood on his toes and peered past Tolly’s shoulder as if the water itself might read the word and approve.

Down at Sarn Ford the ferryman came along the plank, a can of oil in one hand and a rag in the other, with the contentment of a man who has found a job that only needs time and neatness. He nodded to the elder Bounder and to Nathron, who had appeared at first light as if the willow had decided to grow a man for the morning. The Ranger had a strip of paper under his thumb and a look that counted well and hurried nothing.

“No new cairns,” the Bounder called softly, not to wake anything that might be sleeping out of season. “No thumb‑marks on caps. Your twig sits like a thought a ferryman would have had without us.”

“Good,” Nathron said. “We keep courtesy; we keep watches; we keep the truth of the bar.” He smiled a little and did not tire it.

They made their courtesy rounds in a short half‑hour. The elder Bounder rubbed the rota board with a damp rag and set a clean edge to the chalk marks; the boy rewound the chalk’s string with the seriousness of a man binding a book. At the fork‑crown willow Tolly touched the token that meant “all watches as posted” and left the loose loop where it was, for waiting is not laziness when a gate is in view. On the post by the board a small thing had been left in the night: a short length of plain cord tar‑touched and tied about with a thread of red. No one had seen the hand that brought it; the Bounder set it in the corner by the ledger slate and, with a piece of chalk, wrote: “cord returned.”

“Someone’s figures went wanting,” Tomberic said, and did not seek to know whose. He offered the ferryman two apples without ceremony, and in return received the promise of a dab of tar for the plank when the sun stood higher. “You cannot beat a fair trade for keeping peace,” he observed, and the ferryman laughed softly as if that proverb had been waiting to be said all morning.

By mid‑day Nathron brought out the strip he had kept under his thumb and added a few words in a spare hand.

“A message,” he said. “Plain as a fence rail; no names; no boasting.” He read it so that all could carry it whole: “False cairns removed; cord and tar set by unknown hands collected; twig leaned at true run; ferrystone voice steady. Compact posted at Hay Gate and overlook; countersign by proverb; escorts by day only. No reeds answered. Keep the watches.” He folded the strip again and sealed it with a bit of wax that kept no crest, only a thumb’s truth.

A rider from farther south, who had come by the Greenway with no wish to be admired, stepped out of the shade and took the strip as a man takes a loaf, grateful and not making poetry of it. “I will carry it,” he said. “If there is more to be said it will be said in the same size.” He bowed in a way that gave no one any reason to bow back more than once, and was gone between the hedges with the calm of a man riding along a line he already knew.

In the afternoon a skiff showed where the river broadens shyly before the ford, a low thing with a parish bundle in the middle and a man who had the look of somebody who had been told old stories of rivers and had decided to believe only half of them. He had come by day, as a decent fellow does when he is new to a place; a Bounder walked the bank with him, no more command than a friendly company, and the ferryman gave a small lift with the pole where the true run gathers itself. The skiff made the crossing without scrape or pride. The man raised his hat; the Bounder put a dot on the board and the very short word “escort” beside the hour.

A reed called later, thin and hopeful from the far side, three short and one longer, as if someone had been told it would work and wished to report success. The wind gave it back in tatters and nobody answered. The boy listened with a face like a young clerk finding an error that would ruin no one’s supper and then went back to his business of trimming the board’s ragged paper edge.

“Some lessons end by not being taught,” Maralda said. “I prefer that sort.”

They walked the overlook toward late light. The willow‑holt wore a gloss like good iron; the bright stones taken from their bad manners shone a little in the sack where the elder Bounder had put them, ready to become a garden path in some place where shine belongs. Tolly read the ferrystone once more because he does not trust a day that has gone too kindly to keep its shape at the last. It spoke the same word it had spoken in the morning and seemed content to keep it.

“It holds,” he said simply.

“Then we may go home by hedges,” Tomberic answered. “If we take the lane that minds the hay‑house, we can smell the apples even if we never so much as eat one.”

“We will carry the Mayor’s copy and Mossfoot’s,” Maralda said. “By bells tomorrow, and the ledger will stand a little straighter for the weight.” She tied her fresh copy with the same small neatness that had become her habit as surely as Tolly’s pencil had become his, then reached without fuss to settle the strap of his satchel so it would not rub. He said “By bells,” and she answered with a look that needed no word.

Toward evening the ferryman oiled his oars, the kind of labour that looks like idleness if you do not know the price of dry wood. The boy swept the dirt from the foot of the post and, seeing that the board’s edge had begun to feather a little with being read, took out his knife and trimmed it tidy, no flourish, no whittling, only the care that keeps a thing from becoming shabby for want of a minute. The elder Bounder made his mark on the rota where the dots meet and shook his head once at a thought that had tried to make itself important and failed.

“If there are men counting, let them count this,” he said. “A cart in its lane; a plank with oil where it needs it; a board whose words are short; and a river that knows its own mind.”

They took the hedge path that keeps a man on good terms with thorns. From the rise you can see the ford and, beyond it, a grey slice of the south country going on about its business without telling you exactly what that business is. The breeze came up out of the west with the smell of cut grass and a little of the damp place under the willows. Crows went to their beds in a sensible way, in small knots and without sermon.

By sundown they stood again at the Hay Gate. The post kept its board as it had in the morning; the chalk swung once and was still. Tolly set his scrap on the shelf in the watch‑house and wrote in a hand that does not dawdle: “Ford holds; warnings sent south; watches keep.” He added the hour and a small mark like a leaf so that anyone who had watched as long as he had would know whose shorthand it was without any pride being harmed by the knowing.

Tomberic set a coil of rope on the peg where rope likes to hang and does not kink itself for mischief. Maralda slipped the copies into her satchel under the red thread and nodded to the boy, who had been pretending not to wait for such a nod since he had got up. Nathron touched the brim of a hat that might have been anyone’s and looked south the way a man looks at a road he does not own and will nevertheless keep safe by courtesy.

“We have taken nothing from the river it would not thank us to remove,” he said. “We have added nothing it did not already prefer.”

“And we have left a sentence where men can see it when their minds go woolly,” the Bounder added, tapping the board. “That is honest work.”

They parted without ceremony. The ford, having been minded with small hands and short words, went on making its own music. The willow leaves shook themselves once like a dog coming out of water, and then the hush came back that belongs to places which are not lonely but do not wish to be crowded with talk. The road to Michel Delving lay the way it always had, and the hedges were in a mood to be kind to travellers who understood that kindness often looks like a stile in good condition and a gate that does not stick.

# Epilogue: The Memory Kept

By bells the steps of the Mathom-house held their cool, as if stone can remember shade better than sun. The sound from the square below climbed up and thinned: cart talk and gossip to do with apples and an aunt who had promised jam and had delivered stories instead. Maralda came up the last rise with Tolly and Tomberic, and Mossfoot was waiting in the doorway with the look of a man who has learned not to look surprised when ordinary things bring news.

“By bells,” he said, because it is proper to greet a ledger by its hour. “If you have brought the sort of nothing that proves something, you may come in.”

They went through the long room where the old buckles and the bounders’ staves hang their sleep, and into the ledger chamber where the ink keeps the Mayor company. The air had a smell of paper and patience. Maralda put her satchel on the table and untied the red thread on the first packet with the care one gives to a thing that has learned its own worth by being carried. She set a small square on the table: a clean map copy of the ford’s bars, “before” and “after”, dots for bright stones in the first, a plain run in the second, twig marks for the true line. Her hand had made it plain and not clever.

“Map copy,” she said. “Witnessed by Nathron; to be kept with the ford notes. Square hand; no flourishes.”

Next she laid down the knot primer: loops and ties shown in small drawings with their meaning written to the side in a way a ferryman’s fingers would understand faster than his eyes. End knot for attention; double for bells; loose loop for wait; tight loop for go; tail‑tuck for left; fork for right; straight tie for all watches as posted; the tight turn for doubled dawn and dusk when the river sits lower. Tolly tapped each with a pencil as if the touch would fix it more firmly in the world.

“Knot primer,” he said. “Learned by practice; not secret; to be shared with bound posts and ferry folk.”

The tar scrap came next, flaky now and tied about with a thread of red, and beside it a short length of plain cord that had met tar against its will. A small note in Maralda’s square hand went with them: “Found at bar’s end; likely from stake; kept to answer small questions.” Mossfoot read the note and nodded in that way a man does when he is grateful to be spared a speech.

“All this,” Mossfoot murmured, “fits with what my nose thought it knew and what my knees thought about the river in fog. I like it better on the table.” He turned to Tolly. “And you, lad, do you bring the day in a line?”

Tolly set out the short ledger sentences he had kept in his pocket book and transcribed them into the town volume while Mossfoot watched the neatness of the pen more than its speed. “By sundown fog lay low. Lantern one swing low; no answers to reeds. Wake took shoal; horn two notes south. Packet recovered and sealed. Watch tokens set as posted.” Then the day later: “False cairns removed by joint hands; twig leaned at true run; ferrystone steady. Cord and tar collected. Compact posted. Escorts by day only. Keep the watches.” And yesterday: “Ford holds; warnings south; boards tidy.”

Tomberic stood with his hat in his hands, a rare thing for Tomberic, and only smiled in a way that said this room liked quiet jokes. He set a small bag of bright pebbles on the table and said, “Garden path.” Mossfoot grinned and said the Mayor’s wife would be pleased to see shine in a place where shine belongs.

“We will lodge the copies in order,” Maralda said, her voice turning from road to record without losing itself. “Mayor’s sentence in the civic book; ford packet in the Mathom-house ledger drawer; one square posted at the Hay Gate and one at the overlook already; this primer to be taught by hand to those who need it and not to those who like cleverness for its own sake.”

The Mayor came in while she spoke, with dust on his cuffs and a mind for short talk. He set his name with a plain mark on the line that said “received and entered by bells.” He was a man who trusted things to hold if you give them the right drawer and the right hour, and he preferred his drawers labelled and his hours rung.

“We do not make a parade,” he said, which was as much oration as the room would suffer. “The posts already tell the folk what they need, and the ferryman will teach any honest hand to tie what talk cannot teach. I am glad of your red thread.” He tapped it as if it were a small banner fit for this house and no other. He looked from Maralda to Tolly and back. “You keep tidy company between you. The town does well by it.”

They went out to the steps to let the ink dry. The square kept its afternoon in a sensible fashion. A child ran across with a pretend sword and a piece of string at his wrist tied in two colours. “That is for counting,” he told another, solemn with the importance of being seen doing a thing properly. Over by the well a woman said to her neighbour that the leaf‑banner in the west room looked less of a rumour these days and more of a thing that can anchor talk without starting fights. It was the sort of sentence Michel Delving says when it has decided to remember something.

“We will send a copy to the Mathom-house’s country drawer,” Mossfoot said. “And a note to the Hay Gate: ‘Boards stand; rota holds; no answers to reeds; day only for strangers at the ford.’ That last line is as old as good sense.”

“Old things like to be said as if they were new once in a while,” Tomberic replied. “It keeps them from sulking.”

They went back in, and Maralda tied the red thread on the packet one last time and wrote on the corner, small and square: “Sarn Ford, SR 1417; bar cleared; compact posted; knot primer taught; ‘Keep the watches’ relayed.” She set it in the drawer that holds river things: ferry receipts from winters that tried to break boats; a list of repairs done to the plank when a freshet unsettled the nails; a thin stone that once sat on a shelf in a ferryman’s shed and remembered the shape of boots. Tolly stood near enough to read the neatness of her hand without crowding it. She did not handle the other objects. It is impolite to wake old things without cause.

Mossfoot took the civic book and gave it its place with the weight of a man who respects paper when it has been honest. “This will stand for what it needs to stand for,” he said, not grandly. “If anyone from south asks whether the ford is left to chance, we will say it is left to courtesy, which is a stronger keeper.”

Tolly stood a moment in the doorway and let the square fill his eyes: steps dipped in the middle by many careful feet; a boy being taught to carry a bucket with both hands and not to slop; a cart that had decided to creak only when asked; bells counting an hour with no hurry. In his pocket, folded once and then again, lay the scrap where he wrote for himself and not for drawers. He looked at it and, because a man may keep a private sentence without betraying a public one, he wrote under the last neat line: “There and back by hedge and stone.” He made the letters small enough that they would not quarrel with the other business. Maralda, seeing him fold the paper away, offered a fresh square from her satchel with a sliver of red thread through the corner. “For the next errand,” she said, as if the world had quietly agreed there would be one.

“Home?” Tomberic said, as if the word were a place as well as a roof.

“Home,” Tolly agreed. “By the lane that minds the hay‑house.”

They left Mossfoot and the Mayor to their drawers and their bells. The steps down were cool; outside, the square had warmed to its late light and a smell of apples and clean buckets. The talk ran on but not about them. That was for the best. They would carry their small boast inward, where boasts belong if they are to keep from souring. Without needing to speak of it, they turned toward the same road out of town and set their feet to one pace.

At the door, where the sun and the room meet and are polite to each other, Tolly looked once over his shoulder. The Mathom-house kept its ordinary light as if it had been built to teach ordinary to any thing that came in too proud. The pages would go quiet and the red thread would cease to look like a ribbon and become a tag again. Outside, the lanes were bright, and the boards at the posts would go on telling the same short words until they were not needed and then, perhaps, telling them still, because good words like to work even when they have nothing left to carry.

They went down into the square, and the bell counted as it always had. The wind out of the west turned a leaf against the step and let it lie. Far away, where the road runs lean and the talk grows thin, other matters would be moving; but here a ford had kept its word, and neighbours had kept theirs. By bells the Shire minded its habits, and the ford minded the river, and between them there was peace enough to be worth guarding.