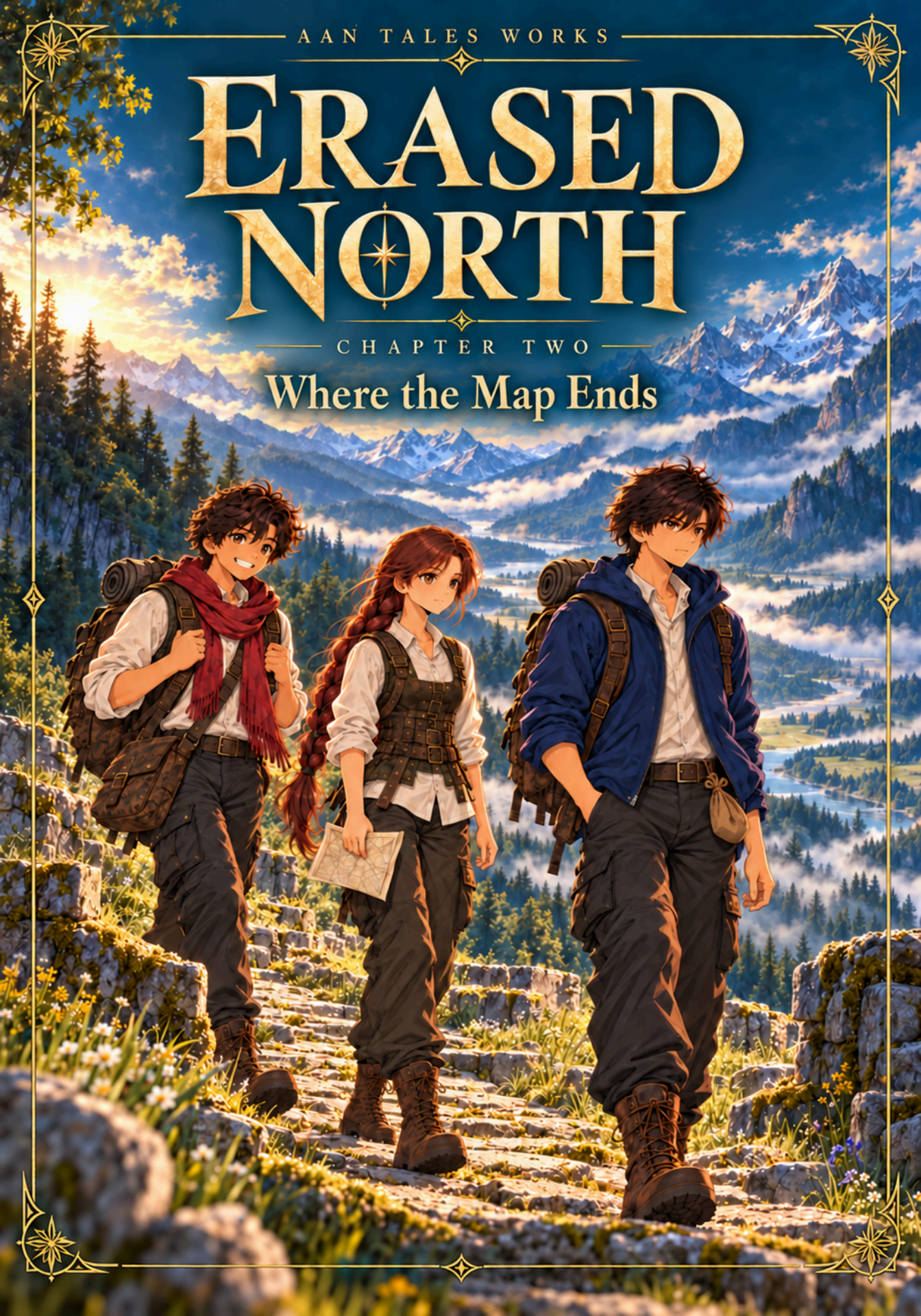
AAN TALES WORKS

ERASED NORTH

CHAPTER TWO

Where the Map Ends



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Where the Map Ends

By the time the town disappeared behind them, the sun had already climbed above the eastern hills. At first, leaving had not felt particularly dramatic.

The road beyond town was familiar enough. It passed between open fields and low stone walls, through patches of farmland where morning dew still clung to the grass. Wooden fences followed the edges of the fields, and here and there thin trails of smoke rose from distant farmhouses as families began their day.



For a while, Rayan could almost have convinced himself that this was nothing more than a long morning walk. Almost.

But every time his hand brushed against the pocket where the Broken Compass rested, he remembered why they were there.

They were following a road that officially did not exist.

Behind them were familiar doors, familiar voices and people who would know their names. Ahead lay a line of measurements copied from an old record. Rayan tried not to think about how little that was to carry into the mountains.

The straps of his backpack pressed against his shoulders. He adjusted them and felt the Compass through his pocket once more. It was a small, ordinary movement, but Mira noticed.

"It hasn't gone anywhere," she said.

"I know."

"You've checked three times since the last fence."

Sami glanced at the fence behind them. "Four. I wasn't going to mention it."

Rayan let his hand fall. For a moment, their laughter made the distance from home feel smaller.

Rayan walked slightly ahead of the others, his boots darkened by the damp ground. The weight of the supplies they had divided between them was noticeable, but he hardly paid attention to it. His eyes kept moving between the landscape ahead and the mountains rising beyond it.

They had seemed far away when viewed from town. Out here, they looked different. Larger. Colder. And much less welcoming.

Sami walked several steps behind him, carrying his rugged backpack and occasionally adjusting its weight against his shoulders. He had been talkative when they first left town, but even he had grown quieter as the familiar roads began to disappear.

Mira walked between them with the copied information from AR-317 protected carefully among her things. Every few minutes, she stopped to compare the old survey measurements with the landscape. Rayan slowed and looked back.

"Anything?"

Mira did not answer immediately.

She studied the record, then looked toward a low ridge ahead of them. Her eyes moved carefully from one landmark to another.

"The elevation matches," she said eventually. "And that ridge should be the same one mentioned in the survey."



Sami looked around. There was no road.

Only grass, weeds, scattered stones and an uneven stretch of countryside leading toward the foothills. He turned to Mira.

"Are we absolutely sure this used to be a road?"

"The measurements say it was."

Rayan reached into his pocket and took out the Broken Compass.

Morning light caught along its worn brass casing as he opened the lid. Beneath the cracked glass, the single needle trembled. It did not point north. It shifted slowly toward the mountains. Rayan watched it.

"And this seems to agree."

Sami leaned over just enough to look at it.

"That is not as reassuring as you think."

Rayan gave him a small smile. Then the needle twitched again. All three of them noticed. The smile faded from Rayan's face. Mira stepped closer.

"Don't move it."

"I'm not."

For several seconds, the tiny mechanism inside the Compass gave a faint metallic vibration. Then it stopped. The needle remained at an angle. Not north.



Not quite along the faint track they had been following, either. Toward the rough ground beyond the fields. Mira looked from the Compass to the landscape.

"Let's keep going."

Rayan closed the lid. They continued.

* * *

The countryside changed gradually.

There was no single point where the familiar world ended. Instead, pieces of it simply became less common. The fences became older. Then fewer.

The cultivated fields gave way to patches of wild grass.

The wide tracks narrowed until they were little more than worn lines through the earth. Eventually even those began to disappear. The mountains filled more of the horizon now.

The morning breeze carried the smell of wet soil and pine. Somewhere in the distance, water flowed. Rayan found himself listening differently.

Back in town there had always been something underneath the silence - voices through open windows, cart wheels, doors opening and closing, someone calling from across a street. Here, the spaces between sounds were much larger.

A bird calling from somewhere among the trees could seem strangely loud. So could the crunch of their own footsteps. Mira stopped suddenly. Rayan nearly walked past her.

"What is it?"

She pointed toward the ground. At first he saw nothing unusual. Grass. Mud. Small stones.

Then Mira stepped sideways and pressed the heel of her boot against a patch of weeds.

"Look at the level."

Sami crouched beside her. The ground beneath the vegetation was unusually flat. Not naturally flat.

It formed a broad strip running across the slope. Rayan looked farther along it.

Once he knew what to look for, he began seeing it too. A line hidden beneath everything else.

Mira walked several paces forward, pushing aside tall grass with her boot. Something pale appeared beneath it. Stone.

She crouched and cleared away some of the soil. The edge was straight. Sami came closer.

"Part of the road?"

"Maybe."

Mira followed the stone line. A few metres farther on, they found another. Then another. Rayan's heartbeat quickened. They spread out.

What had looked like meaningless pieces of landscape began connecting.

A weathered stone post leaned at an angle beneath a thorn bush.

Farther ahead, a shallow depression ran parallel to the flattened ground. Mira examined it.

"Drainage channel."



Sami looked at the earth packed inside it.

"Doesn't look very useful."

"Not anymore."

She stood and looked along the slope.

"But it wouldn't be here unless there was something to drain."

Rayan turned slowly.

Now that the pieces had been pointed out, he could almost imagine it. A road.

Not a narrow mountain trail, but an engineered route wide enough to have required drainage and boundary markers. It had been here.

AR-317 had not simply recorded an idea on an old map. People had built this road. People had travelled it.

Rayan crouched beside one of the exposed stones. Its centre had worn smoother than its edges. He traced the hollow with his eyes,

imagining footsteps passing over the same place until even stone had yielded.

That small sign troubled him more than the abandoned road itself. It made the route feel used, practical, once familiar. Someone might have known these bends as well as he knew the streets around the General Store.

Now the stones lay beneath weeds, and they were struggling even to find them.

Rayan stared toward the mountains.

"So they really erased it."

Mira looked at him.

"We know the records were altered."

She glanced at the buried stone beneath her feet.

"And now we know the road existed."

"Does this look like it disappeared just because nobody used it?" Sami asked.

Mira remained silent. Rayan looked around again. He understood what Sami meant.

Old roads could be abandoned. Grass could grow through cracks. Trees could spread across paths. Rain and winter could damage stone. But this felt different. Boundary stones were half buried. The drainage channel had been filled.

Sections of the road surface appeared to have been covered deliberately rather than simply broken apart.

It was as if the landscape had been encouraged to swallow the road.

Rayan felt a faint chill that had nothing to do with the morning air. Someone had removed the road from the records.

Had someone tried to remove it from the land as well? The filled channel and covered stonework made him suspect it, but suspicion was not proof.

"Why?" he asked quietly.

Neither Mira nor Sami answered. There was no answer yet. Only another question.

And somewhere ahead, hidden beneath years of soil and vegetation, the forgotten road continued.

* * *

By late morning, following it became harder.

Sometimes the old route revealed itself for twenty or thirty metres at a time. Then it vanished. They learned to look for small inconsistencies. Ground that was too level.

Stones that formed lines nature was unlikely to make.

Trees growing in strangely even positions along what might once have been a roadside.

Whenever they lost the alignment, Mira returned to the measurements from AR-317.

Whenever the measurements became uncertain, Rayan checked the Broken Compass. Neither method was perfect. Together, however, they kept moving.

Eventually they reached a place where the land divided around a rocky rise.

To the left, a narrow but clearly used mountain path curved uphill between the trees. To the right, there was almost nothing. Only rough ground, thick weeds and scattered rock. Mira checked the survey information again.

"The old alignment goes right."

Sami stared at the rough slope.

"Of course it does."

Rayan opened the Compass. The needle shivered. For a moment it remained still. Then the mechanism inside gave a soft whir. The needle turned. Right. Toward the rough ground. Rayan immediately stepped forward.

"That's our route."

"Wait."

Mira's voice stopped him. He turned. She was still standing where the paths divided.

"The survey points that way," Rayan said.

"I know."

"And the Compass points that way."

"I can see that."

"Then what's the problem?"

Mira folded the survey sheet carefully.

"We don't know what it's reacting to."

Rayan glanced at the Compass.

"It has led us this far."

"No." Mira's voice was calm but firm. "Evidence led us this far. The Compass helped."

Rayan frowned.

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is that we can understand the evidence."

She pointed toward the Compass.

"We still don't understand that."

Rayan looked down at the object in his hand.

The needle continued pointing toward the rough slope as though the argument had nothing to do with it.

For a moment, the only sound was wind moving through the grass. Then Sami stepped between the two routes.

"We could just look around before choosing."

Rayan and Mira both turned toward him. Sami shrugged.

"The old survey says right. The Compass says right. Mira says don't blindly trust the mysterious broken object."



"I didn't say it like that," Mira replied.

"Not exactly."

He pointed toward the ground.

"So let's see if the road leaves us anything useful."

Rayan looked back at the rough route. Part of him wanted to continue immediately.

Every hour they spent examining stones and measurements felt like another hour between him and whatever his father might have known. But he remembered Mr Halden's warning. Think before you rush into things. He closed the Compass.

"Fine."

They searched.

This time Rayan made himself look before reaching for the Compass. He followed the level strip with his eyes, searching for where it emerged beyond the weeds. Mira checked the slope against her notes. Sami moved toward the trees, where the ground was softer and might hold marks.

Working separately for a few paces made the search quieter. Rayan could hear a loose buckle tapping against Sami's pack and the dry whisper of Mira unfolding the survey. They were ordinary sounds. He was grateful for them.

Rayan and Mira compared what remained of the alignment with the survey. Sami searched along the edge of the trees. For several minutes, nobody found anything. Then Sami stopped.

"Rayan."

Something in his voice made Rayan turn immediately. Sami was crouching beside a low branch.

"What?"

"Come here."

Rayan and Mira joined him. Sami pointed. The branch had been cut. Not snapped by wind. Not torn by an animal. Cut. The exposed wood was pale beneath the bark. Mira touched it lightly.

"This isn't old."

Rayan's attention moved instantly to the surrounding ground. Sami was already looking.

A patch of mud lay beneath the trees where rainwater had collected.

Most of its surface was disturbed by leaves and small animal tracks. But near the edge was something else. A partial impression. The heel and outer edge of a boot. Rayan crouched. For several seconds, he said nothing. Someone had been here. Not when the road was built.



Not decades ago. Recently. His chest tightened. A thought came before he could stop it.

"My father..."

Mira looked at him. Rayan kept staring at the print.

"What if he came this way?"

"Rayan."

"What if this is -"

"Recent doesn't mean your father."

The words hurt more than he expected. He looked up at her. Mira's expression softened.

"But it does mean somebody still knows this road exists."

Rayan looked back at the boot print. Hope and disappointment sat uncomfortably together inside him. Mira was right.

There was nothing here that connected the print to his father. Nothing except what Rayan wanted it to mean.

He looked for another print, something clearer, something that would let him argue. There was only crushed grass beyond the mud.

Mira waited beside him without speaking. That was easier to bear than reassurance. She had not dismissed the discovery; she had only refused to turn it into a promise. At last, Rayan nodded. "Somebody," he said.

"Somebody," she agreed.

Sami stood and looked farther into the trees.

"Whoever it was," he said, "they may have been following the road too."

Rayan rose slowly.

The cut branch marked a passage through the undergrowth.

The boot print pointed in the same direction as the forgotten road. Toward the mountains. He opened the Compass again. The needle trembled.

And this time, when they started walking, none of them joked about where it was pointing.

* * *

The route climbed.

By afternoon, the open countryside was far behind them.

Trees crowded closer around the old road, their roots pushing through the earth and twisting over buried stonework. Sunlight reached the ground in broken patches, moving slowly across the path as branches shifted overhead. The air had become cooler.

Rayan could hear water somewhere ahead, although he could not yet see it.

The Broken Compass had become increasingly difficult to understand. Sometimes its needle shifted confidently along the route. Sometimes it trembled without choosing a direction. And sometimes it simply stopped. Rayan tapped the casing lightly with one finger. Nothing. He tapped it again. Sami looked over.

"I'm fairly sure hitting ancient mysterious objects is how bad stories begin."

"I wasn't hitting it."

"You were negotiating aggressively."

Rayan looked at him.

Sami managed to keep a straight face for approximately two seconds. Rayan laughed despite himself. Even Mira smiled.

The tension that had followed the boot print loosened slightly. Rayan closed the Compass.

"Fine. I'll let it think."

"Very considerate."

They continued uphill.



A few minutes later, the sound of water grew louder. Not the gentle trickle of a stream. Something heavier. Faster. The trees opened. Rayan stopped.

The old road ended at the edge of a rocky ravine.

Below them, mountain water rushed between dark stones, white where it struck the rocks and deep grey where it narrowed between them.

On the opposite bank, the land rose sharply beneath the trees. Mira looked at AR-317. Then at the water.

"The road crossed here."

Sami stared at the ravine.

"That's inconvenient."

Rayan stepped closer to the edge.

Fragments of old stonework remained on both sides of the stream. Bridge supports. Or what was left of them.

Whatever structure had once carried the road across was long gone. Rayan opened the Compass. The needle moved once. Then stopped. He waited. Nothing. Sami leaned slightly toward it.

"Any helpful ancient instructions?"

"No."

"Excellent."

Mira was already looking upstream.

"There may have been a maintenance path."

"How can you tell?" Rayan asked.

"The slope."

She pointed to a narrow shelf of land running between rocks and trees.

"If people maintained the bridge, they'd need access to the supports."



Sami looked in the same direction. Then he pointed.

"What about that?"

A large tree had fallen across a narrower part of the stream.

Its trunk stretched from their bank to the far side of the stream. Rayan studied it.

"It could work."

Mira did not answer immediately. The water below moved quickly. Very quickly.

"We check it first," she said.

They made their way upstream along the narrow shelf Mira had noticed. It brought them closer to the fallen tree, but it did not cross the water. Beyond the trunk, the shelf narrowed against a steep rock face.

The tree lay across the ravine at a shallow angle. Its thick root end rested on their bank; the narrower end reached a shelf of earth above the opposite rocks. Several broken branches jutted from the bark. Below, the stream struck a boulder with enough force to throw spray into the air.

Rayan tested the trunk with one boot, then pressed more of his weight onto it. It did not move.



"One at a time," Mira said. "And watch the branches."

"I'll go first."

She looked at the opposite end, then back at him. "Slowly."

He tightened his backpack straps and stepped onto the bark. At first the trunk felt broad beneath his boots. Near the middle, where the wood narrowed, he extended his arms for balance. The noise below seemed to rise around him.

He looked down once and immediately wished he hadn't. White water broke over black stone, then vanished into a dark channel downstream.

Look ahead. Find the next place for your foot.

He took another step, then another. When he reached the far side, he climbed onto the earthen shelf and let out the breath he had been holding.

"I'm across."

"I can see that," Sami called. "Try to look less pleased about it."

Rayan slipped off his backpack and set it on the shelf beside the end of the trunk. His shoulders ached. He rolled them once, keeping his eyes on Sami as his friend began to cross.

Mira stayed on the original bank. From there, she could see the underside of the trunk and the branches hidden from Rayan's view.

Sami moved cautiously, placing each boot before shifting his weight. His backpack swayed when he raised his arms. He reached the middle, passed it, and began to relax.

Then a loose strap caught on a broken branch.



The pull stopped him sharply. He twisted to look behind him, and his heel slid along the damp bark.

"Wait. I'm stuck."

Rayan stepped back onto the trunk.

"Don't move. I'll get it."

"Rayan, wait," Mira called. "Let him get his balance."

But Rayan was already reaching for Sami's arm. Beneath their combined weight, the narrower end of the tree pressed into the wet earth. Something cracked at the far bank. Not the wood. The shelf beneath it split.

The shelf crumbled. The trunk dropped onto the rocks below, jolting both boys. Rayan's backpack fell into the stream and vanished in the current. Sami's foot slipped completely off the bark.

Rayan caught his forearm and dropped to one knee, clamping his free arm around a branch stub. Pain shot through his palm. Sami hung against the side of the trunk, one leg searching for purchase above the water.



"Don't pull yet!" Mira shouted.

She had crouched at the rooted end, watching the snagged strap. She could not reach Sami from there, but she could see what was holding him.

"Your bag is still caught. Sami, lean toward the trunk. There's a branch under your right foot."

Sami scraped his boot against the wet wood. Once. Twice. Then his sole found the branch.

"There," he gasped.

Some of his weight left Rayan's arm. Rayan drew a short, shaking breath.

"Keep it there," Mira said. "Free the strap before you climb."

Sami braced his knee against the trunk. With his free hand, he worked the loose strap over the splintered tip that had caught it. The fabric resisted, then slipped clear.



For a second his backpack swung, threatening to pull him sideways again. Rayan tightened his grip. "I've got you."

"Then don't let go."

"I won't."

"Now," Mira said. "Together. Slowly."

Sami pushed against the branch while Rayan pulled. His knee scraped over the bark. He hooked one elbow across the trunk and hauled himself onto it, breathing in sharp, uneven bursts.

Neither boy stood. They crawled toward the far end and climbed onto the rocks beneath the broken shelf.

Rayan sat down hard. For several moments he could only listen to the water and feel the pounding in his arms.

Across the stream, Mira remained still until both boys were clear. The trunk's fallen end was now lodged between two rocks. She watched it, then called to them.

"Is it moving?"

Rayan looked closely. He pressed against the end from solid ground. It held, wedged in place.

"Not now."

Mira tested the rooted end again. Then she crossed low, moving astride the trunk and checking each handhold. At the far end, Rayan offered his hand from the rocks. This time he waited until she reached for it.



Once she was beside them, nobody spoke for a while.

Sami examined his scraped knee, then opened and closed his hands. "That was terrible."

Rayan laughed once from relief. The sound came out too sharply.

"You're welcome."

"I haven't got to that part yet."

Mira looked at Rayan's trembling fingers.

"You can't move before the rest of us know what you're doing."

His brief smile disappeared. "He was slipping."

"I know. But I could see the strap. You couldn't."

Rayan looked back at the tree.

"I wasn't going to leave him there."

"Nobody wanted you to. I needed you to hear me."

He wanted to argue that there had been no time. He could still feel the moment Sami's weight had dragged at his arm. But he remembered Mira calling before the bank gave way, and how little of her warning he had heard. Sami rubbed the mark on his forearm.

"I'm glad you caught me," he said. "I'm also glad she told us what to do next."

Rayan looked at him, then at Mira.

"I should have listened."

Mira nodded. She did not press the point.

Only then did Rayan turn toward the place where he had left his backpack. The shelf was gone.

Rayan searched the rushing water, but his backpack was already gone. Only foam and broken twigs swept past the rocks. He took a step toward the edge, looking downstream.

"Leave it," Mira said.

He stopped.

His food, spare clothing and part of their shared equipment were inside. He watched the water long after the bag had disappeared. The Compass was still in his pocket; he felt its hard outline against his leg, but that brought less relief than he expected.

"We still have mine," Sami said, touching his own pack.

Rayan looked at the remaining bag. Enough to keep moving was not the same as enough to lose carelessly.

"I'll make it up."

"Help us work out what we have left," Mira said. "Start there."

He nodded and sat beside them.

* * *

They rested longer than planned. Afterward, they reorganized what remained. Food. Water. Basic equipment.

Everything suddenly mattered more now that there was less of it. Sami checked his backpack carefully for damage.

The loose strap was scraped where it had snagged, but the stitching still held. He tucked the dangling end away before putting the pack on again.



While Mira redistributed part of the remaining supplies, Sami wandered beneath an overhanging section of rock.

"There's something here."

Rayan looked up.

Sami crouched and brushed aside a layer of dry leaves. Underneath was blackened earth. Ash. Mira joined him. She rubbed a little between her fingers.

"Campfire."

Rayan looked around.

"Old?"

"Not very."

Near the edge of the ash, Sami found something caught between two stones. A short piece of cord. Modern. Weathered, but not ancient.



Rayan felt the same uneasy sensation he had felt at the boot print. One traveller could have cut the branch.

The boot print alone could not tell them where that traveller had gone. But now there was a campfire. Cord. A place deliberately chosen for shelter. Someone had stopped here.

Perhaps the same person who had left the print. Perhaps someone else. They had no way to know, but the signs were becoming harder to dismiss. The mountains no longer felt empty. Rayan looked into the trees.

For the first time since leaving town, he wondered whether the silence around them meant they were alone.

Or whether it only meant whoever else was out there knew how to remain quiet.

* * *

The afternoon light had begun to turn golden when they found the marker. Mira saw it first.

A stone projected from the hillside at an unnatural angle, almost completely covered in moss.

Together, they cleared away enough vegetation to expose its face.

A simple geometric mark had been cut into the stone. Nothing decorative. Nothing religious. Nothing Rayan recognized. Just precise intersecting shapes arranged with deliberate symmetry.

Mira ran her fingers close to the carving without touching it.

"Survey marker?"

"Could be," Sami said.

Rayan had already taken out the Broken Compass. He opened it. The needle did not move. But something else did.

Deep beneath the cracked glass came a tiny mechanical click. Rayan froze.

"Mira."

She turned.

Through the small exposed section of mechanism at the lower right of the dial, he saw a brief movement. Then it stopped. There was no steady ticking, only that single click and the quiet of the trees around them. He held the Compass still.

His attention moved from the mechanism to the worn marks around the rim. He had seen those marks before, but beside the stone carving, their arrangement caught his eye differently.

"Look at these angles."

Mira leaned closer. The markings were not identical, but several lines met in a similar pattern.

Rayan looked between the brass rim and the stone. A resemblance was all he could be certain of. It was enough to make him forget the ache in his arms.

The single needle trembled, turned a few degrees, and settled again. Rayan looked at Mira.

"So whoever built this road knew about the Compass?"

Mira studied both objects.

"Or whoever built the Compass knew about the road."

Sami folded his arms.

"That's much less comforting."

Mira took out her notes.

"What are you doing?" Rayan asked.

"Recording it."

"You don't think this proves they're connected?"

"I think the patterns are similar enough to investigate."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"No."

She drew the stone's mark first, then copied the visible lines from the Compass beside it. Rayan held the casing steady while she worked. When his tired hand began to shake, Sami supported his elbow without making a joke.



On the paper, the differences were easier to see. So were the similarities. Mira left space around both drawings for notes.

"It gives us a possible connection. We still need to find out what it means."

Rayan looked at the Compass again. The distinction frustrated him.

But after what had happened at the stream, he understood why Mira insisted on it. Questions were not answers. Hope was not evidence.

And the Broken Compass, however important it might be, was not something they understood well enough to trust blindly. He closed it. The three continued uphill.

* * *

The sun was descending when Mira stopped again.

At first Rayan thought she was checking the survey again. Then he noticed her expression.

"What?"

Mira looked at the hillside ahead. Then down at AR-317. Then back at the hillside.

"This is it."

Sami looked around.

"This is what?"

"The distance matches."

Mira stepped forward.

"Elevation matches. The ridge behind us matches. The stream crossing matches."

She pointed toward the hillside.

"According to the survey, the road continues through there."

Rayan stared. There was no road. No opening. No trail.

Only rock, trees, roots and dense vegetation climbing across the slope. Sami stared at it too.

"So this is it?"

Mira nodded slowly.

"This is where the map says the road continues."

Rayan walked toward the hillside.

"Through there?"

He opened the Broken Compass. Nothing happened. He turned it slightly. Nothing. He moved several steps left. The needle remained still. Right. Still nothing.

Once again, the Compass gave him nothing. Rayan tapped the casing once. Sami looked at him. Rayan lowered his hand.

"I know."

Mira examined the landscape.

"If the measurements are correct, we're standing on the road."

Rayan looked down. Uneven soil. Roots. Stones.

No sign that carts, travellers or anything else had ever passed through.

"Then where did it go?"

Mira did not answer. They searched. The remaining daylight faded quickly beneath the trees. Rayan examined the rock face. Mira checked the slope.

Sami moved through the vegetation, looking for the same kinds of inconsistencies that had revealed the road earlier. Minutes passed. Then -

"Here."

Rayan and Mira turned.

Sami was standing beside a dense patch of vegetation.

"What did you find?"

"I'm not sure."

He pointed.

"These plants are different."

Rayan looked. They seemed ordinary. Mira came closer. Then she understood.

"They're younger."

The vegetation around them was thick and mature, roots tangled deep into the hillside. But this particular section had grown differently. Less densely. More recently. They began clearing it carefully. Beneath the roots, the soil was loose. Beneath the soil lay stone, but it was not natural rock.

Its edges had been shaped by human hands.

Rayan dropped to his knees and brushed more dirt aside. A straight edge appeared. Then another. Mira crouched beside him.

"Retaining wall."

They cleared a larger section. Old masonry emerged from the hillside. The forgotten road had not ended. It had been buried.



Whether by collapse, time or someone's deliberate effort, they could not yet tell. Rayan stood and looked along the exposed stones. A strange excitement moved through him. All day they had followed fragments. Measurements. Marks. Possibilities.

Now the mountain itself was giving them an answer. The road continued. It was simply hidden.

* * *

Darkness was approaching too quickly to investigate safely. Mira insisted they stop. For once, Rayan did not argue.

They chose a sheltered area near the old wall and began preparing to camp. Sami gathered what dry material he could find. Rayan checked the remaining supplies.

Mira made one last examination of the exposed stonework before the light disappeared completely. Then she stopped.

"Rayan."

He looked over.

Mira was crouched near the base of the retaining wall. Sami joined them.

"What?"

She pointed toward a large stone. Fresh scratches marked one edge. Not weathered. Not softened by years of rain. Fresh. Rayan's pulse quickened.

"Someone moved it?"

"Possibly," Mira said. "These edges look recently scraped. Look at the lighter stone underneath."

Together, they examined the stone. A narrow space existed behind it. Not a doorway. Not a grand entrance.

Just a dark gap between the old retaining structure and the earth behind it. But air moved through it. Cold air. From somewhere deeper inside. Sami stared into the darkness.

"That's not unsettling at all."

Rayan took out the Broken Compass. The instant he opened it - Click. One sharp mechanical sound. All three froze. The needle remained still. Rayan looked toward the gap. For several seconds, nothing happened.



Then a sound came from somewhere beyond the stone. Low. Heavy. Slow. Stone scraping against stone. Sami's expression changed.

"Please tell me that was the mountain."

Nobody answered. They listened. The sound stopped. Mira stared into the darkness.

"I can't tell what made it," she whispered. "Stay back from the gap."

Rayan closed his fingers around the Compass. None of them moved.

Rayan had spent the day wanting the Compass to give him a clear answer. Now that something had answered from beyond the stone, he was no longer sure he wanted to move closer. He stayed beside his friends.

The gap remained dark. Cold air brushed the back of his hand, steady and faint. Somewhere behind that wall, there was space enough for air to move. What else might be there, he could not tell.

"We wait for daylight," Mira said.

Rayan nodded. He did not put the Compass away yet.

High above them, the last light of evening touched a wooded ridge.

For a moment, a human silhouette stood between the trunks. The figure was too far away for any features to be clear, even if one of the three had looked up. None of them did.

Below, Sami shifted closer to the others. Mira kept her eyes on the opening. Rayan stood with the worn brass casing closed in his hand.



The figure stepped back into the trees and disappeared.

The three already knew that someone had travelled the forgotten road recently.

They did not know that, at the end of their first day beyond town, someone was watching them.

END OF CHAPTER TWO

AAN Tales Works

Story, Characters, World & Creative Direction

Atiq ur Rehman

Erased North

Chapter Two: Where the Map Ends

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