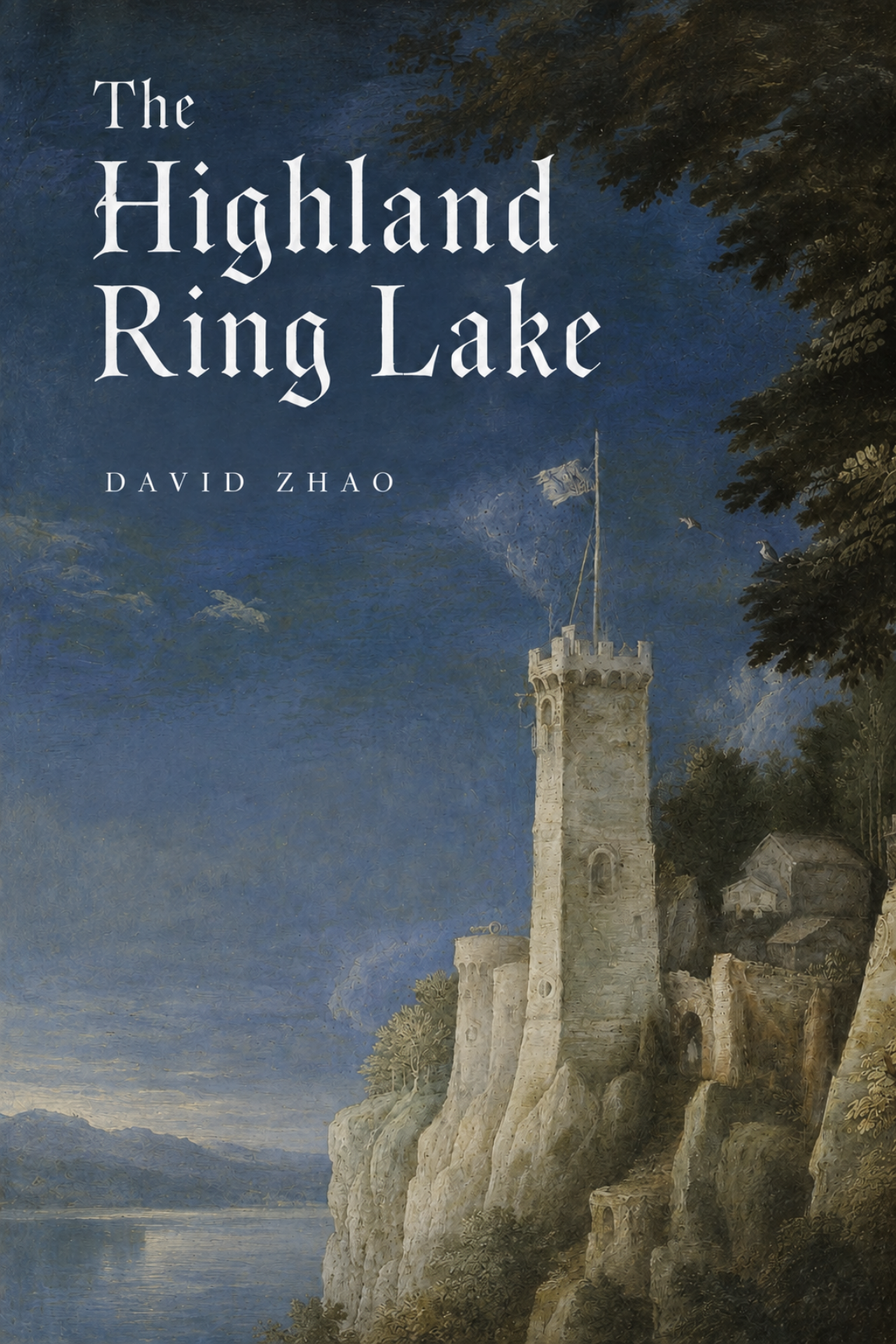


The Highland Ring Lake

DAVID ZHAO



HIGHLAND COUNTY

The enormous black crow spread its wings like some dark spirit out of a midnight legend, leisurely pecking at the grain Joanna had scattered on the ground, bringing disease and famine.

“Sometimes I think I’m a lot like a crow. What do you think?”

The girl called Joanna stared straight into my eyes. As usual, we were sitting beside the aqueduct feeding poultry, stinking to high heaven and bored out of our minds.

“There’s no crow anywhere as fat as you,” I said. I shooed away a little white duck pecking at the grain beside me, picked up a stone, and threw it.

The crow hopped aside and went right on eating.

I lay flat on my back and looked up at the sky. The crow, now full, was circling happily with its companions. “If you turned into a crow, you probably couldn’t even get off the ground—”

An arrow went straight through the crow’s head. Its body twisted in the air and dropped squarely onto my face.

“It stinks!” I accidentally swallowed a few feathers soaked in foul-smelling blood and staggered to my feet.

“Serves you right.”

“No one’s ever going to marry you if you keep acting like this.”

“Hmph!”

I got up and looked at the aqueduct stretching all the way to the horizon. Ever since I moved here when I was about eight, the aqueduct had carried its thin stream of water without stopping, through spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Even in late winter, you could still vaguely make out the water moving beneath the ice. Back when I first came here with Father to inspect our new territory, I said the whole place was frozen solid and smelled like a pigsty. That girl charged out of the crowd,

pinned me down in the mud, and shouted that there was obviously water up there. I tried to roll over, managed to break free for a moment, and then she flattened me again.

“My lord, young master, please forgive her!” a terrified old woman said, prostrating herself.

“No harm done.”

Father seemed delighted that someone had finally managed to subdue me.

I watched Joanna washing the blood groove of her arrowhead in the little waterfall spilling from a break in the aqueduct. One leather boot was planted on the crow’s head while she tried to yank the arrow free, and then the head more or less came apart. She was well-proportioned and strong. A good girl.

“Poor crow, killed by the Crow King,” I said. “Where does this aqueduct go?”

“Jojo, you’ve asked that at least a thousand times,” Joanna said. “How much longer are you going to hide at my house? Another day or two and they’ll find you. Maybe tonight. They’ll drag you straight out of your nest in the middle of the night, and then you’re definitely getting beaten.”

“Call me *my lord*, Joanna. I am the young lord of Highland County, son of David the Invincible, I—”

“Go feed my moss sheep,” she said. “Or there’s no meat tonight!”

“Fine,” I said.

I watched Joanna biting at her beloved moss sheep while the sheep themselves numbly chewed grass. By now, they all smelled more or less the same. I did not dare tell Joanna that.

I turned and looked upstream again. The aqueduct ran north until it disappeared into endless mist. When we were little, the stairs leading from Joanna’s house to the top of the aqueduct were still there, and we often climbed them together to stare into the distance. Back then, you could see a small patch of forest.

That was the farthest I had ever been.

Later, Joanna and I happily executed some northerners there. They cried terribly, one after another. Joanna hacked three of them into pieces to avenge her parents. She laughed the entire afternoon that day, laughing wildly and unable to stop. Then at night she held me and cried. She cried for a very, very long time.

“Are you feeding the sheep or not, Jojo?”

I hurriedly pretended to be working. I turned around and saw Joanna standing in the doorway glaring at me.

“Oh, right. I found another piece of moss-sheep hide.” She turned and disappeared into the house. It was pitch-black inside, and a moment later I heard a piglet scream. “The kind covered in symbols.”

Joanna’s house was basically part of the aqueduct itself: a round lower tower where the endless aqueduct from the north had collapsed and stopped carrying water south. The broken stream collected below into a little pond. Joanna had grown up here.

“Sometimes I think you don’t belong here, Jojo.” She was lighting a fire, trying to make the house a little warmer as evening came, while drops of water seeped down from the aqueduct above the roof. “When you were sitting by the water today, you looked like you didn’t belong in Highland Hamlet. One day, are you going to run very, very far away and stop playing with me?”

“It’s Highland *County*. Do you kill a crow every day?”

“You weren’t listening to me at all, Jojo,” she said, and threw the hide straight into my face.

“Where did you find it?”

“On the old man next door’s roof.”

“These things really do turn up everywhere.”

I examined the hide and carefully squeezed past her. She tried to bite me, but missed. Then she turned back to her porridge and began humming to herself. I opened her weapons cabinet and dug out the other pieces of moss-sheep hide from the bottom, the ones we had already pieced together. I laid the new one beside them and tried to work out whether it fit or whether we had found yet another duplicate.

“Anything?”

“It really does look like a map. Let me see if this piece fits, or if it’s another copy.”

Joanna ignored me and kept humming.

“You can’t even read. How do you remember historical songs that long? I can’t memorize a single section.”

“Because you’re stupid, Jojo. You outsiders are all pretty stupid, and weak too,” she said. “Correction. *Lazy and* stupid.”

She came over, dropped herself directly on top of me, and began eating porridge and meat.

"I'm telling you, my ancestors were royalty. Royalty who used to enslave little lords like your family. When I was small, I remember my grandmother still had a bone flute. When she was young, she went into the forest up north and turned more than three hundred northerners into fish."

"You really are pretty heavy. Also, when was the last time you bathed?" I said. "Ever since your parents died, you've completely lost your manners."

"Hmph. Whether they're dead or alive has nothing to do with me," she said. "I cooked the last piglet today. Tomorrow you're buying me another litter. That's settled."

The more she ate, the happier she became. Meanwhile I was being crushed to death underneath her.

"Don't speak badly of your parents. The dead deserve respect."

"Right. Fair enough. Without them, you and that fat father of yours would probably be eunuchs for the northerners by now, locked in cages and living with piglets."

I turned the map around in my hands and finally found the right orientation.

"Tomorrow you're buying me another litter of piglets. You hear me!"

"There probably won't be time for piglets. Tomorrow, buy three moss sheep instead. And tents, and whatever else we need. I'll tell you tomorrow. I still can't show my face during the day, otherwise I'll—"

"Get caught by David the Invincible's men."

"Yes, yes. Exactly."

Something about the way she answered felt strange.

The new piece of the map was Highland County.

Not long ago, at the beginning of spring, I had taken a blade and hacked someone else I found in Joanna's bed to death. I was a lord's son, and there was nothing anyone could do to me. Father handled the matter fairly enough. The man was dead, so he was dead. His head hung on the city wall for three days until the crows had almost finished eating it. Why did that come to mind? Jojo, son of the great David the Invincible? Anyway, after that, Joanna and I got along even better. Who else she fools around with, I have no idea. It does not matter. If I find out, I can just chop them up too, then hang the head on the wall.

Why did that come to mind?

The family castle was already in front of me. No one noticed me in the darkness. The two idiots guarding the gate were sound asleep: Geoffrey's father, Deriro the Fool, and Bard's father, Lame Sam. I did not dare use the main gate. I suspected David the Invincible was inside with the household men waiting to catch me. Then everything would be over, including my whole plan to travel far away. Keeping low, I climbed the grapevines along the rear garden wall and flipped myself over into the garden. No one was there. I followed the path on the right all the way to the end. If I could climb the tower, I would reach my room. Very few people knew about this route, apart from Geoffrey, the fourth son of one of the guards, and my little stepmother.

When I started climbing, I discovered that the wooden footholds and hooks I had secretly wedged into the cracks between the tower bricks had actually been reinforced. I made it up with surprising ease and slipped sideways through the window into my sixth-floor bedroom.

The whale-oil lamp in my room was still burning. Three days after I had run away, its tiny orange-red flame was still flickering. If I had stayed, I should have been somewhere near the border by now, squeezing land tax and head tax out of people for my stepmother's family. All I really had to do was show my face, but I could not let them get their way. I thought of my little stepmother again. She had once told me that westerners like her went to enormous trouble out at sea to get oil from whales.

"A gigantic fish, with one or two fountains on its back," she had said while telling me stories. "Big enough to equal three of your family's towers! Oh, and I think one whale could buy twelve girls like Joanna!"

I still remembered the teasing look in my stepmother's eyes.

"You're basically the same age as me, Stepmother!"

In the light of the whale-oil lamp, I carefully opened my chest. Buried between the clothes in the third layer were six bags of small silver coins and three bags of large copper coins that my stepmother and I had secretly stored there, all stamped with the emperor's face. I thought it over. Together with the large bag of silver and the bag of gold I had given Joanna for shopping that morning, it should be just enough for the journey.

Among the coins I also found a merchant's travel pass, carrying seals for three directions: north, west, and east. Beside it was an envelope. The lead seal looked freshly pressed.

To Jojo, the cynical and unfilial son:

Your best friend Geoffrey is my spy, so I already knew about your plan this morning. Joanna isn't exactly good at keeping her mouth shut either. You two really are a pair, a pair of idiots. Everyone around you is stupid. People from Highland County are naturally stupid too, unlike us westerners, who have culture and manners. I have to say, your father is useless. He's useless in bed too. Your three brothers and two sisters are idiots as well. Your little sister Cherry is actually all right. As for you, I suppose you qualify as half an idiot.

I knew you would never use the front gate. As for this merchant's pass, I think you'll need it. I secretly stamped the eastern and northern seals in your father's study. The western seal is mine. I've always had one of these. I've always wanted to run away myself, go back to my family's territory and get as far away as possible from this stinking manure pit you call a home. I really envy you. You can simply get up and leave. You and I planned and plotted your escape again and again, and in the end you were the only unfilial bastard who actually ran away. And you even tricked Joanna into going with you. Although she's far more reliable than you, isn't she?

Finally, you don't need to worry about me. I'm carrying a child now, so I won't be going anywhere. I've decided that when the baby is born, I'm going to name it Frog. Tomorrow morning, I'll tell David the Invincible that my spy Geoffrey discovered you secretly heading south, apparently planning to spend a year or two fooling around in the imperial capital. I'll also tell him you said you never want to collect taxes again.

Margaret von Mia

After reading the letter, I drew three frogs on the back, one of them wearing my hat, then stuffed it back where I found it.

When I first met my little stepmother, she had been half a head taller than me. Two years had passed, and now I was a full two heads taller than her. Maybe westerners were simply raised too delicately. She would take care of herself.

I climbed back down through the window and returned to the night.

"Three Big Haystacks" was a perfect place. All day long, you usually found nothing there except a few drunks, cow shit, sheep shit, and chicken shit.

The first thing I saw was three moss sheep, fresh David-family brands burned into their rumps. They were leisurely chewing dry hay from the stacks. Joanna might look

stupid most of the time, but when she actually did something, she was surprisingly reliable.

One of the moss sheep was enormous and sturdy, exactly as I had expected. If I rode it through mountains, forests, or freezing swamps, I was sure it would be more nimble than a horse. Its four legs and lower body were covered in moss, very healthy. If we travelled long enough, some of the four-leaf moss and pomegranate moss growing beneath its belly would surely flower, then grow little fruits that would last all the way into late summer. I looked around the sheep and was pleased to see a full set of saddles, military tents, blankets, and storage bags. We almost looked like real travelling merchants. Joanna had actually bought everything properly. From now on, the big one would be called Pomegranate, and the two smaller ones Raspberry and Grape. Then I noticed a child lying across the back of one of the little sheep. It was filthy. It turned around, bared its teeth at me, and screamed:

“Aow aow aow aow aow!”

“Pretty good little slave. Bought it on the way this morning.”

I smelled that familiar gamey sheep-stink and turned around. Joanna was coming toward me, leading her own three moss sheep.

“All my possessions are tied onto the sheep,” she said. “They actually fit.”

“Why did you buy this?”

“Looked funny. I saw it at the market this morning.”

“So how much did you spend?”

“The small bag of silver paid for the moss sheep, the tents, and all the travelling gear. We locals understand this kind of thing better than you.”

“What about the big yellow bag?”

“Bought this thing.”

“So the gold is gone?”

“Gone.”

“Aow aow aow aow aow...” The slave child kept making nonsense noises, its enormous eyes rolling around in their sockets.

At midnight, we set out from a place about ten *li* north of Joanna’s house and followed the aqueduct north. More than once, I caught Joanna looking back, and whenever she noticed me watching, she turned around and grabbed at my back with one hand. We rode our sheep one behind the other, together with four smaller sheep

following us and Aow-Aow-Aow. Joanna rode on the outside while we stayed on the inside. In the moonlight I could see the ancestral silver-plated axe strapped across her back, nearly half as tall as a person. A bow and a crossbow were tied to the rump of her sheep, along with a huge bundle of oak arrows. The blood grooves glimmered faint blue under the moon. I looked up and saw the aqueduct above us to the left; sometimes, when our sheep wandered freely through one of the great arches holding it up, it would suddenly be above us to the right. I looked back and saw faint lights far behind us. Tomorrow, or the day after, once my little stepmother told them I had gone south to escape tax duty, the whole place would erupt into chaos.

I thought about it. Ever since moving here as a child, I had never once seriously considered simply following this aqueduct north. We had already crossed beyond my family's territory. By dawn, we should reach the farthest place I had ever been before: the little forest we used to see in the distance from Joanna's house. Whenever Father got drunk, he would wave his arms around and boast about the old days, when he followed Six-Toed Salim into war and fought six brutal battles in those woods. After that, he said, whenever he fought there he became a god, completely invincible. So when Salim finally took Highland County, Father received the land south of the forest as his fief. Then came another three ridiculous great battles, two to kill northerners and one to plunder westerners. "Westerners have money and women. Wonderful!" David the Invincible would say with that stupid look on his face. I still remembered my little stepmother rolling her eyes as she poured him wine.

Joanna decided to tie Aow-Aow-Aow onto the back of one of the smaller sheep. She said it fit perfectly. I had originally planned to carry wine on that sheep, so now the wine had to stay behind at Three Big Haystacks, which meant the drunkards there were getting lucky. When the sky began to turn pale in the morning, I noticed a wine cork stuffed into Aow-Aow-Aow's mouth, so for the moment it could no longer go aow aow aow. I had already noticed plenty of dark clouds gathering the night before, and sure enough, by the time we finally passed the northern outpost, it had begun to rain.

BLACK FOREST

“When I come back, I’m killing everyone at that outpost. Sleeping on duty.”

“Whatever.”

Rain hammered down outside. Joanna had made a barely functional door out of wooden boards and jammed it across the entrance to the round chamber. She cocked a crossbow and aimed it directly at the door.

“Is that really necessary?”

“You don’t know East County people.”

“Fine. Can you see that bridge? Way out there. I think there’s a huge bridge, and the aqueduct goes across it. Your eyes are always better than mine.”

“Yeah. Better than yours. I can still see it through the rain.”

We had been following the aqueduct for six days, and it had rained the entire time without stopping. Last night, we finally found another tower laid out exactly like Joanna’s house. She knew what to do immediately. She lit firewood in the fireplace on the western side, then burned incense for the god Akkad near the back wall on the right. She even set several clay jars in the middle of the room, some we had brought and some already there. Around midnight, the rain grew heavier, and water began leaking through the roof, dripping into the jars. I could faintly hear the water running through the aqueduct above us. Joanna said we could take this water with us in the morning and it wouldn’t give us diarrhea. Aow-Aow-Aow tried drinking some during the night. Joanna caught it and gave it a beating. Then, after Joanna fell asleep, I discovered Aow-Aow-Aow had secretly drunk an entire jar anyway.

I thought about the people from the eastern provinces we had passed earlier that day, and the little temporary markets they put together. Those markets never stayed in one place for long, because if they did, the northerners would soon notice them. Luckily, nobody recognized me. Father occasionally sent men along this route to buy supplies, or men from the outposts would come out looking for things they could take. Sometimes you could find two or three markets, sometimes none, and

apparently there had once been as many as six. I could understand only about half of their dialect. Joanna understood everything, so she handled the buying. On the third day, I remembered, someone had offered to buy Aow-Aow-Aow. Joanna refused. I asked her why, and she said the price was too low.

“Wasn’t it still a whole bag of gold?”

“Gold with eastern lords’ faces on it. That stuff’s worthless. Half value at best.”

Come to think of it, some of the people here had looked a little frightened when they saw our faces. I wondered whether Father’s men usually came this way simply to rob them. By moonlight, I turned the merchant pass over in my hand. It seemed completely useless. Nobody had asked to see it even once. The map in my other hand, though, had turned out to be far more accurate than I expected. Maps like these were not particularly rare. Farmers sometimes dug them up in fields, or people found them in ruined old houses. Joanna and I had spent years, ever since childhood, piecing eight sheets together and sewing them into one. With the piece we had found a few days earlier, there were now nine. The moment I realized that the two things I had taken for mold stains on the new sheet were actually the final two letters of *Highland County*, I suddenly understood that the thick black bar running between the letters and continuing onto the third sheet was this aqueduct. I told Joanna, “Let’s go. North.” She just went, “Mm.” And now the rain was pouring down outside, while we rested inside one of the aqueduct’s circular towers. Farther north, farther and farther north, after another six days, twelve days, eighteen days, perhaps we would find another house exactly like this one.

After passing one more tower built in the same way, we saw an enormous river around noon the next day. It cut across the land in front of us, flowing from west to east. I checked the map. There it was: two narrow black lines crossing the thick black bar. When we got closer, we discovered that the aqueduct bridge had collapsed long ago. I looked down through the broken section. The river was perhaps ninety meters below us. At the broken edge of the higher section of aqueduct above my head, a tiny waterfall spilled downward. That weak little structure was the source of every bit of water flowing through the aqueduct downstream. When we tied ropes around ourselves and the animals to get across, I was genuinely afraid the weight of the moss sheep might bring the remaining upper section crashing down. Then Joanna’s house would have no water, and she would have to walk downstream to fetch it from the little river.

I never liked studying when I was young, but I truly could not remember the monks ever mentioning this bridge. The river should have been called the Roche. Farther upstream was Roche Bay, where the northern barbarians had a wooden fortress. Salim and Father had burned it down seven times. Every spring, the barbarians simply

came down again from farther upriver on wooden rafts, a great swarming mass of them, and before summer dried the ground enough for horses to run properly, a brand-new fortress would already be standing. “Then we’ll burn it again,” Father had said. And somehow that was how he ended up with the scar across his mouth from Salim’s blade.

From that day onward, Joanna decided to stop tying Aow-Aow-Aow up. I told her there was no point in tying it up—if it wanted to run away, then let it run. It was useless anyway. So Joanna stopped tying Aow-Aow-Aow up, but it never ran. It ate our food, drank our water, and sang with Joanna at night.

On the far side of the bridge, we found the path ahead splitting in two. The path on the left continued straight north, while the aqueduct ran on into the forest. I had already vaguely noticed that the aqueduct was not actually heading due north, but northwest, and its height had dropped from around ten meters to about three. I turned to Joanna. “So why did you run away with me?”

She was polishing her axe. “Anyway, all my property is already with me. And that piece of land I had belonged to your family in the first place.”

She glared at me.

We turned into the woods and continued along the aqueduct.

(To be continued.)