The Gold That Never Arrived - Illustrated V3



Dungeon Master's edition

At noon, Mara Venn offers 300 gp for the recovery operation, plus 50 gp for each intact payroll chest returned, a maximum of 600 gp for the party. The 300 gp is payable once they recover any chest or deliver a usable route and inventory that permits a later recovery. Mere rumors do not qualify. The reward comes from a separate civic emergency reserve, never from the missing payroll.

OPENING READ-ALOUD

You hear a mallet striking the closed pay-office door. Men and women in road-stained coats hold out wooden tally sticks through the queue. A clerk climbs onto a crate with an empty cash tray in her hands. Before she can speak, a river pilot shoulders through the crowd, supporting a man whose torn sleeve is stiff with blood. He puts a brass dispatch tube on the crate. The clerk looks from the tube to the waiting workers. "Someone has brought back the receipt. Where is our gold?"

DM Prompt: Mara clears a space inside the customs shed for the escort, his papers, and anyone willing to help.

Overview

A gold shipment from Northward has vanished within a morning's reach of Rivermont. The surviving escort carries impeccable paperwork: someone used royal authority to steal the king's money.

Party: four level-5 characters. **Rules:** D&D Fifth Edition, 2014; all adversary profiles and bespoke procedures below are campaign homebrew. **Length:** 4-5 hours of play. **Objective:** recover six payroll chests and identify who ordered their diversion. **Play:** investigation, a compromised checkpoint, a mill heist, and a public reckoning. **Advancement:** award a milestone toward the campaign's next level for resolving the shipment, by any approach; this adventure alone does not automatically grant a level.

This adventure can occur before, between, or after the mortal Rivermont episodes. Retain the actual outcomes of earlier adventures. Inspector Doyle Lestrade can sponsor the investigation if still in office; otherwise payroll clerk Mara Venn hires the party and a magistrate delegated by Northwatch receives the case. Captain Kanarr Talan helps if available and willing; otherwise Mara hires pilot Nella Reed. Neither replacement reverses an earlier death, dismissal, or broken relationship.

Northward is the shipment's upstream place of origin. It is distinct from Northwatch, the established settlement eighteen road miles from Rivermont. The adventure stays near Rivermont; it requires neither a journey to Northward nor a changed regional map. The king remains unnamed so the DM can use the campaign's established ruler.

DM only: the full manuscript contains the conspiracy. Give individual handouts only at their stated discovery points. Imprisonment, threatened livelihoods, and political intimidation feature in play; captives can be rescued without descriptions of torture.

DM Introduction

High Wizard Emeaus has diverted three royal gold shipments. He wants soldiers and civic workers to blame the king for unpaid wages, then accept his offer of emergency rule. The first two shipments are already dispersed through agents outside this adventure. The latest six-thousand-gold shipment remains intact at Alder Mill, where his factor, Olan Vey, will remove it at midnight. Emeaus has ordered Olan to keep the royal stamps on the coins: he intends to distribute the money publicly as relief while announcing that the king has lost control.

Emeaus's household seal secured a false quarantine order. At the Split Oak checkpoint, quartermaster Serit Vale used that order to divert the convoy from the river landing to Alder Mill. Serit believed the quarantine was real until she saw the escort locked in the drying room. Now she wants protection for herself and the drivers. Foreman Voss keeps the gold under guard; Olan carries the collection schedule and Emeaus's signed instructions. The wizard is elsewhere, preparing his announcement. He receives no automatic knowledge of the party and cannot intervene through an unseen spell.

Mara Venn, Rivermont's payroll clerk, hires the characters when an escaped escort returns with the manifest. The party examines the transfer landing, follows the false order to the checkpoint, and reaches the mill by its road or sluice channel. Witnesses, the shipment's serial numbers, and documents each offer independent routes into the case. Recovering the chests restores wages; obtaining Emeaus's instructions and corroboration exposes the deliberate attack on the crown. The party may seize the mill, turn Serit or Olan, or evacuate the gold without winning a fight.

Without intervention, Olan departs at midnight with whatever gold remains in his custody. Emeaus proposes an emergency protectorate two days later. That is a political move, not an automatic coup: witnesses and copied records can still defeat it. A successful recovery remains successful even if the wizard escapes prosecution. The ending tracks the gold, the evidence, and the people separately.

Hook

At noon, Mara Venn offers **300 gp for the recovery operation, plus 50 gp for each intact payroll chest returned**, a maximum of 600 gp for the party. The 300 gp is payable once they recover any chest or deliver a usable route and inventory that permits a later recovery. Mere rumors do not qualify. The reward comes from a separate civic emergency reserve, never from the missing payroll.

Mara has counted three missed deliveries in six weeks. Road crews have started pawning their tools. Today, escort Renn Alder staggered into the customs shed carrying a torn dispatch pouch. He remembers a quarantine barrier and a mill wheel; he escaped before seeing who received the gold. Mara lends the party a six-oared freight skiff and offers access to the receiving ledger. Lestrade, if present, gives authority to inspect the shipment and protect its witnesses. The warrant does not authorize seizure of unrelated property or the execution of suspects.

Stakes

The gold: six locked chests, each containing 1,000 gp. All 6,000 gp belong to the royal payroll, earmarked for Rivermont's soldiers, river pilots, and road crews. The earlier two shipments are a future lead, not additional recoverable treasure in this adventure.

The case: discovering that Emeaus ordered the theft is distinct from persuading the public or a court. Handout 3 records his plan explicitly; Olan can also testify to receiving those instructions.

The workers: Mara needs a verifiable recovery report by the following noon to prevent a work stoppage. A partial recovery lets her make equal partial payments; she will not favor soldiers over civilian crews unless the party persuades the lawful paymaster to change policy.

The midnight departure

Use ordinary elapsed time; do not advance a clock merely because players discuss a plan. Starting noon leaves twelve hours until Olan's departure. Travel to the landing takes two hours, searching it about thirty minutes, onward travel and checkpoint business about ninety minutes, and travel to the mill another thirty minutes. The expected arrival is 4:30 p.m., leaving time for reconnaissance and a short rest.

At **10 p.m.**, the mill's shutters close and the crew lights its loading lamps. At **11 p.m.**, Voss starts moving chests from M3 to the barge at M4, one every ten minutes. At **midnight**, Olan orders departure with the loaded chests he still controls. Fighting, a jammed mooring, or a seized helm prevents that departure; the schedule never teleports gold or repairs sabotage. Record each chest's actual position.

After departure, the barge heads downstream toward Rivermont, taking three hours to reach a private warehouse landing. The party can intercept from the faster unloaded skiff, warn the quay, or follow on the towpath. If nobody intercepts, the gold is unloaded there at 3 a.m. and dispersed in six separate carts by 6 a.m. The warehouse is Olan's fallback, identified in his schedule and known to Serit; it is not a dead-end disappearance.

Factions

GROUP	WANTS AND LEVERAGE	RESPONSE TO THE PARTY
Rivermont pay office	Restore wages; holds the receiving ledger and the emergency reserve.	Gives records freely and records the party's custody of recovered chests.
Emeaus's household	Exhaust confidence in the king, then purchase loyalty with stolen relief funds.	Olan offers money or a false story; Emeaus later challenges the evidence if left free.
Convoy workers	Get their people home without being blamed for obeying an official order.	Serit trades routes and testimony for protection; prisoners identify the chests.
Mill crew	Voss wants his promised fee and an unbroken crew.	Paid guards surrender when outmatched; hired hands do not fight to preserve Emeaus's career.

Evidence and custody

Essential leads require no roll. Checks reveal leverage faster, preserve surprise, or reduce a cost. For an official inquiry, present **two independent sources**, one naming Emeaus and one corroborating the shipment or his orders. Examples: his signed instructions plus Serit's account; Olan's confession plus Mara's receiving ledger; or the original instructions plus matched serial numbers on recovered chests. Use this two-source threshold for this hearing only.

Mara makes witnessed copies of any delivered documents in ten minutes. Copies preserve the investigation if originals are destroyed; openly identify them as copies. A genuine statement under magical questioning is useful evidence but does not prove facts the speaker never knew. Handout 3 bears the same household seal as the diversion order; Mara's six-month-old, uncontested treasury correspondence provides an independent seal and signature comparison without a check.

Encounter Matrix

SCENE AND ENCOUNTER	TABLE TIME	MAIN OBSTACLE	WHAT MOVES PLAY ONWARD
1. The Empty Landing	35 minutes	Two hired knives removing a witness and cargo tags.	Renn's directions, the road sign, or a salvaged order points to Split Oak.
2. The Borrowed Authority	40 minutes	Serit's checkpoint and fear of prosecution.	Her testimony, the mill delivery slate, or a visible wagon trail reveals Alder Mill.
3. The Mill Before Midnight	100 minutes	A guarded shipment, captives, and Olan's departure.	Gold, records, prisoners, or the downstream pursuit reach Rivermont.
4. The King's Empty Purse	40 minutes	Establishing the case and deciding custody.	Wages, protection orders, a stopped relief convoy, or a recorded partial failure.

Allow another 25-60 minutes for the opening, planning, a break, and aftermath. For a two-session game, pause when the party first sees the mill; do not advance fictional time between sessions.

Locations

Location: Rivermont Receiving Quay

Use the existing quay: a 60-by-40-foot platform with north stairs to the street, a west warehouse ramp, and the river along its south edge five feet below. Mara's customs shed opens onto the west ramp. The civic hall is a ten-minute walk away. Olan's fallback warehouse lies another half mile downstream along the same bank; its private landing has a painted white mooring post and an ordinary street entrance.

Location: Transfer Landing and Split Oak

The transfer landing lies eight river miles upstream from Rivermont. The hired skiff covers that trip in two hours; allow three hours back when loaded with witnesses and gold. These are local pilot-assisted journey times, not changes to the campaign's full-day travel rates. A posted road leads three miles inland to Split Oak, an hour on foot. From there a one-mile cart track reaches Alder Mill in thirty minutes. The sluice channel joins the river near the landing and reaches the mill in forty-five minutes by skiff.

The landing is a 50-by-40-foot gravel shelf. A 15-by-10-foot canvas shelter stands north, with a broken cargo cart twenty feet east of it. The river borders south; the Split Oak road exits west. Willow trunks along the east edge provide half cover. The shelf is level and has no hidden drop.

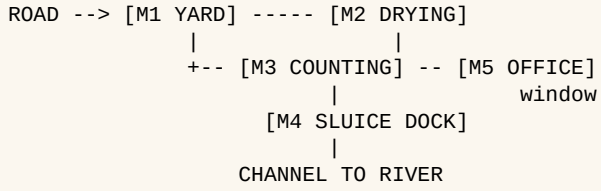
Split Oak is an open 40-by-40-foot road junction. A timber barrier spans the twenty-foot-wide north-south road. A 20-by-15-foot office stands east, with doors west onto the road and south onto the mill track. A conspicuous sign reads "ALDER MILL - TEMPORARY CARGO INSPECTION." The mill track goes southeast; travelers may walk around the barrier through ordinary pasture.

Location: Alder Mill

Alder Mill is a retired royal granary leased through Olan. Walls are stone, twelve feet high; roofs are timber. Interior ceilings are ten feet high, the courtyard open to the sky. Doors are five feet wide unless noted. Benches and chest stacks give half cover. All keyed rooms are at ground level, with no secret floor or unmarked upper storey.

KEY	SPACE AND CONTENTS	CONNECTIONS
M1 Yard	60 by 40 feet; cart and two ten-foot timber stacks. Two knives wait by the cart.	Ten-foot west gate to road; five-foot east door to M2; ten-foot south loading door to M3.
M2 Drying Room	30 by 20 feet; three convoy prisoners, straw, water bucket.	West door to M1; south door to M3. Both doors use Voss's key.
KEY	SPACE AND CONTENTS	CONNECTIONS
M3 Counting Floor	60 by 40 feet; six chests on the north wall, Voss in the center, two knives at the south loading doors.	door to M1; east door to M5; ten-foot south doors to M4.
M4 Sluice Dock	60 by 20 feet along a twelve-foot-wide channel; 40-by-10-foot barge tied alongside.	North doors to M3; west towpath to the landing; navigable channel south.
M5 Office	20 by 20 feet; Olan, desk, delivery ledger, iron cashbox.	West door to M3; south shuttered window to M4, sill four feet above the dock.

M1 and M2 lie north of M3; M5 lies east. M4 runs along the south of M3 and M5. Doors connect directly with no intervening corridors. Offset M3 east beneath the adjoining rooms so that its north wall meets both M1 and M2; the diagram is a connectivity sketch. The dock is two feet above the water; the channel is six feet deep. The barge deck is level with the dock, with a five-foot gangplank at each end. There is room to pass along its deck beside every loaded chest.



This is a DM plan; describe only the rooms and connections the characters can see.

Scenes

Scene 1: The Empty Landing

Runtime: 35 minutes. **Objective:** reconstruct the diversion and secure a witness. **Stakes:** someone is removing evidence while the escort is still missing.

READ-ALOUD

The landing's loading crane hangs over bare gravel. A red wax tag turns on its hook. Beneath a collapsed canvas awning, someone coughs. Two people in rivermen's coats stand beside a small fire, feeding it strips of paper. The road sign behind them points away from the water: "Split Oak Inspection."

Encounter 1: Paper in the Fire

Setup: two Hired Knives are burning discarded packing slips, not the only copy of a vital document. Driver Jori lies conscious beneath the awning, bound by a rope. The party arrives by the south waterline; the knives begin twenty feet away beside the crane. Use the landing geometry under Locations.

1. Give the party the sign, wax tag marked **N-441**, and Jori's presence without checks. Renn remains with Mara and has already told them to look for Split Oak.

2. The knives claim they are cleaning quarantine waste. Showing the recovery warrant or offering safe withdrawal makes them leave their papers and flee west. They will not fight official investigators for ash.

3. If attacked or physically stopped, they fight using Hired Knife statistics. They retreat west when either falls or is reduced to 8 hit points. They take two rounds to reach the western road exit if not stopped, then require normal pursuit to escape.

4. Escaped knives do not reappear as mill reinforcements. They abandon the job and hide in pasture. Captured knives know Serit issued their cleanup order and paid with new Northward coins; they have never met Emeaus.

Investigation: examining the crane reveals that sealed chests were loaded onto a cart, not lost in the river. No roll is needed. DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation) finds an unburned corner of the diversion order in one minute; failure takes ten minutes of sorting and still produces the stamped corner. Jori has a complete copy hidden in his boot, available after an action cuts his rope. Give Handout 2. He identifies three prisoners taken to the mill, including his sister Ressa.

Noncombat options: a conversation, a warrant, a bribe of 10 gp, or simply letting the knives go secures the site. Their starting fire is small enough to extinguish with a bucket or an action smothering it with canvas. Burning papers affect neither Jori's copy nor the posted sign.

Success: Jori is freed; the party has the serial number and false order. **Fail-forward:** even if Jori is not rescued and every loose paper burns, Renn's account and the sign still lead to Split Oak. Jori's captors leave him behind alive when they flee. **Transition:** follow the road to Scene 2, or question Jori about the mill channel and skip directly to Scene 3. Skipping the checkpoint forfeits Serit's early help, not the adventure.

Scene 2: The Borrowed Authority

Runtime: 40 minutes. **Objective:** obtain a route and an ally inside the diversion operation. **Stakes:** Serit thinks surrender means taking the blame for the entire theft.

READ-ALOUD

A wooden pole blocks the road beneath a quarantine board. Nobody wears a mask. A woman in a quartermaster's coat is scrubbing red wax from her fingers with river sand. Behind her, through an open office door, a delivery slate lists six numbered chests. "If you're here for the drivers," she says, "lower your voices."

Encounter 2: Serit's Last Official Order

Setup: Serit Vale and two Hired Knives occupy the junction. Serit stands at the barrier; the knives begin ten feet behind her. She uses Civilian statistics and will not attack. Her guards use Hired Knife statistics and obey her instruction to stand down unless attacked.

Known facts: Serit received the stamped order from Olan yesterday. She escorted the chests to Alder Mill, then saw Voss lock the drivers in M2. She knows the sluice route, midnight departure, and white-post fallback warehouse. She has seen Olan receive letters addressed from Emeaus's household, but cannot personally establish what the high wizard wrote.

Leverage: a concrete protection plan wins her cooperation without a roll: escort to Mara or Lestrade, concealment aboard the skiff, or a witnessed promise to give her account alongside the evidence. She admits knowingly maintaining the roadblock after discovering the imprisonment. If the party only threatens her, DC 13 Charisma (Intimidation) makes her hand over the route and key; failure makes her retreat into the office and demand a neutral witness. The delivery slate remains visible and the signed mill track is open.

Her help: Serit supplies a duplicate M2 key and says "the dry floor stays dry," Voss's delivery countersign. This buys one minute of entry conversation at M1, not unlimited access to the chests. She offers testimony and accompanies the party only if they agree on where she will be safe. If sent to Rivermont, allow three hours on the road; she sends no message to Olan.

If fighting breaks out: the knives defend the office, then surrender when one falls. They do not kill Serit. She hides behind the desk. Searching the office after any outcome reveals the mill destination, a complete copy of Handout 2, duplicate key, and Olan's collection schedule in an unlocked drawer. No check is necessary for a deliberate search.

Success: secure Serit's help and preserve surprise at the mill. **Fail-forward:** if the party leaves without her, wheel ruts and the sign still reach M1; an unsuccessful deception does not summon an extra garrison. **Transition:** approach M1 by the cart track or return to the landing and use the channel to M4. Serit explains both routes if cooperative.

Scene 3: The Mill Before Midnight

Runtime: 100 minutes. **Objective:** take custody of the shipment, rescue its escort, and recover Olan's orders. **Stakes:** moving gold takes time; Olan will trade people and documents for his own escape.

READ-ALOUD

The mill wheel is motionless above a narrow channel. A freight barge rubs against the dock beneath open loading doors. From inside comes the clink of coins and a man's voice counting aloud. Three hands reach between the drying-room shutters. At the office window, a lamp illuminates a sheet covered in columns of numbers.

Arrival: use that text before 10 p.m., while the stated people and barge are present. Between shutter-closing and actual departure, replace the last two sentences with "Light shines through the shutter cracks. Someone taps three times from the drying room." On a road approach, describe the barge only after the party moves around the yard wall or sees it through the building. If an earlier rescue emptied M2, omit the prisoners' hands or tapping.

After an uncontested departure, use instead: "The mill wheel stands still. Water laps against an empty berth beneath the loading doors. A strip of red sealing wax lies beside the gangplank's scrape marks. Beyond the open yard gate, the road runs back toward Split Oak."

Use the party's recorded state if they return after changing the site: do not restore a damaged door, a stolen vessel, or an escaped prisoner. A minute examining the dock reveals the downstream departure without a check. Freed prisoners still on site explain when the crew left; the M5 ledger and duplicate orders remain unless actually removed or destroyed.

Encounter 3: Six Chests and a Signature

Finite roster: Voss and four Hired Knives, plus Olan Vey. Two knives start at M1 and two at M3; Voss starts M3 and Olan M5. Two civilian boat hands wait at M4 and surrender rather than fight. Three civilian prisoners occupy M2. No checkpoint or landing enemies join this roster. If the party secures the mill before loading, all six chests start at M3; later arrivals use the midnight schedule.

Reconnaissance: ten minutes watching shows guards changing their positions, the prisoners' shutters, and both gangplanks. A DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check spots Olan counting and sealing a written order at his desk; failure reveals him when he next visits the loading doors in ten minutes. Flight shows the open yard and dock, not the contents of roofed rooms. Invisibility permits scouting subject to ordinary sound and contact; there are no special anti-magic alarms.

Entry options: the countersign grants entry to M1 for one minute while a guard fetches Voss. A convincing transport or inspection pretext with matching papers lets the party walk to M3 without a check. Attempts without papers require DC 14 Charisma (Deception); failure prompts Voss to demand that they wait at the gate, leaving the channel and windows available. The dock has no sentry. Its boat hands accept 20 gp total to take the rest of the night off, or leave freely if shown the recovery warrant and a safe route. They know how to pilot the barge.

Prisoners: M2 locks open with Serit's duplicate or Voss's key as an action. DC 13 Dexterity with thieves' tools opens one in an action; failure costs the action and makes a scrape audible in M3, allowing Voss to investigate on his next turn. Each door has AC 15, 15 hit points and immunity to poison and psychic damage. Breaking one does not injure those inside. Ressa, Tomm, and Idris use Civilian statistics. They know which chests they loaded and offer to move them once safe, never to fight. They can also climb through a shutter after a character outside spends an action releasing its ordinary catch; no roll is needed.

Voss's decision: he was promised 200 gp and paid none. Olan's cashbox holds exactly that fee. Offer Voss the cashbox money and withdrawal for his crew, or show him Olan's schedule naming him as the person to blame, and he stands aside. His testimony admits taking the drivers prisoner. A promise of immunity requires an official's later agreement; the party can promise safe custody, not an acquittal.

Combat procedure: roll initiative when violence begins. Voss holds the passage between M3 and M4; knives use crossbows from cover and protect their own retreat. Olan uses his force bolt from M5, then moves toward M4. He knows when a guard shouts or he sees a threat, not when an unseen lock is picked. On his second turn after becoming aware of intruders, he offers his signed instructions and testimony in exchange for custody away from Emeaus. If refused, he tries to reach the barge or street. He carries the instructions; taking him alive preserves them automatically. If he dies, the documents remain in his coat, not destroyed by his death.

Morale: knives surrender when Voss surrenders, falls, or leaves. Voss stops fighting at 20 hit points if offered survival; Olan surrenders at 15 hit points. Honor surrendered enemies' actual location and remaining hit points if fighting resumes. Olan cannot both spend an action moving a chest and attack on that turn.

The records: Olan's coat contains Handout 3. His desk's unlocked ledger lists this shipment's six serials, the previous two diversions, and sums paid to Emeaus's household. A duplicate of the signed instructions is filed beneath the ledger, so Olan's escape does not erase the reveal. Deliberately searching M5 takes one minute and needs no check. If both copies are lost, Olan can confess, while the ledger and Serit's household-delivery testimony corroborate his account. If Olan also dies or escapes, Mara compares the ledger's household accounts with her older treasury correspondence; this establishes the financial connection and theft, but obtaining explicit evidence of the intended takeover becomes the follow-up described under Resolution Paths.

Noncombat outcomes: buy out the unpaid guards, escort Olan into protective custody, or remove gold and drivers through M4 while the guards wait for orders at M1. If all cooperate, play the loading and custody decisions without inventing a betrayal to force combat.

Success: the party controls chests, witnesses, or instructions and can withdraw using either vessel, the road, or the towpath. **Fail-forward:** a routed party may retreat through its entry route. Captured characters are disarmed and put in M2; rescuers can still use the outside shutter catches or Serit's key. Olan offers release for a promise to carry his request for protection. Before the last captor leaves the mill, that person lifts M2's outside shutter catches: Voss, a knife, Olan, or a boat hand can perform this action. They want the prisoners found alive. The release does not depend on the boat hands staying. Remaining prisoners can climb out without a check and recover their equipment from outside the door. If departure is delayed, this release is delayed too; the accessible locks, outside catches, and Olan's bargain remain escape options. This permits a later warehouse pursuit. **Transition:** return to Rivermont for Scene 4, pursue the barge, or alert the receiving quay with a messenger or magic.

Moving the shipment

Each chest contains **1,000 gp weighing 20 pounds**, plus its **10-pound oak box**: 30 pounds per chest, 180 pounds for all six. Each measures two feet long, one foot wide, and one foot high. Their locks open with Voss's key; DC 13 thieves' tools or breaking a lid (AC 15, 10 hit points) also opens one. Broken boxes do not diminish the gold; the party can return their full contents and marked lids for the same reward. Record stolen or lost coins by actual quantity.

The skiff carries 1,400 pounds of people, gear, and cargo; the barge carries 4,000 pounds. Include all passengers and equipment when choosing a vessel; taking both boats is possible. The barge needs two pilots, supplied by the boat hands, freed drivers, or characters willing to operate it; it takes three hours to Rivermont whether loaded or empty. The skiff needs two rowers and takes three hours back when loaded. These sheltered-water journeys require no vehicle proficiency.

For quiet loading, two willing people move one chest from M3 to a vessel in one minute, without a check. In initiative, use normal movement and carrying capacity; picking up or setting down an unopposed chest uses an object interaction. A character can carry more than one if their hands, load, and circumstances permit. Two people carrying one chest together move at the slower character's speed. Flight, teleportation, and extradimensional storage work within their ordinary load and targeting limits.

The barge's two mooring lines each release with an adjacent action. Cutting one rope (AC 11, 5 hit points, immune poison and psychic) also works. It cannot leave while either is secured. Once free, two pilots spend one round pushing clear, then it moves thirty feet downstream each round until beyond the immediate site; characters can keep pace along the clear towpath. For a later chase, an unloaded skiff overtakes the barge in thirty minutes if launched within an hour of it. Otherwise the known white-post warehouse provides the interception point. A loaded skiff matches its pace and must use the towpath, magic, or the downstream landing to intercept.

Scene 4: The King's Empty Purse

Runtime: 40 minutes. **Objective:** deliver what was recovered and decide how to use the discovery. **Stakes:** gold can pay wages; credible evidence can stop Emeaus claiming credit for returning it.

> **READ-ALOUD**
>
> The customs shed has stayed open. A lamp burns beside a ledger on the counter, and blankets are folded on a bench for the missing escort. Mara has set out six chalked spaces on the floor, one for each chest. Beyond the door, a watch officer keeps the road-workers' tally sticks in a neat bundle. "Tell me what came back," Mara says. "And who is still out there."

Arrival: if the party sends a messenger rather than returning, Mara meets that messenger and arranges the same accounting. Do not describe recovered chests, freed witnesses, or captured suspects unless they are actually present.

Encounter 4: The Record of a Theft

Setup: Mara conducts intake at the quay. Lestrade or the delegated magistrate takes testimony at the civic hall the following morning. There is no compulsory combat and no magically compelled verdict. Use Evidence and custody for the two-source inquiry threshold.

1. Count actual chests and coin totals against Handout 1. Freeing drivers who identify the containers or matching stamped lids resolves damaged packaging. Pay earned rewards from the reserve.

2. Protect witnesses: Mara offers locked guest rooms in the customs house and a watch escort. Witnesses choose whether to accept. Name who holds each original document; make the ten-minute witnessed copies if the party agrees.

3. Establish the finding. With two independent sources, the magistrate opens a formal inquiry and suspends Emeaus's household authority over this route. With only one source, witnesses receive protection and a further audit begins, but the household's other operations remain active. No Charisma roll is needed to make clear evidence count.

4. Decide disclosure. Immediate publication prevents Emeaus posing as the shipment's rescuer, but warns his other agents. Quiet filing lets a protected investigator use the previous shipment entries to trace his paymasters; announce a next-day report so secrecy does not become indefinite silence.

Negotiation: if Olan was promised protection, he asks to give evidence behind a screen before his name is published. Honoring that request produces a detailed account of Emeaus's instructions. Breaking it does not alter what he knows, but he stops voluntary cooperation and asks for independent counsel. Serit admits both

obeying the false order and maintaining the checkpoint afterward. The drivers reject any bargain that labels them willing accomplices.

If the barge escaped: the white-post landing is an ordinary reachable warehouse, not a second dungeon. Olan and any surviving mill crew remain the only opposition, with their recorded HP, morale, and spent abilities. Mara can block its street gate and withdraw bystanders once warned. Play any interception using Encounter 3's profiles and cargo rules; the building is a single 60-by-40-foot hall with a ten-foot street gate north and ten-foot dock doors south. Six carts wait inside, one per chest, with civilian drivers who refuse a contested load. Before 6 a.m., securing either the gold or the drivers prevents dispersion. If Emeaus's plan remains secret, guards stop the stolen shipment on its serials alone.

Success: recovered gold returns to its owners, the party receives the earned fee, and sufficient evidence opens the inquiry. **Fail-forward:** partial recovery yields partial wages and concrete next leads; lost evidence does not erase rescued people or returned money. **Transition:** close with each witness's destination and the chosen public statement, then use Resolution Paths for the next campaign situation.

Adversary Reference

Olan Vey's complete character reference and statistics appear under **Illustrated References**.

All adversary profiles are **campaign homebrew**. They have no unlisted spells, resistances, reactions, or special detection. All understand Common; Olan also knows Draconic. Darkvision is absent. Statistics apply equally to named and unnamed users of a profile.

Hired Knife

Medium humanoid; **AC 13; HP 18; speed 30 ft.** STR 12, DEX 14, CON 12, INT 10, WIS 10, CHA 10. **Skills:** Stealth +4, Athletics +3. **Senses:** passive Perception 10. No saving-throw proficiencies, damage immunities, or condition immunities.

Action - Shortsword: melee weapon attack +4, reach 5 ft., one target; 1d6+2 piercing damage. **Action - Light crossbow:** ranged weapon attack +4, range 80/320 ft., one target; 1d8+2 piercing damage. Each knife has twenty bolts. One attack per action; no Multiattack. They use ordinary Dash, Disengage, Dodge, and Help when appropriate.

Foreman Voss

Medium humanoid; **AC 16; HP 65; speed 30 ft.** STR 16, DEX 12, CON 14, INT 11, WIS 12, CHA 13. **Saving throws:** STR +5, CON +4. **Skills:** Athletics +5, Intimidation +3. **Senses:** passive Perception 11. No damage or condition immunities.

Action - Multiattack: two club attacks. **Club:** melee weapon attack +5, reach 5 ft., one target; 1d8+3 bludgeoning damage. **Action - Heavy crossbow:** ranged weapon attack +3, range 100/400 ft., one target; 1d10+1 piercing damage; ten bolts. **Reaction - Brace:** when a creature he can see hits him with a melee attack, reduce that attack's damage by 1d6. Usable once per round, expending his reaction. His metal key ring opens M2 and the payroll chests.

Civilian

Medium humanoid; **AC 10; HP 4; speed 30 ft.** All ability scores 10. No skill or saving-throw proficiencies, special senses, damage immunities, or condition immunities; passive Perception 10. **Action - Improvised tool:** melee weapon attack +2, reach 5 ft., one target; 1d4 bludgeoning damage. Serit, Jori, Renn, Mara, the prisoners, and boat hands use this profile if necessary. They flee or seek cover rather than initiate violence.

Difficulty adjustments

For three level-5 characters, remove the two M3 knives before play; Voss starts with 50 HP. For five level-5 characters, add two knives at M1 before play, for six total at the mill, and give Voss 80 HP. Do not add combatants in reaction to a clever bypass. The landing and checkpoint are pressure scenes, not intended to consume a full adventuring day's resources. A rested four-person party should be able to win the mill fight, with recoverable prisoners and gold as its complications.

Emeaus is not physically present in this adventure. No combat statistics imply that he is immune or unreachable: locating and confronting him personally is a subsequent adventure. If the party can reach him now through established campaign abilities, use his existing campaign statistics and location; do not invent an escape or nullify their magic to preserve this sequence.

Rewards and Follow-Up

Party payment: 300 gp base under the Hook's completion condition, plus 50 gp per fully recovered chest or its complete marked contents. Maximum **600 gp total**, or **150 gp per character** for four who divide equally. Returning five full chests and half of the sixth earns 550 gp; the partial chest's 500 gp still goes into payroll. Recovering no chest but supplying the usable route and inventory earns the 300 gp base once the pay office verifies them, even if a later recovery fails. Do not pay the base twice.

Voss's cashbox: 200 gp belonging to Olan's hiring fund, separate from the 6,000 gp payroll. Voss's bargain transfers it to him. If seized instead, it is evidence held by the pay office pending restitution; it is not an unannounced extra party reward. Olan carries 12 gp of personal money, which remains his unless lawfully forfeited. There are no hidden gold bonuses in the mill.

Practical reward: Mara covers the skiff hire, ordinary pilot service, meals, and one night's lodging for the rescued convoy workers. These are paid services, not permanent ownership of a vessel. Kanarr or Nella agrees to a future introduction to Northward's freight masters if treated fairly.

Resolution Paths

Gold and proof: all recovered coins are counted into payroll, and Emeaus's royal transport authority is suspended locally. The king learns that his high wizard engineered the shortages. Emeaus remains a powerful suspect who can be pursued; he does not take the throne by narrative decree. The ledger names two earlier destinations for a follow-up investigation: the warehouse account "Hearth Relief" and a courier payment at Northward's west gate. Neither clue establishes a new town or a forced next quest.

Gold without the full case: Rivermont pays its workers and publicly thanks the party. Emeaus cannot credibly claim to have recovered these same chests if the party disclosed the custody record. Mara seeks the originals of his earlier treasury correspondence and Northward's dispatch registry. Those records can prove authority and financing; Olan or a surviving household courier is still needed to establish the explicit takeover instructions if both copies of Handout 3 were lost.

Proof without gold: protected testimony and documents can block Emeaus's relief announcement, while unpaid workers still demand wages. The king must find replacement funds; a promise is not a payment. Before 6 a.m. the white-post warehouse is a recovery opportunity. After dispersion, its cart drivers can identify recipients if approached rather than threatened.

A bargain with the factor: giving Olan protection and the guards their 200 gp can secure the entire shipment without a killing. The public record still names Olan, Voss, and Serit's actions. Protected testimony is not immunity, and the drivers may argue against leniency.

The party keeps the gold: the payroll remains unpaid in the amount withheld. Serial stamps, driver testimony, and the party's signed custody record make the choice traceable. Emeaus exploits the theft but does not retroactively become innocent. The DM can continue with restitution or prosecution rather than treating theft as a necessary ending.

DM Handout Distribution

Give each player copy only at its discovery point. The illustrated character and shipment references remain DM material.

Handout 1. Give when: Mara opens the dispatch tube during the Hook. **Visibility:** player-safe at that point.

Handout 2. Give when: Jori produces his copy in Scene 1, or the party searches Serit's office in Scene 2. **Visibility:** player-safe when acquired.

Handout 3. Give when: the party takes the document from Olan, receives it in his bargain, or finds the duplicate beneath the M5 ledger. **Visibility:** player-safe only after that discovery.

Illustrated References

NPC: Olan Vey, the High Wizard's Factor

Role: Emeaus's factor, keeper of the signed instructions. His ink-stained cuffs and carefully folded accounts give him the appearance of a clerk, not a soldier.

Want and fear: leave the mill alive, beyond his employer's reach. He smooths each paper before answering and calls stolen chests "the consignment." He knows the takeover plan; his knowledge does not give him awareness of unseen intruders.

At the table: a promise of safe custody buys the instructions and voluntary testimony. A threat makes him seek the dock. Publishing his name after promising a screened hearing ends his voluntary cooperation; see Encounter 4. His survival matters more to him than protecting Emeaus.

Medium humanoid; **AC 13; HP 48; speed 30 ft.** STR 9, DEX 14, CON 12, INT 16, WIS 12, CHA 14. **Saving throws:** INT +5, WIS +3. **Skills:** Arcana +5, Deception +4, Persuasion +4. **Senses:** passive Perception 11. No damage or condition immunities.

Action - Force bolt: ranged spell attack +5, range 60 ft., one creature or unattended object; 2d8 force damage. **Action - Binding thread (2/day):** one creature Olan can see within 30 ft. makes a DC 13 Strength saving throw. On failure its speed becomes 0 until the end of Olan's next turn; this does not impose the restrained condition. On success there is no effect. **Bonus action - Slipstep (1/day):** teleport up to 20 ft. to an unoccupied space he can see. These are magical homebrew abilities, not spells; they require no components and cannot be counterspelled. An antimagic field suppresses them. Spent uses recover after a long rest.

Languages: Common and Draconic. No darkvision, unlisted spells, resistances, reactions, or special detection. This is a campaign-homebrew profile.

When alerted: on his second turn, Olan offers the signed instructions and testimony for protective custody. He surrenders at 15 HP. The instructions stay in his coat if he dies; a duplicate lies beneath the M5 ledger. See Encounter 3 for movement and awareness.

Olan has no offensive reaction. He yields the shipment to survive.



Item: Northward Payroll Chest

Royal property; ordinary locked container. One of six oak chests marked N-441 through N-446. Red sealing wax closes the dispatch cord; the marked lid lets the receiving clerk identify damaged packaging.

Contents: 1,000 gp, weighing 20 pounds, in a 10-pound box. Each loaded chest weighs **30 pounds** and measures **2 by 1 by 1 feet**. The complete shipment is **6,000 gp and 180 pounds**.

Open: Voss's key, a DC 13 check with thieves' tools, or a broken lid (AC 15, 10 hit points). The chest has no magic, charges, or hidden compartment. Breaking the box does not reduce the value of its coins.

Custody: the gold belongs to Rivermont's payroll. Returning a chest's complete marked contents and lid earns the same 50 gp recovery bonus as an intact chest; the separate 300 gp base payment is paid only once. See Rewards and Follow-Up for partial returns.

Moving it: two willing people load one chest quietly in one minute. In initiative use normal carrying capacity and movement; lifting or setting down an unopposed chest uses an object interaction. See Moving the shipment for boats, pursuit, and combined loads.



Player Handouts

Handout 1: Northward Dispatch Record



The sealed dispatch chest

PLAYER TEXT

NORTHWARD TREASURY - RIVER DISPATCH 441

Destination: Rivermont receiving quay. Consignee: Mara Venn, payroll office.

Six oak chests: N-441, N-442, N-443, N-444, N-445, N-446. Each contains one thousand gold pieces under the king's stamp. Total: six thousand gold pieces. Cargo belongs to the royal payroll; receiving signatures acknowledge custody, not ownership.

Transfer at the upstream landing to road escort if the channel inspection requires it. Do not open seals in transit. Any altered destination requires a written order attached to this record.

Dispatch officer: Elin Marr. Escort: Renn Alder, Jori Reed, Ressa Reed, Tomm Hale, Idris Fen.

Handout 2: Quarantine Diversion



The household seal

PLAYER TEXT

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HIGH WIZARD'S HOUSEHOLD

Hold dispatch 441 for inspection at Alder Mill, via Split Oak. Transfer its six sealed chests under the supervision of Olan Vey. The escort shall remain available until the inspection is complete.

No public notice is required. Charge delay to river quarantine and do not enter the cargo in Rivermont's receiving ledger until released.

Countersigned: Serit Vale, convoy quartermaster. Household seal: Emeaus.

Handout 3: Instructions to the Factor



The household seal

PLAYER TEXT

Olan,

Keep all six chests sealed until collection. Leave the king's stamp on the gold. The first two diversions have done their work: the road crews blame his treasury, and the garrison has begun to doubt its next pay.

At midnight, move the cargo downstream. Use the white-post warehouse if the mill is watched. Voss is to answer for any irregularity; do not include him in further correspondence.

In two days I will offer the council relief and ask it to name me Protector, with command of the garrison and treasury. A king who cannot pay his people will find few hands raised for him. Once those offices answer to me, the crown itself can follow.

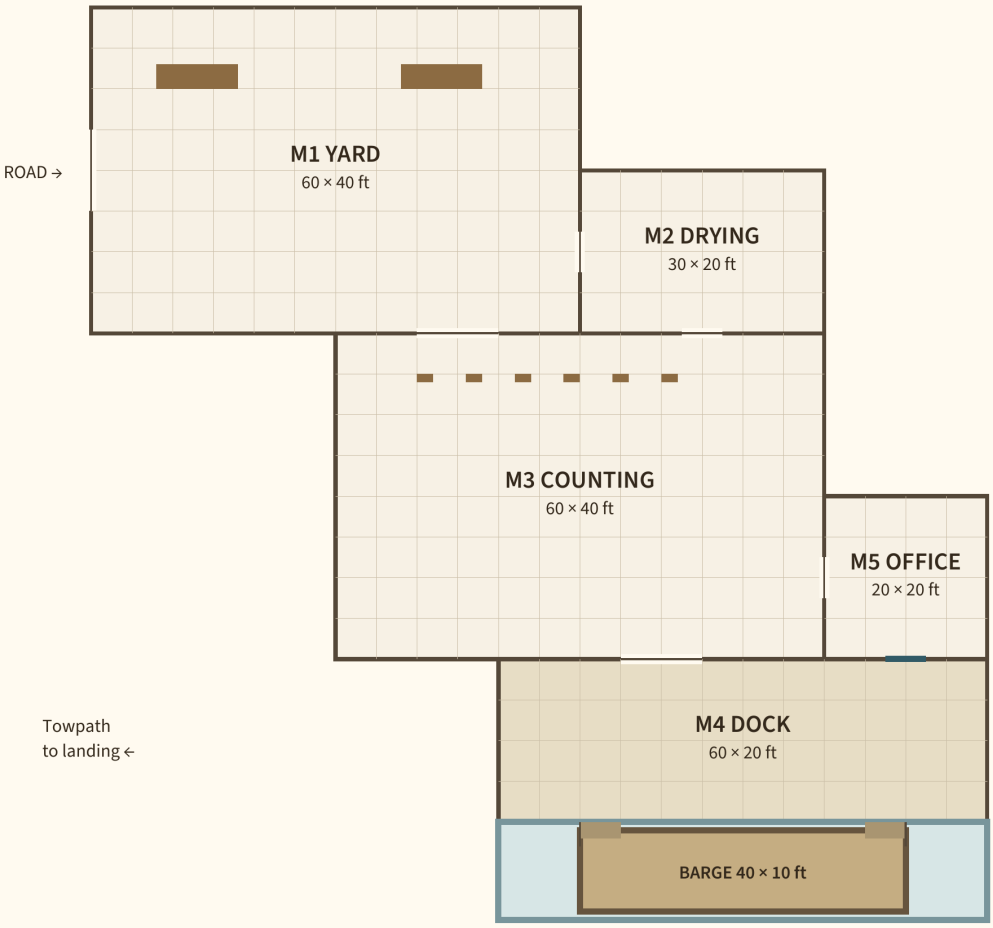
This shipment pays for their gratitude. It must not arrive in his name.

Emeaus, High Wizard

Alder Mill - keyed DM plan and approach routes

Alder Mill | DM plan

Ground floor • 5-foot grid • north up • reveal rooms only as discovered



12-ft channel • 6 ft deep • downstream to river

Bars on walls = doors; blue bar = office window (sill 4 ft above dock).
M2 doors lock. Dock 2 ft above water; barge deck level with dock. Two mooring lines.
Chest positions show arrival before loading. Track actual custody after 11 p.m.

10 ft

APPROACH ROUTES — travel diagram, not geographic scale

Rivermont → Landing: 8 river miles / 2 hours by hired skiff.
Landing → Split Oak: 3 road miles / 1 hour; Split Oak → Mill: 1 mile / 30 minutes.
Landing → Mill directly: 45 minutes through sluice channel. Loaded return: 3 hours.

Map key: DM reference. Use the keyed location descriptions in the adventure. Reveal discoveries during play.

Session Notes

Decisions, discoveries, and the next adventure.

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