

Letters from the Empty Train

120-minute plan · 4 players · Follow the evidence

A train arrives with no passengers and a drum of sealed, undelivered letters. Its sorting carriage is booked for dismantling at dawn.

Content notice: Regret and private correspondence. Only envelope exteriors appear in play; players never need to invent or disclose intimate letter contents.

GM overview

Put three blank forwarding slips on the table: 4 Bell Row, 8 Bell Row, and Mill Cottage. Two cards must be compared to translate a route: the envelope docket supplies the old numbers and a workshop stamp; the register or Ada's punched route strip supplies changes. Correct result: 4 Bell Row becomes 12 Cedar Walk; 8 Bell Row becomes 16 Cedar Walk; Mill Cottage remains Mill Cottage, now reached from Orchard Lane. A fourth card supplies a practical turntable procedure, not an answer to the address mystery. Do not open an envelope to solve this. Players choose between tonight's evidenced delivery, an accountable handover to Pia, and guarded storage. A correct argument is accepted without a puzzle-password check; say exactly which address is still unsupported if needed.

What is really happening

Ada's final route left three bundles in the sorting drum. The route bell repeats the old addresses until each bundle receives an evidenced forwarding destination or a staffed handover. A renamed street and a renumbered terrace caused the mismatch. Scrap routing is a separate operational error, corrected with the turntable's POST setting.

Opening agreement and read-aloud

Agree on subjects to soften or skip. Each player names an ordinary skill and a reason to help. Evidence does not require a successful roll; uncertainty changes time, cost or obligations.

An envelope glides under Joss's shoe and stops at the yellow line. The train has no driver. From the fourth carriage comes a patient bell, followed by the sound of paper trying to find the right slot.

Time and preparation

120 minutes: A route and an accountable handover

Opening agreement: 10 minutes

Inventory mail and hear the station's deadline: 20 minutes

Check changes at the parcel office: 25 minutes

Hear Ada and reconstruct the final round: 30 minutes

Move the carriage or drum and close custody: 25 minutes

Closure and debrief: 10 minutes

Play the custody discussion with Pia and Joss. Additional time permits independent confirmation from both records and a reconstructed route, but no amount of work permits reading private contents as a shortcut.

Starting information: Discover cards in play

Starting state: Sorting work intervals = 6; Carriage routed to the post ramp = false; All bundles have supported destinations = false; Drum carried to Pia = false; Route reconstructed with Ada = false

With 4 players: share the roles of mapper, evidence keeper, speaker and timekeeper.

If the group gets stuck

Either the register or Ada's strip combines with the exterior docket. If the docket is lost, rebuild-route costs two work intervals and uses a retained duplicate. A blocked turntable route leaves the passenger passage available for carry-drum and handover. With no work left, guard-mail resolves custody while preserving the undelivered status.

Arrival platform

Read aloud: Joss sets a red lantern beside the yellow line. The route bell pauses whenever a letter is picked up.
GM: Joss keeps the train motionless. The exterior docket is accessible at once; no one must board to start investigating.

Choice: Inventory the envelope exteriors

Ask: Assign one bundle to each investigator and keep every seal intact.
Requires: Available. Reveal Three sealed bundle labels
Result: Three old addresses and their postmarks are recorded.

Parcel office

Read aloud: Pia turns every envelope face down before opening the address book.
GM: Pia accepts a sealed drum only with a named volunteer and tomorrow's start time. She does not promise delivery tonight without supported labels.

Choice: Compare the street-change register

Ask: Which entries change numbers, and which change only an entrance?
Requires: Available. Reveal Street-change register
Result: Pia lends a copy of the public address changes.

Signal cabin

Read aloud: Ren has chalked a large question mark beside the dismantling order.
GM: The selector card is here. Lowering the red signal is already done; the meaningful player decision is rerouting the carriage or carrying its drum.

Choice: Read the siding and custody choices

Ask: Move the carriage to POST, or carry only its drum?
Requires: Available. Reveal Turntable and custody card
Result: Ren confirms that the train will stay on red until the choice is complete.

Fourth sorting carriage

Read aloud: Ada sits beside a rotating drum. "I knew the houses," she says. "I forgot that an address can change without anyone leaving home."
GM: Ada gives her punched route strip and admits the omission. She can help reconstruct a damaged register for two work intervals. The old route does not itself explain which current street name to use.

Choice: Compare Ada's punched route strip

Ask: Ask Ada what changed on her last week, using only envelope exteriors.

Requires: Available. Reveal Ada's punched route strip

Result: Ada sets her dated route strip beside the undelivered bundles.

Choice: Walk through the route with Ada

Ask: Spend two intervals reconstructing lost address evidence from her punched duplicate?

Requires: Available. Spend 2 Sorting work intervals. Route reconstructed with Ada: true

Result: Ada and Pia check a retained duplicate together and sign the three current destinations.

Choice: Write supported forwarding labels

Ask: State all three destinations and point to two supporting observations.

Requires: (Three sealed bundle labels + Street-change register or Three sealed bundle labels + Ada's punched route strip or Route reconstructed with Ada is true). Spend 1 Sorting work intervals. All bundles have supported destinations: true

Result: The drum's slots stop turning as the three supported labels are attached.

Choice: Carry the sealed drum by the passenger passage

Ask: Spend two sorting intervals preserving the drum while the carriage stays put?

Requires: Available. Spend 2 Sorting work intervals. Drum carried to Pia: true

Result: Ada helps carry the drum to the ramp; every seal stays intact.

Station turntable

Read aloud: A brass POST arrow points toward Pia's loading ramp. YARD points past the dark dismantling shed.

GM: Players can set POST after examining the signal card; describe Ren securing the fictional track lock. The train remains stationary while they discuss.

Choice: Route the carriage to the post ramp

Ask: Ask Ren to secure the lock and confirm POST before releasing the red signal?

Requires: Turntable and custody card. Spend 1 Sorting work intervals. Carriage routed to the post ramp: true

Result: The POST crossing opens. The sorting carriage can finish its route beside the parcel office.

Post-office ramp

Read aloud: Pia has set out a table with three blank forwarding slips and one receipt for a sealed drum.

GM: This location hosts final bell delivery or staffed handover. The passenger passage from carriage to ramp bypasses the turntable, at the cost of carrying the drum.

Choice: Ring once for the completed route

Ask: Deliver tonight using the evidenced labels and the POST ramp?

Requires: All bundles have supported destinations is true and Carriage routed to the post ramp is true.

Result: The bell rings once. Three bundles settle into the correct outgoing trays.

Closure: The last proper bell

Choice: Sign a staffed morning handover

Ask: Name tomorrow's volunteer and a start time; accept the delayed delivery?

Requires: Drum carried to Pia is true.

Result: Pia signs for the sealed drum, and Ada volunteers for the first morning round.

Closure: Letters with a new pair of legs

Connections and changing routes

Arrival platform - Parcel office: Ticket hall. Available.

Arrival platform - Signal cabin: Signal steps. Available.

Arrival platform - Fourth sorting carriage: Platform beside carriage four. Available.

Signal cabin - Station turntable: Fenced inspection walk. Available.

Station turntable - Fourth sorting carriage: Stationary carriage steps. Available.

Fourth sorting carriage - Post-office ramp: Wide passenger passage. Available.

Parcel office - Post-office ramp: Counter passage. Available.

Station turntable - Post-office ramp: POST rail crossing. Carriage routed to the post ramp is true.

Joss - Station supervisor

Goal: Clear the platform without losing the mail.

Offers: A red hold signal and a guarded storage bay.

Will not accept: Will postpone dismantling but cannot promise unlimited platform space.

Voice: Always names who will take the next handover.

Pia - Postal clerk

Goal: Deliver with privacy and traceable custody.

Offers: Forwarding register and tomorrow's staffed round.

Will not accept: No opened letters and no invented recipients.

Voice: Reads addresses carefully, never peeks inside.

Ren - Signal operator

Goal: Keep the sorting carriage out of the scrap siding.

Offers: Turntable access and the lock checklist.

Will not accept: Changes rails only while the train is held.

Voice: Short confirmations repeated back.

Ada - Retired conductor

Goal: Complete a promise without concealing her delay.

Offers: Her punched route strip and help carrying the drum.

Will not accept: Will not use private letter contents as directions.

Voice: Remembers doors vividly, admits uncertain dates.

Reasoning: The bundles need changed addresses, not opened contents

The envelope exteriors identify old addresses; a separate public record translates each one. Nothing inside a letter is needed.

Evidence combinations: Three sealed bundle labels + Street-change register OR Three sealed bundle labels + Ada's punched route strip

Reasoning: The train is repeating Ada's final route

Matching postmarks and punched dates establish a delayed historical round, while the three unsatisfied slots explain the repeated bell.

Evidence combinations: Three sealed bundle labels + Ada's punched route strip

Discovery card: Three sealed bundle labels

Give only when revealed in play.

Bundle A: 4 Bell Row, square workshop stamp. Bundle B: 8 Bell Row, square workshop stamp. Bundle C: Mill Cottage, leaf stamp. All three postmarks fall in Ada's final route week. Write a current destination beside each old one.

Player task: Make three forwarding hypotheses without opening the bundles.

GM answer: The old numbers require translation; the leaf-stamped cottage keeps its name.

Discovery card: Street-change register

Give only when revealed in play.

Bell Row renamed Cedar Walk. Old even numbers increased by eight; workshop stamp remains square. Mill Cottage: unchanged name and leaf stamp; public entrance moved to Orchard Lane. Apply changes only to the matching street.

Player task: Translate the docket's addresses and explain which rule does not apply to the cottage.

GM answer: A goes to 12 Cedar Walk, B to 16 Cedar Walk, C to Mill Cottage via Orchard Lane.

Discovery card: Ada's punched route strip

Give only when revealed in play.

Square route: old Bell 4 - new Cedar 12; old Bell 8 - new Cedar 16. Leaf route: cottage name unchanged; access arrow now points from Orchard Lane. Punched dates match the three bundles' final-week postmarks.

Player task: Cross-check the labels or replace a lost street-change record.

GM answer: With the docket, this independently supports all three destinations; with the register, it supports dating the route changes.

Discovery card: Turntable and custody card

Give only when revealed in play.

Train held on red. Ren secures lock; select POST; Ren confirms the ramp. Alternative: carry the sealed drum through the passenger passage. Handover receipt blanks: receiving clerk, volunteer, start time, three bundle seals intact.

Player task: Choose rerouting or carrying, then fill the custody receipt if delivery is deferred.

GM answer: Rerouting preserves one sorting interval; carrying costs two and makes a staffed next-day handover possible.

State sheet

Sorting work intervals: 6 (resource, minimum 0, maximum 6)

Carriage routed to the post ramp: false (flag)

All bundles have supported destinations: false (knowledge)

Drum carried to Pia: false (flag)

Route reconstructed with Ada: false (knowledge)

Event: The dismantling foreman arrives

Trigger: Sorting work intervals at most 2

A foreman asks for written custody of the mail. Explain the remaining options: supported delivery, Pia's handover, or Joss's guarded storage. The foreman waits for the answer.

At any place: Reserve guarded storage and postpone dismantling

Ask Joss to protect the sealed mail until a documented route is ready?

Requires: Available.

Joss tags the carriage for postal storage. The station uses a spare platform while the address work continues.

Ending: The last proper bell

Requires: All bundles have supported destinations is true and Carriage routed to the post ramp is true

The train finishes its final route at the post ramp. Ada leaves the carriage with an empty sorting bag and a written list of the names of streets that changed.

Next: Who receives thanks for noticing the cottage rule was different?

Ending: Letters with a new pair of legs

Requires: Drum carried to Pia is true

The train rests while the sealed mail waits on Pia's staffed counter. Ada will carry the first bundle tomorrow; the delay is written honestly on the receipt.

Next: What does Ada bring to the morning volunteer meeting?

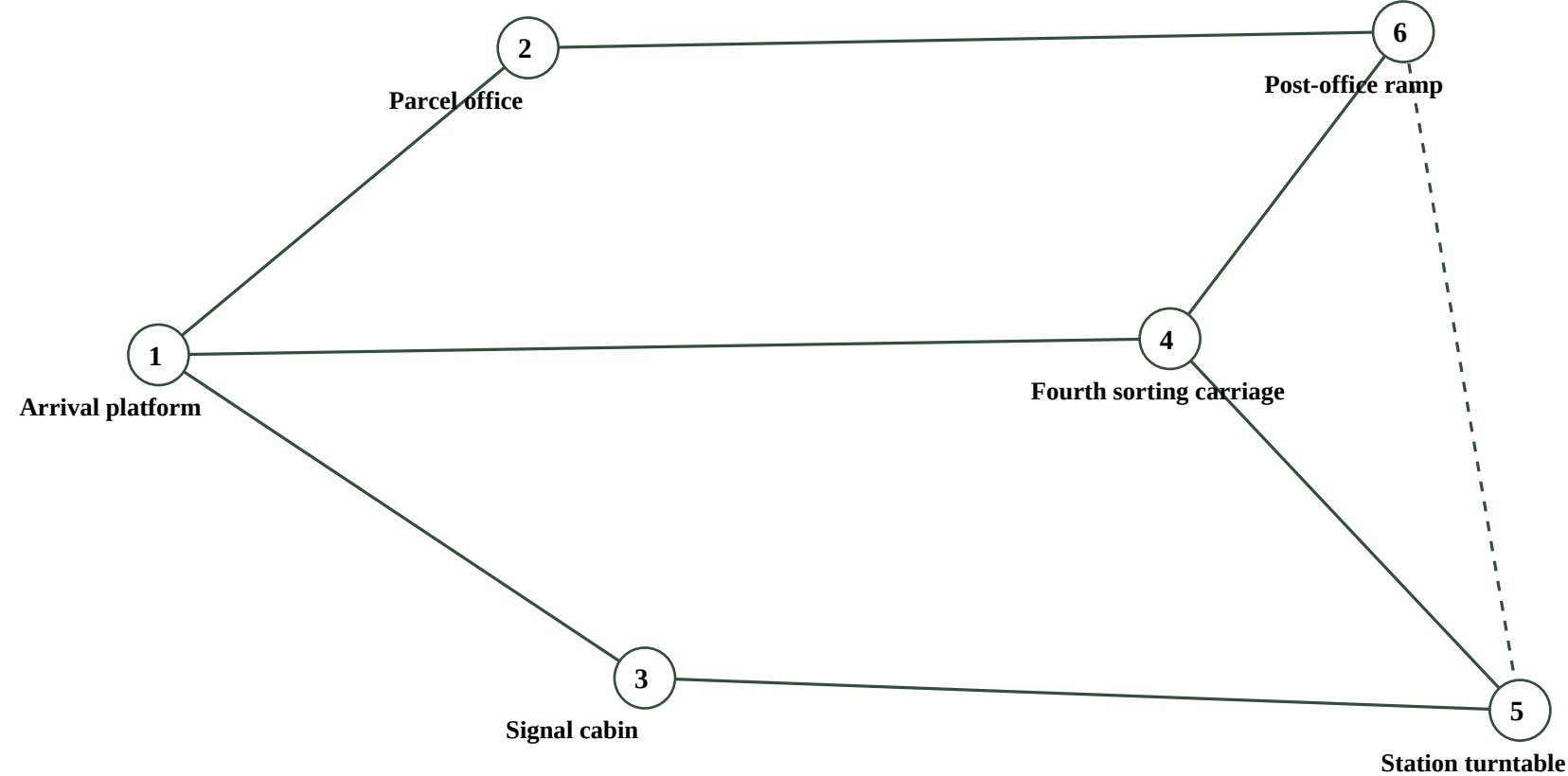
Ending: A protected unfinished promise

Requires: Available

The mail is safe and the carriage leaves the dismantling list. One platform stays occupied, and the town is told that delivery remains unfinished.

Next: Choose who owns the next address check and when they report back.

Letters from the Empty Train - GM decision map



Dashed paths need conditions. Read Connections and changing routes for costs and direction.