



THE LIVING ATLAS THE WAY BACK

An illustrated story of Luma



AN ILLUSTRATED STORY FROM THE LIVING ATLAS

The Way Back

A story of Luma, a lost home, and the price of opening a road.

World and original characters

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Where lost things go

The first thing Luma found at Gristlewick Station was a glove. It lay beneath a bench beside a sleeping traveller, one finger folded under as though it had been pointing somewhere before becoming discouraged. Luma picked it up, waited for the traveller to wake, and offered it with both hands.

“That isn’t mine,” the traveller said. “Good glove, though.”

By evening Luma had found its owner, missed two trains, and been given half a bun by Brindle, who carried orders between the counters of Platform Arcade. Luma ate sitting on an overturned crate, feet dangling above the floor. The bun was warm, Brindle had remembered to ask about the glove, and a gentle yellow-green light began to show through the pale fur of Luma’s belly.

Brindle glanced down. “You’re doing that thing.”

Luma covered the glow with both hands, which only made the fingers shine.

“No complaint,” Brindle said. “Saves a candle.”

Nobody at the station knew quite what Luma was. Nobody had established whether *he*, *she*, or *it* was the appropriate word, and Luma had never seemed to find the question urgent. Names worked perfectly well. Luma was small, soft-furred, and mostly head, with enormous dark eyes, broad little feet, and long ears that drooped on either side of an expression of permanent concern. Sudden noises made those ears flap. Kindness brought out the light.

It was not a light Luma could switch on. It gathered around the throat and belly when the world felt safe enough, illuminating the fur from within like a lantern wrapped in moss. Sometimes gratitude brought it out; sometimes good company; occasionally a particularly satisfactory piece of bread. Fear usually dimmed it. This was inconvenient, since frightening places tended to be the places where a light would have helped.

“Are you staying?” Brindle asked.

Luma looked towards the departure board. Somewhere beyond the names and times was Glassweather Reach, and beyond that was a house nobody could find.

“Where do lost things go?” Luma asked.

Brindle moved the remaining half of the bun closer.

That was how it began.

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Years later, Gristlewick still produced more lost belongings than its passengers admitted to possessing. Luma worked among the vendor counters and platform approaches of the arcade, guiding confused arrivals, returning dropped parcels, and squeezing beneath benches where larger residents could not reach. The station was noisy, crowded, and frequently wrong about its own doors, but it had become home.

Luma learned its smallest geography: the warm corner behind a tea counter, the loose board beside the luggage desk, the sheltered passage where frightened travellers could stand without being swept along by everybody else’s certainty. On dark evenings, when Luma’s glow was strong, somebody would occasionally ask for help finding a dropped coin. Luma would kneel, the greenish light would spread across the floor, and an object overlooked by three lanterns would gleam beneath a bench.

Not every recovered object was ordinary. There had been a spoon that grew heavy near a lie, although the clerk maintained that it merely disliked his desk. There had been a lantern whose shadow showed someone who was no longer holding it. Once, Luma found a little brass door that opened whenever somebody apologised. It fitted no cupboard in the station and remained in lost property beneath a notice reading **OWNER SOUGHT. APOLOGY ALREADY RECEIVED.**

The stories travelled. People began bringing strange things to Luma, or asking about strange things they hoped Luma might have found. Some wanted an owner located. Some wanted a valuation. Some asked questions that made Luma hold the object a little closer.

Brindletooth was particularly good at questions.

He came from Canopy Exchange in Sunspindle Commons, where he sorted lost property and carried records. His visits to Gristlewick were brisk affairs of labels, receipts, and small exact piles. Towering ears rose above ringed eyes and a long muzzle; the exposed teeth of his concentrating half-grin sometimes worried passengers, though Luma knew how carefully those narrow fingers handled a cracked cup.

Brindletooth could identify a parcel by a stain, a smell, or the shape of its missing string. He knew who to contact when an owner had become difficult to establish. Lately, he had been asking about things that did not behave as belongings should.

“Anything from the mineral country?” he asked one afternoon, perched beside the clerk’s ledger.

“A blue bottle.”

“Contents?”

“Rain.”

“Current rain?”

Luma thought about that. “It was raining when I found it.”

Brindletooth made a note.

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The parcel appeared beneath a bench after the evening arrivals. It was wrapped in grey cloth, without string or address, and lay exactly where Luma would see it while checking for dropped tickets. Inside was a small violet pane, no larger than Luma’s palm, held in a thin copper frame. Three scratches marked its back: one long, two short.

Luma knew the mark. Prismwick used it on his work.

The name brought back sunlight caught in jars, a stool beneath a workshop bench, and an enormous boot gently nudging that stool closer so Luma could reach. Luma had not seen Prismwick for years.

Holding the pane towards a platform lamp produced nothing but violet light. Luma turned it over, traced the scratches, and remembered how Prismwick used to pretend that every repaired kettle was a considerable magical achievement. A little warmth gathered beneath Luma’s fur.

The pane cleared.

Through it, Luma saw a red stone doorstep, a cracked window, and a bent hook beside a door.

The platform lamp was still behind it. The house was somewhere else.

Luma’s glow faltered, and the image vanished.

For a long time Luma stood very still. Then, with both hands shaking, Luma wrapped the pane and went to find Brindle.



A country of glass

Glassweather Reach lay in the southeastern mineral country of the Middle Distances. It was a place of copper roofs, striped windbreaks, violet stone, and white noon glare. Windtowers rose above settlements, and at night the cooling ground clicked softly around them.

Most of the Reach was sand and broken mineral soil. After certain electrical storms, however, the upper sand melted and cooled into long strips of glass. These made excellent temporary roads. Carts could cross country that had been nearly impassable the day before. Travellers hurried to use a good surface before another storm cracked it, buried it, or made a better road somewhere else.

The towers and settlements were fixed landmarks. The ways between them were not. Every journey required fresh advice, and the Provisional Roads Office spent much of its time certifying routes that had already become somebody's fond recollection.

Luma had lived there before Gristlewick, in a little house beyond Shardmarket Circle. Prismwick's workshop was nearer the market. At first Luma visited to have the house's cracked window repaired. Later there were errands, shared meals, and a little stool kept permanently beneath the workbench.

Prismwick had a single great eye, a wild halo of rust-gold fur, and a robe decorated with saffron stars. He worked expertly with crystals and chemicals. Whether this made him a wizard remained a local disagreement that he did nothing to resolve. Luma thought him wonderful long before having any opinion about the title.

He taught Luma to study an object before picking it up: the worn handle, the loose fastening, the pale patch where something had stood for years. "Finding a thing is only half the work," he would say. "You must notice where it belongs."

Then a storm came that behaved differently.

Luma was safe in the workshop when it crossed the Reach. By morning, the road home had disappeared. That was ordinary enough. What frightened the surveyors was that the house had disappeared with it. Its foundations, its low wall, the stone where Luma sat in the evenings: everything had gone. Beyond the familiar landmarks lay an empty stretch of sand.

Prismwick searched with the surveyors. Luma carried water and watched the horizon. Weeks passed. Eventually Prismwick put Luma on a westbound train with food, a blanket, and the assurance that it was only until they found a safe way back. Luma had believed him.

At Gristlewick, there had been a glove beneath a bench.

. . .

Brindle listened without interrupting. Afterwards, Morrowstitch repaired a satchel for the journey while Luma packed the violet pane, food, and the old blanket. Nobody suggested handing the object to Brindletooth. Luma could not have explained why, except that this felt like something which needed carrying personally.

At departure, Brindle noticed a trace of yellow powder on the wrapping. It smelled sharply of pepper.

“From the parcel?”

“I think so.”

Brindle brushed it from a finger. “Mind who asks about it.”

Luma looked back once as the train began to move. At the far end of the platform, two tall ears stood above the crowd. Brindletooth was watching the carriage.



The piece that remembered

Prismwick's workshop had changed less than Luma feared. The same jars crowded the window. The same stars had been repaired on the robe. The little stool remained beneath the bench.

Prismwick opened the door, looked down, and forgot whatever greeting he had prepared. His hand settled gently between Luma's drooping ears. For a moment Luma's glow brightened so much that the shadow beneath the workbench turned green.

Then he saw the copper frame.

"Where did you get that?"

Luma told him. Prismwick closed the door, drew the curtains, and placed the pane on a dark cloth. His movements were careful in a way Luma remembered from dangerous experiments.

"It's called a wayglass," he said. "A piece of storm glass taken from the doorstep of your house. We found it after the storm, when the house was gone."

"So the house broke?"

"No. We eventually learned that it had been moved somewhere we couldn't reach. This piece still belongs to it." He indicated the little pane. "With a light behind it, you can see the place it came from. Your glow seems to suit it particularly well."

Luma leaned closer. "Can it take me there?"

Prismwick's eye moved towards the shuttered window.

"With the right treatment, it can make a glass road to the house. But it takes the glass for that road from somewhere else. Nearby roads crack and disappear as the new one forms. The longer you keep it open, the more it takes."

Luma pictured a cart crossing a road that suddenly ceased to exist.

"That isn't safe."

"No."

"Can you stop it?"

“Return the piece to the hole it came from. The road closes, and the borrowed glass goes back.” Prismwick paused. “That was what I wanted to test. Before anybody used it.”

“Who has used it?”

A knock sounded at the door.

Prismwick closed his eye.

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Scrip entered with a receipt.

Luma had never met the mineral appraiser, but knew at once which object in the workshop interested him. Scrip barely glanced at the jars or the repaired robe. His spectacles settled towards the wayglass, and his long, folded face became still.

“Our missing property,” he said.

Prismwick remained beside the bench. “Luma found it.”

“An admirable habit.”

Scrip laid out the receipt. Years earlier, Prismwick had sold him the sample to fund further searches. The agreement had sounded reasonable then: study the glass, share any useful findings, finance a way to recover what the storm had taken. Luma watched Prismwick’s hand flatten against the workbench.

“You sold a piece of my house?”

“I thought it would help me find the rest.”

“And did you?”

“Scrip stopped sharing the work.”

Scrip adjusted his spectacles. “Research is expensive. Other investors were required.”

“Who?”

“People with practical interests.”

He described stores cut off by storms, abandoned workings, rich mineral seams beyond the surveyed roads. All could be reached with a little pane of glass taken from the right place. A road that lasted an hour might be enough to bring out a fortune.

“And the roads you break?” Luma asked.

“Temporary disruption.”

“People are on them.”

“That is why operations must be managed.”

Behind him, the door opened again. Brindletooth slipped inside carrying a narrow leather case. He looked at Luma, and his fingers tightened around it.

Luma understood the parcel then.

“You left it for me.”

Brindletooth’s ears lowered slightly. “You knew Prismwick’s mark.”

“You wanted me to come here.”

“We needed the place identified.”

Prismwick stared at the case. “Put that away.”

Scrip reached for the wayglass.

Luma reached first.



The right person

The escape began with a very small movement. Luma ducked beneath the workbench, taking the glass and satchel into the space beside the old stool. Scrip struck the bench trying to follow. A jar fell; Brindletooth caught it before it broke, and in that brief confusion Prismwick kicked open the low delivery hatch.

Luma crawled through into the alley. Behind came the scrape of furniture and Prismwick saying, with quite unexpected force, “Out of my workshop.”

Market stalls were closing. Copper shutters caught the last light, and the road beyond Shardmarket Circle glowed amber under a violet sky. Luma ran towards Windtower Yard, where permanent stone surrounded the tower bases. Prismwick had taught that much, too: when uncertain, find ground the weather had not made yesterday.

Brindletooth caught up near a striped windbreak. He was faster than Luma and looked miserable about it.

“Please stop.”

Luma backed against the wall. “You tricked me.”

“I was told it was lost property. Valuable property. Someone needed the old location confirmed.”

“Who told you?”

Brindletooth looked behind him.

Scrip was approaching from the market.

“I have to return what I’m given,” Brindletooth said. “That’s my work.”

Luma held the satchel closer. “To the right person.”

For a moment Brindletooth’s fingers relaxed. Then Scrip called his name, and he stepped forward.

Luma slipped beneath the windbreak and ran.



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At Windtower Yard, Mollik stood beside a rope across the glass-road approach. Beyond it, a broad shining route led towards the mineral growths near Violet Cut.

“Closed,” Mollik said.

Luma stopped, panting. “I need somewhere safe.”

Mollik examined the trembling ears, the satchel, and the figures emerging behind the windbreak. A small hand pointed towards a low shelter built against the tower.

“Stone floor. Side door.”

Inside, Luma crouched behind a stack of road markers. The wayglass pressed warm against the cloth. Through the shelter’s narrow window, Luma heard Scrip order the rope moved.

“Cracked surface,” Mollik replied.

“An urgent private matter.”

“Public road.”

Something about Mollik’s unmoving certainty allowed Luma to breathe. A faint glow returned, illuminating the satchel’s stitches and the dusty floor. Luma unwrapped the glass.

The house appeared clearly now. Beneath the copper nail beside the door was a small violet gap.

The pane belonged there.

Footsteps sounded at the side entrance. Luma hid the glass, but it was Prismwick who entered, limping, with one torn sleeve. He knelt slowly.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Luma had waited years for him to find a road. There were questions that would take much longer to answer than the time they had. For now, Prismwick had come, and sat on the dusty floor without asking Luma to forgive him.

The little glow strengthened.

“I saw the hole,” Luma whispered.

Prismwick nodded. “Then we know where it must go.”

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They left by the rear of the shelter, following the stone around the tower bases. Brindletooth waited beside a freight cart.

Neither Luma nor Prismwick had heard him approach.

“Violet Cut,” he said. “There’s a place to open it there. Away from the main road.”

Prismwick drew Luma behind his robe. “Move.”

Brindletooth’s half-grin had vanished. He held the leather case out at arm’s length.

“I can lead you there. Or Scrip can catch us here.”

“Us?” Luma asked.

Brindletooth looked towards the market. “I’ve misfiled his receipt.”

It was not an explanation. Luma accepted it anyway.

They followed an old stone track into the mineral field. By the time they reached Violet Cut, the light had drained from the sky. A covered wagon waited between two outcrops. Yellow powder marked its tailboard, and the air smelled of expensive pepper.

Then something vast moved beneath the awning.

Luma knew that smell. Every porter at Gristlewick knew it.

“Murrik,” Luma said.

The man behind the parcel

He emerged slowly, his enormous ringed body unfolding into the space beside the wagon. Beneath the blunt nose, his crowded grin looked almost welcoming.

Murrik was a familiar figure at Gristlewick Station, though his home trade lay far away at Canopy Market in the northern rootlands of the Ravelgreen. He grew and brokered restricted herbs and powerful spices: stock sought by cooks, healers, and customers who preferred not to explain their needs. Porters knew his warm botanical parcels. Clerks knew that his paperwork usually said less than his consignments smelled of.

The Recorder had printed rumours of undeclared freight. It had proved nothing.

Luma had once helped him retrieve a dropped packet from beneath a luggage trolley. Murrik had thanked Luma and remembered the name.

“Good little finder,” he said now. “I thought you’d recognise the mark.”

Behind them, Scrip arrived breathing hard. “You might have assisted.”

“I did. I supplied the glass, the carrier, the treatment, and someone who knew where to take it.” Murrik’s gaze rested on Luma. “You supplied considerable noise.”

Scrip fell silent.

Brindletooth placed the leather case on the wagon and stepped back. Murrik opened it, revealing a yellow root wrapped in damp cloth.

Prismwick moved in front of Luma. “You cannot know what roads it will take.”

“I know what’s beyond the house.” Murrik indicated the wayglass. “And I know Scrip owes me more than an afternoon’s disappointment.”

The piece had never been lost. It had been sent to Luma, just as surely as a parcel with an address.



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Murrik caught the copper frame while Scrip held the satchel strap. Luma struggled, but a drop of gold sap from the cut root touched the violet glass.

A road formed between the outcrops.

At first it was narrow. Then it widened, gathering colour as though amber and green streams were pouring into it from beneath the ground. Far away, towards Windtower Yard, a sharp cracking carried through the evening.

The house stood at the other end.

Beyond it, exposed mineral seams shone silver in the dark.

Scrip forgot the satchel. He moved onto the road with his spectacles fixed on the gleaming country beyond. Murrik watched him go, keeping the treated glass close.

“The frame,” Prismwick whispered. “If we can get it back-”

Brindletooth took the case from the wagon.

“Murrik.”

He turned.

He dropped it.

The remaining roots rolled towards a fissure in the stone. Murrik lunged to catch them, and Luma slipped beneath his reaching hand, seized the frame, and ran onto the road.

What the light could show

Halfway across, the borrowed glass began to split.

Luma stopped before a widening crack. On the far side Scrip was scraping silver material into a pouch. Behind, Prismwick called Luma's name, but the noise of the breaking road swallowed the words.

Luma's light had almost gone. The house stood close enough to recognise the repaired hinge, the low window, the doorstep worn by little feet. For years Luma had imagined coming back. Now there was barely enough road left to reach it.

"Look down," Prismwick called. "There's an edge beneath you."

Luma looked.

Below the broken surface ran a narrow lip of glass, too thin for Scrip, but perhaps wide enough for small, broad feet. In the darkness Luma could not see where it ended.

Prismwick had reached the crack behind. His great boots remained planted on solid glass.

"I have you," he said.

He could not reach. Luma knew that. But he was there, and his voice was the voice from the workshop, when a stool had been moved closer and difficult things could be attempted.

A soft light spread from Luma's throat and belly.

It revealed the lip, a broken patch, and beyond that a place to put the next foot.

Luma climbed down.

The light did not mend the road. It showed what remained.

Step by step, pressed against the warm glass, Luma crossed beneath the fracture and climbed onto the doorstep.



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The house smelled of dust and familiar wood. Through the doorway stood a table, the cracked window, and the hook where Luma's coat had hung. Nothing inside had hurried to accommodate the passing years.

Luma wanted to enter.

Instead, Luma pressed the wayglass into the little hollow beside the door.

It fitted.

A deep ringing passed through the doorstep. The colours began draining from the road, flowing back towards the distant surfaces from which they had been taken.

Prismwick shouted for Luma to run.

Scrip looked up from the silver seam. When he saw what was happening, he abandoned the pouch and came towards the house.

"Take it out!"

Luma left the glass where it belonged.

The road was narrowing now. Scrip caught up at the fracture, shoved past, and stepped onto a section that broke beneath his weight. His fingers caught the edge. The spectacles fell into darkness.

Luma stopped.

Scrip stared upwards, all dignity gone.

Behind him lay the house. Ahead waited Prismwick. Beneath his fingers, the road was coming apart.

Luma held out both hands.

Scrip grasped them hard enough to hurt.

Prismwick reached across from the other side, caught Scrip's upper body, and hauled. Together they dragged him onto the remaining surface. Then all three stumbled towards the outcrops as the last of the glass withdrew beneath their feet.

Murrik's wagon was already moving away.

Brindletooth stood alone beside the empty leather case.



Something brought home

By morning, most of the borrowed roads had settled back into place. Mollik inspected the approach at Windtower Yard and refused to open it merely because everybody was grateful.

Scrip had lost the silver, the spectacles, and a considerable amount of composure. Brindletooth produced his receipt and, with exacting care, wrote an account of what had happened on its reverse. Murrik's name appeared several times.

Prismwick and Luma returned to the workshop. The little stool waited beneath the bench.

"I thought finding the house would put everything right," Prismwick said.

Luma sat with the old blanket around both shoulders. "You should have told me."

"Yes."

"I'm still angry."

"I know."

For a while they listened to the market opening outside. Then Prismwick fetched a small parcel from a drawer. Inside lay the bent hook from beside Luma's old door, recovered during the first search and kept all these years.

Luma turned it over. A trace of blue paint remained near the screw.

They knew where the house was now. Reaching it again would require careful work, and nobody would be allowed to pull a public road apart simply because Luma missed home.

But the hook was here. So was Prismwick.

A gentle green light gathered beneath the blanket.

GRISTLEWICK / THREE DAYS LATER

Luma stayed three days before returning to Gristlewick. There were surveyors to speak to, an account to make, and a great deal Prismwick had yet to explain. Brindletooth accompanied Luma as far as the station, carrying a copy of the statement in a properly labelled envelope.

At Platform Arcade, Brindle had questions, a warm bun, and a small pile of belongings waiting for attention.

“Anything interesting?” Luma asked.

“Mostly gloves.”

That was a relief.

Luma placed the old hook beside the little brass door in the clerk’s keeping. Then a traveller stopped beneath the departure board, looking from one platform sign to another with increasing despair.

Luma went to help.



ELSEWHERE / THE RAVELGREEN

Far away, beneath the canopies of the Ravelgreen, Murrik examined the only thing Scrip had managed to carry off the road: a tiny silver fragment caught in a fold of his body and surrendered before the wagon departed.

Murrik placed it on dark cloth.

Beside it lay an empty copper frame.

He waited until the silver began to shine.

END OF THE FIRST STORY



About this edition

An illustrated short novel with sequential art. The complete revised story is preserved in this edition; illustrations depict proposed scenes rather than additional canonical evidence.

Original world, drawings and character foundations: Björgvin Guðjónsson. Story and art direction developed collaboratively in the Living Atlas project. Illustrations generated with the built-in image-generation tool using the existing Atlas portraits and district artwork as visual references.