

What the Fog Keeps

I wake to the horn.

It's low and slow, a sound that doesn't travel so much as press inward, as if the air itself is being squeezed. The windows rattle in their frames. Somewhere below my floorboards, a pipe ticks, annoyed at being disturbed.

Second horn.

That means inland fog. Thick enough to close the Causeway.

I swing my legs out of bed and step onto cold tile. My apartment smells like damp wool and old paper-normal for mornings like this. I pull the curtain back just enough to confirm what I already know. The harbour is gone. The lighthouse across the bay has vanished completely, as if someone has erased that part of the world and forgotten to redraw it.

Fog day.

The city doesn't stop for fog days, but it does change its rules. Schedules go soft. Landmarks become unreliable. People speak more quietly, as if the mist carries sound the way water does.

I dress quickly: boots, coat, the red scarf my mother insists makes me visible (nothing is visible in fog, but I wear it anyway). Before I leave, I check the wall by the door where I keep my tokens. Ferry token. Tram chits. Two blank slugs for emergencies.

I hesitate, then take the blank slugs too.

By the time I step outside, the street has narrowed.

Buildings lean inward, not physically at least, not in any way the inspectors will admit but visually, the fog pressing their outlines together. I can barely see the bakery sign across the road, though I smell it. Warm bread cuts through mist like a promise.

"Morning, Iain," calls Thomas from the stoop of the watch office. I don't see him at first - just his cigarette, a floating ember.

"Is it coming off the water or the marsh?" I ask.

"Both," he says. "Bad mix."

Of course it is.

The last time we had a two-source fog day, three people missed their stops and ended up in districts they'd never visited before. One woman swore she'd seen a street she recognised from a dream. The city council said that was impossible. The city has maps.

The city always has maps. They're just not always right.

I make my way downhill toward the Registry, keeping one hand on the iron rail that runs along the main descent. The rail is pitted and cold, but it's solid. It doesn't drift in fog. Street names do sometimes. Distances definitely do.

A bell rings somewhere to my left - too close, then suddenly farther away. I stop walking until it settles. That's another fog rule: if something changes distance without crossing space, stand still until reality makes up its mind.

When I reach the Registry steps, my boots are wet and my shoulders are damp. The building emerges from the fog in pieces: first the granite base, then the columns, then the clock face hovering above it all, hands frozen at 6:40. It's been frozen there for years. No one is sure why it bothers some people and not others.

Inside, the air is warm and metallic. Paper and ink and the faint ozone tang of the signal lamps. My world clicks into focus here. The Registry does not shift. It is an anchor point, one of the few places fog can't lie.

"Morning," says Anna from the central desk. She peers at me over her glasses.

"You're late."

"It's fog," I say.

She snorts. "It's always fog. We open at eight regardless."

I hang my coat and take my seat in Records B, where the ledgers are older and the handwriting worse. My job is simple in description and complex in practice: field reports. When something happens outside the map - an address that shouldn't exist, a road that leads somewhere it didn't yesterday - it comes to us. We don't fix it. We document it. The city hates being fixed. It prefers being witnessed.

By midmorning, the fog has pressed its way into the windows, turning them into glowing squares. The signal lamp on my desk flickers: incoming message from Watch District 3.

INCIDENT: UNKNOWN CROSSING. REQUESTING REGISTRY EYES.

My stomach tightens. Unknown crossings are rare. Not unheard of, but rare. A crossing is where paths intersect - street, alley, stair, canal. Unknown means it wasn't there yesterday and has no reason to be there today.

Anna appears beside my desk without my noticing her move. "You're up," she says.

"Take Thomas."

Of course.

We set out with a length of chalk, a measuring rope, and a bell that chimes when we move too far from confirmed terrain. The fog swallows us almost immediately. Thomas walks ahead, boots sure, watchman's posture stiff with habit.

"Where is it?" I ask.

"Near the Old Salt Works," he says. "Or where the Old Salt Works used to be, depending on who you ask."

I don't like that answer.

The bell stays quiet at first. I count steps, note turns, mark the chalk on walls when they're solid enough to receive it. The city under fog feels like an animal half-asleep, muscles twitching. Streets dip unexpectedly. A door appears where yesterday there was brick.

Then the bell sings - clear, sharp.

We've crossed into unverified space.

The crossing reveals itself reluctantly. First, a smell: brine and iron. Then the sound of water moving, though there's no canal marked here. Finally, the shape: a narrow bridge, no more than three paces long, arching over black water that reflects nothing.

"That wasn't here," Thomas says unnecessarily.

I step closer, my pen already scratching notes. The bridge is made of stone, worn smooth by centuries of feet that, according to the city, do not exist.

There's something tied to the railing.

A ribbon.

My ribbon.

Red, frayed at one end, looped carefully in a knot I learned when I was eight years old.

For a moment, the fog thins, or my vision narrows, and I am very, very aware of my breathing.

"That's yours?" Thomas asks quietly.

"Yes," I say. "I lost it."

"When?"

"Before I worked at the Registry."

Which means before the city considered me official. Before my movements were logged. Before my paths were watched.

The bridge hums faintly, like a held note.

The water below shifts, and I see shapes - reflections of places that shouldn't coexist. A market awning. A stairway spiralling down. The Registry clock, ticking.

"This needs quarantine," Thomas says.

I don't answer.

Because I know, with a certainty that feels like gravity, that this crossing exists because of me. Because the city remembers where I've been, even when I try not to.

The fog thickens, pressing close, as if listening.

“Go back,” I tell Thomas. “Get Anna. Get the barrier teams.”

He hesitates. “You sure?”

“No,” I say. “But I’m right.”

When he leaves, the bell chimes reluctantly, as if unhappy about letting him go.

I step onto the bridge.

The city doesn’t resist. The air changes - warmer, heavier. Each step feels like descending into memory. The fog pulls back just enough for me to see the other side: a landing, a stair, a familiar crack in the stone.

I know this place.

I haven’t been here in fifteen years.

This was the route I took every day after school. Down past the Salt Works, across the little bridge, up the stair to my mother’s apartment. The city removed it after the Works closed, said it was unsafe, unnecessary. I stopped walking it. Eventually, I stopped thinking about it.

Apparently, the city did not.

The other side smells like boiled tea and laundry soap. I hear voices - neighbours long moved away, or dead, or both. The fog here is thinner, gentler.

Nostalgic.

This crossing isn’t a mistake.

It’s an offering.

Anna's voice echoes faintly from behind me, distorted. "Iain! Step away!"

I turn. The bridge shivers.

I understand suddenly, with terrible clarity, what the city wants. It isn't trying to trap me. It's trying to reconnect a path it lost. A sequence broken. A closure undone.

If I walk all the way across - if I take the old route again - the city will seal it behind me. Not erase it. Integrate it. The fog will thin. The maps will adjust. No more unknown crossing.

But I will not come back.

Not to this version of the city. Not to the Registry. Not to the careful distance I've kept from certain memories, certain griefs.

Behind me, the water churns. The bridge hums louder, impatient.

I think of my mother, standing at the window with a dish towel over her shoulder, waiting for my footsteps. I think of all the routes I've documented but never walked, all the ways the city offers itself and how rarely we accept.

"Iain," Anna says again. Fear sharpens her voice. "The fog is closing."

I take one step forward.

Then another.

The city around me exhales - not relief, not triumph, but something like recognition.

When the fog lifts an hour later, the Old Salt Works is still gone. The bridge is gone too. The bell is quiet. The map shows nothing unusual.

At the Registry, my desk is reassigned.

But on certain mornings, when the fog comes from both water and marsh, the city holds a little more space between its buildings. And somewhere, a path is walked again, complete at last.

I don't know who walks it.

I only know the city remembers.