



MAGIC

THE LEDGER BELOW

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

ONE	rpenguin
TWO	JUK3
THREE	Dario Selo
FOUR	Margot Vail
FIVE	wordsbylena
SIX	Sasha Loomis
SEVEN	jmarsh
EIGHT	Priya Nair

Chapter

ONE

written by rpenguin

He came on the first of every month. He wore rubber boots that went to his thighs and carried a leather satchel with a brass clasp that had started to go green at the edges. He had a route, same as any collector. The marshes were last because of the boots, and because of what the boots meant he had to do before he could enter.

He had to kneel.

Not in worship. The eels were not gods. They were, as far as Brennen could tell, just eels, dark and thick-bodied and slow in the cold months, quicker when it warmed. But you couldn't stand over them when they paid. He didn't know why. He'd tried once, when he was new to the route, and the eel that came, a long one, older than he could guess, had simply looked at him from the water and gone back down. He'd had to return the next day and kneel then, and the coin was waiting on a flat rock just below the surface, and neither of them mentioned it.

Now he just knelt.

The coins were old. That was the thing the office kept flagging and Brennen kept writing around in his reports. He'd learned early that if he wrote the coins are very old someone would ask how old, and if he wrote Roman they'd want to know which period, and if he gave a period an archaeologist would show up, and then there would be questions about provenance that Brennen did not have answers to and the eels certainly

weren't going to provide. So he wrote currency, denomination verified, condition variable and left it at that. The tax office accepted payment. That was their job. It was his job to collect it.

Today there were three of them waiting. Two he recognized by size. The big one he called Tuesday for no reason he could articulate, and a smaller one that always arrived from the east side of the reed bed. The third was new. It held its coin in its mouth and when it came to the surface it set the coin on the rock very deliberately, in a way that seemed to Brennen like it had been practicing.

He recorded all three in his ledger. Plot designations he'd invented himself, since the parcels were technically unregistered and the city had never gotten around to assigning them numbers. The eels didn't need addresses. They were where they were.

He blotted the entry and looked out across the marsh. The city was behind him, gray and specific, with its particular smell of coal and bread and something underneath both that had no name. Ahead was just water and grass and the sound of something moving that you could never quite locate. He'd been afraid of the marshes when he first took the route. Now he found them clarifying. Nothing out here pretended to be something else.

He stood, knees aching, and buckled the satchel.

The new eel was still watching him from just below the surface. He could see the pale line of its belly when it turned.

"I'll put you down as Plot Seven," he said. "Unless you have a preference."

It did not.

He started the long walk back along the raised path that cut through the reed beds. The mud smelled like iron and old wood. A heron stood in the shallows to his left, motionless, watching him the way herons did, which was like an accusation without a specific charge.

He thought about the coins in his satchel. What they'd seen. How long they'd been down there in the dark, in the cold, changing hands, if eels had hands, through whatever arrangements eels made with one

another. He thought about this the way he thought about most things: briefly, without conclusion, and then he put it away.

There was still the north quarter to do. A tanner who was always short and a laundress who paid in exact change so worn it was almost smooth, the faces rubbed off from circulation. Human coins. Recent enough. He'd be done by four.

He came off the raised path onto the road and scraped his boots on the iron bar someone had set into the ground there for that purpose, years before Brennen's time. He didn't know whose idea it had been. Someone who'd thought ahead. Someone who'd understood that this was a route people would keep walking, month after month, because the work kept needing doing.

He adjusted the satchel and went on.

Chapter

TWO

written by JUK3

The office kept its records in a room no one was assigned to.

Brennen had passed the door for years without entering. There had never been a reason.

There was, now.

He did not go immediately. He finished the north quarter first. The tanner paid short. The laundress paid exact. Human coins, worn in the ordinary way. He recorded them cleanly and returned just before closing, when the building had begun to empty and the sound of voices had lost its shape.

The door was unlocked.

Inside, the air was cooler. Shelves lined the walls, filled with boxes and ledgers and loose files tied with string gone stiff with age. There was no index. That would have implied intention. Instead there were patterns that almost held, then didn't.

He moved slowly, letting his eye adjust.

He found it by accident.

A thin file, set between two thicker ledgers as if placed there temporarily and forgotten. The paper had a softness that came from use rather than time. No title on the spine.

He slid it free.

Inside, the first page was a report. The format was familiar. Field entries, dates, collections. The handwriting was not his, but it followed the same conventions. Currency, denomination verified, condition variable.

He turned the page.

More marsh plots. Not numbered the way he numbered them. Descriptions that skirted detail without omitting it. Whoever had written this had been better at that balance than Brennen was.

Further in, the handwriting changed. Tighter. Controlled.

There were notes in the margins.

He leaned closer.

Do not record deviations.

The line was darker, pressed harder into the page.

He read it again.

Do not record deviations. Deviations attract attention.

No signature.

He turned the page.

The next report was shorter. Fewer entries. One plot marked inactive with no explanation. Another crossed out with a line so precise it might have been measured.

Then blank pages. Ruled, ready, unused.

He closed the file and held it for a moment. It felt like something that had ended before it was meant to.

A sound came from the corridor. Not a knock. Just a shift, the kind the building made when it settled.

Brennen set the file back where he had found it.

He stepped away, then stopped.

A loose page was tucked behind it. Slightly larger, a different tone.

He pulled it free.

A single line, typed.

Skip the marsh next month.

No heading. No signature.

He turned it over. Blank.

He slid it back into place, aligning it as best he could.

When he opened the door, the corridor was empty.

He returned to his desk without hurrying. The last clerks were gathering their things. Chairs scraped. Papers were stacked into neat, temporary orders.

He sat.

For a moment he did nothing.

Then he opened his satchel.

Two coins.

That was correct. It should have been correct. Still, he felt the absence of the third like a miscount that refused to resolve.

He set the two coins on the desk.

Something caught his eye.

A third coin lay near the edge of the blotter, half in shadow.

He did not remember placing it there.

He reached for it slowly.

It was not like the others. The surface was clean, untouched. At its center, a mark. A circle within a circle, and inside it a shape that suggested a tower or a column without resolving into either.

There was no date.

He looked around the office.

No one was watching him.

No one ever was, and yet the room held the feeling of observation the way the marsh held the feeling of movement beneath the water.

Brennen closed his hand around the coin.

He did not write it in the ledger.

For the first time since he had taken the route, he left a space where an entry should have been.

He closed the book and sat with it like that, the omission resting quietly between one line and the next, as if it had always been there.

Chapter

THREE

written by Dario Selo

He sat with the omission the way you sit with a pain you're pretending isn't there, which is to say: aware of it in every moment, constructing the pretense carefully enough that it becomes, almost (though not quite), a kind of honest forgetting. The office emptied around him. Chairs found their places. Coats were shrugged on with the particular relief of people leaving work that hadn't required them to think too hard, or at all, which Brennen understood was the shape most work took if you let it. He had let it, mostly. Now the coin sat in his closed palm, warm from his skin or warm already (he couldn't tell, couldn't remember if it had felt warm when he first touched it), and the question of what to do with it refused to resolve into anything like clarity. He could log it. That was the obvious answer, the one that followed procedure, which existed (he had been told, when he started) to prevent exactly this kind of paralysis. But the previous collector's note had said skip the marsh, and someone had typed that and left it where it could be found, or where it couldn't, depending on whether you thought Brennen's finding it was accident or inevitability. He didn't know. He was not sure it mattered. What mattered: three eels had paid. Two coins had made it into his satchel. One had appeared on his desk. He opened his hand. The mark at the center of the coin was clearer now, or he was looking at it differently. Not a tower. A lighthouse, maybe. The kind that appeared in old

engravings of the coast, back when the coast had been further out and the marshes had been deeper, before the city had started its slow expansion into every available margin. The inner circle enclosed it completely. The outer circle was broken in one place, a gap so small he might have missed it if he hadn't been looking for flaws. Brennen turned the coin over. The reverse was blank. Not worn blank, the way the laundress's coins were blank. Intentionally blank, cast or stamped or (and here his thinking became the kind of thinking he usually tried to avoid) made blank by some process that had nothing to do with casting or stamping. He thought about the eel. The new one, the one he'd designated Plot Seven. How deliberately it had placed the coin. Like it had been practicing, yes, but also (and this was the part he'd noticed without noting) like it had been making sure he saw. Making sure he understood he was being given something that required acknowledgment beyond the usual entry in the ledger. He could skip the marsh next month. That was another option, the one the note had suggested. But suggestions, when left anonymously, when tucked into files that no one was supposed to read (or that everyone was supposed to read eventually, depending on how you understood the mechanics of an unlocked door), had a way of being less suggestion than test. Someone wanted to know what Brennen would do when presented with a deviation he was supposed to ignore. He put the coin in his pocket. This was neither logging it nor leaving it. This was (and he recognized this even as he did it) a delay disguised as a decision, the kind of move you make when you want to pretend you're still in control of the sequence of events, even though the sequence has already moved past the point where control was available to you. He stood. His knees ached less than they had in the marsh, but differently, the ache having migrated from the specific joint to something more general, more like the feeling of having knelt when you shouldn't have, or of having stood when kneeling was required. The corridor was dark except for the exit lights. He walked past the record room without looking at the door, which was its own kind of looking, its own acknowledgment that the

door mattered more now than it had that morning, when it had been just a door in a series of doors, none of them meaning anything except the places they enclosed. Outside, the street was wet. It hadn't rained. The moisture was just there, the way it was there every evening when the temperature dropped and the city exhaled whatever it had been holding in all day. Brennen turned toward home, then stopped. The marsh was south. He could go now. Not to collect (it wasn't the first), but to see. To confirm that Plot Seven was still there, that the transaction had been what it seemed, that nothing had changed in the hours since he'd knelt and risen and walked away. He turned south.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Margot Vail

The walk took forty minutes. He didn't time it. He knew because he'd done it enough times that his body had learned the rhythm, the particular fatigue that set in at twenty minutes when the streets gave way to packed dirt, the second fatigue at thirty when the ground went soft. By forty his boots were necessary. He hadn't changed them. This meant his feet were wet by the time he reached the raised path. The water came in at the seams, cold and immediate. He kept walking. The marsh at night was not the marsh he collected from. Different birds. Different sounds underneath the sounds, or the same sounds meaning different things when you couldn't see what made them. He had a torch. He didn't turn it on. The reed beds were dark shapes against darker water. He walked the path by memory and by the slight difference in texture under his boots where wood became mud, mud became wood again. He stopped at the place where Plot Seven had surfaced. The rock was there. Flat, particular. The water around it was still. He knelt. He waited. The coin in his pocket felt heavier than it should. Not metaphorically. Literally heavier, as if it had been gaining mass since he'd picked it up, taking on weight the way iron takes on rust. He waited longer. No eels came. This was not unusual. They came when they came. They paid when payment was due. This was not payment time, and he had no right to expect them. He took out the coin anyway. The mark

caught the faint light from the city behind him. The lighthouse, if that's what it was. The broken circle. He set it on the rock. For a moment nothing happened. Then the water moved. Not a ripple. A displacement, something large rising from underneath. Not an eel. Too wide. The wrong shape entirely. Brennen's hand went to his satchel, which was a stupid instinct because there was nothing in his satchel that would help him. Ledgers didn't stop things rising from marsh water. The shape surfaced. A box. Wooden, about the size of a briefcase. Wet, but not rotted. The wood was dark, oiled, maintained. It sat on the surface without floating the way wood should float. It sat like it was resting on something solid just below the waterline. Brennen didn't move. The box opened. Not hinges. The top simply lifted, moved by nothing he could see. Inside: coins. Not a pile. An arrangement. Rows, each coin set precisely against the next. Maybe fifty, maybe more. All of them clean. All of them marked with variations of the same symbol, the lighthouse, the broken circle. One space was empty. Exactly the size of the coin he'd just placed on the rock. The coin was gone. He looked. The rock was bare. When he looked back at the box, the empty space was filled. His coin, in its place, completing the pattern. The box closed. It sank, not quickly but without pause, down into the water until the dark took it. Brennen stayed kneeling. His knees hurt. That was good. That was a normal hurt, the kind that meant his body was working the way bodies worked, following rules that didn't change depending on what rose from marsh water. He stood carefully. The reed beds looked the same. The city behind him looked the same. His boots were still wet, his satchel still hanging from his shoulder. He put his hand in his pocket. The coin was there. This was impossible. He had set it on the rock. He had watched it disappear. He had seen the space in the box fill. He took it out. Same coin. Same lighthouse. Same broken circle. He turned it over three times, checking for differences. There were none. He put it back in his pocket. When he turned to leave, an eel was watching him from the shallows. Not Plot Seven. Tuesday, the big one. It stayed very still, the way eels do when they're deciding whether you're a threat. Brennen

noded to it. It sank without hurry. He walked back along the path, feet squelching, the coin heavy in his pocket. The city grew louder as he approached. Voices, engines, the particular scrape of metal on stone that meant the trams were still running. He would go home. He would dry his boots. He would not sleep well. Tomorrow he would return to the office and decide whether to log the coin that wouldn't leave him, in the ledger that was waiting for its entry.

Chapter

FIVE

written by wordsbylena

He logged it. Not immediately. First: the boots by the door, newspaper stuffed inside to draw the wet. The satchel on its hook. His coat, which smelled like marsh water and the particular staleness of the office, onto the back of the chair. A glass of water from the tap. Drunk standing. Then the ledger, opened on the kitchen table under the lamp that flickered once before holding steady. He'd counted the coins in the box. Reflex, not decision. His eyes had done it while his mind was still processing the fact of the box itself. Fifty-three coins, now fifty-four with his added. Seven rows of seven, plus five in an eighth row that looked incomplete, waiting. He wrote this down on a separate paper, not in the ledger. The numbers wanted recording even if he didn't yet know what they meant. The coin sat beside the ledger. He'd taken it out to confirm it was still there, still real, still impossible. It was all three. He opened to the current month's page. March. Twelve entries so far. The last three: Plot Five, Plot Six, Plot Seven. All marked paid, all dated the first. Standard notations, nothing flagged. He ruled a new line. Drew it carefully, the way he always did, using the straight edge he kept in the table's single drawer. Plot Seven (secondary), he wrote. Then stopped. The coin hadn't come from Plot Seven. It had come from his desk, or it had come from nowhere, or it had come from the box, which had come from under the water when he'd placed a different coin that was

somehow the same coin on the rock. Causality had a sequence. He couldn't identify it. He crossed out "Plot Seven (secondary)" with a single line, the kind that preserved readability. Started again. Unassigned collection, marsh, evening of the 1st. One coin, denomination unknown, condition: new. Mark: lighthouse variant, circle broken at, He stopped. Got up. Measured the coin with the ruler from the drawer. Diameter: 24 millimeters, exact. Thickness: 3 millimeters, near enough. Weight: he didn't have a scale, but it felt wrong. Heavier than a coin this size should be. He estimated. Wrote "approx. 15 grams" with a question mark. The break in the outer circle was at what he'd call two o'clock if the lighthouse counted as twelve. Gap width: less than a millimeter. Almost nothing. He wrote this down. He sat back. The entry looked wrong in the ledger, too detailed and not detailed enough at once. The other entries were clean. Address, amount, status. This one sprawled across the column lines like something that didn't understand the format it was supposed to fit. He turned back three pages. February. The same plots, the same payments. All eels, all marsh. Nothing secondary, nothing unassigned. He counted them. Fourteen payments in February. Thirteen in January, which was normal because the cold made some plots inactive. December: fifteen. He went back further. November, last year: fourteen payments. October: sixteen. September: eighteen, which was the high point, the month when even the deep-water eels surfaced. Every month logged cleanly. Every entry complete. No deviations noted. Nothing that suggested a previous collector had ever seen a box rise from the marsh or received a coin that wouldn't leave his pocket. But the file in the record room had said do not record deviations. Which meant there had been deviations to not record. He closed the ledger, then opened it again immediately. The entry was still there. He couldn't tell if this was relief or disappointment. The coin sat on the table. The lamplight found the mark on its face, the lighthouse. He thought about lighthouses. What they did. They warned. They marked hazards. They showed you where the safe passage was by showing you where it wasn't. The broken circle could mean the light

didn't reach all the way around. Or it could mean the circle was never meant to be complete. He picked up the coin. Pocketed it. The ledger stayed open, the entry visible. Tomorrow someone might see it, might ask what "lighthouse variant" meant, might want the coin produced for verification. He would deal with that when it happened. He turned off the lamp. In the dark, the apartment was just an apartment. Four rooms, a kitchen, walls that needed paint. Ordinary. He went to bed with the coin still in his pocket, his trousers folded on the chair within reach. He didn't sleep well. He'd known he wouldn't.

Chapter

SIX

written by Sasha Loomis

He woke twice. The first time to nothing, just his eyes open in the dark and the feeling that something had asked him a question he'd missed. The second time the coin was on the floor. He heard it fall. Small sound, definite. Metal on wood. He didn't get up. He lay there constructing reasons it could have fallen that followed ordinary physics. The trousers had shifted. His movement in sleep had dislodged them. The coin had been positioned near an edge, gravity waiting. None of these felt true. He turned on the lamp. The coin sat near the baseboard, six feet from the chair. The trousers were where he'd left them, folded, undisturbed. He retrieved the coin. It was warm. In the kitchen he made tea he didn't want. The ritual mattered more than the drinking. Kettle, cup, the waiting. While the water heated he examined the coin again under the better light. The lighthouse mark was the same. The broken circle was the same. But at the base of the lighthouse, barely visible, a new detail: a door. Or the suggestion of one. A thin vertical line, slightly recessed. He was certain it hadn't been there before. He checked his notes from the previous night. Lighthouse variant, circle broken at two o'clock, no other markings. He looked at the coin again. The door remained. The kettle screamed. He poured water over the tea bag and watched it darken, which was something happening in a way he could predict. Comfort in that. He needed to go back to the marsh. This wasn't a decision that

came from thinking. His body knew it before his mind agreed, already calculating the walk, the time it would take, whether he should wait for daylight. He went in the dark. Same route, same forty minutes. His boots were still damp from the night before. The newspaper inside had given up moisture to the air of his apartment. Now the leather took water again, familiar discomfort, the wetness like a signature. The marsh was quieter than it had been. Or the same sounds felt quieter because he was listening differently. He reached the rock. Knelt without deciding to kneel. Put the coin down. This time he counted. Got to forty-seven before the water moved. Not the box. Tuesday, surfacing slow, massive in the way old eels are massive, like they've been taking in the weight of the marsh year by year until they're more marsh than eel. Tuesday looked at him. Looked at the coin. Didn't take it. Brennen waited. His knees hurt already. The cold worked faster at night. Tuesday sank an inch, rose an inch. A gesture. Not quite a refusal, not quite an instruction, but something between that Brennen felt he was supposed to understand. He picked up the coin. Tuesday watched. Brennen held it out over the water, not quite releasing it. The eel moved closer. Its mouth opened slightly, then closed. It swam in a tight circle around the rock, once, twice. Then it went down. Brennen sat back on his heels. His hand still extended, the coin still there. A different eel surfaced. Smaller, pale belly flashing. Not Plot Seven. Not any he recognized. It carried something in its mouth. It placed it on the rock beside where Brennen's coin would have been. A key. Iron, old, simple. The kind that opened locks made before locks got complicated. The eel submerged. Brennen took the key. It was dry. Completely dry, as if it had never been underwater. He put the coin back in his pocket. Put the key in a different pocket, though he couldn't say why they shouldn't touch. Around him the marsh continued. Reeds moved. Water moved. The city behind him was a glow that didn't reach this far. He stood. Started back. Halfway along the path he stopped because a heron was standing directly in his way. The same heron, maybe. All herons looked like accusations. It didn't move. "I'm logging everything," Brennen said. The heron turned

its head in the particular manner that meant it was seeing him from a different angle and finding the view equally suspect. It stepped aside. Brennen continued. The key pressed against his thigh through the pocket fabric. The coin pressed against the other thigh. Two weights, two objects that shouldn't exist in the way they existed. He would log the key. He would note the exchange. He would write it in his clearest hand and let someone else ask questions.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by jmarsh

He reached the office as the first clerks were arriving, which meant the sky was still making up its mind about dawn and the building's locks had not yet been changed from night to day. The door opened to his key without resistance. Inside, the air was cold enough that his breath became visible, small clouds that dissipated as if they had never been. He did not turn on the lights. He knew the way by the particular creaks of the floorboards, by the shape of furniture in darkness, by the architecture of a space he had walked through five days a week for seven years without once feeling he truly inhabited it. His desk was where he'd left it. The ledger was where he'd left it. He sat and opened to the page from the night before, the entry still raw, still exposing itself to the margins in its awkward detail. He turned past it, to a fresh line. He dated it carefully: the second of March, evening hour unspecified, collection location marsh, plot designation unassigned. Then he paused. The key. He could not describe it without sounding like a man inventing metaphors to excuse the impossible. Iron, old, simple: these words were true but insufficient. They didn't convey the weight of it, which was not the weight of metal but something denser, something that suggested the lock it opened had been waiting a long time in the dark. He wrote: One iron key, construction antique, origin unknown, condition: preserved. Markings: none. Retrieved: direct exchange, Plot Seven

tertiary contact, evening hour, marsh location, rock marking payment site. He set down his pen. The key sat on the desk beside the ledger. In the growing light from the window, he could see the teeth of it, each one specific, each one worn in a pattern that spoke of use by hands long dead or still living in some version of the world that permitted hands and keys and locks to matter in the way they had mattered once. He took it up. The temperature of it had not changed. It remained cool in his palm the way things remain cool when they have been underwater and carry that memory in their substance. A thought arrived, fully formed, like something that had been waiting at the threshold of his mind and finally decided to enter: the key opened something in this building. He didn't know how he knew this. It was not a deduction arrived at through reasoning. It was knowledge of the type that could not be traced backward to its source, and therefore could not be questioned in the way knowledge usually permits questioning. He rose. The building was still mostly dark. He could hear a clerk arriving, the particular rattle of keys on a ring, the sound of someone who believed themselves to be alone and therefore made noise without consideration. Brennen moved through the corridors with the deliberation of a man navigating a space that had revealed itself to contain more doors than he had previously understood. There were three doors he had never entered. One was storage, marked on a placard that had gone gray with dust. Another was a supply closet, or had been, or was supposed to be. The third was at the end of the east corridor, unmarked, painted the same gray as the walls so that it existed in the architecture more as a possibility than a certainty. He tried the key in the first lock. It didn't fit. The mechanism was modern, the sort of thing that had come with the building's last renovation, when they'd updated the plumbing and added electric lights that hummed with their own particular resentment. The supply closet took a different key entirely, the sort that came with the building, issued to maintenance staff, kept on a ring. The unmarked door received the iron key as if it had been waiting for it all along. The fit was perfect. No resistance. No friction. The key turned as if turned by a hand that had

performed this action countless times before, which was either Brennen's hand or the hand of whoever had held this key in the years before he was born, and perhaps the distinction between these two things was not as absolute as he had believed. The door opened inward. Inside was not a room but a staircase. It descended. The light from the corridor did not follow it down beyond the first few steps. He stood at the threshold. His mind offered objections to what he was about to do, which was to walk down into darkness carrying nothing but a key that had already proven its ability to unlock things that shouldn't be unlocked. He descended anyway. Behind him the door swung shut.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Priya Nair

The darkness was not complete. Twenty steps down, a thread of light appeared at the base of the wall, thin enough to be a crack but too steady to be accidental. His eyes adjusted incrementally. Stone stairs, each one worn in the center from use. The walls were brick, laid in patterns that suggested age without announcing it. No mortar dust. Everything sealed tight. He could smell minerals, the particular staleness of air that hadn't cycled through open windows in decades, perhaps longer. Fifty steps. His thighs began to protest. The light grew marginally brighter. He reached the bottom and stopped. The staircase opened into a chamber. Not large. Perhaps forty feet across, the dimensions difficult to judge because the light source came from a single lamp mounted on the far wall, a brass fixture that had gone green at the seams, just like the clasp on his satchel, just like the door that had admitted him. The lamp was lit. Not electric. Oil, by the smell of it, the faint smell of old fuel burning with a patience that suggested it had been burning for some time. In the center of the chamber sat a desk. Not his desk. Larger, older, made of wood so dark it seemed to absorb the lamplight rather than reflect it. Behind it was a chair, and in the chair was a ledger. Not his ledger. Bigger. The covers were leather, unmarked, closed. Brennen approached it without deciding to approach. His knees ached less down here. Something about the temperature, maybe, or the fact that he'd stopped

kneeling. He opened the ledger. The first page was dated 1847. The handwriting was neat, precise, the script of someone trained in an era when handwriting mattered as a sign of character. The entries were similar to his own. Collections logged, amounts recorded, plots designated by location. The language was slightly different, the phrasing more ornate, but the structure was identical. He turned pages. 1848. 1849. The handwriting changed. A new collector. This one was faster, less careful. Entries compressed, details minimized. The plots multiplied. Twenty-three collections in August 1851. Thirty-one in September. He kept turning. The handwriting changed again. And again. Decades. A century. The ink shifted from brown to black and back to brown. The paper yellowed and then, in the later volumes, went crisp with age. But every month was there. Every payment recorded. Every plot logged. The dates marched forward in orderly succession until they reached the present year. March. Eleven entries before his own. His entry was not there. He'd logged it that morning, but this book did not contain it. He turned to the next page. Blank. The following page, blank. The rest of the book was empty, the leather covers closing on untouched paper. Brennen stood back from the desk. The lamp continued its patient burning. The key was still in his hand. He'd forgotten he was holding it. The chamber had walls, he realized. Beyond the pool of lamplight, there was darkness, but not the darkness of nothing. The darkness of something withheld. He moved toward it, letting his eyes find the boundary where light surrendered to shadow. A door. Of course there was a door. The key fit. The lock opened. Inside this second chamber was a smaller room, and inside that was a cabinet, and inside the cabinet was a collection of journals. Not ledgers. Personal journals, decades of them, stacked by year. He pulled one out at random. 1923. The handwriting was careful, almost meditative. The entries were brief. Notes on the weather. Observations about which plots had paid and which had gone silent. References to meetings with other collectors, though their names were never given, always just "the man from the north quarter" or "she who handles the industrial sector." And scattered

throughout, in the margins, in the spaces between entries, questions. Why do they pay at all? Where does the money go? Who decided we would kneel? Brennen read the 1923 journal standing in a room beneath a building in a city that had no official knowledge of his work. When he finished, he pulled out another. 1951. The handwriting was frantic, the entries compressed into the margins like an afterthought. Single sentences. Plot Four requested acknowledgment. Plot Twelve produced a key. The lighthouse coins have begun. He stopped reading and returned the journal to the cabinet. He knew what he would find if he kept looking. More records of the impossible. More evidence that the deviations were not deviations but pattern. That the eels had been doing this for longer than anyone currently walking the city had been alive. That the previous collector had not written "skip the marsh next month" as a warning but as a question.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Dario Selo

The coins were never meant to leave, and neither were we.

wordsbylena

The ledger was always waiting, and I was always the one who thought I was choosing to open it.

Sasha Loomis

The lighthouse never stops burning, even when there's no one left to warn.

jmarsh

The marsh remembers what the city forgets, and someone must kneel to keep the accounts balanced between them.

Priya Nair

The eels have been waiting longer than the city has been standing, and they've always known exactly what they were paying for.

rpenguin

THE EELS!

Finished on 6 July 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never
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