

## Before the Sun

The rain had stopped hours ago, but the streets still glistened like molten silver. Water pooled in the seams of cobblestones, trembling whenever a stray breeze swept through the alleyways. Somewhere overhead, a single streetlamp flickered — not quite out of life, but never fully committed to staying lit. It was the kind of hour the city forgot it had, a narrow stretch of time between night's exhaustion and dawn's impatient light.

A lone cyclist drifted through the quiet. Their coat was too thin for the damp air, but the rhythm of their pedaling kept the cold at bay. The hum of the tires was steady, a soft metronome against the hollow spaces between the brick walls. Shopfronts passed in a blur — shutters down, windows black, mannequins in winter scarves staring blankly into nothing.

From somewhere far ahead came the scent of baking bread. It curled through the air like smoke from an invisible fire, warm and insistent, drawing the cyclist onward with a pull stronger than hunger. The source was a bakery on the corner of Bridge and Lanesworth — a place the cyclist had never actually visited but had passed countless times during busier hours, when the glass counter was crowded with loaves, pastries, and the soft murmurs of customers. Now, the bakery stood in quiet defiance of the sleeping city, its oven light glowing faintly through the front window like a beacon.

A delivery truck was parked at the curb. Its engine was off, but the warmth still radiated from its hood. The driver, a man in a navy cap, leaned against the side door sipping from a paper cup. He gave the cyclist a nod, the kind of shared acknowledgment that belongs to those awake in forbidden hours. Neither spoke; neither needed to. The night still had a hold on their words.

Somewhere, a gull cried — sharp, distant, and strangely out of place. It was too early for the birds, but perhaps the sea didn't care for clocks any more than the wind did. The cyclist turned a corner and passed the waterfront, where the tide lapped gently against weathered wood pilings. The water's surface mirrored the sky: black, rippled, and holding a promise of color yet to come. Every so often, a faint streak of orange teased the horizon, as though the sun were testing the patience of the world before committing to the day.

Beyond the docks lay the market district. Empty stalls stood with their canvas awnings rolled tight, but the air already carried hints of what was to come: citrus from crates of early-arriving oranges, the faint musk of burlap sacks filled with roasted coffee beans, the tang of sea salt from the fishmonger's early catch. The cyclist slowed here, coasting between the rows, letting the scents and the slow creak of the tide weave into a tapestry of beginnings.

It was in the market's farthest corner that they found the old clock tower. The building's bricks had weathered a century of storms, its iron hands frozen at 4:12 ever since the great power outage years ago. No one had bothered to fix it — time in this part of the city seemed to run on its own rules anyway. Beneath the tower's shadow, puddles reflected not the sky but the faint glow of lanterns. Someone had left them lit overnight, their flames swaying gently in the damp air.

The cyclist stopped here. Not because they needed rest, but because some part of them understood that this was the moment — the stillness before the turning of the page. The scent of bread still lingered in the air, and the gulls were beginning to gather somewhere unseen. A distant whistle — maybe a train, maybe the wind — carried over the rooftops.

And then, without ceremony, the first full ribbon of sunlight broke the horizon. It slid over the water, painted the bricks, caught in the glass windows of the closed shops. The cyclist closed their eyes for a heartbeat, and when they opened them again, the city was no longer asleep.