

A COMPANION FOR DARK TABLES

VESPERS

Rumors · read-alouds · complications · bargains · omens

Five chapters of system-neutral tools for any game with nights in it. No statistics, no setting locks — fiction-side fuel for storytellers and players alike.

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WHISPERS

Thirty-six rumors, three doors each

CHAPTER I · WHISPERS

I× · HEARD IN THE TAVERN

11 *"The miller's boy came back from the drowned village. Walked out of the water on market day. He doesn't blink anymore, and his mother pretends not to notice."*

TRUE The crossing took his blinking as toll. He sees the drowned now, standing in doorways, patient. He will pay someone to teach him how to close his eyes.

FALSE Grief, nothing more — he blinks when no one watches. What's interesting is why the whole village needs him to be a miracle.

WORSE The boy is still under the ice, knocking. This one is learning the family's habits, and it has nearly finished with the mother.

12 *"The new well tastes sweet. Landlord calls it a blessing and raised the rents the same week."*

TRUE A saint's casket cracked into the aquifer. The sweetness is real, holy, and running out — and men who know will kill for the last barrels.

FALSE Smuggled honey-syrup, poured in at dusk. Harmless — but the man who pours it also keeps the landlord's other ledger.

WORSE Water tastes sweet when something is dissolving in it. The well tastes the town back, and it has preferences now.

13 *"The widow at the end table buys a second cup every night and lets it go cold. Twelve years running."*

TRUE It is for her husband, and on the anniversary of his death the cup steams on its own. This year she has invited someone to watch.

FALSE The cup keeps the chair filled so no stranger sits, smiles, and asks questions. The widow was never married. She is hiding from whoever still sends the wedding letters.

WORSE It is bait. Once a decade someone drinks it to mock her. She knits by the fire and waits, the way anglers wait.

14 *"Old Berth swears the road outside was longer last winter. Says the town is getting closer to something."*

TRUE Surveyors confirm it and are paid to unconfirm it. The maps are redrawn yearly. Nobody redraws what the town is closing in on.

FALSE The road is the same. Berth's memory is shrinking — evenly, in all directions, like something is trimming it for later use.

WORSE The town isn't moving. The something is patient, and it is reeling, and the road is the line.

15 *"They hanged the arsonist Tuesday. Wednesday the fires started again — smaller, politer, like they're apologizing."*

TRUE The hanged man taught someone. The pupil disagrees with the master's taste for spectacle but not with the cause, which nobody ever asked about.

FALSE Insurance men lit the new ones. The hanged man was convenient, innocent, and — this is the useful part — well loved by the dockworkers who know it.

WORSE The fires were never his. They attended his hanging like family, and now they are in mourning, and mourning ends.

16 *"There's a room upstairs the landlord won't let, though he sweeps it every morning and sets the bed fresh."*

TRUE A guest paid thirty years in advance and will arrive, per the contract, any night now. The landlord has begun to hope he won't outlive the booking.

FALSE The room is empty and always was. The ritual is how the landlord keeps his dead son's hours. Break the routine and you break the man.

WORSE The room is let. The sweeping is how the landlord counts the footprints that aren't his, and lately the count is rising.

2× · HEARD AT COURT

21 *"The heir has not been seen at chapel since the hunting accident. The family says he is devout in private now."*

TRUE The accident left him with a terror of stained glass — of what he saw arranged in it, once, in the instant before the fall that should have killed him.

FALSE He attends nightly, hooded, through the servants' door. What he confesses there has begun to reach other ears, priced by the syllable.

WORSE He is devout in private. The thing he prays to answered him in the forest, splinted his neck with its own hands, and now requires the privacy.

22 *"Her ladyship's new food-taster is the third this season. The other two retired wealthy, they say."*

TRUE Wealthy and mute — the pension is generous and its first condition is the tongue. Both settled within sight of the estate, where they can be watched watching.

FALSE Nobody is poisoning her ladyship. She invented the plot to justify the tasters, who are in fact the only people at that table she can bear to speak with.

WORSE The tasters are not tasting for poison. They are being fed something, course by course, and when one is finished — seasoned, the kitchen says — the retirement is arranged.

23 *"The old count paints the same portrait over and over. Burns each one at solstice. His valet buys the canvases by the dozen."*

TRUE The portrait improves each year, and the face is no one the household knows — yet. The valet has orders to send word the day that face presents itself at any gate.

FALSE The count burns blank canvases and paints nothing. The rumor of the ritual keeps his heirs frightened of a curse and away from his ledgers, which deserve the fear more.

WORSE The face in the portrait ages between paintings. The count is keeping someone imprisoned in the only cell that holds them, and every solstice he must build it again from memory before the ash cools.

24 *"They say the chancellor's signature has changed. Small thing. The clerks noticed first and the clerks have stopped mentioning it."*

TRUE A stroke, hidden by the family, hand retrained badly. The realm is being governed by a man who can no longer read his own laws — his secretary reads them to him, with amendments.

FALSE The signature is his. The clerk who first "noticed" was paid to plant the doubt, and the doubt is doing its patient work on the succession.

WORSE The signature changed because signing is how it holds the pen-hand. The chancellor watches his own wrist move and has learned not to interrupt. The new clauses are very well drafted.

25 *"The duchess dances with every guest exactly once. Even the ones nobody else can see, the pages joke."*

TRUE The pages aren't joking. One dance per debt, per the old bargain — and the invisible guests are multiplying, which means somewhere, someone is borrowing against her name.

FALSE She rehearses alone at dawn with a dancing-master smuggled in through the chapel. The perfection is bought. What she pays him with is the actual scandal.

WORSE Every guest, exactly once — because the ones she dances with twice do not leave. Ask the pages how many verses the musicians are contracted for, and why the last verse is never played.

26 *"The king's twin died at birth, they've always said. Then why does the north tower keep a second wardrobe, fitted yearly?"*

TRUE The twin lives, mad and gentle, and the king visits weekly wearing his brother's clothes so the poor man believes he is looking in a mirror. It is the kindest thing the crown does.

FALSE No twin, no prisoner. The wardrobe dresses the king's double for dangerous processions — a tailor's son who has begun, quietly, to be better at the role.

WORSE The wardrobe is fitted yearly because the twin is still growing. Whatever was born second that night did not stop, and the tower was built downward.

3× · HEARD IN THE MARKET

31 *"Don't take coin from the fish-stall — same shilling keeps coming back. Marked ones. Three traders swear it."*

TRUE The shilling returns to its purse by midnight, loyal as a dog. The purse's owner will pay handsomely for its recovery — each of the eleven times you sell it back.

FALSE The fishmonger marks his own coins and re-seeds them, building the legend that keeps thieves off his stall. It works better than the constable ever did.

WORSE The coin isn't returning. It's recruiting. Check your change for teeth-marks; check who in your household has begun saving.

32 *"The spice merchant's saffron is ash, I tell you. And still his queue is longest in the row."*

TRUE Ash from a very particular hearth. His customers know exactly what they're buying, and they are not cooks — note who lights candles with it, and where.

FALSE It is saffron, finest on the coast. The rumor was started by the guild he refuses to join, and it's the queue that's the message: the guild is losing.

WORSE His customers taste saffron because the ash remembers being expensive. Everything the merchant sells is the same grey dust, remembering. The queue remembers being customers.

33 *"The moneylender forgave the whole street's debts on Lady Day. Every ledger line struck through in red."*

TRUE He is dying and buying his soul back retail. The interesting question is what his creditor makes of the arithmetic — and whether forgiveness transfers the accounts or merely the collateral.

FALSE Struck through, yes — recopied into a second book, no. The "forgiveness" converts money owed into favors owed, and favors compound faster.

WORSE The red ink is the contract. Every debtor who felt that lovely lightness signed something with the feeling. The street votes as one man now, and pays its tithe in errands after dark.

34 *"The caravan from the pass arrived Thursday. Trouble is, the same caravan arrived Monday too."*

TRUE Bandits took the caravan and sent ahead a false one with practiced faces. Monday's goods are real, Thursday's men are not — and the horses know it; watch the horses.

FALSE Two caravans, one greedy factor double-selling the same manifest. Fraud, ordinary as rain — until both sets of buyers meet at the warehouse door at the same hour, which is tonight.

WORSE The pass folded in the storm, and the caravan arrived both times it left. The drivers of each swear the other lot are impostors. They are both right. Cargo is identical, except for one crate, which exists only once and knows it.

35 *"The butcher's scales weigh light for widows and heavy for the tax-man. Saint of the row, that one."*

TRUE He is exactly what he seems — which is why three different informers are building files on him, since no one in this quarter is permitted to be clean.

FALSE The scales are honest; the theatre is the point. Widows praise him, the tax-man audits elsewhere, and under the sawdust his cellar holds what actually pays for the shop.

WORSE The scales weigh something other than meat, and they are never wrong. He gives the widows a light measure of it out of mercy. The tax-man gets the full weight he has earned, and the tax-men keep dying of natural causes.

36 *"The night-market takes no coin at all, they say. Barter only, and they're choosy."*

TRUE Memories, first words, the ability to whistle — small things, honestly traded, permanently gone. Everyone leaves satisfied. The stall-keepers are saving up for something specific.

FALSE It's a den for fencing stolen goods behind a mummer's mystery. The "strange prices" are theatre — except the fence has started believing his own patter, and his last three buyers paid in things he can't fence.

WORSE The choosiness is the market. It stocks itself from what it refuses — every rejected customer leaves lighter, and the stalls next month carry merchandise that begs pardon in a familiar voice.

4× · HEARD AT CHURCH

41 *"The great bell rang once by itself Tuesday night. Sexton swears the tower was locked."*

TRUE The bell answers its twin, melted down for cannon a century ago. The cannon has been found, dredged whole from the harbor, and someone intends to fire it.

FALSE The sexton rang it himself, dead drunk, mourning his brother — and heard, in the echo, the reason he'll never drink again. What he heard is the rumor worth chasing.

WORSE Bells are rung to drive things off. Rung once, from inside, means something wanted the town to know the driving-off has stopped.

42 *"The reliquary sweats in hot weather. Sweet, like myrrh. The deacons take turns wiping it, and lately the turns are shorter."*

TRUE The relic is genuine, and it sweats when its saint's oath is close to being needed. The oath concerns the river, the third bridge, and a name the diocese has spent money erasing.

FALSE Condensation and clever incense — the shrine's takings tripled since the sweating started. The friar who engineered it has begun receiving answers to prayers he never sent up.

WORSE It isn't sweating out. It's sweating *through* — from whoever is sealed in there alive, which the wiping-cloths confirm to anyone who burns one and listens to the smoke.

43 *"Father confessor knows things he shouldn't. Widow Aldith's affairs. The reeve's second family. Things never spoken in his box."*

TRUE The dead of the parish confess to him nightly — they are bored, observant, and merciless, and he has begun to drink at the burden of a town with no secrets.

FALSE The confessional's rear panel backs the vestry cupboard, and the sexton's boy sells transcripts. The priest is innocent. The boy's client list is the treasure.

WORSE He knows because he was there for each of them, wearing whichever face the sin required. The parish's sins are his garden — he plants, he waters, and confession is the harvest.

44 *"No one sits the ninth pew. New folk get warned off it kindly. The kneeler's worn through all the same."*

TRUE The pew belongs to the family that built the church and died of it. On feast days their candles light in order, eldest first, and heaven help the year one fails to.

FALSE Woodworm, plain and simple, and a warden too cheap to fix it — but watch which visitors he *doesn't* warn, and you'll have his other employer.

WORSE The pew is sat every service, at capacity. The kindly warning is for your sake — the congregation that uses it arrives through the floor, kneels through the sermon, and has petitioned, in writing, for a larger allocation.

45 *"The choir's been one voice too many since Michaelmas. Descant nobody's singing. The choirmaster transposed everything down and it followed."*

TRUE A novice bricked into the loft two centuries back still keeps her office. She only wants the harmony's top line back — restore the old setting and she'll trade the parish her silence for a mass sung in her name.

FALSE The organist's daughter sings hidden in the loft because her father forbids her the stage. The voice is the finest the county's produced, and three talent-buyers from the city have already heard the rumor.

WORSE It is teaching them the descant on purpose. The setting it wants completed was banned for cause, and the choir is two rehearsals from the final phrase.

46 *"They buried the old vicar face-down. Sexton says it was in the man's own will. Bishop signed off without a word."*

TRUE Face-down, so that when he digs he digs deeper, not out — his instruction, his coffin, his warning. He knew what he'd invited in and chose the only cell he trusted: himself.

FALSE A clerk's error in the will, too shameful to exhume. But the *speed* of the bishop's signature — that was real, and what the bishop feared an exhumation might show has nothing to do with the vicar's posture.

WORSE Face-down is how you bury a door. The vicar was the hinge, and every year since, the grass over him grows in a spiral, tighter, like something turning a handle.

5× · HEARD ON THE ROAD

51 *"The milestones on the north road count down to the city. Except past the ford they've started counting down to something else."*

TRUE A survey crew was paid, handsomely and anonymously, to recut the stones toward a point in the marsh. Whoever commissioned it intends visitors, and has begun receiving them.

FALSE Stone-cutter's apprentice botched the numerals; the guild's too proud to admit it. The marsh point they accidentally indicate is nothing — but three separate parties camped out there believe otherwise, and are now aware of each other.

WORSE No one recut anything. The road decided. Walk it at dusk and the count is different than at dawn, and lower.

52 *"There's an inn two days out with lights and singing, but it's not on the assize list and the ale takes no coin."*

TRUE The innkeep died unlicensed and unshriven and cannot stop hosting. The house is harmless, warm, and desperate — pay for your ale with a splash on his grave out back, or the door forgets where it was, and you stay for the wake. Yours.

FALSE Free ale is the cheapest net ever woven: the singing covers the sound of the stable-boys reading your saddlebags. You'll leave rested, robbed of nothing but letters — copied, resealed, and sold on ahead of you.

WORSE The inn is bait, but not for you: it's a trap for a *specific* traveler, reset nightly for eighty years, and every guest since is upkeep. Whoever it waits for is finally on the road behind you, and the inn is in a mood to be done.

53 *"Pilgrims walk that route in fives. Never fours, never sixes. Ask them why and they change the subject in five words."*

TRUE The shrine ahead admits five and keeps the count — a four arrives, it waits; a six arrives, it chooses. The pilgrims aren't being mystical. They're being economical.

FALSE An old toll-dodge: bridges past the fork charge by the half-dozen. Pure custom now, defended with holy solemnity because no pilgrim will admit the tradition is accountancy.

WORSE They set out in fours. The fifth joins on the second day and each company politely pretends it was always there — because the last company that objected arrived at the shrine as a two.

54 *"The lantern-man walks the causeway on new-moon nights. Follow him and you'll cross safe, they say. Overtake him and you won't."*

TRUE He was the causeway-keeper, drowned at his post, still salaried in candle-stubs left at the shore shrine. He resents nothing but haste — the drowned patches he skirts move nightly, and he is the only map.

FALSE Smugglers' theatre: the "lantern-man" walks the safe line on nights they run cargo, and the legend keeps witnesses at a respectful distance. Lately, though, they've noticed their lantern-man out on nights no one's scheduled.

WORSE The lantern isn't lighting the path. It's sweeping for something in the black water, the way a jailer checks cells. The night you don't see him on the causeway is the night you should not be on it — and tonight the shore shrine's candles are all out.

55 *"Toll's doubled at the old bridge, and the keeper won't say why. Just keeps glancing under it."*

TRUE The thing beneath renegotiated. The keeper fronts the increase and remits the difference nightly, in the dark, in a bucket. He is behind on payments. Cross fast.

FALSE His daughter eloped with the last of the toll-box; the glancing is shame, arithmetic, and rehearsing the story he'll tell the assessor. He'd pay you to carry a letter that brings her home.

WORSE The doubling isn't the toll. It's a collection — the keeper is buying the bridge's silence about what he buried in the west pier footing, and the price of silence, as the glancing suggests, is now compounding hourly.

56 *"Carters won't take the shortcut through the beech wood anymore. Adds half a day around, and they pay it gladly."*

TRUE The wood started charging. Nothing dramatic — a horseshoe here, a name there, the memory of a tune. The carters did the sums: half a day is cheaper than whatever it takes when exact change isn't offered.

FALSE The long way passes the new coaching inn, and the innkeeper pays the carters' guild a quiet percentage. The wood is innocent. The story about it was commissioned, and the man who wrote it wants it back.

WORSE The wood is fine. It's what the wood is holding that the carters won't risk waking with wheel-noise — the guild took a vote, sealed the minutes, and the half-day detour is the whole town's premium on a policy nobody will name.

6× · HEARD FROM BELOW

61 *"The smugglers' new tunnel broke through into an older one Tuesday. Dressed stone, dry as church dust. They bricked it back up by Thursday."*

TRUE The old tunnel is a processional way, and the carvings show the procession going *down*. The smugglers resealed it out of superstition; their buyer, shown a sketch, has offered to purchase the superstition entire.

FALSE Dressed stone, yes — a forgotten cellar of the old mint. The smugglers found nothing but empty coin-racks, resealed it to keep rivals guessing, and started the "haunted" whisper themselves. The empty racks are the story: someone cleared the mint before the fire that officially destroyed it.

WORSE They bricked it up Thursday. The mortar was dry Friday. Someone repoints it, from the other side, every night since — neater each time, as if remembering the trade.

62 *"Rat-catchers' guild raised prices threefold and won't take contracts east of the canal at any fee."*

TRUE The rats east of the canal have a king now — the catchers met its court, heard its terms, and consider the embargo the better bargain. The terms are still open. It prefers to deal with principals.

FALSE The guild-master's simply cornering the market: he owns three warehouses east of the canal, and unchecked rats devalue the district ahead of his buying spree. The rats are ordinary. His ledgers aren't.

WORSE The catchers aren't refusing work east of the canal. They're being *paid* — same threefold rate — to make certain nothing hunts there. The client pays in advance, in old coin, dry as church dust, and the population it's protecting is not rats.

63 *"The gravediggers are striking. Not for wages, they say. For 'conditions.' They won't say which conditions."*

TRUE Three graves in the new row were found open from beneath, dirt thrown *outward*. The diggers want a priest on shift and iron in the fee. The vestry, tellingly, is negotiating instead of laughing.

FALSE It is for wages — but the diggers' spokesman invented "conditions" as leverage, and the town's imagination is doing his bargaining. What he doesn't know: last night someone paid his strike fund to *stay* out another month, and the graves that go undug meanwhile serve that donor nicely.

WORSE The conditions are contractual. The ground has always kept its side — take what's given, keep it down — and lately it hasn't. The diggers aren't striking against the vestry. They're striking against the counterparty, and they'd very much like the town to be present at renegotiation.

64 *"You can buy anything at the flooded crypt on the ebb tide, if you bring a light you made yourself."*

TRUE The vendor is honest and the stock is genuine — salvage from every wreck the harbor's ever eaten. Homemade light is the entry fee because bought flame carries its seller's claim, and the vendor is done being robbed by proxies.

FALSE A pawnbroker's myth for moving cursed inventory: "the crypt" is his cellar, the tide is theatre, and the candle rule sorts out gullible buyers from constables. But his last three "cursed" pieces have been bought back at a loss by a man who checks the wicks — and the pawnbroker has started making his own candles.

WORSE Anything, yes. The price is quoted after you've picked the item up, and your handmade light is the collateral — everyone who reneges is still down there, holding their little candle, discounted stock now, waiting for the next browser on the ebb.

65 *"The beggars on Chandler's Row all sleep facing the same direction now. Even the blind one. Even the new ones, first night."*

TRUE Something under the row radiates dreams, and lying aligned with it is the difference between sleeping warm and sleeping *watched*. The beggars have quietly become the city's finest instrument for detecting its movement — and it has been moving.

FALSE The row's beggar-king enforces the arrangement so that one glance down the street counts his people and flags intruders. It's a muster, not a mystery. What the muster is preparing for — that's the mystery.

WORSE They are not sleeping. They are listening at a keyhole a quarter-mile long, on shift rotation, for a phrase in a language the blind one is teaching the others. When they hear it, the whole row is paid up and gone by dawn, and you will wish you knew which morning to leave with them.

66 *"The oldest debt in the city ledgers has one payment left on it. Nobody living remembers what was bought."*

TRUE The final installment falls due at midwinter, and the ledger names no payee — only a chair at the counting-table that is kept empty and dusted. The city fathers intend, quietly, to default. The dusting-woman has begun setting two cups.

FALSE A clerks' myth kept alive as a training exercise — every apprentice tries to trace it, every apprentice fails, and the failure teaches humility about the archive. Except the newest apprentice didn't fail, and hasn't come to work since.

WORSE The debt is the city's founding purchase, and the last payment was never meant to be money. Interest was set in a currency the founders assumed their heirs would refuse to pay — that was the sellers' whole design. Midwinter approaches. The heirs are counting citizens, and calling it a census.

--- Chapter II — NOCTURNES: forty read-aloud scene-setters — follows. *Vespers* is free, from the *Umbral Vein* project — twenty dark-ambient albums for tables like yours. Take what you need.

NOCTURNES

Forty read-aloud scene-setters

Best read over a quiet court ambience — the Elysium mix works.

How to use these. Each nocturne is a scene-opener meant to be read aloud, once, slowly, before anyone acts. They are sorted by mood, not by die — take what the night needs. Read the last line and stop; whatever your players do with the silence afterward is the scene.

THE COURT

- 1 *The candles are new, but the wax on the floor is old — generations deep, a pale glacier under the sconces. Whoever holds this room has been holding it a very long time, and the servants pour yours last.*
- 2 *Conversation does not stop when you enter. It moves — a ripple crossing the hall away from you, laughter resuming at a safer distance. Somewhere behind the fans and the wine, your name has already arrived.*
- 3 *The toast is raised in your honor. Every glass goes up, every eye comes down to watch you over the rim, and nobody drinks first.*
- 4 *The portrait gallery runs the length of the hall, a century of the same jaw and colder and colder eyes. The last frame hangs empty. The plaque beneath it is already engraved.*
- 5 *In the garden the hedges are taller than a man, and the gravel announces every step you take. The conversation you were following has stopped. The fountain, which was silent when you entered, has started.*

THE STREETS

- 6 *The lamplighter works his way up the row, ladder and flame, ladder and flame. He skips the lamp outside your door without breaking stride — the way a man skips a step he knows is rotten.*
- 7 *The market is shuttered, the awnings dripping, the cobbles slick with cabbage leaves and rain. One stall is still lit at the far end. The vendor is looking at you as if you were late.*
- 8 *The evening crowd is thick, shoulder to shoulder — and parting, smoothly, around someone walking toward you. You cannot see who. But you can see the path.*
- 9 *The bells count the hour wrong. Eleven strokes at midnight, and nobody on the street but you seems to have counted.*
- 10 *The door at the end of the lane has been locked as long as anyone can remember — the hinges painted over, the step unswept. Tonight it stands ajar, and the darkness inside is warmer than the street.*

THE SANCTUARY

- 11 *The incense is thick tonight, sweet and blue in the lamplight, laid on the way plaster is laid on a crack. Underneath it, faint but patient, is the smell it was lit to cover.*

- 12 *The church is empty, but the kneeler at the side altar is warm, and the candle above it has just been snuffed — the smoke still climbing, straight as a plumb line, in air that should not be this still.*
- 13 *From the loft, choir practice: the same hymn, over and over, stopping each time at the same half-finished phrase. Whatever comes next in that verse, they will not sing it.*
- 14 *Every votive candle in the rack is lit. All of them, fresh, hundreds — a harvest of small fears. The offering box, when you pass it, is empty.*
- 15 *The confessional stands against the north wall, two doors, one lattice. As you pass, the priest's door opens. You did not see anyone go in — but you hear, distinctly, both doors close.*

THE ROAD

- 16 *Fog to the stirrups, and the milestone where the roads divide has been defaced — the destination chiseled out, recently, the stone-dust still pale in the grooves. Someone does not want the next town named.*
- 17 *An inn light ahead, warm and low, exactly far enough to reach before the rain. It has been exactly that far for an hour.*
- 18 *The gibbet at the crossroads is old work, grey and leaning — but the rope is new, still pale, still creaking with a weight the wind can't account for.*
- 19 *The mud takes your prints cleanly. Half a mile on, it is taking a second set beside yours — same stride, same direction, no one on the road behind you when you turn.*
- 20 *The coach passes you at dusk, lamps swinging, curtains drawn, moving fast. An hour later, on a road with no crossings, it passes you again. Same coach. Same direction. The curtains are open now.*

THE HOUSE

- 21 *Dust sheets over everything, furniture become white hills in the gloom. One chair is uncovered — placed square to the door you just came through, the dust on the floor around it swept by the hem of something that sat.*
- 22 *The house has been empty for years; the notice on the gate says so, the ivy in the windows agrees. But the hearth is warm under your hand, and the ash is this morning's.*
- 23 *A child's room, tidy as a museum. The game on the floor is mid-play — soldiers ranked, dice showing sixes, one piece lying on its side in the middle of the board as if it had just been taken.*
- 24 *Every clock in the house has stopped, each at a different hour, as if time had been leaving room by room. In the study, behind the locked door, one is still ticking.*
- 25 *The kitchen is cold, the larder bare, the pump dry. The smell of supper — onions, marrow, bread — is coming from the room you just ate nothing in.*

THE GRAVE

- 26 *The oldest stone in the yard is a flake of slate, the name two hundred years drowned in lichen. The flowers against it are fresh-cut this evening, still beaded with the florist's water.*

27 *The sexton's lodge is open, lamp burning, ledger spread on the desk mid-entry. The date being entered is tomorrow's. The name is half-written.*

28 *Frost silvers every stone in the yard, every rail, every blade of grass — except one grave, dark and wet in the white, steaming faintly, as if the ground there were breathing warmth.*

29 *The mausoleum door is bronze, green with age, heavier than three men. It is opening and closing on its hinges by the width of a finger — slow, regular, patient. The rhythm is breathing.*

30 *You know this stone; you have passed it a hundred times. But the name has been re-carved — the old letters ground away, the new ones sharp and white. It is the same name. It has one more date now.*

THE BELOW

31 *Thirty-one steps, the keeper said, and put the count in your hand like a coin. You are at forty and the stair has not turned, and the temperature has stopped falling.*

32 *The air rising from the shaft is warm, and it carries — impossibly, horribly gentle — the smell of bread. Something down there keeps a hearth.*

33 *Your chalk marks were faithful: an arrow at every turning, a cross at every shaft. The arrow you are looking at now points back the way you came. It is your chalk. It is not your mark.*

34 *The water in the gallery is rising — without current, without sound, without source. It is at your ankles now. It is perfectly calm, and perfectly warm.*

35 *You brought lamps, wicks trimmed, oil for six hours. You need not have. The lamps down here are already lit — bracketed at civil intervals, burning clean, recently tended, all the way down into the dark.*

THE DAWN

36 *The birds begin all at once, the whole grey chorus of them — and stop all at once, mid-phrase, like a door closed on an orchestra. The light keeps coming. The silence keeps pace with it.*

37 *The last candle of the night is drowning in its own wax, and the window has gone from black to grey. Between the two lights — the one dying and the one arriving — everyone's face in the room belongs to a stranger.*

38 *You count each other in the courtyard, smoke-stained and shaking: all present. Then you count the shadows the low sun throws against the wall, long and blue. The counts do not agree.*

39 *Dew on the gate, the grass, the cart, the well-rope — the whole world beaded silver. Except the path from the door to the road, which is dry, in the shape of many feet standing still.*

40 *The sun comes up the way it always does — indifferent, punctual, gold on the frost. It finds every face at the table older than it left them last night, and one chair pushed back that nobody will touch.*

THINGS THAT GO WRONG AFTER DARK

A d20 of night complications

Best read over a low tension bed — The Hunt mix works.

How to use these. When a night scene runs too smoothly, roll a d20 — or choose. Each entry is a complication that costs time, light, or certainty without stopping the story. The screw is optional: turn it when the table is comfortable, or when someone says "at least it can't get worse."

1 *The light dies. The lantern gutters, the torch drowns, the lamp-oil is water. Ten heartbeats of true dark before anyone finds flint.*

TURN THE SCREW When the light returns, everything is exactly as it was. That is what's wrong — the thing you heard moving had time to get somewhere, and chose not to.

2 *The informant doesn't show. The bench is empty, the signal unanswered, the chalk mark on the wall half-washed by rain.*

TURN THE SCREW They show — an hour late, calm, word-perfect — and get one detail wrong that only someone else would get wrong.

3 *The wrong bell. A single toll from a tower that has no reason to ring — not the hour, not an alarm, once, and done.*

TURN THE SCREW It was a signal, and everyone on the street who understood it has already begun to walk, unhurried, in the same direction.

4 *The dogs refuse. Every dog on the street — cart-dog, guard-dog, stray — will not cross a particular line, and will not look at what's beyond it either.*

TURN THE SCREW One dog does cross. It comes back changed in some small way its owner keeps almost noticing.

5 *The bridge is out. Flood, fire, or the toll-keeper's chain — the crossing you planned on is gone. There is a ferryman. There is always a ferryman.*

TURN THE SCREW He knows your names. He asks no fee tonight — "it's been seen to" — and will not say by whom.

6 *The patrol is early. Boots and lanterns a full hour before the watch should change, moving with somewhere to be.*

TURN THE SCREW They are not looking for you. Whoever they are looking for is, at this moment, hiding in the same place you are.

7 *The rain takes everything. The trail, the scent, the chalk marks, the ink on the letter in your pocket — the sky opens and the night's evidence runs into the gutters together.*

TURN THE SCREW The letter's ink ran, but not evenly. The words that survive the water spell a shorter, worse message.

8 *The safehouse light is on. The house that should be dark and waiting has a lamp in the upper window — your own signal, lit by somebody else.*

TURN THE SCREW Inside, the kettle is warm and the table is set for exactly your number.

9 *A witness. A child at a high window, chin on fists, watching everything with the terrible patience of the sleepless.*

TURN THE SCREW The child waves — not at you. At whoever is behind you that you haven't seen yet.

10 *The body is gone. Where you left it — dragged marks, no blood beyond what was already spilled, and the coins you closed its eyes with stacked neatly on the step.*

TURN THE SCREW Whoever took it left the coins as payment. The going rate, in some ledgers, for a delivery.

11 *The door is open for you. Barred, bolted, guarded — that was the report. It stands open on darkness, and the hinges have been oiled tonight.*

TURN THE SCREW It closes behind the last of you. Not slammed. Latched, gently, the way a host closes a door.

12 *Someone knows your name. Across the square, warm as an old friend, a voice calls the name you are traveling under — the false one — with real affection.*

TURN THE SCREW They knew the man whose name you borrowed. They think you are him. He owed them something, and they are so glad you're finally back.

13 *The landmark is missing. The map is good, the moon is up, the count of streets is right — and the tower, the tree, the fountain you were steering by simply is not there.*

TURN THE SCREW A local, asked, has never heard of it — but their grandmother used to sing about it, and the song says what happened.

14 *The sign is drawn wrong. Your contact's mark is on the doorpost as promised — reversed, or doubled, or drawn by a hand under duress. Close enough to invite you in. Wrong enough to be a warning, if you look twice.*

TURN THE SCREW It isn't a warning. It's a test of whether you look twice, and the door is being watched to see what you do.

15 *Midnight bells. Every tower at once, unscheduled, on and on — and shutters opening all down the street, lamps moving inside houses, the whole quarter waking to something it apparently expected.*

TURN THE SCREW Doors begin to open. Every household stands on its step, silent, holding a light, facing the same way. Nobody looks at you. It would be so easy to just... stand on a step and hold a light.

16 *The horses refuse. At the gate, at the ford, at the treeline — the animals plant their feet, roll their eyes white, and will go around but not through.*

TURN THE SCREW Unloaded and led away, they calm instantly. It isn't the place. It's something you're carrying.

17 *The fog displaces. Sound comes unstuck from distance — footsteps beside you from streets away, your own names whispered at your shoulder from a conversation happening somewhere else entirely.*

TURN THE SCREW You hear the end of a conversation about tonight — plans, positions, a signal word — in voices you know. Your own among them, saying things you haven't said. Yet.

18 *The coin is wrong. Payment made, payment counted — and under the lamp, the coin is freshly minted with a dead ruler's face, bright as this morning, from a mint that closed before your grandparents were born.*

TURN THE SCREW A collector in the city pays handsomely for these, no questions. The questions come from the people who watch who sells to him.

19 *Two invitations. The same meeting, the same hour — confirmed twice, by two different hands, at two different places.*

TURN THE SCREW Both are genuine. Whoever you're meeting has split in two — a faction, a schism, a body-double, a haunting — and attendance is the ballot you didn't know you were casting.

20 *Dawn comes early. You had two hours; the sky disagrees. Grey in the east, birds starting, the night's business half-done — either you miscounted, or the night was shortened from the far end.*

TURN THE SCREW The bells confirm the impossible hour. Somewhere, someone paid a great deal for tonight to be short — and what they bought it for is already finished.

DEBTS & BARGAINS

*Twenty offers with strings attached**Best read over a candlelit study bed — The Chantry mix works.*

How to use these. Someone powerful offers exactly what a player needs, at the exact moment they need it. Each entry is the offer, the **price** as stated, and the **string** — the clause that is never stated. Reveal the string only when it pulls. A good bargain should be accepted gladly, remembered uneasily, and paid for at the worst possible time.

1 *"I can make the magistrate forget your name."*

PRICE A season of your luck — small things, they promise. Coin tosses. Weather. Timing.

THE STRING Your luck doesn't vanish; it is *reassigned*. Someone else is having your good year, and when you finally meet them, they'll know exactly what you'll have come to take back.

2 *"The door will be unlocked. The guards will be elsewhere. One night only."*

PRICE You owe one door in return — to be opened by you, on request, no questions.

THE STRING The door they ask you to open, months from now, is one you locked yourself, for very good reasons, and they know that. That's why they bought the favor from *you*.

3 *"Your friend will recover. I give you my word the fever breaks tonight."*

PRICE Your gratitude, freely spoken, in front of witnesses.

THE STRING Spoken gratitude, in the old law those witnesses follow, is an acknowledged debt of unfixed size. It has been sold on, twice already, at interest.

4 *"I'll tell you what your enemy fears."*

PRICE You must tell no one — sealed with a handshake that stays cold longer than it should.

THE STRING Now something knows what *you* fear, learned through the same handshake, and your enemy was offered the matching bargain an hour before you.

5 *"The debt your family owes? Consider it restructured."*

PRICE Nothing this generation. Truly. Nothing.

THE STRING The debt has been converted from money to *standing* — your family now votes, marries, and testifies as instructed, and the first instruction will arrive with your firstborn's name on it.

6 *"I can find anyone. Give me something they touched."*

PRICE The object is consumed. Also: they will know, in the moment they are found, who asked.

THE STRING The finder keeps a copy of the scent, so to speak. You are now findable by the same method, forever, and that service is available to anyone who pays.

7 *"Sanctuary. Behind these walls, nothing can touch you. Stay as long as you need."*

PRICE House rules: sunset curfew, no iron, and one hour of your evening spent reading aloud to your host — who never appears, and listens from behind a screen.

THE STRING Every book you read aloud is being *finished*. When the last one closes, the host will no longer need the readings, the sanctuary, or, regrettably, you to leave.

8 *"Ask your question. I have the answer — I've had it for a long time."*

PRICE An answer for an answer. Theirs first, then yours, to one question, fully and truthfully.

THE STRING They don't ask their question tonight. They bank it. Years from now, at the precise moment when truth costs the most, they will ask — and the bargain compels.

9 *"Your rival's caravan will not arrive."*

PRICE You must not ask how. You must never ask how.

THE STRING Not asking is the mechanism. The method was chosen to be the one thing you'd have forbidden, and your not-asking, witnessed and recorded, is your signature on it.

10 *"I will lend you my name. Doors open for it."*

PRICE Use it exactly seven times, then return it with thanks.

THE STRING Everything done under the name accrues to the name — including what its *other* borrowers are doing, right now, in three cities you've never visited. On the seventh use, the ledger presents itself.

11 *"The wound will close. The scar will even flatter you."*

PRICE The pain isn't destroyed; it is deferred. You'll be told when. You will not be told how long.

THE STRING Deferred pain gathers interest. It is due, in full, at a moment of their choosing — and they are patient, and they have watched you long enough to know exactly which moment would break you.

12 *"Safe passage, tonight, through territory that eats travelers."*

PRICE Walk the exact path. Look straight ahead. Whatever you hear beside the road, do not answer it.

THE STRING One of the voices beside the road will be one you cannot ignore — that is the toll, and everyone who arranged your passage knew it. Answering doesn't kill you. It *enrolls* you: next season, yours is one of the voices.

13 *"Evidence? What evidence? By morning there will be no evidence."*

PRICE A single hair from your head, freely given.

THE STRING The evidence isn't destroyed — it is *rehomed*, and the hair establishes whose story it now tells. You are clean because someone else, somewhere, has become guilty of your night, and they are looking for you.

14 *"I'll teach you the trick of it — the thing your master died without telling you."*

PRICE You may never teach it to anyone. It ends with you.

THE STRING The technique is a strand of something larger that must not be completed. You now carry a piece the way a courier carries a letter — and everything that hunted your master for it has a new address.

15 *"The child will be provided for. Educated. Protected. Given every chance you never had."*

PRICE Visits on the first of each month. Nothing more is asked of you. Truly.

THE STRING The visits are for the child to learn your face — because at majority, the child is presented with the full account of what their upbringing cost, and the family tradition of how such debts are collected from the parent.

16 *"Sleep. I'll stand your watch. You have my word nothing will pass."*

PRICE Whatever you dream tonight, you must tell them at dawn, completely.

THE STRING Nothing passes the watch *inward*. Your dream is the outbound report — the reconnaissance you unknowingly perform in territory only the sleeping can enter — and dawn is the debriefing.

17 *"Gold, tonight, no papers, no interest. Between friends."*

PRICE None. It is a gift. They insist on that word.

THE STRING Gifts, unlike loans, cannot be repaid — only reciprocated. The counter-gift they eventually request will also, of course, be freely given between friends. Refusal ends the friendship, and everything the friendship was holding back.

18 *"I can get you an audience. The great one owes me a listening."*

PRICE You speak only truth in that room — the room enforces this; it isn't a rule, it's a property.

THE STRING The audience is granted *because* of the room. Your patron's real client is the great one, who needed you asked three particular questions under truth — and your petition was merely the envelope they arrived in.

19 *"Whatever is hunting you — I can make it stop."*

PRICE You must never again travel by night. A small adjustment, for peace.

THE STRING It stops because a boundary is drawn at dusk, and boundaries have two sides. You are not protected from the night; you are *withheld* from it — collateral in escrow, held against a debt the hunter now owes your benefactor, payable in you.

20 *"Name it. Anything. Tonight I am in a giving mood."*

PRICE To be discussed after. Between reasonable parties. Nothing you'll miss.

THE STRING The price is set *by what you name* — the old symmetry: ask for power, owe obedience; ask for love, owe grief; ask for knowledge, owe testimony. The mood is genuine. Giving is how it feeds.

OMENS & DREAD

Twelve portent chains, worsening

Best read over a funeral ambience — Requiem Hours works.

How to use these. Attach a chain to a doom that is coming — a rite nearing completion, a hunter closing in, a bargain falling due. Deal the signs across sessions: the **first sign** is background texture, mentioned once and left alone; the **second** is noticed by NPCs before players; the **eve** means the doom arrives with the next dusk. Never explain a sign. The table's dread should always be a session ahead of their understanding.

1 *The Birds*

FIRST SIGN The starlings gather a week early, and in the wrong tree.

SECOND SIGN Every bird in town perches facing the same direction — toward something beyond the walls.

THE EVE No birds. Nests full and warm and abandoned, and the sky over the road into town absolutely empty.

2 *The Milk*

FIRST SIGN Milk sours at dusk, house by house, a street at a time.

SECOND SIGN It sours at noon, in the pail, while the cow still gives it — and the cats won't touch it.

THE EVE It will not leave the udder. The beasts stand dry and calm in the fields, all facing the same direction as the birds did.

3 *The Mirrors*

FIRST SIGN Reflections lag — half a heartbeat, caught only from the corner of the eye.

SECOND SIGN Mirrors show the room emptier than it is: a missing chair, a bare wall where the portrait hangs, one less person at the table.

THE EVE One mirror in town shows the room fuller.

4 *The Dogs*

FIRST SIGN The dogs bark together at nothing, once, at the same minute each night.

SECOND SIGN They stop barking altogether — and take to sleeping in doorways, across thresholds, as if assigned.

THE EVE Every dog in town is gone except one, who will not leave the church steps, and who watches the north road the way a soldier watches a gate.

5 *The Salt*

FIRST SIGN Salt clumps in dry cellars; hung meat spoils in a cold week.

SECOND SIGN Bread will not rise anywhere in the parish. The baker's family eats supper in silence and will not say why.

THE EVE Every preserved thing fails at once — brine, smoke, honey, wax — as if the town's stores had been told they will not be needed.

6 *The Well*

FIRST SIGN The well-rope comes up wet a foot higher than yesterday, though there's been no rain.

SECOND SIGN The water tastes of iron, then of nothing at all — and the echo of the dropped stone comes back too late, and doubled.

THE EVE The well stands full to the lip, still as glass, and in the black of it the stars are wrong.

7 *The Candles*

FIRST SIGN Church candles burn with a low flame, all of them, as if the air were thin.

SECOND SIGN Flames lean — every candle in the nave bending the same way, toward the crypt door, steady as compass needles.

THE EVE The candles cannot be put out. Pinched, drowned, smothered — they relight, patient and low, and the priest has stopped trying.

8 *The Children*

FIRST SIGN The children have a new counting rhyme. No one taught it to them. It has too many verses.

SECOND SIGN They play a new game: one child lies still in the middle, and the rest walk circles around them, widdershins, silent. They can't say who invented it. They don't like it. They keep playing.

THE EVE The rhyme has reached its last verse, and the children won't say it aloud. They wrote it on the wall instead, low down, where adults would have to kneel to read it.

9 *The River*

FIRST SIGN The river runs quieter — same depth, same speed, less voice.

SECOND SIGN Things surface that went in years ago: a hat, a doll, a soldier's boot — in order, oldest first, laid politely against the same bank.

THE EVE The river runs backward for the length of the town, only at night, only between the two bridges, and the fish stand still in it like coins in wax.

10 *The Sleep*

FIRST SIGN The whole town sleeps deeply and wakes tired, as if the night's rest were being taxed.

SECOND SIGN Neighbors compare notes: the same dream — a door, a field, a voice counting — arriving house by house down the street, one night at a time.

THE EVE One house's windows stay lit until dawn. The family inside will not sleep again until it's over, because last night the counting voice reached their number.

11 *The Clocks*

FIRST SIGN The church clock loses a minute a day. The clockmaker finds nothing wrong.

SECOND SIGN Every timepiece in town disagrees — except at one moment each evening when they all, briefly, terribly, agree — and chime together, once.

THE EVE They have all stopped at that hour. Wound, shaken, cursed at — the hands will not pass it. The town has been given its appointment.

12 *The Stranger*

FIRST SIGN In the market crowd, at the funeral, outside the church — the same figure at the edge of things, too far to describe, never there when looked for twice.

SECOND SIGN Closer now. In the tavern's corner, at the end of the pew, across the square at dusk — and people have stopped mentioning it to each other, each believing they alone can see it.

THE EVE A knock. The stranger stands at the door of the person the doom concerns, hat in hand, perfectly visible at last, waiting — as it turns out to have been all along — to be invited in.