

OMENS & DREAD

Twelve portent chains, worsening

Attach a chain to a coming doom. First sign: background texture.
Second: NPCs notice first. The eve: it arrives at next dusk. Never explain a sign — dread should run a session ahead of understanding.

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.