

WHISPERS

Thirty-six rumors · three doors each

A d66: roll two dice, read as digits — first die tens (1 tavern, 2 court, 3 market, 4 church, 5 road, 6 below), second die ones. Already standing somewhere? Skip the first die. Do not choose a door until the players bite. Investigated eagerly — **True**. Dismissed — it returns **Worse**.

Chased for profit alone — **False**, and the chase still bills.

A rumor is a hook wearing a disguise. Let it stay dressed.

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HEARD IN THE TAVERN

“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.

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HEARD IN THE TAVERN

“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.

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HEARD IN THE TAVERN

“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.

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HEARD IN THE TAVERN

“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

HEARD IN THE TAVERN

“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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

“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.

“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.

“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.

“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.

“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.

“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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

"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.

“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.