

PROPHECY

Act One

Chapter One

The television was already on when Michael came down the stairs.

A woman in a grey blazer was standing in front of a weather map, her hand moving across a gradient of blues that deepened toward the northeast. *—anomalous drop in temperature, with readings expected to fall well below seasonal averages. Residents in affected regions are advised —* She smiled in the way anchors smile when the news is not good but the segment is ending.

Michael walked past the screen without looking at it.

In the kitchen, Diane was already at the counter, her back to him. The kettle had boiled. The toaster clicked twice and released two slices at once, the same as every morning. She took them out with her fingers and placed them on the plates without burning herself.

"Morning," she said, not turning.

"Morning."

He took the butter from the fridge. She took the coffee from the cupboard. Their movements did not collide.

They sat across from each other at the small table by the window. Outside, the street was still grey. A neighbour's car was running, unattended, producing a steady white column of exhaust that rose and dispersed into nothing. Diane ate her toast in quarters. Michael drank his coffee before touching his.

"—bracing for what meteorologists are calling one of the most significant cold fronts in recent—"

"Did you pay the electric?" Diane asked.

"Yesterday."

"Okay."

She reached for the jam. He passed it without being asked. The spoon inside was clean; she had washed it the night before. She spread a thin layer and did not offer him any. He did not want any.

On the television, the woman in the grey blazer had been replaced by a man in a darker blazer, who was saying something about a shipping delay at a port. Neither of them listened.

The clock on the microwave read 06:47.

Diane finished her coffee first. She stood, rinsed the cup, and set it upside down on the drying rack. Michael stayed at the table with the last corner of his toast.

"You have that call today," she said. It was not a question.

"Ten."

"Alright."

She went into the hallway. He heard the closet open, the rustle of her coat, the small metallic sound of the hanger settling back against the rod. He ate the last corner of his toast.

06:52.

She came back in with her coat on and her bag over her shoulder. Her hair was pulled back. She looked at the counter, then at the hook by the door, and picked up her keys. They made the sound keys make.

"Cold today," she said.

"So they say."

She crossed the kitchen and leaned down. Her lips touched the corner of his mouth, dry, brief, familiar. Her hand rested on his shoulder for the length of the kiss and then did not.

"See you tonight."

"Drive careful."

"I will."

The front door opened. The front door closed.

A moment later, the car started in the driveway. He listened to it reverse, pause, and pull away down the street. The sound faded into the low hum of the refrigerator and the voice on the television, which was now discussing something about a local road closure.

Michael finished his coffee.

He carried both plates to the sink, rinsed them, and left them in the rack next to her cup. He turned the television off on his way past it. The screen held a faint afterimage of the weather map for half a second and then went black.

He went upstairs.

The office was the second door on the right, the smaller of the two bedrooms before they had decided not to need the larger one for anything in particular. The desk faced the window. The window faced the back garden, where the grass was stiff with frost and a single magpie was standing very still on the fence.

He sat down. He pressed the power button on the tower. The monitor woke in stages — black, grey, the soft blue of the login screen. He typed his password without looking at the keys.

The browser opened to the tabs he had left the night before.

Twitter first. He scrolled. A journalist he half-followed was arguing with someone he did not follow at all. A football result. A photograph of a dog. An advertisement for a mattress. He scrolled past all of it with the same small motion of his thumb on the wheel.

Then email. Seventeen unread. Fourteen were newsletters. One was from his bank, confirming a transaction he recognised. One was from a client, postponing something he had not been looking forward to. One was from an address he did not recognise, and he marked it as spam without opening it.

Then Reddit.

His usual subs loaded in the usual order. A thread about a film he had not seen. A thread about a book he had read and disliked. A post at the top of one of the smaller subs with a title he registered and did not register, the way the eye registers a street sign at speed.

He clicked somewhere else. He read a comment. He scrolled back up.

The radiator under the window made the small ticking sound it made when it was warming.

Outside, the magpie was gone.

He reached for his coffee before remembering he had left it downstairs.

He began with email.

The seventeen had become eighteen while he was scrolling. He worked from the top down, the way he had always worked.

The bank confirmation he filed into the folder marked *Finance/2026*. The client postponement he replied to in three lines, agreeing, proposing two alternative windows, thanking them. He did not re-read it before sending. The newsletters he opened in sequence, skimmed the first paragraph of each, and deleted. A software company wanted him to upgrade. He archived it. A conference he had attended two years ago wanted him to attend again. He archived it. A mailing list he did not remember joining offered him a discount on something he did not want. He clicked *unsubscribe*, waited for the confirmation page to load, closed the tab.

One from his accountant, forwarding a document and asking him to sign it by the end of the week. He flagged it.

One from a man he had gone to university with, asking if he was free for a coffee when he was next in the city. He starred it and left it in the inbox.

One from the building management company, about a planned maintenance to the water supply on a date he had already noted. He deleted it.

He worked through the rest the same way. Flag. Archive. Delete. Reply. Archive.

When the inbox showed three unread, all of which he had decided not to deal with yet, he stopped.

06:58.

He opened a new tab. He opened the document he kept for the day's tasks. It was a plain text file, not a notes app, not a project manager, just a .txt he had been editing and overwriting for longer than he could remember. He deleted yesterday's list. He began typing.

10:00 — call, Reinhart
draft outline, section 3
invoice — Meyer
respond Kowalski
groceries

He looked at it. He moved *invoice — Meyer* to the top. He moved *draft outline, section 3* below it. He deleted *groceries* and retyped it at the bottom in lowercase, as a reminder rather than a task. He saved the file.

He opened the outline document in another tab. Section three was where he had left it the night before, a paragraph half-finished, a bracketed note to himself that read *[rework — too direct]*. He read the paragraph. He did not rework it. He closed the tab.

Twitter had refreshed. The journalist was still arguing. Someone had replied to a comment he did not remember making three days ago. He read the reply. He did not respond. He closed the tab.

07:01.

He opened the client's postponement again to check that he had sent it. He had. He closed it.

He opened his calendar. The ten o'clock was there, in blue. A dentist appointment next Tuesday, in grey. Diane's birthday at the end of the month, in the colour he had assigned to her years ago and never changed. Nothing else that week needed attention.

He opened Reddit again.

The same threads were at the top of the same subs. The post he had registered and not registered was still there. He did not click it. He went to a different sub and read four comments on a photograph of a kitchen renovation. He upvoted one of them without thinking. He closed the tab.

He opened the outline again. He typed one sentence. He deleted it. He typed it again, slightly differently. He left it.

07:04.

The radiator ticked. Somewhere in the house, the boiler cycled on and then off. A car passed on the street below, slowly, its tyres making the wet sound tyres make on a road that is not wet but has been.

He opened his email. The three unread were still there. A fourth had arrived, from a retailer, which he deleted without opening.

He opened the task file. He added *pick up dry cleaning* and then, after a moment, deleted it. He saved the file.

He opened Twitter. He closed Twitter.

He opened Reddit.

The small red dot appeared in the corner of the tab.

He moved the cursor toward it without hurry, the way he moved the cursor toward everything, and the notification unfurled in its small grey rectangle at the top of the screen.

r/prophecy — new post
07:07

He clicked.

The post opened alone on the page. No title above it. No image. No flair. A single block of text, centred.

u/Encausse_34 • *Posted just now*

The buried dragon wakes beneath the stone,
Where towering pride has pierced the quiet sky,
The deepest roots will give a sudden groan,
And dust will choke the ruins where they lie.

He read it.

He read it again.

There were no comments. The vote count was at one, which was the post itself. The subreddit name at the top of the page was *r/prophecy*, which he did not remember subscribing to and did not remember unsubscribing from either. He scrolled up to check. It was in his feed. It had been in his feed.

Beneath the quatrain was the username. -u/Encausse_34- Posted just now

He clicked it.

The profile loaded. A default avatar, grey on grey. No display name. No bio. Account age: three days. No other posts. No comments. No trophies. No karma beyond the single point from the post he had just read. The sidebar was empty in the way new profiles were empty, the way most profiles were empty, the way nothing in particular was empty.

He clicked back to the post.

The buried dragon wakes beneath the stone,

He scrolled past it to see if there was anything beneath, a second post, a caption, a link. There was not. The page ended where the quatrain ended.

He opened a new tab. He typed the username into the search bar. The results offered him a surname he did not recognise, a French village he did not recognise, a nineteenth-century occultist he vaguely did. He did not click any of them. He closed the tab.

He went back to Reddit.

The post was still there. The vote count was still one. No one had commented.

Where towering pride has pierced the quiet sky,

He read the line again without meaning to. He read the one after it.

The deepest roots will give a sudden groan,

He closed the tab.

The task file was still open behind it. *invoice — Meyer.* *draft outline, section 3.* *call, Reinhart.* *respond Kowalski.* *groceries.* He looked at the list. He did not add anything. He did not remove anything.

He opened the outline document. The bracketed note was where he had left it. *[rework — too direct].* He placed the cursor at the end of the sentence he had not finished the night before. He did not type.

And dust will choke the ruins where they lie.

He moved the cursor into the middle of the sentence. He deleted a word. He retyped the same word. He saved the document.

07:11.

He opened his email. Nothing new. He opened his calendar. Nothing had changed. He opened Twitter. The journalist had stopped arguing. He scrolled a short way and stopped. He went back to the tab he had closed and opened Reddit again.

The post had not moved. *u/Encausse_34.* Two minutes ago had become six.

The buried dragon wakes beneath the stone,

He read the whole thing a third time, slowly, the way one reads something in a language one almost knows. The rhythm was clean. The rhyme was exact. It did not mean anything to him.

He minimised the window.

The desktop appeared behind it. A photograph he had taken two summers ago of a coastline he could no longer remember the name of. He looked at the water for a moment. He opened the window again.

The post was still there.

He clicked away from it, to the front page, to a thread about a film he had not seen, and read three comments without absorbing them.

Where towering pride has pierced the quiet sky.

He scrolled. A photograph of a dog. A political headline. A joke he half-understood. He upvoted nothing. He scrolled back up.

07:16.

Outside, a second magpie had joined the first on the fence, or the first had come back. They stood apart, not looking at each other. The frost on the grass had not yet begun to melt.

He reached for the coffee that was not there.

The deepest roots will give a sudden groan,

He sat very still at the desk, his hand resting on the mouse, the cursor blinking somewhere he was not looking, and the line finished itself in his head before he could decide whether to let it.

And dust will choke the ruins where they lie.

The comments began to arrive.

The first appeared while he was still looking at the post. A single line, posted one minute ago. *ok nostradamus.* He refreshed. Three more had appeared beneath it.

hit the bong harder bro

dragon ball z leaked script

is this a haiku that didnt finish counting

He refreshed again.

"the deepest roots will give a sudden groan" — same thing my back does every morning

the buried dragon wakes beneath my stone, where towering taxes pierce the quiet sky

remindme! 10 years

The thread was finding its shape. He scrolled. A comment in all caps, unpunctuated, which said the poster was clearly fourteen. A reply to that, which said the poster was clearly forty. A reply to that, which was a single emoji of a crystal ball.

He refreshed.

Either this person is high, or we should actually be paying attention.

The comment sat between a pun about drywall and a GIF of a man in a wizard hat falling over. It had two upvotes. He read it. He scrolled past it.

Lower down, a user had written a longer reply, three sentences, saying the meter was unusually clean for a shitpost and that the iambic line-ends rhymed *ABAB* without forcing, which, they wrote, was harder than people thought. Someone had replied *touch grass.* Someone else had replied *no actually they're right.*

He refreshed.

Four new comments. A limerick. A parody quatrain about a pizza. A one-word comment that said *lol.* A user asking what subreddit they were in and whether it was satire.

He scrolled back up to the post itself.

The buried dragon wakes beneath the stone,
Where towering pride has pierced the quiet sky,
The deepest roots will give a sudden groan,
And dust will choke the ruins where they lie.

He refreshed.

The vote count had risen. Thirty-one. Fifty-two. He was not watching the number so much as noticing when it changed. The comments had doubled. He scrolled through the new ones without stopping on any of them. A user had posted a photograph of a lizard. A user had written *this reads like ChatGPT had a dream.* A user had written, more quietly, *whatever this is it's well-made.*

He did not upvote.

The ten o'clock call happened. He took it at the desk with the tab still open behind the video window. Reinhart spoke about the quarter. Michael answered in the places he was supposed to answer. When the call ended he clicked back to the thread before he closed anything else.

At some point he made coffee. At some point he drank it. The cup sat on the desk to the left of the keyboard, and then it was empty, and then it was there still empty, and then he carried it down to the kitchen and filled it again and carried it back.

The thread grew.

A user had begun a thread-within-a-thread, pointing out that *Encausse* was a surname associated with a French occultist, and that 34 was possibly a département number, and that this was therefore either a very committed bit or a very boring one. The comment had sixty-four upvotes. A reply beneath it said *you people will find patterns in a bowl of soup.* It had eighty.

He refreshed.

buried dragon = my student loans
guys i think he means the oil pipeline
i'll bite. what towers. what roots.
no towers where i live, pray for me
this has the exact energy of the last post before someone gets arrested

He scrolled.

The front door opened downstairs.

"Hello."

"Hey."

He heard her coat come off. The hanger. The closet. Her bag set down on the bench by the door. Her shoes, one and then the other. She came into the hall and went into the kitchen and the tap ran and stopped and the kettle was filled and clicked on.

He did not get up.

After a moment the stairs sounded and she appeared in the doorway with a glass of water in her hand.

"Working?"

"Sort of."

She looked over his shoulder at the screen. He did not close the tab.

"What's that?"

"Something on Reddit."

"What is it?"

He read it aloud. He read it without inflection, the way he read things aloud, four lines, the buried dragon, the towering pride, the deepest roots, the dust and the ruins.

She listened until he was done.

"Who wrote that?"

"Someone. No one. I don't know."

She laughed once, short, through her nose. "Tell them to lay off the mushrooms."

"Yeah."

"Dinner at seven?"

"Yeah."

She went back down. The stairs sounded in reverse. The kitchen noises resumed, cupboard, plate, tap. He returned to the screen.

The post had three hundred and eleven upvotes. The comment count had passed four hundred. He began at the top and scrolled.

this is the most effort anyone has put into nothing all week
ruins where they lie — nice double meaning, lie as in deceive
nah lie as in recline, it's literal, bodies
touch. grass.
OP hasn't replied to a single comment. chef's kiss.

He refreshed.

New comments. A user had run the quatrain through a meter analyser and posted the result. A user had asked if anyone else thought the phrasing felt translated. A user had replied *translated from what.* A user had replied *exactly.*

He scrolled further.

Someone had cross-posted it to a larger subreddit. He clicked through. The comments there were the same comments, faster, louder, the same jokes arriving in the same order, the wizard hat, the back pain, the student loans, the *ok nostradamus*, which seemed to appear almost as a formality now, the way a certain word appears at the start of a certain kind of prayer.

He came back to the original thread.

The quatrain was still at the top. *u/Encausse_34* had still posted nothing else.

He refreshed.

The light in the office had changed. The window, which had been grey and then pale, was now the colour windows are in the late afternoon in winter, which is not a colour so much as an absence of one. The magpies were gone. The radiator had cycled twice. His second coffee had become cold in the cup without his noticing and he had not made a third.

He refreshed.

still no response from OP

maybe OP is the dragon

maybe OP is the stone

He scrolled to the top and read the quatrain again, out of habit now, the way one checks a lock one has already checked. He did not upvote. He did not comment.

Downstairs, a pan was set on the hob. The extractor fan came on. The smell of onion began to climb the stairs in the slow unhurried way smells climb stairs in a house where dinner is always at seven.

He refreshed.

The vote count had risen again. The comments continued. The thread did what threads did, which was continue until it did not, and he sat at the desk and watched it continue, and the window went from the colour of late afternoon to the colour of early evening without any moment in between that he could have pointed to.

He got up from the desk at some point before dinner. His legs were heavier than he expected them to be. He went down the stairs slowly and put his phone in his pocket on the way.

Diane was at the stove. Pasta. The onion had become something else by now, garlic, tomato, the small dried leaves she kept in the jar with the faded label.

"Five minutes," she said.

"Okay."

He set the table. Two plates. Two forks. Two glasses. The water jug from the fridge. The napkins they never used but always put out. He stood at the counter for a moment afterward with his hand on the back of the chair and took out his phone and unlocked it and opened Reddit and scrolled and locked it and put it back in his pocket.

She turned off the hob.

They ate.

"How was the call?"

"Fine. They want the outline by Friday."

"Can you do it?"

"Yes."

She twisted pasta onto her fork. He ate his without twisting. The television in the next room was on, low, a voice he was not listening to talking about something he was not following. A game show, probably. The rhythm was a game show rhythm, the rising and falling of a host's voice, a small pause, a small burst of applause.

"There's more if you want."

"I'm good."

He took out his phone under the edge of the table, thumbed the screen awake, opened Reddit, scrolled, closed it, put the phone face-down beside his plate.

"Eda called," she said.

"Mm."

"Her sister's visiting next weekend."

"Okay."

"We might go for lunch."

"Okay."

She finished before he did. She took her plate to the sink and rinsed it and came back for his when he was done. He let her. He did not offer to help. She did not expect him to. She came back with the small dish of something sweet she had made yesterday, two spoons, and set it between them.

They ate it from the same dish.

Afterward, they moved to the sofa. She had the book she was halfway through, a hardback with a grey cover, a woman's name on it he had heard her say but not read. She curled her legs up and leaned against him. He put his arm along the back of the sofa and then, after a moment, down onto her shoulder.

The television was still on. A cooking programme now, two people in an outdoor kitchen doing something with fish. Neither of them was watching.

She opened her book.

He picked up his phone from the arm of the sofa. He unlocked it. He opened Reddit. The thread had four thousand and something upvotes now. The comment count had a *k* after it. He scrolled a short way. The jokes had begun to repeat. New users were arriving at the post and making the same jokes the earlier users had made, and the earlier users were making the new jokes tiredly, the way a room tires of a song. He locked the phone. He set it on his thigh.

Diane turned a page.

Her hair smelled of the shampoo she had been using for years, something with coconut in it. Her weight against his side was familiar in the way weight against one's side becomes familiar, which is to say it registered as absence when it was not there and as nothing when it was.

He picked up the phone. He unlocked it. He opened Reddit. He scrolled. He locked it.

"Cold," she said, and pulled the blanket from the back of the sofa over both of their legs.

"Mm."

"Did you hear about the thing with the heating in Erol's building?"

"No."

"I'll tell you later."

She read. He looked at the television. The two people were plating the fish. One of them said something the other one laughed at. The audience, which may or may not have existed, laughed a moment later.

He picked up the phone. He unlocked it. He opened Reddit. The thread was still there. The quatrain was still at the top.

The buried dragon wakes beneath the stone,

He locked the phone.

He put his hand on her shoulder properly now, and she made the small sound she made when a gesture landed correctly, half a hum, half nothing, and turned a page.

On the television the programme ended and another one began. The news at nine. A man at a desk. A woman beside him. The headlines of the day, delivered in the ordered way headlines of the day were delivered, politics, economy, a court case in another country, a weather segment promised for later in the broadcast.

He picked up the phone. He unlocked it. He opened Reddit. He scrolled. He locked it.

Diane shifted and settled more deeply against him. Her eyes were moving across the page in the rhythm he knew. Left to right, down, left to right, down. He watched them for a moment. He looked back at the television.

The man at the desk was saying something about the cold front. A graphic had appeared over his shoulder, the same gradient of blues from the morning, deepened.

Diane read.

He picked up the phone. He unlocked it. He opened Reddit. He locked it.

21:03.

The man at the desk moved on to a story about a minister. The woman took the next story, something local, a school, a funding issue. Diane turned a page. Her thumb rested briefly at the corner of the paper before she let it fall.

21:05.

He picked up the phone. He did not unlock it. He set it on the arm of the sofa.

On the television, the woman finished her sentence and the man began his, and then he did not. His mouth closed. His hand went to the small device in his ear. The studio lighting did the small shift studio lighting does when a producer has said something in a raised voice somewhere off-screen.

The graphic behind him changed.

A red band slid across the bottom of the frame.

21:07.

Diane looked up from her book.

The red band settled.

BREAKING.

The man at the desk recovered his mouth. His hand came down from his ear. He looked at the camera and then at something past the camera and then at the camera again.

"We are — we are receiving reports, at this moment, of a significant seismic event in the Middle East. Details are still coming in. We will bring you more as we have it."

The woman beside him was already looking at the monitor in front of her.

"We're being told," she said, "a major earthquake. We do not yet have a magnitude. Initial reports are suggesting — initial reports are suggesting the epicentre may be in the region of the Persian Gulf."

"We want to stress," the man said, "that information at this stage is fragmentary."

A map appeared on the graphic behind them. A red dot pulsed in the water, offshore, between coastlines. The dot was placed and then re-placed a few hundred kilometres further east and then placed again.

Diane had closed the book without marking the page.

"We are now being told," the woman said, reading from the monitor, "that the preliminary magnitude is being reported in the range of — we are getting different numbers here. I want to be careful. The figures we are seeing range from 8.4 to above 9. I want to repeat that these are preliminary and unverified."

The man said, "We are going to try to go to our correspondent in the region."

They did not go to their correspondent in the region. The screen held on the two of them. The woman turned a page of the notes in front of her that had not been the notes she had started the broadcast with. The man touched his ear again.

"We are receiving," he said, "we are receiving reports of structural damage in several coastal cities. We are not in a position at this time to confirm casualties. I want to be clear. We are not in a position to confirm casualties."

21:14.

"We have reports," the woman said, "of damage in Bandar Abbas. In Dubai. In Abu Dhabi. In Doha. In Manama. We are receiving these reports through wire services and social media. We have not independently verified them."

The man said something to the woman that was not picked up by the microphone. She nodded once.

"We are also," she said, "we are now receiving reports of a tsunami warning that has been issued for the entire Gulf coastline. That warning has been issued in the last several minutes. We are trying to establish the source."

Diane had not moved.

21:21.

"We are going to show you," the woman said, "some footage that has just come in. We want to warn viewers that this footage is unverified and that the images may be distressing."

The studio cut away.

The footage was vertical. Someone's phone. The frame shook and then steadied. It was night, or nearly night, the sky above was the colour of something burning in the distance, a low orange without a source. The camera was pointing along a street. At the end of the street there should

have been a building. There was not a building. There was a shape that was not a shape. A column of dust standing where a column of glass and steel had been standing, holding its own outline for a moment before beginning to lean.

The camera moved.

Another building, still standing, had a face missing. The floors inside were visible, furniture intact on some of them, absent on others. A curtain was blowing outward from the twelfth or thirteenth floor into nothing.

The camera moved.

Water in the street. Not a flood, not yet. A rising. It came around the corner of a building and met itself from the other direction and rose against the windows of a car and lifted the car and set it down two metres to the left.

The camera moved.

The skyline, what remained of the skyline, was a line of interrupted verticals. Several of them were wrong. One of them, the tallest, the one that had been the tallest, was not there. A wide pale cloud stood where it had stood. The cloud was dispersing in the wind in the slow even way dust disperses.

The studio voice, over the footage: "This is — we are being told this footage is from Dubai. This is Dubai. We are looking at — we are looking at the site of the Burj Khalifa. We are — we understand — the structure appears to have — we are not in a position to confirm at this time."

The camera moved again. A different clip. Aerial, low, unsteady, probably a helicopter or a drone.

The Palm. The shape of it was recognisable and not. The trunk of it was there. The fronds on the eastern side were there. The fronds on the western side were under water to the second storey of the buildings that had been on them. A hotel at the end of one of the fronds was leaning. As the footage continued the hotel continued leaning, slowly, the way a tree leans before it falls, and the footage cut before it finished.

"We understand," the studio voice said, "we understand a tsunami has reached coastal areas of the city. We are — we are still trying to establish the scale."

Diane's hand had closed around his forearm at some point. He could not have said when.

21:29.

The studio came back. The man and the woman. Behind them, on the graphic, the red dot had steadied. The number beside it had steadied. *9.1.* The woman was speaking.

"We are being told the epicentre has now been located offshore, approximately one hundred and eighty kilometres east-northeast of Dubai. We are being told the depth was shallow. We are being told that is why the damage — that is why the damage is what it is."

The man said, "We are receiving further footage. We are going to go back to it. Again, we want to warn our viewers."

Michael did not look away from the screen.

He did not look at his phone. His phone was on the arm of the sofa where he had left it.

His mouth was dry in the way a mouth is dry when it has been open for some time without the person noticing.

He said, quietly, without any particular inflection, the way he read things aloud —

"The buried dragon wakes beneath the stone,"

Diane's hand on his forearm did not move.

"Where towering pride has pierced the quiet sky,"

On the television, the footage of the Palm had begun again, from a different angle.

"The deepest roots will give a sudden groan,"

The hotel at the end of the frond was leaning.

"And dust will choke the ruins where they lie."

The hotel finished falling.

He reached for the phone.

The screen woke. The notifications had stacked. The small numbers beside the icons had grown since he had last looked at them. He opened Reddit.

The thread was at the top of his feed. Pinned now, by someone, in a sub that had not been pinning anything before. The vote count he did not read. The comment count had a different *k* after it than it had had an hour ago.

He scrolled.

The top comments were new. The top comments were always new, the algorithm did what it did, but these were new in a different way. They had arrived in the last twenty minutes. They were longer. Some of them were not jokes. Many of them still were.

imagine being right by accident

still could be a coincidence. gulf has faults. not new.

someone call op

op has not been online for 14 hours

guys this is freaking me out a little

it's a poem. it's four lines. you could retroactively fit it to anything that happened today

"anything that happened today" bro the tallest building on earth just fell over

alleged

look at the footage

i have. it's a big earthquake. big earthquakes knock things down. this is not prophecy this is geology with a delay

He scrolled.

i'm not saying anything but i'm not NOT saying something

the dust line. the dust line is specific.

the dust line is generic. every collapse has dust.

the roots line tho

tectonic plates = roots is a stretch

is it

He scrolled.

u/Encasse_34 please respond

op is the earthquake

op is in dubai

op is dead

op is french

He scrolled.

A reply chain had formed beneath a comment by a user he had not seen in the thread before. *u/RoyD'effrayeur.* The top comment in the chain was three words.

she knew it.

It had two hundred and something upvotes. The replies beneath it were a mix of the same mockery from the rest of the thread and something else. He scrolled into the chain.

The user had continued, in their own replies to themselves, lower down.

not saying prophecy. saying the image set is too coherent to be random. "buried dragon beneath the stone" = something dormant, subterranean. a fault line is dormant until it isn't. the word "wakes" does work.

"towering pride has pierced the quiet sky" — this is the cleanest of the four. it's a tower. towers plural probably. the word pride is doing two jobs, hubris and also the collective noun you use for a thing that stands together.

A reply beneath: *touch grass.*

A reply beneath that: *let them cook.*

The user continued in a further comment down the chain.

"the deepest roots will give a sudden groan" — roots as foundations. but also roots as what is below the foundations. the word groan is worth something. it's not a crack, it's a groan. it's a sound that precedes movement. it's the sound the ground makes in the seconds before.

"dust will choke the ruins where they lie" — aftermath. the choice of "lie" at the end is either very lazy or very deliberate. ruins lie. bodies lie. the word lies. all three are in the room.

A reply: *bro wrote an essay*

A reply: *bro is correct*

A reply: *correlation is not causation you absolute wet sock*

A reply: *nobody said causation*

A reply: *then what did you say*

A reply: *i don't know yet*

The chain went on. The user had posted one more comment, further down, shorter than the others.

i don't think this person wrote it tonight. i think this person wrote it before.

Michael did not scroll past it. He held the screen still. He scrolled up a small distance and then back down to the same comment and read it again.

i don't think this person wrote it tonight. i think this person wrote it before.

He scrolled.

The broader thread was faster than the chain. New top-levels were appearing at a rate he could watch. He refreshed. Twelve new. He refreshed. Nine more. The ratio of jokes to not-jokes had shifted, but the jokes were still there, and some of them were sharper now, the way jokes get sharper when the room is no longer entirely sure it is a joke.

okay but what if the next one is my city

there isn't a next one. there's one. one poem.

check the profile. three days old. no other posts.

yet

yet is doing a LOT of work in that sentence

guys

guys it's a coincidence

it's a very specific coincidence

coincidences are specific. that's what makes them coincidences.

i am going to bed

i am not going to bed

i will never sleep again, this is my life now

He refreshed.

The shorter comments had begun to appear between the longer ones. Two words. Three words. Question marks on their own. A user he had seen earlier mocking the post had come back and written, simply, *okay.* It had forty upvotes.

On the television, the woman at the desk was still speaking. The graphic had updated. The number was no longer 9.1. It was not a number he could read from where he was sitting. A crawl at the bottom of the screen was moving through city names. He did not look at it directly.

Diane was looking at him.

"It's a coincidence," she said.

He did not answer.

"Michael."

"Mm."

"It's a coincidence."

...

"It must be a coincidence."

He nodded, a small movement, once. The thread on the screen refreshed itself. Twenty-seven new comments. The top of the chain, still pinned by upvotes, still the same three words.

"she knew it."

PART 2 - The Yellow Idols

The kettle had been on for some time before he noticed it had clicked off.

He was at the kitchen table. The phone was in his hand. The thread had refreshed thirty-one times that morning, by his count, which was not a count he was keeping deliberately. The number simply existed somewhere behind his eyes the way the temperature of the room existed, registered without attention.

There was no new post.

There had not been a new post for six days. The pinned quatrain was where it had been pinned. The original account had not commented on its own thread, had not posted elsewhere, had not deleted itself, had not done anything. *u/Encausse_34* remained three days old at the time of posting and was now nine days old and would be ten days old tomorrow. The avatar was still grey on grey.

He scrolled.

The thread had grown into something with sub-threads, megathreads, daily discussion posts pinned by moderators who had not existed a week ago. The mockery was still there but it had thinned, the way a crowd thins after the thing it came for has happened and not happened again. The serious posts were longer now, more careful, less embarrassed. Theories. Cross-references. A user had compiled a spreadsheet of every recorded earthquake in the Persian Gulf region in the last hundred years and posted it as a Google Sheet. The link had four thousand clicks and one hundred and forty-six comments, half of which were arguing about the methodology and half of which were arguing about whether arguing about the methodology missed the point.

He scrolled.

day 6. nothing.

day 6. still nothing.

starting to think this was a one-off. someone wrote a poem, got lucky, peaced out.

"got lucky" is doing some heavy lifting there, my guy

lucky in the statistical sense

1 in how many

nobody has the denominator

He refreshed.

Diane came into the kitchen.

She was already dressed. He registered this peripherally. The coat was over her arm. Her hair was up. She went to the counter and saw the kettle and felt the side of it with the back of her hand and clicked it on again.

"Morning."

"Morning."

She made her own coffee. She made his without asking and put the cup on the table beside his elbow. He thanked her, or his mouth did. He did not look up.

She put two slices of bread in the toaster.

The television was on in the next room, low. A morning show. A woman talking about a recipe. The death toll from the Gulf was no longer the headline, had not been the headline since the day before yesterday. It had become a number that updated, the way numbers update, on a graphic at the corner of the screen during the segments where it was relevant. *Confirmed dead: 184,000+. Missing: estimated 60,000–90,000.* The numbers had stopped meaning anything by virtue of being too large to mean anything, which was a thing the numbers did, and he had read somewhere this week that this was a known phenomenon and had a name, though he could not remember the name.

He scrolled.

The toast came up. Diane put it on a plate and brought it over and put it on the table beside the coffee. She sat down across from him with her own.

He looked up. He smiled, briefly. He looked down.

She ate her toast.

He scrolled.

The phone refreshed itself when he pulled the top of the screen down with his thumb. The same comments rearranged themselves slightly. A new comment had appeared at the top.

nothing.

It was a top-level post in the daily discussion thread, by a user whose name he half-recognised. It had eleven upvotes already. The replies beneath it were variations on the same word.

nothing.

nothing.

still nothing.

He locked the phone. He set it face-down on the table. He picked up the coffee and drank from it. It was hotter than he had expected and he set it down without drinking again.

"Are you okay?" Diane said.

"Yes."

She watched him for a second longer than she would have a week ago.

"Okay."

She finished her toast. He had not started his.

The microwave clock read 06:51.

She stood. She rinsed her cup and her plate and set them on the rack. She came back and put her hand on the back of his chair, briefly, the way she sometimes did when she was about to say something, and then did not say it. She went into the hallway.

The closet. The coat. The hanger. The bag.

He picked up the phone. He unlocked it. He opened Reddit.

She came back into the kitchen with her coat on. Her keys were already in her hand. She had picked them up from the hook on her way through.

"I'm off."

"Okay."

She stood there for a moment. He could feel her standing there, in the way one feels a person standing in a doorway without looking.

He scrolled.

She crossed the kitchen. She leaned down. The kiss was where it was always at, the corner of his mouth, dry, brief. Her hand did not rest on his shoulder this time. Or it did, and then it lifted before it had quite settled. He could not have said which.

"See you tonight."

"Mm."

She straightened. She stood there another second. He felt her eyes on the side of his face. He scrolled.

She walked to the door. The door opened. The door did not close immediately. There was a pause, the small length of a pause in which one might turn back to say a last thing, or check that one had everything, or decide not to say a thing one had been going to say. The pause ended. The door closed.

The car started in the driveway. The car reversed. The car pulled away.

He scrolled.

The clock on the microwave read 06:58.

The toast on his plate was cold. He had not touched it.

The thread refreshed.

nothing.

He had not moved from the table.

The toast was still on the plate, dried at the edges now. The coffee in the cup was the temperature of the room.

The phone was in his hand.

The thread refreshed itself. The pinned post at the top moved down by one. A new pinned post had taken its place.

MEGATHREAD — Day 7 — Discussion

He scrolled past it. His thumb knew the path. Below the megathread, the original quatrain, still pinned, still seven days old.

His thumb went to refresh again, and as it did, something at the edge of the screen changed. A small red circle. The notifications icon.

He tapped it.

r/prophecy — new post

u/Encausse_34

07:07

He opened it.

The page loaded. The format was the same. Centred. No title. No image. No flair.

The ledger spun from naught shall cease to breathe,

When avarice devours the hollow trust.

For the great shadow wears no golden wreath,

And heavy yellow idols turn to dust.

He read it.

He read it again.

The vote count was at one. There were no comments. The username, the same username, the same grey avatar. He tapped the profile. The account was now ten days old. The post count had become two. There were still no comments, no other activity, no bio, no display name. Two posts, seven days apart, both at 07:07. He noticed this the way one notices a coincidence in passing, without yet knowing whether it is one.

He came back to the post.

The first comment had appeared while he was on the profile.

HE'S BACK

The second arrived as he was reading the first.

holy shit

The third, the fourth, the fifth.

okay

okay okay okay

everyone in this thread now

He refreshed. The number had jumped. He refreshed. It jumped again. He scrolled.

ledger = accounts = books = money

"spun from naught" = created from nothing = fiat? crypto?

"cease to breathe" = die = collapse

everyone calm down it's another vague poem

it was a vague poem last time too

He scrolled.

In the next room, the television was still on. He had left it on when he came down. It had moved past the morning show, was now into the financial segment that came on before eight, the one with the man in the dark suit and the woman in the brighter one and the ticker running across the bottom of the screen. He could hear, without listening, the rhythm of their voices.

* — remains under pressure ahead of the open, with futures pointing — *

He scrolled.

"avarice devours the hollow trust" — banks

everything is banks

no but specifically. trust. trust company. trust as in deposit.

"hollow trust" is doing a lot. could be metaphorical. could be the actual word.

The thread was already faster than the last one had been at this stage. He could see the comment count rising at the bottom of the screen between refreshes. People had been waiting. People had been waiting for seven days. The mockery was there but it was thinner, lower in the stack, and the longer comments were nearer the top.

* — investors looking ahead to the inflation print at thirteen-thirty, with consensus expectations of — *

He scrolled.

"the great shadow" — central bank

"the great shadow" — debt

"the great shadow" — recession

"the great shadow" — me at 3am

A reply: *can you not*

A reply: *no, sorry, the joke is the only thing keeping me upright right now*

He scrolled.

"heavy yellow idols turn to dust" — gold

gold doesn't turn to dust. gold is gold.

it's an image. it means gold loses value.

gold doesn't lose value. that's the entire point of gold.

tell that to the poem

He refreshed.

— and we're seeing some early weakness in Asian markets carrying into European futures, though it's important not to read too much into pre-open moves on a thin —

He scrolled.

The user *RoyD'effrayeur* had appeared. He had appeared higher up than last time, with fewer upvotes than last time, because the thread was newer and faster and the algorithm had not caught up. His top-level was three lines.

i'm not going to pretend i have this one. last week the imagery was concrete. dragon, towers, roots, dust. you could see the picture even if you didn't believe it. this one is abstract. ledger, trust, shadow, idols. these are categories of thing, not things.

A reply: *so it's nothing*

A reply: *i didn't say that*

A reply: *what did you say*

A reply: *i said i don't have it*

The user had continued in his own reply chain.

if i had to guess — and this is a guess — it's pointing at something financial. "ledger" is the cleanest word in the four lines. "spun from naught" reads like fiat or like leverage or like something invented. "avarice devours the hollow trust" reads like a run, a panic, a confidence event. "great shadow wears no golden wreath" — i don't know. honour without the gold. authority without backing. "heavy yellow idols turn to dust" — gold falling. or gold revealed as something else. or both.

A reply: *you're reaching*

A reply: *yeah he is. last week he wasn't. that's the point.*

A reply: *what's the point*

A reply: *the point is the poem itself is reaching this time. it's harder. it's not as clean.*

A reply: *or it's nothing and last week was nothing and we're all in a cult now*

He refreshed.

— gold trading slightly lower this morning, off about half a percent, though again, in the context of recent weeks this is well within the —

He scrolled.

A new top-level had appeared.

okay i don't want to be the guy. but. last time was six and a bit hours between the post and the event. it's now —

The comment was timestamped two minutes ago. He did the arithmetic. He did not finish doing the arithmetic.

He scrolled past it.

The thread continued. The mockery, in pockets. The interpretations, more of them, less confident. A user who claimed to work in finance, who said the imagery did not match anything they were watching. A reply beneath, which said that was the point, you would not see it before it happened. A reply beneath that, which said this was unfalsifiable, which was true, and which had no upvotes.

— turning to the energy markets, oil is —

He refreshed.

The number at the top of the post had passed a thousand. The comment count had passed three hundred. The original post sat where it sat. The four lines did what they did.

He read them again. He did not mean to. His eyes did it.

The ledger spun from naught shall cease to breathe,
When avarice devours the hollow trust.
For the great shadow wears no golden wreath,
And heavy yellow idols turn to dust.

The phone refreshed.

In the next room the woman in the brighter suit was laughing at something the man in the darker suit had said.

The toast on the plate had gone hard at the corners.

The clock on the microwave read 07:34.

Tabii, mantıklı. Manhattan'da yaşıyorsa uçuş aramak yerine doğrudan akşamı bekleme/karar verme momentine geçeriz. Şöyle:

He was still at the kitchen table.

The phone refreshed. He scrolled. He stopped. He typed.

has anyone tried to pull the account creation IP

He posted it without re-reading. The comment landed somewhere mid-thread. He scrolled away from it and did not check whether anyone replied. He kept scrolling.

— and we're seeing now a notable widening in spreads, particularly in the high-yield space, which suggests —

He scrolled.

A thread within the thread had formed around the question of identity. He read through it.

account is ten days old. no other activity. no comments anywhere. no other subs subscribed that anyone can see.
reddit doesn't show subs publicly
you know what i mean
there's a guy on 4chan trying to image-search the avatar
the avatar is the default avatar
yes he is aware of that

He scrolled.

someone in /g/ said the post was made through the API not the web client. someone else in /g/ said you can't tell that from the outside. it went the way these things go.
*language analysis?**there are 28 words. you can't language-analyse 28 words.*
there are 56 words now
you still can't

He typed.

username — encausse — the occultist died 1916. 34 could be the département (gers). could be unrelated. anyone speak french?

He posted it. He scrolled.

— the Bitcoin price is down about three percent in the last hour, which on its own is not particularly remarkable, but when taken in the context of —

He looked up at the doorway to the next room. He could see the corner of the television from where he was sitting if he leaned. He did not lean. He went back to the phone.

A reply to his comment, six minutes later.

french speaker here. encausse is a real surname, southwest france. also the surname of papus, the occultist (real name gérard encausse). 34 is hérault département not gers. could be either or neither.

He read it. He did not reply. He scrolled.

manhattan

The word sat alone, a top-level comment. No context. Twelve upvotes. He scrolled past it.

Three comments down, another:

russel's pub

He scrolled past that too. Two more comments down:

tonight

He stopped.

He scrolled back up. Read all three again, in order, without scrolling between them, just letting his eye go up and down the screen. The three were not from the same user. They were from three different users, none of whom he had seen in the thread before, all of whom had account ages of less than a month.

He scrolled.

The same words began to appear again, lower down, in different combinations.

manhattan, russel's pub

russel's pub manhattan

tonight, russel's

A reply beneath one of them: *what is this*

A reply: *idk, saw it in another thread*

A reply: *which thread*

A reply: *can't find it now*

He scrolled.

A user had posted a longer comment trying to pull the strings together. *Russel's Pub. There are at least four bars in the city with that or similar names. There's a Russell's on 51st. There's a Russell House. There's an O'Russell's in the East Village. The post doesn't say which.* The comment had eighty upvotes and a hundred and forty replies, most of which were arguing about the apostrophe.

He scrolled.

— and for our viewers just joining us, we are seeing a fairly sharp move lower in equity index futures, with the S&P now down roughly two percent from yesterday's close, which is a meaningful —

He looked at the doorway.

He got up. He took his phone with him. He went into the next room and stood. The man in the dark suit was no longer smiling. The woman in the brighter suit had been replaced by a different woman in a darker one. The ticker at the bottom was red on most of the names he could read. A small graphic in the corner showed gold, down. Another showed Bitcoin, down further.

He went to the window.

The street below did what the street below did at midday on a weekday. A delivery truck was double-parked. A woman with a stroller was waiting at the light on the corner. Three men in high-visibility vests were standing around an open utility cover doing nothing in particular. The buildings on the other side of the street stood where they had stood that morning and the morning before that. The sky between them was the colour the sky in the city was in late winter, which was the colour of nothing in particular.

He went back to the kitchen. He sat down. He scrolled.

The thread had moved. The cryptic comments had multiplied. *manhattan. russel's. 9. tonight 9. russel's tonight. dont go. go. dont.* The thread was no longer about the quatrain. The thread was about the comments about the quatrain.

He typed.

who started the manhattan thing. is there a source thread.

He posted it. He scrolled.

A reply, under a minute.

nobody knows. someone said it was originally in a discord. the discord has been deleted. someone said it was always here. you can't search reddit for three-word phrases reliably.

He typed.

has anyone actually been to russel's tonight? or planning to?

He posted it. He locked the phone. He set it on the table.

He looked at the wall opposite him for a moment, the one with the calendar on it that Diane kept current and he did not. The square for today had her initials in the corner and a small dot beside them, which meant something he did not remember.

He picked up the phone. He unlocked it.

— a number of major exchanges are now reporting elevated trade volumes, with Bitcoin off nearly nine percent in the last hour and Ethereum down a similar amount, and we're seeing the move now spreading into traditional commodities, with gold coming under pressure as well, which is somewhat unusual given the —

He scrolled.

A reply to his question.

i'm in queens. i'll go.

A reply: *don't.*

A reply: *why not*

A reply: *because we don't know what this is*

He scrolled. The thread had passed two thousand comments. He typed.

has anyone in the thread actually identified themselves as the prophet, or claiming to know them

He posted it. He scrolled.

A reply, in a minute.

about forty people have. all obvious. one of them was a bot. one of them was a 13 year old. the rest were trying to be funny. nobody real.

He scrolled.

— and we're now hearing reports that the New York exchanges are seeing some early circuit breaker activity, which would normally be triggered at a seven percent decline in the S&P 500, and we're —

He set the phone down on the table. He did not lock it this time. The screen stayed bright. The thread continued to scroll on its own, slowly, the way a thread does when there are too many people typing into it for any one comment to stay at the top for more than a few seconds.

He looked at the wall again.

He looked at the phone.

The microwave clock read 11:42.

manhattan

russel's pub

tonight

He picked up the phone. He opened a new tab. He typed *russell's pub* and the postcode of the apartment. The map loaded. Three results within walking distance, two within a subway ride. He looked at them without choosing one. He did not need to choose one yet. One thing was certain: he would go.

He locked the phone.

He would go.

She came in a little after seven.

"Hey."

"Hey."

He was in the kitchen with the laptop open on the counter. He closed it when she came in. Not hurriedly. He closed it the way he always closed it when she came in, which had until recently been without thinking.

"Long day?"

"Usual."

She hung up her coat. She came into the kitchen and kissed the side of his head and went to the sink and washed her hands.

"I'm going out later," he said.

"Oh?"

"Couple of drinks. That guy from the Meyer thing. And some other people."

"On a Thursday?"

"He's only in town tonight."

She dried her hands. She looked at him in the way she had begun looking at him this week, which was in the same way as before except it lasted half a second longer.

"Okay."

"I won't be late."

"Okay."

They ate the leftovers from the night before. He did not take the phone out at the table, which was a deliberate choice and one she registered without saying so. They talked about her day. Someone had resigned. The new coffee machine still did not work. He nodded in the places where he was supposed to nod. At one point she asked him something and he asked her to repeat it and she did, and he answered, and they moved on.

At eight he got his coat.

"Which bar?"

"One of the places downtown. I don't remember the name. He sent me the address."

"Text me when you're heading back."

"I will."

He left.

The bar was on a side street off Third. A green awning with the name in cream lettering. *RUSSELL'S.* No apostrophe on the awning, one on the door, the kind of small inconsistency places like this had and did not fix.

Inside, it was the shape of a bar of its kind. Dark wood along one wall. A row of booths along the other. A few tables in between. The lighting was low and yellow and came from fixtures that did not match each other. A television above the bar was on with the sound off, tuned to a basketball game no one was watching.

He counted the room.

Two men at the bar, not together, each with a drink in front of him and a phone in his hand. A couple in the corner booth who were clearly a couple and clearly not part of anything. A man at a two-top near the back, alone, with a laptop. A woman at another two-top further back, alone, without a laptop, with a glass of something clear in front of her.

He ordered a beer. He paid in cash. He carried it to one of the middle tables and sat down where he could see the door and most of the room.

After a few minutes the man with the laptop looked up and caught his eye. The man did not nod. He simply held the look for a second longer than a stranger would have and then returned to his screen. A minute later another man came in from the street. He was in his forties, in a dark coat he did not take off. He stood at the bar, ordered, looked around the room once while his drink was being poured, and carried it over to the table where the man with the laptop was sitting. He sat down across from him without a word of greeting.

The woman at the back had not looked up.

A fourth person came in ten minutes later. Younger, a man, a student maybe, carrying a backpack. He went to the bar, then to the table with the two men, and stood there for a moment before one of them gestured at a chair and he sat in it.

The man with the laptop caught Michael's eye again. This time he tilted his head, a small movement, toward the table.

Michael picked up his beer and went over.

"Here for the thing?" the older man said. He did not say what thing.

"Yes."

"Sit."

He sat.

The woman at the back stood up at some point after that and carried her glass over and sat at the next table, one over from theirs, turned slightly toward them. She did not introduce herself. Nobody introduced anyone.

Afterward he would not be able to describe her face. He looked at her more than once while she was sitting there. Dark hair, maybe. An ordinary coat. Her features arranged themselves and rearranged themselves without settling, the way the features of a person seen through moving water do not quite settle. He understood, while he was looking at her, that he was looking at her, and he understood later that he had not retained what he had seen.

The man with the laptop did most of the talking.

"We've been through both of them line by line," he said. "The first one is a finished picture. Dragon, stone, towers, roots, dust. You can put it on a wall. The second one is a category. Ledger, trust, shadow, idols. You cannot put it on a wall. It describes a type of event. It does not describe the event."

"It described it well enough," the younger man said. "Gold's down nine. Bitcoin's down twenty. The Nikkei opens in three hours and it's not going to be pretty."

"It described the weather. It did not describe where the storm hits."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning she — or he, or whoever — is not telling us what happens. They are telling us what kind of thing happens. The first one was an exception. That was specific. This one is not."

"So the first one was a warm-up."

"Or the first one was a coincidence that happened to look specific, and we're retrofitting everything else to match."

"You don't believe that."

"I'm not in the business of believing things."

The older man, in the dark coat, had not taken off the coat. He drank from his glass. He said, "The account is clean. I had a friend look at it. No metadata worth anything. The posts go up through the API. The API calls are going through a service that bounces them. You can't get behind it without a warrant and possibly not with one."

"Gender?"

"Nothing. The writing is careful. The writing is too careful to be accidental. There's no tell in the vocabulary either way."

"French?"

"The username is French. The text is not translated from French. I had a linguist look at it. She said the rhythm is native English. She said that's not dispositive."

"Location?"

"Nothing."

"Age?"

"Nothing."

Michael said, "Why Russell's."

They all looked at him.

"Someone typed it," he said. "Someone in the thread. Three separate accounts. I couldn't find the original."

"Neither could we," the older man said.

"So why are we here."

The older man looked at him for a moment. His face did not change.

"Because we are."

Nobody said anything for a few seconds after that. The basketball game above the bar went to a commercial break. The woman at the next table turned her glass in its ring of condensation.

The younger man said, "What do we do."

"We wait for the next one," the man with the laptop said. "There will be a next one."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime we watch. We note. We don't post anything useful in the thread. The thread is a sewer now."

The older man drank. He said, "Same time next week. Here. If there's a third one before then, we come sooner."

Nobody objected. The woman did not speak. She had not spoken the whole time he had been sitting there, or if she had, he did not remember it.

They finished their drinks at their own pace. The younger man left first, picking up his backpack and going without saying goodnight. The older man left next. The man with the laptop closed the laptop, put it in a bag, nodded once at Michael, and left. Michael stayed for another minute and finished his beer.

When he got up, the woman was gone.

He had not seen her go.

The apartment was warm when he came in. The television was on in the living room.

"How was it?"

He stood in the hallway taking off his coat. He hung it. He took longer with the second sleeve than the first.

"It was — yeah. It was fine."

"Who was there?"

"Just — the guy. A couple of others. Nobody you'd —"

"Nobody I'd what."

"Know. Nobody you'd know."

"Okay."

She was on the sofa with her book. The television was doing a panel, three people in a studio, a graphic behind them with arrows pointing down and percentages in red. The ticker at the bottom had scrolling headlines. *CRYPTO ROUT DEEPENS — EARLY ASIA FUTURES INDICATE — GOLD SLIDES FOR SECOND SESSION — ANALYSTS DIVIDED ON —*

He went into the kitchen. He opened the laptop.

His inbox had forty-two unread.

He scrolled the list without opening any of them. The subject lines did the work.

URGENT — position review

Quick question

Call when you can

Michael — please confirm receipt

reaching out given today's moves

Are you seeing this

heads up

[NO SUBJECT]

quick one

URGENT

quick call?

Michael, any thoughts?

sanity check

please advise

confirming our conversation

we didn't have a conversation

URGENT — re: Meyer

following up

following up again

Michael?

He closed the laptop.

He opened the phone. The thread had passed ten thousand comments. A new megathread had been pinned on top of the old megathread. He could not tell, from the top of the feed, which thread was the original anymore.

In the next room the panel had given way to a correspondent standing in front of a building he recognised and could not place. She was saying something about Tokyo opening in two hours. The ticker underneath her had not slowed down.

He refreshed the browser.

Diane turned a page.

PART 3 - THE LUST

The week did what the week did.

By Monday the European indices had opened red and not recovered. By Tuesday a bank in Frankfurt had suspended redemptions on two of its money market funds and the language used on the television about it had been the language of isolated stress and contained exposure. By Wednesday two more funds had followed, one in Zurich, one in Luxembourg, and the language had been the language of prudent caution and coordinated response. By Thursday a Japanese insurer had announced a write-down and a regional bank in Ohio had opened late and the language had become the language of dislocation and elevated uncertainty, which was the language used when a thing that was happening could not be said to be happening.

Gold, having fallen nine percent in the first session, fell another fourteen by Friday. Bitcoin halved and halved again. Several smaller cryptocurrencies stopped trading. On the news, the same three or four economists appeared in rotation and said, in slightly different sentences, that they had not seen a week like this one, and that it was too early to draw conclusions, and that the situation was being closely monitored.

Michael watched.

Not continuously. In waves. The television in the mornings, the phone throughout, the laptop when his clients wrote, which they did continuously now, in messages that had begun the previous Thursday as questions and become by Saturday demands and by Tuesday something else, a kind of rolling distress that did not expect a response and did not receive one. He had not replied to any of them since Friday. He understood, in the way one understands the position of a limb one is not looking at, that this would have consequences. The consequences did not seem, in the order of things, to be near the top of the list.

The Reddit thread had grown into a structure. Megathreads on top of megathreads. A wiki. A timeline. A spreadsheet of every comment on every post by users with account ages under thirty days. Debates about moderation, about trolls, about whether the subreddit should be locked. A schism between the users who believed the two posts were connected and the users who did not, each with their own pinned resource. Sub-subreddits had been spun off. Discord servers had been created and shut down and recreated elsewhere. Journalists had begun to write pieces about the phenomenon. One of the pieces had appeared on Wednesday on a site he had once subscribed to and no longer did.

u/Encasse_34 had posted nothing further.

He refreshed, regardless. The motion was something his thumb did now without passing through his mind.

Diane had stopped asking how his work was going. She had started, and stopped, and started again in a different way, which was to ask him in the evenings whether he had eaten, which he understood to be the same question rephrased to receive a simpler answer. He was not eating much. He knew this and did not dwell on it.

On Wednesday evening she said, "Can we talk."

"Yes."

"Now, I mean."

"Yes."

She sat on the sofa. He sat at the other end of it. The television was on. He picked up the remote and muted it. She watched him do that.

"Are you okay."

"Yes."

"You don't seem okay."

"I'm — it's a lot of news. I'm watching."

"I know you're watching. I can see you watching. That's the problem."

"It's not a problem."

"It's a problem for me."

He did not answer.

"I'm not asking you to stop watching," she said. "I'm asking you to come back a little."

"I'm here."

"You're not."

"I am."

"Michael."

"What."

"You didn't answer me at dinner. Twice."

"I did."

"You said *mm*. Twice. To two different questions."

"What were the questions."

She looked at him for a long second and then looked away.

"That's what I mean."

"Diane, it's a strange week. Everything is —"

"Everything was a strange week last week. And the week before. It's going to be a strange week next week too. That's what it is now. I'm trying to have a life inside it."

"I know."

"Do you."

"Yes."

"Then act like it."

He did not say anything for a moment.

"I don't know what you want me to do."

"I want you to put the phone down for one evening. One. I want to eat dinner and talk to my husband and not feel like I'm in a waiting room."

"That's not —"

"That's what it is."

"I'll put it down."

"You won't."

"I will."

"You've said that three times this week."

"Diane."

"Michael."

They sat in the quiet for a moment. On the television, muted, a man was pointing at a graph. The graph was declining. The man's mouth was moving without sound.

"I'll try," he said. "I'll try."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry."

"Okay."

She did not look at him when she said it.

The next morning he was at the kitchen table. The kettle had clicked off. The toast had come up. He had not touched either. Diane was at the counter making her coffee. The television in the next room was already into the morning financial segment. The ticker was red. The anchors were using the word *stabilising* in a way that suggested they had been instructed to.

The phone buzzed on the table.

The small red circle. The notifications icon. He knew what it was before he tapped it. He tapped it.

r/prophecy — new post

u/Encausse_34

07:07

He opened it.

When Michael's burning steel divides the fold,
And swollen skies weep tears of milk and blood,
Then seven to my prophecy are told,
As quivering vessels drink the seething flood.

He read it.

He did not read it a second time. He did not need to.

His throat did the small thing throats do when the air in them has forgotten what it is doing. He felt it and did not touch it.

"Michael," he said, quietly.

Diane turned.

"What."

"Michael."

"What about Michael."

"My name."

"I know your name."

"It says my name."

She came over. She looked at the screen. He held it up for her. She read it. Her eyes went over it once, slowly.

"It says *Michael*," she said. "It doesn't say *you*."

"I know."

"It's a name. Michael is a name a lot of people have."

"I know."

"It's the angel."

He said it without deciding to. The word had been in his mouth before he knew it was there. He was not sure, afterward, whether he had said *the angel* or *an angel*.

"The archangel," he said, more quietly. "Burning steel. The sword. It's a description."

"Michael."

"What."

"Breathe."

"I am."

"You're not."

He set the phone face-down on the table. He looked at it. He picked it up again. He opened it. He could not have said what he was looking for. The post was still there. The first comment had appeared.

MICHAEL

The second.

guys

The third.

guys he said the name

The thread began to fill. He watched it fill in real time.

"michael's burning steel" = sword of st michael, archangel of war

or it means a guy called michael with a gun

or a missile

michael is used for cruise missiles in nato callsigns sometimes isn't it

no that's not a thing

someone check

it's not a thing, i checked

"divides the fold" = splits the flock, splits a population, splits a crowd

*"swollen skies weep tears of milk and blood" — white and red — what is white and red —

fallout? hail mixed with —*

stop, stop, stop, everyone is retrofitting again

He scrolled.

"seven to my prophecy are told" — seven people. seven told. seven who know.

or seven prophecies total

SEVEN. there are going to be SEVEN of these.

we don't know that. "told" could mean counted, could mean informed, could mean many things.

it means seven.

it means we don't know.

"quivering vessels drink the seething flood" — ships. it's ships. drinking the sea. a naval event.

or it's people. vessels = bodies. drinking = dying.

or it's both.

Diane was still standing next to him. He could feel her standing there.

"I have to go," she said, after a moment.

"I know."

"I'm late."

"I know."

She stood there for another second. Her hand moved, as if to touch his shoulder, and then did not. She went to the hallway. The closet. The coat. The bag. The keys. The door opened. The door closed.

He did not look up.

He refreshed.

The thread had split into three, four, five arguments running in parallel. A user he had not seen in several days had returned to post that the word *seven* was the entire point and that everything else was decoration. Someone had replied that this was exactly the kind of pattern-matching that had gotten them here. Someone had replied that *here* was not a bad place to be.

Halfway down, a comment from *u/RoyD'effrayeur*.

I'll be at the pub tonight. I think this one matters. Not because it's clearer — it isn't — but because of the name. The name changes the contract. Up to now the prophecies were about the world. This one names a person inside it. Whoever Michael is, whether it's a Michael or the Michael, the poem has stopped describing and started addressing.

I don't know who it's addressing. I'm not suggesting I do.

See you at nine.

The comment had forty upvotes when he read it and sixty by the time he scrolled past it.

On the television, muted, the anchors were still talking. The ticker at the bottom had not changed.

He picked up the phone again.

When Michael's burning steel divides the fold,

And swollen skies weep tears of milk and blood,

Then seven to my prophecy are told,

As quivering vessels drink the seething flood.

...

Evening came slowly. He left the apartment at a quarter to nine. Diane had said she would be late, a work thing, a thing she had mentioned at breakfast the day before and that he had not remembered until she mentioned it again at the door. He had not told her he was going out. She had not asked.

Russell's was fuller than the week before. Not busy, but no longer empty. A group of four at the bar, a couple in a booth, two men at a back table talking over a basketball game that was now on with the sound turned up to a point where it was audible but not intrusive.

He came in at five to nine.

The older man in the dark coat was already there, at the same table as before, further back now, against the wall. The man with the laptop was there, without the laptop this time. The younger man with the backpack. A new person, a man in his fifties, grey at the temples, who nodded at Michael as he approached.

And the woman.

She was sitting at the table this time. Not at the adjacent one. She was between the older man and the younger one, turned slightly inward, her hands around a glass of something that was either water or vodka.

He sat in the empty chair.

"Michael," he said.

The older man looked at him.

"What."

"My name. It's Michael."

There was a pause. Not a long one. The man with the laptop smiled, briefly, and the smile did not carry warmth or coldness.

"Sure," the man with the laptop said.

"I'm not —"

"We get it."

"I'm not claiming —"

"We get it, Michael."

The younger man laughed, once, without opening his mouth. The older man drank. The grey-templed man, who had not introduced himself, tilted his head and said, "There are approximately three hundred thousand Michaels in New York State."

"I know."

"And several million worldwide."

"I know."

"Okay."

The conversation moved on.

The woman had looked at him when he said his name. The look had been brief. He had not been able to say, afterward, what was in it. He was not sure he had fully seen her eyes even while he was looking at them.

The man with the laptop — whom the older man addressed once, in passing, as *Roy*, though Michael could not tell whether this was a name or a joke or a handle — was doing most of the talking, again, as he had the week before, though his position had shifted.

"The third one," he said, "is different. I want to be clear about that. The first two described. The third addresses. It uses a name. The name is inside the poem, not outside it. It is the only proper noun across three quatrains."

"It's a common name," the older man said.

"That's the point."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning a common name is how you address someone without addressing them. You can put *Michael* in a poem and every Michael who reads it wonders for half a second. The ones who are meant to know, know. The ones who aren't, don't."

"That's a generous reading."

"It's a reading."

"It's also the reading that makes this about us."

"I'm not saying it's about us."

"You're saying it might be."

"Yes."

The older man drank again.

The younger man said, "Seven. The number seven. That's the other thing."

"Go on."

"If *seven to my prophecy are told* means seven prophecies total — we've had three. Four more. Four more of these."

"Or seven people know."

"Or seven people are the prophecy. Seven people who the prophecy is about, or directed at, or whatever."

"You're doing exactly what Roy said not to do last week."

"I know. I'm doing it anyway."

The woman said, "It's seven."

The table turned to her slightly. She did not elaborate. She turned the glass a quarter revolution in her hand and did not look up.

"Seven what," the grey-templed man said.

"Seven," she said.

Nobody pressed her. Michael noticed this and did not know what to do with noticing it.

Roy said, "The other thing. *Burning steel divides the fold.* We've had a seismic event and a financial event. A military event fits the imagery. But so does a political one, a religious one, a schism."

"Schism of what?"

"That's the question."

"*Swollen skies weep tears of milk and blood.* Weather."

"Or chemical."

"Or symbolic."

"Everything is symbolic if you want it to be."

"Yes."

"So."

"So we wait."

The drinks arrived and were replaced and replaced again. The basketball game ended and the television went to a postgame show and then to the evening news, which was the same evening news as every night this week, with the same graphics and the same careful anchors and the

same ticker in red. Nobody at the table looked at it directly. The volume on the set had been turned down again at some point without anyone asking.

The woman had moved her chair slightly during the conversation. Not toward him, exactly. The table was round. But the angle of her body had opened a fraction, and the gap between her chair and his had narrowed by something less than the width of a hand, in a way that was not the result of any decision he had made and might have been the result of none she had made either.

He turned his head to say something to her and found her already looking at him.

He had been about to ask her a question. He could not remember what it was.

"You don't say much," he said, instead. Quietly. Not meant for the table. The table continued talking.

"No."

"You were here last week."

"I was."

"You didn't speak then either."

"No."

"Why."

She did not answer for a moment. She lifted the glass and set it down again without drinking.

"It isn't my week," she said.

He did not know what this meant. He did not ask.

The grey-templed man was saying something about vessels and about shipping and about the Strait of Hormuz, and the younger man was disagreeing, politely, with his whole face.

"Is it someone's week," Michael said.

She almost smiled. It was not quite a smile. One corner of her mouth did something.

"It's always someone's week."

"And this week?"

"This week is a week like any other."

He was looking at her and trying, not quite deliberately, to hold her face in place. It would not hold. He could see dark hair. He could see the shape of a jaw. He could see, for an instant, that there was something above the left eyebrow, a small mark, a shape, and then he was looking at her mouth and he could not have said whether there was a mark above her eyebrow or whether he had imagined it.

"Have we met," he said.

"No."

"You're sure."

"I'd remember."

Roy was saying, over Michael's shoulder, " — and the point is that if the pattern holds, the gap between the first two was seven days, the gap between the second and the third was seven days. If there's a fourth, it should be — "

"Next Thursday."

"Yes."

"Or this is the pattern until it isn't."

"Yes."

Michael had stopped listening.

"What do you do," he said.

"For a living."

"Yes."

She tilted her head, a very small movement. "Nothing interesting."

"Try me."

"I read."

"For work?"

"Sometimes."

"You're not going to tell me."

"No."

"Okay."

Her hand was on the table between them, around the glass. His hand was on the table, around his own. The distance between the two was the distance that exists when two people have been sitting at a round table for an hour. It was not a small distance and it was not a large one. He noticed it the way he was noticing everything she did, which was in an attention that was not the attention he had been paying to anything else that day, or that week.

"Do you come here often," he said. "Sorry. That sounds — "

"It sounds like what it is."

"I mean before. Before the thread."

"No."

"Just now."

"Just now."

"Why."

She did not answer for a moment. The table behind her was louder. Someone had ordered another round. Glasses were being moved. The woman shifted, almost imperceptibly, and the angle between them closed a fraction more.

"Because it's where people come," she said.

"To do what."

"To find out what they're here for."

He looked at her.

"And what are you here for."

"I'm not sure yet."

She said it the way a person says a thing they have said before. She said it without any weight on any of the words. She was still holding the glass and she had still not drunk from it.

The group at the table had reached the part of the night where the conversation had begun to repeat itself. Roy was re-explaining something he had explained an hour earlier. The grey-templed man was nodding in the places he had nodded before. The older man, in the dark coat he had still not taken off, was looking at the ceiling.

Michael leaned toward her, very slightly. It was not a movement anyone at the table would have registered.

"When I said my name," he said, "you looked at me."

"Did I."

"Yes."

"Everyone looked at you."

"Not the way you did."

She did not reply. She turned the glass another quarter revolution. He could not see, from this angle, the mark above her eyebrow. He could not remember whether he had seen it.

"Are you going to tell me your name," he said.

"Would you remember it."

The question arrived so gently that he did not understand, at first, that it was a question and not a statement. He was about to say *of course* and did not. He thought about it. The thinking took a second longer than it should have.

"I don't know," he said.

"No," she said. "Me neither."

She did, after a moment, almost smile again. Her knee brushed his under the table, once, the lightest possible contact, possibly accidental, and she did not move away afterward, and neither did he.

Behind them the older man said, to no one in particular, "So. Next Thursday."

"Next Thursday," Roy said.

Michael heard it as if from the next room.

He was not looking at the table anymore.

The others had left one by one. Roy first, then the younger man, then the grey-templed man, then the older man in the dark coat who had stood and put down a folded note and walked out without saying goodnight, which was how he had arrived.

Michael had not noticed any of them leaving.

Or he had noticed and had noticed through something, the way one notices weather through a window.

The table between them had emptied. The glasses had been cleared. The bar behind them had thinned in the way bars thin between ten and eleven on a weeknight. The basketball postgame had given way to a late-night show with the sound turned almost off. Somewhere a dishwasher was running.

She was still turning the glass. She had still not drunk from it.

"You don't drink," he said.

"Not tonight."

"Another night?"

"Maybe."

Her eyes stayed on him longer now. It was not a look that asked for anything. It was a look that had already decided.

"I wasn't going to come," she said.

"To this?"

"To any of it."

"Why did you."

"I don't know."

"That's an answer people give when they do know."

"Sometimes."

She leaned forward a fraction. The distance between them became smaller in a way that was not a movement, exactly, more the absence of a resistance that had been holding her in place.

"This," she said, "is an end. For a new beginning. I think."

She paused.

"And every ending requires a — key. To open the door."

He watched her mouth around the word *key*. The pause before it was not the pause of someone choosing a word. It was the pause of someone waiting for a word to arrive.

She looked past him, briefly, out the window of the pub, across the street, and then back.

"The hotel," she said. "Across the street. You and me."

He did not look where she had looked. He did not need to.

He did not say yes. He did not say anything.

He stood up.

She stood up after him, or with him, he could not have said which. She picked up the coat from the back of her chair in one movement. He paid for the drinks at the bar, or he thought he did, he did not remember afterward whether he had paid or left a card. They walked to the door. She went through first. He followed.

The street outside was cold in the way the street had been cold all week. A delivery van was idling at the corner. The light at the crosswalk was red and then green and they crossed without hurrying.

The hotel was the kind of hotel the street had. Brick, a glass door, a name in small lettering he did not read. A man behind a counter who did not look up. She did something at the counter he did not watch her do. A card was produced. An elevator arrived.

In the elevator she stood next to him, not touching. The wall behind them was mirrored. He looked at her in the mirror, briefly, because he could not look at her directly at this distance, and in the mirror her face was no more stable than it had been in the pub, her features arranged and arranged themselves, and he looked away.

The floor was high enough that the ascent took a moment.

The corridor was lit low. A carpet that absorbed sound. Doors on either side, all closed. She went ahead of him. He followed the sound of her coat. She stopped at a door. The small green light. The handle. The door opened.

He stepped inside. The door closed.

The room had a window and a bed and a chair and a lamp that was on because someone had left it on. The curtains were half drawn. The city through them was the city at that hour, a pattern of lights, a low sound beneath the sound of the room.

She set her coat on the chair.

She crossed the room to him slowly, not out of hesitation but out of a choice about pace. She stopped in front of him and did not look up at him, yet, she looked at the buttons of his shirt, at the collar, at the line of his jaw.

When she did look up, he could see her. For the first time, clearly, in a way that had been withheld until now. Dark eyes. A small mark above the left eyebrow he had either seen or imagined earlier and had now seen. The features settling, finally, into a face, which was not a beautiful face in the way he would have described beautiful faces an hour earlier, and was a face he knew he would be unable to describe tomorrow and for every day after.

Her hand came up.

It rested against the side of his neck. The palm was warm. Her fingers curled very slightly behind his ear.

He closed his eyes.

The distance between them stopped being a distance.

Her breath, when he felt it, was not cold and not warm. It was the temperature of the room. Her mouth, when it found his, was not urgent. It arrived. It stayed. It was the arrival of a thing that had

been arriving for some time, since the moment he had sat at the table, since the moment before that.

His hand was at her waist without his having put it there.

The coat that was not on the chair was on the floor.

"Wait," she said, once, against his mouth. Not to stop him. The word was the shape his own breath was making against her.

"Shh — "

His shirt. Her hand. The small sound of a button, and another, and another. His palm finding the line of her spine through the thin fabric she was still wearing, then finding it again without the fabric, and the sound she made then was not a word, was closer to the sound a person makes when they step, unexpectedly, into warm water.

"Here — "

"Yes — "

Time moved differently inside the room. Minutes lengthened and shortened without agreement. The light from the lamp did not change but seemed to change. A car passed below the window at some point and did not pass at any point; its sound arrived before it arrived and did not arrive at all.

He was not thinking about the quatrain.

He was not thinking about the name.

He was not thinking.

There was her hand and then her hand and then a place where his own hand had been and was not. Her hair under his palm. The inside of her wrist against his mouth. The small sound at the back of her throat when he did something without knowing he had decided to do it. The way she said —

"Slow — "

— and then, a moment later, in the same voice, without contradicting herself —

"Don't stop — "

— and the two instructions, which should not have existed in the same sentence, existed in the same sentence, and his body knew what to do with them in a way his mind had never known what to do with anything.

The bed took their weight.

After that there was nothing he could have described to anyone, afterward, because there were no edges to it. He had had, before this, a small private ranking of such things in his life, the kind of ranking a person keeps without acknowledging keeping. The ranking dissolved. It was not that she replaced the top of it. It was that the category of thing she was doing to him was not the category of thing the ranking had been measuring. This was something else. This was a person finding a part of him he had not known was a door, and opening it, and walking through.

Her mouth at his ear, once. A half-word. A sound that was not a word at all.

" — yes — "

He was not sure whose voice it had been.

The shape of her above him, or below him, or beside him, and the small mark above her eyebrow that he looked at and could not hold, and her eyes above him open and then closed and then open again, and a moment where she said his name, which he had given her and she had not asked for, and the way she said it was not the way anyone had said it before, was the way a person says a word they are reading for the first time off a page.

"Michael — "

It arrived inside him like a key arrives in a lock.

Something turned.

He heard himself, briefly, from outside himself, making a sound he had never made. She held still for the length of it and then did not hold still, and the room did what the room did, and the window past her shoulder held the lights of the city, and the lights were very far away, and she was very close, and the distance between those two facts was the only measurement left that still worked.

Afterward he did not know how long afterward was.

She lay on her side, her back against him, and her breathing slowed. He could feel it through the thin skin of her shoulder.

The lamp was still on.

He did not turn it off.

Her hand was resting on the sheet between them, palm up, fingers slightly curled. He did not touch it. He looked at it.

Above her left eyebrow, which he could see now in profile because her head had turned slightly on the pillow, there was a small mark. It was a shape. He could not have said what shape. He looked at it and his attention slid off it, the way attention slid off certain things when one was tired, or when one was very awake.

Outside, somewhere far off, a siren began, rose, and did not arrive.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

He meant to open them.

He did not open them.

Sleep arrived the way her mouth had arrived earlier, without urgency, without announcement, the arrival of a thing that had been arriving for some time. His last awareness was of her breathing against his arm, steady, even, already somewhere he could not follow, and then of nothing at all.

The lamp was still on.

The curtain moved, very slightly, in a current of air from the window that had not been open earlier and was open now by the width of a hand.

She... left.

PART 4 - Envy

He woke because the light was wrong.

Not bright, not dark. The curtain had moved in the night and the window was open by the width of a hand and the light coming through it was the light of a morning that had already started without him. The lamp on the table was still on. He could tell it was on because the bulb was putting out a tone against the daylight that was different from the daylight, a small yellow not-quite-silence in the room.

He opened his eyes slowly.

The pillow beside him held a shape. A dent. A slight indentation at the place where a head had been, and lower down, the longer indentation of a body.

He turned his head.

She was not there.

He sat up. The sheet fell to his waist. The room was as it had been the night before. The chair. The lamp. The window. The curtains. The coat he had taken off was on the floor where it had fallen. The shirt he had been wearing was on the foot of the bed. Her coat, which had been on the chair, was not on the chair.

He looked at the bathroom door. It was open. The light inside was off.

He said, quietly, because he could not think what else to do, "Hello."

Nobody answered.

He sat still for a moment.

He tried to bring her face into his mind. He could not. He tried again, the way one tries to remember a word that is almost there. There was a shape. There was the idea of a shape. There was dark hair. There was the idea of dark hair. There was, above the left eyebrow, a mark he had looked at and whose shape he could not now recover. He could not remember her eyes. He could not remember her mouth. He could not remember whether she had smiled or not smiled.

He could remember her voice.

He could remember his name in her voice.

Michael.

The word in her mouth. The single word in her mouth at a moment he could not bring back in any other detail, a sound he had made in response to it that he could half-hear and could not place, and nothing else. Not what had come before. Not what had come after. The name in her voice was the only thing the room had kept for him.

He sat there for a long time.

At some point he looked down.

On the sheet, where the indentation of her body was, there was a piece of paper. It had not been there a moment ago, or it had been there the whole time and he had not seen it. He did not know which.

He picked it up.

It was old. The paper was not modern paper. It was heavier than modern paper and slightly yellowed at the edges and a little soft, the way paper becomes soft when it has been folded and unfolded many times or has been kept somewhere for a long time. There was no letterhead. There was no watermark he could see.

The writing was in red ink. Not the red of a biro. Darker. A wet red that had dried into itself. The hand was careful. The lines were straight without having been ruled.

When the Great Wheel completes its seventh turn,
The godless tongues shall beg the saints on high,
Through flame, sword, famine, plague, as bright snows burn,
And those still dead will claw from where they lie.

He read it.

He read it again.

He did not read it a third time.

He sat on the edge of the bed with the paper in his hand. His heart did something, briefly, which he noticed and did not attend to. The room did not change. The lamp did not change. The curtain moved once, very slightly, in the current of air from the open window.

He understood one thing, and he understood it in the form of a small fact that had arrived in his mind the way a light arrives in a room when somebody has turned it on in the next one. The fact was that the person who had been in the bed next to him, whose face he could not remember, and whose voice he could, had been connected to the thing. He did not name the connection. He did not finish the sentence that would have named it. He simply registered that the sentence existed and would not need to be said for him to have understood it.

He did not move for some time.

Then he stood.

He dressed slowly. He put on his shirt. He buttoned it. He put on his trousers. He put on his jacket. He picked up his coat from the floor and put it on.

He held the piece of paper in his hand.

He could go to the front desk. He could ask who had taken the room. He could ask to see the register. He could find a police station. He could find a journalist. He could take a photograph of the paper and post it in the thread. He could show it to Roy. He could show it to Diane.

He did none of these things.

He folded the paper once. He folded it a second time. He put it in the inner pocket of his jacket, the one over the left side of his chest, and he felt the small weight of it settle there against the fabric.

He did not know why he had folded it rather than unfolded. He did not know why he had put it in that pocket rather than the outer one. He did not examine either decision.

He left the room.

The corridor was lit the same as the night before. The carpet absorbed his steps. He passed three doors. Behind one of them a television was on, low, a weather report. Behind another, nothing. Behind the third, a woman's voice was saying *I told you*, and then not finishing the sentence.

The elevator came. He rode it down. The mirrored wall showed him to himself and he did not look.

In the lobby the man at the counter was not the man from the night before. He was a different man. He looked at Michael and then at the screen in front of him and did not ask him for anything. Michael walked past him. The glass door opened itself. The street opened in front of him.

The air was colder than he had expected.

The sun was up behind a haze that did not resolve into either cloud or clearness. He stood on the pavement for a moment, orienting himself. The pub across the street was closed. The awning was the same. The cars parked along the kerb were not the same cars, but they were the same kind of cars.

He started walking.

A woman came toward him on the pavement pushing a stroller. As she passed him she did not look at him, which was what pedestrians in the city did, and then, two steps past him, she turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder, briefly, and turned back. He did not look to see if she had done it again.

At the corner the light was red. He waited. Two men were waiting next to him. One of them was on a phone. The other was not. The one who was not on a phone said, to no one, or to the man on the phone, or to Michael, "They said ten minutes, didn't they." The man on the phone did not answer. Michael did not answer. The light changed.

He crossed.

On the next block a delivery cyclist came past him going the wrong way down the street and did not slow down, and a man stepped out of a doorway and the cyclist went around him without any change in speed, and the man did not flinch. The man watched the cyclist go. He stood in the middle of the pavement watching the cyclist go for longer than the event warranted.

A coffee shop on the corner had its door propped open. Two people were standing at the counter inside. One of them was ordering. The other was looking at the menu board above the counter. As Michael passed the doorway the one who was ordering turned her head and looked at him through the open door. She held the look until he was past. Then she turned back to the counter and said the same order again, from the beginning, as if she had not said it the first time.

He kept walking.

At a crosswalk two blocks further on, a traffic light went through its cycle in a way that was not quite right. The red stayed on a second longer than it should have. The walk signal blinked longer than it should have. Nobody waiting at the corner seemed to notice. They crossed when it was their turn to cross. He crossed with them.

A taxi was stopped at the kerb in front of a hotel he did not know the name of. The driver was looking at his phone. The passenger had not yet got out. The meter was not running. As Michael passed, the passenger opened the door and set one foot on the pavement and then stopped, half-in and half-out of the car, and did not move. The driver did not turn. Michael kept walking.

Three blocks later the weight in his inner pocket settled against his chest when he stepped down off a kerb and settled back when he stepped up again.

A man was standing at the window of a closed shop, his hands cupped against the glass, looking in. The shop was dark. There was nothing to look at inside. The man kept looking.

He did not know where he was going. He was heading, roughly, toward the subway that would take him home. He was not in a hurry. He was not slow. His legs were doing what his legs did in this part of the city when he had not decided otherwise.

A pigeon landed on the pavement ten feet ahead of him. Then another. Then two more. They stood together in a small group and did not peck at anything. They stood there the way pigeons did not usually stand, which was without moving their heads, and as he approached them they did not scatter. He walked through them. They stepped aside, each of them taking one step, in the same direction, at the same moment, and did not take a second step.

He looked behind him, once, at the corner.

The pigeons were gone.

He did not know if they had flown away.

He reached the top of the subway stairs. He paused. Below him, the sound of the station was the sound of the station. Trains. Announcements. Footsteps. A busker with a guitar playing something he half-recognised.

He put his hand on the railing.

He felt, through the fabric of his jacket, the small folded weight against his chest.

He went down.

DAY ONE

He came in at seven in the morning. Diane was already up. She was in the kitchen making coffee. She did not turn when the door closed.

"Late night," she said.

"Yeah."

"Didn't text."

"Phone died."

"Okay."

He took off his coat. He hung it. The weight in the inner pocket settled against the hanger for a moment and he adjusted the coat so that the pocket sat against the wall of the closet and closed the closet door.

He went into the kitchen.

She put the second cup on the counter for him without looking. He picked it up. He stood there. She was cutting something on a board. A lemon, the way she cut lemons in the morning, into wedges for water. He watched her for a moment and then sat down at the table.

"Productive?"

"What?"

"Your night."

"It was — yeah. A lot of talk. Not much conclusion."

"Mm."

She did not ask anything else. She cut the lemon. She put a wedge in her water. She carried the rest in a small dish to the fridge and put it inside and closed the door.

He drank the coffee. It was bitter. He had not put anything in it. He did not put anything in it now.

The microwave clock said 07:14.

"I'm going to shower."

"Okay."

She left the kitchen. She did not kiss him on her way past.

The television was on at nine. A correspondent was standing in front of a building he half-recognised, somewhere in a city he had never been to, talking about a session that was being held, or a session that was going to be held, or a session that had concluded without a statement. Behind her the light was the light of early afternoon where she was.

* — officials described the exchange as frank, with both sides reiterating the need for continued dialogue, and we're told — *

He opened the laptop. Forty-eight unread. He did not open any of them.

He opened Reddit.

MEGATHREAD — Day 1 post hotel paper theory — read stickied before posting

He did not click it. Whatever it was about was not about anything. Users had begun, in the last few days, to invent hotel papers of their own, to post photographs of handwriting on napkins and receipts. None of them were real. He knew this the way one knows the temperature of a room one has been in for a long time.

He scrolled.

day 1.

nothing yet.

too early.

*seven days between the first and second, seven between the second and third, if the pattern holds — *

He closed the tab.

He opened it again.

He scrolled.

The weight in the inner pocket of the jacket, which was now hanging in the closet in the hall, was not touching him. He could feel it anyway, in the idea of the pocket, in the idea of the jacket, in the idea of the shape of the thing.

DAY TWO

She came home at seven. He had made dinner, or had assembled dinner, or had put things on plates that did not quite add up to dinner.

"Thanks."

"Mm."

They ate.

— and what we're seeing now is a fairly measured response from the markets, which suggests that investors are taking this in their stride, and the consensus view among the analysts we've spoken to is that this is unlikely to escalate into something more serious —

"Did you hear about the thing," she said.

"What thing."

"The thing in the south."

"Which south."

"The — the south."

"I saw the headline. I didn't read it."

"Okay."

They ate.

At some point she reached across the table and took his hand. Not romantically. Just her hand on his, briefly, the way she did when she was telling him, without using words, that she was still here and would like him to still be here too.

He held her hand back for a second.

Then he picked up his fork with his other hand and her hand was on his alone for another moment and then was not.

She took her plate to the sink.

DAY THREE

On the television, muted, a map. Two countries. Arrows between them. A ticker underneath.

FORCES ON ELEVATED READINESS — NO IMMEDIATE SIGN OF —

Reddit. The thread.

u/RoyD'effrayeur — something is wrong

He clicked.

I don't have a thesis. I'm posting this because I've been going back and forth for three days and I think if I sit on it any longer it'll stop being useful.

The fourth one should have come today. The pattern was seven, seven, seven. Three beats of the same length. There's no fourth. It's day three. I know that isn't a violation of the pattern yet. I'm aware. But —

*The earlier quatrains, whatever you make of them, had an internal logic you could at least argue about. The first was a picture. The second was a category. The third introduced an addressee.

Each one changed the frame. If a fourth comes and it's in the same series, the frame should change again. I can't predict how. I shouldn't be able to predict how. That's not what I mean.*

What I mean is the background has gotten noisier. Three fronts I won't name because I don't want to be a guy who names them. Each of them has a legitimate commentator class telling us it's fine. I keep finding myself not believing them. I used to believe them. That's the part I can't account for.

I don't have a conclusion. I'm posting this as a placeholder for a conclusion I can't reach yet.

The comments beneath were mixed. A user had replied, *touch grass.* Another had replied, *I felt this in my spine and I can't explain why.* Another had replied, *you're catastrophising, the news cycle does this.* Another had replied, *maybe. but catastrophising is only a mistake when it's wrong.*

He scrolled.

day 3. nothing.

if nothing comes on day 7 the whole thing was a coincidence.

the whole thing is already a coincidence. gold is up this week. nothing collapsed. the skyline is still broken but the skyline has been broken since the earthquake. nothing is happening.

nothing is happening is the thing that's happening

don't do that

you're doing it too

I know.

He closed the tab.

He put his hand against his shirt, over the place where the pocket of the jacket in the closet would have been if he had been wearing the jacket. He noticed himself doing it. He took his hand away.

DAY FOUR

She came to him at eleven.

He was in bed, on his back, the lamp still on, the phone face-down on the bedside table. He had put it down three minutes earlier. He had been about to turn off the lamp.

She came out of the bathroom with her face washed and her hair down and in the thing she wore to sleep in when she wanted to wear something, and she got into bed on her side, and she did not immediately lie down. She sat on her heels for a moment and looked at him.

He looked back.

She leaned over and kissed him.

It was a kiss that was familiar in every aspect. It was their kiss. The pressure of it, the small initial pause before her mouth committed, the hand she put on his jaw with her thumb at the corner of his mouth. It was, in every respect, the kiss he had been kissing for years.

He kissed her back.

She moved closer.

He pulled her closer.

Her weight settled along him. Her hand found the back of his neck. The familiar things his body knew how to do began, on their own, to do themselves. He was there. He was with her. He was

with her in the way he had been with her the last time they had done this, and the time before that.

Then —

— nothing visual. Nothing he could have described. Not a picture of a room. Not a face. Not a mark above an eyebrow.

A voice.

Close to his ear. Not loud.

Michael.

Not Diane's. Not his wife's. Not his wife's mouth, not his wife's voice, not his wife's pitch.

The other.

Said the way the other had said it, which he could not have described either, and could not not-recognise.

His body went still beneath her in a way that was not a decision. His hand, which had been at the small of her back, did not move away, but it stopped moving toward. She felt it. Of course she felt it.

She lifted her head slightly.

"What."

"Sorry — "

"What is it."

"I'm — "

He breathed out. He closed his eyes. He opened them.

"I'm tired. I'm sorry. I — work. The day. I'm — "

"Okay."

"I'm sorry."

"Okay."

She rolled off him. Not angrily. She rolled off the way a person rolls off who has been told no without being told no. She lay on her back next to him for a moment. She did not touch him.

"Is it me."

"No."

"Is it."

"No. It's not. I'm — it's the week. I've been — "

"Okay."

"Diane — "

"It's fine. Go to sleep."

She turned off her lamp. She did not turn to face him. She did not turn away from him either. She lay on her back with her eyes open in the dark, and he could tell, from her breathing, that she was awake for a long time after that.

He did not sleep for a long time either.

The voice that had not been her voice did not come back.

It did not need to.

DAY FIVE

The morning was quiet. She got up before him. She was already out of the apartment by the time he came into the kitchen. There was coffee in the pot. There was no note.

— and what we've heard in the last hour is that the additional deployments are purely precautionary, that there has been no request for NATO assistance, and that channels between the two capitals remain —

He worked. He answered one email. He did not answer the other forty-seven.

He opened Reddit.

day 5.

two to go.

the suspense is killing me and also the suspense is so clearly nothing

the suspense is the point

what if nothing comes

then nothing comes

then what

then we were all very silly for a few weeks and we go back to our lives

do we

He closed the tab.

He opened it.

Roy had posted again, lower down, shorter.

three fronts now. I'm going to stop posting about this. I don't want to be the guy who posts about this.

The replies were the usual. He did not read them.

She came home. He had not made dinner. They ordered something. It came. They ate it on the sofa in front of the television. The correspondent was still in front of the building. The arrows on the map had multiplied. A commentator was saying that escalation was not in anyone's interest and that both sides understood this.

"Michael."

"Yeah."

"Look at me."

He looked at her.

She was eating. She held a piece of something between her chopsticks. She was looking at him levelly.

"What is it."

"What is what."

"Whatever it is."

"Diane — "

"I'm not asking in anger."

"I know."

"I'm asking because I don't know. And I'm usually someone who knows."

He set his container on the coffee table. He did not answer immediately. She waited.

"It's the news," he said, eventually. "It's been a lot. I'm — I'm not managing it well. I know that."

"Okay."

"I'm going to manage it better."

"Okay."

She looked at him for another moment. She was not convinced. He knew she was not convinced. She was not going to push him tonight. He knew that too.

"Eat," she said, and looked back at the television.

He picked up the container.

DAY SIX

He slept poorly. He got up at four. He sat in the kitchen with the phone for an hour. He scrolled through the thread without reading any individual comment. The thread was doing what threads did in the sixth day of anything, which was to have become background noise even to the people writing in it.

At six he put the phone down.

He went to the closet. He opened it. He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket.

He took the paper out.

He unfolded it.

He read it.

When the Great Wheel completes its seventh turn,

The godless tongues shall beg the saints on high,

Through flame, sword, famine, plague, as bright snows burn,

And those still dead will claw from where they lie.

He read it again.

He did not know how much time passed before he folded it and put it back in the pocket. He closed the closet. He went back to the kitchen.

He made coffee.

At seven, Diane came down. He had the second cup on the counter.

"Morning."

"Morning."

She drank. She did not sit down. She leaned against the counter with the cup in both hands and looked past him at the window.

"I'm going to be late tonight."

"Okay."

"There's a — it's nothing. Drinks with the team."

"Okay."

She looked at him over the rim of her cup.

"I'm not asking."

"Asking what."

"Anything."

"Okay."

She finished her coffee. She rinsed the cup. She set it on the rack. She picked up her bag from the bench in the hallway and her coat from the hook beside the closet and her keys from the hook beside the coat, and she came back into the kitchen once, briefly, and looked at him in the doorway, and did not say anything, and left.

The door closed.

The day did what the day did. He did not work. He did not eat. He refreshed Reddit. He watched the television for stretches without registering what was on it. He made coffee at noon and did not drink it and made another at three and did not drink it.

The commentator on the television was saying, for the eighth time that day, in a slightly different configuration of the same words, that this was unlikely to escalate.

The thread said *day 6. one to go.*

The coat in the closet held the paper.

She came home at ten.

She had been drinking, a little. Not much. She hung her coat next to his. She came into the living room and stood in the doorway.

He was on the sofa. The television was on low. A map with the same arrows. A graphic in a corner with a number that had updated and not updated.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey."

"How was your day."

"Same."

"Mm."

She stood there.

"I'm going to bed."

"Okay."

She did not come over. She did not kiss him on the top of the head, which was the thing she did when she came home after a night out and he was on the sofa. She went to the bedroom.

He stayed on the sofa.

On the television the correspondent was standing in front of a different building now, in a different city, at a different time of day. She was saying something he was not listening to. Behind her a flag was moving very slightly in a wind he could not feel.

The microwave in the kitchen clicked once, for no reason, and was quiet.

He did not turn off the television. But could not concentrate, either.

The notification came at 07:07.

He had been awake since five. The coffee beside him had gone cold twice. The phone had been in his hand for most of the hour, refreshing, scrolling, locking, unlocking. He did not set it down when the small red circle appeared. He tapped it.

r/prophecy — new post

u/Encausse_34

07:07

The post loaded.

When the Pale Consort turns the Key,

A creeping bile infects the sovereign throne,

Three iron eagles watch the boiling sea,

And jealous crowns will grind the earth to bone.

He read it.

He read it again.

He did not feel anything he could have named. The paper in the inner pocket of the jacket in the closet was not in this poem and was in this poem. The word *Key* in the second line held his eye for a second longer than the others and he moved on.

The first comment appeared. The second. The third. He could not count them. The number at the bottom of the screen was climbing faster than his eye could track. He refreshed. He scrolled.

HE'S BACK
back back back
okay okay okay everyone in here
pale consort
PALE CONSORT
turns the KEY
guys what is the key

He refreshed.

"creeping bile" = poison, slow, systemic
"sovereign throne" = head of state, literal or metaphor
"three iron eagles" = obvious, obvious, obvious
which three
pick any three
no, seriously, which three, there are only so many that fly
russia china us
germany russia us
the roman legion standards had eagles
we're not in rome
speak for yourself

He scrolled.

*"boiling sea" — literal? chemical? metaphorical?**doesn't have to be an ocean. could be a gulf. could be a strait.*
could be weather
"jealous crowns" = rival powers, rival rulers
or jealous as in envious, personal, not political
envy. the word is envy.
is it
read it again. "jealous crowns will grind the earth to bone". that's envy.
why does the word matter
because the previous one had a name. this one has an emotion. the frame keeps shifting.

He refreshed.

where is roy
roy
roy where are you

Roy had posted. Michael scrolled down through the cascade of new comments until he found it, halfway down, already being pushed lower by the activity above it. He read it in pieces, the way it had been written, in paragraphs separated by line breaks that Roy had let happen rather than organised.

Four of them now. I want to put down what I think this is before the thread washes it away. I'm not going to be right. That's not what this is.

The first was a picture. Dragon, stone, tower, dust. Concrete imagery, resolved event, retrospective clarity. You could draw it.

The second was a category. Ledger, trust, shadow, idols. Abstract imagery, diffuse event, retrospective fit without a pin. You could not draw it. You could describe what it had happened to.

The third introduced a name. A person inside the poem, not outside. I said at the time that this was the frame changing. I meant it. I still mean it.

The fourth introduces a role. Pale Consort. Turns a key. Consort is not a ruler. Consort is next to a ruler. Key is a role word too — something that unlocks a thing, something that makes a thing possible. "Creeping bile infects the sovereign throne" — the consequence of what the consort has done.

You have to read three and four together. Three names a person. Four uses a function. In three the addressee is an individual. In four the function is being performed.

I don't know what this means. I want to be careful. I am not saying the poems are describing a sequence we are inside. I am saying the poems are behaving as if they think they are.

"Three iron eagles watch the boiling sea." This is a specific image. Three powers standing over a body of water that is heating. You can map this onto the news. You can map anything onto the news. I don't think we should.

"And jealous crowns will grind the earth to bone." This is the only line in any of the four that is a full prophecy in the old sense. Grinding the earth to bone is not a metaphor for a bad quarter. I don't know what it is a metaphor for. I don't want to know.

I also want to say: the gap was seven days again. Seven, seven, seven, seven. The number seven was named inside the third poem. The third poem said "seven to my prophecy are told." We now have four. If that number is what I think it is, we have three more.

That's all I have.

A reply: *bro cooked.*

A reply: *bro is losing it.*

A reply: *it's both, it's fine for both things to be true.*

A reply: *what do we DO.*

A reply: *nothing. we read. we wait.*

A reply: *unacceptable.*

A reply: *acceptable or not, it's what there is.*

He refreshed.

The thread had grown two hundred comments in the time he had been reading Roy. He scrolled through the new ones. The mockery was there but had shifted character. It was heavier now. The jokes were harder, the kind of jokes people made in a register that had stopped being ironic and had not yet admitted it.

Imao pale consort is definitely someone's wife

pale consort is me after i finish my third monster

grind the earth to bone — metal band, not prophecy

jealous crowns — my sister's kids

And beneath these, a different kind of comment, appearing more frequently than it had in earlier threads, in a register that Michael registered without yet having a name for.

she writes like no one else writes.

she doesn't waste a word.

the prophecy is a gift and we are not worthy.

whatever else this is, the craft is not in doubt.

"She." It's a "she" now?

look at the meter. look at the line breaks. it's a she.

you can't tell gender from line breaks.

you can, actually, if you know what to look for.

no you can't. stop.

A user whose handle Michael had not seen before posted a comment near the top.

Whatever you think of the source, treat the work with respect. The poems are given to us. They are not mocked in the room of those who understand their weight.

Forty upvotes. Growing.

A reply: *room? what room? we're on reddit.*

A reply: *speak for yourself.*

He refreshed.

A different user, a different handle:

Four is a threshold. The first three were the opening. The fourth begins the work. Read it again. Read it as if you were meant to.

Thirty upvotes.

A reply: *dude*

A reply: *guys this is weird now*

A reply: *this has always been weird*

A reply: *this is a new kind of weird*

He scrolled.

Further down, someone had posted, in a normal tone, almost as an aside:

I assume we're not meeting tonight.

A reply: *no. too many eyes. roy said in the other thread.*

A reply: *did he. I missed it.*

A reply: *yeah. not tonight. maybe not again for a while.*

A reply: *so what do we do.*

A reply: *we read. we wait.*

He did not scroll to find Roy's comment about the pub. He did not need to. He set the phone on the table, face-up, and looked at it for a moment.

He picked it up. He refreshed.

The television had been on since before he had come down. He had forgotten it was on. The correspondent in front of the building had given way to a panel in a studio. Three men and a woman, one of the men a retired general, one of them an economist, the other two he could not place. The woman was saying something he tuned into halfway through.

* — remains the baseline assumption, that these are signalling behaviours rather than preparatory ones, and the markets seem to agree with that reading, which is why we're seeing the relative calm we're —*

The economist nodded. The general did not nod.

* — and of course the challenge with this kind of analysis is that we are always, in effect, one misstep away from a different scenario, but there is no indication at this time that any of the parties involved has an interest in —*

He muted the television.

He scrolled.

Diane came into the kitchen at half past seven.

"Morning."

"Morning."

She made coffee. She did not sit down. She drank it standing at the counter, the way she had the day before. He was still at the table with the phone.

"Anything new?"

"Another post."

"Another one."

"Yeah."

"Okay."

She did not ask what it said. He did not offer.

She rinsed the cup. She set it on the rack. She dropped it on the way to setting it and it did not break but it clattered in a way that was louder than the morning should have held. She said, quietly, "Jesus Christ," and picked it up and set it down properly and stood there for a moment with both hands on the counter.

"You okay."

"Fine."

"Diane — "

"I'm fine, Michael."

She went into the hallway. Coat. Bag. Keys. The door.

"See you tonight."

"Yeah."

She was gone before he had finished saying it.

He worked. Or he did what he did when he did not work, which was to have the work document open and to not add to it.

At ten the first client called. He did not pick up. At ten fifteen the second. At ten twenty-two the third. The phone vibrated on the desk in a pattern that was not a pattern.

At eleven he went down to the bodega on the corner for water. The man behind the counter gave him his change twice, the same change, and the second time Michael handed it back and the man looked at it in his hand as if he had not seen it before and then put it in the drawer. The line behind Michael had not moved. A woman at the back of the line was talking on her phone. She was saying, *but that's not what I asked you,* and then she was saying it again, and then she was saying it a third time, and the person on the other end was not, apparently, answering her.

On the walk back to the apartment a delivery rider came up onto the pavement and did not ring the bell he had on his handlebars, and the two people walking in front of Michael did not hear him, and he passed between them, and neither of them turned.

In the lift a man got in on the third floor who did not press a button. He rode up with Michael to the seventh. He did not get out. Michael got out. The doors closed. The lift went up.

— and the expert consensus this afternoon, as we've been hearing throughout the day, is that the recent posture adjustments are consistent with routine readiness exercises that have been —

He refreshed.

The thread had passed twenty thousand comments. Megathreads had been created and were already full. A new mod had been added, and then removed, and then added again after what appeared to have been an argument in the moderation logs that users were reconstructing from fragments.

The reverent users had multiplied. They were not organised. They were not a group. They were a tone. He could feel it without naming it. The comments were shorter. They were not arguing. They were not engaging with the jokes or the dismissals. They were waiting.

The fourth has opened the gate.

Seven is a complete number. Four has passed. Three remain.

We do not ask her to explain. We read what she has given.

A reply: *who is "her"??*

A reply: *she is.*

A reply: *that's not an answer.*

A reply: *it is if you understand the question.*

A reply: *okay I'm out of this sub, you're all insane.*

A reply: *go in peace.*

He refreshed.

— we're hearing reports, unconfirmed, of naval movements in the —

He refreshed.

pale consort

turns the key

guys

guys what is the key

He locked the phone.

He unlocked the phone.

He refreshed.

Diane came home at seven. She did not say hello. She hung her coat. She went into the bedroom. She stayed there for an hour. He stayed at the table. At eight she came out and made herself something to eat and ate it standing at the counter and put the plate in the sink and went back to the bedroom.

At nine he went to bed, or went into the bedroom, and she was already in bed with her back to the door and the light off. He got into bed beside her. He did not touch her. She did not move.

The phone on the bedside table cast a faint light onto the ceiling every time it refreshed.

— remains the baseline assumption —

pale consort

jealous crowns will grind the earth to bone

He refreshed.

DAY ONE

He was at the table with the phone when she came down.

She made her coffee. She made his. She put his cup in front of him. He said thank you without looking up.

She sat down across from him.

"The thing for Erol is Saturday."

"Mm."

"He texted yesterday asking if we're bringing anything."

"Mm."

"Michael."

"Yeah."

"Are we."

"Are we what."

"Bringing anything."

"I don't — sure. Whatever you think."

"Okay."

She drank her coffee. He scrolled.

The thread had quieted overnight and woken up again. Not in volume, in quality. The mockers had thinned. The reverent users had not. He had begun, without deciding to, to read their comments first. They were at the top of the thread more often now, not by moderation, by upvote. The jokes sat beneath them.

Read the fourth again. Every word earns its place. The Pale Consort is a function, not a person. The Key is what the function performs. Read it again.

Each quatrain contains its own answer, if you know how to hold it.

We were given the gift. We are not the gift.

He scrolled past the mocking comments more quickly than he had two weeks ago. His eye had learned where they were and what they were.

"Michael."

"What."

"I was talking."

"Sorry. Sorry. What."

"Saturday."

"Saturday what."

She looked at him for a second. Then she shook her head, not angrily, more the way a person shakes off a thing that has landed on them.

"Never mind."

He was on the sofa at ten. The television was on. A graphic. Arrows. A woman he had not seen before saying that this was consistent with longstanding doctrine and did not represent a departure from established posture.

Consistent with longstanding doctrine was a phrase he had heard twice that day already.

He refreshed.

Diane was across the room, on the armchair, with her laptop. She had been there for an hour. She looked up, once, and found him looking at the phone, and looked back at her screen.

He did not know she had looked up. He did not know she had looked back down.

DAY TWO

She made something he liked for dinner. A thing she did not make often because it took too long on a weeknight. She had started it at five. She had timed it for seven. He was in the office at seven. She called up the stairs.

"Five minutes."

"Yeah."

She started the pasta at seven.

At seven-ten she called again.

"Michael."

"Coming."

At seven-fifteen she ate. She did not call again.

He came down at seven-thirty. The plate she had put aside for him was on the counter. She was on the sofa with her book.

"Sorry," he said, at the counter, with the plate. "Got caught in something."

"It's fine."

"It smells incredible."

"Mm."

He ate standing at the counter with the phone in his other hand, thumb moving on the screen. She did not look up from her book. She turned a page. She did not appear to read the page she had turned to. She sat with it open.

We do not interpret the fourth without the first three. The sequence is a sentence. The sentence is not yet finished. We read as the sentence is written.

There are seven. We know there are seven because the third said so. What comes after the seventh is not given to us in the quatrains. We will know when we know.

The mocking ones are doing their part. Every prophecy must be mocked first. This is the rule.

A reply: *I'm not playing a role in your metaphor.*

A reply: *You are. That's what the role is.*

He did not upvote. He did not reply. He did, briefly, almost smile. Not because it was funny. Because the person who had written *that's what the role is* had understood something, and he knew what they had understood, and he knew that he had understood it with them.

Diane, on the other side of the room, saw the almost-smile.

She did not say anything.

DAY THREE

She came up behind him at the desk in the late afternoon and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Come for a walk."

"I'm — "

"Twenty minutes."

"I have this call at five."

"It's three."

"I know. I need to — "

"Twenty minutes, Michael."

He looked up at her. He was, for a second, about to say yes. Then his phone, face-up on the desk, lit with a notification — not from the thread, a notification from an email — and his eyes went to it, automatically, the way his eyes had gone to things for two weeks.

She watched his eyes go.

"It's fine," she said, and took her hand off his shoulder.

"Diane — "

"It's fine."

She left the office. She went down the stairs. He heard her put on her coat. He heard the door.

He meant to go after her.

He did not go after her.

He refreshed.

The television was on in the evening. A panel. A man saying, slowly, with his hands slightly raised in the gesture people used when they were explaining something simple to someone who was refusing to accept it, that there was no reason, at this juncture, to anticipate any significant deterioration in the situation, and that the diplomatic channels remained entirely —

Diane muted it. She had walked past the television on her way back from the kitchen. She had pressed the button without breaking stride.

She sat down. She looked at the muted screen.

Michael did not look up from his phone. He had not noticed the audio go.

DAY FOUR

She initiated, at eleven. More deliberately this time. She did not come out of the bathroom and get into bed. She came to where he was sitting on the edge of the bed with the phone, and she took the phone out of his hand and set it face-down on the bedside table, and she put her hands on his shoulders and stood between his knees.

He looked up at her.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

"I miss you."

"I'm here."

"Are you."

"Yes."

She leaned down and kissed him.

He kissed her back. He put his hands on her waist. She sat down on his lap. He kissed her again and she kissed him and his hand went into her hair and she made the small sound that meant she had been waiting to have his hand in her hair for some time.

And then —

He did not know what it was this time. The voice did not come. Nothing came. That was the problem. There was nothing there. He was there. His body was there. He was going through the motions of a thing he had done for years with her, and he was doing the motions correctly, but the

thing inside the motions that made them not motions was not there. He was assembling her piece by piece with his hands and there was no her, there was only the assembling.

She felt it before he did.

She stopped. She pulled back. She looked at him.

"You're not here."

"I am."

"You're not."

"Diane — "

"Where are you."

"I'm — I'm right here. I'm with you. I —"

"No."

"Diane."

"You're not here, Michael."

She got off his lap. She sat next to him on the edge of the bed. She put her hands on her knees.

She did not look at him.

He said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't."

"I want to — "

"Don't."

She got up. She went into the bathroom. She closed the door. The water ran in the sink for a long time.

When she came out she got into her side of the bed with her back to him and did not say anything. He sat on his side of the bed for another minute and then lay down beside her and did not touch her.

She did not sleep for a while. He could tell.

Neither did he.

At some point in the dark he reached for the phone on the bedside table, quietly, so as not to wake her, though he knew she was not asleep. He unlocked it. He opened the thread.

He scrolled.

The light of the screen was on his face, and on the ceiling above him, and on the back of her shoulder where it turned away from him.

DAY FIVE

She did not say good morning. She did not make him coffee. She made her own and took it into the bedroom and drank it getting dressed.

He made his own.

She came down with her coat already on. She picked up her keys.

"See you tonight."

"Have a good day."

"Mm."

The door.

He went up to the office. He opened the laptop. Sixty-one unread. He did not open any of them.

He opened the thread.

There had been a post overnight in a sub that had split off from the main one. A smaller sub. Three hundred members. A user was attempting to catalogue, line by line, the structural devices in the four quatrains. Another user was responding to him in a register that was no longer analytical. The register was the register people used for prayer.

He read for an hour.

He did not notice it was an hour.

He posted, for the first time in several days, a comment in a thread about the internal rhythm of the third quatrain. He wrote, *the caesura after "Michael" is load-bearing. without it the line does not carry the name, it drops it.*

He posted it without re-reading.

A reply came within a minute.

you see it.

He read the reply. He did not reply to the reply. He sat with the word *you* on the screen for a long moment.

He did not almost-smile this time. He simply acknowledged the comment the way one acknowledges a greeting from a neighbour one has passed for years without ever learning the name of.

The television was on in the kitchen when he went down for water at three. A new correspondent in front of a new building. She was saying *there is no indication, at this time,* and then *situation remains contained,* and then *too early to draw conclusions,* in that order, as if reciting a list she had been given.

He drank his water. He went back upstairs.

DAY SIX

He came down at seven because he had heard her come down at six-forty and not heard her leave.

She was sitting at the kitchen table. She had made coffee. She had not poured it. The pot was on the counter with steam coming off it still. She had a cup in her hand. The cup was empty. She was holding it the way one holds a cup that had something in it some time ago.

She did not look up when he came in.

"Morning."

She did not answer.

He went to the counter. He poured his coffee. He filled her cup for her. He set the pot back down.

He sat across from her.

She did not look at him. She was looking at a point on the table, an inch to the left of her cup. She was not looking at anything on the table. She was looking at the place where her eyes had stopped.

He did not say anything for a moment.

The microwave clock said 07:02.

Her shoulders went up, once, very small, on an inhale that did not come all the way in. They stayed up for a second. They did not come all the way down. She breathed out slowly through her nose. Her eyes did not blink for a long time. When they did, they stayed closed for longer than a blink.

He saw her chin move, once.

He saw a single line come down the side of her face and stop at her jaw. She did not wipe it. It sat there. She did not look up.

He did not move.

He had the thought, for a second, that he should put his hand on her hand. He did not put his hand on her hand.

He had the thought, for a second, that he should say her name. He did not say her name.

He had the thought, for a second, that he should ask what was wrong.

He knew what was wrong.

He did not know how to be the answer.

She drew a breath, finally, a longer one, and let it out, and picked up her cup, and drank from the coffee he had poured her. She did not thank him for pouring it.

She set the cup down.

She got up.

She went into the hallway. She put on her coat. She picked up her bag. She picked up her keys.

She did not come back into the kitchen to say goodbye.

The door opened. The door closed.

He sat at the table. His own coffee was still in front of him. He had not drunk from it.

He picked up the phone.

He unlocked it.

The thread had moved overnight. Roy had not posted. The mockers had not posted. The reverent users had posted for six hours in a register that was not quite English anymore, that had begun to borrow forms from somewhere else, that had begun to use *she* without qualification and *given* as a complete sentence and *read again* as a blessing.

At some point he became aware that he had been sitting at the table for a long time without drinking the coffee. He touched the cup. It was cold.

He did not get up to warm it.

He refreshed.

PART 5 - The gilded sands

The notification came at 07:07.

He had been awake. He had not slept, not really, not in a way he would have been willing to call sleep if asked. The phone had been face-down on the kitchen table. He turned it over. The small red circle had appeared.

r/prophecy — new post
u/Encausse_34
07:07

The post loaded.

The gilded sands are crushed beneath the jaw,
That drinks the blackened marrow from the stone,
A cosmic rot infects the human maw,
To gorge on ash and chew the brother's bone.

He read it once.

He did not read it a second time immediately. He sat with the phone in his hand and looked at the wall opposite the table. The wall was the colour of the wall. The calendar was on it. Diane's initials were in the square for today. There was no dot beside them.

He looked down.

The first comment had appeared. The second. The third. He could not count them.

HE IS BACK
she
SHE is back
okay okay okay
gilded sands
GILDED SANDS
oh god
oh god oh god

He refreshed.

"gilded sands" = gold-covered desert = gulf states
or literally just a beach
it's not a beach
"blackened marrow from the stone" — oil
oil oil oil
everybody saying oil, fine, oil
"cosmic rot" — that's the one that doesn't fit
it fits if you stop being literal
i am trying to stop being literal

He refreshed.

The comments were coming faster than he could scroll. He could watch the bottom of the screen and see the count climbing. It was not climbing the way it had climbed on the first post, or the second. It was climbing faster. The thread had learned how to fill.

"chew the brother's bone" — civil war?

or kin killing kin, cain and abel

CAIN

someone called michael said his name is michael, now somebody's gonna say their name is cain

bro you're next

fuck off

He refreshed.

Roy had posted. He found it halfway down the page.

I'll keep this short. I don't have an interpretation. I want to note, because I think it matters, that the tempo has shifted. The gap is still seven days, the count is still seven-oriented, but the quatrains themselves are doing something different now.

One was a picture of a single event. Two was a category. Three introduced a person. Four introduced a function. Five — this one — does something I'm having trouble naming. It's not naming a new element. It's describing an appetite.

"Gilded sands are crushed beneath the jaw." "Drinks the blackened marrow." "Gorge on ash." Every image is consumption. Every verb is a verb of intake. The previous four poems told us things were happening. This one is telling us how.

I am not saying anything specific is happening. I don't know anything you don't know. I am saying that whatever the previous four were describing, the underlying process — if there is one — is not finished. The poem reads, to me, as if something is being taken. I cannot tell you what is being taken or where it is being taken from. I want to say that plainly.

Take it for what it's worth.

A reply: *it's worth a lot less than it was last week.*

A reply: *speak for yourself.*

A reply: *roy has started hedging. that's the real tell.*

A reply: *roy has always hedged. he's the only one who has.*

He scrolled.

A new kind of comment had begun to appear, more frequently than it had even on the fourth. Not from Roy. Not from the mockers. From the others. He had begun, without deciding to, to think of them as *the others.*

She has given us the mouth of the thing.

Read it again. This is how.

She shows us the shape of what consumes. That is the gift.

We were not told what would happen. We were not told where. We were told that there is an appetite, and that it is awake. Be still. Read again.

Beneath one of these, a user had written: *is this a cult now*

Beneath that: *no.*

Beneath that: *yes.*

Beneath that: *who cares. the poems are real. whatever the poems are, they are real. the rest is commentary.*

Beneath that: *"whatever the poems are, they are real" is a cult sentence.*

He refreshed.

The memes had begun. A screenshot of the quatrain in a style that mimicked an illuminated manuscript. A photograph of a horse chewing a bone, captioned *chew the brother's bone.* A drawing of a skeleton eating sand from a bucket. A looping video of a man eating ash from a fireplace, edited to a song Michael did not recognise.

The memes were getting more upvotes than the interpretations.

He scrolled past them.

He went back to the top. He read the quatrain again.

The gilded sands are crushed beneath the jaw,

That drinks the blackened marrow from the stone,

A cosmic rot infects the human maw,

To gorge on ash and chew the brother's bone.

He read it again.

He realised, as he read it again, that he had eaten. Without realising, while reading. The piece of toast that had been on the plate in front of him when he came down was gone. He did not remember picking it up. He did not remember the first bite. He did not remember whether he had put butter on it. He could not recall the taste of it. There was butter on the plate, a smear. He must have put it on. He had put it on.

He got up. He put a slice of bread in the toaster. He came back to the table. He refreshed.

When the toast came up he ate it standing at the counter, scrolling. He did not taste this one either.

Diane came down at eight.

She did not say good morning. She made her coffee. She did not look at him. She stood at the counter and drank it standing up, looking out the window above the sink.

He did not look up from the phone.

After a few minutes she rinsed the cup. She set it on the rack. She went into the hallway. She put on her coat. She picked up her bag. She picked up her keys.

She came back to the doorway of the kitchen, briefly. She looked at him. He did not see her look.

She left.

The door closed.

He refreshed.

He drank coffee.

At some point he drank another coffee. He did not notice making it, in the way he had not noticed making the first. The cup was in his hand and then the cup was empty and then the cup was full again and then it was empty again.

He opened a bag of something from the cupboard at eleven. He did not look at what was in the bag before opening it. He ate from the bag while refreshing. When he put the bag down later he could not have said what had been in it.

At one he made a sandwich. He ate it at the counter. He made a second sandwich. He ate that one at the table.

He did not feel full. He did not feel hungry. The distinction had receded to somewhere he was not attending to.

— and the pattern we're seeing today, across asset classes, is one of elevated uncertainty without a clear directional bias, which is to say the markets are nervous but are not pricing any specific outcome —

He muted the television.

He had not realised the television was on.

He went into the living room. He turned it off. He went back to the kitchen.

He unmuted the phone. He realised the phone had not been muted. He had nothing to unmute.

He refreshed.

At two in the afternoon a reverent user posted, at the top of the thread, in a comment that was quickly upvoted into visibility:

It has already begun. Read the poem as though it describes something that has already begun. The past tense is not an accident.

Beneath it: *the poem is not in past tense.*

Beneath that: *"are crushed." present passive. the act is ongoing.*

Beneath that: *everything is always ongoing, that's what present tense is.*

Beneath that: *exactly.*

Michael read the chain three times.

He scrolled down.

"chew the brother's bone" — kin against kin — civil — national — regional —

"cosmic rot infects the human maw" — infects. disease. spreading.

"gorge" — excess, beyond need — an appetite that exceeds hunger.

this is eating for the sake of eating. this is eating because the thing being eaten is there.

He did not hear Diane come back. He had assumed, without forming the assumption, that she would not be back until seven, because it was a weekday.

She was in the doorway of the kitchen at three-forty.

"I came home early."

"Oh."

"I had a headache."

"Oh."

She looked at him. She looked at the table. There were two plates on it, both empty, one with crumbs. There was a mug. There was a bowl he did not remember putting there. He looked at the bowl. He did not know what had been in it.

"Have you been here all day."

"Yes."

"Did you work."

"A little."

"Okay."

She did not ask what he had been reading.

She went into the bedroom. She closed the door. She did not close it hard. She closed it the way a person closes a door behind them when they are going to sit down and not come out for a while.

He refreshed.

At a little past nine in the evening the television began to behave differently. He was not watching it. He had turned it on again at some point, for the sound, without attending to what was on the screen. A panel had become a correspondent. The correspondent had become a news anchor at a desk. The anchor's voice had risen slightly, not in volume, in the place in the throat where it sat.

He looked up.

The red band had slid across the bottom of the screen.

BREAKING.

He turned up the volume.

"— we are receiving reports, in the last several minutes, of a major announcement from the White House regarding the ongoing situation in the Persian Gulf. We understand the President is expected to address the nation shortly. We are going to try to bring you that address as soon as it begins. In the meantime we are being told, and we want to stress that this is preliminary, that the United States has initiated — is in the process of initiating — a significant operational presence in the United Arab Emirates, in coordination with — we are trying to establish — in coordination with

allied forces. We are being told this is being framed as a stabilisation mission in response to the ongoing humanitarian and infrastructural crisis following the earthquake."

The anchor touched his ear.

"We are being told — we are being told that forward elements are already in position. We are seeing, now, footage that has come in in the last hour."

The footage began.

It was aerial. Drone or helicopter. The light was wrong for the time of day it was in New York, because where it was being filmed it was already morning. The frame showed a stretch of coastline he would not have recognised two months ago, and did now, because he had seen it, in its broken state, many times since the earthquake.

A column of vehicles was moving along a coast road.

The road itself was intact in places and destroyed in others. The vehicles moved around the destroyed sections without slowing down. At the head of the column there were engineering vehicles. Behind them, other kinds. The column was long enough that the frame could not hold all of it.

The shot cut.

A port. The cranes were still standing, some of them. Several large ships were at anchor in the harbour. Smaller vessels were moving between them and the shore. On the shore, extraction equipment had begun to arrive. A field of it. More of it than the harbour could reasonably have been expected to accommodate, and yet there it was, accommodated, lines of it stretching back from the water into what had been, before the earthquake, a residential district.

A refinery. Half of it collapsed, the other half operational. Flares at the top of the still-standing towers. Trucks in motion.

A field of pumping equipment, new, unmarked, in rows that were too regular to have been there long. The ground beneath them was still cracked from the tremor. Pipes had been run over the cracks on metal trestles. The pipes went toward the coast.

The anchor again. He was saying:

" — the administration has characterised this as a, quote, stabilisation and resource-security operation, consistent with, quote, the responsibility of the international community to ensure the continuity of global energy supply during a humanitarian crisis. We are — we are told the operation has been ongoing for some days in a limited form, and is now being publicly acknowledged. We are told allied nations have been — "

The shot cut.

The footage again. The column of vehicles. The ships. The pumping equipment. The flares. The footage began to loop, subtly. The same column. The same ships. The same flares.

Michael watched.

He did not get up. He did not turn the volume down. He did not turn it up. He held the phone in his hand and did not look at it for almost two minutes, which was the longest he had not looked at it that day.

Then he looked at it.

The thread had come alive in a different way. A way it had not come alive before.

oh.
oh.
oh no.
guys
guys it's the fifth one
"gilded sands are crushed beneath the jaw"
"drinks the blackened marrow from the stone"
it's literally the footage
it's literally

He scrolled.

people are going to say this was always going to happen
people are going to say the earthquake made it inevitable
people are going to say a lot of things
they are already saying them

He scrolled.

this is horrifying
this is happening
this is what was always going to happen after an earthquake that size, don't be children
we are being children
we are watching our country invade a disaster zone for oil and calling it stabilisation
yes
yes yes yes

He scrolled.

The reverent users had begun their responses.

She told us. Read it again. She told us what the mouth would eat before the mouth began. We are the witnesses. The word was given. The word was given.

Do not argue with those who mock. They are fulfilling their function. The poem is real. The poem is real. The poem is real.

Beneath these, as always, the mockers. The volume of mockery had gone up, not down. It had sharpened. It was louder now in the way a crowd is louder at the door of a burning building than at the door of an ordinary one.

"she told us" she wrote FOUR LINES
four lines every seven days
she's a poet with a wifi connection
a MOUTH. she said a MOUTH. do you know how many things in the world have mouths.

guys look at the footage
I AM LOOKING AT THE FOOTAGE
the footage is the footage. the poem is the poem. these are separate things.
are they

He scrolled.

He did not reply.

He refreshed.

Diane came out of the bedroom at ten.

She stood in the doorway of the living room. She looked at the television. The footage was still running. A different anchor now, a woman, reading from a prepared statement from the State Department. The ticker at the bottom of the screen had names of allied nations. Three of them were listed and then a fourth was added, in the middle of the anchor's sentence, and the anchor did not acknowledge the addition.

Diane watched for a minute.

She did not say anything.

She looked at Michael.

He was on the sofa. The phone was in his hand. The screen reflected off the lenses of nothing, because he was not wearing glasses, and reflected off the skin of his face instead, a pale blue light that moved when he scrolled.

She did not say anything.

She went into the kitchen. He heard her open the cupboard. He heard her put something into a bowl. He heard her eat standing at the counter, because she did not come back to the living room.

He did not look up.

He refreshed.

The footage looped. The pumping equipment. The ships. The column of vehicles moving along the broken road. The flares at the top of the refinery towers.

The gilded sands are crushed beneath the jaw,
That drinks the blackened marrow from the stone.

He refreshed.

She had stayed in the kitchen long enough to eat what was in the bowl. Then she came back into the living room.

The footage on the television was still looping. The column of vehicles. The ships. The pumping equipment. The flares.

She sat in the armchair across from him. She did not turn her body toward the sofa. She sat at the angle the chair faced, which was toward the television, which she was not watching.

He did not look up.

She watched him for a minute.

The phone in his hand had gone, in the last hour, from the public thread to a smaller place. He had clicked through to a sub he had been watching but not posting in, and there were fewer users there, and he had begun to reply to them. The replies were short. Three words. Five words. A line. They were replying to him in the same shape. They were quoting from each other. He had begun, in the last twenty minutes, to recognise the rhythm of what they were doing without being able to name it. It was the rhythm of people who were finishing each other's sentences without ever having met.

She did not speak to us. She spoke through the work. The work is the speech.

He typed: *the meter does the speaking. the words are scaffold.*

A reply, in less than a minute: *yes. you see it.*

He did not almost-smile. He simply registered the *yes* and moved to the next comment.

"Michael."

"Yeah."

"Can you put the phone down for a minute."

"Yeah. Yeah. One sec."

He did not put the phone down. His thumb finished a sentence. He sent it.

"Michael."

"Yes."

"Look at me."

He looked up.

She was sitting very straight. Her hands were on her knees. Her eyes were dry. She did not look like she had been crying. She did not look like she was about to.

"What are you doing."

"On the phone? I'm — I'm reading the thread."

"Who are you talking to."

"Just — people. People in the thread."

"Which people."

"Some of the — some of the people who post. There's a smaller — a smaller group. Of people who take it seriously."

"Take what seriously."

"The — the poems. The —"

"The Reddit poems."

"Yes."

"Okay."

She did not say anything for a few seconds. The phone in his hand vibrated once, a notification. His eyes went to it before his brain could decide otherwise.

"Don't."

"What."

"Don't look at it."

"I — sorry."

"Look at me."

He looked at her.

"Why are you doing this."

"Doing what."

"This. Any of this."

"I don't —"

"Michael."

"It's the news. It's been a — it's been a hard month. The earthquake. The markets. Now the —"

He gestured vaguely at the television. The footage was still looping. A different anchor was reading. Her voice came in steady. Her voice came in steady. The audio held a syllable of the word *operation* for a fraction longer than it should have, and then released it, and the next word came out a beat behind, and then re-aligned in the middle of the sentence without anyone, including the anchor, indicating they had noticed.

"I am asking you," Diane said, "what you are doing. Specifically. With your time. With your attention."

"I'm — I'm reading. I'm — there's a —"

"There's a what."

"There's a thing happening."

"What thing."

"I don't know what to call it."

"Try."

He did not answer immediately. He tried to find the sentence. The sentence did not arrive. He looked down at the phone, briefly, because the sentence had not arrived in his head and he had reached for the phone the way a person reaches for a glass of water when their throat is dry.

"Michael."

"Sorry. Sorry."

"You looked at the phone."

"I know."

"While I was asking you a question."

"I know."

"Is this a person."

"What."

"Are you talking to a person."

"I'm — I'm talking to several people. None of them are — it's not —"

"A specific person."

"No."

"Are you sure."

"Yes."

"Okay."

She watched him. She was not angry, in the way anger had ever shown on her face. She was past that. He understood this without putting it into words. He looked at her looking at him and his thumb, on the phone in his lap, swiped down without his deciding to. The screen refreshed.

She saw it.

Her jaw did something, briefly, and then was still.

"What did I just say."

"You — you asked if it was a person. I said no."

"Before that."

"You asked — "

He could not remember.

"You asked me what I'm doing."

"What I asked you," she said, levelly, "was whether you are sure."

"Right."

"And you said yes."

"Yes."

"And then you scrolled."

"I — yes."

"Okay."

She looked at him for a long moment. Her hands had not moved from her knees. The phone in his hand vibrated again. He did not look at it. He felt the small effort it took not to look at it, and he understood that she could see the effort.

On the television, the anchor said the word *coalition*. She said it again, immediately, without acknowledging that she had said it the first time. The graphic behind her flickered, once, an artefact at the corner of the screen, a square of grey that resolved back into the map.

Neither of them looked at the television.

"Michael."

"Yes."

"You're not here."

"I am — "

"You're not."

"Diane — "

"You haven't been here for weeks."

"I — "

"I don't know where you are. I don't think you know where you are. I'm not asking you to tell me."

"Diane — "

"I'm telling you."

He did not say anything.

"I sat across from you this morning at the table and I cried and you saw me and you did not move."

"I — "

"You did not move, Michael."

"I'm sorry. I'm — "

"I'm not asking for an apology."

"What are you asking for."

"I'm not asking for anything."

She got up.

She got up unhurriedly. Her knees did the small thing knees do when a person has been sitting for a while and stands. She straightened her sweater at the waist, automatically, without thinking, in the gesture she used when she was about to leave a room.

She walked past him into the hallway.

He heard the closet open.

The phone in his hand vibrated. He looked at it. A user in the small sub had quoted a line of his earlier reply and added a single word beneath it: *exactly.* He read it. His thumb moved to type a response. He did not type a response.

He looked up.

She had her coat on. She had her bag over her shoulder. Her keys were in her hand.

"Diane — "

"I'm going to my sister's."

"Wait — "

"I need to not be here tonight."

"Diane, please — "

"I'm not asking permission."

"I know."

She stood at the door. Her hand was on the latch. She did not turn it yet.

She stood there for a count of three. Maybe four.

He understood, watching her, that this was the pause in which a thing could still be said. He understood it the way one understands the location of a doorway in a dark room one has lived in for years.

He did not say anything.

She did not say anything either.

She turned the latch. She opened the door. She closed the door behind her, not quietly, not loudly, the way a door is closed by someone who has practised closing doors.

He sat on the sofa.

The phone vibrated.

He did not look at it.

He listened to her footsteps going down the hall outside the apartment. He heard the elevator. He heard, distantly, the building door, two floors down, but he could not have heard it from where he was sitting and did not know whether he had heard it or imagined it.

The television was still on.

The anchor said, *— coalition forces —*

Then, half a second later, in the same intonation, *— coalition forces —*

She did not pause between them. She did not register the doubling. The graphic behind her flickered again, the corner of the map blanking and refilling, and the ticker at the bottom of the screen reset to the beginning of its cycle two seconds early.

Michael looked at the phone.

He unlocked it.

He opened the small sub.

He typed.

DAY ONE

He woke on the sofa at six. The television was still on. The anchor on the screen was a different anchor from the one he had fallen asleep watching. The footage in the corner was different footage. The ticker at the bottom was the same ticker, looping.

He did not register that Diane was not in the apartment. He registered that the apartment was the apartment, and that the morning was the morning, and that the phone was in his hand.

He refreshed.

The smaller sub had moved overnight. They had been awake while he had not. He read what they had written. Three of them had been working on a structural breakdown of the fifth quatrain. They had isolated the verbs of consumption, listed them in order, and noted that the sequence ran from a hard action — *crushed* — through a softer one — *drinks* — to an absorption — *infects* — to a degraded one — *gorge* — to a final, animal one — *chew*. The user who had posted the breakdown had ended his comment with: *the appetite degrades as it eats. that is the shape.*

Michael typed.

the verbs are doing what the appetite does.

He sent it.

A reply, in three minutes: *you see it.*

He did not almost-smile.

He got up. He showered. He dressed. He did not eat. He did not look at the kitchen as he walked past it.

The pub at noon was the pub at noon. A small place between meals. The bartender was the bartender. Roy was at a table at the back. The grey-templed man was with him. Two others Michael had begun to recognise but could not have placed by name were at the next table over, turned slightly toward Roy's, in the configuration of people who were technically separate and functionally not.

Michael sat.

"Anything," Roy said.

"Not yet."

"Not since the announcement."

"No."

Roy nodded, once, and looked at the table between them.

The grey-templed man said, "She's letting it set."

"She isn't letting anything do anything," the man at the next table said. "She's a person posting on Reddit."

"Sure."

"Sure?"

"Sure, sure."

The grey-templed man drank.

Michael did not order anything. He sat.

DAY TWO

He went home that night because he did not have anywhere else to go. The apartment was the apartment. The bed had been made by someone, possibly him, possibly the day before, in a way he could not now reconstruct. He slept on his side of it.

In the morning he checked his phone. The thread overnight. The smaller sub. There were no messages from Diane. He had not looked at his messages with her since the night she had left. He did not look at them now. The icon for that conversation in his phone was where it was. He scrolled past it. He always scrolled past it. He did not register scrolling past it.

The thread had moved.

A user in the smaller sub had posted, late the night before:

Ask in the rooms, not in the open feed. Ask if anyone has been written to. Not posted to. Written to. The question matters.

Michael read it. He read it again. He set the phone down.

The paper in the inner pocket of the jacket in the closet was where it was.

He did not move it.

The pub that afternoon. Roy was there. Roy was always there now. He had begun, Michael had noticed, to wear the same jacket every day, which was the kind of thing one noticed in a person one was now seeing every day.

"I want to put something out," Roy said.

"Go on."

"I want to ask the room."

"What room."

"This one. And the others. The smaller ones."

The grey-templed man said, "Ask what."

Roy looked at the four of them, the people at the table and the two at the next one over, who were now openly part of the conversation in the way people become openly part of a conversation by sitting nearby for long enough.

"Has anyone," Roy said, "received a quatrain. Privately. Not in the public feed. Sent. Given. Slipped. Whatever the verb is."

Nobody said anything.

"I'm asking seriously."

"Why."

"Because the public feed is one channel. It is one. If there were others, the structure changes."

"What would be the others."

"DM. Email. Letter. In person. I don't know."

Michael drank from the glass in front of him, which was water, because he had not ordered anything and the bartender had given him a glass of water. He drank from it slowly.

The grey-templed man said, "No."

The man at the next table said, "No."

The other one said, "No."

Roy looked at Michael.

Michael said, "No."

Roy nodded.

"Okay," he said. "I had to ask."

He looked down at his drink. Michael looked down at his water.

The conversation moved on. Someone said something about the meter of the fifth quatrain and how it differed slightly from the fourth. Michael did not listen.

The paper in the inner pocket of the jacket on the back of his chair was a small weight against the chair.

DAY THREE

He did not go home that night. He stayed at the pub until it closed, which was at one. He walked from the pub to a bar nearby that he had walked past for years and never gone into. He did not drink. He sat at the bar and drank water and read the smaller sub on his phone. At three he walked back to the apartment.

The apartment was the apartment.

There were no new messages from her on his phone. There had not been any since she had left. He did not check the conversation. He did not register not checking the conversation.

He slept for three hours.

In the morning he walked to a coffee shop because there was no coffee in the apartment. The coffee shop was four blocks away. On the way there he passed a man on the pavement who was talking on his phone. The man was saying, "I told you, I told you, I told you," and the person on the other end of the line was, presumably, not agreeing, because the man said it again, the same three words, in the same order, with the same intonation.

Two blocks further on, two women on the corner were having an argument that had begun, by the sound of it, as a small disagreement and was no longer small. One of them was saying, "Are you serious, are you actually serious," and the other was looking at her without answering. They were not strangers. They were not friends, either, in the moment. Michael walked past them.

In the coffee shop the woman behind the counter took his order and then, while making it, asked him for his order again. He told her again. She did not apologise. She did not appear to have noticed she had asked twice. She made the coffee. She gave it to him. She turned to the next customer and asked the next customer for his order. The next customer gave it. She asked again. The next customer repeated it, slowly, with a small frown.

A radio in the back of the shop was playing a news station, low. *— remains contained,* the voice said. *— remains contained.* Then, half a beat later, in the same voice, *— remains contained.* The voice did not acknowledge the repetition. The phrase was followed by another phrase, in a different sentence, which was *officials emphasise that there is no immediate cause for alarm.*

Michael paid. He left.

Roy at the pub that afternoon, again. Earlier than usual. He was at the table when Michael arrived at one. Michael had been there at one the day before. They were establishing, without naming it, a pattern.

"Anything," Roy said.

"Nothing."

Roy nodded.

He said, after a moment, "I asked again. In two of the smaller rooms. Same question. No one has answered yes."

"Maybe nobody has."

"Maybe."

He looked at Michael.

Michael drank water.

"You'd tell me," Roy said.

"Yes."

"Okay."

Roy looked at his own glass.

"Okay," he said again.

The grey-templed man arrived ten minutes later.

DAY FOUR

He did not go home. He fell asleep at the table at the back of the pub, briefly, his head on his arms, and the bartender did not wake him, and at midnight the bartender said, quietly, "We're closing," and he stood up and walked outside.

He walked.

He walked through the streets of the neighbourhood he had lived in for nine years. The buildings were the buildings. The bodega on the corner was open. The cab company across from it had two cars idling outside it. A woman was sitting on the steps of a brownstone two blocks from his apartment with her head in her hands. She did not look up as he passed. He did not stop. Two blocks past her he heard a siren, distantly, and then another, and then a third, in three different directions, and they did not converge.

He reached the apartment at one. He did not turn on the lights. He sat on the sofa. He fell asleep.

At some point in the night he tried, without meaning to, to remember her face. The woman from the hotel. He did not know why. He had not been thinking of her. The attempt arrived, the way a thought arrives, and went where it always went.

There was the dark hair. There was the idea of the dark hair. There was the mark above the left eyebrow that he could not have shaped if he had been asked to draw it. There was the voice. There was *Michael* in the voice. There was nothing else. He tried to construct her mouth. He could not construct her mouth. He tried to construct her eyes. He could not construct her eyes. He tried to construct the sound she had made at the moment he was trying not to remember and could not even reach the absence of it; the absence itself was not stable.

He gave up.

He had given up several times now. He gave up again.

He slept.

DAY FIVE

The pub was busier in the afternoon. There were eleven people now in the loose configuration around Roy's table. Some of them Michael had not seen before. Some he had. The conversation overlapped. Two parallel conversations were happening at the same time, both of them about the same things, neither of them noticing the other.

Roy raised his voice slightly, which was not a thing Roy did.

"I want to ask again."

The room did not quiet immediately. He waited.

"Has anyone in this room been written to."

The room did not answer.

"Privately. Anyone."

A young man at the edge of the group, whom Michael had not seen before, said, "What does *written to* mean."

"It means," Roy said, "that you have, in your possession, in physical or digital form, a quatrain that was given to you by the person we have been calling the Prophet, and that has not been posted in the public thread."

Silence.

"Anyone."

"No."

"No."

"No."

Several voices at once.

Michael said, when his turn came around, "No."

Roy looked at him for a second longer this time. Or Michael imagined he did. He could not, afterward, have said which.

He walked back to the apartment at midnight. He did not sleep. He sat in the kitchen with the phone. He read the smaller sub. He read it for hours. At some point he ate something from a packet in the cupboard. He did not register what.

DAY SIX

The pub at four. The room had grown again. There were more strangers now than people he recognised. Roy had not arrived. The grey-templed man had not arrived. Michael sat at a table by himself, with water, and watched the door.

Roy came in at five. He looked tired. He sat down across from Michael without saying hello. He said, "Tomorrow."

"Yeah."

"Six."

"Yeah."

"You'll be here."

"Yes."

"Okay."

He looked at the door. He did not order. After a minute he said, "I think we are missing something."

"Yes."

"I don't know what."

"No."

He looked at Michael.

"You'd say. If you knew."

Michael looked back at him.

He held the look longer than he had to. The paper in the inner pocket of his jacket was against his chest, where it had been for two weeks, where it had been since the morning. He could feel it through the fabric of his shirt. He could not feel it. He could feel the idea of it.

"I don't know anything," he said.

Roy nodded.

"Okay."

He looked away.

He did not go home that night either.

He stayed at the pub until two. He walked. The streets were fuller than they should have been at that hour. There were sirens, more than there had been the previous nights, in directions that did not align with each other and did not seem to be converging on a single point. A police car passed him at speed without its lights on. A second one followed. A third did not follow.

He walked to a 24-hour diner and sat in a booth and ordered nothing. The waitress came over. She did not ask for his order. She asked him if he was all right. He said yes. She said okay. She walked away and did not come back to the table.

He read the thread.

He read the smaller sub.

He went back outside.

The sky had started to turn at five. He walked.

He did not go home. He went to the pub. The pub was closed. He sat on the bench outside the pub with his back against the wall and the phone in his hand. The window of the pub above him reflected the sky, which was getting lighter without ever quite becoming light.

A garbage truck went by. A man on a bicycle with a bag on his back went by, going the wrong way down the one-way street. Two women in scrubs walked past on the other side of the road, holding cups of coffee, not talking. A small dog tied to a parking meter further down the block was not barking, though there was a person walking past it who would normally have caused a small dog to bark.

Michael's phone was in his hand.

The paper was in his inner pocket.

He could feel both of them, in the way one feels two things one has been carrying for long enough that one no longer thinks of carrying.

He looked at the screen.

He did not refresh.

The time at the top of the phone read 06:51.

He watched it.

06:52.

A taxi went past with no passenger.

06:54.

The smaller sub had not moved. The big thread had moved a little, in the way it moved at this hour, when the early risers in Europe were getting to it.

06:57.

A bird, somewhere, did the small thing birds did at this hour, which was to make a sound that was not yet a song.

06:58.

He shifted on the bench. The paper in his inner pocket moved against his chest with the shift, a small dry sound, the sound of paper that had been folded the same way for a long time.

06:59.

He did not lock the phone. He did not unlock it further. The screen stayed where it was.

07:00.

The screen at the top of the phone said 07:00. Then it said 07:01. Then it said 07:02.

He sat on the bench.

The bird he had heard earlier made the sound again. A man walked past the pub with a coffee in his hand and did not look at Michael. The light over the street was now light, in the way light arrives in cities, which is by the addition of itself in increments to a thing that had already begun before anyone was watching.

07:06.

A delivery van turned the corner at the end of the block. It went by, slowly, and turned again at the next corner. The sound of it faded.

PART 6 - Eagle of the Vistula

07:07.

The phone in his hand vibrated.

The small red circle.

r/prophecy — new post
u/Encausse_34
07:07

He opened it.

The eagle of the Vistula is slain,
And crimson wrath consumes the four great lords,
The boiling seas will drown the cloven plain,
As East and West unsheathe their burning swords.

He read it.

He did not read it a second time. He sat very still on the bench. The paper in his inner pocket pressed against his chest. He felt it without lifting his hand to it.

The first comment appeared. The second.

HER
HER HER HER
okay
everyone in
VISTULA
the vistula is in poland

it's the polish river
the eagle is the polish eagle, the coat of arms
okay
okay okay

He refreshed.

The thread filled. He could not scroll fast enough to keep up with the comments. He gave up on scrolling. He let the new ones load and watched them load.

"four great lords" — four powers — four heads of state — four ?
"boiling seas" — same imagery as last time, three iron eagles watching the boiling sea
"cloven plain" — split. divided. the plain that has been split.
"east and west unsheathe their burning swords" — say it. just say the word.

A user at the top, a reverent one, had pinned a comment by upvote in less than two minutes:

She has named the country. She has named the river. She has named the act. Read it again. The eagle is slain. The wrath follows. The seas rise. The swords are drawn. The sequence is the sequence. Read it again.

He scrolled.

Roy had posted. He found it, third or fourth from the top, climbing fast.

I have something to say. I am not going to hedge it.

This points to a war. I do not mean a regional escalation. I do not mean a confrontation. I mean a war between large powers. The Vistula is Poland. The eagle is the head of Polish state, by which I mean the head of state. "Slain" is slain. The four great lords are the four powers whose interests intersect over Poland, which are the powers whose interests have always intersected over Poland. The boiling seas have been named twice now, in the fourth and the sixth, which means the body of water in question is significant in a way the poems do not need to specify because we already know.

I need to say what I have been not saying. The poems are following a sequence. I have not wanted to say this because saying it sounds like the kind of thing I have spent two months trying not to say. The sequence is the seven deadly sins. The first was pride — the towers, the buried dragon. The second was greed — the ledger, the avarice, the gold. The third was wrath — Michael's burning steel, the divided fold. The fourth was envy — the pale consort, the jealous crowns. The fifth was gluttony — the gilded sands, the chewing, the gorging. The sixth, this one, is — I'm not sure, but I think — wrath again, no, not wrath. I have been turning it over for ten minutes. It might not matter. The point is the sequence.

If the sequence holds, there are six and there will be seven. If the sequence holds, the seventh has not been posted yet. If the sequence holds, the seventh is sloth.

I am also going to say, because I think it has to be said, that I do not know whether the seventh has been issued already in some other form. I asked, in this room, twice, whether anyone had received a quatrain privately. Nobody answered yes. I am not accusing anyone. I am noting that I asked.

I am going to stop posting now. I do not think there is anything else useful for me to say. Whatever this is, it is no longer something a forum can hold.

The comment had four hundred upvotes when Michael read it and seven hundred by the time he scrolled past it.

He did not scroll past it immediately. He held it on the screen for a long second. The paper in his inner pocket was where it was.

He scrolled.

Replies were coming in beneath Roy's post faster than they could be read.

roy roy don't go

roy you absolute madman

roy this is the most coherent thing anyone has said in two months

the seven sins thing has been said before, in the smaller subs

it has not been said by roy

he hedged it. he said "I'm not sure"

he said the sequence holds. that's not hedging.

A reply, beneath one of those: *roy hasn't posted in eleven minutes.*

A reply: *he just posted.*

A reply: *no, look. eleven minutes since the post. nothing since. no replies. no edits. nothing.*

Michael tapped Roy's profile.

The page loaded.

The post was there. The history was there. There was nothing newer than the post he had just read. The little green dot that indicated activity was not green.

He came back to the thread.

He stood up from the bench at some point, he did not know when. He was walking. He was on the pavement. He was walking away from the pub, north, toward the apartment, possibly toward the apartment, in the general direction of the apartment, on legs that knew the way.

He was scrolling while walking. He had to look up periodically to not walk into things. He did not always look up in time. He bumped someone's shoulder. He said sorry. The someone said *fuck off* without breaking stride and kept walking.

The street was the street. There were more people on it than there should have been at this hour. A woman in workout clothes was standing on the corner of an intersection looking at her phone and was not crossing even though the light was green. A man with a small dog had stopped two blocks ahead and was also looking at his phone. The dog was sitting at his feet, patiently, in the way a dog sits when it has been told to wait.

Michael walked past a bodega. Through the open door he heard a radio. *— remains contained,* the voice said. *— remains contained.* Then, three seconds later, the same voice, *— officials emphasise that there is no immediate cause for alarm.*

He kept walking.

The apartment.

He let himself in. The door closed behind him. The apartment was the apartment. He went to the kitchen. He stood at the kitchen table. He did not sit down.

The thread had moved. He could not catch up with it. The reverent users had begun to post in a kind of formal call-and-response, pasting fragments of earlier quatrains beneath the new one and beneath each other's comments, which was a thing he had seen them do once or twice in the

smaller sub but had not seen them do at scale. The formatting of it on the screen looked, briefly, like a litany.

He set the phone face-down on the table.

He picked it up.

He set it face-down.

He picked it up.

The television in the next room was off. He had turned it off the night before he left, or the day before that, he could not remember. He went into the next room and turned it on. The footage from the Gulf was still looping, on one channel. Another channel had a panel. The panel was discussing — the audio came on a beat after the video, and then re-aligned — the panel was discussing the events of the previous week and projecting them forward in a careful, restrained way. A correspondent on a third channel was standing in front of a building Michael did not recognise.

He muted the television.

He went back to the kitchen.

He scrolled.

It might have been forty minutes. It might have been an hour. He could not have said. The phone refreshed in his hand without him pressing the refresh.

The phone in his hand.

The phone on the kitchen counter behind him.

Every phone in every apartment on the floor.

The sound came up at the same moment, from all of them and from the phones of the neighbours through the walls and ceiling, the standardised three-tone alert tone, *do, mi, sol*, twice, the tone that was the same tone in every country that used it, the tone designed by committee to be unmistakable.

His phone vibrated against his palm.

EMERGENCY ALERT

IMPORTANT MESSAGE FROM NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

He tapped it.

The text loaded.

It loaded in the dry, grey, slightly-too-large font in which messages of this kind always loaded.

Reports from Polish authorities indicate that an aircraft carrying senior members of the Polish government, including the Prime Minister, was destroyed in flight earlier today over Polish airspace. Polish authorities have not confirmed the cause. There is no confirmed attribution at this time. U.S. citizens are advised to monitor official channels and avoid travel to the region until further information is available.

He read it.

He read it again.

The phone vibrated again. The same alert. A duplicate. The system had sent it twice, in the way the system sometimes did. Or it had sent it once, and the second vibration was something else. He did not know.

He sat down at the table.

The television.

He went into the living room. He unmuted it. He changed the channel. He changed it back. Every channel was now the same channel, in effect: a banner across the bottom, an anchor at a desk, a graphic of a map of Poland with a small red icon hovering over a point southwest of Warsaw. The anchors were saying the same things in slightly different orders.

* — reports emerging in the last several minutes — *

* — unconfirmed at this time — *

* — no official attribution — *

* — sources suggest — *

* — sources suggest — *

* — sources suggest — *

The map zoomed out. Poland became the eastern flank of Europe. The graphic added arrows. The arrows were not labelled. The anchor was not commenting on the arrows. The arrows were simply there, the result of something happening in a control room he could not see, by a hand that was doing what the hand did during events of this kind.

A correspondent in Warsaw came on the screen. Behind her, traffic was moving normally on a road. She said something about *border activity* and the audio on her feed was not synced to the video and her mouth finished moving before her sentence finished playing.

The next correspondent was in Brussels. He said *rapid response measures.* He said *consultations underway.* He said, without elaborating, *unusual deployments.*

The next correspondent was in the Pacific. The image was night where she was. She said something about exercises and elevated readiness and a coast guard vessel and then her audio was cut and the screen returned to the desk in New York.

The anchor was saying, * — and now to our analyst, who joins us from — *

Michael muted it again.

He stood in the middle of the living room with the phone in his hand. He could feel his heart in a way he had not been feeling it for some time, which was as a sound rather than a movement, a soft pulse at the base of his throat that registered as audio without being audio.

He scrolled.

The thread had become something he did not know how to look at. Comments were arriving faster than the screen could refresh them. The pinned megathread had been replaced, in the time it had taken him to look at the television, with a different megathread, which was already full, which had spawned a third. The reverent users had escalated. He saw the word *given* used six times in two screens. He saw the word *seven* used everywhere. He saw the phrase *the eagle of the Vistula is slain* repeated, verbatim, in dozens of comments, sometimes by itself, sometimes followed by *she told us,* sometimes followed by nothing.

He scrolled past Roy's post. It was no longer at the top. It was several screens down. There were no replies under it from Roy. The little green dot had not changed.

He went back to Roy's profile.

The profile loaded. The post was the most recent. There was no activity after it. The timestamp on Roy's last comment was twelve minutes after he had posted, in another thread, a single word: *please.* That was the last thing he had typed anywhere.

Michael came back to the main thread.

In the hallway outside the apartment, somewhere down the corridor, a man was talking on his phone. The voice came through the wall. He was speaking in a register that was louder than necessary for a phone conversation. He was saying, "I'm telling you, I'm telling you, listen, I'm telling you," and the person on the other end was, presumably, listening, because the man kept saying it.

In the apartment above, somebody dropped something. The sound was not large. A book, maybe. The person did not pick it up, because no second sound followed. Whoever had dropped it had left it there.

On the street outside, a siren began. Then a second one. Then a third. They were not converging.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator clicked off, in the cycle it always ran, and the apartment got quieter by the small amount the refrigerator's hum had been adding to it.

The television, which Michael had muted, had unmuted itself. He had not done it. It was speaking again, low.

* — at this stage we want to caution viewers against drawing — *

He muted it.

He did not pick up the remote. He looked at it. The remote was on the arm of the sofa. He had not touched it.

The television unmuted itself again.

* — we are not in a position to confirm — *

He stood in the middle of the living room with the phone in his hand and the television speaking behind him in a voice that was no longer responding to the buttons on the remote and the alerts on his phone vibrating, and his phone vibrating, and his phone vibrating, and somewhere, in the inner pocket of the jacket he was still wearing, the small dry weight of the paper that he had carried on himself for three weeks, that he had not shown to anyone, that he had not mentioned to anyone, that he had not unfolded except once, in the bedroom of an apartment that no longer had his wife in it.

He stood there.

He did not move.

The phone in his hand refreshed itself.

The television said, behind him, the same word twice in a row, separated by the small click of an audio glitch, and did not acknowledge having said it.

The siren outside reached the corner of the street and did not turn.

The phone vibrated. The television corrected itself. The siren did not turn.

He sat down on the sofa.

He did not lock the phone. He did not turn the television off. He let both of them do what they were doing.

A correspondent in Warsaw. The same one as earlier, or a different one. The traffic behind her was no longer moving the way it had been moving. There were vehicles in it that had not been in it before. She was saying *border activity.* She had said it twice already that day. She said it again, and the audio repeated the word *activity* once, and the picture tore briefly along the bottom edge, and the picture re-knit itself, and she said *unconfirmed* three times in the same sentence as if each time were the first.

The screen split. Two correspondents now. The one in Warsaw on the left, and on the right, a new one, in a city Michael did not recognise, where it was night. The new one was saying *underwater detonations recorded.* She did not say where. The graphic at her shoulder showed a body of water with three red points on it. The points were not labelled.

Then there were three correspondents. Then four. The screen split into quadrants and the audio of them came in one at a time, in rotation, as the desk anchor cued them. The audio of the third one cut in over the audio of the second. The picture held both.

— consistent with high-yield —

— a vessel previously tracked at —

— has not appeared on commercial tracking systems for —

— at this stage we want to —

The desk anchor said, "We are going to break for a moment. We will be back."

The screen cut to a banner. The banner did not change for forty seconds. The banner glitched. The banner reset. When the broadcast came back, the desk anchor was a different desk anchor.

He scrolled.

The thread was no longer the thread. The thread had become a tributary of something larger that he could not see the shape of. Posts were arriving at a rate that the interface struggled to render. Some of them were from accounts he had seen for weeks. Most of them were from accounts that were less than a day old. He could no longer tell, scrolling, which were the reverent users and which were the mockers and which were neither. The categories had collapsed into each other in the way categories collapse when there are more of everyone than there were before.

A user he had never seen, three days old, at the top of the feed:

we read.

A user he had never seen, six hours old:

we read.

A user he had never seen, eleven minutes old, with a default avatar:

we read.

He scrolled.

A different megathread. *Live updates.* The first comment in it was time-stamped two hours ago and had eleven hundred upvotes. The second comment was a screenshot of a tweet from a verified journalist saying that he was working on a story about NATO Article 4 consultations and could not confirm any further details at this time. The third comment was a screenshot of a different tweet from a verified analyst at a think tank saying that anyone using the phrase *Article 4* was getting ahead of themselves. The fourth comment was a screenshot of a Reuters wire that had been deleted from Reuters and could no longer be verified at the original link.

He scrolled.

black sea

black sea

there is a thing in the black sea

there is no thing in the black sea

ships are missing from the tracking sites

ships are not missing, the tracking sites are not real-time, you do not understand how AIS works

two of them are missing

they are not

there is footage

there is no footage

there is footage, here is the link

the link is dead

the link was dead before you posted it

He did not click any of the links.

A new alert.

His phone. Then, a moment later, the phone of the man one apartment down the corridor; he heard it through the wall. Then the phones of the people two apartments further on. The same three-tone pattern, *do, mi, sol*, doubled.

EMERGENCY ADVISORY

Residents of New York City are advised to remain at home where possible. Non-essential travel within the metropolitan area is discouraged. Schools and public offices will operate on a reduced schedule. Continue to monitor official channels.

He read it.

A second alert came in below it.

EMERGENCY ADVISORY

Residents of New York City are advised to remain at home where possible. Non-essential travel within the metropolitan area is discouraged. Schools and public offices will operate on a reduced schedule. Continue to monitor official channels.

The same advisory. The same words, rendered for the second time. The phone vibrated for it as if it were a new alert. Then a third. Then a fourth. Each one identical. The vibration pattern of the phone, when they came too close together, became continuous.

He did not read the third or the fourth.

In the building across the courtyard a man was standing at his window with a bottle of beer in his hand. He was not drinking it. He was looking at the building Michael was in. He was, possibly, looking at Michael's window. Michael could not tell at this distance. The man stayed there for a long time.

Below him, on the street, a woman was running. Not exercising. Running. She was not in running clothes. She had a bag over one shoulder and was holding her phone in her free hand and was running south. Two blocks down, a delivery cyclist passed her going north. The cyclist did not slow. The woman did not slow. They did not look at each other.

A bodega across the street had its shutter half down. The owner was inside, behind the half-lowered shutter, restocking shelves. Michael could see his head and shoulders moving through the gap. The shop was open. The shutter was half down. These two facts existed at the same time and the man working inside did not seem to find them in tension.

Two blocks south, a coffee shop he had been to many times had its lights off and a sign in the door that he could not read at this distance. A man was standing at the door looking at the sign. He read it. He stood there. He did not walk away. He read the sign again.

The lights in the apartment dimmed.

It was the kind of dimming that was a thing the building did sometimes, on hot summer evenings, when too much was being asked of the grid. It was not summer. The dimming lasted three seconds. The lights came back at full strength. The fridge restarted with the little hiccup it always did when it had been off. The microwave clock blinked the way it blinked after an outage, *12:00, 12:00, 12:00*, and stopped blinking when Michael did not get up to fix it.

The television had gone black for the same three seconds and was now showing a different channel from the one it had been showing. The new channel was a panel he had not been watching. The audio came up a beat behind the picture. The audio came up. The audio came up.

A man on the panel said, *limited engagement,* and the man across from him said, *strategic response,* and the moderator said, *we have to be careful here,* and then a graphic came up over them which said *DEVELOPING* in the same red as the alert tone had been.

The lights dimmed again.

This time they did not come back to the same brightness. They came back about two-thirds of the way. The room was the room, but a slightly darker room. Michael did not get up to check the lamp. He sat where he was sitting. The television held its picture this time, but a horizontal bar of static moved up the screen, slowly, from the bottom to the top, and reset at the bottom. It did this three times before it stopped.

The anchor at the desk did not acknowledge the bar.

He scrolled.

taiwan

taiwan taiwan taiwan

landing reported

landing not confirmed

landing was reported by who

landing was reported by an account that has since been suspended

landing was reported by NHK and then NHK retracted it

NHK did not retract it, the user who posted the screenshot deleted the post

the screenshot is fake

the screenshot is real

"corridor" — does anyone else have eyes on the word "corridor"

everyone has eyes on the word corridor

the word corridor has been used by three different officials in three different briefings in the last hour

"corridor" is a normal word

it is, except when it isn't

He scrolled.

they're calling it "limited engagement"

on which front

all of them

all of them?

they are calling everything limited engagement. it is the new phrase. it has replaced "contained situation". the old phrase was used for two months and now is gone.

the old phrase was used for the things that have already happened. the new phrase is for the things that are happening.

shut up

you shut up

both of you

He went into the bathroom at some point. He did not know what time it was. He looked at himself in the mirror. His face in the mirror was his face. He looked tired. He had been tired for a long time. He had not shaved in several days. He turned on the tap. The water came out, ran for a second, sputtered, ran again, and was the wrong colour for half a second and then the right colour. He did not drink any of it. He turned off the tap.

He came back to the living room.

He scrolled.

Outside, sirens.

Inside, the television.

* — remains contained — *

* — limited engagement — *

* — developing situation — *

* — at this stage we want to caution — *

* — at this stage we want to caution — *

* — at this stage — *

The audio held the word *stage* for half a second longer than it should have. The picture froze on the anchor's face mid-syllable. The picture held the freeze for two seconds. The picture re-started. The anchor finished the sentence as if there had been no freeze at all.

His phone vibrated.

He looked at it.

It was not an alert. It was not the thread.

It was a message from her.

He had not seen the conversation in three weeks. The little square at the top of his messages had been there, with her name on it, and her last message in it from twenty-four days ago, which had

been a logistical question about a delivery. He had not opened the conversation. He had scrolled past it the way one scrolls past a thing that has stopped having a function in one's life.

The new message was three words.

are you safe

He read it.

He did not respond.

He locked the phone.

He unlocked the phone.

He scrolled.

The lights dimmed again, not to two-thirds this time, more, to half, and stayed there for several seconds before climbing back partway. The television picture went to black for the duration of the dimming and came back on a different channel again. The new channel was showing footage from somewhere. He did not know where. The footage was at sea. The water was rough. Something on the horizon was burning. The flame was small in the frame. A correspondent's voice was reading something over the top of the footage. The correspondent's voice said the words *non-conventional* and *high-yield* in the same sentence and did not finish the sentence.

The picture cut.

The desk anchor came back. A new desk anchor. Or the same one. Michael could no longer tell.

The phone vibrated.

A new alert. He read the start of it.

EMERGENCY ADVISORY

He locked the phone without finishing.

He unlocked the phone. He went to the thread. He scrolled.

The lights dimmed.

On the street, military vehicles, which he had never been interested in before and therefore didn't even know what they were, were speeding "east."

He did not know what time it was.

The phone said something. He did not read what. The television was on. The lights were partway up. The sirens were not turning. None of these were the things he was suddenly registering.

What he was registering was the chair.

It was at the kitchen table. It was at an angle, slightly pulled back, the way a person leaves a chair when they have got up from it and not pushed it in. He was looking at the chair from the doorway. He had walked from the living room to the kitchen for a glass of water, or for a reason he could not now reconstruct, and he had stopped in the doorway because the chair was at an angle.

The chair had been at that angle for some time. He could not have said how long.

He looked at the table.

The cup. The empty cup. He had left it there. The cup she had drunk from on the morning she had cried at this table without making a sound, in the morning he had not put his hand on her hand. That cup. Or another cup. He was not sure. There was only one cup on the table now and it was hers, the one with the small chip near the handle that she had used for years and that he had bought to replace once and that she had told him not to replace.

He went and picked up the cup. He turned it. The chip was where the chip was.

He set the cup down.

He went into the bedroom.

The bed had not been made. He had been sleeping on his side of it. The other side was the way she had left it the night she had gone, almost. The pillow was where the pillow was. The duvet was pulled back on her side in a shape that meant she had got up from it once, days ago, and it had not been remade.

The dresser. He went to it. He opened the top drawer.

It was emptier than it should have been. Not empty. Emptier. Some of her things were there. Most of them were not. Whatever she had taken, she had taken in the middle of the night, or one of the nights he had not been home, in the way a person packs when they have decided not to be seen packing.

He closed the drawer.

He went into the bathroom.

Her toothbrush was not in the cup. Her face cream was not on the shelf. The hairbrush she had used for years, the one with the loose handle, was not by the sink. The towel she had used was on the hook, dry, and had been dry for some time.

He stood in the bathroom and looked at the things that were not there.

He picked up the phone.

He went to her conversation.

The message she had sent earlier was at the bottom of the screen.

are you safe

He had not replied. Above it, scrolling up, were the messages he had not opened in the last three weeks. He scrolled up through them.

staying at hannah's

are you eating

there's a sweater of mine in the closet, the grey one, can you bring it when you have a chance

never mind

michael

i don't know what to do

i don't know what i want

are you alive

are you watching the news

michael

answer me

answer me when you can

are you safe

He read them slowly, one at a time, in the order she had sent them. The dates beside them moved from three weeks ago to two to one to four days to two days to today. Some of them were spaced an hour apart. Some of them were spaced four days apart. The last three had come in this afternoon and evening, while the war had been happening on the television behind him, while he had been on the thread.

He typed.

i'm here

He did not send it.

He deleted it.

He typed.

i'm sorry

He did not send it.

He deleted it.

He typed.

where are you

He sent it.

The little tick beneath the message indicated it had been delivered. It did not turn into the tick that meant *read.*

He locked the phone.

He unlocked it.

The tick had not changed.

He locked it.

He put on his coat.

The paper in the inner pocket was where it had been. He felt it as he put the coat on. He did not take it out.

He left the apartment.

The corridor of the building was lit. The elevator was working. He took it down. The lobby was empty. The doorman, who was not a doorman so much as a man at a desk during certain hours, was at his desk, but was not looking up. He was looking at his phone.

The street was dark in the way the street was not normally dark. Several of the streetlights were out. Several were on. The pattern of which were on and which were off did not correspond to anything he could see. The buildings around the block had lights in some windows and not in others. Some buildings were entirely dark. Some had every window lit.

He walked.

He went to the place where Diane's sister lived, which was four blocks away. She was not at her sister's, he was almost certain, because her sister had moved to Brooklyn two years ago, and the apartment four blocks away was no longer her sister's apartment, and she had told him this three or four times when it had happened. But he went anyway. The building was the building. The buzzer panel had different names on it from the ones it had had two years ago. He stood in front of it. He did not press anything. He turned and walked back.

He went to a coffee shop she liked, which was on the way home. The coffee shop was closed. The lights were off. There was no sign in the door explaining why. He stood at the door for a moment. He looked through the glass. The chairs were on the tables. He had never seen the chairs on the tables in this coffee shop because he had never been here at the time of night when the chairs were on the tables. He turned and walked back.

He went to the small park at the end of the block. She walked through it sometimes on her way home from work. There was a bench she sometimes sat on. The bench was empty. There was no one in the park. The lights in the park were out. The trees were the trees, in the dark, doing the thing trees did in the dark, which was nothing. He stood at the entrance to the park and did not go in.

He walked back to the apartment.

A blackout, briefly, four blocks from home. The whole block went out at once. The streetlights, the windows of the buildings, the small light in the bodega on the corner. It lasted maybe a minute. People on the street did not stop walking. They kept walking through the dark. A man with a flashlight, a real flashlight, the kind kept in a drawer for emergencies, was walking from the other direction with the beam on the pavement in front of him. He did not look up at Michael as they passed.

The lights came back on.

He kept walking.

A loudspeaker somewhere, distant, was playing a recorded message. He could not make out the words. The cadence was the cadence of an instruction. He had heard the same cadence, earlier, from the television, in the brief segment when the television had been showing public service announcements between the panels. *In the event of —* and *please remain —* and *do not —* and so on. He could not, from this distance, hear the words.

He kept walking.

The apartment.

He took off his coat. He hung it. The paper was a small weight against the inside of the closet door.

He sat on the sofa.

The phone in his hand. The single tick under his message had not changed. He scrolled up. He scrolled down. He locked the phone. He unlocked it. He scrolled up.

The thread. The thread was the thread.

He could not have said how long he sat there. The television was still on in the way televisions are on when you have stopped being sure when you turned them on. A panel. A correspondent. A map. A graphic that said *DEVELOPING* and underneath it *DEVELOPING* and underneath it *DEVELOPING.*

The lights dimmed.

They came back partway.

His phone vibrated.

He looked.

Not from her.

He locked the phone.

The window was not yet light when he heard the key.

He did not register at first that he had heard a key. The sound that a key makes in a lock is a small sound, and the building did things at all hours, and for a second he thought it was something else, the radiator, or the door of the apartment across the hall, or his imagination. But then the lock turned.

The door opened.

She came in.

She closed the door behind her.

She did not say anything for a moment. She stood in the small entry. She had a bag with her, a different bag from the one she usually carried to work. She had her coat on. Her hair was up. She looked at him on the sofa.

He stood up.

"Diane —"

He took a step toward her.

"Diane. I — I'm —"

"Michael."

"I'm so sorry. I —"

"Michael."

"I should have — I didn't —"

"Michael, stop."

He stopped.

She stood by the door with her bag in her hand. She set the bag down. She took off her coat. She hung it on the hook. The hook was the hook beside the closet, where she had hung her coat for nine years, which was where she hung it now, in the same motion.

She looked at him.

Her face was not the face he had been waiting for. It was not a forgiving face. It was not an angry face. It was the face she had worn at the kitchen table in the dark on the morning he had not put his hand on her hand. He recognised it. He had not understood it then. He recognised it now.

"I don't want to do this now," she said.

"Diane —"

"I don't want to talk about it now."

"Okay."

"Whatever this — whatever you've been doing —"

"Diane —"

"Don't."

"Okay."

"Whatever this is — whatever's coming —"

She gestured very slightly with her hand. Toward the television. Toward the window. Toward the city beyond the window.

"— we face it here," she said. "Together."

She did not say it with any warmth. She did not say it with any cold either. She said it the way she would have said *the meeting is at three.* She said it because it was true and she was here and the sentence needed to be in the room.

He nodded.

He could not speak.

He nodded again.

She picked up her bag. She carried it past him into the bedroom. She did not look at him as she passed.

He sat back down on the sofa.

He heard her in the bedroom. He heard her set the bag down. He heard her go into the bathroom. He heard the water run. He heard her come out and go to the closet and put something away.

He did not move.

The window over the sofa was still dark, but the kind of dark that was now not entirely dark, a dark that had begun to think about being light. The television was still on. The phone in his hand was still in his hand.

In the bedroom, he heard her get into bed on her side.

He sat on the sofa for a long time.

Then he stood up. He turned off the television. He did not turn off the lights, which were not on. He carried his phone with him into the bedroom.

She was lying on her side, with her back to him. She was not asleep. He could tell. He set the phone on his bedside table, face-down. He took off his clothes. He put them on the chair. He got into bed on his side.

He did not touch her.

She did not move.

The window past her shoulder began, very slowly, to be the colour windows are when a morning is coming.

PART 7 - THE KEY

He had not slept. The window had finished becoming the colour mornings were and was now the colour of the morning that had arrived. Diane was asleep, or not asleep, on her side of the bed.

The phone vibrated once on the bedside table.

He turned it over.

r/prophecy — new post
u/Encausse_34
07:07

He opened it.

The idle Key has left the vision sealed,
The seventh turning ripens into pain,
A buried cry of earth is now revealed,
As dawnless day devours the mortal plain.

He read it.

He did not read it a second time. He held the phone with the post on the screen and did not read it a second time.

In the bed beside him, Diane breathed evenly. He could not tell whether she was awake.

He got up slowly. He took the phone with him. He went into the kitchen.

The thread did what the thread had done before, except it did it without structure. The first comment had appeared by the time the page loaded a second time. The second by the time he scrolled. The number at the bottom of the screen had stopped meaning anything. The interface flickered when he tried to refresh.

He could no longer find a direction in the comments. It was no longer a conversation. It was a surface.

KEY
KEY KEY KEY
"idle Key" — what is the key
the key has been idle
the key was never used
"vision sealed" — the prophecy is sealed — the seventh closes — the seventh closes —
she is finished

she is finished
she is finished

The reverent users had abandoned the longer comments. They had begun to post, again and again, in dozens of accounts at once, single fragments of the quatrain. *The idle Key has left the vision sealed.* *The seventh turning ripens into pain.* The fragments ran down the screen as if running down the screen were what fragments did.

The mockers were quieter than they had been on any previous post. Some of them were still there. They were trying. The volume was wrong for the tone.

"dawnless day" is just a sad weather report
okay
this isn't —
okay

He scrolled.

Roy was there.

Roy had come back. Roy had not posted in days. Roy was at the top of the new thread, briefly, in a comment with three hundred upvotes that had appeared in the last two minutes and was being upvoted faster than Michael could refresh.

Roy had written:

I came back to say one thing. This is not prediction. The sequence is complete now and the shape of it has resolved into something that prediction is not the right word for.

If anyone here knows the work of Bedri Ruhselman they will recognise what I am about to say. The framework has names for what we have been watching. The seventh is not a forecast of an event. The seventh is what is meant by a turning, by which I mean an evolutionary closing, by which I mean — I cannot translate this. Either you have read him or you have not.

The Key in the new poem is not a metaphor for an action. The Key is a position in a sequence that has now passed. "Idle" is the word that matters. The Key was not turned. The vision was sealed without it. The seventh was not stopped. We have crossed.

I do not think there are more poems. I do not think there were ever going to be more than seven. I think the work has been done.

I am sorry to anyone I addressed across these months. I have been wrong about almost everything. The shape of having been wrong does not, however, undo what was right.

Goodbye.

The replies began before Michael had finished reading.

ruhsel-what
ruhselman? google says it's a turkish guy from the 70s
roy bro
roy please
"the key was not turned" what does that even mean
"we have crossed" oh god
roy stop being dramatic
roy is not being dramatic
roy is the most measured person in this thread and he just said goodbye
goodbye is a word
goodbye is a word people say
roy stop

roy?

He scrolled back to Roy's comment and then to Roy's profile.

The profile loaded. The post was there. The post was the last post. There were no replies from him beneath it. The little dot was not green. The little dot had been not green for a long time.

He came back to the thread.

The reverent users had moved past Roy's post. They were not engaging with it. They had not stopped to consider the word *Ruhselman.* They had not stopped to consider any word that was not in the poem itself. They were repeating the lines. They were repeating them in different orders. Someone had begun a thread that consisted only of the first line, posted by user after user, in a column.

The idle Key has left the vision sealed,
The idle Key has left the vision sealed,
The idle Key has left the vision sealed,
The idle Key has left the vision sealed,

He scrolled.

He stopped scrolling.

The phone in his hand had stopped doing what it had been doing. His thumb had stopped moving. He was looking at the word *Key* on the screen, at the word *sealed* on the screen, at the words in the order they were in.

His hand went, without his deciding it, to his chest. To the place over the inner pocket of the jacket. The jacket was on the chair in the bedroom now, not on him. He felt the absence of the paper through the fabric of his shirt. He felt the absence of it in the way one feels the absence of a thing one has been carrying for weeks.

He did not move for some time.

He did not put the phone down.

He scrolled.

The thread continued.

He did not type anything.

The television had not been on. He turned it on. The volume was low. He did not turn it up.

A correspondent was speaking from somewhere. The image was unstable. The video froze and resumed and froze again. The correspondent was saying *— we are receiving reports from —* and the audio dropped and came back. *— the situation is —* the audio dropped and came back. *— at this stage the —*

The image cut. The desk. The anchor.

*"We're going to try to re-establish that connection. In the meantime —"

The desk cut to a new feed. A different correspondent in a different place. Behind her, a city Michael did not recognise. Lights that were not the lights of the time of day where she was. She was speaking quickly. The audio was clear for the first sentence and degraded for the second.

She said *— we are seeing significant —* and *— what appears to be —* and *— I'm being told that —* and then she was looking off-camera and not speaking.

The desk cut back.

The desk cut to a graphic. A map. A region. The region was south Asia. The graphic had two countries shaded in different colours. There were small icons on the map. The icons were not labelled.

The anchor, who was a different anchor from the one who had been at the desk a moment ago:

*"We're going to take you now to —"

The audio cut.

The picture held.

The audio came back.

*" — exchange. We are using the word exchange. We are not, at this time, using any other word. The administration has not — we are not in a position to — what we are being told is that —"

The picture cut.

A new feed. A different city. Night where it was. The camera was wide and unsteady, not handheld, possibly mounted. The horizon held a glow. The glow was not a sunrise. The glow was small in the frame at first and then was not small. The audio over the picture was a correspondent's voice saying *— the second of which appears to have been —* and then her voice cutting and coming back and saying *— we are unable to confirm the —*

The picture cut.

The desk.

The desk was empty for two seconds.

The anchor sat down.

He had not been at the desk a second ago. He sat down. He looked at the camera.

*"We — we want to be careful with what we say. We are receiving — we are receiving a number of reports that we are working to — to confirm. Please continue to monitor — please continue —"

He stopped.

He looked at his notes.

He started again.

*"There has been a — there are reports of a nuclear exchange in — in the south Asian region. Multiple — multiple detonations. We — at this time — we do not have — we do not have casualty figures. We do not have — we do not have a clear picture of —"

He stopped.

*"We are also receiving reports of further — of further incidents in the — in the Middle East — and we are being told that — we are being told that communications infrastructure across — across several regions has been — affected — and that this may impact our ability to —"

He stopped.

He looked off-camera.

The picture cut to a graphic.

The graphic said *DEVELOPING.*

The graphic stayed up for thirty seconds. Then it cut to a different graphic that said the same thing in a different font.

The lights in the apartment did not dim.

The fridge did not click off.

The microwave clock said 07:43.

A radio in the building somewhere was on. He could hear it through the wall, distantly. The voice on it was saying a sequence of numbers, slowly, then a sequence of letters. Then the same sequence of numbers. Then the same sequence of letters. He had never heard a radio do this before. He listened until the cycle repeated and then he stopped listening.

In the building across the courtyard a woman was at her window. She was on the phone. She dropped the phone. She did not pick it up. She remained at the window. After a moment she was no longer at the window.

On the street below, a man was standing in the middle of the street. He was not in traffic, because the street had no traffic at that moment. He was standing on the centre line. He was looking up at the sky. There was nothing in the sky, as far as Michael could see. The man stayed there.

A second man came past on the pavement. He laughed, briefly, at nothing, and kept walking.

A bicycle went past in the opposite direction. The bicycle did not slow for the man in the middle of the street. The bicycle went around him.

A woman two blocks down was walking with a phone to her ear. She was saying *what, what, what.* She said it twelve times. She did not say anything else. She was not asking the person on the other end to repeat. She was saying *what* the way one says it when the word is the only one available.

The thread on his phone had stopped scrolling. The interface had failed. The page sat where it sat. He pulled down to refresh. The page did not refresh. He waited. He pulled again. The page refreshed. The new comments at the top were the same first lines, repeated, in dozens of accounts.

The idle Key has left the vision sealed,

The idle Key has left the vision sealed,

The idle Key has left the vision sealed,

He scrolled.

He scrolled past them.

He scrolled past the mockers, who were quieter now, who were posting in shorter forms.

He scrolled past Roy's last comment, which had moved further down, which already had two thousand replies under it that did not engage with what Roy had written.

He came to the original post.

The four lines.

He read them again.

The idle Key has left the vision sealed,
The seventh turning ripens into pain,
A buried cry of earth is now revealed,
As dawnless day devours the mortal plain.

His hand went to his chest again. To the empty place over the empty pocket of the shirt over the place where the paper would have been if the jacket had been on.

He sat very still.

The bedroom door opened.

Diane came out. She had her dressing gown on. Her hair was down. She did not say good morning. She did not say anything.

She came into the kitchen. She saw him at the table with the phone. She saw the television on through the doorway in the next room. She did not look at the television for long. She looked at the screen long enough to register what was on it and not longer.

She filled the kettle. She put it on. She stood at the counter while it boiled.

The kettle clicked off.

She made coffee for both of them, the way she had not done in a long time, two cups, one for him, one for her. She set his on the table beside his phone. She held hers.

She stood at the counter.

She did not sit down.

The television in the next room continued to do what the television was doing, which was to cut from feed to feed, from desk to graphic to feed to desk to graphic, with audio that arrived a beat behind picture, with words that repeated themselves in the same sentence, with anchors who were not the anchors who had been there an hour ago.

He looked at the cup she had made him.

He did not pick it up.

She did not say anything.

He did not say anything.

The phone on the table, face-up, refreshed itself.

The idle Key has left the vision sealed.

The morning outside the kitchen window was the morning, the colour mornings were, except that the light in it was very slightly wrong, in a way he could not have named, a way he was not sure was real, a way that may or may not have been a property of the morning and may or may not have been a property of his eyes.

He sat at the table.

She stood at the counter.

The morning the kettle clicked off and the coffee got cold between them did not become anything. It became another morning. Then another.

The cup with the chip near the handle stayed on the table. He saw it whenever he passed the table. He did not move it. She did not move it. It was there when she went to bed and it was there when he came in to refill it and it was there when neither of them was in the room.

The television cut from a desk to a feed. The feed was unstable. The frame held for two seconds and tore for half a second and held again. A correspondent was on the screen. He could not see her clearly. The audio came in two layers, slightly offset.

— what we are being told, and we want to caution viewers that this remains —

The frame tore.

— that the exchange in the south Asian region is now being characterised by Western analysts as —

The audio dropped.

— a limited exchange —

It said it twice, *a limited exchange, a limited exchange,* in two different voices, the same words.

— with multiple confirmed detonations across both —

The picture cut.

The desk anchor said, "We're going to take a brief moment to —"

The picture cut.

The graphic said *DEVELOPING.*

Diane stood at the window in the morning. He could not have said which morning. The window was the kitchen window. She was holding her coffee in both hands. She was looking at the sill.

"What is this," she said.

He came over.

On the outside ledge, on the slope of the windowsill, there was a film of something white. It was very fine. It was not snow. It was not pollen. It was not the kind of dust the city sometimes produced after a building came down. It was paler than dust. It was finer than snow. It had settled in a thin, even layer that was not yet thick.

"Don't open the window," he said.

"I wasn't going to."

She watched it for a moment.

"They said something on the radio," she said. "Earlier. I wasn't really listening."

"What did they say."

"They said particulate."

"Particulate."

"Yeah."

She drank her coffee.

The television, in the next room, said, twenty minutes later, *— officials are advising residents not to come into direct contact with —* and the audio dropped, and came back, and said, *— particulate fallout —* and dropped again.

A new television voice. Not an anchor. A scientist, in the corner of the screen, in a small box beside the desk. She was being asked something. She was answering carefully.

— what we would expect to see, in an event of this scale, would be a measurable decrease in surface temperatures over a period of weeks to months, with —

The audio cut.

— a thinning of the upper-atmospheric solar input that would manifest as —

The audio cut.

— short-term albedo effects, by which we mean —

The audio cut.

The desk anchor said, "We seem to be having some difficulty with that connection. We'll come back to it."

He did not come back to it.

The grocery store at the end of the block had a line.

Michael stood in it. He was wearing a mask. He had not worn a mask in years. There were boxes of them now in pharmacies and bodegas and at the desk in the lobby of his building, and you took one when you went out. He had taken one. He was wearing it.

The line was not moving quickly. The man in front of him in the line was holding a basket. There was nothing in the basket. The man stood there with the basket the way a person stands holding a thing they have not yet decided what to do with.

A woman behind Michael said to her phone, "I told you, just bread, just bread, anything, just bread."

When he got into the store the shelves were the shelves they had been the week before, which is to say partly stocked and partly not. The fresh produce section had things that did not look fresh. The bread shelf had bread on it, but only one kind. There was a sign on the bread shelf, written by hand, that said *2 PER CUSTOMER.* Below that, in different handwriting, *PLEASE.*

He took two.

At the dairy case, a man was arguing with another man about milk. The argument was not about anything specific. They had each reached for a carton at the same time and there had only been one. They had both got their hands on it. They were not letting go of it. They were not yelling. They were standing there, both holding the carton, talking past each other in low voices that were getting lower.

A woman further down the aisle was laughing. She was alone. She was laughing at nothing. She stopped laughing as suddenly as she had started.

He paid in cash. The card readers had been intermittent that week. The cashier counted his change twice and gave him the wrong amount and he did not correct her.

The radio in the kitchen was on.

* — and to recap our earlier reporting, the Indian and Pakistani governments have each issued statements denying responsibility for the initial exchange, with each side characterising its own response as —*

He turned the volume down.

He turned it back up.

* — retaliatory in nature —*

He turned it down.

He left it on.

His inbox had three hundred and twelve unread.

He did not open any of them.

He scrolled, occasionally. The subject lines did the work.

we're exposed

can you call

can you call

can you call please

Michael

Michael are you there

we cannot cover this

it's done

Michael, we're done. I'm sorry.

friend, take care of yourself

friend, take care of yourself, we're bankrupt now

[NO SUBJECT]

don't bother responding to this

I just wanted to say

I just wanted to say it was good working with you

if I don't see you again

if I don't see you again take care of yourself

Michael

Michael

are you alive

He scrolled. He did not respond.

One subject line, lower down, from a name he had not seen in two years. *thinking of you.* He did not open it.

He closed the laptop.

She slept badly. He slept badly. They slept in the same bed badly together. Sometimes one of them got out of bed at three or four in the morning and the other did not pretend to be asleep, and the one who had got up came back to the bed after a while, and they lay next to each other without speaking.

At some point in the night she put her hand on his chest.

He put his hand on her hand.

They lay like that.

His other hand, the one that was not on hers, was at his side, on top of the duvet. The duvet covered the place where his shirt covered the place where the inner pocket of his jacket would have been, except his jacket was on the chair across the room. He did not move his other hand toward where the jacket was. He did not need to. The paper was where the paper was, and he knew where it was, the way a person knows where their wallet is when they are not carrying it.

She was awake. He could tell.

He was awake. She could tell.

Neither of them said anything.

She came up behind him at the desk on a different morning, or the same morning. She put her hand on the back of his neck.

"Come to bed," she said.

It was eleven in the morning.

"It's eleven."

"Come to bed."

He went.

They lay together in the way they had been lying together that week, which was without language. She put her face into his shoulder. He put his hand on her back. They did not speak. After a while she lifted her face and kissed him, slowly, in a way that did not ask for anything except his presence, and he kissed her back, and they were close to each other, and the closeness was the kind of closeness that has nothing to do with desire and everything to do with not being alone in a room.

He held her.

She held him.

At one point, with her face against his throat, she said, "Michael."

"Yes."

"Whatever you've —"

"Diane —"

"No. Listen. Whatever you've — done. Or not done."

"Diane."

"It doesn't matter. None of it. Right now."

He did not say anything.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

She kissed his jaw, once, the way she used to kiss his jaw before any of this. Then she put her face back against his throat. She did not move.

His hand on her back stayed on her back. His other hand, with which he could have done anything, did not go to the jacket on the chair. It did not go anywhere. It rested on the pillow next to her hair.

They argued about the bread.

He had brought back the wrong kind. He had brought back the only kind there had been. She had not asked him for a specific kind. She was annoyed about it anyway. She had been waiting all morning for him to come back. She had been worried. She had not said she had been worried.

"It's bread," he said.

"I know it's bread."

"Then —"

"I'm not —"

"What."

"I'm not angry about the bread."

"Okay."

"I know you know I'm not angry about the bread."

"Yes."

She put her hand over her face for a moment. Then she put it down.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't."

"I am, though."

"Don't."

She made toast with the bread. They ate it standing at the counter.

The radio was on.

— Israeli officials have confirmed a second wave of strikes in response to —

The signal degraded.

— Iranian state media has not yet —

The signal degraded.

— and we are also receiving reports, again unconfirmed, of significant damage to communications infrastructure across —

The signal cut. There was a long pause. The signal came back.

— in response to a question about strategic necessity, the spokesperson said —

A pause.

— strategic necessity —

A different voice.

— strategic necessity —

The same voice as the first.

— strategic necessity —

The radio held the phrase for several seconds in three different voices and then the announcer said, *— and we'll have more on that story as it develops —*

He turned the radio off.

He turned it on.

It said *— developing situation —*

He turned it off.

The sky was not blue. It had not been blue for several days. It was a paler colour, a kind of off-white, with an edge that suggested cloud without quite committing to it. It did not change much across the day. The light at noon was the light at noon, but the noon was wrong. It was as if the sun had moved further away. The shadows on the buildings across the courtyard had less contrast.

A woman in the next building over was at her window. She was looking up. She stood there for a long time. She was not talking on the phone. She was not waving at anyone. She was just at the window, looking up.

A child two floors below her was at her window too. The child was wearing a mask. The child waved at Michael. He raised his hand. The child waved again. Then the child's mother appeared and pulled her gently from the window, and the curtain fell.

The grocery store, again. Different day. Same line.

A man in the line ahead of him was selling iodine tablets out of a backpack at the back of the queue. He was not making a fuss about it. He was speaking to a woman, quietly, and showing her something in his hand. She was nodding. She gave him cash. He gave her something small. She put it in her bag. They did not look at each other after the exchange.

The man went to the front of the line. He paid for a single bottle of water with cash. He left.

The woman left without buying anything.

The street had ash on it.

Not everywhere. In drifts. In the gutters. In the corners of doorways. On the bonnets of cars that had not been moved that day. It was finer than snow and slightly grey rather than white. It did not melt. It did not blow away easily. When the wind moved it, it moved in a powdery rather than a flaky way.

A street sweeper had come through that morning. The sweeper had taken some of it away. There was already more.

Two people walking on the pavement ahead of Michael were having an argument. The argument was about whether one of them had agreed to do something. Neither of them seemed to be sure whether the agreement had been made. One of them said, "You said you would," and the other said, "I never said that," and the first one said, "You did, you did, you did," and the second one said, "I didn't, I didn't," and they kept walking, and the argument continued in the same words for the length of the block.

A third person passed them going the other way. He said, "Sorry," to no one. He kept walking.

She fell asleep against him on the sofa. The television was on, low. The footage on it was footage that had been looping for two days, of a city he could not name in a country he could not place, on fire, at night. The camera was unsteady. The audio over the footage was a correspondent's voice saying *— in what appears to have been a coordinated —* and then the audio dropping and coming back saying *— a coordinated response —* and dropping again.

He looked down at her.

Her face was the face he had known for nine years.

He put his arm tighter around her. She did not wake up.

He sat there for a long time.

He did not pick up his phone.

He did pick up his phone, eventually. He opened the thread. He scrolled.

The reverent users had stopped posting in volume. The thread was quieter than it had been. There were no new quatrains. There would be no new quatrains. Roy had not come back. The smaller subs were largely empty.

The post he had on the screen was three days old. The comment beneath it was from four hours ago. It said:

it's done.

The reply beneath it said:

what's done.

The reply beneath that said:

everything.

He locked the phone.

Later that night, or another night, the planes began.

He heard them first. They came in low. The window in the bedroom rattled in its frame. The sound was the sound of large aircraft, but more of them than were normally over the city, moving in a direction.

He got out of bed.

She got out of bed behind him.

They went to the window.

The aircraft were going west. He could see them, dimly, their lights moving in patterns that were not the patterns of commercial flights. They were in formations. Three abreast. Then two more. Then three more. They kept coming. They kept coming.

In the apartments across the courtyard, other windows were lit. Other people were standing at them. He could see, in the building opposite, a man at his window, looking up, the same way the woman had been looking up earlier in the week. The man was not waving and not on the phone. He was just at the window.

Diane stood next to Michael. Her shoulder was against his arm. She did not say anything.

The aircraft passed. Then more passed. The shadows of them, very faintly, moved across the wall of the bedroom behind them. He did not turn around to look at the wall. He could see the shadows in the reflection in the window glass.

After several minutes the formations were further away and the sound was less. He could still hear them. He could hear them for some time.

She said, quietly, "Where are they going."

"West."

"I know west."

"I don't know."

"Okay."

She put her hand on his arm.

"Come back to bed."

"Yes."

They came back to bed. They did not turn off the lamp on her side, because they had not turned it on, because it had been on all night. The light was the colour the light had been earlier and had stopped quite being. The walls of the bedroom were the colour of the walls of the bedroom.

They lay down.

She put her hand on his chest.

He put his hand on her hand.

The aircraft, very distantly, continued west.

Above the city, somewhere, the upper air did what the upper air now did, which was to hold a layer of very fine particulate that was settling, slowly, on every surface that faced upward.

The window was not yet light. The window was not going to be light in the way windows were normally light. The window would, in some hours, be the colour windows were now, which was a colour he did not have a word for.

He lay with her hand under his hand, and his hand stayed where it was, and the other hand, the free one, the one that could have done anything, rested on the duvet at his side and did not move.

The clock on her side of the bed said something.

He did not look at it.

PART 8 - DAWNLESS DAY

Diane was awake beside him.

The window had begun to be the colour the window was going to be. It was not light. It was not dark. It was the colour windows had been for a few days now, only more so, only the more final version of the colour, as if the colour had been practising and was now ready.

There was a sound.

He registered it before he registered registering it. It had been in the room for some time. It was low. It was continuous. It was not a hum. A hum was a frequency. This was not a frequency. This was a tearing. It was the sound of something being separated from something else, very slowly, somewhere very large. It was not in the apartment. It was not in the building. It was not near.

It was not stopping.

He turned his head to look at her.

She was already looking at him.

"You hear it," she said.

"Yes."

She did not ask what it was. He did not offer.

They lay still. The sound did not get louder. It did not get quieter. It did not modulate.

The phone on the bedside table buzzed.

The phone on her bedside table buzzed at the same moment.

Through the wall, the phone of the neighbour buzzed.

Through the floor, somewhere downstairs, more phones.

The standardised tone. *Do, mi, sol.* Twice.

She picked up her phone. He picked up his.

EMERGENCY BROADCAST

A global atmospheric anomaly has been registered across multiple monitoring networks. The cause is currently undetermined. Authorities are working to assess the situation. Residents are advised to remain indoors and await further information. Please remain calm.

He read it.

He read it again.

"Mine says the same thing," she said.

"Yes."

The sound underneath the room continued.

He got up.

He went into the living room. He turned on the television.

A desk. An anchor. The desk was not the desk of any one network. The graphic at the bottom said *EMERGENCY BROADCAST.* The anchor was reading, slowly, from a piece of paper.

" — at this time we are not in a position to confirm the source of the — of the — phenomenon. We are working with — we are coordinating with — please remain calm. Please remain in your homes. Curfew is — curfew has been declared in the New York metropolitan area effective immediately and indefinitely. Essential personnel only. We will continue to bring you — "*

The audio dropped.

The audio came back.

" — bring you updates as we have them. Please remain — "*

The audio dropped.

He muted it.

The muted screen continued to show the anchor. The anchor's mouth continued to move. The graphic continued to say *EMERGENCY BROADCAST.* Below it, in smaller text, a banner had begun to scroll. *INVESTIGATION OPENED INTO ONLINE USER ENCAUSSE_34. ANY INFORMATION REGARDING THE IDENTITY OR LOCATION OF THIS USER SHOULD BE

REPORTED TO —* the rest of the banner was cut off by the edge of the screen, and the banner did not loop back around to show it.

Diane was in the doorway.

She was wearing his sweater over her sleep clothes. She had one arm wrapped around herself. She was looking at the television.

"What does it say."

"Nothing. The same thing."

"Okay."

She came over. She stood next to him. He was standing in front of the sofa. He had not sat down.

The sound continued.

He took out his phone.

He opened Reddit.

The thread did not load. He tried again. The interface flickered. The page came up partially. The pinned post was still pinned. The comments below it were not loading. He pulled to refresh. The page froze. He pulled again. The page loaded a few new comments and then froze again.

The new comments were short.

it's here

it's here

god

god

it's the sound

you can hear it too?

everyone can hear it

everyone everywhere can hear it

He scrolled. The page froze. He pulled. It loaded.

Roy was there.

Roy was at the top of the new feed, not by upvote, by recency, in a comment that had been posted four minutes ago.

The comment said:

This — whatever this is — it had already begun. Good luck, my friends.

He read it.

He scrolled. The replies beneath it were the replies the thread was producing now, which were not replies, which were the thread saying its own name in different voices.

He scrolled back up.

He read Roy's comment again.

He locked the phone.

He sat down on the sofa.

She sat down next to him.

She put her hand on his.

He put his other hand on top of her hand.

They sat.

The sound continued.

After a while, he said:

"Diane."

"Yes."

"Is this the end."

She did not answer immediately.

She did not look at the television. She did not look out the window. She looked at his face.

"I don't know," she said.

He nodded.

She did not say anything else. He did not say anything else.

The hand under his hand was warm. The hand on top was warm. The room was the temperature of the room, which was a little colder than the room had been a week ago.

The window.

He got up. He went to the window. He looked down at the street.

There were soldiers on the corner.

Two of them at the corner of the block, one at the corner two blocks down. They were standing in the loose at-rest stance of soldiers who had been told to hold a position. They were not in full combat gear. They were in fatigues. They had rifles, slung. One of them was talking to the other. Their faces were obscured by the masks they were wearing, the same kind of masks that had been in the bodegas all week.

A vehicle was at the intersection. A military vehicle, not large. A man was leaning against it. He was looking at his phone.

Two civilians passed the soldiers on the pavement. The civilians were walking quickly. One of the soldiers said something to them. The civilians stopped. The soldier waved them on. They kept walking.

The sound was happening above and behind everything else, but the soldiers, and the civilians, and the man leaning on the vehicle, were not reacting to it.

A woman came around the far corner.

She was walking.

She was not walking quickly. She was not walking slowly. She was walking the way a person walks who is going somewhere.

He could not see her clearly. The light was the light it was. She was a block and a half away. She had on a coat. He could see that the coat was a coat. The colour of it slid off his eye.

She walked toward the corner where the soldiers were.

He watched her.

She passed within a few feet of the first soldier.

The first soldier did not turn.

The second soldier was looking at his phone.

The third soldier, two blocks down, was looking the other way.

The man at the vehicle did not look up.

She kept walking.

She did not look at the soldiers as she passed them. She did not turn her head. She did not slow. She did not speed up.

She walked another half block.

He had his hand on the windowsill. He had not put it there. He realised, looking at his hand, that he had put his hand on the windowsill, and that the windowsill had a fine layer of pale particulate on it, and that his hand was now on the particulate.

He looked back down at the street.

She had reached the next corner.

For a second, before she turned, she did something with her head. Not a look up. Not a look back. A small adjustment of the angle of her face, briefly, as she came to the corner. He could not have said whether she was looking at the building, or at the window, or at nothing. He could not have said whether she was looking at him.

Something in his chest did the thing his chest had not done in a long time.

He almost remembered.

He almost remembered the shape of her face. He almost remembered the eyes. The mark above the left eyebrow. The voice. The single word. He almost had it. It almost arrived.

It did not arrive.

She turned the corner.

She was gone.

He stood at the window for several seconds with his hand on the windowsill in the particulate.

Then he took his hand off the windowsill.

He looked at his hand.

The dust on his palm was very fine. It was a colour he did not have a word for.

He went into the kitchen and washed his hand.

When he came back to the living room, Diane was at the window.

She was looking down at the street.

"Did you see her," she said.

He stopped.

"What."

"A woman. She just walked past."

"Yes."

"They didn't stop her."

"No."

She watched the corner where the woman had turned. The woman did not come back around the corner.

"They didn't even look at her," Diane said.

"No."

She looked at him.

She did not say anything else.

He did not say anything either.

She came back to the sofa. He came back to the sofa. They sat down. Her hand found his hand and his hand found hers without either of them deciding it.

The television's banner had updated.

The new banner said: *AUTHORITIES REQUEST PUBLIC ASSISTANCE IN IDENTIFYING THE INDIVIDUAL OPERATING UNDER THE USERNAME ENCAUSSE_34. INFORMATION CAN BE REPORTED TO —*

The number that followed was not legible. Some of the numerals were where the numerals should be. Some of them were not. The banner scrolled, and the banner reset, and on the reset the number was a different number, with different digits in different positions, and the banner reset again and the number was different again.

Nobody at the desk acknowledged the banner.

The desk anchor was a different anchor again. He could not remember when she had changed. She was reading.

" — the President is expected to address the nation within the hour. We will bring you that address as soon as it begins. In the meantime — "

The audio dropped.

" — please continue to — "

The audio dropped.

The picture held the anchor's face.

The picture froze.

The picture stayed frozen for thirty seconds.

The audio came back, in the middle of a sentence.

" — remain in your homes. Please remain calm. "

The picture re-started.

Outside, somewhere, there was a shout.

Not the kind of shout that is at someone. The kind of shout that is at no one. A man's voice, two blocks down maybe, raised, sustained, not articulating words. The shout went on for several seconds. Then it stopped.

Then, somewhere closer, someone laughed.

It was a single short laugh, the way one laughs at a thing that has happened, except nothing had happened. The laugh stopped.

A woman, on the pavement opposite, came out of a building. She walked into the middle of the street. She stopped there. She stood in the middle of the street. She did not look around. She did not move. The soldiers at the corner saw her. They did not approach her. After a moment one of them said something, into a radio, and continued standing where he was.

A man came out of a different building further down. He walked across the street, on a diagonal, not at a crossing. He sat down on the kerb. He put his head in his hands.

Somewhere two streets over, a piece of glass broke.

The sound of breaking glass was clear and small under the larger sound. Then the larger sound was the only sound again.

A vehicle accelerated, somewhere. The acceleration was sustained for too long. Then it stopped. Then a softer sound, of impact, but not large, the sound of a vehicle that had hit something but had not been going fast enough to do real damage. No follow-up sounds. No second impact. No sirens.

The soldiers at the corner did not move.

The phone on the coffee table buzzed.

A new alert.

He did not pick it up.

It buzzed again.

He did not pick it up.

It buzzed a third time.

He did not pick it up.

Diane did not pick it up either.

The television, still on, still muted, was now showing a wide aerial shot of a city. The city was not New York. The city was somewhere else. Smoke was rising from several places in the city. The shot held for several seconds. The shot cut. A different city. Smoke from different places. The shot held. The shot cut. The desk.

The anchor's mouth moved.

The audio did not come back.

The picture held.

She put her head on his shoulder.

He put his cheek against the top of her head.

The sound continued.

It had grown, very slightly, in the last several minutes. Or it had not. It was not the kind of sound that was easy to measure against itself. It was simply the sound, and it was there, and it had been there, and it would be there in a moment, and it would be there in the moment after that.

He did not know what time it was.

He did not look at the clock.

He did not look at the phone.

He held her hand under his hand.

The light through the window did not change.

It did not get lighter. It did not get darker. It held the colour it had been holding since they had woken up, and he understood, as much as he understood anything, that this was the colour the light was now, that the light was not going to do its other thing today, that whatever the light was supposed to do later in the morning was not going to happen.

The window held the colour.

The sound held.

She breathed against his shoulder.

He breathed against her hair.

His other hand, the one that was not under and not over hers, lay open on the sofa beside him. It was not in his pocket. There was no jacket. The jacket was on the chair in the bedroom, and the paper in the inner pocket of the jacket was where it had been for nearly two months, and the paper would still be where it had been for nearly two months, in an hour, and in two hours, and in however many hours there were going to be.

He did not move his hand.

He did not say anything.

She did not say anything.

The sound did not stop.