

THE SILT VERSES: 2.6

RIVERSIDE, EXT, DAY

The wind blows.

We hear a gentle rustle of grass - and then the sound of a rifle being cocked. We are listening to MERCER (or GAGE).

A moment passes.

And then, in the distance, we hear men yelling. The rapid-fire of machine-guns. The roar of a CRAB-ANGEL as it flees through the water.

A very human scream, suddenly cut off-

GAGE (or MERCER) fires.

The CRAB-ANGEL shrieks. It takes one step, and another-

-and then we follow it into the water as it comes crashing down.

The CRAB-ANGEL sinks, still bellowing as it dies.

We remain underwater.

And a moment later, we hear MERCER's voice.

MERCER:
(Narrating)
Happy news.

Our efforts are paying off. The river is beginning to suffer.

It breaks its banks, thrashing and flooding, lapping helplessly about our feet as we make our ride along its edge.

It does, as it turns out, have some fight in it; it swallows one of our soldiers one night when his wandering footsteps take him too close to the water's edge.

Gage and I don't stop the course.

This fear, this panic - it shows we're on the right track.

GAGE picks up the narrative.

GAGE:

(Narrating)

We locate one stray worshipper, making prayer-marks in the mud to a grey and drizzling dawn.

MERCER:

(Narrating)

Another stray, betrayed by the first.

GAGE:

(Narrating)

One teetering crab-angel, lost in the reeds and caught in our spotlights' sudden glare. Shrieking as its legs are cut out from underneath it.

MERCER:

(Narrating)

When we make camp, Gage and I sit opposite one another in the darkness, our faces still slick with the blood of quarry, and we whisper our prayers and our visions, back and forth - thrilling at how close we came as our rifles sang and our knives struck.

Far to the north, in the darkness of the vault beneath our cabin, we are building our god, one trophy at a time.

We've been building it all our lives.

The Beast does not exist yet. Not fully.

We've been weaning it on flesh and spirit since we were small, my sibling and I, ever since that first kid that we cornered out in the maize-fields, a knife in Gage's hand, a hatchet in mine.

A year or two older than us, taller and stronger than us, and yet he wept when he saw the look in our eyes and how nimbly we moved.

Now that it feeds on god, it grows faster.

And when we've gathered enough trophies and the shape is at last complete, the darkness will shift, the long grass will part...

...and the newborn Beast will stalk forth from the shadows upon its many legs, its mouths snapping in delight.

It'll eat us first.

GAGE:

(Narrating)

It'll welcome us in.

MERCER:

(Narrating)

I shall be the savage crown of its teeth. Gage shall be the radiant jewels of its eyes.

And together...we'll hunt quaking gods and men through an unready world.

We hear a low thump as the CRAB-ANGEL's body hits the bottom of the river.

LOBBY, INT, DAY

We hear SHRUE input a key code. Doors swing open.

SHRUE crosses the lobby floor. In the distance, over the loudspeakers, we can hear the voice of WILLARD TRUNCE delivering an advert.

Dramatic, inspiring music is playing.

WILLARD TRUNCE:

I'm Willard Trunce, star of Greater Glottage Radio's Carlie Cape. Just like you, I was born and raised in the North-Western territory.

And just like you, I'm deeply concerned about the impact of unsustainable sacrifice upon our local communities.

SHRUE sips their coffee and impatiently hammers the elevator buttons.

WILLARD TRUNCE:

That's why I'll be casting my seeds for Adjudicator Shrue during this Dwindlings.

The elevator doors open. SHRUE steps in. TRUNCE's voice is still playing inside.

WILLARD TRUNCE:

Adjudicator Shrue has pledged to reduce industrial-scale sacrifice by 7% by the end of the next financial year.

They've also signed Harold's Law, to help stamp out wrongful misidentification in the under-tens.

In these uncertain times, the North-West needs stability.

Let Shrue do it for you...

(Dramatically)

...again.

A second, faster voice cuts in.

DISCLAIMER VOICE:

(Quickly)

This promotion was produced and paid for by the Temerik Shrue Re-Election Campaign. These are the Silt Verses, and Adjudicator Shrue would like to thank the following disciples: Daphne Nitsuga, JV Hampton Van-Sant, James J Harringman, Sarah Griffin, Oliver Smith, and Sena Bryer. For more information about non-binding pledges made by the Temerik Shrue Re-Election Campaign, please contact-

The elevator doors open. SHRUE walks away down the corridor, swinging open a door-

CONFERENCE ROOM, INT, DAY

-and light applause erupts. There are two aides in this meeting whose voices we'll hear - ANA and JEFF.

ANA:

(Hamming it up)

Ladies and gentlemen, I am extremely proud and extremely honoured to call this meeting - the first official war council for the re-election campaign of Adjudicator Shrue - to order.

SHRUE lazily accepts the applause, closing the door behind them.

SHRUE:

Simmer down, folks, simmer down, now. Save some of that enthusiasm for when I actually win the thing, hey?

(Taking a seat)

Jeff, Ana - the floor is yours.

We hear the flutter of paper as ANA passes it around.

ANA:

We've got a packed agenda today, Adjudicator. I thought we could begin by taking a look at audience insight for-

SHRUE:

(Interrupting)

Who do we need to worry about?

JEFF's chair scrapes as he swivels to face SHRUE.

JEFF:

We're looking at four serious candidates running against you right now. If the press picks up on the Jolly King Kipper scandal, we're down to three.

Barbeau is the only one you need to worry about.

SHRUE:

(Consulting their papers)

Barbeau. She's-

JEFF:

She's the one who's been clamouring for military retaliation against Nesh.

ANA:

Gunboat Barbeau. Interesting times all around if she makes it to the Legislatures.

SHRUE:

(Still distracted)

Yeah, not on my fucking watch.

Who's she paired with? A war-god, right?

ANA:

Most likely it'll be the Unspeakable Visage of the Atrocious Foe. Fair warning, they've got a lot of money to spend.

SHRUE:

(A little rattled)

Fine. Fine.

OK, so who are we thinking for my pairing?

JEFF:

(Confidently)

Adjudicator, I've prepared a short, uh, video presentation on that exact topic, if you'd be willing to indulge me-

SHRUE:

Fine. Play it.

We hear the sound of a video projector starting up. A short film begins to play.

Soft, twinkly music. An old-fashioned advertising voice is heard.

ADVERTISING VOICEOVER:

Do you feel angry about the state of the world?

Are you habitually frustrated by what you perceive as cruel or selfish behaviour by those around you?

Is your anger and frustration making you feel low, restless, and incapable of normal productivity?

There is an answer.

Try seeing things from another point of view.

We hear the monstrous, toad-like voice of a SAINT OF THE SMILING CHILD, spitting up bubbles of mud as it talks.

SAINT OF THE SMILING CHILD:

FAULT LIES WITH ALL. COMPROMISE MUST BE FOUND.

ADVERTISING VOICEOVER:

Join the Church of the Smiling And Head-Shaking Child Upon the Perfectly Balanced Scales - today.

The Smiling And Head-Shaking Child Upon The Perfectly Balanced Scales has eyes across every surface of his polished head, so he can see things from every angle.

The Smiling And Head-Shaking Child Upon The Perfectly Balanced Scales has one gaping mouth at the very top of his head, and he has an answer for everything, even as he shakes his head in gentle disapproval.

SAINT OF THE SMILING CHILD:

BOTH HAVE MERIT TO THEIR ARGUMENTS. LET ACCOMMODATION BE FOUND.

ADVERTISING VOICEOVER:

Why is the Smiling Child always smiling?

Because he knows...you'll be happier once you've seen things from both sides.

JEFF rolls back across and turns off the projector.

Silence.

SHRUE is tapping their pen on the table in irritation.

JEFF:

(Smugly)

The Church of the Balanced Scales have won paired victories for candidates in South-East, Glottage Central, and right here in Glottage West, sixteen times out of thirty in the past twenty years.

They're a surefire winner at any debate.

SHRUE:

I don't, ah...

(Running a hand down their face in frustration)

Have you actually stepped out of your house recently, Jeff? Nobody has patience for this kind of thing any more.

The Peninsula's divided. We're broke. Nesh is outperforming us on trade, on gods, on everything they turn their hands to.

Our people want us to demonstrate strength and leadership, they want an actual direction on where we go from here.

How do you legislate on our current issues with a god like the Scales?

How do you...how do you take a perfectly balanced view when the question on everyone's minds is about whether we should literally be going to war with our closest neighbour?

JEFF squirms a little.

JEFF:
(*Looking to ANA for help*)
Well, that'd be-

ANA:
(*Quietly*)
In favour.

JEFF:
Right.

You're in favour of the war, but you regret that it's necessary and you have some serious concerns about how it's conducted.

(*Defending himself*)
It's the head-shaking part, it's in the video.

SHRUE:
(*Exasperated*)
But I'm strongly **against** the war, Jeff. I don't want the war to happen.

JEFF:
Strongly doesn't work for this god.

SHRUE:
No. No, I know. I know it doesn't.
(*Firmly*)
Scrap it. This god needs to stand for me as a candidate, folks.

It needs to actually speak to my values, it needs to speak to my policies. It's not just free cash this time around. We need to make the right choice.
(*Proudly*)
I'm thinking...I'm thinking we draft in the Saint.

ANA:
The Saint Electric doesn't get involved in local elections.

JEFF:
Or wars.

SHRUE bristles.

SHRUE:

Yeah, but we've got a big river. Why can't we build her another dam?

ANA:

Her people will say no.

SHRUE:

Two dams.

ANA:

Afraid not, Adjudicator.

SHRUE:

Well, shit! What else do we have, then?

(Looking to ANA and snapping their fingers)

Ana? Ideas?

ANA:

Yeah, I think I've got something.

You ever hear of the Noose Of Twinning Throats, Adjudicator?

She passes a pamphlet to SHRUE.

SHRUE:

(Sceptical)

The name doesn't, uh...

ANA:

I know, I know the name isn't ideal.

But it's this tradition, see, in a village somewhere in the eastern reaches of the territory, where my folks grew up - uh...I've got the name in my notes.

A young couple's getting married, and you drape the noose over both of their necks. The god blesses the union, and the noose miraculously tightens.

It's about harmoniousness, it's about two people - two nations - coming together.

We get a photo of you and a Neshite delegate, both of your throats in the noose, smiling and hand-shaking. We ask Barbeau to come out and put her head in the noose with you.

She does it, she's ceding to your photo opportunity. She refuses - hey, what's she so afraid of, not wanting to stick her head in the noose with you?

SHRUE drops the pamphlet.

SHRUE:

OK, yeah. What's their RSO like?

ANA:

That's what I like about 'em. Not even a particularly hungry god.

They haven't exceeded their annual sacrificial targets once in the past three years. How many prisoners have the Balanced Scales carved a bunch of eye-holes into during all that time?

JEFF:

(Sulkily)

You're asking our candidate to put their neck into a noose. It's a PR disaster waiting to happen-

SHRUE:

(Interrupting)

No. No, I like it.

(Flipping through the pamphlet again)

Can we change the name, though, or is that going to piss off a bunch of local priests? Because I don't like the name.

ANA:

(Spitballing)

The Lover's Knot. The Harmonious Tangle. Sure. We can make it something that works.

SHRUE:

(Overlapping)

Exactly. Maybe we think of it as a wreath, rather than a noose-

ANA:

(Happily)

I'll get onto our people in the territory about buying them out. We'll have the altar in this office by the middle of next week.

JEFF interrupts, sulkily.

JEFF:

If you're running for re-election alongside a god of peace, Adjudicator, sooner or later one of your opponents is going to ask you about the small private army you've got razing their way down the banks of the White Gull.

SHRUE considers.

SHRUE:

Mercer and Gage. You think that looks bad?
(Defensively)

They're rooting out that, uh, that false-faith river god. You told me that's what people wanted to see. Revenge for...

ANA:

Bellwethers.

SHRUE:

Revenge for Bellwethers, yes. We take care of the problem, these rumours about Neshite involvement go away, Barbeau loses her platform. You told me that.

JEFF:

(Patiently)

I did, Adjudicator, yes. But you need to remember - it's been months now.

The longer this goes on, the less you look like the agent of justice, the more it starts to look like, 'Hey, either the renegades have help from abroad, or Adjudicator Shrue doesn't know what they're doing.'

I also understand that there's been some provable collateral?

SHRUE looks to ANA.

SHRUE:

...has there?

ANA:

(Embarrassed)

Somewhat more than we hoped for.

It...may be affecting polling in the northern reaches.

She hands a sheet of paper to SHRUE. SHRUE reads it.

SHRUE:

(Angrily)

Fuck!

OK, look - how quickly can they finish this up?

Think they can bring me the Trawler-man's oilskin by the time the campaign momentum gets going?

Because if they can do that, we don't have a problem.

Silence.

SHRUE:

(Dangerously)

Ana. Do we even know what they've been doing?

ANA:

(Quailing)

We've - we've only had sporadic contact these past few weeks.

They're really out in the wilds now. Not much of a signal.

(Apologetically)

I **have** left them messages.

SHRUE:

Get through to them. One way or another. We're going to set up a meeting.

Jeff, you saddle up the motorcade. And someone fetch me a map.

(Firmly)

Sounds like we need to go see the constituents.

CAR, INT

A car door slams. We hear city traffic as SHRUE's motorcade starts up.

We swiftly transition from environment to environment - a traffic jam, a rainstorm, and a quiet riverside with birds singing overhead.

As someone (presumably JEFF or ANA) plays with the radio, we hear it repeating TRUNCE's campaign advert in brief snippets - growing fainter and more distorted each time - until finally it cuts out.

DINER, INT, DAY

MERCER and GAGE are ushered through a busy diner, pushing through double doors and into a quieter back room.

JEFF:

(Harried)

-we're so glad you could join us at such short notice. Just - wait one second, please, both of you.

We're getting a few pictures.

We hear the flash of cameras.

SHRUE is sat at a booth, posing with a lobster, playing up for the photographers.

SHRUE:

(Calling out jovially)

-and you can tell anybody who needs to know, I've eaten at this diner ever since I was a child, because I grew up in this territory and my pal Johnson, Johnson makes the best damned lobster barbecue up and down the White Gull.

You can put that on the sign, Johnson.

We hear ANA, quickly whispering to someone in the background.

ANA:

(Whispering)

Sainted current. Get the bib off them, they look ridiculous-

JEFF clears his throat. SHRUE looks up and sees MERCER and GAGE.

SHRUE:

Ah, maestros!

Come over, sit with me in the booth, both of you. You hungry?
(*Taking a mouthful and chewing*)
Crab, shrimp. All the fresh harvest of the river. They can fix you a plate.

MERCER growls a response as they sit.

MERCER:
Best not.

We came from upriver.

SHRUE:
I'm not following.
(*To GAGE*)
What does she mean?

GAGE:
Everything we put in the water, the currents carry it down.

SHRUE:
Ah.

So what exactly have you been putting in-

SHRUE trails nervously off, stops chewing, and swallows. They push their plate back.

SHRUE:
(*To the reporters*)
A little space for a private conversation, please, folks?

JEFF:
(*Yelling*)
All right, clear out of here, everybody!

We hear the hubbub subside as everyone is ushered out. The door slams.

And then SHRUE is left with MERCER and GAGE.

SHRUE:
(*Growing nervous*)
I. Ahm. Let me be very clear with you both.

So there can be absolutely no doubt.

We...love the work you're doing.

But...you need to finish it up, or tone it down.

MERCER and GAGE stare at SHRUE in hostile silence.

MERCER:

You told us to course for a river-god, politico.

GAGE:

To pull the nails of his worship free from his fingers. To upend roots. To tear the knowledge of the faith from the heart of the land.

We've been doing all that and more.

SHRUE:

(Nervously chuckling)

Mm. See.

It's the 'more' that's the problem, really.

We were hoping you'd have rooted out the faith by now. Struck at the very heart of it. Captured a few of its high priests.

Instead you're still on the outskirts, burning villages. Killing fishing folk.

And these people, you know...they weren't actively responsible for Bellwethers, they're not personally to blame.

GAGE:

(As if explaining to an idiot)

This is how you kill a god.

It lives in the memory of its faithful. It takes time.

SHRUE:

(Arguing nervously back)

Yes, yes, but you understand that before you unmask a member of the faithful, which of course you've done so very effectively...that person is a constituent.

Keep striking out at individual renegades, without capturing the ringleaders, without striking some kind of final victory that can be shared with the press...and all you're really doing is killing off voters.

Do you see?

I suppose what I'm saying is that we don't need you to **actually** kill this god so much...as give the impression that you've done so.

MERCER:

(Calmly)

Certainly seems like you didn't think this through.

SHRUE:

Um. It's not that we didn't think this through, it's more that the circumstances have changed, and this, ahm, this hunt of yours has taken longer than we hoped.

We didn't know that your services would still be required this close to the election, and of course we had no way of knowing that hostilities with the Linger Straits would be such a hot-button issue, and-

(Hurriedly backtracking)

That's not a criticism. Absolutely not criticising.

We just, ah-

If you're not going to be able to finish this quickly, I need you to keep things on an even keel for a while.

MERCER:

(Flatly)

On an even keel.

SHRUE:

(Flailing)

Just.

If you're going to...keep doing what you're doing, and I understand that this is what we've hired you to do...it can't come back to me in the minds of the public.

And if it **does** come back to me, it needs to be something that nobody could possibly have a complaint about.

Does that make sense?

GAGE:

(Disbelieving)

You want us to conduct...inoffensive killings.

SHRUE:

(Brightly)

Yes, precisely.

One of my aides, I, uh, think it was Jeff, was saying, maybe you could just peacefully shuffle the Trawler-man's people down south, to the lower stretches of the White Gull.

Drive them down into the Mid-Western Territory. Once they're there, we don't need to worry about them.

Or. Or you find an even worse god. Something small, maybe, buried out in the sticks.

Nasty little cult, something people will be glad to see the back of. My people can work with that.

Or, hell, you could take some time off. Enjoy the sights of the territory-

MERCER leans forward, grabs the knife, and jams it into the table. SHRUE gasps and jolts.

The plate and cutlery rattle quietly as MERCER sits again.

MERCER:

(Perfectly calm but accusatory)

The Beast That Stalks In The Long Grass has called for this god. You told us to seek it.

We bled the marks on stone and skull and we made our vow, at your command.

What is begun cannot be stopped.

SHRUE quavers.

SHRUE:

(Trying to be firm)

Inoffensive killings. That's all I'm asking for.

That's fair, isn't it?

Silence.

GAGE:

All right. We'll go south.

SHRUE:

(Relieved)

Thank you. Thank you, that's appreciated.

Was...was there anything else?

GAGE:

The villagers upriver say there's going to be a war with the people across the water.

SHRUE:

Not if I can help it, believe me.

(Unable to help themselves from asking)

What, uh...what exactly are they saying?

GAGE:

Some don't understand why. Some are old enough to have their own reasons for hate. Some are foolish enough to believe wild stories.

But most of them are excited.

They're losing the battle against the land out here.

They're running out of sacrifices.

They think this might change something.

SHRUE:

Well, now you understand how important our mission is here, don't you?

We're going to track down the real ringleaders, we're going to put a stop to it-

MERCER:

(Scornfully interrupting)

You **won't** be able to stop it, politico.

How could you?

A squeak as MERCER pushes back her chair and leaves.

SHRUE:

(Offended and confused)

Ah - excuse me?

(To GAGE)

What did she mean by that? What did she mean by that?

GAGE:

We'd best get back to the march. Nice to see you again, uh, Adjudicator.

GAGE creaks back their own chair and goes.

SHRUE:

(Unhappily)

Yes. Uh. You too.

CAR, INT, DAY

We hear the roar of a car engine.

The tch-tch-tch of a cologne spray.

SHRUE is shaken up by their encounter.

SHRUE:

(Fussily)

Stink's going to be with me for days.

Like bathing with a litter of...fucking foxes. Like they've passed something on to me, you know?

JEFF:

(Soothingly)

At least you made them see reason, Adjudicator.

SHRUE:

(Cheering up)

Yes, I suppose I did.

Sort of gave them the ol' rolled-up newspaper to the nose, didn't I?

All right, what's next?

ANA:

We're going to lay a wreath outside of Bellwethers this afternoon.

(Soothingly)

Well outside the miraculous zone, don't worry. And then tomorrow we're heading back to Glottage.

SHRUE dwells unhappily on this last point.

SHRUE:

Bellwethers. I swear. How many towns have we lost in the polluted lands over the years? What, what about the islands off the northern coast?

Why are we being asked to pretend this one matters so damn much, that's what I want to know.

JEFF:

You can't talk like that, Adjudicator-

SHRUE:

(Waving a hand)

Oh, I know, I know.

Tomorrow, though - I'm thinking we need to strike a more positive note.

Show the world my roots in this territory. I **did** grow up here, after all, let's not forget that.

(Brightly)

So maybe tomorrow, we don't go home. Instead, I set up another photocall. I go fishing-

JEFF:

(Warning)

Jolly King Kipper scandal.

SHRUE:

(Protesting)

That can't be allowed to ruin the very notion of fish, though. Ana, what do you think about-

We hear the sudden noise of cars whizzing past in the background.

ANA spots them.

ANA:
Fuck!

SHRUE:
What?

ANA:
(Furious)
See those cars that just went by? That's Barbeau's motorcade. She's come out here too.

SHRUE:
She-

ANA:
They're going to the same diner.

SHRUE:
But they'll run **our** story, right? Because we were there first.
(Not receiving a response)
Won't they?

JEFF:
(Furiously arguing with ANA)
I told you we should have given them a bigger plate. All-you-can-eat lobster. Fill the frame.

ANA:
(Arguing back)
Oh, come on. You want them to throw up all over that ridiculous bib? I didn't know she'd be here too!

SHRUE:
(Trying to intervene)
Folks. Listen, folks-

JEFF:
We're turning back. Adjudicator, you're going to need to eat some more.

ANA:
You want to run right into Barbeau now, in front of the cameras? You're-

The car suddenly screeches to a halt.

The conversation stops.

SHRUE:
What's...uh, what's happening?

JEFF:
(With sudden uncertainty)
There's something blocking the road, Adjudicator.

SHRUE:
(Peering through the car seats)
Looks like a tree fell down. Do we call somebody to get it taken down,
or...

...my office, probably, right?

The two AIDES, now deadly serious, completely ignore SHRUE.

JEFF:
(To ANA)
Flip for it?

A long, tense silence.

ANA:
(With a sigh)
No. No, you always win.

I'll go take a look.

Just, um, be ready to move fast. Please.

We hear the door open and slam.

ROAD, EXT, DAY

ANA's footfalls upon the tarmac.

Suddenly, she stops.

ANA:
(Calling back)
There's someone...there's someone trapped under the tree!
(Calling)
Sir. Sir. Are you okay?
(A little stunned)
He's bleeding.

We hear the croaking, monotonous, inhuman voice of a LOVE-SAINT.

LOVE-SAINT:
I need...your help.

ANA:
(Transfixed)
He needs help.

LOVE-SAINT:
Hold me close.

ANA is transfixed. Hypnotised.

ANA:
What...what did you say to me?

LOVE-SAINT:
Hold me close and make me whole.

From behind her, we hear the distant sound of the car doors opening. The horn.

JEFF:
(Yelling out, distantly)
Ana! Get away from him, Ana!

LOVE-SAINT:
(Reciting it sing-song)
Hold me close and love me true.
You for I, and I for you.

JEFF:
(Yelling out, distantly)
Love-god. It's a fucking love-god!

ANA takes off her shoes and gets down on the concrete with the LOVE-SAINT.

ANA:
Yes, I'll hold you close-

JEFF:
(Yelling out, distantly)
He's a Saint, he's a Saint-

LOVE-SAINT:
Storm-clouds rage and cold winds blow,
Hold me close and don't let go.

ANA:
No. No, no, I won't let go-

As ANA clutches the LOVE-SAINT, we hear the horrible, rising movement of writhing flesh.

ANA:
(Enraptured)
My heart is so-

The LOVE-SAINT strikes. It's an awful, violent sound - like a barbed tentacle plunging into flesh.

ANA chokes as she's absorbed into the writhing LOVE-SAINT. We hear bone snapping.

And a moment later, we hear the sound of wet flesh dripping down onto the concrete.

CAR, INT, DAY

The car door slams. JEFF, panicking, starts up the car.

SHRUE:
(In shock)
What...what just happened...what happened to Ana?

JEFF:
It's an attack, we're under attack!
(Spotting something)
Shit! There's more of them in the road behind us.

SHRUE:
She just...she...

JEFF:

Adjudicator, Adjudicator, I need you to get these headphones on.

Get these headphones on. Don't take them off, don't listen to what they're saying.

SHRUE:

(Shell-shocked)

I, um...

The outside sounds become muffled as the headphones are placed over SHRUE's ears. We hear some pleasant music - almost a lullaby - and the voice of a RECORDING.

RECORDING:

Emergency anti-prayer tape has been activated. Please remain calm. Do not switch off the tape until the emergency has passed.

JEFF:

(Muffled)

I'm turning this car around! Heading through the trees!

The car hits something - presumably another LOVE-SAINT, and swerves. We hear a muffled series of sounds as the car rumbles through the trees, skidding out of control, finally turning over and over before crashing down-

SHRUE begins breathing heavily as they panic.

Finally, we hear the sound of JEFF, still conscious from the front seat.

JEFF:

(Muffled)

Adjudicator!

We hear JEFF kicking down his door, then breaking the car window to let SHRUE out on their side.

JEFF:

(Muffled)

We need to run!

SHRUE:

(Unable to hear him through the noise-cancelling headphones)

What?

JEFF:
(Muffled)
Go! Go, now!

WOODS, EXT, DAY

-and suddenly we can no longer hear the music through the headphones, only the sound of rain.

SHRUE:
(Still unable to hear)
What?

JEFF:
(Annoyed)
What are you...? GO!

He grabs SHRUE bodily and shoves them out of the car.

SHRUE gasps as they fall onto the leaves, but then gets up and begins to run. We can hear the murmurs of an approaching LOVE-SAINT behind them.

JEFF:
Keep running, don't look back! Just keep running!

We hear the crunch of their feet on leaves as they run.

And then JEFF cries out as he trips and falls.

SHRUE runs after them.

SHRUE:
(Loudly)
Jeff?

JEFF:
(Short of breath)
Adjudicator. You need to get to the trees. I can't-

I can't stop thinking about them-
(Wounded)
I don't think I've ever truly been happy before.

SHRUE:
(Loudly, still unable to hear)

Jeff, what are you saying?

JEFF loses his temper. He picks up a stick and throws it at SHRUE.

JEFF:

Go, do you hear me?

Just get out of here! Go!

(Throwing another projectile)

Get lost, you...stupid, slick, empty suit! Begone!

(As SHRUE retreats)

That's it! Go!

We hear SHRUE running away through the bracken.

JEFF remains lying where he is, exhausted and overcome.

And a moment later, we hear the voice of the approaching LOVE-SAINT.

LOVE-SAINT:

(Singsong)

The years drag on and burdens weigh.

Darling, tell me about your day.

JEFF:

(Tenderly)

Yes. Yes, I will.

Oh, I've been waiting for you so long.

Come here, now. Come here-

The LOVE-SAINT strikes. And JEFF chokes as he's absorbed.

A moment later, we hear his neck snap.

FOREST, EXT, DAY

We hear the music of SHRUE's headphones playing again.

We can make out SHRUE's ragged breath as they dash through the leaves of the forest.

SHRUE struggles upwards, climbing up a fence and onto a roof.

SHRUE breathes hard as they make it to safety.

-and a moment later, below, we hear the slow shuffling sound of feet upon leaves and the murmur

SHRUE:
(Horried)
Oh, **no**...

LOVE-SAINT:
(From below, muffled)
Come down from there. You cannot hide.
For all of time, we'll be entwined.

Your family never loved you true.
But I have set my heart on you.

SHRUE:
(Anguished)
Please, go away. Just...please.

Please. Please leave me alone.

You aren't going to get me, you hear? I'm not going to listen.

-and a moment later, the music stops.

A very tense second of silence.

And then we hear the voice of the RECORDING-

RECORDING:
Rewinding. Please stand by.

The tape rewinds.

FOREST, EXT, NIGHT

The lullaby is still playing. Cicadas can be heard as night falls.

We fade out on the sound of SHRUE's sobbing. They must have been there for hours.

PRESS CONFERENCE, INT, DAY

We hear SHRUE standing at a podium. Cameras flash.

SHRUE sounds shaken. As they speak, we might hear the sound of a piece of paper being turned over.

SHRUE:

(Almost robotic)

...and I'd like to express my sincere thanks to the emergency services for coming to my rescue, and for their courageous efforts in detonating the final Saints without further loss of life.

My sincere thoughts and sympathies, too, are with the families of my staff, who gave their lives heroically and without hesitation to help me get to safety.

As I'm sure you can understand, I'll be taking some time off from the campaign trail to recover-

A clamour of REPORTERS' voices, as before.

REPORTER 1:

Adjudicator Shrue! Adjudicator Shrue!

May the Herald's wrath strike down the low-rate reportage of the Courier - can you tell us any more about your attackers?

SHRUE takes a breath.

SHRUE:

It seems likely at this point that the attackers did come from the Linger Straits across the border.

What we don't know is whether the individuals were acting alone or whether they did, as is rumoured, have some help.

As before, I'd urge all of you to remain calm and not jump to any conclusions.

REPORTER 2:

May the Herald's pathetic circulation continue to diminish as the Courier's lantern rises, Adjudicator - has this changed your position on the need for stronger action against Nesh?

SHRUE sighs. And then some part of them rebels.

SHRUE:

(Speaking honestly and roughly)

I...uh. Listen to me, now. Just listen.

The people of the North-Western Territory are my people. I grew up there. My family grew up there.

So long as I represent them, my sworn duty is to support their petitions, to listen to their needs...but also to be honest with them when I think we might be going down a bad road.

There's something in the air right now. I recognise that.

We've got too much history, us and the CLS, and it's hard to let go when so much has built up between us over the centuries. I know it's hard.

We're all looking for answers. I recognise that. We're all hurt.

But I hear this talk of another war, this chatter of fresh outrages that must be avenged and old insults that cannot be endured, spewing up from somewhere underneath our feet, and I just think...

(Pleading)

It's not going to be like last time, folks.

I've seen that for myself. It's just not.

It's not softness, it's not disloyalty, to point out that this is a fight we're not going to win.

And I am frightened, profoundly frightened, that all this sabre-rattling, all this anger...it's going to bear us someplace we can't come back from.

My people and I were attacked yesterday. Not anyone else. Not Ms Barbeau or her friends, or anyone else who's got a bone to pick with Nesh.

My people.

And I'll take that hurt on, I'll take the indignity and the loss, I'll find a way to live with it and bear it as best I can...

...if it'll stop that hurt being passed on in turn.

That's all I have to say.

Silence for a moment.

We might think that SHRUE has won them over.

Then-

REPORTER 1:

If war **is** declared, Adjudicator, do you still think you're the right candidate to represent the North-Western territory?

SHRUE winces.

And then begins to fumble it.

Gradually, the texture of their voice changes. We're listening to them on the radio.

SHRUE:

If it comes to it...

(Swallowing)

...if it comes to it, and I still very firmly hope that it doesn't, I have a strong relationship with the militarised faiths of the Peninsula.

They obviously have a great deal of history in my territory, and, ah, I have a great deal of respect for them - I know we can work together-

REPORTER 2:

(Yelling out)

Which faiths in particular, Adjudicator? Who are you paired with?

SHRUE:

(Now deeply flustered)

Well. Well, I've been developing some pairings with fresh, exciting new faiths that I think can really do a lot for the people of this territory.

(Struggling to explain)

Such as, such as...the, uh, the Noose Of The Twin Throats.

It's really, uh, clever conceptually, this sort of hanging-god, it, uh...I don't have my notes with me, uh...

...um...

...uh...

SHRUE trails off into silence.

We continue to hear the flash of cameras.

SHRUE:
(Quietly, to themselves)
....I'm done.

VAN, INT

The roar of car engines. The crackle of a radio as someone changes the station.

DIANE STONE:
Would-be Adjudicator Barbeau was all smiles today as she posed for photographs from the control station of an iron Cormorant - suggesting that the battle-saints could be reactivated and pressed into service to defend our northern borders against the CLS.

Next up, after these messages, Semyon Roi's classic crooner, 'One Glimpse And I Lost My Eyes.'

A burst of jingle music.

Then we hear-

FAULKNER:
(A little curtly)
Turn the radio off, please.

We need to keep our eyes open.

The radio clicks off.

We hear the sound of the van roaring onwards.

END OF EPISODE.