

THE SILT VERSES

Chapter VI: It Winds, It Worms, It Wends

MASON'S MONOLOGUE

MASON:

(Narrating)

This is how it begins.

Or, perhaps more accurately, this is how the story was told in our particular family when I was very young, because since that time I have heard endless variations upon the tale across the face of the Peninsula.

Truth takes many forms, it seems - although even the most quarrelsome of our scholars can agree between themselves on a few base details.

It always begins at dusk. In the mist and the cool, on the verge of the falling darkness.

And we're standing here upon the empty flats of the lower delta, with a promised bride looking out across the endless water.

She's been warned all her life about coming here, to the banks of the great nameless river.

Because the river, to the lifelong and generational enmity of the people who live in the broken village, will not obey.

During the harvest season, it floods its banks, drowning their fields in rich, sluggish silt.

During the planting season, it retreats sulkily out of sight, leaving behind parched ditches of cracked mud for the farmers to pick over.

Fish, when they do come up, come up wrong. Either on the surface, or when you split them open.

Wicked children who dare to play in the shallows usually come back safe and sound to the broken village.

But there are occasional days and nights when they don't, and their grieving families will carry out a fruitless search amongst the reeds, uncovering a complete absence of bodies or footprints but stumbling across freshly

discarded debris that seems to have come from another time and a place entirely.

Old glass bottles. Wheels of twisted black rubber. The coiled, slippery bodies of ancient eels and strange, twitching crabs.

All across the face of the Peninsula, scattered and hidden, are tenuous places - and this is a tenuous place if there ever was one.

She should not be here, lingering upon the cusp of dark and impossible depths.

She's been forbidden against coming here alone, but today she needs to be alone, and this is the only place for miles that's lonely enough.

Because tomorrow is her wedding day, and her long white dress is waiting for her upon her bed, and her relatives have flocked to town from all across the countryside, and she has nowhere else to go.

The promised bride is hoping, quietly and gently, that something dreadful will happen to her.

Murder, or lightning-strike, or simply sinking accidentally into the silt.

Something, anything, needs to happen to her to stop what's coming for her tomorrow.

Her tears strike the dark water. The surface breaks, and changes.

And in the spreading ripples, she sees a reflection that is not her own.

There is a garden beneath the river.

It's been there all along, she realises. Waiting for her to become capable of seeing it.

And the things that grow and flourish there are living and bright like nothing that grows above, and the one who tends to the garden is brighter and more beautiful than any man could be.

The girl looks down.

The Trawler-man looks back up.

Future generations will argue about exactly how he is portrayed, with certain depictions tending towards the ornately angelic or even monstrously crustacean.

But I like the simplicity of how it was taught to me.

A figure that's always still, and never certain.

The Trawler-man wears a grey mackintosh and a hood, and it ripples and changes with the currents, just as his skin ripples and changes.

He turns one face towards you when he wants to listen, and another face when he wants to speak.

"Why are you crying?" he asks, and when he's spoken, he turns the first of his faces away from her.

"Tomorrow is the Day of Going Forth," the promised bride tells him. "Which means that tomorrow I will be married. And I know that this is certain, because all of the arrangements have already been made, and everyone keeps telling me how happy I must be at last."

"But I also know that it can't be true, because this is not who I am. It is not who I will ever be.

I cannot give myself up to be shaped by this match and this commitment. I cannot be bound into this life that they have planned for me."

"Then become something else," the Trawler-man says, with the first of his two faces. "My currents are kind, and your flesh is pliant. I will make you something that cannot be bound."

"But I am afraid," the promised bride replies. "I have seen the bodies that come back from below. I have seen the obscene outcomes of the dreadful river."

The Trawler-man laughs, and says,

"They send you to their factories and fields to harden your palms, burden your back and choke your lungs. They strip you of your dignity and they turn your hair white and your gums bloody as they rot you from within. Why should their outcomes be natural, and mine obscene?"

The young bride says,

"But either way I become a vessel - for your purposes or for theirs."

The Trawler-man tells her, and his smile is kind,
“You are a vessel, no more than that; to be anything else would be in excess
of your own nature. Come. Bear me a gift, and I shall leave you something in
return.”

He extends a sodden hand. One of his smiles is kindly.

The promised bride turns and gazes out over the empty plains, back towards
the road that will lead her to the broken village and her wedding day
tomorrow.

She turns back again.

She plunges downwards, into the garden beneath the river.

A moment of silence.

And then we hear church bells, slowly and solemnly ringing.

And then it's time.

The bridegroom is waiting at the altar, in his votive robes, the garlands of
myrtle and rosehip strung around his neck.

He is alone here, in the small stone chapel that had been chosen as
representative of his family's faith.

The bride is late. The guests are late.

It's inexplicable.

No, not inexplicable. He's all too aware that the floodtides of the river can
sometimes leak up over the causeway, delaying travellers, and you need to
be understanding about these things outside of our control.

He will not lose his temper. Not on today of all days. Nothing will be allowed to
spoil what comes next.

His promised bride, become his chosen wife. Beautiful and kind. The envy of
other couples, a divine example to the desperate and the lonely.

Children, one after the other.

A firm path forwards for his life at last.

He can see it, ahead of him, as certain as if it's already happening.

But it isn't happening.

The bridegroom stands patiently.

He steps out into the aisle, peering out through the open chapel door, then retreats back to his place.

Finally, cursing gently under his breath, he strides out of the chapel and stands in the morning sunlight, waiting.

Fear comes next, after fury.

Because it's entirely possible, after all, that he has been tricked.

Perhaps they've all been playing a prank on him, perhaps his promised bride is not coming after all and he's been abandoned here, a laughing-stock of the entire village.

How could they do this to him? How could they dare?

And then as the bridegroom glares out over the road, - quite suddenly, he feels relief.

Because distant shapes are visible now, over the sodden flats, rising up over the horizon of the long road that cuts through the water.

Yes, the wedding guests are approaching.

They march aloft.

Shimmering rivers of silt are falling from the empty sockets of their faces. Tears and vomit and phlegm, all of it transmuted to shimmering rivers of silt.

The wedding guests are coming in upon the road, walking on the towering, elegant pincer-legs of newborn angels.

Their spines are sunk and merged into potched blue-and-purple shell, their eyes reaching upwards in celebration upon lofty stalks of flesh.

Their empty faces turned to the sky, their hands clapping in sequence to mark the march's beat.

The church bells are ringing from above.

The church bells are ringing from beneath.

And as the bridegroom staggers back, aghast, he sees the angels part, and his promised bride comes forward to the head of the procession.

Swept inland upon new towering legs, smiling as she strides forwards to meet him.

He turns, quaking with terror, screaming the names of absent friends and gods, and tries to run.

The ground has become uncertain. His feet sink into sludge and water.

The bride's pincer-leg thrusts through his shin, piercing flesh and splitting bone.

The bridegroom topples. Thick delta-mud soaks his vestments. His eyes are wide and helpless.

The shadow of the river falls over him.

The river fills every inch of him.

And when it's done with him, it passes on.

Presently, the bridegroom gets to his feet.

With freshly stumbling, uncertain steps, silt and water oozing from his trouser-legs and empty sockets, he staggers after the procession.

The wedding marches gloriously on, making its way inland, meeting new guests in the hills and the flatlands, growing as it goes.

These are the Silt Verses. And these are its disciples, in order of their arrival.

Jamie Stewart.
Méabh de Brún
Damien Niesewand
B. Narr
And Calder Dougherty.

Created by Jon Ware and Muna Hussen
Audio production by Sammy Holden.

MASON lists the cast and crew, as previously.

Then we hear CARPENTER'S voice, simultaneous with MASON's for a moment, as she picks up the narrative.

MASON / CARPENTER:
And this is how it begins. /
This is how it begins.

BACK ROOM, INT

A back room next to a busy kitchen. This is perhaps ten or fifteen years in the past.

When CARPENTER speaks in dialogue, we can hear that she's a little brighter, a little younger - and perhaps trying a little harder to make an impression with every word.

CARPENTER:
(Narrating).
I'm eighteen years old.

At the very end of another morning shift, in the back room of Hallowed Hoagies.

I'm skimming through the job listings with my friend Vaughan.

We've spent the past six or seven months together in this dank place, unsupervised and unmanaged, with the paper birettas balanced at awkward and brand-inappropriate angles upon our heads.

Idly swatting the flies away from the mozzarella, concocting various get-rich-quick schemes that go nowhere and achieve nothing.

Mocking at the future as it rushes towards us. Trying to figure out where else we could be that isn't here, but trying not to put too much sincerity on it.

If the world sees that you've made an investment in it, that's when it'll take things from you.

Between Vaughan and I, this is the most important lesson we've learnt in our lives so far.

I'm reading the worst of the job postings out loud, just to affirm that we'll never end up like this.

The International Brotherhood of the Holy Petropater offers excellent benefits for executives in its marketing division. However, the contract does state that you may be flown out to the wells for sacrifice or transfiguration at immediate notice, depending on whether a particular rig dries up without warning.

The South Glottage Central Pumping Station is looking for vestals to tend the sacred pipes. Long-term career development opportunities. If you invest in them, they'll invest in you. Candidates may be required to become a repository for overflow.

Vaughan, slicing tomatoes at the counter, tells me-

VAUGHAN:

Isn't this great? We each get to choose the thing that eats us.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

They say it so casually. Tossing the thought out into the world. Lets it go. Forgets it happened.

They have no idea how long I'll keep turning that phrase over in my mind.

We each get to choose the thing that eats us.

VAUGHAN:

What are you thinking?

CARPENTER:

Ah. Maybe I'll go into property.

The conversation between them is light, rapid-fire and well practiced.

CARPENTER:

(Joking)

The Peninsulan Exchange. Inchworm Tower. Fetch me a crowbar, I'm going into all of them. I might not even need to pay rent on a place to stay anymore. Just a life spent...going into property.

VAUGHAN:

(Playing along)

And the crawlspace, that'll make for a very spacious office.

CARPENTER:

Hissing at the cleaning staff. Leaving scrawled messages in blood across the shared kitchen. Singlehandedly driving the entire occupancy into remote working so I can have the place to myself.

It's the only way you can make a living in this market.

VAUGHAN:

(Seriously)

I'm thinking of going abroad.

CARPENTER:

Just generically abroad.

VAUGHAN:

No - to the Linger Straits. I think I want to apply for a marketing college up there. Get a scholarship, make the move permanent.

(Getting enthusiastic)

Somebody told me about a creative agency that's doing incredible things in apotheosis. They built a god of irony, if you can believe it. And apparently it's everywhere. That's crazy.

I take a three-year course and it's the fast lane to an assistant role, and from there it's only up.

A moment's silence. CARPENTER is trying to summon the words to say something sincere and sweet.

CARPENTER:

Vaughan-

VAUGHAN:

(Putting themselves down)

I know, I know. I'm crazy. I'm telling you all of this city-child-with-a-big-dream shit and then I'm going to end up working right across the street at the Panini Priory, just like that asshole with the horn-rimmed glasses who used to manage us.

CARPENTER:

(Sincerely)

No. Come off it now.

If anyone's capable of making it, Vaughan, it'll be you.

VAUGHAN:

Worst-case scenario is, I spend the next eight months applying in vain. At least then I spend those eight months feeling like I might have somewhere to go.

CARPENTER:

(Gently)
Everyone needs that.

The silence that hangs between them for a moment has become a little sad.

VAUGHAN:
Well, you'll be moving onto bigger and better things yourself soon, I'm sure.

CARPENTER:
You know what? If they paid us enough to live on, I'd happily stay where I am.

Someone asks me for a sandwich, I make them a sandwich. It works.

We hear the door of the restaurant opening, in the middle distance.

CARPENTER:
(A little wistfully)
If only all human transactions were so simple, eh.

VAUGHAN:
Ooh, customer.

I'll handle it. Get in the back room, they don't want to see your mug leering out at them.

We hear the sound of VAUGHAN's receding footsteps.

CARPENTER:
(Narrating)
I'm not naive, even at this age.

I know it's not unique, this feeling of helplessness.

This great rush of dread that everything is about to pass beyond my control, and what little I've built up here will be swept away and taken from me.

This is a common, animal response to change, and I know it's stupid.

But it still hurts, to feel like this.

I do not want to lose my friend Vaughan, who I open myself up to bit-by-bit, revealing my dark thoughts and my frustrations and my lack of interest in so much of what lies before us, and who has somehow not yet turned upon me.

I don't think I can stand to lose Vaughan to travel and study and success and all of the beating life that comes with these things.

I will never tell Vaughan this.

In the background, we hear VAUGHAN talking to the customer.

VAUGHAN:

(Indistinct, chirpy)

Welcome to Hallowed Hoagies. All of our sandwiches today use meat straight from the Chitterling's herds, and the salad is freshly picked.

MASON:

(Indistinct)

I'm actually wondering - is Mallory there? I'm her Uncle Jim.

VAUGHAN:

(Indistinct)

Oh, of course.

(Calling)

Mal. It's your Uncle Jim.

A moment of stunned silence.

CARPENTER:

What?

She steps out into the restaurant.

And then she sees her visitor - MASON, who, of course, she has never met before.

MASON:

(Sweetly, familiarly)

Surprise.

I'm so sorry to intrude, but I simply couldn't miss my favourite niece's birthday.

VAUGHAN:

(Shocked, with rising guilt)

Wait. It's today.

Mal, it's today?

CARPENTER is staring back at MASON, trying to get a read on what's happening.

CARPENTER:

(Dully, almost absent-mindedly)

Yes. It's today.

VAUGHAN:

(To CARPENTER)

You should have said something, you really should have said-

CARPENTER:

I didn't want to trouble you.

(To MASON)

Let's go somewhere else. I hate the things they do to the pickles in this place.

(To Vaughan)

Er-

VAUGHAN:

I'll cover for you, Mal. Have fun.

We hear the shop bell chime.

CAFE, INT

Slowly, we hear the rising sound of chatter.

MASON:

(Grunting slightly as he examines his food)

This is decidedly not a good cheeseburger.

Well, tuck in - don't let me stop you.

Silence.

CARPENTER:

Are you really my uncle?

MASON:

(Levelling with her)

Not as such.

But I knew your Nana. There weren't many who didn't amongst our people.

There was a time when all the children of the water knew the name of Adelina Glass.

Silence. CARPENTER is staring him down.

CARPENTER:

Why are you here?

MASON:

I thought someone should be around to celebrate your birthday.

CARPENTER:

I don't need that.

MASON:

If something is missing from our lives, it's all too easy to convince ourselves it was never needed in the first place.

I'm independent myself. But when we lack people around us who understand our needs, our wants - well, people are an anchor, aren't they?

Silence.

MASON:

Do you still practice the faith?

CARPENTER does not answer.

MASON:

But you remember. You remember what your Nana showed you.

Silence. For a moment, we think CARPENTER will still refuse to answer.

Then she says, very quietly, with a slight choke,

CARPENTER:

How could I not?

MASON:

The things we see when we're young. The...visions, the mysteries. These are the things that root into us like nothing else.

And even as we harden ourselves up as we grow old, they're still there with us. Buried deep inside, worming about our hearts.

(Settling into a story)

When I was seven or eight, my sisters and I discovered something in the copse just outside our house, in the abandoned places where we'd go to play with air rifles and with rockets, making noise for noise's sake.

There were warblers and thrushes that cried in the high branches, in the darkness between the stray beams of light, and if you waited and watched for long enough, you began to hear that there was something else up there,

something that cried like a bird, which heard the tiny dumb songs of the birds and responded in kind...but which was no bird at all.

We watched the Thing that dwelt in the branches that cried like a bird, and we listened to the sounds that followed the patterns of birdsong but came from the throat of no animal, and we fell in love. And like so many children in love, we began to explore how we could best torment the object of our affections.

Experimentation discovered that we could not harm the Thing that dwelt in the branches. We could fire off a round of air rifle shots in its direction and only cause an eruption of anger and startled wings, followed by silence for hours on end before the birds felt safe to settle back onto their perches.

But when we harmed its disciples - catching them with a lucky shot or noosing them in our traps, wringing their scrawny necks before tossing them in a small, untended pile amongst the nettles - that was when the song of the thing changed.

A lament, long and discordant, crying with distress. A wailing for the loss.

We thought this was marvellous.

For that entire summer we did nothing but hunt, and wreck, dashing eggs against the trunks, laughing and scorning the thing in the branches that could only cry, angry and sorrowing, from its place in the darkness of the copse.

But, you know, this was love, of a kind, in the only language I was capable of speaking.

I didn't kill the birds because I hated the Thing In The Branches, I killed them because its song of grief was more wonderful than anything I had heard upon the radio or in the mouths of the living, and I simply had no other way of reaching out to it.

If I could have sung like a bird, if I could have flown up to join it in the darkness, I'd have done that instead.

And despite everything I've been through, in spite of my own adult faith which defines me to this day, if I am one day walking along through dark trees and I hear the cry of something from high above me that is not a bird, not an animal at all...

It won't matter if it's seeking vengeance, or retribution.

I will spread my arms to welcome it. And I will see if, at long last, I am capable of flight.

Because I-

CARPENTER:

(Interrupting)

Mister.

You seem to know a lot about me. But you haven't figured something crucial. I dislike people who talk too much.

So if all of this is meant to make me trust you-

MASON:

(Unruffled)

You've been surviving on your own out here since the foster home, Mallory.

I know I could never make you trust me.

But you should learn to pay attention when other people talk.

Even if you prefer to stick to a few words yourself.

CARPENTER:

(Scoffing)

Because there's wisdom at the end of the story?

MASON:

Sometimes.

But sometimes because it's a weakness; telling stories, waxing on, making you listen. It means you've already beaten them, because they want to show you themselves when you're showing them nothing in return.

It's another person opening themselves up to you like a wound, in the vain hope of explaining who they are and what they mean and why they're in control. And the more they talk, the less they'll see.

That's when - to give an example - you can take that folding-knife out of your pocket, lean forward underneath the table, and press it into their thigh, then drag.

Slash their femoral artery wide open. Leave them for dead.

Yes, I did notice.

An uncertain silence.

CARPENTER, we're guessing, has brought a knife.

CARPENTER:

I wasn't going to use it. I just wasn't sure who you were.

MASON:

I can teach you how to use it. Again - if you want to.

CARPENTER:

I still don't understand why you're here.

MASON:

I'm an open book, I promise you.

Let me tell you what I'd like.

I'd like to come around again, perhaps in a few months' time or whenever you'd feel comfortable with, and I'd like to talk to you some more about your Nana, and what she believed.

I think that's something we could both benefit from.

A long silence.

CARPENTER:

So long as you keep paying for the pancakes.

MASON:

If only all human transactions were so simple.

(Toasting)

Happy birthday, Mallory Glass.

The sound of the clock ticking.

Time is moving on.

We hear, just for a moment, the triumphant voice of VAUGHAN.

VAUGHAN:

(Incredibly excited)

Mal, I got in! I got in, Mal!

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

Change comes, as change must.

My friend leaves me for another city and a fresh life.

I keep working on the hoagie stand. Alone.

But the old man continues to visit me. He tells me more about Nana.

Unearths more half-buried memories of my early childhood.

About the Parish, and the people scattered across the Peninsula who believed in the strength of the shifting water, just as we did.

About the things Nana did to show us the majesty and mystery of the god who lived at the bottom of our garden.

He's never late, my new Uncle Jim. He never misses an appointment.

It's like he wants to prove to me that some things in life can be stable. That some people can be relied upon.

Until, one day, things change again.

STING.

We're back in the cafe. More background chatter.

MASON:

I have to tell you something.

I'm afraid this may be the last time I'm able to buy you pancakes.

Silence. When CARPENTER does speak, she seems more withdrawn than before.

CARPENTER:

Why?

MASON:

I'm heading out westwards soon. Back towards the old worshipping places.

Enough time has passed since the purges. A few of us are hoping to re-establish ourselves near the mouth of the river without drawing undue attention to ourselves. Set up a temple or two. Begin rebuilding.

CARPENTER:

(Uncertainly)

And then what?

MASON:

We reclaim what we've lost. We relocate everything that we've forgotten. Perhaps we can even strike a blow against the enemies who drove us into hiding. But bringing people together, that's how it begins. That's what I've always been good at.

(Fishing for a response)

If you were to come with me, we could stop off at your Nana's house along the way.

I've driven past it, it's still there - boarded-up, a little dusty and rotten, but intact.

It'll feel like coming home.

MASON:

Perhaps you're happy as you are. But I've enjoyed our conversations, and I know I'd appreciate the company as well.

Silence. CARPENTER does not respond.

MASON:

(With increasing impatience)

Would it be agreeable for you to join me, Mallory? Is that something you want?

The silence lingers.

CARPENTER:

(Reluctantly)

Yes.

MASON sighs.

MASON:

If you'll accept a criticism, my child, it's that you're far too proud for your own good. I shouldn't have to fight you to give you what you want.

Once we settle in the Parish, there won't be any room for this kind of obstinacy. You'll need to learn how to live with other people.

(Trying again)

Tell me. Why do you want to come with me?

CARPENTER:

Because I don't have anywhere else to go.

Silence. This was not the answer MASON was expecting - and it doesn't make him particularly happy, either.

MASON:
(Curtly)
That'll do - to begin with.

STING.

FAULKNER'S HOME, INT

FAULKNER:
To begin with, it doesn't seem like anything's wrong.

I'm eighteen years old. I have walked home alone through the woods, as I have done every night since my brother Eddie left for the city.

The lights are on.

I arrive at my front door, my school rucksack still slung over my shoulder, I fumble with both locks, I push over the threshold-

-and quite suddenly I know that my father has gone.

There are a few small signs, it's true. The filthy plates are no longer stacked in the sink. A blanket has been folded neatly over the sofa.

But the absence, the lack, is everywhere. A presence has left us.

My father's shadow has lifted from this place.

I drop my rucksack. I sit on the cold floor in the empty house. And eventually, once it's dark, I lie back.

I have no interest in going up to the bedroom and seeing the cupboard that's been emptied, the bed that's been carefully made.

I don't want to read the single sheet of paper that's been left on the kitchen table for me to read.

It'll be practical, I'm sure. A list of instructions about what's remaining in the freezer. Ideas on which of our nearest neighbours to call in an emergency.

He won't have left any meaning for me beyond that.

He must have been thinking about doing this for a long time.

Perhaps, I consider, as I run my fingers back and forth over the potched floorboards, he figured out what happened to Charlie. What I did to Charlie.

And that's a thrill - the idea that he might have sensed that I had a kind of power and capability beyond our life together, that he somehow knew I had promised myself to the water, and that made him frightened of me.

I'd like to have purpose burnt into the cracks of my skin; a purpose so powerful and single-minded that it can fling people from me.

That's the kind of idea that can sustain you. Send you driving on.

The problem is...I don't think it's true.

My father had never been frightened of me. That would've required powers of observation that he never displayed towards any of his children.

I was just the last thing he left behind.

I spend all night like that, on the floor of the empty living room, in the house my dad built, like something that's been discarded.

When I wake up, the following morning with a stiff neck and a shiver in my spine, I still don't look at my father's letter.

I feel...resolved. Determined to go on, if only out of spite.

I take my rucksack up to my bedroom, and I stuff it with clothes from my wardrobe. I change out of my uniform, and find a T-shirt and jeans to wear instead. I pack some chocolate bars for the road ahead.

I'd rather abandon this place than be abandoned.

I won't be left here to live out a life unseen.

Before I go, I scrawl the crude marks of the Drowning Song upon the walls, across the bath and sink and underneath the beds, across the photograph frames and tearing into the fabric of the couch where we'd sit together.

I have some hateful, cruel idea that another family, a happy laughing family, may arrive here after we're gone. Dropping their cases down, exploring room after room, finding the places where Dad slept, where Charlie slept, where I slept. Renaming the rooms and making new experiences.

Until the marks draw them in.

And these awful, happy, laughing people will find themselves suddenly compelled to drown in the sinks of their new home; helplessly forcing their own heads underneath the taps, their mouths widening taut and ready to receive the choking currents from below.

Nobody else should inhabit this place, after us.

Nobody else should get to succeed, where we failed so very badly, to be a family.

The trucker lanes are vast.

The lorries roll on, their sides emblazoned with the grinning, inhuman faces of the great commercial gods.

The Slag King. Pit Head. He Who Walks In Fizz And In Flavour.

The drivers in their high manual cabs, wearing sunglasses and pollutant-masks, all look the same.

Nothing stops for me. Nobody even acknowledges that I'm out here, walking alone through the dank brown mists and the whispers.

Sometimes I turn and I make the Stray Walker's signs, to try and catch their attention.

Then I give up and walk, and then after an hour or more I stop and try again, and then I give up and walk.

Give up. Walk.

Try again.

Give up. Walk.

Try again.

We hear the lorries roaring past, briefly.

At the first waystation, I drop five loose into the payphone. I dial the first four digits of my older brother Eddie's number.

I replace the receiver.

At the second waystation, the following morning, I do the same. The first four digits, then I stop.

I must spend altogether about half of my money, on the long road westwards, not calling my brother.

And the pattern repeats itself, across a dozen different landscapes, over the course of a half-dozen months.

The hardships of the road are perhaps best not dwelt upon.

The lonely moments. The shivering moments. The hungry and hopeless moments, rustling in bins for discarded chocolate bars.

But then there comes an evening, after a long day's walk and a longer week of wanderings, when I find myself at last standing in front of a moss-covered door - an old moss-covered steel door, set deep into the flats, perhaps an old bunker from the wars, and there are hundreds of old bunkers in these territories, and I've already visited far too many of them according to the whims and deceits of innumerable unreliable informants, but this is the one.

I'm certain of it.

This is the place, at long last, where my knock will be answered.

The secret hiding place of the Parish.

My travelling clothes are sodden and stinking. I've lost a considerable amount of weight. My feet are sore and blistered. But I'm smiling.

I already have it laid out in my head, how it'll happen.

There'll be a hatch in the door. It'll slide open - a pair of glaring, suspicious eyes, like in the old comic-books.

I'll draw the marks in the mud for their approval.

I'll show them that they and I are comrades of the faith.

And the door of the hidden seminary will swing open, and my people will come swarming out in their white robes of the deep waters, and they'll embrace me as nobody has ever embraced me before, laughing and congratulating me and clapping me on the back.

They'll ask me if it was a hard road, getting here.

And I'll say, 'no, I wasn't lonely. I wasn't tired. I'm not hurting. My god was walking with me, all this while.'

I dump my rucksack down into the mud. I face up to the door, and I knock.

A heavy, resounding, above all, empty sound.

Nobody answers.

I wait.

I knock again.

I can see the security camera, half-disguised in the murk, half-shielded by the crawling lichen.

The light is blinking.

This is the right place, I **know** it's the right place, where my people are waiting for me at long last, and I won't be turned away.

People always seem to underestimate me.

I take a seat in the mud before the locked door, crossing my legs.

And I face it.

Day departs. Dusk comes.

And I wait for them to understand that I am worthy. That they need to let me in, my brethren, and join them.

I'm beginning to shiver. It's getting dark, and I still have not eaten, and if this isn't the place, I don't know where I have left to go,

They'll write about this one day. How the young prophet was shunned, and turned away, but proved his resilience and strength of will.

This is how it begins, I tell myself, alone in the murk, as the insects swarm and land and bite on my motionless skin.

This is how it begins...because it has to.

MOTEL, INT

The familiar sound of a bell ringing.

Hayward is waiting at the deserted reception of the motel.

We hear his voice, like an echo

HAYWARD:
(*Calling out.*)
Hello. Hello.

Looking for a room. Hello, hello?

Service?

Silence as HAYWARD waits.

Very faintly, we can hear a rhythmic scratching sound.

It's a horrid, insistent sound in the background.

HAYWARD:
(*Catching the sound*)
Someone there?

A door creaks as HAYWARD moves on into the back room.

The scratching sound grows louder.

HAYWARD can see STANTON, sitting in the corner of the back room.

HAYWARD:
You the motel owner? I've been looking for service.
(*Nervously*)
Everything OK back there?

Is there a light in here, or...

(*With sudden panic and horror*)

Oh, no.

Oh, no...

Suddenly, we hear the voice of STANTON.

It feels different. Calm.

We are listening to something horrible,

STANTON:

(Narrating)

I don't turn around to acknowledge the intruder.

Behind me, he dances back and forth in the threshold, his arms flailing.

Babbling words in a tongue that no longer has any relevance to me.

He's only frightened because he doesn't understand.

His panic leads him stumbling onwards. He almost trips over the sloughings of my old skin, laid neatly across the carpeted floor.

He's welcome to it.

My long whiskered feelers twitch, straining out across the air until they find a hard surface. My round black-pearl eyes blink.

Slowly, clumsily, I raise my cheliped claws to the wall, I inch closer on a dozen legs that crawl from under my dangling trousers, and with the very tip I roughly scratch the prayer-marks as if I've known them my entire life.

My blood makes for a crude ink.

This room makes for a cruder canvas.

My tools are imperfect and uncertain, as am I, but we must all work with what we've been given; and the task itself is perfection enough.

I understand what it all meant now. I was looking at all of it backwards.

There's nothing to be afraid of, once you pass down through the water and you're gazing into the darkness, lit from above.

I understand this ruined town, slumping with each day further into the silt of the falling banks.

I understand this failing, comfortless motel, which I took up after my mother's death and kept running, as best as I was capable of, even though the guests no longer came.

I understand this back room, filled with my mother's memories, with rotten furniture and the peeling yellow wallpaper that I never once thought to replace.

I understand the skin that's been shed. An unhappy, limited human, railing against his own limitations but never once thinking about the steps he might take to overcome them.

This town was the river's territory once. It has never once had a chance to really live. It's only ever trudged on, dead-eyed and sad, towards an empty conclusion.

And I...I was only ever trudging on here myself, picking up a tarnished thread that was handed to me by the last generation, never once wondering where it would lead me.

All of that's been changed now.

The river's last tide is coming for this town. I shall be its herald. We'll find the end we've all been looking for.

And in the frantic shrieks of the unready...

...this is how it begins.