

OFFICE, INT, DAY

SHRUE enters their office - and sighs deeply.

Then they look up - and realise with some surprise that MASON is standing before the mantlepiece in their office. Comfortable, a little smug.

MASON:
Adjudicator. How are the peace talks going?

SHRUE:
(In shock)
Who are you?

MASON:
You and I actually went to school together, if you'll believe it.

Back when you grew up along the water's edge, as you're so fond of telling the papers.

But I'm here in your office today **not** to reminisce about old times - but rather as a senior representative of the Parish of Tide and Flesh.

SHRUE takes the situation in.

SHRUE:
To kill me?

MASON:
(Cheerily)
Oh, let's hope not.
(A little warning in his voice)
I did disable your silent alarm, however. As a precaution.

Please, have a seat. I was just admiring your mantlepiece deities.
(Admiring a small statuette)
Are these amber?

SHRUE sits, heavily.

SHRUE:
Took 'em from a village down south. They're meant to be protective, bring good fortune to a household.

The Golden Hounds of Crooked Lane, they're called. Gods to haunt your steps and watch your hearth.

MASON:

(Enjoying the sound of it)

The Golden Hounds of Crooked Lane.

We give such pretty names to the nameless things - don't we?

We tell such wonderful stories about them.

SHRUE doesn't respond.

MASON replaces the statue with a clunk.

MASON:

I understand my appointment with you today is timely.

I've been reliably informed that the hunters you hired to strike against us have just this morning located one of our compounds.

(With a little genuine concern)

A good number of my children are holed up there.

SHRUE:

(Feeling a little more in control)

Ah. So you're here to beg for your people's lives.

MASON:

If their survival can be worked into our arrangement, I'll take it as an added bonus.

SHRUE:

(Growing annoyed)

There's not going to be any arrangement between us.

MASON:

(Laying out his case)

In three weeks, the Legislatures will debate the necessity of military action against the Linger Straits. You are admirably planning to lead a protest vote, I understand, but you must already know it will fail.

When the war begins, as one of its key opponents, you will become useless. Or worse, suspect.

Your odds of retaining your position after the local election results - well, we both know how that's looking.

They stare at each other for a long moment.

SHRUE:

(With an unhappy smile)

Maybe I don't want to retain this position. Have you considered that?

Maybe I've had enough of these...these fucking twisters.

MASON:

If it helps, I still believe you could still do a considerable amount of good from where you are.

If a war **must** take place, and of course we all hope that it doesn't - better that it has good people overseeing its direction. The right hands at the wheel.

Allowing someone like Adjudicator Barbeau to take control - it seems like a dereliction of duty more than anything else, doesn't it?

SHRUE:

(Stung)

That's not her title yet.

MASON:

(As if to say, 'but she will be.')

No. Not yet.

Our faith is old.

Our god is powerful, as you've seen, although its strength has been too long forgotten.

And you will most certainly be able to re-assert yourself - reinvent yourself, even - in the Legislatures, in the press, wherever such a reinvention is required...

...by offering the strength of the White Gull river towards the coming military efforts.

(Putting it simply)

We're available for hire.

SHRUE:

You think people have forgotten about what you did at Bellwethers?

MASON:

I think that thanks to the sterling efforts of Ms Barbeau and company, many of our citizenry are already fully persuaded that it was our enemies across the water who were responsible.

The formal licencing and recognition of our faith, accompanied by some suitable press statements as to our innocence, should be enough to settle the matter for the history books.

The tune is already written; the song merely needs to be sung.

SHRUE is tempted. Not persuaded, but tempted.

SHRUE:

And how will your own people feel about becoming lawful?

MASON:

The Katabasians will agree with me.

We have a few younger, more fervent elements, it's true, but I've been working to deal with those in my own fashion.

SHRUE considers.

SHRUE:

Can I think it over?

MASON:

You can say yes.

(Calmly)

Alternatively, I kill you right now in your office, and your assassination can be my personal solace for our loss today.

Under those circumstances, whether they mourn you or replace you - the vote will still go ahead.

They stare at each other in the silence.

Abruptly, SHRUE's phone begins to ring.

SHRUE:

(Startled)

-Gods!-

MASON:

(Gesturing to the phone)

Do you mind? I think it's for me.

SHRUE lifts the phone and hands it over.

MASON:

Thank you.

(Into the phone)

Sister Thurrocks. Good to hear your voice.

(With relief and excitement, but trying not to let on)

Mm-hmm.

Yes, I'll remember. Love you lots. Get as far away from there as you can, now.

He replaces the receiver. Waits smugly for SHRUE to ask him-

SHRUE:

What was that?

MASON:

(Now very confident)

Oh - the final piece in our negotiations.

The Wither Mark. The White Gull's wrath is now available for sale as part of our arrangement.

A miraculous new weapon - only one previous owner to date - which can be turned upon Nesh.

Drowning towns, cities. Whatever's required.

It's been uncontrollable and somewhat clumsy, yes, in the hands of fanatics and fools, but that doesn't mean it **can't** be controlled. In the right hands.

It's yours, Adjudicator - if you want it.

SHRUE hesitates.

We don't hear their response.