

THE SILT VERSES - SEASON 3, CHAPTER 2

WATCHMAN'S TENT, INT, DAY

We hear a burst of impressive, CNN-esque music. We're listening to a political broadcast programme.

SAM KINCANNON:

(Seriously, urgently, on the radio)

This is Sam Kincannon, and you're listening to Hard Truths With Sam Kincannon.

Tonight, the Dosser's Draft is formally signed into law, requiring all citizens of age who are **not** already contracted to a licenced deity to be available for auxiliary military duties if called upon.

We'll be discussing the draft with Adjudicator Cross of the South-Eastern and giving you all the facts you need to get your paperwork in order.

Gradually, as the radio continues to play, we hear PRIVATE TAINSLEY entering the tent, carrying firewood. He dumps it on the ground.

We can hear rain spattering the tent canvas outside.

ADJUDICATOR CROSS:

(Lightly, on the radio)

I've actually just spoken to some of the new enlisted volunteers. One young lady from my territory, the South-East, she was going to be hallowed into a war-saint.

But what she said was - and I'll never forget this - "I've had triplets. Whatever happens to me, it can't hurt more than that."

Isn't that absolutely splendid? Our national character, that, that sense of dark and defiant humour.

And I, I really think that-

TAINSLEY:

Argh. Nope.

He retunes the radio.

RADIO ADVERT:

(Cheerily)

As a mother of four, I've got enough to worry about between shopping, chores, housework, and these rascals. Keeping my home warm and bright should be the last thing on my mind.

(Laughing children)

That's why I signed up to a Platinum contract with the Church Electric.

TAINSLEY:

(Annoyed)

More sodding adverts-

He puts the kettle on and settles into a chair.

RADIO ADVERT:

A Platinum contract means an automatic monthly debit so I don't need to worry about bills or changing energy costs.

It gives me great exclusive extras like access to the Church's latest minor deity, the Effervescent Flame.

And it adds my entire family to a shared licence as contracted worshippers of the Saint - so we don't need to worry about an unexpected knock on the door, either.

Now I can get back to what's really important.

(More laughing children)

Praise the Saint!

A small alarm goes off. TAINSLEY sits up.

He switches the radio off, and reaches for the receiver.

TAINSLEY:

(Into the radio)

Corp, there's someone coming.

Corporal?

Nobody responds.

TAINSLEY grabs a rifle and scrambles rapidly to his feet-

WOODS, EXT, DAY

TAINSLEY runs out into the woods.

We can faintly hear the same warning - 'You have come to the end of the inhabited lands. Stray and starving gods dwell beyond this point. Turn back. Turn back.' - that we heard during the last episode.

We can hear approaching footsteps now, as well.

TAINSLEY calls out a warning.

TAINSLEY:

(Calling out)

Ma'am, this is a restricted area. The shoreline is off-limits, it's all been mined!

Ma'am, you can't come through here!

The figure (VAL) keeps approaching. She does not respond.

TAINSLEY swallows nervously. He raises his rifle, frantically cocking it.

TAINSLEY:

(Urgently)

Ma'am, stop walking.

I...I will shoot you, ma'am! Please stop walking!

Ma'am-

VAL stops walking. For a moment.

And then she begins to circle him, like a shark.

If we're sharp-eared, we might notice that the automated warning cuts out while she's speaking.

VAL:

(Calmly and confidently persuasive)

Soldier.

You will not shoot me, and you did not **see** me.

I will certainly not set off any land-mines on my way down the cliffs.

When I make it down to the shoreline, there will be a motorboat waiting for me there with a full engine.

The Last Word is absolutely clear on all of these points.

Don't you agree?

TAINSLEY just stares at her in bafflement.

Then, after a moment, he shifts his footing - and agrees.

TAINSLEY:
(Meekly)
I...yes. Yes, of course.

VAL:
What is your name, private?

TAINSLEY:
Tainsley, ma'am.

VAL continues to circle.

As she speaks, the warning cuts out again - and all around us, we can hear something like rising tension. Like a train coming.

TAINSLEY begins to splutter, breathing hard - like he's having a seizure at the sound of her words.

VAL:
(Reassuringly)
You are a good soldier, Tainsley.

Better than that - you're a patriot.

There is a great destiny waiting for you, and you'll prove yourself a hero by the end.

When it's your time to die - Tainsley - you'll die a hero's death, and it will be brave, and it will be purposeful.

Each of your bullets will strike the right target, just at the right moment, in just the right place.

You will always be remembered for what you did to keep our country safe.

Don't you agree?

We hear a sudden, agonising screech, and the tension falls away-

-and TAINSLEY falls to the ground, choking and gasping.

After a moment, he looks up.

TAINSLEY:
(Utterly convinced and agreeable)
 Yes. Yes.

Thank you, ma'am.
(Scrambling to his feet)
 Let me - let me open the gate for you.

VAL:
(Graciously)
 Thank you, Tainsley. Remember to lock up after me, please.

The gate opens. She walks on.

The automated warning continues to call out from above us.

BEACH, EXT. DAY

An air raid siren overhead. Waves washing up on the shoreline.

We hear VAL's feet upon the rocks of the cliffs.

And we hear her narrating.

VAL:
(Narrating)
 They're not lying, you know, when they say that the war is going badly.

I suppose the difficulty comes to this: in the modern age absolute victory
 and absolute defeat have become nearly impossible things to declare.

After all, there are so many new gods these days and so many different ways the story can be spun.

Someone - nobody wants to admit who - has already exploded the channel bridge, making a direct assault ever more difficult and reckless.

And so both sides are for now content to focus on prolonged and devastating bombardment - mass sanctification, fleets of god-rockets spiralling up into the sky - along the length of the coast.

This is the sort of thing that can appear in newspapers, and which we can all feel good about.

And there are gods out here, too, lurking in the charred sand and swimming in the polluted water, who play their own part in making any land invasion a hopeless prospect.

The Peninsula favours the Torn Prince, that awful barbed-wire deity whose stick-figure angels patrol our country's northern beaches, catching up boatfuls of attempted invaders in loving steel tendrils, twisting tight.

The Linger Straits have evolved their love-saints, chaining the poor whimpering things to floating sea-mines, letting them drift and swim until they find an unlucky victim in the channel who they will pursue, relentlessly, chasing one final explosive embrace-

And now the polluted air and smoke of the endless bombardments is beginning to twist these lands which are, already, so extremely twisted.

Wild new angels stalk the earth here now beyond the barricades, seeking reluctant offerings from military patrols or fleeing civilians.

Licensed deities twist and deform, becoming something new which cannot be negotiated with nor governed.

A great strip of god-haunted, lunatic land is spreading from north to south, from south to north, on either side of the water.

This is the war's one successful conquest, and nobody living will ever benefit from it.

We hear VAL's feet upon the sand.

Gradually, the ambient noise of the beach is replaced by the sounds of the open sea.

VAL:
(Narrating)
 I like it out here.

Nobody can stop me at the barricades on the Peninsular side. Nothing is capable of chasing me down once I've passed beyond them.

I stroll through this new country, this third peculiar territory between the two warring nations, entirely unchanged and entirely unbothered.

I walk the sands in bare feet all the way down to the abandoned motorboat that carries me, untroubled through the channel's dark waters.

The love-saints gaze upon me with hollow eyes as I pass them by in my little boat, and then they swim on.

They recognise me as a kindred spirit, or perhaps another's prize.

I have already been chosen; I am already marked.

Faintly, we hear the air raid sirens of the Linger Straits overhead.

VAL:
 And in time, the enemy's coastline appears on the horizon. The chalk-white cliffs of the Linger Straits, a perfect mirror of our own shores.

My little boat washes up on the charred and broken beach. I step ashore.

We hear the boat washing up - and VAL's feet hit the water.

A moment later, we hear her feet on gravel.

VAL:
 With only a little effort I pass beyond the bombardment zone and the CLS soldiers who - briefly - try to stop me.

For a moment we hear alarms - and a repetitive, fleshy thud, accompanied by horrible, inhuman moans.

We cannot be certain, but we could imagine that VAL has told a CLS soldier that his duty is to keep banging his head against the wall until it breaks.

VAL's footsteps move on, and the sound quickly fades.

VAL:

There's a village out here in the fields of the northern country, a rotten little place with dingy whitewashed houses and a few tumbledown farms, sat amongst the fields just beyond the reach of the Peninsula's god-rockets.

This is where I'll begin.

RECORDING BOOTH, INT, DAY

Silence. The sound of rushing water.

And then the voice of SHRUE. They're confident, compelling, emotive - they might even surprise us with that.

They're working on a pre-record for the intended legalisation of the Parish.

They're telling MASON's story from Season 1, the Trawler-man's tale of the Promised Bride - but it's been repurposed and reshaped into something else.

Inspiring music begins to play underneath.

SHRUE:

"This is how it begins.

At dusk. In the mist and the cool, on the verge of the falling darkness.

And a promised bride is standing here upon the empty flats of the lower delta, looking out across the endless water."

From across the recording booth, we hear a RADIO EXEC rolling across in his chair, speaking quietly to a subordinate.

RADIO EXEC:

(Softly)

Maybe dial the gain back a little on the endless water.

SHRUE:

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

But the promised bride has no choice, because her groom has been stolen from her.

Murdered, by the enemies across the water, with a rifle in his hand and her locket dangling about his throat.

Murdered by the same enemies that even now surround her village upon all sides, readying themselves for the next attack.

The Promised Bride is crying. Because something, anything, needs to happen to stop what's coming for her people 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.

"Why are you crying?" the Trawler-man 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 our foes will make their final assault; they will seize this land for their own."

"I know that I must fight, and I know that I must die, in defence of my people and my community, and I am not afraid to die - but what use can my death be, if our foes overrun us all the same?"

"I am something frail, and I am something small, and even the final sacrifice of my body and spirit would not be enough to prevent our people from being conquered."

"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 conquered."

SHRUE holds there for a moment, and then takes a breath.

RECORDING EXEC:

(Calling from the sidelines)

OK, and that's it for today, people!

STREETS OF GLOTTAGE, EXT, DAY

SHRUE breathes out - opens their umbrella, and walks through the crowds. It's raining in Glottage, and we can hear adverts barking out all around us.

A TSV DEALER pursues SHRUE doggedly through the streets, and we hear the episode credits.

SHRUE appears to be ignoring them.

DEALER:
(As if proffering drugs, tired and desperate)
 Silt Verses. I got Silt Verses.

GM Hakim. Marta da Silva. Sarah Griffin.
(Tapping on a car window)
 Hey. Hey. You looking for Silt Verses? Bit of TSV?

Yinan Shentu? Rhys Lawton? Felix Trench? I've got Dave Wilson?

SHRUE:
(Losing patience)
 No!

SHRUE steps into their car.

TSV DEALER:
(Pleading)
 I'm just trying to find somewhere safe for tonight, mate. Come on. They're going to draft me if they catch me out here.

CAR, INT, DAY

SHRUE slams the door - and promptly locks it.

TSV DEALER:
(Now muffled)
 Please. Please help me.
(Muttering)
 -arsehole-

The TSV DEALER thumps on the window in irritation, then departs.

SHRUE breathes out as the car pulls away.

We can still hear rain, and the faint sound of adverts all around us.

SHRUE gently taps the glass where the DEALER hit it.

SHRUE:

(Narrating)

Glottage feels different now.

Emptier, certainly, a particular kind of emptiness that nobody seems to want to talk about - except when they say something like, "It's so nice to be able to walk through the station without someone coming at you begging for money."

There's also camaraderie, or maybe just the performance of camaraderie - the last war, we all recall, was a time when people came together as a community and really took care of each other, so this, too, must be one of those times.

There are air raid sirens and formal daily death reports that contradict the informal daily death reports, there are missile strikes lighting up the sky to the north of the city, and there are army trucks with cages and screaming faces that we will not think about too hard...

...but perhaps this will do us all some good, you know? Perhaps it'll bring us all together.

(Guiltily and hypocritically)

There are days, it's absolutely true, when I feel like giving up.

Days when I no longer feel entirely convinced that a lifetime in politics has been a life well spent.

It's not that you've lost your humanity or anything like that. There's no point in being dramatic.

Just a faint staining at the edges of your personhood, the patina of complicity weakening the hard steel rods that are supposed to be keeping you standing upright day after day in a field like politics.

You drive past something new and something awful that you aren't **supposed** to think about too hard - the jeeps and fresh-faced soldiers and hasty checkpoints established for the new draft, vagrants rattling the bars of the new cages that sit upon the truck-beds - and you can do nothing whatsoever about it, nothing to make those poor people's condition any better, but you feel as if perhaps you **should** have done something.

As if you're to blame for the sights you're forced to turn your eyes away from, even though they were here before you and they will most certainly outlast you.

On days like these, I only have to gaze up at the seat of government itself, visible through the Petrichoral Parks of Glottage, and I begin to feel my resolve strengthen.

Seventeen high white columns stood before a great casket of white marble. Standing tall on the western side, collapsing in upon itself on the eastern side.

The Moridame Palace was built some four hundred years ago by High Adjudicator Egriman, who as we all know lost his mind, declared himself king of the Unified Peninsula, and then the very next day a god, or a god-king, or a king of all the gods - he hadn't quite established the proper terminology.

After we shot Egriman and buried him deep beneath the vaults of his own palace, we decided that while he might have been a maniac and a fascist and utterly antithetical to our own principles of representative democracy, we did like what he'd done with all the columns.

So we kept the Moridame, and we installed a plaque about how the man's atrocities must, of course, never be forgotten.

Then in the last war, the Lingers hit the palace with a lucky suicide-bomber saint, and the entire eastern side of the roof caved in, and we decided to keep the rubble around as well.

As evidence of our courage under fire, or just to remind ourselves what foreigners were capable of.

The Moridame's been subsiding ever since, collapsing in on itself year by year, losing corridors and backrooms to its own gradual decay - but it's too slow to be considered an emergency and too symbolically important to ever be truly abandoned.

A palace, a monument, and a ruin all at once.

Like this country, a thing both living and dead.

A corpse that keeps dragging itself on and leaving guts trailing in its wake, a triumph of dogged motor function over sense.

It looks like a hive, the Moridame, a swarming insect-nest of white marble and neat-cut grass.

It's a reminder that I have to stay strong, and I have to pick my moments carefully - and there's no time to feel guilty about the things I cannot change.

Because I have changed things. Incrementally, slowly, sometimes agonisingly slowly - which is the only way any change can truly last.

Progress is a kind of trick, above all, it's a subtlety. Like a building in collapse, it needs to have already happened when you weren't quite looking. It needs to become fact before it can be picked apart.

And there are biting, scuttling things in the subsiding walls of the Moridame that come with their own offices and personal assistants -

-and if I give them an opening, I'll be devoured.

The car roars on.

Piped in on the speakers, we catch a hint of a cheerful, patriotic military tune.

COUNCIL CHAMBER, INT, DAY

A busy council room. Everyone is deep in conversation as PRESS SECRETARY CARSON enters.

He hammers a gavel on the desk for attention - then does it again to get a little silence.

CARSON is a talker: cordial, good-humoured, and highly conscientious, and utterly hollow beneath it all.

CARSON:

(Calling to the room)

Hello, good morning, salutations and happy birthdays to those of you whose birthday it is. We'll kick off in five - OK, everyone?

He opens up his notes. ADJUDICATOR CROSS comes over to pat him on the back.

ADJUDICATOR CROSS:
Press Secretary. How are you, how are you.

CARSON:
(To CROSS, shaking his hand)
Hey, Cross, good to see you in town. Love the necktie, you cad and bounder, sir!

From nearby, SHRUE clears their throat. CARSON leaps up at once to greet them.

CARSON:
(To SHRUE, shaking their hand)
Ah!

Shrue! First time on CenSec, hey?

Really damned good to have you with us at last. Get through the new gates OK?

Lots of security, I know, lots of fuss, I hate it, personally, but has to be done!

He chuckles warmly.

SHRUE:
(Nervous and intimidated)
Thank you, Press Secretary. It's, uh, it's good to be here.

CARSON:
(Yanking SHRUE's chain)
Shrue, I promise you I'm not yanking your chain here, but the High Adjudicator, he's been watching your career now with interest.

And he's always said to me, he's always said,
(Putting on a voice)
'as soon as a spot opens up on that council, you get Shrue in the room. They've got an, uh, an authentic, alternative voice that needs to be heard.'

He chuckles warmly.

SHRUE:
That's - that's good to hear.

I was, I was so sorry to hear about Adjudicator Willis, by the way-

CARSON:

(Dismissively)

Don't worry about it. Like I said, the H.A's got his eye on you, and you're the one he wants at this table. You're in, Willis is in the ground. So it goes.

H.A. won't be joining us today, but he wanted me to pass that message on - you've got his unconditional support.

Take a pew and lap up all the cheering.

(Cheering)

Yahhh! Woooo-

SHRUE nervously tries to redirect the conversation.

SHRUE:

Well, uh, I'm actually waiting on his approval. Illegal river-god faith from my territory that wants to come into the fold, help with the war effort.

I submitted the report last month, and I think they've got a lot of value for us.

(Chuckling anxiously)

They're going to make me an honorary Katabasian, if you can believe it, that's an, uh, elder of the faith - apparently there's this whole ceremony, and-

CARSON:

How many bodies?

SHRUE:

I'm sorry?

CARSON:

(Calmly)

How many disciples. Just a guess-timate. Anyone in hiding, anyone not already on the census. It's - it's just good to know.

If it's in the dozens, that's not something we can take time for. You know. Gotta prioritise.

SHRUE:

I'm honestly not sure.

(Trying to explain)

They're more, uh - it's in the report, but they've got a prayer-mark that's, like, a weapon, it's very dramatic, very shock-and-awe, and I think its utility for defence, it'd be just-

CARSON:

(Making an appraising noise)

H.A's office is more interested in raw numbers right now than weaponry. We've got plenty of gods, fewer people.

Find out those numbers for me and it's something I can help with.

SHRUE:

(Questioningly)

But if the approval goes through...they'd be licenced, and they'd be safe. According to the terms of the draft.

CARSON:

(Reassuringly)

Absolutely they would be. Draft's for the unlicenced and the unlicenced only. That is not something we're about to backslide on.

It's just something we need to know before we can act.

SHRUE stares at him - and then backs down.

SHRUE:

...I can find out those numbers for you, Press Secretary.

CARSON:

(Cheerful)

Do, please do. And I'll investigate on my end as well, OK? Find out what the hold-up is.

We've got staff shortages here as well, as I'm sure you've seen. Gets worse every week. But hey, I like making my own coffee; it grounds you.

(Warmly chuckling)

Get it? Grounds you?

(Abruptly changing subject)

Hey, how's the family? Settled in the south?

SHRUE:

(Completely caught off-guard)

Yes, I think so. I, um, need to check in with them, actually-

CARSON:

(Reassuring)

That's good, Shrue. That's good. Because at a time like this, you know, what's really important is that we keep our people safe.

Could be my kids are playing with your kids, you know? Wouldn't that be sweet, if they were playmates?

(Dismissing SHRUE)

I've got to get started, but it's been great to catch up with you, and let's talk more soon. Take a seat, Adjudicator.

CARSON pats SHRUE on the back and strides to the front.

CARSON:

Honoured adjudicators! Honoured adjudicators! OK, if we could have your attention, please!

(Reading from the agenda)

We'll keep this quick, and we'll keep this light.

So, good news first, and this is the stuff that we want you talking about in the press as much as you can. Spread it like compost, folks, see what grows.

(Item one)

Uhhh. Four successful strikes last night on a storage facility - just forty miles south from Nesh. We're getting closer all the time. Wind-gods are doing great work for us.

(Item two)

Devlin's Badge has been awarded to a small boy in the South-Eastern who caught a pair of Linger spies sneaking around in his parents' barn.

(With knowing scepticism)

Wonder how they made it all the way down there.

This kid is **adorable**. Chubby little cheeks, you just wanna squeeze 'em.

Expect a whole news cycle all about him, expect to hear his thoughts on everything that matters and everything that doesn't. You will be so sick of him by the end.

(With a slightly guilty chuckle)

Now for the fuck-ups.

After the loss of the month of Langours, the H.A. has let me know that there will be no further military experimentation upon time-gods during the course of this conflict.

Reassuring to us all, I'm sure.

It was a good idea, but right now the technology just isn't there.

Obviously, when you're briefing publicly, this was a non-event, or if undeniable it was a localised incident, and it's important to be clear about that.

SHRUE:

(Utterly stunned)

Wait. We lost a **month**? When did - when did that happen?

There's some condescending laughter from around the room.

CARSON:

And a warm welcome, of course, to Adjudicator Shrue, who's joining us for their first security council.

He claps enthusiastically. There's not a great deal of uptake.

ADJUDICATOR CROSS:

(Drily and nastily, in the background)

Quisling Shrue, sitting on CenSec.

We must really be getting desperate.

CARSON ignores this.

CARSON:

(Cheerily)

Lot to catch you up on, I'm sure, but we'll try and take it slow. Plenty of footnotes.

Now; the main event.

We've got something very special to share with you today, so get the buttered popcorn out for this part.

A live radio feed from the other side of the channel.

A new saint, a new experimental god, live in the field of combat - and we think you're all going to be very excited to see what this one can do.

Oohs and aaahs, if you please.

(To an underling)

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just put the radio down here. Thanks.

We hear a radio set down on the table with a clunk.

CARSON tunes it.

CARSON:

(Into the radio)

Hello? Are you there, Val? Val?

CARSON retunes.

And then we hear some faint, cheerful background music.

CARSON:

(Bemused, into the radio)

...hello? Are you there?

VAL:

(Crackling, on the radio)

Yes, I'm here.

-and we cut.

LINGER STRAITS COASTAL TOWN: CAFE, INT, DAY

VAL is sitting in a cafe. The same background music is playing.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON, an older CLS police officer, is standing in front of her.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:

I'm going to need you to show me your papers.

(Not getting a response)

I said-

VAL does not respond.

VAL:

(Into her earpiece.)

In fact, Press Secretary Carson, I think I'm just about ready to begin.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON is understandably confused by this.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:
Mm.

He stalks across the cafe and turns the radio off.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:
(Loudly, to the rest of the diner)
Folks, I'm going to need everyone to clear the cafe.

Head on out, take a turn in the sunshine. We've got officers waiting outside for you.

Go on, now - Timothy, Jane. You can finish your lunch in a little while.

The various diners loudly scrape back their chairs and flee for the exit.

We hear the door banging as they pass through.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:
And Ted, if you and the other staff could take yourselves out back to the kitchen, please.

Thank you.

We hear the kitchen doors swing shut.

VAL and the SERGEANT are alone in the room.

VAL:
Am I in some kind of trouble, ahm...
(Noting his shoulder ribbons)
...sergeant?

SERGEANT LOUGHTON takes his time in pouring himself a coffee.

He stirs it.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:
What's your name, miss?

VAL:
Val.

LOUGHTON stirs his coffee.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:

Do you have any papers identifying you as a citizen of the CLS, Miss Val?

VAL:

'Fraid not.

LOUGHTON drops the spoon and then comes, slowly, to sit opposite her.

He's sizing her up as best as he can.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:

Ted back there in the kitchen? He was the one who called the station house. He told me he had a strange woman in here.

A strange woman with a Peninsulan accent, and she'd come in asking some very searching questions about our flood defences and our troop movements.

Playing it all up, y'know, a kind of performance.

Making folks nervous. Like she was **enjoying** making folks nervous.

VAL continues to eat.

VAL:

(Calmly)

Yes, that was me.

And you're quite right - I'm enjoying myself very much.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON stares at her.

Then he sits back.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:

You get to my age, you learn to read people.

And two possibilities present themselves to me.

First possibility, I'm looking at the most incompetent, half-witted spy the Pennies could ever think to send.

A spy who's trying, for whatever reason, to get caught.

VAL:

(Amused)

Mm.

(Into her earpiece)

Are you still getting all of this, Press Secretary?

The SERGEANT ignores that.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:

Second possibility.

You're a wandering derelict or something like that - hoping to get herself arrested for the sake of a warm cell and a hot dinner.

VAL:

(Approvingly)

More likely, mm.

But, Sergeant...I do not **look** like a wandering derelict, do I?

SERGEANT LOUGHTON weighs her up.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON

No. You don't.

VAL holds his gaze for a moment.

VAL:

There's a third possibility, of course, which you've failed to consider.

It could be that I **am** from the Peninsula, I **was** sent here by the Peninsular government, I in fact have representatives of the Peninsular government listening in to our conversation right now...

(Suddenly very serious)

...and I was hoping to speak with you, Sergeant Loughton.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON stares at her.

He's suddenly feeling rather nervous.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:

(In a small voice)

I...

Wh...

...why me?

VAL:

(Reasonably)

It's a small town. Your keyring opens up...the armoury, the generator, and the emergency broadcast system.

For any kind of sensible precision strike, you would be the first one to target.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:

And you're here to...to kill me?

VAL:

Mm-hmm.

(Correcting herself)

No, a little more than that. I'm here to kill your town.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON stares back at her. She doesn't seem to be joking.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:

Who...who are you?

VAL:

I'm a living miracle, sergeant. A hallowed relic, a saint and a sacrifice.

I bear my god's black and delicate marks of ink upon my flesh; I carry its fiery embrace in my wracked and ruined heart.

(Drily)

Lo. Marvel at me.

Silence - and then SERGEANT LOUGHTON gets to his feet, stalking away across the cafe.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:

(Trying to shake that off, but clearly disconcerted)

No. No, you're trying to scare me, that's all.

I've been on this earth a long time, and I've seen all manner of wonders - but I've never seen a saint that walked and talked like you.

VAL:
(Simply)
 You'll never have another opportunity, I'm afraid.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON stares at her, fuming, for a moment.

Then he gets out the handcuffs.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:
(As if testing her)
 All right. I'm going to need you to come back to the station with me.

VAL gets to her feet.

VAL:
(Just as calm and casual, sitting back)
 No.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:
(Bewildered)
 What did you say?

We can hear it again, that strange sound of rising tension as VAL speaks-

VAL:
 Absolutely not.

You can't **arrest** me, Sergeant Loughton.

That's completely out of the question.

The Last Word says you left your sidearm on the kitchen table this morning.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:
(Annoyed and angered)
 Aye, that's not-

He reaches for his gun...

...but it's gone.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:
(Baffled)

I-

VAL:
Told you.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON:
(Weakly)
Oh, shit.

VAL continues.

VAL:
And even if you **had** remembered to bring your sidearm with you today, what could you possibly have done with it?

The Last Word says you lost your trigger finger in a thresher when you were ten.

I'm sure it was painful.

-and the tension breaks.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON screams out in pain as his trigger finger is instantly shredded away.

He stumbles down into a chair, breathing hard and gasping.

VAL continues. Her voice becomes cold and hard.

VAL:
And the more I think of it, the more absurd it is that you could threaten me at all, Sergeant Loughton, when the Last Word tells me that you've been fused to that diner chair ever since you turned sixteen.

The tension breaks again.

And we hear SERGEANT LOUGHTON cry out, in pain, confusion, and terror, as he fuses to the chair.

We hear the creaking of wood mingling with flesh and bone.

VAL:
A strange and horrible thing, unheard of in this village or anywhere in the CLS. Your flesh sinking slowly into the oak like it was thick river-mud.

They tried to free you, of course, but by the time the doctor arrived the struts themselves had sunk further in, splintering beneath your skin, working their way into the bone of your spine.

Your parents fed you for weeks, Sergeant Loughton, sobbing and praying, trying to figure out what god they could possibly have offended, watching as the oaken veins spread upwards and outwards, through the armrests and seat and legs, hardening and cracking the changing flesh of your arms, your legs, your trunk.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON's cries become gradually weaker - he wheezes faintly and unhappily.

VAL:

On the eighteenth day your lungs became varnished wooden vessels and you were no longer breathing.

But your head remained hot flesh for a short while longer, Sergeant Loughton, stinking and lolling atop the polished frame of elm and bone that had once been something like a man.

SERGEANT LOUGHTON has fallen silent.

VAL, head tilted, observes him with quiet satisfaction.

VAL:

Yes, exactly like that.

LINGER STRAITS COASTAL TOWN: EXT. DAY

We hear the wail of sirens.

LOUGHTON'S OFFICERS rush to their positions. We hear guns being cocked.

CLS POLICE OFFICER:

(Shaken and urgent, into the loudhailer)

You're surrounded. Release Sergeant Lawton unharmed and surrender or we will open fire.

Repeat. Release Sergeant Lawton unharmed, or we will open fire-

LINGER STRAITS COASTAL TOWN: CAFE, INT. DAY

VAL calmly walks to LOUGHTON's body and picks up his police radio.

She speaks into it, walking to the window and opening the blinds.

VAL:

(Calmly and with amusement)

Officers. You cannot be here and you cannot shoot me.

You all slit your own throats in the bathroom mirror this morning, having spent a great many years struggling with the cosmic absurdity of serving under a dead man who's also a chair.

LINGER STRAITS COASTAL TOWN: EXT, DAY

We faintly hear the cries of all the OFFICERS collapsing with slit throats at once.

VAL:

(Approvingly)

Precisely so.

LINGER STRAITS COASTAL TOWN: EXT, DAY

VAL walks out of the cafe and down the street, yawning calmly.

We hear the sounds, all around her, of doors being locked.

When she reaches the police car, she unlocks it, opens the passenger door - and then reaches for the loudhailer.

She looks up and down the street.

And she speaks into the loudhailer.

VAL:

(Testing the loudhailer)

Hello. Hello.

Can everyone hear me? Good.

Please listen closely.

The silent town does not answer.

VAL is a little gentler here, almost wistful, as she speaks into the loudhailer.

VAL:

There was never a town here.

That's what the Last Word tells me, and who are you to deny it?

There was never a town here.

There was only a typing error, a misprint - a meaningless name that was wrongly added to a few stray maps and, even then, it was a mistake that was swiftly corrected.

A long silence - and then a building crashes slowly in upon itself.

We might faintly hear some screaming.

VAL:

(Growing almost passionate and sorrowful over time)

There was never a town here. How **could** there have been a town here?

So close to the polluted waters and choking in polluted soil, at the mercy of the changing winds, beset by the environmental corruption of the old wars and now defenceless against the Peninsula's bombardments.

No civilised government would have ever allowed you to settle in such a place.

No civilised government would have let you remain here so long.

And if they **had**, you'd have seen to it that they lost their power, by vote or by fire, and you'd have left this place far behind many decades ago.

All around VAL, the buildings come crashing down.

We can hear a woman screaming in terror in the background.

VAL:

And if there was never a town here - if your grandparents and their grandparents never dwelled here - then there's simply no way that any of you can ever have existed.

You were never born here. None of you.

You never played in these streets. You never set foot in this dead earth.
You were never unlucky enough to breathe in this dry and wilting air.

You were never handed the gift of flesh, and you never carried the weight
of bone.

Any of this would have been a rank impossibility. None of it exists. None
of it could ever have existed.

(With sad finality)

None of you were ever born at all.

Silence.

*We can hear wind blowing through the trees now, as if forests have sprung up where the town
used to stand.*

VAL drops the police radio.

*She's breathing hard for a moment, and ragged, as if the exertion has caused her great pain -
but then she calms.*

She speaks aloud, with confidence, almost cockiness:

VAL:

Did you get all that, Press Secretary?

COUNCIL CHAMBER, INT. DAY

A long moment of stunned silence.

Then CARSON sits forward.

CARSON:

(Into the mic)

Yes, thank you, Val. We got it loud and clear.

Proceed inland as agreed. We'll check in with your progress later tonight.

He turns the radio off.

The stunned silence continues. Then CARSON speaks up.

CARSON:
Well. As you heard.

Just like the rhetorical gods of the last war, Val can spin a good yarn. Lies that become truth, alterations and amendments to the objective present.

Nobody seems to want to speak, so he ploughs on.

CARSON:
The ability to wipe out infrastructure as well as enemy combatants - well, it's welcome, although of course not groundbreaking.

But what's got our scientists really excited about Val is how much of her **agency** she's retained in her sainthood.

You all heard her - she can talk, she can listen, she can follow orders, she can snark like you or I can. She's almost a real person, still!

She's controllable.

And I think those of you in this room who've been staring at the battle-reports with me can agree - a war-saint who's controllable is going to save us a hell of a lot of collateral.

If she makes it far enough behind enemy lines, if she can get access to the encrypted comms of the CLS high command, even the universal broadcast system...well, that's when we'll really see the fireworks.

ADJUDICATOR CROSS speaks up.

ADJUDICATOR CROSS:
Press Secretary, um, a thought.

CARSON:
You can even hit us with a couple of thoughts if you think you've got it in you, Cross.

ADJUDICATOR CROSS:
(*Wheedling*)
A saint that can follow orders more efficiently is a welcome development, yes, and I congratulate our scientists on their well-earned success.

But humanity isn't necessarily a helpful asset here, now, is it?

I mean. I mean. What happens if they hit her with an airstrike?

CARSON:

True enough, Cross. True enough.

She's not **perfect**, we know that. She still needs a mouth to lie.

Like any saint, she's hardy, but she's not invulnerable.

But, you know, we're working hard on replicating her already.

So even if they **do** get lucky and they take her out before she has a chance to speak-

SHRUE, nervously but bravely, raises a hand.

SHRUE:

Can I, uh - can I say something?

CARSON:

(Encouraging)

Go ahead, Shrue. Just leaping right into it.

SHRUE:

No matter how verbose it is, this thing is - is not human.

It's the literalised expression of a concept. Its loyalty, by the definition of a saint, cannot be to us and cannot be to the Peninsula, but only to the image of its deity-

CARSON:

(Calmly and dismissively)

We all know what a saint is, Shrue.

(To the room)

And if Val proves herself to be something beyond that, then maybe...maybe we need to change the definition.

(Pitching)

Maybe we call her a demi-god. A liar's messiah.

(To himself)

Ooh, a liar's messiah, I like that, that rhymes-

SHRUE is beginning to grow angry.

SHRUE:

We have released a liar's god into the Linger Straits, with a staggering lack of concern for the consequences of that.

It's like we haven't learnt from the last war.

The rhetorical gods, the wordsmiths, the silver-tongue deities - we banned them for a reason.

Their destructive impact was not limited to the CLS-

CARSON:

(As if talking to a child)

We banned the **old** gods.

The Last Word, it's a **new** god-

SHRUE:

(Interrupting)

How do we know she isn't lying to us?

How can we be certain that we're in control of her?

I mean, shouldn't this all have gone through Ethics & Safeguards first?

A moment of silence.

CARSON:

(Still as calmly infuriating)

But it **did**, Shrue.

We had Val up in front of Ethics & Safeguards last week. You were there for it.

You've only forgotten that because she **told** you to forget it.

(Apparently at random)

Your partner and kids, they're all settled down south, right?

SHRUE:

(Getting more and more annoyed)

Yes, you already asked me that. And I don't see what that has to do with-

CARSON calmly taps his pencil on the table.

CARSON:

(Cruelly)

Are you **sure**, though, Shrue?

I mean, how can you be certain that you had a family before last week, when Val invented them for you?

SHRUE begins to speak before the horrible possibility of this statement hits them.

SHRUE:

I-

A tense and nasty silence, until CARSON breaks it with-

CARSON:

(Chuckling)

I'm kidding, I'm kidding! We don't do that to our own people. We'd never do that to our own people. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Laughter from across the room, most of it directed at SHRUE.

CARSON:

(Reassuring)

You have a family, Shrue. They're real, they've **always** been real. Don't look so pale, I'm only yanking your chain. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's OK.

(Still chuckling)

Sorry!

To answer your question - which is fair and valid, I might add - let's hear it from the horse's mouth.

CARSON retunes the radio and speaks into it.

CARSON:

Are you there, Val? Val?

Silence for a moment.

VAL:

(On the radio)

Still here, Press Secretary.

CARSON:

Ah! Brilliant.

You mind telling us a little about all the safeguarding work we've gone through with you?

VAL:

(On the radio, a little acidly)

Does someone doubt me?

CARSON:

Not at all.

VAL:

(On the radio, with growing annoyance and threat)

If there's someone who doubts me, I will gladly speak to them directly-

CARSON:

(Calmly)

Just settling a few questions here for the benefit of the entire room.

How did you come to be offered up to the Last Word, Val?

Silence.

VAL:

(On the radio, calmly and casually)

I volunteered, Press Secretary.

I wanted to serve my country however I possibly could - and I knew that my hallowing or my death would be of more use to the Peninsula and the war effort than my mortal life could ever be.

I signed the papers in full knowledge of what I was volunteering, and at no time was I in any doubt about my decision.

I remember that distinctly, no matter how much I've changed since that time.

CARSON:

And how do you feel now that you're a saint?

VAL:

(On the radio, a little blandly)

Very proud to be able to serve my country so effectively, Press Secretary.

The Last Word is a truly marvellous god, and it could only have been created by the greatest nation upon this earth. It's something all of us can be proud of.

CARSON:

So you'll continue to obey orders as we give 'em to you?

VAL:

(On the radio)

Well, I don't outrank anybody, Press Secretary. I'm military property - no different from an armoured jeep or a cruise missile.

I don't really see myself as having a choice in the matter.

Every saint is a servant, after all. Service is all I'm capable of.

CARSON:

All right, Val, thank you. On your way.

CARSON switches the radio off once more.

CARSON:

(To SHRUE)

Satisfied, Shrue?

SHRUE is not satisfied at all.

SHRUE:

(Spluttering)

Well, she- but-

-that was just more words, though.

ADJUDICATOR CROSS:

(Speaking up, proudly)

A good deal more than words, I'd say.

That was **patriotism**.

(Pointedly)

Not a concept that Quisling Shrue would recognise, I'm sure.

CARSON:

(Calmly and smoothly)

I **think**-

I think we'll wrap up there today, folks. We'll have another progress report for you next week.

Adjudicator Shrue, you mind hanging back so we can talk about this some more?

COUNCIL CHAMBER, INT, DAY

A few moments later. The door shuts behind the rest of the council. SHRUE and CARSON are alone in the room.

A long, tense silence.

CARSON:
That was brave, you know.

SHRUE:
(Nervously)
Just asking questions, Press Secretary.

CARSON:
(Encouragingly)
Brave questions.
(With cheerful, casual menace)
But the thing for me, Shrue, I guess the ultimate question, it...it comes to this.

...are you brave *enough*?

SHRUE:
I-

CARSON:
After all, this time last year, as I recall it, you were on the radio talking about, uh, jingoism run amok and the dangers of aggressive expansionism and how maybe we shouldn't be going to war with the Lingers at all.

And now you're on Diane Stone's show week after week, going on and on about anti-sacrificial reform and how this new martyr's cult is something we all need to be sympathetic towards.

And in your first appearance at this council, you're talking back to the H.A.'s office.

Which is your right, indeed.

(As if impressed) There's not many members of the Legislatures who'd ever stand up for a cause they believe in.

And you? You just keep on finding new causes to shout about.

Silence.

SHRUE:

Uh - thank you-

CARSON screws up a page from his notes and tosses it across the room.

CARSON:

(Still just as cheerful)

But...it's not real courage either, is it?

You're making jabs, Shrue, but you're not taking punches.

You're not committing yourself to the fight; you're relying on your position to protect you. And decorum, and discourse, and all of the other fine things that the Legislatures stand for above all.

Whereas real courage, it only ever ends one way, right?

You ever hear of an unbloodied martyr?

He screws up another page. Tosses it.

CARSON:

So if you think you've got it in you to show some real courage, Shrue, you might as well tell me now.

Because what the government needs more than anything is bodies, and I do not want to have to waste weeks and months of my life tangling with someone who's determined to prove an obstacle to the rest of us.

So let's fast-track the inevitable.

We can take you down to the hallowing-sites today, you can fight and scream and be as courageous as you like, and your seat on the council, that can be freed up for someone who lacks your hero's spirit.

A long, tense silence. We can hear SHRUE's frightened breath.

And then CARSON gives them a cheery smack again - but it feels a bit more like a slap.

CARSON:

(Guffawing)

Come on, I'm kidding. I'm **kidding**.

You can't take me so seriously. You know why I'm the Press Secretary, Shrue?

Because I press people's feet to the fire. I heap on the stones.

I make 'em squirm.

(Sincerely and encouragingly)

Keep doing your interviews, keep running your mouth.

Like I said, you've got an alternative perspective on things, and that's so damned important to us.

Don't listen to Cross. You're not a *quisling*. You're an essential piece of the overall puzzle.

You give people hope that we can all find solutions collaboratively, together. By talking to each other.

(Dismissively)

Without resorting to something like the, the Woundtree.

You're something we can work with.

Go home. Call your family.

Come back next week with lots of difficult questions and hard moral quandaries for us. Make us sweat!

A long silence.

SHRUE:

I can - I can go?

CARSON:

Yes, of course you can go! Gods, you're acting like I'm some kind of ogre.
Do I need to smile more?

(More seriously and forcefully)

Shrue. **Do** I need to smile more?

SHRUE:

(Tensely and absurdly)

No, Press Secretary, I think you smile just the right amount.

CARSON:

Good. Weight off my shoulders.

Silence for a moment.

CARSON:

And, uh - Shrue, listen for a moment.

The H.A. and I, we've also been thinking about this anti-sacrificial sentiment, and we've been talking about it with the Church Electric, too.

They're already thinking beyond the end of this war - that's why they're always winning, you know?

It's all coming at a bad time, we have to admit that. It's inconvenient.

But you don't pick the cards you're given. And who knows, maybe it is time for a little change.

(Warmly and sincerely)

So. We're going to put together a summit of innovators. All the brightest minds from the major faiths.

All the brightest sparks from our national politics. Like you.

And we're going to figure out how we can fix this, once and for all - together.

Forget the war with the Lingers, this is real history in the making. And you're invited.

SHRUE:

(Softly, a little sceptically)

I - seriously?

CARSON:

We'll arrange it in the next few weeks, if Glottage hasn't been blown to kingdom come by then.

We want you there with your big ideas and your big heart, Shrue. Start thinking now.

SHRUE:

(Suspicious, but a little cheered)

Uh, all right.

All right, I'm looking forward to it.

CARSON:

(Cheerily)

And I'm going to fast-track your river-god, OK? I'll get it in front of the H.A. tomorrow.

We'll make it happen, and it's going to be a big success for you and for us. Just get me bodies.

Silence.

SHRUE:

Yes, Press Secretary.

Um. Thank you.

CAR, INT, DAY

SHRUE gets back into the car.

They sit there in silence for a long moment.

Then they reach for their car-phone, lift it, and dial a number.

It rings, and rings out.

It goes to answerphone.

SHRUE:

(Softly, haltingly)

It's me. Uh, hope you and the girls are settled in OK.

They said the houses should come with a pool, which is awesome.

I think about all of you splashing about in the afternoons, and it makes me smile.

And you're safe down there. Which is the important thing.

I'm safe too.

(Trying to be cheerful)

I know it doesn't seem like things are going too well for us, but I just had my first CenSec meeting, and - the scientists, they've got some clever stuff up their sleeves!

They're going to surprise all of us, I think.

Silence.

SHRUE:

I may have been a little incautious today. It's weighing on me.

Ring me when you get this, OK? I'd like to hear your voice.

(Weakly, softly)

I'd like to be certain that I didn't just dream you.

Silence.

END OF EPISODE.