

THE SILT VERSES - CHAPTER SEVEN

The radio scratches.

Once again, we hear the voice of SID WRIGHT.

He sounds exhausted now. Distracted. Half-lost.

SID WRIGHT:

(A little feverish, increasingly exhausted)

I'm now on, uhm...Day 6 of my hosting vigil, faithful listeners.

Through the Grindinlord's grace I have been awake for...just over 168 hours.

The doors of the booth have now been locked behind me, as a precaution against my escape. This is perfectly normal.

I am fully aware of what's coming next.

Of what I'll become, once my eyes are permanently opened.

You mustn't be frightened for me, listeners. And don't worry, I have access to a kettle and an extensive selection of Instant Grind, and these sacraments should be enough to carry me forwards towards the end without my once giving in to the dreadful void of sleep.

My, um, my brother-in-law called me last night.

He said this was foolish. He said, 'You're killing yourself for coffee. And not even the luxury brand of coffee, Sid, I don't even like the Grindinlord's stuff, it is not good coffee-'

Can you imagine that? The lack of vision?

(A little sadly)

What's a life, without something to devote itself to?

(Very seriously)

I stepped out into the car park early this morning during the Mellow Memory Magic Hour. I just wanted to breathe in the air one last time before it comes. Dispel any last doubts.

And the dawn, the dawn sun rose like a - the flames lit the fields, and everything was golden. And I was made golden, too, bright and shimmering as the landscape bled out over me, and I understood that

sleep was a wicked thing, truly wicked, to deprive me of sights such as this, and-

(Giving up on trying to explain it)

I don't think you'd be able to see it like I saw it.

I don't think you can understand me from where I've got to.

Silence.

We'll be right back after this.

(Vaguely)

This is... the, um, Silt Verses. And these are, our, er, our people, in order of their appearance:

Lucille Valentine

Damien Niewesand

Parley Cook

B Narr

And Méabh de Brún.

Written by Jon Ware and produced by Muna Hussen

Audio production by Sammy Holden

FANCY APARTMENT, INT

We hear the radio click off.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

My life is comfortable now.

Just the same as anybody else's.

I wake up in soft sheets and walk through an air-conditioned apartment.

I brush my teeth, gaze into the mirror, and comb my hair.

My coffee is always hot. My milk is always frothed.

I barely even notice the view from the windows any more. And when people come here and tell me it's beautiful, I look again, and I can see that it **is** beautiful - the rows of peonies twining around the balcony

rails, overlooking the grand canals of the Periphery Wharfs - and I remember how lucky I am.

I remember I never expected to get this far.

Her voice shifts for a moment, as she addresses her father.

This is how you make things worse.

Two missed calls and a text message, telling me to wire money across to the usual account.

This time it's for Sam's graduation present, even though I know that Sam is not in contact with you these days and does not want to speak with you, any more than I do.

But my happiness is entire and independent from you, I tell myself.

So I do not answer, and I make a silent promise to someday figure out how to find the thing where you stop the notifications from popping up.

We hear the front door slam.

Every morning I leave the bright and gleaming interior of my apartment, and I head out into the bright and gleaming city.

The commuters do look up at me oddly every now and then, as they cram unpleasantly onto their packed platform on the other side of the tracks.

My platform is empty. Nobody else is going the same way as me.

As the great polished steel train-colossus pulls in this morning upon revolving and clattering legs, I catch the briefest glimpse of its steward, who has, as is standard practice, been elevated to sainthood. The fleshly remnants of his body have been fused into the metal of the steel locomotive head.

Arms pinned back, legs removed, an unhappy and no longer human face goggling desperately forward. The prayer-brand of the Saint Electric stamped upon both of his cheeks.

The steward has been painted a pleasing royal blue, to match the paint of the engine's hull and make him less visible to the passengers, but he still moans ever so faintly as he slows to a creaking halt upon the platform and the colossus hunkers down to permit my entrance.

I make sure to thank him and wish him a good day, because we always need to be kind to those people who are worse off than ourselves.

The carriage I choose is empty and air-conditioned, and it bears me out through lowly suburbs and into sweeping plains, until the world is lush and flat and free in every direction, and the sky no longer looks so grey.

The corporate campus where Old Black Crow keeps its head offices is well-maintained. Lawns of flat and immaculate green. Great towering glass blocks. Tiny figures already hunched over their desks, far above.

A statue of our company's brand sponsor, the Bronze Savant, stands at the entrance. His head and body, as ever, is bowed in a foetal pose of contemplation, his blank face hidden from our sight.

I walk past him, nod to the receptionist. Take the elevator up to the Creative Implementation department on the eighteenth floor.

I greet my colleagues. I log into my computer, and check my messages.

And, once again, the real day begins.

Just like any devoted servant of commerce, I work my ass off-

CONFERENCE ROOM, INT

A flash of dialogue.

VAUGHAN:

(Rapid-fire explanation, as if delivering a PowerPoint)

All right. So, the client's core brand values are: Integrity, Boldness, Family, Community.

However, the latest market research indicates that 37% of customers no longer associate Tenderman's with family, they see it as a product for older consumers. Outdated. Old-fashioned.

And this has been on the rise for the past decade, ever since the space became more competitive with the advent of the Shademother.

Paige, what do you have?

PAIGE:

(With the same rapid-fire pace, but more nervously brainstorming)

Uhm, I'm thinking we change direction towards household deity rituals, a totem kept in the hallway.

Something that can be made decorative, a nice ornament for the grown-ups, but it also has these cool, cartoonish avatars which the kids can buy as collectibles. And the totem will be visible to visitors, too, to encourage word of mouth.

A flexible tone of voice for the product with that same brand integrity at its core.

VAUGHAN:

Did you just stick the word 'integrity' at the end there to tie a bow on it?

PAIGE:

Definitely.

VAUGHAN:

I don't like it, but it's going on the whiteboard. *(To someone else)*

Reagan, what do you think? Come on, you need to give me something today.

The voices fade out.

FANCY APARTMENT, INT

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

...and in my evenings, I relax, and I devote time to my passions.

A front door slams.

We hear the sound of a wine cork popping and wine being poured into a glass.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

There are days and nights when I just don't know what to do with this comfort.

For a very long time this kind of life seemed unattainable to me.

I never thought I'd be out watering flowers on my balcony, gazing out across a bright and golden city below.

I never thought I'd be sat in boardrooms, telling people how the world works, and having them listen to me, without ever once doubting me.

And I find myself wondering: is this it?

Is this what happiness, the complete and final state of happiness, feels like? Have I come to the end of things? Is this my triumph?

And if not, is there anything out there that could make me truly happy?

You're always out there, though, lingering on the periphery, and this is how you make things worse.

Seven missed calls. No messages.

I begin to wonder if you're in the hospital, or something worse has happened to you. Surely there must be some emergency, and this is why, alone of all your children, I haven't blocked you yet, because there will come a day when your life ends and I will hate myself and my comfort for being so selfish.

And of course I know that when I do call you, you'll be fine. Curt, distracted.

You won't ask me if I'm fine.

You'll ask for that next dispatch of financial support, for some urgent but ill-defined task or other that simply needs to be dealt with, and when I tell you no or maybe or can you just send me the invoice this time please, you'll curse me for my stuck-up ingratitude and say I'm no child of yours. And when I tell you yes, you'll praise me in a sweet and loving voice and ask for just a little more, a little more for something else that needs to be taken care of.

I'll tell you yes, more often than not.

I feed your love, because I need to hear it even if I can never quite believe in it.

And, as the coffee-hawkers on the radio put it, the daily grind continues.

That's the other thing. This comfort isn't final. Of course it isn't. It can never be taken quite for granted.

You need to feed it and maintain it, like a well-kept balcony with peonies trailing around the railings.

Like the affection in a father's voice.

Or the plants will twist and overrun across the balcony until your neighbours stare at you with shame in their eyes, and the milk will curdle in its pitcher.

You need to keep up your self-discipline, and your coping mechanisms, and the hobbies which occupy your nights and make you a more interesting and complete person, or you'll be left behind-

CONFERENCE ROOM, INT

The front door slams.

The train roars.

Another brainstorming session. Just as pacey as before.

VAUGHAN:

-Listen up. Key brand values are Boldness, Connectivity, Future-Looking - that one's an adjective, great job from the in-house team there - and Integrity.

No idea what we're meant to make out of that, but the Leadership are counting on us.

Paige, c'mon. You want to break your winning streak? I need something from you.

PAIGE:

What is the sponsor doing for the brand right now?

Are there any, uh, miracles to speak of? Unique revelations?

VAUGHAN:

Some worker transfigurations down on the factory floor, but they're not the kind we want to be advertising.

No, we need to be relying on the strength of the brand itself, making our own miracles. Let's make a note to talk to the good folks in Ritual, see what they can do for us here.

Esther. Esther! I know you're not just staring out of the window. What do you have for us?

The voices rapidly fade.

FANCY APARTMENT, INT

The front door slams.

Again, the sound of the wine cork popping.

PAIGE:

(Narrating, a little sadly)

And I was left behind, once, a long time ago, and I cannot let it happen again.

The front door slams.

Again, the sound of the train roaring.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

Until, one day, you realise that all of your frantic efforts to keep up that balance were for nothing.

Because you weren't in control of any of it. Your comfort was rented out to you - it was never really yours to possess.

And in spite of your desperate, flailing efforts towards stability, towards some long-awaited, final happiness...everything changes all the same.

The ding of an elevator.

OFFICE FLOOR, INT.

The background sound of a keyboard clattering.

The swooping sound of an email arriving.

The keyboard pauses.

A long, thoughtful silence. PAIGE is reading an email. She calls to her colleague VAUGHAN, sitting nearby.

PAIGE:
(Urgently, hissing)
Vaughan. Vaughan.

VAUGHAN:
(Distantly)
Mm.

PAIGE:
Did you see this, from Hooper? I don't know who else it's been sent to.

The sound of VAUGHAN's wheeled chair rolling closer across the office floor.

VAUGHAN:
(Closer now)
Keep your voice down. Yeah, of course I saw it.

PAIGE:
What does it mean?

VAUGHAN:
Just read it.

We hear the rich, cultured voice of HOOPER.

HOOPER:
"Dear People Manager,

Thank you all so much for your hard work over the past six months. I've heard great things from your senior executives about the many projects you've successfully closed together.

However, this period has been a great time of reflection for me and the Leadership Team, and it's become ever more apparent than ever that in a changing and tumultuous world, Black Crow Incorporated must adapt in order to survive.

We need to put ourselves in the best possible position to name the unnameable, anticipate customer needs, and provide our clients with the highest standard of ritual consultancy. We need to ensure that we are fit for purpose, and it is very clear to all of us in Leadership that elements of our business have been letting us down in this regard.

I am proud to share the news with you, in strictest confidence, that a conversion programme is now underway.

I understand that this may come as distressing news to some, and this is undoubtedly a challenging time for all of us. All of us will have to make sacrifices.

But we must remember that our agency will come out of the other side as a stronger, more agile brand, more fully capable of weathering the challenges and opportunities that tomorrow will bring.

Your role in this work will be vital - to steady the ship, reassure our people, and keep things running smoothly.

We'll be in touch with further details shortly, as well as an all-staff communique.

E.D. Hooper, CEO.

PAIGE:
Why is this even happening?

VAUGHAN:
Last year's survey results were pretty wretched, I think - prompted and unprompted brand awareness both down.
(Mockingly)
Consumers in key demographics were less likely to associate us as the leading agency in our field than our competitors.

PAIGE:
But those were last year's results.

VAUGHAN:
I'm guessing someone just got around to reading them. Hang on, let me finish this email-

The faint sound of VAUGHAN's chair rolling back away.

PAIGE:
(Urgently)
Wait, Vaughan - Vaughan!

So what does this mean?

VAUGHAN:

Stop hissing at me.

(Calmly)

You can't let this get to you, OK? It's a conversion programme. That means a fresh start. They'll be cutting teams, they'll be reviewing staff budgets. A lot of sacrifices will need to be made.

You need to show them you can be a part of what they're building here.

Try and slip it into emails. How happy you are that we're leading the way. How you're looking forward to a fresh start and a new lick of paint once the Bronze Savant is taken care of. How change is always difficult, but it'll be better for all of us in the end.

Just stay calm. You've already been earmarked, your quarterlies are looking strong. Don't do anything stupid and you'll have a long and happy future here.

PAIGE:

What do you mean, earmarked?

VAUGHAN:

Don't be an idiot. They told you first, didn't they?

Breathe easy. You made it into the chosen few.

Silence.

FANCY APARTMENT, INT

The sound of wine being uncorked.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

"There will be sacrifices."

I know they don't mean that literally, of course. The same bosses who provide croissants and fruit for us in the kitchens every morning out of their own pocket aren't actually going to push for sacrifices.

It's too crude, too cruel, and there are too many lifelong devotees of the Bronze Savant amongst us who'll need to be accommodated.

They'll find a more elegant way around the problem.

They could bus some temps in, perhaps, fixed-term contracts, who can be offered to the new god once it arrives.

If they absolutely have to sacrifice anyone, it'll be the universal poor-performers - the sixteenth floor, the fourteenth, parts of the twenty-first - who no-one could miss.

You have to believe that there's a plan here, or you could lose your mind.

The roar of the train.

OFFICE FLOOR, INT

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

And in fact, the very next morning, Consultants arrive upon campus to help ease the process.

They're taller than people.

Seven or eight foot high, and tottering, even stumbling as they duck through the threshold and onto the office floor. As if it's stilts beneath their long white robes and not something else.

Their rounded, eyeless masks are entirely smooth. Their vestments stir with constant, chaotic movement.

They must have been flown in all the way from Tementry Isle.

My colleagues across the eighteenth floor are enraptured; they seem to think these peculiar giants have been brought in to entertain or inspire us.

Many of them are on their feet, taking pictures and posing as the Consultants stand patiently before them.

A smattering of us - mostly senior managers - remain at our desks, scratching away at our emails, keeping our heads bowed, as the Consultants are hurriedly ushered upstairs to the boardroom.

I've read about their methods.

Behind frosted glass, the Consultants will form into a silent row before their clients. In a single, unified motion, they will separate their white vestments and reveal between them what lies beneath.

A cacophony of saintly transformations, released from its prison of white cloth, stretching out in every direction with different howling faces and inhuman extensions and grasping arms.

This is all that the Consultants are permitted to be; hallowed flesh dedicated to a hundred different gods, so that the Board can decide which one is right for us.

Even down here, you can hear the screams, the delighted laughter, the sobbing.

One voice in particular seems to crack, and stays cracked.

The next morning, an email announces the retirement of the Operations Director, effective immediately, after a long and distinguished career.

All of us chip in for their leaving gift. It will be mailed to their home direct, we're told.

The roar of the train. The pop of a wine bottle being opened.

The rumours start spreading thick and fast, after that, and eventually, a few of my team members feel confident enough to come to me with their concerns.

There've been rumours of a shake-up, they say, and silently they gesture back towards the little wooden shrine to the Bronze Savant, sat amongst the printers and the copiers on the far side of the room.

Someone has hung a sign over it. 'Closed for repairs.'

They ask me, anxiously, if I've heard anything.

I play my part.

There's no cause for concern, I tell them. None at all.

I'll let them know as soon as I know anything more.

At the desk beside me, head lowered, Vaughan continues to type without expression.

The roar of the train.

OFFICE FLOOR, INT

The ding of the elevator.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

The very next morning in the air-conditioned depths of Meeting Room One, Mr Hooper lets us know via video-conference phone that all of our insights have been gratefully taken on board, and a decision has been made.

Our new brand sponsor will be the Crawling-In-Ecstasy.

Something obscene and writhing flashes up onto the screen. Its face is human. Its legs are many.

Someone two chairs down from me shrieks and flails their hands, and then quickly tries to hide their own response.

Hooper seems to make a note of something.

The presenters tell us with broad smiles that the white millipede-god stands for industriousness and collective action that is carried out in the shadows of the world, and that it ties nicely into our own company heritage, since the building has been infested with millipedes since we moved in and nobody has been able to quite stamp them out.

It tracks well with clients, and it's popular in the Briar Passage, where we're hoping to drum up new business.

The draft logo is emailed around to us afterwards: the special cases, the chosen few.

They tell us that feedback is welcome, and all suggestions will be taken on board.

The image filename ends with 'underscore final'.

OFFICE FLOOR, INT

The clatter of keyboards.

PAIGE and VAUGHAN, sitting alongside each other, are typing in silence.

PAIGE:

(Trying to start a conversation)

I just don't understand why they'd choose a thing like that.

It's awful. People won't stand for it.

VAUGHAN:

(Calmly)

Strange gods make for strong gods.

Make something too human and we'll know what to expect from it.
Something less human, we won't know what it's capable of achieving.
I'm sure the clients will eat the whole thing right up.

PAIGE:

But people won't stand for it. They need to consider-

VAUGHAN:

(A little spiteful)

You keep saying that, Paige.

What are we going to do, quit?

We're under contract.

They will do what they will do.

PAIGE:

Well, I don't see the use in being so cynical.

VAUGHAN:

I don't think I really care how useful it is.

PAIGE:

Look, you're coming to this next meeting, aren't you? They're rolling out the change programme.

They've given us a slot for questions at the end. We can ask them-

VAUGHAN:

(As if speaking to an idiot)

No, Paige, I'm not coming to this next meeting.

Silence. PAIGE stops in her tracks.

PAIGE:

Why not?

VAUGHAN:

Because unlike you, I didn't get the inside track. I'm not even supposed to know that any of this is happening, and I wouldn't have known in the first place if you hadn't told me.

Like I said. You made it to the chosen few.

PAIGE:

That means-

VAUGHAN:

My quarterlies are looking pretty rough these days. They've been looking rough for a while.

I strongly suspect Leadership won't want to keep me around when the new god comes.

PAIGE is horrified.

PAIGE:

That's ridiculous, Vaughan. You're...you're the best of us. You've led this team.

You...make me get up in the morning even when I don't want to. You make everyone feel like this matters, like what we're doing really matters-

VAUGHAN:

More fool me.

PAIGE:

It's the wrong choice. It doesn't make any sense.

I'm going to talk to them-

VAUGHAN:

(Curtly)

You don't need to worry about me.

I've got a plan for myself. Run along to your meeting, now. You don't want to be marked up if you're late.

The elevator dings.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

I'm not any part of this, I tell myself. I'm just getting along as best as I can.

Survival is not treachery, and I will not feel ashamed for it, not when I've come so far.

The sound of fingers tapping at a keyboard.

PAIGE:

(Narrating, with determination)

But we are nothing unless we act.

I write my email.

Mr Hooper is the sole recipient.

I plead for my friend Vaughan as a special case, and make note of the various good works and successful projects that they've been a part of over the years, as well as their valued, long-term participation in the softball team.

(Passionately)

I tell them that I've been taking the train in every day, getting into the office early, working and working to the detriment of everything - because that's how much I believe in what this company does.

I tell them that I need to see a return on that faith if I'm going to continue working here.

I need to get something back.

The response comes back almost instantly. Four Directors have been copied in.

HOOPER:

SUBJECT: RE: M. VAUGHAN.

'Thank you so much for speaking to me, Paige.

I completely agree with your comments, and I'm going to make sure they're passed on to Human Resources for review. This is such a difficult time for all of us, and I know these hard decisions can really add to the pressure.

*You're to be commended for your empathy and conscience - Alan, Jill,
I think this is a good reminder that our people managers need to be
properly supported during this challenging period.*

*Please speak to Paige about assigning her one of the vacant
company cars.*

*Paige, if there's anything else you need to discuss with me, please
don't hesitate to ask.'*

A lingering silence.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

They're not actually going to do this.

They can't be this crude, this blatant. They have to find a more elegant
solution than this.

If they are going to do it, they'll have to do it somewhere out of sight.
That much is obvious.

And yet...

They're building something.

Out on the campus grounds, behind a square of thin plastic tape, in
plain view.

I can already see it as I swing my new company car down the road,
glinting in the morning sunlight.

It's a great glass crucible bell, fifteen or twenty feet high and nearly as
wide, with a small steel door and foundation set into its base to admit
entry.

Certain prayer-marks that I do not yet recognise have been painted
upon its sides, swirls of red and purple and white.

Perhaps I should think of it as a cage.

It could admit a dozen people, even more depending on how tightly
they're all squashed in together.

A sign at the office entrance displays a mewling anthropomorphic cat with its hands pressed against its ears, along with the words, 'A-paw-logies for the noise and disruption.'

It's cute. A number of us take photos beside it on our way in.

Every morning, we come in to work. We watch the prison that's being built for us.

We get on with the day as productively as we can.

We leave for home.

The roar of the train.

OFFICE FLOOR, INT

The ping of an email.

HOOPER:
(Narrating)
Subject: Exciting news!

My dear friends and colleagues. I'm inviting all of you to a very special all-company meeting at the end of the month.

Some of you will receive binders on your desks with red stickers. If this is you, please follow the instructions within that binder and arrive half an hour early upon the campus grounds to assist with setup...

The voice fades out.

PAIGE:
(Narrating)
Vaughan is no longer sitting at their desk today, or the day after that.

Apparently they've taken ill and can't be reached.

A few others around the office seem to have had the same idea. Empty chairs are visible across the floor. In the staff canteen, a few of my colleagues mutter darkly about the ne'er-do-wells and slackers who are letting the rest of us down at a very crucial time.

Another email ping.

HOOPER:

(Narrating - another email)

SUBJECT: Hope you're excited!

Just another note, dear colleagues, to remind you that even if you're off work, your attendance is mandatory at our all-company meeting next week. This is covered in your contracts, and contract breaches will of course be taken extremely seriously.

We'll be kicking off the day with a series of wellbeing workshops...

Another email ping.

HOOPER:

(Narrating)

SUBJECT: Not long to go!

We still haven't received acknowledgement from a few of you about our all-company shindig tomorrow. We completely understand that this is a difficult time for so many of us, and we want to be flexible as much as we possibly can.

A shuttle bus will be provided for those of us who haven't been able to make it into the office recently, and our team will be visiting at your homes to give you a helping hand...

Another email ping.

HOOPER:

(Narrating)

SUBJECT: Thank you

Dear People Manager,

I just wanted to say a heartfelt thank-you to you for everything you've done to make tomorrow a rousing success. Your part in all of this will be recognised, and remembered.

Please do join me in Meeting Room Nine this afternoon - we're assembling thank-you cards for our colleagues who are leaving us tomorrow, so do come and add your signature whenever you can...

APARTMENT, INT, DAY

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

Today's the day.

I wake up in soft sheets and walk through an air-conditioned apartment.

I brush my teeth, gaze into the mirror, and comb my hair.

My coffee is hot. My milk is frothed.

I barely even notice the view from the windows.

I still, on some level, don't truly believe that anything is going to happen today. It...simply can't be allowed to.

The company car, as I step into it, smells fresh and feels comfortable.

The exterior has been recently washed, the interior newly hoovered.

It was delivered with kindness, as well as a handwritten note and miniature bottle of champagne, telling me how much I've earned all of this.

People who are capable of that sort of kindness can only be good people.

That's a certainty you can feel beneath your skin.

We hear the roar of the car.

OFFICE CAMPUS, EXT

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

By the time I arrive, they're almost ready to get started.

The great glass crucible-bell stands in the centre of the lawn, freshly polished and painted. The plastic tape has been removed. The door is open.

Everyone is gathered about it, awkwardly milling about, sipping on their coffees and refusing to make eye contact with each other.

There's a van, its windows blackened, parked on the curb on the far side.

It can't be that there are muffled voices from within, crying to be let out, hammering on the inside walls.

Because we're all ignoring them. And I don't believe any of us are the sort of people to ignore anyone in distress.

HOOPER:

(Cheerfully)

All right, all right, I think we're ready to get started. Everyone here?

No, not quite.

(Yelling)

Get them out!

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

The van doors open. My friend Vaughan is yanked out. Shoved onto the fresh wet grass.

Others are tossed out in turn. Our colleagues, blinking in the sunlight from bruised eyes and bleeding faces.

The workers who failed to come in to work. The worst of the worst. There are a few hisses and boos from amongst the watching crowd - but for the most part, we're magnanimous in our silence.

The Consultants swarm around them.

They dress my friend Vaughan in painted hospital robes, the bronze garments of the old, defunct god. They shimmer just like the real thing in the sunlight.

With long gloved fingers, they daub the skin of my friend Vaughan in the sworling letters that will call the new god down upon us.

They garland my friend Vaughan with the painted paper-mache head of the Savant, half-congealed and eyeless, resembling the old world that must be destroyed to make way for the new. Its expression is perfectly stoic.

HOOPER:

I'd like to give a very special welcome to our colleagues who've spent some time off work.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

There's laughter amongst us.

Not even mocking so much as...simply relieved.

My friend Vaughan is shoved, blind and flailing, to the front of the huddled crowd of sacrifices.

HOOPER:

To all of our colleagues who are leaving us today, I'd just like to say a few words.

Pain is temporary. And there is no meaningful change that comes without pain - I know we can all agree on that.

You will be raw material for something truly new.

And that is a remarkable honour. Those of us who are left behind, clutching to our own limited and insincere existences, look to you with immense gratitude and forlorn jealousy.

Beside the new monument in reception, there will be a special plaque, with your names and today's date etched upon it.

We also clubbed in to get you each something. Just a token of our thanks.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

The Consultants herd the sacrifices into an orderly queue.

Each individual, in turn, is presented with a leaver's card before they're ushered firmly towards the doorway of the crucible bell.

Some fight back.

I can see my friend Vaughan struggling, kicking and flailing, as they're dragged bodily forward, and as if taking that for a signal, the other sacrifices

...and that's when Leadership begin to shout words of encouragement.

They say,
'You can do it, folks!'

They say,

'That's it, gang! Not far to go now!'

They say,

'Thank you. For everything you're doing for us.'

And they begin to clap.

The clap is picked up. From everyone who's watching, growing louder and louder until the campus lawn is ringing with applause and the birds take flight from the tower roofs.

The sacrifices are ushered into the crucible bell. The door is shut behind them, and barred.

Their mouths are raised in silent Os as they turn and hammer on the glass, gazing out at us.

In the middle of the crowd of sacrifices, I can just make out the silent, staring paper-mache face that is my friend Vaughan.

Vaughan is not calling out. Vaughan is not struggling. They just...stand there, the blank face looking back out at me.

Somehow that makes me feel worse.

Someone turns the generator on.

And the crucible begins to heat up. Slowly, with a dry hiss rising across the quad.

The sacrifices are screaming harder than ever. Hammering out at us with their fists from within.

You can see the steam rising from the floor, fogging up the glass, obscuring whatever's going on inside.

We hear the rising hiss of the steam.

HOOPER:

(Calling, conversationally)

This part will be quick, don't worry. Praise the Saint, they've made incredible progress with the technology.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

The steam swallows up the screaming, silent faces of our colleagues.

The hands continue to slam frantically against the glass for a time, but now they leave an imprint of hot flesh behind.

A moment later, they stop.

We hear the noise of the clapping rising.

HOOPER:

(Calling)

All right, that's enough. Kill the power; let's see what we've got here.

(To the crowd)

My friends and colleagues. Thank you for bearing with us through all of this.

Here's to new beginnings - and a bright future for us all!

Here's to our new sponsor...the Crawling-In-Ecstasy!

PAIGE:

(Narrating, with increasing horror)

As the steam begins to clear, something enormous unfurls itself from within the baking depths of the crucible.

Its many legs press against the glass.

Its grinning, human face is composed of many different faces.

We applaud its emergence as it roils in the glass, snapping and grinning, attempting to get at us.

Then the generator roars back into life, and the steam hisses back upwards, and the Saint screeches as it dies, a mere instant after it's born.

HOOPER:

Very good. Very good.

All right, I think that's everything.

The clapping rises, climaxes - and ebbs.

PAIGE:

(Narrating; with quiet bitterness)

Afterwards, I seek out my comfort in the eyes of the other survivors amongst the crowd.

Unhappy looks to match my own unhappy look. Conspiratorial head-shakes. Anything that might indicate that we're in agreement here that the leadership has gone too far.

I find them everywhere, these glances, even from those who were clapping just a moment before.

Leadership are circulating, shark-like, amongst us.

They hand out polystyrene cups of cocoa amongst the staff, and give us firm squeezes on the wrist or the shoulder, whispering sympathetic things like 'Are you all right?'

When Hooper comes to me, he simply says,

HOOPER:
Look lively, Paige. People are counting on us.

PAIGE:
(Narrating)
And I remember that as a leader, I'm expected to do the same.

And so I circulate. I hand out cocoa. I offer firm squeezes on the wrist and the shoulder, and I whisper to everyone I encounter,

'Are you all right?'

'Are you all right?'

'Look lively, now. People are counting on us.'

Afterwards, when everyone has dispersed, I help them clear up the plastic cups and turn off the lights.

The crucible, they tell us, should be left to cool. Steaming, fleshy handprints are still visible on the glass.

Workers will be coming to collect it in the morning.

Tomorrow there'll be a bright new sign hanging over the office reception, shrines to our new god scattered across every floor, and people will be on hand to shepherd us through the onboarding process with a half-a-day of workshops.

Since it's a special occasion, I imagine there'll be free pastries waiting for us in the kitchen.

The roar of the car engine.

The slam of the front door.

The pop of the wine bottle.

A moment's silence.

Then the sound of the wine bottle being violently smashed against a wall. PAIGE has thrown it.

PAIGE:

(Narrating, to her father)

This is how you make things worse.

You have not called me at all.

And when I try to call you tonight, ringing at first reluctantly and then feverishly, hanging up and redialling, then hanging up and dialling again, hoping to speak to someone who'll just listen to me and tell me who I am and who I am not...

...you won't pick up.

So I leave my apartment.

I get into my car in the empty parking lot.

I drive out of the city, back past the dew-soaked green fields of the corporate campus, and I keep driving on through the night.

CAR, INT

We hear the faint roar of the car engine.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

On through the mist and the clear skies of the early morning. Across the great yellow suspension bridge that connects the Linger Straits to the Ignathian Peninsula.

The border post is unmanned.

In amongst the pines, there are old bunkers. Ruined concrete foundations. Remnants of the last great religious war.

There's nobody else on the road. It's as if I'm driving into a dream.

We hear SID's voice, crackling in and out of focus.

SID WRIGHT:

(In pain)

...hurts.

I keep thinking, "This track I'll lay my head down. I've worked hard and long, I've given them what I can. They don't need to take any more from me.

"This one's a seven-minute track, thanks to that gratuitous guitar solo, it'll keep the faithful listeners listening for a while...and finally I can sleep."

But He won't let me now.

My eyes are wide open.

(Anguished)

It hurts. Why don't they tell you how much it hurts? It hu-

The radio cuts out.

PAIGE:

(Narrating)

The fuel gauge gradually dwindles.

There's a cheerful cartoon light depicting the Petropater, his slick arms outstretched in a sticky embrace, and it begins to flash red, then becomes red.

I stop at a gas station, fill up to the brink, and keep going. The objective is to drive on, and on until something stops me.

And then, quite suddenly, I stop.

I have come to a river. Distant through the reeds, and shimmering faintly in the dawnlight.

I park the car by the roadside, step out, and wander down amongst the tall bulrushes until I'm standing on the precipice with the water lapping up at my shoes.

The river gazes back at me.

It's awful.

An ugly, flat, hopeless river, its currents stagnant with industrial debris, drifting aimlessly and sluggishly on into the south.

There's nothing grand or beautiful about it.

Birds flounder in the shallows, snapping through the muck to try and reach small wriggling creatures in their shells.

Something calls, far away in the marshlands, and then is silenced.

What exactly was I hoping to find out here? What did I think I'd realise?

I turn back, and I make my way back through the maze of drifting reeds towards my car, parked by the roadside-

ROADSIDE, EXT

PAIGE cuts off suddenly. She's spotted something.

In fact, she's seen FAULKNER, hunched over her car window attempting to break into her vehicle.

PAIGE:

(Calling out)

Hey! Hey! What are you doing to my car?

Get away from there-

FAULKNER:

(Urgently calling out to CARPENTER, who's still out of sight)

She's spotted me.

Carpenter, she's spotted me-

And suddenly CARPENTER emerges from the reeds as well. She's holding their revolver.

CARPENTER:

(Wearily)

Yeah, I can see that.

(To PAIGE, calm as ever)

Hello. No sudden moves, please.

PAIGE:

Is that a *gun* -

CARPENTER:

This has turned into a really shitty day all round, and I'm sorry.

Boot or back-seat?

PAIGE:

What?

CARPENTER:

(To FAULKNER)

Get her keys.

(To PAIGE)

Boot or back-seat? Because if you can keep quiet, you can sit in the back seat, but if you-

PAIGE:

(Still fighting back)

No! What are you - get away from me -

FAULKNER:

(To CARPENTER)

...boot?

CARPENTER:

Boot it is.

We hear a brief scuffle. Then the boot SLAMS.

PAIGE:

(Muffled)

Hey! Hey! What the hell is going on? What do you think you're doing?

The sound of the passenger's and driver's doors opening and slamming again.

The sound of the car starting up, and driving away.

END OF EPISODE.