VISITATIONS

THEOTOKIA &
THE WAR REPORTER

MUSIC BY JONATHAN BERGER
LIBRETTI BY DAN O'BRIEN

LIBRETTI

PAINTING BY VERA CUTKINA

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Visitations

1. Theotokia

by

Jonathan Berger
libretto by Dan O’Brien

commissioned by
The National Endowment for the Arts
and
The Andrew Mellon Foundation
for
StanfordLive

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**Theotokia**

*Cast*

Leon, counter tenor  
Mother Anne, soprano  
Leon’s Mother, soprano  
Yeti Mother, soprano  
(all ‘mothers’ sung by a single soprano)  
3 Congregants, tenor, baritone and bass

*Instrumentation*

Flute (alto fl., fl. picc.)  
Clarinet (Eb, Bb, bass cl.)  
Percussion (timpani, xyl, mar, vib, snare, tom-toms, bongo, wood bl, ratchet, bass dr.)  
Piano  
2 violins  
viola  
cello  
contrabass  
ambisonic digital audio
Theotokia

Notes:

Theotokia is an exploration of the mind of Leon, a schizophrenic who experiences religious hallucinations and suffers from obsessive ritualistic behavior.

Synopsis:

Scene 1: Mother Anne, spiritual leader of the Shakers, invites Leon and her congregants to obtain a secret knowledge.

Scene 2: The Yeti Mother, an imaginary mother of God, calls to Leon from her cave in the Himalayas.

Scene 3: Leon, an institutionalized schizophrenic, compulsively beats out a rhythm on his own body.

Scene 4: Leon’s mother laments her son’s condition, concluding accusatorily, “How could he do this to me?”

Scene 5: Leon obsessively reiterates his mother’s question, his speech transforming into glossolalia as he invokes the Yeti Mother.

Scene 6: The Yeti Mother answers Leon’s distress with a song in celebration of excrement.

Scene 7: The Yeti Mother reveals that she is Leon’s true mother, and that she, along with her congregation of Yetis, will help Leon transcend his physical limitations.

Scene 8: The Yeti Mother and her Yeti children transform into Mother Anne and her congregants once again, soothing Leon with the knowledge that he is now in possession of a secret knowledge. In a rare and painful moment of lucidity, however, Leon realizes that he is alone and suffering from his mental illness.
1. Holy Anger

MOTHER ANNE
A candle lay, a candle lay de lo.
A candle lay de lo, de loo.

And soon you’ll know
what no man ever knows.

CONGREGANT
I am the holy anger
of the Son.
Disguised to mend God’s broken mind.

My name
is Sacanala Vinda,

CHORUS OF CONGREGANTS
Sakanala Vinda.

Our name is something
we can’t tell you,

something you can’t know
yet.
2. There Is a Cave

YETI MOTHER
There is a cave
in the snowy heights
of the Himalayas.


I wait for you
in this dark warm cave
in the heights—

Ka re voo. Ka re ka re voo.

—in the heights
of the snowy Himalayas.

Ka va ka ne ko na.

I wait for you here.

Ka yee ka va tei vas sho ka. Ka yee ka va tei vas sho ka kas.

With my comfort,
with my love
I will guide you home.
3. Leon’s Lament

[LEON in a chair,
eyes closed,
slowly slapping his thighs.

The rhythm
steadies and speeds up
until it’s becomes a frenzied,
almost painful drumming,

both self-punishing
and musical.]
4. How Could He Say This To Me?

LEON’S MOTHER
Why
is he so angry at me?

He did everything I told him to.

Praying, all the time praying.

A good boy! A quiet boy! Nothing’s wrong!

I would come into his room
at night
and pray over his sleeping body.

I was trying
to enshroud a child
in love.

When he came home
from the war
he had this photograph of a girl
I’d never met.

Then one day
when I was at church
he packed his suitcase and left,
and when he came home
he was no son of mine.

On Good Friday
when I was at church again
he broke the necks of the white doves on the roof.

He broke my statues of the saints.
He smashed all of my statues
and threw my crucifixes
in the trash.

And he said,

There will be no gods before me.
And he said,

I am the only begotten son of God, and my name is Jesus Christ.

How could he say this to me?
5. To Me . . .

LEON
to me to me to me
do this do this to me
to me to me to me
to to me
to me
to to tomorrow
to me to me tomorrow
tomb tomb ton ah ton ah
ton ga ton ga ton ga
don ga don ga don ga
don ga don ga don ga dong dong
dung
dung
dung
6. Dung!

YETI MOTHER
Dung! Dung! Dung!

Dung has self-contained energy!

Dung aids plants to grow!

Dung has a healthy smell that swells the air—ah!

where would the farmers be
without it?

The commode says,

Deposit in me.

And the Chinaman says, Honor mine today, indirect food
for tomorrow, most honored guest,

Dung!

Plowing-seeding-dunging-reaping—

Dung! Dung! Dung!
7. Song of the Yeti Mother

YETI MOTHER & CONGREGANTS
Have you never heard the story
about the people who have yet to
be discovered?

YETI MOTHER
Lu di a lu po!

CONGREGANTS
Whose bodies are much stronger
than a human person’s
body?

YETI MOTHER
Vo ne har ko no mei, ko no hu!

CONGREGANTS
Who are above the ape?

YETI MOTHER
Who are the missing link?

Kio bo he, ko lo he lu he!

YETI MOTHER & CONGREGANTS
Who live
in the snowy
Himalayas?

YETI MOTHER
Kio kio lu!

YETI MOTHER & CONGREGANTS
Who can lift a living yak
high above her head
and toss it like a sack of dung?

CONGREGANTS
Who does all these things and more?

YETI MOTHER
Vin du sa ka la!

I am your true mother,
Sakanala Vinda!

You can not run
from me.

I va ka re, I va ka ra lu!

I have been waiting
here for you
in this dark warm cave
in the snowy heights of
the Himalayas.

Where blinding snow white skin and hair have not been stained
by sin,

only by the blood of the rodent rat
of sin!

CONGREGANTS
Who love to eat
the raw red meat
of this rat of sin?

YETI MOTHER & CONGREGANTS
Who love to eat
the raw red meat

and shoot and stomp and squeeze and grip and bite
the living head of this rodent rat
of sin?

Come life,
Yeti life,
come life eternal.

YETI MOTHER
Shake, shake out of me
all that is carnal.

YETI MOTHER & CONGREGANTS
Run life,
Yeti life,
run life eternal.

Stamp, stomp out of you
all that is carnal.
Run life,
Yeti life,
run life eternal.

Stamp, stomp out of you
all that is carnal.

All that is carnal.

All that is carnal.
8. That Sane Men Never Know

MOTHER ANNE & CONGREGANTS
So now you know
we are God’s only children
and from Her holy anger
we must hide.

LEON
There is no cave . . .

MOTHER ANNE & CONGREGANTS
A candle lay,
A candle in your palm.
A candle lay,  
A candle in your brain.

So many blessings
yet to come
that sane men never see.

LEON
There is no cave . . .
There are no Himalayas . . .

It is gone.

But where
am I
now?

I grope in the dark
and the people step on me.

I think, I hope.

But outside

who will I be

now?
Visitations

2. The War Reporter
by
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libretto by Dan O’Brien

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The War Reporter

Cast

Paul Watson, baritone
The ghost of William David Cleveland, bass
Honderich, counter tenor
Dr. Grinker, a psychiatrist, soprano
Lounge singer (one of Paul's inner voices), soprano
Carter (one of Paul’s inner voices), bass
Cleveland’s brother, tenor
chorus, interpreters, reception guests (well-wishers), inner-voices of Paul, (sung by all solo roles at various times)

Instrumentation

Flute (alto fl., fl. picc.)
Clarinet (Eb, Bb, bass cl.)
Percussion (timpani, xyl, mar, vib, snare, tom-toms, bongo, wood bl, ratchet, bass dr.)
Piano
2 violins
viola
‘cello
contrabass
ambisonic digital audio
The War Reporter
an opera in six scenes for five voices and chamber orchestra
Music by Jonathan Berger Libretto by Dan O’Brien

The War Reporter depicts the true story of the inner struggle of Paul Watson, a war reporter who believes he is being haunted by the spirit of the desecrated American soldier he photographed in the streets of Mogadishu in 1993 (a photograph that won Watson the Pulitzer Prize shortly thereafter). Although the libretto’s narrative traverses six geographical locations, the actual drama is set entirely in the psyche of the reporter as he struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Synopsis:

Scene 1: Mogadishu. The site of the downing of a Blackhawk helicopter during the 1993 U.S.-led raid on Mogadishu. Watson and his interpreter pursue the rumor of a captured American soldier and find his corpse being mutilated in the street by a mob. Watson photographs the corpse, but as he is about to snap the photo he hears the voice of Staff Sergeant William David Cleveland warn him: “If you do this, I will own you forever.” Watson takes the photograph.

Scene 2: Columbia. In Columbia University’s stately Low Library, a reception for Watson’s Pulitzer Prize is underway. Amidst a flurry of congratulation and well-wishes, Watson grows increasingly distracted, if not disturbed. The reception party transforms into a vivid and violent reimagining of the brutality of the desecration of Cleveland, culminating in the ominous warning, “The ghosts are getting closer.” Watson’s boss John Honderich makes note of his reporter’s emotional state. Watson replies that he feels badly about the soldier’s family. Honderich asks if he has sought out Sergeant Cleveland’s mother yet, to apologize or at least explain, and Watson is shocked at himself for not having done so already. Honderich reveals that Watson’s colleague Kevin Carter has also won a Pulitzer this year, for his photograph of a vulture waiting for a starving child in Sudan to expire. At first it appears that Carter is taunting Watson, boasting that he has received greater applause than Watson. Jarred back to reality, Watson hears Honderich in fact describing Carter’s recent suicide, presumably at the guilt caused by this photo of the vulture and the starving girl. Watson responds with anger at Carter, before admitting—at least to himself—that he has also considered suicide before but simply lacked the courage. Instead, Watson places himself in harm’s way by returning to war zones.

Scene 3: Johannesburg. In the office of Dr. Grinker, a psychiatrist in Johannesburg, Watson recounts his father’s experience as a soldier in World War Two. He becomes agitated by the memory of holding his dead father’s souvenir Lugar as a boy, and he connects that experience for the first time to his career as a war photographer. Grinker asks why Watson loathes himself—a revelatory idea to Watson—but registering his agitation Grinker suggests ending the session. Watson shows the photograph of Cleveland’s body to Grinker, who recognizes it. Watson reveals that he is constantly haunted by Cleveland’s ghost, and that the ghost is threatening, growing more vengeful.

Scene 4: Mosul. Watson’s death wish takes him to war-torn Mosul in Iraq, where, while photographing a wounded student, he is attacked by a mob. He feels resignation, even elation at the
apparent punishment he is about to receive. Instead, he is saved by a small group of Iraqis. Amazed that he has survived, he assumes it must be for some purpose. The haunting is not over. He asks, “What will I do now that I’m alive?”

Scene 5: Phoenix. Watson flies to Arizona intent on meeting Cleveland’s mother and begging her forgiveness. He drives to her trailer park, but she’s not home. Back at the hotel he leaves a message on her answering machine, and shortly receives a call from Cleveland’s brother, who asks him to leave his mother alone. Watson tries to engage the brother in conversation, asking him if the family hates him. The brother responds that he hates how Watson has “stirred up the ghosts” again. The brother says that Watson is not the one who killed his brother, not part of the mob that dragged his brother through the streets. The brother recalls finding out about Cleveland’s death and recognizing the body from Watson’s photograph. Watson tells the brother how he believes he is literally haunted by Cleveland. The brother suggests that perhaps Watson “owes” Cleveland something, but that it’s not for the brother—or anyone else—to figure that out. The brother rather abruptly takes his leave. Before the conversation ends Watson learns that the brother’s name is Ray, the same name as Watson’s father. Before hanging up Watson once again begs the mother’s forgiveness.
1. Mogadishu

SOPRANO (PAUL)
Have you seen the American soldier?

Have you seen him?

Have you?

TENOR (TRANSLATOR)
That man saw him tied up in a wheelbarrow dead.

He is dead.

SOPRANO (PAUL)
A wheelbarrow?

A wheelbarrow?

COUNTERTENOR (PAUL)
He saw him in a wheelbarrow.

He saw him tied up.

BARITONE (PAUL)
The mob parts around me, black smoke from burning tires.

The wind is blowing and the stench is making me gag.

Mogadishu

was once so beautiful, white painted villas like Italy.

I snap a photo of a boy bouncing on the rotor of the smoldering Blackhawk.
SOPRANO, COUNTertenor, TENOR (PAUL)
Have you seen the American
soldier?

Have you seen him?

Have you?

BARITONE (PAUL)
The mob
parts around me.

I bend over
shoulders stiff

and focus

on the good shot, focus only
on the good shot.

Shutting all else out.

The mob
parts around me

and I see him,

Staff Sergeant William David Cleveland.

BASS (CLEVELAND)
If you do this

I will own you

forever.

BARITONE (PAUL)
When you take a picture
the camera
covers your face
and shuts out the rest of the world.

Everything goes dim

and I hear a voice,

both inside my head and out:
SOPRANO, COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BARITONE, BASS (PAUL)
If you do this
I will own you forever,

Paul.
2. Columbia

COUNTER TENOR (HONDERICH)
Congratulations, Paul!
You’ve won!

SOPRANO (WELL-WISHER)
You’ve won,
Paul!

TENOR (WELL-WISHER)
You’ve won!

COUNTER TENOR (HONDERICH)
Your photograph
is all over the world!

TENOR (WELL-WISHER)
You’ve won, Paul!

SOPRANO, COUNTER TENOR, TENOR (WELL-WISHERS)
The Pulitzer!

TENOR (WELL-WISHER)
How does it feel, Paul,
to have won?

BARITONE (PAUL)
In a room
like the Pantheon and the Parthenon combined,
with hors d’oeuvres
all along the banquet table,
wearing tight shoes
and a blazer,
wool slacks picked out this morning
at Brooks Brothers.

TENOR (WELL-WISHER)
Hey Paul,
your photograph is on the cover of Newsweek
and Time!

SOPRANO, COUNTER TENOR, TENOR (WELL-WISHERS)
Newsweek and Time!

Time!
SOPRANO, COUNTERTENOR, TENOR & BASS (WELL-WISHERS)
You’ve made it!
You’re famous!
You’re someone
to be proud of!

You’ve won!

BARITONE (PAUL)
No! Please, no!

SOPRANO (PAUL)
A boy is wearing
aviator glasses, his face screwed up
in rapturous glee.

An old man raising his cane like a truncheon
beats it down against
the lifeless flesh.

The ropes that bind the soldier’s wrists are stretching his arms out
like Christ.

A woman is slapping the body with a tin can
like he’s a cockroach she needs to kill.

The ghosts are getting closer.

The ghosts are getting closer.

COUNTERTENOR (HONDERICH)
You don’t look so hot, Paul.
Maybe you need some time off?

BARITONE (PAUL)
I guess I feel badly
about that soldier’s family.

COUNTERTENOR (HONDERICH)
Have you thought about finding
his mother?

SOPRANO, COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BASS (PAUL)
Had I?
Why hadn’t I?
COUNTERTENOR (HONDERICH)
Paul, you remember
Kevin Carter, don’t you?

He just won
the Pulitzer Prize
like you

for his picture of a vulture waiting
for a skeletal child to stop struggling
to lift her weighty skull
from Sudan’s red soil.

BARITONE (PAUL)
Just like Carter waited
with his long cigarette ashing
onto the lens of his camera
for that vulture to unfurl
its wings.

BASS (CARTER)
Hear that applause,
Watson?

They love me
more than they love you!

BARITONE (PAUL)
Shut up, Carter.

BASS (CARTER)
I won!

SOPRANO, COUNTERTENOR, TENOR (PAUL)
He’s won. He’s won.

BASS (CARTER)
I won.

BASS (CARTER)
Carter,
shut up.

COUNTERTENOR (HONDERICH)
What are you looking at,
Paul?
BARITONE (PAUL)
Nothing.
Nothing.

COUNTERTENOR (HONDERICH)
Paul, you remember Kevin Carter, don’t you?

He killed himself
Saturday night in a parked car
in Johannesburg.

He duct-taped a hose to the exhaust.

What are you looking at, Paul?

BARITONE (PAUL)
I don’t care
about him.

SOPRANO, TENOR (PAUL)
Why should I?
Why should I care?

SOPRANO, COUNTERTENOR, TENOR (PAUL)
I don’t care
about any of this!

If you can’t do your job
get out of the way
so somebody else can.

BARITONE (PAUL)
Of course
I’ve wanted to kill myself
but the truth is I’ve always lacked
the courage.

SOPRANO, COUNTERTENOR, TENOR (PAUL)
So I tell myself,

SOPRANO, COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BARITONE, BASS (PAUL)
Paul,

BARITONE (PAUL)
just go someplace dangerous,
let someone else
SOPRANO, COUNTertenor, TENOR, BARITONE, BASS (PAUL)
kill you,

Paul.
3. Johannesburg

SOPRANO (GRINKER)
Tell me about your father, Paul.

What was he like?

BARITONE (PAUL)
My father was liberating a village in France.

Twisted streets, churches, houses made of stone.

I can see him.

He takes a bullet in the thigh and watches one of his men trapped in the tall grass. Every time his friend moves a Nazi sniper shoots him till he’s dead.

My father was dead by the time I turned two.

Sometimes my brother would take the dead man’s Lugar out of hiding—

SOPRANO (GRINKER)
You’re shaking, Paul.

BARITONE (PAUL)
—and let me place my finger on the trigger the way I take my pictures now.

SOPRANO (GRINKER)
Why do you loathe yourself, Paul? Why do you feel you’re worthless? Why must you win your mother’s love risking your life for a Pulitzer Prize?

Paul, why don’t we stop for today.

Take a tissue.
Focus
on your breathing.

I’m going to give you
some pills.

BARITONE (PAUL)
Doctor, do you believe in ghosts?

SOPRANO (GRINKER)
It’s a famous picture,
it’s yours?

BASS (CLEVELAND)
If you do this,
I will own you forever.

SOPRANO (GRINKER)
This is only your mind
speaking to itself.

BARITONE (PAUL)
I feel him next to me.
I fear his presence.

SOPRANO (GRINKER)
Is he here with us now?

BARITONE (PAUL)
He is
always with me,
Doctor.

Like my shadow in the sand
he runs after me whispering,

This can not last.
4. Mosul

BARITONE, TENOR (PAUL)
A machine gun
mounted on the back of a Humvee

pounding out death
like a jackhammer.

COUNTERTENOR (PAUL)
Students rush by with a young man
bleeding from his eye.

SOPRANO, COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BASS (CROWD)
Take his picture!
Take it!

BARITONE (PAUL)
Wait! I have to swap my lenses. Wait!

TENOR (PAUL)
And suddenly you can see
the switch go off.

SOPRANO, COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BASS (CROWD)
He’s white!
He’s white!

BARITONE (PAUL)
I’m lifted
off the ground, thrown around, stoned.

SOPRANO, COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BARITONE, BASS (PAUL)
I feel a knife
sliding into my back,
blood pools
on the inside of my shirt.

BARITONE (PAUL)
I’m clutching my camera
while they’re pulling my arms out,

ascending
till I’m floating on top of the crowd
COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BARITONE, BASS (PAUL)
like Christ on the cross.

I am not innocent,
I do not deserve Your mercy.

I am not innocent,
I never have been.

BARITONE (PAUL)
Tear me apart.
Tear me to pieces.

Leave me to blow away like my shadow
in the sand.

COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BARITONE, BASS (PAUL)
If you do this
I will love you
forever.

COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BARITONE, BASS (PAUL)
But then a miracle
occurs.

BARITONE (PAUL)
A dozen people
form a circle around me

and shove me under the steel shutters
of a shop.

COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BARITONE, BASS (PAUL)
I’m inside.
I’m saved.

BARITONE (PAUL)
But what will I do now

that I’m still alive?
5. Phoenix

SOPRANO (PAUL)
Strip malls,

TENOR (PAUL)
drive-thru drug stores,

COUNTERTENOR (PAUL)
nine-hole pitch-and-putt golf courses,

stars and stripes drifting off flagpoles,

TENOR (PAUL)
plumbing supplies, auto body parts

SOPRANO (PAUL)
and strip clubs,

TENOR (PAUL)
above-ground pools, jet skis on cinder blocks,

SOPRANO (PAUL)
to your trailer on cement.

TENOR (PAUL)
Cherubs blowing their horns in the wind.

BARITONE (PAUL)
Hello, ma’am.
This is difficult for me to say.

I took that photo
on that terrible day
in Mogadishu

of your son.

The white sun burning up, burning the sand, bright like Arizona, like Mogadishu.

TENOR (PAUL)
Like Mogadishu.
BASS (PAUL)  
Like Mogadishu.

TENOR (PAUL)  
Bright  
like Mogadishu.

With the old man 
beating on the soldier’s chest 
like a drum.

BASS (PAUL)  
Mogadishu.

SOPRANO (PAUL)  
That boy in sunglasses 
still laughing at us.

BARITONE (PAUL)  
I’ve wanted to meet you for so many years 
to try to explain 
what happened.

I hope you’ll be willing 
to give me some time 
so I can try to make you 
understand.

I’ll be waiting here 
at the hotel for your call.

BARITONE (PAUL)  
Hello?  
Who’s this?

TENOR (BROTHER)  
This is William David Cleveland’s 
brother.

Can I ask you 
ever to call my mother again?

BARITONE (PAUL)  
It’s just that I’ve been living almost ten years 
with this thing.
TENOR (BROTHER)
You mean that photograph of my brother
being dragged through the street?

BARITONE (PAUL)
Do you hate me,
sir?

TENOR (BROTHER)
What?

BARITONE (PAUL)
Do you hate me?

TENOR (BROTHER)
I hate the fact that you called my mother.
She called me up crying.
She said you called her
and stirred up these ghosts again.

BARITONE (PAUL)
I apologize.
I am sorry.

TENOR (BROTHER)
Look,
we don’t care
what you’re going through.

You did nothing.
You are nothing to us.

You’re not the one
who shot my brother
out of the sky.

You’re not the one who dragged him
dead through the streets.

BARITONE (PAUL)
But your mother hates me,
I know it.

TENOR (BROTHER)
We found out while watching the news.

My brother dead
while watching
the news.

We recognized his feet,
just like his father’s feet.

My mother was the one who cried first.

BARITONE (PAUL)
You must blame me for that much, sir!

I could have held my camera down.

I could have taken pictures of my shadow
in the sand.

When I took his picture, sir,

I heard your brother’s ghost warn me,

If you take this picture,

TENOR, BARITONE, BASS (BROTHER, PAUL, CLEVELAND)
I will own you forever

TENOR (BROTHER)
Maybe he means
you owe him something now.

BARITONE (PAUL)
Like what?

TENOR (BROTHER)
That’s not for me to decide.

Look,
I’ve got to pick up my son.

BARITONE (PAUL)
Wait, I forgot to ask you your name, sir.

TENOR (BROTHER)
Ray.

My name
is Ray.
BARITONE (PAUL)
Ray
was my father's name.
6. Resolute

BARITONE (PAUL)

Apologies
for not writing to you sooner, Dan.

I simply lost my grip!

Watching
my camera slip out of my hand, into the wound
of the sea,
the sea,
the ice-broken sea.

My camera slipping
down in the sea,
the sea,
into the open wake of the ice-broken sea.

I’m waiting here in Resolute
for this storm
to clear.

I’d hoped that I could escape.

I’d hoped
that I could stop being
who I am,

but I’ve told The Star that I need to return
to Kandahar.

Between me and my confessor:

I’m no different
than all those Americans
driving their trucks in Iraq
to pay off their mortgages in Florida.

So this is what I’ve become: a mercenary and
a desperate one too.

But there’s something else:
I feel like Cleveland’s waiting there for me.

I have an old Afghan friend who runs an English school in Kandahar where Taliban factions would meet during the darkest days of this never-ending war on terror.

I’m thinking his story should be told.

What do you say?

Why don’t you come with me?

What do you say?

I promise I’ll keep you as safe as I can.

What do you say?

BARITONE AND BASS (PAUL AND GHOST)

Come with me.

Though of course nobody knows what might happen out here.