

THE STRIPELING

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EXT: SPACE - NIGHT

SUPER

One thousand, four hundred light years from Earth.

SUPER FADES

A distant yellow sun shines onto a vast, Earth-like planet.

SUPER

Exoplanet Kepler 452-b.

Fifty years after their first Industrial Revolution.

SUPER FADES

EXT: KEPLER 452-B, DESERT - DAY

A sledge hammer strikes an iron railway fastener into place.

Joined by the throng of RAILWAY WORKERS. Like Ancient Greeks:  
ivory coloured loin cloths, brown leather ankle sandals.  
Otherwise bare, muscular, tanned.

Toil in shimmering heat.

Their cacophony drives the broad ribbon of track into the  
oblivion ahead.

The RAIL-GANG FOREMAN guides them; sees his crew, flagging.

He glances a few yards back, at --

-- his sundial: a post in the sand. A line at the base marks  
when it was set. The shadow cast, 90 degrees from that line.

He grins. Work continues.

A wooden sleeper slams down.

The track points dead at the horizon. Faint peaks of some  
forgotten mountain range.

The Gang have months of effort ahead.

The Sun's fierce halo beats down.

The sound of hammers against iron fades.

EXT: DESERT, THE MOUNTAIN RANGE - DAY

A pale formation rises: a whole geological system.

A black eagle cruises the mountainside, over --

-- a meagre tree line, scrub and cactus.

The eagle wheels on thermals, dives out of the sky, at --

-- a motionless, sand coloured rabbit, flicked into action.  
The eagle misses its prey.

Soars, across the top of the range, into --

-- the caldera of this super-volcano, lush from millenia in its micro-climate (like Yellowstone on Earth).

EXT: CALDERA FOREST - DAY

In the misty distance, hilly remnants of volcanic activity.

SUPER

The Lost Kingdom of Kardarc.

SUPER FADES

The Citadel of Kardarc: neolithic, mystical. Two thin, stream-fed, snaking lakes form natural moats.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

Stout wattle and daub Lodges densely litter the hillside.  
Smoke rises through rough chimneys.

They are crammed around an older granite complex (now the Royal Lodge).

EXT/INT: ROYAL LODGE COURTYARD/CLOISTERS - DAY

The eagle swoops in, rests at the vined courtyard well.  
Flicks spilled water across its plumage.

A native teenage girl: lithe, tough limbed, dark and tanned.  
She runs barefoot through overgrown shadows of the cloisters.

This is PROTO: 17, a mix of wilderness and grace. She wears the standard tribal leather tunic, belted at the waist. Unlike her tribe, she wears an intricate necklace of pearls and black eagle feathers.

She stops dead at the sight of the eagle.

Proto's dark, beaded hair settles.

The bird whips its sharp head, faces her. A stand off. The eagle beats its wings.

Proto braces.

It lifts from the courtyard, takes to the air.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

The eagle glides, over --

-- a ramshackle marketplace. Tribesfolk: leather tunicked women; men in leather loin cloths. Barefoot, dark skinned, these are the Geh d' Pir Neh.

They browse basic stalls laid on the ground. Meat, still in its skin; obsidian tools; feathered keepsakes.

Two YOUNG MOTHERS, mid teens, choose oils. Smooth them into their NEWBORNS' skin. The STALLHOLDER refuses payment.

EXT: ROYAL LODGE - DAY

Proto sprints out.

Past a lazy GUARD DETAIL, combat staffs leaned to one side.

She zips along the lanes of Kardarc.

The eagle shadow cuts overhead.

Proto glances up.

It vanishes, behind the central Temple Mount. Similar to the Royal Lodge, more like an open fort. Granite steps zig zag to the summit Temple.

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT - DAY

Proto bounds up the steps.

Dashes across the Temple square. Vaults the Altar.

Flings herself against the far wall, to see --

-- the sky, empty.

Out of breath, she smiles, looks down to the market. In the crowd, she spots a friend. Proto waves, shouts.

PROTO

Filia!

EXT: MARKET PLACE/TEMPLE MOUNT - DAY

FILIA, slightly younger, softer than Proto, stops. Her commoner's necklace, a cord, bears just a rabbit's foot.

A brace of dead rabbits, tied to a pole, bounces across her shoulder. She scowls to see where the shout is from.

Filia locks on, waves back, just as big a smile.

FILIA  
Sal'la, Proto!

Proto hurtles back down the Temple steps.

Filia ambles along, fast enough not to lose her rabbits.

They embrace excitedly at the foot of the steps.

PROTO  
Sal'la.  
(indicates the rabbits)  
Get rid of that. Come on. Let's go  
to the forest.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto's eagle soars out, over the Inner Lake.

EXT: INNER LAKE - DAY

FISHERMEN, nets gathered, wade by the shore. Flanked by SPEAR GUARDS, poised, obsidian tipped spears held aloft.

In the lake, a small bow wave leads a broad shadow beneath. It heads directly to a lone WATER COLLECTOR by a stream.

She notices --

-- a Spear Guard pivots instinctively to the threat.

The other Spear Guards, silent, follow suit.

The Fishermen, apparently oblivious, tend their nets.

All Spear Guards wait, track whatever lurks beneath.

It nears.

Closer.

The Spear Guards tense up, flex, hurl as one.

Every spear hits its mark, solid, like porcupine quills. A string of bloody bubbles trails to the lake bed.

The Water Collector bows thanks, fills her jug. Trudges off.

The Spear Guards take up another spear each.

Peaceful again, fishing continues.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto creeps around a tree trunk, hides from --

-- Filia, equally stealthy.

Proto halts.

In front of her, a fawn nibbles greenery.

Proto quietly plucks a few blueberries. Offers them up.

The fawn steps to Proto's outstretched hand. They enjoy their special moment.

From the forest, Filia, open mouthed awe, sees the scene.

A full grown doe appears at Proto's back. The fawn still happily feeds from her hand.

Proto senses the doe, stiffens slightly.

The doe stamps one hoof closer.

Proto smiles, retreats, whispers to the fawn.

PROTO

You're brave for one so young.

The doe nudges Proto away. Proto turns, bows. Runs into the forest. The deer, calm, continue their day.

Filia, breath held, takes a step forward. Looks at her feet, too late. Snaps a twig.

The deer spring instantly, vanish into the forest.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

A young man sneaks in the shadows: THEO, also 17. He wears the same kind of necklace as Proto. His wrestler's physique ripples in the dappled light. From his head, one glossy topknot, sides scalp smooth, trails onto his shoulders.

He creeps toward a Lodge, set apart from the rest. Older, less well kept.

INT: LONELY LODGE - DAY

Gloomy, piled with pots, animal skins, botanical samples. Pride of place, a Stone Age chemistry set, on the granite bench the Lodge is built around. Next to it, vellum sheets, carved tablets suggest diligence.

Hidden by dusty leathers, a disc, the height of an adult.

A tall, elegant lady, late 30s: MERCHURIA. Her cloak: black eagle feathers, riven with clusters of pearls, trails the ground. Dreads, loosely bunched in a spray, all in a high, Shamanic head-dress.

She experiments, inspects potions. The long sleeves of her leather dress, tattered and dyed from her work.

EXT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Hidden across from Theo, Proto and Filia watch, amazed as --

-- his hand reaches out, aches to grasp --

-- a wooden staff, smooth from years of handling. Crested by an eagle skull on a cowl of black feathers. They drape over a frame festooned with rabbit skulls: some old, some fresh.

Beautiful, grotesque, Merchuria's Lance guards her Lodge.

Theo's hand swipes the Lance. The rabbit skulls rattle.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

At the theft of her Lance, her eyes twitch sideways.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto and Filia shriek, run, giggle through a glade.

Theo charges after them, Merchuria's Lance thrust out.

He roars.

THEO

Argh!

EXT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Merchuria bows through the door, becomes her full height.

Confirms the theft. Eyelids flicker shut. Chin raised, nostrils flare, inhales, scents for prey.

Her cloak rustles. A breeze, peculiar to where only she stands, whips up.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Theo still charges.

He is snatched, powerfully backwards.

Merchuria's hand lifts the Lance. Theo dangles from it.

Merchuria, lips curled back, stares into his frightened face. She yanks the Lance. Theo drops off.

Proto and Filia, scared, hidden once more.

Merchuria spins, points the Lance straight at them.

They yelp and flee.

She whacks Theo with the Lance as he tries to scamper.

He clatters to the ground and is left, completely alone.

EXT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Merchuria opens her eyes, exhales.

Leans against her Lance, for a moment, to recover.

She replaces the Lance. Shakes her head like a disappointed mother. Calmly ducks back into her Lodge.

EXT: KARDARC/ROYAL LODGE - DAY

Theo sprints between TRIBESPEOPLE, into the Royal Lodge. The two Guards have dozed off.

INT: ROYAL LODGE - DAY

Theo speed walks a quiet, dim corridor.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, ARMOURY - DAY

Small, poorly stocked. Could be a hunter's cupboard.

He grabs a combat staff. Basically, a wooden pole.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto and Filia, still wary, chat along through woodland.

Theo lands in their path, launches the staff at Filia.

Wide eyed, she flinches, waits for it to land. Proto shoves her, dives in front of the staff. It smacks Proto, thumps her to the ground. She stifles her yell, tumbles and jumps up.

Theo senses the tables have turned. He pauses. Uh oh.

Proto seizes the staff. Theo's legs cannot move fast enough.



She pursues him.

Both travel expertly across the terrain.

EXT: WARRIOR STATUE CLEARING - DAY

Theo swerves in, trapped by quarried rock on all sides.

Proto skids up behind him.

PROTO  
Got you now, Theo!

He doesn't move.

He stares up, at --

-- a granite statue: a proud, stern Warrior King. He is decorated with the Royal necklace in obsidian.

Proto and Theo both stand, momentarily disabled.

A tear runs down Proto's cheek.

THEO  
You miss him.

She nods, stubborn. A little girl again. Wipes her tear.

THEO (CONT'D)  
Me too.

He elbows her, swipes the staff, runs off again. She pulls her gaze from the statue, chases after Theo.

Into the clearing steps QUEEN RENNA. Late 30s, immaculate, leisurely. Merchuria's identical twin; by tribal standards, refined. Her tunic flatters. Beaded hair and Royal necklace in place; correct.

Faint stripes radiate from her sternum, around her torso, shoulders and arms.

She admires the stone contours of her King.

EXT: FOREST, ELSEWHERE - DAY

Proto catches up to Theo. He whirls to face her, to fight.

She stands her ground.

Theo, strong but clumsy, rushes her.

She sidesteps lightly as he crashes past. He swings the staff, misses.

Slides over into a mouthful of dirt.

Proto laughs, leaps onto his back, play thumps him.

PROTO  
Haha! You should practice more,  
Theo. I'll always be the elder!

Theo struggles, prostrate, helpless.

MOMENTS LATER

Proto, subdued laughter, dusts herself off. Strolls up to Filia. Places a loving hand on her shoulder.

PROTO  
He's gone for now. Come on. Quiet!

EXT: WARRIOR STATUE CLEARING - DAY

Renna is joined by Merchuria, Lance habitually in hand.

Both gaze, spellbound admiration for the statue.

Proto and Filia wriggle on their elbows out of foliage. Unnoticed, they pause to spy from a ledge. And eavesdrop.

RENNA  
They shouldn't squabble.

Merchuria rolls her eyes.

MERCHURIA  
We did.  
(to herself)  
Still do.

Renna pretends not to hear.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
Yes, Renna, yes! Can't stay  
children forever.

Renna goes to speak. Merchuria continues her sermon.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
When the succession begins, and it  
must, whoever that might be will  
have just two sunsets, to become  
the eagle and not the rabbit,  
otherwise...

Her eyes peer balefully, into Renna's hopeful soul.

RENNA

I know the law, Merchuria. It was  
the same for us. And you needn't  
try scaring me with your... spells.

Merchuria cackles. Their attention goes back to the King.

MERCHURIA

Whether they choose it, or it  
chooses them.

RENNA

I know.

MERCHURIA

I know you do.

RENNA

Well then.

MERCHURIA

Yes. Well then.

Proto and Filia observe, wide eyed, from their hiding spot.

Merchuria's face softens in the statue's presence.

PROTO (O.S.)

(whispers)

He used to say she was as old as  
The Sea.

The young ladies snigger.

Merchuria hears them. Looks sad, for a second.

FILIA

Do you think there ever really was  
a 'Sea'?

PROTO

(unquestionably)

Of course!

The girls wriggle away, back out of sight.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto and Filia skidaddle into a meadow dotted with ponds.  
They stop, pant, hands on knees. Grin at each other.

FILIA

But surely, they're the same -

Right next to them, one of the ponds erupts, flashes steam.

PROTO

Run!

She grabs Filia. They leap back into forest cover. Boiling rain spits down behind them. They laugh, hysterical relief.

EXT: WARRIOR STATUE CLEARING - DAY

The young ladies' laughter chimes.

Renna gently takes Merchuria's arm.

RENNA

Come here.

Merchuria winces, grabs her own wrist.

Worried, she looks away, hides the pain from Renna.

SUPER

One year later.

SUPER FADES

EXT: WARRIOR STATUE CLEARING - DAY

The forest has reclaimed some of the statue. He still has the proud, distant aura.

Merchuria and Renna meet, in the King's presence once again.

Where the Queen has hardly aged, Merchuria is changed. Wrinkled, greying.

Renna takes Merchuria's arm. She slaps the Queen's hand away.

MERCHURIA

I don't need help.

RENNA

Maybe you didn't before. All these years, giving so much to the Geh d' Pir Neh. It's time you rested.

MERCHURIA

Rest! You rest. You're the eldest.

She raps her Lance, irritated, against the King's stone legs.

RENNA

Only the break of day separates us.

## MERCHURIA

Slightly more than the break of day  
separates us now. So come on!  
There's always more to do.

She shuffles away hastily.

Renna watches after her.

A final glance at the King, she follows her Shaman.

## EXT: FOREST - NIGHT

Merchuria shuffles from moonlit trees, into the dark wood.

From beneath her cloak, she produces two new born babies.  
Lively, one boy, one girl, they kick.

She hides them at points beneath fern cover.

## EXT: KARDARC - NIGHT

Torchlit, the two Young Mothers, restrained by their  
families. They struggle, bite and scratch to break free.

Merchuria, a cloaked figure from the forest, Lance high.

She stamps the Lance into the ground.

The families let go. The Young Mothers dash past the Lance.

## EXT: FOREST - NIGHT

Growls of predators. The furred back of a low beast stalks.

The mothers race into the dark. Branches whip, tear at them.

The beast snuffles the forest floor. Switches tack, towards  
the babies. Faster.

Under ferns, the babies gurgle, kick chubby legs.

The mothers step in moonlight, listen as --

-- the beast crashes along.

The mothers' sharp eyes twinkle, see the beast's path.

One of them lunges, jubilant, sweeps back a pile of fronds.

Empty.

She looks to the other mother, panicked. She points, directs  
her to search, together.

Ahead, undergrowth rustles violently: a clear, direct route.

The mothers race toward it.

A baby, alone, sensing danger, wails.

EXT: KARDARC - NIGHT

The families, concerned, hear the baby. Suspicious, they stare at Merchuria.

Stoic, she observes the impenetrable blackness of the forest.

Her grip on that old Lance tightens, just a bit.

EXT: FOREST - NIGHT

Beast and mothers converge. DIRECTING MOTHER dives headlong at plants parted by the animal. A thud. It howls.

Directing Mother and beast tumble through vegetation.

PANICKED MOTHER scoops any baby she finds, clutched to her breasts.

She runs as the beast fights back with Directing Mother.

The forest goes silent. Even the babies stop crying.

Everyone waits.

From the trees, Directing Mother emerges; scratched, bitten.

Her baby instinctively wriggles into her arms.

Mothers and babies, quiet, loving, return to their Lodges.

EXT: KARDARC - LATER NIGHT

Merchuria sits alone outside her Lodge. Stares sadly into her fire. Low singing filters from the main group of Lodges.

INT: KARDARC LODGE - NIGHT

Directing Mother hums, breastfeeds her child.

EXT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - NIGHT

Merchuria gone, the blanket door cover swings, and is still.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Candlelight dances over the crumpled, the chaotic.

A mongrel pup tied to a chair with twine lies in the corner.  
Watches Merchuria. Adores her.

Merchuria, lost in the rhythm of her profession. Petals,  
snipped into jars, mixtures.

She ignites her distillery.

It belches into the room.

Her fingertips trace across cluttered forest findings.

She contemplates, slows to --

-- her choice.

Closes her eyes for a full, divine decision.

The pup yaps.

Flow broken, Merchuria's face creases.

The leashed pup strains on its hind legs, toward the door.

Proto pokes her face in past the door curtain. Uninvited,  
steps in. Gives the pup as wide a berth as possible.

MERCHURIA

Yes?

Proto, polite, clears her throat.

PROTO

Sal'la, Merchuria. My mother -

MERCHURIA

The Queen...

PROTO

Yes, the Queen, has told me to come  
to ask -

MERCHURIA

Whether I'm finished? No. Tell my  
impatient sister, 'Our Queen', I am  
experimenting and interruption only  
delays my completion.

Proto, interest piqued, steps nearer.

PROTO

What are you -

MERCHURIA  
Ex. Peri. Menting.

Proto shrinks to her previous spot.

The pup whimpers, strains to reach her.

Merchuria continues her spell.

Proto peeks at Merchuria's scribed vellum. Eases one silently round: cactus illustrations.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
Never seen those before, have you?

Proto jumps a little.

PROTO  
What is it? Where -

MERCHURIA  
Beyond. You'll see. Perhaps.

Merchuria has a guilty look. Her shoulders sag.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
Go on, now. All this doesn't happen  
by itself, you know.  
(mutters to herself)  
There's only so much 'magic'.

PROTO  
Yes. Thank you. Goodbye, Merchuria.

Proto obediently slides out.

EXT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

The pup gives a high bark, like a kick in Proto's rear.

She shoots away from the Lodge door. Filia's laughter gives her another fright. Proto overcompensates for lost dignity.

FILIA  
Still scared?

PROTO  
Horrible, stupid thing.

They hear Merchuria's chair move. The pup, chair in tow, hurries out. Yaps like crazy at Proto's feet.

Filia nudges between them as Proto goes to pieces.

FILIA  
Shoo! Go on, shoo!



The little dog sizes things up. Toddles back inside.

The girls wander off into Kardarc.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Merchuria turns back to her flasks and potions. Sprinkles a handful of crushed herbs into one of them. Swills it round.

Holds the mixture to the candle light. It reacts, protests.

Unnatural.

Magic.

Merchuria takes a sip. Grimaces.

MERCHURIA

Foul.

Her eyes shine. She smiles, convulses, pukes on the floor. She shudders, recovers. Looks even older.

The pup ambles over, laps the vomit. Yelps, runs off.

Merchuria pours the potion out. Starts again.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

Proto and Filia mooch.

Filia smiles, shakes her head at Proto.

FILIA

Seriously. Still afraid of dogs.

PROTO

No; being bitten BY DOGS.

FILIA

Still, one little pup.

PROTO

It was one little pup -

FILIA

And that was when you were..?

Proto, stubborn, stares at her.

PROTO

Well, you're scared of boys.

Filia feigns confusion. Laughs at the accusation.

FILIA  
I'm not, you know.

Proto gives a 'Yes, you are' nod.

They stroll arm in arm, bicker, bump elbows.

EXT: MARKET PLACE - DAY

Proto and Filia enter the square.

Customers mingle, shabby stalls.

A gang of boys hang about lazily in a corner.

FILIA  
Right. Watch this.

Proto stops, hands on hips to see Filia's romantic efforts.

PROTO  
I can only teach you so much.

Filia marches up to the lads, chooses --

-- the BIGGEST LAD. Grabs his shoulder.

Hefts him into a judo lift.

Throws him, whack, onto the ground.

Proto gasps.

Passers by step across the winded boy. He lays, dazed.

Filia slaps her hands together, marches back to Proto.

PROTO (CONT'D)  
(laughs)  
Filia! That was not what I meant.  
You know that was not what I meant.

Filia takes a bow, blows a kiss to the bewildered boys.

They try to help their friend. He tries to tough it out.

Proto and Filia laugh to each other, at the boys. Walk off,  
arm in arm once more.

EXT: INNER LAKE, FISHING AREA - DAY

Theo, waist deep, bathes. He dives back, rises, floats about.

Luxuriates.

The Spear Guards watch over him.

One Spear Guard shakes his head to the others. Gets a raised eyebrow in return. They continue to guard --

-- Theo. Pebbles splash in. Bounce off his chest and brow. Annoyed, he wrestles around to see --

-- titchy kids on the bank, giggle and point at him.

He splashes at them. They run off.

Theo goes back to relaxing on his back.

On the bank, the kids creep and dance back to the water.

A bigger rock smacks right in Theo's face. He leaps up!

The kids, unarmed, bounce up in fright, run like lightning.

Furious, Theo wades to the bank, a dot of blood over one eye. He rushes after them.

The same Spear Guard smiles, gives a shrug of innocence.

The other Spear Guards try not to smirk.

EXT: KARDARC OUTSKIRTS - DAY

The kids flee past Merchuria's Lodge.

She whisks her door curtain back to see --

-- the kids, pell mell past her, spurred by her presence.

Merchuria steps out, admires their speed. Theo instantly slams into her back. She's propelled forward.

Theo panics as --

-- Merchuria turns.

He cowers, cringes.

MERCHURIA

Oh, Sal'la, Theo. It's you. Again.

Slaps him round the head.

Dissatisfied, clouts him again. On the scratch the rock made.

He goes all puppy dog.

Merchuria's face softens, a tiny bit. She nods for him to go.

Theo hurries off like a naughty toddler.

She shakes her head, watches him.

EXT: KARDARC/ROYAL LODGE - DAY

Theo traipses.

He sulks, past Lodges.

Ignored by Tribesfolk, busy about their day.

Reaches the Royal Lodge.

GUARDS  
(drowsy)  
Sal'la.

THEO  
Hmph. Sal'la, you two.

INT: ROYAL LODGE COURTYARD/CLOISTERS - DAY

Theo hears a girl sing a melody. Curious, he rounds a corner.

Filia sits alone, sings to please no-one but herself.

Theo stays hidden. His eyes, mean, jealous, move over her.

Fila's soulful voice chimes through the Lodge.

Eventually, he steps out.

THEO  
Sal'la, Filia.

Unperturbed, she finishes her line of song. Turns to Theo.  
Smiles hello.

Pisses him off.

THEO (CONT'D)  
Should you be here by yourself?

She still smiles. Considers his question. Gives a tiny nod.

FILIA  
Oh, Theo. Your Guards know me as  
well as your mother.

Unsure of her meaning, he tries to stay nice but nasty.

THEO  
Ah, well. Lucky Guards.

She squints amazement, gets up to leave.

Theo steps in her path. Menacingly close.

THEO (CONT'D)

Poor Filia, running around, trying to be everyone's friend, from the Guards up to the Princess, and even the Queen. Are they your friends, Filia? Are they? Mm? Am I?

He presses closer.

She gives her same smile.

FILIA

Of course, Theo. We'll always be... friends.

He smiles, pretends to win.

THEO

But I think one day we'll be more. I think one day I'll be your King, and then you'll want to be my very good friend, won't you, Filia?

Closer still, the back of his finger traces up her arm.

FILIA

We don't have Kings in Kardarc anymore. You of all people should -

THEO

Ssh.

He softly brushes his lips against her face.

She shudders, wriggles past, jogs to salvation.

CLOISTERS

Unseen by Theo, Filia bumps into Renna. They whisper in darkness, glance to the courtyard. Renna hugs Filia.

RENNA

(whispers)

Not to worry. Join us for lunch.

Filia, happier, nods.

COURTYARD

Theo sunbathes by the well.

RENNA (CONT'D)

(to Theo)

Darling.

He jumps out of his skin.

She beckons him to follow her.

INT: ROYAL LODGE KITCHEN - DAY

Proto and Filia, seated on deerskin covered benches. They eat stew: wooden bowls, wooden spoons.

A fresh venison haunch, butchered and bloody on the side.

Filia eyes Proto's bruises from tackling Theo.

They tuck in.

Theo ladles himself a bowl of stew from the range pot.

FILIA  
(loud)  
I love your mother's stew.

Theo slaps the ladle down, stomps out with his lunch.

PROTO  
(jokes after him)  
You mean our Queen, Filia.  
(normal voice)  
She doesn't make it.

Filia sniggers, but corrects herself.

FILIA  
Yes. The Queen's stew.

They eat.

PROTO  
And venison's for everyone.

FILIA  
Mmm. Rabbit's easier to catch.

She savours the deer.

FILIA (CONT'D)  
Proto, you must be our next Queen.  
You can't allow Theo to become  
King. Your father was good.  
Wonderful! Everyone says it.

Proto munches, watches, listens to Filia's passion.

FILIA (CONT'D)  
But... Theo. He'd be horrible.  
Cruel, greedy...

Proto smiles.

FILIA (CONT'D)  
... selfish, boring...

Proto snorts laughter.

FILIA (CONT'D)  
... stupid. He'd be shit!

They both laugh.

PROTO  
Not our decision, though. Come on,  
eat up if it's so good.

Proto drops her spoon. Her hands tremble.

Filia frowns. A joke?

Proto, frightened, stares at her hands.

Recovers.

PROTO (CONT'D)  
I think... that was it. I think  
it's starting.

She gawks down at herself, as if something might happen.

They both jump to their feet. Run from the kitchen.

FILIA  
We need to tell the Queen!

PROTO  
I need to tell Mercuria!

They run down a corridor.

FILIA  
What about -

PROTO  
- Theo.

They split up.

EXT: ROYAL LODGE - DAY

Proto accelerates into sunlight.

Springs along the path to Mercuria's Lodge.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, QUEEN'S QUARTERS - DAY

Filia, uninvited, rushes in. Calls out.

FILIA  
Your Highness! Your Highness!

Renna, busy at chamois embroidery, sighs.

Filia is upon her. Renna, quietly irritated, turns to her.

FILIA (CONT'D)  
Here you are.

RENNA  
Yes. Here is where I would be. Just  
once, Filia, it might be a surprise  
for you to follow Royal protocol.

Filia stops dead in her tracks.

RENNA (CONT'D)  
Any thoughts?

Renna gracefully tilts her head: Filia should at least bow.  
Stumped, Filia subconsciously mimics Renna.

EXT: KARDARC OUTSKIRTS - DAY

Proto sprints. Dodges Tribesfolk, skips past them, to --  
-- Mercuria's Lodge.

INT: QUEEN'S QUARTERS - DAY

Renna, arms folded, waits for a puzzled Filia.

EXT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Proto giggles nervously as she approaches.

INT: QUEEN'S QUARTERS - DAY

Renna gives up on her bow. Goes back to embroidery.

Filia snaps to. Gasps.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Proto bursts in.

INT: QUEEN'S QUARTERS - DAY

Renna, aghast, turns to Filia.



RENNA  
She's what!

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Proto, breathless, searches. Nobody home. The puppy fawns.  
Proto ignores it.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

Renna strides through the crowd. Filia skips at her side.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Proto goes to leave. Vellum sheets flutter behind her.

MERCHURIA (O.S.)  
Proto.

Proto spins, to see Merchuria, exactly where she wasn't a moment before.

PROTO  
My hands. I think...

Proto offers her palms. Merchuria looms in, grabs them.  
Hoists Proto's arms to the ceiling.

Inspects her skin closely.

PROTO (CONT'D)  
I'm scared. Can't you, or I...  
Can't we do anything, to stop -

Merchuria finds nothing, casts Proto's hands back to her.

MERCHURIA  
Regrettably not.

RENNA (O.S.)  
Proto!

Merchuria rolls her eyes.

EXT: FOREST/KARDARC - DAY

A team of MINERS drag a solid wooden sledge on a mud track.  
Their hands and feet bear thick, protective bindings.

In the sledge, raw lumps of obsidian, various sizes, jostle.

The Miners break into a heroic jog, slide into Kardarc.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

The sledge is brought to a halt, outside --

THE KNAPPING SHED

OBSIDIAN KNAPPERS stand to inspect the delivery. Only their feet have protectors.

Nimble fingers select and discard the obsidian.

The Knappers settle down at work stations.

The Miners haul the sledge away, to reveal --

-- Proto, drags Renna by the hand to the Knapping Shed.

The Knappers, eager to please, jump to their feet again. They display a body length, shining, solid black oval mirror.

Proto and Renna admire themselves and each other in it.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, PROTO'S QUARTERS - DAY

Proto and Renna, same positions in the mirror. It is wedged against Proto's dressing room wall.

RENNA

Are we not the Geh d' Pir Neh? The  
Black Stone People?

MOMENTS LATER

The room, empty.

Merchuria shuffles up to the mirror.

Takes a critical look at her smoky reflection.

Stretches her neck close, as if to a portal. Gives a smug, disapproving shake of the head.

MOMENTS LATER

Merchuria's cloak trails out of the room.

Empty again.

The mirror jumps from the wall, momentarily stands by itself.

It seems, to take, an age, to topple.

It lands, cracks open, right along its back. Split in two.

Tiny shards spray outward, like a mist of blackened blood.

Renna rushes in, followed by Proto, then Filia. Dismayed, they gaze at the smashed glass.

Proto looks to her mother.

RENNA  
This is terrible. How could this  
happen?

PROTO  
We can fix... or get another.

FILIA  
It was so beautiful.

RENNA  
This is not right. This is bad.  
Very bad.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, PROTO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Proto lies, feverish.

She twitches, shivers on the skins of her cot.

The floor, clear of glass, the split mirror remains.

Renna mops Proto's brow with embroidered chamois. Looks up.

Merchuria, positively glowing, Lance held off the floor. She covers the distance to them in a shimmer. Gestures Renna to disrobe Proto.

Merchuria's finger traces a line down Proto's torso. A pair of faint stripes twist, sternum to collar bone.

Merchuria's lips burble some incantation. She appears to enter a trance.

Proto's eyes dart about inside the fever. The violence of it plays on Renna, compelled to comfort her.

Merchuria smoulders. Rattles in her medicine bag.

Renna, hopeful, notices.

RENNA  
The Elixir. Do you have it?

Merchuria casually shakes her head.

MERCHURIA  
It cures all ills, right enough.

PRELAP

MERCHURIA  
But this, this is no illness. It's  
who she is.

EXT: PROTO'S VISION FOREST - DAY

A little girl's hand pushes a branch to one side, reveals --  
-- The King, alive, broad and muscular, on a granite throne.

Impossibly tall; an adult seen from an infant's point of view. Serene, swathed in his ceremonial cloak. Engulfed by lush, shadowy foliage.

His stout hand raises a thick cigar to his lips. The hot end flares, crackles deep orange.

He absorbs the acrid smoke. It trails from his nostrils, sides of his mouth.

His face looms. Wise, paternal. Behind the veil of cigar fumes, lips move sedately. A sonorous mumble.

The vision evaporates.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, PROTO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Renna, deadly serious, stares into Merchuria's eyes.

Impassive, Merchuria stares right back.

MERCHURIA  
Remember?

RENNA  
Yes.

Renna, heartbroken, watches Proto. Merchuria leaves.

EXT: MARKET PLACE - NIGHT

Torchlight flickers. Two OBSIDIAN HAWKERS, father and son, close their stall. Last to leave, lethargic, they pack spearheads, hunting knives, kitchen ware.

HAWKER #1, the son, collects tiny pieces into a box.

MERCHURIA (O.S.)  
What knives do you have?

Hawker #1 jumps. Tools scatter. Sucks a cut on his thumb.

Knives are unwrapped.

Merchuria ponders. The Hawkers try to please.

She selects - a sharpened piece of antler. Even in Kardarc, it's primitive.

Merchuria stores it in her cloak. Offers - a feather.

Hawker #1 scowls at this poor trade. Hawker #2, the father, steps in.

HAWKER #2  
Please, Merchuria. It's a gift.

She remains, feather offered.

The son smiles. As he takes it, she slides her forefinger across his blood.

Merchuria's eyes smile. She seems to wipe the blood in her cloak. Really, sleight of hand, she takes an extra knife.

Back turned, she draws Hawker #1's blood across her own lips.

Hawker #2 despairs of his boy. They hurry to pack up.

EXT: KARDARC - NIGHT

Happy children run around, chased by their mothers. The kids yell, pursued, caught, hauled off to respective Lodges.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - NIGHT

Merchuria, torchlit, sits cross-legged. Trance-like, mumbles. Rotates a fistful of herbs. Crushes their essence.

She pauses. Drops the herbs to the floor.

Brushes a torch over. Lights them.

Wafts fumes into her nostrils.

Inhales, eyes closed, into a stupor.

EXT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - NIGHT

Theo strides towards the doorway glow.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - NIGHT

Merchuria, alert again. One eye bats open, points at her door. She rises, draws the door curtain, reveals --

-- Theo, obstinately petulant.

THEO  
I'm here.

She rolls her eyes. A grudgingly welcome sweep of her arm.  
He ducks in.

EXT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - NIGHT

One last little Tribe daughter: KOJ. A straggler; her mother too slow. Koj creeps, dainty footsteps, tree to tree.

KOJ'S MOTHER (O.S.)  
Koj! Come on, girl. Bed.

Voices from the Lodge.

Koj is drawn to them.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - NIGHT

Theo, hunched down, conspires with Merchuria.  
She passes him a deerskin package, about a foot long.  
A scrape, just outside, draws Merchuria's beady gaze.  
Raises her hand. Silences Theo.

INTERCUT - EXT/INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - NIGHT

The blanket door whips open.  
Koj, right there, jumps in fright.  
Merchuria's face, haughty, furious. Takes up her Lance.  
Theo, engrossed in his unseen gift. A prod of the Lance, leaps to his feet.  
Koj panics, bolts. Theo bursts out, after her.  
Koj, scared, off balance, runs blindly out of Kardarc.  
Theo bounds after her.  
Merchuria, solemn, watches them disappear beyond torchlight. Her eyes search the periphery. She ducks inside.  
Gathers up Theo's gift.  
Heads off, toward the lit up Royal Lodge.

EXT: FOREST - NIGHT

Koj hurries through trees and brush.

Theo crashes along, gains on her.

He's on her. One swipe knocks her off her feet. She yelps, smacks against a tree trunk.

Knocked out.

Theo kneels next to her, waits for signs of life. Plucks berries, munches them.

She gains consciousness. He leans near, pins her down.

Suffocates.

Koj struggles, flexes. Terrified.

Constricted.

Every exhale takes her closer to --

-- death.

Theo stands, brushes himself off. Walks calmly back to the Kardarc torches.

EXT: KARDARC - NIGHT

KOJ'S MOTHER, a teen commoner, wanders. Searches.

KOJ'S MOTHER

Koj. Come on, now.

Theo struts past, heavy eye contact. She defers, looks away.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, PROTO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Proto, laid out, shivers through her delirium.

Theo skulks in, regards her from beneath his brow.

Merchuria makes eye contact.

He nods, a fraction, salacious contempt for Koj's life.

MERCHURIA

(to Theo)

You. Leave. Join... the others. Get yourself ready for tomorrow.

Insulted, he looks to Renna for assistance.

Renna looks to Merchuria to see if he must.

Merchuria broods over Proto.

Renna nods for Theo to go.

He storms out.

EXT: MARKET PLACE - NIGHT

Groups of Tribesfolk at torchlit stations. Enthused.

Warriors, hunters, both sexes, queue up.

Pre-show nerves.

One by one, patience strained, reach the front.

The head of a queue. ATTENDANTS henna tattoo the FRONT WARRIOR with mock stripes. Like Proto's natural colouring.

Completed, they mingle, admire their temporary royal status.

Theo struts to the front of the queue. Attracts looks but no challenge. He stares to the night.

The Attendant gives him a cautious look.

Theo nods to begin.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, PROTO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Renna wrenches herself away from --

-- Proto, curled on her side. Faint stripes crawl smoothly across her bare back.

Renna looks down at something next to Merchuria.

RENNA

Is this for Proto? To help her?

She picks up the package earlier presented to Theo.

MERCHURIA

No!

Merchuria eases Theo's gift from Renna, wraps it back up.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)

It's mine. That's mine.

Merchuria sits, murmurs spells beside Proto.

Renna watches the performance. Turns her face away.



EXT: MARKET PLACE - NIGHT

Theo stands, belittled, as his 'tattoo' is applied.

EXT: ROYAL LODGE - NIGHT

Renna palms tears from her eyes. Heads to the Marketplace.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, PROTO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Alone with Proto, Merchuria casts her head about. One eye on the door. Part of the show.

She slips the tip of a stout obsidian blade into --

-- Proto's thigh.

Proto, even through her state, winces.

A thick line of blood rolls to her cot.

Merchuria stows the knife, whispers her spells.

EXT: MARKET PLACE - NIGHT

Theo is politely ushered to make way for the NEXT WARRIOR.

EXT: KARDARC STREETS - NIGHT

Renna passes Theo on his way back to the Royal Lodge.

She tries a brave smile.

He wafts past, back to his sulk.

EXT: MARKET PLACE - NIGHT

The crowd quietens, draws back, around --

-- Renna, centre stage, prepares to address them.

RENNA

Ready yourselves! And as you leave  
for The Desolation, remember -

INT: PROTO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Theo slinks in, sits, petulant in his daubs.

Merchuria raises her hand, delectably slow above his head. Swipes across it, snaps him from his huff.

MERCHURIA  
And remember -

INTERCUT - EXT/INT: MARKETPLACE/PROTO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

RENNA  
- all you have -

MERCHURIA  
- to do -

RENNA  
- is stop her.

The crowd cheer.

MERCHURIA  
- is kill her.

Theo nods, a sickening smile.

From her cloak, Merchuria reveals the Blade. Glittering obsidian lashed to an antler grip. Perfect.

She runs it in Proto's fresh blood. It absorbs into the edge.

Sheathes it. Passes it to Theo.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
Don't forget it again. Put it on.

EXT: MARKET PLACE - NIGHT

Firelight flickers behind the revellers.

In shadow, Filia watches the spirited preparation. Her face shows fear for her friend.

Discreet, she turns away.

EXT: KARDARC - NIGHT

Filia, alone, trots along --

EXT: ROYAL LODGE - NIGHT

-- past the Guards, distracted by Marketplace noise.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, ARMOURY - NIGHT

Filia looks critically at the scant supplies, almost gone.

She takes a combat staff. Tests it: trial spin, strike. Not quite right. A longer one. Better.

CORRIDOR

Filia clings to the shadows.

Ahead, Merchuria glides along and out.

Theo yawns, toddles after Merchuria, dozens of combat staffs across his arms.

EXT: MARKET PLACE - NIGHT

Merchuria does the rounds of the HENNA WARRIORS.

Passes leaves from her medicine bag into their open mouths.

Obedient, they devour them.

The Henna Warriors ventilate, eyes wide, teeth bared. Gather themselves up, wheeze, grunt. Roar in each other's faces, into the sky!

Merchuria, untouched amid the throng.

They pummel each other, brotherly hammer blows.

She hurls staffs at their feet. They grab, fight for them, break some in the scrum.

MERCHURIA

Now!

Flings her leather clad arms up, face wild.

Ferocious, high as kites, they salute her with their staffs. They jostle, mixed up. Then, as one, pelt from the Marketplace, toward --

-- the black void of the Mountains against the star cast sky.

Merchuria grabs Theo's wrist before he can join them.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)

(rasps)

How do you feel? Hmm?

Spits on his henna, rubs a bit away. Shrugs. He's fine.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)

I can slow her down. Tonight, and the next two days. If you really want to be King, to bring it back, you make it happen.

THEO

That is what I want.

She points to his sheathed Blade.

MERCHURIA

Then that's all you need. By now,  
it's taken effect. So don't touch  
the Blade. At all! One cut is bad  
enough for you. For her, the end.  
And Theo, she is never to be found.

EXT: DESOLATION - DAY

The desert. Vast, harsh. Silent. Frost sparkles in the dawn.

Proto, slumped by some rocks. Unconscious.

Flies buzz at her leg.

Behind her, Merchuria mutters to herself.

Shadows retreat over rock formations, cactus limbs.

The Sun rises.

Floods of light spill from behind the Mountains.

Merchuria ambles off into the heat haze shimmer, and is gone.

Proto, asleep. Coughs, chokes, wakes. Wipes sand from her  
mouth. Spits.

Tries to sit up.

Pain seeps into her.

Consciousness grabs her.

She grasps her wounded leg, whips about.

Convulses.

On all fours, vomits pale bile foam into the sand.

Again, darker, like bloody spinach. Cleared out, shudders.

Tries to peer about.

Brightness catches her face.

Pupils slip shut. Eyelids flicker to open in the hard light.

She tenses, alone, still on her hands and knees.

Tears pump out down her face. Desperate, holds her eyelids  
open. Sand on her fingers just makes it worse. Useless.

She flops over. Wiped out.

Relaxes.

Proto sits up, head hung, takes her time. Her eyes cleanse, slowly, open themselves, to see --

-- the bleached new world emerge under bright blue sky.

She grimaces at the gash in her thigh. Shoos the flies.

Looks round again.

Endless.

Grits her teeth, squeezes putrid juice from her cut.

Like a new born colt, trembles to her feet. Shields her eyes.

Finds the sharpened antler Merchuria bought, stuffed in her tunic belt.

Surveys her terrain.

Far off, the Mountains.

Unsteady, two steps. Falters, onto her knees. Tries again.

Proto limps to a tiny group of shrubs.

Her knife presses into a cactus.

Douses her wound with cactus water. Sluices it clean.

Trims a strip of leather from her tunic hem.

Yanks the leather tight around her leg. Grunts to absorb the sting.

She tests it for weight. Good. Braves the pain of each stride. Shields her eyes from the Sun.

Scours the alien Desolation. Locks onto something.

Half a mile off. The skeleton of a wrecked wooden ship. Mast fallen, like a dried out, gigantic beetle carapace.

Her eyes, suspicious, sharpen at it. Dart around it.

She backs away. In the corner of her eye, something else.

Specks of figures. Thirty at least, tear across the landscape, directly toward --

-- her.

EXT: DESOLATION, ELSEWHERE - DAY

The Henna Warriors: hard, full tilt over rocks. Hurdle the meagre plant life.

EXT: DESOLATION, PROTO'S SPOT - DAY

Her face drops. She turns, runs, all stiff on her cut leg. Terrified, she looks back.

The Henna Warriors zoom along.

Proto limps to a stop. Gets her breath. Readjusts the bandage. Growls through the pain. Glances up.

She breathes deep, digs in, runs, toward the Mountains.

EXT: DESOLATION - LATER DAY

Proto races on in the bone lustre of desert.

Far back, the Warrior pack maintains it's bead on her.

Intent, Proto leads: The Rabbit.

Solemn, they pursue: The Eagle.

Proto sprints to seaworn foothill cliffs.

Ahead, to her left, something closes in. Spurs her on.

She dashes, veers into a nearby canyon.

EXT: CANYON - DAY

Proto slides into a crevice.

Her pursuer races into the canyon, without caution. Nears Proto's hiding place.

Proto leaps out, a flying knockout blow. Smashes her foe to the ground. They grapple in the dust. Proto on top, then, fist in mid air, stops.

PROTO

Filia! What are you doing here?

FILIA

Losing... a fight.

Proto grabs Filia to her feet.

Filia adjusts her blanket, secured at the shoulder by a bone toggle. Picks up her staff.

PROTO  
And how did you get here so fast?

FILIA  
That was Merchuria. She gave out  
all these leaves.

PROTO  
Did she?

FILIA  
Yes. I got some after everyone  
left. They're incredible, you can  
see in the dark, for a while... but  
run, just run forever! Look. I  
brought...

Filia pats herself down for leaves.

FILIA (CONT'D)  
I had some. Where've they -

PROTO  
Anyway, why are you here?

FILIA  
To help. Help you beat those -

PROTO  
No. I have to beat them myself. You  
know this.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Merchuria's eyes roll back, for real. Lips burble in a  
genuine trance. She recites the conversation of Proto and  
Filia, between her voice and theirs.

PROTO (O.S.)/MERCHURIA  
I can do it. I can become whatever  
the Geh d' Pir Neh needs.

Renna sits across from Merchuria, nods.

PROTO (O.S.)/MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
After all, 'One pearl lost...'

Renna joins in.

PROTO (O.S.)/MERCHURIA/RENNA (CONT'D)  
'... is only...'

EXT: DESOLATION, CANYON - DAY

The young ladies, one arm on the other's shoulder.

PROTO/FILIA  
'... one pearl.'

Filia's head drops.

FILIA  
I was only trying to help.

Proto embraces her.

PROTO  
I know.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Merchuria, ever older, sways, shakes from her trance. Renna assists her, smiles, kisses Merchuria's forehead.

Merchuria turns her face away, pleased.

EXT: DESOLATION - DAY

Proto gently kisses Filia's hair. A faint, metallic rhythm, like a blacksmith's anvil, echoes through the canyon. Fades in a breeze. They both look about.

FILIA  
What's that?

PROTO  
Ssh.

The sound is gone. Proto takes Filia by the shoulders.

PROTO (CONT'D)  
Never mind. You must go.

FILIA  
Ugh. Fine.

Reluctantly, Filia turns away.

EXT: CANYON ENTRANCE - DAY

Proto takes a quick peek. Sprints out, toward the Mountains. Once she's out of view, allows a glance back.

EXT: CANYON - DAY

Filia, dejected.



EXT: DESOLATION - DAY

Proto sprints.

A teardrop cleans a line down her face, dies away.

Behind her, still distant, the Henna Warriors have gained.

EXT: DESOLATION, ELSEWHERE - DAY

The Warriors: strong, focused, bound forth.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Morning sun slices through the trees.

Merchuria's Lance stamps hard into the ground.

She heads from her Lodge, takes in the day.

The undergrowth. Plucks her berries, herbs. Sniffs them out, selects the best.

Pops them in her medicine bag.

Merchuria catches a scent. Her sharp eyes cast across, onto --  
-- flattened bracken, broken stalks. Signs of a struggle.

She searches closer.

Levers a rotten log with the tip of her Lance.

Looks underneath. Her face darkens.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, THEO'S QUARTERS - DAY

Merchuria whirls into the Stone Age prince's teenage pit.

Bottles her silence, brings her Lance down as he wakes. He rolls from his animal skins, springs across the floor.

Too slow.

Merchuria catches him out, one crack on the side of his face. He topples in a howl. Collapsed, moans, holds his sore face.

His bloodied hands open. A fresh molar sits in his palm.

Merchuria holds her forefinger to his face. He goes quiet. She spits vehemently on his stupidity. One handed, presents a full bundle from beneath her cloak.

Theo winces.

Koj, wrapped in a blanket.

The infant's pale corpse lolls at him.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

Theo runs, bent double to conceal Koj in his arms.

He dashes from every oncoming sound.

Clears Kardarc, to the shade of the forest.

EXT: DESOLATION - DAY

The noon Sun beats like hell. Proto sprints, nearer the Mountains. Shrubbery, thicker clumps, has to be dodged.

The Henna Warriors, still far away on the flats.

She sucks the last drops of a cactus slice. Casts it aside.

Veers off course, towards --

-- a dark patch on the ground.

EXT: PROTO'S POOL - DAY

Proto stoops to drink. Stops. The stench catches her throat.

Thumps her fist on the ground.

Then, a thought. Cuts, tears another length from her hem.

Snaps a bundle of dry branches. Wraps the skin round one end.

A few moments to dip, soak it in the pool. One eye on the Warriors, smiles to herself.

Wastes yet more time, nerves make her giggle. Kicks heaps of sand across the pool.

EXT: DESOLATION, HENNA WARRIOR TRAIL - DAY

Way off, the Warriors notice --

-- disturbed dust in the dead landscape.

As one flock, they hone in.

EXT: PROTO'S POOL - DAY

Proto collects little grey stones. Looks as the far mass of Warriors point to her. Fresh with cunning, she's off again.

EXT: KARDARC/MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Merchuria, weary, shuffles to her Lodge. Pauses at the door. Senses something not right from inside.

Suspicion in her eyes turns to flame. Flings the door back.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Theo snores on her bed.

She takes in his form. Anger builds.

MERCHURIA

Aah!

He starts, sleepy, arms raised in defence. She jabs with her Lance, beats him round the Lodge.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)

Useless! Boy!

He yelps. Doesn't dare fight back.

After a couple of laps, calms herself, a bit.

THEO

Oh, I'm so sorry, M -

MERCHURIA

Why are you asleep?

THEO

I thought, if I -

MERCHURIA

What! You thought what?

THEO

If I'm asleep, I might start to -

MERCHURIA

Stripe? Are you really telling me that was your plan? To catch a nap?

She seethes.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)

One simple thing. One, and you couldn't even do that... Wait. The child?

THEO

Gone.

(off her look)  
Completely gone.

She accepts this.

MERCHURIA

Right. There's still a way.

Theo looks warily at her devilish smile.

EXT: DESOLATION - DAY

The Henna Warriors thunder up at the disguised pool.

They gallop straight past.

One stops. Realises what it is. Yells to the rest.

They slow, stop and turn.

POOL WARRIOR clears sand away.

EXT: DESOLATION, LOWER MOUNTAINSIDE - DAY INTO NIGHT

Proto, hammer and tongs up a steep slope. Gets nowhere.

She zigzags, creates her own path.

Ahead, clouds gather over jagged cliffs and gullies.

EXT: DESOLATION - NIGHT

In starlight, Henna Warriors bound along between shrubs.

As one, they slow, unable to fail to see --

-- a point of torchlight zigzag up the mountainside.

Amazed, turn to each other. Burst out laughing.

EXT: MOUNTAINSIDE - NIGHT

Proto, torch in hand, makes good time. Hears their far laughter. Ignores them, keeps going. Fast.

LATER NIGHT

Henna Warriors scramble up the mountainside. They, too, find it tough. Get on all fours. Just awkward.

One of them smacks face first into a rock.

They all stop.

Proto ascends, still carries her torch.

The Henna Warriors look at where they are. Where Proto is.

Pool Warrior crouches.

Strikes his little rocks over dry twigs. A tiny fire starts.

The rest follow his lead again.

Pool Warrior puts his torch to the flame. Turns it, coaxes. It catches, blue all over, then flops. Dead.

He looks up. Proto's bright little flame dances. His companions sit with their baby campfires, dejected. Dull.

Kicks his fire out. Lightning flashes.

Thunder rolls.

EXT: DESOLATION, HIGH MOUNTAIN SIDE - LATER NIGHT

Wind picks up, swirls about Proto. She climbs, grasps her torch: foot, hand, stretch, grip ahead.

Loses grip on her torch, snatches at it. Fingers curl round it as she peels from the cliff. Flash of lightning.

The sheer, lethal drop.

Eyes wide, horrified, she paddles through air.

One last fingertip touches stone.

Slams herself upright to the rock. Still has her lit torch.

Thunder grumbles, loud, near.

A heavy downforce of wind pushes her flame right out.

She sighs. Stuffs the extinguished torch in her belt.

Lightning sparks violet across the whole Mountain.

EXT: DESOLATION, LOWER MOUNTAIN SIDE - NIGHT

The Henna Warriors, torchless, fumble in cloudy darkness. They snake slowly toward Proto.

Leaves flutter onto them, seemingly out of the sky.

EXT: DESOLATION, HIGH MOUNTAIN SIDE - NIGHT

A football sized rock; irregular, sharp, drops past Proto.

She gives a little gasp. Hugs the cliff face.

All clear.

EXT: DESOLATION, LOWER MOUNTAINSIDE - NIGHT

The Henna Warriors realise what the leaves are. They leap about to catch them in the wind.

Stuff them in their mouths. One of them spits his into his hand. A black eagle feather.

A handful of feathers whirl in the mix.

EXT: MOUNTAINSIDE - NIGHT

Weather closes in, gathers round the tiny figure of Proto. Lit by lightning, scales sheer rock.

She clings. The wind drags, presses.

An overhang, her only route.

Glances back. Wind whips her beaded hair. Her jaw tenses.

The Warriors, insects, scale in her wake. She advances.

MOMENTS LATER

Proto dangles from the overhang, billowed about. Feet scrabble to find grip.

Her hand slaps over the top of the rock. She wriggles, flips onto a thin ledge.

The ominous dark of a cave mouth, right in front of her.

To her right, the ledge is broken. Her left blocked by a rockslide.

Intense lightning spits behind her.

Gives the cave even greater pitch black depth. Rain dapples the rock.

Splashes her skin and bandage, wets dry blood.

Proto hastily tears another strip from her ragged hem. She kneels, back turned to the storm.

Sheltered in a crack in the rock, she works quickly.

A spark.

A fresh flame.

INT: CAVE - NIGHT

An inquisitive muzzle sniffs from the dark.

EXT: CAVE - NIGHT

The instant her flame enters the cave mouth, something stirs. Something large twists its head. Two eyes glow at Proto.

A long, deep growl echoes out. Proto shivers, breathes hard. Tosses her torch inside.

INT: CAVE - NIGHT

It lights up an Epicyon mother - a huge, outsized, blonde coated dog.

It lurks. Growls.

Barks at Proto, amplified by the cave to a whole baying pack.

EXT: CAVE - NIGHT

Proto shudders. Breathes through primeval fear.

The roar bounces across the valley. The storm answers. Lightning, instant thunder. Rain breaks, lashes down.

INT: CAVE - NIGHT

Fangs glisten, drip with saliva, lips curled in torchlight.

EXT: CAVE - NIGHT

Above the cave mouth, rocks loosen.

Proto steps carefully away from the cave. With one foot, tests the fallen rocks to her left. It holds.

EXT: MOUNTAINSIDE - NIGHT

The Warriors climb, soaked.

EXT: CAVE - NIGHT

Pebbles bounce onto Proto. She looks up just in time. The entire mass loosens towards her.

Hundreds more rocks, boulders, pour over the cliff.

Proto springs back. It gains volume, forces her to retrace her steps.

To the cave.

Rocks bounce, terrifyingly close.

At the entrance, she pauses. The Epicyon growls - Stay Out.

BELOW

The avalanche hits. Warriors scatter for shelter.

CAVE

Proto trembles. Shows herself, bait across the cave mouth.

The beast's fury increases.

The rockslide piles nearer. Proto stands her ground.

The dog charges, incredibly quick for its size. Proto leaps sideways, legs bashed by rocks. The dog skids round, yelps.

Proto dives into the cave. Rocks pile up. Clatter. Flood in. Block the entrance.

MOUNTAINSIDE

The Epicyon flails in mid air.

Drops to the slopes below.

Gets hold of the rock face. Bounces up onto all fours. Scrambles to a stop. Right in front of the Henna Warriors.

Strength in numbers, they inch toward it.

The final flow of rocks travels between them.

Silence.

It attacks.

Unsteady on rock strewn slopes, it gnashes staff tips. Those caught in her jaws splinter, worthless.

INT: CAVE - NIGHT

Sealed in, Proto listens to the terrors outside.

EXT: MOUNTAINSIDE - NIGHT

The Warriors face defeat, regroup, counter attack.

The dog, too large for this arena, topples. They rush in, beat it, stab, lever. Over the ridge it goes.

They watch the dog fall away, vanish in the night.



Cheer for themselves, then look back round.

Path and cave, completely blocked.

INT: CAVE - NIGHT

Proto, torch still lit, alone. Trapped. Looks hard at the mass of rocks. The cave.

Torchlight flickers along igneous walls.

It stretches to blackness. Mewling sounds from a corner.

Proto whips round, torch poised to fight.

She locates two fat, week old epicyon cubs. Blind, they sense her. Tumble nearer.

Proto takes a cautious step toward them. They bumble to her.

EXT: MOUNTAINSIDE - NIGHT

Pool Warrior, tense, confronted with the new surface. Places one foot lightly. The slide grumbles, threatens.

Those still with staffs, strap them to their backs.

MOMENTS LATER

Storm lashed, the Henna Warriors climb their longer route.

INT: CAVE - NIGHT

Proto steps round the cubs. They follow, scent her out.

She pauses, holds her torch to depths beyond.

The cubs reach her feet. She rests her torch, snatches them by their scruffs.

MOMENTS LATER

Proto hefts a rough slab of rock into place, forms a pen. Contemplates the cubs. Taps their pen, leaves them.

Proto ventures far into the back of the cave, steeply down. Cries of the cubs fade behind her.

Torchlight flickers. Narrower passages. Her steps, slow.

Ahead, a blue glow beckons.

Some little beast on the wall slithers, touches her shoulder. She jerks, drops the torch.

The torch rolls down the pathway. Proto stoops, chases it.

It rolls, drops a few feet, still lit, into --

-- a huge lakeside cavern. The glow in the cavern cuts out.

Proto creeps in.

Awed, she takes the torch to wonder at stalactites.

She twitches, droops her head, moans. Her limp body slaps the cave floor. Her torch rolls to the water. Snuffs out.

Proto's second evolution, piteously vocalised in the dark.

EXT: ROYAL LODGE - NIGHT

Merchuria's Lance hammers out each step of her approach.

Renewed vigour, she strides to --

-- the Guards, who jump to, panic as she nears. Fumble their staffs, feign competence.

GUARD #1  
Sal'la, Merchuria.

Her wicked glance. He goes silent.

Merchuria marches on, Lance strikes the floor into the Lodge.

GUARD #2 looks at GUARD #1 like he must be deranged.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, FEAST HALL - NIGHT

Three walls intact, fourth now a long viewing area. A stone brazier burns in the centre of the room.

Merchuria's Lance echoes. Louder, closer. She whirls in.

Renna, solo, passionately faces the stormy Mountains.

Merchuria can barely conceal her contempt.

Renna peers into nothingness.

Merchuria calms, to just being puzzled.

MERCHURIA  
Nothing out there yet.

Renna, stock still.

Merchuria works her jaw. Impatience rises again.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
(louder)  
You won't see anything.

Renna tilts her head, acknowledges the comment.

Merchuria rolls her eyes. Moves between the window and fire.

Renna glances round.

RENNA  
You're blocking the light!  
(off Merchuria's look)  
The fire. Proto won't be able to  
see it.

Merchuria stares at her.

MERCHURIA  
There are a hundred fires burning  
outside. All nice and high.

Renna's eyes implore her.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
As you wish. Here.

She grabs a stone poker, stokes violently. Gets it blazing.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
There. Happy?

RENNA  
No. But thank you.

MERCHURIA  
Glad to help, Renna. Now, if I've  
been of service, I have yet more  
Innocent Trials to perform.

RENNA  
Can't they wait? Just one night? I  
thought you could see -

MERCHURIA  
If they miss their night, if it all  
goes horribly wrong, they could  
lose their precious babies. And  
then what?

Renna faces the Mountains again.

EXT: MOUNTAINTOP - NIGHT

The Henna Warriors crawl, battered, across the summit.

Renna's voice carries across them.

RENNA (V.O.)  
'One pearl lost...'

The Henna Warriors creep over wet rock as lightning flashes.

MERCHURIA (V.O.)  
Is one pearl too many for them.  
This tribe give us plenty as it is.

The brave Warriors steadily shift position for their descent.

MERCHURIA (V.O.)  
The least we can do is make them  
feel part of what we have, without  
actually killing their children in  
the process.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, FEAST HALL - NIGHT

Renna, full of sorrow, gazes into the night.

MERCHURIA  
So you don't really need me, unless  
she gets back.

Checks herself.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
Until she gets back.

Merchuria watches her sister. Then, she too, glances out to --  
-- the dark.

Catches herself, shakes it off. Rolls her eyes.

INT: ROYAL LODGE CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Merchuria mutters, stomps away from Renna.

INT: CAVE, LAKESIDE CAVERN - NIGHT

Small spots of blue light come from deep in the water.

Proto whimpers, shivers, unconscious by the lake.

EXT: PROTO'S VISION FOREST - DAY

Same dense foliage. The King, broad and pleased as before.  
Exhales plumes of smoke, eyes creased in a smile.

Looms forward, speech rumbles.

KING  
Remember...

The vision evaporates.

INT: CAVE, LAKESIDE CAVERN - NIGHT/DAY

A blue glow peels across the ceiling from underwater.

Proto, unconscious, face down. Her head, in a rivulet of rain water, points to the light.

Pushes herself up, shudders awake. Focuses at the light.

Crawls toward it. Gets to her feet.

The whole lake, brightly lit.

UNDERWATER

Shoals of bioluminescent fish.

CAVERN

Proto, enchanted, draws close to the water.

She sees --

-- the far wall: a huge cave painting. A large black triangle, red dots spew from its top. A tall man, staff in hand, and a small woman stand in a black square, untouched by the red dots. They face a blue stretch. In the blue, a long shape topped by a white square holds two tall women.

Below that, a short triangle, rounded top and no dots, inside two blue circles. The stretch of blue is gone. The small woman with little black squares, many small people.

Proto gazes, leans further across a rock. Masses of fish writhe at the surface. Their blue light fills the cavern.

Proto's hand slips.

PROTO  
Aah!

She launches head first into the water.

The glow intensifies, gathers round her. The weight of the fish binds her. She struggles. Swathes of scary, lit fish take her lower.

## UNDERWATER

Proto panics, enveloped.

## ABOVE WATER

The frenzy covers her completely.

## UNDERWATER

Proto's feet reach the bottom. Lets herself sink, legs bend.  
Leaps up, hands raised through the slippery mass.

Flings herself out of the water, grabs onto the rock.

Teeming fish hurl themselves on her back. She climbs out.

Stands, amazed, angry.

PROTO  
(yells)  
Stupid fish!

Instantly, the lake goes black. The fish stop jumping.

One pale shaft of daylight glides over the lake from the path she was on.

A breeze rattles the beads in her hair, makes her shiver. Her hand goes to it.

Feels along the cave wall, to the next passage.

## PASSAGE

The blue light follows her in. Proto glances back, stumbles.

Lashes out to grab, stop her fall.

Clings to the rock, glances over her shoulder, into --

-- a chasm, to the depths of the planet.

Her foot nudges a pebble. It drops.

Proto listens.

Silence.

She presses on, feet edge round the chasm.

The pebble cracks far below. The blue light cuts out again.

PROTO  
(mutters)  
Stupid fish.

Proto sees daylight on solid ground, just ahead.

Flings herself toward it.

One bend after another, the light stronger. Her face, scratched and bloody, a black eye acquired.

She heads to the light, a leper to religion.

The passage narrows, a slim crack of brilliance.

Stooped, cautious, the ceiling scrapes her hair.

Squints her way forward. Breezes rush her face, the beads in her hair, feathers of her necklace.

The opening is a channel, just enough for an adult Epicyon. One last rock juts into her path.

It opens right out.

EXT: CALDERA VALLEY - DAY

Proto stands in high winds. Her stripes, thicker, darker.

This exit is further down from the Desolation entrance. Still unhelpfully high.

The rest of the Mountain falls away from her feet.

Feathers whip from her necklace, lost to the wind. She watches them scatter. Hurt, for a moment.

Spots an outcrop, ten feet away, much lower.

Casts about for some other route. Only cliffs and wind.

Proto backs into the cave, mind's eye set straight.

Outcrop no longer visible, digs in, runs.

Launches herself at where the outcrop should be.

Arms, legs, flail in a barely controlled fall.

The outcrop rises sharply to meet her. She slams on the top. Crouches. Grips with her whole being.

EXT: THEO'S MOUNTAIN PATH, CALDERA SIDE - DAY

Theo, knife sheathed at his waist, fast asleep. Hands behind his head, buffeted by wind.

In the distance, Henna Warriors scale meticulously down.

Theo slumbers on.

MERCHURIA (O.S.)

Wake! Up!

Her Lance prods him. He snuggles over. Feels the rock edge. Jumps awake, sees the drop. Terrified, eyes squeezed shut, hugs the cliff.

Calms down, opens his eyes. Looks about for the Shaman.

Nowhere to be seen.

Rubs his face. Wobbly legged, gets to his feet.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Merchuria's eyes spring open. Takes a long gasp. Flops against her Lance for support.

EXT: THEO'S MOUNTAIN PATH, CALDERA SIDE - DAY

Theo spots the Warriors. He ducks. Watches them.

They reach the mouth of the cave.

EXT: CAVE MOUTH, CALDERA VALLEY - DAY

Nervous, Warriors disappear into the dark slit.

THEO'S PATH

Theo sees them filter out again. Gather like bees at a hive. Dither. At last, one of them launches.

One by one, they jump to the same outcrop Proto did.

Scramble on down the precarious mountainside.

Theo slowly emerges to keep sight of them.

EXT: CALDERA VALLEY - DAY

Mist hangs across the grassy slopes.

Proto dashes through meadow grasses toward the forest.

Ahead, tips of trees poke above the wall of mist.



EXT: MOUNTAINSIDE - DAY

Theo spots --

-- a fast dot, through waves of mist. Proto.

He perks up. Watches the Warriors make it to the valley floor. They fan out, energetically head to the forest.

Into the mist.

VALLEY FLOOR

Proto, arms and legs pump, chin out. Vanishes into the trees.

MOUNTAINSIDE

Theo sees the Warriors careen across the meadow.

They miss Proto's path. He stands, fists clenched.

THEO  
Haha! Yes!

EXT: VALLEY FLOOR - DAY

A trace of Theo's cry carries down. One of the Warriors registers. No time to look, runs straight ahead.

MOUNTAINSIDE

Theo hurries. Skips and skids down.

The mist clears.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto weaves rapidly between thick trunks. Canopy darkness closes.

VALLEY FLOOR

Theo hits the meadow. Keeps a bead on the Warriors' path, careful not to catch up.

His eyes flick across, maintain a fix, on --

-- the spot Proto vanished.

The Warriors hurtle into the forest.

Theo, left alone, steadily crosses the meadow. Genuinely enjoys himself.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto darts into a large clearing. Glances back.

The mountain stares back over tree tops. She slows, stops, winces. Flexes her leg under the bandage.

Snaps off a few berries. Shovels them in her mouth. All the time, anguished, checks back at her cave.

EXT: DESOLATION, HIGH MOUNTAIN/CAVE MOUTH - DAY

The tip of a staff strikes the top of the settled rockslide. It splinters, but some rocks give way.

INT: CAVE - DAY

The cubs, in their stone pen, wake at sounds from outside. Rocks shuffle in, another small slide.

Lit up, the cubs cry out.

The silhouette of a Tribesperson wriggles in, drops down.

Filia.

She steps cautiously, sees the cubs. Forgets all safety. Smiles adoringly. Unclips the blanket from her shoulder.

EXT: FOREST CLEARING - DAY

Proto frowns, unsure, then smiles up at the cave. Nods to herself all is well.

PROTO  
Ah, thank you, Filia.

Something steps into the corner of her eye.

The fawn - now a yearling.

PROTO (CONT'D)  
I didn't expect to see you again.

The yearling sniffs to Proto's handful of berries. They share again. The yearling freezes at a distant crashing sound.

FOREST, ELSEWHERE

The Henna Warriors smash forth through foliage.

## FOREST CLEARING

The yearling skitters in a great arc across the glade. Gone.  
Proto, deflated, watches after it.

PROTO

Good idea. I could do with legs  
like yours.

She pushes on.

Stumbles, barely gets out of the clearing. Staggers, stronger  
against it this time.

Lunges, one tree to another. Clutches her stomach. Shivers.  
Takes a look back.

## FOREST, ELSEWHERE AROUND PROTO'S CLEARING

Left and right, Henna Warriors swerve through the forest.

They break in a wave. Miss the clearing altogether.

Overtake Proto.

Disrupted foliage settles.

## FOREST, JUST BEYOND PROTO'S CLEARING

Proto flops forward. Crawls under a patch of ferns.

The sound of the Henna Warriors fades ahead of her.

## FOREST - LATER DAY

Theo stands silent by the edge of the clearing. Emerges.  
Stops dead. Senses movement in the opposite side.

Prowls across.

## JUST BEYOND PROTO'S CLEARING

Proto lays, shudders through another evolution.

## EXT: PROTO'S VISION FOREST - DAY

Same dense foliage. The King's cigar clouds. The cigar end  
glows fierce, crackles. Eyes smile. He looms forward.

Exhales plumes of smoke.

KING  
Remember... Fight War...

The vision evaporates.

INT: CAVE, LAKESIDE CAVERN - DAY

Filia stands by the lake in blue light. Looks at the water. Mild disgust. Deep suspicion. Her staff, ready to strike the strange fish.

One foot rests into the water. Lights out.

FILIA  
(contempt)  
Stupid fish.

Her face turns to the daylight.

EXT: FOREST CLEARING - DAY

Theo creeps, pauses. Listens. Looks for signs. He spots tracks; disturbed undergrowth. Stooped, follows along; sees Proto's ankle, passed out in her fern nest.

PROTO'S NEST

An outsized black snout glistens, sniffs above Proto's brow. Nuzzles into her hair.

Proto wakes, stiffens, seized by fear. Colossal blond furred jaws hover above her face.

CLEARING

Theo stalks, knife poised. Eager, a sickly smile.

NEST

The Epicyon Alpha hulks over Proto. Looks forward. Growls, hackles right up.

CLEARING

Theo hears the warning. Freezes with dread, face turned sour.

NEST

One huge paw swings past Proto's head, advances on Theo. The massive beast pads round her prone body.

The Alpha's eyes, fixed only on Theo.

CLEARING - DAY

Theo takes a discreet look about.

The Epicyon pack emerges from the forest. Six feet tall at the shoulder.

Theo steps away.

The Alpha growls louder.

Theo sweats. Whimpers.

The dogs move evenly, past Proto. Ignore her completely.

Theo spins on his heel. Head down. Sprints.

The pack burst into headlong pursuit, spread in a line.

Gallop, already beside him. Into the woods.

Ahead of him, they circle back. He is cut off.

Theo strains. Leaps onto a fallen tree trunk, runs up it. Launches himself into the branches of a tree.

Clambers like a polecat.

Trapped.

The Epicyon gather, stare up into the tree at him. Prowl. Growl from their deep, thick chests.

Theo can only observe as --

-- Proto quietly crawls, backs away from her nest. Her stripes shine. Dark, wider, longer, right round her.

Clear of the nest, she jumps up.

The Epicyon hear Proto, cock their ears, eyes on Theo.

THEO  
(soft, urgent)  
Proto. Help me.

A couple of dogs look at her.

She stops, unsure.

They turn back to Theo.

Proto realises what's happening. Laughs out loud.

The Epicyon snicker, whine back at her.

She bows to them, turns, makes off into the forest.

THEO (CONT'D)  
(yells)  
Proto!

A thought strikes him. Slaps the sheath on his belt. Gone!

Scans the forest floor.

The Alpha snarls, bares it's teeth at him.

Theo, sickened, stares off as Proto's footsteps fade away.

All at once, the Epicyon rear their heads. Howl. Theo raises his and screams.

EXT: FOREST - LATER DAY

Scorching sun on Theo, still in the tree.

The pack, laid out, snooze.

Theo, glum, peers down at them. Desperately scans the area. Useless. Inspects his scratches, bloody from the fast climb.

The Epicyon snore smoothly.

A noise, like a stick breaking, comes from far off. Doesn't register with Theo or the dogs.

A piece of firewood flies through the trees. Hits an Epicyon's ribs. It flinches, wrestles itself up, on guard.

The rest of the pack arch eyebrows.

The Alpha is up, curious, alert, pads before them. Same broken stick noise, louder, just across the glade.

The whole pack rise, bolt to the noise.

At the last trace of them, Theo silently steps from his tree.

MERCHURIA (O.S.)  
(hoarse, in Theo's ear)  
Get moving, boy.

Theo spins to see where she is. Another piece of firewood flies in. Clonks him in the shoulders. He jumps, humiliated.

Trots off, after Proto.

In undergrowth, half buried, glints Theo's Blade.

INT: ROYAL LODGE, COURTYARD - DAY

Renna, red eyed, paces in and out of shade.

The water bucket drips black circles in the well.

Renna stiffens, hurries to greet Merchuria. She shuffles, a quick, irritated gait. Renna smiles for her.

Merchuria, aged, an impatient glare.

MERCHURIA

Well? I was told it was important.  
Again.

RENNA

A full day has passed for her now.  
She's only a few hours until her  
second sunset.

MERCHURIA

Mm. Uh-huh. Yes.

RENNA

Are you able to see anything at all  
of Proto?

Merchuria regards the Queen with stern disapproval. Sighs to herself. Gives a half arsed version of 'looking abroad' with her mind for Proto.

Renna wrings her hands, tearful, wills her on.

MERCHURIA

Nope. Not a thing. Must be the  
forest. So, at least your girl's  
making progress, yes?

RENNA

I suppose.

Merchuria, 'magic' performed, turns to leave.

RENNA (CONT'D)

But, you'll keep looking?

Merchuria halts, suppresses exasperation.

MERCHURIA

I will. For you.

Shuffles off again. Smirks, contented superiority.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto speeds. Agility flicks her through the woods.

She hears fast feet ahead.

Sees the backs of the Henna Warriors as they run, spread out to her right.

Runs straight up behind the nearest one.

He turns, a split second too late. Whack! Elbow to the chin. Down without a murmur. Proto snatches his staff before it hits the ground. Races away.

Second pursuer, smacked in the side of the head.

Proto slinks behind a tree, stops. Listens, eyes wide, excited. Breathes quietly through her mouth.

No commotion yet.

She darts out, along the line of runners. Stays low.

All run along together, in and out of sight.

The others check over to her, too distant to recognise.

Straightens her back, waves.

Lengthens the gap between her and the NEXT PURSUER.

Until... she fades from sight. Off they trot without her.

Alone, kicks into full sprint again. Strong, balanced, leaps everything in her path. Revived. Unnaturally capable.

EXT: FOREST, HENNA WARRIORS LINE - DAY

Tired, they hurry along.

Next Pursuer glances to her left, expecting a fellow Warrior.

Nobody.

Suspicious, she runs left, then more. Her pace slows as her mind works. She halts. Scowls back into the thick forest.

Penny drops.

MOMENTS LATER

All Henna Warriors charge, vehement, in Proto's direction. Foolishness burns on their faces.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto races along, skips the girth of a huge fallen tree. Dashes clear across high undergrowth.



A rock juts into her path.

Flips over it.

She sniffs, something there.

Ahead, she sees --

-- bright dots of firelight, hears the crackle.

She scoots down low.

EXT: HUNTING CAMP - DAY

Set up to cook. Skinned rabbits on spits.

FOREST

Proto stops, crouches, blends in. Recces the camp. Inhales a deep waft of cooked rabbit. Her fingers go to her mouth.

Authoritative voices call orders.

She glimpses --

-- Tribal youngsters, do as they're told.

Checks behind herself.

Quiet.

She creeps the outskirts of the camp. Her striped skin fades in and out, practically under their noses.

HUNTING CAMP

One KEEN-EYED GUARD strains his vision into the trees. Readies his staff. Muscles twitch.

FOREST

Proto freezes, melts into the forest.

He looks right at her - doesn't see.

She casts her gaze down.

The Guard turns his back.

Proto drops, disappears.

He quickly looks round again.

Whatever he saw, somehow altered.

He waves his staff for attention. Three more HUNT GUARDS, fresh henna tattoos, move out, to where --

-- Proto hides.

They close in. Stop.

Perfectly still, eyes scour the woods.

Proto slithers round a tree, always just out of sight.

Between them, she drops again.

One of the Hunt Guards shrugs to the Keen Eyed Guard. They give up. Traipse back to camp.

Proto sighs. Shimmies through foliage and away.

EXT: FOREST, FURTHER BACK - DAY

Theo runs angry. Determined.

EXT: FOREST, HUNTING CAMP - DAY

Proto delicately circumnavigates, increases speed.

EXT: FOREST, EVEN FURTHER BACK - DAY

Filia toddles along in dappled shadows. Blanket as a sling round her chest, one shoulder.

A heavy looking bundle swaddled at her back.

Her fingers trail absentmindedly at plants. Adjusts the weight of her sling. Untroubled, walks on.

EXT: HUNTING CAMP - DAY

The First Wave of Henna Warriors close in on the fires.

Shout to the Hunt Guards, who'll become the Second Wave.

1ST WAVE  
Sal'la! Sal'la!

The Second Wave stand at arms.

The First Wave scamper through camp. Beckon the others, who realise what's happened.

Fresh legs burst forth, past the First Wave, into the forest.

The camp, deserted.

EXT: FOREST, FURTHER AHEAD - DAY

Proto dashes. Hears whoops of renewed pursuit. Pushes faster.

EXT: FOREST, EVEN FURTHER BACK - DAY

Filia wipes her brow. Feet fall slower.

She reaches a small pond. Sits by it on a lump of granite. Unties the bundle from her back.

Sleepy cubs tumble, eyes open, onto the grass. Sniff, crawl to the pond, take thirsty laps.

Filia, pleased, watches them. Joins them on her knees, cups water to her mouth. The cubs, revived, play fight.

Filia corals them with her feet.

FILIA

Hey. Don't hurt each other, now.

Gathers them back to the sling. They cry in protest. Little teeth needle her hand, too feeble to resist Filia's guidance.

FILIA (CONT'D)

Come on, or I'll be in trouble. You don't want to get me in trouble, do you? No, no, no.

She scoops them up, hefts them round her back.

EXT: FOREST, MOUNTAINSIDE SHORE OF OUTER LAKE - DAY

Breezes run along the ferns.

A woodland bunch: deer, rabbits, badgers and birds; tread, hop, flutter to one side as --

-- Proto storms past.

Face tight, jaw firm. Registers the animals' lack of concern.

Gathered, they simply watch her pass.

On her heels, the Second Wave of Warriors dash after her.

The woodland bunch scatter loudly.

The Warriors, grim, thunder on.

Proto darts uphill, over rocks, branches.

Close, the Warriors suddenly stop.

Proto, unaware, speeds away.

The Warriors flex as one, staffs arched back. Strained.

Torsos flick forward again - throw.

Staffs arc through the thinned canopy.

They rain down. Proto lunges into thin air.

Ground flashes up behind her. She plummets, head first to the surface of The Outer Lake.

The Warriors stand, gormless in the shade. Glance at each other in disbelief. They snap to, dash after her.

EXT: OUTER LAKE - DAY

Proto slips into the water, hard, clean. Staffs pierce the lake around her.

CLIFFTOP

Half the Warriors skid to a halt. The rest flail into free fall. Those at the top watch --

-- their comrades. No sign of Proto.

Warriors splash down. Odd, clumsy groups.

The clifftop group ponder. One points down excitedly.

OUTER LAKE

Proto sculls forward underwater, heads to --

-- the surface. Front crawl, powers on.

CLIFFTOP

The Warriors go wild, instruct each other to jump. Shove, grapple. Some forced over the edge.

They drop as the first Warrior leapers emerge. Thrash, sort of swim, sort of drown.

Shadows, dark and broad, swirl toward them in the deep.

OUTER LAKE

Proto, strong as ever, nears the bank. Finds her feet. Jump-steps, knees high, to dry land.

## BEACH

Proto sprints to the trees. A glance back. Stops.

Not one Warrior follows her. The lake is still.

Cocky, she walks back. Laughs, turns her back on the clifftop. Lifts her tunic, shows them her backside.

Furious! The rest of the Warriors jump.

Proto strolls to the water, smiles, watches. They hit the water hard, further out than the ill fated lunch party.

She hangs on, impatient along the water's edge.

The Warriors surface, thrash inelegant gulps towards her.

Proto's sure, relaxed smile thins, as --

-- they near, find their feet, grin. Not so nice.

Proto's face drops. She turns, too quick. Off balance. Stumbles, taps along, hands and toes. Eventually, runs.

The Warriors, swift again, cross the beach. Into the trees, whipped by branches, hot on her heels.

## EXT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Merchuria's eyes snap open. A brutal wind whips about her.

Through whirling debris, she catches sight of --

--The Royal Lodge.

Her mini tornado dies to a breeze. Her face turns peaceful.

Smooths herself down, picks leaves from her Lance. Laughs to herself.

## MERCHURIA

Ah, Merchuria. Have faith. There's  
always a way. Faith in the blood.  
That's the way.

## EXT: OUTER LAKE - DAY

A section of rotten log drifts across like a canoe.

In it, Theo, still as a corpse.

The log bumps gently at the Kardarc shore. Rolls over, deposits Theo. Silently, he crawls away.

EXT: FOREST, INNER LAKE, MOUNTAIN SIDE SHORE - DAY

Proto pelts from the woods into the water. Wades out to her waist, dives beneath.

The water settles.

The Warriors burst from the treeline in a pack. Run up and down the shore, like confused dogs.

Tentative steps in the water.

A submerged shape flashes in front of them. They skitter back, furious with themselves.

One of them finds a black eagle feather, washed up.

A thought spreads through the ranks. Subdued, they hang their heads for poor, devoured Proto.

EXT: INNER LAKE BED, UNDERWATER - DAY

Proto, breath held, carefully makes her way. Holds roots, sunken logs, low as possible.

Above swirl crocodilian silhouettes.

One of them skirts close to her. She freezes. It circles, girth casts her in darkness.

The croc slows. Legs out, sinks to Proto. Both motionless.

They watch each other.

Muffled activity at the shore calls the monster's attention.

Proto crawls forward.

Her necklace snags a root. She yanks free, necklace snapped.

EXT: INNER LAKE SHORE - DAY

The Warriors, cautious, try to cross again. One points.

POINTING WARRIOR  
Ah! She lives!

EXT: INNER LAKE, KARDARC SHORE - DAY

Citadel smoke rises above the next line of trees. Proto slithers onto the mud bank.

A cheer goes up from the Warriors!

EXT: INNER LAKE, MOUNTAIN SIDE SHORE - DAY

Theo, unnoticed, steps out from the trees.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

Proto, wide eyed, slick with mud, bursts from the forest.  
Cheers of the Warriors still behind her.

She races through the streets. Bystanders gawp at the  
dishevelled, battered princess.

She stares back, like a trapped animal.

A glimpse of the Temple Mount.

The crowd swarms in behind her.

EXT: INNER LAKE - DAY

Theo wades out, petrified.

Surrounded by a human shield of Warriors.

One is attacked from below. While the rest go to help, Theo  
makes for the far bank.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

The Temple steps shine.

Proto flits between Lodges toward them.

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT - DAY

Renna stands, halfway up the steps. A kindly smile, turns,  
offers her arm.

Merchuria wheezes, goes to take Renna's arm, then spins.  
Spite in her eyes.

Proto, up the steps toward them: two, three at a time.

Renna gasps, delighted. Merchuria closes her eyes in denial.

The Tribe runs after Proto. In their wake, Theo.

Merchuria opens her eyes, resigned to Theo's defeat. Proto  
whizzes past Renna and Merchuria.

PROTO  
Mother. Aunty.

Renna laughs, pure joy, trots after her. Merchuria shuffles up, only her Lance for help.

MERCHURIA  
(to herself)  
Let's get it over with.

The Tribe stream round Merchuria, at a safe distance.

THEO (O.S.)  
Stop! Stop her!

He breaks from the crowd, onto a wall. Leaps toward the top.

His outburst causes everyone to look at him.

Proto keeps going - nearly there.

Theo matches her pace, past Merchuria, past Renna.

Proto takes her final step onto --

-- the top of the Temple, to the Altar.

Stops dead, squints at the altar, like it's half finished.

Theo jumps from the wall, barges past Koj's Mother. Shoulder charges Proto to the floor.

Renna arrives, followed by Merchuria and the crowd. Proto and Theo are separated, seized by the crowd.

THEO (CONT'D)  
She's a murderer! She tried to kill me. She doesn't deserve it.

PROTO  
If I'm a murderer, then why aren't you dead? You idiot.

THEO  
You think you're so clever. Look!

Lifts his arm to the crowd, a convincing wound on his ribs. He is let go.

Renna looks warily confused.

Proto wriggles free, lunges at Theo.

A clenched fist from Merchuria, the crowd seize Proto again.

PROTO  
He's lying. Mother -

Renna becomes stern.



PROTO (CONT'D)  
Your Highness, I swear as I stand  
on the Temple, Theo is lying  
about...

(to Theo)  
So where's my weapon, then?

THEO  
Exactly!

PROTO  
I don't even have a knife.

Merchuria wears a thin smile. Edges toward Proto.

Theo puffs his chest. The crowd murmurs.

RENNA  
He has asked for proof.

PROTO  
Of what? That I tried not to kill  
him?

MERCHURIA  
He has asked. That's the law, girl.

RENNA  
It is.

PROTO  
How can I disprove a lie? How? I am  
here. I'm here right now.

RENNA  
Not as a killer.

MERCHURIA  
A murderer, as Theo says.

PROTO  
He's still -

Merchuria snatches up Proto's wrist, shoves the skin near  
Renna's face. Sneers. Renna recoils.

MERCHURIA  
She'd better hurry.

Renna, annoyed by Merchuria, scowls at Proto's arm.

Merchuria rolls her eyes. Exasperated, yanks the arm closer.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)  
The stripes! Look at the stripes,  
woman!

She rips her own sleeve, reveals darker, grained in stripes.  
The Queen, horrified, turns to Proto.

RENNA  
Run. Run, Proto. Now!

Proto wrenches her arm from Merchuria. Eyes stab into Theo.

PROTO  
Right. If that's what I must do,  
then I will.  
(yells to the crowd)  
I'll do it for the Geh d' Pir Neh!

Their response, stares of disappointment.

Proto, helpless, stares back.

The crowd part, whisper repeatedly.

TRIBE WHISPERING STATEMENT  
'One pearl lost...'

TRIBE WHISPERING RESPONSE  
'... is only one pearl.'

PROTO  
Do not crown him until I get back  
here. With the Blade.  
(to herself)  
And change this stupid law.

TRIBE WHISPERING STATEMENT  
'One pearl lost...'

She pushes through them, fights back tears.

TRIBE WHISPERING RESPONSE  
'... is only one pearl.'

Theo and Merchuria exchange smirks.

The menacing hum builds to a murmur, a call.

A shout. A yell.

Proto, distraught, stops in the middle. Anger overcomes her.  
She pushes back to the Altar. Yells at Renna and Merchuria.

The crowd chant as she squeezes through, breaks out.

The crowd, suddenly silent. All turn to see --

-- Proto at the top of the wall Theo leapt from.

PROTO  
 (to Renna and Merchuria)  
 I'll never do it. It's impossible.  
 There's nowhere near enough time.

Sunset burns over the Mountains behind her.  
 Defiant, looks across the Tribe. Steps from her post.  
 Renna places her arm on Proto's shoulders.

RENNA  
 You are bound to try, though,  
 Proto. For if you don't...

Renna's eyes indicate --  
 -- the anticipation of The Tribe.  
 Renna turns to Merchuria, waits for her offer of assistance.  
 Merchuria feigns ignorance. A stand off.

RENNA (CONT'D)  
 The Sun, Merchuria.

MERCHURIA  
 The Sun, yes - will set. Even I  
 can't stop the Sun from setting.

RENNA  
 I quite agree, and nor should you  
 ever try. But you could 'escort'  
 Proto, as far as you are able.

Merchuria weighs it up. Looks at the Queen, to Proto.  
 To Theo, lank, useless, pouts in front of the Tribe.

MERCHURIA  
 I see. Very well. But only as far  
 as I can assist.

Renna smiles at Merchuria's co-operation.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto and Merchuria make their way from Kardarc. Smoke and  
 Lodges behind them.

Their path peters out to thick woodland.

Merchuria artfully lags behind.

Proto, full of urgency, turns to her.

PROTO  
Please hurry, Merchuria.

MERCHURIA  
Don't I look like I'm hurrying?

Proto's face says not.

PROTO  
But I have to find the knife, and  
return before dark, or the Geh d'  
Pir Neh will kill me.

MERCHURIA  
How do you know, when no-one has  
ever failed?

PROTO  
Well, it's a scary way to find out.

MERCHURIA  
Oh, it's just a tradition. Keeps  
everyone in their place.

Proto, eager, squirms to and fro.

PROTO  
Still, couldn't you..?

Merchuria looks at her, pretends to have no idea.

Proto whirls her arm in the air.

PROTO (CONT'D)  
You know.

MERCHURIA  
(mimics Proto)  
And what's that supposed to be?

PROTO  
Like you did, before, when we...  
(gushes)  
When we went to the Desolation.  
Can't we? Please?

MERCHURIA  
Oh. That. So... you remembered.  
Well, we could give it a try. But,  
you know, it isn't easy.

PROTO  
Ah, come on. You must be used to it  
by now.

Merchuria stops in her tracks.

MERCHURIA

Then why not try it yourself?

She whips her Lance above her own head. Directs a mini tornado to Proto's feet. It scuffs about Proto, lifts her.

MERCHURIA (CONT'D)

Keep it going, girl.

PROTO

I can feel it!

Merchuria raises her hands. Whirls round, slaps the Lance across Proto's back.

Proto catapults, sails up, over the forest. The velocity freaks her out.

Speeds across one lake, a flash of forest, next lake.

Tips of her toes brush tree tops.

She descends, navigates foliage. Tree trunks whizz by.

EXT: DEEP FOREST - DAY

Proto lands, badly. Tumbles, even more battered.

Woozy, gets to her feet, sways, throws up in some ferns.

Shakes herself.

Runs.

MOMENTS LATER

Proto runs wildly on. Stops. Steps into a small clearing. Gets her bearings.

Sees the mountains and sunset.

Takes a moment, looks left, right. Shrugs.

Leans against a tree. Sees it, as if for the first time. Caresses the bark. Can't help laughing.

She runs to the sunset, straight into her next Evolution.

PROTO

Not now!

She staggers.

Flops to her knees, keels over, splayed on the dirt. Jaw clenched, eyes roll, flicker in delirium. Her voice wanders.

Stripes darken. Deep. Aggressive.

EXT: FOREST, NEXT TO KARDARC - DAY

Merchuria looks in her mind to where --

EXT: DEEP FOREST - DAY

-- Proto lays, convulses.

EXT: FOREST, NEXT TO KARDARC - DAY

Merchuria's sinister smile erupts into cackles of glee. Hysterical, Merchuria stands there, laughs insanely. Calms down, strolls back towards Kardarc.

MERCHURIA

Get used to it? Ha! The nausea, the headaches. Yes, little stripeling, you'll get used to it.

She heads off happily. Cracks up again. Leans against her Lance, wipes tears from her cheeks.

EXT: DEEP FOREST - DAY

Proto, wiped out on the ground.

The Sun slides ever nearer the Mountains.

Shadows creep across the forest.

PRELAP

RENNA

What do you see?

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT - DAY

Merchuria, rejuvenated, snaps her eyes open. Smiles, smug and wise, at her worried sister.

MERCHURIA

Her. Evolved. Fully striped now. Do not allow yourself to worry.

Merchuria gives a full, sarcastic preening bow. Smiles to herself.

EXT: PROTO'S VISION FOREST - DAY

The King looms, smiles, smokes.

Proto, her fully grown, present self, stands before him.

KING

Remember...

She turns away, distracted. The King's voice rumbles on.  
Proto gazes past the treetops, closes her eyes.

In her mind, sees --

VISION FOREST, ELSEWHERE - DAY

-- Theo's Blade, half hidden under grass and dirt.

BACK WITH THE KING

Proto's eyes snap open!

The King, pleased, nods to her. Evaporates.

EXT: DEEP FOREST - DAY

Proto's eyes flutter open. She rolls over, sits.

Her face lights up.

PROTO

Filia!

She jumps up, hugs Filia, hard. Neither can resist admiring  
Proto's fully striped body. It shines deeply in the sunset.

PROTO (CONT'D)

Oops, sorry.

Quite matter of fact, Proto leans, wretches, pukes.

Straightens up.

Filia laughs.

FILIA

Charming.

The sling on Filia's back wriggles. The cubs mewl inside.

Proto's face drops.

PROTO

No. You didn't... bring them!

She grows distant, lost in memory - then gasps.

PROTO (CONT'D)  
I know where it is! Come on.

Proto peels forward. Filia runs like mad to keep up.

FILIA  
(to herself)  
Shit.  
(to Proto)  
You go ahead. I'll catch up.

Proto nods, speeds off. Stops.

PROTO  
Come here. I want to try something.

Filia jogs up to Proto.

PROTO (CONT'D)  
Stand there. Just stay very still.

Proto, deadly serious, whirls her hand in the air.

PROTO (CONT'D)  
(off Filia's look)  
Just... hang on.

FILIA  
What am I -

PROTO  
Ah, forget it. Catch up!

She's off again.

EXT: FOREST CLEARING BY THEO'S TREE - LATER DAY

Filia spots Proto by her fern nest. Proto kicks at the undergrowth.

FILIA  
Sal'la.

Proto waves hello without looking up.

PROTO  
You got here, then.

FILIA  
Yes, thanks. You didn't leave much  
of a trail, you know.

Goes to help Proto search.



FILIA (CONT'D)  
I've never seen anyone run like you  
do now, Proto.

PROTO  
(elsewhere)  
He was in that tree.

Points to where Theo hid.

MOMENTS LATER

They stand beneath the tree, gaze into its branches.  
From the twilit woods, a familiar growl surrounds them.

PROTO  
Filia. Why can't you just do as  
you're told, and nothing more?

FILIA  
I did. I am. I thought this was  
what you -

PROTO  
Ssh.  
(whispers, of the cubs)  
This was more.

Back to back, they step round. Wait.  
The Epicyon pack snarl, growl, slowly advance.  
The young ladies cower.  
At her feet, Filia sees something glint. Slowly stoops.

FILIA  
(whispers)  
By the way, I found this.

Proto glances over. Her eyes gleam.  
Filia holds Theo's Blade out.

PROTO  
(whispers)  
Well done, Filia.

Filia beams, justified once more.

PROTO (CONT'D)  
(whispers)  
Here. Swap you.

She offers the little antler piece.

FILIA  
Wow. Not much of a trade.

The pack growl.

PROTO  
(whispers)  
Shush! Let's get out of this.

FILIA  
(whispers)  
Okay. Good idea.

PROTO  
(whispers)  
Hand me one of those.

Filia, surprised, passes a cub by the scruff of its neck. Cute little legs dangle and kick. It gives a tiny growl.

Proto cradles it, gingerly steps out to meet the pack.

They close about her like slow death.

The Alpha, big, bold, pads round beside her. Proto, breath shallow, offers the cub.

A stand off.

Proto gently bends, lowers the cub to the ground. It toddles to the Alpha.

The Alpha puts one huge paw on the cub. Holds it still.

Sniffs the cub, constant low growls.

Proto bows her head to one side.

The Alpha squints at her. At Filia with the other cub.

Finally, it licks the cub under its paw. Swipes it gently back to a mother Epicyon.

Proto risks it, meets the Alpha's gaze. They come closer. Face to face. Eyes locked.

The Alpha sniffs her.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto, thrilled, rides the bare back of the Alpha Epicyon. Clings to the fur, grips with her knees like a pro.

Hurtles down the forest towards Kardarc.

Proto, intent, eager, glances over at --

-- Filia, wide eyed, also bare back on an Epicyon. Hangs on, bounces about madly like an amateur. Glances back to Proto, pretends to enjoy the ride.

Proto, in tune with the dog, digs in. Sun on their backs, they gallop into the forest.

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT - DAY

Crowds languish along the walls. Speech low, sad, reverent.

Renna stands surrounded, seemingly alone, at the altar.

Runs her palm across the smooth granite top.

Gasps.

Looks up at Mercuria.

RENNA  
We almost forgot!

MERCHURIA  
I'll... try to find it.

RENNA  
Now? I'll help.

MERCHURIA  
Oh. Yes. Good.

INT: MERCHURIA'S LODGE - DAY

Mercuria, lethargic, lit by a candle, shoves brick-a-brack.

Renna peers in from the door.

RENNA  
There it is.

Mercuria pretends she didn't know. Drags leathers from the great disc at the wall. Candle light fills the Lodge.

Mercuria marvels at the forgotten beauty of what she sees.

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT - DAY

Mercuria faces the altar, watches with disapproval.

Guards #1 and #2, obscured by her stance, struggle to position something.

She holds out her hand.

MERCHURIA

You can stop.

Faces the Sun. Steps from it's path. Reveals --

-- an ancient ship's gong. Reflects the sunset.

Over the Tribe.

They ogle it's power.

Renna steps forward, sets the striking mallet by it.

GUARD #1

What is it?

MERCHURIA

It's old. Still useful. We need it.

GUARD #1

It's... it's...

Rolls her eyes.

EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto and Filia ride their Epicyon; Filia more confident.

They bound across undergrowth, weave through trees.

Proto catches Filia looking. Filia grins, eyes flick to the Alpha. Pulls a pretend scared face.

Proto grins back, unafraid, spurs the Alpha on.

PROTO

Yah!

The Alpha barks to her. The troop race on.

Kardarc shimmers in the distance.

EXT: FOREST, OUTER LAKE - DAY

Proto's Alpha, zero hesitation, leaps from the bank. They arc, splash in. He submerges beneath her.

For a moment, swan-like, she sails.

UNDERWATER

The Alpha paddles like mad to the surface.

## ABOVE WATER

It emerges, drenched, buoys forward.

Filia's Epicyon leaps high and long from the bank. They splashdown, same way.

Half the lake cleared, they near the Kardarc bank.

Proto's Alpha pads onto dry land. Proto quickly dismounts. The Alpha shakes, head to tail.

In the lake, water ripples next to Filia. Erupts!

A flash of mottled green swipes across her and the startled Epicyon. Filia flinches under the crocodile's weight. All three disappear under thrashing foam.

Proto's face drops in horror.

PROTO

Filia!

Proto rushes, wades out to Filia. The Alpha charges after her. Forces her back with head and haunches. Proto dives across it. The Alpha pounces, catches her tunic in its jaws.

Slings her at the bank.

## UNDERWATER

The crocodile and Epicyon grapple - a death roll.

Filia, breath held, struggles to swim out from beneath them.

She is pushed down, into the gloom.

Her fingers, weak, curl around Proto's sharpened antler.

## ABOVE WATER

The lake goes still.

Remaining Epicyon gather, stranded on the far bank. Snarl at the water, dare not enter.

The Alpha nuzzles Proto to carry on. Tearful, she mounts, steers from the lake. They bound into the woods.

## EXT: FOREST - DAY

Proto rides the Alpha. Tears stream down her cheeks. Her face, though, is iron resolve.

EXT: FOREST/GEYSER MEADOW - DAY

Great shoots of steam rise above the trees ahead. The Alpha stays on course.

Fierce eyes in its mighty head watch the geyser rhythms.

They curve across the open space. Geysers explode on either side. The Alpha powers on, avoids them all.

EXT: FOREST/INNER LAKE - DAY

Proto and the Alpha gather pace, from the forest to the bank. Launch perfectly.

Hit the other side.

EXT: FOREST/KARDARC - DAY

Proto and the Alpha dash down the last wooded hillside.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

Shadows, cast by the Mountain's sunset, creep the streets.

EXT: FOREST/KARDARC - DAY

Proto and the Alpha break out of treeline darkness. Panic and clamour from the Tribe as they're spotted.

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT - DAY

Mountain shadow hits the first steps.

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT, SUMMIT - DAY

Renna lurches down a couple of steps, hands to her heart.

Merchuria, resentful, apprehensive, looms behind her.

Theo lazes on the ground by the Altar. Twiddles the mallet.

EXT: KARDARC STREETS - DAY

Tribesfolk yell at the Alpha. Staffs wielded at his face, flanks. Fierce, he swipes, barks warnings, parries staffs.

Proto hugs the Alpha's back.

They're driven off course, into shadow.

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT, SUMMIT - DAY

Merchuria's eyebrow raises with hope. She and Renna watch --  
-- Proto and the Alpha, chased, lost from view in the maze.

EXT: KARDARC STREETS - DAY

A localised wind swirls about the Alpha's paws as they race.  
Proto and the Alpha round a corner. Pop clear out of sight.  
The Tribe flood after them, stop, confused. Nothing to chase.  
Proto and the Alpha burst into view behind the Tribe. The  
Alpha swerves, gallops, bounds onto --  
-- the Temple steps.

Leaps the first flight, ascends at a pace.

They hurtle up, toward --

-- the rest of the crowd, still with Renna, part hastily.

Proto, determined, locked, rides like hell.

Tribespeople, scared silly, dive from Proto's path.

Proto hits eye contact with Merchuria.

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT, SUMMIT - DAY

The ridden dog summits the steps. Renna sweeps them onward.

Merchuria stands her ground.

The shadow flows up the steps behind them.

The Alpha splays its paws, slides to a halt in front of  
Merchuria.

Proto dismounts, marches up to her, Renna one step behind.

Theo skulks around to stand by Renna.

PROTO  
(to Merchuria)  
For you.

She produces the Poison Blade. Renna recognises it, swipes it  
before Merchuria can touch it.

Theo, stunned, drops the mallet.

In the crowd, the Obsidian Hawkers go to speak.

Merchuria discreetly draws her thumb across her lips.

The Hawkers, lips literally sealed. The Son panics. The Father calmly leads him away.

Renna tastes the Blade edge, very tip of her tongue. Spits the foulness out.

RENNA

Merchuria.

MERCHURIA

What now?

RENNA

Sometimes, I think you offer rather fine advice, but very little help.

MERCHURIA

The advice I offer, Your Highness, helps those who consider whether to take it or not first. Sometimes, you have to come up with your own answers, Renna. You're the Queen. Aren't you.

Renna points the Blade at Merchuria.

RENNA

This is my answer today.

Merchuria gives another gloriously deep, sycophantic bow.

Theo trembles with anger. He sees --

-- Proto, victorious --

-- Renna with the knife --

-- his Merchuria, bow to them!

He roars, leaps on Proto's back like a frenzied ape. Bites, scratches, gouges. Proto screeches with pain and fright.

Merchuria, decrepit, stuck in her bow. Works hand over hand, back up her Lance to spectate.

Theo bear hugs Proto from behind. She writhes in his grip.

Raps the back of his hands.

He gives. Just enough.

She twists, knees his groin. She's free.

He recovers, fuelled by fury. Grabs her throat, digs in. She slams her arms down on his.



He's stuck fast, a madman, breathes through clenched teeth.

Proto's eyes bulge, appeal to --

-- her mother --

-- the Tribe.

Nothing.

Theo's face, crazy. Arms, rigid.

Proto's panic subsides. Arms slams down again. Theo bends, a little. Proto shifts her whole body. Theo, forced to release.

She drops to one knee, fights for breath. He kicks her in the face.

Proto flops sideways.

Renna steps forward, catches Merchuria's warning look.

The Tribe shuffle. Theo strides over, ready to kick.

Proto scrambles by the crowd's feet. Flips, forward roll.

Up.

Faces her brother.

Proto and Theo circle, poised. Proto switches.

Side to side.

Ready to catch him off guard.

Theo's eyes dart to the knife, still in Renna's hand.

Proto front kicks his chest. He absorbs, counters. Flurry of punches on her torso and head. She blocks, spins, back kicks his leg away, off balance.

Side kicks his mouth.

Blood splatters out.

Theo spits.

His tooth skitters across the granite.

Grabs the knife from Renna, who reels back. The Tribe cushion her from toppling down the steps.

Theo advances on Proto. Twirls the knife, shows off.

Proto can't take her eyes off the Blade.

He slashes, jabs.

She slaps, blocks. Waits.

Theo, a high, downward strike. Proto, both arms, blocks, grabs, twists his knife hand round. Forces his back to her. Extra twist.

Theo grimaces - newly gapped, bloody teeth.

Proto takes the Blade. Twists more. Gristle snaps. He gasps.

Thrilled, Proto turns him to face her. Headbutts his face.

Theo drops to his knees.

Proto swiftly hands the Blade to Renna.

Stands over Theo.

Gets to his feet. One hand, lunges.

Proto sidesteps, hook kicks, revolves.

Back fists Theo's face. He careens back over his own feet.

Lands, face first.

Proto stoops, straddles him. Looks to Renna, the Blade.

Renna offers it, nods to Proto.

RENNA (CONT'D)  
You have the law, now.

Merchuria leans in, curious as to Proto's decision.

Proto takes Theo's other arm, twists it back and up. Half conscious, he gurgles. His shoulder is wrenched out. Dropped, limp across his back.

Proto stands, takes possession of the Blade from Renna.

Holds it to the last rays of sunlight.

PROTO  
(to the crowd)  
For all of you!

The crowd, a moment of realisation. They roar approval.

Merchuria regards Theo's hopeless position. She crouches to Proto, hisses conspiratorially.

MERCHURIA  
(to Proto)  
Listen to the Blade, girl. What does it tell you?

Proto looks to Merchuria, to the Blade as if it might speak.

Drifts into a daydream.

EXT: PROTO'S VISION FOREST - DAY

The King smiles down. Smoke clears from about his head.

KING  
Remember... Fight War.

Proto, her present self, wondrous, stands before him again.

Sunlight breaks through the forest behind him. He takes a huge, satisfying toke on his 'cigar'.

KING (CONT'D)  
... Not Wars.

He laughs to the sky, like it's a great joke.

Proto smiles along with him, then understands.

He leans back, disappears as thick, volcanic smoke pours from his throat. The gigantic cigar glows.

PRELAP

The sound of the crowd roars back in.

MERCHURIA (V.O.)  
Proto! What does it say?

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT, SUMMIT - DAY

Proto, surrounded by the crowd, pauses over Theo.

She beams, exhausted, filthy. Jubilant. Holds the knife to Theo's throat.

PROTO  
(to Theo)  
Go. To the Desolation. You are  
banished. And make no mistake,  
Theo, if you return, that day will  
be your last.

She turns, stands, hurls the Blade at the Altar.

Strikes the Gong - BASH - shatters into a million shards of sunlit black glass.

EXT: TEMPLE MOUNT - NIGHT

Proto stands tall, alone, torchlight at the Altar fire.

A feast stands ready to one side.

Her belt and tunic are removed by Attendants.

Placed in the Altar fire.

The crowd behold her. Children ushered to the front to see.

Bare; fully striped - torso, arms, legs. The Alpha Epicyon lies by her feet, grooms it's forepaws.

The Tribe chant, quietly at first.

TRIBE

A pearl has returned. A pearl has  
returned...

Renna, still youthful; Merchuria, aged by years of magic.  
Renna removes her hair piece.

Merchuria removes her head-dress.

The two nod to each other. Sombre in the gravity of ritual.

The chant grows.

Merchuria and Renna approach Proto.

She smiles, eyes shine.

They scowl back.

Proto's smile fades.

All three by the Altar. Proto squints, confused. The chant,  
louder still.

The headgear is raised, side by side over Proto's brow.

Merchuria's sleeves fall back, dense old stripes.

All three women, brief smiles of anticipation.

Merchuria, back to business.

Proto and Renna follow suit.

Proto strains to meet her crown.

The crowd drop silent.

Settled on her head is --

-- the Shaman's head-dress. The crowd gasp, murmur. Proto,  
surprise and wonder.

Renna takes a step back.

Proto's hands close around Merchuria's Lance.

At the feast, a woman's dirty hand grasps a hunk of venison.

Merchuria disrobes. A lifetime of stripes cover her entirely. She swings the eagle cloak around Proto. It weighs her down. She straightens up.

Magnificent. Their eyes meet.

Merchuria peers into Proto's soul. Proto meets her gaze, inch for inch.

Merchuria rests her hand on Proto's shoulder. Proto clasps Merchuria's hand to herself.

An Attendant presents Merchuria with a plain old staff.

She tries a wicked stare. Sighs, accepts it gratefully.

The crowd erupt, a surprise yell of joy.

Behind the old shaman, Proto sees --

-- the crowd part, alarmed.

Filia, courageous on her Epicyon. Ripped and bloody, it pads sedately. Filia tears into her hunk of venison. Chucks a piece to the ground for her dog.

The Tribe go crazy again - dance, chant, sing, yell.

Filia beams at Proto.

Proto starts toward her friend. Renna's look stops her.

Filia, graceful, rides up, dismounts. Bows to Proto. Proto gives a playful shove with her Lance.

PROTO  
(to Filia)  
The cave. Did you see it?

FILIA  
I saw a lot of stupid fish.

Their laughter rings out, fades to...

EXT: ROYAL LODGE - DAY

Merchuria, regular tunic, plain staff, leads Theo inside. She motions the two Guards to follow.

Solemn, they nod to her. Collect their staffs.

Cringe to each other.

INT: PROTO'S QUARTERS - DAY

Merchuria instructs Theo to stand between the split mirror.

Dejected, he sways, nauseously pale.

Merchuria raises his chin with her finger. He tries a smile.

THEO

Sal'la.

Short tempered, she points. The Guards step in with him.

All three men bewildered.

She pours a cup of water at their feet.

Theo gasps.

MOMENTS LATER

Merchuria walks from the empty room.

EXT: KARDARC - DAY

Raucous celebrations continue.

Cloying well wishers deliver modest gifts to the Royal Lodge.

EXT: DEEP FOREST - DAY

The two Guards, wary, follow Theo.

EXT: MOUNTAINSIDE - LATER DAY

All three make slow tracks up.

Away from the tree line.

Theo falters, staggers against loose rock. Falls over.

The Guards watch him struggle to his feet.

EXT: CAVE MOUTH, CALDERA VALLEY - DAY

Theo, limp, stares into the cave. He turns.

The Guards block the path.

He looks past them: one last, confused, sorrowful gaze at --

-- Kardarc, a shining spot of civilisation.

Theo looks hard into the Guards' eyes.

One looks away. The other warns with his staff.

Theo sneers, turns from them into the dark. The Guards stay, watch, until --

-- he is gone.

Duty performed, they plod away.

EXT: CAVE ENTRANCE/EXIT, DESOLATION - DAY

Theo painfully clambers over the rockslide. Emerges, blinks.

Slithers carefully onto the ledge.

Scowls at something, way off in the desert.

Out there, the middle of nowhere, it glints repeatedly.

PRELAP

The faint sound, hammers as they strike railway fasteners.

The sound grows.

EXT: DESOLATION, RAILGANG - DAY

Hammers strike, loud and clear: one side; other side;...

EXT: MOUNTAINSIDE - DAY

Theo, stranded on the wave of rocks, listens.

The sound of the hammers, louder, louder.

FADE TO BLACK.