

Exile

Episode 1
"Crying Wolf"

by
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A 13-part series inspired by

Avernum
PC CD-ROM 2000-present
developed by Spiderweb Software

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EXT. NORTHERN VILLAGE - DAY

Thatched huts cluster together as if for protection in the bowl of a valley. There's not a soul in sight, only trees whispering by a river.

BARBARIAN (O.S.)
(whispering)
Ehs mincog.

Guarded footsteps blend with a sudden rush of wind in the trees. There is still no sign of life until an OLD MAN slowly, deliberately, comes out of one of the huts and plants himself in the center of the village. He's carrying a huge axe.

His wide, bushy eyes scan the treeline. A creak of wood behind him makes him jump. He looks over his shoulder and sees his WIFE and his SON coming out of the hut.

The old man raises a hand to stop them - or maybe to reach out to them - as an arrow bursts through his shoulder.

He stumbles under the force of it as behind him, a war cry erupts from the trees. Armed BARBARIANS stream down the sides of the valley.

His wife panics and flees with a dozen other FAMILIES out of the village. The son stays behind, hesitating in the doorway as further arrows streak down from the sky.

The old man grimaces at him, like he was trying to scare a child. Then he bears his teeth. His son starts, but fails to move. The Old Man opens his bloody mouth and screams at him - his face right out of nightmare.

Terrified, the son runs away. The old man braces himself with the axe and turns into the oncoming wave, still screaming.

His roar mingles with the war cry of the barbarians until they are identical, his face with theirs, his blood with theirs as the village is pillaged and his body brought down.

It takes five of them to do it.

EXT. ERIKA'S HILL - DAY

Gusts of ash and cinder blow past ERIKA, 17, standing in a thawing patch of snow. She is covered in a thousand cuts and burns that crisscross her arms like tattoos.

She raises a hand to shield her eyes from the smoke and looks down the only road of Willing village. The road winds out of the hamlet and crumbles in the midst of a distant forest, coniferous and slightly blue.

LARS (O.S.)

Erika, are you a goatherd or a smith? Burn you if you don't get back in here.

ERIKA

(absently)

Sorry, father. I could swear I saw some, um... some wolves. Down in the valley with the goats.

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - DAY

Not far away, Lars's straw hut opens up at the mouth into a smithy. The open air relieves the heat of a large stone forge connected to a bellows. A cheap anvil takes center, dinged and cracked and melted from regular use and from its natural impurities.

LARS, 58 but burly, with veiny eyes and papery skin, peers into the smoldering forge. He pulls away, covered instantly in a sheen of sweat.

LARS

(shouting)

If you did see wolves, what? You'd need a sword, that's what, and if you leave the bellows much longer you're going to be out of luck with that. You will be banished for your carelessness.

ERIKA (O.S.)

I'm coming father!

Erika comes in from the hill. She takes over at the bellows as Lars plunges an unfinished blade into the forge.

LARS

I doubt you'd recognize a wolf anyway. A mage from the Empire drove them away years ago. I don't think I've seen one since you were born.

He grows serious, then laughs and tussles Erika's hair.

LARS (CONT'D)

Or maybe that was you.

ERIKA

Don't babble, father.

LARS

Babble! You've never seen a mage.

ERIKA

(shrugs)

Sister studied them at the capital.
She said they were fools without
power.

Lars removes the glowing blade from the forge with a pair of
tongs and sets on it at the anvil with a hammer. Erika
watches carefully.

LARS

I'd rather see a wolf among the
goats than a mage in the village.
Their sort are clever and swift-
minded, like the wolf, but even
more cunning. Half their magic is
in their cunning, you know. The
rest...

He shrugs.

ERIKA

If not magic, then what keeps the
wolves away?

LARS

I think you're too clever for a
young woman. A wolf in goat's
clothing, I suspect.

ERIKA

Then I should be driven from the
village, shouldn't I?

LARS

If you don't pay attention, I'll
drive you out myself!

They laugh softly together, father and daughter.

Lars quenches the blade in a tub of water next to the anvil.

LARS (CONT'D)

That's it. Give it an hour and
we'll see if it's true.

As the hissing from the boiling water fades, the pair hear
excited voices from TOWNSPEOPLE outside.

EXT. WILLING ROAD - DAY

Erika and her father drift into a crowd of VILLAGERS gathered
at the end of the village's only road.

In front of them stand a trio of horsemen, two GUARDS with
long sheathed swords and armor, and a third, their leader,
with a dagger hung from a thong around his neck and a
traveler's robe.

The leader, CANDRED, holds up his hand and the group stops. He dismounts and hands the reins of his horse to a PEASANT, who stares at them. He sighs.

CANDRED
Are there any elderly among you who can read?

The townspeople part until Erika and Lars, soot-stained, stand alone before him.

LARS
My name is Lars. I am the village smith and its eldest. You'd best move on, stranger.

Candred pulls a scroll from his robe and hands it to the old man.

CANDRED
I have been sent by the high house of Tenet to protect this ... "village" from nephilium that flee from the north. My name is Candred, and me and my guards will stay here until the danger is passed. Hopefully we will not be here for long.

Distressed whispers start up among the villagers. Lars pulls the scroll open and reads it. Erika squints at it from over his shoulder.

ERIKA
What does it say, father?

Lars doesn't have to read it all. He hands it back to Candred.

LARS
It is their story. They are not... lying about that. It wouldn't matter if they were. We will do as they ask.

The villagers grow even more anxious; they're surprised by Lars's decision.

CANDRED
I'm glad you realize that.

LARS
(half to Erika)
We are not so unclever here in Willing, my Lord.

CANDRED

Well then there's a chance you'll
work out what to do with our
horses. We will stay in your hut,
old blacksmith.

LARS

(worried)
My Lord?

Candred looks disappointed in him.

CANDRED

You can run the forge to keep us
warm.

He pushes past. His two guards dismount then follow behind.
The crowd fills in behind them.

As they flow past, Lars takes his daughter by the shoulders
and pulls her aside.

LARS

Stay away from that man. Do you
hear me? You are not a wolf next
to him.

Erika looks up at her father, concerned.

INT. CORIL'S HUT - DAY

FAMILY HEADS, the seniors of Willing Village, argue across a
heavy wooden table in the center of a dilapidated room,
decorated with goat skins to cover sunlit holes in the walls.

FAMILY HEAD

The issue is not whether they are
here but how they are received!

ANOTHER FAMILY HEAD

That is the decision of our eldest.

FAMILY HEAD

It is our eldest's choices that
have brought us here!

A THIRD FAMILY HEAD

He seems to be making few of them
at the moment.

Lars stares into space, unphased as Coril, a powerful woman
in her 40s, bangs repeatedly on the table, making it shake.

CORIL

Let him speak for himself! He will
have an explanation.

FAMILY HEAD

You seem to have a lot of faith in him. If that's the word.

CORIL

And you have a lot of tongue.

Things begin to get boisterous again when Lars gets up.

LARS

I have work to do.

The Family Heads look to Coril, who is already standing.

CORIL

Actually, that is why we called you here, Lars ... Some of us have been concerned about your judgment of late.

LARS

One does become less tolerant of fools with age.

He laughs alone.

CORIL

It's the sword.

Lars looks down at his calloused hands.

CORIL (CONT'D)

You know we worry about how much time you spend on it, but now, with the village in jeopardy...

The Family Heads mumble.

LARS

It's a commission from the Empire! The most important thing that has ever happened in this place.

CORIL

But you are our eldest, our leader. With the sword, and now by accepting foreigners to stay with you in the village, we wonder if your ... heart ... lies outside of the village, not here with us.

She blushes.

LARS

I've given up family for this village; you know that.

CORIL

Yes, of course. I didn't mean
to...

A THIRD FAMILY HEAD

She's jealous as a maid.

The Family Head growls at him.

ANOTHER FAMILY HEAD

Lars, you must understand: that
painful memory makes us wonder ...
what could possibly be more
important to you than both your
family and the community?

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - NIGHT

Lars drifts into his smithy, mind on other things. He goes to the quenching trough and pulls out the sword, streaming water. He inspects it in the light. No matter which way he turns it, it's dull, and plain, and crude.

Lars's face sinks into a mask of disappointment, then disgust. Next: anger. With a growl, he hurls the sword against the wall where it crashes into a rack of other, discarded blades.

INT. CRAMPED COMMON ROOM - NIGHT

Close quarters around a makeshift dinner table in the only room of the blacksmiths' hut. The walls are patchy and unclean, and tested to bursting by the diners: Candred, his two guards, and wide-eyed Erika.

Candred's two guards are FERRIS, fair haired and in his early 20s, and PREIUR, a compact man with dark hair that's going gray. A bundle of candles illuminate their faces from a sconce at the center.

Candred looks around with resignation.

ERIKA

What is it like to live in a city?

Candred studies Erika carefully, then dismisses her as part of the disappointing decor.

ERIKA (CONT'D)

How long does it take to get there?

CANDRED

(sighs)

Five days' ride. This mountain is
so rough it would probably take as
long to walk.

FERRIS

He sets so slow a pace it's a wonder that's not always the case.

Preiur half-smiles.

CANDRED

It is not a guard's place to say.

Through the only door emerges WODE, 19, with a crude platter and a handful of tin dishes. She sets the dishes, laden with porridge and long edible leaves, before each of them and finally herself.

ERIKA

(proudly)

This is my sister Wode.

Candred watches her carefully as she lays the table. Ferris raises his eyebrows.

FERRIS

What a feast, eh Candred?

Candred doesn't notice him.

WODE

It's actually a fairly common dish, I'm afraid.

CANDRED

Common does not mean it lacks sweetness, my Lady.

An awkward silence.

WODE

So... what is so important about our little village that the Queen of Tenet sends a mage and his men to protect us?

ERIKA

Sister!

Erika jumps up from her seat and Preiur grabs the hilt of his sword. Ferris puts his hand on Preiur's and subtly shakes his head.

Candred laughs and raises his hand for peace.

CANDRED

This dish is not so common after all. How did you know?

WODE

All the signs I've come to expect are there.

CANDRED

And yet you are still not afraid?

WODE

I'm not. That's not the only way
to tell, though.

Candred grunts. More intrigued than ever, he just watches her.

WODE (CONT'D)

The men said that the barbarians
were a day or two off yet. If I
had known they had already arrived
I would have at least dressed for
the occasion.

PREIUR

That's enough.

CANDRED

(to Preiur)

Hush.

WODE

So why are you really here? And
with only two guards. There must
be some other reason.

Candred considers the question seriously. He glances surreptitiously at Ferris, worried. Then he assumes his usual bluster.

CANDRED

The northern nephilium tribes are a
savage and ruthless people. You
would not be... comfortable in
their clutches. Be glad that we
are here to protect you.

Wode holds his eyes, then turns, suddenly grim, to her porridge.

Erika looks frightened at the others who, in turns, also eat. Her wandering gaze catches, through a chink in the wall: Lars, with his face to the opening, glaring at them.

Erika gets up. They all stop to stare at her.

ERIKA

Ah, um. I will be outside - if you
need me. For some reason. I can't
think of why. Ha ha ha.

Erika leaves. She starts to turn back for his porridge, but then changes her mind with a mutter.

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - NIGHT

Lars is fixing his tools on the workbench. He doesn't look around when Erika comes out of the hut.

LARS

I told you to stay away from that man.

ERIKA

Why didn't you tell me he was a mage? I would have known what you meant!

LARS

Because a wolf in goat's skin might stay that way.

ERIKA

Sister knew it as soon as she saw him.

LARS

May the spirits save her.

ERIKA

She can take care of herself.

LARS

And us?

Lars watches, guarded, as Erika goes to the discarded blade. She picks it up and flips it in her hand. Lars looks sad, watching his daughter with a weapon.

ERIKA

What was wrong with it?

LARS

The blade is flawed. I will have to do it again.

ERIKA

But it's the best so far.

LARS

It's dull. A true sword must have life.

ERIKA

The metal must be bad.

LARS

Burn you, there's nothing wrong with the *metal*!

Lars takes a heavy breath and stares down at his hands - thick and calloused.

Erika puts her hand on Lars's shoulder. It's agile and thin: not at all like her father's.

ERIKA
Let's finish it tonight.

LARS
You're not ready for bladework.

ERIKA
Father, you know I am. You've taught me enough.

LARS
I don't want you to be burned, young wolf.

ERIKA
I don't plan on sticking my hand in the furnace, father.

After a conflicted glance into the hut, Lars wearily nods his head.

LARS
I suppose it has to happen sooner or later.

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - LATER

The blacksmiths forge the sword together:

Erika, sweating, smelts together the crosspiece and grip of a hilt using an iron mold.

Lars sharpens the blade against a whetting wheel. Sparks cascade down from the friction. His feet pump at the pedal.

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - STILL LATER

Erika's arm shakes as she wraps a tight cord of leather around the grip of the sword.

Lars, half masked by a bandana, mixes a caustic tempering solution in a pail by the door.

Wode nearly knocks it over as she leaves the hut with a handful of blankets. She giggles while he glares at her.

Erika raises her eyebrows.

WODE
How serious you are.
(nodding back at the door)
They're fools, of course, but then so are you for staying up on a night like this.

Erika laughs, relaxing too much to keep the cord taught. It unravels down the grip.

Wode smirks. She settles down under one of the blankets to watch.

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - DAWN

Wode is asleep. Lars and Erika oil the sword with the corners of their clothes.

At last Erika proudly holds it up. It's beautiful - everything the last sword wasn't. She beams at it, full of pride. Lars looks from the sword to her, from pride to just a bit of envy.

Embossed on the base of the sword is the profile of a wolf, glinting silver as it catches the dawn light.

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - DAY

Lars and Erika sleep under blankets.

A clash of metal on metal jolts Erika awake. She wipes her face and eyes and squints into the morning sun.

EXT. ERIKA'S HILL - DAY

Candred's guards are practicing on the crest of the hill just outside.

Ferris brings his sword down on top of Preiur's. It slides off of the older man's blade like rain off a roof.

PREIUR

Powerful, but you're putting too much weight into it. You mustn't give your balance over.

FERRIS

I had my balance.

PREIUR

Only because I gave it back.

FERRIS

(frustrated)
Show me.

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - DAY

Wode sneaks in with a damp cloth bag. She smiles at Erika and sits next to her.

WODE

Saved you some breakfast. Lazy wolf.

She tussles Erika's hair and smirks.

ERIKA

Lazy!

She grabs the the bag from Wode and pulls out... the porridge Erika left behind the night before. She stares at it. Wode grins at her.

WODE

In celebration of finishing what you started.

Erika laughs. The pair eat with their fingers, warm in the sun's morning rays, and watch the fight:

EXT. ERIKA'S HILL - DAY

The guards start again, swords out, five paces apart.

Preiur glides at his opponent, striking at his knees. They clash, then separate. Each clash is punctuated by a considered pause while the warriors adjust to each other's stances.

Ferris deflects a blow, then returns his own. Preiur flicks it aside. The younger man's sword swings wide, taking him with it.

PREIUR

Look, now your opening is unrecoverable.

FERRIS

(grunting)
True.

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - DAY

Erika looks across at Wode, watching the guards with amazement and admiration.

Proud, Erika gets up and goes to the weapons rack. A line of imperfect swords hang from hooks - Lars's earlier attempts. She reaches for one and hesitates.

At the end, the new sword gleams in the sunlight. She glances over her shoulder at Wode and takes it instead.

Wode frowns, confused.

EXT. ERIKA'S HILL - DAY

Erika strolls up to the base of the hill, flips the sword deftly in her hands, and grins.

It gets the guards' attention.

ERIKA

May I try?

PREIUR

Look here, even this peasant wants
to teach you a lesson.

Ferris smirks. Preiur leaves Erika and him on the hill.

He folds his arms and watches.

Ferris sets up as before while Erika lets her sword dangle
behind her, one-handed.

FERRIS

You haven't any armor?

ERIKA

You can handicap me later after
I've won a match or two.

FERRIS

I'll try to avoid it.

PREIUR

(laughing)

Let's see if she's as spry on her
feet.

This time, Ferris attacks first. Erika is indeed fast on her
feet and dodges several blows. She strikes at Ferris's arms
and hands, but he keeps her off.

Ferris rallies. Erika blocks a powerful slash with one hand,
giving her sword speed as it swings around.

It's all Ferris can do to twist and block the blow square.
He staggers back, almost tripping over himself. He glances
worriedly at his sword. The flexible metal sings and snakes
in his hands.

FERRIS

(panting)

You have a fine sword.

ERIKA

It's not mine. It belongs to the
Prince of Tenet.

FERRIS

(suddenly suspicious)

Does it?

ERIKA

A commission from the Empire
itself.

Ferris comes at Erika again, this time across her body. Erika reflects the cut and retaliates. Ferris falls back, at times just inches away from the tip of Erika's sword.

Erika drives him off the hill onto flat terrain. Away from the slope, Ferris is able to trap Erika's sword against the ground. He kicks it out of her grasp with his armored leg.

It spins and sings before thudding in the dust.

FERRIS
It's worthy of him.

Having had enough, he turns and clears the hill.

Preiur watches his companion walk away, thoughtfully.

Wode appears from the smithy. She fetches Erika's blade from the dirt and offers it to Erika.

Erika scowls at the blade, ashamed of losing in front of her sister. She takes it.

PREIUR
(amused)
You peasants.

EXT. WILLING CREEK - DAY

Erika slashes aimlessly with the sword at tall grass on the mountainside. Wode follows at a distance, a concerned look on her face.

All around is a splendid display of tiny tree flowers, recently out of bud. Birds flit from one flower to another, endlessly curious and thirsty and boisterous as they sing over the burble of Willing Creek. They reach the bank.

WODE
Erika, look!

She points at the creek, flashing in the sun, covered by a constellation of spider webs.

Erika looks up and blinks.

ERIKA
Look at what?

EXT. WILLING VALLEY - DAY

They come upon Candred in a meadow. The mage doesn't notice them, or doesn't care, so absorbed is he in his work. He mutters to himself and carves the air with his jeweled dagger.

Where the dagger goes, a mercury trail follows and lingers, ethereal.

The whole pattern resembles the network of spider webs over Willing Creek, with shimmering, concentric circles and unevenly lengthed spokes - except its scale, which would not catch an insect but a man.

Erika stares, dumbfounded, her first sight of magic.

ERIKA
Sister, look!

Wode can't see the webs. She frowns first ahead, then at Erika, concerned.

WODE
Look at what?

CANDRED
(snaps)
Will you two stop whispering?

ERIKA
What are you doing?

CANDRED
Serious work. If you could see it,
the spell would be quite a sight.

Erika blinks and rubs her eyes.

CANDRED (CONT'D)
I would keep your distance if I
were you. On second thought, send
your disbelieving sister. I'd love
to see the look on her face
spellstruck.

Wode scowls.

WODE
Fiend.

Candred ponders this.

CANDRED
I don't mind a little impertinence.
Did you know, I quite like it?

He looks over his shoulder at her and laughs, a hoarse cackle eerie enough that Wode makes haste away, pulling the dumbfounded Erika behind her.

EXT. VILLAGE COMMONS - AFTERNOON

Erika and Wode encounter a great commotion when they return to Willing. A flock of VILLAGERS, including Lars, surrounds Candred's two guards.

When they get closer, they can see a hunched man bound between them: multiply tattooed, with a head of spinachy hair.

FERRIS
Look what we found on the outskirts
of your village!

Preiur grips a handful of the man's hair and yanks his head back.

PREIUR (CONT'D)
A filthy nephil!

Villagers jeer.

FERRIS
What shall we do with him? Hang
him? Spit him?

One of the villagers in the crowd spits on the BARBARIAN.

Ferris pulls the barbarian back.

FERRIS (CONT'D)
Idiots.

BARBARIAN
Lements.

LARS
What did he say?

PREIUR
Who can tell?

WODE
(over the din)
He wants to know what he's done to
you.

Lars is curious.

WODE (CONT'D)
Isn't it obvious?

FERRIS
He's a scout. He was spying on you
to find weaknesses.
(sarcastic)
Isn't it obvious?

PREIUR
We will execute him now.

Preiur draws his sword, galvanizing the crowd.

CANDRED (O.S.)
Hold, guards!

Candred's voice carries, and the villagers fall silent.

He wades through them to the center and examines the captive nephilium, who stares proudly back.

CANDRED (CONT'D)
We are not barbarians like he. The law is that prisoners of war be sent to Exile.

The crowd murmurs.

WODE
Prisoners of war? No blood has been drawn!

CANDRED
Blood?

Candred looks at her steadily then turns to the captive nephilium. He watches Candred hatefully as the mage draws his dagger and cuts him on the arm next to a series of similar scars.

Candred turns back to Wode and the others and ostentatiously wipes off the blade.

CANDRED (CONT'D)
(to his guards)
Tie him up. We'll take him with us when we go.
(to the crowd)
I have unfinished business. Get out of my way.

Lars watches the peasants as they part for him. They start to mutter. He catches Coril's eye in the crowd and intervenes.

LARS
We've *all* been neglecting our duties! Back to work with you!

Coril gives him a grateful look then herds the disgruntled crowd away.

LARS (CONT'D)
(to Erika)
Even you, little wolf.

Erika takes a last glance at the captive nephilium, now being hauled away on a collar by the guards.

Wode gives Lars an unfocused, angry look, then follows Erika down the hill.

Lars is left alone.

LARS (CONT'D)
 (to himself)
 Even you, old man.

EXT. FOREST - AFTERNOON

Erika splits a wedge of beech with a long-handled axe. She watches Wode chop angrily at her own wood on the next block over.

WODE
 What is it?

Erika looks away. She blinks and shrugs.

ERIKA
 You're my sister. I care what you think.

Wode stops chopping and takes a deep breath.

WODE
 I think they're going to send that man to his death in Exile.

ERIKA
 Exile?

WODE
 Fool!
 (regaining control)
 It's where criminals and thieves are sent by the Empire, deep under ground, to rot... I don't know. What I know is that there are nothing but evil people there, and darkness.

ERIKA
 But the nephil *is* evil. They want to kill us. What choice do we have?

WODE
 What choice do they have?

Wode goes to the wood pile and grabs a log from the bottom. She pushes it in Erika's face.

There's a web attached to the end with a little spider in the center.

WODE (CONT'D)

If I were to chop this block, the spider would have to find a new home. If it came into your home after that, would you kill it?

ERIKA

(confused)
Probably.

WODE

Then you're just like them.

She storms off, back up the hill.

Erika watches her go, upset.

She frowns down at the log and its spiderweb tugging in the breeze.

EXT. VILLAGE COMMONS - AFTERNOON

Ferris and Preiur pore over a map drawn in the sand at their feet. Rocks represent the huts of the village and lines have been drawn to represent the mountainside and the possible locations of invaders.

Preiur squints at the picture.

PREIUR

You should have been an artist.

FERRIS

Don't be stupid.

PREIUR

Seriously. I detect a likeness.

FERRIS

I have a feeling I'm going to regret asking you what you mean.

Preiur blinks at his companion in mock confusion. He points at the map.

PREIUR

The eyes, the sandy hair, the spots..

FERRIS

Alright, alright.

PREIUR

(pointing at a rock)
What's that supposed to be?

FERRIS

That's the cesspit.

They exchange glances then chuckle together.

Behind them, the barbarian slumps against a horse post, his hands tied behind his back. A trail of dried blood runs down his arm among the blue tattoos.

PREIUR

So this is supposed to be east,
next to the mountain peak, right?
We know they won't be coming that
way. That still leaves us pretty
open.

FERRIS

You might say I have an open face.

PREIUR

All right, pay attention if you
want to learn something. That's
why you're here after all. If we
have to defend several square miles
of territory with just three men
and a handful of able peasants,
we'll need to know where they're
coming from.

FERRIS

Sorry.

PREIUR

Let's hope the fact we only found
one scout indicates their numbers
aren't overwhelming. I think we
can thank our illustrious "master"
if that's the case.

FERRIS

(shuddering)

Those magical traps. Ever been
caught in one?

PREIUR

They're effective.

(beat)

You know, ours has to be just as
good.

EXT. LARS'S HUT - AFTERNOON

Erika sways precariously under a stack of wood in her arms that is high enough to obscure her face.

Panting, she deposits it with a clatter against the side of the hut next to a pile of barricade materials: rope, sharpening knives, and shovels. She circles around to the front.

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - AFTERNOON

Erika splashes some of the dirty quenching water from the trough on her face and spits out some grit.

FERRIS (V.O.)
And when it's over?

PREIUR (V.O.)
When it's over we need no longer
pretend to be Candred's fools.

FERRIS (V.O.)
Who's pretending?

PREIUR (V.O.)
(laughing)
He's a buffoon. Hollow and sad.

FERRIS (V.O.)
But he's still a mage, my old
friend.

Erika turns to enter the hut, but stops short at the door:
One of Candred's magical webs covers the entrance.

ERIKA
(calling)
Sister? Father?

INT. CRAMPED COMMON ROOM - DAY

Erika looks through the hole in the wall:

Wode is setting up the table for tonight's meal with candles
and some scraps of hide to cover the meal places. Candred
watches her.

WODE
(sarcastic)
Is the feeling that your eyes are
burrowing into my skull part of the
magic?

CANDRED
It depends on whether you like that
feeling.

Wode scowls and makes for the door.

He catches her.

WODE
Let me go.

CANDRED
It's not safe to go that way.

WODE

I'm not a fool, Candred.

CANDRED

Neither am I.

WODE

A mage is the next best thing. Let me go or I'll call for help.

CANDRED

I've sealed the entrance. They'll never get in.

WODE

Father! Sister! Anyone!

CANDRED

You can't even speak for yourself.
Make Symbol.

With those last words, Wode's voice disappears. She continues moving her mouth, but no sound comes out.

Candred grins.

CANDRED (CONT'D)

See?

Wode stares at him in horror.

CANDRED (CONT'D)

You think I'm a fool. A charlatan? A jester that plays tricks? Now that I've done my tricks, let me show you what magic truly is. Don't be afraid, for fear is like the flame. It consumes you.

INT. LARS'S FORGE - DAY

Erika staggers backward and stumbles over a stool. She looks around wildly for something to wield and grabs the sword from the weapons rack.

ERIKA

I'm coming!

She charges through the entrance to the hut. The web flashes a prism of colors. A torrent of voices explode into Erika's head.

CANDRED'S VOICE (V.O.)

(rapid and jumbled over
onto itself, almost
impossible to make out)

(MORE)

CANDRED'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The intruder walked into the doorway, vengeful perhaps, but foolish. A child of careless wishes. How could she fathom the pain, so young and inexperienced? How would she fathom the guilt when she was gone, dead by all accounts, the victim of a magical web. The victim of shame?

Erika lurches back from the doorway and screams in agony.

She slumps over the anvil, teeth clenched. She holds her head between her hands and twitches in shock. It takes a moment to settle.

She sneaks one look over her shoulder at the web she thought so wondrous before, and shudders.

EXT. RIVER BANK - AFTERNOON

Lars fills a bucket of water from the stream.

Erika approaches frantically. She plants herself in front of her father and offers up the sword.

ERIKA

(in a hoarse whisper)
Help!

LARS

What is it?

ERIKA

The mage is... Candred is...

Lars scowls. He shakes his head, suddenly very old.

LARS

Burn him.

ERIKA

We have to save her!

LARS

I told her to stay away from him like I told you. I told her mages were dangerous. She laughed!

ERIKA

Get the family leaders. We can tear down the hut if we have to. We must do our duty as family!

LARS

What can we do against magic? We are powerless, you and I. No one will help you.

Lars looks at Erika hopelessly. With a growl he puts it from his mind. As if nothing had happened, he fits his barrel of water to one side of a bar with hooks on either end.

ERIKA

What are you doing?

Erika, enraged, brandishes the sword as if to threaten him.

The old man shakes his head.

LARS

We are already caught in his web,
she-wolf. You should put that
sword away; it is part of his
destiny now.

Erika's anger is turning back to panic. She needs an ally.

ERIKA

We have to do *something!*

Lars hoists the bar onto his shoulders. The two full buckets on either end pull the man back and forth. He stumbles then finds his balance.

LARS

You said it yourself. We must do
our duty.

Erika watches him go, disbelieving. She represses tears.

EXT. WILLING VALLEY - AFTERNOON

The tree shadows are lengthening, flickering like bars across the landscape as Erika runs away.

Her breath catches, her tunic catches on a snagging branch, as she stumbles, crying, trying to catch up with the sun.

But the shallow valley is rough terrain. She rushes, half-blinded by the golden tree flowers, the flash of the creek, and the stiff wind.

She trips in a false burrow, twisting her ankle and rolling down the slope of a small hill.

She lies on her back, breathless, dirty, and defeated, but golden in the long sun.

Then a shadow crosses her. It's the shadow of a girl. She smiles, tears in her eyes.

Wode.

She squints harder, then shakes her head. It's not Wode, but a BARBARIAN WOMAN with black tied-back hair and big eyes.

The Woman pulls something from the ground and holds it against Erika's neck: it's the sword.

EXT. CLEARING - EVENING

Erika, tied up, is dragged into the center of a clearing and her hair yanked back. The Barbarian Woman stares down at her, very serious. Thirty or so additional BARBARIANS jeer and spit at her, climbing from around campfires to stare and to hate.

BARBARIAN WOMAN

*Hat hall ew od ith mih? Han mih?
Spi mih?*

One of them picks up a rock and hurls it at Erika. It nearly hits the Woman instead. Another brandishes a war axe.

BARBARIAN WOMAN (CONT'D)

Lements.

Erika starts to say something but it comes out as a terrified moan.

The barbarians stop jeering. Some even look away. One, a particularly HAGGARD BARBARIAN steps forward and utters something in his alien tongue.

HAGGARD BARBARIAN

Ew reth tho nephilium eki mih.

He points to a tree at the edge of the clearing.

EXT. CLEARING - LATER

Erika slumps, tied to the tree. The barbarians watch her and make war preparations -- carving spears, oiling torches, fletching arrows.

When they look away, she pulls against her bonds - sinewy twists of human hair, and looks round for something she can use.

Her eyes fall on her sword, glinting in a rare ray of sunlight from the canopy as a BARBARIAN CHILD, one of the refugees, swings it back and forth, pretending to be a warrior like the others.

The Barbarian Woman stirs, across the clearing, and shouts at him.

BARBARIAN WOMAN

*Yeb lufal; lu reh thoh eide ot eled
word.*

The boy keeps playing and the woman gets up. She goes to him and takes the sword from him.

She doesn't let him go, but holds his arm out. The boy wails as she cuts him, not too deeply. She shows him the bloody sword.

BARBARIAN WOMAN (CONT'D)
Reh lu eide phorrhath?

Then she leaves him there, crying, and brings the sword back with her to the firelight. She tosses it onto the ground.

The boy stares after his mother, eyes red with angry tears. It could be a trick of the fire, but the blade seems to glow red. Rebellion creeps onto his face.

He creeps up and very carefully steals it back.

Instead of returning to his practice tree, the boy makes for Erika, an impudent look in his eyes. He plants himself in front of her.

The boy glances over his shoulder at his mother, then holds the tip of the sword up under Erika's neck and watches Erika try to squirm away. His eyes are full of hate.

BARBARIAN CHILD
(whispering)
Ih. Ateh. Rehh.

He holds his bloody arm up to show Erika. Her pulse quickens at the sight.

The boy pulls the sword back, then starts to hack at the tree. Erika flinches at first, then looks down, amazed, as he frees her. The boy offers her the sword, still ringing from the hard wood, but never stops looking at her with hate.

Erika takes the sword. Precious seconds pass.

BARBARIAN WOMAN
Ih yaid to ot -

She turns her head and sees Erika free, with the sword, standing over their child. She's not the only one.

HAGGARD BARBARIAN
Alkha delvdi bennha!

The camp springs to life as men and women grab their weapons.

Terrified, Erika lurches into the forest, followed close behind by the first of his pursuers and his roaring, gaping mouth full of black teeth.

EXT. VILLAGE COMMONS - EVENING

The captive nephilium's head slams back against the horse post. He cries out miserably, a mouthful of rotting black teeth exposed to the air.

Preiur points with his sword at the map.

PREIUR

Here?

Ferris, still squatting pensively over the plan, shakes his head.

Behind them, peasants erect a barricade around the village of sharpened stakes.

FERRIS

It's no use. Even if he had more than an animal brain he couldn't tell us.

Bitterly, Preiur lets go of the captive nephilium's hair.

PREIUR

I suppose cutting out his tongue would be redundant.

FERRIS

And unpleasant. Have you smelled his breath?

PREIUR

We should send out peasants to scout. His party must be close by now.

FERRIS

You're right, of course. Fetch one for each quadrant and tell them not to dawdle. They're a slothly people.

But Preiur has noticed something in the distance:

Erika, running breathlessly up the hill into the village.

PREIUR

I wouldn't say that.

He points into the distance. Erika clears the ridge, gets through the barricades.

ERIKA

(shouting)

They're coming! From the forest.

FERRIS

What? How far?

Erika, still running, turns to point at the horizon behind her. She makes a whistling noise, except it's not her whistling, but the sound of an arrow shrieking into her shoulder.

Erika staggers backward in front of them, her momentum carrying her to ground on top of Ferris's map.

Ferris has only a moment to look down at the ruined drawing, irritably, before another arrow streaks down from above and clatters uselessly from his armor.

Ferris snatches the arrow from the ground and smirks.

FERRIS (CONT'D)
 (to Erika)
 Huh. Handicap, indeed!

PREIUR
 Archers!

The guards split to the left and right of the horse post, spreading the flank as the clan arrive on the ridge.

Barbarians rattle shields and flails made of skulls as they charge into the village, killing those peasants brave enough to fight and burning huts in their path.

The captive nephilium chained at the horse post grimly watches the battle:

The fight is chaotic. Ferris and Preiur slash open enemy after enemy and, slowly, are overwhelmed. Ferris takes a blow to his knee.

Erika groans, blood pumping from her shoulder into the sand around the rocks and roads of the miniature village. The barbarian glances down at her and their eyes meet.

As the sounds of battle, avalanche-like, roar about them, Erika's eyes, still locked to him, drift closed.

PREIUR (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 (shouting)
 Candred you fool! Where are you?!
 We need you now!

Erika's eyes roll.

Erika mouths the word as it's shouted once more:

PREIUR (CONT'D)
 (shouting)
 Candred!

The mage appears from inside the smithy, half dressed, his dagger protruding in his hand.

He looks at the battle around him, hesitates, then runs away.

Erika sits up, blood oozing from her wound, but possessed.

ERIKA

Can-dred!

PREIUR

(shouting)

Candred!

Painfully, Erika rises. She lifts her sword and raises it even with her wounded arm.

She points it after the fleeing mage.

PREIUR (CONT'D)

Candred, stop!

ERIKA

(spluttering)

Remember, Candred, what you said.
Fear is like the flame. It
consumes you. Isn't that what you
said?!

Flames begin to lick up Erika's sword, as if it were re-entering the forge.

Far off, Candred stops. He turns around slowly and faces Erika, surprise etched on his face. He holds up his dagger as if to shield himself.

Erika's sword roars with fire. Her hand quavers and starts to hiss where she holds it.

The battlefield grows silent. The armies turn to watch.

Then Candred's dagger shrivels like a disintegrating insect and falls from his hands.

Candred looks up from the reduced object with terror. The expression does not last long. Smoke begins to pour from the sockets of his eyes, his mouth, his nose and ears until the mage, gripping his throat, collapses to the ground.

The sword drops from Erika's hand. As it leaves her fingers the light flashes out. Her body follows, not dead, but completely drained.

From among the stunned barbarians:

FRIGHTENED BARBARIAN

Elemant!

The others take up the chant and flee from the village, streaming like water from rocks back into the forest.

Both guards, bloodied and surrounded by ten or twelve bodies, stand dumbfounded in the gap left behind.

The only movement is from the smithy, from where Wode rushes, half dressed and bawling.

She crosses the Commons and kneels next to Erika, who blinks at the sight of her.

WODE

Sister!

She says it to the sky, as if cursing it:

WODE (CONT'D)

Oh! Oh!

ERIKA

I'm sorry, Sister.

The barbarian at the horse post watches them, weak and sick.

The wind, audible again, blows dust onto the bloody map of Willing village.

EXT. VILLAGE COMMONS - MORNING

Erika, battered and exhausted, slumps against the horse-post opposite the captive nephilium. She's been tied there by one red, burned hand and one whole one.

She watches village business from underneath drooping eyelids.

Chimney smoke drifts up from the village huts; men scrape cloth on washboards by the river. It could be a normal day if not for the GRAVEDIGGERS, filthy and tired from hours of work, laboring at the site of last night's battle.

One of the gravediggers, Lars, steps into Erika's view. She smiles through cracked lips.

ERIKA

Father!

Lars stares at Erika very hard.

LARS

(gruffly)

Mage.

ERIKA

No Father, the mage's dead.

Lars shakes his head. He lifts a shaky arm slowly until it points at Erika.

Tears spring into the young woman's eyes.

LARS

No good can ever come of magic.
They say there are always
consequences.

ERIKA

(frightened)

What is to be my fate, Father?

Lars's gaze shifts past Erika to the captive nephilium, who stirs and wakes.

Erika follows his look and the blood drains from her face.

ERIKA (CONT'D)

But you need me! You need me at
the smithy!

LARS

We won't forget you.

(beat)

Here in Willing we learn from our
mistakes.

The life seems to leave Erika. She slumps against her post, identical in pose to the captive nephilium next to her: hopeless and too weak to care.

She watches as Lars turns away and is joined by one of the other gravediggers: Coril. Coril looks at Erika as if she were an alien then, shyly, she takes Lars's hand. They walk away together.

EXT. LARS'S FORGE - MORNING

Ferris, seated on a stool, peels burnt skin from the grip of Erika's sword.

Preiur paces before him.

FERRIS

You will escort the prisoners to
Fort Exile. I'd come with you if
it weren't for this leg.

He massages his wounded knee.

PREIUR

I can manage, my Lord.

FERRIS

(terse)

Hush. We had better not give
ourselves away until we leave the
village, for convenience's sake.

PREIUR

Where will you go, then?

FERRIS

I'll return to Tenet with news of
Candred's death and to deliver
this... gift to the Prince
personally.

He holds the sword up to the light.

PREIUR

I'd say our mission ended well,
wouldn't you?

FERRIS

Yes, it did work out better than I
expected, except...

He favors his knee again.

PREIUR

You'll have worse, *soldier*.

FERRIS

(amused)
That's more like it.

EXT. VILLAGE COMMONS - MORNING

Wode feeds Erika from a bowl of porridge. Erika won't meet
her eyes.

Ferris and Preiur, wearing a tiny crossbow on his belt,
swagger out into center field.

Ferris begins to untie Erika while Preiur moves Wode firmly
aside and holds her back.

WODE

What are you going to do with him?

FERRIS

For the murder of one of the
Empire's mages? He'll be sent to
Exile with the other traitors and
thieves.

Erika bows her head.

Wode groans and struggles to reach her sister. Preiur holds
her at bay.

PREIUR

Don't struggle.
(threateningly)
You've been hurt enough as it is.

They share a glance and Wode backs down.

Ferris hauls Erika over to the barbarian and ties them together. Then he frees the barbarian so that the pair can move, but are linked at the wrists.

FERRIS

Let's go.

PREIUR

(to Wode)

Tell the other peasants to fetch our horses.

Wode turns from them and runs.

EXT. OUTSIDE WILLING VILLAGE - MORNING

A cluster of villagers watch, fearfully, as the two guards hoist Erika and the barbarian up onto a dappled horse, then mount their own.

Preiur canters away, leading the prisoners' horse by a tether. Ferris follows alongside. Then when they reach the road, the pair split up, waving briefly.

Among the villagers stand the Family Heads and Lars and Coril. Coril puts her arm around a depressed Wode as if she were family.

CORIL

Now that they're gone, life will return to normal.

WODE

"They?" Father, Erika saved our village and now you're glad to see her gone?

She shrugs off Coril's arm.

LARS

Erika isn't part of this family, or this village. She's a foreigner now. Worse, an Exile.

WODE

She's been an exile all along.

Wode pushes away from them, and out of the crowd.

Lars turns to Coril for support. She hugs him while he looks down the only road of Willing village where it crumbles into the distant forest, no different than it always has.

LARS

Come, friends. We have duties to perform! Clothes to mend, water to gather, wood to chop.

EXT. MOUNTAIN GLADE - DAY

Ferris chops a log in half with Erika's sword. It rings after the fact, unblemished. Ferris examines the edge, impressed.

He piles the logs up in the shadow of a dewy tree next to his grazing mount. Then he produces some flint and steel from his pocket and lights them aflame.

A spider, in the boughs overhead, watches him through its web.

EXT. FOOTHILLS - DAY

Riding strong, the hooves of Ferris's horse thunder past.

The dust behind him settles before a vista of the forested Willing Mtn. and its cap of perennial snow.

EXT. ROLLING FIELDS - AFTERNOON

Tall plains grass parts before Ferris, riding harder over the hills, crashing through an icy rain.

He spies a thick plume of smoke in the distance, dragging in the rain.

He pulls his mare to and shivers on the spot.

Murmuring to his horse, he spurs it on towards the smoke.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE INN FOR GOOD - EVENING

He dismounts in the mud, slips, and nearly falls onto the half-submerged porch of the Inn for Good, so-called by a stained, heavy sign swinging in the gale.

Other buildings, ramshackle and wooden, loom like shipwrecks over the river-streets.

EXT. THE INN FOR GOOD - COMMON ROOM - EVENING

A few VILLAGERS sit next to the large hearth at wooden tables.

Behind the bar, the OWNER keeps himself warm with a glass of something rich.

Dripping wet, Ferris limps in. He appraises the room, at last settling on the owner.

He approaches the bar and drops a couple of coins there.

FERRIS
Just one night.

The owner raises his eyebrows at the hilt of Ferris's sword - peeking out under his tabard.

The wolf head at its base glints red in the firelight.

Then he pushes the coins back.

OWNER

(loudly)

We follow the *Emperor's* laws here,
my Lord. No charge for royalty.

Ferris follows his glance down at the sword, then covers it with the bottom of his tabard.

FERRIS

You misunderstand. The sword is a
gift for a noble. It's not mine.

He leaves the coins on the bar and hobbles on his bad leg deeper into the inn.

As he goes, the owner glances at a couple of ROUGH MEN by the hearth.

INT. INN ROOM - NIGHT

Ferris tosses and groans in his sleep.

Outside the unkempt room, the lonely howl of a wolf rings in the distance.

EXT. ROAD IN THE WILDERNESS - NIGHT

Erika starts from sleep on the rough ground, sweating and panting. A wolf howls, quite close.

From across a smoldering campfire, Preiur, quite awake, chuckles at her.

PREIUR

You've never seen a wolf, have you?

Erika turns away. Preiur snorts.

ERIKA

I've seen the symbol of Prazac,
Tenet's royal family.

Preiur pulls a badge from inside his cloak: the profile of a wolf inscribed in a circle.

PREIUR

Like this?

Erika frowns, clearly surprised.

PREIUR (CONT'D)
 (pleased)
 I'll show you a real one.

He crawls to the pile of his armor, glittering in the firelight, and extracts the tiny crossbow.

Then he stalks out of the light.

Erika looks enviously at the guard's sword, wrapped in its scabbard near the pile of Preiur's armor. She hauls herself to her feet but can't reach them: her charred hand is chained to the sleeping barbarian's. She tugs at it and winces.

Their horses, tethered to a stunted tree barely visible in the starlight, stamp nervously and snort. Something's got them nervous.

ERIKA
 Shhh...!

Silence, then one of them rears up at a shadow among the shadows. The shadow pulls back.

It skulks to the edge of the light and peers at Erika - a WOLF, its eyes gleaming.

They lock eyes briefly.

Then it seems to hear something, and runs off. The sound of its paws crushing undergrowth is followed quickly by a yelp.

Heavier footsteps herald Preiur. Erika hurries back to her spot, and the guard returns to the camp with the wolf slung over his shoulders.

He grins and tosses down the body with a thump.

BARBARIAN
Jeeyel.

PREIUR
 If that means "dinner" then you're smarter than you seem.

Preiur laughs at him.

Erika watches the dead animal's face and shudders. They both have the same eyes.

INT. INN ROOM - NIGHT

Ferris wakes soundlessly.

He casts about with one hand for his sword.

He finally finds it and squeezes the pommel to reassure himself.

He takes a deep breath, followed by an equally deep silence. In the quiet, he hears something: the faintest whisper, one man to another.

ASSASSIN (O.S.)
For the Empire!

Suddenly, the door bursts open and two ASSASSINS, dressed in black and bandanna'd, storm through.

Ferris, his hand already on his sword, raises it to block the falling cut of one, the ASSASSIN. It slices through the Assassin's blade and sends the tip clattering to the floor.

The second man, SUPPORT, circles around the side of the bed, blocking Ferris's access to the window while the Assassin falls back, gaping at his broken shortsword.

Ferris lurches up, wobbling on his bad leg and turning between them uncertainly. His sword still sings from the first blow.

He lunges at the Support, but the space is cramped and Ferris's sword gets lodged in the slats of the window.

He dodges Support's thrust and yanks the sword out, too far, and stumbles into the Assassin, who floors him with the butt of his weapon. The Assassin holds him down as the Support stoops and stabs him in the shoulder.

He rears back to do it again, but Ferris, scrabbling for something on the floor and -- finding it -- swoops one arm up and jams the severed end of the Assassin's blade into the Support's throat.

The masked man splutters, then collapses. Ferris pulls free and whirls to face the Assassin. Face to face, Ferris's sword clearly outmatches the Assassin and his broken blade.

The Assassin turns and flees through the door.

Ferris closes his eyes. He sighs, weaker than he seemed; he stumbles and grips his bleeding shoulder with his free hand.

Voices creep from down the hall. More assassins, maybe.

He looks around wildly -- at the window, then hacks the slats apart. He gives the pile of armor and his saddlebags on the floor one longing look before pushing through the window into the rain.

EXT. ROAD IN THE WILDERNESS - MORNING

Preiur hasn't slept all night.

He peels some meat off of a wolf bone.

He chews without relish, and stares into the dying campfire.

PREIUR

Sun's up. Time to go. You'll have plenty of time to be idle where you're going.

Erika and the captive nephilium stir.

Preiur offers his bone to Erika, who turns away, disgusted. He shrugs and tosses it down in front of the captive nephilium, who munches on it hungrily.

Professional as he is, quickly gathering together their supplies and stamping out the fire, Preiur still stops to help Erika up.

EXT. BEFORE THE HIGH HOUSE - DAY

Ferris, tattered clothes flapping in the wind, gallops up a grassy hill towards a tall castle keep.

It rises all the steeper against a sprawl of houses and shops between the base of its towers and a river. The dwellings seem to lean against the castle and against each other like toppling dominos arrested by a wall.

He thunders across a drawbridge on the river and up the wide central avenue to the keep.

EXT. THE GATES OF THE HIGH HOUSE - DAY

From Ferris's point of view, the keep seems to grow, taller and taller, bobbing over the gait of his horse as he draws closer.

TOWNSPEOPLE and GUARDS shrink away completely as his horse rears up, whinnying, before the portcullis of the keep.

Then even the tall towers of the castle slip out of sight, even the sun seems to set as an upside-down version of the town comes crashing down on top of it.

Ferris plummets from the saddle. The townspeople and guards creep forward through scattered market stalls and pavilions. They recognize the man before them and rush forward in concern.

INT. FERRIS'S CHAMBERS - TENET - LATER

Ferris looks out of his tower room at all of Tenet. It's a pretty land, with fields and winding roads, and the height of Willing mountain in the distance. Almost fairy-tale, but for the many towns, black like scabs.

The room itself is almost as stunning. Sunlight from the window adds a pattern to the complex carpet and brightens the silk drapes, heavy woods, and paintings of the small room.

Ferris lies in a small four-poster bed with a liveried canopy. The livery is in the profile of a wolf.

Through the doorless entrance totters CALLOUX, old with black-stained hands, carrying a goblet.

Not noticing the young man's wakefulness, Calloux dips a handkerchief in the goblet and begins to mop at Ferris's shoulder with it.

Completing that, he moves up to Ferris's face and notices his open eyes.

He jumps and drops the goblet. It spills all over the floor.

CALLOUX
Oh dear! Oh dear!

He bends over to examine the mess, then straightens back up.

CALLOUX (CONT'D)
Which is not to say, 'oh dear!' because you are well. That is cause for celebration, but I will be flogged.

Ferris scans the room.

FERRIS
Where is my sword, Calloux?

The old man points to a chest by the wall.

CALLOUX
They put it there. But don't get up! You'll stain your feet.
(he points at the goblet)
This is bendarb root with musk.

The old man nods rapidly.

CALLOUX (CONT'D)
Besides, you're injured.

FERRIS
Assassins.

Calloux shrugs.

CALLOUX
Not nearly as good with poison as I am.

He adopts a lordly expression.

FERRIS
 (laughing)
 You're as much a fool as Candred
 was.

CALLOUX
 (raising his eyebrows)
 Was?

FERRIS
 You know..

CALLOUX
 (eager)
 Was it quite a mess?

Ferris peers down at the mess on the floor.

FERRIS
 Well we all make them from time to
 time. It's cleaning up that's
 difficult. You'd better get to it
 unless you want to soil the room
 underneath. You know those stones
 leak down onto the Queen's chambers
 don't you?

CALLOUX
 (a sparkle in his eye)
 From all the way back when you used
 to wet the bed.

Ferris shakes his head, amused, while Calloux busies himself
 on the floor.

A man with fair hair, EMOT PRAZAC, sweeps into the room in
 the robes of royalty. Ferris's expression hardens again.

EMOT
 Little brother!

FERRIS
 Emot.

Emot bows a little.

EMOT
 (imitating him)
 "Ferris."

Emot looks down at Calloux then up at Ferris. He laughs.

EMOT (CONT'D)
 You look better!

FERRIS
 While I serve the fief I am well.

EMOT

Then you must be a traitor.

Ferris looks at him bitterly, but then Emot laughs.

EMOT (CONT'D)

It'll heal. Where are the others?

FERRIS

Captain Preiur's taking some prisoners to Fort Exile.

EMOT

That's a shame. He'll miss the Free Day celebrations. Did Candred go with him, too? That seems excessive.

FERRIS

Candred's dead.

Emot is shocked.

EMOT

Then we lost the village.

FERRIS

(annoyed)

Actually, the Captain and I fought bravely and saved the village.

EMOT

Really? The Captain must have taught you a great deal!

FERRIS

I'm a better swordsman than *you*.

EMOT

I was referring to your bravery.

FERRIS

Ha ha.

EMOT

Are you well - I mean, loyal - enough to come to dinner tonight?

(jibing)

You know how eager we always are to hear about your heroism.

FERRIS

I was thinking about staying in my chambers tonight... will mother be there?

EMOT

She's been spending a lot of nights
in her study. You know her.

(joking)

If she isn't I'll bring you down a
bottle of milk.

FERRIS

Ha ha.

Emot waves an affectionate hand as he goes. Ferris watches
him leave, jealously.

Calloux stands up.

CALLOUX

Your brother is good natured, don't
you think?

Ferris scowls.

CALLOUX (CONT'D)

(pointed)

The Crown Prince has to be.

FERRIS

(annoyed at Calloux)

Thank you Calloux. I think I'll go
down to dinner after all.

INT. BANQUET HALL - TENET - DAY

A splendid arrangement of meats and winter fruit decorates a
long, low table. Tapestries adorn the walls, and NOBLES the
benches. The room bustles with conversation.

At the head sits QUEEN DOROTHEA PRAZAC, a snowflake of a
woman in her 50s. Emot sits at the Queen's right hand.
LIEUTENANT AIMSITY, a beefy, red-faced man at Emot's side
raises his one unscarred eyebrow as Ferris limps into the
hall.

A pair of GUARDS intercede before he can get to the table.

GUARD

Your sword, highness.

Ferris unbuckles his sword and hands it over.

EMOT

Coming to dinner armed, you must
think us enemies.

FERRIS

Forgive my instincts, Brother.

Ferris takes a seat. The Queen squints at him over a pile of
fruit.

AIMSITY

He deserves your pardon, Lords.
After being wounded, you see
shadows even in the flame. I know.

He wiggles his other, scarred-over eyebrow.

FERRIS

And flame even in the shadows.
Thank you, Lieutenant.

AIMSITY

If nothing else, it means the
exercise was a success. This here
is no boy, but a man.

He plants his wine down in front of Ferris.

EMOT

Yes, congratulations brother. A
success. If it were not for poor
Candred...

AIMSITY

Yes, we mustn't forget his
sacrifice.

The Queen exchanges a conspiratorial look with Ferris.

AIMSITY (CONT'D)

I still think the tradition of
service is marvelous. It gives the
royalty a sense of what it's really
like working for the fief.

(nervous)

Not that you aren't normally, of
course.

EMOT

It's hardly fair though, is it?
Not every soldier has a royal
Captain and a mage to protect him.
I remember when I was sent out
during the border rebellions and
there was a whole army between me
and any real action.

FERRIS

(bitter)

Well, you are the Crown Prince.

QUEEN

Precisely. It's our job to keep
you safe because you represent
Tenet itself.

EMOT

If something happened to me, Ferris could always run things.

QUEEN

Ferris doesn't have the same connections you do.

AIMSITY

Besides, Ferris certainly seems to attract his fair share of the usual cutthroats.

FERRIS

They weren't the usual cutthroats. They were from the Empire.

A silence descends. Aimsity blinks. Finally:

EMOT

Are you certain? We've always had a warm relationship with the Emperor.

QUEEN

Your good relations with the Emperor are the only thing between us and a new liege from Escarpa or Valorim. I expect Emperor Hawthorne would love to see something befall his nephew, even as he cried.

(threatening)

Poor Candred was very loyal to the Empire, did you know that?

The rest eat quietly.

EXT. BORDERLAND - VALORIM - DAY

A bridge across a wide river is guarded on either side by a stone guardhouse. A BORDER GUARD climbs down from the top of the nearest one as Preiur and his prisoners approach. He dismounts then helps the others down.

BORDER GUARD

Hold, travelers. What business have you in Valorim?

Preiur eyes the guardhouse.

PREIUR

Finally had some money come out to the border, did you?

The Guard looks over his shoulder at the prisoners.

BORDER GUARD
 More traffic lately. They off to
 Exile then?

Preiur nods and pulls the badge of Tenet from his coat. The
 Guard looks nervous when he sees it.

PREIUR
 There is my authority. I will also
 need supplies.

BORDER GUARD
 We have nothing to spare, uh,
 Captain.

Preiur frowns at the rich guardhouse.

PREIUR
 Truly? I will have a word with
 Dothan about that. He's still in
 charge up at the Fort, no?

The Guard's expression softens.

BORDER GUARD
 You know Captain Sevasant?

INT. GUARDHOUSE STORES - DAY

Lamp held before him, the Border Guard leads Preiur and the
 prisoners down into the basement of the guardhouse. Pillars
 of supplies, mostly dried rations, hay, and replacements for
 wheels, saddles, etc, reach the low ceiling.

PREIUR
 Nothing to spare?

BORDER GUARD
 All these goods have already been
 requisitioned. But for a friend of
 the Captain's...

He pauses and looks up at Preiur, suspiciously.

PREIUR
 ... we served together before I was
 assigned to Tenet. Taught him a
 thing or two.

The Border Guard nods, satisfied.

BORDER GUARD
 He's a good man.

PREIUR
 That was one of them.

The guard pulls a skin of water from a shelf, some hay, and some hardtack.

BORDER GUARD
Couple of barbarians, eh? Do you
want them fed?

Erika gives him an indignant look.

PREIUR
(amused)
Yes.

BORDER GUARD
Valorim had some problems with
natives a while ago. I don't see
why we don't just kill them.

PREIUR
Everyone is equal in the eyes of
the law.

He tosses the hardtack onto the ground in front of the prisoners. Both Erika and the barbarian rush to grab it.

They pause, one on either side of it, and look at each other.

INT. QUEEN'S CHAMBERS - TENET - NIGHT

The Queen's chambers are modest for her rank. Most of the space is taken up by a great bed. One half of the bed has been coated in metal and the shape of a sleeping man in a crown inscribed into the iron sheets and pillows. A memorial.

Ferris and the Queen play a game on a table. The Queen makes a move with one piece, a warrior in white, then rotates the board and makes a move on the other side with a black piece. Then Ferris does the same in reverse.

QUEEN
It's good that you didn't have to
kill him yourself. There was a
always a chance, if you were
caught, of Exile.

This gets Ferris's attention.

FERRIS
Exile?

QUEEN
Increasingly, it seems to be the
price of failure.

FERRIS
Why didn't you tell me?

QUEEN
Because I trust you.

Ferris frowns, trying to work this out.

QUEEN (CONT'D)
I trust your abilities.

FERRIS
But if I had been banished?

QUEEN
Not even I can contradict the
Empire, child. We are all its
vassals.
(sly)
But we must learn to work around
those powers that we cannot resist.

FERRIS
What do you mean?

QUEEN
There is a way out of Exile, but
it's small. Difficult to identify.

FERRIS
Tell me.

His mother looks at him strangely.

FERRIS (CONT'D)
I thought you trusted me, mother.

QUEEN
There is no need to discuss it. No
one goes to Exile of their own free
will. Prisoners. Criminals,
thieves, murderers, inconvenient
vassals. Royalty like us would
have to do something *terrible* to
warrant it.
(suspicious)
Why so curious, my child?

FERRIS
It's just ... the girl who killed
Candred. I can't stop thinking
about her.

QUEEN
(amused)
Oh I see... never mind. Exile has
little relevance in the scheme of
things.

She makes another move. White, then black.

QUEEN (CONT'D)

The only thing that matters right now is your brother's safety.

FERRIS

My brother. Of course.

QUEEN

Without him, Hawthorne would invade Tenet within the year. We would be crushed.

FERRIS

(surprised)

Invade?

QUEEN

Of course. Don't think that your assassins were the first, or that the barbarians in the mountains were there by accident. They were driven there by the Empire to plague us.

FERRIS

But I thought... If you're right... What are we to the whole Empire?

QUEEN

Trouble, it seems..

INT. FERRIS'S CHAMBERS - TENET - NIGHT

Seated at his bedroom window, Ferris watches over the lights of Tenet's towns. He polishes his sword by the light of a lantern; illuminating its other edge is the blue moon.

His wounded arm moves stiffly.

CALLoux (O.S.)

What a fine sword!

Ferris clutches it to him in surprise. He turns to see the old man in the door.

FERRIS

You surprised me, Calloux.

CALLoux

I'm full of surprises.

FERRIS

So which is it today?

CALLoux

(innocent)

I just came to see how the young noble fared.

FERRIS

That *is* a surprise.

CALLoux

(grinning)

And not entirely truthful. I need to ask you a question.

FERRIS

(impatient)

Well?

CALLoux

Candred. He had a dagger, his "ward." What happened to it?

FERRIS

I don't know. He probably lost it in the fight. Is it valuable?

CALLoux

Not as such. Every mage possesses a ward. It's part of him and can't be separated for long. The two parts - mage and ward - will search each other out across the world. Until the mage dies, of course.

FERRIS

Well then there's no problem. Candred's dead. I would have brought proof except...

He trails off, remembering the grotesque way he died.

CALLoux

Since that's the case, his dagger is worth little, but it's still a magical object. I wouldn't mind getting my hands on it in the future, for safekeeping..

FERRIS

What a strange man you are. I'll see what I can do.

Calloux turns to go.

FERRIS (CONT'D)

Oh, Calloux?

CALLoux

My Lord?

FERRIS

What do you know about Exile?

CALLOUX

You never paid attention to your poor old tutor did you? Who was that again?

FERRIS

(laughing)

You're just as forgetful as I am.

CALLOUX

Oh no. I will never forget those long days in the tower. You were a pest.

FERRIS

Humor me. That's an order.

EXT. OUTSIDE FORT EXILE - AFTERNOON

A ridge of sunlight pours into the grand cave of Fort Exile from the wide cave mouth. The opening tapers down past a set of ceremonial battlements built much like Tenet's, but culturally different, with bigger stones and more ceremony:

Mounted over an open portcullis, the pennants of the Empire's vassal states radiate like the points on a crown. They flap sporadically in an unnatural wind that howls out from the cave.

A procession of horses and a handful of CHAINED PRISONERS file through the gate of the Fort. Past it, the cave tapers dramatically downward. The steep decline creates the illusion that they are walking into a sheer wall of earth.

Near the head of the procession Preiur canters on his mount, alert. Alongside, dirty from weeks of travel, Erika and the captive nephilium stumble fearfully. Erika's burnt hand swings at her side.

Behind them: a shout, and commotion. One of the prisoners, a STARVED MAN in rags, breaks from the group.

It isn't long before a mounted DETACHMENT from the battlements sets off after him.

Gasping for breath, the escapee is run down near the cave wall.

The leader of the detachment and handsome Captain of the fort, DOTHAN SEVASANT (30s), dismounts before the huddled man and helps him up.

DOTHAN

What is your crime, friend?

The starved man rests one frightened eye on Dothan's badge: a hawk gripping a rat.

STARVED MAN

Escape from service, my Lord.

Dothan laughs.

DOTHAN

You should try something else. You aren't very good at it. Too good to keep, though. What's the Empire supposed to do with people like you? Kill them?

The starved man looks terrified for a moment.

Dothan laughs again. This is a question he's answered millions of times.

DOTHAN (CONT'D)

I suppose we could. But Emperor Hawthorne is a compassionate man. I've met him. In Exile you can make a new life for yourself -- start fresh maybe? Or maybe you'll get lucky and be the first to escape from the pit. That would be quite an achievement. Although, I expect Exile is probably closer to hell than to fair Valorim.

The starved man whimpers.

Dothan points up at the sun.

DOTHAN (CONT'D)

Take a last look at what you're escaping from, friend.

INT. FORT EXILE - LATER

As the small procession turns past a bend in the cave system, Preiur and his two prisoners glimpse a purple flickering on the tunnel wall ahead. An agitation develops among the horses and the other prisoners.

Preiur's horse is spooked. He has to dismount and hold its reins.

ERIKA

Is all of Exile like this?

PREIUR

This isn't Exile. Wait!

Then, finally, they see it:

THE PORTAL TO EXILE.

The gateway, though locked into the shape of the narrow tunnel like a vertical pool, ripples and seethes with energy.

Arcs of electricity leap from its edges along the scarred rock, reaching along the cave walls like forked snake tongues licking, lashing at the rocks and the prisoners of the procession.

At times the portal seems to clear, and behind it the slope of the cave can be seen tapering into a stony point.

At others, the tunnel seems to widen instead, opening into a vast cavern glowing with blue and green lights and burred with the tiny teeth of stalactites.

From that cavern, a howling wind washes over them and almost drowns out the thin voice of Dothan, who bends against it at the edge of the portal.

DOTHAN

Take one last look, prisoners of the Empire, at what you left behind when you betrayed its will. These earthly horses, fresh air, food from the fields some of you have worked at all your lives...

He points to each example as he speaks.

A GUARD proceeds among them with corn bread and wine, delivering them to the prisoners.

Many of the them are crying. Preiur puts a sympathetic hand on Erika's shoulder.

PREIUR

Can't you see we're giving you a second chance? We're not barbarians, like him.

Preiur nods at the captive nephilium, but the tattooed man could not look more weak, more frightened and small in the purple shadow of the portal.

DOTHAN

Rainwater... flowers... sunlight itself. These things are the essence of life, they exist because there is a natural order to things. By stealing, by killing, or otherwise betraying nature, you have upset this natural order, and the Empire has declared you unworthy of its rewards. No one knows what life must be like deep under the earth. Wild, no doubt.

(MORE)

DOTHAN (CONT'D)

After all, it is full of criminals and who knows what else. But there is a chance that if enough of you band together, nature can be restored even there. If you toil in the image of the Empire, it can be yours again. You will never return to the surface, but you may return to grace. We harbor you no ill-will, pilgrims, only mercy for your lives. Lieutenant..

The Guard grabs the FIRST PRISONER, just ahead of Erika, severs his bonds with a ceremonial knife, and hauls him towards the portal.

FIRST PRISONER

No! Please have pity my Lords!

He continues to blubber, then kicks and screams in the big Guard's grasp. He lets out one last howl before being shoved into the breach. In a flash, he vanishes.

The echoes of his screams linger in the enclosed space.

DOTHAN

(bored)

Next.

Preiur walks Erika gently up to the edge of the portal.

Terrified, Erika looks over her shoulder. From her point of view, Preiur's rocky face softens, unaccustomed to apology.

DOTHAN (CONT'D)

(impatient)

Olle?

Preiur blinks, then his face tightens up again as he shoves Erika forward.

His expression gets smaller, then it slides away, as if she's falling, to be replaced by sheets of actual rock flashing past as she falls, falls, enveloped in a limpid flame. She falls past veins of glittering ore, gems, the crust of the very earth.

She falls farther than an angel would, deep into Exile.

INT. BALLROOM - TENET - NIGHT

A courtly dance. Participants switch partners, swinging them around in their golden apparel. Like comets, they draw close to one another then spin out again, linear and heat-seeking while alone.

Ferris's face is radiant, like the many bright chandeliers and candles of the hall.

He genuinely enjoys himself, swinging a little awkwardly on his lame leg as he spins with a pretty COURTIER.

The Queen watches him slyly from the side.

INT. QUEEN'S CHAMBERS - NIGHT

Ferris helps his mother, the Queen, remove pins and ribbon from her elaborate nest of hair. It's not easy with only one arm and it's an activity he's not accustomed to. They talk through a mirror on the wall.

QUEEN

I have another task for you, my favorite child.

FERRIS

I feel like your servant, mother. What is it you want? The tweezers?

QUEEN

(amused)

I mean I have another *mission* for you.

FERRIS

(stiffening)

My arm is still injured, you know.

QUEEN

This task will not require the use of your arm, only your good manners.

FERRIS

My Lady?

She smiles.

QUEEN

That's better. I want you to travel to Escarpa and woo Flest.

FERRIS

The daughter of King Almon?

QUEEN

I see you know your princesses.

(beat)

I want you to poison her.

Ferris coughs and fumbles with a bit of lace.

QUEEN (CONT'D)

Not very much. Calloux will give you the appropriate dose. I just want her father to be worried and distracted.

FERRIS

Yes, mother.

QUEEN

Calloux will pay visit and heal her with the antidote. He will tell them he used a spell to cure her. The King will be too grateful and distracted to know better, and the Empire will see Calloux as a convenient replacement for Candred.

FERRIS

How do you know?

QUEEN

A powerful mage with stronger connections to Escarpa than to Tenet? Such a person would be the perfect pawn in our court.

FERRIS

But Calloux has no magic.

QUEEN

Precisely. Mages are not to be trusted, dear one. They do not participate in others' destiny; they create their own.

FERRIS

And the princess?

QUEEN

I wasn't lying when I said the Empire would love to see an Escarpan take our throne. Your princess will give us sway with their family should push come to shove. And it will come to shove. Our new court "mage" will see to that.

(whimsical)

Tell me, my favorite child, if you were to inherit Tenet would you be willing to give it up for the Empire itself?

Ferris isn't sure which is the right answer. He avoids her gaze in the mirror. It's cold, but perceptive.

INT. FERRIS'S CHAMBERS - TENET - NIGHT

Ferris lies awake, his bright eyes dimly illuminated by moonlight. He squeezes them closed, but they don't stay that way.

Sighing, he turns on his side, then on his stomach, then his other side so he's facing the glassless portal of his window and the stars through it.

The wind whistles through the gap. It's a hypnotic sound, almost human.

Ferris's eyes drift shut.

The stars begin to fall from the sky, one by one, only to be replaced by others that fall again.

They're not stars, but drops of crystal clear water falling from a cave ceiling.

One such star plummets down, down, splashing on the pale, moon-like face of his mother, the Queen, in her complicated dress, engraved with strange symbols.

She wipes the drop off her cheek like a tear, only for it to be replaced by another.

QUEEN

I have a task for you. A *mission*
for you, my favorite child.

She reveals from under her dress his sword.

On its pommel, the profile of the wolf gleams silver.

She offers it up, flat.

Hands take the blade. Ferris's hands.

She turns her back to him and watches his reflection hesitate in the mirror behind her.

Through the mirror glows Exile as Erika glimpsed it through the portal: caves and rivers and glowing moss.

QUEEN (CONT'D)

Something *terrible*.

Ferris watches in horror as his reflection raises the weapon and brings it down.

INT. FERRIS'S CHAMBERS - TENET - NIGHT

Ferris wakes with a little gasp. He's wrapped himself around the sword. His sheets are streaked with blood.

He shoves the weapon from his bed with a cry. It hits the stone floor and the metal rings out.

FALL TO BLACK.