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Keys of War

Clay Carter Weill

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, cweill@mindspring.com

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KEYS OF WAR

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
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Master of Fine Arts

in

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by

Clay Weill

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ABSTRACT

At the dawn of time the gods created heaven and earth. The creator of the moon joined with the creator of the sun and together they produced the first Empress. She is the embodiment of all that is good and holy. She is the spiritual guide to all the tribes of man.

The tribes are ruled by men. When one man, Baron Stier, rises above the others he is crowned Archduke. He rules in the Empress's name and his dynasty last for half a millennia. Upon the discovery of the land beyond the sacred islands the dynasty falls. And tribes enter into a period of civil war.

The civil wars represent an unstable time. Barons of the tribes fight among themselves for generations with no real gain. But one day through strong virtue and miraculous fortune young Indar finds the strength to unify a nation. This is the second dynasty. His first order is to strip the people of their weapons. His second order is to redistribute the land so the tribes closest to him are the tribes that are the most loyal to him. It is a bold plan, but it is the order that sews the seeds of revolution. The anger of the disenfranchised smolders for two hundred years.

Because the tribes are sealed off from the outside world a strong and popular black market arises. During a certain illegal transaction Baron Reisht comes to possess a flashlight. It is a technology that is so far beyond anything he has seen, he becomes afraid. In a rare and

special moment, something akin to genius, he understands that his country, his home, is in grave danger. The creators of this technology could conquer the tribes at their leisure. Baron Reisht will not let that happen.

The Baron, with unholy determination, marshals his forces and brings to the people he intends to protect destruction on an order they have never before seen. But he is successful. He captures the throne and establishes the third dynasty. On the day of his triumph his greatest fears come true.

KEYS OF WAR

FADE IN:

EXT. SOLAR SYSTEM --DAY

SPACE

Planets revolve around a sun in simple silence.

A blue one is closest.

PLANET

The blue dissolves into details. First hazy gray weather systems roll across brown and green continents. Then, as you fall into the atmosphere individual clouds, like giant pieces of spun cotton, come into focus.

The rushing sound of the wind you might expect is absent. The only sound is the voice of the EMPRESS.

EMPRESS V.O.

My lineage can be traced back in an unbroken line for three millennia. My Father of ages past created the sun, my Mother the moon. I am the embodiment of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness to fifteen million people. I am nineteen.

Near the surface of the planet your trajectory shifts. No longer falling, you fly across the blue green sea.

ISLANDS

A cluster many miles off the nearest continent.

EMPRESS V.O.

I am the conduit between the vulgar and the divine. I am the land, the country, the people. I am not a god, but I am worshipped. I am alone.

MOUNTAINS

Jagged snow capped peaks, too tall for mortals, reach towards the heavens. You fly over them as effortlessly as a child falls asleep.

VALLEY

Green and lush, the land over the Mountains is cut many times, by clear running streams. FARMERS cultivating the fields take no notice of your passing.

EMPRESS V.O.

Rapture. Obsession. Compassion.
These are the mighty words I hear
from many. I would rather they be
said by the one. I must conceive.
Will I be the first, the last, to be
barren?

DESERT

The tall grass fades to brush and then to sand. There is life here, but it is not human.

CITY

Far beyond the desert is the definition of urban sprawl. Houses of wood and stone expand to consume everything around them. They are dominated however, by the only building over two stories tall.

THE CASTLE

Separated from the city by a large brown river, The Castle sits on its own small island. The bridges that gracefully connect the people to this seat of power are all on fire.

EMPRESS V.O.

Now there is war. Thousands are
dead. Thousands more may die. I
don't know what the future holds, and
I am afraid.

EXT. CASTLE --DAY

On the highest tower, an overweight, balding MAN watches. Signified by the blue robes and golden chain of his office, he is the Archduke DARIN and he is watching a battle.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

In the gloom beneath the Castle two armies attempt to destroy one another.

The scene is chaos. The noise is scary.

BODIES, like hulking shadows, twist in a frenetic orgy of violence. At first it is difficult to even make out fists and weapons. But as you acclimate to the scene snapshots become clear.

A YOUNG MAN in poorly fitting purple armor pours powder into the barrel of his rifle.

Before he can fire he is overwhelmed by bodies and fists.

A better prepared WARRIOR, wearing black and gold armor, emerges alone from a bloody scrum. Missing his left eye he examines his mangled and useless hands with his right. But at least he is alive.

A flash of light in the center of the field draws your attention.

It is sunlight shining on a SWORD. The Sword belongs to a HORSEMAN, who screams as he kills those who oppose him.

Surrounded by men who can do little more than tug at his feet the Sword becomes an extension of the Man. It dives into a sea of flesh, cuts through to the bone, and returns again above the heads of the humans perfectly clean.

The horse rears back and kicks. The rider finds himself in a moment of calm. This is when time stops.

It is as if God has taken a picture.

Drops of blood hang in the air. Life lingers in the dying. Bullets are frozen in space.

MALE VOICE OVER
I was born in fire.

You move towards the voice. You move towards the Horseman.

MALE VOICE OVER
Forged with sweat.

But it is not the Horseman you hear.

MALE VOICE OVER
Sharpened with blood.

It is the Sword.

SWORD V.O.
And polished with tears.

INT. WORKSHOP --NIGHT

SUPER: TWO HUNDRED YEARS BEFORE THE BATTLE

The hands of the CREATOR are callused to the point where he can touch hot metal and not get burned.

Still, he uses tongs to pull a hunk of glowing red metal out of a fire.

CREATOR
People will think it is strange, that
I create a sword, a tool of anger and
violence, to commemorate my marriage.

He shapes the metal between a hammer and anvil.

CREATOR
But, whatever your fate, remember
your creation is an act of joy.

Steam escapes as the metal is set into a wooden mold that has been filled with water. A top is fastened and the Creator pours molten metal into the mold.

CREATOR
And that above all else makes you
unique.

The Creator turns over a hourglass and leaves the workshop.

Water vapor rises out of the mold creating a thick curtain of steam.

INT. WORKSHOP --NIGHT

The hourglass is nearly empty when the Creator returns. He cracks open the mold and pulls out a silver blade that is so bright in the reflected firelight it is painful to look at.

The Creator attaches a black handle with a yellow sash to the blade and tests the balance of the weapon.

CREATOR
Absolutely perfect.

In a single motion, with no visible effort, he slices through the sturdy mold.

CREATOR

There will never be another.

INT. COUNCIL CHAMBER --NIGHT

The Creator sits at the head of a long table. To his left are his THREE top ADVISORS. To his right is his MASTER Swordsman, Field Commander of the army, and in an unusual move, not in line with tradition, his WIFE.

The Creator polishes the Sword while he listens.

ADVISOR ONE

More farmers flood into the city everyday.

ADVISOR TWO

The rumors cannot be true. Camdon is too old to lead men into battle.

ADVISOR ONE

His son Indar is not.

MASTER

That pup.

WIFE

We cannot afford to hope the farmers are exaggerating. We must assume the enemy is coming.

ADVISOR THREE

A trade embargo. Camdon, Indar whomever, cannot fight long without iron.

WIFE

It is too late for that. No one would begin an invasion without being prepared.

ADVISOR TWO

A letter of protest to the Empress?

WIFE

A letter of protest? Let's be clear, Indar seeks absolute power. He will not rest until he is Archduke.

MASTER

No one has claimed the blue robe for twenty generations. It cannot be done. The Barons of the realm will not stand for it.

WIFE

It is a difficult thing to unify a nation. But I think he is closer than anyone realizes. This morning we learned Kema joined his banner.

MASTER

That old war dog. I've never known him to avoid a fight.

ADVISOR TWO

My lord, you are not the last Baron with an army big enough to stop him. It does not have to be our responsibility.

ADVISOR THREE

We could always join him.

WIFE

That is a possibility, though we would ally ourselves with former slave traders.

MASTER

Slavery has been outlawed for over two hundred years. The men we are facing do not carry the sins of their fathers.

ADVISOR ONE

I fear total war will be devastating. If we were to be on the wrong side of this conflict we will be destroyed, our history will be erased.

ADVISOR TWO

Our lineage forgotten.

MASTER

We will never ascend the great chain.

WIFE

How do you suggest we proceed?

ADVISOR ONE

Strict neutrality seems appropriate.

The Creator continues to polish the Sword.

SWORD

We could fight them.

He is the only one who hears.

CREATOR

We will prepare to defend ourselves.

The Master places a musket on the table. The Creator looks at it without letting go of his precious Sword.

MASTER

Camdon's friends from the continent have given him this. It reportedly shouts and kills at a great distance.

SWORD

I've yet to give you a reason to trust me. But, if you allow me I will lead you to greatness.

The Creator hands the Sword to the Master hilt first.

CREATOR

Courage, my friends, is our greatest weapon.

Bowed up with fresh confidence, the Master rises.

MASTER

On your word, my lord, the blood of our enemies will cut a new path to the sea.

CREATOR

The word is given.

EXT. FIELD --DAY

The Master, on horseback, trots out in front of what he considers to be a large ARMY.

He surveys his men. All are in yellow leather armor. All carry swords. All have the hard weathered look of veteran soldiers.

On the opposite side of the field a PURPLE ARMY arrives in crisp formation. Their number is less than half of the Yellow army.

MASTER

To ascend the great chain, gentlemen,
how you lived matters little compared
to how you die.

The Master heads towards the enemy. His army follows at a dead sprint.

Listening to the heavy breathing and squeaking armor of the men around him the Master adjusts his speed.

On the other side of the field, INDAR doesn't look like he is old enough to shave, but he is cruel enough to command the respect of grown men.

Indar raises his hand in a silent signal. The army, like a lapping wave rolling on to a beach, limbers their muskets.

The men in Yellow ready their swords. The poor devils have no idea what's coming.

Another signal from Indar and men in Purple take aim. Sunlight gleaming off the muskets almost belies the fact that this is really, really unfair.

Halfway across the field the Yellow army lets out a battle cry that might have been terrifying if it hadn't been swallowed up in smoke and thunder.

The only thing the Master is aware of is the *THUNK* that killed a MAN near him. He stops his horse.

SWORD

You must go on. We are almost there.
Without you, your men will fail.

MASTER

It is some kind of sorcery. A trick.

SWORD

No. You must lead. There is no other alternative.

MASTER

Retreat!

The smoke drifts away.

A new wave of fire. A new round of agony.

A MAN spins like a top, flinging blood on those around him. ANOTHER can only watch in abject terror as his FRIEND'S head explodes.

The Master turns his horse around and gallops for home. The Yellow army, which has not yet been destroyed, stops the advance in confusion.

Even as they retreat more holes appear in their line.

The screams of the wounded haunt us all.

INT. COUNCIL CHAMBER --DAY

The Creator sits slumped in his chair alone with his thoughts.

Only exhaustion keeps the Master from panic when he enters.

CREATOR

What happened?

The Master opens his mouth, but no words come out.

The Creator crosses the room, and pulls out a chair. The Master passes over the Sword without even thinking and sits down.

CREATOR

Commander, I need your report.

SWORD

He quit the field. Abandoned his men.

The Creator looks sternly upon his friend.

MASTER

There was smoke and this noise....

The Creator's Wife runs into the room.

WIFE

Indar is coming.

A shot is heard in the distance. Screams of a panicked mob quickly follow.

The Master cannot bear to look the Creator in the eye.

MASTER

What will we do?

SWORD

All he can hope for now is the chance to erase his shame before he dies.

The Creator places a dented and rusted sword in the Master's lap.

CREATOR

You will do what you can to cover our escape.

The Master takes up the tarnished blade and stands.

MASTER

Yes, my lord.

The Creator grabs his Wife by the arm and hurries her out a hidden door in the back of the room.

They are gone only a second when the front door is kicked in.

Framed by the doorway Indar appears larger than he is. His identical TWIN bodyguards hover near him as he strides into the room.

INDAR

Where is the Baron?

The Master strikes out at the boy, but is gunned down before he gets within five feet.

INDAR

Search the hills. I want his head.

EXT. VILLAGE --DAY

The Creator and his Wife emerge onto a street that is in the midst of a riot.

PEOPLE and animals run over each other in a vain attempt to escape the invading army.

SOLDIERS with filthy hands taunt mothers as they drag shrill shrieking daughters into dark alleys.

The Creator turns to his Wife and sees a mask of fear. He takes her by the hand.

She nods towards several SOLDIERS hacking their way through the crowd towards them.

CREATOR

Meet me by our tree. It will be calm there.

She doesn't move.

CREATOR

You can do this. I promise I'll be there. This is not the end.

She hugs him fiercely and steps into the crowd.

The Creator pulls on the hood of his cloak and turns in the opposite direction.

SWORD

They have seen her. You must kill them. You must kill them all.

The Creator turns around, and sure enough the Soldiers are making their way towards his Wife.

Without fear the Creator dives headlong at his enemies. They are surprised.

The Creator uses his advantage to kick ONE MAN in the chest knocking him under a horse and stab the SECOND MAN in the heart. The THIRD MAN, however, has time to recover.

The Creator is run through and pinned to the wall behind him a foot and half off the ground.

In a last, desperate act of will he plants the Sword in the side of his killer.

The Third Man weak from the blow can only paw at the Sword jammed between his ribs.

SWORD

It will be all right. It's only life after all.

He collapses to the ground. The limp body of the Creator hangs over him. Blood squirts out of his wound and over the Sword in time with his weakening heart beat.

EXT. VILLAGE --DAY

The riot is over.

Bodies line the street. Including the still suspended body of the Creator and the three men he killed.

A half dozen Purple Clad Soldiers make their way through the village. They pay little heed to the fly infested carrion around them.

A MURDERER, hardly more than a lump of dark clothing, crawls through the blood and the shit to each rotting body. A gnarled and hairy hand appears out of the lump, strips each body of valuables, and creeps to the next.

The hand almost passes over the Sword, thinking it ordinary, but pauses. It dislodges the Sword from the sticky remains of the soldier and all the blood immediately drips away.

SWORD

What kind of soldier are you?

The lump stands. All features except the hand are hidden within the folds and the deep hood of the dark cloak. The Sword is tucked safely away in a large sleeve.

MURDERER

I am not a soldier. I am an assassin.

EXT. STREET --NIGHT

A new town that has more life and business than the village.

The Murderer stands in the shadows across the street from a well lit tavern. Only the silver glint of the Sword betrays their presence.

They watch PROSTITUTES hock their wares near the door. All the women of the night wear masks to hide their identity. Some are simple, others are ornate; all cover the lips and eyes of the women wearing them.

One PROSTITUTE receives the lion's share of attention from the Murderer in the shadows. She is tall, has ample curves, round hips, and striking red hair.

An awkward teenage BOY approaches her with his money in his hand.

She takes the money and leads him inside the tavern.

The Murderer strides across the street and down an alley between the tavern and the building next door.

EXT. ALLEY --NIGHT

The auburn haired Prostitute and her client are visible in a second story window until she draws the curtains.

The Murderer climbs up empty barrels and discarded crates to the window and uses the Sword to pry it open.

PROSTITUTE O.S.

Come on now. You can do it. That's
it. There you go. You did it.

INT. BEDROOM --NIGHT

The Boy sits on top of the Prostitute smiling, very proud of himself.

The Sword comes out of his chest throwing blood all over the woman underneath. His body is discarded near the door. His smile forever frozen on his face.

The shocked Prostitute doesn't even scream as the Murderer straddles her naked body and positions the Sword over her heart.

SWORD

Don't do this. Not again.

MURDERER

Shut up.

INT. TAVERN --NIGHT

Blood leaks under the door into the hallway.

A WOMAN being carried up the stairs is the first to see it. She screams.

TWO SOLDIERS IN RED ARMOR climb the stairs four at a time. They are not carrying weapons.

INT. BEDROOM --NIGHT

The door explodes inwards startling the Murderer.

The FIRST SOLDIER in the room trips over the Boy's body giving the Murderer a chance to escape out the window.

EXT. ALLEY --NIGHT

By the time the Soldiers climb out the window the Murderer is half way down the alley. The dark cloak and great speed are both advantages over armor and strength.

The Soldiers climb down to give chase but it is too late. The Murderer is gone.

KEMA O.S.

What passes here!

KEMA, 50, wears a robe that matches the red of his soldier's armor. He is followed by FOUR ADVISORS.

The Soldiers kneel in front of him.

FIRST RED SOLDIER

Murder sir. Another whore and a boy.

KEMA

The new Archduke will be here in two days. His secret police are probably already here. You will not embarrass me.

SECOND RED SOLDIER
There is something else my lord.

The First Soldier shoots his partner a look that says "SHUT UP", but the damage is done.

KEMA
Yes?

FIRST RED SOLDIER
The killer had a sword.

KEMA
All the swords were confiscated and then destroyed.

FIRST RED SOLDIER
Yes, my lord.

KEMA
It was his Majesty's first order as Archduke.

FIRST RED SOLDIER
Yes, my lord.

KEMA
What am I going to say to him when he accuses me of planning a revolution?

Silence.

KEMA
What do you intend to do?

FIRST RED SOLDIER
Seal the city. Search every house for the sword.

KEMA
There are five dead women who hope and demand this plan of yours works.

Kema stares his subordinate down. There is only one acceptable response.

FIRST RED SOLDIER
Yes, my lord.

Kema storms off, followed by his entourage.

Above the Soldiers, hiding on the roof, the Murderer and the Sword watch.

SWORD

You will be captured.

MURDERER

If they capture me they will destroy you.

SWORD

So be it. There is no honor in what you do.

MURDERER

I do not need honor! I need....

SWORD

Yes?

MURDERER

Satisfaction.

The Murderer walks to the other end of the roof.

MURDERER

This Soldier will not stop us. No one will ever stop us. You will bear witness for eternity.

SWORD

Nothing is forever.

KILLING MONTAGE BEGINS

A mask is ripped off of a prostitute. And the girl underneath cries.

Blood drips from a fragile, lifeless, hand.

The Sword draws a line of blood from a flat and perfect midriff.

A voluptuous, naked woman stands unafraid as the sword slices through her middle only to be stopped by her spine.

END MONTAGE

INT. BARN --DAY

SOLDIERS in Purple, not Red, crash through the door.

Barrels of water are kicked over. Crates are destroyed. And neatly stacked bales of hay are spread over the floor.

The Soldiers are searching for the Murderer building by building. They are about to leave this one when the Sword drops out of the rafters.

The Murderer hides above the fallen weapon. The Soldiers, hesitate when they see her, because the killer is a woman.

Relying on their training the Soldiers quickly regain their sense and pull down the biting kicking creature.

She is the most beautiful woman of all time. Perfect in every way except for the feral scowl on her face.

And her deformed and discolored right hand.

The Soldiers bind her arms and legs, confiscate the Sword, and carry them both out of the barn.

INT. AUDIENCE CHAMBER --DAY

At the moment the room that was designed to hold a thousand people can barely contain the egos of two men.

Indar and Kema.

The FIRST PURPLE SOLDIER enters silently with the Murderer and the Sword. He waits at attention.

INDAR

I do not want that woman or her daughters in my house. Why must I tolerate the Empress at all?

KEMA

It is tradition. You are the Archduke. Now you must act like it.

INDAR

I do not need to listen to you anymore.

Kema backhands the boy in front of him. Indar may be the absolute ruler of the land, but he is still afraid of Kema.

KEMA

She is loved. She will help you to become loved.

INDAR

I am the Archduke. My compassion for the people will be clear as I rule. I do not need this woman.

KEMA

They love this woman precisely because she wields no power. We have the power. She does not tax the people. We tax the people. She does not enforce the laws. We rule in her name. But she must live in your household!

Indar wipes blood from his lip.

KEMA

I gave you everything. Don't throw it away. Seal the country. Protect the Empress. And enjoy the life of a Prince.

INDAR

Your actions were dictated by your hatred of my father. Do not pretend you care about me. I love these people, this country. They will love me back.

KEMA

To rule with justice, we must rule with fear. Understand that. And understand how the Empress can help you.

Indar doesn't like what he is hearing. He turns his attention to the Soldier at the door.

The girl is tossed into the center of room. She tumbles across the floor unable to use her bound hands to break her fall.

INDAR

This is the creature who kills your women?

KEMA

It would appear so.

INDAR

Take her to my quarters and prepare her.

A wanton grin betrays his face. This is not a reprieve for the killer.

FIRST PURPLE SOLDIER

And this my lord.

He holds up the Sword.

INDAR

Dispose of it.

FIRST PURPLE SOLDIER

But....

INDAR

It is a sword, they are forbidden.

The Soldier bows his head.

FIRST PURPLE SOLDIER

Yes, my lord.

The soldier leaves.

KEMA

The revelers will be here soon.
Follow the plan. Obey my orders and
I will grant your every wish.

Kema leaves.

INDAR

I wish you would die.

EXT. CASTLE --DAY

The current incarnation of the EMPRESS is a woman, a Lady, of advancing years. Her kind eyes and soft wrinkles betray a certain mischief that tells you she is still young at heart.

She is walking, enjoying the afternoon sun, accompanied by her Daughter, Granddaughter and her new born Great-Granddaughter.

The First Purple Soldier stands in front of a fire holding the Sword, hesitant to throw it in.

EMPRESS

Warm day for a fire.

The Soldier turns, sees the Empress and her family, and kneels.

FIRST PURPLE SOLDIER

I am ordered to destroy this weapon my lady. But if the fire is offensive to you I will douse it immediately.

EMPRESS

No.

Her eye catches the Sword's luminous brilliance. She holds out her hand and the Soldier passes over the weapon.

SWORD

Hello my lady. How may I serve you?

EMPRESS

(TO THE SOLDIER)

Your task is complete.

FIRST PURPLE SOLDIER

Your will, Empress.

INT. AUDIENCE CHAMBER --DAY

Indar sits in the center of the hall, which is now full of the PEOPLE affluent enough to get in. Kema sits to his right. In between them, on a raised dais, is a white throne.

Kema signals the TRUMPETER and the music begins.

The Empress emerges in white robes. When the music stops everyone in the room bows in reverent silence. When she has taken her seat the people erupt in cheers that threaten to shake the room to pieces.

Indar raises his hand for silence, but it has no effect.

He shouts above the crowd and the cheers die down.

INDAR

My lady, I have a gift.

He signals a Soldier who steps forward with a large scroll. It is a map of the country.

INDAR

After five hundred years of strife I present you with a unified nation.

Cheers go up, but not as loud or as enthusiastic as those for the Empress.

INDAR

With your blessing, I who brought order and peace will rule in your name.

EMPRESS

My Dread Lord, I ask that you keep the realm and my people safe and free from war.

INDAR

I humbly ask that you and your daughter and your granddaughter and your great-granddaughter live with me under my care.

EMPRESS

On behalf of my family and my people I accept.

The place goes nuts.

Indar turns his attention to Kema.

INDAR

My most loyal Baron Kema, you are needed for a grave and dangerous assignment.

Surprise not quite stifled.

KEMA

Yes, my lord.

INDAR

As you know many of the false Barons have escaped to the Outer Keys. In the interest of The Empress' request to preserve the peace, I need you to put down the rebellion forming there. Once you have done so consider yourself my regent.

KEMA

And my family's holding here, what of them?

INDAR

I will make sure they are managed properly.

Kema can only bow.

KEMA

Yes, my lord.

EMPRESS

Perhaps, my lord, a prize to help the Baron on his mission.

The Empress' daughter passes her the Sword. The Empress passes it to the kow-towing Kema.

He accepts her gift only because he knows it will anger Indar.

Both men take their seats next to the Empress and the revelers enter behind a ball of fire and a puff of smoke. Musicians and Acrobats fill the hall.

EXT. DIRT ROAD --DAY

Kema rides at the head of long column of red SOLDIERS. His pre-adolescent son LORUS rides next to him.

The column is riding slowly, uncomfortable with the rugged path.

Kema swats at bugs ineffectually. Lorus inspects the Sword.

LORUS

How did Lord Indar know of the rebellion father?

KEMA

There is no rebellion. The Archduke fabricated an excuse to move us as far away from his throne as possible.

LORUS

But aren't we loyal to him, father?

KEMA

He has made his seat of power the city, Selawhy. The lands bordering Indar's are governed by those who have blood ties to the throne. The outer rim of the mainland, including the land our family has ruled for ten generations was given to Barons whom Indar considers loyal. The rest of us have been sent to the Outer Keys or destroyed.

The road comes to an end at a high bank overlooking a beach. There is a dock not far away.

Kema calls out over his shoulder.

KEMA

Captain!

Kema returns his attention to his son.

KEMA

Placing his enemies as far away as he can affords Indar maximum protection. An army would have to fight through thousands of fortified troops to even reach Indar's homeland. But, there is a flaw in his design. Can you tell me what it is?

The CAPTAIN rides up to Kema and salutes.

CAPTAIN

Yes, sir!

KEMA

Captain, I want the boats stocked,
packed and loaded in two hours. We
sail on the evening tide.

CAPTAIN

Yes, sir!

Kema turns back to his son, who is deep in thought and staring
at his reflection in the Sword.

Kema waits patiently for the answer.

SWORD

It is the same reason your father
keeps your bedroom next to his.

LORUS

By placing his enemies so far away he
cannot watch what they are doing.

Kema's stern face splits with a smile as he ruffles his son's
hair.

KEMA

That's right. That is exactly right.

Lorus proud of himself hands back the Sword.

LORUS

May I play in the water?

Kema sees the children of his men bravely fighting the waves.

KEMA

Yes, but don't tell your Mother.

The child is halfway to the water by the time his father is
finished speaking. Kema smiles and sheaths the Sword.

KEMA

And be careful. There are dangers
here that do not exist in the city.

INT. CABIN --NIGHT

It is dark and raining.

Lightening brightly illuminates the room, but then leaves you blind as thunder crashes over head.

The door hangs open on one hinge.

The Sword is taken down from over the fireplace.

Kema is silhouetted in the door frame.

Lorus and his MOTHER wait.

Kema turns his back to the door.

KEMA

Must have been the storm.

MOTHER

You're sure the cannibals have not returned.

Kema nods.

KEMA

Their kind are gone forever.

A four legged beast, not unlike a large wolf but with more teeth, tackles Kema and tears flesh from his chest and legs.

Kema screams and tries to wiggle free, but he is trapped under the great weight of the animal.

Lorus's Mother is in shock, which is why she doesn't move when another animal pounces on her and settles in for dinner.

Lorus runs. He grabs the Sword from where it slid across the floor and turns around to face a third beast.

This one is smaller and has not yet learned how to kill. It watches the small child with yellow eyes.

SWORD

Steady. I will help you.

Moving on pure instinct Lorus steps backwards and trips on the hearth. As the animal jumps it impales itself on the Sword.

SWORD

Run child. Run.

Lorus scrambles to his feet, grabs the Sword, and runs out the back of the cabin.

EXT. FOREST --NIGHT

The storm isn't strong enough to drown out the screams of Lorus's parents being eaten as he runs away.

He runs through the brush. Sharp branches rip away at his exposed skin. The sound of his parents ring in his ears or in his imagination.

Lighting flashes.

Thunder explodes.

He falls down crying, but is too scared to be still.

Rain pelts his body stinging his eyes making it hard to see. There is something in the brush just beyond.

He pitifully raises the Sword.

An ARCHER rises out of the bushes and draws a bead.

Lorus closes his eyes.

The Archer lets fly...

And catches the beast in mid-pounce, inches away from the small, trembling boy.

Lorus passes out into the arms of the large Archer.

INT. CABIN --NIGHT

The Archer opens the door and walks into the room with Lorus in his arms and the dressed beast over his shoulder.

He places the small child on a sleeping mat near the fire.

In the cherry glow of the room his yellow leather armor appears faded, but strong.

He knocks on a bedroom door.

The Creator's Wife emerges. The Archer presents her with the Sword and motions to the boy.

WIFE

Oh my. Look what you have found.

SWORD

It has been a struggle, but I have returned to you.

The Wife sits next to the sleeping child and strokes his head. He awakes and throws his arms around her and sobs with huge racking convolutions.

She lets him weep and can think of nothing to say.

INT. BASEMENT --NIGHT

Smoldering coals in braziers around the room are the only light.

Twenty people in ceremonial robes of various colors face the Wife who stands behind the table holding the Sword.

Lorus, who has grown six inches and put on twenty pounds, seems more like the man he will be than boy he was.

The CROWD parts and he steps into the dim light with a lamb that has been dyed blue.

LORUS

Mother of my heart, now at the dawn of our third year in exile I ask, is it time to revisit those who have wronged us.

CROWD AS ONE

Is it time?

WIFE

No. The time has not yet come.

Lorus places the sacrifice on the table.

Two MEN step forward and hold down the mewling lamb.

The Wife raises the Sword, tears in her eyes.

WIFE

We swear to never forget.

The mewling stops.

SWORD

Patience Lady. Nothing is forever.

The smoldering coals glow slightly brighter.

EXT. FIELD --DAY

You have returned to the battle.

You sweep in again over the men frozen in time. The Sword, bright as ever, is held tightly by the Horseman in red armor.

Beyond them, however, closer to the castle, in the dark shadows of the tallest tower VASH kneels on the chest of his ENEMY. His knife is half way through the Man's throat.

VASH V.O.

I am the Captain of his Majesty's secret police. I am known by many names. You may call me Vash.

EXT. DOCK --NIGHT

SUPER: THREE YEARS BEFORE THE BATTLE

Under the cover of darkness a DOZEN THIEVES working in carefully controlled coordination climb aboard the lone ocean going vessel in port.

EXT. ROOF --NIGHT

The city spreads out in a mosaic of brick and light behind Vash, who dressed in black, casually watches the robbery. FOUR BLUE SOLDIERS are with him.

EXT. SHIP --NIGHT

A door to the hold opens from the inside.

The Thieves push three large crates down the gang plank. They are efficient and brazen.

EXT. ROOF --NIGHT

The Soldiers silently grip their weapons, waiting for the call to action.

VASH

Try to leave some of them alive for questioning. Be careful, they're not going to make it easy for you.

Vash waits until the Thieves reach the dock.

VASH

Let's go.

He nimbly jumps off the roof and lands in the street. His Soldiers follow.

EXT. STREET --NIGHT

The five men move quickly through the coal dark streets making less noise than their shadows hitting the wall. They are careful to avoid the small islands of light that provide the innocent refuge from the city.

As a single unit the Soldiers pull war hammers out of holsters worn around the waist. Vash limbers a staff he had slung over his shoulder.

At the first intersection Vash signals, two men break off and head down a side street. He signals again and two more turn a block later.

EXT. DOCK --NIGHT

All five men emerge onto the wharf at the same time, each covering a different exit.

The Thieves scatter like so many cockroaches, but find they have no where to go.

War hammers, which are rubber or wooden mallets atop short metal handles are incredibly good at crushing bones and damaging organs; especially in the hands of trained soldiers.

Vash's soldiers are very well trained.

In less than two minutes all twelve Thieves lie on the ground, while Vash and his men are barely breathing hard.

FIRST BLUE SOLDIER

Not exactly well trained soldiers.

VASH

That is not their purpose.

Vash hoists the nearest body up off the ground only to find the man limp and foam dripping out of his mouth.

VASH
Suicide capsules!

Without being told the Soldiers reach for the nearest Thief with the intention of preventing them from swallowing by any means necessary.

SECOND BLUE SOLDIER
This one is alive.

VASH
Hold him.

The First and Second Soldier pin the THIEF to a wall. Vash produces a knife and a wet stone. He approaches his captive slowly.

Vash looks at him the way a cobra looks at a bird as he scrapes the blade back and forth across the stone. Nothing else happens for several seconds while Vash lets the Thief use his imagination.

VASH
This, gentlemen, is the Black Ship.
It is the only boat that is allowed
here from the continent. It contains
treasures untold and dangers
unnumbered.

FIRST BLUE SOLDIER
I thought the Black Ship was a myth.

VASH
Now you know.

SECOND BLUE SOLDIER
It is often dangerous to know
secrets.

VASH
Yes it is.

Is Vash talking to his men or his prisoner?

Back and forth, he continues to hone his knife. You can almost see the stone shaving microns off of the metal. This knife could split an atom.

The First Blue Soldier unfastens the belt of the thief and lowers his pants.

You are scared of what might happen next. The Thief is terrified.

THIEF

I don't know anything about....

Vash raises his hand to quiet the man down.

VASH

Shhh. We're going to get there in a moment.

The THIRD and FOURTH BLUE SOLDIERS report to Vash.

THIRD BLUE SOLDIER

The rest are dead.

VASH

I guess we just have the one then.
What do think, was he too afraid, or too clever to follow his orders?

FOURTH BLUE SOLDIER

Fifty says he is a coward.

He pulls a bag of coins out of his pocket as an invitation to bet. Two of his comrades take the offer.

Vash puts the stone in his pocket and blows dust off the blade.

VASH

We're about to find out.

When the man pisses himself the Soldiers holding him instinctively relax.

The Thief seizes his opportunity and throws himself on Vash's knife.

Blood erupts from his chest as he grabs hold of Vash and turns his body to make sure the wound is fatal.

THIEF

From the fires of Ath I will watch you scream in pain.

Spitting up blood he dies. Vash throws the body to the ground and is a study in controlled frustration.

VASH

You are so fired. Clean this mess up.

INT. BEDROOM --NIGHT

Everything in the Empress' Bedroom is white.

Except the jet black hair of the young woman sitting on the bed.

She is the latest incarnation of the EMPRESS, twelve generations removed from the woman you met before. But the mirth in her eyes reveals the family connection.

A SERVANT, carrying a tray, bows upon entering the room. TWO BLUE GUARDS stand outside the door.

On the tray are six stone tablets face down. When presented with them the Empress picks one and reads the name printed on the underside.

EMPRESS

Ian.

SERVANT

He will be sent to you immediately.

Vash appears in the doorway, cleaned up from the night's work.

EMPRESS

Tomorrow.

SERVANT

Your will, Empress.

The Servant bows and exits. Vash closes the door behind him.

VASH

Giving up on my return so soon, your highness?

EMPRESS

I must conceive, Vash. The line cannot be broken.

VASH

Mine is not the voice of jealousy.

EMPRESS

It should be.

VASH

Why? Because I love you? Everyone loves you.

EMPRESS

Yes.

VASH

You must conceive.

EMPRESS

My burdens are my own.

VASH

A year is a long time to wait.

EMPRESS

A year is an instant.

VASH

I have no right to claim you. You belong to me the way a bird belongs to the sky.

EMPRESS

I cannot be your wife. That tells you nothing of how I feel.

Despite his own confusion Vash knows she is in pain and crosses the huge room in an instant to take the tiny girl into his arms.

VASH

Tell me what to do Lady, and I will do it. Tell me what you want to hear. I am yours to command.

EMPRESS

Just love me. Save me.

VASH

Your will, Empress.

INT. BEDROOM --DAY

The Empress is draped over Vash under her white sheets.

They are disturbed by the chime of a gong announcing the imminent arrival of the Archduke DARIN.

Darin enters behind an Eight Man ENTOURAGE.

Darin is twice as old as either Vash or the Empress and twice as soft. He has never longed for anything for more than an hour and nothing has held his attention for half that time.

Vash kneels. The Empress stands.

DARIN

My young highness today your mourning
for your mother ends. You begin your
journey and your reign as our
Empress.

EMPRESS

Yes, Lord Darin.

DARIN

Aren't you excited?

EMPRESS

My mother commuted for only five
years, but she was so intuitive. I
will never be like her.

DARIN

Yes, well, that's true. She was an
incredible woman. Vash, rise and
report.

Darin turns to one of his entourage and whispers in his ear.
The MAN runs out the room.

Vash rises.

VASH

Clearly, there are forces moving
against you.

DARIN

Did they steal my rifles?

VASH

No. But the fact that they tried shows unmitigated gall and speaks to the condition of security in your counting house.

The Man Darin sent off returns with a chair. He places it next to the Archduke.

DARIN

Not exactly what I had in mind but I'll manage.

Darin sits.

DARIN

If they have no rifles, then they are of no consequence. However, I would very much like to know who they are.

VASH

We've caught five smugglers in the last five years. We can't know how many we've missed. I cannot say for certain they don't have rifles. You need to rebuild your defensive positions throughout the countryside.

DARIN

There isn't enough money for that and the new bridges. Besides, great misfortune could never befall my city without ample warning. I am not afraid of my own people. Fix this mess. I want it to go away. There are more important matters that require my attention.

VASH

I have learned there will be a ship that is going to put into an ancient port in the far west. Rather than destroy it I intend to place myself in the group that meets it.

DARIN

And follow the contraband across the countryside.

VASH

Yes, my lord.

DARIN

Good. Follow it to its leader and kill him. Kill the men transporting the goods and anyone else who has knowledge of the ship and its contents.

VASH

I will most likely end my journey in the Outer Keys.

DARIN

Use whatever resources you need, but do not return without the skull of the traitor.

VASH

Yes, my lord.

Darin snaps and four of his men lift his chair to transport him out of the room.

DARIN

Goodbye Empress. Vash.

His men don't bother to close the door behind them.

Vash turns to the Empress.

VASH

I must go.

EMPRESS

The Outer Keys? You are placing yourself in great danger.

He walks to the door to leave, but instead he closes it and comes back to her. They kiss.

VASH

If I could, I would hold on to you so tightly nothing would ever touch you. But that is only my jealousy talking. The truth is you don't need my help, or your mother's.

EMPRESS

I see you with no fear of anything
while I am too afraid to move and I
am ashamed.

VASH

Others will see your fear as well,
and that is why you will succeed.
The people want you to be as you are,
human.

He kisses her again and then leaves.

She stands in the middle of her huge white room all alone.

EMPRESS

I love you.

EXT. MOUNTAINS --DAY

Three Men stand next to a harnessed crate at the base of a
mountain pass. Snow flurries all around them; swirling flecks
of white against a gray sky. And even though they are still
in sight of the sea, the mountains already contain them.

This is a lonely place.

TOBIN, the would be leader of this outfit, is a criminal by
default. Everyone who meets him comes to like his ready smile
and sharp wit.

KENT, a giant of a man, has had more wives than most men have
had great meals. All of his wives love him, but none of them
can live with him.

And poor TANEAL, really is as dumb as he looks.

Vash walks up to them.

TOBIN

I'm glad you could finally make it.
We were going to leave without you,
but then I realized how much fun it
would be to make you carry this heavy
pumba across the whole country.

Vash says nothing and takes his place with the others.

TOBIN

I'm Tobin. That big bastard is Kent, the bald guy is Taneal, and the little feller on the end is Vash. Right?

The men nod.

TOBIN

All right then. There are a few things we need to get right. We got a long way to go and short time to get there. Time counts in this deal, so we go until I say stop. What is in this crate is not your business. Mind your business. Any questions?

TANEAL

When do I get paid?

TOBIN

When the boss gets his box.

KENT

I, for one, would feel better if I got half up front.

TOBIN

I've got nothing except the clothes on my back. You can have them if you want, but I don't think they're gonna fit. Any other questions?

TANEAL

If you don't have any money, what do we eat?

TOBIN

As the priests and my father are fond of saying. The land will provide. Now, if you ladies are done imitating my wife, we can go.

The crate is as tall and as long as a man and half as wide. The harness it is sitting in has two poles running through it. Each end of the pole has grips that fit over a man's shoulder.

Each man moves to a corner, straps in, and with considerable effort stands up. The crate easily weighs a thousand pounds. The first steps are tentative.

Taneal's lack of rhythm is the first problem of a journey that will have many more.

TOBIN

Come on boy, get in step, it's not that hard. Like falling out a tree.

After a few feet Taneal gets the hang of it and the long journey east begins in earnest.

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS --SUNSET

The four men are little more than flecks of dust walking across the rim of the world. The tallest peaks tower over them, but they are still high enough that a single misstep would bring instant death.

Far above the tree line, beneath the blazing sky each man understands what it is to be insignificant.

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS --NIGHT

The full moon reflects off the frozen glacier in a way that invites religious meditation. The group trudges forward listening only to the *crisp crisp* of the snow under their boots until Vash has had enough.

VASH

It's an hour after sunset.

TOBIN

We're going for one more.

VASH

You go for one more. I'm all done.

Vash stops, throwing off the entire group.

TOBIN

We go until I say stop.

VASH

So say stop. I'm going to build a fire.

Vash sets his corner down forcing the others to do the same.

Once he is free from the harness Tobin moves nose to nose with Vash.

TOBIN

It's not that I mind you questioning my orders, Nancy, it's just that I don't give a rats ass about your opinion.

VASH

Bit of whiner aren't you?

Vash sets his jaw for the blow that comes to his gut. His breath explodes out of him in a visible frozen cloud, but he does not fall down.

He stands erect and meets Tobin's gaze.

VASH

You're the leader. You get that one for free.

Vash turns his back on the angry bull.

TOBIN

Vash.

Vash stops.

TOBIN

You make me so angry I just want to squeeze your head until it explodes.

But Tobin can't do that, because he needs Vash and Vash knows it.

EXT. CAMPFIRE --NIGHT

Tobin, leaning against the crate, burns the end of a stick, blows it out, and puts it back in the fire. This game has been amusing him for hours.

Taneal picks at his feet and toes. Occasionally he throws dead skin into the fire.

Kent stretching out near his tent, tries not to get pipe ash on his fur blanket.

Vash broods further from the fire than the others.

TOBIN
(TO VASH)

I reckon I know that look. What's
her name?

If Vash is surprised that he can be so easily read by this man
he doesn't show it.

VASH
Speaking to me again?

TOBIN
It's a long trip. What's her name?

VASH
Everyone calls her Empress.

KENT
Haw. I know the type. My second
wife was an empress, but....

He makes the universal sign for large breasts and smiles.

KENT
What's the problem? You worried she
won't be faithful while you're gone?

VASH
I know she won't be, but it's not her
fault.

KENT
Of course not. It's your fault.
Wife number four taught me that.

TOBIN
Maybe it's your crappy attitude that
she doesn't like. Did you ever think
of that?

TANEAL
I caught my wife with another man.
And I popped her right in the mouth
on my way out the door.

KENT
No you did not.

TANEAL

Shut up. You weren't there. Were you?

KENT

I didn't have to be there to know you did no such thing.

TOBIN

I'm proud to say I'm a happily married man with two girls at home waiting for me. But that doesn't mean I haven't had my troubles with the fair sex.

KENT

They are put here to torment us.

TANEAL

There was this one girl once. I had no trouble with her at all. It was probably because I paid her, I don't know, it was hard to tell.

TOBIN

You want to know what the secret to women is, Susan?

VASH

What's that?

TOBIN

They are always telling you to do something. The secret is to know when to listen.

TANEAL

Bullshit. The secret is to know when to pop 'em.

EXT. CAMPFIRE --NIGHT

When the others are sleeping Vash pulls a pigeon out of his pocket.

He removes its hood and slips a note into the small container attached to the foot.

He tosses the bird into the air. It circles once to get its bearings and flies northeast towards the city.

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS --DAY

The sun has melted the top layer of ice making the footing treacherous at best. Our group moves very slowly.

TOBIN

Come on now. Pick 'em up an put 'em down. I want to be in the valley, by sundown. We've got to make up the hour we lost yesterday.

TANEAL

Tobin, we got a problem.

Taneal forces the group to stop and points at a chasm in the ice.

TANEAL

How are we gonna get across that?

The crate is lowered and all four men gaze down into a bottomless pit that is at least twenty feet across and runs the width of the path.

TOBIN

We could jump it and the pull the box over with ropes.

VASH

It's too heavy. When it falls in the crevice it will pull us in with it.

KENT

We could back track.

TOBIN

No time. That could take days.

TANEAL

We could try to throw it over.

Tobin smacks him up side the head rather than respond.

VASH

Kent, how much lower does that end look to you.

KENT
Five feet. Maybe seven.

VASH
We'll build a bridge.

TOBIN
And you know how to do that?

Vash turns to Taneal.

VASH
We passed a couple of Tannerin trees
a little ways back. Chop down two
and bring back the trunks.

To Kent.

VASH
Get out the tent stakes, hammer, and
cut me eighty feet of rope.

To Tobin.

VASH
If I pull this off, you have to be
sweet to me from now on.

He strips off his coat, walks to the precipice and takes three
steps backwards.

KENT
You're not going to make it.

Vash gets a good start and jumps.

He rolls as he lands on the other side.

TOBIN
Hot Damn!

VASH
Let's get moving.

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS --DAY

Four stakes have been driven into the ground, two on each side
of the rift.

Rope has been lashed to each corner and pulled tight to make a bridge.

The crate is on two logs that are twice as wide as the bridge. It is their intention to roll the crate across.

TOBIN

Vash, are you sure the ropes will hold?

VASH

Let's hope so.

TOBIN

Of course it's your attention to detail that has impressed me most here.

VASH

They'll hold. Just line that thing up straight or it will fall off the side.

KENT

What if the stakes come up?

VASH

Stand on them.

Tobin, Taneal and Kent push the crate on the bridge. The ropes creak as they stretch.

TANEAL

Vash?

VASH

Just keep going. Trust me. This is going to work.

One last push and the crate is on its own. Vash backs up out of the way.

The crate rolls across the bridge picking up momentum as it goes. Once it reaches the other side of the chasm it slides off the logs and continues on another twenty feet down the icy path.

VASH

There you go. That wasn't such a chore, was it?

As the sun sets over the grassy plain the four men suit up and lift the heavy crate. The field of waist high grass is more forgiving, but less comfortable than the mountains.

TANEAL

I wish I had a tall glass of ale right about now. The night before I left I strapped one on so bad I swore I would never drink again, but now I'd cut off my right hand for a pint.

KENT

I am in need of woman.

TOBIN

I saw a cute goat last night.

KENT

We're not there yet.

TANEAL

Maybe not my whole hand, but at least a couple of fingers.

TOBIN

I wish that we would make through the day without Vash pissing me off.

TANEAL

The whole left hand for sure, but I think only the pinky finger on the right hand.

TOBIN

Would you shut up.

TANEAL

I'm just speculating, here. If it bothers you don't listen.

TOBIN

Vash, you got any wishes today?

VASH

Yeah. I wish that whatever I saw moving in the brush up ahead would ignore us.

A SENTRY in green armor stands up out of the grass. He is carrying a chain whip that jingles when he moves.

SENTRY
Halt. Identify yourselves.

TANEAL
Damn!

VASH
Shut up.

TOBIN
What can I do for you?

The Sentry looks at our party in the failing light and doesn't like what he sees. He whistles and FIVE other GUARDS stand up.

SENTRY
Put that thing down.

The men put the crate down and unfasten themselves. Four Guards stand between them and their cargo. The Sentry and the remaining Guard approach the box.

Vash keeps his eyes on Tobin. When he nods Vash sidekicks the Guard in front of him in the jaw. One down, five to go.

Things happen fast.

Tobin tackles his Guard and rolls around on the ground with him.

Kent picks him up and lifts him over his head like a deranged wrestler.

Vash incapacitates a second man without looking like he is trying.

Taneal throws himself on the ground and curls up into a ball.

TANEAL
No! Don't hurt me! I'm weak! Please
I'll do anything! Stop! I'm allergic
to pain! Help! Ow! Don't hurt me!

With a flick of his wrist the Sentry wraps his whip around Tobin's neck. The Guard he was on top of pounds on his exposed chest.

Kent throws his man into the crate and when the dumbass gets up, Kent knocks him silly.

Vash kicks the Guards raining blows into Tobin. But, the would be leader of this outfit is still in serious trouble.

Taneal cries like a little girl on the ground.

Kent is hit in the nose. The shock of the pain running through his face brings him to his knees. This is the opportunity his attackers were waiting for.

Taneal opens one eye and sees no one paying attention to him. He gets up and jumps on the back of one of the men beating on Kent. After sticking his thumb in the man's eye he rides him to the ground.

After what feels like an eternity to Tobin, Vash mercifully removes the Sentry from his whip. Tobin is on his knees gasping for air.

Kent finally recovers and grabs the last Guard around the waist. One headbutt later it's all over.

Tobin removes the whip from around his neck and jumps on the Sentry. He pulls a knife and is ready to kill.

Vash puts his hand on Tobin's shoulder.

VASH

If you kill him you drag us across the line separating mischievous and dangerous. That is attention we don't need.

Tobin spits on the unconscious man and puts his knife down.

TOBIN

Let's go before these assholes wake up.

Kent and Taneal move towards the box. Tobin pulls Vash aside.

TOBIN

You saved my life.

VASH

I saved my own. You just got in the way.

TOBIN

I won't forget it.

When everyone is strapped in Vash reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small scroll, like the one he attached to the pigeon. He tosses it on to the chest of the unconscious Sentry.

No one noticed.

EXT. VALLEY --DAWN

The men are making good time. The eastern sky is yellow, but the stars still shine brightly.

Tobin inspects his bruises by using his knife as a mirror.

TOBIN

The last creek before the desert is two hours away. Do you think you can make it?

TANEAL

I don't know I'm kind of hungry.

TOBIN

I wasn't speaking to you, Captain Courage.

KENT

If we make it to the creek, we'll be in good shape.

TOBIN

Vash, you got an opinion?

VASH

Not today, boss.

TOBIN

What an excellent answer.

VASH

So, Taneal that's an interesting fighting style you have. Is that family tradition or just something you picked up here and there?

TANEAL

If it's not broken, why fix it?

VASH

I'm not criticizing you. I can see how crying like a woman in the face of danger is very effective.

TOBIN

Come on, now, he wasn't crying like a woman while that gorilla was choking me. Let's be fair, it was more like a little girl.

TANEAL

Actually, I was imitating your mother when I showed her my dick.

TOBIN

That's really funny. You should write that down. So as not to forget.

TANEAL

What do you want from me? We can't all kick people in the head like Vash over there.

KENT

That's true. If I tried to get my leg up that high my groin would snap like a frozen twig.

TANEAL

You sure it wouldn't snap like a twig left out to dry.

KENT

Oh, I'm sure.

TOBIN

As long as you're sure.

EXT. CREEK --DAY

Buzzards hang black in the sky.

The slow moving creek separates the green valley grass and the skull white sand of the desert.

Tobin kneels at the water's edge filling bottles and passing them to the others.

TOBIN

How many of these can you carry?

TANEAL

About three.

TOBIN

I'm sorry I phrased the question poorly. It will take us at least six days to cross the desert. How many can you carry, really?

TANEAL

Six?

TOBIN

There you go. See what you can do when you try.

VASH

Wouldn't it be safer to continue to travel at night?

TOBIN

No. There are things out there that are worse than the heat.

Tobin finishes the last bottle and stands up. Each member of the group has six bottles strapped to his waist.

EXT. DESERT --DAY

A sand storm rages.

Long robes do little to protect the face and eyes from the soft itchy sand. With each step, feet sink in the loose dust almost to knee. The men wade more than walk through the rock strewn desert.

To make matters worse, the group is nearly out of water.

The howling wind makes any attempt at conversation futile.

Tobin signals "STOP." They put the crate down and unfasten themselves.

The group gathers around him.

He points to a large collection of bones not far from a cave; the sad remains of someone's failed attempt to cross the desert.

Using rudimentary sign language he tells his men three things:

1. SEARCH THE BODIES FOR WATER
2. BE CAREFUL
3. WE CAN TAKE SHELTER IN THAT CAVE

There is a slight pause and then the most amazing thing happens, the group understands.

Kent, turns one of the harness poles upright to mark the location of the crate should it be buried.

Vash lashes himself to Taneal at the waist and the two men strike out towards the bodies.

Tobin gathers what is left of their supplies.

EXT. DESERT --DAY

Vash stumbles through the bones. Even without the burden of the crate it is difficult to move.

Taneal finds a stash of bottles, but all of them have been broken by the elements.

Then, Vash hits the mother lode. A small box carefully packed with wine. He holds up a bottle to show the others and does the dance of joy.

Tobin runs towards him, waving his arms over his head. Then Vash realizes if this group didn't die of thirst, something else killed them.

He freezes but it is too late. The ground beneath him gives way and Vash sinks up to his waist.

Taneal is jerked to the ground and slides toward the hole. He grabs at the remains of a horse and holds on.

Vash tosses the box of wine to firmer ground as he sinks up to his chest.

Tobin and Kent do their best to hurry.

Taneal tries to stand, but slips and he slides another few feet before he finds another hand hold.

Sand comes up to Vash's chin. He can barely keep sand out of his mouth and nose. As a result Vash, stoic Vash, panics.

VASH

Help me! Help me! For god's sakes
help me!

No one can hear him scream.

Tobin and Kent reach Taneal and help him up. They pull on the rope, but it only tightens around Vash. The desert won't let him go that easily.

Tobin moves towards the quicksand. Kent grabs his arm and shakes his head "NO". Tobin pulls loose and walks towards Vash.

Kent makes sure Taneal has his feet and moves to a large rock. With Herculean effort he lifts the thing off the ground.

As Tobin gets close to, Vash he lies on the ground and crawls forward. When he finds the edge of the pit he reaches out his hand.

Vash's head trembles with effort until his hand breaks the surface of the sand. He grabs Tobin's wrist.

Kent arrives with the small boulder and rolls it into the quicksand.

With something firm to push against, Taneal dragging and Tobin pulling, Vash escapes.

Upon reaching semi-solid ground Vash vomits up his fear and pain. He tries to stand but collapses into Kent's arms.

INT. CAVE --NIGHT

Tobin, Taneal, and Kent sit around the campfire drinking and laughing. The wind outside still roars.

Vash joins the group with a rare smile. He is handed a full bottle from which he takes a heavy drag.

The four men revel in their security, however temporary.

EXT. FOREST --DAY

The forest is a lethal green.

Something lurks just behind every vine tangled tree. Something elusive, but something dangerous.

The group is ill at ease.

TANEAL

How much further?

TOBIN

A night and a bit.

KENT

Good. The sooner we are out of here the better.

EXT. FOREST --NIGHT

Despite the chorus of crickets, the group sleeps around a lonesome fire. The group minus Vash.

He walks into the dense night and when he is just out of the fire light he speaks to a BUSH.

VASH

How many have you brought with you?

BUSH

Over fifty, sir.

VASH

When we make delivery....

Vash struggles with his decision.

VASH

Kill them all.

BUSH

All of them?

This is not easy.

VASH
Not until we make delivery.

BUSH
Yes, sir.

Vash returns to camp and watches the fire. Taneal rolls over.

TANEAL
Ain't you gonna sleep?

VASH
I'm not tired.

Taneal yawns.

TANEAL
When this is over, do you think we'll
still be friends?

No answer is possible.

TANEAL
I hope so. You guys are the only
friends I got.

Taneal rolls over and goes back to sleep.

EXT. FOREST --DAY

The group walks into a clearing.

TOBIN
Stop.

They lay down their burden for the last time.

TOBIN
Well gents, I guess this it. It's
been something else.

Tobin shakes each man's hand.

Vash reveals nothing.

TOBIN
My lord, are you here?

BARON REISHT O.S.
I am here Tobin.

BARON REISHT is a large strong man. He is even bigger than Kent.

He comes into the clearing with TWENTY MEN in Orange and Black armor.

Vash tenses in anticipation of his men pouring out the trees.

The Baron snaps and two of his men open the crate. They pull out hand polished flint lock rifles.

Vash senses something is amiss. The Baron leers in his direction.

BARON REISHT
They're not coming. In fact, they
are all dead.

Vash turns his emotions off. A mask of calm drops over his face.

Tobin comes face to face with the man who betrayed him.

TOBIN
You know what pisses me off more than
anything? I will weep for you. Even
after all.

The last is said with honest and sincere sorrow.

The Baron moves chest to nose with the smaller man.

BARON REISHT
You will begin by telling me your
name and rank.

VASH
I am known by many names. You may
call me Vash.

The Baron laughs. He genuinely laughs out loud.

BARON REISHT
You will be amusing, Vash.

He reaches back and knocks Vash cold. One punch. No need for two.

EXT. FIELD --DAY

The Battle frozen in time.

You move, ghost like through desperate men locked in combat, to the side of the field opposite from Vash. Away from the action, on a hillside of relative calm, you find Baron Reisht sitting astride a large black horse.

There is a patch over his right eye that wasn't there before.

He is smiling at the carnage below him.

BARON REISHT V.O.

History alone is fit to judge me.
Wishing for the world to be different
than it is will not make it so.
Their dynasty is over. I will be
Archduke. It is the only way. I am
Baron Reisht.

INT. STAIRWELL --NIGHT

SUPER: TWENTY FIVE MONTHS BEFORE THE BATTLE

The stone stairs echo the heavy footfalls of men moving with purpose.

The Baron, who at his point still has two working eyes, allows his hand picked Yes Man, GENERAL SHANG, to lead him down the narrow, torch lit enclosure.

At the bottom, Shang unlocks the heavy wooden door with a secret lever hidden behind a brick.

The Baron grabs a torch off the wall.

INT. CASTLE BASEMENT --NIGHT

This small space doubles as a cell when necessary. There are no windows, one door, and just enough room for a man to drive himself crazy should he be locked inside.

The Baron places the torch in a sconce on the wall and sits at a table. He motions and the General joins him. The two men contemplate an ornate box that waits for them.

The Baron stares at his General, as if he is trying to peer into the man's soul.

BARON REISHT

I don't know why I am compelled to share this with you, Shang, but I am.

What the hell do you say to a statement like that?

GENERAL SHANG

Thank you, sir.

Another moment of hesitation and then all doubt is cast aside.

The Baron unlocks and opens the box, carefully folds the silk that protects his treasure, and then lifts off its own velvet pillow a simple, run of the mill, metal flashlight.

He holds it like you would hold a diamond or a child.

Shang knows there is more and barely contains his excitement.

The Baron lays the flashlight on the table as gently as he can, and turns it on.

A circle of light appears on the wall.

Shang gasps.

BARON REISHT

I know. Watch this.

The Baron places his hand over the light, holds it there for several seconds and then shows Shang he is not burned.

GENERAL SHANG

Amazing.

He moves to try it himself but stops half way to get permission. The Baron nods. And Shang, too, places his hand over the light and is not burned.

GENERAL SHANG

How is this possible?

BARON REISHT

I don't know. But I will learn.

There is a knock on the door.

BARON REISHT

Yes.

SOLDIER O.S.
The prisoner is ready my lord.

BARON REISHT
Very good. Bring him to the hall. I
will join him by and by.

The Baron snuffs out the torch on the ground and stares at the perfect circle of electric light on the wall.

INT. PALACE HALL --NIGHT

Vash is chained like an animal to a rolling platform. TWO ORANGE AND BLACK GUARDS are responsible for his transportation and safety.

The Baron studies a scroll as he walks in. Shang is with him.

BARON REISHT
(TO SHANG)
I want to double this number.

GENERAL SHANG
Yes, my lord.

Shang takes the scroll and exits.

BARON REISHT
Welcome sir. I trust you are
enjoying your stay with us.

The Baron standing next to a wall of paintings snaps and the Soldiers wheel Vash over.

The chains make it uncomfortable for Vash to look the Baron in the eye, but he does.

The Baron draws back a curtain that was protecting a particular painting from the fire light.

BARON REISHT

I'm sure you are curious about my collection here, so we will begin. This is the oldest painting in the world. It was created over a millennia ago by an artist who has long been forgotten. It is fading despite my efforts to preserve it, but I believe you can still make out the figure in white. It is the Empress. The artist is trying to capture perfect beauty.

The Baron motions and the Soldiers wheel Vash past a dozen paintings of various Empresses.

BARON REISHT

It is a movement in our art that lasted for almost a century.

The group stops at another painting.

BARON REISHT

This is the first painting we have that varies in theme. Please understand that no one believes our ancestors only painted pictures of the Empress. The civil wars were a time of looting and destruction, but no one would harm the image of our Lady. So they alone survived. This painting is important because it contains a thematic shift. It still shows the Empress, but it depicts the Great Chain of Being rather than beauty. These paintings represent the second movement in our art and helped codify the major religious movement of our people.

The Baron motions, and the entourage continues around the hall.

They pass many paintings varying in size and color. They stop in an alcove containing sculptures of various types.

BARON REISHT

These, too, are also the oldest in existence. Does one in particular strike you?

VASH

The vase.

The Baron picks up a BLUE VASE, perfect in its simplicity.

BARON REISHT

That is one of my favorites as well. This belonged to the first Archduke ever. Do you know why it is blue?

VASH

Those were his family's colors.

BARON REISHT

A common mistake. No. The first Archduke's family wore orange. His wife's family wore black. Their marriage ended the war that allowed him to claim the throne. He asked the Empress which of the two colors should represent the whole. She said to him when the sky meets the sea in the late evening and one fades into the other so you cannot tell them apart, that is the shade of unity. The Archdukes have worn this blue ever since.

The Baron puts the vase back on the pedestal.

BARON REISHT

It is not porcelain. It is made of a resin that has long been lost. It is extremely hard, and very rare. It is breathtaking, don't you think?

VASH

Very beautiful.

The tour continues. They stop on the wall opposite from where they began.

BARON REISHT

This is the latest movement in art.

They are all erotic pictures of men and women.

BARON REISHT

Artists have always been supported by the Barons of the realm. Most support two or three. I play host to fifty. This is the fruit of their labor. What do you think?

VASH

I do not see the next master here.

BARON REISHT

No, nor do I. But we do what we can.

Shang appears in the doorway. The Baron nods in his direction.

BARON REISHT

These are the treasures of our past. I have spent a lifetime collecting them, worshipping them. I wanted to share them with you, because there will come a time when people like you will call me a traitor. It is my hope you will correct them. If you will excuse me. There are other matters that require my attention. These gentlemen will see to your needs. Thank you for coming.

The Soldiers wheel Vash out of the room. Shang approaches.

GENERAL SHANG

My Lord, Captain Rold tells me he already has more men than available weapons. Twice as many recruits would mean we would have three men for every rifle.

BARON REISHT

When a man falls, his weapon will not be wasted.

GENERAL SHANG

That will not be good for morale.

BARON REISHT

Then hire more priests to remind the men of their place in the chain.

GENERAL SHANG
Yes, my lord.

BARON REISHT
How stands the Black and Gold?

GENERAL SHANG
They will complete their training in
a year.

BARON REISHT
Move that up as far as you can.

GENERAL SHANG
My lord....

BARON REISHT
Just get it done. This Vash is a
warning.

GENERAL SHANG
What do you make of him?

BARON REISHT
He is smart, educated. And strong.
You should see the defiance in his
eyes.

GENERAL SHANG
He is a member of the secret police,
of that there can be no doubt. As
such he will know things.

BARON REISHT
Yes, but how do I get at those
things?

GENERAL SHANG
You must persuade him.

BARON REISHT
Bring me some Dallyline mixed in
juice.

GENERAL SHANG
The drug is unreliable.

BARON REISHT
So is torture.

INT. CASTLE BASEMENT --NIGHT

The box with the flashlight is gone. Vash, however, sits against the wall still chained to his platform.

BARON REISHT

Good evening. How was your dinner?

VASH

I have had nothing.

BARON REISHT

Oh? I am sorry. I will see what I can do about that.

The Baron signals and a GUARD removes the restraints from Vash.

VASH

Thank you.

BARON REISHT

You're welcome.

The Guard leaves the Baron alone with Vash.

BARON REISHT

Vash, I would very much like to make this simple. Please, tell me the location and relative strength of Archduke Darin's defenses?

VASH

I don't know.

BARON REISHT

There are consequences to what we say in this room, Vash. Serious consequences. Wouldn't you like to tour my art galleries? Eat at my table? Sleep comfortably in a bed?

VASH

What I would like is to go home.

BARON REISHT

My dear Vash, you were sent here to kill me. Were you not?

No answer.

BARON REISHT

I am a reasonable man, but that makes me angry. At the very least you will be tried and convicted. I doubt you will see your home again. But how you choose to live here is up to you. Tell me the status of the Archduke's defenses and I can make arrangements for you.

VASH

I don't know the status of the Archduke's defenses.

The Baron snaps his fingers.

The Guard returns. He binds Vash's hands at the wrist and tosses the rope over a low beam.

The Baron pulls a knife and tests the blade on his thumb.

BARON REISHT

Are you in good health? Do you have any medical conditions I should be aware of?

The guard pulls the rope and Vash's is lifted into the air. He is lowered until he can just barely stand on tip toe.

Then the rope is tied off.

BARON REISHT

You have now lost all your privileges of rank and person. You no longer have an identity. You will be referred to only as Whore, until you choose to stop playing the role of the Archduke's slave.

The Baron uses the knife to cut away all of Vash's clothing. And they leave him, hanging naked, alone in the dark.

INT. CELL --NIGHT

Vash is somewhere between sleep and consciousness, when the door opens. Two guards set up a table and two chairs then leave. When they have finished, the Baron enters with his dog.

BARON REISHT

Good evening. I trust you slept well.

He ties the dog to the wall.

BARON REISHT

I saw the most wonderful play last night. I wish, I truly wish, you could have joined me.

He cuts Vash's rope and sits down behind the table. Another guard comes in and places a hot breakfast in front of the Baron.

Vash cannot yet put his arms down. He hobbles to the table and sits.

The Baron places a whole boiled egg in his mouth and washes it down with a tall glass of juice.

BARON REISHT

Thirsty?

Vash nods.

The Baron places a still full plate in front of the dog, who is most grateful, and returns to the table.

BARON REISHT

What was your name, whore?

VASH

You know my name.

BARON REISHT

What was your name?

Vash doesn't answer.

The Baron places a glass of juice in front of him. Vash hesitates.

BARON REISHT

It is all right. You may drink.

Vash swallows the whole glass in one gulp. The Baron waits patiently. Vash's eyes flutter.

BARON REISHT
What was your name?

VASH
Vash.

BARON REISHT
Where were you born?

VASH
Selawhy.

BARON REISHT
What is the status of the Archduke's
defenses?

No answer.

The Baron places another glass of juice in front of Vash.

BARON REISHT
You may drink.

Vash drinks a second glass. He wobbles in his chair.

BARON REISHT
What was your name?

VASH
Vash.

BARON REISHT
Where were you born?

VASH
Selawhy.

BARON REISHT
Do you have a lover?

VASH
Yes.

BARON REISHT
Who?

No answer.

The Baron places a third glass of juice in front of Vash. He
drinks without prompting.

BARON REISHT
What was your name?

VASH
Vash.

BARON REISHT
Where were you born?

VASH
Selawhy.

BARON REISHT
Do you have a lover?

VASH
Yes.

BARON REISHT
Who?

VASH
The Empress.

BARON REISHT
What is the status of the Archduke's
defenses?

No answer.

Another glass of juice is placed in front of Vash.

DRUG MONTAGE BEGINS

The room spins.

Vash drinks more of the tainted juice.

The same questions come at a steady pace always with the same
answer.

The final question is the one that is never answered.

BARON REISHT
What is the status of the Archduke's
defenses?

BARON REISHT
What is the status of the Archduke's
defenses?

BARON REISHT
What is the status of the Archduke's
defenses?

No answer.

MONTAGE ENDS

INT. CELL --NIGHT

Vash, passed out cold from the drugs, lies across the table.
The Baron moves very close to his prisoner and whispers:

BARON REISHT
Happy New Year.

The Guard appears in the doorway.

INT. BASEMENT --NIGHT

You have been in this basement before.

The group of twenty people has tripled.

The smoldering coals are still the only light. The quiet
chanting is still the only sound. The Wife has been replaced
by the Baron, but the Sword remains.

AVE, the Horseman, stands in the doorway with a lamb whose
wool has been dyed blue.

AVE
True lord of the realm, now at the
dawn of our two hundred second year
in exile, I ask is it time to revisit
those who have wronged us?

CROWD AS ONE
Is it time?

BARON REISHT
Yes, the time has come.

The new answer brings excitement.

BARON REISHT
Prepare yourselves. This ceremony is
the last.

Ave steps forward and places the sacrifice on the table.

Two men hold down the mewling lamb.

The Baron steps from the shadows into the light and raises the Sword.

BARON REISHT

We swear to never forget.

The mewling stops.

INT. BASEMENT --LATER

The crowd is gone. Ave takes his time cleaning his Sword.

AVE

Did you hear that? He said the time has come.

SWORD

Yes Ave, I heard.

Ave carefully wraps the sword in black cloth.

INT. TORTURE CHAMBER --NIGHT

Vash has been reattached to the rolling platform. Two guards push him around. He has regained his faculties.

The Baron leads Vash on a tour of a different nature.

BARON REISHT

I find most people are so afraid of pain they make themselves suffer more than I ever could.

They walk/roll past a rack.

BARON REISHT

Some of these devices are obvious some are not. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.

The Baron picks up a heavy coiled spring one inch in diameter and four feet long.

BARON REISHT

This for example, was designed to destroy a patient's joints. You would start at the shoulders.

The Baron, with a feather touch, lays the implement of destruction on each body part named.

BARON REISHT

Then move to the elbows, wrists, hips, knees, and ankles. Twelve in all. I have never been given the opportunity to use more than three. How many do you think you can stand?

The tour continues past an iron maiden and a bubbling cauldron heating various metal instruments.

BARON REISHT

The key here is to elicit information. You understand? If I am too persuasive, delirium sets in and this is not useful. The art of the matter is find the balance between persuasion and tolerance. It is different for everyone.

The Baron holds up a scalpel. It shines in the torch light.

BARON REISHT

I find that pain is not always the most effective tool. In some cases permanent damage is a better choice.

The Baron lightly drags the scalpel under Vash's eye.

BARON REISHT

Ever wonder if you could sleep without your eyelids?

The guards detach Vash from the platform and chain him to the wall.

The Baron signals and the guards leave.

Behind the Baron is the Blue Vase Vash admired earlier in his visit.

BARON REISHT

Whore, what is this?

VASH

I told you. I do not know the Archduke's defenses. You drugged me, surely you know I am telling the truth.

BARON REISHT

Of course I know you are telling the truth. I didn't ask you about anyone's defenses. I asked you what this is?

He points at the Vase.

VASH

I don't have the information you want!

BARON REISHT

And I said I believe you. What is this object.

VASH

It is a vase. A Blue Vase.

BARON REISHT

I'm sorry. You must be mistaken. It is a painting. Are you sure?

VASH

It is a vase!

BARON REISHT

Forgive me for this, but I think it may clear your vision.

The Baron uncovers a tray of large needles. He chooses one that is long and thin. He slowly sticks the needle through Vash's left forearm.

Vash's entire body tenses with pain. His cry is not a scream, but more of a grunt.

BARON REISHT

Painful, isn't it? What is that object?

VASH

(THROUGH CLENCHED TEETH)

A vase.

BARON REISHT
I don't understand how you can be so
blind.

The Baron chooses six long needles. Vash pulls his arm away.

BARON REISHT
Wasted energy, whore. Save your
strength.

He winds a crank that tightens the chain. Vash can no longer
move. Vash looks away as the Baron approaches.

VASH
You may control my body but my mind
is free.

The second needle is inserted.

VASH
YOU MAY CONTROL MY BODY BUT MY MIND
IS FREE!

The third and fourth needles form a line through Vash's arm.
He is yelling his mantra.

VASH
YOU MAY CONTROL MY BODY BUT MY MIND
IS FREE! YOU MAY CONTROL MY BODY BUT
MY MIND IS FREE!

BARON REISHT
What is that?

VASH
It is a VASE!

INT. PALACE HALL --NIGHT

The Baron sits alone with his art, staring at the empty
pedestal that was once home to the Blue Vase. Has the night's
work taken its toll on him?

He has his flashlight and is alternating between sitting in
light and in darkness.

Shang clears his throat.

The Baron leaves the light on, but does not turn around.

BARON REISHT

Yes?

GENERAL SHANG

The Black and Gold are ready for inspection. The recruits you ordered are coming in daily.

BARON REISHT

Save the last two thousand until we are ready to launch. There is no reason for us to feed rifle fodder.

GENERAL SHANG

Yes, my lord.

BARON REISHT

Bring me a prisoner slated for execution. Preferably a woman.

GENERAL SHANG

Yes, my lord. You seem troubled, my lord, may I help?

The Baron turns the light out.

INT. TORTURE CHAMBER --NIGHT

Vash hangs limp in his chains. A hundred needles protrude from his arms and legs.

The Baron enters behind a YOUNG GIRL.

BARON REISHT

Good evening. How are you feeling?

Vash stands as best he can, careful not to let the needles scrape the wall behind him.

His voice is harsh and scratched.

VASH

Your daughter is lovely.

BARON REISHT

Lovely yes. My daughter no.

The Baron pulls the Girl to him, and strokes her dark hair.

BARON REISHT

You handle your pain well. You are a very strong man. I am curious to see how you handle the pain of others.

The Baron pushes the Girl aside and walks to a table. He removes a black scarf from the Blue Vase.

BARON REISHT

Whore, what is this?

VASH

Go fuck yourself.

The Baron returns to stand directly behind the Girl, a knife in his hand.

Vash looks directly at her.

VASH

I'm sorry.

The Baron slices off her silvery hair. It is so quiet in the room you can hear the individual hairs land like needles striking glass.

VASH

I'm sorry.

The Baron takes her hand and holds the sickeningly sharp knife to her little finger.

BARON REISHT

Whore, what is that?

VASH

I'm sorry.

The sound of bone snapping is so loud the girl's expression is one of surprise. Blood pools on the floor.

VASH

I'm sorry!

Tears from the depths of his soul pour out of his body.

INT: TORTURE CHAMBER --NIGHT

Vash's chains have been lengthened enough for him to lie on the floor. The needles have been removed from his body. He is humming when the Baron enters.

BARON REISHT

Where are you?

VASH

Home.

Guards bring in a table, chairs, and two covered serving trays.

The Baron sits at the long table.

BARON REISHT

Congratulations. You have survived with us for a whole year.

VASH

You lie. It has only been a few days.

BARON REISHT

How do you know?

VASH

I have not eaten and I am alive.

BARON REISHT

You have not eaten? Why didn't you say something? Please, have dinner with me.

The Baron removes the cover to the tray in front of him. Underneath is a beautiful spread of steaming meat and bright vegetables. The crystal wine goblet sparkles like nothing else in the world.

BARON REISHT

We are preparing for the Empress. Tonight is a test run. I am happy to share with you.

Vash flashes a face of anger upon hearing the Baron mention the Empress.

BARON REISHT

Yes, the Empress arrives tomorrow.
You mentioned your feelings for her,
and your failures. Perhaps she will
ask me to help her.

Vash pulls out his chair and sits down, too tired and weak not
to.

The Baron removes the cover to Vash's plate.

It is crawling with worms. The meat is raw and the water is
dirty.

Vash picks up his fork and dives in without hesitation. The
Baron laughs as Vash devours worms, dirt and whatever else is
on his plate.

BARON REISHT

I like you, whore. Not everyone
appreciates the fingers of a virgin.

The Baron continues to laugh as Vash stops eating.

Vash's hand tightens on the fork. The Baron is about to fall
out of his chair he is laughing so hard.

BARON REISHT

(THROUGH LAUGHTER)

What's the matter? Lost your
appetite?

WHAM!

The Baron falls back out of his chair. Vash's fork in his
eye.

The laughter has turned to screaming.

Guards rush in and tackle Vash. The Baron is escorted away.

INT. TORTURE CHAMBER --DAY

Vash is again lying on his back, arms up in the air, hanging
in their chains.

EMPRESS O.S.

It is an honor to see you again.

Vash's eyes snap open.

BARON REISHT O.S.
The honor is ours Empress.

Vash stands and looks at the high window.

BARON REISHT O.S.
Are you with child?

EMPRESS O.S.
The gods have yet to smile on me in
that manner. Everything I really
need however, I already have. And
what I lack will be given to me when
I am ready to receive it.

Vash jumps and grabs the bars in his hands. If anyone else
were outside the window he would not have the strength to pull
himself up, but to catch a glimpse of her he can.

The window is just above the ground. All he can see are white
shoes standing next to black boots.

VASH
Empress. Empress.

He has no strength to scream. She cannot hear him. Vash
falls to floor.

INT. PALACE HALL --NIGHT

The room has been dressed in its formal attire. Everything
has been cleaned, polished, and shined in honor of the
Empress. The crown jewel of the room is the table.

Covered in white, set with silver, decorated with onyx, the
guests have trouble matching the elegance and beauty of the
table.

When the table is full of THE MOST IMPORTANT PEOPLE in the
Baron's realm, trumpeters call the room to attention. The
Empress meets the Baron at the entrance, and the two walk in
together.

As the Lady crosses the threshold of the room, servants and
guests alike snap to attention. Crisp. Perfect.

She winks at a young serving BOY who just can't help but look at her.

The Baron pulls out her chair in the center of the table and allows her to sit first. He takes his seat to her left and then the room relaxes.

Conversation begins slowly but builds to a loud din. The Baron, however, is sullen and withdrawn.

EMPRESS

Are you all right?

BARON REISHT

Yes. I'm sorry, you deserve better.
Today should be as special for you as
it is for us.

He smiles, but his dark mood quickly retakes him.

EMPRESS

You look as if....

BARON REISHT

I have the weight of the world on my
shoulders. I have heard that before.

EMPRESS

No. That is not what I was going to
say.

The Baron reaches for his glass but comes up short. His injury has destroyed his depth perception. He grabs his fork in a vain effort to cover his weakness.

EMPRESS

You look like a child who is faced
with an unwelcome chore. Frustrated.
Confused.

She takes the fork from his hand and with decorum guides him to his wine. Even Shang, who always watches the Baron, failed to notice.

EMPRESS

I would very much like to retire. Is
there some place quiet we can go?

BARON REISHT

Your will, Empress.

INT. KITCHEN --NIGHT

The Baron and the Empress share a quiet meal.

BARON REISHT

Do you always leave formal affairs so early?

EMPRESS

Whenever I can find an excuse. You needed some quiet attention.

BARON REISHT

I am fine.

EMPRESS

No you are not. Something is eating away at you. I don't know what it is. I probably shouldn't know. But I can say with certainty you should get rid of it.

BARON REISHT

It is not so simple.

EMPRESS

Of course it is. The world is simple. You make it complicated.

BARON REISHT

You are very wise my lady.

EMPRESS

Wise enough to know you've been lectured enough. Now, tell me about your paintings. Are any of them yours?

BARON REISHT

No, my talents lie elsewhere.

The Baron relaxes as he gets started on his favorite subject.

INT. TORTURE CHAMBER --NIGHT

Vash has got hold of the tray of needles. They are soaking in a basin of bloody water.

His first thought is to pick the lock to his chains, but the needles are too thin and flimsy.

His next thought is to their destruction.

When the Baron enters, Vash is busy.

He takes each needle, slams it on the ground to dull the point, and then toss it into the fire. Some go in, others are scattered on the floor around the hot coals.

BARON REISHT

Why must you be so stubborn?

VASH

Feels good.

Vash looks up at the Baron.

VASH

How's your eye?

Vash gets a backhand that bloodies his nose.

BARON REISHT

You would do well to remember that you live by my whim.

VASH

It was not always so. Yesterday I saw you shrink away in fear. You cowered before me, crying in pain. You have no power over me.

The Baron holds up the vase.

BARON REISHT

I'm going to ask one last time what this is and then I am going to kill you. Vash, do you understand me?

VASH

You called me Vash. You can't hurt me. You've never hurt me.

The Baron knocks Vash upside the head with the Vase, shattering the antique. Pieces of all shapes and sizes fly into the air. Vash is stunned, woozy.

The Baron pins Vash to the wall with his forearm, lifting him off the ground, choking him.

BARON REISHT

What are the Archduke's defense plans?

Vash reveals a bloody smile.

VASH

You've never hurt me.

Vash's eyes roll back in his head. He smiles at his approaching end. But at the crucial moment the Baron releases him.

BARON REISHT

You don't get away so easy. You are mine. Do you hear me? I will keep you here forever.

The Baron kicks Vash in the face and walks to a tray of gruesome instruments. He reaches for a knife but misses and knocks over the table.

His anger is uncontrolled now. Picking up the knife he turns back to Vash who lies, face down, bleeding, unaware.

The Baron slices the tendons on the back of Vash's right knee.

Vash screams as his body spasms against the pain.

BARON REISHT

Did that hurt, you son of a bitch?

The Baron storms out the room.

Vash reaches out with a bloody hand and grabs a long thin shard of the vase.

EXT. BARON'S CASTLE --NIGHT

The Empress is standing in front of her packed carriage when the Baron approaches her.

The PEOPLE gathered to see the Empress depart cheer.

BARON REISHT

My lady, leaving so soon.

EMPRESS

I believe, my Lord, my purpose here
is finished.

BARON REISHT

It is your mind, lady, more than
your beauty that we will miss.

He bows and kisses her hand.

BARON REISHT

I knew your mother well. She would
be proud.

EMPRESS

Thank you, my lord. I hope to see
you again.

BARON REISHT

Your will, Empress.

Her carriage rolls away and the people cheer.

General Shang approaches the Baron like a coming storm.

GENERAL SHANG

My lord.

BARON REISHT

Are we ready?

GENERAL SHANG

Yes, my lord.

INT. TORTURE CHAMBER --NIGHT

The Baron's frame fills the doorway. Shock registers on his
face.

Vash's shackles are empty.

There is a note, written in blood on the wall, above the
gathered remains of the blue vase. It reads:

THIS IS A KEY

A scream of frustration escapes his lips as the Baron inspects the remains of his precious Vase. Then he notices the trail of blood leading to the door.

He follows it out the room leaving the door wide open.

In the other corner of the room the Iron Maiden sits quietly. Its gruesome doors open slowly.

Vash checks the bandage on his leg and hobbles to the door.

EXT. CASTLE BALCONY --DAWN

The Baron watches the sun rise. Nature's light washes over him with cleansing purity.

Resting on the railing is his flashlight. The Baron eyes it carefully. It is a long way down should he knock it over.

He reaches out, takes hold of it, turns it off, and places it back on the railing.

He is free of his handicap.

EXT. FIELD --DAY

The Battle.

Even from where the Baron sits, the Horseman in blood red armor is clearly visible.

You travel, as silently as smoke, over the heads of the frightened, fighting men to the center of the field. The Horseman appears to his enemies as nothing less than the embodiment of Death on Earth.

AVE V.O.

I am Ave Etalorus. Field General of the Armies of the East. But I was not always this.

EXT. FARM --DAY

SUPER: TWENTY MONTHS BEFORE THE BATTLE

Ave leans on the fence separating his yard from his corn field. His best friend since before the pair could walk, QUINT, is with him.

The two men are engaged in the most exciting activity within twenty miles: watching the crops ripen.

QUINT

It was good to get some rain yesterday.

AVE

Yeah.

The natural beauty of this place, the warm breeze, the luscious green, the brilliant sky are lost in their eyes. It is the same view they have seen for twenty years.

QUINT

Bored?

AVE

Yeah.

QUINT

I bet you Lia could find you something to do.

AVE

I bet she could.

QUINT

I don't know why you're always bitchin'. She is the prettiest girl in town.

AVE

Why don't you live with her?

QUINT

What is she going to do when Baron Reisht sends out the call?

AVE

She'll do what she has to.

QUINT

Would you lighten up? Since New Year's you have been about as much fun as chicken pox.

AVE

I'm just ready to go. I've been a farmer all my life and the one thing I've learned is I have got to get out of here.

QUINT

Something is moving in the corn.

He points, but Ave isn't listening.

AVE

Waking up to same thing every goddamn day. Anything is better than this, and being a soldier is a lot better.

Quint smacks his friend on the shoulder and points again.

AVE

Let's have a look.

EXT. CORN FIELD --DAY

The corn, while not yet budding, is very tall. It was easy to see the stalks moving from outside the field, but once inside the maze it is difficult to tell where you are.

Ave steps carefully so he won't damage the plants. He can hear his buddy several rows over.

AVE

Anything?

QUINT O.S.

I think it was further out.

Ave spots a leaf smeared with blood.

AVE

Be careful. I think it's wounded.

Vash falls over taking Ave and several plants with him.

Ave screams.

QUINT O.S.

I'm coming! I'm coming!

Ave squirms out from under Vash and realizes the man is unconscious. As he rolls Vash over, Quint appears out of the wall of crops.

QUINT

Oh my god, you're bleeding.

AVE

No. It's not my blood. Help me get him up.

Ave and Quint scoop up Vash and head towards the house.

INT. FARM HOUSE --DAY

LIA, Ave's wife, is a small town girl who married the first boy who asked her. Because that is what small town girls are expected to do.

AVE

How is he?

LIA

He's lost a lot of blood. If he wakes up he'll live. But I doubt he'll ever walk again.

QUINT

Who do you think he is?

LIA

I think we should call the Lieutenant.

AVE

Let him be. There's no point in going to town until he wakes up.

LIA

I don't want him in this house overnight.

AVE

I don't feel like going to town. It's already past noon.

LIA

This is not a pregnant mare Ave. We can't just deal with it ourselves. Someone tried to cut that man's leg off. Someone thought he was dangerous.

AVE

He may not live through the night. How dangerous can he be?

LIA

Where is Rand going to sleep tonight? Are you going to kick your son out into the barn for a stranger?

There is a knock on the door.

AVE

I'm not going to town tonight. Rand can sleep with us.

Lia moves to open the door.

LIA

Great.

Lia opens the door and bows. Ave and Quint stand to see who it is.

The Empress steps into the room.

EMPRESS

Please. I am but a humble traveler in search of a meal.

INT. FARM HOUSE --NIGHT

A simple but plentiful spread covers the table.

The Empress sits at the head with her TWO SERVANTS next to her.

Ave is at the foot flanked by Lia and their six year old son RAND. Quint is between Lia and the Empress' servant.

EMPRESS

You have two names. I have never heard of that before.

Lia excuses herself from the table to check on Vash.

AVE

Yes. Ave is my first name and Etalorus is our last name.

EMPRESS

That is interesting. Eta in our ancient tongue means son of.

AVE

That's right. Lorus is our father of ages past. He was the first to come here to farm. When he and his family arrived the land was covered by dark forests that were filled with great beasts.

EMPRESS

Really?

AVE

Legend has it that one by one Lorus drove the beasts into the sea. It is said he made his first kill when he was only a five years old.

EMPRESS

What were these beasts?

QUINT

No one has seen them in generations. But to hear the elders tell it they were as tall as a man with hundreds of fangs. And they love to feast on the bones of ill-mannered children.

Ave pinches Rand and he jumps.

AVE

There used to be a great many of us. But over time the blood thins and memories are lost. Now Rand and I are the only ones left who can claim a direct connection to the great hunter of old.

EMPRESS

I must say I have stopped at many a farm house on my journey and your story is the most incredible I have heard.

AVE

Thank you, Empress.

Lia returns.

LIA

He still sleeps.

EMPRESS

A sick relative?

LIA

No, a wounded stranger my husband found in the field.

EMPRESS

Stranger? Is he a fugitive?

LIA

We don't know. I certainly hope not.

She shoots Ave a look to remind him of her displeasure.

The Empress raises her glass.

EMPRESS

To random acts of kindness. May they be rewarded.

The table toasts.

RAND

Do you have a name Empress?

His parents are embarrassed by the question.

EMPRESS

I had a name little one. When my mother was Empress my name was Annarain.

RAND

Where is your mother now?

LIA
Rand that's enough.

The Empresses smiles in a way that puts everyone at ease.

EMPRESS
She died just over a year ago. I am
here to introduce myself to our
people.

RAND
Does anyone still call you Annarain?

EMPRESS
No little one, everyone calls me
Empress.

EXT. PORCH --NIGHT

The Empress bows to her hosts.

EMPRESS
Thank you for your hospitality. You
are most kind.

AVE
The honor was ours, Empress.

The Empress hands Lia a shadow box which contains a piece of
white silk bearing her signature.

EMPRESS
To commemorate the occasion.

LIA
We will cherish the memory.

EMPRESS
May we meet again in happy times.

AVE
Your will, Empress.

The small girl enters her carriage and her Servants drive her
into the night.

INT. FARM HOUSE --NIGHT

The Etalorus family and Quint return inside to find dishes lying on the floor. Lia scoops up Rand and looks expectantly at Ave.

He nods.

Ave grabs an shovel from the corner and approaches the door to Vash's room. Quint grabs an axe and is right there with him.

Ave throws open the door and jumps inside.

INT. BEDROOM --NIGHT

Vash is gone and the window is open.

INT. FARM HOUSE --NIGHT

Lia is more frightened now than ever.

AVE

He's gone.

LIA

I told you he was dangerous.

Ave puts down his shovel and sits at the table.

AVE

You're overreacting. He's just gone.

LIA

I'm not staying here tonight.

AVE

Where are you going this late? By the time you get to town, the Inn will be closed.

QUINT

You can stay at my place.

LIA

If you had gone to town when I asked this wouldn't be happening. You are so selfish.

AVE

All right. We'll stay with Quint.

LIA

I'm not sleeping at Quint's. That place is filthy. He lets his dog shit in the house.

QUINT

I do not.

LIA

The man helped himself to our food while we were standing right here and no one noticed. He could come back while we are asleep and do god knows what. We are going to town. And that's final.

AVE

Fine, I'll pack some clothes. I hope you're happy.

EXT. FARM --NIGHT

Vash hobbles into the barn near the house.

LIA O.S.

Don't blame this on me. This isn't my fault. This is your fault.

Blah. Blah. Blah. Even though you can't make out the words, Lia's shrill nagging continues into the night.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FARM --DAY

Months have passed.

The field that was a sea of green is now flecked with gold corn.

Ave emerges from the crops, covered in black dirt, dragging a huge basket of corn behind him.

The walk from the field to the porch is a long, sweaty, trip.

EXT. PORCH -DAY

On the porch Lia divides her attention equally between sorting the corn by size and preventing Rand from climbing on the furniture.

Both jobs whittle away at her sanity.

Ave pours his latest haul into the "to be sorted" pile and sits down.

AVE

Taking a break.

LIA

Fields not half done yet.

RAND

Look at me. Look at me.

Rand is about to do a back flip off the porch railing before his mother grabs him.

AVE

It's hot out there. I'll go back when it's cooler.

LIA

We've got to have this crop in town the day after tomorrow.

AVE

I know that, dear.

Quint drags his own bushel onto the porch and sits next to Ave.

QUINT

I don't think I can move my arms.

The MESSENGER rides up to the porch on a lathered, panting horse. He tosses a written notice in the vicinity of Ave.

MESSENGER

By the order of the Baron of the realm, all able-bodied men are to report to the palace on or about two days from hence. May the Empress keep you.

The Messenger gallops away.

Ave and Quint are up and excited. Their previous lethargy has vanished.

QUINT

I'm gonna go get my stuff. I'll meet you back here in an hour.

He sprints home.

LIA

They're going to send the married men home, right?

She shoos Rand into the house.

LIA

You're going to try and come back so you can help me with the crop, right?

Ave looks at his wife deciding whether or not he is going to lie to the woman he "loves."

AVE

No. I'm going to stay.

The news hits her like a train. She bravely fights back tears.

LIA

How am I supposed to feed your son, Ave? While you are out playing soldier with your friends, what are we supposed to do?

He moves to hug her. She pushes him away and runs into the house.

EXT. PORCH --NIGHT

Quint knocks on the door. When no one answers he looks in the window. Whatever he sees scares him enough to make him back off the porch.

Lia storms out of the house.

LIA

Go on. He'll be with you soon
enough.

Ave comes out with a knapsack in one hand and the Sword in the
other.

His wife turns to him. She is pissed at him for leaving and
pissed at herself for worrying. There are no words for this
combination of emotions.

AVE

Good bye.

LIA

Is that all you have to say?

AVE

I love you. I'm doing this to make a
better life for us.

LIA

Liar. If you loved me you'd stay.
There is nothing wrong with being a
farmer.

Rand runs out the house and attaches himself to his father's
leg. He holds on so tight, Ave can't get him to let go.

Ave looks to his wife for help. Her expression says "You made
your bed."

AVE

Hey little guy.

RAND

When are you coming home?

AVE

Soon. I promise. In the mean time,
I need you to help your mother. Can
you do that?

Ave picks up his son, who has his lip out ready to cry.

AVE

I need you to be brave. You're the
man of the house now.

Rand nods, but cries anyway.

Ave passes him off to his mother.

Ave waits, wanting her to say something that will let him off the hook. But she won't.

LIA

Don't go. I'm asking you. Please
don't go.

She doesn't respond when he kisses her cheek. And she blames herself as she watches him leave.

Crestfallen, hurt, and alone, she goes inside.

Vash sneaks out of the barn. He has regained most of his strength, but walks with a visible limp. He steals some food and heads for home.

EXT. ROAD --DAY

A ragged bunch of men, so sloppy no one would dare to call them an ARMY, marches past a thousand year old tree.

The Soldiers are poorly clothed, poorly armed, and poorly disciplined, but there are a lot of them. They stretch from horizon to horizon creating, a red dust cloud in front of the setting sun.

Ave and Quint are in middle of the line. Marching in a daze somewhere close to sleep.

The call to stop comes from the unseen front, but out of habit Ave continues to put one foot in front of the other until he bowls over the MAN in front of him.

AVE

Sorry.

Too tired to do anything but sleep Ave and Quint sit where they are in the middle of the road. They are doing their best to get comfortable when a long shadow falls over them.

TOBIN O.S.

Not so fast fellas. We got picket
duty tonight.

QUINT

Come on, Tobin, we were on shit
detail last night.

Tobin hasn't lost any of his charm.

TOBIN

That's Lieutenant Tobin to you Quint.
And if you don't move your ass I'll
you have you on shit detail for the
rest of the goddamn war.

AVE

Can we at we at least have a fire
tonight?

TOBIN

We'll see. It depends how much
bitchin' you do between here and
there.

Ave and Quint are slow to get up, but they do get up and
follow Tobin into the woods.

EXT. WOODS --DUSK

Tobin leads TWELVE SOLDIERS, including Ave and Quint, through
the light brush.

AVE

I do believe we're far enough from
the Army to provide ample warning.

TOBIN

Maybe if you weren't lugging that
sword around with you everywhere, you
would have more energy.

AVE

This Sword is more powerful than you
realize.

TOBIN

So's my dick, but I carry a rifle
into battle.

QUINT

Has anyone given you a rifle, Ave?
No. Me neither. I guess were out of
luck.

TOBIN

There will be plenty of rifles soon enough.

FIRST SOLDIER

That's comforting.

They come into a clearing.

TOBIN

We'll set up here. I want four men on duty in three hour shifts.

QUINT

Is that really necessary? We haven't seen shit for three months. Tonight's not gonna be any different.

TOBIN

Then you won't mind taking the first shift. Somebody make some dinner.

EXT. WOODS --NIGHT

The squad sits around the campfire mending cloths, finishing dinner, or swatting at bugs in their sleep.

Ave, Quint, and two OTHERS walk up to the campsite.

QUINT

It's time for someone else to stare at nothing for three hours.

Tobin points at Four Men and they groan as they disappear outside the firelight.

Ave sits near the fire and sharpens the Sword. Quint by contrast heads straight for the food.

TOBIN

You didn't hear anybody moving out there, did you?

QUINT

No. I told you there is nothing out there.

TOBIN

Sisco has twenty thousand men under his command. We're gonna meet'em sooner or later. You understand that, right?

Ave drags his hand over the blade and holds it up the light. It appears normal until he blows on his palm and a hair line of red appears on hand.

AVE

I believe you.

TOBIN

You should. Because let me tell you something about Sisco...

Tobin falls into the fire, throwing the clearing into darkness.

AVE

Get down!

No one has to be told twice.

QUINT

Is he dead? Holy shit is he dead?

AVE

Shut up.

FIRST SOLDIER

You don't lay face first in a fire if you're alive.

AVE

SHUT UP!

FOUR GREEN SOLDIERS creep into camp. The fading embers of the fire cast eerie shadows across their bodies.

Hiding in the dark, Ave watches.

FIRST GREEN SOLDIER

Here's the fire. They've got to be around here.

He pulls back the hammer on his rifle.

SWORD

Kill them, Ave. Kill them all.

SECOND GREEN SOLDIER

I've met women with more fortitude
than these island people. They
probably ran off.

SWORD

Trust me, Ave. I'll help you.

Suddenly, Ave is only aware of the blood pounding in his ears and the Four Men hovering near the fire. Moving with terrible swiftness, like a raging storm, he rolls into the midst of his enemy.

The Sword becomes a blur, as metal rings on metal. Before Ave's men can move, all Four Green Soldiers are dead.

The dull thunder in his head subsides and Ave looks at what he has done. He looks at the blood still running out of the lifeless bodies. He looks at the faces forever frozen in distended pain and he understands as difficult as it will be for a farmer to become a warrior, it will be harder still for a warrior to become a farmer.

Quint is first to shake Ave out of his reverie.

QUINT

Holy crap that was amazing. When did
you learn how to do that?

AVE

Bury the dead. Post a new guard and
continue the watch.

QUINT

Yes, sir.

EXT. MAIN CAMP --DAWN

The high concentration of men in a small area has destroyed all the grass around the road. The camp and everything in it is covered in dark mud.

Ave leads what is left of his squad into camp.

EXT. MAIN CAMP --DAY

The ragged bunch of men are ready to continue their march. Ave is trying to finish a bowl of cold grey porridge when General Shang appears before him.

GENERAL SHANG

Are you the man with the Sword?

Ave jumps to a sloppy attention, dropping his breakfast.

AVE

Yes, sir.

The General tosses him a small pendant.

GENERAL SHANG

You are now the Lieutenant of your squad. Try not to get killed.

He then passes Ave a rifle.

GENERAL SHANG

And next time use this. If you can kill four men with a sword, you can kill forty with a rifle.

AVE

Yes, sir.

Ave salutes and the General walks away. Ave passes the gun to Quint.

EXT. FOOTHILLS --DAWN

Winter has descended over the land.

Ave and NINE other LIEUTENANTS receive their orders from CAPTAIN ROLD in a mist filled valley that is commanded by three hills.

CAPTAIN ROLD

Gentlemen, I received word this morning that the Army has taken Sisco castle. All that remains of the Green Army are the shit kickers on those hills. We're going to clear them out so they can't sabotage our supply lines. We'll form up over there in an hour.

AVE

Why take the hill? Why not pin them up there and let them surrender?

CAPTAIN ROLD

That will take months. If we do this fast and right, the General will take notice.

AVE

Shouldn't we at least tell them they have been defeated?

CAPTAIN ROLD

There are only fifty men up there.

AVE

Fifty men with rifles and trenches. We're going to get slaughtered marching across that field.

CAPTAIN ROLD

I don't give a shit Lieutenant. Our orders came down from the General himself. They contain no ambiguity. There will be no discussion. We will take those hills. Am I being clear?

AVE

Yes, sir.

CAPTAIN ROLD

Gather your men. We are going to do this by the book.

EXT. CAMP --DAWN

Ave's squad is still asleep when he approaches. He bangs a spoon on a pot to get their attention.

AVE

Everybody up. Let's move.

CHERY, a kid too old to be fascinated by the world and too young to appreciate it, is the first to bitch.

CHERY

Can't we at least wait for the ground to thaw before we try to kill ourselves?

AVE

Here it is boys, there are fifty men up there that constitute a thorn in the General's side. We're going to remove it.

Quint stamps his feet to work out the cold.

QUINT

This is what I love about the army, you wake up cold and wet, eat some breakfast and go out and kill some people.

AVE

No time for breakfast. The Captain wants to go before the sun get too high.

QUINT

Even better, because you don't want all that food weighing you down.

AVE

Look, we're getting the shaft today. But tonight when we are on top of those hills, I'll take care of you. Now, let's quit bitching and get this done.

EXT. FIELD --DAY

The sun has burned off the mist. The ground is wet and soggy with patches of white snow every few feet.

Captain Rold stands before his troops.

CAPTAIN ROLD

If a man with a rifle falls, pick it up. If a man without a rifle falls, leave him. Follow me, and I will show you glory.

The Captain turns and leads his men across the field.

EXT. HILLTOP --DAY

The GREEN SOLDIERS ready their weapons.

EXT. FIELD --DAY

Captain Rold has his men in a tight line four deep.

CAPTAIN ROLD

Hold the formation!

You've seen this kind of tactic before.

Ave and Quint are in the first row.

SWORD

We must move faster, Ave. You are in danger.

AVE

Double time!

Not quite in unison the platoon doubles the pace.

Captain Rold is surprised that someone else is giving orders, but it is too late to tell them to stop.

The first shots take out three men.

CAPTAIN ROLD

Steady. Hold the line.

SWORD

Spread out. Their rifles are not accurate.

AVE

It's too late. I can't do that.

EXT. HILLTOP --DAY

The Green Soldiers quickly reload their weapons.

EXT. FIELD --DAY

The advancing platoon approaches the base of the hill.

CAPTAIN ROLD

Don't fire up the hill. Keep in tight formation.

The second shot rains down on them, and it is devastating. Men and blood scatter like shards of glass in a broken window pane. Ave doesn't wait for the Captain.

AVE

FIRE!

He sprints, screaming, up the hill, the only man heading in that direction. Shots ring out behind him.

Captain Rold tries to regain control of the men.

CAPTAIN ROLD

NO! STAY IN FORMATION!

No one pays attention. Every man left standing follows Ave up the hill.

EXT. HILLTOP --DAY

The Green Soldiers try desperately to reload.

Ave is the first to leap over the small stone breastwork at the top of the hill. His men are not far behind.

Without time to reload the defenders are practically defenseless. Ave kills without mercy. Every man that stands near him is hacked away like wheat before a scythe. His men follow his example.

The snow quickly turns red under a river of blood. What is left of the Green Soldiers retreat.

AVE
PRESS ON! DON'T LET THEM ESCAPE!

EXT. HILLTOP --DAY

Ave picks his way through the sea of bodies. He is covered in little bits of flesh and sticky filth, but the Sword remains bright.

Low moans, like a fowl wind, escape from the wounded. The lucky few remain silent, frozen with indecision and horror.

AVE
Chery.

He looks over at his young friend.

AVE
Chery!

Chery snaps back to this reality.

CHERY
Yes, sir.

AVE
Make me a hospital over there. Any man who is still alive will be given a chance.

Captain Rold appears out of nowhere.

CAPTAIN ROLD
Belay that order mister. Leave the wounded be. We must return to the Army.

Ave turns to Chery.

AVE
You have your orders.

Chery nod and leaves without hesitation.

Captain Rold stands eyeball to eye ball with Ave.

CAPTAIN ROLD

How dare you disobey me. I will see you hanged for what you did today.

The Captain backhands Ave and splits his lip. But Ave does not back down.

CAPTAIN ROLD

The General fucking loves me. Do you understand that?

AVE

Captain Rold, I am placing you under arrest.

CAPTAIN ROLD

Is that a joke? Are you trying to be funny?

AVE

Lieutenant TYNE!

A short stocky man runs up to Ave.

TYNE

Yes, sir.

AVE

The Captain is under arrest. He is not to leave your sight until I return. If he opens his mouth, gag him. If he runs, shoot him.

He turns to his former commander.

AVE

Do you understand that?

TYNE

Yes, sir.

AVE

I'll be back by sundown. Have the men fed and in formation by then.

Tyne salutes Ave as he walks off.

EXT. HILLTOP --NIGHT

A large bonfire.

Ave and a gagged, beaten Captain Rold stand in front of SEVENTY FIVE SURVIVORS.

AVE

Today's mistakes were made. Mistakes that will not be repeated.

He removes the Captain's pendants and attaches one to his sleeve next the one he already has.

AVE

I am now Captain of this company. Mr. Rold, for your ambition and incompetence, I sentence you to death.

Ave beheads Captain Rold.

There is no ceremony or drama, only the awfulness of the body falling into the fire.

AVE

Gentlemen, we may not live to see the end of the war. But if you follow me, you will not die for nothing.

Ave has galvanized the hearts and minds of these men, but at a great personal cost.

AVE

Tomorrow we rejoin the Army. But tonight is ours. And a time for quiet celebration. Be glad you are alive, gentlemen, for who knows what lies ahead.

From behind Ave dozens of WOMEN walk up the hill. The men quickly fall out of formation.

The somber mood lingers however, and what follows is more about healing and regeneration than anything else.

Ave surveys the scene and knows he has passed his first test as a leader.

INT. TENT --NIGHT

Ave sits next to Quint, who lost a leg in the battle.

AVE

Are you in pain?

QUINT

No. I feel lucky. Lucky to be
alive. Lucky to go home.

Ave kisses his friend on the forehead.

AVE

I'm going to miss you. This was
supposed to be our grand adventure.

QUINT

Do you have a letter for Lia?

AVE

No. But tell her... Tell her I'm
sorry.

QUINT

I'll tell her you love her. You tell
her you're sorry.

AVE

After all you've seen, you're still
afraid of my wife.

Quint laughs as best he can.

INT. COMMAND TENT --DAY

Ave and General Shang argue over a table. Both men are on
their feet and ready for blood.

Baron Reisht quietly eats his breakfast while listening to the
argument unfold.

GENERAL SHANG

You are just a farmer. You know
nothing about strategy.

AVE

I've been fighting your war on the front line for the better part of two years. I know plenty.

GENERAL SHANG

The men have to stay in close formation to maximize the use of our rifles.

AVE

The men need to spread out to give the enemy many small targets rather than one big one. Do you see that, or are you as blind as you are stupid?

GENERAL SHANG

Who in the hell do you think you are?

AVE

I'm the Captain that's going to kick your ass.

The General crosses the table faster than Ave thought possible. The sucker punch to the head isn't as bad as the stomping Ave receives once he falls to the ground.

BARON REISHT

Shang, that's enough.

GENERAL SHANG

You may want to rethink your strategy, Captain.

Ave spits up blood and has trouble standing.

BARON REISHT

I assume you have a suggestion.

Ave has difficulty talking, but his voice becomes clear as he goes.

AVE

Draben has placed his largest force in front of us, inviting an attack. He is drawing us out into the open where he knows he can get off four shots before we cross the field. Even if only one in eight find a mark, it will cost us half our army.

GENERAL SHANG

But we will shoot back. Many separate rifles coming together to form a mighty fist. If he kills half our men, we will kill two thirds of his.

AVE

You sir, are dreaming.

The Baron restrains the General with a gesture.

BARON REISHT

So what would you have us do? Run home, our tail between our legs?

AVE

No, my lord. I have a plan. Something Draben has never dreamed of.

BARON REISHT

And what's that?

AVE

Cavalry.

EXT. CAMP --DUSK

The Baron and the General are alone.

BARON REISHT

It is a bold plan.

GENERAL SHANG

Yes, it is. Keep in mind, my lord, if he is too successful he may rise to challenge you.

BARON REISHT
He may indeed.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --NIGHT

Twilight settles over the field. Campfires on the far hills still outnumber the pure white stars that are just beginning to peek out from behind the curtain of night.

Things appear peaceful until you see the endless line of horses straining at their reins. General Shang trots back and forth in front of the battle line.

GENERAL SHANG
And always remember he who is last
among us to fall will be the one who
goes unhonored.

A cheer from the men who are ready to battle.

Tyne is next to Chery is next to Ave.

TYNE
Attacking at night. This could be
confusing.

CHERY
If you see a man not on a horse, run
him down. How hard is that?

TYNE
And if you fall off your horse?

AVE
Here we go.

The horses leap onto the field. A trot quickly becomes a gallop.

EXT. CAMP --NIGHT

A SENTRY in Red and Yellow armor beats wildly on a drum. MEN behind him scramble in and out of tents, desperate not be caught off guard.

One by one, hundreds of MEN line up and take aim, but in the moonless night there is nothing to shoot at. Only the sound of hooves pounding the soft earth hints at the coming danger.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

Leaning over the neck of his horse, Ave draws the Sword.

The black noise of battle fades in Ave's ears.

SWORD

You're holding your breath, Ave. You must breathe to be remain calm. You must be calm to be focused. You must focus to survive.

Bright flashes of light followed by dark smoke signal the defenders' first shots. Ave is only vaguely aware.

SWORD

Mercy is for the weak, but cruelty is not for the strong.

The second shots spin outward to bring truth and blood to an unfortunate few.

SWORD

Be not afraid. Only in death will you discover the importance of life.

The third shots sound like lightning snapping an ancient tree into pieces. Even Ave can't ignore it.

EXT. CAMP --NIGHT

Ave is the first man over the wall.

Acrid smoke burns his eyes as he engages the surprised and unprepared men below him.

Ave, quickly spinning to defend each quarter, rains death on the soldiers around him. Answering every blow with a parry and killing at will, his silhouette becomes the shape of utter horror.

Like a thousand lions voicing rage, Ave's cavalry joins the battle with a great and terrible cry.

The camp burns.

Ave kills another and another and another.

Finally, free of torment, Ave rides into the heart of the camp. Hacking down tent poles and spreading fire, he adds to the confusion of the attack.

Ave finds the Command Tent undefended. He rides through the large flaps.

INT. COMMAND TENT --NIGHT

The Commanders of the Red and Yellow army are dead by their own hand. A YOUNG SERVING GIRL stands frozen on the precipice, ready to slash her own throat but not ready to die.

AVE

No! Don't!

He reaches for her but the invisible bonds that stayed her hand have snapped and she is gone.

Ave cries out in pain and frustration.

INT. THE BARON'S TENT --NIGHT

Ave passes the Red and Yellow standard to the Baron.

AVE

My lord, we suffered twelve hundred casualties. Three hundred may return to duty before we are done.

The Baron nods.

AVE

We captured almost five thousand men. Apparently Draben did not pay his mercenaries enough to die for him. The Baron himself, along with his commanders, are dead.

BARON REISHT

Allow the mercenaries to swear loyalty to me. Double their pay, but do not place them in crucial areas.

AVE

Yes, my lord.

BARON REISHT

You've done well.

Ave salutes and is dismissed.

EXT. CAMP --NIGHT

Ave walks alone through the camp. As he passes by the men, they stand and nod their heads in respect.

Tyne approaches.

AVE
Find me parchment and a pen. I want
to write home.

TYNE
Yes, sir.

INT. THE BARON'S TENT --NIGHT

General Shang joins the Baron.

GENERAL SHANG
He could command the entire army now,
if he tried.

BARON REISHT
That means one of you is expendable.

Shang inclines his head to his lord's observation.

INT. AVE'S TENT --NIGHT

A blank sheet of paper stares at Ave. He, however, is looking at a dead rat in the corner of his tent.

He walks over to the creature and with all the gentleness of a new mother he picks up the broken animal.

After respectfully placing the body in a small fire, Ave says a silent prayer and unsuccessfully fights back tears.

INT. THE BARON'S TENT --NIGHT

The Baron and Shang.

GENERAL SHANG

You know my loyalties, my lord, but
he, in the end, is a stranger.

BARON REISHT

Is your life really this important to
you, Shang?

GENERAL SHANG

My lord, I am only trying to protect
you.

BARON REISHT

I still hold the cards in this game.
The young General is not a threat and
as it happens, still useful.

GENERAL SHANG

General?

BARON REISHT

You will announce it tomorrow.

GENERAL SHANG

Yes, my lord.

INT. TENT --NIGHT

Ave, cradling his sword like a woman, sleeps... and dreams.

EXT. FARM --DAY

The golden sun.

The sapphire sky.

The emerald crops.

Are all nothing compared to the beauty of his wife.

Lia tosses a giggling Rand into the air and catches him with
the sure hands of a loving mother. Happiness--

Turns to anger when she turns to stare at you.

LIA

How am I supposed to feed your son,
Ave? What are we supposed to do?

The crops wither on the vine. The sky turns grey and brown.
An evil wind blows.

Lia drops Rand to the ground and walks towards us. A knife
appears in her hand.

The child cries.

She slices her own throat, but does not stop walking. Blood
pours down her chest.

Her skin turns a grotesque yellow and melts off her bones as
she reaches out to grab you.

The child cries forever.

INT. AVE'S TENT --NIGHT

Ave wakes up gulping air.

He looks around and even though everything is as it should be,
he dares not sleep.

EXT. ROAD --DAY

Ave inspects his troops as they ride past. His FIRST CAVALRY
OFFICER is having difficulty.

Ave rides up along side him.

AVE

What seems to be the problem?

FIRST CAVALRY OFFICER

Nothing, sir.

AVE

I asked you a question, soldier.

FIRST CAVALRY OFFICER

I would see an end to this business,
but I'm no coward, General.

AVE

We had a saying when I was a farmer.
Never wish for rain on a sunny day.
Every day has its own peculiar
difficulties.

FIRST CAVALRY OFFICER
Yes, sir.

AVE
Hang in there, soldier. I'll have
you home soon enough.

Ave drops back out of line and rides to the rear, where he
finds Chery and Tyne.

TYNE
Shouldn't you be at the front leading
this rabble?

AVE
I'm a general. Wherever I am is the
correct place for me to be.

CHERY
I wish I knew what we are going to
face in Selawhy.

AVE
If you knew, you would only fret
about it. You will see what we have
already seen.

TYNE
Only more of it.

AVE
We've been picking up men all along
the countryside. We've captured
thousands of rifles. If anything we
are better prepared now than when we
left the keys.

CHERY
Still, I'd feel better with 10,000
more men.

AVE
We don't need 10,000 more men, we've
got you on our side.

In the distance, the spires of the great castle peek over the
horizon.

INT. THE BARON'S TENT --NIGHT

The Baron waits.

AVE O.S.

My lord?

BARON REISHT

Come.

Ave enters.

The Baron slides a chest across the table to Ave. He opens the box.

BARON REISHT

My reports tell me we will face close to a hundred thousand men tomorrow. Can you defeat them?

AVE

How did you know?

BARON REISHT

I know all of our history, Ave Etalorus.

Ave pulls out the brilliant red chain-mail armor.

AVE

We will win, my lord. I swear it.

The Baron salutes and Ave exits.

Shang appears from a shadow.

BARON REISHT

Have the Black and Gold arrived undetected?

GENERAL SHANG

Yes, my lord.

BARON REISHT

Then Ave might just be correct.

INT. TENT --DAY

Ave kneels before a small statue of a tree. He takes a small handful of dirt and rubs it on his forehead and arms.

AVE

Almighty gods, I ignored my duties as a father and a husband for selfish reasons. But, now I pray to you and ask only that you watch over my wife and child. They are what I would have you judge me by when we soon meet.

He touches his forehead to the ground.

AVE

May my words and my heart be acceptable to you, whom I trust even in the face of death.

He rises, grabs the Sword, and steps outside.

EXT. CASTLE --DAY

Ave is nearly blinded by the brightness of the day. In front of the castle moat is a rainbow of armor that constitutes the enemy.

Ave turns and faces his own army, already formed and ready for battle. They cheer as he mounts his horse and rides in front of them.

Ave rides back and forth in front of his ranks. Tyne and Chery ride just behind him carrying banners that snap in the wind. The Army falls silent as Ave speaks.

AVE

Friends, at last the time has come. Waiting for us across that field is the greatest fighting force the world has ever seen. Those men will gladly cross the fires of Ath for the privilege of feeding you your own guts. But we will be victorious or we will ride into eternity with the blood of heroes in our hearts. We will be victorious, and the world will tremble at the tale of our deeds. We will be victorious, and history will never forget our names.

A loud cheer goes up as Ave wheels his horse and drives towards the waiting army.

EXT. CASTLE --DAY

Baron Reisht watches from atop a quiet hill.

He can clearly see the red armor in front of his army.

The larger multi-colored force of the Archduke waits with steel nerves that belong only to professional soldiers.

Behind the Baron, however, hidden from view, are 20,000 TROOPS in fearsome lacquered armor of sparkling Black and Gold.

Each one carries a weapon that is both a rifle and a sword.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

The scene is chaos. The noise is scary.

All battle lines have broken. Men fight for air more than ground. Ave is the eye of the storm, hacking down men as they stand before him.

His horse rears, and he finds himself in a moment of calm.

This is when time stops.

On the highest tower of the castle the Archduke, Darin, watches.

DARIN V.O.

I was born to hold absolute power. I was raised on the principles of leadership. I have lived for only one purpose. I am the Archduke, Darin. Or at least I was until today.

EXT. BALCONY --DAY

Time continues to flow.

The Archduke and his ENTOURAGE observe the battle like nervous fans watching a sporting contest.

The Empress comes to stand by their side. Her expression is a mixture of fear and disgust.

DARIN

Come to watch with us, my dear?

EMPRESS

No. I came to ask if you spoke with Vash this morning.

DARIN

Yes. I sent him to scout the enemy's capabilities.

EMPRESS

But his leg....

DARIN

Is fine. By his own testimony his leg is fine.

EMPRESS

Has he returned?

DARIN

Not yet.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

At the base of the tower Vash slits his enemy's throat. He rolls off the body and runs as best he can towards the moat.

THREE MEN with spears stand in his way.

They don't even see Vash throw his knife, but it is clear why the First Man falls.

Not distracted by their fallen comrade, the Two remaining Soldiers attack with a series of thrusts and wicked turns.

Vash nimbly dodges them all.

Even diminished by injury Vash's skills are superior to the combined might of his attackers. They present a challenge no greater than that of a mouse to a cat. And the only thing Vash loses in their confrontation is time.

Leaving the vanquished soldiers on the field, Vash dives into the moat. He swims beneath the surface of the water until he reaches a grate at the base of the castle wall. With some difficulty he removes the heavy hunk of metal and swims into the tunnel.

EXT. TOWER --DAY

Darin's grim expression slowly turns into a smile. He feels like he is winning.

DARIN

My name will be joined with the
Founder as great leaders of our
house.

Vash appears over his shoulder.

VASH

My lord, I have news.

DARIN

Report.

VASH

The invaders are holding troops in
reserve. Enough to take the
advantage.

From his point of view Darin can see that the invading army, Ave's army, has been surrounded. They have fashioned a circular line and their circle is shrinking.

DARIN

Nonsense. If he had troops he would have used them by now. You must be mistaken.

VASH

There is no mistake, my lord.

Darin looks back to Vash and takes his time mulling over his options.

DARIN

General, make the field commanders aware of the possibility of reserve troops.

The GENERAL steps out of the entourage with a pair of flags and makes a series of complicated signals.

VASH

Pulling men inside the palace would be preferable, my lord. It was built for defense.

DARIN

Now I know you are being over cautious my friend. I have five thousand soldiers in the palace already. Adding more would be inconvenient.

Darin turns his attention back to the battle.

The Empress takes Vash's hand and gently pulls him inside.

INT. PALACE --DAY

The Empress, who is supposed to love all her people equally, is not allowed to nag. But Vash understands.

VASH

I am fine. I have healed.

EMPRESS

Why do you continue to take unnecessary risks?

VASH

I must do what I can to serve my lord.

She is patient.

VASH

I will not be captured. Not by him.

EMPRESS

I know he hurt you, but...

VASH

You don't know. You don't know! I will not be his prisoner. Not again.

EMPRESS

Will Darin win this battle?

VASH

I don't think so.

EMPRESS

Then, when the time comes, escape. You can do that. You can do anything.

He is about to answer, but there is a commotion on the balcony. When he turns to see, she turns him back.

EMPRESS

Vash, I'm carrying your child.

Speechless joy.

DARIN O.S.

Vash! I need you.

Like a well-trained soldier he answers his commander's call without thinking.

The Empress, who is supposed to love all her people equally, is not allowed to cry for one man, but she does.

EXT. BALCONY --DAY

Darin points.

DARIN

Look.

From high above the field the Black and Gold Army looks like a dark amoeba that smothers the Archduke's multi-colored force.

On the battlefield, however, it looks very different.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

The Baron finally shows us why he has never been challenged. He moves with such purpose and ferocity it is almost unnatural.

Flanked on both sides by his specially trained, specially armed troops, he is unstoppable.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --ELSEWHERE

Ave's horse has been shot. His right leg is pinned under the dying animal. He can't see the sky from where he lies on the ground. His world is now made up entirely of dirt covered boots and severed limbs.

Never releasing the Sword, Ave struggles to free himself. BODIES trip over the horse and fall near him. Blood rains down on him in thick droplets.

As long as he is on the ground, he is in danger.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

The Baron fires his hybrid weapon with devastating effect, but rather than take time to reload, he fends off attacks while TWO BLACK AND GOLD SOLDIERS load their weapons.

When they are ready, the Soldiers fire and then take up a position to protect the Baron and others.

In this way the Baron gains ground, five bloody feet at a time.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --ELSEWHERE

A PURPLE SOLDIER sees Ave on the ground and takes aim with his rifle. The fallen general pushes for all he is worth on his saddle. The blood soaked earth is soft and there is movement.

The Soldier is careful. He slowly pulls back the hammer to make sure it engages. He steadies himself for the kick and squeezes.

MISFIRE.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

Black caked-on mud turns the Baron's sweat into dark stripes that line his face.

Step by step, inch by inch, with methodical determination, he takes control of the churned up ground.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --ELSEWHERE

Ave is unaware of his good fortune.

The Purple Soldier throws his rifle to the ground in frustration. He draws a hammer from his waist. Seizing the opportunity, he runs screaming towards Ave.

Ave has his back turned to his assassin.

The Purple soldier raises his hammer, poised to strike.

Ave works his ankle free but it is too late.

The Purple soldier brings his hammer down with dread precision and deadly force.

But before the mallet meets its mark, the Soldier is shot. The force of the blow knocks him backwards and the hammers falls harmlessly by his side.

Baron Reisht holds the smoking gun.

Ave, now on his feet, and standing next to his Lord, is again the most feared man on the field.

BARON REISHT
To the Castle.

EXT. BALCONY --DAY

The shrinking circle has begun to expand. Darin's Army falls back toward the Castle Moat.

Darin turns to the Empress.

DARIN
My lady, help me.

EMPRESS
What would you have me do?

DARIN

You are the bringer of life and of light. You can stop this madness before it is too late.

EMPRESS

I fear I cannot.

DARIN

You have to. It is your duty to protect your people.

EMPRESS

You are not the force of light battling the forces of darkness. I could not interfere even if I knew how.

DARIN

I am the Archduke. My will is your will!

She shakes her head "NO."

He looks back to the battle.

His forces have been split in two. Ave and the Baron have a clear path to the Castle.

DARIN

Vash, come with me.

Darin leaves the Balcony. Vash follows. The Empress is reluctant to let go of his hand, but he gives her no choice.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

The Black and Gold hold the Archduke's Army at bay, while Ave and his men prepare to destroy the Castle Drawbridge.

A hundred men take careful aim at a large wooden door.

AVE

Fire.

INT. PALACE --DAY

The thunder of the rifles makes Darin dive for cover. Vash helps the large man to his feet.

DARIN

We must hurry.

INT. TREASURE ROOM --DAY

A stone vault with chests neatly stacked from wall to wall holds the wealth of a nation.

Darin blows dust off an ornately carved box. He opens it and pulls out a sword. He picks it up and hands it to Vash.

Vash holds the ancient weapon with respect.

DARIN

Protect me. Protect me from those who are trying to kill me.

So overcome with fear, Darin looks faint.

DARIN

It is not too late. It's not too late! Is it?

VASH

With my life, my lord.

Again the rifles from just outside echo throughout the Palace.

DARIN

Send the FIRST ADVISOR to my chambers. Now!

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

Ave's men reload.

The door is splintered and showing signs of weakness.

AVE

Ready!

The men take aim one more time.

INT. PALACE HALL --DAY

Vash has formed two lines of men that stretch across the width of the hall. The front line has taken a knee, the second line is standing. They are all aiming rifles at the door.

VASH

When the door collapses, do not fire.
When the enemy comes pouring through
the portal, do not fire. Only when
your eyes are filled with black
armor, are you allowed to pull the
trigger. Do you understand?

REGIMENT AS ONE

Yes, sir!

The next shot opens gaping holes in the door. Daylight pours through like the light of heaven.

VASH

After your shot, you know the plan.
Hold out as long as you can. The
more of them we take with us the
higher we will ascend up the chain.

A final shot and the door collapses in a cloud of dust.

Ave's Men flood into the hall.

Vash's men fire as one and in a single instant forty men disappear behind a curtain of smoke.

The defenders break to several different doors in the hall reloading as they go.

As he retreats out of the hall Vash can see Ave's armor gleam, like a beacon in the foggy haze. Vash readies his sword.

INT. DARIN'S BEDROOM --DAY

Darin fidgets in the corner of his room.

His First Advisor knocks before entering.

FIRST ADVISOR

Your Majesty?

He bows.

DARIN
How could you let this happen?

Darin is careful to keep a chair or a table between himself and his trusted Advisor.

FIRST ADVISOR
My lord, you must calm down.

DARIN
There is an Army in my home! Do not tell me to calm down.

FIRST ADVISOR
How may I serve?

DARIN
Fetch the accountant.

FIRST ADVISOR
My lord, you cannot bribe an invading army.

Frustration.

DARIN
Stop giving me reasons to kill you and fetch the accountant.

INT. DINING HALL --DAY

The battle for the control of the Castle moves from room to room.

Ave and several of his men slide into this room and hide behind overturned furniture.

Vash and his group find cover on the far side of the table.

CLOSE UP'S ALTERNATE:

AVE
We go on three.

VASH
Anyone have any bullets left?

AVE
One.

VASH
I guess we have to rely on courage.

AVE
Two.

VASH
I'll take the one in red.

AVE
Three!

Ave comes screaming around the barricade, ferocious and terrifying. But, Vash is unafraid.

Vash vaults on top of the table.

Ave meets him with an overhand blow.

Vash blocks, but the force of the blow buckles his bad knee.

Ave moves in for the kill. Vash sweeps the large man's legs out from under him and the two roll apart.

Playtime is over.

The battle around them has been joined.

INT. DARIN'S BEDROOM --DAY

Darin paces impatiently.

His First Advisor returns.

FIRST ADVISOR
My lord, the accountant has fled.

Darin opens his mouth, but the First Advisor interrupts.

FIRST ADVISOR
You must collect yourself. I have brought...

A beautiful scantily clad woman walks into the room.

DARIN
...LARA...

FIRST ADVISOR
...to help clear your head.

INT. DINING ROOM --DAY

Great shafts of light fill the noble hall. From atop the table Vash and Ave take careful measure of each other. Recognition dawns almost simultaneously.

AVE
It's you.

VASH
I'm sorry things must end this way.

AVE
So am I.

A spinning, flashing, impossible to follow rush.
A blur of motion; a cacophony of force.
A duel worthy of worship.

INT. DARIN'S BEDROOM --DAY

Lara sits on a long sofa with Darin's head in her lap. She softly strokes his hair.

The First Advisor lingers, unseen, in the doorway.

DARIN
You know, Lara, of all my concubines
you are my favorite. How many
children do we have?

LARA
Four.

DARIN
That's right, four.

Gunfire reverberates through the Castle.

DARIN
I wish they would stop that. My head
is beginning to hurt. You know I
love you, more than the others,
anyway. You know that, don't you?

LARA

Yes, my lord.

DARIN

Then let us depart. You and me. My accountant is gone, but we could find enough treasure here. Don't you think?

LARA

My lord, I cannot save you.

She kisses his head.

The gunfire is louder now.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

The fighting winds down. Only the suicidal refuse to surrender.

Baron Reisht and General Shang pick their way through the empty bodies towards the castle.

GENERAL SHANG

We don't know what is in the castle, my lord. It is too dangerous for you to enter. For your own safety, let the army go first.

BARON REISHT

You sound more like a woman everyday. Billet the army and see to the wounded.

Tyne runs up to his commander and salutes.

TYNE

My lord.

BARON REISHT

Yes?

TYNE

The last of the enemy has surrendered. The field is ours.

GENERAL SHANG
That doesn't mean caution is no
longer warranted.

TYNE
The General is correct, my lord.
There is some kind of commotion in
the harbor.

The Baron stops, grabs Shang and kisses him full on the mouth.

BARON REISHT
It is time I fulfilled my destiny.
You have your orders.

GENERAL SHANG
Yes, sir.

BARON REISHT
(TO TYNE)
Grab twenty men and come with me.

INT. PALACE HALL --DAY

With twenty men behind him, Baron Reisht enters the castle.

INT. DARIN'S BEDROOM --DAY

Darin stands on his bed and shouts at Lara and the First
Advisor.

DARIN
This is madness! How can you even
suggest such a thing?

LARA
It is the only way for you to ascend.

FIRST ADVISOR
She is right. You cannot allow
yourself to be captured. To do so
would be to forfeit your honor.

Darin stares in gaping disbelief.

FIRST ADVISOR

At the dawn of the civil wars
Archduke Steir was captured by your
ancestors. They hung him naked in a
cage and allowed the people to stone
him until he died.

DARIN

I don't want to kill myself.

FIRST ADVISOR

As I see it, you do not have a
choice.

INT. DINING HALL --DAY

Battle fury surrounds the paladins on the table.

If Vash is a greyhound, quick and sure, then Ave is a timber
wolf, strong and fearless.

Back and forth they move across the table, locked in perfect
combat.

A slash intended to cut a man in half. An acrobatic dodge
followed by a quick thrust. A deft parry and combination
attack.

No longer a duel, this is poetry.

INT. PALACE TEMPLE --DAY

The Temple is a square room made entirely of wood. A statue
of a tree decorates the north wall. A white mat with a red
border rests in the center of the room. On the south wall:
witnesses.

The First Advisor leads a feeble Archduke in.

FIRST ADVISOR

The priests have prepared the way.

The only object on the mat is a long ornamental knife.

When Darin spies the people gathered, he regains some of his
arrogance.

He locks eyes with the Empress who meets his gaze. Without help Darin strides onto the mat and kneels before the knife.

DARIN

Almighty gods, whom I trust even in
the face of death, accept my words
and my heart.

He sits up and prays.

DARIN

Let the glory of the Gods be extolled
and your great names be hallowed in
this the world you created. May the
Empress, who is born of you, rule in
your name now and forever.

EVERYONE IN THE ROOM

Amen.

He touches his head to floor, sits up and continues.

DARIN

Let the Empress be blessed for all
time beyond all the songs and
adorations that I may utter in
life.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD --DAY

Shang oversees the burial of men in unmarked graves.

DARIN V.O.

Bless the ones who came before us and
those who will follow that they may
fill the world with compassion and
succeed where we have failed.

EVERYONE IN THE ROOM V.O.

Amen.

INT. PALACE HALLWAY --DAY

Men hide in doorways and under tables as their comrades in arms are shot and wounded or shot and killed.

DARIN V.O.

May the sanctity of grace and the
promise of life come true for me and
my country for now and for all time.

EVERYONE IN THE ROOM V.O.

Amen.

INT. DINING HALL --DAY

Alone in the room, Vash and Ave continue their violence.

DARIN V.O.

May she who causes peace to reign in
the heavens cause peace to reign
among us and all the world and let us
say

EVERYONE IN THE ROOM V.O.

Amen.

INT. PALACE TEMPLE --DAY

Darin takes the knife in his hand and holds the point under
his chin.

DARIN

My Gods, I pray that life never ends,
and in the next turning of the
seasons, you look favorably on my
life and my deeds. This is what I
would have you judge me by when we
soon meet.

He shoves the knife into his neck and falls backwards.

Blood quickly covers the entire mat.

Baron Reisht walks into the room alone.

No one moves.

No one says anything.

He splashes through the blood and reaches down to pull off the
gold chain of office.

Without ceremony he places it around his own neck. He turns to the people in the room.

BARON REISHT

Get out!

Everyone obeys. Even the Empress.

INT. DINING HALL --DAY

Exhausted, struggling for air, Vash and Ave continue.

Both men have minor injuries. Both men can barely lift their weapons. Both men refuse to surrender.

The next one to make a mistake will die.

Vash swings.

Ave blocks and returns.

Vash dodges. They pause to rest. Ave thrusts, Vash blocks. They pause to rest. Weary.

BARON REISHT O.S.

My people. We are victorious.

A loud cheer goes up from outside.

AVE

It's over. Surrender yourself.

With surprising speed, Vash lashes out and drives Ave back. Flipping off the table, Ave avoids being stabbed. He retreats.

Vash knocks chairs out the way in pursuit.

The bloody, marble floor is slippery.

His back to the wall, Ave swings the Sword in a high arc over his head. Vash sidesteps the blow, but Ave is still too fast.

He adjust his swing and catches Vash in the shoulder.

Vash staggers backwards.

The Empress enters.

EMPRESS

STOP!

Ave moves in, ready to end it.

EMPRESS

There is no point. Please.

Ave hesitates, but then kneels.

AVE

Your will, Empress.

The Empress hurries to catch Vash before he falls.

She cradles him in her arms.

Vash struggles to talk, but can't.

EMPRESS

I know. It's all right. I know.

Vash is dead.

The Empress mourns and I mourn with her because I loved him too.

INT. PALACE HALL --DAY

Exhausted, Ave, through will alone, drags towards the ruined door.

Tyne runs up to him.

TYNE

General, where is the Baron?

Ave just shakes his head.

TYNE

Get to the docks there is someone there.

AVE

Find the Archduke.

Ave does his best to hurry.

EXT. DOCKS --DAY

A STRANGER in modern camouflage sits under a tent.

Behind him, in the harbor, is a iron plated battleship five times bigger than anything else in sight.

When Ave arrives, he stands.

He opens a book and struggles with the words that are not in his native tongue.

STRANGER

On behalf of Roderick Fourth King. I
claim this land and its people for
Daimland. God the King save.

He launches into a speech in his own language, but is drowned out by a rifle shot.

The stranger looks at his chest as blood soaks through the cloth.

BARON REISHT

Over my dead body.

The crowd opens up to make room for the Black and Gold.

EXT. CASTLE --DAY

Flowers bloom on the site of the battle.

EMPRESS V.O.

The blood soaked earth gave bloom to
flowers not seen in four generations.
But we do not take pleasure in their
return.

EXT. AVE'S FARM --DAY

Ave kisses his wife. Rand jumps for joy.

EMPRESS V.O.

The Archduke fears the strange ships
will return and bring with them
humiliation of irreducible
proportions. He has called upon
every available resourse to prepare.

INT. BASEMENT --NIGHT

Ave wraps the Sword in black cloth and hides it away for another time.

EXT. OCEAN --DAY

An armada of iron ships steam there way across the sea.

EMPRESS V.O.

And so, we journey into history
certain the future will hold many
sorrows, but certain it will hold
many joys as well.

FADE OUT

AFTERWORD

Title

Keys of War is possibly the worst title in the history of screenwriting. It is confusing, uninteresting, and somewhat intimidating. So, why does the very first page of this script have these words centered above my name? The most honest answer I can give is you can't submit *untitled* to a producer. A better answer might be that for all this script is, and I am tremendously proud of it, there is something missing. There is a unifying element I have been unable to wrap my brain around. Whatever it turns out to be, it is directly connected to the title. To solve one problem is to solve both problems. Ultimately this title is tentative.

Story

A screenplay is a tool that is used by literally hundreds of people who build a movie frame by frame. The format of a screenplay is designed to help these people break down a script into the parts they need. It is not designed to tell a story, but help others tell a story. The art of the matter is to balance these two opposing forces. On the one hand you want a script that engages a reader, because if it does not, your movie is never made. On the other hand you want a script that is easy to work with because if it is not, your movie will never be made. What

is engaging is not easy to work with. It is a bit like trying to make a beautiful hammer. Therefore, things are often lost in a script that are made clear on screen.

As such let me describe the story:

At the dawn of time the gods created heaven and earth. They created the stars in the sky and they created the fish in the sea. The creator of the moon joined with the creator of the sun and together they produced the first Empress. She is the embodiment of all that is good and holy. She is the spiritual guide to all the tribes of man.

The tribes are ruled by men. When one man, Baron Stier, rises above the others he is crowned Archduke. He rules in the Empress's name and his dynasty lasts for half a millennia. But nothing is forever. Upon the discovery of the land beyond the sacred islands the dynasty falls. And tribes enter into a period of civil war.

The civil wars represent an unstable time. Barons of the tribes fight among themselves for generations with no real gain. But one day through strong virtue and miraculous fortune young Indar finds the strength to unify a nation. This is the second dynasty. His first order is to strip the people of their weapons. All swords are confiscated and destroyed. His second order is to redistribute the land so the tribes closest to him are the tribes that are the most loyal to him. It is a bold plan, but it is the order that

sews the seeds of revolution. The anger of the disenfranchised smolders for two hundred years.

Because the tribes are sealed off from the outside world a strong and popular black market arises. During a certain illegal transaction Baron Reisht comes to possess a flashlight. It is a technology that is so far beyond anything he has seen, he becomes afraid. In a rare and special moment, something akin to genius, he understands that his country, his home, is in grave danger. The creators of this technology could conquer the tribes at their leisure. Baron Reisht will not let that happen.

The Baron, with unholy determination, marshals his forces and brings to the people he intends to protect destruction on an order they have never before seen. But he is successful. He captures the throne and establishes the third dynasty. On the day of his triumph his greatest fears come true.

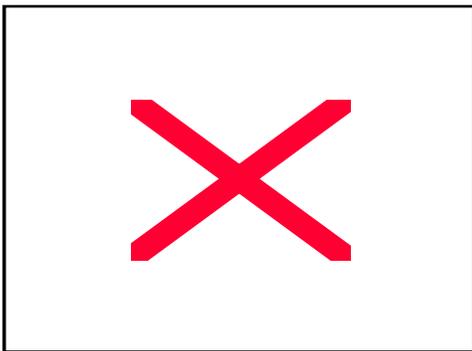
Structure

A story is a structured narrative designed to achieve an emotional effect, demonstrate a proposition, or reveal a specific virtue.

There are three different levels of structure in this story.

The first structure is what I call the biological structure. It is a repeated pattern of rising and falling action with each peak going higher than the next until you reach a furious climax.

On page fifteen the first battle is described in seven inches. On page one hundred fifteen three battles are running simultaneously.



The second structure is the traditional American movie structure as defined by Syd Field. It is the breaking down of the one hundred twenty pages into a series of small pieces. The first step is to divide the script into three acts. Act One is page one to page thirty. Act Two is page thirty one to ninety. And Act Three is page ninety one to one hundred twenty. The third act of my script is stretched because of the length of the battle sequences. The second step is to divide each act into even smaller pieces and punctuate certain moments with "pinches" and "twists." For example, there is in this structure, supposed to be an act one twist, where the story turns on itself and travel in a new direction. On page thirty two of *The Keys of War* the audience is transported two hundred years into the future. They jump from the establishment of a dynasty to the dawn of the revolution that brings the dynasty down. Field's structure works on

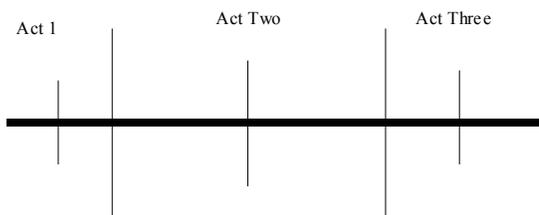
the principal of giving the audience what they want, but not what they expect.

The final structure on which this story is hung is Joseph Campbell's theory of the heroic journey. This is the structure I used in the vignettes that make up the movie. In Campbell's structure there is a problem in the provincial world in which the hero of the story resides. He or she is called into the magic world where he/she gains the knowledge and experience necessary to save the provincial world. He or she then returns to the provincial world and either saves mankind or dies trying to do so.

The Sword begins in the possession of the creator, journeys through the hands of the Murderer, Kema, and Lorus, but ultimately returns to the Creator's Wife --Home, with greater knowledge.

Vash begins in the world of the Archduke. Their problem is the illegal smuggling of weapons. He then

Syd Field's Structure



journeys through across the country, but fails to learn to be flexible in his convictions, and ultimately fails to save his world.

Baron Reisht is not the hero as such, he is not a virtuous man battling a single flaw, like Lancelot. His is flawed man clinging to a single

virtue. His journey through the magic world, the torture of Wash, teaches him to rid himself of all virtue, to overcome his compassion. Only then can he save his world from what he sees as the great danger.

Ave by contrast is the perfect hero. He is virtuous but battling his ambition. His journey through the war, the revolution, gives him greater perspective on his life and even though we only get a glimpse, it is clear he returns to his family with a greater appreciation for what they give him.

The Archduke Darin has a truncated story due to the length of the script, but his world is threatened by invasion. It is too late for him to journey through a magic world. He is trapped in this reality. He appeals to love, to money, and to power, but none of them can save him. He learns nothing and ultimately is forced to take his own life. It is implied there was a time when his call to take a journey came and he missed it, but it is only an implication.

Themes

There are several themes running through this script. The major theme running through the underlying story line claims the Socratic notion to know the good is to do the good. Each character ultimately does what he thinks is best

for himself and his nation. In his own mind he is righteous.

Further, each vignette has its own theme. Part of the heroic structure, the Campbellian structure, is the hero changing, growing, learning what he needs to know to save his provincial world.

Sword. Because the Sword is a passive character and ultimately serving a dramatic purpose instead of a thematic purpose his theme is not an argument like the themes of the other characters. The Sword is full of ability, but dependent upon luck to end up in the right hands. Thus, his theme is the Machiavellian notion, that in order to be successful you need both virtue and fortune.

Vash. Absolute loyalty leads to betrayal. Vash, in his loyalty to the Archduke ends up betraying his friends and in the end, his love. His blind, inflexible adherence to what he feels is his moral code ends up destroying him. Vash fails to learn this lesson as he journeys through the magic world and therefore in the end he cannot save his world.

Baron Reisht. Compassion leads to weakness --in order to conquer you cannot be troubled by morality. Machiavelli states in *The Prince* "be good." You should be good, love your wife, go to church, and respect your parents. If you can't do that, if your ambition is too great, do not be

hindered by a traditional sense of right and wrong. Most people, most failed leaders, operated in the middle between good and evil. Baron Reisht purges himself of this burden and becomes capable of anything.

Ave. Ambition leads to suffering. Unlike the Baron, Ave is a good person in the traditional sense. His flaw is his inability to appreciate what he has in his farm and his family. Through the horrors of war, he discovers how much he had and how much he stands to lose.

Darin. Like the Sword, Darin serves a dramatic function. Because all the other story lines resolve themselves in the middle of his story, he does not get the time he deserves. His theme is the line from Shakespear "when troubles come, they come not in single spies, but in battalions." Darin is a warning. For all his power for all his wealth in the end he is unable to save himself.

Changing Sides

In western movies the audience always sympathizes with the narrator or the main character of the story. As long as that character is not cruel to animals or small children the audience will follow the character on their journey and in most cases forgive their actions. I would cite as examples *The Godfather*, *Richard III*, *Blade Runner*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Crow*, *Dirty Harry*, and *Unforgiven*. The heroes of these

stories are brutal, often despicable people, but we follow them and even come to like them.

If this is true and you want to tell a story about the nature of good and evil, not the battle between good and evil, you have a problem. If *The Keys of War* were told only from Ave's point of view it would be more traditional, but it would be reduced to a story of freedom loving rebels fighting against a tyrannical government. On the other hand if *The Keys of War* had been told from Vash's point of view it, again, would have been more traditional, but it would have been reduced to a story of the forces of law and order fighting chaos and darkness. I wanted with this story to strike at something different.

By repeatedly changing sides I wish to force the audience to draw their own conclusions. They cannot default to the usual archetypes. Ave and Vash are very similar characters, nearly interchangeable. In their final showdown the audience doesn't know who will survive. If I've done my job as well as I hope, different audience members will be rooting for different characters.

The End

Everyone who has read this script has a lot to say about the end of the story. By that I mean the invaders in modern camouflage coming on shore. Some people think that their presence is jarring and they don't like it. Others

feel their arrival means the end of the character's country and way of life and they don't like it. I think their presence is vital. The invaders must arrive to complete Baron Reisht's story. When considering his worth as human I want the audience to consider whom they would want leading their country when Cortez comes calling.

As, to the matter of what happens next, I do not think the victory of the strangers is assured. I would give the advantage to the people defending their home. If we learned nothing from Vietnam, or the American Revolution, or the Japanese invasion of China, or even the Roman invasion of ancient Britain it is that a people defending their home are nearly unbeatable. But this discussion should be saved for the sequel.

Ultimately I think the invaders are intriguing, open the door for a sequel, and are necessary.

VITA

Clay Weill was born in Louisiana in 1976. He is the fourth generation of his family to graduate from Louisiana State University. He currently lives in Baton Rouge.