

Massacre

by Clayton Emery

Based on
PEOPLE OF THE MIST
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FADE IN

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE PLAZA - NIGHT

Chesapeake Bay, 1200 AD.

Night, firelight. DRUMS throb.

Young Native Americans dance. The most beautiful dancer is RED KNOT.

Villagers sit and CLAP, SING, WHOOP, CALL.

Tribal elders watch and brood, preoccupied.

While beyond the palisade, in the dark, skulk war-painted raiders.

EXT. BAY - MORNING

Mist drifts across the water.

TITLE OVER

Chesapeake Bay -- 800 Years Ago

TITLE OVER

MASSACRE

A canoe strokes through the mist to a tiny island.

EXT. PANTHER'S ISLAND - DAWN

A tree-covered island in the bay.

BROKEN CLIFF lands. Startles as CROWS CAW and take off.

Broken Cliff is young and strong. Carries a spear and club.

He creeps toward the island's center.

EXT. PANTHER'S CAMP

A tiny mud-plastered hut and campfire are flanked by crude statues of OKEUS and OHONA, twin gods.

Okeus is dark, with a black topknot, wicked grin, dark eyes. Decorated with lightning bolts. Holds a war club.

Ohona is white, sad-mouthed. Holds a shock of corn.

Broken Cliff, nervous, balks at the statues, then yells.

BROKEN CLIFF

(calls)

Witch! I am Broken Cliff! I
challenge you!

A dummy SWINGS from a tree. Broken Cliff hurls his spear
through it. Pulls his war club.

BROKEN CLIFF

I do not fear your tricks, sorcerer!

A RATTLESNAKE slithers in. He SMASHES the snake.

BROKEN CLIFF

Not so clever --

RUSTLING sounds in the brush. Broken Cliff creeps.

A GOOSE wearing a necklace THRASHES. (One foot is tied down.)
Broken Cliff raises his war club to strike.

BROKEN CLIFF

Ha! Uh!

A noose drops over Broken Cliff's neck from behind, SLITHERS
backwards through a tree fork, and SNUGS tight.

Broken Cliff strangles slowly. His last vision is the Panther
watching him die.

THE PANTHER is old, lean, with gray hair. Despite his name,
he has a large raven tattooed across his chest.

Panther removes the goose's necklace and unties its foot.
Gives it grain. The goose has a bad wing.

PANTHER

Thank you, Lag Wing.

EXT. PANTHER'S ISLAND

Panther drags Broken Cliff's body to the canoe. Lays the
body neatly, with weapons at hand. Pushes off the canoe.

Crows CAW and flap off again. Panther waves to them.

PANTHER

Return to your clan, Broken Cliff.

He sees smoke rise on the main shore, at an isolated spot.
Is puzzled.

EXT. BEACH

This beach is far from the village, out of sight around a bend.

Smoke rises from a bonfire. Nearby is a driftwood tree.

NINE KILLER SMASHES branches with a maul to feed the big -- and pointless -- fire.

Nine Killer is War Chief of a hundred battles, and it's worn him down. He wears an eye patch and war club in his belt. In peace time, he's the village "police chief".

(Throughout, the war club defines the warrior. Nine Killer's is a plain tree root grown around a stone.)

LAZY WATERS and TALL PINE "escort" TREMBLING LEAF to Nine Killer, then split to hunt ducks, yet stay in earshot.

Lazy Waters is a "beat cop", smart, lazy, a ladies' man.

Tall Pine is a "beat cop", big, looks dumb but is not.

Trembling Leaf is 40, a fat man, a bully.

TREMBLING LEAF

Nine Killer. What is this rudeness?
I was sleeping --

NINE KILLER

Good time to talk. All the visitors
coming and going, you won't be missed.

TREMBLING LEAF

Missed?

Nine Killer smashes more wood, feeds the fire. It ROARS.

NINE KILLER

Always something to do as war chief.
My wife is ready to divorce me.
You're not married, Trembling Leaf.

TREMBLING LEAF

My wife died two winters ago. You
know that.

NINE KILLER

And you know how women talk.

TREMBLING LEAF

Women?

NINE KILLER

Some say you're sniffing around your
eldest daughter. Pestering her.

Nine Killer SMACKS the fire. It ROARS.

Trembling Leaf turns to run, but Lazy Waters and Tall Pine
signal: Stay put.

NINE KILLER

Any crime weakens the clan. If a
man murders, or steals, or forces a
woman, I must punish him.

TREMBLING LEAF

I would never --

NINE KILLER

But the worst crime is to mix blood.
At even a hint, I'd take this maul,
and break the man's legs and arms,
and pitch him into the fire.

TREMBLING LEAF

You wouldn't --

NINE KILLER

Then his family. Then I'd burn his
house to the ground. Burn out the
rot.

Nine Killer pushes Trembling Leaf near the fire. He weeps.

NINE KILLER

Find a nice widow, Trembling Leaf.
But first move out of your daughter's
hut. Before the sun sets.

Nodding, Trembling Leaf stumbles away.

Lazy Waters and Tall Pine come up with dead ducks.

LAZY WATERS

What was that about?

NINE KILLER

Doesn't matter. Everything's
peaceful.

They walk down the beach. And flush DUCKS.

AERIAL SHOT: Ducks leave the beach, flap over marsh, then
over the forest. East is Flat Pearl Village. West is a
high ridge, then Oyster Shell Landing.

EXT. OYSTER SHELL LANDING

Oyster Shell Landing is a secluded inlet where the river meets the bay. Many canoes are drawn up.

Ducks fly over. And below...

COYOTE TAIL and Raiders hang back in a marsh.

Coyote Tail is War Chief of a rival village. A seasoned warrior, but hot-headed. He wears a coyote tail roach.

Fifteen Raiders are dressed similarly to Coyote Tail. They wear war paint and carry strung bows with arrows ready.

Five Yellow Snake warriors wear yellow clothes or war paint and matching hair.

They wait impatiently, watching...

... HIGH FOX pace back and forth, bobbling his war club.

High Fox is a handsome but callow "prince" with a fancy nose ring. Carries an ornate ball war club, never used.

He frets by a canoe with traveling gear, looks at the sun. A Raider signals: Kill him? Coyote Tail: Wait. High Fox decides, trots into the forest.

With the way clear, the raiders enter the forest.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE GATE - MORNING

The village is longhouses and huts surrounded by a palisade of logs. The only entrance is a gap where logs overlap.

Farther out are crops: corn, beans, squash, tobacco.

A few people yawn and go out the gate to pee. Women dig vegetables for breakfast. Dogs scrounge.

(Throughout in BG is a never-ending struggle for food: hunting, fishing, hoeing, watering, grinding, preparing.)

GATE GUARD watches the gap and the countryside, yawns.

SAD OTTER is coming back in. AUNT THISTLE stops her.

Sad Otter is a 14 YO girl. She's solid, plain, an ugly duckling with a port wine stain on her face.

Aunt Thistle is early 20s, an unhappy stepmother.

(Throughout, all women have cheek tattoos. Girls do not.)

AUNT THISTLE
There you are. How dare you?

SAD OTTER
Auntie, I apologize if --

Aunt Thistle SMACKS her shoulder hard.

AUNT THISTLE
Shut your mouth. You've said too much. Embarrassing us in front of our cousins. Have you no pride?

SAD OTTER
I'm sorry. I just wanted --

AUNT THISTLE
Nobody cares what you want. Gods above, how you shame our family. May The Panther take you --

QUICK FAWN was passing in, but snags Sad Otter.

Quick Fawn is a girl 13 YO, lean and fast. Her hobby is imitating people, which gets her into trouble.

Two big DOGS follow her everywhere, always underfoot.

QUICK FAWN
Can you help me fetch firewood?

She drags Sad Otter away before Aunt Thistle can object.

GATE GUARD
(calls)
Quick Fawn, wait. Bent Willow, escort them.

BENT WILLOW is going out to hunt. He waves them on.

Bent Willow is young and sullen, with a scar on his chin. He carries a war club, bow, arrows.

BENT WILLOW
Not the dogs.

Quick Fawn shoos her dogs back in the gate.

SAD OTTER
In my village the boys gather firewood and the girls carry water.

QUICK FAWN
 Mine too. You're Sad Otter, from
 Three Myrtle Village? I'm Quick
 Fawn. Did you enjoy the dance?
 Etc.

Girls CHATTER while...

THUNDERCLOUD stops Bent Willow, pulls him aside.

Thundercloud, self-styled emperor, wears gaudy clothes and jewelry, a Mohawk haircut, and swallow-tail tattoos by his eyes. He carries a double-spiked war club, poses as wise and inscrutable.

BENT WILLOW
 Thundercloud? Great Chief?

Thundercloud pulls Bent Willow aside, WHISPERS, points to the forest and all around. Bent Willow nods.

Bent Willow, Quick Fawn, and Sad Otter enter the forest.

EXT. FOREST

The forest is hushed. Trees are tall and shady. Near the village, the forest is open, picked clean.

The girls spot a fallen branch, good firewood. Break it up.

BENT WILLOW
 If you see any strangers, run home.

Bent Willow exits down a deer trail. Quick Fawn mocks him.

QUICK FAWN
 The mighty hunter. So. Did you see
 Lost Feather chase White Deer last
 night?

SAD OTTER
 No. Tell me.

Quick Fawn, very animated, mimics dancers.

QUICK FAWN
 He grabbed her skirt and tried to
 kiss her. She slapped him, but they
 were laughing. So tonight, after
 the wedding feast, watch in the
 Teasing Dance to see --

SAD OTTER
 Ssh!

They listen. Hear RUNNING. Grab branches as weapons.

RED KNOT runs down the path with a travel bundle.

Red Knot is a beautiful spoiled "princess" with a rich dress and red knot in her hair. Fresh tattoos mark her cheeks.

RED KNOT

Oh!

Red Knot stops to catch her breath.

QUICK FAWN

Red Knot, you can't do this.

SAD OTTER

Can't do what? Where are you going?
It's not safe to be out alone.

RED KNOT

I won't be alone. I'm meeting High
Fox.

Sad Otter is thunderstruck, heartsick.

SAD OTTER

High Fox?

RED KNOT

We're running away. Forever. I
won't marry Thundercloud.

QUICK FAWN

You're crazy as a coon.

SAD OTTER

You can't shirk your duty to the
clan.

Red Knot points to her new "woman" tattoos.

RED KNOT

I'm sick of being the clan's slave.
I'm a woman now, and I'm going to
marry High Fox.

QUICK FAWN

They'll send my uncle. Nine Killer
will hunt you to the ends of the
earth.

RED KNOT

We'll go farther. I want to marry
for love.

SAD OTTER
We can't have what we want in life.

RED KNOT
I can.

She runs on down the trail.

SAD OTTER
She's so brave.

QUICK FAWN
She's spoiled rotten.

SAD OTTER
What shall we do?

QUICK FAWN
Stop her. They'll roast us alive if
we don't. Go.

SAD OTTER
But where is she going?

QUICK FAWN
The landing, must be. Go. I'll
fetch Nine Killer.

Quick Fawn, a fast runner, runs for the village. Sad Otter
runs after Red Knot.

FARTHER ON

Hunting, Bent Willow hears RUNNING, steps back on the trail.

Red Knot runs up. He blocks her.

RED KNOT
Get out of my way, fool.

Bent Willow has unrequited and hopeless love for Red Knot.

BENT WILLOW
You -- shouldn't be out alone.

RED KNOT
People should stop ordering me about.

She slides around him. He snags her wrist. She SLAPS him.

RED KNOT
Don't touch me, you -- driftwood.

She runs on. Bent Willow glares, heartsick and furious.

Angry, he crashes through brush.

A moment later, Coyote Tail steps onto the trail. Looks both ways, then signals.

Silent, Raiders cross the trail and fade into brush.

A moment later, Sad Otter runs past.

EXT. RIDGE

The flat top of a steep ridge. Big trees. The path runs up, across, then back down.

Flushed, Red Knot reaches the top, stops to catch her breath.

Hears a FOOTFALL behind. Spins to the (unseen) assailant.

RED KNOT
High Fox? Oh. What are you doing
here?

A double-spiked war club WALLOPS Red Knot's temple.

She drops dead.

EXT. BEYOND THE RIDGE

Bent Willow, sulking, stumbles to the water's edge.

DEER are drinking, look up.

He whips up his bow and arrow, aims, but --

RUNNING sounds come down the ridge.

Deer bound off. Bent Willow SHOOTs and misses.

He glimpses someone run down the ridge toward the landing.

BENT WILLOW
Red Knot?

Whoever, she's gone. Disgusted, Bent Willow hunts his arrow.

EXT. FOREST

Sad Otter comes to a fork in the trail. Unfamiliar with the area, she hesitates, picks one way, runs.

But the path peters out. She stops. Hears RUNNING.

Ahead, through brush, she sees someone running.

SAD OTTER
Red Knot? Come back, please!

But the person runs on, heedless.

Sad Otter backtracks, finds the path up the ridge, climbs.

EXT. RIDGE

High Fox is crouched over Red Knot's body. He weeps.

Sad Otter arrives. From the same village, they are childhood friends, but now she loves him desperately.

SAD OTTER
High Fox. What have you done?

HIGH FOX
Red Knot is dead!

SAD OTTER
Ohona protect us, no. It can't be.
I just saw her --

Sad Otter WEEPS but carries on. She straightens Red Knot's limbs, tugs down her skirt.

HIGH FOX
What will I do now?

SAD OTTER
Hush, hush. I'll help you.

HIGH FOX
You can't help me. Leave me alone!
Leave her alone!

High Fox shoves Sad Otter away. Leaves a bloody hand print on her dress.

SAD OTTER
Wait, wait. Oh...

HIGH FOX
I can't go back to Flat Pearl Village.
And no one's home at Three Myrtle
Village. What will I do?

SAD OTTER
We need time to think.

HIGH FOX
They'll say I killed her. They'll
burn me alive!

SAD OTTER
Listen. Go to Crab Island. Hide
there.

HIGH FOX
What good is that?

SAD OTTER
I'll think of something. Just go.

High Fox runs off. Forgets his war club, which Sad Otter
picks up.

Sad Otter runs back down the ridge.

EXT. BEYOND THE RIDGE

Hunting his arrow, Bent Willow hears someone RUNNING.

It's High Fox. Bent Willow trips him with his bow.

BENT WILLOW
High Fox. Stop stomping around.
You'll scare the deer.

HIGH FOX
It's not my fault. I -- have to get
back.

High Fox hides blood on his hands.

BENT WILLOW
Is that blood?

High Fox runs on toward the landing.

BENT WILLOW
(calls)
Are you going to meet Red Knot?

Curious, Bent Willow follows.

EXT. OYSTER SHELL LANDING

High Fox pushes off in a loaded canoe. Bent Willow sees.

BENT WILLOW
(to himself)
Good riddance, High Born.

EXT. FOREST

Sad Otter, carrying the war club, runs down from the ridge toward the village.

But high up, she sees Coyote Tail's war party enter the open forest near the village. She ducks to hide.

SAD OTTER

Raiders!

CLOSER TO THE VILLAGE.

Quick Fawn, running for help, stops at a high point to catch her breath.

Looks back and sees Coyote Tail's party.

QUICK FAWN

Raiders!

She runs.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD

Continuing marriage celebrations, young men play lacrosse with forked sticks and a "ball" of two stones connected by a thong. They WHACK and TRIP each other: practice for warfare.

Girls watch and YELL from the sidelines.

Thundercloud's Empire Warriors DRILL like soldiers, swinging war clubs high and low in sync, CHANTING.

SHELL COMB comes in the gate. She carries firewood and bullrushes wrapped in a skin.

Shell Comb, 38 YO, is still a knockout despite motherhood. She dresses provocatively with shell combs in her hair.

Gate Guard chats to a VILLAGE WOMAN.

VILLAGE WOMAN

(catty)

Carrying firewood, Shell Comb?

SHELL COMB

(raspy)

Bullrushes. I need to wrap a sore throat.

Shell Comb moves on.

VILLAGE WOMAN
Sore thighs, more likely.

GATE GUARD
Don't irk her. When she's clan chief --

VILLAGE WOMAN
May Okeus forbid it.

GATE GUARD
Still, Shell Comb carrying firewood.

VILLAGE WOMAN
Next she'll be gutting fish.

INT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD

A longhouse open at both ends. It's both a temple and storehouse, but nobody enters without prestige or permission.

It's dim inside, smoky from a sacrificial fire at center.

HIGH PRIEST enters from outside. He carries a basket of food.

High Priest is old and poor-sighted. Wears an elaborate deer hide smock, necklaces, and bracelets.

He walks past walls hung with sacks of food, spare weapons for war, trophy scalps and captured shields from wars past.

Centermost is a man-sized statue of Okeus. Stained dark, with a black topknot, leering mouth, dark stone eyes, lightning bolts down his arms.

Normally the god holds a war club with double spikes in one hand and a corn shock in the other: war and peace. (But at the moment his war club is missing: a clue.)

Before the god is a smoldering fire pit. Baskets of food are scattered as gifts.

Behind the god, like bunk beds, mummies of elders are wrapped in skins and stacked. Okeus guards them.

High Priest walks, then stops.

In the smoky dimness, a woman "bows" before the statue of Okeus, then flits away.

High Priest walks to the statue. (Clue. Now the god holds his war club in one hand.) He sets down the basket.

Thinking he saw a ghost, he makes a warding gesture. Exits.

EXT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD

High Priest comes out and begins prayers to the sun, CHANTING.

CHILDREN snigger as a NAUGHTY CHILD mimics the priest.

PRIEST 1 comes up behind and drags Naughty Child inside, SHRIEKING. Children scatter.

Priest 1 and Priest 2 are young men in training. Wear elegant deer hide smocks, necklaces and bracelets.

Children creep back to peek in the door.

WISE HAWK hobbles up with her cane. Prods a peeking Child. They scatter again.

Wise Hawk is an old woman, clan chief, wracked with arthritis. Wears a simple crown of bird feathers. Uses a cane.

An old DOG follows her everywhere.

Naughty Child runs out CRYING. Wise Hawk trips him/her, smacks a rump. Child runs on. She goes inside.

High Priest carries on PRAYING, oblivious.

INT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD

At the statue of Okeus, Wise Hawk sprinkles corn flour from a pouch into the fire.

WISE HAWK

Lord Okeus, pray accept this offering
and give us a day of joy, for a change --
Uff!

Flour PUFFS. Smoke makes her SNEEZE.

WISE HAWK

Uch. Don't you scorn my offering,
you wicked god. I've unleashed the
whirlwind in your name.

She dumps the corn flour. Bows to the wrapped mummies racked behind the god.

WISE HAWK

(to mummies)
Greetings, old friends. You
understand best. Life is pain --

THUNDERCLOUD (O.S.)
Wise Hawk! I would address you!

WISE HAWK
(to Okeus)
Speaking of pains, your servant calls.

EXT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD

Wise Hawk hobbles out. Thundercloud broods.

Two Empire Warriors act as bodyguards. They dress alike with neat Mohawks. Grumpy fanatics.

WISE HAWK
Must you disturb an old woman at
prayers --

THUNDERCLOUD
Wise Hawk. Where is Red Knot?

Villagers gather, MUTTERING at his disrespect. Empire Warriors stare them down.

WISE HAWK
How should I know? Home, sleeping
in, or preparing for the wedding --

THUNDERCLOUD
She is not in the village. My
warriors searched every hut.

WISE HAWK
Fine thing. Then she stepped out
the palisade. Nerves. Or perhaps
she bathes in the bay --

THUNDERCLOUD
Neither is she without the palisade.

WISE HAWK
Then...

She's stumped. And suddenly worried.

THUNDERCLOUD
If this is some game your village
plays, I suggest you drop it, or
incur my wrath.

WISE HAWK
Game? A fine way to talk to your
future grandmother-in-law --

Thundercloud waves to bodyguards.

THUNDERCLOUD
Find Red Knot. Sweep the fields,
beach, forest. Escort her back.

WISE HAWK
Don't you dare lay hands on that
girl. She's heir to the chiefdom.

THUNDERCLOUD
She's my wife-to-be. Needing
protection.

WISE HAWK
Flat Pearl Village will protect her
until she's your wife.
(to villagers)
Where is Nine Killer?

Someone points down the beach.

But Quick Fawn comes running, GASPING.

QUICK FAWN
(gasping)
Raider! Two tens! Painted for war!
Hiding in the forest!

Villagers YAMMER. Wise Hawk waves her cane.

WISE HAWK
Whose warriors? Where?

QUICK FAWN
(panting)
Slender Bark's. Coming around the
ridge. Two tens. All with weapons.

Wise Hawk points down the beach.

WISE HAWK
Fetch your uncle.

GASPING, Quick Fawn races off.

GREEN CLUB blows a WHISTLE. Empire Warriors fall into line,
very military.

Green Club is Thundercloud's lieutenant, huge, menacing,
fanatical in his devotion to Thundercloud's dream of empire.

THUNDERCLOUD
Brace these raiders.
(MORE)

THUNDERCLOUD (CONT'D)

Tell them they invade my territory
at their peril. Kill them if you
must.

GREEN CLUB

Yes, Great Chief! Warriors, for
Thundercloud!

Empire Warriors give a HOWLING WAR CRY and trot off.

Wise Hawk is outraged.

WISE HAWK

Call them back. I give the orders
here.

THUNDERCLOUD

Ease your mind, Clan Chief. I will
protect my betrothed and my village.

WISE HAWK

We don't want a bloodbath on this,
of all days. And it's not your
village.

Thundercloud smirks: Just wait.

EXT. BEACH

Nine Killer walks back with Tall Pine and Lazy Waters. All
have war clubs, bows, and arrows. And dead DUCKS.

Wading in the bay, Villagers set drowning nets for birds,
haul in fish and lobsters.

Tall Pine, who looks big and dumb, is just a slow thinker,
thinking hard.

TALL PINE

Chief, it pays to look all around a
tree, right?

NINE KILLER

If this is gossip, spare me.

TALL PINE

Just one question before we get
back... Thundercloud comes out of
nowhere --

LAZY WATERS

West somewhere.

TALL PINE
With his Empire Warriors --

LAZY WATERS
Goons.

TALL PINE
He crushes Stone Frog, takes over
his village --

LAZY WATERS
I could take Stone Frog.

TALL PINE
Then he comes here, to the Independent
Villages, to marry Red Knot.

LAZY WATERS
Smart way to conquer a tribe.

NINE KILLER
Hasn't married her yet. We have
until sunset.

TALL PINE
Still. Red Knot is the Clan Chief's
granddaughter. What does that make
him?

LAZY WATERS
(scoffs)
"Great Chief."

NINE KILLER
Or "Emperor".

TALL PINE
So. Do we become his -- vassals
overnight?

LAZY WATERS
His slaves?

TALL PINE
And, tomorrow, could he send us to
war against the southern tribes?

LAZY WATERS
Oh.

Nine Killer stops. He's tried to keep this threat quiet.

NINE KILLER

Thundercloud claims he'll protect
our tribe. Wise Hawk agreed to this
marriage-alliance. She does what's
best for the clan. As do we all.

Nine Killer hooks a thumb at Panther's island.

NINE KILLER

If you want to see the future, ask
the Panther. For the present, be
tight-mouthed as a clam.

He resumes walking, hoisting the dead ducks: a bad omen.

Quick Fawn comes running.

QUICK FAWN

Uncle! Raiders! Two tens! Slender
Bark's men! By the ridge!

TALL PINE

I'll rally the men --

Nine Killer restrains him. Walking, thinking.

NINE KILLER

They could just be passing through,
paying their respects.

QUICK FAWN

Thundercloud's men go to fight them!

They run.

NINE KILLER

Grab everyone you can and blockade
the forest. I'll cut them off.

TALL PINE

Alone?

NINE KILLER

Go!

Tall Pine and Lazy Waters run for the village. Nine Killer
diverts for the forest, puffing.

Bent Willow, still hunting, comes out of the forest.

NINE KILLER

(panting)

Where are the raiders?

BENT WILLOW
What raiders?

Puffing, Nine Killer just waves him along.

EXT. FOREST

Coyote Tail has stopped to plan an approach. Men point two ways. He decides. They press on --

As Nine Killer steps from behind a tree, arrow nocked.

NINE KILLER
Coyote Tail. Greetings. Out for a
hunt? On Flat Pearl land?

COYOTE TAIL
Yes... We were tracking a herd of
deer and decided to pay our respects.
Something about a wedding.

Coyote Tail signals Raiders to surround Nine Killer.

NINE KILLER
You're far off the main trail. Better
stop there.

Raiders freeze. They fear Nine Killer. Coyote Tail is
miffed.

But Nine Killer frowns to see five yellow-clad raiders.

COYOTE TAIL
A man alone shouldn't make threats.

Nine Killer NICKERS. Bent Willow steps out with drawn bow.

NINE KILLER
Nor threaten men aiming arrows.

COYOTE TAIL
I've heard the story. How you killed
nine men in one day. Your head would
make a fine war trophy.

NINE KILLER
Another day like this, and I'll let
you have it.

They glare. Coyote Tail shuffles, ready to dive.

NINE KILLER
Think, man. The woods are tinder
dry. One spark will burn us all.

Coyote Tail's Raiders gawk.

Tall Pine glides in, bow drawn. Then Lazy Waters.

More Flat Pearl warriors surround the Raiders. Who drop weapons.

NINE KILLER

My thanks. Now. Why are you here?

COYOTE TAIL

We come in peace. Truly.

NINE KILLER

Painted for war?

COYOTE TAIL

A message for your Clan Chief. Let me deliver it and we'll go.

NINE KILLER

Tell me and I'll deliver it. There's a line you can't cross.

COYOTE TAIL

My message is from Slender Bark to Wise Hawk, for her alone.

NINE KILLER

I'll save you the trouble. "Slender Bark respectfully submits a marriage between Thundercloud and Red Knot might disadvantage the Independent Villages. He suggests the wedding be postponed until a council of chiefs can convene."

Coyote Tail gawks. How did he guess?

NINE KILLER

Slender Bark heard the news, panicked, and sent you scooting north. Otherwise he'd come himself at the head of many tens.

COYOTE TAIL

Slender Bark does not "panic".

Coyote Tail stiffens. A hothead, he might fight.

TRAMPING sounds. Thundercloud's Empire Warriors arrive.

Green Club steps beside Nine Killer.

NINE KILLER
Finally found us?

GREEN CLUB
(to Coyote Tail)
Our Great Chief, Thundercloud, Ruler
of the East, orders you retreat or
die.

NINE KILLER
(mouths)
"Ruler of the East?"

COYOTE TAIL
Thundercloud?

Coyote Tail gestures: He can kiss my ass.

Green Club ROARS and leaps at Coyote Tail. They BANG war
clubs, grapple.

Both sides ROAR, ready to leap into battle. Nine Killer's
men start to fall back, away from the scrap.

Quick, calm, Nine Killer draws his war club. Kicks Green
Club behind the knee so he flops. Whacks Coyote Tail's
fingers to drop his club. Feints so Coyote Tail dodges and
sprawls face down.

Flat Pearl Warriors warn everyone to freeze.

With his club, Nine Killer gently taps the back of Coyote
Tail's head.

NINE KILLER
A bad place to be.

With his club, Nine Killer gently taps Green Club's nose.

NINE KILLER
Friendly advice? Let the War Chief
handle negotiations.

Coyote Tail and Green Club rise and dust off.

COYOTE TAIL
Slender Bark's "friendly advice"
stands.

NINE KILLER
And in the spirit of friendship, I
give you your lives.

Nine Killer waves: Go.

Raiders stoop for weapons: No. Slink off. Coyote Tail glares: This isn't over. Exits.

GREEN CLUB
Thundercloud will hear of this insult.

NINE KILLER
No doubt. His warriors are full of talk.

Empire Warriors trot off.

Flat Pearl men wipe off sweat. Lazy Waters WHISTLES.

TALL PINE
Glad I don't stand in your moccasins.

BENT WILLOW
Being War Chief doesn't look so hard. Maybe I'd like that job.

NINE KILLER
Another day like this, and you can have it.

LAZY WATERS
Who missed two tens of warriors right under his nose?

BENT WILLOW
I was hunting. I lost an arrow.

Yet Bent Willow is empty-handed.

NINE KILLER
Notice anything strange about that party?

TALL PINE
The five warriors in yellow.

LAZY WATERS
Hate to see them show up.

BENT WILLOW
Huh?

NINE KILLER
Tall Pine, take half the men and follow the coyote. See --

Sad Otter comes running with High Fox's war club.

SAD OTTER
Nine Killer! Red Knot is dead!

NINE KILLER

What? Where?

BENT WILLOW

I saw her just a while ago.

SAD OTTER

Up on the ridge.

NINE KILLER

Show me. Men, go.

Men trot off, BUZZING with news. Nine Killer retains one young Warrior.

Nine Killer, Sad Otter, Bent Willow, and young Warrior walk to the ridge.

NINE KILLER

You're... Sad Otter, from Three Myrtle Village. Daughter of Windsong.

SAD OTTER

She passed of bed fever. I live with Aunt Thistle now.

NINE KILLER

That's a shame.

Nine Killer nods at blood on her dress.

SAD OTTER

Red Knot's. From High Fox. She was running away. To marry him.

BENT WILLOW

I'll kill him.

SAD OTTER

(sniffles)

So deep in love.

NINE KILLER

Squirrels, both of them. If this is true, it's a calamity.

SAD OTTER

It's true.

EXT. RIDGE

Red Knot lies as if asleep. Her hair is matted with blood.

The party arrives.

NINE KILLER
Blood and bones.

Bent Willow SOBS. Sad Otter SNIFFLES.

NINE KILLER
Take heart. At least she won't marry
Thundercloud.

SAD OTTER
(sniffles)
Even in death, she's beautiful.

Nine Killer gently rolls Red Knot.

NINE KILLER
Beautiful as her mother ever was.
Stop sniveling. Weep for our tribe.

He finds in Red Knot's hand a fancy necklace, whole, not
ripped loose.

SAD OTTER
High Fox's.

BENT WILLOW
I'll rip his heart out.

Nine Killer looks at the war club in Sad Otter's hand.

NINE KILLER
Caught red-handed. And that's his
war club? Where did our prince go?

Sad Otter points.

BENT WILLOW
Down to Oyster Shell Landing. Into
a canoe.

NINE KILLER
Carry her back to the village. I'm
going to the landing.

BENT WILLOW
He's gone, paddled off.

Nine Killer walks toward the landing anyway.

Bent Willow and Warrior cut a sapling to carry Red Knot.

Sad Otter dithers, then runs after Nine Killer.

SAD OTTER
Why go to the landing?

NINE KILLER

I'm in no hurry to return to the village.

SAD OTTER

Me neither.

NINE KILLER

This killing will mean war.

SAD OTTER

With who?

NINE KILLER

Every man, woman, and child under the sun.

EXT. OYSTER SHELL LANDING

Nine Killer and Sad Otter see only empty canoes.

SAD OTTER

Look. Out there.

Far out bobs a canoe. They borrow a canoe and catch it.

Inside lies the body of Broken Cliff neatly laid out.

SAD OTTER

Broken Cliff. He's from our village. What happened?

Nine Killer points to Panther's island.

NINE KILLER

"Hunt the panther, and he hunts you."

SAD OTTER

The Panther? Why attack him?

NINE KILLER

Kill a man of great power, eat his heart, gain his power. Idiot.

SAD OTTER

Some girls go to him for love potions.

NINE KILLER

And then as wives go for poisons and curses.

Nine Killer and Sad Otter paddle back to the landing. Haul Broken Cliff's body out. Nine Killer examines it.

SAD OTTER
Why didn't the Panther eat him?

NINE KILLER
Maybe he was full. We have an
abundance of idiots. Huh. Strangled.

SAD OTTER
Not magic?

NINE KILLER
Who knows? The Panther has a dark
spirit but great wisdom. I saw him
once address a council. Having no
clan, he had no allegiances, so could
pierce the mist. He made magic with
words.
(beat)
High Fox is probably hiding under
his father's bed.

SAD OTTER
Don't say that. He'll be a great
chief someday.

NINE KILLER
Not after Wise Hawk skins him alive.
And burns what's left. And heaves
his ashes in the bay.

SAD OTTER
It's my fault. I should have stopped
her.

NINE KILLER
(scoffs)
She's headstrong as her mother. And
grandmother. Was.

SAD OTTER
High Fox couldn't have killed Red
Knot.

NINE KILLER
You'll need magic to prove that,
girl.

Nine Killer turns back for the village.

SAD OTTER
I'll -- stay a while.

Nine Killer exits.

Sad Otter boards the canoe and paddles away.

EXT. FOREST

Coyote Tail's Raiders jog-trot over a rise. He raises a hand. They halt.

COYOTE TAIL

Red Moon, take the men home. Two
Bones, Slow Dog, come with me.

His men are perplexed.

COYOTE TAIL

Slender Bark needs to know what's
goes on at Flat Pearl. And maybe we
can insert a wedge.

Coyote Tail and Two Men turn and trot back.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE GATE

Bent Willow and Warrior carry Red Knot's body slung like a
dead deer on a sapling.

Villagers and Priests come running, then stand silent. Quick
Fawn weeps quietly.

Wise Hawk stands proud, but suddenly buckles. Priest 1
catches her. She recovers, putting on a brave face.

WISE HAWK

Who has done this?

BENT WILLOW

High Fox.

QUICK FAWN

They were running away together.
For love.

WISE HAWK

One night, and the whole world goes
mad.

Wise Hawk leads a procession to the House of the Dead.

Now Women WEEP and WAIL.

Shell Comb comes out of the Great House.

SHELL COMB

(raspy)
What's happened?

VILLAGE WOMAN
It's Red Knot.

Shell Comb crumples with grief, must be helped along.

EXT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD

At the door, Priest 1 and Priest 2 gently take the girl's body. High Priest SHAKES a rattle and CHANTS a dirge.

Wise Hawk and Shell Comb follow in. The rest stay out.

INT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD

Priests lay the body on a mat before Okeus. Cover her with a deer hide.

Shell Comb RASPS, COUGHS.

SHELL COMB
(raspy)
How did this happen? She went to bathe in the bay. A fresh start to a special day.

WISE HAWK
A secret plan to meet High Fox. What's wrong with your throat?

SHELL COMB
Too much dancing. Weddings are supposed to be a time of joy.

WISE HAWK
(scoffs)
You should know.

Priests hover.

SHELL COMB
The priests must prepare her to meet our ancestors.

WISE HAWK
Allow us to say goodbye, please.

Priests exit.

Wise Hawk feels between Red Knot's legs, SNIFFS her hand.

SHELL COMB
What are you doing? Mother!

WISE HAWK

She wet herself, but no man left his seed.

SHELL COMB

You think Slender Bark's raiders raped her?

WISE HAWK

What are you talking about? High Fox killed her.

SHELL COMB

High Fox couldn't kill a rabbit. Slender Bark's raiders murdered her to strike at Thundercloud.

WISE HAWK

Or Thundercloud killed her to strike at Slender Bark.

SHELL COMB

You'd suspect her husband-to-be?

WISE HAWK

I'd suspect any chief for a dozen days' walk. Black Spike opposed the alliance too.

SHELL COMB

So -- What? High Fox lured my daughter to an assassination? Black Spike is a man of honor.

WISE HAWK

I wonder...

SHELL COMB

You're a clan chief. Why not suspect yourself?

WISE HAWK

Now you're thinking. Why not suspect me? Many will.

SHELL COMB

The simplest answer is Slender Bark's raiders killed my daughter. The sooner we strike back the better.

WISE HAWK

And the thinking is done. We're surrounded by enemies, daughter. Choose your battles wisely.

Disgusted, Shell Comb flounces out.

Wise Hawk covers the body with deer hide. Alone, she sheds a tear.

WISE HAWK
Goodbye, granddaughter.

She rises stiffly before the statue of Okeus.

WISE HAWK
(to Okeus)
I sacrifice corn meal, and so you
repay me? Go ahead, laugh. Even
you will sorrow before the last leaf
falls.

EXT. PANTHER'S ISLAND

Sad Otter paddles a canoe, GROUNDS ashore.

She gets out, legs shaking. Looks around.

The island is quiet, eerie.

Summoning courage, she walks toward the center.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE PLAZA

The plaza is the town square. Centermost is a fire pit.
The ground is beaten down by dancing.

Around the edge stand totem-like poles carved with animals:
spiritual guardians.

In BG, a Village Woman sets a food basket before a guardian
pole.

Nine Killer and Wise Hawk meet in the open to not be
overheard.

WISE HAWK
War Chief. A sad morning.

NINE KILLER
And a strange one. I sorrow for the
death of your granddaughter. But we
may have bigger problems.

WISE HAWK
May Okeus take your tongue. Is that
possible?

NINE KILLER

Slender Bark's raiding party. Five
Yellow Snake warriors were mixed in.

WISE HAWK

Yellow Snake and Slender Bark are
now allies. Eh?

Aunt Thistle barges up.

AUNT THISTLE

Nine Killer, someone saw Sad Otter
with you. Where is she now? I plan
to whip that girl bloody.

NINE KILLER

Sorry, don't know.

Aunt Thistle storms off.

In BG, Priest 2 comes and collects the offering basket from
the guardian statue.

Wise Hawk stares at the guardian statues as if seeking wisdom.

WISE HAWK

One crisis at a time. Where is High
Fox?

NINE KILLER

It's said he paddles like a salmon
for Three Myrtle Village.

WISE HAWK

We need to bring him back.
Immediately.

NINE KILLER

I'm... not convinced High Fox is the
killer. Bent Willow was out in the
forest too. Even some girls, one
carrying a war club.

WISE HAWK

And Slender Bark's raiders.

NINE KILLER

Coyote Tail would have taken her
head for a war trophy and then bragged
about it.

WISE HAWK

So who killed my granddaughter?

NINE KILLER

You need a wiser man than I -- Uh
oh.

BLACK SPIKE storms up with Bodyguards.

Black Spike is 44, Clan Chief of Three Myrtle Village upriver
and High Fox's father. He has good clothes, a worn war club,
and black spikes tattooed on his cheeks.

He's sputtering mad, ready to explode.

Shell Comb comes to listen. Nine Killer tries not to stare:
he's always lusted for her.

Black Spike and Nine Killer are old friends, so doubly-pained
by this trouble.

BLACK SPIKE

Clan Chief, why are accusations of
Red Knot's murder being laid at my
son's feet?

WISE HAWK

Black Spike, the two plotted to run
off. They met on the ridge --

BLACK SPIKE

That means nothing.

WISE HAWK

-- And may have quarreled. It happens
when lovers are young --

BLACK SPIKE

It's absurd. And insulting.

Shell Comb jumps in, throat raspy, coughing.

SHELL COMB

(raspy)

Red Knot and High Fox are but friends.
Were.

WISE HAWK

Everyone saw them dance last night.

NINE KILLER

Clan Chief, with all due respect,
High Fox --

BLACK SPIKE

Impossible. The boy couldn't kill a
rabbit.

SHELL COMB

Use your eyes. Slender Bark's raiders
infest our forest.

NINE KILLER

High Fox had blood on his hands --

SHELL COMB

My daughter was assassinated. We're
surrounded by enemies. Wise Hawk
just said so.

WISE HAWK

She can listen when it's useful.

SHELL COMB

Our enemies have hatched a plot to
divide us.

WISE HAWK

And a fine job. But we must speak
to High Fox.

NINE KILLER

If he's innocent --

BLACK SPIKE

He is innocent.

WISE HAWK

Then he may have seen the murderer.

BLACK SPIKE

If so, he'll tell me. No one from
this village will touch him.

NINE KILLER

Old friend, let's not strike sparks --

BLACK SPIKE

Your village whips up the flames,
Nine Killer. We came to celebrate a
wedding and stand accused of
treachery.

(beat)

We return to Three Myrtle Village.
Come take my son if you dare.

Black Spike storms away.

WISE HAWK

Better and better.

NINE KILLER

Why is he so angry?

SHELL COMB
Because you show him no respect.
But you will.

Shell Comb sashays off.

Wise Hawk and Nine Killer stare. What does that mean?

EXT. PANTHER'S CAMP - AFTERNOON

Sad Otter sits by the fire, terrified. Holds High Fox's war club like a good luck charm. Avoids looking at the god effigies.

Panther drags heavy driftwood into camp. Doesn't see her.

SAD OTTER
(terrified)
H-hello.

PANTHER
Gah!

Panther startles. Looks up at CROWS with a "What the hell?" Throws a stick at them. Crows CAW and flap away.

He aims a branch at the girl.

SAD OTTER
Elder, I -- I need your help.

PANTHER
Toss the war club.

SAD OTTER
Elder, I am Sad Otter of Star Crab
Clan of Three Myrtle Village. I
must speak with you.

PANTHER
Yet you must be deaf.

SAD OTTER
Please, Elder, High Fox needs your
help... What?

Panther stares, curiosity piqued.

PANTHER
People usually say, "I need your
help."

SAD OTTER
I do.

PANTHER
While holding a war club.

SAD OTTER
You won't kill me?

PANTHER
You won't kill me?

SAD OTTER
You killed Broken Cliff.

PANTHER
He didn't come begging for help.

She tosses the war club.

PANTHER
Slowly.

SAD OTTER
My good friend, High Fox, is son of
Black Spike, Clan Chief of Three
Myrtle Village. He --

PANTHER
I thought Net Sinker was chief.

SAD OTTER
He died two summers ago. Red Knot
was killed, and Wise Hawk thinks --

PANTHER
Wise Hawk is still alive? Wait,
who's Red Knot?

SAD OTTER
Wise Hawk's granddaughter. How long
have you been out here?

PANTHER
Since this island rose from the water.
Speak.

SAD OTTER
Red Knot was betrothed to Thundercloud --

PANTHER
Thundercloud? From over the western
mountains?

SAD OTTER
I believe so, Elder. I thought you
wished me to speak.

PANTHER

Could anyone shut you up? What's
Thundercloud plotting?

SAD OTTER

He -- conquered Stone Frog and united
the upriver tribes. He wanted to
marry Red Knot -- I don't know his
plans. But Nine Killer warns of
war.

PANTHER

Sounds a right muddle.

SAD OTTER

Unless you help High Fox.

PANTHER

Finally, me. Why me?

SAD OTTER

Nine Killer said you could pierce
the mist and make magic with words.

Panther takes a turn around camp, thinking, decides.

PANTHER

(thinks)

No.

The matter finished, he makes a chopping motion on the
driftwood. SMACK! Hurts his hand.

SAD OTTER

No, what?

PANTHER

No, I can't help you.

SAD OTTER

You help others.

PANTHER

They come here. I give them potions
and charms. They go away.

SAD OTTER

But the danger. To Flat Pearl and
Three Myrtle. All the Independent
Villages.

PANTHER

All that I left behind.

SAD OTTER

But only you can help, because you
have no clan.

PANTHER

And why would a man with no clan
help anyone?

SAD OTTER

Wise Hawk would --

PANTHER

Kill me on sight.

SAD OTTER

I'm sure Black Spike would reward
you for --

PANTHER

What I want, no man can give.

SAD OTTER

What do you want?

PANTHER

(no answer)

He struggles with driftwood, losing.

SAD OTTER

I'd give anything to save High Fox.

PANTHER

Give up your life.

SAD OTTER

My life?

PANTHER

Renounce your clan. There's a
sacrifice. Become my slave, and
I'll believe you're sincere.

SAD OTTER

A slave? To you?

PANTHER

If you would upend a life, start
with your own.

SAD OTTER

I...

PANTHER

I thought not.

Shamed, Sad Otter exits. Panther gives up on driftwood.

Panther looks at the effigies of Okeus and Ohona.

PANTHER

A fine pair you are, to break young
girls' hearts.

EXT. PANTHER'S ISLAND

Sad Otter arrives at her borrowed canoe.

Goes to push out, but breaks down SOBBING.

INT. WISE HAWK'S GREAT HOUSE

The Great House is the "mayor's mansion". Opulent with
colorful mats, baskets, pots, furs. A half-finished tapestry
hangs on a loom.

Wise Hawk sits by the fire, staring at flames. Shell Comb
brings her food.

SHELL COMB

Seeking a vision?

WISE HAWK

One doesn't need prophecy to see
disaster. Well, maybe you do.

SHELL COMB

I say we war against Slender Bark.
Honor compels we act.

WISE HAWK

Learn patience, girl, or you'll never
be a leader.

Shell Comb huffs, returns to her tapestry.

Nine Killer comes to the door, waits.

WISE HAWK

Enter, War Chief.

Nine Killer sits. Fears bad news.

WISE HAWK

We need that boy.

NINE KILLER

A raid against Three Myrtle Village?

Shell Comb jumps up.

SHELL COMB
Mother, no! Spill blood between
cousins and friends? That's showing
patience?

WISE HAWK
It can't be helped. High Fox --

SHELL COMB
Is harmless. Everyone agrees.

WISE HAWK
Return to your tapestry before I
forget you're my daughter.

SHELL COMB
Who lost a daughter.

Shell Comb moves away, stifling a (fake) sob.

NINE KILLER
Clan Chief, if I may --

Wise Hawk makes a chopping motion: The matter is finished.

WISE HAWK
Strike like lightning, War Chief.
For the clan.

Nine Killer goes out.

Wise Hawk broods. Shell Comb slips out.

EXT. THUNDERCLOUD'S HOUSE

Thundercloud travels around his "empire", so this is a
temporary loaner house. Two Empire Warriors guard the door.

Shell Comb approaches. Guards block her way. Green Club
comes over.

SHELL COMB
I would bespeak Thundercloud.

GREEN CLUB
Were you summoned?

SHELL COMB
I am the Clan Chief's daughter. I
am not "summoned". Now step aside.

He lets her pass.

INT. THUNDERCLOUD'S HOUSE

The house is full of baskets and traveling gear on mats. A portable throne is laid with furs and skins.

Empire Warriors stand as bodyguards inside. Thundercloud sits by the fire smoking a pipe, drawing plans in sand.

Shell Comb enters.

SHELL COMB

Great Chief. I respectfully request
you stage a punitive raid against
Slender Bark.

Thundercloud stares at Shell Comb's beauty, but plays cool.

THUNDERCLOUD

I respectfully decline. The time is
not right.

SHELL COMB

His skulking murderers killed my
daughter. Your bride.

THUNDERCLOUD

They would have captured her for
ransom. Or taken her head. So, no.

SHELL COMB

As daughter of the Clan Chief, I
demand you take measures.

THUNDERCLOUD

When you are Clan Chief, then make
your demands.

Enraged, Shell Comb storms out. Thundercloud watches her saucy walk.

He goes back to plans in sand. Finishes his pipe. Better do something.

He stands, preens, and marches out like a king.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE PLAZA - MORNING

On the plaza, Tall Pine, Lazy Waters, and other Warriors gather with war and trail gear: bow, arrows, blanket, satchel of food.

Nine Killer arrives with his gear, does a head count, frowns.

NINE KILLER

Where is everyone?

TALL PINE

Many have gone "hunting".

LAZY WATERS

They were promised five days of feasting and fooling around.

TALL PINE

Not a bloodbath with kinsmen.

NINE KILLER

Ohona plans, Okeus plots.

Thundercloud approaches with Green Club and Bodyguards.

THUNDERCLOUD

War Chief, you go to raid Three Myrtle Village?

NINE KILLER

I can't discuss my orders, Great Chief. Ask Wise Hawk.

THUNDERCLOUD

I forbid it. Black Spike is our bulwark in the north. I won't allow family feuds while enemies surround us.

NINE KILLER

Unless I'm mistaken, your influence evaporated when Red Knot died.

THUNDERCLOUD

Depart, and I'll send my Empire Warriors to stop you.

NINE KILLER

Keep your dogs on a leash. They tend to get lost.

Green Club seethes. Thundercloud storms off.

TALL PINE

Thanks be to Ohona he didn't get to marry Red Knot.

NINE KILLER

Too many chiefs and not enough braves.

EXT. BEACH

Bent Willow, the loner, digs clam.

Shell Comb approaches. He's puzzled.

SHELL COMB
Clamming? A good day for it. Bent Willow, I need a favor.

BENT WILLOW
From me?

SHELL COMB
I need you to carry out a secret mission for the good of the village.

BENT WILLOW
What has the village done for me?

Shell Comb touches him. He's flustered.

SHELL COMB
Do it for me, then. I'd be very appreciative.

BENT WILLOW
How -- so?

SHELL COMB
When I'm Clan Chief, I'll need a War Chief. Someone brave and capable and independent. For another...

She strokes his arm or hair.

BENT WILLOW
What's the mission?

SHELL COMB
I hear you're the best hunter. And the fastest runner...

EXT. PANTHER'S CAMP - MORNING

Panther exits his hut, hobbling, cold and stiff. Doesn't notice Sad Otter sitting. Startles again.

PANTHER
Gah! Are you a demon sent to torment me?

No longer terrified, resolute, hand on breastbone, she swears.

SAD OTTER
I will do it.

PANTHER
Huh? Do what?

SAD OTTER
Renounce my clan. Be your slave.
If you help my friend High Fox.

PANTHER
More than a friend.

SAD OTTER
You can see into my heart. Yes, I
love him.

PANTHER
Love is a poor reason to renounce
your clan.

SAD OTTER
Haven't you ever loved, Elder?

That stings. He looks for a way out.

PANTHER
Once an arrow is shot, it can't be
called back.

She rises, ready to serve.

SAD OTTER
I, Sad Otter, am your slave.

Stuck, Panther gathers a few pitiful belongings.

PANTHER
A demon, definitely.

SAD OTTER
Together we'll prove High Fox is
innocent.

PANTHER
If so, then someone else murdered
this girl Red Knot.

SAD OTTER
True. But you can spy out the
answers.

PANTHER
If I had answers, would I live on
this dratted island?

EXT. RIVER - MORNING

Nine Killer, Tall Pine, Lazy Waters, and Warriors paddle canoes upriver. All are painted for war. NK daubs on paint.

TALL PINE

Do we have a plan?

NINE KILLER

Does it matter? Even if we win, we lose.

LAZY WATERS

Jinx.

NINE KILLER

If we get ahead of Black Spike, we seize his village, hold it hostage, and demand High Fox. If Black Spike is already home, we sneak over the palisade and grab the boy. Without bloodshed, may Ohona bless us.

TALL PINE

Either plan, getting away is the trick.

LAZY WATERS

Always is.

TALL PINE

We worry about fighting Yellow Snake or Slender Bark, and here we attack our own people.

NINE KILLER

And my blood brother. Pray we surprise them.

EXT. FOREST

Black Spike's entourage, tired from celebrating, plods.

BLACK SPIKE

Pick up your feet. We need --

BENT WILLOW (O.S.)

Ho!

The party whirls. Warriors circle Black Spike's family.

Bent Willow trots up the trail, PANTING. He carries a green branch, a sign of peace. Stops out of reach.

BENT WILLOW
Shell Comb sent me.

Black Spike waves him close.

BENT WILLOW
Nine Killer boards canoes to raid
your village and seize High Fox.

BLACK SPIKE
When will they leave?

BENT WILLOW
This morning, with the flood tide.

BLACK SPIKE
How many?

Bent Willow shrugs, turns to go.

Black Spike nods. A Warrior grabs him.

BENT WILLOW
What? That's all I know.

BLACK SPIKE
You come with us. If Nine Killer
plans an ambush, you die first.

Bent Willow is dragged along.

EXT. RIVER

Sad Otter paddles the canoe steadily.

Panther is nervous as the canoe tips. More nervous about
socializing again.

PANTHER
(to himself)
They're just men and women. No
better, no worse.

SAD OTTER
Did you say something, Elder?

PANTHER
Nothing important. Where are we
bound?

SAD OTTER
We call it Crab Island. High Fox
and I played there as children.

EXT. CRAB ISLAND - NOON

A tiny treeless island. No one is visible.

The canoe lands. Panther goes to rise, but old and lame, is stuck.

PANTHER
Girl, give me your hand.

Sad Otter balks at his "death touch".

PANTHER
I'm too stiff to get up.

Sad Otter, strong as a bear, plucks Panther ashore.

SAD OTTER
(calls)
High Fox!

High Fox pops up, filthy and bug-bitten.

HIGH FOX
About time. I ran out of food. And
almost froze last night.

Sad Otter has a water jug. He DRINKS greedily. Panther plucks it away.

PANTHER
First things first. High Fox. Look
me in the eye. Upon pain of death,
did you kill Red Knot?

High Fox is incensed. Who's this duffer?

SAD OTTER
The Panther.

High Fox is jolted.

SAD OTTER
He's here to help. Trust me.

PANTHER
Answer, boy.

HIGH FOX
I didn't kill her. I loved her more
than life itself.

Sad Otter is stung.

PANTHER

Let's hope so. Because if you lie,
young prince, I'll wring your soul
from your body.

EXT. THREE MYRTLE VILLAGE LANDING - NIGHT

Nine Killer's canoes coast in. Warriors jump out, drag them
ashore silently. All debark.

Nine Killer signals CANOE GUARDS 1 and 2 to guard canoes.

Nine Killer clutches his war club to his chin, asks a silent
prayer of the sky gods. Warriors join in silence.

The war party moves inland.

EXT. THREE MYRTLE VILLAGE

The village has the same layout: forest, then fields, then
longhouses and huts inside a palisade. A few fires give
weak light.

They creep, sticking to forest, hunker in brush.

Tall Pine signals: Has Black Spike arrived home?

Nine Killer: Can't tell.

Taps Lazy Waters: Circle the village. He goes.

Nine Killer frets: Something isn't right. Slaps his forehead.
Mimics a dog: No dogs barking.

Sudden WOLF HOWL-WAR CRIES blare in the night.

Lazy Waters comes running and flops.

LAZY WATERS

They're out in force. Coming this
way.

TALL PINE

Back to the canoes --

But Canoe Guard 1 runs and flops.

CANOE GUARD 1

They got the canoes. Blue Smoke is
dead.

Now comes a steady CLATTER of war clubs on wicker shields or
bows, and sinister CHANTING.

TALL PINE
Who could have warned them? A spy?
Or someone from our village?

BLACK SPIKE (O.S.)
Nine Killer! Throw our your weapons!

NINE KILLER
Can we cut north?

LAZY WATERS
No.

BLACK SPIKE (O.S.)
Surrender or die!

TALL PINE
Surrender and die.

NINE KILLER
(calls)
Black Spike! We do not come to kill
cousins and friends --

BLACK SPIKE (O.S.)
Says the thief in the night! Shoot!

Arrows ZIP. Nine Killer's men lie flat in brush, but some
are HIT. Men CRY OUT, GROAN. Some rise and SHOOT back.

A brave or suicidal Three Myrtle Warrior WHOOPS and attacks.
A Flat Pearl Warrior BATS him down, but is SHOT by an arrow.

BLACK SPIKE
We only need the sun to rise, Nine
Killer!

TALL PINE
What do we do?

NINE KILLER
Pray the mist rises.

WOLF HOWL-WAR CRIES sound all around.

EXT. CRAB ISLAND - DAWN

Panther drinks tea by a grass fire. High Fox mopes. Sad
Otter waits for magic, fiddling with her war club.

PANTHER
You two were selfish children. The
path you chose led to danger, and
Red Knot paid the price.

HIGH FOX
I wasn't my idea.

PANTHER
Running off was Red Knot's idea?

HIGH FOX
It was the only way to be together.
Black Spike, Wise Hawk, Shell Comb,
everyone spoke against us. They
said Red Knot must marry some other
chief, and I some chief's daughter --

A SPLASH sounds in the river. Sad Otter stands up.

Canoe Guard 2 paddles a canoe. Has a head wound, is fuddled.

SAD OTTER
You're from Flat Pearl Village?
What happened?

CANOE GUARD 2
(fuddled)
Nine Killer went to capture -- what's
his name. They got -- canoes. Hurt --

SAD OTTER
Flat Pearl Village raids Three Myrtle?

PANTHER
Put out. I can help that man.

SAD OTTER
No time. That's my village.

Sad Otter, High Fox, and Panther (puffing to keep up) pile
in the canoe and paddle off.

PANTHER
(to himself)
Hurrying to a massacre. Why didn't
I say no?

Rounding a bend, in the distance they hear CLASHING, CHANTING,
DRUMMING, and WAR CRIES.

EXT. THREE MYRTLE VILLAGE LANDING -- MORNING

Even while a battle goes on, men dip nets in fish weirs and
women gather wild rice.

At the landing, Three Myrtle warriors watch the canoe pull
in with Panther, Sad Otter, and High Fox.

THREE MYRTLE WARRIOR
High Fox? Sad Otter. Who's this?

HIGH FOX
No one. Where is my father?

SAD OTTER
Please. What's happening?

THREE MYRTLE WARRIOR
Nine Killer's men are pinned down in
the forest. Who is this?

Sad Otter helps Panther rise in a dignified manner. Panther
walks past the Three Myrtle men.

PANTHER
I am the Panther.

THREE MYRTLE WARRIOR
The Panther?

Spooked, men make warding signs and let them pass.

EXT. THREE MYRTLE VILLAGE

Nine Killer and his men lie as flat as possible. Some are
wounded. Occasionally one shoots but ducks as arrows fly.

Three Myrtle Warriors are painted for war.

NINE KILLER
Black Spike! No one needs to die!
Give over your son and we'll leave!

THREE MYRTLE WARRIOR
(laughs)
How? Walk on water?

NINE KILLER
I give my word High Fox will be
protected!

A Flat Pearl warrior risks a shot.

BLACK SPIKE (O.S.)
And I give my word to fight to your
death! Generations unborn will sing
of our courage -- Aagh!

TALL PINE
(war whoops)
We hit him.

NINE KILLER
My oldest friend.

LAZY WATERS
If Black Spike is dead, will they
let us go?

NINE KILLER
Would you?

TALL PINE
Chief.

Panther breezes through with a regal manner. Sad Otter and High Fox follow. What the hell?

PANTHER
Black Spike! I am the Panther! Let
me approach, or else!

Three Myrtle warriors hold their shots and move aside.

Black Spike has an arrow in his arm. Great pain.

BLACK SPIKE
High Fox? Are you all right?

HIGH FOX
I'm fine, Father.

BLACK SPIKE
But what have you done? Brought a
witch to curse our village?

PANTHER
To bless it. I come to stop this
raid.

BLACK SPIKE
Black magic. Just what we need.

PANTHER
Who is the Flat Pearl War Chief?
(calls)
Nine Killer! Step out here!

NINE KILLER
Why should I trust you, night
traveler?

PANTHER
I am here to sort this mess out. I
grant you protection.

BLACK SPIKE

Hold on. We mean to kill them.

PANTHER

Shall I sing to make them invincible?
Let them rampage through your village?
Or strike your men blind?

BLACK SPIKE

Better I order my men to cut you
down like a corn stalk. We don't
fear your magic.

PANTHER

Do you fear your arm turning black?
Swelling like a putrid corpse? With
fever burning your sense away while
you die of thirst --

BLACK SPIKE

Stop! Can you -- save my arm?

PANTHER

(calls)

Nine Killer, step up. Or shall I
let Black Spike kill you?

NINE KILLER

I don't fear death!

PANTHER

Neither fear life.

NINE KILLER

Don't shoot.

Empty-handed, Nine Killer joins Panther and Black Spike.

PANTHER

Hear me. I come to investigate the
accusation that High Fox killed Red
Knot. That was Flat Pearl's reason
in coming, no? And Three Myrtle's
reason for defending? Then I'll
remove the motive to fight.

NINE KILLER

Why you, wind walker?

BLACK SPIKE

What do you care?

PANTHER

If Flat Pearl and Three Myrtle destroy each other? If hundreds die, or are enslaved, or starve? No. Matters not to me.

NINE KILLER

Then why?

PANTHER

She asked.

Everyone looks at Sad Otter, who's mortified.

PANTHER

Or maybe I'm just curious. Who really did kill Red Knot?

BLACK SPIKE

Sorcerers...

PANTHER

You, carry Black Spike to the village. Make light so I may remove that arrow. Sad Otter, fetch boiling water and rags, a sharp knife, a bone awl. Purple iris, tobacco or fresh maple leaves, bulrushes. High Fox, stay close. Nine Killer, ready your canoes. Well? Get moving.

NINE KILLER

Don't sorcerers sow strife and discord? I never knew one to make peace.

PANTHER

Stick around. You'll see strife and discord aplenty.

EXT. THREE MYRTLE VILLAGE

Not allowed inside the palisade, Nine Killer and his men are fed at the edge of the woods. Food bowls are shared.

Black Spike sits propped in a litter-chair, arm in a sling. Panther fusses with it. Sad Otter chatters with a friend.

PANTHER

That must do.

He has blood on his hands. Walks toward the landing to wash.

NINE KILLER

Friend, why are you so angry? You know High Fox must be innocent.

BLACK SPIKE

Ohona help me, the boy couldn't kill a rabbit. Still, you traveled here with warriors and witches.

NINE KILLER

Not my choice.

BLACK SPIKE

(sighs)

What can we do but obey the clan?

NINE KILLER

Even if it means fighting old friends.

EXT. THREE MYRTLE VILLAGE LANDING

Panther washes off blood, but hears a TWIG SNAP.

He whirls. An old woman, MOTH, watches him.

Moth is an old slave woman, real name unknown. Her face and hands have old burn scars. She's half-crazy.

Panther rises. Moth edges away. He talks soothingly.

PANTHER

Grandmother, a beautiful day, is it not?

MOTH

(addled)

No. Yes. I know you. Do I know you?

PANTHER

I am - a friend, Grandmother. What can I do for you?

MOTH

Do you know me? You know me.

PANTHER

I'm sorry. I'm old and forgetful. If you could tell me your name?

MOTH

I lost it. Long ago. In the house.

PANTHER
What house, Grandmother?

Agitated, she waves her hands. Keeps pointing up.

MOTH
It burned. From the bottom up. Up.
Do you remember?

PANTHER
I'm sorry -

MOTH
It burned me. Burned me.

PANTHER
Whose house, Grandmother?

MOTH
Monster Bone. His ghost haunts the
night. Burning, burning. Bad blood.

SAD OTTER (O.S.)
Panther? Elder?

Sad Otter comes searching. Moth runs off.

PANTHER
Who is that?

SAD OTTER
Just Moth.

PANTHER
Moth?

SAD OTTER
Flew too close to the flames? She's
mad.

PANTHER
Not so mad she recognized me, and
asked for help.

SAD OTTER
She's beyond help. Black Spike keeps
her as a kindness, like an old dog.

PANTHER
Another revered elder.

EXT. THREE MYRTLE VILLAGE

Panther returns to Nine Killer and Black Spike, who laugh over old jokes and share bowls of food.

With one awkward hand, Black Spike picks at his teeth. One incisor is a peg tooth.

Panther picks up a bowl of food.

PANTHER

The old woman, Moth, said a house
burned down. Or up. What house?

BLACK SPIKE

What house didn't burn? Crazy times,
eh, Nine Killer?

NINE KILLER

The Monster Bone War.

PANTHER

When?

BLACK SPIKE

Near two tens of years. Where have
you been?

PANTHER

Away. What happened?

BLACK SPIKE

My father, Net Sinker, sought to
ally with Monster Bone. He was Great
Chief -

NINE KILLER

Hardly "great".

BLACK SPIKE

The upriver tribes were getting pushed
from the north. My father and Wise
Hawk -

NINE KILLER

Gods, yes. She was Clan Chief even
back then.

Panther offers to share his bowl, but people balk, so he eats it all.

BLACK SPIKE

The plan was Monster Bone would be a
new bulwark to our north.

NINE KILLER

Give the Independent Villages some
breathing room.

BLACK SPIKE

So Wise Hawk married Shell Comb to
Monster Bone. She was our -

NINE KILLER

Spy.

BLACK SPIKE

Ambassador. I was War Chief up there,
listening to Monster Bone bitch.

NINE KILLER

And me. I wasn't "Nine Killer" then.

BLACK SPIKE

Soon enough. We became blood
brothers.

NINE KILLER

Bathing in other peoples' blood.

BLACK SPIKE

Monster Bone pushed back the northern
raiders. We had peace for a few
years. Then - What happened?

NINE KILLER

Who knows? Raiders swarmed in,
villages burned, people died.

BLACK SPIKE

Whole villages wiped out.

NINE KILLER

Like Bent Willow's.

Flashback: Chaos and war. Houses and villages burn in the
night. War whoops. People scream. Children cry.

PANTHER

So Monster Bone's house burned?

BLACK SPIKE

Aye. Old Moth was the only one to
escape.

NINE KILLER

There went the alliance. Stone Frog
moved in and clamped down. We drew
a line at the Fish River.

PANTHER

A lot of coming and going, just as now.

(beat)

High Fox's mother? Did she die in a raid?

BLACK SPIKE

No. In childbirth.

PANTHER

What was her name? And clan?

BLACK SPIKE

We don't name the dead, Panther.

PANTHER

You never remarried?

BLACK SPIKE

Well, yes. Colored Star was my second wife. But she died in her sleep. That was enough.

NINE KILLER

He doesn't need a wife. Women love to bed a chief.

BLACK SPIKE

Gives them power.

PANTHER

Children belong to their mother's kin. Why wasn't High Fox returned to his clan?

BLACK SPIKE

They were poor. They went west. Here High Fox would have a better life.

NINE KILLER

Black Spike wants his son to become chief of Bloodroot Clan.

PANTHER

All the more reason to clear his name.

EXT. THREE MYRTLE VILLAGE LANDING -- MORNING

Flat Pearl people prepare to depart in canoes. Three Myrtle Villagers watch them go.

Black Spike, arm in a sling, holds High Fox, who's nervous.

BLACK SPIKE

I commend my son to your care,
Panther.

PANTHER

I'll watch over him. As will Nine
Killer, Wise Hawk's deputy. We'll
get to the bottom of this mystery.

NINE KILLER

Just curious. Who told you we were
coming?

BLACK SPIKE

Still waters, Nine Killer.

Black Spike walks off.

But a Three Myrtle Warrior scratches his cheek (miming Bent
Willow's scar). Nine Killer is puzzled.

High Fox drags Sad Otter aside.

HIGH FOX

Thank you for bringing the Panther.
I feel safe with him.

SAD OTTER

You've been my friend forever. I'd
do anything to protect you.

HIGH FOX

And I'll pay you back when I am Great
Chief of all the Independents. If
only wish Red Knot were here. How
cruelly she was taken from me.

SAD OTTER

Our love -- your love is in the hands
of Ohona, High Fox.

Seeing her chance, Aunt Thistle barges in. Other family
women follow. She grabs Sad Otter and shakes her.

AUNT THISTLE

Where have you been, you shameless
trollop? Stop pestering the Clan
Chief's son.

Sad Otter shakes free and handles her war club.

SAD OTTER

Auntie, I attend the Panther's business. I belong to him now.

AUNT THISTLE

What? You stupid child. Always you disgrace us --

SAD OTTER

I did it so the Panther may prove High Fox innocent.

AUNT THISTLE

Fool. A chief's son will never love an ugly nobody like you --

Panther interrupts.

PANTHER

Unhand my slave, woman. You two, get in the canoe.

AUNT THISTLE

She's going nowhere, witch. She belongs to Star Crab Clan.

PANTHER

Not any more. She's mine, body and soul. Now depart, before I pluck your black heart from your chest and feed it to the fish.

Panther makes a spooky gesture. Women fall back.

People push off canoes. Sad Otter sits behind Panther.

Aunt Thistle makes a chopping gesture: You are finished!

SAD OTTER

Can you really pluck out someone's heart?

PANTHER

I can do whatever people imagine.

SAD OTTER

Then I wish you would pluck out mine.

PANTHER

You only think you've lost everything, caterpillar.

SAD OTTER

Caterpillar?

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE GATE -- NOON

The returning warriors arrive, tired but safe. Family members sing songs of welcome. Priests sing songs of gratitude.

But suddenly come whispers: "Witch!" People scatter to avoid Panther and Sad Otter. Children shriek and run.

Nine Killer hangs onto High Fox.

Wise Hawk and Shell Comb approach.

WISE HAWK

I scatter salt at your feet, sorcerer.

PANTHER

(grins, nods at cane)

You also practice magic, Clan Chief.
When last we spoke, you walked on
two legs.

WISE HAWK

I ask why you're here.

PANTHER

I come to pierce the mist and find
Red Knot's murderer.

Wise Hawk points to High Fox.

WISE HAWK

We have him.

PANTHER

I think not.

WISE HAWK

(shoos him with cane)

I won't tolerate a night traveler in
my village.

PANTHER

There will be no witchery on my part.
But there is much curiosity about
Red Knot's death. If you drive me
out, more questions will arise.

SHELL COMB

We have nothing to hide. Search the
village for all we care.

WISE HAWK

No. Nine Killer, drive him hence.

NINE KILLER

Clan Chief, with all respect, The Panther saved our lives. And accomplished our mission to fetch High Fox. Even saved Black Spike's life.

WISE HAWK

So, I needs thank you on behalf of the village. Very well. Go without the walls and wait. Shell Comb, see our -- guests are fed. High Fox, I invite you to the House of the Dead, where our priests may attend you. War Chief, with me.

Panther and Sad Otter go outside the palisade.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD

Girls carry jugs to water vegetables.

Panther and Sad Otter sit on a log to wait. Villagers give them a wide berth.

SAD OTTER

Everyone fears your magic. It must be nice to have power.

Panther plucks a pebble from her ear. Sad Otter is amazed.

SAD OTTER

Magic.

PANTHER

Yet I ask, was there a pebble in your ear?

SAD OTTER

Uh, no.

PANTHER

So where was the pebble?

SAD OTTER

In your hand?

Panther shows the back of his hand. The pebble is wedged between his fingers.

SAD OTTER

But you really do work magic? Ow!

Panther bounces the pebble off her head.

Shell Comb brings them a bowl of food.

SHELL COMB
Even sorcerers and slaves are afforded
hospitality in Flat Pearl Village.

Panther and Sad Otter eat.

PANTHER
I regret the loss of your daughter,
Shell Comb.

Shell Comb gets teary.

SHELL COMB
My daughter was very precious to me.
But I must be brave. The clan depends
on me.

INT. WISE HAWK'S GREAT HOUSE -- AFTERNOON

Nine Killer eats. Wise Hawk sips tea.

WISE HAWK
So, War Chief?

NINE KILLER
What a dozen warriors couldn't do
with weapons, an old man did with
words. His price is to meddle in
the murder of Red Knot.

WISE HAWK
Meddling.

NINE KILLER
I know you gambled Red Knot's marriage
to keep our village safe.

WISE HAWK
And with her death, our little world
turns turtle.

NINE KILLER
Having seen The Panther in action,
I'd say we need his magic.

WISE HAWK
Shell Comb is right. Let The Panther
hunt.

NINE KILLER
Full measure is the best way in war.

WISE HAWK

Protect him with your life, but kill him if I send word.

NINE KILLER

As always, I do your bidding. Still, curious orders.

WISE HAWK

Curious times. Girls carrying war clubs. What's next?

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD

Panther has wandered off to stare at the bay. Sad Otter fiddles with her war club.

Quick Fawn tows her to the field, idly checks the crops.

QUICK FAWN

Sad Otter, what have you done?

SAD OTTER

You sound like Aunt Thistle. My former aunt. I'm dead to my family.

QUICK FAWN

You really became a slave to save High Fox's life? You're so brave.

SAD OTTER

Red Knot was brave, and look what happened to her.

QUICK FAWN

The tobacco, all worm holes. You know she and High Fox were in love.

SAD OTTER

I know.

QUICK FAWN

More than in love. For six moons or longer.

SAD OTTER

No, that can't be. Red Knot only just became a woman.

QUICK FAWN

Everyone knows. It's dishonorable. A man does not seduce a child.

SAD OTTER

Oh, High Fox. How many ways can you break my heart?

QUICK FAWN

It's cruel to say, but he'll never love you. Nor anyone, really.

SAD OTTER

Why did you tell Red Knot, "You can't do this?" Did you know she was running away? Oh.

Nine Killer approaches Panther. Sad Otter runs to bodyguard.

NINE KILLER

Elder, I'm to escort you.

PANTHER

(amused)

And knock me on the head if need be?

NINE KILLER

You can read minds.

Sad Otter hurries up, hefting her war club.

SAD OTTER

I'm sorry, Elder. I shirk my duties -

With a flick of his war club, Nine Killer sends Sad Otter's war club flying. She retrieves it.

NINE KILLER

It's not a toy.

SAD OTTER

I know. Can you teach me how to use it?

NINE KILLER

A girl?

PANTHER

My bodyguard.

Nine Killer instructs. She mimics.

NINE KILLER

There are many strikes, and you must master them all. Sweeps. Jabs. Backhand. Punches. Crotch shots. Most important, hit them or they'll hit you.

SAD OTTER
I'll remember.

NINE KILLER
You'd better. Many people would
kill a witch.

SAD OTTER
Broken Cliff tried.

PANTHER
And others before him.

NINE KILLER
I am at your disposal. Where will
your search begin?

PANTHER
Where the mystery started.

EXT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD

Girls pound corn in mills, singing in time.

Panther, Nine Killer, and Sad Otter approach the house.

NINE KILLER
Uh...

PANTHER
Does the mighty war chief fear to
enter the House of the Dead?

NINE KILLER
I deal in men, not gods.

PANTHER
Mightn't I steal Greenstone Clan's
treasures? Or insult your ancestors?

NINE KILLER
My ancestors are hung up in the
forest. But as you wish.

SAD OTTER
Must I go?

PANTHER
You must. Else who'll protect me?

INT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD

PANTHER

Hello?

Priest 1 approaches with gore on his hands.

PANTHER

I wish to see Red Knot's body.

PRIEST 1

She is being prepared.

PANTHER

I am authorized to go anywhere and ask anything.

PRIEST 1

So we were told. It's just -- the preparation is not pretty.

PANTHER

I've waded knee-deep in dead.

Before the statue of Okeus (holding his war club), High Priest and two Priests neatly skin Red Knot. Her guts are piled in a basket. Muscle and bone show on her skull. Eyes bulge.

PANTHER

We came just in time.

Sad Otter looks and faints. THUD!

Nine Killer, green himself, carries her outside.

HIGH PRIEST

The ghosts told of your coming, Panther. A warning in case I needed to fight your sorcery.

PANTHER

Just between us, brothers, I've no more magic than a mink. But which ghosts?

HIGH PRIEST

Red Knot's. Her ghost came just after dawn and bowed to Okeus.

PANTHER

Did she say who murdered her?

High Priest takes the dead girl's hands.

HIGH PRIEST

No. Holding her hands, I've studied the coals until my eyes ached. But a mist lies between us. Almost as if Red Knot wants her secret kept hidden.

PANTHER

Secret?

HIGH PRIEST

A crime. Worse than her murder.

Nine Killer returns.

NINE KILLER

A crime worse than murder? Treason?

HIGH PRIEST

Ask Red Knot.

PANTHER

I shall. Would you inform her, please, that I need to -- poke around? For the good of the clan?

NINE KILLER

The dead are easily offended.

High Priest shakes a rattle and sings a dirge.

HIGH PRIEST

Red Knot, daughter of Shell Comb, daughter of Wise Hawk, we ask your forgiveness as we seek the truth.

More singing and rattling, then he stops.

PANTHER

Thank you. First question, how did she die?

High Priest gently rolls her skull.

HIGH PRIEST

We found no damage except blood in her hair. She might have dropped to sleep, like a child.

NINE KILLER

A blow to the temple. I've killed men that way. Dead before they hit the ground.

Panther washes the skull. Reveals a crushed spot with two dents: small one near the eye, larger one above the ear.

PANTHER

Two dents. Was she struck twice?

NINE KILLER

One blow would knock her flying.
More likely a double-spiked war club.

Nine Killer shows his war club, a tree root grown around a stone.

NINE KILLER

Some drill a hole and set another
spike in the head. Thundercloud
carries one with a copper spike.

PANTHER

Something to see.

SHOT: They work before the statue of Okeus, who holds a double-spiked war club.

Panther carefully marks a stick with the positions of the skull holes, and pockets it.

Panther studies her arms and hands, not yet skinned. Her fingernails are intact. Flexes her forearms.

PANTHER

Fingernails not torn or clotted with
blood.

NINE KILLER

Nothing cut off. No trophies taken.

PANTHER

No bones broken.

NINE KILLER

You wouldn't expect a girl -- a woman --
to put up a fight.

PRIEST 1

Not Red Knot.

Using a stick, Panther pries open her jaw.

PANTHER

She didn't bite her tongue. No teeth
are - Wait. This tooth is chipped?

CLOSE ON: A canine tooth looks broken, but is a congenital peg tooth.

HIGH PRIEST

No, it's a peg tooth. A birthmark.

Panther inspects her scalp on the cut-away skin.

PANTHER

Very little blood. So death was
instant, as you say, Nine Killer.

Panther inspects every inch of her body, slowly.

NINE KILLER

What are you looking for?

PANTHER

I don't know. But what's not here
is just as important as what is here.

NINE KILLER

Huh?

PANTHER

Any trace of man's seed?

HIGH PRIEST

No.

NINE KILLER

So she wasn't violated. Or used by
High Fox.

PANTHER

What were her belongings?

PRIEST 1

Her dress. Shoes. A bundle.

NINE KILLER

The necklace.

PANTHER

What necklace?

Priest 1 gives him the intact necklace.

NINE KILLER

High Fox's. Your shadow identified
it.

PANTHER

So the two met before her death?
For what?

EXT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD -- AFTERNOON

Panther and Nine Killer come out. Sad Otter is woozy but stands. Panther takes her war club.

It is prettily engraved with a smooth wooden ball for a striker. Brand new, unused. No spikes.

NINE KILLER

No spikes.

SAD OTTER

So High Fox didn't kill her.

PANTHER

No, High Fox's war club didn't strike her down. But some man's did.

NINE KILLER

True. No woman carries a war club.

SAD OTTER

I do.

PANTHER

A brutal attack. When a woman kills, it's quiet. Poison, smothering, a knife in the ribs while he sleeps.

NINE KILLER

You speak from experience?

SAD OTTER

A woman could have ordered a man to kill Red Knot.

PANTHER

Very good. Someone like, say, Wise Hawk?

SAD OTTER

Her own granddaughter?

NINE KILLER

Can we slow down? Why did you say, "What's not here is as important as what is here"?

PANTHER

Fancy an example?

NINE KILLER

Please.

PANTHER

(shouts)

You scheming skunk, I'll kill you!

Panther suddenly swings the war club at Nine Killer's head.
He throws up an arm and ducks.

Panther stops. Taps Nine Killer's upraised forearm.

NINE KILLER

Are you crazy?

PANTHER

Very. Tell me, what was the condition
of Red Knot's forearms?

NINE KILLER

Uh, intact.

Panther taps him again.

PANTHER

Would yours be?

NINE KILLER

A strike like that would break my
arm -- Wait.

SAD OTTER

She never tried to defend herself.
A surprise attack.

Priests 1 and 2 come out to sing to the sunset.

NINE KILLER

An ambush... It's getting dark.

SAD OTTER

Where shall we sleep? I have -- had
cousins here.

NINE KILLER

I've got an idea, but...

INT. ROSEBUD'S HOUSE -- EVENING

Rosebud feeds her children, including Quick Fawn.

Nine Killer enters. Kicks out a dog. Plows into Rosebud.

NINE KILLER

Sister --

ROSEBUD

A word, brother?

NINE KILLER

Can everyone read minds but me? The Panther needs a place to sleep.

ROSEBUD

(loud)

He'll bring death and ruin to our house. No one would ever sleep here after a sorcerer curses it.

NINE KILLER

He's an honored guest.

ROSEBUD

He's a witch sprung from the loins of Okeus.

EXT. ROSEBUD'S HOUSE

Panther and Sad Otter wait outside, overhearing. Sad Otter worries, but Panther grins.

INT. ROSEBUD'S HOUSE

NINE KILLER

They paid him great homage in the House of the Dead --

ROSEBUD

Then let him sleep with the dead.

NINE KILLER

Wise Hawk would grant your pick of winter stores, to the benefit of your children.

ROSEBUD

What good if the Panther eats their flesh and chews their bones?

NINE KILLER

He doesn't eat children.

QUICK FAWN

You said he eats little girls.

NINE KILLER

He's sworn to practice no witchery. Help me out, Rosebud. I must know he's safe.

ROSEBUD

Oh... I can't refuse anyone
hospitality. Even a witch.

Nine Killer ducks out and brings in Panther and Sad Otter.
Children shriek and hide.

NINE KILLER

The Panther of -- no clan. My sister,
Rosebud.

PANTHER

I bless your hospitality, Rosebud.
I've hear you're the best cook in
the village.

ROSEBUD

Sit, guest. I'll see what I can
scrape up.

Panther sits by the fire. Sad Otter sits behind him.
Children slowly peek and creep back, fascinated.

Nine Killer goes to leave.

PANTHER

Where will you be, War Chief?

NINE KILLER

I have a wife. Last time I checked.

Nine Killer exits. Kicks out another dog.

NINE KILLER

Damn it, Quick Fawn!

QUICK FAWN

Elder, is it true what they say about
you?

PANTHER

Most of what's said is foolishness.
But you're Quick Fawn, the legendary
runner? Did you ever hear the story
"How the Deer Got His Antlers"?

Children shake heads.

Panther takes from the rafters an ear of dried Indian corn.
He twists and folds as he talks, intriguing the children.

Rosebud gives Panther and Sad Otter bowls of food.

PANTHER

Ah, squash. And mint tea flavored
with blackberries? Mmm.

ROSEBUD

I grow a special mint traded from
far upriver. No one else has it.
And it's hard work to keep deer from
nipping it.

PANTHER

Yes, deer... Long ago when the animals
could speak, Chief Deer had no
antlers. And every year, the Brothers
Bear would raid the village and demand
tribute. So, one day...

His voice drones on, everyone mesmerized.

Later...

Panther finishes his story. He's twisted the corn into a
doll, which he gives to a child. Sad Otter is asleep.

PANTHER

... And ever since, Chief Deer and
all his warriors grow antlers in the
fall. If you'll excuse me.

Panther exits. Rosebud burns the doll in the fire.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE GATE -- NIGHT

One of Nine Killer's warriors stands guard in the gate.

Panther goes out the palisade gate to pee. The guard gives
him a wide berth.

Suddenly he's surrounded by Thundercloud, his lieutenant
Green Club, and another Empire Warrior.

THUNDERCLOUD

Grab him.

Warriors balk. Panther makes a spooky gesture.

THUNDERCLOUD

He's not a witch. Just an old man.

GREEN CLUB

An elder.

THUNDERCLOUD

Do it.

Reluctantly the warriors grab Panther's arms. He doesn't resist. Is almost amused.

PANTHER

If you wished to bespeak me, child --

THUNDERCLOUD

I have only one message, intruder.
Quit my village by sunrise, or never
see the sun set.

PANTHER

I'm too old to fear death, "Grass
Mat".

GREEN CLUB

"Grass Mat?"

Thundercloud jams his fancy double-spiked war club across Panther's throat, choking him.

THUNDERCLOUD

You are never to speak that name
again, "Raven". Ouch.

PANTHER

(half-choked)

And you should never close with an
enemy, Grass Mat.

Panther presses a bone dagger below Thundercloud's heart.

Thundercloud jumps away. Empire Warriors let go of Panther.

PANTHER

Your war club has double spikes. A
beauty. Where did you get it?

Sad Otter comes running with her war club.

SAD OTTER

Elder, are you all right?

PANTHER

I'm fine. You think you net fish,
Grass Mat, but it's you are pulled
in. And you two.

(spooks warriors)

Mind your manners, or I'll sic my
bodyguard on you.

They walk off.

SAD OTTER

Why did Thundercloud call you Raven?

PANTHER

Because it's a bird of ill omen.

INT. WISE HAWK'S GREAT HOUSE -- NIGHT

Wise Hawk dozes by the fire. Shell Comb does hand work.

Thundercloud rushes in.

THUNDERCLOUD

I demand you drive the Panther from this village. Are you asleep?

Wise Hawk jerks awake.

WISE HAWK

No. What? Don't you dare give me orders.

THUNDERCLOUD

He is a monster walking on two legs, here to poison your village.

WISE HAWK

Even a monster may come in handy.

THUNDERCLOUD

Take heed. If you won't control who comes and goes, I will.

Thundercloud exits.

WISE HAWK

The Panther gets under that man's skin like a chigger. I wonder why?

SHELL COMB

If the Panther had power, he'd be a great chief somewhere.

WISE HAWK

Instead he's a pariah burrowed in a sandbank. Who is he?

SHELL COMB

Have you told Thundercloud the rumors? That Yellow Snake and Slender Bark may have formed an alliance?

Wise Hawk takes a stick and idly draws a map in the ashes, crisscrossing lines to show the factions.

WISE HAWK

If he can't find out on his own...
Anyway, it can't be much of an
alliance. Those brainless buffalos
will never trust each another.

SHELL COMB

Fools with weapons look for a target.

WISE HAWK

They'll probably egg each other to
attack Thundercloud's "empire". But
will they drive through us or go
around?

SHELL COMB

Either way, best we marry someone to
Thundercloud.

WISE HAWK

(scoffs)
Who?

SHELL COMB

Or to Black Spike. He plans to unite
the Independent Villages under his
son.

WISE HAWK

Blessed Okeus, never idle. Who says
that?

SHELL COMB

High Fox is yakking it up. They call
him "the prince".

WISE HAWK

More men with big feet.

SHELL COMB

Maybe we'll squeak through another
winter unharmed.

WISE HAWK

Maybe. But come the leaves, someone
will stomp us out like a grass fire.
And our lineage will be swept aside.

Wise Hawk scribbles out the map.

SHELL COMB

Maybe not.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD -- MORNING

A distant rattling and drone is High Priest praying to gods.

In BG, Nine Killer talks to Lazy Waters at the gate.

Panther stands staring at the water. Wise Hawk joins him, hobbling with arthritis.

PANTHER

You're up early, elder.

WISE HAWK

And you, elder. Do you never sleep?

PANTHER

With one eye open. Are you in pain?

WISE HAWK

(scoffs)

Life is pain.

PANTHER

Some can be put off. Have you tried
pounded willow bark? The inner bark.
Steep as a tea, and drink. Not too
much, or it upsets the stomach.

WISE HAWK

Always the stomach. Sounds like a
clumsy plan to poison me.

PANTHER

Only one way to find out.

Wise Hawk turns to go.

PANTHER

Don't fear for you life's work, Clan
Chief. Your world will survive you.

Sad Otter runs up, still sleepy.

SAD OTTER

Good morning, Chief. Elder. If you
keep sneaking away, I can't protect
you.

PANTHER

Every dawn I pay homage to the gods,
whoever they be.

SAD OTTER

Okeus and Ohona are the chief gods.
What others could there be?

PANTHER

As many as clouds. But Okeus and
Ohona suffice.

SAD OTTER

That's something I've never
understood. Why is there a cruel
god? Why does Ohona not banish him?

PANTHER

Because he's a brother? And family
and clan are all we have?

SAD OTTER

You have no clan.

PANTHER

I mean, you can't just banish someone
you dislike. There's always a bigger
vision. Why would First Mother birth
twins knowing one was evil?

SAD OTTER

Because a mother can't -- I don't
know.

Panther sketches in the sky, and (CGI images) of Okeus and
Ohona loom like giants.

PANTHER

Maybe she knew too much goodness is
bad for us.

SAD OTTER

Too much goodness?

In the sky, Ohona makes sunshine and crops grow. Okeus sneaks
behind planting weeds, then calls down hail.

PANTHER

Ohona makes the sun shine and rain
fall so crops grow. But think. Too
much food would make us fat and lazy.
So Okeus plants weeds to pull, or
flattens crops with hail.

Okeus withers leaves so they fall, and blows cold winter
winds. Ohona makes leaves grow and brings warmth.

PANTHER

Okeus withers the leaves and summons
snow. Ohona brings the warmth and
the leaves to life.

SAD OTTER

The circle.

PANTHER

Hard work and lean times make our
people stronger.

SAD OTTER

Like longing makes love grow stronger.

In the sky, the brother gods begin wrestling. When one
crashes to the ground, thunder rumbles.

PANTHER

You're bad for me, Sad Otter.

SAD OTTER

Elder?

PANTHER

You were born of Ohona's right
testicle. But your goodness blinds
you to peoples' flaws.

SAD OTTER

You mean High Fox.

Nine Killer walks by, going down the beach. Nods.

PANTHER

Yes. A whiner and a leech.

SAD OTTER

You just don't understand love.

Girls congregate on the beach, idly scanning the rocks.

PANTHER

What are they doing?

SAD OTTER

Picking periwinkles?

Thundercloud's Empire Warriors trot in formation. Strip and
plunge into the bay. Girls WHISTLE and CHEER.

PANTHER

That goes for you too.

SAD OTTER

What? Oh.

Wistful, Sad Otter practices war club swings.

Some Warriors run from the surf after Girls, who run SQUEALING. Green Club calls them back.

EXT. SWEAT LODGE

Down the beach is the sweat lodge. Tiny, built of whale ribs and covered with bark and seaweed.

Shell Comb's dress hangs outside. Two Servants wait.

Nine Killer shoos servants out of earshot. Strips and enters.

INT. SWEAT LODGE

Nine Killer enters, blinded by steam and darkness.

NINE KILLER

Shell Comb?

She's naked in dim light, sultry. Dashes water on stones for steam, then sprinkles crushed herbs.

SHELL COMB

My secret concoction. Sit. They say steam leaches evil from the soul.

NINE KILLER

You wanted to see me.

SHELL COMB

I want you for many things, Nine Killer.

NINE KILLER

Such as?

SHELL COMB

I want you to continue as War Chief when I am Clan Chief.

NINE KILLER

When you are Clan Chief, I'll consider it.

SHELL COMB

But we need allies. Thundercloud has great plans for the Independent Villages.

NINE KILLER

I have great plans for the killifish.

SHELL COMB

Or, with help, Black Spike may be
able to push out Stone Frog.

NINE KILLER

The best challenge is the one never
issued.

Shell Comb touches him. Nine Killer edges away, but the
lodge is tiny.

SHELL COMB

I can promise you great things, Nine
Killer. You've always fancied me.

NINE KILLER

As may be. But we're cousins.

SHELL COMB

I'm not so sure we're blood.

NINE KILLER

We're both Greenstone Clan.

She strokes him. He trembles, tempted.

SHELL COMB

What men and women do in the dark is
of no concern to others.

NINE KILLER

Unless their secrets endanger the
clan.

SHELL COMB

I would never jeopardize the clan.

NINE KILLER

Then don't make rash bargains behind
the Clan Chief's back.

SHELL COMB

Leave the thinking to the chiefs.

NINE KILLER

Good advice.

SHELL COMB

As for the Panther, bear in mind you
may have to slay him.

NINE KILLER

I thought he was a doddering old man.

SHELL COMB

He's too free with our secrets.
Rake up old ashes and you risk burning
your fingers.

NINE KILLER

Some secrets need to be burned clean
lest they fester and rot.

SHELL COMB

You are a knife, Nine Killer. And
when dull, discarded. You may go.

Nine Killer exits.

EXT. SWEAT LODGE

Emerging naked, Nine Killer runs and plunges into the bay,
splashing and snorting.

Men spearfishing from canoes watch curiously.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE

Wise Hawk walks. Snags two boys with fishing poles.

WISE HAWK

Bound for the landing? Are there
still willow trees down there?

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD

Women hoe in the fields, singing. Children shoo crows with
rattles and shouts.

Empire Warriors trot by, chanting a cadence.

Nine Killer joins Panther and Sad Otter. Carries a stick.

NINE KILLER

How goes your war club practice?

SAD OTTER

Uh, I've been too busy.

NINE KILLER

(sarcasm)
Spoken like a true warrior. Here.

With the stick, Nine Killer whacks a log hard. Sad Otter takes it and whacks. It stings her hand.

NINE KILLER
Harder. Ten times ten. Or until
the stick breaks.

SAD OTTER
It hurts my arm.

Nine Killer holds out his forearms for inspection.

SAD OTTER
I see... your arms?

PANTHER
His right forearm is thicker.
Pounding makes muscle and bone grow.

SAD OTTER
Ten tens?

NINE KILLER
Then the same with your left. And
again afternoon.

PANTHER
Hard work and lean times.
(touches her forehead)
Working this will make your brain
stronger.

NINE KILLER
Shout too. Makes men jump.

Sad Otter gives a feeble whack and small cry.

NINE KILLER
Louder.

SAD OTTER
(warbles a scream)

NINE KILLER
Practice. Panther, what will you
have?

PANTHER
Bigger vision. We need to know every
event that led to Red Knot's death.

SAD OTTER
The dance.

EXT. FLAT PEARL PLAZA

Panther, Nine Killer, and Sad Otter stand on the plaza.
Villagers don't shun the Panther so much now.

PANTHER
People trickled in from all the
Independent Villages? Black Spike's
village too?

NINE KILLER
Everyone. Flat Pearl was bursting
at the seams.

PANTHER
So naturally, there was a dance.

SAD OTTER
It was wonderful.

Flashback: Dance, night

Flashback: A bonfire lights the night. Drummers drum and
sing. People sit blankets and wicker chairs, clapping and
shouting encouragement.

Flashback: Wise Hawk sits a throne overlaid with furs.
Thundercloud sits to one side framed by bodyguards. Black
Spike sits opposite. All wear shining finery.

SAD OTTER (V.O.)
The Teasing Dance went on the longest.

NINE KILLER (V.O.)
Wise Hawk had the seat of honor.
Sitting there, framed by Thundercloud
and Black Spike, you could believe
she ruled from the mountains to the
sea.

SAD OTTER (V.O.)
The young men and women could have
danced all night.

NINE KILLER (V.O.)
I swear some did. Gave me a headache.

SAD OTTER (V.O.)
Red Knot glowed like a seal in the
firelight. So beautiful.

Flashback: Marriageable men and women dance the Teasing Dance.
They face in separate lines, dance forward and backwards.
Men scuffle to get opposite a woman, and get bumped aside.

Flashback: Red Knot dances, flirts with every man, but favors High Fox.

NINE KILLER (V.O.)
Shameless. With her betrothed sitting
on his throne.

SAD OTTER (V.O.)
It was her last chance ever. Married
women can't dance it. Nor us girls.

PANTHER (V.O.)
And Thundercloud? He must have
disapproved his fiancée making eyes.

NINE KILLER (V.O.)
Sat there like a lump. Sometimes
he'd mutter and Green Club would
skulk off like a coyote.

Flashback: Thundercloud, broody, speaks low to Green Club,
who sneaks off.

PANTHER (V.O.)
On what mission?

NINE KILLER (V.O.)
Who cares?

PANTHER (V.O.)
A lot of coming and going.

NINE KILLER (V.O.)
A lot of slipping away. Nothing
like a dance to make a woman frisky.

Flashback: Lovers steal away, toting blankets. Shell Comb
goes alone in one direction. Black Spike goes another way,
wearing his distinctive blanket.

SAD OTTER (V.O.)
High Fox and Red Knot disappeared
just before the last dance.

Flashback: Red Knot dances opposite High Fox, but suddenly
they're gone.

Flashback: The Warrior Dance is somber. The oldest warrior,
Mockingbird, shuffles out. Drums throb. The second-oldest
joins him, then a third, and so on.

NINE KILLER (V.O.)
Last came the Warriors Dance.
Mockingbird led off. Then other
warriors, in order of age.

PANTHER (V.O.)
Did anyone slip away?

SAD OTTER (V.O.)
No, that would be disrespectful.

NINE KILLER (V.O.)
The Warriors Dance honors our
veterans.

PANTHER (V.O.)
As it should. Respect for elders is
the bedrock of a community.

BOTH (V.O.)
Yes, Elder.

Flashback: As the warriors dance, people slip back from the
shadows and sit quietly.

NINE KILLER (V.O.)
It went late. And cold. The stars
were sharp. Green Serpent blessed
us.

SAD OTTER (V.O.)
So we knew it was over.

Flashback: Everyone is exhausted and cold. High Priest shakes
his rattle and blesses everyone. Last the guests of honor.

PANTHER (V.O.)
Was Red Knot anywhere to be seen?

SAD OTTER (V.O.)
She sat at Thundercloud's feet then.
She looked happy.

NINE KILLER (V.O.)
Because she planned to run away.

SAD OTTER (V.O.)
To escape.

PANTHER (V.O.)
A decision that killed her.

Flashback crashes. They're back on the empty plaza.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE

Panther indicates Wise Hawk's Great House facing the plaza.

PANTHER

So a few hours pass, then more coming
and going.

SAD OTTER

Most people sleep in after a dance.
I was only up because Aunt Thistle
kicked me awake. So her too.

Flashback: Sad Otter berated by Aunt Thistle.

NINE KILLER

Everyone goes out the gate to pee
first thing. Except some elders who
can't walk that far.

PANTHER

Who do we know for sure? Early on,
Red Knot left the Great House.

SAD OTTER

To bathe in the bay, she said. It's
good luck on a wedding day.

Flashback: Red Knot slips out of Wise Hawk's Great House and
skips for the gate with a bundle.

PANTHER

Who else?

SAD OTTER

Quick Fawn. And Bent Willow. He
was going hunting. And Thundercloud.

PANTHER

Thundercloud was out early? Alone?

SAD OTTER

I think. He bespoke Bent Willow in
private.

Flashback: Thundercloud pulls Bent Willow aside, whispers.
The girls wait nearby.

PANTHER

So Bent Willow wandered the forest
when Red Knot was killed. Didn't
she spurn him?

SAD OTTER

She was fickle. She spurned every
boy. But they forgave her.

NINE KILLER

High Fox must have left early to reach Oyster Shell Landing.

PANTHER

Right. High Fox passed the gate -

NINE KILLER

More likely over the palisade. Some go that way. Off to his secret rendezvous to steal a bride.

Flashback: High Fox climbs the palisade and drops outside.

SAD OTTER

The heart can't help who it chooses.

PANTHER

If High Fox had denied his heart and obeyed clan law, Red Knot would still be alive. Who else?

SAD OTTER

Some women picking vegetables. I don't know their names.

NINE KILLER

The gate guard. Spider? Cedar Canoe?

Flashback: A gate guard yawns. Women bring in vegetables.

NINE KILLER

Eventually, everyone.

Panther wanders, thinking. Sad Otter shadows.

Old MOCKINGBIRD totters up to Nine Killer, and proffers a blanket (Black Spike's).

Mockingbird is the oldest man in the village, half-senile.

NINE KILLER

Good morning, elder. What's this?

MOCKINGBIRD

Good morning, Alder Fish. Can you return this?

NINE KILLER

I'm Nine Killer, grandfather. Return it to who?

MOCKINGBIRD

The owner. I found it.

NINE KILLER
Found it where?

MOCKINGBIRD
(points vaguely)
I can't get out the gate. Takes
forever to pee. No fun getting old.

NINE KILLER
I can imagine. Who --

MOCKINGBIRD
Return it, will you? That's a good
lad.

Mockingbird wanders off. Nine Killer waves down Quick Fawn
and lobs her the blanket. Huh?

NINE KILLER
Mockingbird gave it to me. Just
hang onto it.

Nine Killer catches up to Panther and Sad Otter.

Quick Fawn opens the blanket. Shell Comb stops.

SHELL COMB
Where did you get that?

QUICK FAWN
My uncle. Mockingbird gave it to
him.

SHELL COMB
Huh.

Quick Fawn moves on. Shell Comb thinks.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD

Thundercloud watches Empire Warriors drill. Wise Hawk joins
him.

THUNDERCLOUD
My men could carry the forest on
their shoulders.

WISE HAWK
They should be strong. They eat
like bears in fall.

THUNDERCLOUD

Flat Pearl Village should be honored to host our army. When I rule these many lands, Flat Pearl could be the center of power, revered by all.

WISE HAWK

When. For now, Flat Pearl's winter stores dwindle by the day.

THUNDERCLOUD

So your hospitality fails?

WISE HAWK

My patience fails. I'll ask that you quit the village or send your men to gather food.

THUNDERCLOUD

True warriors don't grub for roots and clams.

Thundercloud fiddles with his spider gorget.

WISE HAWK

Then send them off to war. Preferably against someone with fat granaries.

THUNDERCLOUD

What does the Panther tell you?

WISE HAWK

(scoffs)

Another spider spinning a web. Find some food, Thundercloud. Or lose some men.

Wise Hawk walks off.

Thundercloud signals Green Club, gives him orders.

Shell Comb saunters by with a (different) blanket. Hands it to Thundercloud. Puzzled, he follows.

EXT. BEACH

Bent Willow trolls for crabs. He throws out a deer leg on a line, drags it in slowly. Crabs follow and get scooped up.

Panther, Nine Killer, and Sad Otter arrive.

PANTHER

You fish alone too?

BENT WILLOW
Fools talk and scare off game.

PANTHER
You are Star Shell Clan.

BENT WILLOW
Barely.

NINE KILLER
Bent Willow was adopted. His village
was destroyed in a raid.

BENT WILLOW
And I was passed around like a basket
of walnut hulls.

PANTHER
If you had attracted Red Knot's
affection, that would've been a feat.

Nine Killer puzzles, then recognizes Bent Willow's scar.

Flashback: A Three Myrtle Warrior scratches his cheek.

Bent Willow keeps crabbing.

BENT WILLOW
I'm busy. We need to feed
Thundercloud's wonder warriors.

PANTHER
You walked the forest while Red Knot
was killed.

BENT WILLOW
Hunting. I didn't kill her.

PANTHER
Did you resent she was promised to
another? That you'd never have her?

Panther idly plays with crabs in basket.

BENT WILLOW
There was always a chance. If I
became War Chief, say.

PANTHER
As when Thundercloud becomes Great
Chief?

BENT WILLOW
I loved Red Knot. I'd have married
her, even tainted.

NINE KILLER

Tainted?

BENT WILLOW

Ask High Fox.

Panther looks at Sad Otter: What's that mean? Sad Otter shrugs.

BENT WILLOW

He carried his war club up the ridge.
I saw that.

Flashback: High Fox, impatient, runs up the ridge.

BENT WILLOW

But then Red Knot ran down it, so
she was still alive.

PANTHER

Down the ridge?

BENT WILLOW

Toward the landing.

SAD OTTER

No, she was killed atop the ridge.
She never got down the far side.

PANTHER

If she ran down the ridge, she would
have accompanied High Fox.

Flashback: A woman (Shell Comb) runs down the ridge, seen by Bent Willow.

BENT WILLOW

Believe what you want.

Bent Willow moves down the beach. Nine Killer picks up Bent Willow's war club: all wood, no spikes.

SAD OTTER

Maybe he saw her ghost.

PANTHER

Before it entered the House of the
Dead to salute Okeus?

NINE KILLER

I wonder which spirit sent Bent Willow
to warn Black Spike of our raid?

EXT. SWEAT LODGE

Servants tend a fire and carry in white-hot rocks with sticks. Shell Comb dismisses them. Shucks her dress and enters.

Thundercloud strips and follows.

INT. SWEAT LODGE

In dim light, Shell Comb dashes water for steam, sprinkles herbs.

THUNDERCLOUD

Smells good.

SHELL COMB

My secret concoction. I thought you might relax. You're very busy.

THUNDERCLOUD

A chief has much to do. A Great Chief, more.

SHELL COMB

My mother spoke of the food shortage.

THUNDERCLOUD

Flat Pearl Village has never lacked for food or hospitality. Until today.

SHELL COMB

She's ancient.

THUNDERCLOUD

She lacks vision. Most chiefs do.

SHELL COMB

I will not. I see farther than most. I see a way to help you.

THUNDERCLOUD

And that is?

SHELL COMB

All this trouble started when someone struck down your betrothed. Now everyone's plans unravel.

THUNDERCLOUD

And you will not be taken for granted?

SHELL COMB

My mother can't last forever. I
will succeed her. Were we married,
you would rule Flat Pearl Village.

THUNDERCLOUD

Shell Comb, hot as fire.

SHELL COMB

As beautiful as my daughter, with
more experience.

THUNDERCLOUD

True. You know the ways of the
Independents.

SHELL COMB

That's not what I meant.

THUNDERCLOUD

I need sons.

SHELL COMB

Does this look like an old hag?

Shell Comb moves closer. They kiss.

THUNDERCLOUD

The Panther.

SHELL COMB

I'll deal with him.

Deep kissing.

EXT. RIDGE

Panther, Sad Otter, and Nine Killer climb the ridge. Panther
puffs.

NINE KILLER

You won't drop dead, will you?

PANTHER

And force you to carry my corpse?

NINE KILLER

I'd leave you for the crows and
raccoons.

They reach the top.

PANTHER

A poor feast. Now, where was Red Knot lying?

NINE KILLER

Here. The killer probably stood behind this big tree and whacked her.

Sad Otter steps to another big tree. She can duck behind brush but see the trail.

SAD OTTER

War Chief, I think not. If he hid here, he could see the trail.

PANTHER

Smart girl. Remember, War Chief, Red Knot was taken by surprise. Still. Show me how she lay.

Sad Otter lies down, mimicking Red Knot's body.

NINE KILLER

The blood has washed away.

PANTHER

Nine Killer, go down and run up the trail, please.

NINE KILLER

All the way back down?

PANTHER

Five paces. Sad Otter, hide.

Nine Killer goes down, trots back up. Panther directs. Sad Otter mimics smacking Nine Killer. He mimics falling backwards down the slope.

SAD OTTER

That's wrong. She fell on her face.

PANTHER

So what's missing? Try again.

Nine Killer goes back down, trots back up. Passes Sad Otter hiding. Panther prods her.

SAD OTTER

Nine Killer.

He turns.

PANTHER
Strike him dead.

Sad Otter mimics whacking Nine Killer in the temple. He mimics falling forward where Red Knot lay.

SAD OTTER
Oh, my.

NINE KILLER
The killer spoke, she turned, never
defended. It was some man she
trusted.

PANTHER
And died trusting.

Flashback: Red Knot spins, mouths, "High Fox? Oh. What are you doing here?" And is struck down.

PANTHER
So it could have been High Fox.

SAD OTTER
(holds up war club)
Not with this.

PANTHER
Yes, the mysterious double-spiked
war club. It could have been shoved
under leaves.

All around is vast forest: they'd never find it.

Squatting at the murder spot, Panther sifts leaves systematically. They help.

SAD OTTER
What do we look for?

PANTHER
Anything.

NINE KILLER
Here's something. Hickory wood.

A thumbnail-sized chip is rounded, one side stained dark, one side bare wood.

PANTHER
Part of a tool. Worked by hand.

NINE KILLER
Stained with color.

SAD OTTER

Anyone could have dropped it. People
run this trail all the time.

PANTHER

Still, it may answer a question we
haven't asked yet.

They walk back. Spook deer or other animal, who flee.

NINE KILLER

I wish we asked fewer questions.
All the trouble we stir up, angering
people with accusations...

PANTHER

Which do you prefer? A pretty lie
or an ugly truth?

SAD OTTER

But this question-asking is needed
to prove High Fox innocent.

PANTHER

No. To discover who killed Red Knot.

NINE KILLER

And hold him down, break his arms
and legs, and pitch him into a
bonfire.

SAD OTTER

I don't want it to be High Fox.

PANTHER

It's time you learned, child. We
don't get what we want in life.

INT. WISE HAWK'S GREAT HOUSE

Wise Hawk sits by the fire.

Shell Comb has a shelf of herbs and powders. She prepares
two mugs of tea. Puts something extra in her mother's.

WISE HAWK

Is that my willow bark? Gods above,
but the Panther really is magic. I
can make fists again.

She drinks. Flexes her hands freely.

SHELL COMB
We won't need his magic much longer.
I've got news. I'm to marry
Thundercloud.

Shell Comb grinds herbs to powder.

WISE HAWK
You?

SHELL COMB
I still spend my three days in the
Woman's Hut.

WISE HAWK
You wear out husbands like other
people wear out moccasins.

SHELL COMB
If I conceive his child, Thundercloud
would fight like a wolf to protect
this village.

WISE HAWK
You and Thundercloud... He must
have other wives.

SHELL COMB
The one he leaves here will be the
most powerful among the Independent
Villages.

WISE HAWK
I will consider it. I'm still Clan
Chief.

SHELL COMB
Drink your tea, Mother.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE GATE

Men carry in strings of fish.

Panther, Nine Killer, and Sad Otter return to the village.
A guard tends the gate. Lazy Waters talks to him, eyeing
women who pass by.

LAZY WATERS
Chief, Thundercloud wishes an
audience. And Wise Hawk.

NINE KILLER
I hit people with clubs. Why am I
so popular?

LAZY WATERS
(to Panther)
Find Red Knot's killer yet?

PANTHER
I've found many with good reason to
kill her. Where were you that
morning?

LAZY WATERS
After a dance? In bed. With a woman
on each arm. Hey.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD

Empire Warriors led by Green Club come from the forest.
They drag a body: one of Slender Bark's scouts.

Nine Killer and Lazy Waters step out.

GREEN CLUB
Another of Slender Bark's spies. We
chased off the rest.

NINE KILLER
How many were there? And where?

GREEN CLUB
(waves vaguely)
Ten? They ran like women when we
lifted our weapons.

NINE KILLER
Then how did you kill this one?

GREEN CLUB
A lucky shot.

LAZY WATERS
Bent Willow?

They suddenly recognize Bent Willow. He's shaved his head
and adopted Empire Warrior garb.

NINE KILLER
Finally found a home, eh?

BENT WILLOW
Be glad I no longer chase your job.

NINE KILLER
And when these men move on?

BENT WILLOW

(spits)

This village has had its day.

Empire Warriors drag the body away. Tall Pine comes up.

TALL PINE

Dogs fetching their master's dinner.

LAZY WATERS

Three canoes of his warriors are
packing to go.

NINE KILLER

Wise Hawk ordered them gone.

TALL PINE

Good riddance.

NINE KILLER

(to Lazy Waters)

Does that son of yours still moon
after that Three Myrtle girl?

LAZY WATERS

Takes after his old man.

NINE KILLER

Find him. Then both of you make the
rounds. Have our men sharpen flints
and check strings and fletching.

TALL PINE

Planning some action, Chief?

LAZY WATERS

When is The Panther going back to
his island?

NINE KILLER

Nothing to do but gossip?

Tall Pine and Lazy Waters depart.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE GATE

Panther has collected children. Performs an impromptu magic
show. Sad Otter, Nine Killer, Quick Fawn watch.

Lazy Waters returns with his son Redbird, a teenage whippet.

Nine Killer takes him aside, gives him a small pouch. It
holds nine black beach pebbles.

NINE KILLER

(low)

Tomorrow, carry a message to Black Spike. Give him those pebbles so he knows it's mine. Ask him to please come to Flat Pearl Village to plan strategy. Slender Bark's scouts trespass again. Tell him we'd be honored to host his family and a ten of warriors. Be very polite.

(holds him)

And tell him we've cleared High Fox of Red Knot's murder, so the boy is free. And. Tell no one where you go, not even your father. Understand?

Redbird trots off. Nine Killer rejoins Panther.

QUICK FAWN

Grandfather, Mama invites you to dinner.

PANTHER

Tell your mother I'd be honored, granddaughter.

NINE KILLER

That buys us a couple of days.

PANTHER

For...

NINE KILLER

You to find Red Knot's killer.

Quick Fawn looks guilty.

NINE KILLER

What's eating you?

QUICK FAWN

Nothing.

Quick Fawn runs off. Nine Killer goes too.

SAD OTTER

Elder, may I speak to High Fox?
Alone?

Panther nods. She runs off, but winces. Her stomach hurts.

PANTHER

(calls)

Ask him why Red Knot held his necklace!

(MORE)

PANTHER (CONT'D)
(to Lazy Waters)
A woman on each arm, eh?

LAZY WATERS
Get yourself a nice widow, Elder.
Use your magic to bewitch one.

PANTHER
And... what would I do with her,
again?

They laugh.

EXT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD -- EVENING

Sad Otter calls inside. But gasps. Her stomach hurts.

SAD OTTER
Hello? It's Sad Otter. May I bespeak
High Fox, please? On business for
the Panther?

Priest 2 brings High Fox to the doorway.

SAD OTTER
In private?

Priest 2 signals: Stay in the vicinity.

Sad Otter and High Fox walk around the longhouse. It's dark
between buildings.

HIGH FOX
Has the Panther discovered who killed
Red Knot? I'm dying all cooped up.

SAD OTTER
He'll prove you're innocent. Then
you'll be free.

HIGH FOX
I'll return to Three Myrtle Village.
My father will probably arrange a
marriage.

SAD OTTER
Oh. I must stay with the Panther.

HIGH FOX
I loved Red Knot. She was so
beautiful.

High Fox fiddles with his necklaces.

SAD OTTER

Not the last time I saw her. Oh.
Why did Red Knot clutch your necklace?

HIGH FOX

I put it in her hand. Something of
myself to take into the next world.
I could really talk to her, you know?

SAD OTTER

I'm listening. Ow.
(rubs her sore stomach)

HIGH FOX

You've been a good friend, Sad Otter.
I wish I could reward you.

SAD OTTER

High Fox. You know how girls talk.
Some say you coupled with Red Knot
before her wedding day.

HIGH FOX

No.

SAD OTTER

Even before she became a woman. Six
moons ago.

HIGH FOX

It's not true. I swear it. Who
says these things? I'll have them
punished.

SAD OTTER

I don't -- Oops!

She stumbles over something in the dark. A body.

SAD OTTER

Someone's hurt. Fetch the priests.

High Fox runs, returns with Priest 1 and 2, with torches.

The dead man is old Mockingbird.

PRIEST 1

Mockingbird.

Priest 1 and 2 carry Mockingbird into the House of the Dead,
chanting. Wave High Fox to follow.

Sad Otter stops at the door. Stomach pain makes her groan.

SAD OTTER
(groans)

INT. THUNDERCLOUD'S HOUSE

Thundercloud sits his portable throne. Wise Hawk and Shell Comb sit on each side. Empire Warriors are bodyguards.

Nine Killer enters. An Empire Warrior demands his war club.

Nine Killer gestures: Try and take it. Thundercloud waves to back down.

THUNDERCLOUD
Pray, sit.

NINE KILLER
Or kneel?

Nine Killer remains standing, hand on his war club. He frowns: Why are these three so chummy?

SHELL COMB
"Great Chief."

NINE KILLER
Wise Hawk is my chief. What do you want?

THUNDERCLOUD
Things have changed. We --

NINE KILLER
What things?

THUNDERCLOUD
I'd like to recruit you as my War Chief. Having the famous Nine Killer in my ranks would bring prestige to my entourage.

NINE KILLER
No thanks.

THUNDERCLOUD
Why not?

NINE KILLER
For one, you travel afar. My place is here. For another, I don't like you, Thundercloud.

THUNDERCLOUD
Why not?

NINE KILLER

I don't need a reason. Here I serve best. Oh, I've invited Black Spike here to plan strategy against Slender Bark.

SHELL COMB

How dare you issue an invitation without consulting the Clan Chief?

NINE KILLER

Pardon me if I'm confused.

WISE HAWK

I give you new orders. The killifish are running. We need to harvest netsfull.

Wise Hawk rubs her stomach: it hurts.

NINE KILLER

The Panther hasn't yet exposed Red Knot's murderer.

SHELL COMB

Nor will he ever. He's only here to gulp your sister's squash.

NINE KILLER

It's true Thundercloud's men gnaw at the granaries like rats.

THUNDERCLOUD

My men prepare for war. You could lead them, War Chief. I'll even forget your insults.

NINE KILLER

Better you remember them.

Empire Warriors object to the insult. CT waves them down.

SHELL COMB

See that the Panther leaves tomorrow. Or we'll order you execute him.

NINE KILLER

I would refuse. The Panther brings light to this village, same as Robin brought fire.

SHELL COMB

He plies witchcraft, and you're duped.

THUNDERCLOUD
War Chiefs can be replaced.

SHELL COMB
And traitors burned alive.

WISE HAWK
The investigation into Red Knot's
death is finished. The Panther is
cast out. War Chief, mend the nets.

Nine Killer exits.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE

Wise Hawk walks home. Shell Comb holds her arm.

SHELL COMB
Who said any setback can be turned
into an opportunity?

WISE HAWK
I did. I'm surprised you listened.
But your tapestry unravels before
it's even knotted.

SHELL COMB
Nine Killer will do as we say.

WISE HAWK
He'll defend this village with his
life. That's why he's War Chief.

SHELL COMB
It's time he passed the hatchet.

WISE HAWK
(rubs painful stomach)
I wish I could pass something.

SHELL COMB
Are you ill?

WISE HAWK
Too much willow bark. Can you really
give Thundercloud a child?

SHELL COMB
A clever woman can always produce a
baby.

WISE HAWK
All we lack is a clever woman.

SHELL COMB
I've got something better.

She steers Wise Hawk into the house, then moves off.

EXT. THUNDERCLOUD'S HOUSE -- NIGHT

In shadows, Shell Comb waits.

Green Club arrives.

GREEN CLUB
You wished to see me, Daughter of
the Clan Chief?

SHELL COMB
I have a request. Something only
you can do, Green Club.

GREEN CLUB
And what do I receive in kind?

Shell Comb moves close, caresses him.

SHELL COMB
(touching him)
What would you like?

INT. ROSEBUD'S HOUSE -- NIGHT

Panther eats. Hungry dogs watch. Rosebud does handiwork.
Children play Jackstraws with reeds, betting nut shells.

PANTHER
The rumors are true, Rosebud. You
are the best cook in the village.

CHILD
Tell us another story, Grandfather.

ROSEBUD
"Grandfather?"

PANTHER
Did I tell you "How Chipmunk Got His
Stripes?" How about, "Why Brother
Bear Has a Short Tail?"

CHILD
No. Tell us.

Nine Killer enters, angry.

NINE KILLER

Elder, Sister.

PANTHER

Raccoon Eyes says I'm to leave, eh?

NINE KILLER

I know you can turn into an owl, but do you send your invisible spirit to spy too?

CHILD

Turn into an owl!

NINE KILLER

Yes, you're banished from the village.

Nine Killer takes up handiwork, but botches it.

PANTHER

Grass Mat, I mean Thundercloud, has plotted to drive me out since the first day.

ROSEBUD

Why does he hate you so?

PANTHER

I killed his father and ruined his mother.

ROSEBUD

You?

NINE KILLER

Now he's got Wise Hawk and Shell Comb on his side.

ROSEBUD

They're to marry.

NINE KILLER

That's why he's so cocky. Balls. I must fish.

PANTHER

Fish don't wait.

NINE KILLER

I should scout our borders for enemies. Try to guess who'll jump first. I'll admit, facing invasion, one girl's death may be frivolous.

Sad Otter enters. Sits in pain.

ROSEBUD
Have you eaten, girl?

SAD OTTER
No, thank you. I'm not hungry. My
stomach really hurts.

ROSEBUD
Sure it's not lower down?

SAD OTTER
What?

ROSEBUD
Between your legs?

Sad Otter checks. Her hand comes up bloody.

SAD OTTER
I'm bleeding to death.

ROSEBUD
Get used to it.

QUICK FAWN
Someone will feast at the Newly Made
Woman Dance.

SAD OTTER
But I'm a slave.

ROSEBUD
Oh, my. You do need to go to the
Women's Hut. Come with me. I'll
straighten it out.

PANTHER
She can't hide for three days. Who'll
protect me?

ROSEBUD
Ignore him.

PANTHER
Wait. Did you talk to High Fox?

SAD OTTER
High Fox did not kill Red Knot.

PANTHER
Now she has a woman's second sight.
Who did?

SAD OTTER

I don't know. Why do you bewilder
me with questions?

PANTHER

Here's another. You may have killed
Red Knot. Ever think of that?

SAD OTTER

What? How dare you!

PANTHER

You wanted Red Knot gone so you could
have High Fox. You had a war club.
So you brained her.

SAD OTTER

You horrible, horrid, hateful old
man!

ROSEBUD

I'll poison his squash. Come.

Rosebud drags Sad Otter out. It's quiet.

QUICK FAWN

Why do you ask so many questions,
Grandfather?

PANTHER

What are your legs for, Quick Fawn?

QUICK FAWN

Running?

PANTHER

And what's your brain for?

QUICK FAWN

My brain?
(laughs)

Quick Fawn collects dishes for the dogs to lick clean.

CHILD

Thinking. Your brain is for thinking.

PANTHER

I dub this child Chief. Maybe you
can find Red Knot's killer.

NINE KILLER

We gave it a good shot. I will miss
you, witch.

PANTHER

I will miss you, mankiller. And
this home and fire and these children.

NINE KILLER

As long as we ask questions, why
does The Panther wear a raven tattoo?

PANTHER

Who said it was a raven?

NINE KILLER

Sad Otter.

PANTHER

It's a long story.

NINE KILLER

We've a long night.

PANTHER

Not for children's ears.

Panther is silent. NK works on some repair. Rosebud returns.
NK signals to shoo children to bed. She does, then sits.

PANTHER

When I was young, I had big dreams...

Flashback: Young Panther loves a girl who clearly loves him.
But she's taken away by the chief and married to another.

PANTHER (V.O.)

But we don't get what we want in
life. So I renounced my tribe.

Flashback: Panther berates the elders, then storms out.

ROSEBUD

Why?

Nine Killer signals: Don't interrupt.

Flashback: Young Panther treks through lonely forests.

PANTHER (V.O.)

So I traveled. Traded in trinkets
and gems. Told stories. Even the
fiercest warriors like a good story
at the end of the day.

Flashback: Panther tells stories to a rapt audience.

PANTHER (V.O.)
Eventually, I found a war. And
warriors.

Flashback: Panther, trekking, comes to a destroyed village,
still smoking, littered with bodies.

Flashback: Panther meets Serpent Warriors, and cautiously
joins them.

PANTHER (V.O.)
And a village. A big one.

Flashback: From a high spot, Panther sees the vast mound
city of Cahokia.

Flashback: Panther looks up at the palace and Serpent King.

PANTHER (V.O.)
I joined their army. Distinguished
myself in raids.

Flashback: Panther leads Serpent Warriors to lay waste a
village. He slaughters anything that moves.

Flashback: He's tattooed with the raven.

PANTHER (V.O.)
I became a War Chief.

Flashback: Panther, in finery, directs hundreds into battle.
He draws maps and directs other officers.

PANTHER (V.O.)
I was rewarded for faithful service.

Flashback: Panther wears fabulous finery. Has a huge house.
Servants kneel. Wives greet him. Tribute is piled up.

Flashback: One slave boy (young Thundercloud) gazes up with
murder in his eyes.

PANTHER (V.O.)
Then Great War Chief.

Flashback: In the night, Panther slashes a rival chief's
throat. Saws off his head.

Flashback: Tosses the severed head atop a mound of rotting
skulls. But he's unsatisfied.

PANTHER (V.O.)
I'd climbed the mountain.

Flashback: Restless, Panther paces.

PANTHER (V.O.)

Then the Serpent King -- that's a
Great Clan Chief -- proposed I take
my warriors and cross the mountains
to the big salt water. Extend his
kingdom. Here.

Flashback: Panther listens to the Serpent King sketch big
bloody plans. Panther nods.

PANTHER (V.O.)

Finally I could return and avenge
myself on my clan.

Flashback: In an opulent bed, with wives around him, Panther
thrashes in a nightmare.

PANTHER (V.O.)

It stormed. Such a storm. I'd never
seen such a storm.

Flashback: Panther jerks awake as lightning flashes.

Flashback: Panther runs outside, near the pile of skulls.
Lightning rips the sky.

PANTHER (V.O.)

I had a vision.

Flashback: Panther, framed by lightning, is berated by Okeus
and Ohona looming in the sky.

PANTHER (V.O.)

I saw what I had done. What I had
become. What would happen if I
carried out the king's plan.

Flashback: Angry gods show skulls multiplying to the horizon.
Until they reach the sea. Everyone in the world is dead.

Flashback: Panther climbs the mound of skulls and throws
them down. But more multiply, threatening to smother him.

PANTHER (V.O.)

I ran.

Flashback: Panicked, crazy, Panther runs. Down the mound,
across the flats. Hounded by Okeus and Ohona. Finally
reaches the black forest and leaves the life behind.

PANTHER (V.O.)

I wandered. I walked. Sometimes
crawled.

Flashback: A mental wreck, Panther stumbles through forest.

PANTHER (V.O.)

Finally I reached the big salt water.
I was home. Yet I had no home.

Flashback: Panther staggers on the beach. Steals a canoe.
Paddles.

PANTHER (V.O.)

So I came to my little island. As
far as I could go. So settled down.

Flashback: Back to present day, in Rosebud's quiet house.

NINE KILLER

But... Why the raven?

PANTHER

My name across the mountains. When
I was done with a village, there
were left only bones for ravens to
pick.

ROSEBUD

And your name before that?

PANTHER

That man is long dead. And we do
not name the dead.

Rosebud gives Nine Killer a mat and blanket (inadvertently,
Black Spike's). They exit.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE -- NIGHT

They walk. Panther looks around at the village like a
condemned man.

PANTHER

After hearing that story, you're
probably glad to be shet of me.

NINE KILLER

I take men as I find them, Panther.
Whatever you did over the mountains,
you do good here.

PANTHER

Mist coming in off the bay. Obscuring
the world. Like one girl's death -

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD -- NIGHT

As they cross the field, they hear RUNNING. Nine Killer pushes Panther flat and pulls his war club.

NINE KILLER

(whispers)

Get down!

Silently Green Club and two Empires spring from the dark.

Nine Killer can swing wild, while they must dodge each other. He knocks down all three.

But Nine Killer takes a shoulder wound. Panther rises.

PANTHER

You're hurt?

NINE KILLER

I'm getting old. Who's that?

PANTHER

Green Club.

Nine Killer kicks Green Club.

GREEN CLUB

(groans)

PANTHER

Did you kill Red Knot on
Thundercloud's orders?

GREEN CLUB

(hazy)

What? No.

NINE KILLER

(to Panther)

Finished?

Panther nods. Nine Killer smashes in Green Club's skull. Checks the others: dead.

PANTHER

Just leave them?

NINE KILLER

Unless Thundercloud blabs, people
will think Slender Bark's skunks
killed them.

PANTHER
Not another investigation.

SNICKER. Then both LAUGH like fools.

EXT. PANTHER'S CAMP

Edge of the forest.

Nine Killer lays out the mat and blanket. Strikes a small fire, wincing at his shoulder wound.

NINE KILLER
Tomorrow we can boat you to your island.

PANTHER
I shan't return to my island. I couldn't survive another winter.

NINE KILLER
But where will you go?

Panther signs: Here.

NINE KILLER
Our new masters won't like a witch haunting our forest.

PANTHER
They can always send the War Chief to assassinate him.

NINE KILLER
Whoever that may be.

PANTHER
It won't be Green Club. You think Slender Bark will attack before winter?

Nine Killer fusses with the fire.

NINE KILLER
I think he must. If Shell Comb marries Thundercloud, he's conquered us. Slender Bark will destroy our village to stop Thundercloud from unifying the Independents. Once Flat Pearl Village is wiped out, he'll move on to crush Black Spike. Or Thundercloud will.

PANTHER

You see no alternative to war?

NINE KILLER

I see the crops waxing tall from
blood spilled on the soil.

PANTHER

And no bright spots?

NINE KILLER

I'm no longer young or fast. I won't
live to see my clan enslaved. Good
night, Elder.

Nine Killer exits. Panther is alone.

EXT. BAY -- DAY

Nine Killer and other men drag nets and haul in fish. Hard
labor with danger of swamping the canoes. Nine Killer suffers
with his shoulder wound.

Nine Killer sees Panther walking the shore, thinking, alone.

Black Spike's entourage arrives. Villagers sing songs of
welcome, hug, shake hands. Priests chant.

Nine Killer greets Black Spike. But sees Panther at the
edge of the forest, alone.

Panther sits, looks up. A huge wolf watches, slips away.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE

Sad Otter exits the Women's Hut. Looks at the world with
new eyes. Has fresh tattoos of womanhood on her cheeks.

SAD OTTER

Finally.

Quick Fawn comes running. Her two dogs follow.

QUICK FAWN

Three Myrtle Village is here.
There'll be a dance.

SAD OTTER

What's this talk that three of
Thundercloud's men were killed?

QUICK FAWN

Cut down in the field by Slender
Bark's spies.

SAD OTTER

I wouldn't bet on that.

QUICK FAWN

Your Panther refuses to leave. He
camps by the forest. Wise Hawk is
furious --

AUNT THISTLE

There you are!

Aunt Thistle brings an uncle and two brothers.

AUNT THISTLE

Still carrying that war club? You
insipid tart. No thought of how you
shame your family --

SAD OTTER

None.

AUNT THISTLE

Don't you back-talk me, you brainless
chit. I'll whip you bloody. Grab
her.

Uncle and two brothers step in, uncertain what to do.

SAD OTTER

Back off.

Aunt Thistle shoves them.

AUNT THISTLE

Take that stupid thing away.

Three men close in. As one touches Sad Otter, she slings
her war club. Wallops a knee, clips a chin, slams a shoulder.
Screams war cries. Knocks down all three.

Men come running at the noise, including Nine Killer.

SAD OTTER

I'm a woman now, Auntie. I take
orders from no one.

Sad Otter stomps off, leaving them amazed and fuddled. Quick
Fawn tries not to rejoice.

Nine Killer (arm in a sling) follows her.

EXT. PANTHER'S CAMP

Panther sits by a tiny fire huddled in a blanket. Sad Otter and Nine Killer arrive.

SAD OTTER

Elder, what are you doing?

Panther gives her a look: obviously, nothing. They sit, helpless to help.

SAD OTTER

I'm sorry for the cruel things I said.

PANTHER

Women have said worse.

Quick Fawn brings a bowl of squash with a cover. Her two dogs threaten to trip her.

QUICK FAWN

Mama said to give you the last of the squash -- Oops!

Quick Fawn trips over a dog. Drops the bowl. Her two dogs swarm and gobble it.

NINE KILLER

Niece, what have I told you --

SAD OTTER

Look.

Two dogs choke, fall, and die. Panther sniffs the dogs' breath. Quick Fawn cries.

PANTHER

Likely water hemlock.

NINE KILLER

Someone poisoned the squash? How? Quick Fawn --

QUICK FAWN

I don't know. Mama left it by the fire and told me to fetch it.

NINE KILLER

Could have been anyone. Death hangs over us like a cloud.

SAD OTTER

Oh. I forgot to tell you.
Mockingbird died.

PANTHER

When was this?

SAD OTTER

Three nights ago. High Fox and I
found him outside the House of the
Dead.

QUICK FAWN

He's already been hung up in the
forest.

PANTHER

So no way to tell how he died.

NINE KILLER

Poor Mockingbird, may Ohona honor
his name. Didn't even know me the
other day. Thought I was Alder Fish.

PANTHER

Mockingbird bespoke you?

QUICK FAWN

And gave him a blanket.

NINE KILLER

Something he found... Niece, where's
that blanket?

QUICK FAWN

Right there.

Quick Fawn points. Panther is wearing the blanket that
Rosebud gave him. Panther unfolds it.

PANTHER

Black Spike's.

NINE KILLER

He must have left it behind.

PANTHER

He wore it all the time. He must
have lost it.

QUICK FAWN

That night at the dance.

NINE KILLER

A man goes off in the dark with a
blanket, it's usually to meet a woman.

Flashback: At the dance, Black Spike wears his blanket.
Then he's gone. Sometime later he's back, no blanket.

QUICK FAWN

The people in the shadows.

Everyone stares.

QUICK FAWN

Red Knot told me her plans.

NINE KILLER

Niece...

QUICK FAWN

She swore me to secrecy! A blood
oath!

SAD OTTER

She's dead now.

QUICK FAWN

Red Knot planned to run away with
High Fox before dawn.

SAD OTTER

They'd been lovers for six moons.

NINE KILLER

And you beetle-brains didn't tell
anyone?

QUICK FAWN

(crying)

I - didn't think she'd do it.

PANTHER

Where did she tell you?

QUICK FAWN

In the shadows of the Great House.
I remember now, Mockingbird surprised
two people - together on the ground.

Flashback: Red Knot pulls Quick Fawn into the shadows of the
Great House, babbling her secret.

Nearby, Mockingbird staggers into the shadows to pee.
Stumbles over two people on a blanket.

The secret lovers bolt. Mockingbird picks up the blanket and wanders off.

New flashback: The man is Black Spike.

NINE KILLER
Black Spike and some woman.

PANTHER
They must have overheard Red Knot babbling her plans to elope. Who's the woman?

NINE KILLER
Could be anyone. I told you women like to bed a chief. Gives them power.

PANTHER
Power... Gods above, I've been wrong all along.

SAD OTTER
About what?

PANTHER
Everything.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE PLAZA -- NIGHT

A celebration to welcome Black Spike's entourage.

BLACK SPIKE
(prays to sky)
Okeus, hear me. Divert your wrath around us. We, your people, honor your name and presence. Look into our hearts and see your worth reflected there. Pray turn your ire upon our enemies and the unworthy.

ALL
Great lord, may you harm the unworthy.

Again the Teasing Dance. People clap and sing. Drums beat. High Fox is among the male dancers, having fun.

Positions have shifted. Thundercloud sits centermost with Shell Comb. Wise Hawk is shunted aside, and looks ill. Black Spike sits opposite.

Nine Killer stands by himself, watching everywhere.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD

Panther watches through the palisades. Sad Otter bodyguards but dances in place. A guard watches the gate.

PANTHER
Why not join in?

SAD OTTER
I have no clan.

PANTHER
You belong to the greatest clan now.
Womanhood, rulers of the world.

SAD OTTER
I'm a slave.

PANTHER
Talk is you're a blooded warrior.

SAD OTTER
I'll take their scalps if they touch
me again.

A forlorn warrior exits the gate to patrol the forest's edge.
Passes a grinning scout coming in.

Quick Fawn comes running with two young men, THIN BIRD and
LIGHTNING CAT. All smile.

QUICK FAWN
Sad Otter. This is Thin Bird and
Lightning Cat from Duck Creek Village.
They want to meet you.

SAD OTTER
Me?

THIN BIRD
Is it true you're bodyguard to a
witch?

LIGHTNING CAT
And you can really swing that war
club?

PANTHER
Yes and yes.

THIN BIRD
Would you like to dance?

LIGHTNING CAT

Hey, I'll take her.

QUICK FAWN

She's pledged her heart to High Fox.

THIN BIRD

I could take the prince with one arm broken.

LIGHTNING CAT

Come on.

They haul Sad Otter away. She lobs the war club.

Panther snags Quick Fawn.

PANTHER

Granddaughter, while you catch your breath, I have a chore.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE PLAZA

Quick Fawn teases Thin Bird and Lightning Cat near Thundercloud's throne. Oddly, she carries a robe. Goaded, the boys rough-house. One falls against the throne.

SHELL COMB

You titmice. Get away from the Great Chief's throne or I'll have you birched.

Quick Fawn deftly steals Thundercloud's war club, wrapping it in her robe. Nine Killer sees that.

QUICK FAWN

My apologies, Great Chief.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD

Quick Fawn delivers Thundercloud's war club to Panther.

PANTHER

Clever girl. If anyone threatens, say I bewitched you.

QUICK FAWN

My uncle says your magic is just common sense and hocus-pocus.

PANTHER

Don't be too clever. Shoo.

Quick Fawn runs off. Nine Killer wanders up. Panther compares the measuring stick (of marks on Red Knot's skull) against the double spikes. No match.

Nine Killer examines the club.

NINE KILLER
A beauty. Good heft.

PANTHER
Black Warrior style. From the Temple
of the Sun.

Nine Killer: Huh?

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE PLAZA

Thundercloud misses his war club.

THUNDERCLOUD
Stop the dance! Stop the drums!
Where is my war club? Who has dared
to steal it?

Music and dancing dies. People freeze.

SHELL COMB
It had to Quick Fawn, niece to Nine
Killer. Where is she?

Nine Killer comes forward with the club. CT snatches it.

NINE KILLER
Spare the girl. Blame The Panther.

THUNDERCLOUD
How do I know the Panther didn't
curse it or steal its power?

NINE KILLER
You don't. But isn't there great
power in the - what was it? Temple
of the Sun?

THUNDERCLOUD
Beware, War Chief. You could be
broken and pitched into the fire.
Tonight. Here.

NINE KILLER
All that greasy smoke at a
celebration?

DRUMS strike up, a different beat, hard and edgy.

Empire Warriors drag a red-painted pole to the center of the dance floor. Atop it are scalps taken in previous wars.

They start a war dance. SHRIEKING and WHOOPING, they strike the pole with clubs as they'll strike their enemies.

The crowd's reaction is mixed. Some CHEER and CLAP. Some are appalled.

NINE KILLER

A war dance? Who authorized that?

THUNDERCLOUD

I did.

SHELL COMB

Look!

Some Flat Pearl warriors join in, screeching and pounding the pole. The crowd is flummoxed.

NINE KILLER

(calls)

Stop the drums! You men, break that -

Suddenly arrows zip from the darkness. War-dancing men are hit, some killed.

WAR WHOOPS and WOLF CRIES sound all around.

NINE KILLER

We're under attack! Enemies are inside the palisade!

THUNDERCLOUD

Empire Warriors! Rally to me!

Villagers scream and run in all directions. Warriors howl. Many are shot by arrows.

War-painted raiders jump from shadows, killing anyone. These few fanatics climbed over the palisade, a suicide mission for glory.

Most of Coyote Tail's raiders are outside the palisade. They shoot through uprights. Hundreds surround the village.

Nine Killer bellows orders, heedless of personal danger. Lazy Waters is shot dead by his side.

Despite his personal ban, Panther runs onto the plaza carrying Sad Otter's war club. She grabs it.

SAD OTTER

Elder, it's horrible.

PANTHER

It's war.

Sad Otter hefts her war club and looks for a target.

SAD OTTER

If they want a war -- Awk!

Panther snags her hair and drags her to cover.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE

People trample each other in panic. Some are hit by arrows.

Panther calmly shoos people to take cover. He tows Sad Otter by the hair.

PANTHER

Get down between the houses! They're shooting through the palisade! Etc.

SAD OTTER

Let me fight!

Wise Hawk suffers a stroke and collapses. Shell Comb struggles to carry her to the Great House.

SHELL COMB

Someone, help me, please!

Villagers drag Wise Hawk. A warrior trips over Shell Comb, drops his bow, runs on. Shell Comb looks at the bow.

Sad Otter struggles to get loose of Panther.

PANTHER

No time for games. Shoo those children away from the palisade. Get them behind the House of the Dead. I order you!

SAD OTTER

I - Damn it!

Sad Otter dashes off, spots children cowering.

SAD OTTER

Get behind the house into the shadows -

A bloodied invader rushes, swinging a war club, SCREAMS.

Reacting, Sad Otter smacks him with her war club and drops him, pounds him senseless.

She looks at blood on her war club, amazed, then runs on.

Elsewhere, Thundercloud bravely leads his Empire Warriors to mop up the infiltrators in bloody hand-to-hand combat.

Quick Fawn runs by. Panther mashes her down behind cover.

PANTHER

Stay down!

Panther is temporarily alone, looking for what to do next.

Sad Otter trots back. Sees an archer (Shell Comb) hiding in shadow aim at the Panther. Jumps in the way.

SAD OTTER

Look out -- Oh!

The arrow slams into Winter's Conch's ribs.

PANTHER

Sad Otter!

Straining, Panther carries her to the House of the Dead.

INT. HOUSE OF THE DEAD -- NIGHT

People shelter inside, huddling by Okeus. Babble is tremendous. SHOUTS and SHRIEKS sound outside.

Rosebud helps Panther lay down Sad Otter.

ROSEBUD

Poor child. May Okeus take their eyes.

PANTHER

Curse me. My stupidity.

ROSEBUD

Have you seen Quick Fawn?

PANTHER

She's safe. Hold her down.

SAD OTTER

Elder? It -- hurts!

PANTHER

Be brave, little warrior.

The arrow struck her side but glanced off ribs. The arrowhead is lodged under her skin.

ROSEBUD

Do we cut it out? She'll bleed to death.

PANTHER

Not if we're quick.

He produces a chert knife.

PANTHER

Hold her. Sad Otter, hold tight.

SAD OTTER

I'm ready -- Aggh!

Panther slashes skin to expose the arrowhead. Pushes the arrow, breaks off the head. SNAP! Yanks the shaft out backwards. Sad Otter faints.

PANTHER

This is a Flat Pearl arrow.

ROSEBUD

Do we stuff the wound with catkin or sphagnum moss?

PANTHER

First let it bleed clean. Red blood is good.

ROSEBUD

Will we sear the wound shut?

PANTHER

No. We'll bind her ribs with cactus pads and smartweed.

ROSEBUD

You've done this before.

PANTHER

Many times. Now. Press.

ROSEBUD

Will she survive? Not that it matters if our village burns to the ground.

PANTHER

I must go. Rub crushed nightshade into her temples. And save this arrow. Don't lose it.

ROSEBUD

Why? Where are you going?

Panther runs out.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE

Thundercloud's Empire Warriors have killed all the infiltrators. They whoop as they collect scalps.

Nine Killer rallies a defense. Villagers overturn canoes and stack cordwood and baskets for makeshift barriers.

Slender Bark's men shoot between uprights, but fewer people are hit. Women corral children and bring sheaves of arrows and spears.

Panther dashes to Wise Hawk's house.

INT. WISE HAWK'S GREAT HOUSE

People dash about, some at chores, some uselessly.

Shell Comb tends Wise Hawk. The stroke is killing her, but she's too tough to die. Panther enters.

PANTHER

Clan Chief. Can you speak?

WISE HAWK

(straining)

Sorcerer. Save -- the village.
Save -- my people.

PANTHER

I'm just an old fraud. There's
nothing --

WISE HAWK

Save us. You're the only one.

SHELL COMB

I knew you were all mumbo-jumbo and
lies. You've brought a curse on
this village, and everyone will die.

PANTHER

Would that were a lie.

SHELL COMB

Useless. A miserable old liar without
even a clan to make excuses for him.
(spits on him)

Panther makes his decision, and exits.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE

Thundercloud and Nine Killer meet.

THUNDERCLOUD
All the raiders inside the palisade
are dead.

NINE KILLER
I count tens of tens out there.

THUNDERCLOUD
Come dawn they'll fire the longhouses.

NINE KILLER
We need a diversion. Maybe sneak
some women and children out a gap in
the palisade.

THUNDERCLOUD
It's your village. Pick a spot and
I'll launch a strike.

NINE KILLER
We collaborate well considering you
tried to assassinate me.

THUNDERCLOUD
What are you talking about?

NINE KILLER
Green Club and his two friends.

THUNDERCLOUD
Ambushed by Slender Bark's scouts?

NINE KILLER
You didn't send Green Club -

Panther bumbles up.

PANTHER
Nine Killer. Is Slender Bark out
there?

NINE KILLER
His warriors are. More than I've
ever seen in one place.

PANTHER
But does Slender Bark lead them? I
needs bespeak him.

NINE KILLER
Elder, they're not here to talk.

PANTHER
Call and ask. Trust me.

NINE KILLER
(shouts)
Men of Long Stake Village! This is
Nine Killer, War Chief! Hear me!

COYOTE TAIL (O.S.)
I am Coyote Tail, Nine Killer. Come
to pay back an insult.

NINE KILLER
You jabber like a blackbird. Does
Slender Bark lead you?

COYOTE TAIL (O.S.)
Our Great Chief has come to piss on
your ashes.

NINE KILLER
Just let me break that man's teeth.

Panther rises.

PANTHER
I'm going out there.

NINE KILLER
What? They'll kill you.

PANTHER
An old man, unarmed. Probably not.
Tell them.

NINE KILLER
(shouts)
Our venerable elder, The Panther,
wishes to parlay with Slender Bark.

COYOTE TAIL (O.S.)
You're stupider than I thought, Nine
Killer. Anyone who stands up will
be knocked down.

NINE KILLER
Anything else?

PANTHER
Tell them -- Eight Rocks of Sky Fire
Clan comes to talk.

NINE KILLER

Who? You?

(shouts)

Blackbird! Eight Rocks of -- Sky
Fire Clan comes to talk.

Slender Bark's men BABBLE.

SLENDER BARK

(calls, old and creaky)

Who dares? Eight Rocks is long dead!

PANTHER

(calls)

Says Tadpole, who was given his first
copper coin by Uncle Eight Rocks.

More BABBLE.

COYOTE TAIL (O.S.)

You may come out. No tricks!

Nine Killer rises.

NINE KILLER

You need someone to watch your back.

PANTHER

We've come all this way.

They march out.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD -- NIGHT

Coyote Tail and warriors surround them. All painted fiercely
for war.

COYOTE TAIL

Nine Killer, drop your war club.

NINE KILLER

I am the Elder's -- Eight Rocks's --
escort.

COYOTE TAIL

I don't know what trick you --

PANTHER

Curb your tongue, dog, or I'll spit
your head on a pike.

Very haughty, Panther pushes on. Nine Killer marches after.

SLENDER BARK sits a robe laid on cordwood.

Slender Bark is 50 YO and cranky.

SLENDER BARK

What is this nonsense? Eight Rocks vanished years ago.

PANTHER

And now I'm back. Eight Rocks, son of Small Ax and Silver Stone. You are Slender Bark, son of Blue Gill, son of Heron?

SLENDER BARK

I am. But --

PANTHER

Raised by White Fire wedded to -- to Warm Fall?

SLENDER BARK

My aunt. But --

PANTHER

I am brother to White Fire. Your uncle.

SLENDER BARK

This -- makes no sense. Eight Rocks. Where have you been all these years?

PANTHER

That is my business.

SLENDER BARK

I think not. How do we know you didn't drop from the Moon? Why did you renounce your tribe? Your position?

PANTHER

(long pause)

Very well. I mentioned Warm Fall. I loved her. She was taken from me and given to White Fire, my brother, a pampered monster.

NINE KILLER

Huh.

PANTHER

I -- couldn't stand the thought of them being together, so I walked out. Kept walking. Traveled over the mountains and became a War Chief known as Raven.

(MORE)

PANTHER (CONT'D)

(shows tattoo)

But I left that life and returned
here, where I settled on an island.
To be alone.

SLENDER BARK

All because you were denied a woman?

PANTHER

All for love, yes. Are you satisfied?

SLENDER BARK

Not hardly. Why defend this ant
hill? What do you care?

PANTHER

There are people here I cherish. A
girl. A friend. It's enough.

SLENDER BARK

You're mad.

PANTHER

As may be. Who are the elders of
your nation?

SLENDER BARK

Only me. The others are all dead.
But you --

PANTHER

Am the sole surviving elder of Sky
Fire Clan.

SLENDER BARK

By the eyes of Okeus. Six days on
the trail to get here! It's not
fair!

COYOTE TAIL

(to Nine Killer)

Is this cock-up your doing?

NINE KILLER

Belt up. Or Great Chief Eight Rocks
here will appoint me War Chief.

SLENDER BARK

With all respect, Uncle, we need to
seize and fortify this village.
With that upstart Thundercloud
gobbling up villages like a bear --

PANTHER

I'll deal with Thundercloud. Call off the attack. Assemble your men. Flat Pearl Village will see them fed, then you'll return to Long Stake Village.

SLENDER BARK

The council must verify your claim to Great Chief -

PANTHER

At the coming of the leaves. Withdraw to the beach. We'll have food sent down. Nephew.

Panther points. Sullen, Slender Bark goes with his men.

Panther and Nine Killer are left alone.

NINE KILLER

First you stop a raid, then you stop a war.

Both laugh. Then Panther sobers.

PANTHER

Easy compared to what comes next.

INT. WISE HAWK'S GREAT HOUSE -- NIGHT

It's crowded. Wise Hawk lays on a litter by Shell Comb. Sad Otter lies on a litter, dozy from drugs and pain.

Tall Pine and warriors shepherd in "guests" (suspects). Bent Willow sulks. Thundercloud preens. Black Spike glowers. High Fox frets. Everyone buzzes.

The High Priest has a long basket covered by a blanket.

Last, Panther enters.

BLACK SPIKE

Elder, why are we here?

SHELL COMB

Is it true you are Great Chief of the Sky Fire Clan?

HIGH FOX

And Slender Bark's men are gone?

Panther ignores them and goes to Wise Hawk.

PANTHER
Wise Hawk, we need your wisdom.

WISE HAWK
(slurred)
Panther. Once Eight Rocks. You
save our village with a few words,
then need me? I am finished.

PANTHER
Bide a while, please.
(addresses room)
We gather to uncover the truth of
Red Knot's murder. So welcome one
more with something to tell.

Silence. Panther signals High Priest for the basket. Panther
takes out Red Knot's polished skull.

Eerie, he whispers to the skull, and pretends to listen.

PANTHER
I've said all along that learning
why Red Knot was killed would be
difficult, if not impossible.
Learning how was easy, once we knew
where to look.

Panther takes a war club from the basket.

WISE HAWK
That's -- from --

PANTHER
The House of the Dead. Okeus's own
war club, yes.

Flashback: The statue holds a double-spiked war club.

HIGH FOX
Look!

Panther peers. Dark hairs are caught in the club.

PANTHER
Red Knot's.

Panther fits two spikes to holes in the skull. Perfect match.

PANTHER
As further proof, we found this on
the ridge where she died.

From a pouch, Panther produces the half-polished wood chip
they dug up. It fits on the war club.

SHELL COMB

So? Anyone could have walked in and stolen it.

PANTHER

Who would need to? Or want to?

NINE KILLER

You said many people had reasons to kill the girl.

PANTHER

She was beautiful. Desirable. A Clan Chief's daughter, a likely successor. Bent Willow wanted her.

BENT WILLOW

I still would, were she alive.

Flashback: Bent Willow stalks through the forest, grim.

PANTHER

Thundercloud made her part of his plans, which shift like quicksand. Perhaps she was more useful dead, an excuse for war.

THUNDERCLOUD

Old men maunder when their minds are gone.

Flashback: Thundercloud is outside the village that morning, and comes through the gate, broody.

Panther takes the necklace from the basket.

PANTHER

High Fox wanted Red Knot. But may have resented her control.

HIGH FOX

I loved her. You don't know. Sad Otter might have killed her. She was there.

SAD OTTER

Oh, High Fox.

Flashback: High Fox mourns Red Knot's body as Sad Otter arrives.

PANTHER

I could even suspect Wise Hawk. If Red Knot disobeyed the clan, better death than disgrace.

WISE HAWK

Dog spittle.

Flashback: Wise Hawk watches Red Knot dance for High Fox.

PANTHER

And there were raiders about. But
we proved Red Knot was killed by
someone she trusted.

Flashback: Coyote Tail's raiders skulk, spot something.

NINE KILLER

I don't understand. You eliminate
everyone.

PANTHER

I was brought here by -- a friend --
to solve Red Knot's murder. Because
I'm clever. Too clever.

BLACK SPIKE

You were brought here to prove my
son innocent.

PANTHER

That I cannot do. But High Fox did
not kill Red Knot.

BLACK SPIKE

(sighs with relief)

PANTHER

I said the why might be difficult,
and I was wrong. The simplest answer
was right before us. Red Knot was
murdered because she was running
away with High Fox.

HIGH FOX

We were perfect for each other. Two
hearts beating as one.

PANTHER

Sadly, true.

Puzzled murmurs around the room.

PANTHER

Seven and ten summers ago, a truce
was struck with the tribe of Monster
Bone. Wise Hawk gave Shell Comb as
his bride. Nine Killer and Black
Spike traveled there often as a
safeguard.

Flashback: A longhouse burns.

PANTHER

But there was a raid. A longhouse
burned, and Monster Bone died. And
Shell Comb returned to her people
and gave birth to Red Knot.

SHELL COMB

Born of two lines of chiefs.

PANTHER

But not Monster Bone's line.

SHELL COMB

Eh? What do you accuse me of?

PANTHER

While in Three Myrtle Village, I had
a curious thought. Among our people,
children belong to their mother.
She recruits help from her relatives
to raise them. Nine Killer knows
too well, as he struggles with his
sister Rosebud's children, especially
Quick Fawn.

(beat)

Yet Black Spike kept his son High
Fox by his side. I asked, where was
the boy's mother?

BLACK SPIKE

She died. In childbirth.

PANTHER

So you said. And her clan was poor.
They went west. So High Fox stayed
with Black Spike to live the good
life.

HIGH FOX

It's true. I'll be chief when my
father steps down.

PANTHER

Yet you lied to me, High Fox. And I
promised I'd wring out your soul.

HIGH FOX

I never lied.

PANTHER

It was sad you had so much in common
with Red Knot. I'll show you one
thing more.

Panther brings the skull close. Points out the peg tooth.

PANTHER

I thought this peg tooth was once broken. The High Priest said no, it grew malformed. It intrigued me because I'd seen it before.

Startled, Black Spike touches his peg tooth.

HIGH FOX

It's -- inherited?

PANTHER

From father to child.

BLACK SPIKE

(looking at High Fox)
What?

NINE KILLER

That's why Black Spike seemed so angry. He was grieving a daughter.

Panther looks at Shell Comb. She looks away.

HIGH FOX

Shell Comb is my mother? Father?
You lied?

BLACK SPIKE

High Fox, tell me you didn't -

PANTHER

High Fox, you said you never touched Red Knot. You lied.

NINE KILLER

For six moons and more.

HIGH FOX

Red Knot was my -- sister?

HIGH PRIEST

The crime. The most terrible crime.

NINE KILLER

The worst crime of all. Incest!

People shriek.

HIGH FOX

Ohona save me! I didn't know!

PANTHER

You both flaunted the wishes and
plans of the clan. Red Knot died
for it.

NINE KILLER

And High Fox dies for it now!
(to lieutenants)
Grab the boy. Build a fire. A fire
tall enough to blot out the stars!

BLACK SPIKE

No, it was me! I killed Red Knot!

People freeze.

PANTHER

What?

BLACK SPIKE

I killed her! High Fox knew nothing
about it! I must pay! I alone!

NINE KILLER

Madness. We're all mad. Drag them
out.

SHELL COMB

No, wait. This is wrong!

Tall Pine and others drag High Fox and Black Spike outside.
People spill out in a mad rush.

PANTHER

Wait. Listen.

No one listens. He's left alone with Wise Hawk and Sad Otter.
She weeps.

SAD OTTER

(weak)

I wish I'd never gone to your island.

Panther exits.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD -- NIGHT

People run from all over the village carrying firewood.
They buzz. "Incest!"

Tall Pine and warriors drag Black Spike and High Fox.

Black Spike's warriors bristle, ready to fight.

BLACK SPIKE

No, my warriors. Keep the peace. I go freely.

Nine Killer dumps over the portable War Dance pole stippled with arrows. People bring firewood. Build a roaring fire.

Tall Pine brings Nine Killer the great maul.

NINE KILLER

I don't want it.

TALL PINE

It's your job, War Chief.

NINE KILLER

Black Spike is my oldest friend.

TALL PINE

No one else can do it.

Reluctantly Nine Killer takes the maul. The fire roars. He has to step back. Faces Black Spike.

BLACK SPIKE

Listen. It's all my fault. High Fox is innocent. He didn't know. Blame me and his mother for keeping our secret.

Panther arrives.

NINE KILLER

Custom demands everyone go into the flames. For the good of the clan. To keep us strong.

PANTHER

War Chief, I must tell you -

NINE KILLER

Not now, Elder!

BLACK SPIKE

My son is innocent. I killed Red Knot. I will pay. I alone!

NINE KILLER

(to Panther)
Elder. Help us.

PANTHER

We -- have a confession.

Shell Comb runs up.

SHELL COMB

No! I wasn't him! Black Spike didn't -

Tearing loose, with a last look at Shell Comb and High Fox, Black Spike hurls himself into the fire.

People shriek. Black Spike screams as he burns alive. Shell Comb echoes his scream.

High Fox tears loose and runs away.

Nine Killer throws the maul into the fire.

Panther turns away, but Nine Killer grabs his arm.

NINE KILLER

You lied, old man. You haven't explained anything!

PANTHER

You want the truth?

Panther drags Nine Killer away.

But they're surrounded by Thundercloud and Empire Warriors.

THUNDERCLOUD

Raven. You are no longer needed. My men will escort you home.

NINE KILLER

The bottom of the bay.

PANTHER

It is you who are no longer needed, Grass Mat.

THUNDERCLOUD

I warned you --

NINE KILLER

Panther...

PANTHER

(loud)

I named you Grass Mat when you were my slave!

Thundercloud hefts his war club.

THUNDERCLOUD

Kill him. Slowly. Break every bone in his body.

Panther snatches away his war club.

PANTHER

With this? How fine an weapon. Fit
for a High Priest of the Temple of
the Sun. From whom you stole it.

THUNDERCLOUD

Strike him down!

But Empire Warriors listen.

PANTHER

Kill me yourself. You wear the gorget
of the Spider Warriors. Bloodthirsty
fanatics who prove their devotion to
the Serpent King by killing eight
men in mortal combat.

NINE KILLER

Eight men?

PANTHER

One for each leg of the spider. Did
you pass that test? Or just forge
that gorget? And those swallow-tail
tattoos? Only the high-born may
wear them. And since you were a
slave...

THUNDERCLOUD

Nowhere on earth can you hide from
me.

PANTHER

Why not? You can't see the truth
before your own eyes. That your
dreams of empire are built on the
mist.

THUNDERCLOUD

I will build an empire to eclipse
the sun.

PANTHER

Wishes won't feed hungry men. The
Serpent King had armies of slaves to
grow food for his warriors. Their
fields run out of sight. But here,
between sand and salt water, every
man, woman, and child must labor the
day long for a bowl of stew.

THUNDERCLOUD

Crush him!

PANTHER

(address Empires)

You've seen it. Even Flat Pearl
Village couldn't feed you. You needs
hunt and fish like the rest of us.
You always will.

THUNDERCLOUD

He spins lies! Our empire will
stretch to the mountains!

Empire Warriors just walk away.

THUNDERCLOUD

Warriors, return to me! I command
it!

INT. WISE HAWK'S GREAT HOUSE -- DAWN

Panther enters with Nine Killer. Checks Sad Otter, asleep.

Shell Comb weeps (over Black Spike, not her mother).

NINE KILLER

Why didn't you just marry Black Spike?

WISE HAWK

(weak)

I refused permission. I had to keep -
Flat Pearl Village - forever free.

SHELL COMB

So, Panther, you solved Red Knot's
murder. Now go stake your claim to
Long Stake Village.

PANTHER

I'm not finished.

SHELL COMB

My mother is dying. Show respect.

PANTHER

Better I show her who killed her
granddaughter. And ended your line.

SHELL COMB

You babble, old man. Next you'll
soil your loin cloth.

WISE HAWK

There's no one here but us, Panther.
Eight Rocks.

PANTHER

There was a witch at work. But not I.

SHELL COMB

Black Spike confessed to killing my daughter. His daughter, too.

PANTHER

And why would he kill her?

SHELL COMB

He... hated her for... luring away High Fox.

PANTHER

Bent Willow saw Red Knot run down the ridge, even though she was already dead up top.

New flashback: Looking like Red Knot, Shell Comb runs down the ridge.

NINE KILLER

All that running makes one croak like a frog.

Flashback: Shell Comb berates Nine Killer, but coughs.

Panther picks up the broken arrow that shot Sad Otter.

PANTHER

This arrow was lost by Bent Willow. But found by the ridge-runner and shot at me.

New flashback: Shell Comb finds the lost arrow.

New flashback: From the shadows, Shell Comb shoots the arrow at Panther, but hits Sad Otter.

NINE KILLER

Treachery never to be forgiven.

Panther picks up Okeus's war club.

PANTHER

This war club was stolen. Yet after felling Red Knot, it was returned to its rightful owner.

Flashback: Shell Comb carries the blanket-wrapped bundle of firewood and bullrushes through the gate.

New flashback: She dumps the firewood and rushes. Hidden among them was Okeus's war club.

PANTHER

Then Red Knot's "ghost" entered the
House of the Dead to salute Okeus.

New flashback: Seen through a haze, Shell Comb bows to replace the war club in the statue's hand.

NINE KILLER

We looked and looked.

Panther unfolds the blanket over the basket: Black Spike's.

PANTHER

During the Teasing Dance, someone
slipped away to share a blanket with
Black Spike.

New flashback: During the dance, Black Spike (wearing his blanket) signals to Shell Comb, and they slip away separately.

PANTHER

As they coupled on the blanket, a
half-blind elder tripped over them.
Afraid to be caught, they fled.

New flashback: Mockingbird almost trips over Black Spike and Shell Comb, who get up and run.

Flashback: Black Spike, missing his fancy blanket, returns to the dance. Shell Comb returns to her seat.

Flashback: Mockingbird gives Black Spike's blanket to Nine Killer. He passes to Quick Fawn. Shell Comb asks about it.

PANTHER

So afraid was one lover, she killed
Mockingbird lest he blurt their
secret.

New scene: In shadows, Shell Comb smothers Mockingbird.

Panther walks to Shell Comb's shelf of herbs and powders.

PANTHER

Our killer knew poisons, too. Water
hemlock for a quick death, may apple
root for a slow one.

New flashback: Shell Comb poisons squash in Rosebud's house.

New flashback: Shell Comb poisons her mother's tea.

PANTHER

The past is present. What of Black Spike's wife, Colored Star, who died in her sleep? What of Monster Bone, who burned in his bed while a raid ravaged the village?

NINE KILLER

What of Green Club bribed to ambush me and The Panther?

(looks at Shell Comb)

"Rake up old ashes and you risk burning your fingers."

WISE HAWK

(dying but rallying)

Panther, you stir up more trouble than Okeus. Take me outside.

PANTHER

I'm not done.

WISE HAWK

You've said enough. Take me out.

SHELL COMB

Mother.

WISE HAWK

I am still Clan Chief.

Nine Killer fetches help to carry out Wise Hawk and Sad Otter on their litters.

EXT. FLAT PEARL PLAZA -- DAWN

People gather, exhausted and shell-shocked. Shell Comb props Wise Hawk on her throne.

Panther spots High Fox lurking outside the palisade. Nine Killer signals two men to carry the girl out.

WISE HAWK

(weak)

Hear me, People of Flat Pearl Village. People of the Mist. I, Wise Hawk, bequeath my last wishes. Tall Pine, step forth.

TALL PINE

I'm here, Clan Chief.

WISE HAWK
I dub you War Chief. Serve your
clan well.

Confusion, murmurs. Tall Pine looks at Nine Killer, who's
just as confused.

TALL PINE
I - For the clan, I accept.

WISE HAWK
Bent Willow. Step forth.

Sullen Bent Willow, in Empire Warrior garb, steps up.

BENT WILLOW
Clan Chief?

WISE HAWK
Bent Willow, we adopted you as our
own. Yet you repaid us by swearing
allegiance to Thundercloud -

BENT WILLOW
Chief, I -

WISE HAWK
And so are you banished. No longer
of our clan or village. Go or burn.

Bent Willow, stunned, creeps away.

WISE HAWK
Nine Killer, step forth.

NINE KILLER
I am your servant.

WISE HAWK
Nine Killer, I dub you Clan Chief.

Shocked murmurs from the crowd.

NINE KILLER
What? No. I don't want it.

SHELL COMB
No! You can't -

PANTHER
(to Shell Comb)
You have no wish to be Clan Chief.

SHELL COMB
I - have no wish to be Clan Chief.

NINE KILLER

Still, I don't - There's no one
else, is there?

WISE HAWK

And so... I am finished.

Wise Hawk slumps. Her dog howls.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD -- DAWN

Sad Otter is alone on her litter, groggy from drugs.

Tall Pine guards the gate. High Fox comes slinking from the
dark. Tall Pine lets him approach Sad Otter.

HIGH FOX

Sad Otter, you have to help me.

SAD OTTER

(groggy, in pain)
High Fox, I can't even sit up.

HIGH FOX

But the whole world has betrayed me.
My father ruined me. I can't be
Great Chief now. Not ever.

SAD OTTER

We don't - get what we want - in
life.

HIGH FOX

But I'm all alone. I can't go home.
No woman will ever marry me. What
will I do?

Fumbling, Sad Otter gives High Fox his war club.

SAD OTTER

Go, High Fox. Just go.

High Fox gawks. Tall Pine points: Get lost.

Sobbing, High Fox runs off into the dawn.

Tall Pine walks to Sad Otter's litter.

SAD OTTER

(sobs)

TALL PINE

You're worth ten of him, Panther
Shadow.

SAD OTTER
(mouths)
"Panther Shadow?"

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE

Priests carry Wise Hawk to the House of the Dead. Her dog lies atop. High Priest sings a dirge and shakes a rattle.

Shell Comb watches them go. Exhausted villagers pick up. All shun Shell Comb.

Panther watches the sacrificial fire die.

SHELL COMB
Happy? You've ruined our village.

PANTHER
The village will be stronger with
Nine Killer in command. You chose
your path.

Flashback: Red Knot tops the ridge. Hears someone, whirls.

New flashback: Shell Comb wallops Red Knot with a war club.

SHELL COMB
I couldn't let her marry High Fox.

PANTHER
You needed but to speak.

SHELL COMB
I was fighting for my life.

PANTHER
I know. Years ago, I'd have done
the same.

SHELL COMB
Then you understand. Reputation is
everything.

PANTHER
And that's why you can never be Clan
Chief.

Panther walks through the gate. Nine Killer heads that way.

SHELL COMB
Nine Killer.

NINE KILLER
Pack your things, Shell Comb. I'll
grant you escort wherever you care
to go.

Crushed, Shell Comb finally cries.

EXT. FLAT PEARL VILLAGE FIELD -- DAWN

Panther props Sad Otter to watch the dawn.

SAD OTTER
Have you finally laid Red Knot's
ghost to rest?

PANTHER
I never came for Red Knot. I came
for you.

SAD OTTER
Me?

PANTHER
Watch. Usually there's mist this
time of year, but today dawns bright
and clear.

SAD OTTER
But what shall I do?

Nine Killer joins them.

PANTHER
Whatever you like. I release your
bond. You are free, butterfly.

NINE KILLER
You lied, old man. You really do
work magic.

SAD OTTER
(scoffs)
Nobody got what they wanted.

PANTHER
But wanting what's best for the clan,
we get what we need.

FADE OUT