

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Fourth Revised Network Draft

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Mojo Films

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Capital City of Kendan



Rebel Base

TIGHT ON A WOMAN'S FACE. A BEAUTIFUL FACE...

This is **GRACE**. 25. Stunning. Brave. From sound and movement, we sense she's on horseback... She gives a signal to stop. All goes still. And we WIDEN TO SEE WE'RE IN--

EXT. FIELDS - DAY

A vast, green plain, bathed in sunlight. White flowers. Rolling hills. A landscape of pure, picturesque beauty. And surrounding Grace--

SIX GIANTS. Ten feet tall. In formation behind Grace, at her service... And behind them--

HANDMAIDENS. FLAG-BEARERS. KNIGHTS. A long, colorful procession, stretching off into the distance. Great pomp and ceremony to it. And at the head of the column, beside Grace--

A **DISTINGUISHED WOMAN** (50s), also on horseback. Wise. An advisor of some kind. She and Grace both look out ahead, to--

A RIVER at the edge of the field, and a STONE BRIDGE crossing it. But the river, and everything beyond its far bank, are completely enshrouded in mist. A dense, impenetrable fog.

WISE WOMAN

He awaits you. On the other side...

(beat)

The one with whom you share a past.

And a future. And a destiny...

Grace peers out across the bridge into the haze.

GRACE

I can't see anything.

WISE WOMAN

Yet you know it to be true.

On Grace, torn. She looks down at the foggy bridge. And from out of the mist, we hear-- A DEEP MONSTROUS GROAN... A vague sense of movement in the mist... Something big... Grace looks back to the Woman, eyes wide--

WISE WOMAN (CONT'D)

(a small smile)

No one said the path would be easy.

On Grace. Steeling herself. Pretty clear, this is a girl who doesn't back down from a challenge. She gives the signal to her escort of giants to move out--

WISE WOMAN (CONT'D)

They cannot protect you. This path... You must travel alone.

On Grace. Hesitant. Conflicted...

GRACE

I have everything I need. A life, to be envied.

(then)

What is to be gained from this?

WISE WOMAN

Find him... And see...

On Grace. Beat. Unreadable. Then, she dismounts, and leaving her protection behind, approaches the bridge alone...

MOMENTS LATER, Grace, at the foot of the bridge. So misty, we can only see a few feet ahead. She looks back, at her escort, at the warm comforting meadow she's leaving. And then--

She steps into the fog. Immediately disorienting... Swirling... Moves forward cautiously... Until--

THE LOW GROAN RETURNS-- A DEEP BASS RUMBLE now-- Close--

Grace goes still. A tense beat, before she begins to see-- A DARK FIGURE taking shape in the mist... Huge. Dwarfing her. Its outlines are ill-defined, but she clearly sees--

ITS EYES. Piercing blue. A moment, as both creature and Grace hold each other's look... Grace should be terrified, but something is telling her not to be. There's no anger in those eyes. No malice. Something just a little bit... inviting. A beat, before the Figure, and the eyes, recede back into the mist.

And then, appearing as if from nowhere just beside Grace--

WOMAN IN WHITE

He's here.

And off Grace's confusion, we SMASH TO:

INT. ROYAL APARTMENT - DAY

--as GRACE'S EYES SHOCK OPEN. She's asleep on a settee, in a dress; much less soldierly than we just saw her in her nightmare. Standing over her is a nervous young woman-- **ELISABETH** (21). Grace's younger sister; perhaps a little sexier, perhaps a little less bright. But at the moment, completely frazzled--

ELISABETH

He's here.

GRACE

Here, at the door?

Elisabeth nods nervously. Off Grace, collecting herself--

INT. TOWER CORRIDOR - DAY

Grace emerges, shutting the door behind her. Beside the door, we note a giant of a man sitting guard by the door. Asian. A warrior. Extremely badass. This is **YANTA MHO**.

And waiting in the corridor patiently is **CYRIL** (50s).

GRACE

When I woke up this morning, do you know the first thought that went through my head? I thought, *I so hope the first face I see when I open the door this morning is Cyril's*. And here you are...

CYRIL

In answer to your prayers.

(then)

I was hoping for a moment with His Highness. That is, if he even remembers me.

A joke. Grace musters a polite smile.

GRACE

Sorry. You'll just have to settle for me.

And Grace walks off. Cyril eyes the closed door to the Royal Apartment intently, before turning and walking after Grace...

CYRIL

And how is your father faring today? Better I hope?

GRACE

Much. I imagine he'll be returning to his duties in a few days.

CYRIL

Duties? The Council would settle for just the sight of him. A people shouldn't be so separated from their leader for too long. Nor he from his advisors.

And as they disappear down a flight of stairs--

INT. PALACE CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER

One of the palace's cavernous main halls. Vaulted ceilings, 30 feet tall. Ornate stained-glass windows high above, coloring the sunlight. Marble as far as the eye can see. Like the Vatican's brawnier, wealthier big brother.

Grace and Cyril walk-and-talk. As they do, COURTIERS nod and curtsy. GUARDS salute. Grace is a rock star here...

CYRIL

Two weeks of his absence. Two weeks of council meetings in which you have sat in his stead--

GRACE

Because he asked me to. Father doesn't want to be disturbed while he's recuperating.

CYRIL

That may be. But there are bigger issues at play. One day, your father will be dead--

GRACE

Cyril!

CYRIL

One day, young lady, you will be Empress.

(that lands; Grace quiets)

And as Chamberlain, it will be my duty to you then, as it is my duty to your father now, to make sure you have the support of your people. Inside the palace, and out.

(beat)

If you misstep now, if you appear to be as your critics say-- a child, qualified to lead only insofar as your father has decreed it-- The damage to your eventual authority may be impossible for me to repair.

We've now arrived at a FLOOR-TO-CEILING CURTAIN in the corridor. Two ATTENDANTS stand by. Cyril stops in front of it, as though waiting for Grace to pass through. She slumps.

GRACE

Is this really necessary?

CYRIL

If you're standing in for your father, you must stand in for all of it.

(then)

To lead, you must be respected. You must be feared. But first, you must be seen...

Cyril opens the curtain-- Blinding light-- And Grace enters--

EXT. PALACE PARAPET - SAME

--overlooking the THOUSANDS OF CITIZENS gathered below in the PALACE PLAZA for a glimpse of their Princess. Beyond them--

THE CAPITAL CITY OF KENDAN. Magnificent domes. Gleaming spires. Rome meets Constantinople meets Xanadu. Stunning. But as we REVERSE ON--

GRACE, we see her for the first time in a private moment. Cyril behind her. The crowd too far below to see clearly. And the look on her face is far less confident than what we've seen before. Stressed. Unsettled. And just barely keeping it together... And off her look, we go--

DOWN INTO THE CROWD on the plaza below. And settle on an **OLD WOMAN**. Among a sea of smiles and cheers, she is stone-faced, staring up at Grace... Off her creepy glare--

INT. CABINET HALL - LATER

Grace sits at the head of a long table. Part throne room, part conference room. Assembled is the 12-member COUNCIL-- right now, the speaker is a **GENERAL GOFF**(50s)--

GENERAL GOFF

Heyborn is pacified.

(off everyone's approval)

Nine soldiers dead; 61 natives, of which 32 were fighters, 31 civilians. But the north fork of the Pahrag River is secure.

A sea of heads around the table, nodding their approval.

GENERAL GOFF (CONT'D)

A garrison rises as we speak to keep the peace, and commerce open. Once the unit is fortified, operations will move north into--

GRACE

How many children?

Everyone quiets. Grace is looking directly at Goff.

GENERAL GOFF

Excuse me?

GRACE

Among the native casualties. How many were children?

Goff doesn't appreciate the question. With some attitude--

GENERAL GOFF

Eight.

GRACE

Eight... Why so many?

GENERAL GOFF

Who's asking, ma'am?

The room gets a little colder. That was awfully fucking insubordinate. Grace just stares back evenly at the General.

CYRIL

Watch your tone.

GENERAL GOFF

For two weeks, we're told she speaks for Lord Dorian. His Majesty is a warrior, first and always. Yet for two weeks, the questions I'm asked are not a warrior's questions--

CYRIL

What are you suggesting--?

GENERAL GOFF

If she's altering his words, let her say so. But I will not have my honor questioned as it just was, under the masquerade that Lord Dorian is doing the questioning--

CYRIL

Speaking falsely in the Emperor's name would be treason, General--

GRACE

I'm wondering...

Everyone quiets. Looks back at Grace, who is still staring evenly at the General. Cool. Ice in her veins...

GRACE (CONT'D)

I'm wondering what the warrior, the Emperor, my father, will say when he hears you feel the questions he's given me to ask are *weak*.

GENERAL GOFF

I didn't say *weak*--

GRACE

I'm wondering what he'll say when he hears you questioned the honor of the Crown Princess, his daughter, in front of his cabinet. I'm wondering if your tone with him will be quite so crude as it just was with me. I'm wondering if you'll say anything at all.

(off his silence)

My father's reforms are to the benefit of the frontier peoples. But killing their children seems a poor strategy for persuading them of that fact. Or so says the Emperor. Feel free to disagree.

(then)

Dismantle that garrison. Send a new commander, and send him with food and supplies. Send him with restitution for grieving parents.

(beat)

To lead, one must be *loved* above all else.

Off Grace, apparently quite a badass when called for...

LATER, the meeting breaking up, as councillors mill about. Grace is approached by one of the council members-- **MARA** (50s), in a regal-looking clerical habit. Privately--

MARA

You're an easy one to be proud of. I must be an outstanding teacher.

GRACE

I lost my temper. I know better than that...

Mara considers Grace; can tell she's having a rougher day than she'd like to let on...

MARA
Are you alright, dear?
(off her look)
You're still having the dream...

GRACE
Every night, since father fell ill.

MARA
The mystery man...
(then, with a warm smile)
Jitters, dear. You are to be
married in a matter of months, it's
perfectly normal.

From Grace's look, we can tell it doesn't feel so normal. But the moment is broken as A RUNNER approaches Grace, whispers news in her ear... Whatever it was, Grace's mood lightens because of it... Off her little smile.

INT. CORRIDOR - LATER

Grace walks down a corridor. Stone faced. TWO GUARDS behind her. An imposing sight. AND ON THE OTHER END OF THE HALL--

A SOLDIER, walking this way. 20s. Handsome.

GRACE
When I give you an order, I expect
it to be followed.

SOLDIER
So it was an order you gave me?

GRACE
When I make a request of a soldier,
can it be considered anything else?

SOLDIER
(sincerely)
Then I must fall on my sword, and
hope that you'll have it in your
heart to forgive me--

GRACE GRABS HIM, kisses him passionately. His eyes go wide-- wasn't expecting that-- But he quickly settles in...

Across the hall, a **NUN** (in a habit like Mara's) turns the corner escorting a **CHILD** (7). The Nun sees the makeout session going on, and without missing a beat, turns the Child right back around, and back down the hall they came from...

ON GRACE AND THE SOLDIER, as they finally separate...

GRACE
I forgive you.
(then, whispered)
And if you're going to fall on
anything, I would hope it would be
me...

On the Soldier. It's possible he's blushing. He looks past
Grace to the Guards--

SOLDIER
Nice to be home.

This is **GARRICK**. Grace's fiance. And off Grace, beaming--
LATER, Grace and Garrick walk-and-talk--

GARRICK
I know you wanted me to write, and
I'm sorry I didn't quite get to it--

GRACE
(smiles)
Not once.

GARRICK
Yes, but I think it's important to
remember, I was never in any danger--

GRACE
You think I wanted you to write
because I thought you were in
danger?

GARRICK
...you didn't?

GRACE
You were fixing a bridge.

GARRICK
I was escorting engineers--

GRACE
Who were fixing a bridge.

GARRICK
It could've been dangerous.

GRACE
I'm almost positive it wasn't.

NEW ANGLE - DOWN THE CORRIDOR - REVEAL THE OLD WOMAN from the Plaza. Skulking behind a column... Watching Grace and Garrick from a distance. We then GO BACK TO--

GARRICK

Well if you weren't worried about me, then why did you want me to--

GRACE

Because you get to see things. I see meetings, and tutors, and Cyril--

GARRICK

I was in Andleburgh. Their chief export is boredom.

GRACE

There's a world out there. And there is always a reason I'm told I can't go see it.

Grace feigns a smile. But Garrick can tell, there's something truly dispirited beneath it. With genuine concern--

GARRICK

I'm sorry. I know how stifling things can be here for you.

(then)

Next time I will send back sketches so you can see the wonder that is Andleburgh. You'll love their sheep.

Grace smiles. He's good at cheering her up. But then--

OLD WOMAN (O.S.)

My Angel...

The words freeze Grace. The hairs standing up on her neck. She turns to see THE OLD WOMAN walking this way. Garrick isn't sure what's going on, but he's now alert...

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

My Angel, I can help you--

And the Old Woman produces A DAGGER-- Not wielding it, offering it up as a gift. But a knife's a knife--

GARRICK SPRINGS INTO ACTION-- Pulls a startled Grace behind him, and in the same fluid movement, draws his sword-- SWIPES-- SENDS THE DAGGER FLYING, and SKITTERING ACROSS THE FLOOR... The Guards are on the Woman a split second later. Off Grace, shocked...

INT. PRISON BLOCK - NIGHT

A darkened cell. A figure huddled on the floor. The CELL DOOR OPENS, light pours in. A PRISON GUARD in the doorway. The Guard steps aside, revealing Grace behind him. He gives her an ambivalent look, before--

GRACE
Leave. Now.

The Guard exits.

GRACE (CONT'D)
Who are you?

REVEAL it's the OLD WOMAN huddled in the cell.

OLD WOMAN
A friend, dear.

Grace pulls out the DAGGER. Considers it curiously.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)
Bearing gifts...

GRACE
This gift is going to earn you a trip to the hangman.

OLD WOMAN
Still... Worth the giving.

On Grace. Seriously creeped out. But too intrigued to leave.

GRACE
Palace Guard thinks you're with one of the rebel groups from the border provinces. Although they're completely at a loss as to how you got inside Palace security...

OLD WOMAN
Is that why you came to see me? To find out which door I used?

GRACE
...no.
(beat)
You called me something. *My Angel*. Someone very important to me used to call me that.

OLD WOMAN

When you were young. Before you fell asleep at night. When no one else was listening. Your mother loved you more than you know--

GRACE

How could you know that?

OLD WOMAN

There's much I know that would surprise you...

Grace considers her. Thinks better of this. Turns to go. But as she nears the door--

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

I know about the lie.

Grace stops. Turns back towards the Old Woman, stunned...

INT. ROYAL APARTMENT - LATER THAT NIGHT

Grace enters, and shuts the door quickly. Elisabeth is here, sitting beside a bed. And in bed, we see for the first time--

EMPEROR DORIAN. Their father. And he looks like shit... Emaciated. Wispy. Really, really sick. And unconscious.

ELISABETH

Where have you been? You can't leave me here like that, what if someone tried to come in?

GRACE

Yanta Mho hasn't left that door since we first closed it. No one's getting in here.

ELISABETH

What if *he's* the one that tries to come in here?

GRACE

He's sworn a blood oath to obey the Emperor. I told him father ordered him to keep this room secure. So he will.

ELISABETH

And when he figures out *father* didn't order him to do anything...?

GRACE

I'm not planning to tell him. Are you?

ELISABETH

Don't talk to me like I'm a child; if this gets out, I'm going to have to answer for it just like you.

(then)

This has gone too far. We need to tell everyone the truth...

GRACE

The truth is that for two weeks we've been lying about his health so no one will know how weak he is. That I've been giving orders in his place while he's been like this. This is not a truth that's likely to be received well--

ELISABETH

He's getting worse. The medicines aren't helping at all--

GRACE

That's because he isn't sick.

ELISABETH

...what?

Grace opens the pouches she's carrying. In them are a series of POWDERS AND SOLUTIONS...

OLD WOMAN (O.S.)

What ails him was *done* to him.

And we BEGIN TO INTERCUT WITH:

INT. PRISON CELL - NIGHT (EARLIER)

--the rest of Grace's conversation with the Old Woman--

OLD WOMAN

A particular poison. Derived from the nightweed plant. A preferred tool of the rebel army that inhabits the Great Black Swamp. Committed to overthrowing your father and restoring the Old Order.

BACK TO THE APARTMENT, as Grace finishes with her powder/liquid concoction. Brings it to Dorian's bedside.

ELISABETH

He has tasters. Guards. Spies.
Frontier savages can't *poison* him.

GRACE

We're about to find out.

Grace pulls out a SMALL KNIFE--

ELISABETH

What are you doing?

GRACE

Sorry, father...

--and DRAWS THE BLADE ACROSS HIS ARM.

ELISABETH

Grace!

Grace collects a few drops of blood. Drips it into the bowl with her concoction.

Grace stares into the bowl. A beat, before the blood mixes with the liquid... And the LIQUID REACTS, TURNING BLUE. Grace looks up at Elisabeth. *See?* Off Elisabeth, her stomach sinking, we go back to--

BACK TO THE PRISON CELL--

OLD WOMAN

No medicines will cure your father. The only antidote comes from the nightweed itself. But to obtain it one must enter the deepest bogs of the Great Black Swamp. Through treacherous terrain, beyond rebel territory, to the great stone gateway that leads to the lowlands.

GRACE

I don't care how treacherous it is, I'll send the entire Eastern Army to retrieve it--

OLD WOMAN

No you won't.

GRACE

No? Why not?

OLD WOMAN

Because if the Emperor is incapacitated yet still alive, it is his Chamberlain that would assume control as steward of the Empire.

(off Grace's look)

You can't send the army-- You can't send anyone-- to retrieve the nightweed, because doing so would expose your lie. And your authority vanishes. And *Cyril* takes charge...

GRACE

Well if I can't send anyone to get it, then why bother telling me about it at all?

OLD WOMAN

(small smile)

I can guide you through the swamp. Away from danger...

GRACE

(beat; laughs nervously)

Me...? That's absurd--

OLD WOMAN

Who else would you trust with your father's life? Or with your lie?

Quickly Grace isn't laughing. Realizes this lady is serious, and making a strong point...

GRACE

Why should I trust you? Why would I do what you ask of me?

OLD WOMAN

But I ask nothing of you. I offer you only an opportunity. The question you must ask yourself is, what are you willing to risk to take it? What are you willing to risk to save the father you love so dearly?

Off Grace, realizing she may just have to do this--

BACK TO THE APARTMENT, as Elisabeth stares in disbelief--

ELISABETH

Absolutely not! You have no idea who this woman is, for all we know, she's the one that poisoned father--

GRACE

--then she'd have nothing to gain by helping me now. And if she wanted to harm me, there are better ways.

ELISABETH

We need to come clean. Tell Cyril, and let him step in--

GRACE

If the rebels poisoned father, they had help on the inside. Someone close to us. Are you certain you know who it was? Who it wasn't?
(re: Dorian on the bed)
Would you bet his life on it?

Elisabeth is spinning. But she can't quite say Yes...

EXT. CAPITAL CITY OUTSKIRTS - NIGHT

Two HOODED RIDERS slip quietly away from the city. As they near, we see it's GRACE and the OLD WOMAN.

Grace stops for a moment. Looks back at the IMPERIAL PALACE in the distance, lights flickering... And Grace then rides on, off into the dark, trailing the mysterious Old Woman...

OFF IN THE SHADOWS, we spot a **ONE-EYED MAN** (in an EYE-PATCH), lurking. Watching intently, as Grace rides off, disappearing into the night... Off his creepy glare, we DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. GRASSY PLAINS - DAY

TWO HORSES, small against a sea of grassy rolling hills.

TIGHT ON GRACE, as she takes it all in. It's beautiful...

EXT. WETLANDS - DAY

Boggier. Flatter. Grace and the Old Woman ride TOWARDS CAMERA... But Grace's expression changes as she sees something ahead. She stops her horse, and TIGHT ON HER LOOK OF AWE, before we REVERSE to see--

THE GREAT BLACK SWAMP. Stretching as far as the eye can see. Dense canopy. Dark. Foreboding. And yet something about it seems familiar... We can't help but notice, it looks quite a bit like the misty fields from Grace's dream. Grace seems to clock the connection as well, but shakes it off... Off Grace--

EXT. SWAMP - DAY

The sun barely penetrates the heavy canopy here. Grace trails behind the Old Woman, as they ride a narrow path through the bog...

GRACE

How did you know what you knew about me? I've come this far. I think I'm entitled to some answers.

(then)

Do you have spies in the palace?

OLD WOMAN

Spies can only obtain facts, my Angel. I know more than facts.

GRACE

Stop calling me that. What are you talking about?

OLD WOMAN

I know what you fear...

GRACE

Really...? And what is it I fear?

OLD WOMAN

(beat)

You fear that you do not love the one you are to wed.

GRACE

I think we've reached the limits of your clairvoyance--

OLD WOMAN

You fear the life you lead isn't meant for you. That another life awaits elsewhere. Another love...

GRACE

Forget I asked--

OLD WOMAN

You fear what lies across the bridge.

That sucks the air right out of Grace's lungs.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

There is much to be gained, my Angel. More than you know...

GRACE
...who are you?

This as the Old Woman rounds a bend in the path. Grace far enough behind her that she loses sight of her for a moment--

GRACE (CONT'D)
Dammit, how could you know that?!

But as Grace rounds the corner, she sees-- NOTHING. *The Old Woman is gone.*

On Grace, starting to get a very bad feeling. She dismounts from her horse--

QUICK CUTS-- Grace kicking through the thick brush off the path-- Searching frantically for signs of the woman or her horse-- And as this goes on, we go to--

NEW ANGLE - POV of someone WATCHING GRACE FROM A DISTANCE... Someone lurking in the dense foliage.

BACK WITH GRACE. Knows she has to keep it together. Tries to collect herself. Then-- A RUSTLE IN THE TREES. Beat.

A FLOCK OF BIRDS ERUPTS FROM OUT OF THE BRUSH... Their SQUAWKING SPOOKS THE HORSE, who takes off running... Grace trots after it, but it's no use. She's now totally alone...

Grace walks the path. Nervous. Hearing sounds in all directions. Her head on a swivel. And as she turns back around, she's staring right at--

A HUGE FIGURE. Hulking. Towering over Grace. And though we can't yet see its face, we see THE EYES. Blue. Piercing. Unmistakably similar to the creature's eyes in her dream... She turns to run-- Trips-- Goes to the ground--

But as the Figure takes a step towards her, she springs up-- SWIPES AT WITH THE DAGGER towards it--

The Figure calmly steps back, and she misses by a mile. The Figure then PUNCHES HER IN THE FACE-- and we SMASH TO BLACK.

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO**EXT. SWAMPS - DAY**

Grace's eyes flutter open. Foggy. She orients herself...

She's sitting, leaned up against the trunk of a tree. A less gloomy section of swamp than we last saw; sunlight peeking through the canopy here. She shakes off the haze. Winces, as the pain from her jaw hits her. But as she rubs it gingerly, she notices--

A HORSE, grazing. Not hers. Riderless. No sign of whoever-- whatever-- the *beast*-- that was chasing her. She scans around, until she sees--

THE BEAST. Its back to us. Sitting a dozen yards away by a brook. Appears to be eating. We can just make out broad shoulders; a huge frame... Its got skin like a man's; smooth, if a little grayer. We can't yet see its face, but even from the back of its head we can tell, whatever it is, it definitely isn't human.

Grace eyes it, fearfully. Even sitting still, it's unsettling. Grace then eyes the horse again. If she can reach it before her captor turns around and notices, maybe she can escape...

She stands... Steps towards the horse... Quietly... Just a few steps away... But then--

A TWIG SNAPS. Not from her, from somewhere in the brush-- The Beast's head cocks-- Listening-- Grace goes still... Frozen... A tense beat, until--

A FAWN EMERGES FROM THE BRUSH. Frail. Young. It inches hesitantly towards the Beast, who seems to settle back into eating. Grace exhales...

She takes the last few steps to the horse-- Right there-- But she feels compelled to look back-- And as she does, sees--

The Beast, holding out a small fruit, as the fawn nibbles away at it. Something striking about the image. Something strangely... gentle? Grace watches, unable to look away. But after a beat, she snaps out of it. Reaches for the reins--

BEAST (O.S.)

I wouldn't.

Grace looks over, and sees--

THE BEAST, now looking right at her. Definitely not human. His face is vaguely animal-like. Features a bit like a bull.

A bit like a wolf. Strong, masculine jaw. But the eyes... There's nothing animal about them. A hint of Marlon Brando in them. Magnetic. Piercing. And somehow tragic...

Atop his head, his hair is dense, like dreadlocks, and pulled together into something like a top-knot, giving him a vaguely samurai-type feel. And as he stands, we see just how big he is. Pushing 7 feet tall. Powerful... Meet **SHIRO**.

SHIRO (FIGURE)

She doesn't like strangers.

(then)

She doesn't like anyone, really. The last person to touch those reins that wasn't me got a good trampling for it.

Grace looks over at the horse, who SNUFFS at her.

GRACE

You *hit* me.

SHIRO

You tried to stab me. I would say we're largely even.

(then)

Perhaps we should start again. My name is--

GRACE

I know who you are. Your face is not easily forgotten. You were guardian to my father's predecessor... Emperor Cleo's Holy Protector. Your name is...

As Grace struggles to remember, we're TIGHT ON SHIRO, as slow realization hits him... He looks up at Grace in disbelief.

GRACE (CONT'D)

...Shiro.

(then)

I can only assume you're now in league with the rebels in this swamp. Disgraceful, to say the least. But disgrace is nothing new to you, is it? Certainly not after how Cleo met his end...

SHIRO

...your father's predecessor.

It takes Grace a second, before she realizes--

GRACE

What, you expect me to believe you don't know who I am? You hired that woman to lure me out here--

SHIRO

What woman...?
(then, still stunned)
So you're-- Dorian's daughter...

GRACE

(totally incredulous)
And you didn't know that...
(beat; a little less)
You didn't know that?
(beat; fuuuckk...)
You didn't know that.

SHIRO

I'll tell you what I know. You're going to be worth a damn fortune...

Off Grace, her situation not improving--

INT. ROYAL APARTMENT - DAY

Elisabeth stands by a window, staring out into the distance.

ELISABETH

If you knew what she was doing out there...

She turns, and we see she's talking to Dorian. Still unconscious. She has to laugh a little.

ELISABETH (CONT'D)

If you knew, you'd probably tell me I'm the crazy one for worrying.
Grace knows what she's doing...

Elisabeth approaches Dorian's sickbed. A beat, as she considers him.

ELISABETH (CONT'D)

I know what you think of me.
(beat)
That I'm not as strong as she is.
That I'm not as smart. That I'm
less than.
(then)
What did I ever do to make you think that?

On Dorian. Frail. Unable to give her any answers.

ELISABETH (CONT'D)

Well I'm smart enough to know that what Grace is doing is going to get her killed.

(beat)

And I can't sit here like some child, waiting for it to happen.

She stands up. Her resolve growing.

ELISABETH (CONT'D)

I'm not a child. Sooner or later everyone is going to realize that.

INT. TOWER CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER

Elisabeth exits her father's room. Yanta Mho, in his spot.

ELISABETH

There's someone I have to go see. If Cyril visits before I return, it would be better for everyone if he believed I was still here...

He ignores her. Elisabeth is just not a factor in this guy's world. She then discreetly unbuttons her top button. Steps in front of him. And with a suggestive smile--

ELISABETH (CONT'D)

If he asks if I'm still here, you'll cover for me, won't you?

Yanta Mho looks up. And just for an instant, his eyes hang on her cleavage-- Before he meets her eyes. Icily--

YANTA MHO

(re: Dorian)

My oath is to keep my Lord safe. Not to answer questions from Cyril.

ELISABETH

I'll take that as a yes.

Off Elisabeth, who can clearly bring the sexy when she wants--

EXT. BARRACKS COURTYARD - DAY

THE CLASH OF SWORDS-- as SOLDIERS SPAR. GARRICK is taking on THREE OTHERS AT A TIME, and toying with them. It's pretty impressive... Then, mid-fight, he catches sight of--

ELISABETH, waiting impatiently. Garrick clocks her distraught look. And as Garrick KNOCKS ONE OF THE SOLDIERS DOWN with a particularly powerful attack, SMASH TO:

MINUTES LATER, Garrick and Elisabeth, mid-conversation, in a private corner of the yard. Garrick is now the one looking unsettled--

GARRICK

I'm going after her. I'll take the whole battallion if I have to--

ELISABETH

No-- You can't say anything to anyone. Grace said that if anyone found out about father's condition, his life would be in even greater danger. You have to promise me.

Garrick considers her. He then walks off--

ELISABETH (CONT'D)

You'll go alone?

GARRICK

...not exactly.

EXT. SWAMP - OVERGROWN PATH - DAY

Shiro walks, leading his horse by the reins, as Grace rides sidesaddle, hands and ankles still bound.

GRACE

You were right before. If your leaders ransom me back to my father, it'll be worth a fortune.

(then)

Although... If you were enterprising, maybe that fortune is yours alone. You said yourself, you didn't expect to find me here. Stands to reason, if you don't tell them, they'll never know.

SHIRO

No thank you.

GRACE

So what, you're saying you're not for sale?

SHIRO

Far from it. I am entirely for sale. Just not to you.

GRACE

Why not?

SHIRO
Don't trust you.

GRACE
You don't even know me--

SHIRO
You anything like your father?

GRACE
(beat)
On my best day.

SHIRO
Then there you have it.
(beat)
Besides. Too late...

And at that, they round a bend, and sprawled out before them--

EXT. REBEL VILLAGE - SAME

A CANYON, sunken into the ground-- Surrounded by stone walls a hundred feet deep-- And in the center--

THE RUINS OF A LONG-ABANDONED TEMPLE. Overgrown with ivy and brush. The architecture is much different from Kendan's-- primitive and strange. Torch lights illuminate both the temple itself, as well as the small adobe huts cobbled together around the canyon floor. This, is the **REBEL BASE**.

Shiro and Grace ride down a stone incline along one of the canyon walls. Grace sees men, women, and children bustle through the COMMONS sitting before the temple-- at least a few of them are non-human to varying degrees. Grace takes it all in. Never seen anything like this before. *She wanted to see the world...*

MINUTES LATER, Shiro and Grace reach the Commons. An **ATTENDANT** approaches Shiro's horse-- Decidedly not human. Squat, vaguely TOAD-ish face. Shiro addresses him privately, with a proud little smile on his face--

SHIRO
(re: Grace)
...you know who that is?

TOAD answers with a guttural series of grunts, but which Shiro clearly is able to understand. Shiro's smile fades.

SHIRO (CONT'D)
How did you know?
(more grunts)
What do you mean, everybody?
(MORE)

SHIRO (CONT'D)
Clearly not everybody-- I didn't
recognize her.

More grunts. Shiro's eyebrows go up. He then points an
angry finger at the Toad--

SHIRO (CONT'D)
Hey-- It's enough with that!

NEW ANGLE - ON GRACE, as Shiro and the Toad bicker. And then--

TIGHT ON HER HANDS, as she very discreetly is trying to WORK
FREE A SHARP-EDGED BUCKLE from the saddle. Hands still bound--
- An awkward position-- Almost has it--

SHIRO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Let's go.

WIDEN, and see Shiro is waiting to help her off the horse.
He didn't see what she was doing. Grace lets Shiro
effortlessly lift her off the saddle and to the ground. And
as he escorts her off, we go--

TIGHT ON THE SADDLE, and the indentation where the sharpened
buckle used to be...

INT. HOVEL - LATER

A humble one-room adobe hut, small fire burning in the
center. Grace sits alone on the floor. A STOIC GUARD stands
watch. Then enters **EHREN** (40s; drill-sergeant-y). Shiro
enters behind him, leans by the door lazily. Ehren then
produces GRACE'S DAGGER... Considers it curiously...

GRACE
You won't hurt me.
(off Ehren's look)
My brother is next in line to the
throne behind me, and you know it.
If you kill me, he'd succeed my
father as Emperor, and... Well, I
think we can both agree that's not
an outcome that would bode well for
your survival.

Ehren considers her. Smiles. Then, he sets the dagger down--

EHREN
If your brother is even still
alive... His bloody crusade to
find your mother has gone without
news for quite some time, from what
I hear.
(off Grace's silence)
(MORE)

EHREN (CONT'D)

But you're right. Your brother on the throne is the last thing any of us wants to see. So let's assume no one here has any interest in murdering you.

Ehren sits across from Grace.

EHREN (CONT'D)

Now that that's out of the way, perhaps you'd like to tell us what you're doing here? How is it we come to find the Crown Princess wandering the bogs alone?

Grace clams up. Isn't gonna answer that...

EHREN (CONT'D)

I know you're headed to the nightweed field.

(off Grace's reaction)

What I don't know is, why? What could be so important that you would venture out there alone?

(then)

You have so great a need for an assassin's poison? For its cure?

At that Grace's expression changes, as it dawns on her...

GRACE

You don't know, do you?

Ehren cocks an eyebrow. Puzzled And it sinks in for Grace. *The rebels didn't poison dad...* Grace takes a beat. How to play this... Then, steely--

GRACE (CONT'D)

Let me set a few things straight for you. If you think you are going to get any kind of information from me that would aid you in warring against my father, you're very much mistaken. So that leaves you with two choices. Be reasonable, and we can negotiate a generous price for my release. Or be wiped out when my father's army comes to retrieve me, which I imagine is nearer in the offing than you know.

Beat. This lady's got balls... Ehren's smile fades.

EHREN

Then let's negotiate.

(then)

But I think we can both agree that you're worth a lot more to the empire than money.

ON SHIRO. Cocks an eyebrow. That's news to him... Grace hides it well, but she's also a little thrown--

GRACE

You don't want money?

EHREN

I want an exchange. Prisoner for prisoner.

Grace is now feeling on completely unknown turf. Just can't let it show.

GRACE

What kind of prisoner?

EHREN

(beat)

I want Mir Venda.

On Grace. A slow *Fat Chance* smile.

GRACE

The man who murdered Emperor Cleo...

(then)

He's too dangerous. You think my father, or anyone at court for that matter, would agree to that?

EHREN

That's the price for your release. Take all the time you need to decide.

Ehren exits, Shiro behind him.

EXT. REBEL VILLAGE - SAME

Ehren and Shiro emerge from the hovel---

SHIRO

'Worth more than money?' There is no such thing as 'worth more than money', that's why they keep making more of it.

EHREN

I understand you're only here as long as we pay you to be, but for the rest of us, there's something more important at stake here...

They stop walking. The wheels in Ehren's head spinning.

EHREN (CONT'D)

What is this? The heir to the throne wanders right up to our door -- alone?

SHIRO

Maybe she got separated from a transport.

EHREN

Did you see any tracks other than her own?

Shiro's silence answers that clearly enough. And off Ehren, trying to make sense of all this, we INTERCUT WITH:

INT. HOVEL - SAME

Grace, bound, left under the watch of the Stoic Guard. And TIGHT ON HER HANDS, as we see she's using the sharp buckle to saw away at the rope binding her hands. And just as the ROPE BEGINS TO FRAY-- And Grace stifles a small smile-- We go--

BACK TO THE COMMONS, with Ehren and Shiro--

SHIRO

Just sell her back to her people and be done with it.

EHREN

We've lost dozens of men trying to get him out of that fortress of a prison.

(then, re: the camp)

Take a look around. After years of war against Dorian, this is all that's left of the rebellion. I'm not the leader Venda is, I know this. Without him, eventually, this rebellion dies.

SHIRO

With or without him, I think we all know how this ends.

(MORE)

SHIRO (CONT'D)

And without me out in front, your men don't fight at all, and things end a lot faster. Something to consider.

Off Ehren, not appreciating that at all, we go--

BACK TO THE HOVEL, Grace sawing through her restraints-- Almost there-- And then--

Her hands come free. The Guard only notices as she's finishing cutting her ankles free-- She pops up-- Grabs the DAGGER FROM THE TABLE where Ehren left it-- Wields it--

The Guard appears a little amused. A little bored.

GUARD

Ok. Let's have it.

Grace considers a moment. The guard dwarfs her. But her focus shifts-- Down from the Guard-- To THE GASLAMP in the middle of the room. And as she KICKS AT THE LAMP, we SMASH--

BACK TO THE COMMONS, with Ehren and Shiro. Ehren is stunned.

EHREN

You're threatening to walk away?

SHIRO

I'm simply reminding you why I'm here, that's all.

EHREN

These people here-- They fight for a cause. They fight to restore what Cleo lost. And you are a symbol of that cause. Doesn't that mean anything to you at all?

SHIRO

No. It doesn't. The moment Cleo's body hit the floor was the moment I stopped caring about any of that.

On Ehren. Wants to be angry. But just feels tired...

EHREN

You mean something to them. Right now. Whether you care about it or not-- Don't take it away from them.

Before Shiro can reply, SHOUTS ARE HEARD from across the way. Ehren and Shiro turn, SMOKE BILLOWING OUT OF THE HOVEL GRACE WAS IN. Off their look, we go--

INT. HOVEL - LATER

The fire now subdued. The hovel smoking and charred. The Guard, mortified at his failure. And Ehren looking up at the back window of the hovel that Grace escaped out of... And as Ehren and Shiro share a look, we DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SWAMP - PATH - DAY

Grace makes her way down the swamp path. Up ahead, she sees-- A GIANT STONE ARCHWAY... Off Grace--

EXT. NIGHTWEED BOG - DAY

The bog that the Old Woman spoke of. And up ahead, a raised terrace on which Grace can see HUNDREDS OF VIOLET BLOSSOMS growing in the brush... The nightweed...

Grace remembers the Old Woman's warning, but everything seems quiet. Peaceful. Grace makes her way across the bog quietly-- She reaches the terrace-- Climbs up the small bluff towards the nightweed-- But the vines on its wall are slick, and--

GRACE SLIPS-- Grasping for a hold-- But can't hang on. Goes down in a heap. Shit. But then, before she can haul herself off the ground, she hears--

THUMP... THUMP... Heavy footfalls across the bog.

Grace remains still. Silent. Peering out into the trees, where she can just make out movement. Something huge... A creature, though she can't make out any details. It remains still a moment, scanning. Before tromping away, it's footfalls getting quieter in the distance...

On Grace, a small sigh of relief...

MOMENTS LATER, Grace is up on the terrace... She pulls the dagger-- Uses it cut a few handfuls of the weed. Stashes it in a pouch, and draws the string tight. As she does, she smiles to herself... *She did it...* And then, as she turns to leave, she finds herself face-to-face with--

A **MAGHRA**. Ten feet tall. Jaws that could crush a Volkswagen. It's squatting. Inspecting Grace. Its breath on her face...

On Grace-- Paralyzed with fear... Maybe it will leave her alone? But then-- IT UNLOADS WITH A BLOOD-CURDLING HOWL--

Off Grace, completely fucked, we SMASH TO BLACK.

END ACT TWO

ACT THREE

EXT. NIGHTWEED BOG - DAY

Direct pick-up. Grace faced off against the Maghra... It ROARS-- Approaching slowly-- Grace draws her dagger, as if it'll make any difference when that thing decides to attack--

She backs away-- Until she's cornered, up against a stand of trees-- The Maghra-- Just about to CLAW AT HER-- When--

GRACE SWIPES WITH THE DAGGER-- And as the blade comes into contact with the Maghra's hide, THE CREATURE SCREECHES-- SMOKE COMING FROM THE WOUND-- It recoils...

Grace, stunned, looks at the blade, which is very faintly glowing orange... Hot to the touch...

ON THE MAGHRA-- Now pissed-- It CHARGES GRACE-- And just as it's about to be curtains for her--

A SWORD SLASHES INTO FRAME-- GASHES THE MAGHRA ACROSS ITS CHEST, as it stumbles backwards and falls to the ground, stunned... And REVEAL--

SHIRO, on horseback, sword drawn-- Full badass-mode...

He extends a hand to Grace to haul her up to the saddle--

SHIRO
Sooner than later, please.

Grace hauls herself to her feet-- But as she's about to take his hand, she sees above and behind him--

A SECOND MAGHRA-- Shiro doesn't see it in time-- IT SWIPES AT HIM, knocking him off his mount... His horse spooks, and takes off...

The First Maghra is now up on its feet, and the two creatures come at Shiro at Grace--

SHIRO (CONT'D)
Gimme that--

He grabs the dagger from her, and is now wielding sword in one hand, dagger in the other. But with each Maghra attack, we're unsettled by their sheer strength... One swipe, if landed cleanly, would squash Shiro... As he attempts to fight them off, and he and Grace try to back out of the bog--

SHIRO (CONT'D)
You're welcome, by the way...

GRACE

Can we make a run for it?

SHIRO

They're faster than they look. We won't get far without her--

We spot-- SHIRO'S HORSE, off in the treeline across the bog.

GRACE

Then we're in trouble.

SHIRO

Well you're in a lot less trouble than you were a minute ago--

Shiro's cut off as-- HE AND GRACE BOTH FALL DOWN INTO--

INT. NIGHTWEED BOG - FOOD PIT - SAME

--a camouflaged PIT, about 15' deep. Some criss-crossing vines break their fall a bit, but both land with a THUD on the floor of the pit-- Grace LANDS HARD ON HER ANKLE, producing a SICKENING CRUNCH.

In serious pain, Grace grimaces. Holds her ankle a moment. But as she rolls over, trying to push up off the ground, she's suddenly face to face with--

A HUMAN SKULL, resting in the mud, grinning back at her. She STIFLES A SCREAM, before-- Shiro reaches down and hoists her up. Beat.

SHIRO

Still better off than a minute ago, if we're being honest with ourselves.

Goes to Grace to try to help her up, but she SMACKS HIM AWAY.

GRACE

I don't need your help.

Shiro shrugs. Suit yourself. He then moves to the base of the wall. Sheer mud. Few footholds. He looks up the wall, trying to piece together an plan.

GRACE (CONT'D)

What is this?

SHIRO

The Maghra only feed at night. They use these pits to trap prey and hold them til nightfall.

GRACE

That doesn't seem like a very good plan. What if we escape before they come back?

SHIRO

The prey are usually paralyzed too quickly to escape.

GRACE

Paralyzed? By what?

SHIRO

By those.

Grace then sees it-- SNAKES, emerging from small holes in the walls... Hundreds of them, dropping down on the floor of the pit. Off Grace and Shiro--

EXT. CITY LIMITS - DUSK

FOUR HOODED RIDERS, at the outskirts of the capital. And as they near us, REVEAL THE LEAD RIDER IS GARRICK. No longer in uniform; very low-profile. The THREE RIDERS behind him have their faces obscured by masks beneath their hoods; only their eyes visible. Their clothes and cloaks are ragged and threadbare, but there's something elegantly dangerous about them. Like hobo ninjas.

UP AHEAD, Garrick sees a carriage approaching the city. An ESCORT OF HEAVILY ARMED SOLDIERS ride before it... Heading towards us. Garrick shifts uncomfortably... *Not good...*

They get closer... Passing by us... Garrick peeks discreetly from the side of his hood, and as he does, he sees clearly--

CYRIL in the window, looking back at him. Garrick looks away--

They pass by each other... Getting further apart... Garrick hoping, praying he wasn't noticed... Until-- he hears THE CARRIAGE CALLED TO A STOP. Hears someone get out of it.

CYRIL (O.S.)

Captain?

On Garrick. Keeps going... Doesn't turn...

CYRIL (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Captain Garrick!

Garrick jaw clenches. No choice. He calls his horse to a stop. And turns to face Cyril, who is walking this way. Garrick removes his hood. The jig is up...

GARRICK
Lord Chamberlain...

CYRIL
I thought that was you. How unexpected. Tell me, what are you doing so far from your unit at the time of day--

And Cyril nears, he gets a look at Garrick's other riders--

CYRIL (CONT'D)
And with such interesting company.

GARRICK
I can explain.

CYRIL
Mercenaries... From the Catacomb City. Bull Ragen's henchmen?
(off Garrick's silence)
Captain. You must know that your... *association* with the Ragen Gang is the worst kept secret in the capital.
(beat)
You are to wed the Crown Princess. The Emperor's most favored soldier. With so much to lose, can you really afford to give credence to the rumors that the Empire's most notorious ganglord is your brother?

Beat. On Garrick. Measuring his next move carefully. Then--

GARRICK
A merchant in the city recently had a rather unwholesome business deal go rotten. His partners paid him back by kidnapping his daughter. This merchant has a friend among the Grand Generals, I can't say which of course. But this friend asked me to secure the daughter's rescue. And asked me to do it in the strictest of confidences.
(re: Mercenaries)
The Catacomb Mercenaries have always been known for their code of silence. Which is exactly what I needed to carry out my orders.

Cyril considers him a long beat. Then, conspiratorially--

CYRIL

Forgive me. I should have known better than to doubt you. Go.

Garrick hesitates. *Was that too easy?* But before he can exit--

CYRIL (CONT'D)

One more thing, Captain. The Princess, your wife-to-be. No one has seen her in the palace for more than a day. Would you have any idea where she might be?

GARRICK

That's strange, I just saw her this morning.

Cyril stares at him. Reading him. Cyril then smiles--

CYRIL

Of course. I'm sure she'll turn up.

Garrick then mounts up, and rides off. We hang on Cyril, his anger growing. He storms off towards his carriage. And as he opens the door to enter the carriage we see--

THE ONE-EYED MAN that spied Grace leaving the city. In Cyril's employ. And as we PRELAP THE HISS OF SNAKE, we go to--

INT. NIGHTWEED BOG - FOOD PIT - DUSK

--as a SNAKE SNAPS AT GRACE'S HEELS... She kicks mud back at it-- But more snakes are dropping in-- She won't be able to hold them off much longer. Behind her, Shiro is braiding together vines growing from the upper part of the pit wall...

GRACE

How did you find me here anyway?

SHIRO

(re: dagger)

You really don't know what this is, do you?

(then)

They call them Fen Fangs. The gladesmen that lived on the far side of the swamp made them ages ago to deal with the Maghra. Never actually seen one before. Whoever gave that to you went to a lot of trouble to get you in and out of this bog alive. Although teaching you how to hold a knife might not've been a bad idea.

Shiro gives the rope one last tug. It's sturdy.

SHIRO (CONT'D)
Alright, up we go.

GRACE
That isn't going to work.

SHIRO
It'll work.

GRACE
I've studied under the most
respected engineers in the Empire.
And I'm telling you, you're too
heavy. They won't hold.

SHIRO
Well, then, you don't have to come.

Shiro offers her a hand one last time. She can't bring herself to trust him... But then, Shiro's focus moves down-- To Grace's feet-- He REACHES OUT, SCOOPS HER OFF THE GROUND, JUST AS-- A SNAKE STRIKES, missing her ankle by inches...

Shiro starts climbing, hauling himself and Grace up out of the pit... As he climbs, Grace gets her first close look at his face. Inches away. And for some reason, she can't look away. There's something overwhelmingly *powerful* about him.

ABOVE, ON THE VINE, where it emerges from the wall... We see it's starting to fray... Uh oh...

BACK TO GRACE AND SHIRO, as he glances down... Catches her staring. She looks away. And as he keeps climbing--

BACK TO THE VINE-- Fraying... Getting awful thin...

BACK TO SHIRO, as they near the top-- He helps Grace up onto solid ground. But before he can pull himself up--

THE VINE SNAPS. Shiro scrambles to grab hold of something-- GRABS HER HAND for a moment-- Slips-- We notice he RIPS LOOSE A BRACELET ON HER HAND-- But before he falls into the pit, he manages to dig his fingers into a crevice on the wall--

And he's hanging there... Just barely... The pit floor now covered in snakes... He looks up at Grace, standing over him. She stares back at him a beat. And then--

She backs away... And disappears. And off Shiro--

END ACT THREE

ACT FOUR**INT. NIGHTWEED BOG - FOOD PIT - NIGHT**

Direct pick-up. Shiro hanging by his fingernails... Looks down, and the snakes are now carpeting the floor of the pit. If he falls, he's toast... Then--

A WET SNEEZE from above. Shiro looks up, and sees HIS HORSE staring back at him. A moment, before Grace appears beside it, throws the reins down to Shiro--

GRACE

Grab hold.

As Grace then climbs into the horse's saddle, Shiro warns her through gritted teeth--

SHIRO

She... Doesn't like... *Strangers.*

This as Grace mounts the horse, and expertly coaxes it backwards... Pulling Shiro up out of the pit, until he's on flatland. As he hauls himself off the ground and up into the saddle behind Grace--

GRACE

(proud of herself)

Perhaps I'm a stronger rider than you gave me credit for--

She's cut off, as Shiro physically lifts her up out of the saddle, turns, and places her behind him. *He'll drive.*

He then turns back forward in the saddle. Looks down, and gives the horse a shitty look. Mutters under his breath--

SHIRO

Whose side are you on, anyway?

Then-- A HOWLING FROM THE MIDDLE DISTANCE through the treeline. The Maghra are coming back... SHIRO SPURS THE HORSE ON, and they take off out of bog. And as they recede deeper into the swamp, we DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SWAMP - CLAY CAVERNS - NIGHT

A long clay ridge, with caverns dotting the face of it. Like swiss cheese, each cavern opening of different sizes.

At the base of the ridge, Shiro removes the saddle off the horse. Out of Grace's earshot, he's still at it--

SHIRO

I mean, you couldn't give her a little fight? *Something?*

The horse just stares back at him impassively. But as Shiro turns, he sees-- GRACE, with the dagger out.

GRACE

I'll be leaving now.

(then, re: the nightweed)

If I don't get this home, and soon, someone very close to me dies. And I simply won't permit it.

A tense beat. Shiro staring her down. And then, Shiro shrugs, and calmly leads the horse off towards one of the caverns. Grace watches him walk off, a little puzzled.

INT. CLAY CAVERN - NIGHT

Shiro enters the cavern, and sets to work building a fire. A beat, before we hear the THUNDEROUS FOOTSTEPS OF THE MAGHRAS, traipsing through the forest. Another beat, before Grace hobbles hurriedly back into the cavern.

GRACE

They're back.

Shiro looks up at her. *No shit.*

GRACE (CONT'D)

For how long?

SHIRO

Til morning. But until then, the hungrier they get, the angrier they'll get. So unless you're determined to be a hot meal before the night's out, I think we're stuck here.

On Grace. Boned. As she shifts her weight on her bad ankle, she winces, leans on a wall for support.

SHIRO (CONT'D)

You're really going to stand there all night just to make a point?

Beat. Grace reluctantly sits, as Shiro starts the fire. He then turns, and tries to take her ankle. She recoils.

SHIRO (CONT'D)

If it isn't set, it'll get worse.

GRACE

Aren't I worth the same price lame?

SHIRO

Probably.

Another beat, before she lets him check out her ankle. He touches it gently, and she winces. He then gets to tearing a few strips of fabric from his cloak. As he does...

SHIRO (CONT'D)

You're not what I expected.

GRACE

What does that mean?

SHIRO

At least twice today you threatened to stab me. I'm not saying I don't like my chances against you... I'm just saying, you've got spirit...

GRACE

You expected me to be a coward?

SHIRO

Dorian's kid; let's just say I was managing my expectations.

Shiro pulls out a flask from his cloak. Offers it to Grace.

SHIRO (CONT'D)

It'll dull the pain.

Grace hesitates. Shiro takes a swig, to show her it's safe.

GRACE

I don't drink.

Shiro shrugs. Takes her ankle. Readies to set it--

GRACE (CONT'D)

Wait wait wait wait...

She grabs the flask. Deep breath. Takes a good long swig. Coughs-- That's strong stuff. Shiro smiles. She then gives him a nod. Ready. And as SHIRO WRENCHES HER ANKLE, we PRELAP THE SOUNDS OF HYSTERICAL LAUGHTER... SMASH TO:

LATER, Grace has full-on lost it. Can't breathe, she's laughing so hard. Shiro watches, amused, nursing his flask.

A long beat, before Grace collects herself. Catches her breath. Settles. Beat...

GRACE (CONT'D)

What was I saying?

Shiro smiles. Offers her the flask again. She takes it.

GRACE (CONT'D)

If father knew about this, he would not be pleased. If Cyril knew... Good God.

SHIRO

My old friend Cyril. How is he these days?

GRACE

(beat; it clicks)
Cyril served Cleo before my father, you served alongside him.
(then)
You must have known him well.

SHIRO

Too well...
(then)
Does he still make that face when he's angry, but doesn't want you to think cares enough about you to be angry? Between his eyes...

Grace furrows her brow dramatically.

GRACE

Like... like this...

Shiro has to laugh. Grace watches him. Then, with things feeling a bit more comfortable between them--

GRACE (CONT'D)

You shouldn't be so afraid of me.

SHIRO

Come again?

GRACE

You, Ehren, the rebels. You're fighting and dying to restore a system that died a long time ago. And you're doing it all to prevent me from inheriting the throne.

SHIRO

And you think that's about you?

GRACE

It's at least a little about me.
I'm simply saying, perhaps I will
be a better leader than you think.

SHIRO

Listen... You were a child when
Cleo fell, so I don't blame you for
not understanding this. But for
1000 years, the priestesses of the
Sorai used the Old Way to choose
heirs to the throne. 1000 years.
Until your father came along.
Trust me. This is not about you.

Grace grins a bit of a condescending grin.

GRACE

The Old Way... A funeral pyre for
the dead Emperor? Search teams
following the smoke, looking for a
child prophesied to inherit his
soul...? This is really how you
think leaders should be chosen?

SHIRO

Well, I spent a good part of my
life trying to protect a man chosen
just that way... So you might be
asking the wrong person.

GRACE

You served him well, from the
stories I hear. Time was, no one
in the Empire would have called you
anything less than a hero.

He doesn't respond, lost in his head. Grace considers him.
Filled with regret. Broken. And somehow, in this light,
noble. We see a thought forming in her head.

GRACE (CONT'D)

They called you a hero because you
swore to protect your Emperor's
life at all costs. So what I'm
about to say should be easy for
you, of all people, to understand.

(then)

My father is dying.

Shiro looks up. Huh?

GRACE (CONT'D)

He's been poisoned. I assumed it was your people that did it. Perhaps it was. Perhaps not. Right now, I don't care. I don't care about their cause. I don't care about your past. I don't care about the Empire. I just don't want him to die.

(then)

Before you were this cynical, you were sworn to defend the right. What could be more right than a daughter trying to save her father?

And off Shiro, genuinely thrown by this news...

INT. TOWER CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Cyril strides down the corridor, with a SIX IMPERIAL GUARDS in tow. Yanta Mho glances up at him indifferently.

CYRIL

I demand to see the Emperor.

Yanta Mho looks away. The message clear. *Fat chance.* It pisses Cyril off to no end.

CYRIL (CONT'D)

No one-- *no one*-- but his daughters have laid eyes on him. The Princess is nowhere to be found in the palace. The prisoner that assaulted her in the Hall was released on her authority. And I saw her fiance ride out of the city with three Catacomb Mercenaries headed to who knows where. Something is not right. The security of the Empire is at stake. If you will not stand down, I will enter that room by force.

The Imperial Guards put hands on their swords. That gets Yanta Mho's attention. He stands up. *Jesus, he's big.* Now standing between Cyril and the apartment door.

Even at six-against-one, we don't like Cyril's chances here. As the tension builds, the DOOR OPENS. And ELISABETH emerges.

CYRIL (CONT'D)

Where is your sister?

ELISABETH
(totally freaked out)
She'll be back-- She just went...

CYRIL
Went *where*? The state is without a
head. Am I to understand *you* now
speak for the Emperor?

ELISABETH
Well... No-- But Grace will be--

Cyril points an angry finger at Elisabeth--

CYRIL
Be very careful what you say next--

Yanta Mho steps between them, pushing Elisabeth behind him protectively. And just for a moment, we clock Elisabeth noting Yanta Mho's hand on her belly... Between the adrenaline, and the protective gesture, it's just a little bit exhilarating...

CYRIL (CONT'D)
(to Yanta Mho)
You swore to protect this Empire--

YANTA MHO
I swore to protect my Lord.

CYRIL
They are one and the same!

YANTA MHO
No. They are not.

Cyril's had about enough. Signals his Guards. They draw swords. Yanta Mho draws his. This is about to get way out of hand-- But just before anyone can make a move--

ELISABETH
Wait!

Everyone turns to her... As she OPENS THE APARTMENT DOOR. A stunned moment. Can she do that?

Cyril doesn't wait for explanations. He walks past a stunned Yanta Mho, and enters the Apartment. Yanta Mho then glares down at Elisabeth. For a moment, she fears for her life-- She just made him look ridiculous, and now he looks pissed. But he just storms off in the room, leaving Elisabeth alone, and feeling small...

EXT. PLAINS - DAY - DREAM

The mist... The bridge... The dream we saw before, but things are a little darker now. The clouds more ominous...

Grace emerges from the fog, making her way cautiously over the bridge... A few paces behind her, the Wise Woman...

WISE WOMAN

Go to him...

Grace looks up ahead, and through the mist, she can just make out-- DORIAN, lying in his sickbed. Unmoving.

Grace looks back-- the Wise Woman's face is different-- She's now the Old Woman. And with anger in her eyes--

WISE WOMAN/OLD WOMAN

Go!

Her voice, shrill and unsettling. Grace turns, starts towards Dorian, but then-- From the mist-- A FORM APPEARS out of nowhere-- Threatening-- IT'S SHIRO-- Eyes glowing-- And off this startling image-- SMASH TO:

INT. CLAY CAVERN - MORNING

Grace wakes in the cave. Alone. Shiro gone. She breathes easy-- He let her go? She hauls herself up off the ground...

EXT. CLAY CAVERN - DAY

Where a light rain is falling. But she stops, as she sees--

SHIRO, kneeling in the mud. Shirt off. Still. Eyes closed. He's in some kind of meditation. Grace watches, fascinated, before he senses her presence, and his eyes open. He pops up nimbly, and resumes loading his horse.

GRACE

I can't outrun you. I can't outfight you. But I will not go with you.

SHIRO

You will.

GRACE

I will not. If I go with you, he dies. I don't care what you think of his politics, he's my father--

SHIRO

I gave my word I would return you to Ehren. And I will.

GRACE

Your word? Like you gave Cleo your word to protect him before you betrayed him?

Shiro turns. Glares at her. She's nearing a raw nerve.

SHIRO

What?

GRACE

I've heard the rumors. That you took money from Mir Venda to look the other way while he and his assassins killed Cleo.

SHIRO

You don't have any idea what you're talking about.

GRACE

I know what your word is worth.

SHIRO

You want to know what happened to Cleo? Mir Venda didn't kill him.

(then)

Your father did.

On Grace. Doesn't buy that for a second. But something about Shiro's conviction unsettles her.

SHIRO (CONT'D)

Cleo was a good man. But he was a flawed man. His regime had weakened. Dorian saw an opportunity. So one night, Yanta Mho and his assassins descended.

FLASH TO A SERIES OF IMAGES, INTERCUT INTO Shiro's story. THE EMPEROR CLEO, in the ROYAL APARTMENT-- Shiro standing before him-- Shiro draws his sword--

SHIRO (CONT'D)

They thought I would yield to their numbers.

(beat)

They were wrong.

MORE IMAGES-- Shiro, fighting off assassins in the uniforms of Imperial Guards-- He's a one-man wrecking crew-- Then, as Shiro faces against Yanta Mho--

SHIRO (CONT'D)

But what I hadn't accounted for was
your father's treachery...

JUST BEFORE SHIRO AND YANTA MHO FIGHT, Shiro's eyes go wide--
He lowers his sword-- And REVEAL, behind him-- DORIAN, a
bloody knife in his hand-- He stabbed Shiro in the back--

SHIRO (CONT'D)

I escaped, instead of dying by
Cleo's side as I should have. I
failed.

(then)

In the ensuing chaos, your father
cast himself as the white knight,
there to restore order. Took the
crown upon his head, sat his ass
upon the throne, and stole for
himself an Empire--

GRACE

You lie.

SHIRO

Dorian is not who you think he is--

GRACE

Don't you speak his name--

SHIRO

Have you seen the scar?

GRACE

(beat)

What are you talking about?

SHIRO

Before I was beaten, I gave him
something to remember me by.

ONE LAST QUICK IMAGE-- Shiro lunging at Dorian weakly--
Slicing him across the chest--

SHIRO (CONT'D)

I'm sure he still bears the scar.
Ask to see it. Ask where it came
from. Look in his eyes when he
tells you. Then tell me which one
of us is the liar.

There's something too genuine about Shiro's tone to be
dismissed. Grace doesn't know what to make of all this. A
tense staredown between the two of them. But it's broken by--

THE THWOOSH OF AN ARROW zipping past-- Missing Shiro by inches-- He turns, and we see--

GARRICK AND HIS MERCENARIES, charging this way--

And off Grace, about to be the prize in a very nasty fight--

END ACT FOUR

ACT FIVE

EXT. CLAY CAVERNS - DAY

Shiro, sword drawn-- In a CROUCH-- And up ahead of him--

GARRICK AND HIS MERCENARIES ARE CHARGING THIS WAY....

It's 3-on-1, but Shiro doesn't seem disturbed by it. And just as Garrick and his guys are almost here--

GRACE STEPS BETWEEN THEM.

ON SHIRO-- WTF?

GARRICK AND HIS GUYS PULL UP. Their swords drawn. Shiro's sword up and at the ready, like a coiled snake. And we're in a standoff.

GARRICK
(to Grace)
What are you doing?

GRACE
He means a great deal to his people. If we kill him, there will be no negotiating with them...

SHIRO
Big 'if.'

Shiro and Garrick never break eye contact. Two alpha males, ready to charge at an instant.

GARRICK
I don't think he's going to give us that choice, dear.
(to Shiro)
Am I right, sir?

SHIRO
(to Grace)
Your husband is a smart man.

GRACE
He's not my husband--

Garrick gives her a look-- *Really? Now?*

GRACE (CONT'D)
Not yet-- Though that's not really relevant--

SHIRO

Whatever he is... Maybe he will be smart enough to turn and go before he no longer has that choice.

This is gonna get worse before it gets better. But in the midst of this standoff, if we're paying attention, we realize--
- THERE ARE ONLY TWO MERCENARIES WITH GARRICK.

NEW ANGLE - IN THE TREES - THE THIRD MERCENARY creeps silently along. He's behind Shiro, unseen... And only a few yards away... He draws his sword... And begins to skulk out of the treeline, as--

BACK ON THE STANDOFF IN THE CLEARING--

GARRICK

Stand down. And you will live.

SHIRO

She'll be returned to you. But there will be a cost.

GARRICK

I looked up to you as a boy, you know. I thought your disgrace was as bad as it could get, but apparently you're determined to raise the bar...

Shiro smiles. Whatever. Itching to get this fight started.

ON THE THIRD MERCENARY, now out in the clearing... Just a few yards away from Shiro... Ready to strike...

ON SHIRO-- notices one of the other Mercenaries eyes shift-- TURNS BEHIND HIM, where he sees the Third Mercenary is ALMOST ON TOP OF HIM-- SWORD RAISED-- But before Shiro can even attempt to defend himself-- we hear--

THUMP-- THUMP-- AND--

THE THIRD MERCENARY IS SNATCHED OFF THE GROUND, and into the clutches of--

THE MAGHRA, WHO BITES THE MERCENARY IN HALF, leaving just a pair of bony legs, that it discards disdainfully into the trees-- And as Maghra #1 chews up his appetizer, MAGHRA #2 STEPS OUT OF THE TREELINE, and starts to move towards us.

Quickly, Shiro, Garrick and the two remaining Mercenaries have a common enemy... And the FIGHT BEGINS...

MAGHRA #2 goes after Grace-- But Shiro ATTACKS, and manages to score enough of a blow to ward it away... This as--

Mercenary #1 swoops in, tries to grab Grace so they can get the hell out of there-- But before he can get a hand on her--

MAGHRA #1 gets a hold of him. Mercenary #1 is toast.

Maghra #2 scores a GLANCING BLOW on Shiro, and it almost knocks him clear off his feet...

Mercenary #2 steps in-- Tries to attack as Maghra #2 is focused on Shiro-- But he's not fast enough, and MERCENARY #2 IS SWATTED LIKE A RAGDOLL off into the trees...

Just Garrick and Shiro now, Grace between them, as they go back to back, trying to defend her against the circling Maghras... It doesn't look good for any of them.

SHIRO

Go.

GARRICK

I'm not leaving her--

SHIRO

I'm not asking you to.

It clicks for Garrick. He looks back at Shiro from the corner of his eye... Is he saying what Garrick thinks?

SHIRO (CONT'D)

I'll distract them.

GRACE

You'll die...

Garrick eyes him suspiciously-- Some kind of trick? Shiro answers that definitively, by-- CHARGING HEADLONG INTO THE TWO MAGHRAS. A whirlwind of sword attacks-- Maghra swipes-- It's chaos.

Garrick grabs Grace, and pulls her up onto his horse. As they turn to go, Grace watches from a distance as Shiro gets hammered by the Maghras. A look on her face-- Admiration? Regret? He just gave his own life to save her and Garrick...

This as Garrick SPURS HIS HORSE... And as the two of them ride off into the distance, we DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. IMPERIAL PALACE - DAY

Dawn. The city is quiet and still. Grace and Garrick dismount from their horse. An eerie silence in the courtyard.

INT. TOWER CORRIDOR - DAY

Garrick helps Grace along, but as they emerge from the stair, they see--

SOLDIERS lining the corridor. They all stare at Grace, silently. By the Apartment door, Yanta Mho's SEAT IS EMPTY. The cat, apparently, is out of the bag...

INT. ROYAL APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Grace and Garrick enter. The room is packed. Elisabeth, in tears, sitting by Dorian's bedside. Mara, sitting beside her, consoling. Most of the Council. THREE PHYSICIANS, tending to a still-unconscious Dorian. Yanta Mho, sitting at the foot of the Emperor's sickbed like a dog mourning its owner. And then Grace notes--

Cyril, standing off to the side, a PAIR OF SOLDIERS with him; it appears he was just giving them orders... But now, he's giving Grace a nasty glare. A tense beat-- no one is quite sure what to say... Grace starts towards her father's bed.

GRACE

Clear the room, please.

CYRIL

What do you think you're doing?

GRACE

I have the antidote he needs.

(to the Physicians)

You may stay, I'll need your help.

CYRIL

Antidote--? You have committed the most serious of crimes, young lady--

GRACE

You should know, I can't stand it when you call me that.

As Grace talks, she gives the NIGHTWEED to the physicians--

GRACE (CONT'D)

Do you know what to do with this?

A physician takes it. But then looks to Cyril-- Doesn't know who he should be taking orders from. Grace clocks it-- She knows full well what's going on here. To everyone else--

GRACE (CONT'D)

I said, clear the room!

CYRIL

You are in no position to give orders-- I am in charge here!

GRACE

(re: Dorian)

When he wakes up, which of you wants to explain to him why you defied me?

Beat. That did it. People start filing out. All except Elisabeth, Mara, the doctors, Cyril, Yanta Mho, and Garrick. Grace wins this round.

CYRIL

And if he does not wake up... I will see to it you are charged with treason before you ever sit a day on the throne.

GRACE

Go to hell.
(to the physicians)
Do it. Now.

The physicians set to work grinding up the nightweed. Everyone watches nervously.

Elisabeth approaches Grace, her eyes red from crying. A look of unbearable guilt on her face.

GRACE (CONT'D)

(through gritted teeth)
You let them in...?

Elisabeth doesn't know what to say. But before she can reply--

YANTA MHO

I let them in.

He steps in behind Elisabeth. Grace glares at him. Elisabeth caught in the middle. Grace looks to her sister, sensing it's bullshit. Wanting her to tell the truth. But Elisabeth just stares back. Can't do it...

Grace looks back to Yanta Mho. If he's taking the rap for this, then he's taking the rap for this...

GRACE

We'll be discussing this later.

Grace then steps away, moves back to Dorian.

Elisabeth turns to Yanta Mho-- Why? A steely, unreadable look, before--

YANTA MHO

You're not a child. You shouldn't be talked to like one.

And he steps away. Off Elisabeth, not quite sure what to make of this new turn in her relationship with Yanta Mho...

ON THE PHYSICIAN, as he pours the nightweed solution into Dorian's mouth. Grace sits by the bedside, watching. Elisabeth joins her. The medicine goes down Dorian's throat... And then... Nothing.

Agonizing silence. No response from Dorian at all. The moment hangs... Heads droop around the room. Eyes close. Subjects prepare to lose a king. Daughters prepare to lose their dad...

Grace moves to her father. Gets close to him. Takes his face in her hands...

GRACE

Don't you leave me, father. Don't you dare do it. Don't you dare...

Mara steps forward. Puts an arm around Grace to console her. A beat, as Grace weeps. But then, refusing to give up-- Grace pushes Mara away-- Gets in Dorian's face--

GRACE (CONT'D)

Wake up!

AND SHE SLAPS HIM. Around the room, no one can watch Grace unravel like this. And just as they're sure this has just become a wake--

A ROYAL GASP sucks the air out of the room. Labored... But deep... DORIAN LIVES.

Grace collapses into tears. The physicians move her out of the way to tend to him. A collective sigh of relief like nobody's business. And off Grace and her sister, holding each other tightly... DISSOLVE TO:

LATER. Dorian is propped up in bed. Haggard. Hoarse. But alive. AN ATTENDANT and a PHYSICIAN tend to him, as Grace sits by his bedside.

GRACE (CONT'D)

At first, I simply didn't want your enemies to know you were weakened.
(MORE)

GRACE (CONT'D)

Then, when I discovered you had been poisoned, I didn't know who to trust. I knew the only way to be sure was to get you the antidote myself.

(then)

I lied to keep you safe. And then I lied to save you. I do not deny it.

Dorian considers her a long moment.

DORIAN

Cyril...

CYRIL

Yes, Your Highness.

DORIAN

When I'm well, you and I need to discuss what it is that constitutes the definition of treason. I'm not sure you and I are currently of the same mind.

Cyril nods, embarrassed. Dorian takes Grace's hand.

DORIAN (CONT'D)

Thank you.

Grace smiles. But before she lets go of Dorian's hand, Grace turns to the Attendants and Physicians around the bed.

GRACE

May we have a moment please?

Dorian waves them away. Grace begins helping Dorian up from bed, laying out fresh clothes, etc. But while she's tending to him, she leans forward. Speaks very quietly so as not to be overheard--

GRACE (CONT'D)

I have reason to believe it was not the rebels that poisoned you.

Dorian looks up at her. An eyebrow raised.

GRACE (CONT'D)

I have reason to believe someone close to you is responsible...

Dorian looks out at the room. Cyril. Yanta Mho. Fouray. Mara. Goff. The other advisors. His youngest daughter...

Dorian takes it in evenly, showing nothing. As he does, Grace is absently helping him remove his shirt...

DORIAN

Well that is something we'll have to get to the bottom of, I'd think.

Grace nods. But then, she sees something that makes her go white as a sheet. A SCAR, on Dorian's chest. FLASH TO--

THE IMAGE WE SAW EARLIER-- SHIRO SLASHING DORIAN years ago--

BACK TO GRACE. Dorian clocks the look on her face.

DORIAN (CONT'D)

Is something wrong?

GRACE

No... I've just never noticed...

The scar...

(then)

Can I ask where you received it?

ON DORIAN. Hesitates a beat. Then smiles, plays it smooth--

DORIAN

A lifetime of fighting, dear. They all run together.

Dorian then waves the Attendants and Physician back over. Grace backs away, the world shifting beneath her feet...

Dorian is helped up out of bed.

DORIAN (CONT'D)

Now... These rebels in the swamps.

I think perhaps it's time to deal

with them once and for all.

Abducting my daughter is something

I simply will not permit to stand.

(then)

General Goff will enter the swamps

and remove the rebel presence

entirely. Fortunately, we now have

someone who's seen this base of

theirs, and can locate it...

Dorian turns to Grace. Her head spinning. Trying not to let it show.

GRACE

I'm sorry... I was blindfolded

after they captured me...

He considers her. We (and she) suspects he knows she's lying. But he lets it go... For the moment...

DORIAN

Unfortunate. But nothing that can't be overcome.

(then)

Now, if you'll excuse me... I'd like some air.

Advisors exit. Dorian and Yanta Mho walk out towards the balcony. As they do, Cyril passes by Grace. They share an icy look. Cyril then follows Dorian out. On Grace. Lost...

GARRICK

Hey... Are you alright?

GRACE

(forced smile)

Yes. Of course. I just need a minute to let it all settle in...

(re: Dorian, et al.)

You should join them, I'll be right behind you.

Garrick goes to leave. But there's something bothering him, something he can't quite swallow...

GARRICK

When I take a prisoner, especially one of value, the first thing I do is restrain them. For their safety. For mine. If for no other reason than that it reminds us both of our roles at every turn.

(then)

In the swamp, when I found you... You were unbound...

On Grace. Unreadable. A beat, before Garrick shakes it off--

GARRICK (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, I'm sure it's nothing.

(then)

You're sure you're alright?

Grace nods. Garrick lingers a moment, before following Dorian's entourage out onto the balcony. And off Grace, her world turning upside down...

EXT. REBEL VILLAGE - DAY

The commons. Ehren sits by a fire along with Toad. Ehren seems concerned. Distressed.

EHREN

Two days. Still no sign of him.
(beat)
You think he's alright?

Toad shrugs. Grunts a response.

EHREN (CONT'D)

You don't know, or you don't care?

Toad just looks back at him. Isn't it obvious? But before Ehren can respond, he notices--

A COMMOTION by the treeline at the edge of camp. A handful of people congregating... And then--

SHIRO EMERGES from the trees, on horseback. And he looks like he's taken a couple of trips through a meat grinder. Bloody. Battered. But alive.

He dismounts from the horse, and almost collapses. Ehren rushes over to him, as the villagers help Shiro sit up against the bough of a tree...

SHIRO

You don't pay me enough for this.

Ehren smiles.

EHREN

The Princess?

SHIRO

(shakes his head)
Rescue party came for her. The rest... Is a long story.

Ehren takes that in. The wheels in his head turning.

EHREN

Without Venda, it's just a matter of time before this all falls apart. And she might be the only chip in the Empire they'd trade him for.

SHIRO

Did you not hear me? She's back inside the palace by now...

EHREN

She was lured out of the palace once. Maybe she can be lured again.

SHIRO

(beat)
You definitely don't pay me enough
for that.

Ehren gives Shiro a welcome-home pat on the shoulder.

EHREN

Start coming up with a plan.
You're going to get her back.

And Ehren exits. Shiro sighs. No rest for the weary.

A beat, as villagers come by, offering O.S. support, welcomes, thanks. Shiro waves politely. As the crowd clears, he discovers something lodged in his sleeve... He pulls it out-- GRACE'S BRACELET. He considers it. The faintest hint of a smile. Intrigued... The moment is broken, as another voice from O.S. gets his attention--

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

My Lord...

Shiro smiles a little--

SHIRO

Hasn't been my lord for a good long
time, lady...

He opens his eyes, and sees-- **THE OLD WOMAN.**

OLD WOMAN

I can help you, my Lord.

And off Shiro, wondering who this woman is, we SMASH TO:

EXT. MISTY FIELD - DAY

GRACE'S FACE. The shot we opened on. WIDEN, to see--

The fields from her dream. But the mist is gone. The bridge is clear... Grace crosses it. And sees ahead--

SHIRO, approaching from the other side. Cleaned up. The shining warrior from the flashbacks.

WISE WOMAN (V.O.)

You share a past, you and he. And
a future...

Shiro and Grace reach each other at the apex of the bridge. A few feet apart. Eyes locked, unable to look away. Innocent. Curious. Fixed.

WISE WOMAN (O.S.)

You share a destiny, my Angel...

To the side, we see the Wise Woman. Grace turns to her--

GRACE

Mother... Tell me what to do.

And we get that the Wise Woman, all along, has been **JOHANNA**.
Grace's mother.

WISE WOMAN/JOHANNA

Follow your heart, my Angel. It
will show you the way...

Grace turns back to Shiro. Their connection seemingly
growing by the moment.

GRACE

There's too much that separates us.

JOHANNA

No one said the path would be easy.

GRACE

There is too much to lose...

(then)

What could possibly be gained from
this?

Johanna considers Grace. Smiles, warmly...

JOHANNA

A new world.

Beat. Shiro extends a hand to her... But just as Grace is
about to reach out to take it-- She stops-- Sees--

A RIDER, on horseback, fast approaching... Something ominous
about it. Grace turns back to Johanna, but-- SHE'S GONE. And
as Shiro turns to see what Grace is reacting to, we see--

THE RIDER FLASHES PAST, SNATCHING GRACE OFF THE GROUND-- We
get a quick, but clear look at his face-- It's GARRICK...
And as Grace is ridden away-- And as Shiro, alone, recedes
into the distance... SMASH TO:

INT. GRACE'S CHAMBERS - NIGHT

Grace wakes. Garrick is asleep on the other side of the bed.
And off Grace, her world spinning, we SMASH TO BLACK.

END OF PILOT

*