

THE WOMAN KING

by

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BLACK SCREEN

A text crawl sets the stage for an epic tale to unfold.

## WEST AFRICA 1823

The African Kingdom of Dahomey is at a crossroads. A new king, Ghezo, has taken power, just as his enemy, the powerful Oyo Empire, begins to kidnap and sell his people to the European slave ships. The Oyo army is large and powerful, but the young king has his own fearsome weapon: an elite force of female soldiers, the Agojie, led by a general, Nanisca. Now, they are all that stand between the Oyo and their annihilation...

1 INT. HUT - NIGHT

1

A TEENAGE GIRL. Her sweet face frozen with fear. This is FUMBE.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN, crammed into the small hut, some with haunted looks, clothing bloody and torn. Fumbe turns to a WOUNDED WOMAN, shivering, her thin cloth garment wet with fresh blood. Her halting breaths whisper --

FUMBE

Mother...

Her mother can barely open her eyes.

MOTHER

Fumbe. When the men come, do not look at them...

Fumbe stares, terrified, at the hut's entrance, covered with a thin fabric curtain. Beyond it, firelight flickers. Men are heard, talking, laughing...

2 EXT. HUT - SAME TIME

2

SIX MEN sit around a small fire, drinking, and oiling their weapons; knives, hatchets, machetes. Behind them, a small village, maybe thirty huts, perch like sitting ducks on the African plain.

ONE OF THE MEN hears something. His head whips to look. He gestures for silence and stands, hand gripping his machete. The other men peer out at the GRASSLANDS...

The bright full moon shines down. The grasslands stretch off in every direction. They seem to be waving in the breeze. An IMPALA leaps up from the grass, spooked, disappears into the darkness.

The men make fun of their skittish comrade. Return to their drinking and laughter.

A BIRD CALL... ON THE MEN, hearing this... exchanging glances and then... AGOJIE TROOPS RISE FROM THE GRASS. THIRTY soldiers, ALL WOMEN. And at the forefront, NANISCA. A General, eyes steely, her CHISELED body SCARRED from endless battles. She wears a necklace of shark's teeth, jagged and sharp.

Standing beside her, her right hand, AMENZA, long and lithe, taut with adrenaline. To her left, IZOGIE, a young lieutenant, with the swagger of an elite athlete, her eyes unblinking.

The Guard looks at his compatriots -- they are in deep shit.

NANISCA WHIPS UP HER MACHETE! The female soldiers start screaming, undulating their voices in a terrifying battle cry... *Eh-le-leh-m'elele!* THEY CHARGE!

Nanisca, Amenza and Izogie quickly overwhelm the Guards, swinging their machetes with more skill, more speed.

IN THE MAHI VILLAGE, MEN, half dressed, rush out of their huts with axes and picks, to find they are overrun by the Agojie, tearing down doors and walls, routing the occupants. These women soldiers have no fear, dispatching challengers, no matter their size. Ferocious, unrelenting, they CUT DOWN this one, slice that one. The VILLAGE WOMEN huddle in terror, but are not touched by the Agojie.

3 INT. PRISONER HUT - SAME TIME 3

Fumbe hears the fighting. The captive women are fearful...

4 EXT. ENEMY VILLAGE - SAME TIME 4

NANISCA grapples with a man. He is strong, BUT SHE AND HER SOLDIERS OIL THEIR SKIN FOR BATTLE. Nanisca's arms and legs are glowing, slick, he cannot hold her. She spins away, gets behind him, holds her machete to his neck.

NANISCA  
You challenge the King of Dahomey?

VILLAGE LEADER  
No! We are farmers, we did nothing!

NANISCA  
Where have you taken our people?

VILLAGE LEADER  
We took nothing!

AMENZA  
(calling Nanisca by her  
title of General)  
*Miganon!*

Amenza yanks down the fabric door of the prisoner hut. THE DAHOMEY CAPTIVES stare back in fear, including Fumbe, holding her mother...

Nanisca's eyes grow cold. She turns back to the village leader and SLITS HIS THROAT, dropping him to the ground.

5 EXT. ENEMY VILLAGE - DAWN

5

Smoke from dying fires drifts over the grasslands. Nanisca, blood smeared on her battle gear, walks with Amenza through the battered village, post-battle. She spots a discarded arc of metal on the ground, A CRUDE HORSESHOE which she hooks and raises with her machete, showing Amenza.

NANISCA  
Horses. That can only be Oyo  
soldiers.

She frowns, looking out at the casualties... her warriors and others.

HER POV: An Agojie warrior, TARA, kneels at the dead body of one of her comrades. She takes a tiny metal charm from a small leather pouch attached to her belt. She lays the charm on the dead warrior's forehead.

Nearby, the girl, Fumbe, hangs over her dead mother, crying. A shadow falls over her. NANISCA stands there, weary, fierce.

NANISCA (CONT'D)  
Who is she?

FUMBE  
My mother.

NANISCA

We will take you back to your  
village. Perhaps your father...

FUMBE

They killed him. And my brothers.  
They killed them all.

Nanisca glowers. The low sun, red in the smoke, rises behind her. She takes in the sight of the rescued Dahomey women, brutalized by their captors, their eyes haunted and empty.

Izogie walks over to Nanisca and Amenza.

IZOGIE

Miganon. The prisoners are ready to  
march.

Nanisca glares at the three surviving Guards, bloodied, their hands tied with rope. Behind them, MAHI MEN AND WOMEN, now captives of the Agojie.

NANISCA's face is cold, practical, eyes falling across the dead Agojie. To Amenza and Izogie --

NANISCA

Bring me stronger warriors.

6 EXT. FARMHOUSE - EARLY MORNING

6

Out of a mud house comes a young woman, NAWI -- 19. Small, skinny, toughened by a life of neglect. Her fingers are working, braiding her own hair. She pauses in the shadows, sitting on a small stool to finish braiding before she performs a long list of chores:

AT A WELL... she hoists a heavy bucket of water...

She piles a cord of wood from a larger stack. Wraps it in a blanket. Lifts it ONTO HER BACK. Walks back to the house with the heavy load. There is no joy in her movements, muscle memory from years of hardship.

She hefts a long stick in her hand, throws it up into a tree, knocking its high-hanging fruit to the ground. Gathers it...

Takes meat from bread fruit, feeds the goats.

She tosses corn to the chickens, enclosed in a pen...

7 INT. FARMHOUSE - SHORT TIME LATER 7

In the cooking area, Nawi lights the stove fire. Boils the water. Cooks porridge from the seeds. Corrals two children, a girl and a boy -- LIDA AND BOTHI.

7A EXT. FARMHOUSE - SHORT TIME LATER 7A

Nawi feeds the children breakfast. A plump, lumbering woman walks out from the farmhouse; the children call her "Mama." This is YDANDE.

The children embrace her, loving her girth. She pushes a large empty basket into Nawi's hands, regarding her coldly.

YDANDE

Go to the market, Nawi.

8 EXT. CITY OF ABOMEY - LATE MORNING 8

The Dahomey capital. A thriving CITY, with broad dirt avenues and mud-walled buildings, humming with various industry: BLACKSMITHS, all men, pound molten metal. An open-air REFINERY -- women boiling nuts to make palm oil. Large weaving LOOMS employ men producing fabrics; there's a POTTERY STUDIO, a BATHHOUSE, a BROTHEL...

9 EXT. CITY OF ABOMEY - OPEN MARKET - SAME TIME 9

Merchants sell vegetables, oils, cloth, chickens, baskets, metal statues and fetishes, beads, dolls...

NAWI, shopping with her friend, DAYO, softer than she. As they pay a merchant with the local currency, cowrie shells, a SHOPKEEPER calls out --

SHOPKEEPER

Nawi, tell your mother to see me  
for the dress!

NAWI

What dress?

SHOPKEEPER

Your wedding dress! I will make you  
beautiful. Tell her!

Nawi frowns, as Dayo gives her a wide-eyed smile.

DAYO

They have made you another match?

NAWI

I don't know what she's talking  
about...

Then they hear THE SONOROUS CALL OF A CONCH SHELL. Nawi  
brightens for the first time.

NAWI (CONT'D)

They're coming!

She grabs Dayo's hand and leads her in a run.

10 EXT. BOULEVARD IN FRONT OF THE PALACE - SHORT TIME LATER 10

Citizens of Abomey gather, CHEERING, SINGING, across from the  
Abomey palace, which is surrounded by a HIGH WALL, stretching  
the length of the town. The wall is topped with forbidding  
HORNS and SKULLS, grimacing at all who enter.

Nawi and Dayo are in the front, watching the freed Dahomey  
women returning from their fight. Relatives cry with joy and  
RUN INTO THE ROAD, hugging their mothers and daughters who  
have been returned. One of the female Mahi captives, ODE,  
bound behind them, watches.

ON FUMBE...alone, in the midst of the tearful reunions. There  
is no family for her.

Low, gonging BELLS ring out. A group of EUNUCHS stand at the  
gates, solemn, tolling rustic hand bells, calling...

EUNUCHS

*Ago! Ago!*

Nawi cranes her neck to see, but Dayo hits her arm... all  
around them, people LOOK DOWN, averting their eyes. A MOTHER  
tugs at her CURIOUS CHILD...

CURIOUS CHILD

I want to see.

MOTHER

(whispers --)

The King does not allow us to look  
upon the Agojie.

The AGOJIE TROOPS march toward the towering, wooden gates of  
the palace. The women have majesty and swagger, their weapons  
clang and swing from their hips. Their skin shines. NAWI  
LIFTS HER EYES to get one glance at them, fascinated by their  
confidence, their power.

Nanisca and Amenza walk together. Nanisca's face is dark, pensive. Amenza tries to cheer her.

AMENZA

Nanisca, it is a victory, they cheer for you.

NANISCA

They do not know an evil is coming.

AMENZA

They know you will protect them.

Amenza gestures at the refugees. Nanisca sees A MOTHER REUNITED WITH HER BABY, DAUGHTERS WITH THEIR FATHERS, WIVES WITH THEIR HUSBANDS, holding them, weeping.

Some kind of determination comes into her face. As she passes through the open gates of the palace, she turns to the HEAD EUNUCH, TANONU, bald, in feminine make-up and a purple robe.

NANISCA

I wish to speak to the King.

TANONU

He is only seeing wives today.

NANISCA

Tell him. I will wait.

11 EXT. FARM ROADS OUTSIDE ABOMEY - DAY

11

Nawi and Dayo wander home, carrying their full baskets.

NAWI

What do you think it's like? In the palace?

DAYO

All the King's wives wear opals and rubies, and dresses of silk from the foreign ships. They drink from golden cups as delicate as a leaf.

NAWI

Not the Agojie. They drink from the skulls of the men they have killed.

DAYO

No...

Nawi grabs up a broken branch, brandishes it like a machete. Slices the top off of a tall TERMITE MOUND. Termites scatter.

NAWI  
 (morbid fun --)  
 Yes. They cut off their heads and  
 melt off the skin in boiling hot  
 cauldrons. They make necklaces out  
 of their teeth.

Dayo makes a face. Nawi laughs. They reach Nawi's farm. The  
 children run to greet her.

CHILDREN  
 Nawi! Come see! Nawi!

LIDA  
 We have a visitor! A rich man from  
 Cana!

Dayo looks at Nawi, whispers --

DAYO  
 Maybe he is handsome.

Nawi's father, MORU, rushes to her. Eager.

MORU  
 Where have you been? You are late!

NAWI  
 Mother didn't tell me...

He takes her basket...

12 EXT. FARMHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

12

Moru brings Nawi to an outdoor area with a table, drinks  
 poured -- Ydande fawns over the SUITOR, his back to us. Nawi  
 sees the man, watches him turn... HER FACE FALLS. He is in  
 his 50's, an old man in her world. She presses down her  
 revulsion as he comes toward her, in his cloth caftan and  
 cowrie-strand necklaces, signifying wealth.

MORU  
 This is Master Abade. His wife has  
 died. He seeks a new bride who is  
 strong enough to bear him new  
 children.  
 (to Abade)  
 As you can see, she is healthy.

Abade walks around Nawi, examining her physique. He lifts her  
 arm, coldly judging.

ABADE

Skinny.

MORU

If she is not with child by the rains, bring her back.

Abade notices another flaw, a bumpy white SCAR on the flesh of her back upper arm. Thumbs it.

ABADE

What is this?

MORU

She was an active child.

ABADE

A disobedient child?

There's a certain relish in the way he says this.

ABADE (CONT'D)

Leave us alone for a moment.

Moru escorts Ydande away, into the house, leaving Nawi alone. She swallows, fearful. Abade steps closer.

ABADE (CONT'D)

I own three fields of palm trees.  
You will work.

She doesn't answer.

ABADE (CONT'D)

You do not talk to your husband?

He SLAPS her across the face. Nawi, shocked, YELPS in pain.

ABADE (CONT'D)

In my house you will learn to obey.

He GRABS HER ARM. She SHOVES HIM, a reflex action. He SHOUTS, falling back into the table, knocking things over. A pitcher of juice spills on his caftan. Her eyes widen...

Moru and Ydande rush out from the house, shocked by the scene. Moru quickly goes to Abade, who slaps Moru's hand away as he rises, GLARING.

ABADE (CONT'D)

The whispers were right, this girl is worthless. I will let it be known. No one will pay for this wife.

He leaves the yard. Moru turns to Nawi, fury in his eyes.

13

EXT. ABOMEY STREETS - SHORT TIME LATER

13

Moru DRAGS NAWI, his hand gripping her arm. The children run after him, crying.

LIDA

No, Papa! She's sorry, Papa!

Ydande, breathless, hastens after them, realizing where Moru is going...

They are at THE PALACE WALLS. Moru marches up to the WOODEN GATES, Nawi in his grasp. Pounds on it. Calls --

MORU

I wish to give my daughter to the King!

THE GATES OPEN and an Agojie, IZOGIE, who we saw at the rescue, looks down at Nawi.

IZOGIE

What is she good for?

MORU

A soldier, a slave. I do not care. She brings shame on our family! No husband will have her!

NAWI

I will not marry an old man who beats me!

Izogie raises a brow. Maybe they can use this girl.

MORU

Go to war then. You will understand what pain is.

Nawi steals a look at Izogie then looks down... remembering the rule that they must not look at the Agojie. Izogie sees this gesture of respect. She opens the door, holding it...

IZOGIE

Enter.

Nawi looks at Ydande and Moru, hurt in her eyes. She turns, and walks inside. THE GATES CLOSE...

14 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

14

Nawi lifts her eyes, looks around, her heart racing.

IZOGIE

Come.

Nawi follows. She is agog at everything around her, the life of the mysterious palace she has always wondered about.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

Close your mouth. You look like a fish.

Nawi claps her mouth shut as they walk through THE VAST space.

In one area, A LARGE GROUP OF AGOJIE WOMEN practice fighting with machetes led by TARA. The heavy weapons ring out with each hit. Another LARGE GROUP in a drill; lunging, spinning, shouting with spears, lead by a young, muscular soldier named ESI. And ANOTHER GROUP working on their hand-to-hand combat, led by a strong Agojie named CINDRA.

At the opposite end of the grounds, a LARGE GROUP OF MALE SOLDIERS move through grappling drills.

Further along, LARGE WOODEN VATS... fires lit beneath them. Older women use long wooden paddles to stir as STEAM RISES.

NAWI

What's in there?

IZOGIE

Indigo dye.

NAWI

Oh.

The women lift out pantaloons.

IZOGIE

What did you think it was?

NAWI

...Heads.

IZOGIE

(scoffing)

No.

They walk on.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

Those are the heads.

She points to a low-burning fire, sending black smoke upward to three skulls, impaled on tall bamboo poles.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

The men who raided our village.  
They disrespect King Ghezo. They  
pay a steep price.

Nawi glances at a group of MEN, in robes, in discussion, in front of the group of MALE MAHI CAPTIVES, still bound. They drop their eyes as they pass.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

The rest will be sold. In Ouidah.

A long wall of pillars and dried PALM FRONDS, woven together, separates the private quarters from the public space, stretching across the end of the parade ground.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

No men but the eunuchs are allowed  
in the palace after dark. Beyond  
this wall... this is a palace of  
women.

Nawi can see people moving, the music of WOMEN'S VOICES.  
Izogie leads them into...

15 EXT. PALACE - INNER COURTYARD - CONTINUOUS 15

It is different here, more inviting. A small marketplace where WOMEN are cooking food -- balls of akasa and fried yam cakes. Selling handicrafts. There are women potters, others sew, others string cowrie shells. There are CHILDREN, giggling, chasing each other with abandon...

Izogie moves through another pass way. Nawi follows...

16 INT. PALACE - AGOJIE BARRACKS - CONTINUOUS 16

A low, open building, with a large grassy courtyard at its center. The Agojies' private quarters. Some are here, relaxing, braiding hair, tending to wounds. Nawi sees the bond of their sisterhood.

Izogie points to an area of mats, lined up close together. A GROUP OF THIRTY WOMEN are there -- among them, Dahomey rescues like Fumbe, and Mahi captives like Ode from the village.

IZOGIE

Trainees sleep there. Find yourself  
a space.

Izogie calls out to the group --

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

Bathe yourselves. Add your clothes  
to the fire. You will no longer  
need them.

Izogie walks away. Nawi looks around, still anxious.

17

INT. PALACE - KING'S PRIVATE CHAMBERS - SAME TIME

17

A LINE OF WOMEN sit in an assortment of gilt European chairs. They are different ages, all beautiful, and adorned in colorful jewelry, coral and cowries weaved into their hair.

At the end of this line of chairs, we find NANISCA, standing, still in her blood-smearred clothing.

KING GHEZO -- 28, enters the room, accompanied by Tanonu. Ghezo is handsome, youthful, at the beginning of his reign. He wears a long robe embroidered with crocodiles. The only ornament, a small gold chain of European manufacture. He walks as if the earth were honored by its burden.

All the women get on their knees and touch their heads to the ground. Nanisca, too. From her vantage point on the ground, she sees the KING'S FEET, the only feet we have yet seen wearing SANDALS, a royal affectation. He stops before her.

GHEZO

Nanisca. Come with me.

The other women's eyes follow them out. A beautiful wife, SHANTE, speaks to Tanonu.

SHANTE

Why does he favor her? She shows no  
respect. Comes here filthy...

TANONU

She fought for him during the coup.  
Put him on the throne. What did you  
do? Locked yourself in a cupboard.

Shante watches Nanisca disappear down the hall, jealous.

18 INT. PALACE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

18

Nanisca falls in step with the young king.

GHEZO

Why do you wait with the wives?

NANISCA

I need to speak to you before the council convenes.

(then --)

The Mahi tribe did not raid our village alone. They had help.

(shows him the horseshoe)

From the Oyo.

He takes the horseshoe.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

They attack our people, in alliance with the Mahi. They have broken the treaty.

GHEZO

(angry)

It is not my treaty. My brother bowed to them. Paid them their blood money.

NANISCA

They are testing the new King.

GHEZO

So we will do as they do. Raid the Oyo villages, sell their people.

A subtle fury flickers on Nanisca's face.

NANISCA

And who does that help? The white traders, not us.

GHEZO

It shows them we are no longer afraid.

NANISCA

You know of the changes at our port in Ouidah. The English are gone. They will no longer trade in captives.

GHEZO

Empty words. Americans, Portuguese, Dutch, they will never stop the trade.

NANISCA

And this is why the Oyo wish to conquer us.

GHEZO

(disbelief)

Conquer us?

NANISCA

They test you, to see if we will fight back. And if we do not, they will mount a larger attack, perhaps even here, on our capital.

This hits Ghezo hard.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

We must end the Oyo, and end the trade. For all of us.

Ghezo reacts. This is a radical shift.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

I fought for you against your brother because I knew you cared for our people.

GHEZO

And now you counsel me to take them to war?

NANISCA

Some things are worth fighting for.

A moment between them...

19

INT. PALACE - THRONE ROOM - SHORT TIME LATER

19

The ministers notice that Nanisca and Ghezo have entered together. She takes her seat among Dahomey's ministers -- MEN AND WOMEN. Nanisca, called the Miganon (General) with her male counterpart, the MIGAN; an old male religious leader, AJAHE, and his counterpart, Nanisca's lieutenant Amenza; the male head of logistics for the palace, the MEU, the female head, the MEUNON, and so on.

Sitting just behind the King, is his favored wife, Shante, there to attend to him.

Ghezo takes his seat on an ornately carved wooden throne. The eunuchs try to serve him English tea in a cup and saucer, but he waves them off. He **TOSSES THE HORSESHOE**. It lands with a thud.

GHEZO

The Oyo have entered our lands.  
They have broken the peace. When  
they come for the tribute, we will  
not pay it.

The council reacts. The male general, the Migan, glances harshly at Nanisca -- what the hell has she said to him?

MIGAN

That would mean war.

GHEZO

We have been under the foot of the  
Oyo since before my father's time.  
Because we feared their might. But  
who are we as a people if we allow  
fear to control us?

MIGAN

My king, I agree. But we are not  
ready for such a war. They are a  
nation twice our size, with horses  
and more muskets. We need time to  
plan, and prepare our armies.

NANISCA

The Agojie are ready.

MIGAN

How many did you lose in this last  
battle? Against the lowly Mahi?

Nanisca sees Ghezo listening to him.

MEUNON

Dahomey has prospered in the peace,  
and the Oyo as well...

NANISCA

The slave trade is the reason we  
prosper. But at what price? It is a  
poison, slowly killing us. And the  
Europeans know it. They come to our  
lands for their human cargo.

MEUNON

They come to trade. We sell them  
what they want.

AMENZA

But why do we sell our captives?  
For muskets. To capture more  
people, to sell for more muskets.  
It is a circle with no end. A  
spiral, leading into darkness. This  
is not the way. Fa seeks light.

NANISCA

We have other things to sell. Gold.  
Palm oil. They need it for lamps,  
their cookfires, for their pulleys  
and machines. We can double our  
harvest. This is our advantage over  
the Oyo and their desert lands...

Shante scoffs at this.

SHANTE

She wants to make us a nation of  
peasants.

NANISCA

I want Dahomey to survive.

Shante lays her feminine, bejeweled hand on Ghezo's arm.

SHANTE

The Gods have brought us a new  
king. A King to be feared.  
(to Nanisca)  
No one fears a farmer.

MIGAN

She is right. And even if we could  
defeat the Oyo, there will be  
losses, and that leaves us  
vulnerable.

AMENZA

The ancestors will protect us. A  
defeat of the Oyo will please them.

MEU

We have already started to gather  
the tribute. Perhaps we pay, to buy  
us time.

Ghezo feels the pressure. Long beat, then --

GHEZO

I promise, it will be our last.  
(beat)

(MORE)

GHEZO (CONT'D)

As for the palm oil, show me,  
Nanisca. Show me how much you can  
produce. And we will see.

He leaves with Shante. The Migan turns to Nanisca in anger.

MIGAN

You speak in secret to the King?  
You seek to cut me out?

NANISCA

If the King respects me, it is  
because I have earned it.

Nanisca walks away.

20

EXT. ENEMY VILLAGE - DUSK

20

Across the grasses, thundering hoofs of THIRTY OYO WARRIORS  
arriving at the ruins of the Mahi village. Their leader, OBA  
ABUA, riding in the lead, pulls up his horse and HOLDS UP HIS  
ARM.

They come to a stop. Oba, in long red cloth robes and English  
boots, swings off his horse and strides into the near empty  
village. A protective scarf covers all but his piercing eyes.  
He is followed by his second-in-command, BOMA.

He comes to the corpse of an Agojie, uses his foot to kick  
her face-up. He turns to his assembled warriors, enraged.

OBA

Do you see this? Your comrades  
murdered! By women!

He turns to Boma.

OBA (CONT'D)

The Dahomey grow too bold under  
their new King.

BOMA

No more peace?

OBA

Peace is for the weak.

21

EXT. PALACE - AGOJIE COURTYARD - DUSK

21

THE AGOJIE eat a meal, sitting in small groups on the ground,  
their weapons piled against the walls.

The Recruits, including Fumbe, now dressed in a simple uniform, sit together. The MAHI CAPTIVES WHISPER to each other anxiously. One of them, ODE, is athletic, steely. Takes in their surroundings. Her eyes fall on...

Nawi, sitting alone, still in the clothes she arrived in. She's entranced by the Agojie, their weapons, the thick metal jewelry on their arms and wrists, the easy way they laugh and chat, Izogie and Tara among them.

She creeps over to the pile of spears, touches one spike.

ESI (O.C.)

Do not touch another soldier's  
weapon.

A young, muscular woman, ESI, glares at her. Nawi quickly pulls her hand away. Izogie walks up.

IZOGIE

Especially that one. It is cursed.  
Esi couldn't hit an elephant in a  
stampede.

She laughs. Esi grins back.

ESI

Turn your back and see how true my  
aim is.

She walks away. Izogie picks up her own machete, holds it out. Nawi touches it, it CUTS HER FINGER. Izogie smiles.

IZOGIE

Spent all my liberties walking the  
river till I found the perfect  
whetstone, shaped smooth, by a  
waterfall. Sharpens to a thorn.

Izogie sees Nawi staring at her FINGERNAILS. Izogie has sharpened them to points, like talons. She jabs two fingers forward...

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

Pop out their eyeballs, fight is  
over.

Izogie makes an eyeball sucking sound. Nawi grins.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

They are also useful in keeping the  
trainees in line.

Nawi's grin fades.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)  
Why are you not in uniform?

NAWI  
I let the others bathe first.

IZOGIE  
The first rule of training? Always  
obey Izogie.

Nawi nods. Doesn't move. Izogie looks at her. Taps her fingernails on her spear.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)  
I am Izogie.

Nawi gets it, quickly walks out.

22

INT. PALACE - BATHS - SHORT TIME LATER

22

Nawi moves down the stairs into the dimly lit underground cavern where natural springs create pools of water. A fire burns hot in a clay oven. She removes her dress. Puts it into the oven, watches it catch fire. She steps into one of the baths, feeling the heat of the water sink into her bones.

WATER AND MOVEMENT. Nawi is startled. ANOTHER WOMAN is there, at the far end. Through the steam, we recognize NANISCA. Nawi starts to get out...

NAWI  
I'm sorry...

NANISCA  
You may stay.

Nawi sinks back down in the water, modest. Nanisca cleans her arms, her head. She still wears the shark tooth necklace. Nawi takes in her taut physicality, her scars. Enamored.

NAWI  
Are you a soldier?

NANISCA  
(curt)  
What do you think?

A beat. Nawi begins to wash, too.

NANISCA (CONT'D)  
You are one of the captives we  
freed?

NAWI

No. My father brought me. As a gift to the King.

NANISCA

(disdainful --)

Is your father rich?

(before she answers --)

He must be. If he were poor he would have sold you to a rich husband.

NAWI

He tried. I don't want a husband. I want to be a soldier. An Agojie.

NANISCA

And what does that mean to you?

NAWI

It means you are admired. You are unafraid. You are somebody.

NANISCA

Some of those things are true.

(beat)

How old are you?

NAWI

I have nineteen years.

NANISCA

That is old for a recruit.

NAWI

I will work hard. Harder than anyone...

NANISCA

Many obstinate daughters are dumped at the palace. They usually fail.

Nawi's rebellious nature awakens. She eyes Nanisca.

NAWI

All our lives, they tell stories of the Agojie. That you have magic. But you look like a regular old woman to me.

NANISCA

Fighting is not magic. It is skill. We will see if you have any.

She gets out of the bath. Amused.

23

EXT. PALACE - AGOJIE COURTYARD - NIGHT

23

Torches light the area. DRUMS PLAY. Nawi, Fumbe, Ode and the other recruits watch as the AGOJIE sing and dance in a victory celebration. They see Izogie, Amenza, also TARA, from the opening battle, and CINDRA. The warriors dance in unison, the footwork kickass, perfectly matched as they move. Strong. Joyful. Izogie and Amenza lead, as two by two, they go to the center -- dance together, laughing, forehead to forehead.

Nawi watches, firelight illuminating her smile. This joy is a feeling so foreign to her. A DRUM HIT STOPS THE MUSIC.

Nawi notices the LEADER of the Agojie walking through the ranks, regal in her shark's tooth necklace and a breastplate made of hundreds of cowrie shells. Nawi realizes it is...

NANISCA, the woman Nawi was rude to in the baths. Nanisca turns, LOOKS AT NAWI as she passes. Nawi is mortified. Nanisca steps up to a raised platform. Amenza STAMPS A SPEAR.

AMENZA

*Gboje!*

The Agojie, in unison, turn toward her, hands behind their backs. Amenza calls out to the Recruits.

AMENZA (CONT'D)

I am Amenza. You come to the palace of Ghezo, the ninth monarch of the Dahomey people, descendants of the leopard, Agasu. Beloved of the twin gods, Mawu and his sister, Leesa.

Nanisca steps forward, looking out over the women, their faces in conflict, fearful of what awaits them.

NANISCA

You are called to join the Agojie.  
We claim victory, or we claim  
death.

The women react.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

Our scars are our pride. They tell  
our story. Of how we were stronger.  
Of how we survived.

ON NAWI... taking this in.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

We fight. For Dahomey, for our sisters. For our great king. You will be revered. You will be paid for your work. Your opinion will be heard. No tribe or kingdom in all of Africa shares this privilege. Women, toiling in the fields, nursing children, sleeping in their husband's beds, will know of your battles and sing your praise and wish they could be you.

ON NAWI -- these words affecting her.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

For this honor, we live out our lives in these palace walls. We will take no husband. We will bear no children.

(then --)

I offer you a choice. Any woman who does not wish to stay may leave. No harm will come to you.

The Recruits glance at each other. The Mahi captives look at Ode. She looks back. After a moment, a few start to walk out of the courtyard. Then a few more. They look back at her. Ode remains...

NANISCA looks at Nawi. Their EYES MEET, Nanisca expecting Nawi to walk away. NAWI plants her feet. Stands like the Agojie, hands behind her back, chest high. You couldn't pry her away.

Fumbe looks at the young women leaving, thinking... Then she sees Nawi... and decides to stay. Nanisca looks out over the remaining women.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

Show me you are worthy.

24

INT. PALACE - AGOJIE BARRACKS - LATE NIGHT

24

Nawi picks up a mat, looks around for a spot. She sees Ode making a space for herself, alone. She sees Fumbe sitting on her mat, weeping. Nawi lays her mat down next to her.

NAWI

What's your name?

FUMBE

Fumbe.

NAWI  
Why do you cry?

FUMBE  
I am not a soldier.

NAWI  
Then why did you stay?

FUMBE  
I have nowhere else to go.

Nawi sits down next to her.

NAWI  
So we are the same.

Ode has been listening. Nawi looks over.

NAWI (CONT'D)  
You are Mahi. Why did you stay?

ODE  
Here, I will be the hunter, not  
prey.

Nawi lays down. The three girls stare up, wondering what lies  
in store...

25 EXT. ROAD OF REEDS - EARLY MORNING

25

A road carved through a sea of six foot tall reeds. The  
trainees, in their matching uniforms, RUN barefoot in the  
deep red dirt. Nawi sprints ahead, determined to be first,  
but burns herself out and starts to drag. Ode catches her  
first. Passes her. Then the rest. Nawi struggles to keep up.  
Izogie appears, running alongside.

IZOGIE  
Too slow! The Oyo will catch you!  
Hang you up by your feet to cut  
your throat!

Nawi tries to run faster. She THROWS UP.

26 EXT. DRY RIVERBED - DAY

26

The exhausted trainees are lined up, pulling sacks filled  
with heavy stones up a rocky incline. Nawi is dripping with  
sweat as she struggles to lift her sack. She notices they are  
monitored by the high brass, Nanisca and Amenza...

The trainees trudge forward, strain under the weight. Barefoot, hitting rocks and sharp twigs. Izogie confronts a tearful Ode, whose feet are bloody and cut.

IZOGIE

We are feared because we do not  
fear pain! The more you welcome it,  
the less you will feel.

Ode struggles back to her feet. Izogie shadows Nawi, who is losing ground.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

You move like a sloth!

She does a funny impression of a sloth in slow motion. Nawi grits her teeth. Uses her firewood trick. Shifts the bag onto her back like a backpack. She can run now, gaining speed...

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

Yes! Yes!

Nawi passes Ode, reaches the top! She smiles. But her smile fades as she sees FUMBE far behind, tears in her eyes, TRUDGING, one slow, painful step at a time.

27

EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - DAY

27

The trainees are given their ammo belts. They are excited, fastening them around their waists. Nanisca paces.

NANISCA

Today you receive your first  
weapon.

Each is given... A COIL OF ROPE. Nawi frowns. She holds it up, letting it fall limply.

LATER... They practice tying KNOTS. Nanisca comes along, pulling to see if they come undone. Fumbe's holds fast. Nanisca nods in approval and Fumbe flushes, pleased. Nanisca yanks Nawi's knot and it PULLS LOOSE.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

(already walking away)  
Again.

NAWI

(under her breath --)  
A rope is not a weapon.

Nanisca turns.

NANISCA

You wish for a different weapon?

Nawi reacts -- "shit." Nanisca takes her own machete out of her belt. Hands it to Nawi. Gestures to the TWIG DUMMIES set up in a row twenty feet away.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

Go. Attack the soldier. Take his head.

Nawi is embarrassed. Everyone is watching her. The machete is much heavier than she realized. She has to back down.

NAWI

I apologize...

NANISCA

Do not apologize. Do it.

Nawi meets Nanisca's eyes. Then she draws herself tall, raises the machete and rushes at the dummy, swinging at its neck with a HUGE SWIPE. The blade gets STUCK... barely one inch deep into the neck.

She hears LAUGHTER from the assembled group. Nawi tries to free the machete. She cannot. NANISCA comes forward and easily frees her machete. Then, she step-turns and with little effort SLICES OFF THE HEAD. It rolls on the ground. She looks at Nawi.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

I would work on that rope.

She walks away. Nawi almost growls as she ties the shit out of the damned rope.

33

EXT. PALACE - INNER COURTYARD - NIGHT

33

The trainees wait in line for their rations. Ode takes hers and moves to eat alone. Nawi takes hers as Izogie approaches.

IZOGIE

Hey, Tse-tse.

NAWI

Who is Tse-tse?

IZOGIE

You. Little fly, always buzzing around, full-speed. But you don't know where you're going!

(MORE)

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

We need smart warriors. The dumb ones die quickly.

NAWI

I am not dumb.

IZOGIE

Then show me. You have to train different. The drills are a game. It is play. Like when you were a child...

NAWI

I was never allowed to play. I was made to work.

IZOGIE

I was born in a brothel. When I had fourteen years, my mother put a sign out to sell my virginity.

Izogie looks at her. There's a coolness, a distance.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

The first man came, and I cried for my mother. But she didn't come. The second man came, and complained of my tears. My mother whipped me. The third man came and I burned him with an ember I plucked from the fire with my bare hand.

She shows Nawi a scar on her palm.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

Your father was cruel. As was my mother. It is enough to make you cry. But it is better to laugh, yes? You have a new family now.

As Nawi thinks, a Dahomey song begins under the images...

34

EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - DAY

34

Izogie smooths oil from a bowl onto her skin as she faces Nawi in a wrestling circle. Ode, Fumbe and the other trainees look on. Nawi tries to get a grip on Izogie, but can't, her head drops as she struggles with the taller woman.

IZOGIE

Eyes up!

Nawi looks at Izogie...

IZOGIE (CONT'D)  
Never look away.

Nawi's eyes bore into Izogie's and then... IZOGIE grins slightly, slips around her and FLIPS her to the ground. Nawi grows frustrated. Grabs one of the bowls of oil and POURS IT OVER HER HEAD, drenching herself. Izogie laughs as Nawi faces her, oil dripping down her face and chest. This time, Izogie is the one who cannot get a hold on Nawi's glistening limbs. Soon both are laughing...

35 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - DAY 35

With new MACHETES in hand, Nawi, Ode, Fumbe and the rest of the trainees stand behind Izogie. The trainees follow her movements as she slices through a machete drill. Nawi is focused, but the machete is unwieldy. Izogie comes to her.

IZOGIE  
Do not hold the sword. Be the  
sword.

Nawi flows with the machete, using strength from her thighs, her middle, to become the sword.

36 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - LATE NIGHT 36

The grounds are empty. Save for two women at the line of training dummies. Nanisca grips her machete, charges down the line in a dance of brutal efficiency as she spins, slices, stabs, cuts down dummy after dummy. Her athleticism, her intensity is a sight to behold. Izogie charges down the line, following Nanisca's rhythm, beat for vicious beat. In the shadows, Nawi watches, studies their relentless practice...

37 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - DAY 37

Drills. Esi leads the staff training. Spinning her spear with incredible skill and speed. The trainees dive to the ground, jump back up, runs forward to where the SPEARS stand, pitted into the dirt. They pick them up and HURL THEM FORWARD... Most of the spears fall to the ground, but Nawi's HITS the target...

38 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - DAY 38

The trainees fight in pairs as Izogie watches. Nawi fights with Ode. Nawi struggles to force Ode out of the circle, but Ode is strong.

She gets a grip on Nawi, is about to pull her out. Suddenly, Nawi uses Izogie's move to slip around her and SLAM her to the ground. Ode and Izogie are shocked...

39 EXT. SHOOTING RANGE IN THE RED DESERT - DAY 39

MALE SOLDIERS shoot at clay pot targets against the blood red mountains of red earth. A LARGE MOUND OF GUN POWDER sits atop an open wagon.

The female trainees, in a line, load and fire rusty old muskets. A MALE SOLDIER guides them. It's a lengthy set of steps: tear open a small fabric pouch of gun powder with their teeth, pour powder in the mizzen. Stuff a musket ball down the shaft with a wand. Raise it to their shoulders. FIRE!

ON NAWI... THE KICK IS STRONG. It pushes her back into the arms of the male soldier guiding her. She laughs a little, surprised. There's a an undeniable moment of flirtation as he helps her regain her footing. Picks up the musket and puts it in her hands. He touches her hips and shows her how to find strength in her body as she fires the powerful weapon. NANISCA, watching the drill, sees this...

40 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - DAY 40

Two LARGE CROWDS of Agojie warriors and male soldiers face off. The energy is aggressive, boastful, vocal. They yell out competing chants:

MALE SOLDIERS

Men of Dahomey feel no pain! We  
take a bullet and shoot again!

AGOJIE WOMEN

Men of Dahomey run away! Agojie  
women stand and fight! We pluck out  
hearts! Show Ghezo's might!

In the middle of the warring factions, Izogie stands opposite a LARGE MALE SOLDIER. A short double edged spear separates them, THE BLADES BURIED INTO EACH OTHER'S SHOULDERS. They stare at each other, daring the other to break. Izogie stares blankly, the only sign of the excruciating pain is the wetness in her eyes. The Male Soldier grimaces but holds his ground.

NANISCA and the MIGAN stand together, watching their troops, each rooting for their fighter to win.

Nawi, Fumbe, Ode and the trainees look on in awe and excitement. And then, Izogie TAKES A STEP FORWARD, burying the blades even deeper. The Male Soldier stares back...then steps back in defeat. Izogie snatches the blade from her bleeding shoulder, pounds her chest with a PRIMAL YELL.

The Agojie go nuts. Even Nanisca applauds. Nawi, Fumbe, Ode and the trainees jump up and down, joining in the exuberant CHANT...

41 EXT. ROAD TO DAHOMEY - SUNSET 41

The trainees walk together, talking and laughing, starting to be a unit. Silhouetted against the sun, Nawi drapes an arm over Fumbe's shoulder...

NAWI

Show me how to tie the rope.

FUMBE

Never. It is the only thing I can do better than you.

42 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - LATE NIGHT 42

All is quiet. Everyone is asleep. Nawi leads Fumbe and other trainees SNEAKING OUT. Ode sees them. Nawi meets her eyes. She nods her head, "Come on." Ode hesitates, then follows. They dash across the grounds...

AT THE STAND OF DUMMIES, they pause. Nawi hands out little gunpowder sachets. Each trainee sets about coating the necks of the dummies with the gunpowder. They laugh quietly...

43 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - MORNING 43

Izogie and Tara are going to demonstrate the proper head-chopping technique to the trainees. WATCHING AT THE SIDE, Nawi, Fumbe and Ode share an excited glance.

Izogie and Tara run at the dummies. As their swords hit the necks sparking the gunpowder, THE HEADS EXPLODE off the bodies. Izogie and Tara stumble back. The trainees stifle their laughter. Nanisca peers at Nawi...

44 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - SHORT TIME LATER 44

Nawi, Fumbe, Ode and four other trainees stand before Nanisca. Izogie and Tara watch.

NANISCA

Which of you designed this trick?

None of the girls speak up.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

Then you will all be punished.

NAWI

I did it.

Her friends start to object.

FUMBE

We all did it --

NAWI

No. It was me.

(beat)

I apologize.

NANISCA

Once again.

Nanisca gestures to Fumbe, Ode and the others.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

Go back to the barracks.

They leave as fast as they can. Izogie and Tara follow. Nawi is alone now in front of the General.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

How did you make this... explosion?

NAWI

You don't need a gun to use  
gunpowder. You just need a spark...

NANISCA

But you like the guns. You enjoy  
practicing with the young men in  
the infantry? I see you flirting.

NAWI

This is not allowed?

NANISCA

You know it is not.

NAWI

The men who are soldiers have  
wives, children. But the Agojie  
cannot? It doesn't seem fair.

Nanisca is consistently surprised by Nawi.

NANISCA

Were you this arrogant with your family? No wonder they gave you away.

This cuts Nawi. She lashes back.

NAWI

I think it is you who are arrogant.

NANISCA

I am a General. I have earned it.  
(done with her)  
I should put you out --

NAWI

No, please...

NANISCA

I have watched soldiers die because they were not disciplined. Their easy life did not prepare them --

NAWI

I did not have an easy life!  
(tears form in her eyes)  
I want to be here. With my sisters.  
I want to fight for my King...

Nanisca doesn't do well with emotion.

NANISCA

Your tears mean nothing. To be a warrior, you must kill your tears.

Nawi's eyes burn with pride...she bites back her emotion. Nanisca gestures for her to leave. When Nawi is gone, Nanisca breathes deeply, sighing. It is hard to have "killed her tears" for an entire life.

45

EXT. PALACE - AGOJIE COURTYARD - NIGHT

45

The Agojie eat. Ode goes to sit near a group of Agojie including the fierce Tara, who blocks her from sitting.

TARA

You are a Mahi prisoner, and that is all you will ever be.

Wounded, Ode turns to go, but Amenza, who has overheard the exchange, steps in.

AMENZA

What did you say?

TARA

She should be my slave, not a warrior.

CINDRA

Dahomey women are the true Agojie.

AMENZA

I also came here a captive. Do you think yourself better than me?

TARA

(beat, then --)  
No Ajahi.

AMENZA

If you make it through the final test, you are one of us. No matter where you come from.

Tara walks away. Ode stares down. This has been hard for her.

AMENZA (CONT'D)

I was once enslaved. I served the Miganon. And now I sit at the King's council. You are what you believe you are.

Ode nods. She marches into the barracks.

46

INT. PALACE - AGOJIE BARRACKS - SAME TIME

46

NAWI sits on her mat, alone, when Ode comes and takes her bedding up, moving it to another place.

NAWI

Where are you going?

ODE

You are trouble, and I already have enough of that.

As Ode goes off, Nawi notices Izogie, pulling on her weapons belt. Attaches a knife. She sees Nawi.

IZOGIE

Eat up, Tse-tse. Nanisca favors the strong.

Nawi doesn't move.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)  
What is the first rule of training?

NAWI  
(beat, then --)  
Always obey Izogie.

She stands. Reluctantly. Izogie looks at her, then --

IZOGIE  
Come with me.

47 EXT. PALACE WALLS - SHORT TIME LATER

47

Izogie and Nawi exit a secretive door in the Agojie compound, taking them to the street. They walk toward the city lights of Abomey ahead. Izogie pulls a flask from her belt. Takes a drink. Holds it out to Nawi.

IZOGIE  
Drink.

NAWI  
What is it?

IZOGIE  
The only thing the white men bring worth having. They call it "whiskey."

Nawi tries it. Chokes. It tastes awful to her. Izogie laughs.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)  
There. We finally found a way to quiet you. Your tongue will get you kicked back to your village. Why do you challenge the Miganon?

NAWI  
(beat, then --)  
If I'm quiet, she won't see me.

IZOGIE  
Do you think she has time to think about you? She's thinking about... the world. She may one day be the *Kpojito*.

NAWI  
The Woman King? But we have not had one for so many years.

People in the street drop their eyes or turn away at the sight of Izogie.

IZOGIE

His brother did not honor it, but King Ghezo believes in tradition. In the twin Gods, Mawu and Leesa. Man and woman. Male soldiers and female. Ghezo will name a Woman King. For the Gods. And the people.

NAWI

Is that what Nanisca wants?

IZOGIE

I cannot say. But in the palace, she is a legend. She was captured as a young soldier. Given up for dead. But she returned, with the Oyo bastards *kofes* hanging from her belt.

Nawi takes this in.

50

INT. PALACE - NANISCA'S CHAMBERS - LATE NIGHT

50

Nanisca lies on her mat, in fitful sleep. She wakes up, shouting, covered in sweat. In a moment, AMENZA steps into her chamber. Nanisca pants, still breathless from the dream.

Amenza takes a European-style silver flask from her pocket, pours spirits into a cup -- mixes in herbs from a leather pouch around her waist.

NANISCA

Uch, Menza, you know I hate that drink...

AMENZA

The King drinks anything I give him.

NANISCA

The King is young. He brings that silly wife to the council.

AMENZA

Shante? She is ambitious. She wants to be the first among the King's women. Maybe even the Kpojito.

NANISCA

The Kpojito must have a vision.

Amenza sits on the bed with her.

AMENZA

Tell me the dream. It dispels its magic if you say the words.

Nanisca locks eyes with her for a long moment.

NANISCA

I am in the jungle. And something is out there, in the darkness... a beast, angry... I try to hide, but it finds me...

AMENZA

Perhaps the dream is a warning. Let us throw a chain.

Amenza picks up a cloth bag that rattles with palm nuts, clacking together...

NANISCA

Not the nuts...

AMENZA

Do not call them "nuts," they are sacred.

Amenza places a circular tray on the floor. The tray has carved symbols all around it, and is covered with white sand in the middle. She shakes ONE PALM NUT out of the bag and onto the sand -- draws a circle around it.

Nanisca picks up the cup of sleeping medicine and drinks it.

NANISCA

With any luck I'll be asleep on the third toss.

MINUTES LATER

THE TRAY now has sixteen palm nuts thrown, with circles around them to connect a CHAIN. Amenza points to a section.

AMENZA

You have enemies gathering.

NANISCA

I could have told you that.

AMENZA

I see fire. Fire and smoke...  
something or someone from your  
past...

Nanisca's hand suddenly shoots out and messes the board --  
the chain of circles disappears and the palm nuts roll.

AMENZA (CONT'D)

So impatient.

NANISCA

It's nonsense. And your medicine  
too. I'm not even tired.

AMENZA

Go to the altar. Leave gifts for  
the dead. If you do not respect the  
chain, respect your own dream.

51 EXT. PALACE - INNER COURTYARD - SHORT TIME LATER 51

Nanisca walks the empty courtyard, carrying a cloth bag...  
SHE HEARS SOMETHING... the panting breath of someone moving,  
the whipping sound of a machete slicing sharply THROUGH AIR.  
She looks through the open palm curtain, seeing...

NAWI. While the other women sleep, she practices her moves  
like she watched Nanisca and Izogie do. Two hands, one hand,  
jabs forward. She has no idea she is being watched...

ON NANISCA... watching...

52 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - DAY 52

Tribute Day. The grounds are full of people... MALE DAHOMEY  
WARRIORS IN FORMATION. The Agojie and the trainees. SERVANTS  
AND WORKERS buzz around the tribute. The MEU and MEUNON count  
the items. There's a basket of brass-plated figures. Baskets  
of polished coral. Farmers bring SACKS OF GRAIN and urns of  
palm oil. Muskets are stacked in a pile.

KING GHEZO, Shante and other wives are on the raised  
platform, shielded from the sun by large, colorful UMBRELLAS.  
Amenza and the other Council Members are there. Nearby, a  
group of male VIP's, among them the owner of the brothel,  
AGIDIGBI. He glares at the WOMEN who left his charge, and now  
stand with the trainees.

Nanisca motions for Izogie to step out of formation. Izogie  
moves to her.

IZOGIE  
Yes Miganon.

Nanisca speaks quietly.

NANISCA  
You went into the city last night?

IZOGIE  
Yes Miganon. To recruit.

NANISCA  
Agidigbi is a friend of the court.  
You know he is protected.

IZOGIE  
And who protects the women?

Nanisca stares at her, then --

NANISCA  
You are my best soldier. But when  
you anger the King, even I cannot  
protect you.

Beat, then, chastised, Izogie simply nods. She stands tall,  
moves back in formation.

THE SOUND OF MUSKETS FIRING...

THE MEN AND WOMEN SOLDIERS hit their chests and SHOUT OUT  
COMPETITIVE CHANTS AS A SALUTE TO GHEZO. He smiles at the  
adoration. Then, his attention is drawn to...

THE OYO CONTINGENT, arriving in the palace. There are twenty  
men on horseback, and in the lead, two we recognize:

OBA and his lieutenant, BOMA. Galloping in, they make a  
formidable entrance, reining in their horses and dismounting.  
Oba walks forward, most of his face covered by the scarf,  
Boma slightly behind him... Ghezo, with Nanisca and the Migan  
just behind him, meets them in the center of the Parade  
Ground, in a traditional ritual, the gathered army and palace  
royalty watching.

OBA  
I am General Oba Ade. My  
lieutenant, Boma. I bring King  
Ghezo the esteemed regard of the  
Alafin of Oyo.

Oba says the words, but his lack of respect is evident. He  
unwraps his scarf, revealing his face...

fierce, marked by tattooed lines on his cheeks in a wave-like pattern, his earlobe elongated by a RAVEN'S BEAK pierced into it.

CLOSE ON NANISCA... her eyes CHANGE as she looks at his face. She knows this man. ON NANISCA... frozen. We SMASH CUT TO:

53      FLASHBACK - INT. DARKENED TENT - NIGHT      53

Nanisca's POV, Oba's face, over hers, grunting. He RAPES HER, the Raven's beak in his ear open and taunting her. Her legs are shackled.

SMASH BACK TO:

54      PRESENT - EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - DAY      54

NANISCA. Still as a post, stunned and shook, as the King finishes his words...

KING GHEZO

...gifts for the Alafin, as is tradition. My general Nanisca will accompany us.

But Nanisca is frozen, eyes glued to Oba, unable to speak. His eyes fall on her, and his lips curl in a belittling smile. They walk toward the collection of goods. Nanisca does not move.

KING GHEZO (CONT'D)

(under)

Nanisca.

Nanisca straightens and follows, on her guard. Amenza watches, concerned, having clocked the moment.

Each Oyo officer examines a gift. Oba picks up a musket and examines it. Boma notes to his superior:

BOMA

Old and broken.

MEU

This is what the traders bring us.

OBA

This is less than ever before. Did you think we would not see?

GHEZO

Did you think we would not see your hand in the raid on our village?

Oba smiles coolly.

OBA

To make up for your shortcomings I will accept an addition to your tribute.

He points at...THE AGOJIE WARRIORS.

OBA (CONT'D)

Forty Agojie. Not too old. We will march them to Ouidah.

ON NANISCA... she finds her voice.

NANISCA

For what purpose?

OBA

We will use them as... guards.

Nanisca holds in the desire to bury her dagger in his gut. Ghezo remains calm, political.

GHEZO

And if I refuse?

OBA

You may no longer use the port in Ouidah for your trade.

GHEZO

The port belongs to Dahomey.

OBA

We have taken control. It is our port now.

Ghezo is trapped. Feels the eyes of his people on him. Then --

GHEZO

I'm surprised you bring your horses here to the plateau. If they are bitten by the flies, they will die of sleeping sickness. Sometimes a mouse can bring down the elephant.

OBA

Do you threaten the Oyo, Little King?

(MORE)

OBA (CONT'D)

Your brother was weak enough for you to kill, but we are an Empire.

MIGAN

(anger flaring)

You will respect the King!

He goes to draw his machete, but Oba's TWO GUARDS, ever at his side, step forward. Ghezo holds up a hand.

GHEZO

Migan. This "general" attempts to bate us. But we will not jump at his foolishness.

Ghezo draws Nanisca and the Migan away. They confer in private. SHANTE, on the dais, watches, unable to hear.

ANGLE ON NAWI, FUMBE, the other Agojie wait. Ghezo and his generals return to Oba.

GHEZO (CONT'D)

Twenty Agojie. Of our choosing. We will march them to Ouidah and surrender them. And the port remains open to us for our trade.

Amenza is completely taken aback. Nanisca has agreed?

OBA

We have a deal. I will leave Boma to enjoy the feast you have prepared.

One of Oba's soldiers brings him his horse, which he mounts.

OBA (CONT'D)

In Ouidah, I will be waiting.

He turns and rides away. Ten soldiers on horseback follow, while others load the tribute onto their horses.

Nanisca walks to her assembled Agojie, begins to hand-pick the women she will send to Ouidah. With a wave of her hand, each one is separated off from the larger group.

ON NAWI... her eyes widen as Nanisca looks at Izogie for a moment then waves her hand. Izogie glances toward Agidigbi in the VIP section, then marches to the discard group, showing no emotion.

Nanisca moves to the trainees. She sees Fumbe but passes her by. Nanisca eyes Ode. Ode is resigned to be chosen.

But then, Nanisca's eyes move on to Nawi. Nawi holds her breath... Nanisca waves her hand. Nawi must go. Her face falls.

Nanisca returns to Ghezo. He turns to Boma and the three other officers.

GHEZO

Now we feast.

SERVANTS bring out platters piled high with food and drink. Boma and the Oyo officers move to the dais. Nanisca follows, her face full of anger.

55 EXT. RITUAL GARDEN - NIGHT

55

In a secluded, fenced area, a large tree creates a canopy over an altar. Brass and wooden figures, faces of the gods, called *Vodun*, decorate the space. This word, *Vodun*, will someday transform into the English word -- Voodoo. Nanisca walks in. The garden is empty, candles are lit. She kneels, bows to the statues.

NANISCA

Ghosts of the dead. Help us.

Help... me...

Her eyes close, and when they open again, we see EMOTION, TEARS BRIMMING. She pushes it back. Rises defiantly. Then, a voice startles her...

AMENZA (V.O.)

Nanisca.

Nanisca whirls. Amenza has entered.

AMENZA

What happened? At the tribute today? I have never seen that look from you.

NANISCA

Your chain was finally right.

Nanisca leaves the garden.

56 INT. PALACE - AGOJIE BARRACKS - NIGHT

56

Nawi dresses for the journey -- attaching to her belt her machete, and a small drawstring bag in which the Agojie carry good luck charms -- fetishes. Fumbe watches.

FUMBE

I have never been to Ouidah.

NAWI

Nor I.

Fumbe takes Nawi's rope from her belt. She shows her friend how to tie the proper knot.

FUMBE

Over. Under. Around. Down.

She hands it to Nawi. The two young friends look at each other, both emotional at this parting... they embrace.

57 EST. SHOT - BAY OF OUIDAH - DAY 57

The waters of the huge bay are choppy and inhospitable. European tall ships anchor outside the bay. Long ROWBOATS overcome the waves to take cargo to and from the ships, piloted by *KRUMEN* -- Dahomey men who work the port.

58 EXT. BAY OF OUDIAH - SAME TIME 58

A ROWBOAT is rowed by FOUR *KRUMEN*. Their passengers from the tall ship are TWO YOUNG MEN in their mid-twenties, dressed in European fashion, white pants tucked into tall boots, high-collared shirts and jackets. One is a ship's captain, *SANTO FERREIRA*, a Brazilian of European decent, empowered by his stature. The other is a light-skinned Black man, *MALIK DIALLO*. They speak **in PORTUGUESE --**

FERREIRA

(subtitled --)

*Hang on! You don't want to fall in!*

Ferreira, Malik and the *Krumen* splash into the surf as their boat is pulled onto the sand. Other boats are also pulled ashore, their cargo unloaded by long assembly lines of men throwing boxes.

Malik steps firmly with his boots onto dry ground. He takes a long look around. Speaks in Portuguese --

MALIK

(subtitled --)

*I can't believe it. I'm really here.*

Ferreira claps his old friend on the back.

FERREIRA

*It is a savage place. I'm afraid  
you will not find it to your liking  
after the comforts of your  
upbringing.*

MALIK

*I can say the same for your ship.*

Ferreira feels his friend's judgment.

FERREIRA

*Slave ships are the only kind that  
come to these shores. This is my  
first crossing as Captain, but I  
intend to run the ship as my father  
ran it. You of all people  
understand, those ties are not  
easily slipped.*

Ferreira and Malik grew up together, but now they are men,  
with a wedge between them.

FERREIRA (CONT'D)

*Come, I'll show you the city.*

Malik follows him.

59 EXT. STREETS OF OUIDAH - SHORT TIME LATER

59

Ouidah town is dominated by a LARGE FORT. At high tide, the  
sea washes right up to the walls. The port is crowded, dirty,  
smelling of fish and sewage. Goods are carried in large  
baskets on the heads of Africans; baskets full of squirming  
fish, sacks of grain, tobacco --

WHITE MEN -- sailors and slave traders, hairy, dirty, greet  
each other in the open-air entrances to bars and brothels.  
There is a palpable air of immorality. MANY LANGUAGES are  
spoken; English, Portuguese, French, Dutch.

We find Malik and Ferreira walking here. They enter...

60 EXT. TOWN SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

60

A gathering area, full of people, rimmed by balconies of the  
rooming houses, the white fort LOOMING behind it, its arched  
entrance on the square. A spiked portcullis gate hovers like  
daggers above the fort entrance.

ON MALIK, taking it all in, his eyes drawn to...

The SLAVE MARKET, and the BARRACOONS, open, pen-like prisons, full of AFRICAN MEN AND WOMEN. There's misery in every eye he meets. WHITE TRADERS examine the captives and barter.

Ferreira sees Malik's face... his shock and dismay.

FERREIRA

*You have seen the same markets in  
Brazil.*

Malik now notices, on the other side of the Barracoons... A LINE OF WOMEN... THE TWENTY HAND-PICKED AGOJIE WARRIORS, straight and proud, marching into the square, led by Nanisca and Amenza. Two of the Agojie carry a LARGE BASKET. Malik watches them, mesmerized, and then, he sees...

NAWI whose eyes are glued to the miserable barracoons. She has his same look of shock and horror on her face and then... SHE SEES MALIK. He looks ridiculous, an African man all buttoned-up in the heat. As for Malik, he is utterly fascinated by the Agojie, their pride, their swagger.

MALIK

*Are they...?*

FERREIRA

*The Dahomey Amazons. Virgin  
soldiers. Bloodiest bitches in  
Africa.*

Nawi turns away as her comrades pass A SMALL GROUP OF OYO WARRIORS on horses, watching the AGOJIE with leers.

The Agojie line up across the square, in one long row, twenty women stretching almost to the fort's gate. The scores of people in the square can't help but watch the events unfold.

Nanisca and Amenza step forward. The Agojies place the basket in front of them, step back into the line.

An OLDER MAN, an Oyo Bureaucrat in robes, approaches.

NANISCA

*We bring tribute from King Ghezo.*

ON NAWI... near to the fort's gate, one of the last in the line. She has fear in her eyes as she scans the courtyard. In various alcoves she sees traders and bureaucrats, money changing hands, parchments being signed with quill pens. Sees all the men's eyes crawling over her and her comrades.

The Oyo Bureaucrat gestures and Nanisca follows his arm to see A GROUP OF SIX OYO SOLDIERS walking toward them. Leading them is OBA.

There's a feeling of a standoff, the basket stands alone in the space between Nanisca and Oba, who sneers at the Agojie.

OBA

Dahomey has no soldiers man enough.  
They have to arm their women.  
Little girls playing soldier. I'm  
sure my men will find plenty of use  
for them.

He laughs. It pierces Nanisca.

ON NAWI... she hears a rumble of movement. Closest to the fort's entrance she sees... some distance away, but coming --  
TWO COLUMNS OF OYO SOLDIERS...

OBA (CONT'D)

(ordering soldiers)  
Disarm the women.

ON NAWI, looking at Izogie, trying to gain her attention. Izogie turns, and sees the danger too...

ON NANISCA -- eyes boring into Oba's.

NANISCA

These soldiers are not your  
tribute. This is your tribute!

She lifts her foot, KICKING OVER THE BASKET. FOUR HUMAN HEADS roll out. Their death grimaces still visible, frozen in rigor mortis. The four Oyo officers left in Abomey; they never rode out alive.

ON OBA... he knows one of these heads... his comrade, BOMA. He looks in red anger at NANISCA. Knows he has been set up.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

You disrespect our King in his own  
house, now we will kill you in  
yours.

In the square, there is shouting, the Bureaucrat calling for soldiers!

NANISCA (CONT'D)

(yells to her soldiers --)  
Eh-dabo!

The Agojie take off sprinting for an alcove, led by Izogie. Nawi follows. NAWI glances back, is shocked to see Nanisca DRAW HER WEAPON! Oba draws as well. Their eyes are alight with fury, squaring off to fight... Nawi looks back at the Agojie who disappear up a stairwell.

Then, she turns, races back to the FORT ENTRANCE! The Oyo soldiers have almost reached the gate as:

Nawi draws her machete and CUTS THE ROPE that suspends the spiked portcullis gate... THE IRON GATE FALLS, spikes plummeting... trapping them inside. The soldiers swarm the gate, get their hands on the bars -- strain to LIFT IT...

ON NANISCA AND OBA... their blades clashing. Nanisca intends to kill this man. But her rage, rather than her skill is driving her movements, making her sloppy.

NAWI (O.C.)

Miganon!

Nanisca turns to see NAWI, who points at the fort entrance, where the soldiers have lifted the gate and are POURING THROUGH... Distracted, Oba pounces, KNOCKING HER MACHETE OUT OF HER HAND...

Oba SMILES... Nanisca will surely be captured. ON NANISCA, furious, but resigned, motions to Nawi...

NANISCA

Go!

The two Agojie plunge into the crowd, fighting their way to the alcove. OBA and his soldiers PURSUE.

MALIK sees this, looks at Nawi and Nanisca, wishing them escape.

Nanisca and Nawi sprint into the shadowy alcove...

CAMERA STAYS WITH THEM as they follow the stairs to the high wall that edges the cliffs... They can HEAR the thunder of footsteps behind them... They scramble up the wall and LEAP!

61 EXT. OCEAN - CONTINUOUS

61

Nanisca and Nawi drop from the DIZZYING HEIGHT, crash into the ocean below, pop to the surface. FOUR CANOES are held steady in the water by FOUR MALE DAHOMEY WARRIORS with long poles. The boats are filled with the other Agojie. Izogie and Amenza stand on a nearby canoe. Amenza pulls Nanisca in.

Nawi struggles against the waves. IZOGIE flings out a rope...

IZOGIE

Grab on!

Nawi lunges to catch the rope. Grips it, gritting her teeth, as Izogie pulls. NANISCA stands in a canoe.

Above, Oba and his soldiers can only watch. They raise their muskets. FIRE! Bullets splash the water around them.

NANISCA

Push off!

Nawi, breathless, holds on.

62

EXT. SECLUDED SHORELINE - LATE DAY

62

The canoes are pulled onto shore by the male soldiers. The exhausted, but exhilarated Agojie slosh through the surf, fall onto the sand.

NAWI is bent over, breathless, and then... NANISCA steps before her.

NANISCA

Why did you not follow the plan?  
You were to go to the boats!

NAWI

The soldiers were coming. If I did  
not move when I did --

NANISCA

So you are the hero? You can act on  
your own, without orders?

NAWI

You would never have escaped!

Izogie shoots her a look.

IZOGIE

Nawi.

A beat between them. Nanisca fights off a stab of feeling.

NANISCA

We are Agojie. We do not act alone.  
We move together. With one purpose.  
Alone, you are vulnerable. Alone  
you are killed, or worse. It is you  
who faced capture, by disobeying my  
orders.

Nawi looks down. Amenza hears this... knows Nanisca is speaking of her own past. Nanisca speaks to all the soldiers.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

Now you have seen the barracoons. A  
captured Agojie is a slave.

(MORE)

## NANISCA (CONT'D)

Used by men. Sold to a ship where  
human beings are piled up like  
fish. To rot. It is better to die.  
To cut your own throat.

Nanisca walks away. Nawi swallows, overwhelmed. Amenza follows after Nanisca. Speaks softly.

## AMENZA

I will never question you in front  
of others. But it is you who did  
not follow the plan.

Nanisca silences her with a wave of her hand and strides away. Swallows back the emotion, the memories...

CUT TO:

65      PRESENT - EXT. PALACE - INNER COURTYARD - NIGHT      65

The Agojie have returned and are home, on the other side of the palm curtain, greeting their comrades. Fumbe embraces Nawi, helps her with her weapons, thrilled her friend is home again. Nawi smiles, but her eyes follow Nanisca as she enters, alone...

66      INT. PALACE - KING'S CHAMBERS - SHORT TIME LATER      66

CAMERA tracks Nanisca as she walks down the hall. She passes an open archway where she looks in to see...

THE KING'S WIVES AND CHILDREN. Shante is with the other young wives, lounging. One of them, INIYA, NURSES A BABY, a young prince, on her breast. Nanisca is drawn to the mother and child. Shante catches her eye and gestures her inside.

## SHANTE

I hear you have had a victory.

## NANISCA

A small victory in a large war.

## SHANTE

Nanisca. I think we have... started on a wrong foot. I wish to be your friend. I can help you. I have the King's ear. We should work together, to serve our king, to ensure he grows only more powerful...

NANISCA

It is you who wants to be powerful.  
To stay safe and rich in your fine  
palace...

SHANTE

Too much change can be dangerous. I  
have said this much to my husband.

NANISCA

Then we will soon understand who  
truly has his ear.

Nanisca leaves the chamber. Shante watches after her.

67

EXT. OUIDAH - TOWN SQUARE - MORNING

67

Oba and his advisors stand outside the barracoons, talking with a few ship captains, among them, Ferreira. Malik stands nearby, listening in. Oba speaks to the Captains a man translates his words into Portuguese, murmuring behind him.

OBA

Dahomey is an abomination, with an  
army of whores. We will march to  
their city. And we will take it.

FERREIRA

(in Portugese subtitled)  
*Tell him I know Ghezo. He will  
fight to the end for his people.*

The interpreter starts to tell Oba, but Oba waves him off.

OBA

I know what he said. Ghezo is a  
usurper. He stole the crown. The  
Mahi, the Egbo, they will join us.  
Dahomey is the only tribe in Africa  
with women soldiers, and women in  
the council room. It is against the  
gods. We will put the women of  
Dahomey in their place.

ON MALIK... overhearing this. Oba smiles at the slave ship  
captains...

OBA (CONT'D)

More cargo for your ships. The  
Agojie sell high at the markets.  
(to his interpreter)  
Tell them. Ouidah is open for  
business.

Oba leaves, heading for the entrance to the fort with his retinue. Ferreira turns to Malik. In Portuguese --

FERREIRA

*You wish to see Abomey? Then we must go now. With gifts for the King. Before it is no more.*

68 EXT. JUNGLE TRAIL - LATE DAY 68

Miles of lush jungle. We spot the travelers slowly picking their way through it.

A LINE OF PORTERS carry a strange assortment of GIFTS on their heads: a gilt end table, a long bolt of deep pink silk. A crate of whiskey and rum. A large, ornate clock.

Malik and Ferreira bring up the rear, slogging in the heat...

69 EXT. PALM FOREST - LATE DAY 69

ROWS AND ROWS OF PALMS, the fields full of WORKERS, men high in the trees, picking the nuts. Women on the ground, carrying baskets full of nuts on their heads toward:

AN AREA WITH LARGE CALDRONS... fires lit beneath them. The nuts are loaded from the wheelbarrows into the vats. The oil is separated off the top of the cauldrons by large metal ladles. WOMEN do the hot work of ladling the oil into CLAY POTS.

Nanisca shows Ghezo the operation.

NANISCA

The oil must cool in the ground for several days, and then it will be ready for transport.

WOMEN carry the pots to a cleared area, dotted with HOLES dug in the ground, round pools, rimmed with dirt. The women POUR THE OIL in the holes. Steam rises up. Then they lay large palm fronds over the holes. Further away, MEN dig more pools as the operation WIDENS.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

This field alone produces hundreds of barrels. If we harvest many fields each year, we will have a continuous supply to trade.

Ghezo is impressed.

GHEZO

I did not see a path before,  
Nanisca. But now I do.

NANISCA

Vision is seeing what others do  
not.

Ghezo takes this in. Then --

GHEZO

I see our greatness. We will  
conquer the Oyo, and then expand  
our territory. We will be the  
greatest empire in Africa.

NANISCA

Yes, my king. But let us not be an  
empire who sells its people. Let us  
be an empire who loves its people.

GHEZO

My brother sold our own. I would  
never do that.

NANISCA

Even if they are not Dahomey, they  
are still our people.

(then --)

The white man has brought  
immorality here. They will not stop  
until the whole of Africa is theirs  
to enslave.

70

EXT. PALACE - AGOJIE COURTYARD - NIGHT

70

The Agojie eat in small groups, around fires. Nawi's  
attention is drawn to two of the soldiers, who sit together.  
In the shadows of the firelight, there's a subtle intimacy.

Nawi takes this in, as Fumbe, Ode and the other recruits  
start to go into the barracks. They are stopped by an order:

IZOGIE

Trainees! A final test is being  
prepared! You will be pitted  
against each other, to perform your  
battle skills before the King.  
Those who pass the test will become  
Agojie. And those fail will leave  
the palace, never to return.

Nawi and Fumbe exchange glances. This is it. They will be in... or out.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

Look to your weapons. Tomorrow is the day.

71 INT. PALACE - AGOJIE BARRACKS - LATE NIGHT 71

Nawi sits on her bed roll, her dagger and machete laid out and shining. But it is the rope knot she carefully practices.

NAWI

(under)

Over. Under. Around. Down.

She looks over at ODE, who sharpens her machete with a leather strap. Ode tests the blade. Does a few moves, handling her machete with ease. Her eyes meet Nawi's. Game face on. Nawi feels her own weapon... it is dull.

72 EXT. ABOMEY PALACE - FIRST LIGHT OF DAWN 72

Nawi sneaks through the secret door Izogie showed her...

73 EXT. JUNGLE - EARLY MORNING 73

Nawi jogs in the jungle, she HEARS something in the brush... a majestic cheetah strolls past. Nawi watches, then resumes her jog...

74 EXT. JUNGLE - WATERFALL - SHORT TIME LATER 74

Nawi finds a waterfall. She bends to pick out black stones from the water's edge. Finds one smooth as silk. She uses the whetstone to sharpen her machete, scraping it along the blade, then she hears...

VOICES. Male voices. Speaking in Portuguese. She takes the stone and her machete and DISAPPEARS into the foliage...

MALIK appears, just awakening from their night camp, his breeches and shirt open, barefoot. He goes to the water's edge. Splashes his face, fills his canteen.

Malik looks out at the shimmering water. Then, he TAKES OFF ALL HIS CLOTHES; shirt, breeches... he is soon naked. He immerses himself, swimming out into the center. He lays back, takes in the beauty surrounding him...

LATER

Malik's wet feet step over stones to reach the place where he left his clothes and -- THEY'RE GONE. He starts muttering in Portuguese. Peering into the trees, sensing a rat.

MALIK  
(in Portuguese --)  
*Santo! This isn't funny!*

And then... HE SEES NAWI, stepping out, near the tree line, dagger in hand. He quickly covers himself with his hands.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
(subtitled)  
*Do you speak Portuguese?*

Nawi glares at him.

NAWI  
Go back to Ouidah, Slaver. Naked  
like the people you sell.

Malik surprises her by answering her in Fonbe.

MALIK  
I am not a slaver.

NAWI  
You understand me?

MALIK  
My mother was Dahomey.

NAWI  
Where is she now?

MALIK  
(beat, then --)  
She is gone.

Nawi is taking all this in, her curiosity peaked.

NAWI  
You do not look like Dahomey.

MALIK  
My father is white.

NAWI  
So you are... Dahomey... but not.  
And white man, but not.

MALIK

Yes.

They stare at each other. Then --

MALIK (CONT'D)

Do you think I could have my pants  
now?

Nawi still wary, tucks her blade back into her belt, tosses  
the clothes to Malik. He pulls them on.

NAWI

(still wary)

I saw you, in Ouidah. Why are you  
here? In the jungle?

MALIK

My name is Malik. I am going to  
Abomey. The place my mother told me  
so much about.

(beat)

Perhaps I will see you, too?

NAWI

If you are allowed into the palace.

She sees a crucifix on his bare chest. Reaches for it, then  
pulls her hand back. He takes it off and hands it to her. She  
examines it.

NAWI (CONT'D)

One of the King's wives worships  
this *Vodun*. I believe in *Legba*.

MALIK

Who is *Legba*?

NAWI

He is the trickster. My life has  
been full of tricks, so I believe  
in him.

THEY HEAR VOICES -- men approaching. She drops the crucifix.

MALIK

Wait!

She disappears as Ferreira appears.

FERREIRA

(in Portuguese)

*There you are.*

They go to fill their canteens. Malik collects his chain.

75 EXT. STREETS OF ABOMEY - DAY 75

Malik, Ferreira and their party make their way up the crowded streets. Malik takes it all in. He has never seen a thriving city of African people; artisans, farmers, music, trade. The people happy and prosperous. FREE. It thrills him.

Malik, Ferreira and the women bearing the gifts lead the way toward THE PALACE, the huge double gates opened by a coterie of brightly clad Eunuchs.

Malik is welcomed by the Dahomey people -- smiling, accepting him. It feels like a homecoming as he passes through to...

76 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - CONTINUOUS 76

A riot of color. Umbrellas waving and flags flying. Ghezo sits on a large dais, surrounded by AGOJIE GUARDS. The porters bearing gifts are swarmed by his wives, also on the dais; they argue over the pink silk.

Malik hangs back with Ferreira. In Portuguese --

MALIK

(subtitled --)

*You say it is savage. But it is magnificent.*

FERREIRA

*You see it through rose-colored glasses. Why do you think the King's Guards are all women? Because he trusts no man.*

Malik looks at Ghezo, who turns his attention to NAWI and the other trainees, armed and ready, oiled for battle, their skin shining.

Ghezo addresses the trainees. This is the closest they have ever been to their charismatic and handsome King.

GHEZO

There will be one last test. A war game. We will see which of you are fit to be called Agojie.

He gestures to an obstacle course set up; a wall of HUGE BRAMBLES, the size of cars, A FENCE OF THORNS, and behind it a mud pit -- rising out of that, A WALL of soil and stone, fifteen feet high.

ON NAWI... her heart stopping. She has to do that?

Malik watches Izogie and Tara lead the trainees off, and now it is Ferreira's turn to present to the King. Ghezo embraces his old friend. They speak in Portuguese --

GHEZO (CONT'D)

*Too long, Santo! You hide yourself!*

FERREIRA

*Your Portuguese is flawless, Your Majesty. You have been practicing.*

Nanisca and the Migan, Amenza and her male counterpart, the AJAHE -- all watch this reunion of Ferreira and Ghezo. The Migan leans in to Nanisca.

MIGAN

I do not like this Captain. Puffed up like a banty rooster.

NANISCA

Finally we agree.

The generals share a look, as Ferreira makes a showy bow and offers HIS SPYGLASS as a gift to the King. Malik bows as well -- offers an ORNATE ENGLISH SWORD.

FERREIRA

*This is Malik. His mother was taken from Dahomey as a captive and enslaved in my country.*

Ghezo is stricken by this. He speaks to Malik in Fonbe.

GHEZO

My mother was also taken. Sold away by my own brother. I have men in your country searching for her. They will bring her back. Perhaps they can bring your mother too...

MALIK

My mother is dead.  
(this affects Ghezo)  
It was her dying wish that I come here, to her home. The only place that she was ever free.

GHEZO

(sobered)  
Then it is also your home. We welcome you.

MALIK

Your majesty, we have seen the Oyo  
overrun the port at Ouidah...

GHEZO

We know what kind of men the Oyo  
are. But they cannot defeat my  
Agojie. We show you today.

He gestures for the men to sit down on pillows that have been  
laid out. A chorus of DRUMBEATS begins...

77

EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - SHORT TIME LATER

77

A HUSH falls over the crowd as drums play, an ominous beat.  
THE AGOJIE TRAINEES, including Nawi, Fumbe and Ode, march to  
the start of the obstacle course, machetes on their belts.

ON THE DAIS Malik spots Nawi. He leans forward...

ON THE PARADE GROUND Fumbe swallows nervously. Nawi glances  
at her foe, Ode, who refuses to look at her. Izogie stands  
before her trainees. Slowly removes her own magnificent  
machete.

IZOGIE

Relentlessly we will fight.

Nawi meets her eyes. Izogie winks. Nawi raises her chin,  
stares at the obstacle course as she takes her place at the  
starting line. Her eyes are drawn to the dais, where she sees  
MALIK, with Nanisca and the King, watching her. Malik raises  
a hand to her...IZOGIE SEES THIS. Looks out at Nawi.

AT THE STARTING LINE Nawi is hit with a rush of adrenaline  
and nerves. Izogie raises her machete and BRINGS IT DOWN...

Drums BANG, A MUSKET SHOOTS OFF! The race begins! The  
trainees sprint toward the obstacle course. Nawi, Ode and  
three other girls are in the lead -- they LAUNCH THEMSELVES  
ONTO THE BRAMBLES climbing through but THORNS tear at their  
flesh and sink into their skin. They ignore the pain,  
scrambling over and into...

THE OOZING MUD. They struggle to push through, slipping and  
falling.

MALIK is blown away by Nawi's athleticism. She is light on  
her feet and stays upright. Nanisca watches the display with  
critical eyes.

Nawi reaches the wall first, tries to climb, but her feet slip. She takes her rope, the knot pre-tied and THROWS IT UP, LOOPING IT ONTO A SPIKE AT THE TOP OF THE WALL!

She yanks it tight and starts climb it up, leaving Ode and the other's in the mud, behind, but as she looks down, she sees...

FUMBE tries to copy her. Fumbe throws her rope, but HER KNOT SLIPS FREE, and she falls back into the mud.

NAWI, near the top of the wall, sees her friend...

ON IZOGIE, watching from the sideline.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)  
(mutters --)  
No, no...

ON NAWI. She wants to win, so badly, but she calls out to Fumbe, motions to her to throw her rope. Fumbe does. Nawi LEANS OUT.. FINGERS BARELY CATCHING IT. She quickly ties the knot and loops it around a spike as Ode reaches the top!

ON THE DAIS...Nanisca sees her do this. Sees fumbe now climbing up...

Nawi turns to continue her own race...ODE IS NOW AHEAD, clamoring down the wall. Nawi ignores her rope, LEAPS down, crashing to the ground hard. Stunned, she lays there. Ode lands safely, takes off running. Nawi scrambles up, RACES through an open area where male soldiers pretend to be enemy soldiers and PELT THE TRAINEES with rocks. They both take the hits, but Nawi has caught up. THEY ARE NECK AND NECK.

Nawi and Ode face one more task at the end of the clearing... Nawi's old nemesis, THE ROW OF DUMMIES, with their stick heads.

Nawi finds another level of speed, sprinting hard, taking the lead over Ode. She draws her machete... she spins, the machete in her two hands as she SLICES OFF THE HEAD. Cleanly. It goes FLYING through the air, rolls in the dirt.

Nawi stalks over, lifts the dummy head and HOLDS IT UP TO THE CROWD. NAWI WINS THE RACE.

THE WATCHING CROWD of Agojie, townsfolk and male soldiers CHEER. Malik is dumbstruck. Completely taken by this young woman so different from what he has ever known.

ON NAWI... the victor. She stands, still breathless, sweat glistening on her skin. She glances back...

AT THE WALL, two trainees who failed the test are weeping, as Esi escorts them away.

Nawi turns back, as the handsome Ghezo walk down the steps from the dais, crossing to her. She gulps. She has never been this close, to the young king who she and her people adore.

NAWI  
(bows)  
My King.

GHEZO  
Tell me your name.

NAWI  
(such a moment)  
I am Nawi.

ANGLE ON MALIK... hearing her name.

GHEZO  
You are as beautiful as you are  
fierce. If you were not so skilled  
at warfare, I would have made you a  
wife.

Some laughter from the assembled dignitaries. He gestures and Tanonu steps forward. He has a machete on a fabric cushion. Ghezo takes it in two hands presents it to Nawi. It has a beautifully carved handle.

GHEZO (CONT'D)  
To the victor.

She takes the weapon, honored, and catches eyes with... NANISCA, who nods her approval. A CONNECTION. Nawi feels a surge of happiness, of acceptance, as she turns to walk away, allowing a huge smile to bloom on her face.

GHEZO (CONT'D)  
(to all the trainees --)  
You have done well. All of you.

ON ODE... watching with jealousy, still breathless. Nawi sees her. She goes to her and they EMBRACE, honoring each other.

The trainees are helped by servants, and comrades who tend to their wounds. Nawi lays on a mat, as Izogie tries to dig out a thorn. Nawi winces and moves her foot.

IZOGIE

Be still!

Nawi grits her teeth. Izogie pulls out the thorn, LONG AND SHARP.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)

Why did you return to help Fumbe?  
You could have lost...

NAWI

Fumbe is my friend. I want her to stay. To stay she must pass the test.

Nanisca and Amenza, appearing behind Izogie.

NANISCA

To be useful, she must stand on her own.

NAWI

(nodding toward Amenza)  
You would not help your friend, Miganon?

NANISCA

Amenza? I would step on her head to win a foot race.

Amenza laughs a little, but then wonders. Nanisca crouches in front of Nawi. She picks up her arm, examining the cuts.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

Your first scars. The mark of a warrior.

She holds out her own arm, matching it to Nawi's.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

You see? You will have many more.

Nawi drinks in the closeness like oxygen. Amenza watches, surprised by Nanisca's attention. Nanisca shows Nawi's cuts to Izogie...

NANISCA (CONT'D)

Make sure all the thorns come out. Here, and here...

She turns the arm and then... stops. She sees something. She holds Nawi's arm, stretched out...

NANISCA (CONT'D)

What is this?

ON THE SIDE OF NAWI'S ARM... HER SCAR. We've seen it before. Mr. Abade touched it when he examined her to be his bride.

NAWI

My father called it the devil's mark. It was there when he chose me in the orphanage.

Nanisca looks at Nawi's face. Searching it now, as if it's the first time she's really looked at her.

NANISCA

You are an orphan? But your father...

NAWI

Took me in. I guess I didn't turn out to be the daughter they wanted.

Nanisca drops Nawi's arm. Nawi touches the scar, not noticing that... Nanisca has left, walking out of the barracks. Past servants, wives, eunuchs, but she sees none of them.

80

PRESENT - INT. NANISCA'S CHAMBERS - SHORT TIME LATER

80

Nanisca bursts into her room. With a shaking hand she pours herself some water... but doesn't drink. Amenza joins her.

AMENZA

Nanisca, the festival continues, the King requests your presence...

Nanisca looks at her. Amenza can see something is very wrong.

NANISCA

What did you do with it?

Amenza is frozen for a moment... and then she knows.

AMENZA

You told me never to tell you.

NANISCA

I am asking...

AMENZA

You said you would ask, and you made me swear never to tell you...

NANISCA

Amenza!!

Nanisca pounds her fist on the table. Amenza raises her chin.

AMENZA

I am not your servant.

Beat.

AMENZA (CONT'D)

I took her to the missionaries. You saw them. We passed them on the road, when we were marching.

NANISCA

Which way were they going?

AMENZA

I don't remember! I did what you asked, you told me to take the child and I chose to give her away!

Nanisca sits on the bed.

AMENZA (CONT'D)

Why do you ask these questions, after so many years?

(beat)

...because Nawi is an orphan? You can't possibly think...

NANISCA

...no. Of course not.

The two old friends look at each other.

AMENZA

The Gods are not that cruel.

81 EXT. PALACE - PARADE GROUND - DUSK

81

Tanonu escorts Malik around, showing him wares -- pottery, beautiful appliquéd robes and delicate metal figurines, all shown to him by proud artisans.

ON THE DAIS Ghezo and Ferreira drink together, alone.

FERREIRA

(in Portuguese)

*What is this talk of stopping the slave trade?*

GHEZO

Speak my language when you are in my palace. You have the words.

Ferreira is on his heels. Not so confident in the language.

FERREIRA

Your wife said you seek an end to slaving.

GHEZO

She does not speak for me. And she will be punished for thinking she does.

FERREIRA

Your Agojie general wishes this.

GHEZO

My generals obey my wishes.

FERREIRA

So you wish to sell... palm oil?

GHEZO

I want my people to prosper, as those in your lands do.

FERREIRA

(forgetting himself)

But the slave trade makes you rich! As rich as the King of England. If you stop the trade...the money goes. The captains will take their business to another king.

GHEZO

Their business of selling Africans?

FERREIRA

Not all the white captains are your friend. You will be unprotected.

Ghezo hears this. A small, hard smile appears on his face.

GHEZO

I am under no illusions that you see us as anything but commerce. But I am a king. This is my land. And if you do not come to my shores to trade what I wish to trade, it is you who are unprotected.

Ferreira quickly backs off, realizing that to anger Ghezo in this palace could mean imminent death.

82

EXT. PALACE - THE PALM CURTAIN - DUSK

82

Malik outside it, curious, walking its length. HIS POV: The shadow world behind it... women walking, children playing, distant drums; feminine laughter. He catches the scent of their food. He can see Agojie dancing... ONE OF THEM IS NAWI. She glimpses him peering in.

ON MALIK... his hand touches the fronds, ruffling them. As he is about to pass to the end, HE HEARS A WHISPERED VOICE.

NAWI (V.O.)

Malik.

A HAND part the curtain. NAWI'S dark eyes peer out at him.

MALIK

How are you? Are you hurt?

NAWI

Why should you care if I am hurt?

MALIK

May I come in?

NAWI

No. No man may cross the palm line.  
In Brazil foreign men may look on  
the King's women?

MALIK

In Brazil, women cover their  
bodies. Long sleeves. Long skirts.

NAWI

Then how do they run?

They both laugh a little. BELLS START TO RING -- night approaches. Malik looks over his shoulder to see Ferreira preparing to leave.

MALIK

We make camp outside the walls  
tonight. Come to see me...

NAWI

Tonight we take our blood oath.

MALIK

Afterward.

NAWI

If you wish a girl to come to your tent, they have girls you can pay in the market...

MALIK

What? No... I just... want to talk.

NAWI

You can talk to your friend.

MALIK

(laughs)

No. To you. I want to...

(feeling so drawn)

...talk to you.

Nawi feels something she's never felt before. Something powerfully intoxicating. She feels... wanted. The CONCH SHELL blows, Malik looks behind him -- THE GATES OPEN... Ferreira waves to him. He turns back to her.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Come to the waterfall. I will be waiting.

She smiles. He smiles back. He turns around, running backward, waves to her. She watches him go...

83

INT. PALACE - THRONE ROOM - NIGHT

83

Ghezo paces. He sees Ferreira's gifts; the pink fabric, the spy glass. A bottle of spirits. He hears his wives in the hallway, talking, laughing. He frowns and then...

HE TAKES HIS ARM AND SWEEPS THE GIFTS, sending them clattering to the ground. SHANTE appears in the doorway.

SHANTE

Is everything alright, my love?

He glares at her.

GHEZO

You are not welcome.

She frowns, this is new. She waits a beat, then comes to stand behind him. She carefully lays her hands on his shoulders, begins to knead his muscles, carefully uses her delicate fingers to find the relief he seeks...

SHANTE

I understand. You have the weight  
of our people on your shoulders.

He says nothing, but allows her to touch him.

SHANTE (CONT'D)

You are the leader they seek. They  
see you as a savior, from the ills  
of your brother. From the Oyo  
murderers. They want to see Oyo  
suffer, to see every Oyo bound and  
chained on a slave ship. That is  
the victory you will give them. You  
will make Dahomey richer and more  
feared than any king before you. We  
sell captives to protect our own  
people from being sold. This is  
what you know because you are a  
King. And the woman who stands  
beside you, the Kpojito, must honor  
and protect you always.

She moves before him, looks up into his eyes.

SHANTE (CONT'D)

Listen to no one but your heart, my  
king.

She puts her hand on his heart. He kisses her with passion.

84

EXT. PALACE - AGOJIE INNER COURTYARD - NIGHT

84

The trainees stand in a line. HOLD OUT THEIR FOREARM. AMENZA  
uses a dagger to make a SLICE in the soft flesh of the inside  
of their arms. When she cuts NAWI'S ARM, she looks at her  
face... could this be the infant that she herself chose to  
give to the mission? When she could have left her to die?

She CATCHES Nawi's BLOOD into a brass bowl, mixing it with  
the other trainees. NANISCA steps forward. Cuts her own arm,  
adds HER OWN BLOOD, her forearm scarred with dozens of nicks.

Nanisca stands before them. Nawi looks at her, expecting to  
see in her eyes what she saw before... a connection, the  
favorite. But she is surprised to see NANISCA'S EYES ARE  
EMPTY. She simply studies Nawi as she gives the oath.

NANISCA

Do you dedicate your life to your  
King and to your Agojie sisters?

ALL

I do.

NANISCA

Will you lay down your life for the people of Abomey, foreswearing all others, children, family, the company of men?

Nawi's eyes search, waiting for Nanisca to meet them, but Nanisca's eyes do not return to her.

Amenza pours a clear-colored spirit from a pottery pitcher into the bowl. Sprinkles a powder inside it. Mixes the liquid. The women all stand together, each in turn SIPPING FROM THE BOWL. The new Agojie chant with Amenza...

AMENZA

Blood of our sisters.

RECRUITS

Blood of our sisters.

AMENZA

Make us invincible.

RECRUITS

Make us invincible.

AMENZA

You live for me, and I for you.

RECRUITS

You live for me, and I for you.

NANISCA says the words, but her eyes are distant. NAWI is upset, confused.

85

INT. PALACE - AGOJIE BARRACKS - NIGHT

85

The Agojie women prepare for bed, laughing, feeling good. Fumbe and Ode sit together, comparing their new scars. Nawi sits on her mat. Izogie sits behind her, braiding her hair.

IZOGIE

You are now my sister, my equal. I will be proud to fight with you.

NAWI

I want you to teach me, as Nanisca teaches you. I want to be great.

IZOGIE  
You must focus. There can be no  
distractions...

NAWI  
I will.

IZOGIE  
(beat --)  
At the test. I saw the man from  
Brazil wave to you.

NAWI  
I met him, in the jungle.

IZOGIE  
And you... like him?

NAWI  
I have no way to know if I like him  
or not.

Beat.

NAWI (CONT'D)  
Why can we not love and be  
soldiers, too?

IZOGIE  
It makes us weak.

NAWI  
Have you not felt love?

IZOGIE  
I do not think about love. I think  
about greatness. I want to be  
Miganon one day.

NAWI  
And that is enough?

IZOGIE  
It is a hard life we have chosen.  
We survive in our own way. You must  
find yours.

Nawi takes in her words...

86 EXT. PALACE - INNER COURTYARD - LATE NIGHT 86

Nawi walks along the wall, shadowed from the moonlight. She comes to the door Izogie once led her through, sneaking out...

87 EXT. WATERFALL - SHORT TIME LATER 87

Malik and Nawi walk near the waterfall, talking.

MALIK

As a boy, my mother told me about Africa. About this place. And the women warriors.

NAWI

What did she say about us?

MALIK

That you were proud and strong. And feared. I thought they were just stories.

NAWI

I grew up with those stories, too. It made me dream that one day I could matter.

MALIK

My mother was a slave. That is all I knew of African people. I never dreamed that we were warriors, and kings. Now... I see the majesty. The beauty.

He looks at Nawi. She feels his gaze.

NAWI

You did not see the beauty in her?

He looks away. Ashamed.

MALIK

My father's blood gave me my freedom. Made me feel that I was different... But I am my mother's child. That is who I am. Who I want to be.

NAWI

I think you are a good man. You must not ally yourself with slavers like Ferreira.

MALIK  
We grew up together.

NAWI  
Does he see our beauty as you do?

Malik takes this in. Quiet for a moment. Then --

MALIK  
Nawi. The Oyo are coming...

NAWI  
We are ready...

MALIK  
Not just the Oyo. Other tribes,  
too. I heard their general.

This makes her grow solemn.

NAWI  
I must tell the Miganon. We must go  
back...

She rises to go. He catches her hand.

MALIK  
Wait. Tomorrow, we will be gone.

She looks at his hand on her skin.

NAWI  
You will return...

MALIK  
I want to.

She opens the little leather bag at her waist, and takes out  
a small charm.

NAWI  
This is Ogou, he is courage and  
strength. Perhaps he will bring you  
back to us.

MALIK  
I have nothing for you.

Beat, then she puts her hand on his hip... and relieves him  
of A DAGGER IN A SHEATH on his belt.

He smiles a little. She smiles back. She leans in and kisses  
him, on the lips. Surprising them both. She looks down,  
feeling a surge of attraction that makes her heart ache.

She's shy again. He holds out his hand to her, to help her on the slippery rocks.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
I'll take you back.

This gentlemanly gesture is foreign to her. She smiles and walks over the rocks with ease herself. He follows.

89

INT. PALACE - BATHS - SHORT TIME LATER

89

Moonlight shines off the water. Nawi comes in, looking for Nansca... She sees her, sitting at the edge, legs immersed.

Nawi moves next to her. The water soothes her aching feet.

NAWI  
Miganon. I have heard something.  
The man, with Ferreira. His name is  
Malik. He heard the Oyo General  
speak of a plan to grow his army  
with other tribes...

Nansca knows who this must be.

NANISCA  
The Mahi, and Egbo. The Oyo have  
given them courage.

Beat, then --

NANISCA (CONT'D)  
Malik. You sneak out on the night  
you take your blood oath to meet  
with a slaver?

NAWI  
He is not a slaver...

NANISCA  
You defend him?

NAWI  
His mother was Dahomey!

NANISCA  
Come here.

Nawi steps into the water.

NANISCA (CONT'D)  
You do not understand the dangers  
you face, you disobey the rules!

NAWI

What do you want from me?! I have beaten them all, I showed I am the best!

NANISCA

It is not enough to be the best!

NAWI

Why? Because you were captured? That will never be me!

A pause.

NANISCA

I was raped. Many times each night. I knew nothing of the ways of men. When they would come, I wished only to die.

Nawi listens, moved.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

And when I escaped, I was with child. The child of those men. I took a drink, a potion that... takes the child away. But the drink did not work. I did not want to leave the palace -- I hid my belly. I bathed alone. I asked for distant missions... and one day, the baby came.

92 FLASHBACK - EXT. JUNGLE - NIGHT

92

In the jungle, Young Nanisca gives birth, squatting, holding onto a thick, low tree branch. Amenza is with her. She has a flask with liquor, she cleans a dagger...

Young Nanisca pushes, bearing down. Fights her SCREAM. The baby slips out, bloody, crying.

NANISCA (V.O.)

It was a girl. I told Amenza to take it away.

Young Amenza severs the cord between her and the baby.

NANISCA

But the blood, it kept coming. She left me alone, with the baby, and went in search of something to stop the bleeding...

94      FLASHBACK - EXT. JUNGLE - NIGHT

94

Young Nanisca looks at the little creature, a baby born of violence and pain. The baby opens her toothless mouth to CRY, her little face scrunched and then... her eyes open.

She looks right into Nanisca's eyes. Nanisca feels a pull, her body, her mind, drawn to this child.

NANISCA (V.O.)

And in that moment, I did something. I made a mark. A cut. On the left arm.

Nanisca sees AMENZA'S DAGGER lying near. She picks it up, brings the knife to the baby's skin and makes a small CUT, on the side of the infant's upper arm.

THE BABY CRIES. Young Nanisca drops the knife. Her hand, trembling, reaches to her shark's tooth necklace.

She YANKS OFF A SMALL TOOTH, PRESSES IT into the cut and under the skin. The baby shrieks. Nanisca scoops up a fistful of mud and PATS IT ON THE ARM, pressing it, stopping the blood.

NANISCA (V.O.)

Into the flesh I pressed a tooth. A shark's tooth.

95      PRESENT - INT. BATHS - LATE NIGHT

95

Nawi's eyes go to Nanisca...to the NECKLACE SHE WEARS...

NANISCA

She had to know. That someday, if she met a girl... a girl who had this scar, she could cut the flesh and see if the tooth is inside.

ON NAWI. Almost unconsciously, her hand goes to her arm -- And then, with a rustle of water, she moves to go. Nanisca stops her, GRABS HER WRIST.

Nawi's arm stretches between them, their eyes are glued.

NAWI

(whispers)  
It isn't me.

Nawi now sees Nanisca's dagger on the stone edge of the bath... it has been lying there, all this time.

Nanisca picks it up. Nawi swallows. She relaxes, ever so slightly. She does want to know. She grits her teeth as Nanisca presses the dagger to the white mark of the scar and slices it open...

Nanisca presses her fingers INTO THE CUT, and Nawi yelps, WRENCHES HER ARM AWAY.

Nawi sits on the edge of the bath and with a growl SQUEEZES HER ARM... Blood pours from the wound, dripping out in huge droplets onto the wet stone rim... as the blood mixes with the thin film of water, they see it, lying there...something WHITE, glinting, swimming in the red.

Nanisca stares down at the TOOTH, mesmerized. Nawi does, too. Then she looks up at Nanisca. Nanisca looks back at her. THE TRUTH, PALPABLE BETWEEN THEM. Nawi struggles to find her words. And then --

Nawi leaves. She stumbles out of the baths, overcome with emotions, and even fear at this impossible truth.

NANISCA is spent. She holds the shark's tooth, guilt and conflict in her eyes.

96 EXT. PALACE SQUARE - LATE NIGHT 96

Nawi, in her wet shift, walks across the empty courtyard, the bravado she summoned leaving her like a breath, as tears come. Alone now, she lets the true feelings hit her. She is lost. Broken. A RAINDROP. Splashes off her hand. Another splats on her head. Then she sees the rain, all around, huge drops pock the dusty ground...

Nawi looks back, at her home, the palace. A long beat, and then... she sinks to the ground. Burying her head in her arms, as the rain turns the dust around her to mud...

97 EXT. PALACE COURTYARD - DAWN 97

Nawi awakens, lying on the ground by the palace gates. For a moment, peace. And then the truth rushes back to her. She stands. Her hair and face crusted with mud. She walks toward the inner courtyard, feeling empty, abandoned...

98 EXT. PALACE - INNER COURTYARD - SHORT TIME LATER 98

Nawi comes through the palm curtain. There is no one outside. As she passes under the thatched awning... NANISCA IS THERE... standing some distance away. Their eyes meet, and then...NAWI feels anger. She has to turn away, going within.

Camera holds on Nanisca, swallowing back any feeling.

99 EXT. HILLSIDE - DAY 99

A scouting party, Nanisca with Amenza and Izogie, as well as the Migan and TWO OF HIS MEN, hide in the rocks at the tip of a slope, peering out to the valley below. The Migan uses Captain Ferreira's spyglass to look out over the fields.

SPYGLASS POV: IT'S MISTY, hard to make out details.

NANISCA

What do you see?

MIGAN

A field of men.

SPYGLASS POV: In his glass... men marching, on foot and on horseback. Enslaved men pulling cannons. It's a huge invading army.

Nanisca takes the glass from him and looks herself...

100 EXT. PLAINS - SAME TIME 100

The infantry fly the flag of Oyo, the colors of Mahi and the Egbo tribe as well.

NANISCA (V.O.)

They will be here in one day's time.

101 EXT. HILLSIDE - SAME TIME 101

Nanisca hands Migan the spy glass.

NANISCA

They will set up camp at the foot of the plateau. It is the only place for such an enormous army, with marsh surrounding us.

MIGAN

We are greatly outnumbered.

NANISCA

Their size makes them arrogant. And slow. Clumsy, like their weapons... the guns don't work at all if the powder is wet.

The Migan looks at her...starting to see.

MIGAN

We drive them back to the marsh,  
yes, but how?

Nanisca bends, squatting to a NEARBY TERMITE MOUND. She fingers the red powder, thinks of Nawi.

NANISCA

You don't need a gun to use  
gunpowder.

102 EXT. OPEN FIELDS AT FOOT OF PLATEAU - DAY 102

The MIGAN directs DAHOMEY MEN. They DIG HOLES in the open fields at the bottom of their plateau. An assembly line of MALE SOLDIERS pass pots with steaming palm oil from person to person, DOWN THE HILL.

Elsewhere, women with pouches sprinkle a powder into the termite mounds that dot the field.

103 INT. PALACE - AGOJIE COURTYARD - SAME TIME 103

The Agojie prepare for battle. Excitement in the air. A woman plays a dance beat on the drum to keep the spirits high. Izogie SINGS, and the others answer in chant-like fashion. Angle on Ode, Fumbe, chanting with the others.

IZOGIE

We drink the blood of the Oyo!

ALL

We smash the heart of the Oyo!

IZOGIE

We take the head of the Oyo!

ALL

We eat the heart of the Oyo!

104 EXT. AGOJIE BARRACKS - SAME TIME 104

IN A DARKER PLACE, QUIET... Someone prepares for battle.  
CLOSE SHOTS:

A HAND, with thickened nails, being lifted from a bowl of brine. The nails are FILED with a crude metal file to SHARP POINTS... like talons.

TWO CUFFS clasp onto both wrists.

HANDS smear oil from a pottery bowl onto dark skin; arms, belly, legs, feet.

A small cloth bag, filled with fetishes and charms, is tied to the belt.

A BEAUTIFULLY CARVED MACHETE, tested by fingers for sharpness, slides into a BELT at the waist, next to MALIK'S DAGGER. We finally reveal this warrior's face...

IT'S NAWI. She looks fierce and coldly confident...

105 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - NIGHT

105

The FULL ARMY OF AGOJIE stand in formation. Nanisca stands on the dais before them. Ghezo and his wives stand behind.

NANISCA

For ninety years, Dahomey has lived  
under the thumb of the Oyo!

CAMERA PANS THE FACES OF THE AGOJIE. Finds Nawi, eyes dark as steel, her face blank as stone, painted with dried mud.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

Will we allow our nation to die in  
the hull of ships bound for distant  
shores? Or will we rise up?! And  
stride into battle screaming to  
those who would enslave us...No  
more! We fight now, for those who  
will come after us. For the future  
of our kingdom! We are the sword of  
victory. We are the blade of  
freedom! We are Dahomey!!!

The Agojie raise their weapons and cheer, shout and holler. Except Nawi. She stands in cold silence. Drums begin to play, the PALACE GATES are pulled open by the Eunuchs.

Ghezo stands before Nanisca, his hand clasps her shoulder.

GHEZO

You are my champion.

NANISCA

By next sundown, victory will be  
yours.

OUTSIDE THE GATE...

A LARGE FORCE OF MALE WARRIORS led by the Migan waits.

Nanisca takes her place at the forefront of the Agojie, begins a TROT, on foot, out of the castle. Amenza, Izogie, Tara, Nawi, Fumbe, Ode and all their comrades follow, feet pounding the dirt. The men FALL IN BEHIND...

106 EXT. OYO ENCAMPMENT - DAWN

106

The Oyo have indeed made a massive encampment at the foot of the plateau. Tents are everywhere, and dotted throughout, something these tribes are used to seeing everywhere; TERMITE MOUNDS.

The army is just beginning to stir. A few Oyo soldiers carry pales of oats and water toward THE HORSES, kept in a makeshift pen, standing together, scores of them.

NAWI and IZOGIE creep amongst the horses, who seem to sense them. They stamp, breath steaming from their nostrils. Izogie gets the gate of the pen open. Nawi shoos the horses out, making them run... TOWARD THE TREELINE...

THE GROOMSMEN CALL AN ALARM -- but their voices are drowned in the drum of the HOOF BEATS. THE HORSES ARE POURING OUT, Nawi and Izogie run with them, dodging the LARGE TERMITE MOUNDS THAT DOT THE OPEN FIELD...

Soldiers rush from their tents. People shout, a guard fires a MUSKET which only scares the horses more. They RUN AWAY, into the dawn...

Izogie and Nawi run into the bank of trees, where they find THE FOREST IS FULL OF DAHOMEY TROOPS waiting.

THEIR COMRADES... HIDING THERE. Hundreds. There are both Agojie troops, led by Nanisca, and behind them... the male soldiers, the Migan leading them in his own leather armor. Nanisca stands there, watching the Oyo encampment mustering.

107 EXT. ENCAMPMENT - SAME TIME

107

The Oyo soldiers quickly arm themselves. Oba strides through them, loading his musket, throwing it over his shoulder...

GROOMSMEN

The horses!

OBA

Forget the horses, we march!

The massive army starts forward toward the tree line.

108 EXT. BOTTOM OF THE PLATEAU - SAME TIME 108

NANISCA is handed a torch. It illuminates her face, for a brief moment, and then... she touches it to the ground where a small pool of palm oil sits. The OIL IGNITES. A WOOSH OF FLAME! Oil trails have been set, the fire follows the fuel, racing in trails to...

109 EXT. OYO ENCAMPMENT - SAME TIME 109

The TERMITE MOUNDS! Which have been planted with gunpowder. When the fire hits these, they IGNITE AND EXPLODE like bombs!

The mustering Oyo and Mahi forces SHOUT in terror. Their tents ignite, their ammunition. Explosions! Men catch fire. A chaotic melee...

OBA  
To the marsh!

The Oyo race toward safety, coughing from the oily black smoke. They leave behind crates of ammunition, which begin to EXPLODE from the heat and sparks. MEN ARE SENT FLYING!

110 EXT. MARSH - MOMENTS LATER 110

The Oyo forces break through the tree-line, a huge loud mass of men, scrambling into the mud and water of the marsh, struggling, their weapons dripping in the water.

111 EXT. TREELINE - SAME TIME 111

Amenza, Nawi and the others wait...

THEIR POV:

Across the marsh, they see NANISCA appear, raising her machete...

NANISCA  
*Eh-lele m'eh-le-le!*

Her Agojie warriors answer, in a roar of women's voices...

AGOJIE WARRIORS  
*Eh-lele m'eh-le-le!*

The whole AGOJIE army CHARGES INTO THE MARSH. They ATTACK the gasping Oyo. The Migan and the MALE DAHOMEY WARRIORS appear behind them.

In the wet marsh, MUDDY FROM THE PREVIOUS RAIN, the Oyo's muskets are rendered useless. And the fire has cut off any escape. The marsh becomes a sea of humanity, men and woman FIGHTING TO THE DEATH in hand to hand combat.

ANGLE ON OBA...

In the middle of the fray, seeing his men are in trouble. He starts SLICING THROUGH BODIES.

IN THE FIELD

Nanisca and Amenza battle men behind and in front of them, both covered with mud and blood.

THROUGH SMOKE that fills the wet air... we see the MIGAN, fighting alongside his male soldiers, swinging his machete with ferocity...

Oyo soldiers, savage in their desperation, KEEP COMING AT THEM, hurling themselves.

OBA is a mountain of fury, swinging his sword at the Agojie in his path. He cuts down TWO WARRIORS when ESI raises her spear against him. He swings at her, and she blocks the blade, counters and cuts him. Enraged, he catches her spear as she swings again, breaks it across his knee. She rushes at him...and catches his blade in her chest. She drops to her knees, dying. Not satisfied, he raises his machete to sever her from her life for good...

ANOTHER AREA...

FUMBE... fighting for her life. An Oyo soldier overpowers her, knocking away her machete. As the man is about to STRIKE HER DOWN, Fumbe finds within her the fight. She ducks the machete and RUSHES the man, knocking him down. With her BARE HANDS she shoves his FACE DOWN INTO THE MUDDY MARSH, holding it there, with all her strength. He twitches and struggles.

ANOTHER OYO soldier is BEHIND HER, he raises his axe to slice her wide open when...a BLADE suddenly punches through the front of his chest. BLOOD SPURTS FROM HIS MOUTH and he FALLS.

IZOGIE is there. She pulls her machete from the man's back, takes the deadman's axe and throws it to Fumbe, who has to turn immediately to block a blow from a new foe...

FIND NAWI, slicing the men in her way with a RAGE and FEARLESSNESS. SMALL AND FAST. Seemingly untouchable.

And then she is grabbed from behind by a HUGE OYO SOLDIER, lifted into the air and slammed to the ground. Her head RINGS from the impact...

HER POV: The Huge Oyo warrior heads toward her...

Nawi stays low as he nears. She suddenly WHIPS HER MACHETE across his legs and he stumbles, bringing him to his knees... she slices through his chest and he FALLS, pinning her under his girth. She grunts, using her arms to push, STRUGGLING to get free... BUT WHEN OYO SOLDIERS APPROACH, she stops. FEIGNS DEATH, closing her eyes, stilling her breath.

Oyo feet stomp around her. Then, one pair of feet slows. An OYO SOLDIER CROUCHES, looking down at her. He takes out his dagger to slit her throat when...

Nawi's eyes SNAP OPEN! His eyes go wide with fright, and in that frozen instant, Nawi JABS TWO SHARP FINGERNAILS INTO HIS EYES! He grabs his face, blinded. Drops his dagger. She catches it, SLITS HIS THROAT. He slumps and dies in the mud.

Nawi resumes her attempt to get free, digging with her hands at the mud...

112

EXT. A ROCKY OUTCROPPING - SAME TIME

112

A few Oyo soldiers have found a hiding place that gives them time and space to load and fire MUSKETS, but we see, just as Nanisca has always said, how unwieldy the weapons are, how SLOW the men are to reload. As they fumble and shout at each other, they see, emerging through the smoke of the oil fires... A LONE WARRIOR, machete in hand. NANISCA.

One of the Oyo finishes loading a weapon, gets it to his shoulder, tries to aim his shot, but the KICKBACK is tremendous...

Nanisca, with reflexes honed from many battles, ducks as THE MUSKET BALL whizzes past her head. THE SHOOTER CAN'T BELIEVE IT... he sees her RISING AGAIN. She starts to run toward them. The shooter YELLS at the others to load.

ON A SOLDIER... gun jamming from the moisture of the marsh. In other words, HE'S FUCKED.

Nanisca is ON THEM, KICKING the gun out of one soldier's hand while SLICING OFF THE HEAD of another. The third one drops his gun and tries to run... NANISCA THROWS HER DAGGER and lodges it between his shoulder blades.

She picks up the muskets and TOSSES THEM to male Dahomey soldiers approaching behind her. Together they continue their drive TOWARD THE BURNING ENCAMPMENT.

ODE comes upon a CANNON unmanned. She struggles to move the heavy beast, TURN IT AROUND, point it at a group of approaching OYO SOLDIERS. The men FIRE ON HER... Ode takes a BULLET to the SHOULDER, just as Tara and a group of Agojie run forward, in danger from the row of Oyo snipers. Ode cranks the cannon in their direction and LIGHTS IT!

Just as the Oyo raise their guns, THE CANNON EXPLODES. The Oyo soldiers are BLOWN INTO THE AIR. Tara sees what Ode's done and raises a fist to her...

TARA

Yes!

She raises her machete, leads her soldiers after the retreating Oyo. Ode charges with them... but no one sees HER SUDDENLY STUMBLE, FALL TO HER KNEES, TRYING TO BREATHE, the fight chaotic all around her.

WIDE VIEW OF THE MARSH... the Agojie are winning, we see many soldiers with cowrie breastplates standing over the foe.

ELSEWHERE we follow NANISCA... on a mission. She grabs wounded Oyo soldiers, brings them to her face.

NANISCA

General Oba? Where?

One man points to A LITTER being carried by enslaved men. Nanisca runs to it. SHOVING two men out from under it, sending it CRASHING DOWN. Nanisca SLASHES at the fabric to reveal the man inside...IT'S NOT OBA.

113

EXT. ANOTHER PART OF THE MARSH - SAME TIME

113

Oba is here, finding dead men flopped over the cannon, seeing a horse in the distance, eyes scanning the marsh to realize it is mostly Agojie still standing. Rage and defeat in his eyes.

A soldier runs up to him...

SOLDIER

General, we've found your mount!  
Through here...

Oba looks out and waves his arm.

OBA  
Fall back! Fall back!

114 EXT. THE MARSH - SAME TIME 114

The DAHOMEY warriors see THE OYO ARE DROPPING THEIR WEAPONS and falling back, running away. They begin to cheer...

AMENZA  
They are retreating!

Nanisca looks around the fields of the dead, sees the Migan coming toward her, flanked by his male warriors. She sees his look of triumph.

MIGAN  
We have vanquished the Oyo!

The brave Dahomey soldiers, men and women, begin to CHEER with relief and triumph! Nanisca allows herself some pride in this moment.

115 EXT. CORNER OF THE MARSH - DAY 115

Nawi hears the distant cheers. She FREES HERSELF from under the dead Oyo. She can barely stand, finding herself in a SEA OF THE DEAD. She draws her machete... begins to move, hearing the cheers of her comrades. Then she hears a sound... like a woman's voice, muffled.

She tries to place it, the sound is not too far off... she turns toward a dark stand of trees, where she thinks the sound is coming from. It comes again.

Nawi moves toward the TREES. Her eyes scanning, enters the area, eerily quiet. She hears...A GUN COCKING.

Several Oyo men step out from behind the trees. Among them, OBA. The men grab Nawi, who starts kicking and screaming...

As she fights, biting, getting hit, a foot smashes against her back and PRESSES HER TO THE GROUND. Nawi FINDS STRENGTH to still FIGHT, until THEY SMASH HER HEAD with the butt of a musket. Everything goes BLACK.

116 EXT. PLAINS - LATE DAY 116

SOUNDS... a rattling, the thumping of horse's hooves...NAWI as her eyes OPEN... her face is cut and her eyes swollen. She turns her head to see...

A DEAD AGOJIE... her glassy eyes staring. Nawi lies in a SHALLOW WAGON with six other Agojie, feet bound, and hands bound to each other. Nawi tries to LIFT HER HEAD to see.

HER POV: Two horses pull the flatbed wagon. An Oyo soldier drives the carriage, whipping the horses. Beyond the carriage she can make out another flatbed wagon, and FOUR MORE OYO SOLDIERS on horseback, galloping ahead.

NAWI tries to shift her body. She stifles a gasp as A HAND, dangling a rope, comes across the dead body to touch her. She hears a whispered voice --

FUMBE (O.C.)

Nawi.

The hand pats her. Fumbe's FACE appears, peering over the dead woman to see Nawi. The two stare at each other. THE WAGON RATTLES ON. The girls speak in the quietest way, almost reading each other's lips.

FUMBE (CONT'D)

I failed.

NAWI

No. You stayed alive.

Nawi, though her face is swollen and bloody, is able to give her an encouraging smile. Then, she sees the dangling rope on Fumbe's arm.

NAWI (CONT'D)

You are not tied to anyone.

Fumbe shakes her head.

NAWI (CONT'D)

What is behind you?

Fumbe shakes her head, she can't hear.

NAWI (CONT'D)

The edge? Are you at the edge?

Fumbe looks behind her. She is at the edge of the wagon, against a wooden lip, about six inches. She turns back to Nawi and nods. The wagon RUMBLES over rocks, causing it to JUMP before settling again. Nawi and Fumbe's eyes are glued.

NAWI (CONT'D)

Go over the side.

Fumbe realizes what she's saying. She shakes her head, no...

NAWI (CONT'D)  
You want to live?

The wagon rattles.

NAWI (CONT'D)  
Do it. When I say.

Fumbe breathes, scared. They HIT ANOTHER BUMP, joggle...

NAWI (CONT'D)  
(emphatic whisper --)  
Now.

Fumbe's eyes go wide and she ROLLS TO HER LEFT, violently, shoving herself OFF of the wagon with all her strength.

AS THE WAGON bounces back down with a rattle, Nawi's eyes stare toward the muddy, rocky road. She sees FUMBE lying in the road. Her form RECEDES as the WAGON hurtles away. Nawi rests her head back, breathing with relief.

117 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - NIGHT

117

The Agojie soldiers, bloody but victorious, return through the huge open doors of the palace. Ghezo stands in the center of the parade ground, in magnificent kingly robes, awaiting their return, beaming with pride, Shante nearby. He sees...

NANISCA entering the palace. He strides to her. Puts his hands on her shoulders.

GHEZO  
You have brought Dahomey a victory  
for the ages. Your name will be  
remembered, songs will be sung.

She bows her head, accepts his praise, as he moves past her to embrace the Migan...

Wounded Agojie and male soldiers are everywhere, having their wounds tended by the Eunuchs and the palace doctors.

NANISCA walks through the throng of soldiers, her eyes scanning the faces of the injured Agojie warriors...

HER POV: Tara is kneeling at the corpse of Ode. She takes a fetish from her bag and lays it on the forehead of this young soldier who saved her life.

Nanisca watches Ode being honored, when Amenza approaches.

AMENZA

The mighty Oyo have run away in  
defeat!

Nanisca is not celebrating. Amenza notes her general's eyes  
searching...

AMENZA (CONT'D)

She is not here. No one has seen  
her.

Nanisca looks down. Amenza touches her back, but Nanisca  
shirks off the tender touch and walks away.

118 EST. SHOT - OUIDAH - DAWN 118

The tall ships are anchored in the bay.

119 EXT. BARRACOONS - DAWN 119

The gate of a barracoon is opened. Oba and his men shove the  
captured Agojie, including Nawi, into the crowded pen.

OBA

Clean them up. We need to sell  
them, to buy passage on a ship.

OYO SOLDIER

We are not going home?

OBA

At home, we are dead men.

Oba peers at the bounty of his otherwise lost battle. Even  
bloody and tired, the Agojie, muscular and proud, stand out  
amongst the other people in the crowded barracoon. He points  
to the group.

OBA (CONT'D)

Dress the Agojie in their uniforms.  
The bids will be higher for  
soldiers.

His men pull the Agojie out. But not Nawi. Small enough to  
blend in with the other captives.

120 EXT. BARRACOONS - LATE NIGHT 120

Torches lit. A NEW GROUP OF CAPTIVES are pushed into the  
overcrowded pens already filled with men and women. They are  
SPLASHED with buckets of water.

BUCKETS OF YAM are set along the open rails of the pen. The captives RUSH at it, their hands reaching through the bars, scrambling for the food.

NAWI lets the people rush around her and away from her. She doesn't care to eat. She realizes there is one other person like her in the pen, just standing there, not caring -- the person is far down, at the other end. Their heads turn to look at each other...

IT IS IZOGIE.

Nawi walks toward her. Izogie is wounded, her arm BROKEN and hanging at a strange angle. Nawi embraces her. Izogie winces from the pain.

Nawi leans Izogie against the fence. She leaves for a moment, then comes back with a piece of yam. Izogie refuses it. The light seems to have gone from her eyes.

NAWI

Eat. We need our strength if we're going to escape.

A dry bark of laughter escapes Izogie's throat.

IZOGIE

I know what I must do. What the Miganon said. We will slit our throats.

NAWI

(firm)

You will do no such thing.

Izogie hears a deep reserve of toughness in Nawi.

NAWI (CONT'D)

We are Agojie! Relentlessly we will fight.

NAWI (CONT'D)

...my arm is broken...

NAWI (CONT'D)

We do not give up.

Izogie looks at her. Long beat, then --

IZOGIE

Take my arm.

Nawi stretches it out. Izogie winces, then, she feels for the ends of the broken bone. She motions for Nawi to take over.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)  
Push it back together.

Nawi finds the ends. Pushes them back into realignment. Izogie CHOKES BACK A SCREAM OF PAIN. She falls back. The arm looks straighter, undamaged.

IZOGIE (CONT'D)  
You're strong for a little bug.

A slight laugh. They're both overwhelmed by the moment, the necessity, the bind they are in.

NAWI  
Now what?

Izogie looks all around them, taking everything in. The SLAVE MARKET beyond the pens. It is an open dirt square.

121 EXT. ROAD TO ABOMEY - EARLY MORNING 121

A cock crows somewhere. A SHEPHERD herds a few long horn cattle down the mostly empty streets when he peers, seeing something, a site that almost scares him...

A FIGURE is stumbling down the road, plastered in mud, A FILTHY ROPE still attached to her arm...

IT'S FUMBE. We see her face, determined, she opens her mouth to call to the man but her voice comes out in a croak. She falls on her knees. The Shepherd runs to help her.

122 INT. PALACE - AGOJIE BARRACKS - MORNING 122

Fumbe lies on her mat, medicine women applying poultices to her wounds. Amenza oversees, laying a cloth on her forehead. Agojie peering at Fumbe suddenly part, making way for Nanisca, who comes to the mat, looking down at Fumbe.

NANISCA  
You were taken captive.

FUMBE  
By Oyo men. One was a general...

NANISCA  
Oba?

FUMBE  
Yes. That is the name.

NANISCA  
How many others?

FUMBE  
Six or seven. Nawi said to throw  
myself off the wagon...

NANISCA  
...Nawi?

FUMBE  
They were taking us to the  
barracoons.

This hits Nanisca hard. Her eyes meet Amenza's. Before she  
can speak, Tanonu appears.

TANONU  
Miganon. The King requests you.

123

INT. PALACE - THRONE ROOM - SHORT TIME LATER

123

Nanisca enters, surprised to see ALL THE KING'S WIVES  
sitting, waiting. Shante is the only one who turns to look at  
Nanisca.

After a moment, Ghezo appears, attended by servants and  
Tanonu, who carries a three-legged stool, a portable throne  
that he sets down for Ghezo.

GHEZO  
The women in this room are the best  
Dahomey has to offer. The women the  
King has chosen to hold close to  
his heart. I have brought you here  
because tomorrow I am going to make  
an announcement.

(a beat)  
I have chosen my reign mate, the  
*Kpojito*.

Shante smiles to herself.

GHEZO (CONT'D)  
The *Kpojito* is beloved of the  
people. She must be deserving of  
their admiration, their trust. And  
we must share a vision for our  
future. A bold vision. For this  
reason, I have chosen... Nanisca.

ON NANISCA... quietly struck, her eyes meeting Ghezo's. He  
smiles at her. But Shante is livid. She rises.

SHANTE

She is a common soldier!

GHEZO

Wife! You will sit down.

She stamps out of the room. The other wives exchange glances.

GHEZO (CONT'D)

(to Tanonu)

Go to her.

(to the wives)

Kelu, Iniya, you will aid Nanisca. Make her robes. We will put on a great feast. Invite the city into the palace. In three days time, we will announce it. And announce an end to the trade.

The other wives go out, leaving only Ghezo and Nanisca. A beat.

NANISCA

My king. It is a great honor. But perhaps... it is too soon. When we have lost so many soldiers, and the people are grieving...

GHEZO

Grieving? No one is grieving. We have won, we have thrown off the yoke! We must declare it, far and wide, we must let the people know.

NANISCA

My king. I wish to seek our lost Agojie. Some were taken captive.

GHEZO

How many?

NANISCA

Six or seven.

Ghezo looks at her, surprised.

GHEZO

If they were captured, they are weak.

He sees the hesitation in her eyes.

NANISCA

They will be sold. Used by the men.

GHEZO

Nanisca. The moment you seek is upon us. The few have been sacrificed for the many. We must now move forward --

NANISCA

I can go alone. Let me try...

Ghezo's eyes grow hard.

GHEZO

Do not mistake my admiration for weakness. I am the King. You will not seek these captives. You will stay by my side and take the honor I bestow you.

She meets his eyes. Nanisca bows and leaves the chamber.

124 EXT. PALACE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS 124

Amenza is waiting. She's been eavesdropping.

AMENZA

You are the Kpojito!

She hugs Nanisca to her. But we see in Nanisca's eyes... she isn't able to feel the accomplishment.

125 EXT. THE BARRACOONS - DAY 125

Men with muskets guard the pens, always vigilant. Oba comes in, to choose the next group to be lead to the block. Nawi and Izogie stand, watching him.

IZOGIE (V.O.)

We will be marched out of the barracoon in small groups.

Oba walks through the crowded barracoon, touching the arms of the ones he wants taken to the block. He touches the shoulder of Izogie. His men grab her roughly and take her out. She grits her teeth, trying not to show any pain as they yank her about.

IZOGIE (V.O.)

We must stay together. We cannot be separated.

Oba looks further, walking RIGHT PAST Nawi, not choosing her -  
 - perhaps the plan will be foiled at the outset -- then he  
 passes Nawi again. SHE LOOKS HIM IN THE EYE. Could this man  
 be her father? Her flesh and blood? He feels her eyes burning  
 into him. He taps her shoulder. Nawi's eyes never leave Oba  
 as the men take her away.

126 EXT. MARKET AREA - SHORT TIME LATER

126

The chosen captives now stand in a line against a wall. Men  
 come along and rip their tops off. NOTE: There will be no  
 frontal nudity.

IZOGIE (V.O.)

From this moment on, we will have  
 our legs. We will not be tied or  
 chained.

Guards kneel and UNTIE THEIR LEGS. Then their hands.

Both men and women are ordered to WASH THEMSELVES with  
 buckets of water and tallow soap, guns held on them. Nawi and  
 Izogie are not shy or humiliated. They wash their wounds,  
 their faces. Their eyes surreptitiously take in the scene.

IZOGIE (V.O.)

We must have patience.

Enslaved women approach with their uniforms. Dress them.

127 EXT. MARKET AREA - LATER

127

At the blocks, the slave ship captains, three Europeans,  
 among them FERREIRA, poke and prod the captives, who now wear  
 simple sleeveless frocks. They lift their lips to look at  
 their teeth, test their muscles. IZOGIE takes her place on  
 the block, looking proud in her battle uniform.

IZOGIE (V.O.)

We must not let them see my arm is  
 broken.

The three captains are impressed by Izogie's athletic body.  
 The fierceness of her gaze. Ferreira lifts one arm over her  
 head, then takes the BROKEN ARM and lifts it over her head.

ON NAWI... holding her breath. She sees Izogie's jaw clench,  
 pushing down the pain. Showing no flinch to the white men. He  
 puts down her arm. Squeezes her breast.

Ferreira and a French captain both want to buy Izogie. In an animated discussion, they one-up each other on price. Oba smiles at this. Just as he thought, the Agojie are valuable.

IZOGIE (V.O.)

You will make a distraction. That will be the moment. We will each disarm a guard, and run. Don't stop until you reach the lagoon.

Nawi and Izogie trade glances. Ferreira makes the final bid for Izogie, and wins. As they come to take Izogie, Nawi gets ready to launch into her distraction....

MALIK

Nawi!

The slavers turn -- MALIK strides into the market area. Yells at Ferreira in Portuguese --

MALIK (CONT'D)

(subtitled --)

*What the hell are you doing!*

FERREIRA

*What I came here to do!*

MALIK

*You call them savages? It is you who is savage!*

FERREIRA

*Stay out of this! Count yourself lucky you are not on the block!*

This comment from Ferreira shocks Malik.

ON IZOGIE... realizing the whole plan is about to falter. She bashes an ELBOW TO THE FACE of the white slaver to her right. She rips off his musket... all around her, other captives take advantage of the shouting and chaos. Izogie RUNS out of the market, musket on her back...

Nawi runs after her when FERREIRA GRABS HER...

NAWI

Let go! Let go!

ON IZOGIE... she's made it out of the market, she's home free, but hearing Nawi shout, she hesitates. Not following her own rule, she TURNS BACK. She shoves people out of the way to get back to Nawi. Nawi sees her, shakes her head NO!

Malik pulls Ferreira off Nawi. Nawi gets up, is about to run to Izogie when A SHOT RINGS OUT! THEN TWO MORE!

ON IZOGIE... blood blooms across her chest...she CRUMPLES TO THE GROUND.

NAWI (CONT'D)

No!

Nawi RUNS to her, kneeling at her body.

NAWI (CONT'D)

Izogie...

Izogie struggles to rise but her body slumps. She coughs up blood.

IZOGIE

Tse-tse. You run like a sloth.

NAWI

(tears springing)

Please...

Izogie grips her hand, trying to rise...

IZOGIE

Be the sword.

Nawi nods, throat choked as Izogie's grip loosens. She can't go on. She dies. Nawi weeps, the commotion now elsewhere, as guards chase down the other runaways in the dissipating smoke from the muskets.

Malik comes to Nawi. Ferreira is not far behind. Nawi yells at them, anger and grief in her eyes.

NAWI

Get away! Get away from her!

She covers Izogie's body with hers. Oba looks at Malik.

OBA

You want this one? It's one hundred réals.

130 INT. PALACE - NANISCA'S CHAMBERS - SAME TIME

130

Nanisca sheaths her machete, opens her small fetish bag and places her charms inside. This time, adding a new one: NAWI'S SHARK TOOTH.

She ties the fetish bag on her belt. And then Amenza appears in the doorway. She's shocked to see Nanisca in battle gear...

AMENZA

What are you doing?

NANISCA

Move aside.

AMENZA

If you leave you are defying your king. He will expel you. Or worse.

Nanisca looks at her friend. Tries to make her understand.

NANISCA

Amenza. I know what it is, in the dream -- the thing I'm so frightened of...

(beat)

It is me. It is the girl who was silenced in those shackles, by those men. I have hidden her away, I have denied her pain... but I am going to hear her now.

(swallowing emotion)

I have to try to save her.

Nanisca moves past Amenza and goes out.

131 EXT. PALACE - INNER COURTYARD - SHORT TIME LATER 131

Nanisca walks toward the secret door.

Through an opening of the palm curtain, the Migan sees her. Knows what she is about to do. Is he going to stop her? Sound the alarm? She disappears from his sight...

132 EXT. OUTSIDE THE PALACE WALLS - CONTINUOUS 132

The secret door closes. Nanisca stands there a moment, completely alone, hearing the air move in the trees. She starts her run, even, strong, heading to the coast...

133 EXT. JUNGLE TRAIL - DAWN 133

CLOSE ON NANISCA as the early sun starts its rise... still she runs, determined, free. And then, she hears OTHER FEET, pounding the dirt.

She turns to see behind her, cresting over a hill...AMENZA and a SQUAD OF TWENTY AGOJIE, among them FUMBE AND TARA, run toward her. And behind them... the MIGAN. They catch up, and join her, running with her. Nanisca allows herself a feeling of relief. She runs, with her fellow warriors, to battle...

134 EST. SHOT BOARDING HOUSE - OUIDAH TOWN SQUARE - EARLY MORNING

135 INT. BOARDING HOUSE - MALIK'S ROOM - SAME TIME 135

Nawi on the floor. Motionless. Staring at Izogie's blood, dried on her hands. KEYS clank in the door and it is opened... MALIK ENTERS. Nawi rises, glowers at him.

NAWI

Do you own me now?

MALIK

Nawi...

NAWI

Get out.

MALIK

I'm trying to protect you.

NAWI

By locking me in?

MALIK

Do you know what these Oyo would do to you! I have to lock you in!

He takes her hand and LAYS THE DOOR KEY inside it.

MALIK (CONT'D)

There. You have the key now. You can choose when the lock is turned.

Her bloodied fingers close around it. She stares at it. Beat, then Malik reaches for the washing bowl. He pours water from a pitcher, gently washes the blood from her hands with his. As she watches their hands, she slowly softens.

MALIK (CONT'D)

My mother guided me here, to find myself. And I found you.

(then --)

I won't set foot again on a slave ship. I have booked passage on a cargo ship bound for England.

(searching her eyes)

(MORE)

MALIK (CONT'D)

Come with me. We can find a new life, where we don't have to fight...

NAWI

Such a place does not exist.

MALIK

Then we will make it. Nawi, don't you see? It was... God's design, or Legba's, that you and I, in all the vastness of the world, should find each other.

NAWI

My sisters...

MALIK

They are not here. I am here.

She finally looks up.

NAWI

My heart has many scars.

Tears pool in Nawi's eyes. She so deeply yearns for love. After a moment, her mouth finds his.

136 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - DAY

136

The celebration is being prepared -- the dais is built for the King and his wives. The King's throne is carried out.

As Ghezo oversees this, Shante and Tanonu appear, walking to him. He frowns as Shante bows low.

SHANTE

Husband. Please, accept my deepest apologies for questioning your will.

GHEZO

(wary)

What do you want?

SHANTE

The wives are whispering. I came to Tanonu to tell him what they say. And he has asked me to tell it to you.

GHEZO  
 (to Tanonu)  
 I don't want you discussing my  
 business with the Tasi.

TANONU  
 My lord. Forgive me, but it is too  
 important. Nanisca has gone to  
 Ouidah.

TANONU (CONT'D)  
 With the Migan and a number of her  
 soldiers.

Ghezo seethes with fury.

GHEZO  
 We must postpone the feast.

Tanonu and shante exchange glances.

SHANTE  
 No. The people gossip and share  
 rumors. You cannot postpone it  
 without looking weak. That may be  
 Nanisca's intent.

GHEZO  
 What are you saying?

SHANTE  
 My only thought is for you. Perhaps  
 she is looking for more than  
 Kpojito. She led a coup for you.  
 The Agojie will do whatever she  
 says. Can she truly be trusted?

Ghezo stares at Shante, with both rage and suspicion... she  
 keeps her head down, eyes low.

137 EXT. OUIDAH - TOWN SQUARE - THE BARRACOONS - NIGHT 137

The square is alive with DRUNKEN SAILORS and general mayhem,  
 MEN from different countries boisterously arguing, laughing.

IN THE BARRACOONS, the captives try to sleep, some coughing,  
 a few weeping. A TEENAGE GIRL, alone in the pen, holding her  
 knees to her chest, unable to sleep.

MORE GUARDS are posted since the escape attempt of Izogie and  
 Nawi. Both Oyo and White Slavers. Two men with blunderbusses  
 at each of the barracoons, and two more in the center market.

The men watch the revelry in the lit-up saloons, jealous. One of the guards lights a hand-rolled cigarette.

SLAP -- a hand comes over his mouth and his THROAT IS SLIT before he utters a sound. His partner meets the same fate. They slump to the ground, dead eyes staring through the bars of the barracoon at THE TEENAGE GIRL. Shocked, she looks up...

NANISCA puts a finger to her mouth -- motioning the girl to be quiet.

ANOTHER BARRACoon. One of the guards is HIT WITH A SPEAR in his chest. He clutches his heart, his fellow guard, shocked, starts to scream, getting out HALF OF A YELL before HE IS SMASHED IN THE FACE with the butt of AMENZA'S spear.

The remaining TWO GUARDS now shout and raise their weapons, but they are too late. The MIGAN and TARA STAND from their hiding place and FIRE THEIR MUSKETS. The guards crumple, dead on impact.

138 EXT. OUIDAH - TOWN SQUARE - STABLES - SAME TIME 138

Oba and a few of his men eating and drinking outside the horse stables. Oba hears what sounds like musket fire...

OBA  
What is that?

OYO SECRETARY  
Just drunken sailors blowing off steam. It happens every night.

But Oba rises...

139 EXT. OUIDAH - TOWN SQUARE - THE BARRACOONS - SAME TIME 139

The AGOJIE SOLDIERS work quickly, knowing the gunfire will bring more men. The captive Agojie bow their heads in deference and thanks to Nanisca. They are handed weapons. They free the rest of the captives -- the stronger men and women are handed the muskets and other weapons of the fallen guards. Nanisca searches their faces.

NANISCA  
Where are the others?

CAPTIVE AGOJIE  
Izogie was killed, Miganon. Nawi has not returned.

A flicker of emotion in her eyes, and then NANISCA hardens. She and three others pull unlit TORCHES and set them into the dying fire of the guards. THEY BURST TO LIFE.

IN THE SQUARE... the WHITE SAILORS and SLAVE DEALERS see the approaching hoard of former captives, led by Nanisca and the Agojie, who set aflame anything they pass, barrels, hay bales, piles of wood. PEOPLE run shouting, frightened. Men start to battle them! But their panicked aggression is no match for the balletic brutality of the Agojie. Nanisca and Amenza cut down man after man, before they can even raise their muskets.

ON THE ROOF of the buildings around the square are OYO SHOOTERS, gunshots RING OUT!

Several people are killed. Nanisca points to the Oyo Shooters and freed captives rush toward them...

AT THE FORT ENTRANCE... the thunder of horse's hooves can be heard. Oba has gathered his last Oyo troops and they RIDE INTO THE MELEE.

140 INT. BOARDING HOUSE - BED CHAMBER - SAME TIME 140

Malik and Nawi lay in bed. Malik jumps up, waking from the commotion.

MALIK

Stay here.

But Nawi rises, hearing the shouts, rushes onto the BALCONY overlooking the square.

HER POV: She sees Agojie warriors battling the slave dealers. She sees Oba and his men on horseback, unable to move amidst the crush of savage fighting.

ON NAWI'S FACE... she can't believe it. Her sisters have come to the rescue. Shaking with emotion and relief, she rushes back into the room. She looks around. Lying on the bed is a DRESS in European style. She picks it up. She sees the white lace pantaloons and camisole that are meant to go underneath. She pulls on the pantaloons and the white camisole.

She sees Malik's pistol in a leather belt, draped over a chair. She takes it and buckles it around her waist.

141 INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE THE BED CHAMBERS - SAME TIME 141

Ferreira, half-dressed and terrified, rushes to Malik.

FERREIRA  
 (Portuguese --)  
*We must go! To the ship! Forget the  
 cargo, they'll kill us all!*

Ferreira hears the cocking of a pistol. He turns. NAWI POINTS THE PISTOL AT THEM...

NAWI  
 Move.

MALIK  
 Do not go Nawi, you'll be killed!

Ferreira pulls Malik back and Nawi moves past, down the stairs.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
 Nawi!

She keeps going...

142 EXT. OUIDAH - TOWN SQUARE - SAME TIME

142

The savagery of the battle is the most intense we have seen. The freed captives' anger propels them onto the sailors and slavers. No one is safe. As soon as they kill, they grab the dead man's weapon and toss it to another fighter.

ON OBA, his horse afraid of the flames starting to climb up the walls of the boarding house and customs buildings...

Oba takes a whip from his belt and SLAPS HIS HORSE on the flank... the horse surges forward.

ON NANISCA... killing a shooter. Through the smoke, through the scrum of fighting bodies and screaming men, she HEARS the pounding of HORSE'S HOOVES.

HER POV: Oba has turned his horse and is trying to retreat to the safety of the fort.

NANISCA RUNS TOWARD THE FORT'S GATE...

OBA ON HORSEBACK, about to gain his freedom when he sees... NANISCA STEPPING UP TO BLOCK the entrance to the fort, her machete drawn...

Oba smiles... DIGS INTO THE FLANKS OF THE HORSE... He's galloping DIRECTLY TOWARD HER. He intends to run her over with the terrified beast.

ON NANISCA... she holds, holds, the hoofbeats thumping... At the last possible moment, she does her spin move and SLICES THE CHEST OF THE HORSE with the machete before SLIDING AWAY ON HER KNEES, just avoiding being trampled.

THE WOUNDED HORSE REARS UP, BUCKING OFF OBA! He flies off, hitting the ground with a crunch of broken bones. The HORSE runs away, crazed.

Nanisca stalks to Oba, who is on all fours, struggling to crawl away. He sees a KNIFE on the ground near him, reaches for it...

NANISCA GRABS HIM by his leather coat and TURNS HIM AROUND. HE HAS THE KNIFE. He attacks, STABBING IT INTO HER SHOULDER, all the way up to the hilt.

She stands there. He smiles. The knife is just below her shoulder, in the chest. Did he hit a fatal blow? Blood starts to trickle down her cowrie breast plate.

But Nanisca's face registers nothing. No pain, no fear. She uses her fist to grab the knife and YANK IT FROM HER FLESH, then she takes one step and PLUNGES IT INTO OBA'S GUT.

They stand there, like that, close together, their blood comingling. She grits her teeth.

NANISCA

You do not remember me.

Oba shakes his head, no...

NANISCA (CONT'D)

Now you will never forget.

She stabs him again, he grunts in pain. She KICKS HIM AWAY. He falls backward, to the ground, eyes staring up... DEAD.

Nanisca stands, breathless, looking down at the still body of her tormentor. Then she hears the click of a musket. She turns. AN OYO SOLDIER stands before her, A MUSKET at his hip. He raises his weapon to shoot Nanisca and then...

A SHOT! A bullet explodes out of his chest as he falls, face down, revealing... NAWI, her rescuer, lowering the pistol. Nawi, for the first time, sees that Nanisca, her mother, has come to rescue her. This time, NANISCA DOESN'T LOOK AWAY. So much passes between them, but before they can say even one word to each other...

WHITE SLAVERS APPROACH, running toward them, on either side. The two Agojie warriors, mother and daughter, turn and fight, back to back, dispatching them with almost balletic grace.

As the men fall, they exchange a look. Nawi tosses Nanisca a blunderbuss from one of the dead men. Nanisca looks at it. The source of so much horror. She tosses it with disdain. Grips her machete. Calls to her warriors.

NANISCA (CONT'D)  
*Eh-dabo, Agojie!*

143 EXT. OUIDAH SHORELINE - DAWN 143

The shore is chaos, the town square in flames. A Portuguese sailor from the ship frantically waves Ferreira and Malik onto his rowboat as they march with their enslaved captives.

Malik stares at the bound men and women. Then he rises, knife in hand and cuts the rope that binds them! The Krumen as well as the now-freed Africans pour back toward shore, pulling the Slavers into the water with them. FERREIRA TRIES TO ESCAPE. THEY SHOUT AND GRAB HIS ARMS, HIS LEGS...

FERREIRA  
No! Malik!

Malik turns away. Splashes into the water toward a long boat bobbing there. Two Krumen are suddenly beside him. He thinks they are going to drag him back, but they get into the boat.

AFRICAN KRUMEN  
Come brother! You cannot stay here!

Malik gets in, as Ferreira is swallowed up into the violent crowd, screaming...

144 EXT. BAY - CONTINUOUS 144

Malik rows with the Krumen. He sees NAWI some distance away, with Nanisca and other Agojie women, standing on the rocks.

THEIR EYES MEET. They do not know what the future holds, but for now they must follow their own paths. Nawi nods to him. He nods back. HIS POV: He sees Nawi turn to escape the town, running with her Agojie sisters.

145 EXT. HILLS ABOVE OUIDAH - MORNING 145

The Agojie and the Migan lead the escaped captives on a march. At the head of the ragtag group, Nawi and Nanisca walk, side by side. Amenza is behind them, looking at their body language, how similar they are as they walk in front of her.

Nawi looks out to sea. A SHIP FLYING THE FLAG OF SPAIN, sails billowing, catches the trade winds that will carry it away from the slave coast.

The Agojie veer away from the freed captives, who march in another direction, heading for their homes. As the Agojie fall in together, THE TEENAGE GIRL from the Barracoons runs to them, to Nawi.

TEENAGE GIRL

Take me with you. I want to be an Agojie.

Nawi allows her to fall in step with her, bringing her along with this tribe of fierce women.

146 EXT. STREETS OF ABOMEY - DAY

146

The small, wounded band of Agojie, and the Migan. As they trudge down toward the palace, all around them, the Dahomey people gather. A cheer begins to ripple through the crowd, started by village women, but picked up by all.

PEOPLE OF ABOMEY

*Miganon! Miganon!*

In the crowd, Nawi sees some familiar faces... her friend Dayo, full of pride. Her adoptive parents, Moru and Ydande, amazed at her transformation.

ON NAWI... feeling pride and a sense of belonging that no one can take away from her. She sees ABADE, the man who would be her husband, in the crowd. She raises her chin in triumph. He sees her, then casts his eyes down, as is the custom. She smiles.

ON NANISCA AND AMENZA... they notice the gates to the palace are open, they notice flags flying. They move inside, followed by the Agojie women in the rescue party...

147 EXT. PALACE - PALACE SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

147

They see lines of Agojie warriors, male warriors assembled. The dais is occupied with the wives of the King. SHANTE IS THERE, ARRAYED MAGNIFICENTLY IN THE PINK SILK ROBE, HER HAIR PILED HIGH. And then, she hears the commotion of Nanisca and the band of rescuers entering the courtyard...

ON GHEZO, in his throne, frowning to see Nanisca's return.

He is surprised to hear the people cheering as they flow into the courtyard behind the Agojie, chanting. "Na-nis-ca! Na-nis-ca!" And more significantly, "Kpo-ji-to!"

ON THE DAIS, Ghezo stands, with his wives, with all of his ministers from the cabinet. He looks around, the cheering for Nanisca echoing in his ears. Shante stares daggers at the crowd. She is ready for her own cheers, but they do not come.

The Migan takes his place among the assembled male warriors.

Nanisca walks forward. She takes off her machete and lays it on the ground. She bows to King Ghezo, laying her head down into the dirt. Ghezo walks down the steps and comes to stand in front of her. He speaks to her -- only her.

GHEZO

You disobeyed your king.

NANISCA

I will resign my command.

A beat. He reaches down and picks up her machete. It is heavy in his hands.

ON NAWI... concerned, not sure what will happen. ALL AROUND... THE PEOPLE TAKE UP THEIR CHANT AGAIN... Na-nis-ca, Na-nis-ca!

Ghezo rises to the dais. He turns toward the assembled troops and palace retinue. EVERY SOLDIER IN THE PARADE GROUND drops to a knee and bow their heads.

GHEZO

We have ended the rule of the Oyo Empire!

A chant begins, low and rhythmic, in the male corps...

MALE SOLDIERS

Ghezo, Ghezo, Ghezo!

GHEZO

Many never thought it possible. But others had a vision.

Ghezo looks at Nanisca.

GHEZO (CONT'D)

That is what makes a great leader. Seeing what others do not.

Nanisca reacts.

GHEZO (CONT'D)

What the Europeans and the Americans have seen is that to hold a people in chains, one must first convince them they are meant to be bound. We have joined them in becoming our own oppressors. No more. No more.

Murmurs throughout the crowd. His council look at each other.

GHEZO (CONT'D)

We are a warrior people. There is power in our minds, our culture, our unity. We are limitless if we understand our power. I will lead with this vision. A vision that is shared.

Ghezo looks at Nanisca.

GHEZO (CONT'D)

Heroes of Dahomey! Behold, the bravest of the brave, chosen of Ghezo, elevated in his name to the sacred title of *Kpojito*! Nanisca, the Woman King!

The crowd CHEERS. He holds out his hand. Nanisca rises and walks up the steps to the dais. She stands with Ghezo, who LIFTS HER ARM. Louder CHEERS erupt! Music plays. Shante sinks to seated, disappointed, but unable to deny the will of the people.

ON NANISCA'S FACE, there is weariness, pride. She acknowledges the King, the people. She sees Nawi disappearing out of the crowd.

148 INT. PALACE - RITUAL GARDEN - LATE DAY

148

Nawi comes into the garden, still wearing her soiled lace garments, now torn. She kneels at the altar of the ancestors. Lays out an offering of food... Behind her, someone enters the chamber, comes to kneel beside her. It is Nanisca. They stay there, together, in silence.

NAWI

An offering. For Izogie.

NANISCA

She does not want that fruit. She wants this.

Nanisca puts a bottle of whiskey on the altar. Nawi stares at the whiskey, feeling the loss of her friend, and much more.

NAWI

In my blood is the blood of a killer. A man who brought great pain to you...

NANISCA

You are an Agojie.  
(beat)  
It is not your fault. What happened to me. You are not the thing that hurt me.

Nawi's eyes fill. Wishes she could believe her.

NANISCA (CONT'D)

You survived, because you are meant to be here. You are... Nawi. My daughter. But I do not have the right to claim that...  
(a beat)  
My comrade. Perhaps we can start from there.

Nanisca does not kill her tears. Nawi, overwhelmed and emotional, gets up and leaves. Nanisca stays within...

149

EXT. PALACE - AGOJIE COURTYARD - NIGHT

149

A HUGE CELEBRATION of dancing. Nanisca, as usual, stays on the sidelines as Agojie dance with abandon, then she sees... NAWI, coming out from the barracks. She wears her Agojie breastplate. The dirt and wounds have been cleaned. Nawi sees Fumbe and smiles, joining her in the dance.

Nanisca smiles, relieved. And then Nawi breaks free from the dance. Agojie chant, *Mi-ga-non, Mi-ga-non*. Nawi comes to Nanisca. She leans in, whispers in her ear --

NAWI

Mother. Will you dance?

Nanisca feels Nawi's gesture of acceptance, and forgiveness. She TAKES NAWI'S HAND...

The women PAIR OFF. As is their custom, they hold each other's faces. Nawi lays her two hands on NANISCA'S FACE. Nanisca does the same to her. They dance together, forehead to forehead. EYES UP. NEVER LOOKING AWAY. The triumphant music floats up...

150 EXT. HILLS ABOVE OUIDAH - DAY

150

A GROUP OF AGOJIE look out over the ocean, Nawi and Nanisca at the head of them. Nanisca looks through the spyglass, hands it to Nawi to look through. HER POV: The last of the tall ships, leave the coast of Africa, fading into the distance.

NAWI

They are leaving.

NANISCA

For now. They will return.

NAWI

And we will be ready.

The two women look out to sea as we...

SMASH TO BLACK.