

THE CALLING DARK

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Formatting Note:
Player control - BOLD
Cutscenes/Cinematics - NORMAL

1 BLACK SCREEN 1

Text: "If you talk to the animals, they will talk with you, and you will know each other. If you do not talk to them, you will not know them and what you do not know, you will fear. What one fears, one destroys." - Chief Dan George, Tsleil-Waututh Nation

Begin montage (w/credits)

2 EXT. APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS - DAWN 2

Rolling, forested hills spanning into the distance. A mighty mountain range cutting through. Fog rests over the hills like a sheer blanket illuminated by the cold dawn...

...Far below, the forest is dense, the trees cast long shadows. It's dewy and idyllic - unsettling...

...Deeper into the forest, darker and denser...

...A small creek through a clearing. Just beside it, the old remnants of a small campfire...

...Deeper into the forest...

...The trees are ancient; the stories they could tell - especially one towering giant with eery, strange symbols etched into its bark...

...Deeper and deeper through the trees...

...A lone yet imposing totem pole covered in creeping vines and moss...

3 EXT. APPALACHIA - RANCH - CONTINUOUS 3

...A dewy, mist-laden 19th-century horse ranch. All is quiet, sleepy...

...The cold sun casts long shadows over a paddock, and the surrounding forest looms dark and foreboding...

4 INT. RANCH STABLES - CONTINUOUS 4

...Some horses huff and stir, the other stalls empty. Through the long passage, the main ranch house stands proud in the distance...

5 EXT. RANCH HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER 5

N'KOA (18) - with the fluid confidence of someone raised among horses and an untamed wildness in her eyes - jogs down the porch stairs and makes her way to the stables.

She wrings her gloved hands together, her breath escaping in small clouds.

End montage.

6 INT. RANCH STABLES - MOMENTS LATER 6

N'koa walks through the stables, touching an old mare's nose as she passes.

She stops at the last stall, peers in. A young horse lays on its hay bed. It lifts its heavy head.

N'KOA
Hey there, fighter. Feeling strong today?

It huffs at her, she chuckles.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
Good morning to you, too.

She turns toward the tack room.

7 INT. RANCH STABLES - TACK ROOM - CONTINUOUS 7

She enters the room and looks around at the equipment.

You look around the tack room, examine the equipment. You spot a note on the saddle rack. It reads:

"Saw the sun before you, today. Stalls are clean. Water troughs filled. Hay nets done. Our sick friend still needs tending. Seems brighter today, but watches for your face, not mine. Happy birthday. -Tala"

You put the note down.

YOU
Thanks, tala.

You pick up brushes and a new blanket, then leave for the stall. When you approach, the horse is on its legs and craning its neck.

YOU (CONT'D)
Look at you! You're feeling brighter today, then?

You enter the stall and proceed to groom. You start with a curry comb, using gentle circular motions. The horse bobs it's head.

YOU (CONT'D)
Feel good? Gramps thinks you're
getting stronger every day,
father's a little more reluctant.

You move around to the other side.

YOU (CONT'D)
It's a wonder you're so patient
with me. I think you just like
having someone to talk to.

The horse huffs.

YOU (CONT'D)
(chuckle)
Don't get me wrong - I like talking
to you, too. I just wish you could
actually talk back.

Next, you use the dandy brush to remove loosened dirt and hair.

YOU (CONT'D)
Had that dream again last night,
the one I told you about...that
same woman, in the forest. And she
was singing that same song up to
the moon...

You move around and continue.

YOU (CONT'D)
She gets more familiar every time.
And no, I haven't mentioned this to
tala. He'd just tell me I have a
wild imagination - just like my
mother's.

You move onto the body brush, using long, gentle strokes.

YOU (CONT'D)
Don't tell anyone, but... Every
night it happens, it feels more and
more like, maybe, it's her I'm
dreaming about. Not that I know
what she looks like.

You move around - long, soothing strokes.

YOU (CONT'D)
But I feel it. Not her; more like
I'm feeling myself? But in a
different way...a lost way. I don't
know how to describe it.

**Finally, you use a wide-toothed wooden comb for the mane and
tail. You start with the mane.**

YOU (CONT'D)
And then I wake up and stare at the
trees, the mountains. And I dare to
imagine that she's out there,
somewhere. If she's alone or...if
she's with her family. Our family.

You move and crouch to comb the tail.

YOU (CONT'D)
And then I feel horrible for even
thinking it, because I've got *tala*,
and gramps and nana. And they've
done so much for me. I love them.
And that's enough. It has to be
enough.

N'koa finishes the tail, gets up and moves around to hold
the horse's jaw. She stares into its eyes for a few moments.

N'KOA
But if she's out there...wouldn't
she wonder about me, too?

She kisses its muzzle.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
Thanks for listening. But this is
our little secret, okay? As a
little gift on my birthday.

The horse shakes its mane.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
(giggle)
I know, I hardly believe it myself.
Now, you behave in there.

She picks up the brushes and leaves.

8 INT. RANCH STABLES - TACK ROOM - CONTINUOUS 8

She tidies up the equipment, putting everything in its place. She spots TAKODA (40) through the window longeing a young gelding in the main corral.

9 EXT. RANCH GROUNDS - MOMENTS LATER 9

N'koa jogs up to the fence and hops up, leaning on her forearms.

He smiles at her, eyes wrinkled with crows feet from years of easy laughter. He turns his attention back to the horse, clicking his tongue and speaking gentle commands. His authority and handling is effortless, like the gelding is an extension of his own self, despite the male's agitation.

N'koa admires his work with affection.

TAKODA
How is our fighter?

N'KOA
On strong legs this morning.

TAKODA
I don't know, I saw a very sorry
state earlier.

N'KOA
Maybe I just have a special touch.
(chuckles)

Takoda hums in thought. Then gestures.

TAKODA
Come. Let's put that "special
touch" to use.

N'KOA
(hesitates)
I don't know. He looks...unstable.

TAKODA
I'm right here. Show me what you've
learned.

N'koa hops over the fence into the corral. Takoda calls the gelding to a stop, tugs him closer.

You approach Takoda. He extends the lead to you, gestures towards the gelding. You take the lead, stroke his muzzle.

YOU
Hopefully you're as patient with me
as your friend is.

Takoda clicks his tongue, the gelding trots to the edge.

(Tutorial sequence)

TAKODA
Let's take this slow.

You hold the lead, guide the gelding in a circle around you.

TAKODA (CONT'D)
He's agitated and nervous. Try calm
him down. Have you been practicing
what I taught you?

YOU
Uhh, sure. I think I've got it...?

(Dialogue options, possibly timed)

YOU (CONT'D)
Súnka shimána...?
(Mahkeya: "Be peaceful,
horse")

The horse flicks his mane.

TAKODA
Good. Although you can do better.
He's still nervous, he senses your
doubt. If you want him to be at
peace, you yourself must be at
peace.

YOU
Alright...
(clears throat)
Súnka shimána.

The gelding shakes out his neck, legs more relaxed.

TAKODA
Better! Now, get him into a gentle
trot, but remember to keep pace,
keep control.

Two tongue clicks and the gelding accelerates into a trot.

TAKODA (CONT'D)
Hánu!
(MORE)

TAKODA (CONT'D)
 ("Yes")
 Faster, now.

Two more tongue clicks into a gentle canter. You must keep control of the lead or the horse will grow more agitated.

TAKODA (CONT'D)
 Good, I think that's enough. Let's stop for now. Do you remember?

YOU
 Yes, it's the one phrase I painfully remember.

TAKODA
Tsk, your arm healed just fine. It wasn't the worst fall I've seen.

YOU
 Okay, hear me, friend. *Íshta, íshta.*
 ("stand, stand" - halt command)

The gelding huffs, hesitantly slows to a stop. Takoda whistles the horse over.

The horse walks over to Takoda, offers his muzzle. N'koa hands the lead back.

N'KOA
 He doesn't like me very much, does he?

TAKODA
 He neither likes nor dislikes you.

Takoda cradles the gelding's head, whispers calming words in Mahkeya.

TAKODA (CONT'D)
 He senses your doubt. Most living things have lost spiritual connection with each other. But horses are special. Sacred. They have a connection to the spirit world, a powerful connection. So, they can sense when one is spiritually unbalanced.

N'koa doesn't respond - she stares at the gelding, into his eyes.

The male's eyes are a dark brown, the richest brown imaginable, bright with life and intense awareness.

Takoda watches her for a few moments.

TAKODA (CONT'D)
Come, I think this one's had enough
handling for today.

They lead the horse back to the stables.

The cold dawn slowly turns to the chilled stirring of a new morning. The sun peaks over the trees, the ranch bathed in waking light.

10 EXT. RANCH STABLES - MORNING

10

Later, the gelding is untacked and out to pasture.

You're in the stables, Takoda idly sweeping away. He stops when you talk to him.

YOU
Thanks for doing my chores earlier.
Why were you up so early?

TAKODA
Hmm. The best thing to do with
restless thoughts is to busy
yourself from them. And I thought
I'd give you an easier day today.

YOU
What were you thinking about?

TAKODA
Don't concern yourself with an old
man's worries. There's still much
to do, though.

YOU
Ah, yes. An easier day. What do you
need?

TAKODA
Well, I don't think Sarah's gone
out to collect the eggs. You could
start with that? Oh, and we've also
run out of that poultice for our
patient over there, so you'll need
to raid her garden and make a new
batch. Do you remember how?

YOU
I think so?

TAKODA
Good. And then when you're done,
come find me. I need your help with
the boundary fences.

YOU
Again? What is it this time? A
rogue cow? Why can't gramps go
instead?

TAKODA
He's got his hands full. And, we're
doing our job.

YOU
Anything else?

TAKODA
Hmm. No, not yet.

YOU
Alright, I'll get right to it.

**You are free to explore the ranch, the Main House, and
complete side Duties.**

11 INT. RANCH HOUSE - MORNING

11

The kitchen is warm - not just from the small stove fire,
but the atmosphere; the floral decals on the wall; herbs
hanging from the ceiling next to cast-iron pots and pans;
the bright curtains drifting idly on the breeze.

You place the basket on the table. The house is quiet. You
hear a meow - MAPLE, a light-brown, almost ginger Siberian
cat sidles into the kitchen, weaves between your legs.

You bend down to pet her, she trills in response.

YOU
Come to spy on me, have you?

Maple *meows* up at you.

You can explore to find interactable items.

12 EXT. RANCH GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS

12

You leave the house towards the side garden.

Down a small path is a sizable, enclosed glass greenhouse surrounded by external beds.

13

INT. RANCH GREENHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

13

Inside, the greenhouse is lush with rows of herbs, vegetables, flowers and greenery. You walk through the rows, naming a few that Sara's taught you as you stop to admire.

As N'koa reaches the end of the row, she jumps slightly, finding SARAH (61) tending to her plants. She looks up with the kind of smile that invites safety, but eyes twinkling with mischief that belies her grandmotherly presence.

N'KOA

Nana, I wasn't expecting to see you here.

SARAH

Really? In my own greenhouse? I must've woken up adventurous.
(chuckles)

N'koa looks around sheepishly.

SARAH (CONT'D)

I know why you're here. Your pa sent ya, didn't he.

N'KOA

We, uh, finished that poultice for umm-

SARAH

That one sure is taking its time. I think it just likes bein' doted on.

N'KOA

There's improvement.

SARAH

Hmm. Well, you two need'a stop stealin' my herbs. Otherwise I might just have to teach ya to grow your own. These little critters listen to ya, sometimes more than me.

N'KOA

I kind of have my hands full already.

SARAH

Those beasts are high maintenance,
aren't they. But take extra, that
should last ya. And use that
workspace, I don't need it right
now.

N'KOA

Thanks, nana.

Sarah returns to her plants, humming away.

YOU

Let's see if I remember what I
need.

**You explore the Greenhouse and collect what you need to mix
a soothing poultice: yarrow leaves, comfrey root, calendula
flowers, root resin, spring water.**

As N'koa finishes up, Sarah comes over to admire her work.

SARAH

I'm impressed. Your pa couldn't
have done it better. Speaking
of...he's been quiet recently.

Sarah walks N'koa through the greenhouse.

N'KOA

Really? I haven't really noticed.
Then again, I haven't really felt
like myself lately.

14

EXT. RANCH GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS

14

They stop outside. Sarah tugs her gloves off, stuffs them in
her apron pocket.

SARAH

Nightmares again?

N'KOA

Not really nightmares. They're
just...strange. I don't know.

Sarah places her hands on N'koa's shoulders.

SARAH

Firefly, you know you can always
talk to me about whatever you're
feelin'.

N'KOA

I know-

SARAH

But. You also need to know that you can talk to your pa. You're a grown woman now, but you'll never stop needing him.

N'KOA

I know. And I've tried. He just tells me to put my mind at rest, not to dwell on restless thoughts.

SARAH

Hmm. Maybe he believes that helps? Just keep trying.

Sarah puts her gloves back on and turns. She stops at the door.

SARAH (CONT'D)

And tell your pa not to forget about those fences. The old man is grumblin' about it.

N'KOA

We're leaving soon.

She nods then disappears into her greenhouse.

15

INT. RANCH STABLES - MOMENTS LATER

15

When you enter the stables, Takoda saddles up the young gelding and the old mare.

TAKODA

Good. Are you ready to head out?

You approach the horses.

N'koa caresses the mare's muzzle as Takoda finishes with the gelding.

N'KOA

Saw nana in the greenhouse. She doesn't want you stealing her herbs anymore.

TAKODA
 (chuckles)
 Yes, the woman who practically
 grows them for us.

N'KOA
 Gramps is complaining about the
 fence, apparently.

TAKODA
 Please-

He hefts a sack of wooden slats onto the back of the saddle,
 ties them down.

TAKODA (CONT'D)
 I only found out this morning.

N'KOA
 You walked the boundary? Why?

N'koa mounts her horse, checks the stirrups and saddle.
 Takoda is silent for a while.

TAKODA
 I needed to check the wards.

He mounts the gelding, clicks his tongue, N'koa follows
 suit. They exit the stables at a gentle walk.

16 EXT. RANCH GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS

16

N'KOA
 You know, I don't think I've ever
 asked, but why do you check them?
 It's not like they've ever broken.
 Do they even do anything?

Takoda looks over at her with an unreadable smile.

TAKODA
 Leave an old man to his
 superstitions. Come.

With clicks and heel taps, they trot through the ranch and
 head into the bordering woods.

17 EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - RANCH BOUNDARY - MORNING

17

**Dappled sunlight filters through the canopy of ancient oaks
 and pines, casting golden patterns across the forest floor.
 Birds call from the branches above, their songs mingling
 with the soft rustling of leaves in the breeze.**

You follow Takoda on horseback along the trail at a gentle walk.

He takes a long exhale.

TAKODA

The forest feels alive today. How's that old girl treating you?

(Dialogue options)

YOU

I think she's enjoying the scenery as much as I am.

Takoda looks over his shoulder.

TAKODA

She's content. See her ears? What do you notice?

YOU

They're resting to the sides, sometimes twitching around.

TAKODA

What does that tell you?

YOU

That she's relaxed, but alert to sounds around us?

TAKODA

Good. At least I know you still listen to some things.

(Dialogue options)

YOU

Only the things I actually want to listen to.

TAKODA

Selective hearing. Am I talking to my daughter or my own horse?

YOU

What was that?

TAKODA

Funny.

You come to a dead log in the path. Takoda skirts it, but you tap your heels and the mare hops over.

There's a comfortable silence between you. You take in the flourishing sounds of nature.

There's a rocky dip in the ground. You carefully control the mare, leaning back then forward as you clear the ditch.

TAKODA (CONT'D)

Your mother could name every plant
and every little creature in this
forest.

YOU

...What?

TAKODA

I could listen to her for hours,
telling me how each little plant,
even the seemingly insignificant
ones, all have a purpose.

(Dialogue options)

YOU

But- You hardly ever talk about
her? Where's this come from?

TAKODA

I don't know. When I think about
Sarah and her greenhouse, I think
they might've gotten along well.

YOU

I wouldn't know.

It comes out sharper than completely intended.

TAKODA

I do. It's like I'm with her every
day.

A heavy silence falls as you continue along the trail.

Eventually, the trees thin out.

TAKODA (CONT'D)

Here we are. Hitch up.

You enter a clearing, spot a wooden fence illuminated under the sun. It spans far, running all the way through the forest.

You dismount and hitch your horse to a small tree next to the gelding.

Takoda dismounts and hefts the slats off the saddle.

TAKODA (CONT'D)
Remember your gloves.

You take them out of your saddle pouch, pull them on.

You join Takoda by the fence as he assesses the damage.

Multiple slats are lying splintered in the grass, some barely hanging onto the rest of the fence. The fence itself is splintered and bent, like-

N'KOA
Something crashed through.

Takoda kneels down, runs a gloved hand along the wood. He picks up a broken slat.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
That's some angry rogue cow. A
bull, maybe?

Takoda doesn't respond. He watches the treeline, then drops his tool satchel.

TAKODA
Let's get to work.

They work together replacing slats, fitting them back into the fence, wiring coil. They're out of breath and shining with sweat.

N'KOA
So- Have you and gramps decided
what you're gonna do with him?

Takoda looks up, N'koa nods her head to the gelding. They huff as they lift another slat together.

TAKODA
Abram wants me to train him for
cattle drives.

N'KOA
Cattle drives? Gramps doesn't have
cattle. Or other riders.

TAKODA
(sigh)
I shouldn't be telling you this.
Not yet.

N'KOA
What is it?

TAKODA
I've suggested for us
to...relocate. All of us. Bigger
land, resources. And now he's stuck
with the idea.

N'KOA
Relocate? But, we can't just move
an entire ranch?

TAKODA
No, but we can build a new one.
He's been talking about cattle,
there's wealth in that. And I think
it's in our best interest to find
better land.

N'koa stands, stretches out. She bends down to grab her
water.

YOU
What do you mean wealth? And why
would we need better land? This is
just fine.
(takes a sip)

TAKODA
Abram and I think it's time to find
somewhere closer to civilisation,
to people. We are isolated out
here. And struggling.

N'koa returns to helping.

N'KOA
We're not struggling. And we're not
isolated. We're just- We just don't
need anyone else. We're safe and
protected from other people. You
said yourself, there are some who-

TAKODA
It's not the people I'm worried
about anymore.

N'koa pauses, tilts her head. Takoda falters, then stops.

N'KOA
Does nana know?

TAKODA
...She's on the fence.

He glances over at the slats.

TAKODA (CONT'D)
So to speak.

There's no humor in N'koa's face.

N'KOA
This is all I- all we've ever
known. And now you want to just
pack up and leave?

Takoda sits back to rest, takes a sip of his water.

TAKODA
It's not that simple, it would take
time. But think about the space we
could have, the horses you could
train. There'd be more hands
around, you could even meet people
your own age-

N'KOA
Wait. What do you mean, you're not
worried about the people?

Takoda pauses, then-

A rustle in the trees.

Takoda shoots to his feet.

The horses start to snort and paw at the ground, shaking
their heads. N'koa watches their ears swivel in all
directions, turns to Takoda-

He's already a few paces beyond the fence staring into the
dark, dense forest.

N'koa watches his tight back, the darkness of the forest
like a sleeping mammoth before him. The glaring sunlight
seems to stop at the treeline.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
Tala, what is it?

Takoda squints his eyes, steadies his breathing.

The forest beyond is still, holding its breath. The warmth
of the sun doesn't penetrate...birds don't sing...

...life doesn't stir - completely absent.

He backs up slowly.

TAKODA
Gather our things.

N'koa stands, gathers the tools and supplies.

N'KOA
What is it, a bear? Maybe it's that
cow-

TAKODA
Mount up. Let's go.

N'KOA
But the fence-

TAKODA
Let's go.

He turns quickly towards the horses.

N'koa stops, faces the forest. Still no sign of life, but
she swallows hard.

They secure everything to their saddles, mount, then trot
away from the clearing back to the ranch.

18

INT. RANCH STABLES - MIDDAY

18

The once-dewy morning has turned overcast as a slight breeze
blows in fallen leaves.

Takoda and N'koa dismount. He's tense, refuses to look at
her. He swiftly untacks the horses. N'koa watches.

N'KOA
What was that? What did you see?

Takoda doesn't speak; instead clips on the leads and walks
them out to pasture. She follows.

19

EXT. RANCH GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS

19

N'KOA
What broke those fences?

Takoda unlatches the gate then lets the horses off, watches
as they stride further afield before closing it again.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
 Why do we need to find new land?
 This is our home! What are you so
 worried about-

Takoda snaps around, the leads swinging in his fist.

TAKODA
 -N'koa. Please.
 (sigh)
 Do not worry about things you don't
 understand.

N'koa folds her arms.

N'KOA
 I'm an adult now. That has to be
 worth something.

He sighs, walks up to her and caresses her cheek.

TAKODA
 I understand it may seem like I'm
 keeping things from you. But one
 day, you'll understand why -
 understand that I do everything I
 can to protect you.

N'KOA
 Protect me from what?

Takoda just smiles, then drops his hand.

TAKODA
 Take the rest of the day. I'll see
 you tonight. I have a surprise.

Before she can say anything, Takoda leaves her standing
 under heavy grey clouds. She watches the treeline swaying in
 the restless breeze.

20

EXT. RANCH GROUNDS - NIGHT

20

N'koa walks through the pasture fields, up a small hill. The
 grounds are illuminated a rich green under the waning moon,
 the stars bright enough to light her way.

She spots the large, ANCIENT BEECH TREE at the top of the
 hill, and the warm glow of a fire beneath it.

When she reaches the top, Takoda is sat on a log bench
 before a small campfire. He smiles up at her.

TAKODA
Care to join me on this fine
evening?

N'koa sits next to him, playfully thinks for a moment.

N'KOA
Hmm. I don't think I had anywhere
else to be. Gramps and nana are
conveniently busy.

TAKODA
(Chuckles)
I told them I wanted you to myself
tonight. I have a gift.

He pulls out a leather cord, and at the end of it, an
intricately carved wooden sparrow, with tiny turquoise chips
for eyes. He loops it over her head.

She holds the sparrow, careful with its wings.

N'KOA
You made this?

TAKODA
If you don't like it, I'm sure
Sarah-

N'KOA
No!
(giggles)
No, I love it. It's beautiful.
Thank you, *tala*.

She wraps her arms around him. They hold each other for a
moment. He pulls away first.

He watches her studying the sparrow, purses his lips.

TAKODA
I wanted you to have something to
remind you of your mother.

She whips her head.

N'KOA
What?

He watches the sparrow now, hanging around her neck.

TAKODA
She was my sparrow. Always wild,
always free.

Flashback.

EXT. FOREST STREAM - DAY

A woman with flowing black hair and warm skin frolicks through the trickling stream, her laugh like the sunlight glittering her cheeks.

She stops and turns, dances and kicks up water. The droplets sparkle like jewels.

Present.

EXT. RANCH GROUNDS - NIGHT

TAKODA

Wherever she stepped, whatever she touched, came alive. She had an intimate relationship with Life itself - like she had one foot here, with me, and another...somewhere I could never reach.

N'KOA

She sounds beautiful.

Takoda takes her hand, squeezes.

TAKODA

You are my greatest gift, N'koa. You remind me that she's never left...because I see her in you, every day.

Tears spill down N'koa's cheeks, her eyes sparkle.

Takoda clears his throat and pulls away, reaches behind the log.

TAKODA (CONT'D)

I do have another gift.

N'koa chuckles and wipes her eyes.

He turns and presents an old bottle, completely bare, save for old twin wrapped around its head. The dark amber liquid inside sloshes and sparkles against the fire.

N'koa flicks wide eyes up at him.

N'KOA

Don't tell me...

TAKODA
(chuckles)
Don't tell gramps.

N'KOA
Tala! He's going to kill you.

TAKODA
He'll get over himself.

He pops the cork then pours a dribble into a small cup. He hands it to her. When she reaches out, he pulls back.

TAKODA (CONT'D)
We're going to behave, alright?

N'KOA
Please.
(takes the cup)
This stuff smells like oil.

EXT. RANCH GROUNDS - LATER

The waning moon peaks around wispy clouds.

Takoda and N'koa bellow out laughter, now sat on the ground, backs against the log. They both take another sip.

N'KOA
I'm anxious to see how you plan on replacing gramps' now-empty bottle.

TAKODA
This is oil compared to the others, he won't notice.

N'KOA
You gave me the bad stuff?!

TAKODA
(winks)
It's the best stuff.

N'koa discards her empty cup and stands. She stumbles a step, but catches herself with a giggle.

N'KOA
I think I'm going to turn in, it's pretty late. I've no doubt you're going to work me hard tomorrow.

TAKODA
Bright and early.

N'KOA
 Naturally.
 (pauses)
 Thanks, *tala*. For everything.

Takoda nods. She turns and heads down the hill.

Takoda watches her leave, then turns his gaze to the moon...
 ...to a sparrow soaring overhead.

INT. RANCH HOUSE - N'KOA'S BEDROOM - LATER

Beads of sweat pearl along N'koa's hairline. Eyebrows scrunched, she whimpers and tosses.

[Dream]

Through her eyes, we see N'koa crashing through the forest. She claws at branches and brambles as she cries out, breathless.

SEQUOYAH
Keep moving!

N'koa speaks, but it's not her voice.

You push through the dense forest, running and running-

You stumble into a moon-washed clearing. A fog rolls in from the trees. And in the centre, a woman [SEQUOYAH] with flowing black hair and warm skin. She sings up at the moon in Mahkeya. You move toward her, your movements slow. Her singing gets clearer, more desperate. She holds something in her arms...

Closer, you see tears streaking her face, and in her arms...

A baby, motionless. The rag is soaked red.

You cry out. And then:

YOU
 ...It's you...

Finally, her face turns to you-

-but she's faceless, and instead you stare into shadow so dark it devours all light. A screeching sparrow flies out from its depths-

N'koa shoots upright with an agonising cry, clutching the sparrow pendant against her chest. Tears stain her cheeks, breathing frantic.

She swings her legs over, tries and fails to steady her breathing.

She looks down at her sparrow-

A GUTTURAL HOWL cleaves the night air...

...echoed by the screeching of horses.

N'koa shoots across her room to the window.

Outside, the ranch is dark, darker than before. Black clouds shield against the stars and waning moon. But she spots no movement and...

...in the distance, under the old tree...

No campfire. Complete darkness.

N'KOA

Tala...

INT. RANCH HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

You exit the room and creep through the dark house, careful not to disturb any floorboards.

Downstairs, the curtains dance on a phantom breeze-

MEOW-

Maple scurries out of the darkness through the house, tail full and low.

You jump, knocking an ornament behind you. If you don't catch it in time, it smashes to the floor.

You hurry out of the house.

I/E. RANCH GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS

You dart across the ranch, through the stables, greeted by the anxious sick horse bobbing his head.

But you ignore him and continue through the paddock, reaching the pasture fields...

N'koa slows to a stop. Her bottom lip trembles.

Sprawled before her...half a dozen dark mounds...

She forces her feet forward...step by step...closer..

She cries out, clutches her throat-

Dead horses litter the field, ripped open, their innards darkening the earth beneath - eyes left wide in terror.

She sobs as she walks among them, stopping when she spots the old mare she rode earlier today-

-something grabs her ankle-

-she screams, turns-

-then drops to her knees...

A few feet away, Takoda lies clutching his side, blood spilling from his mouth.

Her sobs are breathless as she crawls to him.

N'KOA
Tala...tala please...no...please...

TAKODA
...N'koa...

He coughs and sputters.

She reaches him, assesses his wounds-

His left side is shredded, blood spills through his fingers. Her hands shake, touch everywhere to hold, to fix...*something*.

Takoda's trembling hand takes her own.

TAKODA (CONT'D)
My daughter...

ABRAM AND SARAH (O.C.)
N'KOA!

In the distance, their faint voices cry out for her.

TAKODA
...listen to me...

N'KOA
*Tala, don't speak. Help is coming,
just hold on, please-*

TAKODA
...Please, listen to me... She
never left...

N'KOA
 (stutters)
 W-what do you mean?

TAKODA
 She never left...she's been with
 you all this time... You have to
 follow the Sparrow...

N'KOA
 ...the sparrow? I don't know what
 you're saying!

She cries desperate tears now. He coughs, moans. Blood pours
 into the grass.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
Tala! Please, you can't leave me! I
 need you! *Please don't leave me!*

TAKODA
 ...I'll always be with you...I'll
 be with you when you find
 them...when you find...find her...

His throat gurgles, his eyes fade...

...his hand drops.

N'KOA
Tala?

She nudges him. Then again.

TAKODA
Tala.

She shakes him, pleads his name over and over, begs for him
 to stay...

Sarah and ABRAM (61), the hard lines of his face taught,
 slow to a stop, breathless. Abram looks around at the
 carcasses, clutching his hair. Sarah steps forward, slow.
 Silent tears run from her eyes.

SARAH
 Firefly...

N'koa's shoulders shake, her hair shielding her face...

...and when she looks up, tears streak through the bloodied
 handprint on her cheek.

INT. RANCH HOUSE - N'KOA'S BEDROOM - MORNING

N'koa sits on the floor, back against the bed, and stares out the window. Her skin is pale, dark circles under her eyes.

She stares ahead, her eyes distant. In her hands, she toys with the sparrow pendant.

A knock at her door.

Sarah peaks her head in.

SARAH

Hi, Firefly. May I come in?

N'koa doesn't stir, doesn't acknowledge her at all.

Sarah moves carefully towards the bed, sits on the corner. She holds an old, LEATHER JOURNAL in her hands.

For a few moments, they sit in silence. Sarah stares out the window overlooking the ranch.

In the distance, Abram ties a heavy rope around a dead horse, pauses to wipe his brow.

SARAH (CONT'D)

He's gon' break his back out there, the poor fool. At least he's doing somethin' for once.

N'koa drops her head, her only movement.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Now, you don't have to do or say anything, alright? You can sit here for as long as ya need. But... I thought you'd wanna know that we're holding vigil for your daddy tonight. At your tree. I thought we could tie ribbons.

N'koa turns her head slightly towards Sarah.

SARAH (CONT'D)

A tradition, in our family, when someone... Well, we say a prayer, or wish, for them and tie a ribbon - so they can remember their way home.

When N'koa speaks, the sound is small and distant.

N'KOA

I think he'd like that. Thank you.

Sarah smiles, looks down at the journal.

SARAH

I also have a gift.

N'koa turns, notices the journal in her lap.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Think of it like a late birthday gift. He entrusted me with this, told me to give it to you when the time was right.

N'koa reaches out, gently takes the journal into her own lap - traces the frayed edges.

Sarah rests her hand on N'koa's cheek, the girl looks up.

SARAH (CONT'D)

He was a very special man. And he was very proud of you. I know you may be feeling lost - I miss my daddy every day. But I can promise you, no matter what, you will always have a family - with us.

N'koa doesn't speak - a single tear trails from her lashes.

Sarah gets up and leaves. N'koa watches her go, then looks down at the journal. She rests her back against the bed once more.

N'KOA

What did you want to tell me?

You flip open the pages, read through different journal entries, swiping through sketches and ramblings, all stranger than the next.

"Great Sun, 1831

I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how to look after a baby. I'm afraid of doing this alone. I'm afraid of doing her wrong. But Abram and Sarah seem like good people. They didn't have to take us in. But I don't know if we'll stay. The old man says he could use the help, and Sarah seems taken with N'koa. I could see her running around her, free - she'd love the horses.

But when I took her for a walk, I noticed how she reached for the trees, as if she could see something I couldn't. She has her mother's gift - and it terrifies me. How do I prepare her for this burden when I barely understand it myself? I have nightmares of Nisuh's last words to me... 'The child will call the darkness, or the darkness will call the child.'"

You flip through more pages, strange sketches.

"Red Leaves, 1846

When I checked the wards today, something troubled me. Strange cuts again in the nearby trees, bleeding dark sap. I remember these. But it can't be them. I thought they died out. If not, I must urge Abram about leaving this place.

I've been considering something that pains my heart. I could risk the journey, bring N'koa to her mother's people. She'd be safe and protected. But Junaluska would turn me away. I'd be leaving her there, with a family she doesn't know.

I can barely remember the paths Sequoyah showed me so long ago to her people's hidden valley. My memory isn't what it was, but this is what I recall:"

Rough sketches of two paths: one winds through some trees, with a note about a poisoned grove and evil spirits; and another leads high up into the mountains, a crooked tree at its apex - and a note: 'Follow the white water to the singing stones'. This path continues to a depiction of a waterfall falling into a valley.

"Sequoyah, my free bird, I dream of you every night. I hear you calling for me, for N'koa. Soon, I'll be home."

N'koa shuts the journal, breaths ragged. Her eyes dart around, but she's somewhere else.

She jumps to her feet, clutches the journal.

You can explore the room, interact with items. And then you head downstairs.

INT. RANCH HOUSE - KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

You head downstairs, but the kitchen is empty. You hear muffled voices from the sitting room. You follow.

INT. RANCH HOUSE - SITTING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

When N'koa enters, Abram and Sarah turn from the window, startled to see her. Sarah steps forward.

SARAH
What is it, Firefly?

N'koa looks at Abram, but he stares out the window. She looks to Sarah.

N'KOA
I have to go.

SARAH
Go? Go where, hun?

N'koa gestures with the journal.

N'KOA
I have to leave. He wanted to
leave, to take me *here*.

Abram steps forward, a hand on Sarah's shoulders.

ABRAM
What do you mean he wanted to
leave?

N'KOA
My people - my family - are out
there, and he's showing me how to
get there.

SARAH
Firefly...

N'KOA
If there's even a chance that
she's- that my people are out
there, I have to know for myself-

ABRAM
So, wanna leave. You wanna go out
there, alone. After *everything*
we've done-

SARAH
Sweetheart, you have family here.
I'm sure your daddy would've loved
to take you there, but he's gone-

N'KOA
Exactly. He's gone. My mother is
gone. But their people-

ABRAM
-could be dead, too!

Silence falls. N'koa's eyes leak with fresh tears.

N'KOA
I'm asking for help. I need to
know. If there's even a chance...

Sarah steps forward, gently takes N'koa's shoulders.

SARAH
I told you that no matter what, you
always have a family here, with us.
And we'll be right here when you
return.

N'koa lets out a sob, then smiles. Sarah looks deep into her
eyes.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Are you sure? What about tonight?

N'KOA
He wouldn't want me to wait.

They hug, tight.

SARAH
Alright, then. I'll help you pack.
Abram, you sour bastard. Be useful
and get her supplies.

Abram scowls, grumbles something inaudible, then stalks out.
Sarah winks, then leaves - wipes at her eye.

**You look around the living room, interact with different
items.**

YOU
I should probably go talk to
gramps.

You make your way to the stables.

INT. RANCH STABLES - LATER

**You walk through the stables - they feel unsettlingly empty.
But you notice Abram at the end, saddling up the young horse
you cared for.**

N'koa stops behind them, looking around at the supplies gathered: a SATCHEL, QUIVER and an old ASH WOOD BOW.

N'KOA
That's my father's bow.

Abram finishes tightening a stirrup, then turns, looks at the supplies.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
You went through his things.

ABRAM
With his blessing, I assure you.

N'koa chews her lip, thinks. Abram continues with the saddle.

N'KOA
Did... He knew he was going to die.

Abram pauses for a moment, then continues.

ABRAM
Not exactly. I'll be honest, I didn't take your daddy's ramblings about spirits and...and Whites.

N'KOA
Whites?

ABRAM
But I did know that he grew scared. I didn't think that man could, and he wasn't scared for himself. He was scared for you. So, he made us promise that you get his...stuff, should anything happen. He wanted to keep you safe.

N'KOA
Yeah, in the dark, too.

Abram finishes, faces her.

ABRAM
I've never known a more honest man. This place won't be the same without him. Or you. But you deserve more than this. If what he said is true, you best be on your way, little Firefly.

N'koa jumps into his arms, hugs him tight.

He clears his throat, hesitantly pulls away.

ABRAM (CONT'D)
Now, I have a birthday gift of my own. Our stubborn soldier over here miraculously found a new will to live in the night. And, I'm not letting you go out there alone. So, this is yours.

N'KOA
Gramps...thank you.

ABRAM
Go on, then.

You now have the opportunity to fully customise your horse. You can change mane and tail, full body colourings, sex and breed. At the end, you can choose a name from the expanded list, each with their own meanings.

ABRAM (CONT'D)
That's a fine name. You'll be well taken care of.

SARAH (O.C.)
Wait!

They both turn to see Sarah hurrying through the stables with a LARGE SATCHEL.

When she reaches them, she checks the bag.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Clothes, food for a few days, some other things you might need. I even raided my own greenhouse. If you need anything out there, it'll be in this.

She hands it to N'koa; she swings it over her chest.

Sarah grabs her in for a tight squeeze.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Og, Firefly. What are we gonna do without you?

N'KOA
Like you said, you'll be here when I return. And I will. I promise.

She turns to Abram. He rests a gentle hand on her cheek.

ABRAM
Ready to go?

She nods. He cups his hands for her foot, then helps her up. When she's settled in the saddle, he secures the bow and quiver. And then he hands her his worn leather DAGGER AND SHEATH.

ABRAM (CONT'D)
You'll need this, too.

She secures it to her belt, gives them a final glance, then taps her heels.

EXT. RANCH GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS

On horseback, she exits the stables at a gentle walk. Abram and Sarah watch her leave. Abram holds his wife to his side.

N'koa checks the saddle, her satchel, all her supplies, then stops at the edge of the ranch boundary, the dirt path leading deep into the dense, looming forest ahead.

N'KOA
Here we go.

She taps the horse's neck, and then they move forward, on their journey home.

RUN TITLE SEQUENCE

ACT II

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - DAY

You follow the trail, take in the forest around you. You recognise natural resources Takoda taught you over the years.

Ancient trees tower all around you like sentries, canopy so dense the sunlight flitters down in ethereal shafts. Life calls out to itself, so natural, and so unknown to you. Your horse's ears swivel back and forth. The forest feels alive, watchful - as if a thousand eyes observe your passage with curious intent.

YOU
According to *tala's* journal, this should lead us either up the mountain or through the valley. What do you think?

Your horse huffs, shakes its mane.

YOU (CONT'D)

Well, we've still got a ways to go.

You explore the forest. The deeper you go, you start to notice strange markings on some of the trees. Some you recognise from the journal - others are crude and unsettling.

As it grows darker, the forest grows quieter.

N'koa's horse slows. She tilts her head.

N'KOA

What is it?

Flap- snap-

N'koa jumps and turns to the sound. A SPARROW hops on a nearby branch, chirps at her.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

(sigh)

Just a damn bird. Can I help you with something?

The bird chirps, takes off, then lands on a branch further off the trail. It chirps louder.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

Hmm... Alright.

She taps her heels once and they venture off the path after the bird.

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - CLEARING - CONTINUOUS

The bird leads her further off the path, and the trees start to thin...and lead to a rocky outcropping. An opening reveals a small cave within.

N'koa dismounts, hitches the horse to a tree. She examines the mouth of the cave: if she could call it that, as it stretches only a few feet in, but still enough cover.

N'KOA

At least we found shelter.

You gather your supplies and set up a small camp. You need firewood, so you set out to gather fallen branches and sticks.

The forest around you feels...off, as if it watches you with bated breath.

When you return, you set up your campfire at the mouth of the cave. After a few struggled attempts, it lights. You sit down on your bedroll and rest.

INT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - CAVE - NIGHT

N'koa lies on her side, watching the flames dance. With each spark-

-dead horses, a bloodied hand grabbing her-

-"...tala please...no...please..."-

She blinks away the memories, tears falling to her neck.

With a sigh, she rolls onto her back, stares at the rocky ceiling, listening to her horse huff-

-s n a p-

She bolts up. Stares into the dark night beyond the cave. The small fire barely illuminates her horse, absentmindedly nibbling at the foliage.

-crunch-

She bolts to her feet. Something is out there, watching her.

She slowly grabs her discarded belt, pulls the dagger from its sheath...

She steps forward...one...three...

-rustle-

She stops at the mouth, points the dagger forward. Swallows.

N'KOA
(whisper)
Come on...come on-

JUDD (O.C.)
...Hello...

N'koa jumps back, dagger outstretched in both hands.

N'KOA
As- As far as I know, animals d-
don't speak. So if
you're...human... Show yourself.

Silence. No rustling, no twigs snapping or leaves crunching.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

Come out!

Slowly, carefully, a man emerges from the brush...and into the dim firelight.

JUDD (21) steps out, shadow given form, hands up in mock surrender.

JUDD

I just wanted the horse.

His clothes are worn, dirty - there's something both predatory and wounded about him, how he moves with calculated casualness; but beneath the grime and slight goatee, there's a roguish charm about him - he carries himself like someone who's learned to survive on wit and quick thinking.

They stare each other down.

Judd takes a step-

N'KOA

Stay there. Don't come any closer.

JUDD

I'm not gon' hurt ya.

N'KOA

How do I know that?

He shrugs a shoulder, smirks.

JUDD

S'pose you don't. I wouldn't trust me neither. But I just need shelter for the night. I see you've got a fire goin'.

He nods towards the small campfire.

JUDD (CONT'D)

I can help. It'll just die out.

(pause)

You don't wanna be out here in the dark.

N'koa studies him...then eventually lowers the dagger - not all the way.

N'KOA

You stay out here.

JUDD

I don't even get a rag?

N'KOA

You get the leaves. And you keep watch, keep the fire going.

JUDD

Yes, ma'am. If anything comes a'stalking, I'll be sure to jump in harm's way.

He smirks. N'koa scowls. She backs up into her little cave, settles back down onto her bedroll - one hand rests on the dagger. She furrows a brow at her hers, still content eating grass, then back at him.

He watches the fire, hands outstretched. She studies him, his hair golden like the sun, and his eyelashes - prominent, for a man. She stares at him...until her eyelids droop and shroud her in darkness.

INT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - CAVE - MORNING

N'koa's eyes fly open. She jolts up, dagger out.

Outside, the clearing is empty, and there's a small log next to the fire - but no sign of the strange man.

N'KOA

No...

She bolts out the cave.

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - CLEARING - CONTINUOUS

She looks around, searching-

Her horse is still hitched and secure, content even. She sighs.

And then she notices the fire still going. Strong.

She looks around, scans the trees-

JUDD

Mornin', miss.

N'koa jumps, swings the dagger.

JUDD (CONT'D)

Whoa...

(chuckles)

Don't hurt yourself, sweetheart.

He drops a dead rabbit next the fire.

JUDD (CONT'D)

Hungry?

She eyes it, eyes him-

-then notices Takoda's bow over his shoulder.

She jumps at him, but he's quick to hold her back. She shouts, struggles against his arm.

JUDD (CONT'D)

Hey! Hey! Calm down!

N'koa shouts, shuffles back, shoves the dagger at him.

JUDD (CONT'D)

Whoa, hey, okay-

N'KOA

(snarls)

Give it back.

JUDD

Why don't you just put the knife down-

N'KOA

The bow. Drop it.

Judd grinds his teeth- then drops the bow. He kicks it to her.

JUDD

Just thought you might be hungry.

She scrambles for the bow, slings it over her shoulder - dagger still pointed.

N'KOA

You don't know me. You *followed* me.
For my horse. You take my fath-

(swallows)

You steal my bow. And then you
bring...*that*?

JUDD

Call it a peace offering.

N'koa snorts, but it's dismissive.

N'KOA

Leave. Now. I don't know what you want, but whatever it is, you won't get it from me.

JUDD

I see that.

He steps, palms up.

JUDD (CONT'D)

Sure, I followed you. Sure, I wanted your horse. I'll be honest, you looked like an easy target, and quite frankly, I was sick of riding on Shank's pony. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and your company is surprisingly welcome. And I don't care about your thoughts on fate, but the chances of finding someone out here who asks questions first is slim to none. I believe we can help each other. So, I say again, take this as a peace offering.

N'koa considers his words, face softening.

N'KOA

I've got food.

Judd throws his hands up, curses-

N'KOA (CONT'D)

But thank you.

They size each other up... She lowers the dagger...then sheaths it.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

Keep the rabbit. And stay here.

He stands and watches her dip into the cave. He studies the horse...

She returns with bread wrapped in sloth. She breaks it and hands him one half. He takes it, sniffs the loaf.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

Really?

He shrugs, then takes a bite. And another. And another. He scoffs it down. N'koa stares - but doesn't judge.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
Is that what it's like out here?
Alone?

He wipes his mouth, his goatee, dusts his hands.

JUDD
After long enough, yeah.

He shrugs off his coat, places it on the log, then sits.

After a few moments, she joins him. She tries to leave good space - but the log is small. She nearly brushes his shoulder.

N'KOA
How long have you been out here?

She nibbles her bread to avoid looking at him.

JUDD
I'm not sure, actually. Days?
Weeks?

N'KOA
And you're alone?

JUDD
Thankfully, yes.

With multiple options, you ask him questions about who he is, where he's from.

YOU
What are you running from?

He shifts uncomfortably with a bitter chuckle.

JUDD
Straight to the point, aren't you.
But who says I'm running from
anything?

YOU
You've been alone out her, possibly
for weeks. With no supplies, or
weapon. You're starving. I may not
know much, but I don't think people
do that by choice.

JUDD
No. I didn't. Let's just say I'm
running from monsters.

YOU
Monsters...

JUDD
They say there're monsters out here, demons. Personally, I've never seen one. The only demons I have seen...

He looks down at you, grim.

JUDD (CONT'D)
...are people.

You stare into the trees.

YOU
So...you haven't noticed anything strange about the forest?

JUDD
You means besides the creepy markings and effigies?

YOU
You've seen them, too?

JUDD
I recognise them too well. The people I ran from- they're not right.

He stares into the fire...

JUDD (CONT'D)
I'd never seen so much blood.

They sit in silence, and then Judd perks up.

JUDD (CONT'D)
I have a suggestion. Why don't I come with you?

She stands, checks on her horse.

N'KOA
You don't even know where I'm going.

JUDD
Right. Where're you headin'?

N'KOA
 (bitter laugh)
 You really think I'm going to tell
 you?

JUDD
 Come on, sweetheart. We literally
 just broke bread together.

She snorts, checks the saddles and fastenings.

JUDD (O.C.) (CONT'D)
 We're friends now. And friends help
 each other.

She turns-

-gasps. He's standing right behind her. He smirks.

JUDD (CONT'D)
 I can help you.

She contemplates, then raises an eyebrow. He dips his head,
 steps aside. She proceeds to gather her things, then pauses
 to look at him.

N'KOA
 Aren't you going to help?

With a charming grin, he helps her clear the camp.

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - LATER

**You guide your horse over a small stream, careful with the
 slippery rocks. Judd follows behind.**

JUDD
 Did I mention I was tired of
 Shank's pony?

YOU
 I don't know what that means.

JUDD
 Seriously?
 (pauses, huffs)
 Well, it basically means travellin'
 on foot. And I've been travellin'
 on foot for a while. So much that a
 hand up would be much obliged.

YOU
 You wanna ride my horse?

JUDD
Pretty please?

You don't answer, and you continue along the trail.

JUDD (CONT'D)
You didn't say where we were going.

YOU
I am going to the Great Valley - at
least that's what I'm calling it.
I'm...trying to find something.

JUDD
The 'great valley', huh? I know of
one, deep in the mountains,
practically hidden under the trees.
There's a river, that much I do
know.

YOU
How?

JUDD
How what?

YOU
How do you know?

Judd falls silent. And then:

JUDD
Just rumors, stories.

**You come to a small incline, the path barely visible beneath
roots and fallen branches. You giude your horse up, Judd
follows pursuit, huffing and cursing under his breath.**

YOU
(giggle)
You good down there?

JUDD
Yeah, well-

N'koa's horse whinnies and snorts, agitated. She grips the
reins.

She leans down, rubbing its neck.

N'KOA
Hey, sshh... What's going on-

JUDD

You might wanna look up...

N'koa leans back up slowly, lifts her eyes...

...to more than a dozen marked warriors suddenly surrounding them from the trees - bows knocked and aimed at them.

N'KOA

Judd... What do we do? Who are they-

She looks down-

But he's nowhere in sight.

She panics, in the saddle - pauses, then slowly reaches for her bow-

CHATAN (O.C.)

I wouldn't.

A formiddable warrior [CHATAN, 38] steps forward. He stands with the stillness of a predator at rest, hardened face marked with faint red ochre designs. A long braid threaded with small pieces of bone and feathers rests over his broad shoulder. His dark eyes miss nothing, as he takes in every detail of N'koa and her horse with the methodical patience of a natural hunter.

CHATAN (CONT'D)

Who are you.

He speaks with the authority of a man who doesn't ask questions. N'koa falls into a panicked silence.

CHATAN (CONT'D)

You're out here, alone.

N'koa's voice is meek and lost under his scrutiny.

N'KOA

I'm not alone.

CHATAN

You are now.

No sign of Judd.

N'KOA

What did you do with my friend?

CHATAN
 Friend? Nothing. He scurried away
 like the rat he is.

N'KOA
 (falters)
 Y-you know him?

CHATAN
 We know vermin when we see it.
 However, he is not our prey...

She spots movement out the corner of her eye-

CHATAN (CONT'D)
 You are.

Someone reaches up, her horse bucks-

N'KOA
 Hey!

Thwack-

Darkness.

INT. SETTLEMENT - TENT - NIGHT

N'koa groans and clutches her head. She rolls to the side,
 wills her eyes open.

She's in a round tent that joins at the top, lying on hard
 packed dirt. The canvas is inlaid with intricate weaving and
 beads. At the top hang little ornaments and feathers.

It's dark, but the glow of a fire outside illuminates the
 cramped space-

And the men standing watch at the opening.

She swallows her panic, looks around for her
 supplies...nothing. She grabs for the pendant-

-gone.

N'KOA
 No...no, no, no, no, no...!

She searches the dirt, tears falling, the sparrow gone. She
 clutches her chest, now bare.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
Tala...

She snarls, stands, examines her canvas cage.

You search the space, but find only tiny pebbles, a stick, and an empty water bowl.

YOU

There has to be a way out...

You eventually find a thin slit in the tent wall where two pieces of hide are bound together from the outside.

You pry and pull...but to no avail.

N'koa turns, lost and desperate, eyes swollen red.

She steps towards the figures at the entrance.

N'KOA

Hello? I need help! There's been a mistake!

They stir, a figure walks by...but no response.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

Please, I need to talk to someone!
I'm not a threat!

Still nothing.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

I need food... water...

Her voice starts to fail as she sinks to her knees.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

...please...

She curls into herself, sobs filling the silence.

INT. SETTLEMENT - TENT - DAY

N'koa lies on her side, shivers. Through the canvas, she hears distant conversations in an unfamiliar language, the crackle of fires, movement and life all around.

Her breathing becomes labored.

INT. SETTLEMENT - TENT - NIGHT

N'koa tosses, sweat pearls on her forehead despite the cold. Her lips are dry, cracked.

In her delirium, she sees flashes-

-a woman with flowing hair singing to the moon, horses running through mist, Takoda's face morphing into shadow...

She mumbles and groans, incoherent. She reaches out, grasps for something that isn't there.

INT. SETTLEMENT - TENT - DAY

Night blurs into day. She sinks further into delirium, oblivious to time.

INT. SETTLEMENT - TENT - NIGHT

N'koa lies motionless on the ground, her breathing barely perceptible. The tent is silent except for the whisper of wind through hide.

A *soft chirping* breaks the silence.

N'koa's eyes flutter open weakly. A FAMILIAR SPARROW hops near her face, its feathers seeming to glow with a faint blue light in her fevered vision.

N'KOA
(weak)
I...know you...my sparrow...

It chirps a few more times, then flutters toward the gap in the hide from outside - barely big enough to squeeze through.

The sparrow disappears through the opening.

N'koa forces herself up on trembling arms, follows the bird's path. She crawls to the tear, peers through.

Even in her fevered state, she's struck by the beauty - hide-covered dwellings arranged in harmony with the natural landscape; the glow of fires creates warm pools of light; the sound of a nearby lake laps at the shore.

She pushes through the gap.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - NIGHT

Your vision is distorted, out of focus, with strange colors and light patterns dancing at the edges. The sparrow hovers nearby, glows with that same ethereal blue light.

You must follow the sparrow while staying hidden. Stealth tutorial begins here.

If spotted by guards, you're returned to the tent and must try again.

Eventually, you crouch behind a stack of woven baskets as a guard walks past.

The sparrow chirps softly, flies toward a larger structure at the village's center. You move carefully between shadows.

You duck behind a canoe as another guard passes, carrying a spear.

Dizziness washes over you. The sparrow circles back, chirping with concern.

YOU
I'm...trying...just...give me a
moment...

[Balance prompt: If failed, N'koa stumbles slightly, attracting attention.]

The sparrow leads you to the largest dwelling - the SACRED PLANKHOUSE. It's more imposing than the others, with intricate carvings visible even in the moonlight.

You must time your approach to avoid a guard who patrols back and forth in front of the entrance.

The sparrow slips inside. You wait for the guard to turn away, then follow.

INT. SETTLEMENT - SACRED PLANKHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

N'koa regains some focus as she enters the sacred space. The plankhouse is dimly lit by flickering candles, shadows dance along the walls.

She looks around in wonder. The space is large but simple - a deerskin hide spread on the floor, nothing else except for the walls themselves:

They're covered in large stone carvings and woven tapestries depicting...stories. They seem to move in the candlelight, telling their tale.

She studies the images: an ancient creature with antlers and claws... Warriors fighting it... A woman making some kind of pact or sacrifice... The same woman transforming, becoming something...else.

N'KOA
(whisper)
What is this place?

She traces one carving with her finger - the woman's face stills her breathing...

A tall shadow fills the space.

She spins around with a gasp-

At the entrance - CHIEF JUNALUSKA (68), a lean, imposing figure with long hair and weathered features worn from decades of leadership and battle. There's something regal yet weary about his bearing.

He steps forward - his expression shifts from stern authority to something like...recognition.

JUNALUSKA
...Sequoyah...? You've returned...?

N'koa is struck motionless. Her voice quivers.

N'KOA
N-no...N'koa... My name is N-
N'koa...

But her fever and exhaustion catch up.

The room spins as she collapses into darkness.

INT. SETTLEMENT - CHIEFTAIN'S HOMESTEAD - BEDROOM - MORNING

N'koa groans awake, but instead sits up on soft furs. Sunlight filters through, and she can hear the sounds of village life outside.

She spots a clay bowl of water next to her. She grabs it and gulps it down, wipes her mouth and looks around the room. The space is warm and comfortable - woven rugs, carved wooden items, the scent of sage in the air.

NISUH (59) appears in the entrance as if materializing from shadow itself. Her braided hair is streaked with grey and adorned with turquoise beads and small feathers. She carries a polished wooden staff decorated with hawk feathers, topped with a sparrow carving. Her piercing eyes study N'koa with unsettling intensity.

NISUH
You will come with me.

She follows without question.

INT. SETTLEMENT - CHIEFTAIN'S HOMESTEAD - CONTINUOUS

You follow Nisuh through the homestead. She leans on her staff as she walks, but her movements are fluid and purposeful.

You try to ask questions - where you are, where they're taking you - but receive no response.

INT. SETTLEMENT - CHIEFTAIN'S CHAMBERS - CONTINUOUS

Nisuh leads you through hanging beads and buckskin curtains into a larger chamber. At the far end, Chief Junaluska sits on a raised platform covered in furs and skins. Nisuh takes her place beside him.

The morning light streaming through the entrance illuminates both leaders, giving them an ethereal presence.

JUNALUSKA
Who are you, child?

N'KOA
My name is N'koa. I was looking for help, for my people-

JUNALUSKA
Your people?

N'KOA
My...my mother's people.

NISUH
And who is your mother.

N'koa pauses, unsure. She addresses the chief.

N'KOA
I think you know her. You said her name, last night.

Nisuh's eyes pierce right through her.

NISUH
Who was your mother?

N'koa steels her voice.

N'KOA
Her name was Sequoyah. My father was Takoda. He... he died protecting our home.

At the mention of Sequoyah's name, Nisuh angrily steps forward. Junaluska holds up a hand.

JUNALUSKA
That name is sacred here. You will not speak it lightly.

N'KOA

She was my *mother*. My father told me to find her people if anything happened to him. He... He was going to bring me here himself.

They study in her in silence.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

I don't know where my things are, but you can see for yourself. Everything is in his journal.

They exchange glances.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

You've already looked. The you must know I'm talking truth!

NISUH

Takoda was your father?

N'KOA

Yes. He raised me from when I was a baby. He told me stories about my mother, about her people, her gifts...

NISUH

And you? Do you have such *gifts*?

N'koa hesitates.

N'KOA

I... I don't know. Sometimes I see things. Feel things. My father said I have her eyes.

Nisuh studies N'koa's face intently, then turns to Junaluska. He gives a small nod.

NISUH

If your blood is true, you must prove it. Our people will not accept outsiders easily, even those who claim kinship.

Junaluska stands.

JUNALUSKA

You will undergo the trials that every one of our young warriors must face.

(MORE)

JUNALUSKA (CONT'D)

Three nights in the wilderness
alone with only two items of your
choice. If you survive and show
wisdom, we will know the spirits
accept you.

N'KOA

Three nights? I've just- I... I
don't know if I can-

NISUH

If Sequoyah's blood truly flows in
your veins, you will find the
strength. If not...

The implication is clear enough.

N'KOA

And if I fail?

JUNALUSKA

Then you are not one of us, and you
will be exiled from our lands.

N'koa swallows, nods.

NISUH

First, recover your strength. And
learn our ways. You may explore the
village, but do not expect others
to help you. You may observe and
speak, but you cannot ask for
anything until you have proven
yourself.

She gestures toward the entrance.

NISUH (CONT'D)

When you are ready, find me at the
lakeshore. I will prepare you for
what lies ahead.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - MORNING

N'koa steps out into the morning light, eyes adjusting. For
the first time, she can truly see the hidden village:

The settlement sits in a natural valley beside a crystal-
clear lake. Hide-covered dwellings blend seamlessly with the
landscape, adorned with beads, feathers, and carved totems.
Smoke rises from cooking fires.

People move about their daily tasks - men crafting arrows and repairing nets, women weaving baskets and tending children, elders sharing stories under the shade of ancient oaks.

Children run between the huts, laughing and playing games she doesn't recognize. Horses graze peacefully in a meadow beyond the village, and canoes rest along the lakeshore.

It's simple but beautiful, alive with purpose and community. For the first time since leaving the ranch, N'koa smiles...

But she also notices the way people glance at her - curious, wary, some openly suspicious. A few point and whisper to each other.

You are now free to explore the village, but with limited access. Most NPCs will acknowledge you but won't trade or offer services. You can interact with various objects and observe daily life to learn about Mahkeyan culture.

As you explore, you discover items that provide lore about the tribe's history, their relationship with the forest, and hints about the supernatural threats they face.

You make your way through the village, take in the sights and sounds. Near the stables, you spot a young, wiry man working with the horses.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - STABLES - DAY

DUSTU (16) picks out a hoof, hunched over. He hums a pleasant melody. N'koa approaches. When he stands and turns, he jumps and then laughs nervously.

DUSTU

Spirits! You scared me. You're the foreigner everyone's talking about.

N'KOA

I wouldn't call myself that, but...
I suppose it fits right now.

DUSTU

I'm Dustu.

N'KOA

N'koa.

DUSTU

Ah, means 'brave one'.

They stand in uncomfortable silence...and then:

DUSTU (CONT'D)

Oh! I have someone you might want to see...

He leads her toward a familiar horse - her own mount from the ranch, now with a simple rope halter instead of the leather bridle.

N'KOA

You have my horse!

DUSTU

Your horse? This animal belongs to no one. We simply care for it.

N'KOA

[He/she] is my companion, faced the darkness of the forest with me.

N'koa approaches her horse. It nickers softly and nuzzles her hand.

DUSTU

Animals are not possessions. They choose to travel with us, to work alongside us, but they are free beings deserving of respect-

N'KOA

-[He/she] is my friend.

DUSTU

I see... I know I'm not supposed to but... Would you like to learn how we truly ride?

EXT. SETTLEMENT - Paddock - CONTINUOUS

Dustu teaches you bareback riding techniques, explaining the philosophy behind their approach to horses. This unlocks the Running Mount ability and improves your bond with your horse.

DUSTU

Now you and your companion understand each other better.

N'KOA

Thank you, Dustu. This feels...right.

When ready, you must find Nisuh at the lakeshore.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - LAKESHORE - DAY

You make your way to the lakeshore. You observe nets pulled back in, baskets full of fish, children playing in water.

You spot a wooden dock that extends over the crystal waters. At the end stands a small pavilion adorned with woven rugs and wood chimes.

N'koa walks along with walkway, admires how the afternoon sun glitters along the rippling water.

Nisuh stands at the railing, looking out.

N'KOA
It's beautiful here.

NISUH
Water and land, two worlds meeting
in harmony. Like the balance we
must maintain in all things.

She turns to N'koa.

NISUH (CONT'D)
Are you ready to hear what lies
ahead?

N'KOA
I have to be.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
The trials test more than survival.
They test wisdom, courage, and
spiritual connection. You will be
given basic items: water, rope -
and one weapon of choice. Nothing
more.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
And I'm, what, supposed to find my
way back? I don't know this place.
Some bastard knocked me out. I
don't know how I got here.

NISUH
The spirits will guide you, if you
listen. If Sequoyah's blood truly
flows in your veins, you will not
fail.

Nisuh picks up a folded pile of clothes.

NISUH (CONT'D)
Traditional garments for the
trials. When you are ready,
warriors will escort you.

Nisuh studies N'koa chewing her lip, frowning at the
clothes.

NISUH (CONT'D)
Strength is not just physical
power. Your mother understood this.
She survived these same trials when
she was your age.

For the first time, Nisuh's expression softens slightly.

NISUH (CONT'D)
She was frightened too. But she
found courage in serving something
greater than herself.

N'KOA
Will you tell me about her? After?

NISUH
If you survive them, there will be
much to discuss.

She starts towards the village.

NISUH (CONT'D)
Rest tonight. Tomorrow, your true
test begins.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - DAWN

The village stirs to life as the sun rises over the lake.
N'koa emerges from the homestead wearing the traditional
trial garments - simple, unobtrusive...both foreign and
familiar.

You make your way through the waking village.

**A group of warriors, led by Chatan, waits for you near the
village edge with your horse. Their horses are ready, and
they carry your basic supplies.**

When N'koa approaches, his grin is mischievous.

CHATAN
Are you prepared?

N'koa looks back at the village - at Dustu waving from the
stables, at the smoke rising from morning fires.

N'KOA
I guess so.

CHATAN
Weapon?

N'KOA
My bow.

A pointed look at him. He laughs, and a warrior hands it over.

She mounts her horse bareback. The warriors nod approvingly.

CHATAN
Then we ride.

They set off into the forest, leaving the safety of the village behind.

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - DAY

You will now face off against the darkness of the forest wilderness in the Three-Night Brave Trials [please see pitch deck for details].

[Skip to-]

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - NIGHT (NIGHT 3)

N'koa stumbles through the dark forest, breathing hard. Behind her, something CRASHES through the underbrush - heavy, unnatural, and gaining ground.

She clutches her bow, only two arrows left. Her spirit sight flickers weakly - she's exhausted, pushed beyond her limits.

A GUTTURAL ROAR echoes through the trees.

N'koa spins, nocks an arrow. In the moonlight filtering through the canopy, she catches glimpses:

Something that might once have been human, now twisted into a nightmare of elongated limbs, exposed bone, and animal husks. Its eyes burn with unnatural hunger deep within an elongated deer's skull.

The creature bursts from the treeline. N'koa releases her arrow - it strikes true but barely slows the thing down.

She turns to run - trips over a root, crashes hard. Her remaining arrow scatters into the darkness.

Strong arms hook under hers. She shrieks and struggles until they release her. She turns-

JUDD is already heading through the trees.

JUDD
This way! Move!

N'koa scrambles to her feet - hesitates.

N'KOA
What are you doing here?

JUDD
Saving your life! We can argue later!

The creature tears through the trees with renewed fury.

Judd grabs N'koa's hand, pulls her deeper into the forest. Behind them, the thing gives chase.

You follow Judd at pace through the forest, jumping and leaping over rocks and down trails. The creature keeps pace, tries to flank you.

JUDD (CONT'D)
There's a stream ahead - these things won't cross water.

N'KOA
How do you know that?

JUDD
Because I've seen what they can and can't do!

You reach a narrow creak. Judd doesn't hesitate, plunges in. You follow suit.

They trudge through the water, onto the other side. Behind them, the creature reaches the water's edge - stops abruptly. It SHRIEKS in frustration...but will not cross.

N'koa turns in the water to get a good look-

She stops breathing. It blends with the trees as if torn from them; its head an elongated stag skull, moss and skin and *flesh* hanging from its bloodied antlers-

But its the eyes that stop her dead: gold, flecked with green, glowing unnaturally...staring right through her, growing still.

As if shaken from its trance, itt lets out another bellow, then crashes back the way it came.

JUDD (CONT'D)
What are you doing?

N'koa turns and crosses the stream.

They collapse, breathing harsh.

N'KOA
Where have you been.

Judd doesn't answer. He takes off his coat, wrings out the water.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
You followed me. You've been watching the whole time.

JUDD
Not the whole time. Just... when I heard the sounds. When I realized what was hunting you.

N'KOA
This was supposed to be my trial!
My chance to prove myself! Mine alone!

JUDD
Your trial was survival. You survived. You're welcome.

N'koa storms to her feet, despite exhaustion.

N'KOA
You're welcome?! Because of you, I've failed! They'll know I had help, they'll say I'm not worthy, that I'm not her-

JUDD
They'll say you're alive. Sometimes that's all that should matter.

A silent, tense moment. The creature's roars fade in the distance.

N'KOA
Why? Why come back? Why risk the danger?

He looks out at the sprawling mountains, the dawn sun that peaks the crest.

JUDD

Because... because I've lost enough
people to monsters. I found
myself...not wanting you to die.

He turns with that roguish grin.

N'koa studies his face in the waking light - sees, beneath
the prickly exterior, genuine fear.

She looks down at her own soaked boots.

N'KOA

The tribe won't trust you. They
barely tolerated my presence.

JUDD

Then we don't tell them about my
help. You succeeded, you proved
yourself. Alone.

N'KOA

I won't lie to them.

He groans.

JUDD

You won't be lying. Not exactly. I
didn't do anything. You just
followed me to a stream. You've
already survived this long on your
own.

N'KOA

(smirks)

Not really on my own, though,
right?

JUDD

(scoffs)

Right.

N'KOA

We should get going then. I don't
want to risk that thing coming
back.

They start their journey back to the settlement.

JUDD

It won't.

N'KOA

How do you know so much about it?

They walk in silence for a moment.

JUDD

There are things about me, about my
past, that I haven't told you -
things that if I did... You'd see
me different.

She stops to face him.

N'KOA

Judd...

He stops a few paces ahead.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

Are you going to hurt my people?

He turns eventually.

JUDD

No.

N'KOA

Are... Are you going to hurt me?

He stares at her, storm-tossed eyes intense.

JUDD

I couldn't.

She contemplates his answer, then walks on.

N'KOA

Then whatever else there is...
doesn't matter anymore.

They continue toward the village as the sky begins to
lighten.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - MORNING

N'koa and Judd emerge from the forest. Chatan and several
warrior wait at the entrance, surprised relief when they see
N'koa-

Weapons are at the ready when they see Judd.

Everyone stops.

CHATAN

Three days. You were to return alone.

N'KOA

You don't understand. I was hunted by...something. We escaped.

Murmurs among the warriors. Chatan's hand moves to his weapon.

CHATAN

The trial was yours to face alone. His... assistance... calls your worthiness into question.

N'KOA

Then question it. But I survived, and I brought information about the threat we all face.

Chatan studies, his expression growing grim.

CHATAN

(to Judd)

You will come with us.

Two warriors move to flank Judd. They take hold of his arms.

JUDD

Whoa, hang on now...

N'KOA

Where are you taking him?

CHATAN

To answer for his interference. And to explain how he knew to find you.

N'koa follows them through the village, close behind Judd.

N'KOA

(quiet)

What you said about things you can't tell me...

JUDD

Not here. Not yet.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - CENTRAL FIRE - CONTINUOUS

Chief Junaluska and Nisuh wait as they approaches. Other TRIBAL MEMBERS gather towards the commotion.

Nisuh's sharp eyes take in N'koa's condition - exhausted but unbroken - then fix on Judd.

JUNALUSKA

You have completed your brave trials.

N'KOA

I'm alive.

JUNALUSKA

But you were not alone.

N'koa straightens, steels her resolve.

N'KOA

I faced the challenges. I survived what was meant to kill me. And I discovered threats to our people. I have more than proved myself.

NISUH

That remains to be seen, *child*.

N'KOA

There is something...unnatural, out there. I think it was the same creature that attacked my home. And if it came for me out there, then it's close. And getting closer.

Murmurs ripple through the gathering crowd. Nisuh leans forward on her staff.

NISUH

(to Judd)

And you? How do you explain yourself, *White*?

Judd snarls.

JUDD

I've seen what that thing can do. I was in the area, I heard it hunting. I couldn't stand by and watch another person die to it.

She hums with scrutiny. Junaluska studies both of them carefully.

JUNALUSKA

The trial tests more than survival.
It tests judgment, wisdom,
spiritual connection. Did you learn
these things?

N'KOA

I learned there's a corruption
spreading through these lands. That
nature is bending to the will of
something that wants to tip the
balance. That our people face a
threat we don't even understand.

She glances at Judd.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

I learned I don't have to always
rely on myself.

Judd swallows, hard, then drops his head.

JUNALUSKA

These are wise lessons.

(pause)

You have passed your trials. You
are welcome.

Relief washes over N'koa. The gathered crowd responds with
mixed reactions.

JUNALUSKA (CONT'D)

Apart from surviving...

(chuckle)

You may ask for one thing. As a
token of acceptance.

She doesn't hesitate.

N'KOA

Judd stays here. With me. In the
village-

NISUH

I forbid this-

JUNALUSKA

Why.

N'KOA

He's- He's my friend. The only one
I have right now. We saved each
other.

She hesitates, chews her lip.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
And he has information that may
prove useful-

JUDD
What?!

He turns to her, furious.

N'KOA
He knows about the threat; it's how
we were able to escape.

Judd falls into a cold silence.

Junaluska thinks, Nisuh protests. And then:

JUNALUSKA
Very well. He will remain here, but
he will be under watch. And your
responsibility. His actions will
reflect your place here.
(to Judd)
Your knowledge may prove useful,
but your loyalties remain in
question.

JUDD
Much obliged.

CHATAN
(snarls)
Don't mistake pragmatism for trust.

Chatan pulls Judd away.

Nisuh approaches N'koa, places a weathered hand on her
shoulder and sighs.

NISUH
Come. You need food, and rest.
Tomorrow, we will speak of what you
learned.

As N'koa is led away, she turns to watch Judd escorted
through the village.

He doesn't look back.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - DAY

Now, you are free to explore the village, learn about your people, and accept optional quests and tasks.

You are also free to interact with merchants; various customisation is also now available.

You are talking to an NPC who gives you a Task, when Chatan approaches you.

CHATAN

N'koa. The Chief requires your presence. Now.

Without a word, he stalks away. You make your way to the Chief's Homestead.

INT. SETTLEMENT - CHIEF'S CHAMBERS - MOMENTS LATER

Chief Junaluska paces, clearly troubled. Nisuh sits in shadow, her weathered hands gripping her staff. Several of Chatan's WARRIORS stand at attention.

N'koa enters, hesitant. She stops before the Chief. The atmosphere is grim.

JUNALUSKA

Three of our best hunters have not returned from the eastern territories. They were expected back two days ago.

N'KOA

Maybe they tracked game further than planned?

NISUH

These men know the forests like their own heartbeat. They do not simply... disappear.

Junaluska stops pacing, fixes N'koa with an intense stare.

JUNALUSKA

You brought word of corruption from your trials. Your claim your...friend...has useful knowledge.

N'KOA

I was told.

JUNALUSKA

Nisuh tells me you have your
mother's gifts. We need your aid in
this - someone who can see what
others cannot.

N'KOA

(to Nisuh)

And you think I can?

NISUH

You are, apparently, your mother's
daughter. Maybe you can succeed
where she failed.

N'koa tilts her head, the silence heavy.

N'KOA

What aren't you telling me? About
my mother?

Nisuh and Junaluska exchange a loaded look.

NISUH

Truths will be earned, child. Find
our missing, then we will speak
more freely.

N'koa leaves with heavy feet.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - DAY

You leave the homestead, observe the village.

YOU

I've gotta bring Judd with me. If
he'll even talk to me. I at least
need to try.

**You head towards the edge of the village. You reach a small,
sturdy shelter under loose guard. Two WARRIORS sit nearby,
alert but not overly restrictive.**

YOU (CONT'D)

I need to speak with him. Alone.

**The guards exchange glances, then move to a respectful
distance - close enough to intervene, far enough to give
privacy. You enter.**

Judd rests on a log, tossing a small rock. He doesn't look
up.

N'KOA
Judd...

JUDD
Come to check on your prized
prisoner.

N'KOA
That's not fair.

JUDD
Isn't it?

He sits, doesn't anger in his eyes. It unsettles her.

JUDD (CONT'D)
You didn't have to tell them.

N'KOA
They wouldn't have accepted you
otherwise.

JUDD
That was my choice to make.

N'koa joins him, close enough that their knees almost
touch.

N'KOA
I couldn't just let them-

JUDD
You could have. Probably should
have.

He tosses the rock and lets it fall. He looks to her.

JUDD (CONT'D)
Do you have any idea what you've
done, the doors you've opened?

N'koa frowns.

JUDD (CONT'D)
There is a whole other world beyond
that one beast. There things,
people, you don't wanna know about.

N'KOA
But you know. And it means you can
help-

JUDD
It means I'm a resource. A tool.
(MORE)

JUDD (CONT'D)
(scoffs)
These bastards have been hunting
me, and now *they have me!*

He shouts at the guards outside. N'koa frowns with the weight, the pain she's caused. She picks at her nails.

N'KOA
It means something to me.

He looks at her - all his attention on her.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
That...*thing* killed my father. Tore
through our home. Took everything
from me. And now it's coming for my
people.
(looks up)
And you could help stop it. That
means something to me. I wasn't
going to lose that, too.

Her words hang between them. She looks away, flushed.

JUDD
I lost my family, too.

N'KOA
I know you're angry. You have every
right to be. But three hunters are
missing, and the Chief wants me to
find them.

She meets his eyes again.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
I...I need you - to come with me.

JUDD
(smirks)
As your prisoner?

N'KOA
As my friend. That's what you said,
right? When you were stalking me?

He chuckles darkly.

JUDD
I deserve that.
(pause)
The chief's dog won't like it.

N'KOA
Chatan will be convinced. He likes
me.

JUDD
I can see why.

She stares into his intense grey eyes...then dips her head.

JUDD (CONT'D)
This...friendship, makes things
complicated.

N'KOA
What do you mean?

He looks away, throws his walls back up.

JUDD
There are still things you don't
know, things I don't expect you to
understand. But I think, in time,
you will.

She nudges his shoulder.

N'KOA
I'll take your word for it.

She hops to her feet.

JUDD
Where are you going?

N'KOA
Where do you think? We're leaving.

JUDD
Now?

N'KOA
Do you have somewhere to be?

JUDD
Uh, no...now's good. We can go now.

But he hesitates.

JUDD (CONT'D)
Do what you need to do. I'll meet
you at the gate.

She turns to leave, stops.

N'KOA

Judd? You don't have to be alone
anymore. You're not. You're gonna
be okay. We'll be okay.

She leaves, Judd watches her go - his face falls.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - DAY

**You explore the village, customise/upgrade your gear,
complete Tasks/Side Quests.**

**When ready, you approach Dustu with the horses. He mucks and
completes his usual duties.**

N'koa slings the HORSEBACK SATCHEL over her horse, secures
her gear.

DUSTU

Kenani was my cousin. He's the best
tracker in three generations.

N'KOA

We'll find them, Dustu. I promise.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

The corruption, the beast... it's
like the old stories my grandmother
told. The hunger that devours from
within.

He shudders, continues his tasks.

DUSTU

She said they were just stories,
but after what you saw...

N'KOA

They're not just stories.

Chatan approaches, spear in hand, stoic as ever - with Judd
in tow.

CHATAN

I believe you're taking *this* with
you.

JUDD

This has a name.

He shoves toward N'koa and the horses.

JUDD (CONT'D)

Mr. Pointy Stick over here has a hard time realising my usefulness as a tool.

Two mounted warriors approach.

CHATAN

Be grateful we're not making you walk. You'll ride with Atsila. If you even twitch wrong, I'll personally make sure you join the missing.

Judd marches over to a mottled gray mare.

JUDD

He's growing on me.

N'koa mounts her own horse, and the party rides out through the village.

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - LATER

You ride hard through the forest for hours.

Here, the woods are dense, dark - untouched by humans, completely wild and unknown.

The trees are ancient, and hold their age-old secrets.

You notice the change, though - the symphony of life dying to a din. There's an underlying sense of unease.

YOU

(to Chatan)

How far would they typically range?

CHATAN

Two days' hard ride. They were tracking deer movements for the Gathering Moon hunt.

You close your eye, extend your spiritual senses. Colors shift in your vision - the healthy green-gold of natural forest energy, but something else...

Darkness threading through like veins of poison.

YOU

Something's wrong with this place.

Chatan signals the party to halt.

JUDD
What do you see?

YOU
The Life energy here... it's been
disturbed - *unmade*.

CHATAN
'Unmade'?

You dismount, place your hands on the earth. Your vision shifts fully into the spirit realm.

SPIRIT SIGHT:

The forest appears as flowing rivers of light and energy. But dark tendrils snake through the natural patterns - they lead deeper into the woods.

YOU
This way... The energy is being
drawn to something.

You follow the pulsing light, lead the party through the trees.

They emerge into a clearing that feels...wrong. The grass is the right color but somehow lifeless. Trees stand at unnatural angles.

In the center: a circle of standing stones, clearly ancient but recently... altered. Dark symbols have been carved over the original markings.

Judd drops to the ground, studies the stones.

JUDD
(to himself)
It's them.

Scattered around the circle: hunting gear, personal items - but no bodies.

N'koa approaches the stones carefully. Her special sight reveals darkness leaking out from the symbols.

N'KOA
Whoever- whatever did this, they
were feeding on Life energy,
leaving nothing behind.

She reaches toward one of the altered symbols-

A VISION FLASHES: Three hunters stumbling into the clearing, confused, drawn by an unnatural compulsion... Dark, robed figures emerging from the forest... A struggle... The hunters dragged toward the stones...

N'koa jerks back, breathing hard. Judd is at her side.

JUDD

What did you see?

N'KOA

They were taken, alive I think.
Three days ago.

She gestures to the depths of the forest.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

That way.

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - CULTIST CAMP - MOMENTS LATER

Through the trees, smoke rises from a concealed CHILDREN DIVINE camp. The search party approaches on foot with preternatural stealth.

Down below, a dozen men, all robed in dirty, white rags, strange cuts and marking along their faces, bodies...

...And three figures bound near a large tent, barely conscious.

ATSILA

They're alive!

Chatan holds up a stern fist.

CHATAN

I see maybe...twelve men. No
weapons - nothing obvious.

JUDD

They're dangerous enough.

N'koa turns to him.

N'KOA

Who are they?

JUDD

(shakes his head)
We shouldn't be here.

N'KOA

Judd.

JUDD

You've heard the term 'Whites'. You people like to use it. Well, here they are.

N'KOA

That's it? Just them?

JUDD

(cold laugh)

Oh no. This ain't even scratching the surface. They're like...maggots, spreadin' everywhere.

N'KOA

Who are the 'Whites'?

CHATAN

Men who think the land is theirs. Men who will kill everything that challenge that.

N'KOA

...My father mentioned them, in his journal... But that was years ago.

JUDD

Parasites don't like to die.

CHATAN

Get down.

They all lower-

From the largest tent emerges a grotesque FIGURE wrapped in dark cloth. As it moves, N'koa groans.

CHATAN (CONT'D)

What is it?

N'KOA

That...*thing*...

JUDD

That's one of their *concoctions*. Demons they like cookin' up. But...it has a weakness.

You close your eyes, extend your senses. With your Spirit Sight, you see the true scope of what you're facing.

N'KOA
 Yes, I see it. It has a sort
 of...anchor. There.

She points to a twisted tree at the camp's center, hung with
 bones and strange fetishes.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
 If I can disrupt that, it'll lose
 its connection to this realm,
 making it vulnerable.

CHATAN
 And how do you propose to get close
 enough?

N'koa falters for an answers. Judd clears his throat.

JUDD
 You won't need to - I can.

N'koa frowns, starts to questions, but Chatan speaks first.

CHATAN
 And what makes you think they won't
 kill you on sight?

JUDD
 This is part where I ask you to
 trust me and not ask questions
 right now.

CHATAN
 You don't get that privilege-

N'KOA
 Judd-

JUDD
 Just get to that tree, sweetheart.
 And be ready for all hell to let
 loose

Judd stalks away. Chatan and N'koa exchange glances.

CHATAN
 We'll be ready.

**Ensuing GAMEPLAY - You must stealthily make your way into
 position.**

N'koa crouches behind some crates, the tree so close...

N'koa steadies her breath, watches Judd stride carelessly through the camp.

A CHILD DIVINE SENTRY spots him, raises a crude dagger - then lowers it.

SENTRY

Brother Matthias? How are you here?

JUDD

I was sent on word of prisoners?
 Father Nathaniel sent me to do
 ya'll's dirty work - you know how
 he is with *efficiancy*.

He examines the restrained braves with an air of authority.

N'koa watches this exchange intently, burrows furrowed.

More Children Divine gather, seemingly enamored with Judd's presence. He stands with them...easily.

The dark figure approaches - it floats across the ground unnaturally. And when it speaks, it's as if N'koa hears its voice inside her own mind.

DEMON

Matthias. You're not supposed to be here.

JUDD

Why? Scared I'm gon' do a better job?

The demon chuckles, low and dark.

DEMON

We already have what we need from them. There's no need for you here, *prince*.

The demon spits the word like a curse.

JUDD

(smirks)

Maybe I just miss being around you freaks.

N'koa sees her chance as the cultists' attention draws to their stand-off. She moves silently toward the twisted tree.

Judd continues his deception, drawing the cultists away from the tree.

She reaches the corruption's source - the tree pulses with dark energy, bones and fetishes hanging from its branches like grotesque fruit.

She places her hands on the bark, feels the *wrongness* of it, and channels her energy against the corruption. But it fights against her.

The demon immediately feels it, and whips round to spot her. It lets out an unearthly *HOWL*-

Judd attacks first, catches the cultists off guard. Chatan whistles, the warriors attack.

The demon charges for N'koa-

Judd intercepts, taking the brunt of its evil energy. He groans in pain...

You fight against the corruption, and eventually, a healing energy sweeps over the camp and surrounding forest.

You turn and join in the fight.

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - CULTIST CAMP - LATER

N'koa slumps against the cleansed tree, wipes her brow. She examines the camp: ruins of tents, rubble; Children Divine bodies scattered - the demon banished. Smoke rises from dead fires.

Several of Chatan's warriors tend to the rescued warriors, bloodied, weak - but conscious. Just.

N'koa drops her head, exhausted. Judd approaches.

JUDD (O.C.)

N'koa-

CHATAN (O.C.)

Don't. Move.

N'koa looks up. Chatan is between her and Judd, spear point pressing against Judd's throat.

CHATAN (CONT'D)

Take another step, and I will cut you down...*White*.

The curse hangs in the air like the corruption. The warriors move forward, weapons ready.

CHATAN (CONT'D)

I could smell that stench on you
from the moment you crawled out of
the trees.

N'koa stands on weak legs, steadies herself. Judd looks to
her - desperate, pleading.

JUDD

N'koa...

CHATAN

Give me a reason not to slice you
open in front of her.

N'KOA

Chatan-

JUDD

I can explain...

CHATAN

Then *Speak!*

Judd looks to N'koa again-

CHATAN (CONT'D)

Do not look at her. She's not going
to help you. *Speak.*

JUDD

(swallows)

My family... we were taken when I
was just a boy. Our farm was
desecrated, left to nothing. We
were forced to live among them,
to... to *become* them. My little
sister, she- she saw things that...

He grinds his jaw, steels himself.

JUDD (CONT'D)

They killed them - my parents, my
sister. They made my pa watch as
they-

(pause)

Father Nathaniel said they weren't
strong enough, that I deserved a
worthy father...that I showed
potential.

N'KOA

Judd...

JUDD

I had no choice. I was young,
afraid - scared to die alone. So I
played along, listened to him,
learned, did things that...
Eventually, I knew I had to escape.

N'KOA

You were running from...them.

They acknowledge each other, a silent moment passing.

Chatan growls, his spear doesn't waver.

CHATAN

Lies! If you escaped, why did they
welcome you?

JUDD

Because not everyone knows I ran.
Knowing my Father, he would've spun
some story. He doesn't like losing
his Children, his control. These
guys still thought I was up there
sittin' pretty.

N'koa studies him for...something. But she's exhausted.

CHATAN

I don't believe a word out of this
parasite's mouth. We exile him.
Now.

ATSILA

And send him running back to them,
having seen our home?

CHATAN

Then we kill him-

N'KOA

No.

She falters forward, places a hand on Chatan's spear.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

He helped us save the hunters. He
fought beside us. Whatever he was
before...

She looks into Judd's eyes, willing something there.

N'KOA (CONT'D)

...he chose to stand with us today.

CHATAN
This is a mistake.

N'KOA
The mistake would be killing our
advantage. We can learn more about
these people, defend against them.

A long, tense moment. Finally, Chatan lowers his spear.

CHATAN
(to Judd)
You will return to the village
under heavy guard. The Chief will
decide your fate.

JUDD
Naturally.

N'KOA
You go on ahead. I'd like to stay
out here, learn more about this
place, see what I can find.

Chatan doesn't argue.

As the warriors begin preparing to move out, Judd catches
N'koa's arm gently.

JUDD
(whispered)
Thank you. For believing me.

She looks down at his hand, looks back up - yanks her arm
away.

N'KOA
Don't make me regret it.

Judd stalks away.

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - DAY

**You explore the area, interact with the ruined camp. You
explore the surrounding area, and notice strange tracks in
the dirt, strange marks on the trees.**

YOU
That thing was here.

You examine the clues more closely.

YOU (CONT'D)

This means it's getting closer. But why, how? Surely those...people would've been dead? Was it scared of the demon? Or was the demon scared of it?

(pause)

I should tell the chief what we found.

You are free to explore the forest, complete side tasks, and head back to the village when ready.

INT. SETTLEMENT - CHIEFTAIN'S CHAMBERS - LATER

N'koa enters to find Chief Junaluska, Nisuh, Chatan, and Judd already deep in discussion. MAPS and OLD CULTIST ARTEFACTS are spread across a low table.

Judd sits slightly apart from the others, still under obvious suspicion. His face is carefully neutral - no sign of that roguish charm.

JUNALUSKA

N'koa. Join us.

She joins Chatan, notes the tension in the room.

JUNALUSKA (CONT'D)

Chatan has been explaining what you discovered. The corruption... Was it strong?

N'KOA

(clears throat)

Yes. It took nearly all I had to cleanse it.

(pause)

What are these?

NISUH

Things we've collected over the generations to tell us about them.

N'KOA

They've been around that long?

NISUH

Longer than you can imagine, child.

Nisuh examines a red-stained BONE CARVING with distaste.

NISUH (CONT'D)

They've been corrupting our sacred sights for years, weakening the barriers between worlds.

JUNALUSKA

The hunters you rescued confirmed it. They found one on their hunt - which led to their capture. But the Whites have been mapping our territory for a time, now.

Junaluska turns to Judd, his expression like hard stone.

JUNALUSKA (CONT'D)

And your assessment of their numbers?

JUDD

That camp was maybe twenty strong. But they have others. Larger ones, closer to their main stronghold. Like outposts.

N'KOA

Their main stronghold?

JUDD

An old stone church of some kind, deep in the mountains. That's where Father Nathaniel... where their leader resides.

NISUH

How many followers does this *Father Nathaniel* command?

JUDD

Hundreds. Maybe more. They raid farms, small towns, preaching their message - 'purifying the land'.

The weight of this settles over them. Chatan leans forward on a fist.

CHATAN

We must strike first, catch them off guard. We'll send scouting parties, find this stronghold. We know these mountains better than any White. This threat is growing.

JUDD
(whispered)
You have no idea.

JUNALUSKA
Speak plainly.

Judd shakes his head.

JUDD
You don't know what you're actually
up against. Look, I'm not here to
argue who the land belongs to, but
you might as well let them take it.
You stand no chance against-

Nisuh stomps her staff - hard. The beads rattle.

NISUH
(hiss)
Let them take it? We have been
fighting for our land for
generations.

She stalks toward him, slow, purposeful.

NISUH (CONT'D)
You are the foreign sickness that
spreads. You are the unwanted
plague. You are the evil we must
banish. You like to spit pretty
words, boy, but I see you for what
you really are.

Nisuh and Judd stand a breath apart, she imposes his space -
but he holds his ground.

N'koa holds her breath, eyes darting. The chamber is quiet.
Then:

JUNALUSKA
Our hunters are returned to us,
Nisuh. Let us honor their vitality.
Hold a ceremoy tonight - let us all
rejoice in these small victories.

Nisuh reluctantly steps away, turns to N'koa.

NISUH
You did well, your power is
growing.
(pause)
Your mother would be proud.

Nisuh strides out, slow and regal.

Tensions ease.

JUNALUSKA

Tonight, we do not dwell on dark matters. Our hunters are safe, our people have shown courage in the face of evil.

He smiles for the first time.

JUNALUSKA (CONT'D)

We will hold a feast. Let the entire village know that we do not cower before threats, but face them with unity and strength.

(to N'koa)

You and your companion have earned recognition. Tonight, we honor your success.

She bows her head. The chief departs, Chatan follows - with Judd in tow.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - LATER

You explore, interact, complete side quests. The forest is free to explore as you uncover mysteries, sacred sights, and evil outposts. New tasks are available to help prepare for the celebrations.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - CENTRAL FIRE - NIGHT

The village pulses with life. A massive CEREMONIAL FIRE crackles at the center, casting dancing shadows on gathered faces. DRUMMERS beat steady rhythms while DANCERS move in intricate patterns around the flames. A nearby giant YEW TREE is adorned with BEADS, LANTERNS, and intricate WEAVING.

Children laugh and chase each other between the adults. The rescued hunters sit in places of honor, looking healthier after rest and healing, sharing their stories.

N'koa spots Judd sitting alone on the edge of the festivities. He watches on solemnly.

N'KOA

Why aren't you dancing?

He looks up, offers a wan smile.

JUDD
Something happens when I dance. I
somehow become a blubbering
chicken.

She sits beside him on the log bench.

N'KOA
That's oddly specific.

JUDD
It's an odd thing to see.

They chuckle. For a moment, they sit in comfortable silence,
watch the dancers spiral around the fire. The drums create a
hypnotic rhythm.

JUDD (CONT'D)
You... You look like you belong
here.

She turns to him, eyes hopeful.

N'KOA
Do I?

His eyes are distant, defeated.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
Judd, what is it?

JUDD
Nothing... Everything's gonna be
fine.

N'KOA
(quiet)
You're lying to me again.

His jaw sets.

JUDD
Maybe. Does it matter?

N'KOA
It matters to me. You're the only
friend I have, I need to trust you-

JUDD
That's where your problem lies.
People like me don't deserve trust
from people like you.

N'KOA
What are you talking about?

Judd stands, agitated.

JUDD
You think you have this gift. You think you can save everyone. You are a tiny, insignificant thorn in their side. And yet you wanna throw yourself into the fire for people who didn't even want you in the first place.

N'KOA
...That's not-

JUDD
You can't save everyone, N'koa. Sometimes all you can do is protect yourself.

His voice dances on the edge of desperation. She swallows her hurt.

N'KOA
What aren't you telling me?

JUDD
Just watch yourself, sweetheart. Be smart. Don't trust anyone.

N'KOA
Not even you?

He stares at her for a long moment, conflict clear in his eyes.

JUDD
Especially me.

Before she can respond, he walks away, disappearing into the crowd. N'koa starts to follow, but stops.

She looks around the celebration - suddenly it feels less welcoming, the shadows seem deeper.

NISUH (O.C.)
The fire has much to show tonight.

N'koa jumps, then turns to Nisuh, who appeared as if from those shadows.

The spiritual leader studies her.

NISUH (CONT'D)
You are deeply troubled.

N'KOA
Just-
(clears throat)
Tell me about my mother.

NISUH
What do you wish to know?

N'KOA
Everything. Her gifts, her
connection to the spirits...what
happened to her.

NISUH
That is a very long, gruelling
story.

N'KOA
Please.

Nisuh nods slowly, as if she's been expecting this
conversation.

NISUH
Sequoyah was... extraordinary. Even
as a child, she could see things
others could not. Speak with
creatures of forest and stream. She
could even converse with the
spirits themselves.

The fire crackles, sending sparks into the night sky.

NISUH (CONT'D)
But such gifts come with much
burden. The spirits that touched
her... they were both light and
shadow.

N'KOA
Shadow?

NISUH
All power has its opposite, child -
its adversary. Those who can
commune with light...must also face
darkness.

N'KOA
You mean the corruption? The evil
you've been fighting?

NISUH

I mean that your mother's gifts
made her both our greatest
protector... and our greatest risk.

N'koa looks to the flames for comfort.

NISUH (CONT'D)

And then she had you. I'm sure your
father told you that we exiled
them. But it was, in fact, the
opposite.

N'koa turns a quizzical gaze to the old woman.

NISUH (CONT'D)

She exiled herself. She wanted
Takoda to take her place, with you,
but he wouldn't have it. That boy
would have followed her through the
realms. But she knew what she had
to endure. And she would not let
you have ny part of it.

[Flashback]

EXT. APPALACHIAN FOREST - NIGHT

*SEQUOYAH (25) runs through moonlit trees, BABY N'KOA
strapped to her chest. Behind her, TAKODA (28) carries
supplies, his face grim.*

In the distance: HOWLS - both human and inhuman.

TAKODA

They're getting closer.

SEQUOYAH

The Fall is not far. We can lose
them in the water.

*A MASSIVE SHADOW crashes through the trees ahead of them - a
creature of pure darkness with burning eyes.*

***You, as Takoda, must navigate the dark forest with Sequoyah,
protect N'koa, and not get caught.***

*STRANGE MEN in bloodied, tattered white robes appear from
all sides.*

*Sequoyah stops, turns to Takoda with desperate eyes. She
unstraps N'koa, presses her into his arms.*

SEQUOYAH (CONT'D)
Take her away from here.

TAKODA
No. We do this together.

Baby N'koa wails, Takoda looks down at her, desperate.

SEQUOYAH
Look at me, my beloved.

Her eyes are already changing - touched by shadow.

SEQUOYAH (CONT'D)
You must protect her, keep her
safe, keep her away from all this.

She kisses both Takoda and baby N'koa one last time.

SEQUOYAH (CONT'D)
Go. Go, now!

*Takoda hesitates, then runs with Baby N'koa as Sequoyah
turns to face the approaching darkness.*

*The last thing he sees before disappearing into the trees:
Sequoyah standing alone against a towering beast.*

[End Flashback]

EXT. SETTLEMENT - CENTRAL FIRE - PRESENT

N'koa stares into the flames, tears stream down her face.

N'KOA
(whispered)
How do you know?

NISUH
...She told me herself.

N'koa looks at her, pleading.

N'KOA
So she's still alive. You've seen
her.

Nisuh turns her gaze - N'koa spots a single tear.

NISUH
If she's alive, who she was is long
gone.

N'KOA
I don't understand.

NISUH
The evil that corrupts our sacred
places, that twists men into
monsters... it has been seeking a
conduit. A way to enter our world
fully.

N'koa clutches the sparrow pendant.

NISUH (CONT'D)
I believe your blood is that
doorway.

N'koa opens her mouth to respond-

SCREAMS and the CLASH OF WEAPONS tear through the night.

Villagers scatter, grab children, fall to the ground. The
giant fire flares - illuminates dozens of WHITES, robed and
bloodied, storming through the village. They cut down
everything in their path.

Mothers grab children, elders weep in the dirt.

The sight is horrific, bodies falling everywhere.

N'koa can't breathe.

NISUH (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Get to safety!

Everything around N'koa blurs to a gruesome din.

She spots Chatan and his warriors - they fight like demons.

Ahead, Nisuh fights with her staff - Junaluska tears through
the cultists to get to her. She's struggling.

N'koa takes a step-

A clothed hand wraps around her throat, her mouth. She
screams, but they're muffled. She kicks, fights...

...then everything fades to black.

INT. DIVINE STRONGHOLD - CRYPT - DAY

N'koa groans awake, jolted by cold stone beneath her. She
shoves to her hands and knees, sways.

FATHER NATHANIAL (O.C.)
 Good, you're awake.

N'koa lifts her heavy head...

Behind a rusted metal gate stands FATHER NATHANIAL (56), an imposing man robed in clean white, adorned in silver decals. His grey beard is trimmed, and beneath the age and pockmarks, his eyes devour the sight of her with an insatiable, barely contained hunger.

FATHER NATHANIAL (CONT'D)
 (whispered)
 Absolutely perfect...

She manages to stand on shaking legs, grabs the nearby stone wall for support.

N'KOA
 W...where am I?

FATHER NATHANIAL
 Why, you're a guest in my home.
 Apologies for all this. My Children
 don't like you people. Personally,
 I'd have you up in my chambers with
 me.
 (low chuckle)
 But that's no matter. You'll be
 joining me soon enough.

N'KOA
 You must be Father Nathaniel.

FATHER NATHANIAL
 Of course you know who I am. I
 believe my Son has told you much
 about me and our Mission.

N'KOA
 Your 'Son' couldn't get far enough
 away from you. He's one of us.
 Spilled all your sick secrets.

Father Nathaniel chuckles, but it's deep and...self-satisfied.

FATHER NATHANIAL
 I'm sure he spun a lovely story for
 your sweet little ears.

N'koa recoils.

FATHER NATHANIAL (CONT'D)
Oh, I see...

He steps closer, runs a hand down a metal bar.

FATHER NATHANIAL (CONT'D)
It didn't take much to get you to trust him. Did it? You're completely taken with him. That's good. Yes, very good. It means he can do It.

N'KOA
...Do what?

He doesn't seem to hear her.

FATHER NATHANIAL
It'll be so much sweeter, so much more tragic. And our Mission will finally begin.

Father Nathaniel turns away.

N'KOA
Wait! What do you want with me?

He stops, looks over his shoulder.

FATHER NATHANIAL
Purity.

He stalks away. N'koa slumps to the ground, covers her head...and succumbs to exhaustion.

INT. DIVINE STRONGHOLD - CRYPT - NIGHT

The CLANG OF KEYS in the metal lock-

N'koa jolts away, a small light illuminates her sunken, scarred cheeks. She blinks wearily, then-

JUDD (O.C.)
It's not poisoned.

She scrambles back against the stone.

N'KOA
You.

Judd stands at the entrance, an OLD PLATE and CUP in his hands. He smirks, stalks toward her and leaves them at her feet-

She kicks them away - food and water splash on stone.

JUDD
Fine, go hungry.

He turns without another word.

N'KOA
(weak)
Why...

He stops at the gate, doesn't turn.

N'KOA (CONT'D)
You didn't just want some lone
girl's horse. Did you.

JUDD
No.
(turns with a smirk)
I wanted the lone girl.

N'KOA
Your family, your home...everything
you told me-

JUDD
Truth. All of it.

He turns, stalks to her. He crouches in her space, takes her
chin.

JUDD (CONT'D)
Every last word.

She tries to jerk her head away, but he holds firm.

JUDD (CONT'D)
You are more special than you
realise. And that's what's most
frustrating. If you just let
yourself, you'd be so, so powerful.

He tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

JUDD (CONT'D)
But no. You'll rather let the
Father take all that power for
himself.

N'KOA
(snarls)
I don't even know what he wants
from me!

JUDD

He wants your purity. He wants your blood to cleanse the land that's rightfully his.

N'KOA

The land belongs to *my* people! My power belongs to *me*-

JUDD

Your power belongs to your mother!

He lets her go, stands and straightens himself.

N'KOA

...my mother?

JUDD

It would be in your best interest to just accept what happens next.

N'KOA

Since when have you had my best interests at heart?

He leaves the crypt, locks the gate with rough hands. Pauses.

JUDD

Since I met you.

He stalks away, leaving N'koa in darkness.