

"The Unbanished"

Season 1, Episode 1 The Ritual of Avenir

BY

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COLD OPEN- EXT. MEADOW OF THREE MOONS - NIGHT

A vast, rolling sea of tall grasses sways gently in the night wind.

In the far distance, a jagged mountain range cuts against the horizon, its peaks capped in eternal snow, faintly luminous beneath starlight.

Above it all a sky that is unmistakably not Earth.

Billions of stars shimmer across a velvety indigo-black canvas. A soft, clouded nebula blooms faintly among them in muted purples and blues. And hanging in quiet dominance – three moons, each a different size, each casting its own subtle glow.

The image alone tells us this world is not ours.

The camera begins a slow, graceful descent, drifting downward toward the meadow.

It glides low through the grasses, weaving between stalks, brushing their tips, moving as though the land itself is guiding us forward...

Until it comes to rest behind a solitary figure.

A pair of cloaked shoulders.

Still.

Unmoving.

EXT. MEADOW OF THREE MOONS - CONTINUOUS

EXTREME CLOSE ON – ORIANNE DUCHAMP

Her hood and fur-lined cloak conceal much of her face, but not her eyes.

They are sharp.

Focused.

Alert.

Her breathing is slow.

Controlled.

As she shifts slightly, her markings become visible.

There are rows of delicate white dots curve beneath her eyes and around her lips. Another precise column traces the bridge of her nose to her chin.

At the center of her forehead are three concentric rings.

The Mark of Three Moons.

This is a mark given only to the most exceptional, and ironically, currently being worn by someone who clearly wishes it were invisible.

ORIANNE holds a long assegai spear, nearly seven feet in length.

The shaft is matte black, banded with thin white stripes near the hilt.

Its blade is long, slender, and faintly translucent, catching starlight like polished crystal.

The camera slowly pedestals upward, rising above her..

Higher..

Revealing the truth.

OVERHEAD SHOT

Orianne is not alone.

DOZENS OF YOUTHS (FORTY ONE total, plus Orianne) are spread across the meadow in a loose wedge formation, all wearing similar cloaks.

Each of their faces also bear commendation markings, but none as numerous, or as intricate as Orianne's.

Every one of them grips an assegai.

They crouch in silence.

Waiting.

Then...

A DEAFENING, MONSTROUS ROAR tears across the valley.

It echoes off the mountains.

Ripples through the grass.

Vibrates in the bones.

The Youths flinch, but Orianne does not move.

MEDIUM SHOT – ORIANNE

Her eyes remain forward.

She raises her fist, then extends her fingers.

Closes them again.

Once. Twice. Three times.

A silent command.

The Youths steady themselves.

Orianne slides her hand up the shaft of her assegai, gripping just below the blade.

She twists, igniting a faint spark that snaps to life at the hilt.

That spark ignites a brilliant white flame, that races along the blade, engulfing it in controlled, radiant fire.

The light reflects in her eyes.

No fear.

Only resolve.

OVERHEAD SHOT

Across the meadow, one by one, the youths follow her lead.

Each assegai ignites in sequence, small constellations of white flame blooming across the dark grass.

Dozens of burning blades.

A silent army.

Waiting in formation beneath three alien moons.

Ready.

**EXT. MEADOW OF THREE MOONS – CONTINUOUS
WIDE SHOT**

Behind the formation, the ground ERUPTS.

A violent explosion of soil, roots, and shattered grass blasts into the night sky.

From the crater, a massive shape SURGES UPWARD, roaring as it tears free from the ground.

The **TAUREN LIZARD**.

It rears onto its hind legs, towering over the youths like a living siege engine.

The creature is colossal, easily the size of an elephant, but built like a nightmare.

Its trapezoidal head is slightly smaller than its thick, muscular neck. Its body is long, armored, and serpentine, plated in overlapping bony scales that catch the moonlight like polished stone.

Rows of jagged plates run down its spine and tail, glistening beneath the glow of the three moons.

It resembles a grotesque fusion of salamander and stegosaurus but far more powerful and nimble.

And very, very angry.

It roars again.

The sound alone sends ripples through the grass.

The Youths recoil.

Some stumble back.

Some freeze.

MEDIUM SHOT — ORIANNE

Orianne snaps her fist into the air.

But the formation is already breaking.

The Youths had prepared for the creature to emerge from the eastern rim of the clearing.

Not here.

Not this close.

Not behind them.

Panic spreads faster than reason.

WIDE SHOT

The forty-one youths SCREAM and surge forward, abandoning formation as they charge the Tauren Lizard in a wave of chaos.

Their training fractures.

Their fear leads.

MONTAGE — THE BATTLE UNRAVELS

Flaming assegai spears arc through the night, striking the creature's armored hide. Some stick. Most shatter harmlessly.

The Tauren Lizard WHIPS its massive tail, sending a cluster of youths flying through the air like broken dolls.

The beast plunges back underground in a violent spiral of dirt.

It ERUPTS beneath another group, launching bodies skyward in a storm of screaming and firelight.

One youth drops his spear and runs.

Another trips over him.

Two collide and fall.

A third is dragged beneath the surface in a blur of claws and dirt. The white flames flicker wildly across the meadow, no longer orderly, no longer united.

Just scattered points of panic.

EXT. MEADOW OF THREE MOONS — CONTINUOUS MEDIUM SHOT — ORIANNE

The camera finds her again.

She has not moved.

She stands exactly where she began.

Her blade still burns steadily, untouched by the chaos around her.

Her eyes track every movement.
Every mistake.
Every loss.
The roaring.
The screaming.
The thunder of the creature.
All reflected silently in her gaze.
Not fear.
Not shock.
But understanding.
She exhales slowly.
And finally...she steps forward.

EXT. MEADOW OF THREE MOONS - CONTINUOUS

The Tauren Lizard moves like a living earthquake, bursting from the earth, vanishing again, reappearing in violent, unpredictable arcs.
But Orianne no longer watches the chaos.
She watches the pattern.
Her eyes follow the rhythm of the creature's movement.
In.
Out.
Turn.
Pause.
Strike.
Again.
She inhales slowly.

Another pair of youths vanish beneath the dirt in a spray of soil and screams.

Orianne exhales.

And breaks into a run.

Not straight at the creature, but at a precise diagonal, cutting across its projected path.

The camera tracks her in a smooth lateral glide as she moves against the chaos around her, every step measured, deliberate, certain.

She reaches an invisible point in the grass.

Stops.

The ground beneath her feet SWELLS.

The earth bulges upward.

Then...

SLOW MOTION

She is launched into the air.

Orianne rises with the eruption, lifted atop a massive, armored snout as the Tauren Lizard bursts upward beneath her.

Dirt and grass spiral around her like a storm.

She stands on the creature's nose.

Balanced.

Still.

For a suspended heartbeat Orianne and the Tauren Lizard lock eyes.

Then Orianne kicks off its snout.

Her body twists gracefully in the air, cloak flaring like a dark wing.

She rotates, in perfect control.

And brings her assegai down, not with brute force, but with precision.

The flat of the blade slams against the crown of the Tauren Lizard's armored skull.

A sharp, resonant CRACK echoes through the meadow.

The creature's eyes snap wide.

Then soften.

Then slowly droop.

Its massive body collapses forward.

WIDE SHOT

The Tauren Lizard crashes onto its belly, sending a low shockwave through the grass.

Orianne rides the fall, leaning back and gripping one of the jagged dorsal spines to keep her balance as the beast settles into the earth.

Dust billows, then drifts, then clears.

The monster lies still, its serpentine torso inflating and deflating with a low rumble as it breathes.

Defeated.

MEDIUM SHOT — ORIANNE

She releases the spine and steps down from the creature's neck.

Her cloak brushes against its armored hide.

She twists the hilt of her assegai.

The white flame retracts and extinguishes, leaving only the faint glow of cooling metal.

For the first time, the meadow is quiet.

Then...

A soft, polite APPLAUSE breaks the silence.

Orianne turns.

PAN REVEAL

Two figures step forward from what appeared to be empty space at the edge of the clearing.

As they move, a massive mirrored panel pivots away, revealing itself as a concealed observation barrier, its reflective surface perfectly camouflaging them within the environment.

MENTOR ALEXANDRE (tall, composed, dignified) and **ASSOCIATE MENTOR MALIKI** (slightly younger, sharper, eyes alive with envious admiration), they begin walking toward Orianne across the settling dust.

As they move, a faint, synchronized MECHANICAL WHIR ripples across the meadow.

One by one, more MIRRORED PANELS embedded invisibly among the grasses begin to rotate.

They turn like slow, silent doors.

With each rotation, a new figure is revealed.

Then another.

Then another.

ATTENDANTS (dressed in darker, utilitarian cloaks) step through the reflective surfaces and into the open meadow.

Their expressions are calm, professional, and unmistakably disappointed.

They move quickly and efficiently toward the scattered youths.

MONTAGE — ORDER RETURNS

An attendant grips a trembling youth by the shoulders, steadies them, murmurs something low and firm.

Two attendants haul dirt-covered youths up from the shallow collapse trenches, brushing soil from their face without ceremony.

A third kneels beside a sobbing youth, twists the hilt of their assegai, extinguishing the blade with a sharp, practiced motion.

Another attendant collects a discarded spear from the grass and hands it back with a look that carries no anger only expectation.

One youth tries to explain, the attendant simply shakes their head.

The youth falls silent.

White flames wink out across the meadow, as the Attendants shake their heads, and help the Youths extinguish their weapons.

MEDIUM SHOT – ORIANNE

She watches the attendants work.

WIDE SHOT

Alexandre and Maliki continue their approach, passing through the returning order.

The meadow no longer feels like a battlefield.

It feels like a classroom after a failed test.
The Tauren Lizard lies inert behind Orianne, massive, silent, sleeping. It's almost peaceful now.

The Youths stand again, heads lowered, weapons dormant, bodies marked with dust and bruises.

Only Orianne stands untouched.

Centered.

EXT. MEADOW OF THREE MOONS – CONTINUOUS

The last of the dust settles.

Alexandre and Maliki now stand before Orianne.

Behind them, the youths remain in loose formation, quiet, bruised, attentive.

ALEXANDRE

Well done, Orianne.

Orianne inclines her head in respectful acknowledgment.

ALEXANDRE (CONT'D)

In all my years as Mentor, I believe you are the first youth to pass this challenge without drawing breath from the Tauren Lizard. Your fellow youths were incapacitated, but you watched. You learned. You adapted. (beat) tell me...why did you not kill it?

Orianne meets his gaze calmly.

ORIANNE

Mentor Alexandre. As you taught us, the crown of a Tauren Lizard's skull is highly sensitive to temperature. The heat from my assegai overwhelmed its receptors, causing loss of consciousness rather than fatal trauma.

She gestures subtly toward the fallen beast.

ORIANNE (CONT'D)

And its scars... though bred for these trials, it is still a warrior. One worthy of respect.

Maliki raises an eyebrow.

MALIKI

You respect a Tauren Lizard?

A few of the youths stifle quiet, nervous laughter.

ORIANNE

Yes, Mentor Maliki. It did not deserve death for fulfilling its duty any more than we deserve life for fulfilling ours. All life has value. Does it not?

Maliki considers her.

MALIKI

While you speak of empathy, you forget, the Tauren Lizard can recover from any wound. Even a mortal one. Can one truly offer compassion to a life that has no natural end?

Orianne answers without hesitation.

ORIANNE

If one values life only because it ends, then what one truly values is death, not life.

A hush falls across the meadow.

Alexandre lets out a soft, delighted laugh, shaking his head.

ALEXANDRE

A hunter's head. A healer's heart. And the mind of a scholar. (to Maliki, amused) She quotes the Progenitors as if she wrote their words herself.

Orianne lowers her eyes, embarrassed by the praise.

ORIANNE

Thank you, Mentor Alexandre. But as you taught us, one must rely on the mind as much as the spear. Perhaps, even more so.

Alexandre nods, pleased, then turns to face the assembled youths.

WIDE SHOT – THE YOUTHS

Dirt-streaked, humbled, and listening.

ALEXANDRE

Youths of Javari, Orianne has enabled your success. Gather your belongings. We return to the sleep-houses to prepare. (beat) The Ritual of Avenir will begin at full light.

His expression hardens just slightly.

ALEXANDRE (CONT'D)

And tardiness will not be tolerated.

The youths straighten as one.

THE YOUTHS (IN UNISON)

As you have said it, so let it be so!

The words echo across the meadow beneath the three moons.

CUT TO

OPENING TITLES

1. (FLASHBACK)

EXT. THE CROYANTES PIT – NIGHT

A colossal, circular STONE PIT carved deep into the earth.

Its walls rise high and sheer, ringed with tiers of roaring spectators.

Torchlight flickers wildly across carved banners, bloodstained stone, and writhing shadows.

The sound is overwhelming CHANTING.LAUGHTER. METAL STRIKING METAL.

This is not just a sport.

This is a ritualized cruelty.

INT. PREP CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS

A cramped, torch-lit chamber beneath the pit.

Two dozen fighters prepare in tense, violent silence.

Some stretch scarred limbs.

Some kiss charms.

Some stare at themselves in polished steel plates.

And some already bleed.

Among them a **YOUNG WOMAN**, barely twenty.

Small. Lean. Fresh-faced.

Her knuckles tremble as she tightens the wraps around her hands.

She is an orphan.

She is terrified.

She is determined.

As she ties her hair back, the torchlight catches a **TATTOO** at the base of her neck (an intricate, unfamiliar sigil).

A **LARGE FIGHTER** shoves past her.

LARGE FIGHTER
Wrong pit, little ghost.

A **GRIMY FIGHTER** laughs.

GRIMY FIGHTER
She won't last a breath.

The young woman lowers her eyes.

But she does not move.

EXT. THE CROYANTES PIT - MOMENTS LATER

A massive iron gate **SLAMS** open.

The fighters are herded into the pit.

The crowd ERUPTS.

Two dozen combatants enter the ring.

Male. Female. Massive. Scarred. Savage.

And one small orphan girl among them.

The crowd notices immediately.

BOOS.

LAUGHTER.

POINTING.

CROWD

Feed her first!

Take her eye!

She won't make it ten heartbeats!

The young woman swallows.

She steps forward anyway.

ANNOUNCER (OFFSCREEN)

People of Javari! Tonight, you bear witness to the Croyantes. Not a contest of strength alone, not a contest of speed alone, but a reckoning of will! Twenty-four enter this pit, yet only one will leave it standing with both eyes intact. The rules are simple. You may strike. You may grapple. You may bleed. You may break. You may steal breath from lungs and courage from hearts. Your victory is claimed only when you take the sight of another. An eye to remind us all that vision is the first mercy the world ever gives us, and the first it ever takes away.

The Crowd cheers and hollers, bloodlust blending with the excitement and anticipation for the start of the event.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

When your opponent can no longer see you, they no longer threaten you. When they can no longer see you, they no longer belong in this pit. When they can no longer see, they are no longer participants of the Croyantes.

Another frenzied roar from the crowd.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

You may lose blood and still fight. You may lose hope and still fight. But when you lose your eye, you are finished. You will be removed. You will be remembered. And you will be spared. Fight with cunning. Fight with mercy, if you must. Fight with cruelty, if you dare. But fight knowing this... the pit does not care who you were. The pit only remembers who remains. Let the Croyantes begin!

THE BATTLE — CHAOS IN MOTION

CAMERA: UNBROKEN, WHIRLING, VISCERAL

Two fighters crash together, biting and clawing.

A woman drives her thumb into another's eye socket. Blood sprays. The victim SCREAMS and falls.

A man is tackled to the ground, his face pinned as fingers dig mercilessly.

The pit becomes a writhing storm of bodies, dust, and violence.

The orphan is knocked aside.

She rolls, barely avoiding having her head stomped.

She scrambles up just as Large Fighter charges her.

She ducks under him, leaps onto his back, wraps her legs around his waist, and jams her thumbs toward his eyes.

He screams and thrashes violently, as both of his eyes are wrenched free from their sockets, gruesomely dangling by the ocular nerves.

He throws the orphan off his back, slamming her body down hard onto the stone floor.

A heavily armored pair of CROYANTE GUARDS comes and escorts him out of the battle zone.

SLOW MOTION

She pushes herself up. Blood in her mouth. Dust in her lungs. Eyes burning with something new. Shaking the cobwebs from her head, she carefully watches the remaining fighters, searching for an opening.

THE TURN

She darts between two grappling bodies, tucks and rolls, closing the distance between herself and Grimy Fighter, who is prematurely celebrating, raising his fists toward the crowd at the edge of the pit, the eyeballs of an opponent in his hands.

She creeps in close and climbs up the back of Grimy fighter like a wild cat ascending a palm tree, hooks her fingers into another's face and rips sideways.

Grimy Fighter's eyes come free.

The scream is deafening.

The crowd goes silent.

Then ROARS.

MONTAGE

She uses smaller size to slip beneath strikes. She lets fighters exhaust themselves before finishing them. She turns enemies against each other. She dodges, ducks, pivots, adapts.

Another eye is taken.
Then another.

She bleeds. She limps. But she does not stop.

FINAL DUEL — THE CROYANTES PIT

Only two remain.

The pit is littered with blood, broken bodies, and discarded weapons.

The dust hangs thick in the torchlight.

The ORPHAN stands near the edge of the arena, chest heaving, her tired, gore-slicked arms hanging at her sides.

Across from her —

The **VETERAN FIGHTER**.

Massive. Scarred. One eye already gone, its socket crudely bandaged and leaking fresh blood. His remaining eye burns with feral focus.

The crowd senses the shift and their screams lower into a collective, breathless roar.

CLOSE ON — THE ORPHAN

Her lips tremble slightly.

Her legs are unsteady.

She swallows hard.

She knows this man has ended dozens of lives in this pit.

And she knows she is almost out of strength.

WIDE SHOT

The Veteran suddenly charges in a controlled, terrifying sprint.

The orphan ducks beneath his first swing, but the Veteran backhands her across the face, sending her skidding across the stone.

The orphan slams into the pit wall, so hard, the bloodthirsty crowd actually gasps at the brutality of the impact.

As the orphan struggles to rise, the Veteran is already on her.

He drags her by the hair and slams her head against the stone.

Once.

Twice.

Blood spills from her mouth, as the Veteran lifts her by the throat.

VETERAN FIGHTER

You lasted longer than I expected.

He throws her across the pit.

She lands hard, sliding through dust and blood.

The crowd begins to chant his name.

SLOW MOTION

She pushes herself up.

Her arm shakes violently.

Her breath is ragged.
Her eyes dart –
Searching.
Thinking.
Refusing to surrender.
The Veteran stalks toward her.
He feints left.
She reacts too late.
He tackles her to the ground.
They roll.
He pins her wrists.
She struggles, but he is stronger.
He leans close.
His remaining eye fills her vision.
His fingers rise toward her face.
Slowly.
Deliberately.
The crowd SCREAMS.
Her fingers scrape helplessly at the stone.
Her strength fades.
Her breath shortens.
Her vision darkens.
It is over.
A BEAT
Then –

She stops struggling.

She relaxes.

Just enough.

The Veteran hesitates, confused.

In that fraction of a second –

She drives her knee upward into his ribs.

Hard.

He grunts.

She twists, slipping one wrist free.

She claws at his face, forcing him back.

They separate.

She staggers to her feet.

He lunges again.

She ducks.

He misses.

Overextends.

She grabs his arm, uses his momentum, spins behind him.

But he counters, throwing her over his shoulder.

She slams into the ground.

He pounces again.

They grapple.

Rolling.

Striking.

Biting.

Desperate.

She headbutts him.

He reels.

She stumbles backward, barely standing.

They face each other again.

Both broken.

Both bleeding.

Both furious.

WIDE SHOT

The Veteran charges one last time.

She does not move.

The crowd SCREAMS at her to run.

She doesn't.

At the last possible instant -

She drops flat.

He flies over her.

She spins.

Scrambles up behind him.

He turns-

Too late.

She leaps onto his back, wraps her legs around his waist, and hooks one arm around his neck.

He thrashes violently.

She begins to slip.

Her grip weakens.

She is losing him.

Her hand trembles.

Her fingers stretch.

Strain.

Miss—

Then find his face.

She drives her thumb into his remaining eye.

Not fast.

Not clean.

She presses.

He SCREAMS.

She presses harder.

Her face contorts with pain and effort.

Finally —

The eye gives.

He collapses forward.

She falls with him, still gripping, still shaking.

Then she releases.

SILENCE

The Veteran lies motionless.

Blind.

Defeated.

Alive.

The Orphan remains kneeling beside him, gasping for air, her body trembling uncontrollably.

For a long moment, no one speaks.

Then —

The arena EXPLODES.

The crowd ROARS in disbelief.

In awe.

In horror.

In triumph.

WIDE SHOT

She slowly rises.

Unsteady.

Bloodied.

Victorious.

The smallest fighter.

The last standing.

The Champion of the Croyantes.

CLOSE ON — THE ORPHAN

Her eyes glisten with tears she refuses to let fall.

She looks around the pit.

At the blood.

At the bodies.

At the crowd.

Then she lowers her head.

CLOSE ON — BACK OF HER NECK

As she lowers her head, the tattoo is fully visible now.

The sigil glows faintly with sweat and torchlight.

The camera PUSHES IN.

Closer.

Closer.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. SKYFIELDS OF ARDWOOD

Golden light spills across the vast meadow, transforming the grasses into waves of amber and green.

The chaos of training is gone.

Now there's order. Calm. Preparation. Anticipation.

Clusters of **YOUTHS** sit or stand in small groups, dressed in ceremonial garments, some pristine, some worn thin with time and care.

Orianne sits alone on a low stone.

Her garments are clearly secondhand, but immaculate. They're pressed. Clean. Perfectly maintained.

In her lap, is a bowl of yams and rice.

She eats carefully. Not a drop spills. Not a stain forms.

Every motion controlled. Disciplined.

CLOSE ON — ORIANNE

She's focused on her food.

A few strands of hair slip loose from her bun, brushing gently against her face. She pauses and carefully wipes her mouth, but senses something and looks up.

ORIANNE'S POV

A short distance away Alexandre watches her, with his arms folded. A small, knowing smile stretches across his face.

BACK TO SCENE

Orianne scrunches her nose at him, playfully.

Alexandre chuckles softly and walks over to sit beside her.

TWO SHOT — ORIANNE & ALEXANDRE

Between them sits a small cleansing bowl of water.

Orianne dips her fingers in and watches the surface ripple, as her reflection distorts.

She exhales quietly.

CLOSE ON — HER REFLECTION

The markings.

Rows of delicate white dots beneath her eyes.

Around her lips.

Down her nose and chin.

And at the center of her forehead, The Mark of Three Moons.

Beautiful.

Impossible to ignore.

BACK TO SCENE

Orianne touches her forehead lightly.

Not pride.

Not shame.

Something complicated.

She rubs her eyes and looks out over the Skyfields.

WIDE SHOT — SKYFIELDS

Hundreds of youths.

Waiting.

Every three thousand nights, for countless generations, they gather here in the Skyfields of Ardwood for the Ritual of Avenir.

A moment that defines a life.

BACK TO ORIANNE & ALEXANDRE

Alexandre studies her.

Something is off.

ALEXANDRE

Is everything all right, Orianne? Were the yams not to your liking?

ORIANNE

No, Mentor Alexandre. The yams were perfect.

ALEXANDRE (waves to the distance)

Then perhaps you fear some vile creature descending from Umadyn? Fear not, Orianne, if anything dares enter the Skyfields, it will be handled swiftly, and without mercy.

Orianne nudges him lightly.

ORIANNE

No monsters. Just nerves.

Alexandre is genuinely surprised.

ALEXANDRE

You're nervous? What do you have to be nervous about? There is no question you were the best Youth in this generation of Tutelage. Your excellence is not in question.

Orianne exhales slowly and looks back at the field.

ORIANNE

That is exactly what concerns me. My excellence may have drawn too much attention. What if they send me to Courbonne to serve the Aristos? Or to Tollerbella, to fight with the Vaincre? Or keep me here in Ardwood, with the Explorateur? I don't belong among either of them. But what if my excellence...

Alexandre straightens his posture.

ALEXANDRE (interrupts)

Never apologize for your excellence! Yes, you are physically gifted. We all see it. But you are more than that. And You have earned the right to pledge whatever Stratum you wish.

ORIANNE

I petitioned every Mentor. Each of them. But...

She trails off.

Watching the horizon.

Something unsettled in her.

Something she cannot name.

Alexandre studies her.

Concerned now.

WIDE SHOT – SKYFIELDS

The wind shifts.

The grasses ripple.

In the far distance—

A faint shimmer of movement along the processional road.

Barely visible.

But approaching.

BACK TO ORIANNE

She doesn't see it yet.

She stares out over the field.

ORIANNE

I just want to be where I am meant to be.

And I want to be the one who decides where that is.

Alexandre softens.

ALEXANDRE

Then trust that you will be.

EXT. PROCESSION WAY – MORNING

Youths, Attendants, and Mentors alike all bow low as a GILDED PALANQUIN glides forward on the shoulders of uniformed bearers.

Within it sits **ZEMAYA BELLEGARDE**, a Queenmother who holds the title of Puissant Haute Champion of Javari. Her posture is effortless authority. Her gaze surveys the Skyfields with quiet ownership.

EXT. RITUAL GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS

The remaining youths kneel in formation.

Alexandre and Maliki stand before them.

Orianne stands at the front.

The palanquin lowers with deliberate grace.

Silence spreads across the meadow.

Zemaya steps down.

She does not rush.

The air shifts around her.

She approaches Orianne and gives a faint smile.

ZEMAYA

I am told you subdued the Tauren Lizard without
taking its breath.

Orianne bows deeply.

ORIANNE

Yes, Queenmother.

ZEMAYA

Look at me.

Orianne rises.

Their eyes meet.

There is something unmistakable in Zemaya's gaze.

Recognition.

ZEMAYA (CONT'D)

Precision. Discipline. Restraint. Rare qualities
in one so young. Tell me, Youth. What Stratum
do you intend to pledge?

Orianne does not hesitate.

ORIANNE

The Enlightenment Stratum, Queenmother. I wish to become an Instructor. One day, a Mentor... like my Mentor Alexandre.

Alexandre straightens slightly, visibly touched.

Maliki hides a disgruntled smirk of pride.

Zemaya's expression cools.

ZEMAYA

Enlightenment? A mind such as yours confined to classrooms? That is a waste.

Alexandre steps forward carefully.

ALEXANDRE

With respect, Queenmother, the Enlightenment Stratum requires the sharpest minds. Her restraint today proves...

Zemaya turns her head just enough to silence him.

Not harsh, but final.

ZEMAYA

I did not ask you, Mentor.

Alexandre lowers his gaze.

ZEMAYA (CONT'D)

A Youth with her instincts belongs in the Vaincre Stratum. Warriors shape history. Instructors merely describe it.

Alexandre cannot help himself.

ALEXANDRE

Queenmother, with all reverence to your position, the Progenitors teach that wisdom guides strength, not the other way around.

Zemaya turns fully to him now and smiles.

ZEMAYA

I must caution you to remember that you serve at my pleasure, Mentor Alexandre.

Alexandre bows.

ALEXANDRE

As you have said it, so let it be so.

Zemaya turns back to Orianne.

ZEMAYA

Let us test this conviction via quarrel. If you make me cede in single combat. I will approve your pledge to Enlightenment.

Murmurs ripple through the youths.

Zemaya continues, measured.

ZEMAYA (CONT'D)

And I will personally fund your journey to Navanca. Every expense. Every need. You will begin your path as Instructor without burden. But if I best you, you will pledge Vaincre. No debate. No appeal. Do you accept?

The meadow is silent now, all eyes are on Orianne.

Orianne considers the Queenmother before her.

She sees the robes. The jewels. The gilded carriage.

This is a politician, a ceremonial figure. Zemaya is powerful in voice, but surely not in body.

Orianne smiles respectfully and bows.

ORIANNE

I accept the terms of the quarrel, Queenmother.

Maliki inhales sharply.

Alexandre closes his eyes briefly.

Zemaya smiles.

EXT. RITUAL GROUNDS - MOMENTS LATER

The attendants widen the circle.

The youths step back.

Orianne loosens her shoulders, adjusting her stance.

Across from her, Zemaya stands draped in ceremonial silk and gold.

Alexandre steps closer to Orianne, lowering his voice.

ALEXANDRE

Orianne... listen carefully.

She keeps her eyes forward.

ORIANNE

Mentor, I appreciate your concern.

ALEXANDRE

This is not concern. It is instruction. You do not understand who—

ORIANNE

She is a Queenmother. A stateswoman. A leader of councils and processions. She has not seen combat in a generation. I am younger. Faster. Better conditioned.

Maliki steps in beside them, eyeing Orianne with open amusement.

MALIKI

Yes, Mentor Alexandre. The Queenmother cannot overwhelm Orianne with tax policy and ceremonial etiquette. Orianne almost smiles.

ORIANNE

With respect, Mentor — I will not underestimate her. But I will not overestimate her either.

Alexandre studies her face.

Sees the certainty there.

Too much certainty.

ALEXANDRE

Power does not fade as predictably as muscle.

ORIANNE

Then I suppose we will test that theory.

Maliki chuckles.

MALIKI

I look forward to the spectacle.

Alexandre exhales slowly, stepping back, helpless now.

WIDE SHOT — THE CIRCLE

The drums begin to beat softly.

Zemaya reaches up and unties the clasp at her shoulder.

Silk slides to the ground.

Orianne's faint smile lingers.

Then Zemaya removes another layer, and another.

The final robe drops revealing muscle.

Definition.

Scars.

Strength that has not dimmed.

Alexandre does not look surprised.

Orianne does.

Zemaya rolls her shoulders.

Camera pans around to reveal her in all her athletically lithe,
battle hardened glory.

Lingers for a beat on the same tattoo at the base of her neck.

This is not just a politician.

Not merely a Queenmother.

This isn't even just a former champion.

Zemaya was the orphan champion of the Croyantes.

She cracks her knuckles.

Her eyes are no longer ceremonial.

They are sharp and predatory.

ZEMAYA

Let us begin.

CUT TO...

EXT. MARKET PATH - DAY

A far cry from the ceremonial avenues.

This part of Javari is cramped.

Canvas awnings sag. Vendors shout half-heartedly. Suspicion hangs in the air thicker than the dust.

Through it walks **MARIE**.

Small. Graceful. Strikingly beautiful in a way that feels almost misplaced here – like nobility walking through ruin.

Her long black-and-white dreadlocks are pulled back loosely, swaying behind her.

She walks quickly.

A few dozen feet behind her trails a **MASSIVE CLOAKED FIGURE**.

Slow. Steady. Unrelenting.

She glances back. He's still there. Her pace quickens. So does his.

EXT. GAMING DEN ENTRANCE - CONTINUOUS

Marie ducks inside.

INT. GAMING DEN - DAY

Dim. Despite the daylight outside.

The place is mostly empty, but it still hums with danger. The room smells of old smoke, cheap liquor, and decisions people regret.

Tables scattered. Dice. Cards. Old blood stains. A few patrons glance up, then immediately look away.

Marie scans the tavern and her eyes come to rest on **VALENTIN**.

Seated at the back like a king in exile, with his feet propped on an ottoman. His exquisite gold shoes gleaming in the dankness. He is immaculately dressed, completely untouched by the grime around him.

He doesn't look at her immediately, which somehow means he already has.

Marie approaches with careful, controlled urgency.

INT. VALENTIN'S TABLE

Valentin finally lifts his eyes.

Slow.

Appraising.

A long beat.

MARIE (urgent, breathless)
Someone's following me.

Valentin says nothing, he just studies her.

Not concerned.

Interested.

He takes in the details, her face, her posture, her hands.

What she's hiding.

What she's offering.

VALENTIN
And you thought to bring that trouble... here?

Marie leans closer.

Lowering her voice.

Letting a hint of vulnerability slip into her tone.

MARIE
I thought... perhaps you might protect me.

Her fingers brush the edge of his table. Not quite touching him.
But close enough to suggest it.

It's a loaded implication.

MARIE (CONT'D.)
Men like you don't often turn away opportunity.

Valentin smiles and leans back.

He's amused...and intrigued

VALENTIN

Men like me don't often receive visitors
who arrive with fear in their eyes... (beat)
...and calculation in their posture.

Marie doesn't flinch. If anything, she softens.

MARIE

Then you understand me better than most.

VALENTIN

I understand that fear makes people honest.
And honesty is rarely this... well-presented.

His gaze lingers just long enough to be intentional. It's not crude
or objectifying, but rather controlled and assessing.

VALENTIN (CONT'D)

So, tell me. Should I be more interested
in the man following you, or in why you
chose me to hide from him?

Marie allows herself the faintest smile.

She steps closer.

Into his space now.

MARIE

Because I've heard of you. Or rather I've
heard of your place. Salon de Valentin. People
say if someone walks in with a problem, you
can all but guarantee they leave without it.

VALENTIN

People say many things, don't they?

He studies her again.

More intently now.

VALENTIN (CONT'D)

And what, exactly, would you offer in exchange
for this... solution?

Marie stares deeply into his eyes.

MARIE

Whatever makes the problem worth solving.

A long silence.

The room seems to lean in.

Valentin taps a finger lightly against the armrest.

Thinking.

Enjoying this.

VALENTIN

Careful. Vague promises tend to become
very specific obligations.

MARIE

Specificity ensures that nothing is left
to chance, that everyone gets what they...
desire.

A flicker of something flashes in Valentin's eyes.

Approval.

Amusement.

Hunger.

He leans back again.

Decision made.

VALENTIN (CONT'D)

No need to discuss details now. Come, sit.
If your pursuer presents himself, he will
quickly learn that anyone who brings
trouble into my house..

He snaps his fingers and from shadows, side rooms, behind curtains **A
DOZEN ARMED HENCHMEN** emerge. Each of them carries heavy weaponry.

VALENTIN (CONT'D)

...rarely leaves with their breath.

HOLD ON — THE DOOR

It CREAKS open.

The cloaked man enters.

Silence.

No one moves.

The cloaked man walks calmly to the bar, completely unfazed by the dozen armed men watching him.

He places one massive hand on the counter.

CLOAKED MAN (to bartender)
I'll have something strong.

The bartender freezes and looks to Valentin.

BACK TABLE – VALENTIN

Valentin exhales slowly. He's annoyed but intrigued.

He raises his voice just enough.

VALENTIN
You there, brute. I am called Valentin Boulet.
As proprietor of this den, before you can be
served, I must insist that you name yourself
and state your business.

AT THE BAR

The cloaked man doesn't turn.

CLOAKED MAN
My name is my own...as is my business.

A few of the henchmen shift.

Hands tighten on weapons.

BACK TABLE – VALENTIN

VALENTIN
Then you have chosen the wrong house. Here,
we trade in names. And in business. Refusal
to offer either tends to shorten one's stay.

The cloaked man finally turns.

Even beneath the hood, his size is absurd.

CLOAKED MAN
That sounds less like a rule...(beat)...and
more like a preference.

A ripple through the room.

VALENTIN

You will find my preferences... are rarely optional.

The Cloaked man takes a step away from the bar.

Closer now.

Still calm.

Still unconcerned.

CLOAKED MAN

Then perhaps we do understand each other.
I also have preferences. I prefer to drink before I speak.

A ruffle laughter spreads across the henchman, but the chuckles fade quickly under Valentin's glare.

VALENTIN

And I prefer to know whether the man I am serving is worth the glass he drinks from. Or if I should simply break it over his head.

CLOAKED MAN

If you intended to break it, I don't believe you'd have offered it. Seems a proprietor who breaks a patron's glass would be rather wasteful, no?

Valentin's smile tightens.

The cloaked man's gaze drifts.

Lands on Marie.

Lingers.

Deliberate.

Marie stiffens.

The Cloaked Man's posture softens, he raises his hands in a sign of deference.

CLOAKED MAN (CONT'D)

I mean no offense. I am called Kyrian. I seek companionship...for a brief time. That pretty *sprite* at your table, she's smaller than I...prefer, but sturdy enough.

MARIE (offended)
Who are you calling *sprite*?! You *brute*!

KYRIAN
And feisty too? I like that. Tell me, Valentin,
how much for her attentions? I'm certain
I can't match what you've paid, but surely,
I've got enough *shells* to fold into your
reserved spot for a bit?

VALENTIN
What makes you think I pay for her attentions?

KYRIAN
Please. Gold shoes. Fancy robes. Drinking
at first light with a coterie of armed
brutes for company. There's no shame in it.
There are many men who rely on props and
posturing to ignite desire.

CLOSE ON VALENTIN

Stillness.

Absolute stillness.

The smile is gone.

Completely.

The room holds its breath.

VALENTIN
Kyrian, is it? Well Kyrian, I was considering
letting you purchase a drink before my men
cut off your legs. But you've offended me.
So now you'll just lose your legs.

The henchmen tighten their circle, weapons ready.

Kyrian chuckles.

KYRIAN
If anyone's removing legs, it'll be me.

The henchmen surge forward, and the cloaked man drops his cloak,
revealing two enormous clubs are strapped across his back, he draws
them in one smooth motion...

GAMBLING DEN FIGHT — INSTANT VIOLENCE MONTAGE

A club CRUSHES a man's chest, sending him airborne into a table.

Another henchman swings, Kyrian catches the blade mid-air, snaps the wrist, and caves in his skull.

A third is lifted and thrown through a support beam.

Wood splinters. Bodies break.

Blood spatters across the walls like paint.

Kyrian moves with terrifying efficiency. He's not wild or sloppy. He's a force of purposeful destruction.

BACK TABLE — VALENTIN & MARIE

Valentin rises, suddenly less composed.

He pulls a long, thin dagger from beneath the table.

Grabs Marie.

Blade to her throat.

Kyrian turns slowly, blood dripping off his arms and face.

VALENTIN

That's enough! If you want the girl to continue drawing breath, then leave my place. Now!

Marie's eyes flicker.

Not fear.

Timing.

THE REVEAL

In one fluid motion, Marie slips her weight, rotates under Valentin's arm

A hidden blade flashes into her hand—

Then another.

She moves like lightning.

SLASH across his wrist

SLASH across his forearm

A third cut opens his grip completely

Valentin screams, dropping the dagger.

Marie steps away.

Kyrian approaches the table and stands over the wreckage.

Marie beside him.

MARIE

You should have paid your rent, Valentin.

Valentin looks between them.

Bleeding.

Terrified.

VALENTIN

What... what is this?

Kyrian steps closer.

KYRIAN

Collection.

MARIE

Cassius sends his regards. Well actually,
he sent us. You've met my associate, Kyrian.
Kyrian le Rasoir. And I am called Marie LaPierre.

The color drains from Valentin's face.

VALENTIN

Wait, wait, wait. The One-Woman Plague?
The Razor? No, no, no. I beg of you. Just
tell Cassius I was away, yes? Please. Through
those doors, in the kitchen, I have barrels
of wine, fermented milk, whatever you-

CUT TO...

EXT. SERVICE ROAD - LATER

A cart waits down the road past the den, it's pulled by Brie and Burgundy, two striking ALBINO ZEBRAS.

Kyrian and Marie load a large, blood-leaking bundle into the back.

MARIE

I can't believe you called me a sprite.

KYRIAN

You called me a brute.

MARIE

And what was that bit about being small but sturdy?

KYRIAN

You are small. And sturdy.

Marie pauses before closing the flap, Valentin's GOLD SHOES stick out from the bundle, still attached to something thankfully unseen.

MARIE

I still didn't like it.

She pulls the flap shut and climbs in the seat next to Kyrian.

KYRIAN

Next time I'm buying your attentions, I'll use different language. *Pardon me, monsieur Valentin, by what manner of magyc did you wield, to summon such a radiant beauty.*

MARIE (laughing)

Shut up. What's our next task?

Kyrian rummages through his tunic and pulls out a scroll.

KYRIAN

We have a rendezvous at the Filet Noir, with someone called...Lanos.

MARIE (sighs)

The Filet Noir? Why risk a meeting so close to the border of Terre d'Os?

KYRIAN

Larger risk means larger rewards. Or are you content chasing gamblers and goat thieves along the eastern coasts?

Kyrian clicks his tongue and Brie and Burgundy pull them, and the cart off down the road.

CUT TO...

EXT. RITUAL GROUNDS - DAY

The circle holds.

The Youths stand at its edge. Silent. Watching.

Alexandre. Maliki. Attendants.

All eyes on Orianne and Zemaya.

The drums beat faster and faster until finally..

The fight begins.

Orianne moves first.

Fast.

Precise.

She lunges..

Zemaya pivots inside Orianne's strike, redirects her momentum-

Orianne is thrown hard to the ground.

Before she can recover, Zemaya's foot presses into her shoulder, pinning her.

ZEMAYA

You rely too heavily on prediction.

Orianne twists and Zemaya lifts her foot.

Orianne scrambles up to strikes again.

Zemaya counters with a brutal elbow to the ribs, and a sweep of the leg.

Orianne crashes again.

As she tries to rise, Zemaya is there delivering a backhand strike that snaps Orianne's head sideways.

The crowd murmurs, but Orianne doesn't give up.
Orianne attacks high - Zemaya redirects low

Orianne feints – Zemaya reads it instantly

Orianne spins – Zemaya intercepts mid-motion

Each movement from Zemaya is efficient.

Minimal.

Perfect.

She's not faster.

She's earlier.

CLOSE ON – ORIANNE

Breathing hard.

Bruised.

Shaken.

But watching.

Tracking.

Learning.

The pattern emerges...Zemaya always steps *half-beat ahead*, she always anticipates the second movement, but not the first.

Orianne steadies herself.

Resets.

THE SHIFT

Orianne moves again, but this time she commits to a false opening.

Zemaya steps in but Orianne breaks pattern, dropping lower than before.

Orianne hooks Zemaya's leg and twists, driving her weight forward.

Zemaya hits the ground.

The crowd GASPS.

Orianne pounces. Mounting Zemaya, she leans in, trying to pin, trying to end it.

GROUND LOCK

Zemaya, still on her back—

Calm.

Controlled.

She traps Orianne's arms.

Locks them.

Orianne strains, but fails to break free.

ZEMAYA (quiet, almost amused)
Cede. You've proven enough. Cede.

Orianne's eyes burn.

ORIANNE

No.

Zemaya tightens the lock.

ZEMAYA

Then you will break.

THE MOMENT

For a few seconds, Orianne stops resisting, but then...

She LEANS INTO the lock. Hard.

A sickening CRACK reverberates through the clearing as her left arm SNAPS at the elbow.

Bone TEARS through skin.

The crowd recoils in horror.

Orianne SCREAMS but doesn't stop, instead she wrenches her arm free and angles the exposed bone at Zemaya's face.

ORIANNE (strained, feral)
Cede...or I will take your teeth.

Blood drips down her arm, and her body shakes violently.

Zemaya stares at her, an impressed smile flashes briefly across her face, before it turns to a sinister smirk.

THE REVEAL – MAGYC

From behind Orianne—

Something moves.

A long, sinewy **TAIL** slithers into frame.

It coils around Orianne's torso And violently RIPS her off Zemaya,
hurling her across the clearing.

Orianne lands hard and doesn't move.

WIDE SHOT

Zemaya rises.

The tail extends behind her, fluid and alive.

It is not a natural appendage. It's **MAGYC**.

The air hums as Zemaya's eyes begin to glow white.

She raises her hand and a dagger appears, hanging in the air
perfectly still.

Zemaya nods and the dagger glides over until it hovers just above
Orianne's chest.

Orianne lies on her back, barely conscious.

CLOSE ON – ALEXANDRE

He runs to Zemaya.

ALEXANDRE (urgent)
Queenmother! This is enough!!! Orianne has
been bested. The quarrel is over!!!

CLOSE ON – ZEMAYA

The Queenmother ignores Alexandre and addresses Orianne.

ZEMAYA
Cede.

CLOSE ON – ORIANNE

ORIANNE (weak, but clear)
...no...

MEDIUM SHOT – ZEMAYA and ALEXANDRE

Zemaya exhales, impressed.

She shakes her head.

EXECUTION

The tail dissipates into smoke.

Zemaya snaps her fingers and the dagger DROPS down, driving straight through Orianne's chest.

Orianne SCREAMS.

Zemaya turns to Alexandre.

ZEMAYA

Now...it is over.

ALEXANDRE

You used *Magyc* against a Youth?! You had already won!

Zemaya shakes her head and raises her hands.

The sky fractures as waves of white and blue **MAGYC FIRE** pour down, flooding the clearing, obliterating everything!

Youth. Grass. Stone. Sound itself.

Gone.

Only Zemaya and Alexandre remain, standing in a void of burning light.

Alexandre collapses to his knees.

ALEXANDRE(terrified, broken)

QUEENMOTHER!!! Could you not have taken the breath from my lungs?! Could you not have wielded the Magycs to restrain and subdue, rather than destroy?!?!

Zemaya chuckles.

ZEMAYA

For one tasked with teaching, you are remarkably ignorant.

She gestures.

The fire vanishes.

The meadow returns.

Untouched.

Unburned.

The youths still stand.

Only Orianne remains fallen.

Broken arm.

Blade in her chest.

EXT. PALANQUIN - MOMENTS LATER

Attendants carefully lift Orianne and load her into Zemaya's palanquin.

Zemaya climbs in after her, reaches beneath the seat, and pulls out a carved **CALABASH, full of a shimmering liquid. COPPERMILK.**

She tilts Orianne's head and pours.

The liquid glows as it flows down her throat.

The wounds begin to close.

Bone retracts.

Flesh knits.

Breath returns.

INT- INSIDE THE PALANQUIN (CONTINUOUS)

Orianne gasps. She's alive. Weak, but whole.

ZEMAYA

Take a moment. Say goodbye to your Mentor.

Orianne looks out.

Alexandre stands in the road, growing smaller as they depart. Even in the growing distance, his face is shaken, but relieved.

Maliki stands beside him, confused, but eerily intrigued.

ORIANNE

Queenmother... I lost.

ZEMAYA

Yes. You did. And yet you managed to impress me. Enough so, that I will honor your intended pledge. Orianne Duchamp, for the successful completion of your Tutelage, for earning more accolades than all the Youths of your generation- including the Mark of Three Moons, for facing me unwaveringly in quarrel, I, Zemaya Bellegarde, Puissant Haute Champion of Javari, acknowledge and accept your pledge, and grant you the rank of Instructor within the Enlightenment Stratum.

Orianne frowns and looks out of the window.

ORIANNE

Thank you Queenmother, but if I am to pledge Enlightenment, why are we not headed south toward Navanca? We are travelling to the Northeast are we not?

Zemaya leans back slightly.

ZEMAYA

Your talents are indeed exceptional. We are going to Courbonne. An expedition is being prepared. Over the next few hundred nights, thousands of the Vaincre will be arriving from Tollerbella, ready to follow Skinner Hakim into the frozen peaks of Ayrsulth. But all they know is how to spill blood and take breath. They will need an Instructor to accompany them. One who Understands both how to think, and how to fight.

A long beat.

Orianne nods.

ORIANNE

As you have said it, so let it be so.

CUT TO BLACK