

Thorn (Act I)

By

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FADE IN:

EXT. ROYAL PALACE - NIGHT

A young boy, no older than seven or eight, sits on the balcony. He is THORN, the young prince of Djilan. His dark hair blows in the wind. Glazed lanterns tilt in the breeze, the dim light caressing his dark skin.

Within a curved entry, the palace chamber is luxurious, sparkling with gold and silver and mirrors and jewels. The painting of a dark-haired woman hangs on the wall. The woman's dark face is serene.

Thorn sits on a carved marble bench on the palace balcony, giggling and tugging on something. A high-pitched GROWL. On the balcony floor, a black jaguar cub grips a large wishbone in its teeth.

Thorn tugs playfully on the wishbone. The jaguar cub GROWLS and tugs back.

Behind Thorn, a dim orange speck is visible in the darkness, strangely out of place against the night stars.

EXT. DJILAN - NIGHT

Red moonlight. A clustered archipelago dots a dark and misty coastline. A large cove branches into several twisting canals that intersect through the lush islands.

Past a white beach and a dusty hill, a tall stone wall extends across the horizon. Behind the wall, brick buildings with sloped tin and wood-thatched roofs and smoldering stone chimneys. Textured shadows dotted with glowing bulbs of orange light.

Atop a hill overlooking the village, an enormous castle dominates the landscape. Domed towers rise behind an arched gate. Royal standards flap gently in the wind.

High above the castle bedrock, a balcony juts out from a curved stone turret. An orange light glows from the balcony.

EXT. DJILAN ISLAND - NIGHT

On the largest of the coastal islands, the ruins of an ancient ziggurat, a massive, stepped temple of mud brick and petrified wood, rise above the top of the forest.

At the top the temple, an orange glow flickers, revealing the outline of a man.

EXT. ISLAND TEMPLE - NIGHT

The man, naked except for a furry loincloth, stands over a small, pitch-black pool of oil. He cautiously holds a torch.

The man bends over the pool, looking at his reflection in the black ooze. His wavering reflection blinks back at him from the puddle.

Behind the man, RUNNING footsteps, a SNARL, and then a horrific BEAST bursts into view, a mass of wild hair, furious eyes and gnarled teeth, its skin smeared in red blood and black oil.

The man HURLS his torch at the beast. It EXPLODES into flames and increases its demonic pace.

With a blood-curdling WAIL, the burning creature LAUNCHES itself at the man, sending them both SPRAWLING into the pool of oil.

A bloody and twisted mass of limbs, they are instantly incinerated.

A cloud of fire SHOOTS into the night sky.

EXT. ROYAL PALACE - NIGHT

From the balcony of his chamber in the palace, Thorn watches the fireball rise into the sky.

Thorn drops the wishbone and stands and stares at the fireball.

In the near distance, across a narrow estuary, the temple is visible, a plume of smoke rises from its altar, a light gray against the black sky.

Thorn's golden eyes shine in the darkness.

INT. DJILAN DUNGEON - NIGHT

Thorn's face, wrapped in an ornate tattoo. The penetrating, golden eyes are the same, but now Thorn is in his early twenties.

(CONTINUED)

The palace is now a dungeon. Thorn sits high up on a large, carved stone, one hand on his sword, overlooking a caged fighting arena. He is flanked by a page of the royal court.

Around them, the dungeon is cavernous, filled with groups of SLAVES and their HANDLERS. The slaves are bound with leather or chains. Some are grotesquely scarred, or missing a finger or ear from battles lost, long ago.

In the center of the dungeon, a CROWD of shifty-eyed men clutch bits of silver or trinkets. The crowd undulates in a fluid mass around the cage.

INT. DUNGEON PIT - NIGHT

Within the black, rusted bars, in a large, three-foot-deep pit, two SLAVES wrestle.

CROWD

Kill him! Rip out his throat! Kill him!

The muscular, whip-scarred WROTH lifts his adversary and throws him against the cage, which SHUDDERS from the impact. The man hits the ground with a THUD.

Across the arena--a broken sword! Both men SCRAMBLE for it.

Wroth reaches the sword and SWINGS it into his opponent's head. A mist of blood SPRAYS into the air as the dead man falls back. The crowd ERUPTS.

INT. DUNGEON - NIGHT

Pieces of silver and jewels exchange hands amongst the crowd.

Two PALLID MEN emerge from a dark corner of the dungeon and enter the cage to collect the body.

INT. DUNGEON PIT - NIGHT

Aten, a stocky, white-haired fellow, steps into the arena.

ATEN

Who else will challenge Wroth? ...
Challenge, you cowards! Fight for
your freedom!

Wroth roams inside the cage menacingly, spackled with blood. He brandishes the broken sword and exalts himself.

(CONTINUED)

Aten glances around for a worthy challenger. A beat. He points to a pale peasant in the crowd.

ATEN

Eh ... Very well then, YOU!

Across the pit, the ghostly pallbearers lift the corpse onto a plank and wheel it out of the pit.

INT. DUNGEON - NIGHT

The crowd parts seamlessly to let the pallbearers through. The pallbearers shuffle into a colorless hallway.

INT. DUNGEON PIT - NIGHT

EVI, a slim, obviously frightened man is pushed into the cage at Wroth's feet. The iron gate SLAMS shut behind him.

Evi cowers away from Wroth, trembling, looking around for a weapon or a shield.

INT. DUNGEON - NIGHT

ANA, a peasant woman, fights through the crowd toward the cage. She desperately clutches at EVI through the bars.

ANA

No, please! Evi! Evi!

INT. DUNGEON PIT - NIGHT

Ana cries and clings to Evi through the bars as Aten paces around the cage.

ATEN

Place your wagers then. Wagers!

Wroth GRIMACES at Evi as Ana cries.

ANA

No, please!

INT. DUNGEON - NIGHT

From his perch on the white stone, Thorn leans over and whispers to his page. The page quickly walks down to the cage and flaps his hand toward Aten.

INT. DUNGEON PIT - NIGHT

Aten rolls his eyes.

ATEN

Ahh! Be done with it then! Out with him!

The gate SWINGS open again and Evi quickly clambers out and embraces the sobbing Ana and they disappear into the crowd.

INT. DUNGEON - NIGHT

Thorn watches their exit. The crowd groans with disappointment.

INT. DUNGEON PIT - NIGHT

Aten raises his hand to quell the murmur.

ATEN

The code is clear! He who grants clemency shall offer the challenge!

The crowd erupts. Wroth's expression becomes serious.

INT. DUNGEON - NIGHT

Up on the rock, Thorn stands and removes his cloak.

Thorn LEAPS down onto the top of the cage. He opens a hatch and

INT. DUNGEON PIT - NIGHT

Thorn drops into the pit.

ATEN

Wagers! Place your wagers!

Thorn walks toward the side of the cage where his page awaits. Thorn takes the page's broadsword and turns and tosses it to Wroth, who catches it cleanly by the hilt.

(CONTINUED)

Wroth to Thorn. Wroth now wields the broken sword in one hand and the broadsword in the other.

The crowd buzzes as Thorn and Wroth stare each other down.

With a shout, Wroth HURLS the broken sword at Thorn and CHARGES forward.

Thorn DEFLECTS the projectile and DUCKS Wroth's LUNGE attack and STABS Wroth with an upward strike. A mortal blow. The crowd erupts.

Wroth STAGGERS, DROPS his sword and FALLS to the side of the cage with a CLATTERING THUD. He GASPS for air. Black blood collects in a pool underneath him.

Thorn stands over Wroth. The men stare at each other as Wroth breathes his final breath. Thorn looks disgusted with himself.

Thorn turns and stalks out of the pit, disappearing into the crowd.

The page's broadsword sits completely surrounded by a pool of blood.

Aten scurries back into the arena, careful to avoid the blood surrounding Wroth's corpse.

ATEN

New challengers! Who is next?!

INT. DUNGEON HALLWAY - NIGHT

The pallbearers' footsteps slosh through muck and blood as they wheel the corpse down a dark dungeon hallway. The walls are covered with scratches and signs of struggle. A guarded gate leads into an empty courtyard. (Begin Credits)

EXT. DJILAN - NIGHT

Fluttering torchlights guide the pallbearers down a dirt path. As they exit another gate, the massive walls of the city are now visible in the distance.

EXT. DJILAN OUTSKIRTS - NIGHT

Past the outskirts of the city, the pallbearers cart the body across a short bridge.

EXT. DJILAN TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

The pallbearers pass a wooden post with three short pegs pointed in different directions, a trail marker.

The road leads up a hill, and the pallbearers disappear around a corner.

Passing through a heavily-guarded gate, the pallbearers enter a giant presidio. Mud-brick structures fill the city, with the dome and wind-catchers of a palace rising from the center.

EXT. DJILAN CAUSEWAY - NIGHT

Dim yellow lanterns light the way as the pallbearers push the cart down the main causeway and disappear down an alley.

The pallbearers breathe heavily as they pass boarded storefronts and empty booths toward another gate beyond which lies the castle.

EXT. ROYAL COURTYARD - NIGHT

The orange glow of burning campfires breaks the gloom. Huts and tents line the courtyard. A group of staggered, smaller buildings surround the great castle.

At the gate, red and black banners flap in the wind.

In an adjacent building, a shadowy figure stands in a large stone doorway. He waves the pallbearers in. (End Credits)

EXT. ROYAL LABORATORY - NIGHT

GRISWOLD, a white-haired elder, pulls his robe tight around his shoulders. Orange light glows from within the doorway behind him.

GRISWOLD

Right on schedule, aren't you? This way then.

Griswold leads the pallbearers through the stone doorway.

A beat. The POUNDING of hooves. From a tree in the courtyard, birds flutter into the night sky.

EXT. ROYAL COURTYARD - NIGHT

Thorn, cloaked upon a dark horse, rides through the courtyard toward the castle.

INT. ROYAL LABORATORY - NIGHT

Shadows dance through dark hallways. Griswold holds a candle as he walks into a musty but meticulously organized storage room.

Griswold motions the pallbearers toward a slab where they gingerly slide the body. The corpse has a gaping neck wound, which Griswold examines.

GRISWOLD

(to corpse)

Well, I guess it's no secret what happened to you, eh?

Griswold pays each pallbearer with a piece of silver and silently ushers them out.

INT. ROYAL LIBRARY - NIGHT

VISAN, a manicured, middle-aged nobleman, sits at a large desk in front of an impossibly thick book, scribbling furiously in an open page.

Visan removes his spectacles and takes a sip from a cup. Papers are sprawled across the desk.

GRISWOLD (O.S.)

Thorn sent us a fresh one!

Visan picks up a chart from amongst many on the table and squints at it.

A close up of the chart reveals anatomical drawings of a man, with different parts circled in red ink.

Griswold walks into the library through a far doorway.

GRISWOLD

Have you decided?

INT. ROYAL LABORATORY - NIGHT

Shelves line the walls, covered with jars of cloudy liquid haze.

Visan and Griswold lean over the corpse. Griswold holds a flickering lantern over the body.

VISAN

At least its not as bad as the last few. There was nothing left to examine ... Savages.

GRISWOLD

This one probably died quickly.

Visan walks into the shadows and emerges with a menacing, spring-loaded, claw-like device.

The lantern rests beside the corpse's head. Griswold stands over the body, scalpel in hand. He makes a deliberate stroke across the corpse's chest.

Visan inserts the claws into the corpse's chest and SQUEAKILY pries them open. A PING echoes through the lab as the claws lock.

Both men lean over the body. Griswold holds up the lantern in one hand and covers his nose and mouth with the other.

VISAN

Ugh, this one was walking rot. What's Thorn feeding them?

GRISWOLD

It's a dungeon.

Visan wields some kind of surgical fork, moving things around in the man's chest.

He YANKS out a dripping organ as Griswold holds out a jar filled with gray liquid.

VISAN

This should do.

The fleshy chunk drops into the jar with a SPLASH.

Griswold cradles the jar in one arm and lifts the lantern in the other, inspecting the shelves to find a place for the jar. Behind Griswold, Visan exits the lab.

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VISAN (O.S.)
The hour is late. Get rid the rest.

EXT. ROYAL COURTYARD - NIGHT

Visan walks out of a stone doorway into the courtyard. The long cords of his robe flail in the wind as he disappears into the darkness.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - NIGHT

Inside the royal chamber, a long purple rug leads to the dais upon which sits an empty throne.

The chamber is lined with hand-crafted artwork and statues, ornate and shimmering in their beauty.

INT. ROYAL PALACE STAIRCASE - NIGHT

Behind the throne, an ivory staircase leads up and into a marble hallway.

INT. ROYAL PALACE HALLWAY - NIGHT

Polished white slabs all around, lined with statues and busts. An arched doorway leads to a balcony.

EXT. ROYAL PALACE BALCONY - NIGHT

The stone terrace overlooks the city and the ocean beyond.

KING THAED, wearing a dark robe, stands in the doorway to the balcony. He holds an apple and examines a carved and polished bust of himself.

Behind the king, Thorn stands on the end of the balcony, overlooking the city below. A giant moon hovers overhead.

KING THAED
I'm expelling those traders
tomorrow. This is the second time
they have asked for lower tariffs.
Greedy jackals. As if granting them
safe passage was not enough.

The king takes a bite from the apple. He walks onto the balcony and places a hand on the balustrade.

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KING THAED

I have never asked them to come here. Our markets draw their kind--lazy and greedy. They want to trade but they don't want to pay. Lucky I didn't have them all fed to the dogs.

THORN

They bring your favorite spices, the finest furs, brews from the far west. Why not let them stay longer?

KING THAED

You would build an empire on charity, my son? Who will keep the crown upon my head?

THORN

The traders are connected to many kingdoms, they bring us the finest remedies from each. In the least, do their tales of travel not amuse you? Why not make them allies?

KING THAED

Allies ... enemies ...

The king looks at Thorn deeply. He rests a hand on Thorn's tattooed forearm.

KING THAED

There is no one but us, Thorn. You are the last.

King Thaед moves to a corner of the balcony and motions for Thorn to join him. The king faces the city in the valley below. The hilt of a sword glints from the folds of his robe.

KING THAED

Below us, Thorn, everything you see, your forefathers took from those who would have wasted it. Men of weakness. Sickness. Who would have given away what their ancestors fought and died for. People who wasted their time, preparing for tomorrow, but tomorrow wasn't preparing for them. It didn't even know they were there!

Thorn gazes out beyond the city rooftops, to the sea.

(CONTINUED)

KING THAED

Their birthright was meaningless to them, Thorn. Their destiny meant nothing. Destiny, is something that is taken, not given. Taken by the strong, through fear and pain. Men will always fear your black skin, your golden eyes. These are tools with which to grasp your destiny, to take everything which has been laid before you. This is your birthright, Thorn.

The King tosses the eaten apple core over the railing.

KING THAED

In a fortnight, you will travel with the trade caravan when they make their journey across the sea.

A beat. Thorn considers the implications of this command.

THORN

What of my duties here? Is it your wish that I leave?

KING THAED

I know you have no taste for politics, my son. And this desert has little to offer a man like you.

The king turns, hands on his hips, and faces Thorn sternly. His sword is more prominent now.

KING THAED

It is my wish for you to be that which you were born to become. To explore the mysteries of the world for yourself. To create a name for yourself that men will fear and dread, so that their children and grandchildren will know your name and the name of your kingdom.

A beat. The king speaks with focused intensity.

KING THAED

Most men are but ripples in the oceans of time. Great men make waves. Do you understand, Thorn? This is your destiny.

A beat.

(CONTINUED)

THORN

When all men fear you, can you
discern friend from enemy?

The question goes unanswered. Visan enters the doorway,
breaking the mood.

VISAN

Pardon my--

The king suddenly grips the hilt of his sword and playfully
takes a step toward Visan, as if challenging him to a duel.

KING THAED

Aha, Visan! Reveal yourself! Friend
or enemy?

The gesture takes Visan by surprise. He takes a step
backward, bumping into a carved bust of the king.

The ivory bust topples and SHATTERS into a cloud of white
powder on the marble floor.

KING THAED

You see Thorn, if you seek
adversaries, look no further than
your own allies. They know where to
strike.