

YORK

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. CLARK PLANTATION - KENTUCKY - DAWN - 1803

Mist curls over tilled fields. A rooster crows. Somewhere, a dog barks. The world is waking up—but YORK (30s, massive, black, muscled like a carved god) is already working.

He hauls a barrel of water up a muddy hill, shirt soaked, breath fogging in the cold.

Nearby, WHITE FARMHANDS unload sacks of grain. They nod to York—not with equality, but the grudging respect reserved for a man who could break them in half.

A YOUNG BOY (9) watches York in awe.

BOY
(to himself)
He don't even breathe hard...

OVERSEER (O.S.)
YORK! You ain't done yet, boy. That barn's still leanin'.

York sets the barrel down. Calmly. Wipes his brow. Turns.

YORK
Then I reckon I'll lean it back.

The farmhands chuckle quietly. The Overseer scowls, spitting tobacco.

OVERSEER
You best watch your tongue, slave.

YORK
Yes, sir. It's just the one I got.

WILLIAM CLARK (O.S.)
That tongue got a use, Overseer.
Same as his back. Let's not break
either just yet.

CLARK (30s, lean, commanding) rides up on horseback. He eyes York like a man inspecting a tool he doesn't yet understand fully—but intends to use.

CLARK
Washington's called. Expedition
west. Me and Meriwether. We leave
from St. Louis.

A beat.

CLARK (CONT'D)
You're coming with me.

York doesn't move. Doesn't speak. Just watches the horizon, where the mist is beginning to burn off.

YORK
I go... 'cause I must?

CLARK
You go because you're mine.

Off York's face—no emotion, no rebellion. Just silent steel. And something else: the flicker of fate.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN

EXT. MISSOURI RIVER - NIGHT - 1804

East of St. Louis, Missouri Territory

A raging storm. Wind howls. Trees bend. The river is violent—black water thrashing like it's alive.

A wooden canoe smashes into a submerged rock—SNAPS. Two men are thrown into the river.

Shouts from the distant riverbank.

LEWIS (O.S.)
Hold tight! HOLD—

YORK (30s, massive, black, soaked to the bone) crashes through the underbrush, rifle slung, eyes locked on the chaos. He sprints for the river.

CLARK (O.S.)
YORK—DAMN IT—WAIT—

But York's already diving headfirst into the flood.

UNDERWATER CHAOS — arms flail, one man vanishes under. York grabs the other, hauls him up, swims furiously.

The other man—young, white, terrified—screams, swallowed by a whirlpool.

York doesn't hesitate. He goes under again.

Moments pass. Silence.

Then—YORK BURSTS from the river, one man in each arm, kicking, gasping.

The expedition crew rushes in, forming a human chain to pull all three men to shore.

ON SHORE, the survivors cough, cry, shake. York lays them down gently.

Everyone stares.

No one speaks.

Until one grizzled soldier murmurs:

SOLDIER

Ain't no man should be that strong...

LEWIS

No. That ain't just a man.

CLARK (QUIETLY)

That's York.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

EXT. CLARK PLANTATION - KENTUCKY - DAWN - 1803

York hauls a barrel of water up a muddy slope. His shirt clings, soaked from morning labor. He doesn't grunt. Doesn't slow. This is just another day in the life of a man built to survive.

A WHITE FARMHAND (20s, wiry) leans on a fence, sipping from a tin mug.

FARMHAND

Damn ox works harder'n two mules. Don't break, don't cry.

SECOND FARMHAND

Yet still a slave. That's God's order, ain't it?

They chuckle. York says nothing. Keeps walking.

From the main house, WILLIAM CLARK emerges. His boots are polished. His coat pressed. He watches York from the porch—calculating.

York deposits the barrel beside the barn. Wipes sweat from his brow. Just as the OVERSEER storms out, whip coiled.

OVERSEER

You're behind, York. I said haul two more. Or we'll see how quick you work when that back's striped.

YORK

Only one barrel behind. But if you think a lash can speed me up, you're welcome to find out.

The Overseer steps forward—too close.

CLARK (O.S.)

That'll do.

The Overseer freezes. Clark walks down, gaze fixed on York.

CLARK (CONT'D)

President Jefferson's authorized an expedition west. Meriwether Lewis and I will command it.

York turns, face unreadable.

CLARK (CONT'D)

We need strong backs. Loyal men. You're coming.

A long pause.

YORK

I go because I must?

CLARK

You go because I say.

A beat. York nods once—slow, deliberate.

YORK

Then I hope your god is watching. He'll want to remember the shape of this world before we change it.

Clark studies him, uncertain whether it's obedience or a threat.

EXT. CLARK PLANTATION - NIGHT

The world is still. Crickets hum. Fireflies blink in the fields.

York sits alone outside the slave quarters, sharpening a blade on a whetstone. His eyes flick up—Clark approaches, quiet, holding a jug of whiskey and two tin cups.

CLARK

You earned a drink tonight.

York eyes him, skeptical. But accepts.

Clark pours. They sit on opposite ends of a log.

CLARK (CONT'D)

Men are already talkin'. Say the west is wild, godless. Savages. Ice mountains taller than cathedrals.

York takes a sip. Waits.

YORK

Why take me?

Clark turns to him. A long beat.

CLARK

Because I trust you to watch my back. And because no man can scare the tribes like you will.

York swallows that.

YORK

When we return... if I serve well...

Clark meets his eyes.

YORK (CONT'D)

Will I be free?

Clark hesitates. Just long enough.

CLARK

You serve well... and we'll talk of it.

York nods. But it's not enough. And they both know it.

CLARK (CONT'D)

I give you my word, York.

York stares ahead into the dark.

YORK
Then I'll hold you to it.

Clark drinks. York doesn't.

EXT. ST. LOUIS FORT GROUNDS - DAY - WEEKS LATER

St. Louis, Missouri Territory

A rough-and-bustling military camp carved into the muddy banks of the Missouri River.

Dozens of men—soldiers, hunters, interpreters—load crates, polish rifles, wrestle oxen into carts.

Flags snap in the wind. The Corps of Discovery is coming to life.

LEWIS (O.S.)
We'll need more powder. And mules
that don't die in a puddle.

MERIWETHER LEWIS (30s), sharp-eyed and sleepless, scans a checklist as CLARK approaches on horseback—YORK walking beside him.

York carries an enormous wooden crate alone, while two white men strain together with a smaller load.

Eyes turn.

Men stare. Some laugh. Others whisper.

SOLDIER (UNDER BREATH)
Christ almighty... that a man or a
mountain?

SECOND SOLDIER
If I looked like that, I'd own this
whole damn fort.

York doesn't flinch. Doesn't smile. Keeps walking.

LEWIS looks up, curious.

LEWIS
You brought your valet?

CLARK
Brought my right hand.

LEWIS
He's not enlisted.

CLARK
Don't need to be. He'll pull twice
the weight and eat half the
gristle.

York sets the crate down. Calmly. Eyes Lewis.

YORK
Sir.

A beat. Lewis nods.

LEWIS
We leave in three days. Tell him to
be ready.

CLARK
He don't need telling. He's always
ready.

As Clark walks off, one YOUNG PRIVATE steps forward, curious
and cocky.

PRIVATE
That true what they say? Indians
think you're a spirit?

York turns, slow.

YORK
Don't know. But if you wake up with
your boots on backwards, maybe
they're right.

Laughter.

The Private steps back, grin fading.

York moves on.

EXT. MISSOURI RIVER - ST. LOUIS SHORE - MORNING

Departure Point, St. Louis

The river is glass. Mist rolls low across the surface like a
spirit breathing. All is silent—until a flint ignites and the
clang of gear signals the start of something immense.

Three long keelboats, loaded with supplies, weapons, charts.

The Corps of Discovery—45 men—stands at attention.

CLARK

Mount up. This ain't a march—it's a making.

Men move with purpose.

YORK, standing off to the side, eyes the water. It's wide. Endless. Like the future itself.

He clutches a worn token—a carved bone trinket, barely visible in his palm.

A BLACKSMITH walks by, scoffing.

BLACKSMITH

Watch that river, ox-man. She don't care how big your shoulders are. She'll swallow you whole.

York says nothing. Just steps toward the lead boat. Lifts a crate, steps aboard.

The boat dips under his weight—but rights itself. Steady.

LEWIS (O.S.)

This is it. Last edge of what's known.

ON YORK, as he gazes upriver—toward the unknown.

YORK (V.O.)

They say a man can walk his whole life... and still be nowhere. But what if he walks into a place that's never had a name?

He plants himself at the front of the boat.

A final call from Clark:

CLARK

PUSH OFF!

The boats creak. Ropes snap free.

Water churns. The expedition begins.

York stares ahead, the land behind him shrinking, fading.

YORK (V.O.)

What if... for once... he ain't followin'?

EXT. MISSOURI RIVER - VARIOUS LOCATIONS - MONTAGE - DAYS INTO WEEKS

Journey North - Missouri to North Dakota

RAGING RAIN. MUD UP TO THEIR KNEES. INSECTS EVERYWHERE.

A soldier pukes from tainted water.

Another slices his leg on a rock and screams as York cauterizes it with a hot blade—calm, precise.

Boats stuck in reeds. York single-handedly lifts one free while four men struggle on another.

YORK (V.O.)

They called it discovery. But it was more like forgetting. Forgetting what it meant to be soft... slow... afraid.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - NIGHT - CAMPFIRE

Orange fire flickers across sweaty, worn faces.

Men eat in silence—exhausted, bitter.

Private GANTER (20s, sarcastic) nudges a flask toward York.

GANTER

Here. Even you earned this today.

York accepts. Drinks. Hands it back. The men are surprised.

SOLDIER #1

He never asks for it.

SOLDIER #2

Doesn't have to. Look at him.

A beat. Then:

GANTER

Say... you got a woman back east?

YORK

No.

GANTER

West, maybe?

YORK (DEADPAN)
You offering?

Laughter ripples. Even Lewis chuckles.

LEWIS
First joke I've heard in three weeks.

YORK
First whiskey I've had in three years.

The men laugh again—not at York, but with him. A shift.

EXT. PLAINS - LATER - DAY

Nebraska Territory

A group of NATIVE AMERICAN SCOUTS watches from a ridge.

Lewis raises a white flag. Clark rides forward.

YORK steps into view—towering, dark-skinned, armed.

A collective gasp among the tribe. Whispers spread.

TRIBAL TRANSLATOR
They say... you bring the Spirit Walker.

The TRIBAL CHIEF steps forward—his expression reverent. He speaks through the translator:

CHIEF (TRANSLATED)
Has he come to teach us... or test us?

York freezes. Everyone watches him. He doesn't answer.

One of the warriors offers a carved eagle feather—placing it at York's feet. A sacred gesture.

The soldiers murmur. Ganter mutters:

GANTER
Christ... they're worshipping him.

EXT. MONTICELLO - NIGHT - 1803 - FLASHBACK

Charlottesville, Virginia

A candle flickers in the window of a grand plantation home. Trees creak in the wind. A storm is brewing in the distance.

Inside—

INT. THOMAS JEFFERSON'S STUDY - NIGHT

THOMAS JEFFERSON (60s) sits at a large oak desk, parchment maps unfurled before him. A globe, a rifle, a bust of Caesar.

MERIWETHER LEWIS (30s) stands nearby—rigid, composed, but clearly unsure of the weight being placed on him.

JEFFERSON

The Louisiana Purchase has doubled this country, Meriwether. But it's land we do not know. I intend to change that.

He gestures to a hand-drawn map with wild, blank areas beyond the Mississippi.

JEFFERSON (CONT'D)

You are to find a water route to the Pacific. Establish trade. Chart the unknown. And secure our claim—before the French or Spanish do.

LEWIS

And if it cannot be done?

JEFFERSON

Then we will be wiser in our failure. But it must be tried.

Lewis processes this.

JEFFERSON (CONT'D)

You'll lead a corps of men. Soldiers, surveyors. The finest we have.

LEWIS

Then I'll need a second-in-command. Someone who knows the wilderness. Who can lead men... when I can't.

JEFFERSON

You have a name?

LEWIS

William Clark.

Jefferson nods, approving.

JEFFERSON

Then write to him. You depart
within the year.

He sits back. Watches Lewis study the map again.

JEFFERSON (CONT'D)

And Meriwether... if you find
anything that disproves what we
believe this nation to be—write it
anyway.

A quiet beat.

Lightning flashes outside.

CUT TO:

EXT. MISSOURI RIVER - DAY - BACK TO PRESENT

Approaching Fort Mandan, North Dakota Territory

Rain pours over the keelboats. York leans into a wind that
feels ancient. The storm is here.

YORK (V.O.)

They called it a map. But it was
just paper... waitin' to be filled in
by men like us. Or erased by what
we found.

EXT. MISSOURI RIVER - DAY - PRESENT

The storm is no longer brewing—it's here.

Waves hammer the keelboats. Wind lashes like a whip. Rain
pours sideways.

Men shout to each other across the chaos.

LEWIS

PULL LEFT! BACK OAR—LEFT!

One boat veers off, spinning toward a rock shelf.

York, soaked, stands like a mast—gripping a rudder that's
trying to buck loose.

CLARK

York! Brace it!

York jams his boot against the deck rail and pulls with both arms, muscles bulging, rope burning into his hands.

The boat stabilizes—barely.

Suddenly—a WHINE, then a SNAP—a rear mast gives. Wood splinters. A beam smashes into a soldier, sending him into the water.

Splash.

SOLDIER (O.S.)
MAN OVERBOARD!

Without hesitation, York dives in.

EXT. UNDERWATER - RIVER CHAOS

Dark. Cold. Limbs flail.

York grabs the drowning soldier—PRIVATE THOMPCKINS—hauls him upward.

EXT. RIVERBANK - LATER - DRENCHED

The storm has passed. Men collapse on shore—soaked, shaken, shivering.

Thompkins coughs violently as York rolls him on his side.

No one speaks. Then:

THOMPCKINS (GASPING)
You... you could've let me drown.

YORK
Could've. Didn't.

A few men chuckle. Others avert their eyes.

PRIVATE GANTER, sour, steps forward.

GANTER
Ain't right. Him getting all this glory. Not even enlisted.

LEWIS
You want to trade places with him?

GANTER

I want to know what happens when he turns. Big man like that? He turns and kills one of us?

York stands.

YORK

If I turn, you won't ask questions after.

Silence.

CLARK steps in.

CLARK

Enough. York's my man. He's here on my authority. He speaks when I say. Moves when I say.

CLARK (CONT'D)

He saved one of yours. That should be the end of it.

A beat. York looks at Clark.

Then walks away—not toward camp, but toward the woods. Alone.

EXT. WOODED RIDGE - NIGHT

York sits under a tree, drying his hands near a fire he made himself.

He stares out at the river. The land beyond. Wild. Open.

YORK (V.O.)

They fear me. But they need me.
They command me. But they ain't
never owned what's inside.

A faint howl in the distance. The wilderness calls.

EXT. PLAINS ENCAMPMENT - LATE AFTERNOON

Southwest North Dakota Territory

A peaceful tribal village of lodges and smoke. Children play. Drums echo faintly.

The Corps of Discovery approaches, dusty and worn. York walks beside the lead cart.

The Tribal CHIEF and his warriors emerge, expression unreadable—until they see York.

A hush.

Whispers ripple through the crowd. Mothers clutch children. Elders bow their heads.

TRIBAL TRANSLATOR

They say he walks between worlds.
That his skin is of the spirit
realm... and that you bring him as
a sign.

CHIEF (TRANSLATED)

We honor the one whose shadow
brings no harm.

The Chief steps forward and gestures for York alone.

Clark nods. York hesitates—then steps out, flanked by warriors.

GANTER (LOW)

This is a damn circus...

EXT. TRIBAL LODGE - NIGHT - CEREMONIAL FEAST

A massive fire burns. Tribal drummers beat rhythmically. Food is laid out—roasted meat, root vegetables, berries.

York is placed at the center, seated beside the Chief.

A WOMAN (20s)—beautiful, graceful, powerful—approaches and kneels beside York.

The Chief speaks softly, via translator:

TRIBAL TRANSLATOR

To share his strength, our
bloodline must know it. She is a
daughter of the moon.

York stiffens. He looks to Clark. Clark does nothing.

York looks at the woman—she gazes at him without shame.

YORK (SOFTLY)

I've never been honored.
Not like this.

The woman gently places her hand on his.

EXT. RIVERBANK - LATER THAT NIGHT

Ganter stands alone, smoking. Private Thompkins approaches.

THOMPKINS

Still angry?

GANTER

Ain't right. First he's carryin' our loads. Now they worship him like some damn sun god.

THOMPKINS

He saved your life, Gan.

GANTER

Ain't about that.

A long beat.

GANTER (CONT'D)

He starts thinkin' he belongs here... Somebody better remind him he don't.

EXT. TRIBAL ENCAMPMENT - LATE NIGHT

The fire's burned low. Drums have faded. The celebration is over, but the unease is not.

York sits alone near the embers, sharpening a blade. Eyes on the dark. Listening.

Ganter, half-drunk, leans against a tree with Private Dunley and Private Thompkins nearby.

GANTER

You see how they bowed to him? Fed him like a chief. Offered him their women.

DUNLEY

Can't lie, Gan. That's the most meat I've had since spring.

GANTER

We fight, bleed, row those boats—and they pray to him like he's Moses come back black.

A quiet beat.

THOMPCKINS

He saved my life. I ain't forgot that.

Ganter stares at him.

GANTER

You think that makes him one of us?

THOMPCKINS

Don't know. Just think maybe he's more than you give him credit for.

Ganter smirks. Pulls a knife. Tosses it into a log a few feet away.

GANTER

Next time you're drowning, try praying to him. See if he walks on water.

York stands. Slowly. Approaches the fire.

The men freeze.

YORK

The river don't care what color a man is. Neither does the cold. But I reckon cowards still come in only one.

Ganter steps forward. Tense.

GANTER

Don't get smart, boy.

YORK

Too late for that.

DUNLEY

Enough. Ain't worth it.

A tense pause.

YORK

You talk a lot for someone always watchin' other men do the work.

He walks off into the dark—leaving the fire behind him.

EXT. FORT MANDAN - NORTH DAKOTA - DAY - EARLY WINTER

Fort Mandan - Near Present-day Washburn

Snow falls steadily. The landscape is stark-flat, white, and wind-carved.

Log walls rise from the earth, half-buried in drift. Men work to patch leaks and reinforce roofs.

Lewis and Clark ride in with a smaller team, including York, covered in frost.

Tribal scouts flank them-guarded but respectful.

They approach a small lodge where TOUSSAINT CHARBONNEAU (40s, slick, pompous) waits.

Beside him stands a young Native woman-pregnant, quiet, watchful.

CLARK

Charbonneau?

CHARBONNEAU

Oui, monsieur. I speak Hidatsa,
Shoshone, a little English. She-
(points to the woman)
-she's my wife. She speaks more.

LEWIS

What's her name?

A beat.

SACAGAWEA

Sacagawea.

She says it soft. Strong. Lewis and Clark nod.

York watches her-the only other face not white, not free.

LEWIS

Your people have horses?

SACAGAWEA

Yes. In the mountains.
My brother... is chief.

Clark and Lewis exchange a look.

CLARK

Then we'll need her when the snow
melts.

CHARBONNEAU

She go nowhere without me.

SACAGAWEA
I go where I please.

York suppresses a smile. Clark notices.

INT. FORT MANDAN - LATER THAT NIGHT

A rough room. Crates stacked. A fire sputtering.

York sits alone, repairing boots. He glances up—Sacagawea steps inside, holding a pot of water.

SACAGAWEA
They say you pulled two men from
the river.

YORK
Didn't count. Just reached.

She kneels by the fire, warming her hands.

SACAGAWEA
They look at me like I'm not here.
Even when I speak.

YORK
Then we ain't strangers.

They share silence. Comfortable. Human.

SACAGAWEA
Your eyes... see more than they
say.

YORK
Your voice... says more than they
hear.

A beat.

SACAGAWEA
This world... it forgets people
like us.

YORK
Not if we walk loud enough.

She smiles—just slightly.

Charbonneau's voice yells from another room.

CHARBONNEAU (O.S.)
Woman! Come!

She gathers herself. Leaves without a word.

York watches her go.

YORK (V.O.)
Some chains don't make noise. But
they still drag.

EXT. FORT MANDAN - COURTYARD - MORNING

North Dakota Territory

The wind howls. Snow crunches beneath boots.

Lewis and Clark oversee a brutal training session—firearms drills, sled hauling, ice axe techniques.

Men stumble. Fall. Bleed.

York leads a group of four, pulling a heavy sled stacked with provisions. His strength dwarfs the others—but he never complains.

Nearby, Sacagawea walks carefully through the snow, one hand on her belly, the other carrying firewood.

LEWIS
Double-time! These mountains won't
wait for you!

GANTER (GRUNTING)
Maybe we let the ox-man pull it all
himself.

DUNLEY
He already is.

Ganter stumbles and falls. York doesn't stop. Then—he does. Drops the sled. Walks back.

The men brace—but York offers a hand to Ganter.

Ganter refuses it.

YORK
No shame in falling. Just don't
stay down.

A tense pause. Then—Ganter gets up on his own.

York walks back and resumes hauling.

Clark watches. Says nothing. Lewis nods once—respect forming.

EXT. WOODS NEAR FORT - LATER

York and Sacagawea walk side by side, collecting brush for kindling.

SACAGAWEA
You never raise your voice.

YORK
Not sure it'd matter if I did.

SACAGAWEA
The wind would hear it. The trees.

YORK
Trees don't write history.

She glances at him—softness beneath her strength.

SACAGAWEA
They remember more than men do.

York breaks a branch, tucks it under his arm.

YORK
You ever think of walking away?

SACAGAWEA
Every day.
But I got the boy now. He's gonna
need to see something better.

A long pause.

YORK
Maybe I walk far enough, I find a
place where I ain't less.

SACAGAWEA
Then walk loud. So the rest of us
can follow.

EXT. FORT MANDAN - PARADE GROUNDS - DAY

Clark stands before the assembled men.

CLARK
Tomorrow we push west. Beyond maps.
Beyond names.
You've trained hard. Fought harder.
But what waits for us don't care
about ranks or birth.

He looks directly at York, then at Sacagawea.

CLARK (CONT'D)

We survive as one... or not at all.

The men nod. Weapons are checked. Sleds packed.

YORK (V.O.)

They said it was discovery. But it was just a march—straight into forgetting.

EXT. FORT MANDAN - PARADE YARD - MORNING (CONTINUED)

Snow falls steadily. A broken sled lies half-buried near the wall.

York crouches beside it, showing three men how to lash a sled brace tighter with leather. His hands move like he was born to this.

Lewis watches from a distance—clearly impressed.

LEWIS He's doing more teaching than half the sergeants.

Clark doesn't respond. Keeps walking.

INT. TRIBAL LODGE - NIGHT

Sacagawea screams in labor. Midwives surround her.

York waits outside, seated on a log, anxious. Inside, Charbonneau paces uselessly.

A baby's cry.

Moments later, a Shoshone elder steps outside holding a wrapped infant.

ELDER WOMAN (SOFT)

A boy. Strong.

She gently places the child in York's arms—an unexpected gesture.

York looks down at the baby. The storm rages beyond the fort walls.

YORK (V.O.)

All that walkin'. All that fightin'.

(MORE)

YORK (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Maybe it was just to hold this—for
one second.

INT. FORT STORAGE ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

York lays the baby gently in a cradle by the fire.

Clark enters, watches him for a beat.

CLARK
Don't get ideas.

York looks at him.

CLARK (CONT'D)
You don't own what you carry.
Not the load. Not the moment. Not
the name.

York doesn't speak.

YORK
Then I reckon the silence is mine.

EXT. FORT MANDAN - RIVER LAUNCH - DAY

Mandan Departure Point

The Corps loads their boats. Snow crunches beneath hurried
boots.

Sacagawea steps into a keelboat with her child wrapped
against her chest. Charbonneau follows, still useless.

York helps secure gear—no one acknowledges him. He's muscle.
Ghost. Myth.

Lewis climbs aboard. Clark mounts his horse.

CLARK
We go now.

Boats shove off into the current.

YORK (V.O.)
They said we were discoverin' the
world.
But I was tryin' to find myself in
it.

As the boat vanishes downriver, we hold on York's face.

He's no longer a shadow.

He's becoming.

EXT. RIVERSIDE - JUST OUTSIDE FORT MANDAN - EARLY MORNING

A quiet clearing. The river glistens in early light.

Sacagawea sits on a large stone, partially wrapped in a blanket. Her breast is bare, her newborn son nursing peacefully. She hums low, a melody without words.

She is unashamed. Unhidden. Part of the earth itself.

York steps from the trees, returning with firewood—he stops when he sees her.

She looks up—no embarrassment, no fear. Just stillness.

SACAGAWEA

We hide nothing from the river.

York lowers his eyes—not out of shame, but respect.

YORK

I didn't mean to—

SACAGAWEA

You didn't steal what's already been given.

A pause.

She covers herself slowly, gently shifting the baby to her shoulder.

SACAGAWEA (CONT'D)

He knows your voice. It calms him.

York steps closer, kneels near the fire ring.

YORK

He's gonna remember none of this.
But you'll carry it like armor.

She watches him.

SACAGAWEA

No. Like a scar. But not all scars are ugly.

They sit in silence. The baby breathes softly between them.

EXT. FORT MANDAN - LATER THAT DAY

The Corps finishes packing. Snow crunches beneath boots. Boats are prepared. Tension low, but focus high.

York climbs aboard with Sacagawea and the child already settled.

Ganter stares, chewing a dry leaf—still bitter.

Clark gives a final nod.

CLARK

Westward.

The boats push off. The wind catches. The river widens.

EXT. MISSOURI RIVER - KEELBOAT - DAY

Western Dakota Territory

The boats drift downstream, current steady, ice clinging to the edges. The trees are skeletal. The horizon—endless.

Men row. Quiet. Watchful. Cold.

York sits at the front, alone. His eyes scan the treeline. He's already beyond this boat, this day.

YORK (V.O.)

We were leavin' the known. Not just
maps... but laws.
Rules made by men who ain't never
bled in snow.
Ain't never carried no one but
themselves.

EXT. KEELBOAT - LATER

A group of men huddle around Ganter, speaking low.

GANTER

Clark don't say it, but you see it.
That ox gets too much voice.
It starts thinkin' it belongs.

Lewis overhears. Says nothing. But files it.

INT. KEELBOAT - NIGHT

Sacagawea sleeps with her child bundled tight in furs. York sits opposite, sharpening a blade.

He watches her. Watches the child.

YORK (V.O.)

That boy... he ain't asked for none of this.

Neither did she.

But she carries life. I carry weight.

EXT. WILDERNESS MONTAGE - DAYS PASSING

Montana Wilderness - Eastern Rockies Approaching

A man dies—slips on ice, cracks his skull. They bury him in frozen soil.

The keelboat cracks on a submerged log—York leaps waist-deep to hold it upright.

Native scouts appear in the distance—unmoving, unreadable.

The river forks—no one has answers. No trail. No voice from home.

YORK (V.O.)

They think they lead. But the wild don't follow.
It just waits... and watches...
Same as me.

EXT. CAMPFIRE - EDGE OF UNKNOWN LAND - NIGHT

A final camp before the next leg. Lewis paces over maps. Clark drills a few men.

York sits alone, oiling his musket.

Clark approaches, tosses a piece of hard tack at York's feet.

CLARK

You don't eat, you fall behind.

YORK

I ain't behind. You just walkin' in circles.

GANTER (LOW)
 Ox man pulls like ten men.
 One day he figures out he don't
 need us.

DUNLEY
 He figures that, and we got a
 problem.

They go quiet as York passes.

EXT. HIGH RIDGE - EARLY MORNING

Montana Territory - Near the Continental Divide

The expedition crests a hill. Below them—a vast, untouched
 valley of snow, pine, and distant mountain shadows.

A moment of silence. Even the wind stops.

YORK (V.O.)
 Ain't no masters out here.
 No maps.
 No names they gave us.

York steps forward alone. Plants his boot in the untouched
 snow.

YORK (V.O.)
 Maybe this is where I start being
 more than what they see.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. RIVERBANK - DUSK

Deep Montana Territory

The men drag the boats over a frozen embankment, cursing,
 straining. It's too steep. Too slick.

A soldier slips—Thompkins, again—falling into an icy eddy,
 sucked under instantly.

SOLDIER
 Man overboard!

Before anyone reacts—York drops his gear and dives. No
 hesitation. The others hesitate. Watch.

EXT. UNDERWATER - MOMENTS LATER

Dark, murky. York's arms cut through the black. He grabs Thompkins by the coat, kicks furiously upward.

EXT. RIVERBANK - CONTINUOUS

York drags Thompkins out. Rolls him over. Slaps his back until he coughs.

The men surround them. But no one speaks. No one helps.

Clark walks up.

CLARK

You wet the supply sacks.

York turns, breathing hard. Mud and ice clinging to him.

YORK

Could let him drown.

CLARK

And we'd be down one less mouth to feed.

York locks eyes with him. Not anger. Just realization.

He walks away—alone again.

EXT. CAMPFIRE - NIGHT

York sits by the fire, a small one built away from the others. He sharpens his blade. His coat steams. Eyes fixed on the flame.

YORK (V.O.)

They don't see the blood no more.

Just what I carry.

Just what they take.

YORK (V.O.)

But out here...

I'm startin' to remember who I was before they told me.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. RIVERBANK - NIGHT

York sits alone on a rock, high above the river. The moon lights the trees below like bones in the dirt.

In his hand—a small carved object. The one we glimpsed in earlier scenes. A woman's face, worn smooth with time.

He closes his eyes.

YORK (V.O.)
She said I was born with fire in
me.

But they been pouring water on it since I could walk.

The wind moves through the trees like whispers.

YORK (V.O.)
They don't see it yet.

But the flames ain't out. They just waitin' to burn through.

He opens his eyes.

The fire's still there.

EXT. WILDERNESS CAMP - NIGHT

Wind howls through the trees. The fire is low. York sleeps beside it, arms crossed, blade tucked under his coat.

His brow twitches. Breathing quickens.

DREAM SEQUENCE - EXT. VIRGINIA SLAVE AUCTION - DAY - YEARS EARLIER

A blur of voices, ropes, dust, and chains.

A CHILD'S EYES—wide, afraid. York, no older than 9, clutches his mother's skirt.

AUCTIONEER (O.S.)
Strong back. Loyal breed. Raised
with Clark family stock.

A bell rings.

YOUNG YORK is pulled away. His mother screams. Arms stretch. They are separated.

YOUNG YORK

Mama!

EXT. CLARK HOUSEHOLD - DUSK - LATER

A young William Clark, perhaps 10, sits at a polished table.

York, now a house servant, stands behind him, holding a plate.

CLARK'S FATHER (O.S.)

He's yours now, Will. Like a dog.
Keep him close. He'll carry your
name farther than you will.

York looks down—not at the plate, but at a map on the table.
Eyes linger on it.

The edges of the dream begin to curl and smoke.

BACK TO PRESENT - EXT. WILDERNESS CAMP - NIGHT

York jolts awake. Sweating despite the cold.

He grabs his blade. Breathes deep.

YORK (V.O.)

You ain't where you came from.

But sometimes, it walks beside you anyway.

EXT. FROSTED RIDGE - MORNING

The world is white and merciless. Wind slices across the trail. Snow up to their shins. Boots crunch in rhythm.

York marches ahead of the others, eyes focused. He's more alert today—something's shifted inside him.

Behind him, the Corps trudges—grumbling, aching.

DUNLEY

I swear the sun don't rise out
here. Just a grayer shade of dead.

GANTER

That's 'cause we followed a shadow.

He throws a glance at York—spiteful, low.

York doesn't stop. Doesn't turn.

EXT. WOODED CLEARING - SHORT TIME LATER

Sacagawea kneels by a stream, washing cloths, her child nearby bundled in furs.

York steps from the brush, carrying firewood.

They meet eyes. No words at first.

SACAGAWEA
You walk different today.

YORK
Dreams don't stay buried forever.

She nods—like she knows exactly what he means.

SACAGAWEA
The land remembers. The spirits
too.

YORK
Then maybe they'll remember me.

He drops the wood. Turns back into the trees.

EXT. RIVER CROSSING - LATE MORNING

The Corps approaches a split in the frozen river—one side appears calm but deep, the other narrow and rapid.

LEWIS Split the teams. Test both routes. We rejoin by sundown.

CLARK
Ganter—take six men. York's with
you.

Ganter grimaces but nods.

EXT. RIVERBANK - GANTER'S TEAM - SHORT TIME LATER

York moves ahead, axe in hand, testing the ice as he goes.

Thompkins slips—his foot punches through the edge.

THOMPKINS
Ice!—Jesus!

Suddenly, the ice beneath him collapses—he drops waist-deep, current pulling hard.

Panic erupts.

DUNLEY

Get a rope! Get a rope!

Ganter fumbles—but York's already moving.

He drops his gear, grabs a fallen branch, and lunges onto the ice.

YORK

Grab it! Now!

Thompkins snatches it—York braces, straining. The ice cracks again.

With a roar, York hauls Thompkins out, just as the shelf gives way beneath him.

Both collapse on the snowbank—drenched, gasping.

Silence. The men stare.

Ganter kneels beside Thompkins.

GANTER (TO THOMPKINS)

You alright?

THOMPKINS (COUGHING)

Yeah. I... I think so.

No one looks at York. No "thank you." No nod.

York wipes his face. Stands. Alone.

EXT. RIDGE ABOVE THE RIVER - SUNSET

York climbs alone. Stands looking west.

The others are far below. Tiny. Fragile.

YORK (V.O.)

You carry 'em through the cold.

Through the dark. But it don't matter.

YORK (V.O.)

They still see the chains...
Even when you're the one breakin' 'em.

He turns, and disappears into the trees.

EXT. FOREST EDGE - NIGHT

A campfire flickers.

Drums. Faint. Rhythmic. Not from the Corps.

York walks through the trees, drawn by sound.

He steps into a clearing lit by torchlight—a tribal gathering. A new group they've encountered. Silent. Watching him.

A medicine man approaches. Decorated in feathers and bone. He speaks softly. A younger translator steps up.

TRANSLATOR

They saw you in the river.

You did not belong to the ice.

They say you walk between this world and another.

YORK

I walk alone. That's all.

TRANSLATOR

No. The spirits walk with you.

Your shadow is large. But your chains are thin.

The medicine man offers York a white-painted handprint across the chest. A warrior's mark.

TRANSLATOR (CONT'D)

You are not like them.

You are becoming.

EXT. CORPS CAMP - LATER THAT NIGHT

Ganter watches York return, face streaked with white paint, silent and calm.

Men stare.

GANTER (LOW)

Look at him.

They're makin' him one of them.

DUNLEY

Maybe they see what we don't.

Ganter doesn't respond. But his jaw tightens.

EXT. TRIBAL CAMP - CEREMONY CIRCLE - LATER THAT NIGHT

Torches surround a stone clearing. Tribal members form a wide circle, humming a low chant.

York stands at the center. His chest is bare. His arms streaked with ash and paint. The medicine man circles him slowly.

TRANSLATOR

Tonight you are not slave. Not shadow.

You are the one who walks.

The one who remembers the fire.

A tribal elder woman steps forward, her eyes blind with age but voice sharp.

ELDER WOMAN

You will see mountains.

You will see the edge of the sky.

A beat.

ELDER WOMAN (CONT'D)

But you may not come back.

The chanting slows. The circle tightens.

York doesn't speak. But his eyes—they understand.

EXT. CORPS ENCAMPMENT - EARLY MORNING

Clark stands with Lewis near the gear crates as York returns, covered in ceremonial ash and paint.

The men stare. Some curious. Some uneasy.

Clark's eyes narrow. He steps forward.

CLARK

Where the hell were you?

YORK

With the people we met.

They shared fire. Spoke of spirits.

CLARK

They don't command you. I do.

York holds his ground.

CLARK (CONT'D)

Wipe that paint off.

You're not one of them.

YORK

You said the wild didn't care about names.

Neither do they.

A long beat.

CLARK

I said wipe it.

York slowly wipes the ash from his arms—but not from his face.

Clark turns and walks off—tense, unsure who's still following who.

EXT. TRAIL INTO THE MOUNTAINS - LATER THAT DAY

The Corps marches. Snow now knee-deep. The Rockies loom ahead, jagged and endless.

York walks in front. Silent. The paint still across his eyes.

YORK (V.O.)

They gave me no name.

Now I carry too many.

Some fear me. Some follow.

But none of 'em see me for real.

EXT. BITTERROOT MOUNTAINS - NARROW PASS - MORNING

Montana Territory - Late Summer, 1805

Snow clings to high ridges. The Corps trudges up a narrow pass, pack animals slipping on shale. The wind howls like a living thing.

YORK leads the front, eyes sharp, steadying a panicked mule with one arm.

Behind him, LEWIS and CLARK survey the map, frowning.

CLARK
These ridges run west... but not
the way we need.

LEWIS
We'll ask the Shoshone again.

If Sacagawea can find her people, we might get horses.

CLARK
That girl better be more than a
charm.

Up ahead, York halts. Raises a hand.

YORK
Something's watching.

The Corps goes silent.

From the ridge above—A lone SHOSHONE SCOUT. Painted, armed,
still as stone.

He locks eyes with York.

Then vanishes.

EXT. SHOSHONE ENCAMPMENT - LATER THAT DAY

Western Montana - Shoshone Territory

A wary, tense meeting. Tribal warriors circle the Corps.
Sacagawea steps forward, face trembling.

Then—from the crowd—a cry of joy.

An ELDER WOMAN rushes forward and embraces Sacagawea.

SACAGAWEA
(murmuring, overwhelmed)
My people...

The mood shifts. Spears lower.

York watches—this is not his moment, but he feels the weight
of it.

A SHOSHONE BOY inches toward York, eyes wide.

He reaches out.

Touches York's skin.

Then smiles.

EXT. SHOSHONE ENCAMPMENT - NIGHT

A firelit feast. The Corps eats cooked elk. Laughter. Warmth.

Sacagawea sits beside York.

SACAGAWEA

They say you are the buffalo
spirit.

Strong, watching. Feared by men. Loved by the wind.

York chuckles—embarrassed but curious.

YORK

They ain't wrong about the wind.

She sure follows me everywhere.

Sacagawea smiles. Then more softly—

SACAGAWEA

You'll never be free if you follow
white men's paths.

Even the brave ones.

YORK

Maybe.

But I got a path.

And I reckon it runs through these mountains.

EXT. SHOSHONE ENCAMPMENT - EARLY MORNING

Mist swirls low. The camp stirs. Dogs bark. Fires crackle
low.

York is already up, sharpening a blade. Sacagawea approaches,
carrying her child.

SACAGAWEA

We ride soon. My brother gives you
a horse.

York looks up, surprised.

YORK
A whole horse?

She nods.

SACAGAWEA
He says you ride like the wind, and
walk like the bear.

So... he gives you both.

She hands him a carved bone talisman—a bear etched into its surface.

SACAGAWEA (CONT'D)
For protection. Or power. Depends
who you ask.

York takes it, quietly moved.

YORK
I'll keep it close.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL - LATER THAT DAY

The Corps rides single file, the path narrow and perilous.

York rides near the front, his horse calm under him.

Behind him, Dunley and Ganther eye him with a mix of awe and unease.

DUNLEY
That horse should be a white man's.

GANTER
So should that respect.

They both spit.

DUNLEY
Don't care if the savages see him
as some kind of god.

Still bleeds red. Still just property.

Clark hears it. Says nothing. But his jaw tightens.

EXT. RIDGE OVERLOOK - SUNSET

The Corps crests a ridge—and the horizon explodes open.

Snowcapped mountains stretch endlessly. Rivers snake through forested valleys. The vastness is breathtaking.

Everyone stops, stunned.

York dismounts, walks to the edge.

He opens his arms to the wind.

YORK
(softly)
God made a big country.

Big enough for dreams.

Clark watches him. Something unreadable in his gaze—envy, admiration, or fear.

EXT. RIDGE DESCENT - LATE DAY

The path narrows dangerously. Horses falter. The river roars far below—a sheer drop.

Suddenly—

A horse SCREAMS. One of the soldiers—GANTER—loses control. The beast stumbles, pack slipping.

GANTER
Help! Christ—!

The horse rears, teeters—Ganter is thrown, tumbling down the slope, tangled in his saddle rope.

The Corps freezes—no clear path down.

Except one.

York doesn't hesitate. He unhooks his rope, scrambles down the steep incline.

Clark moves to stop him—

CLARK
York! Don't be a damn fool!

Too late. York slides down, grabs a tree root, then Ganter's belt.

YORK
Hold on. I got you.

Ganter's face is bloodied. He's terrified.

GANTER
Why... why you helping me?

YORK
Ain't about you. It's about getting
back.

York hauls him up—muscles straining, rope cutting into his palms.

Finally, they reach the top. York collapses, breathing hard.

The Corps surrounds them, murmurs of disbelief.

SOLDIER #1
He saved him.

SOLDIER #2
Like it was nothing...

Clark kneels beside York.

CLARK
You risked your life for a man who
spits at your feet.

York shrugs.

YORK
He'd do the same for me.

Beat. Clark knows that's a lie.

Sacagawea watches from the rear—impressed.

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

The Corps is quiet around the fire.

York sits alone, wrapping his blistered hands.

Ganter approaches, awkward.

GANTER
I ain't said thanks. So... thanks.

York nods, silent.

Ganter walks away.

YORK (TO HIMSELF)
Next time... I let him fall.

He half-smiles.

EXT. MOUNTAIN RIVER CROSSING - NEXT MORNING

Western Montana - Early Autumn, 1805

Mist rises from a rushing glacial river. A crude raft is nearly assembled from logs and lashings.

Lewis and Clark argue softly nearby.

LEWIS
The current's faster than it looks.
If the rope breaks—

CLARK
We've no time. Either we cross now
or winter finds us here.

York secures the final log. His hands are raw and bleeding.

YORK
She'll hold. If you don't fight
her.

Clark nods.

CLARK
You and I go first. Prove it's
safe.

They push off.

EXT. RIVER - RAFT - MOMENTS LATER

The raft rocks violently in the whitewater. Clark steers. York anchors the rear.

Suddenly—a branch SNAPS the guide rope. The raft spins.

CLARK
York—brace the side!

York plants his feet, throws his weight into the raft, managing to slow the spin. The far bank nears.

They crash against it, hard. York flies forward—hits a rock.

Clark scrambles to him.

CLARK (CONT'D)

York!

York groans—a gash across his scalp.

YORK

(smirking through blood)
Still got all my teeth.

EXT. CAMPSITE - THAT NIGHT

York lies by the fire, head bandaged.

Sacagawea tends to him silently.

SACAGAWEA

You try too hard.

YORK

I try... just enough.

To get free.

She looks at him—a flicker of sorrow.

SACAGAWEA

The world you serve will not free
you.

YORK

Then I'll take freedom.

Like we take this land.

One step at a time.

EXT. FOREST PATH - EARLY MORNING

Eastern Idaho - Late Autumn, 1805

Drizzling rain. Mud everywhere. Trees loom tight on both
sides.

York scouts ahead with two soldiers—DUNLEY and WALTERS.
Tension crackles.

DUNLEY

(quietly, to Walters)
Every damn time, he leads. Why?

WALTERS

'Cause Clark trusts his nose. That ain't our call.

DUNLEY (CONT'D)

He's not a scout. He's a slave.

York stops—holds up a fist. He's heard something.

They freeze.

A twig snaps. Then—movement in the trees.

Suddenly—ARROWS WHIZZ past them.

YORK

DOWN!

They dive. A band of Blackfeet warriors emerges—bows raised.

York rolls, fires—drops one attacker with a clean shot.
Another arrow grazes his shoulder.

Dunley panics—runs.

York grabs Walters, drags him to cover.

WALTERS

(shouting)

We're outnumbered!

YORK

Then we make 'em count.

EXT. SAME FOREST - LATER

The skirmish is over. Two Blackfeet lie dead. One flees. York stands, wounded but alive.

Dunley returns—shaking, ashamed.

Clark rides up with the Corps.

CLARK

Who broke ranks?

WALTERS

Dunley did. York held ground.

Clark glares at Dunley, then York.

CLARK (TO YORK)

You good?

YORK

Better than him.

CLARK (TO ALL)

Next time a man runs, he won't need
to.

He'll already be gone.

Clark rides off. York stares after him—no pride, just quiet resolve.

EXT. FOREST RIDGE - MOMENTS AFTER FIRST ARROWS

Still page 45, expanded

York pulls Walters behind a fallen log.

YORK

Circle left! Cut the distance!

Walters nods, crawls through brush.

Dunley hides behind a tree, shaking. He fumbles for his flintlock—drops it.

A Blackfeet warrior charges from the right.

York grabs a broken branch—sharp—and lunges.

They clash—York slams the warrior down with brute force.

YORK (TO HIMSELF) (CONT'D)

Don't need no powder for that.

EXT. TREE LINE - CONTINUOUS

More warriors emerge. The forest echoes with whoops and war cries.

York spots a figure crawling toward a wounded Corps soldier—young, bleeding out.

York barrels forward, lifts the soldier with one arm, and drags him backward—

CRACK! A musket fires. A warrior drops behind him.

CLARK (O.S.)
 Fall back! Tight line! On me!

Clark and Lewis arrive with six men—musket volleys drop two attackers. The rest melt back into the trees.

Silence.

Only groans and heavy breath remain.

EXT. MAKESHIFT FIELD POST - NIGHT

The wounded are treated. One soldier dead. His name: Private Landry.

A bloodied blanket covers his face.

Clark surveys the faces—anger, fatigue, division.

He turns to Dunley.

CLARK
 You ran.

DUNLEY
 I— I was flanked, sir. Got lost.

CLARK
 You weren't lost.

Just gone.

A tense silence. Then—

CLARK (CONT'D)
 Next man that breaks ranks—we leave
 him where he lies.

He walks off.

EXT. EDGE OF CAMP - LATER THAT NIGHT

York sits alone, cleaning his blade. His hands shake.

Lewis joins him, calm but studying.

LEWIS
 You think Clark's too soft on them?

YORK
 No.

I think he's too hard on himself.

A beat.

LEWIS

They follow you. Some don't like it.

YORK

Then they best get used to it.

LEWIS

You ever think of what comes after this?

YORK

Sometimes.

Then I stop.

LEWIS

You saved more lives today than half the Corps combined.

That matters.

York doesn't smile.

YORK

Not if it's forgotten.

EXT. CAMPFIRE RING - LATER THAT NIGHT

Tension simmers. Soldiers sit in clusters. Some whisper. Others glare at York across the fire.

Dunley approaches slowly, a tin cup in hand. He offers it.

DUNLEY

Whiskey. What's left of it.

York eyes him. Takes the cup. Drinks.

DUNLEY (CONT'D)

Look—I didn't ask to be saved.

That don't make me weak.

YORK

No. Running made you weak.

Living... gives you a second chance.

Dunley looks away, ashamed.

DUNLEY

They say you think you're better
than us.

YORK

(smiles)

Not better.

Just ain't waiting for permission to breathe.

INT. YORK'S TENT - DEEP NIGHT

The fire flickers outside. York lies still.

His eyes flutter. He dreams.

DREAM SEQUENCE - EXT. SLAVE MARKET - FLASHBACK

A boy's POV. Shackles. Screaming. Muddy boots. A woman's hand
torn from his.

We glimpse YORK'S MOTHER—torn from him as a child.

MOTHER

Remember who you are.

Now:

York—older—kneels before CLARK, but Clark's face shifts,
becomes Lewis, then a faceless white mask.

VOICE (O.S.)

You're free when they say so.

YORK (IN DREAM)

No.

I'm free when I say so.

EXT. RIDGE OVERLOOK - EARLY DAWN

Bitterroot Mountains - Western Montana

York stands alone, looking west.

Snow caps glint in the distance. Miles of wilderness ahead.

Sacagawea joins him silently, infant on her back.

SACAGAWEA
You dream too loud.

YORK
Didn't mean to wake you.

SACAGAWEA
You didn't.

The wind did.

She offers him a strip of dried elk.

SACAGAWEA (CONT'D)
I dreamed once too.

Then I woke.

YORK
Maybe I'm just learning how to
sleep.

EXT. RIDGE OVERLOOK - EARLY DAWN - CONTINUED

York chews the dried elk meat. He stares into the vast, wild unknown.

YORK
What do you see out there?

SACAGAWEA
Endless walking.

And maybe... a place the sky touches the water.

YORK
Think it's real?

She adjusts her baby, eyes hard.

SACAGAWEA
Real don't matter.

What matters is forward.

Footsteps crunch behind them. It's Clark, pale from lack of sleep, scanning the horizon with a small brass telescope.

CLARK
We're on track. But barely.

Next range is worse. Snow's deeper. Game's thinning.

SACAGAWEA
Shoshone won't cross those passes
until spring.

CLARK
Then we'll cross without them.

A long silence.

YORK
And if we don't make it?

CLARK
Then we die trying.

He looks out—gritting his jaw. York's face is unreadable.

EXT. CAMP - LATER THAT DAY

LEWIS gathers the Corps. Clark stands beside him. Cold wind howls.

LEWIS
We believed the Pacific lay just
past the Divide.

We were wrong.

The men murmur. Some curse under their breath.

LEWIS (CONT'D)
There are hundreds of miles ahead.

No mapped trails. No guarantee of game. We press forward. Or we turn back failures.

YORK
Or die legends.

Silence.

Even Lewis studies York—like he's hearing something unexpected.

CLARK (TO THE MEN)
Bundle everything. Next push, no
stragglers.

We leave at first light.

The Corps disperses, shaken.

EXT. WILDERNESS PATH - DUSK - MONTAGE BEGINS

Snow begins to fall. Boots crunch over frost-bitten earth. York helps a limping soldier. Sacagawea feeds her child with one hand, holds reins with the other. Clark writes furiously in a journal by firelight.

A beaver carcass roasts over open flame—barely enough.

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS - DUSK - WINTER DEEPENS

The Corps drags forward. Snow knee-high. Breath clouds. Eyes sunken.

A pack mule collapses—can't go on. One soldier raises a musket.

YORK (SHARPLY)

No.

He kneels. Unhooks the gear. Lifts it onto his own back.

Clark watches, impressed—but says nothing.

INT. MAKESHIFT SHELTER - NIGHT

Wind screams outside. Inside, the men huddle around a smoky fire, chewing boiled leather.

DUNLEY

We're eating boots now?

WALTERS

Beats eating each other.

Low laughter, bitter. York doesn't eat.

Sacagawea feeds her child. Her hands are shaking.

CLARK (O.S.)

Two days without game. No trail signs.

If we don't find meat tomorrow, we cull.

LEWIS

Cull what? We already lost two horses.

CLARK

Then we start with the weak.

Including men.

Silence. Eyes flicker to York.

EXT. TREE LINE - NEXT MORNING

York stalks through deep snow, tracking. He finds faint hoofprints—elk.

He drops low, eyes scanning.

A snow-laced ridge. A massive bull elk.

York lifts a long-barreled musket. Breathes. Fires.

BOOM.

EXT. CAMP - LATER

The elk hangs gutted over a bloodied tarp. The men cheer as fresh meat is carved.

York sits alone, chewing slowly.

CLARK (APPROACHES)
You kept us alive.

YORK
One more night, maybe.

CLARK
I'll remember this.

YORK (QUIET)
So will I.

INT. CLARK'S JOURNAL - NIGHT - SUPERIMPOSED PAGES

We see ink forming York's name over and over— "York brought down the elk." "York carried half the load."

Then—Clark pauses.

He writes: "Still a slave."

EXT. NATIVE ENCAMPMENT - THE NEXT DAY - NEZ PERCE TRIBE

The Corps stumbles into a valley—smoke from bark-covered lodges.

The Nez Perce emerge, cautious but calm.
 York steps forward. Tall. Massive. Black as night.
 The children stare in awe. One elder speaks softly.

NEZ PERCE ELDER (SUBTITLED)
 He is made from the dark sky.

Not man. Not beast. Spirit.

They kneel before him.

York stares, stunned. Sacagawea looks at him—reverent.

EXT. NEZ PERCE ENCAMPMENT - DAY - CONTINUED

York kneels awkwardly, surrounded by awestruck children and elders.

Nez Perce women place ochre and feathers in his hair. A boy reaches to touch his dark skin—fascinated.

Lewis and Clark observe from a distance.

LEWIS
 They think he's a god.

CLARK
 (small laugh)
 He ain't.

LEWIS
 You sure?

Clark watches York—half-admiration, half-fear.

INT. NEZ PERCE LODGE - NIGHT

The Corps warms inside a large communal lodge. Meat sizzles on stones. Laughter. Comfort.

It's the first real peace in weeks.

A Nez Perce elder offers York a pipe. He accepts.

ELDER (SUBTITLED)
 Your eyes hold old storms.

Where do they go, when you sleep?

York exhales smoke slowly.

YORK
They don't.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF THE ENCAMPMENT - SAME NIGHT

Lewis walks alone, recording notes. He stops, looks to the stars.

Clark approaches from behind, brooding.

CLARK
The men—some of 'em—think York
deserves a vote.

Say he's earned it.

LEWIS
We made this a democracy. Not a
joke.

CLARK
Then maybe the joke's on us.

Lewis says nothing. Clark stares off.

CLARK (CONT'D)
He never once asked for more than
what he was given.

And somehow, he took more than we ever had.

EXT. NEZ PERCE ENCAMPMENT - NEXT MORNING

Departure. Gear loaded. Goodbyes exchanged.

A Nez Perce woman steps forward. She bares her breast,
presses York's hand to her chest.

The Chief speaks softly.

CHIEF (SUBTITLED)
She wishes to honor you.

You are life-bringer.

York meets the woman's eyes—gentle. Sad. Sacred.

He kisses her forehead. Then steps away.

SACAGAWEA (QUIETLY)
They see what others don't.

York looks over the valley—one last time.

EXT. SNOWY RIDGE - HIGH ALTITUDE - MORNING

The Corps trudges along a narrow mountain path, snow knee-deep, wind screaming. Steep cliffs drop off on one side.

York carries more than any two men. He grips the reins of a shivering mule.

Sacagawea rides with her baby, swaddled tight.

Suddenly—a distant CRACK.

DUNLEY

What was that?

CLARK

Hold—hold!

CRACK—CRACK—WHUUMPH!

The snow above breaks loose. A ROARING AVALANCHE begins its deadly descent.

LEWIS

DOWN! DROP EVERYTHING!

EXT. RIDGE PATH - SECONDS LATER

Chaos. Screams. Snow blinds.

A soldier tumbles off the cliff, vanishing into white death.

York grabs Sacagawea's reins—wrenches her and the baby from danger—just as snow buries the path behind them.

A wall of ice crashes over them—

FADE TO WHITE.

EXT. TEMPORARY SHELTER - HOURS LATER

The survivors huddle inside a makeshift snow cave.

Roll call. Two men are missing. One mule dead. Half their supplies gone.

York lies still, blood dried at his temple. He stirs. Sits up.

CLARK
We thought you were gone.

York stands, shaking it off.

YORK
Not yet.

INT. ENCAMPMENT - THAT NIGHT

Tension is high. Rations low. A rustling is heard— someone sneaking.

Burke, a wiry, shifty private, is caught hoarding pemmican he didn't earn.

CLARK
You steal from this group again,
you walk east. Alone.

Burke's eyes dart—settle on York.

BURKE
Why don't he walk? He ain't even
free. He's property!

YORK (CALM)
That property saved your life three
times.

BURKE
Then maybe I should own you.

CRACK!

York punches Burke—drops him cold.

Clark doesn't move to stop him. No one does.

EXT. WILDERNESS - THE NEXT MORNING

Burke is gone. His bed is empty. His tracks head east.

LEWIS (SOFTLY)
He won't last a day out there.

CLARK
That was his choice.

They look to York.

LEWIS
And that was yours.

York says nothing. But there's a fire in his eyes.

EXT. FROZEN RIVERBEND - DAWN

The Corps breaks camp slowly, bodies aching, morale low.

York stands watch, scanning the trees. His breath comes in slow clouds.

Sacagawea approaches, bundled in furs. Her baby whimpers.

SACAGAWEA
He cries for warmth.

There is none left to give.

York kneels—removes his own thick outer coat, wraps it around her child.

YORK
He'll grow strong. He has you.

SACAGAWEA (SOFT)
He has you, too.

They share a moment. Quiet. Respectful. Something blooming—not romantic, but sacred.

EXT. MARSHLAND - LATER THAT DAY

The terrain shifts. Wet. Treacherous.

Men sink ankle-deep. A cart wheel snaps. Tension builds.

Private LORING, younger and frightened, begins to panic.

LORING
We're lost. The maps are useless.
We're gonna die out here.

CLARK
Hold it together, soldier.

LORING (TO YORK)
Ask the sky you came from where we are. Maybe your gods know.

YORK

My gods are tired of saving fools.

The line lands like a hammer. Silence.

Then—Loring breaks into laughter, and slowly, so do the others. Even Lewis smiles.

EXT. CREST ABOVE THE PACIFIC - DAYS LATER - SUNSET

Golden light spills over distant blue. They made it.

The Pacific Ocean.

Men drop to their knees, stunned.

York walks to the edge, arms slack, eyes wide.

YORK

It's... bigger than my mind.

SACAGAWEA (QUIET)

It's what freedom must look like.

YORK

Then why don't I feel it?

EXT. BEACH CAMP - NIGHT

A fire crackles. Clark writes in his journal. Others roast fish.

York sits apart, alone with his thoughts. He digs into the sand with a stick.

He draws a figure a man in chains, facing a wide sea.

He stares at it.

Then erases it.

EXT. PACIFIC COAST - RAIN-SOAKED MORNING

Gray sky. Crashing surf. The Corps builds lean-tos near the tree line.

Lewis and Clark argue quietly.

LEWIS

Wintering here is madness. We'll lose men.

CLARK
 There's no going back 'til spring.
 We fortify. We endure.

York watches from afar, listening.

INT. TEMPORARY SHELTER - NIGHT

Rain pounds above. Inside, the men vote—where to camp, how to ration, who leads each watch.

Sacagawea votes. So does every enlisted man.

Then York steps forward.

YORK
 I'd like to vote.

Silence. The men look to Clark. Even Lewis hesitates.

CLARK
 You're not a member. Not
 officially.

LEWIS
 It's unprecedented.

YORK
 So was this journey.

A long beat. Clark finally nods.

CLARK
 Let him vote.

York does. And the men cheer.

EXT. OCEANSIDE CLIFF - THE NEXT DAY

York stands alone, overlooking the crashing sea. Sacagawea joins him.

SACAGAWEA
 They honored you.

YORK
 With a vote. Not a name.

She studies him.

SACAGAWEA

You carry every man here on your
back.

But no one carries you.

YORK

That's how you know you're free.

She says nothing. But her silence is powerful.

EXT. OCEANSIDE FORT - TWO WEEKS LATER

Rain hasn't stopped. The fort is crude but functional.
Sickness creeps through the men. Supplies thin.

York chops wood alone. The others work in teams. No one helps
him.

Clark watches him. Something churns beneath his cold,
managerial stare.

INT. COMMAND TENT - NIGHT

Clark and Lewis huddle over papers.

LEWIS

We draft the report. Submit names
for commendations.

CLARK

We'll include the soldiers,
Sacagawea-
(beat)

LEWIS

And York?

Clark doesn't answer.

LEWIS (CONT'D)

He saved your life. Mine. Half the
men owe their breath to him.

CLARK

He's not a soldier. He's mine.

LEWIS

That's not how history will see it.

CLARK

History don't write itself.

EXT. RIVERBANK - EARLY SPRING - DEPARTURE DAY

The Corps prepares to leave. Spirits lift.

York approaches Clark.

YORK

You said—when we returned—I'd be
free.

CLARK

When we return, we'll speak to it.

YORK

We're speaking now.

CLARK (COLD)

You'll be free when I say you are.
That hasn't changed.

York's jaw tightens. He nods once—slowly. Turns away.

Sacagawea watches the exchange from a distance. Her eyes
darken.

EXT. CANOE ON THE RIVER - DAYS LATER

York paddles hard. Rain lashes his face.

Behind him, the men laugh, drink, trade stories of women and
rewards waiting back home.

York says nothing. His back to them. His shoulders never
looked heavier.

EXT. MISSOURI RIVER - CANOES - SUNSET

Orange light glimmers off the water. The Corps rows
downstream, heading east. The journey home has begun, but
York's eyes remain westward.

A small bird flutters above him—free, effortless.

YORK (SOFTLY, TO HIMSELF)

How far do you fly before you
forget where you started?

INT. CAMP - NIGHTFALL

A crude fire burns low. Most of the men sleep.

Clark sits nearby, flipping through his journal.

York approaches. Stands over him.

YORK
I want my freedom, William.

CLARK (WITHOUT LOOKING UP)
You'll have your place again.
You'll be provided for.

YORK
That place was chains.

Clark looks up now.

CLARK
You forget yourself.

YORK
No, sir. For the first time, I
remember.

They stare each other down. The fire pops. Then York walks away.

EXT. PRAIRIE RIDGE - DAWN

York walks alone, just out of camp, arms folded across his chest.

He closes his eyes, and for the first time—

FLASHES of his childhood, his mother, her hands sewing, singing softly.

MOTHER (V.O.)
You are not the dirt they drag you
through.

You are sky, baby. Sky can't be owned.

York opens his eyes. They glisten.

EXT. RETURN TRAIL - LATER

The Corps travels with less urgency now. Fatigue has replaced excitement.

Lewis rides up beside Clark.

LEWIS

The Spanish territory's closing in.
We'll be lucky to stay ahead of
trouble.

Clark nods, distracted.

LEWIS (CONT'D)

York's different.

CLARK

He's always been different.
(beat)

LEWIS

Then treat him like it.

Clark says nothing.

EXT. PLAINS TRAIL - DAY

The Corps trudges through flatlands.

A small group of settlers rides past, wide-eyed at the sight
of the expedition.

They stop. Stare at York.

SETTLER WOMAN (WHISPERS)

A black giant...

SETTLER MAN

Is that one of theirs?

Clark rides forward, proud.

CLARK

That man helped chart the unknown.

He fought, led, and bled beside us.

The settlers nod awkwardly but don't speak to York.

Just to Clark.

YORK (V.O.)

They look at me like I'm legend.

But still ask another man for my name.

EXT. EDGE OF ST. LOUIS - NIGHT

Campfires flicker in the distance. The city's glow is faint but growing.

York stands alone, eyes fixed on the horizon.

Lewis joins him.

LEWIS

We'll make our report. Congress
will sing our names.

Clark's will be on statues. Maybe mine, too.

YORK

And mine?

LEWIS

I'll speak it. You have my word.

York nods, grateful but uncertain.

YORK

Words only echo. It's names that
stay carved.

EXT. ST. LOUIS - PARADE ROUTE - DAY

Crowds cheer. Flags wave. The Corps of Discovery marches home.

York walks behind Clark.

Kids wave American flags.

Women toss flowers.

But when York passes, the noise dims. A few people stare. Murmur. Clutch children.

ONLOOKER #1

Who's that?

ONLOOKER #2

Clark's slave. Big fella.

York hears every word. Every erasure.

EXT. ST. LOUIS - OUTSKIRTS - EVENING

The cheers have faded. The flags are gone.

York stands with his meager belongings, beside Clark's estate, the place he left nearly two years ago.

YORK (V.O.)

I walked to the end of the world.

And came back the same.

INT. CLARK PLANTATION - OFFICE - NIGHT

Clark drinks brandy. York stands across from him.

YORK

I served. I led men. I saved lives.

CLARK

You were brave. Unquestionably.

YORK

Then keep your word.

Clark sips. The pause is cruel.

CLARK

You'll remain under my protection.

I'll see you well cared for.

YORK (QUIETLY)

That ain't freedom.

CLARK

It's more than most men get.

YORK

I ain't most men.

A tense silence.

Clark breaks it.

CLARK

You're mine, York. That hasn't changed.

York stares at him. Not hate. Not rage. Just the profound weariness of a man who carried a nation's myth, and got buried under it.

EXT. SLAVE QUARTERS - NIGHT

York sits outside a cabin. Alone.

He unwraps a bundle—a keepsake from the expedition:
 A small wooden carving of a buffalo—crude but strong.
 He closes his hand around it.
 His shoulders shake.
 But he doesn't cry.

EXT. CLARK PLANTATION - STABLES - EARLY MORNING

York hauls sacks of feed. The same fields. The same overseer.
 But now, every movement carries the weight of memory.

**He passes a boy—the same one from the opening.

BOY

Is it true? You seen the ocean?

York doesn't stop.

YORK

I touched it.

BOY

What's it like?

York pauses. Looks toward the horizon.

YORK

Like freedom—

until you look back.

INT. BLACKSMITH SHOP - DUSK

York works the forge. Sweat, sparks, steel.

Another enslaved man, EZRA (40s), watches.

EZRA

You walked with generals. Sat with
 chiefs.

Now you shod mules?

YORK

Better than shod myself.

Ezra eyes him.

EZRA

If I had a taste of what you had,
I'd have run. Or fought.

YORK

You ain't me.
And I ain't who they wrote about.

EXT. SMALL CHURCH - NIGHT

York kneels in the back pew, alone.

A BLACK PRIEST (60s) approaches. Sits beside him.

PRIEST

You bear something. I can feel it.

YORK

I bear everything.
But don't nobody want to carry me.
The priest puts a hand on his shoulder.

PRIEST

Maybe you weren't meant to be
carried.

Maybe you were meant to be carved-into stone.

EXT. FIELD - DAWN

York stands tall, shirtless, framed by the rising sun.
He breathes deeply.

YORK (V.O.)

You can take my name from the maps.
But I carved it in rivers.
And rivers don't forget.

INT. CLARK'S STUDY - NIGHT

Clark writes by candlelight. Maps, notes, and ledgers
surround him.

He hears a knock.

It's York. Calm. Controlled. He steps in, eyes locked.

YORK
Don't write me out.

Clark looks up, tired.

CLARK
You'll be remembered as part of the
expedition.

YORK
Then name me.

Not just "the Negro." Not "the servant." Write it plain:
York.

CLARK
You ask too much.

YORK
I gave more.

A beat. Clark says nothing.

York turns and walks out. Not defeated. Resolved.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAWN

York walks alone, with just a satchel and his carved buffalo.
Behind him, the Clark plantation disappears in the mist.

YORK (V.O.)
If I can't be free where I stand,
then I'll walk 'til I find a place that sees me.

MONTAGE - YEARS LATER

- York telling stories to Black children in a small village.
- Trading with Native tribes, greeted with respect. - A rough
sketch of York's face, drawn in charcoal on animal hide. -
His name, carved into a tree. - A child's voice:

CHILD (V.O.)
Tell it again, Papa York.

EXT. ROCKY HILLSIDE - NIGHT

A fire crackles.

York sits with a small group of BLACK FREEDMEN and a Native elder. Children gather close.

NATIVE ELDER

The Black warrior came from the east.

He walked with thunder in his steps.

CHILD

Was he real?

YORK (SMILING)

That's what makes a story powerful.

You'll tell it either way.

EXT. UNKNOWN OUTPOST - DAY

Years have passed.

Clark, now older, rides into a trading post.

He notices something carved into the wood of a central pillar:

YORK WAS HERE.

WALKED WITH KINGS.

STOLE NO FREEDOM—EARNED IT.

Clark stares at it. Long. Quiet.

INT. CONGRESSIONAL HALL - WASHINGTON D.C. - DAY

Lewis gives testimony. A full house. Applause.

LEWIS

We crossed the continent.

We mapped a new world. We survived with the help of many. Sacagawea. Toussaint. Seaman the dog. And York.

Whispers rise. The name lands heavy.

LEWIS (CONT'D)

He stood beside us—never behind.

I say his name here, so history can't forget it.

EXT. WOODED TRAIL - NIGHT

York walks alone. Older now. Beard grayed.

He looks up at the stars.

YORK (V.O.)
Maybe I wasn't free in their eyes.

But I walked free.

EXT. PLAINS - DUSK

Wide open. Silent. Untouched.

A child runs through the tall grass, holding a carved buffalo.

CHILD (V.O.)
They say he never died.

He just kept walking.

EXT. EDGE OF A VILLAGE - NIGHT

York stands silhouetted by torchlight as villagers—Black, Native, mixed—gather in a circle.

A young man steps forward with a drum. A woman with a carved flute.

YORK
Sing it right.

Not the way they tell it...

But the way it felt.

They begin to play—a haunting, rhythmic melody that stirs the gathered souls.

YORK (V.O.)
You ain't free 'til your name
echoes.

And I ain't done speakin'.

INT. LIBRARY - MODERN DAY - DAY

A young Black girl reads a leather-bound book titled *Voices of the Forgotten: York of the Corps of Discovery*.

GIRL
(whispers)
He was real...

She turns the page. A drawing of York, back straight, fists clenched, staring toward the horizon.

EXT. WASHINGTON, D.C. - NATIONAL MALL - SUNSET

A new statue stands:

YORK, carved in bronze. Shirtless. Axe in one hand. A compass in the other. His face fierce, unbowed.

Tourists pass. Some stop. Some don't.

But one man—an older white veteran—salutes.

VETERAN
Finally.

EXT. RIVERSIDE - NIGHT

York sits beside a flickering fire, staring into the flames.

He pulls the carved buffalo totem from his satchel.

YORK (V.O.)
I ain't askin' to be remembered
like no king.

Just don't bury me twice.

The flames reflect in his eyes—equal parts sorrow and peace.

EXT. NATIVE ENCAMPMENT - MORNING

York rises before dawn, surrounded by a quiet village.

He hugs a young boy goodbye—his son? A protégé? It's unclear.

YORK
Remember your name.

Even if no one else do.

The boy nods solemnly.

York walks away, alone again.

EXT. MOUNTAIN RIDGE - DAY

York climbs the final incline. Sweat beads, legs burn. But he pushes through.

At the peak, he gazes across a vast, untouched valley.

YORK (V.O.)

They said no man could walk so far.

But I ain't no ordinary man.

He smiles. Breathes.

Then, slowly, he disappears into the horizon—his silhouette fading into the light.

EXT. SMALL GRAVEYARD - UNKNOWN LOCATION - TWILIGHT

A humble wooden marker, weather-worn, half-buried in grass.

No name. Just a carving:

"He walked farther than freedom."

A young BLACK HISTORIAN (30s) kneels beside it, brushing away dirt.

She opens her notebook. Beside it, a book: "YORK: The Other Explorer."

INT. CLASSROOM - MODERN DAY - DAY

A TEACHER (40s) writes on a smart board: "Who was York?"

A diverse group of middle-schoolers raise their hands.

STUDENT #1

He was a slave.

STUDENT #2

He was a hero.

STUDENT #3

He walked across America. And back.

The teacher nods.

TEACHER
He did all that.

And still had to ask for his name.

INT. MUSEUM EXHIBIT - DAY

A plaque beside a bronze bust:

YORK (1770? - UNKNOWN)
Enslaved. Explorer. Legend.

Visitors stop to read. A small boy stares up in awe.

EXT. HORIZON - SUNSET

Back to the mountains.

York's silhouette appears again. Ageless. Tall. Proud.

He looks to camera. Holds our gaze.

Then turns and walks into the golden light, swallowed by sun and sky.

YORK (V.O.)
This land wasn't free.

But I made it mine.

FADE TO BLACK.

TEXT ON SCREEN:

YORK'S contributions to the Lewis & Clark Expedition were unrecorded officially.

He was denied his freedom until years later—if at all.

Today, statues, books, and oral histories continue to honor the man history nearly forgot.

XT. MOUNTAIN PASS - SUNSET

York trudges along a rocky path. His body aches. But his eyes—his eyes are awake.

He hears a CRY—faint, desperate.

He drops his satchel and races uphill.

EXT. RIDGELINE - CONTINUOUS

A YOUNG NATIVE GIRL clings to a cliffside, foot stuck.

York doesn't hesitate—slides down the slope, grabs her arm, hoists her free.

The girl's FATHER appears, breathless. He stares in awe at York.

FATHER (NATIVE LANGUAGE, SUBTITLED)
You walk with the spirits.

York just nods.

EXT. CAMPFIRE - NIGHT

The father offers York a pipe. They sit by the fire. The girl sleeps nearby.

FATHER (IN BROKEN ENGLISH)
You are far from your people.

But not lost.

York gazes into the flames.

YORK
Not lost. Just... finally seen.

INT. FLASHBACK - CLARK'S STUDY - YEARS LATER

William Clark (older, gaunt) signs a letter. He hesitates. It reads:

To whom it may concern, I, William Clark, do grant York...

He scratches it out. Rewrites. Doesn't sign it.

CLARK (TO HIMSELF)
Some debts can't be paid in paper.

He burns the letter.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - 1863 - CIVIL WAR - DAY

Smoke. Mud. A Union regiment charges forward—Black soldiers.

One falls. Another grabs the flag.

In the chaos, we see the same buffalo totem York once carved, tied to the soldier's neck.

Legacy lives on.

INT. CIVIL RIGHTS MARCH - SELMA - 1965 - DAY

Protesters move forward. Silent, defiant.

A young Black man walks near the front. On his T-shirt:

YORK WALKED SO WE COULD RUN

INT. MODERN-DAY SMITHSONIAN EXHIBIT - DAY

Visitors pass a new display: YORK: THE OTHER PIONEER.

A hologram shows the route of Lewis & Clark.

York's name flashes every step of the way.

EXT. NIGHT SKY - STAR FIELD

York stands alone on a cliff, looking up. The stars glitter above.

YORK (V.O.)

They can take your name.

Your place.

Your story.

But they can't take the walk.

He smiles faintly.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. MOUNTAIN RIDGE - DUSK

The expedition climbs a steep trail. Wind howls. Snow flurries swirl.

YORK helps SACAGAWEA over a ledge, her feet slipping.

SACAGAWEA (BREATHING HARD)

These mountains... they do not want us here.

YORK (SMILING FAINTLY)
Mountains don't care who wants
what. They just are.

She chuckles softly. It's the first moment of ease they've shared.

EXT. RIDGE OVERLOOK - CONTINUOUS

The team crests the ridge—and freezes.

Below them: a collapsed ice bridge. Jagged ravine beneath.

CLARK
Dammit.

MURMURS from the men.

PRIVATE FLETCHER
We backtrack three days for another
pass?

YORK
No need.

All eyes turn to him.

YORK (POINTING) (CONT'D)
We build one.

FLETCHER (MOCKING)
What, you gonna carry us?

A tense beat. Then—

LEWIS
He's right. If we stay, we die.

MONTAGE - ICE BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION

York chops logs. His axe bites deep.

Sacagawea weaves rope from hides.

Clark oversees from above, begrudgingly impressed.

At night, York sews a wound on a frostbitten scout.

EXT. ICE BRIDGE - NIGHT

Torchlight flickers. One by one, the men cross York's bridge.

The last man pauses—looks back at York.

MAN

Thank you.

York nods, but says nothing. Just watches the firelight play across the ice.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - NIGHT

Campfires glow.

York sharpens a blade alone, lost in thought. Sacagawea wraps her child in furs, watching him.

Nearby, Private Fletcher glares at York from the shadows. Jealousy burns in his eyes.

FLETCHER (TO ANOTHER SOLDIER, LOW)

He gets the respect, the glory. All for swinging an axe and scaring redskins?

SOLDIER

He earned it. And the Chief's woman seems to think so too.

Fletcher bristles.

INT. YORK'S TENT - LATER

York sleeps soundly.

A FIGURE creeps inside—knife glinting.

Before he strikes, a bone-handled knife appears at his throat.

SACAGAWEA (O.S.)

You should leave. Now.

Fletcher freezes—caught. Sacagawea's hand is steady, her eyes deadly calm.

EXT. CAMP - MORNING

Clark confronts Fletcher before the whole group.

CLARK
 Attempted murder. That's a hanging
 offense, soldier.

FLETCHER (DESPERATE)
 He's just a slave!

A long, silent beat.

LEWIS
 He's more than that. And he saved
 your life five times over.

YORK (QUIETLY)
 Let him live. The mountains will
 judge him.

Clark nods. They strip Fletcher of his rifle and send him
 off-alone.

EXT. RIVER CROSSING - DAY

Rain pelts the group. The river is swollen, fast and
 roaring—no bridge in sight. Horses rear. Panic sets in.

CLARK

Dammit! If this storm holds, we lose the pass.

LEWIS
 We build a raft—double up. Cut
 time.

York eyes the current—then the sky.

YORK
 No time. Water's rising by the
 hour.

A child cries. The Shoshone guide points downstream.

GUIDE (SUBTITLED)
 Water spirit angry.

SACAGAWEA (TO YORK)
 We can't wait. If we do—

YORK (TO ALL)
 We go now. I lead.

EXT. RIVER - MOMENTS LATER

York strips down—ropes lashed to his waist and chest. He dives into the frigid water, powerful arms slicing the current.

From the shore, the group watches breathless.

He reaches a rocky outcrop mid-river, anchors the line.

LEWIS (AMAZED)

By God...

Men begin to pull across, hand-over-hand, trusting York's rope.

MONTAGE - RIVER CROSSING

Sacagawea crosses with her baby tied to her chest.

Clark steadies a horse.

York holds each line taut, barefoot and freezing, unshaken.

One man slips—York dives in, rescues him, drags him up.

EXT. FAR BANK - LATER

Soaked and shivering, the team collapses. Lewis hands York a blanket.

LEWIS

You don't need a title. Just a damn crown.

York doesn't answer. He watches the current carry away what's left of the old world behind them.

EXT. PACIFIC COASTLINE - DUSK

Waves crash in the distance. The expedition stares at the vast ocean—silent, reverent.

They've made it.

York steps forward, bare-chested, his skin lit golden by the setting sun. He looks... mythic.

LEWIS (QUIETLY)

The edge of the world.

CLARK

No. Just the beginning of a new one.

EXT. NATIVE VILLAGE - NIGHT

A bonfire blazes. The local tribe has welcomed the expedition. Drums echo. Dancers whirl.

York sits among them, painted with tribal ochre. Children climb on him. Women laugh.

The Chief approaches York and bows—not to Lewis, not to Clark.

To him.

CHIEF (SUBTITLED)

You are not a slave here. You are spirit.

Sacagawea watches, moved.

INT. TENT - LATER

Clark enters. Sees York surrounded by tribe members. The moment is warm, familial.

Clark's jaw tightens.

CLARK

We leave at dawn.

York meets his gaze.

YORK

Yes... Master.

A bitter silence.

EXT. PACIFIC BEACH - EARLY MORNING

The expedition packs up in silence. The ocean mist clings to them.

York lingers a moment, gazing at the sea. His hands press into the wet sand.

YORK (V.O.)

I dreamed once... this was freedom.

Water too wide to be caged.

But dreams don't carry chains.

He rises, brushing sand from his palms. The moment is gone.

EXT. WILDERNESS - MONTAGE - RETURN JOURNEY

York lifts a wounded soldier over his shoulder.

He breaks trail through dense thickets.

He buries a fallen man, whispering a prayer in private.

They move slower. Spirits dim. Winter nips at their heels.

EXT. PLAINS - NIGHT

York sits with Sacagawea and her baby.

SACAGAWEA

Will you stay with them... when it
ends?

YORK (SOFTLY)

I'll stay with me. That's all I
got.

She nods. Then, quietly, leans in and kisses his cheek.
Nothing romantic. Just truth. Shared sorrow. Respect.

EXT. MISSOURI - CLARK'S CAMP - WEEKS LATER

The expedition is over. There's no fanfare. Just men
unloading gear. Horses snorting.

York approaches Clark, hopeful.

YORK

We done what no man ever done.

You said-after. I'd be free.

Clark doesn't meet his eyes.

CLARK

There's more work yet. I'll need
you. That's final.

York stands still.

YORK (QUIETLY)
Yes... Master.

INT. CLARK'S STUDY - NIGHT

Candlelight flickers. Clark reviews maps, sipping whiskey. The door creaks open—York steps in.

CLARK
You don't knock?

YORK
Didn't figure I needed to. Not
after all we been through.

Clark doesn't look up.

CLARK
You want thanks? A medal?

YORK
I want what you promised. What you
looked me in the eye and said.

Freedom.

Clark rises, jaw tight.

CLARK
You think one expedition makes you
a free man? You're still mine.

A pause. York stares.

YORK
I ain't yours. Not in any way that
counts now.

CLARK (DANGEROUSLY LOW)
Careful, boy.

YORK
No. I ain't no boy.

They lock eyes. For the first time, York does not lower his gaze.

YORK (SOFT, STEADY) (CONT'D)
You said "after."

It's after.

He turns, walks out. The door shuts behind him—not slammed, but final.

EXT. SMALL CABIN - OUTSKIRTS - NIGHT

York sits alone on a stoop, staring at the stars. Behind him: a tiny shack Clark let him live in.

He lights a pipe with shaking hands.

 YORK (V.O.)
 They say history is written by men
 with pens.

But I carved my name in rivers.

In mountains.

In flesh.

In blood.

He exhales. Smoke curls into the dark.

INT. ST. LOUIS - NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

A printing press runs. Fresh pages roll off—headlines about the Lewis & Clark Expedition.

INSERT - The printed story:

“...and their courageous journey was led by Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark...”

No mention of York.

No mention of Sacagawea.

Just the white men.

EXT. CLARK'S PROPERTY - DAY

York chops wood. He's older now. Slower.

Children run past him—none are his.

His muscles are still strong, but his eyes... they've grown distant.

INT. TAVERN - NIGHT

Drunken men laugh about the "glorious expedition." Clark holds court.

MAN

Didn't you have a... what was he? A slave with you?

Clark waves him off.

CLARK

A servant. Strong back. Not much else.

York sits in the shadows, listening. Alone.

EXT. UNMARKED GRAVE - DAY

A rough wooden cross.

No name.

Just earth.

YORK (V.O.)

I crossed a continent...

Carried men who'd never carry me.

I was seen as a god.

Now I'm not seen at all.

EXT. MONTANA - MODERN DAY - DUSK

A bronze statue of YORK. Towering. Regal.

A BLACK FAMILY stands before it. The FATHER lifts his son to read the plaque:

"YORK - Explorer. Warrior. Legend.

He asked for freedom and made history instead."

Tears glint in the mother's eyes. The boy stares up, eyes wide.

FADE TO BLACK.

YORK (V.O.)

I was never lost.

You just took your time finding me.

EXT. EDGE OF MISSOURI - SUNSET

York stands by the river where it all began. He stares across the water, older now, shoulders heavier. A sack rests at his feet—he's packed all he owns.

A passing boatman nods to him.

BOATMAN

You headed somewhere?

York just smiles faintly.

YORK

Already been. Just makin' sure I don't forget.

He kneels, scoops a handful of river water, lets it slip through his fingers.

YORK (V.O.)

I gave 'em a path.

A body. A soul. A story they never told. But the land remembers.

EXT. PLAINS - MONTAGE - DAY TO DUSK

The vast trail west—quiet now.

A rusted compass on a museum shelf.

A child in school flipping past a single mention: "a slave named York assisted.."

A mural in a reservation community—York drawn larger than Lewis or Clark.

York's statue again, this time lit in gold at dusk, a candle burning at its base.

FADE TO BLACK

YORK (V.O.)

This land was never theirs.

But I walked it like it was mine.

FINAL TEXT (WHITE ON BLACK)

YORK (1770? - ?)
The first African American to cross
North America.

Denied his freedom.

Lost to history.

But never forgotten.

Lost to history.

But never forgotten.

EXT. WASHINGTON, D.C. - NATIONAL MALL - PRESENT DAY - NIGHT

A tour guide leads a small group past the Lincoln Memorial.
The crowd drifts by a lesser-known bronze statue tucked
beside a garden.

A plaque reads simply:

YORK - Explorer. Slave. Man.

A young BLACK GIRL lingers behind. She stares up at the
statue, wide-eyed.

GIRL
Mama... why didn't we learn about him
in school?

Her mother smiles softly, places a hand on her daughter's
shoulder.

MOTHER
Because some stories take longer to
be heard.

The girl touches the statue's hand. Holds it.

FADE OUT.

YORK (V.O.)
You found me now.

THE END

