

TABLETS OF THE BEDOUIN

Of the Warden Who Would Not Weep

Written by
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EXT. OUTER SPACE - UNKNOWN TIME AND PLACE

So many stars, yet deep black overwhelms. Something shines.
A speck.

You move towards it. The speck is clearer. Metal.

Even closer. A vessel. A Seed.

Carved into its iridescent titanium surface: "Why should I
fear? When was I less by dying?"

The Seed turns to face the stars. An emblem, a LEAF, on its
back. Its exotic propulsion mechanism engages. A flash of
light.

And it's gone.

The stars remain, indifferent.

You move forward. Slowly, barely noticeable at first.

Accelerating: the stars pull back.

Faster: they smear into lines.

You're at unimaginable speeds, plunging into the unknown.

YOU STOP.

Another canvas of stars. Indistinguishable from where you
started.

Except for one. Exactly where the metallic speck hung.

Al-Lawha.

EXT. AL-LAWHA - BURIED CITY OUTSKIRTS - FLOWER MEADOW -
NIGHT

A planet shaded by the darkness of night. A landmass
surrounded by clouds. A meadow dotted by vibrant
bioluminescent flowers. Two boys, lying on grass, looking up
with wonder.

Deep in one of the boys' eyes, the starry night reflects
back. This is ALTAIR. He carries a comforting smile, always.

ALTAIR
All those stars, and only one sky
to carry them.

Altair tilts his head.

ALTAIR
Or is it the stars themselves that
are holding up the sky?

The grass shifts beside him.

FARD is propping himself up. He stretches.

FARD
Who knew New World soil would be
so comfy?

ALTAIR
So, what do—

Fard points.

FARD
Aireth is rising!

Altair sits up. Neither boy speaks.

A massive gas planet with two moons in precise alignment
peeks over the horizon. Cerulean swirls brush its surface,
casting the meadow in its haze.

Fard tackles Altair, rolling over him and squeezing him
tight.

FARD
Happy birthyear, my friend.

He jumps up.

FARD
One moment!

Blue flowers, Warden's Bloom, paint the meadow hill behind
them, each one lit from within. Fard runs through them to
the meadow's top. The last of his head is buried behind it.

A cold breeze. The flowers dance under the aquatic cast of
Aireth's quarter-rise.

Altair pulls his robes tighter.

ALTAIR
You know, scaring me won't work.

No reply. The sky goes dark again. Aireth has already set.
Nothing left but the icy blue of the flowers around him. He
can't look away.

Endless stars. Painted flowers.

ALTAIR
I know you're behind me.

Altair turns to face Fard, giggling.

FARD
I'll surprise you one day.

Fard holds something behind his back.

ALTAIR
Well, that's not toda—

FARD
Boo!

Altair steps back. His smile twitches.

In Fard's hand is a gorgeous, one-of-a-kind, flower-powered electric oud.

ALTAIR
A flowered oud? How?

Their eyes lock. Then, Altair swallows Fard under his arms.

ALTAIR
Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

Fard squeezes himself out, teasing the oud in his hand.

FARD
You were saying?

Southern stone body. Vintage vine strings. Lizard hide strap. Metallic freckles glinting under the twinkle of stars. A rare mandarin flower glowing from its core.

It calls to Altair. His smile can't contain his excitement. His hand extends, about to grab it.

Strum.

Oud in hand, Altair is made whole.

Backed by the flower-filled slope and under the awesome starry sky, he starts playing. And the stars go quiet to listen.

Ethereal synth plucks decorate the cold air.

Structureless and transient.

Until they take shape.

One by one.

Forms emerge.

Polyphonic melodies, microtonal scales, irregular rhythms.

An improvisation of the most wonderful complexity.

Fard is in awe.

Altair's eyes are closed. He is with the stars.

A flash. The face of his MOTHER.

His hand hesitates.

The sound of her voice, humming, echoes in his head.

Altair continues playing unpredictable notes that tickle the brain.

The warm humming follows, far behind.

Altair finds it, traces the hum, plays around its melody.

A familiar harmony calls, but he can't seem to reach it.

Fard is in a spell.

Altair is almost there.

Wrong note.

Spell-broken.

Note found.

Spell-bound.

Warmer.

The comforting hum is less distant.

Melody harmonizing. Percussion in syncopation.

It clicks.

Altair finds the Melody of Warmth. And something finds him.

Horrible screams.

The air distorts. Altair stops playing.

Fard looks both ways.

FARD
What's wrong?

ALTAIR
It's here.

Altair's gaze drifts past Fard.

FARD
The ghost?

Altair looks towards the metallic valley below, where a few stray flowers hold their light against dark.

Fard shakes his head.

FARD
The stars would sooner fall.

ALTAIR
We have to help.

FARD
But I don't se—

The flowers dim one by one, embracing the valley in shadow.

FARD
Impossible.

Something is moving. Something dark.

A thousand voices shatter the air. Altair flinches, his smile refusing to relax.

ALTAIR
Come on, it's still screaming!

He swings his oud behind his back and runs.

FARD
Scary screaming ghost. Help?

Fard shakes his head and follows. A mosaic of flowers refracts behind them, a hazy mirror of the stars above. They are ants against the massive vibrant meadow. As they approach the hill's bottom, the valley's flowers light back up.

FARD
It's gone?

ALTAIR
No, I still feel him.

FARD

Him?

Fard sees Altair staring at an empty patch of grass.

Altair sees something else entirely. A void, black and screaming, the air around it warped with pain.

ALTAIR

He's right here.

Altair is unfazed by the horrifying distorted darkness before him. Looks at it like a scholar studying an animal.

FARD

But there's nothing there?

Altair doesn't respond, completely distracted by the strange sight.

FARD

It's getting cold, we should head back before the ceremony.

Altair steps closer. The screams get louder.

He whips out his oud. The darkness swallows him.

He accepts it smiling, and strums. His fingers move without him.

A WOMAN's voice, raw with agony.

WOMAN (V.O.)

Kill me!

Altair stumbles.

His smile doesn't fade. Pluck by pluck, he holds onto the melody's warmth. The darkness parts, revealing a young BOY huddled behind warped air.

The Boy looks up. He is terrified.

Altair has seen enough, and strums.

Wisps of light swirl around them, drawn to the melody, as if the air itself were listening.

Altair kneels down to the Boy as he plays the last notes. The screaming falls away. The Boy's eyes are wet, marked by the weight of unimaginable suffering.

And a promise of unimaginable hope.

Altair smiles towards him with immense empathy. And leaps.

The Boy's dark void pushes against Altair like a repelling magnet. Altair fights it, the thousand screams blasting at him like a hurricane. Hair blowing. Almost there. Face to face.

Warm.

ALTAIR
Need a hand?

Altair extends.

A hand grabs back.

Radiant light.

Altair embraces the Boy with the endearment of a brother, announcing their fraternity to the stars.

From Fard's perspective, Altair is hugging air on top of a patch of grass, talking to himself.

ALTAIR
I'm Altair. Nice to meet you,
friend.

CUT TO:

INSERT - A SLAB OF IRIDESCENT METAL

Etched onto it: "Of the Warden Who Would Not Weep"

EXT. FLOWER MEADOW - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

ALTAIR
Hello? Can you hear me? Are you
OK?

Altair is still talking to himself.

ALTAIR
Hello? Do you un- Wait, stop!

Altair runs, away from the meadow and towards the dark horizon.

Where the Sprawling Woods wait.

They are less forest than creature. Massive branches wind around each other in endless tangled embraces, as if every tree were reaching for every other tree. There are few leaves, just woven wood. Sparkling.

Fard chases behind.

FARD

Wait!

But Altair is running faster.

FARD

You're heading the wrong way!

Altair keeps shifting as Fard tries to keep up.

FARD

We're going to miss the Turning!

From above, their path traces a child's scribble. From Altair's perspective, the Boy is screaming and running without direction.

Altair shouts.

ALTAIR

Be careful! Those woods are dangerous!

The Boy doesn't seem to understand.

Altair concentrates as he runs. His breathing steadies. And then he sees it. The Boy, but not where he is. Where he will be.

Altair cuts a line through the meadow that makes no sense until it does. He arrives at the exact spot the Boy hasn't reached yet.

And catches him.

Fard is on the ground behind, out of breath.

The Boy is screaming in Altair's arms.

ALTAIR

Calm down. I just want to help.

Altair lets go, and the Boy quiets.

ALTAIR

Breathe.

The Boy breathes.

ALTAIR
It's OK. You're OK.

There is deep anger in the Boy's face.

ALTAIR
Let's do this again. I'm Altair.
What's your name?

The Boy looks away as Fard catches up.

FARD
What is wrong with you?

ALTAIR
Fard, please trust me.

Altair turns to the Boy.

ALTAIR
Why are you running?

The Boy's eyes pierce his with an unfamiliar feeling: rage.

ALTAIR
Talk to me. I won't hurt you.

His mouth opens as if he is about to speak.

Altair's smile widens.

But the Boy screams.

Altair laughs.

ALTAIR
Why are you angry?

The Boy stills, as if struck by thought for the first time.

ALTAIR
Well, that doesn't make any sense.
No reason to feel angry if there's
nothing bothering you.

Fard's mouth is open as Altair speaks to empty air.

ALTAIR
Are you a ghost?

The Boy tilts his head.

ALTAIR
It's OK. What about your name?

The Boy stomps his feet, grasping for something he can't reach, a thought, a word. Anything.

ALTAIR
Hey, that's fine. Don't worry about it.

The Boy looks down.

ALTAIR
I have an idea. You can choose your own name. I wish I could've done that!

For the very first time in his entire existence, the Boy smiles.

Fard's arms are crossed.

FARD
So, are you going to explain any of this, or what?

EXT. FLOWER MEADOW - HILLTOP - NIGHT

The boys approach the meadow's hilltop, where the silhouettes of two giant camels frame the night sky.

Altair runs up to one of them, SABRA, and throws his arms around her.

ALTAIR
Yeah, I know, I missed you too, Sabsab.

He buries his face in her copper fur.

ALTAIR
Hope you didn't get too lonely. Guess what? I met a friend. Guess what again? He's a ghost!

Fard rolls his eyes. The other camel, TAMR, lifts his head towards Fard with a judgmental glare.

ALTAIR
Who's a good girl? You. Yes, you are.

Fard places his hand on Tamr's neck, stroking gently, with eyes still on Altair and Sabra.

FARD
Don't listen to them, Tamtoom,
it'll make you soft. We know
better, don't we?

The Boy is fascinated by Sabra. He reaches for the camel, but his arm goes right through her. He pulls it back and holds it against his chest.

Altair notices and puts an arm around the boy.

ALTAIR
You couldn't have picked a better
day to exist. We're both marked by
the Twin Moons.

Sabra folds down beside them.

ALTAIR
Come, ride with me.

EXT. BURIED CITY OUTSKIRTS - TRAIL - NIGHT

The boys ride on their camels down the hill as the Buried City steals their breath. Massive titanium gates rise from the desert, silver sand banked halfway up their face. Behind them is a layered, sprawling city patched together over generations. Stone and clay and woven canopy built over titanium, as if the city grew from something it never fully understood.

Altair turns to Fard on Tamr.

ALTAIR
Sorry, by the way. Didn't mean to
leave you out.

FARD
I know.

ALTAIR
To be fair, it's not every day I
get to meet a ghost.

FARD
Hanging around you long enough,
I'll end up a ghost sooner than
later. And I won't be so friendly.

Fard cracks a smile.

FARD
This ghost, it's a boy?

Altair nods.

ALTAIR
I think it's always been him.

FARD
And he's riding with us right now?

ALTAIR
Yeah, he can hear you too.

FARD
What's he saying?

ALTAIR
Not much. But I'm working on it.

Altair turns to the Boy, and winks. Holding onto Altair, the Boy looks around in amazement.

EXT. BURIED CITY OUTSKIRTS - MAIN ROAD - NIGHT

Under the ethereal glow of colorful flower fairy lights, the main road to the Buried City gates is decorated for celebration.

They pass a stall serving Lizard's Tail skewers. Merchants twirling flowerlamps, casting blue patterns across the faces of onlookers.

Altair slows near a wagon of caged MONKEYS, long armed with green eyes. He stares at each of their fingers, curled tightly around the bars. Fard presses Altair's shoulder and nudges him forward.

They continue weaving between woven tents full of families camping. Past dancers performing with electric vine whips, commanding lightning to their rhythm.

The Boy looks up at a glowing crystal ball flying over them. A girl catches it on the other side and runs with it through an applauding crowd. The Boy stills. He tugs on Altair's arm.

ALTAIR
What is it?

The Boy points. An ANNOUNCER's voice cuts through the noise.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
... disappointed to be missing the
Turning inside, but cheer up! This
performance will be legendary!

ALTAIR
A performance?

Altair can't help himself. He nods to the Boy and looks to Fard.

Fard understands.

They shift course and approach the small stage with an even smaller crowd gathered around it, cheering.

The announcer is standing behind a flowered microphone, a single Warden's Bloom woven with powervines that trail backstage.

ANNOUNCER
We are extremely proud to present
to you, on this special Cycle of
the Twin Moons, a prodigy of our
New World.

Altair and Fard, still on their camels, cheer with the crowd.

ANNOUNCER
Awarded musician of the year, two
years in a row, please welcome our
talented drummer, Noura!

The Boy, sitting behind Altair, looks around and mimics, applauding.

A young girl, NOURA, walks onto the stage carrying a goblet drum half her size and sits on a small wooden box. She seems tiny even against the small stage.

But then she starts drumming.

A simple beat at first. Slow.

The Boy is entranced, pulled by the rhythm. He starts bobbing his head. Altair joins, his face contorting with satisfaction.

Tempo rising. Feet tapping. Heads shaking. People across the crowd are dancing.

Fard jumps off his camel.

Noura uses the wooden box as a second kit. She plays faster, each finger a mind of its own.

Altair jumps off and extends a hand to the Boy. The Boy accepts, jumping behind.

The whole crowd is on their feet, but not together. A man sways to a rhythm the woman beside him doesn't hear. A child stomps to a beat that hasn't landed yet. Two strangers move in opposite time and neither is wrong. Noura's hands are laying down so many rhythms at once that every body in the crowd has found its own, and every one of them is real.

The Boy dances like it's his first time, in the moment and uncaring.

By instinct, Altair swings out his new oud. From the edge of the crowd, lit by the mandarin glow of the oud's core, Altair plays.

Murmurs spread between Noura's audience.

CROWD MEMBER 1
That's Altair.

CROWD MEMBER 2
Stars be with us.

Noura looks at Altair from the stage, and nods.

Altair matches her tempo, improvising around her beats while dancing with the crowd.

Noura tries to throw him off, but Altair doesn't falter.

A smirk escapes her.

Altair joins her percussion, drumming his oud, painting her off-beats. He tries to throw her off.

She slips, but carries on.

Altair smirks.

Noura shifts rhythms in paradoxical ways the body can anticipate, but the mind cannot.

The crowd cheers them on.

Organic thuds and electronic plucks marry.

A TEENAGE BOY at the edge of the crowd has stopped moving. His eyes are on Altair.

The crowd doubles, then doubles again.

Rhythm and melody in perfect harmony. The audience is hypnotized.

Noura and Altair become one.

Transcendent.

The Boy's eyes are wide with reverence.

A proud grin spreads across Fard's face.

Altair leads into the Melody of Warmth.

But just as he starts, Noura gasps and stops.

Altair keeps playing, fully under the melody's spell.

The loud crowd goes strangely quiet, until Altair snaps out of it and looks towards the stage.

Noura's gone.

Altair is about to run after her, but a hand catches his arm. The teenage boy from the crowd.

ALTAIR

Oh hey Rigel. You've grown.

Altair turns back towards the empty stage.

ALTAIR

Noura! You were awesome!

He rolls his shoulder against RIGEL's grip.

ALTAIR

Can you let me go?

RIGEL

Your father has been looking everywhere for you two.

Altair smiles.

ALTAIR

Don't be so bothered.

Rigel takes a breath.

RIGEL

Count yourselves lucky I found you before the Turning.

Fard steps in between them.

FARD
We were on our way.

ALTAIR
Yeah, we got a little distracted.

Altair looks at the Boy. The Boy smiles back.

Rigel shakes his head.

RIGEL
They're starting right after the
Triad sets.

Fard checks the sky.

FARD
We've got time then.

ALTAIR
No, Rigel's right. We should be
there early.

Altair places a hand on Rigel's shoulder.

ALTAIR
Thanks, really. But can I just
meet that drummer?

RIGEL
You know we're at full capacity.

Altair looks at him with his frustratingly endearing smile.

ALTAIR
What's one more person? Call it my
birthyear gift!

RIGEL
Right. Happy birthyear.

He looks away.

RIGEL
My sister sends her regards.

The compliment escapes him before he can stop it:

RIGEL
You two were amazing.

Altair hugs Rigel before he can resist. And runs off, snatching the Boy's hand.

ALTAIR
Won't take long!

EXT. MAIN ROAD - BEHIND THE STAGE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Nothing. Just pots of Warden's Bloom chained into a circuit with powervine.

ALTAIR
Hey! Noura? Are you here?

Altair turns to the Boy.

ALTAIR
Where do you think she went?

He points. Far in the distance, Noura is sitting on crystallized stone. It's sparkling.

EXT. MAIN ROAD - CRYSTALLIZED STONE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Altair approaches from behind.

ALTAIR
You played as though time itself obeyed you.

She turns to him.

ALTAIR
I'm Altair.

NOURA
I don't— Wait, you're the Altair?

Altair shrugs.

She gets up quickly.

NOURA
How embarrassing!

Curtsies.

NOURA
I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you.
I wouldn't have run off—

She looks at him strangely.

NOURA
There's something wrong about you.

ALTAIR
You have Sight?

Noura is jolted back.

NOURA
What? No! How would you know that?

Altair gives her the same smirk from the stage.

ALTAIR
Why do you hide it? You should be proud.

She slumps.

NOURA
Please don't tell anyone.

Altair straightens, chin high.

ALTAIR
My promise already breathes in the air.

The Boy mimics him, chin high, perfectly serious.

NOURA
Why doesn't my Sight work on you?

ALTAIR
I know as you do. I'm immune to it. Haven't figured out why.

NOURA
That's unheard of! You should be studied! How ar—

He grabs her hand.

ALTAIR
I don't have much time. You were unforgettable and it would be my pleasure to invite you to the Turning ceremony. I know it's short notice—

NOURA
Yes! Of course, yes! The stars have finally listened! What a glorious night!

The Boy is standing between them, his eyes on Noura. They have not left her since she started playing. As if he's remembering something he never knew.

EXT. BURIED CITY - MAIN GATE - NIGHT

Thousands press against the Buried City gates. The titanium walls rise so high the crowd beneath them looks like sand.

The Boy holds onto Altair's hand as they walk. Ahead of them, Rigel parts the way.

ALTAIR
Come on, the crowd won't hurt us.

Altair pulls on the Boy's hand.

Noura follows, distracted by the swarm. Fard is having trouble forcing his way through.

The crowd greets Altair with deference, not as a child.

An OLD WOMAN reaches out.

OLD WOMAN
Altair!

A CHILD calls from his father's shoulders.

CHILD
Happy birthyear!

A MERCHANT bows.

MERCHANT
Pride be with us.

Altair reaches back as he passes. Noura falls in beside Fard.

NOURA
He must be used to this, huh?

The ground rumbles. The gates drag through metallic sand, gears turning around glowing blue flowers. Through the open gates are heads as far as the eye can see.

Noura stops breathing.

Fard nudges her forward.

FARD
Knowing Altair has its perks.

They pass through the gates and the crowd splits around them like trapped air between veins.

NOURA

Whoa.

Noura's feet slow. The city is a rhythm she can't count. Ancient metal under market stalls. Crystal fixtures beside clay ovens. Every step around her carries a different tempo.

The Boy at Altair's side is still watching Noura. He sees her fingers trill against her thigh without her noticing, and her eyes on green light seeping between the cracks in the walls.

Then he looks up at Altair.

Blinding.

EXT. BURIED CITY - GRAND STEPS / RESERVE CONSOLE - NIGHT

The crowd gets denser as the road opens to the Grand Steps of the Buried City. Each of its silver steps runs deeper than a camel and wide enough for entire processions. Lanes of people climb and descend across them. The palace above is unseeable from below, its mirrored surface buried behind the stars.

Fard helps Rigel pry a path open. Noura can't stop looking around. Ahead of them is the World Reserve's deposit console, a monolith of pure titanium, perfectly cubic and immense. All four of its walls reflect an ocean of people.

GUARDS struggle to contain the crowd. One of them, a GUARD IN BLACK, stands apart. His eyes are on the stars above.

GUARD IN BLACK

The Triad has set!

An entire face of the titanium cube flickers green, then disappears. On an elevated platform before it, SHEIKH ALDEBARAN joins the crowd in applause. Behind him, seven other SHEIKHS of the Free Tribes. A NEW WORLD EXPERT with ledger and ink. And a sacred SEER in woven leaf.

The Seer taps Aldebaran's shoulder and points to Altair.

Aldebaran straightens. He waves Altair over.

ALDEBARAN

Just in time, son! Happy birthyear!

Altair runs to the platform, pulling the Boy with him.

ALTAIR
Thank you, Father.

He shakes his father's hand, proper. Aldebaran smirks, seeing through the act.

Altair turns to the other Sheikhs and bows.

ALTAIR
Honored keepers of freedom, I bow
to your council.

The Sheikhs chuckle and bow back.

SHEIKHS
Brother of our land, may the
council honor all.

The Boy mimics and bows, peeking at Altair for validation. Altair nods, ever so subtle, in approval.

Noura and Fard watch from the crowd. Rigel stands beside them, his eyes holding onto Altair a little too long.

On the platform, Altair stands between Aldebaran and the Seer, his hand half-closed around the Boy's invisible one. The Seer's gaze settles on it.

A flowered microphone waits before Aldebaran. He takes it.

ALDEBARAN
Honored brothers and sisters!
Please, calm.

A HUSH spreads through the crowd.

The Seer does not look away.

Aldebaran looks across the faces of Al-Lawha.

ALDEBARAN
First, I offer my gratitude. To
each tribe, each hand, and each
heart, for guiding us through this
eventful cycle.

The Seer finds where the Boy's face would be. His eyes roll back. His body shakes. But before anyone notices, he is back as he was.

ALDEBARAN

It is unfortunate for us to be
missing one of our Sheikhs
tonight, but let me assure you,
the Greenlands have sent us their
voices.

Standing behind Aldebaran is Sheikh MISHAL, draped in
flamboyant metallic robes threaded with rare mandarin
flowers.

Mishal makes a show of scanning the crowd, hand over his
brow. Near the front, half-hidden: Rigel. Mishal spots him
and beams.

Rigel looks away, then back at the stage. Mishal won't stop
waving him up.

ALDEBARAN

Let it be known that our trial
collaboration with the New World
has exceeded all expectations!

The crowd cheers, scattered hisses among them.

Mishal is persistent, calling attention to himself behind
Aldebaran and gesturing more expressively towards Rigel.

Rigel sneaks a peek and shrinks back. His face flushes red.

ALDEBARAN

This past year was the most
efficient ever recorded!

The Sheikhs applaud.

Rigel walks towards the stage with his eyes on the floor.

ALDEBARAN

This cycle has seen two major
delays, both Southern.

Mishal rubs Rigel's hair like a child. Places a hand on
Rigel's shoulder in a proud display.

ALDEBARAN

To those from the Southern Lands.
Your burdens have not gone unseen,
and your steps are honored.

Across the crowd, some shake their heads, unconvinced.

ALDEBARAN

Now, before announcing the Twin Moons' Turning of our World Reserve, Sheikh Mishal, of our beloved Sister Tribe, would like to share a message.

The people erupt, roaring Mishal's name. Mishal holds his hands high and turns for the crowd, feeding on their reverence. He squeezes Rigel's shoulder, then steps to the microphone.

MISHAL

Thank you, cousin, for the... serviceable introduction. Only one title though? You wound me! I had a whole tablet prepared.

He pats his robe as if looking for something.

The crowd laughs. He roars, laughing even louder than them. Rigel shakes his head.

MISHAL

Now, my gems, heirs of the Twin Moons, your special cycles have blessed these lands for as long as they have held.

Mishal looks across the crowd, then directly at Altair. He winks.

Rigel sees it.

MISHAL

As Sheikh of our only closed border, I understand your hesitation towards integration. But these past years of collaboration between my Crystal City, the New World, and the Free Markets have allowed our cities to thrive beyond anything we could have built alone.

The crowd shifts, unconvinced but not refusing.

MISHAL

Four of the Reserve's faucets for our tribes, and yet the one we share with outsiders moves more in a single cycle than all of ours combined!

Altair's fist clenches as he notices more of the crowd hardening around him. He takes a deep breath and loosens his grip.

MISHAL

Some of the independents have
grown greater than us!

The people boil, shouting curses towards the stage. From the heart of the crowd, a single VOICE rises.

VOICE

Let it flow!

Quickly, it is joined by others, until it becomes a powerful, rhythmic chant.

Mishal holds up a hand. The crowd stills.

MISHAL

Brothers and sisters! You may not
want to believe this, but New
World sciences have advanced
beyond your wildest imaginations.

People turn to each other, murmuring.

MISHAL

With their aid, your share of the
Reserve will flow, permanent and
unending.

The murmuring changes. Something loosens.

MISHAL

Please, think deeply. Is rejecting
the hand of a brother, no matter
how foreign, representative of our
ways?

The crowd speaks over itself.

MISHAL

Let your thoughts be known to your
Sheikhs. The council will take the
vote tomorrow.

The corner of Mishal's mouth lifts, just barely.

MISHAL

As for my gift, you are all
welcome to tour my great city on
your long journeys back. Come see
the wonders of the New World.
Enjoy our food and wine.

The crowd thunders.

MISHAL

Happy Marking!

Behind Mishal, Aldebaran taps his foot, arms crossed.

MISHAL

With honor and pride!

CROWD

With honor and pride!

The crowd's joined voices echo through the Buried City.

MISHAL

And now, to announce the Turning,
allow me to reintroduce our kind
leader, Keeper of our Records,
Collector of our Songs, and Warden
of our World, Sheikh Aldebaran!

Mishal's eyes slide towards him, satisfied. Aldebaran
retakes the microphone to a louder crowd. His laugh comes
half a beat late.

ALDEBARAN

Apologies for my negligence,
cousin. As anyone would agree, it
would be impossible for any title
to contain you.

A few chuckles.

ALDEBARAN

Let us begin with the Guaranteed
Reserves.

He looks behind him at a woman, irreverent in style, waiting
to be called.

ALDEBARAN

Sheikha Nashira, would you please
announce your selection?

NASHIRA walks up to the microphone.

NASHIRA

Thank you, my Sheikh. As proud
voice of the Free Markets, we
offer salt.

ALDEBARAN

Al-Lawha accepts your reserve with
honor. You may step back.

The New World Expert marks his ledger. The guard in black
pushes a cart of salt into the deposit console, disappearing
into its interior. He steps out as the darkness behind him
flickers green.

Noura gasps, eyes wide. Around her, the crowd applauds, but
not with passion. With communion. Something that is done
because it is expected.

One by one, the remaining Sheikhs announce their reserves.

Sheikh DENEb, short, fingers ringed with New World gems.

DENEb

... proud voice of Fortune's
Fulcrum, we offer wine.

Sheikh SAIF, with a smile that knows more than it's showing.

SAIF

... voice of World's Edge...
pulleys.

Sheikh HAIDER, large and imposing, draped in hide, chest
exposed.

HAIDER

... of Star's Cradle... fur.

Fard is nodding off, while Sheikh JADY, young and boyish,
approaches the microphone.

JADY

... Climber's Valley... rope.

Noura is admiring the geometric patterns woven onto a
woman's dress. The woman has lines that take decades to
build on a face too young to hold them. She walks towards
the microphone with the absolute grace of her title.

Sheikha LAYLA.

LAYLA

As proud voice of Water's Loom, we
offer wool.

A snore distracts Noura from the stage. Fard is in and out of sleep. She looks at him, then at an opening in the crowd.

She bolts.

ALDEBARAN (O.S.)
With that done, allow me to
announce the adjustments for this
cycle.

The New World Expert hands Aldebaran the ledger.

Noura weaves through the crowd, sliding easily as if she knew everyone's movements.

ALDEBARAN (O.S.)
Flour faucet allocation will
increase to three times per day.

Fard jolts awake and notices Noura gone.

ALDEBARAN (O.S.)
Cotton. Twice per day.

Fard runs after her. Altair spots both of them from the stage. Aldebaran is still on the microphone.

ALDEBARAN
Water. Fifteen times per day.

Fard strains to match Noura's pace, who keeps evading his vision.

FARD
Wait up!

Noura looks back while still running.

FARD
Where are you going?

EXT. BURIED CITY - ALLEYS AND CORRIDORS - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

But she runs faster. She turns into a winding alley. Jumps over a fence. Weaves between corridors. Turns a corner.

Altair stands in front of her.

ALTAIR
Planning on letting us suffer
through that alone, huh?

His smile is infectious.

She smiles back, busted.

NOURA

No offense, but I don't care how much wheat you're getting this cycle! You have no idea how much I've dreamt of this place and this may be my only chance to see it.

ALTAIR

So... you're into history?

Noura stares at him as if he'd just asked whether stars had light.

NOURA

Who wouldn't be fascinated by the oldest city in the world? Your technology might as well be magic!

Fard catches up, out of breath, barely able to speak.

FARD

To be fair, it's magic to us, too.

Altair chuckles in agreement and considers something. Looks at Fard. Fard nods.

ALTAIR

Want to see the real magic?

Noura is already nodding before he finishes the sentence.

ALTAIR

But you'll have to promise not to tell anyone.

Altair extends a hand.

Noura smirks, chin up.

NOURA

My promise already breathes in the air.

She shakes it.

A good distance away, Rigel stands behind shadow. He watches the three of them laugh.

EXT. BURIED CITY - WARDEN'S PALACE - FRONT - NIGHT

Carved of Titanium Damascus, the palace's iridescent surface sings color back at the starry sky. Noura steps sideways, then back, watching the colors change.

Fard approaches.

FARD
You OK?

Noura doesn't look away.

NOURA
I've never seen anything more
beautiful.

Altair is waiting by the Palace's right wall.

ALTAIR
Come on.

The WARDEN'S KEY, smooth and heavy as stone, turns between his fingers.

ALTAIR
Before Father finds out.

Fard is already running.

FARD
No way I'm missing this!

NOURA
Hey!

Noura laughs chasing behind.

Altair puts a finger to his mouth as they catch up to him. They nod and follow, crouching down. Their warped reflections snake along the palace's uneven surface.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - BACK - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Fard peeks around its back corner.

FARD
No guards! We were right!

Noura relaxes, standing up.

NOURA
You two really planned this for
that long?

Altair walks to an inconspicuous part of the palace's back wall.

ALTAIR
It was a little past the last Twin
Moons.

Fard looks to Altair with longing.

FARD
Close to when we first met. As if
saving my life wasn't enough.

Altair pulls the key from his robe. He taps it onto a seamless slab of the palace's flush metal. Faint green seeps from imperceptible seams as the wall pushes back and slides open.

Noura doesn't wait. She runs right past Altair. From inside, her voice echoes:

NOURA (O.S.)
Bless the Twins! The stars really
are with me!

INT. WORLD RESERVE - PALACE ENTRANCE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

A reflection of Noura's face is fractured by green geometric patterns. An infinite chain of herself reflects between the Reserve's alien titanium walls. Infinite Altairs approach behind.

Noura is focused on the pattern.

NOURA
What's giving them light?

They pulse, lifelike.

ALTAIR
The hands of those who came
before.

Altair smiles, but Noura's not satisfied.

ALTAIR
That's what Father always tells
me, but I don't even think he
knows the answer.

Between the kaleidoscope of infinite Nouras and infinite Altairs, the Boy stands, without one reflection of his own.

ALTAIR
As Warden, my hand will join
theirs. I'll make sure this light
reaches everyone.

Fard is looking at the path ahead. A slope, carved into metallic stone.

ALTAIR
My father disagrees, but I believe
that includes its knowledge.
That's why I brought you and Fard.

The Boy waves at the polished walls, disappointed by nothing waving back. Altair notices him and giggles.

ALTAIR
Don't worry, that includes you
too.

NOURA
What?

Noura watches the empty patch Altair was talking to.

ALTAIR
Oh, right! I met a—

Fard tugs on Altair's arm.

FARD
Is that the path ahead?

Altair looks at him. Past the excitement. Past the smile.

ALTAIR
Do you not want me to tell her?

Noura turns between them.

NOURA
Tell me what?

Rigel looms nearby.

Fard's eyes drop.

FARD
I'm sorry, Altair. It's just, too
much to take in.

ALTAIR
That's OK. I understand.

Altair's eyes stay on Fard's. Then, he turns to the Boy, then back to Noura.

ALTAIR
You may not believe me, but I've
been haunted by a ghost ever since
I can remember.

Noura looks at him. She really tries.

ALTAIR
Today, we became friends.

Altair gestures towards empty space.

She bites her lip. Hard.

ALTAIR
He's waving!

Noura looks at Fard, who's looking down, then to where the "ghost" would be.

NOURA
Hello?

Altair and the Boy perk up, sharing the same naive smile.

ALTAIR
Onwards, fellow Wardens!

He salutes, role-playing, and leads them to the slope.

Noura laughs, a real one, and salutes back.

Altair notices Fard is walking with his head still down. He stops. Tilts Fard's chin up.

ALTAIR
All good?

Altair is right there. Slowly, Fard smiles.

ALTAIR
Now, I demand an offering of
cloth!

Nothing.

Altair extends a hand, palm up.

ALTAIR

Cloth!

Nothing.

Altair drops his hand and pulls a layer off his assembled woolen robe. He lays it on the smooth mirrored floor.

The Boy mimics and tears a piece from his own robe, identical to Altair's. Fard takes a layer off his.

Noura presses her hand to her vine-fiber shirt.

NOURA

But I don't have a loose layer.

The Boy holds out a layer of his robe towards her. It hangs in the air between them.

ALTAIR

It's OK, Noura can use mine.

Altair sits on his piece of wool and taps.

ALTAIR

Come sit behind me.

Fard and the Boy lay theirs next to his as Noura sits behind Altair.

Altair takes the Warden's Key and slides it across the floor. The pattern is complex, but his hand doesn't hesitate.

ALTAIR

Hold on.

The Reserve hums. Green patterns seep from the walls of the slope ahead, breathing light into them. The slope steepens. Fard holds his cloth tighter.

FARD

Is this safe?

The floor answers for him. A vibration rolls through the metal, and they're moving.

Noura squeezes Altair.

NOURA

Woohooooooo!

INT. WORLD RESERVE - BRIDGE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Wind. Hair. Speed. They shoot down the Reserve's throat onto a narrow bridge. The Boy lands next to them, laughing.

FARD
Aaaaaaaaahhhhh!

Fard is spat out right behind.

The bridge is a thread. Above them, below them, on every side, the Reserve is alive with movement.

Noura gets up.

NOURA
Whoa.

A complex network of chutes zips pallets of levitating resources, tracing paths of living green.

NOURA
This is amazing!

She looks over the rails. There's no bottom, just more pallets.

NOURA
How are they flying?

Altair is fixing his robe.

ALTAIR
I'm not sure, but I want to ride them one day.

She looks back from the rails.

NOURA
Yes! That's genius!

Fard is studying the movement of pallets around them. He traces them to a ring of five outlets at the Reserve's top.

FARD
Which of those is Sheikh Mishal's faucet?

Rigel stands by the slit's opening, spying from behind. He sees Altair point at his father's faucet and continue walking.

Altair approaches a solid titanium wall at the end of the bridge. Green laser lines part the slab open like a portal, allowing them into the World Reserve's control console.

INT. WORLD RESERVE - CONTROL CONSOLE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Noura's hand drifts to where the wall had been.

NOURA
Th-This isn't possible.

Fard is stopped in place, eyes darting everywhere. Rigel follows at a distance.

Altair turns.

ALTAIR
Rigel, come join us!

Rigel almost trips. Fard and Noura look back.

Fard rolls his hand into a fist.

FARD
What are you doing here?

Rigel doesn't speak.

FARD
You were following us!

Altair puts a hand on Fard's shoulder.

ALTAIR
Fard. It's OK.

Rigel steps towards them.

RIGEL
No, it's not OK!

Another step.

RIGEL
You can't be in here!

Rigel's voice is shaking.

RIGEL
Especially not with outsiders!

Altair tries to speak. He can't find the air.

Fard steps between them.

FARD
Watch yourself.

RIGEL
You would show them before your
own?

Altair steadies himself, grabbing onto Fard.

ALTAIR
Fard isn't an outsider. And Noura
isn't a threat.

RIGEL
This is irresponsible!

Rigel stops. He sees Altair struggling for breath, and softens.

RIGEL
Altair. You know our ways.

ALTAIR
I do.

Softer still.

RIGEL
Why then?

A moment. Altair smiles.

ALTAIR
So, is it as you imagined?

Rigel breathes.

RIGEL
No. It is far beyond that.

Altair's smile grows.

ALTAIR
Just wait until you see what's
inside.

INT. WORLD RESERVE - CONSOLE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Green light traces the Warden's Key as Altair slides it across the console's ancient slab. Behind him, Fard's hand hovers over a dial etched with a Leaf, not quite touching it. Altair glances back.

ALTAIR
Not that one.

Fard pulls his hand away.

FARD
What's it for?

Altair shrugs without looking.

ALTAIR
The Warden's Chamber.

He laughs.

ALTAIR
Father would have my head.

A small laugh from Fard.

Noura is crouched, an eyelash away from engravings. Letters in a language so old they've become shapes. Rigel stands still, watching streaks of green blink between metal seams, following paths that seem to decide themselves.

The console hums under Altair's hand. Something inside it is moving.

Rigel steadies himself.

RIGEL
What's happening?

Fard jolts away from the dial.

FARD
Are we moving?

The Boy holds onto Altair. Altair holds him back.

ALTAIR
Almost there.

INT. WORLD RESERVE - CHAMBER - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The wall's metal parts open, revealing a mirrored chamber where a single bag of colorful crystals reflects infinitely.

Noura steps towards it.

NOURA
This really is just a giant
underground vault.

Altair comes up behind her.

ALTAIR
In a way.

He walks to the bag.

It sits on a pallet, alone in the chamber, no larger than a sack of grain. The crystals inside catch the light and throw it back in colors: reds and gold and a deep violet that seems to move. The bag is simple, woven. Ordinary.

And yet the mirrored walls multiply it into an infinite corridor of itself.

ALTAIR
Grab as many as you like.

Their cupped hands go straight through the crystal pebbles, as if the bag were a mirage.

Noura gasps.

NOURA
This doesn't make any sense. I can
still feel them!

Fard is speechless.

Altair's smile widens, noticing even Rigel unable to hide his amazement.

Pulling their hands out, the crystals duplicate. Noura stares at the crystals in her palm, then pours them into her mouth.

NOURA
(between crunches)
They're real!

ALTAIR
Watch this.

Altair grabs the whole bag, nearly as tall as he is, and drags it out of the pallet. It slides off, leaving the original as it was.

Fard watches his reflection standing over the bag across the chamber's wall. It goes on forever.

FARD
The stories are true.

Noura is counting her fingers.

NOURA
How many times can this be done?

ALTAIR
For as long as it is preserved in
a chamber, infinite.

Rigel is watching Altair. His expression won't settle.

ALTAIR
Regardless, with just five faucets
and everyone to feed, it doesn't
matter how many times. The Warden
faces an impossible burden.

Noura is tapping her fingers against each other, working something out.

NOURA
Even back home, no one's figured
out the best way to move
everything where it needs to go.

Altair nods. The weight of it is not new to him.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Blue flowerlight breathes dimmer through the palace halls. Sheikh Aldebaran stops by Altair's slightly open door. He peeks in.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Altair is weeping in his sleep.

Wailing.

Aldebaran shakes his head and gently closes the door.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - DAY

Silver silk bedding, unkempt. A collection of ouds, scattered. Piles of gems over ledgers and scrolls.

A New World DOCTOR shines a mandarin torch into Altair's eyes. They drift to the ceiling. It is covered in blue flowers.

DOCTOR

How long have you been seeing him?

Altair looks at the Boy sitting by his side.

ALTAIR

Since last night.

Lush curtains flutter around a large open balcony. A ringed moon rises, half-visible, like a moon in the daytime, casting golden-green light into the room.

ALTAIR

Well, technically he's been around my whole life.

The doctor looks to where Altair is looking.

DOCTOR

What do you mean?

Sheikh Aldebaran stands behind him.

ALDEBARAN

Doctor, Altair has been through a traumatic childhood.

ALTAIR

He was there, Father! I felt him everywhere. Especially when you played Mother's melody.

Aldebaran's expression grows stern.

ALDEBARAN

My heir, command your emotions.

Air leaves Altair's lungs.

ALTAIR

But I found. The right. Notes. He heard it.

Aldebaran conceals his surprise.

ALDEBARAN
Breathe. Do not slip to your old
ways.

Altair takes a deep breath.

ALTAIR
Yes, Father.

The doctor writes on his scroll, then turns to Altair.

DOCTOR
Ask the ghost, how many fingers do
I have behind my back?

The Boy walks behind the Doctor and raises three fingers. He
smiles.

Altair smiles back.

ALTAIR
Three.

The Boy raises six.

ALTAIR
Six.

Aldebaran looks over the doctor marking his scroll.

ALDEBARAN
What are you thinking?

The doctor scratches his head.

DOCTOR
Sight. It's not about seeing the
future. It's about an incredibly
enhanced perception of the
present.

ALDEBARAN
Yes, but that doesn't explain
Altair?

They both look at him.

DOCTOR
What happens when someone is
immune to it? When that much
processing power is turned
inwards?

Aldebaran catches Altair staring at nothing.

ALDEBARAN

Wait. You're suggesting Altair
might be masking his own ability?

The doctor folds his scroll.

DOCTOR

Precisely.

Altair is distracted by the Boy making funny faces behind
the doctor.

DOCTOR

He's not seeing a ghost. He's
having a conversation with his own
intuition.

The boys laugh.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALL OF SULH - DAY

Sheikh Aldebaran stands at the head of an ancient metal
table, engraved with a sculpted map of Al-Lawha. It is
detailed with caravan trade routes, lit faintly green.

The continent is split by the Serpent, a large canyon
separating its southern third from the Northern Lands.

At the northern end of the map, where the New World extends
over clouds, Altair stands by Aldebaran's side.

Across from them is Mishal, with his son Rigel close behind.
The remaining Sheikhs line the table between. By the door,
Fard and the Boy listen.

Sheikha Layla meets Aldebaran's eyes.

LAYLA

I'm sure of it, he's dead.

Aldebaran's face softens. The Sheikhs shake their heads.

Sheikh Haider holds Layla's shoulder.

HAIDER

This is true.

He points at a caravan route. It leads from Star's Cradle in
the southern mountain range, to Water's Loom, on the eastern
edge of the southern riverlands.

HAIDER

Mirzim's usurper settled here.

Layla grips the table.

LAYLA
Refugees tell us he hoards
supplies to himself. Our cousins
suffer under his rule.

Haider nods.

HAIDER
My caravan guards. They are
trained for bandits, not starving
mothers.

He gestures at the Greenlands, taking up most of the
Southern Lands between their cities.

HAIDER
Passage here is difficult.

His hand trembles.

Haider meets Altair's eyes, and the trembling stops.

Aldebaran holds himself looser.

ALDEBARAN
I am very sorry to hear this.
Sheikh Mirzim was a brother to me,
may his star shine bright.

Sheikh Jady, almost too young to be at the table, retreats
twice before stepping forward.

JADY
Um... well...

He shuffles in place.

Mishal clicks his tongue.

MISHAL
Speak up, boy!

JADY
Th-There is another issue.
Hundreds have been crossing our
Valley, seeking refuge here in the
North.

Jady points at the eastern edge of the Serpent, the
narrowest in the canyon. It is where the Northern and
Southern Lands are closest.

Sheikh Deneb's rings click against the table.

DENEb

And you didn't take them in?

JADY

We did! We have no space left.

Mishal glances at Deneb.

MISHAL

I say we gather an army south and
teach those warring savages a
lesson.

Aldebaran tightens.

ALDEBARAN

Violence, cousin? If not for my
forebear's mercy, allowing your
breakaway, not even the stars
would have known your name.

Rigel's eyes are on the floor. Next to him, Mishal chuckles.

MISHAL

I was only joking, of course.
Don't be too serious. We all know
the solution here, just accept it.

Sheikha Nashira, dressed to be mistaken for a street urchin,
steps up.

NASHIRA

Sheikh Mishal is right. The New
World caravan network is much
faster than ours.

She traces the table, marking it with green light.

NASHIRA

Their roads connect the
independents.

She draws a triangle: Union's Point, the Silverlakes, the
New World.

Deneb's Fortune's Fulcrum sits inside it. His rings press
into his fist.

DENEb

So they diverted the stream? No
wonder my wells run dry!

Mishal brushes his ornate robe.

MISHAL
Sands shift. Either we price the
passage or we pay for it.

MISHAL
(to Aldebaran)
Cousin. My Sheikh. You must adopt
New World gems.

ALDEBARAN
That is not our way! I will not
allow the threat of dependence!

MISHAL
What about the threat of another
Cursed Warden?

The Sheikhs hold their breaths. The room goes still.

Haider breaks the silence.

HAIDER
With respect, Sheikh Aldebaran,
Sheikh Mishal is right. The
Reserve is already threatened by
the warring tribes on our Southern
Lands. You are not yet impacted,
but my mountains, and Sheikha
Layla's riverlands, are. I will
not allow our people to suffer.

Aldebaran looks around the table. All the Sheikhs are
nodding, even young Jady.

Aldebaran finds his hand on Altair.

ALDEBARAN
But we have nothing to offer to
the New World. We cannot sacrifice
another of our Reserve's five
faucets.

Nashira's hand moves in her pocket.

NASHIRA
You are thinking too narrowly,
Sheikh. The Free Markets had
nothing to offer. We built
something to offer.

Sheikh Saif steps out of Mishal's shadow.

SAIF

Why don't you charge for tourism?
Our viewpoint at World's Edge has
been very lucrative.

Aldebaran's palm flattens on the table.

ALDEBARAN

That is out of the question! This
city will forever be open and
welcoming. With honor and pride!

SHEIKHS

With honor and pride.

The reply is without passion.

Altair looks at the door. Fard makes a gesture, as if
smelling a flower. Altair understands.

And steps up.

ALTAIR

I'm sorry to interrupt, honored
council.

He looks up at his father.

ALTAIR

The solution is simple.

They all turn to him, impatient. Altair takes a deep breath.

ALTAIR

Ask yourselves, what does the New
World depend on the most?

The Sheikhs go quiet.

Saif glares at him.

Nashira taps her feet.

Then, Deneb's eyes widen.

DENEB

The boy's right. Flowers!

ALTAIR

I was in our meadow last night.
The New World's soil is fertile in
our sands.

Layla looks at Altair differently.

LAYLA
How would that help us?

HAIDER
This is true.

Haider nods.

HAIDER
Their caravan routes must also
face the Serpent. Crossing it
remains a bottleneck even for
their experts.

Mishal pats Saif's back.

MISHAL
Tell them, brother!

All eyes fall on Saif.

SAIF
Well. The New World expressed
interest in developing on my land.

Saif points at World's Edge, a promontory on the southwest
corner of the Northern Lands.

Deneb bangs the table.

DENEB
You mean to say you helped expand
their network!

Mishal hisses.

MISHAL
Hold your tongue, friend, and
listen for a change.

Deneb is red with anger, but submits to Mishal. A smile
escapes Saif as he continues.

SAIF
We have sky slings running
supplies along this entire edge.

He points across the western edge of the Serpent.

SAIF
The New World installed their
first slings this past year.

Mishal's eyes are somewhere else entirely.

MISHAL
I've seen them myself! A single
sling moves pallets faster than
three of our own!

SAIF
I have to admit, they're beyond
anything we could've built alone.

Aldebaran looks between them.

ALDEBARAN
And they charge gems for their
use?

Mishal turns his wrists.

MISHAL
As they do with any of their
services, what of it?

Young Jady hesitates to meet Aldebaran's eyes.

JADY
Um... given the incoming
refugees... can't they settle
around your city? You would have
enough hands to cultivate the
flowers.

Mishal claps Jady's shoulder.

MISHAL
Yes, boy!

Haider considers.

HAIDER
This is true. It would solve both
issues.

Aldebaran looks around the council. All the Sheikhs seem
convinced. But not Nashira.

ALDEBARAN
Something on your mind, Sheikha?

She throws up her hands.

NASHIRA
You would flood the world with our
most sacred resource! Flowers will
be as sand!

ALDEBARAN
 You are weighing the shock to your
 markets?

Nashira stares blankly, as if what he said were obvious.

ALDEBARAN
 Then we must choose, Sheikha. Do
 we protect the price of your
 flowers, or the lives of our
 people?

Her eyes burn.

Aldebaran looks at Altair. His pride breaks through.

ALDEBARAN
 Your voice is heard, but we must
 act now. All in favor of New World
 integration, raise a hand.

Every hand rises, except Nashira's. Her arms are crossed.

EXT. BURIED CITY OUTSKIRTS - FLOWER MEADOW - TIME-LAPSE

A small meadow of Warden's Bloom sleeps beyond the Buried City gates. As the ringed moon rises and sets, the meadow grows, a flower itself. The meadow's petals spread. More blue across more lands. Travelers arrive. Settlers follow. The setting moon rises and sets and rises again. More flowers. More light. More settlers. The ringed moon turns through the days. Faster and faster. The city is an island within an ocean of flowers. Aireth marks the sky with a third moon.

A new year.

CUT TO:

INSERT - A SLAB OF IRIDESCENT METAL

Etched onto it: "LOST FRAGMENT - ON THE SOLACE OF
 SOLIDARITY"

EXT. SERPENT CANYON - CLIFFSIDE - DUSK

A slab of marble hangs from a rope. The rope grows taut. The slab lifts. Behind it, purple moss illuminates the Serpent's stone wall.

A scrappy man, BALQAM, peeks from above. His voice whistles through a gap in his teeth.

BALQAM
Food is ready!

Below, two STONEWORKERS, dusted silver, turn to each other.

STONEWORKER 1
Better not be lizard's tail again.

The rope loops around a protruding stone at the canyon's top. Hanging from it like a pendant, a flowered wheel coils the slab upwards. The marble rises over the two workers.

Balqam turns from the stone. Before him, a caravan of people. Laughter from children playing. Men and women around a campfire, eating lizard's tail. Giant camels sleeping beside a row of wagons. The campfire's orange light flickering across them.

The rope rises slower under the marble's weight. The slab's shadow hangs over the two stoneworkers packing their tools.

Balqam stands by the campfire.

BALQAM
OK, they're coming. But quickly,
before the surprise, I wanna just
tell you how much I'm grateful.

The wheel strains. Shifts upwards.

BALQAM
And I love you, all of you. Like,
really, so much. Tonight, though,
it's their night. They pulled
through.

The protruding stone tilts.

BALQAM
Their tireless work, this whole
expedition, they earned this
night.

The wheel jams. The slab stops rising.

BALQAM
Anyways, enough mush talk, it's
time to celebrate! Happy Marking!

The people around the campfire cheer.

The stoneworkers lock their toolboxes. The shadow over them grows. They're about to step away.

A MAN gasps.

CARAVAN MAN
Balqam! The wheel!

AT THE LIFTING STONE

Without hesitation, Balqam runs towards the protruding stone. Just as he's about to grasp the rope, it slips away. The slab shatters on the canyon's floor, killing the two stoneworkers.

BACK AT THE CAMPFIRE

BALQAM
... their tireless work, this
whole—

Balqam blinks. He was experiencing Sight.

BALQAM
The wheel! Now!

Balqam runs to the wheel, others behind him. He jumps onto the rope and hangs off the stone. The rope slips upwards despite his weight.

BALQAM
Get away from the wall!

A person jumps onto Balqam's feet. More and more latch onto the rope. Bodies on bodies. But the rope still climbs.

The children hold their breath.

The rope is nearing the stone's top. Three layers of bodies on it. It's about to slip.

The children jump onto the feet of their elders. The slab is held by the weight of the entire caravan.

The two stoneworkers arrive running, the last two on the rope. It starts going back down.

Balqam drops. One by one, others drop to help. Together, they pull the marble up in one piece. Balqam smiles as sweat drips down his forehead.

BALQAM
Close one.

CUT TO:

INSERT - A SLAB OF IRIDESCENT METAL

Etched onto it: "END OF FRAGMENT"

EXT. BURIED CITY - WEST FAUCET - DAY

Pallets of supplies flow out of flowered conveyor belts, gliding into storehouses. Lines of caravans wait their turn, each marked with the Crystal City's emblem, a Branch. New World experts move between them, ledgers and flower clocks in hand.

By one of the gates, Rigel. There's a drive in his eyes that wasn't there before. He's taller too. Not physically, but in the way he holds himself.

He raises his voice at a MERCHANT.

RIGEL

Sheikh Aldebaran would never trade
with you again! Let alone my
father!

A dark cloud, faintly iridescent, looms over them.

The merchant's camel carries bags on its side. Rigel draws his dagger and cuts the bags off. The merchant stares at them in the sand.

MERCHANT

What difference does it make?

RIGEL

Every grain matters! Every single
one! You think because no one is
counting—

Rigel's anger sinks. Altair stands behind him, taller than him.

ALTAIR

What is going on here?

Sabra waits nearby, munching on a bag of shrubs left before her. She is much larger, some grey in her hair.

Rigel turns to Altair.

RIGEL

Don't worry about it. This is my
post.

Altair's attention is on the merchant.

ALTAIR
Is everything OK?

MERCHANT
Yes, yes! I was just on my way.

The merchant gets on his camel and rides away.

Altair puts a hand on Rigel's shoulder.

ALTAIR
I felt you all the way from the
East Faucet. You didn't have to be
so mean.

Rigel nudges Altair's hand off.

RIGEL
He deserved it. I won't allow an
outsider merchant to steal from
your father!

He takes a breath.

RIGEL
Altair, you can't be too nice. It
makes you weak.

Altair smiles.

ALTAIR
I don't see it that way, cousin.

Near them, the Boy stands, having not aged a day. He is
staring off into the distance. With longing.

Altair fiddles with his hands.

ALTAIR
Anyway. I came to tell you
something.

RIGEL
What is it?

ALTAIR
Well. I...

He shuffles in place.

ALTAIR
You see...

Rigel squints.

RIGEL

I've never seen you so nervous.

Altair stills.

RIGEL

Spit it out!

ALTAIR

(all at once)

I've been seeing your sister.

Altair looks away, face red.

ALTAIR

Father plans a formal presentation tomorrow.

RIGEL

Wait.

Rigel shakes his head.

RIGEL

What?

ALTAIR

I think I'm falling in love with her.

Rigel's face drops.

ALTAIR

I know we haven't always been on good terms.

Altair's chest tightens.

ALTAIR

Rigel?

He searches Rigel's eyes.

ALTAIR

We can work this out.

Rigel hugs Altair.

RIGEL

Altair.

Rigel pulls back and puts a hand on Altair's shoulder.

RIGEL

We may not see eye to eye, but I
have always seen you as family.

Fard, with a thick mustache and a full beard, runs up from behind.

FARD

I told you it would go well!

Rigel rolls his eyes.

RIGEL

You left the East Faucet unmanned?

FARD

Only for a bit.

Rigel crosses his arms.

FARD

It's OK, the New Worlders can
manage it just fine.

Before Rigel can respond, a GUARD rides in.

GUARD

My Sheikh!

He salutes.

GUARD

Your father summons you urgently.

Altair doesn't think. He gets on Sabra, the Boy behind him, and rides towards the South Faucet, leaving Fard and Rigel behind.

EXT. BURIED CITY - SOUTH FAUCET - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Caravans crowd the South Faucet, marked by the Rope of Climber's Valley, the Loom of Water's Loom, and the Chisel of Star's Cradle.

The conveyor belts have stopped. Their flowers are dim, some without light. WORKERS scramble to replace them while TWO NEW WORLD SCHOLARS, pockets down every seam, study the lightless pots.

A VALLEY COURIER faces Aldebaran.

VALLEY COURIER
But the flowerlight blight
spreads, Sheikh.

Behind him, many more workers shout over each other.

Aldebaran turns to them.

ALDEBARAN
I will solve this! Be calm!

DISSENTER
You can only promise dust!

Fists rise. Curses are thrown.

ALDEBARAN
I cannot control the winds, but I
plan to steer us through them!

A CRADLE COURIER shoves to the front.

CRADLE COURIER
Our sons burn with fever! We
cannot wait for your dead faucets!

Aldebaran's hand finds the hilt of his dagger. He doesn't draw it.

ALDEBARAN
Please, you must understand. This
is unprecedented.

Altair walks through the chaos. Smiling. The people he passes stop shouting. Then the ones behind them. Then the ones behind them. Aldebaran feels him coming and turns.

A young woman, HAYA, sits on one of the Cradle's caravans. She plays with a ball in her hands. The ball drops.

HAYA
By the Stars. Another voice?

Altair walks past her, but the Boy doesn't. He stops. Not the way he stopped for Noura. Not curiosity. Something deeper. Something that aches.

HAYA'S FATHER sits beside her. Frail.

The Boy's mouth moves. No sound comes out. If it could, it would be her name.

Altair pulls on the Boy's arm, prompting him forward. They meet Aldebaran in front of a crowd of hurt eyes.

Aldebaran shakes Altair's hand.

ALDEBARAN
I've been holding my temper.

Altair sees the conveyors. Sees the lightless flowers.
Without needing a word, he turns.

ALTAIR
Friends!

The mess of caravans quiets at his command.

ALTAIR
I am Altair, your Warden's heir.

DISSENTER
Shame!

Altair's smile is heavier.

ALTAIR
I vow, as my father has—

DISSENTER
Your child speaks for you!

Altair tries again.

ALTAIR
We will inves—

Within the crowd, one prays to the cloudy sky.

DISSENTER
Voice of the Stars, hear our call!

Altair's hand finds Aldebaran's arm.

ALTAIR
Please, I understa—

DISSENTER
Praise the Messiah!

An involuntary breath seizes Altair as more DISSENTERS join
their voices.

DISSENTERS
Down with the Warden! Praise the
Messiah!

The clouds hang lower. Altair freezes beneath his smile.

Aldebaran pulls his son back and steps forward.

ALDEBARAN

That is enough! Guards!

PALACE GUARDS draw their daggers. The sky is darkened under the approaching clouds' cover.

The dissenters fight back.

Elbows. Knees. Fists.

The clouds shimmer with thunder.

DISSENTER

Voice of the Stars, help us!

The Boy is still staring at Haya. A dagger's pommel on liver. Her father is knocked down in the chaos.

Altair sees it. He takes a breath. Haya's face unclenches.

Altair runs for the guards.

ALTAIR

Stop!

A hand holds him back. Aldebaran's.

ALTAIR

Please!

Altair pulls free. He moves through the fighting until he stands at the crowd's center.

ALTAIR

Stop!

Altair's voice reverberates through everyone. The guards stop. The crowd stops.

It starts raining.

Aldebaran's jaw loosens.

Altair faces the dissenters. Eye to eye to eye.

ALTAIR

You may have lost faith in us, but
know this. We do hear your voices.
And we will be better.

The guards let them go. He glances over each of them.

ALTAIR
No one will suffer under my ward.

The Boy turns away from Haya to Altair, as if he heard a life-altering revelation.

Beside one of the conveyors, two pairs of eyes widen. The New World scholars.

Their potted flower is glowing brighter.

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Starlight creeps through the woven canopy of the Sprawling Woods. A sparkle moves between the branches.

Altair sits with the Boy beneath them, surrounded on all sides by dark forest. The flowered oud glints mandarin orange behind his back.

ALTAIR
It was so hard, Sada. I haven't
been that close to breaking since
before we met.

He reaches for the oud and plays a looping melody as he speaks, beautiful in its simplicity. The melody settles into the trees. Their sparkles pulse around Altair's notes, flowing from branch to branch. As if dancing.

Sabra lies beside them, listening in blissful ignorance.

The Boy has a name now.

SADA.

SADA (GHOST)
I know. I felt you, but you did
well.

Altair shakes his head.

ALTAIR
I promised I would stop their
suffering.

His simple melody diverges.

ALTAIR
Why?

Darker.

Sada's eyes shut, swayed by it.

SADA (GHOST)
Because you must.

ALTAIR
But.

The music stops.

ALTAIR
I have no idea how to help them.

A silence between them. Sada breathes. Altair plays.

He explores another melody.

ALTAIR
The faucets are flowing faster,
but the stream still dries.

Altair's notes are tinged with sadness.

Sada stands and paces around him, hands behind his back.

SADA (GHOST)
Maybe the South can build their
own storehouses?

ALTAIR
Like the ones by our conveyors?

Altair's notes lose structure.

ALTAIR
We can barely manage our own.

The notes ache.

ALTAIR
Unless...

He plays with more intensity. His notes blur together.

ALTAIR
A Southern Warden? No. Father
wouldn't trust that.

Altair loses himself to louder notes. Sabra turns her neck towards him, and grunts.

Altair plays slower. Deeper. His eyes lift to the stars.

Sada jumps.

SADA (GHOST)
There! That's it!

Altair hangs onto that series of notes.

SADA (GHOST)
You're so close to it.

He explores its relative scales. A melody of melancholy. But it's not quite right. He falls back to the simple, beautiful loop.

ALTAIR
I can't.

Sada tries to speak, but his lips don't move. His voice subdued by another's presence.

Altair looks around. Sada points. And Altair's melody resolves with inevitable satisfaction.

Under the sparkling arches of two sprawling trees, REELA smiles. A roll of parchment is slung behind her back.

REELA
I thought I'd find you here.

Altair runs to her. Stops a hair's width apart.

ALTAIR
And I could never see you coming.

Their breaths overlap.

A hug.

Deep. Real.

Behind them, Sada watches. He is smiling, his hand on his other arm.

Altair kisses her forehead. They lose themselves in each other's eyes for a moment too long before Reela snaps herself out.

REELA
Let's not be rude, where's Sada?

Sada perks up. Altair points.

Reela runs to an empty patch of air.

REELA

Hope you aren't filling his head
with too many of your wild ideas.

Sada shakes his head, eyes rolled, offended.

Altair approaches them.

ALTAIR

You should've seen it today,
Reela. It was bad. A riot almost
broke out.

Reela takes his hand.

Altair's voice drops.

ALTAIR

They even call to the false
Messiah.

REELA

Altair. You must understand, some
things are beyond your control.

Reela's thumb gently strokes the top of Altair's hand.

REELA

Have trust in your father and the
New World experts.

Altair's smile thins.

ALTAIR

Lives are at stake.

REELA

They always are.

The woods sparkle. A breeze brushes Reela's hair.

REELA

What a beautiful night.

Altair is awestruck by her. His eyes don't leave her. But
Reela is focused on where Sabra sits.

REELA

Lie there on Sabsab!

She turns to where Sada would be.

REELA

Sada, you too!

She poses Altair and instructs Sada until the landscape holds them in her canvas. A living painting.

Parchment unrolled, her steady hand preserves the fleeting moment.

Altair scruffs Sabra as Reela paints.

ALTAIR
Are you nervous about tomorrow?

Reela looks up from her canvas.

REELA
Nervous? From my father?

His fingers move between Sabra's fur. She snores.

Reela bursts out laughing. Altair too.

Sada stares at them, warm with joy, then looks away to the dark horizon, with longing.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - DAWN

Balcony curtains blow violently. A storm rages outside. Altair turns in his sleep, sweating. Sada sleeps next to him in equal discomfort.

Altair's face crunches to the sound of thunder. Sada moans in pain.

DISSENTERS (V.O.)
Down with the Warden! Praise the
Messiah!

Sada sits up. A tear in his eye. He sees Altair and shakes him awake. Altair takes a moment before noticing Sada's tears.

He finds himself smiling.

ALTAIR
Oh, was I bad?

Sada nods.

Altair looks to the open balcony. Lightning rips over the green of dawn.

ALTAIR
It's almost daytime, we can stay
up.

Sada smiles, wiping his eyes.

ALTAIR
Quite the storm for my
presentation.

EXT. BURIED CITY - MAIN GATE - DAY

Vines and mandarin flowers dress a procession of caravans.
Aldebaran leads on MACHBOOS. Altair rides beside him on
Sabra. Their robes catch the light.

Aldebaran slows to Altair's side.

ALDEBARAN
About yesterday.

Sada listens.

Altair looks away.

ALTAIR
I'm sorry, Father.

Aldebaran turns to him.

ALDEBARAN
No, son.

ALTAIR
I was weak.

Aldebaran waits. Altair looks back.

ALDEBARAN
I have never been more proud of
you.

An involuntary breath catches Altair.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - WEST ROAD - DAY

The caravans wind over wet silver dunes, stark against the
cloudy sky. Sheikh Aldebaran's eyes are lost on the horizon,
heavy with the weight of tomorrow.

Altair notices.

ALTAIR
Hey.

Altair rides ahead of Aldebaran.

ALTAIR
Forgot to tell you something.

He rides faster. Sada enjoys the wind blowing in his hair.

ALTAIR
But you'll have to catch me!
Aldebaran laughs and accepts the race.

ALDEBARAN
Machboos.
Pats him.

ALDEBARAN
Show them.
They launch.
Machboos soars past Sabra in a blink. Altair scruffs Sabra's side.

ALTAIR
Sabsab! You can do this!
Sabra tries to keep up with young Machboos, but she runs slower and slower until her legs give out. She goes back to her gentle stroll, unwilling now to race.
Altair laughs as he pets her some more.

ALTAIR
That's OK, you did great.
Aldebaran slows down.
ALDEBARAN
Poor Sabra, she's still got a half day's journey ahead of her.

Altair rubs Sabra's thigh.

ALTAIR
She'll be fine.
Sabra gives him a look.

ALDEBARAN
What did you want to tell me?
The procession is a good distance behind them.

ALTAIR
I got close to finding it.

Aldebaran's hands are tighter on the reins.

ALTAIR
The second melody.

Aldebaran doesn't even try to hide his gasp.

EXT. CRYSTAL CITY - MAIN GATE - SUNSET

Delicate flowerlight from within the Crystal City breaks through its walls. And above it.

Casting its skies in color.

Altair sees Sada's jaw hang low. Then looks up.

ALTAIR
These walls never fail to steal my
breath.

At every angle, the sky shifts like a shattered rainbow.

Aldebaran smirks despite himself.

ALDEBARAN
They serve the eyes more than
protection.

Coiled flower vines wrap around the base of several crystal pillars, central on the city's wall. Sands shift with vibration. Flowerlight brightens as gears turn. And the pillars draw down into the shuffling metal, buried without friction.

A small figure stands beneath the opened gate. Sheikh Mishal. He's waving with both arms, as if they might not see him.

Altair and Aldebaran approach on their camels. They dismount, kneeling, heads down.

Mishal reaches down.

MISHAL
Get up before I embarrass myself.

They get up, the ringed moon almost set behind them.

MISHAL
Come here, my boy!

Mishal swallows Altair, a roaring laugh masking his tears. With arms still around Altair, he peeks at Aldebaran.

Aldebaran winks. A quiver in his smile.

Just past the gate there is a glass fountain. Water trails down the sculpted figures of Mishal and his family. Mishal at the top. Then MUNEERA. Then Rigel and Reela.

INT. CRYSTAL CITY PALACE - DINING HALL - EVENING

Metallic marble. Flowerlight chandeliers.

The hall is packed with people, all dressed in shirts and trousers cut with the New World's expert precision. They dance to the flowered instruments of New World musicians. They eat from culinary masterpieces filling rows of crystal tables.

At the head of the Sheikh's table, Mishal reaches for a scoop of something goopy. He puts some on Altair and Aldebaran's plates.

MISHAL
Rope Caviar, fresh from Climber's
Valley this morning!

Altair looks at it, stringy and slimy.

MISHAL
This batch was gathered halfway
down Al-Lawha! Can you believe it!

Altair pokes at it.

ALTAIR
I can't imagine.

He smells it, instant regret on his face.

ALTAIR
It must have been a dangerous
climb.

Aldebaran gulps a big spoonful as Altair moves his plate away. Aldebaran chews. More like slurps, actually.

ALDEBARAN
Wow.

He struggles to hold the food down.

ALDEBARAN
Interesting. Flavors.

There are tears in his eyes as he swallows.

MISHAL
Glad you like it cous—oh, right!
Brother!

Mishal roars, patting Aldebaran's back.

Aldebaran coughs the food out, timed to the pats.

ALDEBARAN
Speaking of the Valley, when's
last you heard from Sheikh Jady?

Something settles on Mishal's face.

ALDEBARAN
Haider tells me he has grown to be
a confident and wise leader.

Mishal's eyes are duller.

MISHAL
Yes, his reputation sings far now.
But.

He stops himself.

MISHAL
Let's not stain this wonderful
day! You must try some of the—

ALTAIR
Tell us!

ALDEBARAN
Tell us!

Mishal is taken aback. He looks between them, vulnerable.
Then, he exhales.

MISHAL
More refugees have been passing
through Jady's Valley.

He takes a moment before continuing.

MISHAL
Sheikha Layla.

The laughter of guests drones behind his words.

MISHAL
 She has pledged herself to the
 so-called Voice of the Stars.

Aldebaran's utensil drops.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - TRAINING GROUNDS - DAY

Dropped daggers litter the ground beneath metallic dummies.
 Rigel is breathing heavily. A dent in his dummy's head.

A PALACE GUARD walks the line, hands behind her back.

PALACE GUARD
 Good! Now, start running!

Rigel runs alongside rows of other trainees.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - STUDY BALCONY - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Sheikh Aldebaran and Fard spectate from above. Reela draws
 the scene, standing next to them. The running trainees are
 so small.

From inside Aldebaran's study, Altair's oud scrapes at
 something that isn't a melody yet. Fard looks towards the
 sound.

FARD
 With respect, my Sheikh, how are
 you so sure the Forgotten Ballad
 exists?

Aldebaran's eyes are on the horizon.

ALDEBARAN
 I'm not.

Altair's notes are painful.

ALDEBARAN
 But I do have faith in the stories
 we chose to preserve.

Their faces contort with each of Altair's plucks.

ALDEBARAN
 In my time with the Seers, I—

Altair steps out, oud in hand, notes still clanging
 together. His brows soften as his eyes find Reela, lost to
 her art.

And Altair loses himself to her.

Aldebaran turns to him.

ALDEBARAN

Any luck?

Altair breathes. His dissonant notes resolve into a tranquil melody.

ALTAIR

These walls make no difference. I
still feel everyone through them.

Sada, standing near, tries to signal something. Altair puts
a hand on Sada's shoulder, unable to read him.

ALTAIR

The truer notes feel heavy with
melancholy. I must be farther from
people.

Reela laughs from behind her canvas.

REELA

Trust me, the farther the better.

Altair beams, giddy. Sada tugs on his robe, but Altair
doesn't notice.

Below, Rigel takes the lead ahead of the running trainees.
Reela cheers. Altair transitions to a celebratory melody.

Rigel looks up at them cheering. A proud smile lifts the
edge of his lips.

He trips.

Altair and Reela giggle as Sheikh Aldebaran walks back
inside, wearing worry.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - STUDY - DAY - CONTINUOUS

A collection of instruments lines the walls. A map of
Al-Lawha detailed with caravan routes, now integrated with
the New World. Piles of ledgers. Fragments of metal tablets,
jagged. Music notation on fallen scrolls.

A painting of three performers before a large crowd. Its ink
is not from these lands.

Fard enters.

FARD
One more year and it'll be our
turn.

Altair and Reela follow behind.

Fard turns to them.

FARD
I'm actually excited for training!

Altair shakes his head.

ALTAIR
I don't think I am.

Aldebaran's eyes are grave.

ALDEBARAN
You'll have to be.

Altair holds Reela's hand as Aldebaran looks between the
three of them.

ALDEBARAN
Our Seer warns of shifting cycles.

Fard walks around the study.

ALDEBARAN
Our experts warn of spreading
blight.

Fard examines the broken tablets, moving them around, unable
to piece them together.

ALDEBARAN
And now, our people warn of losing
faith.

Fard approaches the map.

Altair holds Reela's hand tighter, then lets go. He
approaches the Sheikh.

ALTAIR
Father.

Altair breathes.

ALTAIR
Some things are beyond our
control.

Reela grins behind him. Altair looks back at her, and finds himself grinning too.

Aldebaran sees them. His jaw tightens.

The words come out of him before he can stop them.

ALDEBARAN
EVERYTHING IS IN YOUR CONTROL!

Reela flinches. A scroll drops from Fard's hand.

ALDEBARAN
You will be Warden! It will be
your burden!

Altair hugs his father.

ALDEBARAN
It is... my burden.

Aldebaran stills.

Altair lets go. Looks up, calm.

ALDEBARAN
I'm sorry, son.

Fard is looking at the map, at Water's Loom in the Southern Riverlands.

ALDEBARAN
I just don't understand.

Fard traces the river up to the Serpent.

ALDEBARAN
How could Sheikha Layla turn on
us?

To a waterfall that leads into the Shimmering Jungle.

ALDEBARAN
Why build a dam?

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - DUSK

Green skylight brushes Reela's face. Ears cradled. Cheek in Altair's hand.

Puts his forehead to hers. His thumb stroking her face.
Soft.

He stares into her eyes.

She's somewhere behind them.

REELA
Was I wrong?

He kisses her.

She turns away.

REELA
Your father.

Nudges her back.

REELA
I didn't mean to.

His hand moves to her lips.

She takes it, and holds it between both of hers.

REELA
I accept your burden.

He moves closer. His eyes are warm.

ALTAIR
And I would be lost without your
melody.

She surrenders and leans in.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Altair wakes up. The sheets are damp beneath him. Sada stands outside, facing the stars.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BALCONY - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Altair approaches behind him. Beyond the city's walls, flowers sleep under starlight.

ALTAIR
They seem to be listening to you.
What are you telling them?

Sada turns to him, eyes wet.

ALTAIR
Oh, Sada, what's wrong?

Sada points.

ALTAIR
The Sprawling Woods? You want to
talk?

He shakes his head. Points somewhere else.

ALTAIR
You want to go somewhere?

He nods, then shakes his head, his small fist clenching.
Points again and again at different angles. Up! Left! Right!

ALTAIR
You want to leave?

Sada stops. He nods.

ALTAIR
But. We tried this.

He nods.

ALTAIR
You'll fade.

He looks at Altair.

ALTAIR
You need me.

Holds his eyes.

ALTAIR
I... I'll need you.

Sada turns away.

BEGIN MONTAGE - MEMORIES OF LONGING

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Altair lies on Sabra, playing notes colored with heartache.
The Sprawling Woods sparkle around him, listening, as he
searches for a melody.

EXT. FLOWER MEADOW - NIGHT

Sada runs down the flower meadow. Altair chases behind.

SADA (GHOST)
Please, just let me go!

Altair slows down.

Sada looks back... then keeps running.

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Altair plays, eyes shut. No city. No voices. Just the trees.

EXT. BURIED CITY - GRAND STEPS - NIGHT

Altair and Reela stand face to face. He holds both her hands. Stares into her eyes. They are dressed for their wedding.

ALTAIR
... to be Warden of your heart.

EXT. FLOWER MEADOW - NIGHT

Sada is a dot on the horizon. Altair watches him get smaller.

EXT. BURIED CITY - GRAND STEPS - NIGHT

Aldebaran, Mishal, Muneera, and Rigel stand behind the bride and groom.

REELA
... vow to join our voices.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Altair jolts awake.

ALTAIR
Sada!

No one's there.

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Altair's melody turns. Heavier.

Sabra grunts.

EXT. BURIED CITY - GRAND STEPS - NIGHT

A flood of people cheer beneath the Grand Steps. At the top, Altair and Reela shine.

Altair lifts Reela's veil.

ALTAIR
... as one.

REELA
... as one.

They kiss.

EXT. FLOWER MEADOW - NIGHT

Sada takes a step, his foot fades.

He snaps his foot back in.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - REELA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Reela's joyful face is drenched with the sweat of childbirth. A BABY in her arms smiles.

Altair's heavy melody looms behind.

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Altair's fingers hover over his oud. He shifts to a warmer melody.

Sada is distracted by the trees around them. The woods are dark.

Altair laughs.

ALTAIR
Seems I scared it off.

Sada reorients himself back to Altair.

SADA (GHOST)
You were so close though!

THE SAME WOODS - LATER YEARS

But Altair is with another BOY, the same age as the ghost Sada.

The boy is looking up at the canopy of branches.

BOY
They really understand us?

ALTAIR
There is no they, Sada, these
trees are one soul.

The Sprawling Woods sparkle around them with excitement.

EXT. FLOWER MEADOW - NIGHT

Altair is tiny, so far away. He waves.

Sada waves back. Takes a step.

And fades.

END MONTAGE

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Altair holds his oud out to the boy.

ALTAIR
Your turn, son.

His son, SADA, takes it, wide-eyed. He runs his thumb across
its strings. Admires the stone.

Plays.

Clunky at first, but somehow nice.

ALTAIR
Breathe.

He breathes. Closes his eyes. And ethereal synth plucks
decorate the cold air, structureless and transient.

Until they take shape.

The woods shimmer alongside Sada's beautiful notes as warmth
and longing collide in Altair's eyes.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - WEST ROAD - DAY

Reela and Sada drop down a twinkling metallic dune. They
soar faster and faster on SEMECH. They lift off the white
camel's back. Sada on Reela and Reela on the reins.
Weightless.

The wind whips past them. Reela laughs, her hair blowing.
Sada raises his hands.

SADA
Woohooooo!

He looks behind. Altair is riding old Sabra, clearly not
keeping pace.

SADA
The streak continues!

Reela pulls back.

REELA
The sands don't keep score, little
one.

Semech slows.

Altair catches up.

ALTAIR
Sands don't.

He winks past her, to his son.

ALTAIR
But I will.

He turns away from the West Road towards a flat open desert.

Sada notices a lone dim Warden's Bloom in the sand. He
points at it.

SADA
Wait! Bad luck!

Reela stops Semech. She swings off the young camel and walks
straight to the flower.

SADA
Mother, no!

She plucks the dim flower out of the metallic dirt.

REELA
Didn't you know, Sada?

She winks past her son, to Altair.

REELA
Stars don't give much thought to
luck.

Altair looks at Sada, then at the flowerless spot.

ALTAIR
Wait, what bad luck?

Reela laughs. Sada doesn't get it.

ALTAIR
Come on, we'll have to break here.

Altair turns them north, away from the road.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - MIGRATION SITE - DUSK

They ride small against wide-open sands. The green horizon is identical in every direction, except where the ringed moon sets.

Altair gives Sabra a good scruff.

ALTAIR
Good girl, Sabsab. We're right on time.

Semech kneels down, allowing Reela and Sada to step off. Reela grabs her bag of art supplies from Semech's side.

Ahead of them, Altair lays down a blanket. A teapot. Blue flowerlight in a vase. His oud glows mandarin behind his back.

Sada sits next to him. Too far away, Reela lies on Semech and sets up her sketchbook.

ALTAIR
Love, come have some tea.

Altair pours a cup for his son.

REELA
Not now.

Reela is sorting her colors.

He pours a cup for himself.

ALTAIR
You're not going to watch with us?

She squints, fingers like a picture frame in front of her.

REELA
Don't worry about me, I'll see
fine from here.

Sada scouts the horizon while sipping his tea. Something
glowing floats in the distance.

SADA
There! A rope glider!

More of them. Small dots.

Altair jumps up.

ALTAIR
I see them!

They move towards them. Closer. Floating, graceful blobs.

Sada looks in all directions.

SADA
There are so many!

The rope gliders' tentacles catch the light. Thousands of
them. The creatures ride the wind like bubbles.

Altair and Sada laugh, thrilled with anticipation, as if
approaching a downhill slope. The rope gliders are almost at
them.

Sabra grunts with fear. She tries to move away but gives up
after little effort.

Altair holds Sada.

ALTAIR
Prepare yourself, they're coming!

They brace, ducking their heads under their hands.

Unending bulbous translucent creatures glide around them.
Their heads pulse, contracting and expanding, trailing light
behind them. Altair and Sada peek out of their buried heads.
And they forget to breathe.

Sada reaches out at them.

SADA
They look like stars!

And Altair reaches for his oud.

ALTAIR
They do, don't they?

Under the beautiful migration of rope gliders, Altair's eyes are focused solely on his son, full of joy, as he plays the Melody of Warmth.

He glances back. Reela has vanished behind her canvas.

ALTAIR
What do you think, love?

She peeks.

REELA
Don't move!

Altair obeys. He goes back to his song. And experiments.

An unexpected note.

An ink stroke on Reela's canvas.

Another note.

Another stroke.

Sada stands up. Gliders swirl around him, dancing to Altair's song.

Reela is behind her canvas.

Sada pokes one of the gliders. It bounces away and glows brighter.

Altair gets up, oud in hand. He plays a lovely melody while Sada plays with the creatures.

Reela's eyes are on them.

REELA
I said don't move.

Altair doesn't listen. He walks to Reela. Close.

Sees her work.

Stops playing.

There are no rope gliders on her canvas. Only this. Altair's smile, watching his son.

REELA
What do you think?

Altair's glassy eyes distract from his smile.

ALTAIR
You were meant to document the
migration...

She shares his smile, gliders breathing light behind her.

ALTAIR
You won't get another chance for
years...

She puts her ink down.

REELA
Yes.

She looks at her drawing. Back at Altair.

REELA
But I wouldn't have ever gotten
another chance for this moment.

She kisses him as living bokeh whirl around them.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - MIGRATION SITE - NIGHT

A flowerlight torch highlights Reela's dark face.

REELA
With sharp teeth. And long claws.

She points the torchlight at them.

Altair and Sada are holding each other, fear in their eyes.

REELA
The Beastmen climb Al-Lawha only
on the darkest of nights.

She looks around.

REELA
Just like this one.

The horizon is pitch black. Rainy.

Reela claps her lap. Altair and Sada jump.

SADA
I've never seen you this scared,
Father!

ALTAIR
Ah yes, a little sand in the
flower. Just what I needed.

Reela sits down between them, swallowing both under her
arms. She pecks Sada's cheek.

REELA
Isn't it nice to see your father
this far away from people?

Pecks Altair's.

REELA
Unburdened to express himself.

Altair turns to her.

ALTAIR
And still you choose to burden me
with your untrue stories.

REELA
Who claims my story's untrue?

Soft chuckles disappear into the dark horizon. Altair and
Sada lie on Reela's shoulders, looking out.

Altair gets up.

ALTAIR
We should start moving.

He extends a hand to Reela.

ALTAIR
Can't have your father wait too
long for his dinner.

Reela smirks and grabs his hand.

EXT. CRYSTAL CITY - MAIN GATE - NIGHT

Flowerlight breaks through the city's walls, casting color
across everything beneath.

The translucent pillars of the main gate draw down into the
sand. Altair rides through on Sabra. Reela and Sada follow
on Semech.

By the glass fountain, Sheikha Muneera. The water casts
light across her face in patterns that shift with every
ripple. She looks exactly like her sculpture.

She is speaking to a scrappy man with a gap in his teeth.
Balqam.

MUNEERA
This is entirely unacceptable.

Balqam's hands move with the theatrics of a performer.

BALQAM
Sheikha, please, the trail has
been difficult.

Reela helps Sada off Semech.

REELA
Go say hello to your grandmother.

Sada runs. Muneera's eyes catch his. She drops down with
open arms.

MUNEERA
Oh, look how tall you are!

He hugs her tight. She squeezes tighter.

MUNEERA
I've missed you, love!

SADA
You should've come with us, Mama
Muneera! It was amazing!

Muneera laughs and rubs his hair.

MUNEERA
I'm sure it was, my son.

The main gates draw down again, revealing a stunning slab of
metallic marble. Its veins pulsate with light.

From behind the slab, a voice calls out to Balqam.

VOICE (O.S.)
Where do you want it?

Balqam turns to Sheikha Muneera for a response. He gives a
frustratingly endearing smile.

Like Altair.

INT. CRYSTAL CITY PALACE - DINING HALL - NIGHT

Mirrored on the floor, Altair and Reela dance upside down. Around them, couples twirl to the music.

Every night, Mishal opens his halls, and every night, his people fill them. Columns of tables are lined with them, laughing, eating, gossiping.

At the Sheikh's table, Mishal and Muneera are dining with Rigel and Sada. Mishal raises his goblet, Muneera's arms around him.

MISHAL

Another!

A server scurries to fill his cup.

MISHAL

Always good... to have the
fam-family over.

He pats Sada's back, slurring.

MISHAL

Loo... looking good, Sheikh!

Mishal roars. Sada joins, unsure what's funny. Mishal laughs even harder.

Rigel eyes him and shakes his head.

Muneera rubs his back and places a loaf on his plate.

MUNEERA

Love, you should have some more
bread.

Mishal pushes the plate away.

MISHAL

I must... save my appetite.

He slurps his drink and smacks his goblet on the table. Turns to Sada.

MISHAL

Work... work. Ahead of us. Ay,
Sheikh?

He pats Sada harder. Sada forces a soft laugh and looks back, searching for his parents.

Altair and Reela are lost to the music. To each other. On the crowded floor, they dance alone with their reflections.

Rigel sees his father on Sada.

RIGEL
Father, not now.

Mishal ignores, focused on Sada.

MISHAL
So son... the storm draws near.

Sada doesn't know how to respond as Altair and Reela approach, beaming with joy.

Rigel bangs the table.

RIGEL
Father! Stop!

Mishal jumps. Reela turns to Rigel. Sharp.

REELA
Brother!

Muneera places a hand on Reela.

MUNEERA
Don't worry about it, dear.

Altair sits next to Sada, an arm around him.

MUNEERA
Your father hasn't been himself lately.

Muneera holds Mishal's shoulder and pecks his cheek.

Rigel rolls his eyes.

RIGEL
You wear your title too loosely, Sheikh.

Mishal stands.

MISHAL
Boy! Don't you dare.

The air stills. Sada grabs Altair's hand under the table.

Muneera moves the loaf of bread back to Mishal.

MUNEERA
 Shush now and eat up! Jady's
 council call may very well be
 about something else!

She catches Rigel smiling.

MUNEERA
 And you too! Your father worries
 because he must! He is Sheikh, as
 you will be!

Reela looks between them, then to Sada and Altair with a
 smirk and a shrug.

EXT. BURIED CITY OUTSKIRTS - FLOWER MEADOW - DUSK

Sada rides behind Altair on Sabra. Endless colorful flowers
 surround them. He spots Reela on Semech, way ahead.

SADA
 Can't I ride with Mother?

Sabra turns to glare at Sada. Sada pets her.

SADA
 Sorry, Sab, but you're even slower
 than old Tamr.

Altair clicks his tongue playfully and leans close to
 Sabra's ear.

ALTAIR
 He doesn't yet understand the
 wisdom of your years.

Sada rolls his fingers between Sabra's fur.

SADA
 Don't mean to bring him up, by the
 way.

He wraps his arms around her.

SADA
 I'm sure Tamtoom is always
 thinking of you.

Sabra grunts. Drawing closer, Reela slows her pace on
 Semech.

Altair's eyes are elsewhere.

ALTAIR
Your uncle Fard spends more time
traveling now than with us.

A wave of longing washes over his face as Reela matches
their pace.

ALTAIR
It's funny to imagine him, of all
people. Our first foreign
ambassador.

REELA
I remember when people called him
outsider.

Reela laughs.

REELA
Imagine Rigel's face then.

Altair's laugh is quieter, his eyes not fully back.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - SADA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sada lies on Altair's childhood bed, illuminated by the soft
orange glow of the oud in Altair's hand. His father is
playing a lullaby.

The room is as Altair left it, years ago. Except for the
animal paintings covering every wall. The balcony is open,
its curtains blowing as Altair plays.

SADA
Father?

Altair's lullaby is soothing.

ALTAIR
Yes, son?

The stars twinkle outside.

SADA
Why does Grandfather care so much
about the Second Melody?

Altair smiles while he plays.

ALTAIR
Well.

He thinks carefully.

ALTAIR
Why does your mother care so much
about her art?

SADA
That's easy, she loves to draw.

Altair continues playing.

ALTAIR
Yes. But why?

Sada considers, stumped.

ALTAIR
Think of this. When I play my
music...

Altair transitions into a riff. Sada giggles.

ALTAIR
I share something beyond words.

He shifts to the Melody of Warmth.

ALTAIR
Tell me, how do you feel now?

Sada's face softens.

SADA
Warm.

ALTAIR
Explain that feeling exactly.

SADA
Soft... a cozy blanket... mother's
hug.

Altair returns to his lullaby. Sada snaps out of his trance.

ALTAIR
Now, why does your mother care so
much for her art?

Sada sits up, his thumb on his lips.

SADA
Is it... because she's trying to
share what she sees?

Altair nods.

ALTAIR
And what if those lost melodies
appeared in hundreds of old
paintings and scrolls?

Sada's face lights up.

SADA
People wanted to share them!
That's why he cares so much!

Altair kisses Sada's forehead.

ALTAIR
It's time for sleep. We have a
long day tomorrow.

He walks to the bedroom door.

Sada is sitting up, gripping his blanket.

SADA
I've gotten much better at the
oud. Maybe I'll find the Second
Melody!

Altair looks back, and smiles.

ALTAIR
I'm sure you will, love.

He leaves his oud by the door.

ALTAIR
Sleep well.

And gently closes it behind him.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALLWAY - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The palace's silver halls are barely lit by flowers, hung sparsely. Altair passes an open door. He peeks in.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - REELA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Reela is sleeping. A flowered lamp lights the empty space beside her, waiting for Altair.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALLWAY - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Altair turns. Light seeps from beneath the door at the hall's end. He walks towards it. Opens the door.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALDEBARAN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Aldebaran sits at his desk holding a metal tablet. He sets it down.

ALDEBARAN
You should be asleep.

Altair's silhouette is framed by the door, rays of flower-lit hallway streaking around him.

ALTAIR
So should you. The council will arrive by dawn.

Altair sees the scrolls on his father's desk. Many ledgers. A drawing of a dam. Schematics of a bridge.

ALTAIR
You work too hard, Father.

Aldebaran's fingers glide over the etched metal of the tablet. Faint green pulses within its markings. Music notation around a symbol, like a prism.

An Obelisk.

Aldebaran pushes it away.

ALDEBARAN
I must. The storm approaches, son.

Altair smiles.

ALTAIR
Then I will prepare my raincoat.

Aldebaran can barely offer a half-smile.

ALDEBARAN
I'm serious. You have Sada and Reela now. And if the rumors are true...

ALTAIR
Father, I am with you.

Altair kisses his father's forehead.

ALTAIR
And I'm serious myself, you should
get to bed.

He turns off the desk lamp and extends his arm. His father looks at him, weary.

And takes his hand.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - REELA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - LATER

Altair sits up, sweating. Reela is asleep next to him. He looks around his dark room. As Altair lies back down, something dark flashes by a crack in the door. He sits up.

ALTAIR
Sada?

Reela mutters in her sleep.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALLWAY - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Altair steps out. Aldebaran's door is ajar.

Another flash of darkness.

Altair runs towards it.

ALTAIR
Sada! Is that you?

He peeks in.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALDEBARAN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Aldebaran is sleeping at his desk, flower lamp back on. Altair closes the door, and turns.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALLWAY - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

A dark void catches his vision. Altair chases after it.

EXT. FLOWER MEADOW - NIGHT

Outside the Buried City's walls, boundless blue flowers dance with the wind.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - FRONT - NIGHT

The iridescent titanium palace sits like a crown atop the city. Guards litter its grounds. Some stand watch around the front door, startled as Altair tears through.

Altair runs past sleeping camels. His eyes hang on Sabra before finding the palace's backside.

A flash of black. He runs.

EXT. FLOWER MEADOW - NIGHT

A field of Warden's Bloom waves as a breeze blows across the painted meadow.

One dims.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - BACK - NIGHT

Altair approaches a guard.

ALTAIR
Have you seen anything come by
here?

GUARD
(saluting)
What do you mean?

Behind the guard, green light fades on the palace's flush wall. Altair runs to it, leaving the guard confused.

EXT. FLOWER MEADOW - NIGHT

The flowers still despite the wind. Their light plucks out like random notes.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - FRONT - NIGHT

Guards run to the camels, grunting in discomfort.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - BACK - NIGHT

The palace's flush wall is sliding shut. The World Reserve's back entrance.

Altair throws himself through the closing gap.

EXT. FLOWER MEADOW - NIGHT

Half the meadow is already dark.

All at once, the rest follows.

The flowers convulse.

INT. WORLD RESERVE - PALACE ENTRANCE - NIGHT

Altair is surrounded by reflections of himself.

ALTAIR

Sada! Are you here?!

His voice echoes between the Reserve's ancient walls.

A thud. The Warden's Key is on the floor.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - FRONT - NIGHT

The camels are hysterical.

Sabra. Semech.

The guards can't hold them down.

INT. WORLD RESERVE - PALACE ENTRANCE - NIGHT

Altair is losing his breath. He panics and runs for the door.

Altair's breathing is heavy. Frantic.

He reaches for the key.

Fumbles.

Hyperventilating.

Hands flail against the Reserve's wall.

Banging. Gasping for air.

Drops to the ground.

Croaks.

Unable to draw breath.

Reaches out... wheezing...

Eyes close.

Hands go still.

Until.

Altair is left with an unnatural frozen smile.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - BACK - NIGHT

Altair walks out of the Reserve.

Palace guards lie on the ground. Scattered.

He approaches one of them. Turns them over.

They're dead.

Without a drop of blood.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - FRONT - NIGHT

Altair runs. Then stops.

His hands tremble.

Bodies of guards lie over still camels.

He goes down to one of the camels, its face buried underneath a guard. Moves the guard.

ALTAIR

Sabsab?

Collapses.

Swallows Sabsab under his arms, a half-smile stuck on his face.

Strokes her. Rubs his head to her body.

Sees Semech. Dead.

He turns.

The palace doors.

Runs.

EXT. BURIED CITY - GRAND STEPS - NIGHT

Altair sits, oud in hand. He is a speck in the middle of the Grand Steps, surrounded by an ocean of still bodies.

He plays the first note.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - SADA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Altair opens his son's bedroom door. Quivers.

Sada is limp on his bed, mandarin oud in his hand.

Altair approaches. Trembling.

Sada's face is calm.

He pulls Sada's eyelids down. Grabs the oud.

Walks out.

EXT. BURIED CITY - GRAND STEPS - NIGHT

A dissonant melody is forming.

Altair plays the second note.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - REELA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Reela lies on her bed. Peaceful.

Altair lies next to her.

Stares into her eyes.

Thumb stroking her cradled face.

Gentle.

Pulls down her eyelids.

EXT. BURIED CITY - GRAND STEPS - NIGHT

Altair's eyes are shut as he plays. A melody close to heartache.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALDEBARAN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Aldebaran is dead at his desk, scrolls buried underneath him.

EXT. BURIED CITY - GRAND STEPS - NIGHT - INTERMISSION

As a five minute countdown approaches zero, the camera holds on a living, horrific painting:

Altair is lost in his notes, reaching for something just out of reach.

He plays on the Buried City steps.

Small.

His half-smile hangs over unimaginable death.

He plays.

Before bodies.

Soft... SADA (V.O.)

A note.

A cozy blanket... SADA (V.O.)

Another.

Mother's hug... SADA (V.O.)

Pluck by pluck.

Altair recovers the Melody of Longing.

A living, horrific painting.

END OF INTERMISSION

EXT. BURIED CITY - GRAND STEPS - DAWN

Altair is sleeping on his oud. Green rays of dawn break over him.

Mishal's shadow hangs.

MISHAL

Altair?

Altair snaps awake. Looks around, frantic. The sea of bodies is still there. Looks up.

Mishal, Jady, Nashira, Deneb, and Saif stand before him, horrified. A hand grabs him from behind. He turns.

Rigel stands tall, his arm extended. Altair stares at his open hand with nothing but his half-smile.

And takes it.

Rigel pulls him into an embrace. Altair doesn't let go.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALL OF SULH - DAY

Altair stands at the head of the ancient metal table. His eyes are on the floor. Rigel is by his side, and Mishal stands across, leaning on a cane. The four Sheikhs are between. Everyone is looking at Altair.

Deneb pushes off the table.

DENEb

Speak. What are you hiding?

Mishal turns to him. His cane cracks the floor.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - REELA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Mishal kneels before a bed.

Reela's face.

Rigel looks away. Altair watches.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALL OF SULH - DAY

Mishal raises his fist towards Deneb.

MISHAL

One more word, Sheikh.

Saif pulls Mishal's arm down.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALDEBARAN'S BEDROOM - DAY

Altair grabs an arm.

Rigel another.

Together, they carry Aldebaran on their shoulders.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALL OF SULH - DAY

Jady steps up, a man now.

JADY
My Sheikh.

Mishal turns.

JADY
No. Sheikh Altair.

Altair looks up, distant behind his half-smile.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - SADA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Altair carries Sada out of bed. Rigel watches. Mishal turns away.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALL OF SULH - DAY

Jady holds Altair's eyes.

JADY
Not even the Stars may know your
sorrow, but our hearts share your
wound.

He turns to the other Sheikhs. They nod.

Altair doesn't respond.

Jady walks closer. He takes Altair's hand.

JADY
We stand, as you. But more
refugees are passing through. We
must act.

Altair remains distant. No one says a word.

So Deneb speaks for them.

DENEB
How can he be Warden? The boy
can't—

Mishal bangs the table.

MISHAL
I said hold your tongue, Sheikh!

Saif grabs Mishal.

SAIF
Deneb is right.

Mishal's arm falls back to his side.

Nashira nods.

NASHIRA
You know it to be true. The
faucets must remain open and our
new Warden must rest.

Mishal looks between them.

MISHAL
Sheikh Aldebaran himself trained
Altair. He knows the Reserve
better than any of us!

Jady considers.

JADY
Your city has managed one of the
faucets for many cycles now.

Mishal's mouth opens. Nothing comes out.

JADY
It must be you.

MISHAL
My loyalty is to Altair! He is
Warden!

Mishal grips his cane tighter.

Deneb turns.

DENEB
So is ours! With honor and pride.

The Sheikhs reply, almost a tic.

SHEIKHS
With honor and pride.

A side of Saif's lip curls upwards.

SAIF
It will only be temporary.

Nashira smirks.

NASHIRA
And it's no secret Sheikha Muneera
can manage your city on her own.

Mishal's nostrils flare.

MISHAL
Don't you—

RIGEL
They're right, Father.

Mishal meets Rigel's eyes. Rigel holds them without
shifting.

Mishal looks around the table. The Sheikhs are nodding. To
Altair. His eyes are not present. To Jady.

MISHAL
Tell us, boy! Why did you even
call us to meet?

Jady stiffens.

JADY
The Messiah's influence has
strengthened since last we met.

The Sheikhs hold their breath, leaning closer.

JADY
Sheikh Haider now follows him.

Saif's smile dies. Nashira's arms uncross. Mishal whips his
cane against the table. Altair's eyes stay elsewhere.

JADY
There's more. They asked to build
a bridge over my Valley.

Deneb doesn't let him finish.

DENEB
They plan to come north!

JADY
I refused, of course. But his
followers grow more by the day.

Altair's eyes see past them. He looks down.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - DAY

Reela's sketchbook. Altair and the Boy, posed on Sabra.

Altair flips through its pages.

A baby, held. Muneera's arm around Mishal. A dented training dummy. Altair watching Sada.

He slams the book shut.

Rigel stands by the door.

RIGEL

Hey.

Altair turns.

RIGEL

This burden is not yours alone.

Altair doesn't respond. Rigel breathes.

RIGEL

We both lost her, you know.

A half-smile.

Rigel closes the door.

BEGIN MONTAGE - MEMORIES OF WARMTH

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Altair sits alone. The mandarin glow of his oud is the only light between the trees. He plays a note.

EXT. BURIED CITY - MAIN GATE - DAY

Refugees flood the Buried City walls. Altair's notes hang in the background.

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

An ethereal STAG with antlers that glow chases sparkles from branch to branch. It runs along a wall of trees that separates the Sprawling Woods from the open meadow. The sparkles turn inwards, luring it deeper.

EXT. BURIED CITY - MAIN GATE - DAY

New World experts mark ledgers between caravans.

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Altair's brows contort against his half-smile as the Melody of Longing takes form.

EXT. BURIED CITY - MAIN GATE - DAY

Sheikh Mishal and Rigel shake the hands of refugees as they enter the Buried City. Altair is distant beside them.

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

A pluck. The stag runs after the celestial sparkles. It is running in circles. Altair falls back to the Melody of Warmth.

EXT. BURIED CITY - EAST FAUCET - DAY

Rigel runs between caravans, between couriers and experts, ledgers and arguments.

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Altair's hair is longer. His notes warmer. He hears Sada and Reela racing ahead on Semech.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALL OF SULH - DAY

Mishal sits with New World experts, Rigel beside him.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - DAY

Altair opens Reela's sketchbook. A blank page.

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Roots trip the ethereal stag. It collapses into Altair's song. The stag struggles. More roots grow around it.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - DAY

Altair studies the balcony's blowing curtains, and puts ink to paper. A pluck.

EXT. BURIED CITY - GRAND STEPS - DAY

Rigel walks up the Grand Steps. People reach out to him. They call out his name.

EXT. SPRAWLING WOODS - NIGHT

Altair stops playing, but the melody continues.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - DAY

His hair is below his chin, Reela's sketchbook in his hand. He draws. Tears out a page and starts again. The melody crescendos. Piles of scrunched paper litter the floor. Altair is focused on the open balcony. Another stroke. He peeks out from his canvas. A full beard. Squints at his drawing. A final stroke. Altair holds out the sketchbook in front of him. On his canvas. The ethereal stag. Rotting under coils of roots. Its antlers still glow with life.

END MONTAGE

INT./EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM / BALCONY - NIGHT

Altair leans on the balcony rails. The Buried City breathes beneath him: every face replaced and nothing changed. He takes out Reela's sketchbook, and shuts it.

Rigel stands by the balcony door, blue flowerlight haloing around him.

RIGEL

Hey.

Altair tries to raise the other end of his half-smile, then turns back to the horizon.

RIGEL

How quickly life returns.

Rigel leans beside him. The Grand Steps are crowded with people enjoying their night.

RIGEL
It's surreal, isn't it? Born from
their ghosts.

Clinking dishes. Passing footsteps. Conversations too far
away to mean anything.

Altair breathes.

RIGEL
I came close to giving up.

Rigel's eyes are on the people below, small as sand.

RIGEL
Many times.

Altair's eyes are nowhere.

RIGEL
Refugee housing allocations.
Faucets management. New World
negotiations.

Silence.

RIGEL
Father forced all this on me.

Nothing.

RIGEL
Altair!

Altair turns.

RIGEL
You are wasting time! The world
needs their Warden!

Altair doesn't break. He breathes deeper. Rigel calms.

RIGEL
What are you doing?

Altair opens his arms.

Rigel pushes him back.

RIGEL
Stop!

He recoils.

Altair's smile strains. He walks forward.

RIGEL

Stop it!

Rigel staggers back. His hands out.

RIGEL

My feelings are not yours to take!

Altair stumbles.

RIGEL

Release me!

Altair's smile loosens.

ALTAIR

I.

He steps back.

ALTAIR

I never meant to.

His breath catches.

ALTAIR

I'm so sorry!

Rigel collapses on the floor, wailing.

RIGEL

Reela!

He curls into a fetal position. Fights for air.

Altair's hand hovers over him.

Rigel can't see it. He is sobbing on the floor. Altair crouches until he meets Rigel's eyes. His half-smile remains calcified on his face. Rigel moans. Altair rubs his back.

Altair stands, arm extended over him a second time. Rigel finds his breath.

And takes it.

He shudders under Altair's embrace.

RIGEL

You've been carrying all this
within you?

Altair holds him tighter, but a knock on the door pulls him back.

ALTAIR

Fard?

Fard runs to Altair. A device with a blinking red flower is strapped on his waist.

Altair turns to him.

ALTAIR

I...

He loses himself in Fard's eyes.

ALTAIR

I've—

Fard squeezes him, lifting him up.

FARD

I've missed you too, my friend!

Rigel notices Fard's device. Its flower is blinking faster.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - COURTYARD - NIGHT

The courtyard opens to the stars, its metallic walls lit by Warden's Bloom. A shooting star.

Groups socialize. Others are seated on benches lining its walls. The air is alive with overlapping voices, soft laughter, and the quiet music of tea being poured.

On the back wall, Mishal sits on a stunning titanium throne that pulses with light from within. He laughs from his belly until the palace's entryway catches his eye.

Altair, Rigel, and Fard stand beneath it. The chattering stops. The room parts for them. A direct line from Altair to Mishal.

Mishal stands. Altair approaches and kneels.

MISHAL

Get up!

Altair obeys.

MISHAL

Speak, boy!

Altair smiles from within.

ALTAIR
Thank you for your patience, my
Sheikh.

Mishal's mouth parts. He scans Altair's eyes. Then, he
beams.

MISHAL
Oh my boy! Welcome back!

Rigel watches them embrace. He finds himself smiling.

Fard clears his throat.

FARD
I'm sorry to interrupt, Sheikh.

They turn.

FARD
We must speak in private.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - HALL OF SULH - NIGHT

Fard draws a green line between the tightest gap on the
Serpent, right over Climber's Valley.

FARD
Here. The so-called Messiah likely
already crossed North.

Altair shakes his head.

ALTAIR
But Sheikh Jady is a friend.

Mishal slams the table.

MISHAL
Layla! Haider! Jady! Southern
traitors! All of them!

Rigel turns to Fard.

RIGEL
Something is off.

He looks up, searching.

RIGEL
Sheikh Jady called the meeting to
warn us about this Messiah. Now he
builds him the bridge?

Fard hardens.

FARD
There have been strange rumors in
the New World.

He stops on those words.

Mishal grunts.

MISHAL
Speak!

FARD
They say... the Voice of the Stars
can control the will of others.

Rigel goes white. Altair's fist clenches.

Mishal roars with laughter.

MISHAL
You can't be serious!

Rigel shakes his head.

RIGEL
That's impossible.

Fard turns to Rigel.

FARD
I thought so as well. Although,
New World Intelligence rarely
proves wrong.

Mishal's laugh dies in his throat. His face empties.

MISHAL
Another storm approaches.

A hand on Mishal's shoulder. Altair's.

ALTAIR
My raincoat is ready, Sheikh.

Altair looks between them.

ALTAIR
I will journey to Jady myself and
ensure the loyalty of our Cousins.

The air is still.

ALTAIR
They must know me as Warden. And I
must understand our enemy.

Silence seizes the room. Then, Rigel kneels before Altair.

And Fard kneels beside him.

Altair's fists loosen.

Mishal chuckles.

MISHAL
That would make Fortune's Fulcrum
your first stop! The storm itself
wouldn't convince Deneb of
anything!

Then, he kneels.

MISHAL
Let me accompany you. You'll need
my support to secure their
allegiance.

Altair crouches, placing a hand on Rigel and another on
Mishal.

ALTAIR
No, not like this.

He helps them up.

ALTAIR
Allow me to earn your trust.

ALTAIR
(to Mishal)
My Sheikh, I accept your aid with
deep gratitude.

Mishal shines with pride.

ALTAIR
Fard. You are to go back to the
New World and learn everything you
can about this Southern Conqueror.

Fard rises and nods.

Altair pulls something from his robes. The Warden's Key. He holds it out.

ALTAIR
Rigel. You are to keep my place as
Warden with full authority. Fath-

Altair's lungs seize with a sudden, sharp breath.

ALTAIR
Father trained you well. You have
honored him in my absence.

Rigel stares at the Warden's Key.

RIGEL
Y-Yes, my Sheikh!

And takes it. He salutes.

EXT. WARDEN'S PALACE - FRONT - NIGHT

Altair and Fard step out. Altair stops. Tamr stands in front of them.

ALTAIR
Tamtoom!

He runs. Gives him a good scruff.

ALTAIR
I've missed you, boy. How've you
been?

Tamr grunts.

ALTAIR
Tell me about it!

Altair laughs.

A hint of jealousy glints in Fard's eyes.

FARD
Altair, I'll be traveling by
caravan. Could you take care of
Tamr for me?

Altair stills.

ALTAIR

What?

His fingers roll between Tamr's fur.

ALTAIR

No. I can't take him.

Fard gets closer.

FARD

I won't have much need for a camel
in the New World.

Altair takes his hand off.

ALTAIR

He'll miss you.

FARD

He'll be fine.

ALTAIR

But—

A hug.

FARD

I'll see you two soon.

Fard pats Tamr.

FARD

Behave yourself, boy.

He hands Altair Tamr's reins and walks away.

INT. WARDEN'S PALACE - ALTAIR'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Altair looks between his oud and Reela's sketchbook. Between
warmth and longing.

He picks up the sketchbook and shuts the door behind him.

EXT. EAST ROAD - MISHAL'S PROCESSION - NIGHT

The sketchbook slides down Altair's chest. He is in an
open-top metal wagon, lying on a snoring Tamr, illuminated
by pots of Warden's Bloom.

The night sky twinkles above them. The wagon bumps along. The sketchbook slides. On its open page: Altair's two reflections on a corner of the wagon's walls.

The flowerlight goes out. Altair gasps for breath, awoken.

ALTAIR
Stop the procession!

He bangs on the walls.

The wagon stops. Altair jumps out. Mishal swings his opalescent wagon's door open.

MISHAL
Altair?

Guards surround Altair on the ground. He holds his throat, out of breath.

Mishal runs to him.

MISHAL
Altair!

But Altair is already up.

ALTAIR
Someone's in danger!

He jumps back onto the wagon.

ALTAIR
Tamr! Time to go!

Tamr wakes up on his own time. Altair gives him a pat.

ALTAIR
Now, boy!

He leads Tamr out.

ALTAIR
I'll be right back.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Altair rides into the dark desert. In the distance, a patch of flowers holds the dark back, barely. Altair taps Tamr's neck.

ALTAIR
Good boy.

He rides faster.

The camel rears back, bellowing. The light is still far in the distance. Tamr drops to his knees. Altair gets off him and runs.

Unconscious in the darkness, a figure moves. Balqam. A trail of dragged sand stretches behind him all the way to the faraway flowerlight.

Altair offers his hand.

EXT. EAST ROAD - MISHAL'S PROCESSION - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

A shadow on the horizon draws closer. Altair on Tamr, Balqam behind him, his face pale.

Tamr kneels before Mishal. Altair steps off. Balqam hangs limp on his shoulder.

Mishal's jaw sets.

MISHAL
Who's this?

ALTAIR
A brother.

Altair turns to the guards.

ALTAIR
Treat him as our own.

They salute.

EXT. EAST ROAD - PROCESSION CAMP - DAY

Sheikh Altair and Sheikh Mishal sit among COURIERS, SERVANTS, and GUARDS on dozens of rugs patched together. The silver sand beneath them reflects the midday light. The island of rugs looks as if it's floating.

Altair passes bread to Balqam.

ALTAIR
Eat. I know you're hungry.

Balqam reaches slowly and takes a bite.

Mishal turns to him.

MISHAL

Talk to us! What happened to you?

Balqam takes another bite.

Altair places a hand on Balqam.

ALTAIR

Your caravan. They're gone, right?

Balqam shudders. Then nods.

Altair looks between the travelers. Every mouth is full and talking. Tamr munches on shrubs. He finds himself breathing heavier. He leans to Balqam. His voice drops to a whisper.

ALTAIR

Their breath stolen?

Balqam's eyes slam back.

BALQAM

I didn't know what to do! I tried
to save them!

FLASH: Balqam sees his caravan gasping for air in front of him.

Mishal holds him.

MISHAL

Slow down. You're safe now, my
boy.

Balqam looks to the desert.

BALQAM

The blight. It spread so fast. I
left them.

Altair tilts his head up. Balqam stills.

Altair is smiling.

ALTAIR

I carry the same weight.

Thunder cracks behind them. Mishal turns to it. A dark cloud looms closer.

MISHAL

It seems the storm has arrived.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - EAST ROAD - DUSK

Rain drizzles over caravans and camels trudging through metallic mud. They climb dunes, weave between travelers. The ringed moon sets, magnified on the horizon. The caravan is a silhouette over its green.

Altair looks out from his open wagon and pats Tamr behind him.

ALTAIR
Tamtoom! Up! Quick!

Tamtoom gets up slowly. His head sticks out of the wagon beside Altair.

Alone in the sand, a single blue flower, tall as a tree. Breathing light.

Altair grabs his sketchbook from Tamr's saddle. Just as he's about to draw, the sketchbook drops from his hands. The flower is dimmer.

Altair strokes Tamr.

ALTAIR
It's OK. Stars don't give much thought to luck.

Somewhere far behind, a melody echoes with warmth.

EXT. THE CROSSROADS - NIGHT

Mishal gets off his extravagant wagon, dressed even more extravagantly, a cane in his hand. Altair hears him muttering.

MISHAL
... a crime against comfort.

He helps Mishal down the wagon steps and onto the uneven sand.

Mishal trudges ahead.

MISHAL
These roads are shit. Even a beggar's camel would be humbled.

He nearly trips, balances on his cane, and continues forward to a sign labeled 'The Crossroads.' Six directions. The Buried City. The New World. The Silverlakes. The Free Markets. Climber's Valley. World's Edge.

Mishal points at it with his cane.

MISHAL
The 'fulcrum' of Deneb's
'fortune.'

He roars as he walks ahead. Altair follows behind.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - APPROACH - NIGHT

A kaleidoscope of blinking flowerlight signs reveals itself, loud under the quiet starry night. There is not one main gate to the city. Each of its alleyways opens up to the surrounding sand.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - STREETS - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Mishal leads. The streets are crowded. Flashing signs with false promises: money, love, anything with a price.

Altair slows at a wooden building, larger than the rest, its purple sign pulsing around a gem.

He peeks in.

INT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - CASINO - NIGHT

A woman throws back a drink, slams the glass down, and scatters gems across a table. The crowd around her erupts.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - STREETS - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Mishal approaches from behind.

MISHAL
Want to play?

Altair shakes his head and continues walking.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - DARK ALLEY - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

They cross through the alley, pass by beggars and people smoking something. A large rat scurries on the dirt by their feet. Mishal hisses and swats with his cane. The alley opens up.

Lights. Sounds. Life.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - SQUARE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

They walk out to the noise of an applauding crowd in a large square. Altair's attention turns to them. Street performers in a flowerlight show.

Mishal turns his attention away. He points at a large mansion covered with strobing bright flowers, right in the center of the courtyard.

MISHAL

That's it.

Altair smirks.

ALTAIR

I see he has a taste for subtlety.

Mishal croaks. Then belts out with laughter.

MISHAL

Now you're getting it!

EXT. DENEH'S MANSION - ENTRANCE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

A small MAN stands guard. He holds out a hand. Altair looks at it.

ALTAIR

Please, this is an urgent matter.

The guard keeps his hand up.

GUARD

Sheikh Deneb is a very busy man.
We must announce your entrance.

Mishal throws the guard's hand down.

MISHAL

Tell him his Sheikh is about to
announce his funeral!

Mishal nudges the guard out of his way with his cane.

Altair smiles at him as he passes.

ALTAIR

Sorry.

He follows Mishal in.

INT. DENEb'S MANSION - LOUNGE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Deneb sits alone by a fireplace, a goblet in hand. Empty wine bottles litter the floor around him.

He is startled by Mishal opening the door.

MISHAL
Mind if I join?

Altair waits behind him.

MISHAL
Peasant.

Altair clenches his jaw. Deneb's tongue is loose.

DENEb
I-I'll... be in good c-company!

His goblet drops, spilling his drink.

DENEb
Vassal!

Mishal's brows crash together. Deneb doesn't flinch. Altair looks between them and Deneb's fallen drink. He braces.

But they erupt into laughter, roaring over each other like it's a contest.

INT. DENEb'S MANSION - LOUNGE - NIGHT - LATER

The floor is now littered with twice as many bottles. Mishal raises his goblet.

MISHAL
Those were... great years... Ay?

Deneb raises his.

DENEb
They c-couldn't see... us coming!

Altair watches them laugh under the warm fire, an open sketchbook in his hand.

They go quiet. Mishal's thumb strokes the base of his goblet. His eyes are lost in Deneb's.

MISHAL
We... have your word?

Altair's eyes reflect their smiles over firelight.

DENEb

On my... life! We are... brothers!
With... with... ho...

Deneb starts snoring.

Mishal hiccups.

MISHAL

With honor and pride.

He gets up on his cane, then falls.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - SQUARE - NIGHT

Altair carries Mishal out of Deneb's mansion. The square is even more alive than before they went in. Mishal pushes himself off Altair and finds his balance.

Altair is elsewhere. The sound of drums, hundreds of them, pulses through Deneb's city. Mishal continues walking on his cane, unaffected by its control.

MISHAL

I'll just... one more drink.

The drumming continues.

Complex. Intricate.

Altair searches for the group of drummers.

The rhythm shifts.

He shifts with it.

It inverts.

Altair pushes through the dancing crowd.

The rhythm slips ahead of him.

Silent beats within beats.

He is close to the drummers.

So many layers.

He arrives at the front.

Only to find.

One intoxicated woman drumming on a trash can.

The same one from the Casino.

The drumming stops.

The woman looks up.

There is so much hurt behind her eyes.

It melts away before Altair's warmth.

ALTAIR

Noura?

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - NEON-FLOWERED STREET - NIGHT

Noura flounders along a neon-flowered street. A MAN is walking with her. Afterimages of people streak around them. The trails of ghosts.

MAN

Noura?

The man's cross-faded face syncs into a cohesive image. Altair. They stop under a flower-lit sign of a skewer over wavy lines.

ALTAIR

You should have some food.

Noura jabs a finger at the sign's blinking light.

NOURA

I invented those!

Altair's gaze hangs on her face. He takes a breath and helps her in.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - SKEWER BAR - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Stools line a small, packed bar on the street corner. Two vacant. A CHEF flips rats on skewers over a wood fire.

They sit. The chef doesn't look up from his fire.

CHEF

Two skewers?

Altair looks at Noura. Her head is folded into her arms on the table. He shakes his head.

ALTAIR

Just one.

The chef places a raw skewer on the fire.

Altair sits for a moment. Other DINERS are alive with conversation around him.

ALTAIR

How've you been?

Noura's barely audible.

NOURA

I'll find her... I promise.

Her head goes back down.

ALTAIR

Tomorrow then.

A skewer is placed in front of her.

ALTAIR

Eat up.

Noura peeks at it. She takes a sniff. A bite.

Spits it out, hot.

EXT. OUTSIDE FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - PROCESSION WAGON - MORNING

Noura is startled awake. Tamr grunts, trying to move from underneath her. Next to them, Altair sleeps on the rug lining the wagon's floor.

Noura jumps up. She looks around, frantic.

NOURA

What's happening? Where am—

Altair sits up. Her eyes go wide.

NOURA

A-Altair?

He stretches with a smile.

ALTAIR

Good morning!

NOURA

You're real?

She reaches out to touch him.

ALTAIR
What are you—

Noura swallows Altair under her arms. She exhales with the relief of an entire lifetime.

NOURA
Bless the stars! I've missed you.

The space between them is heavy. It's unbearable.

Altair speaks into her shoulder.

ALTAIR
You have no idea.

Noura pulls back, not letting go completely, but enough to search his eyes. Deep sorrow cuts through her hungover haze.

NOURA
Wait.

Her smile evaporates.

NOURA
The blight... the Buried City...

She fully recoils, eyes wide with horror.

NOURA
Oh, Altair.

Her hands fly to her mouth as if to stifle a cry.

NOURA
I'm so... so sorry.

Altair simply smiles.

EXT. OUTSIDE FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - PROCESSION CAMP - DAY

The patchwork of rugs is set beside Mishal's procession. It looks over Fortune's Fulcrum ahead. The entire caravan sits around it. Laughter rises and falls over food and soft chatter.

Altair pours Noura some tea while Mishal speaks to a guard beside them.

MISHAL
You say you lost him in the city?

A mouth-stuffed laugh.

MISHAL
I say Balqam took a liking to
Deneb's armpit!

He laughs louder, food flying out.

MISHAL
No better place for a man to
recover!

Noura sips from her tea. Altair is staring at her.

ALTAIR
What do you do now?

Noura hesitates.

NOURA
I... I'm a scholar.

ALTAIR
That's amazing!

She takes another sip. Altair falls still.

ALTAIR
I don't mean to burden you, but I
could use a scholar's expertise.

She turns her cup in her hands.

NOURA
I wish I could help. I just. I
don't know if I can.

ALTAIR
Sure you can.

Altair takes out his sketchbook as Noura takes another sip.

ALTAIR
Mind if I draw you?

NOURA
What?

Altair starts drawing.

NOURA
Where's your oud?

His eyes on his canvas.

ALTAIR
She needs a break.

A stroke of ink on paper.

ALTAIR
Your drum?

Noura waves her hand around.

NOURA
Al-Lawha itself.

She smirks.

Altair smirks back.

ALTAIR
Last night. You mentioned
something.

Another stroke.

ALTAIR
Who are you trying to find?

Noura looks down at her cup.

NOURA
A friend.

She takes another sip.

NOURA
But your blight is more important
now.

Altair is buried under his canvas.

ALTAIR
Where's your friend?

Noura puts her empty cup down.

NOURA
Seeking justice that no one else
will. She's after the Conqueror.

Altair stops.

On Altair's page: Noura's face, her eyes smudged out. He
shuts it.

ALTAIR
Then we walk a similar path. I
plan to solve this two-front
blight.

He stands up.

ALTAIR
Would you help us?

And extends his hand.

She looks up. And takes it.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - TRAIL - DUSK

Noura shrieks with exhilaration, hair blowing, riding behind
Altair across the green horizon. Altair is rubbing Tamr
good.

ALTAIR
You're pretty fast for your age,
aren't you, boy?

Just ahead, the half-set ringed moon reflects off the
metallic sand, making it whole.

NOURA
Have you figured out why you're so
strange yet?

Altair turns to Noura, then pats Tamr.

ALTAIR
Faster, boy!

Noura shrieks louder. She laughs despite herself.

NOURA
Slow down!

ALTAIR
I can't hear you!

Altair pats Tamr some more.

Tamr soars. Noura squeezes Altair, her eyes shut. Altair
pulls back, slowing Tamr down.

NOURA
What was that for?

The procession is far behind them.

Altair breathes.

ALTAIR
To live!

Noura's whole face opens.

NOURA
So... have you?

They bob up and down, lulled by Tamr's gentle pace.

ALTAIR
I figure my Sight isn't like
yours. I don't see like you do.

The horizon's green is deeper.

ALTAIR
I... feel.

He pulls on the reins, stopping Tamr, and turns to Noura.

ALTAIR
I felt it for them, Noura.

Altair's eyes have never been more grave.

ALTAIR
All of them.

FLASH: Altair sees himself starving for breath in the World Reserve.

ALTAIR
Suffocating.

Noura's eyes are black with terror.

A distant flute interrupts them. It's playing a familiar melody.

The Melody of Warmth.

ALTAIR
Mother's melody!

NOURA
Mother's melody!

They turn to each other.

ALTAIR
What?

NOURA
What?

Altair slides down Tamr before he can kneel. Noura stumbles off after him.

On the horizon, a dark wave approaches. A mass of people, thousands of them. A MAN walks ahead, veiled by mirage. He plays a stone flute.

ALTAIR
That must be him.

He steps forward.

Noura grabs him.

NOURA
Wait. His reach is dangerous.

ALTAIR
You mean his mind control?

Noura scrunches her face.

NOURA
How do you know about that?

The Man, the Messiah, the Voice of the Stars... The CONQUEROR is approaching. His flute's melody is warmer.

Altair steps.

ALTAIR
I must face him.

Noura holds him back.

NOURA
No. Let me.

The Conqueror is still veiled on the horizon. Altair takes another step. Noura holds him back again.

NOURA
Believe me, you're not ready for this.

Altair peels her hand off.

ALTAIR
I have to be.

NOURA
I can help you.

Another step.

Noura runs in front of him, blocking his path.

ALTAIR
Your friend might be here.

Noura doesn't budge.

NOURA
She can handle herself.

She looks up. So many stars.

NOURA
We knew what he is...

As they continue talking, the Conqueror continues to march.
He wears a young face. A flute plays between his lips.

The horizon ahead of him is masked by blinding light. He
covers his eyes, unable to look directly at Altair. He takes
a step.

FLASH: Sada, Altair's son, suffocating in his bed.

His flute drops. Tears stream down his face.

He braces. Takes another step.

FLASH: Reela suffocating in her bed.

The Conqueror chokes on his tears. Step.

FLASH: Rigel, furious.

He looks down with apology. Step.

FLASH: A dagger's pommel on liver at the South Faucet riot.

He grunts, knocked back as if he were hit himself. Step.

FLASH: Aldebaran, worried at his desk.

His eyes soften. Step.

FLASH: Balqam's entire caravan suffocating. A husband holds
his wife as they pass.

The Conqueror is dragging himself forward on the ground,
desperate for air.

FLASH: A WOMAN. Her face is crunched in pain. Her scream
pierces his hearing.

WOMAN (V.O.)
Kill me!

The Conqueror stands up. Winces at the light ahead of him.
It's blinding.

One more step.

FLASH: Noura, looking up from the trash bin, drunk and
lonely.

His breath shudders as tears pour down his cheeks. He turns
around, bawling. The Conqueror walks back on his own
footprints as the green sky goes dark behind, and Tamr trots
into the faraway stars.

THE CONQUEROR
Oh, my poor child.

CUT TO:

INSERT - A SLAB OF IRIDESCENT METAL

Etched onto it: "END OF TABLET"