

TABLETS OF THE BEDOUIN

Of the Scholar Who Would Submit

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EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - SACRED POND - DAY

Mandarin rays scattered by jungle canopy shimmer over a BABY's face. The baby lies on a leaf, floating on a pond, surrounded by WOMEN in woven grass, waist-deep, chanting. Beneath the water, the women stand on tangled vines.

Iridescent treetops cover the dense jungle. A single circle of open sky above the ancient pond. Facing the pond, an OBELISK hovers. Neither metal nor glass. Light passes through it and comes out broken.

The ELDER, shimmering feathers on her shoulders, cups the pristine water and pours it into the baby's mouth. The Obelisk vibrates. Cymatic patterns ripple on the pond's surface, morphing with the Obelisk's hum.

The women chant around it, each in their own way. Underneath, the Elder's feet get caught between vines. She trips and collapses the hypnotic ripples.

Beside the pond, a LIZARD bites its own tail, lodged between fallen rocks.

The Elder's hands shoot out. The baby tips. The leaf folds. The Obelisk hums as the baby sinks.

Chunks of raw flesh between the lizard's teeth, last bit of tail still stuck.

A hand grabs the baby. The lizard escapes, tailless.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - ABOVE THE CANOPY - TIME-LAPSE

Above the jungle canopy, the cerulean cast of Aireth, a giant gas planet, rises with two moons in precise alignment. Over the trees, shimmering water condenses into a cloud and dissipates as day turns to night and night turns to day.

Aireth rises with a third moon. Iridescent clouds breathe out of the jungle canopy. The ringed moon rises and sets, marking the days. Over and over and over.

Aireth rises again. Another year. Its three moons align differently. Stars trail and the sky fades from gold to green to black to green to Aireth rising and setting. Each time, its three moons in a different orientation. Like clock hands.

The years turn. Faster and faster. Drumming. Ticking.

Aireth rises. Two moons in precise alignment. The same sky as the day the baby sank.

EXT. AL-LAWHA - NORTH OF THE SERPENT - TIME-LAPSE

Over the Shimmering Jungle, towards the Serpent's northern rim, the markings continue. Aireth rises and sets. The sky flickers through the years until the twin moons align again.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT / BURIED CITY - TIME-LAPSE

Across the metallic desert, through caravans and camels, Aireth's moons tick forward. Aireth rises. Two moons in precise alignment. Downwards, the Buried City is alive with flowerlight and festivities. Out the city's gates, a young girl hugs a young boy.

EXT. BURIED CITY - MAIN GATE - NIGHT

NOURA pulls back.

NOURA

Thank you.

ALTAIR smiles at her.

NOURA

That was the best day of my life.

She turns and runs away.

EXT. NEW WORLD - RED ARCHWAY - DAY

Enormous stone walls, draped in vibrant vines, are the horizon itself. An archway of red flowers lights the path in. Caravans squeeze between swarms of people funneling in and out of the choke point.

Noura drums as she walks alongside a company of MUSICIANS, all much older. A STRING PLAYER pulls metal across vine. A resonance hums where the two meet. A HORN PLAYER blows into coiled stone, its throat bellowing. A WIND PLAYER breathes through hollowed wood, its airy whistle dancing over them both. The crowd gets denser as they near the Red Archway of the New World.

The strings, horns, and winds march in time to Noura's drums. PEOPLE cheer them on as they wedge past. Noura meets the eye of a DAUGHTER clapping on her FATHER's shoulder. She increases tempo. The child giggles and claps faster.

The horn bellows off beat.

HORN PLAYER

Show off!

Noura riffs on her drums, each of her fingers a different rhythm.

NOURA

Just keep up!

Metal screeches through vine. People in the crowd clasp their ears. The string player drops her hands down.

STRING PLAYER

You keep rhythm!

Noura laughs.

NOURA

I am!

She skips beats in unexpectedly satisfying ways.

NOURA

Feel it!

The wind player rolls their eyes. The entire ensemble becomes a mess of sounds. People turn away from them. They pass through the Red Archway as the beautiful chaos fizzles.

EXT. NEW WORLD - TRAM ENTRANCE - CONTINUOUS

Flowered trams move up and down a wide declining street. Vines curl around them into tunnels of tangled green. The transit lines. Daylight streaks between their cracks.

Before them, an OFFICER stands on a podium with a stack of scrolls, a vine whip holstered on their side.

Noura is next in line.

NOURA

I'm with the company.

She points to the musicians.

The officer barely looks up from their scrolls.

OFFICER

Name?

NOURA

Noura.

OFFICER
Residence?

NOURA
Layer one, Quadrant four,
Residence three.

The officer gestures for her to pass.

Lighting the tram station from above, red flowers hang on vines. Like dying stars. Noura looks around. Takes a deep breath.

NOURA
No place like home.

The company DIRECTOR approaches. He places a bag of gems in her hand.

DIRECTOR
Good job.

As he walks away, Noura notices a woman standing by a transit line. She's holding a bouquet of blue flowers.

Noura runs.

NOURA
Mama!

RUDAINA catches her. She holds Noura too long in her arms.

NOURA
You're not going to believe who I
met!

Rudaina leans back, eyes on Noura still in her arms.

RUDAINA
I've missed you, little heart.

She holds up the flowers.

RUDAINA
Warden's Bloom, your favorite.

The tram arrives. Rudaina pulls her daughter in.

INT. NEW WORLD - TRAM - CONTINUOUS

The tram is packed shoulder to shoulder. Noura leans on a window. Red flowers streak past outside. She looks at the blue bouquet in her hands. Smells it.

NOURA
Fresh metal?

Noura draws the bouquet closer, away from the bodies crowding the tram.

NOURA
You didn't have to.

Rudaina smiles.

RUDAINA
What good are my gems if not for
your potential?

Noura rolls her eyes.

RUDAINA
So, did it live up to my stories?

The TRAM's SPEAKER interrupts.

TRAM SPEAKER (V.O.)
Stopping. Layer one.

It screeches to a halt.

EXT. NEW WORLD - LAYER ONE - CONTINUOUS

They exit as the tram continues down. Below them, concentric terraces carved from the stone itself fall away in steep rings, alternating between flowers and buildings, deeper and deeper until a crystal tower rises from the bottom.

Rudaina's brow arches.

RUDAINA
The Warden's heir?

Noura jumps with urgency.

NOURA
It's true, I promise!

She looks both ways. Beside them, a BOY in a flowered wheelchair gets on a flowered elevator. Gears turn around the blue glow of Warden's Bloom as it lowers him to the layer below.

There's no one else around. Noura leans towards her mother.

NOURA
He showed me the World Reserve.

Rudaina chuckles.

RUDAINA
And I saw the Anqa.

NOURA
I'm serious!

Rudaina's eyes are on the tower. Luminous flowered elevators climb its sides, bridges connecting in and out of it to the city's top. Her gaze follows it up to the New World's peak. Then back to Noura.

RUDAINA
Tell me more.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - LATER

The residence is alive with greenery. Mandarin flower vines curl from the high ceiling, lighting the room with calm breath. They sit at an exquisite crystal table. Alien drum kits scattered around them.

Noura takes a bite of her saucy vegetable dish. Rudaina looks up at the flower-draped ceiling. Noura nods, her mouth full.

NOURA
I swear! They duplicated right in
my hands.

She can barely chew the food down.

NOURA
And the pallets were levitating!

Rudaina's plate is untouched.

RUDAINA
You continue to astound me, my
heartbeat.

Noura is inhaling her food.

NOURA
Imagine if I could figure out how
they levitate! We'd be able to
fly!

Noura's eyes bulge.

NOURA
Maybe find worlds outside
Al-Lawha!

The corners of Rudaina's lips curl.

RUDAINA
Where was this conviction when I
used to read you my scrolls?

Noura's face goes straight.

NOURA
Those were just fantasies.

Rudaina grins.

RUDAINA
Every story carries truth.

Her eyes are elsewhere.

RUDAINA
I myself have seen things. Any
story that held them would be
called fantasy.

Noura swallows.

NOURA
Like what?

Rudaina takes a breath.

RUDAINA
That tale is a song that has no
end. And you have to be up for
school tomorrow.

NOURA
It has to do with Father, doesn't
it?

RUDAINA
Finish up and get ready.

Noura wipes her plate clean.

NOURA
Whatever it is, know that you are
passing up valuable insight!

Rudaina chuckles.

RUDAINA
I'm sure I am.

Noura stands up. She raises a fist.

NOURA
Mark my words, the world will know
me as the greatest scholar alive!

She runs to the door. Hesitates. Turns.

NOURA
Sing me to sleep?

CUT TO:

INSERT - A SLAB OF IRIDESCENT METAL

Etched onto it: "Of the Scholar Who Would Submit"

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Noura is lying on her bed. Rudaina is over her, humming a warm melody, backed by the dim mandarin freckles of the flowered ceiling.

Noura's room is littered with vine scraps and potted plants. A desk with red and yellow flowerheads. Some flower schematics. A world map.

Noura stares at a vase of blue light beside her.

NOURA
Why don't you sing your song
anymore?

Rudaina stops.

RUDAINA
We already discussed this.

NOURA
But I can sleep without it.
Really.

RUDAINA
It's not just that.

A breath.

RUDAINA
That melody's power. I don't
understand it.

She holds Noura's hand. Strokes it gently.

RUDAINA
We don't know how it would affect
a growing child like you.

Noura sits up.

NOURA
Let's find out, then.

Rudaina lets go.

NOURA
That night, Altair played it. But
somehow, more... right.

Rudaina's breath catches.

NOURA
What's wrong?

She paces around the room.

RUDAINA
Nothing. Are you sure?

Noura throws a finger at her mother.

NOURA
I knew it! You are hiding
something!

RUDAINA
Fine.

Rudaina walks to Noura and sits on her bed.

RUDAINA
Songs carry memory. And that one
is heavier than Al-Lawha itself.

Rudaina hums the start of a melody.

She stops.

RUDAINA
You are right. We sho—I shouldn't
be afraid of it.

Rudaina looks off towards something just out of sight and
smiles. As if to someone else in the room with them.

Her eyes are wet. She continues humming. Her notes coalesce.

Noura lies back down to the familiar song. Her face stills. Her breaths deepen. Until she falls asleep to the Melody of Warmth, cast blue by the bouquet of Warden's Bloom beside her.

INT. SCHOOL - BOTANY GREENHOUSE - DAY

Kids grouped in threes work on scattered benches. Light refracts off misty sprinklers, fogging the dense space. Exotic plants, even trees, pulse with light behind the haze.

Noura is at a bench. On it are scraps of powervines, red and yellow flowerheads, and a collection of plant leaves. A girl, ALIA, and a boy, TAREK, share her table.

Alia giggles while weaving vines together.

ALIA
I thought your promise 'already
breathed in the air'?

Noura holds a leaf's edge to her eyes.

NOURA
My best friends shouldn't count.

Tarek grits his teeth.

NOURA
Tarek, it's fine.

Noura places a hand on his shoulder.

NOURA
Altair said he wanted its
knowledge to be shared anyway.

His jaw loosens. Noura watches Alia connecting red and yellow flowerheads in series.

Around them, kids grouped in threes argue among themselves, with red and yellow flowers on their tables connected in the same way.

Tarek scratches his head.

TAREK
Are you sure the pallets were
levitating?

Noura scratches hers.

NOURA
Not really. The place was filled
with mirrors, it could've been—

A girl behind them: NAYLA.

NAYLA
Wow, you really are crazy.

Noura recoils.

NOURA
Mind your own business, Nayla.

A breath rages out of Nayla's flared nostrils.

NAYLA
You think you're so smart—

An explosion steals their attention. Three kids are black with ash at another table. Their flowers are smoking. Out of the fog, the BOTANY TEACHER, a stern figure, claps her hands.

Nayla bursts out laughing. Noura, Alia, and Tarek too. The Teacher's eyes snap to their table. She holds out a wilted Warden's Bloom.

BOTANY TEACHER
Laugh your time away. I'm coming
around now.

Noura turns back at Nayla.

NOURA
Let's see if your Sight can get
you out of this one.

Nayla huffs and runs back to her table.

Noura notices the flower circuit in Alia's hand.

NOURA
Hey, I think we're wrong. This is
too much power.

Tarek is staring at the bickering kids covered in smoke.

TAREK
You're right, they had theirs the
same way. Reds breathe hard and
short. Blues breathe deep and
long. Their breaths must sync for
resonance.

Alia holds up a yellow and red flower coiled in a ring of vine.

ALIA
What if we connect them in
parallel?

Noura shakes her head.

NOURA
The red would slow down to
yellow's breath, but its power
would still be too strong.

The Teacher is getting closer. Noura holds up one of the thicker leaves and hands it to Alia.

NOURA
More resistance to soften red's
breath, but how can we slow it
down even more?

Alia snips the ring of vine between the red and yellow flowers. She ties the red flower onto the leaf.

ALIA
Two yellows in series?

Another table fills with smoke.

Tarek is looking at them.

TAREK
That would just make the yellows
breathe harder, not slower.

Recognition dawns on Noura.

NOURA
Right!

TAREK
That's it!

Alia looks between them.

ALIA
I'm not getting it.

Noura smirks.

NOURA

Think about it. If yellow is
already slower than red, how do we
get even slower?

Alia looks at the snipped yellow flower on the table, then
to Noura handing her another yellow flower.

ALIA

Two yellows breathing together!

The Teacher is almost at their table. Alia quickly braids
the yellow flowers in parallel.

The Teacher is over them.

BOTANY TEACHER

Time's up!

Tarek grabs the blue flower from their Teacher's hand. Noura
hands Alia the resisted red leaf under the table.

She looks up at her Teacher.

NOURA

It's still not fair.

The Teacher side-eyes Noura.

BOTANY TEACHER

Not this again.

Under the table, Alia connects the resisted red to the
parallel yellows.

ALIA

Noura's right, your time is
meaningless.

The Teacher crosses her arms.

NOURA

Yeah, why is our time up when the
other benches are still working?

The Teacher scans their eyes.

BOTANY TEACHER

For something so meaningless, why
does it seem like you're trying to
buy more of it?

Nayla chuckles with her group nearby.

Alia pulls out the completed circuit from underneath the table.

ALIA
Because it's only meaningless if
you waste it.

Nayla's chuckling catches in her throat. Noura giggles. The Teacher bites bitterness behind a forced smile. Tarek connects the wilted Warden's Bloom to their circuit. Its petals uncurl as it blooms, renewed with light from within its humming crystal core.

INT. SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - LATER

Conveyor belts run through a large crystal table like veins, moving food between so many students. Alia laughs with Noura.

ALIA
She was so angry.

She tears a piece of animal thigh from a roast in front of her.

Noura is devouring her plate of meats.

NOURA
I get this feeling she doesn't
want us to succeed.

ALIA
Same! We were the only table that
got it right. I don't get her.

Tarek is disengaged, sitting between them. He points to some potatoes.

TAREK
Pass me some of that?

Noura reaches before they get too far.

NOURA
She's just jealous we're going to
be placed as Scholars while she's
stuck here.

Tarek hands Noura his plate.

TAREK
You can't assume that. And I'm not
liking all this bad talk about
Teacher.

Noura smirks as she hands his plate back.

NOURA
Are you in love or something?

Alia chuckles.

Tarek goes red.

TAREK
Our placements are still days
away, you never know what can
happen!

Alia drops a bone onto her plate.

ALIA
Come on, do you really not believe
we're going to be scholars?

Tarek takes a bite from his food.

TAREK
I'd rather not be too sure.

Noura's cheeks are swollen with food.

NOURA
We live in the greatest city in
the world—

A scream echoes through the dining hall. On the far end of the table, Nayla is between two boys in a fistfight. She holds one back and knocks the other one out. The kids around her applaud.

Noura winces. She looks back at Tarek.

NOURA
Have faith that the city of
experts will know what to do with
the three smartest students in
school.

EXT. NEW WORLD - LAYER FIVE BRIDGE - DUSK

Under the green of dusk, Noura walks onto a crowded vine bridge woven with red light. Tarek and Alia follow behind. The bridge connects the fifth layer to the crystal tower at its midpoint. Ahead of her, the tower juts into the darkening sky. Below, it plunges just as far.

NOURA

It's kind of unfair, isn't it?

Alia peeks down from between the gaps in the vines they walk on. The tram is tiny by the base of the tower. A crowd of people wait by its station.

ALIA

No kidding, the tram would've taken the whole night before our turn.

Tarek's eyes follow the flowered elevators moving up the tower's side.

TAREK

Are you sure we're allowed to join?

Noura walks backwards ahead, weaving between people on the narrow bridge without looking. She waves a metallic card.

NOURA

What good is being the musical pride of our New World if I don't get to share my perks?

She turns back around to face the tower's entrance of woven vines. They slither open.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - NEW WORLD HUB - CONTINUOUS

Polychromatic light stains the tower's translucent walls. The three walk small beneath the high ceiling. The open space buzzes with people. Noura sees their afterimages trail ahead of them as they walk. She pays them no attention.

They pass a NEWS BOY waving rolls of scrolls.

NEWS BOY

Sheikh Mirzim is dead! Usurper claims the Greenlands! Read all about it!

Tarek shakes his head.

TAREK

It never made any sense to me. Why
would the Free Tribes fight if
they have everything?

They pass a MERCHANT selling shoes. Alia nods.

ALIA

And they're free to move anywhere!

A PERSON's ghost slips beside Noura, crashing onto the hard ground. Noura catches the person right before they slip. The three of them continue walking as if nothing happened. The person looks back, confused.

Noura's fingers trill to the movement of steps around her.

NOURA

It's not so simple. The Warden
must figure out how to share the
Reserve with everyone, no matter
where they choose to live.

A glass sculpture looms over them. Noura looks at it. A tower of people carrying each other.

NOURA

Not even our greatest experts
could handle that job.

Beneath it, a plaque reads, 'By merit, we advance.'

Tarek shrugs.

TAREK

Speaking of experts, O pride of
our New World, when's your first
practice?

NOURA

Tonight, just after the triad
sets.

Alia laughs.

ALIA

Is it true your performance in the
Buried City got everyone pissed?

A large New World gem is exchanged for smaller gems. Parents drag their crying child to a barbershop. A man tries on a shirt in front of a mirror.

Noura slows her pace.

NOURA

Not my fault our idiots don't
understand rhythm.

They arrive at the elevator hall. It's packed.

NOURA

Altair understood. The Free Tribes
loved it.

Vined doors slither open as elevators are instantly filled.
The waiting crowd is barely depleted.

Noura leads, sliding between the crowd to a lone elevator.
People stare at them with bitter eyes as they pass. Noura
taps her card to a metallic surface. A dim mandarin flower
breathes light. The elevator opens.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - ELEVATOR - NIGHT

The three of them step into the huge glass elevator, all to
themselves. Their eyes go wide. The starry sky hangs over
the New World nighttime. Alternating terrace layers gleam
with flowerlight and exotic plant life.

Red. Yellow. Green. Red. Yellow. Green.

Tarek can't stop looking.

TAREK

You're right. This doesn't feel
fair.

Noura taps her card. Layer one. The elevator moves up the
crystal wall. Bridges extend out the tower at each layer
like spokes on a wheel. The layers get further away, the
rings wider the higher up they go.

Noura is looking at them. The vined bridge leading towards
the first layer is so crowded.

NOURA

By merit, we advance.

The doors open.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Crystal mallets wrapped in leaf drum a metallic dome. Hidden
beneath each strike, a faint note hums. Imprecise, but on
time. Faster. Blurring together with reverb. The crystal
table hums with resonance.

Noura's eyes lift from her mallets to the table. She slows down. The table stills.

Slower.

She catches silent beats within beats. Her rhythm swings.

Tick. Beat. Tock. Tick. Beat.

Her eyes are on the table.

Then they widen. She drops the mallets.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Noura finds herself scrambling over her bedroom desk. She plucks a glowing plant from a pot. It dims immediately. She reaches for a red flowerhead from a pile and connects a powervine between them. The plant stiffens. Glows bright.

Its edges burn with smoke.

Noura plucks another plant, stealing its light. She connects a yellow flowerhead in parallel to the red. They breathe with each other. She attaches the plant to them.

It flickers without rhythm. Alive. Noura is entranced by it. She starts nodding to its phantom beats. She dribbles her fingers in the air, unable to catch the plant's chaotic pulse.

Noura stops herself. She disconnects the plant and grabs another yellow flower. A red and two yellows now, all in parallel. She connects the dim plant back.

Nothing happens.

Noura scrunches her face. She looks around the room. The bouquet of Warden's Bloom sits by her bed.

FLASH: The Warden's Bloom uncurling in class, its crystal core resonating to the sound of blurred humming.

FLASH: Blurred humming connects her mallets to the crystal table.

She gets up from her desk and grabs one of the blue flowers. The Warden's Bloom sparkles with static in her hands. It's beautiful. She grits her teeth.

And snaps the core off, bursting its light away.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY - NIGHT

Dissonant timbres overlap as musicians tune their instruments. Noura sits over a large metallic dome, her fingertips ringed with soft mallets.

The Director stands in front of them. He waves a hand. Everyone goes silent. His eyes are on Noura.

He lifts a finger.

Noura waits.

He drops it.

Noura glissandos, rolling her fingers on the metallic surface. Shimmering. The Director nods and turns to the winds. Noura arpeggiates back and forth in perfect rhythm. She yawns. The director drops a finger. The winds dance within Noura's space. A finger drops. The strings crescendo. A finger. Horns.

The director sways as he conducts the sterile symphony. Boredom seeps from Noura's face, stark against her perfect rhythm. She looks down at her fingers. They blur together.

Back and forth.

Tick. Tock.

She lets go.

Her monotonous rhythm refracts into colorful polyphony. The other players lose sync, calling out her name. The Director lets Noura continue for just a bit more.

He raises a hand.

DIRECTOR
That's enough, Noura.

The orchestra coughs to a halt.

Noura throws both her hands up.

NOURA
But you said I could do my
flourishes as long as I kept
rhythm.

The other musicians grumble.

The Director raises a brow.

DIRECTOR

And you agreed your 'silent beats'
wouldn't count.

Noura grabs something from under her chair. She raises the device in front of them. A small box with a crystal dial and a leaf sticking out of it.

NOURA

But what if they weren't silent?

She turns the dial. The leaf's rim glows hot orange. It stiffens, then starts flapping back and forth.

NOURA

There!

She wiggles the dial as the plant flaps faster and slower.

NOURA

A perfect Time Keeper!

All eyes are on her. The room is quiet. The Director looks at Noura with calm eyes. A chuckle breaks out of him.

And they all start laughing.

The Director wipes his eye.

DIRECTOR

Please, Noura. Support the band
and stick to the rhythm.

Noura looks down at her device, her face sunk, and puts it away.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Noura cries under Rudaina's arms. Rudaina strokes her hair.

RUDAINA

It's OK, my heartbeat.

She wipes Noura's eye.

RUDAINA

Come sit. I made your favorite.

Noura peeks at the table.

Lizard's Tail. Perfectly plated. She sniffles.

NOURA

How?

Rudaina leads her to the table.

RUDAINA

A merchant all the way from the
Serpent.

Noura sits with her mother, still sniffing.

NOURA

They laughed at me. Even the
Director.

She buries herself in her plate, sniffing less with each
bite.

Rudaina holds in a laugh, watching Noura try to stay upset
while devouring her favorite meal.

RUDAINA

You don't have to stay with them,
you know. What need do you have of
extra gems?

She gestures at the drums scattered around the room.

NOURA

It's not about the gems.

Noura is looking at the drums. She hears them beat.

NOURA

I want them to understand.

Her face hardens.

NOURA

By merit, we advance.

Rudaina reaches to slice a piece of tail.

RUDAINA

By merit, we advance.

The knife stops mid-cut, as if she remembered something. She
looks both ways.

RUDAINA

Who else knows about your Sight?

NOURA
How many times do I have to tell
you? Just Alia and Tarek.

Rudaina sighs.

RUDAINA
That merchant brought troubling
news.

NOURA
What is it? Why do you still make
me hide my Sight?

Rudaina takes a breath.

RUDAINA
The Seers have abandoned the
Shimmering Jungle.

Noura's head pulls back.

NOURA
What?

RUDAINA
With the death of Sheikh Mirzim,
and now this, a storm approaches.
We must be—

Noura drums the table.

NOURA
My Sight is a gift!

She gets up.

NOURA
You're no better than the
Director!

She runs to her door.

NOURA
Superstitious! Keeping me stuck!

Slams it.

INT. SCHOOL - ARENA - DAY

The arena stretches wider than it is long. Ten parallel lanes run its length, each the size of a caravan road, divided by painted lines that glow faintly. Between two small Cradles at every lane's ends, obstacles rise in scattered rhythms: Low tunnels to crawl through. Climbing frames to vault. Leaning walls to duck around. Raised platforms to leap from. No two lanes are alike. Each is its own song.

Kids are split across every lane in two teams of five. Red and blue.

On the first lane, Noura stands opposite Nayla. An INSTRUCTOR walks between them.

INSTRUCTOR
First to three points today. Spark in the enemy Cradle scores. Spark dimmed or stolen is denied. Both count.

Nayla stands in the middle of her team. Blue. Her headband is marked with a star. The Carrier.

INSTRUCTOR
Remember. The Spark must stay lit.

Nayla holds a dim crystal ball in her hand.

INSTRUCTOR
Stillness dims it. Backwards movement dims it. If it dies, bring it home and wake it.

Noura's team wears red. The boy next to her bears the star.

INSTRUCTOR
Carriers begin. Midlaners breathe between. Widelaners stretch the lane.

The Instructor walks through the second lane.

INSTRUCTOR
Not too fast. Find the rhythm between rhythms.

He sees Alia and Tarek giggling at each other from its opposite ends.

INSTRUCTOR
Anticipate your teammates as well
as your opponents.

Nayla's eyes are on Noura.

INSTRUCTOR
By merit, we advance.

Noura's voice rises over the others.

NOURA AND CHILDREN
By merit, we advance!

Tarek ignores the sweat on his blue headband. Alia taunts
him from the other end, a star on her red.

INSTRUCTOR
Try your best today.

The Instructor's eyes land on Tarek's.

INSTRUCTOR
This will count towards your
Placement.

Tarek whips to his teammates.

TAREK
How? Placements are just two days
away!

A buzzer echoes through the arena.

INSTRUCTOR
On three.

Noura's eyes are on Nayla.

A beep.

Alia touches her Spark to her team's Cradle. It wakes with
red light.

A second beep.

Nayla's fingers tighten around hers.

Final beep.

LANE TWO erupts first.

Alia climbs an obstacle, careful to keep her red Spark
alive. Her Widelaner breaks open near Tarek.

She throws.

Tarek smacks it out of the air.

The red Spark dies before it hits the floor.

Buzzer.

INSTRUCTOR
Spark dimmed! Lane Two, Blue!
One-zero!

Alia panics. Turns between her teammates.

ALIA
Back to the Cradle! Recharge!

Too slow.

Tarek's Carrier slips through and drops his blue Spark into Alia's Cradle.

Buzzer.

INSTRUCTOR
Spark in Cradle! Lane Two, Blue!
Two-zero!

Alia snatches her dimmed Spark and races home. Her teammates tangle in front of her.

ALIA
Move!

Tarek cuts across before she throws.

Steals.

Buzzer.

INSTRUCTOR
Spark stolen! Lane Two,
Three-zero! Blue wins!

Tarek cheers.

Alia laughs at him by his Cradle. She nudges him.

ALIA
Guess you'll be placing as Athlete
now.

BACK TO LANE ONE

Nayla walks forward, slowly, with her blue Spark.

Down the lane, by Noura's Cradle, a blue Widelaner throws up an open hand. Clear.

Nayla's arm rises.

A red Widelaner cuts in behind him.

Her arm falls.

Noura follows her team's other Midlaner. They pace just ahead of their Carrier with the red Spark.

Nayla silently passes her blue Spark to a Midlaner crawling underneath. He takes it through a tunnel as Nayla pretends to still hold it.

Noura discreetly receives her red Spark from her Carrier behind her.

Nayla notices.

Locks on.

Noura looks around. Trails of her teammates and opponents illuminate where they would be. Nayla's trail intercepts Noura's by an obstacle a few steps towards her left.

Noura steps right.

Their paths flicker. Nayla intercepts a few steps to the right.

Noura steps left.

A trail of Nayla's teammate above her.

Noura ducks.

Nayla's teammate crashes behind her.

Noura continues forward. Her focus is on Nayla.

Nayla's trails vanish.

She isn't moving.

NAYLA
You have Sight?

Noura misses a step, still walking to keep her red Spark lit. The Instructor is looking at them.

Nayla runs.

Noura sees Nayla's trail intercepting hers at the tunnel ahead. She looks behind and sees Nayla's Midlaner's trail directly at their Cradle, about to score.

Noura runs towards the tunnel.

NOURA
On my back right! Guard our
Cradle!

Two of her teammates spot the blue Spark, not in Nayla's hand, and run towards the Midlaner holding it.

Noura jumps above the tunnel's entrance as Nayla tackles no one on the ground.

Nayla yells.

Buzzer.

INSTRUCTOR
Spark in Cradle! Lane One, Blue!
One-zero!

Nayla's Midlaner raises a fist by Noura's Cradle. He runs back to his Cradle to recharge his blue Spark.

Noura doesn't stop.

She keeps moving.

Reaches Nayla's Cradle.

Dunks.

Her red Spark hits the Cradle's wall and bounces back, before falling in.

NOURA
Yes!

No buzzer rings.

The Instructor calls.

INSTRUCTOR
Spark dimmed! Backwards movement!
Lane One, Blue! Two-zero!

Noura's teammates curse. They call out her name.

Noura swipes her Spark out and throws it back to a Widelaner near her Cradle. The Widelaner catches the dead crystal and places it home.

It wakes with red light.

Nayla approaches Noura.

NAYLA
You're cheating and we're still
winning.

Noura's eyes follow her Widelaner weaving through with the red Spark.

NOURA
I'm not cheating.

The Widelaner's trail reaches Nayla's Cradle.

Noura smiles.

Nayla throws her hands.

NAYLA
There! Why did you just smile? You
see it too, don't you?

Noura ignores and steps away.

Nayla's hand rests on her shoulder.

NAYLA
You already have a Sighted player
on your team. You have to disclose
this, Noura.

Noura peels her hand away and runs.

Nayla chases after her.

Buzzer.

INSTRUCTOR
Spark in Cradle! Lane One, Red!
Two-One!

The Widelaner throws the scored red Spark to a teammate near their Cradle.

Recharged.

Noura spots Nayla's teammate hiding their blue Spark. Their trail is undefended.

Nayla spots it too.

Noura and Nayla's trails weave through obstacles ahead, flickering near the hidden blue Spark.

Noura's trail intercepts Nayla's teammate.

Nayla's intercepts Noura's.

Noura's intercepts Nayla's.

The trails stutter back and forth.

Noura's trail snatches the blue Spark.

A flash.

Noura is at the other end.

Nayla lunges where Noura should be.

Hits the floor instead.

Noura steals the blue Spark. It dims.

Buzzer.

INSTRUCTOR
Spark stolen! Lane One, Red!
Two-two!

The Spark drops from Noura's hand and clatters on the floor.

Nayla gets up. Her nostrils flare.

NAYLA
Crooked cheater!

She leaps to attack Noura, but Noura dodges perfectly as Nayla falls to the ground.

Nayla gets back up, red.

The buzzer rings.

INSTRUCTOR
Time!

The Instructor runs to Nayla and Noura.

INSTRUCTOR
Explain yourselves!

Nayla winds to jump on Noura again. The Instructor holds her back.

INSTRUCTOR
Stop this lunacy!

Nayla screams. She claws at Noura, trying to break free.

INSTRUCTOR
Now!

All the other kids are crowded around them.

Nayla drops her hands.

NAYLA
It's not fair! She doesn't even
want to be an Athlete!

INSTRUCTOR
What is going on?

NAYLA
Noura has Sight!

The kids gasp.

The Instructor lets Nayla go.

INSTRUCTOR
Is this true, Noura?

Noura looks at Nayla.

Then to Tarek and Alia.

Then back to the Instructor.

And nods.

BEGIN MONTAGE - THE ANTHEM

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY - EVENING

Noura drums in perfect pace with the musicians around her.
Her eyes are blank. A SINGER sings at the front.

SINGER
(singing)
From ancient bonds, our minds set
free, a truer path, for all to
see.

INT. SCHOOL - HISTORY CLASSROOM - DAY

The HISTORY TEACHER stands in front of a metallic map of the Free Tribes.

HISTORY TEACHER
Now, what is their core tenet?

Kids swing their hands up. Noura raises hers higher. The Teacher points at Noura.

NOURA
Freedom of movement!

HISTORY TEACHER
Correct, Noura!

SINGER (V.O.)
(singing)
No longer bound by chance or
creed, but by the measure of our
deed.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY - EVENING

Noura's mallets blur as the music marches forward.

SINGER (V.O.)
(singing)
We stand as one, by test and
trial, our glorious New World,
beyond denial.

EXT. SCHOOL - ZOOLOGY PAVILION - DAY

Noura sits with her classmates around a gazebo. The ZOOKEEPER stands in the middle, a large bird in his hand. Around them, animals are locked in cages.

SINGER (V.O.)
(singing)
Our shared submission, our truest
light.

The Zookeeper walks around with the bird.

ZOOKEEPER
A segur can smell its home from
the very edge of the world.

The segur flaps its wings aggressively. Some kids jump back. Tarek doesn't. He's mesmerized by it.

ZOOKEEPER

Think. Why is this useful?

The bird is majestic. Its wings shine like metal.

The Zookeeper points at Tarek.

TAREK

A messaging network?

The Zookeeper smiles. Tarek's chin lifts.

SINGER (V.O.)

(singing)

A perfect rhythm, a logic bright,
our shared submission, our truest
light.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY - EVENING

The Director conducts in front of the conservatory. His arms move without feeling. Noura looks around. Everyone's movements fall into their trails. The song, static.

SINGER (V.O.)

(singing)

We stand as one, by test and
trial, our glorious New World,
beyond denial.

INT. SCHOOL - HISTORY CLASSROOM - DAY

The History Teacher points at the map.

HISTORY TEACHER

And who was the first breakaway,
establishing this law?

Alia swings her hand up. Nayla swings it higher. Tarek avoids the teacher's eyes.

SINGER (V.O.)

(singing)

A perfect rhythm, a logic bright.

The teacher points at Tarek.

TAREK

Um... the Southern Tribes?

The teacher clicks their tongue and points at Nayla.

Nayla gives Alia a look.

NAYLA
The Sister Tribe!

Alia huffs.

SINGER (V.O.)
(singing)
Our shared submission, our truest
light.

EXT. SCHOOL - ZOOLOGY PAVILION - DAY

Tarek's eyes don't leave the bird.

TAREK
Is it true that segurs descend
from Anqas?

The Zookeeper chuckles.

ZOOKEEPER
The only descendants of Anqas,
Tarek, are stories.

The kids laugh. Nayla louder than the others. Tarek's eyes leave the bird and go to his feet.

Noura stomps her foot.

NOURA
You're all wrong! Stories carry
truth!

She pats Tarek's back.

NOURA
We'll see who's laughing when
we're flying on one.

She shakes him playfully. Tarek allows himself to smile.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY - EVENING

The New World National Anthem drones behind, the Singer's voice an unintelligible deep echo. The Anthem is on its last notes. The musicians, a giant haze. Noura's eyes are blank as her drums tick.

END MONTAGE.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM - DAY

Noura snaps awake. She jumps up from her bed.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Noura runs past her mother. Stops. Looks back.

Rudaina is giggling at something she's reading.

Noura walks back to her.

NOURA
I'm sorry.

She kisses her forehead.

NOURA
I didn't mean—

RUDAINA
You were right to feel frustrated.

Rudaina puts the scroll down.

RUDAINA
Carrying secrets is a heavy
burden. I have been wrong to force
that weight onto you.

Noura embraces her.

NOURA
Oh, Mama, no! I'm the one that's
so sorry.

She kisses her mother's head again and again.

NOURA
I love you so, so much. You have
no idea!

Rudaina's eyes are glassy.

RUDAINA
Love you too, little heart. Good
luck today.

She kisses Noura back.

Noura lets go and runs to the door. Before stepping out, she turns, a smile wide on her face.

NOURA
Won't need it, I've got merit!

She shuts it behind her.

INT. SCHOOL - ARENA - DAY

Ceremonial mandarin flowerlight hangs over organizers preparing scrolls on tables. Kids shift in place around the large vine-draped room.

An ORGANIZER clears her throat. Behind her, a banner. A tower of people.

ORGANIZER
Line up behind your letter! Read
your placement with logic, not
emotion.

Noura stands in line. Nayla stands in front of her.

ORGANIZER
Trust our experts.

They step forward.

ORGANIZER
And trust yourselves.

Noura can't stop her hands from fidgeting.

ORGANIZER
By merit, we advance!

Noura's voice is lower than the others.

NOURA AND CHILDREN
By merit, we advance.

They are close to the table. Nayla looks back at Noura. She smirks.

NAYLA
You seem nervous.

NOURA
I am. What of it?

Nayla's head tilts back.

NAYLA
That's the first honest thing I've
heard you say.

Noura shakes her head. Her attention is elsewhere.

NAYLA
Don't worry. Your placement as
Scholar is surer than a mandarin's
light.

Noura sees Nayla.

NOURA
You really think so?

NAYLA
You frustrate me, you know that?

A moment.

NAYLA
Of course you'll be a Scholar!

Noura smiles. A real smile.

NOURA
Thanks. So, what do you want to
be?

Nayla stumbles. There are three kids ahead of them.

NOURA
What is it?

Nayla hesitates.

NAYLA
Y-You'll make fun of me.

Noura's brows blast up.

NOURA
I'll make fun of you?

Nayla turns red.

NAYLA
You're the one always snapping at
everyone!

Noura chuckles. One person ahead.

NAYLA
I want to be Head Minister.

Noura smacks Nayla's shoulder.

NOURA

Now that's what I call ambitious!

Nayla's up next. She looks back.

NAYLA

Good luck.

And steps forward into her future.

Noura is smiling.

A scroll drops from Nayla's hand. Her eyes find Noura's.
They're grave.

Noura's smile sinks. She approaches Nayla stepping away.
Picks up the scroll. Sees Nayla's name. And her own.

Both placed: 'Soldier.'

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Noura sits across from her mother on the vine-rugged floor.
She fiddles with the Time Keeper flapping in her hands.
Rudaina tries to find Noura's eyes.

RUDAINA

I'm assigned to the Security
Minister's tomorrow. I'll ask him
then.

Noura rotates the dial back and forth, making it pulse
slower and faster.

RUDAINA

I'm sure it's a mistake.

Noura doesn't look.

NOURA

What if it's not?

The device in Noura's hand reflects behind Rudaina's eyes.

RUDAINA

You never know, the military could
find important use for that.

The device flaps faster. Violent.

RUDAINA

And for you. A technician maybe?

Noura sees her mother.

NOURA
Do you really enjoy cleaning
homes?

Rudaina smiles.

RUDAINA
Of course I do, little heart. It
eases my mind.

Noura dials her device down, making it flap slowly.

RUDAINA
It may not be as exciting as
Soldier, but it's still important.

The flapping blurs into a second pulse.

RUDAINA
Hey, you still have your practice
tonight. Want to show me what
you've been working on?

Rudaina gets up.

Noura is focused on her device.

NOURA
I don't get it! Alia and Tarek got
placed as Scholars! Why not me?

Mallets drop in front of Noura.

RUDAINA
Don't worry about that.

Rudaina stands, draped in the ceiling's mandarin light.

RUDAINA
I challenge you to play me
something so unbelievable, it
would surely get you kicked out of
the company.

A smirk betrays Noura. She grabs the mallets.

EXT. MILITARY BARRACKS - COURTYARD - DAY

Noura stands next to Nayla within a row of kids across an
open courtyard. NAJIM, a young man, walks between them.

NAJIM
 Congratulations, Initiates! You
 have been trusted with the most
 important job of our New World.

He walks past the faces of each new recruit. Past a boy,
 RASHID, who seems too young to be there.

NAJIM
 My name is Najim, your Squad
 Leader. As you have likely
 reasoned, all of you have Sight.

The INITIATES break into a cacophony of hushed voices. Noura
 turns to Nayla.

NOURA
 So it was your fault! Why am I not
 surpri—

Najim is crouched right by Noura's face.

NAJIM
 You are not to provoke any of your
 fellow recruits.

Noura clenches her fists.

NAJIM
 Understood?

A sound catches in Noura's throat.

NOURA
 Why should I have to listen to
 you?

Najim stands up. Tall.

NAJIM
 You don't.

He looks around at the other recruits.

NAJIM
 None of you do.

He continues walking.

Nayla nudges Noura.

NAYLA
 You're embarrassing.

Noura nudges Nayla back.

Najim's hand is behind his back.

NAJIM
You may leave if you wish. The
Free Tribes will gladly accept
anyone.

Najim stops mid-step.

NAJIM
But their conflict boils hotter in
the South. Our intelligence warns
even New World borders may be
threatened.

He looks directly at Noura.

NAJIM
We understand your sacrifice.

Noura's thumb taps against her seam.

NAJIM
But it is the responsibility of
our strongest to protect our
weakest.

Noura's eyes are on the horizon.

NAJIM
And you are our strongest!

He salutes.

NAJIM
By merit, we advance!

INITIATES
By merit, we advance!

Noura's voice is not with them.

She glances around. All the other initiates are in salute.

BRIEF MEMORY IMPRESSIONS - over the waiting salute:

FLASH: Alia's laugh.

FLASH: Tarek's laugh.

FLASH: Rudaina clapping to Noura's drums.

BACK TO THE COURTYARD.

Najim turns to her. Nayla too. Their hands still on their heads.

Noura salutes.

CUT TO:

INSERT - A SLAB OF IRIDESCENT METAL

Etched onto it: "LOST FRAGMENT - ON THE MERIT OF EXPERTS"

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - CANYON RIM - DAY

Metal shacks line the canyon's rim. Dented. Rusted. Too scuffed to hold a reflection. Between them, a platform extends out the canyon's rim. The Serpent's Shore stage. Below, nothing but air and the green of jungle canopy, impossibly far down.

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - MAIN ROAD - CONTINUOUS

A metallic dune rises before it all. Camels climb it, a long caravan behind. Leading ahead, Sheikh MISHAL and AKRAB, a large man in the tailored uniform of a New World Minister. On his shoulder, a pin. The Handshake.

A rotten fruit bounces off Akrab as he rides through. He turns to the LOCAL who threw it with eyes that pierce.

Sheikh Mishal laughs nearby on his camel.

MISHAL
Don't mind them, Akrab—

One of the locals points their finger.

LOCAL
Monsters!

Mishal keeps his eyes forward.

ADVOCATE
Traitors!

Mishal stops. The edges of Akrab's lips curl as he continues riding ahead.

Mishal leans off his camel. He looks down at that local, their ADVOCATE. A swarm surrounds him. Fists tight. Jaws tighter.

Mishal holds the Advocate's eyes, and roars. The swarm flinches. He looks up at the sky.

MISHAL
How the cycles have turned!

His laugh is lighter.

MISHAL
Your anger is misdirected, friend.

Mishal turns to the swarm.

MISHAL
Come on! Let it out!

He strokes his camel's neck.

The Advocate stands straight before Mishal.

ADVOCATE
You fence our survival behind
Gems!

The CROWD bubbles.

ADVOCATE
Our suffering rewards your
comfort!

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - TEENS' SHACK - CONTINUOUS

Two TEENAGERS sit opposite each other. Sweat crawls down their foreheads. On the table between them, a large ball of powervine waits.

Through the open door, a narrow ledge before the canyon's edge.

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - MAIN ROAD - CONTINUOUS

A group of locals struggle to hold the crowd back. They reach their hands out to Mishal.

Mishal clicks his mouth.

MISHAL
Lies! Is this what your Sheikh
tells you?

The crowd shouts.

CROWD
Glory to our Shore!

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - TEENS' SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The OLDER TEEN unravels the powervine. Slowly. Carefully.
His hands shake. The yarn's end is connected to a
flowerbomb.

It drops.

The YOUNGER TEEN catches it, his breath held. His eyes fling
to the other.

They exhale.

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - MAIN ROAD - CONTINUOUS

Mishal's shadow covers the Advocate.

MISHAL
I understand your pride. Your
people's independence is
honorable.

He turns to the crowd.

MISHAL
But the Cursed Warden is gone! You
cannot blame us for his sins!

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - CANYON LEDGE - CONTINUOUS

The older teen walks out of the shack. It overlooks the
steep drop to the lush canopy of trees below. He lets the
vine dangle behind the edge as he transports the flowerbomb
along the canyon's face.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - TEENS' SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The younger teen holds the other end of the powervine behind
the shack's open door.

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - MAIN ROAD - CONTINUOUS

The locals murmur. Mishal looks down at the Advocate from
his camel.

MISHAL
Do not let your stubbornness fool
you.

To the crowd.

MISHAL
You chose to leave the Free
Tribes. And you welcomed gems.
Your conditions are your own.

They shout louder.

CROWD
Liar!

A YOUNG WOMAN.

YOUNG WOMAN
Parasite!

Mishal turns his wrists.

MISHAL
But the Reserve is equally yours!
Our Free Tribes would welcome all
of you back!

Within the boiling crowd, the Advocate is looking down.

The crowd parts. A short man wearing a mandarin-flower robe
and stacks of silver necklaces walks through. Sheikh KATHIB
raises his hands.

KATHIB
What is happening here? This man
is a gift to our Shore! Where is
our hospitality?

He turns to Mishal, looking up, a hand rubbing his arm.

KATHIB
Please excuse them, Mishal.

He glares at his people, his gaze landing beneath them.

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - SHEIKH'S SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The older teen stands in front of the Sheikh's Shack. It is
not much larger than the others, right beside the center of
the canyon's shoreline.

His hands are crossed over a bulge on his robe. He turns to face the canyon.

Its width extends to the horizon. The other side is beyond visibility. He crouches down and attaches the flowerbomb behind its edge. The vine dangles from the bomb in an arch along the canyon's wall. All the way to the trigger in the hands of the younger teen before his shack on the far right of the shoreline.

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - MAIN ROAD - CONTINUOUS

Mishal dismounts.

The crowd parts around him and Kathib walking down the road towards the Sheikh's Shack. They enter.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - TEENS' SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The younger teen passes the trigger to his older brother. The older brother passes it back. They pass it back and forth.

Until the Advocate barges in.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - SHEIKH'S SHACK - CONTINUOUS

A mosaic of mirrors tiles the walls. They glimmer electric blue through crystal fixtures holding bouquets of Warden's Bloom.

Mishal, Kathib, and Akrab's reflections break into a fragile fractal across them. Through one of his faces, Mishal turns.

MISHAL

Your fear is unfounded, that would
gain us nothing.

Akrab nods once.

AKRAB

Yes, your security will be the
Base's first priority.

Kathib looks out the open door. His people are loud outside.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - TEENS' SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The older teen holds the trigger high above him. The Advocate raises his hand.

ADVOCATE

No!

The teen's thumb twitches over the trigger.

OLDER TEEN

It must be done!

ADVOCATE

Drop it!

The younger teen turns to him.

YOUNGER TEEN

Why the change of heart, cousin?

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - BELOW THE SHEIKH'S SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The flowerbomb pulses, buried behind the canyon's edge. The Sheikh's Shack sits right above it.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - SHEIKH'S SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The three men stand. Mishal shakes Kathib's hand.

MISHAL

It's always a pleasure, my friend.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - TEENS' SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The Advocate walks close to the older teen. The trigger held high above him.

ADVOCATE

This is not who you are.

The teen pants. He looks up at the trigger in his hands.

OLDER TEEN

They deserve it! They have to go.

The Advocate places a hand on his shoulder.

ADVOCATE

We can leave.

The older teen looks down.

ADVOCATE

You don't have to do this.

His hand descends.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - SHEIKH'S SHACK - CONTINUOUS

Akrab turns to Mishal as they walk out the door.

AKRAB
Nice work.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - TEENS' SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The trigger lands on the ground. Standing over it, the older teen wipes sweat off his face. The Advocate embraces him. He sighs as his pulse slows.

The younger teen sees the trigger on the ground. The Advocate pulls back from the older teen. His head whips.

ADVOCATE
Stop!

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - SHEIKH'S SHACK - CONTINUOUS

Sheikh Mishal steps out the door. The flowerbomb pulses right beneath his feet.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - TEENS' SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The younger teen presses the trigger.

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - CANYON WALL - CONTINUOUS

The powervine flutters in the wind under the planted bomb, still alive with light.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - TEENS' SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The Advocate steps off the vine on the floor. It's snapped.

CUT TO:

INSERT - A SLAB OF IRIDESCENT METAL

Etched onto it: "END OF FRAGMENT"

EXT. NEW WORLD - LAYER SEVEN GREENHOUSE - NIGHT

Noura walks beside Alia and Tarek through the seventh layer. The entire layer is a greenhouse. Rows of labeled specimens stretch the full ring of the city, tagged with metal plaques too small to read.

Noura watches Alia and Tarek as they walk ahead. Vine-fiber cut for work, pockets down every seam, a pen holstered at each collar.

The air is thicker this deep down. Condensation beads on leaves, on labels, on skin. Above them, the stars.

One of the plants wraps around Tarek's finger. He pulls a magnifying glass from his sleeve and examines its leaves.

TAREK

We tried to convince our
Instructor.

Noura is playing with the Time Keeper in her hand. Alia turns to her.

ALIA

She even recognized your name.

Alia glances at Tarek.

ALIA

Remember that? It seemed strange.

Noura points.

NOURA

That's it, right?

Alia unfolds a piece of parchment. She looks at a drawing of a boxy plant. She checks where Noura is pointing. It's a living, glowing match.

ALIA

Yeah, it is.

She flicks the pen from her collar and marks it.

ALIA

How did you know?

Tarek runs to the plant, pulling clippers from a thigh pocket.

Noura shrugs.

NOURA

Didn't you say gate plant? I have
two pots of them at home.

The Time Keeper in her hand is flapping fast. She loses
herself to its trails.

NOURA

My Sight is a curse.

Alia yanks Noura's shoulder, turning her.

ALIA

It's not.

She shakes her.

ALIA

Your Sight is amazing!

Tarek arrives. Noura watches the gate plant in his hands
dim.

NOURA

I've always dreamed of coming
here.

Noura takes a deep breath. Her eyes drift. A bud mid-bloom,
a leaf pulsing faint light, wherever she looks, something
alive. Then down at the Time Keeper.

NOURA

Guess I was marked for another
path.

The gate plant loses the last of its light. She looks
between Tarek and Alia.

NOURA

Najim's right. I have to do this.

She looks back down. Her breath catches. Alia leaps to hug
her. Tarek joins.

Pulling away, Tarek's eyes hold Noura's.

TAREK

Why must you just pick one path?

Noura stumbles back.

NOURA

What do you mean?

TAREK
Go be our hero by day. At night,
we promise to teach you everything
we learn.

Noura's mouth opens. A smile spreads on her face. Her Time Keeper buzzes, flapping fast.

Alia notices it.

ALIA
What's that?

Noura's eyes falter, awoken from her excitement.

NOURA
My stupid Time Keeper!

She tosses it to Alia.

NOURA
You can have it!

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Noura finds her mother lying on the floor, reading from a scroll held up above her.

NOURA
That ant story again? How many
times have you read that?

Rudaina puts the scroll down and sits up.

RUDAINA
I spoke with the Minister.

Noura's weight shifts.

NOURA
Oh, and?

Rudaina taps a spot on the floor next to her. Noura sits.

RUDAINA
Who else knows about your Sight?

Noura's fingers still against her thigh. Then.

NOURA
It was an accident! During the—

RUDAINA
We should leave.

Noura shakes her head.

NOURA
What? Why?

RUDAINA
It will be fun. Don't you want to
see the world?

Noura flings back.

NOURA
But... the New World needs me.

A silence lingers between them. Rudaina's smile doesn't
move, but her eyes do.

RUDAINA
They will force you to use your
Sight.

NOURA
So what? This doesn't make any
sense. I thought you trusted the
experts!

Rudaina places a hand on her daughter.

RUDAINA
And I admit my mistake, little
heart. Your place is not as
Soldier.

Noura stands up. She is surrounded by her drum kits.

NOURA
Alia and Tarek may be in danger. I
have to protect them.

Rudaina pulls on Noura's hand. She taps the spot next to her
again. Noura sits. Rudaina's eyes trace the woven rug's
vine.

RUDAINA
I won't see you throw your life
away, after everything I've been
through.

She follows the weave's repeating pattern. A tear drops from
her eye.

NOURA
Mama, what's wrong?

Noura leaps onto her. Rudaina shuts her wet eyes over Noura's shoulder. Noura holds her tighter.

NOURA
It's OK. I don't mind being a
Soldier, Mama.

Noura hums the Melody of Warmth with broken notes. Rudaina pulls back. She wipes her eyes with a smile.

RUDAINA
Our proud musician of the New
World, can't even hold a note.

Noura grins behind her own glassy eyes and tries the note again. It comes out worse.

RUDAINA
Promise me.

Noura's smile fades.

NOURA
What is it? Of course.

Rudaina has never been more serious.

RUDAINA
If you notice anything, and I mean
anything, strange about your
Sight...

Rudaina's words hang. Noura doesn't let her finish.

NOURA
I promise.

INT. MILITARY BARRACKS - TRAINING MATS - DAY

Noura and Nayla pace around each other, their feet bare on white mats. The other initiates are paired around them.

One hooks another's legs, tipping their balance, slamming them onto the mat. Najim passes them.

NAJIM
Taking your opponent down requires
intellect, not just skill.

Noura spots an opening in Nayla's stance.

NAJIM
Never underestimate your partner.

Nayla notices Noura focused on her front leg. She baits her, leaving it forward as they circle each other.

NAJIM
Anticipate their movements.

Noura paces back and forth. Her trail leads to Nayla's extended leg. She goes for the other leg.

NAJIM
Tricks on tricks.

Nayla sees it before it happens. She catches Noura in a headlock. Najim is beside her.

NAJIM
Nice job, Nayla.

Noura struggles to break free. Her face is red.

NAJIM
Remember to breathe, Noura.

Najim walks behind Nayla.

NAJIM
That choke won't work.

Noura is still locked under Nayla's arms.

NOURA
Can you let me go?

NAJIM
Wait.

Najim adjusts Nayla's arms. He tightens her grip.

NAJIM
There, now don't squeeze. Rotate your shoulder, like this.

He demonstrates a headlock.

Nayla tries it. Noura's eyes are about to pop. She taps. Nayla lets go. Najim looks between them.

They're laughing. Noura is holding her neck.

NOURA
That felt weird!

Nayla is miming the move.

NAYLA
That was fun!

Najim smiles. He looks around the class. They are fighting with animosity.

NAJIM
Everyone! Listen up!

They stop. Najim gestures at Nayla and Noura.

NAJIM
You are training partners, not enemies. Be grateful to each other and leave your egos off the mats!

EXT. NEW WORLD - LAYER ONE - NIGHT

Noura walks with Alia and Tarek along Layer One's rim. A tram whizzes by on their left. Through its passing windows, the crystal tower is alive with light.

Noura turns to Alia.

NOURA
How are we sure?

ALIA
Our field scholars at Climber's Valley.

Tarek is looking out over the rim. The New World terraces are beautiful at night. He trips.

Noura catches him, way too close to the edge.

NOURA
Careful.

She turns back to Alia.

NOURA
So... they're just casting ropes off the edge? And they come back wet?

ALIA
Yup. There's no doubt Al-Lawha is surrounded by deep water.

Tarek nods.

TAREK
The Great Flood probably really
happened. It's not just a story.

NOURA
Well then, that explains all the
clouds.

Noura turns to the rim where a lone bench waits. She sits.
Tarek and Alia sit next to her.

NOURA
Guess there really isn't anywhere
else.

Tarek is looking up at the night sky.

TAREK
I wouldn't be so sure. My biggest
takeaway from class today was The
Scholar's Axiom.

From behind, the three of them sit as one beneath the stars.

TAREK
To see one star is not to know the
sky.

EXT. NEW WORLD - TRAM ENTRANCE - DAY

Noura steps off the tram. The vined wall surrounding the New
World stretches out both sides, endless. Ahead, a tunnel of
braided red flowers is the only gap through. Lines of
travelers funnel through the Red Archway. Officers mark
their ledgers as they pass.

A horn bellows. Then another.

DOCTORS run for the tunnel.

DOCTOR
Let them through!

The crowd parts.

DOCTOR
Make way!

The doctors disappear into the archway and return carrying
two SOLDIERS. An UNCONSCIOUS WOMAN, and a SCARRED MAN. Their
uniforms are torn. Their skin is bruised.

The Scarred Man stares at Noura through his only eye. From the brow down, a gash that won't close. He is being carried away, mumbling.

SCARRED MAN

The stars listen... we are saved.

Noura winces and looks away. On her far left, past the crowd, stand the military barracks.

EXT. MILITARY BARRACKS - OBSTACLE COURSE - DAY

The Initiates are lined up. Najim paces in front of them. Behind him, an obstacle course.

NAJIM

Your lives have been marked by peace. The cycles claimed by the Cursed Warden's tyranny are long gone.

Noura and Nayla are distracted by each other.

NAJIM

But peace is never permanent.

Nayla is whispering to Noura.

NAYLA

They must've been from the Squad that went—

Najim is by their faces.

NAJIM

We must be prepared.

The girls are startled and straighten up.

NAJIM

Only one of you will earn the responsibility of Squad Leader.

Noura and Nayla lock eyes.

NAJIM

But you will each play a part.

He holds a hand up. Drops it.

NAJIM

Go!

The Initiates race through the obstacle course.

EXT. NEW WORLD - PATH FROM THE BARRACKS - EVENING

Noura and Nayla walk beside the massive vined wall of the New World. The Barracks is smaller behind them.

NOURA
Almost had you at that wall.

EXT. MILITARY BARRACKS - OBSTACLE COURSE - DAY (EARLIER)

Noura jumps on a wall. Nayla jumps behind her. They climb it. Neck and neck. Far ahead of the other initiates.

EXT. NEW WORLD - PATH FROM THE BARRACKS - EVENING

Nayla's fingers trace the vines on the wall as they walk. Noura turns to her.

NOURA
I'm picnicking with Alia and Tarek tonight.

Nayla's fingers press harder on the vines.

NOURA
Want to join?

Her hand falls to her side.

EXT. MILITARY BARRACKS - TRAINING GROUND - DAY (EARLIER)

Noura and Nayla swing vine whips on training dummies. They tangle with each other instead. Sparks shoot up towards their hands.

They let go. The vines thrash on the ground, still sparking, alive with nowhere to go.

Noura and Nayla burst out laughing.

EXT. NEW WORLD - PATH FROM THE BARRACKS - EVENING

Nayla turns from the wall's vine on her left to the wide ring of the first layer on her right. Almost a line due to its large circumference.

NAYLA
I can't. I'm busy.

NOURA
Are you now?

Noura smirks.

NOURA
With what?

EXT. NEW WORLD - BOTTOM LAYER - NIGHT

The bottom layer opens wide, the only ground in the New World that isn't a ledge. Grass runs to every edge, lit turquoise by the crystal tower rising from its center. Picnic blankets dot the green like scattered petals.

Alia and Tarek lie on one of them. They're staring into each other's eyes. Noura stands above them.

NOURA
So, what's today's lesson?

Their ghosts lean in. They scramble apart. Noura laughs and steps aside.

Nayla's behind her.

NAYLA
Uh... Hello.

She waves. Noura is grinning.

Alia stands up. Leans on Noura's left.

ALIA
What's she doing here?

Nayla, on Noura's right.

NAYLA
See, I told you.

Tarek, across from Nayla.

TAREK
Bully.

Nayla grunts.

NAYLA
You're the bully!

Alia laughs. With emphasis.

ALIA
You're delusional.

Nayla takes a deep breath. Noura is trying so hard not to laugh.

She fails.

Nayla side-eyes Noura.

NAYLA
Aren't you going to say something?

NOURA
I'm sorry, I was sure the Stars
were enjoying this moment.

She's still chuckling as she places a hand on Alia.

NOURA
Nayla's awesome. We've been way
too hard on her.

Noura turns to Tarek.

NOURA
What was that Scholar's Axiom
again?

Tarek thinks. And smiles.

TAREK
To see one star...

NOURA
Yeah, that's it. We saw one star.

Noura pats Nayla. Hard.

NOURA
And she has a whole sky in her!

Nayla forces a smile.

EXT. NEW WORLD - BOTTOM LAYER - LATER

Alia, Tarek, and Noura are laughing together. Nayla watches, sitting farther away.

Tarek can barely breathe.

TAREK
He actually thought valley snails
and rope gliders were different
animals!

Noura laughs harder.

NOURA
And they placed Shahid as Scholar?
Of all things?

Nayla leans toward their laughter, then settles back where she was. Alia notices.

ALIA
Hey, everything OK?

A gentle breeze glazes the grass around them. Nayla looks down at it.

NAYLA
If-If I ever hurt any of you...
know that I did not mean to.

Alia looks at Tarek, an unexpected warmth between them, then back at Nayla. She taps on the spot next to her.

ALIA
Noura tells me you wanted to be
Head Minister.

The edge of Nayla's lip lifts. She moves to sit next to Alia.

ALIA
Why?

Noura chuckles.

NOURA
Alia! Be nice!

ALIA
What? I'm just—

NAYLA
No, it's fine.

Noura leans in.

NAYLA
What I'm about to say may sound
conspiratorial.

NOURA
What is it?

Noura hangs off Nayla's silence.

NAYLA
I love the New World. Really, I
do.

Nayla looks up. The crystal tower's peak is so high above.

NAYLA
But...

Her fists tighten.

NAYLA
Our way is unfair.

They are quiet for a moment. Then Tarek turns to Nayla.

TAREK
It really is, isn't it.

Alia joins.

ALIA
Tell us something new.

Noura releases her pressed palms from the grass.

NOURA
You don't even want to know where
my mind went!

They laugh, the four of them.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Rudaina hums the Melody of Warmth. The Warden's Bloom by Noura's bed holds back the dark. Noura's eyelids flutter, on the edge of sleep. The blue bouquet fades into blackness. The warm melody grows fainter. Noura's lids waver. Out. And in.

Screams tear Noura awake. Rudaina kneels down to her.

RUDAINA
What's wrong, little heart?

She brushes Noura's head.

NOURA
I saw something! A ghost!

Rudaina looks around.

RUDAINA
Where is it?

Noura points to a corner.

NOURA
It was there! It felt horrible!

Rudaina runs to that corner.

RUDAINA
Suhail?

Noura gets up.

NOURA
What are you doing? Who's Suhail?

Rudaina turns.

RUDAINA
Sorry, my heartbeat. It must have
been a dream—

Banging interrupts them. They turn to the sound. The door.
Rudaina runs to it.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - CONTINUOUS

No one's there. She looks down. A METAL TABLET waits by her feet.

Noura calls from her bedroom.

NOURA (O.S.)
Mama! Are you OK?

Rudaina picks up the tablet. She flips it over. Her hands shake as she traces the letters with her thumb. Then, she smiles.

RUDAINA
Yes, love, I'll be right there.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY

Noura ticks her goblet drum as the New World orchestra strolls along.

BEGIN MONTAGE - THE TICKING OF YEARS.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - NEW WORLD HUB

Off-duty, everyone moves at their own pace. Noura matches Nayla's. Tarek drifts behind with Alia. Ghost trails multiply around Noura, splitting and merging between the crowd. They pass the News Boy with a bag of scrolls.

NEWS BOY

Squad rescued by Southern Messiah!
Read all about it!

Nayla grabs Noura.

NAYLA

Heard that? I told you it was
them!

INT. MILITARY BARRACKS - TRAINING MATS

Noura's drum continues ticking. Trails of Nayla and Noura slither around each other. They flicker without rhythm. Noura mounts Nayla on the mat. Nayla mounts Noura. Noura's eyes flick right. She dives for Nayla's right foot. Nayla steps away. Noura's face slams the mat. Nayla extends a hand. Noura grabs.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY

Her drum ticks faster. Noura's fluttering fingers crescendo over it. She holds this tempo. It becomes a drone. She loses herself.

And submits.

Her rhythm swings. Musicians around her turn with rolled eyes.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM

A Warden's Bloom dims in the bouquet by Noura's bedside.

EXT. NEW WORLD - LAYER ONE BENCH - NIGHT

The four friends sit on their bench. The flowerlit city vibrant in the nighttime. Alia looks toward the crystal tower.

ALIA

The schematics were beautiful.

Tarek nods, looking towards the trams.

TAREK

The bridge's mechanism would hold the weight of thousands.

Noura's eyes are on the stars.

NOURA

Teach it to me.

Nayla is staring up at them too.

NAYLA

You two are saving the world, while we're...

Tarek and Alia's hands fall on Nayla's shoulders.

EXT. MILITARY BARRACKS - TRAINING GROUND

Noura's drums rage ahead. Initiates whip their vines in time to Noura's beat. Dummies spark with static, ticking with each lashing. Rashid keeps missing, off rhythm. Nayla adjusts his wrist. Rashid finds Noura's time. He lands the hit.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY

Noura slows down. Her hands lift off the drum and down to the mallets. She picks them up and turns to another kit. She's taller now, her hands calloused, her rhythm fixed. Static.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM

Alia and Tarek are teenagers. They lie on their stomachs over flower schematics. A conveyor belt. They point at things on it. Noura's eyes see past the schematics. Rudaina reads from a scroll behind them.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - NEW WORLD HUB

Nayla walks ahead of Tarek, Alia, and Noura through the busy center. She is taller than all of them now. The News Boy has become a NEWS TEEN.

NEWS TEEN

Sheikha Layla submits to Southern
Messiah! Plans to build dam! Read
all about it!

Noura turns to the group. Her eyes darken.

EXT. MILITARY BARRACKS - OBSTACLE COURSE

Noura and Nayla crawl through mud. The other recruits are close behind. FAY, the closest of the initiates, is about to pass them. Rashid struggles far behind. Noura's drum continues ticking ahead of them.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY

The Director conducts at the front. Noura accents every fourth beat. A simple backbeat for the repetitive piece.

EXT. NEW WORLD - BOTTOM LAYER - NIGHT

Tarek's fingers roll between grass.

TAREK

I-I don't think we're allowed to
say.

The tower's light catches the star pinned to his chest.

The light catches Alia's star beside him, too.

Noura's face sinks.

NOURA

What do you mean?

Tarek turns away. Noura turns to Alia.

NOURA

So there's no lesson today?

Alia's hand presses her pin, then she looks down.

EXT. NEW WORLD - OVERHEAD - TIME-LAPSE

Rings of concentric red trails, the trams, rotate around the New World. They alternate clockwise and counterclockwise between every other layer. Noura's backbeat ticks behind. The city is a living clock as night turns to day and the crystal tower's shadow circles the New World and day turns to night and blue flowers dot the city more and more, over and over until the tram trails fade from red to blue and Noura is a young woman.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY

Noura's beat remains monotonous as the orchestra swells around her.

INT. MILITARY BARRACKS - TRAINING MATS

Noura spars with Rashid, a young man. He matches her ferocity. Noura slams him onto the mat as an older Nayla slams an older Fay. Fay pushes herself up. Nayla demonstrates the takedown and lets Fay try it on her.

EXT. NEW WORLD - LAYER ONE BENCH - NIGHT

The four sit on the bench. Small beneath the stars. They talk. They laugh. They point at things below them. As the city turns and the drums tick and time slips, Alia and Tarek fade away, leaving Noura and Nayla alone.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - NEW WORLD HUB

Noura and Nayla walk through the bustling crowd. They pass the NEWS MAN waving a scroll.

NEWS MAN

The Conqueror plans to build a
bridge! Thousands will follow
North!

Noura and Nayla turn to each other. Their eyes heavy with worry.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM

The bouquet of Warden's Bloom by Noura's bedside flickers like the days. Then, all at once, the blue flowers burst, swallowing the room in darkness.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - MUSIC CONSERVATORY - NIGHT

Noura's mallets trail under her. Her eyes drift away from them. Everyone in the orchestra is free between her ticks. Her rhythm imprisoned to the beat.

She stands. The ticking stops. The company coughs to a halt. Her mallets crack on the floor.

NOURA

I quit!

END MONTAGE.

INT. SECURITY MINISTER'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Rudaina scrubs the floor while humming fragments of a forgotten ballad. The place is identical in layout to their own residence, but the fixtures are different. A map hangs on the wall. Various medals. A framed certificate, 'New World Intelligence-Founding Member.' A photo of the Security Minister, MENKAR, and a woman.

The photo tips over as the door slams open. Rudaina turns.

RUDAINA

Noura?

Noura doesn't respond. Rudaina stands up and approaches her daughter. Noura is still.

Rudaina embraces her.

Noura pulls back.

NOURA

Do you like it here?

RUDAINA

Of course I do. Why?

Noura forces a smile.

NOURA

Just asking. I quit the company.

Rudaina moves Noura's hair out of her face.

RUDAINA

Good. Your drum sets were getting dusty.

EXT. MILITARY BARRACKS - COURTYARD - DAY

Najim stands in front of the Initiates.

NAJIM
You first walked these barracks as
children.

They are in full uniform, vine whips holstered at their
sides.

NAJIM
These past years, I have seen you
prove your merit again and again.

He walks to Rashid.

NAJIM
Though, some had me questioning.

Places his hand on him.

NAJIM
Stars know how close I came to
giving up.

Nayla chuckles beside him.

NAJIM
But, Rashid, I am proud to say my
doubts were in vain.

He steps back from him and paces.

NAJIM
Look at each other!

Nayla and Noura giggle, turning to each other.

NAJIM
Shake your neighbor's hand.

They shake each other's hands.

NAJIM
Thank you for your service,
Initiates. Today, you are
Soldiers!

He salutes.

NAJIM
By merit, we advance!

The SOLDIERS salute as one.

SOLDIERS
By merit, we advance!

Najim straightens.

NAJIM
Nayla!

Nayla jolts, startled, and drops her hand. Noura turns to her.

NAJIM
Step up!

Nayla walks up to Najim. They stand face to face.

NAJIM
Time and again you put your
comrades first. Your training has
shown you understand a core
principle. A squad advances as
one.

Nayla's hand shakes by her side.

NAJIM
You earned my respect. And, more
importantly...

Najim gestures at the standing soldiers.

NAJIM
... you earned theirs.

Fay and Rashid nod alongside the other soldiers. Najim takes out a pin. On it, a RED PETAL. He attaches it to Nayla's uniform.

NAJIM
Congratulations, Squad Leader!

NAYLA
Th-Thank you.

Nayla salutes.

NAYLA
May my leadership prove merit.

She turns and salutes her squad.

They salute back. Among them, Noura's smile beams, hand on her head, eyes wet with pride.

EXT. NEW WORLD - LAYER ONE TRAM STATION - EVENING

Alia, Tarek, and Noura wait for the tram down to the Hub.
Alia turns to Noura.

ALIA
Where's Nayla?

NOURA
She's already on her first
assignment.

TAREK
Can't believe she made it to Squad
Leader.

Tarek looks between them.

TAREK
Watch her be Security Minister
next!

Noura's smile aches.

NOURA
Never thought of that.

ALIA
Where's she stationed?

They are almost by the tram.

NOURA
One of the independents we're
integrating with. Serpent's Shore.

Noura is next in line.

NOURA
Intelligence reports there's some
tension between the locals and
their Sheikh. It may slow
construction.

The tram door shuts before they get in, full. Alia and Tarek groan.

NOURA
I'll admit, the Company did have
its privileges.

INT. NEW WORLD - TRAM - LATER

They wobble, shoulder to shoulder, holding onto a railing above them. The tram is tight with people. Noura fidgets between them.

NOURA
So, how was your field visit?

Alia and Tarek do not answer.

NOURA
Still working on the Buried City
faucets?

Alia looks at Tarek, then shrugs at Noura.

ALIA
The blight interferes, but they
should be good now.

Tarek nods.

TAREK
Ever since the riot, we've added
triple-redundant tolerances on
each conveyor.

Noura's eyes find her feet.

NOURA
Oh.

The Scarred Man stares at her from the other end of the tram. Noura doesn't notice.

NOURA
What's wrong then? Why have you—

The tram screeches to a halt.

TRAM SPEAKER (V.O.)
Stopping. Layer Five.

EXT. NEW WORLD - LAYER FIVE BRIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Noura, Alia, and Tarek leave the tram station to the crystal tower bridge. The bridge is crowded with people. Its flowerlight is no longer red, but Warden's Bloom blue.

Noura steps onto it.

NOURA
Please, I can help you guys if you
tell—

Alia grabs her. Tarek watches.

ALIA
Noura! Just stop!

The crowd rushes around them, indifferent.

ALIA
We're not hiding anything!

Tarek sees Noura, her face sunken. His eyes quiver.

TAREK
Can we hang out like before?

Noura looks at the Crystal Tower ahead.

TAREK
Forget our jobs for the night.

Tarek nudges Alia. Alia rolls her eyes then steps forward.

She hugs Noura.

ALIA
Sorry.

Noura continues walking.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - NEW WORLD HUB - CONTINUOUS

They pass the glass statue, a tower of people, glinting under blue flowerlight. Noura sees her reflection curve around it.

NOURA
Remember our Botany Teacher?

Alia's reflection wobbles near hers.

ALIA
She hated us.

NOURA
Yeah... I don't blame her.

They meet each other's eyes, then share a laugh.

Tarek points through the space between them.

TAREK
What's happening?

People are running. A large crowd surrounds a NEWS GIRL. Her bag of scrolls is almost empty.

Noura taps on a WOMAN walking out of the crowd with a scroll in her hands.

NOURA
What's the story?

The woman's eyes are grave. She notices Noura's military attire.

WOMAN WITH SCROLL
You don't know? The Buried City...
the blight...

Noura's eyes widen. The woman's hand is on her head.

WOMAN WITH SCROLL
The World Reserve is unclaimed.
The Warden's Heir is the only
survivor.

Noura loses her breath.

Tarek steps forward.

TAREK
What do you mean only survivor?

The woman turns to Tarek, then walks away.

Noura is trembling. Alia holds her friend. Noura can barely let out one word.

NOURA
Altair.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Noura rolls her fingers on a dented metallic dome. Pure notes are buried beneath each impact. Patient. Beats within beats. The sounds shimmer. The crystal table hums.

Rudaina lowers her scroll on the vibrating table. It rolls shut.

A melody forms. Completely Noura's own. An Ode to the Buried City. Tender. Delicate. Aching.

The melody boils.

Tears escape Noura's shut eyes.

Her fingers blur. Faster. Notes beautiful, but angry. A complex polyphony of rhythm and melody. It builds.

And builds.

Rudaina's mouth is open.

They collide.

Noura screams.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Noura adjusts her uniform in front of a mirror. Through it, she sees Rudaina reading on the rug behind her.

NOURA

Are you sure you're not coming?
Fard will be giving the speech.

RUDAINA

Send the Ambassador my regards,
I'll be fine right here.

Rudaina is back behind her scroll.

NOURA

This free time is a gift, hate to
see you wasting it on that same
story.

Rudaina puts the scroll down. Her eyes meet Noura's through the mirror.

RUDAINA

You take reading for granted,
little heart.

Someone knocks on the door. Noura runs to open it.

Nayla stands outside, hair ravaged, uniform tattered.

She leaps onto Noura and shivers on her shoulder. Noura holds Nayla tight, stroking her hair, numb.

INT. MILITARY BARRACKS - NAJIM'S OFFICE - LATER

Najim's desk is functional. A single Warden's Bloom. A world map. A plaque that reads 'By merit, we advance.' Noura and Nayla sit across from him.

Najim places his hands on the desk.

NAJIM
Your assignment was inappropriate.
It was our fault.

Nayla huffs.

NAYLA
My father had nothing to do with
it! The Conqueror is to blame!

Noura holds one of her hands under the table.

NAJIM
Nayla. Your trauma is fresh.

Nayla grits her teeth.

NAJIM
Rashid's passing was not your
fault. Still, we can't accept your
proposal.

Noura meets Najim's eyes.

NOURA
Sir. With no disrespect, the
Conqueror will be crossing North.
If not now, when?

Najim stands.

NAJIM
Trust that your experts are not
idle, but we will not escalate
this conflict.

He salutes.

They stand and salute. Rage burns behind Nayla's eyes.

INT. MILITARY BARRACKS - TRAINING MATS - LATER

Noura and Nayla spar on the mats.

NAYLA
His followers are crazy!

Their trails knot around each other in an intricate dance.

Noura's trail catches Nayla's back. Nayla ducks before Noura actually catches it.

NAYLA
I hate him!

Noura rolls onto her back, legs flying up to grab Nayla's neck. Nayla jumps over, her trail moving ahead of her. Noura leaps onto the spot Nayla's trail rolls onto. Nayla is pinned by Noura, mounted above her.

Noura smiles.

NOURA
Got you.

Nayla pushes onto Noura's left knee with both hands.

Noura presses her weight on Nayla's face. Nayla is buried underneath her. She presses both her palms onto Noura's knee, until Noura collapses and Nayla slips out.

Nayla stands up. Winks.

NAYLA
Not yet.

They pace, circling. Sweat drips down their faces.

NAYLA
He won't stop.

Many trails weave and flicker ahead of Noura. They keep circling. Noura focuses on one of the trails. It leads to Nayla's back.

Fuzzy, hard to see.

Noura breathes. The trail refocuses. Clearer.

She steps aside as Nayla flies past her. Noura catches Nayla's back. Headlock. Nayla taps. They shake hands.

Noura scratches her head. Nayla is about to step off the mat.

NOURA
Nayla?

Nayla turns.

NOURA
Can we try something?

Nayla walks back.

NOURA
Intend to take me down, but don't
act on it.

NAYLA
What?

Noura hesitates.

NOURA
Haven't you ever wondered how far
our Sight goes?

Nayla's eyes spark open. She finds her stance. And they are
circling each other once again.

NAYLA
OK, where is the farthest you see
me?

Noura scans Nayla's ghosts weaving around her. Closest one
is rolling around her right leg. She points to it.

NOURA
Here. You rolling.

Nayla's head flings back.

NAYLA
Even I can't see that I'd do that!

NOURA
What about me?

Noura sees her trail feint towards Nayla's leg, then mount
her open back.

NAYLA
Right here by my leg.

NOURA
Nope.

In a flash, Noura is on Nayla's back, right where her trail
ended. She drops off and pats Nayla's back.

NOURA
We've been training wrong this
whole time!

Nayla's eyes renew with drive.

NAYLA
Teach me!

They circle each other. Eager.

Ahead of Noura, trails weave.

NOURA
Focus on their ends.

They flicker wildly.

NOURA
Feel their pulse. Breathe with
them.

Noura breathes, caging the chaotic flickers.

NOURA
Stay ahead of them.

Nayla breathes. Her face strains with focus. Then, her eyes
open.

NAYLA
There! I'm seeing more of me!

Noura sees Nayla's single trail refract into a fractal of
possibilities.

NOURA
Yes, that's it!

She tries to dodge four Naylas coming at her. A fifth Nayla
catches her.

NOURA
Whoa, that was amazing!

Nayla releases Noura. She smiles.

Noura is already back in position.

NOURA
Again!

They circle.

Noura's trails thread through Nayla after Nayla, getting close to the real Nayla behind them.

One of Nayla's trails passes one of Noura's. Noura breathes, summoning a new trail, pushing that one back.

NOURA

Come on.

Noura focuses on the real Nayla.

NOURA

Take her down.

Noura's metallic drum rings behind her ears. More and more trails surge out of her. She hears rhythm on rhythm until anticipation breaks.

Nayla's trails can't keep up, outnumbered by Noura's army. They surround Nayla. So close to her.

NOURA

Down!

Nayla falls down.

Screaming.

Noura's trails vanish.

Nayla looks up. She's trembling.

Absolute terror in Noura's eyes.

EXT. NEW WORLD - PATH FROM THE BARRACKS - DUSK

Noura and Nayla walk silently. The barracks get smaller behind them as the ringed moon sets.

NAYLA

It must be how he does it. His followers are being controlled.

Noura doesn't speak.

NAYLA

Come on, Noura, we have to train this ability. It's the only way we can stop him.

The crystal tower imposes, high on the horizon.

NAYLA
He made them kill Rashid!

Noura's head is down.

NOURA
To rob one's will...

She looks at her hands. They shake.

NOURA
Nayla?

Noura's voice cracks.

NOURA
What are we?

She sobs.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Noura's head is in Rudaina's lap. Rudaina's fingers move through her daughter's hair.

RUDAINA
Swear to me.

Nayla sits on the rug nearby. Rudaina turns to her.

RUDAINA
Both of you.

Nayla scratches the rug.

NAYLA
But people need to know. We have to warn them.

RUDAINA
No, my love. The people will panic without reason.

Noura sits up. She holds her mother's hand.

NOURA
She's right, Mama. It's our job to protect this city. We can't hide this.

Rudaina pulls her hand away.

RUDAINA
Hear me now, Noura. You are not to
tell anyone.

She stands and walks to Nayla.

RUDAINA
Please, Nayla.

Nayla crosses her arms under Rudaina's shadow.

RUDAINA
How about this? If I am proven
wrong and things escalate, then I
will go straight to the Security
Minister myself.

Nayla stands and meets Rudaina's eyes. She extends a hand.

NAYLA
OK.

INT. MILITARY BARRACKS - TRAINING MATS - EVENING

Noura and Nayla circle each other. Nayla stomps her foot.

NAYLA
Come on, Noura!

Noura Sights a takedown. Goes for it. Nayla is flat on her
back beneath Noura.

NAYLA
Command me!

Noura catches Nayla's neck between her legs.

NOURA
No!

Squeezes them.

Nayla taps.

NAYLA
We're wasting time!

Gets up.

NAYLA
I'm planning on leaving. I have to
save that city.

Noura stands.

NOURA
What? No, you're Squad Leader! You
can't abandon us!

NAYLA
I already have! Rashid is dead!

Noura steps closer.

NAYLA
Those people. You should've seen
them.

NOURA
There was nothing you could have
done. It was a trap, Nayla.

NAYLA
And they now wait for their
Messiah. Unknowing of their fate
as cattle.

NOURA
What would you do?

NAYLA
Your mother doesn't have to know.
I'd only warn them.

Nayla takes Noura's hand.

NAYLA
I want them to understand.

FLASH: Young Noura across from Rudaina at the crystal table,
the same words on her lips. Her eyes go to her drum kits.

Noura hears her drums beat over Nayla's words.

NAYLA
I have to clear my father's name.
Help me teach them to break free.

EXT. MILITARY BARRACKS - COURTYARD - NIGHT

Noura and Nayla stand alone on cold grass. Small beneath the
awesome starry sky.

They circle each other. Ticking.

Noura commands:

NOURA

Down!

Nayla grunts. Then drops.

Stands up.

NAYLA

Again.

Noura's face crunches.

NOURA

Down!

Nayla's own legs refuse her. She plunges. Tries to get up.

NOURA

Stop allowing me to see it!

Noura is sweating.

NOURA

Down!

Nayla pushes herself. Strains.

Falls before she gets up.

The word tears out of Noura.

NOURA

(guttural)

Down!

Tears stream down her face.

Nayla screams. She tries to resist it, but collapses harder. She stands, eyes red with pain.

Noura's breath catches.

NOURA

Down!

Nayla crashes back onto the grass. Yells into her arm.

NAYLA

No matter what I do, I can't fight
it!

Noura sits next to her. She looks up at the stars. So many of them. She puts an arm around Nayla and turns, eyes raw.

NOURA
What if we can't resist?

Nayla's eyes reflect the same terror.

VOICE (O.S.)
We can't. We have to submit to it.

They look up. It's Najim.

NAJIM
Only then can you defeat an
Imposer. Tricks on tricks.

Najim extends a hand to Noura.

NAJIM
Try it on me.

She grabs. They face each other.

A wave of trails surges out of Noura, weaving through
Najim's sparse projections.

NOURA
Down!

He collapses, and squints with discomfort, a hand pressed
onto his head.

Then he shakes. Orients himself. And stands.

NAJIM
Uff, that was strong. Now see how
it feels if I anticipate your
command.

Noura tracks Najim's single trail. It sits down.

NAJIM
Now.

Trails of Noura extend out of her. They flicker over Najim's
trail, which is already sitting down before Noura commands
it.

NOURA
Down!

Her trails disappear, but Najim is still standing. Noura and
Nayla turn to each other, grinning behind wide eyes.

EXT. NEW WORLD - BLUE ARCHWAY - NIGHT

Beneath the archway, Noura hugs Nayla. A caravan waits behind.

NOURA
I'm going to miss you so much.

Nayla's eyes shut over Noura's embrace.

NAYLA
I've never had a real family
before.

NOURA
Nayla, stop. Don't say it.

NAYLA
I'm so grateful for you. I love
you, Noura.

Noura pulls away.

NOURA
Please, if there's any danger,
come back for us.

NAYLA
In and out.

Nayla smiles, holding back her tears.

NAYLA
I promise.

From behind Noura, the Scarred Man approaches.

SCARRED MAN
Nayla?

Nayla jumps back.

NAYLA
Yeah?

He hands her a pin and retreats into the darkness, without another word.

Nayla turns it over. Her other hand flies to cover her mouth.

On it, a handshake. Nayla throws the pin as far as she can.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - DAY

A knock on the door. Rudaina puts her scroll down. She opens the door.

Najim stands with Menkar, the Security Minister.

Rudaina's face sinks.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Noura sits with her mother at the crystal table opposite Menkar and Najim.

NOURA
New World Intelligence?

Rudaina grabs Noura's arm.

RUDAINA
No, I won't allow it.

Menkar looks between them.

MENKAR
Noura's gift would be invaluable
to the NWI.

Rudaina turns to Noura. Her head's down.

MENKAR
She can save us.

Rudaina slams the table.

RUDAINA
You don't know what she carries!

Her breath catches. Najim places a hand on Rudaina's arm. She meets his eyes.

RUDAINA
I can't lose her too.

Najim's calm stills the room.

NAJIM
You're wrong, by the way. There
was another Imposer. A prodigy
like her.

Noura's pupils turn, listening, while still facing down.

NAJIM

He was our youngest initiate.

Menkar nods.

MENKAR

We can help her train it.

Rudaina shakes her head.

RUDAINA

No. You don't understand.

Her eyes are somewhere else.

RUDAINA

This curse, it's—

Menkar's chair screeches back. He is standing.

Rudaina and Najim stand, almost by instinct. Noura stays seated.

MENKAR

You risked everything for one life, Rudaina. It's her turn to choose as you once did.

Menkar looks at Noura.

MENKAR

The New World needs you, Noura.

She doesn't look back.

He salutes.

MENKAR

By merit, we—

Noura stands. They snap to her.

Noura's eyes scan each of theirs.

Menkar's, frustrated.

Najim's, proud.

Rudaina's, worried.

NOURA

I refuse.

A grunt, a click, and a sigh collide.

BEGIN MONTAGE - THE TICKING OF MOMENTS.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM

Fingers dance on metallic dents. Noura is tapping the steel dome on her lap. Meditative.

EXT. NEW WORLD - BOTTOM LAYER - NIGHT

Alia and Tarek converse with excitement. They turn. Noura stands above them. The excitement fades from their eyes.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM

She plays gently. Her hands cross over. Searching.

INT. CRYSTAL TOWER - HOSPITAL

Noura sits by Fay's hospital bed. Fay is unconscious. Noura puts her head to Fay's hand. Fay's parents and soldiers from their squad watch.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM

Noura's eyes shut as she plays. Patient. Her jaw clenches. So much weight behind each note.

EXT. NEW WORLD - LAYER ONE BENCH - NIGHT

Noura sits alone on the bench, looking over the city below. Then she looks up at the stars. One of them shoots.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM

The rhythm breaks open. A kaleidoscope of sounds skates over silent beats.

EXT. NEW WORLD - BOTTOM LAYER - NIGHT

Noura sits next to Alia and Tarek. They force smiles. Noura sees through them, and rolls her eyes.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM

Fingers trilling. Notes overlapping. Face buckling.

The melody simmers.

Then explodes into random banging.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. NEW WORLD - BOTTOM LAYER - NIGHT

Noura stands up.

NOURA
I'm done, Alia!

She towers over Alia and Tarek. The crystal tower is taller behind her.

NOURA
Stop lying to me!

Tarek leaps up and holds her.

TAREK
You're going through a lot right now, we're sorry.

NOURA
Tarek... please.

Noura's crying.

NOURA
Let me in.

Alia gets up and pulls Tarek away.

ALIA
You need some rest, Noura.

Noura looks between the two of them. They can't hide the pity in their eyes.

She turns away from them and steps towards the massive tower's light. She stares at it. Her fists clench.

Noura turns back around.

NOURA
I don't believe you!

A flurry of trails floods out of her. She commands.

NOURA
TELL ME!

Alia's eyes bulge.

ALIA
Our promotion to Field Scholars.

She covers her mouth.

ALIA
The Time Keeper.

Gasps.

ALIA
We stole your idea!

Alia falls on the grass.

ALIA
What did you do to me?

Noura's anger reflects off Tarek's horrified eyes.

Then she sees Alia, disheveled and traumatized. Runs to her.

NOURA
No. No.

Reaches.

NOURA
I'm so sor—

Tarek pushes her away.

TAREK
Get away from her!

Noura steps back. Looks at her trembling hands.

At Tarek, seething.

At Alia, completely shattered.

She runs away.

EXT. NEW WORLD - LAYER ONE BENCH - NIGHT - INTERMISSION

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

Noura sits silent on her bench.

Small.

Her fingers trace the tower's blue pulse.

She trills.

FLASH: Alia's gasp.

FLASH: Tarek's eyes.

Beat by beat.

Noura's fingers lose the city's rhythm.

A living, beating painting.

END OF INTERMISSION

EXT. NEW WORLD - BLUE ARCHWAY - NIGHT

Noura stands beneath the archway. A caravan marked with the Branch passes from behind.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT (EARLIER)

Rudaina is sleeping on the rug, a scroll on her face. Noura nudges her up and leads her to her room.

EXT. NEW WORLD - BLUE ARCHWAY - NIGHT

Noura is looking back through the blue tunnel. A tram arrives at the station. She looks ahead. The caravan is nearing the horizon.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - RUDAINA'S ROOM - NIGHT (EARLIER)

Noura's mother sleeps in her bed. Noura kisses her forehead.

EXT. NEW WORLD - BEYOND THE BLUE ARCHWAY - NIGHT

She runs.

Faster.

Her hair blowing in the wind.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM - NIGHT (EARLIER)

Noura sweeps gems, flowerheads, and vine scraps into a bag before walking out her door.

EXT. NEW WORLD - CARAVAN ROUTE - NIGHT

Noura is right behind the caravan. Chasing it. Almost there.
She jumps on.

FADE TO:

INT. SISTER TRIBE CARAVAN - WAGON - DAWN

The ringed moon hangs low on the green horizon. Noura is asleep between piles of people, shoulder to shoulder. They roll into each other as the wagon bumps.

A hard stop knocks Noura into the wagon's metal. She sits up, sweating.

The person next to her grunts. People around her are getting up.

She stands, and tips onto her toes to look over the wagon's wall.

EXT. THE CROSSROADS - CARAVAN PARK - CONTINUOUS

They are parked among other caravans. Each is marked with a Free Tribe's emblem. Her eyes hang on one of them. The Buried City's Leaf.

In the distance, a sign reads 'The Crossroads.' She climbs out of the wagon towards it. It points six ways. The Buried City, the New World, the Silverlakes, the Free Markets, Climber's Valley, and World's Edge.

Noura looks towards where the Buried City would be. She hears her mother humming the Melody of Warmth. She turns the other way, where a patchwork of alleys and flowerlight ticks.

She moves towards it.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - ALLEY - DAY

Noura walks through the dirt alleyways. A flowered sign woven into the shape of a bottle flashes red above a wooden door, barely lit against the golden daylight. She enters.

INT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - BAR - CONTINUOUS

Vine-wrapped bottles along the back wall. Dim red flowers pulse on scattered high tables. Sitting and standing between the wooden space, guests drink.

Noura sits at an empty table. Places a gem on it. A hand grabs it from behind her, and exchanges it for a bottle.

INT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - BAR - LATER

Noura is doubled over on the table, buried between her elbows. Five empty bottles are near her.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - ALLEY - EVENING

Noura stumbles down a tight alley. Sips from a bottle in her hand. A haze of dancing lights beneath the dark green horizon.

On her right, people laugh through an open door, rolling dice on a table.

INT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - GAMBLING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Noura dumps her entire bag of gems onto the table. People around her cheer. She reaches for the dice before the cheering dies.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - ALLEY - LATER

Noura slumps on a wall.

Vomits.

Loud cheering from the end of the alley.

She turns to it. Wipes her mouth.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - SQUARE - NIGHT

Steps out to an applauding crowd in an open square.

At its center, a bright flashing building.

Too bright. She looks away.

The flowerlight performers are bowing. The crowd is dispersing.

Noura walks to a metal bin by a wall. Turns it over. Trash falls out.

She sits on it. Looks around. Takes a breath.

Plays a simple, easy rhythm.

Fingers roll over the metallic rim.

People turn.

A crowd forms.

Their heads bob to Noura's ticks.

Noura's hands blur into trails.

She looks up from them. The crowd is dancing.

She goes faster.

The crowd matches her tempo, locked to her beat.

Noura mutters under her breath, playing even faster.

NOURA
(mumbling)
Stop...

But the crowd keeps up, on her rhythm.

Their trails blur to her beat.

She can't tell her hands from their bodies.

She shifts. Slower.

But they cheer, slowing to her rhythm.

NOURA
(mumbling)
... following me.

Even slower.

The crowd is compelled.

NOURA (V.O.)
(remembered)
TELL ME!

She screams as her rhythm breaks open.

But the crowd catches it.

Noura plays off beat. Tries to get them off.

The crowd cheers louder, finding her time.

Noura explodes into a complex polyrhythm.

A voice disrupts.

ALTAIR (O.S.)

Noura?

Noura stops, and looks up.

Sheikh Altair is smiling with radiance.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. FORTUNE'S FULCRUM - SKEWER BAR - NIGHT

Tick.

Noura stands under a flashing flowered sign, a skewer over wavy lines. Raises a fist to them.

NOURA

I invented those!

FADE TO BLACK.

Tick.

Noura turns from her seat.

NOURA

I'll find her... I promise...

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. MISHAL'S PROCESSION - DAY

Tick.

Noura's eyes go wide.

NOURA

A-Altair?

Altair 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.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. MISHAL'S PROCESSION - DAY

Tick.

Altair is staring at her.

ALTAIR
What do you do now?

Noura hesitates.

NOURA
I... I'm a Scholar.

ALTAIR
That's amazing!

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - TRAIL - DUSK

Tick.

Noura shrieks with exhilaration, her hair blowing. She rides behind Altair on TAMR across a horizon of metallic sands.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - TRAIL - DUSK

Tick.

Altair's eyes have never been more grave.

ALTAIR
I felt it for them, Noura. All of them. Suffocating.

His half-smile reflects off Noura's horrified eyes.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - TRAIL - DUSK

Tick.

A distant flute. A familiar melody.

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 the 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.

She runs in front of him, blocking his path.

ALTAIR
Your friend might be here.

Noura doesn't budge.

NOURA
She can handle herself. We knew
what he is... I have his curse.

Altair puts a hand on her shoulder. He's smiling.

ALTAIR
Our paths are marked, then.

Tock.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - NORTHEAST TRAIL - NIGHT

The procession snakes over the desert's metallic sand. The sand hardens as the procession continues east. Camels skid over the uneven metal, almost solid.

INT. MISHAL'S PROCESSION - WAGON - CONTINUOUS

Noura lies across Tamr's back. She watches Altair, standing over the wagon's walls, sketching the horizon.

He turns. That same effortless smile.

ALTAIR
Noura! Come look!

Noura scruffs Tamr then pulls herself up, stepping beside Altair.

Puddles of liquid metal dot the ground, each one a mirror. Small gems jut from them like teeth. Further out, the puddles widen into a shore. The gems grow taller, branching into crystal trees.

NOURA

Wow.

The procession halts. The wagon doors slide open. Sheikh Mishal stands waiting, leaning on his cane as if he had been expecting this moment.

MISHAL

I thank those poor fools for
encouraging the scenic route.

He gestures outward. Noura and Altair step down.

EXT. SILVERLAKES - SHORE - CONTINUOUS

Around them, gems erupt. Clusters. Spires. Crystal roots buried in the mirrored skin below. All pulsing faintly.

Mishal pats his robe.

MISHAL

Oops, forgot my purse.

Noura and Altair stare at him with blank faces. Mishal chokes with laughter.

EXT. SILVERLAKES - SHORE - LATER

Noura and Altair stand opposite each other and on top of themselves, upside down on the smooth metallic ground. Altair braces.

ALTAIR

I'm ready. Command me.

Noura's fist clenches.

Altair sees it.

ALTAIR

You don't have to do this.

NOURA

I want to.

Noura's fingers loosen.

NOURA
You don't have to do this.

She smirks.

ALTAIR
I do, actually.

He smirks back.

NOURA
I'm serious though.

ALTAIR
So am I.

He steps closer.

NOURA
On three, then.

Noura takes a deep breath.

NOURA
This will feel horrible.

Altair presses his feet to the metal.

NOURA
One.

Altair's eyes are locked on Noura's.

NOURA
Two.

Noura's eyes are locked on Altair's.

NOURA
Three!

He's smiling.

NOURA
I'm so sorry!

Noura scrunches her eyes and turns away.

NOURA
Down!

A flurry of trails screams out of her.

Towards no one.

The trails disappear. Altair pops back where he was.

He is staring at Noura's reflection.

ALTAIR

Whoa.

Noura jumps with excitement.

NOURA

You're immune!

She runs to him.

NOURA

What did that feel like?

ALTAIR

I think you disappeared.

Noura leans back.

NOURA

I what? Can we try again?

They stand on top of their reflections, the horizon's line a perfect mirror.

NOURA

Down!

Trails of Nouras, ghosts without reflections, burst from her. Altair vanishes, while his reflection remains.

Altair's reflection points at her.

ALTAIR

There! You're invisible!

Her trails vanish, and Altair pops back in.

NOURA

Strange.

Noura tilts her head.

NOURA

You were also invisible to me.

EXT. MISHAL'S PROCESSION - CAMPFIRE - NIGHT

Noura rolls her fingers in the air, nodding to phantom beats. She sits cross-legged next to Altair, cast orange by a flickering campfire.

He turns to her.

ALTAIR

What if you're immune too?

The procession around them pulses between soft chatter and hard laughter.

NOURA

I don't think so.

Hitched camels eat from a line of shrubs in front of Noura.

NOURA

You're different.

A cane stakes the ground. Mishal. He sits between them, struggling to cross his legs.

He wraps Altair under his arm.

MISHAL

Nashira may be difficult tomorrow.

Altair looks at Noura. He blushes under Mishal's warmth.

MISHAL

I'm going to need you, my boy.

EXT. FREE MARKETS - CARAVAN PARK - DAY

Noura, Altair, and Mishal weave through unending caravans. Merchants and camels. Ledgers and gems.

They pass an AVIARY DEALER, arms outstretched, with a bird perched on their gloved hand.

AVIARY DEALER

Segurs!

Its sharp talons are clenched between the dealer's fingers, unable to fly.

AVIARY DEALER

Well trained! Many routes available!

Noura stares at its flapping wing, curved like a bow.

Mishal sees her.

MISHAL

Want one?

Noura shakes out of her trance.

NOURA

Oh, no thanks.

Mishal shrugs as their path opens up to a main street wide enough for six whole caravans.

MISHAL

Your loss, I've spent more gems on
a single bottle of wine.

He keeps walking. The roar catches him mid-step.

EXT. FREE MARKETS - MAIN STREET - CONTINUOUS

Hundreds thread through the road in both directions. Grids of massive open warehouses on its two sides. In between are unending market stalls under metal sheets.

They pass a storehouse made of solid ice. Noura peeks inside. All kinds of dead meat. She pinches her nose, flinging herself back. Altair giggles.

They keep moving. A man rattles his gem bag while holding a woman's hand. A mother hands her small daughter gems and kisses her. A man barter with a merchant. The merchant nods and accepts his gems with a smile.

Altair is looking around at everyone. People wear their robes looser here.

ALTAIR

Perhaps I misjudged Nashira's
markets.

Mishal grins at Altair saying this.

MISHAL

Yes! See? This is the future!

He gestures wide.

MISHAL

This is what I've been building!

EXT. FREE MARKETS - GEM PALACE GATE - CONTINUOUS

Nearing the end of the wide street, they approach a gate between columns of crystal pillars wrapped in vine. It is marked with the Gem, emblem of the Free Markets.

The vines sparkle with static. The pillars hum with resonance. The gate swings open.

Noura's fingertips glide over the gate as they walk in. She feels its breath buzzing.

EXT. FREE MARKETS - GEM PALACE GARDEN - CONTINUOUS

Ahead of them, a garden, where blue flowers and gem sculptures play.

Noura walks up to one of them. The sculpture is faceted, angular, built of broad flat planes that refuse to curve.

She steps back, and her eye fills in everything the stone withholds: a person embracing their camel.

Altair's fractured reflection approaches. He presses a palm to one of the flat surfaces. It's cold.

Noura looks at him. He's smiling through heavy eyes. She places a hand on his shoulder, then hugs him.

Mishal watches Altair's eyes shut on Noura's shoulder. He forces a cough.

MISHAL

My brilliance is fashionable, I see.

They let go, turning to him. He gestures.

MISHAL

An imitation of my own palace!

Way ahead, the Gem Palace. Cut, not carved. It takes the golden daylight and hands it back in pieces.

INT. GEM PALACE - HALL OF DEALS - DAY

NASHIRA is dressed as if rank were someone else's concern. A headpiece marked with the Gem is the only indication of her distinction as Sheikha. She is signing scrolls from a pile, one after another.

The ceiling is a jagged mass of crystalline formations, jutting at chaotic angles. Throughout the palace's main hall, rowdy traders negotiate on ruby tables.

Nashira doesn't look up from the pile of scrolls.

NASHIRA

I expected you'd be here sooner.

A scroll is signed. Gems are passed. Hands are shaken.

MISHAL

Apologies, Sheikha.

Mishal stands over her.

MISHAL

We came through the Silverlakes.
The Conqueror blocks the East
Trail.

Nashira drops her pen.

NASHIRA

And is that why you are here?

She looks up. Her eyes turn between Altair and Noura.

NASHIRA

So soon? Your grief certainly had
a short shelf-life, Warden.

Noura's fist clenches. Altair breathes.

Mishal slams the table. Scrolls flutter onto the ground.

MISHAL

Watch your tongue, woman.

The room goes quiet. Helpers collect the scrolls on the floor.

NASHIRA

I assure you, Sheikh, if not for
my tongue, your city would be
rubble.

Nashira turns back to her scrolls.

Mishal grunts.

MISHAL

We're leaving.

He pulls Noura with him. Mishal looks back. Altair is still standing before Nashira.

MISHAL
Now, son!

Altair takes a seat across from Nashira.

NASHIRA
You're refreshingly measured,
warden.

Nashira looks towards Mishal, who is still gesturing for Altair to leave.

NASHIRA
Such emotional liabilities... are
costly.

Altair puts a hand on Nashira's signing hand. She's startled. She meets his eyes.

ALTAIR
I'm sorry for your loss, Sheikha.

Her mouth opens.

ALTAIR
I never told anyone about her.

Nashira's eyes open wider.

NASHIRA
Those NWI scum! What did they tell
you?

Mishal smirks seeing Nashira angry from afar. Altair puts his other hand over hers.

ALTAIR
Your daughter was so passionate.

Nashira throws his hands off.

NASHIRA
Stop it!

Altair is locked onto her eyes.

ALTAIR
Our archives brought her so much
happiness.

Nashira stands. Her chair screeches.

NASHIRA
Was it Aldebaran? Tell me!

ALTAIR
Despite her joy, her memories of
you weighed heavy.

Nashira points at the door.

NASHIRA
Out! Now!

Altair smiles at her. He stands and steps closer.

ALTAIR
My Sight... I feel you.

She steps back.

ALTAIR
Let me in.

Altair extends a hand. Nashira's eyes waver.

Noura watches Nashira's many trails collapse into one.

Nashira grabs Altair as he pulls her into an embrace. She
cries on his shoulder and worry melts from her face.

Noura's breath shallows. Mishal rubs his chin, his lips
curling at a horizon only he can see. The Traders in the
room stare in silence.

Altair pulls back.

ALTAIR
That same peace. It's how she
felt.

Nashira looks small in front of him.

NASHIRA
I never forgave you over the
flower farms, you know.

Her face is softer.

NASHIRA
But this Conqueror, he would kill
my whole market.

Altair holds her eyes.

ALTAIR

The smiles of your people gave me
hope today. I vow to protect your
city, however you choose it to be.

He extends his hand a second time.

Nashira shakes it.

ALTAIR

Although he would never admit it,
your markets impress even our
Sheikh.

They peek at Mishal, his arms crossed, and share a laugh.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - SOUTH TRAIL - NIGHT

Metal reflects the stars. Altair passes on Tamr. Noura is
clinging onto THOUM's white fur as they soar behind.

NOURA

Altair!

Altair looks back as he soars faster, his long hair flapping
ahead of him.

ALTAIR

You can do it! Just feel him!

Thoum grunts and chases. Noura presses her face on the camel
and holds him tight.

NOURA

I can't control him!

She's slipping. Loses her grip. Shuts her eyes.

NOURA

Altair, help!

Altair stretches his hand in the space between the two
camels and rubs Thoum. Noura is still holding tight, her
eyes shut, her hair blowing.

ALTAIR

Thoum is a good boy. But he's an
animal, with a mind of his own.
You must surrender to his rhythm.

Noura opens her eyes. She sees Altair holding out his hand.
She sits upright, and takes it.

ALTAIR
Move with him.

Their hands separate.

ALTAIR
As one.

Noura finds her balance. Puts her hand on Thoum. She feels his breath. She breathes with him. Then soars.

Altair soars on Tamr beside her.

They ride together across the canopy of stars reflected below them. Faster and faster. Tamr and Thoum are neck and neck.

A ledge ahead.

ALTAIR
Slow down!

It extends as wide as the horizon.

Noura is almost at it.

NOURA
I don't know how!

Altair is behind her.

ALTAIR
Pull his reins back!

EXT. AL-LAWHA - EASTERN RIM - CONTINUOUS

Noura pulls back. Thoum skids, a hair's width away from Al-Lawha's eastern edge. Thoum grunts and looks back at Noura.

Altair approaches behind on Tamr.

ALTAIR
Whoa.

There is nothing but stars ahead of them.

ALTAIR
I've never seen the edge before.

Altair gets off Tamr. He peeks down.

There is no bottom. Only darkness.

Altair jolts his head back from vertigo. He giggles. Noura sits. She dangles her legs over Al-Lawha. The world itself is her seat.

Altair pulls her back.

ALTAIR
Careful!

Noura laughs.

NOURA
You worry enough for the both of us, Warden.

She taps the spot next to her.

NOURA
Come on, the wind feels amazing.

Altair submits. He takes out his sketchbook from Tamr's saddle and sits next to Noura. She turns to him. Sees him drawing.

NOURA
Altair?

Altair looks up from his sketchbook.

NOURA
What you did to Sheikha Nashira.

Her eyes fall to her feet, swinging over nothing but clouds.

NOURA
How could you?

Altair puts his sketchbook down. A moment. The wind between them.

ALTAIR
I know what you saw. I felt her walls fall.

He looks at his hands.

ALTAIR
But I didn't push them, Noura. I just... stood close enough.

His hands drop to his lap.

ALTAIR
I don't know where that ends and
my influence begins.

The clouds shift beneath their feet.

Noura doesn't answer. She's looking at the edge.

NOURA
Strange. There are way less clouds
than I remember.

Their clothes flutter.

They lose themselves to the view. Somewhere between the
stars, a speck. It's getting closer. A SEGUR is flying
towards them.

It perches next to Noura. There is something tied to its
feet.

Altair looks at it.

ALTAIR
Must be for you.

Noura holds the bird. She detaches the message and unfolds
it.

ALTAIR
What is it?

She reads it twice.

NOURA
A wedding invitation.

Altair laughs.

ALTAIR
Someone I know?

Noura flips the message over.

An emblem. THREE STARS.

Her breath stops.

NOURA
It's the Conqueror's. He's going
to be in Serpent's Shore.

EXT. MISHAL'S PROCESSION - CAMP - DAWN

The horizon is deep green. Noura is packing a bag. Altair pulls her shoulder from behind.

ALTAIR
You can't go alone.

She looks at Mishal, laughing with others by a campfire.

NOURA
And you can't come with me.

She continues packing.

ALTAIR
Is that a command?

She looks back at him. Her laugh fades as fast as it came.

NOURA
I have to tell you something.

Her hands go quiet on the bag.

NOURA
I'm not a Scholar.

Noura turns away.

NOURA
I was a Soldier.

She looks back.

Altair is still smiling.

ALTAIR
Then you're the smartest soldier
I've ever met.

Noura leaves the bag open and throws her arms around him.

NOURA
I'm going to miss you, Altair.

Altair squeezes tight.

ALTAIR
I'll miss you more.

Noura pulls back, but Altair goes back in, tighter.

ALTAIR
Please come back to us, Noura.

Noura buries her face on Altair.

NOURA
In and out. I promise.

She steps back. Their eyes are locked.

She slings her bag over Thoum's saddle. Mishal catches her eye. She runs to him. He looks up. Noura backed by hazy starlight, smiling over flickering flames.

NOURA
Thank you for your hospitality, my Sheikh.

A quick hug. Mishal roars.

MISHAL
You are most welcome. My city's gates will always open for you, my girl!

Noura smirks.

NOURA
With honor and pride.

And runs back to Thoum.

She waves goodbye as she rides off towards the rising ringed moon.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - SOUTHERN TRAIL - DAY

Noura rides through open desert. Wild Warden's Bloom dot the metal like scattered blue sparks. The ringed moon hangs high in the golden sky. They merge into a busy road.

Thoum weaves between travelers and merchant stalls, between caravans moving both ways. A GROUP marching in formation blocks the path ahead. They chant.

MARCHERS
The Voice calls! Praise our Messiah!

Noura pulls the reins back. Thoum grunts and kicks his feet up as Noura flings off his side, scraping into the metallic dirt. Her arms bleed.

Beside her is a stall marked with three stars. A long line of people wait in front of it. The STALLKEEPER is handing them food.

Noura scruffs Thoum and gets back on.

She breaks away from the trail, into the open desert.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - DUSK

The ringed moon is lower on the horizon, almost beneath a metallic dune ahead. She rides over it as the green of dusk turns black.

EXT. UNION'S POINT - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

On the other side, a ring of domed metal buildings. Other than slight variations in size and rust, it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. The center is open to the sky. A town circle rather than a town square.

A man waves Noura over as she rides into the city. He stands at another stall marked with three stars, another long line of people in front of it.

Noura's eyes waver. She rides the other way.

Noura stands in the city's center between the ring of buildings. Trails of travelers and residents wash around her without rhythm. She hears her drums flicker, her fingers tapping her side, unable to sync to their trails.

The emblem of THREE STARS is everywhere.

On walls. On flags. On sleeves.

Noura turns to one of the buildings, an inn. Her reflection warps on its uneven surface as she hitches Thoum. She enters.

INT. UNION'S POINT - INN - NIGHT

The INNKEEPER smiles behind the counter. An old woman. She stands. Three stars are woven onto her robe. Noura pulls out her bag of gems. The innkeeper puts her hand over it. She laughs.

INNKEEPER

Oh no, my flower, keep your gems.

The innkeeper holds out a key.

INNKEEPER

The stars do not bind by debt.

Noura stares at the gems in her hand.

She takes the key.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - SOUTHERN TRAIL - DAY

Noura rides down the wide trail of metallic gravel. The road is busier than the previous day. The blood on her arm is still wet.

She passes another of the Conqueror's stalls, a long line of people waiting. The person in front is handed a pair of shoes by the stallkeeper. The stallkeeper's eyes meet Noura's.

STALLKEEPER

Noura!

The stranger waves her over.

STALLKEEPER

Come, get in line!

Noura's jaw hangs open. She rides away. Fast.

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - MAIN ROAD - DUSK

Mandarin flowers blanket the main road to Serpent's Shore, glazing it orange. The road is packed with people. Layered robes brush against vine-fiber trousers. Fur-lined leather catches on tailored weaves. Every corner of Al-Lawha dressed in its best. Noura rides Thaum through them. The metallic shacks are no mere shacks anymore. They have been transformed into metallic works of art, each with their own identity, tastefully draped in vines and flowers.

Ahead, a gap between the shacks leads to the decorated overhang that steps over the Serpent's edge. The Serpent's Shore stage.

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - STAGE - CONTINUOUS

On it, the Conqueror holds a veiled woman's two hands. His white robe is cut so precisely it looks sewn onto him. His eyes are full of warmth and longing. A SEER chants behind them.

Flowerlight and starlight twinkle over the couple as the ringed moon sets beneath them. The Seer's chanting breaks into an unpredictable rhythm. The Conqueror embraces the woman. Tender.

Noura is entranced by the Seer's chaotic pulse. Her fingers trace his rhythm, rolling in the air, unable to tame it.

The Conqueror lifts the veil.

It's Nayla.

Noura collapses.

FADE TO:

EXT. SERPENT'S SHORE - STAGE - MOMENTS LATER

Noura's blurred vision comes back. Wedding GUESTS are looking down over her, muttering in worried tones. They help her up.

Noura stands, off balance. She shakes her head.

The Conqueror is kissing Nayla.

Heat floods Noura's face.

NOURA

Nayla!

Nayla breaks from the kiss, snapping to Noura. The guests gasp. The Seer stops chanting and takes a step towards her.

The Conqueror puts a hand on the Seer, then turns to the murmuring guests. Nayla stands beside him. Her eyes locked on Noura. She gestures for Noura to wait.

Noura doesn't. She runs for the platform. The guests part around her, allowing her to pass.

Noura jumps onto the stage, straight to Nayla.

NOURA

Nayla! Are you OK?

She looks back to the Conqueror. His eyes hold her without pressing. Gentle.

NOURA

Did he hurt you?

Nayla smiles, as if in a trance.

NAYLA
Noura, I'm fine.

She hugs Noura.

NAYLA
Thanks for com—

Noura turns to the Conqueror.

NOURA
What are you doing to her?

The Conqueror steps closer. Noura steps back, her arms wide, a wall defending Nayla.

NOURA
Release her! Now!

The watching crowd speaks over itself. They recognize Noura by name.

The Conqueror breathes.

CONQUEROR
To see one star...

Noura turns to Nayla.

NOURA
Nayla, let's go!

She pulls on her hand.

Nayla doesn't budge.

NAYLA
... is not to know the sky.

Terror in Noura's eyes.

She turns back to the Conqueror, sandwiched, arms outstretched protecting Nayla.

NOURA
How are you doing this?

She commands the Conqueror.

NOURA
TELL ME!

The Conqueror falls to the ground. The Seer collapses nearby. The guests scream.

Nayla grabs Noura from behind.

NAYLA
Noura, stop!

Noura's eyes burn.

NOURA
I SAID TELL ME!

The Conqueror looks up, shivering, eyes full of pity.

CONQUEROR
Love, Noura.

Noura's breath catches.

NOURA
Liar! Tricks on tricks!

Nayla holds her hand from behind.

NAYLA
It's not a lie, Noura.

Noura doesn't look.

NAYLA
I love him.

The Conqueror gets up. He helps the Seer to his feet, and gives him a hug.

NOURA
He's an Imposer! You're being
compelled to say that!

Noura looks out over the guests.

NOURA
Can't you all see that!

They are horrified. A hiss.

GUEST
Witch!

A shout.

ANOTHER GUEST
Curse!

Noura falls on her knees. She's trembling.

The Conqueror stands over her. He addresses the audience.

CONQUEROR

There are no curses in our world!

Nayla grabs his shoulder.

NAYLA

I told you.

He shakes his head.

CONQUEROR

She needed to see for herself.

He extends a hand. Noura looks up.

His face is so gentle.

CONQUEROR

I'm Suhail.

Nayla nods behind SUHAIL.

SUHAIL

Nice to finally meet you, sister.

Noura looks up at his open hand.

She cries.

INT. SERPENT'S SHORE - SHEIKH'S SHACK - LATER

A collage of flowers through a mosaic of mirrors, as if inside a lantern. At the central table, Noura, disheveled, sits across from Suhail and Nayla, their arms around each other. The Seer sits alone nearby, eyes locked on Noura.

Suhail glances at the Seer, then back at Noura.

SUHAIL

I've always wanted to thank you in person.

A laugh huffs out of Noura.

NOURA

Thank me? For what?

SUHAIL

Your Time Keeper.

NOURA

H-How do—

SUHAIL

Oh, Noura.

His eyes well.

SUHAIL

If only you knew how incredible
you were.

Nayla is staring at Suhail. Her smile grows.

Noura looks between them.

NOURA

Am I being tricked?

Nayla turns to Noura and leans across the table.

NAYLA

I'll never forget that look on
your face, back in botany class. I
used to be so jealous. You knew
exactly who you were.

She puts a hand on Suhail's lap.

NAYLA

All that light... choked out.

She meets Noura's eyes.

NAYLA

By merit, we advance. Huh?

Nayla smirks. Noura smirks back.

The Seer pants loudly on the other side of the room. Suhail
joins, wheezing, struggling for breath.

He falls onto the floor.

NAYLA

My love!

Nayla drops down to him.

Noura crouches over them.

NOURA

What's happening?

Suhail is breathing heavily. His eyes find Noura's. He grabs her arm, tight. He can barely speak.

SUHAIL
I need you, Noura.

Nayla is stroking his head. She is humming the Melody of Warmth into his ear.

Suhail strains.

SUHAIL
The world. Is losing. Its breath.

Suhail fights to stand up, his eyes desperate on Noura.

SUHAIL
We need a Scholar.

Noura's eyes open.

NOURA
What?

She steps back.

NOURA
No. I'm a Soldier.

Nayla steps forward.

NAYLA
No, you're not.

NOURA
I promised Altair. I have to go back.

Suhail stammers.

SUHAIL
You will have...

He reaches out.

SUHAIL
No one to go back to.

Noura looks behind at the door.

NOURA
What are you talking about?

The Seer grabs her shoulder, startling her. She turns to him. He's smiling with eyes that seem to see past her.

Suhail is smiling too.

SUHAIL

He has been eager to meet you.

Noura sees herself in the Seer's eyes.

NOURA

Who are you?

Nayla watches Noura and the Seer, so close to each other. Her smile aches.

Suhail steps between them.

SUHAIL

For Nayla. Let him show you.

The Seer extends a hand.

SUHAIL

One star is not enough to decide.
Journey with him to the Sacred
Village.

Noura's reflection breaks into pieces across the wall.

NOURA

Why? Didn't the Seers leave?

Suhail looks down.

SUHAIL

Not all of them.

Nayla grabs one of Noura's hands.

NAYLA

I should've reached out to you.

NOURA

Yeah. You should've.

Suhail turns to Nayla.

SUHAIL

She wouldn't have believed us.

NOURA

I still don't!

Noura looks at Nayla. At Suhail.

Suhail breathes.

SUHAIL
Mama would've understood, you
know.

FLASH: Noura's lips on her mother's forehead.

She watches Nayla rubbing Suhail's back.

Watches Suhail, regaining his breath.

Turns to the Seer, his hand still open.

Noura nods.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - SOUTHERN TRAIL - DAY

The Seer rides behind Noura on Thoum. The busy road parts around them. Some reach their hands towards the Seer. Others bow down as they pass.

Noura looks back at him. She raises a brow.

The Seer laughs and shrugs.

NOURA
Can't you talk?

He tilts his head. The stallkeeper waves from one of Suhail's outposts. A long line of followers wait before it.

STALLKEEPER
Noura! Thaaban!

Noura stops Thoum. She turns to the Seer.

NOURA
Is that your name?

THAABAN gestures towards the outpost.

NOURA
How?

He insists, pointing repeatedly.

NOURA
I heard you the first time!

She rides to the back of the line. A FOLLOWER looks back.

FOLLOWER
No, please go ahead.

The whole line turns to Noura and Thaaban. They gesture them ahead.

Noura looks at Thaaban. He winks. Thoun kneels at the front of the outpost. Noura pats him.

NOURA
Good boy.

EXT. SOUTHERN TRAIL - STALL - CONTINUOUS

The stallkeeper watches them step off.

STALLKEEPER
Finally got your attention.

Noura stares at him.

NOURA
How do you know my name?

The stallkeeper laughs. His finger moves down a scroll to her name. He turns it to show her.

STALLKEEPER
There. It's on the list. You're Noura, right?

He looks back at the scroll.

STALLKEEPER
Let's see here.

His head ducks back behind the stall.

He pulls out a bandage.

STALLKEEPER
For your arm.

A bag of nuts. A jug of water.

STALLKEEPER
For your journey.

He calls back to a COOK behind him.

STALLKEEPER
Is it done?

The cook steps forward.

COOK
Right on time!

Puts out a plate of steaming hot, fresh lizard tail.

The stallkeeper reads from his scroll.

STALLKEEPER
Says here it's your favorite.

He hands her the plate with a smile.

Noura sits at the road's edge near the outpost. Beside her, Thaaban packs supplies on Thoum. From the other side of the road, a steady stream of travelers crosses. Through the shifting gaps in the crowd, Noura slowly eats her lizard's tail.

Noura takes a bite. A traveler receives a pair of shoes. Another bite, a blanket. Bite, a traveler smiles, reaching their hand towards the stall. Bite, another smile.

Noura's plate is empty. She looks up from it and sees more travelers joining the back of the line, then to Thaaban, his face pressed against Thoum's fur, petting him good with both his arms.

She finds herself smiling.

EXT. CLIMBER'S VALLEY - NORTHERN LIFT - DAY

A semicircle of metal and flowerlight juts from the canyon wall. It doesn't belong there. It's large enough to swallow a caravan whole. Noura leads Thoum inside. Thaaban steps in behind them. They are pressed shoulder to shoulder.

An orderly line waits as the lift's doors slide closed. It descends.

Noura looks up. Her jaw drops.

A bridge blocks the entire sky. It extends all the way across the Serpent. Noura leans off the elevator rail.

Below, a patchwork city of leather and wood. Trails of travelers and merchants weave between the Valley's mess of leaf-capped huts. To the city's far left, a steep drop descends into a sea of clouds. The lowest edge of Al-Lawha. On the far right, a jungle. Sparse at first, but denser further out as the canyon's width opens up to the full horizon.

Thaaban clicks his tongue. He points at a dried depression running through the city's center. The memory of a river. A line of restaurants is perched alongside it, overlooking the barren view.

Noura turns to him.

NOURA
Must've looked prettier before the
dam.

He nods with eyes that aren't there. The lift slides open.

EXT. CLIMBER'S VALLEY - CANYON FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

Huts and cabins crowd towards Al-Lawha's edge. Beyond them, ropes trail down the canyon's face. Families climb between ledges at different depths. Children scramble up, mothers descend with bags, as routine as walking between rooms. Their clothes are cut for work, like the New World's, but in leather and woven fiber. Belts heavy with stakes and coiled rope.

Noura hitches Thoum in front of a bag of shrubs by the canyon wall. She scruffs him good, and hands gems to a man under a camel sign.

At the back, between huts selling climbing gear, a cabin catches Noura's eye. Its door bears a single star.

A flag waves high above it. 'By Merit, We Advance!'

Noura giggles. Then erupts into full-blown laughter.

Next to her, Thaaban turns towards the Jungle. His smile fades.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Noura, a girl, lies on her bed.

NOURA
Mama, how do you know so much
about it?

Rudaina smiles down at her. Noura rolls her eyes.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - VALLEY SIDE - DAY

Noura looks at her feet as she walks beside Thaaban.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

RUDAINA
The Shimmering Jungle is a Sacred
place.

Rudaina turns away.

RUDAINA
But it is also dangerous.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - VALLEY SIDE - DAY

Dispersed shrubbery condenses on the stone ground. It gets denser with each step.

And denser.

INT. NOURA'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Rudaina holds Noura's hand.

RUDAINA
Do not lose your way, little
heart.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - VALLEY SIDE - DAY

A wall of green rages ahead of them. Trees, plants, and flowers shake violently within a barrier of air current. Deep inside, something shimmers. An iridescent sheen.

Noura looks up at Thaaban. There is fear in his eyes.

They step in. The wind hits like a drum. Hair whips back. Clothes flatten. Their hands go up without thinking, palms forward, pressing into the wall.

They break through.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - DENSE GROWTH - DAY

Thaaban mutters under his breath. He parts the way ahead with a branch. Afterimages trail behind him, doing the same.

Noura blinks at the extra Thaabans, then follows.

The Jungle is dense with a shimmering fog. It's difficult to see too far ahead.

They are surrounded on all sides by lush greenery. Noura looks up. The canopy is beyond sight, buried between treetops.

She looks back down. The chain of Thaabans has multiplied. Each one holds a branch. Each branch bends the jungle around it. She can't tell which hands are real.

The trails cascade into the actual Thaaban. Noura bumps into him.

He grabs a branch before falling. Just one step ahead, a scaly wall slithers past.

Noura's hands fly to her mouth, muffling her gasp.

NOURA
What was that?

Thaaban exhales. He turns to Noura, shakes his head, and continues walking.

Vines hang down in arches. A squeal. Noura looks up.

Dark shapes swing through the canopy above. Long-limbed, hunched, moving like shadows with hands. Their eyes green behind the fog.

She looks back down. Thaaban is way ahead, looping between trees. Noura readies to run after him.

A hand grabs her from behind. She turns.

It's Thaaban.

She looks back to where he was leading.

There's no one there.

She shakes her head.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - NARROW PASSAGE - LATER

Noura squeezes her body between narrow gaps in trees. Thaaban is holding her hand, guiding her ahead.

She is stopped by a pattern in the trunk in front of her. It morphs. A fractal.

Her held hand scratches on the rough wood.

NOURA
Ouch!

She pulls her hand back. A splinter.

Thaaban holds a finger to his mouth. Points up.

The canopy above them slithers.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - TALL GRASS - LATER

Tall grass sparkles like fireflies behind the dense fog. Some of the sparkles are alive. They're crawling.

Thaaban points down. A frog. He gestures widely and steps forward.

Noura looks down as she walks. Every other step, a frog she avoids.

Step. Ribbet. Step. Step. Ribbet.

Drums tick in time with her steps. The sparkles around her drag. They smear onto the fog like star trails.

A harsh sound from the treetops. Noura looks up. A bird, each of its feathers a different color.

Something squishes beneath her. Noura lifts her feet. A dead frog.

NOURA
Oh, no. I'm so sor—

TAREK (V.O.)
(echoing)
Get away from her!

Noura jolts back.

NOURA
Tarek?

She steps on another frog.

NOURA
No, please. I didn't mean—

TAREK (V.O.)
(echoing)
Get away from her! Get away from her!
Get away from her!

Noura is speaking to the fog.

NOURA
I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!

Tears run down her face.

A hand rests on her shoulder.

She jumps.

It's Thaaban. He demonstrates an exaggerated breath.

Noura's quivering. He demonstrates again. She attempts to breathe.

NOURA
Wh-What is this place?

Her pupils are dilated.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - LOST IN THE FOG - LATER

Noura is looking up at a tree. Ants are crawling in a helix, all the way up. Beyond it, the dense jungle stretches as far as the fog allows.

NOURA
Thaaban?

She turns, more frantic.

NOURA
Thaaban!

Green eyes watch her from the forest canopy. They laugh at her. The Director's voice joins them, laughing.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - LOST IN THE FOG - LATER

Noura is lying on a tree trunk. Her eyes are somewhere else.

In front of her, a lone flower blooms with white light. A rodent scurries towards it. Sniffs it.

The ground opens, swallowing the small animal, leaving the lone glowing flower, back as it was.

Noura rolls her fingers through the fog.

NOURA
Tricks on tricks...

FADE TO:

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - FAUNA - LATER

Noura walks through dense bioluminescent fauna, their lights trailing behind as she passes.

FADE TO:

Noura walks through the same dense bioluminescent fauna, their lights trailing behind as she passes.

FADE TO:

Noura walks again through the same dense bioluminescent fauna, their lights trailing behind as she passes.

She shakes her head. Looks the other way. Both sides identical.

She starts sweating. Her drums flutter against her breath.

She falls on the grass and focuses on the pulse of a glowing plant in front of her.

A round, furry creature sits on the plant's stem, breathing slowly. It blinks at her with one eye, then the other. She reaches her hand to it. It moves to her fingers. Noura scratches its head. It purrs and scurries away. Her drumming realigns. Her breath comes back.

She turns the other way, but something catches her foot. A skull. A slug crawls through its hollow eye.

Noura leans down. A skeleton in tattered vine-fiber. Pockets torn open. A pen still clutched in its fingers. And a star pinned on its sleeve.

NOURA
(under her breath)
A Field Scholar.

She salutes.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - DENSE FOG - LATER

The iridescent fog is thick. A kaleidoscope of fauna pulses behind its veil.

Noura looks down. Insects are crawling through everything.

Giant leaves fade in as Noura swats them away. With each step, the fog gets thicker. She can't see anything.

Until something parts the fog open.

A SERPENT's head, the size of an entire residence. It hisses.

Noura screams. Birds fly away.

She jumps sideways just as the snake snaps its head forward. Ants crawl up her hand where she landed.

She gets up and shakes them off.

The giant serpent is right behind her.

Noura runs. She swats leaf after leaf through the dense fog.

Looks behind.

The serpent's tongue.

She runs faster.

A tree trunk.

She slides around it.

The snake slithers, following behind.

The trees get denser. It's hard to see anything.

The serpent is almost at her.

The gap before her is too tight.

Noura climbs between the trunks.

NOURA

Help!

Her hands and legs are outstretched. She races up.

The serpent doesn't fit. It slithers away.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - HIGH BRANCH - CONTINUOUS

Noura sits on a thick branch above. She looks around.

NOURA

Where am I?

A bird stares at her from another branch.

NOURA (V.O.)
She's just jealous we're going to
be placed as Scholars while she's
stuck here.

Noura looks at the bird.

NOURA
What did you say?

There's nothing there. She laughs at the fog. It doesn't
laugh back.

She looks down at the branch beneath her. The ants are
crawling around it. They walk in an unbroken spiral,
continuing over Noura's legs as if she is part of the
branch.

She stares at them. Notices they're carrying food. Smiles.

Her drums join their rhythm. A recursive cadence that folds
back into itself.

She puts her finger to one of the ants. It crawls onto it.
She alternates fingers as it crawls in a straight line
between them.

ALTAIR (V.O.)
(remembered)
You must surrender to his rhythm.

She moves her finger back to the colony. The ant steps off
and falls back into line.

ALTAIR (V.O.)
(remembered)
Move with him. As one.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - UNDERGROWTH - LATER

Noura climbs back down the trees. Something hums through the
fog.

The Melody of Warmth.

Noura dances through dense fog, her steps delicate around
the wildlife. Her metallic drums flicker around her steps,
without rhythm.

She stops. Her eyes open wide.

A large translucent flower. Its petals break light like a
prism.

She smells it. Her whole face opens.

She touches it. Lights hop on its petals like fireworks.

Noura squints. A pattern on it doesn't match the dancing lights. The pattern flutters. A moth hides within it.

NOURA

Whoa.

Noura withdraws her finger without disturbing the moth, then turns.

The Melody calls.

Her drums answer.

She steps towards it.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - LIGHTER FOG - LATER

The fog is lighter. The jungle greener. The melody warmer.

Noura parts larger leaves ahead. They glow with morphing patterns as they move.

Her grin hasn't left. Her eyes are still dilated.

She trudges through thick mud. Something swims in it. It tickles Noura's feet.

She giggles. The Melody's hum is louder.

Green eyes above laugh at her. Noura looks up at them.

MONKEYS. They're laughing hysterically.

She finds herself laughing with them.

The humming is so close, right behind a wall of leaves ahead.

A hiss. The serpent drops from the canopy above.

Noura's drums beat randomly. She breathes. The drums rehere. Close. But they're not syncing.

The serpent's head is larger than Noura's body, the rest of it hidden behind fog.

NOURA

I can't control him.

Her fingers drum phantom beats in the air, syncopating with the Melody of Warmth humming behind.

The Serpent moves with Noura's fingers. It is entranced by them. Its head dances to Noura's drums.

Noura and the serpent move as one.

A silent resonance between them.

It hisses. Then, slithers away into the fog.

Noura bows. Barely. And turns towards her mother's melody.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - SACRED POND - DAY

There is no fog here. Golden skylight streaks onto the surface of a pond. Across from it, an Obelisk hovers. Light breaks around it.

Noura approaches the pond. Her face ripples on its iridescent surface. She looks ahead. The Obelisk hangs in the air. Her drums diffract around its pulse.

Noura crouches onto the grass beside it. She can see the other side.

She waves her hand under it. It passes between the grass and the hovering Obelisk.

NOURA

Just like the Reserve's pallets!

She stands up and reaches out to it. The Melody hums from within its metallic glass. Warmer.

Touch.

SCREAMS swallow her.

Noura jolts back. She looks around. Everything is as it was.

The Melody is louder from within the Obelisk. She braces, and touches it again.

A thousand screams surge through her. She breathes. Her spare hand drums phantom beats in the air, taming the chaos.

Voices swirl on top of each other. Indistinguishable.

Noura focuses on the Melody behind the screams. Behind the voices. She breathes deeper. Her fingers roll to the Obelisk's chaotic pulse.

Through them all, she finds a single voice.

NOURA

Mama?

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - CARAVAN WAGON - DAY

Rudaina is humming the Melody of Warmth in a caravan wagon. She looks up.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - SACRED POND - DAY

Noura jumps back, her hand flinging off the Obelisk. She runs back in.

Screams over screams over screams. She can't find the melody. Her hand presses harder, her eyes crunched.

A hand pulls her back. Noura turns.

NOURA

Thaaban?

He is trembling. She hugs him.

NOURA

Where did you go?

He stares at the Obelisk. Then at her. The Melody of Warmth comes back from within it.

NOURA

Don't you hear that?

Thaaban shakes his head. Noura runs back to the Obelisk.

Thaaban chases behind.

Noura touches it and sees Rudaina.

NOURA

Mama!

Thaaban tries to pull Noura away, but his hand snaps back as if he touched fire.

EXT. METALLIC DESERT - CARAVAN WAGON - DAY

Rudaina's eyes are where Noura would be.

RUDAINA
Little heart, is that really you?

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - SACRED POND - DAY

Noura's eyes are shut. Wet.

NOURA
Yes, Mama!

RUDAINA (V.O.)
Was that Thaaban?

NOURA
What? How do you—

RUDAINA (V.O.)
Oh, my heartbeat.

Rudaina's voice breaks.

RUDAINA (V.O.)
Tell your father I haven't gone a
day without missing him.

Noura falls on the grass, right next to Thaaban. She turns to him.

NOURA
Baba?

Thaaban's jaw trembles. The rest of him follows. Noura swallows him under her arms.

NOURA
Mama misses you.

Her cheek presses to his chest.

NOURA
(quieter)
I didn't get to miss you.

She helps him up. Reaches for the Obelisk.

Thaaban pulls her back. He shakes his head.

NOURA
What? Why?

He shakes his head again. His hand finds his chest. Then, he reaches it out to her.

Noura looks at the Obelisk. Then back at her father.

She takes his hand.

EXT. SHIMMERING JUNGLE - SACRED VILLAGE - DAY

Two trees wrap around each other, their branches tangled, as if they were one. Their roots knot into an arch, forming a tunnel.

Thaaban ducks into the dark path. Noura follows. The roots sparkle in circles around them as they pass.

Light. Another open canopy within the dense jungle.

Huts. Children playing. Women in woven leaf and painted faces. They all go still. They turn to Noura and Thaaban stepping out of the roots.

The Elder, an old woman with shimmering feathers across her arms, walks up to Thaaban. Her eyes pierce his. She gestures at Noura without looking at her.

ELDER

Who's this?

Thaaban smiles. Noura crosses her arms. Her eyes pierce the old woman's.

NOURA

I'm his daughter.

The Elder steps back. A hand flies over her mouth.

Thaaban kisses her forehead. Her feathers shake.

ELDER

Rudaina was right... What have I done?

She gets closer to Noura. Meets her eyes. Then pulls her into an embrace.

ELDER

I'm so sorry, my heartbeat.

Noura leans back, brows raised.

NOURA

Should I know you?

The Elder holds Noura's face.

ELDER
It is my fault that you don't.

Noura looks at her. Looks at Thaaban. Looks back. Nothing connects.

ELDER
I'm Thaaban's mother.

A pause.

ELDER
Your grandmother.

The drums behind Noura's ears go silent.

Thaaban yanks on Noura, like an excited child. He points behind a hut.

The Elder turns to him.

ELDER
But it has another's name?

Thaaban shakes his head and points at Noura.

The Elder laughs.

ELDER
I haven't seen him this excited in years.

Noura's eyes won't rest. A child laughs, and her head turns. A painted face watches her, and her head turns. The Elder's feathers shift in a breeze, and her head turns. She cannot choose what to look at.

She sees her father. He is gesturing harder for her to follow. He yanks her, impatient. Gestures forward again and again then walks ahead.

EXT. SACRED VILLAGE - BEHIND A HUT - CONTINUOUS

Noura follows. A hut. Then around it.

Her mouth opens. No sound comes.

The jungle's shimmer has shape. Long feathers trail behind a massive BIRD like cloth in wind. Each one catches the canopy's light and breaks it into a thousand colors. Greens, golds, reds, blues. Its outline keeps dissolving into the trees. The head lowers.

One foot is tucked beneath the body.

Feathers rouse along its neck.

Noura screams.

NOURA

An Anqa!

She starts jumping up and down.

NOURA

What a glorious day!

Thaaban laughs. Noura throws her arms around him.

NOURA

Thank you.

She lets go.

But he doesn't. Tighter.

He leans back and turns to the spectacular creature.

Noura notices a tag around one of its legs. It reads, 'For Tarek.' She forgets to breathe.

ZOOKEEPER (V.O.)

(remembered)

The only descendants of Anqas,
Tarek, are stories.

NOURA (V.O.)

(remembered)

We'll see who's laughing when
we're flying on one.

Her eyes flood. A laugh huffs out of her, but it breaks halfway. She turns to her father.

Thaaban is shaking violently. His eyes roll up.

Noura grabs him. Her eyes go somewhere else.

SUHAIL (V.O.)

This is hurting us—be quick—

NOURA

Suhail? How are—

Noura is still holding Thaaban, her eyes not present.

SUHAIL (V.O.)
Would you help us?

Foam bubbles out of Thaaban's mouth.

Nayla's voice rises behind Suhail's.

NAYLA (V.O.)
The world needs you, Noura!

Thaaban's cheeks bleed from biting into them.

Suhail is growling in pain.

SUHAIL (V.O.)
Noura! I can't kee—

NOURA
OK.

Suhail lets out a shaky puff of air, as if a great weight had just been lifted from his chest.

NOURA
What do you need me to do?

Thaaban flings back and collapses onto the grass. Noura's eyes are back. She sees him.

He looks up at her from the ground, panting.

Then, he smiles.

CUT TO:

INSERT - A SLAB OF IRIDESCENT METAL

Etched onto it: "END OF TABLET"