

T H E  
C H R O N I C L E S O F C H O  
T H E  
L A N D O N C E L O S T

anton a. hill

FADE IN:

On a deep blue emblem of exotic design. The style is reminiscent of a visual marriage of Arabic and Egyptian hieroglyphics. This emblem is the Great Seal of Niris-Im.

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS - NIGHT

The Great Seal hangs high above an enormous, blue room with a narrow, five hundred seat table. Everything in this room, and in this world, is fashioned from glass.

Standing at the table is His Eminence RESEV-IM, a striking man, dressed in a blue Priest's uniform. He pours a drink. Breathes in its aroma. Sips. An unseen VOICE speaks to him in a language resembling a harsh, ancient German.

VOICE

We've located him, Your Eminence.

INT. HALL OF RECORDS

A dim, grey room. In the center stands a circle of computer terminals. Over them hovers a golden-brown, holographic image of a block of interwoven vines.

A MAN, late 20s, dressed in a grey Officer's uniform, is at one of the terminals. He hastily types lines of code. Ever suspicious, he shoots periodic glances down the hallway.

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS

Resev stares at his glass.

RESEV

Bring him.

VOICE

Yes, Your Eminence.

INT. HALL OF RECORDS

The image of an ancient stone Shrine hangs before the Man. A knot of vines twists out of the holographic block. Envelops the image. Sucks it in. The Man shuts down his terminal. The room darkens. The Man quietly escapes down the hallway.

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS

Resev sips.

VOICE

He's on his way, Your Eminence.

RESEV  
And his family.

VOICE  
Yes, Your Eminence.

RESEV  
Be discreet.

VOICE  
As always, Your Eminence.

INT. QUARTERS

Black. A soft shimmer flashes. Then another. It's light reflecting off a rotating, azure, crystal sculpture. About a foot tall, the sculpture resembles a miniature tree with serpentine branches. This object is a Wemanim.

NALID-IM, a curious boy of three, in a white uniform, gazes into the Wemanim.

Nalid's mother, a WOMAN, late 20s, dressed in Officer's grey, holds Nalid's sleeping younger brother, MANA-IM. The Woman anxiously packs last-minute supplies into two compact cases.

The Wemanim's rotation slows... Nalid spins it again. His mother eyes the front door. Nods at Nalid.

WOMAN  
Hurry, Nalid-Im. Receive your blessings before your father returns.

Nalid plants himself in front of the nearest wall. Presses it with his index finger.

A white control screen draws itself out from under Nalid's fingertip. On the screen appears the Great Seal, then the sparkling, golden-brown image of the disembodied head of NIRIS-IM, an austere old man. The god of these people.

The Idol gives Nalid a warm smile. The Idol's voice is deep and comforting, but within it there lies a disturbing, otherworldly resonance.

NIRIS-IM  
My blessings upon you, your family, and your home, my child. Did you attend service today...

The Idol's image flickers.

NIRIS-IM  
...Nalid-Im?

The boy nods.

NIRIS-IM  
Wonderful, my child. Attend every  
day, and, in the next life, you may  
join me in the Tower of Ufanim.

Nalid gazes at him anxiously. Glances at his mother. She's  
busy packing. Nalid scoots closer. Whispers.

NALID  
Your Glory Niris-Im, what's outside  
of Cho?

The Idol flickers.

NIRIS-IM  
There is nothing beyond our  
glorious city, my child.

NALID  
Then where's Nothanam?

Flicker.

NIRIS-IM  
All things will become clear to you  
in time, my child.

Confused by the Idol's answer, Nalid opens his mouth to ask  
another question --

The Man bursts in. The Woman runs to him.

WOMAN  
There you are! I've been so  
worried! Did anyone see you?!

MAN  
No one. Is everything ready?

The Woman nods. Points to the packed cases. The Man grabs  
them. And Nalid. Leads them out. The Woman hesitates at  
the door. Her eyes linger on her Wemanim. She moves to grab  
it.

WOMAN  
I'm taking it with us!

The Man holds her back. With a calm tone...

MAN

No, my love.

The Woman nods regretfully. The Man looks over their quarters one last time. Shuts the door.

INT. TRANSPORT BAY

A control panel stands before a large portal. Outside shine the millions of lights of Cho, a magnificent glass city.

The family rushes in. The Man touches the control panel. A small map lights up. The Man notices his wife's worried eyes. Caresses her cheek.

MAN

Be brave, my love. They'll never find where I've hidden it.

He punches in coordinates. A clear, two-seat shuttle hovers in through the portal, straight toward them. The shuttle door slides open.

EXT. CHO

The shuttle shoots off into a vast channel. It joins thousands of others. They fly at amazing speeds. In all directions. A crash seems inevitable. The family's shuttle passes right next to another. No one even flinches.

These shuttles zip past tall towers, domes, and palaces. The buildings glow from the millions of lights within them and sparkle under the clear, starry night.

INT. SHUTTLE

The Man and Woman hold hands. Mana begins to cry. His mother sings quietly to him. Nalid senses her fear.

NALID

Where are we going?

The Man puts a finger to Nalid's lips. Smiles. Nalid peers out of the shuttle, at the city streaming by.

In the distance, Nalid sees the tallest building in all of Cho: the Tower of Ufanim. It reaches high into the sky. Disappears within a circle of clouds. Illuminates them with a blue halo.

Nalid presses his face against the glass. Breathes its name in awe.

NALID  
The Tower of Ufanim.

EXT. CHO

The shuttle reaches its destination transport bay.

INT. TRANSPORT BAY

The family rushes out into a...

EXT. CEMETERY

Tall, twisting glass sculptures dot the serene, lamp-lit park. The perfectly preserved remains of countless Officers lie beneath frosted panes. The tombs are marked with etchings over the dead Officers' faces.

The family hurries through. Stops at a great, grey wall, more than a hundred feet high.

WOMAN  
Are you sure this is the place?

MAN  
It matches the coordinates I found  
in the Archives.

...Lurking in the shadows, several dark figures close in.

The Man sets Nalid down. Nalid touches a nearby grave. Shivers.

WOMAN  
Nalid!

She gestures for Nalid to stay next to her. Nalid obeys.

The Man goes through one of their cases. Clothes. A hand-sewn parachute. Food packages. The Man locates a small blade. Uses it to etch an X into the wall's surface large enough for them to crawl through.

As his father works, Nalid gazes through the thick wall. At the buildings outside.

NALID  
His Glory Niris-Im said there's  
nothing outside of Cho.

WOMAN  
Niris-Im doesn't know everything.

Nalid's shocked at his mother's blasphemy, but says nothing. The Man finishes the X. Attaches small explosives to it. Grabs a detonator from his bag. Eases his family away from the wall. Clicks the detonator...

A low, throbbing pulse emanates from the X.

MESSENGER

A pleasure to finally meet you.

The Man spins around. Leaps in front of his family. Standing before them is a massive man, MESSENGER, and a dozen SERVANTS. Their dark helmets obscure their faces. Their long, curved, glinting swords eagerly await fresh blood.

The Man holds up his detonator. Gives Messenger a cocky grin.

MAN

One step closer, and I'll blow you straight to Nothanam.

The X's pulse quickens to a shrill whine. The Servants inch toward them. Both parties wait for the other to attack --

MAN

Now!!

Holding Mana tightly in her arms, the Woman sprints for the transport bay. The Man grabs Nalid in one arm, his cases in the other, and runs after her. Messenger and his Servants are about to give chase when --

SHRIEK!! A torrent of crystal spikes explodes from the X. The Servants' helmets and uniforms shatter. Tear their flesh into bleeding chunks. Suffocating on their own blood, the Servants wriggle to the ground.

Messenger dodges the blast, but it's too late. The explosion knocks him to the ground.

INT. TRANSPORT BAY

The Woman hurries into the shuttle. The Man punches in coordinates. Jumps in after her. The doors slam shut. The shuttle takes off toward the wounded Cemetery wall.

EXT. CEMETERY

The shuttle zooms past Messenger and his Servants. Knocks over a line of sculptures.

Messenger picks himself up. Blood drips from his helmet's scarred faceplate. He waves to his surviving Servants. They all stumble to the transport bay.

The shuttle's about to crash through the remainder of the Cemetery wall, when --

INT. TRANSPORT BAY

Messenger reaches the control panel. Enters a command.

INT. SHUTTLE

It halts. The family slams against the shuttle wall. The Woman panics.

WOMAN

Noth!!

The Man sets down Nalid. Sees Messenger and his Servants coming. Attempts to pry open the door. Slams into the door. No use. The Man braces himself against the opposite wall. Kicks the door over and over. A tiny crack appears.

Messenger and his Servants surround the shuttle. Messenger signals to a Servant at the control panel. The shuttle opens. No escape.

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS

Resev waits patiently at the table. Messenger and his Servants march in the family. The Man and Woman cling to their children. Behind Resev, on the far wall, Nalid notices the Great Seal. Messenger bows to Resev.

MESSENGER

Your Eminence.

RESEV

Welcome.

He sets down his glass. Turns to the Man.

RESEV

Such a lovely family. My Priestess Lahia-Nam has always wanted to have two more.

He eyes Nalid.

RESEV

Young Nalid must be near four by now. He possesses such a fascinating mind.

Nalid's parents are astonished. Resev notices with a cunning grin.

RESEV

Oh yes. We know everything. About young Nalid's vast talents. About what you've found and what you intended to do with it.

The Man struggles.

MAN

Your Eminence, please! The people of Cho deserve to know the truth!

Resev's grin disappears.

RESEV

The only truth is that which His Glory Niris-Im dictates!!

He turns away. Snaps his fingers. Messenger tears Nalid and Mana from their parents' arms. The boys scream. Their parents rip into the Servants. Fight desperately to save their children. The Servants beat them down.

Nalid reaches out to his parents. Barely grasping Nalid's hand, the Man attempts to reassure him.

MAN

We'll be together again. In the Tower of Ufanim.

The Servants drag him and his wife out of the room.

INT. RESEV'S QUARTERS

A grand dwelling with floor to ceiling windows. A panorama of the nearby Tower of Ufanim and the rest of Cho. Dozens of rooms. Exquisite furniture. Resev's wife, Her Eminence LAHIA-NAM, runs to the door. A pair of Servants opens it.

Resev steps in with Nalid and Mana. The boys are petrified. Their eyes are red from sobbing. Nalid takes in the vastness of the quarters. On a nearby table, his eyes find Lahia's Wemanim. Far cruder than his mother's.

Lahia reaches for Mana. Cuddles him in her arms. Her eyes glisten with joy.

LAHIA

Oh, Resev. They're so beautiful.

Resev kisses her.

RESEV

Anything for you, my love.

LAHIA

What about their memories?

RESEV

The medicine will take full effect in a few moments. After that, we'll be the only family they know.

He calls out to the other rooms.

RESEV

Galo-Im?

From a distant room, a Servant leads GALO-IM out to them. He's a chubby little boy in white, a couple years older than Nalid.

RESEV

These are your new brothers. Their parents were killed in an accident. His Glory Niris-Im has placed them in our charge. Greet them.

Galo doesn't budge. Resev speaks in a warning tone.

RESEV

Now.

Galo stomps over. Under his father's harsh stare, Galo holds out a hand. Nalid glares at him with blazing hatred. Resev sets Nalid down. Nalid shoves Galo to the ground. Hides behind the Wemanim. Lahia goes over to him. Kneels.

LAHIA

Go ahead. Say hello.

She puts a comforting hand on Nalid's back. Nalid stares at her with confused, frightened eyes. Shakes his head. His sense of where he is, and who these people are, deteriorates with every passing moment. He tears away.

NALID

Noth!!

Resev picks him up. Nalid screams. Resev carries him back to Galo. Holds him firmly in place. Galo timidly embraces Nalid, but Galo's eyes betray his dislike for his new brother.

Nalid gazes at the Wemanim... and beyond it, out the window, at the Tower of Ufanim, before so distant, now so very near. Clutching to his final shred of memory, Nalid passes out. Whispers sadly.

NALID

In the Tower of Ufanim.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

INT. NALID'S ROOM - MORNING

Screens depicting sculptural motifs, architectural features, and tracts of literature cover the walls.

Nalid, now early 20s, slim and handsome, studies the glyphs on three literature screens. He points to each one. Pronounces them. Memorizes them.

Resev calls from a far off room.

RESEV

Nalid-Im?!

NALID

One more minute!

He tries to speed up his research.

INT. DINING ROOM

Resev, Lahia, Galo, and Mana enjoy breakfast. Galo's now a towering, barrel-chested man in grey. Mana's lanky and boyish. Resev and Lahia have a few more lines and grey hairs.

Resev takes a bite of his meal. Grumbles at Mana.

RESEV

Mana, fetch your brother.

Mana stands. Wipes his mouth.

INT. NALID'S ROOM

Mana throws the door open.

MANA  
Still "studying" for your exam?

He sees Nalid's research. Quickly shuts the door.

MANA  
Not again, Nalid-Im! If father catches you --!

NALID  
I'm not afraid of him.

MANA  
You should be.

NALID  
Mana, I'm close. I can feel it.

He drags Mana over to his research. Points out different literature screens. Their glyphs range from simple characters, to elaborate, calligraphic works of art.

NALID  
This is the Choan we speak every day. This is two thousand years older. This is the oldest I could find. Five thousand years.

Mana's mildly intrigued.

MANA  
As old as Cho itself.

NALID  
Wrong. They all show patterns of change which started before this.

He touches a screen with ancient glyphs.

NALID  
Our language originated more than three thousand years before Niris-Im created our fair city.

Mana scoffs.

MANA  
That's insane. There was nothing before Cho.

NALID

That's a myth. Our city evolved just like art, architecture, and language.

MANA

If father hears you, he'll send you straight to Nothanam.

Nalid shakes his head. Laughs.

NALID

Another myth!

He faces his brother.

NALID

Myths have bound our people for millennia. My work will set them free.

MANA

That's blasphemy, Nalid-Im! Father won't stand for it!

Nalid ignores him. Gazes at the screen with the oldest glyphs.

NALID

When I can access the Hall of Records, I'll find text old enough to reveal the root of these patterns.

He smiles at his brother.

NALID

Imagine it, Mana-Im. My work could overthrow the entire theocracy of Cho. Give the city to her people.

Mana's about to protest when --

RESEV

Nalid-Im! Mana-Im!

MANA

Let's go --!

NALID

Mana. They've returned. Their faces were as clear as the sky --

Mana's about to respond, when --

Galo barges in. Nalid touches the wall. His research vanishes.

GALO  
Father's waiting.

INT. CLASSROOM

Touching highlighted glyphs on their desk screens, thousands of students work on their exams.

The TEACHER keeps an eye on his own display. It shows several horizontal graph bars marked with the students' names. As the students answer correctly, the bars grow farther to the right.

One bar stretches to the middle of the others. Completely average. The Teacher glances at Nalid. Deep in concentration. Another bar barely moves. The Teacher shakes his head. Studies KUHHEL-IM, large, muscular.

Kuhel waits until the Teacher turns away from his screen. Kuhel pretends to scratch his palm. A cheat sheet slips into his hand.

The Teacher checks Nalid's bar. Still in the middle. Kuhel's bar suddenly jumps ahead of Nalid's and the other's. It catches the Teacher's attention. His brow furrows.

EXT. CEMETERY - EVENING

The same one where Nalid's family attempted escape. The sculptures sparkle in the warmth of sunset. Walking hand-in-hand, Nalid and ALAD-NAM stroll the grounds. She's a lovely young woman, in grey, a couple years older than him.

ALAD  
You should work for the Council.  
For your father. You could become  
a Priest in ten years. Maybe less.

Nalid laughs.

NALID  
The Tower of Ufanim would tumble  
into the furnaces of Nothanam  
before Resev let me sit at the  
Council's table.

He shakes his head.

NALID

No, he's groomed Galo for the Priesthood since he was a boy. I'm going to be an Archivist.

ALAD

Why in Nothanam would you do that!?

NALID

I'll have access to the Hall of Records.

Alad sighs impatiently.

ALAD

Nalid, you've been a Servant to your ridiculous "theories" as long as I've known you --

NALID

They're the truth!

Alad lets go of his hand. Faces him.

ALAD

Our quarters will be tiny!

NALID

We'll make room!

ALAD

You'll never have time for us!

NALID

I'll find time!

Alad turns away.

ALAD

Sometimes I think you love your theories more than anything or anyone else in Cho.

Nalid turns her to face him. Tenderly holds her face.

NALID

Alad, you know that's not true.

Alad looks away. Nalid goes to a nearby sculpture. Kneels. Picks a cube out from under the sculpture. Brings the cube to her. Touches his fingertip to its top. The cube melts away. Reveals:

A Wemanim. It's breathtaking. A base of dozens of clear vines weave together into a thick, twisting, rope trunk. The trunk blooms gracefully into a flurry of tendrils.

Alad gasps. Her eyes shine with tears.

ALAD

My Wemanim! It's... amazing!

She touches it gently, as if her fingers could shatter it. She kisses Nalid. He gets on one knee.

NALID

Alad-Nam, I swear I will always love you. You and no other. To my final day.

Alad smiles. Speaks softly.

ALAD

Always?

Nalid stands. Holds her close. Whispers.

NALID

Always.

They kiss.

INT. GREAT HALL - EVENING

A grand coliseum, it houses millions upon millions of people. The populace of Cho.

Resev, Lahia, Galo, and Mana sit together in a balcony high above the stage.

On stage, Nalid stands at attention with thousands of his classmates. A fanfare sounds. The hall goes dark. A single spotlight illuminates the very center of the stage. The PRIEST PRESENTER steps into the circle of light.

All heads turn to him. The hall quiets. The Presenter raises his hands. His voice echoes through the hall.

PRESENTER

People of Cho, from the Tower of Ufanim, His Glory, Niris-Im!

He steps out of the circle. The disk of light rises from the stage. Hovers several feet above. From unseen heights, a stream of sand pours straight down onto it. The sand billows into a great mass. Molds itself into the head of Niris-Im.

Niris-Im smiles at the crowd. The crowd smiles back. Niris-Im's voice flows from every direction.

NIRIS-IM

My children, those who stand before us have earned our admiration and blessing. I am proud to present them. Behold, our new Officers!

The audience erupts in applause. When it dies down, Niris-Im continues.

NIRIS-IM

Before we begin, it has come to my attention that one young man has distinguished himself above the rest.

He faces Nalid, who nearly tumbles over from the attention.

NIRIS-IM

Nalid-Im, son of my Priest Resev-Im and his Priestess Lahia-Nam, please step forward.

Nalid cautiously obliges. Eyes the Idol suspiciously. Seemingly unaware of Nalid's presence, the Idol continues.

NIRIS-IM

Because your academic achievements surpass those of any in the history of Cho, I hereby grant you a seat on the Council of Priests.

The audience gives Nalid a standing ovation. It's overwhelming. An entire nation's praise.

Nalid forces an uneasy smile. Bows to the crowd. Finds his family. Stares at his father.

Resev and Lahia applaud proudly. Mana cheers for his brother. Galo winces with envy.

INT. RECEPTION HALL

All the new Officers, their families, and many older Officers celebrate. Servants meander with drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Resev, Lahia, Galo, and Mana present Nalid to their guests.

RESEV

Thank you all for joining us in our son's celebration.

He faces Nalid.

RESEV

Nalid-Im, you have made us so very proud. It has been a true blessing to watch you become a man.

He swallows the lump in his throat.

RESEV

I only wish your... first parents could have seen this day. You would have made them proud as well.

He raises his glass. The crowd does the same.

RESEV

We have great plans for you in the years to come. His Glory Niris-Im's blessings upon you.

Everyone claps, then the crowd goes back to socializing.

Galo glares at his father. Wanders off to the nearest Servant. Throws back a few. A small crowd of girls finds Mana.

Kuhel, the one who cheated on his exam, greets Nalid with open arms, and a winning smile.

KUHEL

His Eminence, the great Priest Nalid-Im! I always knew it would happen!

NALID

Behind every great Priest stand his great friends, Kuhel.

They embrace.

KUHEL

Where is Alad?

NALID

Still at her station. She said she'd find me later.

KUHEL

Something's bothering you.

NALID

It's nothing.

KUHEL  
 Nalid-Im, how long have we known  
 each other?

Nalid steers Kuhel away from the crowd.

NALID  
 Doesn't it seem strange?

KUHEL  
 That Galo has yet to find himself a  
 woman? Or that Mana can't seem to  
 find enough?

Nalid laughs. Eyes the crowd. Kuhel nods. Leads them out.

EXT. CHO

Nalid and Kuhel step into the shadows.

NALID  
 I don't want any station higher  
 than Archivist.

Kuhel nods.

KUHEL  
 Your theories.

NALID  
 Why would Niris-Im grant me a seat?

KUHEL  
 Why question the will of His Glory?  
 You now have what every Officer has  
ever wanted.

NALID  
 That's what frightens me.

Kuhel laughs. Leads them back inside.

KUHEL  
 Enough of this. Tell me. You and  
 Alad?

NALID  
 The wedding's in two weeks.

INT. RECEPTION HALL

Kuhel slaps Nalid on the back.

KUHEL  
Congratulations! But now, you face  
the most difficult choice of your  
entire life. Galo or Mana?

NALID  
I was hoping, if you weren't  
otherwise engaged, that you'd be my  
best man.

KUHEL  
It'd be an honor, my old friend.

NALID  
Then it's settled. Now tell me.  
Your station?

Kuhel gives him a dismissive wave.

KUHEL  
I'll get by wherever they place me.

NALID  
You always have.

INT. TRANSPORT BAY - NIGHT

Nalid punches coordinates into the control panel. A single-seat shuttle arrives. The door slides open.

ALAD  
There room for one more?

Nalid finds her leaning seductively against the entrance. She joins him. Politely pushes him aside.

ALAD  
I have a better way, Your Eminence.

She enters a command. A new route replaces the one Nalid had entered. This one covers extensive areas of the city. Nalid laughs.

NALID  
Alad, that'll take all night.

Alad gives him an alluring smile.

ALAD  
I know.

She takes his hand. Pulls him in. The door slides closed behind them.

INT. SHUTTLE

Pressed together in the cramped space, Alad wraps her arms around Nalid's neck. They kiss.

INT. TRANSPORT BAY

The shuttle launches out into the thousands of others traversing the great city.

INT. SHUTTLE

Steaming up the shuttle, Nalid and Alad make love as they fly through the night.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

EXT. CHO - MORNING

The towers and palaces reflect the clear blue sky and sparkle under the morning sun. Enchanting at night, the city is glorious during the day.

Millions of people hike to their stations. Hundreds of thousands of shuttles weave around each other. Flawless, perfect order.

INT. TRANSPORT BAY

Nalid and Alad's shuttle coasts to a smooth stop. The door slides open. He helps her out. They kiss as they make their way to the control panel.

ALAD

Thank you for such a lovely evening, Your Eminence.

NALID

Thank you for stealing me away, my Priestess.

He kisses her. With one last smile, Alad disappears into a corridor. Nalid steps back into the shuttle. Flies home.

INT. RESEV'S QUARTERS

Nalid sneaks in. No one's up yet. He runs into his room.

INT. NALID'S ROOM

Nalid quickly undresses. Jumps into bed. Just as he's getting comfortable --

His father marches in.

RESEV  
Enough sleep, Nalid-Im.

He tears off the bedclothes. Nalid rubs his eyes.

RESEV  
You have an appointment with the Council.

INT. TRANSPORT BAY

Nalid and Resev land in front of an ancient, stately building, the Hall of Priests.

INT. RECEPTION CHAMBER

Five hundred Servants stand at either side of a long path. Resev and Nalid follow it to the double doors at the other end. After a few feet, Nalid stops. A wave of bewilderment washes over his face.

RESEV  
What is it?

NALID  
I've been here before.

RESEV  
Impossible.

They continue down the path. The last two Servants open the doors for them. Resev motions for Nalid to proceed.

RESEV  
After you, Your Eminence.

Nalid steps inside.

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS

Around the table sit five hundred men, the PRIESTS, each with his own attending Servant. As Resev and Nalid enter, the Priests stand. Bow to Nalid. He's struck by the gesture.

At the opposite end of the room, Nalid notices the Great Seal bearing Niris-Im's glyph.

FLASH TO:

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS - NIGHT

...the first time Nalid saw it.

BACK TO:

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS - MORNING

Nalid blinks. Nervously bows in return.

RESEV  
Gentlemen, may I present my son,  
Nalid-Im.

They all greet him. Resev motions for him to sit at the end. With a nod, Nalid obeys.

Resev snaps his fingers. His Servant sets a Priest's uniform in front of his son. Nalid dangles his fingers over the cloth. Marks it with the slightest indentations. Nalid sits back. Takes a deep breath.

Resev nods. Nalid gazes at him, at the Priests, then stands. Removes his uniform. Puts on the new one. The Priests clap.

RESEV  
A perfect fit!

Nalid starts hyperventilating. Grips the edge of the table for support.

FLASH TO:

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS - NIGHT

Messenger tears Nalid and Mana from their parents' arms.

BACK TO:

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS - MORNING

Nalid's head is swimming.

RESEV  
Now, where shall we begin?

Nalid looks like he's about to vomit.

FLASH TO:

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS - NIGHT

Nalid reaches out to his parents. Barely grasping Nalid's hand, his father attempts to reassure him.

MAN

We'll be together again. In the  
Tower of Ufanim.

BACK TO:

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS - MORNING

The words echo in Nalid's mind. He finds everyone staring at him.

RESEV

Nalid?

Nalid stumbles out of the room.

INT. NALID'S QUARTERS

They're similar to Resev's, except for the proud placement of Alad's Wemanim on a table in the first room. Nalid steps in.

NALID

Here you are.

Already dressed in her Priestess uniform, Alad greets him. Admires his new uniform.

ALAD

Quite handsome.

Nalid gestures to their quarters.

NALID

When did all this happen?

ALAD

This morning.

NALID

We're not even married yet.

ALAD

They know we will be soon.

She pulls him to the windows. Points outside. Gazes in reverence.

ALAD  
So close to the Tower of Ufanim.  
Its shining glory will greet our  
children each dawn.

Nalid eyes her, uncomfortable with her prediction.

NALID  
Each dawn.

Alad smiles at him, then drags him toward other rooms.

ALAD  
And the kitchens are amazing!

She stops. Senses his mind is elsewhere.

ALAD  
I'm sorry, love. I'm being so  
selfish. Was the Hall of Priests  
everything you expected?

Nalid sits down. Alad joins him.

NALID  
...As I sat there before them, I  
had this terrible feeling.

Alad takes his hand.

ALAD  
Of course you did. It's only  
natural to feel a certain awe.

NALID  
No, Alad. This wasn't awe. It was  
fear. Like I've never known.  
...Except in my nightmares. I need  
to go to the Hall of Records.

He heads out. Alad chases after him. Catches him at the door. Pulls him back. Holds him.

ALAD  
You can't go now.

She grins mischievously.

ALAD  
You haven't even seen our bedroom.

NALID

I'll be back soon.

Crestfallen, Alad gives him a quick nod. Nalid kisses her. Leaves.

INT. HALL OF RECORDS

Little more than a reception desk and hallways branching off to record rooms. Nalid marches in. The Servant on duty greets him immediately.

SERVANT

Your Eminence.

He bows. Not really enjoying his new authority, Nalid finds it difficult to respond.

NALID

...I'd like to see the records on the Creation.

INT. RECORD ROOM

Nalid orients himself to the system. The holographic block of interwoven vines above his terminal displays an image like a microscope observing hairs. Nalid types commands. The block zooms in. A vine unravels itself. Faces him.

From within the vine spring a dozen illusory screens. They show glyphs similar to the ones Nalid researched. He sighs. Types again. More screens. More glyphs. More disappointment.

Nalid repeats the process again and again. Searches through Cho's written history. Soon, the entire space above him is filled with glyphs in various stages of evolution. He compares them, studies them, obsesses over them until --

ALAD

Love?

Nalid finds her concerned face on the wall behind him. He turns to her. Rubs the frustration from his temples.

NALID

I'll be home soon.

He touches her screen. It vanishes. He shuts down his terminal. Leaves.

INT. NALID'S QUARTERS - NOON

Nalid and Alad share lunch. Nalid stirs his food in circles on his plate. Alad touches his rotating hand. His eyes find her.

NALID

Sorry.

ALAD

You didn't find any text.

NALID

I was sure it would be staring me in the face. A song. A poem. Something that proves we weren't created from... nothing!

He sighs. Alad holds his hand.

ALAD

Perhaps you were looking too closely. You're a Priest now. You can always go back later.

INT. NALID'S ROOM - NIGHT

Alad is fast asleep in Nalid's arms. Nalid's wide awake. Staring at the ceiling. Suddenly, his eyes snap open with the spark of inspiration. He carefully slips away from Alad.

INT. RECORD ROOM

The holographic block above the terminal zooms out until a sea of vines hangs before Nalid. He studies the immense system. A tiny, nearly undetectable detail catches him. The block zooms in.

It's a cluster of bulging, discolored vines. Despite Nalid's commands, the vines keep still. Surprised, Nalid tries again. No reaction. He enters a flurry of commands. Surrounding vines reach in. Split the cluster open.

A small cube appears. Opens itself. A mass emerges. Molds itself into the shape of Nalid's forgotten father. Sudden, unexpected recognition flashes across Nalid's face. He presses himself against the wall. The illusion speaks.

MAN

Greetings, Nalid-Im.

INT. NALID'S ROOM

The wall lights up with Nalid's face.

NALID

Alad, you're a genius! I was  
looking too closely!

Alad blinks awake.

ALAD

Where are you?

INT. RECORD ROOM

Nalid is at his terminal. Alad stands at his side. They  
listen to his father's image. Next to it, the Shrine.

MAN

From what we can tell, not only is  
it composed of an unknown material,  
but it lies six days to the east of  
Cho, in a city that's much older.

Alad whispers.

ALAD

But there's nothing beyond Cho --

MAN

Find this Shrine, and you'll find  
the truth behind the history of our  
people. Then you can expose the  
Priests for the liars they are.

He pauses.

MAN

May you fare better than your  
mother and I. Niris-Im's blessings  
upon you.

His image and the Shrine both disappear as the vine cluster  
seals itself up again.

INT. NALID'S QUARTERS

Alad follows Nalid as he haphazardly throws things into a  
case.

ALAD

What about our wedding?!

Nalid stops.

NALID  
...I'll leave after it.

ALAD  
So kind of you to fit our life into  
your plans!

Nalid holds her.

NALID  
Alad, there's no one in this city  
more important to me than you, but  
I've waited my whole life to free  
Cho from myth. This is my chance!

ALAD  
Don't you dare forget about us.

NALID  
Never.

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS - MORNING

Resev listens impatiently before the other Priests.

PRIEST 1  
We warned you of this possibility.

PRIEST 2  
We warned you that the boy was  
dangerous.

PRIEST 3  
We warned you that you might one  
day face a necessary choice.

RESEV  
Nalid-Im can prove nothing!

PRIEST 1  
Of all people, Resev, you should  
know that proof is not necessary.

PRIEST 2  
Proof is never necessary.

PRIEST 3  
The boy only needs to instill a  
grain of doubt in the minds of the  
people.

RESEV  
No one would ever believe him.

PRIEST 1  
But if someone did...

PRIEST 2  
One would convince another.

PRIEST 3  
Many would convince more.

PRIEST 1  
His Glory allowed you to make the  
boy a member of this Council in the  
hopes that you could control him.

PRIEST 2  
But you can't control him.

PRIEST 3  
You never could.

RESEV  
Give me more time. I can stop him.

PRIEST 1  
You've had more than enough time.

RESEV  
He is my son!

PRIEST 2  
Adopted son, Resev-Im. Don't allow  
your feelings for the boy stand in  
the way of your duties.

RESEV  
I am well aware of my duties.

PRIEST 3  
Then either carry them out, or  
we'll find someone who will.

INT. NALID'S QUARTERS - MORNING

With his dress Priest uniform half on, Nalid frantically checks a slew of city maps. Alad makes last minute touches to her own uniform, hair, and makeup.

ALAD  
I'm almost ready.

NALID  
I can't find Kuhel.

ALAD  
Have you checked his station?

NALID  
He's not registered anywhere.

ALAD  
What about his family?

NALID  
They haven't seen him.

ALAD  
We need to go.

NALID  
It's as if he completely  
disappeared.

ALAD  
Nalid?

She marches over to him. Fastens his uniform.

NALID  
This isn't like him, Alad. I think  
something might've happened to him.

ALAD  
And I'm sure she's quite lovely.  
Let's go.

With a resigned sigh, Nalid takes her arm. They head out.

INT. TEMPLE - AFTERNOON

The image of Niris-Im's head rests on a large pedestal before two aisles of pews. Nalid and Alad stand before the Idol, their families in the pews behind them. Kuhel isn't there.

NIRIS-IM  
Will you, Alad-Nam, take this man  
as your husband?

ALAD  
I will.

NIRIS-IM  
To share with, and to be with, for  
all of time?

ALAD  
For all of time.

INT. RESEV'S QUARTERS - MORNING

Alone, Resev stands by the window. Looks out on the Tower of Ufanim. His voice hangs heavy with despair.

RESEV  
You were the single greatest mind  
we had ever seen. Your power would  
have exceeded that of His Glory  
himself.

He pauses. Speaks in a near whisper.

RESEV  
By His Grace, may you forgive me,  
my son.

An aging Messenger enters.

MESSENGER  
Your Eminence?

INT. TEMPLE - AFTERNOON

Alad smiles at Nalid.

NIRIS-IM  
And Nalid-Im, will you take this  
woman as your wife?

NALID  
I will.

NIRIS-IM  
To share with, and to be with, for  
all of time?

NALID  
For all of time.

INT. RESEV'S QUARTERS - MORNING

Messenger awaits his orders.

RESEV  
Tonight. After the reception.

INT. TEMPLE - AFTERNOON

Niris-Im smiles.

NIRIS-IM

Then I bless this marriage, for as long as you vow yourselves to each other.

INT. RESEV'S QUARTERS - MORNING

Resev faces Messenger.

RESEV

Be discreet.

Messenger bows courteously.

MESSENGER

As always, Your Eminence.

INT. TEMPLE - AFTERNOON

Nalid and Alad bow to Niris-Im.

INT. RESEV'S QUARTERS - MORNING

Messenger leaves. Galo enters.

RESEV

You've always wanted to become a Priest. Perform a task for me, and you'll be well on your way.

INT. NALID'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Nalid carries Alad inside. He stumbles. She giggles.

INT. NALID'S ROOM

Nalid lays her on their bed. Crawls on top of her. They kiss --

CRASH!! Before they can say anything, a group of Servants seizes them. Nalid and Alad scream for each other as the Servants drag Nalid away.

INT. RESEV'S QUARTERS

They're just as quiet as Nalid's were.

INT. MANA'S ROOM

Mana's studying. Ready for a break, he gets up.

INT. DINING ROOM

Mana sits. Lays his head on the table. Gives the attending Servants orders.

MANA

...Water.

None of them moves. Mana lifts his head.

MANA

I gave you an order --!

He stops. Gawks at them. They don't respond. Sensing danger, Mana slowly stands. Steps back from the table. They close in. As Mana breaks into a run, they rush him.

INT. VAULT

The Servants strap Nalid and Mana onto tables.

NALID

I swear, by the Tower of Ufanim, if any of you lays one finger on Alad, I'll --!

BAM! A Servant punches him. The others laugh as they head out.

MANA

My father, Resev-Im'll toss all of you into the furnaces of Nothanam!

More laughter. The brothers are left in a moment of silent misery, until an old voice echoes beyond their field of vision.

MESSENGER

Amusing, isn't it?

MANA

Almost as amusing as you'll be when you beg us for your life!

NALID

One finger!! I end you!!

MESSENGER

We thought you'd be different.

Messenger emerges from the darkness. Removes his helmet. From above his left eye, razor-thin scars streak out to the edges of his lined face. A gruesome, permanent reminder of the Cemetery explosion so long ago.

NALID

You.

FLASH TO:

EXT. CEMETERY - NIGHT

Messenger and his Servants surround Nalid's family's shuttle.

BACK TO:

INT. VAULT - NIGHT

Messenger slits the middle of Nalid's uniform top, then both his sleeves, leaving Nalid's upper body exposed.

MESSENGER

But instead, you ended up just like your dear, dear parents.

MANA

Nalid, what's he talking about?!

NALID

You killed them?

MESSENGER

Who am I?

He polishes a shining blade. Holds it gently over Nalid's chest.

MESSENGER

Who am I --?

He gasps. Blood trickles from his mouth. A hand buries a blade deep into him. Messenger rips the knife from his body. Clutches it as he hits the floor.

GALO

No one.

He snatches the knife. Cuts Nalid and Mana loose. Nalid leaps off his table. Tears off the remainder of his shirt. Slams Galo against the wall. Presses his arm against Galo's neck.

NALID  
Alad?!!

GALO  
She's safe.

NALID  
Where?!!

GALO  
All you need to know is I've agreed  
to care for her.

Nalid presses harder. Galo chokes.

NALID  
Where is she, Galo?!!

GALO  
In your quarters. But there'll be  
Servants everywhere --!

NALID  
I'm not leaving without her!!

GALO  
It's impossible, Nalid! Save  
yourselves!

Nalid releases him. Nalid and Mana make a run for it.

INT. PASSAGEWAY

Nalid and Mana come to a fork. Nalid skids to a stop.  
Considers.

MANA  
What's that smell?

Nalid spots an opening at the end of one of the passages.

NALID  
There.

They run straight into a...

INT. REFINERY

A sprawling, industrial nightmare, crammed with enormous,  
black furnaces. Millions of filthy, beaten people drain the  
furnaces of their glowing liquid. Under the brutal guard of  
Servants, the people mold the liquid into the glass of Cho.

The brothers are frozen at the horrid sight before them. They instinctively back against the wall. Feel their way through the shadows --

Someone leaps out. Nabs them. Slams them down on a conveyor belt. Whispers harshly.

KUHEL  
Nalid-Im! What are you doing here?

Nalid's eyes find his old friend, now beaten and scarred.

NALID  
Kuhel??

Kuhel grins.

KUHEL  
In the flesh.

NALID  
Where are we?!

KUHEL  
The heart of Nothanam.

MANA  
It's real??

Kuhel runs a finger along one of the scars on his face.

KUHEL  
Too real.

INT. NOTHANAM

Kuhel weaves the brothers through the labyrinthine refinery.

NALID  
What about your family?

KUHEL  
The Noths are my family now.

MANA  
"Noths"?

KUHEL  
The wretches of Nothanam.

They soon come upon a solitary Servant. Kuhel motions for the brothers to keep quiet.

Kuhel sneaks up behind the Servant. Slips his arms silently around the Servant's neck. Just as the Servant realizes what's going on --

CRACK! Kuhel snaps the Servant's head back. The Servant's arms and legs go limp. Kuhel lowers the body carefully to the ground. Beckons to the brothers.

KUHEL

Servants don't take kindly to the slaughter of their own.

They set off.

KUHEL

There's only one way to escape. You won't likely survive, but if it means avoiding the Council...

They come to a set of sandcraft vehicles resting before a great door. Kuhel helps the brothers into a sandcraft. Starts it up. Hits a switch on the wall.

SCREECH!! The door scrapes open. A thick blanket of clouds waits outside. The sound alerts some nearby Servants. Nalid turns to Kuhel.

NALID

Come with us!

Kuhel considers it, then gives Nalid a mad smirk.

KUHEL

Not this time, my old friend.

The Servants are nearly upon them.

KUHEL

Niris-Im's blessings!!

He hits one of the sandcraft's controls. Before the brothers know it, they launch into the sky.

INT. SANDCRAFT

Nalid grapples with the controls.

MANA

You know how to fly one of these?!

NALID

I'll learn!

He pulls a lever. The back of the sandcraft opens up. Nalid tweaks the controls. They spin around. Fly straight for the dismal, gangly fortress of Nothanam.

MANA

Wrong way!!

Nalid yanks the controls to the right. The sandcraft turns, but not fast enough...

The sandcraft glances off the wall. Sparks and shards of glass fly everywhere. Nalid cranks back on the controls. They shoot straight up.

MANA

What are you doing?!

NALID

Practicing!

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS

Monitoring the action from a screen near his seat, Resev listens to updates from unseen Servants.

VOICE

Your Eminence, there's been an unauthorized launch from a western refinery.

RESEV

Go after it!

INT. SANDCRAFT

The brothers pass through a layer of clouds. Head straight for the underside of Cho. Flip upside down. Streak underneath the city. Mana glances over his shoulder.

MANA

Look!

Fifty smaller craft fall into pursuit.

NALID

I have an idea.

MANA

It better be good.

They fly into the city.

EXT. CHO

They head straight for a collection of quarters. The other craft hunt them with relentless skill and speed.

INT. SANDCRAFT

Mana buries his head.

MANA

Nalid-Im!

NALID

Hold on!!

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS

Resev watches the chase on his screen.

VOICE

Your Eminence, they're headed directly for a residential section!

RESEV

Go after them.

VOICE

But Your Eminence --!

RESEV

You have your orders!

He touches his screen. A 3-D model of the sandcraft, complete with images of Nalid and Mana, appears before him. Resev touches a glyph on his screen. The sandcraft flashes.

INT. QUARTERS

An Officer couple eats dinner. The husband sees the sandcraft. Screaming straight for them. The husband jumps up. Grabs his wife. Dives to the floor.

INT. SANDCRAFT

Nalid and Mana brace for impact.

INT. QUARTERS

The sandcraft explodes through the wall. Sprays glass everywhere. The chasing craft blast in after them. Shatter the entire block of quarters.

INT. SANDCRAFT

A low, throbbing pulse begins to emanate from all around.

FLASH TO:

EXT. CEMETERY - NIGHT

The last time Nalid heard the strange noise in front of the explosive-laden X his father carved on the Cemetery wall.

BACK TO:

INT. SANDCRAFT

Distracted by the memory, Nalid turns the wrong way. Sends them straight into a channel swarming with shuttles.

MANA

What are you doing??!

EXT. CHO

Nalid threads them along. Barely misses thousands of shuttles.

Not far behind them, the pursuing craft hit the channel. Most of them take the time to navigate the safest route. A few are too late. Crash right into shuttles. Chunks of smashed glass and people tumble to unknown depths.

INT. SANDCRAFT

For the moment, Nalid's lost their pursuers. The pulse quickens to a shrill whine.

MANA

What's that noise?!

NALID

We have to abandon the craft.

As if it were necessary, Mana takes a quick look outside. Below them hangs nothing but empty, thin air.

MANA

How in Nothanam are we supposed to do that?!

In the distance, Nalid spots a portal in the channel wall. He slams them toward it. Full throttle. Nalid slips out the sandcraft window.

EXT. SANDCRAFT

Nalid straddles the edge. Ready to jump.

MANA  
Are you insane??!!

NALID  
Come on!

Mana joins him.

NALID  
Ready?!

MANA  
No!!

Nalid keeps watch on the fast-approaching portal.

NALID  
Now!!

EXT. CHO

They leap off. The empty sandcraft rips by. Just as it passes them --

SHRIEK!!! It explodes in a monsoon of glass shards.

Nalid dives inside the portal. Mana barely makes it. Slams on the portal's edge. The force knocks the wind out of him. Mana slips. Holds on by the tips of his fingers.

MANA  
...Nalid!

Nalid crawls over to him. Takes his hand. Pulls him in --

Mana's other hand slips. He flails desperately. Nalid tries to hold him up, but Mana's weight drags them both out. Nalid braces himself on the edge of the portal. Slowly pulls Mana up.

Mana loses his grip...

Then he swings his free arm back onto the edge. Nalid takes Mana's slipping hand. Carefully pulls Mana up to his stomach. Mana crawls the rest of the way in.

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS

The 3-D model of the sandcraft disappears.

VOICE

Your Eminence, they're heading into  
a dead end.

RESEV

Follow them.

VOICE

But Your Eminence --

RESEV

Do it now, or be sent to Nothanam!

EXT. CHO

Most of the pursuing craft crash right into a wall.  
Shattering into a bloody, twisted mess.

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS

Resev stares at his screen with a hint of satisfaction.

VOICE

Your Eminence, the fugitives have  
been neutralized.

Resev rises from his seat. Barely keeping it together, he  
mutters to himself.

RESEV

By His Will, may you find what you  
seek, Nalid-Im.

He turns around. Heads home.

INT. COMPARTMENT

The brothers collect themselves. Nalid finds a hallway. He  
and Mana race into it.

INT. NALID'S QUARTERS

The brothers run in. They find more than a dozen Servants  
waiting for them. The Servants wield their swords. The  
brothers wield their fists.

NALID

Alad!

ALAD

Nalid! What's happening?!

She rushes out to him, but three Servants block her way.

NALID

Let her go!!

He and Mana tackle them, but it's no use. The Servants surround them, yank them away from her, and throw them up against the wall.

In the midst of the scuffle, Nalid accidentally knocks over Alad's Wemanim. Breaks it in two.

GALO

For years, I'd despised you, Nalid-Im. You had the praise and now the station I've so desperately desired. Not anymore.

He saunters in.

GALO

I told you to save yourselves. If you don't accept your exile, you will die.

He snaps his fingers. The Servants release Alad. She runs to Nalid. Holds him.

NALID

And I told you I'm not leaving without Alad.

GALO

She's innocent in the Council's eyes. There's no reason to change that.

He nods to the Servants. They release the brothers.

GALO

A craft is waiting.

ALAD

No, Nalid. Stay. Please. Whatever's happening, your father can reason with the other Priests.

GALO

Father's already failed. When the Council finds out that Nalid's still alive, they'll stop at nothing to kill him and Mana.

Nalid pries himself from Alad's arms.

NALID

Galo's right. Our only hope is to prove my theories are the truth.

MANA

You'd have to tell everyone in Cho.

Galo laughs mockingly.

GALO

The Council would shut down the entire city before they'd let that happen.

NALID

First I'll find my proof. Then we'll deal with the Council.

He holds Alad close. Touches her face. She whispers.

ALAD

Always.

They kiss as if for the last time. Reluctantly, Nalid pulls away.

GALO

Nalid. Mana. Niris-Im's blessings.

Nalid gives Galo a quick nod. Nalid and Mana make a run for it.

INT. TRANSPORT BAY

The brothers find a craft like the ones that earlier pursued them. Without a second thought, they jump in.

INT. CRAFT

The cockpit closes. The brothers put on helmets. The craft shoots off.

EXT. CHO

Nalid weaves them through the city's innards.

INT. CRAFT

Mana struggles to hold on.

MANA

Where will we find your proof?!

NALID  
In a city six days to the east!

EXT. CHO

Nalid's flying is better, but still dangerous. He nearly crashes them into everything...

EXT. CEMETERY

They come upon the great wall.

INT. CRAFT

Mana's about to lose it.

MANA  
But there's nothing beyond...!

EXT. CEMETERY

The craft rips right through. Smashes out a jagged, gaping hole. The buildings they'd seen beyond the Cemetery wall were nothing but a facade.

INT. CRAFT

Mana's as surprised now as he was shocked before.

MANA  
...Cho?!

OUTSIDE

The craft flies off into the night.

FADE OUT:

EXT. DESERT - AFTERNOON

The craft soars through wisping clouds, over endless desert.

INT. CRAFT - EVENING

It's sunset. The brothers' faces are covered in stubble. Mana sleeps as best he can. Nalid fights to keep awake --

Thump! Mana sits up.

MANA  
What was that?!

Nalid checks the controls.

NALID  
Power's failing!

The craft starts to shake. Rapidly loses altitude.

MANA  
Slow down!

Nalid fights with the controls.

NALID  
I can't!

They sail through the cloud layer. Rocket over the desert.

MANA  
Noth!

NALID  
Hold on!

The ground races towards them. They brace for impact --

WHAM!! They explode through the top of a dune. Plow down the other side. Cruise over dune after dune like a roller coaster. Barely hold on...

The craft finally skids to a stop. They sit there. Dazed.

MANA  
What's that?

He points at a desert tree sticking out of the sand. Directly in front of the craft.

NALID  
...A Wemanim.

EXT. DESERT

The cockpit opens. The brothers drag themselves out. Collapse onto the sand. The powerful force of the winds claws at their clothes. They slide up against the craft. The wind beats their faces.

Nalid stomps through the wind. Touches the tree. It doesn't react. He returns to the craft. Finds a couple pieces have broken off. He opens a panel. Inspects the insides. Torn up. Disconnected.

NALID  
...Galo!

He slaps the panel closed. Steps away. Gazes back toward Cho. Too far away, he can't see it anywhere. Facing facts, he resumes his hike to the east. Mana shuffles after him.

MANA

What now?

NALID

To the east.

MANA

How much farther?!

NALID

Hard to tell. We'll travel at night. Rest during the day.

They set off.

The blue sky and brown sand around them become...

...The blue sky and buildings of Cho.

INT. ALAD'S QUARTERS - EVENING

Small and plain. Now wearing her original Officer's uniform, Alad sits before the broken pieces of her Wemanim. Silently admires the evening colors reflecting off them --

Knock knock!

ALAD

Who is it?

GALO

Galo. May I come in?

Alad jumps up. Rushes to the door.

ALAD

Any word?!

GALO

I think you should...

He gestures to a nearby chair. Alad sits.

ALAD

What happened?!

GALO

Shortly after they left, we lost contact.

Alad can't believe her ears. Fights back tears.

ALAD

...No!

GALO

I'm sorry.

ALAD

No!!

She breaks down. Sobs uncontrollably.

ALAD

Nalid-Im... My love...

Galo holds her. Comforts her. His eyes wander to her Wemanim pieces.

GALO

I'm so sorry.

He doesn't dare smile, but the smug look he gives the broken sculpture reveals his intentions toward her.

The sparkling of the Wemanim pieces becomes...

...A blanket of millions of stars.

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

The brothers hike over the dunes, past dozens of desert trees, fighting the mighty gusts every step of the way.

EXT. DESERT - AFTERNOON

Nalid wakes. By the growth on his face, and his tattered pants, several days have already passed.

In the distance are more trees. But these are different. Dark green. Covered in leaves.

Nalid tries to stand. Takes a deep breath. Picks himself up. Suddenly collapses. Picks himself up again. Drags himself a few inches.

NALID

Mana...

Mana's silent.

NALID

Mana-Im!

He crawls to his brother. Shakes him. It takes a few moments, but eventually Mana wakes.

MANA

Are we in... Ufanim?

NALID

No.

Mana cranes his sunburnt neck. Squints at the trees. Lays his head back down.

MANA

Wake me when we arrive.

Nalid pushes himself to his feet. Stares at his toes. Puts one foot in front of the other. Then the other in front of the first.

...Taking seemingly forever, Nalid finally reaches the trees. Collapses next to one. Smiles at his brother. All those feet away.

NALID

Mana!

Mana doesn't respond. Nalid gets up. Steps into the shade. Sighs at the sudden, amazing cool.

Then Nalid spots something. Red and round. Hanging from one of the trees. He stammers over to it. Plucks it from its branch. Sinks his teeth into it. Gasps at its flavor. Laughs at his discovery.

Nalid takes bite after bite. Savors the taste. Clutches the fruit as if it were about to run away. Takes another bite.

He carries several of the fruits to Mana. Rolls Mana over.

NALID

Mana, I found something better than Ufanim.

Mana laughs dizzily.

MANA

Nothing's better than paradise.

NALID

Taste.

Mana sits up. Rubs his eyes open. Nalid passes him a fruit. Mana studies it.

NALID

Eat.

Mana bites into it. His eyes snap open at the taste.

MANA

Are there more?

Nalid laughs.

NALID

As many as you want!

EXT. FOREST

Sitting against one of the trees, the brothers rest behind a large pile of fruit cores. Mana takes the last bite of his. Tosses it on the pile.

...Rumble. They look at each other.

NALID

Was that you?

MANA

I thought it was you.

...Another rumble. Nalid jumps to his feet. Scans their surroundings. Nothing.

...Rumble. Mana scans too.

NALID

Where's it coming from?

...Rumble. They gaze into the sky. Both their mouths drop wide open.

Black clouds. Bright streaks of flashing light. A thunderstorm.

...Rumble. It's coming right for them.

Fear overcomes them. Nalid yanks Mana under a cluster of trees. They watch the oncoming storm --

Then Mana feels something that confuses him... rain.

MANA

Noth!

It freaks them out. They run out from under the trees. Furiously wipe droplets off their arms and legs.

Nalid gazes into the sky. Into the clouds. A single drop falls... Hits his forehead.

For a still moment, Nalid feels his brow. Feels the drop. Wipes it from his skin. Tastes it.

NALID

Water!

Mana stares at him. Laughs hard.

MANA

From the sky?!!

BOOM!! A cloudburst shatters all over them. They holler in terror. Then they realize the rain drenching them is what they've been so desperate to find. They dance around with their heads tilted back. Lap it up.

Then their clothes become uncomfortably wet. They run under a bunch of trees. Rest there. Both are ecstatic at their new discovery. Nalid holds up a triumphant arm.

NALID

To the east!

A lightning bolt slices into a nearby tree. The brothers jump ten feet.

They run...

...and they don't stop.

MANA

Noth!! Noth!!

NALID

Run!!

The struck tree splits in half. Tumbles over. Into another one. Tiny lights dance all over them. Burning. Spreading. A nascent forest fire.

The brothers gaze at the flames. The blaze devours tree after tree. Closes in on them. They run off into the night.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST - AFTERNOON

Now thin as rails, the brothers hike slowly through the trees. Gather bark and branches. Long, greasy, matted hair hangs from their filthy, sunburnt heads. Uniform scraps cling to their bodies.

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Protected by the thin shelter of branches, bark, and leaves, the brothers are fast asleep. The only noise is the slight rustle of trees in the wind --

Then fast footsteps.

Mana wakes. Sits up. Glances back and forth. Strains to listen. The sound is gone. He lies down again.

INT. TENT - AFTERNOON

Nalid wakes to find Mana gone. Sees him outside. Sitting on the ground. Waiting. Watching the trees.

EXT. FOREST

Nalid joins his brother.

MANA

I heard footsteps last night.

NALID

So did I. Let's move.

They return to the tent. Take it down. Carry the pieces to a new spot.

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Listening intently to the quiet breeze outside, the brothers stay up half the night waiting for footsteps.

INT. TENT - MORNING

The brothers sleep soundly. A stick reaches in. Pokes Nalid right in the face.

NALID

Noth!

The stick recedes. Nalid whispers to Mana.

NALID

Mana! Wake up!

Mana blinks awake. Grabs the stick. It yanks back. Mana pulls. Nalid helps. The stick jerks harder. Breaks free. Disappears outside. Nalid follows it. Mana is right behind.

EXT. FOREST

Armed with spears, bows, and arrows, a half dozen hooded hunters stare down at the brothers. The brothers shout. A few of the hunters flinch. One in the middle steps forward. Pulls down its hood.

Flowing, black hair falls down around the lovely, brown face of AMIRA, a young woman. She's painted in striking symbols. Black-ringed eyes. White-fanged lips. Yellow-streaked arms. Crimson diamond cheeks.

She's fascinated with the brothers. The brothers stare at their captor, then remember they're naked, and cover themselves.

Amira kneels before the brothers. Speaks a strange tongue resembling a mixture of Gaelic and Hindi.

AMIRA

They're paler than anyone I've ever seen.

Mana whispers.

MANA

She sounds so strange.

NALID

I wonder what she's saying.

KIMAR pulls down his hood to reveal a young man wearing not only a hunter's face paint, but also a permanent glower.

KIMAR

They sound so strange.

AMIRA

I wonder what they're saying.

Nalid studies the silent ones. Ready to strike. Waiting on Kimar and Amira.

KIMAR

Amira, they're naked men. Nothing more. Let's go.

AMIRA

Queen Shamai'll wanna see them.

KIMAR

No she won't. Let's go.

Amira stands.

AMIRA  
Kimar, they're starving. We gotta  
bring them with us.

Nalid whispers to Mana.

NALID  
When I give the word, run.

Mana nods. Kimar gives the brothers a suspicious glance,  
then leads Amira away from the group.

KIMAR  
We know nothing about them, and you  
wanna bring them with us?

AMIRA  
They'll die if we don't.

KIMAR  
Let them die.

AMIRA  
We can't just --!

NALID  
Run!

He and Mana sprint into the woods. Kimar waves to his group.  
The hunters chase after the brothers.

AMIRA  
Don't kill them!

Kimar shoots an arrow. It nails a branch inches from Nalid's  
head. Nalid quickens his pace. The hunters are hot on the  
brothers' heels. The hunters send a flurry of arrows and  
spears after them. All hit nearby trees and bushes.

The brothers gain a healthy distance from the hunters. Mana  
glances over his shoulder.

NALID  
Move!!

Kimar readies an arrow. Takes careful aim...

Zip! Kimar hits Nalid in the leg. Nalid hollers. Trips.  
Tumbles to the ground. Mana stops.

NALID  
Keep going, Mana!!

Unsure of what to do, Mana dives behind a tree. Nalid grabs at the arrow. Winces. Grinds his teeth. Takes hold of the arrow. Yanks it out.

NALID  
Noth!!

The hunters catch up to him. Surround him. Point their spears at his head. Nalid calls out.

NALID  
Run Mana!

But Mana stays still. Amira examines Nalid's wound. Gives Kimar a nasty look. Kimar grunts.

KIMAR  
He'll live.

He scans the trees.

KIMAR  
Now, where's the other one?

Mana waits behind his tree. Torn between surrender and safety. He steps out. Kimar marches over. Takes Mana by the arm. Leads him back to the others.

EXT. FOREST

Hands tied, the brothers are now clothed in borrowed robes. Nalid's wound is bandaged. He supports himself on a makeshift cane. The hunters take the brothers deeper into the woods.

AMIRA  
You didn't have to bind them.

KIMAR  
They didn't have to run.

Mana whispers.

MANA  
What now?

NALID  
We wait.

EXT. CAMP - NIGHT

The hunters and the brothers sit around a small camp fire. Eat a dinner of roasted meat and vegetables. Nalid and Mana wolf down their meals.

Mana finishes his first. His food no longer a distraction, he scoots up to the fire. Reaches out to it...

MANA

Noth!

He yanks his hand back. The hunters laugh at him. Nalid casts a concerned glance at his brother.

NALID

Careful of their technology, Mana.

Mana glares at the ones who laughed at him, then sits back. Rubs his hand. Kimar snorts.

KIMAR

What's the matter? Never seen a fire?

Mana gives him a suspicious look, then turns his attention back to the fire.

MANA

You think they know where the city is?

NALID

I can't ask until I learn their tongue --

He stops talking when he notices Amira watching him.

NALID

Wait here.

He stands. Cautiously crosses over to her. Kimar stands. Grips his spear threateningly. Nalid shows them his palms. Points to himself.

NALID

Nalid-Im.

He waits. Kimar laughs.

KIMAR

What's that mean?

AMIRA  
It's his name.

She stands. Points to herself.

AMIRA  
Amira.

She points to Mana. Nalid glances at him.

NALID  
Mana-Im.

AMIRA  
Where's your home?

KIMAR  
It's so obvious, Amira. The  
distant land of Home-Im. South-Im  
of North-Im.

The hunters laugh. Amira ignores them. Nalid shakes his head.

AMIRA  
Home?

Nalid attempts the word.

NALID  
...Home?

KIMAR  
He'll never learn.

Amira gestures for Nalid to follow her. He does. Kimar aims his spear at Nalid's neck. Nalid steps back.

MANA  
Nalid?

Nalid keeps his eyes on Kimar. Holds a hand up to his brother.

NALID  
It's fine.

KIMAR  
Careful, Outsider, or I'll slay you  
like the beast you are.

Amira gives him and his spear a dismissive push aside.

INT. AMIRA'S TENT

Amira lights a lantern. Sets it at the corner of a desk. There Nalid finds a canvas of finger-smudged sand depicting a wooden home built around a tree. It's not the sloppy mess of a child, but the marvelously detailed creation of a master.

Near the canvas is a set of jars and a brush attached to a ring. The jars are filled with colored sand. Except one that holds tar.

Amira circles her finger around the painted dwelling.

AMIRA

Home.

Nalid nods. Amira points to him.

AMIRA

Home?

Nalid points to the sand jars.

AMIRA

You wanna try?

Nalid stares at her, confused.

AMIRA

Sit.

She pushes him into the chair. Sits across from him. Grabs a clean canvas.

AMIRA

Gimme your hand.

She takes Nalid's hand. Slips the brush onto his index finger. Places his hand in hers. Guides his hand across the canvas.

Nalid smiles at their results. Amira makes a few more strokes. Grabs a jar of green sand. Sprinkles it over the canvas. Hands the jar to Nalid. He does the same. Passes the canvas back to her. Amira gently blows on its surface.

They both smile at their work. A tall, green tree. Nalid picks up the red jar. Sprinkles some sand in his hand. Points to it.

NALID

Home.

Amira shakes her head. Nalid dips the brush into the tar. Points to the canvas. Amira nods her approval. Nalid paints a sun above rolling hills. Pours the red sand over it. Points to the hills.

NALID

Home.

Amira nods.

AMIRA

The desert.

Nalid draws the Great Seal. Points to it.

NALID

Home.

AMIRA

I see.

Nalid hands the canvas to her. Amira gives it back to him, along with her brush, colors, and tar.

AMIRA

Gift.

Nalid accepts with a nod. Kimar shoves Mana inside. Glares at Nalid and Amira.

KIMAR

Here's the other one.

No one's sure how to respond. Finally, Amira speaks up.

AMIRA

...Thank you --

KIMAR

I'll find them a cot.

AMIRA

I'll sleep on the floor. They can have the bed.

KIMAR

Amira, that's insane. They might --

AMIRA

If anything happens...

She wields a spear. Thrusts it at Kimar's stomach.

AMIRA  
...I'll dispatch them forthwith.

KIMAR  
Amira.

Amira puts the spear away.

AMIRA  
Good night, Kimar.

Kimar sees she's not going to listen.

KIMAR  
Good night then.

He steps back outside. Amira closes the tent.

EXT. FOREST - MORNING

Kimar leads the hunters down a dirt road, past a small home built in an ancient tree. The home is painted with weather-faded scenes, and hung with decorations of tiny glass wind chimes that whisper delicate melodies in the soft breeze.

AMIRA  
I haven't visited Iara in so long.  
We can at least stop and say hello.

KIMAR  
I have nothing to say to that  
crazy, old man.

The brothers speak quietly.

MANA  
Did you find out about the city?

Nalid shakes his head.

NALID  
I need to learn more of their  
tongue.

They continue down the road till they reach the outskirts of the...

EXT. VILLAGE

Protected by a range of snow-capped mountains, clusters of homes circle a towering pyramid of glass-plated earthen blocks, the Palace. Within the Palace reside the crystal halls of steaming baths, where hundreds of Villagers soak.

Thousands more Villagers, clad in handcrafted garments, though not in face paint, carry out various tasks in the Village's kitchens, workshops, weaving studios, farms, and smith furnaces. Others swim in a nearby lake.

The brothers are awestruck.

NALID

This is the most beautiful place  
I've ever seen.

MANA

Even more than the Tower of Ufanim.

They hardly notice the large crowd forming around them. Hands reach out. Smiling faces give foreign salutations. Kimar leads them all past the Palace, past the homes, into a brick coliseum, the...

INT. FORUM

It resembles Cho's Great Hall, though with a capacity for mere thousands. Kimar and his group drop their things.

KIMAR

There she is. My Queen!

At the opposite end of the Forum, the crowd makes way for QUEEN SHAMAI, a stunning young woman dressed in royal robes of crimson and jade. She leads an entourage of ATTENDANTS. Kimar and Amira run over to her, and bow.

KIMAR

Amira found these... Outsiders in  
the woods --

Amira jumps in Kimar's way.

AMIRA

Near dead! They came from the  
desert. We have to nurse them back  
to health --

KIMAR

Then kill them --!

Queen Shamai holds up a finger. Kimar stops. Lowers his eyes. Queen Shamai studies the brothers a long while.

QUEEN SHAMAI

I shall consider the matter.

INT. FORUM

Standing before Queen Shamai and her Attendants, the brothers keep very still as the crowd furiously debates. Kimar stands up with his arm raised.

KIMAR  
My Queen, the Outsiders have come  
to destroy us!

Vast numbers of the crowd laugh at him.

AMIRA  
They're harmless!

KIMAR  
Laugh now! You'll see!

Further debate erupts between Kimar and a few others. Amira realizes something. Digs into her things. Pulls out the painting she and Nalid made of the tree. Holds it up.

AMIRA  
Queen Shamai, they can read the  
signs!

Queen Shamai raises her arm. As she does so, silence falls over the crowd. Everyone sits. Queen Shamai nods at Amira.

AMIRA  
The signs on the Palace.

The crowd murmurs excitedly.

KIMAR  
What??!

Amira runs the painting to Queen Shamai. Points out the Great Seal. Queen Shamai considers it, then stands, and leaves without another word.

EXT. IARA'S HOME - EVENING

The dwelling that resides outside the Village. The windows glow with the warmth of lamp light.

INT. IARA'S HOME

IARA, a silver-haired man in simple robes, shares tea with Queen Shamai.

QUEEN SHAMAI

I don't know how our people will react to them, but if the Outsiders can read the signs...

IARA

That would be most interesting.

QUEEN SHAMAI

But what if they are dangerous? What would you do, my King?

IARA

Shamai, that title and position are yours now. As is the Village.

Feeling scolded, Queen Shamai nods reluctantly. Makes up her mind.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Ever since I was a girl, I've wondered what secrets the Palace holds. I say let these men tell us.

Iara grins, condescending.

IARA

A wise decision.

Queen Shamai grins back.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Ever the mocking mentor.

IARA

Ever the heedful ruler.

Queen Shamai stands to go.

QUEEN SHAMAI

I'd best get back. Thank you, my King.

IARA

Ever at your service, my Queen.

EXT. FORUM

Amira sits on the ground with the brothers. Teaches them to speak. Kimar paces nearby.

KIMAR

She's gonna let them stay. She'll put them in my home. Make me feed them. Because she can.

Trying to ignore him, Amira shows the brothers a clump of dirt.

AMIRA

Dirt.

She holds it out. Nalid takes it. Rolls it around in his palm. Attempts the word.

NALID

...Dirt.

Amira nods, smiling.

AMIRA

Good.

KIMAR

Then she'll make me build homes for them. Two big homes. With ten rooms each --

AMIRA

Iara chose her, Kimar --!

KIMAR

By the sands, She wasn't the first son in ten generations to be passed over as king!

Queen Shamai finds them.

QUEEN SHAMAI

No, but I am the first queen to bear the torture of your gripes.

Amira and the brothers stand. Amira bows. So do the brothers. Kimar spins around. Bows.

KIMAR

My Queen. I beg your pardon. I meant no --

QUEEN SHAMAI

They shall stay until they decipher the signs. While they do, they are in your charge, Amira. Now get them washed up. Properly clothed.

Amira gives her a grateful nod, then leads the brothers to her home. Kimar bows nervously, and leaves.

INT. AMIRA'S HOME

The rooms are cluttered with amazing stained-glass landscapes and still-lives. The brothers sit on blankets. Watch Amira prepare a mixture of herbs and boiling water. Nalid attempts the Village Tongue.

NALID

Amira, what are "signs"?

Amira's astonished at his words.

AMIRA

You learn quickly.

Nalid nods.

AMIRA

What you painted.

She shows him the rendition of the Great Seal. She then brings them a cup of her concoction.

AMIRA

Medicine.

Nalid cautiously accepts it. Takes a gulp. His face contorts in horror. He spits it out. Coughs. Mana laughs at him.

NALID

Nothanam!

He holds it out to Amira. She shoves it back in his face.

AMIRA

Drink it!

Nalid chokes some down. Amira pushes the cup into Mana's face. Mana eyes both her and his brother. Takes a healthy gulp. Gags. Amira takes the cup.

NALID

I want to see the signs.

AMIRA

Soon. Now rest.

She takes the medicine. Stands, and leaves. Closes the door behind her.

INT. AMIRA'S HOME - NIGHT

Mana is fast asleep. Nalid gets up. Finds the paint set Amira gave him. Steps outside.

EXT. AMIRA'S HOME

Nalid gazes at the Village. Dim lights lie scattered across the settlement. The sky is clear overhead. A comforting wind blows through the warm, muggy air. Beyond the tops of the trees and dwellings stands the Palace.

By this quiet light, Nalid paints an oval of tar over the tree he and Amira made. On it, he sprinkles white sand. As he does so, he speaks to the canvas.

NALID

Always.

His white-speckled canvas becomes...

...A woman's face reflected in a shimmering surface. Her eyes are red from weeping.

EXT. CEMETERY - NIGHT

It's Alad. She sits alone. Under the stars. Stares at the sculpture before her. Galo approaches her. She doesn't bother to face him.

GALO

The widow of a forgotten man. Your friends have abandoned you. Your family has all but disowned you.

ALAD

This is where we met.

FLASH TO:

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Nalid studies the sculpture. Alad wanders by with some friends. They pause at the sculpture. Nalid faces Alad. Talks to her as if they were the best of friends.

ALAD (V.O.)

We were both admiring the same piece. He told me he saw it every night in his nightmares.

Alad's taken aback by Nalid's earnestness. Alad's friends move on, but she lingers.

BACK TO:

EXT. CEMETERY - NIGHT

Galo stands right behind her.

GALO

You have your station only because father granted me the power to allow you to stay.

ALAD

At first, I was frightened by his words...

FLASH TO:

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

As Nalid speaks, Alad isn't sure what to make of him.

ALAD (V.O.)

...then I found myself bound by the passion in his eyes.

Nalid smiles at her. Alad can't help but smile back. She touches his hand.

ALAD (V.O.)

I fell in love with him that very day.

BACK TO:

EXT. CEMETERY - NIGHT

Alad wipes her eyes.

ALAD

He swore that one day he'd unlock the secret of what was buried in his mind. I never imagined he'd be killed for it!

GALO

Alad, please. This has to stop. It's been months.

ALAD

Why did you come here, Galo?!

GALO  
I want to help you.

ALAD  
You can't.

GALO  
Father tells me that one day soon,  
the Council will make me a Priest.

ALAD  
What you've always wanted.

GALO  
Every Priest needs a Priestess.

Alad glares at him, half enraged by his insinuation, half intrigued at the prospect.

GALO  
I know I'm not him, but I can give  
you what no one else will. A  
family. A home. And I'll care for  
you the rest of my days.

He holds out his hand. Alad looks like she's about to tear it from his arm... but she doesn't. She slowly, begrudgingly accepts it.

INT. CRAFT

Holding hands, Alad and Galo glide over the city. Circle the Tower of Ufanim.

Galo touches Alad's face. With a sad, guilt-ridden sigh, Alad looks away. Galo gently turns her head to face him. They stare at each other for an awkward moment. Galo leans in for a kiss. Alad feels no passion, but doesn't fight it.

INT. TEMPLE - AFTERNOON

Niris-Im officiates Galo and Alad's wedding.

INT. RESEV'S QUARTERS - EVENING

Galo's and Alad's families are gathered for the evening reception. Alad carries her new Wemanim. It's a paultry ornament compared to the one Nalid made for her. She greets several family members and friends...

Then Alad finds some quiet space by a window looking out at the Tower of Ufanim. She gazes at it. Tears well up in her eyes. A single drop streaks down her cheek.

ALAD

...Always.

The Tower's gleaming reflection in her tear becomes...

...The top of the sun-soaked Palace.

EXT. PALACE - MORNING

Fed, washed, clean-shaven, and dressed in new tailored clothes, Nalid inspects the hand-drawn markings on a block at the base of the Palace. Queen Shamai and her entourage hover over him. Nalid speaks Choan.

NALID

These glyphs don't even resemble ours.

QUEEN SHAMAI

What was that?

Nalid switches to the Village Tongue. Lies his ass off.

NALID

They look familiar, but...

He scans the enormous surface of the Palace. Covered in the signs.

NALID

...they'll take some time to translate.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Then you had best get started.

NALID

I'll need something to... make signs.

Queen Shamai gestures to a couple of her Attendants. With a nod, they run off.

EXT. FOREST - AFTERNOON

Kimar leads a large, seasoned hunting party... and Mana. Now adorned with his own hunter paint. They prowl through the trees seeking out their prey. Kimar stops. Holds up a hand. Points. The others gather around him.

In the distance, a herd of beasts grazes. They resemble a mixture between grizzly bears and wild boars.

Kimmar motions to the party. They ready their spears. Sneak up to the herd. Feeling their presence, the herd moves away.

Kimmar scowls at Mana. Grumbles to himself.

KIMAR

By the sands, she had to give him  
to me.

He whispers to Mana.

KIMAR

Outsider! Not there!

He points to where Mana holds his spear. Shows Mana the proper way to hold it.

KIMAR

Here!

Mana sees no difference, but does what he's told.

Kimmar gives the party an urgent wave, then runs, whooping, after the beasts. Everyone follows. Kimmar throws his first spear. Nails one of the animals in the back of its neck. It collapses. Kimmar chases after the rest of the herd.

The other hunters have varying degrees of success. Some easily cut down the beasts. Others lose their spears in the trees and brush.

Mana fares better than most. Deftly uses a single spear to slay one after the other.

Removing a spear from a fallen animal, Kimmar notices Mana running off alone, after a stray. Wielding his bloodied weapon, Kimmar follows.

The animal charges away. Mana arms himself with the first of his remaining three spears. Lunges it at the beast. Misses by mere inches.

MANA

Noth!

Kimmar catches up. Throws a spear. Also misses. Mana throws his second. Nails the dead center... of a tree trunk. Kimmar laughs at Mana's failure.

KIMAR

I'll show you how it's done,  
Outsider!

He hurls. Misses again. Mana readies his last one. Takes careful aim. Kimar throws again. Misses. Mana throws.

Whack! The beast plunges out of its run, tumbles a few feet, and stops cold.

The two men catch up to the dying animal. Mana grins proudly as he tears his spear from the animal's body. Kimar eyes Mana and his prize. Snorts.

KIMAR

Luck.

He storms off.

INT. FORUM - NIGHT

Aglow with nighttime merriment. A fire blazes in the center. Several hundred fill a ring of seats playing drums, pipes, and strings. Others engage in games and gossip.

Nalid sits by himself. Works on a page of translation. Near him lies the paint set Amira gave him. His canvas is now a nascent painting of Alad's face.

The hunters and their friends admire their newest member, Mana. Kimar stands off to the side with his friends. Pretends to ignore them all.

Queen Shamai enters with her entourage. The crowd quiets.

QUEEN SHAMAI

The hunt brought us twice the meat  
of last year. It shall be a rich  
winter indeed!

The hunters cheer. Queen Shamai leaves. Everyone gets back to celebrating. Mana finds his brother. Speaks Choan.

MANA

I don't understand a blind word  
they're saying, but I can see these  
people enjoy their lives more than  
anyone I ever knew in Cho.

Nalid doesn't look up from his work.

MANA

How much've you finished?

NALID

Only the one. And from what I can  
tell, there's no structure.

MANA

What do you mean?

NALID

Groups of sounds. None of the words I've heard. I don't know how long it'll take me to make any sense of them.

Amira smiles at Mana. He smiles back.

MANA

Take as long as you want.

He turns his attention back to Nalid.

MANA

Any sign of your city?

Nalid shakes his head.

NALID

Not here.

Iara enters the Forum. The adults greet him respectfully. The children gather around him. Beg for a story. Iara calls out to the crowd.

IARA

Shall I tell a tale?!

Everyone cheers. Iara nods to the musicians. They start a pounding rhythm. Nalid sets down his work. Listens.

IARA

Long before the time of your great-grandfather's great-grandfather, there lived a young blacksmith who loved a young huntress.

People clap for the beloved tale.

FLASH TO:

EXT. FORUM - NIGHT

At a celebration in the distant past, a handsome young man, the BLACKSMITH, gazes at a beautiful young woman, the HUNTRESS, as she dances with friends and other admirers.

IARA (V.O.)

She was beautiful and had many suitors.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

The Blacksmith marches toward the desert.

IARA (V.O.)  
Desperate to woo her, he travelled  
to the desert to seek inspiration  
in the solace of the sands.

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

Sitting near a fire, the Blacksmith stirs the smoldering wood pile.

IARA (V.O.)  
One night, as he awaited slumber,  
he saw a star shining in the heart  
of the fire's coals.

The Blacksmith notices a glob of molten glass. He scoops it out with a stick. Examines it.

EXT. DESERT - MORNING

The molten glob has cooled to a chunk of glass. The Blacksmith spends most of the morning kicking it around, hitting it against things, and admiring its diffraction of the sun's rays.

IARA (V.O.)  
It was as hard as stone, as clear  
as water, and as bright as the sun!

EXT. VILLAGE - AFTERNOON

The Blacksmith arrives with the glass chunk and two huge sacks full of sand.

IARA (V.O.)  
He returned with the desert star,  
and with as much sand as he could  
carry.

INT. SMITHY

The Blacksmith works with glass all day under the intense heat of his gigantic forge.

IARA (V.O.)  
He built a mighty forge, and with  
it, fashioned a great gift as a  
symbol of his love.

Satisfied with his work, the Blacksmith sets down his tools. Drapes a fine linen cloth over his gift.

EXT. FORUM - EVENING

The Blacksmith presents the gift to his would-be bride. She's overjoyed by the gesture. They kiss.

Nearby, her other suitors look on. Their eyes flare with jealousy.

INT. BLACKSMITH'S HOME - NIGHT

The Blacksmith and the Huntress are sound asleep, naked in each other's arms. The suitors burst in. Seize the lovers. Throw sacks over their heads. Drag them, kicking and screaming, from the bed.

IARA (V.O.)  
Jealous of the Blacksmith's gift,  
the other suitors flew into an  
insane rage!

EXT. VILLAGE

Under the usually enchanting light of the moon, the suitors beat the young lovers to death with the Blacksmith's gift.

INT. FORUM - DAY

The suitors stand trial before the king and the entire Village. To the king's right sits the Blacksmith's gift. Concealed under the now blood-soaked linen.

IARA (V.O.)  
As punishment for their terrible  
deed, the king banished the suitors  
to the sands, never to be heard  
from again.

The king stands. Stretches his arm dramatically toward the desert.

EXT. FOREST

Now chained to the Blacksmith's gift, the suitors drag it along with them as they march toward the horizon.

BACK TO:

INT. FORUM - NIGHT

Iara bows. The crowd cheers. The drummers lighten their rhythm to a funerary drone. The children run up to Iara. Climb all over him. Iara laughs at their excitement.

Studying Iara, inspiration sparks in Nalid's head. He collects his work. Approaches the old man.

INT. IARA'S HOME

Nalid and Iara share tea.

IARA  
Shamai tells me you've made progress on your translation.

NALID  
Not as much as I'd like.

IARA  
Our young Queen is a patient ruler. She'll give you all the time you'll need.

Nalid nods.

IARA  
You didn't come here to talk about the Palace.

Nalid sips his tea.

NALID  
The myth you told tonight...

IARA  
The Blacksmith's Gift.

NALID  
It seemed strangely familiar. What are your other myths like?

IARA  
Some speak of great battles, great heroes, great loves.

NALID  
Is there truth to any of them?

IARA

There's always some truth to a myth, but whatever it was, it's now lost to the millennia.

EXT. PALACE

Under the night's serene stillness, Nalid sits in front of the building. Works on his translation by moonlight.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Are you gonna finish it all tonight?

Nalid flinches at the sound of her voice. Jumps up. Bows.

NALID

My Queen.

Queen Shamai gently lifts his chin.

QUEEN SHAMAI

I prefer to see my people's eyes.

Nalid nods.

QUEEN SHAMAI

You've been here for hours. Time for a walk.

She leads him on a stroll around the Palace.

NALID

Why are you still awake... my Queen?

QUEEN SHAMAI

Night's the only time I ever have to myself.

NALID

How long have you held this position, my Queen?

Queen Shamai smiles at his audacity.

QUEEN SHAMAI

A personal question.

NALID

Pardon me, my Queen --

QUEEN SHAMAI  
 Three years now. Though sometimes  
 it feels like much longer.

NALID  
 I can imagine.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
 Tell me, Nalid-Im, why'd you leave  
 your homeland?

NALID  
 A personal question.

Queen Shamai nods like she expects an answer.

NALID  
 It's a very long story.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
 The night's young.

NALID  
 When I was a boy, my parents  
 discovered an ancient secret. Our  
 leaders killed them for their  
 discovery.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
 What kind of secret?

NALID  
 The true history of our people.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
 And you think you'll solve this  
 little mystery in our Village?

NALID  
 I hope to.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
 What'll you do once you have?

NALID  
 Bring it to my people. Show them  
 the truth. But so far all I've  
 found is a Palace with many signs,  
 and no answers.

Queen Shamai stops. Admires the Palace.

QUEEN SHAMAI

She's a wonder, isn't she? More than five thousand years old. Built from earth, glass, and a single stone.

NALID

What's "stone," my Queen?

Queen Shamai searches for a way to explain, then spots the perfect description.

QUEEN SHAMAI

There.

She shows Nalid to one of the Palace's corners. Under its glass plate, Nalid sees not the usual marked earthen block, but a blank stone. It's the exact same substance as the Shrine in Nalid's father's message. Nalid's eyes brighten.

NALID

This is it!

He excitedly runs his hands across the stone's surface. Inspects every scratch, dent, and crack.

NALID

The same material as the object in the...!

He can't find the words.

QUEEN SHAMAI

The what?

Nalid faces her.

NALID

This! Are there other... stones like this one?

QUEEN SHAMAI

I haven't seen any since I was a girl. On a trip to the mountain ruins.

That piques Nalid's interest.

NALID

"Ruins"?

Queen Shamai struggles to explain.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
A village... of stone --

NALID  
Can you take me there?

Queen Shamai's taken aback by his sudden passion.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
It'd be a long trip by foot.

NALID  
How long?

QUEEN SHAMAI  
Weeks.

NALID  
My Queen, I need to see these  
ruins.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
There's a party going to the desert  
in a few days. I'll have Amira  
take you with them. Teach you to  
fly.

NALID  
Fly??

EXT. DESERT - MORNING

Including the brothers, Amira, and Kimar, a group of  
adventurers sail the winds on huge, cloth gliders, and surf  
the dune crests on glass-lined wooden boards.

Unaccustomed to the thrust from his glider, Nalid flails  
around. Amira calls after him.

AMIRA  
Never fight the winds! Ride them!

Nearby, Nalid sees Mana hollering gleefully, as he easily  
sails with the best of them. Nalid slowly gains control over  
the board. Soars high above the desert...

It's quiet. Calm. Complete serenity. Then --

Nalid dips. Thumps on a dune. Slices its crest. Sand  
sprays out from under his board. Nalid twirls wildly in the  
air. Shouts excitedly. Soars back up into the sky.

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

Dancers and musicians circle bonfires on dune tops. Mana and Amira dance together. Settled near a fire, Nalid works quietly on his painting of Alad. He smiles at his brother, then gazes into the distance. Spots...

Cho. Its millions of lights give the sky a quiet glow, like a candle-lit jewel resting on the horizon of the infinite sands.

Mana parts with Amira. Heads over to their things. Kimar, drunk out of his mind, gets in Mana's way.

KIMAR

Get used to these sands, Outsider.  
Soon Queen Shamai'll dump you back  
here.

Ignoring him, Mana pushes past. Kimar stops him.

KIMAR

What's wrong, Outsider? Don't  
understand?

Mana shoves Kimar out of his way. Kimar pushes him back.

KIMAR

Months and months of living off my  
people, and, by the sands, you  
still can't speak?!

Resisting his mounting anger, Mana tries to side step him. Kimar takes a swing at him. Mana dodges, then nails him.

A crowd surrounds them. Half shout for Kimar. The other half for Mana. Nalid leaps to his feet. Pushes to get through.

Mana and Kimar exchange blows. Neither one gains the upper hand. Their friends join the brawl. The crowd explodes into a riot.

Nalid can't get near his brother. Instead, he runs to a fire. Removes one of its burning logs. Races up the nearest dune. Hurls the log down into the fire below. Sparks and embers shoot everywhere. The mob scatters.

NALID

Enough!!

Everyone freezes. They all gaze up at Nalid in stunned silence. Nalid stomps back down. Seizes his brother.

Marches him away. Amira catches up to them. Tenderly takes Mana's arm.

KIMAR

We should've left you to die!!

Nalid and Amira ignore him. Mana shoots him a bitter glance. Kimar retreats through the crowd. His friends follow.

EXT. VILLAGE - NOON

Largest of the dwellings, Queen Shamai's home is built on a hill overlooking the Village.

INT. QUEEN SHAMAI'S HOME

Kimar, Amira, and the brothers nervously stand before Queen Shamai, and her Attendants.

QUEEN SHAMAI

To avoid any further conflicts,  
Amira shall personally tutor Mana-  
Im starting tomorrow morning.

Amira nods.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Kimar is not to interact with Mana-  
Im and Nalid-Im unless instructed  
to do so.

They nod.

QUEEN SHAMAI

You are free to go.

They all head out.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Except for you, Kimar.

Kimar halts. Goes back to her.

KIMAR

My Queen?

QUEEN SHAMAI

There is something you wish to say.

Kimar takes a moment to decide, then goes for it. Speaks to the ground.

KIMAR

You should've exiled the Outsiders the moment they arrived. You let your fantasies about the Palace's "secrets" cloud your judgement.

He looks up at her.

KIMAR

After months of waiting, we still have no translation.

He takes a step toward her.

KIMAR

But it's not Nalid-Im's translation you want. You'll wait until you think no one notices, then you'll slip him into your bed!!

Queen Shamai nods, looks away, then --

She swings back. Belts Kimar across the face. Socks him in the stomach. Upper cuts him to the floor.

Some of the Attendants gasp. Kimar groans. Queen Shamai stands by Kimar's head. Peers down at him.

QUEEN SHAMAI

You may disagree with my decisions as much as you like, Kimar, but if you ever disrespect me again, by the sands, it shall be you I exile!

She kneels. Gets in his face.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Do I make myself perfectly clear?!

Kimar's expression switches from shock, to anger. But he bites his tongue. Nods sheepishly.

QUEEN SHAMAI

You are free to go.

Kimar stands. Storms off.

INT. AMIRA'S HOME - MORNING

Listening to Mana, Amira paces back and forth. Frustrated out of his gourd, Mana's seated, repeating a phrase over and over.

AMIRA

Again.

Mana jumps up.

MANA

Me no good...!

He points to his tongue.

MANA

...tongue! No good!

AMIRA

You're improving.

They're both silent. Amira goes outside. A moment passes. She pops her head back in.

AMIRA

Don't just stand there.

EXT. FOREST

Amira pulls Mana through the woods bordering the lake. They stop at the water's edge. Amira takes a deep breath.

AMIRA

I love the smell of green.

Mana also takes in the scent of nature, but then Amira pulls him along. They head up a narrow path siding the stream which dumps into the lake. They come around a hillside. Find a magnificent waterfall. Mana stops in his tracks.

MANA

Ufanim!

Amira smiles at him.

AMIRA

A waterfall.

Mana attempts to pronounce the word.

MANA

Water... Fall?

Amira takes his hand.

EXT. WATERFALL

Amira leads Mana up the trail to the edge of the falls. Introduces Mana's hands to the mist. The cold tickles him. Mana laughs.

AMIRA

Mist.

MANA

Mist.

Amira places her hand on his face.

AMIRA

Feel it. Just feel it. The warm.  
The wet. The cold.

Mana holds her hand against his face.

MANA

Warm. Wet. Cold.

EXT. PALACE

Carrying heavy packs, gliders, and boards, Queen Shamai and Nalid climb to the top. They cast their gliders to the winds. Queen Shamai nods at the mountains.

QUEEN SHAMAI

The ruins are two days to the east.

She eyes the Village. Grins.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Savor her beauty. You won't see  
anything like it for quite a while.

Nalid takes one last look. Queen Shamai jumps off the Palace. Swoops into the sky. Nalid watches her ascent, then leaps after her.

They soar over the Village and trees, into the mountains.

EXT. FOREST - AFTERNOON

Queen Shamai and Nalid hike into the evening. Though the scenery is gorgeous, the trail is strenuous. Stripped down to bare backs, sweat shines on their tanning skin.

EXT. FOREST - EVENING

Queen Shamai and Nalid hike up a steep ridge at dusk. Nalid pauses for a rest. Wipes his face with his shirt. Takes a swig from his water skin. Admires the view.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Come...

Nalid takes another drink, then follows her up the slope. As they come over:

QUEEN SHAMAI

Here they are.

She points to...

EXT. RUINS

The ancient remains of what was once a great city, now just foundations, rubble, and dust. Awestruck, Nalid shakes his head at the sight.

NALID

Ufanim.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Very, very old. Thousands of years.

NALID

Who were they?

QUEEN SHAMAI

No one knows. All we have are the myths.

Having seen this before, she quite comfortably hikes deeper into the skeletal city. Nalid waits there a moment. Lets his eyes feed on the forgotten grandeur before him. Then follows after Queen Shamai.

Queen Shamai and Nalid tread on smooth, worn cobblestones. Around them stand the crumbling remains of buildings, streets... civilization.

Nalid stops. Kneels. Draws a shape in the dirt resembling the Shrine.

NALID

Have you seen this?

Queen Shamai shakes her head.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
What is it?

NALID  
What I need to take back to my  
people.

He mumbles to himself in Choan.

NALID  
I'm looking too closely.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
Excuse me?

Nalid scans the area. Locates a nearby caved-in wall next to a pillar. He goes over to it. Queen Shamai follows. They climb the jagged stones. Nalid switches back to the Village Tongue.

NALID  
It has to be here. If not in the  
open, then in a room, or passage.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
There's nothing like that here.  
Only what you see.

Nalid jumps to the pillar. Scrambles up. Scans the area. Streets. Walls. Arches. Pillars. Nothing like what he's looking for.

NALID  
It has to be here.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
It'll be dark soon. We need to  
make camp.

Nalid keeps scouring the area. Grumbles in Choan.

NALID  
Help me, Alad.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
Nalid-Im.

Nalid alerts Queen Shamai in the Village Tongue.

NALID  
Wait. There!

He points to a nearby square. Its surface is checkered with cracked, sunken spaces.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
It's only a plaza.

Nalid grins.

NALID  
Not to me.

EXT. PLAZA

Nalid and Queen Shamai run in. Nalid climbs down into one of the sunken areas.

NALID  
There's a room underneath us. Over time, the supported areas of the ceiling stayed level.

Queen Shamai gets it.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
But the open areas sank.

NALID  
All we need to do is get inside.

Queen Shamai teases him.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
That's all??

She joins him. They dig at one of the cracks. Pull out rocks, roots, and dirt...

EXT. PLAZA

Nalid and Queen Shamai eventually come to a solid layer of stone bricks. They remove one after another, until they open a small hole. Nalid goes for another brick --

Rumble... Snap! A large chunk of masonry crumbles out from under Nalid. Queen Shamai yanks him back as the bricks crash into the darkness below. Nalid gives her a grateful smile.

NALID  
Thank you, my Queen.

Queen Shamai nods cordially.

INT. CAVE

A rope drops forty feet into darkness. Holding a torch, Nalid slides down. Gets his bearings. Queen Shamai slips down after him. Guided by the torchlight, they move in a couple feet...

Queen Shamai lets out a horrified gasp --

Bones.

Every surface is decorated with the fossilized human remains of thousands of adults, children... families. An ancient catacombs. The grisly sight takes Nalid's breath away.

NALID

...Nothanam.

He passes corpse after corpse, unable to speak as he takes it all in. Queen Shamai stays right at his side.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Incredible.

Catching sight of something, Nalid freezes. Falls to his knees. Before him lies a child's tiny skull. Lodged in it, Nalid can clearly see the rusted remains of a blade.

NALID

Who would do such a thing?

Queen Shamai touches his shoulder.

QUEEN SHAMAI

The Blacksmith's Gift!

She points to a few feet in front of them...

Sparkling in the torchlight, Nalid finds a Wemanim lodged into the very Shrine he's sought for so long. The Shrine still bears a clear set of archaic glyphs arranged in a circle around none other than Niris-Im's Great Seal.

FLASH TO:

INT. NALID'S MIND

Nalid's mind's eye races through the entire night of his family's attempted escape in one massive flood of memories.

BACK TO:

INT. CAVE - EVENING

Nalid shakes the images out of his head. Kneels before the Shrine. Touches the writing. Whispers to himself in Choan.

NALID

This is it! The secret my parents found! The secret the Council was so desperate to protect! Niris-Im is a myth! We're the same people!

He takes hold of the Wemanim. Informs Queen Shamai.

NALID

This is the truth I've been searching for!

He tries to pick it up. It holds firm.

NALID

Too heavy.

Queen Shamai observes the Wemanim's placement in the stone.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Too stuck.

They both grab onto the Wemanim. Pull as hard as they can --

CRACK!! They break it free. Bolts of energy shoot out from the hole in the Shrine. The force flings them into the surrounding bones.

Queen Shamai picks herself up. Wipes the dust off her face.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Nalid-Im?

She finds Nalid a few feet away, face down. She rolls him over. Nalid blinks. Sits up. Smiles at the Wemanim clutched tightly in his hands, then at the glyphs on the Shrine...

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

On glyphs racing across a screen.

INT. HALL OF RECORDS - NIGHT

The screen belongs to the front desk. The Servant on duty quietly works away when he hears --

Zzzt! The sound's coming from one of the record rooms. The Servant hurries to investigate.

INT. RECORD ROOM

The display crackles and flashes like a midsummer storm. Random portions of Nalid's father's final message flicker on and off. The Servant touches the wall. A screen appears. Resev rolls over into frame.

INT. HALL OF PRIESTS - DAY

Alone, Resev skims information on his screen. Next to it lies a Priest's uniform. Galo enters.

GALO  
You sent for me, father?

Still reading, Resev stands.

RESEV  
...Yes.

He greets his son cheerfully.

RESEV  
Tell me, how's my granddaughter?

GALO  
She and Alad are both well.

RESEV  
Good. Good.

He leads Galo to his screen.

RESEV  
Late last night, a settlement  
outside of Cho made contact.

Galo's stunned.

GALO  
That's impossible! There's nothing  
beyond Cho.

RESEV  
Or so we thought.

He shows Galo the image of the Shrine Nalid found.

RESEV

The signal originated from this device. It was weak, but clear.

He turns to Galo.

RESEV

The mere sight of these Outsiders will destroy the people's faith in Niris-Im. All our beliefs, our very way of life, will be lost.

GALO

Then what's my assignment?

RESEV

You'll go into Nothanam. Find a resilient group. Lead them to this settlement, and conquer it before it has a chance to discover us.

He gestures to his screen.

RESEV

Its entry in the Archives will be "Niris-Im's Gift." It will be a new era for Cho.

GALO

But even if we conquer them, everything our people know will become a lie, a myth.

RESEV

A myth is only a lie until the people believe it.

GALO

How can you make them believe?

Resev smiles arrogantly.

RESEV

Controlling weak minds is a simple task. All you do is eliminate their will, and replace it with faith.

He puts a hand on his son's shoulder. Gives him the Priest's uniform.

RESEV

Congratulations, Your Eminence.

Galo stares at the cloth in his hands, unable to believe he's just been promoted.

INT. GALO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Galo struts in wearing his new uniform. Finds Alad in one of the bedrooms. A baby girl in her arms. The baby starts to cry. Alad comforts her.

GALO  
Father's given me my first  
assignment as Priest.

ALAD  
What you've always wanted.

GALO  
I'm to locate and conquer a  
settlement.

Alad gawks as if she heard him wrong.

ALAD  
A settlement??

Her mind reels with the possibilities.

ALAD  
By His Glory, Nalid was right!

GALO  
That doesn't matter now.

ALAD  
But Galo, if there is a city, Nalid  
might still be alive!

Galo hisses.

GALO  
More than two years and you still  
refuse to forget him.

ALAD  
I'm coming with you.

GALO  
No you're not.

ALAD  
Galo, if there's even a slight  
chance that I could find him and  
Mana, it's my chance to take.

Galo sees she won't let up.

GALO  
If I allow you to go with me,  
you'll train with the Servants.

Alad nods. Sits. Returns her full attention to her daughter.

ALAD  
Is that all, Galo?

Galo's about to respond, but decides against it. No love lost here. With an annoyed sigh, Galo leaves.

INT. TRANSPORT BAY - MORNING

Galo and a Servant step inside a shuttle. The door slides closed.

EXT. CHO

The shuttle drops past miles of glass into a sea of milky mist.

INT. SHUTTLE

Galo watches their descent. The dark shape of Nothanam drifts through below them.

EXT. NOTHANAM

The shuttle slips out from the cloud layer, over the shadowy, twisted mass. The shuttle's descent slows as it approaches a jagged lip precariously hanging over an immense chasm. The shuttle lands. The door slides open.

INT. NOTHANAM

Galo and the Servant march down a long, dark hallway. Galo winces at the putrid smell. He and the Servant emerge onto a balcony high above a repulsive crowd of millions of Noths. An ear-splitting siren fills the air.

SERVANT  
Ah, we're just in time for the  
games, Your Eminence!

He points below.

A portion of the crowd disperses. Forms a cleared circle. A filthy, yet familiar man strides over from a nearby refinery.

He has worn, lined skin, a shaved pate, and an iron body built from seemingly decades of hard labor.

It's Kuhel, who so long ago aided Nalid and Mana in their escape. He enters the circle. The crowd makes a ruckus. Kuhel holds up his hands. They quiet down.

Kuhel tears off his shirt. A solid, chiselled physique. And a scar-tattoo carved up his spine that blooms into a sunburst at the base of his skull.

Kuhel tosses his shirt into the crowd. Hundreds of young women fight over it. One of them, not a day over sixteen, claws at the others till she wins the prize.

KUHEL

Who's first?!

An OPPONENT, a young man much larger than Kuhel, enters the circle.

OPPONENT

Who could resist pounding such a filthy son of a whore?!

He tears his own shirt off. An equally impressive body. He tosses his shirt into the crowd. Only a couple women fight over it.

Both Kuhel and his Opponent hold up their hands. Spectators toss swords at them. Kuhel plucks his out of the air as if it were waiting for him. His Opponent misses. The sword hits the ground. Slides away. The Opponent collects it.

KUHEL

What are you waiting for, boy? I'm right here!

That enrages his Opponent. Their swords clash. Their skills are near equal, but the cold detachment in Kuhel's eyes allows him to channel his emotions straight to his blade. Its only moments before he out-matches his Opponent's moves.

Clink! The Opponent's sword deserts him. Panic flashes in his eyes. Kuhel sets his own sword down. Steps away from it. His Opponent comes running. Kuhel is too fast for him --

Bam! Kuhel catches his Opponent's jaw in a slick right hook. The Opponent hits the ground.

KUHEL

Boy, you're not even trying!

He wraps his fingers around his Opponent's neck. Stands him up. Dazed, his Opponent merely stares at him. Kuhel smiles at the crowd.

KUHEL

Would you like to see him hit me?!

The women go crazy. Kuhel turns to his Opponent.

KUHEL

Come, boy.

He backs away. Beckons. His Opponent attempts a fight stance. Kuhel nods, bemused. His Opponent swings. Kuhel catches his arm, and, with a horrible crunch, wrenches it out of its socket. His Opponent screams. The crowd loves it.

Kuhel lowers his Opponent to his knees. Asks the crowd.

KUHEL

Would you like to see mercy, or watch the boy beg?!

Most cry for begging. Some feign mercy. Kuhel whispers into his Opponent's ear.

KUHEL

You might've survived...

His Opponent's too frightened to blink. Kuhel reaches his arm around his Opponent's face. Strokes it gently --

Then, snatching both swords, Kuhel stands. Crosses his arms. With a wet swoosh, he slices his Opponent's head clean off. Blood squirts all over Kuhel. The head bounces a couple times on the severed neck before tumbling to the floor.

KUHEL

...but I must satisfy my public.

His Opponent's body goes limp. Falls over. Kuhel flips the two swords twice in the air. Plants the swords in his former Opponent's back. Stands up straight. Kicks the corpse aside. Insane applause.

KUHEL

Who's next?!

INT. GALO'S QUARTERS - MORNING

Five Servants lead Kuhel in at sword point. They find Galo staring out the window.

SERVANT

The Noth you requested, Your Eminence.

Galo faces them. Nods. The Servants release Kuhel, but keep their swords trained on him.

GALO

I know you. You were in Nalid's class before you became a Noth.

Kuhel chuckles a little.

KUHEL

Was I? Memory is such an odd thing. It comes and goes.

GALO

I brought you here because I need to learn about you.

KUHEL

Learn about me, Your Eminence?!

He laughs.

KUHEL

My life is but a simple story. One little misstep turned this once promising man into the scarred, broken Noth who stands before you.

His voice quickly matches his fury. He takes slow steps toward Galo.

KUHEL

Now all I do is shovel sand! Burn sand! Even in slumber, I scrape sand from my eyes!! Does that satisfy your curiosity, Priest?!!

GALO

That man you killed yesterday. Impressive. Could you teach your skills to me? To others?

Kuhel laughs out loud. Wanders over to Alad's Wemanim. Gently caresses it with the tip of his finger --

Kuhel swings back. Dives between the Servants. Snatches the swords from the trembling hands of the first two. Flips the swords. Stabs the Servants in the stomach. Somersaults to the next two. Stabs them...

The last Servant retreats --

Thunk! Kuhel hurls one sword into the Servant's posterior.  
As the Servant falls --

Whack! The second sword slices into the back of the  
Servant's neck. Before the Servant hits the ground, Kuhel  
grabs his clean sword. Spins around. Hurls it at Galo's  
head.

The sword goes right through Galo. A hologram.

Clink! The sword lands nearby. Neither Kuhel nor Galo is  
particularly surprised. That instant, the front door opens.  
A dozen new Servants file in. Surround Kuhel. He doesn't  
move.

GALO

I was wondering when you'd get  
around to that.

KUHEL

If you'll excuse me, Your Eminence.

He turns toward the door. Ignores the new Servants as he  
heads out.

GALO

I'll grant you your freedom. And  
the freedom of hundreds more.  
Whomever you choose.

Kuhel stops.

GALO

But will your fellow Noths follow  
you?

KUHEL

For a chance to escape Nothanam?

He faces Galo.

KUHEL

Into the furnaces.

INT. NOTHANAM - DAY

Standing at his balcony, Galo and some Servants watch Kuhel  
and a man spar with swords. Galo points out Kuhel.

GALO

At the end of their shift, take  
him, and whoever comes with him.

The siren rings. Kuhel, the man he fought with, and others  
get on their sandcraft. A wall slides away. The sky awaits.  
The group flies out into the open.

EXT. NOTHANAM

The swarm of tiny sandcraft free-fall.

Kuhel grips his sandcraft using only his legs. Lets his arms  
stream in the air's current. Hollers with exhilaration.

The swarm nears the ground. Most start their engines in  
time. Make near-crashing swoops over the dunes. A few miss.  
Explode in the sand.

Kuhel flies up and up, eclipses the sun, then goes back for  
more.

The cruel afternoon sun becomes...

...The pale, full moon.

INT. AMIRA'S HOME - NIGHT

Sporting long, greasy hair, an unshaven face, and bloodshot  
eyes, Nalid has clearly been awake for days, if not weeks.

He shows Mana the Wemanim he found, along with stacks of his  
translations of the Palace signs. Near them lies Nalid's  
finished stained-glass of Alad. The brothers speak in the  
Village Tongue.

NALID

He was a gifted, young blacksmith.  
The pride of his people. One day,  
he made a discovery that changed  
everything.

He holds up the Wemanim.

NALID

Glass. He preached that with it,  
they could build an empire of  
astounding knowledge. Machines.  
Prosperity. Our fair city of Cho.

He laughs.

NALID

Most thought he was mad. Others worshipped him. Battles broke out. Then war. He led his followers to the desert. His name was Niris-Im.

He pauses. Reflects.

NALID

A visionary. A genius. But a man like any other.

He spreads out his pages. Runs his finger along a line of writing.

NALID

The survivors buried their dead, and resettled here. The Palace is a memorial to the fallen.

He points to a few signs.

NALID

There was no structure to most of the signs because they were names. ...So many names.

He excitedly shakes the Wemanim.

NALID

This is the proof I need! Mana, we're going home!

He pulls his brother across the room, to his glider and board. Kneels by a backpack full of supplies.

NALID

We'll fly to the desert, find our machine, repair it, and be back in a few days!

MANA

I can't.

Nalid gawks at him.

NALID

Can't what?

He stands. Glares fiercely at his brother. Mana finds it hard to admit.

MANA

...I don't wanna go back.

NALID

By the blazes of the furnaces of  
Nothanam, why not??!!

MANA

I love Amira.

Nalid freezes. Then the impact of his brother's admission hits him. Nalid smiles wide.

NALID

Mana-Im! That's wonderful!

MANA

Why don't you stay? You could be  
happy here.

Nalid's smile disappears. He switches to Choan. Mana stays with the Village Tongue.

NALID

I need to go back.

MANA

Forget her, Nalid-Im! The Council  
will kill you!

NALID

Mana, I need to go back!

He plants his eyes on his stained-glass of Alad.

MANA

All the paintings, Wemanims, and  
translations in the world won't  
return you to her!

In a burst of rage, Nalid snatches the stained-glass, swings around, and tosses it at Mana.

NALID

Nothanam!!

Mana ducks. The glass shatters on the wall. Realizing what he's just done, Nalid rushes over. Gathers the pieces into a pile. Then, in an impulse, he grabs the backpack, slips it on, takes his glider, board, the Wemanim, and storms out.

EXT. PALACE

Nalid drags his supplies to the top of the building. As he casts his glider to the sky, he can't help the moment of regret and sadness that creeps over him as he gazes at the Village.

He shakes the emotions out of his head. Shoves the Wemanim into his backpack. Fastens his feet to the board. Takes off. Soars above the Village...

EXT. FOREST

Flying over the trees, Nalid laughs with glee. Stronger winds take hold, and before he knows it, he's high in the sky. He gazes at the horizon... toward Cho.

EXT. DESERT

Nalid glides over the dark dunes and trees. Scours for any sign of his craft. Nothing. Then, in the distance, he spots a surface reflecting the glinting stars above.

He descends near it. Throws off his glider and board. Runs to it. Lets out a relieved laugh. Wipes away the sand. Finds an edge. Terror clouds his face...

It's nothing but a piece left from the crash. He frantically digs it out. It's a triangular sheet, about half the size of his glider. He looks it over. Weighs it in his hands. Then stabs it into the sand like a shovel.

EXT. DESERT

In a hole about five feet deep, covered in sand, Nalid drips with sweat. No craft anywhere.

EXT. DESERT

The entire area is now scarred with dozens of similar holes. Working in one at the edge of the others, Nalid desperately shovels out two more piles of sand, sticks the craft piece into the ground, and takes a deep, exhausted breath.

He climbs out of the hole. Wanders toward Cho. Heaves a drained sigh. Drops to the ground. Stretches his limbs --

Clink. His knuckles hit a surface. He turns over. Crawls to the spot. Wipes away the sand, revealing:

Glass.

EXT. DESERT - MORNING

Nalid works on the unearthed craft by the light of dawn.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
No one ever goes out this far. Too  
easy to get lost.

Nalid peers over the vehicle. Spots her a few feet away.

NALID  
How did you find me?

QUEEN SHAMAI  
When you've ridden the winds as  
long as I have, you can find  
anything in these sands.

She admires the craft.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
So this is how you came to us.

She steps toward Nalid. Runs her fingers along the craft's  
surface.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
Incredible. Does it fly?

NALID  
It will.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
You really think you can convince  
your people of something they don't  
wanna believe?

NALID  
I have to try.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
From everything you've told me,  
that not only sounds futile, but  
suicidal.

She comes face to face with him.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
Think of your brother. ...He'd  
miss you.

NALID

Are you commanding me to stay, my Queen?

QUEEN SHAMAI

Our agreement was that you'd leave only after you'd given us your translation.

NALID

Somehow I doubt you came all the way out here to enforce our agreement.

QUEEN SHAMAI

You can make a life here. There's so much more you could teach us. The translation is only the beginning.

She turns away. Heads home.

QUEEN SHAMAI

The choice is yours, Nalid-Im.

Nalid stares back toward Cho for a long while, then at his reflection in the craft. Making his decision, he sets down his tools. Calls after Queen Shamai.

NALID

My Queen!

INT. FORUM - EVENING

In the center stands a ten-foot tall replica of the Wemanim Nalid made for Alad. Torch lights play on its surface.

Drums pound. Flutes and strings sing. Wearing elaborate costumes and sparkling glass masks, all the Villagers dance around the Wemanim. Even Iara is here. Dancing with a crowd of children.

Now cleaned up, shaven, and well-rested again, Nalid dances in a group with Queen Shamai. Mana and Amira dance in another. Kimar is surrounded by a dozen huntresses.

Following the beat of the music, the groups form a chain. Hold hands. Weave themselves in and out of the Forum. The tempo changes. Everyone takes partners. A girl finds Kimar. Queen Shamai leads Nalid. Amira takes Mana.

Nalid and Queen Shamai dance near the Wemanim. Queen Shamai smiles in wonder at the Wemanim.

QUEEN SHAMAI

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

NALID

Only the best for you, my Queen.

Queen Shamai's smile brightens.

The music changes again. Amira pulls Mana to her. Mana steals the moment. Kisses her. She seems surprised, then grabs his face, and returns the kiss... They hold each other. Oblivious to the dancing around them.

Nalid watches them. Sees Mana smile. Mana notices Nalid's gaze. The brothers share a moment of unspoken mutual admiration --

Then Amira whispers in Mana's ear.

AMIRA

Take me to the waterfall.

Mana leads her away. Not far off, Kimar glares after them.

Queen Shamai turns Nalid's head to face her.

QUEEN SHAMAI

I have something to show you.

INT. PALACE

Lit only by the moon, the bath walls are decorated with glass tiles depicting all aspects of Village life. Queen Shamai leads Nalid to a tile of the mountains.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Whenever one fades, another replaces it. My great-grandfather made this one.

NALID

It's lovely.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Maybe one day you'll make your own.

She leads him to a pool. Faces him. Snatches his mask.

NALID

My Queen?

QUEEN SHAMAI

Yes?

NALID

Give it back.

Queen Shamai holds it over the pool.

QUEEN SHAMAI

I wonder, Nalid, what would you do to me if I... dropped it?

She shakes it threateningly over the steaming water.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Would you do anything to me at all?

She tosses it in. Removes her own mask. Throws it in too.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Or would you simply ignore me, like you have for so long?

They stand still, face to face, in the shaft of moon light. She runs her finger down his chest. Slips her shirt off. Stands there a moment. Naked in the bath steam.

Queen Shamai takes Nalid's hand. Leads him into the pool. Slowly circles him. Wraps her arms around his neck. Closes in. As their lips are about to touch --

Nalid pulls away.

NALID

I can't.

He stares at her beautiful, wet, naked body. Queen Shamai advances.

QUEEN SHAMAI

I want this.

Nalid resists.

NALID

You don't love me, Shamai. You only think you do.

Queen Shamai's mouth drops open, more from shock than offense.

NALID  
 You're beautiful, passionate, but  
 the woman I love --

He corrects himself.

NALID  
 My wife... still awaits me.

Queen Shamai stares at him in painful silence.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
 Your wife. By the sands, I've been  
 such a fool!

NALID  
 I wish I could love you, my Queen.

QUEEN SHAMAI  
 Don't you dare call me that!

She jumps out of the water, throws on her shirt, and runs out into the night. He runs after her, but stops at the Palace entrance. Watches her flee.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

INT. FORUM - AFTERNOON

Gathered before the Wemanim, everyone is present for Mana and Amira's wedding. Iara finishes his blessing as the couple gaze adoringly at each other. Nalid stands near his brother. Smiles proudly. Mana and Amira kiss. Everyone claps.

EXT. VILLAGE - NIGHT

Families socialize. Children play around Amira's home.

INT. AMIRA'S HOME

Packed to the seams, Mana and Amira separately navigate their friends and neighbors. Nalid finds his brother. They embrace. Nalid speaks Choan. Mana responds in kind.

NALID  
 Congratulations, Mana-Im.

MANA  
 You should talk to her.

Nalid's confused. Mana points across the room to where Queen Shamai chats with people.

NALID

I'm the last person in the world  
she wants to talk to.

Mana hands him a package.

NALID

What's this?

MANA

A wedding present.

NALID

It's your wedding.

MANA

Open it.

Nalid obeys. It's his stained-glass of Alad. The pieces are stuck together with tar.

NALID

I thought you wanted me to forget  
her.

MANA

It's your pain, Nalid-Im. Only you  
can free yourself from it.

INT. FORUM

Cradling his stained-glass, Nalid gazes through his Wemanim. Into the sky.

NALID

Always.

A light snow falls. Amazed at it, Nalid peers straight up. Queen Shamai quietly moseys in. Nalid doesn't notice her at first.

QUEEN SHAMAI

It's called "snow."

Nalid smiles at her. Queen Shamai joins him. Nods at his stained-glass.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Am I interrupting?

NALID

No.

QUEEN SHAMAI

I thought you might like the company of a friend.

NALID

I was afraid you hated me.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Never. I merely wish things were different.

NALID

So do I.

He holds out his hand. Queen Shamai takes it. Touches his stained-glass.

QUEEN SHAMAI

What's her name?

NALID

Alad-Nam.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Is she as beautiful as this?

NALID

Even more.

He turns his attention back to the Wemanim. Queen Shamai leans her head on his shoulder. They stand there. In silence. Watch the night come. And the snow fall.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

A hunting party's set up camp for the night.

EXT. CAMP

Though they've retired to their tent, Mana and Amira are still very much awake.

Kimar emerges from the woods with several carcasses slung over his shoulders. He dumps them near the fire pit. Stretches. Eyes Mana and Amira's tent. Grunts at their shadows. Goes to his own tent.

INT. KIMAR'S TENT

Not even bothering to undress, Kimar goes straight to bed.

EXT. FOREST

A dozen figures sneak through the trees. They soon come upon the camp. Quietly surround it.

INT. AMIRA'S TENT

Mana freezes. Amira whispers.

AMIRA  
What is it?

Mana touches a finger to her lips.

INT. KIMAR'S TENT

Mumbling to himself, Kimar slowly falls asleep. A figure slips inside. Silently closes in on Kimar's bed. Wields a long, curved, glass sword. A Choan Servant.

INT. AMIRA'S TENT

Mana and Amira dress. Both grab bows and quivers of arrows. Run out.

EXT. CAMP

Mana and Amira set off in opposite directions. Mana sees movement in Kimar's tent.

INT. KIMAR'S TENT

The Servant's right next to Kimar. The Servant lifts his sword. Ready to strike --

Mana bursts in. Nails the Servant in the back of the neck.

Kimar sits up with a start. Sees the Servant sink to the ground. Gagging on Mana's arrow.

EXT. CAMP

Armed and ready, Kimar and Mana burst out of the tent. They race through the other tents. Help their fellow hunters dispatch of the remaining attackers. When they finish, they gather at the fire pit. Amira's not there.

MANA  
Amira!

He and Kimar run off in search of her.

EXT. FOREST

No one's around. Kimar and Mana move cautiously. Someone runs toward them. They ready their weapons.

AMIRA

It's me!

She appears from out of the shadows.

AMIRA

I got three more. How many left?

KIMAR

We don't know. I'll keep watch.  
Everyone else pack up.

They all head back to their tents.

INT. QUEEN SHAMAI'S HOME - MORNING

Kimar, Mana, Amira, and Nalid meet with Queen Shamai.

QUEEN SHAMAI

How long do we have?

NALID

Hours, maybe less.

QUEEN SHAMAI

How many?

NALID

Hundreds. Thousands.

QUEEN SHAMAI

I can fight. But the people.  
They're not warriors.

NALID

My Queen, I think I have a  
strategy.

EXT. VILLAGE

Amira runs off alerting families. Kimar stops Mana.

KIMAR

Outsider!

He extends his hand. Mana cautiously accepts. Kimar gives him a firm shake. Mana cracks a grin. Kimar nods. They all head off towards the Palace.

EXT. FOREST

Armed with shields and swords, battalions of thousands of Servants await orders. Behind them sits a large craft.

INT. CRAFT

It's equivalent in size and style to Officer's quarters. Galo puts on a set of Priest's armor. Runs his finger along the edge of his sword. Quite sharp. Alad sits nearby. Already in her own armor.

ALAD

Galo?

Galo spits on a cloth. Rubs his shield to a fine sheen.

GALO

Yes?

EXT. VILLAGE

Kimar and other hunters distribute farm tools to a line of young men. Once each man receives a weapon, Kimar paints the man's face.

KIMAR

By the sands...

INT. CRAFT

Galo practices various fighting stances.

ALAD

What are we about to do?

GALO

His Glory's will.

EXT. VILLAGE

Kimar paints a face.

KIMAR

...we will...

INT. CRAFT

Galo swings his sword around.

ALAD  
What if we find Nalid and Mana?

Galo faces her.

GALO  
We won't.

EXT. VILLAGE

Kimar paints a final face.

KIMAR  
...survive.

INT. CRAFT

Galo goes to the door. Alad joins him.

GALO  
Whatever happens, remember your  
training.

They leave.

EXT. FOREST

Galo signals a nearby Servant. The front battalion begins  
its march.

EXT. VILLAGE

Queen Shamai, the brothers, Kimar, and thousands of Villagers  
are on the outskirts. Queen Shamai supervises the hasty  
construction of a wall of felled, sharpened trees.

Hacking at a trunk, Kimar suddenly remembers someone.

KIMAR  
Iara!

Before anyone can stop him, he runs as fast as he can to  
Iara's home.

INT. PALACE

Amira hides hundreds and hundreds of children.

AMIRA  
Everyone must stay here until Queen  
Shamai returns for us!

She and the other hunters take their posts at the Palace entrances.

EXT. IARA'S HOME

Winded, Kimar arrives.

KIMAR

Iara! We have to leave!

Iara leans out. Smiles, pleasantly surprised.

IARA

Kimar! Good morning! Out for a hunt? I was just about to make some tea. Come in.

Kimar enters.

INT. IARA'S HOME

Iara starts the brew.

IARA

Sit down, sit down.

Kimar obeys.

IARA

I'm glad you came.

EXT. FOREST

The battalion cuts its way through trees and underbrush.

INT. IARA'S HOME

As Iara rambles on, Kimar quickly loses patience.

IARA

I worry about you, Kimar. You're a great man. You love your people. But you can be so very angry.

His words touch the younger man, but Kimar doesn't let it shake him.

KIMAR

My King, there's a people coming to attack the Village.

IARA

Attack the --?

From the distance comes a steady rumbling rhythm, like that of an oncoming storm.

KIMAR  
There's no time. We have to go!

The rhythm grows louder. It catches Iara's attention.

IARA  
What's that sound?

Kimar stands. Rushes the old man out.

KIMAR  
The attack!

EXT. FOREST

Both Kimar and Iara see the first battalion emerge from the trees. With their weapons drawn, the Servants march right for them.

KIMAR  
Iara run!!

He tries to move the retired King, but Iara just can't keep up. A Servant gets within range. Hurls a blade into Iara's back. The old man falls. Kimar runs back for him. Iara clings desperately to Kimar's arm.

IARA  
Go...!

KIMAR  
I'm not leaving you --!

The same Servant catches up. Impales Kimar with his sword. Kimar yells out. The Servant rips his weapon from Kimar's body. Kimar drops to the ground. With his last breath, he reaches out to Iara.

KIMAR  
My... King.

Iara's already dead. Kimar fights to maintain consciousness, but doesn't stand a chance. His arm relaxes. His eyes close. The battalion marches on.

EXT. VILLAGE

The wall is still incomplete when the battalion emerges from the woods.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Get ready!

Everyone drops their work, picks up their weapons, and stands guard behind the wall. The brothers are bewildered at the sight of their own Servants coming for them.

The battalion closes in, now only about fifty yards away.

Queen Shamai clutches her weapon with white knuckles.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Ready!

The battalion crashes into the wall. Hacks into it like an axe through paper. A sword slices through. Slashes a Villager in the stomach. He goes down screaming.

Queen Shamai calls to the brothers.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Nalid, Mana! Go!

The brothers obey. Bring about fifty others with them.

Portions of the wall crash down. Servants march in. The Villagers fight valiantly, but are no match against the Servants' training and weapons. The Servants cut right through the Villagers. Dozens fall.

Queen Shamai sees that they have no chance.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Fall back!

The ones who can obey. The Servants crush the rest, and the remainder of the wall, under their feet.

EXT. FOREST

A Servant reports to Galo and Alad.

SERVANT

They're retreating, Your Eminence.  
Victory is ours.

Galo nods to Alad.

GALO

Shall we?

They don their helmets. Galo gives a signal. The entire rest of their army moves in.

EXT. VILLAGE

Ranks have broken. The battle spills all over. Some Villagers engage the enemy with their tools. Others break off pieces of their homes. Use the pieces as weapons in surprise, guerilla attacks.

EXT. PALACE

A group of Servants charge the Palace. The children scream. Amira and the hunters shoot the Servants, but their arrows glance right off their armor.

A Servant kills a hunter near Amira. She grabs the Servant's shield. Slams it as hard as she can into his helmet. The force shatters his helmet into his face. Blood squirts out the cracks. He goes down in agony.

EXT. VILLAGE

As the first battalion continues its slaughter, the next reaches the Village outskirts.

EXT. PALACE

Carrying their gliders, boards, and spears, Nalid, Mana, and the hunters rush to the top with Queen Shamai. They scan the trees. The battalions flood the woods towards the Village.

QUEEN SHAMAI

Hold them back as long as you can.

She runs off. The brothers begin an aerial attack. Swoop over the Servants. Cut down a long swath. Holler with the thrill of victory.

EXT. VILLAGE

Hitting the meat of the battle, Queen Shamai fights through as quickly as possible. Takes down the occasional Servant along the way.

Galo and Alad arrive with the last battalion. After they slaughter a few Villagers, Galo notices the hunters. Points them out. Neither he nor Alad recognize Nalid and Mana among them.

Galo waits for the hunters to finish their run. He signals. His battalion hurls blades at the hunters. One strikes Mana from the sky.

NALID

Mana!

EXT. PALACE

Queen Shamai joins Amira. Bashes as many Servants in the face as she can.

EXT. VILLAGE

Mana struggles to stand. Tries to pry the blade from his shoulder.

Galo signals to Alad. She goes after Mana. Not recognizing her, Mana takes off. Alad easily catches up.

Nalid leaves the Palace. Chases after Mana and Alad.

Mana jumps behind a tree. Alad swipes at him. Chops branches off with every blow. Mana grabs a thick branch. Blocks her attacks. Again and again, Alad comes at him. Each time she slices a chunk from his weapon. He holds on.

Then Alad scores a nasty slash. Mana blocks. Alad's force cuts slowly through the wood. It's his draining strength against her ferocity and training.

Snap! Mana's weapon is gone. Alad's sword cuts down the middle of his chest. He hollers. Flies backwards. Falls over himself.

Nalid catches up to them. Alad lifts up her sword. Ready to spear Mana.

Nalid runs up to her, but Alad's ready. She flips her sword to the pommel end. Clubs Nalid upside the head. Nalid hits the ground. Alad flips her sword back. Raises it high in the air...

Nalid watches. Dazed. Alad lances her sword down through Mana. Into the soft earth. Nalid barely hears his brother's cry, or his own voice:

NALID

MANA-IM!!!

He quickly crawls to Mana. Grabs the blade still stuck in his shoulder. Yanks it free. Picks himself up.

Alad tears her sword out of Mana's body. Faces Nalid. Ready to strike. Nalid shoves the blade, as hard as he can, straight into her stomach. Wraps his arm around her. Twists the blade even further in. Guts her.

As Alad collapses, she grips his arm. Nalid rips the blade from her body. Pushes her hand away. Scoops his dying brother into his arms.

NALID

Mana...?

Mana barely opens his eyes. Smiles at his big brother. Speaks Choan.

MANA

The Tower of Ufanim...

He tries to say more, but his mouth just hangs open. His head falls back. Nalid's tears turn to fury as he eases his brother's body to the ground. He picks up Alad. Holds the blade to her neck. Speaks the Village Tongue.

NALID

For Mana-Im.

He removes her helmet. Drops the blade. Cries out in Choan.

NALID

Alad-Nam!!

He holds her. Alad slowly reaches up. Brushes his hair out of his eyes. Wipes away some of his face paint. Recognizes him. Smiles. Strokes his sweaty, tear-streaked, blood-drenched face.

NALID

Hold on, Alad! I'm right here!  
Don't leave me! I can save you!  
You'll be fine! I'll take you back  
to Cho! They'll save you! Please!

He calls to anyone who might listen.

NALID

Help!! Help!!

Alad pulls his head to hers. Whispers.

ALAD

...Always.

Nalid holds her close, as if his touch could save her. He kisses her with years of pain, regret, and heartbreak. Her head and arms fall limp.

Her eyes:

Open. Still. Silent. Gone.

Nalid's hand finds her sword. His fingers wrap around its handle. He slowly rises to his feet. His eyes blaze with cold, blinding, heart-broken rage.

With a tortured cry, he charges back into the battle. Tackles the first Servant he sees.

But the Servant is too quick. He deflects Nalid's attack. Flips him over. Slams him on his back.

Before Nalid can get up, the Servant has him pinned. Pries Alad's sword from Nalid's fingers. Flips it, and his own, twice in the air. Holds them over Nalid's chest like knives about to carve into a steak --

The Servant doesn't strike. Nalid screams in Choan.

NALID

Do it!! Kill me!! Choan coward!!

SERVANT

Nalid-Im??

He tears off his helmet. It's Kuhel.

NALID

Kuhel-Im! What are you doing here?

Kuhel helps him up.

KUHEL

I could ask you the same thing.

NALID

I thought by now you'd be dead.

KUHEL

I told you I'd get by wherever they placed me.

He scans the battle.

KUHEL

Tell me. Are they... your people?

NALID

Yes.

Kuhel gives him a cocky grin.

KUHEL

Well, my old friend, they need a new strategy!

He spots the Forum. Heads for it. Nalid follows. Kuhel calls out.

KUHEL

Noths!!

More than half the entire Choan army ceases fighting. All turn to him. He waves to the Forum. They follow his and Nalid's lead.

Galo sees this.

GALO

What in the name of His Glory is he doing?! Attack!!

INT. FORUM

Kuhel and Nalid run in. Followed by Kuhel's newly-formed, massive army. They all climb into the seats. Kuhel holds up his helmet. His fellow Noths do the same. Now they can tell themselves from the real Servants.

It's just in time. Galo leads in his army. Now he, and his Servants, are trapped.

Kuhel grins hungrily at the invading force. Lifts his sword to his lips. Slices it past them. Licks the dripping blood.

KUHEL

There's an ancient Noth proverb which says: "Once you learn not to fear death, you are, then, truly free."

He and Nalid give each other a quick glance. Attack at the same time:

Nalid charges to the ground. Slices into the nearest Servant. At first, the Servant's skills and strength are too much for him. But after only a few moments, Nalid learns, predicts, and matches the Servant's moves.

Kuhel flips his and Alad's swords twice in the air. Holds them high. Lets out a bloodthirsty cry. Leaps forward. Slams to the ground right behind an unwitting Servant.

Now Kuhel flips backwards. In mid-air, he slices his swords up, at an angle, into the Servant's back. Then, as he lands, he cuts down the opposite way.

For a moment, the Servant stands there with a gory X dripping down his back. Finally, Kuhel yanks out his swords. Rips the Servant's body into bloody chunks of flesh.

With insane zeal, Kuhel goes berserk. Dives into the fray. Skewers. Beheads. Tears every Servant in his path to pieces.

Nalid uses tactics. Kuhel raw brutality. Together, they're unstoppable as they cleave through the Choan army.

Queen Shamai runs in. Sees the Noths attacking the Servants. Joins the fight.

Groups of five and ten Villagers and Noths attack each Servant. Back them against the wall. Slice each of them down until only Galo's left.

Fifteen swords impale him. Blood stains his uniform. Spills all over the ground. Nalid removes Galo's helmet. Discovers the face of his long lost brother. But Nalid has no tears left. All he can do is bow his head, and back away.

Queen Shamai approaches Kuhel. He's silent... still. They exchange glances, then he wanders off.

EXT. VILLAGE - NIGHT

Remaining families and friends reunite. Together, they gather the bodies of their loved ones. Nalid, Amira, and Kuhel help clean up the disaster.

INT. FORUM

Everyone attends to funeral pyres bearing the bodies of Iara, Kimar, Mana, Galo, and Alad. Nalid, Queen Shamai, and Amira stand together. Kuhel is nearby. Nalid places his glass portrait of Alad on her pyre. Watches it melt away.

Nalid eyes Kuhel, then turns his attention back to the pyres... their awful flames a terrifying sign of what's to come.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END