

FADE IN:

EXT. THE SEA OF THE SUN - AFTERNOON

Dark clouds and an amber sunset loom over an endless field of BLUE FLOWERS. They sway in a gentle breeze.

A LOCUST zips through the field. A red diamond-shaped eyeball painted on his forehead. It makes a beeline towards--

SACRIFICIAL SHRINE - CONTINUOUS

A SHRINE made of stone atop a desolate hill. INSECT CULTISTS in black robes gather around an ALTAR where a ANT PRINCESS lies, struggling to break free. THE SWARM OF SANGRIA.

A CULT LEADER, in a scarlet robe, approaches her with an iron dagger in hand.

He raises it over the princess when battle horns BLARE out.

Dark clouds part as an armada of MURDER HORNETS swarm overhead in tight formation.

Leading the charge is ADMIRAL VESPA, an eye-catching murder hornet with the physique of a goddess. She stands before cultists, draws her spear, and points at them.

Hornet soldiers ZOOM full speed overhead.

SANGRIAN WARRIORS rise from the shrubs, meeting the hornets mid-air. A tense battle ensues!

The hornets SLASH through the Sangrian frontlines and free the princess.

A ROOKIE HORNET SOLDIER falls to the floor. Desperate for his life, he scrambles back as the enraged Cult Leader raises his dagger before him.

Vespa's spear drives through the leader. Just in time.

With a benevolent smile, she helps the rookie to his feet.

The battlefield calms. The Order of Sangria falls. The hornets celebrate their victory. It's brief...

The ground trembles, effigies crumble. A gargantuan PRAYING MANTIS bursts from underground! Four legs, vivid yellow eyes, and razor-sharp raptorial arms. The face of a monster!

It snatches the princess and scales the shrine.

Soldiers flee. Vespa stands tall. She locks eyes with the mantis and darts at it like a speeding bullet.

Face to face, the mantis SWINGS its arm at Vespa.

CUT TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

A LADYBUG CHILD gives a book report in front of a classroom of INSECT CHILDREN. A chalkboard reads: "WHAT INSPIRES ME:"

LADYBUG CHILD

--And then, Vespa flew faster and faster and faster! She looked that gross monster in the face and shoved her spear down its--

Her teacher, LEAF, a yellow butterfly with blue wings and a beak-like face, cuts her off.

LEAF

Okay! I think we'll stop here for now! T-thank you, Delilah.

An awkward beat as he stares at his class.

DELILAH

Aww, come on... I was getting to the best part. Didn't you like it?

LEAF

Of course I did. Your writing has improved so much this season! You had me at the edge of my seat the whole time.

DELILAH

Do you like the drawings with it?

Leaf turns to the next page-- a crude, crayon drawing of Vespa GORING the mantis.

LEAF

Oh, yeah. They're very...
(clears throat)
...creative.

DELILAH

I used my whole red crayon for this one!

LEAF
Did you now?

Leaf glances at the sundial on the wall. End of class.

LEAF (CONT'D)
That seems to be all the time we have! Before you go, I want to say it's been a pleasure teaching you this season, and I hope you all have a great--

He turns back to an empty classroom. Not a single goodbye.

Leaf begins to pack his things in a MESSENGER COURIER. He stops at the stack of reports and flips through them. All of them are about accomplishments by Vespa and the Armada.

Leaf sighs in dejection.

OUTSIDE WINDOW:

EXT. ARBORDALE - CONTINUOUS

A town high up in the grove of a mighty oak tree. VARIOUS INSECTS zip around wicker buildings and wooden walkways that snake around the tree's branches. An endless row of storefronts abuzz with activity. MERCHANTS peddle their goods to patrons. It's full of life!

TITLE: FLUTTER

WORKER INSECTS lower and put the finishing touches on an impressive statue of Admiral Vespa. FERN, a yellow butterfly with teal wings and an ascending, sloped nose, directs the effort. A LEAFY CLIPBOARD in one hand, a QUILL in the other.

FERN
A little more! You got an inchworm to work with.

The statue lowers and slides into place.

FERN (CONT'D)
And... perfect! Great job everyone!

Fern checks off the last item on a TO DO list.. A reminder at the bottom reads: "BECOME A LEADER!"

LEAF
You might be a little off center.
Better start over just to be sure.

FERN

You know, there's only so much four arms can do. You're more than welcome to help us if you'd like.

Fern flitters around the statue for one last inspection.

LEAF

I'd love to, Fern, but I'm pretty spent. You wouldn't believe what sugar water does to a kid.

Fern rolls her eyes and descends next to Leaf. They make their way through the market crowds.

FERN

So, your first season teaching is over! Pretty exciting, huh?

Leaf glances over to the statue, then to a group of HORNET GUARDS casually chatting amongst themselves.

LEAF

Yeah. I'm really happy for them... This last day was a little rough. Their final projects were a bit on the monotonous side.

FERN

Let me guess. Were they all about Vespa and the Fall of the Swarm?

LEAF

What are you, a fly on the wall?

FERN

You do seem to be obsessed with her. Might be rubbing off on your students. Just not in the way you'd like it to.

LEAF

No kidding. I was hoping they'd tell me what they're inspired by.

FERN

I mean, she did wipe out a bloodthirsty cult that was on the brink of ravaging society as we know it. Kinda hard not to be inspired by that.

(beat)

Or take issues with...

LEAF

Hey! You know *that's* not my problem. I'm just saying a little variety would be nice. I'd kill for a whole report on rocks!

Leaf stops and slouches.

LEAF (CONT'D)

I wanted my students to show me what inspires them. Yeah, the Armada is great, but I want them to be great too.

FERN

Maybe try working on being more charismatic and more confident. Y'know, inspire the setae off of them!

LEAF

If only that were easy...

ARION (O.S.)

Little did I know those crustaceans had been following my trail since I left Molnock, and heaven knows they weren't looking for camaraderie.

Excitement blooms on Fern's face. She snatches Leaf by the wing and drags him over to a crowd surrounding ARION, a strong, naga-esque leopard slug in a sapphire-colored armor.

A group of CHILDREN in the front hang onto every word of his story.

ARION (CONT'D)

So there I was. Crabs to the left of me. Crayfish to the right. And front and center was the largest mud crab you'd ever see! Claws the size of bird talons! To say I was between a salt block and a hard place was an understatement.

INSECT CHILD

How did you get out?

Arion smirks.

ARION

Simple...

He draws a giant BATTLE AXE and turns towards an acorn placed on a stump.

ARION (CONT'D)
--but I saw my chance and WHAM!

He SLAMS it over an acorn! Bits and shards fly towards Leaf.

ARION (CONT'D)
Cut one of those claws clean off!
Those salt peddlers scuttled for
the hills!

The children CHEER. Fern CLAPS as if it were her first time hearing this.

FERN
Now that's how you be inspiring!

LEAF
Yeah, Arion has it all...

FERN
I mean he has ton of confidence.
He's good with kids.
(more intimate)
Has an irresistible physique...

LEAF
Don't you think him being your
boyfriend is making this a bit of a
biased example?

FERN
Yeah, he's great...

As the crowd disperses, Fern and Arion's eyes meet. They exchange excited smiles as Fern flies into his arms.

FERN (CONT'D)
I missed you so much!

ARION
I told you it'd just be few days.

FERN
The way my week has been going, it
felt like an eternity.

Leaf recoils as Fern and Arion touch noses. A string of slime bridges the two as they pull apart.

FERN (CONT'D)

I'm really looking forward to what you have planned for our date this week. You've made quite a big deal of it.

Fern traces a heart on Arion's neck.

ARION

What can I say? I got a feeling it will be a night to remember!

As Fern leans against his shoulder, Arion digs into an armor pocket and checks on a carved RING BOX. He flips it open. A beautiful ENGAGEMENT RING upon a soft cushion.

ARION (CONT'D)

(to self)

At least I hope so...

FERN

What was that?

Arion glances back at Fern and stuffs the ring box back in.

ARION

N-nothing. Just thinking out loud again. You smell... lovely today.

FERN

Aww, thank you!

ARION

New fragrance?

FERN

It's citrus! It actually might be my new favorite!

LEAF

(to self)

You sure it's not the pheromones?

Fern STOMPS Leaf's foot, then returns to her tender demeanor.

LEAF (CONT'D)

Ow! Geez!

FERN

You remember my little brother, right? I can't remember the last time you two spoke.

ARION
Of course! How's it hanging?

Arion reaches out to give Leaf a fist bump. Leaf reaches out for a handshake. An awkward beat.

ARION (CONT'D)
We'll... work on that.

Leaf thumbs through papers in his bag. Arion watches on.

ARION (CONT'D)
Fern says you're a librarian or something like that?

LEAF
A teacher, actually. I teach prepupal.

ARION
Teacher, that's right! I imagine this is a short-term gig, as you look to get into something you're really passionate about.

LEAF
But teaching *is* my passion.

ARION
Really? I'd figured someone like you would strive for something more than this. But hey, we can't all be knights.

Leaf responses with an unimpressed look.

FERN
You guys want to come with me to the citadel? I got business to tend to with the Chancellor?

LEAF
You're leaving already? You just finished a job.

FERN
Leaf, all of this is my job. Plus, this might be my one chance to ask about my walkway restoration proposal. Inara knows we need it.

They watch a BUG trip over a worn out floorboard and into a BARISTA WORM who slides through an open hole in the floor.

LEAF

Sounds fascinating, but I got so much on my plate right now. Why don't I catch up with you guys later

FERN

Are you sure?

Leaf nods with a passing beat between the two.

As Fern is about insist, Arion offers her his arm.

ARION

Care for an escort?

Fern smiles at him accepts his arm. She waves back to Leaf, then leans against Arion's side.

As they're leave, Leaf takes a step forward-- right into Arion's slimy trail. He's stuck in place.

LEAF

(to self)

Great...

He pulls at his legs and flaps his wings to no avail. He tugs even harder until breaking free, stumbling back, and CRASHING into a pile of vases.

A disgruntled VASE OWNER stills a wobbling vase and drags it close to her side.

Leaf scrambles to his feet and slinks away.

EXT. ARBORDALE - THE CITADEL - DAY

An open courtyard with a sundial lies before an impressive stronghold decorated with leafy flags and teal tapestries.

CHANCELLOR KEEN, an elderly moth with tattered wings, makes his way down the steps with Admiral Vespa and CAPTAIN KARYS, a lean hornet in jet-black armor.

Their presence draws many excited onlookers.

CHANCELLOR KEEN

Forty-two seasons ago, your heroics saved our civilization from total annihilation.

VESPA

Oh, please, Chancellor, you're
making me feel like a relic.

CHANCELLOR KEEN

Relic or not, your accomplishments
are worth celebrating. Thanks to
you, we've been able to sustain
ourselves during these challenging
times.

VESPA

You're so kind. I'm simply playing
my part for the success of
Arbordale. One of many moving parts
that makes us strong.

Vespa glances looks the tree. RESIN-FILLED HIVES sit onto
wilting branches. Insect workers collect buckets the resin
and add it to a giant GLASS SILO shaped like a honey jar.

VESPA (CONT'D)

Of course, now you have me curious.
With you planning on stepping down
from your position, have you made a
decision on who you'd like to be
your successor?

CHANCELLOR KEEN

I may have an inkling...

Vespa leans in with anticipation.

CHANCELLOR KEEN (CONT'D)

But nothing I am ready to move
forward with right now. I'll know
when the time to move on is. When
that is, that might be a question
best left for--

FERN (O.S.)

Your majesty!

Fern flitters over to Chancellor Keen and greets him with a
huge hug. Vespa watches on, less enthused.

CHANCELLOR KEEN

Fern! Speak of the thorny devil!
How's my number one go-getter?

FERN

Never better! Got all my tasks done
for today and then some!

CHANCELLOR KEEN
That's my girl!

Keen lets out a hoarse COUGH. It takes Fern by surprise.

FERN
Oh dear, your cough is coming back.

CHANCELLOR KEEN
Oh, it's fine. Just been under the weather, is all. Didn't expect spring to last this long.

FERN
Good one, sir.

VESPA
It's nice to see you again, Fern.

FERN
You as well, Admiral. I have so much--

Fern holds out her right arms for a formal shake.

Vespa leaves her hanging.

VESPA
I was not aware you still apprenticing under Chancellor Keen.

CHANCELLOR KEEN
Well, these wings aren't what they used to be. I cannot begin to tell you how much of a valuable asset Fern has been to our town.

Fern hides a blush.

FERN
Just doing my job! Now, before we get side tracked, I can't wait to show you how well everything came out.

Fern leads the Chancellor and prattles on with Vespa behind.

Arion begins to follow. Karys blocks his way with a SPEAR.

CAPTAIN KARYS
Arbordale dignitaries only. Nothing personal, rogue.

ARION
But I'm--

Karys remains stoic.

ARION (CONT'D)
You got it...

EXT. TREE BRANCHES - DAY

Leaf ascends through a sea of sprawling branches.

LEAF
'We can't all be knights.'
(scoffs)
Like I'm trying to be a knight, you
big, slimy--

SMACK! Leaf flies face-first into a hive. Tree resin sloshes
as it wobbles. He grabs hold to still it.

LEAF (CONT'D)
That was close...

Leaf continues on his way. The hive's base starts to sag.

EXT. - LEAF'S OUTPOST - CONTINUOUS

Leaf arrives at a wooden deck with a telescope hidden away in
the tree's canopy. There's a cozy office feel to it.

He tosses his bag onto his hammock and falls back onto a desk
chair. A plethora of field notes, sketches of flowers, and
books on birds lay scattered across his desk.

The leaves RUSTLE. He jerks his head back.

A shadow grows beyond the leaves.

Leaf wields an astrolabe like a club, approaches the leaves,
and pulls them open.

OLEANDER
Hi, Mr. Leaf!

OLEANDER, a caterpillar child with magenta stripes, pops out!
A small GREEN ENVELOPE in her hand.

Leaf jumps back. He drops the astrolabe on his foot.

LEAF
Oleander?! How did you get up here?

OLEANDER
I crawled up here.

LEAF
Well, obviously. I mean, *what* are you doing up here?

OLEANDER
I saw you flying up here and wanted to say hi.

LEAF
That's really nice of you, but you know the canopy is a dangerous place. And if the guards find you, they're going to--

OLEANDER
Oh! What is that?

Oleander stops at the telescope and spins it like a globe.

OLEANDER (CONT'D)
Heh, spin.

Leaf throws his arms at the telescope to still it.

LEAF
Please be careful with that! It's quite expensive!

OLEANDER
Sorry... What is this place anyway?

LEAF
It's my study. I do some personal work here. Anyways, you still haven't told me why you're up here.

OLEANDER
Well... I'm hiding.

LEAF
Hiding? Are you playing a game or--

The look on her face says it all.

LEAF (CONT'D)
Oh, right. Your metamorphosis. I thought you were excited about becoming a butterfly? You were looking forward to it all season.

OLEANDER

I was... But then I heard Iris tell Cedar tell Lilac, who told me all the details about a metamorphosis. She said they stuff you in a creepy-looking bag that you can't get out of, and then you turn into soup, and then--

LEAF

Whoa, whoa! Take it easy!

Leaf holds his arms out.

LEAF (CONT'D)

Here. Like we talked about.

Oleander grabs his hands.

LEAF (CONT'D)

Now. Breathe in...

She takes a deep breath...

LEAF (CONT'D)

And out...

Then exhales.

LEAF (CONT'D)

There. Better?

OLEANDER

A little...

LEAF

I get that you're anxious. Believe me, I was too. But you're more than ready for this. It's like I've been telling you. What comes out of a chrysalis...

LEAF (CONT'D) OLEANDER
...is stronger than what goes Is stronger than what goes
in. in...

OLEANDER (CONT'D)

But, what if I come out wrong? I don't even know what I want to do for the rest of my life.

LEAF

Nobody turns out wrong. Let me show you something.

Leaf parts the leaves and shows Oleander a bustling market below. Shop vendors perfecting their craft and telling stories of their wares.

LEAF (CONT'D)

At one point, every bug down there wasn't sure what they wanted to do. But eventually, they all discovered who they were and what they're truly passionate about. I know you'll find your calling. And when you do, it'll be the most incredible feeling ever.

Oleander smiles as she takes it all in.

OLEANDER

Mr. Leaf? How did you know that breathing thing would make me feel better?

LEAF

Well, I'm your teacher. I know everything about you.

OLEANDER

So... you know about the time I found out babies don't come from the mulch fairy?

An awkward beat. He wasn't expecting that response.

LEAF

What do you say we get you to the sanctuary?

OLEANDER

Okay. Can I at least look into your tele-thingy? Please?

Leaf smiles back. He can't say no to that face.

LEAF

Okay. Real quick, okay?

Leaf brings the stool from his desk over to the telescope. Oleander climbs up and peeks through its eyepiece.

OLEANDER

The sky has a lot of clouds.

LEAF

You'll have plenty of time to figure that out.

(MORE)

LEAF (CONT'D)
You might end up becoming a
painter, a writer, or maybe even a--

OLEANDER
Bird!

Oleander points to the sky.

LEAF
Well, no, not a bird. That's not
possible.

OLEANDER
No Leaf, a bird! Look!

Leaf seizes control of the telescope. He spots a shadowy blur
that swoops by.

He grabs Oleander, and places her in a small chest.

LEAF
Wait here. I'll go warn the--

THUD! A HUMMINGBIRD, with stunning blue feathers along its
throat, perches on a nearby branch. It towers over the two.
It locks eyes with Leaf as if they were a pair of deer in
each other's headlights.

OLEANDER
See? See? I told you it was a--

Leaf closes the chest shut. Oleander's voice is now muffled.

LEAF
A hummingbird...

The bird hops to a resin hive and starts drinking from it.

Leaf slowly makes his way over to him, comparing his notes to
a worn textbook with the same hummingbird. A perfect match.
He's visibly shaking at the realization.

Oleander POPS from the chest.

OLEANDER
Mr. Leaf! Look! I was right!

The bird rears back and darts past Leaf, descending towards--

EXT. ARBORDALE - MARKET - CONTINUOUS

The hummingbird perches on the Statue of Vespa. Every insect
stops in their tracks. Dead silence.

The hummingbird CHIRPS.

Insects SCREAM and scramble for cover. Panic ensues as the bird zips around, pecking the insects and getting tangled in the town's decor.

FERN

Everyone, calm down! We have procedures for these things-- No, don't fly toward it! Everyone, listen to me!

No one listens. Fern slouches in complete dejection.

FERN (CONT'D)

Or just don't. Whatever...

A manic LADYBUG shoves Fern out of the way. She falls onto the walkway. The hummingbird notices and heads over to her.

Fern shields herself as Arion slides in front of her. His axe, armed and ready.

ARION

If you want a piece of her, you'll have to get through me!

The hummingbird nabs his axe and tosses it like a twig. It looms over Arion, his tongue tracing the side of its beak.

ARION (CONT'D)

Oh boy...

The bird pounces at Arion. Arion attempts to drag himself free as the bird's long tongue licks him to no end.

ARION (CONT'D)

Ack! Get off me! Filthy pest! Where is your chivalry?!

Fern watches on at a loss for words.

A SMOKE BALL pelts the hummingbird and EXPLODES into a thick plume of smoke. Karys and hornet guards with CROSSBOWS move in with a continuous barrage.

The hummingbird releases Arion and retreats up the tree.

TREE BRANCHES - CONTINUOUS

The bird grazes against the paper hive. It begins to tip. Leaf races over to it and desperately holds it back. It's too heavy and SNAPS off the branch! He watches it fall towards--

ARBORDALE - CONTINUOUS

Vespa and the hornet guards gather to strategize.

CAPTAIN KARYS
We lost sight of it.

VESPA
Make sure it is not returning for
another pass. I want total
confirmation that--

FEMALE HORNET GUARD
Look out!

The hive SMASHES onto a shop. Resin oozes down, glazing the storefront. A trapped MERCHANT pounds from within the walls.

MERCHANT
(behind screen)
Help me!

Arion rushes over and starts hacking away with his axe. Several hits, and the resin breaks. He reaches in and helps the merchant out.

MERCHANT (CONT'D)
Bless you!

The dust settles. The market left in shambles.

Chancellor Keen looks on in despair.

FERN
It's okay. No need to worry. We'll
get this cleaned up by tomorrow
morning. I'll start up an emergency
plan--

Keen lets out a hoarse COUGH, this time, nearly dropping to his knees.

Fern swoops over to catch his fall. She hides a grimace.

FERN (CONT'D)
Let's get you inside. I'll make
your favorite soup.

Vespa watches them head indoors, then quickly inspects the glass silo.

ARBORDALE - CITADEL COURTYARD - CONTINUOUS

A shaken Leaf blends into the crowd with Oleander.

OLEANDER

That was really cool, Mr. Leaf!

LEAF

Yeah, really cool... So cool, in fact, why don't we make this our little secret and tell no one about what just happened.

CAPTAIN KARYS (O.S.)

And what secret would that be?

Karys appears behind them.

OLEANDER

We saw a bird up in the branches!

Leaf chuckles apprehensively.

LEAF

Sh-she's a bit hysterical over what happened. I mean, technically, we all saw the bird. I wouldn't imagine--

Bruised hornet guards draw their crossbows at him.

CUT TO:

A crowd gathers to watch hornet guards perform a thorough inspection of Leaf's belongings.

Vespa studies one of the children's drawings of her, then gives a coy look to her large backside.

VESPA

(to hornet guards)

It's not...that big. Is it?

The guards turn back to their investigation.

Vespa collects herself and turns to Oleander.

VESPA (CONT'D)

I struggle to believe a child would be responsible for all this mess. Yet here we are.

OLEANDER

I-I didn't mean...

Leaf cuts between them.

LEAF

Hold on, this isn't her fault.
(lying)
I brought her up there.

VESPA

You. Brought a child up there? What are you even thinking? Are you intentionally trying to lure birds here?

LEAF

Of course not! I'm an educator, not a lunatic! Why don't we talk about those resin silos you're planting over our heads?

VESPA

What about them?

LEAF

They're responsible for the rise of bird attacks here. What is this, the sixth time this season? And another thing about resin?

Leaf KNOCKS against hardened sap.

LEAF (CONT'D)

It's dangerous! Heaven forbid someone gets frozen alive in it.

VESPA

The logistics of storing and preserving resin are complicated. I wouldn't expect someone like you to understand.

LEAF

I know enough that it's not worth sucking the life out of our home.

VESPA

So is the life of not having a source of nectar around.

LEAF

Funny, you mention that. Are you aware what bird that was?

VESPA

Yes, a hummingbird. An obnoxious pest like all birds.

Leaf pulls out notes from his bag and flips through them for the crowd at hand.

LEAF

Far from it.

He runs a finger against Arion's slimy film.

LEAF (CONT'D)

These guys are relentless eaters, but they're only concerned with finding sticky liquids and film to eat.

ARION

Don't remind me...

LEAF

And this was not any ordinary hummingbird, but one with blue feathers on its throat. One said to only reside in the *Sea of the Sun*!

Vespa stops dead in her tracks.

Karys' grip on his spear tightens.

VESPA

I... don't see where this is going.

LEAF

This can solve our food problem! We can track this bird back to the field and harvest seeds for ourselves. Send the whole armada if you have to. We'll never have to

Vespa's wings shoot out and cut him off.

VESPA

Simply out of the question! Too much of a liability.

LEAF

But think of what this can do for our futures.

VESPA

My absence would leave this place
vulnerable to predators and who
knows what else.

The crowd becomes tense from the thought.

VESPA (CONT'D)

Without my leadership here, this
community would perish. I refuse to
take such a foolish risk.

LEAF

What good are you for this
community if you aren't willing to
try to improve it?

VESPA

What good am I???

She BUZZES over to Leaf's face.

VESPA (CONT'D)

You wouldn't be here without me!
Let me remind you that I carry a
huge legacy with me!

Arion shields himself as Vespa's stinger looms overhead.

ARION

(to self)

Huge is one way of putting it...

VESPA

I defend you from the harshest
predators, providing solutions for
nourishment, ridding the world of
the Swarm of Sangria!

LEAF

I never said--

Vespa snatches his notes and crumples them into a ball.

VESPA

Don't ever try to question my
legacy. I've witnessed firsthand
what you've only read about.

She tosses the notes at Leaf's feet.

LEAF

I've been searching for a solution
to these problems for years.

(MORE)

LEAF (CONT'D)
Our fears shouldn't stop us from
trying new things!

Leaf turns back to the crowd.

LEAF (CONT'D)
Sure, this is all working, but it's
a short-term solution to a bigger
problem. Our home is dying. Doesn't
that bother anyone?

The crowd avoids eye contact with Leaf, afraid to speak up.

VESPA
Their silence speaks louder than
your words ever could.

Vespa makes her departure.

VESPA (CONT'D)
We're finished here. I need a
drink...

The crowd disperses, leaving Leaf alone with balled-up notes.

EXT. ARBORDALE - MARKET - EVENING

Merchants close their shops as the sun sets.

GRUNGY MOTHS gather around a lamp post. They stare at it in anticipation. A VENDOR shoos them away.

LIGHT VENDOR
Buzz off, ya freeloaders!

Leaf drags himself through the market. His eyes fixated on uncrumpled notes.

EXT. THE SANCTUARY - CONTINUOUS

Leaf stops before a SANCTUARY with stained-glass windows. Unkempt vines coil around. Its wooden door is ajar.

He considers, then--

INT. THE SANCTUARY - NIGHT

--gently pushes the doors open.

LEAF
Hello? Anyone?

No response.

Leaf steps into a breathtaking room. Chrysalises hang like ornaments from an IRON TREE. A statue of LADY INARA, a divine firefly goddess, watches over them. Moonlight pours through in from an open ceiling, casting a radiant glow.

He hovers around the tree, inspecting each chrysalis. He stops at a nameplate that reads: "OLEANDER" and places a hand on her chrysalis. It soothes him.

FERN (O.S.)
I thought I locked this door.

Fern stands in an open corridor.

Leaf turns and lands on his feet.

LEAF
Sorry. I was checking on some of my students. Didn't get to send them off for... reasons.

FERN
I know what you mean. It's been one of those days.

Fern flitters over to Leaf and joins his side.

LEAF
How's Keen holding up?

FERN
Not great, but you couldn't tell with his spirit. I'm sure he'll pull through. He has to.

Fern's smile dissolves into a frown.

She looks at the statue of the goddess. Her smile returns.

FERN (CONT'D)
Y'know, on days like this, I think about what Lady Inara says. 'When you're in the dark, the light will lead you out.' It reassures me that the bad days are bound to end.

Leaf remains silent.

FERN (CONT'D)
I know Vespa can be intense, but it isn't anything against you. She only wants what's best for us.

LEAF

Don't you think I want the same?

FERN

I never said you didn't.

LEAF

It seems like you are. Fern this could be life-changing! She's crazy not considering doing this!

FERN

I know you don't see eye to eye with her, but she's most likely going to appoint her as his successor. You have to accept that.

LEAF

Do I?

He pushes away from the rail and flutters in the moonlight.

LEAF (CONT'D)

I've poured so much energy into helping others, and it feels like nobody could care less.

FERN

Leaf, you can't think like that.

LEAF

Apparently, I'm not supposed to think at all.

Leaf looks back at the feather in his hand.

LEAF (CONT'D)

I'm going to prove this island exists and harvest its seeds for us to sow.

Fern flies up and cuts Leaf off.

FERN

What? You can't be serious!

LEAF

Believe me, Fern, I'm as serious as one can possibly be.

FERN

Did you dislocate an antenna?
You've never flown beyond this
field. You don't know what's out
there!

LEAF

Hardly any of us do, Fern! We're
not going to inspire future
generations by sitting around and
doing nothing!

Leaf looks back at the vine of chrysalises.

LEAF (CONT'D)

Someone has to show them they can
reach new heights too.

FERN

What if you tear a wing out there
and can't fly again? Then what?

He stops, weighing the options.

LEAF

I'm a teacher. I'll find a way.

Fern watches Leaf run out of the sanctuary. She glances back
at the vine of chrysalis and sighs.

EXT. LEAF'S OUTPOST - DAWN

Leaf swoops to his desk and throws everything he has into his
bag. Papers, quills, anything he can get his hands on.

The GREEN ENVELOPE falls into his bag.

EXT. TREE BRANCHES - CONTINUOUS

Daylight begins to break. Leaf pushes through the tree's
foliage. An open grassy field before him. He nervously
fiddles with the strap on his bag.

The wind blows against Leaf's back. Just what he needed.

LEAF

Now or never.

Leaf takes a deep breath and leaps off the branch. He unfurls
his wings--

EXT. THE OPEN FIELD - DAY

--and swoops over an endless valley of grass and shrubs.

Leaf skims over blades of grass and weaves through shrubs.

A DEER and her young FAWN cross the field. Leaf flies past them. The fawn stops and watches Leaf in wonderment.

Leaf ascends higher into the air. He feels so alive!

LEAF

Okay. Eye on the prize. Looking for a hummingbird.

He spots a shadow in the distance.

The shadow takes the form of a MOCKINGBIRD, making a beeline towards Leaf. Its talons barely miss him.

Leaf darts away as the bird chases him.

LEAF (CONT'D)

I said a hummingbird! Not a killing machine!

A plethora of trees in the distance.

OWL NEST - CONTINUOUS

Leaf swoops into a hollowed-out hole in the tree. The mockingbird refuses to follow and makes its leave.

LEAF

That was too close...

Suddenly, an OWL rotates its head, glares at Leaf, and STOMPS at him.

Leaf scrambles out of the hole--

DREY NEST - CONTINUOUS

--And lands in another nest.

LEAF

Oh, come on. Not another one.

Two BABY SQUIRRELS stare at Leaf with big, innocent eyes.

Leaf sighs with relief.

THWACK! A MOTHER SQUIRREL starts to beat Leaf with a stick.

MOTHER SQUIRREL
You leave my babies alone! Go on!
Get outta here, you lil bug-eyed
creep!

Leaf scrambles out of the nest. The mother squirrel chucks an acorn at him. A direct hit! He spirals down to the surface.

EXT. THE WETLANDS - CONTINUOUS

Leaf tumbles onto the damp, muddy floor.

LEAF
Okay... Enough of that...

He picks himself up and takes in his surroundings. Tall willow trees and moss-covered stones surround him. A river flows nearby. Minimal sunlight gives off murky vibes.

Leaf spots a CRICKET headfirst in a tuft of grass. A fully packed traveler's rucksack on their back. He sighs in relief and approaches them.

LEAF (CONT'D)
Excuse me! Sorry for interrupting
whatever you're partaking in, but
could you tell me where I might--

The cricket slumps out of the bush. Their upper torso is gone, as if they were bitten in two.

LEAF (CONT'D)
That's unsettling...

An ANOLE LIZARD springs out and tackles Leaf. It GROWLS and SNAPS at Leaf as he struggles to hold him back.

Leaf kicks the lizard off and scrambles to the rock. His back against a wall. The lizard approaches with a hungry glint in its eyes. Leaf closes his eyes and anticipates his demise.

WHOOSH! A blur flies past, followed by a YELP.

Leaf opens his eyes. The lizard is scurrying back into the brush. A slicked off tail lays limp before him.

Across from him now stands a PRAYING MANTIS in a hooded cowl. Four legs and razor-sharp raptorial arms. She brings the hood of the cloak down, revealing vivid yellow eyes and a pretty face.

They stare at each other, speechless but yearning to learn more. The mantis takes a step forward. Leaf shudders back towards the rock. The mantis stops, regretting doing so.

Growing voices break their trance. The mantis flees, shedding the cowl.

LEAF (CONT'D)

Wait, I--

Leaf retrieves the cowl, his mind racing with what he saw.

END OF ACT I