

EXT. FIELD - MORNING

It's only a little past sunrise and the shadows in the field are still long. Or, they would be if the field contained anything but waving grass to cast shadows.

The grass... and the CLOUD SHEPHERD (52). He casts a shadow too. Wrapped in a poncho and sitting on a folding chair of his own design, he squints skyward. He's tall, tan, and lean, with a patchy beard and long mop of black hair.

He rummages around in the large leather satchel by his feet, still keeping one eye skyward, and fishes out a small pipe and tobacco box. He settles back in his chair to smoke.

Everything the Shepherd owns feels like it was made by hand and has been repaired at least a dozen times - He has the air of a tired, but self-sufficient, nomad.

A stake is pounded in the ground by the Shepherd's feet, anchoring one end of a long, thin rope. The rope arcs towards the sky like the string of a kite - Going up, and up, and up.

At first glance, it appears the other end of the rope is just a knot floating in mid-air. The dozens and dozens of micro-strings branching off it are so thin they're only visible when they catch the sunlight.

Each string is attached to a CLOUD. Puffy white clouds with strings, all attached together to the Shepherd's leash.

The Shepherd finishes the fiddly business of lighting his pipe and takes the first puff with a satisfied sigh. He glances above him - not up the rope, but at a closer target.

SHEPHERD

Oh don't you give me that look.

Another CLOUD, this one wispy and thin, descends towards the ground like an errant sheet of paper caught on the wind. It wears a harness that's so light and thin it's barely visible.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)

(re: pipe)

Sirus. I promise. Only one today.

Sirus looks about as skeptical as it's possible for a cloud to look as it waves an ethereal tendril at the Shepherd - He can understand whatever cloud sign language Sirus is doing.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)

This time I mean it. On my honor.

(As he takes another)

(MORE)

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)
Hm - You wouldn't be so judgmental
if you could try this though. Mm.

He stows his tobacco box as Sirius settles down near him.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)
(Nodding towards clouds)
How're they doing up there?

The cloud shrugs.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)
Well once everyone's full let's
move. Lotta stops to hit today.

The Shepherd looks out to the horizon, contemplating and humming a melancholy tune to himself --

ON THE TUNE:

EXT. CAMP - EVENING, DECADES AGO

Decades earlier. The Shepherd is a much younger man, sitting around a camp fire cheering and drink with a half-dozen other YOUNG BANDITS under a starry night sky.

They chant a merry DRINKING SONG - a happier version of the same tune the Shepherd is humming. Clearly, they are celebrating some victory.

Behind the camp is the smoldering wreckage of some sort of huge WOODEN SHIP. Like an ocean liner on land.

BACK TO PRESENT:

EXT. FIELD - SAME AS BEFORE

The Shepherd shakes it off. Clearing the cobwebs. He looks over at Sirius and sees that the little cloud is alert. Agitated. Like a dog that can hear something in the distance.

SHEPHERD
What is it-?

But before he's even finished he's heard it too. A DRONING in the distance. Getting louder. The Shepherd's eyes widen.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)
(Urgent)
Round 'em up. We gotta move.

Sirus nods and zips skywards as the Shepherd extinguishing his pipe... but not without one more drag.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)
(Re: pipe, to Sirus)
This one didn't count!

The Shepherd gets everything packed into his bag as Sirus zips upwards towards the other clouds. In the distance we can see the source of their panic: AN AIRSHIP, getting closer.

Now we can see the intact version of the flaming wreckage from the Shepherd's memory. Nearly a thousand feet long with dozens of sails and hundreds of propellers to match, its lacquered wood gleams as it churns through the air.

Right in its path: THE SHEPHERD'S FLOCK OF CLOUDS.

Bag packed, the Shepherd grabs his CROOK-STAFF from the ground beside him - It appears to be made of many interlocking pieces and have strange mechanical functions.

He hooks the rope with the end of his staff and attaches a handled mechanism, like a fishing reel, to the shaft.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)
(Calling)
Here we go, everyone!

He turns the handle, which spins the end of the staff and starts to reel in the rope with great speed.

High above him, the clouds all jostle and resist, trying to fly in different directions. But Sirus darts around, this way and that, keeping the flock moving in the same general direction towards the ground.

With its massive sails and propellers, the airship's wake blows the grass and trees below every which way and leaves chewed-up clouds and wind currents in its wake.

The Shepherd's eye never leaves the wooden behemoth, carefully calculating its trajectory and the position of his clouds. He keeps reeling them in as fast as he can.

Finally, Sirus and the Shepherd get the clouds down towards the ground. They continue bucking and struggling as the droning of the airship keeps getting louder.

The Shepherd can see the massive wind disturbance on the grass, only a few hundred feet distant. He pulls a small cloth bundle out of his bag and starts unwrapping it.

Despite starting smaller than a picnic blanket, the bundle unwraps again and again and again until it's the size of a large tarp - Like Sirius' harness and the cloud leashes, it's made from something that must be magically thin and light.

The Shepherd hooks one corner of the tarp to Sirius' harness so the cloud can help him get it draped over all the clouds.

He lifts the edge carefully, motioning to Sirius.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)

All right, get under there boy.

Dutifully, Sirius darts under, squeezing between a few rowdy clouds inside. Satisfied, the Shepherd attaches another mechanism to his staff with a *sparking* electrical sound--

There's a *hum* as a wire running through the staff glows blue. He shields his eyes and touches it to the edge of the tarp - ZAP! - there's a flash as the tarp STIFFENS into a dome.

The Shepherd breathes a sigh of relief. He stows everything back in his bag and then sits next to the dome to help anchor it. For a second, everything is still.

Then, the airship flies overhead.

The drone is almost deafening, the wind like a concentrated hurricane. The Shepherd covers his ears and hunkers down as the wooden monstrosity blots out the sun--

ON THE DRONING:

INT. TREE HOLLOW - AFTERNOON

In a forest full of impossibly-tall trees, the Shepherd and his raider friends hide inside a hollow near the very top.

They're up so high that, when they look out, they are on the same level as an airship flying by on a carved-out route through the forest.

A CHARMING RAIDER (30s) with a gold tooth gives them all a daredevil grin - He's obviously the ringleader here.

CHARMING RAIDER

You boys ready?

All nod. They pull on GOGGLES and WING-SUITS and prepare to fling themselves into the open air.

CHARMING RAIDER (CONT'D)

Then PROVE IT.

As the young Shepherd and the raiders JUMP we go--

BACK TO PRESENT:

EXT. FIELD - SAME AS BEFORE

The dome, weighted and stiff though it is, nearly blows away from the force of the airship overhead. The Shepherd throws himself over top of it, gritting his teeth with effort.

Finally, after what feels like an hour, the sun comes back out. The droning dies down. And the Shepherd is finally able to stand without the wind pushing him back down.

As the airship leaves, the Shepherd breathes a heavy sigh and gives the dome a comforting pat.

SHEPHERD

(Exhausted)

Don't worry everyone. It's gone.
It's gone.

FADE THRU BLACK.

EXT. RIVER VILLAGE - LATER

At the place where the wide, flat, fields start to give way to hills and mountains beyond there's a VILLAGE on a river.

A sprawling collection of pre-industrial wooden buildings, farms, and marketplaces, the River Village is bustling and going about its day as the Cloud Shepherd approaches from the fields.

EXT. CARA AND PEYTON'S FARM - SIMULTANEOUS

One of the farmers on the outskirts of the village, CARA (40s, friendly), spots him first. In the middle of weeding her vegetable patch, she straightens up to stretch her back and spots him - a man with a personal flock of clouds.

She calls to her family inside the house.

CARA

Hey Peyton! Boys! The Cloud
Shepherd's here!

PEYTON (40s, protective) and their three SONS (8, 15, and 19) come out, shielding their eyes against the sun.

The Cloud Shepherd spots them watching him, so he gives them a wave, and they wave right back.

The Shepherd reaches the perimeter of the farm and raises his staff into the air - The rope "leash" for all the clouds is tied through the loop. He STABS the staff into the ground - burying it at least a foot deep, anchored.

SHEPHERD

Okay everyone, you know the routine...

He gives a little *whistle* to Sirius, who zips skyward and starts to nudge the clouds around.

Soon, the clouds are arranged over the fields just-so. The Shepherd cups his hands to his mouth and calls to the family.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)

Make sure you're somewhere dry!

(Smirk)

It's starting to look like rain.

And with that, he gives a TUG on the rope.

For a beat, nothing happens. The youngest of the three sons cranes his head out.

YOUNGEST SON

What's he talkin' about?

PEYTON

Just wait. You'll see.

Right on cue, the rain starts. Just a few drops at first. But soon it grows into a misting. Then a sprinkling. Within moments, the weather has gone from a warm, dry afternoon to an absolute DOWNPOUR.

The Shepherd watches, smug and dry, from the fence just outside the perimeter. He clearly loves this part.

He sees one of the clouds getting AGITATED. Shaking. Sputtering. Spitting out little arcs of lightning and rumbles of pre-thunder. The Shepherd points it out to Sirius.

SHEPHERD

Calm her down, would ya? Don't want her going storm cloud on us.

Sirius flies up and nudges the cloud cautiously - He gets a brief ZAP like static electricity from a doorknob, but the cloud shakes it off like a sleepwalker. It's calmed down now.

Once the rain has died down, Cara and her family come out to greet the Shepherd at the fence. The oldest son holds a handkerchief-wrapped bundle under his arm.

CARA

Hey there, Shepherd.

The Shepherd looks up from where he'd been busying himself adjusting his ropes and gadgets. It's clear he spends more time talking to clouds (and himself) than people.

SHEPHERD

Oh, ah, hey yourself. Hopefully
that rain should do ya for a while.

Peyton sticks out his hand for the Shepherd to shake.

PEYTON

More than enough. Thank you.

There's a beat where the Shepherd looks at Peyton's hand, then remembers. He shakes it. Peyton looks surprised at the strength in the skinny older man's hand.

SHEPHERD

Question for you folks... You been
seeing a lot more airships around
here?

PEYTON

Uh, now that you mention it...
yeah. Any idea what that's about?

SHEPHERD

(He has guesses but-)
Nah. Can't say I do.

Cara interrupts, pushing her oldest son forward.

CARA

(To oldest son)
Go ahead.

OLDEST SON

Right. Here.

He holds out the bundle to the Shepherd.

SHEPHERD

Aw, I tell ya every time you don't
need to do that. I don't do this
for the--

CARA
We know. But we want to.

She gives him a look. He's not leaving without it.

EXT. FIELD - MEANWHILE...

Back in the big open field. A spot seemingly like a million others. A steel-toed BOOT crunches down into the dirt.

The boot belongs to a hunched, rail-thin figure who leans down to investigate the dirt below his feet. He's mostly concealed in a dark cloak, and his limbs and torso that can be seen are tightly covered in bandage-like wrappings.

Atop his skinny neck is a tilting, bobbing head covered in a cracked porcelain MASK - All wide starring eyes and no mouth.

This... is THE MADMAN.

The Madman drags his long, pointed, fingers over the dirt and picks up a small bent MATCHSTICK - One of the matches that the Shepherd used to light his pipe.

He stares off towards the horizon, then whips his cloak around himself as he continues his hunt.

EXT. VILLAGE OUTSKIRTS - SIMULTANEOUS

Miles away, the Shepherd walks along the outskirts of the River Village. He's halfway through eating an apple from the bundle of food Cara gave him.

They reach the next stop - another small farm on the water - and begin to set up the flock again.

The Shepherd tugs the rope, gets the rain going, and settles against a fence post to wait.

As he watches, a YOUNG GIRL (7) comes out of the farmhouse under a massive umbrella and starts walking towards him.

As she gets nearer, he calls out to her.

SHEPHERD
Where are you going? You're going
to get soaked!

She stops walking. The noise under her umbrella from all the rain is deafening.

YOUNG GIRL
(Can't hear)
What?

SHEPHERD
I asked "Where are you going?"

YOUNG GIRL
What?

Exasperated, the Shepherd waves her towards him. She walks over as fast as her short legs will allow.

Finally, she reaches the perimeter of the rain storm and drops the umbrella to the ground beside her with a *thunk*.

YOUNG GIRL (CONT'D)
What'd you say?

SHEPHERD
(Amused)
I was asking what was so damn important you had to come out while I'm watering. You'll get soaked.

YOUNG GIRL
Nuh uh. Got my umbrella.

SHEPHERD
So I see.
(Beat)
So... what can I do for you?

YOUNG GIRL
Oh! Right! I was just wondering, well, I was wondering... how do you tell the clouds what to do?

SHEPHERD
(more amused)
Just that, then?

YOUNG GIRL
Um. Yes? Cuz my neighbor Tamlin... She has a cat who, her cat doesn't listen to anybody, but when you talk to it, it still looks like it can hear you.
(Beat)
But when I talk to clouds they don't do *anything*.

That finally gets a laugh out of the Shepherd.

SHEPHERD

Well, if you were talking to your average clouds then, yeah, I wouldn't have any luck with them either.

(Beat, thinks on it)

Eh. Maybe a little luck.

(Anyway)

But. It's not just about me. See, these are special clouds. They're from a little grotto way up in the mountains.

YOUNG GIRL

How did you find them?

Sore subject. He withdraws a little.

SHEPHERD

That... That's a long story.

(Beat)

But. Every year I go to the grotto, find all the new baby clouds, and bring them to their new home. Along the way, we stop and water farms like yours, help the grass grow... help everything be green.

The girl stares up at the flock of clouds in amazement.

YOUNG GIRL

Where's their new home?

The Shepherd's eyes grow distant.

SHEPHERD

It's... pretty far.

YOUNG GIRL

Wow. Your job is amazing.

A beat as the two of them watch the rain together.

SHEPHERD

It has it's moments.

FADE TO:

EXT. BACK TO THE PLAINS - LATE AFTERNOON

The sun is starting to get low in the sky as the Shepherd wraps up his last stop of the day. He whistles to the flock.