

## ABSTRACT

The Star Seeker

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Storytelling is the defining constant in every culture, for our stories remind us who we are and what we value. In light of this fact, I chose to write a screenplay about a heroine named Aster, whose fear of the dark and quest for light mirror humanity's search for good. Through her journey across the land of Pelclair with her friends Rhys and Tago, Aster discovers that she has a higher calling on her life and must overcome great obstacles in order to save her sister and her kingdom. Drawing on my studies of great books and great films, I have written an epic adventure narrative with the hope of creating a work that will encourage people to pursue their own callings despite the darkness.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

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Dr. Sarah-Jane Murray, Great Texts

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THE STAR SEEKER

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Baylor University  
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Honors Program

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## INTRODUCTION

The slip of a disc into a DVD player. The buttery smell of popcorn wafting through a theater. A ticket being torn along serrated edges. Relaxing into a chair, plump and hard or soft and squashy. Lights dim. Noise hushes. We're ready. Ready for the story.

Storytelling is a defining constant in every culture, for our stories remind us who we are and what we value. Whether a story is told through paintings, tapestries, scrolls, books, plays, ballets, or films, it grabs our attention. Whatever the medium, the crux of the pull is the same: As humans, we want to know who we are, why we do what we do, where we are from and what we value. Stories answer our questions, engage multiple sections of our brains and, in short, are the most effective and memorable way of conveying information.

While I have always loved stories and have been fascinated by their power and use, I never thought I could write a piece of any value. During my undergraduate studies, I have focused on studying the great books that shaped western civilization. My love of literature originally led me to want to write a literary research thesis. I began the thesis research process with a goal of doing an analysis on a work of children's literature, such as the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling or the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. Tracing how Arthurian legend impacted J.K. Rowling's world-building or looking at how C.S. Lewis used well-developed characters and allegory to present a multifocal understanding of the story to his readers were two ideas I considered pursuing in my thesis research, but I was not hooked. Although these proposals were

compelling, they didn't present the kind of challenge I was looking for... although I didn't quite know what that was yet. It was at that point that I made my entry into the study of story theory or, as Dr. Murray termed it, story rhetoric.

I had the good fortune of exploring many of the seminal ideas that infuse Dr. Murray's research over the course of the Great Texts Capstone course, offered under the rubric of "Great Texts in Story." But what did this mean and why did it become so important to my own academic journey? At first, I learned how to structure a story with maximum impact on the reader or watcher. Ultimately, I came to understand how good writing can change the world (for better or worse). As I dabbled in three-act structure and outlined and drafted the final project for the course, something clicked: For the first time, I could see the link between the books I had been reading — the voices inherited from the past — and the future. That bridge, I realized, was creativity. The writers of whom I had grown so fond had not stopped at reading the stories they inherited from their predecessors; they had taken the chance to write their own. I realized that out of all the ideas I was exploring for my thesis, I was most excited about the fictional story I wanted to tell. Not because it would be fun (and indeed, it has proven to be nothing less than excruciatingly hard work every step of the way), but because deep down inside, I was feeling called to do more than enjoy the creativity of others; I was being called to contribute something to that ongoing conversation that shapes and informs how we look at the world.

Throughout the process, I have learned far more than what it takes to write an insanely great story. I have learned the importance of community. Dr. Murray founded a "thesis pod" and encouraged her three students — Kathryn

Sommers, Kate LeTourneau, and me — to work together, sharing our outlines and samples of our work. In giving each other feedback on story problems, we became better writers and provided each other mutual support throughout the thesis process. In no small way, our friendships came to exemplify what Aristotle defines in Book Eight of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as friendships of the good — those rare relationships when the self sinks into the background and we care, rather, about the good of our friend. The thesis pod has been one of my favorite parts of creating *The Star Seeker* and, for the first time, I understand wholeheartedly what it meant for Tolkien and Lewis and the other Inklings to lean on one another and push each other to excel.

### *Influences*

My love of literature began early. My mom taught me to read when I was four years old, and by age five, I got on my own magic carpet and entered the fantastical world of children’s literature. As I grew up, epic tales of adventure especially inspired me. I experienced wealth and poverty and learned the meaning of grace under pressure from *A Little Princess*; I met Aslan and took Lucy as my role model in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. My favorite movies as a child were *Beauty and the Beast* and *Cinderella* because the protagonists were smart, courageous and kind. I wanted to be like my heroines in the books and movies I loved. I wanted to go on an adventure and save the world.

As I grew up, the books I read and films I watched as a child reminded me that whenever I faced difficulties in life, I could overcome them by choosing to do the right thing and digging deep down inside until I found the requisite courage to do so. For example, in *A Little Princess*, Sara Crewe was plunged from

great wealth and comfort to poverty and oppression. However, she never lost her kindness or compassion. Her faith and hope were the qualities which led to her eventual redemption. I also loved the story of Caractacus Potts in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. This is a man who worked hard and made life magical for his children even when he was at his wit's end on how to provide for them. His creativity within the limits and challenges facing him inspired me. Moreover, with Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, I witnessed the story of a child with an incredible intellect who overcame the limits of an oppressive headmistress and doltish parents by using her mind and her creativity to do extraordinary acts of telekinesis. Matilda employed her creativity to conquer the challenges of the world into which she was born; she also (and perhaps more importantly) learned to exercise her intellect in a healthier way. Looking back, I realize all of these stories have a redemptive and hopeful element that drives them. At the end of the day, no matter how difficult the circumstances, the resiliency of the human spirit prevails. It's hardly surprising that the same themes dominate my own work. The stories I adored as a child are part of the reason I have such a strong drive to go and help other people. Great literature tells us who we are; it tells us why we do what we do; and it helps us understand our world.

As far as shaping my understanding of the purpose, function and nature of dramatic writing, three other books have especially guided me. From Christopher Vogler and the *Writer's Journey*, I learned more than the paradigms and archetypes he borrows from Joseph Campbell. As Vogler explains, "the Hero's Journey and the Writer's Journey are one and the same. Anyone setting out to write a story soon encounters all the tests, trials, ordeals, joys and rewards of the Hero's Journey" (293). In the process of writing my thesis, Vogler's words



ring true. I have undergone struggles and setbacks but also experienced joys and triumphs. Without a doubt, “writing is an often perilous journey inward to probe the depths of one’s soul and bring back the Elixir of experience—a good story.” In writing a story, we draw upon our own experience and heart in order to produce an authentic work.

J.R.R. Tolkien’s understanding of writing, articulated in “Mythopoeia,” broadens Vogler’s insight. Rather than simply tapping one’s own experience, Tolkien explains the importance of drawing on the absolute truth that can be found in God’s creation and guaranteed by faith alone. Tolkien sees the human being as a “sub-creator, the refracted light / through whom is splintered from a single White / to many hues, and endlessly combined / in living shapes that move from mind to mind.” In responding to the call to create, we are in essence responding to that part within us that mirrors God who created the world *ex nihilo*. For Tolkien, writing is an act and expression of faith. It must also be an act of humility for (as Dante learns in canto twelve of the *Purgatorio*), no human being can ever hope to close the gap between his or her abilities as an artist and the perfection of God’s artistry. As Ira Glass puts it, our “taste is what disappoints” us. For Glass, the novice is doomed to failure when she compares herself to the great writers and storytellers she admires and expects to match them. For Dante and, I believe, Tolkien, even the greatest human artist will fall short of the divine and must learn to write as a response to God’s call, rather than an attempt to match the expressions of creativity and beauty we find in the world around us.

The third book that has exerted considerable influence on me is Stephen King’s *On Writing*. According to King, “books are a uniquely portable magic”

(104). No matter where we find ourselves in the world, if we open up a book, watch a movie, view a TED talk, or partake of a story in any medium, we engage in an act of telepathy. Writing and reading transports us outside of our time and place, and into a greater conversation. In creating stories, it is therefore vital that we take the task of writing seriously and understand it not as a trivial exercise, but as an opportunity to expand our readers' world by offering a unique and fruitful point of view (106). As Dr. Murray often tells us, "Storytellers are ethicists: With our pens, we have the power to change the world." As I pondered all of the above, I set out to tell a story that presents a positive, uplifting worldview that upholds the triumph of good over evil. At the same time, I wanted to challenge my audience to embrace a higher calling and understand they are part of a story that is much bigger than themselves.

### *Creative Process*

I knew at once that I wanted to write a fairy tale. I have always been enchanted by the genre, as I believe we can find truth in the fantastic in a very different way from in the mundane. In "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," C.S. Lewis explains, "but at its best [a fairy story] can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of 'commenting on life', can add to it" (*On Stories* 62). Although I will never meet a dragon or griffin, the element of the fantastical awakens a sense of adventure in me.

As Richard Walter notes in *The Essentials of Screenwriting*, every detail of a story must be integrated. This means that it must contribute to pushing the story forward (or backward) and fuel character development. Nothing is left up to

chance. With this in mind, I set out to create a professional step outline of my story based on the traditional three-act structure outlined by Dr. Murray in *Three Act What?* Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle understood full well the importance of structure in forging meaningful dramatic writing and stressed the importance of crafting a strong beginning, middle and end (*Poetics*). Below, I have outlined the final step-outline to which I arrived for *The Star Seeker* and present the basic rationale for each of these elements or “beats.” Furthermore, I paid close attention to Lajos Egri’s description of the dramatic premise necessary for all great writing and established clear sets of opposing values: “X” triumphs over “Y.” The dominant or antagonistic values in *The Star Seeker* are encapsulated in Merrick, the evil sorcerer and royal advisor, who killed Aster’s family and will do anything to try to gain the throne for himself, including consorting with dark spirits. The darkness is the essence of evil: it tries to cover over truth with shadow and prevent people from seeing clearly. The Glaedwin and the key, both of which help Aster find the truth about her identity and lead her towards good, represent the underdog values. At its simplest, *The Star Seeker* is about a girl who goes on an adventure to find out why her father died and ends up discovering her true calling while saving her kingdom in the process.

OPENING IMAGE: In the dark of night, Merrick closes the Glaedwin and stages an ambush on King Prescott and Queen Elodie after he steals their youngest child Ellara. Basir, one of the Queen’s guards, escapes into the woods with Aster, the eldest princess. McCrae is sent after Basir, but when McCrae realizes he has to kill his friend and an innocent child, he cannot do it. Basir and Aster escape, but the kingdom is firmly in Merrick’s clutches. The opening image

is vital to the screenplay because it establishes the conflicting values and gives the audience a sense of what will happen during the rest of the story. For this reason, it is important to write an opening image with a picture of your climax because “when you begin with the end in mind, the conflicting values of the story world begin to come into focus” (*Three Act What? 2*).

WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: Aster is almost finished weaving a tapestry for her town called Belroe. She is excited because her father is going to tell her about the origin of her key necklace that night. Aster goes to teach self-defense to the girls of Belroe. Meanwhile, Ellara lives in the palace with Merrick as her father figure and lives in a subtly oppressive environment. Then we return to Belroe, where Aster and Rhys have a meet-cute at the restaurant. Basir throws a surprise party for Aster’s seventeenth birthday. The ordinary world must demonstrate to the audience who the protagonist is by providing them a glimpse of the character’s world. Giving the audience an understanding of the character’s starting point is important so that they can trace the character’s progression throughout the adventure.

INCITING INCIDENT: While Aster sleeps, her key glows in the dark. Merrick sees it in a dream and wakes up. He realizes that Aster still lives and determines she must die. The inciting incident is significant because it is the first moment that demonstrates the world is changing and the protagonist is about to enter the adventure. In other words, “the stick of dynamite is lit, and the fuse is burning. But it hasn't exploded just yet” (4). This moment is important because due to his dream, Merrick acts to force Aster to come to the palace so he can kill her. Without this moment, the adventure would never have begun.

DILEMMA: Aster goes into town and finds that royal soldiers have burned her loom and tapestry. Basir decides they need to leave for Aster's safety. Before they can leave, royal soldiers attack Basir in the street. Unaware of the danger, Aster goes out to find him. A soldier knocks her unconscious and Rhys saves her, but cannot save her father. Basir dies. His last words: "Find Belinda." The dilemma presents a moment to the protagonist where they must decide: should I stay or should I go? Aster is unsure of what to do at this moment because her life is in limbo – everything she loved most is gone and she has no friends besides Rhys, whom she does not yet trust.

THRESHOLD: Soldiers try to break in to kill Aster in her home. Rhys warns her and they escape. Rhys tries to convince her to go to the palace for safety, but she decides to follow her father's last wish and find her aunt Belinda, thereby accepting the quest and entering Act II. At the threshold, the protagonist must make a choice to move from the ordinary world to the extraordinary world (6). The protagonist must see a goal and the threshold is where she decides to pursue it. Significantly, "the protagonist may commit to a goal only to discover later that what she is really after (the MacGuffin, or broomstick) is something else altogether" (6). In *The Star Seeker*, Aster commits to going to Belinda's house to find out why her father died, but when she finds out that she is part of a bigger story, she eventually will recommit herself to the adventure, but for a MacGuffin she never saw coming.

ADVENTURE SEQUENCE: Aster and Rhys reach a neighboring town. Aster meets a blind beggar who tells her she can find Belinda by following the white fox. Aster and Rhys follow the white fox to outrun royal soldiers whose commander recognizes Aster. The white fox (Tago) shape-shifts into a white

turtle, and they ride him to the bottom of the river, where they help a dolphin escape a trap as Aster faces her fear of the dark. Tago turns into a white griffin and Aster and Rhys ride him to Belinda's house. In the adventure sequence, the action abates as the protagonist discovers the new world and makes progress towards her goal. Aster meets Tago, the supporting character, who leads her and Rhys on a journey through Pelclair, giving Aster the opportunity to explore her kingdom and see the troubles it faces. Through allowing the story to slow down, "the writer builds anticipation for the next major twist and turn, occurring at the midpoint" (7).

**MIDPOINT:** At Belinda's magical house, Aster learns that she is the lost princess and heir to Pelclair, but she does not believe Belinda. Aster goes out to Belinda's garden and sees in a pool that her reflection is crowned with stars. She then sees a vision in the pool and believes that Merrick is going to kill Ellara. She decides to go to the palace to save her sister. The audience finds out that Rhys works for Merrick and is informing on Aster. The midpoint is a crucial tent-pole moment of the story because the protagonist must move from passive to active. Aster has been going along on a journey because she wants answers about her father's death, but when she finds out she is a princess, she does not believe it. When she receives confirmation from the magical pool, Aster commits to the journey and decides that she will put herself in danger to pursue a higher goal.

**ALL DOWNHILL:** Aster and Rhys fly on Tago to the castle. A brachtil (big bird of prey) attacks them and Aster falls. Ellara finds her mother's diary and finds out that she has a sister named Aster. Aster wakes up in a cottage. After a fight, she and Rhys use a shortcut through a cave, facing Aster's fear of the dark. Evil Voices try to hurt them but Aster uses her key (which has powerful light) to

defeat them. They are on their way out of the cave and Rhys is about to tell Aster the truth he has been hiding but she won't listen. They arrive outside and are surrounded by royal soldiers. The commander makes Rhys take Aster's key and shows her Rhys betrayed her. In the all downhill section, it becomes much harder to for the protagonist to complete their goal; it is as if they are walking through quicksand. Aster must overcome many obstacles while Merrick continues to become stronger. In sum, "while the first half of act two privileges the protagonist's values, antagonism escalates in the second half" (9).

**BRICK WALL:** In prison, Aster feels stuck and lost. In a bowl of water, Belinda appears and pushes Aster to recommit to the quest, saying she has sent Rhys to help. The brick wall is the point where the protagonist can see no way around the problem at hand. They are in despair, and often a supporting character or mentor must inspire them to pick themselves up and recommit to the quest. "This critical commitment (which mirrors and magnifies the commitment at the end of act one, signaling that the protagonist is now ready to confront her greatest adversary)," is the final main tent-pole moment following the threshold and midpoint (9).

**PLAN:** Aster picks the lock of her cell. She and Rhys have a confrontation. Aster rejects Rhys's apology and immediately regrets it. Aster finds her way to the throne room and runs into Merrick. When I wrote this section, I originally had Aster and Rhys reconciling, but I realized that that decision was too easy. It made the final climax simple because they were working together again. In order to bring Aster to a point of despair in the next section, she needed to feel like she was completely alone with no resources or friends. Although Aster and Rhys do not make up in this scene, they leave each other at a place of possibility for

reconciliation, which is why they can reunite during the climax scene without much interaction.

TRAP: Merrick leaves Aster in a side room with a creature that will eat her from the inside out. Aster destroys it with her key, but feels hopeless. Her key reminds her that saving Pelclair is her calling.

CLIMAX: Aster faces Merrick in the throne room. McCrae and Ellara back her story up with evidence. Merrick tries to frame Ellara for killing him with a dagger, but Aster sees through his subterfuge. Merrick unleashes his evil magic and battles Rhys as Aster reaches the Glaedwin. Merrick kills Rhys as Aster kills Merrick. Aster opens the Glaedwin and nothing happens. As Rhys dies, the Glaedwin emits light that brings him back to life. The kingdom is restored.

The climax is the point towards which the entire story moves and therefore must clearly resolve the conflict between values. “Every great ending has a beginning, middle, and end,” and the three steps above represent those Aristotelian points (10). At first, the protagonist makes a plan, and it seems to work. Aster encounters some obstacles, but almost succeeds before she hits the trap, when she runs into Merrick. The trap should mirror “the downhill spiral of the second half of act two,” and the protagonist is faced with an obstacle she doesn’t know if she can overcome (10). However, Aster gains the strength and faces the antagonist as “jeopardy continues to carry the scene” (10). In the end, she conquers and attains the MacGuffin, bringing the story to the point for which the audience has waited.

RESOLUTION: Aster, Ellara, Rhys, Belinda, McCrae and Tago live happily in the palace. Aster is queen over her kingdom and all is right with the



world. The resolution should leave the audience with an image of the protagonist in their final state, either comedic or tragic.

My story pivots around Aster, whose fear of the dark and quest for light mirror humanity's quest for good. Through her journey across the land of Pelclair with her friends Rhys and Tago, Aster discovers that she has a higher calling on her life and must overcome great obstacles — including the fact that she doesn't know her identity — in order to save her long-lost sister and, on a more epic scale, the entire kingdom. To all intents and purposes, it is a coming of age tale: I explore the growth process a character undergoes in order to embrace their true identity and step into a leadership role. Throughout the adventure, Aster wrestles with her own insecurities. She constantly fears being lost and not finding herself. Her entire life has been a subterfuge but exceptional conditions, brought about by her birthday and coming of age, call her out of hiding. Above all, she fears being lost and not being able to recover her true identity or even understanding what that means. I have chosen to reflect that inner turmoil thematically throughout the story by making Aster afraid of the dark. Like the great adventurers of old and Dante's pilgrim who finds himself lost in a dark, dark wood, the stars are Aster's saving grace. Not only do they provide light in the darkness, they also symbolize the higher good for which Aster searches. Aster is destined (in spite of her current state and status when we meet her) to become a great leader, but she must first set out to uncover the truth about herself on her own.

Aster's insecurities and self-doubt do not make her a weak leader — quite the opposite. One of the most inspiring statements about leadership I have encountered is in C.S. Lewis's *Prince Caspian* (411):

‘Welcome, Prince,’ said Aslan. ‘Do you feel yourself sufficient to take up the Kingship of Narnia?’  
‘I—I don’t think I do, Sir,’ said Caspian. ‘I’m only a kid.’  
‘Good,’ said Aslan. ‘If you had felt yourself sufficient, it would have been a proof that you were not.’

As Aslan establishes in the above passage, humility is the key to leadership. Throughout my screenplay, I wanted to explore themes of leadership and responsibility as well as the servant’s heart necessary for success. Thus, I have endeavored to make Aster as humble a ruler as Caspian. I also explored how she must serve her people by leading them towards safety and health, as a shepherdess leads her sheep.

Another thematic strand running throughout my work is how the status of a ruler affects the land and subjects over which they rule. For example, in *Oedipus Rex*, the status of the rulers directly affects the prosperity of the country. According to Tiresias, only when the great secret is brought to light will the land be able to find prosperity again. This idea had a major influence on my world building, and resulted in the creation of the Glaedwin — a magical box that acts as a Golden Fleece of sorts. When it is closed and locked by the heir’s key, the light and prosperity it provides are snuffed. There are two keys: one for the king and one for the queen. One key is passed down to the heir in order to protect her and lead her towards her destiny at the appropriate time. The land of Pelclair suffers while Aster is lost, and it will only prosper when she is found and her identity is embraced by her people.

Finally, the tension between independence and friendship makes up another component of the thematic backdrop of my work. Aster is hyper-independent and does not like anyone except her father to look after her. Rhys comes along on the trip and saves her numerous times. Rhys unconsciously

follows his father's footsteps, for his father is McCrae, the guard who chose not to kill Aster and Basir on the night of their escape. Just as McCrae saved Aster's life, Rhys continues to save her life and serve the kingdom, following the legacy of his father. Therefore, Aster's and Rhys's relationship is almost destined because of a history neither of them know anything about. In the course of their relationship, Aster is proud and does not want to admit that she needs help. And yet, as she bears witness to Rhys's self-sacrifice, she begins to find out that friendship and love require a level of dependence. Aster learns that she needs to allow herself to be helped because she cannot do everything on her own. In my own life, I have struggled with this same internal conflict, and it seemed natural to be a part of Aster's character as I wrote her. I believe that levels of independence and dependence are both necessary for a healthy life, but leaning too far in one direction or the other can be dangerous. I used to think that a modern woman is one who is fully independent and does not need anyone's help to succeed. However, I have found that relationships of any kind must be built on a level of dependence, and allowing another person to help and challenge you is crucial to building that trust. This is another reason why the thesis pod experience was so meaningful to me.

In the end, I'm telling Aster's story because I want to be able to create a work that affects an audience for good. If it touches only one life, my work is enough. Through my exploration of leadership and service, friendship and how girls have the power to go on an adventure and change the world, I hope to be able to start discussions about these topics and provide hope for other people.

*A New Understanding of Writing and Art*

Throughout the process of writing *The Star Seeker*, I've learned both practical abilities as well as broader ideas behind how creativity functions. One of the biggest skills I've honed through writing a screenplay is how to economize. I used to think that the more words I used, the more legitimate I would appear. However, as I've undergone the editing process, I've come to understand the power of simplicity. I give the reader enough to imagine with, but not too much. I don't like to craft the image in its fullest capacity because it takes the interactivity out of the reading. Stephen King believes economization is essential because it "leaves quite a lot of room for individual interpretation." When we fall prey to "prissy attention to detail, [...] it takes all the fun out of writing" (105-106). Far from filling in all the details, screenwriters must create a world that affords readers, producers and directors a good deal of wiggle room.

A crucial element of screenwriting in particular is the principle of "show, don't tell." When creating a scene, the writer may have the option to have a talking head scene, in which the main content of the scene is dialogue and action is limited, or to focus on the action with dialogue secondarily. The "show, don't tell" principle is important for films because people's brains are ignited when multiple senses are being engaged. Instead of simply hearing words and seeing stationary characters, dialogue should be integrated into action with multiple senses being stimulated. For example, a scene in which two people are having a confrontation in an office is static. When that same confrontation occurs in a parking garage with water dripping from the ceiling, the dissonant sound of traffic in the street below, and a car with a smoking engine, an element of danger is introduced and the senses are ignited. One can sense the acrid smell of a car

engine, hear the street sounds, and imagine the touch and taste of the water dripping. Sensory storytelling is therefore important for the screenwriter as well as any other storyteller. (For more on this topic, see Murray's *Hardwired for Story*.)

I have come to understand that stories are meant to help people understand the truth through experience. In discussing *Oedipus Rex* in his essay "On Stories," C.S. Lewis states: "We have *seen* how destiny and free will can be combined, even how free will is the *modus operandi* of destiny. The story does what no other theorem can quite do. It may not be 'like real life' in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region" (31). Lewis explores how the main purpose of the story itself is not to provide excitement, but to allow the reader to enter the fictitious world and learn truth through projected experience. While we may understand in theory "how destiny and free will can be combined," through the story of *Oedipus* we understand and internalize how that comes to be. We feel the heartache of Oedipus and Jocasta, we understand Creon's disgust and we are in awe of Tiresias's understanding. While theorems are important to explain how destiny and free will work together, only through a story like Oedipus's can we understand how the idea applies to our lives. Stories show and point the audience towards truth instead of telling them and synthesizing for them what they must believe.

Writing a screenplay has also provided me with the practical experience of how the parts of a narrative relate to the whole. Each scene, in essence, is a fractal image for the entire story. A fractal is a thing or image that has the same pattern in its smallest element as it holds in the full element: for example, a

snowflake. In a well-executed screenplay (or, for that matter novel, etc.), each scene must hold an image of the entire story; the stakes of the entire narrative must be in jeopardy; the character's growth must be called into question. This principle seems simple in theory, but at times I struggled to find how to implement it. However, that endeavor caused me to grow and push myself. For example, I have a scene in Act I that introduces the grown up Ellara and her relationship with Merrick. The scene was originally flat and full of exposition about the opening image. It was depressing and overly emotional and, frankly, did not work. I was not sure what to do. I knew I had to establish Ellara and Merrick's relationship as well as Ellara's place within the court, and I had to show how Ellara was happy in her life only because she was ignorant that there is true joy. I thought about putting Ellara in the throne room and having her trying to do a princess's duties with Merrick looking over her shoulder the whole time, but it felt too early in the story. I eventually put her in her room with her ladies and Merrick, and looked at the relationships in her life. In the previous scene, the audience sees Aster handling a confrontation with dignity and leadership, and she is in a very active environment. In contrast, Ellara is in a static environment, showing how she is trapped. She does not know how to handle confrontation, and Merrick has to save her from bullies, and yet he is a bully himself. Ellara's struggle mirrors that of the entire land, and her oppression is part of the goal Aster will embrace on her journey: to free her captive people from Merrick's clutches. Therefore, the conflicting values of the entire screenplay are found, fractal-like, in the details of this scene. Although not all of my scenes may accomplish this idea, I tried to incorporate it into my writing as much as possible.

As evidenced by my process in struggling to find how to present Ellara's first scene, I came to embrace the valuable position that no work is ever lost. In fact, in the process of writing *The Star Seeker*, I have gone through three very different rewrites. When I first changed my story, I was initially upset that I had done so much work for (what I perceived to be) nothing. However, Dr. Murray assured me that my work would not be in vain and I would only gain from the foundation I had created, even if I was scrapping it for something new. Over two more rewrites, I have come to see how true her words are. Although my story has changed in many areas, the act of writing itself stretches my skills and makes me better. Only by creating bad writing have I learned how to be a good writer. By sifting through ideas and sculpting the story to be its best, I've come to understand nuances of writing I would not have learned if I had simply held on to the story I originally was telling. At the end of the day, stories are a design process and the writer must go through multiple prototypes prior to finding the one that works. Even then, the process of fine-tuning the design has only begun. In that light, creative writing is a discipline that hones patience, humility and also determination and grit.

In her book *Mindset*, Carol Dweck discusses two vantage-points from which human beings tend to approach life. The first — the fixed mindset — assumes each person has set abilities and cannot change them. Thus, failure is not an option and hard work is for the inferiorly gifted. The second mindset — one of growth — assumes each person can develop their abilities and talents through hard work and determination. Now, failure becomes a necessary condition for learning. In writing my thesis, I have written bad scenes, created weak story structure, and had multiple other failures. However, addressing my

failings and mistakes has empowered me to become a better writer. Operating under the fixed mindset is not an option if one wants to be creative in any field. Creativity *requires* failure, both in one's creation of art as well as in the art itself. In a story, characters need to have failings and make mistakes, for this imperfection is the element that makes a story believable and relatable.

When excellence is a moving target, there are opportunities for growth. The journey through writing my creative thesis has not only made me a better writer, but it has also made me a better person. I've learned that failure is not only okay, but also a necessary part of learning. It was a big step of faith for me to embark on a creative thesis: What if I failed? What if I was an awful writer? What if my story was not any good? But I chose to do it anyway because the benefit of pursuing a love I've had ever since childhood outweighed the desire to stay in the safety of a research thesis. Stepping out of my comfort zone stretched me in new ways, and I have no regrets. Perfection, as found in the fixed mindset, stifles creativity, whereas imperfection allows creativity to thrive. In my opinion, the best art is that which is imperfect or transcends the societal expectations of perfection. We find an inspiring example of this phenomenon in the work of Vincent Van Gogh. While his art may not have always filled the entire canvas or conformed to the standard of art during his time, Van Gogh was able to create transcendent expressions of beauty through his innovative techniques. His seminal work, *The Starry Night*, was a main image inspiration for *The Star Seeker* because it speaks to the human desire to reach for something higher and more beautiful.

Van Gogh is an influential example of transcending limits, but through my thesis process, I have also learned how creativity must begin its development



within limits. Through writing within the parameters of three act structure as outlined by Dr. Murray, I have learned how creativity must be cultivated by following structure. Compelling narrative is formed when a protagonist begins in one place, journeys through adversity and either succumbs to those challenges or overcomes them. The process wherein the protagonist wrestles with the journey is at the heart of what creates the character arc and brings the hero to a new (and believable) place at the story's end.

### *An Education in Creation*

Confronted with the power of storytelling as my undergraduate studies draw to a close, I find myself more and more intrigued by the ethics of creativity and storytelling — a process that brings me full circle back to one of my first courses at Baylor. In Book Six of the *Republic*, Plato articulates the analogy of the cave, in which people view shadows on the wall of a cave and strive to understand their world through the imperfect images that dazzle their senses. And yet, it is only when we walk outside into the light that we realize the shadows are but pale reflections of truth and that the human soul is on a constant journey to find that truth. Creatives have the opportunity to shape culture in multiple ways. On one end of the spectrum, they might create shadows for the cave-dwellers and reinforce their servitude. However, I want to be the kind of writer who functions at the other end of the spectrum — the kind of writer who endeavors to paint the sun and lead the cave-dwellers towards the good. Given the power of storytelling to manipulate the masses, it's hardly surprising that Plato was nervous about allowing the untrustworthy tellers of tales dwell in his ideal city. At the end of the day (and as Plato will later point out in the *Timaeus*),

stories must be the preoccupation of those who care about the good, seek to find truth, and see art as a means to shape culture for the better. The creative must take care to provide a truthful vision of the world for their viewers, for art can lead people towards truth or away from it. Throughout this process, above all, I have learned that there is no such thing as “just a story” and I have felt the weight of that burden to bring to my audience something worthwhile.

In conclusion, I believe the process of writing a creative work has allowed me to find deeper meaning in my studies of great books. Not only do I appreciate my education more acutely, but I also understand great art in a more profound way. I see how difficult it is to create art at all, and art worth experiencing is even more demanding to produce. But I have also found that Lewis’s words ring true: “the story does what no other theorem can quite do” (*On Stories* 31). Only through experiencing the truth can we fully understand it, and only by writing have I been able to understand writers. As I close this chapter of life and learning and a new one begins, I realize that writing a creative thesis has changed me in ways I could never have imagined. I will forever be thankful for the opportunity to learn how to create.

FADE IN

EXT STARRY SKY NIGHT

NARRATOR [V.O.]

Once upon a time there was a  
kingdom called Pelclair.

The stars shine over rolling hills and mountains. Villages  
of snug cottages lie between patches of forest.

The silver towers of Caèl Ashblane, the royal palace,  
glisten in the moonlight.

INT THRONE ROOM NIGHT

NARRATOR [V.O.]

There was a box which had existed  
since before the history books were  
written. It was called the  
Glaedwin. When the heir to Pelclair  
opened the Glaedwin, light and  
prosperity reigned in the land.

MERRICK (35), dressed in black, creeps up the dais. Between  
two THRONES is a table with a small box, the GLAEDWIN.

NARRATOR [V.O.]

One night, however, the Glaedwin  
was closed.

Merrick closes the box and turns a KEY.

NARRATOR [V.O.]

And that was the night that changed  
everything.

Merrick holds up the key in his hand and jerks his fingers.  
The key magically crumbles into dust. He stands over the  
Glaedwin and laughs.

EXT CASTLE COURTYARD NIGHT

The fog lies heavy over the hard-packed dirt in the  
courtyard.

Merrick, on horseback, emerges from the gate and canters to  
the people clustered at the wall.

KING PRESCOTT (34) and QUEEN ELODIE (32) stand near the wall  
of the castle, surrounded by guards. Queen Elodie holds her  
oldest daughter (YOUNG ASTER, 1) close to her chest. She  
tucks the golden KEY NECKLACE fastened around the sleeping  
child into Young Aster's jacket.

QUEEN ELODIE  
Prescott, I don't like this.

KING PRESCOTT  
The Glaedwin has been closed. Until we know who did it, we must protect the girls.

King Prescott holds their second daughter (BABY ELLARA, 1 mo.) in his arms and takes one last look at the infant as the rider comes to a halt in front of him.

MERRICK  
My liege. Time is of the essence.

King Prescott hands Baby Ellara to Merrick.

KING PRESCOTT  
We are indebted to you, Merrick.

MERRICK  
I will get the princess Ellara to safety. Godspeed, my king.

Merrick gallops away.

PING. King Prescott falls to the ground with a CRY and writhes in pain. An ARROW protrudes from his back.

Queen Elodie GASPS. She turns to one of her guards and thrusts Young Aster into his arms.

QUEEN ELODIE  
Basir, take Aster. Run!

BASIR GREER (40) hesitates, turns and runs.

PING. Queen Elodie SCREAMS. Basir flinches but keeps running.

Basir hears the sound of FOOTSTEPS behind him. He turns the corner.

EXT CASTLE ALLEY NIGHT

FOOTSTEPS and HOOFBEATS ECHO in the courtyard.

Basir spots an exit in the outer wall. He hugs the palace wall and reaches the door. He goes through and closes it as men on horses ride around the corner.

EXT FOREST NIGHT

Basir runs. The sounds of his FOOTSTEPS and BREATHING break through heavy silence in the wood.

Basir hears HOOFBEATS behind him.

SWOOSH. Basir GRUNTS in pain. He stops and looks down to see a DAGGER in his leg and blood on his pants.

A HORSE and RIDER come around the tree. The horse rears, and the rider settles him. The rider brandishes his sword.

BASIR  
McCrae, my friend.

BRENNAN MCCRAE (35) lowers the sword.

MCCRAE  
Basir.

BASIR  
Do not do this. The heir to  
Pelclair--

McCrae looks at Young Aster. She looks at him with an innocent expression.

MCCRAE  
Godspeed.

McCrae turns his horse and gallops away.

Basir slowly limps through the forest as the grey light of dawn filters through the trees.

NARRATOR [V.O.]  
In one fell swoop, Sir Merrick  
eliminated the king and queen.  
Aster had escaped, but Sir Merrick  
had Ellara, and so held the kingdom  
of Pelclair firmly in his grasp.

INT WEAVING WAREHOUSE DAY

High windows let light into the warehouse of looms. A long tapestry lies on the ground, a riot of color.

One scene illustrates the gathering of the harvest next to a river. Another shows the pressing of grapes into wine with a backdrop of mountain scenery.

A third shows a scene of girls dancing in a circle, with the center girl in white in a place of honor.

Hands flow like water on a loom strung with rich color.

ASTER (18) weaves.

The clock STRIKES one.

Aster stops her weaving with reluctance. She closes her eyes in the light of the sun. She SIGHS.

The door opens. A crowd of chattering women enter and break the quiet.

Aster picks up her bag and leaves the warehouse.

EXT           STREETS OF BELROE           DAY

Aster walks through winding streets vibrant with street vendors and villagers. Soldiers mix in uneasily with citizens.

An old mural of King Prescott and Queen Elodie is painted on the wall. Aster looks at it and almost runs into MADAME LANE (24).

ASTER

I'm so sorry, Madame Lane.

MADAME LANE

Happy birthday, my dear. I hope you'll take some time off to enjoy your special day.

Madame Lane hugs Aster.

ASTER

I finished the last scene today. It'll be ready to present to the town soon.

SOLDIER 1 (23) steals a bag of apples from a VENDOR (57).

VENDOR

You have not paid, sir--

SOLDIER 1

Good try, old man.

Soldier 1 throws an APPLE at the vendor. He takes a bite of another apple as he walks away.

The apple rolls on the ground to Aster. She gives it to the vendor.

The vendor deflates and accepts the apple. He returns to his fruit stand.

MADAME LANE  
These soldiers make me anxious.

ASTER  
I wish they would leave.

MADAME LANE  
They won't until we provide our harvest quota, and without good rain, who knows if that will happen.

They look up at the cloudless sky and sigh.

ASTER  
We can hope. Oh, the sun. I'll see you.

MADAME LANE  
Have fun with your girls.

Aster walks down the street.

Aster reaches the edge of the village. A big, old barn stands in a field of grass.

INT BARN DAY

Aster enters the barn. Inside, two dozen girls ranging from ages 6-17 chat. Some tie up skirts, some wear pants.

ASTER  
All right ladies, it's time to get started.

The girls line up in front of Aster in two rows.

ASTER  
Let's start with partners. I'm going to teach a new move today. Bridgett, you can help me demonstrate.

Bridgett (16) comes to the mat at the front.

ASTER  
I'm going to teach you all how to flip someone over you. It will end up looking like this--

Aster pulls Bridgett down, balances Bridgett on her right foot, then uses her momentum to pull Bridgett in a flip over Aster's body.

Aster rolls up to a standing position and helps Bridgett up as the class CLAPS.

BRIDGETT

I want to practice that on a soldier.

ASTER

That's not why I'm teaching you self-defense. Class, remember why we are learning self-defense.

CLASS

To stand up for ourselves.

ASTER

Exactly. Don't trust a soldier, and don't antagonize him. If a soldier threatens you, this technique would work. But the point is to be able to communicate with someone.

BRIDGETT

They won't listen to me. I'm a girl.

ASTER

You can treat them like humans and they can reciprocate.

BRIDGETT

They won't. They're monsters.

ASTER

Everyone has a point of view.

BRIDGETT

Even the soldiers who took my father's crops and left us nothing.

ASTER

When people act on orders--

Bridgett suddenly executes the same flip they demonstrated on Aster. Aster lands on the ground. Bridgett straddles her and blocks Aster's neck with her arm.



BRIDGETT

Don't tell me my father lost his  
dignity because someone was doing  
his job.

Aster thrusts her hips upward and pushes Bridgett off  
balance. Aster rolls Bridgett over and incapacitates her.

ASTER

Don't underestimate people.  
Communicate first. If they want to  
be violent with you, then you use  
these techniques, but never  
instigate violence. Next time take  
your anger out on a punching bag,  
not on me.

Aster helps Bridgett up. Bridgett returns to the group.

ASTER

All right, everyone pair up.

INT        ELLARA'S APARTMENT        DAY

ELLARA (17) sits in her sitting room. JULIET (22) and JOANA  
(19) play a card game. Other ladies in waiting do embroidery  
and converse.

Ellara reads a book in the window seat.

MERRICK (52) enters.

MERRICK

What are you reading today, my owl.

ELLARA

Ellara. My name is Ellara.

MERRICK

Whatever you say, my owl.

ELLARA

I'm reading A History of Pelclair.

MERRICK

One of your favorites. Readying  
yourself for the Independence Day  
Ball.

ELLARA

A speech needs to be  
well-researched.

MERRICK

Wise counsel from my owl. Remember what the main function of a ball is. You must practice your dancing.

ELLARA

I suppose so.

MERRICK

Let's practice now.

ELLARA

I need to read, Merrick.

JULIET

Come, Princess, dance with Sir Merrick. You need the practice.

ELLARA

I don't think--

JOANNA

You must, Princess Ellara. Think of how mortifying it would be to trip in front of everyone.

The ladies TITTER.

MERRICK

Ladies, I do not appreciate this treatment of the Princess.

JULIET

Sir Merrick, we didn't mean--

MERRICK

Not another word. Well, my owl, if you will not dance, I will get back to preparing for the ball. Happy reading.

Merrick exits. Joanna and Juliet look at Ellara in disdain, then return to their employments.

Ellara closes her eyes.

EXT APARTMENT ROOF SUNSET

Aster SIGHS with her eyes closed.

BASIR (OFFSCREEN)

Aster, I need you downstairs.

ASTER  
A minute, Father.

BASIR (OFFSCREEN)  
Right now, please.

Aster opens her eyes. She is upside down, holding a difficult yoga pose. She is in the middle of the garden on the apartment roof.

Aster closes her eyes. A POUNDING on the roof door, which is in the floor. Aster loses her concentration and falls.

ASTER  
It's my birthday, Father.

BASIR (OFFSCREEN)  
Time to go, Aster. I need you.

Aster composes herself and leaves the roof.

INT BASIR'S TAVERN NIGHT

Aster goes behind the counter, where BASIR (58) works.

BASIR  
I need you to handle orders. Master Lane has a pressing problem and it cannot wait. I'm sorry Aster.

ASTER  
It's fine.

BASIR  
One day I'll give you a more fitting birthday, my princess. I swear it on the song of the stars.

ASTER  
It's perfect when I'm with you, Father.

She goes to wait on tables.

RHYS (20) enters the tavern. WAITRESS (25) escorts him to a table. He notices Aster, who arrives to take his order.

ASTER  
What can I get for you.

RHYS  
I've seen you before.

ASTER

Not unless you've come to Belroe.

RHYS

I haven't. But it seems like I've met you before.

MADAME LANE

Aster. Dear, when you've finished taking this man's order, your father needs you in the kitchen.

ASTER

All right. What would you like to order, sir.

RHYS

It's Rhys. And you are--

ASTER

None of your business.

RHYS

Okay, none of your business, I'll have the fish. No, the turkey. Except I had fowl last night. Maybe the salad. I'm not a fan of crudités, though. Or perhaps--

ASTER

I haven't got all night.

RHYS

I'll stick with the fish. And your name was--

ASTER

Fish it is.

RHYS

Thanks, fish it is. You sure know how to provide charming service.

Aster closes her book and walks to the kitchen. Rhys watches her.

INT BASIR'S TAVERN KITCHEN NIGHT

Aster enters.

CROWD

Surprise!

Aster is shocked. A dozen of her close friends of all ages are gathered around the center table, where a small cake rests.

BASIR  
Happy birthday, Aster.

Basir and Aster hug. Madame Lane cuts the cake.

ASTER  
A cake.

BASIR  
I know it's extravagant, but it's your eighteenth birthday. We wanted to celebrate with style.

ASTER  
I remember when we used to have sweets every holiday.

MASTER LANE (28)  
That was before the palace raised taxes. Again.

MADAME LANE  
Don't get him started on the palace.

ASTER  
The princess can't know how her kingdom suffers from all the taxes. If she did, I'm sure she would change things. I would.

BASIR  
It's not the princess's fault. Her regent makes the decisions.

ASTER  
But the princess will come of age in a year -- then she can do something about it. We should send her a letter.

BASIR  
We're here to celebrate your life, Aster. A toast: to a long and fruitful life of love and service. To Aster.

Everyone toasts. People enter their own conversations.

MASTER LANE

Basir, you surely don't mean you want Aster to be a servant for the rest of her life.

BASIR

On the contrary. Aster is a leader, What do leaders do, Aster.

ASTER

Serve others. Oh Father, that's it. I'll go to the palace and--

BASIR

We can talk about it tomorrow. For now, we celebrate.

INT            ASTER'S APARTMENT            NIGHT

Aster and Basir sit in the living room and sip tea.

ASTER

Father, it's time.

BASIR

It has been a long day. You're right. It is most certainly time for bed.

ASTER

Not for bed.

BASIR

We've had our tea. We've had our chat. I can't think of anything else.

ASTER

My key.

Aster pulls out her KEY on the chain around her neck.

BASIR

I told you I would tell you when you were-- one hundred, as I recall.

ASTER

No, Father. Today, my eighteenth birthday. Tell me. I need to know where my key is from.

BASIR

Your key is a gift from your mother, but its story begins a long time before you were born, before Pelclair even existed. But for now, I am tired and have eaten entirely too much cake. I will tell you the rest of the story in the morning.

Master Lane puts his head in the door.

MASTER LANE

Basir, there's a brawl downstairs.

BASIR

There always is.

Basir kisses Aster on the forehead.

BASIR

I'll be back soon.

But he is not back soon. Aster waits, and eventually falls asleep.

Basir comes in and stretches. He sees Aster is asleep. He picks her up and carries her to her room.

INT        ASTER'S BEDROOM        NIGHT

Basir lays Aster down and pulls the blanket over her limp form. He kisses her forehead and leaves.

The stars outside the window shine like diamonds.

The clock STRIKES midnight.

Aster's key glows around her neck. It fills the room with ethereal brightness.

SINGING VOICES

The heir / The heir / The heir to  
Pelclair.

The clock TICKS one minute after twelve. The key's glow lessens and disappears.

INT MERRICK'S BEDROOM NIGHT

Merrick wakes up with a start.

MERRICK  
Impossible. I destroyed both keys.  
That's impossible.

Merrick gets up and goes to a BOWL in the middle of the room. He puts some black powder in the bowl and MURMURS wordlessly.

The powder swirls in a patchy, wet darkness. It reveals Aster asleep in her room with a key around her neck.

MERRICK  
It can't be.

Merrick pauses for a moment over the bowl.

He walks to his door and KNOCKS. GUARD 1 opens the door.

MERRICK  
Bring me Commander Trask  
immediately.

EXT BASIR'S TAVERN DAY

Aster exits the tavern. Basir follows and waters the plants in the window box.

BASIR  
Finish up that tapestry today,  
dear.

ASTER  
That's the plan. But Father--

BASIR  
Tonight. I'll tell you everything  
at supper. I'm sorry, my princess.  
I'm late.

Basir goes back inside the tavern. Aster walks down the street.

Aster sees a long, thin cloud of smoke rising in the distance. She runs.



EXT WEAVING WAREHOUSE DAY

Aster arrives outside of the weaving warehouse.

She sees her LOOM burning in the street. Attached to it are the burnt remains of her TAPESTRY.

Two VILLAGERS douse the burning loom with water.

Aster inspects the smoking loom. It is badly charred and unusable. Aster goes to the tapestry and sinks to her knees as she fingers the burnt fabric. She picks up a SCRAP with a dancing girl in white on it.

RHYS

So much for that. I never was a fan of tapestries.

Aster turns around to see Rhys standing in the street.

ASTER

All my work. It's gone.

RHYS

This was yours. Except this one. I'm sure it was beautiful. What were they thinking--

ASTER

I've been working on this tapestry for two years. People gave me wool and dye when I ran out, even when they couldn't spare it. It was for our community. It was beautiful. But now it's gone.

RHYS

I don't know what to say.

ASTER

It's not your fault.

INT BASIR'S TAVERN DAY

Aster sits at the bar while Basir cleans. Aster holds the SCRAP of fabric with the dancing girl on it.

ASTER

My loom was singled out. I don't understand.

BASIR

I don't know, Aster. People can be cruel.

ASTER

I can't think of who could have done this.

BASIR

No one who lives in this town.

ASTER

A soldier.

BASIR

Perhaps.

A pause. The tavern continues to function around them.

ASTER

That's it. The soldiers have done too many things. They've stolen, they push us around, and now they've burned my loom in the street. I could go to the palace and talk to the princess, show her --

BASIR (IN A SHARP TONE)

No.

ASTER

Father--

BASIR

I forbid you to go to the palace.

ASTER

But they destroyed--

BASIR

Aster, I will never allow you to go to Caèl Ashblane. If you go in that castle, you will not come out alive.

ASTER

It's not like they routinely kill petitioners at the palace. There's something you're not telling me.

Aster pulls out her KEY.

ASTER  
It's about my key, isn't it. You're never going to tell me.

BASIR  
Don't ask me how I know, but I swear it's true on the song of the stars. You have to trust me for your own safety.

INT     ASTER'S APARTMENT     NIGHT

Aster sits at the kitchen table, dejected. She looks at the SCRAP with the dancing girl on it.

Basir enters.

BASIR  
I've been thinking about the incident. We need to leave town.

ASTER  
Leave town.

BASIR  
Until things calm down.

ASTER  
It was my loom. A singular event.

BASIR  
It'll be you next. Pack a bag while I go to Widow Merle's to return her quilts. When I get back, we'll leave.

ASTER  
You could tell me where we're going.

BASIR  
Your Aunt Belinda's. It will be safe there.

ASTER  
I have an Aunt Belinda.

BASIR  
Come with me to Widow Merle's. We can talk through it.

Aster looks out the window at the night.

ASTER  
Not in the dark.

BASIR  
Very well. I love you, child.

Aster does not answer. Basir exits.

EXT STREETS OF BELROE NIGHT

Basir walks down the deserted street towards Widow Merle's house.

Two soldiers emerge from the darkness.

SOLDIER 1  
Who goes there.

BASIR  
Basir Greer.

SOLDIER 2  
This is the one.

The soldiers attack Basir.

Basir YELLS.

INT ASTER'S ROOM NIGHT

Aster opens her trunk and begins to get out clothes. She stuffs them in a bag.

She finds a QUILT and sighs in frustration.

ASTER  
Father.

She pulls on her coat, picks up the quilt, and leaves the room.

EXT STREETS OF BELROE NIGHT

Aster walks down the street.

She hears A FIGHT around the corner. She looks around and sees that her father is on the ground. Two soldiers kick him.

ASTER  
Father!

Aster runs toward her father.

ASTER

Stop it!

One of the soldiers (SOLDIER 2, 22) walks to Aster. She executes a self-defense move and makes him angry.

Soldier 2 punches Aster and knocks her unconscious.

Out of nowhere, Rhys pushes Soldier 2 down. He throws a punch and knocks Soldier 2 unconscious.

Rhys picks Aster up and takes her to an alley. He lays her down on the ground and checks to make sure she's okay. He pushes a large CRATE in front of her and runs back to the street.

EXT      STREETS OF BELROE      NIGHT

Aster wakes up and blinks hard.

She sees the wet street next to her face and sits up with a start.

ASTER

Father.

Aster looks around, disoriented by the crate and the new place. She stands up and holds her head with care.

Aster stumbles out into the street.

Basir is unconscious in the road. The quilts lie in chaotic disarray around his broken body. Aster falls down in shock. She crawls to him.

ASTER

Father-- please wake up, Father.

Basir's eyes flutter.

BASIR

Find-- Belinda--

Basir dies.

ASTER

Father-- No!

Aster sobs in the street. Lights illuminate the windows of the surrounding homes.

Rhys runs up. He kneels down.

RHYS  
I'm too late.

ASTER  
You knew he was dying--

RHYS  
I was reporting those soldiers to  
get them locked up. I had to or  
they would have come back and  
killed him.

ASTER  
They did anyway.

RHYS  
I--

ASTER  
Go away. This is all your fault.

Rhys steps away. He does not obey Aster. He protects her  
from the people who emerge into the street.

Aster SOBS over her father's body.

EXT GRAVEYARD DAY

Grass in the graveyard flutters softly in the wind.

Aster kneels at Basir's headstone. She picks up the dead  
flowers and replaces them with new ones.

Aster takes a moment at the headstone, then gets up and  
walks away.

Rhys standings at a respectful distance.

RHYS  
Hello.

ASTER  
Hello.

RHYS  
I'm so sorry about your loss--

ASTER  
Aster. My name is Aster.

RHYS  
Aster. I'm sorry I couldn't help  
your father.

ASTER

You tried. I guess that's what matters.

RHYS

If there's anything I can do.

ASTER

I think you've done enough.

RHYS

What's that supposed to mean.

ASTER

My father wouldn't have died if you had just taken him to get help. You needed to feel heroic by locking up the bad guys before tending to the man dying in the street.

RHYS

If I hadn't taken those soldiers, they would have killed more people. Besides, I didn't know he was dying.

ASTER

It was pretty obvious.

RHYS

Some sort of thanks would be nice. I saved your life at least.

ASTER

You what.

RHYS

I took you to safety. Who knows what that soldier would have done if I hadn't.

Aster pushes Rhys. She acts out in a wild frenzy of grief.

RHYS

Hey--

Rhys tries to restrain her. Aster wrestles free and falls to the ground. She pounds it with her fists.

ASTER

You let my father die. Why didn't you save him first -- why did he die.

Rhys kneels down with Aster. She SOBS into the grass.

RHYS

Aster--

ASTER

Go away. You should have saved him.

Rhys stands up and walks away. Aster kneels at her father's grave and mourns all she has lost.

INT MERRICK'S APARTMENT DAY

The MAGIC BOWL shows Aster kneeling in the graveyard. Merrick stands over it and watches her like a vulture.

A KNOCK on the door.

Merrick blows on the mixture, which turns back to powder, then drapes a cloth over the bowl.

MERRICK

Enter.

Princess Ellara enters.

MERRICK

Ellara, my owl, what brings you here so early?

ELLARA

I'm working on preparations for the Independence Day Ball as you asked. I want your opinion on something.

MERRICK

Fire away.

ELLARA

For the entertainment, I'm considering either an illusionist or a dance troupe with a fire breather.

MERRICK

An interesting dilemma. Your preference first.

ELLARA

The dance troupe.



MERRICK

Excellent idea. But the fire breather.

ELLARA

A fire breather would be marvelous entertainment. You seem unconvinced.

MERRICK

Not particularly for myself, but I know that you are afraid of fire.

ELLARA

That's true, but my tutor has encouraged me to face my fears.

MERRICK

But in such a public place. That doesn't seem to be wise.

ELLARA

Maybe not. Perhaps the illusionist would be better. Do you agree--

MERRICK

Only because I care about your comfort, my dear.

ELLARA

All right. Illusionist it is.

Ellara exits. Merrick shakes his head and returns to his bowl.

INT        ASTER'S APARTMENT        NIGHT

Aster sits at Basir's desk and goes through his things. She picks up a faded woven HANDKERCHIEF with a NOTE pinned to it.

The note says, "Aster's first project, age 5. She'll do great things."

An urgent KNOCK on the door.

Aster gets up to open it. She cracks open the door and sees Rhys.

ASTER

Go away. In case you didn't understand the first two times, I never want to see you again.

RHYS

It's urgent. Let me in for one minute and you'll understand.

Aster is irritated. She moves back and Rhys comes in. Rhys shuts the door with haste.

RHYS

Aster, you're in danger.

ASTER

Okay.

RHYS

There are soldiers outside your door. I overheard their plan in the tavern across the street. They're trying to kill you--

ASTER

Kill me.

RHYS

I don't know why, but we have to get out of here right now.

A CRASH from downstairs.

RHYS

There they are.

ASTER

Father said I was in danger from the palace.

RHYS

We have to go now. Is there another way out--

ASTER

Bolt the door and follow me.

EXT APARTMENT ROOF NIGHT

They emerge from the roof exit.

While Rhys puts a chair over the entrance door, Aster tries to open a CHEST, but it is padlocked.

Rhys gets a rock from the garden and pounds the lock free. He opens it, and Aster retrieves a long ROPE.

Aster ties the rope to the edge of the roof.

ASTER  
You first.

Rhys slides down the rope while Aster holds it.

A POUNDING on the roof exit.

Aster slides down the rope as men push the door open.

EXT STREETS OF BELROE NIGHT

Aster lands at the bottom. Rhys runs and Aster follows.

EXT WOODS OUTSIDE BELROE NIGHT

Aster and Rhys stop as they reach the woods at the edge of Belroe.

ASTER  
Those men were trying to kill me.  
But why.

RHYS  
I don't know.

ASTER  
I can't go back home. They'll be  
looking for me.

RHYS  
Come with me. I'm going home to  
Ashblane. We can find you a place  
to start over.

ASTER  
My father forbade me from ever  
going to the palace.

RHYS  
Not even the city.

ASTER  
Yes. He said-- That's it. I  
remember. I have to find my Aunt  
Belinda. Maybe she'll know why my  
father died.

RHYS  
Then we'll go see Belinda.

ASTER  
We-- there's no we. I barely know  
you.

RHYS  
I saved your life from the soldiers  
who killed your father-- you can  
trust me. I'm going with you.

ASTER  
Common sense tells me no.

RHYS  
It's not a problem for me. I'm  
happy to help.

ASTER  
I don't need your charity.

RHYS  
Come on, Aster. I swear on the song  
of the stars that I won't hurt you.

Aster is taken aback as she hears her father's favorite  
expression.

HOOFBEATS echo through the street.

RHYS  
Let's go.

Rhys WHISTLES.

RHYS  
Alastair--

ALASTAIR, a horse, canters around the corner. Rhys mounts  
his horse and helps Aster up. They ride away as the soldiers  
come around the corner.

EXT TOWN STREET DAY

Aster and Rhys ride into NEIGHBORING TOWN.

They travel down dark, sparse streets. The villagers give  
the travellers looks of distrust.

ASTER  
It's different here from my  
village. Darker.

RHYS  
This is how most of the kingdom is.

They ride further into town. Aster sees a VILLAGER (45)  
steal a POTATO from a stand.

SOLDIER 3 (30)

Thief.

SOLDIER 3 raises his hand to strike the villager. Aster looks away. The villager YELLS in pain.

ASTER

We need to find where Belinda is and get out of here as fast as possible.

RHYS

As soon as we get supplies.

ASTER

We should figure out where we're going first.

RHYS

Do you want to be hungry when we're lost in the middle of nowhere? And who doesn't know where their aunt lives. That's strange, if you ask me.

Rhys and Aster dismount from Alastair. Rhys hands the reins to Aster.

ASTER

Fine. We can get the supplies first.

RHYS

I don't think so. You stay here and don't draw attention to yourself. I'll get the supplies. Whatever happens, don't move.

Rhys goes into a store across the street. Aster loops the reins to the railing next to her.

ASTER

You're not the boss of me.

Aster hears a hoarse LAUGH. She looks down and sees a BEGGAR (83), who sits on the ground.

ASTER

What's so funny.

The beggar LAUGHS again. Aster sees that he is blind. She reaches in her pocket and pulls out a coin. She drops the coin in the beggar's cup.

BEGGAR

Thank you, princess. That's a lovely key.

ASTER

I'm not a princess. And who told you about my--

BEGGAR

Lovely.

Perplexed, Aster leaves the odd old man.

She walks into the nearby tavern.

INT TAVERN DAY

The tavern is dark and dirty. Aster walks up to the bar.

ASTER

Excuse me sir.

The BARKEEPER (50) does not look up from his work. He spits in a CUP and polishes it with a dirty RAG.

ASTER

Sir.

The barkeeper ignores her.

ASTER

I need your assistance.

BARKEEPER

No need to get your knickers in a twist.

ASTER

Do you know of anyone named Belinda who lives around here.

BARKEEPER

What am I, the palace directory.

ASTER

So you don't know.

The barkeeper picks up another cup, spits in it, and wipes it with the dirty rag.

ASTER

Stop with the spit already.

BARKEEPER

Don't tell me how to run my tavern,  
girl. If you're so keen to know,  
ask the beggar outside. He'll be  
glad of another delinquent to  
babble with.

Aster stalks out of the tavern.

EXT TOWN STREET DAY

Aster looks around the town in uncertainty. She sees a fountain with a mural behind it. She approaches it and sees that it is a mural of King Prescott and Queen Elodie giving food to a beggar. Aster's face softens. She walks up to the blind beggar.

ASTER

Sir.

BEGGAR

Princess.

ASTER

Do you know of a woman named  
Belinda who lives around here.

BEGGAR

The key-- the key-- the white fox.  
Follow the white fox.

ASTER

(Holding her KEY)

The white fox-- You're not making  
any sense.

Commander Trask's regiment marches into view. Aster kneels down next to the beggar to hear him.

BEGGAR

Find Belinda. The key -- follow the  
white fox. They are coming. They  
are coming for you, princess.

The beggar pulls his enormous CLOAK around Aster and hides her from view.

SOLDIER 3 (20) kicks mud into the beggar's face and LAUGHS.

The regiment continues to march. Soldier 1 and Soldier 2 walk by and Aster sees their faces.

ASTER  
Let me go.

BEGGAR  
No, princess, no--

Aster struggles out of the beggar's cloak and emerges.

ASTER  
You killed him!

LIEUTENANT (30)  
Attention!

The regiment stops and salutes to their commander in the street.

COMMANDER TRASK (40) comes around the block of men to see Aster.

COMMANDER TRASK  
What's going on here.

ASTER  
Nothing.

COMMANDER TRASK  
I know you.

Rhys comes out of the store. He sees Aster and Commander Trask and hurries over.

ASTER  
No you don't. But those men do.  
They killed my father. They need to  
be punished for their crime.

COMMANDER TRASK  
Is that so. My deepest apologies  
for your loss. But stay a moment.  
There's someone I've been looking  
for. Perhaps you can help me.

ASTER  
Probably not.

COMMANDER TRASK  
A traitor to the crown.

ASTER  
I don't know any traitors.



COMMANDER TRASK  
A girl of eighteen.

ASTER  
There are hundreds in the land.

COMMANDER TRASK  
A girl with a key around her neck.

ASTER  
Never seen one.

COMMANDER TRASK  
Just like this one.

Trask reaches out and pulls the KEY out of Aster's shirt.  
Aster snatches the key back.

Trask draws a KNIFE and raises it.

RHYS  
Aster!

Rhys pulls Aster back from the blow. Aster clutches her key.

As she falls, the key shoots out a burst of white light at Trask. It stops the knife and pushes the hilt back into his face.

Trask falls to the ground unconscious.

Aster sees Trask on the ground. She looks at her key in bewilderment.

BEGGAR  
The white fox.

Aster looks up from her key and sees a WHITE FOX (TAGO), who stares at her from the middle of the soldiers. Soldier 2 brandishes his sword at the fox. The fox GROWLS like a bear and its eyes turn from brown to electric blue. Soldier 2 backs off.

The white fox gives Aster a look, then turns and runs off.

The soldiers mutter in confusion, unsure what to do now that their commander is unconscious.

Aster runs after the white fox and Rhys follows.

LIEUTENANT  
Arrest them!

Soldiers pursue Rhys and Aster. Rhys whistles for his horse.

Alastair pulls the reins free and runs after them. Aster and Rhys mount and gallop after the white fox.

INT MERRICK'S OFFICE DAY

A KNOCK sounds on the door.

A dark room with a small fire. Merrick sits at his desk on the opposite side, as far from the fire as possible.

MERRICK

Enter.

The door opens. BRENNAN MCCRAE (53) walks in.

MCCRAE

Sir Merrick.

MERRICK

McCrae.

Merrick reads one of his papers. McCrae waits.

MCCRAE

About Rhys--

MERRICK

Silence.

McCrae obeys and clenches his fists.

MERRICK

How long have you worked for me.

MCCRAE

Twenty-four years, sir.

MERRICK

An honest servant. You have been truthful in all communications.

MCCRAE

Correct.

MERRICK

Ah. But you have not.

Merrick stands. McCrae is confused.

MERRICK

The night you swore to never speak of. That night was when you began to keep the truth from me.

MCCRAE

Sir, I--

MERRICK

You gave me a false key. A false key. Not only that: you swore you killed the child when you clearly did not do so. And yet, you would still deny it.

MCCRAE

I thought she would die in the woods. Basir was severely wounded. I thought--

MERRICK

It doesn't matter what you thought. What matters is that by the hand of one traitor, my plans are in jeopardy.

MCCRAE

Traitor--

MERRICK

But never fear. I will get my revenge on you. Your son will pay dearly for your deception.

MCCRAE

No, not Rhys--

MERRICK

Silence, traitor!

MCCRAE

You are the traitor! You, who ordered your servant to kill the heir to kingdom in cold blood. You, Sir Merrick--

McCrae clutches his throat as he chokes. He puts his hands up to his throat, then falls to the ground unconscious. Merrick puts his hand down.

MERRICK

Guard.

A guard opens the door.

MERRICK

Take him to the dungeons.

Merrick sweeps out of the room.

EXT PALACE GARDEN DAY

Merrick enters the garden. Ellara reads on a blanket in the midst of flowers.

MERRICK

And what are we reading today, my owl.

ELLARA

Philosophy of Botany.

Merrick sits down on a nearby bench.

MERRICK

An appropriate reading location.

ELLARA

I thought it would be helpful to have the subjects of my study all around me. It makes the book more realistic.

MERRICK

I can see.

Bells STRIKE in the distance.

ELLARA

It's time for my statesmanship class.

MERRICK

I have an idea. Skip that class today.

ELLARA

I wish I could. It's so boring. But I must learn how to run the country, no matter how much I dread it.

MERRICK

You'll have my guidance when you become queen, and you'll learn on the job. Surely I can convince you to skip one class.

ELLARA

My tutor--

MERRICK

Never mind your tutor. Come and  
play a round of badminton with me.

Ellara hesitates.

MERRICK

Come my dear. You won't be a child  
forever. Play while you can with  
your old Merrick.

Ellara relents with a smile, closes her book, and leaves it  
on the blanket.

EXT       WOODS       DAY

Aster and Rhys ride through the woods on Alastair. Tago the  
white fox is ahead of them. He sometimes goes out of sight  
but always reappears through the trees.

RHYS

Why are we following that fox.

ASTER

It's the key. The beggar said we  
would find Belinda if we followed  
it.

RHYS

Are you crazy--

EXT       RIVERBANK       DAY

They ride through trees and reach a riverbank. Tago drinks  
some of the river's water.

Ago turns from a fox into a large white turtle. It turns and  
looks at them. Aster and Rhys dismount from Alastair.

ASTER

I think it wants us to get on.

RHYS

There's no way.

ASTER

It seems friendly.

She approaches Tago and strokes his head. The turtle makes a  
deep, un-turtle-like PURR.

RHYS

There's no way I'm getting on that animal.

ASTER

It will take us to Belinda. The beggar said so.

RHYS

I'm not in the habit of trusting beggars for directions. Especially when they're blind and send me running after an albino shapeshifter.

They hear the sounds of HOOFBEATS in the wood.

ASTER

The soldiers will be here soon. If we leave now we can escape.

Rhys looks at Tago, then at the woods.

ASTER

This is the best way.

Aster mounts Tago like a horse.

Alastair bats his eyelashes and puckers his lips at Rhys, then pushes him forward as a way to tease him about Aster.

RHYS

Alastair--

The horse neighs and prances in a circle.

ASTER

Alastair wants you to go. I don't see why you're being so difficult.

RHYS

I'm going to ride Alastair across the river. You can take your chances with the albino.

Tago SNORTS, offended. Rhys tries to catch Alastair's reins, but the horse runs out of reach.

RHYS

Fine. Fine. You win.

He turns to Alastair.

RHYS  
If anything happens, I blame you.

Alastair WHINNIES.

RHYS  
Meet us downriver.

Alastair SNORTS in acquiescence and trots away. Rhys gets on the turtle behind Aster. Tago ambles to the river and slowly gets in the water. Rhys looks back at the soldiers, anxious for the turtle's pace to speed up.

They finally enter the water, and the turtle slowly paddles.

The soldiers break free of the forest line to the river bank. They halt their horses.

Tago puckers his turtle lips, and a BUBBLE forms around his mouth. He blows and the bubble grows.

ASTER  
The soldiers are too close. How--

COMMANDER TRASK  
Fire at will!

Archers fire ARROWS at the group. However, Tago's bubble has expanded and covered Aster and Rhys. The arrows don't pop the bubble.

Tago descends underwater.

EXT [UNDERWATER] RIVER DAY

Tago swims through the river.

Tago makes a NOISE of concern, then swims down. The atmosphere darkens because the river is so deep.

ASTER  
I don't like this.

RHYS  
The magical fox-turtle seems like a bad idea now. No kidding.

ASTER  
The dark. I don't like the dark.

They swim along the bottom of the river. They come up on a LUMP on the river floor. The lump squirms.

Tago makes a worried NOISE and nuzzles the lump. The lump SCREAMS in fear.

RHYS

It looks like there's an animal in trouble. I think the turtle wants us to help.

ASTER

But we can't see.

Rhys reaches into his pocket and pulls out MATCHES. He lights one in the air of the bubble, and they can see a PINK DOLPHIN struggle in a net.

Tago turns his head back towards Aster and Rhys and motions at the lump.

RHYS

This turtle isn't going to leave until we help.

ASTER

Now you speak turtle.

RHYS

I've been around animals long enough to know what they're thinking. We'll have to go together. The bubble won't split in two.

ASTER

But it's so dark.

RHYS

I've got matches. We'll be fine.

He stands up on the turtle. He loses his balance momentarily and sticks his hand through the bubble. Water pours in. He brings his soaked hand back in the bubble, and the hole closes.

RHYS

Come on.

ASTER

What if you run out of matches before we get back to the turtle. The darkness will engulf us.



RHYS

It's a risk we'll have to take. If you don't, the dolphin will die. The longer you sit here, the less light we'll have.

Aster hesitates. Finally she stands up. She is afraid but does not see another option.

ASTER

Let's get it over with.

They roll the bubble over to the dolphin like a hamster wheel. Rhys lights matches.

Aster GASPS as a large FISH appears out of nowhere and seems like it will hit the bubble. In fright, Aster stumbles back into Rhys as he shakes out a match.

They walk around the turtle to be on its far side. Tago makes a WORRIED SOUND.

RHYS

Okay, turtle. The net is being held down by this rock. We can move it if we put our hands through the bubble and you push.

ASTER

Why don't we just pop the giant air bubble and drown. Yes. That's a fantastic idea.

RHYS

All three of us have to push together, which means no matches. We can do this.

They put their hands out of the bubble. Water trickles in.

RHYS

One, two, three.

They push the rock, but it won't budge. Water pours in faster.

They push harder. Water floods the bubble and now is up to their knees.

Finally the rock falls and the net comes undone. The dolphin is free and CHATTERS its thanks. It swims away.

Rhys lights a match. Aster has a breath of relief as the light comes back. They see a large SHARK swimming towards them. Startled, Rhys drops the matches into the water at the bottom of the bubble.

RHYS

No!

ASTER

The matches--

RHYS

They're wet. And that thing is coming closer.

ASTER

Do something.

RHYS

You do something, little Miss Follow-the-Fox.

The bubble jolts as the shark bumps against it.

ASTER

Rhys--

They both yell as the dolphin rolls the bubble onto the back of the turtle. Aster closes her eyes. The water sloshes all around the bubble and soaks Aster and Rhys. The bubble settles and Tago swims away from the shark.

RHYS

The dolphin -- it saved us.

Aster opens her eyes and sees the dolphin. It CHATTERS at them as they swim up toward the light. She looks back and sees the shark turn back towards the dark.

EXT        WOODS        DAY

Tago emerges from the river in the middle of the forest. They are surrounded by tall, feathery trees. Alastair grazes on the river-fed grass.

The bubble POPS and Aster and Rhys fall off the turtle's back.

Rhys wrings out the water from his clothes. Aster holds her knees and breathes deeply.

ASTER

The dark. I can't do the dark. That was awful.

RHYS

But the dolphin is alive and you're back on land. Without the dolphin we would have died.

ASTER

We wouldn't have been in danger of dying without that turtle taking us to the bottom of the river.

RHYS

The soldiers would have killed us. Besides, we protected a helpless animal. That's worth a little danger.

ASTER

I can't believe I trusted it. What was I thinking. It's a shapeshifter.

RHYS

It has a good heart. You're underestimating it.

ASTER

We almost drowned.

RHYS

In the service of the weak and vulnerable.

ASTER

I can't get on that turtle again.

RHYS

You don't have to.

He looks over and Aster follows his gaze. Tago finishes his transformation into a white GRIFFIN.

ASTER

I don't care if that animal is going to Belinda's or not. I'm not getting on it again.

Tago comes up to Aster and looks into her eyes. It COOS.

Aster softens.

TAGO  
Ta--go. Ta--go.

ASTER  
Ta--go. Tago?

TAGO  
Ta--go.

ASTER  
Hi, Tago.

Aster pets Tago's head. Tago makes the same deep PURR he made as a turtle.

ASTER  
I'm still not getting on you.

Tago looks up at Aster, then touches her key with his beak. The key glows faintly, then goes back to normal.

ASTER  
How did you--

TAGO  
(SQUAWKS)

RHYS  
It's a sign.

ASTER  
Maybe you're right.

RHYS  
So you'll go.

ASTER  
There's no other way for me to get to Belinda's.

RHYS  
Well, you could walk. Or have a normal aunt who doesn't send magical guides to her house. That would also work.

Aster playfully hits him as she climbs on Tago's back.

RHYS  
Alastair, follow us if you can. If you can't, go back home. I'll see you there.

Alastair WHINNIES.

The griffin takes off and flies toward a distant mountain.

INT        THRONE ROOM        DAY

Ellara sits on her throne. Merrick stands next to her. A PEASANT (40) kneels on the ground.

PEASANT

... And the drought has forced us into bankruptcy. So, Your Highness, I humbly ask that you give me a loan from the palace to restart my farm, and food to feed my starving family.

MERRICK

Your farm must have failed through neglect.

PEASANT

My oldest son broke his leg and was unable to help with the harvest. My wife is ill and the rest of the children are small. This year we can succeed. My son's leg is healed. A loan from the palace would help us back on our feet and save my wife's life.

MERRICK

I don't think--

ELLARA

Of course we will give you a loan and food.

MERRICK

My owl--

ELLARA

Sir Merrick will take care of it personally.

Merrick snaps his fingers and the guards pull the man away.

EXT        SKY        NIGHT

Aster and Rhys fly on the back of the white griffin toward the snowy mountains in a dim twilight.

Aster looks over Tago's back. The country passes under in waves of dark trees and light barren fields. She looks up towards the sea, where the palace, Caèl Ashblane sits on a hill near the sea and flush with the forest. The castle looks menacing in the dim light.

ASTER  
Pelclair looks so dead.

RHYS  
I've travelled over the entire country. It's dead everywhere. Your village was different, though. It was bright.

Rhys looks over Tago's side at the ground, then quickly looks back up.

ASTER  
You're afraid of heights.

RHYS  
No.

ASTER  
I'm pretty sure you are.

RHYS  
Tell me the story behind your key.

ASTER  
There's not much to tell. I've always had it. My father Basir said that my mother gave it to me.

RHYS  
And it's never seemed magical before. No weird glowing or anything like that.

ASTER  
Not that I've ever seen. Until today.

RHYS  
Magic like that will attract soldiers on our trail.

ASTER  
Like I could control it.

RHYS

I'm just saying, we've had a lot of military followers in the past few days. And you have no idea why--

ASTER

I knocked out their commander. But I still can't understand why the soldiers killed my father. Oh no-- what if it was my fault. They were coming for me. But why--

RHYS

Men with weapons can prey on the weak.

Tago SQUAWKS. They see a small cottage nestled in the snow on the top of the mountain.

EXT BELINDA'S COTTAGE NIGHT

The stars shine on the mountaintop and make the snow gleam.

Tago lands in front of the cottage. Aster and Rhys dismount.

ASTER

I hope this is right.

Tago turns from a white griffin into a white fox.

Tago goes up to the door of the cottage and paws on the door. Aster and Rhys follow.

The door opens. BELINDA (64) stands at the threshold.

BELINDA

Hello Tago. You've brought me guests, I see.

Tago nuzzles Belinda's leg like a cat. Belinda looks up at Aster and Rhys.

BELINDA

Aster--

ASTER

Yes. You know me--

BELINDA

Oh Aster, what a delight it is to see you after all these years. Welcome, my dear.

Belinda envelops Aster in a hug.

BELINDA

And who is this handsome hunk--

ASTER

This is Rhys. He's traveling with me.

Rhys shakes Belinda's hand.

BELINDA

Belinda Greer. It's a pleasure to meet you. Well come in, come in. The house is a bit of a mess, but we'll fix that up soon enough.

They walk inside the cottage.

INT BELINDA'S COTTAGE NIGHT

The entire inside of the cottage is covered in spring flowers and plants. The ground is carpeted in flowers and grass, and ivy climbs up the walls. Bushes stand in place of furniture.

Tago the fox climbs up the ivy on the walls.

BELINDA

Sit down, sit down.

Aster and Rhys sit on some bushes while Belinda waves her hand.

Brooms and dustpans appear out of thin air. They sweep the flowers, grass and dirt off the floor.

Belinda gets out ingredients in the kitchen.

BELINDA

I remember when you first came into this house. That's when I met you -- when you were a baby. Tago brought you and Basir here one night. He walks in with a bundle strapped to his chest and blood dripping all over my floor, and all he says is, 'I've got a present for you.' Then he hands you to me, a beautiful little girl fast asleep. You clung to my neck, and I'll never forget how trusting you were, you poor thing.



Brooms dislodge the ivy on the walls. One broom pulls down a piece of ivy Tago is using to stay on the wall. He falls down with a SQUEAL. Belinda ignores him and sets out a plate of hors d'oeuvres on the grass-covered table.

BELINDA

Basir was a mess -- almost bled out on my floor because he wanted to make sure you were all right first. But I fixed him up as best as I could, and he insisted on going on his way as soon as he could walk.

The brooms sweep the grass off table and finish dislodging ivy from the ceiling.

BELINDA

And now I'm assuming he has passed away. Oh, my dear brother-- We agreed that I would never see you until Basir died. It was too dangerous to have you travel back and forth. And people don't like me to live in their towns -- magic, you know. I hope he died peacefully.

ASTER

He was murdered.

Belinda snaps her fingers at the last word, and the brooms fall to the ground. Now the roomy cottage is spotless except for a big flower, which sits in a patch of dirt on the table.

Belinda sits at the table.

BELINDA

Did the soldiers see you--

ASTER

I think so, but I don't know why they would try to kill me. I'm just a girl from Belroe.

BELINDA

So he didn't tell you.

ASTER

Tell me what.

INT ELLARA'S APARTMENT DAY

Ellara sits next to her window, her book forgotten on her lap.

LADY IN WAITING (18)  
Sir Merrick, Your Highness.

Merrick walks in and bows. Ellara stands up.

MERRICK  
And what are you reading today, my owl.

ELLARA  
I'm not in the mood for games, Merrick.

MERRICK  
My owl, what's the matter.

ELLARA  
The peasant whose farm was failing and whose family needed food--you said you would take care of his concern.

MERRICK  
I did as I said.

ELLARA  
I asked my lady in waiting to check on him. The man's wife died from starvation, and that the palace had done nothing. I trusted you to take care of him.

Ellara sits in her chair, her head in her hand.

MERRICK  
I told my servant to take care of it. I must reprimand him for his carelessness. But don't worry your pretty head.

ELLARA  
I asked my lady to look into it further. She said that in the past two months, many concerns I gave you were neglected.

MERRICK

Princess--

ELLARA

You said you wanted to take care of the kingdom. I may not be a good ruler, but if I can't trust you, I'm going to change my regent.

Merrick is silent.

ELLARA

You may go.

MERRICK

My owl--

ELLARA

My name is Ellara. To you -- Your Highness.

Merrick bows stiffly and leaves.

INT MERRICK'S BEDROOM NIGHT

Merrick storms into his room. He goes to the SEER BOWL and throws off the cover. He pours the BLACK POWDER inside and MURMURS wordlessly.

An image of Aster and Rhys at Belinda's cottage swirls to the surface.

MERRICK

She lives still.

A snake-like voice comes from the bowl.

BOWL

Kill.

MERRICK

Yes, Aster must die.

BOWL

And Ellara.

MERRICK

I need her.

BOWL

She is becoming dangerous.

MERRICK

Yes--

BOWL

King Merrick. It has a nice ring to it. Let the darkness reign.

MERRICK

King Merrick. If something were to befall the princess--

The bowl shows Ellara. She reads in a chair. The image changes to one of Merrick with a crown on his head.

BOWL

The people would look to their trusted regent.

Merrick looks at the view of Pelclair from his window.

MERRICK

King Merrick of Pelclair.

INT BELINDA'S COTTAGE NIGHT

The trio sits around the table.

BELINDA

Basir never told you.

ASTER

Basir wouldn't keep a secret from me unless it was important.

BELINDA

And he never told you about me.

ASTER

When he was dying, he told me to find you.

Belinda SIGHS.

BELINDA

Basir did not tell you the whole truth to protect you. He knew that something might happen to you if the palace ever found out.

ASTER

The palace.

BELINDA

I'm afraid, my dear, that Basir was not your father.

ASTER

No.

BELINDA

There is more. Aster, you are the daughter of King Prescott and Queen Elodie, and the elder sister to Princess Ellara. You are the true heir to the throne of Pelclair.

RHYS

You must be joking.

ASTER

There's no way. The king and queen only had one daughter.

BELINDA

Two. The palace does not allow people to speak of the lost princess, but those of us who were alive when the King and Queen died remember that they had two daughters. Everyone thinks you're dead, sweetheart.

ASTER

This cannot be.

BELINDA

I have no proof, but you do. Your key. It is the symbol of your inheritance. It protects your life. It is the key to the Glaedwin.

ASTER

The Glaedwin.

RHYS

The royal box that cannot be opened.

BELINDA

You hold the key to the kingdom's prosperity, my dear. You are the heir.

RHYS

Your village -- that's why it was so prosperous. Aster, imagine the changes you could make.

ASTER

I don't believe you.

BELINDA

Believe me or not, my dear, it is the truth.

INT BEDROOM NIGHT

Aster lays in a bed and looks at the starry sky through her window. She SIGHS.

She rises and reaches for her coat.

EXT BELINDA'S COTTAGE NIGHT

Aster steps into the snow. She looks up at the stars and sees her breath, foggy in the cold mountain air.

Aster's steps CRUNCH on the snow as she walks away from the house.

She sees a green copse of trees and walks toward them, intrigued.

Aster reaches the trees and sees that she stands at the edge of an indentation of the mountain, where a wild summer garden lies.

EXT BELINDA'S GARDEN NIGHT

Aster leaves Belinda's snowy cottage behind her and descends into the garden.

Flowers of all seasons and colors cover the ground. She sees a path between two rows of white birch trees and walks toward it. A warm breeze blows her hair.

EXT GARDEN POOL NIGHT

The path leads to a still, clear pool surrounded by birch trees.

Aster goes to the edge of the pool and regards her reflection.

As she looks, stars in the sky move in the shape of a crown on her head. She tilts her head in her reflection. The stars move with her head and retain the shape of the crown.

INT BELINDA'S COTTAGE NIGHT

The clock on the wall strikes midnight.

EXT GARDEN POOL NIGHT

Aster gazes at the crown in wonder, and sees her key glow in the water's reflection.

BELINDA (V.O.)

You are the daughter of King  
Prescott and Queen Elodie, and the  
elder sister to Princess Ellara.  
You are the true heir to the throne  
of Pelclair.

ASTER

The true heir--

SINGING VOICES

The heir / the heir / the heir to  
Pelclair...

The water swirls. Merrick's face appears. A dagger and blood cloud the water. Ellara's face appears.

Aster GASPS. She looks up at the stars in the sky.

ASTER

Ellara.

Rhys watches from the shadows.

INT MERRICK'S BEDROOM NIGHT

Merrick smiles as he watches the scene from his SEER BOWL.

INT MERRICK'S OFFICE NIGHT

Merrick sits at his desk and holds a mirror.

MERRICK

You're sure.

RHYS

Positive.

Merrick taps his mirror and Rhys's face disappears.

Merrick taps his mirror three times. Commander Trask appears within its depths.

MERRICK

They are in the mountains and about to depart. Find them. Follow them closely, and don't trust McCrae's boy.

COMMANDER TRASK

Understood, sir.

Trask salutes. Merrick cuts off the connection.

Merrick stands and looks at the mountains outside his window.

EXT BELINDA'S HOUSE DAY

Belinda exits her house. She carries a large BASKET of food.

Aster and Rhys look up as they finish their preparations.

ASTER

Belinda, I don't think that will fit.

BELINDA

Anything can fit if you really want it to, my dear.

Belinda pulls out an ACORN from her pocket. She opens the top and pushes the basket into the acorn. She closes the top again.

BELINDA

See.

Belinda hands the acorn to Aster as Rhys mounts Tago.

BELINDA

And you're sure you want to go to Caël Ashblane. Immense danger will await you.

ASTER

The palace is where I will find answers. I have to go.

Aster mounts Tago.

BELINDA

Be careful in the skies. There are savage predators and they won't hesitate to attack even a big strong griffin like Tago.



Belinda hugs Tago's neck and kisses his feathers.

ASTER

We'll be careful. Thank you for everything.

BELINDA

Go and make me proud, dear ones.

Tago takes off and they fly through the mountains. Belinda waves as the trio grows smaller in the horizon.

EXT MOUNTAINS DAY

The land of Pelclair stretches below. In the light, the land looks flat and barren. Caël Ashblane shimmers in the distance.

RHYS

So, a princess. That came out of the blue.

ASTER

I know. It's hard to believe. Going to the palace will give me answers.

RHYS

I wonder why the palace would forbid the people from talking about the princess's older sister.

ASTER

Maybe they wanted to assure the princess's power.

RHYS

Or maybe the older sister was killed mysteriously and they want to avoid pretenders.

ASTER

Or maybe I'm the real princess.

RHYS

Maybe.

ASTER

That bird in the sky -- it's so beautiful.

RHYS

I don't recognize it.

ASTER  
It's getting bigger.

An enormous BRACHTIL, a bird of prey, swoops through the sky.

RHYS  
A brachtil. This isn't good. Hold on.

The brachtil heads straight for them. It feints at Tago, who SHRIEKS and pulls up. Tago's eyes turn from brown to bright blue. He GROWLS like a bear at the brachtil.

Rhys tries to draw his sword from the saddlebags behind him, but struggles.

The brachtil feints again. Tago swoops to avoid it, and slashes at the brachtil with his talons.

The brachtil comes back in rage, its talons outstretched.

Tago pulls up, but not soon enough. The bird's claws slash across Aster's shoulder and push her off balance. Aster SCREAMS.

She falls off Tago. As she falls, the KEY bursts a bright white light at the brachtil, which falls unconscious through the sky.

RHYS  
Aster!

Aster falls through the sky and holds her shoulder. She looks up as Tago dives toward her. Her eyes close as she blacks out.

INT PALACE LIBRARY DAY

Stacks of books on tables. Different open books show content about King Prescott, Queen Elodie, and the Glaedwin.

Ellara sits at a table and reads an especially thick BOOK. She closes it in frustration.

Ellara gets up to put the book back. She trips over a stool and falls. The book lands on the ground.

As Ellara bends to retrieve it, she notices a BUTTON underneath the bookcase. Ellara peers at it, then presses it.

BOOM. The sound ECHOES through the empty library. Ellara looks up and waits for someone to check on her. No one comes.

WHOOSH. The bookcase swivels around on SQUEAKY HINGES until it locks with another BOOM. Ellara scrambles up. She sees a small compartment door at eye level. She unclasps the lock and opens it. Inside is a stack of PAPERS and BOOKS, and on top, a DIARY.

A KNOCK on the door.

JULIET

Princess Ellara, are you all right.

ELLARA

Fine, fine. Leave me to my work.

FOOTSTEPS recede down the hall. Ellara picks up the diary off the top and blows the dust off the cover. She opens the diary and reads aloud.

ELLARA

"My dear Prescott gave me the idea to start this diary. I am on bedrest until I deliver my first child, so to pass the time, I am writing about my life and memories." Mother.

Ellara sits down on the nearest chair. She flips through the journal to a random page.

ELLARA

"My little Aster had her first fever today." Aster--

Ellara turns the page and scans it. She continues to flip, looking for her name.

ELLARA

Aster. Aster. Aster. Who is Aster. What about me--

Ellara turns to the last page.

ELLARA

"I am pregnant again. I am delighted for Aster to have a sibling. Prescott and I have been considering names, and if it's a boy, we'll call him Prescott. If it's a girl, we'll call her Ellara

ELLARA  
after my grandmother." An older  
sister.

Ellara looks up from the book. She struggles to process the new information.

A KNOCK on the door startles Ellara. She closes the diary and pushes it under the napkin on the table leftover from her lunch.

MERRICK  
Your Highness, it's Sir Merrick.

ELLARA  
One moment--

She closes the compartment and is at a loss on how to turn the bookcase back around. She presses the button at the bottom, but nothing happens.

MERRICK  
Princess, are you all right.

ELLARA  
I'll be with you momentarily.

Ellara looks up and sees another button hidden in the decorative trim at the top of the bookcase. She pushes the stool and stretches to reach the button. Ellara stops when she realizes that Merrick will hear the sound and will be suspicious.

Ellara steps off the stool and runs to the library door. She opens it and pokes her head out.

ELLARA  
Yes.

MERRICK  
Your Highness, is everything all right.

ELLARA  
Everything is fine. Tell me your concern, or please leave. My work is very important and I hate to be disturbed.

MERRICK  
Very well, Your Highness. I have been thinking about our discussion about my failure to help that

MERRICK  
 peasant. I want to say that I'm  
 sorry. Princess, you don't look  
 well.

ELLARA  
 I'm fine. I didn't sleep much last  
 night. Go on.

MERRICK  
 Please accept my apologies and know  
 that I am working to amend my  
 transgression.

ELLARA  
 Is there anything else.

MERRICK  
 I have some matters I need to  
 discuss with you about the  
 Independence Day Ball, but now is  
 not the right time. I think you  
 should go lie down.

ELLARA  
 I think I will. You may leave,  
 Merrick.

MERRICK  
 I shall call your servant--

ELLARA  
 No. Please go.

Merrick bows and leaves.

Ellara hurries back to the bookcase and steps on the  
 stool. She barely taps the button with her finger when  
 another BOOM sounds. The bookcase swivels back around and  
 lands with another BOOM.

Ellara pulls out the diary from underneath the napkin and  
 sandwiches it between two other books.

Juliet enters.

JULIET  
 Your Highness--

ELLARA  
 Juliet, I am going to my room. Have  
 no one disturb me.

Ellara pushes past Juliet with the books before the lady in waiting can respond.

EXT        BARN        DAY

Rhys paces in a barn. He SNEEZES, and kicks some hay in frustration. He SNEEZES again.

Finally he pulls out a small mirror from his pocket. He taps on it.

MERRICK

Report.

RHYS

Sir, she is badly injured.  
She cannot travel. I don't think  
you'll need her. I can--

MERRICK

Don't tell me who I need.  
You'll deliver the girl and the  
package as promised. If you don't,  
your father will pay.

RHYS

My father.

MERRICK

He's in prison right now. Don't  
make me make it worse.

RHYS

Why--

MERRICK

No questions. Any other news  
to report.

RHYS

No, Sir Merrick.

Merrick taps the mirror and his image disappears.

Rhys goes to the window and views the cottage with a look of decision on his face.

INT COTTAGE DAY

Aster wakes up. The cottage is bright. Aster is disoriented.

Aster looks to her right, and sees Rhys sitting next to her bed. Everything becomes clearer.

RHYS  
You're awake.

ASTER  
What happened.

RHYS  
You fell from Tago's back.  
He caught you before you hit the  
ground, but the brachtil wounded  
your shoulder.

Aster sits back.

RHYS  
How are you feeling?

ASTER  
Shoulder hurts. Everything  
hurts. We must leave.

SUZANNE (47) enters the room with a pillow.

SUZANNE  
I heard your voice. Glad you're  
up, dearie. Let's take a look at  
that shoulder.

Aster sits up. The woman removes the BANDAGES from Aster's shoulder and TISKS.

SUZANNE  
You'll need lots of healing. Lots  
of rest.

ASTER  
We need to leave.

SUZANNE  
Are you mad--

ASTER  
We're running out of time. It's  
really important.

SUZANNE

Important enough to put your life  
in danger.

RHYS

We'll talk about it, Suzanne.

SUZANNE

I surely hope so. Travelling  
indeed, with an injury like that.

As she leaves the room, Suzanne mutters under her breath.

ASTER

Rhys, I have something I need to  
tell you.

RHYS

I have something I need to tell you  
too.

ASTER

Let me go first. I had a vision  
at Belinda's house. I was in the  
woods at the pool, and I saw the  
stars align on my head in the shape  
of a crown.

RHYS

Because you're the princess.

ASTER

Yes. But there was  
something else. When I looked in  
the water, I saw an older man with  
angry eyes. It was Sir Merrick, the  
princess's advisor. He's going  
to kill Ellara at the Independence  
Day ball in two days.

RHYS

Sir Merrick--are you sure.

ASTER

I'm sure.

RHYS

So you think you need to get to the  
palace before the ball to save  
Princess Ellara.



ASTER

I saw it in the water. I know it's true in my gut. I have to go, hurt shoulder or not.

RHYS

No way.

ASTER

I can't believe you're not supporting me.

RHYS

I would if it wasn't such a dangerous idea. You need to stay here and rest.

ASTER

I don't care. I am leaving tomorrow whether you come with me or not.

RHYS

You wouldn't last two minutes out there without my help.

ASTER

I don't need you. You volunteered to come with me.

Rhys gets up and walks to the door.

RHYS

Get some rest. You'll need it.

He closes the door too hard.

Tago comes out from under the bed in the form of a WHITE FOX.

TAGO

Ta--go.

ASTER

You'll go with me, right Tago.

Tago curls up on Aster's lap and PURRS. She leans her head back but can't sleep.

EXT COTTAGE DAY

Aster is trying to put the saddlebags on Tago the HORSE with just one arm due to her injured shoulder. The saddlebags fall on the ground. They land with a soft THUMP in the dust.

Aster pulls them back up on Tago's back and awkwardly attaches them to the saddle. She mounts.

Tago NICKERS and turns his head toward the cottage.

ASTER  
Rhys isn't coming.

TAGO  
[NICKERS]

ASTER  
No, I didn't tell him.

TAGO  
[SNUFFLES]

ASTER  
I'm not going back. Let's go.

She urges Tago to go, and he trots away reluctantly.

INT COTTAGE DAY

Rhys is burrowed under blankets. He hears the sound of Tago's HOOFBEATS and sits up abruptly with a blanket still on his face.

Rhys stumbles out of bed and checks in the next room. Aster's bed is made up.

RHYS  
Aster.

He pulls on the rest of his clothes.

EXT COTTAGE DAY

Rhys comes out of the house fastening his boot.

SUZANNE  
You're sure you don't want some food for the road--

RHYS  
I've got to catch her before she gets far. Thank you for your help Suzanne.

He takes off in a run.

SUZANNE  
You're welcome.

She stands at the door and watches in worry.

INT WOODS DAY

Aster trots on Tago.

ASTER  
Hurry up Tago.

TAGO  
[SNORT]

ASTER  
We are not going back for him.

TAGO  
[NICKERS]

ASTER  
I don't care how much you like him.  
He's no friend of mine.

Tago rolls his eyes. Aster hears quiet FOOTSTEPS running through the trees. She looks back.

ASTER  
Oh no.

Rhys reaches Tago and Aster. Tago pulls up and NEIGHS happily.

RHYS  
Aster--

He stops to catch his breath. Aster waits, looking like an aloof queen.

RHYS  
I'm sorry about how I acted  
yesterday.

ASTER  
Okay.

RHYS  
Okay. An 'okay' is all I get. I  
just sprinted through the forest to  
find you after you left me.

ASTER  
I wouldn't have had to leave you if  
you had supported me.

RHYS  
You are seriously injured.

Aster dismounts from Tago.

ASTER  
It doesn't matter. My sister is in  
danger.

RHYS  
But how do you know--

ASTER  
I know. And even if you don't  
believe me, a real friend would  
support me.

RHYS  
A real friend would keep you safe.

ASTER  
You can keep me safe by coming with  
me, or you can leave. I'm going to  
the palace.

Aster turns to mount Tago, and Rhys catches her hand as she  
gets up. She looks at him in a question.

RHYS  
Then I'm coming with you.

ASTER  
Are you sure--

RHYS  
Positive. I even know a shortcut to  
get us there in time.

Rhys mounts Tago behind Aster. She urges Tago into a gallop.

EXT       WOODS       DAY

The sun shines through the trees, speckling the ground  
with shards of light.

Tago carries Aster and Rhys through the forest.

ASTER  
So what is this shortcut?

RHYS  
You'll see when we get there.

ASTER  
I don't like surprises.

RHYS  
Sorry - you're going to be surprised.

ASTER  
In a good way?

RHYS  
We're almost there.

They emerge from the trees into a clearing at the bottom of a mountain.

EXT CAVE DAY

They face a hole in the ground. Cliffs surround it in a semi-circle.

ASTER  
It's a dead end.

RHYS  
It's our shortcut.

ASTER  
The hole in the ground is our shortcut--

RHYS  
Yep.

ASTER  
How long is it?

RHYS  
Six hours.

ASTER  
Six hours in the dark--

RHYS  
It will get us there in time for the ball. Our only other option is if Tago turns into a griffin and flies us.

ASTER  
 You'd rather avoid flying. And the  
 brachtils--

RHYS  
 Safer for you, no heights for me.

Aster thinks.

A SCREECH echoes through the mountains.

ASTER  
 Brachtil.

RHYS  
 Yes.

ASTER  
 I--

Another, closer SCREECH. The sound of wings FLAPPING.

ASTER  
 The cave.

RHYS  
 You're sure.

ASTER  
 Let's go before I change my mind.

INT CAVE DAY

They enter the cave. Tago has transformed into a WHITE BEAR.

They journey through the dank cave. They go through narrow,  
 low passages, emerge into larger caverns with stalactites  
 and stalagmites, then slide through low tunnels.

INT HAUNTED CAVERN DAY

They enter an enormous cavern that stretches hundreds of  
 feet up into the mountain. Water DRIPS and rats SCURRY  
 through the labyrinthine rock.

VOICES  
 Aster.

RHYS  
 I think we're almost through--

ASTER  
Did you hear that.

RHYS  
Hear what.

ASTER  
I thought I heard-- never mind.

They continue to walk. Aster holds onto her KEY.

VOICES  
Aster.

ASTER  
Do you hear them now.

RHYS  
I can't hear--

A piercing SCREAM ECHOES through the cavern.

RHYS  
What--

Another SCREAM, followed by a dissonant chorus of SCREECHES, GROANS, and YELPS. Underneath the screams, the Voices repeat Aster's name.

VOICES  
Aster. Aster. Aster.

Rhys swings the LANTERN around. As he does so, he bumps into Tago and drops the lantern.

The fire in the lantern burns on the ground, then is slowly covered over with grey SLUDGE. The light pulses from inside the sludge, then sputters and dies.

The cave is now black, and the air explodes with a CACOPHONY of terrifying noises. Aster and Rhys hold onto each other.

ASTER  
Rhys, did you feel that.

RHYS  
Something bump against your leg--

ASTER  
Yes.

Tago GROWLS, but the Voices drown him out.

The Voices yell Aster's name in a taunting rhythm.

VOICES  
Aster / Aster / Aster.

A loud SCREAM, then the Voices begin to sing the Glaedwin's song in a discordant, jeering chorus.

VOICES  
The heir / the heir / the heir to  
Pelclair.

Aster holds onto her key as Rhys holds onto her. She taps the key frantically, but nothing happens. Aster looks at the key and realizes something. She closes her eyes and concentrates.

As she does so, the key glows faintly. Aster opens her eyes in the soft light.

The Voices falter and SCREAM in terror. Aster begins to see the cave in the key's light. She LAUGHS, and as she does so, the Voices SCREAM in one final agony as the key's light swells and amplifies.

A dark trail of shadow swirls away up into the ceiling of the cavern.

The key emits bright light but can still be seen in the middle of its luminance.

The trio walks down the hallway.

INT PALACE HALLWAY DAY

Merrick strides down the hall, flanked by staff.

CLERK 1  
The princess has approved the  
illusionist as entertainment.

CLERK 1 (35) hands Merrick a CLIPBOARD. Merrick signs it.

MERRICK  
Approved. Food.

CLERK 2(30)  
Meats: blackened salmon, dry-rubbed  
steak, goose, duck, chicken,  
venison...

Ellara approaches in the hall.



MERRICK

Ah, my owl, how were your lessons today.

ELLARA

Fine, thank you Sir Merrick.

MERRICK

Princess, I need your advice on something of national importance.

ELLARA

Go ahead.

MERRICK

We don't know whether the royal kitchens should provide goose as well as duck. As our princess, only you can decide.

ELLARA

This is your matter of national importance. Merrick, please deign to treat my time with more respect. And call me by my correct title.

Ellara sweeps away. Merrick stares after her in hatred.

INT CAVE DAY

Aster and Rhys walk through a passage in the light of the key.

RHYS

We're almost out.

ASTER

Almost out of the dark.

RHYS

Aster, I have something I need to tell you.

ASTER

Can it wait until we get outside? I don't want to stay in this cave any longer than we have to.

RHYS

No, I need to tell you this before we leave the cave. I haven't been completely honest--

ASTER

Race you!

She runs, Tago close to her side. Rhys runs after them.

RHYS

Stop-- Please!

Aster exits the cave. Rhys follows close behind.

EXT CAVE DAY

Aster runs out of the cave entrance to the light of day. She squints in the bright sunlight and her eyes adjust.

Aster GASPS as she sees the tunnel exit ringed by soldiers. Archers are stationed around the perimeter with their arrows trained on them.

Rhys catches up to Aster.

RHYS

No.

ASTER

Did you know about this--

RHYS

I--

COMMANDER TRASK

Halt!

Two SOLDIERS stand behind Aster. Four more soldiers throw ropes over Tago and flatten him to the ground. Tago ROARS in anger, his eyes electric blue.

COMMANDER TRASK

Good work, McCrae. Get the package and I'll give you a horse back to the palace.

RHYS

Sir, it is not here.

COMMANDER TRASK

Don't play games with me, boy.

Trask stares Rhys down, but Rhys does not give in.

COMMANDER TRASK

Take the package or the girl loses a finger.

One of the guards pulls up Aster's hand and puts her finger between his teeth. Aster gasps in pain since he pulls up her injured arm.

Rhys is torn, unsure if Trask will follow through.

COMMANDER TRASK

I'll give you the count of three.  
One... Two...

Rhys gives in and goes up to Aster. He takes off the necklace.

RHYS

Aster--

ASTER

Don't speak to me. How dare you.

Rhys gives the necklace to Trask.

ASTER

You have what you were looking for.  
Now let me go.

COMMANDER TRASK

I do have what I'm looking for.  
Take her.

The guards put Aster on a horse.

RHYS

Commander Trask, arresting Aster  
was not part of my orders.

COMMANDER TRASK

But they were part of mine. You can  
take it or leave it. Get on the  
horse now, boy.

Two soldiers come up to him with a horse.

Rhys hesitates. He takes the horse's reins. All of a sudden, he punches one guard in the face and knocks the other one out. As he does so, the horse rears and more soldiers attack.

Rhys tries to fight but is overpowered. He falls to the ground and soldiers kick him.

Commander Trask motions to the soldiers who hold Aster's horse, and they leave the brawl.

All of a sudden there is a SCREECH from Tago, who has become a griffin. He SCREECHES again and wrestles out of the ropes. The soldiers run away. Tago goes to Rhys and looks in the direction Aster left by. He SCREECHES in anguish -- he does not know who to help.

Rhys passes out.

INT GARDEN DAY

Ellara sits in the garden with a book. Merrick walks up to her.

MERRICK

What are you reading today, my owl?

Merrick looks over her shoulder and sees QUEEN ELODIE'S JOURNAL.

MERRICK

What's this.

ELLARA

My mother's diary.

MERRICK

A rare find.

ELLARA

It says that I have a sister. An older sister named Aster.

MERRICK

It must be a forgery. You were the only child of your parents' marriage.

ELLARA

I don't believe you. I've seen my mother's handwriting before. This is her diary.

MERRICK

Remember that I knew your mother in person. I can tell you that this is not your mother's.

ELLARA

Liar.

MERRICK

Excuse me.

ELLARA

You are a liar, Merrick. After the ball, you are finished. I'm replacing you.

MERRICK

Princess--

ELLARA

I'm tired of how you push me around and make me do what you want. You have acted like a father, but now I know that you don't care about me at all. Get out.

MERRICK

Get out. You tell me to get out. The man who raised you.

Ellara turns away. Merrick motions to his two BODYGUARDS, who approach out of Ellara's line of sight.

ELLARA

I order you as your princess. This already hurts me, Merrick. Just go.

MERRICK

I'm not going anywhere.

Ellara GASPS as two bodyguards grab her arms, and one puts his hand over her mouth to stifle her SCREAM.

MERRICK

Give me the diary.

Ellara shakes her head no.

MERRICK

Take it.

The bodyguards try to take the diary, but Ellara holds on and it sticks to her body like a barnacle.

BODYGUARD 1

We can't get it. She's holding on too tight.

The bodyguards keep pulling, but to no avail.

MERRICK

What do you mean you can't get it. She's a girl.

## BODYGUARD 2

It's like it's glued to her arms.

Merrick steps back, a look of fear and recognition on his face. He composes himself quickly, but Ellara notices his expression.

## MERRICK

Put her under guard. The princess has a terrible illness and will be unable to attend the ball tomorrow. Take her to her quarters. Now!

The guards take Ellara away. Merrick stands in the garden for a moment.

## MERRICK

Too much power in that family. It is good that she will die too.

He strides away.

INT DUNGEON CELL NIGHT

Aster sits in a dark prison cell. The moon and stars shine softly through the window above her head.

Aster picks up a BOWL of water off the table next to her and raises it to drink when the water becomes cloudy and swirls like the water did in Belinda's pond.

Belinda's image forms in the bowl.

## BELINDA

Is this thing on?

## ASTER

Belinda-- how--

## BELINDA

Never mind about me. How are you doing, my dear.

## ASTER

How do you think. I'm in prison.

## BELINDA

But you're in the castle.

## ASTER

Locked behind bars. There's no way out. I can't really be the

ASTER  
princess. If I were, I would be  
able to find a solution.

BELINDA  
You don't believe you're the  
princess-- My dear, that is  
nonsense.

ASTER  
It's not. Even if I were, I don't  
deserve to be. And I can't believe  
I trusted Rhys.

BELINDA  
I see. That's a shame.

ASTER  
That's an understatement.

BELINDA  
Especially since I already sent  
Rhys on his way to help you.

ASTER  
You what--

BELINDA  
Rhys is more trustworthy than you  
think. I'll let him explain why  
when he arrives.

ASTER  
Do you know what he did?

BELINDA  
Yes, and it's not as bad as you  
think. Listen to him. Now drink  
your water. Ta-ta!

The water swirls and Belinda's image is gone.

Aster looks in the bowl, about to drink, and sees the stars  
from her window reflected in the water.

As she looks at it, stars come out of their places in the  
sky to create a diadem around her head in the bowl's  
reflection.

Aster gasps. She puts the bowl down and looks out at the  
stars.

EXT        WOODS        NIGHT

Rhys rides Tago, a WHITE HORSE, through dark, tangled woods. Dank leaves brush Rhys's face and one sticks to his eye. He pushes it off in impatience.

                 RHYS  
                 Almost there.

They round a large tree and see one of the city gates to Ashblane. Rhys urges Tago towards it and pulls his hood tighter. A GUARD stands at the gate.

                 GUARD 1  
                 Name and occupation.

                 RHYS  
                 Derrin Bridell, palace messenger.

The guard inspects Tago. He pats the horse's nose too roughly, and Tago's eyes turn from brown to electric blue as he GROWLS deeply. The guard retreats.

                 GUARD 1  
                 Free to enter. Wait, are you--

As the guard recognizes him, Rhys rushes away.

                 RHYS  
                 Derrin Bridell. Thank you.

Rhys and Tago gallop into the city.

INT        ELLARA'S APARTMENT        NIGHT

Ellara sits next to the roaring fire in her dim, empty sitting room. QUEEN ELODIE'S DIARY lies idly on her lap as she looks into the fire.

A sharp, hard KNOCK on the door.

                 ELLARA  
                 Enter.

Merrick enters.

                 ELLARA  
                 Why are you here.

                 MERRICK  
                 I need your speech to give for the  
                 ball.



ELLARA

You may not have it. I memorized it and burned the original so I would have to practice.

Merrick spies the diary.

MERRICK

I hope your people will enjoy an absent princess who has nothing to say to her people.

ELLARA

You're the one preventing me from going to the ball.

MERRICK

It's for your own good. You've been a naughty child.

ELLARA

I'm to receive the crown in a year. I'm not a child. You have no right to keep me here.

MERRICK

On the contrary. I am your legal guardian.

ELLARA

My real parents would not treat me like you do.

MERRICK

Let me remind you who knew your parents and who did not.

Ellara stands up with the diary in hand.

ELLARA

I may not remember them, but I know them. Do not deny me my legacy.

MERRICK

A legacy bound within a book of questionable legitimacy.

Ellara sets down the diary and walks to Merrick.

ELLARA

My parents were far more than what one book could describe. Their legacy is bound into the walls of

ELLARA  
 this castle, lives in the hearts of  
 Pelclairians, and is woven into the  
 fabric of the land itself. Do not  
 disrespect them.

Merrick holds up the diary, which he snatched with magic  
 while Ellara spoke.

MERRICK  
 You are a naughty child indeed.  
 Burning your speech, and now--

ELLARA  
 No!

Merrick throws the diary into the fire. Ellara kneels and  
 looks at it helplessly.

MERRICK  
 Enjoy your solitude, Princess.

He slams the door.

Ellara watches the book burning. She steels herself and  
 sticks her hands in the fire with a short SCREAM. She pulls  
 the book out and stifles the fire with a nearby blanket.

Ellara bends over her ruined hands and cradles the book.

INT CELL DAY

The cell is dim, but a bright ray of light shines into the  
 room and illuminates the cell door. Aster uses a rusty NAIL  
 to pick the lock.

The lock CLICKS. She hears FOOTSTEPS come down the hall.  
 Aster runs to the bed and pretends to be asleep.

Someone enters the room. They approach the bed and lean over  
 Aster.

Aster opens her eyes and punches the person. She realizes  
 too late who it is.

ASTER  
 Rhys!

Rhys is on the ground.

RHYS  
 I probably deserved that.

ASTER  
I can't believe you had the  
audacity to come here.

RHYS  
Belinda sent me.

ASTER  
So you didn't want to come help  
after you betrayed me.

RHYS  
It's not that. I did, but I didn't  
think you'd accept me.

ASTER  
You're right. Get out.

RHYS  
Just let me explain my side of the  
story.

Aster pushes him towards the door.

ASTER  
I don't want to see your face ever  
again.

Rhys turns around and stops her.

RHYS  
Listen to me--

Aster executes the same self defense move she taught her  
class and lands Rhys on the floor.

FOOTSTEPS sound down the corridor.

ASTER  
The guard. Get under the bed.

Rhys hides under the bed and Aster arranges her blanket so  
it covers him up.

GUARD 2 (30) walks slowly past the cell. He looks at Aster,  
who stares back innocently. The guard moves on. His  
FOOTSTEPS ECHO through the hall.

Rhys pulls Aster down to the ground so she faces him.

ASTER  
Oof. Stop it.

RHYS

Listen. I work for the palace. They sent me to your village to get you. I didn't know they were going to kill your father and try to kill you. All I was told was that I needed to get you to the palace for national security.

ASTER

My father--

RHYS

When I figured out that Merrick had killed your father, I didn't know what to do. But I have always been told to put my duty to my country before anything else, and it made the most sense to follow the rules.

ASTER

The rules! You let my father die.

RHYS

I didn't--

Aster gets up. She can't stand to be near him.

ASTER

You saved me because you knew I was valuable and you let my father die so I would go with you.

Rhys stands.

RHYS

That's not true.

ASTER

I can't believe I trusted you. And you've known that I'm the princess the whole time.

RHYS

I didn't know -- not until Belinda said so. Then I realized why I was escorting you and I started second-guessing myself.

ASTER

Not enough to change.

RHYS

Wrong. When you were injured by the brachtil, I tried to get them to call off the mission. I realized they were going to stop at nothing to kill you.

ASTER

Kill me. Of course you knew they were going to kill me.

RHYS

You aren't listening. I didn't know who you were or why I was taking you. I didn't know anything until it was too late. I--

Rhys stops himself as he realizes he cares for Aster. Aster misinterprets his pause.

ASTER

You what. You're sorry -- if that's the case you can keep on feeling sorry. I'm done with you. Out.

Rhys walks to the door.

RHYS

He wants to be king.

ASTER

Who.

RHYS

Merrick. He's going to kill you and Ellara because he wants to be king.

ASTER

How could you know that.

RHYS

Belinda told me. And she told me that she would tell you to listen to me.

Aster hesitates and remembers Belinda's words.

ASTER

Goodbye Rhys.

Rhys leaves the cell. Aster puts her head in her hands in regret. After a moment, she pulls herself together.

INT PALACE CORRIDOR SUNSET

Aster sneaks through the corridor.

Aster stops when she hears FOOTSTEPS approach. She hides and waits for a squad of soldiers to pass by.

She walks farther down the hall. Aster reaches a courtyard, but hides again as she hears MERRICK'S VOICE. Merrick walks down the hall with a CLERK.

MERRICK

...and you're certain the musicians  
are in place.

CLERK

Yes, Sir Merrick.

MERRICK

Very well. Tell everyone that the  
ball will begin in six minutes on  
the dot.

Merrick and his clerk walk away.

Aster runs past the courtyard and down the hall. She hides behind a corner. She sees the entrance to the Great Hall. She knows that Ellara must be there.

After checking to see if the coast is clear, Aster ventures out around the corner. A HOUSEKEEPER (55) appears behind her.

HOUSEKEEPER

You, get back in the kitchen where  
you belong.

Aster is pulled into a doorway. The door is shut.

INT KITCHEN SUNSET

Aster finds herself in the palace kitchens.

HOUSEKEEPER

Get your uniform on, girl. You're  
severely late.

Housekeeper takes Aster by the ear with a grip like steel and pulls her down the hall.

ASTER

Let go of me.

Aster executes a self-defense move and escapes the housekeeper's hold.

Aster runs down the kitchen hall.

HOUSEKEEPER  
Stop that girl!

A COOK bars the door to the hallway. Aster runs through the kitchen and dodges COOKS, stoves and moving carts.

A FIRE from a stove spouts up in front of her. Aster turns and runs, evading obstacles until she bursts out the door and back into the palace corridor.

INT PALACE CORRIDOR SUNSET

As Aster stumbles into the hall, she bumps into a large velvet mass. With a start she realizes she has collided with Merrick.

The housekeeper runs out of the kitchen with a loud BELLOW.

HOUSEKEEPER  
Get that girl-- Sir Merrick. I apologize for her impertinence.

MERRICK  
Do not trouble yourself, Housekeeper. I will speak to the girl and make sure she understands the error of her ways.

HOUSEKEEPER  
Sir Merrick, the banquet--

MERRICK  
I insist. You must continue with your preparations.

The housekeeper curtsies and leaves.

MERRICK  
Take her.

MERRICK'S GUARDS manhandle a squirming Aster into a bare stone room off of the hall.

INT PALACE ROOM SUNSET

Aster wrestles free of the guard's grip around her arm. She punches him in the face and is about to get free when the other guard holding her wounded arm pulls up, re-injuring her shoulder.

Aster CRIES OUT in pain. Another guard knees her in the stomach. Aster doubles over and kneels on the ground. She holds her shoulder in silent agony.

MERRICK

We meet again. You probably don't remember me. You were a child when we last saw each other. You were supposed to die with your parents, but that mistake will shortly be remedied.

ASTER

You--

MERRICK

Ah-ah, no naughty words from you, Princess. I don't have enough time to hear your accusations.

ASTER

You were the one. You killed my parents--

MERRICK

I said no accusations. Whining seems to run in the family.

ASTER

My sister.

MERRICK

Sweet little thing, but I've grown tired of her. She's a disposable commodity.

ASTER

You're a monster.

MERRICK

Not compared to the darkness I work for, Princess.

ASTER

You admit to me what you have done and you call me Princess. Why.



MERRICK

I thought it might be comforting  
for you to hear your true title  
once in your life before you die,  
which will in fact be very soon.

ASTER

Your threats do not frighten me.

MERRICK

But I know what does.

Merrick reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pinch of  
matte black DUST. He places his fingers next to his mouth,  
breathes in, and softly blows the dust. It expands into a  
black dimness and settles over the whole room.

Aster recoils tighter into herself, but steels her nerves.  
If she could handle the cave, she could handle this  
darkness.

ASTER

I don't understand why you killed  
my parents.

MERRICK

They were pathetic rulers, and you  
and your sister would be the same.  
Ruling is about power, control. I  
have ruled this country for the  
last sixteen years, and I'm tired  
of living in the shadows. It's time  
for me to have my glory.

Aster notices her KEY around Merrick's neck.

ASTER

And what does your glory entail?

MERRICK

Fame all over the kingdom. I saved  
their princess years ago, but they  
will soon find out that she is out  
of her mind and murderous. She will  
die. You will die. I will rule.

Aster puts her head in her hands.

MERRICK

Look at me when I'm speaking to  
you.

Merrick leans over and tries to push Aster back to face him, but she surprises him. She grabs his shoulder in one hand and the key in the other, and she uses his momentum to force him to roll over her and land on his back on the floor. Midair, Aster pulls the key off his neck. Merrick GROANS and gets up.

Aster stuffs the key in her pocket right before the guards restrain her. They force her on her knees.

MERRICK

Congratulations, Princess. You've just signed your death sentence. This will teach you to assault a royal official.

Merrick reaches in his robe and pulls out a small, slimy beetle-like KROID. It wriggles loathsomely.

MERRICK

But some fun first.

He moves his hand across the air like a paintbrush, and a VEIL OF SHADOW appears. He shoves it toward Aster. It attacks her face and ties itself around her eyes.

MERRICK

Where to put it. Your back will do nicely.

Merrick sets the kroid on Aster's back. She GASPS.

MERRICK

Yes, those bites do hurt. You'd best hurry Princess. Once this kroid finds your lips and eats through them, it will force you to swallow it. Then you will spend the next two weeks in agony as it eats you from the inside out.

Merrick motions to the guards, who file out of the room. He walks to the door. Aster WHIMPERS.

MERRICK

Pathetic.

He SHUTS the door. At the sound, Aster pulls at the blindfold. It won't budge. It's as if it is sewn to her face.

Aster GASPS in pain. The kroid has bitten right below her shoulder blade. It moves toward her hurt shoulder.

ASTER

Key.

She pulls out the key and aims it behind her back.

ASTER

Kill it.

The key fires a spurt of light at her back. It misses the kroid, which darts out of the way up towards her neck.

The kroid bites her back near her spine, closer to her injury. Aster CRIES OUT. She re-aims the key.

ASTER

Come on, Key. Kill it.

The key fires again. The kroid scuttles, this time to Aster's shoulder. It bites through the bandages.

Aster SCREAMS. The kroid leaves her shoulder. Aster closes her mouth just in time. The kroid lands on her lips and bites her.

A violent shudder like a peal of thunder goes through Aster. She aims her key with shaking hands. A burst of light hits the kroid. It disintegrates.

Aster's lips and back are bloody and bruised. She collapses from exhaustion.

ASTER

No more.

Aster sets down the key.

For a moment, the chamber is silent but for Aster's soft breathing.

The key lifts itself off the ground and touches Aster's eye. A soft pulse of light emanates from the key and bathes Aster's face with a VEIL OF LIGHT. The blindfold disintegrates from Aster's face, and she brushes black dust off her eyes.

Aster is surprised to see the key float in front of her.

ASTER

Key--

She stops when the key touches her lips, and a PULSE of light heals them. Aster sits up. The key goes around to her back and heals the two bites with two more PULSES.

The key then rests on her shoulder. The key PULSES three times, and Aster watches with wonder as her shoulder is healed completely. Aster moves her shoulder and it feels like new.

ASTER

Thank you. But I can't get out of this room. Ellara is going to die. My best friend betrayed me just like my parents' best friend betrayed them. A traitor is going to rule Pelclair and ruin it. I can't handle this pressure anymore. It's hopeless, Key.

The key stares at Aster for a moment.

SINGING VOICES

The heir / the heir / the heir to Pelclair.

As the Singing Voices begin to build, the key turns so its point faces the ceiling. Out of the key pop balls of liquid gold filled with millions of golden sparks. The balls shoot into the dimness of the ceiling. The shadow hangs like thick clouds in the ceiling recesses. The balls explode like fireworks, but the sparks settle into millions of tiny stars.

Aster looks up in wonder at a three-dimensional sky in the ceiling. She gasps as she arises and walks around. She reaches up and touches a star. She pulls it down and it is like a diamond.

Aster looks at the key, which floats near her face. It moves to her chest over her heart, and then rises up to the sky.

ASTER

My heart seeks the stars.

The key lays itself in her hand. She looks at it and a WORD appears on the delicate shank.

ASTER

Princess.

Aster closes her hand around the key, a new sense of purpose ablaze within her.

INT        THRONE ROOM        NIGHT

Merrick stands on the dais in front of the two empty thrones. Large, cathedral-esque windows line the ceiling and reveal a cloudy black sky.

MERRICK  
Greetings, men and women of  
Pelclair, and welcome to the Annual  
Pelclairian Independence Day Ball.

The crowd APPLAUDS.

INT        HALLWAY OUTSIDE THRONE ROOM        NIGHT

Meanwhile, Aster creeps through the hall up to the door. MUTED APPLAUSE seeps through the walls. She tucks her KEY necklace into her shirt.

She stops at the two enormous doors of carved wood. She listens through the crack.

INT        THRONE ROOM        NIGHT

MERRICK  
I am sure you are all wondering  
where the Princess Ellara is.  
Unfortunately, she is very ill and  
cannot leave her bed.

INT        HALLWAY OUTSIDE THRONE ROOM        NIGHT

Aster GASPS when she realizes Ellara's absence. Merrick's muted tones continue to come through the crack.

MERRICK (OFFSTAGE)  
We are all deeply saddened by her  
absence. However, I will say a  
speech in her stead.

Aster takes a deep breath and pushes the doors open.

INT        THRONE ROOM        NIGHT

The CROWD turns as one when they hear the WHOOSH and CRACK of the doors behind them.

Merrick is speechless for a moment, but regains his tongue.

MERRICK  
Who dares disturb the royal ball.

ASTER  
Royalty. Sir Merrick, you are a  
traitor.

The crowd MURMURS at the libel. Aster walks forward and the crowd parts like the Red Sea.

MERRICK  
A pretty trick, but you have no  
evidence or standing.

ASTER  
I have every possible standing. I  
am the eldest daughter of King  
Prescott and Queen Elodie of  
Pelclair, heir to the throne.

The crowd GASPS.

VOICE IN THE CROWD  
Treason.

ASTER  
It is not I who have committed  
treason. Sir Merrick killed my  
parents and took over Pelclair. I  
have been in hiding with my  
adoptive father, Basir.

MERRICK  
A laughable set of lies, and worth  
your death. Guards, seize her.

MCCRAE  
Stop!

Everyone looks over to the side of the throne room. McCrae, with a white mouse (Tago) on his shoulder, walks through the crowd to the dais.

MCCRAE  
This woman tells the truth. She is  
the natural born daughter of the  
late King and Queen. I know because  
I was on the squadron that killed  
them.

The crowd gasps. Some step farther away from McCrae.

MCCRAE  
We were under secret orders from  
Sir Merrick. We did not know our  
treasonous objective until the

MCCRAE

mission was underway. I was sent to capture the guard who had escaped with the eldest Princess, Aster. When I saw him, I realized it was my friend Basir, and I could not kill him or a child, no matter my orders. When Sir Merrick found out my deception a few days ago, he threw me in the dungeon to silence and punish me. I have wounds to testify.

Merrick CLAPS in condescension.

MERRICK

A well-crafted tale. Yes, this man belongs in the dungeons, but it is because he is mad, not because he he is a traitor. Now, however, his fate is a different story. This girl will join him in the traitor's gate very soon. Guards, restrain them both so they will not harm our guests.

A door slams open with a BANG. Princess Ellara appears with Rhys behind her. She walks erectly like a princess, but her hands are bandaged. The crowd GASPS and bows. Ellara walks through the crowd.

Aster watches Rhys. She is stunned that he rescued her sister. They make eye contact briefly. Aster looks at Ellara.

Aster and Ellara make eye contact. Ellara stops as time seems to stand still. In the midst of the bowing crowd, the two girls realize innately their shared sisterhood. Tears come to their eyes as they smile.

Ellara walks more quickly and reaches the dais. Rhys stands in the crowd, and no one notices him. Merrick bows stiffly and blocks Ellara from reaching Aster.

MERRICK

My Princess. I am astonished to see you well and walking.

ELLARA

Please move Sir Merrick. I want to see my sister.

Merrick puts his hand on Ellara's forehead to test her temperature as she again attempts to push past him. Aster struggles to get out of the iron grip of the guards, but to no avail.

MERRICK

The child is sick out of her mind with fever. She's delusional.

ELLARA

Stop patronizing me. Aster is my sister. It says here in my mother's diary.

Ellara holds the diary for all to see. Merrick's face goes white as he realizes he has lost control of the situation.

MERRICK

But my owl, why would you believe this girl is your sister? If your sister ever existed, she would have died with your parents.

ELLARA

She is my sister. I know it in my heart.

MERRICK

A heart is all very well, but proof is better. Now you must sit down and rest yourself, Princess.

Merrick pushes Ellara to a chair, but she resists.

Aster fights against her guards, again to no avail.

ASTER

Ellara!

Merrick struggles with Ellara. Rhys rushes up to help, but before he can, Merrick staggers back with a GROAN. BLOOD drips down his pants and a DAGGER sticks out of his side. Merrick falls on the ground.

ELLARA

What--

MERRICK

Arrest her.

Two guards restrain Ellara.



ELLARA  
 Stop. I didn't do anything. Release  
 your princess.

The guards ignore her. Merrick's bodyguard comes up to help  
 him.

ASTER  
 This makes no sense.

MERRICK  
 The princess is mad.

ASTER  
 No. Princess Ellara's hands are  
 bandaged. There is no way the  
 Princess could pull out a hidden  
 dagger and use enough force to stab  
 anyone when she can barely use her  
 hands.

MERRICK  
 That is preposterous. Do you see  
 the blood spilling out of me?

ASTER  
 You framed Princess Ellara.

ELLARA  
 I think you wanted to lock me away  
 so you could be king.

Merrick recoils on the ground.

MERRICK  
 This is madness. You are all mad.  
 Treason!

ASTER  
 Treason is murdering a sovereign  
 and betraying one's country. You  
 are the traitor, Merrick.

A change occurs in Merrick's face. He LAUGHS: a slow,  
 sickly, cackling laugh that builds. In echoing response, the  
 GROANS of the Voices of the cave begin softly and grow  
 louder. More GROANS, YELPS, and SCREECHES sound.

Rhys edges through the crowd towards Aster.

The crowd shrinks back in fear as darkness slowly seeps into  
 the room. It fills the ceiling and crawls towards the floor.

ASTER  
Stop it, Merrick.

But Merrick continues to LAUGH and the Voices' groans turn into JEERS. The SOUND SOARS in dissonant, cringe-inducing pitches.

Rhys has almost reached Aster.

Merrick stops laughing. The Voices die down into a LOW MURMUR.

MERRICK  
A traitor. Yes, that is what I am.

The Voices echo him like a congregation agreeing with an 'Amen.'

ASTER  
You have lost. No one believes you anymore.

MERRICK  
But you see, I have won. I have tried to win the people's respect for years, but fear is the only way to command respect.

ASTER  
You're wrong.

MERRICK  
Try running a country for sixteen years. But you will never know because my rule is only beginning and your life is about to end.

Merrick rises off the ground. Black roots dig into the floor of the throne room and wrap around him. They grow up until Merrick stands in the middle of a black, burned TREE. He LAUGHS and the Voices LAUGH with him.

Rhys reaches Aster and comes up behind her. He finds pressure points in the necks of Aster's guard and the guard falls. Rhys catches him and lays him silently on the ground.

ASTER  
Rhys--

RHYS  
Open the Glaedwin. It's the only way to stop him.

ASTER

Thank you -- for everything.

She impulsively kisses him on the cheek. Aster looks at Ellara, who mouths the word 'Go.' Aster heads to the dais, where the Glaedwin rests between the two thrones.

VOICES

She escapesss--

MERRICK

Not so fast, my little princess.

Merrick makes one of his tree branches magically extend to grab Aster and hoist her in the air. Aster tries to get free, but the sharp, burned bark scrapes her skin.

Ellara runs to the tree.

ELLARA

Stop it, Merrick!

A tree branch whips out of nowhere and hits Ellara on the head. It knocks her unconscious.

Meanwhile, Rhys runs up to the tree and climbs. Merrick moves the branch that holds Aster so she faces him.

MERRICK

You will die first, a death that should have occurred seventeen years ago.

Aster spits in Merrick's face. Merrick ROARS with rage, and the Voices ROAR with him.

RHYS

Let her go!

Rhys stands on a large branch. It is so big that it cannot bend itself to reach Rhys.

Rhys distracts Merrick's attention. Merrick turns with a GROWL and pulls his hand up. A branch grows on the tree and snatches Rhys.

TAGO

[SQUAWK]

Tago in the form of a GRIFFIN with blue eyes blazing flies to Aster. He BURPS and a flash of white light zings and hits the branch that holds Aster. The branch withers to its base. Aster falls but Tago catches her.

Rhys cuts the branch off of himself. Merrick turns and sees Tago catch Aster and fly towards the dais. Merrick forms a black swirling ball of magic and aims it at Aster, then hears Rhys's YELL. Rhys raises his sword and attacks Merrick. They fight, magic against sword.

Tago flies Aster to the dais. Aster hugs Tago and runs to the Glaedwin. She pulls out her key. It's time. All of a sudden, Rhys YELLS in pain.

In a fatal moment of indecision, Aster turns back at Rhys's yell. Merrick has stabbed Rhys with a tree branch. Rhys kneels in pain on the wide branch. Another branch stabs him and Rhys YELLS.

Aster looks at the Glaedwin, then back at Rhys. Merrick forms a ball of black energy. Rhys looks up and sees it. Merrick aims for Aster.

Aster looks back at the Glaedwin. Suddenly, Aster turns and shoots a blast of white light out of her key to the heart of Merrick's tree. At the same time, Merrick shoots the ball of black energy.

RHYS

No!

Rhys jumps in front of the ball of energy, absorbing its killing force into his chest. He falls. Tago lands under Rhys on the ground and catches his fall. Rhys rolls down Tago's wing to the ground.

ASTER

Rhys!

A deep pain washes over Aster like liquid lead. Her whole body sinks with the weight as a stone in water.

She looks and sees Merrick's tree shrivel up into black dust. A writhing under his velvet cloak, then stillness. The cloak deflates. The Voices SCREAM in the agony of final death.

Rhys lays on the ground. He barely breathes.

Aster looks at him in anguish. She sees McCrae at Rhys's side. She sees Ellara blinking unsteadily, huddled on the ground. She sees the people in the room, who quake in the corners of the throne room with fear.

ASTER

No more.

Aster inserts the key. She turns it and opens the lid. She looks inside.

Nothing happens. Aster looks inside the box. Ordinary wood.

ASTER

No.

She presses the key to her heart, then turns and runs to Rhys. She kneels at his side. Aster looks up at McCrae, who shakes his head.

ASTER

Wake up.

RHYS

I'm here.

ASTER

I'm sorry, Rhys. I tried, but the magic doesn't work. I'm not the princess.

RHYS

You are.

Rhys finds her hand and squeezes it. He breathes out his dying breath. Aster puts her head on his chest in grief.

As Rhys dies, light from the Glaedwin falls into the room like fog, fog that illuminates rather than obscures. It bubbles down the steps of the dais to Rhys and the rest of the throne room.

Aster jerks when she feels the light wash over them. It covers Rhys and soaks into him. He turns golden. Patterns of light eddy and flow across his body.

Rhys BREATHES. He and Aster smile at each other in joy and embrace.

Meanwhile, the whole castle fills with a full, warm incandescence. The light flows up the walls through the windows. Everything is covered with a shimmery golden veneer.

Outside the windows, the clouds roll away and the stars shine in jubilation.

SINGING VOICES

The heir / the heir / the heir to  
Pelclair...

ASTER

Look. The stars are singing.

Aster and Rhys stand and Ellara, Tago and McCrae join them. The whole crowd sings in harmony as they look toward the stars.

INT            OUTDOOR COLONNADE            EVENING

Aster runs down the colonnade and LAUGHS. She looks back. Rhys runs after her, a look of pure joy on his face. Aster waves a colorful VEIL above her head.

EXT            PALACE COURTYARD            EVENING

Ellara teaches a group of children in the garden. Belinda looks on.

ELLARA

And this one is called Crocus  
Savitus. It is known for its  
luminescent petals in the spring.

Tago runs up to the group of children as a FOX.

BELINDA

Tago, we are learning about the  
myth of the griffin and the crocus.  
Go on.

Tago transforms into a white griffin. The children climb all over him with SQUEALS of joy.

Aster and Rhys run down the colonnade into the garden. They LAUGH and catch their breath. Rhys sees Tago.

ASTER

Come on.

RHYS

Not the griffin again.

Aster goes up to Ellara, who watches the children play. Aster takes the veil out from behind her back and gives it to Ellara, who is thrilled.

ELLARA

You're weaving again.

ASTER

I missed it. But I've missed you my  
whole life.

They hug.

RHYS

Aster, are you going to ride this  
albino shapeshifter or not.

ASTER

He doesn't mean it, Tago.

Aster gets on Tago, whom Rhys has already mounted. Tago  
takes off.

EXT SKY NIGHT

Tago sweeps and soars across Pelclair. Rhys holds onto  
Aster, who looks at the brightly twinkling stars above her  
in rapture. She looks at her kingdom and knows that all is  
right with the world.

THE END

FADE OUT

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