

Where the Sidewalk Ends

by
Tasha Huo

Inspired by the poem by Shel Silverstein

Pete Letz
Cousin Pete Productions and Management
pete@cousinpeteproductions.com
323.301.3367

FADE IN:

EXT. TRAIN STATION - NIGHT

A spotlight on an otherwise pitch-dark ground. It takes a moment to realize it's a PROJECTION of a clock face. But there's something off about it. ...It's ticking backwards.

THE HIGH-PITCHED MOAN OF A TRAIN APPROACHES. We sense it deep beyond the fog, coming on like a stalking monster.

Snow falls like gentle ash.

There on the platform, bundled like a snowman in a pink parka and Hawaiian board shorts is little VERA SOLA (12). Her hood points down at the clock face projection. She barely notices the train pull to a stop behind her.

The TRAIN'S WHISTLE PEEEEAAALLLLLLSSSSSS...then turns into the sound of SCREECHING TIRES, CRUSHING METAL. A WOMAN SCREAMS!

Vera's little body jolts at a tap on the train window. The sounds were just in her head.

Inside, a haunting OLD MAN stares out at her. He taps again and nods for her to come inside.

She pulls her over-sized backpack on and climbs up.

INT. TRAIN - CONTINUOUS

Vera, pink hood still hiding her face, shuffles her way down the aisle. Clumps of snow melt off and plop on the carpet.

Her hood eyes the Old Man before she chooses a window seat.

The train tugs onward.

OLD MAN

Cold out.

(pause)

Like it'll never be warm again.

Vera's hood turns, hearing him. It stares back out the window. Her little finger draws a frowny face in the condensation on the glass.

CUT TO:

INT. SOLA HOUSE - YESTERDAY AFTERNOON

Everyone is dressed in black. The mood is somber.

Through the crowd of people eating cake, into an EMPTY ROOM but for a large refrigerator box. The room is half-packed up in boxes, a few remnants of its former life lingering here and there.

UNCLE MIFFLIN (O.S.)
Have you seen Vera? Vera?

MIFFLIN (58) peeks into the room, but something about the refrigerator box strikes him. He approaches it to find Vera lying inside like a sleeping corpse, wearing a black cape.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
(sighs)
Vera. Get up.

Vera opens her eyes and looks at him, but doesn't budge.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
What are you doing?

Vera shrugs.

VERA SOLA
What am I supposed to be doing?

Mifflin sighs.

WOMAN IN BLACK
Mifflin?

Mifflin meets the WOMAN at the door. She shakes his hand and gives him a little hug.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Thank you for coming.

WOMAN IN BLACK
It was a nice service.

Vera jolts up straight in her box.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Thank you.

VERA SOLA
How was it nice?

UNCLE MIFFLIN
(warning)
Vera.

VERA SOLA
There was nothing nice about it!

She leaps out of her box. She pushes past Mifflin and the Woman and stops in the middle of the room of cake-eaters.

VERA SOLA
(superhero villain voice)
Your days are numbered too! And
some day, you're all going to pay!

She stalks off, cape trailing behind her.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
(chuckles nervously)
She has a flare for the dramatic.

A man in a suit more fitting for the 19th century watches from the corner. He's not eating cake.

We may notice a gold pin on his lapel with an EMBLEM OF A CITY ON THE EDGE OF A WATERFALL. We'll meet this man later as AUGUSTINE.

AUGUSTINE
Just like her father.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Vera disembarks the train; slogs through the snow towards a lone Victorian home.

INT. EXECUTOR'S OFFICE - YESTERDAY AFTERNOON

Vera, black cape still attached, is led beneath two impressive columns, carved as large oak trees culminating at a frontal piece representing a DARK, THICK FOREST. It looms over Vera, frightening her as she enters.

The room itself is no less intimidating. Victorian in style, gargoyles watch from the corners and Renaissance paintings of mythic heroes adorn the papered walls. A large grandfather clock TICKS conspicuously.

But more imposing than all of this, is the man looking out the latticed floor-to-ceiling window. His thin, frail body all clad in black. As he turns...

INT. SOLA HOUSE - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Vera closes the front door behind her and stands still, listening quietly and hearing nothing. She sees a stack of books and ungraded papers. They must be Mifflin's.

She walks right up to them. Then shakes like a wet dog. Snow splats across the pages and books. Damaging them instantly.

She takes off her parka and hangs it on the hook right above the books. The wet coat drips directly onto their covers.

Satisfied, she slinks up the stairs.

INT. EXECUTOR'S OFFICE - YESTERDAY AFTERNOON

The wiry man turns, showing us the gaunt, pallid face of MR. RADIX. It startles Vera, but Mifflin pushes her closer.

UNCLE MIFFLIN

Mr. Radix is going to talk to you
about your parents' will, Vera.

MR. RADIX

More about you, actually.

VERA SOLA

(clinging to Mifflin)

Mr. Radix is a funny name.

Beat. Blank stare.

MR. RADIX

The shameless honesty of children
is neither cute nor cuddly to me,
Miss Sola. Nor is your cherub face
endearing or encouraging.

At that, he glances at Mifflin, who shifts nervously.

UNCLE MIFFLIN

Maybe we should...

But Radix is one step ahead. He pulls an old weather-worn envelope from behind his back, as if he had it in his hand all this time.

MR. RADIX

It was your parents' particular
wish that you were given this the
day of their funeral.

He doesn't hand it over. Doesn't move.

MR. RADIX

Mifflin. There is tea brewing in the parlor. Would you mind?

UNCLE MIFFLIN

Uh...you know, I think --

MR. RADIX

The tea, Mifflin, thank you.

Mifflin grits back words, but doesn't want to cause a scene in front of Vera. Reluctantly, he leaves her alone with him.

Vera's eyes follow Mifflin out. When she turns back around, Mr. Radix has crossed half the room. He's right in front of her now. She GASPS.

MR. RADIX

Yes. You'd do well to be afraid, Miss Sola. This is going to be exceedingly difficult, and you should not mistake yourself.

His shadow casts upon her face. Yes, she is scared.

MR. RADIX

Good.

He hands her the envelope.

VERA SOLA

(chokes on her own voice)

Is this... Is this all... all that's left?

MR. RADIX

It's more than you think. In fact, it's everything.

Vera looks at the plain envelope. All that's left of her parents. It's so simple, it mocks her. Tears of anger build.

BACK TO THE PRESENT:

INT. SOLA HOUSE - NIGHT

Vera passes a half-open door, then stops at the sound of CRYING. She peeks in to see...

Mifflin, quietly weeping on the edge of the bed. He holds a woman's necklace. It's a moment before he notices Vera and wipes his face.

UNCLE MIFFLIN

You're home. I didn't hear -- You want dinner?

He hops up and replaces the necklace in a jewelry box.

UNCLE MIFFLIN

You look positively glacial. I'll make you some chamomile. Before you start sneezing. Go put your stuff away.

He walks out, but not before kissing her on the head.

Vera hasn't taken her eyes from the jewelry box. With Mifflin gone, she goes straight to it and pulls out the necklace he'd been holding.

It's a simple gold chain with a locket. Vera doesn't think anything of the embossed image of A CITY AT THE EDGE OF A WATERFALL on the front. Instead, she just opens it to the picture of her dad, DANNY, kissing her mother, MIRANDA, on the cheek as she closes her eyes in girlish glee.

Vera shoves the necklace in her pocket.

EXT. UNIVERSITY - NEXT DAY

Vera's black cape trails behind her.

She walks with Mifflin, who carries his waterlogged books and papers. Their hands at their sides are close. That they're not holding hands is noticeable; Vera's statement.

They stop at a ROUND WOODEN DOOR placed seemingly at random in the middle of a long stone wall with no end in sight. At their approach, the door creaks open on its decorative iron hinges in the curious shape of vines.

The PORTER, a small elfish man, peeks his head around the edge of the door.

PORTER

Professor Mifflin!

UNCLE MIFFLIN

Godwin.

PORTER

Mail, Professor! Your mail has been left here!

The little man flits back into the porter's booth as Mifflin gently encourages Vera through the door. She resists his touch like the teen-to-be she is.

INT. PORTER'S BOOTH - DAY

The Porter rummages through mail slots.

PORTER

I know you've been on grieve leave, Professor. By Benvolio, I know! But you have a cohort a plenty at this university to collect your mail for you. I don't understand it, don't choose to ever will, how you professors get anything done and mold young brains when your own heads are missing whole chunks. Gone!

He turns -- stops, mail overflowing from his arms' embrace.

PORTER

You have a child with you, Professor.

UNCLE MIFFLIN

Is all of that mine?

PORTER

Of course! And the Professors Sola. The world did not seem to get the memo of their --

UNCLE MIFFLIN

Thank you, Godwin.

He's still staring at Vera over the pile of mail.

UNCLE MIFFLIN

Uh, this is Vera. My sister's daughter. Vera, say hello to Mr. Godwin.

She doesn't. The Porter gives her a dirty, distrustful look.

PORTER

Professor Miranda Sola was a gorgeous, exceedingly interesting and special woman. Are you?

VERA SOLA

I'm only twelve.

PORTER
(to Mifflin)
Where'd she learn that excuse?

Mifflin shrugs.

The Porter dumps the mail into Mifflin's arms.

PORTER
Professor, beware the mail!

And with that, he shuts himself back in his booth.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
C'mon.

A cluster of mail falls. Vera picks it up and carries it.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Thank you.

They walk together around a vibrant green quad of manicured lawn with a sign that says boldly DON'T TOUCH ME!

INT. MIRANDA AND DANNY SOLA'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Mifflin and Vera walk in with empty boxes. It's less an office and more of a U-store of all things exotic and mysterious. Tribal statues, ancient urns, taxidermy of exotic beasts.

The ARTWORK might be the most odd, though - styles range from Titian to M.C. Esher. From artists we've seen before, to complete originals, some with the paint still wet.

Mifflin takes Vera's boxes.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Why don't you go...

She looks up at him. Tears in her eyes.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
I mean, you don't have to help me do this. Go relax somewhere. You remember how to find the library?

Vera walks out. But then stops and turns back...

VERA SOLA
Second star on the right. Then straight on 'til morning.

Mifflin smiles. A shared memory there.

EXT. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY - DAY

Vera stops at the gravel walk leading to the Gothic library.

DANNY SOLA (V.O.)
You can almost smell the books from
here.

Vera looks up to see her dad, DANNY SOLA, standing right
beside her, holding her hand.

DANNY SOLA
Incredible, isn't it? A library is
nothing but a vault of dreams. And
what dreams may come! It's like
Neverland! That sign should say,
"Second star on the right. Then
straight on 'til morning!" C'mon!

He pulls Vera towards the library. But like a soul being
tugged from her body, "Memory Vera" gets pulled along
instead. And our Vera is left standing as before, watching
the MEMORY of her and her dad running for the Library.

Vera looks at the SIGN her dad meant.

It just says LIBRARY and has a WHITE ARROW pointing...

Wait.

The WHITE ARROW doesn't point to the library at all like it
should. It points in the opposite direction.

Curious, Vera follows the arrow. It leads her down another
gravel walkway that simply ends at a sign: UNTAMED GARDEN.
The overgrown flower bed is taller than Vera.

Apparently a fool's errand, she turns to head back. But
something stops her...

...because as she turned away, the white flowers in the
garden seemed to be in a shape. She looks again, and sure
enough. At a certain breeze-blown angle, the flowers form a
large white arrow pointing ahead.

Vera debates whether to follow it when a RED SHOE falls on
her head. She picks it up. It's a child's shoe. What the --

UNCLE MIFFLIN (O.S.)
Vera?

Uncle Mifflin comes up at a fast clip. Tries not to seem worried as he takes her hand.

VERA SOLA
Uncle Mifflin. Something...

She's not quite sure how to explain it all.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Let's go. I'm done for the day.
Let's go home.

Mifflin takes her quickly away from the garden.

Somewhere in the garden, someone or thing watches them go.

Vera secrets the RED SHOE away in her pocket.

INT. SOLA HOUSE. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Dinner is set. It's a preposterously tall stack of pancakes. A punch bowl full of eggs sits next to it. A platter of bacon.

Vera, still in her cape, rests her chin on the table and just stares at her cup. It's one of those homemade plastic cups with a soggy picture of her and her parents on the inside.

Mifflin eats just to eat. The only sound comes from the TICKING CLOCK on the wall. Vera looks up at it.

VERA SOLA
You put the batteries back in.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Vera, why are you still wearing that? Aren't you too old for that kinda thing?

He means her superhero cape.

VERA SOLA
It's not supposed to have batteries.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
It's a clock. It's supposed to tick. It marks time. Time passes.

Vera glares at him.

VERA SOLA
That's why Dad took out the
batteries.

Mifflin sighs. Looks at the clock too. Debates whether to
appease her and remove the batteries.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Eat your food.

VERA SOLA
Me and what army?

UNCLE MIFFLIN
I thought children were supposed to
be hungry. Especially ones who
haven't eaten in three days.

VERA SOLA
Hot dogs and cheese are food.

He starts eating faster as his anger builds.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Please eat.

VERA SOLA
I'm not hungry.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
What is this, the Hunger Artist?
You want to perish away and die, is
that it? Is this your great
statement? You want to join your
parents? You think that makes
things stop hurting? You know
nothing! You'd have no chance
there...

He stops himself. Realizes he's said too much. Gone too far.

Vera, fuming, stands up and yanks a pancake out right from
the middle of the stack. They all go tumbling.

VERA SOLA
Thank you!

She takes a giant bite out of it and stalks off. She returns
after a beat and grabs her cup, then runs out again.

Mifflin slowly stops forcing food down his throat. He throws
his fork down, knows he's losing his shit.

FADE TO:

INT. VERA'S ROOM - LATE AT NIGHT

Vera's cup sits on the bedside table.

She's wide awake, sobbing. The envelope from Mr. Radix on her lap. Still sealed. She starts to TEAR IT UP in a violent rage, then can't bring herself to do that either.

Finally she just opens it. Being careful not to tear it.

Inside, a letter. No, a poem. Shel Silverstein's WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. VERA'S ROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Danny sits at the edge of the bed, reading. Miranda folds Vera's clothes at the dresser.

DANNY SOLA

"There is a place where the sidewalk ends and before the street begins, and where the grass grows soft and white, and there the sun burns crimson bright, and there the moon-bird rests from his flight to cool in the peppermint wind. Let us leave this place where the smoke blows black and the dark street winds and bends."

VERA SOLA

Do you think that's what it looks like, Daddy?

DANNY SOLA

What's that, goo?

VERA SOLA

The end of the world. Where the sidewalk ends.

Danny shares a knowing look with Miranda.

MIRANDA SOLA

I think it looks different for everyone. We each have our own ends, our own worlds. Like everything else, it depends on what you believe.

DANNY SOLA
But nobody really knows.

MIRANDA SOLA
Of course. Not really.

VERA SOLA
Why?

MIRANDA SOLA
Because those who go can never come
back.

Vera looks over at the clock beside her bed. Batteries out.
She's made sure time has stopped around her.

CUT TO:

INT. VERA'S ROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

The same clock. Still stopped.

VERA SOLA (O.S.)
(reading)
"We shall walk with a walk that is
measured and slow, and watch where
the --"

Vera wipes snot and tears away. The next words sober her.

VERA SOLA
"Where the chalk-white arrows go.
To the place where the sidewalk
ends."

INT. SOLA HOUSE. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Mifflin's asleep on the couch. Photo albums scattered on the
floor around him. Half the room is packed in boxes.

Vera sneaks, shielding herself with her black cape.

VERA SOLA (V.O.)
"Yes we'll walk with a walk that is
measured and slow..."

She fishes through his jacket nearby. Finds a SET OF KEYS.

EXT. UNIVERSITY - NIGHT

The round wooden door closes behind her. Godwin stumbles out of his booth, sleepy-eyed. Thinks it was his imagination, goes back in.

Vera emerges from the shadows. That black cape works wonders.

She hurries past...

EXT. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY - NIGHT

...past the sign, which now points properly at the library. She doesn't care, she hurries down her old path to...

VERA SOLA (V.O.)
 "And we'll go where the chalk-white
 arrows go."

EXT. UNIVERSITY GARDENS - NIGHT

She stops before the Untamed Garden. Angles herself to see the flowers form that WHITE ARROW in the moonlight.

She pulls out the RED SHOE from her pocket.

She whispers to give herself courage as she pushes through...

VERA SOLA
 "For the children, they mark. And
 the children, they know. The
 place."

Vera's through the garden now, brambles in her hair. And is now in the moonlit shadow of a great GOTHIC MANOR.

VERA SOLA
 "Where the sidewalk ends."

All sound seems to disappear. Should she knock or...

A FLUTTER IN THE WIND leads her around to the side of the manor where she sees a KITE STRING. Follows it up to...is that a child flying in the air?

MAN'S VOICE
 Hey!

Vera freaks -- throws the RED SHOE!

AUGUSTINE (from the Wake) rounds the corner at the other end of the kite.

AUGUSTINE
You found his shoe.

Vera looks up and realizes it's not a child, but a kite in the shape of a person. He only has one red shoe.

EXT. AUGUSTINE'S VERANDA - MORNING

A man in red shoes comes out. They belong to BOBBY O'SULLIVAN, Augustine's Irish butler. He's got a boxer's body and demeanor with a butler's deference.

He pours Vera and Augustine coffee.

AUGUSTINE
He said he couldn't fly. I told him anything is possible.

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
And I still haven't, sir.

AUGUSTINE
Just the test model, Bobby. We'll see.

He and Bobby work seamlessly to prepare the coffee perfectly. Augustine takes care of the sugar; Bobby the cream.

AUGUSTINE
You have your mother's face. This area here. Can't see a darn thing of Danny's.

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
Don't suppose she wants to look like a man.

VERA SOLA
Uhm...

AUGUSTINE
Uhm? Worst first word of a journey I have ever heard. Bobby?

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
Original though.

AUGUSTINE
Hmm. Connotes uncertainty.

VERA SOLA
Journey?

AUGUSTINE
 (frustrated)
 You are on a journey, of course.

Vera takes in the scene really for the first time. The dawn rising behind the great stone mansion. Giant, tuxedoed Bobby, anachronistic Augustine. The "Bobby kite" askew by the table.

VERA SOLA
 I...I don't know. I just...

Augustine looks up at Bobby, truly confused. He turns back to Vera. Blinks.

VERA SOLA
 You knew my parents?

AUGUSTINE
 Longer than you have. I am
 Augustine.

No recognition from Vera.

AUGUSTINE
 (ahem)
 Headmaster of the University?

Still no.

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
 (in French to Augustine)
She's not ready.

AUGUSTINE
 (in French)
*If we waited until we felt ready
 for things, nothing important would
 ever get done.*

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
 (in French)
She's scared.

AUGUSTINE
 (in French)
So am I.

VERA SOLA
 You weren't at the funeral.

AUGUSTINE
 No. No I wasn't. Just the after
 party. There are always so many
 delightful baked goods.
 (MORE)

AUGUSTINE (CONT'D)

I suppose it's due to the
necessity, at such a moment, of a
sugar high.

(thinks)

Come with me.

EXT. WATERS OF LETHE. HEADMASTER'S MANOR - MOMENTS LATER

Augustine stands with Vera on a SMALL DOCK at the edge of a pond. It's PERFECTLY STILL in spite of the wind rustling the trees and blowing up the tail of Bobby's tuxedo jacket.

VERA SOLA

Looks freezing.

AUGUSTINE

You are much stronger than I am,
Miss Sola. Were I to get a map from
my parents, nothing would be able
to stop me from trying to follow it
to the ends of the world until I
figured out just what
extraordinariness it led to.

Map? What map? Well, Vera's ready for this nonsense to stop.

VERA SOLA

Okay. Well I'm sorry I bothered
you. I think I should go home now.

AUGUSTINE

Why do you wear this? A bit
childish, isn't it?

He means her cape.

VERA SOLA

(defensive)

Well I am a child. And secondly, my
mom gave it to me. So...

(remembering)

She said as long as I wear it, I'd
be safe.

AUGUSTINE

Mmm. Thought so.

He rips her cape off and pushes her into the pond.

As she fights to the surface, she sees Bobby and Augustine
turn and walk away. Just as she's about to scream -- SHE'S
PULLED UNDER!

The pond goes instantly flat again. Not a ripple to be seen.

UNDERWATER

Vera looks up, but sees only black, not the muted light of day you'd expect to see. The panic of drowning sets in...until she sees it.

Just ahead, a small light on the surface. As if there's daylight beyond.

She desperately swims for it.

Just as she's about to surface, she's YANKED BACK as if the water is trying to stop her. She has to fight now, fight to get to the light. She kicks hard at the black water. This is no joke - she's fighting for her life now.

She reaches for the light...so close...just scrapes the pale surface with her fingertips as she loses consciousness.

The black water wins. Pulls her deeper. But then a HAND reaches in, grabs Vera's arm and pulls her out.

FADE OUT:

INT. VERA'S ROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

The Silverstein book lays on the bedside table. Vera's tucked in and engrossed in the book Danny flips through with her.

It's a large, ancient book bound in worn leather, exquisitely illuminated like a medieval Bible. For a moment, we catch the embossed EMBLEM OF THE CITY ON THE EDGE OF A WATERFALL on its cover.

As Danny flips through, we see various depictions of the far reaches of the world: a flat sea ending at a waterfall, circles of Hell, etc.

Vera is entranced.

DANNY SOLA

Some believe there is a world of light at the end of the world. A place where all questions become clear, and truth is as easy as sipping water from a cup.

(turns a page)

But there is a darker belief that says at the end of the world is Emptiness. It is an Emptiness that you can feel.

(MORE)

DANNY SOLA (CONT'D)

A great Nothing that terrifies you.
It's a place where all your shadows
from life consume you.

VERA SOLA

But if it's nothing, what does it
matter if you feel it?

Danny holds his hand over Vera's eyes.

DANNY SOLA

Close your eyes.

When he removes his hand, Vera's eyes are closed.

DANNY SOLA

Let the last light fade away. Now
let all the remembrances of light
fade away. See only the darkness.

He waits a moment.

DANNY SOLA

Now, do you feel the breeze washing
over your skin from the open
window?

VERA SOLA

Uh-huh.

DANNY SOLA

Can you remember the way I look,
sitting at your feet?

VERA SOLA

Yes.

DANNY SOLA

Do you hear your own voice?

She nods.

DANNY SOLA

Then you also know that you exist,
in spite of the darkness. Not only
because you can hear your own
existence, can feel it...

He touches her gently.

DANNY SOLA

...but because you can remember it.
Now, imagine that you can't feel
anything.

(MORE)

DANNY SOLA (CONT'D)

You can't remember anything, not Mommy or Daddy, that you can't feel warmth or a hug. That all there is is darkness, and nothing else. You're just alone. And that's all.

Vera opens her eyes. She's disturbed.

DANNY SOLA

To some people, that's what is at the end of the world.

VERA SOLA

But it's not really like that, is it, Daddy?

Danny smiles and closes the heavy book.

VERA SOLA

I mean, which one is right?

DANNY SOLA

None of them.

He tucks her in.

VERA SOLA

One of them has to be right!

DANNY SOLA

Why? Every object like every story has at least two ends, Vera. It depends only on what you believe. Just like everything else.

He kisses her on the forehead.

DANNY SOLA

Like every thing you see in the world. It depends on you.

He turns off the light.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST - DAY (PRESENT)

Vera's limp body is carried through a drooping canopy of trees with bare, BLACK BRANCHES reaching overhead like interlocking skeletal fingers.

She goes in and out of consciousness and is unable to make out the face of the person carrying her...

...or that as she passes underneath the trees, petals begin to flower and black branches turn brown again.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN - DAY

Vera slowly wakes to find herself alone in a small cabin that seems to be made of the earth itself. A dirt floor gives way to a plush square of a 4-leaf clover "rug" before the crackling fire. Vines twist to form crooked windows. A thatch of leaves and twigs overhead sport tweeting birds. Something bubbles and squeaks in a cauldron in the hearth.

Vera herself is wrapped in a home-stitched blanket on the sofa. Somebody has been taking care of her.

Near the fire, she sees her necklace with her parents' locket on it and her Silverstein poem, drying out.

She scrambles to collect them just as the FRONT DOOR OPENS. She freezes - friend or foe?

At the door, a giant bear hits mud off his boots with a heavy stick. Then in walks GARDNER, a man, not a bear. He's a colossal man, in fact, wearing a bearskin coat which he strips and leaves at the door.

He glares at Vera as he sits at his cauldron. His hands shake. He licks his lips with the eagerness of a heroin addict prepping his next fix.

Only when he tests a sip of what looks like gold water, does he have the wherewithal to speak.

GARDNER

Saw a guy try to drink from the
lake. Waters of Lethe grabbed him
right up. By the time I got to him,
he'd lost his bloody mind right
along with all his memories. Still
wanders around these woods too,
naked as a jaybird like he forgot
even how to wear clothes. Ain't
decent. Not that that matters now,
I suppose. Suppose you can be as
indecent as you want now! Emptiness
don't care about decent.

He carefully pours whatever's in the cauldron into his flask. Only after a hearty swig does he turn to look at Vera, now cowering in the corner.

GARDNER
What's yer name then? I said what's
your name!

VERA SOLA
V-Ver --

GARDNER
Speak up.

VERA SOLA
Vera.

GARDNER
Hmm.
(is it familiar to him?)
You can call me Gardner. You smell
fresh. You new?

It's like gibberish to Vera.

GARDNER
When...did...you...die?

VERA SOLA
What! I'm not -- I didn't. What?

Vera looks around with new purpose now. Is she dead?

GARDNER
Well you died at a bad time, I'm
afraid.

VERA SOLA
(sotto)
I was just in a pond. Just...then
he pushed me. Then...

A theory brews. She looks about, trying to piece it together.
That's when she sees something out the window...that makes
her stand. And draw close to it.

Past her, and outside, an overgrown walkway is cut through
the dead forest and leads up to a RED LIGHTHOUSE. Grazing on
the decaying brush along the walk, is a BLACK UNICORN.

VERA SOLA
That's...

Gardner quickly checks as if expecting danger.

GARDNER

Unicorn.
(swig; sarcastic)
Whimsical, innit?

VERA SOLA

No. But...that's...I've seen that.

INT. MIRANDA AND DANNY SOLA'S OFFICE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

A painting dries on an easel. Of a path. And a WHITE LIGHTHOUSE. It's exactly like the one outside Gardner's.

Miranda hurries in with Vera, fresh from school.

MIRANDA SOLA

So Ulysses S. Grant used to sell
firewood on the side of the road?

Vera loves being here. With all the art and knickknacks it's like walking into a fantasy world.

VERA SOLA

He wanted to be a math professor.
(re: the painting)
A new one.

MIRANDA SOLA

(sifting through papers)
Yeah. You like?

VERA SOLA

(nods)
How come light houses are always
white? Why not...red?

MIRANDA SOLA

Found it!

She joins Vera at the painting.

MIRANDA SOLA

It can be whatever we want. I like
red.

VERA SOLA

Where's it gonna go?

They look up at one of the walls - it's covered in original artwork. Landscapes, cityscapes, a few odd cartoonish people.

MIRANDA SOLA

I think your dad liked it for right there.

She points to an open spot right beside a color sketch of a LUSH FOREST with waterfalls and flowers. It could be Gardner's forest, except that his trees are dead.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN - DAY (PRESENT)

Vera runs out the door.

Gardner takes a swig. Takes a big think.

GARDNER

Huh.

EXT. RED LIGHTHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Vera crawls over the brambles and tears through rotting tree limbs 'til she's standing at the lighthouse door.

VERA SOLA

(scared, excited)

What's going on?

Gardner stops behind her. He picks up a DEAD FLOWER smashed in one of Vera's footprints. Stops because...it's starting to bloom again.

He looks up at Vera, now pounding on the lighthouse door. *Who is this girl?*

VERA SOLA

(knocking furiously)

Mom! Mom! Dad! It's me! I'm here!

This place is too dilapidated to be lived in. But Vera's fists are bleeding from knocking.

GARDNER

Hey hey hey. HEY. Nobody's in there. Stop, girl. STOP IT.

He wrestles her back. She JUST SOBS.

Gardner isn't sure what to do. He sits next to her. A boulder beside a pebble.

He lets her sob. Then finally, offers her his flask.

She wipes her snotty nose. Blinks up at him.

He takes a pull for himself instead.

GARDNER

I know ye feel lost. Ye aren't.

(beat)

I mean. You are. But you'll come to find that you ain't as lost as ye think ye are. K?

He tries to smile encouragingly. That's when he notices the LOCKET around her neck. And the EMBLEM on it.

GARDNER

Where did you get that?

Vera tucks it into her shirt.

GARDNER

Impossible.

VERA SOLA

It's my mom's.

A tear comes to his eye. He clutches her face.

GARDNER

Thank God. Thank God.

He grabs her hand. It's like a mitten clutching a pea. He tugs her up --

BEHIND THE RED LIGHTHOUSE

Over the craggy edge, a MILE-WIDE RIVER streams through the woods below them and ends at a waterfall. As if the forest floor just broke off.

A DEEP RUMBLE, and another section crumbles into Emptiness. Just black nothing.

Gardner nods to her as if to say, "Go on then."

VERA SOLA

What's happening to it?

GARDNER

Emptiness happens in the lull between when a Keeper dies and the heir takes their place. It's the space between creation. When we're unkept. But you're here now.

(MORE)

GARDNER (CONT'D)

That's what matters. You've come to fix everything.

But the look in Vera's eyes steals his excitement.

GARDNER

You are the Keeper.

VERA SOLA

Of what?

GARDNER

You're the Keeper of the Netherworld.

Vera backs away. Gardner doesn't like the fear in her eyes. He grabs her by the collar and shakes her!

GARDNER

Who did you steal that locket from?
Who?

VERA SOLA

Nobody! It's my mother's!

GARDNER

Well where is she!

VERA SOLA

DEAD!

He releases her.

VERA SOLA

And my dad. They had an accident.

Gardner falls to his knees; looks hopelessly out over the broken ground in the distance.

GARDNER

And they never trained you.

VERA SOLA

Did you say this was the Netherworld?

GARDNER

The Inbetween. The place where we all go to learn our final lessons before we can move on. And it all belongs to you. Which is why I don't understand.

VERA SOLA

What?

GARDNER

Why it's dying.

He gets up and heads back to the cabin.

Vera is left staring at the crumbling earth, vanishing into Nothing before her eyes.

INT. CABIN - MOMENTS LATER

Gardner packs a bag.

VERA SOLA

Am I dead?

GARDNER

If you were, all there'd be is Emptiness. But we're both still here. Which means there's still a chance.

VERA SOLA

For what?

GARDNER

For you to train. Yer the Keeper 'cuz you have the power of creation. You just don't know it yet.

VERA SOLA

(not hearing him)

But you're dead. So. Are my parents here?

GARDNER

They're dead, ain't they!

Suddenly the dying world outside doesn't matter. All that matters is --

VERA SOLA

We have to find them.

GARDNER

I'm finding you a Groundskeeper. Someone who can teach you enough to hold it off. Who knows? I don't know. Here.

He throws her a polka-dotted bag on the end of a hobo stick.
He hurries to get his own things and get out the door --

VERA SOLA

WAIT!

A giant, halted by a little girl.

VERA SOLA

If we find my parents, they would
know how to stop it. This
Emptiness.

GARDNER

It's impossible to find them.
Members of the Order bypass The
Inbetween. They go right to The End
of the World. The very end of Life
itself. The only one who can take
you there is...
(gets a thought)
Let's go.

He's outside, shoving on his bearskin coat.

EXT. WOODS - CONTINUOUS

Vera has to almost run to catch up with him.

VERA SOLA

Who? Who, Gardner?

GARDNER

The Seer. His job is to lead souls
who are ready to The End of the
World. He's the only one who can
find it. And he can train you.

Vera doesn't hear that last part.

VERA SOLA

Let's go.

Gardner grabs her arm as she marches past him.

GARDNER

Hey. Your parents are dead. You are
living. It's your turn now to shape
the world. Whether yer ready to or
not. It ain't the way it's supposed
to be. But it's the way it is.

(gently)

(MORE)

GARDNER (CONT'D)

The Seer will help you find your powers. Nothing more.

Vera pulls her arm free. She refuses to hear him. Instead, she chooses a direction and starts hiking.

Gardner is torn. Let her go, help her, or strangle her. He DECIDES when he sees that overhead, the canopy of DYING BRANCHES come alive again and blossom in her wake.

GARDNER

(finally...)

The Seer's temple is this way.

INT. UNKNOWN DARK ROOM - SAME

No faces. No names. Someone stares out an arrow-slit window, the slim line of light revealing only the shoulder of a green cloak, and the pin of the Order: THE CITY AT THE EDGE OF A WATERFALL.

The sound of a door. Someone has entered. He's BURLY, wide like a wrestler.

BURLY

She arrived.

GREEN CLOAK

I know.

(beat)

I can feel it.

BURLY

Shall we send --

GREEN CLOAK

Do it.

The sound of a door. Burly has left.

EXT. ROCK FOREST - DAY

Instead of trees, the narrow path Vera and Gardner walk is lined with ancient monoliths. Some are crumbling. The sound of falling pebbles is as frequent as birds in a wood.

VERA SOLA

I know this.

(laughs; tears in her eyes)

I saw it in a drawing my mom did once.

(MORE)

VERA SOLA (CONT'D)

She said she imagined that the
rocks were like trees. They grew
from the earth. Needed sunlight.
And water.

She touches one of the impressive stones.

VERA SOLA

Could feel.

(beat)

It was just a drawing.

GARDNER

Long ago, the Netherworld was just
nothingness. But then the Keepers
were given the extraordinary power
of creation. To give souls a world
to dwell in while they wait.

VERA SOLA

Wait for what?

GARDNER

Their final lesson. So they can
move past all this. To the place
where no Emptiness can ever touch.
Where the innocent and the wise
live forever.

VERA SOLA

Where my parents are.

GARDNER

Without a Keeper, this returns to
nothingness. Even your mother's
rock forest.

Vera climbs a rocky ledge. She follows along on the rock
treetops, Gardner below. As she steps, he notices the roots
of the stones growing strong.

VERA SOLA

Why didn't they tell me?

GARDNER

Maybe they did. And you weren't
listening.

(sees ahead)

C'mon, Little Keeper. We're close.

EXT. ANUBIS ROCK BRIDGE - LATER

GARDNER

We're here.

They look out across a crack in the earth twice the size of the Grand Canyon. More than a mile across sits the HIGH TEMPLE. Magnificent though it is, sitting on the edge of an ancient ragged cliffside, Vera can't take her eyes from what's standing in her way:

A sliver of river winds along the canyon floor. And rising right out of the middle of it is a massive structure made of desert rock and moss. It's in the shape of a man with a jackal for a head and claws for feet. It's massive, its humanoid body more than 7000 feet tall. Chiseled into his chest is the EMBLEM OF THE CITY ON THE EDGE OF A WATERFALL.

This is ANUBIS ROCK BRIDGE.

VERA SOLA

It'll take forever to get across.

GARDNER

Don't use that word. It means something a little different here.

(to Anubis)

We are ready to cross!

At his words, the Anubis monolith turns its moss-covered Jackal head and stares right at Vera.

A VOICE BELLOWS, but not from the mouth of the monolith. It's a voice that seems to come out of the air itself.

ANUBIS

You may only think you are ready.
But it is I who chooses those who
cross here.

GARDNER

This is the Keeper.

At this, the Jackal tweaks its head for a better look.

Vera grips her LOCKET for courage.

ANUBIS

The small Keeper speaks?

Gardner's look encourages Vera.

VERA SOLA
We would like to - we are ready to
cross?

The Jackal seems to smile.

ANUBIS
Then three questions you must
answer truly or not at all. For
truth will bring you closer, and a
lie shall see you fall.

Vera looks down the steep canyon. She steels herself.

ANUBIS
Your parents loved you, but now
they are gone. Who yet remains who
can love you that strong?

VERA SOLA
Are all the questions going to
sound like that?

Gardner awaits her answer.

Vera thinks about it carefully. Doesn't want to answer.

VERA SOLA
(beat; diverting)
It's like a kid's book.

A slow, rolling RUMBLE starts to quake the ground beneath her
feet. She's reluctant to admit the truth, but she knows it.

The RUMBLE BLENDS INTO...

EXT. SIDEWALK - DAY (FLASHBACK)

THE RUMBLE OF AN ENGINE. It's clean, souped up, a real
machine...

...That's attached to the back-end of a skateboard with
bicycle handlebars. Confidently posed atop it, is Uncle
Mifflin and little Vera in front of him, both wearing aviator
goggles.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Fearless leader!

VERA SOLA
Yes, Navigator?

UNCLE MIFFLIN
The sidewalk ends in ten meters.

VERA SOLA
Then that is where our journey
begins, Sir Mifflin. Onward!

She points ahead and Mifflin floors it.

EXT. SIDEWALK END/CLIFF'S EDGE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Mifflin and Vera picnic in the grass at the edge of a cliff that overlooks an incredible vista. The ocean laps the cliffs below. A seagull floats at their eye level.

VERA SOLA
How long do you think they'll be
gone this time?

UNCLE MIFFLIN
I don't know, little one. But we're
good, right?

Vera nods and smiles big.

VERA SOLA
Yeah. We're good.

CUT TO:

EXT. ANUBIS ROCK BRIDGE - DAY (PRESENT)

The RUMBLE of the angry earth grows at Vera's silence.

VERA SOLA
(finally)
Uncle Mifflin.

The ground stops quaking as Anubis now pulls his claws from the river at the canyon bottom and spreads his legs to straddle the water. When the dust settles...

ANUBIS
Fear is where you dwell. But what
fear is it that makes you most
unwell?

Vera looks to Gardner - *What kind of question is that?*

GARDNER
Answer it. It's the only way to
cross.

VERA SOLA

What do these have to do with anything? I thought they were going to be riddles or something.

The ground starts to rumble angrily.

GARDNER

Answer!

VERA SOLA

I don't know...I'm scared of everything! Death?

The rumbling becomes MORE FIERCE. Like it's coming from the core of the Earth itself.

GARDNER

Think, Vera! Your greatest fear!

VERA SOLA

I don't know.

(searches her mind)

Uh...uh...sharks? Uh...Mr. Frisee's dog? Getting lost!

The ground CRACKS right around Vera's feet. She nearly falls, but she grabs Gardner's coat and he yanks her back just as the ground she was standing on disappears into the canyon.

GARDNER

The truth, Vera!

She's guessed it all along. But now knows it's come to admitting it. The answer comes, ever so reluctantly. It makes her cry.

VERA SOLA

(quiet)

Being alone.

(then)

BEING ALONE!

The shaking stops. Her answer ECHOES through the canyon.

The admission has exhausted her. And saddened Gardner. He takes her hand.

GARDNER

You're not alone.

The answer was true, so Anubis raises his sinewy arm of rock and grabs hold of the canyon lip, grasping the precipice like it's a handle.

A narrow path trodden by the feet of past visitors is like a SCAR across Anubis's arm and chest.

Vera and Gardner edge across it. One slip and they plummet.

GARDNER
One more. You're doing fine.

ANUBIS
Join your parents and The Emptiness
will consume all. When forced to
choose, where will you fall?

Vera quickly glances at Gardner. This truth she knows. But now it feels like betrayal to admit.

VERA SOLA
This is stupid.

Anubis tweaks his head in a terrifying, bloodthirsty manner like he's about to devour her.

GARDNER
(hard)
Answer the question.

ANUBIS
Life is but a series of choices.
Some easy. Some toilsome. But,
young Keeper, there must be a
choice.

VERA SOLA
It's not fair.

An ungodly ROAR erupts from within Anubis's body. It shakes them off balance. They slip from the path. Slide down the rock chest to certain death.

GARDNER
Vera!

His look is pleading as he's about to slip out of sight.

GARDNER
(it's okay...)
Say it.

VERA SOLA
Mom and Dad. I would choose them.
(screams over the noise)
I just want my parents back!

The chaos stops.

I JUST WANT MY PARENTS BACK! echoes through the canyon.

Gardner pulls himself back up to sturdy ground. He looks at her, ashamed. He helps her to her feet, but then leaves her to dust herself off.

Anubis lifts his other arm and grabs the edge of the cliff by the High Temple, digging his fingers into the rock until he becomes a part of the canyon itself.

His arms now stretch from end to end. To form a rock bridge.

Vera follows Gardner across.

INT. HIGH TEMPLE - DAY

A long entrance hall. The sunshine outside throws a deep rectangle of light into the temple, but not deep enough to reach the inner sanctum ahead.

Vera's still feeling the shame from the bridge, but the excitement of finally finding out where her parents are overtakes her. She starts to run for the inner sanctum.

Gardner grabs her by the collar to slow her.

GARDNER

Yer not the first person in the
world to want what ya can't have.
Nor the last.

(beat)

The Seer can help you find them.
Just make sure when you do, you
remember what you're really here
for.

Vera knows why she's here. And she's about to get closer to that goal.

They step together into the deep shadows of the MAIN CHAMBER. It's pitch black and perfectly silent.

VERA SOLA

Why's it so dark?

GARDNER

I don't know.

(beat)

If you knew how to Keep anything,
I'd ask you to turn on the lights.
But since that tradition clearly
died with your parents...

Vera's about to retort when GARDNER ATTACKS HER. He wraps his great hand over her mouth and pulls her into the deepest shadow. She struggles like mad until...

...A LANTERN bobs around the corner. Caught in its circle of light are TWO SINISTER MEN carrying a large basket brimming with old dusty artifacts: a baseball and mitt, a stapler, an old typewriter. The MEN carry it like it's booty.

The BALD ONE drops his handle and a chewed up tennis ball slowly rolls out of the circle of light into the darkness.

SCURVY

A little warning!

The one with SCURVY takes the lantern to find the ball. He snatches it, not realizing it's rolled just inches from Vera and Gardner.

BALD ONE

Heavier than it looks, in't?

SCURVY

Not as heavy as that little twat.

They both laugh. Bald One rubs his aching hand, his laughter falling flat. Something scares him.

BALD ONE

What's the Emperor gonna do with him anyway? Seems like dangerous business to me.

SCURVY

Well it ain't our business, so what's the matter? You done yet?

BALD ONE

I just mean, could think of a few better ways to use that power than stealin' young'uns.

Bald One reluctantly takes the basket up again, lantern in the other hand. It's too heavy so he sets the lantern down.

SCURVY

I can see the entrance from here. Leave it.

As their footsteps fade, Gardner comes into the light.

VERA SOLA
That hurt!
(rubs her face)
Was that the Seer?

Gardner shakes his head "no".

GARDNER
This was not a good idea.

He grabs the lantern and directs it around the room. It lands on an overturned THRONE CHAIR.

VERA SOLA
Well is he here? Did they take 'em?
What's wrong, Gardner?

As Gardner inspects the throne like an experienced tracker. He finds a STICKY BLACK RESIDUE on the floor. He touches it, smells his finger. He doesn't like what this tells him.

GARDNER
Vera, let's go. Quickly.

VERA SOLA
Where is The Seer?

GARDNER
He's gone.

VERA SOLA
What do you mean? Where is he,
Gardner?

GARDNER
I don't know. We have to go. Now.

Vera looks around this dark, empty place where she had so much hope for answers. She falls to her knees and cries her first hopeless tears.

VERA SOLA
I'll never find them now, will I?
And I'll never get my powers
either. ...Did I do something
wrong?

GARDNER
It's not your fault. Sometimes
things happen that aren't in our
plan. That hurt us.

He's speaking from experience. Vera's too self-involved right now to notice.

GARDNER

And we can stay on our knees, or we
can stand up.

He lifts her gently up. Back to her feet.

GARDNER

And we can do what we need to to
make things better.

VERA SOLA

Then. We have to try to find The
Seer.

He lifts her up onto his shoulders.

GARDNER

C'mon. I'll be your giant for a
little while.

Together, they head out of The Temple.

EXT. DOCKS - DAY

TAR is slapped on a ship's bow. It drips in sticky puddles
onto the dock (the source of the black residue at the Temple)

THE DOCK - a stone slab the width of a Nascar track juts half
a mile out into a sea so perfectly blue it's as if someone
painted it. (In fact, much here appears to be perfect
paintings of reality rather than solid reality itself.)

There are a lot of UNSAVORY CHARACTERS loitering and working
here. Gardner presses Vera close to him.

GARDNER

Don't wander.

She wouldn't dare.

Every sight is new and terrifying to her:

Just like any other dock, it's busy with SAILORS. But the
ships here vary from 3-masted clippers to submarines, Junks
to towering Viking ships with grotesque animals for
figureheads. It's an incredibly vibrant and diverse scene.

To match the ships, the SAILORS and DOCK WORKERS wear their
native garb: Mayan robes, Roman tunics, greasy American
overalls. (Note: each person is dressed according to the time
& place they died.)

Up ahead, Gardner spots a weasly man carrying a giant black book half his size. He sees Gardner over the top of the book, raises his spectacles to be sure, then takes off running. He knocks barrels and tools in Gardner's way.

But Gardner dodges them all and easily catches the man.

GARDNER

Ribald. Why are you running?

RIBALD

Gardner, is that you? I thought you were my bookie. How lovely to see you functioning soberly.
(smells his breath)
Ish.

Gardner slams Ribald against the wall. Nobody cares enough to help the little man.

Actually, Vera notices that everyone seems distracted by URGENCY AND PANIC as crews rush to pack up their ships, desperate to set sail NOW. Strange...

In fact, as Vera looks, she notices the end of the dock is slowly crumbling into the sea, in a hurry to become ruins.

GARDNER

Ribald, you pulled the wool over your eyes again, didn't you? Looked the other way for something you should've been looking right at.
Haven't you?

RIBALD

I don't know what you're talking about.

GARDNER

You see all yer doin' is helpin' to tear the world asunder, don't ya?

RIBALD

Gardner, I -- I --

Vera sees the BALD ONE from the Temple. She pulls at Gardner's sleeve, but he ignores her.

GARDNER

Who's taken the Seer, Ribald? They want to use him to find the End of the World, don't they? This world gone to shite, they think he's their ticket to safety, don't they?

RIBALD

The Seer? Who would take the Seer?
Who could?

The Bald One notices Vera noticing him, and Gardner roughing up Ribald. He climbs up the plank to a ratty old ATAKEBUNE, an ancient multi-level Japanese warship. It looks more like a floating fortress with a top deck.

A chipped and rotting Kirin serves as the figurehead with a home-sewn Colonial American flag wrapped around its chest.

Vera is bumped by a RUSHING SAILOR. It spurs her into motion, and she heads straight for the Atakebune.

GARDNER

The Emptiness is already taking the forest. The Seer can help stop this. What ship did he go out on? Who took him, Ribald!

Ribald laughs like a madman. It's enough for Gardner to let him go and take a step back.

RIBALD

Gardner. Jesus. You think the Seer can stop this? Nobody can stop this but the Keeper. And if what I hear's right, the Solas died before naming an heir. We're fu---

A FERRY blows its great horn.

RIBALD

Your worst nightmare's finally come true, my friend. It's every man for himself now. Just like up top. There's no hope left for us.

Gardner glances back to check on Vera, but she's gone.

He spins around. Searches frantically. No sign of her!

GARDNER

Vera? Vera? Vera! Did you see where the girl went? The girl I came with.

VERA SOLA (O.S.)

(from the Atakebune)

GARDNER! They're leaving! Gardner!

Gardner spins around fast, spots the ATAKEBUNE weighing anchor at the end of the dock.

He dashes after it, but it's already too far out to sea. He sees Bald One pry her from the railing and drag her off.

Ribald steps up and pats him on the shoulder.

RIBALD

The Seer is with the only one mad enough to think The Seer can be controlled.

(beat)

Not enough time for any of us to learn our lessons now, is there? The Emptiness will take care of us long before that. Guess you'll never get to find her, will you?

It's a secret they share. Ribald laughs that maniacal laugh and leaves Gardner to watch as, truly, all hope sails away.

INT. ATAKEBUNE. MAIN CABIN - DAY

Vera is thrown into this dark room. The door slams shut and locks behind her. She pounds and yells. There's no point.

She finally stops and inspects her surroundings. It's so dark; the only thing she can make out is a WRITER'S DESK in the corner awash with blue light and a puzzle of shadows from the ornate Japanese window panes.

Then she notices a pair of HANDS rest calmly on the desk, cuffed in the blue and gold of a naval officer. CAPTAIN THORNTON himself is shrouded in darkness.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

There are rumors that there is no new heir. That the Keepers died before they, or anyone in the Order, could train a new Keeper.

He steps around his desk, the window light revealing a lean soldier's body in an 18th-century Navy officer's uniform. His face still in shadow, he makes his way to a side table.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

It is also said that the Keeper alone possesses the power to create the extraordinary out of a vast Emptiness, indeed to shape life itself. Life after death, that is. Using nothing but dreams.

He lifts her LOCKET to see the emblem in the light. Vera stares at him, afraid, uncertain.

He pours two glasses of a GOLDEN LIQUID.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
You do not look powerful.
(then)
Are you?

There is a tinge of fear in his voice.

VERA SOLA
No.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Well. Looks can be deceiving
though. Can't they.

He snaps his fingers and all the lamps in the room alight,
revealing a comfortable, even regal room with cushions, maps,
globes, and marvelous trinkets from different eras.

And of course, the dark, handsome face of CAPTAIN THORNTON.

VERA SOLA
Who are you?

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Drink. It will make you feel
better.

He hands her a glass. Vera sips and instantly hacks it up.

Thornton laughs.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Not quite rum, is it? Sometimes the
best stuff for you is the nastiest
of all. It's liquid health. In this
place it's easy to lose your body,
and your mind.
(holds up his glass)
They call it Aura. You regain taste
when you drink it. You can feel
full again. Pleasure, warmth, pain.
Liquid health. People kill each
other for just a sip of this
revolting stuff.

Thornton chuckles, but there's (always) pain behind his joy.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
The only other place to feel that
way again is at the End of the
World.

(MORE)

CAPTAIN THORNTON (CONT'D)

But I've never known a single soul
who's made it that far. And now,
mayhaps I never will.

He shoots back his entire glass.

VERA SOLA

(re: the lights)

How did you do that?

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Groundskeepers still have certain
powers. Though I can feel the
Emptiness taking that too.

VERA SOLA

(remembers Gardner's goal)

You're a Groundskeeper.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Is the rumor true?

(pause)

Do you know who you are?

VERA SOLA

...I'm Vera Sola.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Are you?

VERA SOLA

If you think I'm the Keeper, why'd
you kidnap me?

Thornton pours another glass for himself.

VERA SOLA

I just came here to find my
parents. That's all I'm here to do.
And when they fix this --

CAPTAIN THORNTON

(severe)

That's not going to happen.

VERA SOLA

My parents taught me nothing. I
can't help you. They can.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

If they are dead, then they are
lost to the End of the World, like
all Keepers before them.

VERA SOLA
The Seer knows where the End is.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
(pause; knows a secret)
He's lost too.

He downs his liquid health.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Come. Let me show you something.

EXT. ATAKEBUNE. MAIN DECK - DAY

Thornton emerges with Vera to find a motley crew of PIRATES from all centuries of life. They've been waiting for her.

One CHINESE PIRATE kneels and bows to her. One ITALIAN simply weeps, clutching his crucifix necklace.

But most stare, sneer; some wanting to cut her throat or do other unspeakable things.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Q?

Vera's scooped up by the QUARTERMASTER, probably the deceased Queequeg. Another pirate binds her hands and ankles.

They cram her, kicking and screaming, into a CRATE.

A PIMPLY BOY brings forward a jar with crawling creatures within. They look like a cross between a spider and a crab.

The boy unscrews the jar and drops one of the creatures inside the crate. She SCREAMS.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
The Netherworld, like the world
atop, is a dangerous place. Full of
peril. And uncertainty.

Another snapping creature is dropped in.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
You wish to seek your parents. A
goal I fully comprehend. But it is
a journey you take yourself. I will
not lend help to a fool's errand.
Q, what will you do with Miss Sola?

QUARTERMASTER

Crew hears they're taking children
to feed to the monster at Shell
City, Cap'n. For 100 pound liquid
Aura.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

If only you had a Groundskeeper who
could train you to better face such
dangers. But alas, you need no
training, right? Not if your
parents will save you.

He turns to go back to his cabin.

QUARTERMASTER

(aside)

Cap'n, is it her?

CAPTAIN THORNTON

We'll find out.

As he gets to his door, Vera's screams turn to --

VERA SOLA

I'll train! I'll train! Please!

INSIDE THE CRATE

Vera's covered in the blood-black creatures. She closes her
eyes.

VERA SOLA

I'll do anything. I'll do anything.

When Vera opens her eyes again, they're gone.

ON DECK

CAPTAIN THORNTON

(to Q)

Pull her out.

(to the crew)

Let's put the wind to our backs,
boys! Make for the Seven Seas!

The Quartermaster grabs him before he returns to his cabin.

QUARTERMASTER

If she is who you think. They'll
come for her.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Then we best be sure she's ready.

He looks back at Vera being pulled from the crate. There's a tinge of doubt that this exhausted little girl is a savior.

CAPTAIN THORNTON (PRELAP)

Control.

EXT. ATAKEBUNE. MAIN DECK - LATER

A harness is tightened around little Vera. Young WWI sailor, WILL, finishes tying the knot, hands her a sword, gives her a happy wink, and retreats. We realize now Vera's standing on THE PLANK.

The sea flies under her feet far below.

Thornton is suddenly there pointing a sword at her. He pokes her with it. Again. Until she's forced to step further down.

VERA SOLA

I'm gonna fall.

WILL

I got ya, little one!

Will's at the end of the rope attached to Vera's harness. Q glares at him. Will loses his smile quickly.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Control over body leads to control over mind. One cannot come before the other. You ever held a sword before?

VERA SOLA

I'm twelve.

In response, Thornton jabs her with the sword. It nicks her arm and she bleeds.

VERA SOLA

Hey!

She swipes at him angrily and instantly falls off the plank.

Thornton looks back at Will, who's gritting hard to keep hold of his end of the rope.

WILL

Got 'er, Cap!

MOMENTS LATER

Vera is crying. She's very wet. Sword still in hand. Still on the plank.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

The key is to accept where you are.
If you fight it, you will always
fall. If you accept it, you can
master it.

VERA SOLA

I'm scared of heights.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

You are on sturdy ground. The
height of it makes no difference.

He pokes at her again. Draws blood from her other arm. She doesn't even manage an angry swipe before she tumbles off.

LATER

Vera is *pissed*. More wet. Cuts all over. Still on the plank.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Anger at where you are does not
change your situation. It only
makes it less tolerable. Do you
want to fall again?

VERA SOLA

No.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Then don't.

He pokes at her. She steadies herself with all her might and counters. This time, she doesn't fall.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Well done. Now we'll try it without
the harness.

Vera's pride turns to fear. She falls.

EXT. ATAKEBUNE. MAIN DECK - NIGHT

PIRATES are sprawled out across the deck, asleep in all manner of odd and uncomfortable positions.

Vera eyes a pile of rope. Tries to arrange it like a bed. When she finally gets in, it's rock hard and lumpy. She wiggles, adjusts until she's just kicking and elbowing madly.

CAPTAIN THORNTON (O.S.)
The Keeper could turn it into a
feather bed.

Thornton stands nearby with a bowl of Aura.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Could make this ship fly or turn it
into a matchbox if she wanted.

VERA SOLA
And it's just rope. So maybe I'm
not who you think I am.

Thornton sits next to her and offers her the bowl.

VERA SOLA
No thanks.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Don't be a snot.
(smiles)
Know what's good for you.

She takes it and drinks. Magically, her cuts and bruises
fade. The magic startles her.

VERA SOLA
So what does a Groundskeeper do?

CAPTAIN THORNTON
We maintain the world the Keeper
creates while they are with the
living. I help keep the Sea.

He looks up at the NIGHT SKY, a glorious tapestry of
constellations. Unlike in our sky, the mythic heroes and
battles depicted are clearly evident.

VERA SOLA
Did it hurt?

CAPTAIN THORNTON
(beat)
Dying?

She nods.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
I don't remember, actually. So I
suppose if it did, it doesn't
matter. I simply woke up here.
Well, over there.

He points to the ship's helm where Q steers.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
As if nothing had happened at all.
Another chance to get things right,
I expect.

VERA SOLA
Like what?

Their attention is drawn to PIRATES telling stories.

WWII PIRATE
I heard the beast is a demon.
Larger than three men, and it burns
with fire and spits bullets.

MEDIEVAL PIRATE
Are you mad? It's a dragon.
Everybody knows that. Big as this
entire ship and eats women.

WWII PIRATE
Whatever it is, it's why the
captain don't go near that cursed
city. Not at night no-how. Whole
town goes quiet at night. That
place will eat you come dark, don't
care you a Groundskeeper or not.

WILL
What about if you're the Keeper?

They all turn to look at Vera. When they see Thornton there
too, they quickly change the subject and mumble on.

VERA SOLA
What are they talking about?

CAPTAIN THORNTON
The Monster of Shell City. They say
it's made of pure fear.
(chuckles)
And the flesh and bones of the
people it's killed. The tale is
that only a fearless child can
defeat it.

At this, Thornton looks at her.

VERA SOLA
Seems to me only grown-ups are
fearless.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
They're not.

He takes the bowl from her. Stands.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
They just --

VERA SOLA
Learn to control it?

Thornton smiles. Nods. He looks at her, deep in a thought not unlike sadness. He turns his back as...

A WAVE CRASHES over the side of the ship. It wipes Vera clean off her rope bed. She slams into a mast hard.

The ship seesaws with the sudden storm. The CREW run about. Q barks orders. Through the pelting wind and rain, Vera watches Thornton standing calmly.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
You have the power to stop this,
Vera Sola.

One CHINESE PIRATE is wiped off his feet by a wave. Vera watches helplessly as the water dashes him like a ragdoll.

VERA SOLA
Stop it!

The wind and rain build. They have to scream to hear --

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Why are you scared of it?

Vera watches helplessly as the CREW tries to regain control.

VERA SOLA
I don't know how!

CAPTAIN THORNTON
You don't believe.

VERA SOLA
Believe that I can control weather?
No! I don't!

CAPTAIN THORNTON
That you've been taught all you
need to know. You don't believe
that your parents prepared you for
this!

Vera takes this in. He's right, of course. It hurts to hear.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
They did, Vera. They tried.

WILL is wiped off his feet by a wave. Vera watches as the water drags him right for an opening in the railing. She thinks for a moment she can save him -- but then doubts herself, and just closes her eyes, not wanting to see him tumble over.

Only when his screams stop does she open her eyes again. To find that the opening in the railing no longer exists. It's been replaced by a board that stopped Will's fatal fall.

Will gets safely to his feet. He stares at her, awe-shocked.

But Vera knows she didn't do it. She looks through the rain at Thornton, who knows it too. Slowly the rain beats to a stop. The ship evens. The clouds disappear.

Thornton, disappointed, climbs to the helm, leaving Vera mortified by her failure to save Will.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
(sotto)
Now we try it for real.
(to Q)
To Capital City.

QUARTERMASTER
Sir?

CAPTAIN THORNTON
You heard me.

QUARTERMASTER
They'll be expecting that.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
The only way through this now is
forward. Whether we like it or not.

Q gets what he means. Vera must come first.

EXT. CAPITAL CITY - DEMOLISHED - NIGHT

The full moon makes for eerie light as the Atakebune floats down a canal. Actually, it used to be a road paved in silver and gold cobblestones, which still glitter beneath the surface. Remnants of grand bridges still pierce the water like lonely columns, hinting at a greater civilization that used to be here.

With no pattern or sense, this once opulent city is now deteriorating, chipping away, molding, or just disappearing altogether. Fires blaze in nearby windows. Not like a city that's been attacked. More like a city that's just dematerializing.

EXT. ATAKEBUNE - SAME

Thornton stands with Vera and Q.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

The Capital City. No place in the history of the living world was ever as beautiful. It was as grand as the imagination of a Keeper is infinite.

They pass a magnificent facade with Corinthian columns, and statues and bas reliefs. It's right out of a Homeric fairy tale. But now, it's literally just a facade; the building itself eviscerated.

VERA SOLA

What happened to it?

GREEN CLOAK'S VOICE

It is what happens when you are made to be alone.

Vera's confused by the voice. No one else seems to hear it. It feels like it's in her head.

QUARTERMASTER

The Emptiness is oblivion itself.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Without a Keeper, all life in the Netherworld begins to disappear.

GREEN CLOAK'S VOICE

But you do not have to be alone.

The sky overhead promises fire and brimstone, rain and tornadoes. Everything horrible.

And something strange all around them. Balls of white light bursting up and flying straight into the sky.

VERA SOLA

What's that?

To Thornton, it's difficult to answer.

GREEN CLOAK'S VOICE
Find them. And they will fix
everything.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Drop anchor here.

As they pull up to a rotting dock, Vera notices a burnt-out playground on shore. The echoes of children haunt the air.

VERA SOLA
What are we doing here?

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Unless a new Keeper arises to take
power, all that souls will have
when they pass into this world is
Nothing. Do you know what that
feels like?

VERA SOLA
(pause; remembering
Danny's story)
Yes.

EXT. DECAYING STREET. CAPITAL CITY - NIGHT

A small band of PIRATES walk like bodyguards with Thornton and Vera. Weapons drawn, they stare hard at the rubble and empty buildings, expecting an ambush.

Someone, or something, scurries through the hazy shadows.

Thornton puts his hand around Vera's shoulders, pulling her a little closer.

QUARTERMASTER
Aura fiends. I can smell their
stink.

CAPTAIN THORNTON
Aura is the essence of life. It can
be mined only from living things.

The WWII PIRATE next to Vera cocks his luger.

WWII PIRATE
Cold. Dead. Fingers.

VERA SOLA
(frightened)
Where are we going?

QUARTERMASTER

Down!

The PIRATES scatter like a platoon in enemy territory. Q leads Thornton and Vera safely behind the remnants of a toy store. The old Victorian toys augment the sense of decay.

Something stalks them from behind. A PIRATE SCREAMS. The sound of humans feasting then a sharp burst of light brightens the street like a flash bomb.

Vera doesn't have time to see where it came from as Thornton drags her out into the street.

Another SCREAM from somewhere in the back.

Thornton conjures a thick MIST, which roils over from the canal waters and into the streets.

Another FLASH OF LIGHT from behind brightens the mist for a quick moment before Thornton pushes her into the fog.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Run!

Before she can ask where to, the mist has surrounded her. She can't even see her hands in front of her.

CAPTAIN THORNTON (O.S.)

Run!

The CRACK of gunshots, then the flash of gunfire is barely visible behind her. Vera runs away from it.

CAPTAIN THORNTON (O.S.)

(distant now)

Run, Vera! Run!

Vera runs for her life. Runs until she can't hear anything behind her. She stops. The fog is so thick now she can't breathe. She's lost. Panic rises!

...But then the clouds part. And she emerges into a clearing as if something about this place is repelling the fog.

But why here? This short tract of sidewalk and lush front garden. This singular, unassuming home at the center of a fogless circle.

As Vera approaches, the broken street lamp in front of the house hums...SPARKS!...suddenly glows to life at her presence. And Vera realizes...

This isn't just a house -- it's her house.

Without even a glance back, she runs up the porch steps!

INT. "SOLA HOUSE" - SAME

Vera bursts into the bright, warm house. It's what this house must've looked like with life in it, not the dark house full of moving boxes we saw in the beginning.

VERA SOLA

Mom! Dad?

Through the hall and into the kitchen.

VERA SOLA

Mom? Dad?

Up the stairs, past happy photos, into her parents' bedroom.

VERA SOLA

Mom! Dad!

She only now realizes the silence is unbearable. Her smile fades. Something's not right about this room. There are cracks in the walls. The windows are missing their panes. A wind pushes a gust of dried leaves out from under the bed.

In the hallway, the bannister's white paint flakes off and dissolves. The wallpaper is yellowing rapidly.

She makes her way to her own bedroom door. Pushes it open.

VERA'S ROOM

Is perfectly intact. Bed made. Walls newly painted. Trinkets laid out just right. The only part of the house not in decay.

EXT. "SOLA HOUSE" - SAME

Thornton, Q and the remaining crew step through the fog. They're breathless. Dirty. Still on edge.

QUARTERMASTER

It's not safe for her here.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

It's worth the risk.

He looks up at the house, at the light in an upstairs window.

INT. "SOLA HOUSE" - SAME

Vera picks up the brown book on the bedside table: WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS. She flips through the pages --they're filled with her family's handwritten notes and crayon colorings-- straight to the "Where the Sidewalk Ends" poem.

Thornton appears in the doorway.

VERA SOLA

Why did you bring me here?

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Your mother made this. It says a lot that it's the last thing standing in the midst of all this Emptiness.

He watches through the window as outside in the streets, AURA FIENDS burst out of the looming fog and attack his pirates. Drug-addled but juiced on life essence, they're hideous but strong and quick.

VERA SOLA

Yeah? Like what?

He turns away from the window, perfectly calm. He kneels and takes her hands gently.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

They're gone from life, and yet their hope and memories of you remain strong.

He cups her face with his hand.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Strong, Vera. They did not leave you with nothing.

CRASH! A window breaks downstairs.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

I know it feels like it. I know. But with the world crumbling around you, the warmth of the world they gave you, and taught you about, still lives!

Men screaming. Swords clanking downstairs. Vera: frightened.

VERA SOLA

What have you done?

CAPTAIN THORNTON

If you do not believe in yourself,
souls will be lost, Vera. This
entire world will perish. You could
have saved that man in the storm.

VERA SOLA

No.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

You believed someone stronger than
you would do it in your stead.

VERA SOLA

You did it.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

No, Vera. I didn't.

Vera is stunned.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

Your parents have passed their
powers on to you. It's time you
believe that.

FIENDS burst into the room. Desperate scavengers, they're
armed with shivs and rocks. Anything they could cobble
together from the ruins outside.

Thornton unsheathes his sword and pistol. TWO FIENDS attack
him. The fight is fast and brutal. Thornton has centuries of
experience. But the fiends have desperation.

VERA SOLA

No!

Thornton stuffs his sword into one of the Fiend's stomach and
throws him out the window. A moment later, a white ball of
light shoots vertically into the sky outside.

The SECOND FIEND slaps Thornton's sword to the ground.

Vera throws her alarm clock at the Fiend's head. It distracts
him enough for Thornton to grab a book and jam it into the
Fiend's throat. He swings it at his head and knocks him to
the ground.

Thornton looks at Vera. They share the same thought. He nods
encouragement.

As the Fiend gets to his feet, Vera scans the room for
inspiration.

She sees the fallen Silverstein book open to "Where the Sidewalk Ends". The picture of the dog falling through the ground sparks an idea --

Vera lowers her palms to the floor and closes her eyes. She opens them again -- nothing's happened. The Fiend is now on his feet, making for Thornton.

She closes her eyes tighter. Presses her palms harder.

...and suddenly the Fiend falls through the floor. He grasps for a hold on anything, can't register, and plummets.

Vera can't believe it.

CAPTAIN THORNTON

You did it.

His proud relief is cut short when a THIRD FIEND appears, pulls out a pistol and fires a bullet into his head.

VERA SOLA

NO!!!

Instead of blood and brains, Thornton collapses into a ball of white light. It hovers for a moment, then shoots straight up through the ceiling, blowing a hole in the roof, and disappearing into the sky.

The Fiend instantly drops to his knees to scoop up the gold dust where Thornton used to stand.

He turns on Vera now. And WE RECOGNIZE HIM. It's BURLY, the man talking to Green Cloak much earlier.

BURLY

Here, pretty pretty.

She's too stunned by her loss to do anything as Burly heads for her, blade drawn. Just as he's about to strike -- someone in a GREEN CLOAK apparates into the room. His fight with Burly lasts mere seconds. He's as fast as light. Then suddenly, he's still and quiet.

The white light of Burly's soul hovers beside him then flings up into the sky.

GREEN CLOAK

Come with me. Hurry.

He wraps his cloak around her and --

INT. UNCLE MIFFLIN'S HOUSE. HALLWAY - FLASHBACK

Danny flings his coat off Vera, whom presumably he was protecting from the rain since they're both drenched.

Vera wears a thin plastic coat that looks like a giant rubber ducky.

DANNY SOLA

Miff!

UNCLE MIFFLIN

Danny.

Mifflin is on his knees drilling a hole into the wall below the coat hooks.

DANNY SOLA

Mifflin, I was just reading the most amazing postulation just now -- where's your *Scientific American*? Mine's busted.

He tosses his soaked magazines aside. He whips his coat onto a hook and does the same for Vera's.

DANNY SOLA

A single photon, observed, passes through a single slit, projects itself as any photon does as a single spot of light. Unobserved, however. Unobserved, ho-ho, and the story changes. Unobserved, whether by you or me or the potentiality of you and me in the form of a camera, and that simple photon --

He throws his hands out in opposite directions. Vera is rapt.

DANNY SOLA

...Anything that can occur, will occur. Talk about the ultimate choose-your-own-adventure! Reality as we know it does not...
(calmer; takes a breath;
kisses Vera on the cheek)
...does not exist unless we observe it. We make reality, even in this world.

UNCLE MIFFLIN

If a tree falls in the forest...

DANNY SOLA
Precisely!

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Well why don't you go observe the
tea in the parlor, Daniel.

DANNY SOLA
Vera! Chamomile! Before you start
sneezing.

Danny exits into the parlor.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
When does your mother get back?

Vera shrugs.

VERA SOLA
Dad says he can't tell me where she
goes until I'm older.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
You disagree?

VERA SOLA
What does being older have to do
with anything?

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Sometimes with age comes
experience. And experience changes
the way we understand things.

VERA SOLA
But either way, I'll understand it.
Right?

Mifflin smiles.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
I suppose so. What happened to your
winter coat?

VERA SOLA
Dad caught it on fire.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
On purpose?

Vera nods.

Mifflin's not entirely surprised. He rises, achy. He's
installed another hook, much closer to Vera's height.

VERA SOLA
You've ruined your beautiful wall,
Uncle Mifflin.

Mifflin hangs her duck coat on the new hook.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Nonsense.
(scoops her up)
There might come a day when you'll
visit and you won't have your mom
or dad with you to be your giants.

Danny pops his head back into the hall.

DANNY SOLA
One lump or two?

Mifflin picks up Vera and carries her into the parlor.

FADE TO:

EXT. BLACK SHIP - AFTERNOON (PRESENT)

Through the blurry site of a pair of BINOCULARS, we search, search, then finally focus in on a FLYING MACHINE docked on a flat rock in the middle of the sea.

We sweep up until we spy a large basket. Little Vera's in it. And standing with their back to us, is GREEN CLOAK.

The basket is pulled up on enormous chains, up and up. Then...GREEN CLOAK turns its hood, senses us watching.

We lower the binoculars, panicked. Concerned.

And as we lower the binoculars, we get a full glorious view of where Vera is going: It's an enormous hollowed-out shell that breaches the water by 1,000 feet. And built right on top of the shell are buildings - towers and churches and houses. An entire civilization.

This is SHELL CITY.

From this distance, we see the basket go right up through a hole in the shell ceiling. Vera's gone.

EXT. SHELL CITY - AFTERNOON

A village of buildings from different eras. Instead of brick and mortar, shells and sea debris are the building blocks of everything here.

This also seems to be the "Church Belt" of the Netherworld. There is a worshipping center on every corner. Religious iconography decorates streets and storefronts.

VILLAGERS stop to stare as they pass by. The further into town they go, word spreads until people are now waiting for them outside shops and houses. Staring, in awe.

There are women, men, elderly, and babies. But no children.

One WOMAN hands Vera a loaf of bread as they pass. A MAN offers her a wooden horse. The old toy of a long-gone child.

Green Cloak ignores them and presses through the crowd. As they cross the MAIN COURTYARD, past a giant fountain with a welcome statue of Archangel Michael...

Vera spots an OLD MAN across the way, staring hard at her. It's an eerie look, full of foreboding. Slowly, he shakes his head as if to say, "Don't go inside."

As Green Cloak leads her up a ramp to the doors of a grand castle made of white shells. On seeing him approach, the ROYAL GUARDS open the doors and Vera and Green Cloak disappear within.

INT. EMPEROR'S PALACE - CONTINUOUS

Green Cloak leads Vera through an antechamber to another set of tall, gilded doors. He's silent. His gait determined.

GREEN CLOAK

If you want to stay alive, let me
do the talking.

The gilded doors open as they approach. Green Cloak encourages Vera forward with a gentle hand on her back.

INT. EMPEROR'S PALACE. THRONE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

A lengthy red carpet leads up to a platform where the EMPEROR sits in an austere, cushionless stone throne. The arms end in roaring lion heads. The Emperor himself, like a warrior king, is adorned in polished armor with the gold seal of Shell City emblazoned on his chest.

Beside him, his blonde EMPRESS, in a gown made of roses, reclines on a cushioned throne looking centuries wiser than her husband.

The hall is lined with Corinthian columns and crowded with Catholic iconography, making them look like the King and Queen of Vatican City.

Green Cloak stops at the foot of the platform, kneels and finally removes his hood revealing the most beautiful young man Vera has ever seen. Dark, ageless and perfect, she can't take her eyes off him.

EMPEROR

Seer. What have you brought me?

VERA SOLA

(sotto)

The Seer.

THE SEER

A fearless child, my lord.

EMPRESS

How can you be so sure?

THE SEER

I found her in the Capital City.

This is impressive.

VERA SOLA

I'm not --

THE SEER

She killed an Aura Fiend.

Vera's horrified.

EMPRESS

This little thing?

VERA SOLA

No, I --

The Seer privately grips her hand. His look reminds her of the silence she's supposed to keep.

It doesn't sit right with her, but she decides to trust him.

Meanwhile, the Empress takes the Emperor's hand.

EMPRESS

My dear. The night.

Everyone turns to the window, Vera last to realize what they're looking at. All of the windows are suddenly blackened by darkness.

A piece of the ceiling crumbles off behind the throne.
Strangely, neither the Emperor or Empress seem to notice it.

EMPEROR

Put her with the others.

The Emperor ushers the Empress quickly out of the hall as if
the night sky would chase them.

The Seer glances up at the impending night.

THE SEER

Come with me.

INT. DUNGEON - MOMENTS LATER

Vera trails the Seer down dark, crumbling stairs and walls
covered in wet, black moss. FACES appear in the rock,
watching her descend. The looks in their stone eyes are a
mixture of fear, sadness and confusion.

VERA SOLA

Ghosts.

THE SEER

We're all ghosts.

He looks back at her.

THE SEER

Except you, of course.

His smile is arresting, and his allure comforts Vera easily.

THE SEER

They are victims of the Emperor's
monster. Unable to die, unable to
live on here. Trapped by their
fear. They've forgotten there's
anything else.

Vera stops at one of the faces. Young. It could be hers.

VERA SOLA

How can you die if you're already
dead?

THE SEER

Death here is simply being as far
away from The End of the World as
you can be.

(smiles at her)

(MORE)

THE SEER (CONT'D)

This isn't the only realm that the
dead are forced to dwell in. A
death here is the same as up there.
It's a step back.

Vera is spooked. By him. The ghosts. Death.

THE SEER

You'd share a similar ending if I
had told them who you really were.
The Emperor is not keen
on...competition. Come.

They come upon a row of cells full of malnourished CHILDREN.
This must be where the town's kids are kept.

VERA SOLA

Competition?

THE SEER

You have more power than he can
possibly imagine. And not having
power is the one thing the Emperor
most fears.

The Seer leads Vera past. Most are too weak to even
acknowledge her.

VERA SOLA

Where are you taking me?

THE SEER

Do you like stories, Vera Sola?

At this, some of the weaker children perk up.

WE FADE TO:

EXT. SHELL CITY - DAY (FLASHBACK STORY)

A small bearded man, vaguely resembling the regal and refined
EMPEROR we just saw, fishes off a tiny island of rocks and
dirt beneath the shade of the giant Shell.

THE SEER (V.O.)

A long time ago, one of the Keepers
of the Netherworld appeared to a
soul known as Albus.

A TALL KEEPER in gray robes is suddenly standing behind the
man. Startled, he drops his fishing rod and tumbles into the
sea. Full of kindness, the Tall Keeper helps him out.

THE SEER (V.O.)

He found him as ordinary as other souls, but saw in him also an imagination and eagerness for dreams that surpassed many.

CUT TO:

SHELL CITY - STREETS (FLASHBACK STORY)

The Tall Keeper walks with this Albus across the crest of the giant Shell. As he walks, the shell turns into cobblestones and pavement beneath his feet until by the time they come to a stop, they're standing in the middle of a Courtyard.

Albus is enthralled by this magic. Graced by its presence. Everything empty in him is suddenly filled with joy and he smiles with tears and laughter in his eyes.

THE SEER (V.O.)

So he bestowed upon him the greatest honor that a searching soul in the Netherworld can possess.

The Keeper leans down and pins something to Albus's lapel. It's the EMBLEM OF THE CITY ON THE EDGE OF A WATERFALL.

THE SEER (V.O.)

The Order of the Keeper. Albus would from then on be a Groundskeeper, tasked with protecting and maintaining the Keeper's creations when they were absent in the Land of the Living.

SHELL CITY - TIME LAPSE (FLASHBACK STORY)

The City builds as if on its own. Open land becomes huts becomes houses and churches and towers. Empty streets are suddenly teeming with industrious, happy souls. This is a warmer, long ago Shell City than the one we saw with Vera.

THE SEER (V.O.)

With the help of Albus's imagination and dreams, the Keeper built Shell City for him to rule with the kindness and fairness innate in his soul. And other souls flocked to Shell City, which became known as a beacon of safety, comfort and justice.

(MORE)

THE SEER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
But it wasn't long before Albus
became possessed by fear.

VERA SOLA (V.O.)
Of what?

BACK TO PRESENT:

INT. DUNGEON - PRESENT

The Seer brushes his hand over the stump of a candle, which
alights at his presence, and grows taller as it burns.

VERA SOLA
What does a soul have to be scared
of? Especially if he's...

THE SEER
In the Order?
(smiles)
We are all here because we have
unfinished lessons to learn. Even
Groundskeepers.

There's a sadness behind his words. Vera's still a little too
naive to notice the resentment though.

THE SEER
And soon fear became all he knew.
Until he forgot his duties.

SHELL CITY - FLASHBACK

Doors slam shut. The street gaslamps blow out. There's a
coldness here. The whole city feels gray and unwelcoming.

THE SEER (V.O.)
So afraid was he that his hopes and
dreams for Shell City would be
taken from him, that he forgot his
important role and became consumed
by his fear.

Something moves through the dark streets. Something that
slithers on the back of fog and swallows shadows.

THE SEER (V.O.)
And opened the way for the monster.

INT. DUNGEON - PRESENT

The children all shudder. Vera looks out the window into the black of night with new appreciation of its terrors.

That's when the Seer closes the cell gate and locks her in.

VERA SOLA
What are you doing!

He leans in close, so only she can hear. A confidante who's locking her behind bars?

THE SEER
You are here in Shell City for a reason, Vera Sola. The Keeper gave the Emperor the most important task of all. For in Shell City was the resting place of the Keeper's Key.

VERA SOLA
The key to what?

A look from the Seer gives her the answer she was hoping for.

VERA SOLA
To my parents.

THE SEER
To the End of the World, yes. And once you find them, they can stop the Emptiness and fix all this. But because the Emperor has forgotten his sacred duty, the location of the Key is lost. Except to the true Keeper.

Vera perks up. Everything she wants is in reach now. Finally.

VERA SOLA
What must I do?

THE SEER
It is said that the Key will only reveal itself to the Keeper. But if the Emperor knew you were the heir, his fear that you are here to take Shell City from him, I'm afraid, would cloud all else.

VERA SOLA
So I'm a "fearless child".

They look out at the other imprisoned children.

THE SEER
I'm afraid so.

A great RUCKUS draws their attention to a GUARD who's now dragging a TEENAGED GIRL out of a far cell. She's too weak to really fight back, but she claws nonetheless. Her fingertips reach back towards her dark cell. Her SCREAM as she's yanked brutally away, Vera will never forget.

VERA SOLA
Where are they taking her?

THE SEER
She will face the Monster.
(shakes his head, sad)
And she will not succeed.

The girl's cell door creaks on its hinges. Open now, but it's not a symbol of freedom. The other children now seem *safe* behind their bars.

THE SEER
That trick you did at the house.
Could you do it on this door?

VERA SOLA
I don't know.

THE SEER
You must. For in this, I cannot aid
you. The Keeper and the Keeper
alone will find the Key.

He grips her hand through the bars. The faith in his eyes gives Vera strength. She nods and watches him walk away. Leaving her alone.

Vera retreats into the dark of her cell. Her first moment alone to register all she's seen. The Emptiness. Capital City. Her house. Thornton's death. The proof of her powers. Already, she's not the scared girl she once was. But fear and self-doubt creep in now that she has a chance to breathe.

Then a SCREAM pierces the night. All the children hear it. It bleeds through their windows. It's the TEENAGED GIRL from before. Vera would know that scream anywhere.

TEENAGED GIRL (O.S.)
No! No! Please! Noooooooooooo ---

Her pleading is cut short by utter silence.

Someone cries in another cell.

At this, Vera looks around for any way to escape. There's no way she's staying here to be fed to that monster thing.

That's when she notices...

The CANDLE the Seer lit for her. It's old, melted down, the pale wax frozen in its overspill in such a way that, with the pointed flame alight, it forms a WHITE ARROW pointing up.

Vera looks at her ceiling. The brick and mortar is tight. Impenetrable without tools.

CAPTAIN THORNTON (V.O.)
Control over body leads to control
over mind.

Vera closes her eyes and steadies her breathing.

CAPTAIN THORNTON (V.O.)
Your parents have passed their
powers on to you. It's time you
believe that.

Vera opens her eyes. And with utter surety, stares at the ceiling. The brick and mortar peel away like paper.

Exhilarated, Vera drags the nearby broken bed over. Carefully uses it to give her a leg up. She pulls herself up and onto the roof of her cell. She looks around to find it...

VERA SOLA
Familiar. How do I know this.

She is surrounded by dozens of staircases. Some lead to nowhere, some up to hatches in the ceiling or floor, others to boarded up windows.

The floor is checkered. On some squares sit large stone statues in no particular order, like some giant haphazardly left his game of chess half-played here centuries ago.

The STATUES depict an odd smattering of creatures: beasts; grotesque or angelic people. Some haunting, some beautiful, some simply terrifying.

Like the one Vera comes to now. It's a cross, with a man hanging upside down on it. In place of his face, is a giant, gaping eye that seems to follow her as she continues on.

Another shows an ANGEL pouring water from one cup held at her chest, to another she holds at her waist.

Another is a KNIGHT on a horse in mid-step. As Vera comes around to the front, she sees that the Knight's mask is up revealing a skeletal face with holes for eyes.

VERA SOLA

Death.

(suddenly excited)

Death!

To a stone man raising a wand and pointing to the floor with his other hand. The look on his handsome face is grave, grim.

VERA SOLA

The Magician. It's the hero's journey.

CUT TO:

INT. SOLA HOUSE. LIVING ROOM - FLASHBACK

Miranda lays with Vera on the floor, like two happy children.

Before them, Miranda peels cards from a deck and lays them down. As we get closer, we realize they're TAROT CARDS, and Miranda is laying them out in order.

Right now, she lays down THE TOWER. A horrifying image of a castle tower under attack by storms and fire. People tumble from the tower to their deaths.

Vera is frightened by the image. It captures her imagination. We can almost HEAR the lightning and the screams.

MIRANDA SOLA

The Tower. One of the most important cards of all. It is when our hero accepts that they must change. The tower represents their old selves. Stuck. Unyielding. Unconscious. Not ready to believe.

At this, she strokes Vera's head. It calms little Vera.

Miranda lays down the next card. THE STAR. It depicts openness and light and grace.

MIRANDA SOLA

But when they have nothing left to do but believe, then the world becomes theirs.

Vera already holds THE WORLD card in her hand. The final card in the tarot hero's journey. It shows perfect freedom.

Miranda smiles and kisses Vera on the forehead.

INT. DUNGEON - PRESENT

Vera looks around at the statues now, looking for one in particular. She finds it - THE TOWER. It's as frightening as she remembered. In one of the carved-out windows, a face looks out in terror, mouth agape in silent stone screams.

But there's no fear in Vera's face now. There's something stronger.

VERA SOLA

After The Tower, the hero makes his way to...

She looks, finds it -- JUDGMENT: An angry Angel with a trumpet, staring severely down at a man, woman and child, pleading and hanging onto the Angel's legs like babes.

VERA SOLA

Judgment. And then. The World.

She spins, looking for it. Can't seem to find the statue she's looking for. *Where is it?!*

Then something stops her -- a peculiar door at the head of one of the staircases. Unlike the others, this one is round and has the remnants of once being ornately trimmed.

She climbs that staircase, gets to the door to see the faded carvings of a man, an ox, a lion, and an eagle within the round door. There's no knob.

VERA SOLA

It's missing something.

It's missing the WOMAN who usually stands in the middle of the circle on the card. Vera suddenly knows what to do.

Vera closes her eyes, takes a breath, and steps right through the circle of the door so that she herself completes the card as the "woman" at the center of the circle.

She turns and looks back at us...

INT. OUBLIETTE - SAME

Vera looks back through the round door like she's looking through a window, not the stone it seemed on the other side.

This room now is much different. Darker. More forgotten. She stands ankle-deep in bilgewater, looking out at a massive, craggy, black rock column the width of a house in the middle of this otherwise empty room. At its crown is a dais where something GOLDEN GLITTERS.

Vera smiles. She thinks about it for a moment and steps up to the column, presses her hand against its cold surface. Nothing happens. It's like this rock is impervious to her newfound powers.

She stares up the edge of the massive structure.

VERA SOLA

(ugh)

I guess sometimes you have to do
the work.

She starts climbing.

THE DAIS - LATER

Vera climbs over the lip, finally at the top, and just lays for a tired second. Her face is sweaty and dusty. Her hands a little bloodied.

She catches her breath, which is stolen again at the sight of the KEY. Gold. Magical. Perfect, as you'd imagine it to be.

Vera holds it in her hands. To her - this is just one step shy of getting her parents back.

OUBLIETTE - LATER

Vera climbs down, feet splashing back onto soggy ground.

She doesn't see it, but BEHIND HER is The Seer.

THE SEER

You found it.

Vera is startled to see him here.

THE SEER

Come. Give it to me and we can go
get them.

He sees her suspicion.

THE SEER

I know how to get to the End of the
World and use the Key to find them.
This isn't your job, Vera. Fixing
the Netherworld.

(MORE)

THE SEER (CONT'D)

How is one little girl expected to defeat the Emptiness? The burden is too much, and it's not fair for you to carry it alone.

He's making sense. A sense Vera had herself not long ago. She softens to his caring and convincing words, lets him get close.

He smiles so kindly and reaches out his hand.

THE SEER

Come. Let me help you.

She pulls the KEY from her pocket and places it in his palm. Then she looks up into his eyes, his expression changed. And she knows. She's made the wrong choice.

VERA SOLA

Please don't.

The water around Vera's ankles SWIRLS. She tries to step away, but the water holds her tight like liquid chains.

The Seer walks off into the shadows, where TWO GROUNDSKEEPER GUARDS emerge.

VERA SOLA

Seer! Don't do this! You promised you would take me to my parents. You promised!

The Groundskeeper Guards descend on Vera.

CUT TO:

EXT. ARMORY - MOMENTS LATER

Vera is tossed out a door which promptly closes again behind her.

The armory is a V-shaped enclosure which funnels off to a rickety wooden gate. That's all that's between her and the streets of Shell City and an enormous, stalking BEAST.

The walls of the V are stocked with racks and racks of weapons, shields and armor. The variety in the arsenal suggests multiple and very different kinds of beasts wait for Vera beyond the meager gate.

EMPEROR'S GUARD

Better pick something. Quickly.

He's a hard man, scars across his face from countless barely-survived battles.

EMPEROR'S GUARD

There's no way but that way now.

Vera turns to the door she was just spewed out of. Concentrates. Tries to do what she did with the ceiling in her cell, but she's too scared and angry to find that place of serenity. Another GROWL from somewhere seals her fear.

EMPEROR'S GUARD

Told ya. I'd recommend the chain mail. It's fool-proof.

Vera, now fueled by anger and frustration, looks at all the weapons and grabs a SHORT SWORD.

EMPEROR'S GUARD

All style. No brains. Ok then.

He flings open the gate and pushes Vera out.

EXT. SHELL CITY. MAIN COURTYARD - SAME

The city is deserted. It's so quiet she can hear the sound of ocean waves lapping the Shell miles below.

A single gas lamp illumines the giant ivory wings of Archangel Michael in the center of this circular cobblestoned piazza.

As she makes her way across the courtyard, her FOOTFALLS ECHO through the abandoned streets which spread out before her like dark threads of a spider's web.

She stops under the down-turned face of Michael. He stares at her like he wishes he could help. But with no Key, Vera feels helpless.

A sliver of light appears on the ground. Vera follows it up to a window where the Emperor and Empress observe, thrilled.

DOWN A DARK SIDE STREET - someone watches Vera, so small in the midst of this palatial courtyard.

But Vera doesn't see the watcher. Instead, she steels herself, and turns to face the music.

VERA SOLA

Okay. I know you're out there.

(silence)

I know you're out there!

VERA SOLA'S ECHO
Out there...there...there...

VERA SOLA
Come and get me!

VERA SOLA'S ECHO
Get me...get me...get me...

VERA SOLA
I'm not afraid of you!

VERA SOLA'S ECHO
Afraid...afraid...afraid...afraid.

That's strange. What happened to the "of you"?

At once, the darkness closes in. The gas lamp is still on here, but the darkness creeps in as if with a mind of its own. Vera backs up until her heels are against the statue, terrified what being touched by the darkness means. It quickly overcomes her, throws her into shadow.

Her singular breaths heavy through the dark.

A light flips on in a house ahead. LAUGHTER. Though she's surrounded by rows of houses and churches and shops, the entire City seems empty. Except for that LAUGHTER. She walks towards it.

On tiptoes, she peers in.

...to find *herself*. Sitting with her parents inside. They're having a grand old time, playing some kind of game.

Vera starts to cry. She taps at the glass. They don't hear.

VERA SOLA
Mom!

She taps again. Again. AGAIN!

VERA SOLA
Mommy! Mommy!

--A DARK FIGURE passes inhumanly fast in the foreground--

Vera gasps and spins to look into the dark shadows...

INT. HOUSE - SAME

A frightened MOM, DAD and SON huddle together in their darkened house.

Out the window, they see Vera frightened by something. She looks back into their window, tears in her eyes and...

EXT. SHELL CITY - SAME

Taps again. But her own family she sees within does not notice her.

ANOTHER LIGHT further down.

A CLOAKED FIGURE passes fast and out of sight.

Vera flees to the next window. An engagement party. The smiling guests all watch the happy COUPLE dance.

Vera throws her palms into the window, tries to break it in. The glass is like stone. A moment and the MAN near the window turns to say something to the WOMAN next to him -- it's her father! And the woman is her mother!

INT. COUPLE'S HOME - SAME

In reality, the COUPLE hold each other on the couch, trying not to look at the strange, desperate girl pounding on their window with her palms.

EXT. SHELL CITY - SAME

Sobbing now...

VERA SOLA
Please! Let me in! Somebody please!

INT. COUPLE'S HOME - SAME

WOMAN
Robert...

MAN
No. We can't. You know we can't.

EXT. SHELL CITY - SAME

Four new FIGURES, all with the same death-black cloak, white wraithlike faces, join the first on the street. They stalk towards Vera purposefully. Staring...staring...

She runs for her life now. Ignores the LIGHTS that come on in windows, the LAUGHTER and the VOICES, even when it's her parents'.

Finally she turns a corner, crosses the main street and ducks under the decaying porch of a gazebo.

The FIGURES --now there are at least 10-- stop as one when they turn the corner and can't find her. They speak to each other wordlessly and spread out.

Vera's lost track of them. Can't follow them all from between the slats of her hideout. She tries to control her breathing. Remembers the SHORT SWORD in her hand. It feels useless, but at least it's something.

Someone, or something, approaches...the sound of their scuffs (not even footfalls) get closer.

Instinctively, Vera grabs her PARENTS' LOCKET for comfort. Touching it again awakens something in her. She looks at it, really looks at it, and notices now THE EMBLEM on its cover.

VERA SOLA

They tried.

INT. VERA'S ROOM - FLASHBACK

Young Vera cries. Her knees and elbows scuffed. Bicycle helmet tossed to the floor. Danny dabs Neosporin on her cuts.

DANNY SOLA

So you're going to run from
everything that scares you in life?

Pouty Vera nods.

DANNY SOLA

Running from danger I get. That's
common sense. But running away from
something just because you're
afraid of it? Don't know a single
soul who changed the world that
way. More importantly.

He gently patches up the scuff on her chin.

DANNY SOLA

Don't know a single soul who's been
happy doing that either.

He tenderly, lovingly rubs her ear. A familiar comfort.

DANNY SOLA
I just want you to be happy, baby.
Because then you won't need to run.

FADE TO:

EXT. SHELL CITY

Vera. Under the gazebo. The memory makes her into a reluctant but ready hero. She tucks the locket away in her shirt. She raises her head. And in her eyes, a new resolve.

She listens. Hears nothing.

Slowly, she climbs out of her hiding place. As she retreats back to the main piazza, the wraiths slither out of shadows and soon have her surrounded. She points her sword at them.

VERA SOLA
Stay back!

They sure look dangerous. And hungry for her blood.

VERA SOLA
I am the Keeper. Just like my
mother before me.

They stop.

VERA SOLA
She created all of this. And I
created you.

LEAD WRAITH
(raspy)
You are alone. Abandoned.

VERA SOLA
They didn't abandon me.

LEAD WRAITH
You have nothing.

She grips the locket under her shirt. It looks like she's touching her heart.

VERA SOLA
(more to herself)
I have everything I need.

LEAD WRAITH
Nothing but loneliness. Resentment.
And fear.

She stares right at the Lead Wraith. His voice sounds hungry to feast on her fear.

VERA SOLA
I am not afraid of you.

The Lead Wraith smirks. They all close in on her, skeletal hands reaching...

Vera points her sword at them, ready to fight to the death.

VERA SOLA
I AM NOT AFRAID OF YOU!

An EXPLOSION OF DARKNESS AND SCREAMS blast Vera to the ground.

INT. COUPLE'S HOME - SAME

Their windows shatter. They scream, hold each other tight.

INT. HOUSE - SAME

The Family clamp their hands over their ears as their windows shatter and their house shakes violently.

EXT. SHELL CITY - SAME

The wraiths burst to mist like a great force just exploded out of Vera.

Vera on the ground, shielding her eyes, covered in glass. Her sword still firmly in her hand.

VERA SOLA
I'm not afraid! I'm not afraid! I'm
not afraid.

A hand reaches out for Vera.

VERA SOLA
I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid.

It yanks her to her feet.

VOICE
Vera.

She opens her eyes. It's Gardner! Without a word, she leaps into his arms.

He peels her off.

VERA SOLA
How did you --

GARDNER
No time. Come on. This is the last
place you should be.

Vera looks around and sees Shell City the way it really is. CITIZENS emerge, frightened and curious. Homes and streets are lit up. In Vera's fear, she could not see any of this.

Then something stops them. It's not over...

CLANK. CLANK. CLANK. HEEEEAVE. CLANK. HEEEEEEEEEEAVE.

It's coming from the Main Courtyard.

MAIN COURTYARD

-- where a SMALL ANIMAL is pinned down with chains staked into the cobblestones at the feet of Archangel Michael.

GARDNER
It's a Chimera.

It looks more like a small fox, if a fox had two heads. Its hair stands permanently on end along its spine, which ends at a poisonous barb.

GARDNER
No wonder it's so gifted in
illusion. But who would've chained
it here?

VERA SOLA
The Seer.

Out of the palace rushes the Emperor with his Guards in tow.

GARDNER
We need to go.

VERA SOLA
Wait.

The Emperor gives the Chimera a wide berth, but circles it, aghast. Citizens eye Vera like she's the 2nd Coming.

VERA SOLA
His greatest fear is not having
control.

She steps closer to the Chimera.

GARDNER

Vera!

VERA SOLA

(to the Emperor)

I am Vera Sola! Keeper of the
Netherworld!

The entire city reacts with joy. Except the Emperor.

EMPEROR

The Keeper is dead. There is order
here when there is chaos everywhere
else. I make this city safe! I am
the closest thing to a Keeper there
is now.

VERA SOLA

Living in fear is not the same
thing as living in safety.

Vera pets the Chimera on the head then yanks out the stake
holding its head down. It's enough - it's still tangled in
its chains, but it now has the strength to get loose. And so
does the Emperor's fear: chaos...

GARDNER

Run!

EMPEROR

Get her!

Gardner and Vera run for their lives. Behind them, the
Chimera gives out a monstrous ROAAAAAR and evaporates into a
dark mist which consumes the Emperor and the Guards. It makes
them each experience their own personal fears and each reacts
differently to their personal hells.

But it doesn't get all of them - a handful have escaped the
mist and are chasing after them.

The Citizens watch on, unaffected. The mist doesn't touch
them. They are no longer afraid.

But the mist does chase after the Guards. Gardner pulls Vera
down an alley. They sprint.

Behind them, the Guards and black mist pursue them.

Finally, they reach the BASKET that took Vera up earlier.
Gardner's about to lower them down, then sees they don't have
time. So instead, he pushes Vera over the Shell's edge.

She plummets to the black waters below.

Gardner leaps in after her.

When Vera surfaces, spitting salt water, she sees she's landed right next to GARDNER'S BOAT. She splashes for it, draws herself in and lays gasping and wet on the floor.

A moment and Gardner joins her. He's instantly to business, prepping the sail and the oars.

GARDNER
Up, Keeper! We must clear this
place before --

His breath stops.

Vera looks up to see a blade of black mist has stabbed Gardner right through the heart. It now pulls back, retreats to the City where the SCREAMS of Guards can still be heard.

VERA SOLA
Gardner!

Gardner looks like he's seen a ghost. Unmoving. Not blinking.

Vera has no choice, she must take control. She struggles to get ahold of the oars. Her little muscles barely have the strength to row this boat.

Vera yells for Gardner, but he's unresponsive. His mind miles away.

Just then, a wind fills the sail and helps her flee the shadow of Shell City.

EXT. OCEAN. GARDNER'S BOAT - DAWN

The sail is full. Below, on deck, Vera sleeps, the oars still in each hand. The sail begins to deflate.

Gardner stirs. When he opens his eyes, there's life in them again. He looks like he has the worst hangover on the planet. He sees the wind has died. Gently, he picks Vera up and lays her on a folded-up spare sail. He takes to rowing.

Vera's eyes blink open.

VERA SOLA
Gardner.

He smiles at her, a mixture of pride and regret.

VERA SOLA
You're okay.

GARDNER
Me? 'Course.

VERA SOLA
The Seer took the Key to the End of
the World.

GARDNER
The Seer?

She pulls herself up on the bench next to him. Rubs her
sleepy eyes.

VERA SOLA
The Chimera showed you something
awful?

He nods. Vera doesn't want to pry.

GARDNER
My daughter. From life. Someone
took her while I was...I didn't do
anything to stop it. Couldn't. I
was there, but I didn't even know
it was happening.

He stops rowing. A beat then he reaches into his coat and
pulls out his FLASK. He leaps up, rocking the boat hard -
Vera has to hang on - and bounds to the bow, reels his elbow
back. He's gonna chuck that flask as far as it will fly!

Then something stops him. He can't do it.

He crumples. A giant in shambles.

GARDNER
She was fifteen when she was
kidnapped. She would have had to
walk right past me to leave the
house. But I never saw her. Didn't
see anything.

VERA SOLA
(pause)
Is she here? Have you found her
here?

GARDNER
We each have our own paths here.

He tucks the flask back into his coat.

GARDNER

Just like up top. And when each of our business is done, we will be reunited. Rebecca was an angel. I doubt she'd be in a place like this. She probably went right to the End of the World when she --

He hiccups back a tear.

GARDNER

Where the Emptiness cannot touch her!

(wipes his nose)

I have to believe she's there already. Waiting.

(laughs sadly)

Wondering what's taking her papa so damn long.

He gathers himself and with a deep breath, he's back to business.

VERA SOLA

What's your lesson?

He looks at Vera. Changes the subject with a laugh.

GARDNER

The conqueror of the Monster of Shell City. Hah. I knew you had it in you!

He rocks the boat again as he climbs back to his seat, takes up the oars. He elbows Vera. The force nearly throws her over. It makes them both laugh. A welcome release.

VERA SOLA

What's the Seer want with the Key?

GARDNER

I don't know. The Emptiness wreaks havoc in more than just destruction.

(taps his head)

It destroys you here too.

VERA SOLA

What happens if he goes to the End of the World?

GARDNER

Well. The Universe doesn't work that way.

(MORE)

GARDNER (CONT'D)

You cannot go if you still have
life lessons to learn. Let's just
say the Emptiness will be the least
of our problems.

VERA SOLA

Then we have to stop him.

A beat as Gardner takes in this change in priorities from
Vera.

VERA SOLA

But how do we get there? The Seer's
the only one who knows its
location.

Gardner is hiding an alternative. He doesn't want to say it.

GARDNER

There's one way. But nobody takes
it.

VERA SOLA

Why not?

GARDNER

You'll see.

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Gardner's boat is beached on a lava rock beach. Two pairs of
footsteps, one giant, one tiny, make their way to the woods.

EXT. FOREST OF DREAMS - DAY

Vera and Gardner are knee-deep in foliage and mud: a swamp
forest.

VERA SOLA

My mom would never have made this.
This is disgusting.

Gardner smirks.

GARDNER

This forest has been here long
before your mother became Keeper.
And long before that.

He stops. Looks around. Takes a deep breath.

GARDNER
We're close. I can feel it.

VERA SOLA
Feel what?

GARDNER
The end.

Vera slips, falls.

VERA SOLA
Ick.

Gardner plucks her out. It makes a plunger sound as she's sucked out. He puts her on his shoulders.

VERA SOLA
My mother always said there is no end. Because every end is another beginning. Like this place. It's just another journey. Like life. Huh, Gardner?

Gardner is silent.

VERA SOLA
The Seer was the Head of the Order.
Like my dad. But my dad got to go
to the End of the World.
(pause)
I wonder what the Seer has to
learn.

GARDNER
How not to steal, I think, is
probably on the list.

Vera laughs before she even realizes it. The sound and feeling surprises her. It seems to surprise the forest too. The sound spreads through the forest, rustling the trees. An echo comes back, but it's a beautiful song as if from the voice of an angel.

VERA SOLA
That sounds like...my mother.

GARDNER
You know, I met her once. On one of
her visits. She was incredibly
kind.

VERA SOLA

And funny.

(smiles at a memory)

I keep thinking maybe all this is just a joke. And I'll wake up and she'll be laughing at how I really thought she...she would just leave. Without telling me about all this.

Gardner chuckles.

GARDNER

She was a smart woman. I'm sure she had her reasons.

VERA SOLA

She was smart.

(pause; a thought!)

She was smart! Very smart.

She crawls off Gardner's back. She pulls out her poem from her pocket.

VERA SOLA

"There is a place where the sidewalk ends and before the street begins, and there the grass grows soft and white..."

(skims ahead)

"Past the pits where the asphalt flowers grow, we shall walk with a walk that is measured and slow, and watch where the chalk-white arrows go, to the place where the sidewalk ends."

She looks up, realizing. No need to read.

VERA SOLA

"Yes we'll walk with a walk..."

INT. SOLA HOUSE. KITCHEN - FLASHBACK

Vera shuts the window. Its curtain falls back into place without the breeze.

And sure enough...the WHITE ARROW forms again on the floor.

This time, Vera follows it...

...right to the dining room where the boxes Mifflin has packed and labeled also form a crude WHITE ARROW shape pointing out the sliding glass door to the backyard.

VERA SOLA (V.O.)
 "...that is measured and slow, and
 we'll go where the chalk-white
 arrows go."

EXT. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY - FLASHBACK

The Library's sign points its white arrow the wrong way.

VERA SOLA (V.O.)
 "For the children, they mark..."

INT. UNIVERSITY GARDENS - FLASHBACK

The flowers flutter in a breeze, forming a brief white arrow.

VERA SOLA (V.O.)
 "and the children, they know..."

INT. DUNGEON - FLASHBACK

The candle in Vera's cell forms a crude white arrow upwards.

VERA SOLA (V.O.)
 "the place where the sidewalk
 ends."

EXT. FOREST OF DREAMS - NOW

VERA SOLA
 She knew.

GARDNER
 What?

VERA SOLA
 (excited)
 She knew all this time.

She starts rushing around, looking for something.

GARDNER
 She knew what?

VERA SOLA
 They both did.

She runs around a corner. Stops. Looks about her then
 suddenly starts climbing a tree.

GARDNER

Whoa little Keeper. What are ye doing? Where are ye going? Be careful!

Vera slips on a wet branch, but keeps going. Finally, she gets to the peak and sure enough -- the tops of the forest, with daylight dancing on its leaves, form a WHITE ARROW pointing at a clearing less than a mile ahead.

She sits back, exhausted. Almost ready to cry.

Gardner is far below, confused.

GARDNER

Vera?

She wipes her eyes with her sleeve.

VERA SOLA

I know where you want me to go. I know.

EXT. ABOVE THE TREES. CLEARING - LATER

From above the trees, we see Vera and Gardner emerge into the clearing below at the tip of the WHITE ARROW formed by the play of daylight on the tree leaves. As soon as they do, the wind blows a different direction and the WHITE ARROW disappears.

EXT. CLEARING - SAME

Gardner looks worried. Pulls Vera close.

GARDNER

This place is full of dark magic.

VOICE

Wrong.

The voice is soft. Like silk. It feels as if it's everywhere.

GARDNER

Who goes there?

CHERRY BLOSSOMS flush to life in the trees all around them, creating a pink glow as if the petals were lights. A fog rolls in, creeps across the forest floor.

But one area at the far end remains darkened by shadow.

VERA SOLA

Dead end.

VOICE

Wrong.

VERA SOLA

Please. Can you help us?

VOICE

Help the Keeper?

An EGRET with black circles under its wings like eyes flutters down from the branches. It stares at them knowingly.

GARDNER

This was a bad idea. We can find another way. You don't need to do this.

The bird cocks its head to disapprove of Gardner. Vera shakes free and steps for the egret.

VERA SOLA

Please. I don't know how to get to the End. And I need help.

The bird flashes its wings, forcing the fog around it to swirl as it slowly, elegantly turns into a pale woman in ballet shoes and a diaphanous white cocktail dress. This is ANNALISE.

She reaches into the mist and pulls out a white lace umbrella and, with the other hand, a white satin top hat, which she places gently on her head with a confident smile.

ANNALISE

So you are the one we have been waiting for.

VERA SOLA

My name is --

ANNALISE

I know it.

There's something frightening about this ivory goddess.

ANNALISE

I know why you are here. I know your question. And I know where you will find the answer.

GARDNER

We're looking for the Seer. That's it, witch.

ANNALISE

(fierce)

The Keeper no longer needs to be spoken for!

Gardner's about to clobber her, but Vera stays him with a hand on his arm. She steps towards Annalise. Gardner wishes she wouldn't get so close.

VERA SOLA

Do you know how I can get to the End of the World to stop the Seer?

ANNALISE

His desire is very similar to yours. His thoughts the same. Paths that cross in the night.

GARDNER

Damned riddles.

VERA SOLA

He's scared of being alone. Isn't he? Does he have someone who made it to the End before him?

Annalise smiles an impressed "yes".

GARDNER

He was Head of the Order. He knows how this works. He knows what he has to do to get there proper.

VERA SOLA

Knowing has nothing to do with it.

ANNALISE

The Keeper is as wise as she is small.

VERA SOLA

Even if he destroys the Netherworld in the process, he'll try. Trust me.

(beat)

What do I have to do?

ANNALISE

He is empty, just like you. Lost. Unsure.

(MORE)

ANNALISE (CONT'D)

Things he once knew to be true, no longer seem absolute. He seeks certainty and sanctuary.

She looks at Vera coyly. She swirls her umbrella tip in the fog.

ANNALISE

There is no certainty and sanctuary. Not even now, with you and this endeavor.

VERA SOLA

I have to try anyway.

Annalise smiles approvingly.

ANNALISE

Then walk The Gauntlet and take your test.

Cherry blossoms bloom at the very back of the clearing, bringing to light a DOORWAY through the trees that was hidden in shadow before. A lantern grows on a hook on the trunk from which the door is carved.

GARDNER

No. There must be another way.

ANNALISE

It is the quickest!

GARDNER

This is the Keeper! You would risk her life?

ANNALISE

She risks only what she allows.

GARDNER

I swear I will wring your bloody --

VERA SOLA

Gardner, it's okay. It's the only way, right? I can do it.

ANNALISE

The Gauntlet will reflect your own mind. Nothing more, nothing less. Only the strong survive.

Vera faces the doorway. Petals of pink light float down over the entry.

Deep breath. The doorway leads into pitch darkness. Vera takes the lantern off the hook, takes one last look back, then steps through and is swallowed by blackness.

GARDNER
You better be sure.

ANNALISE
As I said. There is no certainty.

INT. THE GAUNTLET - CONTINUOUS

Vera walks through Stygian shadows. The lantern shows nothing but darkness on all sides. The only sound comes from her footsteps and nervous breaths.

VERA SOLA'S VOICE
What if something's in here with
me?

A DEEP GROWL of some kind of nightmarish beast from up ahead. Vera freezes.

VERA SOLA'S VOICE
What if it's huge?

Another GROWL, this time from something much bigger.

Vera backs up, retreats into shadow until her back is against a craggy cave wall. She sets the lantern down and crawls just out of its circle of light so she's hidden in darkness.

VERA SOLA'S VOICE
I should've listened to Gardner.

A SPOTLIGHT suddenly appears ahead, lighting a boat that rocks as if on waves, even though it's on solid ground.

INSIDE THE BOAT, impossibly, is Vera and Gardner. They struggle with the sail and the oars. Getting wet from waves that Vera, watching still from the shadows, can't see.

It's like watching a play.

"GARDNER"
It's here! The Emptiness!

"Gardner" throws his body over "Vera" to protect her as the boat's bow is torn apart by an invisible force that eats its way right through the deck and --

Vera turns away, unable to watch as their screams and the sound of ripping wood suddenly stops.

She slowly opens her eyes to see just darkness again. A beat, then she finds her strength again to pick up her lantern. She must go on. To turn back is to fail.

EXT. CLEARING - SAME

Gardner paces, nervous.

Annalise reclines against a tree, humming to herself and staring at Gardner with laughter in her eyes.

ANNALISE

The Gauntlet is open to you as well, Maxwell Gardner.

Gardner stops at the use of his first name.

ANNALISE

But you will have to leave behind your curse in order to get through alive.

GARDNER

You mean my curse will have to leave me.

ANNALISE

You would do well to learn from the Keeper.

Gardner scoffs, keeps pacing. He doesn't trust Annalise.

ANNALISE

She shakes off her curse even now.

She listens, as if hearing Vera.

A moment and we start to hear what she does...a quietly growing...SCREAM!

Gardner panics. He runs to the black doorway, where a new lantern now rests on the hook, ready for him to take.

GARDNER

VERA?

ANNALISE

You have always waited for the world to prove itself good to you, instead of making the good yourself, Maxwell. It's funny how it takes a child to make you realize what a child you are.

VERA SCREAMS AGAIN from within.

Gardner can't take it anymore. He throws his flask away, grabs the lantern and runs in.

Annalise smiles and looks up at the sky, as if sharing a thought with someone above.

INT. THE GAUNTLET - SAME

Vera screams and runs as fast as she can. Her feet find stairs. She falls to her knees, skins them badly, but gets right back up and bolts up the steps.

She gets to the top, stops to hear if she's being followed. Doesn't hear anything. She takes a beat to catch her breath.

VERA SOLA'S VOICE
It's not fair. That I have to do
this alone. It's not fair.

A MAN walks into the light. His legs move like an automaton, but he's flesh and bone. Except for the strange HINGES on his temples. He lowers to a squat at the edge of Vera's lantern-light.

Vera holds her breath, unsure if this creature is going to attack her or walk on without a fuss.

The HINGE-MAN uses his hands and pulls open the top of his head, which creaks back on the hinges. He starts pulling things out that look like little marbles of light or dark.

HINGE-MAN
(notices Vera)
Hey.

VERA SOLA
Uh. Hey.

HINGE-MAN
What's not fair?

VERA SOLA
Huh?

HINGE-MAN
I heard you before. Whining about
something not being fair.

He pulls out a GRAY MARBLE. Bites on it. Considers it. Decides to throw it back into his head.

VERA SOLA
What are you doing?

HINGE-MAN
Taking out the bad thoughts. Some
of the gray ones are alright. Good
for you.
(holds up a finger)
Sometimes. Sometimes.
(looks at her weird)
Why don't you just take yours out?

VERA SOLA
Out what?

HINGE-MAN
Thinking your situation is unfair.
That's a black thought if I ever
heard one. Maybe it'll help you
find the way out.

VERA SOLA
My parents are gone. Everything I
do, I have to do alone now. I don't
deserve this.

Vera is in full-pout mode.

VERA SOLA
I was so close, and now I'm never
gonna get out of here. And that's
not a thought. It just is.

HINGE-MAN
What just is is that you're here
with nothing but a lantern and your
own wits. That it's unfair is your
own black thought. And it is not
doing you any good either, so don't
even know why you bother with it.

He pulls out a black marble, chucks it away.

VERA SOLA
I don't have hinges.

HINGE-MAN
And I suppose that's unfair too.

He closes the top of his head again. Tightens the screws on
his temple hinges. Gets back to straight legs.

HINGE-MAN
You wanna get out?

VERA SOLA

Yes. Do you know the way?

HINGE-MAN

Nope. But whenever I wanna find my way somewhere, I do what I need to do to get there, and sooner or later, I find myself there in no time.

(tips his head)

Miss.

He slinks off, leaving the ground behind him littered with black marble thoughts.

DANNY SOLA suddenly materializes next to her. And we're in an old flashback here on the dusty floor of The Gauntlet.

DANNY SOLA

Now, imagine that you can't feel anything. You can't remember anything, not Mommy or Daddy, that you can't feel warmth or a hug. That all there is is darkness, and nothing else. You're just alone. And that's all.

Vera looks at him, tears in her eyes. She knows it's not real.

VERA SOLA

But is that right, Daddy? Is that all there is now?

Danny smiles. He puts his hand over her eyes.

DANNY SOLA

Now close your eyes. And imagine that you remember everything. That people love you, even if they're gone. That all there is is life, and nothing else.

He leans in to whisper...

DANNY SOLA

It depends only on what you believe, goo. Like everything else in the world,...it depends on you.

When she opens her eyes again, Danny is gone. All those black marbles still litter the floor around her. All those negative thoughts. She picks one up. Throws it far away. It's freeing.

A moment and then...Vera stands, determined.

She closes her eyes and raises her face and arms upwards.

VERA SOLA

What if there was light.

Slowly, DAYLIGHT opens up and paints her and everything around her. She laughs at the warmth suddenly on her face.

She opens her eyes to find she's standing at the bottom of an OUBLIETTE: a deep, round hole in the ground. A ramp winds up the side of the walls all the way to the top.

She can't believe it.

EXT. END OF THE WORLD - MOMENTS LATER

Vera climbs up and out of the Oubliette to find herself face to face with a wooden sign that reads:

EDGE

KEEP OUT

She gets to her feet. She's dusty and worn down. Her knees and elbows are bloody, much like they were in that flashback when her dad was patching her up. But now, she doesn't cry.

Past the sign, the world narrows to a tiny sidewalk. A thin stretch of earth that leads right into the clouds.

Standing just off the edge is THE SEER. He reaches out his hand and his fingers touch an invisible gate that becomes visible as soon as he makes contact with it.

A round gate of intricate concentric iron circles now reveals itself. At the center of the smallest circle is a KEYHOLE.

VERA SOLA

Seer!

The Seer turns.

VERA SOLA

Give me back my Key.

He smiles.

VERA SOLA

You don't belong in there.

He loses his smile.

THE SEER

What do you know what I deserve?

VERA SOLA

You'll get there when you're supposed to. And not until.

She moves slowly closer.

THE SEER

Who decides that? You? And what do you know about anything? A child!

He turns back to the gate, is about to turn the KEY...

THE SEER

You can't stop me, Vera Sola!

VERA SOLA

What if I could.

The key stops just as it enters the keyhole. But the Seer doesn't turn it. In fact, he doesn't move at all. Indeed, neither does anything else. The wind has stopped. The dust in the air has frozen in place. The Seer's clothes, whipped by the wind off the ledge, are stuck in a permanent breeze.

Only Vera moves. She walks right up to the Seer, pulls his hood back so that she can look right into his face.

VERA SOLA

I understand. And I'm sorry you're in so much pain.

A tear falls down his frozen cheek.

VERA SOLA

But your journey doesn't end today.

She gently takes his hand off the KEY.

BY THE OUBLIETTE

Gardner climbs over the top, just in time to see the Seer DISAPPEAR right in front of Vera.

INT. HIGH TEMPLE - SAME

The Seer appears in the middle of his throne room, his hand outreached just as he had been a moment before.

He crumbles to his knees. But there's an odd relief to his tears. He knows Vera is right, after all.

EXT. END OF THE WORLD - SAME

Vera looks at the KEY sitting there in the keyhole. This is what she came for. Her parents are beyond.

Gardner gets to his feet.

GARDNER

Vera!

Vera turns the KEY. The gate's circles unswirl, creating a round open doorway filled with light.

GARDNER

Vera, no! You can't go in!

The wind, now resumed, is too strong for Vera to hear Gardner. She gets to her knees at the doorway's edge, and ever so carefully...leans over the edge.

Gardner runs to intercept her.

As Vera leans, her face glows with extraordinarily bright white light.

By the time Gardner has gotten to her, Vera is already back on her feet.

VERA SOLA

You made it through.

He nods.

VERA SOLA

To make sure I was safe.

GARDNER

The Seer...?

VERA SOLA

He's gone back to his path.

GARDNER

You're not going in there. To get your parents? You know what'll happen if you do.

Vera looks back through the open gate. It's so tempting.

VERA SOLA
No. Not yet.

She takes his hand. A pea clutching a mitten.

VERA SOLA
But you're ready.

Gardner's dumbfounded. He can't believe what she's offering him right now.

VERA SOLA
Sacrifice is a hard lesson. I hope
I learn it some day too.

She leads Gardner towards the open gate. There's so many words he wants to say right now. Instead, he elbows her playfully. It almost knocks her over. He laughs and walks through the gate, disappearing within the light.

The gate closes after him and fades back into invisibility. The KEY falls to the ground.

Vera takes a breath. Not going through herself was the hardest obstacle she's had to face yet.

She picks up the KEY, tucks it in her pocket. She turns her back to the End of the World and walks off.

EXT. LOOKOUT - MOMENTS LATER

Vera climbs to the top of a high overlook. The grass here is dead, but comes back to life wherever she steps so that a green path is carved out in the hill from where she's tread.

Now at the top, Vera has an incredible view of the Netherworld. A small spec in the distance indicates Shell City.

THE EMPTINESS gets closer. Vera can see the sea end at a waterfall that disappears into nothing. The sky itself falls in chunks like decaying pieces of ceiling.

Vera rubs her hands together and takes a big breath to get ready for a big job...

INT. AUGUSTINE'S VERANDA - MORNING

Uncle Mifflin rounds the corner to find Augustine being served lamb chops, macaroni and cheese, and apple pie by Bobby the Butler.

Mifflin is furious.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
WHERE IS SHE, AUGUSTINE?

Augustine wafts in the aroma of the lamb chops.

AUGUSTINE
(up at Bobby)
Marvelous, Bobby. You've outdone
yourself.

He grabs a fork and knife.

AUGUSTINE
Mifflin! Won't you join me?

Bobby whips open a white napkin and carefully tucks it into
Augustine's collar from behind.

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
(bows his head slightly)
Mr. Mifflin.

Mifflin is at the table now like an angry bull.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Where is she, you pompous,
arrogant, ridiculously flamboyant,
pseudo-intellectual?

AUGUSTINE
Pseudo?

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
Would you like some tea, Mr.
Mifflin?

AUGUSTINE
Mifflin, you really must calm down.

Frustrated beyond words!

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Tea?

Bobby is perfectly serious.

AUGUSTINE
Have some tea, Mifflin. I'm having
my favorite meals all at once.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Please tell me it's because you're
dying.

Bobby pulls out a chair for Mifflin.

AUGUSTINE
(as if he never thought of
that)
Hmm...one never knows, I suppose.

Bobby exits.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
I'm serious, Augustine. Vera's
gone. I know you said something to
her yesterday. Where is she?

AUGUSTINE
You know where.

Mifflin paces. If he doesn't, he might hurt someone.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
I specifically told you -- I told
you -- Bring her back.

AUGUSTINE
I can't.

Bobby returns with tea. He pours Mifflin a cup.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
I will hit you, Augustine. Neither
of us will like it, but I swear to
you I will.

AUGUSTINE
Mifflin, please calm down.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Don't tell me to calm down! It's
having no effect!

AUGUSTINE
Certainly not the one I'm
intending, I can see that.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
All I was doing was trying to keep
her safe. Now I know you know where
she is and how to get there. You
will tell me or --

He grabs a butter knife off the table.

AUGUSTINE
You'll smear me?

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
Sir.

Bobby nods to a spot on the table where the light shines through the tea pot and Mifflin's outstretched butter knife, to form a rough WHITE ARROW.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
I won't ask again, Augustine. Where is Vera?

His gaze follows where it points out to the lake.

AUGUSTINE
She's safe.

Mifflin follows Augustine's look to see Vera walking up to the house from the lake, soaking wet. She's definitely not the same scared little girl who went in.

AUGUSTINE
Bobby.

Bobby grabs a blanket he had ready on one of the chairs and rushes over to Vera, throws it over her shoulders.

VERA SOLA
Thank you, Bobby.

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
Miss Sola.

Vera sees Mifflin and smiles.

Mifflin drops the knife and runs after her. He falls to his knees, grabs her, checks she has all her limbs. Sees the cuts on her knees.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
You're hurt.

VERA SOLA
No. I'm okay.

He hugs her so tight. She hugs him back even tighter.

VERA SOLA
I love you, Uncle Mifflin.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Oh baby. I love you too. I love you
too.

Vera looks up to see Augustine standing on the veranda, his
expression curious.

Mifflin and Vera walk hand-in-hand up the steps. Vera stops
at Augustine and hands him the KEY.

VERA SOLA
Will you keep this safe for me,
Headmaster?

AUGUSTINE
(relieved)
As you wish, Keeper.

Vera takes Mifflin's hand again and they walk off together.

VERA SOLA
Uncle Mifflin?

UNCLE MIFFLIN
Yes, Vera?

VERA SOLA
I'm so hungry I could eat a whale!

Mifflin laughs and picks her up in his great arms.

UNCLE MIFFLIN
I'll make you anything but
pancakes.

BACK AT THE VERANDA

Augustine regards the KEY.

AUGUSTINE
She did it, Bobby.

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
She did, sir.

AUGUSTINE
You're surprised.

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
Yes, sir.

AUGUSTINE
Put this someplace safe.

He hands Bobby the KEY.

BOBBY O'SULLIVAN
What about --

AUGUSTINE
When she's ready.
(beat)
When she's ready.

Bobby bows his head, takes the KEY, and returns to the house.

Augustine looks out at the lake and lets out a happy laugh.
He sits down to his meal of favorites and digs in.

We move above him, far overhead until we can see Mifflin and Vera walking through the garden, then farther still until they're just tiny dots on the earth.

Farther still until we're through the clouds, deep up in the sky, and through a small hole and pause. At the end of a sidewalk that comes to a point, and a wooden sign that warns:

EDGE

KEEP OUT

FADE OUT:

THE END.