

THE WIZARDS OF PERFIL

by
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based on the short story by Kelly Link

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BLACKNESS

NARRATOR (V.O.)

All wizards are strange, but the wizards of Perfil are the strangest of all. That is what people said.

EXT. FAIRY TALE MARSHES - EVENING

We push through dense underbrush that opens onto a meadow of storybook towers under a lush painted sky.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

The wizards built tall towers in the marshes of Perfil, and there they lived as hermits in lonely little rooms at the top of their towers.

Swooping toward a window at the top of one of the towers, we glimpse a shadowy room. A TOWERING DECREPIT MAN is hunched over inside, much too big for the room.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

They rarely came down at all, and no one was sure what their magic was good for. Not that magic could ever be good for anything.

The hunched wizard glances over his shoulder at us. His face is all wrinkles and severe lines.

His beady eye glistens, and in it, pinpricks of light dance like fireflies and become...

EXT. FAIRY TALE MARSHES - NIGHT

...glowing lights - much too big for fireflies - that swoop over the black, reflecting waters.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

There were wobbly lights like balls of sickly green fire that dashed around the marshes at night, hunting for who knows what...

EXT. FAIRY TALE MARSHES - DAY

Large hewn building stones lie toppled in the mud.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

...and sometimes a tower tumbled down and then the prickly reeds and marsh lilies that looked like

(MORE)

NARRATOR (V.O.) (cont'd)
ghostly white hands grew up over
the tumbled stones, and the marsh
mud sucked the rubble down.

In TIME-LAPSE, finger-like tendrils creep up over the stones, thicken into embracing vines, and then envelop the stones.

INT. DEEP IN THE FAIRY TALE MARSHES - DAY

We push through cloudy, amber water. An object emerges in the murk: a skull, poking out of the mud.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Everyone knew that there were
wizard bones under the marsh mud
and the fish and the birds that
lived in the marsh were strange
creatures. Their veins coursed
with magic.

A fat minnow darts out of the skull's eye hole.

EXT. FAIRY TALE MARSHES - AFTERNOON

Against a lush sky, a GROUP OF BOYS wades in the water, nets and swift hands poised to make a catch.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Boys dared each other to go into
the marsh and catch fish.
Sometimes when a brave boy caught a
fish in the murky, muddy marsh
pools, the fish would call the boy
by name and beg to be released.

Young hands grasp a HUGE WHISKERED CATFISH. It gasps for air. Beads of water roll off its leathery skin. Its eye is a penetrating black bead, just like the wizard's eye.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
And if you didn't let that fish go,
it would tell you, gasping for air,
when and how you would die.

The hands release the huge catfish. It swims away lazily into the murkiness.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
That is what the people of Perfil
said about the wizards of Perfil.

TITLE SEQUENCE

Over a MONTAGE of images from a large ornate tapestry - fantastical woven scenes that depict the lore of the wizards: a tower rising out of a watery landscape; a dragon grazing lazily in the field below; a strange fish pokes its head out of the marsh waters; deep in the waters below, glittery treasures lie sunken in mud...

EXT. PERFIL MARKET - DAY

Plump, ringed fingers unwrap a small bundle to reveal a pair of tarnished candlesticks.

JEWELER (O.S.)
Hmmm. Just brass, I suspect.

A fat, sweaty JEWELER inspects the candlesticks with disinterest as he simultaneously studies the desperate face in front of him...

...a starved, ragged looking woman in her mid-30s, who struggles with a large pack on her back. This is MIRI. She is flanked by her 6-year-old twin boys, MIK and BONTI.

Bonti tugs at the frayed edges of Miri's skirt.

BONTI
We're hungry, Mom. When will we eat?

MIRI
Soon, soon. I promise.

A few steps behind the twins stands HALSA, a dark, surly 12-year-old girl. She is the twins' older sister.

MARKET VENDOR (O.S.)
Fresh, beautiful apples. Apples right here. Beautiful apples.

Halsa tracks the voice of the market vendor, her eyes landing hungrily on the display of red apples. Very beautiful indeed.

Halsa looks around at the bustling marketplace. At first glance, the scene is almost medieval: filthy people pushing wooden carts, hauling big bundles of rags. But familiar touches from our own world stand out: plastic tarps held down with bungee cords, a rusted shopping cart, a child in tattered sneakers, another in a pink, hooded sweatshirt. The market has the ramshackle feel of a Tijuana shanty town.

The jeweler now unwraps a small bundle to reveal a pair of silver earrings. Delicate little snakes swallowing their own tails.

JEWELER
And what do have we here? Oh.

The jeweler inspects the earrings through a loupe, but with his other eye he notices Halsa scowling at him, scratching at her arms fiercely as something stokes her temper.

MIRI (O.S.)
I'll settle for six.

JEWELER (O.S.)
Oh, no, no, no. Two at most. If even. The market is full of refugees selling off their bits and pieces. And I have several of these already.

Miri lowers her head in defeat. Halsa continues to glower in the background.

MIRI
Please. I need to get my children on the train to Qual. We won't last another day here.

With a sinister grin, the jeweler leans in to whisper in Miri's ear.

JEWELER
The man has come to buy today.
They keep the children safe, I'm told. Much better safe than dead.

A shudder runs through Miri.

The jeweler dangles the earrings from his hand, offering them back to her.

Halsa moves forward to grab the earrings from Miri.

HALSA
Mom, what are you doing?! Those are mine! Auntie gave them to me.

MIRI
(snapping)
Everything that we have is ours, Halsa. Stop being a selfish brat!
(MORE)

MIRI (cont'd)
Unless you'd rather not have
anything to eat!

Fuming, Halsa turns behind her to see ONION, a scrawny, moon-eyed 11-year-old boy, holding a bundle almost as big as he is.

HALSA
Onion!

Onion stares with glassy-eyed wonder at the bustle around him.

We move in close to Onion's eyes. They flutter strangely as if the boy is on the verge of fainting.

HALSA (O.S.)
Those earrings are mine and you
know it! Get over here!

Onion doesn't hear Halsa. His head is full of strange voices as he watches...

...an OLD WOMAN fall to her knees under the weight of the pack on her back.

OLD WOMAN (V.O.)
It's alright if I die here. I'm
not afraid anymore. There will be
peace now.

...a YOUNG GIRL on crutches, one leg missing. Her mouth waters as she watches an old man take a bite out of a raw potato.

YOUNG GIRL (V.O.)
A little salt would make it nicer.
A whole sack of them and some salt.
And then carrots. Lots and lots of
carrots.

...a NERVOUS MAN stands backed up against a wall by two soldiers who check his papers.

NERVOUS MAN (V.O.)
I shouldn't have said anything. I
shouldn't have fought with her. I
knew she'd accuse me. I knew it.

More and more voices. A growing cacophony as Onion teeters and sways.

And there's Halsa of a sudden. Pushing him to the ground.

HALSA

I can't believe you. You're useless. We wouldn't even be in this mess if it wasn't for you.

Miri sees what's going on. She gathers her bundles quickly, and rushes toward Halsa, dragging the twins by her side.

MIRI

Halsa, leave him alone.

HALSA

He's doing it again. Someone's going to see us.

Miri pulls Onion up from the ground and shakes him. Noting the trance in his eyes, she looks around her nervously. *Is anyone watching?*

MIRI

Onion, Onion! Snap out of it!
Someone will see you. Do you want to get us all killed?! Onion!

INT. PERFIL STABLES - DAY

Halsa's eyes slowly adjust to the darkness. She takes in her surroundings. A darkened stable behind the market stalls. The muffled murmur of haggling from the market. A line of women and children in front of her. Nervous mothers glancing around with suspicion. Whispers.

Halsa is startled by a sudden blinding light behind her as...

...a large TAPESTRY is pushed aside. A mother quickly ushers her child under it and into the stable. Halsa notes the strange scene on the tapestry: a tower rising out of a watery landscape; a dragon grazing lazily in the field below. Then the tapestry flaps shut, cloaking the room again in shadow.

HALSA

Where are we?

At the end of the line of people, she sees a horse with a knotted mane and a shadowy, caped figure armed with a sword at his waist. The caped figure is sizing up a little girl.

He checks her head for lice, her teeth for decay. He shakes his head "no" and pushes the girl away.

WHISPERED VOICE (O.S.)

Halsa. Halsa.

Halsa notices Onion, standing just behind Miri, staring at Halsa with glazed eyes.

ONION (V.O.)
Halsa.

Onion's lips aren't moving. He's just staring, and his voice is in Halsa's head.

Halsa scowls at Onion. Slaps him hard on the head.

HALSA
Stop it!

Halsa slaps him again. Harder.

YOUNG REFUGEE GIRL (O.S.)
That's not very nice.

Startled, Halsa turns to face a scrawny, toothless REFUGEE GIRL who's standing alone behind her in the line.

YOUNG REFUGEE GIRL
You should be nicer to your little brother.

HALSA
He's not my brother. He's just a cousin. A really rotten little cousin.

Onion looks up at Halsa. Tears gathering in his innocent eyes.

HALSA
(to the girl)
What's happening here?

YOUNG REFUGEE GIRL
Hasn't your mother told you? He's a secretary for the wizards of Perfil. He comes here every week to buy for them.

Halsa follows the girl's gaze toward the caped figure at the end of the line.

HALSA
Buy what?

YOUNG REFUGEE GIRL
You, silly.

The little girl laughs, eerily unconcerned about the situation.

YOUNG REFUGEE GIRL
You know about the wizards, don't you?

Halsa stares at her in silent horror.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
Boy! Up!

MOMENTS LATER:

Halsa watches with relief as Miri pushes Onion to the head of the line.

Onion approaches the caped figure. He is TOLCET, a black man with white-pink spatters across his face and hands. What appeared to be a cape is a great, worn rain poncho; the sword, a large rusty machete in his belt.

Tolcet holds his hand out to Onion.

Onion stares at Tolcet with innocent fascination.

TOLCET
My name is Tolcet.

ONION
You are two colors.

MIRI
I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry.
He's very quiet. His mother is dead. He doesn't eat much, and he's strong enough. We walked here from Larch. There were no wizards in Larch, but his mother could find things when you lost them. She could charm your cows so that they always came home.

TOLCET
How old is he?

MIRI
Eleven.

TOLCET
Open your mouth, boy.

Tolcet takes hold of Onion's chin and inspects the boy's teeth.

TOLCET
Small for his age.

Tolcet shakes his head grimly. He looks over at Mik and Bonti.

Miri pulls the twins close to her. They're clearly not for sale.

TOLCET
And the girl?

Miri shakes her head. *Absolutely not.*

Halsa backs away as Tolcet reaches to grab hold of her chin.

Miri again pushes Onion forward.

MIRI
He's a good boy, very obedient.
And he's not afraid of witchy folk,
begging your pardon.

Halsa looks guiltily at Onion, as her mind wanders to...

INT. PEASANT FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

A loud, panicky knock on a door.

Halsa watches from behind Miri as her FATHER opens the door to reveal: ONION'S MOTHER, a radiant young woman, her eyes wide with fear.

ONION'S MOTHER
They've burned down the house, and
it won't be long before they find
us. Someone in the village must
have said something. Can you take
him?

Onion peeks out from behind his mother's skirt, and she pushes him toward Miri and Halsa's father.

MOMENTS LATER: Onion's mother hastily removes a pair of earrings. She hands them Halsa: the silver snakes swallowing their tails.

MOMENTS LATER: Halsa watches as she pulls her son close to her in a tight farewell embrace. Onion's mother looks up at Halsa, locks eyes with her.

ONION'S MOTHER (V.O.)
Take care of my son, Halsa. You
and he are as one.

MOMENTS LATER: Halsa watches as Onion's mother races away.
She glances back and then disappears into the night.

BACK TO:

INT. PERFIL STABLES - DAY

Tolcet stares knowingly into Halsa's eyes.

TOLCET
I'll take the girl.

Halsa backs away from him and clings to her mother.

MIRI
I'm sorry. I just can't do that.

Tolcet towers over Miri.

TOLCET
It's the girl or nothing.

Onion grabs at Tolcet's hand.

ONION
Please take me.

Tolcet ignores Onion, pulls out his purse, counts out coins.

TOLCET
Twenty-four for the girl.

Miri shakes her head. No please!

But Tolcet gazes deep into her eyes, as if he's reading her mind.

TOLCET
It's enough to get you all on the
train to Qual. To safety. Certain
death awaits you here.

Tolcet grabs Miri's hand. He forces the purse into it.

TOLCET
The children are well looked after.
It's your only choice.

Miri knows that Tolcet is right.

And Halsa can see it in her mother's eyes. A panic begins to rise within her.

HALSA
Mom, what are you doing?!

Miri casts her eyes to the ground.

Tolcet holds out his hand to Halsa.

TOLCET
Let's go.

HALSA
Mom, what's wrong with you?! You
can't do this.

Halsa rushes toward her mother, but Miri backs away. She can't look her daughter in the eye.

MIRI
You're saving us all, Halsa. You
understand that. I'll come for you
as soon as I'm able.

Halsa steels herself. Her eyes go cold, full of hatred.

Onion runs forward and wraps his arms around Halsa's waist.

HALSA
Stop it! Get off of me! I hate
you!

Halsa pushes Onion away. Tolcet grabs her from behind.

TOLCET
Come on.

EXT. PERFIL STABLES - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa punches and kicks at Tolcet as he opens the cage door of a small wooden cart and pushes her inside. He quickly lashes the cart to the horse's harness.

Miri runs towards them, Tolcet's purse in her outstretched hand.

Halsa glares at her.

MIRI
Take it back. Please. Don't take
her!

But it's too late. Tolcet mounts the horse and quickly rides off. He glances back at Onion with a demonic wink.

Onion watches Tolcet and Halsa speed away. A sinister whisper floats in the air:

TOLCET (V.O.)
Don't worry, boy. All will be well
and all manner of things will be
well.

EXT. ENTRANCE TO PERFIL - DAY

Tolcet speeds the horse and cart toward the city rampart, a stretch of corrugated tin sheets topped with barbed wire. The cart now has a blanket draped over it.

Tolcet slows the horse and slips a coin into the hand of a SLEAZY GUARD.

SLEAZY GUARD
Get what you were after?
(under his breath)
Freak.

Tolcet grunts at the guard and rides off.

Halsa pushes a bit of the blanket from the cage to catch a glimpse of the retreating Perfil gates.

She sees two large, rough wooden cages flanking the road. Each contains a human figure. Some of the passing refugees are picking up stones from the road and throwing them at the cages.

One cage holds a FRIGHTENED 17 Y.O. GIRL. A crude placard hangs on the cage: 'WITCH.' Her eyes catch Halsa's glance.

EXT. DESERTED PLAIN - AFTERNOON

Tolcet steers the horse and cart down a berm and off the road.

Halsa stares at the retreating town of Perfil.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL RUINS - AFTERNOON

Tolcet and Halsa travel through the remains of a long-dead industrial plant, now all crumbling cement walls and rusting iron framework.

EXT. RIVER BANK - AFTERNOON

A meandering river in a low plain.

Tolcet unfastens the horse from the cart, and leads it to the water to drink.

He opens the door of the cage and offers his hand to Halsa.

HALSA

What if I run?

TOLCET

Do as you wish.

Tolcet sits down by the river bank and lights a long clay pipe.

Keeping her eyes on him, Halsa cautiously makes her way out of the cage. She walks to the river bank and scoops her hands in the water, splashes her face.

In the distance, on the other side of the river, Halsa watches a plume of black smoke rising from the horizon. She stares into the fringes of a raging fire. Off-screen GUNSHOTS stir up a memory in her:

INT. PEASANT FARMHOUSE - AFTERNOON

The sound of GALLOPING HORSES approaching.

FATHER

(whispered, to Miri)

Go! Go! I can stall them.

Halsa's father stands poised to open the door, but urges Miri onward as she herds Onion, Halsa, Mik & Bonti toward the back.

SOLDIER (O.S.)

Open up!

FATHER

(loudly to the door)

I'm coming! I'm coming!

Miri glances back at her husband. She knows the inevitable.

EXT. PEASANT FARMHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

The children race through tall grasses away from the house: Halsa, followed by Onion, Mik & Bonti, and then Miri bringing up the rear.

Gunshots ring out from the house. Halsa stops in her tracks, reels around, her eyes filled with horror.

HALSA
Dad! Daddy!

She starts running back toward the house, but Miri intercepts her and tackles her down into the grasses, clinging to her so that she can't get up and run back.

HALSA
We can't just leave him.

MIRI
It's too late, Halsa. We have to go. It's too late.

Halsa pounds her fists against Miri's chest.

Miri slaps Halsa hard across the face in a desperate effort to quiet her.

MIRI
We have to go.

HALSA
I hate you.

Halsa looks beyond Miri to see Onion standing there, holding hands with her twin brothers.

HALSA
It's him! He led them to us! It's all because of him!

Onion casts his eyes to the ground, avoiding Halsa's vicious glare.

MOMENTS LATER: The farmhouse is engulfed in flames.

TOLCET (V.O.)
These are bad times, girl. It's too easy to lay blame. The whole world is pointing its fingers.

BACK TO:

EXT. RIVER BANK - AFTERNOON

Tolcet puffs on his pipe, staring at Halsa who still kneels by the river lost in her thoughts.

TOLCET

Your mother had no choice. She did what so many have been forced to do. You know, there are far worse ways to be sold.

Halsa looks up at Tolcet quizzically. *Has he seen what she's been thinking?*

She takes a few cautious steps toward Tolcet and sits down at a safe distance from him. She's exhausted.

TOLCET

What do you know about the wizards of Perfil?

HALSA

People are afraid of them.

TOLCET

Are you afraid of them?

Halsa stares at Tolcet for a beat, scratching at herself nervously.

HALSA

They say the wizards started the war. Why else would they hide away in the marshes?

TOLCET

Because the marsh is full of magic.

HALSA

And they live in high towers because they have too high an opinion of themselves.

TOLCET

No, because they're curious. They like to be able to see things that are far off. They like to be as close as possible to the stars. And they don't like to be bothered by people who ask lots of questions.

HALSA

So why do they buy children?

TOLCET

To run up and down the stairs, to fetch them water for bathing, to
(MORE)

TOLCET (cont'd)
carry messages, to bring them
breakfasts and dinners and lunches
and suppers. Wizards are always
hungry.

HALSA
So am I.

Before, Halsa can even finish her sentence, Tolcet holds up an apple over his shoulder.

Halsa is cautious that he seems to know what she would say, but hunger gets the best of her and she moves towards him to grab the apple.

TOLCET
You see things that are in people's heads.

HALSA
What? No, I can't.

TOLCET
Your cousin has a gift too, but he's too young to control it.

HALSA
(with a snort)
Onion? A gift?

TOLCET
You see what's in my head right now.

HALSA
No!

Tolcet is amused by her defiance. He closes his eyes and thinks.

Halsa continues chewing her apple and pretends to ignore him, but as she chews, her eyes begin to flutter. She can't help her mind wandering to...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MARSH - EVENING

Smooth deep water. Black. Velvety. An undulating mirror that catches the light of the rising moon.

A lamenting female voice echoes across the water: a haunting gypsy song.

SUPERIMPOSE: Tolcet's face, eyes closed, thinking.

SUPERIMPOSE: Halsa's face, eyes fluttering, falling under the spell of the song.

TOLCET (O.S.)
I can feel you looking.

HALSA (O.S.)
(dizzy whisper)
I'm not looking.

SUPERIMPOSE: Onion's face, eyes shut as well. He hears it too!

TOLCET (O.S.)
Don't look too long, or you'll fall in and drown!

Tolcet's speckled hand reaches into the water and stirs it, breaking the moon into ripples.

ONION (O.S.)
It's beautiful.

The ripples of water calm revealing the gently undulating reflections of Halsa, Tolcet and Onion.

TOLCET (O.S.)
It's easy to get lost in it. You have to know the difference between wishful thinking and the things that are real. Between things that have been and the things that will be.

A sudden eddy of water disperses Tolcet's reflection, leaving Halsa and Onion alone in the ripples.

EXT. RIVER BANK - AFTERNOON

With a start, Halsa takes in her surroundings. The rushing river. A half-eaten apple lying in the dirt.

TOLCET (O.S.)
C'mon. You can ride with me.

Tolcet sits on the horse, slapping the back of the saddle where he's inviting Halsa to sit.

Halsa looks at him. Hesitant.

HALSA
Will you stop playing tricks on me?

TOLCET
Was there a trick?

With a gentle smile, Tolcet holds his hand out to Halsa and pulls her up onto the horse.

EXT. MARSHLANDS - AFTERNOON

The river has broken down into a series of wide, shallow pools. Muddy paths disappear into thick stands of rushes.

Tolcet's horse ambles along, its hooves sinking into the path. Water wells up and fills its hoofprints.

Fat jeweled flies cling to the rushes.

In a clear pool, a snake curls like a green ribbon through water weeds.

The air hums with magic.

TOLCET
It will be uncomfortable at first.
The marshes of Perfil are so full
of magic that they drink up all
other kinds of magic. And there are
bugs.

HALSA
Well, I don't want anything to do
with magic. I don't believe in it.

TOLCET
I see.

Tolcet's horse whinnies and snorts. He strokes the odd pigtails in the horse's mane.

TOLCET
Yes, yes, yes. I know.

Halsa huffs and scratches herself nervously. Are Tolcet and the horse talking about her?

They continue on alongside the water and follow a path into an overgrown thicket.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - EVENING

Halsa senses something in the air - a curious stillness. Whispers. She holds tighter to Tolcet's cloak.

TOLCET

You can grab on if you want.

HALSA

I'm not afraid.

From Halsa's POV, we push through the dense thicket, which opens to a meadow of a dozen towers against the evening sky.

The towers are not nearly as splendid as their earlier fairy-tale incarnation. They are tumbledown and lichen-covered and look as if they might collapse at any moment. At the tops of the towers are open windows, some with tatty curtains or rickety shutters that sway in the breeze.

Halsa stares into the open window of one of the towers. *Is something moving inside?* A shudder runs through her. *A voice in her head.*

ONION (O.S.)

Did you see that?

Halsa catches herself. Shakes the voice away as if swatting at a fly.

HALSA

Go away!

EXT. PERFIL MARKET - CONTINUOUS

ONION

The wizard is watching us.

MIRI (O.S.)

Onion! What's wrong?

Onion's eyes flutter open. He stands with a mouthful of rice-cake, dreamily stopped in the middle of chewing.

Miri, Mik, and Bonti are staring at him. Miri is holding out a bundle of bread loaves.

MIRI

Carry this.

ONION

Huh?

MIRI
Are you okay?

Onion snaps out of it and reaches for the loaves.

MIRI
Do you need to sit down?

Onion shakes his head.

MIRI
Then come on.

They head toward another vendor's stall.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - CONTINUOUS

Tolcet and Halsa ride along the paths, weaving among a complex system of canals towards the center of a meadow.

GRIMY-FACED URCHINS sit atop half-ruined walls of toppled towers and watch Tolcet and Halsa ride up.

TWO ODD GIRLS sit winding up a ball of oily, black twine. They look up at Halsa and stare eerily.

A tiny boy, BURD, 8, is trying to do headstands. He catches sight of Halsa and falls over, distracted by the new arrival.

Other STRANGE CHILDREN peek out of tower doors, set down buckets and brooms and begin to follow the horse.

In the center of the meadow is a stone-encircled fire pit. A tall, bean-pole of a boy, STILT, stirs something in a pot.

Halsa glances furtively at these other kids - all of them silently staring at her. She scratches her arms nervously under this scrutiny.

TOLCET
Down you go.

Halsa reluctantly slides off the horse.

TOLCET
Come on. Out of the way.

Halsa backs away from the horse and turns to face the other children as Tolcet hops down and starts to lift the woven harness and baskets off the horse.

Halsa and the children stare silently at each other, a mutual sizing up. And then suddenly, the children's faces light up.

CHILDREN
Essa! Essa!

TOLCET
Thank you, Essa.

Halsa turns to see a dirt-covered, athletic teen girl, ESSA, 14, barely clad and dusting herself off. Her hair is knotted in ratty pigtails just like the horse's mane was. She curtsies to Tolcet.

Halsa gapes at her. *Where has the horse gone?*

ESSA
You be good, now, or they'll turn
you into something even worse.

HALSA
Who?

ESSA
The wizards of Perfil.

She lets out a neighing, horsey laugh. All of the other children laugh as well.

CHILDREN
Oooh, Essa gave Tolcet a ride!...
Essa, did you bring me back a
present?

WILLET
Essa makes a prettier horse than
she does a girl.

Essa, in a flash, flings a pebble at WILLET, a chortling, pudgy, 12-year-old boy.

WILLET
Oi!

Halsa is impressed with Essa - her age, her self-assurance, but when Essa catches her eye and winks at her, Halsa blushes and looks away.

TOLCET
Shh, shh, shh. This is Halsa.
She's one of you now.

Halsa can't bear the silent scrutiny of these freakish children. She feels all eyes upon her *She's most definitely not one of them.*

Essa's horsey laugh breaks the silence.

TOLCET
Come get something to eat.

Halsa quickly stumbles after him.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - FIREPIT - NIGHT

A bent metal plate, doubling as a shovel, scoops glowing coals out of the fire pit and into a rusted tin can with holes punched in it.

Halsa, sits next to Tolcet on a log by the fire, stuffing her face with bread, fish, and onions. She watches as TWO KIDS fill the tin can with coals and start spinning it by a long wire.

TOLCET
Not over here. Away from the fire.

The kids run off into the shadows beyond the firelight, their tin can glowing and trailing sparks.

Tolcet quietly watches Halsa.

Halsa keeps eating. She's ravenous.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - NIGHT

The edges of the meadow dance with swirling fiery lights, comets with spark tails circling in the darkness. The children run with their ember-filled tin cans, spinning them above their heads, over the ground, up and down, even throwing them high into the air.

Halsa watches them as Tolcet leads her through the meadow among the towers.

TOLCET
This way.

They turn among a cluster of towers. Halsa looks up.

Windows high up in each of the towers are lit from within, flickering with candlelight. They are solemn, monolithic.

INT. TOWER - MOMENTS LATER

Tolcet and Halsa step into the base of the tower, less a room of its own than the start of a narrow stone staircase that winds up the sides of the walls and merges into a shadowy spiral that leads to the top.

Tolcet pulls aside a dusty curtain at the base of the staircase, revealing a small alcove. On the floor is a reed pallet and a mothy wool blanket.

HALSA
What do I do?

TOLCET
Sleep. Tomorrow you will learn how to be a servant to the wizard.

Tolcet hands her a stub of a candle and turns to leave.

HALSA
Aren't you going to tie me up or something?

TOLCET
That won't be necessary. No one who doesn't already know the marshes ever gets very far. And you wouldn't want to make your wizard angry.

Tolcet smiles strangely, and shuts the door behind him.

Halsa plops down on the pallet, but something underneath her is sharp. She feels for it, and pulls out of her pocket a small cloth-wrapped bundle. She opens it to find...

The snake earrings. *How does she have them?*

FLASH: From earlier in the day, Onion rushes forward and wraps his arms around Halsa's waist. He sneaks something into her pocket.

HALSA (V.O.)
Get off of me! I hate you!

Halsa grimaces, her face wracked with conflicting emotions. *How could he be so good to her?* She buries her face against her knees.

EXT. PERFIL MARKET - NIGHT

Onion and the twins are seated among their packs, bundles, and recent acquisitions from the market. They are in the market, now shut-down and deserted.

Miri hurries towards them.

MIRI

Come on. Get the stuff. There's a church nearby where they'll let us sleep. The train leaves early in the morning.

As Miri gathers them around her and leads them out of the market, Onion closes his eyes in concentration.

ONION (V.O.)
(whispered)
Halsa.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - NIGHT

The towers are silhouetted against the moonlit sky. Lights flicker in their upper windows. The marsh buzzes with night sounds.

ONION (V.O.)
Halsa.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE- NIGHT

Halsa lies on her pallet, wrapped in the mothy blanket. Her eyes are fluttering, as if in a dream.

ONION (V.O.)
Halsa. What can you see?...

FLASH: Fire rips across the familiar tapestry, blackening the image of the tower and the dragon.

FLASH: Wounded people cower beneath the wreckage of market stalls. Crying and screaming everywhere.

ONION (V.O.)
Where is everyone?

HALSA (V.O.)
Mom!

A WOMAN SCREAMS.

FLASH: Train wheels speed along a track.

A SHRILL TRAIN WHISTLE.

FLASH: A skein of oily, black twine rapidly unspools.

Halsa's eyes move even more rapidly beneath her closed eyelids.

FLASH: A wooden bucket tumbles down a spiral staircase.

FLASH: The snake earrings glimmer in firelight.

FLASH: Onion's mother glances back as she disappears into darkness.

FLASH: The farmhouse is engulfed in flames.

A DEADENING SCREAM.

FLASH: We rush up the spiral stairs of the tower, moving at a dizzying speed.

FLASH: At the top of the stairs, we glide towards the closed door of the wizard's room. Candlelight flickers from beneath the door and spills out onto the floor.

A dark shadow passes behind the door and blocks part of the light. Huge feet? A heavy dragging cloak? Whomever or whatever it is stands there. It knows that we are outside the door listening.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - CONTINUOUS

Halsa covers her head with the blanket.

HALSA

Stop it!

She stares at the candle, close to the end of its wick. A gust of wind snuffs it out.

BLACKNESS.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Everyone knows that wizards are unreasonable and come to bad ends.

EXT. MARSH - NIGHT

A lonely white bird glides across the surface of the water.

EXT. ENTRANCE TO PERFIL - NIGHT

NARRATOR (V.O.)

No wizard has ever made himself useful by magic, or, if they've tried, they've only made matters worse.

A large mass of refugees huddles against the wall of the city, setting up camp for the night.

Near the city gate, the two large, rough wooden cages -- both of them, now empty.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

No wizard has ever stopped a war or mended a fence. It's better that they stay in their marshes, out of the way of worldly folk like farmers and soldiers and merchants and kings.

An old woman looks at posters of the smiling YOUNG KING plastered on the walls. He points at us accusingly: "The King Protects You - Do You Protect the Kingdom?" The old woman scowls.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - MORNING

Thin lines of smoke waft from crooked chimneys at the tops of the towers.

The sun's rays hit the towers' crumbling roof tiles and cast long shadows across the meadow.

Chattering birds swoop among the towers.

INT. TOWER - MORNING

Halsa lies peacefully asleep on her pallet.

The dusty curtain to the alcove is drawn back and sunlight streams in. Tolcet's spotty hand shakes Halsa shoulder.

TOLCET

Up.

Halsa cracks open her eyes. Tolcet is standing there with an empty wooden bucket.

TOLCET

Go and fetch water for the wizard.

Halsa rubs her eyes and glances at him sleepily. Although she does not speak, Tolcet hears her thoughts.

HALSA (V.O.)

Go and fetch it yourself.

Tolcet laughs at her and heads out the door.

TOLCET

It's not a good idea to keep a wizard waiting.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - MORNING

Tolcet strides along the path through the towers. Halsa, carrying the wooden bucket, runs to catch up with him.

Other children scurry past, carrying buckets of water, covered baskets, bundles of twigs.

Halsa sees the TWO ODD GIRLS approach, coming from the opposite direction. They tote baskets, precariously balanced on their heads. They walk side-by-side and between them hangs the black, oily twine. One of them holds the ball and continues spooling it up, while the other pulls tangled twine from a basket in her arms. They're taking up the width of the path.

Halsa scurries aside to let them pass, but is amazed that Tolcet walks directly between them, seeming to pass right through the strand of twine.

Halsa looks back. The twine hangs unbroken between the girls.

EXT. MARSH - MOMENTS LATER

Tolcet leads Halsa along a well-trodden path that slopes down to a small pool.

TOLCET

The water is sweet here. Fill your bucket and bring it to the top of the wizard's tower.

He turns to leave.

HALSA

But...?

TOLCET

I have an errand to run. I'll return before nightfall.

Halsa is visibly nervous. *That's all you're going to tell me?*

TOLCET

Don't be afraid, Halsa.

He turns away from her to move quickly down the path.

HALSA

Wait. But what do I do then?!
What if the wizard asks for
something else?

TOLCET

(turning back)

I would worry less about what your
wizard asks for, and more about
what your wizard knows. You can't
keep secrets from a wizard.
Secrets make them angry.

Tolcet disappears into the underbrush of the path.

Alone and afraid, Halsa stares into the brush. A calming
voice enters her head.

TOLCET (V.O.)

Be patient, Halsa. You just might
find that you're here for a reason.
We focus on the smallest things,
and the world starts to make sense.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - MORNING

Halsa lugs the bucket back towards the towers. As she passes
the fire pit, she glances down at the bucket and stops.

The bucket is half empty.

She looks behind her. A trail of water traces her path.

She holds up the bucket. Water trickles from its split
bottom.

A muffled snicker catches her attention. Over at the fire,
the other children look away, pretending not to have been
watching.

Halsa straightens her back and marches back toward the marsh.

WILLET (O.S.)

Do you want a bucket without a hole
in it?

More giggles behind her.

Willet grabs the bucket he's been using as a seat and
approaches Halsa with it.

WILLET

Here. You can take this one.

Halsa stares at Willet, not comfortable accepting this kindness.

WILLET

Go on. It's O.K.

Halsa begrudgingly takes the bucket, and turns to go.

Willet grabs her gently by the arm.

WILLET

Don't worry. It gets better with time. When you get used to things. All the magic eats away at you at first.

Halsa recoils from Willet's touch.

HALSA

I'm not staying *here*. My family is on their way to Qual. I'll have my own room there. There's nothing that could keep me here.

Willet stares sadly at the stubborn, delusional girl.

EXT. TOWER - DAY

As Halsa approaches her tower, she sizes it up in the daylight. It doesn't seem that high. It actually seems kind of shabby and run-down. Rusty oil drums form the makeshift foundation. The rest is a motley array of driftwood, scrap metal, and adobe-like blocks. Messy bird nests occupy any of the available nooks high-up, and white bird droppings have spattered down beneath them.

Halsa snorts.

HALSA

Lazy, sloppy wizards.

INT. TOWER - DAY

Halsa stands at the base of the narrow stone staircase and looks up. The stairs disappear into a shadowy spiral.

Halsa starts up the steps, counting aloud to ease her mounting anxiety.

HALSA

Two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight ...

MOMENTS LATER:

Further up the tower, Halsa continues her ascent.

HALSA
Twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one,
thirty-two ...

Cautiously, she moves into the darkening curve of the staircase.

LATER:

Halsa keeps coming up the stairs. She's starting to breathe heavily.

HALSA
... Ninety-seven, ninety-eight,
ninety-nine, four hundred.

She plops the bucket down on a step and catches her breath. She looks up - *still more steps*. *But this doesn't make any sense.*

Leaving the bucket, Halsa ventures a few more steps. *Perhaps the top is just around the corner.* No such luck.

The sudden echoing sound of a crow cawing startles Halsa. She stops dead in her tracks.

HALSA
Stupid wizard tricks. You'd think
they'd have fewer steps rather than
more.

Halsa catches her breath and resolves to resume.

She picks up the bucket, but as she does, the rope handle detaches from the eyelets on the bucket, and the bucket goes tumbling down the stairs, splashing water and echoing loudly as it goes.

Halsa freezes. *She's seen this before!* Her eyes flutter.

She hunches up her shoulders and clenches her fists like she's trying to shake this off.

HALSA
Stop! Stop it.

FLASH: The tapestry bursts into flames.

FLASH: The wooden bucket, splashing water, tumbles down the spiral staircase.

FLASH: Train wheels speed along a track.

A SHRILL TRAIN WHISTLE.

FLASH: A train's smokestack spews black smoke. On the smokestack A RED STENCILLED DRAGON EMBLEM, breathing flame.

FLASH: The wheels of the train spin furiously.

FLASH: An ominous range of black mountain peaks.

Halsa reels with dizziness. She hears a voice in her head:

CACKLING WOMAN (V.O.)
That boy's got the magic in him.

FLASH: A hand violently sweeps chessmen off a checkered board. A fist slams down.

THE SOUND OF AN EXPLOSION.

BLINDING WHITE.

SILENCE.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. TOWER - DAY

Halsa opens her eyes with a start. She's still high on the tower stairs where we left her. The sound of the bucket still tumbling down the steps.

HALSA
I don't know what it means.

Afraid and confused, Halsa continues her trudge up the stairs. Just around the next bend, the stairs end at a landing, and there it is: the closed door to the wizard's room.

Halsa knocks quietly.

No answer.

She knocks again.

HALSA
Good morning? Hello? Your, uh,
wizardness?

Still no answer.

HALSA

Sorry about the water. I'll get more.

Halsa tries the latch. The door is locked.

HALSA

And I don't have any secrets, you know. I'm sure you can tell that anyway.

Halsa leans her head against the heavy door, panting and exhausted.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - FIREPIT - DAY

A spoon scrapes the edges of an empty pot.

HALSA

Where's the porridge?

STILT

Breakfast is over. Long time ago.

Halsa stares at him in furious disbelief. Someone taps her on the shoulder. She wheels around, ready for a fight.

ESSA

Here.

Essa holds out a piece of bread, stale and hard.

For a moment Halsa considers not taking it.

Essa snorts.

HALSA

Thank you.

MOMENTS LATER:

Essa and Halsa sit together as Halsa devours the bread. A few other children mill about behind them. The tiny boy BURD attempts headstands.

ESSA

So your father sold you?

HALSA

I don't have a father and no one
sold me. My mother's coming to get
me soon.

ESSA

Is she really?

HALSA

Who sold you?

ESSA

No one. I ran away from home. I
didn't want to be a soldier's whore
like my sisters.

Halsa tries to work out the logic.

HALSA

Are wizards better than soldiers?

ESSA

What do you think? Didn't you meet
your wizard?

HALSA

He was old and ugly, of course. I
didn't like the way he looked at
me.

ESSA

(stifling a laugh)
Oh dear. Then, of course, he gave
you your assignment. It's
important to know what you're here
for. Otherwise...

Halsa is visibly nervous. *What is she here for?*

HALSA

Otherwise what?

ESSA

Otherwise you'll just waste all of
your energies hating your mother.
Wondering how she could do such a
thing as sell her dearest daughter.

Essa neighs a long and hearty laugh.

Halsa tries her best not to react. She scratches nervously
at her arms.

The other children, now watching Halsa, also snicker. Among them are VEERY and YONICA, two 9-year-old girls, and FENNICK, a boy with big ears and even bigger glasses.

Halsa watches as Essa stands up and holds out her hands toward Fennick.

ESSA

Fennick, come here. What are we here for?

Fennick holds Essa's hands and the two of them close their eyes. They sway slightly, sharing a world together that no one else sees.

FENNICK

Ice cream. And a cake as tall as the towers. Can I have a piece?

ESSA

Go ahead. If you can eat underwater.

FENNICK

That's what it is. A jelly fish.

ESSA

It looks like the milky way. The deeper we go, the more things glow.

FENNICK

The deeper we go, the more we'll know.

Halsa seems more and more stranded as she watches the strange, enchanting ritual.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - FIREPIT - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa approaches Willet who sits away from the rest of the group, watching Burd practice his headstands.

HALSA

They're all acting like little children.

BURD

And what's so bad about that?

HALSA

(to Burd)

I'm not talking to you!

(to Willet)

(MORE)

HALSA (cont'd)
Would you tell me what my duties
are? What is a wizard's servant
supposed to do?

WILLET
You carry things up the stairs.
Fish. The wizards love fish.
Firewood. Or kaffa, when Tolcet
brings it back from the market.

Burd tumbles gracefully out of his headstand into a seated position.

BURD
Wizards like unusual things. Old
things. So you go out in the marsh
and look for things.

HALSA
What things?

WILLET
Glass bottles. Petrified imps.
Strange things, you know, out of
the ordinary. Or ordinary things
like plants or stones or animals or
anything that feels right. Do you
know what I mean?

HALSA
No.

Burd looks askance at her. *Stop playing dumb.*

BURD
Things with magic in them, silly.

HALSA
(dismissive)
Magic.

Halsa scratches at herself impatiently.

Willet leans toward Halsa to whisper softly to her.

WILLET
You know, I hated my mother too.
After she sold me. It's better
now.

EXT. PERFIL TRAIN STATION - DAY

Burdened with packs and bundles, Miri leads Onion and the
twins along the crowded platform. They pass a wall of

posters of the smiling King, pointing at us accusingly: "FEAR PROTECTS YOU. THE ENEMY IS AMONG US."

The platform is jammed with refugees, passengers, carts of freight, everyone jostling each other among the blasts of steam and shrill whistles.

As they approach the train, Onion tries to catch a glimpse of the engine and gets separated from Miri.

MIRI

Onion! Where's Onion? Onion!

Onion pushes his way through the crowd until he gets a clean view of the engine:

On its smokestack, a stencilled BLUE HERALDIC DOLPHIN.

MIRI

Onion!

ONION

Look at that!

EXT. MARSH PIER - CONTINUOUS

Halsa stands knee-deep in the water staring at a shiny object under the undulating marsh grasses.

A voice drifts across the still waters.

ONION (V.O.)

It's beautiful! We've never been
on a train before.

Halsa waves her hand, swatting the voice away.

HALSA

Leave me alone. I'm not there with
you.

Halsa reaches to pull the object out of the water. It's half of a decorative thimble with a gilt-edge and a pattern of small red flowers.

She inspects it closely, turning it in her fingers. She closes it tightly in her fist and shuts her eyes.

Nothing happens.

She opens her eyes and tosses the object angrily back into the marsh.

EXT. PERFIL TRAIN STATION - CONTINUOUS

CONDUCTOR
Tickets? Tickets?

Miri pushes her way up to one of the train's doors and hands her tickets to the conductor.

MIRI
Four of us.

CONDUCTOR
These tickets are to Qual.

MIRI
Yes.

CONDUCTOR
This train's for Larch. You want
Track 3.

MIRI
Where?

CONDUCTOR
Over there.

The conductor points it out for Miri. Onion looks as well.

Under the sign for Track 3, Onion stares at...

...a stencilled RED DRAGON EMBLEM BREATHING FLAME on the engine's smokestack.

MIRI
Onion!

Mik grabs Onion's hand and yanks him forward.

MIK
Come on!

Onion turns around to see...

...a very lost looking Halsa suddenly there behind him!
She's staring with dread at the familiar fire-breathing dragon emblem.

ONION
I felt you looking. C'mon.

But as soon as Onion reaches for her hand, she's gone.

EXT. MARSH PIER - CONTINUOUS

HALSA

Stop it! I'm not there with you.
I'm not!

Halsa startles herself with the sound of her own voice. She is standing in the water where we left her. Very much alone.

She climbs out of the water and runs down the pier back towards the towers.

INT. TOWER - DAY

Halsa carries a full bucket of water and some cooked fish wrapped in leaves, up the tower stairs.

MOMENTS LATER:

She carefully sets down the bucket and the fish outside the wizard's door. She knocks cautiously.

There's no response.

HALSA

Wizard? Wizard? I've brought you some fish and fresh water.

No response.

HALSA

Wizard? Um, can I ask you a question?

No response.

HALSA

May I please ask you a question about the things that I see?

No response.

HALSA

They're just bad dreams. Nothing magic about it, right?

Disappointed, Halsa puts her ear to the door for a beat. *Is that breathing that she hears?*

FLASH: From the other side of the door, the towering decrepit figure mimics Halsa's gesture. His panting becomes a creepy, growling moan.

Halsa jumps away from the door and runs as fast as she can into the stairwell.

A hand reaches out from the shadows to gently graze her shoulder.

Halsa screams.

TOLCET
What is it that you see, girl?

Tolcet emerges from a dark corner of the stairwell, a knowing, gentle smile on his face.

Halsa backs away from him cautiously.

TOLCET
You can talk to me.

HALSA
I don't see anything. I'm not like all of you.

Tolcet smiles warmly at the stubborn girl.

HALSA
I don't see anything!

TOLCET
You can walk a thought like a tight-rope if you know where you're going.

EXT. WAR-TORN LANDSCAPE - AFTERNOON

Train tracks lead toward the horizon. With a puff of smoke, the engine chugs along them.

The train is stuffed with people, hanging out of its doors and windows. Even the top of it is loaded with overflow passengers, bundled and hunkered down for the journey.

INT. TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

The train car is jammed with people - sitting, standing, gabbing. Babies cry. A DRUNK MAN presses his way down the aisle, stumbling against people and laughing as he goes.

Onion glances around the train car, taking in the passengers. Frightened and miserable faces. A PRAYING WOMAN mutters and fingers a string of beads. A HUNGRY BABY wails. A WOUNDED MAN coughs wetly, the bandage around his throat stained brownish-red.

Across from and directly facing Miri, Onion, and the twins are two rich women, ORNA and DOFFNA, 30s, all fans, flounces, and filmy handkerchiefs.

The rich women smile flirtatiously at Mik and Bonti who giggle coyly at them.

Onion eavesdrops on TWO MIDDLE-AGED MEN across the aisle who speak in hushed tones.

BEARDED MAN

We're safer leaving. They say the King's army is on its way to Perfil next.

BALD MAN

The King's men won't sack Perfil. If anything, they're coming to defend it against the rebel armies.

BEARDED MAN

And you believe that?! The King thinks that Perfil's full of sympathizers. He thinks that everyone's his enemy.

BALD MAN

Shhh! What are you saying?!

The Bald Man glances nervously at a uniformed guard at the far end of the coach.

BEARDED MAN

The king is mad. He sends our armies to burn down our own towns, full of perfectly loyal citizens, and when the soldiers resist the orders, he sends out another army to fight them.

BALD MAN

The King's right. There are traitors, sympathizers with the wizards! The kingdom is full of them.

BEARDED MAN

People are too afraid to be sympathizers. They'd turn in their own mother as a witch if she guesses it'll rain and it actually does.

BALD MAN
 (getting flustered)
 No, no, no. It's blasphemy, what
 you're saying.

Onion stares at the Bald Man, who's doing his best to contain his rising anger. Onion hears what the man is thinking:

BALD MAN (V.O.)
 If you're not careful, I'll happily
 turn you in, you idiot.

His eyes fluttering strangely, Onion absentmindedly repeats the man's words.

ONION
 I'll happily turn you in, you
 idiot.

The Bald Man bolts upright in his seat, frantically scans the car.

BALD MAN
 Who said that?!

Miri glares at Onion. She slaps him hard on the thigh.

Further down the aisle, a woman cackles maliciously. She points straight at Onion and comments to the man next to her:

CACKLING WOMAN
 Did you see what he was on about?

Miri quickly diffuses the situation.

MIRI
 I'm sorry. He was just playing.
 Just a kid's game.

The woman stares suspiciously at Onion and laughs:

CACKLING WOMAN
 That boy's got the magic in him.

We've heard this cackling voice before: it's the voice from Halsa's vision.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - FIREPIT - CONTINUOUS

Halsa chokes on a bite of food. She's heard this too!

The other children look up from their meals. They stare curiously at Halsa who's seated at a distance from them, doing her best to mask her anxiety.

As the children go back to their business, Halsa closes her eyes and concentrates.

FLASH: Flames engulf the tapestry.

FLASH: The smokestack with the fire-breathing dragon emblem.

A SHRILL TRAIN WHISTLE. THE SHRIEKS OF THE CACKLING WOMAN.

FLASH: The wheels of the train spin furiously.

FLASH: A tunnel looms. Ominous, black mountain peaks tower beyond the tunnel entrance.

TOLCET (V.O.)
You can walk a thought like a tight-rope if you know where you're going.

Halsa strains to control her thoughts.

IN HALSA'S MIND...

...she suddenly hovers over the landscape like a giant. From her perspective, the train now looks like a model speeding into a toy tunnel.

Halsa strains to get a closer look at the train. The map-like landscape begins to ripple slightly and zoom in as if we're falling rapidly toward it. Halsa gets a quick glimpse of a soldier stretching a trigger wire across the train tracks.

FLASH: A murder of crows bursts noisily into the sky.

FLASH: A hand violently sweeps chess pieces off the board. A fist slams down.

FLASH: The King looms over the fallen chess pieces. Crazed. Malevolent.

THE SOUND OF AN EXPLOSION.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - FIREPIT - CONTINUOUS

Something clicks in Halsa's mind. She speaks aloud as if in a trance.

HALSA

You have to separate the things
that have been from the things that
will be.

(beat)

He's going to blow up the train.

The other children stare wide-eyed at Halsa.

She catches herself. Their stares are unbearable to her.

BURD

She's in a trance.

VEERY

She's magic.

YONICA

The wizard is speaking through her.

Halsa cringes at the words as she moves away from the group.
She's like a terrified girl who's embarrassed to scream.

Tolcet watches Halsa, smirks at her knowingly. *Of course you have the gift.*

HALSA

Stop looking at me like that!
Leave me alone. I was never
supposed to be here, you know. It
was Onion, not me. I don't want to
be here.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE- NIGHT

Halsa peeks out the door of her tower room. Makes sure that no one's around.

She closes the door, sits down on her pallet and closes her eyes.

IN HALSA'S MIND...

...she is high on the tower steps, struggling to lift the huge skein of oily black twine. As she moves it the twine begins to spool its way out the small tower window, winding its way into the night sky.

HALSA

(whispering)

Onion! Onion!

The tendril of twine reaches out into the darkness toward the tiny, floating figure of Onion. It winds itself around his foot and begins to engulf him.

INT. TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

Asleep, Onion tosses and turns in his seat.

ONION (V.O.)
Stop it, you're hurting me.

HALSA (V.O.)
Onion, you have to get off the train.

Onion's eyes flutter as Halsa's voice reaches him.

ONION (V.O.)
Why are you here with me? You always yell at me when I do it to you. It's not fair.

HALSA (V.O.)
Forget about that. You have to find some way to get off the train.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - CONTINUOUS

Halsa rocks back and forth, trance-like.

HALSA
You have to tell them.

ONION (V.O.)
Tell them what?

HALSA
They're going to blow up the train.

ONION (V.O.)
Who? That's not true. You're just trying to scare me.

IN HALSA'S MIND...

...she looks through the tiny tower window at the distant figure of Onion floating in the darkness. She pulls on the twine and the tangled figure of Onion begins to spin like a top.

HALSA (V.O.)
Onion! This is no joke. You have to tell my Mom. The king's army is
(MORE)

HALSA (V.O.) (cont'd)
going to blow up the train. You
have to tell her now.

ONION (V.O.)
Stop it, Halsa. I'm dizzy.

HALSA (V.O.)
Tell her.

INT. TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

Onion tosses and turns and then opens his eyes with a start.
Miri eyes him strangely. She strokes his hair.

MIRI
It was just a bad dream. Go back
to sleep.

Onion settles back in his seat and closes his eyes, but the
voice won't leave his head.

HALSA (V.O.)
Look, just do one thing for me will
you. Go to the window and look out
in both directions. Can you at
least do that? Then I'll leave you
alone.

Onion grumbles, rubs his eyes, and gets up from his seat.

ONION
(to Miri)
I have to pee.

He moves cautiously down the aisle past the cackling woman
who stares at him with a knowing grin.

Onion slides a window down and pokes his head out into the
moonlit night. In one direction, he sees the vast basin of
the Perfil gulf.

In the other direction, miles and miles away, the shadowy
black peaks of a mountain range.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - CONTINUOUS

HALSA
How far are the mountains?

ONION (V.O.)
How should I know?

HALSA
Ask!

INT. TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

Onion obediently moves to the end of the coach and shyly tugs on the coat tails of the uniformed guard.

ONION

How long 'til the mountains?

UNIFORMED GUARD

There's a lot of factors in that equation, my boy. We'll need to refuel at Slough, for sure, and barring any track breaks or signal trouble, we should be at the pass in a day or so. If we're lucky.

The guard pats Onion on the head.

ONION

A day or so if we're lucky.

The guard looks at the boy strangely as he hears his words repeated.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - CONTINUOUS

HALSA

Good. Now stop talking to yourself and go tell my Mom.

ONION (V.O.)

I'm not getting punished.

Halsa bangs her fist on the ground.

HALSA

Ahhh! Onion! Is this what you want? Do you want to be dead?!

INT. TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

Onion suddenly speaks aloud.

ONION

Why do you care all of a sudden? You hate us all anyway.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - CONTINUOUS

HALSA

I do not!

Halsa opens her eyes, stunned as if she's been slapped. Is Onion right?

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. RIVER BANK - DAY

Splashing and struggling: three teen-age boys viciously push Onion under the surface of the water.

Halsa and a few other children stand wading in the river nearby, watching the struggle.

HALSA
Leave him alone!
(reaching for Onion)
Onion, get away from them! Let's go!

Stumbling backwards in the water, Onion breaks free of the boys and catches his breath. As they laugh at him, Onion sets his jaw, clenches his fists and closes his eyes tightly. As if he's summoning a mental weapon.

BUCK-TOOTHED BOY
Stupid runt! Why don't you--

HALSA
Onion!

The buck-toothed boy stops suddenly. His eyes go wide and then flutter.

Onion furrows his brow.

Halsa glances around nervously, backs away from the boys. Whatever Onion's up to, she doesn't want to be associated with it.

Panicked, the buck-toothed boy shakes his head, swats his hands in front of his face, like he's chasing off a nightmare.

Onion shakes as if a seizure's taken hold of him.

A SKINNY GIRL watches the scene with growing concern. She grabs Halsa.

SKINNY GIRL
What's the matter with your cousin?

HALSA

How should I know? He's in a
trance or something. He's a freak.

The girl pieces it together and yells to the other children.

SKINNY GIRL

(pointing at Onion)

Get away from him! He's magic!

The children stare horrified at Onion, backing away from him as quickly as they can.

FLASH CUT TO:

INT. PEASANT FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

A loud, panicky knock on the door.

Halsa watches from behind Miri as her FATHER opens the door to reveal ONION'S MOTHER, her eyes wide with fear.

ONION'S MOTHER

They've burned down the house, and
it won't be long before they find
us.

Halsa looks guiltily at Onion, peeking out from behind his mother's skirt.

BACK TO:

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - NIGHT

Halsa stares into space, struggling with a not very pretty picture of herself.

Then, somewhere high up in the tower, a door creaks. It catches her attention.

She jumps up from her pallet and begins to run up the tower stairs.

INT. TOWER - NIGHT

Frantic and out of breath, Halsa climbs the last few stairs of the tower and leans her head against the closed door.

HALSA

(whispered)

Wizard? Wizard? Will you help me?

Wizard? Please? Onion won't

listen to me.

There is nothing but silence.

HALSA

Please help. I'll be a better
servant to you. Please.

Halsa huddles up in a ball by the locked door.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - MORNING

A group of children chat as they head off down a path towards the marshes. They carry buckets, baskets, fishing poles, and nets. Essa is at the rear of the group. She glances back over her shoulder.

Halsa is following them, but keeping her distance.

ESSA

And where do you think you're
going?

Halsa bows her head shyly. She wants Essa's support but she's still not comfortable asking for it.

HALSA

I'm coming with you all. To look
for magic things for the wizard?

ESSA

Oh, are you? I thought you didn't
believe in magic?

Halsa is silent, humiliated at having her own words thrown back at her.

Essa looks at her skeptically.

ESSA

So you just want something, then.
Typical. You won't find anything
magic with that attitude.

Essa takes a good look at Halsa. She sees that all the strength has gone out of her. Her eyes are tired, her guard is down. She's in no state for a challenge.

She grabs hold of Halsa's hand.

ESSA

C'mon.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/PATH - MOMENTS LATER

Essa and Halsa walk.

HALSA

Do you believe in seeing into the future?

ESSA

Why, is the future seeing into you?

HALSA

No. I don't know. But even if it was, I don't see what I could do about it.

ESSA

Tolcet says the future is just a story, like a vapor, and vapors change shape all the time. One choice can change everything.

Halsa ponders Essa's words.

EXT. MARSH - MORNING

The children are spread out across the marsh, hunched over and stalking through knee-high water like a flock of wading birds. Further out, two boys lean out over the edge of a skiff and drag nets through the water.

Halsa trails her fingers in the silky water. Water weeds dance like flowing hair in the mud at her feet. Halsa scans the bottom, but she's not even sure what she's looking for.

BOY (O.S.)

Whoo-hoo!

Halsa watches as a boy in the distance yanks a mossy tricycle out of the mud and shows it to the kids near him.

Determined now, Halsa reaches down into the mud, dislodges something, and pulls it up:

A piece of broken concrete with a rusted bar in it.

Nothing magic about that. She drops it with a plunk and resumes her search more frantically.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - MORNING

The children gather excitedly around a long plank set up like a table. Tolcet calls them to order.

TOLCET

Okay! And what have we got?

We glide over the table, looking down as each child places their items on the plank, displaying their finds: an old green bottle, a large coin with a hole in it, a smooth red rock, a rodent's skull, a small plastic cow.

TOLCET (O.S.)

Very good, very good, ahhh, well done ...

A girl's hands carefully place down two halves of a broken, china teacup.

TOLCET (O.S.)

Hmmm ... Magic, Veery?

VEERY

Can't you tell?!

TOLCET

(laughing)

Well done.

Halsa clears her throat loudly, getting Tolcet's attention. She raises her hand impatiently.

HALSA

I have something here.

TOLCET

In due time, Halsa. See how it's done first.

More objects -- the children display them proudly: the lens of a magnifying glass, a tiny carved picture frame, shells, a fish vertebra, a faucet handle, a bent teaspoon, a rubber boot, a string of colored beads, a glass jar with a newt in it, an empty hornet's nest, the dried face of a sunflower.

TOLCET

Very good, very good, yes, yes, well done all.

Tolcet arrives at the end of the table, where Halsa excitedly places her object on the plank. It's a tiny, greeny-copper key.

HALSA

I found this.

TOLCET

Hmmm. Is it magic?

HALSA

Yes.

(feigning belief)

It's... magic.

Tolcet notes Halsa's discomfort with the very word.

TOLCET

Well, what do we think? Is it
magic? Hold it up, Halsa.

Blushing, Halsa holds up the key to the judgement of the
other children.

Tolcet points to different children for their verdicts.

CHILDREN

No... No... Unh-unh... Nope... Uhh,
no... No... Unh-unh.

To Halsa, the process seems interminable. She lowers her
eyes and nervously scratches her arm.

TOLCET

I guess it's not magic.

HALSA

Oh.

TOLCET

May I see it?

The key looks even smaller in Tolcet's rough hand.

TOLCET

Burd, where is the box you found?
The one that even you couldn't
open?

Burd runs from the table toward one of the towers.

Halsa sighs. *How long with this humiliation last?*

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - MOMENTS LATER

Burd's hands carry a small, rusted, locked box.

He places the box in Tolcet's hands.

Tolcet's fingers slip the tiny key into the lock. It fits.

Halsa watches anxiously as Tolcet jiggles the key in the lock. A CLICK. The lid flips open.

Tolcet peers into the box, and finally holds it for Halsa to see.

HALSA
(disappointed)
Just a doll.

Tolcet plucks it from the box and holds it up: it's a strange-looking figure, carved out of greasy black wood. It has no back, only two fronts: a Janus.

TOLCET
It can see both backwards and
forwards at the same time. What do
you think, Halsa? Magic?

Full of doubt, Halsa stares at the double face of the doll.

HALSA
It must be. Yes, definitely.

TOLCET
Just as the key led to the box, one
belief can lead you to all the
magic you could want. Magic is
belief, Halsa. Is it just a doll?
What do you think, Burd?

BURD
(with a shrug)
It's not mine.

Tolcet hands it to Halsa.

TOLCET
It's yours.

Halsa hefts the doll in her hand.

HALSA
So it is magic, then?

TOLCET
That's up to you.

Tolcet turns to the children and claps his hands.

TOLCET
Okay.

The children gather up the magic objects and head towards their towers, leaving Halsa by herself.

She stares at the doll in her hand.

INT. TOWER - DAY

Halsa reaches the top of the stairs. The bucket on the top step is empty. Halsa places a full one down next to it and sets down a plate of cooked fish.

She knocks on the door.

HALSA

Wizard? I've brought you
breakfast. And something else.
Something I found in the marsh.

Silence.

HALSA

It's a doll. It's definitely a
magic doll.

Silence.

HALSA

If I give you the doll, will you do
something for me? You're a wizard,
so you ought to be able to do
anything, right?

Halsa sets the doll down in front of the door.

HALSA

Will you stop the train? My family
is going to die if you won't stop
it. You know about the soldiers?
And the sabotaged track? And that
the King will blame the wizards?
Can't you get my family off the
train?

Silence.

HALSA

Why won't you talk to me?!

Halsa fumes and pockets the doll.

HALSA

I think you're a coward. That's
why you hide up here, isn't it?

Halsa spits in the bucket of water, and starts down the steps, but suddenly wavers.

HALSA

Wizard? If you keep the train safe, I'll give you the doll. I need to be with my family. You know I don't belong here.

(beat)

And I'm sorry I spit in your water. I'll go and get more.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - DAY

Halsa lugs a full bucket of water back from the marsh. She swats at the bugs that are eating her alive.

Essa stands near the path, smoking a clay pipe.

ESSA

Mud. The flies are bad today. If you put mud on your face and arms, they leave you alone.

HALSA

It smells.

ESSA

So do you.

In a show of anger, Essa snaps her pipe in two and storms off to join the children around the fire pit.

Nearby, Burd has mastered his magical headstand: with his arms crossed over his chest, he waves his legs languidly in the air.

Further down the path, Halsa passes Tolcet, who is seated under a gnarled tree in a battered, oaken throne. He smokes a clay pipe as well, though twice as long as Essa's.

TOLCET

Did you give the poppet to the wizard?

HALSA

Oh yes.

TOLCET

What did she say?

Halsa is taken aback. She?

HALSA

Well, I'm not sure. She's quite young and lovely. But she had a horrible stutter. I could hardly...

Tolcet can't keep himself from laughing at Halsa's game.

Halsa blushes, and storms off toward the pier.

EXT. MARSH PIER - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa sits sulking at the end of the pier. She turns to see Tolcet approaching from behind.

Tolcet takes a seat beside Halsa and looks deeply into her tired eyes.

HALSA

Why won't the wizard help me?

TOLCET

Help you with what?

Halsa hesitates. *To tell is to make an admission.*

HALSA

The train to Qual. My mother and Mik and Bonti are on it. And Onion. And when the train is in the mountains, there will be an explosion.

TOLCET

And how do you know this, girl?

HALSA

Because I see it.

TOLCET

A little girl who can see backwards and forwards in time? Hmm.

HALSA

So why won't the wizard help me?

TOLCET

Why should the wizard help you?

HALSA

It's my family on the train. They need to get off.

TOLCET

And what of the other people?
Won't they need help as well? Or
is death only bad for some?

Halsa turns her gaze downward, suddenly ashamed of herself.

TOLCET

Won't they all need your help?

HALSA

What are you saying? How can I
help them?

TOLCET

I don't know. How can you?

Halsa is about to storm off again when Tolcet grabs her by the wrist.

TOLCET

Could it be that that's what you're
here to find out?

Halsa turns to walk down the pier. Tolcet's voice rings in her ears.

TOLCET (V.O.)

Ask yourself what it's like to see
the future and the past at the same
time. What does that do for the
present? Understanding is what
makes everything possible.

EXT. MARSH - AFTERNOON

Halsa wanders through the tall marsh grasses. As she walks, she turns the doll over and over in her hand. She studies its face closely. The expressions on both faces are exactly the same.

She turns it again. Is that a faint smile on one side? A furrowed brow on the other?

Halsa closes her eyes tightly.

TOLCET (V.O.)

You're walking with purpose...

IN HALSA'S MIND...

...she scans the featureless, parched earth around her. A vast neutral landscape. There is nothing but sand and sky. The sun beats down.

TOLCET (V.O.)

...you know exactly where you've been, and exactly where you're going. There is no fear.

Halsa looks behind her. In front of her. There is nothing to distinguish a destination. Or a starting point.

Halsa looks down at her feet. A small crack in the earth begins to open up.

TOLCET (V.O.)

Your feet are firmly on the ground. In the here and now.

The crack opens wider and wider, revealing a gaping chasm. Tolcet stands on the other side, holding out his hand to Halsa. He's getting further away from her as the chasm opens wider and wider.

TOLCET (V.O.)

There is no space between us. We are together side by side. In the present. You can hand me the doll now. Prove to me that you're here by my side.

Halsa steps forward to offer Tolcet the doll. For a moment she is weightless, walking on the air above the chasm.

She looks down. Looks at the face of the doll. Now grimacing. Now releasing a terrible scream.

Halsa hesitates.

And she plummets deep into the chasm.

TOLCET (V.O.)

The present is boundless. Anything is possible in the stillness of that moment.

A series of quick FLASHES: ...the spinning train wheels... the fire-breathing smokestack... the looming tunnel... soldiers pull the trigger wire taut... the crows burst into the air... the ominous black mountain peaks... the King slams his fist on the chessboard... the SHRILL TRAIN WHISTLE...

BACK IN THE MARSH:

Halsa barrels through the tall grasses, off the path, running in a blind fury, and swatting her way through the tall reeds.

HALSA

Stop it! Stop it! Show it to someone else! I can't do anything about it!

Halsa comes to a sudden stop with a gasp. She holds her head in her hands and shakes it back and forth violently, like she wants to yank the thoughts right out of her head.

HALSA

Stop! Stop!

All is eerily quiet in the marsh for a beat, and then Halsa hears a strange CRUNCHING sound and looks up.

Right in front of her, hunkered down in the reeds, is a DRAGON, not a fanciful, winged mythological creature, but a huge, leathery, reptile - an overgrown Komodo dragon, 10' long from nose to tail, with wicked, black eyes.

Halsa freezes, unsure of what to do.

The dragon slowly pulls itself up onto its bow legs. It's almost as tall as Halsa. It tilts its head, flicks its long, black, forked tongue, sizing her up.

Halsa just stands there staring blankly, almost as if she's resigned to whatever will happen.

The dragon opens its mouth, hisses, and then waits for a response.

Halsa still just stands there, passive, staring.

The dragon is pleased by this. It almost seems to be smiling! *Dinner!* It leans its head in closer to her, flicks its tongue once more.

Halsa turns up her palms, lets her shoulders sag, tilts her head to one side: she's making herself completely prone.

HALSA

(muttering)

Go ahead. I don't care.

The dragon flicks its tongue, hisses, opens its mouth wide, and rears its head, ready to strike.

ESSA (O.S.)

Haaaaaa!

Essa comes barrelling through the reeds, holding up her arms to make herself seem as big as possible.

She whacks the dragon on the snout with a stick. It flinches.

She whacks it again, and this time it takes a step backwards and hisses angrily at her.

Essa holds up her fists in a swift, violent threat. The dragon retreats further.

ESSA
Go on, you!

The dragon, suddenly sheepish, slowly turns away. It glances back over its shoulder with a reproachful look.

Essa gives it a swift kick.

ESSA
Get going!

The dragon lumbers off into the reeds, its tail slithering behind it with a swoosh.

Halsa shakes herself out of her daze.

ESSA
You have to be firm with them.
Otherwise they get inside your head
and make you feel as if you deserve
to be eaten. The less you do, the
more powerful they are against you.
Are you okay?

Halsa nods her head shyly. She's still in shock.

ESSA
Are you listening to me? Any time
you give up, there is no hope.

Essa grabs her by the arm and leads the way, back through the reeds, toward the path.

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS - NIGHT

A stream of refugees trudges alongside the railroad tracks. They stand to the side as the trains chugs past.

The dragon-emblazoned smokestack trails black plumes.

The train approaches the entrance to a tunnel. Ominous black peaks loom in the night sky.

We've seen this image before. There's a sense of things falling into place, lines converging.

INT. TRAIN CAR - NIGHT

We move down the crowded aisle of the train car. People are sprawled everywhere - on the floor, in the aisle, in the luggage racks. Many are still dozing...

...as the train thunders into the tunnel.

HALSA (V.O.)
Onion. Onion.

Onion tosses and turns. Halsa's voice is a fly buzzing around him. He shakes his head and swats in front of his face.

HALSA (V.O.)
Tell them, tell them, tell them,
tell them ...

Onion awakens and opens his eyes with a start.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - CONTINUOUS

Halsa's brow furrows in a trance. She and Onion are locked in communication.

HALSA (V.O.)
You have to stop the train. You
have to stop the train.

INT. TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

ONION
(murmuring, aloud)
Stop yelling at me. Go away.
Halsa, stop it.

HALSA (V.O.)
Onion, stop the train! Stop the
train! Stop the train!

ONION
How am I supposed to stop a train!?

Onion starts at the sound of his own voice.

Miri stares at him suspiciously.

MIRI

Onion?

ONION

Something bad is going to happen.
We have to stop the train and get
off.

Miri glances over.

The two rich women, Orna and Doffna, stare at Onion as if he's a lunatic.

Miri pats Onion's shoulder.

MIRI

Onion, you were asleep. You were
just having a bad dream.

ONION

No, I wasn't. We have to get--

MIRI

(suddenly threatening)

It was just a dream.

(under her breath)

Do you want people to hear you
talking this way?

Onion glances around. Other passengers in the car have stopped their conversations and are looking at him. He sees the futility of the situation.

MIRI

Now go for a walk and shake it off.

EXT. TRAIN ENGINE - CONTINUOUS

A POV from the front of the train. The engine approaches the end of the tunnel.

A SHRILL TRAIN WHISTLE.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - CONTINUOUS

Halsa balls up into a fetal position. Her breathing is faster and faster.

TOLCET (V.O.)

Small things, Halsa. Magic is
belief.

Halsa gropes around on the floor, searching for something.

TOLCET (V.O.)
There is no space between us.

Halsa groans in pain.

HALSA
Onion! Take it!

She thrusts her arm up in the air. In her fist: the two-faced Janus talisman.

ANOTHER SHRILL TRAIN WHISTLE.

INT. TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

Onion topples backwards and falls on a SLEEPING WOMAN. She wakes with a start and pushes him off of her.

SLEEPING WOMAN
Watch it!

Onion lurches forward, eyes aflutter.

HALSA (V.O.)
Take it!

ONION
(aloud)
What is it?!

HALSA (V.O.)
Just take it! Here!

ONION
What is it? Stop it! I don't want it!

People in the car are waking up as Onion screams out. Miri is paralyzed with confusion and fear.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - CONTINUOUS

Halsa's chest heaves in pain, her body wracked by some inexplicable force.

FLASH: The skein of oily, black twine rapidly unspools.

FLASH: The snake earring glimmers in the firelight.

FLASH: Onion's mother stares out at us.

Halsa thrusts the doll forward again.

HALSA

Take it!

INT. TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

Onion staggers backwards again, this time falling on his ass in the aisle.

ONION

Stop it! You're hurting me!

Onion's eyes flutter. He's on the verge of passing out.

ONION

(weakly)

Halsa.

Dizzy with pain, Onion unclenches his hand and reaches out.

EXT. BARREN LANDSCAPE - CONTINUOUS

The train barrels past.

The murder of crows bursts noisily into the sky.

Up ahead, the trigger wire is visible across the track, and we're barrelling right for it.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - CONTINUOUS

HALSA

Take it!

She clenches her teeth and fights back a shriek of pain. She thrusts the doll as far as her arm can stretch, her tendons and muscles on the verge of snapping.

FLASH: The skein of twine unspools with demonic speed.

FLASH: The twine spirals around Halsa's outstretched arm and up into the air, like a life force shooting out of her.

FLASH: Onion's hand reaches out.

THE SHRILL TRAIN WHISTLE.

EXT. BARREN LANDSCAPE - CONTINUOUS

We barrel across the trigger wire.

THE SOUND OF AN EXPLOSION ... BLINDING WHITE.

HALSA (V.O.)
(screaming)
Onion!

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MARSH - MORNING

The undulating mirror of the smooth deep water. Black. Reflecting nothing but dim light.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - MORNING

Halsa sits awake on the pallet, a broken little girl. Spent, drained of energy.

She rubs her head. It hurts. Her ears RING loudly.

MOMENTS LATER:

She pats her body, her pockets, searching for something.

She shakes the blanket. She crawls around the pallet, her hands groping. *The doll is gone.*

MOMENTS LATER:

She holds her hands to her head, closes her eyes, and focuses as hard as she can.

HALSA
Onion? Onion? Can you hear me?
Onion?

All she can hear is the RINGING in her ears.

EXT. MARSH PIER - DAY

Halsa sits alone, shoulders slumped, at the end of the pier. She stares blankly at the fishing line that she dangles in the water.

HALSA
(faintly)
Mom?

Halsa looks up. Tolcet is seated next to her at the end of the pier - as if he's been there for hours.

Tolcet registers the hopelessness in Halsa's eyes.

Tolcet takes Halsa's chin in his hand, tilts her head this way and that, as if he can see inside it. He smooths her hair.

Halsa closes her eyes, passive but also relieved to give in to a comforting touch. Emotions well up inside of her. She's still just a frightened and hurt little girl.

She starts to cry and cry and cry.

TOLCET
Shh, shh, shh... Halsa...

HALSA
Why did you tell me I could do something? I couldn't do anything. I can't do anything. The train blew up. My family is gone.

TOLCET
Is that what you see?

HALSA
No, I don't see anything anymore. Did the wizard do this to me?

TOLCET
Is it better or worse this way?

HALSA
Better. No, worse. It doesn't matter. My family is gone. I'm stuck here forever. What am I going to do?

Halsa's crying softens into breathy gasps. Tolcet gently brushes his fingers through her bangs.

TOLCET
You are still a servant of the wizards of Perfil. You have a purpose. All things may yet be well.

Halsa pulls away from him, a fury now rising within her.

HALSA
How can anything ever be well?! How can you say that?! How can we serve men and women who hide in towers and do nothing to help people who need help? What good is magic if it doesn't serve anyone?

(MORE)

HALSA (cont'd)
 The wizards of Perfil are mean and
 cruel and selfish cowards and
 useless, and I hate them!

Halsa runs away down the pier and into the tall marsh grass.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - NIGHT

The moon rises up over the marshes, round and fat.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 The wizards of Perfil don't write
 poetry, as a general rule. As far
 as anyone knows, they don't marry,
 or plow fields, or have much use
 for polite speech.

The towers loom high, their windows lit with eerie light.

INT. TOWER - NIGHT

We glide up the stone stairs, spiralling upwards and upwards
 and upwards ...

INT. THE WIZARD'S ROOM - PRE-DAWN

The window is open against the inky blue sky. A candle still
 sputters, all but melted into the mound of wax drippings.

We move around the room, taking in the wizard's possessions.
 On the table: books, papers, binoculars.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 Wizards are sly, greedy, absent-
 minded, obsessed with stars and
 bugs, parsimonious, frivolous,...

On the walls: old, faded photos of various men and women,
 posed in rag-tag groups - some in uniforms, others with guns,
 others at rallies. A collection of photos from a dusty
 revolution or uprising. A lost history.

...invisible, tyrannous,
 untrustworthy, secretive,
 inquisitive, meddlesome, long-
 lived, dangerous, useless, and have
 far too good an opinion of
 themselves.

Further along the wall, a strange mirror displays the surface
 of the marsh, itself an undulating mirror reflecting the
 streaked dawn sky.

EXT. PATH TO QUAL - DAWN

A stream of refugees trudges through a field of flaming oil wells.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Kings go mad, the land is blighted,
children starve or get sick or die
spitted on the pointy end of a
pike, and it's all beneath the
notice of the wizards of Perfil.
The wizards of Perfil don't fight
wars.

MONTAGE:

- Dark clouds gather in the skies above the marsh. The monsoon season has arrived. A pleading whisper floats on the air.

HALSA (V.O.)

Onion.

- Halsa sits on her pallet at the base of the tower stairs. She cradles her head in her hands. Closes her eyes tightly and strains to see. Nothing comes.

- High in the tower, outside the wizard's door, an empty bucket of water. Fish bones on a plate. The wind gusts down the spiral staircase like a lonely wail.

HALSA (V.O.)

Onion. Onion.

- In the steady drizzle, Halsa wades in the marsh, frantically searching for objects. From a distance, Essa watches her sadly.

- Outside the wizard's door, a cobweb stretches across the mouth of the empty bucket. A spider inches its way along the web towards a struggling fly.

- Halsa sits on the marsh pier, the barnacled piston valves of a trumpet in her outstretched hands.

HALSA (V.O.)

Onion. Onion.

- An angry pounding sound from behind the wizard's door. Maggots twist around the ribs of the fish bones on the forgotten plate. The wail of the wind grows ever more mournful. Hungry.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - AFTERNOON

Halsa sits slumped on her pallet, dejected and alone.

She focuses on the wailing sound. It seems all too human now. *Is it in her mind?*

She stands at the base of the stairs and focuses more carefully on the sound. It's coming from someplace outside, far away.

Halsa moves quickly for the door.

EXT. MARSH - AFTERNOON

Cold and drenched, Halsa walks a path we haven't seen before. She tracks the sound, which becomes more distinct with each step. It's the sound of a deep and terrible pain.

She stumbles through deep brush, tripping in muddy channels. The sound is louder still.

Halsa arrives at a clearing at the edge of the brush. She sees the ruins of a tower jutting out of the mud flats. It is covered in moss and has been there long enough to seem a natural outgrowth of the marsh.

Tolcet kneels beside the ruin, clasping his head in his hands in the gesture of Munch's "Scream." a tormented scream. The horrible wail emanates from him.

Tears well up in Halsa's eyes as she watches Tolcet. She is about to move toward him, when a hand clasps her shoulder firmly from behind.

ESSA

You can't disturb him now. The world is speaking through him.

(pulling Halsa's hand)

C'mon. We're not supposed to be in this part of the marsh. It's forbidden.

HALSA

But there's something wrong. We should help him.

ESSA

There's nothing wrong. He's a wizard's servant too, Halsa. He has his duties. Especially today.

HALSA

I don't understand. What's today?

Essa smiles strangely as she pulls Halsa away from the clearing, back into the brush.

ESSA

It's the day the wizards went up into their towers and didn't come back down. It's the day we hope they might come down again.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - AFTERNOON

A YOUNG HARE lies motionless on a flat rock. Its fur is matted. It appears dead, except that its eye is open: black and glassy. Its sides rise and fall in labored breathing.

Outstretched children's hands form a large circle around it.

The air bristles with whispers and magic.

Halsa and Essa enter the meadow from one of the marsh paths. They see the circle of crouching children.

Halsa stops in her tracks. She's suddenly woozy, a sweat forming on her brow.

ESSA

You'll be alright. The magic is strong when they're all together. You'll feel better when we join the circle.

The children have their eyes shut in concentration, their faces lost in a collective trance.

Halsa follows Essa reluctantly.

HALSA

I can't. I have nothing to offer.

The children open a spot in the circle for them. Essa eases Halsa into her position.

Halsa looks with great discomfort at the dying hare.

HALSA

What is it? Is it a wizard of Perfil?

FENNICK

Shhh!

BURD

It's a hare, silly. It came out of
the marsh.

The hare's breathing quickens. The whispers grow louder,
even though none of the children is actually speaking.

Halsa blinks away a sudden flash of dizziness.

HALSA

Is it saying something?

Burd looks Halsa straight in the eye.

BURD (V.O.)

Everything speaks.

His lips aren't moving as he speaks to her.

Halsa trembles with fear.

FLASH: The skein of black, oily twine unspools with
quicken^g speed.

ESSA (V.O.)

Halsa, listen.

Essa's looking straight at her now as well. All the children
are. The air becomes deafening with whispers.

HALSA

I can't hear anything.

CHILDREN (V.O.)

Halsa ... Halsa ... Listen ...
Listen to it ...

Halsa steels herself. Reluctant to give into it.

Essa places a hand on Halsa's shoulder, looks gently into her
eyes.

Halsa begins to let go. Her eyes flutter.

FLASH: The skein of twine spins faster and faster.

FLASH: The hare's sides rise and fall with quickening breath.

The children's outstretched hands tremble.

CHILDREN (V.O.)

Can you feel it? Halsa...

Halsa relaxes her body, giving herself fully now to the trance.

Her eyes flutter rapidly.

And she faints.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - EVENING

Halsa's eyes ease open, and she finds herself lying in the grass.

She sits up with a start. She's in the meadow, just where she had been with the other children, but no one else is there. Just the flat rock - with nothing on it.

HALSA

Essa? Burd?

The air is silent. No one is in sight.

And then Halsa notices something move in the grass.

It jumps up: a baby hare.

Another one jumps nearby. And then another.

The meadow is suddenly full of baby hares, dashing between the towers, leaping over each other, tussling in midair.

Halsa watches them, even gets caught up in the joy and wonder of the hares' play. At first, she doesn't even notice the sound of another child, a boy, laughing...

FLASH: Seated in Tolcet's oaken throne, Onion laughs at the hares' antics.

Halsa turns to see, but the throne is empty.

HALSA

Onion?

The meadow is silent except for the frolicking hares.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - FIREPIT - MORNING

Essa and Halsa sit beside the smoldering firepit. In the distance, the heads of the other children bob in and out of the tall marsh reeds.

Essa smokes her clay pipe, watching Halsa staring off into space.

HALSA

Do you believe in ghosts?

ESSA

Why, are you seeing them?

HALSA

My cousin, Onion. He was on the train that blew up. I saw him in the marsh.

ESSA

Ghosts don't travel. It's something else. He's trying to reach you.

HALSA

He's alive somewhere, then? That's what you mean?

Halsa is on her feet, excitedly pacing back and forth. A weight has finally started to lift from her shoulders.

HALSA

He's alive!

ESSA

You should know. I'm not the one seeing ghosts.

Halsa begins to run toward her tower.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - NIGHT

Halsa places a few pieces of clothing and bits of bread and fruit into a rag bundle.

She holds the snake earrings up to her ears and looks at her reflection in the bucket of water.

A blurry image forms on the water's surface, distorting Halsa's reflection. The image is like bad reception, damaged film. But it's something.

ONION (V.O.)

Halsa ...

FLASH: Onion, gray and ashen, seated at the foot of Halsa's pallet. He smiles at her.

Halsa turns to look, but no one's there.

HALSA

Onion? Are you alive?! Is Mom OK?
Mik and Bonti? I can't see clearly
anymore. It's all noise.

Halsa closes her eyes now, focuses as hard as she can.

FLASH: A blurry, moving POV -- railroad tracks in a barren landscape, stretching toward the horizon.

FLASH: Another moving POV -- this one circling a mass of flickering votive candles, milagros, talismans, and photographs of the king.

HALSA

I know you're out there. I'll find you.

Halsa ties up her bundle and ponders what she's about to do.

EXT. TOWER - NIGHT

The door to Halsa's tower inches open. Halsa peeks out, looks around. The coast is clear. She slips out of the tower and starts heading away quickly.

She glances back at the tower. High in the window, candle light flickers, a hunched shadow passes. *Does the wizard see her?*

Halsa steels herself and keeps walking.

HALSA

(under her breath)

Go ahead. Turn me into a one-legged crow. I don't care.

(beat)

I don't need your help anyway.

Halsa quickens her pace, just in case the wizard decides to challenge her defiance.

EXT. BARREN LANDSCAPE - MORNING

Train tracks. Halsa's feet hop up onto them and walk along. We follow her feet and pull up to reveal:

Halsa, a lone figure walking along endless train tracks that disappear into the horizon of a dry, barren plain: a little girl striking out on a long journey.

EXT. WAR-TORN LANDSCAPE - DAY

A MONTAGE of refugees' faces as they trudge onward: worn, miserable, afraid, hopeless... A wailing baby with a dirt-streaked face. Its mother, stoically deaf to its cries, knows there's nothing she can do for it... A chain of hungry children, each holding the hand of the one in front of it, is led by a teen girl, who can't be much older than Halsa... Old women, old men, women, children...

Halsa glances at these faces, sadly registers the defeat and fear in their eyes.

Next to her, a grimy-faced TODDLER yanks at her rag bundle. Halsa smiles at it, waves her fingers playfully in the child's face.

The child's mother pulls the toddler away from Halsa and glares at her suspiciously.

Halsa lowers her eyes, confused that anyone would be afraid of her.

EXT. RUINS - NIGHT

Halsa huddles in the lee of a large, shattered, concrete drainage pipe. She stokes a tiny fire.

She stares into the fire's glowing embers. She closes her eyes, sets her jaw and balls her fists tightly.

HALSA

Let me see. Let me see.

FLASH: A fallen bottle, gushes water onto the ground.

FLASH: A fox collar on a woman's coat. Its dead eyes glisten. The woman's back arches in pain as an arrow pierces it.

HALSA

Onion. Tell me what it means.

EXT. DESERTED PLAIN - DAWN

The dawn sky is all fiery red. Halsa is a lone silhouette marching along the railroad tracks.

EXT. PATH TO QUAL - DAY

We track along with Halsa's feet: bound, ragged, but marching determinedly along the railroad tracks.

EXT. CHARRED FIELD - DAY

Halsa follows the train tracks across the razed fields of a charred farm. The destruction is fresh, still smouldering, and yet in the middle of the field is a huge newly-erected billboard:

"Who loves you? Who protects you? Who's your friend?" it asks over a smiling image of the king. "The King! The King! The King!"

Halsa treks onward.

EXT. PATH TO QUAL - EVENING

An open flat-bed rail car slowly rolls along the tracks. It is loaded with WOUNDED SOLDIERS: men wrapped in lengths of bloody cloth, blinded, missing hands, arms, legs.

Other soldiers push it, while still more limp alongside or behind it.

Halsa sits beside the tracks, massaging her feet and watching the snail-paced procession. The rail car moves out of view to reveal a small group of soldiers in tattered uniforms, moving along the crest of a hill which parallels the tracks. They scan the ground around them, scavenging for something.

EXT. PATH TO QUAL - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa stands on the crest of the hill. She watches with horror as the soldiers weave among a sea of corpses, checking the bodies for anything of value.

Halsa watches a panicky YOUNG SOLDIER, only a few years older than her, rifle through a dead man's pockets. She notices that the soldier and the dead man are wearing the same uniform.

HALSA

Aren't you on the same side?

The soldier starts at Halsa's voice and quickly pockets a few bullets from the dead man's kit bag.

SOLDIER

What do you want? I don't have any food.

HALSA

Isn't this your own army?

SOLDIER

These are from the rebel army... I think.

EXT. PATH TO QUAL - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa follows the soldier as he continues to scan the corpses. She's wary, but the more she watches this soldier's eyes, the more she sees some decency in him. He's just a scared boy.

The soldier approaches a body, which has been lashed to a tree trunk. Halsa follows and shrieks when she sees it:

Its eyes have been gouged out and its hands are missing all of its fingernails.

She turns away, shields her eyes, calls out to the soldier behind her:

HALSA

What happened to him?!

SOLDIER

He's one of the infiltrators, an informer for the rebel army. This is the one who told them we'd be here.

HALSA

Rebels?

SOLDIER

The King says the rebel armies fight for the wizards. It's an uprising. They've been attacking our men for months.

Halsa peeks through her fingers, sees something she hadn't noticed before:

Pinned to the tortured man's body is a stencilled cloth badge: a snake swallowing its own tail.

HALSA

And what's that for?

SOLDIER

We mark them with the wizard's symbol. It stands for eternal suffering.

Halsa isn't sure what to make of this.

The soldier stares into the empty sockets of the dead man's eyes.

SOLDIER

I don't know. Sometimes I feel bad for the wizards. My grandad used to say that when they were banished to the marshes, that's when the world went dark.

Halsa looks at the soldier in disbelief.

HALSA

Banished?

The soldier holds his hand out to Halsa. She takes it and follows him.

EXT. PATH TO QUAL - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa watches as the soldier rolls another body. He reveals the shrapnel-marked face of a young man about his age. The soldier looks into the dead man's eyes. It's clear from the way that he looks that this is someone he knows.

He gasps, and falls to his knees. He begins to sob.

Halsa kneels next to the young soldier and places her hand gently on his shoulder.

She sits there with him for a long beat, until he begins to quiet down.

EXT. DESERTED PLAIN - DAY

The sun beats down. Cicadas buzz.

Halsa rides in the back of a mule-drawn cart. She sits across from SIX VEILED WOMEN, all sheltered by parasols.

The smallest one pulls back her veil and makes eye contact with Halsa. She's just a girl. She smiles. Her teeth are studded with gems.

The cart's GRUFF DRIVER glances back, scrutinizes Halsa's dirty face and tattered clothes.

GRUFF DRIVER

Girl, you stink. Before we get to Qual, you're gonna need a bath or no one's gonna get anywhere near you.

Halsa looks away and stares at the passing barren land.

EXT. CHARRED SECTION OF RAILROAD TRACKS - DAY

From the back of the mule-drawn cart, we pass a section of railroad track that gleams amid charred earth around it, as if an explosion has scorched the ground but left the tracks untouched.

Refugees surround the spot on the track, most of them kneeling or bowing in prayer. The circumference of the scorched area is ringed with flickering votive candles, milagros, talismans, and photos of the king.

In the back of the cart, Halsa recognizes the familiar image. As the cart lurches to a stop, Halsa grabs her bundle and hops off.

Halsa walks among the praying refugees, scanning the crowd for a familiar face. She approaches a MILAGRO VENDOR who strolls the periphery of the gathering.

MILAGRO VENDOR

Pray to the king for help. Take your pick. Only two brass coins, my friend. Or we can make a deal.

HALSA

I'm looking for my family. My mom, and my twin brothers, and my cousin?

MILAGRO VENDOR

Yeah?

HALSA

Have you seen a woman with twin boys?

The milagro vendor shrugs.

HALSA

What happened here?

MILAGRO VENDOR

A miracle. That's what happened. The wizards tried to blow up the train, but--

HALSA

Wizards?

MILAGRO VENDOR

The wizards of Perfil. They tried to blow up the train and all the passengers, but the king prayed for the train's safe delivery, and God granted his wish. God is with the king.

HALSA

And what happened to the train?

MILAGRO VENDOR

Nothing. The king's prayer protected it, and it passed right through the explosion. Ask him. He was here when it happened, saw it plain as day.

The milagro vendor points out a BLINDED MAN, seated off to the side of the tracks. His eyes are bandaged, his face is blistered, his hair singed off. Halsa stares at him.

MILAGRO VENDOR

Clouds and clouds of black smoke and fire, but nothing touched the train.

HALSA

So where is it?

MILAGRO VENDOR

The train went to Qual, with all the people on it, as it was meant to do.

HALSA

(softly)

The wizard saved the train.

MILAGRO VENDOR

You haven't heard a word I said. The King. The King saved the train.

A huge weight seems to lift from Halsa's shoulders. Her face lights up with one of the few smiles we've seen from her.

Halsa runs to catch up with the cart of veiled women, already moving down the road towards the walled city of Qual in the distance.

EXT. QUAL RAMPARTS - DAY

A row of rough wooden cages, just like the ones at Perfil, hang outside the immense wall that keeps the rest of the world out of Qual.

Each cage contains a hunched over figure and is labelled with a placard: Seer, Witch, Healer, Curse-Monger.

From the back of the cart, Halsa, now clean and wearing the same garb as the other veiled women, stares up at the cages. One of the women is fastening a veil to Halsa's head and covering the lower half of her face.

VEILED WOMAN

Remember, don't show your teeth.

HALSA

Why do they hang the cages like that?

VEILED WOMAN

Qual is a safe town. The cages show their loyalty to the king. It keeps the armies from attacking.

EXT. ENTRANCE TO QUAL - MOMENTS LATER

The cart rounds a corner to reveal the city gate and the crowds of people waiting to get in.

To one side, guards corral refugees behind barricades, keeping them at bay, ignoring their pleas, their outstretched hands waving identification papers.

The veiled women lower their parasols, hiding their faces.

But Halsa glances guiltily at the desperate, clamoring refugees.

She looks up ahead: a short line of well-dressed, RICH PEOPLE - in carts and on foot - are cursorily checked and waved through the gate.

A sudden hubbub in the crowd, and Halsa turns to see:

A young woman has jumped the barricade and grabbing onto the cart, trying to get in.

YOUNG WOMAN

Take me! Take me!

One of the veiled women grabs Halsa.

VEILED WOMAN
Stay back!

Halsa watches in confusion as guards grab the young woman's legs, wrench her hands from the cart, and wrestle her to the ground.

The cart rolls onward.

At the gate, a GUARD confers with the cart's driver, glancing back at the veiled women, sizing them up. Halsa keeps her head down, trying to blend in.

The guard flashes a smile at the driver, and waves the cart forward.

EXT. INSIDE THE QUAL GATE - DAY

Safely inside the city gate, Halsa slinks away...

The city of Qual is entirely different than anything she's ever seen: well-dressed, well-fed citizens stroll along groomed avenues and ride in human-drawn rickshaws.

Buildings are clean, bustling with activity, and fronted with plants and greenery.

This is not the bombed-out, war-torn world of starving refugees that exists outside of the city walls. It's an oasis of wealth and abundance.

Halsa can't believe her eyes. She never imagined that anything like this even existed.

The cart lurches to a stop. Halsa glances around. *Where are we?*

MOMENTS LATER: One by one, the veiled women hop down from the back of the cart. The driver yanks them roughly by the wrists.

GRUFF DRIVER
Come on! Let's go!

Halsa eyes the man warily, and seeing an opportunity, spins on her heels, jumps off the front of the cart, and dashes off down the street.

GRUFF DRIVER (O.S.)
Hey! Hey! Get back here!

EXT. QUAL MARKET - DAY

From behind, we watch TWO WELL-DRESSED WOMEN escorting TWO WELL-DRESSED BOYS. We can't see their faces, just their backs, as they weave through bustling crowds.

The women both wear fox collars: dead faces with beady, glassy eyes like the ones in Halsa's vision.

LATER:

At a sweets vendor's stand, the women buy bags of sweets for the boys. Just as they are about to turn, passing people obscure our view.

EXT. QUAL PARK - DAY

From a distance, we follow the two women and the two boys as they walk hand-in-hand along shaded paths in dappled light.

EXT. WELL-APPOINTED HOUSE - DAY

The women and the boys mount the stairs to the house and open the large front door.

The boys step inside and then hesitate, as if they sense someone watching them. They turn and look out, and we see that they are:

Mik and Bonti, Halsa's brothers, no longer dirty-faced urchins but transformed into rosy-cheeked, well-fed rich kids.

The two women turn as well to see what the boys are staring at. They are Orna and Doffna, the rich women from the train.

DOFFNA
What is it?

The twins titter and run into the house. Doffna shrugs at Orna, and they enter as well, shutting the door tightly behind them.

The door is fortified by the sound of many LOCKS CLICKING INTO PLACE.

INT. WELL-APPOINTED HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mik and Bonti chase each other into the dim, richly furnished parlor and stop, dumb-founded, in their tracks when they see:

Halsa, clutching her rag bundle, seated in an ornate chair in the middle of the room. She smiles at them. *I've found you!*

HALSA

I knew that I would find you. You two could never hide from me.

Mik and Bonti's lack of a reaction is only made worse by the unison scream that issues from Orna and Doffna as they step into the doorway and see Halsa as well.

ORNA

Who are you?!

DOFFNA

What do you want? How did you get in here?!

Doffna spies an open window across the room, curtains fluttering in the draft.

HALSA

I'm Halsa. I'm their sister.

ORNA

Sister?!

HALSA

(to Mik and Bonti)
Where's Mom? Where's Onion?

The women are speechless. They clutch Mik and Bonti to them.

HALSA

Where are they? Why are my brothers with you? I don't understand.

Orna and Doffna glance at each other nervously.

INT. WELL-APPOINTED HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - LATER

As Doffna sets a plate of cakes on the coffee table, she whispers to her sister.

DOFFNA

I've called for them. It shouldn't be long.

Halsa, seated across from them on an overstuffed sofa, glances hungrily at the cakes, but resists the temptation. *Something's not right here.*

Orna glances nervously at her.

ORNA

We were on the train with your mother. The train that the wizards tried to destroy. The miracle.

DOFFNA

God save the King.

ORNA

And when that happened, we stopped. People got off the train to see what was going on. Your mother sent the other boy, Onion, off to fetch some water.

Gears click into place in Halsa's head. She's filled with a sense of dread. She already knows this story.

FLASH: A fallen bottle, gushes water onto the ground.

DOFFNA

And that's when the wizards attacked. A whole ambush of them. Traitors!

FLASH: Thundering horse hooves.

FLASH: A mounted soldier screams a WAR CRY and wields a crossbow.

HALSA

What happened to my mother?
Where's Onion!?

ORNA

We even lent your mother one of our coats. It was so cold up there in the mountains. We tried to help them, but...

DOFFNA

She shouldn't have gone after him.

The women stare at Halsa. Unsure what to say next.

ORNA

There was no way she could have saved the boy.

Halsa looks on the verge of fainting. Her eyes begin to flutter.

FLASH: A fox collar on a woman's coat. Its dead eyes glisten. The woman's back arches in pain as an arrow pierces it.

HALSA
(weakly)
Mom.

Halsa reels with dizziness. Mik and Bonti rush to the rich women's side.

Halsa grabs the edges of her seat for support, steadying herself.

FLASH: Orna and Doffna watch from the window of the train as Miri writhes on the ground, an arrow in her back.

HALSA
(barely a whisper)
You watched her die.

DOFFNA
Look at her, Orna.

ORNA
Oh, dear. She's another one. Like the Onion boy.

DOFFNA
She sees things.

ORNA
(whispering)
A witch.

Halsa catches herself, remembers where she is. She sees the women clearly now. They are hideous. Powdery makeup filling the gaping cracks of time.

Doffna hugs Mik and Bonti to her bosom.

HALSA
I am not a witch, and the wizards did not attack anything or anyone!
It was the King! You act like you're all safe here in your cozy little houses. But you're not. The armies will come for you too.

Orna and Doffna look at each other aghast.

ORNA

I'll have you know that my own brother is a general in the king's army, and there's no way that anything will ever happen to the town of Qual as long as I live here.

Halsa stands and approaches the women. She stares intensely into Orna's eyes.

HALSA

Your own brother will lead the army that sacks this town and leaves with your head on the end of a pointy stick!

Orna's eyes roll back in her head. Doffna tries to shake her out of it.

FLASH: Orna's severed head, hoisted up on the end of the pointy stick. Her eyes rolled back in her head.

Orna passes out in Doffna's arms.

Somewhere an ALARM BELL starts clanging.

Horrified, Doffna backs away from Halsa, pulling Mik and Bonti with her.

Halsa reaches for her brothers.

HALSA

Mik, Bonti. Let's go. Now!

Mik and Bonti cling to Doffna's skirts. They're not going anywhere.

HALSA

I'm your sister!

BONTI

You're magic.

Halsa registers it: *Her own brothers, turned against her!*

Doffna lets out a shriek.

Halsa dashes for the open window.

EXT. WELL-APPOINTED HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Armored guards head for the front door, stomping past a small alley next to the house.

Halsa cowers in the alley, waiting for the guards to pass so that she can make a getaway. She can hear the guards laughing as they batter the door.

GUARD #1 (O.S.)
This'll make five for the night!

GUARD #2 (O.S.)
And what are we doing to this one?

They chuckle menacingly.

Halsa clenches her eyes shut in fear.

FLASH: The inside of a dark chamber. A hatch opens to reveal a blinding light. A man's hand reaches inside the chamber.

FLASH: The man's hand grasps a child's wrist.

FLASH: The man's hand brandishes a pair of pliers. *Clack clack clack!*

Halsa hears the door break in and the soldiers storm into the house. She bolts out of the alley and down the street.

EXT. ROAD TO QUAL - EVENING

In the distance, the city of Qual, its lights starting to twinkle as darkness settles on the landscape.

A sign at the side of the road welcomes visitors to Qual.

Halsa walks past it, heading in the opposite direction - away from the city.

She is bundled up against the chill night air and braced for another journey. She's leaving behind much more than the city of Qual.

Ahead of her, the road stretches out, seemingly without end, into the darkness that envelopes the horizon.

EXT. DESERTED PLAIN - NIGHT

Halsa sits by a tiny crackling fire, hunched against the cold.

She stares at the flame. Her eyes well up with tears.

HALSA

Mama. It wasn't your fault. I
don't blame you.

She buries her face in her knees and sobs and sobs and sobs.

Wind fans the fire. It crackles, shoots sparks, and WHISPERS
ever so subtly:

VOICE (O.S.)

Halsa ... Halsa ...

Halsa pricks up her ears, jumps to her feet on alert. *Is
someone out there?* She peers into the encroaching darkness.

The wind whips around her.

VOICE (O.S.)

Halsa ...

HALSA

(whispering)

Who's there? Onion? Is that you?
Onion?

Silence.

Halsa closes her eyes, 'listening' by other means, but still
she neither sees nor hears anything else.

HALSA

Are you still alive?

FLASH: The tapestry consumed by fire.

FLASH: Thundering horse hooves.

FLASH: The inside of a dark chamber. Labored breathing. A
hatch opens to reveal a blinding light. A hand reaches
inside the chamber.

FLASH: Gray sky viewed through the rough wooden bars of a
cage.

WIND HOWLS.

EXT. BARREN LANDSCAPE - DAY

We're down among cart wheels and feet bound in rags, all
plodding forward on a dusty road. Another column of
desperate refugees.

But the column of legs and cart wheels starts to split down the middle, making way for someone coming in the other direction.

A set of feet, then legs, approach from the opposite direction ... a young girl ... It's Halsa.

She walks, steely faced, against the flow of traffic. All the refugees are headed toward Qual, but she's headed away.

The refugees stare at her like she's crazy.

A YOUNG REFUGEE MOTHER grabs Halsa by the arm.

YOUNG REFUGEE MOTHER
Where are you going?

HALSA
To Perfil. Where I belong.

YOUNG REFUGEE MOTHER
No, no, no. It isn't safe. The purge is on. The king's armies are on their way to Perfil to root out the sympathizers.

HALSA
Let go of me.

YOUNG REFUGEE MOTHER
Where's your family?

HALSA
I have no family.

Halsa frees herself from the woman and marches onward against the crowd.

YOUNG REFUGEE MOTHER
Hey! That way isn't safe.

HALSA
It's where I belong.

The woman watches her strangely and then turns and continues on in the stream of trudging refugees.

EXT. BARREN LANDSCAPE - EVENING

Halsa walks on, determined. Something about her face has changed. She's no longer a little girl.

And yet, in the vast landscape, she is a tiny figure, vulnerable, prone, an insignificant speck.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Few remember that the wizards did not always hide away in the marshes, that they once plied their magic in the great cities of the world.

EXT. BARREN LANDSCAPE - DAY

We glide over charred and smoldering ruins...

NARRATOR (V.O.)

They worked the markets and the thoroughfares and gained followings throughout the kingdom.

...over a trail of refugees, tiny like ants, traversing the vast crater of a dry lake...

NARRATOR (V.O.)

They gained favor with the Old King because they were gifted in divining. They could ferret out a drop of water wherever it was hiding.

...over a field of motionless oil derricks...

NARRATOR (V.O.)

...and they could feel the rhythms of the earth and tell you whether the crops were sick or the fuel was still gurgling deep in the ground.

EXT. MARSHLANDS - EVENING

A flock of pelicans glides over the still waters of the marsh.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

It was when the Old King began to tire of bad omens, that the wizards retired to the marshes to watch and wait. There, they learned from the birds and the fish that the waters were rising, and they built their tall towers.

We dive into a muddy pool, through a dense swirl of tadpoles, to find a tiny frog. We move closer and closer to the frog,

until it fills the frame and a strange runic design takes shape on the its back. As it fills the frame, it becomes a relief map, and gradually a miniature world.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

They studied the maps and legends that the marsh coughed up. They listened to everything, because everything speaks. Brackish blood ran in their veins and, like the marshes themselves, they soaked in the pain of the world.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - DAWN

We push through the dense thicket, which opens onto the meadow full of towers.

Halsa stands at the edge of the thicket and takes in the view: the towers rising against a brilliant dawn sky. It's beautiful in a way that she's never noticed before.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

It is hard to be a wizard.
Everything speaks, but no one
listens.

Halsa runs down the slope toward the towers.

MOMENTS LATER:

Halsa walks through the still sleeping camp, taking in the changes that have occurred in her absence:

Large, wooden fences constructed from long logs tied together with cross beams;

Walls and screens made of upright bamboo lengths woven through with rushes;

Groupings of lean-tos and huts, built of sticks and thatched with marsh grasses. Someone has been hard at work preparing the camp for something, but all of it is incomplete, interrupted mid-task.

INT. TOWER - MORNING

Halsa quietly enters her wizard's tower. All is just as she left it.

She peeps behind the curtain to the alcove: her pallet is still there, and it's empty.

INT. TOWER - MORNING

Halsa, bounds up the stairs with a full bucket of water and arrives at the top, just outside the wizard's door.

An empty bucket sits on the step. Halsa smiles to see it.
It feels like she's home.

She taps on the wizard's door.

HALSA

Wizard? Wizard? Good morning.
It's me, Halsa. I've brought you
your water. Okay. I'll be back
with your breakfast.

Halsa is about to carry the empty bucket downstairs but reconsiders.

HALSA

Wizard? I'm ... I'm sorry that I
ran away. I promise that I won't
ever do it again. I don't ever
want to go away from here again. I
think I know why you hide away from
the world.

Halsa leans her head against the wizard's door. Something else is on her mind, but she hesitates.

HALSA

Thank you for saving the train.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - FIREPIT - MORNING

Fire crackles in the fire pit, but Halsa sits alone on the ring of stumps and stones that are usually filled with children.

She looks around impatiently. *Where can they all be?*

She stands, paces, walks a few feet here and there to see if anyone else is around. No one.

HALSA

Hello? Hello?

INT. ESSA'S TOWER - DAY

Halsa pokes her head in the door.

HALSA

Essa? Hello?

There's no answer.

Halsa notices an empty pallet, but instead of a mattress, it is just a mound of hay with a pillow.

EXT. MARSH PIER - DAY

Halsa scans the horizon of the marsh. Where there would normally be the silhouettes of children wading in the water for magic objects, there is nothing.

She is troubled to see the odd girls' skein of oily, black twine unraveled and scattered all over the pier.

HALSA
(whispered)
Where are you?

Halsa closes her eyes, breathes deeply.

A shudder runs down her spine, and in a flash, she turns to face the thicket at the end of the pier. She stares at the underbrush suspiciously.

HALSA
I know you're there. I can feel
you.
(beat)
Come out.

The thicket rustles, and then a head pops up from it: a small child, his head crowned in greenery.

And then, one by one, heads pop up from all over the place: all of the wizard's servant children, each one camouflaged.

Two white birch saplings bend - they are legs, with branches tied to the ankles. It's Burd, who even in hiding stands on his head.

BURD
Where have you been?

HALSA
What's going on?

BURD
Where have you been?!

HALSA
I went to find my family. Where's Tolcet? Where's Essa?

There's a murmur of concern and fear among the children.

VEERY

They went to warn the people of
Perfil. The armies are coming.

Halsa takes this in.

YONICA

They've been gone for days.

HALSA

But Perfil's a safe town. What
about the cages?

BURD

Tolcet said the whole kingdom is
unsafe.

VEERY

The King thinks his enemies are
everywhere.

YONICA

The purge is on.

HALSA

But why were you all hiding? The
armies won't dare come here.

WILLET

We got afraid.

HALSA

Afraid? Of what?

EXT. MARSH - DAY

The children push through thick brush and arrive at a clearing. Across the mud flats, the fallen tower juts out of the muck of the marsh.

Halsa recognizes this place.

HALSA

We're not supposed to go here.

Burd sets out onto the mud flats. The other children wait for Halsa to follow.

Willet grabs her hand, and the group of children sets off in a single file following Burd's footsteps.

MOMENTS LATER:

Burd pulls aside a mass of vines at the base of the massive ruin. The vines obscure a rusty metal hatch. Burd pulls the hatch open, revealing a dark bunker-like space.

Burd hands Halsa a torch and signals for her to go in.

INT. BUNKER - CONTINUOUS

Holding the torch in front of her, Halsa steps in. She holds up the torch for light and gasps at what she sees:

The entire room is full of human bones: a tangled heap of skeletons, a mass grave.

Lichen-covered skulls leer at Halsa, their eye sockets flickering with shadows from her torch. They bear the marks of violent death: bullet holes, blade marks, cracks.

She moves in and touches one of the skulls with her fingers, stares at it. It's smaller than her own head. A child.

Halsa notices something under the skeleton. Around its wrist is a bracelet of charms, among them, an oily black Janus doll. A silver snake.

FLASH: The HUNCHEO FIGURE of the WIZARD, his back to us, stares out the tower window.

FLASH: Around the wizard's wrist is a bracelet of carved wooden charms.

FLASH: From the window of the wizard's room, we see what the wizard sees - a great conflagration in the marsh.

FLASH: Soldiers with bayonets corral large groups of people... a firing squad takes aim... a body plummets from a tower in slow motion.

Halsa stands there dumbstruck amidst the sea of bones.

EXT. MARSH - DAY

Halsa steps out of the bunker, deeply troubled by what she's seen.

The children stare at her, waiting for an opinion, an explanation.

VEERY
Who are they?

YONICA
What are they doing out here?

STILT
What happened to them?

Halsa cannot look the children directly in the eyes. Her mind races, putting pieces together. And then a look of horror crosses her face.

In a flash, she's off across the mud flats, running back towards the towers.

INT. TOWER - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa races up the steps, half-running and half-stumbling up the dizzying, spiral staircase.

Halsa reaches the top and pounds her fists against the door.

HALSA
Wizard?! Wizard?!

She tries the handle. As ever, it's locked.

She listens very carefully for any movement inside the wizard's room.

Nothing.

Without thinking twice, Halsa backs up against the opposite wall, takes a deep breath, and runs her shoulder into the door.

The door opens more easily than she expected. There is an enormous release of air as the tower becomes a wind tunnel.

Halsa falls to the floor of the wizard's room.

Unsure of the confrontation she may have forced, Halsa looks around her nervously.

HALSA
Wizard? You have to be here.

Silence.

Halsa moves cautiously into the room ...

HALSA
Who will protect us?

The room is empty.

Halsa looks at the window, the tattered curtains, the melted stub of a candle, the book-cluttered table, the mirror, the bed. But there's no wizard.

Halsa spins around the room, scanning it for any other hiding place, and all the while growing more and more panicky and confused.

Halsa looks out the window. Across the way are the other towers, their top windows open on dim, shadowy rooms.

INT. BURD'S TOWER - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa races up a different spiral staircase.

INT. BURD'S TOWER/WIZARD'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa bursts in through the doorway. A different wizard's cell, but also empty.

INT. ESSA'S TOWER/WIZARD'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa flings open the door of yet another wizard's room.

Empty.

Halsa's mind reels. *How can this be?! After all this time... It makes no sense!*

Then she hears the sound of HORSE HOOVES galloping into the meadow, followed by children YELLING.

VEERY (O.S.)
Something's wrong.

BURD (O.S.)
It's Tolcet.

Halsa dashes out of the room and down the tower stairs.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - CONTINUOUS

Rounding the towers, Tolcet's horse comes galloping into the meadow. Tolcet, though riding, is slumped against the horse's neck. His arms dangle. His head lolls.

The children rush forward and help to lower him from the horse and lay him on the ground. They huddle around him, rolling up something to put under his head, bringing a bucket of water, trying to make him comfortable.

The horse, standing alone, whinnies impatiently.

VEERY
The harness!

Yonica runs to the horse and reaches for the woven saddle.

BURD
Tolcet! Tolcet!

VEERY
Give him air!

BURD
Tolcet, are you hurt? Where are
you hurt?

Burd starts to unwrap the long cape that Tolcet clutches to his torso. There is blood all over it and all over Tolcet's hands.

Panting and out of breath, Halsa runs to join the group.

HALSA
What's happened to him?

Essa is suddenly hovering over him as well.

ESSA
He's been shot.

HALSA
By who?

ESSA
The stupid townspeople of Perfil.

HALSA
Why? Why?

Burd lifts Tolcet's cape. Underneath it, Tolcet's torso is soaked with blood.

BURD
Oh, no. No, no, no.

The children are ripping rags to staunch the blood flow, to try to save Tolcet, but Halsa backs away in horror.

HALSA
Why? Why did they shoot him?

ESSA

We went to warn them that the armies are coming. To offer them refuge in the marsh.

HALSA

But why did they shoot him? Why? If he was just trying to warn them, why?

ESSA

People don't like to be told what's coming. Haven't you figured that out by now?

Tolcet coughs blood, groans.

ESSA

Tolcet, Tolcet ...

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - DUSK

The children have all formed a circle around Tolcet's deathbed. They're waiting for him to die.

Halsa sits within the circle, by Tolcet's side.

HALSA

The bunkers. Those are the bodies of the wizards.

TOLCET

(weak whisper)

Halsa ... Halsa ...

HALSA

Explain this to me. Why are we here?

TOLCET

Shhh ... Shhh ...

HALSA

What use is any of this?

TOLCET

Halsa, listen ... You must do something ...

HALSA

Tell me, tell me. What do I do?

TOLCET

You must go to the town of Perfil--

HALSA

I don't care about the town of Perfil! Let the army burn it down! They deserve it! You were just trying to warn them, trying to help them, and look what they did. I don't care if they all die!

TOLCET

Halsa, you must go before the army gets there.

HALSA

Why?!

Tolcet grabs her wrist with his hand, stares into her eyes.

FLASH: The town of Perfil, sits on the horizon.

FLASH: Gray sky viewed through the rough wooden bars of a cage.

FLASH: Outside the Perfil wall, the rough wooden cages flank the gate - except now there are many more than before, stacked on top of each other in great rows, each containing a hunched person.

FLASH: We barrel towards a cage in one of the top rows - a tiny figure huddled inside of it - and stop just outside the bars. The figure turns and looks right at us: It's Onion.

Halsa reels back in horror at the vision Tolcet has shared with her. Her prior visions of the cage suddenly make sense.

HALSA

But how--? How can I--? What happened to the wizards? Aren't there any of them left?

Tolcet smiles at Halsa, glances to the children surrounding him.

Halsa looks at them: Essa, Burd, the two Odd Girls, Willet, Veery, Yonica. They're just children like her, but they stare back with wise eyes.

HALSA

We're just kids! What can we do?!

Tolcet coughs, winces in pain. He's fading.

TOLCET

When you learn to truly accept your gifts, Halsa, you'll be more powerful than you ever imagined you could be.

Halsa is taken aback. *It's all too much. Her? Powerful?*

Tolcet closes his eyes.

HALSA

Tolcet? Tolcet?

The other children lower their heads. Essa and Burd pull Tolcet's cape up around him, covering him completely: a shroud.

Halsa stumbles to her feet and staggers away from the circle of children - a girl with an enormous burden.

The children start placing their hands on the shrouded body.

Wind whips through the marsh grass.

Clouds tumble in the sky over the towers.

A sudden CACOPHONY of FLAPPING WINGS and SQUAWKS.

From the center of the circle of children, a huge flock of white birds bursts noisily into the air. The children raise their arms toward the sky.

Halsa looks above her. The air is filled with the great, white birds, circling and swooping among the towers.

She looks back toward the children: Tolcet's shroud is still there, in the center of the circle, but it's flat on the ground. There's no body.

INT. TOWER ALCOVE - NIGHT

Essa strokes Halsa's hair again and smiles at her. A gesture of comfort and patient wisdom.

HALSA

Why did you let me believe that there were wizards in the towers?

ESSA

It gives you a focus. Something to try to understand. We all want someone else to make choices for

(MORE)

ESSA (cont'd)
us. Until we learn to choose for
ourselves.

Halsa reaches under the pallet and pulls out a small bundle.

HALSA
Will you do something for me?

She unwraps it: the snake earrings.

A glint of recognition sparkles in Essa's eyes.

ESSA
World without end.

HALSA
What?

ESSA
It's what they stand for.

HALSA
A soldier told me they stood for
eternal suffering.

ESSA
I suppose it depends on how you
look at them.

Halsa holds the earrings up to her ear lobes.

HALSA
Will you do it for me?

ESSA
It'll hurt.

HALSA
Good. I want it to hurt.

MOMENTS LATER:

Halsa tenses as Essa eases a small needle through her
earlobe.

ESSA
Okay, hold on, hold on...

A drop of blood falls onto Halsa's leg, streaking the inside
of her calf.

MOMENTS LATER:

ESSA
Alright, let's see.

Halsa looks at Essa, turns her head both ways so that Essa can see. The snake earrings glimmer.

Essa smiles in approval.

Halsa is pleased.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - FIREPIT - MOMENTS LATER

The children watch as Essa hands Halsa a woven grass harness.

ESSA
Drape it over my back, step away,
and then when I'm ready, climb
up...

Halsa stares at Essa with disbelief.

Essa gets down on her hands and knees.

The children begin to stamp their feet on the ground, a tribal heartbeat.

Halsa places the saddle on Essa's back and steps away.

Essa shakes her head side to side, flaps her lips like a horse.

ESSA
And hold on ti-i-i-i-ight.

Essa's voice has become a loud whinny. The sound of it startles Halsa.

The children's feet stamp the ground.

Halsa watches as:

Essa lifts one hand off the ground, pulls it back, and then flings it forward, like she's shaking water off it. Suddenly, it's a horse's leg and hoof.

Halsa's eyes widen in amazement. She takes a step back.

The children's stamping grows louder, more powerful.

The two odd girls wind the skein of black twine in their hands.

Essa's kicks out her other leg and grows in height, her torso thickening. She hunches her shoulders and shakes her neck and head.

Halsa looks on with astonishment.

Essa's transformation complete, the horse steps out of the shadows into the firelight, whinnies, and paws the ground with its hoof. *Let's go!*

EXT. MARSHLANDS - NIGHT

Reflected in shallow moonlit pools, the horse gallops at full speed, pulling a cart behind it.

Halsa clings to the horse's back. Behind her, in the cart, Burd, Willet, Veery, and Yonica brace themselves against the bumpy ride.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL RUINS - DAWN

The horse and cart barrel past the crumbling cement walls and ironwork of the old industrial plant. We recognize this as the path to Perfil.

EXT. DESERTED PLAIN - DAWN

Halsa guides the horse over a small rise to reveal the imposing walls of Perfil in the distance.

As she steers the cart past barbed wire barricades, the children whisper among themselves. Anxious now.

EXT. ENTRANCE TO PERFIL - MORNING

Halsa pulls the cart up to the rows of cages, leaps off the horse, and runs alongside scanning them.

HALSA
Onion?! Onion?!

Burd, Willet, Veery and Yonica look on in horror at the suffering people in the cages.

Strangely, there is no one else stirring outside the town walls. It is eerily quiet.

Halsa hones in on a cage at the top tier. A small child lies sleeping on its floor.

HALSA
That's him! Onion!

Halsa quickly takes in her surroundings. The guard house by the city gate. A ladder leaning against the stack of cages. She turns back to the children -- they're still huddled together in the cart, frozen with fear.

HALSA

Come on! We can do this. We can!

(to Burd)

Grab that ladder, and help me.

(to Veery)

You keep an eye to make sure no one comes.

(to Willet and Yonica)

And you see if you can get these others open. Come on! Quickly!

EXT. ENTRANCE TO PERFIL - MOMENTS LATER

Halsa raises herself to the top rung of the ladder to see Onion curled up in a ball at the bottom of the cage.

HALSA

Onion! Onion! Wake up! Onion, it's me, Halsa. I'm here. Wake up. I'm getting you out.

At a nearby cage, Burd rubs his hand across the padlock, and blows gently into the keyhole. The lock clicks open. He scrambles to the next cage.

Willet is pulling padlocks off their latches and flinging open cage doors. Following behind him, Yonica helps people out of the cages.

HALSA

Burd! Up here!

Halsa rattles the door to Onion's cage, but he still isn't moving.

HALSA

Onion? Onion?

Halsa realizes something is dreadfully wrong when she sees Onion's outstretched hand: there are nasty black scabs where his fingernails have been removed.

Tears well up in her eyes.

HALSA

Oh, Onion. What have they done to you? Hurry!

Burd blows into padlock of Onion's cage. Halsa flings open the door, reaches in, and grabs him.

HALSA
Onion! You have to wake up!
Please!

As she pulls him out of the cage, something slips from Onion's shirt and dangles from a string around his neck...

...the Janus doll.

Halsa stares into the blank faces of the doll for a beat.
Was it me who saved the train?

TOLCET (V.O.)
There is no space between us. We are together side by side.

MOMENTS LATER:

Halsa drags Onion down the ladder and lays him on the ground in her lap. Halsa rubs his shoulders to try to warm him.

HALSA
Onion, please wake up. You're going to be fine. I'm here. I'm here.

The horse whinnies and tosses its head anxiously. *Let's get out of here!*

WILLET
Okay, the last one's out! Let's go!

The last of the freed prisoners runs off, disappearing around the bend of the city wall. Yonica, and Willet are scrambling to get back into the cart.

Veery comes running from the Perfil gate.

VEERY
Halsa, Halsa! Guards!

BURD
Come on!

But Halsa is too focussed on Onion's inert body. She cradles him in her arms and cries: a piéta.

HALSA

Onion. You can't die. You can't.
You're the only one I have left.
Please, please.

PERFIL GUARD #2

Hey! You! What are you doing?

PERFIL GUARD #3

Get away from there!

Two PERFIL GUARDS run from the gate towards Halsa. As they approach, she turns to face them, and they stop in their tracks. Halsa is no longer a crying little girl, but a fearsome fury.

HALSA

What have you done to him?! Huh?!
What did you do to him?!

An unexpected gust of wind punctuates her tirade, kicking up dust and frightening the guards.

They raise their bayonets in defense, but Halsa takes no heed. She picks up Onion's body and starts carrying him toward the gate to the city.

HALSA

He's just a little boy! Look at
him! You're cowards. All of you.
Stupid frightened mice.

Willet and the other kids stand poised by the cart. They're too frightened to move.

HALSA

C'mon! Follow me.

The horse whinnies. *Let's go!* But Halsa is walking into the city, not away from it - past the frightened guards and through the gate.

PERFIL GUARD #2

No, stop! Stop!

He runs after Halsa, raising the butt of his rifle to strike her down. Halsa senses his approach and turns to face him.

HALSA

Just touch me, Eiko Hagen of
Perfil, and I'll tell you how and
when you'll die.

Guard #2 stops in his tracks. *How does she know his name?*

HALSA

Come on!

Halsa turns and marches onward into the city.

The children scramble after her, past the frightened guards.

EXT. PERFIL STREET - MORNING

Clouds roil in the sky above Perfil.

A heavy wind whips down the narrow street, blowing leaves and a torn, but still smiling, poster of the king.

A powerful voice wails above the wind.

HALSA (O.S.)

Perfil! Cowards of Perfil! Show yourselves! Perfil! Come out and see what you've done.

People scurry through the street, duck into doorways. Shutters are drawn closed with a bang. Whatever or whoever is coming, they don't want to be around to encounter it.

EXT. PERFIL MARKET - MOMENTS LATER

The market square is deserted.

One last set of shutters bangs closed.

Halsa walks through the empty square carrying Onion's body in her arms, screaming out, crying.

HALSA

Where are you, people of Perfil?
Why are you hiding? Are you afraid? Afraid of a harmless little boy? Afraid of a little girl?

Halsa mounts the steps to the fountain at the center of the market. She lays Onion's body down, kneels next to it.

HALSA

Why don't you come out and see what you're so afraid of?! Come and take a look at the evil wizards of Perfil!

Burd, Willet, Veery, and Yonica cautiously gather around Halsa. Their eyes dart back and forth nervously.

All around them, shuttered windows loom, concealing people who watch them from the shadows but dare not speak or reveal themselves. The market is eerily silent.

Halsa caresses Onion's hair, holds out her hand over him, closes her eyes.

HALSA
Onion... Onion...

The other children kneel down in a circle, stretching their hands over Onion's body.

The wind picks up, rattles pots and pans hanging in one stall, whips at linens hanging in another stall.

The air grows dense with whispers and prickly magic.

Halsa breathes deeply, concentrates with all her effort.

SUPERIMPOSE: The great ball of black, oily twine begins to vibrate, starts to turn ...

Halsa gasps.

Across the market square, a set of shutters flies open with a *WHAP!* and reveals a frightened family.

The children's outstretched hands tremble over Onion.

FLASH: The skein of oily twine begins to unspool.

WHAP! In the market, another set of shutters is flung open, revealing more frightened people who are watching the children.

The children's eyes flutter behind her eyelids -- Halsa, Burd, Yonica...

WHAP! WHAP! WHAP! Set after set of shutters flies open. Doors fling open. Tarps are pulled back. All revealing the cowardly people of Perfil. Forcing them to see.

Up in one window, a FAT MOTHER peers out, gasps at what she sees:

FAT MOTHER
Willet?

FLASH: The POV winding frantically up the spiralling stairs of the wizard's tower.

FLASH: The skein of twine unspools even faster.

Halsa furrows her brow as tightly as she can, breathes slowly and deeply.

Onion's chest rises with a sudden intake of breath.

FLASH: The snake earring glimmers in the firelight.

FLASH: Children's feet stamp in the dust by the marsh fire pit.

FLASH: In the flickering firelight, different children's faces look up at us, one by one: Stilt... The Two Odd Girls... Fennick... others of the wizards' servants... they too are part of this ritual...

CHILDREN (V.O.)
Halsa... Halsa... Halsa...

FLASH: The skein of twine is a blur as it spins.

Onion gasps.

Halsa gasps, winces, holds her breath in pain.

The murmuring voices stop. The wind stops. All goes silent.

Halsa's head lolls in exhaustion.

At their open windows the townspeople stare down with awe.

A faint whisper breaks the silence:

ONION (V.O.)
Halsa... Halsa...

Halsa blinks her eyes open to see...

Onion's eyes flutter open. He looks up at Halsa. Smiles.

Tears well up in her eyes.

A loud WHINNY interrupts the moment. The horse rears up violently in the market. *Let's go!!*

MOMENTS LATER:

Halsa stands and looks up at the townspeople in their windows. The anger has gone from her.

HALSA

Fear won't protect you. Fear is why you've never been safe. Only you can save yourselves.

EXT. ENTRANCE TO PERFIL - MORNING

The horse, carrying Halsa and Onion and pulling the cart with the other children, gallops away from the Perfil gate. Halsa clutches Onion, who is still weak, in her arms.

As they ride away from the town, a HORN CALL sounds behind them.

Halsa looks over her shoulder:

On the horizon, the front lines of the advancing army are visible, barreling forward toward the city of Perfil.

Halsa spurs the horse to go faster.

FLASH: Thundering horse hooves of the approaching army.

FLASH CUT TO:

EXT. PERFIL MARKET - DAY

A flaming torch head. We follow it as someone carries it through the Perfil market.

A WOMAN SCREAMS.

As the torch passes various market stalls, SOLDIERS run past, unleashing chaos and destruction. Wounded people cower beneath the wreckage of market stalls. Crying and screaming everywhere.

The torch comes to a rest in front of the familiar tapestry which hangs over the door to the stables.

Whoever is carrying the torch thrusts it under the tapestry's fringe. Fire rips across it, blackening the image of the tower and the dragon.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - AFTERNOON

The horse and cart come galloping into the camp.

The children help Halsa and Onion dismount, carrying Onion as Halsa passes him down from the horse.

Onion, still weak, smiles up at the children who carry him. There is a tacit acceptance between all of them. *You are one of us.*

HALSA

Take him to my bed. His name is Onion.

Halsa jogs over to where Essa is brushing herself off. Essa turns away, annoyed.

HALSA

Essa, thank you.

ESSA

You don't listen at all! You could've gotten us all killed.

HALSA

Essa. Thank you.

Halsa bows deeply.

Essa softens, lets out a whinnying laugh, and curtsies to Halsa.

INT. THE WIZARD'S ROOM - NIGHT

Onion sleeps in the wizard's bed.

Halsa leans in, strokes his head, and stands back to watch over him. She is genuinely happy to see him.

On a small table by the bed is the Janus talisman.

Halsa picks it up, ponders it, inspects its two faces. Something about it makes sense to her finally.

Halsa strokes Onion's hair.

ONION

Halsa, the wizards are all so young. I thought they would be older.

HALSA

Shhh. Go to sleep now.

ONION

Halsa...

HALSA

Sleep!

Suddenly, she hears yelling and commotion coming from the marsh below. She runs to the window and looks out to see...

...on the horizon, a red glow hanging above the town of Perfil, lighting up billows of ashy smoke...

...and below her, coming down the berm into the meadow, a group of ANXIOUS REFUGEES.

...A SMALL CHILD among the refugees points up toward Halsa. *There she is!* The child's mother chides her and slaps down her pointing finger. But they all look up to see her...

The young girl wizard, leaning out of the window of her tower.

INT. THE WIZARD'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Halsa steps away from the window and finds herself standing face-to-face with her reflection in the mirror, superimposed over the image of the marsh.

She takes a good look at herself, and for the first time ever, she's filled with a sense of her own power: a deep understanding that she has the ability to make a difference, to affect a change in the world.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - EVENING

The camp is full of refugees - some of them wounded, burned, or in shock - and the young wizards tend to them.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
And so it happened that war came to
Perfil and the town was burned to
the ground.

The children lead the refugees to lean-tos and shelters; ripping up bandages; applying compresses; bringing steaming medicinal drinks; rounding up stray livestock into newly built pens.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
War spread like a canker to all the
villages of the kingdom. The
armies fought their own people.
And no one could blame the wizards
anymore. No one could blame magic.

EXT. QUAL RAMPARTS - DAY

Fire licks the edges of a tattered poster of the smiling young King. The King's face melts and curls away.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 There was no one to blame anymore
 but the king.

A bit of ash floats through the air...

...and lands on the ground, where a tiny seedling inches its way upwards through a crack in the parched earth.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 And so the world slowly began to
 heal itself.

EXT. MARSH - DAY

Water trickles through a muddy channel past herons which peck their long beaks into the mud...

...past marsh hares hopping in and out of the tall reeds...

...rushing into a murky pool which teams with life. Tadpoles with tiny runic designs on their backs swim above a dizzying array of shiny, magic objects.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 The people of the kingdom had told
 the stories they needed to tell.
 But stories are not like fire or
 water or a breath or a heartbeat.

EXT. PERFIL MARSH/MEADOW - FIREPIT - NIGHT

A great bonfire roars in the firepit, but the crowd surrounding it is much larger than we've seen before: closest to the fire are the wizard children; seated among them are refugee children; and then behind them, the adult refugees.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 Stories are only reflections of
 things. They are not constants
 like fear or wonder. Or hope.
 Stories change.

To one side of the fire is a rag-tag refugee band, squawky and percussive. They play the accompaniment to a story-telling dance.

And in the center of the group, Onion and Halsa stand in the firelight.

HALSA
 Once upon a time...

ONION

A long, long time ago...

HALSA

...the father of the fallen king
came all the way from the King
City...

ONION

...travelled long and far just to
visit his once trusted advisors,
the wizards of Perfil.

HALSA

The wizards had been banished to
the marshes because they saw that
the world was growing sick, and
they were trying to get people to
listen. They had not spoken to the
old king in many years.

ONION

But the old bearded king had been
having spooky dreams, dreams about
his son...

HALSA

...who was only a tiny, itty bitty,
mewling baby.

ONION

They were dreams that made him
afraid. So he dared come to the
marshes to say to the wizards of
Perfil...

HALSA

"Oh, great wizards of Perfil, you
who are wise and blessed with
foresight, what is the meaning of
my dreams?"

ONION

And the wizards looked warily into
the old king's head and shuddered
with fear.

HALSA

"Dear old, long-bearded king, you
are right to be afraid, for one day
your son will grow up and become
king..."

ONION

“...but he will go mad. And there will be war...”

HALSA

“...and famine...”

ONION

“...and more war...”

HALSA

“...and a time when all people will do is search for their enemies, even if they have none. And your son will be to blame.”

ONION

The old, long-bearded king went into a furious, long-bearded rage.

HALSA

And he sent his soldiery men to throw the wizards of Perfil down from their tall towers.

ONION

Which is exactly what they did.

A LITTLE GIRL jumps up from the listening crowd.

LITTLE GIRL

And the wizards turned into big white flappy birds and flew away!

Halsa and Onion shake their heads grimly. The little girl plops back down in her seat, disappointed not to have guessed the story correctly.

ONION

The king's men slit their throats, one by one, and threw them out of their tower windows...

HALSA

And they landed *THUD! THUD! THUD!* right here!

The audience gasps, appalled at this horrific story.

ONION

But...! He didn't get them all.

HALSA

One wizard...

ONION

Just a little boy, really...

HALSA

An odd little boy who had inky
black skin with great pink
splotches all over him...

ONION

A little boy who was two colors...

HALSA

...he had been out in the marshes
fishing for magical fishes when the
king's men had come.

ONION

And he alone escaped from the old
king's vengeance.

HALSA

And when this boy grew up...

ONION

...and the wizards' unwelcome
predictions came true exactly as
they had said...

HALSA

...Tolcet, the two-colored man,
would go out in search of other
children who were magic just like
he was, in the hope that one day
they could stop the king's war...

ONION

...and heal the kingdom of its
itchy, fevery cankers...

HALSA

...so that one day all manner of
things would be well again.

A LITTLE BOY calls out from the crowd.

LITTLE BOY

So where are the wizards of Perfil?

Knowing looks and wry smiles pass between Halsa, Onion, Essa, Burd, Veery and Yonica, Willet and Stilt. Even the Two Odd

Girls, who have never smiled, grin at each other as they wind up the huge skein of oily twine.

The wizard children start to stomp their feet in the dust.

The band kicks into the fiery chorus, building speed.

The little boy claps his hands in delight.

Halsa and Onion clasp hands and stand side-by-side.

They are as one.

EXT. MARSH PIER - MORNING

The refugee children have formed two lines, each one pulling a rope that leads to something stuck in the mud underwater. They are trying to dislodge it.

A young girl and boy wade about in the water where the thing is buried, poking at it with sticks, trying to loosen it.

GIRL

1, 2, 3, Pull! 1, 2, 3, Pull!
Here it comes! Here it comes!

With a great SUCKING SPLASH, the kids pull the object up out of the mud and water.

They drag it up onto the bank. It's a large piece of flat metal, with two metal posts, a sign of some sort, but it's covered in muck and slime.

BOY

Wipe it off! Wipe it off!

The boy steps out of the way to let the girl do the honors.

She wipes the mud away. Letters are revealed: 'PER-FIL.'

BOY

What is it? Is it magic?

The girl wipes away more of the mud. The other kids inspect the sign, perplexed.

CHILDREN

What does it say? It's a sign for something. Well, duh. Can you read? No. Can you read? No.

BOY

I can read.

GIRL

You cannot.

BOY

I can too. Halsa's been teaching
me.

GIRL

So what does it say?

The kids stare at the sign: "SUPER-FILL OIL REFINERY."

BOY

It says suh- suh- suh-

GIRL

Like I said, you can't read.

BOY

It's definitely magic though.

The other children laugh and help pull the sign away from the bank.

With the sign hoisted on their shoulders, they form a slow procession toward the looming towers of the Perfil marsh.

FADE TO BLACK.