

EXT. WOODS - DAY

A calm wind plays through the branches. Leaves rustle. Owls hoot -- late evening. Tranquil. Idyllic.

Something crashes through the trees. A young girl PANTS as she runs a few steps, stops -- and then starts CRYING softly.

A twig snaps nearby. The sounds of the forest fade -- even the wind seems to listen. The girl SNIFFS.

YOUNG ROWAN  
(nervous and strained)  
H--hello?

GRAEL  
(a bright, cheerful voice)  
Little girl, little girl -- why are  
you crying?

CUT TO: MAIN  
THEME

FADE IN:

EXT. COUNTRY HOME - MANY YEARS LATER

Voices murmur in the distance -- the sound of a waiting crowd. Someone clears their throat, and the whispers quiet.

A delicate keyboard rendition of "Here comes the bride" begins to play.

FADE TO:

INT. COUNTRY HOME - CONTINUOUS

Sharp footsteps march down the hall before someone raps just as sharply on a thin wooden door.

MARI  
(nervous)  
Rowan? Rowan, are you alright?

When there's no answer, Mari rattles the doorhandle. It doesn't budge.

MARI (CONT'D)  
(irritated but concerned)  
For goodness sake Rowan, what are  
you doing in there? They're  
already...

Suddenly the door swings open, and a chair that had been propped against the handle falls to the floor.

MARI (CONT'D)  
 (alarmed)  
 Rowan? Sweetie, are you alright...?

Mari GASPS, rushing across the room. The window is open, and the music and increasingly confused murmuring carry through.

MARI (CONT'D)  
 (not sure if she's mad or worried)  
 Rowan...?

FADE TO:

EXT. WOODS - CONTINUOUS

Rowan is running through the woods again. She PANTS with exertion, wedding dress catching on low-hanging branches.

The music can be heard through the trees before it fades entirely. When it does, she finally stops running to catch her breath -- and her thoughts.

ROWAN  
 (breathless and anxious)  
 Oh my god. Oh my god. I...  
 (beat of realization)  
 I did it. I finally did it.  
 (beat of recognition)  
 Shit.

Rowan's legs fold underneath her, and she falls against a nearby tree.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (defeated)  
 Just... shit.

GRAEL  
 (same tone as before)  
 Little girl, little girl -- why are you crying?

ROWAN  
 (she expected him)  
 I'm not...  
 (wipes her eyes)  
 I'm not crying, Grael.

GRAEL  
 (playacting curiosity)  
 Really? My, then it must have been  
 a very small rainstorm, to wet only  
 your cheeks.

ROWAN  
 (irritated)  
 Go away Grael. I'm not in the mood.

GRAEL  
 (amused)  
 Oh, but Rowan...

A set of light, dragonfly-like wings flutter as he starts flying.

GRAEL (CONT'D)  
 (smarmy)  
 I haven't seen you in a life-age.

ROWAN  
 It's only been seven years.

GRAEL  
 Oh, you know how it is: sprite  
 years are like dog years. I thought  
 you were never coming back.

ROWAN  
 (softer, smiling)  
 Oh, shut up Grael. You're a  
 thousand and two if you're a day.

GRAEL  
 (mock offense)  
 My word! You should know better  
 than to mention a sprite's age!

Rowan can't help herself -- she LAUGHS.

GRAEL (CONT'D)  
 (ecstatic)  
 Ha! A smile! I knew you remembered  
 how!

ROWAN  
 (good-natured scolding)  
 Ha ha. Stop flying for a second and  
 help me up.

His wings stop, and light, springy footsteps dance over to Rowan. She stands with a slight GRUNT.

GRAEL  
 (overly dramatic)  
 M'lady.

ROWAN  
 (gently sarcastic)  
 You're a gentleman and a scholar,  
 Grael.

GRAEL  
 (SNIFFS in disgust)  
 I resent that remark.

ROWAN  
 (amused)  
 Right. A rascal and a scallywag.

GRAEL  
 (smiling)  
 Just as you say, m'lady.

ROWAN  
 (rolling her eyes)  
 Oh, stop groveling Grael.

GRAEL  
 Of course, m'lady.

ROWAN  
 And stop calling me m'lady!

GRAEL  
 Yes, m'lady.

Rowan can't help another LAUGH.

GRAEL (CONT'D)  
 (as she laughs)  
 Oh dear. Old habits die slow, it  
 seems.

ROWAN  
 (finally cheerful)  
 Tell me something I don't know.

GRAEL  
 (mock academic tone)  
 The Large Magellanic Cloud is  
 approximately 163 thousand light-  
 years from the earth, and will  
 collide with the Milky Way in just  
 under 2.4 billion...

ROWAN  
Already knew that.

GRAEL  
(slightly hurt)  
Oh. And I was so proud of that one,  
too.

ROWAN  
(friendly)  
Been doing some reading?

GRAEL  
(brightly)  
Oh yes! We've expanded the library  
most excellently since you left.  
The astronomy wing, especially. We  
had to move it into the observatory  
to find enough space.

ROWAN  
(interested)  
And the knowmes didn't mind?

GRAEL  
(musing)  
Oh, they complained loud enough to  
wake the dead. Had to give the  
zombies all a glass of milk to put  
them back to sleep, but we managed  
in the end. By then the knowmes had  
calmed down enough to help us move  
the books.

ROWAN  
(suddenly trepidatious)  
Could I... could I see it?

GRAEL  
(surprised)  
See? But -- My child, you haven't  
gone into the Echwood since...  
since...

ROWAN  
(irritated)  
Since graduation, I know. It just  
got so hard to come home after...

GRAEL  
(suddenly realizing)  
What are you wearing, child?

ROWAN  
 (surprised he noticed)  
 Oh. Um, it's a... it's just a  
 dress.

GRAEL  
 (worried)  
 A wedding dress. And a very nice  
 one, if I do say so myself...

ROWAN  
 (cutting him off)  
 Don't. Just -- don't. Look, will  
 you take me back or not?

GRAEL  
 (nervous)  
 Goodness! To the Echowood? Sweet  
 child, you know it isn't meant  
 for... I mean, now that you're...

ROWAN  
 (fed up)  
 Look, I came back here for one  
 reason, and if you're not going to  
 help me...

GRAEL  
 M'lady, wait!

She doesn't reply. Her footsteps recede into the silent woods.

After a moment, Grael whistles -- a high, descending birdcall. A blue jay flutters down beside him.

GRAEL (CONT'D)  
 (conspiratorial whisper)  
 Tell the Lady Little Ash -- *she's*  
*here.*

The bird whistles back, then races off.

FADE TO:

EXT. FOG-BOG - LATER

Mud bubbles and boils. Sound is muffled by the thick, choking fog. Every once and a while, swamp gas ignites and burns.

Sticky, slurping footsteps grow louder and closer. Rowan GRUMBLES -- this isn't how she pictured this going.

ROWAN  
 (pissed off muttering)  
 '...you know it isn't meant for...'  
 Isn't meant for what, Grael, hmm?  
 Grown-ups? Adults? Boring people?  
 Well I tried being all those  
 things, and guess what? It didn't  
 work out. And if you won't let me  
 into the Echwood, I'll just have  
 to...

Mud slurps underfoot. Rowan GASPS as her leg is caught, and she starts to sink.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 Oh, great.  
 (GRUNTS as she struggles)  
 No good. Um... Grael? Hello! I'm  
 stuck in the bog! Help?  
 (quieter)  
 Anyone?

An oppressive silence answers.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (trying to stay calm)  
 Right, no one else wants to be out  
 here. That does make sense. So how  
 badly am I...

A mud bubble bursts, and the ground around Rowan begins to slurp.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (panicky)  
 GRAEL! HELP!

Her words don't even echo, dying on the wind.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (trying to stay calm)  
 Okay. Think. The Fog-bog. What do  
 you remember about it?  
 (beat)  
 Oh, how did that poem go... 'Grael  
 of the wooded night... come and set  
 the day alight...' No, that's not  
 it. Um... oh! 'Fog-bog, warm and  
 hungry earth, give us now our...  
 our...' Umm...

GRAEL  
 (voice faint in the fog)  
 Now this is one fine mess you've  
 found, child.

ROWAN  
 (suddenly hopeful)  
 Grael! Is that you?

GRAEL  
 (voice growing closer)  
 I should certainly hope so! My my,  
 m'lady. You're up to your elbows in  
 it.

ROWAN  
 (annoyed)  
 And I'm about to be neck-deep in  
 it!

GRAEL  
 (CHUCKLING)  
 Soon you'll say you've had it up to  
 here.

ROWAN  
 You can make all the puns you want  
 later, just get me out!

GRAEL  
 (cloyingly bright)  
 Is that a deal?

ROWAN  
 (half-screaming in panic)  
 Just help me!

GRAEL  
 (with showman's flair)  
 Your wish is my command.

A strong wind blows in across the bog. The swamp gas flames  
 flicker and snap, and the mud slurps as Rowan is lifted free.

She lands on solid ground with a soft thump and a GRUNT.

ROWAN  
 (slightly breathless)  
 Thanks.

GRAEL  
 (amused)  
 Don't thank me yet.  
 (MORE)

GRAEL (CONT'D)

(CLAPS HANDS)

Gwards?

A dozen sets of heavy footsteps tramp forward in a quick march as low, muffled voices grunt with each step.

ROWAN

(worried)

What is this?

GRAEL

(audibly smiling)

The lady Little-Oak has requested your presence at Castle Caraway. We're to give you a police escort.

WARD 1

(thick and slurred)

Yah, an' make sure you don'n escape.

GRAEL

(irritated)

...and to make sure you don't escape. Thank you, Reginald.

WARD 1

(pleased as punch)

Y'welcome boss!

ROWAN

(confused)

Why would I want to escape?

GRAEL

(creepily comforting)

No reason at all! And that's why we don't even need to think about it, do we?

(almost threatening)

Do we?

ROWAN

(nervous)

Um... No. Of course not.

GRAEL

(triumphant)

Castle Caraway then! Double-quick!

WARD 1

Yessir! Alrigh, march out! One two three four, one two three four...

The guards tramp off through the fog, but Rowan lingers a moment, distracted by something.

ROWAN  
 (muttering to herself)  
 'Fog-bog, warm and hungry earth,  
 give us... give us...'

GRAEL  
 (from a distance)  
 M'lady! Are you coming?

ROWAN  
 (distracted)  
 What? Oh, yeah, yeah, I'm -- I'm  
 coming.

Even as she says it, she just stands there for a moment -- then turns and runs after the others.

MUSIC, FADE TO:

INT. CASTLE CARAWAY - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Owls hoot outside the window. A small fire crackles in the hearth.

A heavy wooden door creaks open, then shuts. Someone pads across the floor slowly, then flops down on the bed.

ROWAN  
 (tired and strained)  
 Ugh... God I'm old.

Someone knocks on the door so rapidly it sounds like a woodpecker's attacking it. Rowan GROANS.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (dead)  
 Yeah.

GRAEL  
 (through the door)  
 M'lady?

ROWAN  
 (frustration mounting)  
 For the love of... Come in!

Grael opens the door, his footsteps nearly dancing over the floorboards as he crosses the room and sits down on the bed.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 ('I just want to sleep')  
 What do you want Grael?

GRAEL  
 (knowing this annoys her)  
 Want? Why nothing, dear child -- I  
 simply came to ensure m'lady was  
 satisfied with her accommodations.

ROWAN  
 (almost the last straw)  
 The accommodations... They're fine,  
 Grael, just fine.

GRAEL  
 (insulted)  
 Fine? Fine? M'lady, peanuts are  
*fine*. Broiled asparagus is *fine*. A  
 parking ticket with only a moderate  
 fine is... *fine*. This is the Castle  
 Caraway! I should say it's a good  
 deal better than *fine*.

ROWAN  
 (struggling to keep her  
 voice level)  
 Exquisite. Extraordinary. Five star  
 review. That what you want?

GRAEL  
 (eyebrow raised)  
 No, I want you to be more than  
*fine*, m'la...

ROWAN  
 (just done with him)  
 Grael, you're my best friend, but  
 if you call me m'lady one more time  
 I'm going to put you through that  
 wall.

Rowan flops down on the bed. A moment's silence, then...

GRAEL  
 (trying to mask his worry)  
 Did... did I say something wrong?

Rowan scoffs, staring up at the ceiling.

ROWAN  
 No. It's not you. It's... it's  
 just... this.

GRAEL  
(on the back foot)  
This?

ROWAN  
This. All of this.

GRAEL  
The castle?

ROWAN  
The castle, the observatory, the  
bog... Everything.

GRAEL  
(making light)  
Now what could possibly be wrong  
with everything?

ROWAN  
(trying to be honest)  
Well... Nothing. Not really. It's  
just...

GRAEL  
(nervous)  
Just what?

ROWAN  
(reluctant)  
It's just not what I expected. What  
I remembered.

GRAEL  
(slightly shocked)  
Not how you remember -- dear child,  
nothing here has changed. Nothing  
here ever changes!

ROWAN  
(quoting)  
'The Echwood just echoes on, where  
nothing lost is ever gone.'

GRAEL  
(relieved)  
Oh thank the stars -- you do  
remember!

ROWAN  
(troubled)  
Some of it. Most of it.

GRAEL  
 (worry growing)  
 And... the rest?

Another long silence.

ROWAN  
 (trying to appease Grael)  
 I guess it's not really important,  
 is it?

GRAEL  
 (pleased)  
 Nay child, 'tis not. All you need  
 know is that this is your home, and  
 it always will be.

ROWAN  
 (disconcerted)  
 Right. Home.

After a moment, Grael stands up and crosses to the door.

GRAEL  
 (a little too paternal)  
 Sweetest dreams, m'lady.

ROWAN  
 (muttering)  
 Don't call me...

The door creaks shut. Rowan SIGHS, alone at last. An owl hoots outside the window, reminding her of the time.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (to herself)  
 I'm supposed to be married by now.

She sits up then stands, pacing the floorboards.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (trying to remember)  
 How did that poem go...? 'Fog-bog,  
 warm and hungry earth... Fog-bog...  
 earth... Give us now our...'

A sonorous bell rings out the hour. Rowan stops pacing, then walks slowly towards the window, listening.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (quoting from memory  
 again)  
 'The hour chimes of Caraway, struck  
 by the queen herself, they say...'

Rowan freezes mid-step.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (confused)  
 No, that's not right... that can't  
 be right. Who's...  
 (beat of realization)  
 Lady Little Ash.  
 (beat)  
 Who's Lady Little Ash?

After a moment, Rowan turns and rushes to the door. She tries the handle... but it's locked.

GUARD 2  
 (from outside the door)  
 Er'rythin' okay, m'lady?

ROWAN  
 (muttering to herself)  
 What?  
 (to the Guard)  
 Fine! Everything's fine!

The Guard GRUNTS. Rowan backs away from the door.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (barely contained panic)  
 Why would there be a guard -- or a  
 lock... unless...  
 (quoting from memory)  
 'The castle great has cells above,  
 with beds as soft as feathered  
 doves.'  
 (realizing she's been  
 played)  
 Grael, you son of a...

She doesn't finish the sentence, rushing over the window. The hooting of the owl grows louder as she leans out.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (calculating)  
 Okay, that's pretty high, but I  
 might be able to climb down if...

GUARD 3  
 (calling from below)  
 Even'n, M'lady!

ROWAN  
 (to herself)  
 Why are they all calling me...  
 (MORE)

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
(calling to the Guard)  
Evening!

She ducks back into the room.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
Great. Now what?

A sudden flapping of wings comes from the window.

OWLIVER  
(as though chuckling)  
Who who who...  
(wise but mischievous)  
Now this is a fine mess you've  
gotten yourself into.

ROWAN  
(recognizing him)  
Owliver?

OWLIVER  
(amused)  
The one and only! So good to see  
you again, Rowan!

ROWAN  
(seeing an old friend)  
What are you doing here? Shouldn't  
you be back at the great tree?

OWLIVER  
(proud)  
I'm a visiting dignitary for the  
feathered folk now. Imagine that!  
Owliver Crumbwell, ambassador to  
Castle Caraway.

ROWAN  
You're staying here? In the castle?

OWLIVER  
(offended)  
Don't be crass. I wouldn't stay  
indoors if they offered me the  
rooms of the queen herself. Though  
I must say, the trees in the garden  
are far preferable to your  
quarters.

ROWAN  
Don't remind me. Do you know the  
way out of here?

OWLIVER

(amused)

What, beside the locked door and  
the decidedly fatal drop out the  
window?

ROWAN

(annoyed)

Besides those.

OWLIVER

(mildly disappointed)

Oh child -- did I really teach you  
nothing?

ROWAN

What?

Owliver sighs like an exasperated teacher.

OWLIVER

'Echowood has paths unseen...'

ROWAN

(suddenly remembering)

'...known only by the mind that's  
keen...'

OWLIVER

(with masked excited)

'To pass yourself the walls  
between...'

ROWAN

(unmasked excitement)

'...just look for stones of jade-  
like green!'

OWLIVER

(utterly relived)

Ha! I knew I taught you that one!

Rowan rushes over to the wall as Owliver takes flight,  
circling the room and HOOTING excitedly.

ROWAN

(scanning the wall)

Red, purple, yellow, orange -- ha!  
Gotcha!

OWLIVER

(as if he's cheering)

Who Who! Who!

The sound of Owliver's excitement vanishes.

FADE TO:

INT. CASTLE CARAWAY - SECRET PASSAGE - CONTINUOUS

Everything falls silent. The cozy sounds of the bedroom are replaced with dripping water and a quiet howl of wind.

ROWAN  
 (ecstatic even so)  
 Ha! Take that Grael! I... I...  
 (beat)  
 Where am I?

After a moment, Rowan starts walking. Her footsteps are harsh and echoing in the narrow, bare passage. Muffled voices are heard through the walls.

LITTLE ASH  
 (a child's angry voice)  
 Then why did you bring her to the  
 castle?

GRAEL  
 (less flippant than usual)  
 She was stuck in the Fog-Bog, lady  
 Little Ash! Would you rather I left  
 her to die?

LITTLE ASH  
 (tantrum)  
 Yes I would!

Something smashes into the wall outside, shattering. Rowan GASPS and jumps back.

GRAEL  
 (trying to change the  
 subject)  
 Did you hear something...?

LITTLE ASH  
 Don't try to distract me, Grael!  
 This is about you, bringing that --  
 that...

GRAEL  
 (helpful)  
 Grown-up?

As Grael speaks, Rowan creeps forward slowly, her soft footsteps echoing.

LITTLE ASH  
 (growing madder)  
 Don't say that word! You know I  
 hate that word!

GRAEL  
 (backpedaling)  
 Forgive me, your worship. What  
 should I call her, then? An adult?  
 A woman?

LITTLE ASH  
 (cold and cruel)  
 She's a traitor, Grael. A traitor  
 to everything Echowood means. And I  
 want her destroyed.

Rowan can't stifle another GASP.

GRAEL  
 (on full alert)  
 Someone's here!

LITTLE ASH  
 (like she's just caught  
 someone in hide and seek)  
 Behind the fireplace!

There's scuffling as Rowan tries to run, but she stops as a  
 strong wind throws her down and out of the passage.

INT. CASTLE CARAWAY - THRONE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Rowan GRUNTS as she's pulled out of the open fireplace, her  
 hands squeaking on the tile as she tries to catch herself.

GRAEL  
 (terribly amused)  
 What have we here, then? A little  
 bird trapped up the chimney flue?

LITTLE ASH  
 (cold and angry)  
 Looks more like a rat in the wall,  
 to me.

GRAEL  
 (diplomatically)  
 Now, let's not be too hasty in our  
 judgements...

LITTLE ASH  
 (ignoring Grael)  
 And do you know what we do to rats,  
 traitor?

ROWAN  
 (still a little dazed)  
 What... who are...?

LITTLE ASH  
 (venomous)  
 We burn them. With fire. So that no  
 one has to smell their filthy stink  
 ever again.  
 (beat)  
 Grael?

ROWAN  
 No, wait...

GRAEL  
 (with all his charm)  
 Your grace, don't you think that  
 may -- perhaps -- be a trifle  
 extreme?

LITTLE ASH  
 (screaming)  
 I want her dead! I want her  
*destroyed*, so I can never turn into  
 what she's...!

Little Ash trails off.

GRAEL  
 (flippantly)  
 Whoops...

ROWAN  
 (suddenly realizing)  
 Turn into... hold on. Who are you?

GRAEL  
 (you can hear his eyes  
 roll)  
 Really Rowan? You still don't get  
 it? And here I thought you grown-up  
 types were supposed to be smart.

LITTLE ASH  
 (fuming)  
 What did I say -- about using that  
 word?

GRAEL  
I... oh. Dear.

LITTLE ASH  
(howling in rage)  
Gwards!

The doors burst open, and what sounds like a dozen heavy-footed soldiers rush in, grunting and muttering.

GRAEL  
(whispering to Rowan)  
I'm afraid I must admit I didn't see this coming.

ROWAN  
(whispered back)  
What, you though betraying me would end well?

GRAEL  
(whispering)  
My dear child! Betrayal is such a strong word...

WARD 1  
(to the queen)  
Yea, Lady Lil' Ash?

LITTLE ASH  
(sadistic glee)  
Call the kitchens. Have the elves light the ovens, extra hot. We've got a pair of rats to burn.

GRAEL  
On the other hand...

ROWAN  
(outraged)  
You can't do this! I'm a guest of the castle!

LITTLE ASH  
(disgusted)  
And you could've been the queen, if you just didn't leave.

ROWAN  
(stunned)  
What?

GRAEL  
 (pretending to be stunned)  
 Yes, what?

ROWAN  
 (desperate now)  
 Who are you?

GRAEL  
 (matching her tone)  
 Yes, who are you?

ROWAN  
 (to Grael)  
 Stop that!

GRAEL  
 (to Rowan)  
 Yes, stop that!

LITTLE ASH  
 (enraged)  
 SHUT UP!

The whole court -- Gwards included -- falls silent.

LITTLE ASH (CONT'D)  
 (quieter)  
 You really don't know me, do you?

ROWAN  
 Should I?

LITTLE ASH  
 (to herself, a little sad)  
 Of course you don't. I can barely  
 recognize you. I almost thought  
 Grael found the wrong person when I  
 first saw you.

ROWAN  
 (shocked)  
 Found?  
 (turning to Grael)  
 You were looking for me?

GRAEL  
 (sheepish)  
 When am I not? After all, that's  
 how I found you both, alone and  
 wandering in the woods...

LITTLE ASH  
 (cutting him off)  
 Stop it!

ROWAN  
 You found... both of us?  
 (beat)  
 Oh, god.

GRAEL  
 (amused)  
 Ah! I know that light in your eyes.  
 Finally figured it out, did you?

LITTLE ASH  
 (enraged)  
 GRAEL! I order you to be quiet!

GRAEL  
 (shrugging)  
 Too late, your majesty. She knows.

Little Ash SHRIEKS in exasperation.

LITTLE ASH  
 (full on tantrum)  
 Gwards! Take them to the kitchen!  
 Take them now! Put them in the  
 ovens while they're still heating!  
 I want to see them cook *alive!*

GRAEL  
 (softer than usual)  
 Um -- Lady Little Ash?

LITTLE ASH  
 (with spite)  
 And gag that stupid sprite, I don't  
 want to hear him anymore!

GRAEL  
 (smiling to himself)  
 My supreme, I'm only trying to tell  
 you that... HMMPH!

Grael is gagged before he can finish his sentence. A Gward  
 GRUNTS in satisfaction.

LITTLE ASH  
 (with dark joy)  
 Much better. Now the other...

ROWAN  
 (almost whispered)  
 Little Ash.

Rowan steps forward. Little Ash stumbles a few steps back.

LITTLE ASH  
 (terrified)  
 What are you doing!?  
 (to gwards)  
 Stop her! Gwards! Somebody grab  
 her! Now...!

She cuts off as Rowan grabs her arm.

LITTLE ASH (CONT'D)  
 (full-on panic)  
 Let me go! I order you to let me  
 go!

ROWAN  
 (realizing the truth)  
 Little Ash. That's what Grael used  
 to call me. To call *us*.

LITTLE ASH  
 (scrambling away)  
 Help! Someone shoot her or  
 something!

WARD 1  
 (no idea what to do)  
 Uhhh...

LITTLE ASH  
 (furious)  
 Oh, you're all useless! Useless!  
 Grael!? Grael!?

GRAEL  
 ('what can I do?')  
 HMMPH?

LITTLE ASH  
 (exasperated)  
 Do something you stupid sprite!

ROWAN  
 (mostly to herself)  
 What are you? A copy? A  
 doppelganger?



ROWAN (CONT'D)  
 (taken aback)  
 What are you doing?

WARD 1  
 (with dumb rage)  
 You et' the queen. You ain't goin'  
 nowhere.

ROWAN  
 (exasperated)  
 I didn't "eat" anyone, you stupid  
 ogre...

WARD 2  
 That's razist.

ROWAN  
 (continual)  
 ...Little Ash was a part of me. A  
 younger version of me! Some kind  
 of... What was she, Grael?

All the Gwards turn to look at Grael. There's a dangerous  
 silence.

GRAEL  
 (chillingly flat)  
 She was the queen. And the queen is  
 dead.

WARDS  
 (all)  
 Long live the king!

GRAEL  
 And as King of Castle Caraway...

WARDS  
 (all)  
 Long live the king!

GRAEL  
 Yes, thank you. As King of Castle  
 Caraway...

WARDS  
 (all)  
 Long live the...

GRAEL  
 (to the Gwards)  
 Keep it up, and I'll bake you all  
 into a pie.

GWARD 1  
 (oblivious)  
 Long live the...

Thunder rumbles overhead, and lightning strikes the Gward. A few other Gwards jump back, SHOUTING IN ALARM.

GRAEL  
 (chilling)  
 Anyone else!? No? Good. Now --  
 M'lady.

ROWAN  
 (worried -- this isn't her  
 friend)  
 Grael?

GRAEL  
 Since you killed the queen, the  
 only fitting punishment is that you  
 take her place now. Forever.

ROWAN  
 (trying to reason)  
 Grael, I... I can't. I need to go  
 home. I'm getting married...

GRAEL  
 (cold)  
 You lost that chance when you  
 decided to come back here.  
 (to Gwards)  
 Take her.

Dozens of heavy feet rush forward. At the same instant, there's the flutter of huge wings at the window.

ROWAN  
 (relieved)  
 Owliver!

OWLIVER  
 (overblown bravado)  
 'Who' called for a rescue?

ROWAN  
 (deliriously happy)  
 No one!

Rowan rushes for the window.

OWLIVER  
 (clearly that sounded  
 cooler in his head)  
 (MORE)

OWLIVER (CONT'D)

Oh. Right. Still, you don't mind if I...

ROWAN

(almost laughing)  
Just go!

GRAEL

(all humor gone)  
Stop that owl!

OWLIVER

Hold tight!

Owliver kicks off the ledge, flapping off into the night as Gwards rush to the window, firing crossbows.

EXT. CASTLE CARAWAY - CONTINUOUS

Arrows whistle past as they speed away from the castle.

ROWAN

(overjoyed)  
What took you so long?

OWLIVER

(sheepishly)  
Well, I couldn't follow you into the secret passage, and by the time I figured out where you went it was already too late, and I... what... what are you doing?

ROWAN

Giving you a hug, you big lump!

OWLIVER

(uneasy with 'emotion')  
Oh. Right. Um, well, keep doing it, cause it might get a bit bumpy on the way... AHHH!

An arrow strikes home, slicing through Owliver's feathers.

ROWAN

Owliver!

OWLIVER

(more worried about her)  
I'm fine, I'm fine... just... hang on tight... hang on tight...

INT. CASTLE CARAWAY - THRONE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The string of a longbow is still humming.

WARD 2

Well shot, m'lawrd. Got 'em righ'  
'tween the ribs, y'did.

GRAEL

(darkly smug)

Thank you Rupert. Come along: we've  
a bird to catch.

Grael's wings flutter as he takes off.

FADE TO:

EXT. FOG-BOG - LATER

The heavy stillness of the mist hangs over the swamp. After a moment, a flurry of desperate wing beats breaks the silence before Owliver crashes into the mud.

OWLIVER

Aggh!

ROWAN

Ooof!

Rowan tumbles a few feet, stunned. After a moment, she rises.

ROWAN (CONT'D)

(whispering)

Owliver? Owliver?

A jet of swamp gas ignites nearby, whooshing as it illuminates the scene. Owliver groans a little way off.

ROWAN (CONT'D)

(terrified)

Owliver!

Rowan splashes through the mud to her old friend. She GROANS, turning him over with a dull thump.

ROWAN (CONT'D)

(desperate)

Owliver? Owliver, come on -- talk  
to me here. Please. Please!

(beat)

Please.

But it's not good -- the owl is gone.

Rowan falls back, plopping down on the wet earth. The sounds of the swamp fill the empty space.

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
(whispered)  
I'll remember you.

GRAEL  
(cruelly)  
And what good will that do him,  
child? He can't remember you.

Rowan tries to stand, but the mud slurps her back down before she can.

ROWAN  
(annoyed at herself)  
Oh you've got to be kidding me...

GRAEL  
(mocking her)  
What's the matter, little one?  
Forgot where you were standing?

ROWAN  
(resigned)  
Just go away Grael. I mean it this  
time.

GRAEL  
(offended)  
Go away? And let you drown? No, no,  
nonono... Not while you have a job  
to do yet.

ROWAN  
(just tired of it all)  
Job...?

GRAEL  
(bright and cheerful)  
Queen of Castle Caraway! Lady of  
the Echowood and the isles beyond  
the sea! Mistress of the wild  
shores and newborn green!

ROWAN  
Oh. That.

GRAEL  
(taken aback)  
Don't... don't you want that?

Rowan doesn't answer.

GRAEL (CONT'D)

What are you saying? You'd rather have what *they* offer? Skies full of smog and paved-over forests? A job that steals all the best parts of your days? Dying in a hospital bed once you're too old and too weak to carry on?

ROWAN

Life.

GRAEL

What?

ROWAN

(somewhat uncertain)

I want... life. A real life.

(beat)

I have to grow up sometime.

GRAEL

(incredulous)

Pah! Who says? Just ask Lady Little Ash... oh wait, you can't.

ROWAN

You really think that was living? It might be hard for you to understand, but life doesn't go on forever. And it sure as hell doesn't stay simple.

GRAEL

Of course it does! I mean, goodness child, look at me!

ROWAN

And look at me. I'm sitting in the mud in my wedding dress, pretending I'm back in the Echwood.

GRAEL

Is that what you think this is? A dream?

ROWAN

Maybe. Maybe I just snapped. I wouldn't be surprised.

GRAEL

(confused)

What?

ROWAN  
Alecks.

GRAEL  
(realizing)  
Oh.

ROWAN  
(finally being truthful)  
Yeah. I saw them at my Bachelorette party, just sitting there at the bar. Alone.

(beat)  
We tried to ignore each other. Made it almost the whole night before Susan decided to open another bottle of champaign. Of course we both turned to look at the same time, and... and...

GRAEL  
(thinking he understands)  
You kissed them.

ROWAN  
(shocked)  
What? No! No, god no!

GRAEL  
(confused)  
Oh?

ROWAN  
No!  
(beat)  
But... but I would've. If they'd asked me to.

GRAEL  
(realizing)  
Oh.

ROWAN  
(letting it all out)  
And... And I couldn't stop thinking -- I brought Alecks here so many times, showed them everything, tried to get them to see what I saw, but... but everything was black and white to them. And sometimes I wondered... you know, what if? What if some part of Alecks really did believe it? What if...?

The mud under Rowan suddenly slurps, pulling her further down.

GRAEL

(worried)

Come child, there's no need for this. Give me your hand, and I can help you. Perhaps we can even convince Alecks to come back, if only we work together?

Rowan SCOFFS.

ROWAN

(incredulous)

You still don't get it do you? I love Alecks -- but I'm not going to marry them.

GRAEL

(genuinely confused)

Wh -- what?

ROWAN

That's the thing about life. It doesn't make much sense. It never did.

(beat)

I finally remembered. The car crash. Running away from home. Meeting you. Writing the world. The poems. All of it.

GRAEL

(an edge of panic)

Rowan, you're still sinking...

ROWAN

I just didn't think what it meant to write myself into them.

(beat)

How did that poem go again?

GRAEL

(the king is afraid)

Rowan...!

ROWAN

(quoting from her full memory now)

'Fog-bog, warm and hungry earth -- give us now our second birth.'

GRAEL  
(full on terror)  
Rowan!!

His voice disappears under one last slurp of mud, along with all other noise.

The sound beneath the bog is deep and soothing: like a slow and heavy heartbeat. Rowan doesn't struggle.

FADE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

The low heartbeat turns into the high, electronic pulse of an EKG. Nearby, someone paces back and forth.

After a moment, Rowan GROANS awake.

MARI  
(worried)  
Rowan? Rowan sweetie, are you awake?

ROWAN  
Ugh... yeah, I guess so.

MARI  
Oh saints alive, I could just kiss you to death!

ROWAN  
(pained, but smiling)  
Thanks Mom. What happened?

MARI  
Oh, you passed out in the garden just as the band started playing. Now, you musn't feel ashamed about it -- I mean, all that pressure you put on yourself, it's really no surprise that you... oh, but that doesn't matter now you're okay. I'll go get the doctor!

ROWAN  
No mom, I'm really...

But Mari's already out the door. Rowan flops back down, exhausted. She breathes slowly, then...

ROWAN (CONT'D)  
(with no surprise)  
Hello Grael.

GRAEL  
(sadly)  
Hello Rowan.

ROWAN  
(CHUCKLING)  
You never used to call me that.

GRAEL  
Huh. I guess times change.

ROWAN  
Yeah. Times and people.

There's a long, awkward silence between them.

GRAEL  
You know, I'm really not sure what happens now.

ROWAN  
You'll be fine without me, Grael.  
Aren't you like, what, a thousand and two?

GRAEL  
A thousand and five next week.

ROWAN  
Well. Happy birthday then.

GRAEL  
Thanks.  
(beat)  
You know, funny thing is, I don't feel it.

ROWAN  
What do you mean?

GRAEL  
I know I'm a thousand and four. I know I'm old. But all that time before we met feels... I don't know, kind of... fuzzy.

ROWAN  
I could say the same thing about you.

A moment of silence as they evaluate each other.

GRAEL  
Are we enemies now?

ROWAN  
No Grael. And we're not friends,  
either.

GRAEL  
(genuine regret)  
I'm sorry about Owliver.

ROWAN  
Me too.

GRAEL  
(one last try)  
You know, there's still a lot to do  
around the Castle. The library  
needs another expansion, and the  
knowmes are all warmed up for  
another fight.

ROWAN  
You're just going to have to manage  
without me. For now, at least.

GRAEL  
(finally giving up)  
For now.

Suddenly, the door burst open.

MARI  
(indignant)  
The nerve of that doctor! *She's*  
*stable*, he says. Just look at her!  
Does she look stable to...

Mari suddenly realizes she's rambling.

MARI (CONT'D)  
(back into Mom mode)  
Oh I'm so sorry dear, I didn't mean  
to shout. He's busy right now --  
but Laurel's just outside!  
(beat)  
Rowan?

ROWAN  
(distracted)  
Hmm?

MARI  
(slightly worried)  
Everything alright?

ROWAN  
(back to reality)  
Yeah. Everything's fine.  
(beat)  
Go ahead.

MARI  
(relieved)  
Laurel dear? Your fiance's back  
with us.

LAUREL  
(from the hall)  
Oh thank god. Tell her I'm going to  
kill her for ruining my wedding.

MARI  
(smiling)  
Laurel says she loves you more than  
the earth and sky, sweetie.  
(kisses Rowan's forehead)  
I love you, Little Ash.

ROWAN  
Love you mom.

Mari stands, her steps retreating. Laurel enters the room.  
There's a moment of silence between them, before...

LAUREL  
Welcome home, stranger.

FADE OUT.