

EXT. RIVER WAY PARK - DAY

A blazing summer sun, its rays of light filtering through translucent green leaves. We're staring up at the canopy of an ancient OAK TREE.

Our gaze travels down the gnarled branches... the trunk... to a small family sitting amongst the thick roots.

A MOTHER and two DAUGHTERS on a picnic blanket, a pile of worn cards between them.

ALIZA (Afro-Irish, 37), a kind smile softening the edges of her tired eyes. She has a slight Irish accent.

TALIA (17), poker faced. She sits with her back ramrod straight and her shirt looks recently pressed.

NESS (9), hiding a mischievous smile behind fanned cards. Her clothes are already grass-stained.

Aliza and Talia are mirror-images of each other, but Ness is more... Otherworldly. There's something about her wild hair and bright eyes.

TALIA
Don't cheat.

NESS
I'm not cheating.

TALIA
Mom...

ALIZA
Ness knows the rules.

Ness stares right at Talia and raises a taunting eyebrow.

NESS
I'm not doing anything! I promise.

Behind Ness's back, **her fingers are crossed.**

TALIA
Sure, Ness.

The family draws another round of cards.

A moment of stillness in dappled sunlight. They look like they're in a fairy tale.

TALIA (CONT'D)
 (groaning)
 I fold.

Aliza silently put down her cards. All eyes are on Ness.

Ness throws her cards down. It's a smatter of useless cards - Ness doesn't even have a pair.

Talia flops onto the grass, defeated. Ness celebrates with a little impromptu jig.

TALIA (CONT'D)
 Technically...

NESS
 (miming Talia)
 Technically...

TALIA
 (smiling)
 Yeah, yeah.

NESS
 The *rule* was that I'm not allowed
 to *comment* on my cards.

TALIA
 (getting up)
 Just because you won--

Both of them leap up!

TALIA (CONT'D)
 --Doesn't mean I can't get you
 after!

Talia chases after Ness, who shrieks with laughter. Aliza stays seated, smiling.

Talia tackles Ness! She picks Ness up, flips her upside-down, and swings her around in circles.

NESS
 (giggling)
 Talia! Talia, stop!

Aliza starts to stand, but *winces in pain*. She presses her hand to her chest.

Talia notices and stops immediately.

TALIA
 Mom?

Ness doesn't notice anything, she's still laughing & hanging upside down.

ALIZA
It's alright. Let's settle down.

Everyone arranges themselves back onto the blanket.

Aliza pulls out an old BOOK with green leather binding, and thumbs through its yellowing pages. Illustrations of faeries, knights, and dragons in ink blur past.

ALIZA (CONT'D)
A story, perhaps?
(skimming the book)
The legend of Thomas the Rhymer?

TALIA
I've heard that a million times.

ALIZA
Then a new story.

Aliza flips to another section. Ness and Talia settle down.

ALIZA (CONT'D)
Once upon a time... in the
Otherworld, a land of trickster
faeries and dangerous beasts...

She's cast a spell over them...

ALIZA (CONT'D)
A Queen gave birth to a son, and,
as she awaited her King's return,
she called the boy 'Nix Nought
Nothing'.

As she continues, we drift away...

The family's under an oak tree atop a hill. Its steep grassy slope leads down to a burbling creek. Past that, a patch of sparse woods...

ALIZA (O.S.) (CONT'D)
The King's journey was reaching its
end. He was weary and impatient
when he reached a wide river, one
he could not cross. A giant offered
him passage across in exchange for
'Nix Nought Nothing'.

Perched amongst branches, a CROW watches the family...

ALIZA (CONT'D)
The King agreed, not knowing that
it was his son's name. However, he
realized his mistake when he
arrived home.

Aliza pauses to take a deep breath. Ness remains entranced in
the story. Talia moves closer, concerned.

ALIZA (CONT'D)
It's alright.
(clears her throat)
He tried to trick the giant by
giving it the gardener's son, and
the boy was killed.

Ness gasps.

ALIZA (CONT'D)
The King sent the hen-wife's son,
and the boy was killed. Finally, he
had to hand over the prince... ***That
is the power of promises...***

The wind rises, carrying a cloud of dandelion seeds from the
forest. Aliza shivers.

ALIZA (CONT'D)
I think it's time to go home.

Talia moves to help Aliza up, but Aliza waves her away.

NESS
What happens next?

ALIZA
(teasing)
I'll tell you tomorrow.

Aliza stands, snapping the book shut. Ness leaps up to grab
it, but Aliza holds it high above their heads.

They tussle, laughing.

Ness leaps up and grabs the book! (Aliza let her have it.)
She dances away triumphantly.

The dandelion seeds drift past them, touching Ness's face.

Ness turns to look at the forest. In the shadows of the
trees, a bright light like a mirror reflecting the sun...

NESS

Look!
(points)
A light!

TALIA

(shades her eyes and
looks)
I don't see anything.

Talia's POV: The woods, empty and normal.

On Ness: Her eyes, reflecting the glinting light.

The wind carries a trio of whispering voices...

WISPS

Vanessa...
Vanessa...
Vanessa...

Ness starts down the hill, towards the woods. Talia catches her by the hand and pulls her back.

NESS

(to Aliza)
Can I go look? Please?

ALIZA

Only if we go together, dear.

Talia gives Aliza a look: "Really?"

Aliza: "Be patient. Why not?"

They head down the hill together, Ness leading, Talia holding her hand.

The LIGHT flits between the trees like a hummingbird.

NESS

Do you think it's a faerie?

TALIA

They're just stories.

ALIZA

Just don't trust them.

Talia glares at Aliza: "Don't encourage her." Aliza smiles, shrugs... Then she winces, putting her hand to her chest.

TALIA

What's wrong?

Ness frees herself from Talia's grasp. She makes her way down the hill.

Dandelion seeds swirl around her, and she smiles in pure delight.

WISPS

Ness... Ness...

Ness... Ness...

Ness... Ness...

The wind is stronger now, colder.

TALIA

Ness! Come back!

Ness, without thought, plunges into the forest. The light's just a few steps beyond the treeline.

She grabs it, and it explodes into a puff of glowing dandelion seeds!

Behind her, Aliza and Talia make their way down the hill. Aliza stumbles, Talia helps her up.

TALIA (CONT'D)

VANESSA!

There's another glow, farther in the trees. And another, and another. A trail of dancing lights leads into the woods. The faint sound of bells, or is it laughter?

EXT. RIVER WAY - FOREST - DAY

All is quiet. Just the sound of the forest.

Ness follows the trail of lights. They wink out one by one... leading her to a massive tree. It's dark hollow is tall and wide enough for an adult.

WISPS

Over here

over here

over here...

Ness climbs in.

It's dark, and extends much longer than it should.

ALIZA

(faint)

Ness!

Ness looks back.

There's only darkness.

NESS
Mom? Talia?

In the tunnel, a pale light in the distance... an opening?

EXT. RIVER WAY PARK - DAY

Aliza and Talia at the edge of the woods. Aliza's breath comes fast.

TALIA
I can't see her.

Aliza moves past her daughter, into the trees.

ALIZA
Ness?

TALIA
(yelling)
Stop hiding! Mom is--

ALIZA
(harsh)
I'm fine.

It's the first time we see Aliza's mask of calm slip.

ALIZA (CONT'D)
(strained)
I'm fine, go find your sister.

She looks scared, her expression frozen for just a moment too long.

Aliza collapses to the forest floor in one smooth motion. A marionette with its strings cut.

TALIA
Mom!

ALIZA
(barely)
Find Ness.

EXT. OTHERWORLD - FOREST - POND - NIGHT

Ness tumbles onto the other side.

Aliza's book slips from her grasp and falls onto the forest floor.

It's nighttime here. A full moon high in the sky.

Ahead, a small pond, round as a mirror. The surrounding tree roots extend into its murky depths.

WISPS

Here...

Over here...

Over here...

NESS

Hello? Where am I?

Ness gets up, approaches the pond's mirror-smooth surface.

WISPS

What do you want...?

What do you want...?

What do you wish for...?

NESS

I want go home now. How do I get back? *Hello?*

A Wisp appears over the center of the pond.

Ness steps in. The pond's surface remains unnaturally still. She wades to the center, the water only reaching her knees.

The Wisp makes a faint sound, Ness leans closer to it.

From the water... A pair of webbed hands reach up, silently, slowly...

The Wisp disappears in a small explosion of light.

The creature grabs Ness!

Ness is dragged down, down, down. She struggles.

The pond is deeper than it was before.

The dark water closes over her head.

She looks up, seeing the distorted moon.

A webbed hand closes over her shoulder.

Ness looks at the creature.

She screams. It's silent, a cloud of bubbles bursting from her mouth.

EXT. RIVER WAY PARK - DAY

Talia stumbles back towards the hill. Aliza's arm slung over her shoulder. She's struggling with the weight, crying...

TALIA
HELLO? HELP!

She's at the edge of the forest.

TALIA (CONT'D)
HELP! SOMEONE!

She slips, falling hard onto one knee. Screams out in pain.

There's a faint shout in the distance. A tiny figure waving at her, flip phone in hand.

Talia scrambles back up, leaving Aliza lying on the ground.

TALIA (CONT'D)
(crying)
I'll be back, I'll be back.

She runs as fast as she could towards help.

EXT. OTHERWORLD - FOREST - POND - NIGHT

Ness struggles in the water, eyes filled with fear.

She's face to face with the creature.

It's a woman. Almost.

Naked and inhuman. Long hair tangled with water-weeds. Beautiful if it looked less like a shark.

It's a Nixie, and a hungry one.

It opens its mouth, revealing needle-sharp teeth.

Ness flails her arms and pushes the Nixie back. Its grasp looses, Ness kicks away from it.

Bubbles escape her mouth. She's weak, drowning...

Ness's hand, reaching up, pale against the dark water.

A faint flash of red and white lights above. Something piercing through the trees.

She reaches, *reaches*.

Grasps a tree root.

Pulls.

EXT. RIVER WAY PARK - ROADSIDE - NIGHT

Red and white lights flashing on Talia's tear-stained face.

She's watching an ambulance pull up.

EXT. RIVER WAY PARK - EDGE OF THE WOODS - NIGHT

Just the trees.

Then, a figure approaches.

Ness stumbles out of the forest.

She's covered in mud. Leaves stick to her hair, her torn clothes. Her eyes are empty with shock.

EXT. RIVER WAY PARK - ROADSIDE - NIGHT

Talia watches a pair of paramedics lift her mother into a gurney. Someone gives her a blanket.

She's struggling not to cry.

A paramedic puts a mask on Aliza's face.

EXT. RIVER WAY PARK - HILL - NIGHT

Ness stumbles past it, dripping mud everywhere.

She sees the ambulance. Talia waiting. Aliza's already inside, her face obscured from Ness.

NESS

TALIA!

She breaks into a smile and runs towards her sister. She barrels into Talia, hugging her hard.

Talia doesn't hug back.

TALIA
Where were you?!

NESS
I was in the forest.

TALIA
You were gone!

NESS
There were faeries, they led me to
a pond--

TALIA
Stop it! Stop making things up!
Faeries aren't real!

NESS
They were real! *I was scared!*

TALIA
We went in to look for you. You
weren't there. And now Mom's...
She's...

Finally, Ness sees Aliza in the ambulance.

NESS
What's wrong with her?

TALIA
I don't know yet.

They watch the paramedics close the doors. Talia stares at
the ambulance as it drives away, even after it's gone.

TALIA (CONT'D)
If we hadn't gone into the woods...
We might've gotten her help sooner.

NESS
They tricked me--

TALIA
Stop.
(beat)
We're going home.

On Ness, watching the ambulance leave, shock settling in.

EXT. OTHERWORLD - FOREST - NIGHT

On the grass, Aliza's book of fairy tales. The book begins to sink. Grass blades wrap around the edge of the cover.

It looks as if the forest itself is consuming it.

The book disappears into the earth.