

GUARDIAN OF THE GATES

"Pilot"

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TEASER

FADE IN:

EXT. GAS-LIT ALLEY - NIGHT

A RAT finds an APPLE in the middle of the street. It bites it, pulls it - it doesn't move. Another pull. Nothing.

It peeks around the apple - something peeks back. Yellow eyes, pointy ears, little face - an IMP. It's tug-of-death--

--but the varmints scatter as TWO THUGS run through, each carrying a heavy sack. They round the corner, throwing long shadows against a wall as they run towards an IRON GATE.

They get there. SMALL THUG puts down his sack and fumbles with his belt as BIG THUG stands lookout--

--and sees a SHADOW, in the alley they just came from. Big Thug elbows Small Thug to freeze.

The shadow SHRINKS. It's walking away. The thugs exhale.

CLANG!!!

The shadow TURNS. The thugs look at each other, then to their feet - a RING OF LOCK PICKS, dropped by Small Thug.

The shadow LENGTHENS - it's not human. It's huge. Hulking. Horned. The thugs' eyes widen with panic.

A DEMON rounds the corner, EYES GLOWING RED. It looks to the gate - nothing there. Then to the side--

--where the thugs are playing cards on a lit doorstep, their sacks safely stashed elsewhere.

The Demon towers over them, something out of a nightmare. Big Thug casually draws a card.

BIG THUG
Evening, Inspector.

The Demon leans into the light - he's wearing a uniform. He glares at them, then turns toward the gate.

DEMON
I thought I heard--

CLANG!!!

The Demon jerks back - Small Thug has dumped some coins on the ground, his palm lingering open. The Demon FLARES.

DEMON

You are hereby reminded that, by
municipal code 17A, exiting the
city after dark is a crime.

BIG THUG

Only crime here is all the money
I'm taking from this guy. With his
consent, of course.

The Demon SNORTS, considers hauling them in - but moves on.

The thugs watch him leave, then move fast. Big Thug grabs
the sacks, Small Thug unlocks the gate. They flee the city--

--a Gothic city on a mountain, one of many cities and
mountains on the horizon. Beyond, an ocean glitters.
Overhead, a FAMILY OF DRAGONS soars. This is...

SUPERIMPOSE: The Gray

EXT. CLEARING - NIGHT

The thugs stop to catch their breath. Small Thug leans
against something, then looks up...

It's an ancient STONE TOWER, piercing the sky. A narrow path
has been carved all around it, leading to the top.

MAGNUS (O.S.)

The Dark Gates.

MAGNUS has been waiting - expensive cape, coiffed hair.

MAGNUS (CONT'D)

They can only be truly appreciated
at night. Shame your city elders
don't agree.

BIG THUG

Sure, Lord Magnus. Shame. Real work
of art.

Small Thug hands Magnus a VIAL with a few purple drops left.

SMALL THUG

Here, Your Lordship. Worked just
like you said.

MAGNUS

It better have, for what it cost.
Any complications?

BIG THUG
Nothing you need to worry about.

MAGNUS
Good. Let's continue.

Magnus starts up the tower. The thugs hesitate.

SMALL THUG
If we do this - if the Dark Gates
open - we're rich as kings?

MAGNUS
When they open - richer.
(under his breath)
Lot of good may it do you.

The thugs follow Magnus up the tower as it starts to RAIN.

EXT. TOP OF STONE TOWER - NIGHT

They reach the top as the storm picks up. The thugs put down their sacks and rub their shoulders.

Magnus continues towards TWO PILLARS - ruins, one taller than the other, with an ALTAR between. This is a holy place.

Big Thug CHUCKLES. Magnus sneers.

MAGNUS
Is something funny?

BIG THUG
Just that here we are. The Dark
Gates. All the stories, all the
talk about the Guardian... and
where is he?

GUARDIAN (O.S.)
Right here.

They look up to the taller pillar - it's not actually taller. There's something crouched on it, a bundle of black fabric, a sinister MASK with GREEN EYES.

The GUARDIAN OF THE GATES rises, releasing his long cape to the wind as LIGHTNING STRIKES. He looks down at them--

--and LEAPS.

ACT I

EXT. TOP OF STONE TOWER - NIGHT

Magnus hits the ground hard as the thugs SCREAM and flee, leaving their sacks behind. The storm rages now.

The Guardian steps towards Magnus, cape billowing to reveal a dull-gray armor - like an ancient statue come to life.

MAGNUS

The legend is true. Hello,
Guardian.

GUARDIAN

Magnus.

Magnus stumbles to his feet - holding a WHISTLE.

MAGNUS

You know who I am? Then you should
know I never travel alone.

He BLOWS THE WHISTLE. The ground SHAKES. It SHAKES again. The Guardian cocks his head curiously...

A final SHAKE - and a huge TROLL launches itself into the air behind Magnus. It lands with a ROAR and backhands the Guardian, sending him flying against one of the pillars.

GUARDIAN

Unngh!!!

The Troll DROOLS and HEAVES, awaiting Magnus' orders.

MAGNUS

Alive, if you can. If you can't...
I won't hold it against you.

The Guardian shakes off the hit - just as the Troll CHARGES. The Guardian waits... and waits...

...and LEAPS just before contact. He twists in mid-air, grabs the Troll by the neck and uses its own momentum to slam it to the ground. The Troll YELPS. The tower SHAKES.

Magnus is almost to the sacks when feels the tower move. He turns - the Guardian KNOCKS OUT the Troll with a STOMP and walks towards him. Magnus backs away, close to the edge.

MAGNUS

Y-y-you stay away from me! Stay
away from--

Magnus' foot slips. He SCREAMS and FALLS, grasping at air...
The Guardian catches him by the wrist. Magnus goes limp.

GUARDIAN
I guard these Gates. They stay
closed.

MAGNUS
You keep saying that...

Magnus' hand TRANSFORMS into BONY CLAWS, his face SPASMS
into a twisted mask of evil with a VOICE to match.

MAGNUS (POSSESSED)
...you must really want to believe
it.

The Guardian isn't fazed. This entity - they've met before.

GUARDIAN
You never stop trying.

MAGNUS (POSSESSED)
Would you? If it were you in that
prison, wouldn't you keep trying?
Wouldn't you do...

Magnus looks toward the sacks, still unopened.

MAGNUS (POSSESSED)(CONT'D)
...whatever it takes... to be free?

GUARDIAN
You will never be free. Not while I
guard the Gates.

MAGNUS (POSSESSED)
And how much longer is that? I get
closer every time, you know. I'm
getting stronger. And you... you're
not.

The Guardian's arm QUIVERS from strain. He throws Magnus
back onto the tower, then opens the sacks--

--KIDS. They're LITTLE KIDS. About three years old, two in
each sack, sleeping peacefully in a sparkling purple aura -
the same color as the potion in Magnus' vial.

The Guardian stands over Magnus - unconscious, but Magnus
again. LIGHTNING STRIKES, a FLASH of the twisted face...

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL LUNCH YARD - DAY

The twisted face - drawn in pencil, on college-ruled paper.

VOICE (O.S.)

Nick? Yo, Nick. Nick!

NICK FINCH (14) snaps out of it, SNAPPING his pencil in two. Not cool enough for cool, nerdy enough for nerd - in teenage taxonomy, Nick has no species.

NICK

Huh? What?

TWO GEEKS, his friends, stare at him from across the table.

GEEK 1

You did that thing again.

GEEK 2

You missed our whole story!

Around them, lunch period BUSTLES - it's as high school as high school gets. This is our world. This is...

SUPERIMPOSE: The Light.

NICK

Sorry, I...

Nick looks down at the picture again - the grotesque face stands out among other doodles. He focuses on it, gets sucked in - the grin WIDENS, the eyes seem to GLOW...

GEEK 1 (O.S.)

You alright, man? Talk to us.

GEEK 2 (O.S.)

Yeah, what's with all the space-outs lately?

Nick SLAMS his notebook shut, snapping out of it for good.

NICK

Okay. Back. Whoa, hold up...

Nick sees a CROWD begin to form, pointing at something. The general lunch HUBBUB intensifies into LAUGHTER.

NICK (CONT'D)

...what's going on?

GEEK 2

Just what we've been trying to tell
you about this whole time.

GEEK 1

A little something called...

Nick stands on the table to look over the crowd. He sees it,
in the adjacent student parking lot...

A beautiful SPORTS CAR - dripping in EGG YOLKS.

GEEK 1 (O.S.)

...payback.

The geeks exchange a somber fist-bump. Justice is served.

GEEK 1

Make us drink toilet water.

Nick sits back down.

NICK

Yeah. You're both dead. If he finds
out--

GEEK 2

No way! We're good. Got rid of all
the eviden--

He knocks over his backpack. An EGG rolls out and BREAKS at
the feet of a very pissed JOCK, flanked by two bigger
JOCKS. The lunch yard goes quiet. Students scatter.

GEEK 2

(points at egg)

Yeah... that? That's for a project.

The geeks SQUEAL, make a run for it, but are caught by the
jocks - who lead them away, CHUCKLING.

LEAD JOCK

And you guys thought toilet water
was bad.

Nick watches them go. Maybe this time he stays out of it. It
was their fault. Why should he get involved? They're almost
to the end of the lunch yard...

NICK (O.S.)

What's the matter?

The jocks turn. Nick leans against a table, casually tossing
and catching an egg.

NICK (CONT'D)
Don't dig the new paint job?

LEAD JOCK
Look, Finch - I know it wasn't you.
Just let these guys take their
medicine, okay?

The jocks keep walking - Nick needs a Plan B. He looks at the egg in his hand, shakes his head... this is gonna hurt.

NICK
Know what? You're right. My bad.

Lead Jock turns - Nick's on the table, in pitching stance.

NICK (CONT'D)
Think they missed a spot.

Nick FIRES OFF the egg at the car, SHATTERING a window - an impossibly powerful and accurate throw, given the distance. He looks at his hand - where did that come from?

It works - the jocks drop the geeks and re-lock on Nick, who leaps off the table and runs like hell, jocks at his heels.

The lunch yard is now empty - except for the geeks, who exchange a silent, embarrassed fist-bump and part ways.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL ENTRANCE - DAY

"FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL," per the SIGN. Bushes, a sculpture, a flagpole - the usual. Inside, the BELL RINGS.

A PAIR OF BOOTS walks into the shot, followed by the flapping ends of a TRENCH COAT. Whoever this is, he stops, looks at the school for a moment... and moves on.

EXT. INSPECTOR'S STATION - NIGHT

The Gray's version of a police precinct - pillars, stone steps, an "INSPECTOR'S STATION" shingle over the door.

The Guardian DROPS IN with the sacks. He rests them on the steps, catches his breath and leaps away--

--just as the station door swings opens. The Demon Inspector rushes out, followed by a rookie human OFFICER.

DEMON
Four children in all. All quarters
have been alerted. I'll search to
the western wall, you take the--

(sees the sacks)
What's this?

The Demon approaches the sacks - as the Officer catches a glimpse of the Guardian in the sky.

OFFICER
Inspector, look! There he is!
There's the--

The Demon turns. The Guardian is gone.

DEMON
The who, Officer?

OFFICER
The--the... nobody... sir.

The Demon SNORTS disapproval. He opens the sacks - the kids are waking up from their magic-induced sleep. One of them smiles - the Demon smiles back, tickling her with a claw.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
The missing children! But how--

DEMON
Questions later, Officer. Right now...

They pick up the kids, moving them inside where it's warm.

DEMON (CONT'D)
...let's get these kids home.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY

Nick peeks around the corner - coast is clear. He runs down the hall, almost makes it...

LAUREN (O.S.)
Nick?

He freezes - that voice. He's about to get pummeled, so of course it'll be in front of her. He turns...

LAUREN (14) stands at her locker. A vision, as always.

LAUREN (CONT'D)
What are you doing? Shouldn't you be in class?

NICK

Lauren! Heeey. Yeah, just... just heading there now. Right now.

LAUREN

Wait. Are you in trouble?

NICK

What? Trouble? No. Zero trouble.

Nick grins like an idiot - as he usually does around her. Lauren smiles too, then breaks the semi-awkward silence.

LAUREN

I have something for you, actually. I was gonna find you after school, but since you're here...

Lauren turns to her locker - just as the jocks round the corner and spot Nick. Nick spots them right back.

NICK

Yeah... hey, Lauren...

Lauren shuffles through her locker, oblivious. Nick watches the jocks lumber towards him.

LAUREN

...it's just a little thing, no big deal. But I hope you like it.

NICK

Lauren, I kinda gotta...

Just a few yards now - it's do or die.

LAUREN

So, yeah. Happy birth--

NICK

...gotta go!

Nick BOLTS just as Lauren turns around with a PRESENT, which the jocks KNOCK OUT of her hand as they barrel through.

Lauren picks up the present and watches the chase turn down another hallway. She shakes her head, disappointed.

The jocks stop at a "WET PAINT" sign - the hallway is taped off, completely dark. They sneak in under the tape.

LEAD JOCK

You didn't tell me it was your
birthday, Finch. We'll have to make
this one extra special.

Nick hides behind a stack of paint buckets. He peeks around
and sees an "EXIT" sign - and the door right under it.

LEAD JOCK (CONT'D)

Doesn't have to be this way. You
bring this on yourself, playing the
hero all the time. Come on. It's
gotta get old, right?

Nick makes a run for it, in full view of the jocks.

NICK

A little, yeah!

Nick runs into the door - but BOUNCES OFF. It's locked. He
goes down hard, disoriented. The jocks stand over him.

NICK (CONT'D)

That's... definitely a safety
violation.

LEAD JOCK

Well, you know us. Safety first.

Lead Jock brings down his FIST - and Nick BLACKS OUT.

EXT. OUTSIDE GUARDIAN'S FORTRESS - NIGHT

The Guardian hits the ground hard, SKIDDING to a stop. He's
near an OLD ABANDONED FORTRESS, in ruins.

He gets to his feet and stretches out his hand - an ILLUSION
FIELD sparks GREEN at his touch. He walks through it...

...and the fortress isn't abandoned anymore - it's in its
prime. But something's wrong - BLACK SMOKE RISES. The
Guardian summons strength and leaps over the wall.

EXT. GUARDIAN'S FORTRESS - NIGHT

He lands in a courtyard - once beautiful, now devastated.
Sculptures lie shattered, wood burns in piles...

And all around, swords shattered. Stones stained red.

GUARDIAN

This can't be...

ACT II

EXT. GUARDIAN'S FORTRESS - NIGHT

The Guardian walks through the destruction, in a daze.

GUARDIAN
What... happened?

KAY (O.S.)
Is... is someone there?

The Guardian turns - a voice from somewhere behind him, under debris. He clears away the rubble to reveal KAY (16), a young soldier in shock.

GUARDIAN
By the Gods. Kay.

KAY
Guardian. We tried... I tried...

The Guardian kneels beside him, pulling him close.

GUARDIAN
It's alright. It's alright.

KAY
They just... appeared. We didn't even have time to sound the alarm.

GUARDIAN
Who, Kay? Who did this?

Kay hesitates, avoiding the Guardian's gaze. He whispers.

KAY
Black Blades.

GUARDIAN
Black Blades?! But that's not... Did they say anything? What did they want?

KAY
They wanted the heir. The next Guardian. They wanted me.

Kay's eyes fall to the devastation in the courtyard. The shattered blades. The shattered lives.

KAY (CONT'D)

They died... they died protecting
me.

GUARDIAN

It was their duty. Kay, you're--

The Guardian looks down at Kay's side - a patch of RED spreads from under his armor. Kay is wounded.

INT. GUARDIAN'S FORTRESS - GREAT HALL

The Guardian kicks open thick oak doors, Kay unconscious in his arms. A woman turns to them - mid-30s, raven-black hair, regal. This is HECATE - and the Guardian holds her son.

HECATE

Blessed be the gods...

Hecate races through the Great Hall, now a makeshift clinic for survivors of the attack. Dozens of soldiers receive care from household staff and one harried DOCTOR.

HECATE (CONT'D)

Doctor! Over here! Please!

Hecate leads the Guardian to an open blanket and pillow. The Guardian puts Kay down gently, Hecate kneels beside him.

HECATE (CONT'D)

Oh, my son... We didn't find him
when we searched the battlements.

The Doctor and his assistant rush in, Hecate and the Guardian step back. Hecate can't hide her disgust with the Guardian - they whisper as Kay is looked to.

HECATE (CONT'D)

Where were you?

GUARDIAN

You know where I was.

HECATE

Not where you should have been. If
he dies--

The Doctor interrupts them, wiping sweat off his brow.

DOCTOR

He's lost blood, but it looks worse
than it is. Apply pressure to the
wound, we'll be back to bandage him
up. He'll be fine.

The Doctor rushes off to other patients as Hecate kneels beside her son and does as instructed.

HECATE

I wish you'd hurry with the transition. He's already sixteen - if he were the Guardian, he would be healed by now. He'd be stronger, he could've fought--

GUARDIAN

I know.

HECATE

Black Blades?! How is that even possible?

GUARDIAN

I... I don't know.

A CAPTAIN, arm in a sling, reports for duty.

CAPTAIN

I'm sorry, Guardian. We fought them as best we could. They surprised us, our weapons were no match--

GUARDIAN

It's alright, Captain. Is everyone now accounted for?

CAPTAIN

With young Kay, everyone on the battlements.

GUARDIAN

And below?

A blank stare from the Captain. The Guardian turns to Hecate, whose eyes go wide...

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL - LUNCH YARD - DAY

Nick stands over a water fountain, running cold water on his face. He turns off the water and breathes deep.

NICK

I really need some new friends.

LAUREN (O.S.)

You think?

Nick turns - his face is BRUISED, one eye nearly SWOLLEN SHUT, his lip BUSTED. Lauren stands nearby, concerned.

NICK
Lauren! Didn't... didn't see you
there.

LAUREN
I'm surprised you can see anything
at all. Can I?

She feels his face. He TWITCHES.

NICK
It's nothing.

LAUREN
More like the worst you've ever
gotten.

NICK
Well, it is my birthday.

Lauren, unimpressed, PUTS an ICE PACK to Nick's face.

NICK (CONT'D)
Oww! I mean... thanks.

Nick sits on a bench, holding the ice pack on his swollen
eye. Lauren sits a level above him, on the table.

LAUREN
I don't know why you do it, Nick. I
know they're your friends--

NICK
--something I'm totally
reconsidering.

LAUREN
Yet you stuck up for them. Again.

NICK
Yeah.

LAUREN
Why?

NICK
'Cause I can take it.

The simplicity of Nick's response catches Lauren off-guard.
He looks up at her, shrugs and smiles.

NICK (CONT'D)
I can take it.

Lauren smiles back - this is Nick in a nutshell, she wonders why she even had to ask. She gives him his birthday present.

LAUREN
Here. Tried giving it to you earlier, but you kept getting punched in the face. Open it.

Nick unwraps it - it's a BRIGHT RED SCARF.

LAUREN (CONT'D)
Made it myself.

NICK
Wow. That's a red scarf.

LAUREN
If you don't like it--

NICK
No, no! I love it. It's just... it must've been a lot of work. You know. For a friend.

They look at each other - their smiles say it all. Lauren wraps the scarf around Nick's neck and springs to her feet.

LAUREN
Come on, I'll walk you home.

NICK
Wait, aren't I supposed to--

Nick and Lauren hit the sidewalk, now officially flirting.

LAUREN
I think you're basically legally blind at this point, so...

NICK
Ohh. That's how it is?

LAUREN
That's how it is.

They're almost over the horizon, their VOICES TRAILING, when a PAIR OF BOOTS enters the shot - same as in ACT I.

It's the STRANGER. Tall, dark-haired, early 40s, skin as weather-worn as his trench coat.

He watches them go - he's found who he's looking for. He tries to follow, but something stops him. He looks down...

A yappy DOG pulls at his pant leg, GROWLING. A little OLD LADY yanks at its leash, but it's latched on like a piranha.

OLD LADY

Oh my goodness, Caesar! Bad dog!
Sir, I am so sorry.

STRANGER

No need.

The Stranger looks at the dog - and gives it a SNEER.

The dog YELPS and TAKES OFF, dragging the old lady. The Stranger follows Nick and Lauren in the other direction.

INT. GUARDIAN'S FORTRESS - STUDY

The Guardian smashes through the remains of a door already hacked open. He steps into the study...

It's been ransacked - bookshelves on the floor, tables overturned, vials and other equipment shattered.

The Guardian steps over the debris, overturning it as he goes, looking for something. For someone.

GUARDIAN

Father! Father, are you in he--

He sees something. In the corner of the room. A HAND.

GUARDIAN (CONT'D)

No. Father.

The Guardian rushes to the OLD MAN and kneels at his side. He takes his hand - the Old Man opens his eyes.

GUARDIAN (CONT'D)

I'm here.

OLD MAN

You stopped him? You stopped
Magnus?

GUARDIAN

Yes. There will be no sacrifice
tonight.

OLD MAN
Not there, anyway.

The Old Man COUGHS. He reports, militarily.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)
Five Black Blades, armed. Looking
for--

GUARDIAN
--looking for the heir. Kay is
safe. Father, let me get the
doctor.

OLD MAN
Leave the doctor to those that need
him. I'll need something else.

GUARDIAN
Father, the Black Blades... how?
Not through the Dark Gates. I was
there.

OLD MAN
Summoned elsewhere. Dark magic. The
Guardian is needed more than ever.
(hopeful)
The transition?

The Guardian hesitates - now is not the time for
half-truths, but he knows what the Old Man needs to hear.

GUARDIAN
It's begun.

OLD MAN
Kay will be Guardian, as I was
before you. You've served well.
Done me proud.

The Old Man puts his hand on the Guardian's, then reaches
feebly towards his face.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)
My child. Let me see you.

The Guardian takes off his mask, his face hidden in shadow.
The Old Man caresses it, smiles...

...and his hand FALLS. The Guardian bows his head, his face
lost in the darkness of his hood.

The Guardian runs his hand gently down the Old Man's face,
closing his eyes. He puts his mask back on.

INT. GUARDIAN'S FORTRESS - GREAT HALL

Hecate watches Kay sleep. She senses something, looks up...

The Guardian walks in holding the Old Man, wrapped in his former cape. He rests him beside the sleeping Kay.

Hecate strokes the Old Man's hair and kisses his forehead. She looks at the Guardian, her face tight with rage...

...and runs into his arms. The Guardian returns the embrace.

All those able, soldiers and staff, surround them and kneel in mourning. A warrior's send-off.

The Guardian looks over Hecate's shoulder - to Kay. To the red bandages over a wound not yet healed...

EXT. SIDEWALK OUTSIDE NICK'S HOUSE - DAY

Nick and Lauren get to Nick's house, walking side-by-side. Lauren jumps out in front for a grand gesture.

LAUREN

See? Home safe and sound.

NICK

You know, I almost preferred the punches. You... wanna come in?

LAUREN

I have to get home. But tomorrow--

(shocked)

Nick. Your face.

NICK

Yeah, nasty. I know.

LAUREN

No, it's totally...

Nick's face doesn't have a single zit on it - let alone a bruise. It's like the beatdown never happened.

LAUREN (O.S.)

...healed.

ACT III

INT. NICK'S HOUSE - ENTRYWAY

Nick bursts through the front door and runs to a nearby mirror. Lauren wasn't kidding. His face - not a single mark.

NICK
That's not... possible...

VICTOR (O.S.)
Nick? Is that you?

VICTOR, Nick's dad, rounds the corner. Mid-30s, thin, unshaven, paint-splotted apron - an artist. The house is covered in his art, mostly intentionally.

VICTOR (CONT'D)
Is that the birthday b--

Nick is fully engrossed in the mirror, stretching his skin, pulling down his eyelids - the bruises had to go somewhere.

VICTOR (CONT'D)
Everything... okay?

Victor looks out the open front door, looking for clues.

VICTOR (CONT'D)
Hey, is that - was that - Lauren?

That gets Nick's attention.

VICTOR (CONT'D)
Wait, does that mean - you and her...

Nick grins in spite of himself. Victor explodes.

VICTOR (CONT'D)
Yeah? Finally?!

Nick closes the door, sparing the neighbors.

NICK
Yeah, dad. Don't make a big deal about it, okay?

VICTOR
No deal will be made. Of any size. At all.

Nick tries to walk past Victor - who can't help himself, and TUSSELES his son's hair as he walks by.

NICK
Aww, dad! Come on...

Nick escapes into the dining room...

INT. NICK'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM

...and stops dead in his tracks.

NICK (CONT'D)
Whoa.

It's birthday central - streamers, balloons, a "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, NICK!" sign, pizzas on the table - and a big rectangular PRESENT, wrapped in newspaper.

VICTOR
Too much? Cool. That's what I was going for. Go ahead, open it.

NICK
Dad, you don't have to get me stuff.

VICTOR
Just open it.

Nick rips it open - it's an old, rusted TOOLBOX.

NICK
No way. You're giving it to me?

VICTOR
You've been eyeing it since you could crawl. So yeah. All yours.

Nick opens the toolbox - it's Victor's old ART SET. A lifetime of pencils, brushes, pastels - an artist's dream.

VICTOR (CONT'D)
Happy birthday, bud.

NICK
Thanks, dad.

Nick hugs his dad, surprising him - Victor thought good Nick hugs were in the past, so he's happy to snatch one more.

On a wall nearby hangs a PICTURE from a different time - of a much younger Victor, Nick as a baby... and, holding Nick, a raven-haired young woman with emerald-green eyes.

VICTOR (O.S.)
Come on, pizza's getting cold.

NICK (O.S.)
Yeah, 'cause we never eat cold
pizza.

But they're not alone. Outside the window, watching the entire exchange between father and son, is the Stranger.

The Stranger turns away from the window, head hung in disgust at what he's been reduced to, what he's become.

VICTOR (O.S.)
So this Lauren thing - we gonna
talk about it, or--

NICK (O.S.)
Or not.

VICTOR (O.S.)
O-kay then.

The Stranger glances through the window one last time. His happiness would cost them theirs. He makes up his mind.

The Stranger breathes deeply, adjusts his coat - and LEAVES.

INT. GUARDIAN'S FORTRESS - STUDY

The Guardian flips a table, SCREAMING in rage - at Magnus. At the Black Blades. At himself.

He looks to an adjacent wall - a ripped, askew PORTRAIT of a man, woman and two dark-haired babies.

He moves the portrait, revealing an intricate DOORWAY brimming with the GREEN ENERGY of the Guardian. He looks at his hands - maybe it's not too late.

The Guardian puts his hands on the doorway - they glow GREEN, his energy combining with the door's. The door resists, bends, CREAKS - but finally opens...

...into a dark chamber, empty except for a tall, freestanding STAINED-GLASS WINDOW in the center of the room. The window's frame is a stone carving of a cloaked figure.

The Guardian touches the frame. The window AWAKENS, washing the room in a kaleidoscope of color.

He leans closer - each stained-glass fragment is a different part of a different world. Some monstrous, some beautiful, all accessible from here.

This is the GUARDIAN'S GATE.

The Guardian searches frantically through the fragments, hoping he can still find the one he needs.

He finds it - and has a moment of serenity. It's still here. All might be well.

The Guardian checks behind him - the study is empty, he's alone. He reaches out and taps the fragment...

...and a WHITE LIGHT engulfs the room. He walks into it, into the Gate - and DISAPPEARS. The WHITE LIGHT fades slowly--

--but not slowly enough. The Guardian was not alone. In the study, a patch of DARKNESS on a wall begins to MOVE. It CREEPS down the wall to the floor, flowing like thick oil.

The viscous darkness snakes towards the Guardian's Gate, birthing GLOBS along the way. Each glob expands and transforms into individual shapes - until there are five.

The last glob takes form, bigger than all the others. It surveys them - they've lost their black sheen but gained FANGS. CLAWS. Jagged WEAPONS. They're hybrids of evil.

One by one, the BLACK BLADES step through the Guardian's Gate - as the hidden doorway closes behind them.

EXT. MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE - DAY

SUNRISE in the Gray - glorious pinks and oranges as the sun peeks over the horizon and the birds CAW.

EXT. CITY GATE - DAY

The Demon Inspector, more red-eyed even than usual, follows a chipper OFFICER jangling keys.

OFFICER

Sorry to disturb you, sir, but we found them this morning. Went to open the gate and there they were.

It's the thugs, on the outside of the same gate they fled through. From the looks of them, they've been here all night. They're shaking, BLABBERING incoherently.

OFFICER (CONT'D)

I tried to question them but they haven't said much, apart from some nonsense about the Guardian. Not

OFFICER (CONT'D)

sure we'll get much more out of them.

The Demon stands over the thugs, eclipsing the sun.

DEMON

You leave that to me.

INT. NICK'S BEDROOM - NICK'S DREAM

Nick looks down - he's standing on the edge of a stone tower, the toes of his sneakers hanging over the ABYSS.

He looks up - his arm is outstretched. He's holding someone over the edge, but he can't see the person's face...

The twisted face from his notebook looks up, with a mouth full of FANGS and a long, FORKED TONGUE that wraps around his arm. Nick shakes the creature off, it FALLS...

Nick hears something - a GALLOP. He turns and sees a Troll headed straight for him. Nick drops to the ground and covers his head, hoping it passes over him...

He opens his eyes and stands. He's in a beautiful courtyard - statues, fountains, flowers. LIGHTNING STRIKES and it's all gone, shattered, blood on the ground...

He sees an Old Man, wounded. He runs to him, takes his hand - the Old Man smiles. LIGHTNING STRIKES and he's gone.

Nick's in his house, looking in the mirror. Then the mirror goes BLACK - and two GREEN EYES begin to GLOW.

INT. NICK'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Nick SITS up in his bed - covered in sweat, heart racing.

NICK

Ate way too much pizza.

He flips his pillow, lies back down, turns to the side... but hears VOICES. WHISPERS.

INT. NICK'S HOUSE - HALLWAY

Nick follows the voices - they get clearer as he walks.

VICTOR (O.S.)

I mean, I don't even know where to start. You can't just show up like this. It's not fair to us. It's not fair to Nick.

INT. NICK'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM

Nick goes into the dining room. There's Victor, two cups of tea - and a WOMAN. Victor is visibly concerned - he didn't want Nick here for this. Not yet.

VICTOR

Hey... Nick. Sorry we woke you.

NICK

Dad? What's going on?

The woman turns towards Nick. Mid-30s, emerald-green eyes - just like the picture on the wall, except for a shock of WHITE in her raven-black hair.

Nick freezes. He must still be dreaming. This can't be real.

NICK

Mom?

HELENA rises awkwardly, almost knocking her chair over. Nick looks to Victor for guidance, but there's no help there. This is uncharted territory for all of them.

Helena faces Nick, trying to keep it together. She brushes a hair off his forehead, picks lint off his shirt...

HELENA

Nicky. Look at you. Look at--

She can't hold back. She pulls him close, hugging him tight. Nick doesn't know how to react, he has so many questions...

They can wait. He closes his eyes and hugs his mom back, tears welling in his eyes. Helena hugs him even tighter.

The embrace ends. Helena kisses him on the forehead and wipes his tears with her sleeve, then wipes away her own. They smile at each other - they have the same smile.

Victor interrupts as nicely as possible - for Nick's sake.

VICTOR

Nick, bud, you should go back to bed. It's a school night. How about we pick this up...

(to Helena)

...tomorrow?

Helena looks at Victor, pleading: *I'm not staying - please don't make me say it.*

NICK (O.S.)
Why did you leave?

The bluntness of Nick's question catches both his parents off-guard. But there's no anger here. He just wants answers.

NICK (CONT'D)
Why did you leave? Where did you go?

Helena sits down at the table, Nick sits next to her.

HELENA
I didn't want to leave you. I never... never wanted to leave either of you.

NICK
Then why did you? Dad said one day just disappeared. No phone number, no address. No way to find you.

Helena looks to Victor, who avoids her gaze.

NICK (CONT'D)
He still tried. For a long time. Until I told him to stop.

Helena looks at her son - the son she left as a baby, now talking like the man he's becoming.

NICK (CONT'D)
Mom. Why did you leave?

HELENA
I... I wanted to give you a choice. I thought I could give you--
(catches herself)
Nick, there's something I have to ask you.

She puts her hand on Nick's and looks deep into his eyes.

HELENA (CONT'D)
Have you felt... strange... lately?
Seen things. Felt stronger.
Healed--

Nick FLINCHES at the last one - Helena catches it.

HELENA (CONT'D)
Oh, Nick. I'm so sorry.

A NOISE outside. Helena looks toward the window.

HELENA (CONT'D)
They followed me.

Helena runs to leave, Nick and Victor follow close behind.

NICK
What? Who? Who followed you?

HELENA
So stupid. Led them right to you.

VICTOR
Helena, what's going on?

HELENA
I have to go, get as far as possible--

Nick's not letting his mom leave. He grabs her shoulder--

NICK
Mom, wait!

--and GREEN ENERGY envelops Helena, washing the house in LIGHT. Nick and Victor shield their eyes. The light FADES...

Where Helena was standing, now stands the GUARDIAN OF THE GATES, MASK in hand. Helena is the Guardian.

NICK
Whoa. Mom?

HELENA
I know you have a lot of questions, Nick. I'll answer them, I promise.

Another NOISE outside, closer. Helena faces the window.

HELENA (CONT'D)
Stand back. Whatever happens, let me handle it. Oh, and Nick...

She puts on the mask - the GUARDIAN'S VOICE speaks.

GUARDIAN
...happy birthday.

And on the sound of BREAKING GLASS, we...

FADE OUT