

andrewfaure@gmail.com

RIFTCASTER

Echoes of the Veil

by

Andrew Faure

PROLOGUE

The archaeology student crouched low, her breath shallow and her skin slick with sweat. In the shade, it was a stifling 35°C. The midday heat pressed against her back like a physical weight, but she hardly felt it. Her focus was entirely on her trembling hands and the delicate dental pick she held. She scraped at the fragile ribs of *Rhydion the Red*, a Celtic king who had been a ghost of history for nearly two thousand years, just waiting for the light to hit his bones again.

The excavation site was carved into a Wiltshire hillside on the edge of Pangwell, a village that felt older than its own name. This was a place that breathed history. You could hear it whispering in the ancient stone circles and the sunken burial mounds, a landscape thick with legends and secrets that should have stayed buried.

Then the wind shifted. The scent of crushed grass and warm earth vanished, replaced by something stale and cold. A ripple ran through the ground. It was slow and deliberate. It wasn't a tremor so much as a heavy, subterranean breath.

The student froze. A sudden, inexplicable dread lurched in her stomach.

The earth exhaled. A low, guttural rumble vibrated beneath her knees and rose from the deep soil. Around the trench, the other students raised their heads. Tools stilled. Someone murmured a question, but the words didn't register. Her eyes were locked on the skeleton.

The bones shifted. The dirt caved inward, and a dark fissure split the ground right beneath the king's ribcage. A shadow, darker than any natural hole in the earth, began to bleed upward. It didn't look like smoke or mist. It looked like a tear in the fabric of the world

itself. King Rhydion's remains collapsed into the hollow below, half-vanishing into darkness as the student stumbled back, choking on a curse.

She tried to scramble back, but her boots skidded on the loose scree. The air grew impossibly thin. The heat of the Wiltshire sun was gone, replaced by a biting, unnatural chill that turned her breath into a pale cloud.

From the darkness of the rift, a sound emerged. It wasn't a human voice, but a sequence of melodic, sharp vowels that felt like ice water in her veins.

"Aethra vailen... nethari."

A light flickered from the sunken trench. It was a reflection, a gleam of something unnatural buried in the hollow beneath the ancient ribs. It looked smooth and glassy. It almost seemed to be breathing.

Her lungs squeezed tight as her mind rebelled against the sight. That object didn't belong in a two-thousand-year-old grave. It shouldn't be there at all.

The ground lurched again. A crack split the soil, releasing a frequency that hummed just beneath the limit of human hearing. The student's mouth opened, but the air in her throat had turned to stone. No words came.

In a sudden, violent motion, the grave swallowed itself. Bones tumbled and dust billowed as the last remnants of history sank into the dark. Silence rushed back into the valley, heavy and expectant.

And beneath it all, something listened.

CHAPTER ONE

A Crack in the World

The roar of Kalan's dirt bike tore through the hush of the ancient forest, his tyres chewing up the narrow woodland path in a growl of defiance. He twisted the throttle harder, urging the machine forward as if he could outrun the gravity of his own life. He wanted out of Pangwell, the quaint, thatch-roofed purgatory he had known for eighteen years.

As he leaned into a sharp curve, sweat trickled down his forehead and dampened the dark brown strands of his hair. It was a tousled mess, caught somewhere between 'casually rugged' and 'forgot to book a haircut for six months'. His eyes, deep-set and strikingly blue, narrowed against the grit kicked up from the trail. His face was leaner than it had been a year ago, sharpened by a summer spent under a sun he hadn't expected to see from the seat of a bike. Not that he cared, or that anyone in this town would have noticed the change.

He wasn't even supposed to be here. By now, he should have been standing in the Colosseum, tracing his fingers over stone worn smooth by centuries of history. He should have been in Pompeii, or wandering the halls of the Louvre beneath the Winged Victory of Samothrace. Instead, he was performing another high-speed tour of the Wiltshire countryside which, unlike the Louvre, feature no winged victories. Just cows and existential dread.

His European backpacking trip had evaporated the moment his father decided that history and travel was a luxury they couldn't afford.

"*A waste of money*," his father had said, flipping through bills at the kitchen table without looking up.

Kalan's fingers brushed the folded newspaper scrap in his jacket pocket. The edges were worn soft from constant rereading:

‘EXCAVATION OF ANCIENT CELTIC BURIAL MOUND UNCOVERS
MYSTERY.’

The mounds lay just ahead, where the archaeologists had been digging for months. Kalan had been watching them from a distance, a ghost on the perimeter of a world he desperately wanted, *needed*, to belong to.

"Archaeology is a waste of a degree," his father had told him, his voice as flat and final as a closing door. "I'm not paying for it. Find something useful. Something that makes money."

Because nothing says ‘practical career choice’ like spending forty years in an office listening to Dave from accounting drone on about his new golf clubs.

Kalan's grandmother had been different. She loved the stories woven into the land. As a child, Kalan had sat by her fireplace, eyes wide, as she spun tales of hidden doorways and kingdoms that slipped through the cracks of reality. Today, he wasn't going to stand on the sidelines anymore.

He veered the bike onto the country lane, his chest tightening as the burial mounds loomed ahead. They had always been there, ancient and still, but today they felt restless. A makeshift fence of red-and-white caution tape crisscrossed the site, staking a modern claim to

buried secrets. The air hummed with activity as archaeologists and students moved with a hurried, nervous purpose. The rhythm of tools striking the earth sounded like a heartbeat.

Kalan swung off his bike and pulled off his helmet, shaking out his damp hair. He scanned the site, mentally mapping the excavation grid. To him, this wasn't just a hole in the ground. It was a doorway to something bigger. He'd spent years imagining places like this. For a moment, the dig felt like a piece of Kalan's childhood fantasies come to life. Ancient pyramids, cities lost in the desert, monuments buried by time.

A gust of wind stirred, lifting the scent of dry dust and old stone. Kalan shivered as the temperature took a sudden, sharp dive. A prickle of unease crawled up his neck. Someone was watching. He scanned the tree line, searching for a face or a movement, but the woods were unnaturally still. No birds took flight. No branches swayed. Yet the sensation of being observed remained, heavy and cold.

He shook it off, forcing a breath. *I'm imagining things.*

His eyes flicked to the largest mound, where a man stood apart from the others. *Dr. Elijah Beckford.* Kalan recognized him from the grainy photos in the paper. In person, Beckford looked less like a pioneer and more like a man carrying an invisible weight. Fine lines etched his dark skin, and the silver at his temples gave him an air of weary authority.

Kalan had always imagined that meeting a real archaeologist would be different. There should have been excitement in his eyes, the glint of discovery and a few tall tales about lost treasures. *A fedora.* Instead, he found a man who looked like he spent more time fighting bureaucracy than unearthing legends.

"You're a relic, Dr. Beckford!" a woman's voice snapped, cutting through the air.
"Enjoy the rest of your miserable career!"

A student stormed away, tangling herself briefly in the caution tape as she fled the site. Beckford watched her go, his jaw tight. When he turned, his gaze landed directly on Kalan.

"And you are?"

Kalan's brain momentarily short-circuited. *Say words. Don't look like an idiot.* "Uh... Kalan. Kalan Mitchell." *Great. Nailed it.* "I read about the dig in the paper...."

Beckford's expression softened into faint amusement. "Local boy, then? Always the curious ones." He glanced toward the trenches. "We're short-handed now, thanks to..." He waved vaguely toward the fleeing student. "You want a closer look? Make yourself useful."

Before Kalan could respond, a junior archaeologist came running over, her face grim. "Professor! We're ready to lift it out."

Beckford turned away, and the junior archaeologist smiled at Kalan and lifted the caution tape for him to enter the site. He didn't need to be asked twice.

As they moved toward the heart of the dig, the scrape of tools stopped. A tense, waiting silence fell over the researchers. The edges of the trench curved inward, as if the grave had tried to swallow itself. At the centre lay a skeleton in total disarray. What should have been a carefully preserved burial was a broken puzzle of scattered bones. Some ribs had shifted and fallen into the hollow beneath, half-buried in the unsettled dirt. The skull remained intact, its empty sockets staring at nothing.

But it wasn't the bones that held everyone's attention.

Nestled beneath the ribcage, half-sunken in the dirt, a shimmer caught the sun. It was a transparent sphere, smooth as water, its surface pulsing with a faint, rhythmic light. Kalan's

mouth went dry. He knew what was supposed to be in a Celtic grave: iron swords, urns, animal skulls, maybe a chariot wheel. But this object was not of this place. It was not of this time.

Dr. Beckford inhaled sharply as he brushed the soil away. Kalan edged closer, his heart hammering. The glass orb seemed to *breathe*. A ripple moved through the air, a strange tug that resonated in Kalan's marrow. His skin tightened with static. He felt a desperate, irrational urge to reach out and touch it.

It knows me.

"This isn't possible," Beckford muttered, his fingers trembling just inches from the glass.

"What is it?" Kalan whispered.

"Just stories. Myths," Beckford snapped, though his eyes never left the object.

A student nearby shifted uneasily. I read online that local legends say the mounds weren't just graves, but... doorways?"

Kalan tried to force a smile. "My grandmother used to say they were gateways to other worlds."

Beckford looked around sharply, rubbing his temples. "This is what social media and *Ancient Aliens* has done to archaeology," he muttered. "I have students repeating TikTok conspiracy theories instead of reading their course materials."

Kalan stayed quiet, deciding it was best not to mention his own late-night YouTube rabbit holes regarding Stonehenge being a landing pad for time-traveling druids.

"Some scholars," Beckford reluctantly grumbled, "believed this site was built on a boundary marker between tribes. A crossing point. But no one can agree on what it was meant to divide."

Kalan felt a pang of recognition. His childhood had been filled with wild tales of forgotten worlds and civilisations, stories that had sparked his obsession with archaeology in the first place.

Carefully, Beckford lifted the sphere from its resting place as sunlight struck its surface, igniting it with an otherworldly brilliance. The object's glow seemed to deepen, shimmering across its surface like light bending through water. For a second, Kalan could have sworn it was *looking* at him. Then something ran across the inside of the ball. A shape. No, a creature. Tiny, blurred, barely visible through the glass, there and gone in a flash.

"Did anyone see that?" Kalan asked, his voice cracking.

"Just reflections," Beckford dismissed.

But then the air changed. A low hum vibrated through the trench, a pressure rising through Kalan's ribs and into his very bones. The orb flickered, its glow intensifying as if it were waking up. As quickly as it had started, the vibration faded. Kalan gasped for air, his skin cold.

"Did no one else feel that?"

The others exchanged amused, oblivious glances. Suddenly, a pulse of golden brilliance exploded from the relic. The world tilted. Kalan's stomach lurched as reality seemed to shatter. His senses were flooded with memories that weren't his: glowing figures, mist-wreathed cities, and skies cracked open with shards of light. A seam appeared in the air,

splitting the world like a wound. Kalan gasped, but no air came, only the suffocating weight of being watched. *A presence.*

His knees buckled, his mind spiralling into the crack between worlds. Pain shot through his skull like fire, and he felt an ancient presence, watching him from the dark.

He was falling. Falling into a place that had no name.

A voice, distant and distorted, slithered through his mind in a language that sang of ice and old stars.

"Tá sé dúisithe."

The alien sounds slithered and sang through his consciousness, then reformed into English in the back of his brain: *"It's awake..."*

The words were lost, swallowed by static roaring in his mind.

A hand gripped his arm, pulling him back from the brink. "Boy! Are you alright?" Beckford's voice, muffled, barely reaching through the fog. The orb flickered again, its glow shrinking like it was drawing a slow, measured breath.

The voice in the dark spoke again, urgent and ancient. *"Is tusa an droichead idir na domhainní."*

"Bridge... you... between..."

The static in his mind roared into a crescendo. The world went black, and Kalan dropped to the ground.

CHAPTER TWO

Give Them Unquiet Dreams

The sun hung low over the Wiltshire hills, casting bruised shadows as Kalan pushed his dirt bike home. His thoughts were a tangled knot of unease. The visions refused to fade. Even now, they lurked at the edges of his mind: a jagged tear splitting a violet sky, figures with eyes like molten gold, and ancient cities drowning in a silver mist. They flickered too vividly to ignore, terrifying precisely because he knew the memories did not belong to him.

His fingers gripped the rubber handlebars tightly. The steady crunch of tyres rolling over dried pine needles was the only sound as the suffocating stillness of the forest pressed in close. After passing out at the excavation, he had woken with a violent start, his lungs burning as if he had been dragged underwater. Someone had been crouching over him, pressing a warm plastic bottle to his lips. And drifting around him, like static, were the murmurs he was never meant to hear.

"Did you see his eyes?"

"I thought he was having a seizure."

Kalan had shoved himself upright, muttering a panicked excuse about heatstroke. He had staggered away quickly, feeling the weight of a dozen stares burning into his back. Because nothing projected quiet confidence quite like face-planting into a two-thousand-year-old trench and then speed-walking away as if it were perfectly normal.

By the time he reached Pangwell's crooked streets, now bathed in the fading hues of early evening, the strange hum had settled into a dull, rhythmic pulse at the base of his skull. Normally, the sight of the village grounded him. It was boring, but it was safe. Tonight, however, the thatched roofs and stone cottages felt like cardboard cutouts. The town felt like the fading echo of a place, rather than reality itself.

A flicker of movement flashed in his periphery. Kalan turned sharply, his heart thudding against his ribs. There was nothing there. Just the pooling shadows beneath an old stone wall. He tightened his grip on the bike and forced his shoulders to drop. *Just tired. Just overthinking.*

He finally reached the edge of his family's property. The crooked house was suffocated in thick ivy, charming in the exact way an estate agent would describe as 'full of character', which usually just meant drafty and expensive to heat. Inside, the heavy scent of roasted chicken curled through the hallway, mingling with the bitter tang of his father's over-steeped tea and the sharp, familiar scratch of newspaper pages turning.

Richard Mitchell sat at the kitchen table. His wiry frame was hunched over the local gazette, his eyes scanning the headlines as if they held the secrets of the universe.

"You're back late." His father didn't bother to look up. He flipped a broadsheet page with the smug, practiced precision of a man who had mastered the art of passive-aggressive parenting.

Kalan hovered in the doorway, a cold thread of tension twisting through his gut. He should say something. He should tell his father about the buried glass orb, about the impossible visions, about the terrifying certainty taking root in his chest that something was fundamentally wrong. But he already knew the script. His father would call it an overactive

imagination. He would sigh and prattle on about how Kalan had unfortunately inherited '*the storytelling gene*', in the same tone someone else might say *chronic gambling addiction*.

So, Kalan swallowed the truth down. "Just riding around."

Richard grunted, a sound that conveyed volumes of disappointment. "Dinner is in the oven if you're hungry. And your sister called. She said Nanna is overdue for a visit."

Kalan hesitated. *Nanna*.

His grandmother had once been the absolute centre of his world, but her memory was being stolen, piece by brutal piece. Alzheimer's had taken her sharp wit, her warmth, and worst of all, her stories. The vibrant woman who had once spun breathless tales of fairies, of Celtic myths, and of hidden worlds right beneath their feet was now a ghost haunting her own body. She was someone who barely recognised him anymore. She no longer knew the boy she had once filled with so much wonder.

A sudden whisper curled at the edge of his hearing. It was soft and coarse, sounding like dry paper scraping against stone. Kalan spun around, his pulse hammering a frantic rhythm as his gaze snapped toward the empty, shadowed hallway.

Nothing.

At the table, Richard flipped another page, entirely oblivious to the sudden drop in temperature.

Kalan forced himself to take a slow, trembling breath. "I'll go see Nanna tomorrow," he murmured, turning his back on the kitchen and heading straight for the stairs.

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Sleep refused to come. Kalan lay flat on his back, staring up at the dark ceiling as summer rain began to drum a relentless tattoo against the slate roof. The steady rhythm should have been soothing, but tonight it only set his teeth on edge. The strange hum of the relic still resonated deep inside him. It was a lingering, metallic pulse beneath his skin. Every time he closed his eyes, that impossible golden light flared bright behind his eyelids, flickering like a camera flash that had burned itself permanently into his retinas.

A sudden rustling outside his first-floor bedroom window jolted him to full alert. He stiffened, every muscle locking into place. The rain was heavy, but this sound did not belong to the storm. It was deliberate.

It was just the wind, he told himself desperately. Obviously the wind.

He turned onto his side, punching his pillow to shift the shape, but the crushing weight in his chest refused to ease. His skin prickled with a cold sweat, his pulse quickening for absolutely no logical reason, until his gaze drifted unwillingly toward the glass.

He froze.

A dark figure stood just beyond the glass. *Tall, angular and unmoving.* A silhouette, carved from the night, perfectly still in the driving rain. Kalan's stomach knotted violently, his breath locking solid in his throat. His body refused to obey him, caught in a paralyzing limbo between lunging for the bedside lamp and remaining impossibly, invisibly still.

Then he blinked, and the figure vanished. There was only the wet glass, the sliding raindrops, and his own pale reflection staring back at him from the dark.

Kalan exhaled a long, shaky breath, pressing a hand to his hammering ribs. Great. Just what he needed. A textbook sleep paralysis demon to round out the perfect evening. His exhausted mind was clearly fracturing.

But as he watched the window, his reflection held his gaze a fraction of a second too long. It was as if the mirror image hadn't quite caught up to his movements. There was a sickening awareness behind those reflected blue eyes, a gaze that felt entirely separate from his own. And then, a hairline flicker of liquid gold shimmered deep within the pupils of the glass boy.

Kalan sucked in a sharp, painful breath. He leaned forward, peeling the duvet back, peering closer at the dark pane. But the gold was gone. It was just a trick of the dim streetlamp filtering through the rain.

Then, a whisper curled at the very edge of his hearing. It did not come from the wet garden, nor from the shadowed corners of his bedroom. It originated from somewhere deep inside his own head.

"Kalan."

The voice slid through his skull like cold silk. Kalan jerked backward, his chest heaving, his breath tearing loudly through the silence of the room. He scrambled back against the headboard, his eyes frantically scanning the shadows.

The bedroom was entirely empty. The heavy wooden door remained securely closed.

But his skin crawled with absolute certainty. Something had been here, and worse, something had stayed.

~ ~ ~ ~

When sleep finally claimed him, it offered no escape. Kalan dreamed of a city in ruin. Great towers bowed beneath the crushing weight of time, their once-grand facades crumbling into pale dust. Iridescent vines snaked across the wreckage, glowing faintly in a permanent twilight, pulsing with a rhythm that felt sickeningly alive. The air was thick with a cloying sweetness, but beneath it lurked the sharp, sour tang of rot. He swallowed against the nausea rising in his throat, but the taste lingered, coating his tongue like ash. The ground quivered, rippling as if the earth were breathing beneath his feet, but still he pressed forward, drawn blindly toward the light ahead.

The glass orb.

It hovered in the dead air, its golden glow pulsing in a way that was simultaneously inviting and deeply menacing. Shadowed figures loomed in the distance. They were distorted silhouettes, carved from the mist, with eyes burning like twin suns. One stepped forward. Its form rippled like a mirage on disturbed water, suggesting a creature that did not quite belong to the physical laws of this world. Its sheer presence pressed down on him, heavy and stifling.

Kalan tried to step back, to run, but his limbs refused to obey. The figure loomed closer. When it spoke, the voice slithered directly into his mind, cold and slick, winding through his thoughts like toxic smoke.

"You... bridge," the entity grated, each word deliberate and impossibly heavy. *"Must. Open. Rift."*

The English came haltingly, as if dragged from some deep, buried memory. Then came words he didn't recognise, the same sharp, melodic vowels from the excavation.

"Súileanna-Sí. Is tusa an droichead idir na domhainní."

A jagged crack split the sky above them. More figures stood at the very edge of the world, their hands outstretched. The heavens fractured like shattered glass, and through the brutal breaks, blinding golden light pulsed outward. The orb shimmered in response, its glow expanding and contracting in a slow, rhythmic, living breath. The closest presence reached for him, and a hand made of absolute cold pressed hard against his bare chest.

The vision collapsed.

Kalan woke with a violent, gasping jolt, his heart slamming against his ribs like a trapped bird. His chest ached, the phantom pressure of the hand lingering just a second too long in the waking world. Sweat slicked his skin as he pressed a shaking palm to his sternum. The strange hum was still there, a faint, metallic vibration vibrating beneath his ribs.

And his wrist burned.

Kalan lifted his arm into the dim light. A *mark* had appeared on the inside of his wrist. It was a thin line, like a fresh scar etched entirely in light. He stared at it, transfixed by the impossible geometry. It was a sigil of interlocking curves that resembled some ancient, forgotten script. The mark pulsed with a cold, inner brilliance that seemed to shift and crawl just beneath the surface of his skin. He traced a trembling finger along its edge, feeling nothing but his own smooth flesh, yet the glowing design remained, blatantly defying reality.

Then, as he watched, the light dimmed. The pattern faded, receding into his veins like water absorbed by dry sand, until absolutely nothing remained but unblemished skin. Kalan rubbed frantically at the spot, his pulse racing.

With shaking hands, he grabbed his phone from the nightstand. His fingers felt stiff and clumsy as he typed into the search bar: *Can heatstroke cause hallucinations?*

A dozen medical articles loaded instantly. Disorientation. Dizziness. Sensory disturbances. Nausea. His eyes skimmed the dense text, the clinical words blurring together until he finally clicked the screen off, plunging the room back into shadows.

"Right," Kalan whispered to the empty room. "Sure. Hallucinations. Heatstroke. Oxygen deprivation. Or, and hear me out, haunted."

Outside, the creeping grey light of dawn filtered through the rain-streaked window, casting pale, stretched shadows across the walls. For the first time in his life, Pangwell's quiet charm felt like a sinister mask. Kalan sat on the edge of his mattress, staring at his reflection in the cracked wardrobe mirror. His blue eyes were shadowed and hollow, his hair a wild mess. He ran a hand through it, pulling hard at the roots, but the coil of tension in his gut refused to loosen.

A shadow flickered at the very edge of his peripheral vision, like dark ink bleeding into clear water. It moved too fast and felt far too deliberate, vanishing completely before he could be certain it had ever been there.

A sudden, dull thud pulled him sharply from his spiralling thoughts.

Kalan turned, frowning. A yellow pencil had rolled off his desk, clattering onto the wooden floorboards. His frown deepened. It was weird, but not strictly *paranormal weird*. It

was probably just gravity, even though he hadn't gone near the desk and the windows were tightly shut against the morning draft.

He exhaled slowly through his nose and leaned down. As the very tip of his finger brushed the lacquered wood, *the pencil moved*.

It twitched. It was a sharp, precise jerk, exactly as though an invisible finger had nudged it back.

Oh. Okay. Paranormal weird, then.

The voice from his nightmare bled directly into the waking room.

"You are not alone."

Kalan ripped his hand back from the pencil as if the wood had caught fire. His heart slammed a frantic beat against his ribs, his breath coming in shallow, panicked gasps. He forced a desperate, breathless laugh, shaking his head at the empty air.

You're overtired, Mitchell. That's all. He grabbed the pencil in one quick, blind motion and shoved it roughly onto the desk, purposely looking away so he wouldn't see it tremble for a second longer.

"Kalan! Breakfast!"

His father's voice cut through the heavy silence of the house, sharp, mundane, and brutally insistent. The terrifying trance shattered instantly. Kalan ran a shaky hand through his hair, the gesture doing absolutely nothing to tame it. He threw one last, deeply suspicious glance at his reflection in the mirror, just to make absolutely certain the glass boy didn't blink first.

Satisfied, he grabbed his hoodie and bolted for the stairs.

CHAPTER THREE

Flicker in the Glass, Whisper in the Dark

The rain had finally stopped, but the morning mist clung stubbornly to the fields and thatched roofs of Pangwell, swallowing the village in a quiet, shifting veil. By the time Kalan reached the archaeological dig site, the fog had thinned just enough to curl around the edges of the excavation in damp, grey ribbons. Red-and-white caution tape snapped and twisted in the biting breeze. The low murmur of voices filled the air, sounding subdued and careful in the heavy dampness.

Kalan hesitated at the edge of the churned earth. He knew he should not have come back. After yesterday's humiliating blackout, the phantom whispers, and the suffocating dream, he should have stayed safely in bed. He should have buried himself under his duvet and let the world move on without him. That would have been the smart, rational choice. And yet, here he was, proving he possessed the self-preservation instincts of a horror film extra. Despite everything, something far deeper than mere curiosity pulled at him. It was a physical itch beneath his skin, dragging him back to the dirt.

He stepped carefully over the ruined ground, his trainers sinking slightly into the wet mud. The rich, metallic smell of damp soil filled his lungs as he scanned the site, searching the tents for the hunched silhouette of Dr. Beckford.

"Kalan!"

He turned to find his friend Chris jogging toward him. Chris was broad-shouldered, with dark curls perfectly tousled, looking exactly as though he had just wandered off a moody coastal photoshoot. The cheeky, familiar grin spreading across his face told Kalan that Chris was actively hunting for mischief.

"I didn't expect to see you out here," Kalan said as his friend stopped beside him. "I thought your manager had you chained to the café espresso machine today."

"I heard someone dug up a skeleton, so I figured I would come see what all the fuss is about," Chris replied, glancing toward the deep trenches. "Apparently the bloke in charge here is a bit of a headcase. I thought I might get some free entertainment."

Kalan managed a tight smirk. "You missed quite the show yesterday."

"Oh? Do tell." Chris raised an expectant eyebrow.

"They found this weird glass ball. It apparently shouldn't exist."

Chris rubbed his chin, looking thoroughly unimpressed. "So, let me get this straight. They dug up a rotting corpse, everyone held their breath in absolute suspense, and then, drum roll, they found a mystical marble? Wow. Truly, local history is riveting."

Kalan's stomach tightened uncomfortably. "It is not a marble."

Chris cocked his head, clearly picking up on Kalan's sudden unease. He shoved his hands deep into his jacket pockets. "Alright, Kal. Lead the way. Let's go find Indiana Jones, then."

"Oof," Kalan grimaced. "If you are hoping for Indiana Jones, you need to lower your expectations. Dramatically."

~ ~ ~ ~

They found Dr. Beckford inside one of the larger canvas staging tents. The archaeologist was hunched over a long folding table completely cluttered with loose papers, delicate brushes, and encrusted artefacts. Right at the centre, resting on a square of dark velvet padding, was the glass sphere.

To Kalan, its glow was subtle but entirely unmistakable. It emitted a faint, golden rhythm that ebbed and swelled, tugging at the surrounding air and bending the space around it in a way that felt sickeningly unnatural. Kalan's chest tightened the moment he laid eyes on it.

"Mitchell," Beckford said flatly, not bothering to look up from his notes. "If you are just here to gawk, you can join the tourists at the perimeter fence. The other volunteers are actually digging."

Kalan flushed hot under his collar. "I was just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat," Beckford muttered. His fingers delicately traced the air just above the orb's smooth surface. "But in this particular line of work, curiosity is everything. Do you have any idea what this is?"

Kalan shook his head slowly. "No."

Beckford straightened up, his weary gaze suddenly sharpening. "Neither do I. And that is exactly the problem."

Chris stepped closer to the table, his arms crossed defensively over his chest. "It looks like an ancient paperweight."

Beckford turned to him, his expression deeply severe. "If it were just a paperweight, young man, it would not be glowing. And it certainly would not have been buried deep within the ribcage of an Iron Age king."

Chris looked genuinely puzzled. "It glows?"

Beckford's eyes flicked back to Kalan. His voice dropped, softening into something conspiratorial. "It doesn't glow for everyone," he said cryptically. "But some people seem to feel it."

A sharp chill skittered down Kalan's spine. "What do you mean, feel it?" he asked softly.

Beckford's hands hovered protectively over the relic, his forehead lined with deep, exhausted wrinkles. "This object does not belong here. Not in this grave. Not in this time. Perhaps not even in this world."

Chris's mocking smile faltered briefly. He glanced nervously between Kalan and the older man, his foot shifting in a subtle step backward.

"Then where does it belong?" Kalan pressed.

Beckford's piercing eyes locked entirely onto his. "That is exactly what we need to find out."

Chris stepped forward again, squinting hard at the glass. "So, what? You are saying this thing is..." He scoffed loudly. "Magic?"

Kalan's stomach twisted into a painful knot. The word felt completely wrong. It was too small, too childish for the heavy dread radiating from the table.

"What if I just..." Chris mumbled. He reached recklessly for the sphere, his bare fingers skimming the smooth surface.

The exact second he touched it, his expression shifted.

"Nothing," Chris announced loudly.

But Kalan had seen it. It was just a flicker, a split second where Chris's dark pupils dilated massively, his breath caught in his throat, and his fingers twitched with a sudden, violent spasm. Then, the mask slipped back into place. He was fine.

"Are you sure you didn't feel anything?" Kalan asked, studying his friend's pale face intently.

Chris frowned, aggressively rubbing his fingertips together as if trying to brush away an invisible, greasy residue. "It was just cold. Really cold for a second." He shrugged the sensation off with a painfully forced casualness.

Beckford's calculating gaze snapped straight to Kalan.

"Try it," the archaeologist ordered quietly.

Kalan hesitated. Every single instinct screaming in his brain told him to back away. Unfortunately, backing away had never been his strong suit. Heart racing against his ribs, he reached out. His trembling fingers gently brushed the curved surface of the orb.

Gemini said

This is a fantastic continuation. The introduction of Chris adds a necessary, grounding layer of reality. Having a friend who is completely oblivious to the magic makes Kalan's internal experience feel so much more isolating and terrifying. The moment with the elongated shadow standing right behind Chris is incredibly creepy—a perfect YA thriller beat.

For this rewrite, I focused on deepening that sense of isolation. When Chris touches the orb and lies about feeling it, and when Kalan sees the shadow, the prose needs to slow down to emphasize the horror of Kalan being the only one who truly understands the danger in the room.

I have maintained the exact pacing, preserved every character beat, applied strict British English formatting (*trainers, duvet, headcase, mate*), and used absolutely zero em-dashes.

CHAPTER THREE: Flicker in the Glass, Whisper in the Dark

The rain had finally stopped, but the morning mist clung stubbornly to the fields and thatched roofs of Pangwell, swallowing the village in a quiet, shifting veil. By the time Kalan reached the archaeological dig site, the fog had thinned just enough to curl around the edges of the excavation in damp, grey ribbons. Red-and-white caution tape snapped and twisted in the biting breeze. The low murmur of voices filled the air, sounding subdued and careful in the heavy dampness.

Kalan hesitated at the edge of the churned earth. He knew he should not have come back. After yesterday's humiliating blackout, the phantom whispers, and the suffocating dream, he should have stayed safely in bed. He should have buried himself under his duvet and let the world move on without him. That would have been the smart, rational choice. And yet, here he was, proving he possessed the self-preservation instincts of a horror film extra. Despite everything, something far deeper than mere curiosity pulled at him. It was a physical itch beneath his skin, dragging him back to the dirt.

He stepped carefully over the ruined ground, his trainers sinking slightly into the wet mud. The rich, metallic smell of damp soil filled his lungs as he scanned the site, searching the tents for the hunched silhouette of Dr. Beckford.

"Kalan!"

He turned to find his friend Chris jogging toward him. Chris was broad-shouldered, with dark curls perfectly tousled, looking exactly as though he had just wandered off a moody coastal photoshoot. The cheeky, familiar grin spreading across his face told Kalan that Chris was actively hunting for mischief.

"I didn't expect to see you out here," Kalan said as his friend stopped beside him. "I thought your manager had you chained to the café espresso machine today."

"I heard someone dug up a skeleton, so I figured I would come see what all the fuss is about," Chris replied, glancing toward the deep trenches. "Apparently the bloke in charge here is a bit of a headcase. I thought I might get some free entertainment."

Kalan managed a tight smirk. "You missed quite the show yesterday."

"Oh? Do tell." Chris raised an expectant eyebrow.

"They found this weird glass ball. It apparently shouldn't exist."

Chris rubbed his chin, looking thoroughly unimpressed. "So, let me get this straight. They dug up a rotting corpse, everyone held their breath in absolute suspense, and then, drum roll, they found a mystical marble? Wow. Truly, local history is riveting."

Kalan's stomach tightened uncomfortably. "It is not a marble."

Chris cocked his head, clearly picking up on Kalan's sudden unease. He shoved his hands deep into his jacket pockets. "Alright, Kal. Lead the way. Let's go find Indiana Jones, then."

"Oof," Kalan grimaced. "If you are hoping for Indiana Jones, you need to lower your expectations. Dramatically."

They found Dr. Beckford inside one of the larger canvas staging tents. The archaeologist was hunched over a long folding table completely cluttered with loose papers, delicate brushes, and encrusted artefacts. Right at the centre, resting on a square of dark velvet padding, was the glass sphere.

To Kalan, its glow was subtle but entirely unmistakable. It emitted a faint, golden rhythm that ebbed and swelled, tugging at the surrounding air and bending the space around it in a way that felt sickeningly unnatural. Kalan's chest tightened the moment he laid eyes on it.

"Mitchell," Beckford said flatly, not bothering to look up from his notes. "If you are just here to gawk, you can join the tourists at the perimeter fence. The other volunteers are actually digging."

Kalan flushed hot under his collar. "I was just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat," Beckford muttered. His fingers delicately traced the air just above the orb's smooth surface. "But in this particular line of work, curiosity is everything. Do you have any idea what this is?"

Kalan shook his head slowly. "No."

Beckford straightened up, his weary gaze suddenly sharpening. "Neither do I. And that is exactly the problem."

Chris stepped closer to the table, his arms crossed defensively over his chest. "It looks like an ancient paperweight."

Beckford turned to him, his expression deeply severe. "If it were just a paperweight, young man, it would not be glowing. And it certainly would not have been buried deep within the ribcage of an Iron Age king."

Chris looked genuinely puzzled. "It glows?"

Beckford's eyes flicked back to Kalan. His voice dropped, softening into something conspiratorial. "It does not glow for everyone," he said cryptically. "But some people seem to feel it."

A sharp chill skittered down Kalan's spine. "What do you mean, feel it?" he asked softly.

Beckford's hands hovered protectively over the relic, his forehead lined with deep, exhausted wrinkles. "This object does not belong here. Not in this grave. Not in this time. Perhaps not even in this world."

Chris's mocking smile faltered briefly. He glanced nervously between Kalan and the older man, his foot shifting in a subtle step backward.

"Then where does it belong?" Kalan pressed.

Beckford's piercing eyes locked entirely onto his. "That is exactly what we need to find out."

Chris stepped forward again, squinting hard at the glass. "So, what? You are saying this thing is..." He scoffed loudly. "Magic?"

Kalan's stomach twisted into a painful knot. The word felt completely wrong. It was too small, too childish for the heavy dread radiating from the table.

"What if I just..." Chris mumbled. He reached recklessly for the sphere, his bare fingers skimming the smooth surface.

The exact second he touched it, his expression shifted.

"Nothing," Chris announced loudly.

But Kalan had seen it. It was just a flicker, a split second where Chris's dark pupils dilated massively, his breath caught in his throat, and his fingers twitched with a sudden, violent spasm. Then, the mask slipped back into place. He was fine.

"Are you sure you didn't feel anything?" Kalan asked, studying his friend's pale face intently.

Chris frowned, aggressively rubbing his fingertips together as if trying to brush away an invisible, greasy residue. "It was just cold. Really cold for a second." He shrugged the sensation off with a painfully forced casualness.

Beckford's calculating gaze snapped straight to Kalan.

"Try it," the archaeologist ordered quietly.

Kalan hesitated. Every single instinct screaming in his brain told him to back away. Unfortunately, backing away had never been his strong suit. Heart racing against his ribs, he reached out. His trembling fingers gently brushed the curved surface of the orb.

It rippled beneath his touch. It was a slow, terrifyingly patient recognition. The object was *awake*, and it was stirring beneath its glassy shell just for him.

Then, a phantom whisper of thought flickered directly through Kalan's mind. It was a cold breath against the very fabric of his consciousness.

"You... are bridge."

Kalan flinched hard, his breathing instantly turning ragged and unsteady. The canvas tent suddenly felt miles smaller, the air growing impossibly thick and heavy.

Beckford narrowed his eyes, watching Kalan with intense, academic fascination. But before Kalan's self-consciousness even had time to take hold, the solid ground beneath his feet shuddered. The world bent. He stumbled forward, a crushing weight pressing into his skull and shifting violently behind his eyes.

The tent stretched around him in impossible, sickening proportions. The canvas walls curved inward, the fabric rippling and bleeding like liquid gold. The damp air crackled with the exact same invisible, static charge he had felt when the relic was first unearthed.

Outside, the morning wind began to howl without warning, violently flapping the tent walls and snapping the heavy ropes. The portable work lights flickered and died. A voice stirred, buried deep beneath the roaring hum of the wind.

"You were always meant to find it."

An ancient, suffocating presence crawled through Kalan's mind, dark and thoroughly invasive. He turned sharply, fully expecting to see someone standing right behind him, but the tent remained still. It was empty, save for the three of them.

Chris frowned, looking around in confusion. "What?"

"Nothing," Kalan lied.

Except it was not nothing. The orb pulsed once more on the velvet pad. In that brief flash of golden light, Kalan saw a shadow standing directly behind Chris. It was tall. Far too tall. Its featureless form bent at impossible, jagged angles, its limbs elongated like stretched taffy.

Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the figure was gone. A freezing sweat broke out along the entire length of Kalan's spine. His hands trembled uncontrollably at his sides. He forced his leaden feet to take a slow step backward.

Had absolutely no one else seen that?

Chris raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Are you alright, mate? Your face is doing something weird."

Kalan forced a weak, unconvincing smirk, even as his own heartbeat thudded a deafening rhythm in his ears. "Just a little dizzy."

He dragged a shaking hand through his hair, swallowing hard against the rising nausea.

I definitely need more sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

She'll Hear No More the Lowing

The care home crouched at the edge of the village like a waiting gargoyle. It was a grey, rectangular building with narrow windows, and as Kalan approached, he could not help thinking it had been designed by an architect fundamentally opposed to happiness.

He clutched a cheap bouquet of daisies, Nanna's favourite, his fingers wrapped white-knuckled around the damp stems. Inside, the sterile, fluorescent-lit corridor somehow felt colder than the biting wind outside. A faint hum pressed against his eardrums. It was low and rhythmic. That relic had done something to him. Either that, or he was experiencing a spectacular psychological break, which was a deeply inconvenient side effect of being too curious.

Chris had messaged twice already to ask if he was alright after his hasty exit from the dig site. Kalan had not answered. What was he supposed to type? *Hey, no worries, I am just hallucinating three-metre shadow demons and losing my grip on reality.* He simply did not have the time to fix his broken brain today.

The building was oppressively quiet. The silence was broken only by the distant, tinny murmur of a daytime television programme and the occasional rubbery squeak of a

nurse's shoes on the linoleum. The sharp scent of antiseptic lingered in the air, mingling sickeningly with the faint aroma of overcooked cabbage from the kitchens.

Kalan's chest tightened as he passed the neatly numbered doors. Each one contained a little world of its own, housing lifetimes of memories and stories that were now fading right alongside their occupants.

When he finally reached his grandmother's room, his hand hovered over the metal handle. This was always the hardest part. Seeing the empty shell of her felt like a physical blow. He could just leave. He could walk away, pretend it was not happening, and she would absolutely never know.

But that would officially make him the worst grandson in history, and he was not quite ready to add that particular title to his growing list of failings.

He knocked gingerly and pushed the door open.

~ ~ ~ ~

The room was sparse but meticulously tidy. Its only decorations were a wilting potted plant on the windowsill and a faded photograph of his mother as a young child. Nanna sat in her chair by the window, her frail frame outlined against the pale afternoon light. Her silver hair was pulled back into a loose braid. Her hands rested gently in her lap, folded and remarkably graceful.

She stared out at the damp garden below, her pale gaze distant, looking as if she were seeing something millions of miles beyond the manicured hedges and empty flowerbeds.

"Hi, Nanna," Kalan said softly. He placed the fresh daisies into an empty glass vase beside her bed. The bright yellow and white blooms looked garish against the drab, beige room. They felt as out of place as an overly enthusiastic birthday balloon at a funeral.

She did not react. Her eyes remained fixed on the middle distance. Kalan was used to this routine. He knew how to wait.

He pulled a vinyl guest chair close to her knees and sat down, leaning forward. "I went to the burial mounds yesterday," he murmured. "They are digging them up. They found something strange. It was a glass sphere, buried right inside the ribs of a Celtic king. It was glowing."

For a long moment, there was absolutely nothing. Then, a microscopic flicker of life crossed her features. Her breath stuttered in her throat, catching on a sudden, sharp inhale.

Kalan leaned closer. "Did you hear about it on the news?"

Nanna's dry lips parted. Her gaze finally shifted, but not to him. She looked straight past his shoulder. She raised a frail, trembling hand, pointing a single finger toward the window in a slow, deliberate motion. Kalan turned around to follow her gesture, his eyes frantically scanning the garden below. The green hedges swayed in the normal afternoon wind. Nothing was out of the ordinary. There were only damp flowerbeds, wet grass, and a concrete birdbath collecting the recent rain.

"What is it, Nanna? What do you see out there?"

Her outstretched hand trembled violently. The words took their time, slipping free from her mouth like a rusty, half-remembered secret.

"They are watching."

A cold sweat broke out across Kalan's skin. "Who, Nanna? Who is watching?"

Her mouth worked silently for a second, trembling as if the syllables physically hurt her throat.

"Sheevra," she whispered.

This time, her voice was startlingly clear. It cut right through the dementia-clouded haze of the room like the sharp gleam of a knife. Her thin fingers suddenly lunged forward and clenched tightly around his wrist. Kalan jolted backward in shock. Her grip was like a steel vice, far stronger than her frail body should have allowed.

"The Watchers," she continued, her words turning brittle with ancient memory. "They see beyond. Always beyond. And they never forgive."

The metallic hum pressed against Kalan's skull once again. It felt exactly like a living creature waiting patiently just beyond the edge of his thoughts. He forced a weak, terrified smile, but her grip did not loosen. Her fingernails dug painfully into his skin, and her clouded eyes suddenly sharpened with absolute, terrifying clarity.

"They know what you are."

His heartbeat faltered, skipping a panicked rhythm. "Those are just your stories, Nanna." He was no longer sure if he was trying to convince her, or himself.

Almost instantly, her crushing grip failed. The supernatural spark in her expression faded away, replaced once more by the blank, vacant stare of the illness. But her fingers twitched weakly against his palm, as if her trapped mind desperately wanted to say more. Kalan threw a nervous glance back at the window. The trees in the garden now stood unnaturally still, frozen completely, as if the entire world were caught in a suspended moment between breaths.

Seeing Nanna's frailty return ate away at him. He had read medical articles about dementia patients weaving random fragments of reality into paranoid nonsense.

"Sheevra," Kalan muttered under his breath, testing the strange word on his tongue. It felt heavy and wrong. "You used to love telling us those stories when we were young. Do you remember?"

Her dry lips parted, but only a quiet puff of air came out.

"You used to say terrible things lived in the deep woods," he murmured, gently rubbing her knuckles. "Things a person could not see unless the creatures wanted to be seen."

Nanna's hand went dead still in his grip. Her voice dropped into a gravelly, chilling register. "Not just the woods."

Kalan frowned, leaning closer. "What do you mean?"

Her fingers twitched a final time. "The in-between."

A phantom spider of ice crawled slowly up Kalan's spine. "Nanna, what does that mean?"

Her breath grew incredibly weak, rattling in her chest. "They know what you are."

Kalan opened his mouth to demand answers, but her clouded eyes had already drifted shut. She looked impossibly small again. She was fragile and completely lost in whatever labyrinth her broken mind had retreated into.

Gemini said

This is a deeply emotional and pivotal chapter. You have captured the tragic, mundane reality of visiting a relative with dementia and perfectly weaponized it. Having Nanna be the one to deliver the first real lore drop—because no one will believe a woman losing her mind—is a classic, brilliant Gothic trope.

To elevate this rewrite, I focused on the contrast between the clinical, sterile environment of the care home and the ancient, creeping dread of the Sheevra. I also slowed down the final moment with the vase to emphasize that Kalan's emotions are now physically impacting the world around him.

As always: **Strictly British English, completely faithful to your original text, and absolutely zero em-dashes.**

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"They are waiting," she hummed, rocking her shoulders slightly. "Always waiting."

She breathed out a thin, weary sigh. Then, in a voice so soft Kalan had to hold his own breath to hear it, she began to sing.

"Through glass they came, through glass they go.

The whispering ones, the ones below.

A touch, a crack, a rift drawn wide.

And worlds shall tremble, side by side."

The horrifying words hung suspended in the sterile air between them, brittle as ancient dust.

"Nanna?" he whispered, his voice cracking.

But the moment was gone. She only stared blankly out the window at the empty birdbath. Kalan forced a painful smile and gave her frail hand one last, gentle squeeze.

"Get some rest, Nanna. You have had a long day."

He stood up, but the sickening unease sat thick and heavy in the bottom of his chest. Stepping backward, he cast a lingering, paranoid glance around the small corners of the room. With a final, sorrowful look at his grandmother, he turned his back on her and headed for the heavy wooden door.

He had barely taken a single step when her voice rose up behind him. It was thin and feeble, but utterly lucid.

"I saw them once. Long ago. I saw them in the in-between."

Kalan froze dead in his tracks. A violent cocktail of emotions twisted violently in his gut. It was grief, longing, fear, and an unbearable sense of loss. He missed his grandmother. He missed the real her, the brilliant woman she was before her mind had started slipping away into the dark. He hated that she had become a hollow stranger living inside her own skin.

His throat tightened with unshed tears, and his hands clenched instinctively into tight fists at his sides.

Crack. It was a sharp, violently unnatural sound. It sounded exactly like thick winter ice splitting over deep water.

Kalan's head jerked around. The cheap glass vase on Nanna's nightstand now bore a jagged, silver fracture running straight down its side. It was a vase he had looked at a hundred times before without incident. As he watched in muted horror, the hairline crack widened just a fraction of a millimetre more. Then, the room stilled completely.

Kalan swallowed the lump of terror lodged in his throat and forced his rigid fingers to loosen their death grip on the door handle. He pushed the door open and fled into the corridor, while Professor Beckford's warning echoed relentlessly through the corridors of his mind.

"This does not belong here. Perhaps not even in this world."

CHAPTER FIVE

Where the Wild Folk Whisper

Sunlight filtered through the dense forest canopy, scattering bruised, golden streaks across the mossy ground and the rippling black water.

St. Elwyn's Holy Well was a deep, stone-lined pool hidden right in the middle of the woods. It had always been a safe haven for Kalan and his two best friends, Chris and Noah. As children, they had spent countless hours here fighting imaginary monsters and digging for buried treasure that definitely did not exist. Once, they had even attempted to build a raft out of rotting branches, a disastrous naval experiment that promptly sank, taking Noah's dignity and one of Kalan's shoes with it. These days, the well served a very different purpose. There were far fewer knights and dragons, and a lot more avoiding adult responsibilities and pretending they actually had their lives together.

Kalan lay shirtless on the damp grassy bank. He dangled his legs over the well's ancient stone rim, staring down into the dark water as if it held all the answers to the universe. It did not.

The metallic hum was much louder today. It pressed like a physical weight against the very edges of his thoughts. Even as Chris and Noah joked nearby, Kalan's fingers nervously traced the weathered stone of the rim. Nanna's terrified voice still echoed relentlessly in his head.

They know what you are.

The forest felt entirely too quiet. The fine hairs on the back of Kalan's neck prickled with cold unease, reacting to the total, suffocating absence of wind or birdsong.

A faint, rhythmic creak of rope broke the heavy stillness. Chris was swinging lazily back and forth on the old tyre swing. Its frayed strands groaned in loud protest, yet it held firm, just as it had for years.

Noah sat cross-legged on the ground a few feet away, absently tossing loose pebbles into the well. His blond hair fell in soft, messy waves over his forehead, perfectly framing bright blue eyes that always seemed to sparkle with quiet mischief. His slender frame and boyish charm gave him an effortlessly magnetic presence, and he moved with a slow deliberateness that hinted at hidden depths.

Noah squinted up at Kalan. "You are doing that thing again."

"What thing?"

"The 'I am thinking too hard but pretending I am not' thing." Noah flicked another pebble into the well, watching it disappear beneath the glassy surface with a soft plink. "So? What is up?"

Kalan's mind drifted uncomfortably between the warm, comforting familiarity of the afternoon and the intense, terrifying pull of the unknown. His thoughts dragged forcefully back to the muddy excavation. To Dr. Beckford's grim words. To the chilling question of exactly why he could feel the buried object when no one else could.

Kalan hesitated. "I might go back to the dig site."

Chris stopped mid-swing, his trainers dragging heavily in the dirt. "Why?" He shot Kalan a sceptical look. "That professor gives me the absolute creeps. He is one bad day away from whispering '*my precious*' at that glass thing."

Kalan shrugged, keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the well's reflective surface. "He is just intense, I guess."

Frustration simmered hot in his chest. As the emotion spiked, the water below rippled completely on its own, sending small, unnatural concentric circles spreading outward from where his reflection wavered.

"Nah, you were into it," Chris teased, oblivious to the moving water. "Way too into it."

Kalan let out a forced half-smile, desperately trying to hide the invisible weight pressing down on his ribs. "Did you not mention the shop was thinking of running guided forest tours? Pangwell's very own guide to the mystical woods?"

Amusement danced brightly in Noah's eyes. "Led by Chris and his in-depth, scholarly knowledge of exactly two types of trees?"

Chris immediately puffed out his chest. He released the rope swing to strike a heroic, statuesque pose. "Led by a man with glistening hair and a body sculpted by the ancient gods."

"A man who once got completely lost in his own street," Noah countered without missing a beat. "And then called me for directions while standing directly outside his own front door."

Chris ignored him, throwing his arms wide, affecting the mock-tone of a tour guide. "Welcome to Pangwell. The Fairy Village! Home of weird ribbons and terrible life

decisions." He gestured grandly toward the colourful strips of fabric fluttering from the thick branches above them. "See those? The locals say they are tied as offerings. Prayers to the fairies for protection or good fortune."

Kalan's thoughts drifted instantly to his grandmother's stories. She had always insisted the ribbons were never just folklore or quaint tourist offerings. They were something else entirely. Whenever he had asked how she knew, she had only ever given him a slow, conspiratorial wink.

Chris continued his grand pitch, leaning even further into 'tour-guide voice'. "Personally, I think it is just a convenient excuse to litter aesthetically. But the local legend says these specific trees are purely magic. The old folks swore that oak, ash, and thorn trees marked the hidden doorways between worlds. Boom. Thank you very much. You can tip your handsome guide on the way out."

Doorways. The word slammed into Kalan's chest.

Kalan snorted, masking his panic. "And the tooth fairy pays rent down at the Pangwell Inn."

"I will pay for the tour just to hear you recite that terrible script again," Noah snickered.

For a fleeting moment, Chris and Noah's light-hearted banter washed over Kalan's rising unease. Lazy summer afternoons like this felt completely timeless. But just beneath the laughter, the supernatural hum pressed even harder against Kalan's skull. He got the distinct, terrifying feeling that he was standing right at the precipice of something infinitely bigger than himself.

"I might go back," Kalan repeated, much quieter this time.

Chris opened his mouth to deliver a sarcastic reply, but a sudden, violent rustle in the dense underbrush silenced him completely. All three boys froze, their gazes snapping as one to the dark edge of the clearing.

The sound grew louder. It was coming closer, and moving entirely too fast.

The thick underbrush trembled wildly. Heavy branches snapped in rapid, brutal succession. Then, without warning, a massive deer exploded into the clearing. Its hooves skidded frantically across the damp earth, tearing up chunks of moss. Its brown flanks heaved with exhaustion, the muscles tensed tight beneath a coat completely slick with sweat. Wide, rolling, frantic eyes locked onto the boys for a split second.

Then it was gone, vanishing back into the deep trees just as violently as it had come. The very air seemed to twist and warp in its wake.

"That was weird," Noah murmured, his voice tight.

"Poor thing probably saw its own reflection in a puddle and absolutely freaked out," Chris grinned, though his smile was a little strained. "Highly relatable. I had the exact same reaction when I accidentally opened my front camera this morning."

Kalan's gaze remained glued to the dark gap in the foliage where the deer had emerged. Something was fundamentally wrong. It was not just the animal's blind fear. The entire weight of the forest had shifted, as if something massive and unseen had just moved through the trees right behind it.

He glanced nervously at his friends, then back to the swaying branches. Was this all just happening in his fractured mind?

Chris's phone beeped loudly, shattering the fragile, breathless quiet. "I have got to go meet the suppliers with my boss."

Kalan barely registered the words. His racing thoughts looped endlessly around the image of the panicked deer and its wild, terrified eyes. The air around the well still felt heavily charged, exactly like the heavy moment right before a lightning strike.

Then, hovering just at the absolute edge of Kalan's hearing, a sound rose from the deepest, darkest part of the forest. It was a voice, low and melodic. It was not quite speaking words. It was more of a rhythm, carrying a terrifyingly familiar feel, like a sinister song half-remembered from a childhood dream. It threaded smoothly through the ancient trees like invisible fingers searching blindly for something.

Searching for *him*.

Kalan physically shook himself, forcing the invasive thought away. He grabbed his shirt and quickly followed his friends out of the clearing, desperate for the safety of the village.

But the cloying unease clung to him like a second skin. And in the dark woods behind him, the trees did not settle.