

The meteorite—if that is what it truly was—came three days after leaving Toör. It burned bright in the sky, a corona of cool blue cloaking a heart fierce as ember. It was beautiful. Then it winked out, leaving us motionless, the night sky re-emerging in dim jealousy.

I had looked to Brae then, my mouth parted with a word half formed. But Brae just shuffled, feet crunching on loose leaves, eyes squinting towards that point on the horizon.

Then came the explosion—or something like an explosion. There was only the light, spitting forth from the horizon and illuminating the sky with a narrow, prismatic jet. Then that too was gone, lost to space.

We waited, expectant on a sound that never came. No rumble, no shockwave. If we had been asleep, we might never have known of its passing.

Or so I thought, back then.

“What?” I said in whisper, the lone word finally finding itself.

Brae had said nothing. She motioned we continue, stepping up her pace. Though the waning moon still gave enough light to see the mossy way below our feet, she lit a torch and held it high as we walked. The light struck the myriad tree branches lining the path, casting each leaf and twig into darting shadow-shapes. Somewhere nearby came the low snort and rustle of an animal. Jackhog, most likely. Scavenging in the night, it must have been startled by our footsteps and flame.

In truth, if I am to be honest in what I write here, Brae’s insistence on the safety of fire had unnerved me. We had walked with the moon’s silver guidance for hours, so why the change? What significance had that celestial body brought?

“Why the torch?” I asked, words echoing thoughts as I brushed aside a branch.

“Would you rather I put it out?” she said, her first words in over an hour. Those words carried something strange. Something out of place, even for Brae.

I could have answered. I could have set forth a series of questions. It was what I did with Brae: ask questions to seek the slightest favour, often receiving nothing in return, not even a grunt. But sometimes, if my question could nudge her just right, or I found her in a moment of peace, or I said something spectacularly stupid, I could glimpse the single thing that made me smile: her eyes and their edges, the way they creased, the momentary wrinkling. It was always enough, seeing those creases, thinking that perhaps I had brought a fleeting distraction to her life. I suppose it had started as a game. One I had played for years.

But that night had been no time for games.

I shrugged, though I doubt Brae could tell. By then we had reached a larger clearing and she had taken the lead, sweeping the torch in what I felt were unnecessarily wide arcs until she caught sight of the forest hedge once more. “I don’t care if you put it out or not,” I said, forgoing my own silence. “I just don’t see why we need it. There is moonlight enough. Why waste a torch?”

“Waste?” Brae stopped, whirling to face me. In the flickering torchlight, her hair flared a shade more crimson than usual.

This was not going well. “Not waste.” I held up an appeasing finger, like a banner pole bereft of any actual banner. “*A flame at night, waste no light, drown the ghost, appease the blight.*” I spoke the charm in my best lyrical tone. “Yes, yes, powerful and true and all that.” Brae was superstitious. I knew this, even from a young age. I just didn’t see how her superstition fit with what we had witnessed.

She said nothing, staring instead at my unwavering finger. Finally, I let it drop. Her eyes in turn shifted to mine. They were deep set and cold, entirely devoid of creases.

“Brae,” I said coolly. “What *was* that? What did we just see?” The meteorite already seemed the distant memory of dream—something that may not have actually occurred.

Brae continued to hold my gaze, inspecting me as though I were an outsider.

“I don’t know,” she said, dropping her eyes and slumping her shoulders. “I don’t know,” she repeated, her voice drained of any power. And then, in a moment of honesty that felt distinctly juxtaposed to the impervious Brae I had spent so long trying to crack, she added, “but it is not the first I have seen.”

*Not the first.*

I wondered deeply on her words that night. I wondered at their meaning, at the fear writ across Brae’s face. At what may lie ahead. Everyone sees meteorites, on occasion. Especially night rangers. Those that wander unseen in the cloak of dark. But her words gave me pause, and it is only with the silent passage of time, with deep regret, and with my own slow stupidity that I caught her true meaning. It was no mere meteorite that we saw. It was something far more profound. Something intangible, even for me now.

Brae shook her head, as if ridding herself of some unseen insect. “Let’s move,” she said. “The night is still upon us, and we have a ways before camp.”

I had almost protested, almost stopped her and demanded some answers, or at the very least set upon her some questions. But instead I let it go, motioning an *as-you-wish* gesture with my hand.

It is a decision I have forever had to live with.

The forest hedge meandered a long way north, a natural marker upon the land. In places it was scant but trampled scrub—interminable sections of barren grassland making you question if you had lost your way. Though if you looked carefully, if you stepped back and looked hard, or sometimes if you looked soft, you could always see it, always find it.

Elsewhere it was a rigid, literal hedge. Not the well-kept hedge of some lord, but a hedge nonetheless. Sprawling yet defined, like someone had sowed it seed by seed and left it to grow, to come back every so often and give it a loose trim.

I had read enough to know the main reason for this unusual growth, or at least a scholar's premise. The large shrub that dominates the hedge is sensitive to the magnetic drift of the world. In the region we walked, there is some sort of magnetic seam and if the hedge strays too far, it withers. Perhaps the roots garner nutrients from it. Perhaps it is pulled along by it, like the way flowers somehow turn toward the light of day. In any case, I have no idea, and I doubt anyone truly does.

Over time, the hedge and all the plants that like to entwine along with it have spread in an uncanny route that runs a rough path north. It makes a fine bearing for any traveller. It is no trade route, though. It is no place where an established path has been forged or demarcated through the trodden boots of time. Too remote in the southlands, after all. But it is old. Tirelessly old. Old and unwavering.

Of course, on maps, like the very one Brae carried folded in her belt, the hedge was a solid line.

A simple, easy-to-follow, easy-to-spot, solid black line.

Hah!

“No cartographer has ever walked this,” I'd said with my best mock disgust on that second day of our journey. The day before we saw the meteorite. After seven hours of walking, we rested against the trunk of a large oak, sharing small sips from a single water flask. There would be enough streams on our journey and we carried three flasks each, but with Brae you did things the ranger way. You took precautions.

To the south, a patch of the hedge was visible; to the north, nothing but tall grass.

“Look at this,” I said, pointing down to the map, the parchment unfolded in front of us on the ground. I hovered my finger (hovered, not touched, for I wouldn't make that mistake again) over where I thought we had stopped. “We're here, but *nothing*, no lines, no mark ... *nothing!*” I stood up and turned, making wild gestures with my hands towards the north and the south and then at the map's complete lack of hedgeline.

“Sit down, fool. You're not even close. We're here.” Brae placed her finger on the map's surface, tracing from where I thought we were to where she thought—*knew*—we were. The polished band on her right first finger flashed as it caught the light streaming through the oak's canopy.

“There's no tree there, though. This oak is probably a thousand years old. There should be a tree,” I said, looking to Brae. I was waiting for the creases. I caught one, just a hint near her right eye. One was enough. Like a morsel of food, it would nourish me for hours.

“Cartographers don’t draw trees, dimwit. Not unless there’s a whole bunch of them together.” She pointed off to the east where the landscape swelled to a series of low hills, each carpeted in thick forest.

I pictured a group of cartographers sitting together, each taking turns to try to draw a single tree.

I refrained from sharing this image.

“Hmm, fair point, fair Brae.” I scratched the top of my head. *Was I really a dimwit?* Looking down, I could see that Brae was right. East of the point on the map where she had indicated, depicted quite clearly by concentric lines, were the hills to our right. Sketched between these lines in a rudimentary yet neat fashion were a strand of trees. Pashel Forest was written below in an oddly familiar script. I’d never heard of Pashel Forest. But then I’d never heard of most places outside of Toör.

“Come on, we’ve wasted enough time.” Brae started to refold the map, but not before she traced her finger a good ways further north, to a point where a tiny fleck of ink was starred on the map’s surface. She tapped it twice and made a short clucking noise in the back of her throat before glancing into her satchel. Within it was her journal. The one with the cover like my own. Then she continued folding the map with the same care one would use to handle a kitten. I watched her as she did this, as her hands moved. Despite her strength and profession, those hands were delicate and the skin of her palms soft. Well, I remember they *looked* soft. I couldn’t know for sure how they actually felt, not that day. The only time those hands had touched me had been within a glove. From a swift slap across my cheek. I’d made a remark about her father, years ago, and at the time I was rather proud of that remark, thinking it wry and witty. But Brae had felt otherwise. It was a stupid thing to say, I realise that now.

With one last and careful fold complete, she pushed the map through two loops in her belt, securing it in place. Shouldering her satchel and bow, tying the waterskin back alongside her others, she caught me watching.

“What?” she asked, amber eyes ablaze.

“Oh, nothing,” I said, smiling. “I just like the way you fold maps. It’s very calming.” As I spoke, I stared longingly at that map and the way it got to sit folded neatly into her belt.

But Brae said nothing in reply. She merely huffed and walked on, without looking back.

She knew I’d follow.

And so I did.

For those first days of our journey we did little else but maintain the route north, following the forest hedge when it was apparent, trusting in our steps when it was absent. I wasn't so stupid as to be oblivious of my own luck in travelling alone with Brae. It left me with a constant, inner glow.

But that would be extinguished soon enough.

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At one point we came to a series of boulders, their layered and jagged rock an imposition upon the earth. Scrambling to the top, I had stood upon the summit to marvel in each direction. South—the way we had come—were the low and rolling hills so characteristic of that region. Low save for the mountain whose face held Toör in its protection, of course. I could no longer see the sprawling stone-and-wood buildings and smoking chimneys nestled behind that face, but I knew they were there and would remain so, awaiting our return. To the west I glimpsed a small farm, corralled animals mere moving dots amongst a distant, static field. Eastwards there stood a scattered array of buildings; Downen, Brae confirmed after seeing me squinting—another place I hadn't heard of.

Looking north, I caught sight of the hedge once more.

"I see it again, Brae," I yelled down. "The hedge. To the north."

Brae huffed. "Of course it's to the north, idiot. That's all it does." Turning, she began the short detour around the rocks.

I shrugged, standing and watching her long strides in those weatherworn boots, the map in her belt, the bow on her back, the way her copper hair was caught and whipped by a sudden gust. Then I hopped down and trotted to re-join her.

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Early the next morning when the soft orange of daybreak reached out to us, we came upon a wide stream, the water gushing and eager. Surely it wasn't so deep, I thought, but Brae decided it an unnecessary risk to find out and said instead that we should cross elsewhere. As I stopped and stared at this little obstacle, I noticed the abrupt end to the growth of the hedge before the water's edge. It was as though it had taken offence at the stream's passing, to ignore it and just continue on the other side. *Perhaps the plants had jumped across?* I had laughed at myself then, Brae eyeing me with a look that was half bemusement, half irritation. I pondered a moment longer on this question of the stream, eventually deciding that it was entirely that: an interruption. The stream had come second, languidly driving its way through the hedge at some stage long after the line of shrubs had become established. It must be very satisfied with its work, I thought, pondering just what task it had since set itself. *To find an ocean*—surely that is the greatest desire of any stream. I watched its flow, the way the water ran between rock and field and off to the east, wending past that far village of Downen. I hoped for its sake that there was an ocean that way, but I couldn't know for sure.

"Left or right?" I asked, breaking my reverie and looking to Brae. She was chewing her lip, a gesture second only to the creasing of her eyes. Below, I could see tiny black fish in the water, battling the current.

“I think either, but the left draws me.” She had unlooped the metal pendant kept wrapped around her wrist, letting it swing from her fingers. It was a habit I disliked, the idea that fate could be teased from the world and sensed through a mere piece of string. She called it her guidance. I called it her folly. But only to myself. Folly would find me fast enough were I to speak those words aloud.

After refilling our flasks, I accepted her choice and sure enough we soon found a shallow section to cross. Our boots removed, trousers pulled high, we waded through the current. I would have just left everything on, but Brae insisted we make the crossing barefooted.

“You don’t want clothes wet. Especially boots,” she said. “Wet feet in wet boots. Never pleasant.”

I nodded, wincing as the icy water lapped across my skin. At this, Brae laughed. Actually laughed. The sound of it, the fact that it had been me to elicit that response, both of these things combined to a compact ball of warmth in my stomach.

“That was your first time, wasn’t it?” I said, buoyed by that warmth and unable to help myself.

“My first time?” Brae had stopped on the far bank, an eyebrow raised.

“The laughing. Not so painful, I hope?” I hopped across the last of the stream and jumped up into the thick grass to join her. Wiping the balls of my feet, I sat down and began to unroll my trousers, keeping my eyes on Brae. But she said nothing. *Brae the Laconic*; a fitting title perhaps. She stared at me, merely blinking. But there, hidden in that movement, one eye held something. I was sure of it.

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As for food, we each carried our bundles for the journey to Kareth—dried fruit, hard-bread, a few slices of salted meats; no luxury, but it had been deemed enough, provided we ration ourselves. To supplement this meagre diet, we relied upon Brae’s proficiency as a ranger. She would track as we walked, noting the way that animals had disturbed the brush, left their droppings, marked their paths with the faintest of footprints or deposited strands of hair on thorns. It was invisible to me, of course, these signs and disturbances that animals leave as they move—their spoor, I was informed. I listened with fascination true enough, and Brae had noted my attention, warmed to it, even. There was something verging upon respect at my attitude to listen and learn and I felt that—finally, after so many years—I had found something she was eager to talk of.

On the afternoon of the third day, before that night-time sighting in the sky, Brae motioned for us to a stop. Before I could look to see why, she was gliding the bow from her back, nocking a silent arrow. She knelt, pulling the bowstring taut, pausing, watching, waiting for the rabbit to stop. When it did, she didn’t hesitate. Her fingers released and the arrow thwished through the air. The rabbit fell limp, twitching. I hadn’t even taken a breath.

“We’ll rest here a while,” she said, indifferent to her own marksmanship, walking to the trunk of a nearby tree before casting a glance my way. “I’ll start a fire. You can fetch us dinner.” And she was smiling. At me. With no-one else around for that smile to have been for—no chance of mistakenly thinking it was for me, only to find out it very much was not. So doing

my utmost to feign nonchalance, and making sure I most certainly did not skip, I set off towards the fallen rabbit.

Kneeling down next to it, I was reminded of my feelings around death—feelings that haven't ever changed. It looked peaceful, almost asleep, eyes still open with a dark, glistening red. But the arrow that ran through its neck and reemerged halfway down its flank betrayed that look. Beneath the rabbit, between the thinning blades of grass where it had taken its ill-timed pause, the soil was wet. Urine. Its parting gesture.

“Renn? What are you doing?” Brae called.

“Coming,” I responded, not wanting to tell Brae I didn't want to touch the rabbit, that I was fearful it might still be alive and that when I tried to grab it it would somehow move and I would hear the arrow shaft scraping against its spine. I shuddered, placing my hand at the rabbit's neck, tentatively at first, then with more confidence, scruffing the fur. The flesh underneath was still warm. “I'm sorry,” I said, keeping my voice low. “Know that you will feed us well. Know your final act was in helping others.” Then I took a deep breath, stood and made my way back to Brae, holding the rabbit at arm's length, some part of me still worried it may move.

After another short errand to gather herbs a little way back along our path, Brae skinned and cooked the rabbit over a small fire. It tasted good, tinged only by my mind's recollection of its death. We had robbed it of life, to fuel our own. Such thoughts didn't seem to plague Brae—she ate eagerly, sitting cross-legged, elbows on her knees and her boots unlaced.

“It's good,” I said, picking meat from between my teeth.

Brae flicked a bone into the embers of the fire and shrugged. “Not bad.”

I nodded. Once more, it seemed up to me to try to nudge the conversation. “Who taught you to shoot an arrow so straight?” I asked, knowing full well the answer.

Brae fingered several strands of wayward hair out of her eyes, tucking them back behind her ear, then smiled. It was a wan, lost smile. “My father,” she said. “When I was young, of course. I've had long enough to practise since then.”

It had felt unwise to press further, yet I had caught something from Brae as she looked to me, as though perhaps she wanted me to. I hesitated, considered for one moment, but instead I said, “Will you teach me?” And then, somehow I found myself adding, “I could fetch your dinner each day. Our dinner, I mean.”

Brae shook her head, letting go a sigh. “Maybe someday.” She paused, dropping her gaze, a frown now across her brow. “If there is time.”

The fire cracked. Brae poked at the flames, spreading the burning twigs. “Get some sleep, we'll walk again after dark.”

As I drifted into those meagre few hours, I thought of my home, the village of Toör, of my father and my friends. I had no way of knowing how much everything was about to change.

I had known Brae since I was fifteen. Well, that is not quite true. I had known her from a younger age, but I did not notice her—properly, with a boy’s wandering eye—until my middle teenage years. She was twenty by then, and in the four years from when she had taken up the mantle of her father, Brae had acquired a certain weathered hostility that separated her from anyone else. It was something I found utterly entrancing. Her role, her fleeting presence, it all added to the air she commanded.

As a night ranger, she was sworn to patrol the dark, wander the forests, be warden to our surrounds. Growing up, I never felt we needed much protecting. Not in such a remote region. What danger was there to a village as ours? We seldom had merchants and travellers, and when they did grace our path they were greeted with warmth, any news from Kareth or beyond a welcome currency for exchange. On maps, Dusk’s Weald may as well have signified the end of the land, little reason to explore beyond. And though as a village we kept the fringes of that deep forest in check, if there were dangers to the south, none ever emerged from those woods. With the only ways to get to and from Toör the twin routes leading north and east, the roads were easy enough to patrol.

It was safe. The world felt safe.

Such were my naïve views.

Of course, I was idiot enough to voice these thoughts to Brae one time in *The Patient Owl*, the best and only tavern of Toör. I was sixteen myself that night, an evening that seems so vivid to me still. I’d had a full year to cultivate my fawning, and the power of ale lubricated my tongue quite readily into stupidity.

“What great perils have you saved us from this season, ranger of the night?” I had asked, resting my head against the back wall. I was sat across from Brae on the room’s long table, its dark wood stained through years of spilled ale. She had just returned from two weeks of ranging, skirting the forest, walking the routes in and out of Toör. Her boots were caked in mud and she wore her longbow across her back, the supple curve of hickory protruding from her shoulder like she had been born with half a set of wings. Brae was alone, and I had very much wished to keep things that way, sidling along the bench until I was opposite her.

She looked at me, taking a slow sip from her mug, the amber of each iris reflecting the room’s light; then her eyes narrowed, wrinkling and creasing at their edges for a mere moment. That is, at least, what I hoped I saw—the room had begun to swirl and faces had taken on a slight blur.

“What do you know of perils, Darrow’s son?”

That stung. A title was a step up from being completely unknown, but I’d rather it be my true name coming from her lips than that of my father.

I tried to smile. “Well that’s the thing. There are no perils. Not here. Not in end-of-the-land Toör. If anything, we need some perils, to get us up from no perils, otherwise a ranger’s ranging days are short-lived, their duties are, err, well they would be rather, they would ...” by this point, I had no real idea what I was saying. The words kept coming until, thankfully, I trailed off.



The wrinkles—if they had ever been there at all—were gone.

“Are you trying to suggest, little boy, that I am of no use?”

I felt a deep rush of crimson flare through my cheeks. Brae raised an eyebrow.

“No, not at all, I ...” I began, wondering just how I could recover. But I wasn’t given the chance. Brae stood up, downed her ale in two long gulps and walked away and out of The Owl. I watched her leave, the way she moved easily through the crowd, until she was swallowed back into the night.

From the corner of the room, seated with the other elders, I caught sight of my father watching. He was smirking and shaking his head.

As I lowered my head to the table, I made a silent vow to never let her walk away from me again.

On the evening of the sixth night, near three full days after sighting the meteorite, Brae held out her arm. My head—eyes to the ground and looking for the occasional glowbug flaring green—walked straight into it.

“Ow!”

“*Shhh*,” she hissed, swatting me round the back of my head.

“Ow!” I repeated. Brae was scowling, hand contemplating a second strike. I glared at her, mouthing the shape of a single, silent word: *What?*

She pointed ahead to where a low hill rose up from the ground. Its top was crowned by a line of trees, solemn guardians to the cloudless night sky. As I looked, Brae continued to point.

And then there, between two thick trunks, something stirred. The air rippled, like the shimmer of a hot Ochre day.

I watched, unsure of what I was seeing as the rippling shifted and spread. In one moment it was gone, but then it returned. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Brae’s hands go to her mouth. “Have I found it?” she said, words coming through closed fingers. She took two steps forward. “An oracle.”

I couldn’t grasp her meaning. “An oracle? Is that what you said? An oracle?”

She nodded, keeping her eyes fixed on the shifting haze. The air rippled, then changed, as though it were not air between those trees but water, and someone—*something*—were casting small pebbles across its surface.

The faintest of smiles pulled its way across Brae’s lips. At first I mistook it for simple awe or amazement. But no, it was not awe, I realised. It was relief.

I stalked up to her. “You knew?”

Again Brae nodded. “Yes,” she managed. “It is why we came.”

It was precisely *not* why we came. There had been no mention of an oracle on this little errand. The letter that was tucked into my satchel—the one sealed and rolled tightly with the threads of Toör—was not destined for an oracle. For some creature of myth.

“*Why we came?*” I let out, all too loud.

That landed me another strike around the head, a fierce look now in Brae’s eyes. This time, though, it proved too much. In an act part retaliation, part fury, and, well, mostly idiocy, I made to push her.

I got so far as lifting my arms.

Brae moved like lightning, sidestepping and sweeping her hands down and across my own, knocking them back. Her hands grasped my wrists, clamping onto them with an ox’s strength. With a twisting motion she flung me to the floor and I landed face down, head striking the dirt. I let out a muffled groan.

But Brae wasn't done. She was on top of me, spinning me over, straddling me and pressing a forearm against my throat. Her knees pinioned my arms, driving a steady pain deep within. Her left palm went over my mouth, stifling pathetic emanations as she leaned in.

"You are a foolish boy," she hissed. "Never listening; always playing the fool. You think being Darrow's son affords you such?"

Brae's face was close. So close. My heart raced as I looked into flared nostrils. Her hair, that deep copper-bronze, fell in thick curls around my cheeks, creating a secret cave. In the dim light of this sudden and marvellous cave—rapidly filling, I recall, with her delicate scent—I could make out the freckles that dotted her cheeks.

Through all this, I did not speak. *Could* not speak. Brae's palm stayed across my mouth as her arm remained pressed to my throat. I shook my head in a rapid side-to-side.

Finally, Brae released her hand, though her forearm didn't budge. I managed several thin wheezes, but I didn't make to struggle. My mind was only interested in daring my physical self to do one thing: to kiss her. I could have done so, for her lips—so full and alluring—tempted me with their proximity. Should have done so, possibly. If I had, then maybe *I* would be gone and she would not have walked up to those trees. Or perhaps, like Brae's notion of her guidance, there is only one path and we tread it regardless; a perception of choice is all we get.

Brae's hair tickled my skin. Her arm began to loosen. Eyes of amber stared into mine. And we remained that way, unmoving. Time had slowed. It lasted minutes. Or it lasted but a few short seconds. I honestly cannot say. Whatever the reality, Brae eventually let her arm slide away and she sat up, placing a finger over my lips. She tilted her head toward the night sky, hair parting to allow the pink of an earlobe a cautious escape to attune to the night.

"Do you hear it?" she whispered, that rage now gone from her voice.

I strained, turning my head to mirror hers, trying to let as much sound reach my ear as possible. I quieted my mind. There was the rustle of leaves and Brae's own breathing, the distant hoot of an owl, the sound of my heart beating rapid and heavy. As I tried to hear beyond, her finger stayed across my lips.

Then, in the distance, there was a glimmer of sound, faint and high-pitched. It wavered, sometimes there, sometimes not. It sent a series of chills through my body. Whatever it was, it sounded both terrifying and beautiful.

Brae looked to me. As I nodded, confirming, a slight smile crept back across her face.

And yet still she kept her finger pressed to my lips.

So I licked it. A short, quick lick.

I do not know why I did this. (That is not quite true, of course. I would be lying if I said I had never dreamt of doing such, before or since.) Brae flinched her hand away and slapped me. This time without a glove. A single deft swipe that left my cheek stinging.

"What was that, Renn?"

Perhaps I had gone too far.

“I’m sorry,” I said, lacking any other appropriate response. “I didn’t know how else to remove your finger. I can’t feel my hands.” This was true, at least. My arms had grown numb under the pressure from her knees.

As though realising the nature of her position for the first time, Brae looked down. “Oh,” she managed. Then she moved, rolling off and sitting to my left. “Sorry. Don’t push me. Ever.”

Technically, I hadn’t pushed her. I had only *intended* to push her, but somehow these were details I felt unwise to point out. Still, Brae had apologised. I mentally checked that off my list. In the space of several days I had elicited laughter and an apology. And, I had licked her finger. I allowed a smile at my small achievements.

“Shall we start again?” I asked, voice low. I pointed towards the hill, to where light and sound shifted and shimmered. “What’s happening, Brae? What *is* that, there within those trees?”

For a long moment, she looked at the hill and the trees and we both watched as that strange light flickered in and out. Then she turned to me, eyes now full of tears.

“It is something I have waited years for,” she said, looking down at the grass and then back to the trees. “A fleeting spirit, trapped between worlds.”

“Trapped between worlds?” I repeated, my words sounding stupid.

Brae nodded. “Between worlds. Between time. *Within* time, perhaps.” She shook her head, wiping the tears from her eyes. “The very same my father searched for. The last thing he searched for, of that I am sure.” Her eyes closed and she took several deep breaths before speaking again. “It is many things. If any of this is true.”

If any of what is true? I wanted to ask.

“What do you know of such?” she said.

Of oracles? What did I know of oracles?

Nothing. Not then.

But that was all about to change.