



Secrets of the Whispering Stone

Tales of Rook · Volume 1

by Mythas

CHAPTER ONE

When Moonlight Speaks

From time immemorial, the light of the harvest moon whispered many things to those who could hear its soft songs, but today it sings an especially exciting tune. As Rook of the Eastern Glades, I stand before the old Whispering Stone as the moonbeams play across its aged surface with the grace of ghosts playing ancient tunes.

The rustling of my emerald overcoat and the glittering silver of my coat trimmings catches the light of the celestial body that illuminates all things as I move closer to the stone and secure the leather straps of my rapier's scabbard. Twenty years I have walked this path and lived my life without hearing the Stone truly *speak*. However, today is an exceptional day for sure.

Towering above me with the height twice mine, the aged stone bears ancient runes on its surface, carved so deep into the surface they seem to breathe with its power. I was a young cub when I saw this stone for the first time in my life, and with small claws following the mysterious markings, my mentor would tell ancient legends of long-lost lands and magical creatures.

Old stories, I thought back then. *Pretty tales of cubs too simple and innocent to understand anything beyond this wooden world.*

How wrong I was!

As the celestial orb reached its zenith in the night sky, strange events started unfolding before my eyes. For the first time ever, I witnessed how the ancient runes on the stone's surface began to glow with a special kind of light, one that caused me to cry feline tears in my surprise. Moreover, the colors were unusual; neither silver nor golden, it was something else and it felt very much like the color of my soul.

Intrigued by what happened, I approached the stone and heard the whispering of a breeze. The air around the stone seemed to shimmer like in a hot place and there was an interesting aroma of jasmine and starflowers, something I used to smell every time my mind was filled with the thought of a girl named Seraphina.

"Seraphina," I whispered the name, feeling a sting of pain that ran down my spine at hearing her name once more.

We were close friends twenty years ago; however, after the harsh words and broken promise of mine, she left and became a mere name in the stories. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find any traces of her presence until tonight. Hearing the Whispering Stone calling out

her name, I felt the familiar sense of regret and loneliness wash over me like the waves of the lake near her village.

However, the runes on the stone seemed to respond to my whisper, and began moving and rearranging themselves into something that I could decipher thanks to the education of my youth. The words began forming themselves slowly, as if emerging from a deep ocean, and I realized that the message contained something important.

When friendship lies broken And hearts grow cold with time The Whispering Stone shall open To those who seek to mend the rhyme

Beyond this portal gleaming Awaits a realm of faded dreams Where those we lost are dreaming Of reconciliation's healing streams

A shiver ran through me from the tips of my antlers to the very end of my tufted tail. The Stone was offering me the opportunity to cross the borders of the realm of my knowledge and plunge into the unknown. Instinctively, my fingers found the grip of my rapier, yet, I knew that it wouldn't help much beyond this boundary.

The portal formed around the stone, turning it into a clear window through which I could see the most wonderful places, each of which could hardly exist in reality. There was a garden in which I heard voices of my friends who laughed, and paths paved with starlight and winding in landscapes created in the depths of imagination.

Moreover, I saw her. Seraphina stood in the grove of silver trees, whose opalescent wings glimmered with the same light that seemed to appear from everywhere. Her twilight eyes gazed at some distant point, and her body was bent under the burden of grief.

She remained as perfect as I remembered her twenty years ago. Even now the sight of her fills me with emotions so powerful that make me involuntarily step back, completely losing control over my actions. What should I say to her? How can I tell her that I have spent many sleepless nights composing apologies I had never had the courage to say?

Even now it seems that she was so elegant and flawless that even I, who knew her for almost half a lifetime, don't feel worthy to talk to her. However, friendship, true friendship means much more than comfort. The bravery needed in order to face one's friend is different from courage needed during battle.

It is the courage to apologize for your mistake, to stretch your hand across the gap in relationships to heal the wounds of a friend's heart. And now that I faced the decision to step beyond the stone's portal, the energy coursing throughout my body increased, filling me with excitement and fear at once.

Behind me lie everything familiar, the comfort of my cottage, the quietness of my ordered life, and the pride of a solitary man living his peaceful days alone. Yet, ahead of me is something entirely different, a land of mystery and danger, where the only thing you can see is how much your dear ones are willing to forgive you.

The runes continued spinning, forming dizzying patterns, and it seemed to me that this is my last chance to get there before something terrible happens. Pressing my palm against the glowing portal, I heard its whispers and sensed the light of the crystal of moonlight. Energy flowed throughout me, filling me with a strong emotion that caused tears to flow out of my feline eyes.

This is my choice; I can either remain Rook the Scholar, Rook the Solitary, or become Rook the Seeker of Friendship and Reconciliation. The portal shivered and invited me to step inside, and somewhere behind its glowing surface, Seraphina continued waiting for my brave move.

CHAPTER TWO

The Keeper of Forgotten Words

The moment my hand touches the shining surface of the portal, reality re-shapes itself for me like a master potter's hands re-shape the clay into the object of his imagination. I'm no longer standing in the glade of the Eastern Forest, but I'm floating—yes, *floating*—in between, a place of unimaginable colors that have no names in the languages of any creatures in the world.

The emerald overcoat billows like underwater waves due to some mysterious currents in the air that shine and shimmer in bright silver filigree. Under the leather shoes, there are streams of pure starlight that intertwine and make a path that stretches in the direction of my previous life as well as to infinity ahead of me. In front of me, the portal starts to dissolve in front of my eyes in the same manner of the soap bubbles popping. Its shining silver sphere fades, and it shrinks into a single coin floating in space.

The familiar panic starts to claw at my throat with a known feline sharpness. *What have I done?* – The question ripples through my thoughts as I try to make sense of this place. No words flow easily through my lips; it's clear that I've completely lost the verbal skills of which I used to be so proud.

"First time crossing the Threshold of Remembrance, young Feyline?"

The voice is gentle and carries an incredible number of decades of experience that can tell the listener about thousands of similar situations. I spin around trying to find the owner of this voice, but there's no creature in this place—there's only me floating in space surrounded by the darkness filled with colorful streams of ribbons.

"Panic not, child of the Eastern Glades. Your blade will have no effect here, though your heart will definitely work well."

For a moment, I feel the voice coming from inside my body, resonating in my ribcage and making me think of some huge cosmic cat purring. I try to calm myself enough to relax my grip on the hilt of my weapon.

"Who is addressing me in this strange place between the worlds?" I try to call out in surprise, hearing my words multiplied by the echoes of space and creating an impressive harmony as if the sound were playing music.

"My name has been given to me by people of different races," comes the answer, "The Moonwings know me as the Keeper of Forgotten Words. The Earth-born creatures address me

as the Sage of Second Chances. And you, Rook with a heart full of pain, can simply call me Aldric."

There he stands right in front of me in an instant—the old, wise and powerful being. He seems to be made from moonlight and memories—some mixture of an old human being and something that can't be explained by simple terms. Aldric has a long beard, silver and shining with tiny stars following the movement of his breath. Deep twilight-colored eyes look at me with great patience and immediately give me a sense of security.

"I know your name," I manage, trying to steady my voice despite the situation, "I know the reason why I'm in this place."

"Indeed." Slowly walking towards me, Aldric stops just in front of me. I notice with amazement that there's no contact with the ground—the sage glides without touching the ground as if there's no gravity and no solid objects in the space around him. "You spent twenty years in exile from joy. You said some words in rage, breaking the silver cord between two souls of the kindest people. I know about Seraphina's tears and your pride. About endless nights in contemplation and wondering if forgiveness can bloom once again in those neglected gardens."

Each sentence pierces my heart, bringing back memories from twenty years past. They sting painfully and remind of the terrible mistake that was made a long time ago. "How do you know about it? I told no one about it."

"Because I am the Guardian of the Threshold between worlds and the keeper of everybody who crosses between this world and the Forgotten Realm of Eldritch magic and memories," Aldric answers. Then, with one wave of his hand, he brings me somewhere.

Now I find myself in a huge library. However, it's not just a library—every wall of it is built up of the most bizarre objects that I've ever seen. The shelves seem to be built from frozen sounds and crystallized songs, every book on them shining with internal light that changes the shape of its covers with some rhythm of their own. Some volumes seem to fly around the place, flapping their paper wings while other volumes hum melodies that make a symphony of memories of this place. The air is filled with words, living and dancing like little fishes in space between the books.

"Welcome to the Archive of Hearts," Aldric says, pride and endless sorrow filling his voice with a melancholic melody. "All those books in this archive contain the words that could have made someone happy, but were never uttered by the owner of those hearts. Here, all the apologies hidden because of excessive pride, all the confessions of love held back due to the fear, all the words 'I'm sorry' that could have changed many destinies."

I reach out towards one of the dancing words, shining like a star in a gentle pinkish light. As soon as my fingers brush past them, I feel their immateriality and lack of touch. "I can't touch them."

"Not yet," Aldric says, nodding. "Until those words have found their owners, until they receive the voice of their creator, they'll stay in this place, remaining hopes and regrets of those people whose souls created them."

The wise keeper leads me further to the Archive, showing me some unusual shelves filled with strange objects. I see that these shelves hold some sort of crystals of emotions—grief shining black like diamonds, happiness glowing brightly with captured rays of sunlight, and love changing every imaginable color. I'm astonished with the immensity of feelings that seem to live and breathe in this archive.

"Why did you bring me here?" I ask, trying to guess an answer. "Why don't I just head to the Forgotten Realm to find Seraphina?"

Aldric stops before one of the strange shelves of the archive, looking into the distance with the look of remembrance in his eyes. "Told me, my dear young scholar, what is friendship in your opinion?"

His question takes me by surprise and I find myself unable to provide an adequate answer, knowing very well the correct response in theory. "Friendship is probably...loyalty, I guess. Experiences, trust and companionship."

"A textbook answer," Aldric sighs slightly, but I can't feel any condemnation in his tone. "But an incomplete one. Look!"

He picks up a book from one of the shelves, touching it with his finger tips. Immediately, the book dissolves into pure light that surrounds both me and Aldric. And before I realize it, I'm standing invisible in my own glade. But it looks different—this is the landscape from twenty years ago, reminding me of my youth.

I watch myself quarreling with Seraphina in those times, listening to my own voice saying those poisonous words that hurt her to death. I see how her Twilight eyes get hurt as a result of my words and she turns away from me to fly away into the distance of a twenty-year-long separation and loneliness.

"Stop!" I scream, but the scene continues unfolding before me, revealing the next details. I see myself watching my best friend packing her things and leaving my glade in rage as I stood silent. I see how she hesitated to leave as she turned back to look at me from behind her wings, hoping that I'd ask her to stay. However, she eventually disappeared from my sight, flying in the opposite direction and taking away all the twenty years of friendship and shared laughter.

The image vanishes, and I find myself standing in the Archive once again with tears flowing down my fur face. "I remember..."

"That wasn't the end of your friendship," Aldric sighs, "it was just the wound you couldn't cure. True friendship isn't the absence of disagreements, it's the process of overcoming them. True friendship implies the ability to be vulnerable, the admission of guilt, the desire to choose love despite your pride."

He leads me to the next shelf and shows it to me with his hand. Those books seemed to emit golden warmth, and as he touches one of them, it dissolves and fills the place with melodies. "Friendship requires certain kinds of courage: not the courage to raise a sword against an enemy, but the one to open up to someone who hurt you. Not the courage to be eloquent during public discussion, but the one to be sincere in private conversations. Not the courage to stand alone and fight against the whole universe, but the one to ask for help when needed."

As Aldric spoke to me, I realized that something changed inside of me. I felt my heart warming and melting, becoming softer than I had expected. "But what if she won't want to forgive me? Maybe those twenty years have left their mark on her soul and made it too tough for anything good?"

"Ah, my dear Rook," the wise keeper of the threshold smiled at me. "That's the most beautiful question you've ever asked, and it proves that you started to think not about yourself but about others and what you're going to give them. That's the beginning of wisdom."

Aldric takes me to the center of the Archive and shows me the pedestal. On it, there's a strange book that seems to be made of living moonlight, its pages turning on their own and writing the words of their own will. "This book is called the Book of Living Friendship. Unlike other archives here, this one doesn't store any past glory or grudges—it preserves the present possibilities. Any sincere attempt of reconciling two old friends adds to the book's pages."

"Then tell me what I have to do?" I asked, surprisingly finding that I was calm about everything happening to me.

"You have to go to Seraphina," Aldric replied, "not with excuses or justifications, but with the three words capable of healing any wound. Not 'I was partly right,' or 'both of us made some mistakes,' or 'sorry for hurting you,' but sincere, humble and vulnerable words: I was wrong."

Looking deep into my eyes, he says, "Be aware that once you'll cross over, you'll enter the Forgotten Realm of Eldritch magic. You can't lie anywhere there, you can't cheat and pretend. Any word you utter in this place will be imbued with your true intention."

Suddenly, I start noticing the change in the Archive around me as it starts disappearing into the depths of emptiness. The books become less real and disappear as wisps of mist, but before

Aldric leads me to the end of this place, I decide to ask him one last question. "Is she okay, Sir?"

"She tills the Garden of Lost Things," Aldric replies, sadness filling his voice, "waters the ghostly roses of forgotten dreams, tending the phantom fruit trees that were never fruitful. She guards those parts of the souls that were lost in pride and stubbornness and fear. But she is too weak and sad because of that, dear friend. She needs her laughter in this realm as much as the realm needs it."

Now, I'm standing again in space and floating towards the entrance to the Forgotten Realm. Ahead of me, I see an enormous archway made of crystal music and filled with the sounds of reconciliation and forgiveness. Through the arch, I can see some incredible things—a city floating in the clouds of intentions, forest of memory-trees, and the garden filled with translucent flowers glowing with unfulfilled potential.

"One final gift, my dear Feyline," Aldric says, "and you'll be able to move further towards the archway." From the folds of his robe, he takes out the silver bell attached to a silver chain made of moonbeams, "This device is called the Bell of True Speaking. If you're having trouble finding the appropriate words when you see your friend, just ring this bell three times and say what you think."

I accept the little bell in my hands, sensing its emotional weight that is even greater than the actual one. "Thank you," I say quietly, though there weren't any words capable of conveying all the gratitude I was feeling.

"Use this gift wisely," Aldric replies to me, smiling warmly at me. "Remember, Rook of the Eastern Glades, friendship is neither a point you can reach nor a path leading there, it's the garden that you're tending every day. Some seasons of friendship may be more beautiful than others, but with a proper care, even the toughest winter will eventually give away to it."

Looking up, I realize that I'm getting closer and closer to the arch, and I can see the garden and Seraphina through its walls. Heart clenched from the mixture of familiarity and nostalgia, I see the beautiful creature tilling the Garden with gentle care, protecting and loving her plants as much as I remember. She looks exactly as she looked twenty years ago—untouched by time but full of sorrow and grief. Even from the distance, I see how low the pride and arrogance have become—the careful movements of her graceful wings, the way she seems afraid of applying too much effort because of the fear of shattering the beauty that she keeps alive.

She's stunning with her unearthly beauty and elegance, but even at this moment I'm already realizing how hard I'll find talking to her later on. However, besides the familiar anxiety, there's something else that makes me realize what is important in this situation—this feeling is much stronger and much deeper.

The little Bell of True Speaking rests gently in my hand, reminding me that there's always another way to speak when words fail. With these thoughts running through my head, I move towards the arch and through it, entering the world where forgiveness will bloom in the carefully cultivated garden and waiting for the Moonwing fairy with her gorgeous opalescent wings.

CHAPTER THREE

The Gaurdian of Lost Things

The moment my leather boots touch the crystalline ground beyond the archway, I understand why this place is called the Forgotten Realm. Everything here exists in a state of beautiful almost—flowers that shimmer with the memory of fragrance, paths that wind toward destinations that shift with the observer's deepest longings, and a light that falls not from any visible sun but from the accumulated hopes of countless souls who have passed through that musical doorway.

I find myself standing at the edge of what can only be the Garden of Lost Things, and the sight steals what little breath I have managed to gather since crossing the threshold. Before me stretches an impossible landscape of translucent beauty—roses that glow like captured starlight but cast no shadows, fruit trees whose branches bear the ghostly outlines of dreams never pursued, and winding between them all, paths of what appears to be crystallized tears that catch the ethereal light and scatter it in rainbow fragments across the phantom blooms.

And there, perhaps fifty yards away, moving with the careful grace of someone tending precious, fragile things, is Seraphina.

My heart performs an acrobatic feat that would impress even the most skilled circus performers, leaping into my throat and then plummeting to somewhere near my boots before settling into a rhythm that sounds suspiciously like a war drum. She is exactly as I remembered and utterly transformed—still possessed of that ethereal beauty that once rendered me speechless at village gatherings, but now carrying herself with a solemnity that speaks of years spent in careful isolation.

Her opalescent wings, once so animated in conversation that they seemed to dance with her words, now hang close to her graceful form like folded prayers. The silver hair I remember cascading freely down her back is now braided with such precise care that not a single strand dares to escape, and those tiny bells woven throughout—bells that once chimed with her laughter—now move in perfect silence, as if even they understand the sacred quiet of this place.

I duck behind one of the larger phantom fruit trees, feeling simultaneously foolish and necessary in my concealment. The tree's ghostly branches provide adequate cover while allowing me clear sight of her movements, and I settle against its trunk—which feels surprisingly solid for something that appears to be made of crystallized wishes—to observe the woman I have traveled between worlds to find.

She moves through the garden with the ritualistic precision of a priestess performing sacred duties, and indeed, I realize as I watch, that is exactly what she has become. Each ghostly bloom receives her individual attention—a gentle touch to straighten a translucent petal here, a whispered word of encouragement to a struggling phantom bud there. She carries a watering can that appears to be filled with liquid moonlight, and as she tends each plant, I notice that her touch brings a momentary flush of almost-color to the ethereal flowers, as if her care alone keeps them from fading entirely into nothingness.

The sight fills me with a complex mixture of awe and profound sadness. This is what she has made of her exile from our world—not a retreat into bitterness, but a transformation into the guardian of all the beautiful things that have been abandoned or forgotten. Every carefully tended bloom represents something precious that was cast aside, every perfectly pruned branch speaks to her dedication to preserving what others have given up for lost.

But there is a cost to such devotion, and I can see it written in the careful way she holds herself, as if too much spontaneous movement might disturb the delicate balance she has created. Her twilight eyes, once so quick to dance with mischief or spark with intellectual curiosity, now hold a distant, almost melancholy peace. She has found purpose in this place, yes, but it is a purpose born of resignation rather than joy.

As I watch, she approaches a section of the garden that makes my chest tighten with recognition. Here grow roses of a particular translucent gold, their ghostly petals shifting through shades that speak of autumn afternoons and shared laughter. I know these flowers, though I have never seen their like before—they are the crystallized memory of our friendship, the phantom blooms of all the moments we shared before pride and stubbornness turned us into strangers.

Seraphina's movements become even more careful as she tends these particular roses, and I see her lips moving in what might be whispered conversation with the memories themselves. She cups one particularly beautiful bloom in her hands, and for a moment her composed expression cracks, revealing a grief so profound that I have to grip the phantom tree's trunk to keep from rushing to her side immediately.

"Twenty years," she whispers to the ghostly rose, and though she is too far away for normal hearing, something about this place carries her words directly to my heart. "Twenty years I have tended you, kept you alive when the rest of the world would have let you fade. But keeping memories beautiful does not ease the ache of their absence, does it?"

The rose pulses with a slightly brighter light at her touch, and I realize with a start that I am witnessing something profoundly intimate—a daily ritual of grief and devotion that she has maintained for two decades. Every day she comes to this spot, tends these particular blooms that

represent what we once shared, and speaks to them as if they might somehow carry her words back to the friend she believes lost forever.

"He was so proud," she continues, and now I can see the tears that have begun to track down her cheeks like liquid starlight. "And I was so stubborn. We stood there in his cottage arguing about something so trivial I can barely remember the details, but I remember exactly how his green eyes flashed when he raised his voice, remember the way his antlers caught the lamplight as he turned away from me."

She pauses in her ministrations, and I see her wings tremble slightly—the first unguarded emotion she has displayed since I began my observation. "I should have been the one to apologize first. I should have swallowed my pride and spoken the words that would have healed us both. But I waited for him to come after me, waited for him to realize that friendship was more important than being right. And when he didn't..."

The sentence hangs unfinished in the ethereal air, but I can complete it myself. When I didn't come after her, she assumed that our friendship meant less to me than my wounded pride. She has spent twenty years believing that I simply let her go, that I chose to be right rather than fight for what we shared.

The truth hits me like a physical blow, doubling me over behind my concealing tree. All these years I have carried the assumption that she left because she no longer valued our connection, that her departure was a rejection of everything we had built together. But watching her tend these memory-roses with such devotion, hearing the longing in her whispered words, I understand that she has been waiting just as I have been waiting—both of us trapped in our respective prisons of pride and misunderstanding.

She moves away from the golden roses to tend another section of the garden, where crystalline fruit trees bear the ghostly outlines of dreams that were abandoned before they could ripen. Here her movements become almost mechanical, the routine so practiced that she seems to be moving through muscle memory alone. But I notice that she takes no joy in this work, no satisfaction in the care she provides. It is duty, nothing more—a way of filling the hours that stretch between one day and the next.

"Sometimes I wonder," she says to a particularly drooping phantom apple tree, "if he ever thinks of me at all. If he remembers the way we used to sit by the stream reading to each other until the stars came out, or how we would argue about philosophy until dawn, neither of us willing to concede a point but both of us secretly delighted by the other's passion."

She reaches up to touch one of the ghostly apples, and for a moment it gains almost enough substance to seem real. "I remember everything, you know. Every conversation, every shared silence, every moment when our eyes would meet across a room and we would know exactly

what the other was thinking without a word being spoken. That kind of connection doesn't come along often in a lifetime."

Her voice breaks on the last words, and she sinks gracefully to her knees beside the phantom tree, her carefully maintained composure finally cracking under the weight of twenty years of accumulated sorrow. "But I was too proud to go back. Too proud to admit that I might have been wrong, that the argument itself mattered less than the friendship it threatened to destroy. And now... now I tend ghosts and phantoms, keeping alive the memory of something beautiful that I helped to kill."

I find myself gripping the Bell of True Speaking that hangs around my neck, its silver surface warm against my palm. Every instinct in my body screams at me to rush to her side, to gather her into my arms and speak all the words of comfort and reconciliation that have been burning in my heart for two decades. But something deeper—some understanding born of watching her careful, ritualistic devotion to this place—tells me that such an approach would be wrong.

This is not a moment for grand gestures or eloquent speeches. This is a moment that requires the same careful attention she has given to her phantom garden, the same respect for fragile beauty that she has shown to these crystallized memories. Whatever words I eventually speak to her must be chosen with the same precision she uses to tend her ghostly roses, spoken with the same gentleness she shows to dreams that hang by threads of hope.

As I watch, she rises from her kneeling position and moves toward the center of the garden, where a fountain of what appears to be liquid starlight plays in the ethereal air. She settles on a bench carved from what looks like crystallized song—its surface shifting through harmonies that speak of healing and reconciliation—and for the first time since I began my observation, she allows herself to simply sit still.

In this moment of stillness, I see her as she truly is beneath the careful guardianship she has assumed. She is tired—not physically, for this realm seems to exist beyond such mundane concerns—but soul-deep weary in the way that comes from twenty years of tending beautiful things that can never fully bloom. Her wings, which once carried her through our world with such joy and purpose, now seem like burdens she bears rather than gifts she employs.

Yet even in her weariness, there is something magnificent about her dedication to this place. She has taken her grief and transformed it into a force for preservation, ensuring that the beautiful things that others have abandoned continue to exist, even if only as phantoms and memories. There is nobility in such service, a kind of heroism that requires no audience or acclaim.

"I wonder what he would think of this place," she muses to the fountain of starlight, and I lean forward despite myself, hungry for any insight into her thoughts about me. "He always loved beautiful things, always had an eye for the poetry hidden in the everyday world. I think he might appreciate the way the light falls here, the way it catches in the translucent petals and scatters meaning across the paths."

She pauses, reaching out to trail her fingers through the fountain's luminous spray. "But I think he would be sad to see what I have become. He knew me when I was wild and free, when I danced through storms and argued passionately about books we had read. This careful, quiet creature I have become... she would be a stranger to him."

The observation cuts deep because it carries a grain of truth. The Seraphina I remember was indeed a creature of passion and spontaneity, given to sudden flights of inspiration and bursts of infectious laughter. This contemplative guardian of lost things, while beautiful in her own way, lacks the vibrant spark that once made our conversations crackle with intellectual electricity.

But as I watch her sitting beside the starlight fountain, I realize that the spark is not gone—merely banked, like coals waiting for the right breath of air to flame back to life. When she spoke of our old arguments and shared readings, her eyes briefly kindled with something approaching their old fire. The passionate, brilliant woman I fell in love with—for yes, I can admit it now, in the safety of my hidden observation—still exists beneath the careful composure she has cultivated.

The thought brings both hope and terror in equal measure. If she is still the woman I knew, still capable of the fierce intellectual joy that once drew us together like magnets, then perhaps there is truly a chance for reconciliation. But it also means that approaching her will require all the courage I can muster, for she has always been able to see through any pretense or carefully constructed facade.

As if summoned by my thoughts, she suddenly looks up from the fountain and gazes directly toward my hiding place. For a heart-stopping moment, I think she has spotted me, and I freeze like a deer caught in lamplight. But her twilight eyes pass over my concealment without recognition, and I realize she is simply scanning the garden with the automatic vigilance of someone who has appointed herself its guardian.

"Sometimes I feel as though someone is watching," she says to the fountain, and my blood turns to ice water in my veins. "A presence just beyond the edge of perception, like a half-remembered dream or a word that hovers on the tip of the tongue. It is probably nothing more than wishful thinking, the desperate hope of a lonely heart that someone, somewhere, remembers the friendship that once bloomed in this very spot."

She stands and smooths her ethereal robes, preparing to continue her rounds through the garden. "But hoping is dangerous in a place like this," she continues, her voice taking on a note of hard-won wisdom. "Hope is what transforms the lost things into phantoms rather than letting them die cleanly. Better to tend what exists than to dream of what might be."

As she moves away from the fountain toward another section of the garden, I am left with the profound realization that my observation period has served its purpose. I understand now not just her current state—the careful balance between grief and duty, between the preservation of beautiful memories and the acceptance of their loss—but also the delicate approach that any reconciliation will require.

She has built this sanctuary not just for the lost things of the world, but for her own heart. Every phantom bloom represents a small piece of herself that she has preserved and protected, and any sudden disruption to that careful ecosystem could cause the whole structure to collapse. Whatever words I speak to her, whatever gesture I make toward reconciliation, must acknowledge the twenty years of patient tending she has given to the memory of our friendship.

The Bell of True Speaking grows warm against my chest, and I understand that the time for hiding and observation is drawing to a close. Soon I will need to step from behind this phantom tree and reveal myself to the woman who has been the north star of my heart for twenty years. The thought terrifies and exhilarates me in equal measure, for I know that the next words we speak to each other will determine whether the phantom roses of our friendship can bloom again, or whether they will finally fade into the oblivion that claims all unwatered dreams.

But first, I allow myself one more moment of watching her move through her carefully tended sanctuary, memorizing the grace of her movements and the quiet devotion with which she approaches each ghostly bloom. Whatever happens next, I will carry this image with me always—Seraphina in her garden of lost things, keeping beauty alive through sheer force of will and the kind of love that asks nothing in return.

The lesson is clear now, written in every translucent petal and crystallized tear that forms the paths of this impossible place: true friendship is not just about the joy we share in each other's presence, but about the faith we maintain in each other's worth even in the long seasons of absence. She has been my friend all these years without my knowledge, tending the memory of what we shared with the same care she gives to all the lost and forgotten things that find their way to this realm.

Now it falls to me to prove worthy of such devotion, to find the courage to step from the shadows and speak the words that might transform phantom roses back into living blooms. The Bell of True Speaking hangs heavy with promise around my neck, and somewhere in the distance, I can hear the crystallized music of the archway singing songs of second chances and

redemption earned.

Taking a deep breath of the ethereal air—which tastes of starlight and possibility—I prepare to leave my hiding place and begin the most important conversation of my extraordinarily long life.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Resonance Of Truth

My resolve, crystallized in the silent observation of Seraphina's lonely vigil, felt as fragile as the phantom blooms around me. One wrong step, one misspoken word, and it could shatter into a thousand useless fragments. My hand, trembling slightly, rose to the silver bell Aldric had given me. Its surface was cool, smooth, and impossibly heavy with the weight of unspoken words. The time for watching from the shadows was over.

Taking a breath that tasted of starlight and regret, I stepped from behind the ghostly tree. My leather boots made no sound on the path of crystallized tears, yet my emergence felt as loud as a thunderclap in the sacred quiet of the garden. Seraphina, who was tending to a patch of pale, luminescent lilies that seemed to weep dew, straightened slowly. She did not turn at first, but I saw her shoulders tense, the graceful line of her back becoming a bastion of defense. She had felt my presence, the intrusion of a living, breathing being into her realm of memory and shadow.

My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic drumbeat against the garden's ethereal symphony. My tongue felt thick, a clumsy, useless thing in my mouth. All the eloquent apologies I had rehearsed in the lonely quiet of my study, all the poetic turns of phrase, abandoned me. I was left with nothing but the raw, unadorned truth, and the terrifying prospect of speaking it.

This was it. The moment that would define the rest of my days.

Lifting the Bell of True Speaking, I let its moonbeam chain slide through my fingers. I followed Aldric's instruction, my thumb striking the silver lip three times. The sound was not what I expected. It was not a chime or a peal, but a low, resonant hum that seemed to emanate not from the bell itself, but from the very air around us. The note hung in the atmosphere, a perfect, crystalline vibration that caused the phantom flowers to tremble and the light to intensify. It was the sound of a key turning in a lock that had been rusted shut for twenty years.

Seraphina turned. Her twilight eyes widened, first with confusion, then with a dawning, incredulous recognition that struck me with the force of a physical blow. The watering can of liquid moonlight slipped from her fingers, its contents spilling onto the path where it sizzled like starlight on frost. Her face, a mask of serene melancholy only moments before, was now a canvas of warring emotions: shock, pain, a flicker of something that might have been anger, and beneath it all, a deep, ancient well of sorrow.

“Rook?” she whispered, and my name on her lips after two decades was both a balm and a wound. It was a name I had not truly heard, not in the way she said it, since the day she walked away.

I took a hesitant step forward. The resonant hum of the bell still vibrated within my very bones, compelling an honesty that my fear fought to suppress. “Seraphina,” I managed, my voice rough, unfamiliar.

She took a step back, her opalescent wings flaring slightly, a shield of shimmering light and memory. “How? This place... this place is not for the living. It is for what is lost. For what has been forgotten.” Her words were not an accusation, but a statement of bewildered fact. It was as if a character from a well-loved but long-finished book had suddenly stepped from the pages.

“I never forgot you,” I said, and the bell’s resonance seemed to catch the words and amplify their truth, sending a ripple through the garden. The golden roses that represented our friendship pulsed with a soft, warm light. “I never... for one moment... forgot you.”

Her beautiful face hardened, the guardian reasserting control over the woman. “Forgetting is not the only way to lose something, Rook. Sometimes we simply let it go.”

The sting of that was sharp, but it was true. I had let her go. I had stood in my pride and watched her walk away, my silence a heavier blow than any angry word I could have shouted. “I know,” I said, the admission tearing from my throat. “I was wrong.”

I expected an argument, a rebuttal, a list of my crimes against our bond. Instead, a strange thing happened. The ground between us, the path of crystallized tears, began to shift. Tiny, sharp thorns of what looked like black ice pushed up between the crystals, a manifestation of the pain her words had summoned. The garden was listening. It was judging.

“Wrong?” she echoed, her voice devoid of its former warmth, made brittle by years of solitude. “That is a small word for twenty years of silence, don’t you think? I built this sanctuary from the pieces of what you... what we... shattered. Do not come here now with small words.”

My fear urged me to defend myself, to explain, to qualify. But the Bell of True Speaking was a relentless anchor to my heart’s core. It would allow no excuses, no shifting of blame. “It is the only word I have, but it holds the weight of every one of those years,” I insisted, taking another step. The thorns grew, barring my way. “I was wrong to place my pride above your friendship. I was wrong to believe that being right was more important than being... together. I stood in my cottage after you left, drowning in my own stubbornness, and I let the best part of my life walk out the door because I was a proud, foolish coward.”

As I spoke, a tremor ran through the garden. The black thorns receded slightly. Seraphina's expression faltered, the carefully constructed dam of her composure showing the first signs of cracking. She saw no artifice in my words, no manipulation, only the stark, ugly truth I had hidden from myself for so long.

"You think I bear no blame?" she countered, her voice trembling now. "I was just as proud. I waited for you to follow. I walked all the way to the Whispering Glade, certain that any moment I would hear your footsteps behind me, hear you call my name. I sat by the portal stone until dusk, telling myself you would come. When you did not..." She gestured to the ghostly landscape around us. "When you did not, I let it take me. I chose this."

"You chose a prison," I said, my voice softening. "A beautiful one, to be sure. But a prison nonetheless."

"It is a place of purpose!" she flared, and her wings beat once, sending a gust of jasmine-scented air toward me. "I tend to things no one else cares for. I keep memories from fading into oblivion! Is that not a worthy life?"

"It is a noble one," I conceded, meeting her twilight gaze. "But it is a life lived in the past. You are the guardian of endings, Seraphina. But we... we were always about beginnings. New books, new arguments, new paths to explore by the river. Don't you remember?"

As I spoke of our shared past, the golden roses brightened again, their phantom petals gaining a hint of substantive color. A single, perfect, golden bloom detached itself from its stem and drifted on an unseen current, landing at her feet. She stared down at it, her breath catching in a soft gasp. It was a memory, tangible and real, offered up by the very place she had chosen as her refuge.

"I remember everything," she whispered, the fight draining out of her. She knelt and touched the petal, and I saw a tear fall from her cheek, a drop of liquid starlight that sizzled on the crystalline ground. "That is the curse of this place. I cannot forget. I relive that argument every day. I feel the weight of the words I should have said, the apology I should have offered."

I saw my opening, not to win an argument, but to finally bridge the chasm between us. I knelt as well, right there on the path of tears, heedless of the few remaining thorns. We were eye-to-eye now, two souls separated by twenty years and perhaps ten feet of magical ground.

"Then let us say them now," I urged, my voice thick with emotion. The Bell's hum seemed to intensify, wrapping around us like a blanket of pure intent. "Seraphina, friend of my heart. I am sorry. I am sorry for my wounding pride, for my thunderous silence, and for every single day of the twenty years I allowed to pass without seeking you out to beg your forgiveness. My life has been a lesser thing without you in it."

My words, stripped bare of all pretense by the bell's magic, hung in the air between us. The entire garden held its breath. The phantom trees ceased their shimmering, the starlight fountain quieted its flow. All of existence seemed to hinge on her response.

She looked from me to the golden rose at her feet, and then back to me. The guarded mask of the keeper was gone, replaced by the face of the woman I knew, the friend I had loved with every fiber of my being. Her twilight eyes swam with unshed tears.

"And I am sorry, Rook," she said, her voice finally breaking free of its careful restraint. "I am sorry I did not turn back. I am sorry I punished your pride with my own. I let my hurt become a wall, and I hid behind it instead of fighting for us. My life, too... it has been a beautiful, aching void."

With our mutual confession, our shared apology, the garden erupted. It was not a violent explosion, but a joyous, overwhelming blossoming of life. The starlight fountain surged high into the ethereal air, raining down droplets of pure, concentrated hope. Every phantom flower in the garden burst into full, vibrant, solid color. The ghostly apples on the tree beside her ripened into crimson reality, their scent filling the air. The paths of crystallized tears melted away, replaced by soft, green moss that glowed with an inner light.

And the roses—our roses—they bloomed with such ferocity and beauty that it stole my breath. They were no longer translucent memories but living, breathing flowers of radiant gold, their fragrance a heady mix of shared laughter and the promise of a new dawn.

But the most wondrous change was in Seraphina herself. As the wave of healing energy washed over the garden, her opalescent wings unfurled to their full, glorious span, shimmering with renewed vitality. And from the braids in her silver hair, a sound I had thought lost forever tinkled through the air—the soft, clear chiming of her bells, woken from their twenty-year slumber by the resonance of forgiveness.

She laughed, a real, unburdened laugh that was the sweetest music I had ever heard. The sound scattered the last vestiges of melancholy from the air. I rose to my feet and, closing the distance between us, I finally, *finally* extended my hand.

She took it without hesitation. Her fingers were warm, real, not the ghostly touch I had feared. It felt like coming home.

"Look," she breathed, gesturing to the transformed landscape around us. "You have broken the curse."

"We broke it," I corrected gently. "Together."

The Garden of Lost Things was gone. In its place stood something new, something vibrant and alive: The Garden of Second Chances. Every plant, every path, every drop of water pulsed with the magic of reconciliation. It was a place not of endings, but of new beginnings.

We stood there for a long moment, hand in hand, simply drinking in the beauty of what our honesty had wrought. The twenty-year ache in my soul had finally begun to subside, replaced by a warmth that spread through my entire being. We had found our way back.

But as my eyes scanned our new surroundings, I noticed something I hadn't before. At the very center of the garden, where the fountain now played its song of renewal, the ground was beginning to glow. The light wasn't coming from the fountain, but from beneath the earth, pulsing in a steady, rhythmic beat, like a great, sleeping heart that we had just woken up.

The garden's transformation was not merely aesthetic; we had fundamentally altered the nature of this realm. We had replaced its core power source—the energy of regret and longing—with the far more potent magic of forgiveness and hope. And that awakening power was now presenting us with a new, unforeseen reality, a consequence of our mended bond that we would have to face together.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Heart of Second Chances

The feel of her fingers clasped around mine completed the cycle that spanned twenty years. The specter of my long, empty life disappeared with a hiss of displaced air as her warmth enveloped my hands. In front of us, the Garden of Second Chances throbbed with new life, an eternal symphony woven of our newfound forgiveness. Every blade of glowing moss, every delicate flower petal and leaf was a note in this composition of healing.

We had rewritten a tragedy into something greater – a world where our love flourished in the absence of our hubris.

At the center of the garden, though, there was another melody – one that didn't play in the air, but deep inside me, matching my own heartbeat. The light from underneath the ground was golden and inviting, pulling us towards a revelation of our own making.

"What is it?" asked Seraphina, her tone laced with wonder. Even the tiny silver bells in her opalescent hair played their melodic song, mirroring the pulsing rhythm of the earth itself. Her glorious wings, now unfurled and no longer drooping under the weight of my memory, reflected golden rays of light.

"I don't know," I admitted, my own voice heavy with the tears I hadn't yet shed. "It feels... like the source. Like the very magic we've forged today."

Side-by-side, the two of us tread a path made of soft, living moss, drawn towards the core of the mystery by some invisible magnet. Each step brought more warmth to our feet, guiding us closer to the very heart of the garden. There, amidst a ring of white stone, was a large, rough geode, pulsing with a brilliance unlike any other. It was as big as the storyteller's chair and its incandescent surface was split open, allowing a heart-shaped chasm of golden crystals to show the depths of its incandescence.

This was the Heart of the Garden. The very manifestation of the hope we'd found.

Intrigued, I felt a sense, born of the touch of the bell on my forehead and the whisper of my own heart. I released Seraphina's hand and reached out to the mysterious heart with trembling fingers. She mirrored me, placing her palm next to mine and completing the connection.

Instantly, the surrounding scenery dissolved into oblivion, as the world around us became the place in between, where visions and memories met. Our eyes were no longer fixed on the glowing garden – instead, we were looking through an ethereal window, watching a familiar scene unfold below. My glade was visible on the horizon and I couldn't tear my gaze away from

my own cottage, smoke wafting from its chimney into the still morning air. This was a picture of the life I'd left behind in the twenty years that Seraphina had been away.

Then, the image of our glade shifted. The golden light of the garden's heart connected us with the Whispering Stone in the most literal sense possible – it formed a link in the form of a thread between us and our home world. We were one. The geode gave us an understanding that went beyond words – it showed us our choices, the life lessons our story had finally taught us.

Two separate paths opened in front of us. Each was filled with the promise of happiness, though in different ways.

The first one showed the two of us staying in the Garden of Second Chances. We'd be the caretakers of this miraculous place – the guardians of a perfect sanctuary we created with our magic. This garden would grow under our constant watch, a place without regret and without the sting of pride. Here, the two of us would grow old and grey, enjoying our sunset years and listening to the whispers of the golden roses that were so much like Seraphina herself. The portal to the outside world, however, would lose its magic – becoming an inert stone that we could stare at all day long, dreaming of better times.

The second path led back to our original world. This option involved the destruction of the very place we've just created – the bursting of the Heart of the Garden, giving off the torrent of energy and magic that would form a stable, permanent portal between the two worlds. This would allow us to return home, to our cottage and to our glade. However, this would be paid for with the destruction of the garden itself – the magical plants would lose their color, becoming the memories that we had created in the other dimension. And we would never be able to enter this realm again – the Garden of Second Chances would turn back into the Garden of Lost Things, but this time, the loss would apply only to us.

I sighed deeply. Choosing to go back was a difficult decision. On the one hand, this garden was an ideal place to spend my days, surrounded by nature and by the love of my guardian. On the other hand, going back home promised happiness and companionship – the promise of a better tomorrow after a tough life experience.

But as Seraphina looked at the vision of her childhood home, she sighed, as well. Her expression, which had been so serene before, suddenly softened and became almost vulnerable.

"Twenty years is a lot of time," she whispered. "This garden wasn't made by magic alone. I spent all of those years transforming my sorrow into something bigger. I can't abandon it... Can I?"

"You haven't lived your life to the fullest," I argued, the words stinging on my tongue. "You've spent all of this time in an artificial paradise, unable to move and grow because of the

lack of purpose."

"A paradise?" Her expression changed instantly, her twilight eyes glowing in a sudden flash of fire. "It is not paradise. Rook, I was trapped in memories. I had nowhere else to go. I was living in the past until you showed me the future."

Her words struck me like a slap in the face. I had no response to this; she was right. Staying in this place would mean trapping my newfound happiness in amber – imprisoning my guardian in the illusion of a peaceful sanctuary. What good would this be for anyone? It was time for action, for facing our problems and for helping others in the process.

"It will be hard," I pointed out slowly, trying to choose my words wisely. "To let it go... I know we must do this, but it's... painful."

"To destroy it?" her tone turned gentler. "No, Rook. It is not destruction. It is a transformation. And the best part is... we take it back home with us."

She turned my attention away from the garden to the vision of my cottage and of the Whispering Stone in particular. "There are so many broken friendships in this world, Rook. So many lonely gardens, so many people stuck in the past because they've lost their faith. Perhaps... this is our life lesson."

And I realized she was right. The purpose of this entire experience wasn't to hide away, to run away into a perfect garden of illusions. No. The true reward of our story was learning from our mistake, forgiving each other and moving on together. There were so many other people in the world who needed our help.

The choice became obvious. It hurt, but it was necessary. I squeezed Seraphina's hand gently, trying to find my words in a rush of emotions. "My life has always been a lesser thing because you weren't a part of it. Now, even in paradise, it would be incomplete. And we should face the real world together."

The chiming of her bells sounded like music to my ears as a smile illuminated her beautiful face. For the first time since our reunion, I felt no awkwardness, no embarrassment at her beauty. On the contrary, she radiated an aura of home and comfort that made me forget everything around us.

"Together, then," she confirmed.

We both looked at the geode in front of us, feeling the heat radiating from its surface. It was time for us to say goodbye. We took the geode's power in our hands, thinking of what it meant to us. We thought of the happy moments we had shared, and we remembered the sting of our argument – we recalled all the grief of the past, all of the joy of the present. We gave our

regrets, our fears and hopes. We gave our love.

The geode accepted them, opening up to us. The deep, resonant groan reverberated in the air as a wave of golden light traveled across the surface, breaking the Heart of the Garden wide open in the process. It burst open without any noise, releasing a surge of golden energy that washed over everything in sight, erasing everything it touched. The beautiful garden was fading away – and it made me cry. But this farewell was also an incredible blessing. The roses shimmered and turned into motes of golden light, the moss faded away, and the impossible fragrance disappeared. I was leaving behind my temporary home, but I was taking its heart with me – I was taking her with me.

The wave of golden light converged, forming the shape of a beautiful archway that glowed and hummed with a gentle, pure tone of a harmonized soul. This was our path back home – a portal we would be able to walk through any time we wanted.

Seraphina looked at me, her twilight eyes reflecting golden rays of light. "Are you ready?"

Was I ready? I looked at the ghost of the Garden, a place that had seen so many sorrows and joys, at least in my memory. All of the happiness and peace we had experienced would become our cherished memory, but this would make it even more precious. I was about to leave this place, to return to the outside world, but the feeling of contentment was too strong to ignore.

"With you?" I repeated her words softly. "I'm ready for whatever comes next."

Hand-in-hand, we stepped through the glowing archway of the portal.

Instantly, everything around us changed. The bright light that surrounded us vanished, as if we had jumped back into reality. We were walking in familiar glades, stepping onto the soft greenery of the Eastern Glades. There, in front of us, stood a transformed Whispering Stone – its grey surface was covered in swirling patterns of golden light. The ancient runes, etched into the stone, told a new story – one of friendship and forgiveness. And the entire rock pulsed with a golden light, the exact same light that had powered the Heart of the Garden.

The archway shimmered and disappeared into the fog of dawn.

We were home.

I gazed at my beloved Seraphina, my eyes unable to capture the sheer beauty of her face in the morning light. She had transformed – the glow of her youth and innocence had returned and I couldn't help smiling. It was so good to see her smile once more, to feel the joy emanating from this gorgeous creature.

"I've missed the sunrise here," I admitted.

"And now I'll watch it with you."

CHAPTER SIX

The Unmaking of a Miracle

And the silence after that was melody – sweet sounds of a world that was once again put to rights, beautiful harmonics of two hearts beating in the same rhythm after decades of separation. Seraphina was standing by my side, head resting on my shoulder, and in this small, simple gesture the emptiness that had for decades gnawed away at my soul was replaced with something solid and tangible. Golden light of the rising sun spilled over the Cragglewood Peaks and bathed the eastern glades in its warmth. But this was not the glades I knew – everything was new in their light, like I am seeing them again for the very first time. Dew drops on the clover, the bark of the sentinel pines – even the air felt fresh and alive. All around us the Whispering Stone radiated its soft golden warmth, the captured heart of the Garden of Second Chances beating in synchronicity with mine and Seraphina's own. Written in the veins of its stone was the language of forgiveness and the tale that was etched there could not but make us happy.

The bells attached to Seraphina's hair were ringing now, their sounds mellow and comforting. After so long time in the stillness of the garden of Second Chances, they were once again filled with the music of the world – the sound I could hear only in my dreams.

"I've missed our sunrise," I said, feeling my heart swell with gratitude, relief and the sorrow of wasted years.

She tightened her grip on my hand. "Everything looks brighter when you see it not alone," she replied, and for the first time since I'd known her, her twilight eyes shone with joy.

We just stood there for quite some time, frozen statues of contentment, while the world around us slowly woke up and started its daily routine. There were no vows of everlasting loyalty between us, no great promises or declarations. We did not need any of that – just standing together was enough to know that whatever happened before and was forgiven and buried. Walking through the valley of sorrow had done us well and we emerged on its other side, scarred but united. In this moment it seemed to me like we finally earned our happiness – a calm life filled with sunrise and love.

I was wrong. Oh, how blind I was in those times – how naive I was to think that miracles do not ask for their due, for their price.

The first sign of disturbance in this peaceful world came from the Whispering Stone. For a split second its steady beat stumbled, then the golden glow emanating from it turned to feverish white light, casting a bright and sickening glow in its surroundings. Intricate runes inscribed there started to move and transform into twisted symbols, strange and alien, and chilling air

invaded the area, its touch freezing and metallic, carrying with it the smell of dust.

The ground near the Whispering Stone began to transform: lush green grass became grey and dry as it suddenly crumbled to ashes. The spreading blight was soon joined by another phenomenon – thick briar plants began growing all around it. Their growth rate was absolutely incredible: in seconds they reached my knees, wrapping themselves around the trunk of the ancient pine tree. At the same time thorns, glistening and crystal-clear, appeared on their vines, shining with light, similar to the one that flowed from the Whispering Stone.

I unconsciously placed my hand on the hilt of my rapier, knowing very well that such enemy could never be beaten by a mere weapon. Our journey back to the world had disturbed something far older than anything I'd ever met before, and this was the consequence. Magic that was supposed to heal and restore everything instead started to corrupt and destroy it.

Opalescent wings, once again filled with colors of a midnight sky, flared behind Seraphina's back as she rushed toward the Whispering Stone. "The energy... it's the same as from the Garden, but it's... soured. It's imbalanced."

"What do you mean?" I asked, rushing to follow her and protect her from this menace.

"It's hard to explain..." she started hesitantly, looking at me with fear-filled eyes. "In the beginning I thought that Garden is a sanctuary. That the energy there comes from all those people's sorrow and devotion to their lost things. It was as if this Garden is holding all those sorrows, preserving the memories... But now I'm thinking... what if it wasn't meant to do that? What if it's just a seal, keeping the sorrow inside?"

For a long time nobody spoke. Words of her revelation hung in the air between us, suffocating and choking. We had not simply taken the magic of that place to ourselves. We hadn't even brought its Heart to the world – we've torn its gates apart and paved the way to freedom for its prisoner.

I was hit by a realization, sharp and cold, that we are facing the consequence of our choice. All my regret and grief about myself, about my stubbornness and about Seraphina's departure are petty compared to the fact that I've destroyed the Garden of Lost Things, its magic and its purpose. What we've done to save our relationship, what I've done for my selfish longing to get the woman I've loved for decades back, almost killed the world of Fey and our friends in it. All of our private sorrows and griefs that were finally reconciled and healed were nothing but a prelude to something bigger.

The blight spread faster now, consuming the green leaves of the trees and transforming everything around the Whispering Stone into desolation. The thorny briars began tightening around the trees trunks, making them groan with exertion. The sky above slowly turned dark

purple with grey streaks, as if it was preparing for a storm. And yet it wasn't raining – air in the area was becoming increasingly charged with energy, making breathing difficult. Suddenly, a tearing noise broke the silence and ghostly shapes started pouring out of the stone, glowing in eerie light. Unlike delicate phantom-flowers, these spirits were twisted and malformed, filled with malevolence and sorrow. With their empty sockets and thorny, clawed hands they resembled demons straight from my worst nightmares. And these demons had chosen us for a meal.

"We should retreat!" I shouted, pulling Seraphina away from the stone. Some of these creatures managed to attack us, reaching out with their claws – their targets narrowly escaped and only barely managed to evade deadly blows of phantom hands. As we were running for our lives, our once beloved glade was slowly turning into nightmare, unfit to serve as home for us anymore.

From the safe confines of our cottage we could observe the process of corruption. The stone became an eye of the storm, constantly spinning in the light of a storm with ghostly spirits rotating around it. The blight continued to spread from the area and was quickly transforming it into a grey wasteland. An awful feeling of guilt started eating at me and my mind – because all of this is my fault, because I've opened Pandora's Box.

"This is my fault," I repeated, looking around our now ruined home. "Because of me, the disaster happens."

She turned from the window and grabbed my face with her hands. "No," she said firmly. "You and I both made this decision. I agreed with you to come to this world and bring its magic along with us, rather than staying in that perfect world you imagined. We chose the imperfect reality, the flawed world of our choice. I don't deny that we've started something terrible, but we can fix it. We'll pay for our mistakes together."

As I was listening to these words, I couldn't help but be amazed by her courage and strength. Seraphina was no longer a melancholic guardian, but a queen – a powerful queen, able to lead her followers and fight with this enemy. Her friendship helped me regain my confidence, so necessary to defeat the monster threatening me and Seraphina.

"But how?" I asked quietly, looking at our destroyed home. "How could we stop this? Aldric is gone, our only sage is gone. No one will help us to decipher what this... creature is and how to combat it."

"We can try," she replied. "You said it yourself, we opened this stone with our power. But we used this power unwisely and the stone reacted. Perhaps... Perhaps we can solve this problem using the same method. Only this time..."

Suddenly, I understood what she meant to say. The stone is now an open gate between our worlds – it is connected with the energy that is destroying it. If we are able to reverse the direction of energy, perhaps it will work – if the energy flows out of the stone, it may be possible to draw it back and stop this madness.

"But... we will destroy our only link to each other," she suddenly interrupted my thoughts.

"Yes, it is inevitable, but this may be the only solution," I said. "Or maybe we can... summon Aldric, call for his help, using this stone as a medium."

Our gazes met and I knew what she thinks – she was afraid of the price we have to pay, but now she understands that it is necessary.

There was no time for deliberation and hesitation – the blight was still growing and soon our home will become part of nightmare that was spreading.

We left the cottage and stepped onto the porch, feeling the power flowing around us. Air was becoming colder and thicker, making breathing even harder than before. It smelled strongly of corruption and destruction. Slowly but surely we went towards the blighted glade – and towards the solution to this riddle. I drew my rapier, feeling its familiar presence in my hand and its blade glowing in the unnatural light. Seraphina's wings spread out to their full size and caught in their currents the air of the corrupted area. We slowly advanced toward the stone, dodging attacks of phantom creatures that suddenly appeared before us.

We were not a scholar and a guardian anymore, not a man and a woman, lost to each other for years. No, we are one now – a pair of warriors fighting against the monster of their pasts, created by them. We stopped on the edge of blighted circle surrounding the Whispering Stone, looking at it in hope.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Harmony of Scars

And so, when it happened, our choice was made not with dread, but the resounding clarity of a struck chord. We knew there was no other way to save ourselves: to retreat was to damn the rest. We found ourselves surrounded by chaos – by the destruction wrought by the very force which brought us together. The Whispering Stone, having granted us the privilege of our reunion, was now the epicenter of uncreation – a blinding source of power whose fevered white light seemed to beckon chaos from beyond. "The stone is a conduit," Seraphina's voice rang clearly in the discordant cacophony. "It's a gateway, opening and closing on the hinge of sheer power. We can't lock it with brute force. We can't overpower a storm. We need to make it... to make it stop by creating a resonance that can calm the chaos down, by offering it harmony." Her words were a breath of fresh air in the tempest raging around us. Harmony. Yes, our relationship always seemed to be a harmony in itself – a perfect blend of understanding and empathy, of shared jokes and conversations with the stars that neither of us ever had time for anymore. Harmony versus chaos: to beat it, we needed to regain what we'd lost twenty years ago. "But how?" I asked, my voice lost in the roar around us. "With the only thing that could overcome despair," she answered calmly, looking at me with twilight eyes. "With our joy. With our forgiveness. The heart of our little garden was more than just a key, you know. It was a seed. We've planted it here and now we should make sure it survives, despite the blight trying to strangle it." Together, we moved towards the blighted place where life ended and chaos ruled supreme. The chill emanating from the cursed ground bit through the thin layer of cloth that was my clothes, freezing my blood. The corrupted air crackled like fire and my rapier felt like it was glowing from the reflected power of the Whispering Stone – it felt like nothing else than a tuning fork, waiting to sing in harmony with its master. Seraphina's huge wings, as majestic as they were, were the last line of defense we had – their power would control the chaotic airflow, giving us room to act. We walked into a circle of blighted grass – its white glow making our feet sink into the rotten floor of our paradise. Suddenly, we weren't surrounded by friends and loved ones anymore. All those thorny specters of anger that had spent decades trapped within the stone prison, came at us, burning with hatred and spiteful rage – a mixture of countless lifetimes' worth of solitude and abandonment. They tried to stab us, lashing out with crystal-thorn whips – their weapons. I blocked the first attempt, the impact of the blow sending sparks of rage and sorrow through my body – an overwhelming wave of emotion that made me wince. Another one came at us from the side and, before I could raise my sword in defense, Seraphina sent out a powerful gust of air from her wings, making the phantom evaporate in a cloud of shrieking dust. That was a fight; we fought in perfect harmony. She knew my weaknesses and strengths, my fears and desires – and I knew hers. We didn't need to discuss

anything; our actions spoke for themselves as we moved through the battle like the dancers of an age-old ballet. Our steps echoed throughout the blighted forest as we advanced towards the core of the disaster, cutting and blasting whatever tried to get too close. Seraphina used her ability to send streams of light and gusts of air at the approaching enemies; meanwhile, I acted as a blade of our duo – fighting off any danger that tried to get too close to my partner. Soon enough, we arrived at the source of the trouble. The Whispering Stone towered above us, its power radiating from it like a living storm, threatening to consume us. The screams coming from it drowned our world in an endless cacophony of despair, regret and mourning. The prisoner – the source of all our grief – was trapped inside the ancient stone, its presence causing a chain reaction of blight. It was our fault – a mistake caused by twenty years of solitude, by our unwillingness to forgive and forget – a mistake that turned into something much worse. "Now, Rook," Seraphina's voice was tense, but her face remained calm. "It's time we touched it and told it our story." Trembling from the fear and anticipation, I placed my hands on the trembling stone. Agony – but not a physical one; a pain in my very soul. I felt a stream of sorrow running through my body and mind, washing me with despair and grief and rage that someone took away the ones we loved. I saw the faces of millions of people and their lives – solitary, full of regrets and longing. And somewhere at the bottom of all the sorrows, I could feel the echoes of my failures and sins: the pride that tore us apart, the cowardice that kept me quiet, and twenty wasted years because I was too afraid to apologize. Chaos understood me; it knew I had a weakness – a hole in my soul, something that could help me sympathize with it. And so, it poured into my soul, trying to crush me and drown in my own despair and rage. I wanted to cry and scream, but all I could do was wait and hope that something or someone would save me from this terrible agony. Then, amidst the roaring of despair, I heard it. Seraphina was humming. Her melodious voice sounded like a ray of sunshine piercing through a heavy fog – like a fragile ray of hope shining in the midst of the darkness. It was her favorite song – a child's rhyme about a firefly that longed to be a star like its brothers and sisters. It was the song she sang when she was little, when she used to hide among the pines of the garden to catch a glimpse of my clumsy self. Her mother, in turn, used to sing it to her on chilly autumn nights – the very same nights I used to spend listening to the whispers of our little garden. It was a savior for me. Slowly, I could hear the chiming bells in Seraphina's silver locks resonating to the tune of the song, adding harmony to her efforts. The tune itself created a barrier around us, resisting the chaotic flow of power and sorrow that threatened to engulf us. I could feel her presence in my head – warm and soothing, not an intruder, but a loving hand trying to lead us out of despair. "You are not alone," she thought into my mind as I tried to grasp the meaning of the phrase. "I'm here. Remember with me." And so I did. I opened my soul for memories, allowing it to flood with happiness – memories of us: of a clumsy kitten tripping over the roots of a great oak tree, and a little girl with wings perched on a branch above me. I remembered us playing games in the garden, the berries we ate and the secrets we exchanged under the stars. I recalled

how it felt when I finally asked her to be my friend – my only friend until the end of our lives. And I poured these memories into the stone. Not as a weapon, but as an offering. I poured in the pain of losing her and the joy of being reunited; the pain of my shame and her forgiveness and, maybe, of our love that was growing in front of me right there and then. And the Whispering Stone reacted: it trembled with the intensity of our emotions. Another tone emerged from it and began intertwining with the song of harmony coming from Seraphina's lips, adding its own notes to the melody. White and golden tones began mixing and transforming, forming the harmony we'd been hoping for. And soon, the shrieks coming from the prisoners began faltering and turning into the moans of confusion – for the first time in centuries, the prisoner was calming down and stopping the blight in our beautiful little garden. The thorny branches of the Whispering Trees began losing their power and turned into dull sticks. The stone started shaking fiercely as chaos was pulled out from it, flowing out of the garden like waves. Its energy was going back into the abyss from which it came, drawn in by the harmonious and peaceful tune. And then it happened. Seraphina and I poured all of our energy into creating that perfect resonance and it worked. The tune that was echoing in the air stopped and everything fell silent. We lay on the grass, breathing heavily and catching our breath. I could see her next to me – pale and tired, with her wings drooping and her eyes closed. She was exhausted and almost dying, but there was no other way for our victory to become real. With great effort, I lifted myself up on one elbow. Our little paradise looked different now: the tall pines stood with deep wounds on their trunks, caused by the crystal thorns; the ground was scorched in a great circle around the stone and the leaves and flowers that had survived the blight were beginning to fade into oblivion. I looked at the Whispering Stone; its ancient runes had been blurred and the golden veins, formed by the magic of our love, disappeared without a trace. But the worst thing that I could see was the deep cracks and splits forming on the surface of the stone: one of them tore it in half and closed the gate for eternity. The price we paid for the victory was too high, yet we had no time to think about it – there would come a time later for grieving and crying.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Echo of Starlight

The oppressive silence that enveloped the glade after the end of our struggle was palpable. It seemed to push into me from all sides, filling all the spaces between the gasping, torn magic. It seemed to reverberate in my ears and my very bones, a reminder of the terrible powers that had been used and contained. The air was cleared of the dissonant power, leaving behind only the pungent and earthy smell – of home and of death. We had succeeded. The glade lay battered and scratched around us, but it was still ours. The ancient sorrow was now in its stony, silent prison. But when I slowly rose to my knees, ignoring the pain in every muscle, the cost of our victory seemed to lay pale and motionless in the wounded grass beside me.

It was Seraphina.

At the mere thought of her, my whole body felt a sharp, bitter chill. Without further ado, I dropped to my knees despite the pain in my muscles and began crawling towards my fallen friend. With her rapier left unused and forgotten in a pile of grass beside me, I touched her shoulder and noticed how fragile and changed she had become. The wings of the Moonwing were no longer those dazzling and light-giving shields which were capable of controlling the winds. Instead, now they were withered and lifeless, colorless as the skin of a snake shedding the remnants of its previous existence. Nevertheless, they were still mesmerizing and tragically beautiful, like the opalescence of the fallen and frozen autumn leaves, which symbolized the glory of summer long gone. Her silver hair that was illuminated by the soft shine of the tiny bells braided in it was as dead and colorless as the surrounding grass. The stars in her twilight eyes had lost their radiance and now looked like feeble embers at the bottom of an extinguished candle. Her chest heaved up and down, but the breaths were shallow like ripples left in the water after dropping a stone in it.

"We... we did it," I said, trembling slightly. "Our glade..."

"Sssh, now," I said softly, feeling a wave of tenderness flooding my exhausted mind. "Sleep."

With infinite gentleness, I gathered my poor, fragile friend into my arms, trying hard to feel the beating of her fragile heart. Our journey back to the cottage turned out to be a heavy, laborious undertaking. With each step, I concentrated on the heartbeat trying to keep the delicate melody of her rhythms alive with the power of my will. It seemed like the very ground resisted me as we dragged our tired forms across the traces left by the storm, while the wounded trees seemed to stare at me compassionately. At long last, we reached my humble dwelling – the wooden cottage that was my sanctuary and haven for as long as I can remember. Hidden

under the protecting branches of the massive oak, the place seemed to turn into a fortress of my solitude now. When I gently laid my unconscious friend on my cot and closed the curtain, hiding the damaged Whispering Stone from view, it seemed to transform into a sickroom.

During one whole day and night, I tried my best. Though not a trained healer and not a doctor, I knew a few secrets of the Faery folk and their medical practices. I boiled infusions of Sun-petal and Silverleaf, believing that these herbs were said to restore a soul of one weakened. She could drink but little. I prepared a paste of Moon-moss but when applied, the healing herb showed no effect on my poor companion. I did nothing. Seraphina was dying, not of illness, but of an entirely different and incurable cause, since her Moonwing had simply given too much of herself in our struggle.

From time to time, she would wake up, drift in and out of shallow consciousness and mumble some meaningless words, talking of her friends in the Garden of Ghosts. One time, Seraphina suddenly opened her eyes and clung to my sleeve.

"It is not your fault, you stubborn, antlered fool," she whispered with a note of former teasing in her voice. "I've told you this before. Your light is not dependent on your being. It comes from joy, hope, and creation. In our fight, we created cages for the storm. While doing that, we had to use some of our soul for the process of singing. That's my fate, but I would do it again without a second thought. You are more precious to me than all the gardens in the world."

"A price that I shouldn't have allowed you to pay," I replied, feeling guilt weighing on my mind and shoulders like a physical weight. I was responsible for opening the portal and causing a series of misfortunes resulting in this situation; it all started from my selfish loneliness.

"You didn't *allow* me," she corrected me gently, squeezing the sleeve of my coat. "We had to do it together. This life with you, though short, is far more precious than all the centuries of solitude in the Garden of Ghosts. I'm glad to share your fate, even if only for a couple of days. That's the present."

Her words were supposed to comfort me, but instead, they urged me to do something for both our sakes. Reconciliation had to last forever, and there was only one way it could be achieved – to restore my friend's strength. After she drifted off to sleep, I went to my humble library and began searching for some answers there. Not to the books with the history and philosophy, but to the chest which was concealed by the ancient texts bound in wyrm-hide. Written on the parchment made of river-reed paper and berry ink, they were sealed with berry wax.

After a painstaking search lasting for a number of hours, I managed to find the answer to my question regarding Seraphina's symptoms. As it was known from the lore, Moonwings were the conduits of starlight, absorbing the ambient magic of the night from the sky. They could be

revived if their source was sacrificed during an event which had drained them of their power. An old text found in the small book of silver said that in order to revive a Moonwing, one should use something called the Pool of Sleeping Starlight which could be located among the highest peaks of Dragon's Tooth. The Pool required people with pure intentions and no thirst for power to be granted its favors. As for how to find it, I received only hints:

"When the light of a Moonwing is sacrificed, it does not die, but sleeps. In order to be revived, it requires being woken in the untainted reflection of the heaven it was born in. Seek the Pool of Sleeping Starlight, where the sky lies dreaming in the heart of the earth. But beware, for the Pool will not give its gift for free. It demands a resonance, an offering of what is most cherished, to reflect the light it grants."

That was not the information I sought. Instead, I was provided with only a few riddles leading to the Pool of Sleeping Starlight. They said that the Pool could be located in the veins of starlight, meaning veins of a rare mineral. Moreover, this mineral could be found only in the Dragon's Tooth mountains which were known to be a treacherous place to travel. I had little chances to reach the Pool of Starlight if I had such a weakened companion as Seraphina with me. Deep in thought, I laid the small silver book on the floor and looked at the serene figure sleeping on my cot.

It was a risk. We would never return from this journey. We both knew that. The only chance left was to accept the risk and head for the Pool of Starlight. Hope was a powerful feeling, which could provide you with new hope, but it was often cruelly deceptive with regard to the options that it left you. Our life as we knew it was over. Whispering Stone was destroyed; the glade was ruined; our friends were far away in the Garden of Ghosts. Only one choice was left – to continue on the only possible path.

Turning to see my poor companion asleep, I felt an urge of guilt and horror. Seraphina, having spent all her life protecting the Earth from various threats, sacrificing herself for it again and again, was going to spend her last moments dying in my arms. Could I give her such an ending as her peaceful death? No, I couldn't. That was why I had to think of some solution.

Next morning when my companion opened her eyes sleepily, I explained everything to her. She listened quietly to my words but did not say anything until she had finished, then looked at me wearily.

"Rook," she said softly. "Though at my former level, a journey to the Dragon's Tooth mountains would have taken several weeks at least. Moreover, the area is full of dangers. I have nothing to offer to the Pool now."

"I will carry you to it," I responded, ignoring her words. "No matter what the Pool will ask of us in exchange, antlers, memories, even my rapier, I will give it. I cannot lose you again,

Seraphina. I've finally managed to bring you back to me."

This last remark was enough to stir my companion out of her lethargy; she opened her eyes and suddenly, they were shining with light. She looked attentively at me studying my face and the expression of my eyes, where my love for her burned brightly now. Seraphina slowly let out a tear, which traced a sparkling trail down her cheek.

"You stubborn, magnificent, antlered fool..." she muttered with a note of a prayer. "All right. Let's go. Together."

CHAPTER NINE

The Offering of Echoes

The climb to the Dragon's Tooth mountains was one long pilgrimage into silence. Instead of soft soil of Eastern Glades, my boots crushed hard shale and stone that whispered under my steps. Seraphina was in my arms now; her limp body hung from my shoulder like an amulet of some strange deity. Her soul was a burning ember refusing to die down. I was the manifestation of an impossible attempt to preserve her soul flame from the howling gale. Her opalescent wings were hanging listlessly over my shoulders as the bells on her head made no sound. The most telling proof of this was an absolute silence of the mountains. Every crunch and sound I made seemed to echo from the rocks around with deafening volume. I was alone, and I walked alone, full of fear for my companion and my inability to help her. Ancient texts told me of the "veins of fallen starlight" which would guide me to the Pool that was going to revive Seraphina's inner light. The following three days we spent looking for the said starlight were fruitless. Though I was a good scholar and a good analyst of maps, these mountains defied my attempts to penetrate them. Their gigantic and ancient rocks were covered with indecipherable runes and symbols. Every shiny mica outcropping in the mountains was a deceptive landmark, every little river and steamlet flowing from them seemed to mislead me. On the fourth day of our travel, I had to take shelter in a cave-like hollow in the side of a huge granite formation which sheltered us from the freezing rain pouring from the sky. Cautiously laying Seraphina on my emerald overcoat, whose filigree had lost its color due to dirt, I tried hard to dispel despair growing inside me, but I clearly realized that time was passing without bringing any results. The opalescence of her skin had faded to nearly translucent. She was becoming invisible for me, and the coldness I could sense in her previously had become external now. Her breath formed clouds of mist, and her pale skin turned gray-blue in color. I failed to help her in every way. "Have a look at the scenery, Rook," she said in an incredibly weak and sleepy voice. "Is it not beautiful?" "What is it?" I answered, looking at her. "The silence of the mountains. The mountain doesn't strive for anything. It just... is. There is a beautiful peace here." I didn't want her to lose her hope. Her tone of voice was filled with a certain degree of despair, which made me angry. I was angry at those stupid mountains and the indifferent sky above them, angry at myself for every mistake I had ever committed. Pride had prevented me from apologizing to her for long years, which was now killing a girl who used to be my best friend. The silence that now separated us was getting its revenge. "No," I retorted. "There is nothing beautiful here. This is a place full of failures." Then I turned away from her and struck the rock walls of the cave in rage. The sharp pain running from my wrist to my shoulder restored some reality to my mind, and I pressed my palm onto the granite. The icy coldness of the air numbed my thoughts. Being a Feyline, I knew that my ancestors used to listen to the Nature. Listening with their hearts, they

learned its secrets. My ears could not hear it now. *Listen*, the voice in me commanded. *The mountain sings. All you need is to hear it.* I took a deep breath and shut my eyes, concentrating on the rock. Fearing that I might hear something dreadful, I nevertheless calmed my mind from any intrusive thoughts. All I could hear was the mountain, the sleet, and my own labored breathing. Listening with my antlers rather than ears, I heard it. A rhythmic hum sounding from the depths of rocks seemed ancient, like the very Earth. It was eternal like the pulse of universe. Amidst this humming, I sensed other noises, different notes sounding less confidently. These were minor chords of iron and granite. But suddenly, yet another chord appeared. Silvery, sharp, clear and distant like starlight coming from the highest point of the mountains. This chord seemed to be different from others, somehow closer to the essence of Seraphina and her inner light. It seemed that the starlight was trapped in this ancient stone and dreaming. Opening my eyes, I saw Seraphina staring at me.

"I've found it," I told her. "The way to restore your strength."

"What did you find?" she asked me.

"The way to save you," I answered and, picking her up again, started climbing upwards.

Following the silvery, distant chord was not an easy task. It seemed to lead us far from beaten paths, away from any areas where any Feyline scholar had ever traveled. Climbing the mountains, I followed this silvery humming that seemed to come from far away. Following my senses and instincts, I scaled steep rocks and crossed gorges and canyons I would never dare pass otherwise. Ignoring the thin and cold air, we were moving onwards.

Now my companion was no longer my only reason to climb those mountains. Instead, she was like a beacon of light illuminating my path. Whenever my fears and terrors of falling became too strong, I remembered our experiences together, regaining faith and strength necessary to continue. Though stumbling in my tiredness and nearly falling down the abyss, I remembered the taste of a sunberry which had been planted by her and was inspired with her memory to make the next step. The fact that she could not help me any more in this did not bother me at all. In my mind, Seraphina and I were equals again; she was my co-survivor now.

Thus, I, who used to be shy and silent, turned into the determined and resolute Feyline who was going to accomplish the given mission whatever it might cost me. Peaceful Seraphina had vanished as well, replaced with determination. I did not notice any vestige of my Moonwing in her now; instead, there was a firm determination now.

Several days of climbing amidst icy atmosphere passed. Our climb was hard, but we persisted regardless. We had a goal, and nothing would distract us from it. Soon, the silvery hum started to grow louder and clearer. It directed me to some place I wouldn't notice otherwise – the dark cleft in the rock that I should have avoided. But now it seemed to lure me there like a

magnetic field.

Approaching the place, we could feel how the air inside the cleft was cooler, thicker, and carrying some special fragrance of the Earth lying underneath and something celestial as well. Stepping inside, we saw nothing but darkness, but the light appeared shortly after. Silvery resonance filled dark rocks, appearing everywhere – in the walls, ceiling, and air. Exiting the mouth of the cleft, we entered a huge cavern that could have belonged to Earth's core itself.

It felt like we had opened a door to the core of the planet. Gigantic crystals lining the walls reflected the light from an unseen source. Looking at us from the darkness above, the obsidian ceiling was covered with thousands of points of light – true starlight that had been caught in the rocks forever. Shining brightly and reflecting the harmonious hum of the mountain outside, this place was definitely sacred; I had come to it with a purpose.

In the middle of the cavern, there was a perfectly round pool filled with black liquid, the liquid which didn't reflect anything around it. That place and object I had searched for so long were known as the Pool of Sleeping Starlight. Now my task was to awaken it, but how? *It requires resonance; an offering of the most cherished things to reflect the light.* What did I cherish the most? My antlers? Yes, they represented my identity as a Feyline, but it wasn't pride. My rapier? That was just a weapon. My life? Yes, I would have offered it to save her, but the Pool would have refused. Memories? Of course, I could easily lose all of them, but they were dearer to me than any other possession. What was it? Recalling the memory that I cherished so much, I smiled slightly remembering its joy and peace. This was the moment I finally reconciled with Seraphina in the Garden of Lost Things and when we had embraced our common past. I had apologized to her, and she had done the same to me. We had become friends once again, and our hearts had become reconciled. The sound of silver bells filled our heads; we were happy once again. Reliving this memory now was to feel its happiness and peace. It was the one thing that the Pool was asking for, and the only thing that I had now. But to give it was to lose it. That memory was the reward for all my ordeal. It was priceless as something so intimate that losing it meant losing its essence as well. Yet, this act of giving away something that could make Seraphina happier could be selfless. I offered her something that was the reward for me to heal us both. For her happiness and recovery, I would do anything. I knelt besides the Pool of Starlight and turned to look at my friend. I was going to tell her how I felt after restoring her strength, but now was the right time. "I love you, Seraphina. I always have." Seraphina's eyes flooded with tears. "I know that, Rook," she whispered. Closing my eyes, I went deep inside my soul to find the memory. There was it – the one where we embraced our common past and became friends again. I heard the sound of silver bells ringing in my companion's hair. There was her touch that I could remember feeling on my skin. There was my happiness and peace that I relived now. With a silent scream of psychic agony, I released my

memory to the Pool of Sleeping Starlight. It seemed that it reacted immediately. Feeling something

CHAPTER TEN

A Friendship Forged

"Rook?" The melodious voice that had once belonged to Seraphina carried a delicate confusion. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Her luminous face was clouded with worry. Still shimmering with starlight from the Pool, she was radiant with vitality. She was whole, strong, the silver bells in her hair ready to ring with her laughter. And there I was, my joy having been stripped of everything precious in it. How could I explain a color to a world of greys? How could I explain the taste of honey to someone whose tongue could only remember ashes?

My words betrayed me. They were rocks in my mouth, heavy, useless and entirely inadequate. The stoic scholar, the same as before I fell mad with the desire to protect Seraphina, returned, not because of the shame or shyness but the depth of my grief. I could tell Seraphina was hurt. She had been reunited with a long-lost friend who had just fallen silent again. Her confusion had transformed into sadness. She had every right to blame me and hate me, and yet... I could not let her think of me as such. I wanted her to know everything...

I pointed to the Pool. My hand trembled with emotion and fear that I would not succeed in telling her what happened there. Words failed me. My hand, though, did not. It spoke of my intention loud and clear: show her what had happened. Do not let me fail her again.

Seraphina followed the direction of my hand, puzzled even more than before. She was sure of something else: I was sad. The flickers of the celestial light in her twilight eyes had become darker than usual. She got up, gracefully and elegantly, with that kind of movement that had been a trademark of her fey self and that I thought to be lost forever, and knelt beside me at the Pool's edge. She did not touch the water. She only looked into it as if it would reveal a hidden message for her.

"What did it ask of you, Rook?" she asked in hushed tones. "What was the offering?"

The Pool answered her. But not by showing her visions, as one might expect to get from the pool used for scrying. It did not even send any visions for me. All it did was speak with the resonant tone and show me how it understood her query.

She gasped and widened her eyes. There was no way for her to understand what was going on until she felt it herself. I watched with dread as her expression became radiant with light she could not see. Seraphina experienced the blissful moment of transformation, she felt the Garden of Lost Things change into the Garden of Second Chances. She felt the phantom roses turn into velvety roses, covered in gold. She saw the crystallized tears that made the path slippery

melting away and giving their place to the soft, glowing moss. She heard the music of the silver bells ringing in her hair for the first time in over two decades, the sweetest melody she had ever heard. And then she saw, rather felt the warmth of my hand in hers, the relief, the unspoken forgiveness, the purity and strength of our bond renewed... I could see it reflected in her face. I could feel it myself because I could see the love for me burning brightly in those twilight eyes. That memory had become the most valuable gift she could receive from me.

Seraphina's face softened into a beatific smile. Tears rolled down her cheeks and her hands flew to her mouth. "Oh, Rook," she whispered, looking into my eyes, as if she could hear the music through them. "This feeling..."

And then, the Pool changed. The light was gone; the air became heavy and thick with the feeling of pain that was hard to breathe. The celestial hum grew deeper, and suddenly a new, pure golden note appeared. It was the feeling of my joy. However, it soured immediately; it shattered into pieces, making thousands of dissonant sounds. I saw the color of joy fade away into a grey void; the Pool had shown Seraphina the pain that went along with the feeling she just felt. She was crying as the Pool showed her the second part of my offering. I watched helplessly as the memory that made me happy disappeared from my soul; I felt my pain that Seraphina now understood in its full horror. She felt the joy turning to just knowledge, not to a feeling anymore. She felt the phantom limb pain and the guilt. She felt the memory of our reconciliation turning into the memory of a crime.

Seraphina jerked back, away from the source of the pain she could not escape from anymore. She tried to hide her crying face in her hands. Life had become too heavy for her to carry and enjoy. The starlight in her eyes turned into the reflection of an awful, expensive fire. Seraphina was saved but now knew what price she had to pay for her freedom.

"No," she sobbed, shaking her head as if trying to convince herself of what was happening in her mind. "No, you couldn't have. Bwibly, you couldn't have taken our reunion, Rook! It was sacred!"

All I could do was nod. The stoic mask broke and tears threatened to spill from my eyes as well.

Seraphina climbed to her feet and threw herself at me, embracing me with all her might. She did not look like a beautiful fey anymore – now, she looked like my friend, crying with despair, and holding me tightly, sharing her pain and sorrow. We knelt in the heart of the mountain, two people who felt the same emptiness filling them. We hugged tightly, my hands resting on her vibrating body, a life I had to give to the Pool in exchange for her freedom and salvation.

"It was the only thing I had to offer that was precious enough," I confessed bitterly. "The only resonance of such a power."

"But it was the foundation!" she cried, holding onto me and crying her heart out. "It was the start of our new friendship! Without it... What are we? Just forgiven? Just a chapter in a history book? You gave away our song, Rook."

I tightened my embrace as the truth hit me. She was right. But I started to understand what she meant.

I gently loosened my grip and put my hands on her shoulders to pull her close and whisper into her ears. "Seraphina... Yes, you are right... The song is gone. And the memory of its performance disappeared from my heart. But my dear... Our friendship... It is not about memory. It is about choices. Every choice we make. We are singers. A song... It is the music we play every day. The memory was just a beautiful gift. Yes, it was... But it was in the past. Our friendship... Is a daily choice. And the choice is ours to make."

Her sorrowful eyes met mine and softened a little. Understanding flickered inside her.

"You took away the feeling," I went on, somehow finding clarity in my speech. "But the truth could not be stolen. And this truth is that I will make this choice again and again. Right now. I will give up this moment for a thousand times to keep you safe and alive, Seraphina. This choice... This choice IS the song now. It is a quieter song perhaps, a sad one. But a strong one, forged by this... scar. This scar..."

I put my hand on the crack running across the inert Whispering Stone in the glade we had left behind. Seraphina understood what I meant and placed her hand on the same spot as her wings drooped and the opalescent membranes quivered with sorrow.

"Scars forge a better friendship," I whispered.

The celestial hum in the cave became quieter. The Pool of Sleeping Starlight seemed to approve of our conclusions. Seraphina squeezed my hand tightly, hiding her eyes in my shoulder. Her tears dried up, replaced by resolve. Grief lingered inside her but no longer frightened her. It had become a shared memory. She looked into my eyes and smiled sadly. I returned the smile.

"A friendship forged by scars," she whispered. It was not a question.

I helped her to stand up and then followed her lead. We silently left the Pool behind, not saying anything but knowing that there was nothing more to say. It was time to leave. We left for home.

The journey down the Dragon's Tooth Mountains did not go easily. It was hard, and yet there was a new harmony between us. There was a new understanding between two people, and this made it possible for both of us to help each other to descend down into the Eastern Glades.

There was no more separation between protector and victim. There was partnership, and this strengthened us.

When at last, we got down from the slopes of the mountains, seeing the silver-barked pines of the Eastern Glades was almost overwhelming. But we soon realized how much had changed. Everything was the same – yet not really.

There was scorched earth spread in a wide circle from the Whispering Stone in the center. The trees near it looked twisted and tortured, as if they had undergone something painful. Their bark was blackened as if struck by lightning, though the pines still bore green needle-like leaves on their branches, showing how resilient they were. Even the air smelled thinner now – as if all the vibrant magic of the glade was fading away, as if it was slowly dying... This place had been through a catastrophe, and would never forget it.

In the middle of this circle stood the stone. The once powerful portal into the other world became a rock – a big, old stone with a deep crack on its face. The Golden veins of our forgiveness were nowhere to be found. The runes inscribed on the stone were barely visible. It was like a tombstone of magic.

We came closer to it and kneeled down in front of it. Seraphina placed her hand on the stone, right beside the crack. Her wings, newly grown and completely restored, drooped. They were tired but not of traveling. They were sad – because we had paid a high price for her survival.

"It's all broken," Seraphina murmured sadly. "The portal. The glade. Even the memory of its mending."

"No," I said quietly, putting my hand on the stone next to hers, warming the cool opalescent skin. "Broken? It is not broken. Changed. The portal is closed now, yes. The magic is gone forever. But we are here. We survived and returned. This stone... It is no longer a door to the other side of the world. Perhaps... it may become a new door for a new person."

She looked at me, confused.

"The lesson," I went on. "For over two decades, I came to this place in hopes that it would heal the wounds of my pride and my inability to listen. The Whispering Stone offered me such a chance but, Seraphina... This was not the magic to mend the wound in my heart. The magic... True magic resided in my choice to pass through that stone, to forgive you. It lay in my ability to open up and share my pain with the person I loved."

I looked around at the wounded glade. Some people, probably, had returned to the place after the terrible light disappeared. They peered from behind the pines, watching us with curiosity and awe.

"The lesson... It is that you don't need the Whispering Stone to pass to the other side of your heart," I continued. "All you need to do is make the first step towards it. Perhaps, we are not the only ones with broken friendships, with pride and silence that tore our bonds apart. Perhaps... We are not the only ones who should come here not to seek for a solution for problems, but to heal their hearts."

Her hand turned under mine, our fingers intertwining. Seraphina smiled again, genuinely, though her happiness no longer contained the golden, heavenly glow of our old memory. She was happy, but not joyous as the first time – she had felt sorrow, but managed to rise above it. I saw the silver bells ringing in her hair softly, and it sounded good.

"Forgiveness and Harmony Forged in Scars," Seraphina said softly.

We looked at each other with deep understanding of the new meaning of our bond.

"I hope it is a lesson worth sharing," she whispered.

We stood there, hand in hand, looking at the rising sun. The glade was no longer a place of tragedy. Now, it was a place of beginnings.