



The Song of the Sacred Glade

Tales of Rook · Volume 2

by Mythas

CHAPTER ONE

Echoes on Ash

Healing is not a miracle of magnificent repairing either. Healing is the work of knees and hands, a painstaking endeavor of pulling up charred weeds out of the soil that refuses to regain its former fertility, inch by inch. For the past few weeks, our days began with me using a trowel to dig up the soil, and then, after some effort on my part, Seraphina would take over, crumbling clods of earth and turning the scorched soil back to some resemblance of fertility again. Our epic performance had left behind this tedious task of restoration; it felt like an endless circle of scraping earth with my claws, while her magic, which used to be able to calm the anger of the cosmos, now was reduced to soothing murmuring to the confused creatures of this glade. All that remained from the majestic symphony of our reunion and the battle we fought was the sound of her silver bells, the last music in a suddenly quiet world. Seraphina and I were different. We were neither the carefree, joyful companions of our early years in this realm, nor were we the bitter strangers who spent decades apart. There was something new about our friendship – created by the sacrifice made in a firestorm of emotions in the heart of a mountain. There was still the conversation between us, of course; however, it was done mostly with a look, with a gesture, and with the unspoken understanding. For example, whenever my shoulder ached in protest of the strenuous work we were putting ourselves through, she came with a poultice of cool moss before I even managed to say something about my discomfort. And whenever her face showed signs of weariness, I was offering her a waterskin without being asked. This strange, deep bond seemed to create an orbit around some kind of common center that both of us acknowledged without saying it out loud. This emptiness, that used to make me feel so alive and euphoric when I saw my old friend, was now a dull pain in my heart that never went away. Seraphina noticed it, of course; she knew that it existed inside me, even though she did nothing about it except acknowledging its existence with a silent presence. Fey of the glade looked at us through the thick screen of trees that bordered our work area. They did not intervene, either way; however, judging by the expression on their faces, they were afraid of us at first, then grew tired of that kind of emotion, and finally developed some kind of resentment towards us. Why? Because we did not just save them and their home. Because we were the ones who brought all the danger, breaking it over the stone and creating an enormous scar on the earth where there once was a Whispering Stone. And now they were afraid of us. The work felt particularly heavy today. The sun was pale and distant, the sky was unusually quiet; even the air that we were breathing seemed to be lacking that characteristic vibration, that humming of a living world. It was this silence that scared me most. "The moss is wrong," Seraphina whispered to me, pointing at the patch of soil where the previous week I tried to cultivate some Carpet Moss. She knelt down, her opalescent wings were folded carefully under her; she had become

more earthly than celestial lately, so her feathers had gained more brown spots than celestial blues. Indeed, the moss I wanted to plant in this spot did not look as good as I remembered. Its color was pale yellow, it was dry like dust, and when touched with a claw, it crumbled in my hand. "There is no water here," I said logically. "Soil is still poor." "It is not the lack of water," she replied firmly, shaking her head. "There is a lack of something else here. The earth stops singing to it; it cannot learn to grow." Of course, Seraphina's poetic intuition was always better than mine; however, what she meant by that statement became clear rather quickly. There was no magic left in this glade. Our heroic deed had killed the stone, but what it killed besides was the source of all magic in this place. Now the soil here lacked the power of that harmony, that magic that kept all the plants growing and flourishing, and we took the source of their joy from them. Later, we walked along the perimeter of our scar, trying to estimate its size. Everywhere we could notice the same sad picture – the new shoots on the blackened pines seemed to be pale and weak, the chittering of squirrels among the leaves sounded listless. Once we came to the place where there was a small pond with floating moon-lilies. These lilies used to sparkle with the light that was trapped in their petals, but now their pads were brown at the edges, and the lilies themselves were withered and reluctant to open in this dull world, where no magic resonated with them anymore. "When we contained the sorrow," I told Seraphina, watching my reflection in the murky water, "we harmonized with it. We did not kill it; we sang it to sleep and gave it a companion in its cage, but to sing such a perfect melody of sadness and pain, we borrowed our song. We gave the song of our joy, of our happiness; perhaps, we borrowed the song of the glade." "We used the voice of the glade to calm its sorrow," Seraphina finished the sentence, sighing. "Now it has forgotten how to sing its hymn." We returned to the cottage in the dark evening, and the silence followed us; the air here felt especially oppressive surrounded by books and maps, that once filled the room with a warm atmosphere of scholarly contemplation. Now it was just a tomb of my thoughts, a prison where I tried to understand this new world that we created. In this silent room, I lit a candle and sat down at the table; the little flame seemed to defy the coming darkness, but I felt that the silence had taken control over us. Seraphina doesn't sit. Instead, she floats in the little house, tracing the backs of my books, the rim of a clay bowl, the antlers of a deer that once lived here and then died years ago and became a wall decoration. "Is it something you regret, Rook?" Her question is barely audible. She doesn't turn to me. I look at the flame of the candle, then back at her. Painful throb of my heart reminds me how hard the choice was to make and how much it cost me. "No," I say, feeling how heavy my words are, how much they weigh. Just like the mountain that took away my joy. "I do not regret having you here with me. I'll never do." Seraphina faces me with tears glittering in her twilight eyes. "But what about the memory... our moment...?" "Our moment is everything we experience right now," I say, standing and approaching her. Shyness is no longer a part of me – at least when I'm talking to my old friend. The scholar is gone, leaving nothing behind except the friend. "This one right here. Standing in this little room and speaking to you

right now. Our moment is our labor today, in the ash of the glade. Memory was wonderful, Seraphina. A gift wrapped in golden paper, but we don't live in our memories. We live in our decisions. And mine is that. Choosing you. Choosing to have scars, silence, and laborious life because it's real." A tear rolls down her cheek. "I choose that too." And we stand in front of each other without any sadness in our eyes, just determination. We've come so far. And we can't just let our home become an object of the past just because of the lack of sounds. "The fey are getting weaker," she starts, her voice growing in confidence. "I can feel it. Newborns are born with silent eyes, while the elders spend all their time asleep more than awake. This silence is a slow poison to them. That's why they blame us – they are scared, they don't know what to do." "We should teach them," I reply, finding myself in the same vein as Seraphina. Saving the glade from the storm was only our first mission. Now we should teach it how to sing again. My gaze roams through my bookshelves with countless knowledge of lost kingdoms and magic. Surely, there is something that can help us deal with the problem in hand. We managed to defeat despair with joy, rage with harmony, but how to overcome silence? I need a method and information. It seems like the latter lies within my shelves' bounds.

CHAPTER TWO

The Library of Silence

And my resolve, forged in that flickering candlelight of that evening, was as firm as the sturdy ancient oaks at the borders of our forest glade. But as anyone with experience in the art of resolving matters should know, a resolution is not a map. It's simply a declaration that you will make that first bold step into the wild, into the untamed wilderness ahead of you, and start walking. And my wilderness was a familiar one. The ranks of my own books were dense and tall.

I lived through the next three days, immersing myself in my library. The familiar scent of aged paper and tanned leather became a source of embarrassment. I unfurled scrolls, so delicate that they might turn to dust at my claws. I perused leather-bound books with titles of 'Histories of Resplendent Magics' and 'Compendiums of Celestial Restoration.' They were all lies, each and every one. For these volumes talked about healing the lands scorched by dragon fire with the use of one, perfect, pronounced draconic word. They described waking the dead forests petrified by the gorgon's stare using tears of a phoenix. They mentioned rituals requiring the alignment of moons long ago destroyed and turned into asteroid belts. They mentioned using artifacts such as the Whispering Stone. What remained of the latter was little more than a scarred stone.

These books were my life's work, the collection that represented a museum of a world of yore. They depicted the magic as a huge, roaring orchestra, while we needed to teach our glade to whistle. The dissonance of it all echoed inside my mind, filling my ears with that dull throb as it resonated inside my skull. Every piece of parchment, every tome, scroll, and grimoire only added to the silence pressing me from all sides as if trying to strangle the very air inside me. My knowledge, the tools that once made sense of the universe for me, had become useless to me as a key for a locked door melted down into nothingness by the passage of time.

In those three days and three nights, Seraphina was my constant companion. However, unlike me, she did not immerse herself in the world of dead letters. Instead, she spent hours sitting in a small garden patch behind my cottage. There, under the cover of my silver bells in her hair singing a melancholy tune, she cultivated life, making green and glowing her hands in contact with the earth and speaking to wilting bean plants with the voice of a mother to a frightened infant. She brought me cups of mint tea and bowls of broths, leaving them on my cluttered table, the question in the eyes asking: *have you found it?*

No, I have not found it. Not here. My library was a place of my failure, of a profound lack of knowledge and insight necessary to help my glade. For so many years, I had been the one

studying, parsing and ordering the world. But now, as it turned to rubble, I found myself utterly helpless to save anything. Each page I turned and each word I read brought another wave of that shameful sensation that burned my heart.

On the fourth day of my research, as a feeble sun tried hard to break through the thick blanket of clouds, there was a knock on the door. This knock wasn't the tentative tap of someone cautious, but the heavy, intimidating knock of a heavy wooden door vibrating with every hit. Seraphina, busy with her plants by the window, straightened, her body growing stiff. The silvery bells on her hair fell utterly silent as if they knew that the worst was yet to come.

Opening the door, I was met with the sight of members of the Fey Council. There were three of them, all of them sharing the same expression of grave weariness that made their eyes hollow. In the middle of the three sat Elder Lorian, a Dryad with bark-like skin paler than I ever saw before, as well as leafy hair, brittle and stained brown. At his left, there was Elara, Pixie Matriarch and usually radiant with vigor, her wings now colored as faded parchment. At his right, sat Grimsby – a stout, proud Gnome with a magnificent beard, now gray, its usual fiery color drowned in the pale ashen hue. They did not look at me with hatred and fury that I deserved. No, that would have been better. Their looks were filled with the soul-deep disappointment I had seen before, years ago.

"Rook," Lorian's voice rasped, "we need to speak with you."

Stepping aside, I allowed the trio to enter my crowded house, but they moved slowly, as if they found my air difficult to breathe. Their eyes surveyed my books and scrolls not in search of something important, but like one would assess the treasure collected by a madman. Seraphina glided next to me, her hand on my arm as a silent source of comfort in times when I found myself surrounded by enemies.

"The silence spreads," Elara said, her usually strong voice sounding like a distant whine of an insect. "Glimmerwood sap stopped glowing. Light orbs die shortly after we make them. We are becoming the creatures of twilight, Rook, and we fear the darkness ahead."

"The last three babies in our warren were born... quiet," Grimsby said, his deep voice rumbling as if shaken by grief. "They do not laugh. They do not cry. Their eyes are wide, but they do not seem to see anything. They are like... echoes of children."

The impact of his words hit me like a fist in the guts. We had been focused on the scorched earth and the wilting flora so much that we had not seen the other part of the problem. The silencing of our glade was not an environmental issue. It was not even just a crisis. It was the matter of our very existence.

Elder Lorian, finally gathering enough strength to lift his eyes to meet mine, gave me a look I was not expecting. There was something from the past in his gaze, that of the master proud of his young student's achievement in the field of magic studies. "We know you acted without evil intentions," he said, as if it cost him a lot. "You two faced the storm when it was raging. We hid and watched you two brave heroes fighting it. We did not forget that, Rook. We understand. However, you interfered with the heart of this glade. Using its very essence and soul as a key to lock away a sorrowful memory. Now, the glade does not remember itself anymore."

Taking a hesitant step towards me, the elder Dryad looked at me. "The community is afraid. They suspect you two did it to silence the world forever and create a safe place for yourselves. They see the world around them crumbling while you live among the remnants of your handiwork. Fear breeds suspicion, and suspicion breeds decay in the roots of our society. We are afraid to ask the community to hope because they cannot feel it any longer."

The rage burned in my veins. My worn out emerald coat suddenly felt uncomfortable like a costume from a play gone wrong, as well as the rapier at my waist. "What are you saying, Lorian?"

It was not Lorian, though, but Seraphina, who finally spoke, her words dripping with understanding. "You demand we leave."

The elder lowered his head, ashamed to have to tell that to someone like me. "We are offering you a choice, a chance you never gave to our glade. The coming moon will be full. This moon is traditionally named Moon of Fading Embers. It's always a reminder that it's time to let go before winter. But this time, it will be a deadline. Restore the heart of this glade by the time the moon reaches its zenith... or you will be banished from the Eastern Glades forever."

I could have guessed. The word that hung in the air like some sort of threat was exiled. Being thrown away from the land that belonged to me by birth. This cottage, this library, this glade. They were all my home, where I lived my happy childhood and became who I was now. To lose it would be akin to having my own story torn apart and destroyed before I even finished writing it.

Looking at Seraphina, I realized how hard it was going to be for her. After all, exile was not something new for her. Once, in her grief, she chose to leave her family. Now, they asked her to repeat the same action in the same state.

With their mission accomplished, the three elders silently left, leaving the door open. An airy breeze entered the room, rustling through the pages of parchments on my desk, mocking my situation. For a few moments, I remained standing there, staring at the empty doorway in horror and shock. Failure. Complete and utter failure. My books gave me no answers. Everything I learned was useless to me now.

And I could be banished from this land because I was unable to help it?

"Rook," I heard Seraphina's soft, sad voice. Turning around, I saw her staring at the pile of books I left behind as if looking for something. She pointed with her delicate fingers to one of the tomes that had caught my attention days ago. *Tales for Feylings and Other Lost Things*. Children's tales.

"All this greatness and power," she whispered. "Everything you seek is here in these fairy tales. They are like your rapier, Rook. Instruments of direct conflict. But the glade is not in a struggle now. It's asleep. And when one sleeps, you can't wake him with a sharp weapon. You must use your voice to awaken a sleeper."

She was right. All of that great power did nothing but disappoint me. My way failed me, so it was probably time to try another method. Picking up the book, I noticed that it had a cover made from simple moss-colored fabric. Flipping through the pages, I felt something familiar. Something distant but recognizable. Childhood memories, dimmed as they were by time, yet not entirely gone. Tales of dancing sprites and mischievous fairies.

Opening the book somewhere in the middle, I found myself staring at a small poem entitled "Sleeper's Hymn."

"When the heart forgets its beat, When the song has lost its sound, Look not for what is complete, But for echoes in the ground.

Threefold the echo will remain, A whisper of the soul's refrain.

One where sunlit hope still dares To bloom amidst the deep despairs. One where silent waters rest, To grant the wisdom of the blessed. One where from the broken stone, A seed of resilience is sown.

Find the three and make them one, And a new song will be sung." *

Reading it out loud, I felt something stirring inside me. It sounded like a fairy tale, a simple, almost childishly written rhyme, but somehow, it resonated in the silence with a power I felt in great incantations in days long past. This wasn't an answer I sought. It wasn't a solution to the problem or a ritual to perform. It was a puzzle, a quest. A whole new approach to solving our troubles.

The heart of our glade didn't forget itself completely, only fell into sleep. So, we had to awaken the glade's soul by restoring its will to live. By making three different seeds come together as one.

"The Seed of Hope," Seraphina breathed, her eyes glowing bright with excitement. "The Seed of Wisdom. And the Seed of Resilience. A new song," she added quietly.

The deadline set by the Fey Council was approaching rapidly, like a shadow on my mind. A mere three days was too short to prepare anything and too long at the same time. The poem I found in an old book suggested a quest of unimaginable difficulty, a road full of dangers and obstacles. However, looking into Seraphina's eyes, I felt some of the pressure lifting off my chest.

We weren't done. It wasn't the end, just another beginning. While my library gave me no answers to our problems, it pointed me in the direction I needed to look. Now that I had a direction, I could start searching. It would be hard, but maybe not impossible. If there was something that defined me, it was perseverance.

Closing the book, I smiled tiredly. "So, it seems that our studies are completed," I told her quietly. "Now, our journey begins."

CHAPTER THREE

Where Hope takes Root

Our expedition began with no pomp and splendor, but with simple folding of a map. The old, parchment map, covered with fading ink and traces of abandoned paths, was my protection against the vast and silent unknown that was looming ahead of us. The rhyme of Seraphina's children's story was an encouragement, yet my scholar mind needed more certainty of the route we were going to take. The Sunken Kingdom of Reeds. I found three references to that mythical place among my archives. First, it appeared as an impassable marsh described in a footnote of an old mariner's logbook. Second, it was mentioned in a cartographer's atlas as the 'Mourning Fen'. Finally, in a book on Elder Fey history there was just a brief hint on the place, where the kingdom of the Elder Fey had sunk 'into sorrow'. None of these descriptions had convinced me much.

"The maps says we should go west, to the lowlands where the Glimmerwood River forks into twelve rivers," I told Seraphina who was sitting at the arm of my reading chair. "It is necessary to look for the oldest river."

Seraphina gave me a tolerant look, but she was not disagreeing with me. The silver bells in her hair were motionless, just like everything else inside my quiet little glade. "Your map tells you where a river used to run, Rook," she replied gently. "It cannot tell you, where its heart is now." And then, her eyes, that were now gray and mossy in color, closed for a few seconds. "Land is thirsty. Old ways are gone. We need to listen for a new one."

She spoke the truth – a scholar like me should have known better. A Feyline, gifted with the sense of antlers, should have remembered that a river moves as surely as a river. However, my mind, trained for centuries to rely on paper maps and books, was too dumb to accept the lessons of nature. I folded the map and put it into my worn emerald coat, as if I already admitted my defeat. Seraphina sighed. "There is nothing else," she said softly. "It is time to go."

We left our glade at dawn. No-one saw us leaving. Doors and windows remained tightly shut. Nevertheless, I could feel the eyes of those hundred inhabitants of my domain staring at us from behind the shuttered panes. They wished us no harm, but they seemed to be sure that we were about to fail. Their hopes in us were fading fast, so they were casting us out in the desperate attempt to cure themselves of their fears. The traces of our failure surrounded us since the very beginning of our way – drooping silver-bell flowers, willows whose branches did not weep any longer, and the ugly scar of burnt-out earth where the Whispering Stone used to stand. Our wound was the center of the world we created, and we were the one who delivered that fatal blow.

For two days we kept traveling. I tried to remember all the details of the land, but it seemed useless. All the tracks were covered with thick layer of dust, all the old deer trails were gone, and the wind brought only a faint trace of the past. It was hard to imagine that once upon a time there were people moving around in such a silent landscape. But Seraphina knew the way. I do not know whether she could actually navigate with the help of sun and stars, but I guess that there was something else leading her. Sometimes she would stop walking and place a hand on the bark of a dying birch tree or put her fingers into a puddle. Then, without turning her face towards me, she whispered some name that I did not catch. It must have been an ancient name for those trees and rivers that were no longer here.

The road that she showed us led us to the misty and gloomy land of stunted birches and grey ashes. The air smelled wet and decaying. The soil under my paws started to move, trying to swallow me in a desperate embrace. Soon we reached a place that made no doubts. It was the Sunken Kingdom of Reeds. Reeds. Not those bright and green that decorated banks of our rivers and swayed happily under the breeze, but dark and tall ones of this place, lost in the gloom of the eternal fog. They looked like an army marching in every direction. Kingdom of rust-red stalks in a silent pool of muddy waters. Indeed, this land deserved its name. The feeling of desolation was strong here, so strong, as if the place wanted us to feel how hopeless it was.

"This is our destination," whispered Seraphina softly. Her voice sounded fragile in the dead silence of the place. Silver bells in her hair chimed once, as if trying to reach some invisible creature. The only answer was the drip of moisture from a dead log.

We entered the pool slowly. Cold, dark waters of it embraced our bodies unwillingly. Despair. Melancholia. It was what I expected to meet here. Thin, grey rays of the sun, penetrating through the dense canopy of reeds. The air full of death. Even my rapier, the weapon of my scholar pride, seemed inappropriate there. It looked like the weapon of madness and fear. What enemy was there that we had to fight with? Silence? Melancholia?

For a long while we wandered along the silent rows of reeds, looking for a hint of anything unusual. Antlers, which usually responded to each vibration of a forest, stayed numb and blind. The mind, desperate to make any sense of the things, tried to recognize some pattern. But everything there was chaos. Pure chaos and silence.

And then we heard sounds, finally. I thought that they were caused by pieces of mud that fell onto the reeds, but then I realized my mistake. One of those pieces came to life, unfolding its strange, humanoid form. The head was a lump, and there was no mouth or eyes on it. Yet, I felt that there was somebody who observed me. Fen-Whisperers. I had read their name somewhere before. Primitive creatures dwelling in marshy lands, silent and enigmatic.

More and more of them unfolded from the ground. They did not rush to greet us or attack us, though. We simply saw them watching us quietly. It was impossible to recognize them among other pieces of dried grass and mud, but we sensed that we were in a company of intelligent beings. And yet, they made no movement, they did not respond to us.

"Greetings," I said loudly. I could hear the crack of my voice in that deafening silence. "We came to you in search of a Seed of Hope."

They ignored me, or rather did not understand me. My attempts to communicate with them were fruitless. They were too mysterious. Too indifferent.

Then, as usual, Seraphina helped me. It was not the first time when I could not understand the people, because she could. However, she did not try to make friends with those silent creatures. She went ahead to a small pool, covered with water lilies. Their leaves were brown and dry, and their flower buds looked like dying fists. She knelt in the water and placed her opalescent wings on her back. With glowing hands of hers she started to hum. It was not a powerful spell. Just a simple childish lullaby, the only sound breaking silence. Even her silver bells joined her with their chiming.

What did she try to do? I asked her this question, but I immediately understood the answer. She was trying to make them relax and listen. To convince them that she meant no harm and that it was safe to share their secret. Moreover, she was willing to share some piece of herself with those silent and melancholic creatures.

I did not resist her. My hand rested on the hilt of my rapier, but I suddenly realized that she needed to deal with the problem alone. I stood aside and listened silently. Seraphina's power was gentle and subtle. Her lullaby was so sincere and peaceful that even a hardened heart could not resist.

Slowly but surely, something began to change. One of brown leaves unfolded and recovered their natural colors. One of flower buds opened, showing its pale, almost transparent petals. Then a low murmur could be heard. Reeds rustled and moved. The young creature, made of dried-up reeds and muddy earth, approached and pointed to a narrow alley between two tall plants. It was an invitation.

Our young guide led us to the innermost corner of that desolate land. There was a clearing there, a round pond of clear water sparkling with drops of light. It looked like the sun managed to reach this remote place. Water here was so crystal-clear, and there was a little sprout in the dark earth at its bottom. That is how it looked like in the first place. But something changed soon. That little sprout grew brighter and brighter until we could clearly discern its gentle and warm light.

That sprout was what we were looking for. The Seed of Hope. I wanted to take it, to grasp it quickly, just like I did during my previous adventures. But then something else came to my mind. It was the message of that silent land and its silent creatures that I tried to learn.

The young Fen-Whisperer looked at the Moonwing and made another gesture, pointing to that pond and to me. It was her turn. Now she had to complete her task.

Once again, Seraphina went towards the water and kneeled there, placing glowing palms of hers over the sprout. Again, she began to sing, but now I heard the echo of her words. They sounded like words of promise, an act of faith and trust. Those were not her orders or requests anymore. She asked for permission, she promised her faithfulness.

Nothing happened for some time. Seraphina's song filled that silent land with warmth and light. Finally, one of sprout roots grew brighter and floated through the water to reach Seraphina's hands. She gently held it there, and it pulsed with gentle light. Meanwhile, that parent sprout dimmed a little bit, but it recovered very soon. Fen-Whisperers, gathered around the pond and observing our proceedings, made a noise, as if saying 'Thank you'.

My friend rose, still holding that delicate root in her hands. It seemed to me like an endless task that was completed. We had found something that we could hardly imagine in that deserted and dead-looking place. She turned to me and handed that little miracle to me. "This is not a seed," she whispered. "This is a promise that even in deepest silence something waits to grow."

I looked at that little piece of light in her palm and at those silent creatures that were guarding it with such loyalty for centuries. Books I read were mistaken, apparently. Heroes did not receive prizes and rewards; they received gifts and promises instead. Now I had to keep faith that was put into my hands.

When we left that land and went back along the rows of reeds, I felt a strange change. A certain motion was there. That grey, lifeless silence was replaced by a sound of peaceful rustling and fresh breath of air. Hope that had been taken away from that land returned back to it. This was our gift.

As we left the Mourning Fen and entered our land, I felt the same change there. The silent land was changing too. In a mossy little pouch on my friend's waist, there was now a piece of hope we had got in the swamp. One piece of our future. Two were left. Moon of Fading Embers was merciless to us, counting every hour that we had lost. We had to find another two pieces.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Labyrinth of Still Reflections

And as if we had broken the spell of that desolate place, The Mourning Fen let us go, like an old man releasing a melancholy thought. Our parting gift, unlike any trophy, was a delicate sleeping beauty kept in the moss-pouch fastened to Seraphina's belt. The Root of Hope emitted a faint, creamy light in it from deep within the pouch, pulsing steadily with the approaching darkness of evening. Its warm glow was a defiant act of resistance, completely alien to the cold, dead space where our reunion should have brought the melody of celebration and joy. I knew the tune, I knew the facts, but the song itself was lost, buried under layers of silent misery. This time, we climbed from the lowlands to the backbone of the world – the Dragon's Tooth mountains, the very range where I had traded my happiness for a chance to revive my friend. My rapier slithered rhythmically against my thigh, a useless metronome counting out the steps leading us towards another unknown adventure. The rhyme of the old book served as our guide: *Seek wisdom where silent waters rest in the Crystal Labyrinth*. Simple instructions for an academic scholar. Labyrinths are a geometric puzzle, and crystals form the structures of minerals under pressure. Waters are one of the elements, which are simple enough to understand for me. "The oldest legends place the Crystal Labyrinths in the geode fields of the western slopes," I stated after two days of climbing. The sound of my voice was strange in the crisp air of the mountain pass. "They are considered pockets of primordial magic, the crystallization of the world's thoughts. The 'silent waters' can be understood as a reference to subterranean pools, trapped and frozen for millennia." Silence was Seraphina's reply. She caressed the rough surface of a granite peak with her palm while her eyes were shut. In the trance of deep meditation, her irises appeared darker than usual, their colors intensified into deep green and brown hues as if she could perceive the secrets of the earth and its history. She wasn't wearing her silver bells anymore – I suspected that the sound would disturb the communication with nature she was having. "The stone is not sleeping, Rook," she finally whispered, her tone surprisingly certain. "It is waiting, thirsty for your touch. The water is not *in* the labyrinth. The water *is* the labyrinth." As usual, Seraphina's words shattered my carefully constructed logic, leaving me speechless and uncertain. As it was with the Mourning Fen, all my maps and theories proved useless in the face of reality and the truth that I was supposed to learn from nature itself. Once again, I was forced to admit that I was the one whose knowledge was limited and insufficient. However, the memory of the mourning place was too vivid to reject everything I believed in completely, and I nodded, my antlers brushing against the nearest branch of a pine tree. "Then you must lead us there." The words didn't hurt me as much as last time, when I was convinced that the task was doomed to fail and that our quest wouldn't be completed. Instead of geodes I had expected to see when we reached our destination, Seraphina

led us towards a narrow mountain pass in the upper regions of the range. The winds up there whistled in mournful tones, screeching and tearing everything that lay in their way, leaving nothing alive. The air here was cold and fragile like a crystal itself; every step produced an eerie sound of crunching rock as if every grain of soil was a separate piece of glass. The entrance to the labyrinth was unexpected; we happened to stumble upon it by pure coincidence. I was about to walk past a sheer cliff face of milky quartz, an ordinary rock among a dozen others, but Seraphina stopped, tilting her head to listen. Then she stretched her hand to the stone, pressing her palm firmly against the surface. "It listens," she said with a whisper of awe. The opaque surface of the stone shimmered, turning translucent and finally transparent, allowing us to see a corridor of light instead of a dark cave. We entered it through a seemingly solid wall without touching it, and the oppressive silence met us with its oppressive presence like a suffocating blanket. No sounds echoed in the tunnel – not even the sound of our own steps. All we could hear was the sound of our hearts beating, which sounded loud enough to make me panic. A tunnel was carved in crystal in front of us, reflecting our every movement in infinite copies and creating an illusion of motion. Every corner of its walls, floor, and ceiling was made of interlocking hexagonal crystals of the size of boulders, polished to perfection and creating a mirror-like surface that reflected even the smallest details of our appearance. I could see each thread on my coat, every speck of dried mud stuck to my claws, and even wrinkles that surrounded my eye pupils. The light in the corridor was artificial; it seemed to emanate from crystals itself – a pale, analytical glow that chilled me to the bone. We walked in complete silence, moving further and further into a mazelike crystal structure until my efforts to track our progress by studying fractures and different types of crystals became futile. Every corridor was identical, and I could easily get lost and spend hours wandering in circles, looking at countless copies of my reflection and my exhausted friend's. Every reflection of her was accompanied by the sight of a pair of large silver bells on her head, which was an unusual detail to notice considering the lack of sound in the labyrinth. It started quietly, like an illusion that can be dismissed at any moment. My eyes caught a slight glimpse of something peculiar out of the corner, and I followed the movement, turning my attention to Seraphina's reflection that walked next to mine. It was just my imagination, or so I thought. Then I saw it – a phantom pair of Seraphina's wings, vast and beautiful, with a hint of stellar power. The memory of her old, glorious wings made me sad, and I knew she had experienced the same feeling. A shadow of her grief crossed her face for an instant before she smoothed it away and looked proud and strong, as if it had been her decision. Then I looked at my own reflection, and I was ready to fall on the ground. Instead, I found myself staring at the hollow space in my chest where my heart should have been. A transparent void that opened access to the most precious memory in my life. A fragment of Seraphina and me reunited and happy in the presence of the restored Whispering Stone. She was smiling with a joy that hurt to watch – she was smiling so brightly, I had to squint in order not to cry from the nostalgia. The sound of the silver bells hung in the air

around her, and I could feel the warmth of her body and the joy of her voice. The sight was so perfect, so full of bliss and hope, that I could feel the light of the stone in her eyes. It felt so real, but the worst thing was that I couldn't feel anything at all. The memory of our reunion had been extracted from me by the Pool of Sleeping Starlight. The academic knowledge of it being gone from my mind wasn't enough; the memory of the moment I felt the magic of it being torn from me was torturing me on a daily basis, and seeing it right here and now in an endless loop was a torture too severe for my brain to bear. I felt the pain of losing something I loved, and I gasped, overwhelmed with the feeling of loss. The unbearable silence around us was suddenly invaded by the sound of my own voice – Seraphina was looking at me worriedly, trying to understand the source of my sudden suffering. "What do you see?" she asked. I knew her well enough to know that she understood perfectly well what I was seeing because she had shared the same experience with me. "It's just the reflection," I answered, my voice raspy. I tried to tear my eyes away from the wall, focusing on Seraphina herself instead. It was hard; now I could see myself in every mirror in the tunnel. I could see my reflection's hollow chest and the memory of that wonderful moment of our happiness, endlessly repeating itself in my mind. "No," she replied, sounding calm despite her concern. "It is not a trick of light. It is the truth of the labyrinth. The past and the present are here." "And what does it mean?" I snapped at her, my anger echoing loudly in the tunnel. "What wisdom does one find in seeing how miserable he is? What wisdom can come of remembering a moment of joy he cannot enjoy now?" I felt like smashing the image in the wall with my rapier. However, my rage was not met with the response of the labyrinth's environment; it started producing even more reflections. Not just my reflection now, but a reflection of the void in my chest. I could see my empty past everywhere: the twenty years of silent loneliness in a study room, lost friendships, forgotten friends... My reflections were a reflection of my regrets, with the hole in my chest being the centerpiece. "The meaning is in accepting the reflection," Seraphina answered, and her sound broke into my thoughts like a ray of hope. "The labyrinth makes us remember what we are; the wisdom is in understanding what we did, accepting the results of our actions." She stepped in front of me, putting her hands on my shoulders to stop me from doing anything insane in the midst of this hallucinatory experience. We looked at each other's eyes in our reflections, and her own eyes shone with the colors of the good soil. She knew the truth of those memories well enough; she had felt the painful extraction of that memory too. "I did not take that memory from you," she continued, sounding desperate and hopeful at the same time. "I received it as a gift. Your memory is not a void. It is a sacrifice you have made in exchange for a life. And it is in me now, with these silver bells." She took one of her bells and moved it a little, making it produce a pure, melodious sound. Despite being the only sound here, it was powerful enough to affect the surroundings: the reflections in the crystal walls started flickering like a wave in the still water, and the vision in my chest somehow stopped. Seraphina had introduced a new truth to the labyrinth, and the reflection had accepted it. She hadn't tried to erase the pain that I felt. Instead, she tried to help

me understand the true meaning of my sacrifice: that memory was a symbol of my choice, my willingness to save my best friend and pay whatever the cost might be. The hole in my chest wasn't an illusion – it was the result of an incredible act of kindness that made me a stronger person. I could be proud of it even now that my life was broken. Finally accepting her words, I exhaled, relieved to find a way to deal with the problem. I let go of the hilt of my rapier and lowered my arm, relaxing. The anger dissolved into the silence, leaving nothing but a deep sadness in its wake. I felt calmer now, and the pain didn't scare me anymore. It was just the part of who I am, and there was no point in denying that. "I know it's a choice. But seeing the reflection... it feels like the memory has been stolen from me all over again," I admitted, whispering the words I didn't dare to say. "We will look at it together, then," Seraphina said softly. She didn't remove her hands from my shoulders, and I didn't feel the urge to push her away. Together, we returned to facing the wall, and I studied the reflection in it again. This time, I saw what I needed to see. I saw the hole in my chest, the reflection that haunted me and filled me with regret. But it wasn't just a memory – it was the sacrifice I had made in order to save the one I loved. Terrible and painful, but worth every bit of my joy. As I accepted that fact of my own life, the labyrinth's reflections started fading, replaced with the images that showed what the future could be. The holes in my reflections disappeared and were filled with other images: I saw the two of us working in the renewed glade, planting seeds and helping the feylings. Seraphina didn't wear her silver bells anymore, and the glade was alive and green. The scorched earth surrounding the Whispering Stone was overgrown with lush moss, and the feylings weren't scared of us anymore. The labyrinth didn't show me what I'd lost but what I could gain after my sacrifice. Now that I accepted my losses, it was possible to start building something new. The path ahead of us started unfolding before our eyes, becoming less and less confusing with every turn. After what seemed like hours of wandering in circles, we finally found the exit to the labyrinth – a straight tunnel ending with a huge chamber in the center. It was shaped like the inside of a cut diamond and was decorated with gigantic crystals, forming an almost organic structure with a perfectly round bottom. There was a pool of water in the very center, perfectly still, perfectly clear, and absolutely devoid of any reflections. The silent waters of the book's rhyme. With the same reverence, we approached the silent waters, the source of contemplative magic of the labyrinth. There were no guardians and riddles – the journey itself had been a test we had passed successfully. We looked into the depth of the pool and discovered how deep it actually was, but there was nothing special there. Only a small stone at the bottom of the pool was waiting to be picked up. Having learned that gifts from nature were to be respected rather than seized, I looked at Seraphina for confirmation. She nodded her head slowly, and I bent down to take the stone. It was made of quartz and was ovoid and polished; I felt an impression of its incredibly dense mass as I touched it. The water around it wasn't wet – not cold or warm, but devoid of temperature and substance. It was like stepping through a layer of idea and feeling nothing. However, the stone was cool and solid, and holding it in my hand

made me feel better instantly. The pool remained unchanged; it didn't react to my contact and stayed as motionless as ever. I lifted my hand, feeling how cold and heavy the stone was. Holding it made me feel the absence of my analytical mind – no doubts, questions, or worries clouded my mind. The hole in my chest still remained a valley in the landscape of my soul, but it didn't hurt anymore. The stone didn't tell me how I could fix the problem, but instead it showed me the way to find the answer to my own question. It gave me peace. "It is called the Seed of Wisdom," Seraphina told me as I gazed into the depths of the mysterious crystal in my hand. "It feels... it feels like a library after it has closed its gates for the night," I admitted. "Not empty, but quiet, like someone has taken away the chaos and left it alone." I opened the moss pouch attached to Seraphina's belt, taking out the glowing Root of Hope. I placed the stone beside it in the pouch, and a miracle happened: the light from the root pierced through the surface of the stone, changing into an almost steady beam. Seraphina's Seed of Wisdom focused the chaotic light and transformed it into a steady, serene flow of warmth and joy. Hope tempered with wisdom. Two halves of my new song for my damaged world. We left the labyrinth through the crystal wall which closed itself after us, leaving nothing except the milky face of quartz. Suddenly, the air of the high mountain seemed fresher and clearer, and I found the silent waters more peaceful than terrifying. We were on our way to restoring our homeland, and we had our two seeds. I looked west, towards the distant image of the glade, and then at the last line of the rhyme of the old book, now echoing in my mind with crystal clarity: *Find resilience in the heart of the great, enduring flame*. The Moon of Fading Embers was growing closer day after day.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Song We Sing Together

The trip down the Dragon's Tooth Mountains was a transition from the world of crystalline thoughts into the fiery heart of the world. The Stone of Clarity rested beside the Root of Hope in the moss-pouch; its quiet calmness was like a soothing balm for my aching, hollowed memory. The air, once brittle and fragile, turned into something else; as we went further and lower, it heated up and was full of the acrid smell of burning sulfur. Our route led us down to the lands of scars and burns – of the charred and black bones of the mountains. The last line of our rhyme sounded: *Find resilience in the heart of the great, enduring flame.*

"The Sunken Forge," I said, remembering my scrolls. An inactive volcano, its cone blasted and destroyed, leaving behind an enormous crater called the caldera. There was an old belief that it holds a splinter of the First Fire in its depths. Ancient volcanoes and their calderas were familiar places in my old days; I would have planned our journey, calculated the angles, but today I was relying on my companion.

We traveled for one whole day along the plains of cracked obsidian, gleaming and sparkling like broken stars under the sun's rays. By nightfall, we reached our destination: it wasn't a towering mountain anymore, but an enormous volcanic caldera, a pit-like shape in the earth's crust surrounded with the crumbling walls of basalt rocks. A curtain of heat hovered on the edge of the pit, distorting the air.

We were standing on the edge of a steep slope and looking into the misty red haze. No visible trails; only glimmers, marking the entrance to the Sunken Forge.

"The way down isn't a trail," Seraphina repeated, echoing my thoughts.

She was looking into my eyes, which were green like the forest, and I could see in them a confirmation of what we both already knew: our journey had come so far, and this part wasn't left behind.

We started to descend the walls of the volcano's crater – and this is what the fire of the Earth had done to its surroundings.

It was unbelievably hot there, oppressively so, as if heat itself was sucking the moisture from the world around and turning the Earth into a desert of fire and ashes. With each step we took, it became even harder, even more dry and stifling – and also filled with the smell of ancient stone and molten metals.

The caldera bottom was a foundry, and rivers of magma, glowing like molten gold, flowed in narrow channels. There were numerous vents on the ceiling, emitting glowing gas like embers from a hearth.

Everything in this underground place seemed to be alive, teeming with energy and power – but it wasn't chaotic; on the contrary, it felt ordered, precise and precise. The flora there was unique, consisting of strange, almost mineral plants – their leaves seemed to be hammered from copper, and flowers of crystal bismuth shimmered in the dim light.

The rivers converged into a giant geode, something like a beating heart of the foundry. The geode was enormous, almost the size of my cottage; its basalt skin had cracked to reveal its inner depths of liquid, molten fire. It was beating in a slow, rhythmic pace, radiating vibrations like a heartbeat, and I could feel them in the very tips of my antlers and bones.

This was the Heart of the Earth, the great, enduring flame.

However, in order to reach it, we had to overcome one more trial. Heat was becoming intolerable and, in combination with its oppressive nature, made us remember every bad moment of our lives; with every memory, came a certain sensation – shame of the council's ultimatum, disgust with the hostility of our neighbors, sharp pain of being tortured in the Pool of Starlight.

All these feelings – the horrible journey since our parting, until this very moment – came flooding into me, filling me with pain.

I stumbled, taking clumsy and heavy steps; feeling my worn emerald coat was weighing a thousand pounds on me. I watched my companion stagger as well and put her hand on her chest; her opalescent wings were shaking in distress.

Seraphina struggled with her sorrow, and I struggled with mine; the former was the guilt of her sacrifice – at the price of saving our community and its magic. Mine, the regret at the years of childhood we had lost. And the sorrow of the glade's silence – all these feelings and sorrows swirling in the heated air of the caldera.

As a consequence, my innate reaction was to draw my rapier; the heat was driving me crazy with my memories and made me seek for the release from it in striking someone. But there was no enemy here except for the reality – a reality which we had to face in its naked form: the reality of my sorrow and her sorrow.

I looked into her eyes – and saw something that made my breath catch in my throat. She closed them, but still stretched out her hand to me as an invitation.

I had no choice but to follow her, and I reached out to touch her – to take her fingers in mine, as if holding to a lifeline.

No words could be uttered there, where the heated air was almost impossible to breathe through; we simply stood there, hand in hand, accepting the torture of our memories – as they were part of our history, which shaped us and formed the story. We were two pillars for our community; two anchors which were holding us, enduring whatever this heat was trying to bring to us. It started working – slowly but steadily, the pressure was disappearing.

The heat remained; there was still so much warmth in the air, suffocating and almost impossible to bear. However, now it stopped suffocating us and became the constant background noise. I focused on the pulsating geode in front of me and saw something else: my companion's eyes were shining again.

A single tear ran down Seraphina's cheeks and dripped on the ground. At the same moment, a sharp crack resounded, and an obsidian stone broken away from the wall. It was shiny and hard, like glass, but somewhere near its center, a small spark of light appeared; it was pulsating rhythmically, following the rhythm of the Heart. The Seed of Resilience.

I carefully picked it up; it was unexpectedly cold and its edges were sharp. I put the shard of stone into the pouch, and watched its light interacting with the light of other seeds. It was as if the light of Hope had passed through the stone of Wisdom and hit the Shard of Resilience; now, there was a bright spark of magic inside.

We hurried back to the Eastern Glades before the end of the Moon of Fading Embers. When we finally crested the last hill, the scenery before us made us lose breath in dismay. Our once green and vibrant home was dying; the trees were wilting and withering, their leaves dry and yellow; their branches were bent and withered. Grass was dead and grey underneath. Even the air smelled stale, as if the glade was breathing in its last breath.

At the center of it stood our community of feylings, crowded around the remnants of the Whispering Stone. They weren't shouting at us, cursing and accusing; on the contrary, they had given up – their bodies pale and listless; their motions weak and sluggish, drained of all energy. A sense of hopeless resignation covered the faces of everyone – it was as if our community had died from despair.

The Fey Council stood in front of them – their faces stern and inflexible. Elder Lorian had a grave look on his face, as if sentencing someone was an everyday matter to him. He raised his hand, addressing us.

"Our deadline for your restoration is over, Rook," he stated calmly, not looking me into the eyes. "Silence has taken root. According to our decree, you are to be exiled from the glade and

leave us in peace."

The Fey Council gave a low approving murmur – and that made my feeling of hopelessness increase to its limits. We had come too late to help our home...

However, it was Seraphina who responded.

"Indeed, Lorian, you're right," she said. "The old magic is gone, and the stone doesn't sing anymore."

She knelt down in front of the feylings, and I did the same. They stared at us in horror and amazement; wondering what were we doing.

"But we don't come here to restore the magic that used to be," I said, lifting the seeds in my paws. "We've come here to help you grow your own."

"Everyone knows how magic works," Seraphina continued, showing our seeds to the community. "But we found something else in our travels. Hope isn't something you can find in your travels. Instead, you get it when you show kindness in desolation."

"Wisdom isn't the knowledge of everything, as everyone can guess," she said, lifting the Stone of Wisdom to her fellows. "It's the ability to accept yourself, including all your wounds."

"And resilience isn't a protection spell that can only be cast by a hero alone," she finished, lifting the Shard of Resilience. "It's a fire you must tend to together."

"These seeds aren't something powerful," I concluded, lifting them. "It's an invitation for your own magic, for your willpower. Remember that the Whispering Stone was only the vessel for the magic of the glade. But the glade is not the stone – the glade is *us*."

Doubts and apprehensions appeared on people's faces, mixed with fear of the unknown. Even Grimbsy the gnome tried to argue. But Elara the pixie fluttered closer, her tiny and flickering form barely noticeable amidst all this despair.

"What do you mean, 'words?'" Elder Lorian sneered. "Our glade needs new magic."

"Of course," Seraphina replied calmly and knelt in front of the Whispering Stone, planting the Root of Hope into the soil. Then, she put the Stone of Clarity into the puddle of lifeless water on the stone. Finally, she laid the Shard of Resilience into the cracks of it.

Nothing happened – but it was only a matter of moments. At first, everything was the same – as if no magic had been done there. But then, something started changing. First, the stone started glowing – then, Root of Hope gave birth to a sprout, growing rapidly. Then, lifeless water started glowing with a whitish light.

And finally, on the stone itself, the Shard of Resilience emitted bright sparks – like a little piece of Earth Heart.

A magic reaction started to occur – and not in the usual way. Not the one that started from one spot, but rather the opposite one: magic started pouring from people to the seeds.

And it worked! The Whispering Stone started glowing brighter and brighter – and then, finally, the crack that was destroying it started healing. Green threads started appearing from the stone, forming a network and covering the seeds, merging them into one.

The crowd was gasping; the revelation came to them immediately. Suddenly, the soil started moving, and a sprout of vegetation started rising from it. Wind stirred the dead branches of the trees, and some withered leaves started flying from them.

Silence was broken with a hum of people's voices singing.

Elder Lorian gaped, and slowly lowered his hand in admiration. Then, he lowered his head in respect, and the rest followed suit. People who were going to exile us in their despair started listening to their Elder, respecting his words.

I looked at my friend and smiled. The hole in my heart was there forever – as if a reminder of the past. However, it ceased to be empty; instead, it had received a purpose – the purpose of the choice we had made.

We had learned many things during our journeys since our parting: to forgive ourselves and our pasts, to accept the flaws we had inherited, to take care of our injured community. Also, we had learned the most important lesson of friendship – the connection between friends, deeper than any love.

Around us, the feylings started humming the familiar song; the one I used to hear from Seraphina when she was my Guardian. Others started joining the choir – and I myself added my voice, creating some sort of harmonious unity with my companion. Soon, everyone joined – humming, not singing, their song.

It was a song of love and loss; pain and despair; hope and courage; determination to rebuild their home. We were helping our community to learn singing their own song.

Elders started planting the seeds and seedlings, creating connections between people. New sprouts started rising, restoring hope in those who lost it. Some of the trees started regaining their foliage. Wind started blowing through the glade – and then, we saw a wonderful miracle: new leaves were starting to bloom, giving hope for the future.

CHAPTER SIX

The Weight of a Miracle

Three weeks. Three weeks was all it took for green to regain the status of a familiar friend that had just come home from a sad and distant journey. Day after day, for twenty-one mornings, I watched it reclaiming its territory, timidly and slowly. It started on the feet of Whispering Stone, where Seraphina had planted the seeds. As the lifeless stone now was covered in the beautiful green moss, the life spread over it in waves of greenery. This time it wasn't the magic, which was effortlessly present everywhere else in our world, that helped in spreading it over the whole glade. On the contrary, now it required effort, attention and dedication, every inch of growing grass being like a battle won. Every little fern that managed to push its head above the dirt around a dried tree was like a hope fulfilled.

We understood the difference between a healed place and one in a state of healing. The magic that worked in this world was no longer something that had been lying dormant in the soil. Now, in order to plant a moonpetal seed, it was required to whisper into its soil a happy childhood dream, wrapped in a lullaby, to wake it up from its slumber. In order to heal an injury done to the canopy, it was required to pour one's life history over the wounded tree in a form of a story. Now that magic wasn't any longer present in the world itself, but it was rather born from people's love to it. The Stone became Heartwood and now had three seeds planted in its cracks, radiating with an ever-changing soft light.

My inner world recovered its equilibrium as well. The empty spot in my chest, where our reunion used to live, didn't go away, but I learned to understand its topography better – I knew its shorelines and bottom of the sea. This wasn't an injured area anymore, but rather a fallow field that made other sounds louder and more meaningful. Seraphina knew about it and, therefore, she didn't try to fill the silence with words. She was sitting quietly next to me in the evening by Heartwood Stone, being the source of heat and humming the melody of her bells. Seraphina was no longer our healer, as her magic was now so deeply rooted in the soil that she herself became a sort of anchor, making our glade stronger. Her laughter was like wildflower scent after raining, her tears like rain after long summer drought. We were both changed in ways irreversible, becoming something better and stronger because of our losses.

Our tribe was changed as well. The suspicion was substituted by respect and admiration. People no longer approached us as representatives of the Council, complaining about their problems, but they were coming to us with a request, with questions about the healing process. We weren't strangers and outcasts anymore; we became the keepers of our miracle.

It was on the twenty-second day when the stranger appeared. Elara, who had become my faithful pixie with a golden light in her hair, flew to me and reported the presence of a group of five people coming towards our glade from the west, from the Salt-Scoured Canyons, the territory inhabited by the Stone-kin. This time, these weren't our fey. They walked with a heavy step, crushing everything on their way. There was no sparkle in their appearance; on the contrary, the dust, resembling ashes or salt, was covering them all.

Seraphina and I, escorted by a hesitant Elder Lorian, decided to meet them. The appearance of these people made me gasp and stop breathing. They were like huge stones on the legs, their color reminding of grey granit. Yet, they were broken, having lost some parts of their skin due to cracks in it. Only when one looked in their deep, ancient eyes, one could realize how much they had suffered during their lives.

"The name is Kaelen," the biggest, towering figure said, her voice like rocks grinding on each other. There was no vibration in her words; she was like a stone that couldn't produce anything more. "We come from the Sunken City of Oakhaven. We follow a certain sound."

"What kind of sound?" I raised my antlers in wonder and confusion.

"Not of the kind that can be perceived with the hearing," Kaelen clarified, her eyes turning towards Seraphina. "There was a certain sensation, like tremors of the soul. The Silence started spreading through our canyons three generations ago. The crystals stopped singing, echoes disappeared. Our children are being born without a heart-song, being just like empty shells. We heard a legend, told by a traveling merchant sprite, about a glade that was silenced and learned to sing again. About a miracle that could bring back the old songs."

Her eyes fixed on Seraphina, then on me, and finally focused on Heartwood Stone through the veil of leaves. "We come here to ask for your seeds."

This request crashed like a stone into our peacefulness. Suddenly the protective instinct raged in me; it was as cold as my sharp rapier. These seeds were not mere trinkets that could be sold. They were our very existence, a symbol of rebirth of this world, the roots of Hope, Clarity and Resilience, united in the Root and giving birth to new trees. Our miracle couldn't survive without being firmly grounded in the soil; without this connection it would become a soulless thing.

"It is impossible," Elder Lorian said in response, his voice as brittle as deadwood, "to give you seeds as they are now our integral part, the source of new growth."

The gnome Grimsby agreed and shook his head, his small body trembling with fright and panic. "We nearly faded. How can we risk this all again? Give seeds to strangers?"

The atmosphere was immediately filled with fear and concern that was familiar to everyone here. This time it was the instinct to protect one's own property in order to survive.

Yet, suddenly Seraphina stepped forward. Looking into Kaelen's eyes, she was able to see the sorrow in them and understood their desire. Humming her magic bells, she addressed the Stone-kin: "Tell me about your place," her voice as soft as spring breeze.

"I... have no idea," was her reply, her rough voice echoing around her. "This place of ending has long been forgotten by us. Great salt pillars that preserve memories of our ancestors are crumbling into dust. Light-geodes that illuminated our world lost their power. We don't laugh, nor dream, and have forgotten the ability to be. We heard that you've found the cure."

"But you should know what we did," I replied firmly and sternly, "was not creating a cure. We've discovered a way to save ourselves with the help of three miraculous seeds. Giving them to you is a suicidal attempt for you."

"And teach us!" pleaded another Stone-kin, this time a younger one, looking as though all his crystalline structures had disappeared, leaving only a stone. "If not the seeds, please give us your knowledge."

"It came to us at the cost, and a big one," I answered him, putting my hand on my heart. "Our lesson is very personal, and it is impossible to duplicate it."

"Rook," Seraphina said, her voice sharp. Turning to me, she gave a quick glance at my chest, where I could almost see the memory of the Mourning Fen. *Hope is not a thing that you find but a thing that you are given when you offer kindness in a desolate place*, she once told the Fen-Whisperers. Wasn't I supposed to remember this lesson first? "Your lessons are not only ours," she said aloud. "Holding onto a miracle means to transform it into some kind of property that sooner or later will lose its value. Isn't this the song you want to perform? One of our survival at the expense of others'?"

Indeed, her words were touching all of us. Elara, fluttering in the air with a worried expression, made her lights brighter from shame. Lorian, looking embarrassed, couldn't meet my eyes, his bark-like skin growing tight around the branches. The easiest way of acting was the one of hiding; yet, it was Seraphina, my beloved, who had offered us the second path – the hardest one, requiring courage, generosity and faith.

And so did I struggle, trying to reconcile the scholar and the friend inside me. I looked at the growing grass surrounding us and at our feylings singing and tending to the newly grown plants. We were in such a fragile state, and a strong wind could destroy everything that had been achieved by hard work. How could I risk the life of our community, letting these desperate strangers take something from us?

"I hear you deliberating," the stone figure growled, "discussing songs and lessons, while my people are fading before my eyes! The grass here is growing green; the air smells fresh, but we haven't forgotten the taste of ashes yet! We are desperate; we'll either seek help or search for ourselves. I heard of the Pool of Starlight, a great source of power located in the northernmost mountains. We will seek it."

These words shocked me to the core. The Pool of Sleeping Starlight where I had to pay a price for my mistake... I couldn't imagine how the lives of these desperate and grieving people would be if they came to this place. They could offer to sacrifice their memories, their dreams – anything – to get a chance to continue living, hoping the Pool would bring them back to the old days. Yet, this place could bring only further despair. What had happened to me once could happen to them.

"No," I replied, "please, don't go there."

Turning to the newcomers, I ordered to them, "Come." Without a moment's hesitation, I led them to the middle of our glade. "I cannot give you what you asked me for, but I will show you what we've created here."

Walking to the center of our forest and showing them all the changes that had occurred since then, I took them to the place where Heartwood stone stood. In the full sun, it was like a powerful symbol of life. There were cracks in it now emitting green glow that connected the three seeds. In the cracks I saw Root glowing with its milk-white light, the Stone shining silver and the Shard with a single deep orange ember in it. Around it I could hear the murmuring of the whole tribe.

"This is our heart," I addressed the stone figure, "and we didn't receive it, but earned with our efforts. Look..." and I pointed at her. "Put your hand here."

With a suspicious expression, Kaelen reached out her rough, stone hand and touched the Shard of Resilience. Suddenly, the spark within it flared, and Kaelen quickly pulled back, as if burnt by it. "What was it?"

"It was not the stone's power that you felt," Seraphina responded to her question, "but something inherent in you. This shard does not create resilience, but rather finds it. The magic feels it in yourself, that incredible willpower that made you overcome all difficulties and come to us guided by the legend."

Looking into Kaelen's eyes and seeing how she was stunned by this revelation, I said, "So you see, you didn't need any help. The power was already with you, inside of you. All this while you were searching for some solution, you have brought with you the most important thing."

I noticed how the lines on her face smoothed, while a crack in her stone skin started producing sound. She looked at her companions and back at us. Despair disappeared from her eyes; now it was only a mixture of surprise and astonishment.

"We cannot give you our seeds, Kaelen," I concluded, addressing the Stone-kin, "as they are already attached to us and won't be able to survive elsewhere. However, we are ready to share with you our story. Our miracle is not a material thing; it is rather a certain experience that should be acquired. It is our miracle to pass to someone else."

Seraphina gently touched her shoulder with a hand: "Hope is not a thing fragile; it is rather a tough diamond that grows in the darkness of stone. The wisdom is hidden not always in silence, but somewhere in the echo answering your call in the canyon."

And so, I saw the birth of a new life in these people's souls – the realization of the mistake and the lesson gained, that of a need for self-reflection and self-realization. It was now Kaelen's task to return to the Stone-kin and guide them through this path. The exhaustion was there, but the mountain-like look was softened with acceptance and understanding.

In the evening, for the first time in generations, the Stone-kin didn't sleep on the hard ground anymore. We offered them soft, fresh grass of our glade where they settled down, and the sweet honey-cakes that we'd started to bake as first fruits of our recovery, were now brought by them. We had managed to create new, harmonious relations between us – low voices of the Stone-kin, like a bass, combined with the ringing melodies of our people.

Watching them by our Moon of New Growth, I noticed two fires, the bigger one belonging to us and the smaller one to Stone-kin. We have saved our home, yet, this was the start of something bigger; our miracle was meant to become a seed scattered into the air.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Echo of Our Sorrow

The fire of the Stone-kin burned differently from ours. While ours was lively and unpredictable, consisting of dried branches of trees, the other fire had a deeper, quieter quality to it – it consisted of gray rocks placed around in a circle. From them emanated a tremendous silent heat of the mountains themselves. During that first evening of coexistence, there appeared a shaky truce, made of fragrant smells of our honey-cakes and the low murmur, that was probably the speech of the Stone-kin.

The next morning, though our home did not yet greet us with birdsongs (our new melodies, as the previous day had shown), brought us soft pearl-colored light that came through the recovering forest canopy. Seraphina and I along with Elder Lorian went to meet with Kaelen and her four traveling companions at the Heartwood Stone. Many unexpressed questions surrounded us like clouds, as our fey watched at a safe distance from behind trees.

"You said you'd teach us," Kaelen started, and her voice seemed like stones falling after the landslide. The anxiety of yesterday's events was covered with a thin layer of hope, but even that hope did not seem like joy anymore. "We are ready to listen."

And then we started like scholars normally would – from asking a few questions. "How did it begin?" I gestured at Kaelen, inviting her to come and take a seat on a mossy rock near me. "Your Silence?"

Kaelen lowered her huge stone body. "At first, it was only a change of sounds. The Great Chimes of Oakhaven – the stones, that sang with winds for a thousand years – suddenly fell silent. "No." She shook her head sharply, and her eyes flashed open. She seemed alarmed – something that I did not see before. "Similar? No. It is the *same* feeling. I can feel it. There is..." Seraphina pressed her palm more firmly against the Root of Hope. "A thread that stretches between here and the other place... somewhere far in the west, in the canyons. Faint, corrupted, but an echo..."

Suddenly, like in the case with her earlier visions, all of the pieces of a puzzle started falling into their places in my mind – slowly and ant. The crystal veins in the caves – darkened. Echoes did not come anymore. It was as if the world turned deaf to us. Our storytellers – they used to read the history in the layers of stone – found nothing but emptiness. Young ones do not grow any longer – they lack the heart-song that makes us kin."

As she was speaking, Seraphina, who was previously standing nearby and gazing at the Heartwood Stone, suddenly swayed. She reached out and touched the Root of Hope with a

hand, while her brows frowned together in concentration. Even the silver bells in her hair ceased to ring.

"This is very familiar feeling, Rook," Seraphina said softly, with a strain in her voice. "This indifference to the world. The colors fading from the surroundings. The feeling of a great stillness is the same as if we were to be hit with the Silence in our own glade."

"Of course," I said automatically. "Blight is blight. The manifestations should be similar." I said painfully. Our choice – the option, offered by her back in the Grove – *the blight in their land is related to our own sorrow* was, as I finally understood, the description of a situation, rather than just a metaphor. We did not vanquish the entity at Whispering Stone, no matter how hard we tried; we only learned to harmonize with it. Using the song of our glade, we managed to make it dormant, putting it back to sleep. The Sorrow... was only suppressed, not killed. Our attempt to save our home by drowning the storm in the glass jar only choked it.

The realization made the space between my ribcage feel as if it was collapsing into a black hole. Our visitors... were not just strangers who needed our help. They were victims of our actions. Victims of our pride and the arrogance of trying to conquer the elements and save our world. We failed to destroy a monster, and then we failed again – by creating a chain of consequences that would lead to the death of another place. All we had to do in order to get rid of the entity was harmonize with it – and now it had a connection to our world. Just like we were supposed to, it started moving. The chain had a destination – those five exhausted travelers in front of us were the only things that had kept their home alive for a thousand years. Or more. But the chain had started moving...

"It was us," I said with a grim certainty, and it tasted like ashes in my mouth. I lowered my gaze to look at the rapier in my right hand – a weapon that was helpless against this Sorrow. This wound could not be healed. "We have doomed your place, and now our world pays for that too."

"What do you mean?" asked Kaelen with narrowing obsidian eyes.

With all the respect of her people and the danger of revealing our secret to strangers, I decided to speak out loud. "We were threatened by something called the Entity of Sorrow. We went to the Whispering Stone and somehow unleashed a creature that had dwelled in it for thousands of years. In order to contain it, we sang an entire rhyme that we found in the Garden of Lost Things, sacrificing our own happiness. It was enough to suppress the monster temporarily..."

Kaelen listened carefully, as I saw many fey's eyes flicker, reflecting our betrayal and regret. The respect of my fellow inhabitants faded, turning to fear and disappointment in those faces. Elder Lorian even took a few steps back, understanding that we had brought the blight

not only to our home, but to another one.

When I finished my story, Kaelen stayed silent for a very long time. Her giant stone hands clenched into fists, while her eyes searched for the answers in Seraphina's face. "Our place is dying due to an echo of the catastrophe, that you faced," she sighed eventually with such weariness in her voice that she seemed much older than usual. "You didn't know..." It wasn't a question.

"I know," Seraphina replied. "Ignorance does not free us from responsibility. It only strengthens it. Our mistake happened thousands of years ago, but we must try to compensate the damage."

Those words reminded me that I still owed the explanation to my friend – I was responsible for what had happened back in the Whispering Stone, but she did as well. Yet her courage and determination was infectious, and she was right – wallowing in my guilt was a luxury I couldn't afford. This was our next lesson – after Hope, Wisdom, and Resilience – the lesson of Atonement. "I'm afraid that our seeds will not bring you the revival," I said with a determination that was fueled by Seraphina. "In my explanation, I told you that they were a focus of our community's will. But it also means that they will never be able to awaken your place, since they have been created by our sorrows and stories."

"We have no stories left," someone whispered behind me. "Nothing but an ending of them."

"You've got the best stories of all, young ones," Seraphina said with soft conviction. "Stories of endurance. Your kind has managed to survive, and that is a victory itself. This is the true beginning."

Thus, after a whole morning of conversation, during which we shared everything we have learnt from our seeds – not only in our glade, but in the books as well – we decided that it was time to say our final goodbye. The fey of our village did not remain passive observers any longer – they understood that we would need them as helpers this time. As they encircled us, led by the solemn Lorian and the courageous Elara, we prepared to say our final goodbyes to our visitors.

"The Heartwood Stone is a kind of a lens," I started, as we gathered near it. "It amplifies the power of will of those, who touch its stones. We'll offer you our will – we shall focus together, and you will understand the message of your land yourself."

Seraphina put both of her hands on the Shard of Resilience. I put mine on the Stone of Clarity, while the other four travelers placed their hands on Kaelen's shoulder. They were ready for a long journey that would start at that point...

"Now we sing."

First of all, Seraphina began humming quietly – a song of her that broke our chains and gave birth to the Hope that our glade felt at that time. Gradually, it became a part of the melody, as our voices joined. At first, mine was raw and uncertain, but then I was soon joined by Lorian's deep baritone and Elara's sweet high tones. After that, all the others fey of our community started joining us with their soft and mellow voices. We were not performing in that moment. We sang as if in prayer – offering all the strength of our collective will, all the magic that we have taught ourselves to create. That melody – the embodiment of Hope, Wisdom, and Resilience, which was inside each one of us, was our gift to those poor creatures.

Three bright lights started growing inside the stones of our magic object, intertwining their rays. Soon, they flowed upwards towards Kaelen's body, illuminating her dark stone skin and bringing the trembling of the entire stone body.

From our connection to the Heartwood Stone, I could clearly sense how she was feeling and perceive everything that she was seeing. It was an image of her own land – as seen through the prism of our lessons. First of all, she saw the ruins of her ancestors' greatness – the tall salt pillars, gradually crumbling under the influence of their age. Yet the heart of the biggest salt pillar, subjected to the greatest pressure, was starting to produce a beautiful flawless stone. Unlike a weak green root, it was solid and resilient, and thus its essence could be described with a word 'memory'. Their Seed of Hope was Memory.

She then saw the deep silent canyons – a home of their echoes. But at that moment, the traveler noticed the wind, carving those silent walls. Inside its breath, the sound of ancient Great Chimes could be heard. It was as if it asked a question. The Silence was not a death, but an invitation. Their Seed of Wisdom was Echo.

Finally, she saw her kin – creatures, whose life essence was dying. However, as the vision continued, she understood that the dust, that they left, was not the sign of their death, but the proof of their resilience. The harsh wind in the canyon made that dust rise up, forming a veil that protected the core of stone from further corrosion. Thus, it was a sacrifice. It was the sacrifice of their past in order to preserve their future. Their Seed of Resilience was Sacrifice.

Kaelen suddenly opened her eyes, shining bright with a light that was not reflecting from the Seed of Wisdom – it came from the depth of her soul, like never before. The vision was gone, but its knowledge stayed within her mind. "Memory... Echo... Sacrifice..." Kaelen repeated those words with amazement. "You've not cured us... but you have shown us a way forward. We now know it better than our feet know our paths."

And they left at the next morning. When they slowly marched away, their footsteps sounding like they were full of energy, not despair anymore, I couldn't help but notice how we strengthened ourselves through helping them. We had no seeds to give, but we gave something

much more important than anything else. By letting Kaelen and her companions see themselves, we gave them strength. As they disappeared among the trees of our glade, I suddenly noticed that our song was growing louder...

However, while their retreating figures filled me with satisfaction, another feeling crept over me, chilling my skin. The gnome, who was watching at the sky, suddenly exclaimed in surprise. "Do you see it?!"

Looking above us, I saw the bright crescent of the Moon of New Growth that should have not been visible to our naked eyes at daytime. Moreover, the moon was surrounded with a purple halo, looking like an omen of death. At the same moment, the Heartwood Stone started flashing faintly – as if it was trying to communicate with us. The stone of Hope, that was glowing brighter than usual recently, started pulsing with the strange power.

Seraphina seized my wrist suddenly with a surprising sharpness. Her face was white, as she was looking somewhere beyond me and the Heartwood Stone. "The thread," she whispered urgently. "When we healed Kaelen, we... we pulled on it. It knows where we are now."

And I knew that this was only the beginning of our new fight.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Salt Scoured Road

But the bruise was still there the next day. It stayed above us during the day like a pale halo surrounding the sickly moon with its violet hue – a reminder of a new, terrible truth. And the Heartwood Stone started glowing, with its three candles of Hope, Clarity and Resilience flickering in response to a change that had come to our lives. The Sorrow had heard of us and had known our names ever since. That was when we sent our song of healing down the living thread to the Heart-kin. But it wasn't only a signal of help – it was also an invitation.

We called the council not in Lorian's chambers, but outside, in the clearing surrounded by the singing tree. Feys stood on the side, their expressions a mix of newly gained hope and a growing fear that threatened to strangle the fragile song of victory they sang together. And there was the impression that a new, dark threat had appeared. Now, when the battle was won, it was coming back to remind everyone that it wasn't over yet.

"Be ready," Grimsby urged, pointing to our woods' boundaries with his gnarled finger. "Let our song grow stronger and build a wall around our minds. We need to protect what we've restored."

"You are right," Elder Lorian agreed, his bark-like skin tightening. "We've paid enough for the whole world. The glade belongs to us now. Hoarding our magic may seem wrong, but how can we carry a candle into a hurricane? What good would it be?"

I stared at them and couldn't find a way to protest. They wanted to hide, to hoard our magic and protect it. But we had been wrong once and it resulted in the loss of our loved ones. We had been wrong, believing that knowledge could shelter us. Now, they believed that they would be protected by our community. But it wouldn't save them.

"Candle in a hurricane goes out," I agreed, knowing that my voice wasn't loud but determined to make my point. "But magic is not a candle flame. And we know that from Kaelen's experience. Magic is fire. And a fire gets brighter when you share it with other people. We shouldn't try to hide and isolate ourselves, thinking that Stone-kins are alone in their problems now. They have a Sorrow and it might grow and devour all of us one day."

I exchanged looks with Seraphina, knowing that her opinion mattered a lot. She remained silent for some time, but then she spoke up.

"It is true. The Sorrow isn't malevolent at the moment, but it is. It spreads, eating the meaning and color out of everything it touches. And if we try to create a barrier, it will simply go under and eat us, just the same. We can't defend ourselves against it. We can only find the

source."

And she pointed at the horizon to the west.

Our departure wasn't greeted by fear. Everyone knew that we couldn't abandon the people of Oakhaven now, no matter how much we wanted to keep it safe. Even Elara with her tearful wings pressed the pouch of soil to me, urging to remember why we were going there.

"Imp, take it with you," she said. "This soil comes from the Heartwood Stone. This is the song you will fight for."

So there I was, carrying the soil of the Heartwood Stone and the hilt of my rapier along with me. Soil and steel. Finally, I was able to combine the two sides of my soul and join them into one. We left alone to walk further on our road. We needed to close a circle we'd opened once.

We started moving to the west and soon discovered that our surroundings were already affected by the Sorrow. They were drained of all energy and life – as if we saw them through a dirty, dusty glass. We were lucky to see it on the second day only, when we came to the Salt-Scoured Canyons.

Everything here seemed to lose its meaning. The air was thin, salty and tasted like a mix of dust and regret. The ground crunched under my paws like dried white soil – a symbol of an ancient mountain. Deep canyons lay on the ground, showing the depth of devastation here. They weren't formed by water or anything else – only by a wind that didn't blow here anymore.

And the silence of this place was overwhelming. I have never experienced anything like this before. There wasn't even a single noise – the absence of any noise turned into an entity that smothered everything around. Silence deadened all sounds, muffled steps, stealing breath from anyone's lungs.

Everything there seemed to have stopped, leaving only an empty space of death everywhere. I could easily compare it with a painting of black and grey tones, deprived of any light and meaning. Such an atmosphere could kill any life – and yet it hadn't.

Fortunately, it couldn't harm me anymore. I didn't have my beloved any more, but I didn't have my wound too. It was just... a void. An empty space inside of me that nothing could touch or infect. But my poor little Seraphina suffered in that silence.

The thread that connected our souls was like a string of pain, making her head hurt and causing her to stagger from time to time. I had to stay with her when this happened, preventing her from following her heart. She would stumble, her beautiful opalescent wings drooping, and her eyes becoming empty and glassy. She would cover her ears, but it wouldn't prevent the painful sound from ringing in her head.

So I used a different technique to restore her senses. I would stand in front of her, preventing her from walking west, and I would talk about the glade. I would describe all things in detail – like the growth of moon petal grass near the stone, like how now the stream started shining differently. I would open the little bag with the soil Elara gave me, allowing it to fill the dead space with living smell. I would give her a piece of my memories to restore her senses and calm her spirit down.

In such a way, our friendship acquired a new language. Seraphina became a guide for me, helping me with directions, while I was a protector for her, keeping her from going insane and restoring her consciousness every day.

On the fourth day, we reached Oakhaven. And there we saw the entrance – not to the city itself, but rather to the underground part of it. It seemed as if the cliff's wall was injured deeply, allowing access to the underworld. We descended there, into a gloomy abyss.

There was nothing better that we could call that place. The Sunken City was truly a breathtaking tragedy. It was a huge cavern whose height was completely lost in the darkness of shadow. From this darkness, enormous crystals were hanging down, reminding of the cathedral's bells. They were the most important symbols of Oakhaven, but now...

They didn't shine. Their crystal veins didn't glow with a soft and mysterious light. Instead, the cavern was completely dark and covered in grey and pale dust, covering absolutely everything. The only beings we could see in it were Stone-kins themselves – and they seemed lifeless too.

Kaelen met us near the city's heart. I could see some kind of a flame in her eyes – maybe the hope, or some remnant of courage that hadn't died there yet. But she didn't look alive – she seemed more like a ghost.

"You have come," she whispered. "We've done everything we could. We've searched for the Memory, the Echo, and Sacrifice, trying to find a way of fighting Silence. But we didn't have luck here. Silence is too deep and too old."

"The Silence can't overpower us," Seraphina retorted, staring with wide, scared eyes at the crystals of despair around us. "Show us everything that you have."

And Kaelen led us to the middle of this cavern, into a large plaza that was completely constructed of salt-stone. It was where we saw our nemesis – the Heart-Chime. It was the largest of all these crystals, reaching gigantic proportions in its size.

And its appearance was horrible. Instead of shining white color, it had turned dark purple-black, with veins of complete darkness on its surface. The Heart-Chime absorbed any light around, turning everything into its shadow. Its thick surface was oozing black shadow

down onto the plaza's floor, where it disappeared, dissolving in the air.

Here we were, facing the Sorrow we've driven from the glade. We have replaced it there with our song of love and hope and thought that it would disappear. But the Sorrow had taken it instead. It had chosen another host for its soul – another place that was ready to accept it and dissolve into this monster.

Seraphina swayed and almost fell down in her attempt to escape this awful feeling. "The thread ends there," she gasped, staring with wide eyes at the monster. "All the apathy, all the despair – it has a heart of pure nothingness. It..."

I unsheathed my rapier and held it with both hands in front of my chest, understanding that we couldn't do anything. We couldn't fight the monster, since it couldn't be destroyed like that. Our strategy in the glade had worked, since we have created harmony in our surroundings, but it couldn't do anything here, where there were no songs left. They were trapped in this huge heart and couldn't escape.

"We can't destroy it," Kaelen whispered, sharing my thoughts. "Heart-Chime is Oakhaven. It is its silence and we are its echoes."

"And we cannot heal it from the outside," I agreed, remembering everything that I could about this creature. The power of despair here was overwhelming. Anything we would put here wouldn't have the desired effect – instead, it would be dissolved immediately in that monster of silence.

Seraphina straightened up, looking directly into the chime's center. "The solution here is obvious," she said, her voice weak and frail. "When a fire is dying, you can't revive it from afar. You need to insert a new ember into its center."

Her eyes were fixed on the very center of that awful Heart-Chime. And I understood that she saw something different from that darkness.

"There you go. The corruption is too deep. The only way to rekindle it is from inside."

But what kind of a rekindling it would be. Anyone who had passed into that void would be gone forever. We could only send something that would live after that, and our souls weren't suitable for it.

However, I could do this – the hole in my soul, formed long ago by another creature.

CHAPTER NINE

The Final, Quiet Note

As I voiced the words, they did not come out from my mouth; they sounded like the words of a learned scholar trying to make sense of an unsolvable problem. "I will go."

Seraphina turned to me with the fury in her eyes. The living, earthly shades of green and brown reflected with an angry red light from the tiny bells that she had worn in her hair since I had given her my life for hers. The girl looked like the Moonwing of a thousand lost dreams, and the terrible price that she had paid for them was now evident in the fire burning in her eyes.

"No," she said. The word sounded like a cry of despair, like a shout of desperation of someone who could no longer understand anything. "Absolutely not. We have lost enough, Rook. *You* have lost enough."

Kaelen watched us without any signs of emotion except for the one I had seen on many occasions before – weary impatience. Behind her, in the grandiose and lifeless avenue of that decaying city, the statue-like figures of her people remained motionless, their spirits too fragile to survive in this environment for any longer period of time. However, their suffering meant nothing to me. Nothing mattered in front of the expression on the girl's face.

"It is not a loss," I answered quietly, realizing that the words I was saying seemed hollow and false next to the wall of her love. "It is an answer, Seraphina. Look at it. It is the Heart of Pure Nothingness. It consumes feeling, it devours memory. And what do you think is its greatest power? Exactly, its power is despair of being empty. But I'm already empty. The space where my joyful memories should live is no longer a wound. It is an emptiness, Seraphina, and I'll give it to the creature, because this is the only thing it cannot touch – it cannot steal something that was already given to others freely."

"An emptiness?" she echoed, moving closer. The opalescent wings stirred, creating a breeze in the stuffy air of the cave. "This is your scar, Rook. You remember how I feel the quietness that came into your body from the Dragon's Tooth, don't you? This is the scar of your love, this is the only thing that reminds me that you are here. Don't you dare to break this scar in the desperate attempt to destroy the monster."

And I knew she was right. I could not tell her about the quietness inside, because I could not describe its magic and its power, but she would be right either way. For her it may sound crazy to believe in the strength of such emptiness, but it was a safe haven for me. It was a place in my soul that could never be conquered by anything or anybody. The creature could not touch me in the place where my memories of joy could no longer exist.

"The Sorrow took my joy," I told her, suddenly gaining a hint of assurance in my voice. "But it left me the choice, Seraphina. I'll carry the choice inside the vessel, the only thing that can save us all."

I touched my belt with my paw, the place where I had a small pouch with the soil Elara had sent to me. It seemed to me a symbol of a home, of the home that was ready to welcome us both.

The Moonwing looked at Kaelen with the same desperation in her eyes and then at the monstrous chime. The storm in them did not vanish, but changed. It transformed from a wild fire into something more focused, something more dangerous. She understood. She was not yet ready to accept my words, but her intellect, a shining star above us all, accepted the terrible logic. She would not leave me to go alone, but would accompany me spiritually.

"An ember needs air to burn," she said quietly, lowering her voice to the whisper of a strategist. "A purpose needs reasons to live. You are our vessel, and we will be your anchor. We won't allow you to be unwritten."

And this is how our plan came into being. It would not be victorious or bright. It would rather be something heavy and dark. However, there would be no chance for us to fight the creature from outside. I had to create the bridge for myself with the help of song, and Kaelen's people agreed to help us with this mission. They did not look at us with anything but despair, but they moved slowly to the great square.

"I will tell you," Seraphina said to the people, and her voice resounded with the power that fought the darkness of the cavern, pushing it out for a brief moment. "Your song is not dead. It was trapped, but now we are going to liberate it."

With my words in her mind, she explained to them the magic of our connection with their city – the magical thread that we had formed with our healing. It was created to carry despair and despair was carried; now, it would be used to transmit life. As the Stone-kin were forming a wide circle around the chime, she closed her eyes and went into some sort of trance. The consciousness left her body and traveled back to the Eastern Glades, to Lorian, to the Heartwood Stone.

I couldn't hear her conversation with the fey of her glade, but I could guess what she wanted to say. I imagined them surprised by her words, but eager to help her in any possible manner. I imagined their hands pressing on the stone that had saved me, and a strange new magic appearing, created with their collective will.

It was Seraphina who became their leader, teaching them a new harmony. Instead of trying to return to their lost heart-songs, she made them remember their meaning and the emotions that

accompanied them. The old Stone-kin started tapping a steady rhythm on the salt-stone floor; it was the beat of water drops that drip into a well. A younger one added a single harmonic note that vibrated in my very bones. It was the deep tone of the mountain and its silent strength.

A sound was slowly forming. It was not a melodious song; it was more of a resonance of life, of immobility and eternity of nature. Then, a second sound filtered through it, becoming louder and louder until they created a harmonious pair of sounds, a mixture of two melodies that did not match but intertwined. It was the sound that traveled across the thread, reaching us from the Eastern Glades and awakening a new life of the city.

They wove with each other and became a song of stone, a song of resilience, a new force that fought the darkness and became the shelter of life itself. With that, the moment approached. I saw Seraphina looking at me with the terrifying combination of fear and pride in her eyes. She nodded sharply, and I knew this gesture was all the encouragement I needed.

I touched the soil in my belt and then stepped into the Heart-Chime.

I was not expecting anything special; however, it was far beyond my expectations. The song that surrounded me died, giving way to silence that was not quiet but absolutely deadly, dark and threatening. I didn't feel my body anymore, nor the paws, nor antlers, nor even clothes – just a point of consciousness that existed within the dark void.

"You are nothing," a thought came into my head; it was so natural and true that it seemed to be my reality for several seconds. "You are the collection of thoughts that fades. You are not a person anymore, you are only the sound with no meaning; you are an object whose chemical bonds no longer exists."

This was what the Sorrow showed me. It did not attack me; it tried to convince me of its ideas, of its truth. The universe was nothing but an accident, a moment in an eternal silence. I saw my life – all the moments of my life without its sense. There was no story behind all my actions and thoughts. There was only a senseless sequence that inevitably led to this destruction.

I even saw our dispute with Seraphina, a dispute that had started the long silence that we experienced. However, all those strong emotions were washed away from my memory. I saw two little feyling creatures, frightened to death and not daring to reveal their feelings. I felt helpless and powerless.

I was about to disappear in this darkness, but the very same moment, something unexpected happened. The darkness suddenly changed its structure; I felt its texture. There was just one thing in that absolute emptiness, and I remembered it instantly: my pouch. I touched the soil in it; and with the help of it, the melody of my people found its way to me.

It was a weak sound, a very simple melody, the sound of a child's hand in a parent's paw. I heard the voice of a parent telling stories to a child. I remembered how I enjoyed eating honey cakes; I saw myself walking barefoot in the glade under the sun. The melody slowly got stronger; I heard the deep, resonant tone of the Stone-kin and understood what they were feeling. It was the warmth of the sun on stone after a long winter. It was the proud feeling after building a rock cairn. It was the taste of salt.

Note by note, they started rebuilding my world. The song did not fight the void; it existed within it, proving that even in the void of the Sorrow, the feeling of life and beauty can exist. It was the evidence of that feeling that I could use my willpower in order to continue my mission.

Led by that miraculous sound, I moved deeper into the darkness, searching for the source of the evil. I finally reached it, and I knew what I had to do now.

There it was, the heart-song of Oakhaven – a crystalline shard. It was small, as small as my claw. It was an embodiment of the city's soul, its life essence, and it was beautiful and delicate. At least, it had been beautiful in the past, but now it was covered with thick black tendrils of darkness, trying to suffocate the life inside. The void was eating its energy, its song, turning it into nothingness.

It was my last chance to save the city. The question was: how? I heard the sound of that terrible silence in the depths of the void; it destroyed everything and was trying to take away my reason. I had no more resources to fight the monster; there was nothing left except... my choice. Yes, it was it. The void could not touch what was freely given to others.

I focused my attention on the empty space inside, ignoring the pain that I felt. The quietness helped me to focus my willpower and concentrate all my attention on the reason why that place existed – my choice, my will. Remembering that fateful night of the pool of Sleeping Starlight, I offered the principle behind it to the silent shard; I presented it with my sacrifice, with my choice. I presented my soul to the heart-song in the only possible way.

The silence answered with the horrible whispering; the darkness was approaching and was trying to convince me that everything was futile, that there was no point in doing what I was planning. And then, it happened.

There was a hum in my ears. A deep and low, but very powerful hum. A small light illuminated the shard that started vibrating. The darkness had been recognized; its logic had been refuted. The hum became louder, and the shard was glowing brighter, creating the pure tone of the song. The Sorrow withdrew as if scorched by the sound, and the song found its way deeper, reaching the source of the evil and penetrating it.

A wave of pure light and power spread everywhere; I fell back to myself, gasping and crying from the feeling of being alive again. I lay on the salt-stone floor, trying to recover. However, it did not last for a long time – I stood up, seeing my rapier lying near me. I looked at the chime, trying to understand what had happened. Indeed, it was changing.

The great chime was no longer bruised and black. It was luminous, translucent white and filled with gold light. The light was coming from deep inside and was pulsating in time with a deep hum that resounded throughout the whole cavern. The song was heard all over the cave, and it vibrated through the floor, making my bones ring.

The people around started changing, too. They raised their heads, and a weak light could be seen inside of them. It was coming from the stone veins, and they started moving slowly, recovering after their silence. They could not hear the song, but the youngest one managed to produce some sort of chime from its chest.

Kaelen fell down on the floor, crying tears of dust and salt. Seraphina ran to me, embracing me and hugging tightly. Bells in her hair produced a melody of happiness that mixed with the heart-song of the reborn Heart-Chime.

"Rook," she said, holding my shoulder. "You came back."

I was staring at that magnificent miracle, hearing its sound – no, its *song*. It was softer than it had been before, but wiser and more harmonious. There was a deep bass of the stone and a multitude of the fey tones; however, there was a completely new one at the center of the song. There was a song of resilience, but also a song of sorrow and of friendship.

CHAPTER TEN

A Sky Full of Stars

But despite the triumphant sound of the resurrected Chime, there was no triumph. Triumph is the crescendo of emotions, the sound of which fades away to leave room for silence after reaching its top. No. The melody that resonated inside us was the one of a stream that found its bed after centuries of silence. It filled the spacious halls of Oakhaven and spread everywhere, reaching even those places that remained untouched by the sound of anything for a long time. It was made of three chords intertwined and inseparable despite the time that passed since their separation – the geological rumbling of awakening souls of the Stone-kin, the bright sound of the faraway glade, and the powerful, simple chord of a choice I had made. My choice.

I lay in the stone of salt and experienced the gradual revival of the world around me. Feelings of carrying my antlers, touching my green fur, and feeling solid earth under my paws were miracles to me. Seraphina leaned next to me, holding my shoulders and supporting me with her gentle paws. I noticed that the fear had gone from her eyes, giving place to a strange emotion that resembled joy. As if her spirit was happy to find itself finally free of the horror that we've been through. Silver bells of her armor, which had remained silent all that while, joined the sounds of Chime with their gentle tinkling.

"You came back," she kept repeating, making me feel safer and calmer. She had been so sure that I would disappear again that this confirmation felt like a spell that chased away the demons.

I nodded, unwilling to use my voice; it hurt too much. I turned my gaze towards the plaza. The lifeless figures of statues and shadows of despair that used to dwell in Stone-kin had disappeared. In their place, a soft cream-colored light started emanating from the veins of crystals in their bodies. One of the little creatures, born during those eons of silence, raised its head and began chiming its sound in harmony with the City's soul.

Kaelen, who knelt to the ground and shivered because of the overwhelming wave of joy instead of sorrow that flooded her, already sang along. Her powerful body vibrated with happiness.

While I enjoyed the sounds of our triumph, however, the melody started changing. It turned more intricate and diverse – a second melody emerged and merged with the first chord. It was like lighting a small candle in a big cathedral and discovering how huge that cathedral was, how much mystery was in it.

"What is it?" I gasped, confused by such transformation of the tune. "Does the song tell us a story?"

"Indeed," Seraphina responded quietly, looking elsewhere as if listening attentively to the sounds of Chime. "Rook, it is not a story. Not quite. It tells us... an answer to the question we do not even remember having posed."

My mind became alert and analyzed the song, trying to decode it. And then it happened – it finally decoded the message.

"The Sorrow," I repeated. "It wasn't an entity, and it wasn't even malevolent. It..."

"...It was simply a tear in reality," Seraphina finished. "Each of us leaves such tears behind when we go... Or, rather, not a tear, but many, many tears. Each of them – a reminder of a certain Being, one of great creative powers, that has left this world long ago."

Seraphina referred to Chime itself, the Prime Weaver, the First Song. She created reality using sounds. But apparently, it has abandoned its creation when it had become ready, leaving the only evidence of it in the form of these holes... Or sorrows. They filled the whole universe, trying to lure everything to the place where nothing can be heard and nothing would ever be able to sing there again.

"We haven't defeated the Sorrow," I whispered. "We have only healed one small wound in it."

"But now we know," Kaelen interrupted us, her voice sounding like a soft rumbling of stones falling from the slope. "Now we know that our connection with your world is no longer the channel of despair. It is the channel of friendship."

Two days later we left Oakhaven. There was no farewell ceremony of saviors and their rescued ones; instead, we had a friendly assembly of companions who worked together to fulfill our common dream. For our new friends, Kaelen and her kind, there was no longer an impulse to fade into nothingness. Instead, the light of understanding sparkled brightly in their hearts, and they decided to stay in Oakhaven, not hiding, but protecting their new homeland and listening to their song, trying to heal its wounds.

"The connection between our homes shall no longer be the channel of despair," Kaelen said, putting her massive paw on my shoulder. "Let it be the channel of friendship. Let our song be the bass note to your melody, and let our strength support it."

Our trip back to our world proved to be the reverse of the previous one – Salt-Scoured Canyons were no longer silent. If you listened to the rock attentively, you could feel a faint vibration – it wasn't silence anymore. The sky seemed larger, and the air fresher.

I walked silently beside Seraphina, both of us enjoying the comfort of a familiar rhythm. My experience of sacrifice at the Pool of Sleeping Starlight had made a permanent void in my heart; however, now I realized that it wasn't a void anymore. It was a gap of the proper dimension and quality capable of receiving a different melody.

My joy, which was sacrificed at that pool, had been erased forever from my memory. But there were numerous new songs of our friends, who returned with us, to replace it. The faint and hesitant chime of the renewed hope that rang in Kaelen's voice, the melodious cry of a youngling, the quiet hum of the faraway glade calling us back home...

We reached the border of our lands as the sun was setting, covering the sky with its pink glow. But what had happened to them? The transformation was unbelievable! Those once dead birch trees now looked brighter and more vivid; their trunks were covered with light-emitting mosses that were similar to those growing on the surface of Heartwood Stone of Oakhaven. The air smelled like rich fertile soil and wet earth; it was warmer, and there were many songs in it!

The Heartwood Stone shone brightly in the middle of the glade; all around it, our people gathered – waiting for us: Elara, Lorian, Grimsby... The pixie flew up to us happily, Lorian smiled confidently; all worries disappeared – and even the old gnome with his shovel in his hand looked amazed.

They had all felt what was going on in Oakhaven: the desperate cry for help, transmitted along the thread, their effort to get a response from Chime, the powerful chord of their will. They knew that we returned successfully by hearing us approaching – and they welcomed us gladly with a warm song.

After the celebration was over and we sat around the crackling fire, I told them about our adventure. I explained everything to our people: about Oakhaven and the resurrected Chime, about the true nature of Sorrow. Understanding spread through our friends' eyes – we had suffered for nothing. All those disasters weren't sent to punish us, but we paid a heavy price for the healing of reality.

"And the Sorrow..." Grimsby muttered, disappointed, "you haven't been chasing an illusion... Old ways aren't always the best."

For a while, he just stared at the dancing flames of the fire, looking at the happy faces around: at the pixie that played with her glow vines and younglings that sang their joyful lullabies. "It was much better, wasn't it? Stronger."

That apology meant our full reconciliation with the old gnome.

The weeks and months that followed passed rapidly. The rapier hung quietly now in the corner of my house; its blade was rusty and unused. On the other hand, a small trowel that I

carried in my belt was often dirty with the rich soil of our home. This was the field I chose for my future studies now – I was interested in studying songs hidden in plants, in the songs of fey that cultivated them.

Seraphina became the heart of our land now; with her silver bells now ringing along with all other sounds of the glade, she looked after the fey and plants, nurturing them lovingly as if they were her children. Seraphina and I are the founders of a new world, created on the foundation of our friendship and willpower.

We are no longer wounded creatures fighting our own suffering.

We are the ones creating our world every day by listening to its song and adding a few verses to it.

Tonight, I stood beside the Heartwood Stone; it was faintly glowing, illuminated by the light of three seeds hidden in its depths: a Root of Hope, a Shard of Resilience, and a Stone of Clarity – our journey. Heartwood Stone was not an object of magic anymore – it became the heart of the stone that pumped fey's blood.

And I turned to look at Seraphina, standing next to me and looking into the star-dusty sky through her translucent opalescent wings. She understood what was the reason for my contemplation of the celestial vault.

There was no happiness of a person who finds his lost love. That moment was long gone, and there would be nothing like that in the future. But as I looked into her eyes and saw the life there, the flourishing world around and the atmosphere of happiness in her, I realized that friendship wasn't worth preserving – it had to be cultivated.

There is no pain in the empty place in my heart anymore. It is no longer needed – it should be empty to receive other songs.