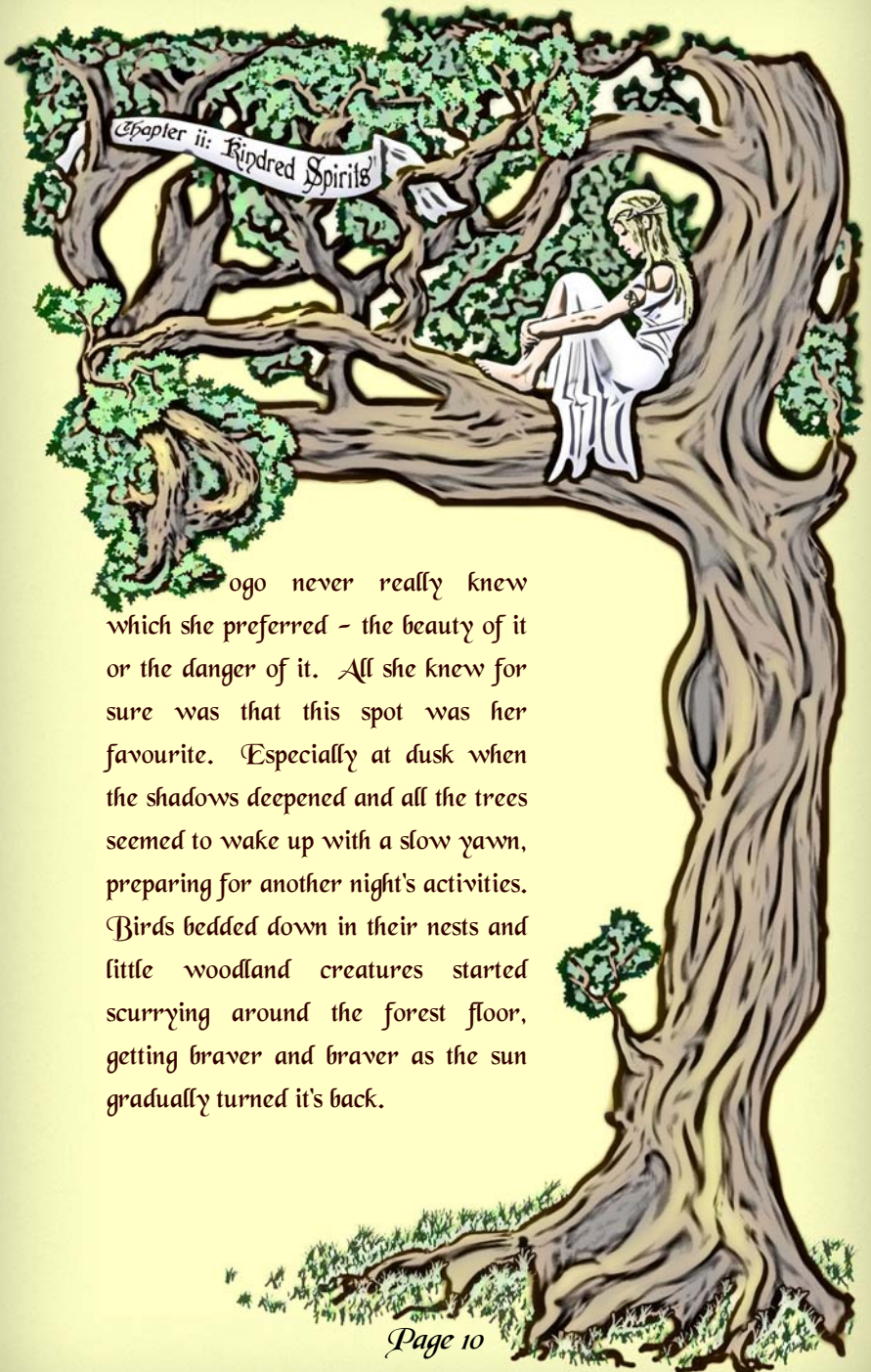




Chapter ii: Kindred Spirits

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Pogo never really knew which she preferred - the beauty of it or the danger of it. All she knew for sure was that this spot was her favourite. Especially at dusk when the shadows deepened and all the trees seemed to wake up with a slow yawn, preparing for another night's activities. Birds bedded down in their nests and little woodland creatures started scurrying around the forest floor, getting braver and braver as the sun gradually turned it's back.

Occasionally, if she'd been perched motionless on her branch long enough, an owl would visit to look over its breakfast menu. She was convinced that the owl was now accustomed to her and even turned it's head to give her a friendly nod on arrival, but it still left pretty swiftly if she started singing.

Other visitors to her favourite spot were much more appreciative. She'd sung countless duets with songbirds who fluttered in from far and wide whenever they heard her sweet voice floating through the sky.

But that was the beautiful side to her spot. The dangerous side was entirely supplied by mankind, who was never far away considering her idyllic hillside woodland was merely an island amidst the sprawling filthy ocean of North London.

Rarely did an hour pass without a rabble of youths appearing and shedding a few crushed beer cans. Or they might hang around for a while, passing a self rolled smoker between them or even self medicating with a syringe. Sometimes it would be a couple coming to find a quiet place to satisfy their sleazy cravings, sometimes for money, sometimes for fun. Now and again it would be a man on his own, just skulking around. Even a man out walking his dog was on the wrong side of good and evil in her world. She'd seen mankind do some unspeakable things from her hiding place up amongst the foliage and she held every single one of them with the same contempt.

It was therefore understandable that nothing but sheer terror gripped her veins the night the most evil and seedy looking of all men suddenly appeared below her tree and started shouting at her. She covered into the crutch of the tree, frozen and silent but he grabbed a branch and started to haul himself up towards her.

She realized her tree wasn't going to protect her from this monster and she darted off down another branch, nimble as a squirrel.

She reached the ground and ran for her life. She could hear nothing beyond her own panting and footsteps but her senses told her that the man was still after her. She sprinted through the woodland, slipping through brambles and into thicker undergrowth - deeper and deeper into her world and further and further from his.

Eventually, after what seemed like much longer than it probably was, she stopped and looked back. There was no sign of him. She tried to stop herself panting to listen but it wasn't easy, her heart was threatening to hammer itself loose. She crouched down amongst the winding, tentacled roots of a huge fallen tree and tried to catch her breath, ears pricked up like a rabbit. Nothing. She dared to hope that she'd escaped but was by no means ready to test it with any movement.

Sure enough footsteps approached.

"I know you're in there!" growled the voice through the brambles. "Don't be scared. I'm not going to hurt you."

She trembled in horror and tried to edge backwards into the tree but there was nowhere to go. He started flattening down undergrowth with a stick, beating his way towards her. She could hear his grunting as he thrashed through her barbed defences. She started to panic and look for her escape. The brambles were thick all around but she had no choice, she scrambled out of her hole and towards one side but the man lurched forward and cut her off. She tried to go the other way but he was just as quick. She retreated into the roots of the tree, curling up in terror, awaiting her fate. With every inch he approached she managed to curl up a bit tighter

and squeeze a little further amongst the roots, just out of reach, but she knew she was just delaying the inevitable.

As a last hope she screamed as loud and long as she could. It seemed to work as the man jumped back, looking around to see if anyone had heard. She did it again and the man beckoned her to stop, so she didn't. She kept screaming, again and again. He backed off a bit more but she carried on screaming. But next time she stopped to take a breath she was so surprised by what she heard that she forgot all about the next scream and just listened.

It was a beautiful lullaby. The smooth tones of guitar strings being masterfully plucked creating a simple but glorious little tune. She just listened for a while, mesmerised by the music, and then very gradually, one muscle at a time, she relaxed and edged out of her hiding place. With every note another layer of fear evaporated from her until she was left with nothing but enchantment, sitting on the end of her tree root, singing the prettiest of melodies along with the guitar.

The two of them sat like that for a while, the misty moonlight staging their performance perfectly for all the wildlife that had been stirred by her screaming. Eventually the song came to its natural end and the two of them basked in the applause from the thousands of leaves, insects and countless other creatures who had witnessed it.

"What's your name?"

Without hesitation she replied "Pogo". For some reason she now trusted him implicitly. After all, anybody who could create such a tender and sensual song couldn't possibly be bad.

"You're not one of them?" She already knew the answer.

Azrock slowly shook his head in confirmation. "Pogo, will you join me?"

She thought for a minute, trying to understand what she had just been asked, but she couldn't.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean would you sing for me. I have this plan. This idea . . .". He paused to work out how to best describe it. "Do you think things are ok out there?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Out where?"

"Out there. In the city. In the streets. Something's not right. People . . . they're living but . . . they're not. They wake up in the morning and they tell themselves everything is ok and, because they're so used to it, they believe it. It happened so gradually that no-one noticed but for me, now, it's unbearable."



Pogo was dumbfounded. It was as if someone had reached in and touched her inner most secret, and it actually felt wonderful. She gazed at him assuming she'd already responded and suddenly realised she hadn't.

"You feel it too?"

He nodded.

"I thought I was the only one."

"I call it 'the fear'."

That was a good name, she thought.

"It's everything. From the generations who have no future and just roam the streets looking to get quick thrills right up to the rulers of the land who are so soiled by filthy, twisted motives that they can't even consider honesty. Whole communities isolated from each other. Each man seeing the next man just out for himself and realising there's no point doing anything other than that . . ." He had to stop as he genuinely couldn't stomach the pain that thinking about it caused him. "I know!" Sympathised Pogo. "But . . . how did it all happen?"

"I have no idea, maybe it's just human nature. But it doesn't matter. What matters is how it can be fought." He looked towards her expectantly. ". . . and I know that you may be the only other person who knows the answer to that."

She was ashamed to say it out loud. She'd always assumed she was just different. An odd ball who got through life in her own quirky ways. "But no-one else believes it" she muttered, the words weighed down by a lifetime of despair. She reached up and removed his goggles, to see his eyes sparkling with the moonlight. "How did you find me?"

"I heard your voice, from the road. Only very quietly, floating in the wind, but I knew when I heard it." He could see

she was yet to be convinced. "How would you feel if for some reason you could never sing again?"

She thought it over and swiftly came to a horrific conclusion. "It would destroy me. I . . . I couldn't live!"

"And yet here you are, surrounded by filth, greed and pain, and . . . well you tell me. What do you think of life?"

"I love life. I think it's beautiful and magical and so, so precious."

He sat back, assuming he'd made his point. "So what makes you think you're so special that you're the only one who can benefit from it?"

She couldn't answer. He carried on.

"For me I understand it most when things get really bad. I've been around a while and I've had some really, really bad times. But I can honestly say, no matter how miserable or scared or depressed I am, picking up a guitar and just playing it will always, always turn that mood into something bearable, even enjoyable. Am I really the only one who is in awe of that power?"

She chuckled a sigh. "Just you and me!" She looked up at the sky, stars blinking through the swaying treetops. She felt free like never before. A lifetime of secret faith suddenly vindicated.

"So what's your plan?"

"We'll make music. Beautiful music. Music that covers every different emotion there is, and we'll record it, and try to get as many people as possible to hear it. Look at it this way - if we can get just one person to feel what we feel then we've got somewhere, so we try with another person, and if they feel it too then we've got even further . . ." He could see she was coming round to the idea, so he moved closer and looked her in the eye with stone cold gravity.

"Don't keep it for yourself Pogo."

She decided there and then that, from now on, she wouldn't.



