

Princess Ruby of Tamworthia

By
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Published by
2Promises Publishing House

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ISBN 978-0-9877284-1-8 Princess Ruby of Tamworthia

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I dedicate this book to the memory of Ron Haggerty.

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Princess Ruby of Tamworthia

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Chapter 1: Needs must
Skipton, Yorkshire, England, 2012.

Jevon Smith fed the car's steering wheel through his hands to carefully navigate the tight lane ahead. It was an early fall morning, the overhanging trees compounded the darkness. The black sky was accented with grey billowing clouds. The car's headlights strained to illuminate a clear path through the murky darkness. He was driving through Chapel Hill, a beautiful narrow lane, with dry-stone walls on one side, on the other, a steep bank leading into a forest. The lane was only one car's width and Jevon prayed he would not encounter oncoming traffic.

Jevon's car was new. It was a modest mid-size, sporting the forestry department's logo, displayed upon each door and applied using a reflective decal. The dashboard heater spewed out warm, welcoming, air. Inside the car, it was comfortable; outside, the air was damp and cold. His mind wandered to an earlier phone call. A satisfied smile crept across his face, signaling the irony that he felt. He'd tortured himself for most of the previous day. How would he manufacture an excuse to visit the cottage today? Then the phone call came. Sometimes life just seems to give you a break. Sometimes, you're aligned with fate, and you have to smile, because often you're not.

Jevon's phone had burst into life at 8pm the previous evening. It was Christine, his sister. She was clearly in a bind and had exercised her last resort. Christine was a successful real estate agent, based in Skipton. She faced an interesting set of events. Three prospective customers all wanted to view three separate properties, all on the same day. That afternoon, Christine had pre-arranged an open house for a particularly hot property, which she knew would sell quickly. She felt strongly that this opportunity could result in some easy money. It was shaping up to be a busy, yet profitable, day. This type of day doesn't come around too often.

When the phone rang, Christine sounded agitated and desperate. "Jevon, are you working tomorrow?"

"No. Why?"

Christine sighed, "I really don't want to do this, but I'm desperate, and needs must. I have a massive day ahead, three showings, and an open house. I will need to be away from the house all day and Kady is sick. Wouldn't you know it, but she's come down with a fever. I'm sorry Brother, but I really need you to cover for me. Can you spend the day with Kady?"

Jevon could hear the torment coursing through her voice. She couldn't afford to be a no-show on this important day. She clearly wanted Kady to spend the day with someone, other than him. Jevon was an exceptionally smart man. He was a loner, described as quiet and a bit weird, by the local folk. Christine knew her younger Brother was harmless, but he was always referred to as weird. Jevon was the smartest kid in school. He always aced the exams and consistently scored the highest within his class. He would frustrate his teachers with exceptionally high grades, without even trying. It was a shock when Jevon shunned a University scholarship to pursue a career in forestry and conservation.

Jevon was always a shy boy. Christine could not recall Jevon having a single friend throughout his school years. He was bullied mercilessly at school. One day, Christine recalled walking past the riverbank bridge, with a group of her friends. One of the girls asked her, if that was Jevon, being dunked into the river by a group of boys. Christine was too embarrassed to say yes, so she waved off the suggestion, and walked on by; ignoring the laughter and the taunts emanating from the riverbank. That memory still haunts her to this day. She wasn't proud of her actions and she

couldn't look at Jevon without feeling some guilt. Jevon was a solemn boy, and now as an adult, he still didn't possess any close friends.

Jevon pulled his car into the narrow driveway of Christine's cottage. He glanced over at a Wellington boot; it was artistically arranged with flowers spilling out of its top. It was a large black, man-sized, rubber boot. He recognized it; it once belonged to Dave. Dave was Christine's husband. He remembered them both as school sweethearts, who were extremely popular students. Christine had a fairytale wedding, perfect in every detail. Jevon was invited to attend but he played no formal part; he was not a groomsman or an attendant. He was not assigned any wedding responsibilities, and was not invited to sit at the head table. He smiled and was happy for Christine but it hurt him, feeling like a guest at his own sister's wedding.

She received a perfect summer day, and the bride looked stunning. The speeches were amusing and the bridal party was glamorous and handsome. Both sets of parents were ecstatic and proud. Jevon remained in the background and the wedding proceeded smoothly. Dave was a great guy; he always tried to make an effort around Jevon. He was smart and funny. Dave took the time to talk to Jevon, and quickly realized that Jevon was intelligent and thoughtful.

Jevon was a huge disappointment to his family when he left school. He left with eight, A-grade O-levels. He ignored the advice of his parents, and the pleas of his career counselors, to stay in school and study for A-levels. His intelligence would secure him a place at a top university, and guarantee him a prosperous career. To everyone's amazement, Jevon accepted a low paying job with the local forestry conservation agency.

His choice seemed to prove to people that Jevon was indeed weird, lazy and wasteful of the intelligence he clearly possessed. Christine was really annoyed with Jevon. He would spend hours in the woods, wasting his time. He was referred to as a hermit, wrapped up in his own company and strange ways. Jevon was a nice looking lad; he'd inherited his Father's ruggedly stark features. A few of the local girls tried desperately to get his attention. Some even tried to connect through Christine, but Jevon didn't seem interested.

It wasn't long before Christine became consumed with married life and her own burgeoning career. One day, Christine called a family gathering, orchestrated to make an announcement. The news of her pregnancy was met with delight. Her small cottage reverberated with the sound of loud joyous celebrations. Jevon took the opportunity to slip out into the garden. The garden was beautiful; it backed onto Skipton Woods, illuminated by the setting Sun streaming through the tall trees. Shafts of light streaked between the large Oaks, dancing across the thick lush lawn. "It's nice out here, isn't it?"

Jevon spun quickly. He managed to see Dave, leaning on a railing, at the rear of the cottage. "Yes, I love the forest. You have a beautiful home."

Dave approached Jevon cautiously. "Jevon, I've many friends, but I don't actually trust too many of them. I like you and I always have. I think I can trust you, right?"

Jevon felt uncomfortable, he didn't know where this conversation was heading. "Sure, why do you ask?"

"I know that you and Christine don't always see eye to eye."

Jevon shuffled his weight nervously, "That's true. I don't really know why she doesn't like me; I haven't done anything wrong, that I know of. I guess we're just very different people."

"She loves you, you're her brother. I talked with her at length last night. She couldn't name one single thing, which you've ever done, to harm anyone. But you do know, don't you? You don't seem to fit in easily around these parts." Dave stared intensely at Jevon, causing Jevon to glance away nervously.

"I don't try to fit in Dave. I just try to be myself, a good person."

"I know that. I can't explain why it is, that some people don't like you. You're a bit shy, but that's not a reason. You're polite and helpful. You eat well and you look after yourself. You're a hard worker and you're exceptionally smart. You read a lot and you're well educated." Dave turned his back on Jevon and kicked at a clump of sod, rising from the immaculate lawn. He didn't want to face him as he delivered his next line. "Yet the fact remains. Most of the people in the town don't like you. They think you're weird, a loner, someone who might just crack one day. Why do you think that is Jevon, why?"

Jevon turned to face the warming rays of the Sun, "I don't know." If he were being truthful, he'd confess that he spent countless hours pondering the very same question. He would inevitably realize that he hasn't done anything wrong, yet people were either fearful of him, or they downright despised him, for no reason at all.

"You're a smart guy, but you're a loner. You're not a bad looking guy, but you don't pay any attention to the ladies. You prefer to hang out in the woods and nobody knows what you're doing in there? Last year, when little Shelley Everstone went missing, you know that everyone suspected your involvement. Malicious tongues wagged, it was your name falling from their lips. When it was discovered that she'd fallen asleep, at the back of that bus," Dave shook his head. "She was found unharmed, yet people still wanted to pin something on you. How did that make you feel?"

Jevon turned to look at Dave, but Dave was still facing away from him. Jevon cast his eyes downwards, "Sad," was all he could manage to say.

"Jevon, I like you and I want to trust you. You've never let me down and I don't think you ever would. Christine's pregnant with our daughter, a little girl. I want you to be her Godfather." Dave turned to gauge Jevon's reaction. "Christine's not so keen on the idea, but it's my call. She's picked that dippy Carol Swanson, from the sweet shop, to be her Godmother. Now there's a raving lunatic, if ever I met one. By the time our daughter is old enough to want some advice from an adult, dippy Carol will be long gone. I need someone who's reliable and likely to be there for her, no matter what."

No matter what - how prophetic that statement would become. Carol eventually married a real loser. He played in a rock band; she did indeed move away, as predicted. When Kady was born, she immediately brightened the life of anyone who came near her. She was a vivacious child with a sharp brain and a keen wit. Kady had a 1,000-watt smile that could light any darkened room, coupled with her bubbly personality.

Jevon turned his car keys, killing the engine of his car. He lifted himself out of the driver's seat. He reached into the back seat, straining to grab a large, leather bound book. As he pushed the heavy car door closed, he stopped to take a deep breath.

He was about to turn and face Christine's cottage, when he remembered his visit from a year ago. He brought wild flowers from the woods and felt more awkward than he usually would. As a Godfather, he wanted to be part of Kady's life, but Christine was always a wary parent. She didn't

seem to trust him around Kady. Jevon was committed, attending every birthday party, bearing a suitable gift: a small outfit, a stuffed teddy bear or a bicycle.

Sometimes Kady would rush to the door filled with the excitement at the prospect of seeing her favorite Uncle. As she got older, Jevon was permitted to stay and quietly watch, as Kady and her friends enjoyed her birthday celebrations. Just before her eighth birthday, Dave motioned to Jevon to join him in the garden; a private chat was in order.

Dave shared with Jevon that he was worried about his health; he'd been coughing up blood. Dave's doctor appointment was scheduled for first appointment of the morning and he was worried. Three months later, the world seemed to turn upside down, with Dave passing away from lung cancer. Christine was devastated. It was an exceptionally hard time. Christine lashed out at her parents and became very protective of Kady. Kady was depressed and Christine seemed to need Jevon around more. He enjoyed this time, feeling needed and loved. He finally felt that he was part of a family.

Jevon helped Christine and Kady through their immense loss; eventually time healed the deep wounds left by Dave's passing. He remembered Christine finding a use for Dave's old Wellington boots, as garden ornaments. It was now over a year later, and Kady's ninth birthday. Jevon's good deeds had been long since forgotten; Christine had reverted back to seeing Jevon as someone that commanded a healthy dose of caution and mistrust.

It came as no surprise to hear the reticence in Christine's voice, as she finally realized, that Jevon was her last resort. She needed someone to look after Kady, while she went out to earn a living. It was Jevon's day off, and he knew that Christine would not return, until early evening. He would spend the entire day with Kady. He turned to face the cottage and began to move towards the front entrance. With the large book tucked under his arm, he shuddered, as the cold morning air enveloped him. The Sun's rays were starting to force their way through the clouds, but the early light did not bring the warmth.

The cottage was old, but was still a beautifully maintained property. As a real estate agent, Christine had managed to get an inside track on this most sought after property. It was situated on a quiet, narrow lane, surrounded by trees. The property was located on Chapel Hill, which was the entrance to the old part of the forest. It was known as Skipton forest. Skipton forest was a protected area, with mature trees and beautiful walking trails. It provided an idyllic retreat from the bustling market town of Skipton and its majestic Castle.

As Jevon approached the thick wooden door, hinged with decorative black iron straps; it swung open in anticipation of his arrival. He bounded over the two small stone steps and entered the cottage. Christine was positioned at the door to greet his arrival. "Thank God you're here!"

"I'm early aren't I? We said 8am."

"I know, come in and keep the cold out. I'm desperate" Christine stopped in mid sentence, realizing what she was about to say. "I mean; I need some help. I've a really busy day."

"And you would rather have called any number of your friends ahead of me but unfortunately you're stuck with me." Jevon walked past Christine, keeping his wet shoes firmly attached to his feet. He knew this would bug her.

Christine knew she had blundered and wanted to change the subject quickly. "What's that?" she inquired, trying to move past the inevitable truth.

Jevon caught her gaze; she was staring at the large book. "It's a book of fairy tales, something to read to Kady and help pass the time. It's also her birthday present."

"Fairy tales; good luck with that, she's nine you know. Anyway, here's what you need to know. She's running a fever and she seems to want to sleep it off. Just check in on her once in a while and let her sleep. She's not allowed out of bed, do you hear me?"

Jevon nodded dutifully.

"Make sure she drinks water, when she's awake. If she needs to go to the bathroom, she's capable of doing that on her own." Christine gave Jevon a stern look. "No video games, mobile phone or Internet allowed. Don't answer the phone; just let it ring. Don't answer the doorbell and keep the front door locked. There's food in the fridge, and extra logs by the fire. I won't be back until 8.15pm. My open house wraps up at 8pm, and I'll come straight home. If you think she's getting worse, call Dr. Sanford. His number is written on a sticky note attached to the phone, near the TV."

Christine picked up her expensive leather briefcase and folded her overcoat across her arm. She dangled her car keys from her fingers and moved towards Jevon. "It's her ninth birthday today. She's as sick as a dog. It's not been a good year for her. She's been complaining of nightmares, for the last two nights, it was monsters in the trees, outside of her window. She hasn't slept well at all. The fever is making her nervous and cranky.

"The book will calm her down," explained Jevon.

"Good. Listen. We both know that you wouldn't have been my first choice, but I do want to thank you, for coming over here and spending the day with Kady. It means a lot to me and I love you." Christine gave Jevon a peck on the cheek before disappearing out of the door. He listened as the droning sound of her car became fainter.

Upstairs, Kady had strained to hear the conversation clearly. The previous evening, she'd pretended to be asleep, when her Mother had phoned Jevon. She knew she'd be spending the day with her Uncle. Kady felt nauseous and was running a fever. She felt sad; her birthday party had been cancelled but she looked forward to her Uncle's visit. She'd sensed a strange tension between her Mother and Uncle Jevon, but she couldn't explain it. She listened intently but all she could hear was small noises, as he settled in downstairs. She heard the water faucet running, as he poured himself a glass of water. Kady wanted company, someone to talk with, so she decided to act. In her best sickly voice she called out, "Mum," and followed it up with a couple of loud, hacking, coughs. It seemed to work, as she heard footsteps ascending the stairs.

There was a light knock on her bedroom door, followed by a soft voice. "Kady, are you alright? It's me, Uncle Jevon. I'm staying with you today, while your Mum's out working." Jevon entered the room and sat on the edge of Kady's bed. Kady pretended to look groggy and sick, but she couldn't conceal her smile. Jevon held a glass of water and a large dark colored book. "Happy Birthday Kady," he said, moving a strand of her sweat soaked hair from her face.

Her face seemed flushed; she was suffering from a high fever. "Would you like some water?"

"No, I'm good Uncle Jevon. I'm glad you're here with me today." Kady lunged forward and coughed heavily.

"You know I wouldn't miss your Birthday for anything, even if you are sick." Jevon followed Kady's eyes to the book. "Oh, I brought you something." He placed the large book across her lap; she pushed herself into a sitting position. "This is your Birthday present." Kady raised her eyes and looked at Jevon. "It's very rare and very old. I've had this for years, and now I'm going to share this with you. There's only one rule though. I have to read this to you and one day the book will become yours."

"What is it?"

Jevon took a deep breath. He'd been waiting for this moment for nine long years. "It's a fairytale, sort of; but not just any fairytale." Jevon looked at the wonderment in Kady's eyes; she'd never be the same again. Did he really want to do this? He owed it to her. "This fairytale is true and I'll prove it to you."

Kady laughed. "I'm nine today Uncle Jevon, I'm not a little girl anymore. I know the difference between make believe and reality. We grow up fast these days you know, my Mum tells everyone that." Kady laughed, mocking Jevon with her sweet eyes.

Jevon pushed a chair closer to her bedside. He hadn't noticed before, but the stuffed animals and pictures of unicorns, had long since disappeared from Kady's room. The decor had changed significantly; it looked like a teenage girl's room. The walls sported posters; they displayed the beaming white smiles of popular boy bands. Her bed was tastefully decorated with pastel colors. Kady was indeed growing up. Her stare snapped him back to the moment. "Oh sorry, I was just thinking of something. So, do you want to hear this fairytale or not?" Jevon accented the word "not," by leaning back in the chair.

Kady responded by sitting more upright. Her nightgown tightened as she softened her approach. "I'm sorry Uncle Jevon. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. I really want to hear the story, are you going to read it to me?"

"Yes, that's the plan."

"It's a huge book, are we going to finish it all in one day?"

Jevon smiled. "We will, if we start soon. Once we get going, you'll beg me not to stop."

Kady realized that Uncle Jevon seemed just as excited about reading her the story, than she was hearing it. It sounded like fun and she liked the thought of spending the day with Uncle Jevon. Kady's Mum used to read her stories when she was younger, but that stopped years ago. "Good, let's get going then."

Jevon realized that Kady was pinned by the weight of the book. It was bulky and bound in a dark leather hide. The book was worn around its edges and had scratch marks, etched into the leather. The front of the book had no markings, no title and no way to identify what it contained. The spine of the book had six golden circles etched into the leather. A green strap, tipped by a brass clasp, wrapped around the pages and secured the front of the book. Jevon reached over the bed and swiveled the book towards him. His chair was uncomfortable and he shifted his weight to adjust the pressure on his legs.

He lifted the heavy book and placed it across his lap. He leaned backwards, deeper into the chair, and snapped loose the brass clasp. Before he opened the cover, he paused. He took one final look at the little grown-up girl that sat patiently before him. Kady was nine years old, with flushed cheeks and sweat soaked hair. Her eyes were big, brown and innocent. She was dressed in a pink and blue nightshirt; she'd propped herself against the headboard of her bed. The pastel covers were pulled up to her chest and she wore an expectant expression. Jevon wondered what he would have looked like, a nine-year-old boy pushing through a fever.

The moment was broken, "Well, let's go, I'm ready." Kady raised her hands to her head. She shook her dampened hair, releasing the sweat so her hair wouldn't flatten. She was a proper little lady.

Jevon opened the large leather flap, revealing the parchment underneath. Embossed in gold letters was the title of the book. Jevon instinctively began to read. He glanced at her as the words started to fall from his mouth.

"Princess Ruby of Tamworthia, by Ranger Oakmoss"

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Chapter 2: The Mystical Forest Skipton Forest, Yorkshire, England, 2012.

Jevon fidgeted, in an attempt to find a comfortable position. He turned the front page of the book. He filled his lungs with air, trembling with excitement; he began to slowly read the text.

* * * * *

My full name is Ranger Oakmoss, my friends just call me Ranger, but you'll have lots of time to learn more about me. I'm the author of this book and I swear to you, that everything described is true. Many books are fanciful tales, designed to entertain an idle mind, but this one is different. The events described in this book actually happened. I bear witness to this fact. The keeper of this book must uphold a time-honored vow. You must promise to keep this powerful knowledge secret, sharing only with the chosen ones. The chosen ones will be carefully selected and must also promise to keep sacred what they learn.

* * * * *

Jevon peered above the edge of the book; Kady was hanging onto every word. "Got that?" Jevon inquired.

"Yup, you've selected me as a chosen one, and I can't repeat any of this to anyone." Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

Jevon smiled, Kady was far too smart for her age. Jevon continued with Ranger's opening remarks.

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A long time ago Humans were happy to share this Earth with all manner of creatures and plants. Humans evolved, they discovered fire and learned to fight over territory and food. They rose from cave dwellers to farmers. They established settlements and forts, made from wood. Humans started to kill animals for food, and chopped down trees to fuel their fires. There was an insatiable need to provide materials to build homesteads. Humans cleared forests to create farmlands and built roads, forts, bridges, dams and Castles. Castles were quarried from stone, yet their need for wood increased. Humans had now evolved into the dominant species in their eyes. Still they fought amongst themselves. They burnt trees to forge metal weapons, cruelly designed to kill and maim.

It seemed darker times drew near, and this once idyllic land, was altered forever. Evil had managed to seep into our forest, manipulating Human behavior. Dark, evil creatures, sent from the underworld, continued to fight a battle with the forces of good. This battle had raged since time had begun. The countryside of England was once brimming with mystical creatures; they possessed old world powers. They fought together to defeat these evil forces.

When Humans began to hunt animals for sport, the delicate balance of power seemed to tip. Humans fought each other, killing for land, buildings, gold and power. Humans elevated themselves above all other species. They started to believe in their own self-importance. Their fears and insecurities drove them to hunt and kill the mystical creatures. They persecuted some breeds into extinction. Driven by evil forces, the mystical creatures were blamed for disease and misfortune. Great birds of the sky were eliminated. The majestic Fire Dragons were persecuted and hunted into extinction. As Humans encroached upon the world of the mystical creatures, it was clear that evil was winning the battle, and a new approach was needed. England in the year 1610 was home to six mystical forests.

A mystical forest is an old forest, an ancient and spiritual forest. This type of forest was hidden deep within the surrounding newer forests. They contained trees that were thousands of years old, connected, and flowing with pure energy. The oldest of trees housed ancient spirits, strong and wise. Everything in the mystical forest was deeply connected, existing in harmony. Each mystical forest had a stream, brook or pond, supplying fresh water. England was covered in forested areas but few contained the significantly older and more powerful mystical forests.

The mystical forests were pure. They contained native plants, unblemished by Humans and their desire to manipulate nature. Many Human travelers had planted Conifers, Sycamore, Pine and Spruce, to supply an insatiable need for wood. These trees were not native to England causing damage to the delicate balance of the forest. Deep within the mystical forests, you would find Oak, Ash, Lime, Chestnut, Rowan, Sloe and Hornbeam. These were the old trees, the ancient trees. If you were to walk through a mystical forest, it felt different. Everything was in harmony, connected and magical. The energy crackled around the plants, water, fish, trees, flowers, animals and insects, which lived in perfect harmony. Some creatures needed to hunt for food but they only took what they needed for survival. They were never wasteful.

The mystical forests were home to grasses, ferns, shrubs, moss, sedges and flowering plants. A trained eye would see colorful orchids, bluebells, wild garlic, enchanter's nightshade, woundwort, figwort, mushrooms, toadstools, burdock, herb paris, ragged robin, dog's mercury, mint, colored pokers and a host of woodland flowers. The old forest had the right amount of shade, moisture, light, and of course, bees and butterflies. By 1544, England was in a precarious position. A mystical forest located in the South, had been ravaged by Humans. The sacred trees had

screamed in pain, as men hacked at their trunks, burning the surrounding land. Animals sworn to protect the mystical forest had long since lost the battle with these dominant Humans.

Fire Dragons had been eliminated. Storytellers now referred to Dragons as colorful characters of legend or within the lyrical verses of fanciful ballads. Dragons could only be seen within the fanciful designs, depicted within a prominent family's coat-of-arms. What the Humans didn't understand was the important function that the mystical forests provided. They served as a place of refuge for the mystical creatures. These powerful mystical creatures had remained hidden, out of sight, for thousands of years. They fulfilled their duty with honor; each species harbored special powers, required to win the battle of good versus evil. Evil could never win when mystical creatures worked together to protect this fragile world.

As the old forests disappeared, many creatures were forced into the open. Humans continued to hunt and persecute them, until more species became extinct. This slowly changed the balance of the eternal war; evil started to gain the advantage. Dark forces could now manipulate Humans, with thoughts of jealousy, revenge, power, pride, hatred, distrust, malice, greed, violence and war. Some unfortunate animals were powerless to resist, as the growing strength of the underworld seeped into our reality. Disturbing whispers echoed across the forest of strange winds and bad vibrations. Strange looking animals and mysterious figures crossed the landscape at night. Evil spells and wretched curses emerged with increasing frequency.

Someone or something, was working tirelessly to place this once honorable land, firmly into the dark power's grip. Plagues and disease spread rapidly, causing more hatred, distrust, and war. Skipton's sacred mystical forest seemed to escape this curse; it was still buried deep within a larger surrounding forest. After decades of destruction, Skipton forest stood proudly as the only mystical forest remaining in England.

The last bastion for mystical creatures, the forest housed Fairies, Wood Sprites, magical trees, Owls, Badgers, and the oldest of all mystical creatures. Running through the forest was Eller Beck, a fresh water stream teeming with fish. It brought essential nourishment to the animals and plants. A small side stream, called Sougha Gill, seemed to supply the Humans with water, preventing their need to venture into the old forest. In the center of the forest was a round pond. It was a large pond, surrounded by the oldest trees. This was the magical heart of the forest. It was here that the spirits of good were the most concentrated, connected, and vibrant.

Many years earlier, after a fierce and bloody battle, the last Fire Dragon was slain by seven of the King's Knights. Most Humans had been convinced that Dragons were extremely dangerous. The last Dragon was a brave young male. The young Dragon was desperately trying to reach the sanctuary of Skipton forest. He'd stopped at a small stream for a nourishing drink. The Knights peppered him with arrows, wounding his wings and rendering him flightless. He fought bravely; exhausted and now tethered, he was no match for the arrows, pikes and swords of the Knights. When news of the final Dragon's demise reached Skipton forest, an urgent meeting was called. The mystical creatures gathered in an area of the sacred forest called Tamworthia. Three leaders were selected to form a council.

It was a day that would change the sacred forest's destiny, a fateful day. It was a somber day, as the mystical creatures admitted they were losing the eternal fight. The cold air circled the forest, fog crawled across the land, but it could not mask the shouts of Humans. Men could be heard searching the forest. They would kill any animal trying to divert their attention away from the center of the forest. Humans would fight and hunt, in some instances they would kill each other,

depending upon the colors they wore. The Human visitors today were different. They didn't wear colors they simply dressed in black.

The mystical animals feared for their leader. The forest was under attack and they had to warn the oldest and wisest mystical creature of all. He wouldn't want to leave the forest, but the danger was too great. If the power of good were to prevail, the mystical animals would need his wisdom. He needed to be safe. A small group of leaders was assembled for the journey. They needed to travel to the center of the forest to deliver the news and warn him.

Acron was the leader of the Fairies. He was a small winged creature, about the size of a Human's hand. He always dressed in green, with small gossamer like wings, protruding from his back. Acron was clever; he was elected to represent the Fairy clans within the forest. Fairies lived in the ancient Ash trees. Acron's territory covered Bestow and Tamworthia, two of the oldest parts of the sacred forest. Fairies had enormous strength for their size and were skilled marksmen with a bow. Each Fairy acquired archery skills, taught from birth, using a custom bow made from the finest Yew. Fairies can always hide within the trees. It was a fact that some mystical creatures seemed invisible to Humans and some, unfortunately, were not.

The wisest of the animals believed it had something to do with the light. It seemed that Humans could only see things across a narrow range of light. When it came to Fairies, they were fortunate. Humans could not see Fairies.

Joining Acron on this important quest was the majestic leader of the Badgers. Belver the Brave was a fierce Badger, a true leader and ferocious fighter. Belver was handsome with white tips on the top of his furry black ears. He sported a classic white stripe that ran from his nose, between his eyes, and over the back of his head. Flanking his white strip, were two black stripes that ran from his snout, over each eye and back through each ear. He was a handsome Badger. Badgers elect their leader based upon their intelligence, fighting prowess and tunneling skills. Belver could fight, as demonstrated by the pink scar that ran the length of his snout. But perhaps his most admirable trait was his supreme ability to tunnel his way from anywhere to anywhere. He'd created a labyrinth of tunnels, throughout Tamworthia, making the Badgers hard to catch and even harder to locate. Then, there was Ranger.

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"Water please."

Jevon stopped abruptly to acknowledge the small, parched sound, emanating from the bed. He lifted his eyes above the edge of the book, and cast them deliberately towards Kady. She just smiled sweetly at him. He reached to his left, towards the bedside table, and handed her a full glass of water. "Are you ok? Are you enjoying the book or is it time to sleep for a while?" Kady took two large gulps of water, swallowing quickly, she handed the glass back to Uncle Jevon. "Are you kidding, it's just starting to get interesting. Tell me more about Ranger." Jevon smiled moving his eyes and his focus back towards the book.

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Ranger Oakmoss is the most famous leader of the Wood Sprites. Wood Sprites are mystical creatures and fiercely territorial. Unlike other mystical creatures they don't live forever. Wood Sprites live exactly a hundred years. They can live anywhere, but they nest in the old mystical forests. They prefer to live in the old Oaks, the sacred Oaks.

They like to burrow into the trunks and live deep within. An old Oak can house up to fifty Wood Sprites. A crackle of Wood Sprites is a family that takes over a tree. Ranger's crackle lived in an old Oak covered in a green moss, deep within the center of Tamworthia. Ranger Oakmoss is the head of his crackle and the head of all crackles across the mystical forest. The Badgers will often tunnel beneath the trees, an arrangement that allows the Wood Sprites safe passage between distant trees. In winter, when food is scarce, the Wood Sprites ensure the Badgers have enough to eat. They will pick berries, nuts and fruits from the highest points of the forest and stash them for the cold winter days.

Humans can see Badgers and often hunt them for their fur. Like the Badgers, Humans can also see Wood Sprites. They can see their movement, but the Wood Sprites have learned to adapt. Wood Sprites can change the appearance of their skin. It's a rough and grainy skin, like the bark of an Oak. They can change both color and texture to match any wood, branch, bark or twig. Their hands and feet are designed to cling onto the surface of wood, using a sticky sap-like substance. This concealment makes them blend in, invisible to the Human eye.

The Wood Sprite's job within the forest is to protect the ancient trees. They also spread seeds across the forest from flowers, trees and shrubs to promote new growth. They're the unofficial guardians of the forest. They ensure that harmony is maintained and worry about the forest's overall health. Wood Sprites watch over the forest and provide the inhabitants with an early warning to the presence of strangers entering the forest. Wood Sprites collude with the whispering trees and the warm winds to signal danger.

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A small trembling hand appeared upon the top edge of the book. It broke Jevon's concentration, as it pulled the book downwards onto his lap. Kady looked deeply into Jevon's eyes, her brow furrowed. "This book is true, right? I mean; that's what Ranger Oakmoss said, at the start of the book, that this was all true?"

Jevon knew he had to continue. "That's what he said."

"My Mum told you that I was having nightmares. I heard her."

"Yes, she did tell me, but ..."

Kady raised her hand and cut him off, "Monsters in the trees. That's how I described them. I saw monsters in the trees." Kady's face had turned an ashen color, a marked departure from her earlier, fever-flushed complexion. She'd suddenly realized what she'd seen. "My Mum told me it was the fever causing me to have nightmares, causing me to see things, but I didn't believe her. I was certain I'd seen something clinging to the branches of a tree. Now I know, they were Wood Sprites, weren't they?"

"Let me read you the book and I think all of this will become clear."

Kady pressed her point home. "No, I want to know Uncle Jevon; what did I see? Ranger said Wood Sprites lived in the sacred forest, the mystical forest, but I saw them in the trees at the bottom of our garden. Are we close to the old forest, the mystical forest? I did see them moving around, but I also saw them hanging onto the branches and trying to stay still. I could see them Uncle Jevon, I could see them."

"I know Kady, I believe you; now let me read this and I promise it will all start to make sense." Kady slumped backwards against her wooden headboard, allowing Jevon to continue. Jevon scratched his head, "Where was I? Oh, here we are."

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The Wood Sprites can talk with the trees, using the power of the forest; they can summon the winds and signal danger. The three leaders made a pact. Their journey would be dangerous but they needed to venture deeper into the forest. Collectively they would head towards the round pond. Growing up in the forest they were all familiar with the stories and legends of the round pond. It was a sacred place, a place with many dangers. Guardians of the forest protected the round pond and many creatures had met their fate trying to intrude upon this inner sanctuary. They would have to stick together and maybe they would survive these hidden perils.

For two days they traveled towards the center of the forest. The forest density seemed to increase, blocking the strong Sun light down to a dim haze. It was the middle of the hot day and still they pressed onwards. At night, strange sounds and the fluttering of wings could be heard. It frightened them, being in unfamiliar surroundings. The Oaks were taller and larger; they seemed to groan their disapproval. The ground was firm, without the safety of the Badger's tunnels to hide in. The energy seemed sharper, the three leaders sensed they were within the spiritual center of the forest; it would be wise if they remained undetected. They were far from the safety of Tamworthia. Apart from disturbing noises at night, their journey was strangely uneventful. They made it to the round pond in two and a half days but they suspected their route could have been easier.

As they stood on the edge of the pond they were all exhausted, scratched, weary, hungry and a little nervous. A rustling noise could clearly be heard. It approached the pond from beyond the trees. Two piercingly bright yellow eyes shone wildly from the dark undergrowth. Acron and Ranger grabbed onto Belver's fur, as if his bulk and fighting prowess would provide protection. They heard a fierce snorting sound and the noise of a large animal moving through the brush.

They all bowed their heads in the anticipated arrival of the oldest and wisest forest inhabitant. The forest was eerily quiet, as if to respect the mere presence of the great beast. The beast propped his weight upon his two front legs. He held his head high and curled his tail around his body like a serpent. Claws protruded from three large toes on his webbed feet, they were dipped into the pond's lapping water's edge. As the leaders raised their heads, they were drawn instantly into the bright yellow eyes of the beast. He was broad, with his massive bulk covered in protective blue scales. Slowly, the beast raised his large reptilian head and they could see the majestic Water Dragon. The creature of legend rose up before their eyes.

The Water Dragon was the oldest and wisest of the mystical creatures. These sea beasts are winged reptilian creatures, with two strong arms supporting webbed feet. They have a long, scaled, powerfully thick, body and tail. The Water Dragon cannot fly, or spit fire, but it does have a long barbed tongue. Its large teeth are sharp, and a formidable weapon, housed within a long snout. It has pointed ears, making the overall appearance unmistakably Dragon. Occasionally, a Human would report seeing a Water Dragon, but this was extremely rare. Most sightings of Water Dragons were reported while sailing in the open sea. Rum fuelled sailors were often prone to exaggerate for the sake of a good story. Many would return full of these stories. The Humans referred to these water beasts as Wyvern. When the hunt for Fire Dragons neared its end, the Humans turned their attention to the Wyvern.

The Wyvern resides in the spiritual world; it can move between the planes of existence and has survived since the start of time. They use water as their way to move between the spiritual world and the physical world. When they feel threatened they quickly retreat into the depths of the oceans, rivers and ponds. They travel back to the safety of the spiritual world, far away from the unenlightened menacing Humans. One Wyvern remained; he was deeply concerned about the future of the old forest. He knew the mystical animals fighting for their lives lacked a convenient escape route.

The oldest Wyvern pushed his snout to the sky; he sniffed the still air and aimed his yellow eyes in the direction of the three leaders. "Standing before me, I have a strange and fanciful collection of mystics, here to command an audience with a Wyvern. A Fairy, a Wood Sprite and a Badger; each of you are noble species, each containing skills that the forest needs. Why do you risk your life to seek an audience with me today?"

Acron stepped forward. "My Lord, we're aware of the restrictions and dangers that surround the pond. Yet we're compelled to come here to warn you of impending danger." A sudden movement registered in their peripheral vision; each leader instinctively glanced to their right. The impressive wingspan of a deadly White Owl glided towards the pond, settling her impressive frame upon the broken limb of a tree. The Owl was unusually large, with razor sharp talons. She moved her protective gaze towards the Wyvern and rotated her head to watch the three leaders. The leaders had all heard of Giselle, but no one was foolish enough to seek her out. They'd heard her tracking them at night. They knew she could have struck at any moment. Her curiosity had been aroused; she'd watched an odd collection of animals, travelling to the pond together. They didn't pose much of a threat to a Great Owl and a Wyvern. Why were they risking their lives?

The Wyvern tapped his claw into the water, snapping the leader's attention back towards the Dragon. "Giselle is like no other Owl. She's a mystical Great White Owl. She's the only one left of her kind. It's sad really, for such a beautiful creature once graced our skies in abundance. The Great White Owl is an ancient mystical animal. She's larger than other Owls and she remembers everything. She can recall everything that she sees and everything that she hears. Giselle's job within the forest is to protect this pond. It lies in the center of the old forest and provides me with a way to come and go. We've been gracious with your company thus far; Giselle has afforded you protection on your journey. Don't disappoint her judgment; tell us why you're here? "

Ranger stepped forward with a lump growing in his throat. His chest was pounding but he knew he had to deliver a compelling argument. "My Lord, I'm Ranger Oakmoss, with me are Acron, leader of the Fairies and Belver, leader of the Badgers. My Lord, we're all worried. The Humans grow stronger every day. The evil within this land grows stronger every day. Today, and every day, we see Humans searching through the forest. As we speak, mystical animals use their powers to distract the Humans and move them away from the old part of the forest. We know we can't hold them back much longer. There's gossip of an old woman; she wanders the forest at night, chanting and casting spells." Ranger's voice crackled with nervous energy. "We'll continue to watch her, but we fear for your safety. The Humans will eventually see you. They'll hunt you, just as they've done with the Fire Dragons."

The Wyvern stamped his webbed foot in annoyance. Belver sensed that Ranger was choking with fear and stepped in to make his plea. "My Lord, we need you to be safe. We've been discussing our fate and we need you to be safe. We'd like you to go back to the spirit world and wait for a while."

The Wyvern sniffed the air again. "You're suggesting that I should hide from the Humans," the Wyvern looked annoyed, snorting air through his nostrils. "I can smell them. I know they're here in the forest. I can also smell evil. The old woman that you refer to is a Witch. She gets her power from a Black Fox. We must stop them."

Belver stood his ground, "You possess wisdom that we don't my Lord. We need to fight these Humans, and we need to fight the evil that controls them. That's our fight, and no mystical animal in this forest will shirk from that fight. We can't afford to lose you though. It would break our belief in all things good and drain our fragile moral. We need to be able to access your wisdom and advice; we need you to be alive, to give us hope. It's too risky for you to stay here. We come today, collectively, to ask you to leave us for now. We beg your forgiveness my Lord, but we need you to go, you're the only Dragon left."

The Wyvern opened his mouth slightly and the large white teeth contrasted against his dark blue shiny scales. "Humans are not evil. Some Humans are pure of heart; it's just a challenge finding them. Wood Sprite, listen carefully." Ranger snapped to attention, realizing the Wyvern meant him. "You must go to the Castle unnoticed, and speak with the Baron. You must inform him of the Witch and the Black Fox. He'll know what to do. He'll help you, he has a pure heart."

Ranger was motionless, he'd been told to speak with a Human, a powerful land Baron, in a heavily guarded Castle. "My Lord, I'm a lowly Wood Sprite, I'm not"

"Silence, Ranger Oakmoss, I have spoken. The Baron is a good man. He has knowledge of the mystical forest and is a rare Human. He can see all of the mystical creatures, including you Fairy."

The Wyvern flicked his snout in the direction of the diminutive Fairy. The impact of this statement was profound. Acron had lived his entire life, comforted in the knowledge, that Humans were not a threat to Fairies. He was wrong. He didn't trust Humans.

Ranger swallowed hard, finally plucking up the courage to speak. "How does the Baron possess this unusual gift my Lord?"

The Wyvern looked across the pond at Giselle, he nodded gently. Giselle adjusted her large feathered wings, folding them neatly at her side. She fixed the leaders with a bold stare and started to speak. "A long time ago, when the Baron was a young boy, he strayed from his parents while traveling through the forest. He wandered far, trying to find his way out, but he headed deeper into the forest. As nightfall drew closer, the battle raged between good and evil. Underworld creatures roamed the forest freely in those days, it was dangerous and the war was intense. The boy was trapped within the forest; he couldn't call for help, it would betray his location. He was scared, vulnerable and alone. The Baron's soldiers searched for the boy. Under the cover of darkness, the soldiers were ill equipped, to face the evil creatures of the underworld. The boy was cold and hungry; he'd survived in the forest for six days and five nights. On the sixth night, the creatures were closing in, attracted to the sweet scent of Human flesh. He'd managed to hide, in the same place each night. Fearful, he hoped the soldiers would find him. Instead, he heard snarls and growls echoing through the forest at night; followed by blood curdling screams. That night, the sweet scent of a Human carried strongly upon the breeze. A particularly nasty Wortenhog was closing in for the kill. The Wortenhog forced the scared boy from the safety of a hollowed log. He ran through the forest, running for his life. The Wortenhog was cunning and ran him straight into a trap. Behind the boy, the sounds of the snarling Wortenhogs intensified. The

boy stopped running; he jammed his feet deep into the soft ground and stared at a ring of fiery red eyes surrounding him. The Wortenhogs were too clever, they'd circled him."

Belver had listened intently but his blood boiled and his fighting spirit surfaced, he couldn't contain himself. "Weren't there any Badgers around to help him fight?"

Giselle ignored the interruption and continued. "The frightened boy watched, as the glowing red eyes moved towards the ground in unison. Together they cowered; frightened, they slipped harmlessly back into the forest. When the boy looked behind him, he saw why the Wortenhogs had fled. Three large Wyverns, flanked by two Fire Dragons, had lined up to bolster his chances. The boy froze from fear, as some Humans do. The Fire Dragons and two of the Wyverns retreated, but the boy remained wary of the remaining Wyvern. The Wyvern stood motionless, he sniffed the air; the Moon moved from behind a thick dark cloud.

The Moonlight illuminated the scene. The boy's eyes sensed movement in the distance, he followed a Fairy as it hurriedly crossed the clearing. The boy's curiosity had betrayed him. The Wyvern recognized that the boy could see the direction the Fairy took. This Human boy could see an invisible mystical creature. He was the first Human of this type that we'd discovered. The Wyvern protected the Human boy, taking him to the round pond. A Wyvern can see the special glow around a creature or object. This boy had a purple glow around his body. It was unusual, for a Human. It was a sign of purity and a kind spirit. For two days the Wyvern talked with the boy. Each night he was protected as the eternal battle raged. The Wyvern provided him with an education about the battle of good versus evil. He introduced him to the power of the forest and why it needed to be protected. From the child's robes, the Wyvern knew he was the Son of the current Baron. One day, he'd become the Baron of this land. In recognition of his protection, and safe return, the boy vowed to protect the forest and the mystical animals that lived within.

Thirty years later, that small boy grew to be the current Baron. The Baron has a pure heart; he's kept his part of the bargain. He forbade Dragon slaying across his lands. He planted trees, to replenish the trees taken for wood. He forbade animal hunting, purely for sport. Most importantly, he kept the old forest safe. It was a sad day when his Wife died bearing his Son. She was a good woman she visited the forest often. He was distraught, that night he took his newborn Son into the forest. He walked into the forest and was immediately surrounded by evil creatures. The Fairies, the Ash trees and the Wood Sprites, saw them enter the forest. They asked the trees to stir the winds, to alert the Wyvern to their danger. The Baron's sweet smell meant he was surrounded quickly. He was quickly secured, encased by the fiercest protection the forest could muster. That night, the Baron presented his Son to the mystical animals of the forest. His Son was surrounded by the brightest of purple light. He had the purest of heart. The Baron swore that his Son, and heir, would uphold his pledge. They're sympathetic to our cause and the only Humans that we trust."

Giselle shot a concerned glance at the Wyvern, unsure if she should complete the story. The Wyvern removed any doubt by completing her story. "We know of only two Humans that we can trust. These Humans aren't like any other Humans. They're called Stibmit's." The Wyvern waited, allowing the new word to register with the leaders.

"A Stibmit is a Human that can see all creatures, one who is pure of heart; they have a purple glow, but they also have a mark. This mark can only be found on a Stibmit, but it's always present. One hot summer's night, the Baron returned to the old forest, shortly before his Son's ninth birthday. His Son was sick, dying from a wretched fever. The mystical animals vowed to help with potions and remedies. It was the wise Great White Owl, Giselle, who finally broke his

fever. She used an ancient remedy of harp ferns, crushed blue orchids and and" The Wyvern snorted his displeasure at his failing memory. He glanced at the wise Owl for an answer.

"It was the venom of a black striped toad." Giselle shuffled, feeling uncomfortable that she had to assist the oldest and the wisest.

"That's it, a lowly innocent toad. But everything has its uses. We'd saved the Baron's child from his wretched fever. This act of kindness had strengthened the bond between the Baron, the child, and the creatures of the forest." The Wyvern looked at the Owl and nodded.

Giselle shuffled her feet nervously before taking over the narration. "A powerful spell had been cast; every Stibmit born afterwards would suffer the same fate. On their ninth birthday they would fall ill from the symptoms of a raging fever. The fever will last for a day or two. Fortunately, it's not fatal; it'll quickly subside."

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Jevon raised his eyes to study Kady. She was listening intently.

"Go on. Keep reading," she said, in an agitated tone.

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The Great Owl turned her head towards the Wyvern. Upon receiving an assuring nod, she then swiveled it back to the leaders. "Once the fever breaks, the sign of the Stibmit becomes more pronounced. To cure the boy's fever we had to dab three dots of a potent poison behind his left ear. We applied the same treatment to the Baron; to protect him from the effects of the fever. Each Stibmit since has been born with three small freckles behind the left ear. After the fever breaks, the freckles become darker. The Stibmit's power of observation becomes more acute. After emerging stronger a new Stibmit can see mystical creatures, day or night, moving or still."

* * * * *

Jevon stopped reading; Kady had leapt from her bed and ran to bedroom cabinet; attached to its front was a large mirror. She quickly pinned back her long brown hair, using her index finger, she bent her left ear forwards towards her cheek. She studied the three dark freckles proudly displayed upon her upper neck; they were tucked away from view behind her ear. She studied them from every angle, until an idea flashed through her mind. She dived over the bed, launching herself energetically. She tumbled to the floor next to Jevon, startling him with her speed. She pounced upon him, straddling her legs either side of his waist; she faced him with inches separating their gaze. She stopped, rigid and still. She calmly smiled at his face and raised her tiny hand. Slowly, she took her fingers and gently pulled his left ear forwards. She gasped as she saw the same three dark freckles, arranged in an identical pattern, on Jevon's neck.

"How long have I had these?" Before he could answer her question, her curiosity got the better of her, "Have you always known that I was a Stibmit?"

"You've had them since you were born and yes, I knew you were a Stibmit; I also knew you would be sick today, starting just before and during, you're ninth birthday. We're both descendants of the Baron of Skipton Castle. I was sick on my ninth birthday. Two days before, I

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