

Princess Ruby of Tamworthia

By
Phil Armstrong

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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 facet 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.

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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.

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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 being 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."

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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

started to see things. Grandfather Dresden spent the day with me; he read me this very book. He had three dark freckles behind his left ear. That day, I spent hours admiring mine in the mirror."

Kady was five inches away from his face, still straddling his body. Suddenly Jevon panicked, he thought about what he would say if Christine were to walk in right now. "Get back into bed, now. You're fever hasn't fully broke yet."

Kady complied willingly, tucking herself into the warm sheets. Jevon closed the book, "I think we should take a break."

Kady disagreed. "There's no way you're stopping now."

"I need five minutes. Go to the bathroom and I'm going downstairs to get us some water. I'll be back in five minutes and then we can start to read again, okay?"

"Okay," said Kady, throwing the sheets to one side and bounding off to the bathroom.

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Chapter 3: Black Fox and Snaggles The Mystical Forest, Skipton, Yorkshire, England, 1545.

When Jevon returned to Kady's bedroom he was carrying two large glasses of water. Kady had returned to her bed; she was sitting to attention with the sheets smoothed across her small frame. Her eyes followed him, as he entered the room. "That was longer than five minutes, I timed you."

Jevon crinkled his nose and made a mock growling face. He placed both glasses of water down carefully, next to his chair. The book remained upon his chair, just as he had left it. "I did a quick check of the doors and added a log to the fire. Are you warm enough?"

"Yup, can we get back to the story?" asked Kady, with her unchecked impatience streaking through her voice.

"So this was a good idea then, reading you the book? Not too lame for a thoroughly modern woman like you?" Jevon teased the young woman and she returned the jibe with a mock growling face.

Jevon slumped into an uncoordinated heap, his body fell in a heavier manner than he'd intended and the chair creaked under his weight. With the book in his hands, he quickly located the paragraph to resume the story. He cleared his throat and began reading again.

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"I've heard enough." The Wyvern thumped a large claw into the pond's edge sending ripples across the water. The pond was eerily quiet, the birds, trees and insects made no sound. It was mid-afternoon; the forest would normally be alive with a chorus of sounds. "I agree with you, young leaders. The forest is teeming with an evil presence; it surrounds us, I can feel it. This is your fight now, and I hope for all our souls, that you win it. I will have to leave you. I have to discuss our plight with my two sisters. They're both wise in very different ways. My Sisters live a

long way from here. They live in different oceans. Rest assured, the three of us will know what to do."

The Wyvern edged its heavy cumbersome frame into the lapping water of the pond. As the Wyvern's scales became wet they shone a brilliant rich blue color. "Once I leave you, returning to this pond will not be easy. It'll take me three Moons before I can return."

Ranger leapt forward, "Wait! How will we know when three Moons have passed?" It was a silly question and he knew he was stalling; he'd come all this way to convince the Dragon to leave. Now he didn't want him to go. He didn't want to disappoint the Wyvern, but he wasn't keen on going to the Castle to talk with the Baron.

The Wyvern addressed the leaders, "Giselle will count the Moons. She'll let you know when it's time for my return. You'll need to formally request my presence back to this world. To open a path for my return, you'll need to follow a strict ritual. Wyverns need to be invited to join the physical world, we're not physical beings. Giselle will organize the ritual, she'll instruct you, the brave leaders of this forest will know when it's time. I must leave now; the daylight is beginning to fade. A Wyvern can hide in the shallowest of ponds. Water has no depth for us. I must have daylight to pass through water to the spiritual realm. I'll return in Moonlight; so it is written. Good luck my friends, work together and seek help from the pure hearted Human; seek out the Stibmit. I'll return as fast as I can, armed with knowledge to win this fight."

The cumbersome Wyvern waddled into the pond. Ranger marveled at how awkward and vulnerable the Wyvern looked. This was the oldest and wisest of the mystical animals? He deserved immense respect and yet Ranger had seen wounded Badgers move more gracefully. A few more strained efforts and the welcoming water began to surround the great beast. With one effortless flick of his powerful tail, the Wyvern was submerged. He flowed gracefully through the water at high speed; the water passed effortlessly across his polished scales. He created no drag or wake. It was obvious to the watching leaders that the Wyvern's body had been created to perfection for this type of environment. The Water Dragon was the supreme beast of the submerged world. The Wyvern spiraled quickly, his motion taking him deeper and closer to the center of the pond.

For a brief moment he paused; supported by his powerful neck, he raised his head above the water's surface. Small rivulets of water trickled down the powerful beast's snout. His eyes focused upon the odd collection of leaders, still assembled on the pond's edge. For a moment it appeared as if he were going to leave them with one last important detail. The Wyvern's head submerged quickly, the calm surface of the pond seemed hardly disturbed, and he was gone.

The leaders looked at each other in stunned silence. Without the protection of the Wyvern, could they trust Giselle? She could kill them instantly. All four stood frozen, waiting for any noise to break the silence. The silence was killing Belver, and yet again his fighting nature pushed him forward. "We have to fight the evil forces for the next three Moons. I'll organize our forces."

Giselle flew to a higher branch. "Good luck leaders, you'll need it. Our ultimate fate rests with a Fairy, a Badger and a Wood Sprite. Ranger Oakmoss; the forest will be lost if you don't enlist the Baron's help. The Wyvern is wise; he selected you for this important task. He chose you because he thought you could do it; don't fail him." Giselle flew from her perch; she flapped her long wings before disappearing into the deep distant woods.

Belver's ears instructed his snout to turn to his right. "We're not alone. I suggest we leave now, back to the safety of Tamworthia and the familiarity of the tunnels. I'm not sure what's out there, but I don't want to find out." Belver hardly managed to form the words when a black, hairy Snaggle, rushed from the forest. Intent on wounding the hapless Badger, he posed a fierce threat. A small noise had distracted Belver; just enough to turn his head. A Snaggle is an underworld creature, about the size of a large pig, but as fast as a lightning bolt. The Snaggle lunged forward, teeth bared and nostrils flared. Ranger had been fooled and was taken by surprise. Fairies often look feeble and small, but Acron was different. He'd seen the movement in the bushes. The Snaggles had kept their distance, cowering and frightened in Giselle's presence. As soon as Giselle had left, they decided to attack. The course black hair stood erect on the Snaggle's back; he went in for the kill. Just before he could clamp his powerful jaws into the distracted Badger's neck, he fell to the ground instantly, howling in pain. The noise of his pain was deafening. It was followed by body spasms and then silence. It happened so quickly that Belver was caught by surprise. The fight minded Badger felt embarrassed and defeated, for he knew he owed someone a life-saving debt. As the Snaggle lay motionless, his cowardly accomplice could be heard running away, deep into the woods. Underworld creatures usually come at night, but this smaller variety of Snaggle, could adapt to the daylight.

Belver and Ranger stared at each other with a look of confusion. They both approached the dead Snaggle with caution. Belver prodded the Snaggle with his claw and they both recoiled from the putrid stench of the creature. They inspected his face, snout, teeth and eyes. It wasn't an everyday occurrence to come this close to a Snaggle. The beast's eyes were still open; they were a bright yellow, except for a pin-sized hole that oozed red blood. Ranger turned to look over his shoulder, taking Belver's gaze with him. Hovering high above them was Acron, his strong bow made from the finest Yew, still drawn for action. He was smiling with his wings fluttering in an excited manner. He kicked forward his little legs in what looked like a celebratory dance. Acron's arrow had flown straight and true. It had pierced the Snaggle's eye, deeply penetrating the brain.

Acron descended towards the leaders, "I don't like Snaggles, never did; they stink."

The leaders laughed, but it was the strained laugh of gratitude. The Fairy had gained some respect. The three leaders began their journey back to Tamworthia and their familiar section of the forest. The journey back seemed longer. It was tinged with the realization of the hardship they must now face. The Snaggle had made them feel vulnerable but more of these dark underworld creatures would roam the woods. Humans would soon swarm the forest looking for wood and hunting animals. Acron fluttered through the air keeping watch from on high. Occasionally he would stop on a branch to rest his tiny wings. Ranger would move from tree to tree, using the limbs to cross from one to another. When he couldn't make a connection he would have to walk along the forest floor. This is when he felt most vulnerable and Belver would try to escort him to give him some additional comfort. Belver would shuffle his way along the forest floor, forcing his way through the undergrowth and leaping over moss covered boulders.

The forest remained unusually quiet. It did not escape the leader's attention. They were extra careful to avoid being spotted or ambushed. The forest cooperated making their journey back simple and fast. It only took them a day as the forest cleared the natural obstacles.

The three leaders progressed in silence but as they entered familiar territory Belver became braver. "Ranger, are you going to the Castle?"

"I don't know how, but that's what the Wyvern wants."

Acron swooped in, hearing the conversation. "We'll need a plan."

"We?" said Ranger, "Are you both going to help me?"

Belver stopped in his tracks, "Of course we are; we're your friends."

Acron nodded as his eyes met Ranger's upwards glance. "I'm nervous about this, but your support makes me feel better. I don't know how we're going to talk with the Stibmit, but you're right, we need a plan."

Acron fluttered silently, "Shhhhh," he pointed to a large creature slumped lazily across a fallen tree trunk. It was too late; the creature wiggled his snout allowing the sweet smell of Badger to enter his nostrils. He raised his body slowly then spread his paws wide. He turned his head and fixed Belver within his hungry stare. For a moment Belver knew he would have a fight on his hands. He could run and find a tunnel, but that would only lead the creature to a tunnel entrance, and introduce more danger. Belver knew this would have to be a fight. The creature was about three times the size of Belver, armed with razor like claws. He would be lucky to win this one.

Belver raised his head and snarled defiantly. He stood his ground and protected his friends. At first, the creature moved forward, snarling and ready to fight. The creature faced him and then backed away; slowly pushing his considerable bulk in the opposite direction. Belver was surprised at his reluctance to fight. The odds were not in his favor, but this cowardly creature continued to bow his head, and loped away from the fray. Once the creature slipped into the undergrowth, Belver turned to proudly face his friends. Belver stood in silence as the sight before him started to register. He looked upwards towards the stone ridge, rising majestically behind him. Nine large Badgers had lined the ridge, providing support for their leader. Belver was unaware of the support; he'd faced the beast with dignity, pride and honor. The Badgers had witnessed selfless act and respectfully lowered their snouts, in a gesture of admiration for their leader.

The leaders had reached Tamworthia they were home and safe. It was time to plan, for it wouldn't be easy to reach the Stibmit. How would they convince him to come to the pond? The leaders followed their Badger escort back to the hollow, where more Badgers, Fairies and Wood Sprites greeted them. Everyone was anxious to hear the news. Conversations flowed late into the night, where opinions were exchanged on how the plan would unfold. Some ideas were based in ridiculous bravado, which would certainly result in death. Some were thoughtful, cunning and worthy of consideration. It was an uneasy time; the perimeter guards had skirmishes with the underworld beasts all night. The blistering Sunrise sent them scurrying back to their underground burrows. The beasts had made progress; they were closing in on the hollow. Two Badgers were seriously wounded and the families were starting to get scared.

There was major reluctance, but the animals had no choice, they needed the help of the Stibmit. The Human was required to protect them and help them get through the next three Moons. Opinions had been strongly voiced. Nobody wanted to involve the Humans but it now seemed they had little choice. They trusted the Wyvern's guidance but it scared them. A Badger screamed as a Fairy tried desperately to suture his deep wound. It ran the length of the Badger's neck, inflicted by a razor sharp claw. How long could they last?

As day light streamed into the hollow, the mystical creatures gathered to agree upon their plan. They needed to protect the hollow. They needed to gather their forces and fight as one unit, leveraging each of their strengths. The three leaders would leave for the Castle to inform the

Stibmit. Leaving their families and the hollow, to the encroaching beasts, would be difficult. They all needed the help of the Stibmit.

Venturing from the safety of the hollow would pose extreme danger for the leaders. They would have to cross through the new forest, heavily populated with underworld beasts, to get to the Castle. The closer they got to the Castle new dangers would emerge. They would start to see Humans on a regular basis and would need to take care. Acron would be invisible, Ranger could hide but Belver would be very exposed. It was agreed that Belver would take them to the edge of the forest. He would then have to turn back; he didn't like it and argued constantly with the suggestion. It will be very dangerous for him to travel alone back to the hollow. It would be more dangerous for him to try to enter the Castle.

As the day wore on, the leaders said their emotional goodbyes. It was time to go and Belver's wife sobbed uncontrollably, as she turned to flee down a tunnel that Belver had made. The three leaders exchanged glances, knowing their best plan was still risky. A commotion drew their attention to the edge of the clearing. A Red Fox streaked into the hollow and fell to the ground, panting and clearly exhausted. A large Badger approached the Fox and snarled his disapproval for the rude interruption. Belver lunged towards the Fox to protect him from imminent attack, "Back Argon, let the Fox speak." Argon retreated but would have loved to fight the Fox.

The Red Fox panted loudly, trying hard to steady his breathing. "I bring news, terrible news. The forest is, the forest is ..."

The Fox could not complete his sentence. He'd pushed the limits of his endurance, running at high speed. Belver stood over the winded Fox in a protective manner, "Calm down and breathe. You're safe here, just breathe, and tell us what you've seen."

The Fox regained his composure, his pounding heart settled. That afternoon the Fox would tell horrific tales of the evil seeping into the forest. Each night, more beasts would appear killing animals and even Humans, across the entire forest. Scared animals would talk of woman, a dark cloaked Human, who would be seen walking inside the forest. She was a powerful Witch. She summoned the beasts that brought misfortune. She'd been observed gathering things across the woods. Sometimes it was flowers, then herbs and mushrooms. Other times she'd catch animals, frogs and toads.

Everyone feared this dark cloaked woman, even the night beasts. During the night they would charge at her, only to cower and screech in pain, when she raised her palm to them. Occasionally she'd be seen with the Black Fox.

Belver sprung to his feet. "Wait, you've seen the Black Fox?"

The Red Fox cowered before stammering a reply, "Yes."

Belver moved his snout to within licking distance of the Red Fox, "In our forest?"

"Yes," affirmed the Fox.

"He's lying," shouted one of the Fairies. "It's a cunning trick."

Belver advanced, making the Fox uncomfortable. Belver's nose touched the Fox's nose. He stared down his snout deep into the Fox's eyes. "Are you telling the truth? Think carefully about your response."

The Fox stood his ground defiantly. "The Black Fox is here, in this forest."

Hundreds of years ago, Black Foxes roamed the forests, and lived in harmony with the other creatures. Red and Black Foxes were not mystical animals and could be seen by Humans. Once a Black Fox became lame, it was in danger of being prey to a larger animal. One night, the sounds of predators were starting to move closer and an injured animal was scared. The legend tells of the Black Fox having a chance meeting with a hideous, horned creature. The creature seduced the Fox with promises of health, power and protection. The frantic Fox accepted the creature's proposal.

The Black Fox became evil, rejoicing in its newly found health and powers. This Fox was immortal, with powers that grew daily. It preyed on the souls of animals and served the underworld. The Black Fox was so evil; it would cast spells that would eventually eliminate creatures from the forest. It is said, that he's the only Black Fox left in this land. Red Foxes run in fear from the Black Fox. The Black Fox embraced evil, and today it seemed that no Fox is openly welcomed in the forest. The Black Fox unlocked the underworld passage to the creatures of the night. This allowed the great beasts to roam the forest and tilt the eternal fight in the favor of evil.

For this reason, many would never trust a Fox again, irrespective of its color. What the Fox told them that afternoon, scared the inhabitants of Tamworthia.

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Chapter 4: The Black Fox The Mystical Forest, Skipton, Yorkshire, England, 1545.

The forest has its own energy; the trees, plants, streams, creatures and weather all play their part in a timeless dance that's existed for thousands of years. Each knows their part and accept their role willingly. When something upsets the delicate balance of the forest, the forest usually deals with it. This leads our story to the Witch.

The Baron of Skipton Castle was a kind man, but he suffered from acute chest pains. As he aged, the pains became sharper and occurred with more frequency. The Baron had one Son, whom he doted on and adored. As a young boy, he impressed his Father with his maturity, patience and understanding. He was the ideal son. Growing up in the Castle, he'd spend most of his time playing with two girls of his age. They were like Sisters to him, but they were actually daughters of two prominent families. After some political maneuvering, each family hoped a bond would form, leading to a marriage that would strengthen family accords. This would create a powerful land empire and entwine the families' power.

Claire was always the outspoken one. She was fun, witty and possessed the most beautiful deep blue eyes. Claire was a small girl, with long braided blonde hair and a large welcoming smile. Gwyneth was shy, intelligent and thoughtful. She was always pleasant and well mannered. Gwyneth had a long elegant neck and a narrow face, framed with straight auburn hair. She was calm with simple, plain looks. Gareth spent time with both girls, but it was obvious that he

avored Claire. Claire was intensely jealous of Gwyneth. Fighting to gain more of Gareth's attention, Claire would be mean towards Gwyneth. Gwyneth often withdrew, deferring to Claire.

Gareth's parents watched the three children play; they suspected Gareth would choose Claire as his bride one day. As they entered the matching age, Claire and Gareth grew closer, laughing, walking and sharing their hopes and dreams. Gareth had grown into a strapping young man. He'd inherited his Father's looks and muscular frame. Claire had blossomed into a beautiful young woman, but she wielded a wicked temper. Claire would shout at the servants and once scolded a young servant girl, splashing her with boiling water.

Gwyneth remained at the Castle; she'd spend time on her own and learn skills from her matrons. She'd gained proficiency in sewing but more important, she would sit and listen to the older women talk. As time passed, she would learn how to be diplomatic and communicate in a thoughtful way. She'd observed the power of language and was no longer a timid, scared, little girl. Gwyneth had blossomed into a woman. No longer the shy, plain looking girl; she'd grown into a beautiful, elegant, confident, woman. Gwyneth was funny, smart, refined and witty. Gareth started to pay more attention to Gwyneth; he noticed her stunning green eyes, soft features and sharp mind.

Gareth liked what he saw; Gwyneth was beautiful. In comparison, Claire was still a young girl; she wielded a wicked temper and a mean, distasteful side. Gareth arranged to spend more time with Gwyneth and Claire became incensed. Her jealousy raised its ugly head like a thunderous cloud, consuming her. Claire shouted, threw objects at the servants and demanded a chance to speak with Gareth. Gareth obliged and told Claire the truth. They'd slowly grown apart, and to make matters worse, he'd fallen in love with Gwyneth. Claire was furious, she felt betrayed. How could this have happened? She'd been convinced they were to be joined. She'd watched these glorious events unfold numerous times within her mind. She'd imagined it so many times that, to her, it was already true.

To Claire, Gwyneth was unworthy of Gareth's attentions. It was common knowledge, for so long, that Gwyneth would make an unsuitable bride. Claire had failed to see the transformation that had occurred within Gwyneth; she had blossomed. Gwyneth was a late bloomer; now she was confident, beautiful, refined and desirable. When Gareth informed his parents of his intension to take Gwyneth as his bride, they were surprised, but delighted. Gwyneth came from an honorable family, with valued traditions. It would make a good political union and Gareth seemed genuinely affectionate towards the girl. They were surprised, because for years, he'd acted as if Claire was the one. This news was devastating to Claire and her family; Gareth's family would have to manage this rejection very carefully.

Claire left the Castle shortly after, and although Gareth made discreet inquiries; he wasn't informed of Claire's location or fate. She disappeared from his view and his life. Over time the Baron managed to restore good relations between his estate and Claire's family. No ill will would result from the breakdown of this potential union. Many times, the Sun rose to be replaced by the Moon, and the bond between the couple grew stronger. One beautiful summer day, Skipton Castle hosted a glorious wedding. Gareth and Gwyneth seemed a perfect match; the Baron could not have been happier.

With the passing of time, Gwyneth was with child and the Castle prepared for an addition to the family. Gareth was attentive and loving throughout. The Baron's health continued to fail; he became weak. The sharp pains increased, deep within his chest. The Castle fell under dark times, with winter bringing a fever that swept over the countryside and throughout the Castle's

population. Many fell sick, including the Baroness. Her aides fought gallantly to save her, but she succumbed to the fever's grip. The Baron, in his weakened state, did manage to survive. His broken heart was never repaired. The loss of his beloved wife gave him little to live for. Not even a Grandchild could spur him onwards. The Baron passed away shortly after the spring season. Gwyneth gave birth to a beautiful girl with rose-red cheeks. They named her Ruby. Ruby seemed to bring good fortune to the Castle; shortly after her arrival, the fever cleared and with it, came the warm summer weather. The Castle adopted Ruby as the bringer of good fortunes. That year's harvest was the best in living memory, and the good times returned to the Castle.

Claire had a different story. She'd left the Castle with feelings of embarrassment and disgrace. Her parents had inquired about the circumstances surrounding Gareth's decision. Why had he changed his mind, when for so long it seemed a certain union? She was confused, upset and angry. Claire returned home to her family's estate, but always felt inadequate. Her parents tried to find her another suitor, but the men she met were old, disrespectful and dirty. She would never find another Gareth.

Under the cover of darkness, Claire would dress in peasant robes and slipped out of her family's residence. She didn't have a plan, but she knew she couldn't stay. Her parents would eventually pressure her into marrying and she'd be trapped in an arranged union, with a spouse she wouldn't love. It may have been a strong political union for the family, but she wasn't staying around to find out. Claire walked calmly to the edge of the village; she didn't want to raise any suspicions. At the edge, she was faced with only one frightening option. She had to choose the path leading away from the village and into the woods. Claire knew her absence would soon be discovered. The village would soon be alive with activity and they would surely find her. She would have to face the consequences, and her parents would increase their search to find a suitable union.

Her dark robes provided cover, but she shivered as the cold night air swirled around her body. A man moved in the shadows but his staggering steps showed the effects of too much ale. Claire hurried towards the clearing, a small section of the village that led to the forest path. Winding her way quickly through the dark empty streets, she began to question her plan. What is she doing? What awaits her in the forest? Will she find safety or purgatory? Would she survive the night or would a wild animal feast upon her flesh? The more she thought, the more she hastened her stride. As if to face the very fear that fuelled her every move, she became more determined to leave. She threw herself into a corner, a dark junction of a fence, made from Ash branches and mud. She'd heard men's voices and she quickly melted into the damp, dark, shadows.

Two soldiers, assigned to watch the perimeter of the village, passed by. They didn't see Claire, crouching within her hooded cape, as they rubbed their hands together for warmth.

They laughed together, before walking onwards to their next stop. Now, was the right time to emerge into the open. The guards had moved onwards and the Moon was smothered with a thick layer of black clouds. The path leading into the forest seemed dark and ominous. What choice did she have? The path was still wet from the day's rain. A thick layer of mud coated the path's surface with pools of water. She noticed the water nestled deep within the tracks carved by the wooden wheels of the merchant's carts.

Claire decided to run through the heavy mud towards the forest path. The mud stuck to her feet, making them slow and wet. She was determined to remain hidden as she hastily pushed her body forward. She passed through the clearing, into the dense cover of the forest; a wave of relieve swept over her. In her heart, she knew she was doing the right thing. Protected from the wind, she hurried along the path, now enveloped by dark branches, leaves and ferns. No one would suspect

she would enter the forest alone. It would take a full search of the village before this possibility would be examined. This would allow her more time to escape and move deeper into the forest. From there, she didn't have a plan. She would have to trust fate and the path that was now chosen for her.

Claire walked deeper into the forest, narrowing her eyes to focus on the way ahead. The dark blanket provided by the trees shielded the light. Claire had to concentrate; she had to stay on the path. She passed a large stone bolder that encroached upon the dirt path. She carefully walked around it, noticing the deep scrapes along its side. It was a large stone often struck by carts, wheels and objects that had traveled down this path. Claire was getting cold and she pulled her hooded cloak tightly to her body. She talked to herself as she walked. "Keep going. You're safe. You'll find happiness. It'll be morning soon."

It would be a long time before morning broke; the beasts of the night were just starting to wake. The forest came alive with animals foraging in the darkness; trees swayed in the wind, strange noises seeped across the cool night air. Claire became frightened; she heard every sound. She saw brightly colored eyes following her from the darkness. Claire was unarmed and suddenly felt exposed. She pressed onwards and hurried her pace. A loud shrill sound pierced the darkness emanating from her right. "What was that?" she heard herself mutter.

This scared her but she was determined to continue. She surveyed the path ahead; she stopped for a brief moment. Something was waiting for her ahead; something large and dark. She stood frozen as she narrowed her eyes trying to focus on the shape ahead. It didn't move.

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"Oh my God, it's a Snaggle; a smelly Snaggle, and it's coming for Claire. I know she's a nasty piece of work, but she doesn't deserve to be mauled by a Snaggle!" Kady pulled her sheet to the base of her nose. Hiding behind it, she allowed her eyes to peer over the edge.

"I can stop right here, if you're frightened?" inquired Jevon.

"No, sorry. I just got a little carried away. I mean, she's stupid to go in the forest on her own and without a weapon? I mean, get armed girlfriend." Kady stopped, realizing that she was at risk of annoying her Uncle. He could decide to pack it in for the day and she wanted to hear the rest of the story. "Sorry," she said dropping the sheet and smiling innocently.

"Carry on then?" inquired Jevon, knowing the answer.

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"Carry on," nodded Kady.

The shape remained still; it seemed to be stalking her like prey. Perhaps it was asleep? Claire inched closer, straining to see the bulky shape that lay ahead. A break in the thick clouds allowed the Moon to provide a welcome shaft of blue light. The light streaked through the overhanging trees onto the dirt path. Claire's face dropped with horror. She'd been walking most of the night, alone, frightened, unarmed, traveling deeper into the forest. In the darkness, she'd been unwittingly turned around. The object ahead was not a large beast, waiting to spring upon its prey. It was a large stone boulder, encroaching upon the path. Claire walked closer, inspecting the

boulder's wounds and shape. She recognized the boulder, and the deep scrape along its side. She didn't care if she alerted the animals to her location; she let out a loud cry of frustration and anguish. She'd spent most of the evening traveling in a large circle.

Her cry did alert the forest to her presence and the animals of the night moved in. Claire sat on the boulder, clutching her head in her hands. A small movement caught her eye and she raised her head quickly. This time it was different. This time, she could see a shape on the path, and it moved like an animal. Its muscular shoulders were rising and falling as it approached. Claire could hear snorting and the beast smacked its lips in anticipation. For a moment she was anchored to the boulder in fear. Then a loud voice of survival erupted within her mind, "Run!" Before the command could reach her tired limbs, she'd spun around assessing her options for escape. When she glanced at the path she clenched her jaw tightly. Bright yellow eyes and dark shadowy outlines were appearing from all directions. She was surrounded with no way out.

Running was futile; she would have to stand and face the great beast. He was taking his time; he lumbered slowly down the path. The Snaggle knew he didn't need to exert himself. He savored the sweet smell of the Human; saliva streamed from his mouth. He snorted loudly, blowing the excess mucus from his nostrils. He wanted to smell her, he wanted to capture as much of that intoxicating smell as he could. He was close now and the kill was imminent. She wouldn't run, but she wouldn't put up much of a fight either. He'd have a harder time keeping the other Snaggles away from his prize. As he waved his snout through the scented air, he recognized a different smell. It stopped him. He waved his nose around frantically trying to fill it with air. It was there again, this time stronger. The scent was unmistakable, and it meant danger.

The great beast stopped, afraid to approach any closer. Claire watched as the beast hesitated. She suddenly became aware of the noises around her. The beasts were slipping away, frightened and cowering. They made small submissive noises; different to the excited snarling they'd made moments earlier. The leader of the hunting pack could not fade away so easily; he was exposed. He was agitated, as he thrashed his head from side to side and tried to find a way out. Another small movement caught Claire's attention. It was a skinny little Fox, appearing from the undergrowth. He pranced onto the path directly between the beast and Claire. He wasn't a pretty Red Fox; instead he was a plain looking Black Fox. He was small in stature; Claire was convinced the beast would make him pay for his error in judgment.

What she saw next astounded her. The Fox moved slowly towards the great beast, he moved his slim frame forward in a fearless manner. He stopped, sat on his haunches and licked his lips. He was sitting well within striking distance of the Snaggle's jaws. The Snaggle looked uncomfortable. He backed away slowly, like an animal does when faced with a much larger, more powerful, adversary. The Snaggle continued to back away, cautiously dropping his snout to the dirt, as a mark of respect. The Fox stood his ground and watched the battle hardened beast retreat. When he felt he was at a safe distance from the Fox, the Snaggle turned and ran. Fear was coursing through the beast's veins, as he disappeared into the dark shadows of the forest.

The Black Fox turned, raised his slinky body, and began the slow walk back towards Claire. She felt calm and relieved; she could see the slender Fox approaching. He had large ears, a slim snout, and black shiny fur covering a slim body with an oversized bushy tail. He traveled along the path with an amusing, unusual, prancing motion. For an animal that had scared away a pack of wild beasts, it was unclear to Claire, what they'd feared. The Fox approached, stopping within touching distance of Claire. He sat proudly upon the dirt path, inspecting the figure before him. He tilted his head; with curious eyes he studied the hooded figure before him. Claire raised her

hands slowly; she pushed her black hood away from her face, letting it fall upon her shoulders. She'd exposed her face, allowing the Fox to study her pretty features.

Claire realized the forest, normally teeming with howls, snorts, growls, and the pounding feet of night beasts, had gone deathly quiet. The darkness had returned, as the Moon seemed to hide from sight. The Black Fox tilted his head to the other side and focused his brown eyes on Claire's features. The Fox had seen enough and suddenly ran into the forest. Claire was confused; she didn't know what had just happened but she'd be eternally grateful to that little Black Fox. After the Fox disappeared, Claire started to worry about her situation. She decided to remain in her current location until the daylight returned. She would lose valuable time and distance from the searching villagers but at least in the daylight, she could avoid circular routes through the forest.

Claire tried to get comfortable, using the boulder as a makeshift bed. It wasn't comfortable, but it was raised from the wet dirt path. Claire tried to sleep; she closed her eyes and pulled her hood over her head. She was exhausted and she soon fell into a deep, yet cautious, sleep. Her dreams were filled with ferocious beasts and sly Foxes, but her body needed rest and she slept.

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"You ok?" asked Jevon pausing at a critical moment. "Are you hungry?"

Kady was just starting to get hungry but there was no way she was going to admit this. The story was getting good and she wanted to know what happened to Claire. "No. Not yet. Perhaps later," she pulled a face that meant please continue.

"Okay, but let me know when you get hungry. Your Mother will kill me if I don't feed you." Jevon shuffled in an attempt to get comfy and resumed.

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When the Black Fox returned to the path, Claire was fast asleep. He'd managed to find a number of specific items within the forest. He'd carried them back gently within his small mouth. He dropped the contents onto the path and selected a leaf he'd taken from an Oak. He lifted the leaf with his mouth and moved towards Claire's right hand. He'd noticed a small cut on her finger and he dabbed the leaf on the wound. He'd collected a small amount of blood, but it was enough.

The Fox selected a small toadstool and chewed it patiently. When the toadstool was reduced to a liquid within his mouth he dribbled two small drops onto the bloodied leaf. The Fox spit the remaining liquid onto the path. His next selection was a coarse green leaf, selected from the broad-leaved Helleborine. The Fox chewed the leaf until his saliva mixed with the plant's taste. Spitting a small amount of saliva onto the Oak leaf his mixture was complete. He discarded the remaining contents of his mouth onto the path. With the concoction mixed he would be able to cast an ancient spell. The Fox lifted the Oak leaf, trying not to spill the mixture. He pushed the leaf against Claire's finger exposing her open cut to the liquid. The Fox used his thin snout to push the leaf over the exposed wound, allowing her blood to absorb the powerful mixture.

The Black Fox curled into a small ball next to Claire. He knew she would sleep heavily tonight. She would be safe from the beasts if he remained near her. He licked his lips, trying to eliminate the strong taste still in his mouth. He curled his spine, tucking his snout under the tip of his bushy tail. It wasn't long before he fell asleep.

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Chapter 5: The Witch
The Mystical Forest, Skipton, Yorkshire, England, 1545.

Ranger Oakmoss was settling in for the night. The Crackle had all gathered, the old, the sick, Mothers, warriors and the young. It was almost time for the Crackle to send the children to sleep. A tradition in the Crackle was to relive the ancient stories of the forest. The practice of telling stories was their way of retaining the Wood Sprite history. This was an oral tradition that introduced their legends, relived the stories of their heroes and served to update each other on more recent events. Kormos was an emerging Wood Sprite, he was a born leader and very intelligent. He stepped forward confidently to take his place on the oratory branch. With the Wood Sprites gathered, high within the safety of the tree's top branches, he began.

"My fellow Wood Sprites of the Tamworthia Crackle. I have a disturbing tale, yet one of great importance. The legend states that many winters ago a Black Fox happened upon a frightened young Human woman wandering the forest at night. But this was no ordinary Fox; it was the Black Fox.

A powerful Lord of the underworld had managed to escape the shackles of the evil deep. As he pushed his dark, cold spirit, into our forest, he desperately sought a vessel to house his putrid, sick, and powerful spirit. For this was an old-world Lord, a Lord of darkness with access to ancient knowledge and perverse spells."

Kormos moved to one side noticing a young Wood Sprite, his face bathed in the Moon's light and his attention captured by the story. Kormos returned his fascinated gaze, "Evil!" he shouted, forcing the young Wood Sprite to recoil in horror. "Pure evil; in the form of a spirit. To this day no one knows how he managed to break free and enter our world. The only fact that we know for certain is that he did. As he seeped into our forest, a hapless Black Fox was foraging for food near by. The spirit quickly consumed the Fox, taking his form for eternity. The Black Fox banished all other Foxes from the forest. The Fox dens remain empty to this day. No Fox, of any kind, feels safe entering our forest. The most ferocious form of night beast still defers knowingly to the Black Fox. He's clever, sly and powerful. The beasts fear him; for they know he's a dark Lord, they fear his status." The younger Wood Sprites leaned in, straining to hear the story, fascinated by the powerful Fox.

"It is said, that as the Fox grew more powerful, he found a young Human woman. She was lost and alone. The Fox saved her from the night beasts and gained her trust. The Fox was clever; he mixed an ancient potion, known only in the underworld. He managed to bewitch the girl and she started to transform. Her heart became cold and vengeful. She surrendered her soul over to the dark side. It is said that they can communicate with each other without using words. On the outskirts of the Mystical Forest, near the dirt path is a thick, dense, group of Rowan trees. Rowan trees are ancient trees, but they're a type of Mystical Ash. They use the wind to whisper to each other and can spread news quickly across the forest. If you're gifted, when you mature, you could become a wind reader. Both my Father and I were born wind readers. We can read the whispers from the ancient Rowan."

"What do they say?" asked a young Wood Sprite impatiently.

"They tell us of happenings within the forest. It's mostly normal events. A tree has been damaged, a lightning strike, perhaps an animal falls prey. Occasionally, they tell us of approaching danger, a group of Humans entering the forest. Perhaps an approaching hunting party or a night beast stranded in the daylight. It started a few winters ago, but the trees told us of a strange shadowy figure. It was an old woman, always dressed in a black cape, moving slowly and with purpose, around the forest. We tracked her and soon realized she lived in an abandoned cottage on the fringes of the forest."

Kormos moved his glance towards Ranger; he stepped aside, as a mark of respect, and offered the oratory branch to Ranger to complete the story. Ranger accepted the invitation by stepping up to the oratory branch. "Each passing day, as the Moon rose high, this young woman seemed to grow older. Her figure became hunched and her face withered and wrinkled. The only company she kept within the forest was her protector, the evil Black Fox. The Black Fox's power was getting stronger. He used the woman to gather ingredients to make powerful potions. He taught her how to cast spells. It is said that the Black Fox managed to open a tunnel from the underworld, straight into our forest. The tunnel only opens when the Moon is at its highest point, it floods the forest with marauding Snaggles and other underworld beasts. These despicable beasts have to return to the tunnel before the daylight breaks; the light will scorch them. Their bodies seem to burst into flames, burning in the day's bright light. We've seen this, when Snaggles are killed or when beasts get stranded. Day after day, the Black Fox gained frightening power. Each night he leads the evil forces into battle with the mystical animals. Each night he seems relentless, summoning the great beasts."

Ranger tried to convince the Crackle of how dangerous the Black Fox was. "He has poisoned the mind of this young woman. She's turned into a withered old Witch. She's filled with hatred and evil, she wanders the forest in the daylight and at night. A few Moons ago the Rowan trees started to sway furiously. The whispering Rowan trees told of an advanced hunting party; six heavily armed Humans looking, searching for deer. They stumbled upon the Witch, and her cottage repaired with sticks, mud and thatch. The old woman was stranded, she could not return safely to her cottage. She found herself surrounded by the men. The Black Fox watched from the vantage point of a high rock, safely hidden in the distance. The men laughed at her appearance, they ridiculed the Witch. Annoyed, she reached into her basket and pulled out a small package, wrapped in the wide leaf of a fern. When she opened the folded leaf, a small yellow cloud rose from her palms. She muttered some ancient phrase, based in a long forgotten language. Intrigued, the men stopped laughing. Then they stopped moving; frozen like the surface of a stream on the harshest day of winter. The Rowan reported that she calmly walked to her cottage, leaving the motionless men to the mercy of the night beasts. I won't describe the carnage witnessed that night, for we all wish the little Wood Sprites here, to sleep well tonight. The old woman of the woods has been turned evil by the Black Fox. He's turned a young innocent woman into an old, evil, wretched hag. She's dangerous and she's acquired powers from the Black Fox. She helps him fight for evil. We must hide when we see her, and we must always hide from the Black Fox."

"And they can talk to each other?"

It wasn't acceptable to interrupt the leader of the Wood Sprites when he was on the oratory branch. Ranger glanced at the young Sprite's parents; he received a polite, embarrassed, nod of acknowledgement. The Sprite's parents would correct this rudeness, in private, later that night. Ranger handled the moment of enthusiasm graciously. "Yes, little one, they can talk to each other, but they don't use words. The trees and many a Wood Sprite have seen the two of them communicate, but they don't hear sounds."

Ranger stepped off the branch allowing another to build upon the story. This was the practice of the Crackle. A younger Wood Sprite stepped up. "It's my first time on the oratory branch, and I'm a little nervous. But I have to share my knowledge and add to this. I too have inherited the wind reader gift. I was gathering nuts today on the outskirts of the forest. The Rowan started to sway wildly and the wind was ushered into the trees. I listened to the whispering; the trees were growing concerned. The Witch carried a basket. This was not unusual, as she would often collect items to make her potions and cast her spells. Today she used a powerful powder. She would throw the powder into the air and it would spread out to form a mist, a damp mist. As the mist turned into fog, it would coat the forest, making everything wet. A damp fog spread across the forest floor. The Witch and the Black Fox would scurry around, frantically listening for a distinct sound. I couldn't understand why the Witch was doing this, but the whispering trees were upset. No, they were angry! They made me promise that I would speak tonight, to share this information with you. The Witch was callously collecting the Yellow-bell flower. In our forest, we're fortunate to have the beautiful Yellow-bell flower. It is said that we are the only forest left that has this flowering plant. Blue-bells are a common flower, White and Purple-bells too, but Yellow-bells are very rare. We know when a Yellow-bell gets wet, that it rings quietly; like a small bird with a pleasant high-pitched song. The Witch didn't pick the flower; she was pulling up the entire plant by its roots. At the end of each day she would build a small fire and empty the contents of her basket onto the fire. She would burn the plants, destroying them." The Crackle gasped in unison. "The Rowan wanted me to tell you. The Witch is moving through each hollow of the forest, trying to eradicate the Yellow-bells."

Ranger glanced at the elders; they seemed worried but tried not to show it in front of the entire Crackle. No one knew why the Witch was eradicating the Yellow-bells but everyone shared the same concern as the whispering trees. She was practicing evil and this meant trouble for the forest. She had to be stopped. That night the Crackle fell into an uneasy sleep with a worrisome question hanging over their heads. Why was the Witch doing this?

Once the Crackle was settled in, deep within the hollowed-out trucks, the Wood Sprite warriors took their turn guarding their trees. That night seemed busier than others, with numerous beasts prowling the forest floor. The Wood Sprites would shout instructions, as they observed the battle from the safety of their trees. They would plan and coordinate strategy. They would help the Badgers to the safety of their tunnels. They could coordinate attacks and direct the Fairies and other animals to safety. Some Fairies would swarm a Snaggle and bring it down. Wounded Snaggles would become trapped above ground, to face a fiery death as daylight broke. The Badgers were the fiercest of fighters. They could hold their own with the smaller beasts but it took a pack of Badgers to take on a Snaggle. This needed coordination, with six Badgers, all knowing their role. It was risky and many Badgers were lost or badly injured. The Fairies would try to help, using their poisoned arrows. It was a team effort, but each night the beasts kept coming. There seemed to be more beasts flooding the forest each time the Moon rose.

It was Ranger's lookout shift as the battle raged onwards. He took his familiar position, high above a clearing, on an overhanging branch. From his vantage point, he could see all of the clearing, including the entry and exit paths. It was a great place to organize an ambush or provide a warning to the Badgers in the battle below. Tonight saw the return of old one ear. One ear was a Snaggle who loved to fight. He'd lost an ear making him instantly recognizable, but he was mean. This Snaggle preferred to fatally injure the Badger by attacking the stomach. He wanted them to have a slow and painful death. He was undefeated and Belver would always try to seek him out. His reputation as a nasty Snaggle had traveled, and the Badgers really wanted rid of this one. One ear had been fighting and was tired, the blood of Badgers stained his snout and he considered it to be another glorious evening. He stumbled to the clearing; unaware the dense forest had receded.

He was alone, tired, exposed and vulnerable. One ear was so tired that he just wanted to go back to the underworld. The night would be over soon and as a loyal soldier he decided to head home.

Acron started the assault. Fifteen Fairies swooped silently from the trees, approaching the Snaggle from the rear. The Fairies drew their bows, with their target in sight. Poisoned arrows pierced the Snaggle's back, piercing the bottom of the spine. One ear felt a small sting and immediately buckled as his back legs folded and his rear-end became paralyzed. He snarled his protest but could not manage to get his rear legs to respond. Badgers appeared from the tunnels, to his left and right. He was outnumbered and injured. One ear let out a roar, hoping that other Snaggles would come to his aid. The Badgers attacked from the sides, trying to approach from the rear. Only one Badger was brave enough to attack from the front; trying to avoid the powerful jaws of the Snaggle. Belver wanted the kill. He tasted revenge for the deaths of his friends, left to die horrible deaths. Belver waited for his moment, with the patience of an experienced fighter. He didn't rush in like the younger Badgers, tearing at the Snaggles motionless backend. He waited for old one ear to whip his jaws to his rear, trying to snap at the pack of Badgers. He came close and missed a young inexperienced Badger by the closest of margins. In this game, you become experienced quickly, or you simply don't.

The Snaggle was distracted, Belver made his move. He ran from the cover of the long grass and leapt forward. Belver clamped his jaws on the great beast's neck, snatching a piece of his throat within his jaws. He felt the warm blood, flow within his mouth, as he fell to the ground. One ear looked surprised; he'd been outsmarted. He knew this was the end. His front legs buckled and now he lay bleeding, motionless within the long grass. Belver barked out an order to retreat; the Badgers backed away. Acron hovered over Belver.

"You got him!" shouted Acron, still gripping his trusty bow.

"He won't make it, I damaged his throat." Belver was still coughing up the foul tasting Snaggle blood from his mouth.

"Fairies, gather with me, we'll finish him," rallied Acron.

"No," shouted Belver, "No, we're going to leave him here."

Acron fluttered closer to Belver, "We can finish off with our arrows."

"No, the Sun will be up very soon. One ear is a particularly nasty beast; he deserves to see the Sun."

Belver had just outlined his request, when the first ray of Sunlight glinted across the flapping wings of the brave Fairy. The two warriors looked at each other and they knew this was the end of a particularly nasty Snaggle.

* * * * *

After the untimely death of the Baron, Skipton Castle was thrown into uncertain times. Politically motivated advisors tried to influence his young son with whispered advice. Gareth was a smart young man, with an old head on his shoulders. He'd watched his Father carefully, and learned from his actions. Gareth noted that his Father would always seek counsel from Arthur, an elder of the court, when he doubted himself or when an important decision loomed. Arthur had always been around. Arthur was a clever man, but he didn't hold a position of power within the Castle. Arthur was an old, frail man, with a long grey beard. He always supported his weight using a long, carved staff made from Elm. Arthur had never tried to influence Gareth, that wasn't his style.

The day came when Gareth's head was spinning with conflicting advice. Gareth approached Arthur; he was resting in the courtyard on a pleasant summer's day. "I need to talk with you."

"If you watch the birds, you can learn a lot about life," was Arthur's response.

"That's good, but I've more pressing matters that need our immediate attention." Gareth was impatient and annoyed at the old man's ramblings.

"The Sparrows are the smaller birds, less aggressive and more adaptive," he said, taking great delight at ignoring the apparent urgency. "Then we have the Crows. Ah yes, the Crows. They're the big black birds that don't visit often. They seem less interested in the day-to-day goings on but they swoop in and make a lot of noise. They haven't taken the time to stand back and observe like the Sparrows. They don't know what they're doing, and with their size, they simply don't care. They're unfamiliar with their surroundings, but again they simply don't care. What they fail to understand is that everything is connected and in balance. This Castle has a rhythm, a way of operating and surviving. The larger Crows think they're above that and do as they please. They push the Sparrows aside with their might, demanding instant respect. They swoop down and expect food to be waiting for them."

Arthur laughed as he poked his staff into the dirt causing the smaller Sparrows to take flight. Gareth had listened carefully; as his patience grew, he realized that Arthur wasn't talking about the birds anymore. "The Crows soon leave empty handed. The Sparrows know that the crumbs from the baker's trays only get cleaned out at mid-day. The baker's assistant dumps the breadcrumbs over there, near that wall, at noon every day. He bangs the trays on the wall to loosen the food scraps. Once he's removed the loose crumbs, he'll take the baking trays inside, to be cleaned thoroughly for the next day. The Sparrows know this, because they've taken the time to observe and learn. They'll tolerate the Crows and their behavior. They'll even let the Crows think that their size elevates their status. But when the weather turns and winter's cold grip approaches, the food sources for these birds will become scarce. The smaller Sparrows don't need as much food to keep them going. It'll be the Crows that starve. They won't know how to adapt and the winter will take its toll, as it usually does." Arthur raised his eyes to meet Gareth. Gareth was paying attention; trying to understand the cryptic messages buried within this amusing bird tale.

"The Sparrows are smaller and weaker. But across all of nature's species, it's usually the smarter birds that survive the harsh conditions. Crows surround you Gareth; perhaps you need to sit back and observe. Surround yourself with Sparrows and you'll not be led astray." Arthur leaned back and drew a line in the dirt with his staff. The Sun was bright today and the warmth was a welcome relief for his tired bones. The wind rustled the trees and he watched the shadows dance across the paved stone courtyard. Arthur liked the trees; he'd learned to appreciate their soothing sounds.

"I need good advice. I need time to learn and I want to make my Father proud. Too many of my advisors have their own political agendas. I know this but I have to make decisions and not appear weak." Gareth paused. He wondered if this old man was as smart as he thought he was.

"You'll do fine. I usually watch the birds at this time, almost everyday. I encourage you to pay an interest, they really are quite amusing."

So it came to pass, the birth of an enduring ritual. Gareth started to watch the birds. He made time each day to sit in the Castle courtyard and discuss the day's events with Arthur. Arthur was a wise and trusted sage. Gareth learned quickly, he matured into a highly proficient Baron in a turbulent time. It was a sad day for Gareth when he learned that Arthur was gravely ill. It was only a few days later that Arthur passed away. Gareth had lost a good friend, a steady hand, and a voice of reason. Arthur had been patient with him, recognizing he had a lot to learn. Arthur had felt sorry for Gareth, being thrown to the political wolves by his Father's untimely demise.

Gareth was alone now, in his late thirties, with a wife and a daughter to protect. Gareth had made some bold moves as a new Baron. He'd won the respect of the Castle and its neighboring inhabitants. He'd fostered a sense of cooperation and fairness across his estate. People paid taxes but they received plenty for this price. The Castle was well run and maintained. It provided shelter and protection when required. Gareth had negotiated his way around several tricky propositions, where a lesser man would have been drawn into a war. Gareth was a strong leader and had gained a reputation as a smart negotiator.

For the last four years he'd faced drought, failed crops, uprisings in the lower regions of his estate, a rash of thefts, a hardened murderer and numerous political maneuvers from politicians and clergy. He'd survived and emerged stronger but, with most successful campaigns, it had taken its toll. The time spent working his way through these issues had opened a distance between himself and Gwyneth. Gwyneth never saw her husband and when she tried to get his time, he was always far too busy to be disturbed. He was busy working on important things. Their anniversary would pass unnoticed and even Ruby's birthday celebrations would be missed. Gwyneth supported her husband, for she knew he faced serious issues that could threaten the very stability that they all enjoyed. Ruby was growing up fast and she hardly knew her Father. They'd not spent time together for years. He knew nothing of her daily life and she seemed distant when she was in his company.

"Don't lock the elbow," barked Joseph; "turn it in slightly." Joseph was the head of the Castle guards. At an early age he'd been selected to guard Ruby as her escort. He'd sworn to protect her with his life. At first he resented his assignment but the two had formed an unlikely bond. Joseph was a large muscular man. He usually dressed as if he were entering a battle, covered in leather and heavily armed. He was a fierce fighter and commanded respect from his fellow guards and citizens of the Castle. He was fiercely protective of Ruby and liked to imagine her as his own daughter. Joseph was a master of the long bow. Ruby would often watch Joseph practice. One long summer's day, Ruby decided to change the course of her destiny. Joseph had stopped his practice routine, frustrated with his lack of accuracy. He knew what he needed to do, for he had been taught by the best. His beautifully crafted bow was made from the finest supple Yew. He carefully rested his bow; he sipped some cool water from his leather-drinking pouch.

He let out a quenched sigh before dropping the pouch of water. "Wait, don't touch that," he screamed. "Put it down now!"

It was too late. Ruby had been observing for years, watching the handsome guard practice his archery skills. She'd always wanted to try the bow and decided that today she would. The bow was stronger than she had expected. She pulled back the arrow, aimed at the straw bale and released the tension. The arrow flew straight and true, hitting the center of the target with surprising accuracy. Ruby turned her head, exposing a satisfied smile. She was pleased that she managed to hit the target using such an oversized bow.

Joseph snatched his bow from Ruby's hands, annoyed at her reckless actions. "You could have hurt yourself! This is a weapon, not a toy."

"I managed to hit the target. My arrow was closer to the center than your feeble attempts." She quickly realized that she'd offended, perhaps hurt his feelings. Ruby did the only thing that she could think of. She opened her bright eyes as wide as she could and flashed a broad smile at him.

Joseph laughed loudly; he knew it was a joke. "If you want to learn how to shoot an arrow then we should teach you the correct way. Your attempt was pure luck. Do you want to learn the right way?"

Ruby nodded with some enthusiasm, but she disagreed with his assessment. It was certainly not luck but merely the result of her attentive observations. Over the following months Joseph would spend time with Ruby and teach her the basic technique. She learned how to hold the bow, position her body, align her eye to the arrow and release her finger grip on the tight twine. Her accuracy improved with practice; she was becoming an accomplished archer. Ruby's accuracy was starting to surpass Joseph's abilities. Ruby could hit a moving target at any range and her technique for reloading the arrow was highly proficient.

Ruby had grown into a confident young girl; she wore leather bindings on her forearms and tied back her hair, so it would not affect her aim. She was starting to take her archery seriously. Her arms were strong and she'd developed an athletic build. Ruby seemed to grow closer to Joseph; he'd become the male influence in her life. Gwyneth had occasionally seen Ruby practicing with the bow. Under Joseph's stewardship, she was confident that Ruby was in good hands. She'd noticed how assured and skilled she'd become. She approved of her daughter's newly found independence. Being able to protect yourself in this changing world would be a handy skill for a modern woman to possess.

It had been a long day. Gareth was tired; he'd spent the day with local dignitaries bickering over money and land. His mind was tired and he looked forward to returning to the Castle and seeing Gwyneth's beautiful welcoming face. He still loved her madly. Gareth was sore from riding as he dismounted his steed and handed the reins to the stable boy. He was covered in dust and dreaded the short walk through the courtyard to his chambers. His legs were sore and he wished he were a younger, fitter man. Three guards had traveled with him today. They were busy in the stables, preparing the horses and returning to the guardhouse for a well-deserved meal. Gareth left the men and started his journey towards his quarters. The impatient clouds had crowded out the bright sunshine. It was later in the day and the evening darkness encroached. Long shadows streaked across the stone walkways. Gareth's heels clicked on the stone slabs as he confidently strode towards the opening of the courtyard.

Above the sounds of his footsteps he heard laughter. It was a sweet welcome relief from the drudgery of the day. Gareth was concealed within a stone covered walkway. Stone arches supported a curved roof that ran the length of the path, creating a long corridor of dark stone. He stopped abruptly to observe the scene unfolding ahead of him. The sweet laughter emanated from

his darling daughter Ruby. She was dressed for archery and laughing with Joseph. She paced out a distance and to his surprise raised a long bow as if to shoot. Her form was excellent. She pulled the arrow backwards, straight and true. The familiar sound of release and the dull thud of the arrow echoed around the courtyard as the arrow hit the straw target. More laughter ensued, Ruby was having fun, real fun. It was nice to see. Gareth had not seen Ruby play, laugh, or run with excitement in his company since she was a little child. His daughter was growing up, and he was missing out on her development. He felt a wave of emotions. He was sad but he was smiling. He stretched his neck to get a better look at the straw target. Three perfectly grouped arrows were clustered within the center of the target. She was good!

A large black Crow noisily swooped across the courtyard and broke the moment. Ruby tracked the Crow with the tip of her arrow, tracking its movement. She never intended to hurt the Crow; she just used it as an opportunity to hone her skills. As the Crow disappeared from sight, in one swift movement she altered her aim from the moving target, and released the arrow at the straw bale. The arrow proudly joined the other three nestled within the heart of the target. "Well done!" shouted Joseph, clapping his large hands. Ruby stomped her feet with excitement. Gareth could feel a smile erupting across his tired face.

Walking on the balls of his feet, he managed to silently slip by unnoticed. Gareth returned to his chambers and looked for Gwyneth. He decided to remain silent on the events he'd just observed. The summer days came and went as usual at the Castle. Gareth became busier as the season wore on, affording him little time to spend with his precious family. The arrow had been drawn with the normal efficiency, "Keep your eye line steady," barked Joseph, trying to be helpful.

"Sir, you're expected immediately." In all of the excitement, Joseph had not heard the guardsman, approaching from his rear. He was angry with himself. How could he not hear the approaching man? He was getting too caught up with the games and not paying enough attention to his job, his duty. What if this man meant harm to Ruby? He was seething and vented his frustration. He spun to see the guard approaching fast.

"What do you want?" he shouted in annoyance. The change in Joseph's demeanor startled Ruby.

"Pardon me Sir, for the interruption," stammered the surprised guard.

"You will be, if you don't explain yourself quickly," shouted Joseph at the hapless guard.

"The Baron wants to see you immediately, in the great hall. He asked me to come and get you from the courtyard."

"The Baron knows that we're in the courtyard?" inquired Joseph, the sound of concern coursing through his voice. "Did he specifically say to come to the courtyard?"

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"They're in deep doo doo now!" blurted Kady, raising her hands to her mouth as soon as the words spilled forth. "Sorry," she smiled sheepishly.

"This might be a good time for a break?" inquired Jevon.

"Awhh really? Can't we just find out what the Baron wants first? I think he's angry over Joseph teaching Ruby archery." Kady was a really bright kid; Jevon marveled at how quickly she could assimilate information and form a big picture perspective, at such a young age.

"Okay, here's what I'll do. I'll read to the end of this section, and then we have to break for some lunch. If I don't feed you, your Mother's going to kill me. My belly is grumbling anyway. Deal?"

Kady hesitated for a short moment, "Deal."

"Right, where was I?"

Kady assisted, "Did he specifically say to come to the courtyard?"

She was too clever for her own good.

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"Yes Sire. He instructed me to go to the courtyard and stop the archery lesson. Those were his exact words."

Joseph shot a look towards Ruby. He knew they were in trouble, deep trouble. The Baron would not be pleased. Ruby looked scared and concerned. She dropped the bow and walked quickly towards the guard. "Did he ask for me also?"

"No, my Lady, just Joseph." The guard sensed the concern.

Ruby stared at Joseph in disbelief. She knew she was the cause of this. Her face was flushed with blood, turning her cheeks the softest of red. She also knew her Father would be furious. What would he do to Joseph?

"I will talk with my Father, he has to be lenient and accept it's my fault. If anyone is going to be punished, it should be me." Ruby made her plea with sincerity but it fell on deaf ears. Joseph had already accepted his fate and had started to walk towards the great hall.

The guard escorted Joseph from the courtyard, as Ruby ran to find her Mother; perhaps she could talk some sense into her Father? Ruby streaked away, running as fast as she could. She scattered birds in her path, startled as she exited the courtyard. She ran towards her Mother's quarters in a blind panic. Her head was light and her heart pumped furiously. She was consumed with fear and anger. She could lose her best friend and any shred of respect she had left for her Father. She had to find her Mother. Running through the hallways, from room to room, she came to an abrupt halt. In the back of her mind a small voice emerged. "This afternoon, I'll be going to the local market. I want to talk to the owners."

Ruby's Mother had told her, but she'd been so consumed with her daily practice, it didn't register. It occurred to her that she didn't really listen to her Mother, and that wasn't fair to her. Her Mother had always been supportive, caring and kind. Ruby stomped her foot in frustration, she'd enjoyed her time with Joseph. She was proficient with a bow and still improving. Why did her jealous Father have to ruin this? She felt powerless and upset. She fought back tears as they welled in her eyes, before splashing her cheeks. She brushed them away with her hands and bounded towards the great hall. Mother was away, but her Father was not going to punish Joseph; she would put a stop to that.

The great hall was a room in the Castle that the Baron liked. It was designed for feasts and banquets, but it was rarely used for this type of function. The Baron had claimed it for his personal use. It was decorated with treasured portraits of his family. His Father's sword hung proudly upon the north wall. Tapestries and shields adorned the main walls. The hall contained several large tables, made from the finest Oak. The stone floor was functional but made the room cold. A large hearth was centered within the north wall, where the Baron could sit and absorb its warmth. He loved the crackling sound of wood being digested by a fire. A pile of logs was stored near the hearth, to replenish the hungry fire.

The Baron's favorite chair was angled to receive the warmth, placing his back to the entrance of the room. Gwyneth was allowed in the great hall. She preferred not to disturb the Baron when he retreated into his room. She'd learned this meant her husband was feeling sad or annoyed. She would give him time alone or with his advisors. She would always feel in the way. He would come and seek her opinion when he felt assured of his path forward.

Gwyneth had told Ruby on many occasions, not to go into the great hall. This had peaked her curiosity. One afternoon, when the Baron was away, they both ventured into the great hall; Gwyneth watched Ruby closely. Once Ruby realized that it didn't have a secret passage, hoards of treasure, tables of food or magic mirrors, it soon lost its fascination. It was simply a stuffy dark room; full of old paintings and old things. Ruby was not impressed.

Joseph approached the entrance to the great hall walking confidently past the two guards. They raised their eyes to acknowledge their leader. He would take his punishment calmly and with dignity. His escort peeled away, leaving Joseph at the entrance. The fire was roaring, its yellow flames danced across the hearth licking the metal grate. The Baron sat comfortably within his favorite chair with his back to the entrance. Joseph cleared his throat, making a noise loud enough to announce his presence. Without turning, the Baron responded to his gesture.

"Come in, and take this seat next to the fire, I believe we need to talk."

"Yes Sire," was all he could muster. His throat was dry and he felt nervous, very nervous. It seemed a long walk from the entrance to the fireside chair. The dryness in his mouth paled in comparison to the heaving sensation deep within his chest. Joseph became that little skinny boy, held by the scruff of the neck, for picking apples from the orchard owner's tree. He felt scared and vulnerable. He approached the chair and could see the Baron slumped comfortably. The two chairs were facing the fire, with a faded woven floor rug placed between them. The Baron was an averaged sized man but today he looked mighty and large. The fire's warmth seeped into Joseph's body as he hesitated in front of the chair. "Sit. Now," barked the Baron, annoyed at Joseph's reticence. Joseph responded quickly by pushing his large frame into the wooden chair.

Joseph stared at the Baron, his right eyelid quivering with nervous energy. The Baron stared into the fire watching the dancing flames and appreciating the warm air caressing his face. Joseph was about to explode; he was a nervous ball of pent up tension. The Baron finally spoke, "I love looking deeply into the fire, you see all kinds of things hiding within the flames." As he spoke, he never altered his gaze, firmly fixed upon the hearth.

Joseph didn't know how to respond. "Yes, Sire."

The Baron finally broke his gaze and turned his head towards Joseph. The Baron's face was stern, one side in shadow, with the other splashed in color from the orange light of the fire. "I

understand that you've formed a friendship with my Daughter?" Joseph froze. He was at a loss for words. What should he say? His hesitation was visible. The Baron helped him choose his path. "It has often been said, that I ask questions to which I already know the answer. It's true, a trait that I learned through observing my Father. It's a method designed to test the honesty of a man. My Father's favorite quote was from Cicero. Where is there dignity unless there is honesty? Are you an honest man Joseph?"

Without thinking, the words "Yes, Sire," spilled from his mouth.

"What type of friendship have you developed with my Daughter?"

Joseph knew he had to choose his words carefully. He wasn't an educated man, and if he stumbled, he could be in serious trouble. "I was assigned to guard and protect Ruby. It means that we spend a lot of time together. She doesn't want to play with the other girls, she's...." he paused searching for the right words, " quite independent."

"And you decided to teach her combat skills?" The Baron shifted his weight, as if to underline his point.

"Occasionally she would watch me practice, and"

The Baron held his hand up to signal that he'd heard enough. "You thought that practicing with a bow, close to my Daughter, would be a safe thing to do? I asked you to guard her and you grew stale of your duties. To pass the time, you decided to hone your archery skills. Close to my child, my Daughter." The Baron was stern but did not raise his voice.

"I tried to be careful Sire, always keeping a safe distance. It was Ruby who grabbed the bow, while I was taking a break."

"I see, so Ruby grabbed the bow while you were delinquent in your duties. I've been told that you encourage this now and teach her archery?"

"She was very insistent, she's quite gifted."

"Gifted," repeated the Baron leaning towards Joseph. "You're now teaching my Daughter how to shoot arrows, is that true?"

"Yes Sire, it's true." Joseph hung his head, resigned to his fate.

"And you let my Daughter shoot, using your big powerful bow?"

Joseph nodded, feeling words would only do him more harm. He stared at the faded rug, tracing the outline of a bird perched within a tree.

"Do you think she is effective with that large bow? Look at me, when I'm talking to you."

Joseph raised his chin, "She's pretty good."

"Well, I want to tell you something." The Baron stood quickly causing Joseph to recoil. He reached behind his chair and retrieved an object wrapped in cloth. "Pretty good, is not good enough, for my Daughter." The Baron pulled the cloth aside to reveal a beautifully crafted bow.

Decorated with the finest carvings of Deer and Fox. The bow was made from Yew and had the mark of a master craftsman. Joseph had never seen a more impressive weapon. It was smaller and would fit Ruby's size perfectly. Joseph saw the Baron extend his arms and offer him the bow. "Take this, and make sure Ruby continues to improve. This will assist her in her training."

Joseph held the bow and marveled at its lightness and balance. It was a work of art.

"So you want me to continue?"

"Of course, I'm pleased with the way you're teaching my Daughter."

The Baron smiled and Joseph sank back into his chair. The Baron had been teasing him. He was filled with relief and finally cracked a small smile. "Yes, Sire."

"You can go now, make sure Ruby knows who gave her the bow. I think she'll like it."

Joseph rose and responded, "I'm sure she will Sire." The bow rested in his hand, perfectly balanced, and beautifully made.

As Joseph left the great hall, he was relieved. He smiled to himself realizing how nervous he'd become. He pushed his shoulders back, straightened his spine and walked confidently. He was no longer that small cowering boy. As he strode confidently away, Ruby streaked towards him in a blind panic. "I'll set him straight. Just let me have a word with him, I'll tell him...."

Joseph had the bow in his left hand; with his strong right arm he scooped Ruby up in one fluid motion. She intended to run by Joseph but Joseph had other ideas. He grabbed the little girl with his strong muscular arm and threw her over his shoulder. As she struggled and kicked, he confidently walked away from the great hall and the Baron. When they were at a safe distance, he explained their conversation and presented her with the bow.

The finest bow maker in the land had beautifully crafted the bow. Ruby finally had a weapon to match her skill. She was well on her way to becoming an expert marksman. Ruby did thank her Father, but she took the opportunity to point out how mean he'd been to tease poor Joseph. After a few seconds of silence, they both laughed and hugged.

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Jevon stood abruptly, "Right young lady, time for some food."

Kady wrinkled her nose but she knew it was time.

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Chapter 7: Swarmed by Evil The Mystical Forest, Skipton, Yorkshire, England, 1545.

"We need a plan," snapped Belver in frustration. It was mid-day in the mystical forest, and the Sun was very bright. Belver, Acron and Ranger were gathered on an old tree stump, in the center

of Tamworthia. A Rabbit ventured into the grassy patch, close to the gathering. He was startled by the group and quickly turned, changing his course and fleeing into the undergrowth.

Belver snarled again in frustration. "How are we supposed to just walk into a Castle guarded by Humans? Ridiculous. I was going to tell that Wyvern...."

"I think it was me." Ranger snapped a retort that stopped Belver in mid sentence. "He singled me out by name to do this impossible task. The whole forest is depending on you!" Ranger shook his head despondingly. "I'm a small Wood Sprite! I'm not armed with fighting skills! Why me?"

Acron rested his wings by settling on the edge of the stump. "We have to think. We have to believe we can do this. The Wyvern believed in us, he's far wiser than any of us. We can do this!"

"Great, so how do we just walk into the Castle and talk with the Baron?" Belver curled his bottom lip in disgust. He was mad and could feel the anger welling up inside of him. The Snaggles would have to be on their toes tonight, for he was frustrated and the fighting Badger would make them pay.

Ranger propped his chin upon his outstretched arm, showing to the group that he was in deep thought. "Why didn't the Wyvern pick Acron?" Acron turned to look at Ranger. "Well, they can't see you, can they?"

"He chose you, so that's the end of it. Let's try to solve this." Acron seemed annoyed.

It was clear that the group could not settle on an elegant solution. The whole forest would be expecting a plan. The Sun had moved across the sky and was hiding behind a large Oak. Time was passing and their plan was still unformed. Belver's keen nose started to twitch; he shifted, casually moving onto his feet. He stumbled over to the Oak, as if he were in deep thought. He kept his snout to the ground and slowly approached the tree. In one swift movement he leapt for the trunk and scaled the tree. He fell to the ground landing on all fours. Belver had dislodged the intruder from the overhanging branch. He quickly stomped his paw and growled. The young Wood Sprite, Kormos, was pinned. He lay upon his back, with the angry Badger's paw, pinning his throat. He tried to wriggle free but the experienced Badger would not let his prey escape. "We seem to have a disrespectful eavesdropper."

Ranger leapt forward and approached the young Wood Sprite. "What were you doing? You insolent boy! Don't you realize how serious this is? Your lucky I'm here, for Belver has every right to tear you to pieces. Now go, and don't come back. I'll deal with you tonight, in the Crackle. Then your parents will deal with you. You'll not have a comfortable afternoon, thinking about your fate tonight. I'm so angry with you, I may throw you to the Snaggles. Go, before my patience runs out." Belver released the stunned Wood Sprite.

Kormos recovered his composure and decided to try to redeem himself. "I will go. I'm going to accept responsibility for my actions. I should not have been listening to your private meeting. I'll go now, but you'll never get to hear my plan, but it sounds like you're well on your way to developing a solid plan."

The young Wood Sprite turned and started to walk away. "Wait!" Acron flew across his path; his bow was drawn and the arrow was pointing straight at the young Wood Sprite's heart. Acron flexed the arrow before offering an ultimatum, "You can start talking now. This better be good."

The remainder of the afternoon was spent listening to Kormos, who articulated a plan that seemed to work. A diversion would occupy the guards; a clever way to sneak into the Castle and give the leaders a good shot at finding the Baron. They were starting to believe, when their conversation was interrupted again.

Acron was tuned to a specific sound. Every Fairy would hear this sound. Each Fairy carried a horn, carved from the hard shell of an acorn. It was presented to each Fairy on their tenth birthday, as a rite of passage. The horn was made to sound a certain way. It was only to be used in dire circumstances; a distress call. The horn would signal to the other Fairies that immediate assistance was required. The horn vibrated at a certain frequency. The whispering trees would recognize the sound and ensure that the whole forest could hear it. The sound traveled through the trees like a wave across the water. It could be traced to its origin, so the Fairies would know where the assistance was required.

A faint sound could be heard at first. Gradually the sound intensified and the trees started to quiver and shake. The whispering trees shook and their trunks started to creak, making a familiar sound. Acron leapt into the air, his wings fluttering wildly. "The Fairy call, we're being attacked, I have to go." Acron was gone, dashing to the source of the sound.

Acron pumped his wings hard; Fairies from all parts of the forest joined him. Armies of Fairies swooping through the trees converging on the source of the distress call. The whispering trees guided the Fairies through the forest, helping them arrive quickly. When Acron arrived at the scene he'd collected over three hundred Fairies in the cry for assistance. He charged into an area of the forest called Artesia, normally a lush, peaceful place. Fairies darted between the trees and flew in erratic patterns. Fairies littered the floor, writhing in agony. Acron struggled to see the threat; he scanned for beasts, men or spirits. A flash of color alerted him to the enemy. Yellow and black blurs streaked across the sky. A Fairy fell from the sky screaming in pain with a large stinger embedded deep within his side.

The Fairy, Erut, was a fierce fighter, he shouted to Acron and his approaching army. "Bees, a swarm of Bees are attacking us, watch out for the stingers; keep behind them. Use your arrows, from behind!"

A large Bee darted towards Acron, his abdomen curled and his stinger pointed right at his chest. Acron flapped his wings furiously and swooped to his left. He managed to draw his bow, load an arrow, and release in one swift movement. The arrow flew true, piercing the yellow stripe of the oncoming Bee. The Bee fell to the ground, to join the other casualties. Battle weary Fairies swooped to the floor to retrieve spent arrows. The oncoming rush of Fairies was a welcome sight for those already engaged in the battle. The Fairies created a circular perimeter. They'd trapped the Bees within.

Arrows flew with deadly accuracy. The Bees were ferocious, fighting to the last Bee. Why were they so upset? What had the Fairies done to provoke such a reaction? Bees are well known for being social, co-operative types. They work together and help the forest with pollination. Occasionally they feel aggrieved. In the past, the head soldier Bee would call for an audience with the forest elders. He would state the Queen Bee's case and ask for a peaceful resolution. Bees don't complain often. When they do complain, the elders act quickly and usually rule in their favor. The Bees never abuse this privilege. It's well known that Bees will fight to the death, but they only do this to protect their hive and their Queen. Any animal fights to protect their home and family. You wouldn't expect less.

The aerial battle was fierce. The Bee's were faster than the Fairies, but they needed to maneuver to use their stingers. The Fairies were armed with arrows and had the ability to reload. A Bee could manage to sting a Fairy, but it left them defenseless and spent. Rather than retreating, the unarmed Bees would try to ram the Fairies, knocking them out of the sky. It was clear; they were fighting to the death. The battle lasted about an hour, with many casualties. The forest floor was a sea of yellow and black. The Fairies closed in, making the perimeter smaller. The last few remaining Bees fought valiantly. As the battle drew to a close, some Fairies started to cheer, in victorious chants. It didn't last long, as their chants were drowned out by the sound of a deafening hum. Approaching the battle weary Fairies was another wave of black and yellow. The approaching Bees looked different. The Fairies had defeated the worker Bees, docile and normally cordial. What lay before them were the elite guard. These Bees were slimmer, faster and trained to fight. The soldier Bees that approached were more agile, and trained in battle techniques. The energy visibly drained from the battle weary Fairies. Waves of the elite fighting Bees swarmed into the area. The trees shook their warnings, but it was too late. The slim, fast, fighting Bees, had larger stingers and looked menacing.

Acron could see the confidence ebbing away from his valiant troops. "Steady men," he shouted. As the Fairies turned to face their fate, they heard a beautiful sound. It was a horn, but not just any horn. This was the battle horn of the Northrop region of the forest. Northrop was a hostile region of the forest; an independent region that normally kept out of the collective. The whispering trees had conveyed the urgency, taking note of the approaching army. The trees had called for reinforcements and the fighting force from Northrop had answered the call.

The Northrop Fairies lined up to one side of the approaching Bees. "Look," shouted one of the Fairies, pointing to the other side of the approaching swarm. The trees shook as an army of Fairies, bearing the red stripe of the Brant section, appeared. The Brant Fairies had traveled from the furthest section of the forest. Having this many Fairies, from different sections, would normally have resulted in a battle. The trees had convinced the leaders to bury their differences and unite, to face a common enemy. Each Brant Fairy had a red stripe painted across their cheeks. A mixture of berry juice and tree gum composed the traditional war paint.

They lined up quickly, armed with deadly blow-pipes. The Bees were funneled through the flanking Fairies, surrounded by archers and blow-pipes. As the Bees entered the open space, arrows and darts rained into them. The helpless Bees fell to the forest floor, mortally wounded. It was carnage, and the military operation, organized by the trees, was clinically executed. The leader of the Bees was a battle-hardened warrior. A poisonous dart had wounded him. His drive and determination had spurred him onwards, towards his enemy. He flew into the Fairies with reckless abandon. Acron raised his bow, with one swift movement; the arrow pierced the brave Bee, causing him to spiral downwards to the forest floor. He joined his brave comrades as the last casualty. The battle was over. Acron tipped his hat to the leader of the Brant and Northrop clans. The Fairies punched the air and shouted cries of victory. The cheers could be heard throughout the forest. The trees shook furiously, joining in with their celebrations.

Bees were not evil creatures; why had they turned? The trees knew. The Witch had cast a spell, turning the Bees hostile. Her power was growing and the inhabitants of the forest were fearful. It was one thing to fight the underworld beasts, but to fight each other, was another disturbing twist. She now had the power to turn friends and allies into enemies. The Bees had been innocent victims; their fate had been decided, the moment the Witch realized that Bees could see Fairies. The Witch had tried to use the Bees to eradicate the Fairies. She wouldn't stop until the mystical creatures were gone forever.

The cheers were broken by the deafening sound of horns. As quickly as the Fairies had appeared, they turned and disappeared into the woods. Acron wanted to thank the Fairies, but he knew his nodded acknowledgement, would be his final gesture of thanks. The Tamworth clan realized they were in debt. They would gratefully reciprocate, should the trees summon their help, to defend the Brant and Northrop clans. In his heart, he knew; they would have died trying to fight the Bee soldiers alone.

The whispering trees had saved the day. The caretakers of the forest knew the Witch was dangerous and destructive. She would conspire with the Black Fox and cast more spells, challenging the delicate balance of the forest. She needed to be stopped, before this escalated and got worse.

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*Chapter 8: Who's Gullible?
Skipton Castle, Skipton, Yorkshire, England, 1545.*

It started with the young son of the Castle baker. The doctor had been called to examine him. He suffered from night sweats and ran a high fever. Soon the baker fell ill, followed by his wife. The fever spread quickly throughout the Castle and the Baron became concerned. Infected families were moved out of the Castle into nearby villages, to try to contain the spread of the fever. Guards were posted at the Castle gate. They refused entrance to anyone who seemed to have the fever. The Baron kept his family isolated within their quarters. He didn't want them to be exposed to the outside world and the panic spreading among the people.

It was a bad day when the Baron was advised that the first guard had fallen to the fever. It seemed that once the fever struck, it rendered a person helpless. Care and comfort was administered but the illness drained the body of any energy and fight. After three weeks, the fever crested and the person seemed to gain some consciousness. This was a sign that death was near. A few days later, the heart would stop beating. Once the guards started to fall ill the Baron became increasingly concerned. He summoned his advisors to an emergency meeting. The Baron strode confidently into the great hall to be greeted by six of his closest advisors.

"Gentlemen, sit please." The Baron joined them at a long Oak table. Pulling his chair towards the table, he clenched his hands, resting his forearms upon the polished wood. "It seems to be getting worse. We're burying the dead quickly and keeping the Castle as safe as we can. I'm concerned. We don't know what's causing this? People are gossiping that it's the water, that the well is contaminated. Some say it's the bread; it started with the baker? What do we know and what can we do, I want your suggestions."

The Baron looked across the table and waited for a response. Arlan was the first to reply. "Sire, we've seen people fall ill who don't drink from the well. We've seen healthy people, unaffected by this scourge, who do drink from the well and eat food prepared with water from the well. I don't know what's causing this but I don't think it's the water."

"Good, then other suggestions perhaps?" The Baron looked at the others. The silence was uncomfortable. "Luke, you seem well connected, what are you hearing?"

Luke raised his eyes as the panic of uncertainty shot across his face. "Sire, I'm always honest and forthright with my opinions. I'm at a loss. I simply don't know what's happening. I've seen fevers before. We trace the source and isolate the infected. We dispose of the bodies quickly and limit the exposure. We setup camps, where the infected can be treated and isolated. It's never pleasant, but over time the fever dissipates and the infections stop. At this point we usually burn the village buildings and try to wipe away any trace of the fever left behind. Everything I have described we're doing. I share your concern, as we simply don't know how this is spreading. It's fatal and no one has survived the fever. Panic is rising and now the guards are getting infected. I'm not sure how long we can keep order and peace. Some people are packing up and leaving the Castle out of fear. Will this spread the fever further afield? It's more responsible to stop people from leaving? Are we all resigned to this fate?"

"Kenneth?"

"Sire, I agree. Why do people fall ill and others don't? Is it simply a matter of time and the weak are being picked off first? I don't think it's the food or the water. I don't think we have a choice. We have to contain this to the Castle and the riverside village. The infected must go to the village. We continue to bury the dead, it's the only thing we can do. We have to plan for more deaths. We have to keep law and order; otherwise it will be chaos. We'll need food and water, this must be protected if we're going to emerge from this."

"Can we not send for help?" The Baron sounded desperate.

Arlan answered. "We can, but who would come? The Castle at Keighley, have said they will provide food. They leave it at a safe distance and then retreat. We have to thank them for that, as it's the only thing keeping us going right now. Sire, we all have thoughts but none of us really know what's causing this or even how it's spreading. That's the truth and that's why, if we were all honest, we're so scared."

"Thank you Arlan. We need to lead our people right now. We need to be their strength. We can't afford to show weakness and panic. We'll meet each day here at the same time. I want ideas, observations and honest discourse. We have to beat this thing. We must look like we're managing this and remain in control, do you understand?" They all nodded in agreement.

A few weeks passed and the situation worsened. A few of the advisory council fell ill. The remaining members gathered at the polished table, waiting for the Baron. He walked into the great hall and joined them. He stared into the distance, barely acknowledging their presence. "She fell ill last night, the Baroness, she's ill. His hands shook as he held his forehead in his cupped hands. "I don't want to send her to the village," he pleaded, his head still buried within his hands. The men shot worried looks at one another.

Arlan wiped his brow. Watched by the other men he began his answer cautiously. "The Baroness may inadvertently become a danger to you and Ruby Sire." The Baron lifted his head, crinkled his brow and shot a fierce look at Arlan, cautioning him to choose his next words carefully. "But we don't have to send the Baroness to the village. We can isolate her within the main wing, she'll be more comfortable there."

The men looked at Arlan, as the Baron's expression eased. "Yes, the main wing, that's where we'll put her." The Baron seemed pleased with Arlan's response. "What news do we have today?" The Baron raised his eyes with some urgency.

Kenneth leaned in, "A man delivering food stopped at the far bank of the river. He wouldn't approach, but we managed to shout across the river. He confirmed that they would continue to support us with food and supplies. He also said that the fever had not spread, it seemed to be contained to our Castle and the village by the river."

"Well, that's good, but what of the cause and the remedy; any thoughts?"

Arlan shuffled and gripped his hands until his knuckles were white. "No Sire, we don't have any firm evidence. A local woman is selling a mint flavored brew but we have no evidence that this works, just hear say."

"Who is she?"

"A local woman from the Kitchen of the Castle."

"Has she had any success?"

"No Sire, not yet."

The Baron looked deeply into Arlan's eyes. He would try anything to save his beloved Gwyneth. "Make arrangements for this woman to come and see me. I want to try some of this brew on the Baroness."

"Yes Sire," Arlan knew it was not going to work, but he wasn't going to be the one who said so.

"If we have nothing more to discuss." The men rose to leave. "Arlen, please send in Joseph, I'll need to see him."

Joseph arrived promptly. "Excuse me Sire, you called for me?"

"Yes, come here, where I can see you." Joseph moved closer to the fire and the Baron's favorite chair. The Baron turned to face Joseph and hesitated, as if thinking through his words. "I need to trust you Joseph. I trust you with the great responsibility of guarding my only daughter, can I give you more responsibility?"

"Yes, Sire," said Joseph in a confident manner.

"The Baroness is ill, she has the fever." Joseph stiffened at the news, his thoughts turned to Ruby and how devastated she would be. "We'll isolate the Baroness within the Castle but Ruby must not know where she is. If she knew she'd want to visit her, do you understand?"

"Yes Sire, I do."

"I need you to listen carefully. You must make me a promise, a pledge if you like." Joseph nodded his acceptance. "There's a chance that I might fall ill. If I do, then you must protect Ruby. If I fall ill, then she has to leave the Castle. She must escape from this place. I want you to promise me that she'll be kept safe. If I fall ill, you must take her out of the Castle, under the cover of darkness. During the day, guards will prevent you from doing this. She'll need to be smuggled out at night. The advisors will try to stop you, so you must be cunning." The Baron stretched his hands towards the fire, warming his palms. "Will you do this for us?"

Joseph took a deep breath. "Yes Sire she'll be safe with me."

"Good, then we don't need to speak of this further, if we understand each other."

Joseph watched the Baron clasp his hands together tightly.

"Thank you Joseph, you're a good man. Take this and keep it safe, in case you need it. The Baron extended his arm to his side and scooped up a heavy leather pouch, which he presented to Joseph.

Joseph took the pouch without questions. The pouch was surprisingly heavy. Later, he realized that he was in the possession of a bag of gold coins. The Baron had loaned Joseph this money; he now had the means to keep Ruby safe.

"That will be all Joseph, please send Ruby in. I have the unenviable task of informing her about her Mother's illness." The Baron turned to dismiss Joseph, staring into the dancing flames.

Joseph tucked the bag under his tunic and left the great hall quickly. He found Ruby and informed her of her Father's request.

Ruby was devastated and Joseph didn't talk much with Ruby over the next few days. He could hear her crying at night, as she remained within her quarters. The Baron looked busy but everyone knew he didn't have the answer. They could tell the difference between a man with the cure, and a man putting on a brave face. The mint remedy was not working and the Baroness slipped quietly into a prolonged sleep. She had a few weeks to live, at best. The Baron had stopped attending the advisory meetings, for he'd fallen ill. They kept this a secret from the inhabitants of the Castle, but Arlen was now in charge. It was a responsibility he didn't want. The Baron moved into isolation and Ruby was reluctantly informed. Ruby was distressed and confided her devastating news to Joseph. Joseph was keenly aware of his pledge and started to plan accordingly. He needed to save Ruby, but would she leave the Castle, and her parents, willingly?

Joseph consoled Ruby, as best he could, and made his way to the guardhouse. He managed to secure a cart and a small horse. He loaded hay onto the cart, and covered it with a woolen cover. He left the cart near the main entrance to the Castle. He tethered the horse and left his spear beside the cart. People in the Castle would recognize the carved spear. They knew it belonged to the head of the guards. They would leave the horse and cart alone, for fear of reprisal.

How would Joseph convince Ruby to leave the Castle?

When Ruby was eight years old she remembered a cold winter day. The wind howled that day and her Mother fussed over the arrangements for her birthday celebrations. The birthday party was fun, with games, music and dancing. As the day drew to a close, her party guests retired, leaving Ruby with her parents. While her Mother prepared the bedchamber her Father asked her to go for a short walk with him. Together, they entered the great hall and he seemed serious. He'd never taken her into the great hall and she felt special. She listened carefully but she was not prepared for what she heard.

Ruby's Father told her she was special. She had a mark behind her ear that would become more important when she turned nine years of age. He described the forest and the creatures that lay within. He described the mystical animals and the relationship he had with them. It sounded unbelievable. He described the oath he'd taken and how he must protect these animals and the

sacred old forest. Ruby listened intently, fascinated by the descriptions of Fairies, Dragons and Wood Sprites. She didn't know if this was a bedtime story or if it were true. Her Father looked serious and he never strayed into the realm of fantasy and make-believe. He told her that it was the truth and that over the next year she would start to recognize these feelings and see strange things. He finally shared with her what would happen on her ninth birthday. She heard about the fever and the transformation this would have on her ability to see and communicate with these mystical animals.

As she started to approach her ninth birthday her birthmark itched relentlessly. She fell into a fever and was bedridden for three days. Her mother worried but she knew why Ruby felt the way she did. It wasn't long after, that she saw movement in the trees, and thought she had seen a Fairy flutter for cover on the edge of the forest. Her Father reassured her and would often talk of his discussions with the mystical animals. Ruby just accepted it but her curiosity grew. She'd never had a chance to visit the forest, as she knew of the dangers that it held. She did feel different and she was convinced that her Father was telling the truth. She was now a Stibmit.

The Castle had fallen into dark times and the people who lived within lived in fear. She couldn't remember the last time she'd heard laughter or seen children play. The birds had moved out and the black crows seemed to hang around like harbingers of doom. The Castle seemed to be dying along with its inhabitants. Ruby heard Joseph in the stone hallway leading to her quarters. It was around noon and she knew he always ate at this time of day. His stomach would be growling and he would hurry back to resume his post. He would also spend time to collect some food for Ruby. When the time was right, she managed to slip out of her quarters unnoticed. Joseph was temporarily away and she would have a short window of time to observe the Castle.

Ruby heard footsteps approaching and hid within a small crevice cut away in the old stone wall. She squeezed her slim frame into the tight space and tried to hold her breath. Two men approached stopping close to her hiding place.

"Who told you?"

"One of the maids, she works in the inside quarters."

"So he didn't send her to the village with the rest of them?"

"No. The rich have their own rules. Is she still alive?"

"Yes, the Baroness is still alive but she's fallen into a deep sleep. She's very ill and unresponsive. I don't think she's got long."

Ruby gasped, stifling a small noise. She clamped her hands over her mouth trying to conceal her horror.

"What was that?"

"Just the wind."

"She doesn't have long but can she can still infect the rest of us?"

"I think that's the concern. She's not that isolated and now we're starting to hear about the Baron."

"I haven't seen the Baron for a few days."

"You've noticed. Do you remember when this first started to happen? How he strutted around the Castle showing everyone that he's in charge."

The men laughed, "Yes I do. So where is he now? Has he left us all to perish?"

"No, he wouldn't leave the Baroness and Ruby."

"I haven't seen Ruby either."

"Ruby's still here, she's locked away safely in her quarters, oblivious to what's really happening. Joseph is still here, so Ruby's still here, right?"

"Right. So where's the Baron then?"

"That's the latest gossip. The butcher prepares his meals on a regular basis. The Baron's stopped eating."

"So he's got it as well?"

Ruby pushed her hands into her face, determined to prevent any sound escaping this time. Tears welled up in her eyes but she remained still.

"That's what they say. So it's pretty serious. If he can't keep his family safe then there's no hope for the rest of us."

"Let's go, we're going to be late."

Ruby listened to the retreating footsteps and waited for a while, paralyzed within the wall. She squeezed herself out of the dusty space and ran towards her quarters. She made it back moments before Joseph arrived with food. He walked into her room carrying a tray of food.

Ruby knew she had to appear calm. "Come in and place the tray down, I need to talk with you."

Joseph performed the actions as instructed. "Are you hungry."

"No, but I do need to talk. You've always been straight with me and I trust you. Don't betray my trust now. I heard some people talking in the hallway and I need some answers."

Joseph knew he had to convince Ruby to leave with him tonight. This sounded like it might be his chance. If he were clever, he might be able to convince her to leave with him, to get help. He needed to foster her trust and use her loyalty to fulfill his pledge.

"My Mother is ill, gravely ill, but she's not in the village, she's in the Castle somewhere. Is this true?"

Joseph needed to keep her trust. "Yes, your Father asked me not to mention it. He knew you would want to visit and you'd be exposed to the fever."

"I understand. Where is my Father?" Ruby's blue eyes shone brightly; a test of loyalties had just been issued.

Joseph paused, if he were to get his way he would need to be clever, "Unfortunately he's fallen ill. He's still within the Castle, but in isolation. We're doing all we can."

Ruby knew she must take the next part of her manipulation slowly and carefully. "I wish there was something I could do. I feel so helpless, trapped in my quarters." Ruby needed to get to the forest. The mystical animals were her last hope of saving her parents. She couldn't tell Joseph. He wouldn't understand that she was a Stibmit, capable of talking to animals.

Joseph knew this was his opportunity, but he had to ease Ruby into this, using her loyalty and trust. "I wish we could help them also. If we stay here, I fear that we'll all perish. Your Father has the Castle sealed, but there are some days that I wish we could go and get help." Going for help, would be the only way he could get her to leave them.

Ruby's eyes widened, like the door of opportunity presented by Joseph's statement. "Then let's do it. Why can't we go and get some help? We're both healthy, let's sneak out and get some help. I agree with you, no one in here seems to have the answer. We're all sitting around, waiting to die. I can't let that happen to my parents."

This was proceeding better than he'd hoped. "You're right, but we just can't walk out of here. I'll come with you on your quest for help, but we have to leave under the cover of darkness. We don't have much time."

"Tonight it is then." Ruby was playing along, feeling a little guilty about how gullible Joseph seemed.

"The side gate will be the easiest. I'll relieve the guard tonight. We have a very light sentry shift on duty. Let's face it, not many people are going to break into a Castle full of disease. I'll have a horse and cart waiting at the side gate, just off the main gate. I'll come for you tonight; be ready. Pack your bow and arrows; travel light, for we won't be able to take much. They take the sick to the village at night, covered by a woolen blanket. When the guards see the cart, they'll know what it is."

Ruby nodded, satisfied with the plan. "I'll be ready as soon as it turns dark."

"Good." Joseph was playing along, feeling a little guilty about how gullible Ruby seemed. Both resumed their day. The day dragged and the time seemed to hang in the air like the meaningless activities that filled the day. Ruby acted normal until the light faded. She faked tiredness and retreated to her quarters, earlier than normal. Joseph inspected the guard roster and made sure he was assigned to a single duty role at the side gate. He had his escape route planned and the cart, horse and woolen blanket were ready to go. Ruby lay under the bed covers but she was fully dressed, with her bow and arrows within reach.

It was excruciating, nightfall had closed in on the Castle but there was no signal or knock at her door. Had Joseph been delayed? Perhaps he'd had a change of heart? Could he have been discovered, exposed? She didn't know, and the suspense was making her anxious and irritable. Should she go down to the side gate? Would that expose the plot? "What should I do?" she kept repeating to herself. Then finally, she heard three short knocks at her door. That was the signal. She leapt from her bed, raced to the door, and grabbed her weapon. She opened the door to see

Joseph looking nervous. He whipped his head from side to side surveying the hallway for intruders. They quickly ushered themselves down the stone hallway, down a flight of stairs, across the courtyard and approached the side door. No one had seen them. Ruby jumped into the back of the cart and hid under the woolen blanket. The rough wooden boards of the cart provided little comfort.

She could hear the muffled sounds of Joseph as he encouraged the horse to advance quietly. The cart started to rock into motion as the plan advanced. She needed to relax, lay back and trust Joseph; she couldn't see it, but they were making their escape. She could bring him into her plan when she was ready. He didn't have to know all of the facts for now. Ruby needed to ensure the escape route taken went through the woods. It was the fastest way to gain welcome cover from the Castle sentry. She also knew, it was the most dangerous route, given the beasts that lurked within.

Ruby couldn't resist. She lifted the edge of the blanket and peered out. She could see the rough edges of the cart and not much else. She swallowed hard and lifted the cover a little more. As she stared into the blackness she recognized the stony path leading from the Castle. They'd not managed to reach the edge of the woods yet. The gentle gait of the horse, and the steady rhythmic rocking of the cart, meant they were still progressing. Ruby was thankful that they'd not been stopped.

Ruby had not heard any voices and assumed that they were safe. She lifted the edge of the blanket and addressed the driver. "Are we near the woods yet?"

Joseph was nervous. "Shhhh, we're on our way, we're almost there." His voice sounded strained and full of concern.

Ruby pulled the woolen cover over her head and gripped her bow tightly. The cart's steady motion was deliberate; Joseph had kept his speed slow and constant for he didn't want to draw any unwanted attention. A guard walked along the lookout at the Castle wall. He cast his sleepy eyes out across the scene before him. Angry at his late night assignment, he was still half asleep. Why did the Castle need guarding? Who would be trying to conquer this disease-ridden prize?

He noticed the cart ambling along slowly. It was sad, but most nights the cart would leave the Castle to transport the ill to the village. A wry smile crossed the guard's face as he realized his current assignment could be a lot worse. He turned his back to the cart and the cool night air. He walked along the edge of the Castle wall until a movement attracted his gaze. Inside the Castle, two women were walking across the courtyard. He moved quickly investigate.

The cart continued at a steady pace, until it reached the edge of the woods. Ruby remained hidden as the horse moved, blissfully unaware. It was left to Joseph to carry the load of responsibility. His chest pounded as he realized how close to safety they were. When the path turned a corner into the canopy of the woods, he couldn't resist; he tapped the reins lightly. The horse felt the light tap on its upper back and buttocks. Familiar with the signal, it stepped up the pace. When they were well within the woods, another small tap had the horse entering into a light gallop.

Once completely out of sight from the Castle, Joseph pulled firmly on the reins and the horse came to an obedient halt. Ruby threw the blanket to one side and staggered to her feet. With her bow at the ready, she knew she was well into the woods, safely away from the sight of the Castle sentries.

"We've made it," whispered Joseph in an excited, yet strained voice.

"Good," whispered Ruby. "What now?"

Joseph didn't know. He needed to get Ruby to the safety of another village, far away from the Castle's guards. He'd heard about a fork in the path, next to a large Oak with a large stone boulder as a marker. The guards had talked about this one night, after too much mead and venison. He knew he needed to take the path leading away from the boulder. The path they were currently on would lead them deeper into the forest; to face the creatures he'd heard so much about. Whole teams of elite fighting soldiers had been defeated in the woods. The beasts that roam the forest at night were legendary. How could the two of them survive such an encounter?

Ruby climbed up to the front of the cart and rode alongside Joseph. She held her bow closely at her side.

"Do you think you'll need that?" asked Joseph, pushing his chin in the direction of her bow.

"You never know, I've heard the stories." Ruby's eyes widened.

"You're a brave girl, your parents would be proud of you."

Ruby peered into the dark emptiness between the trees lining the path. If something ran out from the side, they'd be vulnerable. She glanced downwards at Joseph's feet. She smiled recognizing his bow. It was comforting to know he was armed also. The horse pushed onwards, the path lit by a solitary lantern. Ruby was unaware of the fork in the road, she thought the deeper they went the better it was. She kept a close watch for any movement. She knew she'd be able to see a mystical animal, where as Joseph would not. They approached the fork but it was concealed by a bend. The horse stopped suddenly, it would not proceed. Joseph tapped the reins on its flanks. The horse made an agitated sound and thrashed his head. He didn't want to proceed. Again Joseph tapped the reins.

Joseph tried to reassure the nervous horse, "Steady girl."

Ruby dropped her hand slowly and calmly retrieved an arrow. To the left of the path a small movement had caught her eye and immediately drew her aim. A large snarling Snaggle suddenly leapt from the darkness. Its teeth were bared and it bounded straight for the defenseless horse. Ruby drew the arrow back quickly, and with one swift movement, let the arrow fly. The arrow pierced the great beast's throat, dropping the charging animal instantly. She reloaded quickly and was tracking another as it bore down upon the horse. The frightened horse reared upwards, blocking the ideal shot. Ruby jumped from the cart. She took the shot and the arrow narrowly missed the horse, dropping the approaching Snaggle.

It happened so fast, yet Ruby had performed well. She'd dispatched two Snaggles with near perfect shots. Joseph struggled to hold the reins of the panicked horse; he couldn't let it bolt. In restraining the horse, Joseph hadn't managed to retrieve his bow. A Snaggle approached from the far side of the cart. Hidden within the forest's dark undergrowth, this Snaggle had escaped attention. Joined within a pincer movement, another Snaggle charged the cart from the other side. Ruby was ready; she'd heard the approaching beast. She drew an arrow and waited. The beast was close but the arrow had to be accurate. It bounded towards her, quickly moving its enormous frame. She had to be patient. If she rushed her shot, it would only wound the animal and the beast

would undoubtedly maul her before she could reload. The shot had to be accurate; she waited. Finally the moment arrived and the beast lifted his head, exposing his throat.

With the beast still charging at Ruby, her arm started to shake as she focused on her target. She remembered her training and tried to relax. The bow was drawn and the arrow shot from her hands. She didn't see the arrow hit the target but she knew she'd hit her mark. The Snaggle dropped instantly, letting out a painful scream; it valiantly tried to reach its prey. Ruby stood firm as the Snaggle slid towards her.

She felt proud but her attention switched to a movement behind her. She'd been so focused on the approaching Snaggle that she'd not seen the beast approaching the other side of the cart. Joseph still struggled to restrain the horse; it was too late to react. The Snaggle had seized his opportunity, lunging from the darkness; he managed to clamp his jaws firmly around the guard's arm. Ripping Joseph's flesh with his teeth, the Snaggle thought he'd moved into a dominant position. Joseph screamed in pain. The scream echoed throughout the forest and his body dropped heavily to the ground. Ruby turned quickly, she'd missed the attacking Snaggle. Blood rushed from Joseph's damaged arm; he rolled upon the dirt path, gripping his wounded flesh. The beast had fallen from its lunge, hitting the ground heavily. Ruby ran to assist her wounded friend. Before she could reach him, she shook her head in disbelief. The trees appeared to come alive; the bark seemed to peel off in strips. The wooden strips moved like animals; they rushed to assist the wounded guard.

They seemed to be carrying large fern leaves and ivy twine. Ruby glanced at the fallen beast. Running the entire length of its spine were small arrows, neatly arranged, piercing the full length of its back. Someone, or something, had killed this beast, saving both of their lives. Ranger organized the Wood Sprites, they bound Joseph's arm with fern leaves, smeared with an herbal clotting mixture. They tightened the gaping wound with the twine; so tight, that it stopped the bleeding.

Ranger had ordered the Wood Sprites to reveal themselves, to save the Human. They had reluctantly obeyed. Wood Sprites follow a hierarchical system and don't question orders from a respected leader. Many were confused; why reveal themselves to a Human? Ranger could hear the confusion growing within their ranks. Why not stay hidden and just let the Snaggles and Humans fight it out? Ruby watched in stunned silence. Her Father had described Wood Sprites to her as a child. At the time, she'd thought them to be bedtime stories, designed to excite the imagination of a restless little girl. Ruby quickly took an inventory of her situation. She was stranded in a dark forest surrounded by creatures, appearing to help. She was alone and Joseph was badly injured. She had a few arrows left and was badly outnumbered.

A movement caught her eye and in a flash she crouched, with an arrow drawn, and aimed at the approaching threat. A crisp voice entered her consciousness. "At ease; put down the arrow. We're friends, here to help. The ground seemed to move with a sea of black and white. Badgers streamed into the path to create a safe area. Ruby watched the Badgers work with precision and speed. A large Badger approached and she raised her aim. The Badger stopped abruptly.

"Put that away. If we'd have wanted to harm you, we would've left you to the Snaggles," snapped the Badger in sheer annoyance.

"He's right you know." The crisp voice seeped into her right ear, causing Ruby to spin to her side. She recognized a movement upon a tree limb hanging close to her. A small Wood Sprite was

perched on the limb, trying to get her attention. He blended in perfectly with the bark, but his slight movements caught her eye.

"Who are you?" Ruby was confused? "Did that Badger just talk to me?"

"You're still in a dangerous part of the forest, very dangerous. We'd like you to come with us and quickly. We need to get out of this place and back into a safe part of the forest. The beasts are stirring and soon we'll be surrounded. We don't need to draw attention to ourselves, now come quickly."

Ruby followed the Wood Sprites deeper into the forest. The Badgers pulled Joseph's injured body onto the cart and convinced the horse to follow them. The horse was petrified of the Snaggles and decided the Badgers posed a lesser threat. They proceeded into the forest, until they reached the fringes of Tamworthia. A Fairy fluttered across the sky dragging a large sprig of Foxglove. The Fairy had been dispatched to retrieve the potent flower. The plan was to make a heart stimulant. It was feared that Joseph would die, if he didn't receive this potion. The female Fairies worked hard to create a tonic that would assist in his recovery. The Fairy dropped the Foxglove to the ground; Ruby's attention switched instantly to the Fairy warrior racing across the sky.

The Fairy disappeared into an overhanging branch of a large Oak. Ruby followed the Fairy's path. When Ruby returned her gaze back to the Badgers, she knew something was wrong. The Badgers had stopped their frantic scurrying. Instead, they remained frozen as they stared at Ruby. The Wood Sprites had gathered together and they too stared at Ruby. Ruby suddenly felt unsafe. "What's going on, what are you looking at?"

The Badgers bowed their heads placing their snouts close to the dirt. The Wood Sprites descended from the trees; they all kneeled, facing Ruby. Ruby felt like royalty, but she couldn't understand their instant reverence. It was a moment that seemed to last. Ruby felt awkward and undeserving. In a moment of sheer panic and realization, she turned around slowly. Behind her was a flash of white, contrasting with the stark darkening forest. Ruby squinted until the shape became clearer. Now she could see it; an oversized shimmering Owl was perched upon a tree branch behind her. The Owl had piercing yellow eyes and stretched its wings wide, to command absolute attention. The respect being shown, was reserved for the Owl, she suddenly felt embarrassed. Ruby couldn't explain why she fell to her knees, it was her way of showing respect, but Ruby was unsure of her actions.

It was exceptionally rare for Giselle to make a public appearance. The creatures were excited and scared. Many had never seen Giselle. They even doubted her existence; there are many creatures celebrated in the lyrics of folk songs or the tall tales of legends. Some creatures clearly did not exist, but were manufactured to make a point, teach a lesson, or educate the young. It was shocking to see the Great White Owl. There could be no doubt now, a giant shimmering White Owl was perched in plain sight, for all to see. It was said that Giselle was a special creature from the old world; she was large, powerful, wise and majestic. The Owl started to speak, "When this child entered our forest, the trees whispered to me, alerting me of her presence. But make no mistake; this child is special, worth saving and protecting. I've been watching her, tracking her. She has the mark, three brown marks, arranged perfectly behind her left ear."

The Owl's voice was clear and calm. Ruby had never seen an Owl like this before. Apart from her enormous size, she appeared luminous, with a white shimmering glow emanating from her feathers. Ruby's Father had described mystical animals that lived in the forest. He told her they could talk to Stibmits and the other animals. They possessed knowledge far older than mankind.

She thought his exaggerations made good bedtime stories, but now she knew, he spoke from experience. She began to understand why he was so passionate about preserving the forest.

A large Badger cautiously approached Ruby. Stopping a few feet from her, he bowed his head, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," said Ruby, shocked that she was talking to a Badger.

"My name is Belver, please don't be scared, we don't intend to harm you. Young Lady, you are standing before the oldest tree in the forest." Belver turned and pointed with his snout. "You're in the center of Tamworthia, the oldest part of the mystical forest. It is said that strange powers emanate from this tree, in the form of gifts. One enduring gift is the ability to communicate with each other, and with a few special Humans. You're special to us, do you understand?"

Ruby nodded. "I understand. My Father told me of the forest and the mystical creatures."

Belver inched closer. "Who are you young lady? Why do you risk your life to enter our forest, in the darkness of night?"

"My name is Ruby, I'm the daughter of the Baron of Skipton. I'm here out of desperation. The Castle and all of its inhabitants desperately need your help. My Father always told me that I should go and seek help from the creatures of the forest when everything else fails. My Mother is dying; she could be dead. My Father, the Baron of this land, is dreadfully ill. The Castle is infected; some say its a plague, some say its a curse. People are falling ill, we don't know why, but they don't recover, they die. We need your help, we don't know the cause and we can't find the cure. Will you help us, please?"

It was Belver who answered first, he didn't know why. "Of course we will Princess." As soon as the words escaped his mouth, he felt the panic rise within him. He spun quickly, in deference to the great Owl. She nodded in agreement with his premature affirmation. Acron flew across the great tree, causing Ruby to turn her head and track his flight. He landed on Belver's shoulder. "My name's Acron, you can actually see me can't you?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I?" inquired Ruby.

"I'm a Fairy and a warrior. It's well known that Humans can't see Fairies, but you can, can't you?" To answer his question, Ruby simply nodded.

Ruby studied the diminutive man in front of her, "You carry a bow. I know I'm in your debt for saving both our lives. I saw the row of arrows that brought down that hideous beast. If that was the work of the Fairies, then you have my eternal gratitude."

"Ruby, some of us know your Father, he's a good man. We constantly fight these beasts, but they seem to be getting stronger. Our forest is at war; each night, we fight these evil creatures, but there are things roaming this forest that are far worse. We've been tracking an evil presence in the forest. A Witch and a Black Fox have harnessed dark powers; they cast evil spells across our land. Together they invite these beasts into our forest each night. If your fever plague is a curse, the Witch will be responsible for the spell."

"Then let's get this Witch," shouted Ruby, punching the air.

"Wait my dear, patience is required. You have your Father's strong heart, but it's not that simple, together they possess great power. They've cast spells, evil spells, that cover the forest and beyond, and still their power grows. Your Father would know what to do, but it looks like the Witch anticipated that. She's rendered the Castle useless, a strategic move. It sounds like this illness is a diversionary spell, designed to keep your Father and his army away from the forest. It looks like we're on our own." Acron flew back into the tree; disgusted at the conclusion he'd derived.

"How did you know my Father?" Ruby looked at the creatures collectively gathered under the old tree. No answer was provided. Ranger Oakmoss stepped forward, "Your Father was a protector of this forest. He's a wise and caring man. We needed him; we need his wisdom now. Our plan was to seek his help and defeat this evil Witch. To know that he's ill, by the spell of the Witch, it's not what we wanted to hear. We don't have a plan now, we're barely holding our own against these beasts. We can't hold out much longer. If we don't, their evil will spill across the land unchecked."

"But we can't let that happen, right?" Ruby stepped forward to press home her point.

"As this night progresses we'll lose more of our brave warriors. The beasts keep coming, night after night, from the depths of the underworld. The Witch and the Black Fox have opened our world to these beasts, it's unrelenting." Ranger looked beaten, his back hunched and his body heavy.

Ruby was just a young girl but she could sense the gravity of the situation. These creatures needed hope, just like the people in the Castle. "My Father always said that defeat likes division. We need to fight this together, we need to stick together and play to our strengths." When Ruby was learning to master the bow, Joseph would always tell her, "Play to your strengths."

Giselle listened intently, watching Ruby's every move. "The girl speaks the truth. The Baron is stricken with this spell; our leader is a wise old Dragon, a Water Dragon, older than this forest." Giselle turned to address Ruby. "Your Grand Father was saved in this very forest from a pack of Wortenhogs; fierce beasts from the underworld. The Wyvern saved your Grand Father's life. Your Grand Father brought your Father into this forest when he fell ill. He was sick, dying from a vicious fever. He was a young child, about your age. He'd been poisoned and would have died from his fever. The Wyvern helped your family again, saving your Father's life. The Wyvern continued to help your Father and showed him the ways of our forest. In return for the Wyvern's generosity, he vowed to protect us when he assumed the role of Baron. We regarded your Father as a King, the King of the Humans. To us, you, my dear, are his Princess, and you must become our Princess." Giselle paused for effect. "We need your help; we need to work together to defeat this evil force. The Witch grows more powerful, she learns from the Black Fox. Together they will ruin this forest, if left unchecked. Evil cannot prevail; we must defeat it. In three moons from now, our leader, the Wyvern, will return. We will need to prepare for him; we've much to do."

"Where's the Dragon gone? Will he know how to save my Parents and the Castle?" Ruby realized she'd interrupted Giselle and wished she hadn't.

"Let's hope so Princess, he's older than a Dragon, he's a Wyvern. Our Wyvern has left us to enter the spirit world. He'll meet up with his two sisters. He's intelligent, experienced and cunning, I'm sure he'll return with a plan for us. In the meantime, our plan is to survive the next three Moons and provide him with a path back. It'll not be easy for him to return, he'll need our help. You, Princess, will have an important role to play in his return. The ceremony requires the presence of

a Stibmit; we're fortunate you've joined our fight. Creatures of the forest," Giselle raised her voice and addressed the gathering, "We must protect Princess Ruby of Tamworthia; at all costs!" The sound boomed through the forest. The trees took the instruction and pushed it into the wind. They shook violently carrying the message into every nook and cranny.

Ruby had so many questions. Why was she referred to as the Princess of Tamworthia? Who does she need protection from? What role would she play in returning the Wyvern? What's a Wyvern look like? What will happen in three Moon's time? Will her Mother and Father last for three more days? Can the Castle curse be broken saving everyone?

Ranger was a patient soul. He spent the night with Ruby carefully explaining the answers to most of her questions.

As Giselle's command echoed through the forest, it did not escape the attention of the Witch and the Black Fox. They'd not anticipated a Princess. They'd heard about the King of the Humans, a Stibmit with powers of sight and communication. Their plan had worked to render him ill, making him ineffective. A Daughter was a surprise, but was this Princess a Stibmit? If she were, this would pose a threat to their plan. They exchanged a panic look. The mystical animals had hope, inspired by a new leader. This could be dangerous, she needed to be found and removed. They agreed to double the amount of beasts each night, and remove this unfortunate complication. For now, they must continue to find and burn each Yellow-bell.

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Chapter 9: The First Night The Mystical Forest, Skipton, Yorkshire, England, 1545.

Ruby had been successfully protected from the fierce battle raging through the night. She was quickly moved to a safer part of the forest, a heavily guarded section, and deep within Tamworthia. If Tamworthia fell, the forest would be lost. Ruby could not comprehend the extent of the fighting that occurred each night. She heard the growls, snorts, shouting and cries of pain echoing through the dark mist of the night. As daylight broke, the sounds had changed to the moans of the wounded and the screams of the beasts being scolded by the rays of the Sun. The forest's protectors returned, exhausted, covered in blood, and carrying the wounded. As the wounded gathered, Ruby could not believe her eyes. Badgers of all sizes had assembled. Family members treated wounds, made splints for broken limbs and mourned for the dead. Shallow graves were being prepared; the younger Badger cubs collected wild flowers to honor the brave dead warriors.

Ruby walked through the clearing as the Sun's rays delivered its welcome warmth. She turned to look at a female Badger nuzzling two young cubs as her loved one laid motionless. He'd suffered deep wounds; scratches from a giant clawed paw ran the length of his body. She was strong and proud, she wanted to show the cubs that their Father had fought bravely.

"We have to make their sacrifice count," said a small voice from behind. Ruby turned to see a Wood Sprite, lean and looking like an upright twig; he was raised onto his hind legs.

"Ranger isn't it?" Ruby kneeled to get to the same level as Ranger's eyes.

"Ranger Oakmoss at your service again Princess Ruby. We need you to come with me. We've a lot to discuss and the elders need your help. We'll explain everything, but you're an important key to helping us win this fight. The daylight is our safe time, but only from the underworld beasts. The Witch and the Black Fox seem to be growing in power. We all have a deep-rooted fear that they'll cast more spells; they intend to keep us busy with fighting during the daylight hours. Princess, please follow me, so we can start to prepare."

"I will, but how's my friend Joseph doing?" Ruby felt guilty for not asking earlier.

"He's still sleeping, but the Fairies tell me he's healing. He's been treated with some powerful herbs; they'll aid his recovery, but it's going to take some time. He's not awake yet, but I'll let you know when he is. Now come with me, we don't have the day to waste."

Ruby followed Ranger into the forest. She'd no idea how to help these valiant, but seemingly beaten, mystical creatures. She knew her Mother and her Father was depending on her. The day was spent with the Elders; Fairies, Badgers and Wood Sprites all explained their stories of suffering. Each species addressed her as Princess Ruby; she liked that. She heard their tales and could understand their worsening worries. The Witch was growing stronger and more powerful under the tutelage of the Black Fox.

The Elders knew they would have to kill both the Witch and the Black Fox, but how? They were convinced that Ruby, the Human Stibmit, sent to them by fate, held the key. She was destined to play an integral part in the Witches downfall. They looked to her to provide inspiration, hope and a plan of attack. Ruby was a nine-year-old girl. She had no clue how she should direct the creatures of the forest. She wished her Father were here, he would know what to do. The Elders had tried to capture the Witch before, but she would always conjure up spells and use magic to avoid capture.

They seemed disappointed that their last hope turned out to be a young, insecure girl, with no experience or plan. Ranger sensed the disappointment but still had faith. Princess Ruby was young, but she was a Stibmit, a rare Human being. She'd been sent for reason; they just had to find it. Ruby had a chance to visit Joseph; he was now conscious and healing quickly. Ruby tried to explain to Joseph. She introduced the concept of mystical creatures, their relationship with her Father and the fact that he couldn't see them.

After hours of frustrating conversation, trying to design a plausible plan, the light had started to fade. The forest canopy seemed to close in and block the welcome rays of the Sun. The night air cooled as it swirled around the forest floor, causing an eerie fog to cling to the ground. It wasn't long before the creatures started to organize. The activity level heightened and the sense of anticipation and urgency was palpable. Ranger approached, his movements seemed erratic. "Nightfall approaches Princess. Soon the forest will be overrun with the sounds of battle. We need to get organized to defeat these beasts. They'll come for you; they'll try to kill you. You'll need to be prepared. We'll protect you, but you'll need to be ready to fight.

As predicted, that night's battle was fierce and ruthless. Ruby fought with the mystical animals. The Wortenhogs and Snaggles were sent in droves and they took their toll. The Badgers fought valiantly, but the casualties were recorded at a record high. As Sunrise dawned across the forest, the impact became clear. The Badgers had been hit hard. They'd defended with all of their might, but the Snaggles were bigger and more powerful. The Badgers had defended their territory and their families. Most of the men were either killed or badly injured. There was one more night before the Wyvern returned; could they last one more night?

The Badgers were the fighters. They were ferocious and fast, cunning and brave. The Fairies were small and the Wood Sprites slow. Surely, without the might of the Badgers, they were a spent force. What reception would the returning Wyvern face? It now seemed like it would be the Witch, the Black Fox and an army of Wortenhogs and Snaggles.

Ruby could sense the fear. It appeared that all was lost, yet they had this unfounded hope that the Stibmit would somehow save them! What could she do? She had to do something, but what? Ranger appeared, "We need to talk, the council needs to see you immediately."

Ruby followed Ranger obediently to a secluded part of the fortified compound. A small gathering awaited her. Giselle was perched high upon a hanging branch. Ranger scampered to the relative safety of a large tree trunk, still shaken from the night before. Acron rested, nestled within the stem of a vine, at the base of a tree. Ruby sat and faced the leaders.

"We have to face the truth." Ranger started the conversation with a desolate statement, "With our current forces, we're not likely to last the night. Belver's army is badly injured, his troops fought valiantly, with many losses. They're outnumbered and outmuscled."

Giselle flapped her wings impatiently. "Ruby, we have a more serious problem. The Witch does not seem as interested in the battle. We found that to be strange. When the battle appears to be tipping in her favor she should be working hard to press home her advantage; yet she seems distracted. I wondered why, so I've been tracking her, watching her actions." Giselle extended her large wings and pushed herself from her high perch. She glided down to the ground effortlessly; she landed in front of Ruby. She was magnificent. Her large round eyes settled on Ruby's face, piercing her with her unwavering stare. "We need to hold them back tonight, and that is where we'll need your help. The following night, the Wyvern will return, and we'll need your help again. You're very important to us young lady. You need to be strong and brave. Listen carefully; it's a real possibility that we face extinction. I know what the Witch and the Black Fox are planning. I know why she's so distracted."

Giselle stretched her impressive wings before folding them into her plumage. "The Witch has a spell that sends a damp fog crawling across the forest floor. The forest is covered with Blue-bells, White-bells and a variety of flowers. The most rare of these flowers is the Yellow-bell. This Yellow-bell rings; it makes the noise of a small bell when it gets wet. The Witch dampens the forest floor and searches for the distinctive noise that the flower makes. Once she locates the flower, she removes the whole plant, ensuring that its return is prohibited. She's wiping clean the existence of this flower from our forest."

"Why would she do that?" inquired Ruby, still not understanding the importance of the Witches actions.

"The Yellow-bell flower is more important than you realize. We have to meticulously follow a carefully planned ritual to invite the Wyvern back to our world. It has to be a full and clear Moon, that's the night after tonight. We need to form a circle of power, three leaders at the base of the pond, lined up in a straight line.

Belver will be placed on the left, Ranger Oakmoss will take his position on the right; you'll join us in the middle. The middle position is reserved for a Stibmit; we're fortunate to have you. This is why the Wyvern asked Ranger to risk his life to contact your Father. He knew he couldn't return without a Stibmit present. The Witch will do everything in her power to kill you tonight.

We know she's cunning, that's why she has another plan. She knows we'll do everything we can to protect you tonight. The Yellow-bells are her key to victory, her second plan."

"I don't understand," interrupted Ruby.

"Shhhhh," replied Ranger, somewhat annoyed at the interruption.

Giselle continued, "A Yellow-bell must be thrown into the pond as the Moon reaches its highest point. The Yellow-bell will get wet and start to make a shrill noise like a small bell. The vibration through the water, will guide the Wyvern to the pond's surface, from the dark abyss below. Do you understand now? No Yellow-bell, no Wyvern. She's trying to prevent us from allowing the Wyvern to return. We must find a Yellow-bell or the return ritual will not complete."

"Then we must find one today," Ruby glanced at the leaders individually.

"It's not that easy." Ranger climbed down from his trunk. "We've had the Fairies scouring the forest and they've found nothing. The Witch has burned the plants she's removed. We've not found a single remaining Yellow-bell. The Witch has us distracted during the day; we're looking for this flower when we should be planning for the nightly assault. If we don't find the flower, it could be all over. Even if we find a flower, we have to survive the night, and that will be difficult."

Ruby felt her shoulders shrug with the weight of responsibility. "Then I guess we'll have to get organized." Ruby turned to see the most welcome sight she'd seen in a while. Joseph's large frame was a booming welcome presence. Standing next to Joseph was Belver, his snout covered in blood and a patched wound running the length of his torso.

"You can hear us?" Ruby was confused.

"Yes, temporarily. I'm not a Stibmit, but the herbs they used to heal me are still coursing through my veins. This allows me to see and hear you. It will fade and eventually I'll return to my normal state. I'll question myself later, is this all real or did I imagine this from the effects of the herbs? For now, I'll assume this is all real."

"It's real Joseph, trust me." Ruby was relieved to have her soldier companion back in her life. If a battle needed to be waged, Joseph would be her first choice to plan a battle.

Joseph stepped forward. "Let's get the Fairies organized. They can fly and cover a lot of ground. They'll need to search for the Yellow-bells. We've got a lot of work to do today, if we're to stand a chance tonight." The leaders glanced at each other.

"We don't take orders from your kind; you're not a Stibmit and we've no reason to trust a Human." Giselle fidgeted her feet, in sheer annoyance.

"Forgive me," said Joseph, with the wisdom of an old sage. "I fully understand your position and will defer to Ruby's direction."

"Ruby stepped forward, "I will appoint Joseph, as my battle strategist. I agree on the plan for the Fairies, and will approve any suggestions forwarded by Joseph. He has deep expertise in battle planning, and I'll listen to his counsel carefully. Together, we'll defeat our enemy."

This seemed good enough for the leaders and they reluctantly accepted Joseph's appointment.

During the day, numerous teams were formed, each with their assigned tasks. Joseph explained the fortification plan; Ruby organized the work groups and explained the strategy. The Fairies broke into groups and searched the forest; they covered every section. The remaining Badgers dug pits, holes and tunnels to prepare for the oncoming onslaught. The Wood Sprites were asked to work with the trees. They collected the sticky tree sap, willingly secreted by their protective comrades. As the day progressed, the smaller animals scurried around to collect food for the teams that worked tirelessly. Waves of Fairies returned from their search empty handed, by mid-afternoon concern was rising; no Yellow-bells had been located.

The Badgers had managed to complete their assignments, digging deep trenches across strategic locations. The Wood Sprites went to work on their assigned tasks. It wouldn't be long before nightfall fell and the mystical animals were looking tired. How would they fight when they were exhausted from the day's activities? The council reconvened.

Giselle opened the meeting, "What news from the Fairies?"

Acron was still absent, still looking. He'd refused to come back empty handed. The Fairies pride was at stake. Some Fairies had been flying for hours and had to return, sick from exhaustion. The whispering trees tried to help, to coordinate the sweep of the forest. They directed the Fairies to the locations where the Yellow-bells traditionally grew.

A Fairy had been dispatched to the council, to deliver a report. The news was grim. Each section had been covered and no distinctive Yellow flower could be found. Acron had asked the Fairies to keep looking, until they needed to return and fight. Some Fairies had fallen from the sky from exhaustion. Some pushed themselves harder, determined to find the distinctive Yellow flower. "No flower yet," responded Ruby, shaking her head with her eyes cast downwards in a dejected manner.

Ranger's head jerked to the right suddenly. It was a movement that did not escape Giselle's keen eyes. "What news from you Ranger Oakmoss?" Giselle singled Ranger out.

"The trees, they're chattering. They talk of darkening skies; a storm's approaching and it brings rain. The trees will have to cooperate. Normally they would spread their branches, each leaf competing for the welcome moisture. They talk of pulling in their branches and reducing the natural canopy. They want the rain to cover as much of the forest floor as possible. They hope a Yellow-bell will get wet and start to ring. We will need to find it first."

The meeting progressed with an update on their defensive plan and the state of the various troops available to them. Giselle flicked her head as her eyes changed direction. Her attention had been drawn to a slight noise disturbing the undergrowth, close to the clearing. She rose up, as if to defend the group; she was suspicious of the impending intrusion. Ruby, alert to the danger, spun with a drawn arrow, loaded within her bow. Behind her the undergrowth shook with activity. A large snake appeared and Giselle girded herself, she could swoop down and rip the snake's head off with her strong talons. An oversized crow landed in the clearing and puffed out its chest. The snake tucked in behind the crow for protection. From the other side of the clearing a Red Fox slipped from the cover of the ferns and took up his position. Rabbits, Voles, Moles, Hedgehogs, Dogs, Feral Cats, Weasels, Ferrets, Hares and Stoats all lined up. Each had selected a leader; behind them, a small army had gathered within the forest. Acron fluttered to the front of the group.

"The Trees had asked each creature to summons an army. Tonight these creatures would put their differences aside. A common enemy binds us all, one that threatens our collective survival, our habitat and our families. We have to fight together, that's how we all win, together. We know the Wyvern can save us but we have to get through tonight, to give him a chance. The leaders of each species have come before you Princess Ruby, to ask your permission to join our ranks. This has never happened before, but we've never been under such a threat."

Ruby looked at the packed clearing. Scales, feathers, fur and hard shells were all represented. Small, minute, tall, sturdy, large, thin, swift and delicate were all represented. The clearing was crowded with creatures and critters of all shapes and sizes, united by a common cause, a common enemy. Would a Mouse be this close to a Snake, would a Rabbit stand this close to a Fox? Not normally, yet they were today. This was historic. "My fellow comrades in arms, we welcome your valuable contribution, no matter how small, we're all in this together. There are no small hearts here today; you've all volunteered to help us win this fight. Your contribution is invaluable and your kind will stand shoulder to shoulder. Old enemies and foe will be together for just one night. We have a common enemy tonight, one that threatens our very existence. Thank you all for this brave act, tonight we will fight as one, and fight for our lives. Yes, you have my permission and my eternal gratitude." Ruby punched the air with her bow inciting an immediate response.

Ruby's rallying cry worked, screams, squawks, snorts and barks; a chorus of noise rose into the air. It was a galvanized army, cheering aloud, before the battle began. It felt good, but darkness was approaching and there was much left to do.

* * * * *

Chapter 10: The Battle Plan for the Second Night The Mystical Forest, Skipton, Yorkshire, England, 1545.

There was still more preparations to be done, but time would not allow. The familiar rumblings had started, deep within the darkening forest. This time, it would be different. This time, the beasts would find a reception different to any they'd experienced in the past. Joseph was a masterful planner; Ruby it seemed, was a masterful motivator. She was the leader; she'd managed to galvanized age-old enemies into a cohesive fighting force. Anticipation coursed through the forest; tonight would be different.

The Gateway to the underworld opened as usual with the rising Moon; the familiar rush of muscle heaved its way from the foul opening. Beasts clambered from the abyss, eager to taste blood, and fulfill their breeding heritage. They were driven to kill anything from this world. They gathered in a pack, howling and snarling their presence. The clouds broke, allowing the Moon's blue light to stream into the clearing. It would've been easy to start the plan prematurely. The forest's creatures were ready, but Ruby held firm. She was just as excited, her heart thumping wildly within her chest. The plan required a tricky start. She would have to create fire using a flint block and a pile of dried brush, covered in highly flammable pitch tar. She had to keep her nerve, and start the fire carefully. The beasts would be afraid of the fire and that was central to the plan.

Throughout the day, a trench had been excavated, behind the entrance to the underworld. It circled the entrance, in the hope that it would funnel the great beasts, in the desired direction. Ruby poked her head from the brush, to observe a number of beasts gathering. Again she waited,

as a Squirrel screamed with excitement and anticipation. More beasts poured from the entrance, eagerly awaiting the oncoming fight. The noise was deafening; grunts, chants and snarls filled the air. The trench was filled with sharpened pikes made from wood. The trees had willingly donated the pikes and the flammable sap, in order to win this fight. If the beasts turned to flee in the wrong direction, they would need to cross the camouflaged trench, resulting in their fall and ultimate death.

It was time. Ruby took the flint and struck it hard onto the curved rock, designed to deflect any sparks onto the highly combustible material. Nothing happened. She tried again; this time sparks flew, but they didn't result in a sustained flame. Panic started to swell in her belly; it quickly spread to her mind. "Calm down," she thought, concentrating on the flint, tightly gripped within her hand. She stared at the rock and with one quick and deliberate movement, struck the flint shard into the rock, as hard as she could. Sparks leapt from the flint and a couple deflected onto the tar. A small flame burst into life, a beautiful orange flame. Ruby took a small amount of dried moss, and coaxed it carefully up to the flame. Her heart raced as the flame enveloped the moss. The moss started to burn; now she had a small fire. She held a wooden staff, doused in tar and bound with dried reeds, to the flame. She carefully dipped the tip of the staff into the dancing flames. Instantly the tar caught alight, and the flaming torch burst into life. The flames attracted immediate attention; a beast caught the brilliant light within his gaze.

The plan was working; Joseph had meticulously planned for every detail. The beast bounded towards the light but pulled up short when he realized it was fire. Fear coursed through his body, but it didn't last. A hail of arrows plunged into the beast's side, dropping him instantly. Ruby leaned to her right; she dipped the flaming end of her staff, deep into the edge of the tar pit. It ignited instantly; she watched as the flame coursed its way around the back of the entrance.

The flames leapt high, illuminating the clearing and causing the beasts to panic. A large beast led the way, bounding into the darkness and away from the dancing flames. The rest followed, scared by the crackling sounds and the intense heat. The stampede had begun, and the trail of beasts broke for the darkened gorge, flanked by two steep hills. As the beasts ran, they seemed to pull others with them. They streamed into the gorge and entered the welcome darkness. Joseph was smart. He knew the darkness meant safety, but the darkness could easily be a disadvantage to an unsuspecting foe. As they funneled into the gorge, they soon encountered a narrow path. Two steep walls covered in trees, boulders and bracken flanked their path. The beasts approached the trap, frightened by the flames. One of the beasts, a wily old character, sensed a trap, and headed in another direction. He was a loner and the others ignored his chosen path. He headed straight for Ruby, away from the gorge. Ruby was exposed; she hadn't anticipated a lone break away beast. She was assured the beasts would move like pack animals.

Ruby was stunned into a motionless state, as she watched the great beast running at full speed, towards her location. Her survival instincts kicked in and without thinking, she rolled to her left, distracting the beast. She landed in a kneeling position. She reached back and retrieved her bow. She raised it with her strong left arm. She quickly reached for an arrow, knowing she had time for one shot only. She loaded the arrow with her right hand and pulled the twine back taught. Aiming at the beast's throat, she waited for the right moment. Her heart pounded and she could feel her arm shaking under the resistance of the bow. "Now!" was the word screaming through her thoughts.

Ruby let the arrow fly, but she didn't have time to trace its path. The beast was upon her, snarling its teeth and bearing down. She let the arrow fly and immediately rolled to her left. The beast let out a strange yelping noise, as its momentum came to an abrupt halt. The arrow had hit its mark,

felling the great beast. It dropped immediately and slid across the grassy ground, towards Ruby. Ruby had rolled into a ridge, made of rock and covered in moss. She hit the rocks hard, bruising her leg. She lay still, silently watching the beast expire. The pain coursed through her body. She dropped her head to the ground and closed her eyes. The sounds of battle emanated through the darkness as she opened her eyes. The first thing she saw, as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, was a stone ridge covered in moist green moss. Hiding below a natural rock ridge was a small plant, sporting a beautiful flower, a Yellow-bell. She squinted in disbelief. She pushed through her pain and approached the plant, to get a closer look. It was indeed a Yellow-bell; hiding beneath the natural rock ledge, this flower would have been shielded from the wet mist. The Witch had missed this one, in her efforts to eradicate the flower from the forest.

The pack of beasts continued to pour into the gorge; Ranger had realized the beasts had been bred for their fighting abilities, not their intelligence. For an instant, he felt compassion for the beasts. Then he remembered the carnage he'd witnessed over the last year. The beasts ran along the narrow path, as Joseph had predicted. They ran swiftly, pushing the one in front, in order to escape the dancing flames behind. Soon the forest floor, covered in leaves, ferns, dirt and bracken, fell beneath their feet. A cleverly disguised trap had been laid, with a false floor masking a deep, open, pit. The pit was armed with sharp wooden pikes, waiting to greet the unsuspecting beasts. In their panic and the darkness, the beasts saw nothing; they pushed onwards towards their death.

High above the path, stationed on each ridge, creatures armed with arrows and boulders unloaded their arsenal into the pit. The entrance to the gorge was ignited, closing the escape route for any beast that tried. It was over quickly, quicker than anyone expected. The sound of wounded animals rose from the pit. Tar was poured into the pit, and a lit torch was thrown down to finish the job. Joseph turned from the blazing pit and allowed a smile to cross his face. No creature of the forest will be harmed tonight. His plan had worked perfectly.

The battle had been a success but the Fairies were still searching the woods, increasing their efforts and moving further away from the protection of familiar surroundings. As the leaders gathered, their mood was buoyant. It was a while before they came down from their euphoric state, and settled to discuss the night's events.

Giselle landed gracefully on a sawn off tree stump. "We've done well tonight. Joseph, the creatures of the forest salute you."

Ranger scurried to a nearby trunk, "That showed them, fantastic job!" Their excitement was clearly coursing through their veins.

Belver was the voice of reason. "We've lost many brave souls in this battle, let's not forget that. We fought well tonight, thank you Joseph, but we still have one more night, and no way to get the Wyvern home. We're hanging on, let's face it. We're bravely hanging on." Belver shook his scarred snout, "We can't hang on forever, and we need the Wyvern's help."

Joseph hung his head. He had to admit it felt good to pull off a plan with such precision, but Belver's summary was the truth.

Belver raised his eyes and tried to redeem himself. "Perhaps the Fairies will return with good news, perhaps they've found a Yellow-bell."

"Or perhaps they haven't." A voice emerged from the darkness. It was Ruby. Ruby joined the group, relieved to see her friends. "Let's face it, it's a long shot. I don't think they'll find one, the Witch seemed pretty thorough."

Ruby's tone was unusually negative, out of character from this normally positive, inspirational, leader. Giselle flapped her wings in annoyance, she recognized the truth in the statement, but it didn't help matters by being so honest.

"We have to believe; we'll organize and join the Fairies in their search. Get the creatures together; we need to explain the importance of this search."

As the leaders turned, Ruby interrupted. "No, I don't think that's a good idea. It seems a fruitless waste of time. They would be better planning for the next night's activities."

Everyone froze. Ruby had overstepped her authority. The creatures called her Princess, but Giselle was one of the most revered, feared, and wisest of the mystical creatures. Even the Wyvern listened to her counsel, and rarely went against her advice. Princess Ruby had no right to disrespect the Great White Owl in such an open way. There would be consequences, and the rest of the group tensed, before retribution was administered.

The Great White Owl swiveled her head, fixing Ruby squarely within the gaze of her large yellow eyes. Giselle puffed out her feathered chest, and flexed her wings. She resisted the temptation to spring forward, with her razor sharp talons bared. "A fruitless waste of time?" repeated Giselle, giving Ruby one last chance to explain her statement.

Ruby stepped forward confidently. "Yes, a fruitless waste of time, when I've already found this." Ruby extended her hand, which contained a darkened cloth, taking an uneven shape. All eyes were focused upon the small, concealed shape, nestled within her palm. She carefully, and gently, removed the flimsy cloth, revealing a clump of dirt, some exposed roots, and a green stem supporting five medium sized leaves and a stalk. The stalk protruded proudly towards the dark sky. At its wilted end, was a perfectly formed Yellow-bell. Ranger gasped audibly. Giselle settled and folded her wings, standing down from her attack position.

"You found one!" exclaimed Joseph, stating the perfectly obvious.

Belver was excited too; he could feel his heart beating strongly within his chest. For the first time, in a long while, he believed. This flower had restored his hope; he'd always thought the Wyvern could help them fight this enemy, now he believed they could win this fight. Now they had more than a fighting chance. "We need to plant it, care for it and water its roots. Let's keep it safe until tonight, and we'll need to get it to the pond. Giselle, can you help with that?"

Giselle was pleased. "Take good care of the plant, keep it in the shade, keep it dry and guard it with your lives. When the Moon returns, I'll fly the flower to the pond and we'll conduct the Moonlight ceremony. I predict heavy rain today; the Witch will use all of her powers to summon the rain. The Black Fox will be running through the forest; it has keen ears. If that Yellow-bell gets damp, it will chime loudly, a noise that will be heard. This is our last chance; it must be kept dry and safe. Princess Ruby...." Giselle stopped, to ensure Ruby's attention. "Fate chose you to find this precious flower. You must be the one to guard it. That's your task today, your destiny; nothing else matters. I'll meet you here, when the light starts to fade. Guard this precious flower with your life; keep it dry and safe." Giselle flapped her mighty wings and disappeared into the forest.

The enormous responsibility started to register with Ruby; her excitement was quickly replaced by a nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach. After a while a Fairy fluttered into view; "Giselle said you had new orders for us?"

Ranger took control, "Yes, we do. Ask the Fairies to return from their search, we have new orders but it's complicated, and Princess Ruby will need to speak with Acron personally. We need all of the Fairies to return."

Looking puzzled, the Fairy saluted, retreating into the distance.

Ranger was quick to explain himself. "We can't tell them. Suppose the Witch were to snare a Fairy? We don't want her to know about the Yellow-bell." The group nodded in appreciation of Ranger's caution. "We need to keep this quiet, at all costs." The gravity of his words sunk in with the group.

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Chapter 11: The Third and Final Night The Mystical Forest, Skipton, Yorkshire, England, 1545.

The day dragged on, it seemed intolerantly long. The forest was awash in energetic activity. The Fairies returned, eager to know who had found the flower. The creatures organized their defenses for a final night's assault. Everyone was instructed to watch for the Witch and the Black Fox. The whispering trees had seen them far away, on the edge of the forest. The most battle hardened Badgers were assembled to guard Princess Ruby. She'd taken up residence in a lean, made from branches, ferns and mud. The Wood Sprites had cleverly crafted the lean to blend in with the forest. The Badgers were told the Princess was in danger and she needed additional protection. Inside the lean, the Princess guarded the flower, keeping it safe and dry.

Under the early morning Sun, the Witch cast one final spell. The Black Fox appeared from the underbrush; between its teeth it carried a piece of bark, stripped from an Ash tree. The Fox approached the Witch, feeling smug and satisfied. He dropped the bark at her feet, and flicked his bushy tail in excitement. The Witch stooped to retrieve the fragment of bark, before glancing at the Black Fox. "This should do it. This is the last ingredient, victory will be ours tonight, and darkness will never leave this forest." She turned to drop the bark into the flaming caldron, boiling the ingredients within a bubbling broth. As the bark entered the mix, a strong spiral of white smoke billowed from the boiling pot. It traveled gratefully into the sky and formed into a thick blue haze. Soon the haze became a thick mist and started to cover the sky as far as the eye could see. It wasn't long before the mist had turned to rain, with a soft wet cloud enveloping the entire forest.

If any Yellow-bell remained, it would ring out loud and true. The Fox's acute hearing would detect the familiar sound. The creatures had anticipated this plan. As the sky started to cloud over, fires were lit surrounding the lean housing the Princess. Inside the lean, a small fire kept the air warm and dry. The creatures had created another smaller covered lean, where dry wood was stored, to keep the fires burning strong. The Badgers worked hard to replenish the fires. The lean was situated in a clearing, ringed by the surrounding fires. On the edge of the clearing, Fairies stood guard in every tree. They were instructed to play their horns and sing loudly. Each tree took

a turn to play and sing. Their songs recalled famous battles and beautiful women. Lost love and broken hearts seemed to be a popular theme. Each tree sang, until they could sing no more, only to be relieved by the next tree. The Yellow-bell remained dry, surrounded by a pocket of dry air. The ringing noise from the flower would have been overwhelmed by the noise from the Fairies. It would have been kept from the listening ears of the Black Fox. As nightfall approached, the skies had gradually cleared and the wet mist had dissipated.

The plan had worked. Joseph had devised another battle plan for the Wortenhogs. Everyone was carefully prepared and confident of the approaching final battle. It had been three Moons since the Wyvern had vowed to return. He didn't want to leave but he'd known this was his only solution, his last resort. The Wyvern was confident that he could return with a winning plan. He'd been less confident that the creatures could last the three nights. He'd been loathed to leave the creatures to fight the Snaggles and Wortenhogs, and the growing power of the Witch. Would they survive? Would they survive if he didn't leave? He'd agonized for days, until Giselle had finally convinced him, that he had no choice.

He now relied upon Giselle, a nine-year old Stibmit Human, a Fairy, a Badger and a Wood Sprite, to collectively bring him back. As he sank into the depths of the pond that night, he shook his head, at the absurdity of the plan. Good needed to prevail, good should always defeat evil. Even he had to admit, they were riding their luck.

The Sun had fallen in the sky. It wouldn't be long before it dropped lower and disappeared from view. Princess Ruby devoured an apple; she needed to keep her strength up for tonight. She didn't know what to expect, but she felt nervous. She hoped she was doing the right thing, and that her parents could hold on for one more night.

"How are you doing?" a familiar voice entered the lean.

"Joseph, it's good to see you. How are your plans for tonight?"

Joseph entered the lean carefully, not sure of where the flower was stored. "We're all prepared, but you're avoiding my question, Princess." He broke into a smile.

"I know; I still can't get used to being called Princess."

"I can't get used to animals talking to me and Fairies, real Fairies!"

Ruby shuffled her feet, "I'm nervous, if I were to be honest with you."

"About what?"

"I don't know if I'm doing the right thing? I'm worried about my parents, I don't know if they're still alive? It feels right, but I hope the return of the Wyvern is everything that we're hoping for. A lot is riding on this Water Dragon."

Joseph stumbled to his side, something had moved; his keen reflexes adjusted his body, to face the unwelcome intruder. He peered into the searing sunlight, as a shape emerged. Wide wings and a brilliant white shape gracefully grew larger, as it approached the lean. It was Giselle; the time had come.

"Joseph, prepare the troops. You may have to fight tonight, one more time. Princess Ruby, you'll need to follow me. We have a long journey ahead, through the woods." They exchanged glances, but no words were necessary. Ruby hugged Joseph before he strode confidently away to assume his duties.

Ruby cautiously gathered the Yellow-bell, covering it in a fabric sack. She loaded her quiver with as many arrows as she could, and strapped her bow to her body. "Are you ready?" inquired Giselle.

"Yes. Giselle, I don't want to fail." Ruby looked like a little child, quite different from the fearless warrior that felled a Wortenhog the night before.

"You won't child, we'll see to that." It was the first time that Giselle had sounded supportive. Generally, she sounded mean spirited, with a deep loathing of Humans. Today was different, almost empathetic.

"Who's we?" inquired Ruby. Giselle was perched in front of the lean, her strong talons gripping a tree root, protruding from the grassy ground. Her wings were outstretched. Her impressive plumage shimmered with white and silver flecks sprinkled through her feathers. Giselle folded her wings and moved to one side. Behind her, waiting in the clearing, were three distinct shapes. A Badger, a Fairy and a Wood Sprite waited. Belver, Acron and Ranger, were accompanying Ruby on her journey; suddenly she felt better, more confident. "Well let's get going," snorted Belver, flashing his white striped fur against the setting Sun.

Ruby walked towards them. They bowed respectfully, to the approaching Princess. "Enough of the formalities, we've got an important job to do," said Ruby, setting the tone. "Giselle, are the Humans falling ill because of the Witch? Is it her doing, her evil spells?"

Giselle shuffled, "Yes, Princess."

"Can the Wyvern break this spell?"

Giselle stared at Ruby, with her large yellow eyes. "I'm sure he can Princess. We have to go to the sacred Pond. It's located within the heart of the forest. I'll guide you there; these three have been before. The forest will help you this time, but we have to watch out for the Witch and the Black Fox."

Ranger stepped forward. "The trees tell us that they're far away, at the edge of the forest. If we're careful and keep the Yellow-bell dry, we should be able to make this journey undetected. We can get to the pond as the Moon rises; it'll give us some time before the beasts arrive. But we have to leave now." The urgency strained through Ranger's voice.

And so it began. An unusual journey through the forest commenced. A battle scarred Badger who would never back away from a fight, no matter how big or ferocious his opponent may be. A small but mighty Fairy, armed with the talent of a sure shot; who's arrow flies true, no matter what pressure he's subjected to. A Wood Sprite with a quick brain and sharp intelligence. One who could galvanize warring factions into a formidable force through a soul stirring speech. A Mystical creature whose very existence was only told in legends and folklore; an oversized White Owl, with razor sharp talons and cutting wisdom, gleaned from thousands of years.

They were assembled to escort a thin, strong willed, brave, nine-year old. Recently appointed a Princess, she possessed a remarkable talent as an archer, only surpassed by the purity of her heart. This purity was a gift from her Father, which manifested in a birthmark and the ability to hear and see what other Humans couldn't. She was a Stibmit, and the last remaining hope for this bastion of Good.

Giselle led the way, guiding the group through the forest. She would hop from branch to branch, gliding effortlessly between the hanging limbs. Occasionally the group would stop to rest and drink water. The gravity of the task ahead had altered their mood. They didn't talk much, but no one complained. After a half a day of walking, the worn paths grew narrower and the dense forest closed in. Giselle watched over the group, making sure the path ahead was safe. Ranger received messages from the whispering trees; the Witch and the Black Fox remained far away. As they approached the central part of the forest, the whispering trees disappeared. The ground was too wet, not ideal conditions for this type of tree. The forest enveloped the group, with no clear path forward. Giselle waited, "The next stage of the journey is less traveled. You can't see a clear path, but the forest will help you. You're entering this is the mystical forest, the old forest. The plants, trees and animals that live here are all connected. They know why you're here and they'll help.

Suddenly the thick branches ahead parted, and the shrubs covering the ground parted to create a path. The group smiled at each other, graciously accepting the forest's invitation. After what seemed a long time walking, they approached a swamp. The group looked at each other with the same question running through their minds.

Giselle landed gracefully at their side. "This is the Swamp of the Lost. The plants can drag unwanted intruders, and the fatally curious, deep into the swamp. They'll never reach the sacred pond and never escape the swamp. The swamp is part of the forest; it accepts you. The forest will help you navigate a safe path. You have to cross the swamp."

Princess Ruby pushed the flimsy sack of dirt towards the great Owl. "I'm worried about falling in and getting this wet. The Yellow-bell would be safer with you. Just take it and fly across the swamp, I'll take it back, when we reach the other side."

Giselle could see the logic in Ruby's plea, but it wasn't possible. "I'm sorry Princess, my talons are too strong. They're designed to be weapons, to rip apart my prey, so I can eat. I can't grip the sack in a delicate way; I may damage the flower. We can't risk that. You must keep it safe, and keep it dry. You must be careful as you cross the swamp, it can't get wet."

Ranger accepted the task easily; he led the way to the murky waters edge. Giselle offered a final piece of advice, "Stay towards the center but track to the right of center. The ground is firmer." Ranger nodded confidently, but the group that followed, were not too sure. Acron fluttered past Ruby's shoulder. "If I could, I would carry the flower for you, but it's too heavy for me."

"I know; thanks." Ruby followed Ranger. At the swamp's edge, two submerged tree trunks gently floated to the surface. A string of wet, green leafy vegetation, wound its way around the trunks. Like a strong rope, the vegetation started to bind the logs together, creating a floating walkway. The forest was indeed helping, as best it could. Ranger stepped cautiously onto the logs; they swayed gently within the water. Ruby followed as Acron fluttered high above.

They gingerly started their journey across the log path provided. The logs helped them reach a clump of land, solid enough to support their weight. Ruby was half way across the logs when she glanced backwards. Belver was storming around onshore, acting in an agitated manner. Ruby

shouted over her shoulder, "Come on Belver, you'll fall behind." She concentrated on her balance and keeping the precious flower clutched to her chest.

Belver snorted loudly. "I'm afraid of water, I can't swim." His voice tailed off, ashamed at his admission.

Acron flew back to assist his fearful friend. "Come on Belver, the idea is not to fall in. You can do this, walking across this log, is like walking across a fallen tree in the forest. You never fall off those. This is not as fearsome as the smallest Wortenhog, and you never back away from one of those. You can do this, you will stay dry."

It was all that Belver needed, Acron believed in him, and he was not going to let the Princess down. Princess Ruby needed him; the Wyvern needed him. The forest was helping them; the swamp did not want to claim their souls. He took his first reticent steps forward, and shuffled his way onto the gently bobbing logs. Acron flew above him, "Only look at the logs, just focus on the path ahead of you, you're doing fine."

"Thanks Acron, you're a true friend."

"And you're a mighty warrior, let's do this," Acron's encouragement was working. Once they'd reached the land rise in the swamp, he joined the others.

Ranger teased him, "What took you?"

Acron answered quickly, "Belver was teaching me how to fight."

Ranger accepted the explanation without question, "Well, he would know." Belver exchanged glances with Acron, who flew onwards without a pause. Suddenly Belver's opinion of Acron had changed in an instant. This little Fairy had a large heart, full of pride.

After what seemed an age, the last obstacle was navigated and Ruby managed to plant her feet firmly on solid ground. She'd managed to cross the swamp and was happy to see the welcome sight of Giselle, preening her white plumage. She carefully squeezed her precious package, relieved that it was still dry. When Belver made it to dry land he let out a sigh of relief. Acron fluttered to his side, "Easy big man, you made it."

Belver raked his snout from side to side and enjoyed the feeling of hard dirt under his paws. Tree limbs parted ahead, suggesting the next stage of their journey. Ranger took the suggestion, "Let's go."

Giselle watched the weary looking group, "There's a cold stream ahead, with fresh water and an apple tree; it'll be a nice place to stop and rest for a while." This seemed to spur the group onwards.

After stopping a while, the group was refreshed, feasting on apples, berries, and the clear fresh water. They pushed onwards, guided by the Great White Owl. The skies hinted at the approaching evening, as the Sun started to set. The light was fading but Giselle reassured Ranger, who was starting to worry. "Will we reach the pond before nightfall? I don't relish pushing our way through the forest in the dark."

"Relax Ranger Oakmoss, we're almost there. The sky is perfectly clear, no rain in sight. Press onwards, we're so close." The great Owl pushed away lightly upon the branch supporting her weight, and led the group forward.

It wasn't long before they broke through into a clearing. Ahead of the group lay a beautiful tranquil scene. The Great White Owl was perched high above the ground, on her favorite branch, overhanging the edge of the pond. A shallow strip of land separated the forest, from the edge of the still water. The pond was silent, not a breath of wind dared to cause a ripple on the smooth surface. The glass like surface reflected the darkening skies. Giselle watched the sky; it would soon be time. She knew the ceremony needed to start at the right moment and it was fast approaching. She flew down to the pond's edge, just as the Moon started to reflect in the water. It had been three Moons and she needed to organize the group quickly. "We're going to start the ceremony and we'll only get one chance to do this right. Line up and face me, now!" screamed the excited bird.

The group lined up as instructed. Giselle barked out her orders. "You, Ranger, move to the right, to the edge of the lake, now!" Ranger scurried away without questioning the Owl's order. "Belver to the left, the opposite side of the shoreline to Ranger, go now quickly!" Belver scurried along the edge of the pond and took his position. The Moon had moved across the sky and was now in full reflection of the Pond. Princess Ruby stood motionless in the center, between Ranger and Belver. "Good, now listen carefully, we can only do this once and we can't afford to fail. Ruby, unwrap the flower and detach its head carefully from the stem. Give the flower to Acron. Place the plant and the roots down in front of you, now!" Ruby could hear the urgency in Giselle's voice. She did exactly as she was asked.

"Acron will fly over the pond and drop the flower into the water. It will ring loudly and produce a fierce energy wave. You must hold your palms outstretched from your body at your side. Energy will flow through you; you must stand firm. You will create a circle of power; it must not be broken. Stand firm, not matter how much it shakes you. The circle of energy will help the Wyvern come home. The Moon is high and the night is perfect, it is time. Ruby, give Acron the flower now."

Ruby unwrapped the precious plant. The flower had survived the journey, it looked fresh and the petals were undamaged. Ruby detached the flower at its stem and handed it to the small Fairy. Acron struggled to grip the wide flower. He glanced at the Owl for encouragement. "Now?" he shouted.

"Now," confirmed Giselle. "Go to the center of the lake, drop the flower in the water and fly to the opposite end of the lake. Stay there, until it's safe to return."

"Stretch your palms out everyone, now!" Ranger, Ruby and Belver each raised their arms, their palms facing each other, creating an imaginary line.

Acron flapped his wings furiously, trying to lift the weight of the flower. He managed to lift his precious cargo and flew across the still, moonlit water. Everyone was transfixed; the brave, diminutive Fairy flew erratically across the pond. Acron couldn't achieve the height he desired, so he appeared to skim across the pond's surface. As he drew near the center, he could see the reflection of the Moon. The flower started to vibrate wildly. Acron hung on for as long as he could; flapping his wings as hard as possible. It was all too much for Acron, his arms gave out and the Yellow flower tumbled towards the water. Giselle strained her neck allowing her to witness the upcoming events.

As soon as the flower came into contact with the water, a shrill noise pierced the still night's air.

The Black Fox's ears pricked instantly, a Yellow-bell was ringing loudly, causing the forest to reverberate. The Witch knew instantly; they'd been outsmarted.

The water rippled with the ringing sounds. It was tempting to cover your ears, but the three leaders maintained their stance. A strong yellow-colored beam of energy shot from the floating flower. The Yellow-bell vibrated wildly; the ringing noise caused the water to send ripples across the glass like surface. From the heart of the flower shot an energy beam; the yellow streak shot from the center of the lake, making a loud crackling sound. Ranger instinctively closed his eyes, as the bolt shot towards him. The energy hit him with a force but his body responded in an interesting way. The yellow energy entered his chest, filling him with emotions of peace and joy. His body embraced the energy, and projected a strong beam outwards from each palm.

The yellow beam entered Ruby's palm with similar effects. A yellow string of energy connected Ranger, Ruby and Belver. The flower rang loudly, connecting the leaders to the flower, in a circle of energetic light. The water within the circle started to bubble. The water was cool, but it looked as if it were boiling. Air bubbles surged to the surface from deep within the pond. Connected by a strong yellow force, the leaders watched the bubbling water. A large green mass was emerging at the side of the pond. The distinctive shape of a Wyvern's head could be seen emerging from the bubbling foam. Belver felt excitement; the plan was working. A Wyvern's head emerged, but something was not right. This Wyvern had brilliant green scales and a bright purple stripe that ran the length of its snout between the eyes, and over the back of its head.

The emerging Wyvern seemed to have softer features, like a female. It poked its head from the pond and stared at the three leaders, transfixed upon the shore. More bubbles could be seen at the opposite side of the pond. Another scaled head appeared. This time a dark grey, scaled creature, with long whiskers, and a different shaped snout appeared. A dark color of slate grey, replaced the brilliant green scales. This was a Wyvern, but a different variety. Finally, a large froth of bubbles erupted in the center of the pond. The familiar and welcome site of a blue Wyvern head poked itself through the frothing water. The Wyvern of Skipton forest had returned.

As quickly as the yellow energy had shot from the ringing flower, it disappeared, releasing the three leaders from their invisible bond. Each collapsed to their knees; Belver sprawled upon his stomach. The Wyverns swam effortlessly to the shore. The blue forest Wyvern was the largest of the three.

Acron had fluttered across the pond to join the leaders on the shoreline. Giselle swooped in gracefully to welcome the return of her old friend. The Wyverns bucked at the sight of the large White Owl.

"Easy, she's a friend. This is the Mystical Owl that I talked about." The Wyvern's remained uneasy, alert to any danger. They were more comfortable in the water. "Who are you little girl? Where's the Baron?" inquired the blue Wyvern.

Ranger answered quickly. "The Baron's sick my Lord, this is his daughter, Ruby; she's a Stibmit."

"I see. My friends, I've brought help. We're the oldest and wisest of the Wyverns. To my left is my sister, Bao. Bao means precious treasure, and she rules over the Eastern seas, far away. The

water is warm, with many Islands. In her world, she's the ruler of all Dragons, both land and sea. Bao agreed to come and help, we should be grateful. Bao gently bowed her brilliant green snout. She moved forward and pushed ashore a small, simple wooden box, with her scaled flipper. The leaders looked at the gift, uncertain of their response.

"To my right is my other Sister, Safaa; Safaa means purity. Safaa is the ruler of the old world, the dark Northern seas, and the treacherous waters of the Southern seas. She's traveled far to help us today, they both have." Safaa bowed her grey snout in a gesture of patient respect. She too, pushed an offering forward for presentment. It was an elaborate dark box, covered in the leather hide of an animal, and sealed with a gold clasp.

"Before you today, you have the Elders of the Dragon world. We've come from the far corners of your planet and the deepest of depths. East, West, South and the Northern seas, we represent everything that is powerful and good. We'll win this war with evil, we always do. This is a close one and we'll need to work together. I've brought some additional help," the great Wyvern raised his webbed flipper and an arrow fell to the shore. "We each have a gift from the place beyond, powerful gifts, that'll help us defeat evil."

Safaa stepped forward, "We salute you Mystical animals, for it is your courage that inspires us to fight with you. It is not size that counts," she looked at Acron, "for larger foe have fallen quickly. It's not fierceness that wins the day." She looked at the scarred snout of Belver, "For fierce warriors will never defeat a motivated team. It's not cunning or disguise that wins the day," she looked at Ranger's twig like body, "for cunning can be outwitted and disguises uncovered."

Bao stepped forward. "It's the purity of one's heart," she said, glancing at Princess Ruby, "above all other attributes; that's the one that wins this battle. We have everything represented here today, each of you have a pure heart. We're honored to join your battle."

The largest Wyvern stepped forward. "It's good to see you again my friends. I've spoken fondly of you and our forest. I've explained our plight and the reason why I think this is a place worth saving." He stared at Ruby, "My name's Odin, I preside over the Western waters. I patrol the oceans, rivers, lakes and ponds. I'm the eldest surviving Wyvern and the protector of good. Wyvern's have been hunted and persecuted, lied about and portrayed falsely, for a long time. There was a time that we were revered; now we're to be feared and hunted. The evil hearts in this world have almost made us extinct. There are more of us, but we protect our homes and habitats fiercely. My friends stand before you today, a Fairy, a Badger, a Wood Sprite and a Stibmit, all showing dignity and honor. We've work to be done, the Moon is almost high and we should begin immediately."

The group listened carefully as Odin explained the plan. It would not be long before the gate to the underworld opened, flooding the forest with unwanted beasts of all shapes and sizes. "There's a sequence to this plan, it must be followed precisely. If we move quickly, we can start right away."

* * * * *

Meticulous instructions had been conveyed to the leaders at the sacred pond. Each was given instructions that needed to be followed with no room for error. Belver was the first to receive instructions.

Bao had lowered her snout, in a gesture designed to be less threatening. "Belver, please approach me." Belver was shocked that he'd been singled out and summoned by Bao. He quickly scurried around the edge of the pond, to a position where he faced Bao. "This is a simple wooden box, constructed from the wreckage of a fine vessel that sunk in a fierce storm. The box is unimportant, but it contains a plant; it's actually seaweed that we call Gorsporth. Gorsporth can only be found in the deepest of seas within my world. It's a special plant, with very unusual properties. It'll grow normally under water, where it's wet and cold. If you expose this plant to heat, it'll grow rapidly. If it dries out, it'll turn hard, rock hard. Once the plant has hardened, it dies and remains rock hard. It'll never return to its soft state, even when it gets wet. I have plans for this plant, but I'll need your help. We can not waste any time."

Belver felt privileged to be asked, to play his part, in assisting the Wyverns. "How can I help?" asked Belver, arching his back and lowering his scarred snout in a gesture of respect.

Odin turned his head towards Giselle. "Giselle, fly quickly, as quickly as you can. Tell the animals to build fires all around the entrance, the entrance to the underworld, where the great beasts enter. The Moon is rising; we don't have much time before they'll appear. Dig a pit around the hole; fill it with branches, tar and wood. We need a ring of fire around the Gateway to the underworld. It needs to be sealed and this is the first step. Go now, and wait for Belver's arrival, he'll be joining you at the entrance." The Great White Owl spread her wings and without a sound, majestically glided away.

She quickly located the Human, Joseph. He would organize the activities required to construct a circle of fire. Belver redirected his attention from the large Owl to the Wyvern that stood before him. Bao pushed the simple wooden box towards Belver. "Can you carry this safely in your jaws?"

Belver looked at the box; it wasn't square, it was long and flat. "Yes, I think I can."

"The box is sturdy, but it's full of sea water. The plant needs to remain wet, inside the darkened box." Bao took great caution in relaying her instructions to Belver; he listened intently. He would have to retrace his steps, crossing the swamp alone. Once across, he would run for the entrance to the underworld, it would be a race against time. He would make up some time by using the tunnels; he knew exactly how to navigate his way through to the Gateway. Once he understood, he stooped towards the wooden box. He opened his jaws and wedged his teeth carefully around the box. The salty taste of the water was still evident in the old wood. The fresh water of the pond had weakened the salty taste, but it was still there. Belver glance upwards at Bao; unable to speak, his eyes met hers. She nodded leading with her snout she tilted her head, as if to acknowledge her task was complete. It was up to Belver now, and silently he vowed not to let her down.

Safaa inched forward as Bao retreated. The Wyverns looked awkward, lumbering, animals on land, a far cry from their native aquatic home. Acron shuddered as her deep green eyes fell upon his tiny frame. "You Sir, I request your attention. You can also join him," she growled, glancing at Ranger. Ranger scurried to the side of the pond; the fluttering wings of the Fairy arrived first. "I need you both to work together, this won't be easy, but it's vitally important. Inside this box is something precious, very precious. I loathe to give it away, and wouldn't, unless it weren't so important." She sneaked a glance at Odin, who remained stoic. Our Father was a King; he ruled

all of the water kingdoms. He taught us to be wise and brave. No one could match the purity of his great heart. He defeated evil for thousands of years, until he succumbed to old age. In your world we are immortal, but even Wyvern's choose to leave their physical body when the time is right. Our Father knew it was time, he wanted to move on; he wanted to re-join our Mother in the spiritual world. He left Odin, Bao and I, as able wards to this world, and we swore to protect it. Contained within this box is a precious gift. It's a fragment of bone, my Father's bone. It's the purest substance in existence, and it's very powerful. The bone of a Wyvern is dense and strong. Wood Sprites and Fairies will have to work closely to successfully deploy this part of our plan." Saffa leaned forward, her enormous head dwarfing the diminutive Fairy. Ranger could feel the air pouring out of her nostrils rising from her scaled snout. She opened her eyes wide and glared at the two small creatures cowering in front of her.

"You can work together, yes?"

Ranger choked an answer out first. "Yes," he said, nodding his head. Acron could hardly speak, he responded by nodding his head furiously.

"Good, then we've little time to waste. I'll tell you what you need to do."

Ruby felt apprehensive. Was she an outsider? Did she have a part to play in this plan, or was her usefulness as a Stibmit, now over. She'd been a requirement to summons the great Wyverns, was that the extent of her usefulness? Odin rolled off the mud bank that surrounding the pond. He slipped effortlessly into the welcoming water. If these great animals looked cumbersome on land, they excelled in water. Their shape and size undulated with the resistance of the water. Odin submerged without causing a ripple; his large frame emerged from the water with ease. His head started to break the water's surface, followed by the eyes, snout and mouth. Ruby's eyes adjusted to the emerging sight but lingered on a familiar shape. Protruding from Odin's mouth, snared between his sharp teeth, was the arrow.

Odin glided through the water and approached the shore. He'd completed this move a million times, as he flapped his flippers pushing him forwards. He glided effortlessly onto the muddy pond's shore. Propping himself up with his strong flippers, he bowed his head towards Ruby. He pushed his snout forward and opened his jaw slightly. It caused his grip upon the arrow to loosen but the shaft remained lodged within his mouth. He shook his head, motioning for Ruby to take the arrow. She reached forward and gently retrieved the arrow from his mouth.

She held it carefully with both hands, her palms facing the sky, with her arms outstretched. "Is this for me?" She looked at Odin, her eyes screaming for an explanation.

Odin nodded quietly, not knowing where to begin. "There is a land far away from here, beyond the far depths of the pond. It's called Belhavier. It's much like this world with animals, plants, water, sky and the fight between good and evil. The ruler of this land is a brave King, King Ghard. He doesn't look like you, but I'm sure you would like each other. His kind is highly evolved in the art of magic, and they use their powers to fight the dark forces. King Ghard is a prolific marksman; no one is better with a bow. He's truly a master. I wish you could meet, but unfortunately, that's not possible in this lifetime. I traveled a long way to talk with King Ghard. I've described our fate here in this realm. He would want to meet the brave little girl armed with an ornate bow. He has two sons, neither of which aspires to be archers." Odin paused to see if Ruby was paying attention. His peripheral vision caught the flight of Acron, and the scurrying shape of Ranger, leaving the pond to fulfill their mission.

Gentle waves caressed the shoreline at each side of Odin's submerged tail. Bao and Safaa appeared in the water. Odin could sense their presence but didn't break his gaze upon Ruby. "This is a special arrow, a precious gift from King Ghard and his people. For hundreds of years this arrow has been displayed at the Temple of Victorious Dreams, high upon the Mountain of Fallen Souls. This is a sacred object for the King and his people. A powerful Oougi, a magical woman with great powers, blessed this arrow. It carries a powerful force, so pure that it will kill evil, any evil. The Oougi made the supreme sacrifice to save her realm; she cast a spell that would make this arrow all-powerful but the spell took her life."

Ruby's attention was distracted. She heard a small noise in the water, to the side of Odin.

Bao had left the water and propped her large frame upon the shore, next to Odin. "You must tell her of your promise."

Ruby looked inquisitively at Odin. "Child, all you need to know is that this arrow is important. It's made from the finest wood. It will never bend or warp. It will always fly straight and true. Its feathers are from an exotic bird; the feathers are hardy and slice through the air. The tip is carved from a rock that is hard, sharp, and never dulls. This is the perfect arrow."

Bao couldn't stand it any longer. "Child, this is a powerful weapon, but it needs respect. The Arrow of Belhavier is well known across our realms. It's never been released from the realm of Belhavier. The Oougi made the ultimate sacrifice. She cast a spell of purity to ensure this arrow will kill any form of evil. In return, she gave her soul to the underworld. She died saving her realm. The King was able to kill the leader of evil, destroying his hold over their realm. You have to do the same; you have to use this arrow to kill the Witch. Child, you can't miss, if you"

"Enough," shouted Odin, slapping his flipper into the mud. He shot a stern look at Bao, before turning to Ruby. "Ruby is an archer, I've no doubt she'll kill the Witch. We just have to provide her with the shot. We'll deliver you the Witch; you have to hit her with this arrow. You've been practicing your whole life for this. Killing the Witch will save our land, your parents, and the forest. You can do this."

"Are my parents still alive?"

"The trees say yes, but only just."

Ruby added the arrow to her quiver, "It'll be my pleasure," she said, with the unabashed confidence of a child.

A small noise could be heard to her left. A Fairy landed on a sprig, close to Ruby. He looked shocked at the sight that greeted him. Odin glared at the intruder, "Speak now Fairy."

The Fairy shook visibly. "My name is Deedot. Acron sent me to guide Princess Ruby."

"Good, Ruby I want you to follow this Fairy. Acron, Belver and Ranger know what to do. They'll present the Witch to you, breath deeply and hit the Witch with the Arrow of Belhavier. Listen to me carefully. When you kill the Witch, you must retrieve the Arrow. Do you understand?"

"Yes," responded Ruby. She didn't fully understand.

"Give the Arrow to Giselle, she'll return it to me. It's very important that you do that."

"Yes," nodded Ruby.

"Good luck, now go with the Fairy and meet up with your friends, quickly."

The Fairy took flight, leading Ruby away from the Pond and onto the start of her quest.

"You're an old fool Brother." Bao was not impressed. "Why didn't you tell her?"

Odin turned sharply, "Hold your tongue Sister, it's so sharp it'll cut your own mouth."

"I don't often agree with my Sister, but this time I do." Safaa joined the conversation reluctantly. "You should've told her the truth, she needed to know."

Odin snapped his jaws in disgust. "She's special that one, I have faith in her. She'll kill the Witch. She doesn't need more pressure placed upon her."

Bao flapped the water in frustration. "She might well kill the Witch. In her jubilant celebrations, what if she forgets to follow your instructions and return the Arrow?"

"She won't" Odin snapped, unsure of his answer.

The two sisters glanced at each other. It was Safaa who tried to restore calm. "If we don't get the Arrow back to its resting place in Belhavior, before nightfall in their realm, you know what'll happen?"

"Yes, I'm fully aware of the curse. If the Arrow is not returned in time, the soul who took it will be condemned for all time."

"We're talking about your soul, Brother. It'll be claimed by the underworld, and your death will be certain." The two sisters looked at each other again. Bao flipped her snout at Safaa, urging her to continue. "So you trust this small Human with your life?" Safaa tried to use a sensitive tone.

Odin let the gravity of her words sink in. "I have no choice, if we're to save this realm."

Safaa swam closer to Odin. We all know I'm the fastest swimmer. There's no doubt in that matter, you're not even close. I swim dark and treacherous waters, my flippers and tail are stronger; my body is streamlined and built for speed. If we were in a fight, I'd choose you Odin, my fierce muscle bound Brother. This is a fight for your life, but our weapon is speed. I should take the Arrow back to Belhavior, any delay may cost your life. I will not hear any arguments, my decision is final."

Bao swam closer to Odin, she whispered softly. "My Sister is wise; she can out swim both of us."

Odin reluctantly agreed; he nodded his head in acceptance. "Thank you, thank you both. Sisters, do you still have what you need to return to your worlds?"

They both nodded. "I have a rare yellow pearl, from the Island of Pearls. This will provide me safe passage back to the realm of the East. I can leave whenever I wish." Bao dove into the pond and flipped the water with her scaled tail. She re-emerged, satisfied with her show of agility.

"I have a golden nugget, washed onto the seabed from a clear mountain stream. Its power will guide me to the cold familiar waters of the Northern realm. I too, can return at will." Safaa reassured Odin, "You'll remain here in the West my Brother."

Odin was proud of his siblings. "Then our fate lies with the girl, Princess Ruby."

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The front door opened and swung heavily upon its hinges. The familiar squeaking sound alerted both Kady and Jevon instantly. "Hello?" could be heard drifting upstairs. "Where are you both?"

Kady looked at her uncle, in a blind panic. She knew the arrival of her Mother would end the reading for the day. As the reality sank in, her emotions turned to anger. She punched the bedding in frustration. "No, not now Mother!"

Jevon understood her frustration. "You mustn't tell your Mother about any of this; she wouldn't understand. She'll think that I'm filling your head with a lot of dangerous nonsense. If you want to hear more, you have to keep this quiet. You hear me?"

Kady nodded in disappointment. The door to her room opened gently. "Oh hi," said Jevon, feigning surprise.

"And what are you two up to?" she asked, in an annoying way.

"Uncle Jevon's been reading me a fairy story. It was good but I think we're done for today," Kady interjected.

"How are you feeling?" Christine ignored Jevon and felt Kady's forehead. It was a Motherly thing to do, as she perched upon the bed. Her body language signaled to Jevon that she was home now and in charge. Jevon folded the book closed, and rose as if to leave.

"Wait, thank you Jevon. I had a very good day and you made it possible. Thanks for looking after Kady, I really appreciate it."

"That's Okay, I enjoyed our day together." Jevon looked awkward and nervous.

"Me too, Uncle Jevon," chirped Kady in agreement.

"Mum, can I see uncle Jevon tomorrow, to finish the fairy story? We were close to the end and I kind of want to know how it finishes."

Christine looked at Jevon, as if she were weighing up her options. It was nice that he helped her out but he got the distinct feeling that she wouldn't want him spending more time with Kady. "Well, let's see honey. Your Uncle Jevon's a busy man, perhaps he can leave the book and I'll finish the story for you? How's that sound?"

Kady shot a panicked look at Jevon; it was a plea for help. "I'm not comfortable with that. This is a rare and valuable book. It's the centerpiece of my collection. I don't want to leave it with anyone."

"I left you my Daughter, how more valuable can it get?" snapped Christine.

"Are you busy tomorrow Uncle Jevon?" Kady desperately wanted to find a solution.

"You might not be well enough young Lady." Christine perched upon the edge of the bed.

"I feel fine Mum, the fevers broke. Well, are you?" she insisted.

"I have a few spare hours in the afternoon, between 1pm and 4pm. If it's acceptable with your Mother, we can go to the park. It's supposed to be a nice day and the fresh air will do you good. We can pack a picnic lunch and I'll read you the rest of the story. Will that work?"

Jevon posed the question carefully. He knew Christine didn't trust him fully with her Daughter, but he'd done nothing to create such distrust. He'd acted admirably today, like a good Uncle should. She would have no reason to stop them spending some time together in a public place. Kady demanded a positive answer by the weight of her stare. "Okay, as long as you are fit enough tomorrow. I don't want you catching another chill. Pick her up at 1pm; I'll pack a picnic for the both of you. It works out well. I have to pop in on a listing during the afternoon anyway."

"Great, then I can find out how this story ends." Kady's excitement was palpable.

"But have her back by 4pm," warned Christine.

"Sure," reassured Jevon. "I'll leave you to it then." He rose and headed for the door.

Christine reached out her hand, "Thanks again Jevon," this time it sounded more sincere. Jevon touched her fingers lightly.

"No problem Sis', I wanted to help." He turned and left.

Kady and Christine were sat staring at each other in an uncomfortable silence. She could have asked her about her showings but she'd have been stuck with a long boring response. They both heard the front door close and footsteps on the gravel, as Jevon walked towards his car. The two ladies contemplated their feelings. Christine was coming down from a stressful day.

She was relieved that the showings went well, that Kady was safe and unharmed, and that Jevon had not let her down. Kady was flying high, trying to conceal her excitement. She was energized and stimulated; she'd have difficulty sleeping tonight. She wanted tomorrow to hurry up and arrive. She had to conceal this from her Mother.

They stared at each other in silence for a while. "Right, let me clear away some of this mess." Christine referred to the dishes and glasses used throughout the day. "You get ready for bed; the sleep will do you good." All Kady could think about was 1pm.

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Chapter 13: Picnic in the Park
Skipton, Yorkshire, England, Present Day.

The morning dragged on for Kady. She completed her chores and avoided answering any of her Mothers probing questions. It was obvious; she still didn't trust Uncle Jevon.

She had an awkward morning, but she helped prepare the picnic lunch. The weather was superb, a beautiful day with a few scattered clouds providing some shade from the strong Sun. At 12.55pm she heard the familiar scunching sound of car tires riding along the gravel driveway of her house. Uncle Jevon was on time.

"Kady get ready. Uncle Jevon's here." Kady detected an unusual inflection within her Mother's voice. Jevon had reached the door before Kady had tied her shoes and descended the stairs. "Remember what I told you; home before 4pm and don't take her anywhere dangerous."

Jevon winced at the way his Sister talked to him. He felt as if he were her child and in the middle of a scolding. Kady overheard her Mother and silently shook her head with embarrassment. She bounded down the stairs and beamed a large smile when her eyes met her Uncles. "Hi, are you ready to go?" he said, cautiously.

"Let's go," she said, grabbing the picnic basket.

"Hey not so fast," Christine grabbed Kady's arm. "Give me a kiss." Kady rolled her eyes, knowing this would get her on her way quicker. She kissed her Mother and headed for the door. "Behave yourselves; both of you," she glanced at Jevon who slipped through the open door. Christine could see the spring in Kady's step. She was never this excited about anything they did together. She listened as the car retreated from the driveway; then they were gone.

It didn't take Jevon and Kady long to reach the park and select a great, secluded spot, for a picnic. Jevon opened the book to his marked page, took a deep breath, and stared at Ruby already munching on an Apple. "Are we ready?"

"Yup, let's go." Ruby mumbled with a mouth full of food.

* * * * *

Giselle was the first to arrive at her designated destination and began the plan laid out by the Wyverns. She found Joseph quickly and relayed her instructions. Joseph began organizing quickly. He enlisted the fastest diggers, Badgers from Belver's guard. "I want two concentric circles, dug around the Gateway to the underworld. The inner circle needs to be deep but the outer circle needs to be twice as deep." The Badger's did not question the orders; they'd seen the success of the previous night. This Human knew how to plan a fight. The Badgers started to dig, assisted by an army of Voles, cleverly deployed to dispose of the displaced earth.

Joseph left the team of diggers to their task and approached the Wood Sprites who were itching to help. "You," he said, pointing at the startled creatures. "Work with the trees, I need you to collect tar and sap, to light the fires. Bring it to me quickly; we need a lot to pour into these trenches." They knew exactly what he wanted and scurried away to get organized.

Joseph turned his attention to Giselle, perched high above him. "Giselle, I will need fuel for the fire; branches, shrubs, ferns, anything flammable, to throw into the trenches and keep the fires going."

Giselle nodded her head in acknowledgement and disappeared into the dense forest. The digging continued throughout the day as the shadows grew longer and the Sun ambled across the sky. The long afternoon would soon draw to a close and Joseph felt pressured to complete his task. He assumed the fires were to capture and burn the beasts, as they streamed from the Gateway. He was wrong, and he would soon find out why. As the afternoon slipped away, Giselle appeared from the trees. Behind her was a disturbance; the rustling of leaves, the pounding of hooved feet, and the dragging of branches could be heard. Badgers, Deer, Stoats, Ferrets, and an assortment of creatures, pulled fallen branches to the entrance of the Gateway. Each animal joyfully tossed the fuel into the trenches, so expertly excavated. It wasn't long before each trench was brimming with branches, ferns and wood.

"Where are the Wood Sprites?" muttered Joseph, in a nervous tone. His question was immediately answered. A strong Bull had been enlisted to help. It willingly pulled a sled, made from branches and ferns. The large leaves were crafted into pots, containing the highly flammable mixture of tar and tree sap. Wood Sprites ran in front of the mighty Bull, guiding it through the brush and into the clearing.

Joseph's relief was enormous. "Good job, all of you. We'll win this fight tonight!" He didn't know why he shouted the words of encouragement, but it just felt right. The team had creatively worked together. Together, they'd delivered, even if speaking to a collection of animals did feel a bit weird. The Wood Sprites took wooden ladles and scooped the gooey liquid into the trenches, completing their task. The heat of the Sun had faded and the timing could not have been better. The large Bull looked tired with white foam covering his swollen lips. He collapsed with his front legs folded and his head bowed from exhaustion.

Giselle startled the Bull, thinking he was under attack when he was at his most vulnerable. Raising his head he could see where she'd placed a large woven basket, lined with leaf, containing cool stream water. He snorted in appreciation before curling his parched tongue into the refreshingly cool water.

Joseph looked at the two rings surrounding the Gateway; he was pleased as he folded his arms. He turned to Giselle, perched next to him, "I hope the others are just as successful."

"Well we were!" chimed a familiar voice from behind him. Joseph was startled but spun quickly to see Acron and Ranger Oakmoss." Ranger was followed by what seemed like an army of Wood Sprites. Ranger had sent Acron ahead to organize his army. When Ranger arrived at the abandoned Mill he was met by hundreds of dedicated helpers. On the edge of the forest, a hermit used to make bread. He built a small mill where he would grind his flour. The hermit lived peacefully in the forest for many years. The creatures knew of his existence and in the winter, he would feed the animals, with his stale bread. As he grew older, he could not survive on his own, and he moved away. The forest reclaimed the mill and the building remained unused.

Ranger and Acron set about their task. They'd been entrusted with a precious bone. It belonged to the Father of the three Wyverns. The bone was made of the purest of material. There was one problem. Wyvern bones are very hard and very dense. It had taken the group all afternoon to grind the bone into a fine powder. The powder had been separated into small pouches. Each pouch was attached to a Fairies belt. The Whispering Trees had been instructed and the Fairies had been dispatched to the far edges of the forest. The Fairies surrounded the forest; it's entire perimeter. They perched, stood, leaned and hovered, waiting for the signal.

Giselle flapped her large wings, demanding attention. "Acron and Ranger, you've done well, but you must have patience, for we're not ready yet. We have to wait for Belver; he has an important delivery."

You could feel the tension in the night's air. The trap was set and each knew a piece of the overall plan. Where was Belver? Where was Ruby? Perhaps they'd failed in their assignments and needed help? The group was restless as they described their tasks and tried to piece together the plan. The animals grew worried and some skirmishes broke out between traditional adversaries. These were quickly diffused, as they waited for news. The group was heading into the last remnants of early evening, the high Moon approached. This would excite the animals. Some would fear the battle approaching, some would look forward to fighting the beasts. Mother's kept a close watch on their little ones, making sure they didn't stray far.

A spitting noise could be heard approaching and the familiar gruff voice of Belver. "I can't seem to get the taste of the sea out of my mouth." He spat again, sneezing and spitting loudly. Everyone laughed; they were relieved to see their old friend. "Joseph, I'll need your help with this." Joseph stepped forward wondering what his assignment would be. "Take this foul tasting box to the edge of the Gateway. It contains a seaweed plant called Gorsporth. Listen to me carefully as our plan relies on you doing this right. You only get one shot at this."

Belver gave Joseph the instructions under the watchful eye of the Great White Owl. Joseph took the box in one hand, while holding a lit torch in the other. He carefully jumped across each trench encircling the Gateway. He gingerly opened the box as the salty seawater assaulted his nostrils with a pungent strike. He reached in and carefully retrieved the green striped weed. Hanging from below the plant, were white roots that looked like worms; they wriggled madly. Joseph knelt and dug a hole in the dirt, next to the Gateway, with his strong hand. He placed the wriggling roots into the small hole he'd just made. Immediately the roots wriggled into the earth and latched onto their new home. The Moon was still rising and the air was cool. The plant's ferocious roots snaked their way underground, tapping into a water source.

It was the perfect condition for Gorsporth; cool and damp. The plant jumped into life with the limbs growing rapidly like a vine. Leaves sprouted uncontrollably from nowhere. This plant was taking over the space rapidly. Joseph was surprised by the speed of its growth but reacted quickly. He started to push the growth into the Gateway of the Underworld. The plant streamed into the hole and expanded to block it with its ravenous growth. Joseph watched in amazement.

Giselle soared above his head screaming at Joseph. She swooped down as he struggled to push more of the growth into the densely packed hole. "Light the fire, now!"

* * * * *

"Wait," said Jevon pulling the book towards him.

Kady shot a puzzled look at him, more in annoyance. She followed his gaze and saw an old woman approaching.

"It's so nice to see a Dad and his Daughter enjoying a good book. My Dad used to read to me all the time, but these days kid's heads are glued to electronic gizmos. I didn't mean to interrupt you, I just thought I'd comment on how nice it was; ah pleasant memories." She shuffled off slowly down the worn path, as if reliving her youth.

"She can't hear us now. Joseph has to light the fire!" Kady prompted.

* * * * *

Giselle soared above his head screaming at Joseph. She swooped down as he struggled to push the growth into the densely packed hole. "Light the fire, now!"

Joseph spun quickly and touched the tip of his flaming torch upon the black tar. The flame jumped into life and started to race into the trench, igniting the inner circle. Joseph needed to move quickly or he'd be trapped within the inner ring. The plant grew furiously, over spilling the hole. He'd be tangled if he didn't leap now. Joseph leapt across the first trench before it had managed to completely fire into an inferno. He leapt across the second trench and reach backwards to ignite it. The crowd of animals and creatures cheered loudly as both trenches burst into flames.

Joseph threw the torch into the trench and looked for Giselle. "It's not high Moon yet, the beasts are not coming yet? Why did you tell me to ignite the fires?"

Giselle would not take her trained eyes off the center of the rings. "Watch the Gorsporth, watch the weed. The Gorsporth comes from the deepest part of the ocean floor. It thrives on the cold and the wet. Once the weed senses heat, it changes." The concentric rings of fire were throwing off intense heat and light, two things the Gorsporth cannot tolerate. It started with a leaf closest to the flames, but once the process had begun it was impossible to reverse. A large leaf billowed over into the trench and was licked by an exuberant yellow flame. The leaf reacted in a way that the Wyvern's had hoped. It turned to stone, hard, dense black stone. The stem supporting the leaf turned to stone and the other leaves gradually turned. Soon the stem, roots, leaves, and stalks, made a loud cracking noise, as they turned into stone through the heat of the fire. The hardened plant had transformed into solid black rock. The once vibrant plant had now plugged the Gateway, with an impenetrable stone seal.

Joseph turned to look at Giselle, was that a look of satisfaction? Giselle didn't bask in the accomplishment for she knew there was still much to do. She extended her large snowy white wings. She soared through the spiraling warm air that the fires had created. In an instant, she was gone. Belver raised his snout in a celebratory gesture; he'd completed his part of the plan and kept his honor intact. As word spread, the excited squeals of animals could be heard echoing though the forest. Joseph realized the fire trenches were provided to create heat and light. No beasts were coming through tonight, he could relax; no fighting would occur tonight. The satisfaction of a job well done swept over him, but he had a strange feeling that he was but one step in a larger plan.

The excited squeals did not escape the attention of the Witch or the Black Fox. They knew that something strange was happening within the forest. The normally subdued animals were unusually loud in their celebratory squeals. A famous victory had been won tonight and that would need to be rectified.

At the edge of the forest, Ranger Oakmoss had assembled the largest collection of Wood Sprites ever seen. They'd traveled from far and wide, and assembled in a highly organized fashion. It was like a military operation. Acron marveled at Ranger's organization skills and the compliant nature of the Wood Sprites. The Wyvern bone had been chipped into small pieces. The old mill's grinding stone had been restored. Precious bone dust was collected in small leather pouches. The dust was hard to produce and the grinding stone was smoking with the friction and the heat. The grinding stone was losing the battle but continued to create the precious dust.

As the small leather pouches were filled, a line of Fairies patiently waited to receive their precious cargo. Acron had organized the Fairies, each with their assigned location. As a Fairy received their pouch, they tied it to their belts and flew as quickly as they could to their designated destination. Each Fairy took refuge in a tree, bush, branch, sprig or vine to create a perimeter around the forest's edge. The furthest points were dispatched first. When the final pouch left for its position, the Wood Sprites cheered and wished the final Fairy a safe flight.

At the Southern edge of the forest, the Witch was sensing the growing danger. She turned to the Black Fox in a concerned state. "Tonight, I think we should leave the forest for the safety of the brook. Let's leave the beasts to do their part. I sense changes and I'm not sure what they're up to."

"What kind of changes do you feel?" inquired the curious Fox.

"Magic, old magic. It's powerful and not of this world."

The Black Fox's ears twitched with annoyance. "The Wyvern will not return, let's make sure we haven't missed any Yellow-bells. Let's create one more wet mist and then we'll leave the forest to the beasts."

The Witch listened intensely. She knew something wasn't right, but the suggestion made sense. In the distance she could hear the faint sound of a horn, "Stupid Fairies. They can blow all night, the beasts will run them tonight!"

The Fairies blew their horns. The sound originated from the old mill. It was the signal to start the Fairies plan. Soon, each Fairy would fly from their safe perch, and throw the dust contained in their leather pouches, high into the air. The wind would catch it, creating a blanket of dust around the perimeter of the forest. Each Fairy would sound their horn jubilantly, to signal their task's completion. An invisible ring of the purest dust now sealed the forest. Once the horns had ceased, the task was complete. The Wyverns could hear the high-pitched sounds and knew the forest was sealed.

Safaa turned to her Brother. "This is your world Brother, you live in these parts. It's your energy, your vibration. We defer to you Brother, may our Father's spirit be with you."

Odin closed his eyes and concentrated on the memory and image of his once powerful Father. He was a large Wyvern with a pure heart. He'd long since departed the physical world but the dust from his bone now surrounded the forest. To activate it, he would need to vibrate on the same frequency of his departed Father. Odin concentrated, his whole body started to shake. His blue, scaled tail barely entered the water, with his large frame propped by two front flippers. He stood motionless on the mud bank, until his tail created undulating ripples in the calm water. The energy rose up throughout his body, changing his vibrations. He arched his body to support his entire weight upon his strong muscular tail. He stretched his flippers as wide as they would go either side of his large chest.

Odin raised his snout and let out a thunderous roar. A beam of strong Indigo colored light streaked from each flipper, like lightening bolts crackling across the sky. The Sisters watched closely, pleased that their Brother had made the connection. The purple bolts shot skywards, igniting the dust filled sky. Each particle glowed, creating a blanket of Indigo. The night sky had been ignited with powerful, pure, positive energy. Odin fell into the mud, exhausted and satisfied.

The Black Fox's acute ears heard the roar first, but the entire forest could hear the great roar. The sky continued to shine with a strange Indigo glow. The Witch shot a worried look at the Black Fox. They both recognized the roar of a Wyvern; he had returned. The roar was met with cheers, squeals and shouts of every living creature in the forest; it was a deafening response. They sensed victory and the Witch became worried. She grabbed at the pouch attached to her waist. She opened the pouch and dipped her weathered, spindly hand, deep inside. A cold, dark, sticky gum-like substance, met her fingers. She rubbed her fingers together and withdrew her hand.

Holding her arm towards the sky, she shouted a spell conceived in the old world, a Celtic spell, from a dark Witch. Instantly, the sticky substance smoked and spiraled, into the night sky. It would only be moments before the mist would form and cover the forest with a wet blanket. She would know if a Yellow-bell or a Wyvern was present. She would know if the Wyvern's roar was trickery.

They waited impatiently as the wisps of smoke ascended. To their horror, the smoke crackled and fizzled, as it met the Indigo sky. The pure energy above choked the evil spell into submission. No evil magic would be allowed to fester.

"Let's leave now!" barked the frantic Witch.

The Black Fox did not wait; he turned and trotted briskly in the direction of the forest's path. They were heading for the safety of the brook, far away from the forest. A fallen tree had blocked their path; its trunk was thick and mighty. As they approached, the Witch threw her hand in the air with a violent swipe, commanding the felled tree to clear the path. To her amazement, her magic was ineffective. She commanded a fireball to race into the trunk's core, but again she had the same result. She glanced at the inquisitive Fox. He waited for her to clear the path, but she was powerless. That frightened her, for now she was vulnerable. They hastened towards the large obstacle, with fear rising deep within them. They must hasten their journey; they must leave the forest as quickly as they could. They would have to scramble over the fallen tree.

It was the alert Fox who saw it first. The tree had not rotted, falling from decay. The bark was not blackened from a lightning strike. This tree had been felled by an axe; deliberately placed to create an obstacle. The Black Fox didn't have time to raise the alarm. Six battle-hardened Ferrets, streamed out from small holes excavated near the log. They were scarred from battle and hand selected for this important job. Their fur was drenched in the smells of green moss and mud. The Fox's alert nose would not detect the ambush that lay in wait for them. The Ferret's were quick; they were attacking the poor helpless Fox before he had a chance to outrun them. Nipping at his legs, they sank their teeth into his sinewy shins, anchoring him in position. He squealed in shock and the Witch ran to his assistance. The Fox's instincts kicked in as he snarled and snapped at the Ferrets. He stomped his feet, but it was of no use. He was wounded and bleeding, his magic had been rendered mute. The Ferrets teeth were small, but razor sharp, piercing his skin and bringing him to the ground in pain. On another day, his blood would have been scolding or his movements would have been too fast, but without his dark magic, he was vulnerable. Today, he was just a Fox.

The Ferrets were fast and coordinated. They worked the Fox to the ground, avoiding the kicks, thrown their way by the Witch. A Ferret went for the Fox's throat, but the Fox's snapping jaws caught the Ferret's back end, sending him sprawling in pain. As the Fox fought for his life, his friend the Witch, had retrieved a large branch, and was attempting to swipe the Ferrets with the weapon. A Ferret lunged for the Fox's throat again; this time he sank his needle like teeth into the soft flesh. The Fox yelped and dropped to the ground helpless.

The Witch stepped forward quickly to assist; it was then that her fate was sealed. She turned her body she provided a clear target. Perched high within the trees, above the path, was a hanging branch sturdy and thick. Ruby had sat within its sway, affording her an excellent view of the tussle below. Ruby was wearing a coat made from ferns, mud, pond slime and bark sap. Deedot had arranged for the construction of a smelly coat; designed to confuse the Fox's perceptive nose, and mask her sweet Human odor. She pushed the coat from her shoulders and it fell across the branch. She retrieved the Arrow of Belhavior from her quiver. She'd been patient, she'd waited for her moment; the time had come. She knew she'd be offered one shot and only one shot. She tried not to think of the consequences of missing. She held the bow, her normally steady hand, was shaking. She glanced at the bow and instantly thought of her Father who had arranged for its construction as a gift. A thought floated through her mind. It's amazing that in the heart of the most important moment of your young life, your mind has time to entertain irreverent thoughts. She thought of the arrow and how her Father would be proud. She drew the arrow backwards and focused her eyes on the Witches mid-section. She tried to relax and thought how nice it would be if her Father could meet King Ghard.

She took a deep breath and let the strained twine of her bow release from her taught fingers. The Arrow leapt from the bow and flew straight towards its target. The arrow seemed to fly slowly or time seemed to slow down. Ruby watched in horror as the Arrow of Belhavior cut through the thick forest air. Below, the Ferrets attacked the stricken Fox; once feared he was losing a ferocious battle for his life. The Arrow thumped into the Witches long black robes, causing her to fall instantly. The Arrow had pierced the chest and ribcage of the unsuspecting Witch. She'd not anticipated a strike from above. The powerful Arrow killed the last trace of evil from within the young woman; she fell bleeding to the forest floor.

The old, weathered woman fell to the ground instantly. She suddenly transformed into the innocent young woman, who first stumbled into the forest. The Black Fox was gone; the Ferret's had made short work of the powerless animal. Ruby leapt from the overhanging branch, she rolled neatly to break her fall. She raced to the Witches body, still covered in the black robe. She ran quickly to the formless shape. Ruby rolled the woman over, unconcerned about the danger or state of the body beneath her. The Arrow had pierced a wound into her rib cage but was protruding from her midsection.

Ruby grabbed the arrow's head and firmly pulled it from her victim's body. The arrow slipped out, causing the woman to flinch and groan with pain. Ruby looked around the path. To her relief, she saw the welcome site of a large Owl, wings spread, descending from the Indigo mist. Dropping her bow, Ruby held the arrow aloft in her outstretched hands. Giselle snatched the Arrow of Belhavior; secured within her powerful talons, she changed direction and flew to the pond and the waiting Wyverns.

When Ruby looked at the face of the Witch, it shocked her; a pretty, young face, stared back at her. Claire had stumbled into the forest as a young woman, spurned by the man she'd loved. It was the powerful Black Fox that had turned her into pure evil. He'd caught her when she was vulnerable and bitter. He'd preyed upon her insecurities and taught her to be pure evil. She'd been turned and found it increasingly difficult to turn back, to abandon her chosen path. The Arrow of Belhavior was pure; it was designed to kill evil. It had expunged the dark forces, entwined within her body. She was Claire again, pure happy, Claire. The wound had healed and the arrow had left no trace. As she came to, she started to weep. Ruby held her in her arms, as the emotions released. The sky cleared and a faint Indigo glow could be seen swirling around in the crisp night air.

The evil spells had been lifted. The Castle and Village seemed to emerge from a deep fog. Even in the late hours of the night, people left their beds, their isolation, and their depravity. They felt healthy again and rejoiced in the streets. On the outskirts of the Forest, they could hear the cheers of Human voices, celebrating their turn in good fortune. Ruby's thoughts turned to her parents; she smiled. She hoped they'd managed to hang on, that they'd fought until she could release them. Ruby learned later, that her parents were close to death, but they'd managed to survive.

Princess Ruby and the Arrow of Belhavior became legend in Skipton forest lore. Deep within the forest, on cold nights, when gathered around the fire within a Crackle, young Wood Sprites are still told of the brave Human girl who saved the Forest. They sing of the Stibmit, Princess Ruby, and her friend Joseph. They mimic the archer's pose and sing the songs that tell their tales. Mystical creatures still exist today. Most Human's will walk by them unnoticed, but occasionally, a longer glance and a turned head, will signal the presence of a gifted one; a Stibmit.

The forest and its creatures were safe. Giselle had flown powerfully to the Pond's edge, delivering her precious cargo. Safaa was indeed a strong swimmer and sped to deliver the Arrow of Belhavior to King Ghard with time to spare. Safaa and Bao returned to the deep. Odin lived a long life, before joining his Father in the spiritual world.

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Jevon leaned backwards and snapped the large book closed. "So now you know. You've nothing to be afraid of Kady; you're just different, like me."

"A Stibmit," prompted Kady with a cute smile.

"Yes. You will see the creatures but they respect you, they're indebted to our family and they'll protect you. You must never share your gift," Jevon started to laugh. "They'll think you're strange like me and cart you away." He continued laughing. "We've one hour left and I want to show you something, have you eaten enough because we have to leave now?"

Kady didn't know where he would take her and she was still hungry. She didn't want this to end, so she simply smiled and stuttered a response, "Sure."

Jevon seemed motivated; he'd repacked the picnic in minutes and was bundling Kady into the back of the car. "Where are we heading?" inquired Kady.

"To the Castle, Skipton Castle," shouted Jevon, louder than he needed to. "I have to show you something, and we're running out of time. If I don't get you back by 4pm, you know what kind of trouble I'll be in with your Mother."

Kady laughed, but inside she knew only too well. Jevon sped towards the Castle, he approached the lights, and they turned yellow. Instead of braking, he sped through the intersection at yellow. He glanced at Kady, to see if she had noticed; she had. It was a short ride to the Castle and Jevon was getting excited. He parked the car and hurried Kady inside the Castle's grounds. Kady could hardly keep pace, as Jevon rushed her into an old courtyard, sporting a beautiful Yew tree.

The courtyard contained an inlaid stone floor. Old stone buildings, two levels in height, enclosed the square courtyard. Ornate windows surrounded the courtyard, with a large Yew tree at its center. Jevon's frantic pace came to an abrupt halt, in front of a carved stone doorway. Kady

stopped and faced the doorway. "You're standing in the Tudor Conduit Court, this place oozes with history. Lady Anne Clifford planted the Yew tree in 1659. I draw your attention to the Coat of Arms, located above the door. It's the Coat of Arms for John Clifford, 9th Lord of Skipton. Study it carefully." Jevon paused for effect. "You can see three Wyverns, representing Odin, Safaa and Bao. Small front flippers and scaled tails; yes, these are Wyverns, Sea Dragons, yet we're so far from the sea. Look down at the bottom right hand side of the shield, tell me what you see; talk it out to me."

Kady studied the image carefully. "I see the three Wyverns, but on the shield I see a pattern. Six round rings, arranged in a pattern?"

"Does the pattern remind you of anything?" Jevon was trying to be patient.

"Wait yes. The three rings at the bottom are the Wyverns in the water, lined up across the pond."

"Good, yes. And the three rings at the top?"

"They represent the leaders; Belver, Ruby and Ranger." Kady stared at the shield, carved in weathered stone for all to see. Thousands of tourists have passed under this carving each year.

"Remember the ceremony at the Pond; the one used to summons the Wyvern? Well this is their formation, when the Wyvern's returned."

"Wow," said Kady, hardly believing her own eyes. "That day will never be forgotten. I guess it's when the shift of power happened, when evil was defeated."

Jevon looked at Kady; it was a profound statement from someone so young.

"The mystical creatures took a chance on a small girl. They adopted her as their Princess. She saved the day, Princess Ruby of Tamworthia."

"Did she live happily ever after?"

"She did. She married and had two boys. She lived happily into her old age and never went too long without a visit to the forest."

Jevon smiled at how bright this young lady was. She stared in awe at the Wyverns carved into the stone wall. "We have to go Princess; we have to get you home by 4pm."

On the ride home Kady was curious. "So tell me," she paused. "Why does my Mother always give you a hard time, I mean, why doesn't she trust you?"

"So you see that then?"

"I'd have to be blind and dumb not to notice."

"When I was younger I excelled at school. My grades were really good. When I became a Stibmit, I wanted to spend all of my time in the forest. I liked my friends, the mystical creatures. They were wise and I learned far more than the stuff they taught me at school. I couldn't tell people what I was doing in the forest so I became a bit of a loner. Besides, if I started to talk about Wood Sprites and Fairies they would have locked me up."

“That’s true,” blurted Kady.

They both laughed. “So, I was always considered a bit weird and a loner. Your Mother means well, but she has never gotten over my choice of career. She thought that my grades would take me to university and I was a huge disappointment to her when I decided to work for the conservation agency. She thought I just wanted to waste my time and my life hanging around in the forest. So I got labeled. Kady, society doesn’t like people who are different. They want us all to be the same. I was labeled weird, odd, a creep, dangerous, mentally unstable. Yet I haven’t done a thing to deserve this reputation. I could never tell your Mother why I so desperately needed to protect the forest. I’m not a land Baron. This is the only way that I could spend my life making sure the forest and those creatures remained safe.”

“I get it. My Mother’s so out of order.”

“She’s just trying to protect you, but people are not comfortable with people who don’t conform.”

“Well I’m a Sibmit now. It’s going to be interesting, I don’t like conformity,” she said with a wry smile.

The End ...

"The moment you stop believing in fanciful things, the world stops being fanciful."
Phil Armstrong