

BOOK 6: TROUBLE WITH ZEE





Chapter 1

The Message

Pibbin snapped up a fat black ant. “You know what I like about ants?” he said.

“What?” Leeper had his mouth full.

“They all live together. Once you find a good log, it’s like having a party every day.”

“That’s right,” Leeper said. “Unless you’re so greedy you eat every single one of them.”

Pibbin watched the ants crawl past, and he grinned. “Just one more,” he said. “Then I want to get some for Skitter. Maybe she’ll make us a bunch of ant cookies.”

“*Gunk!*” said a deep voice. Riff poked his head out of Friendship Bog. “Leave a few for me, okay?”



The big Green Frog jumped out of the water and landed beside them.

“I have a message for Leeper,” he said. “Do you know a cute little mouse who lives over in Fox Woods?”

“That’s Marteena,” Leeper said. “What’s she up to?”

“She wants you to come and talk to someone—a cousin of yours. She found him hopping through Fox Woods, looking for you.”

“I’ve got a lot of cousins,” Leeper said. “Have some ants.”

Riff scooped up two ants. “His name is Tatter. He’s worried about something—or he’s scared.”

“Okay,” Leeper said. “I guess I’d better go see Marteena. Hey, Pib, are you coming?”

Pibbin looked at the ant log and thought about Skitter’s cookies. “I was going to—”

“I know, but this might be important.”

Pibbin put on his backpack. “Okay, pal.”

“I’ll catch up with you in a minute,” Riff said. “These are quite tasty.”

Pibbin and Leeper set off along the shore of Friendship Bog, and Riff soon joined them.

“Marteena told me she’d wait for you at the Flat Stone,” Riff said. “What’s that?”

Pibbin looked at Leeper, since he knew a lot about Friendship Bog

“Long ago, the Tall Ones put big stones in the ground,” Leeper said. “We think they used them as markers for something, but we don’t know why. Some of the stones have letters and numbers on them.”

Riff nodded. “I guess they’d make good places to meet.”

As they hopped along, Riff gazed out at the bog. “Look at the way those lily pads shine in the sun. This is a beautiful place to live! And you’ll never go hungry here. Like your ant log—it makes me want to sing.”

Leeper grinned. “So, sing us a song.”

Riff grinned back.

Gunketty-gunk! I like ants.

Red or black, they tickle my tongue.

They’re crunchy and munchy and lots of fun.

I like ants! Gunketty-gunk!

“It’ll be a better song when I get my new flute.” Riff patted the belt he wore across his chest. “Sis made a holder for it.”

He sang the song once again, and soon they reached the edge of Fox Woods.

Marteena must have heard Riff singing, because she scurried out to meet them.

“He’s gone!” she cried in her squeaky voice. “He was so worried, and I told him to wait, but now he’s gone.”

She ran ahead of them to the Flat Stone and climbed up through the moss to its top. By the time they’d hopped onto the stone, she was darting from one end of it to the other.

“Tatter!” she called. “Leeper’s here. Don’t worry—he wants to talk to you.”

She turned to Leeper. “See? He’s gone!”

Leeper hopped to the edge of the stone and looked down at Singing Stream. “He’s probably hiding. Did he tell you anything?”

“About someone called Zee,” she said.

“I have an uncle by that name,” Leeper said slowly. “But I’ve never met him.”

“I hope it’s not the Zee I used to know,” Marteena said. “He was greedy as a weasel and twice as mean.”

“Wait,” Leeper said, and he disappeared over the edge of the stone.

Pibbin looked down and saw him talking to a brownish-colored frog crouched in the ferns. They both had the same kind of spots.

After a minute, they hopped up onto the stone.

“Wow, he’s tall,” Riff whispered to Pibbin.

Pibbin nodded. Tatter was the tallest, thinnest Leopard Frog he’d ever seen—and the most jittery. His long, skinny fingers shook, and his big eyes looked scared.

“It’s okay for us to talk here,” Leeper was saying. “These are my friends.”

“Captain Zee sent me to find you,” Tatter said. “He’s your uncle, I guess.”

Marteena spoke up. “That Zee is Leeper’s uncle?” She twitched her whiskers. “I hope he’s not moving to Friendship Bog any time soon. Where does he live now?”

Quickly Tatter said, “There was a big fire on the other side of the Toop River. It burned up everything, and now Captain Zee has moved across the river. He’s making a farm.”

He gave Leeper a pleading glance. “Captain Zee really needs your help.”

“I’ve been meaning to go and see him,” Leeper said. “I don’t know that part of the family very well.”

Marteena stepped close to Leeper. Her kind little face looked stern. “I’m sorry to hear that Zee is your uncle. Really, I wouldn’t go near him if I were you.”

“Oh, don’t say that!” Tatter cried. “You have to come! Captain Zee needs you!”

The thin spotted frog looked terrified, and questions began to creep through Pibbin’s mind.

What kind of an uncle was this?

What kind of a farm did he have?

And why was Tatter so scared?