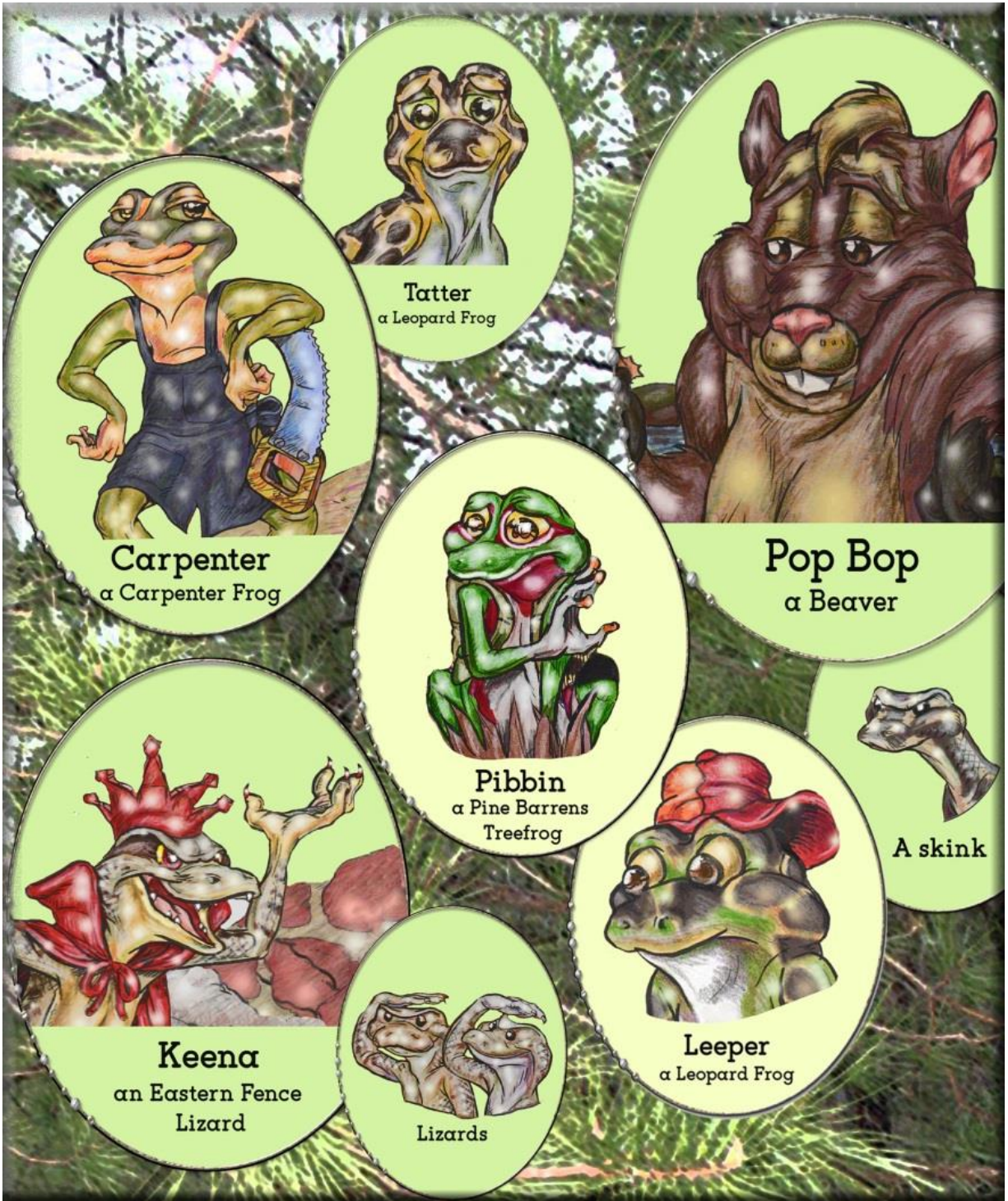


BOOK 7: A DAY FOR COURAGE





Chapter 1

Sleeping Sickness

Pibbin and Leeper hopped past Ticklegrass Field on their way to visit Sheera Turtle.

Ahead of them, a small rabbit was feeding in the grass, so Pibbin knew they must be near the burrows where the rabbits lived.

He looked across the wide, open space. “I wonder if I’d like to live in a burrow,” he said.

Leeper said, “I’d want more fresh air.” He stopped short. “Hey, look at those lizards!”

Six lizards had jumped out of the grass and onto the young rabbit. She tried to shake them off, but they were climbing all over her.

One lizard ran up to the tip of the rabbit’s ear, carrying something.

Pibbin turned to Leeper. “That lizard on her ear! What’s it doing?” he whispered.

“I can’t tell,” Leeper said. “It’s got some kind of a berry. And it seems to be—what?”

Pibbin stared. “Rubbing it onto the inside of her ear?”

The small rabbit stumbled around in a circle, still trying to shake off the lizards.

An older rabbit hopped toward her, calling, “What’s the matter?”

The lizards jumped off all at once and disappeared into the grass.

“Good!” Pibbin said.

Leeper shook his head. “No, something’s wrong.”



The small rabbit took a few wobbling hops toward the older rabbit, slowed, and sank to the ground.

Two more rabbits hurried over. Together they lifted the young one and carried her off.

Pibbin hopped slowly to where the lizards had disappeared. “I think the lizard dropped that berry. Did you see it?”

“I sure did,” Leeper said. “I wonder if we can find it.”

Pibbin bent over a squashed orange berry. “Here,” he said.

An odd, sour smell hung in the air, and something about it made his toes curl.

“Don’t touch it!” Leeper said.

“Do you think it’s poison?”

“Maybe,” Leeper said. “The juice might be what made the rabbit act so strange.”

He poked at the berry with a stick. “It’s flat now. All the juice must have been squeezed out. I’ve never seen one of these.”

“Maybe Sheera can tell us what it is,” Pibbin said. “She knows a lot about plants.”

“Good idea,” Leeper said. “Let’s roll it up in a leaf. It will fit in your backpack, and we can take it to her.”

They found Sheera lying in a sunny spot beside her pool, but she wasn’t asleep.

Gaffer the Gray Treefrog sat next to her, and they were both listening to Beecher, the tall gray Rabbit Chief.

Beecher’s voice was loud enough to waken the sleepy swamp bugs at the bottom of the pool.

“I’m troubled about our young ones,” he was saying. “They’ve got a terrible sickness, and all they can do is sleep.”

Pibbin opened his backpack and dumped the orange berry onto the ground. A sour smell filled the air.

Beecher stepped back. “Sometimes my sick rabbits smell like that. Where’d you get it?”

Leeper told them what had happened, and Sheera lifted her head to look at the berry. “That is called Mud Berry,” she said.

“I’ve never heard of it,” Beecher said. “Where does it grow?”

Sheera closed her eyes to think. “Swamps,” she said finally. “But not in swamps near here.”

She looked at Gaffer. “What about Shadow Swamp?”

“The old stories speak of Mud Berry bushes growing there.” He looked at Beecher. “The juice seems to contain an unusual sort of poison, but I’m not sure how it works.”

Sheera opened her eyes. “The juice probably gets into the young rabbits through the soft skin on the inside of their ears. It would be dangerous for frogs, but not for animals with thick fur or tough skin.”

“But! But . . . !” Beecher, for once, could hardly talk. “Never mind all that! What about my young ones? Is there a cure?”

Sheera looked at Gaffer, and he nodded. “It’s called Gummy Bark, and it grows in Shadow Swamp too.”

Beecher groaned. “Not in Shadow Swamp! Maybe somewhere else?”

Sheera blinked. Gaffer's face wrinkled, and he shook his head. "I don't know."

For a minute, no one said anything. Rain began to fall, making small pattering noises on the leaves. A mosquito buzzed past, but Pibbin didn't move to snap it up, and neither did Leeper.

Beecher turned to them. "You two have gone into Shadow Swamp. Our little ones still talk about you, and the whole Rabbit Tribe will never forget how you brought back our necklace."

Pibbin wanted to jump into the pool and go for a long swim, and he knew Leeper felt the same way. Not another trip to Shadow Swamp!

"Would you do this for us?" Beecher said. "For the sake of our little ones?"

Pibbin felt something inside him growing smaller and more scared. "But what about those lizards?" he said.

No one answered.

Finally Gaffer said, "We will find out why the lizards are behaving like this, but first, we need to help the sick young rabbits."

He smiled at Pibbin with a question in his eyes, and Pibbin remembered him saying, "No one is too small to be brave."

At last Pibbin said, "Okay." His voice sounded squeaky, but no one seemed to notice.

"Sure, we'll go," Leeper said. "What does the bush look like?"

Gaffer smiled again. "The leaves have orange tips," he said. "The branches have little raised flaps on the bark, and the gummy part is underneath."

He looked at Pibbin. "You could use that little saw Carpenter gave you to cut pieces from the smaller branches."

Pibbin nodded. "Where does Gummy Bark grow?" he asked. "In muddy places or in dry sand, or what?"

"I don't know," Gaffer said quietly, and Sheera shook her head.

Beecher sounded more cheerful now. "Maybe you could ask someone when you get there."

Pibbin looked at his pal, and he knew that Leeper was remembering the shrews.

Together they said, "Probably not."

