
A TALE FOR CHILDREN OF ALL AGES

Treeb
and the
SECRET
of the
SACRED
FOREST

BOOK ONE

BEN E. ELD

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In memory of my father, Bertil,
who was always there for us.

In memory of my mother, Tekla,
for artistic inspiration.

To my sister, Gunnel, for your
never-ending hospitality.

To Karen for being a good mother to our son, Ryan.

To Ryan, I am proud of you.

To my granddaughter, Jada, you are the future.

Christine, thank you for everything.

Last but not least, to all of you who helped
with planting forests by purchase this book.

contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	19
Chapter 3	26
Chapter 4	37
Chapter 5	57
Chapter 6	69
Chapter 7	86
Chapter 8	105
Chapter 9	121
Chapter 10.....	135
Chapter 11.....	150
Chapter 12.....	163
Chapter 13.....	179
Chapter 14.....	197

chapter 1



ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE WAS A SACRED FOREST.

All life-forms lived in balance and harmony.

The humans who lived there made sure that what they harvested from the woods was always replanted and the ecological balance maintained. The forest provided all that a person ever needed: oxygen, shelter, water, and food. There was an abundance for all to share. The humans and all forms of life were content and lived well together.

Then one day, something unusual happened. A group of marauders entered the forest. The people who lived in the Sacred Forest had never seen a raider before but had heard tales about them from the elders. The stories that they had heard were frightening, and many a child had experienced sleepless nights after listening to the elders tell them about a force of darkness. After being told to generation

after generation, the stories lost more and more of the truth and eventually were believed to be myths rather than reality. Now, the sudden return and invasion of the marauders were about to change the way of life in the Sacred Forest forever.

Deep in a small forest, far away from any modern human presence or city, lived a young working bee. Together with his friends, the other working bees, he spent his days supplying the hive with nectar to make into honey. The bees flew from the hive to the flowers, back and forth, all day. The peculiar thing, though, was that the young bee always slept at night by himself in a tree rather than with the other workers in the hive. As a result, the other bees gave him the nickname Treeb. Since he was a good worker, nobody at the hive seemed to mind, including the queen bee.

Work was very hard and dangerous for a bee because the nectar from the flowers they needed to produce honey was scarce. The longer the working bees had to fly to get nectar, the more they were exposed to predators. Something wasn't right—there were fewer flowers from season to season.

For generations, the queen bees had told the bees

to never go past a border to what they named the Forbidden Forest. The reason for this was that bees who did cross it never came back, and nobody knew why. Many hives had died out as a result of the working bees not returning to the hive with the nectar that the bees needed to survive.

Sometimes after work, the older working bees told the younger ones of the time when there had been an abundance of flowers and the working bees days had been easy and fun. As time went on, these stories were thought of as just tales, not history. One night, one of the older bees told a story of a Sacred Forest of plenty that once was but had disappeared and no one knew why. He said that maybe it was still out there somewhere, beyond the border of the Forbidden Forest, but nobody knew. That night, Treeb could not sleep. He kept thinking about the Sacred Forest and its bounty of flowers.

Over the next couple of days, Treeb found it hard to focus on work. His mind wandered off to the story about the Sacred Forest. What if it was still out there—and he could find it?

One afternoon, Treeb made up his mind and decided he was going to go looking for the Sacred

Forest. The following morning, he flew off as usual across the fields in a straight line, pretending to look for flowers. He flew all day, and by the early evening, he approached the border to the Forbidden Forest. Guard bees patrolled the border to make sure no bee accidentally flew across it. They never did themselves, no matter how curious they were. The fear of the unknown that kept bees from returning was enough to keep them on the safe side of the border.

Suddenly, a guard bee flew up behind Treeb. “Where do you think you’re going?” asked the guard bee.

“I got lost in a search for flowers. I didn’t realize I was getting so far away from the hive. Thank you very much!” said Treeb, who turned around and flew back in the direction of the beehive.

At a safe distance, Treeb made a sharp turn and flew high up into a very tall tree. From there, he could observe the guard bees patrolling the border.

Patiently, he watched as the evening drew closer to the setting of the sun. As the last rays of daylight succumbed to the darkness of night, Treeb left the tall tree and flew unseen by the guards at high altitude into the unknown, the Forbidden Forest. It was the

first time Treeb had ever flown at night, and he was scared. Still, he continued into the dark. Treeb didn't know how long he flew before sitting down under a large leaf on a huge oak tree. Exhausted, he fell asleep.

The sun rose early in the morning, and as Treeb woke up, he realized that he had come to the end of the forest. As far as he could see in front of him, there was dry land with very scarce vegetation. He had a hard time relating to the scenario in front of him; such a landscape seemed unreal. His first thought was to fly back home. This was the scariest thing he had ever seen. Frozen stiff from fear, he was unable to move. He had no idea how long he'd just sat there in the tall tree, unable to deal with the reality of what he saw. Then he pulled himself together slowly, and a new feeling of strength grew inside of his little body. The fear turned into anger. This barren land could not go on forever; there was supposed to be a forest with an abundance of food somewhere out there, and he was going to find it. Without further contemplation, he bravely dived out of the tree and zoomed down to fly at high speed. He knew to stay out of the view of predators and to fly close to the ground, where he might find cover to hide if needed.

Treeb was going in a straight line for many days, landing now and then to drink nectar from the few flowers he found on the ground. He had never been so far away from home, and the constant flying made him hungry all the time.

While flowers that provided nectar seemed to be sparser the farther he got from home, he kept going and going. Finally, he was running out of energy. After two days without seeing a single flower in the empty land, he felt dizzy and exhausted. He was flying into the light of the setting sun, which made it difficult for him to see what was in front of him. As the last rays of daylight guided him forward, he flew over a ridge, and as darkness fell on the earth, he noticed a group of trees on the top of it. He landed on a branch of the tallest tree, which gave good cover thanks to large leafage. It was now pitch dark, and Treeb had no choice but to wait until morning, when daylight returned, before looking for nectar. His sleep was restless and mixed with dreams of fields filled with an abundance of flowers.

Treeb woke up with a terrible thirst. Luckily, he was satisfied with a few drops of dew that now covered the foliage on the tree. It was still dark, but he

could make out the early-morning light to the east as a new day approached.

As the sun rose in a clear sky, Treeb was looking down into a deep valley and was so exhausted that his vision was blurred. That was what he thought, anyway, because he could not make out what was deep down from the ridge. The shapes were unknown to him; there were strange lines and weird branchless trees. Some of the alien forms reflected the sun and cast the light in all directions. Then, suddenly, he instinctually noticed something very familiar—a bunch of flowers located next to a strange giant form that made fear crawl up his little back. Hunger took control of Treeb's senses, and he flew down the steep ridge at a dangerous speed. Food was all he could think about. Then it happened—he hit an invisible force field at full speed with a sickening thud and fell unconscious to the ground. His last thought was the memory of sweet nectar.

Grandpa Geoffrey was up and about early, as usual. Since his retirement a few years earlier, he had made a habit of taking a morning walk before breakfast. This morning was no exception. He and his wife, Grandma Anna, lived in a comfortable two-story

farmhouse on the outskirts of a small town by the sea. Geoffrey paused and looked at his empty beehive. It had been more than ten years since the last bee had died, and the hive had been empty ever since, but he could not make himself get rid of the empty hive. *Maybe one day the bees will come back*, he thought. The memory of time past, when the hive was full of honey and the garden buzzing with working bees, put a smile on his face. The daydreaming was interrupted by Grandma Anna's voice.

"Breakfast is on the table. Come and get it!"

She stood in the kitchen doorway and waited for him as he walked toward the house. Geoffrey stopped at a small flower bed next to the steps leading up to the kitchen door and removed some weeds. The flowers were very bright and healthy, as far as he could see. He bought flowers on the internet every spring and had them shipped since very few flowers were available in their neighborhood anymore. No bees or other pollinating insects meant no flowers. *It's as if nature is shrinking*, he thought. However, these flowers were beautiful and in full bloom. Suddenly, the window above the kitchen door swung open, and their grandson Oscar stuck his head out.

“Morning, Grandpa!”

Happily, Geoffrey greeted his grandson. “Good morning to you too. Where is Marie—still asleep?”

Marie was Oscar’s older sister. She was twelve years old, and Oscar would be eleven years old in a couple of weeks. The children had spent their summers with the grandparents since they were small, and they were the love of their grandparents lives.

“Get your sister, and come down and eat breakfast,” called Grandma.

Suddenly, an insect hit the open window with a loud thud and fell into the flower bed in front of Grandpa. Geoffrey stood motionless for a few seconds—he could not believe his eyes. The insect that had fallen to the ground after hitting the window was a bee!

“Come down here. You won’t believe what this is!” shouted Grandpa.

Marie had just gotten dressed when she heard her grandpa cry out and the noise of her brother’s feet running down the steps from her room adjacent to her brother’s. *What’s going on?* she thought.

Curious, she hurried down the steps and out the kitchen door behind her grandma to find out what the commotion was all about.

“Come closer. You all have to see! This is a bumblebee, the first I have seen in ten years. Must be a good omen. Maybe the bees are coming back!” said Grandpa.

He carefully scooped up the bee in a leaf and gently made his way up the stairs into the kitchen. When inside, he made a bed in a matchbox filled with cotton and carefully laid down the unconscious bee.

Grandma, Marie, and Oscar, who followed behind, were all standing around the little bee in the matchbox, wondering what Grandpa would do next. They could not remember seeing Grandpa so excited as he cared for the bee.

“I don’t think the bee is dead. I am sure it will come to,” said Grandpa.

As Treeb slowly regained consciousness, he felt something soft underneath his body. As he focused, he saw that four big animals on two legs were looking down at him.

This is it. I am finished, thought Treeb. He could feel the vibration of sound coming from the tallest of the animals as he was expecting the final blow. But nothing happened.

“I think he moved! I should take him down to the flower bed and see if he is hungry,” said Grandpa.

As a big claw came down on Treeb, he thought he was dead, but to his surprise, it didn't kill him. Rather, it picked him up together with the white thing he was lying on and whisked him up into the air. Treeb realized he was in some cave, and the giant began walking to what seemed to be the cave opening. He could fly away right now, but there could be more invisible walls like the one that nearly killed him, so he stayed put. *I have to find a way out before I make a move*, he thought.

The giant walked out of the cave and down a short, rugged hill, and then it gently dropped Treeb into a large yellow flower. The aroma of nectar got the best of him; without hesitation he began sucking nectar out of the flower. Gone was the fear. All Treeb knew to do was to eat.

After satisfying his hunger, Treeb sat motionlessly. The giants had been watching him eating in silence. *What's next?* he thought.

“It looks like the bee is satisfied,” said Grandpa. “Let's see what it does next.”

Treeb was weighing his options. The invisible wall he had hit was pretty high up, so he figured if he was going to make a run for it, he should stay low. He decided to flee while he could. Without warning, Treeb took off from the flower, made a sharp turn around the cave, and then went straight up the hill close to the ground to stay out of sight. He kept going until he landed on the tree on the ridge where he had spent the night.

“I made it!” said Treeb triumphantly.

“So you did!” replied a voice.

Looking around, Treeb could not make out where the voice had come from.

“You are sitting on me. I am the tree, and I was wondering when you were going to come back. Did you have a bad time?” said the voice.

Treeb almost took off, but then he relaxed.

Grandpa, Grandma, Marie, and Oscar all watched as the bee lifted off from the flower and disappeared behind the house.

“Run! Run! We must find out where the bee is going!” shouted Grandpa.

Grandma and Marie watched as Grandpa and Oscar set off after the bee. After a few minutes, both came back with rosy cheeks and full of excitement.

“I think the bee went up the hill toward the ridge. We must get a couple of bottles of water before we start going up that way. We dehydrate fast in this weather,” said Grandpa.

With hats on for protection against the sun and backpacks loaded with several bottles of water, as well as sandwiches, the two explorers took off in the direction of the ridge.

“I haven’t seen Grandpa so excited in years,” said Grandma.

“What is it about the bee that is so important?” asked Marie.

“Let’s get out of the heat and have some cold lemonade. I’ll tell you all about it in the kitchen,” answered Grandma.

As Treeb sat under a large leaf protecting him from the sun and contemplating what to do next, he heard the tree call.

“Hey, you! Bee! I think we are getting company!”

It was now late in the afternoon as Treeb peeked out from underneath the leaf. He could not believe what he saw! Two of the giants, the tallest and the shortest one, came walking up the steep trail and dropped down on the wooden bench under the tree.

What were they doing here? The vibration from their voices reached Treeb, but he could not make out what they communicated about. Human language was new to the bee. He could not comprehend the meaning of what was being said. Eventually, they got up and went back the way they had come.

Treeb decided to stay the night in the safety of the tree and to decide what to do next in the morning.

That night, Grandma Anna was lying awake long after her husband had fallen asleep. She thought about how Grandpa had been a telecommunication engineer before his retirement and had tried for years to get local authorities to pay attention to the declining ecological system. They used to have a large garden with fruit and vegetables and a beehive that produced sweet honey. Way back then, life was good at their home. Then they began to realize that something wasn't right. As the years went by, the fruit trees produced less and less fruit, and the vegetable garden produced fewer and fewer vegetables. Eventually, the day came when the last bee died, and the garden went sterile. It was as if darkness had engulfed the land.

The local authorities did pay lip service to the

demands to take action against the deteriorating situation at election time, but it ended there. Little real change was ever made. The lake above the town and the stream that ran from the lake down to the sea were now all polluted to the point that fishing and swimming were just memories. The empty beehive in the garden was left there because Grandpa would not let go of the conviction that it all would come around one day and the ecological system would return to normal. The sight of a bumblebee today was the sign he had been waiting for, and his happiness seemed endless. Right or wrong, it made Grandma very happy as well, and eventually she fell asleep with a smile on her face.

As Marie went to bed that night, she could not get over Grandpa's upbeat mood that day. He had always been very kind and smiled easily, but today it was different. His smile and happiness were more genuine and deeper than she could remember. She had no previous memory of ever seeing a bee; it looked just like another insect to her. This morning, Grandma told her about the bees they used to have in the hive in the garden and a little about the importance of bees to agriculture, so she had a bit of understanding

about their importance. However, the impact this bee had on Grandpa made her decide that this bee was a very particular insect. Marie loved her grandparents as much as she loved her parents, and today's event made her happy as well. She went into a peaceful sleep.

Oscar was too excited to go to sleep that night. The hike up the hill and being with Grandpa was the best adventure he could remember having. Being city kids, the summers at their grandparents' were always an adventure. Grandpa had explained that they were following the bumblebee to find the beehive it had come from. They hiked by the stream all the way up to the lake and then kept going to the top of the hill where a group of trees were located. Beneath the tallest tree was an old wooden bench that had seen better days. Finally catching their breath, Grandpa said that the sign of a bee in their area was major news. It could mean that an improvement in the local ecological system was taking place. Sitting on the old bench, Grandpa continued telling him how bees were instrumental in the pollination of so many species and that their activities were linked to the production of more than a third of all the food we eat.

It was late when they returned, and Oscar was exhausted as a result of all the hiking. After a late supper, they all went to bed. Still, the sense of adventure kept his mind going. Eventually, the happy boy drifted off to dreamland, where he was chasing a big bee, and slept like a log.

That evening, Geoffrey fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Lately, he had been staying awake long after his wife had fallen asleep, worrying about the grandchildren's future. The pollution levels, droughts, the disappearance of so many species—it all worried him. What was there in their future? Today, though, there had been a sign of hope that things may return to normal. Like a ray of light in the darkness, a bumblebee had come to visit. He was going to find out where that bee had come from. Things may turn around for the better. The happiness he experienced was limitless, and for the first time in years, he slept like a baby.

The nostalgia this summer stemmed from the fact that Marie would be thirteen years old that fall, and she was going to work in a family friend's ladies clothing store during the next summer break. When Oscar heard about her plans, he decided he wanted to

work during the next summer as well to make some extra money for himself. Their father, Tom, then spoke to one of his friends who owned an art supply store and arranged for Oscar to help with the annual inventory numeration for a few days. The children were growing up. They all knew this was the last whole summer together with their grandparents. From the next year on the kids would visit, but they would not spend the entire summer at the farmhouse again. However, none of them would ruin this summer by mentioning it. It was taboo.

The moon rose high that night and painted the landscape in silver. A soft breeze kept the usually hot summer night cool. The hoot of a distant owl was barely audible. A day had ended, and the event that had unfolded would change the lives of all involved in a fashion that they would not have been able to comprehend in their wildest imaginations. It was the first step on a journey that would lead to the search of the Secrets of the Sacred Forest.