

Chapter 10

Lightfoot

The Indian States were not really states like those that made up the rest of the country, but had been set up as independent nations by a treaty between the Indians and the white settlers who had come to establish towns like Plainview and Forestville. The borders between the white man's state and the Indian's country were unmarked and peaceful, and people of any color traveled where they pleased. The treaty that established the Indian States was simply a formalization of an informal promise made by the original white settlers not to encroach past a certain point on the lands of the native people.

Lightfoot was a young Indian boy, almost a man, who loved to roam the forests and fields of the Indian States, to hunt and fish, to gather berries and nuts, and to swim in the Blue River in the heat of summertime.

Lightfoot remembered his parents well, even though they had left him when he was a little kid. They had both died one cold winter when an illness swept through their village, taking the life of every other adult. Children got very sick from the illness as well, but most recovered.

He missed his mother and father, because they knew him better than anyone else in the village, but any child in the village was always treated as everyone's child, and he had grown up free and happy, learning what he needed to know about the ways of the woods from his countless relatives.

That day Lightfoot was far from his home village, having hiked through forests and across streams, because he wanted to spend the night camped by the noisy rapids on the Blue River. These rapids would have been a very short waterfall, five or six feet high, if the Blue River had been a smaller river than it was. Instead the volume of water pouring over this small cliff was deeper than the cliff itself. Instead of falling precipitiously, the river rolled over in wave after wave of sometimes smooth, sometimes turbulent, but always swift flowing water.

His father had brought him here when he was a little boy, and they had camped there for many, many nights. The purpose of the trip was to build a canoe out of the tall stands of birch that lined the river around the rapids. During the day he had helped his father as he selected the right tree, then carefully stripped and prepared the bark, and proceeded to apply tar and leather and wooden ribbings in all the right places. In the end they had a canoe ready for the river.

They carried the canoe further up stream, and his father climbed in and took it on its maiden voyage right through the steepest part of the rapids. Lightfoot begged to come along for the ride, but his father said he was too young to canoe the rapids. Though he promised he could try sometime in the future. He could practice using the canoe on more peaceful waters first.

Now many years had passed, and Lightfoot had practiced paddling the canoe he and his father built on many streams and lakes. But without his father to see him

grow in skill. Now he had come back to the cataract in the Blue River, to try his hand at navigating the rapids he once saw his father shoot.

He left all his gear on shore, just in case, and stepped into the middle of the canoe as he pushed off from shore. The water above the rapids was deceptively quiet. He headed straight out into the current to the middle of the river, then turned downstream. For a moment he held his paddle across the gunwales of the canoe, resting, and looking ahead at the frothing cataclysm he was being pulled into.

The thought really never entered his head of turning around. It didn't seem possible, and certainly didn't seem desirable. But there was fear that needed to be overcome as he slid closer and closer to the edge. He felt like he was falling in slow motion, or being blown by the wind off a cliff. Like in a dream when you can't control what happens, but have to let the stream of consciousness flow forward to the inevitable future. Which only leads forward to more inevitable future.

One last moment of fear as the canoe rose up on the swell of water at the top of the drop. Then his eye saw a path through at the same moment his inner eye felt the same. No decisions to make really. For the first half he rode straight down the middle of the drop, right at an outcropping of turbulence and hidden rock. Then he judged where the torrent of water was deepest as it rolled over these obstacles, and paddled hard to direct himself and the canoe onto this flume of water. Up he went in the air, without colliding into anything, over the top, and down into the turbulent yet smooth fast flowing water on the other side. He turned and looked back and for a moment saw his father in the mist over the rapids, looking placidly at him with the slightest smile of pride. Then he was gone.

He camped that night a little farther down the river. He looked for his father in the flickering flames of his fire but saw nothing. He felt unusually tired, and fell asleep between his canoe and the fire while the flames were still high. He dreamt of the fire, then dreamt of a large cool river rising out of the fire, and above the river was a serene ethereal arch. Even as he dreamt he wondered what it meant.

The next day as he awoke he felt compelled to continue travelling down the Blue River. The feelings of peace that came from the arch were pulling him downstream. He had never travelled outside the Indian States before. But he approached the border like he approached the top of the rapids. Yes, there was fear. But there was also inevitability. Because he knew he wasn't going to paddle back upstream. At least not yet.

As Lightfoot travelled down the Blue River, he thought over the underlying motivation that might be leading him onward. He remembered the troll family that had stayed with his tribe that winter, and the stories they had told about the lands to the north. In his mind's eye he could see their little boy, who was so friendly and innocent. He thought of him as a friend, even though they were not at all the same age. Maybe he was hoping to meet him again.

But he didn't consider that likely, because they had told him their home was at the far mouth of the river, past several towns and cities, and on the other side of the

Okee Swamp. The river between them was becoming civilized (a term used by the new settlers), and was not free and wild like the waters near his home. He wasn't sure he had the stamina or the interest to traverse that length.

Although the little troll's face was in his mind, he also had visions of meeting the people who lived between them. People in his tribe had plenty of interchange with the new people, and made regular trips down the river to trade the products they gathered from the forest for the foods they grew on their farms. But it was not a common trip for a boy his age to make.

The first night he camped near the boundary of the Indian States. The next night he camped on the outskirts of Plainview. He could see the first farms downriver when he awoke in the morning and got back on the river.

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