

## Chapter 11

### Stone City

Orville had said to stop just past the second bridge, the brand new one built for motor traffic over the Blue River heading west out of Stone City. But Susan's grandfather scratched his head when he heard this, because he knew there weren't any paved roads west of the river for any driver of a motorcar to use. It was a huge arch that crossed the river, creating almost a circle in the reflection on the river. And the people of the town had asked their town council to build it. Or had the town council been the ones to ask the people? In either case, they had spent the money on this seemingly foolish gesture, of building a bridge to the other uninhabited side of the river

But there it was when they slipped down the river into Stone City in the early dusk. All steel, with brand new electric lights it spanned the river in a way that must have been a source of pride for the people of the city. All the streetlights in Stone City were being converted to electricity, generated by the new electrical power plant belching smoke south of town. It had been built in the place of an older bridge, one that Babu's parents had told him stories about, before the time when the troll's stopped visiting Stone City, and before they stopped migrating on the River. In the pilings and footings of the old bridge they found the tunnel entrance that Orville had told them about, and the three of them pulled their boat up onto a ridge of concrete at the river's edge, and scrambled up to the entrance.

It was dark in the tunnel. They stood staring into it, realizing they had no torch or candle to carry, and wondering what to do.

"Looking to meet somebody?" a voice called out from the stones piled up to one side of the tunnel entrance. "Not many folk come down to the river that often, so I expect you'll be waiting quite awhile."

At that moment, a short, stocky man appeared on the side of one stone, and sat down on a boulder, further compressing his physical presence until he was no bigger than one of the boulders he lounged against. Susan's grandfather muttered "excuse us" and "no" and "sorry", but none of them knew what to say to the little man.

"But I like it here, especially this time of day. It feels good to get out of those cramped and stuffy tunnels, and come down here to feel the river go by and watch the sun go down."

"Are you a dwarf?" stammered Susan.

"A dwarf?" laughed the little man. And when he stopped laughing, he said to her with a sparkle in his eyes "and I suppose you're an elf, if I'm not mistaken" and then once again broke into fits of laughter "and I don't know what you are old man, but I suppose the heavy guy is a troll" and continued to guffaw to himself.

"What's so funny" demanded little Susan. "I'm not an elf, but he's a troll" and then

Susan started to notice the coarseness of the little man's features, his leather vest, and odd-shaped boots, his long, and unruly hair, and his cap made of leather and studded by metal. "You are a dwarf, aren't you?"

"Hmmpph, ahhaarumph" said the little man, "we don't think of ourselves as dwarves." "But sometimes the name tends to stick."

"Well, whoever you are, can you help us?" Susan's grandfather started in, "we are trying to arrange passage for our friend here to New Delta, but it won't work for him to go by the big steamboats, and we were told to come to this place to find the kind of dwarf, ah er, person to help us out."

"Can't afford passage on the big boats, or can't afford to be seen on the big boats, hmm?" said the little man, looking intently at Babu in the dusk light.

It turns out the little man really was a dwarf, and he finally introduced himself as Gorga. After a little more discussion on the where's and why'fores of their trip, he hoisted a knapsack that no one had seen lying on the ground near the mouth of the tunnel, and led the group underground. As they started out, Susan asked Gorga what his last name was, but he didn't seem to hear her question. Probably because of all the noise they were making, and how the noise echoed off the walls of the tunnel, as the whole crew of them scuffled down the unlit passageway. Gorga was walking fast, had his head down, and seemed to be thinking about something quite furiously, as he stroked his beard and muttered to himself.

It grew darker and darker, and they could hardly make out the sides of the tunnel, and could only see a gray glow back toward the tunnel entrance. Susan's grandfather was falling behind, and was concerned about the lack of light, and was trying to decide what to say to Gorga, or whether to tell Susan to be careful first. Her eyes must see better in the dark than my old ones, he thought. But at that moment, Gorga abruptly stopped in the middle of the tunnel with a big "Oh!". Babu bumped into Susan as they halted, and almost lost his balance as he tried to be light on his feet and avoid hurting Susan.

"It's dark isn't it?" said Gorga, once they stopped, and Susan's grandfather wondered why he said such an obvious thing. Then Gorga continued with "I mean, you have a hard time seeing, don't you?" When they all nodded and uh-uh'ed their reply, Gorga continued to stroke his beard ferociously in thought.

"Now I know we keep torches around here somewhere. You're not the first sky people that have been here, you know. Now where are they?" And he continued to scratch his beard, trying to think. Susan, and her grandfather, and Babu, huddled together in the dark tunnel, waiting for Gorga to remember where the torches might be, and hoping he remembered soon, because the darkness was increasing, as the light from the tunnel entrance grew fainter and fainter as the dusk descended outside.

Finally, he threw his arms up in the air with a loud "Ah ha!", and walked a few quick steps down the tunnel. There he seemed to scramble up the side of the tunnel and

reach back into a head-high opening, straining for something. "Here they are" he said, and everyone was relieved. "Now I think there should be some flints around here as well", and he continued his probing of the dark overhead recess. No one could tell what he was doing, but all of sudden he was holding two stones in his hands, and by banging one against the other small sparks were leaping onto the torches he had laid on the ground. Their faces glowed momentarily with each little spark, then they were back in darkness until the next strike.

Finally, a few strong sparks landed on the tarry material wrapped around the end of the knobby sticks he had found, and he picked it up, and started to blow on it softly, making the sparks grow and glow. All of a sudden flames burst out, and the sides of the tunnel lit up with yellow-orange glow. The little party had a momentary feeling of safety and warmth.

Susan saw it first, a fuzzy brownish-black something falling out of the hole from which Gorga had extracted the torches. Except it wasn't falling, it was more like flying. It looked hideous to Susan, and as a shiver of fright overtook her, she cried out "Watch out, Mr. Gorga" because it was heading right for him. In the next moment, with a whooshing beating sound, the flying animal swooped right by Gorga, and with its passing the torch blew out.

In the dark again, no one knew what to say, except for Gorga, who cried out "Angel!". Then he muttered some sort of dwarfish oath, followed by a chuckle. Finally the sight and sound of sparks started again, leaping from the one stone striking the other in Gorga's hands.

Angel turned out to be one of many friendly bats that inhabited the dwarf's tunnels. After Gorga finally lit the torch she flew over to sit on his right shoulder. When he switched the torch to his right hand Angel shrieked and crawled behind his head to the other shoulder. Seems she wasn't particularly fond of the flame.

From the vantage point of the left shoulder she curiously gazed at the other's in the group. Her large bat eyes squinted in the glare of the torch light, until she figured out how to raise one wing to shade her face. She spent most of the time staring at Babu, who returned the attention. As they walked along the two of them made faces at each other, until finally Angel hopped over to Babu's shoulder and wrapped her wings around his neck. Babu smiled, and started to respond back to her high pitched squeals and clicks with sounds of his own.

At this Gorga stopped the procession, and stared for a few seconds at Babu. After a moment he said "ah-ha", and nodded his head. Then they continued on. As they walked Babu held out his arm, and Angel flew to his wrist, clung to it with her feet, and playfully swung underneath his arm, continuing to happily squeal and click the whole time.

Gorga continued to escort them through the maze of tunnels, stopping at intersections to listen for other travelers, and to allow Susan's grandfather to catch his breath. They walked a few descending passageways followed by some straight hallways connected with left and right turns, followed by an ascending

passageway. When they had traveled so far, so far no-one in the party could have found their way back, Gorga halted at a big set of carved stone doors. They opened effortlessly when he placed his hand against a smooth patch of stone to one side of the doors.

Since they had ducked through a waterfall (and the torch had gone out), the tunnels had been lit by mysterious blue lights, always out of view, somewhere on the ceiling of the rough network. Inside the room that now opened before them they saw all kinds of colored light, but mostly a greenish glow against the walls of stone. As the party walked in they could see the room was quite crowded with other dwarves, each busy in conversation with a fellow, or carving something on the fairly smooth stone faces that comprised the walls of this cavern.

In the center was a simple pedestal, made of grayish-white stone, lit from above from some source of white light embedded in the top of the cavern. For a moment, other strange lights danced and flickered, as if in space above the pedestal, then abruptly stopped.

"Damn, I thought I fixed that" called out one very intense looking dwarf, who scrambled down from a shelf he had been sitting on, grabbed chisel and hammer, and hurried over to a wall of stone that no one else was working on. With fury, he started to chisel away at a section of figures carved in the stone, returning the stone to a flat smooth unmarked surface. With this accomplished, he sat down in a "harrumph" on the floor of the cavern in front of the stone wall, and appeared to go into deep thought.

"What's he doing" whispered Susan, aware she should probably be quiet in the face of such intense thought.

"Shhh" said Gorga, "wait a minute and you'll see." And at that moment, the intense dwarf cried out "Ah Ha", sprang to his feet, and hurriedly chiseled in a new sequence of figures on the stone wall, working so fast that sometimes he had to chip away a figure he had just drawn to make it more like the one he wanted. All the other dwarves continued on with their chiseling and other activities, ignoring the intense one. Then he scrambled back up to his sitting position on the wall on the opposite side, grabbed a stone mallet that lay on a shelf of rock there, and used it to pound once on an outcropping of rock on the shelf. As he hit the rock it seemed to shrink for a moment.

Then an amazing thing occurred. A miniature replica of the Park and bridge in Plainview materialized on the gray-white pedestal. In her amazement, Susan forgot herself and rushed to the center of the room, and stared at the miniature landscape. "Babu, its your bridge" At the moment she cried out the other dwarves took first notice of the newcomers. A general swarm of muttering went around the room, each dwarf trying to figure out who was who in that dark room. And was that especially thick person what they thought it was.

The intense dwarf came down from his perch, and walked over to the pedestal. "You like that? It's really no big deal, we've had the ability to gather views from afar

for over a year now. I was just getting it working again, since we recently changed a lot of the underlying structures."

"It's so beautiful" said Susan, confused by the matter-of-fact attitude the dwarf had toward something so amazing, and so close to her heart.

"Oh you like the scene? That's one of our favorites. It's from Plainview up the river. It makes for a good demonstration, because everyone knows we haven't dug tunnels as far as Plainview, so there is no way we could be faking this."

"How do you do that?" asked Susan.

"Well it has something to do with particles of light that travel together from the sun. You see they get in synch with each other, know what I mean", and he was kind enough to see that Susan really didn't get what he meant, and said "well, like they're dancing together", and she said "Oh" with a moment of pleasure at understanding the concept, or so she felt.

"You see, the particles of light, which we call the photons, get in rhythm with each other, so to speak".

"In the same groove" said Babu. And everyone turned to look at Babu, because it didn't seem the thing for a young troll to say. Or did it?

"Yes" he said, and hopped down from the stool he was perched on, "in the groove." "And when we meet up with these two particles later, after they've split up, we can still tell they'd once been together, because part of them is still in rhythm so to speak. They're in time with each other".

"Oh" Susan said, in a different way than before.

The dwarves were as helpful as they could be. They explained the current situation in the Okee Swamp, how the locals had rebelled against the governments of the big cities upstream and downstream, and how little traffic was travelling the river unescorted. But they had retained their contacts with the people of the swamp, and gave them a name of a man to contact there.

But it was obvious that the next stretch of river was too dangerous for a little girl like Susan to travel. After some thought Susan's grandfather decided he should send her back to Plainview. He could do this by taking her on the train to Plattsburgh, up the Muddy River, and placing her on a horse-drawn coach to her hometown. Susan protested greatly when he explained this to her, but he was firm in his resolve. With a tearful hug goodbye to Babu, she angrily turned to her grandfather outside the tunnel entrance where they now stood and said, "ok, let's go". Then she turned around abruptly and fell into the river.

Everyone standing on the shore (Babu, grandfather, Gorga) looked aghast as Susan fluttered in the water. Her grandfather was not worried too much, because Susan could swim. He told her to swim back to shore, but she was fuming with

anger and embarrassment and for awhile let the current take her downstream. Then she realized the current was strong enough at the distance she had floated from shore to make it difficult to swim right back to where she had fallen in. Those on shore grew concerned, and tried to pick their way over the boulders on the shore toward Susan. Then her grandfather realized he should get the boat, and started picking his way back over the boulders the other way to where it was moored.

As he turned back up stream he saw a welcome and strange sight. There underneath the huge arch of the city's bridge stood a young Indian carefully balanced in his birch bark canoe, gliding through like a sentry floating on a liquid mirror. His eyes met those of the young man, then looked back to his granddaughter, and the request had been silently made and accepted.

Lightfoot then kneeled back in his canoe, and paddled with great strength over to where Susan was struggling with the current. She was mostly in danger of having injured pride, but welcomed his hand when he arrived. He counterbalanced his canoe by leaning to the starboard side as he pulled Susan over the port-side gunwale.

Susan's angry mood had been drenched by the river, and now she was distracted by the amazing apparition that had swooped down on her and romantically saved her from the river. She said hardly anything as Lightfoot paddled them back to shore. Then quietly, introductions were made all around.

Copyright 1993-1997 Scott E. Johnston

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/1.0> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.