

Chapter 5

The Next Morning

The next morning Susan's grandfather got up an hour before the sunrise, and shuffled into the kitchen of his small one bedroom apartment. He hadn't always been an early riser. When he was younger he would've slept as late as possible on any given day, keeping his eyes shut hoping for another pleasant dream to tide him through the day. But just being alive and awake seemed like enough of a dream to him now.

His apartment was really half of a small house. His landlady lived upstairs, in a similar apartment. They kept out of each others way, but enjoyed the chats they had whenever they would accidentally meet on the front steps. She would be asleep for several hours yet, so the house was very quiet, with no creaking footsteps overhead. This was his best time of day for thinking.

He went over to the stove, and put a kettle on with enough water for a single cup of coffee. He would have another cup later in the morning, when he walked downtown to go shopping, or visited a neighbor friend for a chat. He never exactly planned where the second cup would be taken, letting the freedom of his old-age decide for him.

As the flames lit up underneath the copper kettle, Susan's grandfather went into sort of a trance, as his thoughts swirled around what his granddaughter had told him the night before. He found he couldn't completely disbelieve what she said. He thought that was funny, and wondered if it was the start of senility. But his eyes kept returning to the flame under the copper kettle. And his mind's eye kept returning to the past, where the flames of a campfire in his youth had heated that first illicit cup of coffee. Heated it up on that magic copper kettle that belonged to that dwarf.

He and two of his friends had been on a summer camp-out. They were out to explore the wilderness, to conquer virgin territory, to fight Indians if necessary. In general, they were looking to have a good time without the supervision of their parents. They had borrowed a make-shift canoe, a crude plank-board boat shaped like a dugout, and had paddled across the river to the Uncharted Territory.

It wasn't really that uncharted, because the farming community around Stone City stretched for several miles up and down the Blue River, on both sides. The real Terra Incognita began somewhere on the ragged eastern edge of these farm lands, where supplies were no longer economical to haul to and from the river on wagon cart.

They had landed their explorer's canoe at the base of a gully whose steep sides kept it from being farmed, and beat a path into the tangled undergrowth, following the creek that tinkled in the middle of the gully as it flowed back to the river. The

three of them stepped cautiously as they went, beating through bushes with sticks they had found on the way, watching out for wild animals and wild Indians. Although they were making an incredible racket, they thought they could maintain their stealth by not talking, and tried to communicate with a complicated system of hand signals and eye movements (which none of them understood).

At times the forest became so overgrown they had to make their way up the creek, stepping from stone to stone, trying not to get their feet wet. They were concerned about not slowing down, about covering enough distance before they settled down for the night. Their goal was not clear to any of them. They thought maybe they would happen upon an abandoned Indian campsite, or a family of farmers ruthlessly murdered by savages. Either of these would give them enough reason to stop for the night. Then they would contemplate what to do next.

What they did find they weren't expecting. After what seemed like an hour of hiking inland and slowly uphill (though thinking back on it now, Susan's grandfather realized they couldn't have been more than 15 minutes away from the river) they did come upon a campsite. But it wasn't abandoned. Its sole occupant wasn't an Indian, he wasn't a farmer, and he certainly wasn't dead.

Memories of what the three of them saw that day were now fresh in Susan's grandfather's mind, as the fire swirled under the copper kettle. They had been startled by the sight of a short stout person seated behind the fire. They had seen his grin, his odd delight, at being discovered by three young boys stamping through the woods.

It was that grin, that devilish smile that had always made Susan's grandfather discount the stories the dwarf told them that night. But now his granddaughter had confirmed one of them with her own story. And he realized he knew where he was going for his second cup of coffee.

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