

Chapter 7

Ready For Adventure

After carefully listening to Babu's story, Susan's grandfather sat quietly for a long time, stroking his chin, and making small "hmms" and "harumphs" to punctuate his thinking. He looked first at Susan, then at Babu, then repeated this two or three times, then stared at the river with a somber look on his face. Susan was quiet, hopeful that her grandfather would think of something to do.

It was clear to her grandfather that Babu could not stay much longer under that bridge, because he would eventually be discovered by someone other than Susan. Then he would be dragged into town and put on display, like a freak of nature, an animal or wild man-creature, a novelty to the town-folk. They would crowd around the cage that would be built for him, poking him with sticks if it was allowed, and with their fingers if they lost their fear of him. Then he would be sold to the highest bidder, who would in turn sell him to a traveling show that specialized in displaying the oddities of the land to an eager public.

Susan's grandfather had recognized Babu's home, from his stories, as the town of New Delta, the almost-foreign harbor town that stood at the mouth of the Blue River on the edge of the Salton Sea. How could he arrange to transport a troll, even an infant or juvenile troll, all the way down the river without it being discovered?

He wasn't unfamiliar with the ways of the river. He knew how to navigate the backwaters of the river downstream from Stone City. When he had first set out as a young lad on his own, he had traveled to New Delta and taken a job with a small shipping firm. This firm had specialized in the transport of small household items and furniture to small settlements on the river. They had to travel in light small boats that could navigate the myriad of shallow and narrow byways that honeycombed the river area.

But the lower parts of the river were not the same as when he was young. An outlaw people had taken up residence in its bayous, people with little respect for the properly elected governments of the surrounding territories. He couldn't be sure that the little troll would be safe in such a region.

Finally Susan's grandfather bid Babu farewell, and promised him that he would be thinking of how to help him get home, and they would stop back soon. Reluctantly Susan followed as they headed back to town.

The puzzle of how to help Babu occupied his mind as they walked back through town. The afternoon sun was once again at their back as they walked along. Susan said very little, letting her grandfather think.

He finally resolved that the only solution would be to trust to his luck. Just like in the old days on the river when he would tramp up and down, counting on finding

passage with a friendly crew when he needed it. Some of the best times in his life were lived with certain goals in mind but no plan. This would offer an opportunity to relive some of that life again, and maybe show something of the river to his granddaughter. They could travel to Stone City, and there in the bigger city he would find someone who would be willing to smuggle the troll the rest of the river.

So when they got back to Susan's house, he announced to Susan's parents their plans for a boating trip on the river, down to Stone City. They agreed to the idea, and saw it as a recuperative trip for Susan, to help her overcome her outrageous behavior of the recent past. Susan's grandfather explained his plans to go by small boat down to Forestville, and there board a boat captained by a friend of his for the rest of the trip to Stone City.

When the day for departure came, they waved goodbye to family and friends at the boat launch in the park, then floated down the river to where, if anybody was watching, they quickly put ashore for a moment, ostensibly to rearrange something in the boat if overseen, but really to take Babu on board.

That night they camped out halfway between Forestville and Plainview, at a wooded outcropping on a river sandbar. At the crinkling fire Susan's grandfather told her that they weren't going to meet the boat captain tomorrow. Instead they were going to continue down the river in the boat they were in. Susan's eyes gleamed in the firelight when she heard this news, and her grandfather's eyes laughed with her in conspiratorial delight.

Babu, who had been very quiet since they picked him up from under the bridge, slowly warmed to the fire and the company of Susan and her grandfather. He started to tell tales of the Indians who had befriended his family the previous winter. Susan responded with tales of her friends at home, and how amazed they would be to know where she was now. And the grandfather smiled to himself as he tended the fire and was content to listen to the two of them as they babbled on. By the time they bedded down for the night they were a very warm-hearted group of travelers.

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