

Chapter 8

Beaver Valley

On the third morning of rising early from their sleeping bags, and setting out quickly on the river, wisps of fog still danced on the water, and early morning rays of sun slanted in through the forest of trees that surrounded the river. Susan was trying to be brightly awake, sitting in the bow of the boat, watching for what her grandfather had told her about the first night around the campfire, the land of beavers and other wildlife that continued to hold their own against the encroachment of her people.

She started to shiver. The still morning air was quite cool, and the sun wasn't high enough overhead to start warming the day. Often they were in the shadows of trees on the bank. Susan's grandfather noticed this, and steered the boat for the other side of the calm blue river. This side was bright green, in contrast to the dark green tangle of trees on the far side of the river.

Not all the river had been tamed by Susan's people. It hadn't all been evenly settled with farm-yard after farm-yard lining the banks, and town after town jutting landing docks out into the water every few miles. There was a stretch, down-river from Plainview and Forestville, but up-river from Stone City, that had been left untouched by settlers. The land was too hilly to be good for farming, and the bluffs were either too steep to climb, or too rocky to bother with. The forests and trees were thick and tangled. Waterfowl of every kind lived there, flying through the trees along its banks, and fishing in its backwaters.

Even though she was expecting it, her first sign of wildlife that day, if you could really call it wildlife, startled her quite a bit. All at once she realized that the line in the river they were approaching was not a sand-bar or some finger of land jutting out, but a massive beaver dam, over a half-mile in length. As they got close she could see that it was attended to by countless crews of beavers, working together in teams to haul large logs across the dam and wedge them into places prepared by another beaver team.

Her grandfather had explained how these beavers tamed the wild river for their own purposes, creating large placid pools in what would have been a normally fast flowing section of the river. In these pools they raised their young and fished for their dinner.

The Blue River species of beaver were larger and more agile than their creek cousins, and lived in larger communities supported by their communal fishing of the river. Their beaver dams were paired at different locations along the river. Several times a day the beaver community would chew out an underwater plug on the downstream dam, letting the water out, but keeping the fish in, and then go about harvesting the fish that had been trapped. Once harvested, they rebuilt the plug, then chewed out a plug on the upstream dam to let the pond fill up once again with water and fish.

What the beavers built for themselves had also helped the settlers when they came to this land. Their steamboats needed a consistent depth to safely navigate the river. The series of beaver dams, with their ingenious systems of water gates, controlled the water level of the river, making the trip possible.

The beavers did not mind letting the settler's use their systems of dams and pools. They were used to sharing the waterways with Indians in canoes, and had seemingly evolved their structures to better accommodate the larger boats of the newcomers.

The result was a little far-fetched, even by beaver engineering standards. They had figured out how to lash several tall pine trees together to make a leaky, but flexible water gate. A vessel could nudge through under steam power when the water was at the same height on either side of the gate.

Susan's grandfather knew they wouldn't have to use the beaver lock-and-dam system, because their boat was small enough to be hauled over the dam by hand. He steered the boat toward the part of the dam that seemed easiest to cross. Above this low spot in the dam sat a large beaver who seemed to be carefully watching the work being done by other beavers. Periodically he would slap his tail against the dam, while staring at one crew of beavers or another. He paid little attention to the oncoming boat until they nudged to a halt against the dam.

Susan's grandfather got out of the boat to stand on the dam. As he did, the big beaver erupted in a loud chatter that caused all the other nearby beavers to stop and look in their direction. Her grandfather stopped moving, and tried to figure out what he had done to disturb the big beaver. He had thought that the beavers wouldn't mind if he pulled the boat over the dam.

Then, much to everyone's surprise, Babu started to chatter back at the big beaver. Neither Susan or her grandfather could understand what was being said, but it did seem to have a calming effect on the beavers. They waited while Babu continued the discourse, then broke in at the first opportunity to ask him what was going on.

"He says that this is not the place to cross the dam."

"Where should we cross the dam then?" the old man asked.

Babu started a long winded series of clicks and grunts, what seemed like far too many words for what he needed to express. Either the beaver language was incredibly redundant or it was overly precise. Given the nature of beavers Susan's grandfather thought it must be the latter. Finally Babu seemed to finish the conversation and turned to say:

"Over there, near the shore, where there is a similar hollow."

"Susan, Babu, you'll have to get out on the dam and help me pull the boat over."

They looked at each other, and Susan stood up to leave the boat. But as she approached the bow, an entire crew of beavers swam up behind the boat and shoved the boat up and over the dam. Susan fell back on top of Babu, and they both clung to the sides of the boat as they went sliding down the other side of the dam into the pool of water below. The look on their faces made Susan's grandfather break out laughing.

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