

Chapter 9

Orville

Susan's grandfather continued to chuckle to himself, as he carefully walked off the wooden dam and over to the shore. Babu had a look of wonderment on his face, where as Susan's face kept shifting between a look of embarrassment and a look of glee. They had both gotten rather wet as the boat splashed down into the pool of water between the two dams that made up the lock.

The sides of the pond they were floating in were too steep for Susan's grandfather to clamber down and get back in the boat. And they were getting steeper as it seemed the beavers were letting the water out. Susan's and Babu's eyes grew wider as they sank farther and farther down into a hole like a well. Finally a group of beavers on top of the second dam jumped on a long wooden lever, and the logs of the dam parted near the shore. They were whisked out of the pool into an open calm stretch of the river and came to rest against the shoreline, where Susan's grandfather was finally able to get back in the boat.

The beaver in charge of dam repairs was now standing on the shore where Susan's grandfather had been, and was clucking and gesturing away, pointing at the other side of the river further downstream where there seemed to be a great concentration of beaver activity. Babu seemed confused this time, not sure of what he was trying to communicate. It was clear to all that he wanted them to head in that direction. So they paddled off to the other side.

When they got there, they peered under the large canopy of interwoven twigs to see a honeycomb of open-sided beaver lodges arranged in a staircase fashion rising up the river bank. Protected by the leafy vines growing through the canopy, sheltered from the breezes that blow up the river, a large crew of beavers were staffing these half-shell lodges. They were interconnected by stairs and ladders made of logs rammed into the side hill.

Susan's grandfather steered their boat under the canopy, and they came to rest against the edge of the structure. Susan reached out and grabbed a log to hold on to. Babu sat in the middle of the boat and looked up in wonder. He had never seen a bureaucracy before.

"Babu, why don't you ask them if they have any information on trolls who've passed through here."

Babu looked at Susan's grandfather, blinked his eyes, then started to ask the beavers if they knew of river travellers who looked like him.

The process took a long time, as they got referred from beaver to beaver to beaver, each barely able to take the time to listen to their question and inevitably referring them to some other beaver farther downstream in this immense structure. Finally,

the last beaver in the last lodge, the busiest and most harried looking of them all, pulled out a piece of birch bark with some scribblings on it, hurriedly read the contents of it to Babu , then turned back to his work and ignored them.

"Did you understand what he said Babu?" asked Susan's grandfather.

"He said something about an Orville, and something about the last downstream post, whatever that means. And he muttered something about someone being crazy."

As they made their way further down the stream, a prairie storm built up over the bluffs on the side of the river, and the wind started to whip down the valley. Bands of rippled water darted across the surface of the river, running to and fro like a flock of ducks chased by a small boy. They could see each gust before it hit them. Susan's grandfather was directing Susan and Babu to help with the paddling of the boat, as they tried to make it to shore to wait out the storm.

Then they all looked downstream and saw something very ominous. Out of the dark clouds that hung low over the valley reached a spinning arm of wind. Susan's grandfather recognized it as a tornado, having lived through one years ago. Susan and Babu knew with instant recognition and instant terror that it was a dreaded twister. No one spoke as they battled the wind, trying to get to first one shore, then the other, as they were blown helplessly about in the river. And still the arm came at them.

Susan's grandfather instructed Susan and Babu to get down in the boat and hold tight. He kept on trying to paddle the boat to shore, but was getting disoriented. Finally, when it looked like the roaring arm would veer right down on them, a sudden and strong shift of the current pulled them backwards out of the river. In the bottom of the boat Babu clung to Susan, and stared with wide eyes at what he could see around them. All of sudden they were flying by trees on both sides, as they had blown into a channel of water between two levees that they had not seen before.

Babu was terrified, reliving the separation from his parents. Susan's grandfather sat still in the back of the boat, his hands clenched to the paddle he was no longer using. He had a vacant stare on his face. The storm was still raging past them on the river, but the diversion down this channel had taken them out of the brunt of its force. In a moment or two it was quite and calm.

They looked over the edge of the boat to see a lone beaver break the surface and swim on ahead of them. As they continued to watch, this beaver swam lazily down the channel ahead of them, then climbed out of the water where a fishing pole was anchored in the dirt. He grabbed the pole, tugged on the line, and pulled in a fish which he deposited in a basket near his feet. Then he swung the basket around his neck, picked up the pole, and set off walking (yes, walking!) into the woods.

"Orville" shouted Susan's grandfather. The perambulating beaver stopped in his tracks, and turned around with a quizzical look on his face. "Yes?" Susan's grandfather explained that they were looking for information on trolls that have travelled through here earlier this year.

"Wyeall, yes, I did talk to some some trolls going through here early this spring. Haven't seen 'em since. Have you?"

"Oh know, we haven't seen them, Mr. Beaver. We're looking for them" said Susan.

"Looking for them, hmmm?"

"Yes, you see, they're Babu's parents", she said, pointing to the little troll.

"Babu's parents, you say? Hmmm." After a pause, he said "Hmmm" again. He turned around to face the other way on the levee, then scooped down into the water and pulled another fish out of the water, which he placed in the basket he wore around his neck.

"Well, come with me, why don't you" and off he headed down the dam, toward where it intersected with another length of dam. When he came to an intersection, in the levees he stopped, and then emptied the fish into yet another pool of water.

Orville led them back to his lodge and invited them in to warm up in front of his fire. His lodge was much bigger than they imagined it would be, and they could sit comfortably around the fire and stand crouch-legged if they wanted. On shelves attached to the walls were many small models of fantastic things made out of carefully whittled wooden sticks. One was a wheel suspended in mid-air with little buckets fashioned of walnut shells that hung freely so that they would remain upright when the wheel was spun. Another was a four-legged tower that gracefully arched to a pinnacle with a revolving disk at the top. When Susan asked what they were Orville shrugged his shoulders and said they were amusements of his.

Orville offered them some beaver tea, a very bland cup of warm water with what looked like bark floating on the top. He said they could take the pieces out if they didn't care for them. For awhile they talked about fishing, and Orville's technique of fish-farming, how he was experimenting with growing them in controlled pools. He admitted most of the other beavers thought him crazy. And then they finally got around to the business at hand.

Orville stared into the fire, then got up from his haunches and turned to face away from the fire. Steadying himself with his front paws, he backed up into the fire and gingerly used his tail to move partially burned logs around, to give them a better chance of burning. He glanced at each of the party in turn, Babu, Susan, then the grandfather, and appeared to be thinking, or maybe just observing. When he

spoke, the words didn't all make sense. "Trolls were on this river before the beavers. You want to take this little one back to his parents. That is good. At the same time, you will meet up with more than you expected, and that is natural, but you may not think it good. Under the new bridge in Stone City is a tunnel where you can find the dwarves, and they will help you with your journey."

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