

## Chapter 27: John Gets Shrunk

John was out walking in the forest one day when he came upon an old woman. Assuming that she was one of the forest people, he politely nodded his head to her. "Hello Ma'am," he said. "A pleasant day today, isn't it?"

"And what brings you out on this lovely day?" the woman asked him.

"I've come to take some fresh air," said John. "I've been in the castle library all morning. Well, if I'm being honest, actually, I've been in the library all week."

"I see," said the old woman. She was dressed all in black. Her face looked wrinkled, although her voice was smooth and beautiful. "So you belong to Castle Tauna, then? But whose child would you be?"

"Oh no, I'm not part of the royal family," said John. "I am a prince, technically, but I'm from a different land. The Kingdom of Mora. I don't suppose you've heard of it?"

"Mora..." the woman had a far-away look in her eyes. "Where have I heard that name before? That's where the forest ranger is from, isn't it? Midor, his name was."

"Yes, his son Robert guided us through the forest."

The woman chuckled. "So Midor has a son now. And is Vivian the mother?"

"Yes."

The woman chuckled again. "Well, at least there's some justice in the world," she said. "That must have made Carlyle angry."

"King Carlyle? But why would--."

"Don't call him king!" the woman cut John off angrily. "He is not the rightful king of this land."

The woman was upset that it shocked John into silence. "I'm sorry to have offended you," he said after a pause. "He's been very kind to us, however."

"So you are a guest at Castle Tauna, staying with Carlyle, and friends with Vivian's son?" said the old woman, gazing at John thoughtfully.

John was beginning to feel worried. He was beginning to think that maybe it hadn't been so wise to give a stranger so much information. But as she was simply asking him to confirm information he had already given, he nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"Possibly you may be useful to me," she said. "I'm not sure. But it never hurts to keep an extra option in your pocket." She took out a wand, and waved it around while chanting something, and John was suddenly shrunk down to the size of a man's thumb. The old woman picked up John and put him in her pocket, and continued walking down the path.

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It was dark in the old woman's pocket. That was the first thing John thought. He tried to stand up, but it was difficult to get any footing on the soft fabric. The whole thing had a feeling of weightlessness, like the feeling you get when you're tangled in a hammock.

He felt around in the pocket for something he could use, but there was nothing around. At the moment, he was the only thing in the pocket.

But, John did notice that the end of the thread on one of the seams of the pocket was sticking out just a little bit. He grabbed on to this, and was able to keep pulling to get the whole pocket to come undone. Before he knew it, he had created a gap that he could crawl out of.

He pushed his way through, and found himself tumbling out of the old woman's pocket and landing on the ground. She didn't even notice that he had fallen out as she kept walking down the path.

John dusted himself off and looked around. He had escaped, but he was now tiny and the forest was huge. How would he ever get back to the castle?

Well, there was nothing to do now but to start walking. His tiny legs made the journey very slow, but he kept going nonetheless.

As he was walking, various animals in the forest began to take an interest in him. A mouse walked alongside him. "Pardon me," said the mouse, "but what manner of creature are you? You look like a human, and yet I've never seen a human so small."

"I am a human," said John. "But I was shrunk down from my normal size by magic, and am now trying to get back to the castle. Do you know anyone who can help me?"

"Help you?" asked the mouse.

"Help carry me back to the castle."

"Oh, well maybe an animal might offer to do that if you're lucky. Especially if you met one of the bigger ones, like a deer. That is, if you can get their attention. The bigger animals tend to ignore those of us who are near to the ground. But if you yell loud enough, they may take notice. But may I give you one piece of advice?"

"By all means," said John.

"You shouldn't travel on the main path like this. Haven't you ever noticed that us small animals never walk along the main forest paths?"

"I hadn't really thought about it before," said John. "But now that you mention it, I guess I've rarely seen mice or rats along the main path."

"And for good reason," said the mouse. "For one thing, we could be easily stepped on by accident when a big animal comes through. Quite often they don't look where they're going. More often than not, they actually come running down these paths, and if there were a bunch of small animals using the path, we'd all get trampled before the big animal even knew we were there. But also, if we're out in the open on this path, we can be easy prey for anyone who wants to eat us."

"But no one will eat you," said John. "All the animals are vegetarian these days. They have been for centuries. I mean, except for some areas like the Bear King's Kingdom."

"Ah, how little you humans know," said the mouse. "Maybe in the human cities that's true. But so much goes on down on the forest floor that you are never aware of. Why, even in this modern age, a mouse would not approach a snake without caution. And with good reason."

For many snakes have not gone entirely vegetarian, despite what they may say in public. And there are many animals that a mouse must be careful of--the owls, the foxes, the wolves, the cats--why they could gobble up a mouse so quickly that no one would ever even know, and consequently they would never face any penalty for having broken the forest law. And even the large spiders may sometimes try to nibble on a mouse. But even if the bigger animals don't want to eat you, you can never be too careful. There are thieves and criminals in the forest just like there are anywhere else. They might kidnap you, hold you for ransom or sell you into slavery in the goblin mines, you never know."

"What good is a mouse in the goblin mines?" asked John.

"Mice are extremely sought after by the goblins," said the mouse. "We can get into all the tiny places that bigger animals can not. We're perfect for finding all the hidden diamonds in the cave."

"What do you suggest?" asked John.

"Get off the path, and go along the forest floor with the rest of the small animals. Stay under plants and bushes whenever possible, or travel through the fallen leaves to help hide yourself. You can follow me if you want."

"Okay," said John. "By the way, my name is John. What is your name?"

"My name is Benjamin. Benjamin the mouse. You can call me Ben for short."

"How long do you think it will take to walk back to the castle?"

"At the size you're at now? A day, at the very least. Longer if you take my advice and stick to the sheltered areas though. And you should take my advice."

And so John followed Benjamin off of the main path, and they walked through the forest floor, under the fallen leaves, and under the mushrooms, climbing over the roots of trees, and going around the bushes. It was very difficult to make fast time--John realized this immediately. But he kept following Benjamin nonetheless.

A frog hopped by. "Hello Benjamin," said the frog. "Who is travelling with you today? Is he one of the gnomes?"

"Hello Jacob. No, he's a human. He's been shrunk by magic," answered Benjamin. But then the mouse turned to John. "Actually that reminds me," he said. "We should introduce you to the gnomes. They may be able to help you."

"Gnomes? I've read about them in books, but never seen them," said John. "Are they in this forest? I've never heard anyone mention them before."

"The gnomes are mostly in their underground holes," said Jacob the frog. "They only come out when they want to, and they mostly avoid the humans. I would be surprised if the forest humans even knew they existed. But if you know where to look, they're all over this forest floor. They're just a little bit taller than you, I think."

"The gnomes are about 6 inches tall," said Benjamin the mouse. "It looks like you've been shrunk down to about 3 inches."

"Great," said John. "Show me where to find them."

“The entrance to their tunnels is usually hidden by a clump of mushrooms,” said Jacob the frog. “Let’s see if we can find any.”

So they wandered through the forest floor, looking for a hole down to the gnome tunnels by a bunch of mushrooms.