

CHAPTER 15 - THE BIG LAVENDER BEAR

It was a pleasant place to wander, and the two travelers were proceeding at a brisk pace when suddenly a voice shouted, "Halt!"

They looked around in surprise, seeing at first no one at all. Then from behind a tree there stepped a brown, fuzzy bear whose head came about as high as Cayke's waist--and Cayke was a small woman. The bear was chubby as well as fuzzy; his body was even puffy, while his legs and arms seemed jointed at the knees and elbows and fastened to his body by pins or rivets. His ears were round in shape and stuck out in a comical way, while his round, black eyes were bright and sparkling as beads. Over his shoulder the little brown bear bore a gun with a tin barrel. The barrel had a cork in the end of it, and a string was attached to the cork and to the handle of the gun. Both the Frogman and Cayke gazed hard at this curious bear, standing silent for some time. But finally the Frogman recovered from his surprise and remarked, "It seems to me that you are stuffed with sawdust and ought not to be alive."

"That's all you know about it," answered the little Brown Bear in a squeaky voice. "I am stuffed with a very good quality of curled hair, and my skin is the best plush that was ever made. As for my being alive, that is my own affair and cannot concern you at all, except that it gives me the privilege to say you are my prisoners."

"Prisoners! Why do you speak such nonsense?" the Frogman angrily. "Do you think we are afraid of a toy bear with a toy gun?"

"You ought to be," was the confident reply, "for I am merely the sentry guarding the way to Bear Center, which is a city containing hundreds of my race, who are ruled by a very powerful sorcerer known as the Lavender Bear. He ought to be a purple color, you know, seeing he is a King, but he's only light lavender, which is, of course, second cousin to royal purple. So unless you come with me peaceably as my prisoners, I shall fire my gun and bring a hundred bears of all sizes and colors to capture you."

"Why do you wish to capture us?" inquired the Frogman, who had listened to his speech with much astonishment.

"I don't wish to, as a matter of fact," replied the little Brown Bear, "but it is my duty to, because you are now trespassing on the domain of His Majesty, the

King of Bear Center. Also, I will admit that things are rather quiet in our city just now, and the excitement of your capture, followed by your trial and execution, should afford us much entertainment."

"We defy you!" said the Frogman.

"Oh no, don't do that," pleaded Cayke, speaking to her companion. "He says his King is a sorcerer, so perhaps it is he or one of his bears who ventured to steal my jeweled dishpan. Let us go to the City of the Bears and discover if my dishpan is there."

"I must now register one more charge against you," remarked the little Brown Bear with evident satisfaction. "You have just accused us of stealing, and that is such a dreadful thing to say that I am quite sure our noble King will command you to be executed."

"But how could you execute us?" inquired the Cookie Cook.

"I've no idea. But our King is a wonderful inventor, and there is no doubt he can find a proper way to destroy you. So tell me, are you going to struggle, or will you go peaceably to meet your doom?"

It was all so ridiculous that Cayke laughed aloud, and even the Frogman's wide mouth curled in a smile. Neither was a bit afraid to go to the Bear City, and it seemed to both that there was a possibility they might discover the missing dishpan. So the Frogman said, "Lead the way, little Bear, and we will follow without a struggle."

"That's very sensible of you, very sensible indeed," declared the Brown Bear. "So for-ward, MARCH!" And with the command he turned around and began to waddle along a path that led between the trees.

Cayke and the Frogman, as they followed their conductor, could scarce forbear laughing at his stiff, awkward manner of walking, and although he moved his stuffy legs fast, his steps were so short that they had to go slowly in order not to run into him. But after a time they reached a large, circular space in the center of the forest, which was clear of any stumps or underbrush. The ground was covered by a soft, gray moss, pleasant to tread upon. All the trees surrounding this space seemed to be hollow and had round holes in their trunks, set a little way above the ground, but otherwise there was nothing unusual about the place and nothing, in the opinion of the prisoners, to indicate a settlement. But the little Brown Bear said in a proud and

impressive voice (although it still squeaked), "This is the wonderful city known to fame as Bear Center!"

"But there are no houses, there are no bears living here at all!" exclaimed Cayke.

"Oh indeed!" retorted their captor, and raising his gun he pulled the trigger. The cork flew out of the tin barrel with a loud "pop!" and at once from every hole in every tree within view of the clearing appeared the head of a bear. They were of many colors and of many sizes, but all were made in the same manner as the bear who had met and captured them.

At first a chorus of growls arose, and then a sharp voice cried, "What has happened, Corporal Waddle?"

"Captives, Your Majesty!" answered the Brown Bear. "Intruders upon our domain and slanderers of our good name."

"Ah, that's important," answered the voice.

Then from out the hollow trees tumbled a whole regiment of stuffed bears, some carrying tin swords, some popguns and others long spears with gay ribbons tied to the handles. There were hundreds of them, altogether, and they quietly formed a circle around the Frogman and the Cookie Cook, but kept at a distance and left a large space for the prisoners to stand in. Presently, this circle parted, and into the center of it stalked a huge toy bear of a lovely lavender color. He walked upon his hind legs, as did all the others, and on his head he wore a tin crown set with diamonds and amethysts, while in one paw he carried a short wand of some glittering metal that resembled silver but wasn't.

"His Majesty the King!" Corporal Waddle, and all the bears bowed low. Some bowed so low that they lost their balance and toppled over, but they soon scrambled up again, and the Lavender King squatted on his haunches before the prisoners and gazed at them steadily with his bright, pink eyes.