

THE OTTER IN A SPOT OF BOTHER



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Imagine, the biggest, darkest, scariest forest you've ever stood in, with tree's so tall and bushy that they block out all the light on the ground below, and where the animals creep around in the darkness, making strange noises.

Now, imagine the opposite of that.

One that isn't dark or scary, it's just lovely; a big friendly forest where the only strange noise you can hear is laughter.

That forest is Zen Forest, and its where Poppy and Zander live.

Poppy is a Polar Bear and Zander is a Gander, which is a male Goose.

Polar Bears and Ganders normally don't live in forests, but this is Zen, and things are different here.

“How long has Lottie been missing?” you could hear the tension in Poppy’s voice as she quizzed Hetty Otter; Lottie’s mum.

Lottie lived in a Holt, which is a Den made of stones and driftwood at the side of the riverbank, with her 5 brothers and 4 sisters.

“She’s been gone for about 2 hours now,” Hetty Otter cried, “I know she’s always been adventurous, but I didn’t think she’d run away.”

Zander looked around the cramped interior of the Holt and wondered how 10 young Otters and 2 parents managed to sleep inside.

“I know this is scary,” said Zander, “but you couldn’t be in safer hands, you need a trained tracker, a soldier – someone who knows this forest and can find anyone or anything in it.”

Hetty Otter’s eyes widened with hope.

“And you can do all that?” she asked.

“No” replied Zander, bursting her bubble, “but I’m an exceptional actor so I’ll just act like I can.”

Hetty struggled to see how that was going to be of help to her. Sensing her doubt, Poppy stepped in.

“We’ll find Lottie, Mrs. Otter, and we’ll help her find her way home.”

Poppy and Zander didn’t know why Mrs. Otter asked them to help; but when her daughter went missing, she immediately asked them to help.

The first clue ...

Zander stared at the young Otter footprints in the riverbank mud and pretended he knew what he was looking at. He was wearing a camouflaged jacket and skip cat whilst around his neck hung giant binoculars.

“I think Lottie built a raft,” he said, “and this is where she pushed it into the water, before drifting off down the river. That’s what my senses are telling me.”

“I just said I watched her do that!” replied Spike the Porcupine, and Lottie’s best friend, “I saw her do it.”

Zander picked up some wet grass, rolled it between his wings, and then licked it.

“What does the grass tell you Zander?” Poppy was mesmerised.

“It tells me she was wearing her favourite yellow flip flops and a daisy chain in her hair.”

“I told you that too!” Spike seemed to be getting annoyed. “You’re wasting time, get in that raft there and go after her.” Spike pointed his bristles at a rickety raft tied up at the riverside.

Zander took one look at the raft and then turned to Poppy.

“I think we should take this raft Poppy and go after her.”

Spike threw himself and his spiky quills into Zander’s feathery bottom. Zander’s scream was so high-pitched only dogs could hear him.

“Just checking I’m not invisible,” Spike informed him, “that you *can* see and hear me.”

Poppy pushed the raft into the water and climbed aboard. It wobbled like it was made of jelly.

“All aboard Zander,” she said, trying not to laugh as Zander delicately soothed his stinging bum in the river. “We’ve got a lot of water to make up.”

The River that ran round the edge of Zen Forest was still at parts, and fast flowing at others. It was a good thing that Poppy and Zander were very strong swimmers and were at home in the water, because their rickety raft wibbled and wobbled as the current dragged them down the river. As they reached a short bend in the river, Poppy noticed an abandoned raft lying at the side on the bank.

“That’s got to be Lottie’s,” she said, pointing to the raft, “we have to get off here.”

They dragged their raft to the riverbank and quickly jumped off. Squashed in the mud, under a little Otter footprint, was a daisy chain. It was clear they belonged to Lottie.

“There’s her footprints and her chain,” said Poppy, “Daisy came up this way.”

“It’s not her footprint that’s worrying me,” Zander seemed very distracted by something else at the top of the slope, “it’s these paw prints.”

Poppy examined the paw prints that disappeared into the shadowy trees alongside Lottie’s.

“It could be a friendly dog,” Poppy sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

“We both know it’s not a dog,” replied Zander, taking a loud gulp, “it’s a Wolf.”

“I hope this Wolf isn’t trying to scare Lottie,” said Poppy, “wolves love to scare other animals. They’re just mean bullies.”

Zander raised his binoculars to his eyes and quickly scanned the trees around him.

“Can you see anything?” Poppy asked.

“Sssh ... whisper!” replied Zander, “people always whisper when they’re using binoculars.”

“Can you see anything?” Poppy whispered this time.

“You’ll have to speak up,” said Zander, “I can’t hear you.”

Poppy looked frustrated.

“We’re wasting time,” she fumed, “what can you see?”

“There’s a Ladybird on that tree the size of a dinner plate.” Zander hadn’t quite understood the concept of binoculars.

“Let’s go,” sighed Poppy, “there’s an Otter in a spot of bother and we need to find her quick.”

Two miles away, deep in the forest ...

An unsuspecting young Otter was skipping alongside her new friend, Wilbur the Wolf. His fur was grey and white and around his neck he wore a black bandana. Despite being only a year old he was tall and powerful and easily dwarfed Lottie – the little Otter he was walking into a trap to the rest of his pack. It wasn't something Wilbur wanted to do, but he felt he needed to prove himself to the other Wolves who teased him because he was kind and thoughtful.

“This is really nice of you,” Lottie squeaked with excitement, “taking me to the magic garden. I'd never heard of it.”

“Oh, it's real,” lied Wilbur, his guilt stopped him making eye contact with the cute little Otter.

“This is the first time I've ever been away from home,” said Lottie, “I just wanted to leave my Holt – and find some adventure. Now I've made a new friend called Wilbur!”

Wilbur smiled, but the horrible sensation he felt inside made the smile disappear fast. The truth was he didn't want to lure Lottie to a trap, he'd only just met her, and he liked her; she was kind and sweet and the type of friend he always wanted. She certainly wasn't like the others in his wolf pack; they were only interested in terrifying everyone in the forest.

As they neared the Wolf Den, a loud howl filled the air.

“What was that?”, the noise startled Lottie.

“That was one of my friends,” replied Wilbur, looking around, “he's up in those trees on the hill somewhere, watching us.”

Lottie started to feel a little uneasy. She suddenly realised that she was a long way from home, in a strange part of the forest, with a wolf.

“I want to go home now,” Lottie told him.

“You can’t,” Wilbur sighed, “not now, it’s too late.”

“Too late?” Lottie was confused, “too late for what?”

More wolf howls filled the sky. Lottie cowered next to Wilbur for protection; she trusted him. It just made Wilbur feel worse.

“I can’t do this,” he blurted, “there is no magic garden, this is a trap. Those Wolves are waiting for you. They gang up on other animals and terrify them. Trust me – they’re not nice.”

“But I did trust you!” Lottie started to cry, “I thought you were my friend.”

Wilbur quickly scanned the forest. The other wolves from his pack were already surrounding them. He turned to Lottie.

“I am your friend,” he told her, “I’m not going to let them scare you. I need you to get on my back and hold on, don’t be afraid.”

Lottie wasn’t sure whether to trust Wilbur or not, but she had no other option, she heaved herself onto his back – as soon as she held on, Wilbur turned and ran. The trees zoomed past as Lottie clung on as hard as she could. she could hear the other Wolves getting closer. As they reached a small clearing Wilbur suddenly skidded to a stop in front of a steep rocky hill – it was too steep for him to climb up. Just then, the unmistakable growls of his wolf pack crept up on them from behind.

“There’s 4 of them,” said Lottie.

Wilbur turned to face the 4 snarling, slobbering Wolves.

“Why are you running away Wilbur?” growled the pack leader - he was a huge black wolf; much bigger than Wilbur. “That wasn’t the plan,” he snarled.

“Stop it Marcus,” Wilbur replied defiantly, “you’re scaring her.”

Marcus and the other wolves laughed.

“Of course, we are, it’s what we do.”

“Well, we need to stop doing it,” said Wilbur, “nobody likes us, we spend our days trying to terrify other animals. Everyone in the pack does what you say because they’re scared of you. But how would you feel if another animal terrified you?”

“Who’s going to terrify us?” smirked Marcus.

“I will!” Zander flapped down from the rocks above and landed between them. He was wearing his trusty Ninja headband, just for added awesomeness.

“Prepare to feel the pain, from the Ninja Gander.”

Marcus stared at him for what felt like forever, before bursting out laughing. The other wolves just did what Marcus did.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Zander, “did I say *I* will terrify you? I meant *she* will.” Zander pointed a wing towards Poppy standing high up on the rocks.

Suddenly, the laughter stopped, and the wolves fell silent.

Poppy stretched her neck skywards and let out the loudest roar ever heard in the forest.

“That’s a Polar Bear!” Marcus screeched, “let’s get out of here”. The other wolves scarpered after Marcus as he disappeared through the trees into the shadows of the forest.

Poppy climbed down from the rocks to join her friends.

“Lottie, I’m Zander the Gander, and this is Poppy the Polar Bear,” Zander introduced them, “and your Mum asked us to come find you and bring you home safely.”

“Is my Mum mad?” Lottie asked nervously.

“No, she’s worried,” replied Poppy, “she just wants you home safe.”

Lottie looked up at Poppy standing over her.

“And that’s why she sent the strongest animal in the forest to come get me?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Zander, “and I brought Poppy.”

Neither Poppy, Lottie nor Wilbur said a word in reply to Zander, they just smiled and nodded.

“Will you get into trouble now Wilbur?” asked Lottie.

“Nah,” he replied, “I think Marcus and the others have learned their lesson; they won’t be scaring anyone for a while.”

“Good for you Wilbur,” said Poppy, “it took courage for you to stand up for Lottie and stand up to those bullies in your pack.”

Wilbur looked a little embarrassed by the praise.

“As the saying goes, all’s well when friends smell.”

Zander shook his head and sighed aloud.

“It’s `ends well’ Poppy,” he informed her, “all’s well that ends well.”

“That’s what I said,” replied Poppy.

“Come on Lottie, let’s get you home,” Zander placed a reassuring wing around her shoulder, “your Mum is waiting for you.”

The light was starting to fade when Poppy, Zander and Lottie made their way back through the forest. As they reached the rafts, they turned to wave to Wilbur who was watching from a distance.

Despite all the scary things that happened to them, they still thought it was a good day. Because it was the day, they made a new friend called Wilbur.

That was the day Lottie the Otter, got into a spot of bother.

And what a day it was.

Lottie learned that rushing into new adventures can sometimes put you in danger, and that you should always think first, plan what you're going to do, and let your parents know so they don't worry.

Wilbur showed everyone in his pack what real strength is. It's not about following others and getting caught up in things you know are wrong. It's about using your voice to make others see that you can change things for the better.

Poppy and Zander showed everyone that working together is better for protection, not for bullying.

And even in the toughest of times, there's always time to make a new friend.



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