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# 1

## A Long Journey to Make

Darkness had almost overtaken the small band emerging from the damp forest. For an hour now a steady rain had fallen, and all seven young people who trudged down the muddy road were soaked to the skin.

A lightning bolt scratched the darkness, blinding Josh Adams. Instinctively he twisted his head away and squeezed his eyes shut, then promptly stepped into a hole and fell sprawling.

"Josh—are you all right?" Sarah Collingwood was at his side in an instant, pulling at his arm. Unlike Josh, who was tall and gangly, she was small and graceful.

"The lightning didn't hit you, did it?" she asked in a frightened voice.

"No, it didn't—and you can let go of my arm. I don't need any help!"

Josh, at fourteen, was the same age as Sarah. However, he was the leader of this party, and it looked bad for the leader to fall flat on his face, so he pushed Sarah away almost angrily. He was easily embarrassed and already felt himself to be clumsy and plain. He scraped at the mud on his shirt in disgust. *Some leader I am—can't even stay on my feet!*

Then he glanced at the girl and noticed the hurt on her face. "I'm sorry, Sarah. I—I guess I'm a little bit on edge."

"I guess we all are," another voice said. Bob Lee Jackson paused beside him. Jackson was never known as anything but "Reb," for he came from the South. Another

fourteen-year-old, Reb had light blue eyes and pale, sun-bleached hair.

"Do you have any idea where we are, Josh?"

"No, I don't," Josh snapped.

The others had caught up and now stood in a half circle, silently watching him.

"Well, don't look at me! It wasn't *my* idea to travel in this storm!"

This was the sort of thing Josh despised. Others in the group, he felt, were more capable leaders—people such as Dave Cooper. But it was he who had been chosen by Goel to head the party, so now he peered forward and shook his head glumly. "We'll just have to go on."

"We might not find a place to camp all night. Why don't we at least try to get under some trees?" Jake Garfield was a small boy of thirteen, and he looked thoroughly miserable. Water ran down his soft, black cap and dripped onto his shoulders. He shivered. "Looks like we'll have to wait till morning to find a place to stay."

"No, there's got to be something not too far. We can't stay out in this." Josh wheeled and marched off down the road, his feet squishing in the mud.

He had not gone more than a hundred yards when another lightning bolt rent the sky, this time not as brilliant. He batted his eyes and cried out, "Look up there—a house!"

Quickly the others moved forward. Dark as it was, a house of sorts could be seen nestled off the road under some huge elms. "That must be the house Goel marked on the map!" Josh cried excitedly.

"It looks like something out of an old TV series," Dave Cooper said grumpily.

Sarah agreed, and the others looked troubled by the appearance of the building before them. It was a small,

forlorn-looking dwelling. But despite its gloomy appearance, Josh realized they had little choice.

"Come on," he said, ignoring their remarks. "At least it's got a roof and four walls. Goel said that they'd take us in—if it's the right place."

The seven sloshed up to the house, and—wiping the rain from his eyes—Josh knocked on the door.

It opened almost instantly, and the crackling in a large fireplace sent forth a cheerful sound.

"Who be you?" The speaker was a short, muscular man with a set of suspicious dark eyes. "What do you want?"

"We need a place to stay." Josh was aware of the quiver in his voice. "Go—"

"This ain't no inn. You'll have to go someplace else."

But before the man could slam the door shut, Sarah called out, "Goel sent us. He said you'd take us in."

"Goel? Well—that's different." He stared at them for a moment, then shrugged and stepped aside. "You'd better come in out of the wet." He called out, "Matilda, we have guests, guests from Goel."

Eagerly the young people entered the room and stood making puddles on the floor.

That seemed not to trouble their host, however. He said, "You'd better get out of them wet clothes." He peered at them once again and asked, "You say it was Goel who sent you?"

"Yes," Josh said eagerly. "He told us to wait here—that he'd come to us at your house. You *are* Crinen, aren't you?"

"Aye, I be Crinen." He turned away. "Matilda, take these girls to their room, and I'll take these young fellows to the attic."

The woman with merry blue eyes led Sarah and Abigail to a small room attached to the back of the house. "It ain't much," she said, "but at least you can get out of them wet clothes, and I'll fix you something to eat."

"Oh, thank you!" Sarah said warmly, and as soon as the woman left she began unpacking her knapsack. "It's a good thing we wrapped our clothes in oilcloth or we wouldn't have anything dry to put on."

"Well, I don't have anything fit to wear anyway." Abigail Roberts was a year younger than Sarah and much prettier—at least some thought so. She had blue eyes, blonde hair, and a small, graceful figure. Now, as she looked at the garment that had been wrapped in the oilcloth, she frowned in disgust. "This is the ugliest dress I have ever seen."

"At least it's dry."

Sarah put on her own dress, one much like Abigail's, and the two of them picked up their wet clothes. "Let's go by the fire. I hope they have something good to eat."

\* \* \*

Crinen led Josh and the other boys up a ladder into the attic. The boy quickly saw that it was a neat room with a ceiling that sloped to a peak. There were only two beds.

Reb said, "Looks like some of us will have to bunk on the floor." "Oh, we've got plenty of bedding," Crinen said. "You can strip them clothes off, and I'll go see if Matilda has something for you to eat."

As soon as Crinen had disappeared, the boys began eagerly changing their clothes.

"I don't know how we're ever going to get these dry," Jake complained, wringing out his shirt. He watched it drip on the floor. "Maybe we can take turns putting them in front of the fireplace."

The smallest member of the group—Wash—was a black boy of twelve. He moved quickly and soon had on dry clothing. Then he stood watching the others. Glancing toward the opening that led from the loft, he said, "I hope they've got something to eat. My stomach feels like my throat's been cut!"

"Mine too," Reb said. He looked over at Josh. "How long you think we'll have to stay here?"

Josh was pulling a warm brown sweater over his head. "I don't know. Goel didn't say. But I hope it won't be too long, because it's going to be pretty crowded in here."

"Well now, let's go down and see if Miss Matilda has cooked up some vittles." Reb grinned and led the way down the ladder.

Everybody gathered in front of the huge fireplace. Soon the two girls joined them, and they stood greedily soaking up the heat.

Thirty minutes later they were seated at a large, wooden table, wolfing down steaming bowls of what appeared to be beef stew.

"This is *good*, ma'am!" Reb exclaimed. "I don't guess you got any grits to go with it—or hog jowl?"

Matilda paused from her task of stirring the stew and refilling Josh's bowl. "Grits? Hog jowl? No, we don't have any of that. This is just deer stew."

"Well, it's good, whatever it is," Josh said. "And being here sure beats sleeping out in the mud, doesn't it?" He devoured his stew eagerly.

Soon all of them were pleasantly satisfied. Then they sat around the fire, and its warmth began to make Josh, at least, very sleepy.

Crinen came to look at them. He cocked his head to one side. "Would you be telling me where you come from?"

Josh opened his mouth to answer. Then a thought came to him, and he closed it.

Sarah must have guessed what was on his mind. "Well," she said, carefully, "if you mean where we *just* came from, that would be the Kingdom of Atlantis."

Crinen stared. "Why, that's under the ocean! You couldn't live in a place like that! Only mermen and merwomen live there."

Sarah shook her head. "I'm afraid you're mistaken about that. Goel sent us there to do something for him. And now that it's done, he told us to come here."

Crinen looked at them incredulously. He scratched his head. "People living under the sea! If that don't beat all! And now ye be going somewhere else."

"Yes," Sarah said. She started telling him that they were not really from his world—that all seven of them were aliens and strangers.

She tried to put together the story of how nuclear war had come to the earth. "We were all put in time capsules—sleeping chambers—where we stayed in a suspended state for years and years." Then she related how they had been awakened and commissioned by Goel to do his bidding, which meant to combat the dark forces that were now sweeping over Nuworld.

Sarah realized that was too much to explain to Crinen, and she ended by saying simply, "We are the servants of Goel, and we go where he sends us."

Crinen's eyes brightened. "And that's what I be! Me and Matilda." Then a shadow crossed his face, and he lowered his head. "There be not many of us now. The Sanhedrin, they came here last month looking for someone. I don't trust those priests and this Dark Lord they talk about!" He shook his head violently. "I'll have nothing to do with him!"

"That's wise," Josh said. "The Dark Lord is an evil force, and Goel is the only hope for this world."

They talked for a while, but soon all heads were nodding. Josh snapped out of a doze long enough to say, "Let's get to bed. Goel may come early tomorrow."

The girls went to their room at once.

Josh and the boys talked a little more before going to sleep. The last thing Josh remembered was Reb saying, "I shore do wish Goel would hurry up! I purely do *hate* not knowing where I'm going or when I'm going to do something!"

\* \* \*

Reb was due to be disappointed, for Goel did not come the next day—or the next week either.

The Seven Sleepers were glad to rest for a few days. Their journey from Atlantis had been difficult. However, as the week passed, they became edgy. There was nothing to do but walk through the woods, and the weather was turning colder.

Every night they would meet in the attic room before bedtime and talk of making plans, but there were no plans to be made.

"I don't like it," Reb complained one evening. He had been growing more and more impatient. Night after night he had expressed a desire to get on with it. "I want to be doing something!"

Dave Cooper's mouth turned down in a frown. "I'm tired of listening to you, Reb," he said shortly, "All you do is complain."

Ordinarily Reb would have turned off such a remark, but their circumstances had made him short-tempered, and he snapped back. "Well, I haven't heard you singing any happy songs, Dave."

Dave glared. "All you've done is gripe, and I'm telling you to shut up!"

Reb's face flushed. "I don't see anybody in here that can *make* me shut up!"

Dave had been keeping his temper under tight control, but now he threw himself onto Reb, driving him backward. The two fell and began hitting at each other, rolling on the floor.

Sarah jumped to her feet and grabbed Josh's arm. "Stop them, Josh!"

Josh shouted, "Cut that out!"

But the two combatants paid him no heed. They got to their feet, and Reb caught Dave over the eye with a blow that drove him into the wall. Dave struck out, catching Reb in the mouth.

Then Jake came up behind Reb and jumped on him. "Get hold of Dave, Josh!" he called out.

Josh thrust himself between the two. He started to say, "Now you two quit this." However, he had no chance, for in their anger both boys were unreasonable.

Dave's fist caught Josh on the chest and knocked the wind out of him.

Sarah and Abigail were both crying for them to stop.

Suddenly a voice said, "I bring you greetings of peace."

Startled, Reb and Dave dropped their arms, and everyone turned toward the dark end of the attic. A dim form could barely be discerned there.

Instantly Josh knew who it was. "Goel," he gasped.

The figure stepped forward, a tall man wearing a dark gray cloak that reached to the floor, with a cowl that covered his head. The lamplight illumined his stern features. "Why do I find you fighting among yourselves, my friends?" he asked, pushing the cowl back.

Reb ducked his head and muttered, "I'm sorry, Goel."

"Me too," Dave said, his face flushed with embarrassment. "I—I just lost my temper."

And then they all moved toward him, and he took each one firmly by the shoulders, greeting them all warmly—even Dave and Reb.

Finally Josh said, "I'm sorry you found us like this, Goel, but—"

"I know, my son." Goel nodded. "It has been hard." His gaze ran over the seven young people. Then a smile turned up the corners of his lips and gave him a kindly look. The sternness left him. "I have asked hard things of you—and now I have come to ask another hard thing."

Reb instantly said, "Just ask *anything!* I'd rather be doing something important than just sitting here."

Goel looked at him for a long moment. "My son, you must learn to wait. They also serve who only stand and wait. And the least of my servants, if they are faithful in what I command, are as great as the mightiest." He obviously saw that the boy did not understand. "One day you will learn this, Bob Lee—and it may be a hard lesson."

"What is it you want us to do?" Josh asked.

Goel looked long and hard at the Seven Sleepers. "You have a long journey to make—and a difficult task at the end of it. The Dark Power is sweeping over a small portion of Nuworld. Many years ago, after the old earth was destroyed, when all of you were placed in your sleep capsules, a man named Dion survived with some of his people. He led them far back into uninhabited places. There he founded a kingdom, and now that kingdom is in trouble. He is a good man, and his people are good people—but the Dark Lord and the servants of the Sanhedrin have already begun to destroy what he built up."

"What sort of a place is it?" Sarah asked timidly.

Goel asked, "You have heard of King Arthur and his knights of the round table?" When they all nodded, he

said, "Dion was a scholar studying medieval days. After the last great war, his mind was not steady. And when he built his kingdom, he built it after the ideas of King Arthur, even naming it Camelot." He paused. "When you get there you will see strange things. What you must remember is this—unless someone goes to help Dion, Camelot and all in it will fall under the sway of the Dark Lord!"

"We'll do it!" Reb exclaimed. "Just tell us how to get there."

Goel nodded. "I knew that you would, my son." His eyes swept over them. "I have great faith in you, and now you must have great faith in me, for your task will be difficult. Come now, let us talk, and I will tell you about Camelot . . ."

## 2

# Journey to Camelot

Abbey shifted uncomfortably in the saddle and frowned. "I'm tired of riding all day every day—and I don't like this horse any more than she likes me!"

Reb was leading the procession. They were winding along a narrow trail enclosed on both sides by tall trees. For some time the path had been barely wide enough for one horse, but now it broadened.

Reining in his horse, Reb sidled up to the girl's and grinned. "Why, Abbey, this is nothing! You ought to have been with us back in Arkansas when we used to round up some of the wild pigs that roam the woods."

Abbey pouted, her full, lower lip protruding.

She was a beautiful girl, Reb thought, by far the prettiest girl he had ever seen. He admired her blue eyes, as angry as they now were.

"Why would I want to hunt stinky old pigs?" she snapped back. "Anyway, it seems to me we could have gotten to Camelot an easier way!" She shifted uncomfortably, which caused her gray mare to buck slightly. Grabbing at the saddle horn, she gasped and cried out, "Oh! I'm falling!"

Reb instantly spurred the bay he was riding so that he could grab the bridle of Abigail's mare. "You settle down there, girl!" he said sharply to the horse.

The mare gave him a cautious look and seemed to agree.

"See, all she needed was a good firm hand."

Abbey smiled at him with admiration, seeming to forget her irritation. "You're the best rider I ever saw, Reb! The rest of us can barely stay on, but you seem like you were just born in the saddle."

Reb flushed with pleasure. He, along with the rest of the boys, had been smitten with Abigail's good looks from the time she joined them.

Now he said, as modestly as he could, "Well, never was a horse couldn't be rode—never was a rider couldn't be thrown." He grinned broadly, his teeth very white in his tan face. "I guess I found a few of those that couldn't be rode, but I done pretty good at the rodeos."

"You were a rodeo star?"

"Well, I don't know about the 'star' part. I won the state championship in my age group two years running at bronco riding." As he thought back to those times, sadness crossed his face. "I did pretty good at steer wrestling too—but that's all gone."

He rode silently for a while, then glanced over his shoulder. The rest of the party was plodding along. The horses were weary with the day's long journey. Then he looked ahead and asked, "Do you ever wish we were back again where we used to be, Abbey?"

Giving him a startled look, she said, "Yes, I wish that almost all the time, Reb. But I didn't think you did."

"Why would you think that? I'm no different from anybody else."

Abbey could no more keep from flattering a member of the male species than she could keep from breathing. Besides, there was truth in what she said. "Oh, Reb, you are so self-sufficient! Of course, Josh is too, I suppose, and Dave and the others—but they're not like you. Why, look at how you've had to take over on this two-week trip! You had to teach us how to ride and how to take care of

the horses. And that map—why, you knew how to follow that even better than Josh and Dave did.”

“Oh, I just been around horses more. Grew up with ’em, you might say. I had my own pony when I was only six and never got off a horse until . . .”

Abbey shot him a quick glance. “You mean until you went into the sleep capsule?” When he nodded, she sighed. “I know. I think of those days all the time. Oh, Reb, I had so much fun!”

“What kind of fun, Abbey?”

“Oh, parties—and I was a cheerleader and just getting real good at it. It was fun at school! I was elected class president—and I tried out for a part in a play. I would have gotten it too.”

She thought about that time and shook her head sadly. “But that’s all over now.”

“I guess so. We can’t go back.”

The trees formed a living corridor of trunks that wound through the deep forest. The sun shone overhead and came down in filtered bars of yellow that made the riders blink. The deep silence of the woods was broken only by the occasional, far-off sound of birds. But more than once they surprised deer, which threw up their heads and bounded away.

Behind the two in the lead, the other five riders sat their horses in weary silence. They had risen at sunrise, cooked a quick breakfast, and traveled all morning. At midday they stopped to rest the horses and themselves, and they had eaten the cold sandwiches they had packed in their knapsacks. Now the sun was declining.

\* \* \*

Josh kicked his horse into a trot until he was riding beside Sarah. “I hope we get to Camelot pretty soon. We’re just about out of food.”

"Well, according to the map we ought to be there tomorrow."

He gave her a strange look. "You know how maps are in Nuworld. Sometimes they work, and sometimes they don't." He looked back then. Jake seemed about ready to slip out of his saddle. He was exhausted. "Jake's not taking the trip well. Sometimes he's too tired to eat."

"I know. I feel the same way myself. We're just not used to riding this much." Sarah glanced ahead. "I wish we could all ride like Reb. He never gets tired."

"Well, he's kind of a cowboy," Josh said. "But anyway, let's just believe the map's right. Goel's never failed us yet."

At that moment a hawk flew overhead, crossing the sky almost like a bullet. Then it swooped suddenly to the earth, and there was the sound of thumping and a faint cry.

Sarah shuddered. "I know hawks have to kill to eat, but there's always something about it I don't like." Then she said, "No, Goel has never led us wrong." She looked at Josh carefully. "Are you afraid of what lies ahead of us in Camelot?"

Josh considered her words and shrugged. "Well, you might say I'm *apprehensive*, like when we went to Atlantis. None of us knew what to expect, and that's what we got—what we didn't expect. How do you suppose things are going back there?"

They talked about their adventure under the sea—about the king and queen and the other people they had met there and the exciting adventures.

Finally Josh said, "Well, I've had about all the adventure I need for a while."

"I guess all of us have—except maybe Reb—but we have to do what Goel says. Look, we've about reached the top of this mountain, haven't we?"

Josh noticed that the trail was widening even more. "Let's see if we've come to the peak." They spurred their horses to catch up with Reb and Abbey, and the beasts, as tired as they were, responded.

Soon all seven riders were racing toward the summit, which spread out into a much wider area. Minutes later they came to a sight that took their breath away.

A beautiful valley lay far below, like a green carpet. It was dotted with clumps of trees, and far away Josh could see dwelling places. His eyes were keener than the others', and he said, "See over there! That looks like a castle!"

As they all strained their eyes, Dave said, "I don't see anything, but I'm glad to be out of these woods." He looked down the forbidding slope. "The path down doesn't look like it's wide enough for a horse." He hated horses. "I think I'm going to walk down and let this beast get there the best way he can."

Reb laughed. "That hoss has surer feet than you, Dave. You better stay on board. Come on. I'm anxious to get down before dark."

As they descended, Jake moaned. "I'm gonna fall off this thing! Reminds me of a trip I took once. My folks took me to the Grand Canyon, and I had to get on a packhorse and ride down a trail like this. Only this one's steeper."

Josh, who was following closely behind Reb, did not like the steep incline to his right. The trail seemed to be carved out of rock and was solid enough, but it was very narrow.

For two hours the nerve-wracking descent continued until they finally reached the foot of the mountain.

Coming up beside Reb, Josh said wearily, "I'm glad that's over. Maybe we'd better camp—it's going to be dark in another hour."

Reb nodded. "I'll keep an eye out for a stream. Ya'll come on as you can."

Reb rode off. His big bay was seemingly as fresh as it had been that morning. Josh watched enviously as the boy guided the horse and sat on him as easily as if he were in a rocking chair.

They had plodded along for another fifteen minutes when suddenly Reb reappeared over to their right. He was riding at full speed.

Reb began waving. "Turn back! Get back into the woods!"

But it was too late. The horses began milling about, and Jake's horse suddenly hunched, throwing him to the ground. The boy grunted and then scrambled to his feet, trying to catch the animal.

By that time Reb had reached them. He wheeled his horse around to point in the direction of the woods. "Looky yonder—that must be some of the king's men. At least, I hope so!"

Josh followed the direction of the boy's gesture and received a shock. Half a dozen men were emerging from the woods. The sun glinted on their suits of bright armor, and the fading light caught the upright lances at rest in their hands.

"What'll we do, Josh?" Abbey cried out.

"Nothing. We couldn't outrun them on these horses even if they were fresh. Besides, why should we run? We were sent by Goel to the king."

Josh spoke with more assurance than he really felt. *Got to show some spunk here—even if I don't like the looks of those sharp lances.* He was thinking also that Goel had warned them about some knights in Camelot that were not to be trusted. "We've got no way of knowing who they are until we ask," he said. "Let's show them we're not afraid."

The armed men approached, widening their line and encircling the young people.

Dave whispered, "Wow, they look like they came right out of some movie! Look at them. All that armor!"

Josh was filled with apprehension, but he could not help but admire the beautifully wrought armor that gleamed like silver. All the men wore helmets with the visors down, and most of the helmets bore a streamer—red, yellow, blue—that caught the afternoon breeze. They carried swords at their sides, but at the moment each was pointing a steel-tipped wooden lance at the Sleepers.

One horseman nudged his charger forward a few feet, and his voice was muffled behind his visor. "Who are you, and what do you do in Camelot?"

Josh cried out loudly, "We are seven sent by Goel to King Dion!"

The leader swiftly raised his visor, and Josh took in the steady brown eyes that were examining him and the others.

After a long silence the knight said, "How can you prove this?"

Josh was somewhat taken aback. Goel had given them nothing to show that they were his servants, so Josh could only say, rather weakly, "When we talk to the king, we'll give the evidence. Take us there at once."

Another knight shook his lance in a threatening fashion. "They look to be spies to me. Let's hang 'em from the nearest tree."

A shiver ran over Josh, but he allowed nothing to show in his face. "If you hang the servants of Goel, woe be unto you."

The leader stopped the murmur that ran through the other knights surrounding them. He hesitated only for a moment more, then said, "I am Sir Gwin, one of the king's servants. We have had trouble with spies, and we must be

careful. Can you give no proof at all that you were sent by Goel?"

"We have no written message from him," Josh admitted. "If you'll let us talk to the king, I am sure he will be convinced."

Sir Gwin studied the boy, then nodded. "So be it. But you will have to give up your weapons, and you will be closely guarded."

The weapons, such as they were, were taken from them, and they were surrounded by a circle of knights, who eyed them warily.

As they made their way in the twilight, Sir Gwin said to Josh, "I hope you are telling the truth. If you are not, it will go ill for you."

"Why should we not be telling the truth?" Josh asked.

Sir Gwin turned to look at him. He had removed his helmet, revealing himself to be a handsome man with dark eyes and hair. "There are many who wish ill of the king. After all, he is the Sword of Camelot. We must be sure that you are not one of these ill-wishers. If you are from Goel, well enough, but if you are not . . ."

He shrugged, and his expression left no doubt in Josh's mind as to their fate.

Later Josh turned to Sarah. "I wish we had a letter or something from Goel. If we can't convince the king, they'll probably throw us in jail."

Sarah managed to smile, as tired as she was. "Well, we've been there before, and Goel never left us, did he?"