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# 1

## Captured

The only thing moving in the sky above was a single vulture. It kept circling high over the small band of teenagers stumbling through the desert. Only a dot at first, it made a slow swooping curve, coming closer and closer. Something ominous lay in the way it descended.

Finally the bird came close enough so that Reb Jackson lifted his head and gazed at it.

“That’s all we need. A vulture to keep us company!”

Reb was a lean boy of fifteen. He was the tallest of the young travelers who plodded painfully over the sand and rocks that made up this bad country. He had on a well-worn Stetson that shaded his eyes from the blistering sun. Now, stopping and taking it off, he pulled a scarlet bandana from his pocket and mopped his forehead. His face was red. Reb glared up at the vulture. “You come a little closer, and I’ll bust you with a rock!”

“Better save your strength, Reb.” Josh Adams and all the others stopped as well. Josh’s face felt sunburned, and his tongue was thick in his mouth. He shook the leather bottle at his side. “Not more than a few swallows here,” he said. “How much have the rest of you got?”

“I don’t have anything left.” Jake Garfield, short and fourteen, had red hair now shaded by a straw hat. He held up his own leather bottle. It was flat. He could hardly speak. “We’ve got to get to water soon, Josh, or we’re goners.”

Josh looked at the others. Brown-haired Dave Cooper was ordinarily strong and athletic. But their trek across the desert had worn him down. He did not speak at all but suddenly just sat down on the ground and hung his head.

“Come on, Dave, you can’t give up.” Gregory Randolph Washington Jones—Wash—was, at thirteen, the youngest of them. He held out his own water bottle and said, “Here. I got a little left. I’ll split it with you.”

Dave looked up at the black boy. “No,” he said stubbornly. “I’ve drunk mine. You’d better save it for yourself.”

“Aw, go ahead and drink some, Dave,” Wash urged. “I’m smaller than you are. I don’t need as much water.”

“That’s plain silly,” Dave mumbled.

Josh wanted to sit down and rest, too, but he knew that would be fatal. He squinted at the sky. “About three hours of day left. We’ve got to find a spring or a pool or something. The heat will be better when the sun goes down.” Then he walked over to the two girls. Both were sunburned and looked ready to drop. “You girls all right?”

Sarah Collingwood had on a pair of brown shorts, and her unprotected legs were blistered. She wore a bloused hat over her black hair, and that sheltered her face. She tried to smile at him. “We’ll be all right, Josh. Don’t worry about us.”

“Be all right!” Abbey Roberts wailed. “How can you say that? We’re going to die of thirst out here in this desert!” Abbey was usually very careful of her appearance, but now she was dressed in faded, worn clothes as were the rest of the Sleepers.

Josh knew that he had to get them moving. He was the leader of the Seven Sleepers. So he said as cheer-

fully as he could, “Come on, gang. We’re bound to find water. And one thing’s for really sure—that sun has got to go down.”

It took some encouraging, but he finally got the group going again. He tramped ahead of them, his eyes searching for any spot of green. After a while, Sarah came up beside him, and he said, “If you see anything green, we go for it. If it’s green, there has to be water close by.”

“They can have this land of Grobundia,” Sarah said. She took a small sip of water from her bottle.

Josh glanced at her. She was holding the liquid in her mouth, enjoying the delicious moisture as it soaked into her dried tissues.

Then she swallowed and said, “We’ve heard some pretty bad things about Grobundia. After this, I believe them all.”

“We didn’t have any choice,” Josh said. “We had to go through this territory. There’s no other way. Couldn’t go around it. Couldn’t fly over it. Wish the eagles were here to carry us over.”

“The eagles! I’ve been thinking about them myself,” Sarah muttered. “Wish they’d show up again.”

“Maybe they will. Maybe Goél will send them. He knows what we need. The eagles came before when we needed them—just like we do now.”

Josh looked up at the sky. It looked unfriendly and hard enough to scratch a match on. There were no eagles. “Not a cloud,” he said, trying not to sound bitter.

“Well, don’t give up, Josh. We’ve been in tighter spots than this in Nuworld.” Now Sarah was being the encourager.

Nuworld. That weird place that now existed after an atomic war had destroyed most of the world as it

had been. There were strange mutations here. There were giant eagles large enough to ride on. More than once those eagles had carried them away from danger. But now, looking up, Josh saw only the lone vulture.

“We’ll make it,” he said grimly. “Goél hasn’t forgotten us, and we’ll make it. That old buzzard might as well go fly someplace else.”

The sun seemed pasted in the sky, as though it were not going down at all. On and on the Seven Sleepers trudged with sore feet and sunburned skin and mouths as dry as dust.

Of course, finally the sun did go down, and, just as it did, Josh suddenly cried, “Look over there! There’s a patch of green! Come on!”

The stones bruised his feet as they straggled, half-running, across the desert floor. At the green patch, a small spring was making a pool no more than three feet across. Water from the pool trickled off for a little ways and then disappeared into the dry earth.

“Be careful,” Josh said as they knelt about the pool. “We drink what we can, then we fill our water bottles.”

“I could drink it all!” Jake cried.

“Save some for me, Jake,” Reb grinned through chapped and dried lips. “I need an ocean!”

“The girls first,” Josh said.

Not all could drink from the small water supply at one time. The girls drank, and then the boys took turns.

Josh was the last. He drank and drank, then said, “I’ve drunk all I can, and I’m still thirsty. My tissues are all dried up.”

“We’ll have to fill the water bottles a little at a time. This isn’t much of a spring,” Reb said.

Night came on quickly. Overhead the stars glittered like diamonds. A full moon rose above the eastern horizon.

They had lost all of their equipment including their weapons. They had nothing to eat. They were without blankets. All they could do was to curl up on the sand.

Sarah and Abbey huddled together because, as hot as the day had been, the air cooled off rapidly. Josh could hear their murmured conversation.

“I wish we had something to eat,” Abbey said.

“We’ll get to someplace tomorrow. There’s probably a village up ahead.”

“I surely hope so,” Abbey said, “and I need some makeup. I must look awful.”

“Makeup!”

“I don’t feel *human* without makeup, Sarah. You know that!”

Listening, Josh could not help but smile, miserable as he was. He had often noted that no matter how bad things were, Abbey’s first thought was either of boys or her makeup. *Oh, well*, he thought as he started to doze off, *I’d settle for a good steak myself. Abbey can have the makeup.*

But the water had refreshed him, and the singing winds of the desert lulled him to sleep.

Josh did not know how long he had slept. He hated to come out of it, though. Consciousness slowly came back, but he still felt he was half asleep.

*I wish I could just sleep for a month*, he thought, *and wake up in the middle of a nice, green place with lots of lakes and rivers and streams and . . .*

More and more he came out of his almost comalike sleep, and his mind began reviewing what had hap-

pened. Since coming to Nuworld, he had been leader of this small group of young people who had been safely brought from Oldworld by means of sleep capsules. The Seven Sleepers soon found themselves under the command of a strange and wonderful figure named Goél.

Their mysterious leader appeared to the Sleepers from time to time. He led the battle against an evil force commanded by the Dark Lord, and often he had sent them on dangerous missions. Right now Josh lay thinking, *I'd be happy if we didn't have any more missions. I'd just like to take a break for a while.*

A slight sound caught his attention, and he opened one eye. He expected to see one of his friends turning over in his sleep. Instead, what he saw brought him fully awake. Instantly.

At first he could not make out what it was, and then he saw someone's feet standing not three feet away from him!

In alarm, Josh instinctively made a grab toward his waist, but no sword was there. He came to his feet then with a bound but stopped stock-still at once, for something sharp probed right at his heart. He looked down and saw a long, cruel knife, held in the hand of a small, strange being.

Josh looked around wildly. *Dwarfs!* Their entire camping area was surrounded by little men wearing flowing desert robes and carrying blades that glinted in the moonlight. The bright moonlight fell on their dark-skinned faces too. Their robes had hoods that could cover their heads. Their faces were thin and hard. Worst of all, none of them seemed friendly.

Looking down at the little man who held the knife, Josh swallowed hard. "Hello," he said. "My name is Josh Adams."



“I am Gulak. And you’ll have no name soon.”

Gulak had slanted eyes. When he grinned, as he did now, he showed stained, broken teeth. And although he was no more than three feet tall, he appeared tough and wiry and dangerous.

One of the other desert raiders said, “Let’s kill them now.”

“Why should we kill them, Mudnor?”

By now the other Sleepers were on their feet. But they were as weaponless as Josh was. Mudnor laughed evilly as he looked about at them. Suddenly he reached out and grabbed Abbey Roberts by the hair. With the other hand he whipped out a knife and held it to her throat. “Just for the pleasure of it,” he said. “I have not killed anyone in weeks now.”

“Wait a minute!” Josh cried. “You can’t kill us like that!”

Laughter went up from the surrounding band of dwarfs. Gulak said, “Who are you to be telling us what we can do? You come into our land uninvited, and we will do as we please with you.”

“Let me have this one to play with,” Mudnor said, keeping the blade at Abbey’s throat. The girl’s eyes were wide with terror, and she struggled to free herself. But Mudnor was very strong, though not as tall as Abbey.

Gulak laughed at this, but he said, “No, we will sell them as slaves.” He looked up at Josh and, grinning, prodded him with the knife point. “You will not like it in the mines,” he said. “You will go down there and work until you die. You will never see daylight again.”

One of the other dwarfs went up to Sarah. “I’ll take this one. I’ll pay for her myself. She can be my slave.”

He gripped her arm roughly, and she cried out.

“Let her alone!” Josh said. He had time to say no more, for Gulak swiftly reversed the knife and struck him right between the eyes with its heavy handle.

“Hold him!” he said, and instantly Josh felt his hands seized by several of the little men.

“I’ll give you a taste of what to expect in the mines!” Gulak laughed. He drew out a short whip that hung from his belt. It made a whistling sound as he swung it in the air. Then it struck Josh’s back.

A band of fire ran across Josh’s shoulders, and he bit his lips to keep from crying out.

Sarah twisted herself free and threw herself at one of the men holding Josh, dragging him backwards.

“Well, you have spirit,” Gulak said. He started toward Sarah. “I will keep this one myself!”

The one dwarf’s grip had been broken, and Josh struggled to get free. But other hands held him. Then he heard the hissing of an arrow, and Gulak fell to the ground.

Mudnor shouted, “Look out!” He had time to cry no more, for another arrow felled him.

Screams of rage and fear came from the other little men. One of them cried out, “Quick, we’ve got to get away!”

And the band of dwarfs took flight.

It all happened so fast that the Sleepers could only stand there speechless.

## 2

# Banquet in the Desert

Josh stood staring down at the still forms of their small attackers. What had happened seemed like a dream to him, and yet his back burned with the blow he had taken from the little man's whip.

He noted that the horizon was pink. The sun was beginning to rise. He looked into the surrounding desert in all directions, but he saw nothing. They had camped in a small valley encircled by rising rocks and shale. He called toward the distant rocks, "Hello! Who are you?"

The desert was as silent as a tomb.

Dave whispered, "It couldn't have been a ghost. Those guys with the knives were here—and these two are really dead."

Even as Dave finished speaking, a figure suddenly stood up from behind a shelf of rock. Josh saw at once that this was no Grobundian, for he was tall and well formed. "Hello," Josh said again and waited.

All eyes were upon their rescuer as he approached.

Abbey whispered, "He's so good-looking, isn't he?"

No one answered. Josh was studying the young man. He was indeed fine looking, tall and trim with blond hair that lay over his shoulders. He was deeply tanned. But there was a surly look about him.

Josh stepped forward to greet him. "You came just in time," he said. "Thank you."

"What are you doing out here in the desert?"

“We’re lost,” Josh said. “We’re trying to get to Madrian.”

“Well, you’re not more than a hundred miles off course!” There was something ill-natured about the reply.

The young man was less than twenty, according to Josh’s estimate. He was wearing light green slacks and a white shirt. He held a knapsack in one hand. On his back was a quiver of arrows, and in the other hand he held a curved bow. A wide-brimmed hat shaded his face from the rising sun.

The stranger snorted in a disgusted manner. “You’re fools to be out here in Grobundia in the first place. And with no weapons? Where are your weapons?”

Josh was taken aback by the surly tone. “We had a brush with some of our enemies a way back,” he explained. “We had to get out without a thing except the clothes on our backs. I admit we were careless. I guess last night we figured we didn’t need to be watchful in a place like this.”

“What’s your name? Who are you?”

“I’m Josh Adams, and these are my companions.” Josh went around naming each Sleeper, and each felt the piercing gaze of the blue-eyed stranger as he studied them carefully.

A laugh issued from the man’s lips. “A clan of babies out here in Grobundia! You won’t last long. It’s a wonder you haven’t starved to death already. Or run out of water.”

“Well, to tell the truth,” Josh said, “we almost did. If we hadn’t found this spring last night, I think we’d all be out of it.”

Wash spoke up then. “What’s your name? That’s my first question.”

“What’s your second?”

“Have you got anything to eat?”

The small youngster’s nerve—and humor—seemed to impress the blond stranger, and he almost smiled. “My name is Rainor.”

“This isn’t your country, either, is it?” Sarah asked. “You certainly don’t look like a Grobundian.”

“Not much. I’m headed out of here the same as you are—except that I’m not lost.”

“I’ve never been a beggar,” Reb Jackson said, “but if you’ve got a sandwich or a bit of hog jowl or anything to eat in that knapsack of yours, I’d sure appreciate a bite.”

Rainor looked at the tall boy and the high-crowned Stetson as if pondering his request. Then with a gesture of disdain he threw down the knapsack and said, “Not much there, but take what you want. You’re welcome.”

At once Sarah smiled. “Thank you so much, Rainor. We are really very hungry.”

“We’ll be glad to pay you. I did come away with a little gold.”

Rainor stared at Josh as he produced from under his shirt a leather bag hanging from a thong. Then he said, “Never mind payment. And you’d better keep that out of sight. There are people that would cut your throat for your shoes in this country.”

Hastily Josh dropped the bag back down inside his shirt. “That’s good advice,” he said. “I guess I’m not thinking very clearly. And thanks for your generosity.”

“Is there a village close by—or a place we can buy something to eat?” Jake asked. His eyes were on the girls as they began taking food out of Rainor’s knapsack.

“You’d starve to death before you got there,” Rainor

said. Ignoring them, he went over to the spring, lay flat on his stomach, and drank deeply.

Dave leaned over to see what the girls had found in the knapsack. "What's in there?" he asked.

"There's some meat and bread. Not a whole lot. I'd hate for us to eat it all. It's all he has."

"He can buy more when we get to a village," Dave said. "We all can." He eyed the food ravenously, and so did the rest of the Sleepers.

Sarah divided up the food and called out to Rainor, who was now walking around the campsite, standing on rocks at times and gazing off into the distance. "Come and have breakfast with us, Rainor. This is your food. We don't want to eat it all."

He shook his head but did not answer, and she said, "He certainly doesn't have very good manners."

"But he *is* good-looking," Abbey commented.

Josh smiled and took a bite of sandwich. The bread was not fresh, and the meat was dry, but it was food. He thought it tasted wonderful.

When he and the others had finished what little there was of Rainor's food supply, they walked to where their rescuer was again scanning the horizon. Josh felt awkward. He said to Rainor, "We don't usually allow ourselves to get into this kind of a fix, and I'll have to tell you I'm worried."

"You should be!" Rainor motioned back toward the dead Grobundians. "There are plenty more where they came from. They'll probably be back in an hour or two with the whole tribe. Bloodthirsty weasels they are!"

"I hate to have to ask you, but could you tell us how to get out of here?"

Rainor just looked at him. He was silent for a long

time, while Josh waited anxiously. Then Rainor sighed. "You can follow me," he said finally. "If you can keep up."

Walking to where his knapsack lay, he snatched it up and strapped it onto his back. Without even a glance at the others or another word, he picked up his bow and strode off.

"Let's go with him!" Reb said quickly. "That guy's the only game in town. Let's not lose him."

It was one of the hardest marches that the Seven Sleepers had ever been on. They had tramped through swamps and jungles, mountains and deserts, but Rainor seemed determined to walk their legs off. He did stop in the middle of the morning to take a drink from his water bottle and rest a few minutes, and the others did the same. At noon he simply stopped, lay down on the ground, and pulled his hat down over his eyes. He seemed to go to sleep at once, and this amazed the Sleepers.

"He sleeps just like a cat," Sarah whispered to Josh.

"Well, we'd better rest, too. My legs are killing me. I never saw such a walker."

Forty-five minutes later the march was on again. It continued all afternoon. By the time the sun was dropping low in the sky, Abbey whispered, "My water's all gone again."

"Mine too," Sarah said. "This has been the hardest march I can remember."

They staggered on until, thirty minutes later, Rainor abruptly halted. He waited until everyone had caught up with him. "Look," he said, "there is water." He pointed to his left, and they all turned and strained their eyes.

“Yep, I see some green over there,” Reb said excitedly. “Let’s go check it out.”

“It’s definitely water,” Rainor said. “You go make camp beside it. I’ll see if I can find something to eat.”

“Good luck,” Josh said. “We could all use some food.”

The Sleepers watched Rainor stride off into the apparently endless desert. Josh was amazed at his ongoing energy. “Well, let’s see what that water looks like.”

They trudged wearily across the sand. Rainor had been right. There was a small spring, as apparently they all were in this country, but enough for their needs. The place made a very good campsite.

After they had drunk, all the Sleepers threw themselves flat, panting for breath. It had been a hot day, and Josh was sure that the heat had drained every bit of energy out of his body. They all decided to take a nap except for Reb, who was always tougher than the rest. He said he would stand watch while the rest slept.

Josh was still dead to the world when he heard Reb yelling, “Here he comes!”

At once the Sleepers came to their feet. Here came Rainor, strolling into camp with a small desert antelope on his back. Throwing it down, he said, “There’s supper. If you’ll dress it, make the fire, and cook it, I’ll share it with you.”

“We’d be glad to do that,” Josh said. “Everybody scatter around and find something to burn.”

Finding wood proved to be quite a chore, but by fanning out they managed to gather enough. Quickly Dave built up the fire, and Reb expertly skinned and dressed the antelope with Rainor’s sheath knife.

“This here ain’t as big as the deer we had in



Arkansas,” Reb said, “but I expect he’ll make pretty good eating anyway.”

The smell of roasting meat tantalized Sarah and seemingly all the other Sleepers as well. Rainor had said not a word. He sat by himself, staring into the fire and lost in thought. He seemed to be totally in his own world. After a while he got up and walked off, still without speaking.

“He’s *so* strange,” Sarah muttered. “It wouldn’t hurt him to give us a pleasant word now and then.”

“Well, he brought home the bacon, so he can be as mean as he wants to.” Reb grinned at her. Then he poked at the meat with the sheath knife and said, “I reckon this is about ready. Somebody better go find that fellow.”

“I’ll do it,” Sarah offered. She got up and walked toward the sandy rise where Rainor had disappeared. Then she saw him, outlined against the dark red sky as the sun went down. “Rainor,” she called, “supper’s ready.”

He turned at once and walked by her without speaking. In fact, she had to hurry to keep up. “I can’t tell you how grateful we all are for saving us and now for sharing your food with us,” Sarah said.

Still Rainor did not speak. He walked into the camp and glanced at Reb slicing the roasted meat. He sat down, and Reb gave him the first chunk. “You filled the pot, so you get the prime cut, Rainor.”

Still the strange young man did not answer. Without a thank-you, he began to eat.

“Well,” Reb said to the rest, “lay your ears back and fly right at it!” He continued cutting off pieces of the antelope and passing them out.

The roast was tough, and there was no bread left to serve with it, but the meat flavor was delicious. Rainor had given them salt at breakfast time, and there was plenty of water. The Sleepers ate contentedly.

Finally Wash lay back and sighed. “That was super!”

“Sure wish I had some of my mama’s buttermilk pie, though,” Reb said. “That’d go down right good.”

“You remember the time we had to eat tiger meat when we were out in the jungle?” Josh asked.

“That was awful,” Sarah said. “I can’t imagine eating a cat—even a tiger.”

“At least we didn’t have to eat one of them dinosaurs,” Reb said.

Everyone was satisfied and content. Overhead the stars twinkled, and the campfire crackled merrily. A sense of peace came over Josh. For a long time, he and the other Sleepers sat talking about their adventures.

They talked about the time they had been in the land of ice and snow, fighting the Ice Wraiths. They talked about being made prisoners by flying men in the high mountains. They talked about going under the sea to live with the strange race that had adapted to that environment. Again and again they mentioned Goél, for he was the one that held them all together.

Rainor sat in silence, listening to it all.

Josh felt good. His back still stung from the blow he had taken from Gulak’s whip, but Sarah had put on it some soothing ointment that Rainor had furnished. He was warm and well filled, and he was with his friends.

And then, abruptly and for the first time that night, Rainor spoke up. His voice cut into their conversation like a knife. “I am also in the House of Goél.”

Immediately they all began to babble. Sarah was sitting close to the stranger, and she reached over and grabbed Rainor's arm. "Are you really a follower of Goél?"

"I am. Not a very good one, I fear, but I believe he is the only one who can deliver us from the Dark Lord."

Josh was excited. "Rainor, why didn't you tell us this at once?"

Rainor shook his head. "These are dangerous times. Not everyone is friendly to Goél, and some people are pretenders. I see that you are not. In some places where I have been, it is worth your life to confess that Goél is your leader."

"We know that is true," Dave said. "As a matter of fact, if you were an enemy of Goél, you could have killed us all by now."

"I could have done that, but fortunately for you I believe in him."

Sarah asked, "Where's your home, Rainor?"

But Rainor seemed reluctant to talk about his home. "Tell me who you are, instead," he said.

"We are often called the Seven Sleepers," Josh told him.

Rainor nodded. "I suspected as much. We have heard tales of you. But I thought you would be much older."

"Everybody does." Josh shrugged and smiled. "Do you want to hear our story?"

"Yes. I do."

Josh settled back and began to tell their tale. "I was born in Oldworld," he began, "and before the great war came, I was put in a sleep capsule. That's an invention that can keep a person alive for many years . . ."

Rainor listened, his eyes fixed on Josh's face. He

did not interrupt, and his blue eyes glowed with interest as Josh continued to relate the history of the Sleepers.

“. . . and so we woke up in Nuworld—and were things ever changed!”

“Changed how?”

“In almost every way. For one thing, geography was changed from the way it was before. The continents were all shifted around.”

Josh told about their experiences with Goél, and then said, “You’ve saved our lives, Rainor, and I can tell you that Goél will be most grateful.”

“*We* certainly are,” Sarah said.

“Is there anything we could do for you in return?” Josh asked.

The question seemed to grab at Rainor. He started to speak, then changed his mind. “We will talk in the morning,” he said. “Now it is time to get some sleep.”

Everyone got ready to lie down for the night. They recognized the wisdom of Rainor’s words.

There were still miles to go, but Josh was hopeful. “Rainor’s a follower of Goél,” he said wonderingly. “He could lead us out of this desert. Everything’s going to be all right.”

“I think you’re exactly right, Josh,” Jake muttered. “Rainor is just what we needed.”

“Right!” Dave agreed sleepily.

“Sure,” Reb spoke up. “He’s just the ticket. Why, I knew a fellow like him once who—”

“None of your tall tales tonight, Reb,” Josh said quickly. “We’ve got a ways to go tomorrow. So let’s get some sleep.”