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# 1

## Another Quest

I'd give anything if I could go to a beauty shop."

Abbie Roberts was a petite girl of thirteen. She had blonde hair, and her blue eyes gave off sparks as she ran her hands through her long locks. "And a manicure," she added. "Look at these fingernails! They'll never be the same again!"

Sarah Collingwood, sitting across from Abbie, was one year older. She did not have Abbie's spectacular good looks, but she was small and graceful with large brown eyes and black hair.

"Abbie," she said with some irritation, "you might as well forget about such things as beauty shops. You may have had things like that in Oldworld, but they're gone forever."

The two girls sat at the mouth of a small cave and had been staring out into the late afternoon dusk. Both wore clothes that were much the worse for wear. Abbie's blue dress had a torn skirt and was practically stiff with dirt. Sarah's garb was not much better—a pair of jeans with ragged cuffs and a tan shirt with most of the buttons replaced by pins. Both were hot and tired and hungry.

Abbie glared. "I think this camping out is terrible. I liked it much better when we were at Camelot—or even down in Atlantis." She picked up a cloth, went and dipped it into the small stream that ran beside the cave, then wrung out the excess water. Wiping her face, she protested again. "I need some face cream. My skin's getting as rough as rhinoceros hide."

“We’ll just have to make the best of it.” Sarah looked again into the gathering darkness. “I wish the boys would come back. It’s going to be dark soon, and I’ll bet there are wild animals around here.”

Abigail said abruptly, “Let’s wash our hair. I can’t stand it when my hair gets stiff with dirt like this.”

“We don’t have any soap.” Sarah gave her companion a critical look. “I wish you’d just learn to be patient, Abbie. We knew this was going to be a hard trip.”

The Seven Sleepers had just completed an adventure at a strange place called Camelot. Their heads were still filled with visions of ladies and jousting knights and even dragons.

It was the sort of adventure they would have enjoyed in their earlier lives. But their time in Oldworld had been cut short by a terrible war. They had survived only because their parents placed them in sleep capsules. Years passed, and the world changed completely so that when they came forth they were shocked to find themselves living in the midst of strange creatures and alien landscapes. Then they were called to spread the news that Goél, a strange shadowy figure, was going to bring order and peace to Nuworld, as it was called.

“When do you think we’ll get out of this terrible forest?” Abbie asked irritably.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I think Goél could have arranged things a little better. If we have to go from place to place, I don’t see why he can’t give us better transportation.”

Sarah rose to her feet suddenly, biting her lip. She was tired and hungry, and Abigail’s constant complaining got on her nerves. She walked downstream a few feet, stopped and listened, then said, “Someone’s coming!”

Abbie scrambled up and came to stand beside Sarah. Her eyes grew large, and she whispered, “I hope it’s

them—but it could be anybody out in the middle of this forest.”

The two girls peered into the wall of huge trees that flanked the stream.

The voices Sarah had heard grew louder, and then, as three young men stepped out from the shadows, she cried with relief, “It’s Josh—and the others! I hope they brought something to eat.” She ran across the small clearing to the leader. “Josh, are you all right? We were getting worried.”

Josh Adams was fourteen. He was tall and gangling, but there was a promise of strength and grace in his growing form. He was not handsome, and yet there was reliability and steadiness in his face. He had auburn hair that caught the last rays of the sun, and blue eyes. He had been the first Sleeper, the one called to find the rest. He had grown especially close to Sarah.

“Sure, we’re OK, Sarah. Just tired and ready to eat.”

One of the other boys held out a sack. “We’ve got three rabbits,” he said. “That’ll be enough to eat tonight.”

“Oh, good, Jake,” Sarah said. “Give them to me. I’ll clean them.”

Jake Garfield was thirteen, a Jewish boy, small with red hair and intense brown eyes. He handed over the bag. “I wish they’d been yearling calves though. I’m hungry enough to eat one.”

The other boy was the smallest of the three. He was twelve, and his black face was split now by a gleaming white smile. “I’ll clean those rabbits, Sarah,” he said. “I don’t mind.”

“Oh, thank you, Wash. But you all go rest while Abbie and I do the cooking.”

The boys threw themselves down in front of the cave, groaning with relief.

Sarah borrowed a knife from Josh and dressed the rabbits, gutting them while Abbie quickly gave herself to building a fire. She managed to cut some saplings into sticks, and the girls soon had the game roasting over the yellow flame.

When the rabbits were almost done, two more boys came in. Dave, the tallest of the Sleepers and the oldest at fifteen, called out, "We've got another rabbit if we need it." He was athletic, very handsome. He had yellow hair and blue eyes and walked with a springy step.

"Reb," he said to his companion, "that was a good shot. I don't think I could have gotten that one."

The final Sleeper was the most spectacular of all. At fourteen, he was very tall. He had light blue eyes and pale, bleached hair. He wore a Stetson as only a cowboy would wear it. In fact, he had been a kind of cowboy, growing up in Texas in his old life. He grinned now and said, "Shucks, that wasn't no shot at all, Dave. If I'd of had my 30-30, I'd of got that deer we seen a ways back."

"Well, I wish you had it." Dave sat down beside the three boys at the cave mouth. "I wish Goél would let us have rifles. Sure would make life simpler."

All seven young people showed the marks of long travel. They had had time for only quick splashes of water on their faces as far as bathing was concerned, and now they were about to find themselves back in a civilization again.

For a while, Dave did most of the talking. He spoke about their recent adventures, and he grinned at Reb. "Do we still have to call you 'Sir Reb' now that we're out of Camelot?"

"Oh, I reckon not."

Reb had been the hero of their adventure there. A natural horseman and having been a rider all his life, he

had been able to do things in that country that the others could not.

Now the darkness closed about them, and the flickering firelight reflected on Reb's pale blue eyes. "I liked that place," he said slowly, "about as well as any place I ever seen."

"Even better than Texas?" Jake asked.

"Well, maybe not that good—but except for Texas I guess it was about the best place I was ever at."

"I think you just had a case of puppy love." Josh grinned across the fire. "I can't blame you though. That princess sure was a pretty thing, and she sure was gone on you."

Reb's face reddened, but he said nothing. Finally he looked up. "You reckon we'll ever get back there?"

Sarah tested one of the roasting rabbits with Josh's knife. "I hope so. I hope *you* do anyhow. It seemed like you were born for a place like that—horses and jousting. A little bit like the days of the old West." Again she poked at the rabbit. "I think this is about done. Come and get it."

They gathered around, and Sarah and Abbie cut up the rabbits and served them. Then they all sat back, handling the hot meat gingerly, listening to the silence of the forest as they ate.

"Well, that was good," Wash said, licking his fingers. "Still wish that rabbit had been as big as the deer that got away. My stomach thinks my throat's been cut." He looked over at Josh. "How much longer you think it'll be before we get out of this woods?"

"I don't know." Josh pulled the last fragment of meat off a bone, then tossed the bone out into the grass. "Maybe a day or two. And then what?"

His question produced a moody atmosphere, and each Sleeper seemed to be thinking of all that had gone past.

"I'd like to have a little R & R," Reb said.

Jake looked up. "What's that?"

"Rest and recreation." Reb grinned tiredly. "It looks like we could use a little vacation, but I don't know if we'll get it."

Sarah opened her mouth to comment. But before she could speak, a familiar voice broke the silence.

"I realize you're all tired, and I wish that you could have more rest."

The suddenness and unexpectedness of the voice shocked her. Then a tall figure stepped out of the darkness into the firelight, and Josh cried out, "Goél!"

"Goél!" the rest echoed, and all jumped to their feet to greet their guest.

The man was dressed in a gray robe that reached to his knees. His feet were clad with heavy sandals, and the cowl for covering his head was thrown back. He carried a staff in his hand, and there was strength and patience in his face as well as great gentleness.

He let the Sleepers have their way for a moment, smiling at their greetings, then said, "Sit down, my friends. Rest."

He himself remained standing. His craggy face caught the light of the fire, and a smile still touched his lips. "You did well on your quest to Camelot. All of you."

Reb ducked his head. "Well, I made a mess of part of it," he mumbled. "I let myself get taken in by that there sorceress."

Goél's expression did not change. "But you have learned, my son, something about how to defend yourself against the powers of darkness. It is a lesson that you can put to good use on your next quest."

"Are we really going on another journey?" Josh burst out.

"Do you feel strong enough for it?" Goél asked.

Dave said at once, “We’re tired, but if you give the word, we’ll go. Anywhere you say, Goél.”

The strange man smiled yet again. “That is good, my son, and for your bold speech you shall be the leader on the next adventure.”

Sarah thought the others looked surprised, especially Josh. From the beginning he had been the leader of the Sleepers. He blinked his eyes in shock. He said nothing, but she could read the disappointment in his face.

Then Goél was speaking, and all paid careful heed. “You have been obedient to my commands. You have learned much. But the next task I will put to you will demand every bit of strength you have, for the people to whom I send you now are quite different.”

“As different as the people of Atlantis that live under the sea?” Wash asked. “They were pretty strange folks, I thought.”

“And the people at Camelot?” Abigail said. “They were unusual too. How can anybody be more different?”

For a time silence fell over the small, open space where the little fire gleamed. Far off a bird cried, and the trees about them seemed to breathe.

Goél’s voice was low, and Sarah listened carefully, knowing it was likely they were going to face danger.

“The Dark Power,” Goél said slowly, “is strong and is growing stronger. Those who are my servants, such as yourself, are small in number. They must make up in courage what they lack in numbers. All over Nuworld the Dark Lord is desperately striving to stamp out all of the things that I value—courage, goodness, and love most of all. I am about to send you to a people who know little about such things.”

“What kind of people are they?” Josh piped up.

“Not like you,” Goél said. “At least you will think they are not. They will have different values, and you will



have to convince them that the things you believe in are important. You must teach them that if they are to survive, they must stand against the evil that darkens the world. They need," he said firmly, "to learn about dignity and honor and love. They must learn to treat others as they themselves would want to be treated."

He spoke for a long time. Sarah sat listening, trying to store up his words.

Finally Goél said, "These people are simple. I do not wish that you would dazzle them with your superior knowledge or with inventions that might bring destruction to them. When you go to them, you must become in some ways as simple as they are. Only by humility will you win them. I can give you encouragement and hope, but the path that you must tread will not be easy."

Goél drew the cowl up over his head so that his face was shrouded. He reached into a pocket of his cloak and drew forth a paper and a leather bag. "Here is money for your journey and a map. Follow it. You will discover this people when you reach this point—here." He pointed. "Good-bye for now, but I will not be far away from you."

Then he turned and walked off into the darkness. The Sleepers looked after him until the gloom swallowed him up.

"Well," Wash said, "I guess that answers any questions about our getting a vacation." He sat down, looked at the carcass of one of the rabbits, almost picked clean, and shook his head. "I sure wish you was as big as a deer," he said sadly. "I could eat you all myself."

## 2

# Voyage to Nowhere

Well, there it is!" Dave exclaimed, looking out across the vast expanse of gray ocean. "I thought we'd never get here!"

The Sleepers had forged their way through dense woods and along narrow, twisting roads for more than a week. They camped beside the road each night and had been fortunate enough to find food at a few small villages.

"I just hope there's a shop where I can buy something," Abbie said with irritation. She brushed at her clothes ineffectively. "I wouldn't wear these old rags to a rummage sale!"

"That looks like a village over there." Josh nodded in the direction of the shoreline. "From the looks of all those ships, it's some kind of port. So I'm sure we can find something. Come on!"

Dave sent Josh a quick look and said sharply, "I think we'd better get organized before we go into the village."

Sarah as well as several other Sleepers had noticed that Dave was jealous of his new authority.

Wash grinned at Reb. "Give a man a top job, and he'll pretty soon show you what he is, won't he?"

But Abbie was so anxious to get to a store that she put a hand on Dave's arm and said, "Please, Dave. I need some makeup and some fresh clothes. We just can't go on a voyage wearing these old tattered rags." There was pleading in her voice, and when she turned her large eyes on him, Dave immediately was swayed.

"Oh, well, I suppose it'll be all right. Come on then."

As Sarah walked along beside Josh, she noted that his lips were drawn tight with irritation. “Don’t be mad at Dave, Josh,” she whispered. “He’ll be all right as soon as he gets used to being the leader. That’s what he’s always wanted to be, I suppose.”

“Well, he’s welcome to it,” Josh snapped. “If he thinks he can do better than I can, more power to him!”

Sarah wanted to comment that Josh was behaving every bit as badly as Dave. She had learned, however, over the long months the two had spent together, that Josh was generally a sweet-tempered young man, terribly shy at times, and sensitive as a young girl. So what she said was, “Well, I guess we could use some supplies.” She pulled at his patched shirt. “This shirt’s so dirty you could stand it up in the corner!” Her eyes crinkled at him, and they laughed aloud.

“I guess so. Well, you get some nice things too. We can’t go to these people looking like a troop of beggars, whoever they are.” His brow wrinkled. “Goél wasn’t very informative about them. He just said they were simple—but that could apply to almost any kind of folks. I guess we’ll find out when we get there. Let’s go—before Abigail buys the store out.”

Sarah discovered to her delight that the shop was large and well-supplied, especially with gear intended for sailors.

“I don’t want to buy any ships’ compasses or things like that,” Abbie said, “but look—they’ve got a nice stock of clothing. Let’s go try some on, Sarah!”

“Oh, me!” Jake groaned, slapping his head in a forlorn gesture. “Once you get Abbie trying on clothes, that’s it. We’ll be lucky to get out of here a year from now!”

Jake’s timing was off somewhat. But by the time the Sleepers had bought new clothes plus a few extras, it was late in the afternoon. The shopkeeper totaled up the bill,

and Dave paid him out of the gold pieces that Goél had supplied.

The shopkeeper took the coins, weighed them carefully in his hand, then said, "Going on an ocean voyage, I take it! May a man ask where you're going?"

"We're going to a place called the Isle of Mordor," Dave replied.

"*Mordor!*" The man's eyes blinked with surprise—and something else.

*Why—he looks scared out of his wits*, Sarah thought.

The shopkeeper stared at the group of young people, then shook his head. "Well, good fortune be with you." But he sounded doubtful.

"Partner," Reb asked, "what's the matter with that place? You looked a little bit skeery when you heard the name."

The man clamped his lips together. He would say only, "I got nothing to say about the land of Mordor. Thank you kindly for your business."

"That's a strange thing," Sarah murmured as they left the shop. "I wonder what gave him such a scare?"

"Don't know," Josh replied. "One thing for sure—you wouldn't get *him* on a ship going to Mordor."

The Sleepers made their way down to the shore and looked at the boats anchored there.

"I don't know which one to go to first," Dave said, "but that's a nice-looking ship there."

The ship he indicated was the largest of the vessels bobbing at anchor. It had three masts and a comfortable width. On deck, sailors were mending sails, swabbing the deck, doing the things that sailors do when a ship is in port.

"I'll just go give them a hail," Dave said confidently.

As Dave walked toward the shore, Jake ambled over and said to Josh, "I can tell you one thing—this is not go-

ing to be a lucky voyage. Did you see the look on that shopkeeper's face when we mentioned the Isle of Mordor?" He shook his head dolefully. "I don't know what we're going into, but it's not going to be Disney World. There'll be something more there than a few rides. That's what I say."

They wandered up and down the beach until finally Dave's call drew them back. When they came up to him, he was looking highly satisfied.

"It's all taken care of," he said. "They'll drop us off on the Isle of Mordor, but it costs a pretty penny for our passage."

"Did the captain say anything about the place?" Sarah asked anxiously.

Dave's expression changed, but he merely said, "Well, he said it's a little off the beaten track, and he seemed surprised that we were going there. But he guaranteed to take us. And what's more, he said he'd bring his ship back to take us off. He passes by there on a regular basis."

Reb said, "When's he leaving? We've got to get our gear on board."

"First thing in the morning. He said if we could board tonight, he'd give us our quarters. So let's get our stuff loaded."

The next morning the ship sailed out of the harbor. There was much excitement among the Sleepers as they stood on deck watching the land disappear.

Abigail was wearing a new dress. It was a shade of light blue that matched her eyes and seemed very fragile after the rough clothing she had been wearing. She touched her hair and said, "I was glad that shop had some shampoo and some cosmetics. I don't feel ready for anything until I've done my face."

Reb grinned at the pretty girl. "Well, Abbie, you

done it up nice. Shucks—you look good enough to be buried right now! We wouldn't have to do a thing to you."

"Reb! What an awful thing to say!" But then Abigail laughed and put her arm through his. "Let's go to the front of this old boat. I've seen all I want to of that harbor. Let's see where we're going."

Dave watched them go. "I think that girl would flirt with a stone statue," he said. Still, he looked rather envious.

Sarah whispered to Josh, "I think Dave's jealous. He always did like Abigail." She looked up at him. "Just like you did. Remember the first time you saw her? I thought you'd fall over in a dead faint of admiration."

Josh blushed, but he said, "Aw, I didn't either. I'd rather have somebody with brains—like you—anytime, Sarah."

Somehow this compliment didn't please her, and she sniffed and drew away. "Come on, Jake, let's take a walk around the ship. We can talk to some of the sailors."

They had plenty of opportunities to talk to the sailors, for the voyage went on day after day. The food was good, and their sleeping accommodations were better than usual. After the long trek through the woods, a sea journey was a good time to rest up. They found the sailors jolly and very friendly. However they soon discovered that none of the mariners was willing to talk about the Isle of Mordor.

On the sixth day out, Josh and Sarah were sitting on kegs watching the cook, a small gnomelike figure named Bentley, who had, it seemed, traveled all over Nuworld. The pair had come to listen to his tales several times before.

Finally Josh said, "Look, Bentley, none of you on this ship will talk about the land of Mordor. What's wrong with

it? Is there some kind of monster on it? Come on, level with me.”

Bentley screwed his face into a scowl and scratched his sparse gray hair. “Well, now, lad,” he said, “it’s not the kind of place a man wants to talk about, if you catch my meaning.”

“I *don’t* catch it,” Sarah replied instantly. “It must be a frightening place if you won’t even talk about it. Have you ever actually been there, Bentley?”

The cook was peeling potatoes. He carefully pared away a long scrap, dropped it in a bucket, then tossed the potato onto a small mountain beside him.

“When I was a boy—no more than fourteen or fifteen, as I remember—I was on an old freighter. We hit a storm in those latitudes and had to put in. It tore the rigging out, so we had to stay until we got the sails repaired. Some of us had to go into the woods hunting for food. I went with them one time.” He fell silent, picked up another potato, and began to peel it, his eyes moody. “There’s *things* in that place.”

“Things,” Josh repeated. “What kind of things are you talking about? Wild animals?”

Bentley lifted his eyes. They were dark brown and deep-set. “Well, now, I’d seen wild animals afore, lad, but nothing like the things I saw there. Big things. Things like I ain’t never seen since. Don’t know how to talk about them. There’s people in that place too—but they was crafty, they was. Two of our men got took.”

“Got took?” Sarah asked in surprise. “What does that mean—‘got took’?”

“I mean they just disappeared. Went off and never came back. We thought we heard them hollering once, and then it was cut off sudden, like someone had . . . had . . .” Then he snapped, “Don’t like to think about those times.”

“Is that all you can tell us?” Josh asked.

“Don’t like to talk about it.” Bentley had grown moody, and he said only, “Don’t like to tell folks what to do, but you young folks are fools for going to the Isle of Mordor! People go there, and the funny thing is,” he said, “they go in but most of the time they never come out again. Don’t like to talk about it!” Then he turned his back on them.

Sarah and Josh went back on deck.

“He makes my flesh creep and shivers go up my back,” Sarah said. “It’s like going to a horror movie.”

“It’s worse than that,” Josh agreed wryly. “It’s the things I *don’t* know that scare me. If you can see something, at least you know what it is you’re afraid of—but the way all these sailors talk—even the captain—there’s some things on the Isle of Mordor that must be awful.”

“But we know there are people there that need our help,” Sarah said. “So we’ve got to go, and that’s all there is to it.”

Two days later the ship docked in a little harbor. Reb and the other Sleepers were getting into a small boat for going ashore when Captain Shaw came to say good-bye.

“Good luck to you,” he said rather grimly. “I’ll stop off here the first of every month until I find out—” He broke off abruptly and then shook hands with them all. “Be careful now. Watch yourself, for that’s a dangerous place. Wish you wouldn’t go, but I see your mind’s made up.”

“Yes, we have to go, Captain Shaw,” Dave said. “Be sure and check the shore for us. We’ll be stuck here if you don’t come and get us. Don’t know how long we’ll be, but it shouldn’t be too long.”

An hour later the Sleepers were standing on the beach, watching the sails of the ship grow smaller in the distance.



Everyone seemed reluctant to move, but finally Reb shrugged. “Well, she’s gone. Let’s get this here show on the road. Are you ready, Captain Dave?” He winked at Jake, for the two of them had given that name to Dave because he was so proud of his leadership position.

“Don’t call me that!” Dave snapped. He pulled the map out of his pocket and stared at it. “Here,” he said, “look at this.”

They gathered around Goél’s map. It showed a line of mountains and one large river running down to the ocean. “We’ll have to follow the river. See, Goél has marked this area here—I guess that’s the village where we’re supposed to meet the people he’s sending us to.”

“Sure wish that river was going *up*, so we could just ride. We’ll have to follow along the bank, I guess,” Josh said. He looked at the sky. “It’s about noon. You ready to start?”

Dave nodded and folded the map. “Yes. We’ll find a camping spot before night so we can cook us a good meal. We’ll have to do some hunting, though. The food we brought with us won’t last very long. And we don’t know what they’ll have at the village. So let’s go!”

They divided up the knapsacks containing their food, bedding, clothing, and equipment. The girls carried the smallest loads. They started walking along the east side of the river and soon discovered a path.

“Look here,” Jake said, “this thing’s been traveled. People must come from the village to the sea.”

“That or animals,” Reb guessed. “All animals like to go to water, but I guess it’s probably both.”

All afternoon they hiked. The jungle grew more dense as they made their way inward. Now huge trees towered overhead, sometimes shutting off the light of the sun and sometimes arching over the river from both sides until it was like walking down the aisle of a dim cathedral.

Late in the day Dave drew to a halt. "That's some nice ground over there and plenty of firewood. Let's camp here for the night."

"Suits me!" Reb said. "What do you want us to do, Captain Dave?"

Dave glared. "You can go gather firewood. You girls can get ready to cook a little something."

"What about you, Dave?" Josh inquired.

"I'm going to scout around—see what I can find out while the rest of you set up camp."

Dave walked farther upstream, and Wash said, "Well, we got our orders from Captain Dave. Let's get busy." He looked about at the towering trees. "Sure is quiet in here. I don't like it when it's too quiet. Makes me think something's ready to jump on me."

"Wash! Don't talk like that," Abbie said, shivering. "Let's get a fire built—a big one."

Soon they had a fire going and meat roasting on spits over it.

Dave came back, shaking his head. "Can't tell a thing about this place," he complained.

He sat down, took the meat Sarah offered him, and put it between two slices of bread. He waved the sandwich toward upstream. "This area turns into almost a swamp," he said. "I hope the path holds out. I went on a tour once in the Everglades. There were alligators and snakes and everything else." He shuddered. "I hate snakes!"

"So do I," Abigail said and moved closer to him. "What if we have to turn back?"

He looked at her in surprise. "That's the one thing we won't do. We've got to go on, no matter how hard it gets. If it gets too bad on land, we'll make a raft and pole our way up the river. It would be hard going, but we could do it."

“That’s the way to talk, Dave,” Josh said. “You’re right—we’ve got to go on. Goél wouldn’t be sending us on a foolish mission. It’s important, whatever it is.”

“What kind of people can they be, I wonder?” It had been a hard day, and Sarah was growing sleepy. “We’ve seen some strange varieties in our journeys—snakepeople, and giants, and dwarfs, and Gemini Twins.” The thought of the twins they had encountered on their first adventure made her smile. “I wish Mat and Tam were with us now. They were a lot of fun.”

Reb grinned. “You couldn’t get them to go on a trip like this. They liked their comfort too much.” He looked upriver. “*I wish we had some hosses to ride. It’d sure beat walking through this old swamp. But we’ll make it.*”

Jake looked around. “We’ve gotten real close, haven’t we, the seven of us? Back in Oldworld we didn’t even know each other, and now we’re closer to each other than anybody else. I guess that’s the way it is when you go on adventures with people. I hope we always stay close together.”

His words reminded Sarah of the uncertainty of their future.

Finally Dave said, “We better roll up in our blankets. I want to get an early start tomorrow.”

As usual the boys had brought along a small, light-weight tent for the girls. When the two of them had crawled into it and pulled up their blankets, Abbie said sleepily, “*I wish we had a boat like we had back home. We could just get in it and go skimming up this old river. We’ll never have that again, I don’t suppose.*”

Sarah looked over at the girl’s face. The light of the campfire flickered, and dimly she saw Abbie’s beautiful features. She wished for the thousandth time that she had this girl’s beauty, and she thought of Josh’s remark. *I’d*

*rather have someone smart—like you.* As she drifted off to sleep Sarah thought, *I'd trade all my smarts for Abbie's long eyelashes!*

Next day the Sleepers paused at noon to eat a brief meal, then continued along the riverbank. If anything, the trees grew larger and closer together here, so that the sky was simply closed off at times.

For three days they trekked. Fortunately the path was well worn. They were able to trap animals without any trouble—mostly rabbits, although something like a possum got into one of Reb's snares.

They carried no weapons, not even bow and arrows, for that had been one of Goél's instructions. Reb, however, had managed to form a slingshot out of a piece of elastic cord. He was a dead shot and could hit a target fifty feet away with such force it would bring down small game.

He came in one afternoon after a hunting trip and held up his bag. "Look what I got here!" he said, a smile on his face. When they gathered around, he said, "They *look* like squirrels, but look at the size of them! Why, these scamps—they're three times as big as any squirrels I ever saw in Arkansas!"

Josh held up one. "This thing is as big as a small dog. And look at the claws and teeth! Funny kind of squirrel."

"Well, we're gonna see if they're any good to eat!" Reb said. "Sure wish I had some dumplings. Nothing better than squirrel and dumplings. Save me some of the brains," he said, winking at Josh. "You ever eat squirrel brains, Abbie?"

"No!" Abbie shuddered. "And I'm not going to start either!"

They pressed on for another two days. Late the second afternoon, when they stopped for camp, Reb went out

looking for game while the rest made a fire and set up the tent. He came back in less than ten minutes, a strange look on his face. "Better come and take a look at this," he said. "I ain't never seen nothing like it."

"What is it?" Dave asked.

But Reb only motioned for them to follow.

He paused at a cleared space beside the river and said, "Notice how the ground is kinda trampled? Well, look at this." He led them to the water and pointed to the ground.

Josh looked and said, "What is it? I don't see anything."

"Don't you see that track?" Reb demanded. "Look at it!"

Josh then saw that the track was so big he had missed it. It was at least a foot wide and more than three feet long. He had mistaken it for some sort of small crater.

Reb said, "He comes to the river to drink, whatever he is."

Josh stepped back, and the rest gathered around to stare.

Wash peered at the huge track and said, "Look at the claws on that critter's foot!" He shivered. "Whatever it is, I sure don't want to meet up with *him!*"

Dave frowned at the print. "I don't think *any* of us wants to see a thing like this—whatever it is."

"Bentley, the cook," Josh said. "Remember, he told us there were strange things on the Isle of Mordor. I don't like the looks of that."

"Let's get back to camp," Dave said. "I don't like being out in the open like this."

At the campsite, Wash said, "I think I'm gonna find me a different place to sleep tonight."

"Like where?" Dave demanded.

“Like up in a tree somewhere. *Way* up.” He pointed at a tree where there were huge branches. “Maybe I’ll climb up there and sleep.”

“You’d fall out and break your neck,” Dave said in disgust. “We’ll be all right tonight. And we’ll keep a sharp eye out tomorrow. We ought to be at the village in another two or three days.”

But late that night Reb heard a strange thrashing about as if trees were being shoved aside, and Wash whispered, “You sure we don’t want to go climb that tree, Reb? I don’t want that big thing to come visiting.”

“Aw, I’ll pop him off with my slingshot.” Later, however, he looked up at the tree and said, “Before this thing is over, we might all be up a tree, Wash.”

