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1

Happy Birthday—I Think!

Ow! Will you get your big foot off me, Josh!” Sarah Collingwood jerked her foot out from under the heavy weight that had descended on it, and shoved Josh Adams away. “Don’t stand so close, will you!”

Josh Adams blinked into the murky darkness. “Well, I couldn’t help it,” he said. “Besides, why are you standing so close to *me*?”

“Why, she’s got a crush on you, Josh. Didn’t you know that?”

The voice came from somewhere across the darkened room, and the Southern twang identified it as belonging to Bob Lee Jackson, better known to his friends as Reb. He chuckled. “I don’t know why we have to go to all this trouble for old Dave. Just for a little old thing like a birthday.”

“It’s his *seventeenth* birthday, that’s why!”

That voice came from another far corner. Jake Garfield started to add something else but then said, “Quiet! I think I hear him coming.”

Josh heard footsteps approaching the door, and he held his breath until it opened. For a moment there was silence.

Then, when the young man who had come inside turned on the light, all of them shouted at the top of their lungs, “Happy birthday! Happy birthday, Dave!”

“Hey, what’s going—” Dave Cooper could not say more, for suddenly he was surrounded by the six other

teenagers, who lunged from their positions, beat him on the back, and shook his hand.

Sarah ruffled his hair so that it fell down into his eyes.

“Hey, cut it out, will you? You want to kill a fella?”

“You only have one seventeenth birthday,” Josh said, giving him a hard clip on the shoulder with his fist. “You better make the best of it.” Then he said, “All right, you guys, step back and give him a little air. After all, he’s a senior citizen now, you know. We have to be careful of our elders. Old Dave is getting along in years.”

The subject looked anything but elderly. Dave was exactly six feet tall and well-built. He had yellow hair and blue eyes, and his tan gave him an outdoors look. He grinned at Josh. “That’s right! Have a little respect for us old folks.”

Abbey Roberts said, “Back in Oldworld we used to spank people on their birthday. One lick for every year old they were.”

“Yeah, you go ahead, Abbey.” The speaker was a small black boy whose full name was Gregory Randolph Washington Jones. This would have been tiresome to say, so he was known simply as Wash. He had large eyes, and his teeth shown brightly against the blackness of his skin. He nudged Abbey with an elbow. “Go on. You start.”

Abbey, at fifteen, had blonde hair and blue eyes and a perfectly shaped mouth. Now she pouted rather prettily. “He’s too big. I’ll let you guys take care of that, but I will wish him happy birthday like *this*—” She pulled Dave’s head down and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Then she said, “Now you, Sarah.”

Sarah Collingwood was sixteen. She was small, graceful, and had brown eyes and black hair. Quickly she slipped over and kissed Dave’s other cheek. “And

now, you guys can give him that spanking anytime you want to.”

“We’ll take care of that later,” Reb said. “Let’s give him his presents before we get on with that little ceremony.”

Reb was lanky and muscular at six feet one. He had light blue eyes and sun-bleached hair. He was known to give a Rebel yell when he got excited, and now his eyes shown with fun as he said, “Birthday gift!” and shoved a package at Dave.

Self-consciously Dave took the present, muttering, “You guys shouldn’t have done this.”

“Yeah, you don’t deserve it,” Reb said. “We all agreed on that. Now, go on and open your presents.”

Dave opened the bulky package, and when the paper was ripped away, he looked up and grinned. “Hey, Reb! These are the eelskin boots that I wanted so much. I don’t know how you paid for these!” He rubbed their shiny surface. “But thanks. Just what I wanted.”

“Well, here you are,” Josh said, thrusting a small package at him. This proved to be a razor-edged knife with a bone handle and a black leather sheath that mounted on the belt. “Be careful you don’t cut yourself on it—” Josh grinned “—and don’t let Jake borrow it. You know how he dulls a knife.”

Jake Garfield was much shorter than Reb or Josh or Dave. He had a head of flaming red hair, his brown eyes were sharp, and he had a mind that worked constantly. He ignored Josh’s remark and handed Dave a plain brown-paper parcel. “Didn’t have time for fancy wrapping paper,” he mumbled.

Everyone watched as Dave unwrapped the gift, for Jake was the most innovative of the Seven Sleepers. He loved to invent things, and he watched carefully as Dave took off the paper.

“Well, I sure appreciate it,” Dave said, puzzlement in his blue eyes, “but what is it?”

“Just push that little button on the side and you’ll see.”

Cautiously Dave turned over the small black object. It was less than an inch thick, about two inches wide, and three or four inches long. Its smooth case was broken only by one small button. “It won’t blow up, will it?” he asked.

“Just push the button,” Jake repeated.

Dave held the box at arm’s length—he was aware that some of Jake’s inventions were rather scary—and pressed the button.

Instantly a high-pitched howl nearly deafened them all.

Dave threw the box across the room and covered his ears. The rest of the Sleepers did the same, and it was Jake who scrambled across the floor and shut off the noise by pushing the button again. He turned his bright eyes on Dave and nodded. “Well, how’d you like that?”

“Wonderful!” Dave exclaimed, removing his hands from his ears. “Maybe I’ll be able to hear again in a week or two. What’s it for?”

“Why, if somebody jumps out and starts to mug you, you just push the button. It’ll scare the waddle out of them.”

“It’ll sure deafen them,” Josh said ruefully. He shook his head and grinned at Jake, for it was just the sort of thing that Jake would do.

Sarah presented her gift, a shirt that she had made herself out of some very soft blue material. “If it’s too big, I can take it up,” she said anxiously.

Dave held up the shirt, admired it, and smiled at her. “It looks great, Sarah. Thanks a lot.”

Then Wash stepped up. “Here. Try this on for size.” His gift proved to be a beautifully constructed snake-skin belt, which Dave liked exceedingly and said so.

Abbey’s gift was even larger than Reb’s, and her eyes glinted as she gave it to Dave and watched him open it.

It was a fawn-colored suede hat—much like the kind Australians wore back in Oldworld. It had one side pinned up, and he put it on at once. “Just a fit,” he said. He looked around for a mirror and saw none. “How do I look?”

“You look like Crocodile Dundee,” Josh said cheerfully. “Now, let’s have the cake. That’s all the presents you get.”

Abbey and Sarah had made a huge chocolate cake—Dave’s favorite—and he blew out the seventeen candles that they’d set afire.

“You always were windy, Dave,” Reb said, as the smoke curled upward. “Now, let’s get at that cake.”

Abbey served huge slices on plates, and they all sat around eating and talking cheerfully.

As Josh sat down next to Sarah, he looked around and thought, *It doesn’t seem like two years since we got blasted out of everything we knew and came to Nuworld.* As he looked at his six friends, memories flashed through Josh’s mind, and he was soon lost in thought.

The seven of them had been placed in sleep capsules just before a nuclear bomb devastated the earth. Through the miracle of Dave’s father’s science, they had slept for many, many years. When they awakened, they discovered themselves on a strange planet. The nuclear war had changed the shape of continents and oceans. Mutations had arisen, so that strange and exotic life forms now roamed the earth.

And they soon learned that there was a war going on, involving a strange figure called Goél, who appeared and disappeared with startling speed. Goél stood for the old values that they had learned to treasure, but he was opposed by sinister forces led by one called the Dark Lord. All of Nuworld was now a battleground, and the Sleepers had thrown themselves into Goél's service without reservation.

Now Sarah leaned over and asked, "What do you think this assembly is about, Josh?" She spoke of a calling together of the leaders of the House of Goél. They had come from strange and distant places all over Nuworld, and all of them were wondering what was to come.

Josh, who was the leader of the Sleepers, stretched out his six-foot frame in his chair. He had grown up very fast and was still a little embarrassed by his tall, gangly shape. He had not filled out yet like Dave and still had not lost some of his adolescent countenance. He had auburn hair, blue eyes, and had always been a shy boy, unsure of himself. He wondered often why Goél had chosen him to be the leader when there were others smarter and stronger. He had learned to cope with this, however, and covered his insecurities with a good imitation of confidence.

"I think it must be something pretty big," he told Sarah. "Goél has never done this before. He's always come to us individually." He scratched his cheek thoughtfully, then took another huge bite of chocolate cake.

The Sleepers had been hundreds of miles away when the summons from Goél came, and they had rushed as fast as they could to the general meeting place.

"It must be trouble," Jake said.

“Why does it have to be trouble?” Abbey asked. “Maybe it’s good news.”

“You never saw a mob rushing across town to do a good deed,” Jake stated flatly. “Anytime we get a call like this, you can bet there’s got to be a problem.”

“Well, we’ll find out in the morning,” Dave said. He looked fondly around at his friends. “After all the troubles and hard times we’ve been through, I guess we ought to be used to difficult things.”

Dave looked more like an adult than anyone else in the room, although he was only one year older than some of the others. But as it is with some young men, the year between sixteen and seventeen had brought a maturity that did not come to all. He was broad-shouldered, and his body had filled out with sleek muscles so that he looked like an Olympic swimmer.

“I guess,” Dave said, as he put down his empty plate, “whatever Goél says, we’ll do it. Sometimes I think we’re losing, though—that the Dark Lord is gaining ground so fast that we’ll never make it.”

“You can’t think like that, Dave. None of us can!” Sarah exclaimed. Of all the Sleepers, she, perhaps, had more faith in victory than any of the others, and now she said cheerfully, “Let’s get to bed. We might get sent off on a mission to the ice cap tomorrow. Who knows?”

For once the young people had been housed together. The boys had been assigned two rooms, and Abbey and Sarah had a room to themselves. The bathroom was down at the end of the hall, however, and they had to take turns.

While they were waiting, Dave drifted over to Abbey. “I sure like this hat.” He put it on again and turned for her inspection. “It looks good, doesn’t it?”

“Why don’t you let somebody else brag on you, Dave? You’re getting downright conceited.”

There was such sharpness in Abbey’s voice that Dave was surprised. He looked at her and answered in kind. “You’re a fine one to be talking!” he snapped. “You spend half your time primping.”

“I’m just trying to look nice. I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“I don’t either. That’s why I’m trying on my new hat!” Actually, Dave was still pleased with his birthday party. He changed his tone. “It was awful nice of you and the rest of the gang to do this for me, Abbey,” he said. He studied her for a moment, thinking how pretty she was. “You know,” he said, “when you grow up, you’re going to be some foxy lady.”

“When I grow up! I *am* grown up!”

“Fifteen is not grown up.”

“I’m almost sixteen. Besides, girls are more mature than boys. Didn’t you know that?”

“I don’t know who invented that rumor. I never noticed girls being that much smarter.”

Abbey, for some reason, was out of sorts. Perhaps she was nervous about the mission. It had taken a terrible experience in the Underworld for her to learn that her beauty was not something to be trusted. She had learned that lesson the hard way—and not completely, perhaps. And if one of the Sleepers could be said to be fearful, she was the one. The others had to constantly keep her cheered up. Now she was upset with Dave.

“Of *course* girls are more mature than boys, and they could run the world better too.”

“You’re just bossy,” Dave said. He settled the hat on his head and tried it at a new angle. “I wish I had a mirror,” he muttered, “so I could see what I look like.”

He glanced at her. “Women would make a mess of the world if they ran it.”

An argument broke out at once, and the two picked at each other until they were really angry.

Sarah came into the room, stopped dead still, and stared at them. “Are you two arguing *again*? What’s it about this time?”

Dave reached out and patted Abbey on the head—something he knew always infuriated her. “This child thinks she’s grown up. Try to straighten her out, will you, Sarah? And tell her that men are made to take care of women. You know how it is—women are weaker. They need to be cared for.”

Furiously, Abbey slapped Dave’s hand away. “Get out of here . . . you . . . you immature *man!*”

Dave laughed at her and, turning, left the room.

“Why don’t you two stop picking at each other?” Sarah asked in exasperation. “It looks like you’d get tired of fighting all the time.”

“He thinks he’s so smart—and so grown up!”

“Well, Dave *is* pretty smart,” Sarah said calmly, “and he’s very grown up. He’s big as a man, and he’s changed a lot over the past two years. Try to get along with him, won’t you, Abbey?” She sighed. “I don’t think we can stand you two fussing much more.”

Abbey sniffed. “I’d like to be his boss for just about one week! I could really make something out of him.” She smiled and tapped her cheek gently with a finger. The smile brought out a dimple, and she nodded. “Yes, I certainly would like to have charge of Mr. David Cooper for a little while!”

2

The Power of Goél

The Seven Sleepers ate a hurried breakfast and joined the other servants of Goél already assembled in the large open space just outside the village where they had spent the night. An enormous crowd had gathered in the bright morning sunlight.

Josh looked around. “This place is as large as a soccer field,” he muttered. “And it looks like we’ll meet some old friends here.”

The crowd was composed of every sort of being that inhabited Nuworld. Some were dwarfs, stocky and sturdy. Some were towering giants. Some had come on foot. Some, like the Sleepers, had come by ship.

The Sleepers met a pair of Gemini twins that they had shared an adventure with, and they had just started to exchange stories when Dave whispered, “Look, there’s Goél.”

All of them turned to see a man wearing a light gray robe, with the hood thrown back, step up onto a mound where he could be seen by everyone. It was impossible to guess his age. He could have been anywhere between twenty-five and fifty-five. He had smooth, tanned cheeks and a pair of thoughtful brown eyes, well-socketed, and his long brown hair fell back over his robe. There was an athletic strength about him but also a gentleness in his countenance that one could not miss.

He spoke, and his voice was clear and penetrating, so that it carried back to the far reaches of the crowd.

“You’re welcome here, one and all,” he said and looked around as a slight smile tugged at his lips. “Some of you have come a long distance and are tired. I wish that I could promise you a long rest, but I’m afraid my summons calls you to labors even more arduous than those you have already known.”

“Oh, me!” Jake groaned. “I know what that means. Off on another adventure.”

“Hush up, Jake,” Josh said irritably. “You’re always complaining.”

“Our task is difficult,” Goél continued. “The Dark Lord has spread his venom into every corner of Nuworld. Even now he is assembling an army, the like of which you have never seen. Soon he will have his forces gathered and will throw them against us in one mighty attempt to crush those who believe in the old ways.”

A cry went up. “He can’t beat us, Goél. Not as long as you’re our leader.”

Goél smiled as others joined in the encouraging cries. When they died down, he said gently, “It is difficult for a commander to send his soldiers into battle, knowing that some of them will not survive. And I must warn you that in the battle to come, many of you will perish. I know you too well to allow you an opportunity to leave, for you have proved your worth time and time again.”

Here, his eyes seemed to rest on the Seven Sleepers—but later Josh found out that every soldier in that mighty group had the same feeling. Somehow Goél had the ability to speak to a large crowd and yet make each member of it feel that he alone was being addressed.

Goél continued to talk of the preparations that had to be made, and they were momentous indeed. He

spoke of plans, of weapons that must be formed, of strategy. Finally he said softly, though everyone could hear him, “The enemy thinks only in terms of large armies, and, indeed, he has the numbers at his beck and call. But I tell you that it is not always the largest army that wins. The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.”

His voice rose then with an authority that caused a thrill to run through Josh. He stood upright and hung on every word.

“And the battles that are to come may well be the kind in which one person or one small group is able to turn the tide from defeat to victory. When you receive your assigned task, it may seem small and unimportant to you, but it is not, I tell you. Every sword counts. Even those who seem unimportant and feeble are worthy in my sight, for the House of Goél is my pride.”

The Seven Sleepers joined in the cheers that smote the morning air.

Josh cheered himself almost hoarse, and then, when Goél dismissed them, he turned to Sarah and said, “I never understand who he is or what he is—but he’s not like any man I know.”

Sarah said thoughtfully, “He’s more than a man, Josh. No man could do the things that he does.”

The crowd broke up, and the Sleepers headed back to the village where they would await Goél’s summons to receive their assignment.

Josh walked along with Sarah. “I think you’re right,” he said. “There’s something so . . . well, so *good* about him, Sarah. Everyone else that I ever met has some flaw.” He grinned. “Why, even I myself am not perfect all the time!” But he grew serious at once, saying, “He’s all we have to hang on to. We lost everything when we lost our homes and families back in Oldworld,

but somehow I know—and this sounds silly—that we’ll get them back again some day.”

For two days the Sleepers waited for Goél to come to them. They were somewhat impatient—and a little apprehensive. When Goél came, he always sent them into some dangerous adventure. At first this had been exciting. Now they had been at it for two years and were like soldiers who had been on the battle line almost too long.

Jake expressed everyone’s feeling when he said, “I don’t know how long we can hold together. A fellow can take only so many tough jobs.”

The seven were outside, eating the meal that they had rounded up from a local woman. It was composed of some sort of meat that was not as appetizing as it should have been, and Jake stared down at it. “I wonder what this *is*,” he said thoughtfully.

“Better not ask,” Reb said. He tasted his portion and then shook his head. “One thing, it’s not possum. Boy,” he said, “I’d sure like to have a mess of possum and sweet taters like I had back home.”

“Ugh!” Abbey said. “I can’t *imagine* eating a possum. It’d be just like eating a big rat.”

Reb was offended. “You just don’t know what you’re talking about. What we do is, we catch a yearling possum, and then we keep him caged, and we feed him nothing but corn and good stuff for a month. Why, the time you get him all cooked, there ain’t nothing better than good possum with some sweet taters and cornbread.”

Reb’s choice in Southern food turned off some of the Sleepers, but Josh, tasting the meat that was before him, said, “I think possum would be better than this—

although I never tried it.” He looked up and set aside his plate. “Here comes Goél.”

Instantly the Seven Sleepers got to their feet and stood until Goél came up to them.

He smiled and said, “Sit down—finish your meal.”

“Well, would you have some, Goél?” Josh asked timidly. “It’s not much.”

“Why, yes, I believe I will.” He took the plate that Sarah eagerly brought to him, and he ate, seeming to enjoy the food. “Hunger is the best sauce,” he said pleasantly.

His eyes went from one to the other, and Abbey supposed that all the others felt as she did—that somehow he had entered into their innermost thoughts. She flushed when she remembered how proud she had been of her good looks, and how Goél had told her long ago, before their first adventure, that she would have to learn how foolish it was to trust in physical beauty. It was still disconcerting to look into his eyes, for he knew everything about her!

Goél began talking about their past and commended them for their fine work. “You have been faithful to me,” he said.

“Well,” Josh said haltingly, “we haven’t always scored a hundred.”

“I do not judge my servants by what they accomplish but by what’s in their hearts, and your hearts have been through a furnace. I have tried you, my young friends, and found pure gold. I am pleased with my Seven Sleepers.”

Abbey felt a sudden flush of pleasure at his words. More than anything else, the Sleepers wanted to please this one whom they did not understand but whom they loved.

Wash said tentatively, “We’ve been wondering

what's going to happen, Sire." He gave Goél the title that many used. "It doesn't sound too good. I mean, that Dark Lord, he's a bad cat!"

"Yes, he is evil, but with servants like you, Wash, I do not fear for the House of Goél." He smiled as pleasure spread over the small boy's face, then Goél grew serious. "Now I have an assignment for you. It will be difficult, but I know that you will do your best—"

Jake suddenly piped up. "Why don't you just use your power and smash that old Dark Lord?" he demanded. "You could do it. Just step on him like a cockroach!"

Goél held the small boy by the power of his look and said softly, "But if I did that, it would mean that you and the others in this world would have no freedom. You are free to choose—that is the glory of what you are. What would it be like if you had no choices to make?"

Dave straightened up. "Why, we'd be a race of robots."

"Exactly, David, and robots can give no pleasure to me. It is when you are free to choose for me or against me—and you choose me against all odds—that is what pleases me."

Abbey and the other Sleepers listened, soaking up his words as he spoke of love. He seemed to be asking them for more than their service. It was strange that a being like Goél would beg for love, but that was what he appeared to be doing.

"My servants in this world must survive by one thing—their love for me. Nothing else means more than your love for me and for one another. Love is the most powerful force in this universe."

Then Goél said, "Now it is time for your assignment." He pulled a small parchment out of his cloak.

“Here is a map. Guard it well. Memorize it, so that if it gets lost you can have it in your minds, each of you.”

“Where are we going, Goél?”

“This may seem to you a minor mission, but I want you to go to a small nation—a tribe—far away. The tribe is called the Tribe of Fedor.”

“Do they know about you, Goél, or are they under the power of the Dark Lord?”

“The Dark Lord is reaching out in their direction. He has no stronghold there yet, but he will if the people there do not learn how dangerous he is.” His face grew stern, and his eyes seemed to flash with anger. “You must meet the enemy there on his own ground.”

“Will there be real fightin’?” Reb asked with some excitement. He was a combative young man and very good with any kind of weapon.

“There will be physical battle, but, my son, you must remember that the greatest weapon is not a sword or a lance but love.”

Reb looked chagrined and seemed to draw his head back into his shoulders. “I reckon so,” he muttered, but he appeared to be unconvinced.

“To fight is your nature, my son, and I need strong arms such as yours—but love is more powerful than anything else. You must win the minds and the hearts of these people. They are deceived about many things. Be patient. You *can* win them, but they are in darkness and are blind and need the light.”

For some time Goél spoke about their mission, but he gave no specific instructions. “Simply tell them that Goél brings joy and peace to men, while the Dark Lord brings misery and slavery.”

Goél stood then and went to each one of them, clasping their hands, and Abbey thought his smile seemed to pour strength into them.

“I will come to you when you need me, as always,” he said. “But sometimes in the darkness and difficulties you will face, you will not see me. That is when you must simply believe that Goél loves you and will not ever leave you.”

He turned and walked away quickly, headed purposefully toward another group.

Josh said slowly, “Well, nothing much has changed. It’s another hard assignment.” But then, looking around at the solemn faces, he said, “Let’s get ourselves geared up. We’ve got a job to do.”