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1

Last Days for Nuworld

I'm so tired, I don't think I can make it another day, Sarah!"

Josh Adams slumped down beside the small stream that wound through the village and locked his fingers behind his head. Josh was a tall, gangling teenager with a mop of auburn hair and dark blue eyes. He closed his eyes, saying, "It seems like it's nothing but one mission after another—and *nothing* ever really gets accomplished."

Sarah Collingwood sat beside him and crossed her legs Indian fashion. She was wearing a pair of faded blue slacks and a man's white shirt. Her black hair had just a trace of red in it. She had large brown eyes and was, at fifteen, experiencing that first bloom of womanhood that comes to young girls. She was small and graceful, but fatigue marked her face as she answered quietly, "I know what you mean, Josh. It's hard to get up every morning knowing that nothing is really going to change."

Five yards away a flock of sparrows began a miniature war, fighting and rolling in the dust. They cheeped angrily, and finally the largest bird appeared to win some sort of victory.

Josh had opened his eyes slightly to watch the battle, and a cynical smile tugged the corners of his lips upward. "You'd think birds could agree, wouldn't you? Even the birds can't get along in this blasted Nuworld!"

“Oldworld wasn’t a paradise either,” Sarah reminded him. “Birds fought there sometimes too.”

But Oldworld was long gone. It had been called Earth once, but a nuclear holocaust had seared the planet. Continents moved, ice caps melted, new lands rose out of the sea. The inhabitants of the world changed too. The explosion caused mutants of all sorts to spring up in the races that developed after the Great Burning. There were giants, and dwarfs, and Snake-people, and all sorts of alien life forms roaming the planet that was now called Nuworld.

Josh and six other teenagers had been saved from the nuclear explosion by a small group of scientists, including Josh’s father. The seven young people had been put into special capsules, where they slept for many years. Finally they had emerged to find a strange planet in which a sinister being called the Dark Lord was engaged in a horrifying struggle against Goél, the leader of the free peoples. The Seven Sleepers, as they were called, became the servants of Goél. He sent them on several dangerous missions, which had taken them under the sea, across burning deserts, to the tops of mountains, and into jungles harboring saber-toothed tigers.

“How much longer do you think it will be?” Sarah asked idly. She plucked a dry dandelion out of the green grass, examined it, blew at it. As the tiny fragments scattered, she tossed the stem down, saying, “I wish we would have done with it. I know Goél is going to win—but sometimes it doesn’t *look* like it.”

Josh was almost asleep. He mumbled drowsily, “It’s not just the physical stuff that’s so hard. That’s bad enough. I get tired, but I’m tired *inside*. You know what I mean, Sarah?”

“I know. I think they called it ‘battle fatigue’ back

in the wars on Oldworld. Men just got so tired fighting they couldn't go on."

The two rested, saying little, for in truth they were exhausted. They had actually been little more than children when they had first been called from their sleep capsules; now, Josh and Sarah were sixteen and fifteen and had matured greatly. They had paid a price, however. The strain had taken its toll on them.

Finally they wandered up to the house where the Sleepers had been staying since their last assignment.

Josh looked up the four steps that led to the main floor and shook his head. "I don't know if I can climb those steps," he groaned.

"Sure you can." Sarah took his arm. "Let me help you. I was always taught to respect my elders."

Josh managed a grin. "I'm only a year older than you are." As they reached the landing, he said, "That means we'll never get married."

Sarah shot him a startled look. "What do you mean by that?"

"I've decided to marry an older woman. Maybe someone seventeen."

"I hope you marry a widow who's forty years old and has six redheaded, mean children!"

They stepped inside as Sarah said this, and the five young people who were sprawled around the room heard her comment.

"What do you mean, 'redheaded children'?" Jake Garfield piped up. "Redheaded kids aren't mean. They're like me—easy to get along with." Jake had a New York City accent even after being away for so long. He was small, with brown eyes—and red hair.

A laugh went around the group, and the tallest boy, a handsome, athletic seventeen-year-old named Dave Cooper, added, "Everybody knows redheads are

hot-tempered. Now you take us guys with yellow hair and blue eyes—we're right out of *GQ* magazine."

A groan went up, and the girl sitting next to Dave, Abbey Roberts, said, "There's no chance of you winning the humility award, Dave Cooper!"

At fifteen, Abbey had large blue eyes, long blonde hair, and beautifully shaped features. And despite the hardships of their journey, she had managed to dress in a neat light-green skirt and a tan blouse that fit well. She was carefully made up, and her hair was done expertly. She looked over at the small black boy sitting by the window, looking out. "Wash, do *you* think redheads are mean?"

Wash was really named Gregory Randolph Washington Jones. He had been born in New Orleans and had grown up on the street there until he had been popped into a sleep capsule. At fourteen, he was slightly undersized, but he continually wore a cheerful smile. "I suppose redheads are just about like the rest of us. Some good and some bad—but Jake there, I expect he's one of the better redheads."

The young man leaning against the wall beside Wash was six feet one, even though he was only sixteen. Lean, lanky, and muscular, he had very light blue eyes, bleached yellow hair, and was sunburned. Freckles were scattered over his face. His name was Bob Lee Jackson, but everyone called him Reb. He was a true Southerner from the hills of Arkansas originally, who was still fighting the Civil War.

"When do you think we might get out of this place and do something?" Reb asked. "I'm gonna go crazy! It's like being in the pokey. Why, my Uncle Seedy, if he was here, he'd get us on our way toward a new adventure."

A groan went up. Of all the Sleepers, Reb was the only one who continually looked for new adventures.

“Don’t tell me about your Uncle Seedy. I don’t want to hear about him anymore,” Jake protested. He had been busily working on some invention.

“What’re you making now?” Josh inquired, coming over to look at the mass of wires and tubes and coils.

Jake stared at him adamantly. “I’m not going to tell you until it’s finished. I’ve taken enough ribbing from you about my inventions.”

“I hope it’s not a bomb that’s going to blow us all up,” Sarah said wearily. Then she slumped down onto one of the straight-back chairs. “Though I don’t know but what that might be a welcome relief.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say so, my daughter.” The new voice seemed to come from nowhere.

And then every one of the young people leaped to his feet.

Standing in the doorway was a tall man wearing a light gray robe. He had pushed back the hood, and his long brown hair hung down past his shoulders. He had warm brown eyes, a generous mouth, and could have been anywhere between twenty-five and fifty.

“Goél!” Josh shouted, and instantly his fatigue seemed to drop away. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“I know you have,” Goél said, “but I have had many miles to travel.”

“Here, we have some apple cider. Let me heat it up for you, Goél,” Sarah said quickly. She was given to touches like that—cooking and keeping house, whenever the Sleepers had a house to keep.

Abbey could not cook an egg without ruining it, but she was good at serving, and as soon as Sarah poured the cider, Abbey served Goél first and then the rest of them. “I hope you like it, sire,” she said.

“I’m sure I will,” Goél said. He drank gratefully, then took a seat on the chair that Wash had brought.

“Thank you, my son.” Goél waved an arm. “All of you sit down. I have many things to say.”

“Will you stay long this time, Goél?”

“No, I must be gone almost immediately.” When a slight groan went up, a smile touched his full lips. “Some day it will be different, but for now we must do what we must.”

Reb said, “Well, that’s what John Wayne always said. You all remember? In about a hundred movies he said, ‘A man does what he’s got to do.’ I guess him and you are right, Goél. So what’re we going to do now?”

“I know what you would *like* to do.” Goél fixed his eyes on the tall boy. “You would like to go back to Camelot, and put on a suit of armor, and fight dragons again.”

Reb looked down at the floor, embarrassed. In truth, their adventure to the land of Camelot had been the high point of his life. He had become an expert jousting and had, indeed, done battle with something like a dragon. When he looked up, his light blue eyes glowed. “Is that where we’re going? Back to Camelot?”

“I’m afraid not, Reb.” Goél seemed to note the disappointment on the young man’s face and said, “Few of us get to do just what we’d like to do. That is a prize that must be won. But I promise you that some day, if you trust me and obey, you will come through to your heart’s desire.”

He then looked around at the Sleepers, and when Goél’s eyes locked onto his, Josh thought, *He knows everything I’m thinking—he knows everything I’ve ever done!* As the eyes continued to hold his, another startling thought came, *And I think he knows everything I’m going to do!* It was disconcerting. Josh, like every other boy and every girl, had a secret life that he would not care to see paraded before everyone’s gaze.

Yet, somehow it was comforting to know that here was one who knew all about him but still had faith in him and love for him.

“I’m ready to go wherever you say, Goél,” he said simply.

“You are a good servant of Goél, Joshua.” There was pleasure in the tall man’s eyes. He sipped his cider and for some time sat talking about the groups all over the world that bore his name. They were called, collectively, “The House of Goél,” and they comprised all sorts of strange beings as well as those who looked much like dwellers of Oldworld.

Despite Goél’s statement that he must leave soon, he found time to speak with each one of the Sleepers alone.

Sarah prepared a fine supper—including steaks and fried potatoes and a salad—and Reb somewhere had found a quantity of fresh milk. They enjoyed the meal together, and afterward, when night came on, Josh lit the lamps.

Finally, Goél arose. “You have a mission to perform once again, and you have never failed me. You have gone through dark hours, dangerous times, but this, I think, will be perhaps your most dangerous mission of all.”

“It can’t be worse than those giant squid!” Wash exclaimed. It had been Wash who braved an enormous octopuslike creature in the undersea world.

“There may be physical dangers, yes, but some dangers are worse. There are many men and women and young people who could face a physical trial but who would falter before other kinds.”

“What other kinds of trials do you mean, Goél?” Sarah asked.

“Spiritual trials are always harder than any other

kind,” he said. “We’re in a spiritual battle for the world, as well as a physical one, and I would warn each of you to be on guard. You’re all my servants, and I’m proud of each one of you. You all have your strengths . . .” His eyes glided again over each one of them as he said quietly, “And you all have your weaknesses. That is the way of men, and it always will be in this world.”

“Can you tell us more about the mission, sire?” Dave asked.

“Something strange and terrible has been happening in Nuworld.” Goél’s face darkened, his eyes smoldered. “Some of my most trusted servants have disappeared.”

“*Disappeared!*” Jake exclaimed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly that. They have fallen out of sight.” He hesitated, then said, “I caution you again. Be *very* careful! You might be one of the next to disappear. Those that have been taken have been some of my most trusted aides, even as you are.”

“But what are we to *do*?” Abbey asked with some bewilderment.

“Your mission is simply to find my servants and bring them back. They have somehow fallen under the power of the Dark Lord, and they must be rescued.”

“But how can we find them?”

“That is part of your mission—finding where they have gone. I will give you a helper along the way. But there will be those who would lead you astray. So be very careful.”

“How will we know our helper?”

Goél said quietly, “I have given the one who will help you a special phrase. When he meets you, he will say, ‘The stars are doing their great dance.’ Do not trust anyone who does not say *exactly* those words—‘The

stars are doing their great dance’—and then you must say as a countersign, ‘Yes, and every tree will sing.’”

For a few moments he gave them further instructions, concluding, “As you trust in me, so will your mission succeed. Farewell, my Seven Sleepers.” He hesitated, then said, “The last days are upon this planet. The final battle looms on the horizon. I think this may be your last mission before that battle—and your most dangerous. Take care. Remember the signs.”

Goél turned and without another word stepped out of the doorway and faded into the darkness.

A silence fell over the group, and at last Josh said wearily, “So we’ve got to find the missing members of the House of Goél, and then we’ve got to get them free.” He slouched down in his chair, saying nothing more.

As Sarah and Wash began cleaning up the supper dishes, Wash said, “I never seen Josh look so worn out. It looks like he can hardly keep his eyes open.”

Sarah glanced over at Josh, who was sprawled in his chair, his head tilted back. “He’s exhausted—but then we all are.”

“Well, we better get some more get up and go.” Then Wash looked down at the dishes in his hands and shook his head. “But it seems like my get up and go done got up and went!”

2

An Odd Sort of Town

For several days the Sleepers spent a great deal of time trying to figure out their strategy. Goél had told them little enough about the crisis; however, he had left a list of his servants who had disappeared.

At their first planning meeting, Josh said, “This list is about all we have to go on. *Something* in this list has to give us some kind of clue. Everyone take a copy and study it. Try to find something on the list that’ll help pinpoint how to start.”

As simple as the plan sounded, it did not prove to be easy. Each Sleeper studied the names and descriptions of the missing servants. From time to time, they came together to share their findings. The difficulty was that there *were* no findings.

One afternoon they sat around the room, staring at their lists blankly, all of them drained mentally. It was Jake who finally noticed something common to most of the names. He said slowly, “I do see one thing.”

“Well, what is it?” Dave demanded. “Anything is better than *nothing*.”

Jake held up his list. “Almost all of these people disappeared from the same general area. Look—I’ve drawn a map. Every X you see is where they’ve disappeared.”

The Sleepers huddled around Jake, staring down at his map, which he placed flat on the pine table. There was a moment’s silence.

Then Wash said, “See how many of them are clus-

tered around that one little spot. What's that town there on the map, Jake?"

"It's called Acton."

"I've heard of it, but I don't guess none of us have ever been there."

Jake said, "It's kind of a gathering place for scientists—inventors and people like that."

"Well, I guess we'd better get over there," Josh said. "I think we'll all go crazy just sitting around here looking at each other and staring at pieces of paper."

They made preparations at once, gathering together clothing, weapons, some food. Traveling in Nuworld was not like travel in Oldworld. There were no trains, no airlines, no Greyhound buses. By foot or by horseback or by sailing ship was all there was. Travel was dangerous too, for the land was full of marauding outlaws. Even worse, the members of a group called the Sanhedrin had vowed to execute the Seven Sleepers. They were under the command of the Dark Lord, and Elmas, his Chief Sorcerer, had made finding the Sleepers his highest priority.

It took several days of winding through the forest and staying off the main roads before the Sleepers finally reached the small town.

"That's it," Josh said, "according to the map. So I think we better split up here."

"Split up? Why should we do that?" Abbey asked. She was wearing a cranberry-colored skirt and a bolero jacket over a light blue blouse. She looked rather fetching, as she always did. "I don't want us to split up. Let's stay together."

"No, that won't do," Josh said. "The servants of the Dark Lord are looking for the *Seven Sleepers*. What we need to do is go into town one at a time and find places to stay. Elmas will have his spies there, and if he hears

of seven young people coming in together, we'll be caught for sure."

"I think that's smart," Reb said. "Old Stonewall Jackson himself couldn't have figured out a better battle plan than that." He smiled. "But how are we going to talk to each other?"

They spent some time figuring out a communication system. Since they would be separated, never to be seen together, one Sleeper would communicate with another, who would pass along the message until all were aware.

"It sounds awkward to me." Dave shook his head. "What if we have to get together in a hurry?"

"We'll have to figure that out when it happens," Josh said rather sharply. "No plan's perfect. We'll just have to play it by ear."

They followed Josh's plan, some of them staying outside Acton for a day or two. None went in from the same road.

Josh, who had remained outside until last, chose to come in from the east. Entering Acton, he noticed at once that it was larger and more sophisticated than most other towns in Nuworld. He had disguised himself somewhat, putting on the clothes of a peasant, and he tried to appear as country as possible. If anyone asked, he was a yokel come to seek work in the city. He'd put dirt on his face, and he thought he looked properly disreputable.

He approached an inn, entered, and saw that it was almost empty. Two old men sat playing chess and taking sips from flagons that rested on the table.

The innkeeper was a dark-skinned burly man with a fierce head of black hair. He had quick, sharp black eyes. "What'll it be?" he asked, then demanded, "You're a stranger here?"

“Yes, I am. I come to town lookin’ for work.” Josh slurred his speech. “You know where a man might get work?”

“Not for the likes of you,” the innkeeper sniffed.

“Well, could I get a place to stay?”

The innkeeper hesitated. “I’ve got a room out back over the stable. It’s not much but probably all you’ll be able to afford.”

Josh asked to see the place, and it proved to be rough indeed. However, it was all he needed. He paid the innkeeper a week’s rent and then asked, “Could I buy a meal?”

At the sight of money, the innkeeper had perked up. “I’ll have the wife put on a steak. Come in and have a drink on the house.”

Josh went back inside and sat down. The innkeeper, having a paying customer, grew more talkative.

“Business seems pretty slow,” Josh said as he sipped at the powerful drink that filled his cup. He had to at least make a show of drinking it, and he smacked his lips as though it were delicious.

“Aye, times are a little odd.” The innkeeper shook his head dolefully. “I been running this inn since I was a young man. Never seen times like this. Seems like nobody wants to get out at night anymore.” He looked around at the two old men and shrugged. “Up until a while back, the place would be full every night. People come to drink and have a good time. Not no more, though.”

“Where are they?”

“Can’t say.”

The answer was sharp, and Josh felt a sudden resistance in the man. He did not want him to become suspicious, so he asked no more questions.

After the meal, however, Josh wandered out

through the town and tried to make other contacts. Once he passed Sarah, who did not even look at him. He avoided her gaze, too, and passed without speaking. *Going to be hard to do*, he thought, *ignoring Sarah and the others like that, but it's the safest thing to do.*

Josh discovered little on that first foray, and he went back to his room, planning to try to find out more the next day.

The next day, however, proved to be frustrating as well. He stopped at a leather shop to get a tear in one of his boots sewed up. The cobbler accepted the boot, looked at it, and said, "Aye, I can fix it."

Josh sat down and watched him work slowly and methodically on the boot. From time to time, the man would glance at a clock that was on the wall.

Josh began to speak idly, admitting he was a stranger in town. He tried to pump the cobbler for details of one of the missing people, a woman named Jewel.

"Aye, she was here, but she's gone now. I haven't seen her. Don't know where she went."

Something about the man's manner of speaking caught at Josh. His speech was somehow . . . well . . . *mechanical* was the only word Josh could come up with. It was as if the cobbler's mind was far away, and when he finally came back he did not speak much.

When the shoemaker finished the boot and named the price, Josh looked into his eyes. He saw that there was something odd about them. Not their shape, for the cobbler was not a bad-looking fellow—not more than thirty, fair hair, blue eyes. It was the *expression* in the eyes that puzzled Josh. *It's almost like there's nobody home*, he thought, and even he did not know what he meant by that.

“Not much going on in town is there?”

“About like usual, I guess.”

“What does a fellow do here for excitement?”

The cobbler stared at him as if he had not heard, then turned away and started working on a belt.

Everywhere Josh went that day, that sort of thing happened.

Bewildered, he went back to the inn, where he ate supper. No more than half a dozen people were there that night, and most of them were old. Finally, he went to bed, wearily thinking, *We've got to do better than this. I'll contact the others tomorrow and see if any of them has found out anything.*

The next day he met Sarah by prearrangement in a market where a few vendors sold their wares. The two of them seemed to meet by accident and managed to find their way to a deserted section down a side street.

“I don't think anybody's watching us,” Josh said. “What have you found out?”

“Not a thing, Josh,” she said.

“You've got to have found out *something*.”

“Well, what about you?” Sarah exclaimed. Acting hurt by Josh's tone, she said, “You've had as much chance to look around as I've had.”

Josh was irritable and allowed himself to speak back sharply. Soon the two were arguing. Their voices rose, and a man walking by looked at them curiously.

Instantly Josh and Sarah turned and walked away. “Well, that was dumb,” Josh said. “We've got to find a place to meet where nobody can see us.”

“I don't think it matters, Josh,” Sarah said. “I don't think we're going to find anything here.”

“We've got to find something. This place is the only clue we have. Have you talked to any of the others?”

“Yes, I talked to Dave. He’s pretending to be a merchant, stopping for a few days in town. He hasn’t found out anything either, and he said he talked to Jake, and Jake didn’t know anything.”

The two walked on silently until Josh abruptly said, “It looks hopeless, Sarah.”

“What about the man that’s supposed to help us?”

“There’s no way for us to find him.” Josh shrugged. “We’ll have to wait for him to come to us. I guess that’s all we can do now—just wait.”

Sarah stared at Josh oddly. “You’re not yourself, Josh.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean you’re not acting like your old self.” Sarah seemed to find it difficult to explain. “I know you’re tired, but all of us are.”

“Well, we can get rested up here. Nothing to do but wait,” Josh said moodily. He kicked at a stone and sent it flying. “I always did hate to wait. I won’t get in a line if there’s any way to stay out of it. My folks always said I was too impatient.”

“Your dad didn’t think so.”

Sarah had lived with Josh’s family for a time before the Great Burning. It was one thing that tied them together. Josh loved to hear Sarah talk about his parents. They were his tie, in his memory, to his old life.

“I wish Dad were here,” Josh said. “He’d know how to handle this.”

It was a futile wish, and Josh knew it. His father had helped them out of the sleep capsules and then had died.

Sarah took his arm, and he turned to face her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be critical, Josh,” she said softly. “I know this is getting to all of us, but Goél said it

won't be long now. The last battle is coming—very soon.”

“I wish it was here today!” Josh frowned. “Tell the others to get word to me at once if Goél’s servant contacts them. We’ve got to do something soon. Good-bye, Sarah.”

Sarah watched Josh walk off. *He isn't going to last like this*, she said to herself. *I've never seen him so nervous and upset. We've got to do something!*