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# 1

## Final Call to Battle

A sullen, hot sun beat down upon the weary travelers winding their way along the mountainous road. Their feet raised tiny puffs of dust that rose in the almost motionless air, then fell back to earth.

The last member of the procession—a smallish fifteen year old with red hair—stopped abruptly and pulled off his hat. He yanked a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the grime from his face, spat on the ground, and called out, “I’m tired of eatin’ all this dust! Let *me* go in front for a while.”

The leader of the hikers, tall, gangling Josh Adams, did not even break stride. Auburn hair peeped out from under the wide-brimmed straw hat he had on. He kept his light blue eyes fixed on the road ahead as he called back sharply, “Stop complaining, Jake! We’ve all had to take our turn in the back.”

Jake Garfield jammed his hat onto his head and plunged forward, sending up choking clouds of dust. “I don’t see why we can’t wait until it rains. This dust is killing me—I can hardly breathe!” He looked off to the low-lying mountains on one side and abruptly ran into the youth in front of him. “Why don’t you pick up your feet, Wash!” Jake snapped, giving the boy a shove.

Wash, who had been born with the rather grand title of Gregory Randolph Washington Jones, caught his balance. The heavy knapsack on his back pulled him backwards, and he grunted involuntarily. The smallest boy of the party, Wash had ebony black skin

and large, innocent brown eyes. Now he rolled those eyes wildly.

“Watch where you’re going, Jake! Them big clodhoppers of yours are enough to sink a battleship!” Wash was good-natured, however, and turned around to wink at Jake. “If you ever grow into your feet, you’ll be a big fellow, sure enough.”

Sarah Collingwood, marching along behind Josh, was small and graceful with brown eyes and black hair. Dust coated her hair just now, and her face was tense from their long march. She hooked her thumbs under the straps of her knapsack. Pulling at them to ease the discomfort, she groaned. “I’m so thirsty I’m spitting cotton. Can’t we stop and find a stream somewhere?”

“Me, too, Sarah—I’m ready to drop.” The speaker just behind Sarah was Abbey Roberts, a pretty blue-eyed blonde, who was at the moment extremely irritable. “This dust is under my fingernails, in my hair, up my nose. I’ll *never* get clean again! We’ve got to stop!”

Josh gave a heavy sigh. “All right, have it your own way—but we’ll never get to Dothan at this rate.”

“Hey—look over there—I think I see a line of trees. Maybe there’s a creek alongside them.” Reb Jackson was tall, lean, muscular. Traces of the old South were in his speech, and the journey had not worn him down as much as it had the others. He was tough as a piece of leather, and now he shoved his sweaty tan Stetson back on his head and squinted against the bright sun. “I’ll go see how she looks. You come when I holler.” He left the line of march, broke into a half run, and soon was hidden in a gully.

“I wish I was as tough as that fellow,” Dave Cooper said. At seventeen, he was the oldest of the Seven Sleepers. He was tall and athletic, though the weary trek had worn him thin at the moment. He wore a

white cotton shirt, yellowed now with the thick dust of the road, and he took off a light felt hat to wipe his brow. He continued walking, his blue eyes searching the gully for Reb. "There he is—waving his hat. I expect he's found water."

"Well, let's go," Josh said wearily. "But we'll have to make better time tomorrow to make up for today."

"I don't see how we can do any better tomorrow," Jake mumbled as they left the road and trudged through thin grass toward where Reb stood at the line of trees. "We've been practically running all day."

"I guess Josh is afraid we'll be late," Wash said. "After all, somebody's got to keep this bunch on the move."

"We've been on the move for weeks," Jake stated flatly. "We won't be any good when we do get there at this rate. We'll be so dried out we won't be able to even *hear* Goél—much less do what he says!"

Wash shrugged and said nothing. He was accustomed to Jake's grumbling. Now, however, he felt there was some ground for it—the Sleepers had been hard driven.

As he plodded along, Wash thought of the strange life into which he had fallen. He had been born in the slums of a great city. If nothing had happened to redirect him, he would have probably joined a gang and perhaps been shot in one of the drug wars that raged there incessantly.

But he had not met that fate. Along with the other six Sleepers, he had been chosen and placed in a sleep capsule just before nuclear war swept the earth. Time passed, and Wash lay in his capsule oblivious to the raging fires, explosions, and terrible changes that took place on earth. Finally the Sleepers had been awakened and came forth to find the world that they had

known gone forever. They were now inhabitants of Nuworld, where mutations had created strange beings such as giants, snakepeople, and dragons.

Wash kept his eye on the figure of Reb, waiting ahead, and thought of the adventures they had experienced together under the leadership of Goél. At first Wash had not understood Goél, but now he knew that their strange leader was the only hope of Nuworld. The Sleepers had immediately discovered that Nuworld was under the dominion of a sinister being called the Dark Lord. It was only the force of Goél that kept the Dark Lord from tyrannizing and enslaving the entire planet.

Wash thought of how they had fought Goél's battles, narrowly escaping death many times, and wondered what task lay ahead for them. They had been summoned to a council, where the leaders of the House of Goél would rendezvous on the Plains of Dothan.

The Sleepers had been halfway across the globe when the summons came. Their trip had already involved scaling high mountains, sailing treacherous waters, fighting hunger and thirst across desert plains—but now, hopefully, they would soon be at the gathering.

Josh slipped his knapsack from his shoulders and stretched painfully. He did not want to show weakness, but he felt drained and knew that he could not have gone on much farther himself. Looking down at the small stream that wound in snakelike fashion through the rocks, he said, "Well, let's make camp here. We'll eat and get a good night's sleep."

Sarah began going through her pack and shook her head. "We don't have much food left. I'll do the best I can."

"I'll make a fire," Reb said. "Wash, do you and Dave want to help me drag up some of that firewood?"

Tired as they were, they all eagerly joined in the business of setting up camp. They had become experts at this, for they had camped out under many strange skies and in dangerous places. Soon the tent that the girls shared was up, the blankets for the boys rolled out, and the smell of cooking meat on the air.

By the time the food was ready, the red sun was sinking rapidly into the horizon. The boys plopped down, eager for the meal that Sarah and Abbey were preparing.

"I'm hungry enough to eat a skunk!" Reb declared. He was sitting cross-legged. His eyes were bright as Sarah passed him a chunk of meat roasted over the open fire.

"This isn't skunk," she said, "but it's all we have."

"Actually what is it, Sarah?" Dave asked.

"It's part of that last antelope that Reb shot three days ago."

"Huh!" Jake grunted as he took his share. "Must be gettin' a little ripe by now. It'll probably make us all sick." Nevertheless, he chewed with evident enjoyment.

Sarah divided the meat as evenly as she could and then said, "We've only got six potatoes. How do you divide six into seven?"

"Just give me Wash's potato." Reb grinned. "He doesn't like potatoes anyhow."

"You keep your mouth off my potato," Wash protested. "I wish it was a sweet potato, though."

They wrangled for a while. Finally Dave settled the problem by sharing his potato with Abbey. "I'm the only mathematician around here," he said. He put some of the steaming potato into his mouth, then juggled it around fiercely. "Wow, that's hot!"

“Baked potatoes always are.” Abbey smiled. “Don’t be so greedy.”

The Sleepers made the meal last as long as they could. When they came back from enjoying drafts of fresh water from the brook, Sarah said, “I’ve got a surprise. I saved these for a special treat.” She pulled four apples out of her bag and smiled. “Dessert. I kept them, but how do you divide four into seven? That’s worse than six potatoes and seven people.”

“Just let me have Reb’s and Dave’s.” Wash laughed. “That way I think it’ll come out even.”

Sarah managed to distribute close to equal slices.

Josh took his portion and said, “You’re a miracle, Sarah! You keep dredging up food when you think we’re all out.” He bit into the apple and chewed thoughtfully. “It’s almost as sweet as those that grew in the orchard out behind our house back in Oldworld.”

“I remember those,” Sarah said dreamily. “But I don’t think these are near as good.”

Josh and Sarah had been close friends in Oldworld, and he thought that now they were closer than ever. They had been little more than children when they had been snatched out of their homes and placed in the sleep capsules, but now they were quickly approaching maturity. They sat apart from the others, for a time saying little. Finally, Josh demolished all of his apple except for a fragment of core. He stared at it thoughtfully. “I’d like to have four or five of those.”

“You’d have a stomachache if you did. Remember how you ate those green apples back when you were fourteen? I thought we’d have to take you to the hospital. I never heard such hollering and carrying on.” Sarah’s brown eyes held a trace of fond amusement.

Eventually fatigue drove the Sleepers to bed. To Josh’s dismay, they slept late the next morning, and the

sun was high in the sky when they finally dragged themselves out of their blankets.

Reb looked at the creek and said, "I'm gonna fish a little bit. We gotta have something fresh to eat."

Josh was already shaping his blanket into a roll. "We don't have time for that. Better get ready."

"I reckon we've got time to catch a fish," Reb argued.

"You heard what I said, Reb! Get your bedroll pulled together. We've got to get out of here."

Reb stared at him, his face reddening. "The rest of you go on, Josh. I'll catch some fish and catch up with you."

"We can't be separated," Josh snapped. "I don't want to argue about it anymore."

"I'm not arguing," Reb stated. "I'm just going to do what I said."

Sarah laid a hand on Reb's arm. "I'd like to have some fresh fish too, Reb, but we're running late. And we don't want to miss the gathering, do we?"

Josh could see that the Southerner was angry, but Sarah's soft words seemed to draw most of the anger from him.

Reb said shortly, "Well, all right then—but I think it's plumb foolish."

Ten minutes later they had broken camp and were on the road again. A light drizzle began and settled the dust. The ground underfoot became somewhat muddy, but Josh was relieved not to be breathing yellow powder.

When they stopped for a midmorning break, he went to sit by himself under a spreading tree at the roadside.

Sarah came over and sat beside him. "Don't be angry at Reb. He's just wound up tight—like all of us."



“I know it,” Josh said immediately. He was a gentle-spirited boy, not at all certain of his abilities. He often felt that someone else—someone such as Reb, who was the best fighter—should be the leader of the Sleepers. Goél had named Josh, however, and he had to obey.

Picking up a stick, he drew a meaningless figure in the dirt. Silence had fallen over the land, and a slight breeze had risen. Looking up, Josh said wearily, “We can’t go on much longer, Sarah.” There was a touch of defeat in his voice. “I don’t like to talk like that, but it looks to me like the Dark Lord is winning. We’re getting pinned down all over the world. Everywhere we go, the Sanhedrin has its spies.”

“But think of how many we’ve helped, Josh. If we hadn’t gone to the land of the Amazons, for example, the Dark Lord would have won the whole tribe over.”

“Oh, sure.” Josh shrugged his lean shoulders. “We’re winning a little—but the Dark Lord’s servants are everywhere. They’re like . . . like a cloud of locusts. And you can’t kill them by stepping on them one at a time.”

Sarah said quietly, “I think everything’s coming to a focal point.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean—well, there’s something *important* about this summons to come to the Plains of Dothan. I think that we’re going to find out something exciting from Goél.”

Josh nodded slowly. “He did say something the last time about a final battle.” He took a deep breath and tried to smile. “I hope this is it. It’s been a long, hard road the past couple of years.”

Sarah put a hand on his arm. “You’ve done wonderfully well, Josh,” she whispered. “No one could have led better than you.”

Josh suddenly grinned and looked much younger than his sixteen years. “You always know how to make a fellow feel good, Sarah.” He put his hand over hers and squeezed it. “But you’re right. We’ll make it. We might walk our legs off—but we’ll make it.”

The huge field called the Plains of Dothan lay at the base of some high-rising mountains to the east and the west. The Sleepers found the level floor of the plain swarming with activity.

Reb suddenly let out a yelp. “Look! There’s Princess Elaine!” He ran ahead to greet a young woman mounted on a beautiful snow-white steed.

The girl wore a long white dress and a cone cap with a blue veil on the tip. She looked like a medieval princess, which was, in a way, what she was. Elaine came from the Nuworld land of Camelot, where people still lived the lives of knights and ladies and warriors.

Behind Elaine rode a troop of knights wearing armor that glistened like silver. They carried their lances high. Several laughed as Reb came to greet his old friend.

“My Reb!” Princess Elaine said. She came down from her horse and gave him her hands.

When Reb kissed them, a cry of laughter went up from the other Sleepers and from the knights.

Reb flushed but kept his head up. “How’s my horse?”

“We’re still keeping him for you. I’ve been expecting you to come back to Camelot every day since you left.” The princess was looking up at Reb. “You have grown. You’re a man now.”

The other Sleepers, too, were meeting old friends from their past adventures. Jake ran at once to a tall

man and a beautiful young woman who had large wings attached to their backs.

“Sureflight—and Loreen!” These were the winged warriors of the desert where Jake and the others had learned to fly. He approached them, grinning from ear to ear. “I was hoping you’d be here. Did you bring a set of wings for me?”

“No, you’ll have to come back to our home,” Loreen said.

She put out her hands, and Jake grabbed them and held them tightly. “It’s so good to see you, Loreen!” he whispered. “I’ve been lonesome for you.”

Sureflight looked down at his daughter and the young redhead, and amusement came to his eyes. “We have been waiting for you to come back. Loreen has been very lonely.”

Jake looked quickly at Sureflight and then at the masses of people about them. “Looks like we’ve got a little business here first. I think there’s some kind of trouble.”

“You’re right, Jake,” Loreen said. “Goél’s message for us said to bring all of our warriors as soon as we could. We came on ahead of them. There’s going to be a battle—I think there’s no doubt about that.”

Josh and Sarah soon ran into Captain Ryland Daybright and the beautiful Dawn. Abbey and Dave and Wash saw still other old friends, and it was a pleasant time indeed. A meal had been prepared for the large company, and they ate and drank, enjoying a wonderful time of reunion.

And then a voice came over the air, clear and strong.

“Welcome, my friends, to the House of Goél!”

Instantly Josh knew that voice! He turned and saw a figure standing on a flat rock that rose above the

floor of the plain. A tall man, wearing a light gray robe with the hood thrown back, he stood before the host, looking around him calmly.

Goél. The mysterious leader who carried the battle to the Dark Lord. He was burned by the sun, and his eyes were deep set and darkly brooding. His hands were corded with strength, and there was a powerful presence about him as he looked around at those who had come at his bidding.

“My faithful friends, you have come—and I thank you all. For years now you have fought the Dark Lord. Many of our comrades have fallen in the struggle—and some will fall in that one which is to come.”

A voice called, “Is it time, Goél?”

“Yes! The time comes for the final battle. Will Nuworld be ruled by the tyranny of the Dark Lord, or will peoples everywhere come into the House of Goél and live as free beings should?”

The question seemed rhetorical, and he stood there for a time, apparently thinking. Then he began to tell them of many things, and no one moved as long as he spoke. At last, he said, “I will be giving you more instructions later—but for now, eat, and drink, and enjoy the fellowship of Goél.”

Josh turned to Sarah. “Well, that tears it,” he said. “We were right. There’s going to be a final battle this time.”

Sarah looked troubled. “It all sounds so—well, so *final*. What if we lose?”

Josh was silent. He did not want to consider that possibility.

The Sleepers continued to wander among the milling crowd, meeting more old friends. And then Goél himself appeared at Josh’s side and greeted him warmly.

“And here is my faithful Joshua.”

“Sire, we have come,” Josh said. “But we have not the strength that we once had. I fear that we are worn thin.”

Goél smiled at him. “You have done your best, and that is all that I ask of any of my servants. But the hour is near, and I must send you on a mission to alert three more groups of my people.”

“Who are they, Goél?” Sarah asked, standing close beside Josh.

“You must go to the Land of Ice and to the Centaurs and to Celethorn, Land of the Magicians. It will be another long journey, but when those three groups are here, my host will be complete. I will not send you alone. I will have guides for you. Will you do this for me?”

Josh suddenly felt refreshed. The very presence of the tall man, and the warmth of his eyes, and the power that seemed to flow through him strengthened the boy. He said sturdily, “We will follow your orders as long as we draw breath, Goél!”

“That’s my faithful Joshua!” Goél said warmly. “The Seven Sleepers are indeed my pride!”

## 2

# Council of the Dark Lord

**F**ar to the north of the Plains of Dothan, where Goél had summoned his subjects, a land fierce and terrible rose up out of the broken tableland. The trees of that land were withered and stunted, as if compressed by the air into bent, twisted shapes. Birds that would sing merrily in brighter lands avoided the place. The only sounds from the air above were the harsh croakings of ravens as they crisscrossed the somber skies.

Travelers avoided this fearsome country, though to do so meant detouring hundreds of miles through difficult terrain—and those who were caught in it by night sometimes did not live to regret it. When the moon arose, strange beasts, foul and unnatural, issued from caverns in the depths of this blasted land. It was a deadly country, feared and despised by those inhabitants of Nuworld who had the misfortune to find themselves within its borders.

Winter gales swept across the bleak, hostile environment, chilling to the bone and almost freezing the teeth of unfortunate travelers. In the fall, the winds pushed across the landscape as if seeking to shove travelers off the narrow mountain paths into the valleys of broken rock far below. Spring and summer, a time of joy and beauty in other parts of Nuworld, brought forth only blistering sunshine that cooked the rocks and baked the faces of those who hurried across the region.

Far inland in the center of this terrible land, a cir-

cle of jagged mountains ringed a castle that rose out of the stones of the earth. The mountains, which served as a fortress wall against any who would attack, were broken by only three passes, kept guarded at all times by the servants of the Dark Lord. Woe be to those who attempted to pass through! Those who did come were more often brought as prisoners—and most were never seen again.

The castle itself was made of solid stone. No one knew how long it had stood there, but its rocks were blasted gray with age and crumbled with the fierce snows and blistering suns that had beaten upon them. Nor did anyone know *how* such a fortress was built. Those who studied it could only be puzzled, for it would have taken thousands of men thousands of years to build such a structure. Its turrets pierced the sky like daggers, and the rounded walls of those towers were slitted to allow bowmen to deal swift death to any who would attack. At times foul smoke would issue from the chimneys, choking those who had the misfortune to breathe it. Neither plant nor animal could endure its stench for long.

The Dread Tower rose like a skeletal finger in the center, and from its crest the entire land could be surveyed by the Dark Lord and his henchmen.

Inside that tower all was massive stone. Steps carved out of rock led down deep, deep, deep into the bowels of the earth, where dungeons kept their terrible secrets forever. Cries and muted screams rose from these chambers far beneath the Dread Tower. There was at least one huge room, known to none but the Dark Lord himself, where a massive brass gate was bolted to the solid rock, strong enough to secure any living thing. At times the Dark Lord would come and put his baleful eye on the huge gate.

The most cheerful spot in the Dread Tower was the council room. It was here the Dark Lord summoned his commanders from time to time to plot his strategy for overthrowing Goél and his House. Even now, that wicked crew sat around tables, tearing at food like vicious animals and swilling down dark, strong liquor.

The Dark Lord did not join in these riotous festivities. He sat on a seat of stone, his clawlike hands clutching its arms. He was cloaked from head to foot in a black cape, his head hidden beneath a hood that fell over and concealed his countenance. Only the red gleam of his eyes could be seen by his captains as they glanced at him from time to time. Motionless, silent, fierce, the Dark Lord watched the revels of his dusky band.

Several vicious fights broke out as the rowdy feasting went on. Powerful, beastlike men pummeled each other. Once, swords were drawn, and their clash filled the council room. The Dark Lord made no effort to stop the duel, nor did the captains. All cried for their favorites, and when one lay on the floor, his eyes glazing in death, a cry of exultation went up from the supporters of his opponent, who raised his bloody sword high.

Finally the Dark Lord said, "*Hear me!*"

Instant silence fell across the chamber. The eye of every captain looked upward to where his lord sat on the dais, staring down at them. Not one, however, looked with love or admiration. Fear had brought them there, and fear kept them there. Every member of the horrid company knew that only strength would prevail with the Dark Lord. Failure was punished, sometimes with death—which was merciful—sometimes with something much worse.



The air seemed to grow heavy as each waited for the Dark Lord to speak.

At last he said, "The time has come."

The Dark Lord's voice echoed in the council room. Even the candles in their wall sockets seemed to bend with the force of it. "We have waited long enough! It is time to strike the final blow against the House of Goél!" His voice rose to a high pitch, filled with anger and frustration. "Goél must die and all who follow him!" The Dark Lord waited as shouts of agreement echoed, then he said, "I will hear what you have to offer as a method of ridding me of him."

Once again there was silence. All knew the penalty of rashness when dealing with this terrible being who sat watching them, his red eyes glowing. Few dared speak.

At last, however, a tall, thin form stood forth. This was Gnash, the victor in many of the Dark Lord's battles. His features were dark, and his teeth showed yellow as he grinned horribly. He wore a leather jerkin and a sword at his side, which he fingered constantly. "My lord," he said, "we are all aware of the problem of Goél and his accursed House."

A murmur of angry cries went up, and Gnash held up a hand to silence it.

"The answer, as we all know, is somehow bound up with the prophecy that came long ago." He hesitated, then quoted part of a prediction that had been circulated in Nuworld for many years: "And when the Seven Sleepers wake—the House of Goél will be filled."

"You dare speak *that* in my presence?" The Dark Lord leaned forward and half lifted his hand, as if to send a lightning bolt and strike Gnash to the floor.

"Hear me, my dread lord," Gnash cried quickly,

blinking. "We cannot win by ignoring the problem. We must strike at the Seven Sleepers themselves."

His words seemed to appease the Dark Lord somewhat. He settled back in his chair, but there was a sneer in his voice as he said, "This is your answer, Gnash? Have you not tried, all of you, time and time again, to crush these accursed Sleepers? And all of you have failed! Seven babies—infants! And all the warriors of my kingdom cannot bring them to bay! *Faugh!* You are the infants and the babies!"

Gnash swallowed hard but managed to hold his ground. "We have failed—I admit it, my liege lord—but I have come to believe that there is more to these Sleepers than flesh and blood." He waved a hand. "Have we not trapped them again and again? Have we not thrown our forces against them when all hope for them was wiped out—and *still* they escaped?" Gnash shook his head grimly. "This is sorcery, my lord, and we must fight it. And no amount of swords or shields can overcome such protection as they apparently have."

Again, a murmur of agreement ran around the hall, and the flames in the fireplace leaped. The captains seemed hungry wolves as they leaned forward to hear what the Dark Lord would say.

"I think you may be right," he said grudgingly. "I have often thought this Goél—blast his name!—is not of this earth. He is no mere man, or he would have been crushed long ago. What is your remedy then, Gnash?"

"I believe we must take the Sleepers not through brute force but through craft and guile."

For some time the discussion went on. But though it was apparent that Gnash had spoken truth, no practical method of applying his remedy appeared.

The Dark Lord said crushingly, "Is this all of your help, my captains?"

"No, sire."

A heavy, bulky figure appeared to the Dark Lord's right. This was Morder, the chief of the council. There was a cruelty in the man that made even the brutal captains cringe as they watched him. His eyes were small and keen and had a yellowish tinge, peering out from under heavy brows. His skin was dark, and the hair of his head and beard was lank. Hair grew in tufts over his arms and neck as well. No one doubted his shrewdness.

"What is your word, Morder?" the Dark Lord asked. "You have never failed me. What now shall we do?"

"My lord," Morder said slowly, his voice as heavy and bulky as his form. "I have good news. We have placed an informer in the House of Goél."

"This has been tried before!" the Dark Lord said impatiently. "They have always ferreted out those we sent, no matter how clever."

"Indeed, you speak the truth, my lord—but this time I have succeeded. We now have an opportunity to know the inner secrets of the movements of Goél's people."

Gnash cried out at once, "If we have done that, then we can lay snares for them and they cannot escape! War is certain. We *must*—we *shall*—destroy the Sleepers!"

Every throat was suddenly filled with screams of anger and hatred for Goél.

The Dark Lord looked down upon the burly forms of his lieutenants. He lifted a hand and in the silence that followed said, "We must not fail. This Goél, despite all of our efforts, grows stronger. More and more of the

free peoples of Nuworld are flocking to his banner. If we do not destroy him now, he will destroy us.”

Morder said confidently, “Do not fear, my lord. We have the strength—and soon we shall have the knowledge—to trap the Seven Sleepers. Believe me, or let my head answer for it. I will have these Sleepers in the dungeons crying for death before long.”

“Your head is pledge, then, Morder. See to it.”

The Dark Lord leaned back and watched as the feast continued. He did not move, but his power seemed to fill the room.

Morder whispered to Gnash, “If we fail, you know the penalty.”

Gnash said nervously, “This informer—is he a reliable spy?”

“Very reliable. No one would suspect. Do not fear—this time we will trap the Sleepers!”