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# 1

## A Strange New Friend

The rain poured down like a waterfall. It had drenched the small party that emerged from the jungle so that there was not a dry thread on any of them. Overhead the sky was leaden gray, and it looked as if the sun had hidden itself permanently.

The two girls struggled along side by side. The mud was sticky and thick, and each time they took a step it made a hollow, sucking noise.

Sarah Collingwood, at fifteen, was the older of the two by one year. Her glossy black hair was now soaked and hung down her back in strings. Her jaw was set; she was absolutely exhausted. Looking over at her companion, she said, "Pretty bad, isn't it?"

Abbey Roberts had hair as blonde as her friend's was black. She also had much more pride and usually took much more time with her appearance. Now as she looked down at her muddy feet and worn, stained clothing, she gritted her teeth. "Sarah, I'm going to just die if we don't get out of this pretty soon!"

Knowing that her friend was always given to overstatement, Sarah found herself able to grin. She reached over and gave Abbey a pat on the back. "You'll feel better when we get into some dry clothes."

Abbey jerked her shoulder away from Sarah's touch. She was ordinarily a rather sweet-tempered girl, but days of hardship on a mission that had failed had discouraged her.

Sarah knew that. The last mission of the Seven Sleepers had been a failure indeed.

Sighing, she looked at the line of teenagers strung out ahead of them along the muddy trail. Her eyes went first to Josh Adams, the leader. Josh was fifteen, tall and awkward. He was also shy and unsure of himself. It had come as a great shock to him when Goél, who was heading a worldwide fight against a sinister figure known as the Dark Lord, had chosen him to be the leader of the Seven Sleepers.

A nuclear war had destroyed Oldworld. But kept safe in sleep capsules, the teenagers known as the Seven Sleepers had escaped the devastation and had awakened years later. Now as Sarah trudged along, she had a sudden longing to be back in Oldworld and have things as they were.

She wanted to go up and walk beside Josh, but she saw that he was busily talking with Reb Jackson. The thing that stood out about Reb was the large cowboy hat perched on top of his blond hair. Water poured off its brim in a miniature waterfall, but he walked straight and tall as he always did.

Gregory Randolph Washington Jones was slogging along behind Reb. Nobody ever called him anything but Wash. He glanced up from time to time at Reb, his best friend. Sarah thought Wash looked as miserable as everybody else.

The other two members of the group were Dave Cooper and Jake Garfield. Sarah's gaze went to them next. At sixteen, Dave was the oldest Sleeper. He was also the most athletic and the best looking. He made quite a contrast to Jake, who was short, had red hair, and right now seemed to be eagerly talking in spite of his misery.

Reb Jackson tilted his head forward and let the water run off his hat brim. "It sure does look like Niagara Falls, doesn't it?"

"Niagara Falls is gone, Reb," Josh Adams said gloomily.

Josh was ordinarily not so short-spoken, but Reb knew the total failure of their last mission was weighing heavily upon him. Josh was sensitive and had little self-confidence as it was. Now, ever since they had failed to defeat the enemy and had to flee in disgrace, Josh had said little to anyone. Why had Goél let this happen?

Reb let more water run off his hat brim. "What's the matter with you, Josh?" He spoke with a Southern drawl that probably existed nowhere else in Nuworld. "You look like an accident going somewhere to happen."

"The accident did happen, Reb."

"Oh, we took a licking this time, but you can't let that get to you. Goél knows. He's got something in mind."

"Yes, I *can* let it get to me!" Josh said crossly. He clamped his lips together and tried to outwalk the Southerner, but Reb's legs were much longer, and he kept up with him.

"Look here, buddy," Reb said. "You know the old saying, 'Never was a horse couldn't be rode.' And the other part of it is, 'Never was a cowboy couldn't be throwed.'" He laughed aloud and shook his head. "I done proved that many a time, Josh. We got 'throwed' this time, but there's always another day."

But Josh did not smile as he usually did at Reb's words. He plodded on, keeping his head down, and a doleful expression settled over his face. He muttered, "I just can't do it anymore, Reb."

“Can’t do what?”

“Can’t be a leader of the Sleepers anymore.”

Reb Jackson stared at him with surprise. “Well, ain’t you a caution now!” he exclaimed. He reached out and poked Josh’s arm with his fist. “Like I keep saying, you can’t win ’em all. You’ve got to expect some failures along the road. But that doesn’t mean you quit.”

Josh just shook his head. He plodded on for some time before mumbling, “I can’t be the leader anymore. I’m just not fit for the job.”

Reb was disturbed by Josh’s words. He himself had never given up on anything. “You think Goél made a mistake? Not a chance.”

Josh didn’t talk anymore, and finally Reb dropped back and fell into step with Wash. “I’m getting worried about Josh,” he said.

“I’m worried about all of us,” Wash grunted. His legs were much shorter than the tall Southerner’s, so he had to walk faster. “You reckon we’re ever gonna get out of this rain?”

“Sometime. But what worries me is that Josh has given up. He just wants to lie down and quit.”

“Well, who doesn’t!”

Reb grinned in spite of his misery. He pulled Wash’s dripping hat down over his face. “Come on,” he said. “We can’t quit now. Too many miles to go.”

The weary travelers stumbled on for what seemed hours. The rain poured down only intermittently now, and it was in one of those brief times of respite that Sarah called out, “Look, everybody. Isn’t that a house over there?”

Jake Garfield wiped the raindrops from his face.

“Let’s go see who lives there, if anybody does. Maybe they’ll take us in for a while.”

“I don’t know,” Dave said. “It doesn’t look like much of a house to me.”

“Anything would be better than this. At least we’ll have some shelter for a while. Come on.”

They slogged toward the shack, their boots making squishy noises in the soggy ground. They had not gone far before Sarah could see that the little house was made of saplings. They had been stuck into the ground in a circle and tied together with vines. The thatched roof seemed to be made of saplings also. A chimney at the side emitted little gusts of black smoke. Obviously, someone lived here.

Reb was walking up front with Josh again. He called out, “Hello, the house! Anybody home?”

Drops of rain began to fall again, but they were all so wet it could not possibly matter. Then the door—a piece of animal hide strung over the opening—was drawn back, and one of the strangest figures Sarah had ever seen stepped outside. At first she could not make out the face, because the man had on a floppy black hat pulled down over his ears. He was very tall and very skinny. He wore colorless pants and a coat held together in front by what seemed to be pieces of sharp thorn in place of buttons.

“Hello, strangers!” The owner pushed back the hat, and Sarah could see that he was a young man. His stringy hair was brown. He had large eyes that seemed to be gray green, set in a thin face. He had a long, sharp, pointed chin and sunken cheeks. Everything about the man seemed to be long—arms, legs, fingers, nose, everything.

“Reckon there’s gonna be a storm that’ll blow us all away, don’t you think?” he said by way of greeting.

“We’ve come a long way,” Josh began. “We’re very tired and—”

“And hungry,” Reb put in. “Reckon you have room in your house to take us in for the night, sir?”

The man reached his long fingers upward, pulled his hat off, and clawed at his uncombed hair. “Well, I’m expecting the house to blow away if this storm gets any worse,” he said mournfully, “but you might as well blow away from here as anywhere else. Come on in.”

“Strange looking fellow, isn’t he?” Dave muttered to Sarah. “He’s nothing but skin and bones.”

“If we can get out of this rain, I don’t care what he looks like,” she said. Sarah had reached that stage of fatigue where she could hardly talk, so she thankfully followed the strange young man inside.

By way of furniture, the “inside” had two chairs and a wooden table with an oil lamp hanging above it. To one side was a stone fireplace. In it hung a cooking pot, and from it a cheerful fire threw its yellow gleams over the small room. The ceiling went up to a point and somehow managed to give the little house a rather spacious look.

Going over to the fireplace, their host said, “You all look pretty worn out. I guess some stew would go down pretty good. Just made a big potful.”

“Sure would,” Jake said quickly. “We’ve got our own bowls.”

The tall man’s face was highlighted now by the glow of the fire and by the lamp that hung from one of the rafters. Sarah thought he certainly had a mournful look about him. Partly, she decided, it was the effect of his long nose and jutting chin and the deep creases beside his mouth.

“My name is Gustavian Devolutarian,” he told

them. He picked up a big spoon and reached for the tin bowl that Abbey had fished out of her pack. "But if you forget it, I could always tell you again."

There were seven hungry visitors, but the cooking pot was large. He ladled out plentiful portions for them all.

Reb said, "I don't think I can handle that whole name of yours. You got anything shorter?"

"Well, you could call me Gus. It doesn't matter much. How's the stew?" He seemed surprised when everyone said it was delicious. Then he stroked his long chin. "I expect you just got nice manners. I can tell you're well-brought-up young people."

Gus brought out bread to go with the stew. Finally he brewed something that tasted vaguely like coffee. Ordinarily the Sleepers would not have been thrilled with this, but as it was, it tasted very good to them indeed.

"Now," Gus said. He pulled out a pipe and filled it with black tobacco. He lit the pipe with a coal from the fire and sent forth puffs of foul smelling smoke that wound their way heavily toward the chimney. "You folks are criminals escaping from the law, I suppose."

"Why, no!" Sarah said quickly. "Not at all. Whatever made you think a thing like that?"

"Oh, I don't know," Gus said. "Most people who come this way are in trouble some way or other."

Seeing that Josh apparently had decided not to say anything, Sarah explained that they had been on a long journey. They needed to rest somewhere, she said, before they made the rest of the trip.

"Actually, we could use a ship to continue the journey," Sarah said. "It would be a lot easier to get home if we could find one."



Gus puffed at the pipe until it glowed, then took it out of his mouth. "Might find that a little bit hard," he said. "Unless you've got a lot of gold."

"We sure don't have much of that," Josh muttered. He was sitting slumped over with his back against the wall.

Dave said, "It's too late in the day now, but tomorrow we can go try to find a shipowner who would give us some credit."

Gus said sadly, as he said most things, "Well, I wish you luck. Doesn't seem likely, though."

For all his gloom, Gus did his best for his visitors. They all had sleeping bags, and there was just room enough on the floor for everyone. Gus even managed to block off a corner with a blanket hung from the rafters to give the girls their own private room. Just before he blew out the light, he said, "In case a wild animal, such as a wolf or something, comes in, it's been good knowing you folks."

"Gloomy Gus," Abbey whispered. "I've never seen such a pessimistic fellow."

"But at least he's friendly, and he gave us something to eat," Sarah whispered back. "And a place to sleep. Maybe we can get out of here early tomorrow."

But the next day everyone was so weary that they slept until nearly noon.

When the Sleepers finally awoke, Dave saw that Gus had been out hunting. He had brought back some sort of waterfowl and was plucking off the feathers. Sarah and Josh volunteered to help him, while Dave and Jake set off for the village to look for a shipowner.

"Don't tell 'em you're friends of mine," Gus warned as they left.

“Why not?” Jake asked with surprise.

“The fellows in that village don’t like me much.”

“You too cheerful for them, Gus? Is that it?” Dave was standing behind Gus, and he winked at Reb.

“Well, it’s partly that. They *are* mournful kind of folks, them folks in town. And they say I do have too much life about me. But the main thing is I’m such a good looking fellow that all the girls like me too much.”

“Is that a fact, Gus?” Dave said with a straight face. “That’s a real problem.”

“Yes, it is.” Gus was obviously totally sincere. “It’s a burden all right, but us good looking folks just have to bear up with it. Try to get back as early as you can, boys. This is tornado weather. If the house isn’t here, we’ll be scattered out somewhere.”

As they left, Dave said, “I sure hope the townspeople are a little bit more cheerful than he is.”

“I doubt it.” Jake frowned. “Not from what he said.”

While Dave and Jake were gone, the other Sleepers spent most of the day resting. Josh was still downhearted and said he was going for a long walk beside the river. Sarah wanted to join him, but she saw that he wanted no company.

By the time the two boys got back from the village, the girls had managed to roast Gus’s waterfowl. Everyone had been eagerly awaiting their return, but as soon as they stepped into the house, Sarah saw the grim expression on their faces.

“No luck, eh?” Reb asked.

Dave burst out angrily, “No luck at all! We talked to every shipowner down there, and not a one of them is willing to trust us!”

“You can’t blame them much, I suppose,” Sarah said. “They don’t know us. We’re strangers.”

“So what are we going to do now?” Dave asked no one in particular.

Silence fell over the room. Everyone looked out of sorts and cross. And then an argument began as to what should be done next.

When the argument was at its peak, Gus said, “Well, I’ve been thinking, folks. I’d like to take a sea voyage. For my health, you know. I’m not really well. Never expected to live this long. Always heard that a sea voyage would be good for me.”

“What are you trying to say, Gus?” Dave asked, sounding puzzled.

“Well, there’s one captain down there that knows me pretty well. Besides, I’ve got a little stash of money. I can pay him, and you can pay me back when we get to where you’re going.”

“Gus, that’s wonderful!” Sarah beamed. She went to him and took his hand and shook it warmly. “What a kind thing to do!”

Gus nodded and then smiled a rather ghastly smile. “There must be lots of ladies there that would appreciate me. I’ll have to try not to be too attractive, though. That always causes trouble.”

“So when can we leave?” Reb asked eagerly.

“Anytime you like. I’ll have to dig up my little stash of gold, then away we go.” He crossed to a cracked mirror on the wall and studied his reflection for a while. Then he nodded with satisfaction. “Yep, I’ll have to uglify myself a little bit. It wouldn’t do for a handsome fellow like me to be thrust on all those unsuspecting ladies over there!”

## 2

### A Jonah on Board

The *Dragon* dipped down deeply into the pale green waves. Then, when it seemed the small ship would surely be swallowed up, it rose again. From time to time, Sarah and Gus, sitting in the bow, grabbed the belaying pins thrust in the side to keep from being thrown off.

“It’s just like a roller coaster, isn’t it?”

“Roller coaster?” Gus puzzled. “What’s a roller coaster?”

Sarah did not feel up to explaining. She had suffered a touch of seasickness ever since the Sleepers, accompanied by their new friend, had set forth in this ship. Gus had done as he promised. He had produced the gold and convinced Captain Benbow to take them all to their destination.

Gus hung onto the ship until his long skinny fingers turned white. “Shouldn’t wonder but we’d go down pretty soon now,” he remarked. “Doesn’t stand to reason that a ship like this could take much more of a beating.”

“Gus, why don’t you look on the bright side of things?” Sarah groaned.

“The bright side. I guess the bright side is if we all get drowned at sea. Then we won’t have to worry about what happens when we get to land.”

Sarah could not help but laugh at him.

Gus suddenly changed the subject. “I hope Josh gets over his seasickness quick. I never saw anybody turn green like he did.”

“I know. I’m worried about him,” Sarah said. She looked up at the sky then and said, “You think it’s going to storm?”

That was the wrong question to ask Gus. He always thought it was going to storm. “The question is,” he said sadly, “how *bad* is it going to storm?” He took off his hat, and the wind blew his lank hair. “I’d say, offhand, it’s going to be a pretty bad one.”

Gus’s words proved to be prophetic. The Sleepers, the crew, and the captain alike all grew apprehensive as the waves grew higher and the sun was hidden for two days.

Captain Benbow stood at the wheel, talking to his first mate, a forbidding man with a sour expression. “Never seen it this bad, Asmin.”

“No, Captain. Neither have I. And I’ve been out in all these waters. I told you it would happen, though. Remember?”

“Now don’t start that superstitious nonsense, First!”

“Call it what you want,” Asmin said, and his lips drew into a twisty line. “I told you it was bad luck to take these people on. I felt it in my bones right from the start.”

Deep down Captain Benbow was beginning to agree with his first mate. Their passengers had not been a troublesome lot, though, he thought. No drinking. No loud noise. They kept to their cabins, only rarely coming topside even before the storm began. Now the captain’s face grew troubled. “We can’t keep up sail like this for long. It’ll rip the sticks right out of her.”

The storm continued another day and night. It was impossible to eat from a plate. The tables, which were

fastened to the floor, tilted at a right angle. Nothing would stay on them.

Josh, who was stricken the worst with seasickness, could not eat anything. Sarah had taken water to him—or tea, when it had been possible to light a fire. But right now, all she could do was cling to a mess hall table as the ship rolled and tossed, indeed like a roller coaster.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do,” Dave said soberly. “The ship surely can’t take much more of this.”

Reb, who hated ships anyway, said glumly, “I wish we’d never gotten on this ship. I wish we’d gone overland. It would have taken longer, but we wouldn’t be in a mess like this.”

Gus was not looking any too well himself, Sarah thought. His long face had turned slightly greenish.

“You see that ring?” he asked, holding up his hand. “I don’t suppose I’ll survive this voyage. If any of you do and have a chance, I wish you’d get it back to my old mother.”

“Oh, stop it, Gus!” Jake snapped. “We’ll get out of this all right.”

He had no sooner spoken than suddenly the door to the mess hall opened, and the captain came in along with the first mate. Behind them were four sailors, for some reason all armed with pistols.

“What’s the matter, Captain?” Gus cried out. “Is it pirates?”

“No, it’s not pirates,” Captain Benbow said. He bit his lip and seemed reluctant to say more.

“What is it, then, Captain? Is the ship going down?” Sarah asked in alarm.

“It’s going down if we don’t get rid of you people,” Asmin said roughly.

“What can you be talking about?” Abbey cried. She looked at the sailors. “And they’ve got pistols in their hands. What is going on?”

“Well,” Captain Benbow said and could not meet her eyes, “it’s like this. We sailors tend to be a superstitious lot. Too much so, I suppose. But it comes down to it that none of us has ever seen a storm like this before.”

Dave suddenly said, “Wait a minute! You’re not trying to say the storm is our fault!”

“Well, it’s not *our* fault!” the first mate growled. “We never had anything like this until you people got on board!”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to put you out in the longboat,” the captain said quietly.

“Why, you can’t do that, Captain! It would be the same as murder!” Dave said with horror. His eyes were big.

“If we don’t do it, all of us are going to perish in this hurricane!” Captain Benbow said. “Arguing about it won’t do any good. We’ll do the best we can for you. We’ve got the boat ready, we put food in it, and water. Now get your gear. You can take all you want. The boat’s big enough to hold it.”

“But we’re not sailors!” Josh protested.

“Then you shouldn’t have come to sea!” the first mate said coldly. “Now get a move on!”

There was no help for it. That was evident. The Sleepers saw that the captain could not be moved. When the men were gone, Dave said, “We’d better take all the gear. We’re going to need it if we ever make it to land.”

An hour later, the longboat was swung over the side of the *Dragon* and quickly lowered into the water,

where it was immediately tossed about wildly by the wind and the waves.

As the captain cast off the lines, he said, "You'll be all right if you head east. You'll make it." Sarah thought he was trying to be kind.

"Nice of him to be so thoughtful of us," Jake growled. Then he looked up at the mast. "Do we put up sails or what?"

"Just a little one," Gus said. "Otherwise the wind would tear it right off and tear the mast off too. No doubt it will anyway."

"Are you a sailor, Gus?" Sarah asked him, hopefully.

"Oh, I've made a voyage or two. Not likely we'll survive, but we'll do the best we can until we go down and feed the sharks."

Reb glared at him but said, "Just tell us what to do. I didn't survive dragons and saber-toothed tigers to drown out in this here ocean."

Gus proved to be a rather good sailor. He knew which ropes to pull. He knew which ones to release. At last they managed to get up a small amount of sail.

"Now," Gus said as he seated himself at the tiller. "Might as well settle back. We got a little traveling to do. I only hope a whale don't come up under us and shatter the bottom."

Happily, a whale did not come up, and after a long battle with the waves, Jake looked overhead and said, "Look. There's a patch of sky!"

"And the wind's not blowing so hard, either!" Dave exclaimed. "I believe we've made it."

"Be careful about sayin' things like that," Gus called back to him. "Life isn't all sassafras and succotash, you know. Might be another typhoon coming just over there."



But Gus's dire warnings proved unfounded. Within an hour, the clouds had begun to break away, and feeble rays of sun began to enlighten the sea. The raging whitecaps died down into long, slow rollers, and Gus steered the longboat over them expertly.

"Do you know which way we should be going, Reb?" Sarah asked.

"Now that I can see the sun I do. We head that way, Gus. Due east."

"How far is it?" Abbey asked faintly.

"Got no idea," Gus said. "Bound to be a long way, though."

Sarah was sitting next to Josh. "We've got a chance, Josh," she told him. "We're going to be all right. Goél has seen us through again." She hesitated, then asked, "Are you feeling better now?"

"I'm not as seasick. But, Sarah, I'll tell you exactly what I told Reb earlier. I can't lead the Seven Sleepers anymore. Ever."

Sarah opened her mouth to argue, but she saw a look of determination on Josh's face and said no more.