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1

A Plea for Help

Look out, Sarah—you're going to lose him!" Sarah Collingwood had been dozing, holding her fishing pole lightly in her hand. At Josh's yell she made a wild grab for the pole. It slid across the grassy bank and hit the water with a splash. Sarah cried out, "Oh no—!" staring at it.

Josh Adams, age fifteen, was a tall, gangly boy. He had auburn hair and dark blue eyes—and loved to fish. With another yell he plunged into the water, stabbed at the swiftly disappearing pole, and managed to catch the end of it. "I've got it!" he yelled excitedly. "I've got it!"

Sarah watched Josh splash back to the bank, slipping in the mud once and falling headlong. He struggled to his feet, rolled over to a sitting position, then hauled up sharply on the pole. It bent double, and he held it with both hands yelling, "Sarah, it's a real pole-bender!"

Sarah danced around crying out advice as Josh held onto the pole. Finally, with a mighty heave Josh sent a wet fish right into Sarah's face. It knocked her over backward, and she grunted, "Umph!" Falling headfirst, she tried to brush the fish away, but it seemed determined to nestle inside her clothing. "Get him off of me, Josh!" she screamed, shoving desperately with both hands. Josh stood up, muddy from head to foot, and began to laugh. "Hang on to him, Sarah. I think he likes you. He must think you're his mamma."

Sarah finally managed to push the fish away and stood up, her eyes flashing. She was a small girl of fifteen, the

same age as Josh. She was very graceful, but her brown eyes flashed with anger. "You did that on purpose! Look—it's got my hair all slimy." She pulled her hand through her long black hair and patted it. "I ought to throw that fish back."

"Not on your life!" Josh picked up the fish carefully and took it off the hook. It flopped mightily, and the sun caught its silver scales so that they flashed and made a beautiful sight. Holding it up, Josh said, "Look, isn't it a nice one? I think that will feed you and me, and we already have enough for all the others."

Sarah was still peeved and walked over to the clear stream that trickled over mossy rocks. Kneeling down she washed her hands carefully and then dabbed at her face. "Well, I'm not going to clean these fish," she declared. "You'll have to do that."

"No way," Josh said. "We made a bet, remember?" He pulled a stringer up, added the fish to it, held it up, and admired the fish, flopping and trying madly to escape. "The one that caught the most fish doesn't have to do any of the cleaning," he said. "I've caught six, and you've caught three. That means you lose."

Sarah gave him a disgusted look, then shrugged. Suddenly a light came into her eyes, and she smiled slightly. Stepping a little closer to him she put her hand on his arm and said softly, "Joshua, I just thought of something."

Josh stared at her suspiciously. "When you talk soft like that," he said, "I know you're going to try to get me to do something—but you won't."

"Oh, Josh, you know how I hate cleaning those nasty old fish! If you'll clean them for me, I'll make you a fresh pie tonight—all your own."

Josh's face lightened. "Well now, that's business," he said. "But it has to be apple, though, with cinnamon, just like I like."

"That's a deal," Sarah said quickly. She smiled and patted his arm fondly. "Come on, let's go home. It's getting late anyway."

They followed the path that traced its way along the stream. They talked about the fishing trip, and when they came in sight of the house, Josh said, "You know, I wouldn't care if we stayed here for another month. I'm tired of going out on quests and fighting dragons and things like that."

Sarah giggled and looked at him mischievously. "I don't remember you fighting any dragons," she teased. "That was Reb, if you'll remember."

Josh reached over and hit her lightly with his fist. "Never mind that. Living in the caves of Mondar was enough adventure for me," he declared. "Remember those T-rexes?" He gave a shiver. "They had teeth six inches long, just like sharpened knives. They could bite a horse in two."

Sarah nodded. "I wonder how they're getting along? They were good people, weren't they, Josh? You usually think about cave people as being thickheaded—but they're not. They didn't know as much about some things as we did. Down deep, though, they were just like us."

The two walked along thinking of the adventure they had just had. They were part of a group called the Seven Sleepers. The group had been miraculously preserved, surviving a nuclear war. They had awakened in a world they had never imagined, filled with strange beings, and discovered that they had slept for many, many years. All things were changed now. Earth was gone, and the place they now inhabited was called Nuworld.

They discovered that they had been preserved to serve a strange man called Goél, a leader who fought against the powers of darkness that threatened to overcome the world. Many adventures they had known, facing

danger and trial, often failing but learning to trust in the power of Goél. They had just returned from a strange land inhabited by primitive people. They had been glad to get back to a very nice house. Goél said before he left, "You need rest. Enjoy yourselves. Someday I will come again, and you must once again go forth to combat the powers of darkness."

Now as the two young people moved along, light-hearted and laughing, they were suddenly alarmed by a horseman that burst out of the dense woods to their left. He was upon them almost before they knew it, and Josh saw that he was a fierce, warlike man.

"Look out, Sarah!" he yelled, for the stranger had drawn a shining sword that flashed in the red rays of the dying sun. Josh threw himself in front of Sarah, wishing desperately that he were armed. Now there was nothing he could do but try to stand between the warrior and Sarah. "What do you want?" he cried out, standing straight.

The warrior was mounted on a fine, clean-limbed horse that looked swift as the wind. He was not a large man but slender and muscular. His eyes were almost black, and he swept the two with a careful glance. His skin was darker than usual, burned golden by the sun. He had a black beard and trim mustache. He wore a light robe that was almost white and reminded Josh at once of pictures of inhabitants of the desert back in Oldworld.

"What is your name?" the rider demanded.

Josh ignored the whirling sword that was held almost at his chest. He was afraid but was determined not to let it show. "My name is Adams—Joshua Adams," he said. "Why do you come at us with a sword? Are you a bandit?"

For one moment the lean, tanned bronze face of the rider relaxed, and his white teeth showed as he smiled. "No, I'm not a bandit. If I were I would have what I wanted from you already."

Sarah stepped from behind Josh. "What is it you want?" she demanded.

The rider examined the girl carefully and seemed to like what he saw. "You have courage," he said. He nodded as if pleased and added, "I like that." He sat on his horse for one moment, then seemed to make a decision.

In one swift move he came off the animal in a smooth, gliding motion. He slipped his blade back into the sheath at his side, then shoved the hood back from his face. His hair was black as hair can be, and he was a handsome man, though somewhat the worse for wear. He looked tired, and when he spoke again his voice sounded weary. "My name is Abdul," he said. "I serve Chief Ali Shareef."

"Ali Shareef?" Josh shook his head. "I've never heard of him. What's he the chief of?"

"My people live far away," Abdul said. "As you see, my steed is weary." He slapped the coal black stallion fondly on the shoulder and said proudly, "It takes a long, hard ride to tire him out."

"Who are you looking for?" Sarah asked. She had appeared frightened at the rough appearance of the heavily armed rider, but now she came to stand beside Josh saying, "If we can help you, we will."

Abdul stared at her. "I seek Goél," he said and watched their faces. "Do you know of such a one?"

Sarah and Josh exchanged glances, then Josh nodded. "We are the servants of Goél."

"Good!" Abdul seemed to sigh with relief. He suddenly seemed very tired, and his lips grew white. He leaned against his horse, and his head drooped. "I-I want to—" He grabbed at the horse and seemed to be falling.

Josh leaned forward and held him up. "He passed out—or he's about to!" he cried. "We've got to get him back to camp."

"Let's see if we can get him back on his horse—then we can lead him in." Sarah came up and asked, "Can you hear me, Abdul?"

He didn't answer but nodded slightly.

"Come on, Josh, help me boost him up."

The two youngsters managed to get the warrior back in the saddle.

"You lead the horse, Sarah. I'll get on behind him and hold him." Josh leaped up behind Abdul and supported him so that he would not fall. "All right, let's go."

Ten minutes later they reached the small rest house, set back in a grove of trees. As Sarah led the black steed into the yard, the house seemed to erupt with young people. The first out was Bob Lee Jackson, age fourteen. Bob, whose nickname was Reb, was a tall young man with pale, bleached hair and very light blue eyes. He wore a white cowboy hat and came at once to help Josh get the man out of the saddle.

When he spoke, his voice had a distinct Southern twang. "Well, where in the cat-hair did you come up with this one?" he demanded. He was very strong, and between the two they helped the man to a chair on the porch. "He looks like he's done run out of spizerintum—and he sure does look thirsty."

A small-boned girl of fourteen, Abigail Roberts, ran at once to get water. She was a pretty girl with light blue eyes and fine blonde hair, very conscious of her appearance. She brought a glass of water and put it to the lips of the stranger.

He drank thirstily, and when he opened his eyes she smiled at him. "There—is that better?"

Abdul swallowed, then looked around. "Yes, much better." He looked at Josh and said, "Are these your friends?"

"Yes, that's Bob Lee Jackson with the funny hat, and this is Abigail Roberts. This little guy here is Wash." He indicated a small black boy no more than thirteen who had come to watch with round eyes. "And this is Jake Garfield."

Jake was small—the same age as Abigail and not much larger. He had flaming red hair and alert brown eyes.

"And my name is Dave Cooper." The speaker was the largest and obviously the oldest of the young people. At sixteen, he was tall, athletic, and handsome enough to have been a movie star back in Oldworld. He had yellow hair and blue eyes and looked down curiously at the visitor. "Where did you spring from?"

Josh interrupted. "His name is Abdul and he's looking for Goél. He's come a long way, he says."

Jake demanded, "What do you want with Goél?" He was a suspicious boy by nature, and some of the hard adventures he had undergone had made him more so. He looked around, and his eyes narrowed. "How do you know he's not a spy?"

"Oh, Jake, you'd be suspicious of your own grandmother!" Wash said in disgust. "Give the poor fellow a chance, can't you?" He was almost diminutive, certainly not as long as his name, which was Gregory Randolph Washington Jones. There was a kindly light in his light brown eyes. "Don't pay any attention to Jake." He smiled, his white teeth flashing. "He was born suspicious."

Josh had been the leader of the Sleepers from the beginning, except for those times when Goél had indicated otherwise. Now he said, "You're obviously tired and haven't eaten. Suppose we fix you something and afterward you can tell us about yourself?"

"That would be good," Abdul said. "I am very hungry. I've not eaten in two days."

Josh said, "Well, I've got enough fish for all of us. Come on, Jake, you and I'll clean them. The others can get the rest of the meal thrown together."

The Sleepers at once became very active. They were all curious about the visitor, and Abbey insisted on leading him inside and putting him in an easy chair. She sat down and talked with him while the meal was being prepared. Finally she came and whispered to Sarah, "Isn't he the handsomest thing! He looks like a desert sheikh."

"Yes, he's nice looking all right," Sarah said, putting a platter of fried fish on the table. "I wonder what he wants with Goél?"

At that moment Josh came in and said, "Looks like supper's ready. Come on, let's get at it. Abdul, you sit right here. I hope you like fried fish."

Abdul sat, his eyes going over the food, and soon he and the others were eating heartily. Josh kept the conversation going, but every eye kept going back to the man of the desert.

Finally Sarah brought out two pies and said, "Josh, you'll have to share your pie with everyone else."

Josh's face fell, but he shrugged. "All right, I guess I'll have to do it then. Sure hate to give up my pie though." He ate his slice, and when he had finished he leaned back and said, "Well, Abdul, if you want to tell us your story, I guess we're ready to listen."

Abdul's face was relaxed. He had been listening to the talk of these young people and seemed somehow to understand that he had nothing to fear. "I come from far away," he said. "My people are being enslaved and killed by the Winged Raiders."

"The Winged Raiders! Who are they?" Jake demanded.

"They are the raiders of the desert," Abdul said, his lips growing tight.

"Why are they called the Winged Raiders?" Wash asked.

Abdul seemed surprised. "Why? Because they have wings!" he said. "Why else would one call them that?"

"You mean, like real wings? Like birds?" Reb asked. "Yikes, that'd be something!" His blue eyes gleamed, and he shook his head. "To be able to fly like a bird—I've always wanted to do that!"

"I wish these could not fly," Abdul said slowly, "but they can."

"You called them raiders." Josh said. "Exactly what do they do?"

The Sleepers sat quietly as Abdul told how the strange beings came sweeping out of the sky, raiding his people. "They steal our young people and take them away, and we never see them again." His face fell, and he said, "My own brother was taken away when he was very young." Angrily he slapped the table. "They take our crops, they take our people—we live in fear. They must be stopped."

"Why did you come to us?" Josh asked. "Is it that you seek help from Goél?"

"There is a song that some of our people have heard," Abdul said slowly. "It says that one day the Seven Sleepers will break the power of the dark ones. We have heard this, but no one understands. I alone asked our chief to let me come." He looked around the circle and said, "You are the Seven Sleepers?"

"Yes, we are," Josh said quickly.

"Then you must come. Otherwise we will perish."

"We can't go unless Goél commands us," Dave said at once. He shook his head, adding, "We're under his command."

Abdul began to beg, "Surely he wouldn't say no. Can you not ask him? We understand he is a good force and that wherever he goes, peace follows."

"He comes and goes when he chooses," Sarah said. "We have no way of calling him."

Abdul seemed to slump in his chair, his face grew weary, and he shook his head. "You are my last hope. If you will not come, I think our people must all perish." He looked around and said, "I must go back to them."

"Wait!" Josh said quickly. "You're tired and your horse is tired. Rest a few days. Perhaps Goél will come. If he does and if he commands us, we will come and help you."

Abdul nodded slowly. "That would be good indeed. I will hope that Goél will come—and that he will send the Sleepers to help rid my people of the raiders of the desert!"

2

Without Authority

Jake," Reb said in disgust, "you're as stubborn as a blue-nosed mule!" He was spinning his lariat expertly and suddenly launched it out so that it fell over Abigail, who was walking by.

She squealed, and Reb laughed. "Gotcha that time!"

Abigail stared at him with disgust, removed the rope, then walked away with her nose in the air.

"I'm not stubborn," Jake stated flatly. "I'm just careful—that's all." He was putting together a machine that he vowed would catch fish automatically. Reb and Josh had both said they'd rather pull them in on a line. Jake, however, loved to invent things. He slowly pulled a lever, but it snapped, catching his finger. "Ow!" he yelled, hopping around first on one foot, then on the other.

Reb laughed. "Well, it might not catch fish, Jake, but it sure caught you. Here, let me get that little hummer off of your finger."

Jake stopped long enough to allow Reb to disengage the apparatus and then stuck his finger in his mouth. He glared down at the invention, reached over with his free hand, and picked it up. He heaved it as far as he could, then shook his head. "That would have worked if I just had the right kind of stuff to work with." Removing his finger from his mouth, he looked at it. "Wouldn't be surprised but what it was broken." He grunted and looked over to where Abdul was sitting on a rock about thirty feet in front of the house. "How do we know he's who he says he is?"

"How do we know he's not?" Reb asked, pulling his rope in. He began to spin it, making a fancy S-shape and then threw it up in the air. It seemed like a live thing in his hand. "Why would he lie about a thing like that?"

"He might be a spy of the Sanhedrin," Jake grumbled. "You know how terrible that Elmas is. He'd do anything to lead us into a trap. He's almost done it two or three times."

"I don't think Abdul is a spy."

"You never think anybody's a spy. You're too trusting. That's what's the matter with you, Reb. Remember that sorceress that nearly got you chewed up by a dragon? Didn't you learn anything from that?"

Reb flushed, for he had been deceived by what appeared to be a fair young woman back when they were visiting a land called Camelot. "Well shucks! You don't think Abdul's a sorcerer, do you? Haven't you listened to anything he's said?"

"Yes, I have," Jake said, "and I don't say he's wrong, and I don't say he's a spy. All I say is we can't go running off every time somebody walks in and asks us to come and save them."

The argument had been going on for three days. Most of the other Sleepers had gained confidence in the visitor. They found Abdul to be an honest man, strong and obviously very courageous. He had come on a long and dangerous mission for a very noble purpose. Jake, however, had stubbornly refused to agree. And now he shook his head and added, "We'd be crazy to leave here on some wild goose chase. And that's what I'm going to say when we take a vote."

Reb looked up in surprise. "You reckon we're going to take a vote on this?" he inquired. "I thought Josh would just make the decision by himself."

"He says he can't do it. It's too much responsibility."

"Well, I reckon it is. When are we going to vote?"

"I think we ought to vote right away, and I think we ought to vote no."

The vote came quicker than either of the boys expected. When they ran back to the house, Josh stepped out and said, "Everybody gather around. I've got something to say."

He waited until they came close, and he looked at their faces. "I guess you pretty well have your minds made up about Abdul here." He looked over at the stranger, who had stood to his feet. "Abdul, if you don't mind, we have a little private business—"

"Of course," Abdul said at once. "I will go for a walk. Call me when you make up your minds."

Josh waited until Abdul was out of hearing distance, then said quickly, "We've got to do something. Abdul's going back to his people in the morning, and we've got to decide whether we're going with him and try to help."

Immediately Jake said, "Wait! We can't go without the command of Goél. We all know that."

Wash answered, "You don't know that Goél wouldn't want us to go. He's just not here to say. I think we ought to go with him."

Josh looked around the circle and said, "Well, personally I do too, but I can't make the decision alone. We're going to take a vote. Everybody in favor of going with Abdul to the desert, raise your hand."

Immediately every hand was raised—except Jake's. He glared around and shook his head stubbornly. "I vote no," he said. He stood there scowling at the others almost angrily. "I thought you all had more sense! Say he's all right. Maybe he is, but that doesn't matter. Every other quest we've gone on, we went because Goél told us to go. And now you want to go out and do it on our own. I think that's a pretty good way to get us all killed."

"Wait a minute!" Dave said quickly. "You're right, Jake, that Goél has always *told* us when to go, but we know where he stands. And these Winged Raiders sound like they're connected with the Dark Lord to me, and you know Goél's against him."

"That's right," Sarah added quickly. "At least we can make a start and go talk to the chief. Goél has a way of showing up when we need him."

"That's what I say," Reb Jackson said quickly. He was a young man who liked action and was getting bored. "I think we can handle these Winged Raiders." He nodded confidently. "I mean, after all, back in Oldworld I used to go out hunting quail. I didn't have any trouble with them."

Josh shook his head cautiously. "I think these are a little more dangerous than quail," he said slowly. He looked around the circle, his eyes coming to rest on Jake. Biting his lip, he said, "Jake, it takes nerve to stand alone, and I recognize that. But the rest of us all seem to be agreed. Since helping these people seems like something Goél would *want* us to do, I think we've got to go and expect that he will meet us somehow either on the way or after we get there." He gave Jake a curious glance. "You don't have to go, Jake. You could wait here if you want."

Jake threw up his hands in disgust. "I'm the only one with any sense!" he declared. "I'll go, but I won't like it, and that's all there is to it." He turned and walked away, his back straight with anger.

Josh stared after him. "We won't make up our minds now. This is a big decision. Maybe Goél still will come before Abdul leaves in the morning. I sure do hope so!"

Wash said, "I'll go get Abdul, but can I tell him we'll go with him?"

"No, I'm just not sure," Josh said. "We won't decide till morning."

"All right."

Wash ran down the road and found Abdul standing beside the creek, looking down it. Abdul turned to face the young black boy. "What did you decide?" he asked at once.

Wash was embarrassed. He said, "Aw, well—most of us want to go, but—"

"But some do not," Abdul said. "How will you decide?"

"Well, Josh—he's kind of the leader," Wash said. "He wants to go, but he's just afraid to go without an order from Goél directly. He's our leader, you see."

Abdul nodded. "It is good to follow your leader." He seemed heavy and disappointed and began to walk slowly back to the house.

"Tell me more about your people," Wash said, "and about these Winged Raiders. What do they do?"

Wash listened carefully as Abdul spoke of the grief and pain—and even death—the Winged Raiders of the desert had brought to his people. He spoke of families being robbed of their children, of some being killed. Those who had been captured never returned except once in a great while. Only twice, he said, there had been escapes. They had told horrible tales of brutality, torture, and slaves being worked until they died and then thrown carelessly aside.

Wash listened for a long time, and finally when Abdul stopped he said, "You know, my people were slaves a long time ago."

"They were?"

"Yes, there was a great war fought, and finally my people were all set free to be like other men." The small boy's face twisted, and he shook his head. "I don't like to think about anybody being a slave." He looked at the tall

man. "I know Goél would want us to go set your people free." He saw that Abdul still looked discouraged and said quickly, "Don't worry—it will be all right. You'll see! In the morning we'll be going with you."

They returned to the house, and no one said much to Abdul that night. They saw that he was despondent, and Josh whispered to Dave, "I see he thinks we're not going, but I think we have to. What do you think?"

Dave shrugged. "I'm like you, Josh. We know where Goél would stand on this matter of kidnapping and slavery. It's a chance to strike out at the Dark Lord. I think we ought to go."

The next morning at the breakfast table Josh said suddenly, "Abdul, we have decided we're going with you."

At once Abdul straightened his back, and relief washed across his face. He looked over at the small dark face of Wash and smiled. "Now," he said, "hopefully my people can be free—as yours were."

* * *

They took a day to get ready to go. Josh insisted they take as much equipment as they could carry. Nuworld had not developed guns and bombs. The weapons here were swords and longbows and daggers. Reb insisted on taking his rope, of course, and early the next morning they mounted their sturdy horses, and Abdul led them out.

"It will be a hard trip," he warned. "We have perhaps just enough provisions to get us there if we're careful."

They traveled hard the first day, stopping at noon for a brief break, and that night they camped beside a river. They ate the meat that they had brought with them and slept hard, for the journey had been difficult. They rose the next morning stiff from the unusual exercise and rode for the next four days as fast as their animals would take them.

Finally, on the fifth day, Abdul drew up and said, "Look! There is the desert. In a few days we will reach my home."

Reb looked out over the vast expanse of sand. "Je-hoshaphat! I never saw so much country in all my life. Look at it!"

"Can we get across that, Abdul?" Josh asked doubtfully. "I've heard about people dying of thirst in the desert."

"That is true. It is dangerous, but I know the oases and water holes. You must trust me," he said firmly. "I will get you to my people—and then we must trust you."

They traveled for several days over the desert. Abdul had told the truth. He led them unerringly to watering holes. He found water sometimes by digging in the dry beds of streams. Their provisions grew slim, and only when Abdul killed a wild deer were they able to fill their stomachs again.

And the wind! The deeper they penetrated the desert, the harder it blew. The Sleepers clung to their horses, and their clothing was nearly ripped from their bodies.

"Good place to fly gliders." Dave grunted. "But it makes for hard travel."

"The Winged Raiders use these winds," Abdul called out over the wind. "It carries them from their home, the Citadel, all over the desert."

Finally late one afternoon, when their lips were chapped and dry and the girls could hardly sit on their horses and the boys too for that matter, Abdul cried out, "Look! There is the home of my people."

Josh followed his gesture and saw a group of black tents on the far horizon. "Is that where Chief Ali will be?" he asked through his parched lips.

"Yes." Abdul nodded eagerly. "Tonight you will be honored guests under the protection of Chief Ali Shareef."

"Wouldn't be a minute too soon for me." Reb groaned. He eased himself into the saddle. "I've been riding all my life, but this is the longest ride I've ever made. I'm about ready for some cornbread and pork chops."

Abdul smiled at him. "We won't have that, but I'm sure we'll have nice fresh goat."

Reb said to Abigail, who had just made a face, "Just what you wanted, isn't it? Nice fresh goat. Come on, Abbey—I'll give you the best part of the goat!"