

BACKPACK ADVENTURES

Episode 13

“Three Rivers, Three Nations”

“Don’t move!” barked a husky voice. Jace squinted his eyes and strained to make out the figure approaching him from the shadows. From his vantage point—lying flat on his back on the ground—he could tell only that the shape was human.

Jace closed his eyes and relaxed upon the forest floor, his head cushioned by the carpet of leaves. His body ached from the abrupt fall he had taken. His brain felt fuzzy.

My body feels a lot older than thirteen, he thought groggily. Where am I? What happened? With closed eyes, he shook his head back and forth rapidly, then patted the ground beside him blindly to feel for his ever-present backpack.

“I said, don’t move! Now be still or I’ll kill you!”

Jace’s almond-shaped eyes popped open. He froze. Five inches from his nose was the business-end of a flint arrow. His eyes followed the shaft of the weapon up to the owner: a dark-skinned, muscular youth wearing deerskin breeches adorned with colorful beadwork. A single brown and white feather hung in his long ink-black braid. Bright red paint was smeared in a broad band across his face from ear to ear. He scowled at Jace.

“I have no weapon,” Jace managed to murmur. “Please don’t point that thing at me.”

The young man shook his head and smirked. “You think I’m stupid, do you, Rainbow Rider? What kind of being falls from the sky in a rainbow cloud and does not carry a weapon? My friend has found your medicine bag, but he’s afraid to touch it.”

As Jace’s mind cleared, he realized something had gone terribly wrong. At the mention of his backpack, he felt sudden panic. He struggled to remember what had happened. His instincts were screaming “run,” but his body lay helpless on the ground. Take a deep breath and think, he told himself. Think *fast*.

He had to have that bag and yet he couldn’t appear interested in it. He realized, painfully, the keypad that remotely controlled the small but powerful computer in his backpack was at this moment stuck in the back waistband of the soccer shorts he was wearing. Obviously, his captors had already witnessed how the backpack computer transported people. The distinctive rainbow light had accompanied his sudden appearance in the dense forest—not a natural phenomenon.

“Your friend is right, you shouldn’t touch my bag. Only I can control it.” And even that is questionable, Jace thought ruefully. From the corner of his eye, Jace could see his bag lying a foot away from his left leg, propped against a massive tree log. A large black bird perched on a rotting branch that protruded from the trunk like a withered, outstretched arm. But where was the warrior’s friend? Was he behind the log? Would he suddenly appear with a tomahawk?

The flickering sunlight that filtered through the thick canopy of leaves played havoc with Jace’s eyesight. Shadows darted and danced like living beings. Birdcalls filled the hot, humid air. The lichen on the towering hardwood trees and the decaying humus on the forest floor confirmed Jace’s suspicion that he was in an ancient grove. His

nose itched and he hoped the moldy smell of the ground didn't bring on an asthma attack. I need to sit up, Jace thought. I need water, too.

"May I sit up?" Jace queried.

His captor nodded. "I'll kill you like I killed that deer there if you move too fast." He pointed the arrow towards Jace's right. About thirty feet away lay a two-hundred-pound buck with twelve point antlers. Two arrows stuck out from his side just behind his left foreleg. His glassy eyes looked like black marbles and his tongue lolled from between yellowed teeth. His neck had been slit and dark blood stained last autumn's fallen leaves.

Jace sat upright slowly and felt blessed relief at the spot where the keypad had dug into his back. This keypad, about the size of a TV remote control, held the answer to how he had gone from being alone in his bedroom doing history homework before his first soccer match to his current predicament.

Jace brought his knees toward his chest and rested his aching head on them as he rubbed his straight, close-cropped black hair. Suddenly, he remembered and his fear multiplied.

Jace hurriedly put on his last sock. He had changed into his green soccer uniform as soon as he arrived home, anxious to go to the first match of the fall season. It was the first year he would be team captain.

He was also excited because he had just been given a new keypad control device at the Backpack Club meeting. This unofficial middle school club was made up of four friends and two of their siblings.

Jace was the newest member. His neighbor, K.T. and her best friends, Connie and Summer were eighth-graders like Jace. Connie's brother, Roman, and Summer's brother, Travis, were the founders of the club and two years older than Jace.

Roman had developed a super-powerful mini-computer, controlled remotely with a keypad device. The BPC, as they dubbed it, could transport people through space and time. Roman and his best friend, Travis, had shared the device with their sisters and K.T. and eventually with Jace. Roman was a technophile who kept improving his invention with new gadgets like GPS and a universal language translator.

Now Jace held the latest version of the keypad device: a scanner had been added to the bottom of the case so that text and images could be uploaded and displayed on the new digital color screen. Simply sweep the scanner over what you wanted to store and that information would be visible on the larger screen at the top, Roman proudly explained. No more typing in coordinates.

Jace unclipped the old keypad and dropped it into his backpack. He flipped open the American history book. Even though he had lived in Texas for three years now, he had grown up in China and then lived briefly in California. History was by far his worst subject—he could never seem to score higher than 95 in a six-week period. This new keypad might help him study better.

He seldom used the backpack computer to travel through space and time. The few instances he had done so—to China and to India—were not pleasant.

Jace preferred to use the communication capabilities to keep in touch with the rest of the club.

He selected a passage under the heading “Pontiac’s Rebellion” and whisked the device over the page. The bright color screen glowed with the words he had just scanned and Jace smiled gleefully. The new memory chip Roman had installed could hold the entire textbook and more!

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Jace bounded off the bed as his bedroom door flew open. He stashed the keypad device into the back waistband of his soccer shorts and leapt to the end of the bed, trying to block the view of his book and the open backpack. All that stood between the intruder and the truth about the backpack was Jace’s thin and wiry body.

“Yo, Jace,” hollered Dejay. “Yo’ mama said you were in here studying. What’s up with that? We gotta game to go to.”

Dejay Powers was a burly fourteen year old who had moved with his mother from Los Angeles at the end of the last school year. His mom said she wanted “to extract Dejay from the gang influences to which he was falling prey.” Jace thought Mrs. Powers was actually saving the gang members from Dejay.

She had signed Dejay up for the summer recreational soccer league where he met and befriended Jace, much to Jace’s dismay.

To add insult to injury, Dejay was on the same eighth grade team at school and had already ruined the start of school. Dejay came to school on the first day though he was running a fever, blowing his nose and sneezing all over everybody.

He insisted on sitting by Jace at lunch and complained the whole time of a bad headache.

Jace, who had never missed a day of school, came down with the same symptoms two days later and his mother kept him home because he might have a contagious virus. Jace blamed Dejay for his ruined perfect attendance record.

When Jace returned to school, he joked with K.T. in the hall that Dejay was a bioterrorist. The eighth grade counselor overheard Jace and called him into her office – the first time in his life he’d ever been in any trouble at school. Jace received a stern lecture: since 9/11/01 and all the mail trouble that October, no jokes could be made about bioterrorism, or in fact, any terrorism. He had detention the next lunch period for calling names. Another first!

Since then, Jace had been avoiding Dejay, determined not to let him ruin his other two records: leading soccer scorer and straight–“A” student.

“Hey, DeeJ,” Jace said, keeping his body between Dejay and the bed. “Didn’t know you were going to escort me to the game.”

Dejay shifted from left to right and back, trying to move past Jace and sit on the bed. He had been curious to see Jace’s room ever since Jace had let slip how many soccer trophies he had won.

“Naw, my mom’s working late. She asked your mom if I could go with you,” he explained. “So this is the bedroom-study hall of the legendary straight– “A” Jace. Lookie at all the trophies!” Dejay snickered as he pointed to the rows of soccer awards lining Jace’s bedroom walls.

“Dejay, it’s a mess in here. You’ve, ah, we’ve got to go now to make the game.”

Jace stumbled over his words, anxious to lead Dejay out of the room.

“What? You don’t want me in here? Is that a fact?”

Dejay stuck his chest in Jace’s face, daring Jace to stop his forward movement. Jace planted his feet and pressed his lips together in determination. Just then, Jace’s mother called out to the boys to come downstairs.

“Beatcha!” Dejay said as he gave Jace a rough shove and ran back down the stairs. Jace reeled and fell backwards, tripping over the sheets at the end of his bed. His hand reached out to break his fall and he felt the edge of his backpack as he crashed to the floor in a whirl of rainbow light.

As Jace sat remembering, his captor had slowly edged all the way around him, looking for weapons. Jace’s hand went to his back as he freed the keypad from his waistband. Instantly, he felt the arrow tip at the back of his skull behind his left ear.

“This shaft will go through you, Rainbow Rider, and skewer your head like a frog on a stick. Drop your weapon, but tell me, little frog, which river is your home? The Allegheny, the Monongahela or the Ohio?”

“I told you I don’t have a weapon!” Jace carefully placed the keypad next to the backpack. “My name is Jace, not Rainbow Rider. And I’m not a frog. I’m a human being. Just like you. Who are you, anyway?”

“My name is Red Arrow. I’m a Lenape warrior, a great hunter, and the oldest son of our tribe’s storyteller, Star Weaver. My mother is the eldest daughter of a tribal chief. Our village is on the banks of the Monongahela.”

Jace stood up slowly. He was about the same height as Red Arrow. Jace’s mind was clear now, but his back still hurt where he fell on the keypad. He could hear running water, like a river. It reminded him of his thirst.

“Is that the Mononga—whatever that I hear?” Jace asked. “I sure could use a drink of water!”

“*Mo-non-ga-he-la,*” Red Arrow pronounced slowly. “The river you hear is the Allegheny. These two rivers come together south of here and form the Ohio.” He tossed a small container made of skin to Jace who caught the jiggly bag just before it hit his face.

Jace pulled out the wooden stopper and smelled the liquid inside. No smell. He cautiously took a sip and tasted fresh, clean water. Greedily, he gulped another mouthful and pushed the stopper back in place.

“Thanks!” Jace tossed the bag back to Red Arrow who had returned the arrow to his quiver and hung the bow across his back. Red Arrow picked up an intricately beaded bag with a shoulder strap covered in tiny red and white beads.

“Your bag is beautiful,” commented Jace.

“This is my *parfleche*. I use it to carry my food while I travel.”

Jace glanced at his backpack. “ Well, could I have my pear flash?”

Red Arrow picked up Jace’s backpack and dropped the keypad inside.

“No,” he replied as he swung the backpack over his arm. “You’ll be carrying the deer back to our village.”

“There’s no way I can lift that monster!” Jace exclaimed.

“ *I* can lift him. But then again, I’m Lenape. You can build a sled. Like the women. I’ll teach you.”

Red Arrow worked swiftly and showed Jace how to make a game sled from two thin saplings and the twisted branches of the prickly bushes that made up the crowded forest undergrowth. They rolled the heavy carcass of the deer onto the sled.

“My father and uncle would normally be here to help me,” explained Red Arrow, “but this is the end of my passage to manhood. I’ve been away for four weeks now and the last task I had to fulfill was my first solo big game kill.”

“Wait a minute! I thought you said you had a friend with you. The one who’s afraid of my medicine bag—uh, my backpack.” Jace didn’t like to think that Red Arrow had tricked him.

“That’s my friend,” Red Arrow said with a smile as he pointed to the large black crow that eyed Jace warily. Red Arrow clicked his tongue and whistled and the crow flew swiftly to his shoulder. The teen deftly flicked a tiny piece of dried meat into the crow’s beak. Jace stood gawking at the pair.

“I suppose I can trust you since Black Beak hasn’t pecked your eyes out. Yet. I raised him from a chick and he’s my guardian. He can sense danger.”

Red Arrow gently lifted the bird onto his outstretched fingers and hoisted him into the air. The crow circled once and landed on a low branch nearby.

“Let’s go!” commanded Red Arrow.

The two boys struggled through the dense forest along a narrow game trail, Jace in front pulling the game sled, and Red Arrow in back, loaded down with all the other bags. They walked for an hour in silence until Red Arrow announced a water break. He drank first from the skin canteen.

Jace dripped with sweat. His feet were sore from trudging along in just his socks. He swatted a fly from his face and scratched mosquito bites on his legs. Jace studied Red Arrow's calm visage. He didn't look much older than Jace. "How old are you?"

"Fourteen years in the way you count the moons."

"What do you mean? How do you know about my ways?" Jace was curious about this talented boy just a year older than he. His fear had been replaced by respect. Plus, he needed to learn more so he could retrieve his backpack and keypad.

"When I was very little, the French soldiers had a fort near our village, at the point where the three rivers meet. Fort Duquesne they called it. The French were our friends, especially the fur trappers. They gave us gifts and treated us well. The English and the French fought a war. We helped the French. They lost, so we lost." Red Arrow looked sad. "My grandfather died in that war."

"I'm sorry. I bet you miss him. My grandfather died two years ago."

Red Arrow shrugged, unwilling to give in to emotion. "The English destroyed Fort Duquesne and built a new fort, Fort Pitt, in its place. The English do not give gifts. They take back their promises too."

Red Arrow's face grew animated. "Now many tribes have united to fight the English and drive them from our lands. Under the leadership of the great Shawnee chief, Pontiac, we have already destroyed nine forts. Soon Fort Pitt will fall."

Jace took a swig from the water skin and handed it back to Red Arrow.

“How much farther is it to the village?”

“We’re halfway there.”

Jace’s shoulders slumped with the thought of another hour in the jungle- like forest. Suddenly he had an idea.

“What if I could get us there in an instant?”

“What do you mean?” Red Arrow frowned at Jace with suspicion.

“You saw me just *appear* in the forest in the rainbow light, right?”

Red Arrow nodded slightly.

“Well, I can move from place to place using my bag. *And...* I can take anything and anyone I’m touching with me.” Jace smiled as he thought of how strong he would seem if he could “fly” with the deer and Red Arrow.

Then he realized he would need the coordinates and his confidence sank. How could he tell where the village would be? Something, something Red Arrow had said kept nagging him like a pestering gnat. What was it?

“How could you lift all of us on a rainbow? Even Pontiac cannot fly like an eagle across rivers and forests.”

“That’s it!” Jace cried, “Pontiac! I was, um, reading about him in my history book when Dejay pushed me and I fell on the keypad.”

“What?” Red Arrow yelled with exasperation. “I think you’re stalling. It’s time to get moving again!”

“Please, Red Arrow, let me show you how it works. Haven’t you always wanted to fly like Black Beak? It’s not dangerous! I’ll go with you!” Jace took a deep breath and tried a daring taunt. “I rode the rainbow light, but perhaps you’re too frightened.”

Red Arrow glared at Jace. He thrust his hand into the backpack and examined the keypad up close. On the screen a portrait of Pontiac glowed in digital color. Red Arrow’s work-hardened fingers gently tapped the screen. He looked up at Jace and answered the dare:

“Take me to the village on the point where the three rivers meet.”

Jace began to type, talking out loud, “O-hi-o, Al-le-ghe-ny, Mo-non-ga-he-la...”

Jace and Red Arrow stood on a low ridge facing a small village of about a dozen bark-covered longhouses. All was quiet and still. The Monongahela, brown and broad, flowed beyond the farthest wigwam. The top of Fort Pitt could be seen in the distance to the right just past a wide swath of forest. Apprehension clouded Red Arrow’s face as he viewed his village. It was early evening—a time for preparing food and visiting, yet no one was visible.

Caw! Caw! Caw!

Jace jumped at the sound of Black Beak’s cry. The bird had traveled with the boys as they journeyed using the BPC. He now flew to the highest branches of the trees surrounding the village clearing.

Red Arrow tore his gaze away from the longhouses and followed Black Beak’s flight. He turned to Jace with a dark expression.

“If your magic rainbow light has caused any harm to my family...”

“There’s nothing bad in my backpack! I have no weapons! Your family’s probably all inside.”

As if to confirm Jace’s words, a small girl ran from one longhouse to another. Red Arrow prodded Jace with the end of his bow. Jace lifted the game sled and began the short descent to the village.

They walked between two rows of houses and stopped in front of the largest house, a structure about 12 feet by 20 feet. The little girl had run into this house. As Jace set the heavy game sled down, a woman appeared in the doorway. Her face was hidden by the shadow of the bearskin curtain of served as a door.

She was slender and wore a long deerskin skirt. Beaded moccasins protected her feet and her long hair hung down in two thick braids, the dark hair streaked with narrow lines of gray. A short tunic dyed a bright red barely covered her upper body and her arms were bare.

Her arms caught Jace’s eye. Her skin was covered with scabby sores and pus-filled blisters. She held her hand up, palm forward, and it seemed even her palm had crusty patches.

“Stop, Red Arrow, come no further.” The woman moved out of the shadows. The evening sunlight poured over her face, revealing beauty that pock-marked skin could not destroy. The blisters on her face had already healed, leaving deep scars.

Red Arrow stood, fists clenched. His face was a chiseled mask, betraying no emotion. Jace only hoped his own face did not betray the horror of seeing this pitiful woman.

“What happened, Mother?” asked Red Arrow with a slight quiver in his voice.

“Where are the others?”

“The day after you left, we received a message from Pontiac calling a powwow of all the tribal chiefs. Cornstalk, Blue Jacket, Black Hoof, Turtle’s Heart—many chiefs would be there. The English wanted to parley. Your father left me in charge here and took your uncle, Dark Cloud, and the ten other braves with him. Dark Cloud brought back a message three weeks ago. The English captain, Ecuyer, had presented them with woven blankets as tokens of peace. They debated whether to make peace or attack. Many hours they talked.”

She continued, “Dark Cloud intended to go right back to the powwow, but he was overcome with malaise, too tired to travel. He fell ill with fever which broke two days later, but left him covered with an ugly red rash.”

Red Arrow’s mother paused here and swallowed hard, her eyes squeezed shut in pain. Jace could not tell if talking was painful for her or if the memory of what she was telling them hurt so badly.

“Where is he, mother, has he returned to the powwow?” asked Red Arrow anxiously. “If he’s still here, I’ll go with him to find Father!”

“Dark Cloud died last week, my son. I know how much you loved your father’s youngest brother. Do not grieve. Death was a kindness for him after all he suffered. Many others have taken sick. Some get better, as I did. Some...”

Star Weaver paused as the little girl they had seen earlier stuck her head out from behind her skirt. She had only one scab on her cheek and it was almost healed. Star Weaver gently lifted the little girl’s tangled hair from her eyes.

“Some, like Little Turtle, barely get sick at all. I am teaching her the old Songs so she can become a storyteller someday. Most of the tribe has gone to join the Delaware south of the Monongahela. Only the sick and dying are here now. When all are well, I’ll lead them to join the others.”

“Then I shall go now to find my father and fight the English!”

“The English have their own suffering. We see them carrying their dead into the forest where they burn them. The south wind carries the wretched smoke of funeral pyres into the village. Dark Cloud told me when he first arrived that one of the men who brought the blankets looked ill, but he did not know for sure.”

“There’s been no other word from the powwow?”

“None. But Fort Pitt still stands.”

Jace had remained quiet through all the discussion. He felt even more anxious to leave now that it sounded like there was an epidemic of some monster pimple outbreaks that killed a bunch of people! He thought back to his last physical exam before soccer camp. He’d complained about the vaccinations he had to update. He’d never complain again!

“Where do you want me to put the deer, Red Arrow?” Jace asked softly.

Red Arrow turned now to Jace. He seemed to have grown older since they arrived at the village. Disappointment and sorrow filled his eyes.

“Leave the deer by the door. The women will prepare the meat.”

Jace dragged the sled to the doorway, keeping his eyes downcast and looking only at his feet. He could smell a putrid odor as he neared the longhouse.

Red Arrow turned to his mother. “Here is my first big game kill. I have even brought a captive who...” he paused, choosing his words carefully. “Who transported the game to my home. He is released now to return to his own people. Come, I will lead you to the forest path.”

Red Arrow ran quickly toward the forest and Jace hesitated only a moment before running after him. Jace didn’t want to be left alone in the dying village.

“Hey, wait up!” Jace called as Red Arrow entered the edge of the forest. The pathway was empty, as if Red Arrow had disappeared, and Jace felt a burst of panic. Without warning, Red Arrow grabbed Jace’s shoulder from behind.

“Ugh!” Jace sputtered.

Red Arrow’s face was inches from Jace’s and his eyes were on fire. Jace could see angry tears pooling on Red Arrow’s thick dark lashes and his breath was hot and rapid. He huffed as if winded.

“I do not know exactly where my father is, but I do know where Fort Pitt is. Take me inside Fort Pitt now on the rainbow light. I want to kill Ecuyer!”

“What? I can’t take you there!”

“Take me or I’ll kill you, too!” Red Arrow raised a wicked looking eight-inch knife to Jace’s throat.

“Red Arrow, if I take you there, you’ll be killed either by the soldiers or the sickness. You can’t stay here either. I didn’t cause this disease. I’ll help you if I can.” Jace’s voice remained calm even though his heart was pounding.

Red Arrow’s eyes regained their former calm and he took several deep breaths. Slowly, he regained his composure.

“I cannot break my word like the stinking English. I told my mother you could return to your people. Go now! I do not need your help!” Red Arrow released his grip on Jace and sheathed his knife. He took an arrow from his quiver and handed it to Jace.

“An honest token of our friendship,” he said solemnly. He handed Jace’s bag and keypad back to him.

“But I have nothing to give you in return,” Jace responded. “Wait! I have my old keypad. Here, take it. It has no rainbow light, but it may let us talk after I return home. I’m not sure if it’ll work, though.”

Jace handed the keypad to Red Arrow who attached it to the shoulder strap of his bag. Red Arrow smiled at Jace, then fled into the forest. Jace watched him for a moment then lost him in the deep shadows of the great trees.

Jace threw the backpack over his shoulder and checked the new keypad. Roman had added an “Instant Return Button” after a couple of “accidental activations” of the keypad. This would be Jace’s first time to use it.

And the last time, he hoped silently. He looked around the silent forest and thought for a moment that Red Arrow was returning. But it was just the shadow of a crow winging through the upper branches, watching the forest floor.

Jace lay on his bed late that night, trying to study, thinking instead of the events of the long day. He couldn’t believe how the first soccer match of the season had turned out. After leaving Red Arrow, he had rushed to gather his cleats and grabbed an old pair, too small to wear. He had to sit out the first ten minutes while his mother went back to get the right shoes. Dejay started the game and scored a point right away. When Jace

went in, he scored within minutes thanks to an assist from Dejay. They ended up winning, 3 to 0. Maybe Dejay was a difficult person, Jace thought, but at least we can get along on the soccer field.

Jace glanced up at the shelf that held his soccer trophies. A flint-tipped arrow with a red shaft leaned against the wall beside the awards. Jace checked the screen of the new keypad for any messages. His one voice message still registered as “sent/not received.” Leaving the old keypad with Red Arrow had been worth the try. Perhaps it was too much to expect to communicate with someone in the past. Wearily, he picked up his history book and began to read.