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1

Out of the Frying Pan

The great stone door swung slowly to and fell into place with a click.

"Quick," Josh urged, "they're coming!"

Even as he spoke, the angry cries of the soldiers of the Sanhedrin sounded, and they began to pound on the stone walls.

At his side, Sarah shivered. "We just barely made it, didn't we, Josh?"

"Yes. Inside, right now!" Calling their names, tall, lean, freckled Josh shoved his companions in quickly, pushing them one by one down the corridor that led to a gentle, downhill slope. "We've got to get away. They may break through the door."

The company that made its way down through the dark passageway, lit only by torches at irregular intervals, was strange indeed. Sarah watched the group in front of her, thinking, *I never thought to see such creatures as these—not on this earth*. But she knew she was not on the old earth. She was on a planet completely changed by nuclear war. The changes had brought genetic transformation, so that Oldworld was gone and now new sub-species were to be seen.

She glanced again at the group ahead, those members of the new world who had been chosen to help keep the Seven Sleepers from the wrath of the Sanhedrin. Three of them were the strange looking "hunters"—one having huge eyes that could see, it seemed, forever; the second having great ears that flopped and wiggled; and the

third having a large, twitching nose, so that together the three made what was called the Hunter.

Next in line was the giant, Volka, larger than any human had ever been on earth. He had powerful, bulky muscles and a blunt but kind face. Then came two sets of twins, "Gemini twins," who had to stay close together all their lives—Mat and Tam, and the females Amar and Rama. If they were separated, Sarah knew, they would die. And last came their friend Kybus.

"Look! There are some boats," Jake called out. His red hair shone in the light of the torches. "Five of them. How did they know how many boats we'd need?"

"We can worry about that later," Josh said. "Let's get aboard."

One boat was required for the giant. The twins got in another, and Kybus and the Hunter in the next.

"Sarah, you, Reb, and Wash go with me," Josh said. "Dave, you take Abbey, and Jake."

"Right," Dave said.

And they began to climb into the small, flimsy-looking boats.

"Wow," Reb said, his pale blue eyes staring doubtfully at the little craft. "I wouldn't go fishing on the Mississippi in a thing like this."

"It's what we have," Josh said impatiently. "The Sleepers will bring up the rear. The rest of you, go on."

"Yes," Kybus said, his sharp face glowing with intelligence. "Come. I've got the feeling that we need to hurry. They have ways of breaking through stone walls."

The first three boats shoved off, then Dave, Abbey, and Jake followed. Sarah sat down between Reb and Wash, and Josh took the stern, handling the paddle.

The current was swift, and Wash said, "I sure hope that this don't get fast. I can't swim a lick. Can the rest of you?"

As it turned out, Josh was the only one who could swim well, but he said, "Don't worry, this is easy. I've done a lot of canoeing, and if the current doesn't get any faster than this, we're all right."

They glided along smoothly. The underground stream was black in the darkness. Only their hand-held torches cast reflections.

Somehow Sarah sensed that this was a very deep river. She had never liked boating—or water—and since she was not much of a swimmer, fear ran over her. But she said nothing.

They had glided along for perhaps half an hour when Josh said, "I think the current's getting faster." He called ahead, "How is it up there?"

From far in front came the voice of Kybus, very faint, "Be careful, be careful."

"I don't like this." Wash's black face was tense, and his usual cheerful smile was gone. He clung to the sides of the boat. "Sure wish we could get out in the open."

Reb, perhaps trying to lighten the situation, said, "You know what this is like?"

"I know it's like something weird," Sarah said. "What's it like to you, Reb?"

"Why, I went in one of them parks in Dallas, and they had a thing called the Log Ride. I got into that sucker and slid down all the way. And you know what?—it was fun!"

Josh said, "I've been there too, and it *was* fun, but this is a little different." Suddenly he cried out, "Look, look up there!"

Sarah looked up and saw at once what he had seen.

"The ceiling's getting lower," Josh said.

Far ahead, they heard a cry, and a cold chill ran down Sarah's back. Not only was the river beginning to boil, throwing forward the little boats at a speed that was terrifying, but was the ceiling closing in on them? Before, it

had been high enough so that their torches barely illuminated it, but now she saw that it was only a few feet above their heads.

"What if it plays out?" Reb asked suddenly. "What'll we do then?"

"Never happen," Josh said.

But was he feeling queasy himself? Sarah wondered. Was his stomach churning too? This closing in of the ceiling and the racing of the river were things he must have never counted on.

But Josh said, "We'll be all right."

Another cry came from far ahead. "Look out!" And then silence.

"The tunnel's closing in!" Sarah cried. Now the ceiling was so close that she could almost reach up and touch it. "We're all going to drown!"

Sarah grabbed at Josh. She caught his arm, which he was using to paddle, and caused him to miss a stroke.

He said angrily, "Don't hold onto me, Sarah. I need to guide the boat."

As if they hadn't enough trouble, suddenly the torches far ahead of them disappeared—just flickered out, except for the one right in front containing the other Sleepers. "Are you all right?" Josh cried out. "Dave?"

Dave's voice floated back. "We're all right, but it looks like we're running out of river. I can't even see the others."

The ceiling dropped lower and lower, and now it was as if the boat were being drawn into a giant whirlpool. The water was white. Its roaring as it streamed over the rocks was almost deafening. The fury of the rushing water and the sensation of being closed in were terrifying. Fear rose to grip Sarah, and then she heard Abigail scream.

"We're all going to die! We're all going to die!"

And at that moment, though she had little use for Ab-

igail's manners, Sarah thought there was some excuse for the girl's terror.

"Hang on, hang on!" Josh said. "We'll make it."

There was a mighty roar then as the river seemed to reach a crescendo of sound, and Sarah gave up all hope. She crouched in the bottom of the boat, covered her ears with her hands, and began crying out to Goel for help.

And then, as if in answer to her cry, the roaring began to diminish. Sarah looked up to see that the ceiling was no longer right above her head but was rising—almost magically, it seemed.

"We made it through! We made it through!" Josh cried. "Look ahead there!"

Sarah gasped in amazement. They had come into a huge cavern with a ceiling so high that it seemed to go up forever. The torches did not enable them even to see it. On each side, they began to pass huge stalactites and stalagmites that glittered like diamonds, reflecting the torchlight.

"We've come to a big cave," Sarah cried out. "Oh, Josh, there's a shore over there. Let's land on it, quick."

"I think that's a good idea." Josh called out, "Dave, see that shore? I think we'd better pull in."

"All right," Dave called back.

The two boats turned toward a long, sloping beach in a side eddy of the river. As the first boat landed, Jake leaped out and pulled in the prow. Reb did the same for the second boat.

Soon everyone was out on the sand, and Reb was lighting other torches so that they could see what sort of place they were in.

"Why it's like Mammoth Cave," Sarah said. "I was there one time. It looked like this."

"Well, I'm just glad to be anywhere," Jake said. "I thought we'd had it back in that river." He looked all around. "Where are the Nuworlders?"

Dave said, "Didn't you see that divide back there?"

"No, I didn't see anything," Josh said. "What was it?"

"The river divided, and the other boats went the other way. I didn't have a chance to even make a choice—it just seemed like this branch sucked us into it."

Sarah looked around, saw the pale faces, and knew that her own was no better. Everybody's nerves seemed a little shaky. "Let's fix something to eat," she said. "Then we can talk about what we are going to do."

That idea sounded good to the others, and soon they were busy preparing a meal.

"Someone had planned for us," Reb said as he pulled food and firewood out of the boat. "I don't know what kind of grub this is, but I'll be glad to have it."

As the others prepared the food, Josh went up and down the beach. He came back just when the meal was ready. "Well, we might as well eat, because we're sure not going but one way."

They sat down and ate the meat, which was delicious, and afterwards Wash asked, "Well, what are we going to do now?"

Dave shrugged uncertainly. He was a tall, handsome boy of fifteen, the oldest of the group. He had fine, yellow hair and striking blue eyes. "Not much choice about that. We're separated from the rest, and we can't go back up the river, can we?"

"No," Sarah said at once. She was fourteen, small, graceful, very pretty. Her black hair was now wet with the spray of the river. She said, "But we're all right. Goel has brought us this far."

It was Abigail Roberts, who at thirteen was the most attractive of the Sleepers, beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde-haired, very small and well-shaped, and yet always complaining, who said, "No, we're all going to die down here." She pouted. "We'll never get out."

Jake shook his head stubbornly. "Goel didn't save us to let us die like moles underground."

The argument went on for some time, but at last it was obvious to everyone, even seemingly to Abigail, that they were going to have to go on down the river.

Reb summed it up. "Well, I'll tell you, back in the war, Stonewall Jackson, when he seen a bunch of Yankees, he always done one thing."

"What was that, Reb?"

"Why, he charged 'em!" Reb exclaimed. He waved his hand toward the stream. "And we're going to do exactly the same thing." He had pale, sun-bleached hair and light blue eyes, as had his ancestors on the fields of Bull Run and Antietam. "And we'll do it too! But first, I think I'm going to rest a while."

Everyone seemed exhausted. They found blankets in the bottom of the boats—a little soggy but better than nothing, and it was not freezing in the cave. They lay down wearily, and soon most of them were asleep.

But Sarah lay awake for a long time. She was thinking about all the things that had brought the seven of them to this place, and now she began to think of the strange person called Goel, who appeared from time to time to give them counsel.

"Who is he?" she whispered. "*What* is he, and why do I believe in him so much?" But she knew that Goel, whoever or whatever he was, had proven himself to be their friend. "So," she said, as she began to drop off to sleep, "I'll trust him. You have to trust somebody, so I'll trust him."

She was almost asleep when suddenly her eyes flew open. She had heard splashing out on the smooth water, and then a footstep.

"Josh—wake up! Somebody's coming."

Josh, lying close by, came awake instantly. "What is it?"

"Somebody's coming."

Josh quickly awakened the others, and they gathered in a group as a shadowy shape moved toward them.

Josh said, "There's just one. Come on, you guys, let's get him."

As they charged across the sandy beach, Reb let out a wild rebel cry that almost raised the hair on the back of Sarah's neck. Reb got to the intruder first and threw himself on him. Down they went. The others were yelling and trying to get into the fight. Then Sarah ran up holding a torch, saying, "Who are you?"

Josh grabbed an arm, jerked the intruder to his feet, and then stood stock still. A gasp went up from the group, and Josh muttered, "Why—you're just a girl!"

What Sarah saw was a young woman of perhaps eighteen, with black hair and green eyes. She wore some sort of transparent costume through which Sarah could see a green swimming suit that looked much like fish scales. A strange-looking belt was around her waist, having several tubes that ran up to the top of her suit.

"My name is Jere," she said quietly. "And Goel has sent me to be your guide."

Silence fell over the Sleepers. They stared wildly at one another, and then looked again carefully at the beautiful young woman.

"Well," Sarah said tartly, "if there's a pretty girl in a hundred miles, you'll find her, won't you, Josh?"

2

Friend—or Foe?

Josh shot a startled look at Sarah, then shook his head in disgust, but made no answer. Instead, he looked at the young woman and said harshly, "We'll have to know a little bit more about you than that before we follow you anywhere."

The young woman called Jere turned to Josh. She seemed able to make quick decisions, and apparently she had decided that Josh was the leader here. When she spoke again, her voice was low and pleasant, and her green eyes caught the flicker of the torches.

"I think you are wise to question me," she said. "These are not normal days, and one does not know, at times, who is a friend and who is a foe."

Dave stepped forward, his chin held out defiantly. "Well, prove it to us, then—which one you are, a friend or a foe."

"I cannot do that."

The Sleepers glanced at each other again. Sarah knew she was not satisfied with this reply.

Reb Jackson shoved his cowboy hat back on his head and said carefully, "Well, shoot. Here you are, a strange young lady who popped up out of a river wearing a garb like I've never seen before, and you want us to follow you blind."

Jere nodded, and a slight smile turned up the corners of her lips. "I'm afraid that's the way it must be," she said calmly.

Josh looked upset. This was another of those crises

that seemed to tear the group apart at times. As close as they had grown during their dangerous adventures together, still they were seven strong-minded young people. "Do you know who we are?" he asked finally.

"No," Jere answered, shaking her head. Her hair was cut short and was a mass of curls, and she looked very pretty standing before them. She was small, but strongly built, like a swimmer or a gymnast. "I know nothing about you except that Goel sent me to bring you to your destination." She looked at them curiously. "I might ask the same of you as you of me. Who *are* you, and why would Goel want you to come to my home?"

Something about the young woman pleased Sarah. "You really don't know who we are?"

"No. You look like a group of young people, obviously out of Oldtime. Who are you, and what are you doing in this cave?"

Sarah glanced around. "It may save time if I tell her." Without waiting, she plunged into an explanation. "We all come from Oldworld," she said quickly. "Before the great war, which destroyed the old world, we were all placed in what you might call time capsules. We stayed there—*asleep*—until the war was over and for long afterwards. But finally we were awakened, and all came together. We only know that somehow we're going to be used to bring Nuworld to a time of peace, and we think," she added, "that Goel is the key to that."

Jere had listened carefully. Finally she gave a deep sigh and ran her hands restlessly over her hair. She shook her head sadly. "Peace, what we all long for, but what most of us never find." Then she straightened up and seemed to be thinking. "Well, obviously I cannot force you to go with me. You will have to decide. I will go down the beach and wait while you talk among yourselves."

Without another word, the young woman walked away.

As soon as she was out of hearing distance, Dave said, "I don't know about this. She could be anybody. How do we know she's not one of the Sanhedrin's spies?"

Abigail said, "But she doesn't look like a spy. She's too pretty for that."

Jake Garfield grinned, his red hair over his eyes. "Well, sometimes I think it's better for spies to be pretty—get more sympathy that way."

Reb said, "Shoot, I don't know. Here she appears in the middle of nowhere and says we're supposed to follow her." His eyes were troubled, and though he had courage enough for ten young men, something about blindly following a woman clearly bothered him.

The talk went on for some time until finally Josh said, "We can't stand here arguing. We'll have to vote. Everybody that's in favor of following Jere to wherever she takes us, hold up your hand." When he looked around, every hand was up except Dave's and Reb's.

"Well," Josh said, "you two will just have to go along, I guess. Majority rules." He lifted his head and called out, "Jere—Jere."

The young woman came back up the beach. "Have you made up your mind?"

"Yes. Some of us aren't sure, but we're going to trust you. But I warn you," he said suddenly, "if anything goes wrong, I'll be very close to you." He pulled a knife out of his belt. "I don't want to sound unkind—but something may happen to you."

Jere smiled suddenly, and she had one of those smiles where the eyes crinkle up until they're almost invisible. She laughed aloud. "You are wise beyond your years, young man. Come along, and I will take you to your destination."

"You ride in the boat with me," Josh said.

"No. You all will follow me."

There was something majestic about her manner. As she walked toward the boats, Jake said, "I don't know who she is, but whoever she is, she's *somebody!*"

The others seemed to agree, even Reb and Dave. They followed her to the water.

Jere said, "You can get in the boats."

"What about you?"

"I will lead you." Then she looked at Josh and said, "Do not fear. I really *am* sent by Goel."

Something about her words and her manner must have satisfied Josh. He shoved the knife back in its sheath. "I guess we'll trust you. Come on, everybody, get in."

The Sleepers scrambled into the boats. Josh took one paddle and Dave the other. Then they looked back at Jere, who stood on the beach.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ready," Josh said. "But what about you?"

Jere reached for a small object that dangled from her neck and blew it. It looked like some sort of horn. Then she pulled down over her face the plastic hood that had covered her hair. She touched a button on the complicated belt she wore. The transparent suit inflated.

At the same time, there was a loud splash.

Sarah whirled and was shocked to see a huge, round nose and a row of sharp teeth protrude from the water. At first, she thought it was a shark, but then she recognized the animal. "A porpoise," she cried out. "It's like Flipper."

Jere said, "Flipper? No, his name is Captain." She walked to the water, and the huge porpoise turned sideways. He wore a kind of saddle, and a simple bridle through his jaws. He croaked almost happily and moved so that Jere simply stepped into the saddle. She turned back to smile at them. "Follow me. I won't get too far ahead." Then she spoke to the porpoise. "Captain—on!" And the porpoise began to plow through the water.

The Sleepers stared after her as the boats followed.

"Well," Reb said, "I've been to two county fairs and three snake stompin's—but I ain't never seen nothing like that!"

Sarah leaned back and whispered to Josh, "I think she's all right."

Josh said solemnly, "She'd better be. Elmas isn't going to give up—or his Sanhedrin. Not till we're all dead." He looked after the beautiful young woman as the porpoise cut through the water. "If she is one of his spies, and if this is one of his traps, we're goners, Sarah."

But Sarah said, "No, she's not one of Elmas's people, I just know it."

* * *

The reputation of Elmas, Chief Interrogator of the Sanhedrin, was overwhelming. At the very mention of his name, people would tremble, and some prisoners had even been known to faint. But now, as he approached the throne room of the Tower, his own cruel face was filled with uncertainty. He wore a brilliant red robe with a heavy gold chain around his neck, bearing a strange medallion.

To himself he said, *I don't need to be afraid. I've always been faithful to Lord Necros.*

Still, when he was halted before the heavy door by two huge, armed guards, he noticed that his hands were trembling, and his knees felt so weak he was not sure he could stand.

One of the guards opened the door, disappeared, then was back, his heavy face staring down into the face of the Interrogator. "Lord Necros commands your presence."

Something about the words seemed filled with doom, but Elmas straightened up and forced down the fear that had been running through him. He followed the guard into a huge room.

A strange being sat on a throne. He was dressed in black, and a hood covered his face, but Elmas could see his powerful, clawlike hands, almost like eagles' talons. And in the shadow of the hood, the eyes of Lord Necros glowed red.

Here was something terrifying and evil, even to Elmas, who knew something about evil. This, he knew, was like nothing he himself could conjure up.

When Necros spoke, his voice was somehow full and yet had a deadened quality. It was as if a recording were speaking. Still, evil sounded in his speech.

"I have waited too long for your report."

Elmas's words ran over each other. "Yes . . . of course, my lord. But you must forgive me for . . . well, we have had difficulties—"

"Difficulties! I want results, not excuses. Give me your report."

For some time the Interrogator avoided the issue, and the red eyes of Lord Necros seemed to burn into his very soul.

Finally Necros said, "Enough. What is the result of your mission?"

"I . . . I regret to say that the . . . the Sleepers have . . . escaped."

As soon as the words were uttered, a searing pain began at the top of Elmas's head. With a groan, he grabbed his head and fell to the floor.

He sensed that Lord Necros was staring down at him as if he were some sort of insect. It seemed to Elmas that his head would fly off at any moment. "Please, my lord, I can explain—"

Lord Necros then gestured with one clawlike hand. At once the pain began to go away.

"Get to your feet," Lord Necros commanded. "Now I know what you are—a useless servant, indeed, of the Dark Lord."

"No!" Elmas cried out quickly. His hands were trembling so badly that he had to hold them together. Fear had driven almost everything from his mind. But he knew that he had only one chance. "I have a plan, my lord Necros."

"He has a plan." Necros raised his hand again, as if to send the pain flowing through Elmas again. Then he hesitated. "Well, what is this plan of yours? As I explained to you, we control most of the land now, so the Dark Lord commands that we control the sea. You have failed in that mission too, I suppose?"

"No, Lord Necros, please, just listen to me. The plan I have will gain us control of Atlantis—and it will mean the death of the Seven Sleepers."

Lord Necros leaned back on his throne, folded his hands together, and stared down at the Chief Interrogator. "And how are you going to perform these two miracles? You can't even catch seven children with all of your army!"

"But now we'll have them," Elmas said quickly. "You see, lord, it has been obvious from the first that we could never take Atlantis by force. Our people could not compete with the Atlantians under the sea by military power. Since we cannot, my lord, take the city by force, it must be taken from within."

"How do you propose to do that?"

For the first time, a trace of a smile and some assurance came to the face of the Interrogator. "One of the Atlantians has come over to our side."

"One of the enemy? Who is he?"

"Duke Lenomar."

Necros looked thoughtful, then demanded, "Is this true?"

"Yes, sire! He has gained the mind of Lord Aramis and clouded it so that the admiral obeys his commands."

"Then, as you say, the plan has possibilities. Now—"

Necros held out one claw again so that Elmas flinched, expecting the pain to strike him again. But it did not come. Instead, Lord Necros said, "Two things you will accomplish. First, the kingdom of Atlantis must be conquered. We must control the sea, and we can only control the sea when Atlantis is in our power."

"Yes, my lord, and the second thing?"

"As you have been told, the Sleepers must die. Somehow," he said, sounding puzzled, "these young people are tied up with the fate of the world. Our kingdom cannot tolerate their existence. They are the servants of Goel, therefore they must die."

"Yes, sire, I will see to it personally."

Lord Necros looked hard at him and said softly, "See that you do, Chief Interrogator. For if you do not, you will make a trip to one of my torturers, and if you think *your* questioners are harsh, you will think much more highly of ours."

Fear washed over Elmas. "My lord, it shall be done. Have I your leave to go and set the plan in motion?"

"Leave. And we will expect success, or you will meet a fate worse than death!"