



# Chapter Sixteen

## The Outer Dunes

Immediately the river carried them into pitch black. Then began the queasy rhythmic flow in the dark current, pushing them swiftly through the curves and dips in the underground waterway for over an hour until each of them was forced to take turns hanging their heads over the sides of the boat.

“Why does this remind me of a theme-park ride?” Sam mumbled sickly as the boats slowed to turn an especially tight bend in the river.

“I hate rides like this,” Lillia called out in the dark behind them. “Actually, I hate rides in general.”

“As do I,” Gus said with a burp.

Emma punched Sam suddenly in the leg, startling him in the worst of his queasiness, and finally sending up solid chunks in his throat.

“Cheer up you sickies! I think I see light ahead!”

Sure enough, around the next bend was an opening in the dark abyss. A beckoning light appeared in front of them as they approached, turning out to be another smaller cavern. The glass dome overhead spilled enough light into the room that

even the darkest corners were as though the sun were shining directly into the room.

The river carried the riders in the boats in a snakelike pattern around the center of the cavern until they had passed through its interior completely. The water began moving at a more rapid pace the closer they traveled to the far wall. Enamored with the beauty of the various colors dancing happily on the walls from the dome above, no one paid attention as the boats made their way to the opposite end of the cavern. It was only then that they noticed the faded signs warning them of the danger ahead. The sign read:

**Make your exit sure,  
or a certain end you will endure!**

“I think we were supposed to get out in the cavern!” Gus called back to Emma and Sam from his boat, which was already picking up speed.

Panic settled in in the two boats as they hurdled toward the rushing water that disappeared into the pitch-black waterway in front of them. The opportunity for bailing out of the boats into the cavern was becoming increasingly impossible as they picked up speed.

The boats disappeared into the underground river once again, moving at such an incredible rate that even the intermittent blue from Gus’s lantern as it clung to the side of the boat became only a distant speck that bobbed to and fro in the current.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of being slammed from one side of the boat to the other, scraping their hands on the sides of the wall sometimes just for balance, the river began to level out and the boats slowed to where they could just hear each other above the noise of the rushing water behind them.

As the second boat caught up to the first, Lillia pitched her head over the side of the boat just in time to heave into the dark water once again.

Lillia's sick floated by, bathed in eerie blue from the lantern's light, and upon seeing it, Sam did his best not to heave his own lunch again. It was at that moment, head over the side of the boat, that an even more eerie feeling swept over him.

"Uh ... do you uh ... what's that—" he could only manage to utter, hearing a soft dull roar reverberating off the water as he struggled to hold in his vomit.

"I can't take any more of this," Emma winced as she, too, looked green even in the blue glow. "Please Lord no more."

The dull roar grew louder.

"Guys, seriously, what is that?" Sam lifted his head up wearily as a tiny speck of daylight suddenly illuminated in front of them.

"What are you talking about?" Lillia started, then stopped suddenly. "Oh, I hear it too! Sounds like a waterfall!"

They began to realize their peril as the daylight ahead of them disappeared when the boats dipped into another stretch of swift current. At about that time, Gus' lantern smacked into a rock that jutted from the narrow river chute, sending glass and blinding Lazuli light bursting into the cavernous emptiness until it vanished into the dark water behind them.

Now in complete blackness, the boats leveled out once more. Sam and Emma's boat bumped sharply into Gus and Lillia's, nearly throwing Lillia out of the boat.

Panic set in as another bend in the river suddenly met them with a rush of warm fresh air and a distant soft light casting strange reflections on the violent water.

Sam attempted to reach out and grasp the walls that he knew were there, even though he still could not see them clearly, but they were moving so fast that his fingers just bumped along until one struck a jutting rock, and instantly he felt the blood trickling down his hand and the searing pain that followed.

"Duck down and hold on!" Lillia yelled out suddenly in the darkness ahead of Sam and Emma, barely audible above the roaring falls, which loomed closer with every drenching wave from the growing rapids lapping against the boats.

Sam obeyed, and he felt Emma instantly curl into a ball and turn to lay sideways on his lap. He wrapped her up in his arms like a cocoon.

The boat hurled itself around bends in the underground waterway to the left and right, the rapids increasing in strength so badly that Sam found it difficult to hold on to the slippery makeshift handles of the craft and still keep Emma from bouncing around all over the place. Water gushed over them both, soaking them to the bone.

Suddenly the roar ahead of them was upon them, and sunlight pierced into the cavern through the opening in the side of the plateau that swallowed the underground river into the open expanse below. The boats slowed momentarily as they approached the falls, and they had only seconds to make a grab for the side of the cliff before the river spilled over the side to the rocks below.

Gus saw the chance and heaved himself onto the small ledge just inside the opening of the cliff, then snatched Lillia's arm before she tumbled over the edge, pulling her from the boat before it disappeared into the roar. Sam knew he would have to do the same with Emma, but he would have to hop in front of her first before he too could grab the ledge.

Fortunately, Emma let go of him out of instinct, allowing him just enough maneuverability to crawl over her before they reached the cliff. Gus reached out and grabbed his shirt as Sam grasped firmly on the ledge, and then he reached back to yank Emma from the boat.

Although she was stiff from fear, she managed to understand that she needed to hold on to Sam's arm instead of clinging to the boat. Together, Gus and Sam dragged Emma onto the ledge with them.

Panting heavily, the four laid on the ledge for a long while before attempting to sit up and survey the scene. They knew the closeness of their brush with death, and it kept them wary and quiet as they watched the thirty-story waterfall pound on the rocks below. Lillia pointed out the pieces of their boats swirling around the falls, the turbulence of the water churning

them around like a blender.

When they had regained their nerves, Gus led the search for a way down the face of the cliff, but they didn't need to look long as a winding slender path presented itself near the back of the ledge.

"Who in their right mind would use this path of death?" Lillia muttered as they picked their way down the thin ledge.

"For once, Lil', I share your negativity," Gus acknowledged, his back pressed firmly against the rock behind him.