

SEKRET MACHINES

Blurring the line of science fiction and fact, Sekret Machines is an explosive thriller that will make you question everything you've been told about what's really out there."

Larry King

From the
imagination of

With *New York Times*
bestselling author

TOM DELONGE
A.J. HARTLEY

A novel based on
actual events

**A FIRE
WITHIN**



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BOOK 2

**A FIRE
WITHIN**

Sekret Machines Book 2: A Fire Within

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*As I travel within my own consciousness and
rebuild my own soul to handle the next part
of life that is served to me, I wish to dedicate
the themes and learnings that I achieve
to my children, Ava and Jonas . . .*

*And within the Sekret Machines franchise,
these stories contain bits and pieces
of a soul well traveled.*

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**SEKRET
MACHINES
BOOK 2
A FIRE
WITHIN**

1

WARRAD-MURIM

Uruk, Sumeria (Iraq), 3216 BCE

WARRAD-MURIM, FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD APPRENTICE to the mason, Bakshishum, rose from his bed and stretched.

“Amar,” he muttered, “get up. The world didn’t end after all. You have work to do.” He trudged across the stable where they slept on straw with the goats and rinsed his face at the water trough. They would need to ferry water up from the canal to the building site today, a tedious and miserable task that became only more tedious and miserable as the hot day went on. The sooner they got started, the better.

“Amar?” he said again, irritated now. “Leave your nasty little dreams and get up or . . .” He hesitated,

studying the empty straw mattress where his workmate slept. “Amar?”

Maybe he has gone ahead, he thought. Got started on the work, sharpening the chisels or fetching water . . .

That was too much to hope for and, realizing it, Warrad-Murim cursed colorfully. If Amar was late today of all days, after all the other delays, the mistakes in the deliveries of materials, the constant confusion over what was being ferried in and out of the work site, he was on his own. Warrad-Murim would not cover for him. Not this time, and particularly not after last night.

He shuddered at the memory.

The Eanna district was the city’s religious and administrative center. It stood northeast of the Kullaba block at the heart of the town, a place of power, luxury, and impenetrable defenses. But as the city swelled, the temple complex had begun to seem—according to the administrators—not grand enough, and though the great, ornamented structures seemed plenty impressive to Warrad-Murim, they had been ordered to be pulled down and replaced with something more fitting the glory and might of the gods. So being behind—months behind now—was not good. Was, in fact, Bakshishum had pronounced just the day before, insulting, an outrage to Inanna, Queen of Heaven.

And then there had been the portents.

There had been rumors of divine discontent for weeks. The Euphrates was unusually low for the time of year, and that affected everything from crops to basic sanitation. Some of the city’s canals and water sources were entirely

dry, and when an earthquake shook carved statue heads from the buttresses of the royal palace, the goddess's name was spoken in hushed tones. Warrad-Murim had seen worse, and his solution had been to keep his head down, do what he was told, and try to keep the rest of his team on schedule, if only so that when they were sitting around with nothing to do they could point at the vacant ground where the imported red rock was supposed to be and say what Bakshishum himself said on such occasions: "Bring us the stone and I'll work. Without it I am just empty hands."

He liked that. It was pompous and annoying when Bakshishum said it, especially when he was blaming the apprentices for the absence of materials, but when Warrad-Murim said it, it sounded different, adult.

So he had tolerated the rumors of divine displeasure and the threat of beatings from his master, though he had avoided the hard gaze of the overseers when they came to do their weekly progress examination, and everything had been fine till last night.

It had begun an hour or more before the first cock; a great light had appeared without warning over the city. Warrad-Murim might have slept through it, but Amar had woken him to show him what the goats were doing. In fact they weren't doing anything but standing in silence, unblinking and utterly motionless which, for creatures that were naturally both skittish and belligerent, was more than unusual. It was as if they had stopped being goats and had turned into something else entirely, retaining only the shape of the animals. The light came in at every crack,

reflected off every surface so that even the dim and shady stable seemed to glow. Nor was it the golden light of day, but a hard white radiance leaning to blue.

The two boys had left the statue-like goats and gone outside, glad to get out from under the beasts' blank, uncanny stare, shading their eyes against the light overhead. The streets had filled with people all gazing upward, some of them praying to Inanna, some weeping, some even running to get away, though where they would go to escape such a thing, Warrad-Murim could not say. They had climbed to the highest point of the city, marveling at the way the light sparkled on the surface of the river, and it was as if the moon itself had swung low to inspect them.

But when the light began to move it was clearly not shaped like the moon, but long and narrow like a pipe or, Warrad-Murim thought, a wand. Amar had liked that word, and his eyes had flashed with more than the reflection of the goddess above. When the light began to move, drifting silent as a soaring eagle out over the desert, Amar had followed it with his eyes, and gasped when a new beam of light, not a general radiance but a golden spear, lanced down to the earth.

"That is by Sidu's place!" said Amar. Sidu was a trader, mostly cloth and beer, a slovenly brute of a man, but one with a head for business. His home was a mess of huts and storage cabins down by the riverbank. "We should go there!"

"Are you mad?" Warrad-Murim had said. "We should go to bed and get up extra early and get on with our work so that the goddess is appeased."

"Come with me," said Amar.

But that had been madness and, in truth, Warrad-Murim hadn't really believed his friend would go. Amar was a clever boy, but he was too fanciful, too much in love with stories and tales of danger and adventure. He had not yet learned that the only way for a boy of his rank to make his way in the world was to use his hands for someone else's profit. So Warrad-Murim had gone to bed assuming that Amar would wander the now-darkened city for an hour and then sneak in, his head full of rumor and mystery about seeing the goddess in the city's streets, stories he would embroider throughout the following day till Bakshishum threatened him with the lash.

That Amar wasn't here and clearly hadn't returned to his bed at all was annoying and, if Warrad-Murim was honest, worrying.

He skipped breakfast and ran up to the site on the off chance that the boy had indeed gone there early, but there was no sign of him. Warrad-Murim considered the way the sun was inching up over the horizon and, with another muttered curse, set off running down through the streets to the river gatehouse and out, along the bank to Sidu's place, rehearsing the furious words he would heap on Amar's head when he saw him.

More than words. He'd earned a beating this time.

It was still early, and Sidu's wife, Asharru, was fetching water from the river when he arrived. She did not speak but regarded him coldly, as if his very appearance was an impertinence. He bowed, and asked politely if she had seen

a boy, an apprentice a couple of years younger than he, but she shook her head.

"Last night," he added on impulse. "There was a light in the sky. It seemed to point down around here. Do you know where exactly?"

He felt he was taking a risk even asking, and her eyes were wary as she considered her response. At length she made a ritual gesture to ward off evil, then pointed out back over a ridge of rock and sand. Warrad-Murim thanked her, bowed once more, and recommenced his running.

He was weary, hot, and angry by the time he crested the ridge, but his feelings evaporated as he looked down and saw the boy sitting cross-legged on the baked earth. He was hunched over, engaged in some careful practice, scratching with a stick into the sunbaked clay which was, from time to time, part of the swollen river bed. He was positioned in the center of a blackened ring that looked scorched into the earth, and beside him was a square slab of stone whose edge was set with what might have been metal, though it was bluish in hue and sparkled strangely.

Saying nothing, Warrad-Murim took a few faltering steps down toward the circle. Hearing his approach, Amar looked up. His face showed every sign of exhaustion, the special delirium of heat and sleeplessness, but his eyes were alive and focused. Around him, etched into the ground with the stick in his hand, were lines and symbols. Not the pictures they used to tell inventory but something else entirely, and as Warrad-Murim got closer, he saw that they mirrored the strange, fine carvings on the slab of stone.

“Amar?” he said, cautious and watchful. “What is this?”

Amar considered him and smiled.

“It is everything,” he said, and his face was full of something holy and exalted, as if he had indeed met the goddess and heard her truth. “Not just lists. It is all things on earth and in the heavens made usable, beautiful. It is people and trade and resources. It is story and worship. It is the end of error, of miscommunication. It is the prelude and avoidance of war. It is the stuff of peace, of love, of all things.”

Warrad-Murim shook his head, baffled, looking at the strange carved lines and symbols, many of them repeating, sometimes with variations. They spread out around the boy like a carpet. Hours of meticulous, bewildering work.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “What is it?”

Amar smiled again, this time his usual, ordinary, boyish smile.

“Words,” he said. “Not pictures. Sounds.”

“How can you draw a sound?”

“Like this,” said Amar simply. “This,” he said, “is a gift from the goddess. It is writing. It will change the world and everyone in it.”

2

JENNIFER

Fox Smokehouse, Boulder City, Nevada. Present day.

IT WAS SIX DAYS SINCE THE EVENTS THEY HAD COME collectively to refer to simply as “the incident.” Three days of separate interrogations had followed. They had not, they had to agree, been badly treated. Timika Mars had huffed about personal liberties, but her heart wasn’t in it, not given all they had gone through. All they had seen. Alan Young and Barry Regis, being military and used to similar, if less protracted debriefings after far more routine missions than this, thought they had gotten off lightly. Jennifer Quinn kept quiet, swirling the straw in her Diet Coke without drinking, lost in her own thoughts.

The events themselves had become faintly dreamlike to her, like something she had seen in a movie on a plane as she picked at unappetizing food, got up to stretch, or slid in and out of sleep. She was left with moments—some of them striking and vivid—but no clear sense of story line. As she had recounted everything that had taken her to Area 51 and to the stone-faced, uniformed men and women who had probed her account over and over for the previous three days, the events receded, became still more remote and hard to comprehend. Within minutes of the interrogation beginning, she had decided to tell the truth, all of it, holding nothing back. She couldn't know if the others had made the same decision, but they had not had time to agree upon any coherent string of lies, so the truth seemed the only viable option. More to the point, she had no idea what she would be trying to hide from these people who, almost certainly, knew all of it already.

That, after all, was the one thing she had emerged from the incident sure of. The strange lights in the sky, the impossible craft: they would not be surprises to the men and women who ran this installation. They knew them well. They had built them themselves. But they had not done so alone.

And there, as they say, was the rub. Because the one image she had tried to forget would not fade from her mind's eye. It burned there, like the trail in the brush left by the brass-colored sphere as it came down under Alan's weapons. It had been cracked open and she had seen inside. She had looked in and seen the blasted remains of

the cockpit, the two seats and their occupants, both unconscious, possibly dead, one a man in a flight suit not significantly different from Alan's, the other . . .

Not.

That was all she was prepared to say. The other figure had been smaller, childlike, but her mind told her in no uncertain terms that what she had seen was no human child.

Since the four of them had been reunited and turned unexpectedly, bizarrely, loose at the gates of the base, they had talked about everything that had happened, except that. They saw it in each other's eyes when they caught each other unawares, but no one wanted to say anything, as if keeping silent meant it wasn't real, that they could each dismiss what they had seen as a trick of the light, an effect of stress and panic. They could believe that the sphere had been flown by two human pilots. Not by one man and one . . .

Even now she couldn't bring herself to say the word, even in her head.

"Who wants to start?" asked the waitress.

"I'm the hungriest," said Barry, the heavily muscled black soldier she had met only at the height of the chaos. "Ribs, please. Full rack, cowboy beans, fries. And a beer. Thanks."

He sounded . . . together. Unfazed. Jennifer looked at the menu in front of her as if it had just appeared on the table, as if she couldn't read the words in front of her, and waved the waitress on to Alan while she tried to get her

mind around the prospect of ordering food. In the end she just copied Timika, who ordered the Chicky sandwich and a chopped salad with such flair and certainty that you'd think she'd been eating here for months. When it arrived, the food was a surprise, not just because it was good, but because Jennifer couldn't remember what she had ordered.

She needed to sort herself out, and fast.

It wasn't like the last few days had been hard, she told herself again. After she had agreed to sign the nondisclosure agreement on the morning of the second day, her interrogators had been positively polite, their questions seeking clarity rather than seeming to come from disbelief or the sense that she was holding anything back. Timika, whose brand of bullheadedness was a little different from her own, had held out till the final day before signing, only doing so when they warned her she could be held indefinitely according to special provisions within the law concerning national security, but Jennifer had been, she felt, compliant throughout. They had brought her coffee, and though she had been obliged to eat alone in her quarters—more a low-budget hotel room than a cell—the food had been reasonable. On the third day they had even allowed her to make phone calls, though she suspected those were monitored. She had called Reg Deacon, who had been her father's personal assistant and was now her estate manager in the UK. He had been frantic about her silent absence, but she had rolled over that, telling him in no uncertain terms to dump all stock, investments, and business ties to

the Maynard Consortium which, she suspected, was about to have a very bad week. In deference to the document she had just signed, she was sparing on details but adamant, finding a reserve of strength and moral certainty that she had otherwise lost in the bewildering fog of all that had happened at the base.

When they had been released and returned to their vehicles, the four of them had experienced a kind of disbelieving euphoria, laughing hysterically at the smallest thing as they drove and drove in vague search for somewhere to stop and regroup. A few hours ago they had stood on the massive walkway of the Hoover Dam like a bunch of tourists, gazing down the great sweep of concrete to the strangely luminous turquoise of the water below, as if nothing could be more normal. Now they were talking about how good the brisket was, and she was almost certain that Timika was flirting with Barry.

It was surreal.

"And we both had this doc when we were kids, right Alan?" Barry was saying. "Dr. Vespasian. Guy had a weak R. Called me Bawy. Bawy Wegis. '*How are my favowite patients, Bawy and Awan?*' he used to say. We thought it was hilarious. We used to come up with reasons to make him say words he couldn't pronounce. Really not cool. Sometimes I want to write to the guy to say sorry."

"That is so mean!" said Timika. "I didn't think you were so mean."

"I know," said Barry, grinning nonetheless. "We were terrible. But he was always sticking us with needles, drawing

blood, pumping us full of stuff. It was our little revenge, I guess.”

“Pass the salt, please,” said Alan.

“*How have you been feewing?*” Barry said. “Man, poor guy. I wonder where he is.”

“You should find out,” said Timika, scolding, but with the ghost of a smile she couldn’t quite conceal. “Thank him for all he did for you.”

They had been turned loose with no directives or requirements, sent back to their lives as if nothing had happened, or rather as if what had happened had been put into a locked box like the one that had been at the end of Jerzy’s treasure hunt in a concrete vault under an abandoned airstrip. The interrogators had thanked Timika for her trouble, locked the metaphorical box, and pumped the vault full of cement. It was over. Even Alan and Barry had been given an indefinite leave of absence, told to return “when they felt ready.” When Alan told them he didn’t think he’d be back, the guy interviewing him had apparently just smiled to himself and said he should take as long as he needed. They had seemed, Alan said, pretty confident he’d be back. Weirdly so.

Barry was laughing at something Timika had said that Jennifer hadn’t caught, but then it hadn’t been meant for her. The two of them might have been at another table for all the attention they paid to Alan and Jennifer, their eyes never leaving each other’s faces. Timika had spent most of the previous day on the phone to her boyfriend Dion in New York, but it had gone badly. Timika had, she

confided, said some things that had been on her mind for a while, but that she hadn't intended to say. Something about what they had gone through had sent a jolt through her life and "some stuff just came loose," she said. Whatever she was now playing at with Barry seemed to be her way of unwinding, shedding some of the tension and strangeness. Whether it was more than that, or would become more, Jennifer had no idea. After today, who knew if she would ever see the woman again.

"Can I have the salt?" asked Alan again.

Jennifer came to, or came about halfway, turning a quizzical look on him.

"What?" she said.

"I asked if you would pass the salt," said Alan, his politeness strained. His eyes still looked a little sunken from tiredness, but his other injuries seemed to have healed quickly.

"You want salt," she echoed, listening to herself speaking in the silence between Timika's playful laughter and Barry's encouraging rumble. They were bickering in that flippant way that sounded more adversarial than it really was. Something about music. Jennifer's brow furrowed and for a second her eyes closed before she said, "We just left the airbase where we've been held while we were quizzed about a battle with UFOs, piloted by . . . by an *alien*, and you want me to pass the salt?"

Her voice rose as the sentence climbed. Timika and Barry stopped talking and turned to give her a look that mirrored Alan's: surprised, but also anxious, warning. Barry

lowered his head and murmured, "You want to keep your voice down?"

"My voice?" she replied, unable to keep the shrillness out, knowing that she was beginning to sound hysterical and unable to stop it. "He wants the salt and you want me to keep my *voice* down?"

A middle-aged woman two tables over half-turned her head toward them, and Timika made a calming motion with her hand.

"I know we've all been through some weird shit . . ." she began.

"Yeah?" Jennifer shot back. "You don't say! Well, I'm sorry if I'm not quite ready for sightseeing and . . . whatever the hell you two are talking about . . ."

"Timika said that Marvin Gaye was better than Smokey Robinson and I was like . . ."

"I don't care!" Jennifer snapped, slamming her hands to the sides of her head as if trying to hold it together. "How can you just sit here and talk like it's a regular day?"

"Because it is," said Timika, not laughing now.

"What? How?"

"Because it has to be," said Timika.

"This is nuts!" Jennifer gasped, sitting up as if about to rocket out of her chair and storm out. "Everything has changed. I mean . . . Everything! And you're just sitting here *chatting*."

"What are we supposed to do?" Timika returned, stiffening now and tilting her head like a bull considering a charge.

"I don't know! Something! Anything! Not just pretending the world is the same as it was!"

"It is," hissed Barry. "Nothing has changed. We just know more than we did a week ago."

"I just wanted the salt," said Alan.

It was supposed to be a joke, a wry lightening of the mood, but Jennifer wasn't there yet.

"You were in this from the start, Major," she said, looking malevolently first at him, then at Barry. "Me and her? We got dragged into it."

"*Her?*" Timika echoed, the bull starting to paw the ground.

"You know what I mean," Jennifer snapped.

"I think you're not used to not being in control," said Timika, staring her down, "and it's wiggling you out."

"Oh, don't start," said Jennifer.

"Start what?"

"I'm in control because I'm rich and white but you're rolling with it because you're used to getting screwed over."

"You know," Timika responded with a little steel in her voice, "there may be something to that."

"Yeah, I thought there might be."

"Excuse me?" said Timika, matching Jennifer's volume and upping her swagger. "You think I'm getting too uppity, your highness?"

"Woah! Woah! Woah!" said Barry, spreading his hands between them. "Can everyone take it down a notch? That's not what she meant."

"Oh you know that, huh?" Timika fired back.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Jennifer sulkily. "All I know is that . . ."

"Will someone please pass me the damn SALT!" said Alan, punctuating the end of the sentence by snapping his hand open.

It happened instantly. As the others stared in astonishment, the salt shaker, a little glass thing with a silver screw-on cap, slid rapidly across the table as if shot over by some invisible force and slammed into his palm.

The sparring stopped. Wide-eyed and baffled, everyone looked from the salt shaker in his hand to Alan's face in stunned silence.

"What the hell was that?" whispered Barry at last.

Alan shook his head, but when he tried to speak the words wouldn't come out. Carefully, he set the salt shaker down on the table, as if it might explode, and when he finally spoke, he sounded badly spooked.

"I have absolutely no idea," he said.



TIMIKA

Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona

ALAN HAD TRIED TO DO IT AGAIN, THAT THING WITH the salt shaker, but it wouldn't work. He stared at it, one hand open to catch it if it slid suddenly, then tried squeezing his eyes shut and focusing with his mind till it looked like he was going to have an aneurism. The salt didn't shift an inch. Timika watched him warily, not sure what to believe.

Her first response had been to think it was a trick, a joke to defuse the rising tension, but he swore blind it wasn't and, eventually, she believed him, mainly because he looked freaked out. He was either one hell of an actor, or it had been as much a surprise to him as it was to the

rest of them and, cool though it kind of was, not a pleasant surprise. It made him uneasy and he kept glancing at his hand like it belonged to someone else and might start doing things all by itself, like that guy on that *House* episode who kept slapping his girlfriend even though he didn't mean to. Season five or thereabouts. That was pretty cool.

Alan still had no explanation.

"I don't know how I did it," he said about fifty times. "I was angry and I wanted it and it was just . . ."

"We saw," said Timika. "You're quite the David Copperfield."

"The Dickens character?" asked Jennifer, bewildered.

"He's a stage magician," said Barry quietly.

"An incredibly famous one," said Timika. Jennifer shrugged and looked away.

Timika wasn't sure why the Englishwoman kept setting her off. They were, she supposed, both stressed, on edge after all they'd gone through, though they expressed themselves differently.

Different as chalk and cheese, she thought, not for the first time.

Alan's little magic show with the salt shaker had killed more than the brewing squabble. They had eaten their food in virtual silence, keen to get out of the restaurant, though for Timika's part she had no clue what she was going to do next. After the calamitous call to Dion she had spoken to Marvin back in the office, but even that had left her with a cold anxiety that sat in her gut like a cannonball. *Debunktion*—the skeptical website she ran—had been her

life, her pride and joy, her face in the world. But after what she had experienced in the last couple of weeks, how could she go back to it? She had considered modulating the site's content, dialing back its scornful cynicism and doubt, but that *was* the site! It had been built around her hard-edged logic, her critical eye, and her barbed wit. She couldn't simply rebrand the site as something that tolerated all it had formerly derided. That would leave it, at best, weak, tamed by its more measured approach, and at worst, an industry joke. She couldn't bear that. Better fold it outright.

And do what? Return to New York to her cratering relationship with Dion to live in overpriced real estate with nothing to sustain her, and employees—friends—to lay off? She would have to explain to them why she was doing what she was doing, which would be excruciatingly embarrassing. And, she reminded herself, given the papers she finally signed, illegal.

Figures.

But there was one thing she still had to do. She hadn't mentioned it to the others yet because they had all instinctively told the truth to their interrogators. That was a smart call, if only because it kept you from tripping yourself up, and it was what Timika had done for the most part. But there was one thing she had held back, one thing she hadn't been prepared to give up.

Jerzy Stern had come to her in New York and brought her a book: his book, the account of his life and directions to that Nevada airfield. She had found what he wanted her to find at the foot of a concrete shaft, a seemingly ancient

item in a metal box, but then it had been whisked away from her again.

Except that she had snapped a picture of it, and uploaded it to a private drop box before giving up her phone to the soldier who had demanded it. As a reporter and, if she was honest, as a black woman, she had a constant wariness of authority that buzzed in her ears like a witch's insect familiar, always on watch. It was second nature to her to preset her phone so that it would delete all information after each use. That meant she had to carry numbers in her head, but it was worth the inconvenience. In the instant the soldier had demanded she finish her conversation with Marvin out there in the strobe-lit desert almost a week ago, she had stared him down and, when he looked away, she had thumbed open the phone with practiced fingers, slid out the SIM card, and dropped it. As she stepped up to him, the useless phone extended, she had deftly kicked the tiny plastic panel into the sandy earth.

She wasn't sure what they'd get off her phone. They might have returned to the spot and searched for the SIM card, but even if they found it she wasn't sure they'd be able to piece together all she had done, though she supposed that if anyone had the equipment and skills to do so, it would be them.

In any case, she had simply not referred to the picture she had taken or the message she had sent, and no one had prompted her. They'd asked her if she'd looked in the box and she had said she had, but hadn't had a chance to make sense of what was inside.

“Something old,” she’d said, shrugging. “Weird looking.”

One of the women in the room, a dishwater blond in her early thirties, had watched her closely at that, her eyes narrowing a fraction as if she didn’t trust Timika’s pretense of thoughtlessness, but if she’d rung any alarm bells in the blond’s head, the woman hadn’t pressed further. It was easy to pretend you were stupid when other people wanted to believe it.

Even so, Timika was surprised when she had picked up a disposable phone in Boulder City that morning and found the picture still in the drop box she’d sent it to. She downloaded it to her new phone but hesitated to send it to Marvin. The nondisclosure agreement she had signed was nothing to fool with. Even if she said nothing about where the image had come from, Marvin would put two and two together and that could get her into serious trouble. They might already be monitoring her account, waiting for her to screw up . . .

She’d keep the image to herself. For now.

But there was more. Her earlier call to Marvin had raised another possibility, one that might direct her next actions. Apparently in his reorganizing of the office ransacked by the Maynard Consortium’s goons he had turned up a single sheet of paper with a series of handwritten numbers on it. He had photographed the page and e-mailed it to her. It matched the faded, old-fashioned paper of Jerzy’s notebook, and Timika, her heart in her mouth, guessed that it had been left in the bottom of the little box in which the notebook had arrived the day it all began. Dimly, she

remembered sitting outside, slipping the book into the pocket of her long red coat. She missed that coat. She'd left it in some store while running from the fake Homeland Security agent, "Cook."

She closed her eyes, trying to remember what she had done with the box the notebook had come in, but her mind was blank. Maybe she'd left it in the park and Marvin had picked it up. Or she might have handed it to him. She couldn't remember.

But she recognized the string of numbers as a set of coordinates like the ones that had led her to the carved artifact in the bunker. But these numbers were quite different and that meant . . .

Another hidden object?

Possibly.

"Hiya."

It was Jennifer, looking sheepish. Keen to leave Nevada behind and with no clue what they were going to do next, they had left Boulder City and driven the two hours over the Arizona border to the Grand Canyon park entrance. It had been Jennifer's idea, and since the mood was already utterly bizarre, it made about as much sense as anything else. Strangely, none of them had visited the Grand Canyon before.

"Hey," said Timika.

"So," said Jennifer, gazing out over the lookout point through the blue air to the stripes of layered pink and russet stone. "This is the Grand Canyon. You Americans do like everything to be . . . big."

Timika gave her a sidelong look, took in the English-woman's half smile, and said simply, "Yep."

There was a moment of silence as a family of over-padded white people looking flushed and unhappy waddled past. Then Jennifer said, "Listen, about before . . ."

"It's cool."

"I know, but I'm sorry. I suppose everything was just getting on top of me and I was feeling a bit het up . . ."

"Het up?"

"Upset. You don't say that?"

Timika shrugged. "I don't," she said.

"I was feeling . . . out of it, I guess."

"Out of what?"

"The loop," said Jennifer, sighing at herself. "You all seemed so relaxed about it all. I felt," she paused, struggling for the words, "like the English person."

"Ha," said Timika. "Well, you are, you know."

"I know. It just felt we had the Atlantic between us right there at the table."

"Really?"

"Kind of. Not really. I don't know. I felt like the spare wheel, the odd one out, the fish out of . . ."

"I get it."

"Barry's military. Alan flies those things. Even you've been in one. I saw it! But me? I feel like everything is happening to me but I'm not doing anything. I don't know where I fit in. Does that make sense?"

"I guess. Though for what it's worth, I was mostly on the receiving end too."

"I suppose so," Jennifer agreed. "And I don't know why I took it out on you. I'm sorry."

"I know. I guess I was a bit *het up* too." Timika frowned. "Oh, that doesn't sound right at all. You English are so weird with your English."

"What are we doing here?"

"It was your idea," said Timika. "You wanted to see the Grand Canyon. So. There it is."

"I mean, what do we do next?"

"Is there a next?"

"You mean, just go back to our lives?" said Jennifer. "Pretend it never happened?"

"You could." Seeing the fractional tightening in Jennifer's face, Timika added, "not just because you're rich. I didn't mean that. My job, my life in New York . . . I don't know if there's anything to go back to. You could at least pick up where you left off."

"In my castle, you mean," said Jennifer grinning.

"I assumed it was a palace, but okay."

"A palatial castle," Jennifer deadpanned. "Best of both worlds. Comfortable, but you can still throw the servants into the moat."

Timika laughed and considered her.

"I really am sorry about before," she said.

"It is, as you would say, cool," said Jennifer, smiling.

The decision was made in a second. Timika pulled her phone out, called up the picture, and showed it to Jennifer.

"What's this?" she asked, shielding the screen from the sun.

“Jerzy’s buried treasure. It’s what was in the lockbox before it disappeared.”

Jennifer gaped at her.

“Do they know you have this?” she asked.

“Not sure. I didn’t advertise it and I don’t intend to. Just keeping it within the family for now.”

Jennifer’s mouth flickered into a smile, but her eyes went back to the screen.

“What do you think it is?” she asked.

The image showed an irregular slab of stone scored with intricate carved lines, the whole thing edged with a band of bluish metal.

“Writing,” said Timika. “I’d guess some early Near Eastern civilization, but I don’t really know. Older than ancient Greek. You can’t tell from the picture but the metal around the edge, which looks like it was added later, gave off light and energy, like it reacted to touch or closeness. I’d seen something similar before. An old woman claimed to have a piece from Roswell.”

Jennifer looked at her.

“If you’d said that to me a couple of weeks ago . . .” she began.

“I know.”

“What are you going to do with this?”

“Find someone who can read it,” said Timika, pocketing the phone. “And I think there might be another.”

“What? Why?”

Hurriedly, with no sense of taking a risk, she told the Englishwoman about Marvin’s extra page and the numbers

on the back. Jennifer considered this thoughtfully, then nodded to where Alan and Barry stood apart, gazing out over the great gulf. They seemed farther away than mere physical distance would allow. But that was men for you, military men in particular.

“You going to tell them?” asked Jennifer.

“No,” said Timika, another snap decision. “Not yet at least.”

“Well, I need to go back to the UK, but I can help.”

“Yeah? How?”

“The way people like me always help,” said Jennifer. “With money.”

Timika gave her a look.

“I don’t want to impose . . .” she began.

“Please,” said Jennifer. “You are effectively out of work. You have nowhere to live. Do you even have a laptop? Are you going to blow your savings on hotels and car hire and flights?” Timika looked down. “Do you have any idea how much money I’m in control of?” Jennifer went on.

“Okay. No need to rub it in.”

“I’m not rubbing anything in. I’m just telling you the truth. I’ve reclaimed my father’s assets. I have literally more money than I could ever spend and now I want to know what that picture means. I’m not entirely sure why, but I trust you. We’ve been through something. Shared the kind of experience few people ever do. So. Consider yourself a freelance investigator. With one phone call I can set you up with a per diem, a substantial credit line . . .”

"I thought we were living under the radar? Credit cards will bring them down on us like . . ."

"Who? Maynard is done," said Jennifer, not bothering to keep a vicious flash of triumph out of her face. "They are finished. My interrogators said that on the second day. The ones who aren't dead are under arrest pending charges. Deacon confirmed that this morning. And not because of lawsuits from me. The US Department of Justice is after them, and that's about as serious as it gets. If Maynard and their nasty little friends still have field agents, they are burrowing a bloody long way out of sight right now. You are free as a bird."

"The DOJ?" said Timika, awed.

"The legal equivalent of the United States cavalry," said Jennifer. "They are flying the flag of national security and everyone is getting the hell out of the way. Anyone touched by Maynard is in the path of the freight train, and so long as you don't piss off your own government, you can do what you want. No one is coming after you, Timika. Not now. As soon as we're done here, I say we get you set up to re-enter the lists."

"Lists of what?"

"It's a jousting term, I think."

"Knights in armor and shit? Not sure I like the sound of that."

"Then let's just say we're going to get you back up on the horse."

Timika nodded thoughtfully, then grinned.

"You're on, Princess. Timika Mars, investigative journalist, reporting for duty."

Jennifer offered her hand, but as they shook on the deal, her face became suddenly serious.

"I want to know how they got my father involved," she said. "And what they thought they were after. If whatever was at the end of Jerzy's treasure hunt is relevant to that, I want to know."

"Got it," said Timika. "And thanks."

"Sure," said Jennifer. "It's what people like me do. We're the bank."

She said it ruefully, and there was a flicker of something in her eyes that was more than self-deprecating. It was sad.

"You won't regret it," said Timika.

"Never occurred to me that I would," Jennifer replied, rediscovering her uncomplicated smile. "You sure you're not going to tell the guys?"

Timika looked over to them again and shook her head.

"They have enough to deal with," she said. "And I think they'll go back to the base. If they don't know what I'm doing they won't have to keep it secret."

"Alan said he wouldn't go back," said Jennifer, considering him through scratched sunglasses.

"That was before he started making the condiments dance," said Timika. "He might not have realized it yet, but he'll go back. They are the only people who will be able to make sense of what has happened to him."

"You think it's because of what he did, flying that ship?"

"Don't you? He said he flew it with his mind. This can't be a coincidence."

Jennifer nodded thoughtfully.

"You ever watch *Doctor Who*?" she asked. Timika shook her head. "When I was a kid I was terrified of it because of these villains, the Daleks. They looked like salt shakers. Pepper pots, I called them."

"Doesn't sound too scary."

"They went around exterminating anything that wasn't Dalek," said Jennifer. "Shouting and shooting. They were like Nazis in their own private tanks."

"Okay," Timika conceded. "That *is* scary."

"About as scary as accidentally moving things with your mind," said Jennifer.

They watched Alan warily, and when Barry laid a hand on his shoulder and started talking to him, his face earnest and concerned, the women looked deliberately away to give them the privacy they seemed to need.

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