1

I took a deep breath, held it, and stepped into the dark.

"Night vision."

My smart-goggles switched to a gritty green view of arched granite walls, as suddenly I could see. I was in a secret tunnel, deep beneath a five-thousand-year-old temple. Or a pyramid. Or an ancient shrine or something. OK, I didn't really know where I was. I'd not paid attention in the mission briefing because I'd been bursting for a wee. But we were somewhere *really* cool.

I felt three quick taps on my shoulder: the signal to stop. My twin sister, Pan, had spotted something. Digital information flickered across the lenses of her smart-goggles, reflecting off her cheeks, so her face looked even paler than usual.

"Sami?" she said.

A voice spoke, crisp and clear in our ears – the technology of the smart-goggles transmitted sound waves from their frames directly into... Actually I missed that briefing too, but it was high-tech stuff. The voice we heard was that of its inventor, Dr Sami Fazri, computer genius and supplier of gadgets to the world's top treasure hunters.

That's us – treasure hunters. Cool, huh?

"What going on in there?" Sami replied.

"There are some inscriptions here on the wall," Pan said. She crouched and traced a gloved finger over the carvings, a series of slashes and lines low down on the stone that looked to me as if a toddler had attacked the wall with a knife.

"I think it's the ancient Akkadian script," she continued. "I'll take a photo. Can you send it to Mum for a translation?"

Pan leaned closer to the writing and blinked three times. Her smart-goggles recognized the instruction and flashed, taking a high-res photo of the inscription.

"Got it," Sami confirmed. "But your mother isn't happy."

"You've known Mum for longer than us, Sami," I said. "Have you *ever* seen her happy?"

"I can hear you, Jake," another voice snapped in my ear. "But I am *not* supposed to be helping you."

"Mum, can you read the script or not?" Pan replied.

"Why can't you?" Mum asked.

"Because I can't read Akkadian!"

That wasn't entirely true. In the few months that our parents had been training us to become treasure hunters, Pan had studied several ancient languages. I was pretty sure I'd heard her talking about Akkadian, an ancient language from the Middle East. My sister was a genius – a proper one, with a photographic memory and terrifying mood swings – but she can't yet have mastered Akkadian. There was no way she'd ask Mum for help unless she absolutely had to.

Mum sighed deliberately heavily, intending for us to hear.

"First off, the inscription is Sumerian, not Akkadian," she said. "You failed to notice the lack of prefixes on the triconsonantal root words."

I spotted Pan's fists clench at her sides and knew she was struggling to contain her frustration. I gave her shoulder two taps, a signal that had come to mean something like, *Don't scream a load of swear words at Mum.*

"Jane," Sami said. "Pan's not an expert in ancient languages like you."

"Nevertheless," Mum replied, "the inscription is Sumerian and *not* Akkadian. So what does that tell you?"

"That you two spend too much time in libraries?" I suggested.

"No, Jake!" Pan said.

She was getting into this now. My sister didn't

often show that she was excited. Her favourite mood was grumpy, sulking under her dyed-black fringe and behind gothic make-up that made her look like a cross between Dracula and someone dressing like Dracula but going way over the top. When she got talking about clever stuff, though, she couldn't hide her excitement. Her eyes widened and sparkled, and her jaw clenched as she failed to fight a grin.

"That means the inscription was carved *before* twenty-five hundred years ago, when people still used the Sumerian script," she explained.

"Good, Pandora," Mum said. "Keep thinking."

"So the king whose tomb we're looking for," I asked, "did he die before twenty-five hundred years ago?"

"King Ashurnasipal," Pan said. "And he did."

"So this passage *does* lead to his tomb. Result!"

Pan and I went in for a high five.

"Stop fooling around," Mum snapped. "Perhaps you are close, but I can tell you from experience that this is when you should be at your most alert."

"Really?" Pan muttered. "You never mentioned *all your experience* before."

A third voice spoke in our ears. "Less of the sarcasm, young lady."

"Dad?" I asked. "You're listening too?"

His voice was distorted by crackling so loud it caused Pan and me to wince.

"Sami?" I called. "I think the comms network is breaking up."

"No," Sami said. "That's your dad. He's eating crisps."

"You call *that* concentrating?" Pan asked.

"Pandora is right," Mum agreed. "Stop eating crisps, John."

"It's my lunch," Dad replied.

"It is not lunch," Mum said. "A sandwich is lunch. Crisps are a snack."

"So what's a crisp sandwich?" I asked.

"Guys?" Sami said. "The mission?"

Sami was right; Pan had done her bit, and now I needed to do mine. I breathed in deeply and held the breath again, in a sort of meditation technique Dad had taught me to help focus my mind. Pan was a genius, but I had a skill of my own, if you can call it a skill: an odd knack for thinking fast and making plans in tricky situations. They were instincts and impulses that had got me into a lot of trouble in the past, but I was learning to control them.

"Sami," I said, "can you give us a thermal report for a radius of fifty metres, and an ultrasonic scan of this entire tunnel? Send a 4D plan of the tomb to my smart-goggles, as well as coordinates for the extraction drone pick-up, and suggestions for a back-up exit if the drone fails. Pan and I will take proof of find from the king's burial chamber and return with a full archaeology team once the discovery is verified."

"All right," Sami replied, "but you may have trouble. The thermal scan shows three heat signatures

in your proximity. Two are you. The third is not. Whatever it is, it's approaching with speed."

This didn't sound good.

"How much speed?" Pan asked.

"Sami," I said. "Can you use high-sensor thermography to tell its blood temperature?"

I heard him tapping at a screen. "Blood temperature suggests it's not human," he replied. "The creature is ectothermic. An insect. But the thermal reading is way too big for an insect."

"Bring up a list of native insects in ... in wherever we are."

"It's too big for an insect, Jake."

"Can you check anyway, Sami?" Pan asked.

"Good, Pandora."

It was Mum again. I felt a pang of jealousy and hated myself for it; it was childish to think about this right then, but Mum never complimented *me*.

"OK," Sami said. "I'll send a list of insects to—"

"It's a scorpion," I said.

"It could be," Sami agreed. "But it would have to be some sort of—"

"Giant mutant scorpion," Pan said.

"Yes. How do you know that?"

"Because it's right in front of us."

Pan and I edged closer until our sides were touching. Panic rose from my stomach, but I swallowed it back down and kept my eyes on the creature scuttling closer. It was as long as a crocodile, with chunky

claws raised and snapping. Its tail was curled back over its body, as if it were attempting one of Mum's yoga moves, and the stinger at its tip was as long as a dagger.

I reached to my waist, feeling the gadgets holstered around my utility belt: climbing clips, a micro-laser for cutting stone, a grappling gun, a compressed oxygen breathing tube, a flare gun and a clasp to release the inbuilt bungee cord. Where was a giant-mutant-scorpion-killing device when you needed one?

The creature scuttled closer, its claws tapping the stone ground.

"Jake," Pan hissed. "Get us out of this!"

I turned away from the creature and my sister, and scanned the tunnel walls. My breathing slowed as my instincts kicked in again. My eyes moved faster around the tunnel walls. I remembered my parents' training: *there is always another way out if you clear your mind of fear, and think.* And then it happened. It was as if someone had hacked into my brain and taken control, making it work in ways that it usually wouldn't.

"The inscription," I breathed.

"What about it?" Pan asked.

"The stone it's carved on is different from the rest of the wall."

"I... But why?"

I crouched lower, studying the block carved with the ancient script. There was a thin gap around its

edges, as if it could be taken out or pushed in. But the gap wasn't *that* thin. In fact it was pretty obvious, almost like we were *meant* to spot it…

"It's a trap," I realized.

"Isn't the *giant mutant scorpion* the trap?" Pan yelled.

"Look at the ground where we're standing," I replied. "It's a trapdoor, rigged to collapse if we press that stone."

"What's down there?"

"How do I know?"

"So how does that help us against the *giant mutant scorpion*?"

Pan was yelling now, her panic mounting as the creature's tail curled up tighter, like a spring. It was about to strike.

"I'm going to laser it," Pan said.

"No!" I said. "Let it come closer."

"Do you know how scorpions kill their prey, Jake? They paralyze them and eat them alive. *Alive*."

"Just trust me, Pan. Use your grappling gun. Fire it at the ceiling the moment the scorpion steps onto the trapdoor. I'll push the stone and grab hold of your legs. The trap will open, the scorpion will fall, and we'll stay hanging."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. No. I think so."

The scorpion tapped even closer.

My palm trembled as it pressed against the stone

block. My heart was like a machine gun in my chest. "Get ready..."

The scorpion stopped. Its claws clacked together – and vanished. Then the whole creature disappeared, and a loud whirring noise filled the tunnel. Around us the walls began to flicker. The scorpion reappeared for a second, upside down on the tunnel roof, and then it was gone again.

Pan yanked her smart-goggles from her face. "Hey!" she yelled. "The simulator's broken again."

Stark yellow lights came on. More of the "tomb" vanished – the tunnel walls, the stone floor and trapdoor. Instead I saw slatted wooden walls, hay bales and the rusty remains of a tractor in the corner of a barn.

I couldn't help a small groan – for a moment I had forgotten that we weren't really in a lost tomb or anything like that; we were actually in the Yorkshire Dales, up in the north of England, at the country estate of an old family friend. We were hiding out here while being trained as treasure hunters. Only, the training part wasn't going so well...

Sami balanced on top of a stepladder, checking a hologram projector fixed to a barn wall, one of the high-tech bits of kit that had created the simulation of the tunnel in the barn. His face was as wrinkled as a raisin, and his bald head glistened with sweat despite the chilly autumn winds that rattled the barn. His *jellabiya* – a traditional Arabic dress – clung to his back.

He muttered and cursed in Arabic. Sami was one of the world's leading experts in future technology. He didn't like it when his gadgets went wrong.

"Stay in position," he called. "It's just a glitch."

"Leave it, Sam."

Mum rose from a hay bale.

She closed her laptop and pulled off the smart-goggles she'd been using to talk to us in the simulation. She rubbed her eyes, seemingly exhausted by the sheer weight of disappointment.

"They've already failed," she added.

"Failed?" I said. "We were about to kill the scorpion."

"You were about to kill *yourself*," Mum insisted. "And your sister too. Sami, what was beneath the trapdoor?"

"Boiling oil," Sami replied.

"Boiling oil?" Pan protested. "In a five thousand-year-old tomb? How was it still boiling? And the Akkadians never discovered oil."

Mum's jaw clenched. "*Sumerians*. The point is that you were not certain. If that was a real situation—"

"How realistic is a giant mutant scorpion?" Pan complained.

"You faced a giant mutant snake in Egypt," Sami said.

Another breeze rustled through the barn, but that wasn't why I shivered. A few months ago we thought Mum and Dad were just boring old ancient history

professors. Pan and I had travelled with them to Egypt, but they'd vanished. Our search led to a meeting with Sami and another treasure hunter named Kit Thorn, in whose home we were now hiding out. We'd found a secret tunnel in a pyramid, and a lost tomb of an Egyptian god. *That* was where the mutant snake attacked us. But we'd discovered something even more shocking: that Mum and Dad were really super-high-tech tomb robbers.

Actually, that's not quite true. They were tomb robbers *once,* rescuing relics for museums before other hunters could sell them on the black market. Now they were coming out of retirement, and training me and Pan to work with them. Only, it wasn't going so well...

"Fixed it!" Sami announced.

All at once the simulator came back on. Hologram projections beamed from a dozen cameras, recreating the 3D image of the tunnel. One moment we were in the barn, the next we were back in the tomb, and the trapdoor opened.

The simulation shifted up, as if we had fallen into a pit. The scorpion splash-landed beside us in an image of dark, bubbling liquid: boiling oil. The creature writhed and screeched and sank deeper.

I looked to Pan, who shrugged.

"No *way* this oil would still be boiling," she muttered.