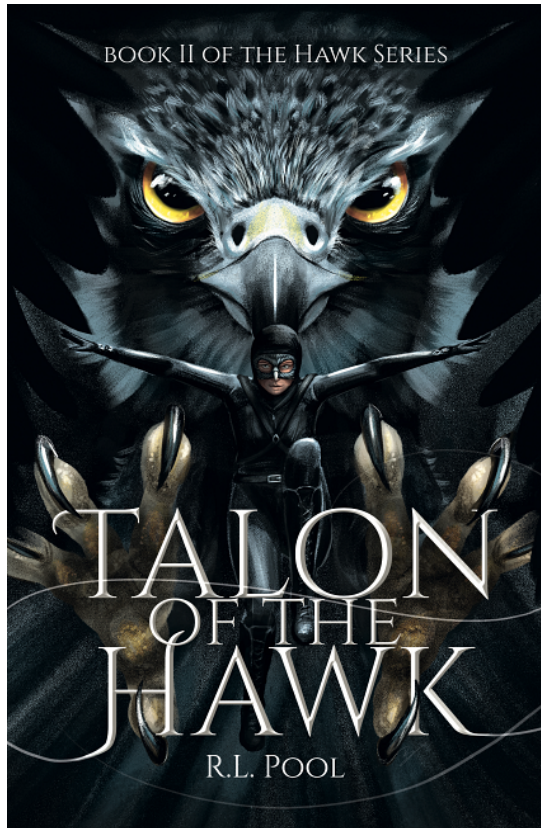




Again, Marissa is sent out to stand against the hidden puppeteers seeking to enslave humanity. But this time it's different. She begins to question the whys and wherefores. She's going to need help. A talon.

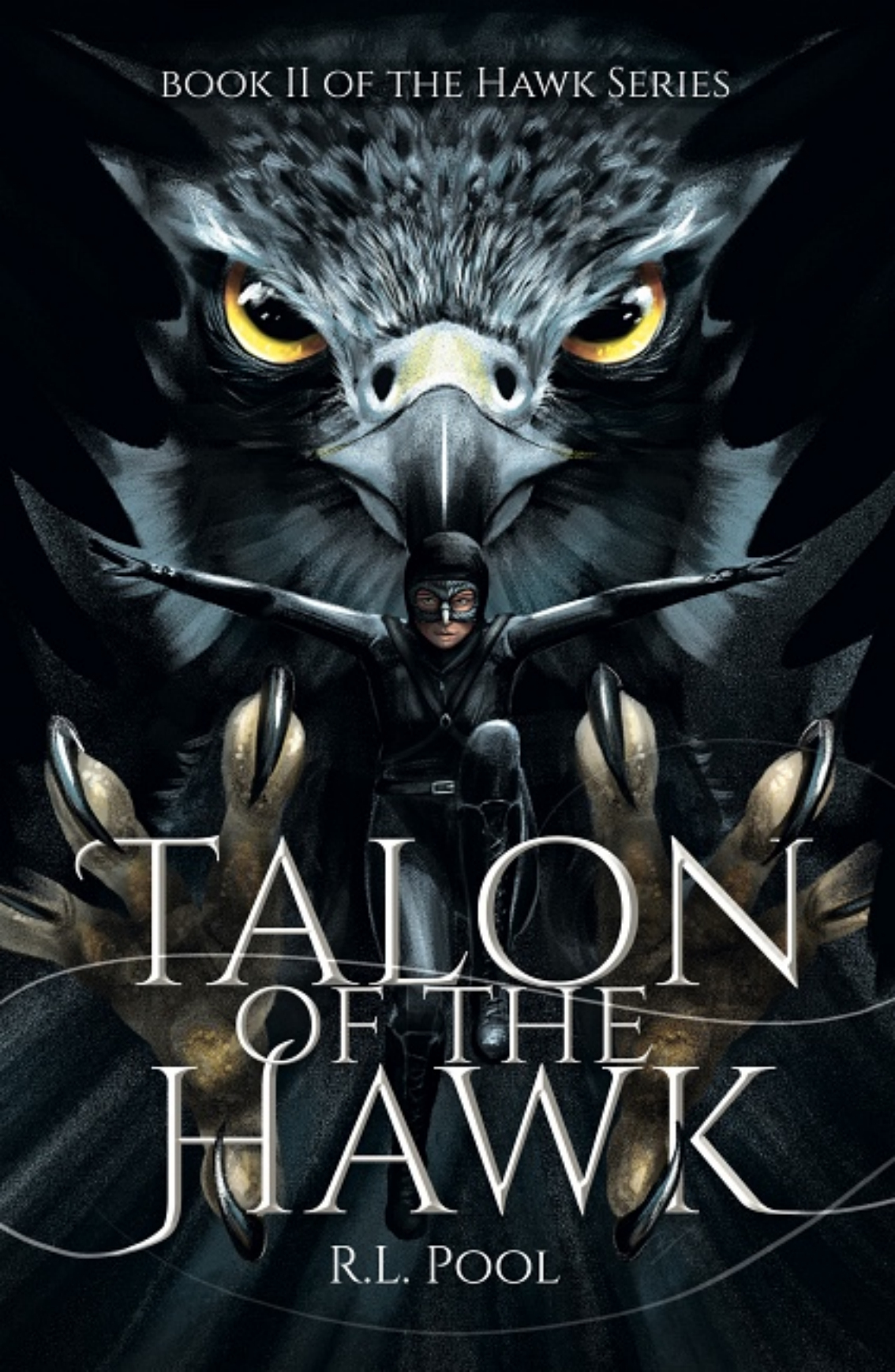
Talon of the Hawk

By R.L. Pool

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BOOK II OF THE HAWK SERIES

TALON OF THE HAWK

R.L. POOL

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Chapter 1

“Thinking is not my forte...”

Okay. I have some time alone just to think about things, ya know? I mean, Briggs, Kara and Amy are up front in the cabin of this slick jet, but it’s all on me... again. I’m back here in the cargo bay just waiting on a green light to jump out of here and into Columbia. What fun!

See, I’m the super-duper hero of this story, right? I gotta be all “truth, justice, and the American way”, although the “American” thing isn’t really what I do. International, or maybe World-Wide suits my mission better. I’m Phillie born and bred, but I’m something else too.

I’m the next generation of mutant, gene-spliced, manipulated human assassin created by Enki to watch over mankind. At least that’s what Aunt Pella and those old books in the attic are telling me.

Enki? You know. Enlil’s big brother? Yeah. I guess explanations are in order.

Back in the day... and by that, I mean some five hundred thousand years ago... the Anunnaki came to town. According to some of the clay tablets found recently, they came from a planet called Nibiru.

They were here for gold, or so we figure. Enki was sent here first to assess the situation, and Enlil came a few thousand years later. Yeah, they’re like... immortal, or at least live a long, long, long time!

They brought worker-bees with them too. They were called Igigi I think. Anyway, the Igigi were tasked with all the hard work of digging up gold, digging channels for transport and irrigation, farming, and... well... everything that required sweat, okay?

Now, you got the Anunnaki sitting at the top of the pile, with Enki, Enlil, as well as a few others lording it over everybody, and King-Poppa Anu at the tippity-top of the hierarchy.

Then the Igigi. I think there must have been a buncha Nibiru-ites sitting below all these shitheads, but they're never mentioned in the cuneiform tablets almost everybody is so excited about. I mean, somebody had to clean the toilets, right?

Anyway, the Igigi got tired of all the work and complained to Enlil. Enlil, the younger brother but the one tasked with Project Earth, had them working their butts off and they didn't like it. They revolted.

Enki stepped in, told little brother Enlil about a thing he was working on, and suggested it to Poppa Anu. The big ole king said, "Do it!"

See, Enki was a smart SOB. I mean, he knew all about living things, scientific stuff, and diet and exercise. Ya, know? Anyway, between him and a few of his Anunnaki colleagues, he came up with... well... us.

Humans! He was well versed in gene manipulation and all that.

No. He didn't sculpt Adam out of clay, breathe the "breath of life" into him, and voila!

Now, let me say right here that the Anunnaki didn't create shit! They used what was already here, created supposedly by an all-powerful, omnipresent, benevolent (maybe), all-seeing entity that nobody can name. Yeah. Even the Anunnaki wrote about the Big Guy as existing and they probably shouldn't "play God" with their experiments.

It's like that old joke about three scientists who confront God and tell Him he's not so hot. After all, they can create life just like Him, right? God said, "Let's make it a competition. You create life and I'll create life."

Well, those scientists got all smug, reached down, and scooped up some dirt. But God said, "Hold up now. I created that already. Make your own."

Yeah. God's a real piece of work, right? Not only all-powerful, but a funny guy to boot!

Anyway, Enki took Anunnaki seed, mixed it with the present bipedal hominids in a petri dish, and came up with us. Problem was, they were all clones and sterile. Not only that, they were stupid as fuck!

Though they could be manipulated and did the work the Igigi had been doing, they required constant supervision. Plus, they couldn't have kids! If they lost one of the clones, they had to make a new one and that took time. Time they didn't have according to some of those tablets.

Anyway, Enki, never happy with just leaving shit alone, figured he needed to make a smarter human that could reproduce on its own. Soooo... he did!

Well, almost.

See, humans lacked a particular gene that would let them make babies. Not only that, but the clones they had already were all male. No babies from guys, right? So, Enki and his folks made a girl... several girls according to some of the tablets.

The girls got with the boys and... you know.

Enki finally fixed the dumb part by adding an extra strand of DNA or something. "The fruit of the tree of knowledge", ya know? Then he showed his creation off to Enlil.

Now, you remember the story of Adam and Eve, right? This was them, although the name "Eve" didn't come up in the cuneiform stuff. Her name was Tiamat... I think.

Now, Enlil liked the idea of stupid slaves and didn't like the idea that humans could actually think for themselves, "like us...". He told Enki to take his abominations and get his ass down to the Abzu. That's southern Africa, folks. No angel with a fiery sword, or proclamations of doom and gloom. Just get the fuck outta here!

Enlil was CEO of Earth, so Enki had to obey.

Okay, that's the story folks like to hear. Ya know? Adam and Eve, sitting in the Garden of Eden eating a forbidden apple? God comes

along and asks what they're doing all dressed, right? I mean, they were supposed to be naked and stupid, right?

Well, that's not the way it went down.

See, the first woman made was a girl named Lilith. Yeah, that Lilith. And no, she didn't come from Adam's rib. Now, this is before Enki found out they were sterile, right?

Okay. Adam wanted some, and Lilith wanted to be on top. Adam, being a whiny bitch, complained to God. Not sure which to be honest, but it must have been Enki. When God looked around, Lilith was nowhere to be found. She told Adam to fuck off and left!

Now Enki was in a conundrum. I like that word. Conundrum.

Anyway, he needed Adam pacified, and he needed the new smarter humans to procreate. He did a little tweaking, yanked some cells outta Adam's rib, and made cute little Eve. With her tuned to be all subservient and shit, Adam was happy again.

A little more tweaking, a bit of gene manipulation, and now these humans were not only smarter, but they could make mini-me's. They had babies. Lots of them!

Enki and crew got going with a bunch more fertile humans, and soon there were humans popping out all over! "Be fruitful and multiply!"

Okay, back to Lilith.

Now, according to some passages in the Bible that didn't make the final cut, Lilith was approached by some angels. They told her that, if

she didn't get her cute little ass back to Adam, she would have to kill off a hundred of her own babies daily. She responded with a counter offer of course.

If she had to do that shit, she wanted to kill off a bunch of other kids for every one of hers she killed. The angels thought that was acceptable and left to tell God all about it.

That's all bullshit! Lilith was sterile! How the fuck could she even begin to do all that?

The truth is, according to multiple translations of tablets Aunt Pella has in the attic, Lilith and Enki were tight. I mean, he liked this smart, headstrong, talented human girl who had, for some reason, some really strange skills. He taught her everything he knew about gene stuff, fighting, and sneaking around and shit. He also liked some of the weird things she could do that Anunnaki couldn't!

When Enlil started whining about the "noisy humans", Enki sent Lilith out to find out what his little brother was up to.

Enki didn't like Enlil anyway because of the heredity thing. Enki was Anu's kid by a concubine, and Enlil was born to the king's wife. Of course, Anu's wife was also his half-sister, but that's another story.

Anyway, Enlil was next in line for the throne... if Anu ever died that is. Enki wanted his kids to have something too. Again, another story for another time, okay?

Lilith snuck around, found out Enlil was poisoning the crops, causing draughts, plagues and all kinsa shit to deplete the population

of noisy humans. Enki and Lilith worked in the shadows to keep the damage down and to keep humanity moving right along.

Of course, that pissed ole Enlil off, but he couldn't see who was shutting him down. This went on for a buncha millennia, with Lilith doing the sneaking, ending some of the perpetrators if necessary, and keeping humans going.

Then, the flood.

Okay. Most folks know all about Noah's Ark, right? Supposedly, God hated the nasty humans and decided one day to wipe 'em out. He called up the waters and drowned them all.

All except Noah and family. God took pity on Noah, told him to build an Ark, gather the animals together, "two by two...", and get on board with his sons and their wives.

Okay, the Ark was big, but not *that* big! I mean, the elephants alone would have taken up a lot of room! And he would have to feed and water all of them for at least forty days and forty nights, right? Two of each? Can you even imagine shoveling that much shit overboard? Not feasible!

Also, that was supposed to have happened about six thousand years ago, right?

Nope.

Ever hear of the Younger Dryas? Yeah. About fifteen to twenty thousand years ago, something happened that plunged the world into

a cold snap. Now, that lasted at least a thousand years. But the end of the ice age was catastrophic!

Mainstream geologists, archeologists, and anthropologists can't explain the sudden thaw, except to say it was probably caused by a meteor, comet, or something else big hitting Earth.

According to some of those cuneiform tablets, it was Nibiru.

Our planets... Mercury, Venus, us, Mars, Jupiter, etc... spin in a mostly circular orbit around the sun, right? I think they call it planer. Like all of us regular planets follow the same plane round the sun, or pretty close, right?

But not Nibiru. It's part of this solar system, but its orbit is elliptical. And instead of circling the sun counter-clockwise around the middle like the other planets, it rips through the solar system backwards and at a weird angle! That means it comes from way out there beyond Pluto, screams into our backyard, zooms past the sun, and flies back out again.

Normally, it doesn't get too close to us, and we escape the cataclysm. It does do some pretty gnarly things to the rotation of the planets though. Like Uranus spinning on its side for instance. And the weird wobble some of the planets do... including ours.

Anyway, Nibiru was gonna come a lot closer in its supposed 3600 year path around the sun. It was gonna cause all kinds of wonderful things like pole shifts, drastically changing climate, and floods that would cover most of the existing land.

The Anunnaki knew Nibiru was coming through and started getting ready to split. They probably used the schedule to get the gold to Nibiru without flying too far too, right? That's probably how they knew this time would be radically different.

Now, Enlil, being a dick, made them all promise to keep all of this to themselves though. He wanted to watch the noisy humans drown, right? There was something about the Nephilim too, but Enlil really, *really* hated humans.

Enki hated it, but had to promise. Thing is, he had other kids to worry about too! See, Anunnaki were prone to screwing. I mean, they screwed anything that would stand still long enough.

Enki was no different in that respect. He saw a couple of good-looking human girls bathing, invited them into his abode, and had his way with them. Yeah! Both of them!

They both had kids... Adapa and Titi... those kids had kids together, and they had kids.

Yeah, I know. Brother and half-sister, right? Well, that came from the Anunnaki royal blood idea that only a kid from the union of a brother and half-sister was acceptable as an heir. That's how come Enlil was heir, ya know? Sick!

Anyway, turns out that, because of Enki's seed, some of those kids had the Lilith gene and Enki knew about it. He got with Lilith, told her to stow away on his space ship, and had Noah... uh... Atrahasis... maybe Utnapishtim...

Okay, depending on who's telling the story, the name changes.

Anyway, Enki told Noah to take two of the girls from his line onboard... both with the active Lilith gene. And then loaded the ark he designed with seed, embryos and all kinsa DNA shit.

Once the water went down, Enlil and Enki landed. Enlil smelled the barbeque Atrahasis... Noah had set up to celebrate their survival, and got pissed at Enki.

Of course, Enki told him he didn't break his promise. He just told a reed wall to build an ark, fill it with the stuff they'd need after the flood, and keep all the animal shit safe. It wasn't his fault Atrahasis was standing behind the wall, was it?

Anyway, Enki calmed Enlil down and Lilith slipped out unseen. After the two god brothers left, she joined Atrahasis and the girls to watch over and protect them.

Now, ole Noah wasn't the only human to escape the flood. There were a lot of folks in different spots all over the world who made it. Although the gold fields in south Africa were covered in silt and dirt, some parts of South America had been washed away leaving gold... *pure* gold... exposed all over the place!

The gold shipment continued until Anu called it. The reason they needed gold was done and they could come home, right?

Nope. For some reason, Earth's environment had caused the normally immortal-ish Anunnaki to start aging faster. Enlil, Enki, Ninmah, and the others were getting all wrinkled up and old. Then,

they found out that, if they did go back to Nibiru, they'd probably die anyway.

Not sure how much of that is true, but they did disappear about four thousand years ago... or so it was written.

Now, Lilith was almost immortal herself. I mean, she was old by now but didn't look it... or so the tablets in the attic said. Enki got with her, told her he would probably be dead in a while and she had to promise to keep on keepin' on to protect the humans.

She promised of course. She liked the two girls who rode with Noah, watched out for them, and when it was time, she watched over their kids. When one tested positive for the Lilith gene, Lilith took her and trained her. She knew she'd eventually die too, and wanted to leave a "hawk" to watch over the people Enlilites were trying to subjugate.

She started a journal and cells of trusted humans to keep her informed of the goings-on around the world too. When the youngster got old enough, Lilith explained everything.

Nobody knows when Lilith died, but we know she probably did from the journals up in the attic. The new hawk went on protecting, watching over the new hawks as they came about, and kept journals too. They would live for a long time, each new hawk less and less with the "imperfect" human intrusion into their system.

Which brings us to me.

My mom, dad, and little brother died in an airplane crash, but I came out of it without a scratch. Why? Because I have the gene even stronger than Aunt Pella! Found out later it was no accident.

Holgren, Briggs and Pella tracked down the ones who rigged the plane, and Aunt Pella removed their DNA from the pool. They think they know who ordered it, but not certain. So that's still up in the air almost twenty years later.

If we are able to slip past the many layers of middlemen to find the puppet masters, Pella says we might not be able to take them out anyway. Something about them running the world and the people below them... far below them... would feel it if those assholes went missing.

Ah, well. I can dream, right?

Okay. I have the gene even stronger than Pella, can do shit I never dreamed anyone could do, and am now poised to jump out of a jet at twenty-five thousand feet. Why? Because of the questions left unanswered after rescuing my cousin Amy from kidnappers, getting drawn into a conspiracy in Spain, and saving a bunch of kids.

Okay. Let's go over those questions, shall we?

Amy, my cousin, was kidnapped. According to Briggs and others, somebody must know about the family of assassins who are charged with keeping the Anunnaki or their surrogates from acquiring the gene. She and the other three girls had samples taken. Info gathered from the kidnappers said somebody was looking for people like Amy. Why?

Because Amy has the gene for the next generation of hybrid assassins! That's why!

Oh! I can't have kids. See, the one with the mighty genes can't have children, is born sterile. But a sister or one of the relatives can. It's something in the system that is kinda confusing... at least to me, right? It sucks, but it is what it is.

Anyway, somebody knew something, and kidnapped Amy because of it.

Then, there's Kara and her story.

Her sister was taken, sent to Spain, and was supposed to become some Muslim pedo's wife. Why? Why take Kara's sister? Was the FBI involved somehow?

Who am I kidding! Of course they are! They're working for the ones in the background, even though most probably have no idea. So, who in the FBI is getting their strings pulled?

The evidence we had led us to Spain and Jorge, the pedo peddler. Why take Amy if they were interested in young girls for fat, Islamic pedos?

And why does all the evidence point to Spain anyway?

And why did Briggs state that the ones snatching Kara's sister were "pros"? Why did the FBI ignore Kara's pleas for help? Are there those who have inside information who want that gene as well? Are they working with the Shadow Government, or are they independent?

I don't know the answers and I don't like the feeling. I once joked about me being put into some kinda breeding program, only to find out I couldn't have kids. That damned alien gene!

But the question remains. Is there a breeding program out there somewhere? Spain? Somewhere else? Where? And who's running it? Why?

All great questions. Hopefully, some of those answers are down there, twenty-five thousand feet below me. Twenty-five thousand feet is a long way down, right? Humans can't do that without special gear. Well, I'm not exactly human. I mean, I am... but not.

"Be careful, Mari." Amy's voice whispered into my ear.

"You too." I responded as I checked the wrist monitor for the ping she and Briggs had found as we flew here.

"I love you."

I had to pause for a second. I heard her, but...

Why do I feel like crying all of a sudden? I don't cry. I don't remember ever...

Get your shit together, Mari. You have a job to do.

I punched the button to open the cargo door, checked on the big package strapped to my front, and slid out. It was gonna be a long night.

Chapter 2

"Well, well, well..."

"How did I get here?"

Now, that's a stupid fucking question. I should be asking, "How am I gonna get outta here?"

Yeah, just keep flapping your wings up there, crow. I'm not on the menu... yet.

I vaguely remember being pulled through the jungle. Not sure where that jungle is, and the guy's face was kinda blurry as he dragged me along by the ropes wrapped around my wrists.

I do remember kicking him between the legs though. I must have contacted something vulnerable there because the next thing I knew I was falling.

Can't waste time on drug dreams, Sandy. I gotta get outta here, find my team, and see what else went wrong.

Okay, the rope around my wrists could come in handy if I can get the dirty knots untied. My boots are gone, belt's gone, my tee is torn, and my "skinny jeans" have seen better days.

The ledge I'm on is small, but at least I didn't fall all the way down... there. I don't even know how far down there is! I can hear water running, but it sounds a looong way down.

I started in on the knots with my teeth and had to keep telling myself to ignore the nasty. I spit a couple of times, the rancid taste of

whatever was coating this nylon making me wanna puke. To take my mind off it, I tried to remember everything.

Me, Kyle, and Jaime landed in Bogotá... this morning? Yesterday? Doesn't matter right now. Kyle, my spotter, flagged down a cab and, while Jaime loaded the bags in the trunk, he told the driver which hotel we were going to. Jaime needed to get the tech set up to start the mission, and we had three weeks, according to Oscar Goldblum, to locate, lock down, and neutralize Carlos Mendicino.

We got into the back of the cab, started off, and... nothing.

I woke up here... wherever here is. Looks like Mendicino located us first. Then again, who tipped him off? If he's behind this, how'd he know when and where we were gonna land? We didn't even have time to check in with our contact here, so... how?

Those are questions for later. Right now, I have to somehow find my way outta this mess, find Kyle and Jaime... if they're still alive... and take this shit to another level!

Okay, this is obviously a well. A big assed well that has rocks lining it all the way to the top. Should be easy enough to climb out, right?

Maybe if I was ten feet tall with big manly muscles! This well is at least six feet across, and those stones? Covered in wet moss. Wet, *slippery* moss! There was no way...

"Hi."

I glanced up, instantly got an eyeful of sweat, and wiped it off on my shoulder. When I looked up again, the head and shoulders of someone was looking down at me.

The voice was kinda soft, feminine, and... well... sounded like she was wanting to start a conversation at the local club or something. I glanced around at the sides of the well looking for somewhere to hide my vulnerable body, but...

"It's okay," the girl-voice added. "I know it sounds kinda crazy, but I'm not your enemy. That would be the assholes who sent you here."

"What do you know about it?" I snapped.

Okay, I'm a bit pissed, but this girl... whoever she is... might be my only way out of here. So...

"Sorry," I added quickly. "You've caught me at my worst. If you could maybe..."

"In a sec," she responded... a little happier than I liked. "First, you need to know that it wasn't me or mine that got you into this mess. That'd be the dipshits who sent you.

"Second, your target isn't who you think he is."

"Mendicino?"

"Yeah," she responded a little tiredly. "Once you're up here, my folks will brief you on everything. I promise."

"So, you're with the CIA? DHS?"

“Nope and nope.” The girl paused for a second and then added, “We’re kinda independent. We don’t work for the government in any shape or form, and have little to do with their weird bullshit. The less they know about our involvement, the better.”

Her head disappeared for a moment and I was tempted to call out to her. I thought better of that seeing as how I was stuck down here and I didn’t know how far away the camp was. When her head popped back over the edge, I admit to feeling a little relief.

“I left you some stuff up here that’ll help get your guys outta the mess they’re in.” she said. “I’ll stick around to cover your back, but I can’t let on I’m here. Okay?”

“What about the guy who dragged me here.” I said softly. “He’ll have already...”

“I... kinda... broke him.” the girl replied softly. “You might check out whatever he has on him before you go after your guys, but he won’t give you any trouble.”

“Broke him?”

“I have a real problem with assholes who drag girls into the jungle to rape, get kicked in the nuts, and throw the girl into a deep well.” she responded... and then chuckled. “He won’t be doing *that* kinda shit anymore.

“Look. We’re kinda on the clock right now. If you wanna know more, you’ll find a little box on the pile of stuff I left you. It’s an earbud

that will let you talk to my guys. They'll fill you in on what you need to know. See ya!"

"Wait!"

Too late. My new girlfriend was gone. I'm still stuck down here with no way to get out and she just up and...

The rope slid down the side of the well and landed on the ledge. I looked up, but only saw the crow still circling. I grabbed the rope, tugged, and it felt solid.

With every muscle in my body screaming at me, I made the climb to the top. I rolled over the edge and lay there for... too long probably, just sucking in air. Knowing that wasn't a good idea, I finally sat up and looked around.

Broke him? Holy Christ, girl!

Over on the other side of the well was a body... more or less. Both arms were in positions that they should never be able to accomplish, and one of his legs looked like it had been broken in six or seven places! It looked like the dude fell into a pretzel machine! I got up to walk around the well to see more and...

His head was turned completely around! Broke him? Jesus!

I picked up the AK, pulled the dirty magazine, and pulled the charging handle. This thing hadn't been cleaned or oiled anytime in the last century! At least the ammo looked rather new. To keep this from blowing up in my face, I'll need to take the time to clean it, oil it, and see that at least some of the crud is removed.

He has an old bayonet sheathed on his pistol belt, along with a butt-pack and an ammo carrier with two more magazines. I'll need those.

I unhooked the pistol belt, rolled him out of it... his arms and leg swinging around grotesquely... and took stock of where I was.

Okay, she said she left me some things. I looked around and there by one of the trees around the well was a small pile of stuff.

I left the mangled pile of jerk for the crow and moved quickly to the things my new best friend left me. Weird shoes, socks, what looked like a one-piece swimsuit, and a little box. Okay...

I set the AK down, looked around again to make sure I wasn't being watched, and picked up the box. Inside were three of those little tiny hearing aids you see on the internet... or so I thought.

I picked one up by the monofilament with the bead attached and stuck it into my ear. Before I even got it in comfortably...

"Can you hear me?"

A male voice, baritone-ish and stern. I waited.

"I can see you've put the earbud in place." the voice continued.
"Just talk normally and..."

"Who is this?" I asked in a sharp whisper.

"You can call me... B."

"You got an A around there somewhere?" I asked, my anger getting the best of me.

"That would be me." came another voice.

Sounded young... and female.

“Who are you?” I asked as gently as I could.

“Would you believe me if I said we were the good guys?” the girl... *A* responded.

“We have little time.” the male voice cut in. “Kyle Reid is trying to save Jaime Ritter’s life. When the thug took you, Ritter tried to stop him. He got stabbed for his efforts. If he doesn’t get medical treatment soon...”

“Got it.” I interjected. “What’s all this?”

I waved my hand over the pile of things left for me and heard something behind me. A tiny drone drifted down and hovered a few feet away. The camera looked like it was moving around like it was alive.

“First,” *A*’s voice came through my ear, “you should find a small package of wipes in there somewhere. I figured you might need to freshen up a bit before you get dressed.”

I lifted the soft bodysuit out of the way and moved the clean sports bra. A canteen and a blue bottle sat on the ground with a little white packet of baby wipes. I lifted it and held it toward the drone, and...

“Yeah.” came the girl’s voice. “That should make you a little more comfortable.”

“Listen, Sergeant Slater,” the male voice interjected again, “we haven’t much time. If you would...”

“No problem.” I responded sharply.

I took off the dirty, torn tee-shirt, dropped it next to the swimsuit, and started to pull off my sports bra. I glanced at the drone and...

“Do you mind?”

“Oh!” *B*’s voice replied quickly.

The drone spun around and hovered there seemingly watching the clearing with the well in the middle. I lifted the sports bra off while listening to *A* giggle.

The wipes were welcome! I used a few on my face, neck and shoulders, and a few more for my boobs and under my arms. I slid the clean sports bra on, reached for the button to my pants, and glanced again at the drone.

“So, we were sent on a wild goose chase?” I asked as I slipped the tight jeans off. “How so?”

“Not a wild goose chase per se.” *A* responded softly. “You are more or less dressing for what they want to see when they take Mendicino out of the picture.

“From what we found, you were supposed to be left dead around the site. A stern middle finger to the other cartels and fodder for the media.”

“So,” I said as I used more of the wipes... down there, “we’re more photo-op stuff for the politicians?”

“Yep.” *A* replied. “With your creds, and the links already in place to bring you to the six-o’clock news, Columbia and the rest of the Latin

American countries around it can point a finger at Washington and be right on target.”

“So, by saving me and my guys...”

“To be truthful,” *A* interjected, “we made that decision just recently. We have to keep a low profile with Washington and a bunch of other countries. If they know for sure we’re involved, we become targets. Luckily, we intercepted a transmission from your contact just in time. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise, I’d be dead.” I all but whispered.

“And your team may die waiting for you.” came the male voice again.

“Okay, smartass,” I retorted, “what’s with the swimsuit?”

“It’s not...”

I could hear the frustration in his voice, but he *was* being somewhat of a dick. I know my guys are in trouble, but running through the jungle dressed in grandma’s swimsuit isn’t gonna help them.

“That is reactionary armor of my own design.” he said a little calmer. “For you, I’ve constructed it in three layers. It will stop most bullets to include the 7.62 from an AK. It will penetrate, but will only travel so far. In tests, it has been stopped with only the point making contact with skin.

“Sub-sonic weapons will only distort and fall away.”

“Good to know.” I responded as I stepped into the piece and pulled it up over the clean sports bra.

After I got it all arranged around my body, I slipped the jeans back on and pulled them up. While I buttoned the fly and pulled up on the zipper, I added, "I'm decent."

I sat down, used a couple more of the wipes to at least partially clean my left foot, and slipped the sock on. Then I took the weird shoe and held it up to the drone.

"It's a size eight and a half." came the man's voice again. "I believe that's your size?"

"Yeah." I replied as I pulled the high-top shoe on. "How'd you know?"

"We have your file." *A* responded. "We have your specs, the specs of your team, and all of your pertinent information. Family, friends... all of it."

I shook my head as I pulled the Velcro around my ankle and adjusted the one over my instep. I used a couple more wipes on my other foot, got the sock on, and stuck my foot into the weird shoe.

"Who the fuck are you guys?" I asked again as I adjusted the straps. "I mean, you seem to be on my side, but..."

"The less you know about us, the better, Sandra." *A* replied softly. "Just know that, if we can, we'll be there for you. As for anyone else, we don't even exist."

"Sandy." I replied. "My friends call me Sandy."

"I'm your friend?" the girl-voice asked.

“Yeah.” I responded as I picked up the AK and looked at the buttplate. If there was a cleaning kit in there... “Not too sure about your friend, but I think we’re friends too.”

“He can be a handful,” she responded with the cutest giggle, “but he’s a good guy.”

“Are you really going to sit there and...”

The guy again.

“If I try to use this now,” I said as I dumped the cleaning kit out of the butt... along with a small bottle of what I hoped would be oil, “I might as well try to take them all with a knife. This won’t take long.”

I pulled the magazine again and cleared the chamber... which sounded like pulling rusty nails through steel roofing.

I felt like walking over and breaking the jerk’s other leg! To treat a weapon like this is criminal!

I lifted the top cap and the crud fell out before I even got it all the way off, and the buffer spring was coated with it. With a little effort, I released the spring, set it on my screwed-up shirt, and pulled the bolt and piston out.

Okay. Now I wanted to stomp on his chest! You ever see the inside of a muffler on a 1965 Chevy Impala after one hundred thousand miles of bad gas? Yeah! That’s what that piston looked like!

If I had it at home, I’d leave it in a vat of bore cleaner for a week, drop it into my vibro-cleaner for another week, and *hope* I’d get some

of the crud off. If I couldn't get at least some of the carbon out of there, I was gonna be stuck with a bolt action AK. Not good!

"I'll make it work." I whispered.

"What?"

"Nothing."

I sighed, took out the old bore brush and did what I could for the piston. I cleaned everything I could see as well as I could sitting here in the jungle with two of my best friends waiting for me to rescue them.

But, when I got it all back together, and the little bottle of oil was almost empty, at least the bolt came back and forth a lot easier. And the action closed properly as well.

I checked out the magazine again, figured the ammo was good... from the looks of it anyway... and locked it in place. I pulled back the bolt and let it fly forward. It seated so...

"Which way?" I asked the drone.

"You need to clean up the mess." the guy said into my ear. "Leave nothing behind that will point to you. Otherwise, they'll know you're still alive."

"Who's they?" I asked as I opened the butt pack on the pistol belt and shoved everything inside... dirty wipes, dirty shirt, and cleaning kit. As I adjusted the belt for my narrow waist, I added, "Hey! I asked a question!"

"It's not as simple as that." the girl answered softly. "There're just too many layers between where you are and where they are to tell

who's pulling the strings. Just get out of there with your guys and we'll see what we can do to get you home safe."

"Bullshit!" Cut and run? Not likely! "Whatever you're into, I want some!"

"But you don't even know..."

"No, I don't!" Okay. I may be really outta my league here, but still... "Some som-bitch set us up! I wanna know who, where, and if I can slip a 250-grain *hello* into their head! Feel me?"

"I do!" The girl was trying so hard. "I know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of someone else's plans! Believe me! But right now, we need you to get your people out of there and to a safehouse where we can maybe regroup and see what we can do about the rest of this. Please, trust me?"

I had to give it to her. She knew just to right buttons to push.

"Okay... for now." I said as I picked up the AK and glanced around the clearing. "But if you try and send me back without answers..."

"I won't." she said softly. "I promise."

"So, which way?"

"First, you're going to need a boost." the guy's voice stated. "The blue bottle has all the ingredients to flood your body with electrolytes, vitamins, and a surge that should give you more of an edge against the miscreants holding your friends."

I picked up the bottle, shook it a bit, and glanced at the drone.

"It's real, Sandy." the girl said softly. "It will help."

I sighed, popped the lid, and took a sip. Strawberry. Not a fan, but...

I drank a little more and felt a lot better about my situation.

“Drink it all, and make sure you bring the bottle with you.”

Okay, Mister Smartass. I chugged the rest, put the cap back and snapped it. Then, while making a face that got a giggle from my young friend in my ear, I stuck it back in the butt pack.

I sipped a bit from the canteen, put it back into its carrier, and snapped the carrier onto the pistol belt. Strawberry sucks and food I can wait for. But water is a thing you need no matter where you are on the planet.

I double checked to make sure I got everything, and looked back at the drone.

“Like I said. Which way?”

Chapter 3

“Sandy to the rescue...”

According to the two voices in my ear, there are four of them... five with the mangled mess at the well. Kyle and Jaime were both shoved into a large dog kennel at the edge of their small camp, and Jaime was not doing well.

At the briefing for this mission, Goldblum insisted that our contact would have our equipment where we could get at it as soon as we showed up. It was supposed to be a scout, nest, wait, and execute mission with the egress and exit laid out. With three weeks to make nest selection, locate the three main targets, and four targets of opportunity, this was rote.

Not so much.

From where I was hunkered down, our gear graced the sweaty thugs in this makeshift camp. The black web gear, Kyle’s Deagle, and Jaime’s Groza, were in grimy hands and draped over dirty bodies as if they owned them. I figured Kyle was pissed almost as much as I am.

Then, there’s *my* shit.

My sweet thang is sitting there on a rickety table, and one of those bozos was fiddling with it. For some reason, this young jerk had taken all of my rounds out of the magazine, lined them up, and was now spinning the calibration knobs on my scope! Hands off my baby, shithead!

When I was given the Barret MRAD, MK22, chambered in .338 LM, I was told to make it mine. From a standard MK22, I built my baby. The pneumatic stock, the fluted barrel, the silencer...

No, not a “suppressor”. Suppressors hold down the noise. When my girl speaks without the big tube on the end, you can hear her in Cincinnati!

With the six-stage silencer Kyle and I put together, she whispers her pissed off nature with a sigh that only I hear. Kinda like a soft, “Pfft.”

Okay. She’s a bit hefty, but she has to be. Sending a sweet but heavy message out there at almost three thousand feet per second causes a bit of a kick, especially with the silencer. The pneumatics help, but the best way to hold her steady is her big butt.

We’re used to each other. We’ve been through it all together. Four missions in Afghanistan, one in Iraq, two in Honduras, and a fun trip to Panama. All covert incursions with defined targets to remove.

And I wouldn’t trade her for any of those cute little light assed rifles some of the guys like to use. She may be heavy to carry around, but she’s never let me down.

Thing is, nobody touches baby. *Nobody!* Can’t think about that right now though. Gotta set this up right.

Okay. Besides the young dipshit fucking with my baby, there was the asshole wearing Kyles gear and grinning like a lottery winner just looking at the big Deagle.

Deagle? Desert Eagle. Pounds of handgun that fires the biggest projectile you've ever seen. I asked Kyle only once why he needed something that big, and got a stone-faced stare in response.

Anyway, that turd was sitting before the only fire in the camp. Now, it's a hundred fifty in the shade, the humidity is above two hundred percent, and these guys think they need a fire? There's not a cooking pot anywhere! I'll never understand some people.

The third guy actually looks like he's on guard. He's standing on the other side of camp by the back of a truck tricked out in desert camo. Kinda out of place in a jungle, but who am I to say? Thing is, he has Jaime's Groza. If he gets a chance to turn that thing on me, I'm toast!

With my piece-of-shit AK, I have at least one good shot. If it cycles, maybe two or even three. But I still haven't seen the fourth guy. Time is not on my side here, so...

This AK was one of those old ChiCom rifles with the weird bayonet folded under the barrel. You had to release it, fold it out, and lock it in place before that wedge-pointed, fluted nightmare was functional.

I got that done with minimal noise, and had to wait for the right time to move. I needed to take out the Groza first. Then, whether or not the AK cycled properly, I had to Rambo the rest. Not a lot of options, I know, but Jaime looked like he'd lost a lot of blood.

I need to get him and us into friendly territory without knowing if there *was* such a place. So, I set myself, checked the selector to make

sure it was on single, and hoped the sights on this AK were at least close.

I needed to take the Groza out first, but I had to wait on the dipshit with the Deagle to make a mistake.

He did.

He let the magazine slide out to admire the thumb-sized rounds. That was my cue.

I brought the sights to bear on the guy with the Groza, his back to me, and squeezed the trigger. As soon as it barked, I came out of the jungle brush like a banshee!

The shithead fiddling with my baby glanced up in shock just before I laid the wooden butt of the AK to his chin. I didn't wait to see if that had the desired effect and ran at the bozo trying hard to get the magazine back into the Deagle. He didn't make it.

I drove that weird bayonet into his chest, twisted it, and yanked it out. He came forward with the effort and fell on his face, his hair just close enough for the fire to singe it. Stunk like shit!

Then, number four stepped out of the jungle with his AK leveled at me. I spun, pulled the trigger to the AK and... nothing. I didn't have time to even look down to see why.

His AK barked at me and I doubled over with the force of the round hitting my stomach. It burned, but I wasn't dead... yet... so I worked the action on the AK until I felt the jammed cartridge free itself. I let the bolt fly forward as I sat up, my breath knocked out of me.

I could have saved myself the effort.

The guy who shot me was bent backward. The girl holding his head and neck in one arm couldn't have been taller than... like... five six? Seven? And was in a tight-fitting black suit that covered everything but her mouth.

His head was tucked under her breasts as she lifted and I could hear the vertebrae snap from here! This girl likes to break things!

She let him fall and grinned at me.

"Get your guys into the truck." she said as she pulled what looked like an iPad from somewhere behind her. "Make sure you get everything that can be traced to you and take it with you.

"You might also want to see if they left any paper around here that could point us to the ones who hired them, you guys, or why they're here. But that's up to you. Take anything you think you might need and get outta here."

She pointed to the pad and added, "Follow the yellow brick road."

She set the iPad to the side of the pickup, skipped backward a couple of steps, and disappeared into the jungle.

That's twice! Twice this weird girl has saved my ass! I walked back toward the large kennel and heard the moan.

The young thug I clocked looked up at me with a weird, "Where the fuck am I" look. I shoved the bayonet into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Don't mess with my baby!

“How’s Jaime?” I asked as I stuck the bloody bayonet through the lock, wedged it against the side of the kennel, and yanked.

“Could be better.” Kyle replied as I swung the gate open and reached in to help him pull Jaime out. “It’s not deep, but that blade was dirty.”

“Let’s get him to the truck.”

“And then what?” Kyle asked as he lifted Jaime into his arms without even thinking about it.

Now, Kyle is a big boy. At six-one or so, he weighs in at at least two-ten. Jaime comes in at a buck fifty... give or take an ounce... and is shorter than me. Kyle is my spotter, backup, and right arm. But Jaime is the tech guy who finds anything I need on the internet. Between us, nobody has a chance. At least that’s what I told myself until today.

“There’s a safehouse somewhere out here.” I replied as I followed him to the truck, dropped the tailgate, and helped him get Jaime settled. “We have friends.”

“The last friends we *thought* we had...”

“These are different.” I replied as I grabbed the Groza out of the dead hands and handed it to Kyle. “I’m going on blind trust here, Kyle. We don’t have much else.” I pointed at the tent and added, “See if there’s an aid kit in there while I get our stuff together.”

He started to turn away, and then looked down.

“What’s that?”

I glanced down at where all the pain was coming from and...

The round the guy shot at me? You know, the one that hit me in the guts and should have killed me? It was just sitting there in that black bodysuit. I reached down, grabbed it, and pulled it out. The tip had a little blood on it, but I was alive!

"Hey... uh... *B*?" I said softly while Kyle looked at me like I was nuts. "Your armor works. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." I heard in my ear. "Now, get going."

"Who are you..."

"Tell ya later." I replied as I bent down to undo Jaime's webgear from the dead thug's body. "Hurry up. We need to go."

I tossed the gear into the truck and went over to do the same to the asshole still holding the Deagle in his dead hand. I pried it loose, got him out of the webgear, and stuck that brick of a pistol back into the holster.

I emptied his pockets, put the wad of bills and coins into my pocket, and opened his wallet. The ID said Bogotá. So, a local. We must be close, or I hoped so anyway.

I stuck the wallet into my back pocket and walked over to the young jerk staring up at eternity without a nose. I could hear him trying to explain himself to Saint Peter with a nasal lisp.

Yeah. I know. Sadistic, right? That's what you get when you piss off a girl.

I took my webgear, every piece of paper and money he had on him to include his wallet, and started thumbing the rounds back into the magazine on the table. At least my 40 Cal was still in the holster. A sniper always has a backup, ya know?

I started checking my baby over as Kyle came out of the tent. He had the hardcase for my MK22 in hand, the case for his spotting scope, our aid kit, and a manila folder under his arm. I collapsed the support legs and waited while Kyle set the case to the table. He opened it and I breathed a bit easier.

The five rounds on the table were now in the magazine, but the other five were there in the case in the translucent blue plastic case. I had all ten of them. At five bucks a pop, losing one could be expensive. And I had no reloading gear here, so what I have is what I have.

I unscrewed the silencer and set it into its niche, and then carefully set baby into hers. Once the magazine was in its place, I closed the lid, looked around for anything else, and then followed Kyle to the truck.

“So,” he asked as he got into the back with Jaime, “where’s this safehouse?”

“I haven’t a clue.” I responded as I picked up the iPad. “But this does.” I pushed the button on the side, and the animated arrow... *yellow* arrow... pointed the way out. “Just keep your eyes open and hang on. I don’t think you’ll be able to do much for Jaime while we’re going, but...”

“I’ll clean it up, put some butterflies in place and bandage it.” Kyle interjected. “If they haven’t fucked with it, there’s some antibiotic in the aid kit, as well as tetanus. I’ll do what I can. Just get us out of here.”

“Yes, please.”

“You gonna be okay, Jaime?” I asked as I glanced over the side of the truck.

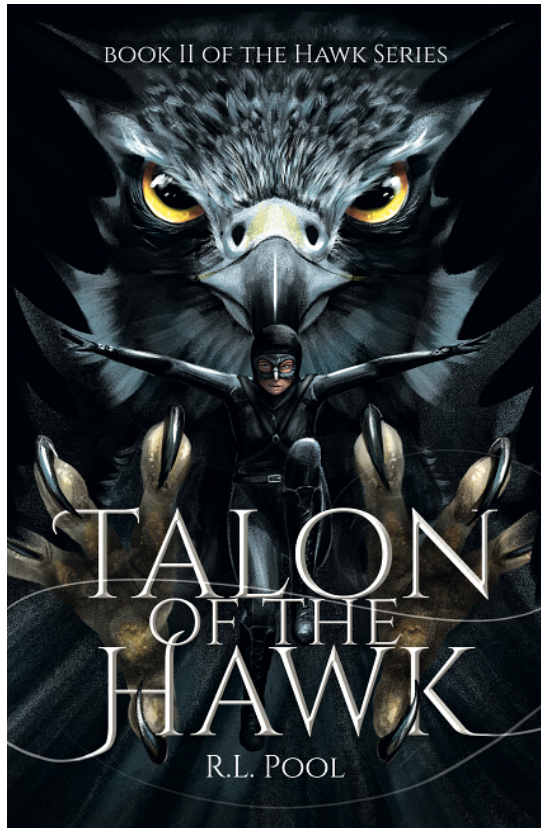
“With Hulk doing the patching, I can’t answer that.” he replied weakly. “Just stop by McDonalds on the way, mom. I want nuggies.”

I was still chuckling as I got into the driver’s seat and started the little pickup. Half a tank of gas. Hope that’s enough.

I got us going, but no more than a hundred yards along, a man decked out like a ninja stepped out of the jungle and leveled a pistol at me. I ducked down just as the round punched through the windshield right where my head was. I glanced over the dashboard while stomping the accelerator and, just before he sent another round, something else black came from the jungle and hit him in the side. I didn’t feel a thump, so...

“What was that?” Kyle shouted from the back.

“Don’t know!” I shouted back. “But I’m not going back to see!” I grabbed another gear and added, “Hang on!”



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