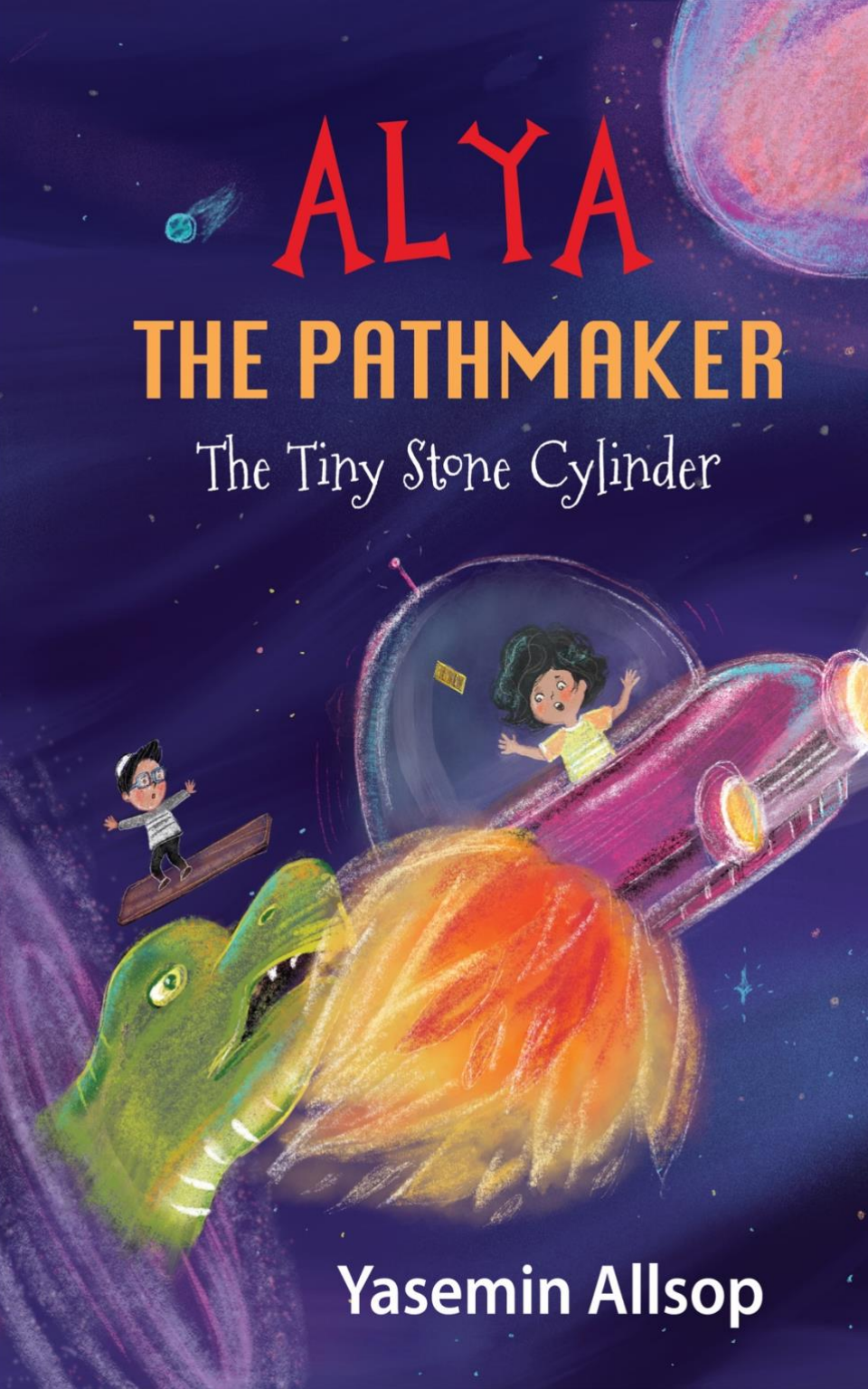
ALYA
THE PATHMAKER
The Tiny Stone Cylinder



Yasemin Allsop

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YASEMIN ALLSOP

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DEDICATION

For all those amazing children who have inspired me to transform my imagination into stories

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FOREWORD

Have you ever looked up at the stars and wondered what might be out there in the universe? In this story, Alya, a little girl who has lost her mother, learns that there could be something more beyond this realm. You will be introduced to Alya's dad, who gives her something to help with this exploration. You will also meet her loyal school friend Ben, whom she learns to trust as a travel companion on various adventures.

Together, we will find them visiting the British Museum, where they will meet grown-ups who knew Alya's mother and who will either help or hinder them on their quest to explore the universe. You can also be a part of this exploration, as Alya and Ben learn how to decode symbols and decipher clues together. Ultimately, you too can share the journey of discovery.

Dr d'Reen Struthers
December 2019

Beginning…

My mum once told me that every soul in our universe is governed by a planet, and once the body dies, the soul floats towards its home in the heavens. "When the time comes for me to return to my planet, you can visit me whenever you want. Just follow the stars dipped in sparkling gold dust," she said.

She loved drawing pictures of the skies. To her, it was like speaking in another language. From stars to planets, comets to asteroids, she could understand the conversations between billions of objects in our galaxy. Sadly, I never had the chance to learn more because soon after my ninth birthday, she died in a traffic accident.

Now, I lie on my bed every evening, staring at the sky, hoping to see my mum one more time and tell her how much I miss her.

Venus was her planet, that glittering morning and evening star camouflaged by heavy clouds.

Chapter One

The Tiny Stone Cylinder

It was a bleak, gusty Sunday evening in September, the twenty-fifth day of the month. I was lying on my bed, staring at the sky through the large windows that covered half the ceiling. The clock read twelve minutes past nine. The stars looked ever so shiny, even through the gloomy smog that buried the entire sky. There was Capella, the sixth brightest star in the night sky, twirling at Vega with her golden, glistening sparks. Near to Vega was Deneb, a supergiant star, chattering along with Altair, furiously twinkling blue and white beams. It seemed like something alarming was about to happen.

Only a few planets were visible tonight. Mars, God of War, the bravest warrior of all, was pushing towards rebellious Uranus. Perhaps he was getting ready for his next conquest. Jupiter, King of the Gods, was racing in between them, creating an illusion

of galloping amongst the stars beyond counting. They all looked very awake, as though there were millions of people living on them.

In my right hand, I was firmly holding a tiny stone cylinder that my mother had left for me before she died. Just this morning, my father had decided it was time for me to have it. After such a surprise, I should have been filled with joy, yet my face had blushed bright red with annoyance. Why had he waited so long to give it to me? It made no sense. I'd ground my teeth and given him a mirthless smile, impossible for him to ignore.

"It's what your mum wanted," Dad moaned, with a defensive note in his voice. "She strictly told me to give you that stone thing this morning."

"Why today?" I asked, expecting an explanation. What was so special about 25 September 2018?

Dad couldn't say, or he chose not to.

Looking for clues, I held the stone cylinder in my hands, right in front of my eyes. No use. My room was as dark as a cave, and it was impossible to see

anything. Hardly surprising. There were no lights in the room except for the small bedside lamp that hadn't worked since my last birthday. That was nearly seven months ago.

Just as I slid the cylinder upwards, under the moonlight, spears of light pushed their way through the windows on the ceiling, brightening the dimmed room. I could even see the small flakes of paint falling from the old, crumbling walls. In an instant, strange symbols appeared on the outer surface of the cylinder. They shimmered and then faded away like an illusion. It must have been the glare from the stars.

Feeling exhausted, I closed my eyes and instantly found myself travelling up to space in a tiny glass spaceship, wearing my pyjamas.

"Odd," I muttered. Would I be able to breathe in space without a special suit? That was a question for my teacher, Mrs. Higgins.

As my spaceship broke through the Earth's atmosphere, the murky shadows of city lights below started to get smaller and smaller with each passing second. Soon, I could only see snow-painted peaks and clear-blue waters.

My mind was stirred by memories of the past. A wonderful sense of hope that I was going to find my

mum filled my heart with great joy. It was so easy to picture her face in my mind now, her dark brown curls falling across her shoulders, and her oval-shaped hazel eyes watching me, as always, with a patient smile.

Suddenly, a huge blast of light exploded like a thousand fireworks in one blow, followed by a bolt of lightning that tore across the stars. Out of nowhere, a giant robot with bizarre hands like cranes appeared, grabbing anything it could in total silence. It was as tall as the trees in our garden. A group of tiny metal creatures emerged from all around the robot, with long tails and gigantic mouths in their bellies. They moved aimlessly, in packs, all of them silent as well. Perhaps it wasn't possible to hear sound in space? Well, there was another question for Mrs. Higgins.

Above it all, an array of never-ending tracks crossed in every direction like a massive cobweb. The tracks looked a lot like luggage conveyor belts in an airport. In slow-motion, the space robot placed a few objects onto the tracks. Everything else, it clumsily shoved into the mouths of the metal creatures that battled for the junk as if they were predators going after their prey.

As soon as the metal creatures gobbled the bulk of the space junk, they wagged their long tails to show

how happy they were. Next, they passed through a circular disk surrounded by multi-coloured flashing lights with flames in the middle, which glittered from all angles. A few moments later, the metal creatures returned for more.

Could this well-lit disk be a gateway of sorts? I wondered where it led to. Maybe a planet, or even another galaxy. Maybe Venus.

Maybe it led to my mum.

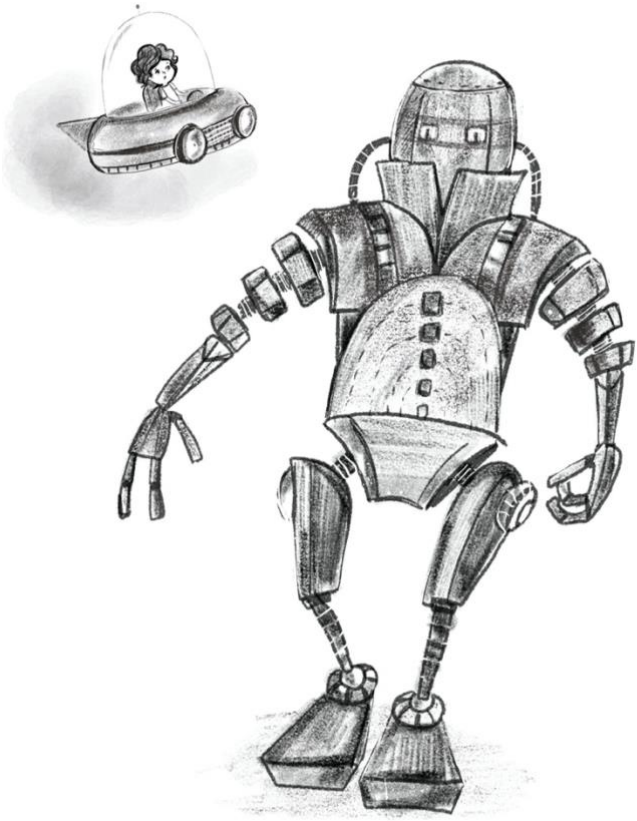
Flustered, I barely noticed the giant robot was advancing towards me. After all, I could hear nothing. In a flash, the enormous junk machine clasped hold of my spaceship and heaved it onto one of the tracks above.

My heart pounded like an alarm clock. Afraid of what might happen next, I tried to get the giant robot's attention by hammering on the glass cover of the spaceship with my fists. It didn't work. The robot kept on coming, closer and closer.

Gathering all my breath, I screamed,

"Hellooooo!"

It didn't answer.



I breathed air onto the glass to form a fog and wrote 'Hello' with my fingers. The robot leaned its shiny metal head gently towards me and stared blankly at the writing before the word evaporated slowly into thin air. Maybe it couldn't read the reversed letters from the other side of the glass.

Then, mirroring my actions, it blew a powerful shot of steam onto the glass and used its sharp crane fingers to scribble some words. It was a good thing

the robot used backwards writing, because if not, I wouldn't be able to read the letters.

'MUZU ANA?' it wrote. What language was that? French, or maybe Spanish?

Growing impatient, the robot's rectangular eyes opened as wide as my classroom windows, then it pointed at itself and wrote 'Aki' on the steamy glass. I was watching its every move, but still, I had no idea what the robot was trying to tell me.

Next, the robot placed its hands on the glass and stared into my eyes. Not sure why, I moved my hands and placed them against the robot's crane fingers. With the glass between us, I eventually met its eyes. They glowed bright orange.

Then, something strange happened. Something very unusual. The voice of the robot vibrated in my mind even though it said nothing. Aki was its name, and it wanted to know mine.

'Alya.' I jotted my name on the steamy glass cover and waved at the giant robot with a big smile on my face.

Clearly not interested, the robot stepped away from the spaceship and gave me a haunted look, as if something was terribly wrong. In a flash, the giant

junk-box flew up and disappeared behind the dazzling stars, into a black void.

I was so happy I hadn't ended up in the metal creature's belly, but I had no clue where I was, or where the spaceship was taking me. An infinite number of objects drifted around, but not on the track, which seemed to have an invisible deflective shield shoving away anything that came close.

Floating steady, I watched the glittering stars dancing elegantly like swans on a lake. It was hard to tell how long I had been on this path. It must have been days, maybe even weeks, though my watch was still showing twelve minutes past nine. Maybe clocks didn't work in space. That was a question for Mrs. Higgins too, should I ever return.

After a powerful engine roar, the capsule began to move much faster. The loudest scream escaped my mouth, echoing all around me. *Engine roar?* Something must have boosted my hearing; I could pick up even the quietest sound now. Maybe I had developed superpowers in space! I couldn't wait to tell Ben, my best friend. For now, though, it was time to focus. Not far ahead, the track looked damaged. As I moved closer, I realised how grave the situation was. The path had split through the middle. Dangerous-looking

bundles of cables were hanging everywhere, flickering and making quirky sounds. It would be impossible to jump over to the other side. Unless I did something quickly, the capsule would plunge through the black pit, and I would fall with it. More superpowers would be very handy now. If only I knew where to get some…

I was almost in the middle of the track, and sparks from the damaged cables were dropping onto my spaceship, melting wherever they fell. My heart was beating heavily in my chest. A loud voice echoed through the track. For sure, it was calling my name.

"Alya… Alya Manning…"

The voice became stronger the closer I got to the broken part of the track. Desperately, I searched for buttons, anything to control the ship, but there was nothing except an empty dashboard.

The ship failed to stop and fell down into the dark, dark hole. I scrunched my eyes tight and hooted with all my might, but there was no one to hear.

In a blink, I escaped the metal creatures and the giant robot, passed meteoroids, passed stars, entered

the Earth's orbit, bounced through the clouds…and then everything blacked out.

Funny, someone was still calling my name.

"Alya? Alya, are you listening? Turn the light off and go to sleep!"

To my relief, the deep, croaky voice belonged to my dad. Okay, hard to believe but I was very pleased to hear him. Even my surroundings were familiar now: my fluffy, soft bed, worn-out mahogany wardrobe, and large ceiling windows. This was my very own room. But…how strange. The lamp beside my bed, the one that hadn't worked since my last birthday, was glowing bright yellow. In my right hand, I was tightly clasping the tiny stone cylinder. The stars were still shining through my ceiling windows, and the clock on the wall read just thirteen minutes past nine.

Chapter Two

The Trip to the British Museum

The barely warm autumn sunlight was still bright enough to break my sleep before the old alarm clock rattled. My whole body felt jet-lagged, as you would expect after a very long journey. It was difficult to say whether I had travelled to space in a tiny glass spaceship or if it was only a dream. I gazed at the stone cylinder in the palm of my right hand. All the writing on it had vanished, and it looked rather ordinary now. Maybe it was just a simple gift from my mum. Something to help me remember her.

I packed my school bag, dressed in my uniform, and sped down the stairs for breakfast. Dad looked baffled to see me up and ready so early.

"Well, this is a surprise. I guess someone can't wait to go to school today," he sniggered, with a big

cheesy grin on his face. "Anything exciting happening?"

On any other day, I would have challenged him, but not today. My mind was already distracted with countless questions, and I had no interest in banter.

"Can I get my packed lunch please?" I asked, nicely.

Puzzled by my politeness, Dad tried to say something, but I quickly interrupted him.

"Thanks, Dad. See ya later."

His face blushed a deep red, and he burbled something. I didn't have the slightest idea what he said, and I did not care. To be honest, he often spoke a lot of nonsense.

I found Ben at the front entrance of school, standing like an important ancient monument, proud and grand. Something didn't look right. He wasn't wearing his school uniform.

"Why are you dressed like this?" I quizzed him.

"What do you mean, why am I dressed like this? Why are you in your school uniform?"

"Hmm, let's see…" I tapped my finger against my chin. "I guess, because we are at school?"

"Not again." Ben sighed heavily. "You forgot, didn't you?"

"Forgot what?"

"The trip to the British Museum."

Oh no… I suddenly remembered today was the day of our school trip, and I'd totally forgotten about it. "Whoops!" I chuckled nervously. "I was distracted by the stone cylinder, then my journey to space. The trip just slipped from my mind."

Ben looked at me with his dull grey eyes as if I was crazy. "What cylinder? What space journey?" he asked.

Taking out the tiny stone object from my bag, I placed it in his hands. The cylinder turned orange and burned hot, like the barbecue in our garden. He dropped the cylinder on the floor and let out a muffled scream, licking his palm like a dog where the cylinder had left a strange red mark.

"Are you okay?" I asked, picking up the stone cylinder.

"Yeah… What just happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," I replied, holding the cylinder out in my hand for him to see.

Ben examined the stone cylinder like an expert detective, then his face lit up with excitement. For a minute, I thought he had unravelled the mystery. It was a short-lived thought.

"What is it?" he asked with wide, interested eyes.

"Not sure. For all I know, Mum gave it to Dad to keep safe."

"Did he not tell you what it's for?"

"He said he doesn't know. Mum told him to give it to me on 25 September, 2018."

"Why? Is it a special day?"

"I don't think so. It's all very confusing."

Ben, looking more serious than usual, straightened his glasses. "We need to first uncover when this thing was made, and then, we should be able to figure out what you can do with it," he said. "Maybe it is from ancient times. Maybe it belonged to a king, or to someone very important. It looks pretty old," he continued.

A king? I had never heard such nonsense! Why would my mum have something that belonged to a king? And what facts were there to show the cylinder was old?

"If only I could understand the symbols on it," I muttered.

"What symbols? There is nothing on it," Ben grumbled as we filed into the school hall.

"Well, they were there yesterday evening. I held the cylinder up, and strange symbols appeared on it. They were like pictures or writing."

He was about to say something, but Ms. Ingham, our headteacher, began to torment us with a lengthy speech about the rules—yes, the *rules*—for our school trip. You know, "Do this, don't do that…" We'd learned quickly that we must be silent when Ms. Ingham was talking, unless we wanted to stay in during lunch break and stare at the empty walls with dirty scribble marks all over them.

The tube journey from Finchley Central to Euston Station was a short and easy one. After, we had a painstaking walk that felt like running a twenty-six-mile marathon. Believe it or not, that's one mile more than what the Roman soldiers would march in a day. We walked—or, shall I say, dragged our legs—through Tavistock Square, which was decorated with a beautiful garden on the left and stylish Georgian

houses on the right. Then, we strolled by Russell Square, another small park with towering trees.

"Weather permitting, we will have our lunch in this park," said Ms. Ingham, sounding unhopeful. No one could blame her. London, our great capital city, was rather famous for its constant rain, so it was best to not get our hopes up.

A right turn into Montague Road, and there it was: the side entrance to the British Museum. Personally, I liked the front entrance on Great Russell Street better. With its magnificent columns and sculptures, it resembled the portico of a Greek temple rather than a museum. I used to come here with my mum at least once a month, and that was the entrance we always used. She would chat to this old gentleman with large rectangular glasses covering almost all of his face. I think he was called Mr. Benson.

A member of the museum education team, with the name tag 'Grace,' welcomed us. She was dressed very smartly and wearing her straight, light brown hair in a low bun. She looked serious but charming at the same time.

"Welcome to the British Museum. Are you ready to walk through history?" she asked in a cheerful voice.

"Yes!" we answered as loudly as we could.

"Let's put your coats into lockers first, and then we can make our way to the gallery where we keep the Egyptian mummies."

We followed her eagerly, but we weren't very calm. Who could blame us? Surrounded by so many fascinating objects, all we wanted to do was chat to each other.

Disappointed with the growing noise level, Ms. Ingham delivered another long and boring speech. I couldn't see why teachers put themselves through such trouble. I once read on the Internet that statistically, on average, telling off children is only effective for thirty-two seconds, after that the children would carry on with whatever they wanted to do. Besides, I never understood the point of depriving children of the most natural human behaviour; and that is talking.

After trotting through many rooms, we reached room 62–63. The sign on the door read, 'Egyptian Death and Afterlife: Mummies.' Grace stopped in

front of each relic, eager to tell the tales of ancient Egypt, sparing no detail. Fascinated by the mummies in their coffins, a chorus of, "Wow… Ahh… Ooh… Cool… Gosh…" dripped from our mouths.

We ran from one relic to another, and it was not long until Ben and I realised we were in a room crammed full of stone tablets. It certainly did not look Egyptian. Panicked, we rushed to the door, where the sign read, 'Room 56: Mesopotamia 6000–1500 BC.'

Ben squinted at my backpack through his glasses, looking troubled. "What is happening?" he asked.

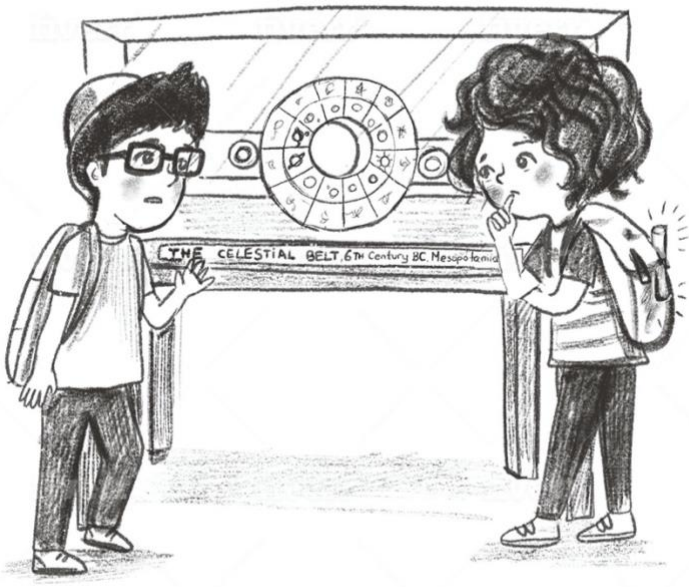
"What do you mean?" I replied, confused.

"Something in your bag is glowing."

Startled, I took my backpack off. Lights of gold and orange were flashing inside my bag. Opening the front pocket, I realised it was the stone cylinder. The symbols on it were glittering just like last night, only much brighter now.

As we walked towards the centre of the room, the cylinder glowed stronger, until we reached a relic, some sort of belt, which turned the shimmering yellow symbols to a metallic green. The belt looked like gold, shiny and pure. It had a circle in the middle that seemed to be a clock with a rounded slot on each

side. Both slots were empty. Jumping up excitedly a few times, I got a glimpse of the museum label. It



read, 'The Celestial Belt, 6000 BC.'

Suddenly, I had the uncanny feeling I was being watched. A peculiar-looking lady, wearing a long purple coat, was carefully observing us from close by. Her giant, round hat covered most of her face, making it impossible for anyone to see her eyes.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" she said, as I slipped my hand into my pocket and exchanged an anxious glance with Ben. I hoped she hadn't seen the cylinder.

"Legend has it," she began, "this was the belt that Enki, the Sumerian God of Earth, used for visiting his Earthly wife. You see, it was forbidden for Gods to marry daughters of men."

"What does the belt do? Is it magical?" Ben asked.

"Oh yes, it is a very special belt," the lady replied. "Lord Enki, desperate to make his Earthly wife immortal, asked his father, Anu, to grant his wish to make his wife a goddess. But Anu, Father of the Earth and Heavens, refused his son's request and banned him from seeing his wife forever. Not long after, saddened by Anu's decision, his Earthly wife died of a broken heart and retired to Mars."

"Why Mars?" Ben interrupted her.

"We will come to that. Now, where was I?" The lady paused before continuing with the story. "Oh, yes. Disappointed, Enki created the Celestial Belt, which allowed him to travel and visit his beloved lover, Lanu, in Mars…until he was caught by his brother, Enlil."

Ben and I listened in wonder as the lady went on, both of us fascinated by her story.

"It wasn't easy for the Gods. They also had to follow rules set by Anu, the father of all. Enlil, who was always jealous of his brother, told his father about Enki breaking the law. Anu was enraged by his son's disobedience and punished him by stopping him from seeing Lanu forever. He removed the cylinder stones from Enki's celestial belt," she said, pointing to the circular slots on the gold belt. "Without those, the path to Mars is hidden, impossible to locate, even for a God."

"What happened to the cylinders?" I asked, squeezing the stone cylinder in my coat pocket.

"No one knows. Well, it is only a legend," she replied, leaning towards me.

I got a strange sensation I'd bumped into this odd-looking lady before. I was about to ask if we had ever met, but I was distracted by a friendly voice coming from the crowd.

"Are you okay? Why are you two not with the rest of your class?"

Looking up, I saw Mr. Benson, the old gentlemen my mum had spent time with during our museum visits. I swung around to point out the

strange lady, but she had disappeared as if she was never even there.

"Alya, right?" Mr. Benson said with a tender smile on his face. "Elsa's daughter? I am very sorry to hear about your loss. Your mum was a great friend."

He led us to room 62, where our class was still listening to Grace's tales from Egypt. Ms. Ingham, unaware we had been out of the room at all, gave us a puzzled look.

"Oh, Ms. Ingham, how nice to see you again. You look lovelier than ever," the old gentleman said, holding his hand out to her.

Charmed by the good-looking gentleman, Ms. Ingham blushed as she held her hand towards him.

Mr. Benson grasped our teacher's hand and lifted it to his lips. The whole class watched the weird scene unfold through wide eyes.

"I wanted to show Alya and her friend a new piece that just arrived in our museum last week. I hope I didn't cause too much trouble," Mr. Benson said.

"No trouble at all, Mr…umm…?"

"Mr. Benson," he finished for her. "Adam Benson, Director of the British Museum."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. All this time, I hadn't realised my mother's old friend was so

important here at the museum. Flattered to have his attention, Ms. Ingham's eyes fixated on Mr. Benson as if he was Adonis, the handsome God from Greek Mythology.

Gently letting her hands go, Mr. Benson turned to me and whispered in my ear, "Goodbye, Alya. Until we meet the next time, stay safe and trust no one. Oh, and one more thing: I wouldn't carry the Seal of Gate around with me if I were you. It might draw some unwanted attention."

Confused by his remarks, I stared at him as he walked away slowly, leaving me more puzzled than I was before.

Chapter Three

The Hidden Room

Saturday morning, the sun was already up and blazing like a fireball, pouring scorching beams onto my cheekbones. I was still in bed, with my eyes half-open, wondering what Mr. Benson had meant by the Seal of Gate. He believed the stone cylinder would draw unwanted attention, yet he hadn't said why or who it would draw attention from.

Perhaps Mr. Benson had confused the stone cylinder with another object. After all, he didn't seem to have very good eyesight. How else could he explain kissing Ms. Ingham's sweaty hands? Willingly too!

"Alya! Alyaaaaa! Your friend is here!"

Oh, bother… The moment I wanted to be left alone with my thoughts, Dad was serenading my name from downstairs.

"Friend? What friend?" I asked, struggling to keep my eyes open.

"That boy, umm…" Dad lowered his voice to ask, "What did you say your name was, again?"

"Ben, sir. Ben Wilson," I heard him reply.

"Yes! Yes, his name is Ben, and he looks pretty hungry!" Dad called up.

That was odd. Ben was supposed to come at ten o'clock. Typical. He was early, like always.

I slid out of my bed covers, pulled on some trousers and a T-shirt, then hopped onto the bannister and sped downstairs. Dad was in the kitchen, making gross pancakes that looked like yellow dishcloths. The kitchen seemed like it had been hit by a tornado—which was a usual scene on Saturday mornings. Ben was by the breakfast table, and he appeared to be enjoying munching on Dad's soggy pancakes.

"You're early," I said, peering at his face.

He ignored me.

"Ben?" I pressed, waiting for an answer.

He gobbled another piece of pancake with a great sigh, then muffled a, "Hello," which sounded more like, "Ello."

Running out of patience, I grabbed his right arm and started up the stairs, two at a time. I could feel Dad's gaze following us up as we climbed. I yanked Ben into my room, then banged the door shut tight.

Just to be sure, I placed a chair behind it. Dad was well known for eavesdropping on my conversations.

"So, what's up?" I growled.

Licking the dripping honey from the corners of his mouth, Ben said, "Alya, your dad's pancakes are the best."

I couldn't believe he was still jabbering on about those gross-looking soggy pancakes. I narrowed my eyes in irritation.

"Ben Wilson!" I ranted, as the clock struck ten. It sure felt a lot earlier. Tired, I sat on my bed. "So, did you find out anything?" I asked, hoping to get some answers about the stone cylinder.

"A bit," he started, as he pulled his tablet out of his backpack. "Look," he said, moving his fingers over an image of a stone cylinder on a website. "It says it was used as a signature."

"Like a seal you put on important documents?" I replied.

"Who told you that?"

"Never mind!" I didn't want to scare him with Mr Benson's warning.

"But listen to this, the Sumerians used it around eight thousand years ago. Isn't that incredible?"

"The Sumerians?" I asked. "What is that?"

"Well, they were an old civilisation, like the Ancient Greeks and the Ancient Egyptians, but they existed long before all of them."

Why would Mum have a stone seal from eight millenniums ago? Did she leave it for a reason? Or was it just a simple present? It seemed like the more information I found out about this object, the more questions I ended up with.

"Alya, I think we need to look for clues in your mum's stuff," Ben suggested.

"She kept most of her things in her study, but I am not allowed to go in there."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe my dad wants to keep everything as it was."

"Hmm… Or perhaps he is hiding something from you."

I shook my head. "Don't be silly, Dad is the one who gave me the stone cylinder, remember?"

Looking unconvinced, Ben repeated, "Honestly Alya, we need to look in your mum's study."

"Dad would never allow it. He always keeps it locked," I explained.

"Does he need to know?"

I could already tell this was a bad idea. A very dangerous one too.

"When does he leave for golf?" Ben asked. He knew Dad went out to play golf every Saturday.

"Around one p.m."

"Great, that's it then!"

"What do you mean, that's it then?"

"Today is the day!"

"Don't we need a plan?" I protested. Acting randomly, without a clear plan, was not something I was in favour of.

"I just told you the plan! Your dad goes out to play golf, and we sneak into your mum's study."

"What about Aunt Margaret?" I asked. He seemed to have forgotten about her. Aunt Margaret was my grandmother's sister, and whenever my dad was out, she would take care of me. Well, she did when she wasn't sleeping or watching television. For sure, she loved watching movies. Mostly, those old black-and-white ones.

"We will make sure she has plenty of films to watch," Ben said, flashing an enchanting smile. "I need to get supplies, so I will see you around one o'clock, okay?"

Confused, I asked, "What supplies?" Though, I doubted he heard me. Like a shot, Ben rushed out of my room.

I sighed and walked to the window. There he was, already racing down the street on his bike.

A few minutes later, Dad knocked hard on my door. Worried about giving away our plans, I opened it up slowly.

"What was that all about?" he asked, looking very suspicious.

"What do you mean?"

"Why was he here?"

"Oh, you mean Ben?"

"Alya!" Dad shouted. He was annoyed.

"Oh, nothing. He came over so we could work on our science project."

"Science project? Really?" Dad cut me off. "You never mentioned any science projects to me, and why did he run out so fast?"

"He went to get supplies."

"Oh, yeah?" He didn't seem convinced. "What kind of supplies?"

"Well, you know…cables, LED lights, alligator clips, and other stuff."

"What are you making?"

"We are going to create…umm!" In an instant, my mind went blank.

"Yes?" Dad pestered, getting impatient.

"Erm… We are going to create our own robot."

"Right." He sighed deeply. He seemed unconvinced. "Listen, young lady, I don't know what you two are up to, but I am expecting you both to behave yourselves for Aunt Margaret. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I promise," I mumbled. "We will work on our project and give Aunt Margaret no trouble."

"Good," he said, walking towards the door.

I ran after Dad and gave him a loving cuddle. Surprised, he looked at me for a moment and then left the room without a word.

It was almost one o'clock. I must have fallen asleep for a while. Dad's car wasn't in the driveway. He had probably left early. There were some noises coming from the living room. Thundering downstairs, I found Ben watching a film with Aunt Margaret.

She was an odd one, Aunt Margaret. For some unknown reason, her hair was always in curlers, and

her face was always painted all colours of the rainbow. She only wore floor-length, flowery, elegant dresses, mostly with wide velvet belts around her waist. Dad had told me she was once an opera singer—a famous one too.

As soon as she saw me entering the room, Aunt Margaret rushed over and cuddled me as if I was still a toddler.

"Oh, Alya, my beautiful girl. How are you?" she asked, patting and pulling my cheeks in all directions.

"Very well, thank you, Aunt Margaret," I said, trying not to laugh. I told you, she was odd.

"Your friend Ben is a magician! He opened this TV from something called the Internet. Oh, come and see! It has all of my favourite films, and Ben told me you don't even need a disk—you just press a button, and it plays."

Aha! Yes, the Internet. Ben was simply playing his tablet through the television. Nothing to do with magic, it was called technology. I wasn't sure how to explain this to Aunt Margaret though.

My attempts at getting Ben's attention proved pointless. He was too engrossed in the film; whatever it was they were watching.

"We need to work on our science project," I said, trying to drop the hint again.

At last, he received the message, but he didn't move. Annoyed with having to wait for him, as this had happened several times before, I climbed the stairs and stopped in the hallway outside Mum's study. Ben must not have been in the mood to face my anger, because he stood up quickly and followed me.

"We need a key," he said, touching the keyhole on the door.

"Like this?" I grinned as I waved a shiny bronze key in my hand.

"I thought only your dad had the key. How did you get that?"

"It doesn't matter," I said, thinking about the moment I'd removed the key from Dad's pocket while I was giving him a loving hug that morning.

I jammed the key in the lock and turned it right twice, pressing hard against the study door with my shoulder. My hands were shaking like jelly. I didn't have the faintest idea what was behind this door. It was Mum's private space, where she could escape from everything, as she would say. I wasn't allowed in. No one was. It was like a hidden room.

The old, rusty mechanism unlocked the door in no time. Ever curious, I entered the room. Ben followed me, one step behind, looking very nervous.

Opposite us was a tiny oak table, worn with age, and a small wooden chair painted white and tucked neatly underneath. To the right, there was a large purple sofa made of velvet that looked very inviting. The walls behind the sofa were covered with matching oak bookshelves.

"There must be a light switch here somewhere," I said, feeling around on the wall.

This room used to be a bathroom, so maybe it had a cord switch hanging from the ceiling. I moved my arm out in front of me, and there it was, just next to the bookshelf. I pulled the cord gently, instantly turning on the light.

"Where is the window?" I asked, looking around in confusion.

"Why? Should there be one?" Ben asked.

I shook my head. "Unless someone removed it since this morning."

I sat on the purple sofa and carefully scanned the room. Except for the few pieces of furniture and the books, it looked almost empty.

With no intention of giving up, Ben knocked on the wall right above the table, where the window should have been.

"I once saw this in a film," he said. "Some people hide their valuable things behind walls."

"Nonsense," I snapped, dismissing the idea straight away.

"This doesn't feel right!" he exclaimed, tapping the wall with his knuckles.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"It sounds hollow, just like a false wall," Ben said as he pressed his ear against it.

I rolled my hands over the walls, touching one section after another. "It all feels the same," I said.

"Nope! Have you got a hammer, or something like that?"

"Are you crazy? You can't use a hammer! What if you make a hole in the wall? For sure, Dad will know we've been in here."

"We'll put it back."

"Really? How do you intend to do that, Ben?" I asked in disbelief.

"I've got supplies, haven't I?" he replied, pulling some super glue, wrapping paper, and scissors out of his bag.

"You want to cover a hole in the wall with wrapping paper?"

"Do you have any other ideas?" he hissed.

I had none. Ridiculous as the idea might sound, I agreed to give him a chance.

"Wait here," I said firmly, then I rushed to the kitchen to search for something that was both strong and heavy. Turning the drawers and cupboards upside-down, the only thing I could find was a pestle, which was a tool Dad used for crushing garlic in a small bowl called a mortar.

Holding the pestle behind my arms, I checked on Aunt Margaret. She had fallen asleep on the sofa. The television was still on, giving off enough noise to block out any sound Ben and I would make upstairs. I tiptoed back up to Mum's room.

"Here you go," I said, passing the pestle to Ben.

He looked puzzled. "What is this?" he asked.

"A pestle. Dad uses it for crushing garlic."

Ben shook the pestle a few times and struck the wall, right above the table. Nothing happened. It didn't leave even a single mark.

"Let me try," I said, grabbing the pestle from his hands. "One…two…three…here we go!" I thumped at the wall.

No sound, no mark, no hole.

"Hey, wait a minute," Ben said in a bossy voice. "Bring me the torch from my bag."

This was not a good time to argue. I quickly handed over the torch and watched him in curiosity.

"Look!" he remarked, pointing at a small round mark on the wall.

"It's just an old mark."

"No, not that," he said, pleased to find something before me. "See this? It's round and looks almost the exact size of your stone cylinder."

Looking closely, I touched the spot he was pointing at. The mark on the rough, crumbling wall seemed to be a hole after all, and it was a similar size to my stone cylinder, just as Ben described.

"Where is your cylinder?" he asked impatiently.

"Here." I pulled the stone out of my pocket.

Ben pressed the stone cylinder on the round mark. With a clanking noise, the tiny object slotted inside the hole. It then spun around clockwise, exactly three times. A few seconds of silence were followed by an old, rusty, mechanical sound.

Suddenly, a small door above the table opened wide, and then a purple backpack fell onto the table.

"What's happening?" I gasped, taking a few steps back.

Ben stood there in astonishment, looking as if he had seen a ghost.

The backpack was very ordinary. Not too small, not too large. I was unsure about the material it was made from—it felt hard and looked strong. There was a circular hole right in the middle, and just above it, a little rectangular-shaped label with unusual symbols on it, like the ones that had appeared on my stone cylinder.

I trudged towards the bag and moved my fingers around it, trying to feel for an opening. But there were no handles, no zips, and no buttons.

"How do you open this thing?" Ben asked, looking startled.

"The cylinder," I said, pointing to the stone cylinder that was still on the wall.

Ben quickly reached for the cylinder and forced it through the circular hole in the middle of the bag. It didn't work. I pressed my finger down on the round shape. *Oh no*, it was stuck!

Ben held the bag secure while I pulled in the opposite direction. My finger gently turned inside the

cylinder, glowing like a candle. There was a short click, and then the backpack opened wide.

There were only four objects in the bag. A shiny pair of glasses that looked a bit like the virtual reality glasses I remembered trying on at school, when we were learning about Ancient Greece in our history lesson. It was like stepping into a time machine and visiting a place from the past.

Below the glasses was a brown leather notebook that had symbols on it exactly like the ones on my cylinder. It was worn-out around the edges. Then, a metal watch—but this one was empty, with no numbers or dials on its face. It looked like a metal flower.

Next to the watch, there was a celestial belt. It was identical to the one we had seen at the British Museum. Only, this was a smaller version.

Gently, I removed the glasses from the bag.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! What are you doing?" Ben asked, trying to guess my next move.

"I want to try them on," I said.

"Don't do it!" he shouted.

Too late. I was already wearing them.

Strange. There was no clip and no attachments. The glasses simply glided onto my face, turning on

automatically with a beeping sound, and glowing blue at the same time.

"What do you see?" Ben asked, keen to find out more.

"Umm, it looks just like a tablet," I replied with excitement. "There are so many icons."

"Icons?"

"Yeah, like the app icons on our smartphones and tablets."

Shifting the index finger on my right hand, I touched an icon with a cup of tea and a cake on it. First, I heard a faint electrical hum in the background. Then, the noise of chopping, kneading, and mixing, followed by the delicious smell of freshly baked something. Finally, the beeping sound of an oven.

Wow! A blueberry muffin and a cup of tea appeared by the backpack.

"What did you do?" Ben screamed.

"I guess I clicked the afternoon tea icon!"

"What? Cool!" Ben grabbed the muffin. "What else can you do?"

"I don't know! So many things… This one says, 'Fly.'"

"What do you mean, 'Fly?'"

Within a second of clicking the 'Fly' icon, I flew up and up, until my head hit the ceiling.

Disoriented, I lost my balance and crashed back to the floor. Ben thought it was funny. I certainly did not.

I wanted to do something to impress him. The icon with a picture of a person running read, 'Action Mode.' That sounded exciting. As soon as I clicked it, someone spoke.

"Action mode cannot be activated. Please put your belt on."

"Who is talking?" I yelled.

"Not me," Ben answered in a trembling voice.

"Okay, stay calm," I said, trying to figure it out.

"I am the one who talked," the strange voice said. "I am Kim. Please put your belt on."

"Who are you? Show yourself!" I demanded.

"I am not a person; I am an AI. This is the last warning, your belt is not on," the voice said.

"What is an AI?" I asked.

"It stands for 'Artificial Intelligence.' I am a computer program."

"Like my apps?" Ben asked.

"I can think and learn like you!" Kim the AI said.

"But you are not a human?"

"No. I am a virtual assistant, and I am programmed to experience human emotions," the AI replied. "Your belt is not on. The system will shut down in thirty seconds."

"Okay, Ben, help me put the belt on!" I shrieked. "Be quick about it!"

Ben placed the belt on my waist, and in a flash, small metal pieces in all different colours started to move around. They covered my whole body, even my head.

"That is incredible!" Ben yelped in excitement, jumping around.

"Huh?"

"Can't you see?"

"See what?" I asked.

He took his glasses off. "Look," he said, touching at the glass.

"Holy crickets!" Somehow, I had transformed into a metal girl, wearing purple and silver tiny metal pieces all over my body.

"Meeting with the director in two minutes," Kim the AI announced.

Before I could ask who, something threw me into a cosmic wormhole, filled with energy particles moving as fast as the speed of light. My whole body was shaking with powerful vibrations. It was so loud, I doubted anyone could hear my screams.

It was hard to say how long this went on. Possibly only a few seconds. At the end of the path, I

dropped onto the floor of a room. Someone slowly removed the VR glasses and the belt from me. I tried to force my eyes open but only a few dark, shadowy figures came into sight.

"Take her to the stabilisation room," a worried voice said.

We passed through corridors filled with stale air and the smell of disinfectant. *A hospital. That's it!* I was in a hospital. Yet the room looked like a computer lab. Someone or something was connecting cables to my head, arms, and legs. I could barely move. I gasped for air. On my right was a giant robot, just like the one I had seen on my space journey. *Could this be…?* I bit my lips to stop myself from screaming its name.

"Hello, Alya," said the faint shadow on my left. "I see you have found your mum's bag," he continued as he approached.

"What happened? Where am I?" I asked.

"Rest now, you are safe. We'll talk another time," the familiar voice said, leaving me alone with the friendly robot.

Chapter Four

Decoding the cosmic code

I woke to the sound of my dad muttering furiously under his breath, but I couldn't quite make out what he was saying. Ben was standing at my feet, next to Aunt Margaret, with a face paler than new-fallen snow.

I gazed across the room with sleepy eyes. There was no trace of the robot, Mum's backpack, or the shadow of the person with a familiar voice—all of them had vanished. Confused by my last memory, I rubbed my arms and head, trying to break free of the cables.

Strange. Nothing was hanging from my body.

"What's wrong with Alya?" Ben asked in a numb voice, watching me wave my hands like a lunatic.

Dad shrugged his narrow shoulders. "You tell me. Weren't you with her?"

Ben looked uncomfortable. He could never tell a lie. He dodged Dad's frown by dropping his eyes to stare at a mark on the wooden floor.

Gathering all my strength, I finally flung myself up onto my feet. It was a struggle to keep my balance steady, but I stayed upright for a few seconds before the entire world started to spin. *Best to take care*, I told myself. The warning came too late. With a cry, I tumbled to the ground.

Dad lifted me gently back onto the bed. "I told you to stay away from that room!" He rolled his eyes. "So, what did you find?"

I couldn't think of anything to say. Instead, I lifted my head to see Ben. He was still at my feet, eyes on the floor as if he was merely thinking.

"Right," Dad said, realising our conversation was going nowhere. He stood up and walked out of the room. Aunt Margaret followed.

As soon as the door closed behind them, I sat up on the bed and crossed my legs, taking a deep breath. After pausing for a few seconds, I swept my gaze across the room in search of the purple backpack we'd found in Mum's study. When I realised it was gone, my brown eyes grew big, and my cheeks flushed red with fear.

"Ugh!" I exclaimed loudly.

"Shh!" hushed Ben. As if reading my thoughts, he went on his knees and pulled the backpack out from under the bed. "Here. I wanted to keep it safe for you," he said, placing the bag on top of the covers.

I opened it up by pushing my finger through the hole in the middle. Only the metal bracelet and the old leather book were inside. No sign of the belt, VR glasses, or my stone cylinder.

"What happened?"

"What happened!" Ben exclaimed, surprised by my question. "Don't you remember?"

"I remember being in a room full of computers, then something attached cables all over my body."

"Really?"

"Yeah," I answered, "and after that, I opened my eyes in here to find all of you staring at me. How did I get here?"

"You remember turning into that robot thing?"

I nodded.

"Well, not very long after that, a tunnel appeared in your mum's room. It was full of sparkling lights, like a passageway made of energy particles."

"I remember gliding through a tunnel."

"You disappeared for three full hours, Alya. I was so worried, I had to call your Aunt for help, and she called your dad."

"You, *what*?" I roared. He must have lost his mind!

"He knew it, Alya. They all knew what was in the room, even your Aunt."

"Shut up!" I could feel the anger rising inside me.

"Your dad asked if we found anything in your mum's room. I told him no, but I don't think he believed me."

My last memories gave me a sudden burst of inspiration. "Silly me, I should have thought of it!"

"Of what?" Ben asked.

"I need to get to the British Museum," I growled.

"Why? What's going on?"

There were times like this when I wanted to tell Ben everything but I didn't want to frighten him any more than I already had. Besides, right now, we had no time to lose.

"I need to speak with Mr. Benson," I said in a mysterious way.

"The gentleman from the British Museum?"

"Yes."

"Why do you need to speak with him?"

"He took something that belonged to me."

"What?"

I jumped off the bed and crossed over to my window. Opening it up, I glanced back at Ben, who was still standing near the bed looking fearful. I hesitated for a moment, then slithered down the tree outside like a snake, just as I had done hundreds of times before.

"Alya! Wait for me!" Ben begged, hopping onto a branch too. Ben Wilson did not like heights, not even a few metres above the ground. "Aaahhhh!" he screamed, red patches covering his arms and face where spiky thorns from the tree branches scratched him.

It was getting dark. The moon was barely visible behind the evening fog, and the sky looked empty without any shining stars. Dad would probably call me downstairs for dinner any minute now and find out I wasn't in my room. I didn't care. Not one bit. Not when I was so close to finding out some answers.

Ben caught up with me just as I arrived at the bus stop. "How are we going to get on a bus without an adult?" he asked, panting for breath.

"We'll find one." I winked at him and quickly reached for a lady who was about to get on. She was wearing a blue velvet coat with large pockets, which I grabbed hold of and tried to act natural.

The bus driver smiled. *Yay!* We were on. Following the lady, I sat on the seat directly behind her and stared out of the window at the houses on both sides of the street, stop after stop, while Ben sat beside me looking nervous.

Soon after, "The next stop is the British Museum," said the digital voice coming through the speakers.

We jumped out of our seats and hopped off when the bus came to a stop opposite the museum entrance. There wasn't much time—it would be closing in one hour. Just like on the bus, Ben and I attached ourselves to a group of strangers and entered the museum easily. No one even noticed.

Once we were in, I walked straight up to the information desk and asked the person behind it, "Do you know where Mr. Benson is?"

"You mean, the director?"

"Director? Oh—yes, that is what I meant." I tried not to smile. I remembered the moment when I travelled through the energy tunnel to meet the director after clicking the action button on the VR glasses.

"He's usually in his basement office."

"Thank you," I said and ran swiftly downstairs, dashing and pushing people out of the way. Ben struggled to keep up.

The sign on the basement door read, 'Museum Staff Only: No unauthorised access.' I ignored the warning. Ben wanted to protest, but after the look I gave him, he abandoned the idea quickly.

We stepped into the basement room, which was crowded with shelves full of books. Mr. Benson was behind a large desk, looking at some papers with his magnifying glass. Aki the robot was towering above him. He immediately noticed me.

"What? How did you get in here?" he screamed, scanning the room like an owl.

My eyes caught sight of the stone cylinder on his desk. "Is that mine?" I asked.

In a panic, he said, "Yes! Yes, it is. I was going to return it to you. I think you must have dropped it when you visited the museum with your class."

"Nope!" I answered, knowing exactly when he took the cylinder. "You took that from me today, Director Benson," I insisted.

Mr. Benson tried to deny it. "You are mistaken!"

"Did you come here again today, after the school trip?" Ben asked, looking puzzled.

I nodded my head, staring hard at Mr. Benson's face. He was about to reply when Aki the space robot made an unusual scratching sound. With a shocked face, it said something that sounded like, "I-me-am-du."

"You've been followed!" Mr. Benson exclaimed. "I knew you would invite unwanted attention."

"You didn't say who from," I protested.

"Okay, go with Aki."

"Aren't you coming too?" I asked.

Mr. Benson pulled a backpack from a drawer under his table, just like the one we found in Mum's room. "Please, go now. I will explain everything later!" he cried.

Ben and I ran after Aki the robot. I could see Mr. Benson in the distance, transformed into a metal person. He was a human robot just like I had been, only he was green, not purple. Opposite him, another

robot appeared—a nasty-looking one, coloured red and gold.

"I wish Mum's bag was here, so I could help him," I mumbled.

"Yeah." Ben smirked. "If it was, you could make afternoon tea. A cup of tea and a muffin sure would be a great help."

I clenched my teeth and gave him a fiery look. "Just shut up, Ben!" He looked slightly worried, avoiding my flashing eyes that gave the promise of payback later.

"Shhh!" Aki said, taking us to a room that looked like the computer lab from my last visit. In the corner was the bed where they attached cables to me. The room was full of screens streaming live videos from security cameras all around the museum. One screen showed Mr. Benson fighting against the wicked human robot with the red helmet and golden belt.

Mr. Benson flew up in the air and flung the evil human robot onto a table. It quickly stood up and threw arrows made of some sort of energy. Ten arrows altogether. Luckily, Mr. Benson ducked down, avoiding the deadly weapons. He made circular movements with his fingers, creating a force, then

hurled it at the chest of the red and gold robot. It crashed into the wall and then dropped to the floor.

I was so glued to the fight that I didn't notice Aki the robot leaving the room. He appeared on another screen, jumping between two hideous creatures. They looked like something in-between a troll and a goblin, with shiny green eyes and short silver wings. The creatures were no more than one metre tall, quite chunky around their upper body, and seemed to have very long, spiky ears. Their noses were the most striking thing about them. They had not two, but three very large nostrils, and just below the middle nostril was a thin-lipped mouth with a permanent smirk.

Ben and I moved our eyes between the two computer screens, watching Mr. Benson and Aki fighting bravely. The evil human robot threw a handful of tiny metal pieces in the air. The small metal particles transformed into metal chains as they wrapped around Mr. Benson's legs, holding him on the ground. The evil human robot moved towards Mr. Benson's desk. Was it after my stone cylinder?

"We need to help him!" I said, already running for the door.

"We?" Ben screamed. "I'll stay here and monitor everything."

No time to think, I grabbed a few books from the shelves and threw them at the evil human robot. It quickly turned towards me, giving Mr. Benson just enough time to escape the metal chains. He tossed some gold marbles onto the ground, and straight away, they turned into gigantic mechanical spiders and jumped onto the evil human robot.

The evil robot's long legs booted one spider with a powerful kick. Before any more of them could climb up, the robot shouted, "Open portal!" and touched a metal bracelet on its left arm. A passageway opened up, and the wicked human robot escaped quickly, along with the two ugly creatures that had come with it.

"Are you all okay?" asked Mr. Benson.

I nodded my head.

"Let's go to the stabilisation room. It's safer there," he said, walking towards the room where Ben was waiting still in shock.

"Alya?" Mr. Benson called. "I know you have many questions, but we'd better get you home before your dad calls the police."

"No!" I protested, refusing to leave without some answers.

"You need to be patient," he sighed. "Think about Ben. His family must be so worried. And just look at him. He is still trembling."

"But…" I started.

Mr. Benson made a stop sign with his hands, then asked Aki to bring my belt and VR glasses. I knew he had taken them from me!

"This weekend, I will take you to see the one who can give the answers you seek," he said.

I nodded sadly. "Are we going home through the tunnel?" I asked, hoping the answer would be yes, as I really wanted to show Ben.

"No," Mr. Benson said. "We are taking the bus."

Ben was disappointed. So was I.

I thought Dad would go mad with us when we arrived home, but to my surprise, he didn't. He just whispered something private to Mr. Benson and Aunt Margaret. I wished I could hear whatever they were saying.

"Bye, Alya," Mr. Benson said as he walked towards the front door. "I will come and see you this Saturday. Until then, I will look after your stone cylinder, okay?"

There was no point in arguing. I nodded my head, desperate for Saturday to arrive fast.

Chapter Five

I, Enki

The clock had just struck ten a.m. when an old Rolls Royce pulled into our driveway, shining blue like the sky. It was Mr. Benson, struggling to park his oversized car in the narrow space below my bedroom window. Growing impatient, I ran out to see him, and Ben followed behind.

After several disappointing attempts, Mr. Benson did a perfect job at parking, then got out of his car and beamed at us cheerfully.

"Good morning folks," he greeted us. "How are you today?"

"Can we go now?" I said quickly, desperate to meet the very important person he had mentioned.

"Calm down, young lady. We have plenty of time," Mr. Benson said with a chuckle.

Irritated by my manners, Dad gave me a stern look. To be honest, I couldn't have cared less.

"Is he coming too?" Mr. Benson asked, looking at Ben.

I nodded and climbed into the back seat, half-dragging Ben with me.

"Yes, I thought that would be the case," he said with a smile on his face.

It took a while to travel through the narrow streets of London, full of potholes in all shapes and sizes. It was like riding a roller coaster, each bump shaking everything out of our stomachs. *Here comes breakfast. Yellow and green, with the smell of blue cheese…*

Pretty soon, we reached beautiful countryside surrounded by rolling hills, where we passed through lots of small villages with thatched cottages. Tall trees in many shades of green and brown curved over the roads, tightly hugging each other. Slowly, the fresh smell of cow poo replaced the putrid scent of vomit.

Ben leaned against the car window, repeating the names of the places we passed by.

"Basingstoke… Are we going to Winchester?" he asked.

"No," Mr. Benson said.

"That's a shame, it has a grand old cathedral."

"What's a cathedral?" I asked.

"It is like a big church, I guess."

"Andover."

"Stonehenge! The prehistoric standing stone circle. We're going to Stonehenge!" Ben screamed, his eyes full of excitement.

But he was wrong. Mr. Benson ignored the signpost for Stonehenge and drove right past it. Ben looked rather disappointed.

We drove for a few minutes along the road, then stopped by two old oak trees, which towered over the car. Mr. Benson scanned the area quickly, as if he was expecting someone. It seemed very suspicious. After that, he touched the metal bracelet on his right arm against a circular mark on the tree trunk to our left.

There were distant sounds of a bang and a beep, a click and a creak, and then a road appeared out of nowhere, rising up out of the ground and into the air. It was so uneven, it felt like the car was performing a wobbly dance routine.

We stopped sharp inside a huge place with very thick, tall walls built of sandstone, and sky-high columns you would usually see in ancient cities. Four soldiers wearing copper helmets and heavy felt cloaks

were waiting for us. They carried short spears with glowing blue lights and rectangular metal shields.

The soldiers led us through the sloping, snake-like corridors, out into a hall at least ten times larger than our school. In the distance, a giant with massive wings was sitting on a throne that shone like the

morning sun, wearing a long white tunic with strange gold patterns.

He had a metal flower bracelet, one on each arm, just like the one I saw in Mum's backpack. The same bracelet Mr. Benson and the evil-looking robot person had. His long beard was braided into an unusual shape. I couldn't help but wonder if this was a human or some other creature.

"Kneel," said the small figure standing next to the giant. "You are in the presence of Lord Enki."

He wanted to continue, but the giant creature with wings moved his hand up and stopped him abruptly.

"I, Enki," said the giant. "Lord of Earth and beyond, ruler of the sea, and the saver of humanity." After that, he looked in Mr. Benson's direction and said, "Welcome, Adama of Ki. What news do you bring, and who are these small Ki people?"

"My lord Enki, this is, umm…"

"Alya. Alya the sky girl," Ben interrupted.

"Sky Girl, you say?"

"Yes, your lord. Sorry, my lord." Ben was fearful.

"And you?"

"Oh! I am… I am Ben."

"Ben the…?"

"Just Ben, my lord."

"Okay, Just Ben, why are you here?"

Ben shuffled on his feet and gave me a worried glance as he said, "No, my lord, my name is just Ben."

"That's what I said."

"But—"

Growing impatient, Mr. Benson hissed at him, "Shh! Stop talking."

"But he got my name wrong!"

"Be quiet and let me do the talking."

"Tell me, Adama of Ki, why are you here?"

Mr. Benson stepped forward. "My lord, this is Alya, daughter of Elsa."

"Elsa?" Lord Enki said, looking confused. "I did not know she had a child."

"Yes, my lord, she kept it a secret."

"A secret?" Lord Enki growled like thunder.

Picking his words with care, Mr. Benson answered, "To protect her, my lord."

"And why have you brought her here now?"

"She has the genetic code and a Seal of Gate," Mr. Benson said, reaching his hand out. My stone cylinder was in his palm.

"Is that so?" Lord Enki asked, grabbing the cylinder from him.

"What genetic code? What is th—?"

Before I could finish my sentence, Lord Enki's gigantic head appeared next to mine, and he quickly pushed one of his sharp nails into my arm. A few drops of my blood landed on a small glass plate, which had some sort of circuit board inside.

"Screen," said the small servant who stood next to Lord Enki.

A large digital display like the one on my tablet opened in front of him. The servant put the glass plate close to the display and then clicked on some icons. After several bleeps and bloops, letters and numbers appeared on the screen. Lord Enki and his servant's eyes grew bigger and bigger. They seemed to be very pleased.

"Leave us," Lord Enki ordered.

Ben wanted to refuse, but Mr Benson dragged him out of the room.

"Alya the Sky Girl, daughter of Elsa," he said.

"Yes," I said in my quietest voice.

"Come closer."

I hesitated. Could I trust this giant?

"No need to be afraid. I will not harm you," he said. "Tell me about your mother."

"She was very kind," I said. "Kind to everyone."

"What else?"

"She died in a traffic accident." Tears started to roll down my cheeks.

"Maybe," Enki mumbled, then he stood to look at the screen. "Did she tell you about what she did?"

"No." I shook my head.

"Did she mention the word Pathmaker?"

"No, she did not."

"Hmm!" Lord Enki turned to activate a digital display that was showing a simulation of the Galaxy. "She was one of the twelve Pathmakers chosen by me," he began. "Their duty was to carry messages from the people of Earth to their loved ones on other planets, where the soul of every living creature goes to after its journey on Earth ends. She was a gifted scientist who could code a journey for every single path you can think of, even the most difficult ones."

I remembered the odd-looking lady at the British Museum who had told us a similar story.

"This is not the first time you have heard this?"

I shook my head. "No. There was a lady at the British Museum. She told us about the celestial belt."

"Yes, you met Gaya," Lord Enki explained with a nod. "You must keep away from her."

"Why? Who is she? Why do I feel like I know her from somewhere?"

"It does not matter!" Lord Enki said, then he continued after a short pause. "Each Pathmaker had a bag of tools to travel between planets. A celestial belt, a pair of mind glasses, the bracelet of I-me, and a Book of Code."

"And a stone cylinder too?" I asked in curiosity.

"Yes, two of them. The Seal of Gate, and the Seal of Path."

"I have only one."

"That is because all of the stone cylinders were taken from the Pathmakers by my brother. Your mother hid her Seal of Gate, but her Seal of Path was stolen by Gaya."

"Why? I don't get it."

"Gaya was a Pathmaker once. A great one."

"Was?" I repeated.

"Yes," Lord Enki said, "until she decided to serve my brother, Enlil."

The great Lord of Earth stared at the stone cylinder in his hands. His face suddenly filled with anger and began to turn purple.

"IGIBALA!" he raged.

I wasn't sure what that meant, but it didn't sound nice at all.

"A long time ago, I was the chief scientist of my planet, and I was trusted with writing the code to create paths to other planets. My brother, Enlil, was so desperate to conquer the other planets, but he needed the stone cylinders and a knowledge of how to write code before he could. The belt only fully works if it has the two stone cylinders slotted into it, just like the many ships on my planet."

"What do they do?" I asked.

"The seals are like compilers. They transfer the code from the Book of Code into the celestial belt, so it can work. The Seals of Gate activate the correct portal for a journey."

"And the Seals of Path?"

"The Seals of Path set the correct code for the journey to a planet."

"And how are you supposed to know which planet someone would go to?"

"Each person is ruled by a planet based on their birthday. You need to look on the celestial belt and match the birth date to its ruling planet."

In truth, I didn't understand what he meant. It all sounded very, very complicated.

"So, does that mean, with only one seal, I won't be able to travel to my mum's planet?"

Lord Enki shook his head. "No. I'm afraid not, but you could use it for travelling to different locations on Earth.

The thought of never seeing my mum again flooded my eyes with tears.

"Don't worry, I have a Seal of Path," Lord Enki announced, wiping the tears from my eyes. "But first, we need to find it."

This enormous person did not seem very scary anymore. Underneath his fierce look, he had a gentle, caring, and loving heart. Lord Enki smiled and summoned everyone back into the room. Ben quickly ran towards me.

"You okay?" he asked.

I nodded, yes. "Where is the Seal of Path then?" I looked at Lord Enki anxiously.

"I gave it to my beautiful Delondra," the Lord of Earth answered.

"Who is Delondra?" I asked.

"Delondra? Oh, she was tall and majestic, my elegant Delondra."

"I thought your wife was called Lanu, not Delondra? That's what Gaya told us."

Lord Enki's servant started to giggle, and Mr. Benson gave me a nudge with his elbow.

"Delondra was my trusted friend," Lord Enki explained. "She was strong, kind, and always loyal."

"Was…?"

"Yes. Delondra passed into the Underworld a long time ago. I had to escape from my brother, so I gave one of my cylinder seals, the Seal of Path, to her. She offered me her services so willingly, and for that reason, her soul is stuck on Ki forever."

"She must be a very brave person," I said.

Lord Enki's servant could not keep a straight face. He continued to giggle beside us.

"Yes, very brave. In fact, she was the bravest Titanosaurus of all…" Lord Enki sighed.

"Titanosaurus?" I repeated. "What is that?"

Ben needed no help to answer this question. He knew nearly everything about dinosaurs.

"The Titanosaurus is an herbivore, around one hundred and twenty feet tall. It weighs approximately seventy tons," he replied, feeling very knowledgeable. "They had tiny necks, large nostrils, and tails like whips. Oh! And tiny, pencil-like teeth."

"Okay… So, Delondra was a dinosaur?" I asked, and the others nodded like it was obvious. "Well, why are we talking about her right now?"

"Because I fed my Seal of Path to Delondra, and she swallowed it," Lord Enki said.

Finally, it was starting to make sense. "Is she still alive?" I asked.

"No, but once we know where she is, we can get a hold of the cylinder. It must have been buried with her bones."

"Where is she?" I asked. "In England?"

"We don't know," Mr. Benson answered.

"So, why don't you search for her?" Ben asked.

"Lord Enki is not allowed to travel to Earth. It is by order of his father, Lord Anu," Mr. Benson said.

"Yes." Lord Enki nodded sadly. "I am bound to stay on my planet, never to leave under any circumstances."

"But you are not on your planet, you are on Earth!" I pointed out.

"This is an intergalactic portal for space travel. Like an international airport, anyone can visit and stay here, but your location must be known, and you must have a ticket to enter," Mr. Benson said.

"A ticket?"

"Yes." Mr. Benson pointed at his bracelet.

"Well, Lord Enki is a VIP guest after all. He is the son of Anu and the Lord of Earth, so he can stay at any portal for as long as he likes, but he cannot leave the portal," Lord Enki's servant added.

"What about you?" I asked, looking at Mr. Benson. "Why can't you search for Delondra?"

"The moment I move, Lord Anu will become suspicious," Mr. Benson explained. "He knows I serve Lord Enki. Besides, Gaya watches me all the time, and I have no doubt she will inform her master, Enlil, right away."

"Basically, we need someone else to get the seal for us," the servant cried.

"Couldn't your soldiers find it?" Ben asked.

"No. If someone without a Pathmaker's DNA touches a cylinder, it will explode into thousands of pieces," Mr. Benson said.

"Yes… Something didn't feel right when I touched it before." Ben stretched his palm out to show us where the stone cylinder had left a red mark. "What about Alya? You said she has her mum's DNA, so that must mean she could look for it?"

"No, she can't." Lord Enki shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Because she is not a Pathmaker."

"With a little adjustment, we could train her—"

Lord Enki stopped his servant before he could finish his sentence.

"Train me to do what?" I asked.

"Train you to become a Pathmaker," Mr. Benson said, glancing between the servant and Lord Enki.

"It would take years to train her, and we haven't got years," Lord Enki said.

"I can do it!" I exclaimed. I was quite excited at the idea of becoming a Pathmaker like Mum. "I want to try. Please?"

"It is not up to us," Mr. Benson said. "Your dad has to sign the agreement."

"What?"

"He is right." Lord Enki sighed. "Your dad has to approve the decision first, or you can't join the Pathmaker Academy."

"Forget it," I said, knowing Dad would never let me do anything that meant I could have fun—and this really sounded fun!

"We will see," Mr. Benson finished. "But we need to go now."

"Go? But I haven't finished my questions!" I was about to argue more, but I abandoned the idea quickly when I saw the soldiers running towards us.

"Goodbye, Alya the Sky Girl," Lord Enki said before flying off in his golden sky disc. "We will meet again."

"Goodbye." I waved to him.

We followed the same path home. Ben fell asleep instantly. I felt so hungry that even the soggy custard cakes we got with our school lunches seemed inviting. I was glad we'd had a chance to meet Lord Enki. At least some of my questions were answered. Still, many more questions stirred in my mind.

"Where is Ki?" I asked, curious after hearing the name mentioned many times today.

"Ki is the name the Sumerians gave to Earth," Mr. Benson replied, checking the sky constantly. Suddenly, "Heads down!" Mr. Benson shouted with a distressed look on his face, turning us away from the huge power balls that landed with a loud explosion near the car.

"What was that?" Ben screamed.

"Gaya!" Mr. Benson answered. "She doesn't give up."

"Where is your Pathmaker kit?" I asked, hoping he would turn into a human robot and save us again.

"It's in my office," he replied, driving in zigzags to avoid Gaya's power balls.

"Maybe you should carry it with you, especially when you know a crazy lady is after you?"

"No, that would only make it easier for her to find me. She can read the signals from a Pathmaker."

As he had finished his sentence, another power ball hit the front window of our car and exploded into hundreds of arrows of energy.

"What are we going to do?" Ben asked. He was frightened. So was I.

"Don't worry," Mr Benson said, "I activated the energy shield around the car, so nothing can pass through."

Gaya and her helpers kept throwing power balls, but luckily, they all bounced off the energy shield. Next, she threw a cable that looked like it was made of energy at the back of the car, aiming just below the boot. She was trying to attach the car to her ship that was sailing high in the sky! Gaya tried once, twice, and finally achieved it on her third attempt. Our car was

pulled with such force that Mr. Benson struggled to drive forward.

"Keep your heads down!" he shouted again, but this time, he sounded worried.

Not very far away, balls of light appeared in the sky and began moving towards us, very fast.

"Yes!" Mr. Benson looked in his left mirror, rather pleased. "Just in time!"

Puzzled, Ben, and I glanced at each other.

Gaya detached the energy cable from Mr. Benson's car and flew upwards, away from the light balls. Soon, it became clear to us that these were not light balls. They were Lord Enki's soldiers in their golden sky chariots, chasing after Gaya and her ugly accomplices. The soldiers were pulled by giant horses, not real ones, specially designed by Lord Enki. They looked like robots. The large wheels of the chariots had sharp spears sticking out on both sides.

The shiny, pointed spear from a soldier at the front dug directly into the metal wing of one of Gaya's helpers, causing it to tumble down faster than raindrops from a cloud.

"Pathetic!" Gaya shouted, flying down to pull her helper up seconds before it crashed into a tree. "Aim at their eyes, you morons!" she ordered. She

meant the eyes of the horses. That must be the only way to stop them.

Her helpers were bad at hitting their targets. Besides, Lord Enki's soldiers were very skilful at driving their chariots, turning and ducking at exactly the right moment. The shiny sky chariots circled around Gaya. Her helpers started running away.

"Come back, you cowards!" she screamed, but it was too late—they had already left.

Gaya flew upwards and touched the metal flower on her left wrist. It opened a path that reached high into the clouds where her ship was docked. She threw some purple dust into the air to create a fog. The dust smelled funny and made it hard to see anything. Before the soldiers could reach her, Gaya's ship sailed into the portal and disappeared, just like that, with her helpers left clinging to the ship's side.

Mr. Benson and the soldiers did not look bothered. It was like they didn't really want to catch her. The soldiers in their shiny sky chariots stopped in front of our car and saluted us, then they slowly disappeared above the skyline.

Ben and I grinned at each other, pleased with our defeat. *Phew.* It was a close call.

We arrived home safe, in time for dinner. After we finished eating, Mr. Benson and Dad went into Dad's study together, so that Mr. Benson could ask for permission to train me up as a Pathmaker. Ben and I sat on the floor outside the room, waiting for them to come back out and give us the bad news. Super tired, I nodded off instantly.

"Alya, he agreed," said a voice.

"Who? What?" I mumbled sleepily.

"Your dad. He's letting you join the Pathmaker Academy!"

"Ben, what are you doing in my dream?"

He laughed. "No, I'm not in your dream, Alya. I'm right here, next to you."

I opened my eyes to find Ben, Mr. Benson, Aunt Margaret, and Dad, all smiling down at me.

"So, I'm going to be a—?"

"Oh, yes!" Ben interrupted, as excited as me. "You're going to become a Pathmaker, Alya! Alya the Pathmaker."

Chapter Six

PM Academy

My mouth fell open in surprise when we arrived at Ki Two International Space Station. Oddly enough, it was Mr. Benson's office at the British Museum. He was sitting behind a large wooden desk piled high with books that were covered in purple dust and smelled unfamiliar. It looked identical to the dust Gaya had used to escape from Lord Enki's soldiers.

Ben and Aki the space robot were moving stacks of books from one side of the room to the other, five or six at a time.

"At last!" Ben said when he saw me, dropping the dusty pile of books on the floor. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," I said, thinking about Aunt Margaret, who had taken two long hours to pack one small piece of luggage. It was a mystery how she piled so many clothes into a such tiny suitcase, plus her shoes, and

don't forget the tea bags. They were the first item on her list when travelling.

"Preparations are in full swing for our journey," Mr. Benson said, opening his slightly worn Book of Code. Carefully, he scribbled something onto a page in a pen that glowed like gold and made an occasional beeping sound. "To activate the gateway, you need to enter the correct script," he said, checking the code repeatedly as he read it out loud.

Define Portal
Wait until The Book of Code is open
Go to Lat: 51.5194° N Long: 0.1270° W
Point towards British Museum
If touching the ground
    Ensemble energy path
    Wait for 5 seconds
    Drop London Underground seats
If touching I-me bracelet
    Initialise Portal
    Wait for 20 seconds
    Open Portal

"It's just a book," I said when he'd finished reading through it.

"Just a book?" Mr. Benson snapped. "It is the Book of Code! It helps us to write scripts that can

change the destiny of the world, even the destiny of the universe."

"Really? How does that work?"

"It's only made of paper, isn't it?" asked Ben.

"Yes, but it is a special paper. It comes from a planet far away from our world, home to a civilisation much more advanced than ours."

Not convinced, I asked with a frown, "What's so special about it?"

"It functions just like your tablet," Mr. Benson said, pulling the leather cover apart. "Look closely. Hidden inside is a sophisticated computer."

"Wow!" Ben said, impressed.

Mr. Benson closed the book and held the flower-shaped metal bracelet on his wrist against the centre of the back cover, only for five seconds.

"Did you just use your I-me bracelet like an ID card to log on to your computer?" I asked.

He nodded gently and put his Book of Code in the pocket of his old-fashioned tweed jacket. "Yes. I authorised the code to work through the main computer in the Pathmaker Control Centre. As it turns out, I haven't got a stone cylinder to activate a portal for our journey. I have to use this temporary

solution for now, whenever I travel to Pathmaker Academy."

"And if the code is correct, the portal will open."

"Precisely!" Mr. Benson replied. "That should happen anytime now."

A circular energy field that reached far above the clouds assembled in front of us. Millions of tiny particles in all different shapes and colours poured down like grains of sand.

"What just happened?" Ben asked in shock.

"I sped up the electrons to radiate energy in the form of protons, so that I could trap some of them and create an electromagnetic field."

That sounded super confusing. I frowned and asked, "Electromagnetic field? Why?"

"That's the only way we can protect our spaceship from the sun's radiation when we're in the Earth's atmosphere, and the cosmic radiation during our mission in space."

"Did you just say we're travelling into space? And…and…in a spaceship?" Ben yelled, jumping around the room in an excited frenzy.

Puzzled by his reaction, I said, "We are at a space station." Clearly, no one had told Ben anything about

the journey. I didn't know much either. It was a secret location in space, that's what I was told.

"Prepare to board the spaceship," Mr. Benson said, looking at Ben with a big, beaming smile.

"What ship?" I asked. There wasn't one in sight.

Pointing at the sky, he said, "Up there."

"And how do you suppose we get up there? Fly?" Aunt Margaret, who had been silent all morning, asked in a huff.

"Well, you could say that," Mr. Benson replied, staring up at the funky-looking seats dropping from the top of the energy field, one for each of us. They were all in bright colours and made of thick corduroy fabric, soft and comfy, like the seats on the London Underground. *Hold on*, the sign on the headrest reminded me of something…

"Is this—?"

"Yes, for many years, the transport service between our portals and the passenger ships have been operated by the London Underground," Mr. Benson said, answering my thoughts. "The service is flawless. It rarely breaks down," he added.

I wished we could say the same about the Northern Line. Dad always complained about packed trains and poor service. Don't forget the air quality

too. Apparently, pollution in tube stations was up to thirty times higher than on busy roads in London. Imagine breathing that air. *Yuck!* Maybe someday soon, we would need spacesuits to travel on the tube.

The seats stopped directly in front of us. "Mind the gap!" warned an automated voice.

Even in here? Unbelievable!

I sat on the seat and tucked my legs in. The belt fastened automatically. Next, the seats tumbled upwards and took off inside the energy pathway, one hundred and eighty degrees parallel to the ground, at a speed of one hundred miles per hour.

I cried in horror like I was in a terrible nightmare. So did Ben and Aunt Margaret—even Aki the space robot. Not Mr. Benson though. He looked extremely relaxed. I shouldn't have been surprised. He must have made this journey hundreds of times before, if not more.

The gigantic spaceship was unusual inside. The walls were made of clear glass, but everything else was forged from metal and painted pitch-black, including the ceiling. Probably to disguise the ship in an equally dark space. A small, round hatch at the top was the only door in sight. As we entered the spaceship, we found ourselves greeted by a voice.

"Welcome to the Pathmaker Express. Please stay in your seats and keep your belts fastened until the seatbelt lights have been switched off," said the voice. "Your safety is our priority."

"Take a seat," said Mr. Benson, but before we could move, the ship was thrown upwards into the sky like a giant frisbee.

Everything began to float around, including Aunt Margaret's hair curlers. Ben was dangling from Aki the space robot's legs, screaming for help. Something was holding me up, but I couldn't see who or what. Mr. Benson was struggling to buckle Aunt Margaret into a seat without her curlers. Slowly but surely, the ship moved out of the Earth's atmosphere, and we all hit the ground with a sharp thud.

I found a seat and was just trying to catch my breath when a robot appeared right next to me.

"Refreshments?" it asked.

"Oh! Yes, please," I said, recognising the hands that were holding me up.

The robot left a cup of green slime for me to drink and a small bar of something that smelled like years-old cheese. It looked a lot like burnt toast.

"Eww, what is that?" Ben asked when the robot moved over to him.

"Food. I cooked it for you to eat," the robot said.

"Keep that thing away from me!" Ben cried, pushing the stinky food bars away with his hands.

"Delicious. Yum, yum. You eat," the robot insisted, pushing it back towards him.

"Kiki, maybe later," Mr. Benson said.

Irritated, the robot left the room, mumbling something under its breath.

All was calm now, just like after a storm at sea. We lay back on our seats and watched outer space through the clear glass walls. A mass of bright green, blue, purple, and pink surrounded by rusty brown was drifting towards us.

"That's a Nebula," Mr. Benson explained. "A giant cloud of dust and gas."

"How is it made?" Ben asked.

"Some nebulae were formed by an explosion from a dying star," Mr. Benson said. "And some formed when new stars were created."

A loud clutching sound, coming from outside, interrupted our conversation. The ship was somehow

struggling to go forward, as if it was tangled up in a tug of war and being pulled back by a great force.

"Kiki, switch off the main computer," Mr. Benson ordered. "Aki, come with me, quick! We have to get rid of them before we set the journey."

Worried, "What's happening?" I asked.

"They found us!" said Mr Benson as he opened the hatch, "Stay here and touch nothing!"

Following the sounds coming from the darkness above, we ran from one window to another. Something or someone was fighting on top of the ship. Up there! No, it was on the left! No—to the right! Now, it was coming towards us.

"Huh!" Ben jumped, as the face of a creature that looked like one of Gaya's monsters crashed into the window next to him.

Aki pulled the creature from behind and shoved it into space. Another one, most likely its twin, opened the hatch. Before we could shout for help, the ugly-looking beast, smelling equally bad, fell into the ship.

Aunt Margaret fainted instantly. Ben and Kiki threw anything they could find to stop the vile beast. I still had the horrid food bar Kiki had given me. Not sure why, I threw it at the monster, and it landed right inside its mouth.

The monster made some strange sounds as white froth appeared all over its mouth. Struggling to stand up, it fell to the floor. Only a few seconds later, thank the stars, Mr. Benson and Aki came in.

"Well, well, well…what have we got here?" Mr. Benson said. "What happened to him?"

"Nothing. I just gave him Kiki's food bar."

"Kiki!" he shouted. "Did you use the muscle relaxer instead of flour again?"

"Ouch!" Kiki replied, embarrassed.

"Lock him up, Aki," Mr. Benson ordered.

Aki held the monster by its legs and dragged him to the storage room.

Finally, with the journey set, the ship began to drift sluggishly through a path in space. It wasn't a very long journey, and luckily, there were no more exciting incidents. We arrived at the Pathmaker Academy at approximately…well, I couldn't really tell. My watch had stopped.

How odd. I had been expecting a busy place like our school, but this looked more like an abandoned building. It was made of thick, tall sandstone, with a glass dome arching over it. There was no sign of any living creature.

"How many students are there?" I asked.

"Including you?" Mr. Benson checked.

"Yes."

"One."

"One?" I was confused. "Where are the others?"

"We don't know. You are the first one we've found with the DNA code."

"But there are others like me, right?" I asked.

He nodded.

The place was massive, like a small town. We passed by a library, a science lab, a technology centre, an airport for spaceships, a fitness suite with a big swimming pool, a cinema, and even a bowling alley. There were at least four cafes too. While we walked, Ben created a map of the area. I was glad. Finding my way around wasn't my greatest talent.

"More than eight hundred people used to live here," Mr. Benson said with a touch of sadness.

"Eight hundred?" I asked in disbelief. "Where are they all now?"

"Gone. They're all gone," he replied.

"Gone where?"

"That's a long story for another time. Let me show you the garden."

Aunt Margaret looked surprised. "A garden? Really? Here?" she said.

"Yes, a garden of hope," Mr. Benson answered, a big smile plastered on his face.

We passed through three metal doors, all with a sign that read, 'No unauthorised access.' Then, we entered a long tunnel, lit up by small, rectangular-shaped metal plates. It was cold and damp. There were strange noises coming from nearby, but it was hard to see who was making them. The tunnel opened onto a green space filled with flowers, fruit trees, birds, bees, and many other creatures. Some of the creatures were familiar, but others looked like they belonged to a different world.

"What is this place?" Ben asked.

"This is where we are trying to preserve life, so that we can use it to build a new home on a different planet in the future."

"Why?" I asked. "Aren't we happy on Earth?"

"Oh, we are, and believe me, there is no place like Earth. Yet we don't know how long our planet will survive if we continue to treat it so badly. We need to preserve these plants that might help us to start again. We need to be ready," Mr. Benson said, looking very concerned.

"Be ready for what?" I asked.

"Ready to leave."

"But we can't leave the Earth—it's our home!" I protested.

"Let's call it a day and get some rest for now," Mr. Benson said quickly, avoiding any more of my questions. "Kiki, show them to their rooms."

Feeling tired, we followed Kiki without complaint, passing corridor after corridor until we came to a stop in front of a wall painted white.

"Open the door," Kiki said to me.

"What door?"

Kiki held my hand and placed it on the wall. An invisible door opened right there. I entered the room slowly. Ben went to follow, but Kiki pulled him away.

"You may not enter."

"Why?" he asked.

"This is not your room."

Ben looked around. "Where is my room?"

"There," Kiki said, pointing to the opposite wall.

"Okay…" Ben touched his hand carefully against the opposite wall, but nothing happened. "It's not working," he complained.

"Of course not. You need keys to open a door."

Kiki took a bundle of keys from a compartment inside its belly, then selected a tiny round one. As soon as it touched the wall, the door opened.

"Why do I need a key, but Alya doesn't?"

"She is a Pathmaker. Are you?"

"No, but…" He sighed, realising what Kiki meant. "Okay, never mind."

"See you later, Ben," I said.

Desperate to sleep, I closed my door straight away and lay down on the bed, placing my stone cylinder on the hard pillow. I wondered what Mr. Benson had meant when he'd said we would be leaving Earth. How could you move billions of people to a whole different planet? My eyes were already half-closed, but I could still see the cylinder glowing, as if it was transmitting some form of signal.

Another dream, I thought. But then, I heard her voice—so real, so strong.

"Alya? Hello, Alya."

"Mum?" I called, looking around to see her, but it was only a sound after all.

"Alya, you need to find the Seal of Path. We are running out of time," Mum's voice said.

"I want to, but no one knows where it is."

"It is in the New World, inside the place where they keep the past, in the tibia of Delondra."

The New World? The place where they keep the past? Tibia? Mum was talking in riddles…

"Mum?" I shouted.

No answer. She had disappeared once again, without even saying goodbye.

I tried to think of something else, but hearing Mum's voice, whether it was real or not, had stirred all my memories. I got out of bed and sat over by the window. The sight of Earth hanging in the same spot since we'd arrived gave me a strange feeling of homesickness. Already, I missed the warmth of sunbeams on my face, and the blue sky with its wandering clouds. How beautiful our world was, with its patterns and colours, even from outer space.

"Kim, are you awake?" I asked. It was a trick Mr. Benson had taught me before we left Earth, to activate my AI whenever I needed it.

"Yes, Alya, I do not sleep. I don't need to," Kim the AI replied.

"Does the sun rise on this place?"

"Yes, there is a sunrise here, but it's different from Earth. Stars will rise throughout the lunar day, but here, you won't see any colours. The sky will always look black."

"Why?"

"Because," Kim explained, "the moon doesn't have an atmosphere."

"Oh! Are we on the Moon?"

"Yes," she said.

So, this was the secret location Mr. Benson had been talking about…

"How long do I need to wait until I can see the sunrise?" I asked.

"There are about twenty-nine days from one lunar noon to next. This means the sun will rise and cross the sky in a fortnight, then it will set in another two weeks."

"So, it's light for two weeks, then it becomes dark for the next two weeks?" I confirmed.

"Yes, but remember, the Moon has no light of its own."

"Really? But it looks so bright from Earth."

"That is moonlight, and it's nothing more than sunlight bouncing off the Moon's surface."

There was so much to learn, but I was exhausted. I put my head on the pillow and fell asleep staring at the black sky with fuzzy blobs.

Ben was beside my bed when I opened my eyes. It must have been morning already. How had he

gotten in? Ah, of course. Kiki was rolling around the room and singing. That robot was crazy, no doubt.

"We've been knocking on your door for the past half an hour," Ben told me.

"Really? I heard nothing."

"Breakfaaaaast!" Kiki shouted, then rolled down the corridor.

"Come on!" Ben yelled, running after her.

I quickly jumped out of bed and ran to get my breakfast, but not as fast as Ben.

"Finally!" Mr. Benson stared hard at me as I walked in, then he added in a moody voice, "We are on a mission, not on holiday."

"How am I supposed to know when it's morning or night? There is no sun," I grumbled.

He ignored my question and said, "Okay, are you ready to start?"

I shook my head. I was going to tell them of my conversation with mum about the Seal of Path, but I decided to keep it to myself for now.

Mr. Benson handed me a piece of paper with some writing on it, showing the timetable for level one Pathmaker training. I guess there must be other levels to complete, but I was quite surprised at how much there was to learn, even as a novice Pathmaker.

ALYA'S TRAINING PLAN

	Activity	*Teacher*
1	Learning about the Sumerians and their writing system called cuneiform.	Mr. Benson
2	Planets and the solar system: Astronomy and Astrology.	Aki
3	Coding skill.	Mr. Benson
4	How do machines work? Repairing spaceships.	Aki
5	Physical fitness.	Kiki
6	Using the Pathmaker Kit	Mr. Benson

I followed the same timetable every day for a whole month in Earth days, equal to only one day on the Moon. Ben stayed mostly in the garden, exploring the plants and animals. We were forbidden to use any Earth technology for security reasons, so he had to let go of his tablet. He could only use a pen and paper to take notes. No photos, no videos, only writing. He looked very frustrated.

"Let me show you how to code in cuneiform," I said, placing a cipher on the table. Perhaps this would occupy his mind.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing at the cipher.

"It is a code wheel, great for understanding and decoding different messages written in cuneiform."

"But what is cuneiform?" he questioned.

"It's an ancient type of writing the Sumerians

used in order to communicate thousands of years ago," I explained, using the knowledge I'd learned from my Pathmaker training with Mr. Benson and

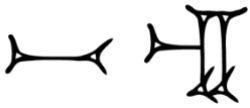
Kiki over the past month. "Cuneiform is a sort of alphabet made up of lots of different symbols, a bit like a code."

"Okay." Ben nodded in interest. And how does the cipher work?"

"Let me show you," I said, turning the inner arrow around until the symbol was aligned with the letter on the outer arrow. "Shall we write your name together?"

"Yes, please," Ben said excitedly.

"Well, there isn't a cuneiform symbol for each letter in our alphabet, so we need to get a little bit creative with our writing. There are so many symbols, but I couldn't fit them all into this basic cipher. We can think Ben as BE-EN. In cuneiform, this would be…" I pointed at the symbols on the cipher.



"That is cool!" Ben exclaimed, grabbing the code wheel from my hands. "Let me try AL-YA."

Ben really enjoyed writing in cuneiform. I was going to suggest we create a secret message for Mr. Benson to decode, but Kim the AI interrupted us.

"Alya, they are waiting for you in the dinner hall," she said. It was great to have her around. Kim was like my personal assistant.

"Come on, let's go," I said to Ben, waving him along as I ran to the dinner hall.

Waiting for us on the table was a delicious dinner cooked by Aunt Margaret. I was glad she came with us. I couldn't imagine living on Kiki's food bars for a month. I would've had no teeth left by the time we returned to Earth!

"Are you ready?" Mr Benson asked.

"Not so sure," I whispered.

"We need to focus on finding the Seal of Path."

"I think I know where it is," I replied.

"What?" Mr. Benson was confused. "How?"

"Mum visited me," I explained, remembering back to the first night we arrived here. "I think it was a dream. She said the cylinder is in the New World, inside the place where they keep the past…in the tibia of Delondra."

"Alya, why did you not say anything before?" Mr. Benson groaned, rolling his eyes.

For a moment, no one said a word.

Tears welled in my eyes. "Because I don't know what is real and what is a dream anymore!" I cried.

"My uncle always calls New York the New World," Ben said quickly, trying to change the subject.

"Okay, leave this with me," Mr. Benson said, jotting a note down in his leather book, desperate to avoid my teary eyes. "We need to get going."

Kiki stayed behind to keep an eye on Gaya's monster. Aki looked sad and gave Kiki a kiss, handing over a little blue rose. Kiki quickly threw it into its chest box. In fact, I think it ate the rose—all of it. We all got onto the ship and waved goodbye to Kiki. Rolling around, it waved back.

"Give me the coordinates, Alya," Mr. Benson said. "Let's see if your training has worked."

"Aki, set the coordinates to 51.5194° N, 0.1270° W," I said, feeling confident and happy.

"I am so ever proud of you." Aunt Margaret smiled. "Your mother would be so proud too." "I know," I said with a full smile, as the ship floated back towards Earth.

Chapter Seven

Expedition New York

Three full weeks had passed since I completed my level one Pathmaker training on the Moon. The seasons slowly began to change, and so did my mood, which I guessed was an effect of the days getting shorter and darker. Constant autumn rains that had soaked the streets of London for months were soon replaced by freezing weather. It snowed for only two days, but that was enough to turn the green fields of Dollis Valley Greenwalk into a white, fluffy blanket.

I was sitting by the window, watching snowflakes gently fall onto bare trees, when Dad walked into my room without knocking. Irritated, my face turned bright red.

"Why don't you ever knock on the door?"

Dad interrupted me. "The school is closed due to heavy snow," he said, reading a text message from

the school. "It's probably best if I work from home with you today."

"Noooo!" I whined. A whole Monday at home with Dad? No, thanks. Instead, I grabbed my phone and texted Ben to ask him to meet me at the park.

Dad looked pleased. "Have fun," he said in a relieved tone. "Don't forget to wear your gloves."

I walked slowly through the park, trying not to slip on the thin layer of snow. Worried about Gaya getting her hands on my stone cylinder, I scanned the area carefully, paying close attention to the path ahead. What if she had followed me? What if one of her monsters was hiding behind the oak tree, only twenty paces away, ready to attack at any moment?

My ears were alert to every hiss and crackle. More than usual, they picked up on even the faintest sound in the air. I breathed a deep sigh of relief when I saw Ben next to the children's play area, fiddling with his kippah.

"Hi, Alya!" He started running towards me. I warned him to take extra care, but his foot slipped, and he fell face-down into the soft snow.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

Ben's face looked like an ice cube that had just come out of the freezer. "That was funny," he said, cheerfully, standing up again and dragging an old wooden sledge behind him. Ben always saw the funny side to things. He sat down on the sledge and bit a chunk out of a jam sandwich.

"Still no news from Mr. Benson?" he asked, licking the last bit of jam from his fingers.

I shook my head.

"Maybe something happened to him?"

"I hope not," I said. "Surely, we would hear about it."

"I don't know." He paused. "But you can't just sit around and wait."

"What else is there to do?"

"Well, your mum said the Seal is in the New World, right?"

I nodded in agreement.

"Let's assume she meant New York."

"New York is an enormous city—you said so yourself."

"I know, but didn't she tell you the Seal is in the tibia of Delondra?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Look," he continued, opening a science website on his smartphone. "The tibia is the lower leg bone, so the seal is probably hidden inside the leg bone of the dinosaur."

"And how do you suggest we find a dinosaur in New York?" I sighed.

"How many dinosaurs do you think there are in New York, Alya?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I did some research," Ben said. "The world's biggest dinosaur skeleton display is in the American Museum of Natural History, and believe me, it matches Lord Enki's description of Delondra."

For a moment, we said nothing. There was a slight rustling behind the thick bushes. Ben spun around to see what was making the noise.

"What is it?" I asked nervously.

He stared into the bushes on our side of the playground. Then, "We have to go!" he screamed in a panic, spinning the sledge around.

Gaya's monsters burst out through the bushes, running towards us. Jumping onto the sledge, we slid around and around the children's play area, then skidded around the corner and accelerated along the

path towards my house. The ground was so icy, we sped through the park like a racing car.

"Two monsters?" I screamed in fright. "Didn't we leave one on the Moon?"

"Maybe it escaped!" Ben replied.

"Faster, faster!" I shouted, feeling a hand trying to grab my shoulder.

Ben quickly steered the sledge to the left and took a shortcut home, through Gordon Road. The slightly taller monster lost its grip on the collar of my coat and hit a tree with a bang, tumbling to the ground. The second monster tripped over the first, but instead of stopping, it carried on and fell into the brook. It did not look like they would be getting up anytime soon.

"We've done it!" Ben cheered, parking the sledge in the front garden.

But the race wasn't over yet. Quickly, we climbed up the wobbly stairs and entered my room, slamming the door shut behind us.

"What now?" Ben asked.

"We need to go to New York," I said. "And we need to go fast!"

"Don't we need plane tickets?"

"Nope," I answered with a smirk. "We can use another way."

"What other way?"

"You'll see," I said. "First, I must complete the checklist."

"Checklist?"

"The Pathmaker checklist, of course."

The Pathmaker Checklist:

- Celestial belt – Wearing it
- Virtual glasses – On my face
- Metal bracelet – On my right wrist
- Backpack – On my back
- The Book of Code – Missing?

"Where is my…?" I desperately searched the room for my Book of Code. "I need to open the portal and set the journey!"

"There!" Ben screamed, pointing to the Book of Code tucked under my bed.

"Okay, let's focus! What is the journey from London to New York?"

Ben looked puzzled. "How do you come up with a journey?" he asked.

"Similar to flying on a plane, I have to set the coordinates, decide the altitude to fly at, and select the duration."

"Duration?"

"It means the speed we'll fly at. The lower the duration, the faster we'll travel."

It took at least ten tries to come up with a golden, glowing script. When it glowed, that meant it would probably work.

Well, you never know until you try a test run…

"Let's test it," I said, placing my metal bracelet against the back cover of the Book of Code, exactly in the centre. Nothing happened.

Footsteps outside the house, close to the front door, began to get louder and louder, faster and faster.

"Try again!" Ben shouted in a croaky voice.

"Hang on!" I said, checking the code for errors. "There must be a glitch in the script."

"Debug it then!" Ben yelled. He looked scared.

I checked the code for errors. Everything seemed correct. Ah—maybe not. There was a spelling error. One simple mistake was enough to ruin the whole script. Oh, and I forgot to indent the code properly!

Eventually, I fixed the script, and the finished code was ready to go.

Define route
Wait until the Book of Code is open
Activate energy tunnel
Point towards: The American Museum of Natural History
Glide for 3600 seconds Lat: 40.7813° °N Long: 73.9740° W
Wait until within 50 metres of destination
Drop the passengers
Close the tunnel
Forever if touching I-me bracelet
Initialise Route
Wait for 5 seconds
Start transport

"Let's try again," I said.

The footsteps were inside the house now, and it sounded like the monsters were having an argument with my dad downstairs.

"Where is she?" a voice asked. It sounded a lot like…

"Gaya is here," I whispered, placing the metal bracelet on the Book of Code.

For a moment, nothing happened, but then, a portal made of colourful energy particles opened by

my bed. I could hear the footsteps moving upstairs now. Pulling Ben with me, I jumped into the portal headfirst.

As I went through the portal, a hand reached out for my ankle. It belonged to a face with a vicious smile. I felt a sudden burning pain where the hand had touched me and let out an ear-piercing scream. Ben lost his grip and started to tumble away from me.

After some time, I reached the other side. Catching my breath, I looked around for Ben. Only a few seconds later, he appeared just above the portal, laughing hysterically and surfing on a floorboard. He tried to stop—unsuccessfully.

Ben fell on top of me with a loud crash, right before the portal closed.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"One of Gaya's beasts threw it in," he said scanning the area. "They got your dad."

"I know," I said, trying to put on a brave face. "We need to focus on the mission. Where are we?"

Ben took his smartphone out of his pocket and clicked on the maps app to find our location. "I think we're in Central Park."

"How do we get to the museum from here?"

"We need to find a tube station," Ben said.

"A tube station? This is not London. They call it the subway here," I corrected him.

Ben ignored me.

"If we follow this path straight, it will take us to the Cathedral Parkway station. We can then take line B southbound, towards Brighton Beach," he said, pointing at the map on his phone screen. "Only four stops to Eighty-First Street, Museum of Natural History."

After a brisk twenty-minute walk, we arrived at Cathedral Parkway Station, which was overcrowded just like the London Underground.

"How are we going to get a ticket? We have no money," I said.

"Like this," Ben replied, sliding under the subway fare gates. "Come on."

As I took my backpack off and rolled under the gates, my eyes met the subway worker's, a tall lady hovering over everyone.

"Stop!" she screeched.

We ran faster and faster and jumped into the first carriage we saw. By the time she arrived, the doors

were closed, and we were on our way. I could see her on the platform, waggling her index finger at us. She was not very happy.

I caught my breath and asked, "Why is everyone looking at me?" I was annoyed with the other people in the carriage who were rudely staring.

"Well," Ben said with a smirk, pointing to my reflection in the window. It had totally slipped my mind that I was still in my Pathmaker outfit.

"Surely, it's not unusual for kids to wear fancy dress costumes," I said.

"Yep, but I bet they don't look like such a real robot as you do," Ben replied.

The next stop was the museum.

"I guess we're leaving the same way we came in?" I asked.

"Yep," Ben said. "Just roll under the gates."

This time, busy with school groups, no subway staff watched us exit.

"Oh, that was easy," I said with a big grin.

Luckily, the subway station was right next to the museum, so we didn't waste too much time getting there. The queue to buy tickets was longer than six double-decker buses though.

"Come with me," Ben said, pulling my hand and striding in big steps towards a school group. We blended in with them by hiding behind two very tall boys and finally entered the museum.

"It says the Titanosaurus is on the fourth floor."

Out of breath from running around, we took the escalator up. There it was, Delondra, Lord Enki's pet, looking as majestic as if it was still alive. One hundred and twenty-two feet long, its neck and head were hanging over the elevator.

"There are so many people around," Ben said.

"We'll wait," I told him. "Once the museum is closed, we'll make our move."

"And until then?"

"Well, I need to work on the code for our return journey back to England."

We sat in the café next to the Titanosaurus display, where I started to write the script for the journey from New York to London. I kept the altitude the same but changed the coordinates and made the duration shorter, as I wanted a quick journey home.

When I was done, I checked the code again and again, just like Mr. Benson did, in search of any errors. The code glowed gold. I smiled and put the Book of Code back into my backpack.

Not long after, the museum staff started to walk around, telling people they had ten minutes left before the museum closed for the day. Slowly, one by one, people began to leave.

Ben looked panicked. "What now?"

"There!" I pointed to the toilets.

We dashed inside, and I helped Ben to climb up inside a toilet cubicle. He pulled me up with him, just before the security staff burst into the room. They didn't see us hiding in there. We were safe.

As soon as they left, Ben and I dropped back down onto the floor and tiptoed over to where Delondra was.

"So, what is the plan?" Ben asked.

"We climb up and look for the seal," I said, pointing to the Titanosaurus's legs.

"Yeah, and how are you going to get up there without breaking its bones?" Ben laughed. He didn't think I was being serious.

"Well, I guess…umm…" I smirked.

"Oh, great," he grumbled. "You have no plan."

"Are you sure about that?" I said, raising an eyebrow. "Kim, turn Action Mode on."

"Action Mode is on," Kim the AI replied.

I stretched my arms out and instantly began to flutter upwards. "Fly!" I instructed.

Just at that moment, Ben screamed, "Alyaaaaa!" His face was as white as a ghost. "You'd better come back down here!"

I paused and looked down at him. "Shh!" I hissed, putting my finger to my lips. "Be quiet!"

Hovering around Delondra's leg, I searched for some slots or anything the seal might fit into. The smooth surface of the skeleton had no damage.

Below, Ben screamed again. This time, I noticed he was running towards the escalators.

Annoyed with his reckless behaviour, I called out, "Tell you what—" But I stopped sharp when a tail whipped my shoulder.

Losing my balance, I began to fall at a fast speed. The room seemed to be spinning around me. A few centimetres before hitting the ground, the same tail that had knocked me down grasped my waist and lifted me back up.

"Muzu Ana?" a voice said, as the tail held me right in front of the dinosaur's eyes. "Muzu Ana?" it asked again.

"Ben!" I called. "It's alive!"

"I know! That's what I've been trying to tell you!" he shouted back.

"Mugu Alya," I said. "And you are Mugu Delondra?"

"Huh!" the dinosaur said, squeezing me hard like a doll as it transformed from a skeleton into a real, living dinosaur.

"Wait! Please, wait!" I screamed. "Dusa Enki."

"Enki?" Delondra said, looking around. She gently put me down and pushed my hair out of my face with her nails. "I know your tongue," she said in well-spoken English. "I have been here for years. I've had plenty of time to practice."

I was puzzled. Delondra was supposed to be dead, but she was not. She wasn't supposed to talk, but she did, and in our language too!

"Tell your friend to come back. I don't eat children," she said. "They smell funny, the Ki children, you know?"

Ben walked towards us with shaking legs.

"Delondra, we need your help," I said in a tiny voice that was almost a whisper.

"I know," she said, still stroking my hair. "You need the seal."

I nodded.

"Many have asked for it," she told me. "Many bad people, but you know my Lord Enki." Delondra pulled the seal out of her leg. "Take it. Take it to my master and tell him I am waiting for him."

I grabbed the seal and put it in my backpack.

Suddenly, Gaya burst from the escalators, into the room. Behind her were the two monsters, holding

my dad and Mr. Benson hostage. The ugly beasts were pushing them into the wall by the escalators, poking them with sharp, pointy metal sticks.

"Give me the seal if you want to see them again," Gaya demanded.

Ben moved behind the bin to hide again, but one of the monsters grabbed him by the arm and hurled him to the ground.

"Come on, silly girl, I haven't got all day!" Gaya yelled. "Give me the Seal of Path!"

"Never!" I flew upwards.

Gaya followed me quickly. I hadn't mastered flying like her—after all, I had only finished level one Pathmaker training. She gripped my left foot and rolled me against the wall. Before I could pull myself up, she threw metal marbles at me. They turned into chains and tied themselves to my ankles in a bow.

Rolling an energy ball in her hands, Gaya moved towards me, preparing to throw. She stretched her arms to release the ball but was stopped by Delondra's tail. A strong whip, and Gaya crashed into the escalators. Her monsters ran to help her.

Mr. Benson took advantage of the monsters being distracted and quickly placed a piece of paper in Delondra's claws.

"Give it to Alya," he said before he was pulled back by one of the beasts.

Delondra passed the paper to me and removed the metal chains from my ankles.

"Run the code, Alya!" Mr. Benson shouted. "Run it now!"

"It's incomplete!" I said.

"It doesn't matter. Go now!"

"But I want to help!" I cried.

"Please, go now, and remember to remove the trackers from your ankles!"

I could see Gaya's metal bugs on my ankles now. That must have been how she tracked us. I pulled the bugs off and threw them at her. Then, peering around, I opened the Book of Code and put the crumpled piece of paper Mr. Benson had given to me inside.

Gaya tried to move towards me, but Delondra seized her by the waist and squeezed her hard.

I touched my I-me bracelet against the back of the Book of Code and fell through a tunnel, spinning faster and faster.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, there were two deafening explosions, everything stopped, and all went dark.

Chapter Eight

En Route to Nowhere

After a bumpy ride through a long, shadowy cosmic tunnel, I ended up once more in outer space, where the day was as dark as the night. Strange as it may seem, here I was, in the same teeny-tiny glass spaceship from my first ever space journey.

Following the incomplete code, the spaceship slowly steered along on a mysterious journey. All I could see was the coal-black space, crammed with meteors, asteroids, and dangerous objects wrestling against each other. In the far distance, barely visible, the whimsical creatures with gigantic mouths in their bellies were hunting for space junk below a yellowish-white planet. There was no one to speak to, nobody to ask for help.

Feeling lonely, I let out a long, sad sigh, wishing Ben was here with me. But my mind was quickly

distracted by a familiar voice when a group of meteors collided with the spaceship.

"Alya, watch out!"

Surprised to hear the AI, I called out, "Kim?"

"You need to manually fly the ship," she yelled.

This was the first time I'd heard an AI shouting.

"How?" I asked. "There are no controllers."

"The ship is voice controlled," she said. "You need to use it by giving it instructions."

"Oh, like programming a computer?" I asked.

"Exactly."

A space rock as large as a football field hit the left wing, and the spaceship shook like an earthquake. In a panic, I quickly gave my first instruction to avoid a lump of space junk that looked like a television.

When I say go

Turn left 72 degrees

Move for 24 metres

Forever if touching the space rock on the right

Turn left 90 degrees
Move for 300 metres

Forever if touching the space rock on the left

Turn right 90 degrees
Move for 300 metres

The ship dodged the space junk with a tiny touch. Only a few moments later, a red and orange asteroid with a purple tail appeared ahead. It looked like a volcanic eruption, only in space. It was travelling very fast, probably around twenty-four kilometres per second. Not sure if I had enough time to avoid this flying volcano, I tried to make my mind focus, but fear took over my brain, making it hard to think of any instructions.

Finally, I created a script, but it was impossible to know if it would work. No time to fuss about, I ran the code.

```
When I say go
    Turn right 12 degrees
    Move for 11 metres
If within
    50 metres of the asteroid
    Change altitude by -100
    Move 150 metres
```

The ship had almost escaped from the asteroid. But only just. With a loud blast, the small spaceship

glided onto a luminous path and started to rattle out of control.

"What now?" I asked.

"I don't know," Kim said in a fearful voice. This AI was truly strange. She had very human emotions.

A strong light blinded my eyes, creating a dust fog all around. Terrified, I tried to hold onto something, but I only fell to the floor, hitting my head hard, as the ship went up in flames.

When I woke up—rather suddenly—at first, I did not open my eyes. It was a sound that called my name. A real human sound, so warm and familiar it gave me the feeling I was in a dream. Yes, that's right, a dream I did not want to wake up from.

But I couldn't stop. My eyes opened anyway, and there I saw her, putting her hands out to catch me, just at the right time.

"Oh, I am still dreaming," I said, for if I was awake, she wouldn't be standing above me. Such nice things could only happen in dreams.

"Welcome, Alya," the voice said, as the blazing fire spread inside the ship, burning everything it touched.

I clutched onto the soft hand and almost sobbed. "It is real," I whispered. "It must be!"

The fire was filling my lungs with smoke. One of the whimsical metal creatures with a gigantic mouth in its belly was pulling me upwards. At least, it was trying to. But my legs were trapped under the dashboard, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't free myself.

"Come on, ATU 3," the soft voice said, calling the metal creature with a green head.

It made some weird sounds, and then two more of them entered the ship. One started to pull my legs sideways, while the other two lifted me upwards.

The fire was near my legs now. I could feel its heat through my human robot outfit.

In a panic, the voice shouted, "Arhis elu!"

Two metal creatures, one with a blue head and one with a yellow head, poured some crystal dust onto my foot, which was still stuck under the melting dashboard. After a few seconds, the smell of unfamiliar spices filled the ship. With a small push, the two metal

creatures got my legs free and pulled me up, towards a planet that looked like it was burning.

"I am right behind you," the soft voice said.

Moving my head sideways, I tried to get a glimpse of the person, but the only thing I could see was my spaceship. It exploded into thousands of tiny pieces, each one sprinkled into outer space.

The metal creatures flew right through the atmosphere of the burning planet and dropped me by the edge of a cliff.

"Where am I?" I asked with a fast-beating heart.

"It is all right," the soft voice said, placing a glass helmet over my head. "You are safe now."

My heart jumped with the memory of what had happened at the museum. I thought of Dad, Ben, and Mr. Benson. Will I ever see them again? Soon, it would be Christmas, my favourite time of the year. Who would help Aunt Margaret decorate the tree? She would be all alone. And what about Ben? Poor thing! He would miss Hanukkah.

Unsure of my fate, I followed the soft voice that had saved me through the unusually hot and dry planet covered with craters, volcanoes, and terracotta mountains.

GLOSSARY

Alya Sky in Arabic
Arhis elu Raise her up quickly *
Atu Gatekeeper*
Cipher A method of writing that hides words by replacing original letters with symbols, numbers, or other letters
Cuneiform A writing system invented by the Sumerians in Ancient Mesopotamia
Dusa Friend*
Hanukkah The Jewish Festival of Lights, which celebrates the time when a miracle happened in the Jews' Holy Temple in the 2nd Century BCE
Igibala Traitor*
I-me-am du She is here / She came / She arrived*
Ki Earth*
Mugu My name is*
Muzu ana? What is your name? *
Sumer The earliest known civilization in the historical region of southern Mesopotamia, between 4100 BCE and 1750 BCE

* The words with this sign next to them are in Sumerian language.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Yasemin Allsop MBE worked as a primary school teacher and Computing coordinator in schools in London for ten years. Currently, she works as a lecturer in education, where she teaches computing and history to trainee primary school teachers. She lives in London with her husband Simon, son Simon Peter, and a beautiful Rottweiler girl called Shadow.

She has received many national and international awards for her work, especially for coaching children in various technology related projects and supporting teachers. She was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list in 2019 for her contribution to education. This is her first creative writing project. She is currently working on various children's books and has already started to write a second book in the 'Alya the Pathmaker' series.

To find out more about the author, events, news, and competitions related to her books, please visit www.yaseminallsop.com or follow her on Twitter @yallsop

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