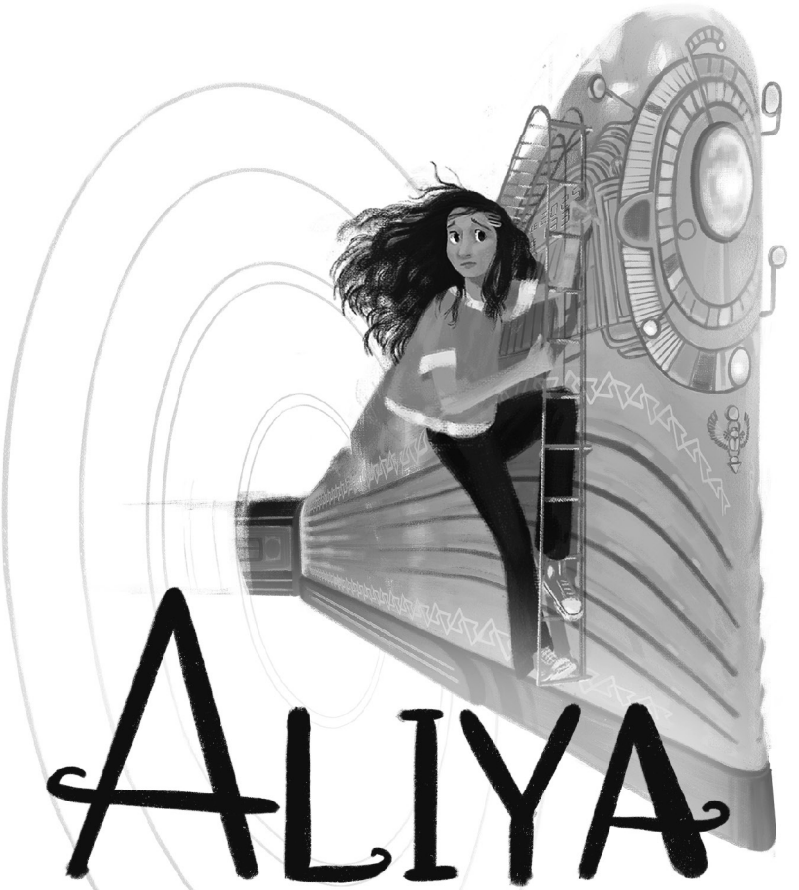

ALIYA

ABOARD THE TIME TRAIN

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To Ahmed

Chapter 1

FUN ACCORDING TO SPHINXES

Aliya Sultan did not understand why her grandfather thought that having afternoon tea with sphinxes was 'safe and harmless fun'. She could think of about a zillion things she'd rather do on this hot summer day than play riddle bingo with a bunch of mythicals. But being twelve years old, and a recent survivor of an attack by the most dangerous criminal in the time-travel world, meant that Geddo's opinions about her safety overruled all her wishes and complaints.

Heaving a sigh, Aliya sank deeper into her velvet armchair. It matched the room's wall tapestries, showing majestic sphinxes lying in front of pyramids and devouring panicking townspeople. This was

Haramachis, a tearoom for sphinxes, specially designed to host the hulking beasts with their lion bodies and human heads. She glanced around at the mythicals that lay lounging around low tables where food and water pipes were arranged in such a way that no opposable thumbs were needed to enjoy them. The sphinxes had dexterous paws, though, and could hold the large china cups the waiters brought them without any effort at all.

Around her, the tearoom reeked of the smoked sausage rolls and sickly-sweet cordial the big cat-humans were so fond of. Aliya furtively stuffed the sausage roll she had been served into the pot of a decorative palm tree, then glanced up at the clock on the wall. Like all time-keeping devices here in the travel world, it was terribly complicated to read, with a plethora of dials pointing in different directions. It gave her no clue as to how much longer she would have to sit through another round of riddle bingo, the sphinxes' game of choice.

Outside the big bay window, Aliya could see Qahira Square. It marked the centre of the Citadel, the most illustrious time-travel city in the known

universe, and the centre of the Infinitum – the time-travel world. Travellers on flying carpets were zipping by, and others were riding in flying elevators – whizzcalators. Aliya even spotted a flying hieraco-sphinx, its great wings beating the air and momentarily shadowing the sun. Again, as so many times that day, the same thought struck her: *I shouldn't be stuck here, trying to answer ridiculous riddles that will win me nothing but a raw steak if I get the answer right. I should be out there, exploring the city!*

Aliya was in desperate need of some fun. She had just returned from a horrible month at an *ageing spa*. A year of being a student in the time-travel world had slowed down her normal ageing process – time worked differently here. That was why she had ended up spending part of her summer holiday at a secret location in the Egyptian western desert, at a spa specializing in soothing the terrible discomfort of your body catching up with its true age once it was back in the earthly realm. The worst part, besides the dull ache and the unsettling creaking of her bones growing too fast, was being stuck with her Great-Aunt Gigi and her assistant Esmat, who had

both interfered in everything she did, and made her drink bucketfuls of gelatinous cow-feet soup to grease her growing skeleton. Staying on at the Infinitum wasn't an option, though. It made you go funny in the head. All travellers needed breaks from the Infinitum's unique form of gravity. Especially if you, like Aliya, were unused to the travel world.

But Aliya had longed to be back. *Ached* with every waking moment, in fact, to be in the marvellous world again, and to see her friends. She had imagined the rest of the summer holiday would be full of wild carpet rides and visits to Pastroudis Sweets for bags of Victorian jelly babies and futuristic tubes of inhalable chocolate, not to mention the 150 varieties of Turkish delight. The pomegranate flavour was to die for! She had longed to play virtual Olympics at Cletus' Internet Cafe, and have long brunches at Smoothieophocles' Treats in the Ancient Quarter.

Instead, the moment she had stepped through the portal at Grand Central Station, Geddo's 'Keep Aliya Safe' campaign had begun. She had been escorted to Matron Olfat's Scholastic Hostel by two

sphinxes who, since then, had guarded her every step. Aliya and her grandfather were staying at the ghoul hostel for 'extra security'. And it got worse: Geddo and Matron had arranged 'safe diversions' to keep her 'entertained'. In the week she had been back, she had already been made to attend Matron Olfat's support group for civilized ghouls (her ears were still ringing from their therapeutic roaring exercises) and join a bunch of ladies from the Victorian Quarter to plant begonias in their town square. The only highlight that day was when a stray camel had crashed the gardening party and tried to eat the flowers, and one decorated hat. She had enjoyed watching the ladies chase the camel off with their swinging handbags and gardening tools.

Apart from that, the week had been dreary, especially since none of her friends were back from visiting their native times. Sending messages from the earthly realm into the Infinitum was a tricky business, which was why their absence had come as yet another rotten surprise once she'd arrived at the hostel to find them still away.

Her grandfather *did* have reason to worry about

her, though. Last year, Aliya had nearly been killed by a cursed necklace sent to her by the magician Dorian Darke. There was no worse threat to the travel world than magic . . . than Dorian. But since the events last year, Infinitum security had been upgraded and made completely impenetrable to magic. Geddo was totally overdoing it, like always.

Aliya picked up the day's *Chronicle* from a coffee table beside her. A large photo of a glorious chrono-train took up most of the front page – the *Silver Express*. Since she got back, Aliya had joined the rest of the hostel's fascination with the daily news reports showing the magnificent machine being made ready for departure. The train, which more closely resembled an elaborate double-decker steamship, contained every possible luxury one could think of. Inside the paper Aliya found an article describing the *Express*'s Turkish bathhouse, complete with a plunging pool. There was also a photo of the chocolate fountains located in first class that came in a variety of blends, from dark as midnight to caramelized blonde. It was the most exclusive time-travel trip there was. As such, the train was reserved

for the crème de la crème – the rich and well-connected elite of the time-travel world. Not even Aliya's mentor, Professor Nigm, had travelled on the train. Nor had Geddo or Great-Aunt Gigi. Aliya's eyes lingered on the marvellous machine in the photo. A train that travelled through time . . . now *that* was an adventure.

Someone nudged her.

'Oi, man cub. It's your turn.'

A sphinx with golden fur and a wine-red tarboosh was frowning down at her, its amber eyes narrowed.

'Oh.' Aliya felt her face heating a little as she realized that every sphinx in the room was looking at her. 'Sorry. I didn't realize.'

She straightened the velvet turban on her head – the one Matron had lent her to give her a 'fighting chance' at riddle bingo. As she touched the velvety folds, she heard a low growl close to her ear. Knowledge turbans were famously worn to help travellers navigate places of which they lacked knowledge, by discreetly whispering facts into the wearer's ear. Aliya wasn't sure that wearing a knowledge turban was allowed at riddle bingo, and she wasn't so sure

she even *wanted* help to answer the conundrum she had just pulled out of a box and read. The prize – again – was a raw steak on a gilded plate, and it was still oozing blood.

'So, what is it?' the golden-haired sphinx called out. 'Come on, man cub. Read the riddle.'

'Why did the citrus tree go to the hospital?' Aliya read from the riddle card.

'*For lemon-aid*,' a raspy voice whispered into her ear. The knowledge turban squeezed its folds around her hairline. Aliya took another look at the oozing steak which lay on display in the centre of the table.

'I don't know,' she lied.

For some moments, the knowledge turban's outraged whisperings blended with the tut-tuts and the huffing of the gathered sphinxes.

'*Lemon-aid*,' the turban hissed into her ear. 'Speak the answer, you silly, silly human.'

When Aliya remained silent, the turban rudely pinched her ear. Aliya quickly tore it off and stuffed it into the pocket of her dress, where it could cause no more harm. Turbans of this sort might know stuff, but they were terribly bad-tempered.

'In my time, we still eat humans who answer our questions wrong,' a sphinx in an Ancient Egyptian outfit said.

'Or destroy their villages or cities,' said another.

There was some scattered chuckling. Aliya tensed. Was this sphinx humour? From her studies she had learnt that sphinxes really used to wreak havoc on human civilization, *especially* if people got their riddles wrong. But these ones had gone through the travel world's civilization process and were supposed to be tame. Nitzi and Hosneyya, the hostel sphinxes Geddo had sent to guard her, mostly talked about knitting and the danger of germs, so Aliya supposed this had to be a joke. She could see them over at the other end of the room, sharing a steak, oblivious to her predicament. *Some bodyguards . . .*

'There's no taste quite like a fresh human,' the Ancient Egyptian sphinx said, moving closer to Aliya, so close she could smell its musty fur. 'Tender like no other meat, with bones that simply pop in your mouth . . . or so I've heard.'

The party of mythical beasts pressed closer. A drop of sweat ran down Aliya's neck. How could

Geddo have thought this a 'safe' outing?

'What an interesting remark,' a deep voice sounded from the other end of the room. 'To think that there still are some sphinxes among us who hanker for human flesh.'

The crowd in front of Aliya opened as though a spell had struck it. Every head turned towards an old sphinx in a worn red tarboosh. He had a magnificent grey moustache that ended in elegant curls.

'Professor F-Fayruz,' the golden-haired sphinx stammered. 'It was only a bit of harmless fun.'

'We meant nothing by it,' the Ancient Egyptian sphinx said. 'Just joking with the man cub. They crack so easily . . . not their bones, I mean . . . oh, that came out wrong.'

'I've spent forty years tracking and neutralizing rogue mythicals,' the professor said grimly. He put down his Turkish coffee cup. 'That was neither harmless, nor fun. Just because I've retired doesn't mean my senses have dulled. On the contrary, should I sense the slightest whiff of roguery anywhere in the Infinitum, I will not hesitate to do my duty.'

His speech ended with a low, feline growl. For some moments the room was utterly quiet. Even Hosneyya and Nitzi had looked up from their steak, blood dribbling down their cheeks.

'Surely you wouldn't report us just for a joke?' a sphinx in a green cape said at last. 'That's not the way of the Brigade, is it?'

There was a tense silence as Professor Fayruz considered. A name zinged through Aliya's head: *the Brigade*. That was her grandfather's old SWAT team, the one he had been captain of. This was *the* Professor Fayruz she had heard so many stories about. The head of the K9 unit, and her grandfather's closest friend – a friend who hadn't set foot in the travel world since he retired ten years before.

'No need,' Fayruz said in response to the sphinxes' worried looks. 'I can see that you're just a bunch of overfed kittens.'

There was some relieved laughter. Then, suddenly, the professor was looking straight at Aliya.

'This girl is the granddaughter of my dearest friend in the world, Captain Farouk Sultan,' he said. 'You would do well to remember that.'

Fayruz dipped his head to Aliya, then turned and left.

'What's brought him back?' Aliya asked the golden-haired sphinx next to her. 'I heard he hasn't left his house in Old Cairo for the last ten years. Isn't he a recluse or something?'

Recluse was the word her friend Mustafa had used to describe the old fighter – it meant a person who wanted nothing to do with society, who lived alone and avoided people as much as they could. Mustafa, a die-hard Brigade fan, had every book under the sun about their escapades. The story went that the professor had retired and cut himself off from society after an incident with a rogue mythical on the bank of the Nile. What had happened to him at that fateful encounter no one knew, but he had never been the same.

The golden-haired sphinx, who was now looking at Aliya with new respect, nodded at her newspaper and said:

'Perhaps he's got a ticket.'

Aliya looked down at her paper, and the photo of

the magnificent double-decker train on the front page. So that was why the old sphinx was here? It made sense – if there was one thing it would be worth leaving the house for, even if you happened to be a recluse, it was a trip on the *Silver Express*.