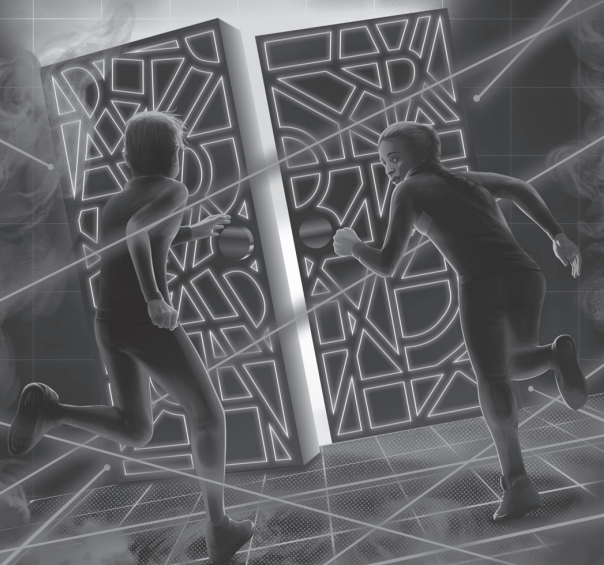
HOW TO STEAL THE FUTURE

HOW TO STEAL THE FUTURE



ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETE LLOYD

CHRISTOPHER EDGE

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

For Chrissie, Alex and Josie



Published 2026 by Macmillan Children's Books,
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
The Smithson, 6 Briset Street, London EC1M 5NR
EU representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor,
The Liffey Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper, Dublin 1 D01 YC43
Associated companies throughout the world

ISBN 978-1-0350-7182-1

Text copyright © Christopher Edge 2026
Illustrations copyright © Pete Lloyd 2026

The right of Christopher Edge and Pete Lloyd to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Quote on p.v used with permission from The David Bowie Archive™.

Material from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* taken from *The Complete Alice* © Macmillan Children's Books 2015 – Macmillan Publishers International Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (including, without limitation, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Pan Macmillan does not have any control over, or any responsibility for, any author or third-party websites (including, without limitation, URLs, emails and QR codes) referred to in or on this book.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% Renewable Electricity by CPI Group (UK) Ltd



This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.
The publisher does not authorize the use or reproduction of any part of this book in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.
The publisher expressly reserves this book from the Text and Data Mining exception in accordance with Article 4(3) of the European Union Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790.

Visit **www.panmacmillan.com** to read more about all our books and to buy them.

‘Tomorrow belongs to those who can hear it coming.’

– *David Bowie*

Prologue

In ancient Greece, on the island of Crete, there lived a king called King Minos. Beneath his palace, King Minos instructed a great inventor called Daedalus to build him a maze, one so complex that it was impossible to escape it. Named the Labyrinth, this maze had countless twisting passageways, myriad blind alleys and endless corridors. And inside the inescapable maze, King Minos imprisoned a monster called the Minotaur.

The Minotaur had the head of a bull and the body of a man. Some say he was the king's son, but the Minotaur was a savage beast with a taste for human flesh.

Every year, King Minos sent seven young men and seven young women into the Labyrinth, where they were devoured by the Minotaur, but one year, a hero called Theseus sailed to the island to bring an end to this cruelty. Volunteering as one of the young men,

Theseus caught the eye of King Minos's daughter, Princess Ariadne, who fell in love with him and promised to help Theseus escape from the Labyrinth.

Stealing the key to the maze, Ariadne left a ball of golden thread just inside its entrance. Tying one end to the door of the Labyrinth, Theseus unwound the thread behind him as he ventured inside the maze, marking the path that he took. In the heart of the Labyrinth, Theseus slayed the Minotaur and then wound up the golden thread to escape from the maze.

But this is just a story . . .

1

'The maze is a dangerous place. The maze is ever-changing. The maze has never been solved.'

I follow the sound of the voice as the curving corridor swings to the right. The speaker is still out of sight, just like he has been from the moment I stepped inside this place and he started talking. His low voice is a constant monotone that seems to keep time with my footsteps as I follow the corridor round. The polished floor beneath my feet looks exactly the same as the walls and the ceiling. There must be speakers hidden inside these smooth white panels that shine with an almost plastic brightness.

Reaching out, I run my hand over the curved enamelled surface, feeling the soft vibration of his words beneath my fingertips as the man continues to speak.

'There are dead ends and diversions, obstacles and

traps, but these are the least of the maze's dangers. It has evolved beyond our control, and it can read your thoughts and use your memories against you to build its walls. The maze can change in a heartbeat, and it will fight you every step of the way.'

My sense of unease is growing, but as the tunnel-like corridor starts to straighten, I wonder if this is the same voice that my sister, Evie, heard when she entered the maze seven days ago.

I glance down at the clothes that I'm wearing. I still feel strange in this close-fitting black tracksuit – the single gold stripe running across my chest marking me out as the latest mazer. Evie was wearing the exact same outfit the last time that I saw her. I remember burying my face in the collar of her tracksuit as I begged her not to go.

'In the heart of the maze lies its greatest prize,' the unseen voice continues. 'An experimental device known only by its codename: *AVENIR*. Many have been sent to find it. Nobody has succeeded. You are the last who can try.'

He says it like the Avenir's a secret, but Evie told me

everything she could. She knew I didn't want her to go, so she wanted me to understand what it was she was going to find. We sat together in my room, looking at the imagined maps she'd made of the maze spread out on the floor in front of us.

'Avenir means the future, Drew.' Evie's brow furrowed in concentration as she slowly turned a pattern of dots into the shape of a looping maze. 'And that is the power the Avenir grants – it allows you to see the future.'

'Like a crystal ball?' I asked, my head hurting as I tried to make sense of what my sister was telling me. 'That's impossible! Nobody can see the future.'

'The future is made by the present and the past,' Evie explained, glancing up from her latest drawing to meet my gaze. 'Take a look at this labyrinth. The past is the line that I've already drawn, the present is the tip of my pen on the page, and the future is the line I've yet to draw. But if you look carefully, you can already see the shape it's going to take.'

I stared down at the looping lines she'd drawn, seeing how the route through the circular maze wound

its way back and forth across the page. But as my gaze flickered beyond the tip of her pen to the empty space that remained, I could see how the curving line she'd just started would inevitably continue, spiralling round to the heart of the maze. And then I watched as Evie finished drawing the line, looping it round in the exact same pattern I'd pictured until her pen came to a halt in the centre of the page.

'The Avenir is like a *quantum* crystal ball hidden in the heart of the maze.' Her eyes shone with excitement as she pushed the finished drawing towards me. 'It would be impossible for us to predict the future in all its complexity – there are too many variables, far too much data for human minds to process – but for the Avenir system, such a task becomes child's play. That is why they built it: to show us the future.'

Evie's only a couple of years older than me, but sometimes it feels like my sister's mind is two steps ahead of mine. I didn't understand *how* the Avenir could let me see the future.

'How does it work? And why do *you* have to enter the maze?' I'd asked her.

Sweeping a strand of her long blonde hair away from her face, Evie had tried to explain. 'The Avenir system combines the immense power of quantum computing with next-level artificial intelligence, allowing it to calculate the future with 100 per cent accuracy.' My sister paused for a second, and I remember the shadow that flickered across her face. 'It was supposed to let us see all our tomorrows, but when the Avenir system ran for the very first time, something went wrong. The system became unstable – running out of control. The Avenir built the maze to protect its secrets and then hid itself away at its heart.'

Glancing down at the maze she'd just drawn, Evie placed her finger at the entrance point she'd marked with an X on the page.

'The only chance we have to find the future is to step inside the maze.' With her finger, Evie started to trace a path through the maze. 'The Avenir built this place, but it's still evolving, out of control. Anyone who enters the maze becomes part of its data set; their lifelines entwine with the maze's ever-changing pathways. An adult mind can't take the strain, but a child's mind can.

It's all thanks to the neuroplasticity of our brains. We're the only ones who can journey inside the maze and find the way to its heart.'

Evie's finger came to a halt at the centre of the hand-drawn labyrinth, and I looked up to meet her gaze.

'But if it's out of control, isn't it dangerous?' I asked her, still not wanting to let Evie go. 'Why does it have to be you? Why can't it be somebody else?'

'Don't you want to see the future, Drew?' Evie asked, ignoring my questions. I glimpsed a hidden fire burning in her eyes. 'To see the path that lies ahead as clearly as the past?'

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded my head reluctantly, but that seemed to satisfy Evie.

'I'm going to steal the Avenir,' she said, wrapping her arms around me as she pulled me in for a hug, 'and I'm bringing it back for you. Together, we'll be able to see all our tomorrows.'

Blinking hard, I try to clear this memory from my mind. That was the last time I saw Evie. She entered the maze a week ago. She didn't come back. The experiment went wrong, but they keep sending us in, two at a

time – just like Noah with his ark. One boy, one girl, and one mission: to find the Avenir. I don't even know if I believe it exists any more.

'It was always our dream to see the future, but the maze is increasingly unstable.' The unseen voice is still speaking in a low, even tone as the narrow corridor now twists to the left. 'The system could shut down at any time. Stay close to your companion and try not to lose yourself. There are no maps of the maze.'

As I hear these words, my fingers reach towards my tracksuit pocket, and I pull out a folded square of paper. I unfold it, taking care not to tear the paper, as I follow the corridor round.

It's the picture of the maze that Evie drew for me, its looping paths forming the shape of a circle. 'Keep it as a good-luck charm,' she'd told me as she pressed the paper into my hand. 'The only time you can ever see a maze properly is when you're outside it. Once you step inside, you're lost, but from above, you can see the whole maze at once. Follow the path for me, Drew, and I'll find my way back to you.'

I stare at the picture in my hand, trying hard not to

think about how long she's been gone. I know this isn't a map, but it almost feels like I'm following its spiral path as the tunnel winds its way round. My gaze flicks to the heart of the maze, and I try to picture what's waiting for me there.

I've not come here to steal the future. I'm here to find my sister.

Anxiety gnaws at the pit of my stomach. I can't see more than a few paces ahead, but I can hear a soft humming that sounds like it's coming from just round the bend. Folding the paper back into a square, I quickly slip it into my pocket as I turn the corner and the corridor opens out into a vaulted space.

That's when I see her. A blonde-haired girl in a black tracksuit, standing with her back to me as she hums a familiar tune.