



# ALIYA

AND THE SHOP OF  
SECOND CHANCES

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*To the Stelzer family,  
for always keeping their door open*

## Chapter 1

# PORTALS AND PREMONITIONS

**A**liya Sultan stretched out her trembling hands and took a deep breath. She could feel her palms light up, beginning to radiate and glow with colour: blue, silver and pink. The travel key felt heavy in her hands as she carefully inserted it into the lock of the wooden door that stood before her in the middle of the room. But just before turning it, she hesitated.

‘All right,’ said her mentor, Professor Nigm, who stood next to her. His voice was as soft as the smoke from his silver pipe. ‘Clear your mind and focus. Quickly now, before Simi gets impatient.’

Aliya glanced down at the key, alight with the same colour as her palms.

Simi. She was not just a time key, but her *nadim*. In this shape, she was the tool that helped Aliya open portals, and even create them. In her other form, as a beautiful hoopoe bird, she was a companion. All travellers had keys, but only locksmiths like Aliya had keys like this, which were *extra*.

Aliya's stomach grumbled and she squeezed Simi a little too hard.

*Relax, she thought. I'm still learning. It's OK. They were all making mistakes like these at the beginning.*

'They' referred to the older and more experienced locksmith apprentices whom Aliya could see passing by outside the workshop, elegant in their crisp uniforms. She would just wait until they were out of sight, she decided. But now they were stopping to watch her! *Why does the Smithy have such big windows everywhere?*

The key twitched in her hand. Simi was getting impatient. A moment or two longer and she would turn back into a bird and fly off, then circle back and target Aliya with luminous droppings – something the *nadim* did as revenge every time Aliya grabbed her too hard.

‘Don’t mind them,’ Professor Nigm said, pointing his pipe shaft at the students. ‘You’ve got just as much right to be here.’

Aliya glanced up at him for reassurance. Since she had become his apprentice a year before, they hadn’t exactly grown close. Professor Nigm was much too forbidding for that. But she trusted him. There was something reassuring about his stern face with its aquiline nose, and his white turban that reminded her of an onion. Puffing on his own nadim, a thin silver pipe, he released a cloud of lilac smoke at her. Lavender. For calming her nerves.

Aliya tried to ignore the gleeful faces on the other side of the window. She raised her hands again and felt Simi stirring in anticipation. Despite being in her second year in the time-travel world, she was still the youngest of the locksmith apprentices. The Smithy didn’t necessarily take on new students every year, so the others were all older and more experienced, something they wouldn’t let her forget.

*Now turn the key slowly, she thought. And think of the practice room in Casablanca.* She pictured the red velvet armchair that stood in a similar workshop,

but in a sister hub in Morocco, one that locksmith apprentices opened portals to for practice. The red armchair was a good prop – an item to help students focus.

Aliya turned her key. A soft light pulsed out from under the door and through the keyhole, the tell-tale sign that a portal had been opened. Pulling the door open, she held her breath . . . but no.

This was not the sister hub in Casablanca. With horror, she realized she was looking in at Uncle Hamdy, the stout Egyptian man who ran the food joint on the corner of her old street back in Cairo. Hamdy sat, frozen, tea glass raised halfway to his lips, staring at her. Aliya and Geddo had been getting their koshary from Uncle Hamdy's for as long as she could remember. The mix of rice, lentils and macaroni with spicy red sauce and crisp fried onions had been their favourite Friday meal.

A quick glance around told Aliya that she was staring out at him from a portal that, on his side, was a refrigerator. Whatever thoughts Uncle Hamdy was forming about her appearing in his fridge were cut short by the mist of lotus spray that Professor Nigm

expertly aimed at his face. One puff would make him forget he'd ever seen them.

Taking Simi out of Aliya's hands, Nigm performed a reverse turn of the key blade and the portal closed. Outside the workshop window, the older apprentices were romping about. Were they laughing at her? She wasn't sure. She imagined Uncle Hamdy blinking in surprise, then looking down at his tea glass, trying to regain his bearings.

The door behind them opened and an older student hurried in, clutching a sleek tablet.

'I'm really sorry,' Aliya said quickly, to intercept the interruption. 'Can I have another go?'

But Nigm's attention had turned to the student, a tall Mamluk youth called Omar Sadik.

'A message, sir.' Omar stuck the tablet into Nigm's hands. 'It's urgent.'

The professor glanced at the screen, his face darkening.

'What is it?' Aliya asked. 'Is something wrong?'

'We'll try again next time,' Nigm mumbled, his thoughts elsewhere. Aliya looked expectantly at the tablet, hoping he would share the news. But of



course he wasn't going to tell her what was the matter. He was kind in his own way, and wise, possibly even quite fond of her, but she was just one of the myriad responsibilities he had as elder locksmith.

'I've got to go.' He looked up at her. 'Maybe . . . have breakfast before our next session?'

'Ouch!' Omar grinned. 'You had a bit of a rumbly tummy?'

Aliya felt her cheeks heat up. She had opened two portals that morning, both to street-food vendors, because she'd been hungry. But that was not all. She was starting to gain a reputation for portal-opening blunders. Last week, she'd opened a portal into the ladies' toilet at Grand Central Station (she had needed a wee), and then into the thick of a Mongol raid on Baghdad (what she had been reading about for history class). That exercise had gone particularly wrong. Openings to other times always had to be made in discreet places, to out-of-the-way storage cupboards or dusty cellars in derelict buildings, so that the time-travellers could sneak into a new time undetected. The mishap had earned her a week's polishing duty in the key nursery,

where she had been bossed around by a grump – a small hamster-like creature with a whole lot of attitude.

Her mistakes were never dangerous, though. Professor Nigm always had the shield on when Aliya was practising, a safety device that ensured that nothing could enter through the portal into the Smithy.

‘Why don’t you join the others for the rest of the lesson?’ Professor Nigm said. A ringlet of smoke, deep blue now, coiled around her shoulders for a moment before dissolving. Nigm’s way of saying goodbye.

‘Yalla,’ Omar said when Aliya made no move to follow them out of the workshop. ‘You know you’re not allowed in here alone.’

‘I *know*,’ she shot back. ‘I’m just gonna get my things.’

‘We’ll be in the carpet nursery.’

Omar gave her an amused look before turning and following Nigm towards the exit.

She returned his smile with a grimace. She was the youngest apprentice, the mascot, the joke . . .

Aliya headed towards the other end of the workshop where her satchel lay on a table. Above her, Simi had changed back to bird form and was whistling in a loop around the room, her luminous crest raised. Aliya gazed up at her. The nadim had always been a strange creature. Maybe because she had picked her out of the most dangerous travel key in the Infinitum. Simi had once been part of the Darkling – the key that belonged to the magician Dorian Darke. She had been the grain of Sublime energy that formed the eye of his snake-shaped key. But after Aliya had stolen and released her from his magic, Simi had metamorphosed into her present form and chosen to become her companion.

Yes, they were companions of a sort. Even so, Aliya often felt lost in the nadim's presence. Last year, before she had taken her final winged shape, Simi had given her all kinds of trouble with her shapeshifting, raspberry-blowing, setting-fire-to-things habits. Now, after a period of calm, she had begun to grow . . . restless, was that it? Some days, the nadim lounged about for hours, uninterested in the apprentice stuff they were supposed to be studying, like

vitalizing time-travel devices or opening portals. At other times, she was fretful and unpredictable, flying about practising her high notes, a sound that felt like shards of glass penetrating your eardrums. One thing was certain: she was very different from the other apprentices' nadims – all trusty beings that did their locksmiths' bidding without fuss. Celeste Clocks had a lemur that curled around her neck like a stole and slept peacefully when she wasn't working. Zeina Zaman had a fountain pen that could write messages in the air. They were useful, calm and reliable tools, while hers . . . Sometimes Aliya felt as though Simi wasn't a nadim at all, but something different altogether – a freakish entity with a mind of her own.

She suddenly became aware that the doorway they used for portal practice stood slightly ajar. Had Nigm not closed it properly? As she approached, Simi swooped down and alighted on her shoulder. Then, plunging forward, she pecked at the lock, probing it with her luminous beak. There was a pulse of light from under the door.

‘What?’ Aliya cried. ‘What did you do?’

Aliya shot a glance over her shoulder through the window and into the corridor. Apprentices were not allowed to open portals without an authorized locksmith around, and whatever Simi did would count as *her* doing. Locksmiths and their nadims lived in symbiosis – like one soul, split into two bodies.

Aliya decided to have a quick peek. It had to be safe enough with the shield on.

For some moments, the opening showed nothing but darkness, an uncanny colour for an opening.

Aliya hesitated. She tried to grasp the nadim, who was fluttering by her head, to urge her to transform back into a key so they could lock the portal, but Simi resisted. Most of the time, all Aliya had to do was stroke her along her striped crest to get her to change. Instead of obeying, Simi squawked excitedly, her attention on the blackness of the portal. But they needed to close this rogue opening fast, before they were seen.

‘Come on, Simi!’ Aliya made another attempt to get the nadim to change.

Without Simi’s compliance there was no way Aliya would be able to close the portal. She needed

her key blade to turn the reverse way in the lock.

Something stirred in the darkness, glittering. Aliya thought it might be water at first, but then realized what she was seeing. It was scales – the scales of an enormous, black snake.

Aliya jerked backwards as the big head swung towards her. The snake's head shifted a little to the side, and now Aliya could see the sunken spot where its eye once had sat – the place Simi had come from.

The Darkling.

Aliya watched in horror as the snake probed the opening for a way to reach them. *Thank God the shield is still activated.* Hands shaking, she reached out and grabbed Simi firmly around her middle, catching her wings and pressing them down. What was *wrong* with her?

In front of her the Darkling swayed, its forked tongue shooting out and hitting the shield. Behind it, Aliya could make out a dim shop. It was the Shop of Second Chances, the locus of Dorian's magic.

'*Switch.*' Aliya gave Simi a sharp tap on the crest.

Simi finally complied, reshaping into a key in her hands. Aliya felt her palms light up as she inserted

the key blade and turned it in reverse. The portal closed.

Aliya sank down on her haunches, her head swimming. Had she – or Simi – just opened a portal to the Shop of Second Chances? How was it possible? It *shouldn't* be possible.