

# AGENT ASHA

## MISSION SHARK BYTES



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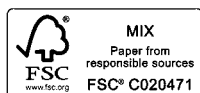
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# AGENT ASHA

MISSION SHARK BYTES

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## Prologue

April 14 - 09:45

A mole's bottom is dark place to be. A duck's bottom is a wet one, and a hippo's bottom is dangerous one.

The sea's bottom is all three, and that's exactly where the diver was swimming.

Kim Lau was currently about a mile away from the shore. According to her depth gauge, she was also thirty-six metres below the surface of the water. Each kick of her powerful legs was taking her deeper into the darkness and further away from the support boat. Her helmet torch wasn't lighting up much, except for a few startled fish.

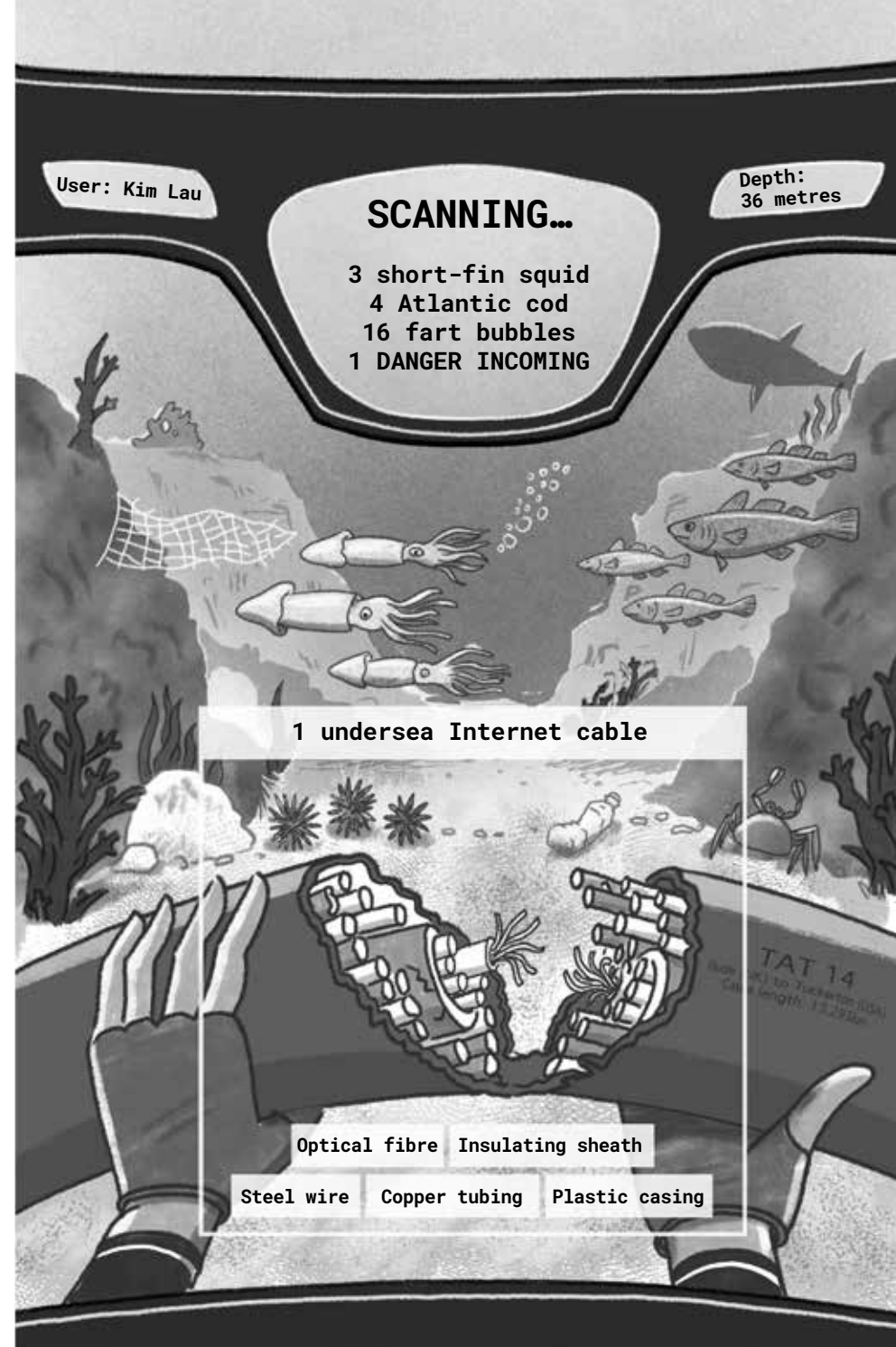
She was looking for a cable on the seabed, but it was hard to see anything in the murky water. It still amazed her to think that lengths of glass and plastic at the bottom of the sea carried the Internet for thousands of miles, from continent to continent.

At least, that was what was supposed to happen. Three of Britain's most important Internet cables had been damaged in the last twenty-four hours. Kim worked for a cable-laying company, and her bosses had sent her team to inspect the cables and find out what was going on.

She scanned the seabed with her torch, ignoring the cold seeping into her diving suit. There it was! The cable was half-hidden among seaweed and sand, stretching away into the darkness. She swam closer.

The neat black casing had been ripped open and fibre-optic wires were spilling out. This wasn't normal wear and tear. This was serious damage. Kim reached for her camera to take a photo.

Wait... What was that?



Had something moved in the darkness?

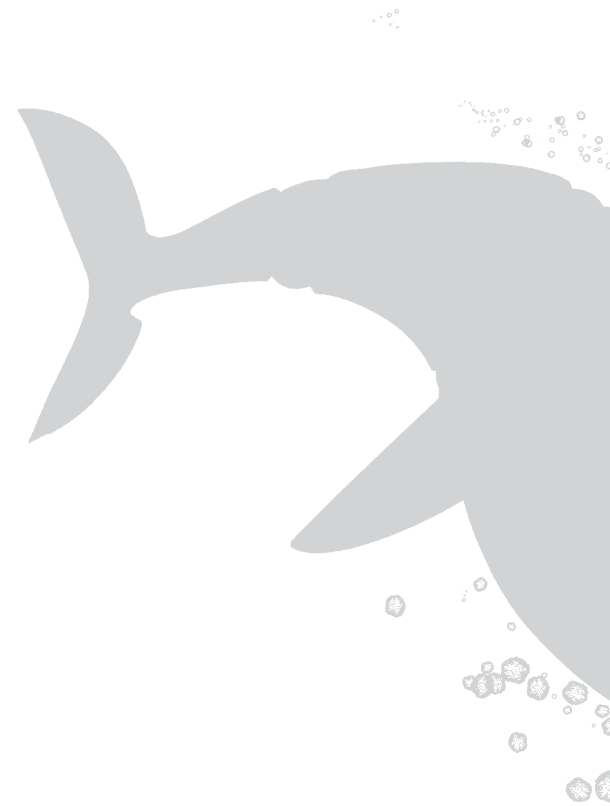
Kim slowly moved her torch from side to side, her stomach lurching. She could hear nothing but the sound of her own breathing through her oxygen mask.

*Stop being silly, she told herself. You're imagining things.*

Then her torch caught the flicker of a dark shape circling the cable.

It was every diver's worst nightmare, swimming silently towards her. One sharp fin. One pointy nose. One gigantic, gaping mouth.

One hundred and one razor-sharp teeth...





## Chapter 1

April 14 - 09:45

Asha pressed the equals button on her calculator seven, eight, nine, possibly ten times. She could never resist messing around with a button, or for that matter, a do-not-enter sign, a locked door or suspiciously loose floorboards. The closer she got to finishing an invention, the twitchier her fingers became.

“It’s not working!” Asha scrolled through the code on her tablet and squished her nose in frustration. “There must be a bug.”

“OMG! A bug! Where? Get it away from me!”





Tumble, a small hamster-like toy with bright orange fur, jumped up from the corner of Asha's desk.

"Tumble, relax! It's not a creepy-crawly bug!" Asha replied.

Tumble was small but loud. Asha had

invented him when she was six-years-old, using a Poopless Pet™ toy, a motherboard from an old games console and a teddy bear. He had a tiny display on his chest that showed his battery level and a few basic emojis.

"Get the bug away from me, Asha!" Tumble shrieked, still hopping from paw to paw.

"Seriously! RE-LAX. It's only a computer bug in my code." Asha was looking at her tablet, searching for the problem.

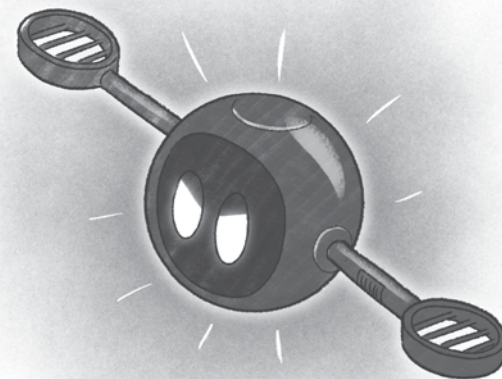
Drone whizzed over and hovered above Tumble's head. "Let Asha concentrate on her coding, Tumble.

You're being a pest."

Drone was a nannybot and she'd been with Asha since she was in nappies. The metallic grey robot had logged every time Asha had cried, dribbled or farted. Now Asha was older, Drone was supposed to make sure she did her homework on time, brushed her teeth twice a day and never broke the rules.

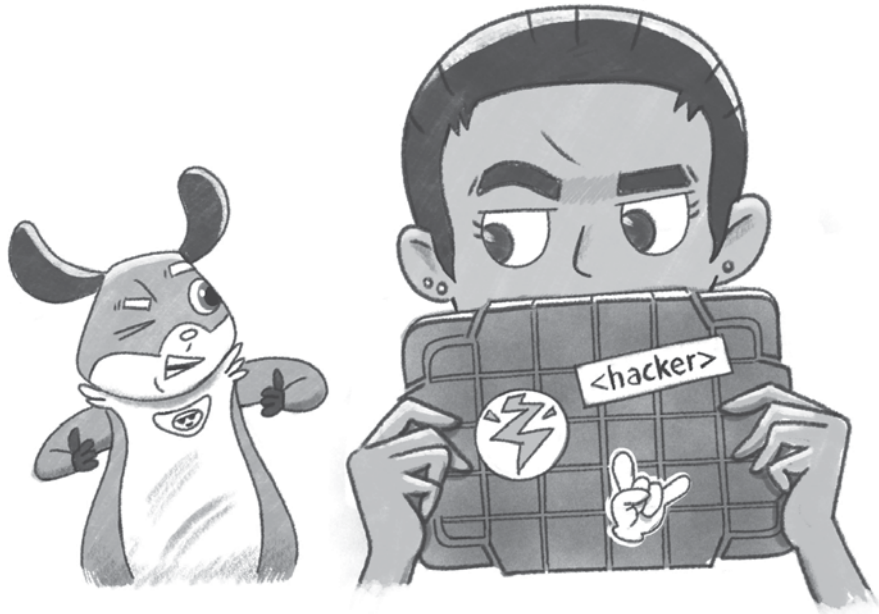
What Asha's parents didn't know was that Asha had been hacking Drone for years. Mostly it had been to get around annoying parental controls, but also to help Asha get out of trouble, which for one reason or another, she never seemed to be too far away from.

"It's just this algorithm..." Asha mumbled. She was trying to invent a way to message her friends using two calculators. Asha knew that teachers loved calculators, so they'd never suspect her if she



was playing with one in class. They'd just think she was doing maths.

"Algorithm. Totally. Got it!" said Tumble, scrunching up the right side of his face and winking at Asha.



"You remember algorithms, don't you? Like ... the jam sandwich algorithm?" Asha asked, putting down her tablet. He still looked blank. Tumble's RAM was quite small.

"Please, you two, no more jam in Asha's

bedroom. It's a hygiene risk!" Drone cut in, but she was too late.

Asha slipped out of her bedroom and checked that no one was in the hallway. She then crept into the empty kitchen and found a tub of butter, a jar of jam, a loaf of sliced bread, a knife and a plate.

Back in her bedroom, she stood opposite Tumble. "Look at these things, Tumble, and pretend I'm a computer. That means I can't think for myself. I can only follow your commands." Asha lined up all the items on her desk. "I want you to give me step-by-step instructions, in the right order, for me to make a jam sandwich."

"No problemo," said Tumble. "First, you put the bread on the plate. Easy!"

Asha repeated his command in her best computer voice: "PUT BREAD ON PLATE!" Then, with stiff, robot-like movements, she picked up the loaf of bread and put the entire thing, wrapped in plastic, on the plate.

Tumble's eyebrows wrinkled. "No, come on Asha! Not all of it."



“NOT ALL OFF IT,” Asha repeated, starting to enjoy being a computer. “WHAT IS IT? WHAT IS ALL? ERROR. DO NOT COMPUTE.”

Tumble paused before speaking again. “Gotcha... Open the wrapper. Take a slice of bread from the loaf. Then put the slice on the plate.”

“OPEN THE WRAPPER. TAKE A SLICE OF BREAD. PUT SLICE ON PLATE.” Asha followed Tumble’s instructions to the letter.

“Then get some butter.”

“GET SOME BUTTER.” Asha smiled then sunk all her fingers into the tub and scooped out a huge, greasy glob of butter with her hand.



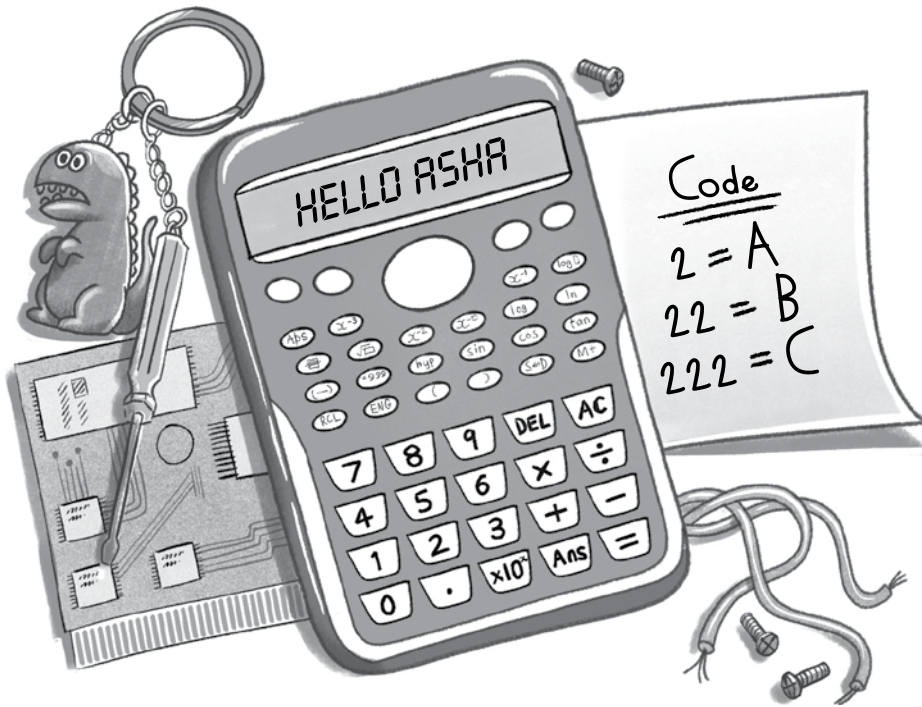
Tumble’s mouth flopped open for a second, then he started laughing so hard that he fell onto his back, his little paws waving in the air. “LOL, Asha! I didn’t mean ALL of the butter and you need to use the knife, not your fingers!”

“Exactly!” Asha wiped the butter off her hands and on to her jeans. “Computers don’t know what we mean unless we’re super clear. You have to write a set of instructions in the right order to get a computer to do anything. That’s the algorithm. And if the algorithm is wrong, you get a bug. And I’ve got a really annoying bug right now.”

“Another bug? OMG! WHERE? Tumble shouted at the floor. “Drone, do something!”

Asha rolled her eyes at Drone and tried not to laugh. She went back to her tablet. She pressed the equals sign again and finally a sharp beep sounded on Asha’s second calculator. HELLO ASHA scrolled across the screen.

“Wow! The chatulator actually works!” Asha bounced up from her desk. “Demola is going to love this!”



Drone bobbed in the air in front of Asha, rotors whirring. “But you should pay attention during class, Asha.”

Asha’s hacks and upgrades hadn’t managed to stop Drone’s main function: worrying. Drone worried about the temperature (“Will you be warm enough, Asha?”), jumping down the stairs (“You might sprain your ankle, Asha!”), and even the toilet (“You should immediately empty your bowels, Asha!”).

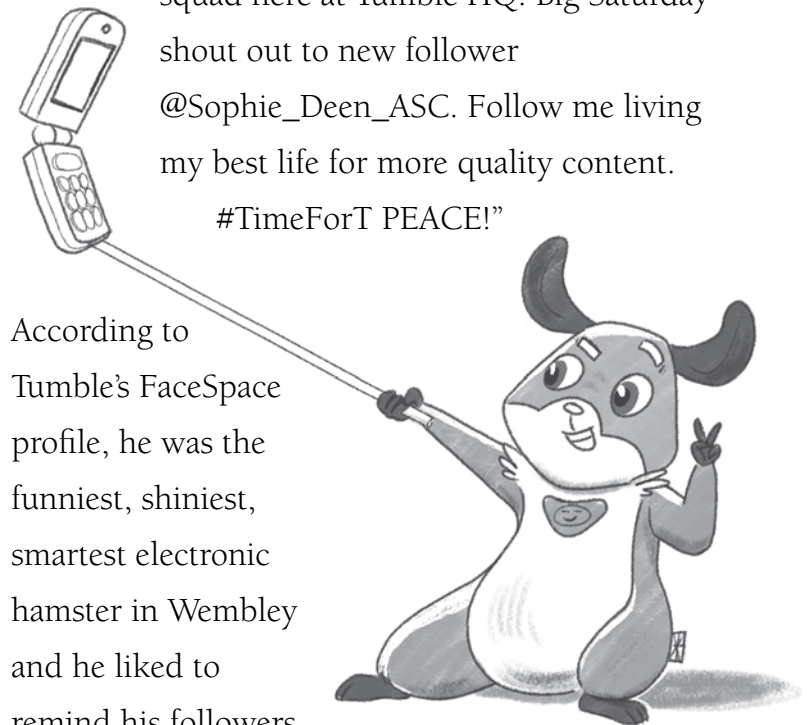
“I’d never use the chatulator when I’m learning

something. Only during assemblies. And breaks. And toilet breaks. And lunch. And maybe detentions.” Asha said the last part under her breath.

Tumble jumped up from the desk, his tiny phone held out in front of him. “What’s up, friendos! It’s 10.06 AM and I’m chilling with the squad here at Tumble HQ. Big Saturday shout out to new follower @Sophie\_Deen\_ASC. Follow me living my best life for more quality content.

#TimeForT PEACE!”

According to Tumble’s FaceSpace profile, he was the funniest, shiniest, smartest electronic hamster in Wembley and he liked to remind his followers at every opportunity.





Drone was unimpressed. “How many followers have you got now? Three?”

“Even Shelly-B started somewhere, Smellycopter,” Tumble replied, sticking his plastic tongue out. He was obsessed with Shelly Belly, the social-media celebrity turned tech-entrepreneur. ShellyInc apps and games were the most downloaded of all time. Whenever a photo of Shelly’s pet monkey-panda hybrid, Amanda, was uploaded to FaceSpace, the Internet almost crashed. “And I think you’ll find I have way more than three followers.”

“Probability suggests they are all bots.” Drone whirled her propellers. In fact, I’ll scan for fake accounts now. Commencing scan...” Drone paused. “Scan could not be performed due to a connection error.”

“You were saying?” said Tumble smugly.

Asha’s eyebrows pulled together. “Connection error, that’s weird. I’ll take a look at the router after breakfast. Not having the Internet will ruin the weekend!”

## Chapter 2

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10:30 AM

In the kitchen Asha was immediately hit by a wall of words.

“Good morning!” cried Dad. “Just in time for breakfast! The most important meal of the day! Especially for you, my wonderful pumpkin, and your BIG GROWING BRAIN!” He rubbed Asha’s head, messing up her hair, and then tried to make her dance along to the song on the radio.

Asha studied his face. Dad was smiling and wearing his favourite football apron, but he looked tired.

“Hello, Rani!” said Mum, looking up from the



spreadsheets on her tablet. Both she and Dad worked hard on their side business, Joshi's Jalesi's. Judging by the piles of spinach, paneer and gram flour lined up on the side, they had a long day of cooking ahead.

"Morning, Mum!" Asha replied, sitting down at the table. Mum had called her Rani – her princess – for as long as Asha could remember. She was

more into prototyping than princesses, but she loved her nickname all the same.

The song on the radio finished playing and the news came on. "The country of Iceland has lost access to the Internet. Reports suggest that undersea cables may have been—"

Dad switched it off. "That's enough of you, Mr News Man. Breakfast time is family time! We don't want to listen to your boring blah blah blah!"

Actually Asha *did* want to listen. She had so many questions. How could an entire country lose access to the Internet? Why was Iceland called Iceland? Who was the first person to make ice cubes?

"Wait, Dad! How can the whole of Iceland's Internet be broken? And what have cables got to do with anything?"

"My genius pumpkin, you know more about this than I do!"



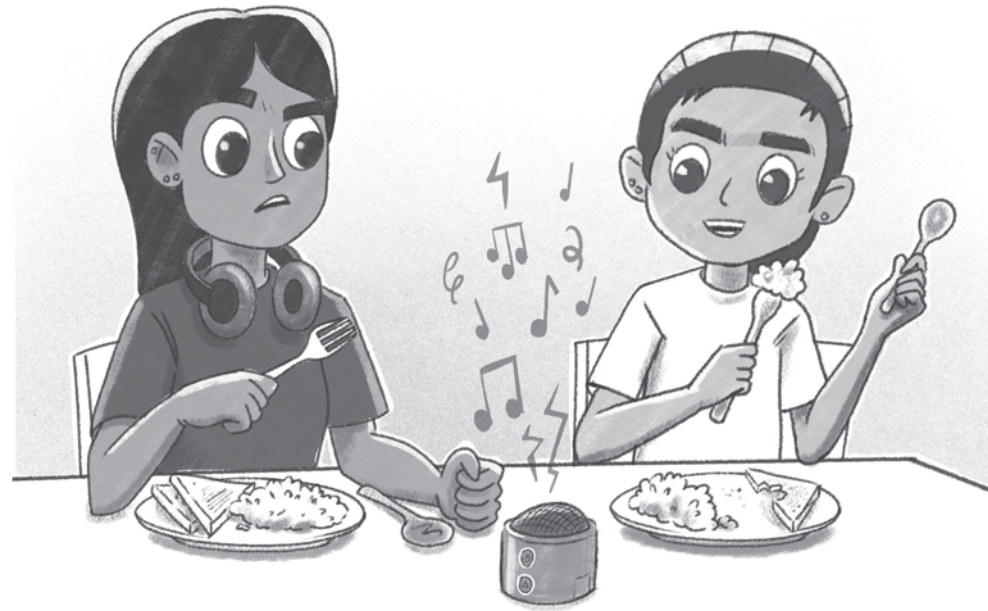
Asha sighed. She should have known better. Her Dad thought the Cloud was an actual cloud.

“Rani, you know enough about electricity to know that the Internet has to be carried by something. I can’t see the cable that makes this light turn on, but that doesn’t mean that cable doesn’t exist.” Mum pointed to the light in the ceiling. She was a whizz at DIY and she knew about how to think through a problem. “Now, tell me, what are you going to do today while we cook, Rani? Invent the next FaceSpace?”

Before Asha could reply, footsteps stomped down the hallway and Asha’s older sister, Anushka, appeared in the doorway. She was wearing a baggy black T-shirt, ripped skinny jeans and a scowl. Anushka had been fun until a year ago. Now, she was only interested in music. Last week, she had recorded the neighbour’s cat and mixed it with the sound of a construction site.

“Hey,” muttered Anushka as she sat down.

“Hey,” Asha responded distractedly. She really wanted to find out more about Iceland’s Internet.



“Putie, turn the radio on.” Asha activated the family’s virtual assistant.

“Iceland’s schools, hospitals and airports are all—” said the reporter.

“Putie, play Nush’s playlist!” interrupted Anushka.

A horrible screeching filled the air.

“Putie, turn the radio on.” Asha repeated, covering her ears.

“Putie, activate parental controls. Don’t play anything!” At Mum’s command, silence filled the kitchen.

“Much better,” said Dad.

The family tucked into their Masala eggs.

Asha thought about how she could record her parents’ voices and then code a program to bypass Putie’s parental controls. She’d already created a VoiceFaker Program for Drone, so it shouldn’t be too difficult.

“Asha, eat your breakfast before it gets cold,” said Mum.”

“Dis is del hmff,” Asha said, digging in. Then she remembered not to talk with her mouth full. “Sorry,” she tried again. “This is delicious.”

“You’re very welcome, pumpkin,” said Dad. “Now, what homework do you have this weekend? I want you to finish that before you do any more tinkering with your gadgets.” Dad poked at the tablet on the table. “And I think there was a message for you...”

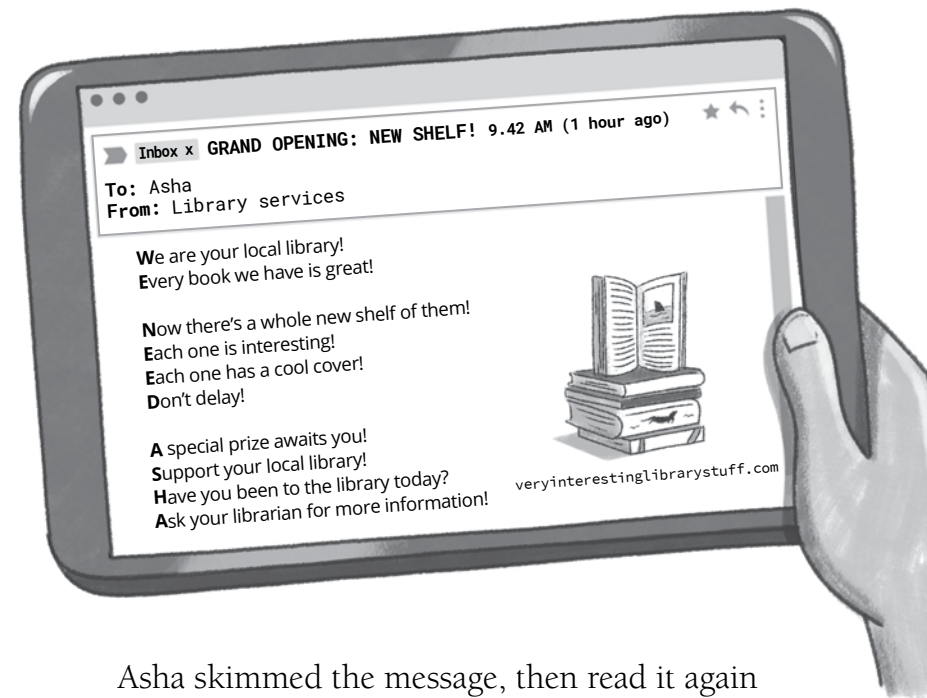
Asha’s parents had access to Anushka and Asha’s email and FaceSpace accounts. In theory, they could check everything that Asha sent or received, but they didn’t know about her other three secret

accounts. Neither did Anushka. Asha leaned over to see what Dad was talking about.

“The local library is opening a new shelf,” he said, opening an email.

“Wow,” said Anushka. “How very-not-exciting!”

For once Asha agreed with her sister. “That’s cool, Dad. I bet they have more ... erm ... paper now.” Asha tried to sound interested. “Let me see.”



Asha skimmed the message, then read it again more slowly.



“Dad”, she said thoughtfully. “Does this message seem ... weird to you?”

Dad nodded wisely. “Ah, that’s how you write when you’re advertising something. You use lots of exclamation marks.”

There were certainly lots of exclamation marks on Joshi’s Jalesi’s website. But Asha was still suspicious. Something about it just felt ... odd.

Asha played around with the words in her head. First she tried them backwards:

**Ew era ruoy lacol yrarbil.**

Then she tried missing out every other word:

**We your library. Book have great.  
There’s whole shelf.**

Maybe not.

What about taking the first letter of every word?

**Wayll...**



That wasn’t right either.

Suddenly Asha found what she was looking for. It was a code. Not the code that she used to write computer programs. It was an old-fashioned human code, where the words contained a hidden message. Once Asha saw it, it was obvious. The first letter of each sentence seemed to jump off the page and dance around, while the rest of the email faded into the background.

The code said: **WE NEED ASHA.**