

THE SECRET OF AVIUM

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Art by Antonio De Luca

1

Ollie paused in the darkness, flattening himself against the corridor's stone wall. He thought he'd heard a voice.

And it wasn't just any voice, it was *that* voice.

Sister Anna's ear-splitting yell.

It was what she used to get everyone out of bed when she wanted to give a rocket to some 'delinquent' who'd got caught hanging around the girls' corridor at night, or sneaking into the dining hall.

If she finds me, this time she'll kill me, thought Ollie.

There was no way he could justify his presence on the ground floor at that forbidden hour. He listened carefully, but the only sound he could hear was his heart pounding in his chest.

To calm himself, he squeezed his eyes shut and recited his good-luck mantra, quickly, without any commas: 'In the shadow of the eagle the sparrow flies sweetly the blackbird flies lightly the owl flies wisely'.

The tension in his muscles loosened and the prickling on his neck stopped.

The shouts are coming from the dormitories, upstairs. And if Sister Anna is there, that means just one thing...

His face lit up with a satisfied smile.

There's nobody on the ground floor.

Exactly as he had hoped.

Ollie immediately turned his attention back to the corridor. Although he knew every nook, cranny and shortcut of the Institute by heart, over the last few days he'd studied the route very carefully, eyeing up his target destination whenever he passed the stairs.

And now, there was just a short distance separating him from the truth. A few steps further and his past would no longer hold any secrets.

Nearly there, he thought, collecting his thoughts.

He'd planned it all out, now was the time to act.

This was certainly his favourite part.

He tiptoed the last few metres of his long trek and reached the stairs. He knew what he would see next: fifteen creaky wooden steps, another short corridor and then three ghostly doors hidden in darkness. The laundry room, the pantry and the last door, with a dust-covered handle – the reason he was there.

The Institute's archive store.

He slipped his hand into his pocket and stroked a small round key. Usually it hung on a hook on the wall of the porter's lodge, under the watchful eyes of Sister Anna. Stealing it had required a certain disregard for danger, a faked fainting fit in the dining hall and some soup poured over the heads of his table companions. As well as some help from an accomplice. The plan, despite its complexity, had worked like a dream and now nothing could get in his way.

Except for Sister Anna, of course, with her boxer's reflexes.

His mouth tightened, in a moment of anxiety. He pushed back his dishevelled hair to stop it getting in his eyes, and signalled towards the old cupboard in the corridor, where the nuns kept the winter blankets.

Rose shuffled out of her hiding place in her furry slippers, and stopped to cover a yawn with her hand.

'Get a grip!' Ollie mimed the words tensely, only his lips moving.

If they were found out of bed, they'd be forced to copy out the one hundred and twenty-seven pages of the Institute's rule book, word for word. Or maybe Sister Anna would

carry out one of her favourite threats, such as ‘delinquents get tied to the car’s back bumper by their ears’. Worse than that, everything he’d planned to get to this point would turn out to be wasted effort. That’s why Rose and her laid-back attitude made him more agitated than any hitch he could imagine.

If she doesn’t take this seriously we’re done for.

‘So now what?’ said Rose, sleepily.

‘So now what, nothing! I’ve already explained it to you,’ said Ollie. He looked at the clock on his smartphone: it was 23:42. ‘We haven’t got long. Sister Anna has a midnight snack before doing the night patrol. If something happens out here, send me a text. You did remember your phone?’

Rose pulled it out of her fleecy pyjama top and unlocked the screen.

Ollie turned pale. ‘You’ve got it on silent, *I hope?*’

‘Sure. But get a move on or I’m going to fall asleep here.’

Here we go again, with her am-I-bothered attitude.

‘You said you’d help me,’ he snapped.

‘Only because it’s your birthday today and you promised to take me shopping for a *whole* day’. Rose gave the sly smile of someone who knows she’s got the upper hand. She spelt it out clearly: ‘N-O S-T-R-I-N-G-S!’

‘It was only supposed to be an afternoon!’ muttered Ollie, swallowing what he was going to say next.

She always tries it on! It’s my fifteenth birthday, and she expects me to buy her a present!

He turned on the phone’s torch and set off up the stairs. He passed by the laundry room and the pantry. He certainly didn’t feel hungry at a time like this. When he reached the end of the corridor, he stopped in front of the archive store.

He’d wanted to open that door ever since he’d first been brought to the Institute, eleven years ago.

He dried his sweaty hands to get a better grip on the key and turned it in the lock. In the silent Institute the metallic click sounded louder than a firecracker. Ollie slipped into the room and the door closed behind him with another terrible thud. He listened, his eyes fixed on his phone's screen.

It was 23:49.

No text from Rose.

He breathed deeply and braved the darkness.

2

The archive store was not much bigger than the table it contained. The windowless walls were masked by three bookshelves stuffed with cardboard boxes and folders covered in dust. In the middle of the desk was the oldest computer Ollie had ever seen. The monitor was grey and bulky and reminded him of an astronaut's helmet. He sat down in front of it and pressed the power button, which made a click. The screen flickered a couple of times, mimicking the fluttering of his heart, and then shone blue.

At last I'll find out who you are, he thought.

He wanted to find out their names. To see their faces.

It took several minutes to load. He'd almost lost hope, but then the cursor flashed and the system demanded a password. Ollie tried the teachers' names and then a few expressions that Sister Anna was fond of, like 'delinquent,' 'justyouwait' and 'overmydeadbody'. But none of them worked. So then he rummaged in the desk, which was full of post-its and coffee-stained sheets of paper. Finally he turned over the keyboard, and there he found a sticky label.

Veritas-filia-temporis, he read. *Bingo!*

But still the computer wouldn't let him in.

Ollie frowned, thinking back to his Latin lessons. *Perhaps it needs to be translated?*
Let's see: truth is... the daughter... of time.

He pressed enter, and the computer loaded the database without any further controls. Smiling triumphantly, Ollie quickly typed out the letters of his name:

Oliver Florens

An egg timer appeared on the screen, rotating slowly.

Impatiently, Ollie checked the time: 23:55.

It felt like being in the hull of a shipwreck, marooned in a dark and mysterious sea. Any minute now a shark would come for its midnight snack. The fifteen steps, the short corridor that led to the pantry, then Sister Anna would see the light coming from the archive store, she'd open the door and... 23:56.

He forced himself to look away from the clock.

It hadn't occurred to him that the old computer would be so slow. It was a setback, but Rose was there as a lookout and in an emergency he could turn off the monitor, hunker down in the dark and then creep away. They just had to stick to the plan.

But in the meantime this is going to drive me insane.

'Calm down,' he said to himself. 'I'm in the heart of the Institute.'

A place that held everyone's secrets: information that might be useful to trade with his friends.

Or at least something he could offer as a gift, to make up for the minestrone he'd poured over their heads as a ruse to get hold of the key.

Maybe I'll even find something out about Sister Anna.

He looked at the bookcases. Many of the folders had fallen on their sides, too bulky for the flimsy shelves. Because of their weight, most had been piled up on the lower levels and all that was left on top were a few scrunched-up sheets of paper and a small box that immediately caught his attention. It was covered in dust.

That must have been there a while.

'Maybe... for eleven years?' he murmured instinctively.

He pointed his phone's torch at it and noticed something gold glittering in the dust. Some kind of insect scuttling away from the cone of light.

He squinted, but it had already disappeared.

'Strange.'

More curious than ever, he stood on the office chair and reached up to the high shelf. He brushed away the dust: the grey shroud concealed a box not much bigger than his open hand. Engraved on the wood were two letters, still perfectly legible: a slightly wobbly O and an R with a curly foot.

‘Oliver and Rose.’

There was no mistake about it. Now his heart really was beating like a drum. The box had something to do with them, it was theirs. He had to see what was inside it.

In the shadow of the eagle, the sparrow flies sweetly...

‘No, not now,’ he muttered to himself.

‘What’s inside that?’ asked Rose.

Ollie nearly fell off his chair. He let the box slip out of his grasp, and his sister snatched it in mid-air. He gaped at her.

‘What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be the look-out!’

‘I was getting bored. Everyone’s asleep, the coast’s clear,’ replied Rose, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. She was looking closely at the object Ollie had found. ‘O and R, that’s interesting.’

‘Rose! It’s 23:59! If Sister Anna comes by...’

‘If Sister Anna comes by she won’t see a thing, petal,’ she butted in, pointing at the door. She’d stopped up the crack with one of the old winter blankets from the cupboard.

‘Clever, huh?’

Irritated, Ollie pursed his lips.

‘Don’t call me petal... rosy-posy!’

She took no notice of him and shook the box, smiling. ‘Shall we open it?’

Without waiting for her brother to reply, she lifted the lid.

‘Oh, how pretty!’ she exclaimed.

Ollie grabbed hold of the box, but his sister held tight and tried to wrench it back from him. Weakened by many years of damp, the wood split with a crack. Ollie and Rose glared at each other accusingly, then Rose picked up its contents, which had fallen to the floor.

‘They’re necklaces,’ she said, throwing one to her brother.

It was a cylinder of amber, attached to a thin chain. It was warm to the touch, which was completely impossible, given how long it must have been inside the box. Ollie thought it must be from his slightly sweaty hand, and wiped it on his trousers. But when he touched it again, he could still feel its warmth. He weighed the pendant in his hand. It was as long as his little finger and very light.

Perhaps it’s a whistle... he thought, but there were no holes to blow through. When he tilted it, the blue light from his phone picked out a fine engraved line.

He turned it over in his fingers to see it better.

‘It’s, well, it has...’ he whispered, looking at it intently, trying to make sense of the intricate carving. He showed it to Rose, unable to hide his astonishment. ‘It’s carved with olive leaves.’

‘And this one has roses,’ said his sister, showing him the necklace in her hand. ‘Do you think they’re from...’

‘Our mother and father,’ Ollie completed her sentence, his mind made up. ‘Yes, I think so.’

The computer beeped. The database had stopped humming and their file was open. Ollie sat down at the table and studied the documents that had appeared on the screen: police reports, Institute forms, medical notes, even a couple of articles from the local paper.

Rose was reading aloud, but her enthusiasm gradually faded.

‘Ollie, there’s nothing here,’ she said at last. ‘We were found in a park, wearing the necklaces and covered by a blanket. If it was our parents, they...’ she shook her head, her words failing her. ‘Do you think our names came from the necklaces?’

Ollie didn’t answer. He just wanted to hurl the pendant as far away as possible and punch the old screen. Their history was nothing more than this: a mouldy old box and a couple of stupid necklaces.

They hadn’t learnt anything.

He turned off the computer, trying to banish the nagging word that kept buzzing in his head: ‘abandoned’. It sounded worse than ‘lost’ or ‘kidnapped’. Much worse.

‘Let’s go,’ he said gruffly to Rose.

‘Straight to detention,’ a voice retorted.

Standing in the doorway of the archive store, in her vast, tent-like flowery mauve dressing gown, Sister Anna was blocking any possible escape route. She was clutching a box of snack bars and smiling smugly. Her inability to decide between chocolate or jam flavours had cost her ten minutes in the pantry, but now she had won a much more delicious prize.

3

Long streaks of rain ran down the windowpanes like tears.

It had rained every day since they'd been caught poking around in the archives. Ollie was moping in his bedroom, staring out at the layers of grey cloud in the sky, resting his chin on his folded arms. He'd been confined to his room for two weeks, and who knew when that pit bull Sister Anna would loosen her grip on him and find a new victim. Ollie had finished all his schoolwork in the first three days, so the nun had changed her strategy: she'd confiscated all his books and made him wash the reusable nappies for all the babies in the Institute. Every single one. Ollie's stomach churned just thinking about it.

For the thousandth time since he'd found it, Ollie took the necklace off.

'Great birthday present,' he grumbled.

He'd spent a long time studying the engraving of olive leaves, hoping to find some clue to his past, and that's how he'd noticed that there was a design on the base of the cylinder. It was raised in relief, like a rubber stamp or a seal for wax.

The design was a double spiral.



He'd spent days researching it on the internet: Descartes, Archimedes, the triskele of Celtic mythology, yin and yang, the infinity symbol... nothing seemed quite right and he'd turned instead to studying the material the pendant was made of, which was still getting slightly warmer in his hand. He'd even sent an email to his chemistry teacher. They'd come to the conclusion that there must be some internal reaction, but there was no question of breaking it apart. In the end, this too began to seem like a dead end and lost its importance.

He stuffed it back under his T-shirt and went back to staring out of the window.

A robin flew from a branch onto the windowsill.

'I'm sorry, the rain's washed away all the crumbs,' he said.

He pressed his finger against the cold glass. He would have liked to open the window and wrap the little bird in a cloth. It was a mystery why the robin had taken such a liking to him and to Rose: since their first night in the Institute, they'd often heard him singing a gentle lullaby.

Like our mother should have done.

In a burst of rage, Ollie slammed his fist into the windowpane.

'Who cares! I don't want parents anyway! And you can get lost too!'

The frightened robin flew away. But the silent and empty windowsill did nothing to improve Ollie's mood, far from it. With a deep sigh, he picked up his phone and enviously scrolled through the holiday pictures posted by his classmates and his friends from karate.

Feeling more and more irritable, he took a photo of the grey wood outside the Institute and shared it, with the caption 'Worst summer of my life.' Then he locked the screen and sank back onto his bed.

The rain fell on the red rooftiles and ran down the drainpipes, dripping steadily on the windowsill. The branch of a tree cast its shadow across the posters that covered his bedroom wall. Ollie rolled over and buried his face under the pillow, sinking into the world of dreams.

Behind his closed eyelids, the bed was transformed into a soft beige velvet armchair. His feet didn't reach the floor. The rain drummed above his head, but he was no longer in his bedroom in the Institute.

He was on a train, at night, and he was escaping from something.

On the seat in front of him, a woman was rocking a baby girl on her knee. The little one was looking around curiously, her plump little hands trying to catch the specks of golden dust that danced in the air. Then the unknown woman leaned towards him and stroked his cheek. There were splendid red feathers tucked into her blonde hair.

‘You’re safe,’ said the woman. ‘We’re nearly there.’

Ollie raised himself on his elbows. He tried to look out of the train window, but he could only see his reflection in the fogged black glass. A moment later the carriage filled with a blinding light and the baby started crying. He was suddenly certain that this was Rose, and the sound pierced through him like the squeaking of a thousand rusty springs.

Mattress springs, he thought, still half asleep.

The bed moved, for real this time, and Ollie’s eyes sprang open. He was wide awake.

Rose was sitting on the edge of the mattress and had taken the phone out of his hands. Ollie lunged forward to take it back, but she pulled away, out of his reach.

‘Give it back to me,’ he said, without much confidence.

Ignoring him, Rose began to scroll through his notifications. ‘You couldn’t have nicked my phone back too while you were at it?’ She paused to focus her attention on something she was reading: ‘Rick’s really got it in for you... he’s even commented on your last photo...’

Ollie shrugged. ‘Rick’s a hater with the brain of a sea slug. Tomorrow I’ll tell Sister Anna and he’ll stop, you’ll see.’

‘Huh... you’re too diplomatic. If I were you, I’d have thumped him on the nose by now.’

Rose went back to scrolling through his posts, twiddling the tulle of her red skirt. Although it was summer, she was wearing thick leggings and a long-sleeved fleece two sizes too big for her.

Ollie sighed. *It’s not like this is the North Pole.*

In recent years, his sister had become obsessed with the idea that she had delicate skin, and even at the swimming pool she bundled herself up in layers, allowing only her feet to get wet. The teachers said she'd get fed up with these silly games sooner or later, she was already eleven years old after all. Rose's response was to shrug her shoulders with a twinkle in her eyes.

'He hasn't got an ounce of imagination,' she decided, and threw the phone back to him. It bounced on the bed and landed on the floor.

Ollie glared at her and retreated into the shell of his bad mood, hoping that would put his sister off. But Rose took no notice and sat down beside him.

'Are you still cross with me about the look-out business?'

'No. Well, yes, a bit, but it's history now.'

'So what's bothering you?' she persisted.

'I had that dream again,' he admitted reluctantly. 'It won't leave me alone.'

'The same one again? You should talk to Stephanie about it, she's really kind.'

Ollie turned away, pulling a face. 'That's all I need, the psychologist! Anyway, what are you doing here exactly? If we're caught together, Sister Anna will double our detention.'

Instead of replying, Rose pointed at the window. For a split second their faces were reflected in the glass, which made them both smile. They shared the same dark eyes and jet black hair, though Rose's was an unruly cloud of curls, while her brother's was short and dishevelled.

'It's stopped raining,' observed Rose, happily.

'And we're stuck here,' replied Ollie, already getting up and starting to search for something in the room. He crouched down to look under the bed. 'Still, if they don't find us...' Triumphantly he held up a pair of wellington boots. 'Are you up for it?'

Rose burst out laughing. 'Of course I am.'

The boots turned out to be useless in the swamp the rain had created. Their rubber soles were old and worn smooth, and by the time Rose led the way up the hill that bordered the Institute's land – her favourite place – their feet were soaked and their socks sopping wet half way up their calves.

Ollie slipped as he was climbing, and ended up in a puddle. Instead of helping him, Rose couldn't stop laughing, and was still sniggering even when her brother lunged at her with his muddy hands. They chased each other up the hill in a merciless mud fight and then raced each other down again, lungs bursting. Once they reached the opposite slope, they sat down on the ground, out of breath but smiling.

'Imagine Sister Anna's face when she sees us coming back,' Rose managed to gasp, in between giggles. 'We'll be in detention for life. Shall we come and live in this wood? We could dig ourselves a hole for a home, like mice.'

'And eat roots and worms,' replied Ollie, pulling a disgusted face and tickling her without warning.

'Why not!' she exclaimed, trying to fend him off.

Rose planted a kiss on his cheek and stretched out, lying with her head across his legs. She fingered the pendant hanging around her brother's neck.

'Mine's got that too, but it's the other way around.'

Ollie sighed. 'What is it that you're talking about, exactly?'

Rose rummaged beneath her fleece and brought out her own necklace. ‘See the double spiral? On yours it’s raised, on mine it’s hollowed out. Maybe it’s some kind of connection or lock.’

Ollie leaned forward straight away to examine it. *That’s the clue!*

‘Have you noticed that they’re always warm?’ Rose added.

Ollie nodded, trying to control his emotions. They were just two pendants, after all. But meanwhile he was hurrying to fit the two ends together. When he rotated them slightly, the two cylinders joined and became one. Ollie and Rose, still connected by their chains, stared at each other for a moment, waiting, motionless. Ollie began to feel uncomfortable.

He’d imagined that a secret compartment would open, or something like that. Or perhaps that the pendants would get hotter.

But nothing’s happened. Everything’s just as it was.

Exactly as he’d been determined to think it would be.

Rose scratched her nose, unscrewed her half of the pendant and stretched out again across Ollie’s legs. ‘I think they’re lovers’ necklaces. You know the kind I mean? They have a pendant in the shape of a broken heart, you keep one half and you give the other half to the person you love.’

Then she added, with a snigger: ‘You should have given one to Gloria.’

Ollie blushed scarlet. ‘How do you know about that?’

‘I have my sources.’

Gloria was the girl he’d fancied for months. He’d finally found the courage to kiss her, just before the holidays. He took his phone out of his trouser pocket and checked his socials. He’d been so caught up in his plan to break into the archive store that they hadn’t been in touch for a while. He scrolled rapidly through the new posts, but then froze when he came to a photo of her at the seaside, in the arms of some guy with a suntan. His jaw dropped. The caption was a row of hearts.

Rose shook him: she was pointing at the sky.

‘Look at that cloud! It looks like a horse, don’t you think?’

‘Mmm...’ he replied, distracted.

He was staring at the screen incredulously, wondering whether he should message Gloria and ask for an explanation or ruin the photo for her with some vicious comment. He’d just been dumped on social media and his joy at escaping from the Institute had evaporated.

It’s true we weren’t really together, and okay, I did disappear for a bit. Still, she could at least have messaged me!

Rose shook his arm. ‘Or maybe it looks more like a dog, that cloud. What do you think? See the paws?’

Ollie looked up, trying to stay calm. There was only one thing he was sure of: if he’d given way to his anger it would only have made the situation worse. And Rose mustn’t find out, or he risked being besieged by questions and taunts for the whole summer.

‘And – what’s that?!’ Rose exclaimed.

A very slight tremble in his sister’s voice prompted Ollie to follow her slender finger, pointing towards the sky. Reluctantly he shaded his face from the weak sun that was warming the little meadow between the hills.

There was a dark shape, right in the middle of the blue sky. Something that made him instantly forget Gloria and everything else.

‘Perhaps it’s a bird,’ he said, doubtfully.

‘To me it looks more like a snake.’

Ollie got to his feet, squinting to see the shape better. No wings of any kind. And it was moving fast, faster than any bird he’d ever seen. Faster than an eagle or an owl.

‘I wonder...’ He didn’t dare say what he was thinking.

‘It’s not a UFO, petal,’ Rose finished his sentence for him, chuckling.

But her laughter died on her lips. Ollie, as white as a sheet, had grabbed her arm and was pulling her to her feet.

‘What in the world is it?’ she asked impatiently. She looked at the object in the sky again: ‘It’s... kind of ... coming down.’

‘No, it’s not coming down,’ he said, utterly serious. ‘It’s *falling* down.’

The sparrows had stopped singing, the crickets were silent. Even the wind had died down. Something big, something very big, was *falling* from the sky above their heads. And Rose was still frozen, staring at it, unsure whether or not to believe her brother, her laid-back expression gradually turning into an anxious frown. Ollie took her hand and forced her to run, overcome by the terrible feeling that he was moving in slow motion while the sequence of events speeded up around him.

A roar broke the silence and the shock wave from the crash behind them flung Ollie and Rose forward, tumbling and somersaulting in the mud. The blast blinded Ollie, then all the shapes and colours returned at once, with the sky where the meadow should be and vice versa. His eyes searched for Rose, a few metres away, and her face came into focus. Now she really was worried. They'd been hurled almost to the edge of the meadow.

Ollie had earth in his ears, in his mouth, and even in his eyes. And he'd grazed his elbows. He tried to clean his face with the palms of his hands. Rose jumped to her feet, covered in mud, her hair reduced to a nest of twigs and leaves. She threw herself into her brother's arms and Ollie hugged her tight, relieved to see her safe and sound. The layers of clothes three sizes too big had done a good job protecting her.

'What the... ' Ollie began, but his words died away.

In the place of their little meadow, where they'd been lying just a few minutes earlier, there was an enormous crater. From the chasm, a smouldering vortex of grey smoke snaked up to the sky. A noise, a sort of deep roar, rose from the pit. Ollie and Rose glanced at each other, their faces serious.

Together they approached the dark shape they could see through the steam. A gust of wind cleared the haze and Rose let out a little cry of surprise, clapping her hands at the bizarre apparition.

'That's impossible,' murmured Ollie. 'It's... a train?'

'Yes, petal, a train!' Rose exclaimed.

The recognizable shape of a blue locomotive, hitched to three carriages of the same colour, had appeared in the crater. The train had survived the crash intact and was half buried in mud.

‘There’s no way it can be a flying train,’ pronounced Ollie, shaking his head as though that was the end of the matter.

Rose opened her eyes wide. ‘Why not?’

‘What do you mean, why not? Trains don’t fly!’

‘But it came down from the sky, you saw it yourself!’

‘*Fell* down,’ he corrected her.

‘Let’s take a look,’ said his sister, excitedly.

Ollie followed her to the train, torn between curiosity and a strange sense of menace. That familiar prickling at the base of his neck, which usually warned him of serious trouble, was bombarding him with alarm signals. He must keep his eyes open. Wide open.

But the train reminded him of something and he wanted to find out what it was.

‘It could be dangerous,’ he warned his sister.

‘Dangerous? It’s a train!’ retorted Rose, pushing him firmly towards the middle carriage. ‘Look! It’s fantastic!’

The coachwork shone like dew. It had no wheels: the mud was smeared over a complicated mechanism of silvered fabric, gears and turbines. Close up, it looked like the blades of a windmill, or an aeroplane’s engines mounted the wrong way round.

‘See if you can get inside,’ Rose suggested.

Ollie glared at her. ‘It was your idea to check it out.’

‘But you’re the eldest, aren’t you?’

Ollie hesitated, then climbed up the three steps that led to the door of the carriage and tried to open it. It was stuck. But when he leaned forward to examine the handle, his eyes lit up.

The old lock was in the shape of a double spiral.

Exactly like the symbol on their pendants.

‘That’s a strange coincidence,’ murmured Rose.

They both felt a shiver running down their spines. In the centre of each spiral there was a small round hole. Rose took off her necklace. The amber cylinder fitted perfectly.

‘Your turn,’ she said to her brother. She was serious now.

‘We’re about to get ourselves into big trouble, you know that, don’t you?’ replied Ollie. The prickling at the base of his neck was getting worse.

His sister lifted the chain over his head and put the pendant in his hand. ‘You really don’t want to know what’s inside?’

Ollie set his jaw. ‘All right.’

In the shadow of the eagle, the sparrow flies sweetly...

He held his breath and pushed the cylinder into the second hole.

The blackbird flies lightly, the owl flies wisely...

The handle shot out and the door opened wide with a mechanical grinding sound.

They glanced at each other. When Ollie reached forward, his hand rigid, something nose-dived into his face. He sprang back, missed the step and fell, his arms wheeling. As he landed in the mud, he saw a flash of red feathers shooting up to the sky.

‘What on earth...!’ he grunted, plastered with mud all over again.

The robin had disappeared, and so had his sister.

He heard Rose’s voice from inside the train. ‘It’s amazing! Come and look! There are elegant armchairs...’

‘They’re beige,’ said Ollie, still standing on the grass outside.

‘... Yes, beige...’ agreed his sister.

Struggling with himself, Ollie bit his lip.

The beige seats, the storm, the flash of lightning... That’s what the train reminded him of: his dream. Rose didn’t know it, but he had talked to the psychologist about his recurring nightmare. Stephanie had explained to him that the train represented his desire to leave the Institute and the woman with the feathers in her hair was his mother. Or it could even be based on a memory, buried deep somewhere in his brain. It was this idea that had led

him to the archive store, to find a photograph, an explanation, some confirmation. And perhaps he would also have found a picture of his father. More than anything else, he wanted to have just one tiny piece of information about them.

But now the train had become real.

It shone in the sun. He could touch it.

It wasn't a dream. And the woman... yes, the woman...

Rose came to the door of the carriage and held out her hand, excited.

'You have to come inside, Ollie! It's incredible!'

Inside, in the half-darkness, the carriage had an ancient, dusty atmosphere. Apart from themselves, there was nothing there except for the soft beige velvet armchairs, gathered around little wooden tables that had a dry, dejected look. Two crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, with spiders' webs stretching across to the floral wallpaper, which was covered with a veil of blackish mildew. In a corner, there was a sideboard containing porcelain cups and saucers, silver cutlery and pastries so old they looked like stones.

Ollie surveyed the carriage. The door of a pendulum clock had swung open, so he closed it.

‘It’s all so... *tidy*, as though the train had never left the tracks.’

And yet they had seen it plummet from the sky just a few minutes ago.

Rose sank into one of the armchairs and its stuffing gave out a sigh. ‘I told you so. This place is fabul...’

The rest of her sentence was cut off by a piercing whistle from the engine, and Rose leapt to her feet in fright.

‘It must be the driver,’ said Ollie.

‘Let’s go and see,’ Rose suggested eagerly.

To the sound of the train’s slow, deep breathing, they walked through the carriages, crossing the battered concertina connectors. The door of the engine car flew open and their ears were assaulted by a mechanical racket that drowned out any other sound.

‘Anyone here?’ asked Rose, clamping her hands over her ears.

In front of them, valves were turning, lights blinking on and off, gears moving other gears in connections that seemed incomprehensible. There was no driver.

Ollie leaned forwards. ‘And what on earth are you?’

A sphere that looked like amber, slightly bigger than a melon, was pulsating in the centre of the panel. It seemed to be simultaneously both liquid and solid. A shining dust swirled inside it and radiated out to the various train controls through a network of small tubes. For some reason it reminded him of the golden insect he’d glimpsed in the Institute’s archive store, and also of their pendants. *Could they be made of the same stuff?*

Right under their noses, a copper-handled lever turned down of its own accord. The engine gave a second very loud whistle and behind them, one after the other, the carriage doors closed.

‘Cool,’ said Rose.

‘No, it’s really not,’ muttered Ollie.

Outside, a thick black smoke was enveloping the train and a horrible stink of burning rubber replaced the musty smell in the carriage. Ollie and Rose covered their mouths and noses with their sleeves, trying not breathe the nauseating, oily stench. They raced back to the middle carriage. The door they’d used to get onto the train had closed. Together, they pulled the handle with all their strength. Nothing happened.

‘We’re trapped,’ said Ollie.

‘Do something!’ Rose commanded.

Ollie was surprised to hear a note of panic in his sister’s voice. Rose’s fear swept away his own, though the prickling at the base of his neck was getting more intense. He looked around, chewing his lip.

Okay, it’s mechanical, isn’t it? So if...

‘Maybe I’ve got an idea. Keep pulling the handle.’

Ollie ran back to the engine. He grabbed the copper-handled lever and tried to heave it back to its original position. It was stuck. Panting, he let go to get his breath back. He tried

again, grunting with the effort. Rose came into the engine car and plucked at his sleeve, her eyes wide. Ollie pulled away from her, but she hung onto his arm.

‘What is it?’ he burst out at last.

‘I’ve found a ladder!’

In the third carriage, fixed to the wall, a dozen rusty steps led to a hatch in the ceiling. This time it only took a gentle push for the trapdoor to open onto the roof of the train. Rose and Ollie climbed out and a thick gust of black soot filled their eyes and noses, making them cough. They felt their way to the edge of the roof, where a rickety rail stopped them going any further, as though the train’s designer had wanted to create a roof terrace.

‘I can lower you down from here,’ suggested Ollie.

He helped Rose to sit on the rail and was just about to let go of her hands when the wind changed direction. The dark smog surrounding the train was blown away, revealing the landscape once again.

The hills had disappeared.

Instead, for miles around, there was nothing but sky, furrowed by soft clouds.

Below them, the Institute was just an unrecognisable speck, as was the nearby village. The fields looked like tiny yellow and green squares. The train entered a large cumulonimbus cloud and when it emerged they were even higher up.

Ollie grabbed Rose and they toppled backwards, away from the rail. Slowly their terror gave way to astonishment.

‘We’re flying,’ said Ollie, hanging on to the roof’s surface.

‘Yes, we’re actually flying,’ whispered his sister.

Cautiously, they moved back closer to the edge. Through the clouds, they could see glimpses of towns, rivers not much wider than ribbons and then the sea. Now and then a bird flew close and a seagull perched on the rail, studying them resentfully. Above the train, the engine was spewing out a thick blue smoke. Its course seemed to be following a route traced by an invisible track. Ollie leaned out to peer under the carriages, where silver sails were opening and closing like wings – he could see a few holes here and there, caused by the crash

landing between the hills. Blades and turbines rumbled ceaselessly, in an effort to dislodge the mud.

‘That’s not all,’ said Rose, her voice flat.

Ollie followed her gaze, not knowing what to expect.

He swallowed. *What’s that?*

They were heading towards a vertical line, a thread of light hanging in the middle of the sky, like the sharp cut of a scalpel through a piece of paper. The gull on the rail took flight towards the line, getting close enough to touch it with its beak.

There was a flash and the bird vanished into thin air.

Rose huddled up to her brother and he held her close as the line got nearer. He remembered the blinding light that always came at the end of his dream. He had never found out what happened after the flash of lightning: that was always the moment he woke up.

Maybe it’s a boundary, or a door...

The train was going very fast. In front of them, Ollie and Rose saw the engine’s chimney disappear into the white light. In no time the blue smoke, the first carriage and part of the second were swallowed by the slit too. When their turn came, Ollie squeezed his eyes shut, blinded by the dazzling white light.

Glinting a last farewell, the train vanished from the sky.

In the shadow of the eagle
the sparrow flies sweetly
the blackbird flies lightly
the owl flies wisely

6

Alive. They were still alive.

Beyond the line of light, the train continued its journey through the sky at top speed. Ollie and Rose could feel a brisk wind lashing at their cheeks and making their clothes billow out. But the sky they were streaking across now didn't appear to be the one that they were used to seeing through the Institute's windows.

Only a short time earlier, when they were chasing each other over the hills, it had been late morning, but now it was nearly evening.

A long way down, masking the setting sun, a thick layer of rust-coloured clouds stretched out in every direction, as far as the horizon. If there was something down there – sea, land or mountains – it was well hidden by the soft, violet and orange veil.

Meanwhile, in the night sky above them, there were two moons, one beside the other, among millions of constellations they'd never seen before.

'No one will believe us,' murmured Ollie.

'Look,' said Rose, pointing towards a patch of sky already shrouded in darkness.

'What are those?'

Her brother squinted, trying to make something out. 'They look like... yes, they look just like... rocks?'

'But they're floating!'

Ollie ignored the absurdity of this statement. 'Really? Well, for that matter so is the train, which shouldn't be possible either.'

'Then they must be asteroids,' decided his sister.

He frowned, thinking. ‘Asteroids are in space, and if we were in space we’d be dead: we’d have suffocated from the lack of oxygen and, well, everything else. Here there’s an atmosphere.’

Luckily for us, he thought.

‘Well, islands then,’ said Rose, still unconvinced.

On the horizon, bathed in the warm colours of sunset, a strange little group of rocks drifted slowly in the sky: a double spiral faintly illuminated by the presence of towns and villages. The larger spiral rose in a cone higher than a hundred mountains, while the smaller one, on its right side, descended in a steep funnel.

Houses meant people.

Or aliens, thought Ollie, with a shudder.

‘We’d best go inside,’ he said at last, although he could have spent hours studying these new sights. But it was getting chillier and he noticed that Rose was hugging her arms to her chest. ‘Perhaps we’ll find some clue in the carriages which will tell us what’s going on, how about it?’

His sister nodded once without protesting.

Inside the train, they tried to clean the mud off. There was no water and nothing to eat other than the stony pastries, which they chose to avoid. They opened all the drawers and lockers in the engine car, trying to find some document or map that would tell them where they were going. In vain. Without much hope, Ollie took his phone from his pocket. The screen was black. He stabbed at the on button and fiddled with the battery. The circuits must have fried when they passed through the line of light. Still, he’d try charging it when he got home. A lump tightened in his throat.

What home? The Institute?

Ollie went back to observing the double spiral of rocks rotating in the sky. First the pendants, then the flying train and the line of light. Now this floating world. There was enough material here for them to be declared insane. *But, perhaps...* he shook his head. *Better not to think about it.*

Better not to think about the woman in his dream.

At last, hungry and dirty, Ollie and Rose flopped into two of the armchairs, struggling to stay awake for as long as possible.

The battle was lost almost immediately.

He was dreaming.

He was four years old and he was sitting in a beige armchair. Outside it was raining and the carriage was engulfed in the dark, nocturnal storm. Soon the train would cross the line of light. In front of him, the blonde woman with the feathers in her hair was holding a baby girl. She smiled uncertainly and reached her hand towards his face. Ollie remembered the gentle touch of her fingers with pleasure, but instead of stroking his face the unknown woman pinched his forehead.

‘Ow!’ he mumbled, waking up.

The robin had perched on his nose and was about to peck him again with its sharp beak. Ollie pulled himself up and the little bird flew off. Next to him, Rose opened her eyes with an effort, adjusted the sleeves of her fleece and was suddenly wide awake.

‘It’s all true!’ she exclaimed, running to a window.

It certainly is, thought Ollie, rubbing his face.

It’s all tremendously real: the armchairs are real, the train is real, the smoke is... He sat up straight, listening. *The train’s stopped!*

‘We’ve arrived,’ announced Rose, excitedly.

The train had reached one of the rocks hanging in the sky. On one side of the carriage, all you could see was the blue sky, with the train hanging in a total void. From the windows on the other side, however...

‘You were right, they aren’t asteroids,’ murmured Rose.

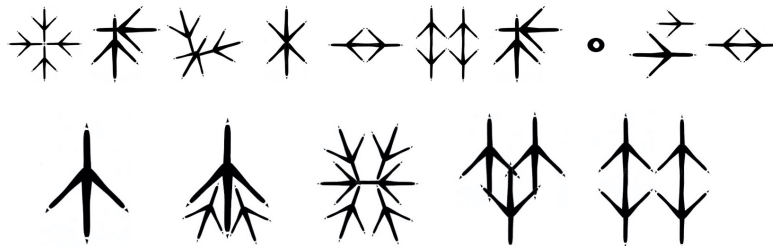
Ollie nodded, unable to take his eyes off the landscape.

Outside, the sun was shining brightly, very like the Earth’s sun, and the grass was lush and green, but the leaves on the plants ranged in colour from pink to pale blue to dark grey, sprinkled with pastel flowers. Here and there, trees bobbed on smaller rocks, anchored to the ground only by a thick network of roots which stopped them from floating away, the wind filling their branches like sails. The two moons of the evening before had not set with the start of the new day.

Rose pointed them out. ‘One red planet and one pistachio-green planet.’

‘And an abandoned railway station,’ Ollie added.

Not far from the train, there was a squat black building, its windows barred with planks. The roof had fallen in. Behind it there was a train shed, with locomotive engines and carriages smothered by creepers. There were some rusty signs alongside the platform. Ollie studied the nearest one, trying to translate the incomprehensible language in which it was written. The letters looked like footprints left by some large bird.



Rose tapped the glass with her fingernail.

‘Do you think the surface really *is* solid?’ she asked.

Ollie didn’t have time to answer: the robin had hurtled out from behind a curtain and was swooping down on them. With a cry of surprise, Rose jumped back from the window.

‘What on earth are you doing here?’ she asked, trying to shield her head.

Ollie bent over to dodge a new attack from above. ‘I think it must have got trapped when the doors closed. Watch out!’

The little bird was darting about above them, crashing into the walls. He dived down to the floor, only to fly off again this way and that. But it wasn’t this bizarre behaviour that worried Ollie and Rose, but the fact that the robin was changing.

It had grown almost to the size of a pelican. Squawking continuously, it was getting bigger before their eyes, its pale red breast dappled with a few tufts of bright scarlet feathers. They watched it circling clumsily in the third carriage, before a thump signalled the end of its flight.

Cautiously, Ollie and Rose went closer.

A sideboard had been overturned, blocking off a corner of the carriage. It shook and shuddered as the tip of a huge wing appeared for a moment and then vanished again. Feathers were fluttering in the air like the aftermath of a pillow fight.

Torn between the instinct to run away and the urge to see what was going on, Ollie and Rose approached on tiptoe and peered over the edge of the sideboard.

excerpt translated by Emma Mandley

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ALPHABET

