

Il segreto del mio migliore amico / My Best Friend's Secret

by

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*Partial English translation
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The process of extinction of a star like Betelgeuse begins with a single atom of iron. As soon as the star begins to produce iron in its core, this otherwise innocuous element starts to consume it like a poison. In a matter of seconds, the star explodes in a fiery sphere.

No, not this!

The phone slips away from my fingers, traces a parable in the air and smashes on the asphalt. Its shell opens and the battery pops out. I run to retrieve it. If it's broken, I swear I'll kill Astrid.

I raise my eyes and meet her gaze as she rides her scooter. She grins, proud of her stunt: she's come up beside me and hit my phone-holding hand. A trick worthy of an elementary school brat. On the other hand, we're talking about someone who can't distinguish right from left and has trouble reading the hands of a watch.

Astrid gives me the finger, her grin framed by a cascade of blond curls. "You should be more careful when you cross the street." She lowers her eyes to my sweatshirt, whose front is taken over by a skull in perfect Mexican-Day-of-the-Dead-style. "If you really want to commit suicide, you could throw yourself out the window. It'd be faster."

What's her problem? Apart from being stupid like a doorknob, I mean. Astrid guns her scooter and rushes away along the road. I cup my hands in front of my mouth. "Go find yourself a brain, moron!"

Astrid, her blond hair waving in the wind, turns the corner and disappears behind the red brick building of the Math faculty. I don't think she heard me, even though my insult was pretty loud. Just as well: when you argue with imbeciles, you risk being dragged down into their bog of idiocies, and suddenly you find yourself drenched in mud and stupidity.

I collect my smartphone's pieces and put them back together. I press the small button to turn it on, and the screen lights up. It doesn't seem broken. Thank goodness. Astrid is a lucky

girl.

The manufacturer's logo fades from the display and the time appears.

Damn, I'm super late.

Of all the mornings for me to bump into Miss Cleverness, it had to happen today that I'm already in a hurry. What a drag.

I clench my bag's shoulder strap and pick up my pace. A flare of acid reflux surges in my throat: the anchovies from last night's pizza are trying to escape and dive back into the sea. I shouldn't have given in to gluttony, knowing full well that a binge at two o'clock in the morning would give me a stomach ache — gastritis doesn't forgive.

But I had to console myself somehow, and when Orfeo offered me the pizza to finish, I caved. The evening had gone pretty well up to that point: we were sprawled on the bed watching and commenting films, while Beatrice, perched on the window sill, licked the back of her paw staring at the stars, her ears pricked up; but then I had the genius idea to watch *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*.

My university commitments had made me miss it in the theatres, and it would have been a good idea to keep missing it. At the scene of Leila flying away into space, I was overcome by such sadness that the only solution left was suicide by anchovy.

I take the shortcut along the computer labs and sneak under the ivy-covered wire fence. Even though it is late spring, the leaves are still brownish, as if they had never recovered from winter. A bit like the *Star Wars* saga, which has never recovered since it has passed in Disney's hands. Why did you do it, Lucas? Why did you sell your soul to the mouse-eared devil?

Help us, Darth Vader!

I wriggle free of the bushes and briskly march through the garden toward the Engineering faculty building. In front of the entrance stairway there always are a few students hanging around and waiting for their lessons to start, but now there is no one. I am monstrously late.

I rub away the dust from the display of the mobile against my sweatshirt's sleeve and check the time again. Luckily the glass is not cracked — not even a scratch. That idiot Astrid dodged a real bullet this time. It seems to me that with every passing day she becomes stupider and stupider. Today's remark about suicide was seriously lame, even by her standards. The combination of skull-decorated sweatshirt, similar-themed earrings — inspired by *Starship Troopers* and bought on Etsy at a thievish price — and hair dyed black must have activated the

emo trigger in her. Astrid is a simple person, and for her people are defined by what they wear: hence my evolution from nerd to emo.

I shake my head. If only she knew what deep cogitation there is behind my appearance! I run my fingers through my black locks, which fall below my shoulders. I specifically aimed for electric blue tips, although Astrid would never guess why.

I increase my pace. I hope that Professor Korolev is late again today. He's always late, but if you happen to get to class after him you get a lecture in front of everyone and a note of demerit. And in my case it would be the third of this semester.

On the other hand, I'd known this was going to be a miserable day the moment I got out of bed and put my feet on the cold floor. My slippers were not there. Toothbrush and toothpaste had disappeared. And after taking a shower, I'd discovered that towels and hair dryer were also gone. I was forced to dab at my hair with the bedsheets.

Another trick of Astrid's, or maybe it had been one of her mentally-challenged senior girlfriends. They enjoy taking it out on the freshmen, and the dean lets it slide. According to him, this kind of behavior forges your character. If my mother had not sworn to me that this is Italy's best faculty of mechanical engineering, I'd have already left. But I trust her: she has been designing oil plants around the world for thirty years, and she knows what she's talking about.

"Hey, tootsie!"

A man's voice makes me swivel around. The gardener, a guy with the big belly of a hardened drinker, is glaring at me, his fingers locked around the handle of his rake. "Get off the lawn, this is not a sidewalk!"

Unfortunately, if I retraced my steps I would trample as much grass as if I proceeded on my path, so to quote Winston Churchill: if you're going through Hell, keep going. I run across the lawn, smashing the first spring flowers under the gardener's vexed gaze. I climb over the low metal railing that surrounds the flower beds and find myself in front of the Engineering building.

I climb the staircase and sneak past the wooden door. Mathematician Niccolò Tartaglia's marble bust welcomes me inside the atrium. I look away from his stern face, framed by a thick beard: a local legend claims that if Tartaglia looks you in the eye, you will never graduate. It's just a ridiculous superstition, but why risk it?

I keep my head down and proceed along the corridor. The air smells of wood and waxed parquet. The classrooms' closed doors follow one another, along with the display cases

protecting the collection of calculating machines that are the faculty's pride: from a reproduction of the Antikythera Mechanism — a mechanical calculator dating back to ancient Greece — up to the Olivetti M10, one of the first portable computers with a built-in screen.

I hear the echo of my steps. There is no one around; everyone is already in class, damn me to hell.

I rush down the corridor, until suddenly a door opens before me. It bangs against the wall, its boom enveloping me, amplified by the high ceiling.

I jump, then I freeze.

This is the door to the dean's office.

And it was Orfeo who banged it against the wall.

He strides out, wearing his usual black jeans, his long hair tied in a half-tail. I glimpse at his face: his mien is dark, halfway between sadness and anger, his jaw knotted. He keeps his arms along his sides, his fists closed.

"And don't you think that it ends here!" yells professor Garofano, our dean, from inside the office. "You'll have to pay all the damages to the cafeteria, understand? You certainly didn't make me change my mind! Do I make myself clear?"

Orfeo keeps going without even bothering to close the door. It's as if he didn't hear the dean, or didn't care. This is not like him. What the hell happened? I bolt after him, reach out to grab him by his shirtsleeve. But he's too fast and slips away from me. He disappears down the stairs leading to the basement. He hasn't noticed me, or possibly he ignored me on purpose, like he did with the dean.

I'm tempted to follow him downstairs. Professor Garofano is a quiet little man: what on earth could Orfeo have done to drive him so mad? Among other things, Orfeo is well-liked by all the professors, has the highest average of the entire faculty, and has already been selected for a post-graduate internship at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Despite the natural charisma generated by his pitch-black eyes and his height, he is even nerdier than me, and nerds usually don't tick off their teachers.

I hope nothing serious has happened. Orfeo is the only friend I have in the whole university.

I peer into the stairwell. Orfeo is no longer in sight. I tap my nails on the handrail. Professor Korolev will skin me alive, but I've got to know what happened. The dean mentioned

the cafeteria...

I sigh. Professor Korolev will have started the lesson by now, and ten more minutes won't change my situation. If he wants to saddle me with another note and lower my average, he will do it no matter what. Might as well take a little look at the cafeteria.

*Neptune, the blue planet, may seem covered in water, but in reality
the water is inside it. This planet has a core of ice and rock,
and the intense blue of the surface is a deception induced by methane.*

Whatever the dean's accusation against Orpheus, I could swear on his innocence. It's the only explanation for the fury on his face: the frustration of the sullied who has done nothing wrong. Orfeo would never jeopardize his academic career a few months before graduating, not to speak of the delicate moment that his family is going through. He is a serious guy, not like Astrid and her comrades. He doesn't go around playing moronic practical jokes, nor does he share his fellow seniors' obsession for betting.

"Oh, excuse me!" exclaims a high-pitched voice.

I raise my eyes. In my absent-mindedness, I ran smack into a cleaning lady. She gives me a small smile. She's wearing rubber gloves, and in her fingers holds a rag that drips into a plastic bucket. I look down at my sweatshirt: her rag has left a damp stain onto the skull. I sniff it. It reeks of stagnant water.

"Forgive me," the woman says. "I didn't see you."

I lift a corner of my sweatshirt between thumb and forefinger. "It's just water, right? There's no bleach or things like that."

"Only water." She squeezes her rag over the bucket. "Maybe a little dirty, but just water. If you'll give me your sweatshirt, I can take to the cleaner's and make sure that they work on it right away."

Actually, the fault is more mine than hers: I was the one with my head in the clouds. "There's no need, really. Although..." I nod toward the door to the cafeteria. "Did something happen there?"

The woman wipes her sweaty forehead with the back of her hand. "See for yourself." She snorts to lift a lock of hair from her eyes. "We've been at it since six this morning, trying to dry it. But we'll never make it for lunchtime."

She opens the door for me, and I peer inside. The cafeteria of the Engineering faculty is one of this institute's prides: large windows overlooking the gardens, luxurious tables worthy of

a five-star hotel, crystal chandeliers.

But today it's a lake.

The water on the wooden floor sparkles in the blades of sunlight that seep through the windows. A number of cooks and cleaners are squatting on the floor, dipping their rags in water and draining them into buckets. The woman I bumped into brushes past me and wades into the big room. She plunges her rag in the middle of a huge pool that reflects the siren-themed fresco adorning the hall's vaulted ceiling. The water shimmers, unraveling the fresco.

The flooded cafeteria is a surreal, fascinating vision. It reminds me of the abandoned cement plant in Borgobianco. But wait... all this is supposed to be Orfeo's doing?

I bite my pen cap, I tap it on the desk, I chomp on it again. Last night Orfeo seemed perfectly calm. Okay, he didn't say much while we were watching the movie about Jurij Gagarin, the first man in space — and he was the one who'd chosen it —, but he seemed interested all the same. And he ate the pizza with gusto.

Meanwhile he was plotting to flood the cafeteria. As I returned to my room in the girls' wing of the dorm, he was putting his dastardly plan into action. What the hell was he thinking?

I shift uncomfortably on the wooden bench. Professor Korolev scribbles something on the blackboard, but what between my late arrival — luckily his lecture did not materialize into a note of demerit — and the concern for my friend, I can't follow his lesson.

I just can't believe that Orfeo could have done such a stupid thing. He might get expelled for this, and that would be a terrible blow for his parents. He is the pride of his family. Their only source of joy after his brother's death. And Orfeo knows this only too well. How could he get in so much trouble? What if it wasn't him? Perhaps my first hypothesis was right, and Orfeo is innocent and wrongly accused. Maybe he's just covering for the real culprit? No, that's absurd.

I bite my pen's cap and chew.

Orfeo told me all about the terrible time he had after his brother died last year. And what would a guy still deep in shock do — flood the cafeteria? It makes no sense.

"Excuse me, Vera?"

Unless Astrid's clique had something to do with it. Them of the bets and the stupid jokes. But Orfeo has always kept his distance from such crap. And seniors take it out on freshmen like

myself, they don't turn on each other.

I bite my pen with a passion, making its plastic creak.

Moreover, usually they keep it contained to simple pranks, nothing so serious as to risk an expulsion. The worst I witnessed was when Enrico, having lost a bet, had to behave like a little dog for a couple of days, going around on all fours outside the classrooms and howling at passing girls. He did it with me, too, scaring me to the point that I almost stomped his face with the sole of my boot. And me thinking that the natural environment of morons was high school, fantasizing that in college I'd be free to study in peace. Such naivety!

No, Orfeo has nothing to do with that scene. He keeps well away from any idiocy. He's profound and bright — he would never bark at me, nor would he flood the cafeteria. I know him well by now.

But if Astrid really convinced him to take part in some crazy bet, I'll rip her a—

«Er... sorry? Vera?»

I truly don't understand Astrid. His father is so rich she could spend her time traveling and snapping selfies for Instagram. What is she doing in college? Among other things, she would never have been admitted if Daddy hadn't paid good money for it. I hate people like that, people who believe they can buy everything. They are worth less than Beatrice's hairballs.

I stick the pen between my teeth. I'll rip her blondie's head off. She doesn't have much use for it, anyway.

“Vera, are you listening to me?”

I rouse myself and turn toward Mirko, who's sitting next to me. In the light filtering through the windows, his eyes take on a golden brown shade. He plants them on my face, then lowers them on the pen I'm crushing. He gives me a puzzled look.

“Are you okay?” he whispers. “I've been trying to get your attention for five minutes, but you just bite your pen like a rabid dog.”

Thank you for the flattering comparison, really!

I eke out a smile. “I'm fine. Sorry, didn't hear you.”

“Are you mad? You're disintegrating that pen. You look pissed.”

It's sweet of Mirko to worry about me, but I have no intention of confiding in him. All we need is to start gossiping about Orfeo, when it might just all be a big misunderstanding. I nod toward Professor Korolev. “I was thinking about the scolding he gave me for my delay, that's all.

By the way, thanks for holding my spot.”

“You’re welcome.” Mirko returns my smile and brushes my thigh with his hand. “Listen, could you lend me the notes from yesterday’s lesson? I don’t trust the others so much.”

Mirko’s comment pleases me: he’s rich but not presumptuous, one of the smartest students of our class, as evidenced by the fact that he recognizes my superior intelligence. Of course, he could have waited for the end of the lesson for such a trivial request. But nobody’s perfect.

“I’ll give them to you later,” I say. “No problem.”

Mirko’s smile widens. “I’ll owe you one.”

Professor Korolev’s chalk pulls away from the blackboard, and I lower my face onto my notebook. If someone would ask me for today’s notes, they would find a bunch of doodles and drops of ink from the pen.

But how on earth could Orfeo have flooded the cafeteria? Even plugging all the sinks and opening all the taps in the kitchen, it would have taken hours to reduce the hall to the lake I saw. He must have broken or punctured a pipe. In the middle of the night and very quietly, to avoid getting caught. Well, if there is someone smart enough to execute such a plan, that someone is Orfeo. If he wanted to, tomorrow he could start a career as an Evil Genius. But it wouldn’t be like him...

I take a stronger bite and the pen’s clear plastic crumbles in my mouth. I spit out bits of it onto the notebook, and Mirko looks at me in disgust. What a crappy morning. My only consolation is that at the end of the lessons I’m supposed to meet Orfeo to explore the supermarket together. Then I’ll be able to ask him what happened.

*Neutron stars are dark wrecks, stars that have run out of fuel
and became dense and compact. A collision between two such stars
causes terrifying explosions of gold dust, and is at the origin
of the heaviest elements of the Universe.*

The tolling of the bells from the basilica is muffled by the classroom's huge windows. I'd like to climb to the last floor of the building and admire the expanse of city roofs along the valley; the sharp top of the bell tower would stand out in the middle of a sea of brown tiles. I yawn and stretch. Korolev's lessons are over, so we can enjoy the fifteen minutes of pause that he always denies us every time he has two consecutive hours with us.

I get up and put my books away, then give my notebook to Mirko.

"Thanks for the notes," he says, still smiling. "I'll give them back to you as soon as I can."

"Take your time, I've already studied them. I basically know them by heart."

Mirko makes a face that is a mixture of envy and grief, but I don't take it personally: the real culprit is this school, with its cruel evaluation policies. At each exam there is only one top grade available for the entire class, and it goes only to the best — that is, to me; the others have to settle for a vote proportional to how close they got to my skills. Thus I understand that deep inside, my classmates would like to see me flounder in order to better their averages without too much effort. Alas, dears, that will never happen: I am the best, and I intend to remain the best.

I pick up my bag and leave the classroom. I turn left, making for the restrooms and checking my phone as I go. I don't expect Orfeo would have sent me a message: he's not one to chat, and he's even less of a social networker than me. But there are a few messages on WhatsApp. They came from Massimo. The first is the usual "Good morning, my adored

Morticia”; the others are pictures. My boyfriend is standing between Giuliano and Lorenzo, his water polo teammates; they are all three bare-chested, their arms around each other’s backs, their typical Instagram-selfie smiles painted on their faces, the pool’s blue water behind them.

In another photo, Massimo shows off his muscles, and in yet another one his friends gaze at him, very pleased with themselves — it’s all very Yaoi. In the last picture, he winks at me through the lens. His Australian-surfer dimple, the same one that I once despised, today makes me want to cover his braggart’s face with kisses.

And it would be the least I could do to make him forgive me. Last night he had an important game, but I totally forgot about it and didn’t wish him well; then after the game he wrote saying that they won, and I had intended to compliment him, but I was so caught up in the movies and the pizza with anchovies that I forgot about it again, and when I got back to the room it was two in the morning and I collapsed on the bed, and this morning... But these are all excuses. The truth is that I should be ashamed of myself. Bad girlfriend. Bad!

He, on the contrary, is so sweet. He sent me these adorable pictures fishing for cuddles. I touch his chest with my thumb. My boyfriend’s smile is immaculate. If I know him, he’s used a photo editing app to whiten his teeth. He wanted to look perfect for me. I’m even a little touched.

I wish Massimo were here: I’d like to taste his lips after a morning spent training at the pool. They’d be fresh and a touch salty, as if he’d been in the sea instead of in the pool. They become very hot when he’s out in the sun taking pictures, and they taste like custard on a freshly baked cake.

I bite my lip, descending the few steps to the girls’ restrooms. I miss Massi’s cheerfulness. Since I moved here to go to college, and he started playing competitive water polo, we see very little of each other. Often we have to set up an appointment just to talk on the phone.

I’ll have to come up with a good apology for having forgotten the game and ignored him, and I must go out of my way to congratulate him on their victory. Giuliano also mentioned this game: it was an important challenge, even if I couldn’t say why if my life depended on it. I shrug my shoulders: it is estimated that the brain has a memory capacity of around 100 terabytes; it’s a lot of space, but it’s not infinite, and it can’t be wasted on useless information such as water polo championships.

I trace Massi’s profile with my finger on the screen. I don’t know what to write. Maybe I’ll do it later, after my talk with Orfeo. Once we’ll have that business cleared and I’ll have

calmed down a bit, I might even be able to go on Wikipedia and understand if yesterday's game was some sort of final or whatnot.

I push the restroom's door wide open with my shoulder, my face bent over my smartphone.

"I need my coffee!" a girl's voice shrieks. "Is that clear, you filthy dyke?"

I raise my head. In front of me stand three girls. They are facing the sinks, their backs turned. The one in the middle I recognize instantly: the cascade of blond ringlets that falls on her shoulders, the designer shirt, the ruffled skirt. The same one she was wearing on her scooter, when she made me drop my phone. Astrid.

"If I tell you that I want a coffee," she goes on shrilly, "you just move your ass and go get it for me, even if it's three o' clock in the morning."

Who is she picking on? Herself in the mirror? Has she gone completely bonkers?

I take a step forward and peer over her shoulder. Surrounded by Miss Cleverness and her two minions I see a slender girl with an athletic body and a shock of red hair in a boyish haircut framing a frightened face. She looks familiar somehow; she's one of those obsessed with running, marching or something of the kind, to the point that I think she's been selected for the world university games.

I stand on my tiptoes. Her eyes wet with tears, the trapped girl's cradles her reddened cheek in one hand. She's trembling.

Has Astrid hit her?

The blond witch slams her hand against the mirror, brushing the girl's face and making her start in fright.

"Listen to me, you skiver," she growls. She's a good head taller than her victim. "Tonight we'll try again. I'll call you and you'll run to Caf  Maison and get me a nice cappuccino macchiato. With two sachets of brown sugar. And be sure it's still nice and warm when you bring it to my room."

She draws her face really close to the red-haired girl's. "And don't forget the receipt, so I can check that this little doggie has been good and hasn't cheated."

Caf  Maison is the bar at the train station, the only one in town that stays open all night. The walk from the dorms to the station is no picnic: you basically have to go down the hill and cross half the town.

The red-haired girl swallows dryly. “I d-don’t have the money for the taxi,” she whimpers in such a tiny voice that I can barely hear her.

Astrid smiles. “So what, it’s my fault if you’re practically a bag lady?”

“N-no it’s not, sorry.”

The two skirted vultures beside Astrid sneer gleefully.

I clench my fists. I’d been told that Astrid is especially fond of bullying freshmen whose families are not rich and whose studies are funded by scholarships. She likes feeling superior, she who gets ahead only thanks to Daddy’s money. She’s truly despicable.

“You’re inferior to me in everything,” she tells the girl. “Think about it. I’m Astrid with an A, you’re Zoélie with a Z. You’re worthless.” She chuckles at her own daft logic. “So it’s only normal that you obey me.”

I swear, in all my life I’ve never witnessed such a show of idiocy. I put my hand on Astrid’s shoulder. “Your nonsense is making my brain bleed. Can you please cut it out?”

At the sound of my voice, her two minions start. Astrid turns slowly and stares, ogling me as if she’d like to incinerate me with her eyes. “The hell you want, suicide girl? Take your piss and disappear.”

“Is that the same mouth with which you kiss your mama, you blonde cockroach?”

“Go ahead and leave, before you really piss me off.”

“Are you offended because I called you a cockroach?” I smile. “Actually, it’s a compliment. You’re much more disgusting than that.”

Astrid removes her hand from the mirror and faces me. “Do you want to spend the next few months in Hell?”

She raises her arm as if to slap me, but she doesn’t dare. I know she’d sell her own mother just to wipe out my smile from my face, but she’s as much of a coward as she is an idiot.

We face each other off, her nose touching mine. I don’t lower my face.

I take my fingers off her blouse and rub them on my pants, as if to get rid of some dirt. It is well known that beetles are not the most hygienic insects in the world.

Astrid takes a step sideways. “Stay away from me. People like you make me puke.”

“You’re telling me? I just touched a cockroach.”

Astrid’s two flunkies line up behind her. The skinny one is biting her nails, undecided whether to intervene in her mistress’ defense or keep quiet like the good coward that she is. The

other one pretends she just entered the restroom by chance, looking pointedly down at the floor tiles. Astrid has chosen two wonderful friends. They're worthy of her.

Zoélie is still in the corner, her back to the sink. She looks like she's about to faint, but at least she's not the target of Astrid's bullying anymore.

"You know what?" Astrid tells me, her voice vibrating with hatred. "Not just the next few months. Next year, too. Even after I'm gone. Now you've gotten my attention, and I won't ever leave you alone."

"A life's dream come true," I reply ironically.

Astrid tilts her face, and her resentful grimace seems to ease up. A flash of satisfaction brightens her face. "Your breath stinks," she leers. "Could be this morning you had trouble brushing your teeth?"

I raise one eyebrow. So now we've regressed to stinkybreath? Then what? When the goings get tough, we'll resort to *roses are red, violets are blue, a face like yours belongs in the...*

"Wait a minute... So it was really you who stole my things."

"You're always busy schmoozing with seniors," Astrid says. "If you're never in your room, it's only normal that your things get stolen."

What is she referring to? The fact that I visit Orfeo in his room? Why does she care?

Astrid runs her hand through her blond ringlets. "In any case, it was all cheapo stuff. I made you a favor by throwing it all in the dumpster."

"And while you were searching the dustbin did you happen to find your brain? Or does Daddy buy you a new one for Christmas?"

Astrid trembles with anger, but doesn't reply. She pushes her girlfriends on and heads for the door. She doesn't have the courage to face me in person, and I'm sure she's concocting a new revenge raid into my room. But she won't find me unprepared.

Her two minions line up behind her and file out of the restroom. They look exactly like two little dogs on a leash. As long as they're happy... The skinny one closing the line slams the door behind her.

"E-everything okay?"

Zoélie's small voice makes me turn around. She is next to me. Her Rick and Morty t-shirt is wet around the collar. She must have used it to wipe away her tears.

She smiles hesitantly.

I return the smile. “Yes, but don’t even think of going to get coffee for that numbskull. We must not give in to the bullies. Never.”

Zoélie swallows. I’m afraid I spooked her again with my forceful tone. Well, the important thing is that he understands the message: if she wants Astrid to quit tormenting her, she has to stand up to her bullying.