

Previously in Pages & Co.

In *Tilly and the Bookwanderers*, Matilda Pages discovered that she was a bookwanderer who could travel inside her favourite books. While looking for her missing mother with her best friend Oskar, she discovered that she was half fictional and had some unusual bookwandering abilities.

In *Tilly and the Lost Fairy Tales* and then *Tilly and the Map of Stories*, Tilly and Oskar defeated the powerful Underwood siblings who had taken control of the British Underlibrary. While searching for the mysterious Archive they encountered the Sesquipedalian, a book-smuggling train home to Horatio Bolt and his nephew Milo. Together they stopped the Underwoods by unbinding all the Source Editions at the British Underlibrary, which meant that many books were freed from the risk of being changed forever.

In *The Book Smugglers*, Milo Bolt realised that his uncle was caught up in schemes that were much bigger and more dangerous than book smuggling. When Tilly's grandad, and then Horatio, were put

to sleep by poisoned books, Milo teamed up with Tilly to work out who was behind it. In Venice they discovered the Alchemist, an ancient collector and hoarder of book magic.

The Alchemist is after the Quip for himself and believes that Tilly is the legendary Anonymous Reader who can find and open The Book of Books – a hidden manuscript that contains the secrets of bookwandering.

After the Alchemist's daughter Alessia stows away on the Quip with the stolen cure for the poison, Milo sets off to find the Botanist, a secretive woman who is the sworn enemy of the Alchemist and guardian of The Book of Books . . .

NO ORDINARY TRAIN

The train rattled gently beneath Milo Bolt as he stared out at the great expanse of darkness surrounding him. Through the windows of the Sesquipedalian he could see only inky nothingness, interrupted occasionally by a burst of glittering shadows. For the Sesquipedalian, or the Quip for short, was no ordinary train. Powered by ideas, it could take you anywhere you could imagine. And Milo was its Driver.

This was a very new state of affairs. It was only hours before that his uncle Horatio, book smuggler of note, had been in charge of the Quip, but it felt like a lifetime ago. A poisoned book and an alchemist intent on controlling all the world's

knowledge had turned Milo's world upside down. Now the Driver's whistle was Milo's, and he was the only person who could tell the train where they were headed next. And he'd chosen to set out on his own, slipping away from Tilly and Pages & Co. quietly, with only—



'Milo?' a voice called.

'I'm in here,' he shouted back, and a few moments later a pale face popped round the door to the engine room. Alessia was the Alchemist's daughter, which is just about as complicated as it sounds. She'd stolen away from her father's home in Venice on the Quip – and also stolen a lot of his research and recipes while she was at it. This was just as well, for Horatio was currently lying poisoned and unconscious in the Pages family's spare bedroom and the only way to revive him was with the recipe in Alessia's notebook.

'What are you doing in here?' she asked, looking around the cramped, stuffy engine room.

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'Habit, I suppose,' Milo said, stretching his arms. Until very recently, he had spent a lot of his time keeping the engine topped up with the wooden orbs charged with imagination that kept the Quip travelling smoothly through the world of Story. Now he had the run of the train without anyone to tell him off and yet it still felt like he was trespassing when he used Horatio's office. Even though he could have slept in one of the fancy guest carriages, Milo was staying put in his cosy, cluttered quarters right towards the back of the train. Alessia, however, had immediately and happily installed herself into the finest guest car, decorated with richly embroidered hangings and jewel-coloured cushions.

There was barely enough room in the engine cab for Alessia to sit down next to Milo on the floor.

'Do you reckon they've noticed we're gone yet?' she asked.

'I suppose so,' Milo said, thinking about the

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noisy Pages family kitchen they'd just slipped away from. 'It's been at least an hour, right? I bet we'll get a letter in the post box before too long.'

'Will they ask us to come back?' Alessia wondered.

'I'm not sure. I hope they understand why we've left . . . Tilly will, at least. But I am feeling a little bad about abandoning my uncle with them without asking.'



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'They'll look after him well,' Alessia reassured him, 'better than we could by ourselves here. They'll understand.'

Milo knew she was right, but he couldn't quash the lingering guilt about leaving his poisoned uncle with a family he really barely knew. Horatio had only ended up at Pages & Co. in the first place because Milo had insisted that the one stolen dose of the Alchemist's antidote be used for Tilly's grandad first. He had been the first victim of the poisoned book, but he was awake and recovering now. This at least demonstrated that they could probably trust the recipe Alessia had smuggled away from her father in Venice. Not that they had any of the ingredients they needed to actually make it.

Horatio wasn't even supposed to have been poisoned – he would still be awake if he hadn't been trying to stop Milo from touching the tainted book.

'I can see you doing it again,' Alessia said, poking him gently in the arm.

'What?'

'Feeling guilty about literally everything, despite nothing being your fault.'

'Well, I'm not sure *nothing* is—'

'Truly Milo,' Alessia interrupted. 'Have you ever poisoned a book?'

'No.'

'And have you used book magicin experiments to try and take over the world?'

'No.'

'And have you lied about your family in order to . . . Well, Horatio's motives remain as mysterious as ever. But, for the purposes of this exercise, have you ever lied about your family to someone who would actually like to know the truth?'

'Nope,' Milo said with a small, reluctant smile.

'Your honour, I rest my case,' Alessia said. 'Stop blaming yourself for things that you didn't do. It's neither of our faults that we have what I will politely call less-than-ideal father figures.'

'Yours is your literal father,' Milo pointed out.

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'I try to pretend otherwise,' Alessia sighed. 'He's not exactly the sort of role model a girl wishes for. At least Horatio seems to have looked out for you in some ways; he definitely was trying to keep you away from *my* father at the bare minimum. Although it's quite fun to think that it's probably both of their worst-case scenarios that we're now friends and have run away with the Quip. I for one take plenty of comfort in that.'

Milo was not a person naturally inclined to see humour in stressful moments and so found Alessia's ability to make a joke out of almost everything a little alarming at times, not to mention her seemingly unflappable confidence. The only time he'd seen it crack was when she'd confessed that while she had the recipe to make the cure for Horatio, she had no idea what most of the ingredients were, let alone where to find them or how to actually put them together properly. They knew that Alessia's father tailored his potions and poisons to individuals to

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make them more potent – as well as harder to cure.

All of that was why they were currently on their way to Northumberland to find the one person who might be able to help with the whole mess – *the Botanist*.