



PEREGRINE

**Location: Portal Tunnel 9, 52nd Bookcase, Reading Room 3,
the Bodleian Library, Oxford, England**

‘Are you *sure* she’s just sleeping?’ Peregrine whispered. ‘Not, you know . . .’

She was peering at the Librarian, whose forehead rested on the desk in front of her. The girl’s bowler hat had rolled off, and a pair of pointy green-tipped ears were poking out from underneath her shower of black curls.

‘What? *Dead*?’ Peregrine’s godfather, Daedalus Bloom, picked up the Librarian’s limp wrist and checked her pulse against his pocket watch. ‘Quite, quite sure. Indeed, apart from being unconscious, this young lady is in tippity-tip-top health.’ He tutted at the open bag of jelly beans on the desk. ‘But sugar is *terribly* bad for a dryad’s digestion. She really should know better.’ He sighed, then winked at Peregrine.

It had in fact been Daedalus himself who had planted the jelly beans: planted them *and* spiked them with enough herbal sedative to knock out a small kangaroo. Peregrine leaned forward and gently placed the Librarian's hat back on her head; it felt a very personal thing to see those vibrant, delicate ears. 'A dryad.' She let out a low whistle. 'Wow.'

'Wow indeed,' Daedalus said, glancing back down at his pocket watch.

Peregrine could not stop staring. She fancied herself quite the expert on mythological beings, but despite all her reading, she'd never actually *met* a real immortal. Apart from Daedalus, and he just looked like your average seventy-something-year-old human, albeit one who ate lots of organic broccoli and went to Pilates twice a week.

But a dryad – a tree nymph – well, that was *really* something.

As Peregrine readjusted the Librarian's hat, she noticed a golden pin in the shape of an apple attached to the dryad's collar. It glittered like a shiny penny in the low lamplight of the library, and she found herself reaching towards it.

'What is *that*?' She whipped her hand back immediately and squeezed her palms tight under her armpits. This was *not* the behaviour of a Library Break-in Assistant. Rather, this was the behaviour of a magpie. A very grabby magpie. She flushed with embarrassment.

Daedalus didn't seem to mind, though. 'That apple, my dear, is the insignia of Olympus.' He set the dryad's wrist down gently. 'Well, the new one. There was some rebranding when Zeus retired a couple of millennia ago. It used to be a lightning bolt – very flash, very *macho*.' He shuddered.

‘Oh.’ Peregrine scanned the other items on the Librarian’s desk. A pot of pencils, a few books, and a framed faded photograph of seven laughing girls in what looked like graduation gowns.

Removing her hands from her armpits, Peregrine picked up the frame and studied it. The girls in the photograph were almost identical: they had the same hair, the same smiles, but with slight differences – a mole here, a bit of extra height there. ‘Septuplets,’ she whispered. She looked closer. There was another girl, shorter and younger than the others – one she hadn’t noticed at first – standing a little apart, her hands shoved firmly into her pockets. Peregrine liked her immediately.

Daedalus cleared his throat, and Peregrine quickly returned the frame to its proper place. ‘Sorry,’ she mumbled.

‘Now that we’re sure our Librarian friend is . . . sleeping –’ his gaze darted to the jelly beans – ‘let’s get this show on the road, shall we?’ He rubbed his hands, then spun balletically on his heels.

Peregrine shook her head. She was always amazed at how spry her godfather was for somebody who remembered carving the blueprints for Stonehenge.

‘Voila!’ Daedalus pulled back the midnight-blue curtain behind the desk with a dramatic swoosh. ‘Or as we say in the Cosmic Realm . . . *voila!*’

‘Whoa.’ Peregrine felt the magic before she saw it: her arms began to prickle, as if a thousand spiders were tap-dancing across her skin. She shivered, and her smile grew wider. So *this* is what magic felt like. It was a sensation she’d only

felt snatches of before. She bit her lip, pushing down the urge to whoop with un-Assistant-like glee.

With the curtain drawn back, Peregrine could see an intricately patterned metal gate, the kind you might find over the door of a lift in a fancy hotel, like the one she and her mum had stayed at once in Athens. A melancholic chord in Peregrine's heart twanged, and she shook her head in annoyance. She did *not* want to think about her mum right now.

The gate was made of shining silver and gold interlocking circles, complex spirals and lines that zigzagged their way across, backward and forward, up and down. Peregrine's eyes followed the lines like the loops of a rollercoaster, swirling round and round. Then, remembering she was supposed to be on lookout, she glanced over her shoulder at the entrance. Not that anyone would be able to see much of them in the dim pre-dawn light.

She and Daedalus had decided on a dress code the previous evening and, as discussed, Peregrine was dressed in a manner befitting a stealthy Top-Secret Library Break-In. Her gangly frame was clothed in black: black T-shirt, black jeans, black socks, even especially-soft-soled non-squeaky black shoes. Her hair – which was the approximate colour and texture of a golden retriever – was tied as usual in messy plaits and tucked into a tight black beanie. Daedalus, on the other hand, had interpreted 'stealthy' slightly differently. He was wearing a dapper navy-blue suit with seventies-style flared trousers and a bright turquoise waistcoat embroidered with a scattering of silver stars.

When she had questioned him about his outfit, Daedalus had responded simply. ‘If I am going to be caught on closed-circuit television, my dear,’ he said, adjusting his fuchsia handkerchief square, ‘I may as well look fabulous.’

‘Hold these please, Peregrine.’ Daedalus passed her a book on ferns of the British Isles, then a couple on woodland fungi and finally a particularly dusty tome on the life cycle of polar bears. He paused, his hand hovering over the last book. ‘Maybe we don’t need the bears,’ he muttered. Turning back to the gate, he traced his finger along the innermost circle until he found a keyhole in the shape of a star, no bigger than the nail of a pinkie toe.

‘Aha!’ He tapped tentatively around the lock, then leaned forward to peer through. ‘Hmm. Just as I thought. OPS have upped the security a little in the last century or so.’ He stood back up and cracked his knuckles. ‘Best to stand over there, in the corner.’

‘B-but . . .’ Peregrine spluttered. She’d spent the last *three* years listening to stories about the Cosmic Realm, and now Daedalus wouldn’t even let her see the portal? It was always like this – magic was *right* there, just an arm’s length away, but she was never allowed to get close enough to touch it. Her face flamed and she jutted her chin over the teetering pile of books. ‘Couldn’t I just . . . look?’ The books wobbled and she veered to the side.

Daedalus raised an eyebrow. ‘I appreciate your enthusiasm, but this is just the *door*. If you got any closer to the portal itself, well, you might be lucky . . .’ He plucked his spectacles out of his waistcoat pocket and put them on.

‘Lucky how?’ she asked, her eyes narrowed.

‘Tentacles will only sprout from your –’ he edged his glasses down and stared at her – ‘nose!’

Peregrine snorted, so a little bit of snot splattered onto the cover of *Indigenous Forest Fungi*.

Daedalus chuckled. ‘I’m deadly serious! You Terrans lost your tolerance for the mystical centuries ago. Why, I remember the first time young Arthur tried to pull that sword out of that stubborn stone . . .’

Peregrine sniffed. She didn’t have any hands free to wipe her nose. ‘What happened?’

‘Mucus.’ Daedalus sighed. ‘EVERYWHERE.’

Peregrine snorted again, and this time *The History of Carnivorous Fungi* slipped from her arms and fell to the ground with such a loud *th-dunk* that they both looked towards the dryad to check she was still sleeping. They needn’t have worried; she’d obviously eaten quite a few of the jelly beans.

‘Ugh!’ Peregrine picked up the fallen book. She wasn’t squeamish exactly, but she was rather fond of her nose. It was small, slightly upturned and covered in freckles. It was, in fact, almost identical to the nose of her mother. Anyway, when there’s a choice of whether to get tentacles or not, she would choose *not*.

‘Fine!’ she said, before shuffling backwards.

‘Thank you. Now if you wouldn’t mind –’ Daedalus rolled up his jacket sleeves and bent down to click open his leather doctor’s bag – ‘please take a further three steps back.’ Without looking up from his bag, he held up three fingers.

Peregrine glared at him. Maybe her fragile mortal self

would fizz into nothing if she saw too much magic, or maybe it wouldn't. But clearly Daedalus didn't think she was ready, and *that* stung.

Daedalus waited to lower his fingers until Peregrine – who really *did* mind actually – had stepped further away from the spiral gate. Then, from the depths of his holdall, he took out what looked like a shining golden stethoscope. Peregrine had seen lots of Daedalus's odd magical contraptions over the years. This was, in fact, how she had discovered that Daedalus was not your average godfather. When she was nine, she had arrived at the house unannounced, to find the lawn being mown by a clockwork lawnmower while a mechanical crow read Daedalus the morning papers. Still, she had *never* seen an instrument like this.

As soon as Daedalus placed the stethoscope earbuds into his ears, its golden tubes began moving towards the gate. Peregrine blinked in surprise as the tubes sprouted tendrils that grew smaller and smaller until finally they travelled straight through the tiny keyhole.

In an instant, golden sparks began swirling around the bookcase. Peregrine sucked in a mouthful of air, a gleeful whoop once more bubbling in her throat. She was seeing it – this was *real* magic. She peered closer, watching the sparks fizz and pop like tiny fireworks. 'What are you doing?'

Daedalus put a finger to his lips. A faint hum emanated from the portal, sounding like the rotors of a low-flying helicopter. 'Hmm. Hmm. HMMM.' He nodded. 'Interesting.' He tapped his bottom lip in contemplation.

'What? WHAT is interesting?' Peregrine leaned forward

on her tiptoes, *The Life Cycle of Polar Bears* sliding slowly out of her arms.

Without glancing up, Daedalus caught the book inches from the ground and placed it carefully back on top of the tottering pile. ‘Very interesting . . .’ After an agonising minute, he finally took the earbuds out and put the stethoscope back into his bag. ‘*Tempus fugit*,’ he muttered. His usually cheerful tone was etched with worry.

Peregrine frowned. Daedalus *never* sounded worried, not about anything. Ever.

‘But we still have time . . .’ He paused, as if considering whether to say anything else. He shook his head and placed a hand tenderly on the bookcase; a few stray sparks licked his fingers. ‘I will bid you farewell for now, old friend.’ He took hold of the midnight curtain and gently pulled it closed. ‘We should go.’ He turned to Peregrine. ‘I can’t be keeping you up all night with criminal activity.’ He picked up his bag. ‘Not on a school night, anyway.’

‘But what about *her*?’ Peregrine indicated the dryad, who was starting to drool.

‘Oh, she’ll be all right.’ Daedalus stood up and looked at his pocket watch again. ‘She won’t notice a thing.’



ROWAN

**Location: Portal Tunnel 9, 52nd Bookcase, Reading Room 3,
the Bodleian Library, Oxford, England**

Precisely twenty-three minutes later, Rowan Strong snorted awake – and noticed something. In fact, she noticed a number of things. First, drool was dribbling down her chin; second, her hat was on at a jaunty angle that was completely against Olympus Inc.’s agent-attire regulations; third, she had fallen asleep.

ASLEEP!

She shot to her feet, slammed her palms down on the desk and pushed her chair back so it squealed like sharp nails on a blackboard.

She, Rowan Strong of the Seven Strong Sisters, had fallen asleep on the job; she had snoozed on her sacred duty; she had *dozed* by the door to the Cosmic Realm! Shame washed over her like a bucket of icy Styx water.

‘The three golden rules of being a Portal Librarian.’ Her Academy professor’s voice boomed in her head. ‘Vigilance, vigilance and vigilance!’

‘*Flooharght!*’ she swore.

As the youngest of her sisters, she always got the worst shifts, the hand-me-down jumpsuits and the battered, moth-eaten manuals. Now she would be the first Librarian *ever* to have been fired from the sacred guardianship of a portal, and on her very first day on the job! Her sisters would disown her; she would be sent back to Olympus in disgrace.

She gulped. She could see her future now: wearing the ill-fitting lilac uniform of a Mountain Mall security guard or carding teenage nymphs at neon-lit Enchanted Forest raves.

No, she was getting ahead of herself. Rowan spun around and pulled back the portal curtain in panic. The gate looked exactly as it always did: shiny. She snatched up her CosPad, fingers swiping clumsily as she scanned for any incoming transports that she might have missed. Nothing. Any messages? None. All portal readings were coming back within acceptable limits. She scrambled for her spectrometer, checking for any other life forms – perhaps a night porter had wandered into the Reading Room by accident? She exhaled.

Everything looked absolutely, well, fine.

Rowan slumped back into her chair and adjusted her bowler hat. She had made a mistake. OK, a *big* mistake, but there was no harm done. She had gotten away with it. *This time*, her old professor snarled in her head. Rowan winced.

Her night shift would be over in a couple of hours; maybe she could wash away some of her guilt by doing some cleaning. The

area around the CosPort desk could definitely do with a tidy. Sweet wrappers and old portal arrival tickets were scattered across the floor, and there was a blob of something suspicious stuck to the drawer handle. She sighed. As much as she loved her big sister, Hazel was kind of a slob.

She took out her key chain and flicked through the keys that the shift manager had given her that morning: desk drawer, portal gate . . . Ah, there we go. Cleaning cupboard. As Olympus's front-line operatives on Earth, only Librarians had access to these keys, and they were DNA-melded too. It had been a rush to imprint them, as Rowan wasn't even supposed to be here – not really, not *officially*. She'd interned with Hazel once or twice, but she was still in her last year at the Academy; she hadn't even taken her oath yet. Then Hazel had gotten a nasty case of bark-flu, and Rowan was the only replacement available. Of *course* she'd said yes – it had felt like such a huge opportunity.

'Yeah, a huge opportunity to mess up,' Rowan muttered as she opened the cupboard. The Oxford Desk in Reading Room 3 might not be the most prestigious of CosPort assignments – it *was* only Portal Tunnel 9, after all – but it was Rowan's first gig. It was important to *her*. As she took out the mop, something caught her eye beyond the Reading Room door caught her eye. There was something on the second step. Something she hadn't noticed before.

She shuffled as close to the edge as she dared. The something was rectangular and laminated, like an ID card. 'A GlamPass?' Rowan whispered, squinting at it suspiciously. 'What in Hera's highlights is *that* doing there?'

GlamPasses were tech-enhanced glammers that made the wearer look like whoever was on the ID badge. These were given out to immortals who needed to hide their true form – extra legs, antlers, that kind of thing – when visiting the Terran Realm. They were also Class Delta CosTech. If any Terrans found a GlamPass – well, it would be disastrous! Worse than that, she corrected herself, it would mean *disciplinary action*.

Rowan tutted. She would have to ask Hazel to check the logbooks to see who could have dropped it. That would be fourteen points off someone's portal licence for sure.

Rowan bit her lip and glanced behind her. *The Librarian's Handbook* was very clear: never, under *any* circumstances, leave your CosPort while on duty. Never. NEVER. But . . . it would only be for a moment, and surely it would be worse to leave a piece of CosTech just lying around until the morning when a caretaker – or, worse – a *student* might see it. Wouldn't it?

Rowan leaned the mop against the nearest bookcase and slowly unclipped the red velvet rope at the top of the stairs to Reading Room 3. Holding her breath, she edged the toe of her boot over the step. Then Rowan Strong, who never EVER broke any rules, broke her second one in as many hours.

One step. Two steps.

She leaned down to pick up the GlamPass and turned it over in her hand. It was a pass to transform the wearer into a Terran office worker. 'Sharon Batterson,' Rowan read out loud. 'Recharge every twelve to fourteen hours.' She tucked it carefully into her jumpsuit pocket. Today was turning out to be a very strange day indeed.

'WARNING! WARNING!' The CosPad on her belt buzzed

like a swarm of angry bees. Rowan scrambled to grab the flashing screen. “‘Portal malfunction’?” Her whole face reflected the red, then blue, then red again. ‘WHAT?!’

There wasn’t a minute to lose. Rowan spun around to sprint up the steps, but . . . the door was gone. Not shut, or closed, but *gone* – as in, vanished. Poof! Even the red velvet rope had disappeared. In its place was a solid metal wall.

Rowan pounded her fists against it. ‘This.’ Smack. ‘Can.’ Smack. ‘NOT be happening!’

The metal clanged in disagreement.

‘No, no, NO!’ She punched the wall one more time, then stepped back and tried to steady her breath. She had been trained for this. Well, not exactly *this*; no Academy simulation had ever been this dramatic. But she *had* been trained for high-level crisis situations. She was Rowan Strong of the Seven Strong Sisters.

Her knees wobbled.

‘First, assess the situation,’ she reminded herself. She pressed another button on her CosPad and shimmering holographic displays popped up in front of her – status reports of all known global portals: Baghdad, Bologna, Istanbul, Nairobi.

Rowan blinked. The always-green dots were now red, red, red, RED.

‘INCOMING CALL,’ the CosPad shrilled.

In an instant, the broad leathery features of Chief Inspector Sibyll materialised on her screen. Sibyll was a very big deal, and not just because she was a giantess. War hero, decorated strategist *and* head of the Cosmic Sprite Investigation Unit of Olympus HQ. Sibyll was, in short, a legend – and you didn’t

use that language lightly in the Cosmic Realm.

‘Agent Rowan, we have a problem.’ Sibyll’s voice boomed through the CosPad and echoed off the library walls. She appeared to be moving at a galumphing speed through Cosmic Headquarters: Rowan could see the familiar marble pillars, each hung with an ‘Olympic employee of the month’ photograph, shake as she stormed past.

‘Our readings show a mass collapse of the Portal Tunnel Network. Do you concur?’

Rowan nodded. ‘Yes, Chief, I see it, but you should know –’

A high-pitched squeak interrupted her confession.

‘Do keep *up*, Simon.’ Sibyll rolled her eyes.

The turquoise face and translucent wings of a struggling weather sprite appeared then disappeared from view. He was holding a clipboard.

‘Our readings *also* show that you are not in your CosPort. Is this correct?’ Sibyll leaned in towards the screen so Rowan could see the blue veins on her temples pulsing.

Rowan chewed the inside of her cheek. This was it. She was *definitely* getting fired, and before she’d even officially got the job. ‘Yes, I –’

Sibyll held up a hand. ‘All of the other Portal Librarians who *stayed* at their posts –’

Rowan’s heart flopped down to somewhere near her Olympus-issue boots.

‘– appear to be trapped within their CosPorts.’

‘Trapped?’ Rowan glanced at the thick metal wall that had appeared from nowhere.

‘Yes. We’ve got visuals, but there seems to be some kind of

CosTech interference, no communications in or out.’ Sibyll sighed. ‘The thing is –’ she leaned even further into the screen, so only her eyes were visible – ‘it turns out our engineers are quite useless.’

There was an indignant snorting sound from off-screen.

Sibyll turned to the troupe in her wake. ‘My apologies, gentlemen.’ She turned back to the screen. ‘*Absolutely* useless,’ she repeated. ‘And you know what this means?’

It means they needed a professional Portal Librarian, one who didn’t abandon their post, one who didn’t SLEEP on duty, one who would know exactly what to do in this situation . . .

‘It *means* we need Daedalus,’ Sibyll announced. ‘Grand Architect Hekate *insists* that she has it in hand, but there’s no point tiptoeing around it –’

Rowan could not imagine the giantess tiptoeing around anything.

‘Daedalus designed the Portal Tunnel Network, and *Daedalus* is the only one who can fix it.’ Sibyll shook her head, so that her impressive neck wobbled back and forth. ‘Essentially, without Daedalus Bloom, we are *all* in a big pile of . . .’

‘*Flooharght?*’ Rowan offered.

‘Exactly.’ Sibyll nodded sagely. ‘He’s on your side of the portal. *We* will find out how this malfunction happened, but I need *you* to find Daedalus. We can give you remote help, but otherwise you’re on your own.’

On my own? On. My. OWN?

‘I . . . I . . .’ The portals between the Cosmic and Terran realms had broken. That meant there was no way through, and – more importantly for her – no way back. Rowan suddenly

felt very small, very alone, and very much like the youngest of the Strong Sisters. She breathed in too fast and coughed. 'I can do this,' she choked, her eyes watering.

Sibyll nodded. 'Your mission, which you have now officially accepted –'

Rowan gulped.

'– is to locate Daedalus and figure out what in Tartarus is going on.' Sibyll's pace quickened. 'I'm putting you in touch with Callimachus Thorn. I'm reliably informed he's our expert on Daedalus, though he's only been in the job for –' Sibyll paused as the weather sprite flew up to whisper something in her ear – 'two hundred years?' She snorted.

Rowan scrunched up her nose. Great, *another* amateur.

'Details are coming through to your computer now.'

Rowan scanned her own holo-displays again. 'But –'

'I know this is not what you expected from your first day as a Librarian.' The giantess's finger hovered over the screen. 'And, Rowan?'

'Yes?'

'Whatever you do, don't mess this up.' The giantess gave one final, decisive nod, then the screen went blank.

Rowan blinked. Well, at least her first day couldn't get any worse.



PEREGRINE

**Location: Daedalus Bloom's Plant Clinic,
4 Brasenose Lane, Oxford, England**

Books, socks and underpants whizzed through the air and into the battered old suitcase that lay open in the middle of the room. Peregrine yawned as she watched her godfather throw a travel pillow with the precise aim and determination of a professional basketball player.

She pulled off her black beanie and tossed it angrily onto the sofa. Daedalus had been a whirlwind of activity since they'd returned from the library, just a couple of hours ago. She *could* have had a nap, but she was too twitchy. She knew what a suitcase meant – it meant that Daedalus was leaving. And only one suitcase meant that Daedalus was leaving *without* Peregrine.

The apartment – in which the offending suitcase now sat – was situated above the florist's that Daedalus owned, and which

he ran with no small amount of help from Peregrine, though the apartment's rooms were now so stuffed with plants that they looked much less like living quarters and more like terrariums with a few sofas in. There were peace lilies in the bath, orchids in the sink, cactuses in the airing cupboard, ferns in the hallway, banana plants on the balcony and spider plants on the stairs. From each stalk hung a label written in neat copperplate handwriting, stating who the plant belonged to and what the plant needed to bounce back to life. For example:

Mrs E. Russell, 511 Morrell Ave.

Three millilitres of valerian essence, a teaspoon of gin and a Shakespearean sonnet twice daily.

Originally the plants had been limited to the greenhouse, then the greenhouse *and* the shop, but word of Daedalus Bloom's Plant Clinic had spread so fast that the plants eventually *had* to be moved upstairs.

Peregrine's mum – whose apartment it *actually* was – had not been entirely happy about this, but Daedalus had reassured her that the plants would absolutely stay in his bedroom 'and maybe a few in the dining room – just to brighten up the place'. This had been the case. For three whole days.

At least Peregrine's bedroom had remained a relatively plant-free zone. It was nice – and necessary – to have somewhere she could go to read that wasn't covered in leaves, petals or potentially poisonous thorns.

The number of plant patients only increased as Daedalus's unique approach to botanical health made him famous on the British horticultural scene. He was a regular, if irreverent, guest on *Gardeners' Question Time*, and his latest discovery, that kitchen herbs preferred to grow to the sound of nineties hip-hop between four and seven in the morning, had caused quite the stir in *Floristry Weekly*.

'I am calling in reinforcements, Peregrine dear.' Daedalus threw a toothbrush over his shoulder. It landed neatly in the suitcase, beside a pair of daisy-printed socks that sported the slogan *Flowers make you look cool*.

Peregrine's freckly face paled. 'No, please. Not –'

'Ms Kidman.'

'But she hates me!' Peregrine dodged a pair of flying sunglasses. Ms Kidman was her ad hoc babysitter, whose idea of a Super Fun Afternoon was getting Peregrine to conjugate Latin verbs while she organised the cutlery drawer.

'She does not *hate* you, Peregrine. Watch out!'

A pair of Bermuda shorts flew past her ear. 'But she is so *boring*.'

'Hmm, yes, she is quite, quite boring. Anyway, I have spoken to your mother, and she agrees.'

Peregrine brightened. 'That Ms Kidman is boring?'

'Yes.' He nodded. 'And that Ms Kidman will look after you while I'm away.'

'Ugh!' Peregrine let out a loud huff. Her mum, who was anything but boring, was away again on an archaeological dig in the Jordan Valley, filming series three of *Penelope Quinn's World of Wonders*, a smash hit with history buffs and armchair

archaeologists alike. Smitten scientists, love-struck Librarians and besotted boffins from around the globe were always sending Peregrine's mother long, complicated love letters and boxes of expensive luxury chocolates. Peregrine used the letters as fuel for their wood burner and ate the chocolates (apart from the strawberry creams, which she left for Daedalus).

Her mum phoned every evening at six o'clock exactly, and asked about Peregrine's algebra, archery, Ancient Greek and aikido, and whether she was eating enough leafy green things. She was especially keen on the aikido, as it was Penelope who had taught her that – before *World of Wonders* had become such a huge hit and Daedalus had officially been named as Peregrine's designated guardian.

Peregrine felt a familiar knot twist in her stomach. This knot tightened with every week her mum was away, and was always there, coiled and heavy. She inhaled slowly, forcing the knot to unwind a fraction.

Out of the corner of her eye, Peregrine spotted another item Daedalus was about to launch into the suitcase. Something that looked very much like –

'Your *passport*?' She shot up a hand and caught it in mid-flight. 'Why are you taking your passport?' A passport meant that Daedalus was not only leaving the city, he was leaving the *country*, and that was far more distance than Peregrine was prepared to put up with. Daedalus had been Peregrine's primary guardian for the last three years, and since she had already lost a mother to travel's exotic temptations, she refused to lose a godfather too.

Then another, even scarier, thought struck her. What if he

was going somewhere Cosmic, somewhere that Peregrine, as a Terran mortal, couldn't follow? She clutched the passport tighter. What if he didn't come back?

'It's only for a few days.' Daedalus took off his hat and fiddled with the indigo feather he always kept there. Its reflection in his glasses made his eyes look as if they had purple stars swimming in them. 'That should give me enough time for the round trip.' He put his hat firmly back on, and held his hand out for the passport.

Peregrine hesitated. She went to hand the passport over, but then pulled it back at the last moment. 'Round trip to WHERE?'

'Sneaky!' He snatched the passport and tapped her nose with it affectionately. 'Well done.'

'But it's not even a real passport, is it?' She scratched her nose where he had tapped it. 'I mean, your name isn't *really* Daedalus Bloom.'

'It most certainly is!' He tucked the passport into his pocket. 'Well, sort of. And when you have lived as long as I have, you appreciate just how important names are. Remember that, Peregrine Quinn.'

Peregrine glared at him, hoping her gaze would be fierce enough and serious enough to make him stay.

It was not.

Daedalus took out his pocket watch. 'Now, Ms Kidman is due here at three o'clock exactly, so she will be here when you get home from school.' He bent down to try to zip up his suitcase, and failed miserably. 'Maybe I didn't need the toothbrush . . .' he muttered.

He sat down on the bag and began to bounce.

Peregrine stopped glaring; it was exhausting. ‘But what about all the plants?’ she tried desperately. ‘And the customers!’

‘Ah yes, let’s go through the list, shall we?’ He pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper from his jacket pocket. ‘Mr Roberts will be phoning about his *scarletis iridiscia* bird of paradise flower tomorrow afternoon.’ Bounce. ‘Four tablespoons of hot chocolate and three hours of Bach played *fortissimo* every morning.’ Bounce. ‘Bernadette needs watering every forty-seven minutes during daylight hours.’ Bounce. ‘Sing them our lullaby at least twice daily.’ Bounce. ‘And most important. Absolutely.’ Bounce. ‘Under no circumstances.’ Bounce. ‘Let Bernadette anywhere near fire, flame or electrical sparks.’ Bounce, bounce, bounce. ‘Got it?’

‘Got it.’ Peregrine had heard that *particular* plant’s instructions dozens of times. She bet Ms Kidman didn’t get this much information on how to look after *her*.

‘Good.’ Daedalus sprang off his suitcase, spun on his heel and zipped up the case in one graceful movement. ‘Time to go!’ he sang.

A squeak made him turn. ‘Ah, Bernadette, of *course* I wouldn’t go without saying goodbye!’ Daedalus picked up his favourite plant and hugged them to his chest. Bernadette’s turquoise, star-splattered pot matched Daedalus’s waistcoat almost exactly. This was not a coincidence. The small purple plant had always been Daedalus’s special project; he had cooed and cajoled and sung to them as a delicate seedling, and when they had been just three inches tall, he had taken them for long walks around the university parks and introduced them to the ducks. He hardly ever even left the shop without the

plant tucked safely into his bicycle basket. Peregrine wondered why he wasn't taking Bernadette with him. She supposed he might get some rather odd looks at customs, wherever it was he was going . . .

She looked up. Bernadette was tickling Daedalus's chin as he poured himself a final cup of coffee into a mug with a handle in the shape of a moon.

Hundreds of plants passed through the shop – thousands, probably – but Peregrine had never seen one quite like Bernadette. Uncurling from a sturdy copper-coloured stem, their leaves were spade-shaped, a vivid, almost-neon green on top and an iridescent petrol-spill purple underneath. Though she was still quite annoyed, Peregrine couldn't help smiling at the plant. With the morning light streaming through the window, it sort of looked as if they were glowing.

Clutching his mug's crescent-moon handle, Daedalus began to sing Bernadette's lullaby. Swirls of steam spiralled around his face, clouding his glasses, as he crooned:

*Light and bright and airy thing,
Rarer than a fairy's wing,
Bring your strength to grow your leaves,
Through you nature's power weaves.
From stem to tip you glow and shine,
Your roots the unknown magicks mine.
The first and last of your wondrous kind,
In you a precious gift we find.*

His song was interrupted by the clock. ‘*Chick-a-cheep, chick-a-CHEEP.*’

The clock was another of Daedalus’s inventions. Every hour a different bird would appear through the door at the top of the clock and chirrup the time. Seven o’clock in the morning was a wren. Peregrine yawned again. She *really* should have had a nap.

‘*Chick-a-cheep, chick-chick-a-cheep.*’ The little wooden bird flapped its wings. ‘*CHEEP!*’ She sounded quite insistent.

‘Ah!’ Daedalus thumped his mug on the table so abruptly that coffee sloshed onto the tablecloth. ‘Oops, sorry about that.’ He smiled sheepishly and thrust the plant into Peregrine’s arms. ‘You’ll have to take Bernadette to school with you of course.’

Bernadette let out a faint squeak as Peregrine struggled to keep hold of them. It sounded like they weren’t too happy with this arrangement either.

‘WHAT?’ Peregrine groaned. ‘But they’re a plant!’

Bernadette squeaked again, louder this time.

Daedalus looked at Peregrine blankly. ‘And?’

Peregrine screwed up her face. ‘And everyone at school already thinks I’m weird –’

‘Weird?’ Daedalus blew a raspberry. ‘You mean *interesting.*’

‘No, I mean WEIRD.’ Peregrine’s voice got louder. ‘So, I can’t turn up for registration with a *plant.*’

Bernadette’s leaves wilted slightly and a sweet peppermint smell wafted up towards Peregrine. She lowered her face and breathed it in. ‘Sorry, Bernie,’ she whispered. It wasn’t Bernadette’s fault; they were a magical plant in a non-magical

world. They didn't quite fit, and Peregrine knew exactly what that felt like. She hugged the pot tighter.

'Coswallop,' Daedalus muttered as he took Peregrine's raincoat off the peg and stuffed it in her rucksack. 'That Caspian chap – you said he brought in a, er, what's it called? You know, floppy ears, smells, terribly popular –'

'A puppy.'

'Yes, one of those.' Daedalus nodded. 'It's just like that.'

'It's *nothing* like that!' Peregrine couldn't quite imagine Candice and her gang cooing over Daedalus's pet plant like they had over Caspian's four-month-old cockapoo.

'Well, how else will you water Bernadette every forty-seven minutes?' He paused, then added a water bottle to the bag. 'Peregrine, please be reasonable.'

Peregrine stared down at the precious peppermint-smelling plant, who was now batting her braids with their leaves. This seemed like such a lot of responsibility, even for just a few days. 'I don't know if I can do this,' she said quietly. 'Maybe –' she coughed – 'I could just . . . go with you?'

'One day, I promise.' Daedalus squeezed her shoulder, then lifted up her chin. 'You were born for adventure, Peregrine Quinn.' His eyes twinkled to match his waistcoat. 'That is why your mother gave you a name with wings.'



CAL

**Location: Terran Communications Department,
the Basement, Olympus Inc., the Mountain
CosDate: 300.23.241**

Callimachus Thorn spat out the segment of this week's *Muse Letter* that he'd been chewing, then read the CosMail again. *Sibyll wants to see you.*

He bleated once, then let out a little moan. You see, Cal was a hooper. That is, half hoofed animal, half human. More specifically, he was a faun.

Cal put the half-chewed paper down and picked up his CosPad. He flicked back to the CosMail. Why was Sibyll contacting *him*? Chief Inspector Sibyll was head of the Cosmic Sprite Investigation Unit (CSI for short), which was the investigative branch of the Cosmic constabularies. That meant *she* was important, whereas Cal was . . . well, not very important at all.

Maybe it was a mistake? Yes, that must be it.

He bit another chunk out of the paper and looked around his office warily, as if Sibyll herself might jump out from behind a pile of paperwork. This was unlikely. For one, the chief inspector hardly ever made it down past Level Ten of the Mountain, and for another, the Terran Communications Department was barely big enough for Cal, his maps, his Terran artefacts and – most importantly – his coffee machine, let alone a giantess.

Cal's CosPad bleeped again. It was another message. *Sibyll wants to see you. NOW.*

Ah. Not a mistake then. Cal's human half was now sweating quite considerably, damp patches forming on the cardigan that Nanny Goat had so lovingly knitted him. It got chilly up here on the Mountain.

Cal gulped and scooted his swivel chair over to his console. Sibyll's Vesuvian temper was almost as famous as the time she had solved the mystery of the uni-foal smuggling ring. What did she want with *him*? Before he could click on his CosMail, a *Muse Letter* article unrolled itself on the screen.

**Live Update: Panic at Mass Portal Failure
Embarrassing Blunder or Enemy Attack?**

A holo-pic of Thoth Thompson materialised under the article, his pixelated wings folded over his feathery chest.

**Reports are streaming in from across the Realm of
multiple inter-realm portal transfers being cancelled**

at the last solar-second. Immortals who have been waiting decades for portal visas have been turned away, with 'technical difficulties' cited as the reason for the disruption. In shocking news, dear readers, we at The Muse Letter have discovered that the portals have in fact Shut Down.

Is it a malfunction? This is possible. However, our reliable and – dare I say – dashing handsome source from inside Olympus Inc. has told this reporter that Cosmic Sprite Investigation's highly trained Librarians have been locked – or trapped? – inside their very own CosPorts.

Designed by the great Grand Architect Daedalus himself, the portals have been part of our way of life for millennia. In fact, who could imagine Cosmic life without a connection to our cousins in the Terran Realm? Grand Architect Hekate and her team are, our insider confirms, working furiously to resolve this situation, but we at The Muse Letter must ask, as you no doubt are asking yourself: if the portals can fail, WHAT will be next?

Thoth Thompson dipped his beak, and the article rolled itself back up, disappearing from the screen with a blink.

Cal's ears flattened. He had never even heard of a glitch in the portal system, let alone it failing. 'It's not possible,' he whispered.

'And yet, here we are!' The booming voice filled the room, making even the maps tremble.

A heartbeat later, Sibyll marched in, her saucer-like eyes scanning the tiny space. ‘Wait outside, Simon,’ she barked as the door swung closed in the face of a bemused-looking weather sprite.

Cal scrambled out from under the desk, where he had launched himself. ‘Hello Sibyll, what a surprise, and an honour, to –’

‘I take it you received my CosMails?’ Sibyll cut in, raising a bushy eyebrow the approximate size and shape of a lesser-spotted slugger-eel.

Cal looked sheepish, which in itself is quite an odd look for a faun.

At that moment, a CosMail flew out of the printer and slapped Cal in his blushing face. ‘Yes, absolutely,’ he mumbled, grabbing at the fluttering page. ‘I was just about to –’

‘You will have heard about the portals.’ Sibyll’s huge fists bunched, as if imagining punching *The Muse Letter*’s Thoth Thompson right in his feathery face.

‘Yes, I –’

‘That means I have a job for you.’ Sibyll said this slowly, chewing the words as if they were a slightly awkward and unusually flavoured toffee.

A job? Cal puffed up his chest. He couldn’t believe the tufts of his ears. He had dreamed of this moment – the moment when someone up there on the Mountain would notice his potential. Whatever the task was, he was ready to leap into action. The leap wouldn’t be very fast, or even particularly high, but it would certainly be filled with a lot of enthusiasm.

‘Not the most important job,’ she added.

‘Oh, no, of course not.’ Cal’s enthusiasm fled, like air from a punctured balloon.

Sibyll fixed him with her infamous analytic gaze that had made much braver immortals than Cal – and there were many – faint in terror. The loose skin around her eyes twitched. ‘We have a trainee Librarian, Rowan Strong, who, by some Cosmic *miracle*, has not been trapped in their CosPort like the others.’ She paused. ‘I am assigning you both – her Terran-side, and you as her Cosmic liaison – to find Daedalus.’

‘*Daedalus?*’ Cal’s ears twitched. ‘The Grand Architect?’ He had worked with Daedalus before, but he had also been the subject of his final-year dissertation at the Academy: *Daedalus Bloom: Crafty or Crackpot?* Cal had concluded, after some research, that he was likely both.

‘*Former* Grand Architect,’ Sibyll corrected. ‘We have our best sprites on the portal problem, and Grand Architect Hekate insists she is making headway.’ She coughed. ‘The point is, we need to explore *all* possibilities. The portals can’t be replaced for obvious reasons, so if there’s even the smallest possibility that they *can* be fixed, if it is just a glitch, and not a . . .’ Her voice trailed off.

An attack. Cal gulped. The idea that anyone would attack the Cosmic Realm was inconceivable. No, it was definitely just a glitch, something that Daedalus would be able to fix. He understood now: they just had to find him.

‘The thing is, with the portals shut down, none of our TraxTech is working.’ She sighed, pulling a huge hand down her face, lengthening her frown. ‘Seeing as you are our resident Daedalus expert, Mr Thorn, and you have the

necessary –’ Sibyll gestured towards the atlas, and Cal’s ceramic duck collection – ‘tools, I am hereby enlisting you to help in this mission. I need you to make it TOP priority – do you understand?’ Sibyll leaned over so she was looking him straight in his bespectacled eyes.

‘I understand –’

Sibyll snorted so loudly that Cal jumped, and let out a little bleat.

‘That is unlikely.’ Sibyll straightened up. ‘Nevertheless, my Investigation Unit is stretched lacewing-thin trying to figure out what exactly has caused this clattering Cosmic calamity. And let me tell you –’ she lowered her voice – ‘OPS are chomping at the bit to take over this investigation. They are *convinced* that this is an attack on the Cosmic Realm.’ She glowered. ‘Not that Admiral Prim needs an excuse to spend more of our budget on HekTek laser blasters.’ She sighed.

Cal nodded. As the investigative branch of Olympus Inc., CSI snooped, hacked, prodded and probed to get answers. They were the quiet ones who worked in the shadows, and their dull grey uniforms reflected their shady role. In contrast, OPS – the Olympic Punitive Squad – were the cool guys. They were the military strong arm of Olympus Inc. and had a well-earned reputation for laser first, ask questions later. They also had the flash gold outfits, all the latest CosTech and frequently made the front page of *The Muse Letter* – usually when they had just blown something up. The organisations hardly ever worked together. If CSI *and* OPS were involved, then this really *was* top priority.

‘We’ve got twenty-four hours to sort this mess out quietly,

Thorn. Admiral Prim has got that Captain Pine waiting in the wings to take over.’ Sibyll snorted. ‘But with that cowboy in charge, who knows what might happen?’

‘Captain *Pine*?’ Cal felt the hair on his haunches lift up. Hansel Pine had been in his year at the Academy and was the Olympic Punitive Squad’s current golden boy. The nymph was faster, bigger and much, *much* more violent than Cal, and had taken every opportunity to remind Cal that his secret dream – of being a full CSI agent – would never, ever come true. You see, no faun had ever actually been a CSI agent; they were too scared, too small, too . . . sweaty.

As if hearing his thoughts, Sibyll tapped her fingers on her CosPad. ‘It says here that you applied to be an active operative with CSI?’ She flicked through the screens, her eyes narrowing. ‘That is very unusual for a faun . . .’

Cal twiddled his thumbs, eyeing his hiding place under the desk. He didn’t want this to get awkward. He, more than anyone, knew what an oddball he was. His parents reminded him frequently.

‘You *did* fail the physical . . .’ Her gaze drifted from his stubby horns all the way down to his goatish hooves. ‘But, hmm, you also had the best scores in the written exam of any immortal in over a century.’

Cal squirmed as Sibyll’s eyes flicked across her CosPad.

‘Look, it’s not *all* stick and no carrot. I’m not a *monster*.’ The giantess paused to pick a spider out of her hair and pop it in her mouth. ‘If you help Agent Strong retrieve Daedalus with *zero* drama –’ she made a circle the size of Cal’s head with her giant thumb and index finger – ‘then I might – *might* –

consider letting you apply for my Investigation Unit.'

Cal squeaked. 'The Investigation Unit? Really?' He took out a moss-green hanky to wipe the sweat off his brow. 'This is most unexpected. I –'

'Don't count your cockatrices before they've hatched,' Sibyll snapped. 'You still have a job to do.' She indicated the maps.

Cal felt his face flush as he wheeled his swivel chair over to his console.

'And not that I'm complaining . . .'

Cal could feel Sibyll's glare burning a hole in his neck.

' . . . but Daedalus has been *uncharacteristically* quiet lately. The last time I checked on him was after the –' she lowered her voice – 'Florence Incident.' She glowered at the memory. Understandably, that particular Daedalus debacle had made the front page of *The Muse Letter* for a month. Not to mention the Terrans almost discovering air travel three centuries too early.

'So?' Sibyll growled. 'Where is he *now*?'

'Right, of course.' Cal stood on his chair to pull the weighty *Off-Realm Register* down from the shelf and traced his hairy finger down its index. 'Ah! Here we are.' He licked his fingers and prodded at the page.

'You're joking?' Sibyll looked over his shoulder. 'The Cosmic Realm's most famous inventor works in a . . . florist's?'

'A *boutique* florist's,' Cal corrected her. Then turned red at the very cheek of it. 'Does very well apparently,' he mumbled, checking his notes. 'A good amount of foot traffic. And we're lucky – it's just around the corner from the Bodleian Library.'

He scratched his beard. 'I think he wanted to stay close to the Oxford portal.' He pushed his glasses a little further up his nose and lowered his voice. 'I always suspected that he checked in on it.'

'*Highly* illegal of course.' Sibyll looked mildly impressed. 'Is there any more data you can give me?'

Cal's ears itched. He was on a roll now. 'He has two known Terran associates.' He clicked a button on the console and an image of a tall, grey-eyed woman in a suit jacket, horse-riding boots and a wide-brimmed fedora hat appeared on the console. 'Penelope Quinn and –'

'No!' Sibyll's eyes widened. '*The* Penelope Quinn?'

Cal nodded. 'Yes, though her location varies. She never seems to be in one place for very long. There is a daughter, though – Peregrine Quinn.' The image of the woman was replaced with a shorter, surlier version. The same shock of white-blond hair, but rather than pulled into a neat ponytail, it was tugged into two messy pigtails that reached to just below the girl's shoulders. 'We have a school address for her. *A St Margaret's.*'

'Hmm.' Sibyll raised her eyebrows. 'Do you remember the protocol for Terran interaction and interview?'

Cal scrunched his face up and shut his eyes, trying to remember that particular Academy lesson. 'Yes. ARC – Approach with caution. Reveal absolutely nothing. Contact CSI immediately for memory-wipe.' He hesitated. 'But *I'm* not actually going to be –'

Sibyll took a deep breath. 'SIMON!'

Cal snapped his eyes open to see the weather sprite bustle

into the office holding a holo-transporter and a lavender-coloured pillow, both of which he placed on the floor.

Cal sprang up from his swivel chair so fast that the chair spun backwards, bounced off the wall and fell over. 'What are those for?' A rising sense of dread told him that he knew *exactly* what they were for. The chair wheels squeaked mournfully in the air.

'I'll send the florist coordinates to Agent Strong. I need *you* to locate that Peregrine girl, see if she has any leads on Daedalus's whereabouts.'

'But –' Cal began.

'Don't worry, it's perfectly safe.' Sibyll and Simon took two steps back. 'With the portals out, there's no telling how long we'll have holo-communications.' Sibyll nodded to Simon, who pressed a button, sending an arc of sparkling blue towards Cal's hooves. 'So it's now or –'

'Never?' Cal offered hopefully, as the blue holo-scan reached his belly, then his cardigan buttons, then the tufts of his beard. His heartbeat picked up pace.

'Calm *down*, Callimachus. You're not even really going to be there.' Sibyll gave him a terrifying stare.

Cal's heartbeat was at a gallop now. But what if he was transported to the wrong place? What if Simon had forgotten to scan his CLOTHES? He wobbled sideways.

'Don't worry, we haven't had a fatality in . . .' Sibyll leaned in towards Simon, who whispered something in her ear.

'Oh' was the last word Cal heard as he fell nose-down onto the waiting cushion, his consciousness evaporating into a glittering shower of blue sparks.