

PRAISE FOR
PEREGRINE QUINN
AND THE COSMIC REALM

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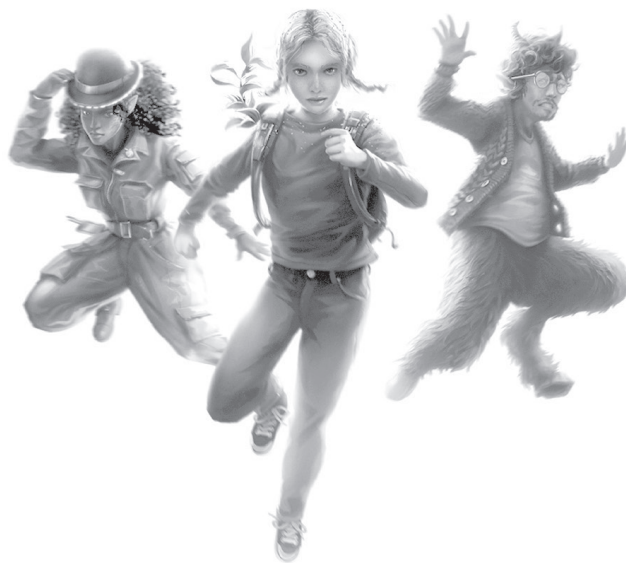
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Piccadilly
PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by
PICCADILLY PRESS
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square, London WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books, Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden
bonnierbooks.co.uk/PiccadillyPress

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Endpaper character illustrations copyright © Brie Schmida, 2024

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

HB ISBN: 978-1-80078-680-6

TPB ISBN: 978-1-80078-796-4

Exclusive edition ISBN: 978-1-80078-987-6

Also available as an ebook and in audio

1

Typeset by Envy Design Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

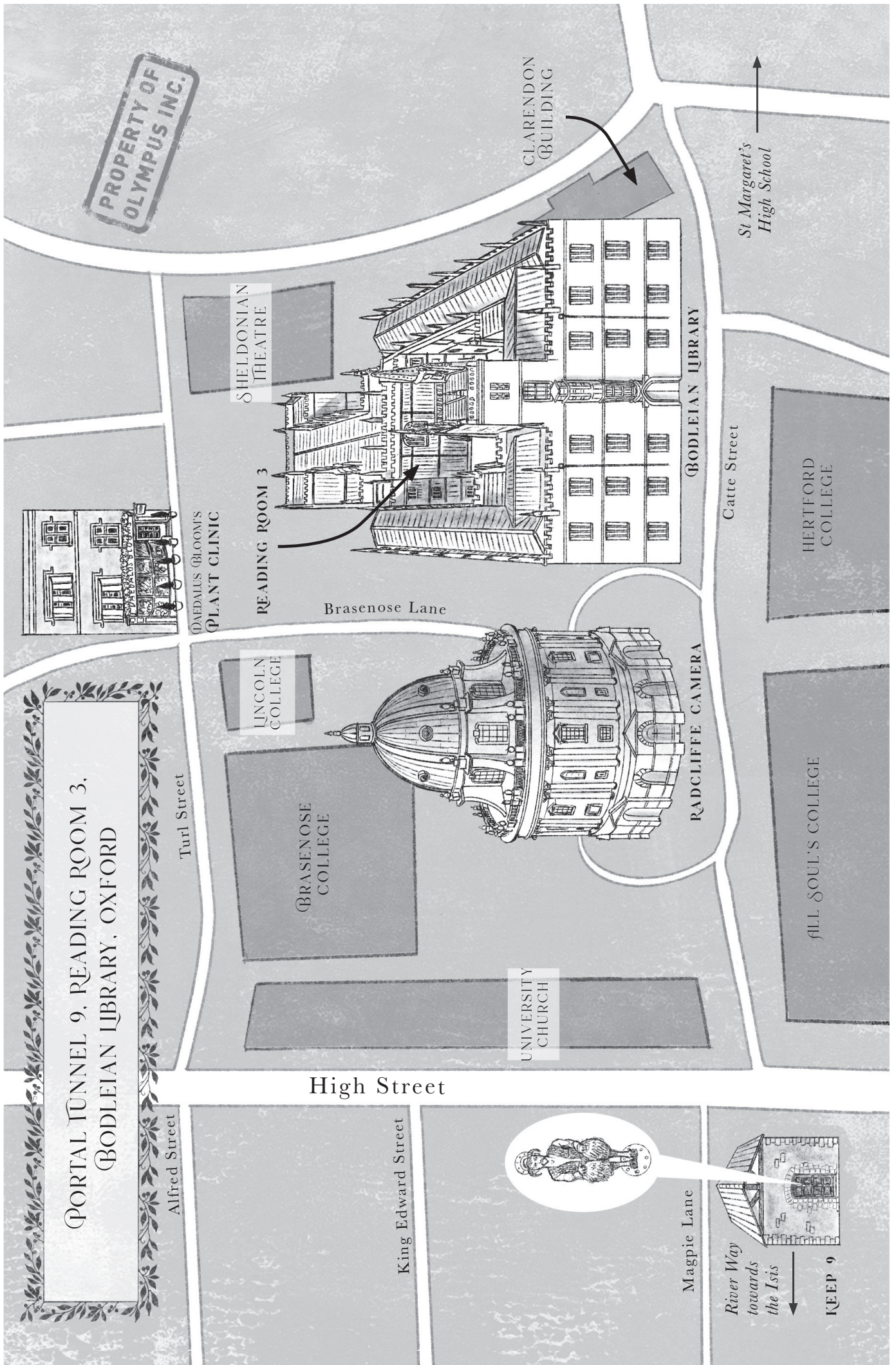


Piccadilly Press is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
bonnierbooks.co.uk

For John, who was always too crafty to have had just one life.

*And for Jacquie, who has always shown me
the magic in this one.*

PORTAL TUNNEL 9, READING ROOM 3,
BODLEIAN LIBRARY, OXFORD



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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 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.