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Peregrine Quinn

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 odd 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 three-piece 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 close-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.'