

# 22. On the Wrong Track

Nearly a week into her first visit to Earth, Virgo felt she was making outstanding progress with her mortal research. They were a curious category, but she found their endless diversity fascinating. Being aboard the 'train' was another opportunity to observe mortals in action and she felt an unfamiliar sensation, a tingling in her stomach, at the prospect of something new.

'I'm hungry,' moaned Elliot less than an hour into the journey, confirming Virgo's observation that young mortal boys ate more than a hundred-headed Hydra. 'I'm going to the buffet car. Stay



here and don't be weird.'

Content for a short while to sit and watch the English countryside go whizzing past the window, it wasn't long before Virgo's curiosity demanded a look around the train. There was nothing 'weird' about her perfectly natural desire to explore her new habitat and Virgo was perfectly satisfied with her decision to ignore Elliot's rule.

The train was an intriguing mixed bag of mortals. There was the large lady in carriage C who had locked herself in the 'toilet' – Virgo was still unsure of the purpose of these small rooms, but the smell from the 'toilet' in carriage F deterred her from investigating further. In carriage J, a small child put on a spectacular performance, making pink milk erupt from his mouth. Strangely, the mortal in the suit opposite him didn't seem to enjoy the show, or appreciate Virgo's enthusiastic applause.

Many mortals seemed displeased that the train was running fifteen minutes late. Time was a big concern in the mortal mind, which was odd because they didn't appear to have anything particularly important to do. As Virgo arrived back at her seat, she wondered what it must be like to live in this strange, imperfect world. A





man carrying a box around his neck stomped up to her seat.

'Tickets, please,' he barked.

'Sorry?' asked Virgo, startled.

'Your ticket,' snapped the mortal rudely. 'I want it.'

'Oh, I see,' said Virgo, her brow furrowed in confusion. 'But it's mine.'

This annoyed the mortal. Mortals often became annoyed extremely quickly over nothing. Virgo suspected it was because their clothing was too tight – this mortal could barely fit his rear end into his trousers.

'Miss, if you cannot produce a valid ticket for your journey, I will be forced to charge you a penalty fare. Do you have a ticket or not?' he huffed.

'Yes, I have it here,' said Virgo, pulling her train ticket from her trouser pocket. 'So you want this?'

'Yes,' sighed the man.

'You want me to give you my ticket?'

'YES!' he shouted more loudly and quite unnecessarily.

'All right,' said Virgo, holding the ticket out.

'Thank you,' sighed the man, reaching for it.

Virgo whipped the ticket away again.

'That'll be nine pounds and fifty pence,' she said.



The mortal gave her a look that could unblock a drain.

'What?'

'My ticket,' said Virgo. 'If you really want it, it'll cost you nine pounds and fifty pence, the same as it cost Elliot. Be grateful I'm not adding a surcharge for your appalling manner and the front-row view of your backside.'

'I am not going to pay for your ticket!' shouted the man. 'Just give it to me!'

Now Virgo was a guest in this realm, but she was not about to have her property stolen, particularly by someone incapable of purchasing the optimal trousers. This simply would not do.

'I will not,' said the indignant Constellation, putting her ticket back in her pocket. 'We've all paid good money just to sit on your train – which is covered in some revolting pink mess, by the way – and yet here you come, refusing to pay a penny and stealing everyone's tickets. It's a disgrace.'

'That's it!' cried the man, throwing his hat on the floor. 'Get off my train! Get off, you rude, obnoxious—'

'Come to think of it,' said Virgo, 'I don't see why we should have to pay for this journey at all. The train was going to London anyway. Why should we have to pay for a service that you are

using for free? No, not only will I not give you my ticket, I insist upon a full refund . . .'

As he wound his way back down the speeding train, Elliot could hear some choice language coming from the carriage ahead of him.

'Please not,' he whispered, praying that it had nothing to do with Virgo.

But as he opened the door, he was greeted by the sight of the Constellation standing on a table, trying to encourage fellow passengers to rise against the tyranny of South Coast Trains while the ticket inspector jumped on his hat in a temper.

Before Elliot could calm the situation, the train jolted so violently it threw Virgo from the table where she had been holding forth.

'Ow! What was that?' cried Virgo from the floor, rubbing her silver head.

'I don't know,' said Elliot, bracing himself between the seats as the train made another sudden jolt. 'But I'm guessing it isn't leaves on the line.'

'What the 'ell's going on?' shouted the ticket inspector down the emergency intercom to the driver.

'Er – Brian. There's someone in my cab,' yawned the driver. 'He's blowing a trumpet at me



and I'm . . . I . . . er . . . I'm feeling a bit . . . zzzzzz . . .'

'Kevin? Kevin? You need to—' The train lurched violently again, dislodging a suitcase from the luggage rack on to Brian's head and knocking him out cold.

'Hypnos!' cried Elliot and Virgo, stepping over the unconscious Brian to race to the front of the train.

Thrown from one side of the train to the other, they forced their way through the screaming passengers, the suitcases littering the floor and the scalding hot coffee that flew at them with every shudder. Eventually they burst into the driver's cab. The wind from the open window nearly blew them straight out again, but they forced their way in. The driver was comatose in his chair and outside the window was Hypnos, waving his trumpet.

'Have fun, kids!' he laughed. 'I'm off to see your buddies at the Tower. Choo-choo!'

He dissembled into a wasp and buzzed away.

'He's mad!' Elliot shouted above the noise of the wind. 'He's going to kill us all!'

'How do you stop this thing?' yelled Virgo.

She frantically pulled all the levers and jabbed the buttons on the train's dashboard, but nothing

would slow the train down. It shot through a station, with a gust that threw the waiting passengers all over the platform. Elliot and Virgo were smashed against the dashboard, and Elliot felt his father's watch crack in his pocket.

'How many people can you carry in your star-ball?' he yelled.

'For the last time – I can't use my powers!' shouted Virgo as the train shot through another signal.

'But just say you could – in an emergency – how many?'

'Barely one,' Virgo yelled. 'But there must be another way to get you off this train . . .'

'It's not just me – what about all these people?' said Elliot. 'We have to stop the train!'

Elliot and Virgo frantically searched for anything that might show them what to do as they charged on through red signals, sending alarms ringing inside the train and out. Elliot wracked his brains, desperately trying to think of something, anything that might save them. Virgo grabbed hold of his arm.

'What?' he cried.

Virgo pointed ahead. Elliot could see nothing but a small black blob on the horizon.

'Wha—?' he started again, as the sound of a



distant whistle gave him the terrible answer. The black blob was taking shape . . .

It was another train. And they were heading straight for it.

'Elliot, we have to get you off this train!' screamed Virgo.

'We can't leave all these people!' Elliot shouted back.

'You have to save yourself!' Virgo screamed again. 'Oh . . . I wish Zeus were here.'

There was a tiny jingle from Elliot's rucksack – and with a loud pop, the bemused King of the Gods appeared next to the train, flying on Pegasus.

'What – where – Winifred . . .' he burbled, scratching his bottom.

'Zeus?' said Virgo. 'How did you—?'

'The wishing pearl! It's in my bag – it must have heard you!' cried Elliot. He looked at his smashed watch. 'We've only got seven minutes before he disappears again.'

'Then hurry up and get on Pegasus,' said Virgo, watching the black blob growing on the horizon. 'You can fly to safety.'

'That's it!' cried Elliot, leaning out of the window to shout instructions.

'Top-hole!' Zeus yelled back, spurring Pegasus





on to the front of the train.

'What are you doing?' demanded Virgo.

'Get off!' said Elliot as she tried to stick her head out next to his.

'I need to know the plan,' she insisted.

'Stop it – you're going to—'

The train rocked violently again as it shot another signal, and the sudden movement pushed Virgo's hand down on the handle, opening the door and sending Elliot flying out of the train, just clinging to the window.

'Elliot!' Virgo screamed. 'Zeus! Zeus!'

But plainly Zeus could hear nothing over the roar of the engine as he tried to secure Pegasus's reins to the front of the train.

'HELLLLP!' Elliot howled as the track whizzed perilously under his feet. His fingers were burning from the strain of holding on as he was slammed against the side of the train. He clung on for all his might – but his grip was starting to slip . . .

Virgo searched her jeans pockets for anything that would help. The other train was approaching fast. She found her *What's What*.

'Help!' she screamed at the blank parchment.

'*Help*,' the parchment started to scribble. '*The need for assistance, often urgently, from someone or something in a moment of particular need.*'



'Aaaaargh!' said Virgo. 'You are SO sub-optimal! You're lucky I don't throw you out of the window! Wait . . .'

She looked at Zeus up ahead, before leaning out of the other door and taking aim at the Olympian. She hurled the roll of parchment with all her might and landed it perfectly on the back of Zeus's skull.

'What the blazes—?' shouted Zeus, turning to see Virgo gesturing wildly at Elliot.

'I . . . can't . . . hold . . . on!' said Elliot as his white fingers lost their final grip on the window. He shut his eyes and prepared to drop to his doom.

'Gotcha!' boomed a huge voice as a strong arm grabbed his rucksack and hauled Elliot on to the back of Pegasus. He looked at the sundial on his wrist. 'We've only got five minutes – let's get a shift on! Virgo – tie these to the door!'

He threw Pegasus's reins to the Constellation, who did as she was asked in a flash.

'I've done it! But I don't—'

'Up, up and away!' yelled Zeus, and he spurred Pegasus up into the sky. The flying horse gave an almighty groan as he took the strain of the train, lifting the front wheels off the track.

'Good boy!' said Zeus, patting his immortal

steed's neck. 'Heave, Peg! Heave!'

'It's too late!' cried Virgo as they continued on their collision course with the approaching train. But Pegasus responded to Zeus's cries with a great surge up into the heavens.

Carriage by carriage, the train gracefully came away from the track and climbed into the air, flowing behind Pegasus like the ribbon on a kite. Zeus replaced his invisibility helmet, and the battered commuters, who had been screaming their prayers and curses, suddenly fell silent as the 6.42 to London Waterloo flew invisibly up into the sky, just missing the train that would have smashed them all to smithereens.

Four minutes later, the invisible train made a graceful landing just outside platform 10 at Waterloo station, fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. Zeus wandered through the train spraying a bottle of Aphrodite's perfume, which immediately calmed all the passengers and made them forget the past six minutes of their lives.

Elliot and Virgo were tending to Brian the ticket inspector, who had regained consciousness somewhere over Vauxhall. As the paramedics arrived to take him away, concerned that his concussion had left him feeling like the train had



been flying, the two youngsters jumped off the train.

'Next time, we'll take the bus,' said Elliot, pulling his father's watch sadly out of his pocket. It was completely smashed. 'Thanks.'

'My pleasure, old chap,' said Zeus. 'But you two knaves were supposed to stay at the farm . . .'

'We had to find you,' said Virgo. 'Hypnos knows about the plan—'

'Crivens!' blasted Zeus, bundling them both on board Pegasus. 'We need to saddle up. By my reckoning, the wishing pearl runs out in three . . . two . . . one . . .'

And with a great big 'pop', the pearl pinged them away into thin air.



