



6. The Swimming Lesson

Despite his tiredness, Elliot had a lousy night's sleep. The thought of Virgo – or whatever the weirdo called herself – stealing the family silver kept him tossing and turning for half the night. The fact that he'd already sold all the family silver helped him to sleep for the other half, but the new day had barely broken before Elliot was pulling on his clothes and heading downstairs.

He expected to find Virgo snoring beneath the patchwork quilt that hid the holes in the sofa. But as he reached the bottom of the stairs, she was wide awake in front of the telly. The sofa didn't

appear to have been disturbed, but nor did Virgo show any signs of having been awake all night.

'Morning,' said Elliot cautiously.

'Good morning, Elliot,' said Virgo, scowling at the television. 'I hope you enjoyed a better night than I did.'

Elliot was about to launch into a tirade about how no, actually, a delusional stranger breaking into his cowshed had rather disturbed his evening. But something more important struck him. Virgo was watching television. They had electricity.

'What, how?' he mumbled sleepily, trying to find words that had yet to wake up.

'I must say, even your hospitality puts your fellow mortals to shame,' Virgo began, clearly relishing the chance for a moan. 'The little people who live in this box are incredibly rude.'

Elliot glanced at the soap opera Virgo was watching as he pondered how the power had been miraculously restored to his home.

'I have been trying to make conversation with them all night,' she huffed. 'But I have been completely ignored. I didn't mind so much earlier when some of them had to go and fight werewolves – these things happen – but these people are downright stupid. Take this woman,' she said, pointing to a well-known soap actress. 'I tried to



advise her against running away with this man, but would she listen? Now she's trapped in a car with someone who killed his own mother only twenty minutes ago. And he ran over the neighbour's dog. And pretended to be his own sister. Now when do we leave to find Prisoner Forty-two?

'When did the lights come back on?' he asked.

'Oh, I rerouted your electricity through your neighbour's system. I had to do some considerable research on electrical circuitry in *What's What*, but it was worth it. This place was darker than a cupboard in a labyrinth.'

Elliot stared at Virgo through his puffy red eyes. The weirdo was also an electrician. Interesting. And he only had one neighbour – Patricia Porshley-Plum. So Virgo had 'borrowed' electricity from Mrs Horse's-Bum without paying for it. Surely that wasn't right? Elliot knew what he had to do.

'Show me how?' he asked Virgo.

'Elly?' His mum was standing at the doorway, rubbing her drowsy eyes. 'Who is this?'

Elliot's tired mind failed to construct a quick lie.

'Virgo, Constellation of the Zodiac Council,' said Virgo, raising her right hand to her left

shoulder. 'I didn't realize mortals lived in packs, like gorgons. Pleasure to meet you, adult female mortal.'

'I'm Josie, Elliot's mum,' said Josie with a warm smile. 'Elliot didn't say we were expecting company.'

'He couldn't have done,' said Virgo. 'I'm afraid I—'

'Arrived very late,' Elliot interrupted. 'It was a bit of a surprise. I'll run you a bath, Mum – why don't you go and relax? Virgo's just leaving.'

'Oh, that's a shame,' said Josie. 'Well, nice to meet you. Hope to see you again.'

'That is highly unlikely, Josie-Mum,' said Virgo. 'I will soon return to my realm of Elysium, where no mortal has ever set foot.'

'Oh, well. Safe journey,' said Josie kindly, as Elliot gently guided her towards the stairs.

Half an hour later when Mum was safely out of the bath, Elliot gave Virgo her flask and a piece of toast, and bundled her out of the door in an old hoodie.

'I won't be long, Mum,' he shouted. 'Stay here and don't let anyone in.'

'Yes, boss,' laughed Josie, happily reading a magazine at the kitchen table. 'See you later, gorgeous.'



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'Look! There it is!' exclaimed Virgo as she spotted Stonehenge from the front gate. 'If we cut across that field, we'll be there in no time.'

'Er - this way's quicker,' mumbled Elliot, not intending to take Virgo anywhere but the Little Motbury police station.

Elliot and Virgo walked in silence down the track that led to the nearby village. The River Avon babbled peacefully alongside.

'I appreciate your assistance in taking me to Prisoner Forty-two,' said Virgo. 'As soon as I've delivered this, I will leave you to your imperfect mortal life.'

'Whatever,' muttered Elliot, who was counting the seconds until this freak was off his hands. He wasn't a morning person at the best of times and his sleepless night had made him grumpier than usual.

After they had been walking for a few minutes, Virgo spoke up.

'I have a suspicion, young Elliot, that you don't entirely believe me,' she ventured, eyeing her toast.

'No. Really?' Elliot said as he chewed on his toast, wishing he had peanut butter. Or butter.

'It's true,' she said, using the untouched toast to brush her hair. 'I appreciate it must be confusing

for your tiny mortal brain, but I really am an immortal Constellation, sent to administer this ambrosia.'

'Actually, I don't care!' snapped Elliot, stopping to face her. 'I don't care that you think you're an immortal tea lady! I don't care that you think you're a walking fireworks display! I don't care if the Easter Bunny forgot your birthday and the Tooth Fairy cancels your lunch plans! I have real problems in the real world and this whole weird fantasy of yours is really getting up my nose!'

Virgo considered his outburst.

'Well, that's up to you,' she said eventually. 'Although I'm sorry the Tooth Fairy bothered you with our social arrangements. She can be thoughtless like that.'

'Oh, for—' Elliot yelled as he stormed away.

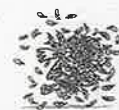
Virgo ran to catch up with him. 'But I can prove to you that I am an immortal,' she mused, looking around. 'I'd transform, but it's in my contract that Council members can't reveal their constellations to mortals ...'

'How convenient.'

'No I just have to find a way not to die.'

'Don't try too hard.'

'Ah!' said Virgo, spotting the river. 'If I were a mortal, I could stay underwater for - what -



thirty seconds maybe?

'Something like that,' said Elliot, stopping but with his arms folded.

'Well, then,' nodded Virgo, and she turned towards the riverbank and waded, fully clothed, into the Avon.

With a guilty prickle in his guts, Elliot realized this had gone far enough. 'Look, you don't have to prove anything,' he said, snapping out of his bad mood. 'Don't be stupid ...'

'Urgh, it's cold and the water is just revolting,' moaned Virgo, striding on regardless. 'You mortals need to take better care of your realm. After all, it won't all be here for ever and then you'll be right in the *glug, glug, glug*—'

The remainder of Virgo's complaint was lost as her silver head disappeared into the river, which swallowed her up with a gentle suck.

'She even talks underwater,' Elliot said to the empty space beside him, glancing at his pocket watch. No need to worry. Virgo hadn't even paused for breath — she'd be out of there in no time.

Twenty seconds. Elliot looked around for the telltale bubbles that would betray Virgo's hiding place. Nothing. Not even a ripple. She was stubborn, that was for sure.

Forty-five seconds. Fair play, the girl could hold her breath. She'd come bursting out of that river with an almighty gasp any second now. Any second at all. Absolutely any second now. Elliot took off his jacket to warm her when she'd finished her silly stunt. Virgo might be a pain in the bum, but he didn't want her to catch pneumonia.

One minute and fifteen seconds. Elliot's heart-beat quickened. He'd been so busy getting cross with Virgo, it suddenly occurred to him that maybe she actually believed all this rubbish. What if she really did think she was immortal and was floating unconscious down the river while he stood there like a lemon? He could be responsible for the life of a seriously unwell young girl. What would he tell her parents? What would he tell the police?

Two minutes. Elliot was now in a full-blown panic. He'd stood by and let this poor sick girl drown herself just because he'd had a crummy night's sleep. He was going to prison and rightly so. He was a horrible human being. There was nothing else for it. He had to go in after her.

Elliot kicked off his shoes, dropped his watch on the grass and ripped off his T-shirt. He was about to lose his jeans, but looking at the mist



rising from the cold water, he quickly thought better of it. With a deep breath for air – and another for courage – Elliot plunged into the freezing river. The water bit him with a thousand icy teeth.

‘Virgo!’ he yelled, thrashing around. ‘Virgo! Where are you?! I believe you! Come out!’

Once, twice, three times he dived beneath the murky surface, but he couldn’t see or feel Virgo anywhere. He stood breathless in the middle of the river, desperately looking for any sign of the girl he’d left to drown. He threw his hands into the water in despair. She had gone. And it was all his fault.

‘Let’s hope you’re immortal,’ called Virgo as she suddenly popped up from the water behind him and calmly walked out on to the bank, picking up Elliot’s discarded T-shirt to dry her soaking hair. ‘Or you’re going to freeze to death in there.’

Elliot didn’t understand. This was impossible. She’d been underwater for nearly five minutes.

‘What? How? You should be—’ he spluttered.

‘Well, here we go again,’ sighed Virgo. ‘Hello. I’m Virgo. I’m an immortal. Shall we move on?’

She helped a shivering Elliot out of the river. He took her hand gingerly, as if she had suddenly turned into Bigfoot. Virgo handed him his soggy

T-shirt, which he put on in a stunned stupor. He trembled in a confused, freezing puddle.

‘Hold my hands,’ the young Constellation instructed, and Elliot obeyed her in a daze. ‘I shouldn’t really, but needs must ...’

With Elliot’s hands in hers, Virgo pulled her palms gently apart. At her touch, a million tiny stars crept from every millimetre of her body, curling into the air in wisps of light. These golden strands reached around them both with a warm, starry glow. Elliot felt the gentle heat seep into his soaking clothes and beyond, penetrating his skin and warming him from the core of his body. In seconds, he was dry.

‘Better?’ asked Virgo.

‘Better,’ answered Elliot, staring at her as if for the first time. He couldn’t believe it. She was telling the truth. Virgo really was immortal.

‘Now, can you please take me to the stone circle?’ said Virgo, looking over the countryside.

‘Stonehenge?’ asked Elliot.

‘Is that a prison?’ asked Virgo.

Elliot thought of the countless tedious school trips he’d endured at the ancient attraction.

‘That’s the one,’ he said. ‘It’s about a mile this way.’

‘Excellent,’ said Virgo. ‘This is going to get me a

promotion for sure. I'll probably be asked to make more of these trips. You might be seeing plenty more of me.'

'Fantastic,' said Elliot, his mind still reeling from the morning's unexpected turn of events.

Virgo strode off across the field, forcing Elliot to run to keep up with her this time.

'So are there more ... like you?' he asked.

'Immortals, you mean?' asked Virgo. 'Of course. Thousands. That's why the Zodiac Council exists – we support them all.'

'So you're like ... a government?'

'Not at all!' scoffed Virgo. 'A government! For immortals! The very idea ... No. Nothing like that. We just tell them all what to do and punish them if they don't do it.'

She halted as she stepped in a ginormous cowpat. 'What is this stuff? It's everywhere in this realm ...'

'Do any immortals live here? On Earth?' said Elliot, looking around as if he might bump into one at any moment.

'Of course,' said Virgo nonchalantly. 'You probably encounter them all the time.'

Elliot thought about some of the strange inhabitants of his tiny village. This actually made a lot of sense.

'You can identify us by this,' said Virgo, pulling a necklace out from her T-shirt.

Elliot examined it closely. On a golden chain hung a small pendant, about the size of a grape. Exquisitely carved in crystal was a heart inside an elaborate flame.

'This is my kardia,' Virgo explained. 'All immortals wear them.'

'Let me see,' said Elliot, reaching out to get a better look. Virgo snatched the necklace away in horror.

'Don't touch it!' she gasped. 'A kardia is the essence of immortal life! Without it, we become mortal! Being stripped of your kardia is the most severe punishment in the immortal world! Without a kardia, an immortal could die! An immortal could be killed! An immortal could be ... an accountant!'

'OK, OK – chill out. Your kardia's a big deal. I get it,' said Elliot, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

'I'm pleased to hear it,' said Virgo more calmly. 'Kardia also help immortals to identify each other and declare our category.'

'Category?' asked Elliot.

'Yes, there are five: Deities, Constellations, Elementals, Neutrals and Daemons. Every category is

made up of different classes and each has a different kardia. For instance, all Deities' kardia are precious metals, but they are bronze for Heroes, silver for Gods and gold for Olympians. Elementals' kardia belong to their element – a troll is an Earth Elemental, so their kardia are stone. Constellations' kardia are crystal and Neutrals' are glass.'

'So Deities and Constellations are better than Elementals and Neutrals?'

'We wouldn't express it like that,' said Virgo grandly.

'You would if you had a stone kardia,' Elliot pointed out. 'What about the Daemons?'

'Oh, them – they don't exist any more,' she said as she trod in more cow dung. 'Is this substance some kind of decoration ...?'

'Don't exist? But you said Daemons were immortals?'

'Not without their kardia. Mighty Zeus stripped the Daemons of their onyx kardia and destroyed them all before he retired. Horrible creatures apparently – loved to torture mortals with their powers – illness, death, old age, that kind of thing ...'

'So who is this Prisoner Forty-two? And why is he at Stonehenge?' asked Elliot.

'No idea,' said Virgo breezily. 'And he's under it.'

'What did he do?'

'I don't know. Something wrong, obviously. When Zeus appointed the Zodiac Council after his retirement, he left instructions that he'd imprisoned a dangerous immortal on Earth and we were to deliver ambrosia to the stone circle every two hundred and fifty years,' explained Virgo, pausing to sniff her dung-covered shoe and wrinkling her nose. 'This has a distinctive aroma. Is this what mortals use for perfume?'

'No. But you can if you like,' said Elliot. 'How long has the prisoner been there?'

'Not sure exactly. It was before my time. Zeus retired two thousand years ago. I'm only ...'

'One thousand nine hundred and sixty-four. You said.'

Elliot pulled up as a realization hit him. 'So this bloke has been imprisoned for two thousand years and it's never occurred to you to ask why he's there?' he asked. 'Don't you think that's wrong?'

'I have been told what I'm supposed to think.'

'Shouldn't you make up your own mind?'

'Don't worry about matters that your sub-optimal mortal intellect can't understand,' she said haughtily, her trainers squelching across the field.



'I understand justice,' said Elliot a little too loudly.

'Our systems are perfect. They have worked for two thousand years.'

'Doing something wrong for a long time doesn't make you perfect,' said Elliot. 'It makes you really wrong.'

'I don't expect you to understand,' said Virgo airily. 'But these are our rules.'

'Your rules suck,' said Elliot.

'Suck what?' asked Virgo.

'Your rules are stupid,' Elliot spelt out.

'How dare you!' huffed Virgo. 'They are not and I will follow them.'

'And do you always follow the rules?' asked Elliot.

Virgo paused. 'Yes,' she answered eventually. Elliot immediately recognized a fellow liar.

'Ah – perhaps they are some form of mortal delicacy?' said Virgo, leaning down to the cow poo. 'Not to my taste, but I'm willing to try ...'

'No!' shouted Elliot, holding Virgo back before she tucked into the cowpat. 'Just leave that stuff alone, all right? So why are you taking him that flask? Why not just leave him there to rot?'

'All immortals are entitled to ambrosia, even prisoners,' said Virgo. 'We need it to stay young.'

Otherwise we'd just get older and start falling to bits without dying. That is every immortal's worst fear. Not to mention a litter hazard. Ambrosia is a basic right.'

'So is freedom,' said Elliot. 'You're just going to give this bloke a drink and then leave?'

'No,' replied Virgo. 'I'm going to throw the flask into his prison and return to Elysium. The rules strictly forbid any contact whatsoever with the prisoner.'

'That's cruel.'

'Those are the rules. And we're here.'

Elliot had been so caught up in Virgo's story, he hadn't noticed that they had already reached the outer boundaries of Stonehenge. He had never understood the excitement about some prehistoric lumps of rock, but now he knew they were an immortal prison, they seemed a lot more attractive.

With the busy summer season over and the sun only just peering through the stones, Stonehenge was eerily quiet. The only people present were Cyril, a lone guide who was on hand to answer any potential questions from any potential visitors, and two security guards enthusiastically evaluating a picture in the early pages of a tabloid newspaper.



Virgo turned to Elliot and placed her left hand on her right shoulder by way of farewell.

'Well, thank you, Elliot the Mortal, for your begrudging hospitality and cantankerous company. It has been curious knowing you and I wish you well in your uneventful mortal life.'

And with that, Virgo hopped over the barrier and strode towards a huge stone, set apart from the stone circle, which Elliot recalled was called the Heel Stone.

'Wait!' he hissed. 'You can't do that ...'

But it was too late. Elliot watched agog as Virgo merrily walked across the hallowed ground and stopped by the Heel Stone, as yet undetected by Cyril, who was looking in the opposite direction and picking his nose. Virgo crawled around the base of the stone, searching for something in the grass.

'Elliot!' she hollered, causing Elliot to wince and Cyril to spin around. 'Would you mind giving me a hand?'

It took Cyril a moment to comprehend the full horror of the scene before him, as a silver-haired girl stood up and kicked the sacred Heel Stone of Stonehenge.

'Oi!' he yelled, reaching for his whistle. 'Stop right there, you hooligan!'

He blew three sharp blasts, summoning the two burly, if portly, security guards from the car park, who ran straight at Elliot.

There was no way he could get in trouble with the police. If they took him home to Mum, they might report her to the authorities. With Cyril approaching from the other direction, he had no choice but to run towards Virgo at the Heel Stone.

Oblivious to the fuss around her, Virgo was yanking up tufts of grass at the stone's base, tearing the soil around the sacred stone and throwing it carelessly over her shoulder before she finally seemed to find what she was looking for. As Elliot skidded to a halt, he could see a small golden handle and an ancient-looking red keypad buried beneath the overgrowth.

'Oh, bother!' snapped Virgo. 'I don't have the passcode.'

'Then make one up!' shouted Elliot. 'We need to get out of here!'

'I bet it's the one Aries uses on the biscuit tin – he uses the same four digits for everything, it's very insecure ...'

'Will you hurry up!' yelled Elliot, glancing over his shoulder at the fast-approaching guards, as Virgo pressed the keypad.

'I knew it!' she chirped as the keypad turned



green. 'It's always 2483: Capricorn's horns, Gemini's arms, Scorpio's legs, Libra's IQ. That golden ram is just asking to be fleeced.'

'What the—?'

Cyril pulled up in shock. Virgo had turned the handle and was lifting the enormous rock as if it were made of papier mâché.

Elliot saw he had no other escape. As she raised it above her head, he launched himself at Virgo and bundled them both into the hole beneath the stone.

It was a blind, frantic leap into the unknown – and Elliot's flying feet only just made it through the gap as the almighty Heel Stone came crashing down and locked them into the darkness below.