

expensive sunglasses on his nose and admiring his reflection in the window.

'Can Charon come with us?' asked Elliot. 'After we've seen Zeus, I really need to get home.'

'Where's home?' asked Hermes.

Elliot pointed to Little Motbury on Hermes's map.

'Oh, it's on the way,' said Hermes. 'I'll get you there much quicker than Charon, bless his salty sandals. We'll drop in on Dad, we'll get you home, bosh.'

'Well, if you're sure ...' said Elliot.

'Not even joking, mate,' winked Hermes. 'Let's motor!'

'Ah – Hermes?' chimed Virgo, picking up the messenger's forgotten iGod.

'Babe – you're a lifesaver,' sighed Hermes. 'I'd forget my head! Then who'd be on the front cover of Messengers' Health? ... Anyhoo – Kottos! I'll take another nectarchino to go. We've got a wedding to get to! BOOM.'



13. For Better or Worse

Elliot had thought that travelling by constellation was the most terrifying experience he was ever likely to have.

But that was before he had driven with Hermes.

At first, riding in the sidecar of the Messenger God's gleaming motorbike – all chrome and turquoise sequins – had seemed awesome. Mum had promised she'd teach Elliot to ride a motorbike when he was old enough and he couldn't wait to roar along the country lanes.

But Hermes's driving was making Elliot consider a small tricycle instead.



For one thing, Hermes viewed speed limits as a minimum requirement for how fast he should drive. As he whizzed along, warning signs flashed up: SCORPIO SAYS DON'T BE TOO NIPPY! THE ZODIAC COUNCIL HONOURS CAREFUL DRIVERS! But if Hermes noticed them, they had no effect as he revved the bike harder to weave in and out of the immortal traffic, earning him colourful curses from an elderly leprechaun on a mobility scooter and threatening hand gestures from a gnome in a white van.

And for another thing, the road was upside-down.

'I don't understand,' Elliot yelled over the roar of the air blasting his ears and the blood rushing to his head. 'Why don't we fall down?'

'We're on the low-way – the immortal road system that runs exactly under the mortal one,' Hermes shouted back. 'You've got, like, a perfectly good network, so we just copied it. Every time you drive down the road, an immortal is probably driving underneath you. You don't fall off the Earth's curve, do you? And you don't fall under it neither. Hold tight!'

In the sidecar, Elliot and Virgo exchanged nervous glances as the bike accelerated again. A voice boomed over a nearby loudspeaker:

'Vehicle registration: B 0 5 H; Owner: Hermes; Category: Olympian. The Zodiac Council warns you this is your second speeding infringement. One more offence and your vehicle will be disabled and you may face a substantial fine or the forfeit of a body part. Have a nice day.'

'Whatevs,' yelled Hermes. 'Nearly there.'

The bike charged along the immortal motorway, finally turning down a country road signposted to the Royal Withering St Stan's Golf Club. Hermes drove up a ramp, which twisted around until the motorbike was the right way up, emerging back on to Earth through a set of road-works.

'Nice of you mortals to keep digging up your roads,' said Hermes. 'Makes it much easier for us to get in and out. Here we are. Boom!'

He swung into the golf-club car park alongside cars that seemed the size of Elliot's cowshed. At last, the motorbike came to a welcome stop. Elliot clambered out, his legs still vibrating from the bike's relentless engine.

'Slumming it again, Dad,' grinned Hermes as he took in the grand facade of the clubhouse, a stately home set in acres of lush green golf course. 'Shut up! We've got five minutes.'

Elliot looked towards an elaborate gold



carriage drawn by a beautiful white horse, in which he could see only an enormous white dress. Three salmon-pink bridesmaids were trying to free the bride, but the circumference of the gown had wedged her firmly in the door. As the carriage rocked and jolted, the horse, clothed in an intricately embroidered coat, released an irritated whinny. Elliot could have sworn it actually rolled its eyes.

They joined the gaggles of posh wedding guests bearing elaborately wrapped gifts. The ladies wore furs, the gentlemen wore tuxedos. Hermes looked woefully at his T-shirt and jeans.

'Nah, mate,' he said, producing his iGod and scrolling around the screen. As he rolled the dial in the centre, his outfits changed from sportswear to beachwear to a pair of lederhosen.

'Hermes, we don't have time,' snapped Virgo. 'We need to get to Zeus.'

'There's always time to look sharp, babe,' said Hermes, finally settling on a designer tuxedo. He offered the iGod hopefully to Elliot and Virgo, taking in Elliot's torn T-shirt and Virgo's backwards trousers. 'Your turn?'

'Hermes!' Virgo hissed.

'Cool, babe,' he sighed. 'You can lead a unicorn to water ...'

They tucked in behind two women wearing dead animals around their shoulders.

'So she's finally found Mr Right,' said the one sporting a dead fox.

'About time,' said the one draped in dead mink. 'She's tried Mr Wrong, Mr Stupid, Mr Boring and Mr Married ...'

They laughed unpleasantly. The dead animals looked mournfully at Elliot. He could see why they were fed up. Not only had they been snatched from the prime of life, but now they were stuck around the necks of these ridiculous women.

'Bride or groom?' asked the usher.

'Neither, you fool,' Mrs Fox announced. 'I'm a guest.'

'I can't believe it,' said Virgo, smoothing her hair. 'I'm actually going to meet Zeus! What should I say to impress him?'

'Nothing?' Elliot suggested as they entered the grand room, which was filled with rows of chairs with a narrow aisle between them. It looked as though a wedding had thrown up everywhere. Flowers adorned every surface, pink balloons filled every corner and there was a huge chocolate fountain with a marshmallow bride and groom dangling their feet in it.



'Now where's the old boy?' Hermes said, hovering slightly off the ground to see over the crowd. 'Ah – bosh!'

Hermes pointed out someone who, to Elliot, was quite obviously the King of the Gods. Even with his back to them, this tall, broad man had a regal bearing – noble, strong and brave. As Hermes, Virgo and Elliot fought their way through the chattering guests towards this towering presence, Elliot wondered what he would say to such a great immortal being.

Although as the man turned around, he didn't have to wonder long.

'Champagne, sir?' said the waiter, offering a glass to Hermes.

'Nice one,' said Hermes, taking two.

'You'd better top me up too, old boy,' boomed a voice behind him. 'Condemned man and all that.'

'Zeus!' Virgo gasped as the waiter moved aside to reveal the real King of the Gods.

Mythology was one of the few subjects that Elliot enjoyed at school and so he was familiar with the classical images of Zeus, all white hair flowing down his broad back and his strapping chest bursting out of a toga as he hurled thunderbolts at his enemies.

So he was rather surprised to find Zeus in a

badly fitting light-blue tuxedo with a frilly shirt, holding a cheese-and-ham vol-au-vent. The long white hair was there, albeit badly slicked back with hair gel. And it wasn't a strapping chest bursting out so much as a gigantic belly.

'Hermes, my boy!' said Zeus warmly, taking his son into a big bear hug. 'So glad you could make it. Such a special day. This one's a keeper. Whatever her name is. And who do we have here?'

He extended a crummy hand towards Virgo.

'I . . . er . . . w-well . . . I'm . . .' stammered the Constellation.

'This is Virgo, from the Zodiac Council,' said Hermes.

'Ah – a pencil-pusher, eh?' laughed Zeus. 'Don't worry, I won't hold it against you. Super to meet you.'

'Th . . . argh . . . bler . . .' Virgo bumbled.

'And this is my mate Elliot,' said Hermes. 'Not sure why he's here, but he's rocking the shabby-chic look and that's good enough for me.'

'Your Majesty,' said Elliot, looking into the smiling deep-blue eyes set in a lined face. Even with the ridiculous outfit, there was still something about Zeus that exuded almighty power. Elliot recalled the sensation he'd had with Thanatos, the sense that this man could read his



mind – but this time it wasn't an unpleasant feeling. It was somehow comforting, familiar, warm. 'I'm Elliot Hooper.'

'Smashing to meet you, Elliot,' boomed Zeus. 'Lovely to have you here. I do love a good wedding.'

'Shame he doesn't enjoy the marriage bit afterwards,' smirked Hermes.

'Behave, you young whippersnapper,' laughed Zeus, hitting Hermes so hard on the back that he fell over. 'Good show.'

'Your Majesty,' said Virgo, dropping into a deep curtsy. 'I desperately need your help. I've done something terrible.'

'There, there – can't be that bad,' said Zeus. 'No worse than these vol-au-vents anyway. I've had better food from Tantalus's Takeaway. And there's no need for any of that – get up, dear girl.'

Just as he helped Virgo to her feet, the organ struck up the opening chords of *Here Comes the Bride*.

'Oh, cripes,' gulped Zeus, dropping the vol-au-vent and wiping his hands on his suit. 'Here we go. Again.'

'But Zeus, I—' started Virgo.

She was drowned out by the chorus of 'ahh' announcing that Petunia, the bride, had made it out of the car park. Unfortunately, however, she

didn't make it much further, as the almighty dress that had wedged her in the carriage now wedged her halfway down the aisle.

Elliot tried not to laugh as the three miserable bridesmaids unsuccessfully tried to free her.

'Zeus,' whispered Virgo. 'Zeus, I really need to—'

'Gordon!' the bride sang down the aisle. 'Darling, Petunia needs you!'

'Oh, crivens – that's me,' whispered Zeus, dropping the small silver flask he'd been sipping and running to his bride. 'Hold on, my fragrant flower. One. Two. Three!'

Elliot hid his mouth in his hand as Zeus grabbed the bottom hoop and gave the dress an almighty tug. The hoop came unstuck, but such was the width and weight of the gown, the wide skirts merely tipped Petunia backwards, leaving her stranded with her legs in the air, flashing her frilly knickers at the congregation.

'Aaaargh! Gordon! Help!'

'Hold on, old girl,' said Zeus, grabbing one of her legs. 'Hermes – grab the other one for me.'

At his father's bidding – and with some difficulty given the strength, size and motion of the bride – Hermes grabbed Petunia's other leg.

'You look great, babe,' he whispered. 'But that



dress really needs a bigger heel ...'

'Right, on my count — one, two, three ... HEAVE!'

As one, the two Olympians yanked Petunia. And this time it worked. Petunia flew free. Sadly, her dress did not. Now, dressed only in her frilly knickers and some underwear that reminded Elliot of an Egyptian mummy, Petunia popped out of her frock like a champagne cork, taking Zeus and Hermes with her as they tumbled down the aisle, and all landed with a splat in the chocolate fountain.

That was when another bride appeared.

Elliot had never been to a wedding before, but he was pretty confident there was only supposed to be the one.

'Frederick!' shouted the second bride. 'What is the meaning of this?'

Zeus poked his head out of the fountain and spat out a mouthful of chocolate. 'Er ... oh, hello ... er ... Enid,' he smiled. 'It is Enid, isn't it?'

'Dad — what are you like!' laughed Hermes. 'You've double-booked your weddings. Again!'

'My angel! You're a vision!' Zeus tried gamely.

'And you're a cheating ratbag!' howled Enid, charging down the aisle, until she was stopped by Petunia's wedding dress. 'Wait till I get my hands

on you, you old dog!'

With one bride still stuck in the fountain and the other fighting the wedding dress, Zeus let out a shrill whistle, at which the beautiful white horse that Elliot had seen outside drawing the bride's carriage came thundering into the room.

'Pegasus! Over here!' Zeus yelled. 'SOS!'

The horse charged down the aisle, elegantly leaping over Enid, the bridesmaids and the wedding dress like a front runner in the Grand National.

'Quickly, up you come,' said Zeus, scrabbling on to the horse's back with the help of the embroidered jacket, and lifting Virgo and Elliot in front of him.

The guests were in uproar, with Petunia and Enid's friends fighting over who had the greater claim to the buffet. Zeus winked at Hermes, who nodded and calmly walked into the fray, lightly touching the dead animals that were draped around their owners' fat necks. At his touch, the furs sprang to life, filling the room with foxes, minks and a particularly ferocious badger, snarling at their captors and chasing them around the room, finally taking their revenge. It did the trick. The crowds parted, giving Pegasus a clear run back down the aisle.



'Come on, Peg – step on it,' said Zeus pulling the reins of his magnificent steed. Elliot braced himself as Pegasus lowered his head and charged out of the golf club. With Hermes fluttering discreetly behind, they headed out into the open air where Pegasus burst out of the embroidered jacket, exposing a magnificent pair of white, feathered wings.

Zeus took a cautious look behind him. 'OK, Peg – up, up and away!'

'Er, Dad – you might want this, you plum,' said Hermes, rummaging around in his bag and producing an engraved bronze helmet that was far too big to have fitted inside.

'Good idea,' said Zeus, strapping the helmet on. 'Belongs to my brother Hades,' he explained to Elliot. 'Makes the wearer and anything they're touching invisible. Darned useful gadget. Hold on.'

As soon as the helmet hit Zeus's head, Elliot felt a tickling sensation as his whole body became transparent. He held up his hand. He could see right through it. It was a very strange feeling, but Elliot didn't have time to dwell on it as Pegasus galloped up the fairway.

The magical horse fully unfurled his gigantic wings and took off into the clear blue afternoon.

As the ground dropped away, Elliot saw a chocolate-coated Petunia run out of the golf club in her undies, pelting her empty carriage with ham-and-cheese vol-au-vents.

