



3. A Star is Born

Virgo! Virgo! Wake up!’
‘*Brrlpmpmgh* – pencil sharpeners!’ burbled Virgo, her long silver hair flopping over her face as she woke with a start in the middle of the Zodiac Council meeting.

‘Whatever are you babbling about, child?’ grumbled Pisces, the large fish whose turn it was to chair the Council in November. ‘So have you done it?’

Virgo tucked her hair neatly behind her ears and fidgeted slightly in her sumptuous red chair – sofa, really – one of twelve that surrounded the circular golden table, which was elaborately

engraved with every Councillor’s zodiac sign.

She had only been half-listening as the other eleven members of the Council (twelve if you counted the Gemini twins separately) discussed whether to renew Dionysus’s pub licence, and if the Cyclops were entitled to half-price eyecare. Her mind had started to wander, as it frequently did these days, to what life might be like outside Elysium, her heavenly home above the Earth’s clouds.

This was absolutely *not* because there was anything wrong. Not at all! Virgo’s life, like her, was completely perfect. Administering the immortal community was, after all, an immense privilege – the Zodiac Council had been appointed by Zeus himself when he and the other Olympians retired. Now it was responsible for organizing every aspect of immortal life, from justice to jumble sales.

But however scintillating it was to ensure that sea nymphs had regulation verruca socks, or that chimeras’ smoke alarms were tested quarterly, Virgo found herself wondering if there wasn’t something . . . else? Nearly two thousand years in the same job looked excellent on the CV, but it was possibly getting slightly . . . less than fascinating. Immortal life was a gift, a miracle, a blessing.



It just went on a bit.

'Virgo!' shouted Pisces, snapping her out of her daydream. 'So have you done it?'

Virgo tried to look as if she'd been listening, but realized that either answer could be wrong. Deciding that no response was better than the incorrect one – Virgo was *never* incorrect – she shrugged a bemused apology.

'For goodness' sake, child, pay attention!' snapped Pisces, a frustrated bubble escaping his pink lips. 'The Muses need that stationery order right away! It's no use being the source of all creativity if you can't find a paper clip!'

'Yes – absolutely right – of course,' said Virgo, picking up her golden quill and scratching 'paper clips' on a piece of parchment. A job. Excellent. That should keep her busy for ...

She looked out of the Council chamber's glass pyramid at another perfect day in her perfect home above the clouds. She knew how lucky she was – after all, who wouldn't want to live in paradise? It was, well, perfect. Once the Council's business was done for the day, perhaps she'd fly a unicorn over the marshmallow meadows? Or swim with the dolphins in the warm waters of Honey River? Or possibly ride the roller coasters at Wonderland? Or maybe not – she'd done all of

those things yesterday. Or was it the day before? Or last week maybe? Virgo couldn't remember and there was no one to remind her. But that was fine. Her life *was* completely perfect. And if she'd had any friends to talk to, she would have told them exactly that.

'So if we're happy to agree that Pan can do another stadium tour – so long as he stops by 11 p.m. so he doesn't upset the Furies – then I think that's everything ...' said Pisces. 'Ah. No. One more thing. Prisoner Forty-two.'

A chorus of moans rang around the chamber as Pisces produced a small golden flask.

Virgo's ears pricked up. She'd always liked the sound of this job. It required a Zodiac Councillor to deliver a dose of ambrosia to an immortal prisoner on Earth. It was particularly unpopular amongst the Council, none of whom wanted to leave the warmth and comfort of Elysium to visit the cold and dirty mortal realm. But as the youngest Councillor, Virgo had never yet been allowed to go. Her mind started to buzz with excitement as she shot her hand up.

'Any volunteers?' Pisces asked.

Virgo waved her hand in the air, letting out a strained grunt as she tried not to shout out.

'Anyone?' said Pisces, somehow oblivious to



Virgo nearly exploding right in front of him. 'Anyone at all?'

At that moment, every other pair of eyes in the chamber had somewhere else to look. Whether it was something fascinating they had written down, something out of the window, or an imaginary speck of dust (of course no such thing existed in Elysium) on their purple robes, not one of them met the fish's glassy gaze.

Virgo stretched her left arm as high as it could reach, supporting it with her right to get some extra height.

'There must be someone,' sighed Pisces.

'Me! Me! Let me!' Virgo blurted out. 'I mean . . . I could perform this task proficiently.'

The laughter of her colleagues echoed perfectly around the chamber.

'Don't be ridiculous,' snorted Aries, the golden ram. 'You're only a child.'

'I'm one thousand nine hundred and sixty-four!' Virgo challenged, to an outpouring of 'Aw, bless' from her colleagues.

'No,' declared Pisces finally. 'This is an important job for an *experienced* Councillor. You stick to your paper clips.'

'But I—'

'Enough!' snapped Pisces. 'My decision is final.'

Virgo accepted this perfectly wise and fair decision without question. Curiously, at exactly that same moment, her golden quill snapped in her hands.

'Well, then, if we have no other offers, I volunteer Taurus,' said Pisces to the bull, who was crocheting a scarf with his horn.

'Me?' whined Taurus. 'It can't be my turn again. Capricorn's never done it.'

'Oh, yes I have,' snorted the indignant half-goat Capricorn, spitting out the pencil she had been chewing. 'I had to do it in the middle of a plague. The place stank. If anyone's been shirking, it's Pincer-Pants over there.'

'Put a sock in it, you old goat!' yelled Cancer the crab. 'I went during the Norman Conquest — I caught so many arrows in my shell I looked like a hedgehog! What about Castor and Pollux? Just because they're one constellation shouldn't mean they only get one turn.'

'Bog off,' huffed the Gemini twins simultaneously and, before long, as so often happened at Council meetings, an ear-splitting fight had broken out around the golden table.

'Take that, you big drip,' yelled Scorpio as he hurled Libra's scales at Aquarius, who threw his water jug at Aries, accidentally hitting Cancer



and earning himself a very personal nip from her pincers.

'Shut it, Goldilocks!' shouted Sagittarius the centaur, who fired a banana from his bow, splattering squashed fruit all over Leo's flowing mane.

Virgo surveyed the unfolding carnage with a sigh.

And then something strange happened.

Virgo was perfectly aware that she had the perfect life in the perfect home. But at that precise moment, she knew that it was the perfect time to leave.

Dodging the flying insults, fruit and body parts, she quietly picked up the golden flask, slipped it into her purple robes and backed out of the Council chamber.

The moment Virgo's feet touched the cloud outside, she began to run, picking up superhuman speed with every step. As soon as she reached the edge of the clouds, she threw her arms wide open, which immediately transformed her into her starry Virgo constellation. She felt the exhilarating rush and familiar warmth radiating through her as her body melted into a million glimmering stars from the feet up, and she whooshed into the air before plunging down through the clouds into the realm of Earth.

This was as far as she'd ever been from home. There was still time to turn back – perhaps this was a mistake? But then, Virgo reasoned, she never made mistakes. She was perfect. So this must be the right thing to do.

She blasted into the Earth's night sky, feeling gloriously happy and free. She'd heard so much about this realm and as she looked down she could see that, yes – it *was* extraordinary. One minute she was flying over dense jungle pulsing with every species of creature imaginable, the next, vast deserts with no life in sight for thousands of miles. Some parts were filled with tall buildings and moving lights, others with nothing but empty and desolate wastelands. Strange scents filled her lungs – fresh green grass, salty ocean air, frozen mountain dew. She circled the Earth countless times, noticing different details every time she went from day to night – from the wonderful to the worrying to the downright weird. The diversity was endless. Everything was just so . . . new. Not perfect, like her home – just different.

Indeed, Virgo was so excited by this journey of discovery that it took her a while to realize that she was missing one useful piece of information.

She had no idea where she was supposed to go.



Virgo wracked her brain for any details she'd gleaned from other Councillors. Leo had once mentioned that Prisoner Forty-two was held on a small island in the north, peopled with an eccentric breed of mortals who liked to drink tea and stand in queues. And Taurus had said that the spot was marked by a stone circle. But up high in the darkness, she couldn't make anything out.

She decided to drop a little to get a closer look and soon she could distinguish the tiny mortals scuttling around like ants below. *What would it be like to meet one?* she wondered. But, no – that was against the rules. And Virgo always obeyed the rules. Well. Nearly always.

Finally, after she'd spent hours rocketing around the night sky, the stone circle leapt out at her in the darkness.

'How considerate of the mortals to light it up for us,' she thought happily, and started to make her descent.

This was all going to work out perfectly. She'd be back in Elysium for supper. What could possibly go wrong?