



5. Strangers in the Night

Virgo didn't come down to Earth with a bump – more of a damp, loud splat.

For a moment, she lay absolutely still, trying to figure out exactly what had just happened. Everything had been going perfectly until that giant metal bird came out of nowhere and knocked her into a tailspin. Hitting the ground had re-formed her into her bodily shape – surely such a great fall should have shattered her into a million pieces? But in the darkness she thought she could feel her arms and she thought she could move her legs. Indeed, the fact that she was thinking at all was a positive sign, so she

risked some small movements. She slowly wiggled her legs until her feet met with a solid floor. Greatly encouraged, Virgo groped around to see what had broken her fall. She felt the immediate area around her body, but every time she put a hand down, it simply disappeared into the squelchy substance upon which she had landed.

She let out a tired sigh and lay back in the mush. There was a slight possibility that this was not going perfectly.

Once the shock of being in one piece had passed, Virgo's nostrils were hit by a truly disgusting stench. She realized it was coming from her squishy landing place and her floundering around had spread it all over her long silver hair and purple robes. With a great heave, she pulled herself to her feet. She closed her eyes, pressed her hands together and opened her palms slightly to summon her star-glow.

She found herself in a large, dark cavern that seemed to contain nothing but straw. The only other light came from the hole her dramatic entrance had made in the roof and that, at first sight, appeared to be her only way out again. As her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she could make out another figure – to her great relief, she recognized the form as a female Bovinor, the



same species as Taurus, on the Zodiac Council. This was good news – Bovinors were renowned for their wisdom and Virgo knew that she was in safe hooves. She decided to make her acquaintance, remembering that Taurus was a stickler for good manners.

'Greetings, Lady Bovinor, my apologies for the abrupt arrival,' whispered Virgo, bending into a respectful curtsy.

The creature didn't return her polite greeting, which Virgo tried not to find extremely rude.

'Forgive me interrupting you,' she continued, 'but could you tell me where I might find Prisoner Forty-two?'

Once again, there was no reply – and to add insult to injury, the Bovinor simply sniffed her udders and released a wholly unimpressed moo.

'I'm so sorry, your ladyship, I'm unfamiliar with your accent,' said Virgo more curtly, crouching down to try to catch her eye. 'Would you mind telling me where I am?'

The Bovinor seemed quite determined to contribute nothing to the exchange, although she did release a loud, wet noise from her backside that Virgo couldn't translate. It certainly smelt like the conversation was over.

'Well, er, thanks for your time,' she said,

discreetly covering her nose as she backed away.

This was no good – she needed some guidance. Wiping her hands carefully on her hair, Virgo reverently pulled out her copy of *What's What*, the immortal guidebook she always kept in her robes. *What's What* was a known authority on every subject and invaluable in any situation. She opened the two ends of the rolled parchment and spoke clearly into it.

'Mortals,' she said to the scroll, which immediately filled the empty page with scratched words from an invisible quill.

'Mortals,' she read by the light of her own star-glow. *'Category: Human. Realm: Earth. Powers: various; sometimes too many, sometimes not enough. Mortals are the result of a failed experiment by the Olympians to create a perfect race. After several unsuccessful attempts to improve on the prototype, mortals were kept as entertaining pets for the Gods, but soon bred out of control. Mortals are very complex and all major studies have proved inconclusive as to their use. But it has been observed that most respond well to food and discount coupons . . . Hmmm. Interesting.'*

Virgo was about to do more research into her whereabouts when a loud creak interrupted the silence of the cavern. There was a door. And it was opening . . .



Not only that, she was completely unarmed. She clapped her hands to snap off her glow, retreated to the smelly mush and grabbed the nearest thing to hand to await her attacker.

'Bessie?' Elliot whispered as he shone a torch into the pitch-black cowshed. 'Bessie, are you OK?'

A low moo reassured Elliot that his cow was unscathed by the star-ball. Thank goodness. He looked around as well as the feeble light from his torch would let him. Nothing was on fire and apart from a huge hole in the roof, no other damage appeared to have been done. What could it have been? A meteorite? Space junk? The contents of an aeroplane toilet? It didn't matter now. He could go to bed – everything else would keep until the morning.

But a sudden rustle in the straw made his heart pound.

'Hello?' he whispered. 'Who's there?'

'Don't move, mortal!' threatened a piercing voice, cutting through the silence of the shed like a thunderbolt.

Elliot stopped in his tracks, his ragged breathing betraying his thumping heartbeat. He shakily aimed the weak beam of light from his torch at the figure in the gloom.

Standing in the large pile of cow dung in the corner of the shed was a girl, no older than himself, dressed in a purple fancy-dress toga with a long silver wig. Her big round eyes were as dark as the night outside and although she was doing her best to twist her delicate features into a ferocious stare, she just looked like a china doll on a bad hair day. She was pointing a large, yellow rubber glove threateningly in Elliot's direction.

'I'm not afraid to use this,' she warned.

'I've seen where the vet puts that glove,' said Elliot to this strange, angry girl. 'Trust me, I'm not coming anywhere near you.'

The girl inched closer to Elliot, not taking her eyes from his.

'Where am I?' she demanded.

'In the cowshed,' Elliot replied.

'Hmmm – Kowsh Ed,' said the girl. 'I've not heard of this region of Earth – are the inhabitants friendly?'

'When they're not being threatened by a trick-or-treater covered in cow poo,' said Elliot.

The girl picked up a handful of Bessie's cow feed and threw it enthusiastically at Elliot's feet.

'Help yourself,' she smiled.

Elliot sensed that he was supposed to be pleased with this gesture. The girl appeared



confused when he didn't respond. She moved a little closer and placed her right hand on her left shoulder in some kind of greeting.

'I am Virgo, Constellation of the Zodiac Council and Guardian of the Stationery Cupboard. And you are?'

Elliot eyed her suspiciously. 'I'm Elliot. What the heck are you doing in my shed?'

'Looking for Prisoner Forty-two, Mr What-The-Heck-Are-You-Doing-In-My-Shed. Is he here?'

'Is who here?'

'Pri-son-er For-ty-two,' Virgo spelt out, as if she were talking to a deaf baboon. 'Where is he?'

'Oh, Prisoner Forty-two,' said Elliot sarcastically. 'Walk down the road to the nearest Yeti and take a left at the Bogeyman. Prisoner Forty-two lives two doors down.'

'Don't be absurd,' snorted Virgo. 'Everyone knows that the Bogeyman lives in Belgium. But it's not your fault; I've heard how simple you mortals are. If you don't know where the prisoner is, I'll just have to find him myself. Farewell.'

Virgo marched past Elliot and out of the barn.

Elliot instinctively knew that getting involved with this girl would be trouble. He knew he should just go back to the house and worry about

how he was going to pay for the roof on top of all the other debts. But more than anything, he knew he couldn't let a young girl with some sort of head injury from the star-ball hitting his shed go wandering around the lonely Wiltshire countryside on a cold, dark night.

He threw some more feed into Bessie's trough and ran after the girl as she ambled aimlessly across the paddock.

'Hey!' he called after her. 'Zodiac girl!'

'Virgo,' said the stranger grandly.

'Yeah, you,' Elliot said. 'Look, it's really late and it's really dark – come back to my house and you can call your parents. You can't walk around here all night, you'll freeze to death.'

The strange girl stopped, clearly considering his proposal.

'I have no parents, child, nor can I do anything to death,' she said. 'I am immortal. But there is a surprising degree of intelligence in what you say. You're not as stupid as I was led to believe.'

'You're too kind,' said Elliot, thinking about his warm comfy bed.

'I am unlikely to find Prisoner Forty-two tonight and you will make an excellent case study. I am keen to learn more about mortals. You sound very curious. Is it true that when you become



unwell, you can generate green slime from your nostrils?’

‘You’ve never had a cold?’ said Elliot, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

‘I’m never ill,’ said Virgo haughtily. ‘I am perfect.’

‘And I’m the Queen of Sheba,’ sighed Elliot. ‘Please. Will you just come inside?’

Someone else with problems. Just what he needed.

‘Very well, Your Majesty,’ the girl finally conceded. ‘Show me to your dwelling.’

Back in the farmhouse, the stranger was soon sitting in front of the cosy fire in the candlelit lounge. Elliot had given Virgo a pair of his old combats, a T-shirt and trainers to replace the robes that had nearly made him puke as he put them in the bin, and offered her the bathroom to remove the worst of the dung from her hair. He had made them both a cup of tea on the gas stove and had spent the last half an hour trying to obtain any information that might explain where she came from.

It was not going well.

‘So let me get this straight,’ he sighed for the umpteenth time. ‘You’re an immortal Constella-

tion who lives in Ilium?’

‘Elysium,’ corrected Virgo.

‘Right, there,’ said Elliot, ‘and you travelled to Earth from the sky in the big star-ball?’

‘Constellation,’ said Virgo, who seemed fascinated by how soggy she could make her biscuit before it plopped into her tea. ‘Constellation travel is one of the most sophisticated transport systems in the immortal world.’

‘So sophisticated it landed you in a pile of cow poo?’

‘That was unfortunate,’ snapped Virgo. ‘I haven’t visited the realm of Earth before and got a little lost in all the pollution you mortals have created. Your atmosphere is filthy.’

‘And why do you have to find this Prisoner Fifty-six?’

‘Prisoner Forty-two,’ corrected Virgo, handing him the golden flask. ‘Because I need to give him this.’

‘Nice,’ said Elliot, pushing away the dark thought of how much money he could get for such an expensive trinket. He started to unscrew the lid.

‘Don’t open that!’ shrieked Virgo, snatching the flask back. ‘It’s full of ambrosia.’

‘Am-what-now?’ said Elliot.



'Ambrosia,' huffed Virgo. 'Immortal elixir. It keeps us young. I must say, your basic education has been very poor.'

'Says the girl with her trousers on the wrong way around,' said Elliot as Virgo shrugged stubbornly and tried unsuccessfully to put her hands in her backwards pockets. 'And when you've given it to him, you'll just turn back into stars and whizz back up to Elision?'

'Elysium,' Virgo repeated impatiently.

'Yes, there. And you're like, a million years old?'

'Actually,' said Virgo huffily, as the last of her biscuit fell into her tea, 'I'm one thousand, nine hundred and sixty-four. But don't be fooled by my youth. I'm very advanced for my age.'

Elliot knew some people were funny about their ages – his maths teacher, Mrs Goodwinge, had been thirty-eight for the past five birthdays – but this was ridiculous.

'Are you sure I can't call your parents?' he sighed yet again.

'How many times, child – I don't have parents! I am a Constellation of the Zodiac Council, sent here to deliver ambrosia to an immortal prisoner. But if that's too much for your feeble mortal brain to comprehend,' she said matter-of-factly, rising to leave, 'then I'll be on my way.'

Elliot didn't know what to do. He really couldn't let this deluded girl leave on her own, but if she wouldn't let him call anyone . . . it was better if she stayed tonight. At least that way she was safe and tomorrow he could take her to the police station in Little Motbury and find her some help.

'No, don't go,' he grumbled. 'It's late, we both need some sleep. There are loads of rooms here, I'll find you a bed.'

'Thank you, Elliot, but immortals rarely sleep.'

'Of course,' said Elliot, too tired to argue with this silly girl any more. 'Well, if you change your mind, there's a quilt on the sofa and you can sleep under that. Promise me you won't run off in the night?'

'I swear it on the Styx,' she said solemnly.

'Marvelloüs,' said an exhausted Elliot, as he climbed the stairs to bed. 'I'll see you in the morning.'

'Sleep well, mortal child,' said Virgo.

'Stay awake, loony star girl,' yawned Elliot.

