

17. Family Matters

Zeus was barely halfway through his explanation of Thanatos's escape when Aphrodite had pulled the keys to her sports car out of her handbag.

'I'm in,' she squealed. 'Sounds like fun!'

But Athene was going to take more persuading.

Zeus, Elliot and Aphrodite were in Athene's office at St Brainiac College, Oxford, where Athene was an esteemed professor of politics, philosophy, economics, English, French, Spanish, Classics, natural sciences and basket-weaving. It was a delicate negotiation.

'YOU ARE SUCH A BORING-BRAINED, LIBRARY-LAME-O, BOFFIN-BUM!'

Aphrodite shouted at her sister across the grand mahogany desk.

'I see you've been studying the Big Book of Intelligent Insults,' Athene shot back over the top of her tortoiseshell glasses.

Zeus looked at Elliot with raised eyebrows. See what I mean? Elliot could hear him say.

'I can't believe you'd rather sit here with your big pointy nose stuck in a book than be out finding the Chaos Stones,' Aphrodite pouted. 'Just because you look like a pensioner doesn't mean that you have to act like one.'

Painful as it was to disagree with Aphrodite, Elliot could see that she was being very hard on her sister. Athene would normally be the most beautiful woman in the room: she was slender, with ebony hair piled into an elegant knot, her deep brown eyes radiating intelligence and grace over the rims of her glasses. But Elliot was convinced that all other girls looked like snotty warthogs next to Aphrodite.

'I am a highly regarded academic,' said Athene grandly. 'Some of us aren't fortunate enough to play boyfriends and girlfriends. Some of us improve mortalkind with brilliant thought.'

'I've given mortals beauty and joy,' replied Aphrodite. 'You've given them some boring books for the downstairs loo. Besides, you're not so grand when you're cheating on those TV quiz shows . . .'

'I do not cheat!' said Athene defensively. 'I win those competitions fair and square.'

'Sure you do,' said Aphrodite with a naughty grin. 'Although with a few extra millennia to study, any idiot could beat those poor mortals.'

‘Not any idiot,’ said Athene, looking directly at her sister.

‘Come now, girlies, this is no time for squabbling,’ Zeus chided. ‘We need to get those Chaos Stones and put Thanatos back in prison where he belongs. We’re a team. I need you.’

‘Yes, Father, your pact with Hypnos – surely you can’t think that was wise?’ said Athene, her dark eyes full of disapproval.

‘Whatever,’ yawned Aphrodite. ‘Prissy-pants, are you in or out?’

‘Out,’ said Athene stubbornly.

Aphrodite opened her mouth to launch another barrage at her sister, but was hushed by her father’s hand on her shoulder.

‘We could really use your fabulous bonce, sweetie,’ said Zeus. ‘But no is no.’

With Aphrodite chewing her tongue, Zeus started to usher her out of the door. Elliot didn’t have siblings, but he’d seen enough of other people’s to know how they worked. Besides, if Athene could help him find the Earth Stone, he needed her on the team.

‘I’m sorry you’re not coming, Athene,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry too, Elliot, but I wish you well,’ she said grumpily.

‘That’s really kind,’ he said. ‘Besides, it’s probably for the best. This isn’t your sort of thing.’

‘What makes you say that?’ bristled Athene.

‘Oh, nothing. Just something Aphrodite said. Nice to meet you,’ he added, starting out of the room under Zeus’s admiring gaze.

‘Wh-what did she say?’ asked Athene, failing to sound as if she didn’t care.

‘Nothing bad. Just that you preferred reading to fighting—’

‘Well, that’s not strictly true, I am a Warrior Goddess!’

‘And that you probably felt a bit old to fight Daemons—’

‘I’m hardly any older than she is!’

‘And that she usually comes up with the best plans anyway—’

‘SHE SAID WHAT?’ shouted Athene, hastily stuffing some books into a large bag.

‘Aphrodite! Come back here! I’ll show you who’s the best fighter!’

And in a blaze of fury, the Goddess of Wisdom swept out of the door towards Aphrodite’s sports car.

‘Good show, old man!’ winked Zeus as they headed out of the university behind her.

With the squabbling Athene and Aphrodite dispatched to fetch Hephaestus, God of the Forge, from his job fixing supermarket self-service machines, Elliot and Zeus flew back to Home Farm. Elliot looked in on his mum, who was happily chatting with Hestia about wallpaper textures in the lounge. All was well – or at least no sign of the Horse’s-Bum – so Elliot hurried back to the cowshed to find out how he was going to get the Earth Stone and save his home.

‘Boom, you’re back!’ shouted Hermes. ‘We’ve been busier than Photoshop in Fashion Week. We’ve found Hypnos in a list of the Earth’s richest mortals.’

‘How can you be sure?’ said Athene sharply, striding into the barn with Aphrodite and a short, stocky man whose right shoulder was slightly higher than his left. He reminded Elliot of a troll action figure he’d enjoyed playing with when he was younger, although when he saw the huge bronze axe hanging inside the man’s brown trench coat, he quickly decided he wouldn’t tell him that.

‘Ah – you’re here!’ boomed Zeus happily.

The troll inclined his head in greeting.

‘Marnin’,’ he said.

‘Hephy, old bean, this is Elliot, a marvellous new friend. Elliot, this handsome chap is Hephaestus, inventor and builder extraordinaire.’

‘How do,’ said Hephaestus coolly, but not unkindly.

‘Hi, Hef . . . Hefist . . . Hefor . . .’ bumbled Elliot, unable to get his mouth around the name.

‘Heff. Ice. Tus,’ Zeus whispered in his ear. ‘Darn awkward name.’

‘Nothing wrong with me hearing, though,’ said Hephaestus, producing a massive hammer from his coat before wandering over to the other side of the shed to look at Bessie’s broken water feeder.

‘Hypnos will have disassembled into a mortal form,’ Athene continued. ‘He won’t look like the Daemon we knew.’

‘Hold tight,’ said Hermes, putting his palm up to Athene. ‘Now where is my iGod? You’re gonna love this.’

‘Snordlesnot!’ yelled Hephaestus, hitting his thumb with the hammer as he fixed the feeder.

Hermes scrambled around in his small bag, his whole arm delving in up to the shoulder. He threw out unwanted items, including a stuffed panda, a green macaroon and the 1994 edition of the London A-Z, the last of which hit Hephaestus on the head, bringing the golden hammer down on his thumb for a second time.

‘Snordlesnot!’ cried the immortal blacksmith again as he whipped the throbbing thumb to his mouth, immediately dropping the offending hammer on his foot.

‘SNORDLESNOT!’ he bellowed for the third time, not knowing which injury to treat first, leaving him awkwardly sucking his thumb and hopping on his good foot for the five seconds it took him to fall over and bang his head.

‘What does "Snordlesnot" mean?’ grinned Elliot.

‘Ah, well. It’s not a word one usually hears in polite company,’ said Virgo disapprovingly. ‘It’s an ancient Titan curse. It’s tricky to translate, but roughly it means, "May the Gods forever poke you in the rear end with a pointy potato and throw monkey dung at your sister."'’

‘Don’t all rush at once, I’m fine,’ grumbled Hephaestus, struggling to his feet.

‘Seriously, where did I leave it . . . here it is!’ said Hermes triumphantly, spotting the tortoiseshell iGod on the floor. ‘So this is just wicked. I downloaded a new app from the Golden Apple Store just the other day. It’s called Veritum – when you tap on a photograph, it shows you the true essence of the person in the picture. Bosh!’

Hermes tapped the picture of the first billionaire on the iGod, a bald, bespectacled man who had made his fortune in computers. At his touch, the photograph changed from a middle-aged man to a scrawny-looking chicken. Hermes nearly fell off his

bale laughing. 'Boom! You should see what happens when you Veritum some Hollywood actors – it's disgusting. Now then . . .'

Hermes went down the list, tapping the pictures. The images variously changed from snakes to toads to rats, while one famous model turned out to be nothing more than a pair of plastic jugs.

'What about this one?' said Aphrodite. 'Richard M. Trumpington, founder of 1Born, online gambling site.'

'Quite righty, Aphrodite,' chimed Hermes, prodding Trumpington's unremarkable mortal features. The picture instantly changed into a gaunt, wild-eyed young man, whose face was locked in a crazy and quite terrifying grimace. At first glance, his chaotic white hair encircled his head like a warped halo. But on closer inspection, it was in fact a mass of tiny feathers in the shape of a pair of wings on either side of his head. In his hands, he clutched a curved ivory trumpet.

'That's him,' said Zeus quietly. 'That's Hypnos.'

'Wow, he hasn't exactly had a rough time of it.' said Hermes, dropping his iGod on the hay bale. 'Estimated wealth of five hundred billion pounds. He lives in a seventy-five-bedroom mansion in the Highlands. What a show-off.'

'I thought immortals can't keep mortal money?' said Elliot.

'We can't,' sighed Zeus. 'We all had to swear on the Styx to adhere to the Sacred Code. But the Zodiac Council didn't know Hypnos was alive – he wasn't made to take the oath. Our rules don't apply to him. Lucky so-and-so ...'

'If we can find him this easily, so can Thanatos,' said Athene, as a copy of the Daily Argus flew into the cowshed out of nowhere, hitting Hephaestus, who dropped the hammer on his thumb in a symphony of 'Snordlesnots.' 'We need to get to Hypnos first while we've got the element of surprise.'

'You can forget about that,' said Pegasus, eyeing the front page of the Daily Argus.

Elliot surveyed the newspaper. The lead story was illustrated with a black-and-brown picture in the style Elliot had seen on the side of Greek vases. At first he couldn't make out what it depicted, but when he looked more closely, he saw that the picture was of Thanatos dangling Virgo by the hair, while Elliot cowered in front of him.

MORTAL PERIL!

BY oViD, CURRENT AFFAIRS CoRRESPoNDENT

The Argus has just come across
The great escape of Thanatos
Virgo met the ancient crook
And let the Daemon sling his hook
The Virgo girl was only due
To visit Prisoner Forty-two
She took the drink for him to sup
And then she royally stuffed it up
'Cos when she crossed the sacred portal
The ninny brought along a mortal
The human child broke the spell
Now Thanatos will give us 'ell
The Daemon villain's on the loose
Those silly kids have cooked our goose.

'We've got a mole!' shouted an outraged Athene.

'Are you accusing one of us of leaking the story?' huffed Aphrodite.

'No,' said Athene, picking up a shovel and whacking a small mound of earth next to her. 'We've got a mole.'

A slightly dazed mole holding a notepad and pencil stuck his head out of the soil before scuttling back underground.

'I'd better call the Zodiac Council and let them know,' said Virgo. 'May I borrow your iGod, Hermes?'

'Bosh,' said Hermes, dialling the number before replacing the device on a bale. 'Not being funny, the signal is pants. It might cut out.'

After a few rings, a flickering hologram of Pisces's fishy face was projected on to the wall of Bessie's pen.

'Ah, Pisces – Virgo here, I thought I'd better update you on a development in the ongoing situation vis-à-vis the Daemons . . .'

‘UPDATE US!’ hollered the projection of Pisces. ‘The phones are ringing off the hook! We’re inundated with panicked immortals! There hasn’t been a stink like this since the Titans’ last curry night!’

Intrigued by the noise, Bessie strolled out of her pen and went to sniff at Pisces’s face.

‘Young lady!’ Pisces went on, his face now projected on Bessie’s backside. ‘Have you any idea of the mess you have created?’

Virgo tried not to be distracted by Hermes and Aphrodite’s giggles.

‘No,’ she said innocently.

‘We’re still trying to get to the bottom of it!’ shouted Pisces, the angry bubbles from his lips looking as though they were coming out of Bessie’s bum. ‘You’ve really landed us in the poop!’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Virgo, trying to make herself heard over Hermes and Aphrodite’s guffaws. ‘I have taken steps to ensure that Thanatos is recaptured immediately. I have sought the assistance of the Olympians.’

‘Ha!’ scoffed Pisces. ‘Those old has-beens! They couldn’t catch a cold!’

Aphrodite and Hermes stopped laughing.

‘I’m warning you, Virgo,’ said Pisces, flickering violently and starting to fade. ‘You are wet behind the ears! My trousers are older than you! I will not have a whiff of scandal!’

‘Sorry?’ said Virgo. ‘You cut out. I didn’t catch that . . .’

‘I said,’ huffed the fish over the crackling signal, ‘I . . . wet . . . my . . . trousers . . . I . . . whiff . . .’

Pisces’s face disappeared as the signal dropped out altogether.

‘Crivens!’ cried Zeus. ‘Hermes, get yourself to Hypnos’s mansion, quick smart. Find out where he hid those stones. We have to get to them before Thanatos does.’

‘Bosh! I love a good spy,’ said Hermes, as his motorbike whizzed into the shed by itself. ‘I’ll take the low road – Scotland, hold tight!’

And he raced his motorbike out of the barn in a flash, leaving a blizzard of hay in his wake.

‘Well, that’s that,’ said Zeus. ‘Now what about some security measures?’

Hephaestus – we need something around the farm, something that will keep Elliot safe inside and everyone else out, something big and tall, something strong, something . . . something like . . .’

‘A fence?’ suggested Hephaestus drily as he wrapped his bright red thumb in a dirty rag.

‘That’s the ticket!’ boomed Zeus, as if Hephaestus had just invented the wheel. ‘Get to it, old man, good show.’

‘I get all the good jobs, me,’ grumbled the blacksmith, heading out of the shed with a golden tape measure, just as Bessie’s water feeder started to work beautifully.

Zeus glanced over at Elliot, who suddenly couldn’t keep his exhausted eyes open.

‘You go and rest,’ he said. ‘You’re going to need your wits about you. Virgo, you stay with Elliot at all times – until we know what Thanatos has in mind, we have to be on constant alert.’

‘Wait!’ said Elliot. ‘I have to go to school tomorrow. I have a stupid history test.’

‘What an admirable attitude,’ said Athene, who was weaving sumptuous silk sheets out of straw.

‘Don’t bother,’ said Aphrodite, pulling a face behind Athene’s back. ‘All the best stuff you learn outside school.’

‘If I don’t go to school, they’ll come looking for me here,’ said Elliot. ‘And none of us need that.’

‘He’s right,’ said Zeus. ‘And the less disruption to Elliot’s life, the better. Virgo, you will go to school and protect him.’

‘Excellent,’ said Virgo. ‘I look forward to spending time in an illuminating mortal educational establishment.’

‘Shame you’re coming to my school, then,’ muttered Elliot.

‘You have to promise us you’ll stay safe, old man,’ said Zeus. ‘Now go and sleep well, it’s been a long day.’

‘I’ll walk the kids back to the house – make sure they get there safely,’ gabbled Aphrodite, hustling Elliot and Virgo out of the shed before anyone could object.

Virgo and Aphrodite chatted away while a tongue-tied Elliot walked a few paces behind them. But when they reached the farmhouse, Aphrodite held Elliot back, waiting until Virgo was out of earshot before speaking.

‘Now listen, Elly,’ she said, opening a locket around her neck and producing a heart-shaped pearl from inside it. ‘Stuff the Fun Police back there, here’s some real help for your test.’

She handed Elliot the pearl, which he turned slowly in his palm.

‘This wishing pearl will grant you anything you want – but only once a day and only for seven minutes. Seven’s my lucky number,’ she said, her eyes twinkling. ‘Keep it near you and make a wish at the start of the test – you’ll ace it.’

‘Wow – thanks,’ said Elliot, stringing together his longest sentence to the Goddess.

‘You’re welcome, sweetie,’ winked Aphrodite.

And with a musical giggle, she sashayed back to the cowshed, leaving a happy pink boy so busy contemplating all the things he might wish for that he didn’t notice an especially nosy neighbour lurking in the shadows, a neighbour who had been spying on the strange new guests and who was determined to find out what was really going on at Home Farm.