

18. An Old Fiend

Until very recently, life had been a blast for Hypnos, the Daemon of Sleep. In fact, several lives had been a blast, as he was now enjoying his twenty-ninth incarnation. Blessed, as all Daemons were, with the ability to disassemble into any shape at will, for the past two thousand years the Daemon of Sleep had enjoyed making history – and money – as some of the world's most notorious characters. Emperor Nero, Genghis Khan, Napoleon, Rasputin, Al Capone – Hypnos had been them all, 'dying' when he'd had enough and reincarnating in a new guise. With the Zodiac Council unaware that he was still alive, Hypnos was free from the Sacred Code and able to do as he pleased. Life was a game. And Hypnos was the winner.

Nothing mattered to Hypnos more than winning. The moment his father Erebus had robbed him of his destiny as King of the Daemons, Hypnos had become obsessed with beating Thanatos. The deal with Zeus had made his yellow, bloodshot eyes dance with vengeful glee. Indeed, his victory over his brother had excited Hypnos so much that he hadn't been able to sleep – for two thousand years. It didn't matter – his insomnia gave him a buzz, a manic energy, a hyper edge that hadn't wiped the smile from his face in two millennia.

But winning is dangerously addictive. Once Thanatos was defeated, Hypnos discovered that he needed to find more and bigger victories. He tried disassembling into sportsmen, but his Daemon strength gave him such an advantage, it was pointless. Winning was only fun when it was unexpected.

And that's how Hypnos discovered gambling.

Now, the thrill of the unpredictable win could be his every day – or could it? That was the buzz. There was nothing Hypnos wouldn't bet on – horse races, roulette wheels, which raindrop would reach the window ledge first . . . The losses made the wins that much sweeter and he could afford both. In his current guise as Richard M. Trumpington, his online gambling business 1Born provided yet another way for Hypnos to cheat mortals out of their money, torturing them with dreams of big wins and making their worst nightmares come true when they lost everything. Nothing gave him greater pleasure. Hypnos had everything just the way he wanted it. The Daemon of Sleep was having the time of his lives.

Or at least he was until yesterday. He never normally paid much attention to the Daily Argus, having no interest in the immortal losers featured within. But yesterday's front page had filled him with a fear he hadn't known in twenty-nine lifetimes. Zeus had lied. Thanatos was alive. And Hypnos knew that his twin would be coming straight for him. Most things were a joke to the psychotic Daemon. The thought of being killed by his brother was not.

Hypnos immediately hired the best security guards money could buy and gave every single one strict instructions not to let anyone in. It didn't matter if someone claimed to be his long-lost son or his dying mother – only Richard M. Trumpington was allowed in his Scottish mansion. So the guards thought nothing of allowing Richard M. Trumpington through the massive gates early the next morning. His butler happily opened the door to allow Richard M. Trumpington into the house while Trent, his personal bodyguard, gladly unlocked the door to the office when Mr Trumpington said he had forgotten his key. Had they all checked with one another, they would have realized that Richard M. Trumpington had never left his office in the first place. But by the time Thanatos had tricked them all and was standing in Hypnos's office, it was far too late.

'Hello, brother,' said Thanatos eventually, after an eternal silence while each twin tried to read the other.

Beneath his laughing stare, Hypnos was frantically calculating how to stay alive.

'Hi yourself,' he said at last. 'You're looking well.'

'How kind,' said Thanatos coldly. 'Two thousand years imprisoned beneath the Earth doesn't do a lot for one's social life, but it certainly restricts poor lifestyle choices. But we have more important matters to discuss. May I?'

Thanatos pulled a tacky golden chair back from the desk and sat on the edge of the seat. He surveyed the opulent room with a sneer.

'They say that money can't buy you taste,' he said. 'How kind of you to prove them right.'

'They say that you're dead,' grinned Hypnos. 'How inconvenient of you to prove them wrong.'

The two brothers stared intensely at each other.

'So how are you?' Hypnos enquired.

'Can't complain,' said Thanatos. 'Although perhaps I can? It's not every day you are betrayed by your own twin brother . . .'

'Yeah – about that,' smiled Hypnos cheekily. 'If I hadn't accepted Zeus's deal, one of the other Daemons probably would have done. Seemed a shame to let the Chaos Stones leave the family . . .'

‘WHERE ARE THEY?’ roared Thanatos, jumping out of the gold chair, sending it clattering across the room. ‘Tell me, or I’ll kill you this second.’

‘If I tell you, you’ll kill me that second,’ said Hypnos, his wild stare challenging his brother. Maybe Hypnos could blink. Maybe he couldn’t. No one had ever kept their eyes open long enough to find out.

‘I’m going to count to one,’ said Thanatos.

‘You haven’t thought this through . . .’ chirped the Daemon of Sleep, his eyes as wide as his laughing mouth.

‘One,’ said Thanatos reaching over the desk towards Hypnos’s slender neck.

‘I always was faster,’ cackled Hypnos, deftly dodging the hand by taking flight with his winged head. ‘Catch me if you can!’

Thanatos lunged repeatedly over the desk, trying to grab his brother, who taunted him by flying away with split-second timing.

‘Too slow!’ laughed Hypnos. ‘You’ve lost your—’

The remaining words were knocked out of Hypnos’s smug face as Thanatos landed a colossal punch on his cheek.

‘I always was stronger,’ said Thanatos, and he grabbed his twin by the neck with one hand and twisted his kardia with the other. ‘Where are my Chaos Stones?’

‘If I die, you’ll never know,’ rasped Hypnos.

‘Then you’d better start talking,’ said Thanatos, lifting his brother clean off the floor and pulling the kardia away from his neck.

‘I . . . know . . . something . . . you . . . don’t . . . know,’ sang Hypnos, his eyes still laughing despite his face turning a fearful shade of puce.

‘TELL ME!’ said Thanatos, shaking his breathless twin.

Hypnos shook his grinning head, no longer able to speak.

‘Oh, for . . .’

Thanatos released the kardia and threw his brother down in disgust. Despite his desperate gasps for air, Hypnos was delighted that Thanatos realized he’d sooner die than lose. He threw back his sore neck and screamed with dark laughter.

‘In a funny way, I’ve missed you,’ Hypnos said, wiping the tears from his eyes as he returned to his seat.

‘If you’re never going to tell me, I may as well kill you now,’ said Thanatos, calmly retrieving the chair and sitting down.

‘And then you’ll never know,’ said Hypnos. ‘Fun, isn’t it?’

‘Where are they?’ Thanatos asked again slowly.

‘Tell you what I’m going to do,’ said Hypnos, his fingers dancing across the table. ‘I’ll tell you where they are one at a time. That way, you get your stones, I get to stay alive.’

‘Until I get them all,’ said Thanatos. ‘Then I’m going to kill you.’

‘I hoped we might have a side bet on that,’ grinned Hypnos. ‘You need someone to kill the mortal child. You can’t.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘A prawn balti, two naan breads and a tub of OMG! marshmallow ice cream,’ said Hypnos.

‘You’ve spoken to Pythia?’ said Thanatos.

‘I’m her best customer,’ replied Hypnos. ‘I bet you I can kill the child. You must swear on the Styx you won’t kill me if I win.’

Hypnos loved watching Thanatos trying to quell his murderous rage. He knew his brother had no choice.

‘Done,’ said Thanatos darkly. ‘Start talking.’

‘Oh, I had such fun hiding them!’ whispered Hypnos. ‘But it’s going to be even better getting them back! Let’s start with the Earth Stone – that one was tricky. Every time I buried it underground, some greedy mortal would dig it up again and I’d have to . . . persuade them to give it back. But then I found a great spot for it . . .’

Hypnos watched gleefully as Thanatos hung on his words.

‘It’s in . . . the Tower of London!’ he whispered with a giggle. ‘It’s an impenetrable mortal fortress and I hid the Earth Stone there – smack in the middle of the Crown Jewels!’

‘Marvellous,’ said Thanatos.

‘I first had the idea when I was a character called Colonel Thomas Blood in the seventeenth century,’ said Hypnos, stretching out and putting his feet up on the desk. ‘I made friends with the guard, then knocked him out and shot him while I stole the jewels. Only I wasn’t stealing them – I put the Earth Stone in there! Various jewellers have moved it around – at the moment, it’s slapped on the front of the Imperial State Crown.’

‘If this tower is impenetrable, how are you going to get my stone back?’ hissed Thanatos.

‘Your timing is impeccable, brother,’ squealed Hypnos. ‘I have a golden opportunity this very week. Once a year the crown is worn by the Queen – she’s an important mortal the other mortals like to print on things – and she will have it in her palace in a few days! Taking it from her will be a breeze. It’ll be like stealing a hot water bottle from a granny!’

‘Then go and fetch it,’ said Thanatos.

‘First I’ll kill the child,’ said Hypnos, flying over to a safe concealed behind the Mona Lisa on his wall. ‘Shouldn’t be too hard. Then I’ll get your stone.’

‘I’ll be at our old home in the Underworld, the Cave of Sleep and Death,’ said Thanatos. ‘Until my stones are returned, I’ll be keeping a low profile. Meet me there with my Earth Stone. Don’t fail me.’

‘What fun!’ squealed Hypnos, pulling his ivory trumpet out of the safe and kissing it. ‘Come on, baby, we’ve got work to do. I’ll take my private jet. The boy will be resting in peace in no time.’

‘He’d better be,’ said Thanatos.

‘Have a nice day, sir,’ said Trent the bodyguard as Thanatos swept past him, disguised once again as Richard M. Trumpington.

‘Have a nice day, sir,’ said Trent again as a second Richard M. Trumpington raced out of the office, looking exactly like the first.

Trent removed his shades and wiped his eyes. He'd been guarding the office all night. Clearly he needed a coffee. He closed the door on the empty room. Or at least, it appeared to be empty.

In his paranoia about who might enter his office, Hypnos hadn't given any thought to what might already be inside it.

Had he paid closer attention, Hypnos might have noticed that amongst the expensive bric-a-brac, a new and especially good-looking jewel-encrusted Grecian urn had appeared the night before. And had he looked more closely still, he would have observed that the large handles on the side of the urn looked remarkably like a big pair of ears, flapping around to hear what might be said. The urn now started to wobble and shake, finally falling to the ground, where it immediately transformed back into the gasping form of Hermes.

'Shut uuuup!' he whispered. 'The Earth Stone! Elliot! Everything! I'm not even joking. Where's my iGod, I gotta call home!'

Hermes delved into his bag and groped around its bottomless depths. He pulled out a sock, a chandelier, a riding saddle and a ferret, but with each desperate grasp, he couldn't find his phone.

'No, mate! Anti-bosh!' he hissed.

The Messenger God recalled his hasty departure from the cowshed – he'd left his iGod on the hay bale. He had no way of contacting the Gods but he needed to warn Elliot – right now.

Hermes ran to the door to escape the tacky horror of Hypnos's office, before transforming into the guise of Richard M. Trumpington.

'Have a nice day, sir,' said Trent to the third identical man to walk out of the room.

He rubbed his eyes again. He didn't need a coffee. He needed a doctor.

Back on the low-way, Hermes revved his motorbike as hard as it would go. He dodged in and out of traffic, jumping over the occasional cyclist as he careered back towards Home Farm at the opposite end of the country.

'Come on, babe,' he urged the bike. 'Let's go . . .'

He revved the bike again, but was shocked when it started to decelerate instead.

'What . . . seriously?' he said as he came to a shuddering halt in a lay-by.

‘Vehicle registration: B 0 5 H; Owner: Hermes; Category: Olympian,’ boomed the nearest loudspeaker. ‘Libra calculates that this is your third speeding infringement. Your vehicle has been disabled. It’s only fair!’

‘You’re joking!’ shouted Hermes, and he kicked his bike in frustration. ‘I’m hundreds of miles away. It’ll take me . . . Urgh . . .’

He delved into his bag and pulled out a pair of winged trainers, which he swapped with the winged biker boots he’d been wearing.

‘Looks like I’m going old skool,’ he said, as he fluttered into the air. ‘I hope I’ve still got it.’

And with a whoosh, Hermes took off, flying back to Home Farm and Elliot’s endangered life.