

19. Be Careful What You Wish For

By Monday morning, Elliot was starting to appreciate living with a cowshed full of immortals.

In a single day, Hestia the Goddess of the Hearth had transformed Elliot's tatty farm into a home that looked like it had jumped out of the pages of a magazine. Some changes were simply the result of a good eye for interior design – the peeling walls were covered in fresh coats of bright paint, sumptuous fabrics covered the plush new sofas and armchairs, and the bedrooms now had enormous fluffy beds that sank a foot when you lay on them.

Other alterations, however, suggested that this was no average DIY job. The bathroom had a shower that flowed like a warm, scented waterfall, with a bathtub permanently filled with hot, bubbly water that was big enough to swim in. Even the toilets played a Mozart piano concerto when you sat on them. But Elliot's favourite changes were in the kitchen, which boasted a self-emptying dishwasher, a washing machine that dried, ironed and folded clothes before spiriting them back into their drawers and – Elliot's personal favourites – a fridge and a kitchen cupboard that always contained exactly what you wanted to eat.

Josie had accepted Elliot's explanation that some friends were staying to help with the farm, even when Virgo had staggered into the kitchen under a tomato the size of a satellite dish, or when Hestia transformed their black-and-white TV into a flat-screen plasma with that expensive games console Elliot had fancied. If anything, Elliot thought Mum seemed better for having the Gods around, chatting to her about life on the farm and none of them batting an eyelid when she asked the same question several times or forgot something they'd just told her. It was a huge relief that someone could watch her while he was at school and, for the first time in ages, Elliot was feeling the benefits of having some help.

But no matter how great the house looked, he was still going to lose it unless he could find twenty thousand pounds by Friday. There had been no word from Hermes and without the Earth Stone, Elliot had no idea how he was going to conjure up the money. He wondered if he should confide in the Gods – he was running out of time. Could he trust them . . . ?

Elliot didn't know for sure. Until he did, it was safer to stay quiet.

While the cowshed was alive with Hestia's building works – much to Bessie's bemusement – and Hephaestus was working on the new fence, the other Olympians came up to the farmhouse for breakfast, which would have fed a small army for a

week. As Virgo was coming to school with Elliot, Athene had woven two perfect Brysmore uniforms, consigning Elliot's tatty old one to the dustbin.

'I intend to make the most of this opportunity to broaden my mind,' said Virgo, admiring herself in her new uniform.

'Try a microscope,' said Elliot, tucking into his third bacon sandwich.

With Josie having a lie-in, Aphrodite doing his paper round in her car, some extra sleep and the fullest stomach Elliot could remember, he felt in pretty decent shape for a Monday morning.

Until there was an irritating knock at the door.

'Coo-eee,' trilled the unmistakable whinny of Patricia Porshley-Plum.

'Hello, Mrs Porshley-Plum,' groaned Elliot. 'Can't chat now, I was just . . .'

'Goodness, it's busy around here!' smiled Patricia with her dead eyes. 'It's like Clapham Junction. That is still a train station, isn't it? I always take taxis, public transport is so . . . public.'

'Yes – we're having some . . . home improvements,' said Elliot, quickly turning Patricia around so she couldn't see the dishwasher frisbeeing plates back into the cupboard. 'But I have to get to school . . .'

'Of course, my little pookums,' said Patricia. 'I just wanted a quick word with Mumsypops?'

'Er . . . she's—' started Elliot.

'Lucky to have such a foxy friend,' drawled Zeus, wiggling his eyebrows.

'And who is this?' she asked with another empty smile.

'I'm Elliot's uncle,' said Zeus smoothly. 'I'm a plumber called Bob.'

'Well . . . Bob,' said Patricia, 'I was hoping to catch . . .'

Elliot shook his head behind her back to warn Zeus she was dangerous. Zeus winked discreetly and ushered Patricia out of the house.

'Drat and double balderdash,' he smiled, shutting the door firmly behind them.

'Josie's away for the day.'

'Away?' said Patricia, a fraction too high. 'Wherever has she gone?'

‘Shopping,’ lied Zeus effortlessly. ‘Heaven help her credit card . . . Hephaestus? How are you coming along with that fence?’

‘I’ll be done by lunchtime,’ grumbled the blacksmith, heaving a fencepost into place.

‘Marvellous,’ said Zeus to Patricia, tucking her reluctant arm into the crook of his elbow. ‘You can’t be too careful these days – never know who might want to get in.’

‘Quite,’ said Patricia, as she was half-dragged up the path and out of the gate. ‘If you could let Josie know I called?’

‘Of course,’ said Zeus, his eyes narrowing. ‘Mind how you go.’

‘You too,’ said Patricia, her eyes narrower still, as Elliot and Virgo brushed past her to set off over the fields to school.

Zeus had secured Virgo’s place at Brysmore with a phone call to Call Me Graham early that morning, pretending to be the headmaster of a prestigious girl’s boarding school. He spun a story that Virgo was Elliot’s cousin, a brilliant student who had just moved to the area and needed to continue her schooling. Clutching the certificates that Aphrodite had expertly forged, Elliot and Virgo walked up Brysmore’s grand driveway.

‘You need to keep a low profile today,’ said Elliot. ‘I can’t have any trouble.’

‘I thought you’d be more concerned about this test,’ said Virgo. ‘I’ve been studying all night and I still don’t think I can possibly pass it. Mortal history is weird.’

‘Thing is, Virgo,’ said Elliot smugly, thinking of the wishing pearl in his rucksack, ‘you’ve either got it or you haven’t.’

‘Got what?’ said Virgo suspiciously, as Elliot swaggered towards the school.

‘Morning, Mr Boil,’ he said to the teacher squeezing out of a compact car that smelt like old fish.

‘Be quiet, Hooper,’ sneered Boil as he finally freed his backside from the door frame.

‘Who’s this?’

‘This is my cousin . . . er . . .’

‘Anna Hooper,’ said Virgo moodily, unhappy with the mortal name Zeus had chosen for her.

‘Urgh – another Hooper, just what we need,’ said Boil unpleasantly. ‘Well, Miss Hooper, clearly there are a few things you need to learn about the Brysmore rules...’

‘Excellent. I always follow the rules,’ nodded Virgo.

‘Unless you change your hair colour by tomorrow, you’ll earn yourself a detention.’

‘Whatever’s wrong with my hair?’ asked Virgo, running her hands through her long silver locks.

‘Silver hair is against the Brysmore rules,’ pronounced Boil.

‘Then the Brysmore rules are ridiculous,’ said Virgo plainly, making Mr Boil gasp at her blasphemy. ‘I have no more control over my hair colour than you do over your hair loss.’

‘How – how dare you!’ exploded Boil.

‘Don’t mind my cousin, sir,’ said Elliot, steering Virgo away. ‘She’s from . . . a long way away. Where she comes from, baldness is a sign of greatness.’

‘No, it—’ Virgo started.

‘Nice to see you, sir,’ called Elliot.

‘I’ll be watching you today, Hooper,’ Boil shouted. ‘Both of you.’

‘Great way to keep a low profile,’ sighed Elliot, as they made their way into school.

‘What a funny little man,’ said Virgo. ‘Is he always that much of a Minotaur dropping or was today a special occasion?’

‘Nah,’ said Elliot. ‘He’s always like that. Hates my guts.’

‘Why?’ asked Virgo. ‘What have your guts done to him?’

‘He doesn’t like anyone who thinks for themselves,’ said Elliot. ‘And it’s possible that last year I sewed sardines in his car seats. But he’s determined to get me kicked out – and I can’t start a new school. They’d ask too many questions about . . .’

‘Josie-Mum,’ said Virgo quietly. ‘Athene explained it to me. Mortal children aren’t allowed to remain with sub-optimal parents.’

‘You have a gift with words,’ said Elliot. ‘But Boil needn’t worry. These exams will get rid of me. He knows I’ll never get eighty-five per cent.’

‘All the more reason to prove him wrong,’ Virgo said.

‘Absolutely,’ he grinned, tapping his rucksack.

Elliot and Virgo walked to the exam hall, where a straggle of fellow pupils were trembling outside, clearly exhausted after a sleepless night of frantic study.

‘Suckers,’ Elliot muttered as Brainy Briony burst into tears and her boyfriend Drippy Dominic was sick in a wastepaper bin.

The waft of old vegetable soup announced that Boil had arrived. The sad gaggle of students trudged into the hall, holding their breath to walk beneath Boil’s smelly armpit as he held the door to count them all in.

When they’d taken their seats, Boil slammed an exam paper down on each individual’s desk, delighting in making his petrified students jump as the thuds ricocheted around the hall.

‘You have one hour,’ he announced with a ghoulish grin. ‘You may begin.’

Elliot watched scornfully as his classmates whipped over their papers in horror and started furiously scribbling away. Elliot casually turned over his test. He didn’t have a clue how to answer a single question. But then he didn’t have to. He waited until the patrolling Mr Boil had walked past his desk.

‘I wish,’ he whispered as quietly as he could, ‘to pass this test.’

There was a tiny tinkling from his rucksack.

Elliot sat completely motionless, his eyes closed, waiting for his mind to fill with inspired historical knowledge.

But nothing happened.

He cautiously opened one eye to see if the test paper had simply written itself. It was completely blank. He didn’t understand. Surely Aphrodite wouldn’t give him something that didn’t work?

Suddenly, Elliot’s hands snapped to his desk and grabbed hold of his paper. He darted his head around to check that Boil hadn’t noticed, but the history teacher was

too busy looming over tearful Briony, narrowly missing Dominic's second puddle of vomit. Elliot didn't get it – how was this going to pass the test? He tried to let go of the paper, but he no longer appeared to have any command over his hands.

'What are you doing?' hissed Virgo, seeing Elliot shake next to her.

'I don't know,' whispered Elliot, 'I can't help it.'

'SILENCE!' roared Boil from the back of the hall, making everyone jump in their seats.

Elliot tried desperately to release the paper, but now his hands seemed determined to raise it off the desk.

'No, no, no,' whispered Elliot as his arms lifted off the table and veered sharply to the right, bringing Elliot to his feet and pulling him over to Virgo's desk.

'What the blazes are you doing, Hooper? Sit down!' shouted Boil as he charged towards Elliot.

But Elliot was utterly powerless. His hands plonked his test paper heavily in front of Virgo.

'Ow!' she yelped. 'What's the matter with you?'

'Silence!' said Boil arriving at her desk in a fury. 'Hooper! You have precisely two seconds to return to your seat before I give you an automatic fail.'

'Sorry, sir,' said Elliot, relieved to be free of the paper and turning back to his own desk. But his hands suddenly sprang to life again, grabbing Virgo's test and jerking towards the table in front of her. This time they forced him to deposit Virgo's paper on Briony's desk, who duly burst into tears again. The other students watched in bemusement as Elliot worked his way around the hall, picking up test papers and passing them on to the next person with increasing speed.

'Everyone get back to work!' puffed a puce Boil as he chased Elliot. 'Hooper, I'll have your hide for this!'

But Elliot was completely out of control, frantically running from one desk to the next, passing exam papers around the room as Aphrodite's pearl granted his wish to the letter.

'Help me,' he panted at Virgo as he completed his third circuit. 'Make it stop.'

Virgo ran over to restrain him, but she was powerless against the Olympian's wishing pearl. Elliot darted from her grip and carried on passing the test from person to person, with a panting Boil shouting threats a metre behind him.

'THIS EXAM IS OVER!' Boil eventually roared amidst the chaos.

At his words, Elliot's hands immediately dropped the paper he was holding and returned limply to his side, allowing the exhausted boy to crumple to the floor.

'You've all failed!' Boil spat to a chorus of groans as every last one of Elliot's classmates shot him filthy looks. 'Hoopers! You're both coming with me!'

'But I haven't—' started Virgo.

'Silence!' screamed Boil, dragging Elliot up by the back of his blazer and frogmarching him and Virgo straight to the headmaster's office.