

15. A Safe Bet

In the small hours of Sunday morning, Thanatos stood outside the residence of Pythia, Oracle of Delphi and conveyor of prophecies.

'You're sure this is where she lives?' he asked.

'As sure as I've got a spare nose,' said Charon. 'I go here meself from time to time. I like a flutter.'

Thanatos looked disdainfully at the neon sign burning in the dawn gloom, announcing that this was BOTTOM DRACHMA BETS in Twitching, Kent.

'I'll go back to the river,' said Charon. 'Don't be long, mind – we've got a long way to go if you want to reach Hypnos's place tonight.'

Despite the hour, Thanatos could see a faint

glow emanating from the flat above the shop. He pressed the buzzer.

'We're not open,' came the crackly reply over the intercom.

'Oh, I think you are,' said Thanatos. 'Hello, Pythia.'

'Is that . . . ?'

Thanatos saw a curtain twitch upstairs.

'Well, well. You'd better come up,' said the voice, buzzing Thanatos in.

Thanatos crunched on discarded takeaway cartons up the stairs and into Pythia's cramped bedsit. The oracle sat in an armchair. She appeared to be in a trance.

'What do you seek?' she asked in a monotone.

Thanatos picked up the television remote and switched off the home makeover show she was watching.

'Oi – I was enjoying that,' Pythia huffed, heaving herself up and venturing towards the kettle. She eyed Thanatos's black robes. 'I see you're still making a big effort to blend in?'

'Some of us still have standards,' said Thanatos, peering disapprovingly at Pythia's spotty complexion, frayed dressing gown and threadbare pink slippers. 'And I shouldn't have to blend in. Besides, my tricks don't work on you.'



'True enough,' said Pythia. 'Cuppa? The milk's not that lumpy . . .'

'I need to know the prophecy,' said Thanatos. 'The one you gave Zeus. His last words to me were: "No immortal can free you. It has been prophesized." I want the rest.'

'Did you bring me an offering?' said Pythia.

'I did, but does it have to be—?'

'No offering, no prophecy,' said Pythia flatly, adjusting one of the curlers in her greasy grey hair.

'Don't toy with me,' said Thanatos menacingly. 'Or I might just—'

'Uh, uh, uh,' said Pythia, flashing her glass kardia. 'I'm a Neutral. Like you say, your tricks don't work on me.'

'Fine,' sighed Thanatos. 'Here it is.' He produced a huge bucket of fried chicken from his robes in disgust. 'Charon insisted I "go large".'

'Good man,' said Pythia through a mouthful of chicken drumstick. 'Oooh – and a plastic toy. Classy. Right – bear with me a second.'

She walked over to a battered computer and started searching through her emails.

'Remember, I don't make this stuff up,' said Pythia, highlighting the message she sought. 'I just give you the odds.'

She hit the print button and an aged printer slowly churned out a piece of paper. The oracle handed it to Thanatos and he read his prophecy:

To: **oracle@delphi.com**
Date: **0016AD**
Subject: **Thanatos** (*Plus how YOU can save on YOUR chariot insurance!*)

If Death is contained in a sacred stone portal
He can't be released by a single immortal
The Daemon you place in the shackles of iron
Needs a young mortal child with the heart of a lion
The child can't die from a terrible deed
By the hand of the Daemon he generously freed
But now he could claim the power Death owns
And conquer the world with the help of four stones
Daemon beware! Your life with no end
Might now be cut short by your new mortal friend
So Life will race Death, but who will be faster?
When four stones are one, they will answer one master . . .

'The boy could rule the world?' said Thanatos. 'With my Chaos Stones?'

'If it softens the blow, I can give you a great tip on the 3.15 at Chepstow?' offered Pythia.

'And I can't kill the child?' Thanatos mused. 'How inconvenient. Does he defeat me?'

'I'm not psychic,' said Pythia, flicking her television programme back on. 'I can't even tell



you if they're going to wallpaper this sitting room in sixty minutes. But while the mortal child is alive, your odds aren't great.'

The conversation was over.

'I see,' said Thanatos, retreating back down the staircase. 'In which case, Elliot Hooper can't stay alive for very much longer.'