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.'



16. All You Need is Love

Elliot jolted awake with a gasp early Sunday morning. He'd spent a troubled night. When he had made his mum supper the previous evening, he'd found the remains of a cake he hadn't bought. Who had been in the house? He'd tried to find out from Josie what had happened, but the day was already a distant memory and Elliot didn't want to push his mum's tired mind any further.

Even though an owl was still hooting her night music outside his window, Elliot got up to prepare for the day. He felt uneasy leaving Josie again, especially with Patricia Porshley-Plum on the



prowl. But he needed to find that Earth Stone to save their home. It was for the best in the long term – once he'd saved Home Farm, he could get back to taking care of Mum.

After he'd sorted the laundry and cleaned the house, he quickly went through what had become his morning routine – making sure that Mum was washed and dressed, cooking her breakfast and then making a sandwich for her lunch, leaving it on the kitchen table in a clear plastic tub so that it would stay fresh and she could see it.

'Mum – will you fold the laundry while I'm out?' he shouted up.

'Of course, lovely – leave it in the kitchen, I'll see to it after breakfast.'

With a grimace, Elliot dumped the neat pile of laundry he'd carefully folded earlier that morning on the kitchen table. He had learnt that the best way to keep Josie in the house was to make sure she had something to do. She could spend hours on a single task and Elliot could always sort it out again when he got home.

As soon as Josie was settled in front of her breakfast, Elliot kissed her on the head.

'Remember – that important parcel is due today, so make sure you stay in,' he said.

'Yes, bossy bum!' she said as she squeezed him back. Elliot had also discovered that telling his mum there was a reason to stay in the house helped to keep her there, even though she couldn't always remember what the reason was. The fact that it was a Sunday and there was no important parcel didn't occur to her.

'Good morning, Elliot. Good morning, Josie-Mum,' said Virgo cheerfully, untroubled by not being invited in. 'Elliot – they're waiting for you in the shed.'

'Who's waiting for you, Elly?' said Josie. 'And who's this?'

'The builders, Mum – they've come to fix the shed,' said Elliot quickly, wincing at Virgo's spectacular lack of subtlety. 'And this is . . .'

'Virgo – we met yesterday,' said Virgo, looking confused.

'Did we? I don't . . .'

'Don't worry about it, Mum,' said Elliot, pushing Virgo outside. 'Stay here. Please. I'll see you later.'

'Love you, baby,' his mum said, starting on the pile of laundry.

Elliot and Virgo headed towards the cowshed, which was clanking with an orchestra of building noise.



'What is wrong with your mother?' asked Virgo plainly.

'Nothing,' said Elliot in reply to the question he had been dreading for so long. 'She's just tired.'

'She didn't recognize me although I clearly introduced myself yesterday,' said Virgo. 'I have been researching mortals and this is not normal. *What's What* informs me that mortals are largely friendly creatures who like to discuss the weather and prefer their negative thoughts to be expressed behind someone's back or on social media. Is your mother sub-optimal?'

'She's fine,' said Elliot defensively. 'It's been a tough year.'

'Perhaps you should replace her with a mother in full working order?' Virgo suggested.

Elliot laughed sadly. 'It doesn't work like that,' he said. 'You can't replace your mum.'

As they walked across the field, Elliot's feet sank into the newly ploughed soil, which had been hard as rock just hours ago. But before he had time to unstick his shoe, he was knocked sideways as a fully grown tree, laden with apples the size of bowling balls, burst out of the ground.

'Mind how you go!' laughed a ruddy-faced woman in overalls. 'I'm Demeter, Goddess of the Harvest – hope you don't mind if I do a spot of

gardening?' She continued to scatter seeds which immediately sprang up into mouth-watering, oversized fruit and vegetable plants.

'Er, no – thanks,' Elliot smiled back as he waded through the field, wondering how he was going to explain giant banana trees in the middle of a damp Wiltshire farm to anyone who came looking.

He pulled open the door to the cowshed, but was immediately knocked down by a swarm of tiny people who came to just above his knees.

'CUSHIONS!' yelled a petite, dark-haired Goddess, dressed in a smart red suit, who was marching around with a clipboard and a pair of golden glasses perched on the end of her nose.

'What the—?' spluttered Elliot, struggling to his feet, only to be bowled over again by another gaggle of pint-sized people whizzing past him in a cloud of smoke.

'Penates,' said Virgo as she too was sent flying by the workers, who Elliot could now see were made from clay, wax, silver or gold. 'They work for Hestia, Goddess of the Hearth. What she can't do with MDF and some sticky-back plastic isn't worth knowing.'

Hestia strode past with a quick smile, muttering about colour schemes and creating space.



Zeus was reclining on a makeshift hay sofa reading the *Daily Argus*, apparently oblivious to the chaos around him. He gave Elliot a warm grin.

'Good morning, old boy!' he roared happily. 'Ready for the day?'

'I guess,' said Elliot, wondering if today was going to be as mind-blowing as the one before.

'Good show!' said Zeus, struggling off the sofa before it was swept away by some penates. 'First off, we need to get my daughters, Athene and Aphrodite. But I'll need your help – they're a pair of feisty fillies and they might behave better with a smashing new face around. We'll start with Aphrodite. You'll like her. Most boys do.'

Elliot had zero interest in girls and Zeus's daughter wasn't going to be any different, but he smiled politely.

'Why have you guys come to England?' asked Elliot. 'Why not, like, Barbados or somewhere?'

'We needed a place where a group of eccentric individuals with strange personal habits could fit right in,' explained Zeus. 'England seemed a natural choice.'

'Makes sense,' said Elliot with a proud grin.

'Peg!' Zeus hollered at his horse, who was lying down with a pencil in his mouth doing the crossword. 'Saddle up!'

'Imbecile!' shouted Pegasus, rising to his hooves.

'Steady on, old chap,' scowled Zeus. 'I might not be the brightest star in the constellation, but that's a bit . . .'

'Fourteen across – a stupid person, eight letters,' explained Pegasus. 'Although if the helmet fits . . .'

'Hermes and Virgo, you start tracking down Hypnos – but tread carefully,' said Zeus. 'The Daemon of Sleep always was as nutty as a squirrel's packed lunch.'

'Daemon of Sleep?' said Elliot. 'That doesn't sound very scary.'

'He was scary all right,' said Hermes. 'Total psycho. He abused his sleep trumpet to torture mortals and immortals, making them fall asleep, keeping them awake or giving them impossible dreams and banging nightmares. He's dangerous. I'm not even joking.'

'So let's find him,' said Virgo, handing Hermes the iGod he was searching for. 'We get him, we'll get the Chaos Stones – and put Thanatos back under Stonehenge.'

'Nice one. Last one to spot him is last season's sweater dress,' grinned Hermes.

'That's the ticket,' said Zeus amiably. 'See you later.'



Pegasus knelt to help Zeus and Elliot clamber aboard.

'Come on, Peg – giddy-up!' yelled Zeus, strapping on the invisibility helmet before spurring Pegasus on to a gallop. One, two, three giant strides and they were climbing into the morning sky, leaving the industrious immortals far below.

It was another beautiful cruise through the sky. But as they floated over the sun-bathed countryside, Elliot voiced a thought that had been playing on his mind overnight.

'What powers do you all have?' he asked. 'The Gods, I mean.'

'That depends, old boy,' said Zeus. 'Athene is the Goddess of Wisdom, so there's not much she can't figure out – she's also a dab hand at arts and crafts, so she can create anything out of anything. Aphrodite, Goddess of Love – she can make anyone fall in love, often with her. Hephaestus, God of the Forge – he's a bit of a whizz at inventions. Hermes – he's our messenger, but he can also turn himself, or anything else, into whatever he wants. And as for me . . . well, I can do a bit of everything – jack of all trades, master of none . . .'

Elliot sensed that Zeus was being modest, but he had a more pressing question to ask.

'Do any of you have healing powers?' he asked quietly. 'Can anyone cure people?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Zeus gently, making Elliot wonder again if he could read his mind. 'I'm afraid we're often better at creating problems for mortals than solving them.'

Elliot's mind flashed back to Stonehenge. '*I can do what the Gods cannot*,' Thanatos had said. Was that a lie?

'Thank the Heavens Virgo got you out of there yesterday,' said Zeus, interrupting Elliot's thoughts.

'Yeah,' he groaned. 'She's mentioned it once or twice.'

'She's quite something,' laughed Zeus. 'I know legendary heroes who wouldn't have had half her courage. Mind you, I also know twenty-headed monsters who don't talk half as much, but one thing I've learnt about women is to take the rough with the smooth. Ah – we're here, good-o!'

Elliot clung on to Pegasus as the horse gracefully landed on a quiet patch of sand behind some beach huts.

'Brighton,' said Zeus, huffing and puffing off the horse. 'How I do like to be beside the seaside. Back in two ticks, Peg.'

'Diet,' said Pegasus.

'Beg pardon?' said Zeus.



'Six down – a healthy eating regime, four letters,' said Pegasus, pulling the crossword out of his saddlebag with his teeth.

'Hmmm. See you later,' said Zeus, taking off his invisibility helmet and wriggling his Hawaiian shirt over his belly as he ushered Elliot across the beach.

They walked up to the promenade and crossed into the winding streets of the town. It had been over three years since Elliot's last trip to the seaside – he and Mum used to camp on the Jurassic Coast, spending every sunny moment on the fossil-filled beaches and every rainy one playing cards as the water hammered down on their cosy tent. The smell of the salty air, mingled with salty chips transported Elliot back to some of his happiest memories.

'Now, Elliot, here's the thing about my girls,' Zeus began as they reached a bright-pink door emblazoned with EROS in lipstick-red letters. 'They are both beautiful, powerful, intelligent women who are a credit to their old dad. But I can't lie – put them together and they're like two harpies fighting over a half-price handbag. Need to handle this one with kid gloves, if you catch my drift.'

'Sure,' said Elliot, with precisely no idea what

Zeus was talking about.

'Good lad, good lad,' muttered Zeus as he pressed the bright-pink buzzer.

Zeus and Elliot entered the reception area, which looked as though someone had lost a fight with a pink paint pot. Everything was pink, from the walls, to the ceiling, to the lip-shaped chairs dotted around the room.

'Welcome to Eros – where love don't cost a thing. Terms and conditions apply,' the receptionist chanted. 'I'm Sally.'

'Well, aren't you just a pretty little thing?' drawled Zeus. 'Can you tell Ms Venus that her old dad's here? And that I'd like to take her receptionist out for dinner?'

Sally turned a shade of pink that perfectly matched her suit.

'I'll give her a ring,' she giggled, picking up the top lip of the pink mouth phone.

'Keep being so beautiful and I'll be giving you the ring, Sarah,' said Zeus.

'It's Sally,' Sally giggled.

'It's irrelevant,' Zeus grinned, picking up her hand and kissing it.

Elliot gazed around the waiting room, which was filled with people who looked . . . single. Photographs of Eros success stories lined the



walls, hundreds of married couples grinning at the hopefuls from every surface.

'Daddy!' chimed the most beautiful voice Elliot had ever heard.

'Hello, my little pearl,' said Zeus, taking his daughter into a giant hug. 'Come and meet my good friend Elliot.'

'Hi there, Elliot,' said Aphrodite, shimmying towards the boy glued to the floor.

Elliot tried to speak, but all the words evaporated inside his mouth. It was hard to say exactly what made the Goddess of Love the most beautiful woman Elliot had ever seen, but as he gawped at her long golden hair, her twinkling blue eyes, her full rosy lips and the snug jeans and T-shirt she was dressed in, he didn't honestly care.

Zeus nudged Elliot in the ribs. 'Your mouth called, old boy,' he whispered. 'It wants its tongue back.'

But Elliot was deaf to anything but the angel song in his head as Aphrodite glided nearer.

'So you're our little mortal,' sang Aphrodite, or so it seemed to Elliot as he drowned in her boundless blue eyes. 'Hermes called me last night and told me all about you. Lovely to meet you.'

'Hubhurghrumph,' garbled Elliot dreamily as he reached for her outstretched hand.

With a twinkle in her eyes, Aphrodite pulled Elliot towards her and planted a big kiss on his cheek. At the touch of her lips, Elliot felt a blush begin twenty metres below the Earth, surging through the ground before it burst into his shoes and erupted all over his face, making him resemble a thoroughly happy tomato.

'Aphy, could we have a word, please? Bit of business to discuss,' said Zeus with a wink.

'Yes, of course – I'm just with a client,' she whispered, gesturing to the gentleman in the knitted pullover in her office. 'With you in a mo, Colin!'

'Er, right-o, OK, then,' replied Colin as he tried to remove his anorak, banged his knee on the desk and tripped over the chair, sending his thick black glasses flying. Aphrodite looked lovingly at him.

'Bless. Such a catch,' she winked.

'Aphrodite Venus?' a voice boomed across the reception. It belonged to quite the tallest and broadest woman Elliot had seen without a shot-put, a giantess in a grey suit brandishing a briefcase.

'That's me,' said Aphrodite sweetly.

'Millicent Tronglebom,' declared the woman, flashing an ID badge. 'Health and Safety Officer.



I'm here to inspect your toilets.'

'Madam!' Zeus boomed admiringly, much to Sally's annoyance. 'You can inspect my toilets anytime! You are my kind of gal. Someone you can cuddle all week and still have enough for sandwiches on Saturday.'

Millicent gave Zeus a look that could brew a verruca. He shirked against the wall, burbling incoherently.

'Your annual hygiene inspection is overdue,' she barked, turning her attention back to Aphrodite.

'Ah. Whoopsie,' said Aphrodite mischievously.

'Whoopsie, indeed, Ms Venus!' roared Millicent, pulling herself up even taller. 'It seems you've never been granted licence BS666: Operating Toilets Where People Might Need One! And if you can't come up with a reasonable explanation, you can expect a substantial fine!'

'I see,' said Aphrodite, looking back at Colin, who was now staggering blindly around the office. 'Won't you come through? I'm sure we can sort something out.'

With a wicked smile, Aphrodite ushered Millicent into her office, gesturing to Zeus and Elliot to follow. She took a seat at her heart-shaped desk. Colin was crawling around the floor in

search of his lost specs.

'Now, how can I help you?' Aphrodite asked Millicent sweetly, opening a small drawer and removing a pink leather box.

'According to our records, you haven't applied for a toilet licence since . . . well, since for ever,' said Millicent.

'That sounds about right,' Aphrodite trilled, opening the box.

'You don't deny it?' said the incredulous Millicent.

'I have nothing to hide,' said Aphrodite. 'Paperwork is boring. I don't do boring. Besides, I can't pay your fine. My services are free. Money is such silly stuff.'

Elliot wanted to argue that it was easy to think that about money when you didn't need it. But everything Aphrodite did was amazing and beautiful and wonderful.

'Don't you have a secretary?' asked Millicent. 'Someone to handle vital matters such as toilet licences?'

'Nope,' said Aphrodite absent-mindedly, fiddling with whatever was inside the box.

'This is a very serious offence, Ms Venus,' Millicent roared. 'You could be facing—'

'Have you met Colin?' said Aphrodite, ges-



turing to the helpless soul floundering about on the floor.

'No,' sneered Millicent, peering down at Colin as if there were a pile of slug sick at her feet.

'You two should get to know each other,' said Aphrodite, suddenly standing up and yanking a pink taser gun out of the box. 'I think you'll get along!'

'What the—?' gasped Millicent, but it was too late. Aphrodite fired the gun and two wires tipped with pink hearts sliced through the air towards their targets – one attaching to Millicent's magnificent bosom, the other to Colin's scrawny bottom.

For a moment, both parties tried to overcome the shock of having a taser fired at them in broad daylight. Elliot noticed that Colin's glasses were lying by his feet, so he handed them to the stunned man, who was plucking the heart from his backside.

Colin rose slowly from the floor, adjusting his glasses to fix his gaze on a dumbstruck Millicent.

'Millicent Tronglebom,' she said softly, extending her hand towards a slack-jawed Colin.

'Colin Limpwad,' he replied, taking her hand as if it were a holy relic. 'You have the most beautiful name I've ever heard. Millicent Tronglebom. It's

like a choir of heavenly hamsters singing your beauty.'

'Why, thank you, Colin,' giggled Millicent coyly. 'I hope you'll not think me forward, but that's a lovely pullover.'

'Sweet Ms Tronglebom – my mother knitted it for my forty-third birthday. We live together.'

'Oh, Colin – how I've longed to find a man who lives with his mother!'

'Sweet Milly – may I call you Milly?' asked Colin.

'Only if I can call you – Schnookykins!' Millicent blushed.

'You can call me anything you want!' roared Colin, gathering the ample Millicent into his skinny arms. 'I have yearned for a woman like you! A woman with grace! A woman with substance! A woman with a bosom I could spot my trains from! Marry me Milly!'

'Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes!' screamed Millicent, tearing Aphrodite's file in half. 'Let us go to Gretna Green this very afternoon!'

'If we hurry, we'll catch the 10.14!' cried Colin, picking up his Thermos flask and the cheese sandwich his mum had packed. 'It's a class 390 Pendolino!'

'You can tilt my train anytime, my little Colly



Flower!' shouted Millicent, shaking her hair free of its bun and scooping Colin up into her arms as they ran towards the 10.14 and wedded bliss.

'And that's why I don't need a secretary,' grinned Aphrodite, replacing the taser in her drawer. 'Now. What can I do for you?'



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.

