



Maz Evans

AGAINST ALL GODS

WHO LET THE GODS OUT? BOOK 4

Chicken
House

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For my Zach

Who is just like Elliot. A true and brilliant hero.

*Your story will always be the greatest one I have
created. I love watching you write it.*

It's real love. Use the flush.

Also by Maz Evans

Who Let the Gods Out?

Simply the Quest

Beyond the Odyssey

DAILY ARGUS

(LIMITED EDITION)

The great *Daily Argus* has taken a new role
(And so this is scribbled on unquilted loo roll)
We've gone underground in more senses than one
We're stuck down in Tartarus, which isn't much fun
But we are devoted to bringing you news
(And thus there's no bog roll in both the gents' loos)
The Daemon of Death is preparing for war
With all Elementals to settle his score
The young mortal child will give him the stones
The price? His mother the Afterlife owns
There's still one more gem that the boy must acquire
The Fire Stone, forged from a gleaming sapphire
If the boy can withstand a trial by flame
His late mother's soul is the prize he will claim
The Daemon has sworn that this time he won't trick 'im
But the kid could end up like a barbecued chicken
If he lives, for the mortals it ain't such good news
(A bit like for us if we need number twos)
It comes down to this – and it brings us no joy:
The fate of the world rests on one mortal boy



1. Hell or High Water

‘**Y**ou have got to be kidding me.’
Elliot Hooper let out a deep sigh.
Another way to die horribly. It must be Friday.

‘Nope,’ grinned Hypnos, Daemon of Sleep.
‘Welcome to the River Phlegethon! All you have to do is dive in and grab the Fire Stone! Simple! But caution: this water is h-h-hot!’

‘Great,’ Elliot groaned, peering from the balcony edge into the blazing river of fire that raged between him and the final Chaos Stone. Even from the relative safety of Thanatos’s cliff-side office in Tartarus, he could feel the wall of



heat blasting off the flaming river metres below. He could just make out a blue glow shining through the flames on the riverbed. It was a huge sapphire: the Fire Stone. It was right there. Elliot reached a hand over the balustrade towards it. Perhaps the river itself wasn't that hot . . .

'Ouch!' he cried as a flame leapt up from the inferno and bit the tip of his index finger. Elliot whipped it to his mouth and sucked his scorched skin. So this was it. He was going to be toasted like a marshmallow in this immortal river of fire if he even attempted to retrieve the Fire Stone. This totally sucked.

A wave of grief swelled unbidden from his heart. These waves kept on catching him out and Elliot was struggling to keep them under control. He forced it back down, deep into his soul, where it had many others for company. He had to build a dam against these moments every time his mum came to mind – they were distracting. And they hurt. It had been just two days since Josie had . . . He couldn't even think it, let alone say it. But it didn't matter. All he had to do was this one thing, and he'd get her back. Once Thanatos had all four Chaos Stones, Elliot could have Josie back again. There was no point in crying. His mum wasn't really gone.

Inspiration suddenly struck. Elliot rummaged in his pocket and drew out his father's gold watch. He swallowed the hatred that swilled in his stomach at the very thought of his da— David Hooper, that useless excuse for a parent, who had handed Home Farm over to Patricia Horse's-Bum. He had cost Elliot his home. And those crucial moments had cost him the chance to say goodbye to his . . .

Elliot shut his eyes to push away the pain that bruised his soul every time he thought about Josie. He added another layer to the dam.

It isn't goodbye, he silently told himself. This is why you have to do this. This is the only way. This is how you get her back.

He opened the lid of the pocket watch and winced, his sleep-deprived eyes dazzled by the gems inside: the diamond Earth Stone, the emerald Air Stone and the ruby Water Stone. He held the watch above his head.

'RAIN!' he commanded, feeling the addictive surge of power that the Chaos Stones always gave him.

A beam of red light shot from the Water Stone and pierced the dark air of Tartarus. A vast black cloud formed above the burning river and, with a distant rumble of thunder, rain started to pour



down on the river of fire.

Elliot stood back and waited for the blaze to die down.

‘Why isn’t it working?’ he said after a few moments.

‘Wrong sort of rain,’ drawled Thanatos, walking up behind him.

Elliot shuddered involuntarily – the Daemon of Death’s voice never failed to chill him to the core.

‘What do you mean?’ he growled impatiently, watching the raindrops fizzle out as they fell on the raging flames.

‘Mortal rain, immortal flame,’ said Thanatos plainly. ‘It’s simply not strong enough. You may as well try blowing the Phlegethon out like a birthday candle.’

‘So how is it going to free your Daemon army?’ Elliot snapped, gesturing towards the stone prison that held the Daemon prisoners on an island in the far distance.

‘Because it has been prophesized,’ shrugged Thanatos. ‘I don’t make the rules. When the Gods imprisoned my Daemons, it was prophesized that only the Chaos Stones could free them. My idiotic brother, on the other hand . . .’

‘Don’t mind me,’ Hypnos sulked.

‘Sorry,’ said Thanatos, with an apologetic bow, ‘my *incredibly* idiotic brother just carelessly tossed the Fire Stone in the River Phlegethon as if he were discarding underwear in the laundry basket. The Chaos Stones won’t help you.’

Elliot lowered his arm and the red beam snapped back into the watch.

‘Of course, I could always have a go . . .’ whispered Thanatos, reaching for the watch containing the stones. But the instant he came near Elliot, his arm was violently repelled by the invisible force that forbade him from touching this mortal boy, who had freed him from Stonehenge.

‘Worth a try,’ he smirked.

‘Why don’t you just jump in and get it?’ Elliot grumbled. ‘You can’t die. Kind of an advantage over me.’

‘True,’ said Thanatos. ‘But I can still be burnt horribly by the attempt and live out my endless days in agony. Honestly, you have the better end of the deal.’

‘Thanks,’ scowled Elliot. How was he ever going to do this?

He followed Thanatos and Hypnos back into the office and shut the balcony doors on his fate.

‘Where’s Mumsy?’ pouted Hypnos, slumping into a stone chair. ‘She promised she’d give me my



baby back today. Where is she?’

‘Who cares?’ muttered Elliot, dropping into a second chair. He hated Nyx, Goddess of the Night, for what she’d done to his friend Hermes. His heart beat a little harder at the thought of the Messenger God still lying unconscious from the poisoned arrow Nyx had shot at him. Would he ever see Hermes again? He was the only God who ever really cared about him. The others had only been using him to get their stupid Chaos Stones. He knew that now.

Another wave threatened his equilibrium. He pushed it back.

‘Mother is busy running an important errand.’ Thanatos settled himself on his stone throne behind his long black desk. ‘Your silly little sleep trumpet will have to wait until tomorrow when she returns.’

‘It’s not silly,’ whined Hypnos. ‘You’re silly . . .’

‘So how do I put the flames out?’ said Elliot impatiently, not in the mood to hear the Daemon twins’ latest squabble. He looked around the dingy office, lit only by torches on the wall and the menacing glow of the river below. This place was grim. He couldn’t wait to leave. With Mum.

‘You don’t,’ said Thanatos crossing his long fingers.

‘Then how do I get the Fire Stone?’ snapped Elliot. ‘In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly fireproof.’

‘Well . . . perhaps you are?’ Thanatos mused.

Elliot clenched his teeth.

‘Could you, just for once, give me a straight answer?’ he hissed. ‘You are epically annoying.’

‘Forgive me,’ said Thanatos slowly. ‘You recall Pythia’s prophecy? It refers to “a young mortal child with the heart of a lion”. Apparently, that’s you.’

Elliot shrugged. That same prophecy had also said that he could ‘conquer the world with the help of four stones’. He remembered that bit.

‘Well, now we’re going to find out for sure,’ said Thanatos. ‘Only the truly courageous can survive the flames of the Phlegethon. Your courage will protect you from the fire like a suit of armour.’

Elliot glanced at his burnt finger.

‘And how do I know if I’m truly courageous?’ he said.

‘You dive head first into the flames,’ said Thanatos. ‘The answer comes back pretty quickly.’

‘And if I do this, you will definitely give me my mum back?’ said Elliot uncertainly.

‘For the last time, I have sworn an oath on the Styx,’ Thanatos insisted. ‘If I break it, I will lose my



kardia and become mortal. Quite aside from the sheer repellence of the idea, it's not much use having power over the Earth and everything in it if I can be knocked down by a number 73 bus. I will return your mother's soul, you lead it out of the Underworld, and, as soon as you reach the Earth, she will be restored to her mortal form, just as she was before she—'

'I get it,' Elliot interrupted, not wanting to hear the words said out loud. His mum wasn't really – not living. She was coming back.

Elliot stood up and returned to the window. He watched wave after wave of flame ebb along the river. There was nothing he *wouldn't* do to have his mum back. But what if he *couldn't*?

The flames outside suddenly roared.

'They can sense your fear,' whispered Thanatos, lurching up over his shoulder. 'You have to get it under control. Tiredness won't help. I've been told you're not sleeping.'

Elliot said nothing. For the brief moments his body allowed him to sleep, his mind tortured him with dreams of Josie. Every time he slept, she was alive and well and loving him as she always had. Every time he awoke, he faced again the cruel reality of life without her. It was easier just to stay awake.

‘We try tomorrow. Get some rest,’ Thanatos declared, nodding at the door, which opened at his silent command. ‘You’re going to need your strength. Every last drop of it.’

Elliot rose from the chair and walked out of the office on to the fiery plains of Tartarus. He crossed over a bridge that took him away from the Phlegethon and back towards his sleeping quarters. The screams of its eternal inmates polluted the ash-filled air. On the dark horizon, Elliot could see the hill and valley where Sisyphus, Tantalus and Asteria’s family toiled fruitlessly at their endless punishments. Everywhere in between, the fiery landscape was filled with Elementals making weapons and practising how to use them. He ducked as a rock whizzed over his head from a makeshift catapult.

‘Sorry,’ shouted a young satyr.

‘No worries,’ Elliot mumbled as he ploughed on across the scorched land. Hypnos was fluttering along behind him. Elliot could sense he was waiting for Thanatos to be far enough away before he spoke.

‘You don’t have to go through with this, you know,’ whispered the Daemon of Sleep. ‘I can help you escape. I can hide you where Thanatos would never find you. You can just leave now.’



‘Why would you do that?’ Elliot asked, stopping to look at the Daemon of Sleep. ‘You bored of trying to kill me?’

‘I guess so,’ Hypnos shrugged. ‘Besides – think of the fun you could have with the Chaos Stones. The world would be your oyster! Your hurricane-filled, flooded, earthquakey oyster if you wanted. And we could get up to all sorts . . .’

‘I can’t,’ Elliot said simply. ‘I have to do this.’

He thought of Josie and took a deep breath. While there was even the most desperate chance of seeing her again – whatever he had to do, no matter how risky it was and how slim the chances of succeeding – Elliot Hooper wasn’t going anywhere.