



OH  
WHAT A  
KNIGHT!

Maz Evans



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*For Jazzy B.*

*The Princess of Publicity.*

*You are a legend.*

*xxx*

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## 1. Too Many Crooks

‘ I SHALL NOT CEASE UNTIL THE OCEANS OF THE EARTH RUN RED WITH THE BLOOD OF MY ENEMIES AND I FEAST UPON THEIR BONES FOR MY BREAKFAST!’

The curse echoed loudly around the Diabolon. Just as all the others had. And there had been a lot of curses in the last couple of hours.

Thanatos emitted a long, weary sigh and slumped against his rock. He might not be physically chained to it any more. But since accidentally releasing the very worst of the immortal community from this eternal prison not two hours ago,

he already felt like he had started a whole new prison sentence. He twirled the deadly fang of Apep between his fingers. Winning it from Seth had seemed like such a triumph. But now?

This was going to be a very, very long Saturday.

‘Thank you, Chernobog, for that invaluable contribution,’ he drawled at the Slavic God of Evil and Swearing as the winged Daemon hissed a foul word in his general direction. ‘So, just to recap, we’ve established that you want blood, Nergal wants to rain plague and pestilence from the heavens—’

‘And famine,’ the Mesopotamian God of War, Disease and Death added, wagging his lion-headed mace. ‘Don’t forget the famine.’

‘My apologies,’ Thanatos deadpanned. ‘Nergal wants to rain plague, pestilence *and* famine from the heavens. Happy now?’

‘I’m not trying to make a big deal of it,’ Nergal said defensively. ‘Hashtag: just saying. It’s, like, famine’s kinda my thing. You know – we all have a thing? Ahriman does disappointment . . .’

‘If you say so,’ sighed the young Zoroastrian God, sitting in the corner.

‘. . . Lilith wants revenge on all men . . .’

‘. . . and I shall take it by destroying all the children!’ howled the winged, pregnant she-devil

before pausing slightly to reflect. ‘Although now I say it out loud, not quite sure how that’s going to work in practice!’

‘And Ogo wants . . . er, what exactly is it that you want again, Ogo?’

‘I want to hatch a new world!’ cried the shape-shifting Dogon God gleefully. ‘I want to overturn the established order! I want havoc and confusion to reign! I want to have children with the yolk from which I was born and create my own new rebel army! I want—’

‘Yeah, so Ogo wants . . . *that*,’ Nergal continued. ‘I’m just saying that we all have our brand. And famine is one of my unique selling points.’

‘Pah!’ spat the enormous blue Maori God, Whiro. ‘I was creating famine when you were still boiling in that giant egg of yours! I OWN famines.’

‘And who says you get plague and pestilence?’ Loviatar, the horned Finnish Goddess of Death, Pain and Disease, chipped in. ‘According to *The Daily Argus*, I’m the queen of plague and pestilence! It described me as an “influencer”.’

‘Influenza, more like,’ Nergal snapped back. ‘You’d be lucky to give humanity a runny nose!’

‘I can do something else to your nose if you keep blithering on, you dribbling buffoon!’ Loviatar screamed.

‘Oh, you did NOT just say that!’ Nergal shrieked, putting his hand on his sword. ‘Come over here and let’s see who needs medical attention! Hashtag: you!’

As the gathering descended into a brawl for the umpteenth time, Thanatos threw back his head and released the groan that had been swirling around his guts. It was time to take control.

‘ENOUGH!’ he yelled at ear-splitting volume, bringing the unruly crowd to a hush. ‘This is ridiculous!’

‘I agree,’ said Hel, the Norse Goddess of Cruelty. ‘We can’t all control and/or destroy the world. We need to devise some kind of system.’

The inmates of the Diabolon considered her pronouncement.

‘A rota?’ Ahriman suggested. ‘We could do it in shifts? Weekdays are better than weekends for me, but I’ll need the third Thursday in the month for self-care. I am determined to learn how to bake sourdough now I’ve got more time on my hands.’

‘Don’t be so stupid!’ Ogo shot back. ‘We can’t take it in turns! This is world domination! Not a holiday home in Tenerife!’

‘Doesn’t work for me,’ Nergal agreed, shaking his head. ‘I’m not really feeling the collab vibe. I



think it will dilute my core solo apocalyptic messaging ...’

‘I SHARE WITH NO ONE!’ Chernobog roared. ‘I WILL CRUSH YOUR SKULLS BENEATH MY FEET BEFORE I SURRENDER ONE SECOND OF MY RIGHT TO EVERLASTING DOMINION!’

‘All right, all right,’ muttered the Zoroastrian God of Strife and Disappointment. ‘I was only saying. I might have known you’d all shoot me down, I literally have no voice in this room.’

‘We are all powerful and malevolent forces who could easily rule the Earth,’ Whiro suggested. ‘So why don’t we determine this according to the way our kind have traditionally settled such matters?’

‘Go on,’ Thanatos encouraged gingerly.

Whiro smiled darkly.

‘With a massive fight!’ he roared, punching the air and accidentally knocking the airborne Lilith across the cave.

‘Hey! Watch it!’ Lilith screamed, swooping down from the air and grabbing his blue hair between her talons.

‘FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT!’ roared Chernobog, grabbing Fenrir the werewolf and wrestling him to the ground.

‘Oh, spare me,’ Thanatos groaned as brawls broke out around the Diabolon, fur, feathers and foul language quickly polluting the air. The Daemon of Death climbed on top of his rock, put his fingers to his lips and released a whistle that could split stone.

‘Wow!’ shouted Hel, putting her hands to her ears. ‘A little warning next time, maybe?’

‘Personal space, much?’ Nergal complained from within Ogo’s headlock.

‘We can’t even have a decent fight any more,’ Ahriman pouted, scratching the chickenpox that Loviatar had just inflicted upon him.

‘My . . . friends,’ Thanatos shouted over the dying hubbub. ‘There is no doubt that all of us are possessed of extraordinary power and potential. And it is because of that very fact that it would be a sorry waste of our gifts to inflict them on each other – and to what end? We are stronger together.’

‘I AM THE STRONGEST AND MIGHTIEST OF THEM ALL!’ Chernobog roared, beating his chest.

‘Dude,’ Nergal hissed. ‘Read the room.’

‘Now, we could all scrap this out and variously wound and destroy one another,’ Thanatos continued.

‘Sounds fun!’ Ogo yelled enthusiastically, grabbing an eye-rolling Ahriman.

‘Here we go again,’ the Zoroastrian sighed.

‘Or,’ Thanatos interjected, ‘we organize. We mobilize. We prioritize. Whoever ends up running this show, they’re going to need some support. And who better than an army of those with the same aspirations and agendas?’

‘He makes a solid point,’ Nergal agreed. ‘The right kind of crossovers can really engage both new and existing audiences.’

‘Indeed,’ said Thanatos uncertainly. ‘But someone must ultimately be in charge, or it will be chaos.’

‘Woo-hoo!’ Ogo whooped. ‘Go, chaos! No? Just me? OK.’

‘What do you suggest?’ asked Hel suspiciously.

‘Whiro is correct that a show of supremacy is the best way to settle this, but let’s do so in a fair and civilized manner,’ Thanatos continued. ‘After all, we’re not monsters.’

He gave his audience a knowing look, which was met with howls of laughter.

‘But, seriously,’ he said, after basking in their response, ‘let’s do this the right way. I propose a tournament. We draw lots, we progress through rounds. Last one standing is declared the winner

and everyone else agrees to support their leadership.’

The massed ranks of the Diabolon paused to consider his idea.

‘Well, I’m just gonna lose anyway,’ sighed Ahri-man, ‘but sure, why not, whatever.’

‘I’m liking the optics,’ said Nergal. ‘This could generate some fantastic content.’

‘I’m in,’ Whiro declared with a grin, flexing his mighty muscles. ‘I feed off death. This should be fun.’

‘I WILL FIGHT YOU ALL UNTIL YOU WEEP AT MY FEET LIKE THE PATHETIC SCRAPS OF FLESH YOU ARE!’ Chernobog added.

‘Well, that’s just wonderful,’ Thanatos announced, twirling the fang again. ‘So if we’re all in agreement?’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Hel, eyeing up the fang. ‘We need some rules.’

‘Never!’ Ogo shouted. ‘Let chaos rule!’

‘No,’ said Hel firmly. ‘You see that, around Thanatos’s neck? I know it. It is a fang of Apep, its poison so deadly it can even kill an immortal. No weapons capable of ending endless life in the tournament.’

‘Shame,’ said Whiro reluctantly, punching his

fist into his palm. ‘But I agree. Brute strength only.’

‘And no throwing shade on the socials,’ Nergal added. ‘Verbal wounds can be as damaging as physical ones, people.’

‘Huh?’ growled Fenrir, looking at his claws with confusion.

‘Opponents can be incapacitated, not destroyed,’ Hel clarified. ‘There are few enough of our kind, without us killing each other. And let’s limit the bouts to ten minutes. Just because we have endless life doesn’t mean we have to use it all.’

‘Buzzkill,’ Ahriman grumbled.

‘Babe, it’s a good point,’ Nergal nodded enthusiastically. ‘I think the message of death, destruction and misery on the mortals is so much more positive if we stick together.’

‘So under those terms,’ Hel continued, ‘I agree.’

A general murmur of consensus echoed around the cave. Thanatos forced a smile. The fang of Apep had been the whole reason he had suggested the contest in the first place. Without it, this was going to be trickier.

Trickier, but not impossible.

After all, the prophecy that had inconveniently released his colleagues had also provided a slither of hope.

*Then hell shall gape its evil jaws  
And no man's child will stop its cause*

No man's child could stop him. He'd take those odds.

'Fair enough,' he conceded, tucking the fang inside his black robes. 'Then we are agreed. Hel, as you seem to have an excellent grasp of the situation, may I leave it to you to draw up the tournament? I have a small personal matter to which I must first attend.'

'Agreed,' said Hel. 'But if you're going out there to get a head start . . .'

'Not at all,' said Thanatos, raising his hands. 'This is an . . . administrative task. I shall return to compete in the tournament with you all, I promise. Without use of the fang.'

'Swear it on the Styx,' Hel insisted suspiciously.

Thanatos found himself caught between irritation and admiration. He rarely dealt with worthy opponents. The Styx vow was unbreakable on pain of losing his immortality. This tournament was going to be a challenge.

'I so swear,' he vowed darkly. 'Now, if you'll excuse me.'

The Daemon of Death made his way through the throngs of gods and daemons and beasts

clamouring to put their name in the draw for the tournament. They would have to wait. Thanatos had an urgent score to settle.

Taking more steps in a few moments than he had taken for years, Thanatos felt his vim and vigour return with every footfall. With deliberate pleasure, he made his way up the stone staircase that he had enviously watched his few visitors use. A rare brightness in his heart, he reached the base of the Heel Stone above. With the lightest of touches – he was delighted to note his daemon strength was still as potent as ever – he flipped the mighty rock open and made his way out into the dimming sunshine beyond. Even when immortals messed with the natural order by releasing the kidnapped sun at midnight, he was impressed that the anomaly was already correcting itself. The world was returning to the darkness that befitted the hour. Thanatos instinctively preferred the darkness. He rarely wanted anyone to see what he was doing.

Although possessed, as all daemons were, with the power of flight, Thanatos preferred to walk to his destination. It had been so long since he'd breathed clean air, and he was determined to take his fill. Besides, with all the events of recent days, he hadn't had time to fully decide on the nature

of his revenge.

His revenge on Elliot Hooper.

There were so many ways he wanted to make Elliot suffer for foiling his last attempt at ruling over this miserable realm. His deal with Morgan Le Fay forbade him from exacting the most pain, unable as he was to harm Hooper's daughter, Vesper. But given how Morgan had betrayed him, he didn't intend for the enchantress to be around to enforce their agreement much longer. Besides, over two decades alone in a subterranean prison had given him plenty of time to mull over different ideas. And when faced with his mortal enemy, Thanatos was entirely confident he'd be able to improvise.

Despite never having entered Home Farm, Thanatos knew where he was going from previous scouting visits during his last liberation. That accursed fence built by Hephaestus had kept him at bay and, in any case, the terms of his first incarceration forbade him from harming the child who had freed him. But that child was now a man – for once, the specifics of a prophecy could prove useful. Elliot Hooper was fair game. Thanatos wasn't one to let a grudge go unsettled. And no fence was going to stop him this time.

But as the Daemon of Death approached the



farm, he was surprised to see that the enchanted defence was, in fact, wide open. He smirked to himself. This was going to be too, too easy. He walked straight up to the front door and, without a moment's hesitation, kicked it in with all his might.

'ELLIOT HOOPER!' he roared into the dark farmhouse. 'It's time for you to meet your destiny!'

He waited for the pleasing sound of mortal screaming to greet his entrance. But the farmhouse remained silent. After a few bewildered seconds, Thanatos felt a small but persistent tapping at his feet.

'Er, sorry, chief,' said a large rat, chewing on a pizza crust. 'Ain't nobody home.'

Thanatos felt his fury rear up inside him. He raised his foot to dispatch the irksome rodent. The Daemon of Death wasn't leaving here without shedding at least some blood.

'Whoa!' choked the rat, spitting out his pizza. 'Hold up there! Let's not be too hasty now. Thanatos, ain't it?'

'Who dares speak my name?' the Daemon thundered.

'Merlin,' said the rat. 'Wizard extraordinaire, most recently enslaved to Morgan. Good to meet ya.'

He held out a small paw in introduction. It wasn't grasped.

'Tough crowd,' said the rat as the Daemon snarled at him.

'Where are they?' Thanatos hissed.

'I could tell ya,' Merlin trilled. 'But it'll cost ya.'

Thanatos raised his foot again.

'Or I can kill you,' said Thanatos, 'and find out anyway.'

'Geez – you drive a hard bargain,' said Merlin admiringly. 'You just missed 'em. The Gods have gone up to the Omnitheon to rally the troops. The rest of 'em have gone on a road trip. To Camelot. To awaken King Arthur. You know, the one who's going to save us all in our darkest hour, yada, yada. Morgan fired me for helping the kid. I was coming back to beg forgiveness, although I don't know why – she's a horrible boss. Real toxic. But I musta left the gate open. My bad.'

Thanatos considered this information. He was of course aware of the prophecy that said Arthur would return – he made it his business to know anyone and anything that might stand in his way. King Arthur and his army had been in an enchanted state in Camelot for centuries, awaiting their moment. But Arthur was another mortal leading an army of mortals. They were as ants

against his power.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘Thank you.’

He raised his foot again.

‘Hold ya horses there!’ Merlin screamed again, cowering beneath his foot. ‘Look – I’m gonna level with you. I’m seeking . . . new employment opportunities. Life with Morgan is . . . well, let’s just say I wasn’t at peak job satisfaction. I was wondering if you might have a vacancy?’

‘And what would I do with a stinking rat?’ Thanatos asked darkly.

‘You wound!’ said Merlin, claspng his heart. ‘Did you not hear the pitch? Wizard extraordin-  
aire! I got all the magic moves, baby! And I know Mistress Morgan like the back of my paw. Couldn’t you use a little magic in your corner?’

Thanatos considered this. With the fang of Apep gone, he could use all the help he could get in the immortal battles ahead. Merlin’s magical powers were the stuff of legend. He might yet prove a useful ally. Or a deceitful traitor. Not that it mattered. Once Thanatos had got what he needed, he’d kill the tiresome creature either way.

‘What are your terms?’ he asked suspiciously.

‘Hey – I can see which way the wind is blowing,’ shrugged the rat. ‘And I want to be on the winning team. Take me on, protect me from . . .

her. And I think this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.’

Thanatos made the rat wait for his decision, although he had already made it.

‘So be it,’ he said. ‘You help me, I will protect you from the witch.’

‘Done and done,’ said Merlin, wiping his ratty paws on his furry belly. ‘Where to, boss? Camelot?’

The Daemon of Death paused to consider this for a moment. Rushing after Hooper was a fool’s errand – let them summon King Arthur, it would all be in vain. And besides, it would keep them all out of the way while he made his own arrangements.

‘We return to the Diabolon,’ he said. ‘I have some matters to attend to. You will help me.’

‘Sure thing, chief,’ said Merlin with a small salute. ‘At your service.’

The Daemon scowled as he turned on his heel, the rat scuttling after him. Elliot Hooper would have to wait for now. But Thanatos would have his revenge.

And when he did, Elliot’s family would soon know their own personal hell.