

ELLA
JONES *vs the*
BATTLE
NOISE

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PROLOGUE

When Everett Croft arrived at his office early one morning, he didn't expect a god to be there. But that's who he found waiting for him, looking out of the penthouse windows on the seventy-third floor of Croft Tower: a being so mighty and powerful that in his presence Everett's entire body trembled, fear coursing through his veins and turning his blood to ice.

"Wh-who are you?" Everett stammered in a croaked whisper, cowering back against his office door, his eyes widening as the god turned to face him.

The dark-haired god towered over Everett. He was impossibly tall and muscled, wearing worn, bronzed body armour that was damaged and dented. Scars covered the god's arms – old wounds

left over from centuries of fighting battles and winning wars. At first glance, he was young and strikingly handsome, but as Everett continued staring the god's appearance warped and aged to that of an old man, his skin gaunt and wearied. Everett tried to tear his gaze away, disturbed by the god's changing appearance, but he found he could not. He was mesmerized by this being.

"Don't you recognize me, *Everett Croft*?" his visitor sneered, his low resounding voice echoing around the room, his eyes flashing blood-red. "You are an expert in the gods, are you not? That is what you pride yourself on being." He moved towards Everett, his stride so large he covered the entire office floor in just a few steps. "You have spent your life learning our stories, you've collected our things, and you have tried to bend us to your will."

Everett gulped at the god's venomous tone.

He was, of course, speaking the truth. Everett Croft was a successful entrepreneur and businessman who had made his multi-million-pound fortune in tech products and inventions, but he had also always been fascinated with deities and legend, dedicating hours and hours of research to all the different mythologies: Greek, Celtic, Norse, Egyptian,



Aztec – the list went on. As Everett became richer and more powerful, so his obsession intensified. Over the years, he had collected rare artefacts and documents believed to have mythological connections; he'd funded excavations and archaeological digs in the hunt for priceless treasures; he'd read and analysed every mythological book and theory that had ever been published in the hope that he might find a god who would be the key to unlocking his biggest obsession of all: to gain world power.

The truth was, Everett Croft wished for the impossible: that he could be a god himself.

He came excruciatingly close to achieving his goal just weeks earlier. After years of planning, he helped to free Lugh, a god who had been locked away by druids for centuries and who had vowed his vengeance on men by stealing the sun. In preparation for Lugh's plot, Everett had designed and produced the Croft Beacon, the only light source that would work in the eternal darkness Lugh had vowed to bring to the human race that had betrayed him.

It was a perfect, flawless plan and right on cue, every nation descended into chaos. For a while, things ticked along very nicely. World leaders clamoured for the Croft Beacons – the first product

in Everett's extensively prepared line – all of them willing to pay a hefty price. Everett would have been rich beyond his wildest dreams, but more than that, he would have been worshipped and admired. The man who had brought back light to the world. A true hero. A god on earth.

But then...

Well, it all went wrong. Everything – the power, the money, the fame, the popularity – slipped from his grasp. No, it was *taken* from him. Taken by a little girl, who somehow managed to persuade Lugh that people were better than he thought and that they deserved light to be brought back to them. A little girl named Ella Jones.

And now he had sworn to get his revenge.

"I know that you tried to get Lugh to do your bidding," said the god in his office, jolting him from his vengeful thoughts about Ella.

"I ... I merely tried to encourage Lugh to fulfil his destiny," Everett squeaked, cowering under the being's bone-chilling glower. "And if ... if there's anything I can d-do for you ... uh..."

He trailed off, desperately trying to work out who this god was before making any promises. His presence had made the room colder somehow, and

his voice had made all the hairs on Everett's arms stand on end. His eyes were filled with anger and hatred. While Everett did not know his name, he could tell he was not here to make the world a happier place. Perhaps Everett could use that to his advantage.

"I am Homados," his unwelcome companion informed him at last.

"God of battle noise," Everett whispered in amazement, his eyes trailing over the symbols on Homados's tunic beneath the armour. "The personification of tumult and the din of war. It really is *you*. Wh-what do you want with me?"

"I'm looking for the Eye of Horus," Homados told him. "The pendant was once worn by Lugh, god of sun, light and justice. I've been searching for him for a long time in the hope of ... *persuading* him to hand it over to me. I received word that he had escaped from prison and he was among the mortals here on earth, but I have now come to learn that I am too late. He has given the Eye of Horus away. I believe you know who has it."

Everett bowed his head as Homados glared at him, a shiver running down his spine.

"I ... I do know," Everett whispered, his voice weak and wobbly.

“So, you will prove useful to me then.” Homados lifted his chin in satisfaction. “I need it for the shield.”

“The shield?” Everett cautiously lifted his head to check he’d heard correctly. “You’re going after the Shield of Hercules.”

“You know it,” Homados said in a low, almost-impressed growl.

“I ... I’ve read that, once completed with the Eye of Horus, it gives its wielder an extraordinary power of protection, making you ... unbeatable against man and gods alike.” Everett gulped. “Is that why you want it? Ultimate power over our world and ... beyond?”

The lips of Homados slowly stretched into a smile so wicked that Everett had to look away, his breathing coming out shallow and raspy.

“You ... you can cause ultimate chaos with the noise of war. You can bring the world to its knees by causing excruciating, unbearable noise that sparks global rage and hate. And with the shield’s power, you’d be ... unbeatable,” Everett whispered, trying to prove to Homados that he was knowledgeable, that he approved of his plan and might be worth keeping around.

Everett had no doubt that as soon as he was no use to a power-hungry god like Homados, he would be disposed of swiftly.

"Tell me who has the Eye of Horus, Croft," Homados demanded in a low, gravelly voice that no one could ever deny. "They must hand it over willingly for its power to work."

Everett grimaced. "Ah. You might have some trouble there."

The ground shook as Homados strode over to Everett, who squealed in terror as Homados grabbed him and pinned him against the wall.

"*What did you say?*" Homados spat, reducing Everett to a quivering wreck.

"I ... I only mean that you'll have to go a different way about it!" Everett croaked, his eyes wide with panic. "I am on your side, oh powerful Homados! I am at your mercy! But this person who has the Eye of Horus, they ... they don't share our vision for the world."

Homados narrowed his eyes, his grasp on Everett tightening.

"But I have ... an idea!" Everett said through wheezes. "I can help you. If you allow me to work with you, I can persuade her to hand over the Eye of Horus willingly."

"Why should I trust you, Croft?" Homados questioned.

“Because, more than anything, I would like to be a part of her downfall,” Everett managed to say through gritted teeth. “Please. Let me help you.”

After a moment of consideration, Homados let him go.

Everett gasped for air, one hand pressed against his chest as his heart thudded uncontrollably beneath it. The god kept his eyes fixed on Everett, testing him.

“I promise you, Homados,” Everett said quietly but surely. “I will find a way to persuade her to give you the Eye of Horus. And then the shield, along with the world, will be yours.”

His dark eyes flashing with hunger, Homados began to cackle until it grew into a laugh so frenzied and violent that, despite his new alliance, Everett Croft trembled with fear as all the windows of his tower began to shake, and somewhere across the city a girl sat up in bed suddenly filled with unexplained dread.