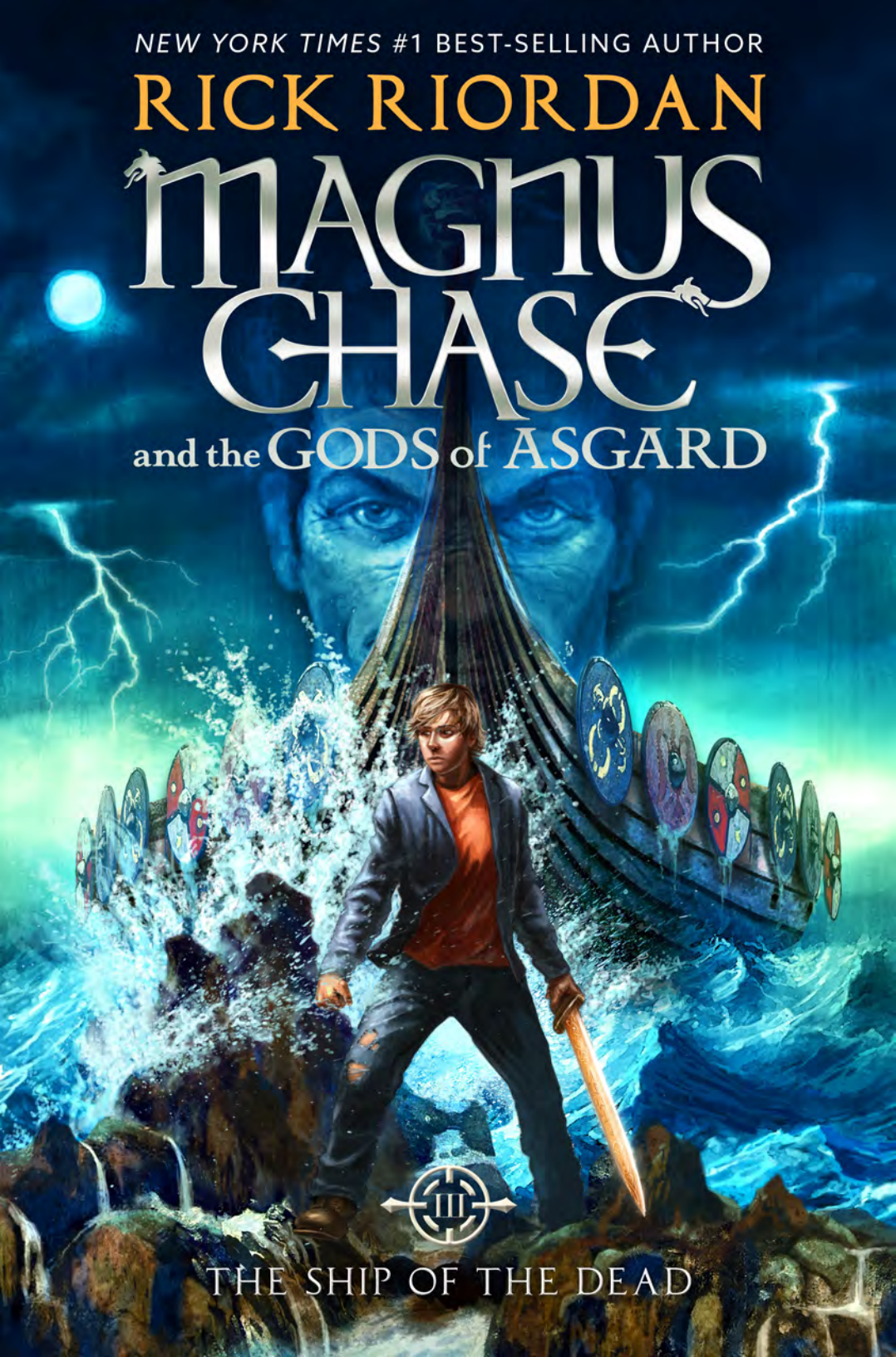


NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

RICK RIORDAN

MAGNIUS CHASE

and the GODS of ASGARD



THE SHIP OF THE DEAD



Percy Jackson Does His Level Best to Kill Me

“TRY IT AGAIN,” Percy told me. “This time with less dying.”

Standing on the yardarm of the USS *Constitution*, looking down at Boston Harbor two hundred feet below, I wished I had the natural defenses of a turkey buzzard. Then I could projectile vomit on Percy Jackson and make him go away.

The last time he'd made me try this jump, only an hour before, I'd broken every bone in my body. My friend Alex Fierro had rushed me back to the Hotel Valhalla just in time for me to die in my own bed.

Unfortunately, I was an *einherji*, one of Odin's immortal warriors. I couldn't die permanently as long as I expired within the boundaries of Valhalla. Thirty minutes later, I woke up as good as new. Now here I was again, ready for more pain. Hooray!

“Is this strictly necessary?” I asked.

Percy leaned against the rigging, the wind rippling little waves through his black hair.

He looked like a normal guy—orange T-shirt, jeans, battered white leather Reeboks. If you saw him walking down the street, you wouldn't think, *Hey, look, a demigod son of Poseidon! Praise the Olympians!* He didn't have gills or webbed fingers, though his eyes were sea green—about the same shade I

imagined my face was just then. The only strange thing about Jackson was the tattoo on the inside of his forearm—a trident as dark as seared wood, with a single line underneath and the letters SPQR.

He'd told me the letters stood for *Sono Pazzi Quelli Romani—those Romans are crazy*. I wasn't sure if he was kidding.

"Look, Magnus," he told me. "You'll be sailing across hostile territory. A bunch of sea monsters and sea gods and who-knows-what-else will be trying to kill you, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose."

By which I meant: *Please don't remind me. Please leave me alone.*

"At some point," said Percy, "you're going to get thrown off the boat, maybe from as high up as this. You'll need to know how to survive the impact, avoid drowning, and get back to the surface ready to fight. That's going to be tough, especially in cold water."

I knew he was right. From what my cousin Annabeth had told me, Percy had been through even more dangerous adventures than I had. (And I lived in Valhalla. I died at least once a day.) As much as I appreciated him coming up from New York to offer me heroic aquatic-survival tips, though, I was getting tired of failing.

Yesterday, I'd gotten chomped by a great white shark, strangled by a giant squid, and stung by a thousand irate moon jellies. I'd swallowed several gallons of seawater trying to hold my breath, and learned that I was no better at hand-to-hand combat thirty feet down than I was on dry land.

This morning, Percy had walked me around Old Ironsides,

trying to teach me the basics of sailing and navigation, but I still couldn't tell the mizzenmast from the poop deck.

Now here I was: a failure at falling off a pole.

I glanced down, where Annabeth and Alex Fierro were watching us from the deck.

"You got this, Magnus!" Annabeth cheered.

Alex Fierro gave me two thumbs up. At least I think that was the gesture. It was hard to be sure from this distance.

Percy took a deep breath. He'd been patient with me so far, but I could tell the stress of the weekend was starting to get to him, too. Whenever he looked at me, his left eye twitched.

"It's cool, man," he promised. "I'll demonstrate again, okay? Start in skydiver position, spread-eagle to slow your descent. Then, right before you hit the water, straighten like an arrow—head up, heels down, back straight, butt clenched. That last part is really important."

"Skydiver," I said. "Eagle. Arrow. Butt."

"Right," Percy said. "Watch me."

He jumped from the yardarm, falling toward the harbor in perfect spread-eagle form. At the last moment, he straightened, heels downward, and hit the water, disappearing with hardly a ripple. A moment later, he surfaced, his palms raised like *See? Nothing to it!*

Annabeth and Alex applauded.

"Okay, Magnus!" Alex called up to me. "Your turn! Be a man!"

I suppose that was meant to be funny. Most of the time, Alex identified as female, but today he was definitely male. Sometimes I slipped up and used the wrong pronouns for

him/her, so Alex liked to return the favor by teasing me mercilessly. Because friendship.

Annabeth hollered, “You got this, cuz!”

Below me, the dark surface of the water glinted like a freshly scrubbed waffle iron, ready to squash me flat.

Right, I muttered to myself.

I jumped.

For half a second, I felt pretty confident. The wind whistled past my ears. I spread my arms and managed not to scream.

Okay, I thought. *I can do this.*

Which was when my sword, Jack, decided to fly up out of nowhere and start a conversation.

“Hey, *señor!*” His runes glowed along his double-edged blade. “Whatcha doing?”

I flailed, trying to turn vertical for impact. “Jack, not now!”

“Oh, I get it! You’re falling! You know, one time Frey and I were falling—”

Before he could continue his fascinating story, I slammed into the water.

Just as Percy had warned, the cold stunned my system. I sank, momentarily paralyzed, the air knocked out of my lungs. My ankles throbbed like I’d bounced off a brick trampoline. But at least I wasn’t dead.

I scanned for major injuries. When you’re an einherji, you get pretty good at listening to your own pain. You can stagger around the battlefield in Valhalla, mortally wounded, gasping your last breath, and calmly think, *Oh, so that’s what a crushed rib cage feels like. Interesting!*

This time I’d broken my left ankle for sure. The right one was only sprained.

Easy fix. I summoned the power of Frey.

Warmth like summer sunlight spread from my chest into my limbs. The pain subsided. I wasn't as good at healing myself as I was at healing others, but I felt my ankles beginning to mend—as if a swarm of friendly wasps were crawling around inside my flesh, mud-daubing the fractures, reknitting the ligaments.

Ah, better, I thought, as I floated through the cold darkness. Now, there's something else I should be doing. . . . Oh, right. Breathing.

Jack's hilt nudged against my hand like a dog looking for attention. I wrapped my fingers around his leather grip and he hauled me upward, launching me out of the harbor like a rocket-powered Lady of the Lake. I landed, gasping and shivering, on the deck of Old Ironsides next to my friends.

"Whoa." Percy stepped back. "That was different. You okay, Magnus?"

"Fine," I coughed out, sounding like a duck with a chest cold.

Percy eyed the glowing runes on my weapon. "Where'd the sword come from?"

"Hi, I'm Jack!" said Jack.

Annabeth stifled a yelp. "It talks?"

"It?" Jack demanded. "Hey, lady, some respect. I'm *Sumarbrander!* The Sword of Summer! The weapon of Frey! I've been around for thousands of years! Also, I'm a dude!"

Annabeth frowned. "Magnus, when you told me about your magic sword, did you perhaps fail to mention that it—that *he* can speak?"

"Did I?" Honestly I couldn't remember.

The past few weeks, Jack had been off on his own, doing whatever sentient magic swords did in their free time. Percy and I had been using standard-issue Hotel Valhalla practice blades for sparring. It hadn't occurred to me that Jack might fly in out of nowhere and introduce himself. Besides, the fact that Jack talked was the *least* weird thing about him. The fact that he could sing the entire cast recording of *Jersey Boys* from memory . . . *that* was weird.

Alex Fierro looked like he was trying not to laugh. He was wearing pink and green today, as usual, though I'd never seen this particular outfit before: lace-up leather boots, ultra-skinny rose jeans, an untucked lime dress shirt, and a checkered skinny tie as loose as a necklace. With his thick black Ray-Bans and his choppy green hair, he looked like he'd stepped off a New Wave album cover circa 1979.

"Be polite, Magnus," he said. "Introduce your friends to your sword."

"Uh, right," I said. "Jack, this is Percy and Annabeth. They're demigods—the Greek kind."

"Hmm." Jack didn't sound impressed. "I met Hercules once."

"Who hasn't?" Annabeth muttered.

"Fair point," Jack said. "But I suppose if you're friends of Magnus's . . ." He went completely still. His runes faded. Then he leaped out of my hand and flew toward Annabeth, his blade twitching as if he was sniffing the air. "Where is she? Where are you hiding the babe?"

Annabeth backed toward the rail. "Whoa, there, sword. Personal space!"

“Jack, behave,” Alex said. “What are you doing?”

“She’s around here somewhere,” Jack insisted. He flew to Percy. “Aha! What’s in your pocket, sea boy?”

“Excuse me?” Percy looked a bit nervous about the magical sword hovering at his waistline.

Alex lowered his Ray-Bans. “Okay, now I’m curious. What *do* you have in your pocket, Percy? Inquiring swords want to know.”

Percy pulled a plain-looking ballpoint pen from his jeans. “You mean this?”

“BAM!” Jack said. “Who is this vision of loveliness?”

“Jack,” I said. “It’s a pen.”

“No, it’s not! Show me! Show me!”

“Uh . . . sure.” Percy uncapped the pen.

Immediately it transformed into a three-foot-long sword with a leaf-shaped blade of glowing bronze. Compared to Jack, the weapon looked delicate, almost petite, but from the way Percy wielded it, I had no doubt he’d be able to hold his own on the battlefields of Valhalla with that thing.

Jack turned his point toward me, his runes flashing burgundy. “See, Magnus? I *told* you it wasn’t stupid to carry a sword disguised as a pen!”

“Jack, I never said that!” I protested. “*You* did.”

Percy raised an eyebrow. “What are you two talking about?”

“Nothing,” I said hastily. “So I guess this is the famous Riptide? Annabeth told me about it.”

“*Her*,” Jack corrected.

Annabeth frowned. “Percy’s sword is a she?”

Jack laughed. “Well, *duh*.”

Percy studied Riptide, though I could've told him from experience it was almost impossible to tell a sword's gender by looking at it.

"I don't know," he said. "Are you sure—?"

"Percy," said Alex. "Respect the gender."

"Okay, fine," he said. "It's just kinda strange that I never knew."

"On the other hand," Annabeth said, "you didn't know the pen could *write* until last year."

"That's low, Wise Girl."

"Anyway!" Jack interrupted. "The important thing is Riptide's here now, she's beautiful, and she's met me! Maybe the two of us can . . . you know . . . have some private time to talk about, er, sword stuff?"

Alex smirked. "That sounds like a wonderful idea. How about we let the swords get to know each other while the rest of us have lunch? Magnus, do you think you can handle eating falafel without choking?"



Falafel Sandwiches with a Side Order of Ragnarok

WE ATE ON the aft spar deck. (Look at me with the nautical terms.)

After a hard morning of failing, I felt like I'd really earned my deep-fried chickpea patties and pita bread, my yogurt and chilled cucumber slices, and my side order of extra-spicy lamb kebabs. Annabeth had arranged our picnic lunch. She knew me too well.

My clothes dried quickly in the sunlight. The warm breeze felt good on my face. Sailboats traced their way across the harbor while airplanes cut across the blue sky, heading out from Logan Airport to New York or California or Europe. The whole city of Boston seemed charged with impatient energy, like a classroom at 2:59 P.M., waiting for the dismissal bell, everybody ready to get out of town for the summer and enjoy the good weather.

Me, all I wanted to do was stay put.

Riptide and Jack stood propped nearby in a coil of rope, their hilts leaning against the gunnery rail. Riptide acted like your typical inanimate object, but Jack kept inching closer, chatting her up, his blade glowing the same dark bronze as hers. Fortunately, Jack was used to holding one-sided conversations. He joked. He flattered. He name-dropped like a

maniac. “You know, *Thor* and *Odin* and I were at this tavern one time . . .”

If Riptide was impressed, she didn’t show it.

Percy wadded up his falafel wrapper. Along with being a water-breather, the dude also had the ability to inhale food.

“So,” he said, “when do you guys sail out?”

Alex raised an eyebrow at me like *Yeah, Magnus. When do we sail out?*

I’d been trying to avoid this topic with Fierro for the past two weeks, without much luck.

“Soon,” I said. “We don’t exactly know where we’re headed, or how long it’ll take to get there—”

“Story of my life,” said Percy.

“—but we have to find Loki’s big nasty ship of death before it sails at Midsummer. It’s docked somewhere along the border between Niflheim and Jotunheim. We’re estimating it’ll take a couple of weeks to sail that distance.”

“Which means,” Alex said, “we really should’ve left already. We definitely have to sail by the end of the week, ready or not.”

In his dark lenses, I saw the reflection of my own worried face. We both knew we were as far from *ready* as we were from Niflheim.

Annabeth tucked her feet underneath her. Her long blond hair was tied back in a ponytail. Her dark blue T-shirt was emblazoned with the yellow words COLLEGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN, UC BERKELEY.

“Heroes never get to be ready, do we?” she said. “We just do the best we can.”

Percy nodded. “Yep. Usually it works out. We haven’t died yet.”

“Though you keep *trying*,” Annabeth elbowed him. Percy put his arm around her. She nestled comfortably against his side. He kissed the blond curls on the top of her head.

This show of affection made my heart do a painful little twist.

I was glad to see my cousin so happy, but it reminded me how much was at stake if I failed to stop Loki.

Alex and I had already died. We would never age. We’d live in Valhalla until Doomsday came around (unless we got killed outside the hotel before that). The best life we could hope for was training for Ragnarok, postponing that inevitable battle as many centuries as possible, and then, one day, marching out of Valhalla with Odin’s army and dying a glorious death while the Nine Worlds burned around us. Fun.

But Annabeth and Percy had a chance for a normal life. They’d already made it through high school, which Annabeth told me was the most dangerous time for Greek demigods. In the fall, they’d go off to college on the West Coast. If they made it through *that*, they had a decent chance of surviving adulthood. They could live in the mortal world without monsters attacking them every five minutes.

Unless my friends and I failed to stop Loki, in which case the world—*all* the worlds—would end in a few weeks. But, you know . . . no pressure.

I set down my pita sandwich. Even falafel could only do so much to lift my spirits.

“What about you guys?” I asked. “Straight back to New York today?”

“Yeah,” Percy said. “I gotta babysit tonight. I’m psyched!”

“That’s right,” I remembered. “Your new baby sister.”

Yet another important life hanging in the balance, I thought.

But I managed a smile. “Congratulations, man. What’s her name?”

“Estelle. It was my grandmother’s name. Um, on my mom’s side, obviously. Not Poseidon’s.”

“I approve,” Alex said. “Old-fashioned and elegant. Estelle Jackson.”

“Well, Estelle *Blofis*,” Percy corrected. “My stepdad is Paul Blofis. Not much I can do about that surname, but my little sis is awesome. Five fingers. Five toes. Two eyes. She drools a lot.”

“Just like her brother,” Annabeth said.

Alex laughed.

I could totally imagine Percy bouncing baby Estelle in his arms, singing “Under the Sea” from *The Little Mermaid*. That made me feel even more miserable.

Somehow I had to buy little Estelle enough decades to have a proper life. I had to find Loki’s demonic ship full of zombie warriors, stop it from sailing off into battle and triggering Ragnarok, then recapture Loki and put him back in chains so he couldn’t cause any more world-burning mischief. (Or at least not as *much* world-burning mischief.)

“Hey.” Alex threw a piece of pita at me. “Stop looking so glum.”

“Sorry.” I tried to appear more cheerful. It wasn’t as easy as mending my ankle by sheer force of will. “I’m looking forward to meeting Estelle someday, when we get back from our quest. And I appreciate you guys coming up to Boston. Really.”

Percy glanced over at Jack, who was still chatting up Riptide. “Sorry I couldn’t be more help. The sea is”—he shrugged—“kinda unpredictable.”

Alex stretched his legs. “At least Magnus fell a lot better the second time. If worse comes to worst, I can always turn into a dolphin and save his sorry butt.”

The corner of Percy’s mouth twitched. “You can turn into a dolphin?”

“I’m a child of Loki. Want to see?”

“No, I believe you.” Percy gazed into the distance. “I’ve got a friend named Frank who’s a shape-shifter. He does dolphins. Also giant goldfish.”

I shuddered, imagining Alex Fierro as a giant pink-and-green koi. “We’ll make do. We’ve got a good team.”

“That’s important,” Percy agreed. “Probably more important than having sea skills . . .” He straightened and furrowed his eyebrows.

Annabeth unfolded herself from his side. “Uh-oh. I know that look. You’ve got an idea.”

“Something my dad told me . . .” Percy rose. He walked over to his sword, interrupting Jack in the middle of a fascinating tale about the time he’d embroidered a giant’s bowling bag. Percy picked up Riptide and studied her blade.

“Hey, man,” Jack complained. “We were just starting to hit it off.”

“Sorry, Jack.” From his pocket, Percy pulled out his pen cap and touched it to the tip of his sword. With a faint *shink*, Riptide shrank back into a ballpoint. “Poseidon and I had this conversation about weapons one time. He told me that all sea gods have one thing in common: they’re really vain and possessive when it comes to their magic items.”

Annabeth rolled her eyes. “That sounds like *every* god we’ve met.”

“True,” Percy said. “But sea gods even more so. Triton *sleeps* with his conch-shell trumpet. Galatea spends most of her time polishing her magic sea-horse saddle. And my dad is super-paranoid about losing his trident.”

I thought about my one and only encounter with a Norse sea goddess. It hadn’t gone well. Ran had promised to destroy me if I ever sailed into her waters again. But she *had* been obsessed with her magical nets and the junk collection that swirled inside them. Because of that, I’d been able to trick her into giving me my sword.

“You’re saying I’ll have to use their own stuff against them,” I guessed.

“Right,” Percy confirmed. “Also, what you said about having a good team—sometimes being the son of a sea god hasn’t been enough to save me, even underwater. One time, my friend Jason and I got pulled to the bottom of the Mediterranean by this storm goddess, Kymopoleia? I was useless. Jason saved my butt by offering to make trading cards and action figures of her.”

Alex almost choked on his falafel. “*What?*”

“The point is,” Percy continued, “Jason knew nothing about the ocean. He saved me anyway. It was kind of embarrassing.”

Annabeth smirked. “I guess so. I never heard the details about that.”

Percy’s ears turned as pink as Alex’s jeans. “Anyway, maybe we’ve been looking at this all wrong. I’ve been trying to teach you sea skills. But the most important thing is to use whatever you’ve got on hand—your team, your wits, the enemy’s own magical stuff.”

“And there’s no way to plan for that,” I said.

“Exactly!” Percy said. “My work here is done!”

Annabeth frowned. “Percy, you’re saying the best plan is no plan. As a child of Athena, I can’t really endorse that.”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “And, personally, I still like *my* plan of turning into a sea mammal.”

Percy raised his hands. “All I’m saying is the most powerful demigod of our generation is sitting right here, and it isn’t me.” He nodded to Annabeth. “Wise Girl can’t shape-shift or breathe underwater or talk to pegasi. She can’t fly, and she isn’t superstrong. But she’s *crazy* smart and good at improvising. That’s what makes her deadly. Doesn’t matter whether she’s on land, in water, in the air, or in Tartarus. Magnus, you were training with me all weekend. I think you should’ve been training with Annabeth instead.”

Annabeth’s stormy gray eyes were hard to read. At last she said, “Okay, that was sweet.” She kissed Percy on the cheek.

Alex nodded. “Not bad, Seaweed Brain.”

“Don’t you start with that nickname, too,” Percy muttered.

From the wharf came the deep rumbling sound of warehouse doors rolling open. Voices echoed off the sides of the buildings.

“That’s our cue to leave,” I said. “This ship just got back from dry dock. They’re reopening it to the public tonight in a big ceremony.”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “The glamour won’t obscure our presence once the whole crew is aboard.”

Percy arched an eyebrow. “Glamour? You mean like your outfit?”

Alex snorted. “No. Glamour as in illusion magic. It’s the force that clouds the vision of regular mortals.”

“Huh,” Percy said. “We call that the Mist.”

Annabeth rapped her knuckles on Percy’s head. “Whatever we call it, we’d better hurry. Help me clean up.”

We reached the bottom of the gangplank just as the first sailors were arriving. Jack floated along ahead of us, glowing different colors and singing “Walk Like a Man” in a terrible falsetto. Alex changed form from a cheetah to a wolf to a flamingo. (He does a great flamingo.)

The sailors gave us blank looks and a wide berth, but nobody challenged us.

Once we were clear of the docks, Jack turned into a rune-stone pendant. He dropped into my hand and I reattached him to the chain around my neck. It wasn’t like him to shut up so suddenly. I figured he was miffed about his date with Riptide being cut short.

As we strolled down Constitution Road, Percy turned to me. “What was that back there—the shape-shifting, the singing sword? Were you *trying* to get caught?”

“Nah,” I said. “If you flaunt the weird magical stuff, it confuses mortals even more.” It felt good to be able to teach *him* something. “It kind of short-circuits mortal brains, makes them avoid you.”

“Huh.” Annabeth shook her head. “All these years sneaking around, and we could’ve just been ourselves?”

“You should *always* do that.” Alex strolled alongside, back in human form, though he still had a few flamingo feathers stuck in his hair. “And you have to flaunt the weird, my friends.”

“I’m going to quote you on that,” Percy said.

“You’d better.”

We stopped at the corner, where Percy's Toyota Prius was parked at a meter. I shook his hand and got a big hug from Annabeth.

My cousin gripped my shoulders. She studied my face, her gray eyes tight with concern. "Take care of yourself, Magnus. You *will* come back safely. That's an order."

"Yes, ma'am," I promised. "We Chases have to stick together."

"Speaking of that . . ." She lowered her voice. "Have you been over there yet?"

I felt like I was in free fall again, swan-diving toward a painful death.

"Not yet," I admitted. "Today. I promise."

The last I saw of Percy and Annabeth, their Prius was turning the corner on First Avenue, Percy singing along with Led Zeppelin on the radio, Annabeth laughing at his bad voice.

Alex crossed his arms. "If those two were any cuter together, they'd cause a nuclear explosion of cuteness and destroy the Eastern Seaboard."

"Is that your idea of a compliment?" I asked.

"Probably as close as *you'll* ever hear." He glanced over. "Where did you promise Annabeth you would go?"

My mouth tasted like I'd been chewing foil. "My uncle's house. There's something I need to do."

"Ohhh." Alex nodded. "I hate that place."

I'd been avoiding this task for weeks. I didn't want to do it alone. I also didn't want to ask any of my other friends—Samirah, Hearthstone, Blitzen, or the rest of the gang from floor nineteen of the Hotel Valhalla. It felt too personal, too painful. But Alex had been to the Chase mansion with me

before. The idea of his company didn't bother me. In fact, I realized with surprise, I *wanted* him along pretty badly.

“Uh . . .” I cleared the last falafel and seawater out of my throat. “You want to come with me to a creepy mansion and look through a dead guy's stuff?”

Alex beamed. “I thought you'd never ask.”



THREE

I Inherit a Dead Wolf and Some Underwear

“THAT’S NEW,” said Alex.

The brownstone’s front door had been forced open, the dead bolt busted out of the frame. In the foyer, sprawled across the Oriental rug, lay the carcass of a wolf.

I shuddered.

You couldn’t swing a battle-ax in the Nine Worlds without hitting some kind of wolf: Fenris Wolf, Odin’s wolves, Loki’s wolves, werewolves, big bad wolfs, and independently contracted small business wolves that would kill anybody for the right price.

The dead wolf in Uncle Randolph’s foyer looked very much like the beasts that had attacked my mom two years ago, the night she died.

Wisps of blue luminescence clung to its shaggy black coat. Its mouth was contorted in a permanent snarl. On the top of its head, seared into the skin, was a Viking rune, though the fur around it was so badly burned I couldn’t tell which symbol it was. My friend Hearthstone might have been able to identify it.

Alex circled its pony-size carcass. He kicked it in the ribs. The creature remained obligingly dead.

“Its body hasn’t started to dissolve,” he noted. “Usually monsters disintegrate pretty soon after you kill them. You

can still smell the burning fur on this one. Must've happened recently."

"You think the rune was some kind of trap?"

Alex smirked. "I think your uncle knew a thing or two about magic. The wolf hit the carpet, triggering that rune, and BAM!"

I remembered all the times when, as a homeless kid, I'd broken into Uncle Randolph's house when he wasn't there to steal food, rifle through his office, or just be annoying. I'd never been *bammed*. I'd always considered Randolph a failure at home security. Now I felt a little nauseous, wondering if I could've ended up dead on the welcome mat with a rune burned into my forehead.

Was this trap the reason Randolph's will had been so specific about Annabeth and me visiting the property before we took possession? Had Randolph been trying to get some post-mortem revenge?

"You think the rest of the house is safe to explore?" I asked.

"Nope," Alex said cheerfully. "So let's do it."

On the first floor, we found no more dead wolves. No runes exploded in our faces. The most gruesome thing we discovered was in Uncle Randolph's refrigerator, where expired yogurt, sour milk, and moldy carrots were evolving into a pre-industrial society. Randolph hadn't even left me any chocolate in the pantry, the old villain.

On the second floor, nothing had changed. In Randolph's study, the sun streamed through the stained-glass window, slanting red and orange light across the bookshelves and the displays of Viking artifacts. In one corner sat a big runestone

carved with the sneering red face of (naturally) a wolf. Tattered maps and faded yellow parchments covered Randolph's desk. I scanned the documents, looking for something new, something important, but I saw nothing I hadn't seen the last time I'd been here.

I remembered the wording of Randolph's will, which Annabeth had sent me.

It is critical, Randolph had stated, that my beloved nephew Magnus examine my worldly belongings as soon as possible. He should pay special attention to my papers.

I didn't know why Randolph had put those lines in his will. In his desk drawers, I found no letter addressed to me, no heartfelt apology like *Dear Magnus, I'm sorry I got you killed, then betrayed you by siding with Loki, then stabbed your friend Blitzen, then almost got you killed again.*

He hadn't even left me the mansion's Wi-Fi password.

I gazed out the office window. Across the street in the Commonwealth Mall, folks were walking their dogs, playing Frisbee, enjoying the nice weather. The statue of Leif Erikson stood on his pedestal, proudly flaunting his metal bra, surveying the traffic on Charlesgate, and probably wondering why he wasn't in Scandinavia.

"So." Alex came up next to me. "You inherit all of this, huh?"

During our walk over, I'd told him the basics about Uncle Randolph's will, but Alex still looked incredulous, almost offended.

"Randolph left the house to Annabeth and me," I said. "Technically, I'm dead. That means it's all Annabeth's.

Randolph's lawyers contacted Annabeth's dad, who told her, who told me. Annabeth asked me to check it out and"—I shrugged—"decide what to do with this place."

From the nearest bookshelf, Alex picked up a framed photo of Uncle Randolph with his wife and daughters. I'd never met Caroline, Emma, or Aubrey. They'd died in a storm at sea many years ago. But I'd seen them in my nightmares. I knew they were the leverage Loki had used to warp my uncle, promising Randolph that he could see his family again if he helped Loki escape his bonds. . . . And in a way, Loki had told the truth. The last time I'd seen Uncle Randolph, he was tumbling into a chasm straight to Helheim, the land of the dishonorable dead.

Alex turned over the photo, maybe hoping to find a secret note on the back. The last time we'd been in this office, we'd found a wedding invitation that way, and it had led us into all sorts of trouble. This time, there was no hidden message—just blank brown paper, which was a lot less painful to look at than the smiling faces of my dead relatives.

Alex put the picture back on the shelf. "Annabeth doesn't care what you do with the house?"

"Not really. She's got enough going on with college and, you know, demigod stuff. She just wants me to let her know if I find anything interesting—old photo albums, family history, that kind of thing."

Alex wrinkled his nose. "Family history." His face had the same slightly disgusted, slightly intrigued expression as when he'd kicked the dead wolf. "So what's upstairs?"

"I'm not sure. When I was a kid, we weren't allowed

above the first two floors. And the few times I broke in more recently . . .” I turned up my palms. “I guess I never made it that far.”

Alex peered at me over the top of his glasses, his dark brown eye and his amber eye like mismatched moons cresting the horizon. “Sounds intriguing. Let’s go.”

The third floor consisted of two large bedrooms. The front one was spotlessly clean, cold, and impersonal. Two twin beds. A dresser. Bare walls. Maybe a guest room, though I doubted Randolph entertained many people. Or maybe this had been Emma and Aubrey’s room. If so, Randolph had removed all traces of their personalities, leaving a white void in the middle of the house. We didn’t linger.

The second bedroom must have been Randolph’s. It smelled like his old-fashioned clove cologne. Towers of musty books leaned against the walls. Chocolate-bar wrappers filled the wastebasket. Randolph had probably eaten his entire stash right before leaving home to help Loki destroy the world.

I supposed I couldn’t blame him. I always say, *Eat chocolate first, destroy the world later.*

Alex hopped onto the four-poster bed. He bounced up and down, grinning as the springs squeaked.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Making noise.” He leaned over and rifled through Randolph’s nightstand drawer. “Let’s see. Cough drops. Paper clips. Some wadded-up Kleenex that I am not going to touch. And . . .” He whistled. “Medication for bowel discomfort! Magnus, all this bounty belongs to you!”

“You’re a strange person.”

“I prefer the term *fabulously weird*.”

We searched the rest of the bedroom, though I wasn't sure what I was looking for. *Pay special attention to my papers*, Randolph's will had urged. I doubted he meant the wadded-up tissues.

Annabeth hadn't been able to get much information out of Randolph's lawyers. Our uncle had apparently revised his will the day before he died. That might mean Randolph had known he didn't have long to live, felt some guilt about betraying me, and wanted to leave me some sort of last message. Or it might mean he'd revised the will because Loki had ordered him to. But if this was a trap to lure me here, then why was there a dead wolf in the foyer?

I found no secret papers in Randolph's closet. His bathroom was unremarkable except for an impressive collection of half-empty Listerine bottles. His underwear drawer was packed with enough navy-blue Jockeys to outfit a squadron of Randolphs—all briefs, perfectly starched, ironed, and folded. Some things defy explanation.

On the next floor, two more empty bedrooms. Nothing dangerous like wolves, exploding runes, or old-dude underwear.

The top floor was a sprawling library even larger than the one in Randolph's office. A haphazard collection of novels lined the shelves. A small kitchenette took up one corner of the room, complete with a mini fridge and an electric teapot and—CURSE YOU, RANDOLPH!—still no chocolate. The windows looked out over the green-shingled rooftops of Back Bay. At the far end of the room, a staircase led up to what I assumed would be a roof deck.

A comfy-looking leather chair faced the fireplace. Carved in the center of the marble surround was (of course) a snarling wolf's head. On the mantel, in a silver tripod stand, sat a Norse drinking horn with a leather strap and a silver rim etched with runic designs. I'd seen thousands of horns like that in Valhalla, but it surprised me to find one here. Randolph had never struck me as the mead-swilling type. Maybe he sipped his Earl Grey tea out of it.

"Madre de Dios," Alex said.

I stared at him. It was the first time I'd ever heard him speak Spanish.

He tapped one of the framed photos on the wall and gave me a wicked grin. *"Please* tell me this is you."

The picture was a shot of my mother with her usual pixie haircut and brilliant smile, jeans, and flannel camping shirt. She stood in the hollowed-out trunk of a sycamore tree, holding a baby Magnus up to the camera—my hair a tuft of white gold, my mouth glistening with drool, my gray eyes wide like *What the heck am I doing here?*

"That's me," I admitted.

"You were *so* cute." Alex glanced over. "What happened?"

"Ha, ha."

I scanned the wall of photos. I was amazed Uncle Randolph had kept one of me and my mom right where he'd see it whenever he sat in his comfy chair, almost as if he actually cared about us.

Another photo showed the three Chase siblings as children—Natalie, Frederick, and Randolph—all dressed in World War II military uniforms, brandishing fake rifles.

Halloween, I guessed. Next to that was a picture of my grandparents: a frowning, white-haired couple dressed in clashing 1970s-style plaid clothes, like they were either on their way to church or the senior citizens' disco.

Confession: I had trouble telling my grandfather and grandmother apart. They'd died before I could meet them, but from their pictures, you could tell they were one of those couples that had grown to resemble each other over the years until they were virtually indistinguishable. Same white helmet-hair. Same glasses. Same wispy mustaches. In the photo, a few Viking artifacts, including the mead horn that now sat on Randolph's mantel, hung on the wall behind them. I'd had no idea my grandparents were into Norse stuff, too. I wondered if they'd ever traveled the Nine Worlds. That might explain their confused, slightly cross-eyed expressions.

Alex perused the titles on the bookshelves.

"Anything good?" I asked.

He shrugged. "*The Lord of the Rings*. Not bad. Sylvia Plath. Nice. Oh, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I love that book. The rest . . . meh. His collection is a little heavy on dead white males for my taste."

"I'm a dead white male," I noted.

Alex raised one eyebrow. "Yes, you are."

I hadn't realized Alex was a reader. I was tempted to ask if he liked some of my favorites: Scott Pilgrim or maybe *Sandman*. Those were fabulously weird. But I decided this might not be the right time to start a book club.

I searched the shelves for diaries or hidden compartments.

Alex meandered over to the last flight of stairs. He peered

upward and his complexion turned as green as his hair. “Uh, Magnus? You should probably see this.”

I joined him.

At the top of the staircase, a domed Plexiglas hatch led to the roof. And on the other side, pacing and snarling, was another wolf.