

RICK RIORDAN

MAGNUS
CHASE
and the GODS of ASGARD



THE SWORD OF SUMMER

Disney • HYPERION

Los Angeles New York



Good Morning! You're Going to Die

YEAH, I KNOW. You guys are going to read about how I died in agony, and you're going to be like, "Wow! That sounds cool, Magnus! Can I die in agony too?"

No. Just no.

Don't go jumping off any rooftops. Don't run into the highway or set yourself on fire. It doesn't work that way. You will not end up where I ended up.

Besides, you wouldn't want to deal with my situation. Unless you've got some crazy desire to see undead warriors hacking one another to pieces, swords flying up giants' noses, and dark elves in snappy outfits, you shouldn't even *think* about finding the wolf-headed doors.

My name is Magnus Chase. I'm sixteen years old. This is the story of how my life went downhill after I got myself killed.

My day started out normal enough. I was sleeping on the sidewalk under a bridge in the Public Garden when a guy kicked me awake and said, "They're after you."

By the way, I've been homeless for the past two years.

Some of you may think, *Aw, how sad.* Others may think, *Ha, ha, loser!* But if you saw me on the street, ninety-nine percent of you would walk right past like I'm invisible. You'd

pray, *Don't let him ask me for money.* You'd wonder if I'm older than I look, because surely a teenager wouldn't be wrapped in a stinky old sleeping bag, stuck outside in the middle of a Boston winter. *Somebody should help that poor boy!*

Then you'd keep walking.

Whatever. I don't need your sympathy. I'm used to being laughed at. I'm definitely used to being ignored. Let's move on.

The bum who woke me was a guy called Blitz. As usual, he looked like he'd been running through a dirty hurricane. His wiry black hair was full of paper scraps and twigs. His face was the color of saddle leather, and was flecked with ice. His beard curled in all directions. Snow caked the bottom of his trench coat where it dragged around his feet—Blitz being about five feet five—and his eyes were so dilated, the irises were all pupil. His permanently alarmed expression made him look like he might start screaming any second.

I blinked the gunk out of my eyes. My mouth tasted like day-old hamburger. My sleeping bag was warm, and I really didn't want to get out of it.

"Who's after me?"

"Not sure." Blitz rubbed his nose, which had been broken so many times it zigzagged like a lightning bolt. "They're handing out flyers with your name and picture."

I cursed. Random police and park rangers I could deal with. Truant officers, community service volunteers, drunken college kids, addicts looking to roll somebody small and weak—all those would've been as easy to wake up to as pancakes and orange juice.

But when somebody knew my name and my face—that was

bad. That meant they were targeting me specifically. Maybe the folks at the shelter were mad at me for breaking their stereo. (Those Christmas carols had been driving me crazy.) Maybe a security camera caught that last bit of pickpocketing I did in the Theater District. (Hey, I needed money for pizza.) Or maybe, unlikely as it seemed, the police were still looking for me, wanting to ask questions about my mom's murder. . . .

I packed my stuff, which took about three seconds. The sleeping bag rolled up tight and fit in my backpack with my toothbrush and a change of socks and underwear. Except for the clothes on my back, that's all I owned. With the backpack over my shoulder and the hood of my jacket pulled low, I could blend in with pedestrian traffic pretty well. Boston was full of college kids. Some of them were even more scraggly and younger-looking than me.

I turned to Blitz. "Where'd you see these people with the flyers?"

"Beacon Street. They're coming this way. Middle-aged white guy and a teenage girl, probably his daughter."

I frowned. "That makes no sense. Who—"

"I don't know, kid, but I gotta go." Blitz squinted at the sunrise, which was turning the skyscraper windows orange. For reasons I'd never quite understood, Blitz hated the daylight. Maybe he was the world's shortest, stoutest homeless vampire. "You should go see Hearth. He's hanging out in Copley Square."

I tried not to feel irritated. The local street people jokingly called Hearth and Blitz my mom and dad because one or the other always seemed to be hovering around me.

"I appreciate it," I said. "I'll be fine."

Blitz chewed his thumbnail. "I dunno, kid. Not today. You gotta be extra careful."

"Why?"

He glanced over my shoulder. "They're coming."

I didn't see anybody. When I turned back, Blitz was gone.

I hated it when he did that. Just— *Poof*. The guy was like a ninja. A homeless vampire ninja.

Now I had a choice: go to Copley Square and hang out with Hearth, or head toward Beacon Street and try to spot the people who were looking for me.

Blitz's description of them made me curious. A middle-aged white guy and a teenage girl searching for me at sunrise on a bitter-cold morning. Why? Who were they?

I crept along the edge of the pond. Almost nobody took the lower trail under the bridge. I could hug the side of the hill and spot anyone approaching on the higher path without them seeing me.

Snow coated the ground. The sky was eye-achingly blue. The bare tree branches looked like they'd been dipped in glass. The wind cut through my layers of clothes, but I didn't mind the cold. My mom used to joke that I was half polar bear.

Dammit, Magnus, I chided myself.

After two years, my memories of her were still a minefield. I stumbled over one, and instantly my composure was blown to bits.

I tried to focus.

The man and the girl were coming this way. The man's sandy hair grew over his collar—not like an intentional style,

but like he couldn't be bothered to cut it. His baffled expression reminded me of a substitute teacher's: *I know I was hit by a spit wad, but I have no idea where it came from.* His dress shoes were totally wrong for a Boston winter. His socks were different shades of brown. His tie looked like it had been tied while he spun around in total darkness.

The girl was definitely his daughter. Her hair was just as thick and wavy, though lighter blond. She was dressed more sensibly in snow boots, jeans, and a parka, with an orange T-shirt peeking out at the neckline. Her expression was more determined, angry. She gripped a sheaf of flyers like they were essays she'd been graded on unfairly.

If she was looking for me, I did not want to be found. She was scary.

I didn't recognize her or her dad, but something tugged at the back of my skull . . . like a magnet trying to pull out a very old memory.

Father and daughter stopped where the path forked. They looked around as if just now realizing they were standing in the middle of a deserted park at no-thank-you o'clock in the dead of winter.

"Unbelievable," said the girl. "I want to strangle him."

Assuming she meant me, I hunkered down a little more.

Her dad sighed. "We should probably avoid killing him. He *is* your uncle."

"But *two years*?" the girl demanded. "Dad, how could he not tell us for *two years*?"

"I can't explain Randolph's actions. I never could, Annabeth."

I inhaled so sharply, I was afraid they would hear me. A scab was ripped off my brain, exposing raw memories from when I was six years old.

Annabeth. Which meant the sandy-haired man was . . . *Uncle Frederick?*

I flashed back to the last family Thanksgiving we'd shared: Annabeth and me hiding in the library at Uncle Randolph's town house, playing with dominoes while the adults yelled at each other downstairs.

You're lucky you live with your momma. Annabeth stacked another domino on her miniature building. It was amazingly good, with columns in front like a temple. *I'm going to run away.*

I had no doubt she meant it. I was in awe of her confidence.

Then Uncle Frederick appeared in the doorway. His fists were clenched. His grim expression was at odds with the smiling reindeer on his sweater. *Annabeth, we're leaving.*

Annabeth looked at me. Her gray eyes were a little too fierce for a first grader's. *Be safe, Magnus.*

With a flick of her finger, she knocked over her domino temple.

That was the last time I'd seen her.

Afterward, my mom had been adamant: *We're staying away from your uncles. Especially Randolph. I won't give him what he wants. Ever.*

She wouldn't explain what Randolph wanted, or what she and Frederick and Randolph had argued about.

You have to trust me, Magnus. Being around them . . . it's too dangerous.

I trusted my mom. Even after her death, I hadn't had any contact with my relatives.

Now, suddenly, they were looking for me.

Randolph lived in town, but as far as I knew, Frederick and Annabeth still lived in Virginia. Yet here they were, passing out flyers with my name and photo on them. Where had they even *gotten* a photo of me?

My head buzzed so badly, I missed some of their conversation.

“—to find Magnus,” Uncle Frederick was saying. He checked his smartphone. “Randolph is at the city shelter in the South End. He says no luck. We should try the youth shelter across the park.”

“How do we even know Magnus is alive?” Annabeth asked miserably. “Missing for *two years*? He could be frozen in a ditch somewhere!”

Part of me was tempted to jump out of my hiding place and shout, *TA-DA!*

Even though it had been ten years since I’d seen Annabeth, I didn’t like seeing her distressed. But after so long on the streets, I’d learned the hard way: you never walk into a situation until you understand what’s going on.

“Randolph is sure Magnus is alive,” said Uncle Frederick. “He’s somewhere in Boston. If his life is truly in danger . . .”

They set off toward Charles Street, their voices carried away by the wind.

I was shivering now, but it wasn’t from the cold. I wanted to run after Frederick, tackle him, and demand to hear what was going on. How did Randolph know I was still in town? Why were they looking for me? How was my life in danger now more than on any other day?

But I didn’t follow them.

I remembered the last thing my mom ever told me. I'd been reluctant to use the fire escape, reluctant to leave her, but she'd gripped my arms and made me look at her. *Magnus, run. Hide. Don't trust anyone. I'll find you. Whatever you do, don't go to Randolph for help.*

Then, before I'd made it out the window, the door of our apartment had burst into splinters. Two pairs of glowing blue eyes had emerged from the darkness. . . .

I shook off the memory and watched Uncle Frederick and Annabeth walk away, veering east toward the Common.

Uncle Randolph . . . For some reason, he'd contacted Frederick and Annabeth. He'd gotten them to Boston. All this time, Frederick and Annabeth hadn't known that my mom was dead and I was missing. It seemed impossible, but if it were true, why would Randolph tell them about it now?

Without confronting him directly, I could think of only one way to get answers. His town house was in Back Bay, an easy walk from here. According to Frederick, Randolph wasn't home. He was somewhere in the South End, looking for me.

Since nothing started a day better than a little breaking and entering, I decided to pay his place a visit.



The Man with the Metal Bra

THE FAMILY MANSION SUCKED.

Oh, sure, *you* wouldn't think so. You'd see the massive six-story brownstone with gargoyles on the corners of the roof, stained glass transom windows, marble front steps, and all the other blah, blah, blah, rich-people-live-here details, and you'd wonder why I'm sleeping on the streets.

Two words: *Uncle Randolph*.

It was *his* house. As the oldest son, he'd inherited it from my grandparents, who died before I was born. I never knew much about the family soap opera, but there was a lot of bad blood between the three kids: Randolph, Frederick, and my mom. After the Great Thanksgiving Schism, we never visited the ancestral homestead again. Our apartment was, like, half a mile away, but Randolph might as well have lived on Mars.

My mom only mentioned him if we happened to be driving past the brownstone. Then she would point it out the way you might point out a dangerous cliff. *See? There it is. Avoid it.*

After I started living on the streets, I would sometimes walk by at night. I'd peer in the windows and see glowing display cases of antique swords and axes, creepy helmets with facemasks staring at me from the walls, statues silhouetted in the upstairs windows like petrified ghosts.

Several times I considered breaking in to poke around, but I'd never been tempted to knock on the door. *Please, Uncle Randolph, I know you hated my mother and haven't seen me in ten years; I know you care more about your rusty old collectibles than you do about your family; but may I live in your fine house and eat your leftover crusts of bread?*

No thanks. I'd rather be on the street, eating day-old falafel from the food court.

Still . . . I figured it would be simple enough to break in, look around, and see if I could find answers about what was going on. While I was there, maybe I could grab some stuff to pawn.

Sorry if that offends your sense of right and wrong.

Oh, wait. No, I'm not.

I don't steal from just anybody. I choose obnoxious jerks who have too much already. If you're driving a new BMW and you park it in a handicapped spot without a disabled placard, then yeah, I've got no problem jimmying your window and taking some change from your cup holder. If you're coming out of Barneys with your bag of silk handkerchiefs, so busy talking on your phone and pushing people out of your way that you're not paying attention, I am there for you, ready to pickpocket your wallet. If you can afford five thousand dollars to blow your nose, you can afford to buy me dinner.

I am judge, jury, and thief. And as far as obnoxious jerks went, I figured I couldn't do better than Uncle Randolph.

The house fronted Commonwealth Avenue. I headed around back to the poetically named Public Alley 429. Randolph's parking spot was empty. Stairs led down to the basement entrance. If there was a security system, I couldn't

spot it. The door was a simple latch lock without even a dead-bolt. *Come on, Randolph. At least make it a challenge.*

Two minutes later I was inside.

In the kitchen, I helped myself to some sliced turkey, crackers, and milk from the carton. No falafel. Dammit. Now I was really in the mood for some, but I found a chocolate bar and stuffed it in my coat pocket for later. (Chocolate must be savored, not rushed.) Then I headed upstairs into a mausoleum of mahogany furniture, oriental rugs, oil paintings, marble tiled floors, and crystal chandeliers. . . . It was just embarrassing. Who lives like this?

At age six, I couldn't appreciate how expensive all this stuff was, but my general impression of the mansion was the same: dark, oppressive, creepy. It was hard to imagine my mom growing up here. It was easy to understand why she'd become a fan of the great outdoors.

Our apartment over the Korean BBQ joint in Allston had been cozy enough, but Mom never liked being inside. She always said her real home was the Blue Hills. We used to go hiking and camping there in all kinds of weather—fresh air, no walls or ceilings, no company but the ducks, geese, and squirrels.

This brownstone, by comparison, felt like a prison. As I stood alone in the foyer, my skin crawled with invisible beetles.

I climbed to the second floor. The library smelled of lemon polish and leather, just like I remembered. Along one wall was a lit glass case full of Randolph's rusty Viking helmets and corroded ax blades. My mom once told me that Randolph taught history at Harvard before some big disgrace got him fired. She wouldn't go into details, but clearly the guy was still an artifact nut.

You're smarter than either of your uncles, Magnus, my mom once told me. With your grades, you could easily get into Harvard.

That had been back when she was still alive, I was still in school, and I might have had a future that extended past finding my next meal.

In one corner of Randolph's office sat a big slab of rock like a tombstone, the front chiseled and painted with elaborate red swirly designs. In the center was a crude drawing of a snarling beast—maybe a lion or a wolf.

I shuddered. Let's not think about *wolves*.

I approached Randolph's desk. I'd been hoping for a computer, or a notepad with helpful information—anything to explain why they were looking for me. Instead, spread across the desk were pieces of parchment as thin and yellow as onion-skin. They looked like maps a school kid in medieval times had made for social studies: faint sketches of a coastline, various points labeled in an alphabet I didn't know. Sitting on top of them, like a paperweight, was a leather pouch.

My breath caught. I recognized that pouch. I untied the drawstring and grabbed one of the dominoes . . . except it wasn't a domino. My six-year-old self had assumed that's what Annabeth and I had been playing with. Over the years, the memory had reinforced itself. But instead of dots, these stones were painted with red symbols.

The one in my hand was shaped like a tree branch or a deformed *F*:



My heart pounded. I wasn't sure why. I wondered if coming here had been such a good idea. The walls felt like they

were closing in. On the big rock in the corner, the drawing of the beast seemed to sneer at me, its red outline glistening like fresh blood.

I moved to the window. I thought it might help to look outside. Along the center of the avenue stretched the Commonwealth Mall—a ribbon of parkland covered in snow. The bare trees were strung with white Christmas lights. At the end of the block, inside an iron fence, the bronze statue of Leif Erikson stood on his pedestal, his hand cupped over his eyes. Leif gazed toward the Charlesgate overpass as if to say *Look, I discovered a highway!*

My mom and I used to joke about Leif. His armor was on the skimpy side: a short skirt and a breastplate that looked like a Viking bra.

I had no clue why that statue was in the middle of Boston, but I figured it couldn't be a coincidence that Uncle Randolph grew up to study Vikings. He'd lived here his whole life. He'd probably looked at Leif every day out the window. Maybe as a child Randolph had thought, *Someday, I want to study Vikings. Men who wear metal bras are cool!*

My eyes drifted to the base of the statue. Somebody was standing there . . . looking up at me.

You know how when you see somebody out of context and it takes you a second to recognize them? In Leif Erikson's shadow stood a tall pale man in a black leather jacket, black motorcycle pants, and pointy-toed boots. His short spiky hair was so blond it was almost white. His only dash of color was a striped red-and-white scarf wrapped around his neck and spilling off his shoulders like a melted candy cane.

If I didn't know him, I might've guessed he was cosplaying

some anime character. But I *did* know him. It was Hearth, my fellow homeless dude and surrogate “mom.”

I was a little creeped out, a little offended. Had he seen me on the street and followed me? I didn’t need some fairy god-stalker looking after me.

I spread my hands: *What are you doing here?*

Hearth made a gesture like he was plucking something from his cupped hand and throwing it away. After two years of hanging around him, I was getting pretty good at reading sign language.

He was saying *GET OUT*.

He didn’t look alarmed, but it was hard to tell with Hearth. He never showed much emotion. Whenever we hung out, he mostly just stared at me with those pale gray eyes like he was waiting for me to explode.

I lost valuable seconds trying to figure out what he meant, why he was here when he was supposed to be in Copley Square.

He gestured again: both hands pointing forward with two fingers, dipping up and down twice. *Hurry*.

“Why?” I said aloud.

Behind me, a deep voice said, “Hello, Magnus.”

I nearly jumped out of my shoes. Standing in the library doorway was a barrel-chested man with a trim white beard and a skullcap of gray hair. He wore a beige cashmere overcoat over a dark wool suit. His gloved hands gripped the handle of a polished wooden cane with an iron tip. Last time I’d seen him his hair had been black, but I knew that voice.

“Randolph.”

He inclined his head a millimeter. “What a pleasant

surprise. I'm glad you're here." He sounded neither surprised nor glad. "We don't have much time."

The food and milk started to churn in my stomach. "M-much time . . . before what?"

His brow furrowed. His nose wrinkled as if he detected a mildly unpleasant odor. "You're sixteen today, aren't you? They'll be coming to kill you."



THREE

Don't Accept Rides from Strange Relatives

WELL, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME!

Was it January 13? Honestly, I had no idea. Time flies when you're sleeping under bridges and eating from Dumpsters.

So I was officially sixteen. For my present, I got cornered by Uncle Freaky, who announced that I was marked for assassination.

"Who—" I started to ask. "You know what? Never mind. Nice seeing you, Randolph. I'll be going now."

Randolph remained in the doorway, blocking my exit. He pointed the iron tip of his cane at me. I swear I could feel it pushing against my sternum from across the room.

"Magnus, we need to talk. I don't want them to get to you. Not after what happened to your mother. . . ."

A punch in the face would've been less painful.

Memories from that night spun through my head like a sickening kaleidoscope: our apartment building shuddering, a scream from the floor below, my mother—who'd been tense and paranoid all day—dragging me toward the fire escape, telling me to run. The door splintered and burst. From the hallway, two beasts emerged, their pelts the color of dirty snow, their eyes glowing blue. My fingers slipped off the fire escape railing and I fell, landing in a pile of garbage bags

in the alley. Moments later, the windows of our apartment exploded, belching fire.

My mom had told me to run. I did. She'd promised to find me. She never did. Later, on the news, I heard that her body had been recovered from the fire. The police were searching for me. They had questions: signs of arson; my record of disciplinary problems at school; neighbors' reports of shouting and a loud crash from our apartment just before the explosion; the fact that I'd run from the scene. None of the reports mentioned wolves with glowing eyes.

Ever since that night I'd been hiding, living under the radar, too busy surviving to grieve properly for my mom, wondering if I'd hallucinated those beasts . . . but I knew I hadn't.

Now, after all this time, Uncle Randolph wanted to help me.

I gripped the little domino stone so tightly, it cut into my palm. "You don't know what happened to my mom. You never cared about either of us."

Randolph lowered his cane. He leaned on it heavily and stared at the carpet. I could almost believe I'd hurt his feelings.

"I pleaded with your mother," he said. "I wanted her to bring you here—to live where I could protect you. She refused. After she died . . ." He shook his head. "Magnus, you have no idea how long I've looked for you, or how much danger you're in."

"I'm fine," I snapped, though my heart was thumping against my ribs. "I've been taking care of myself pretty well."

"Perhaps, but those days are over." The certainty in Randolph's voice gave me a chill. "You're sixteen now, the age of manhood. You escaped them once, the night your mother died. They won't let you escape again. This is our last chance. Let me help you, or you won't live through the day."

The low winter light shifted across the stained glass transom, washing Randolph's face in changing colors, chameleon-style.

I shouldn't have come here. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Over and over, my mom had given me one clear message: *Don't go to Randolph*. Yet here I was.

The longer I listened to him, the more terrified I got, and the more desperately I wanted to hear what he had to say.

"I don't need your help." I set the strange little domino on the desk. "I don't want—"

"I know about the wolves."

That stopped me.

"I know what you saw," he continued. "I know who sent the creatures. Regardless of what the police think, I know how your mother really died."

"How—"

"Magnus, there's so much I need to tell you about your parents, about your inheritance. . . . About your father."

An ice-cold wire threaded its way down my spine. "You knew my father?"

I didn't want to give Randolph any leverage. Living on the street had taught me how dangerous leverage could be. But he had me hooked. I *needed* to hear this information. Judging from the appraising gleam in his eyes, he knew it.

"Yes, Magnus. Your father's identity, your mother's murder, the reason she refused my help . . . it's all connected." He gestured toward his display of Viking goodies. "My whole life, I've been working toward one goal. I've been trying to solve a historical mystery. Until recently, I didn't see the whole picture. Now I do. It's all been leading to *this* day, your sixteenth birthday."

I backed up to the window, as far as I could get from Uncle Randolph. “Look, I don’t understand ninety percent of what you’re saying, but if you can tell me about my dad—”

The building rattled like a volley of cannons had gone off in the distance—a *rumble* so low I felt it in my teeth.

“They’ll be here soon,” Randolph warned. “We’re running out of time.”

“Who are *they*?”

Randolph limped forward, relying on his cane. His right knee didn’t seem to work. “I’m asking a lot, Magnus. You have no reason to trust me. But you need to come with me *right now*. I know where your birthright is.” He pointed to the old maps on the desk. “Together, we can retrieve what is yours. It’s the only thing that might protect you.”

I glanced over my shoulder, out the window. Down in the Commonwealth Mall, Hearth had disappeared. I should have done the same. Looking at Uncle Randolph, I tried to see any resemblance to my mother, anything that might inspire me to trust him. I found nothing. His imposing bulk, his intense dark eyes, his humorless face and stiff manner . . . he was the exact opposite of my mom.

“My car is out back,” he said.

“M-maybe we should wait for Annabeth and Uncle Frederick.”

Randolph grimaced. “They don’t believe me. They *never* believed me. Out of desperation, as a last resort, I brought them to Boston to help me look for you, but now that you’re here—”

The building shook again. This time the *boom* felt closer and stronger. I wanted to believe it was from construction

nearby, or a military ceremony, or anything easily explainable. But my gut told me otherwise. The noise sounded like the fall of a gargantuan foot—like the noise that had shaken our apartment two years ago.

“Please, Magnus.” Randolph’s voice quavered. “I lost my *own* family to those monsters. I lost my wife, my daughters.”

“You—you had a family? My mom never said anything—”

“No, she wouldn’t have. But your mother . . . Natalie was my only sister. I loved her. I hated to lose her. I can’t lose you, too. Come with me. Your father left something for you to find—something that will change the worlds.”

Too many questions crowded my brain. I didn’t like the crazy light in Randolph’s eyes. I didn’t like the way he said *worlds*, plural. And I didn’t believe he’d been trying to find me since my mom died. I had my antenna up constantly. If Randolph had been asking about me by name, one of my street friends would’ve tipped me off, like Blitz had done this morning with Annabeth and Frederick.

Something had changed—something that made Randolph decide I was worth looking for.

“What if I just run?” I asked. “Will you try to stop me?”

“If you run, they’ll find you. They’ll kill you.”

My throat felt like it was full of cotton balls. I didn’t trust Randolph. Unfortunately, I believed he was in earnest about people trying to kill me. His voice had the ring of truth.

“Well, then,” I said, “let’s go for a ride.”



Seriously, the Dude Cannot Drive

YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT bad Boston drivers? That's my Uncle Randolph.

The dude gunned his BMW 528i (of course it *had* to be a BMW) and shot down Commonwealth Avenue, ignoring the lights, honking at other cars, weaving randomly from lane to lane.

"You missed a pedestrian," I said. "You want to go back and hit her?"

Randolph was too distracted to answer. He kept glancing at the sky as if looking for storm clouds. He gunned the BMW through the intersection at Exeter.

"So," I said, "where are we going?"

"The bridge."

That explained everything. There were, like, twenty bridges in the Boston area.

I ran my hand along the heated leather seat. It had been maybe six months since I'd ridden in a car. The last time it had been a social worker's Toyota. Before that, a police cruiser. Both times I'd used a fake name. Both times I'd escaped, but over the past two years I'd come to equate cars with holding cells. I wasn't sure my luck had changed any today.

I waited for Randolph to answer any of the nagging little

questions I had, like, oh: Who's my dad? Who murdered my mom? How did you lose your wife and kids? Are you presently hallucinating? Did you really have to wear that clove-scented cologne?

But he was too busy causing traffic havoc.

Finally, just to make small talk, I asked, "So who's trying to kill me?"

He turned right on Arlington. We skirted the Public Garden, past the equestrian statue of George Washington, the rows of gaslight lampposts and snow-covered hedges. I was tempted to bail out of the car, run back to the swan pond, and hide in my sleeping bag.

"Magnus," said Randolph, "I've made my life's work studying the Norse exploration of North America."

"Wow, thanks," I said. "That really answered my question."

Suddenly, Randolph *did* remind me of my mom. He gave me the same exasperated scowl, the same look over the top of his glasses, like *Please, kid, cut the sarcasm*. The similarity made my chest ache.

"Fine," I said. "I'll humor you. Norse exploration. You mean the Vikings."

Randolph winced. "Well . . . *Viking* means *raider*. It's more of a job description. Not all Norse people were Vikings. But, yes, those guys."

"The statue of Leif Erikson . . . Does that mean the Vikings—er, the Norse—discovered Boston? I thought the Pilgrims did that."

"I could give you a three-hour lecture on that topic alone."

"Please don't."

"Suffice it to say, the Norse explored North America and even built settlements around the year 1000, almost five hundred years before Christopher Columbus. Scholars agree on that."

"That's a relief. I hate it when scholars disagree."

"But no one is sure how far south the Norse sailed. Did they make it to what is now the United States? That statue of Leif Erikson . . . that was the pet project of a wishful thinker in the 1800s, a man named Eben Horsford. He was convinced that Boston was the lost Norse settlement of Norumbega, their farthest point of exploration. He had an instinct, a gut feeling, but no real proof. Most historians wrote him off as a crackpot."

He looked at me meaningfully.

"Let me guess . . . you don't think he's a crackpot." I resisted the urge to say *Takes one to believe one*.

"Those maps on my desk," Randolph said. "*They* are the proof. My colleagues call them forgeries, but they're not. I staked my reputation on it!"

And that's why you got fired from Harvard, I thought.

"The Norse explorers did make it this far," he continued. "They were searching for something . . . and they found it here. One of their ships sank nearby. For years I thought the shipwreck was in Massachusetts Bay. I sacrificed everything to find it. I bought my own boat, took my wife, my children on expeditions. The last time . . ." His voice broke. "The storm came out of nowhere, the fires . . ."

He didn't seem anxious to share more, but I got the general idea: he'd lost his family at sea. He really *had* staked everything on his crazy theory about Vikings in Boston.

I felt bad for the guy, sure. I also didn't want to be his next casualty.

We stopped at the corner of Boylston and Charles.

"Maybe I'll just get out here." I tried the handle. The door was locked from the driver's side.

"Magnus, listen. It's no accident you were born in Boston. Your father wanted you to find what he lost two thousand years ago."

My feet got jumpy. "Did you just say . . . two thousand years?"

"Give or take."

I considered screaming and pounding on the window. Would anybody help me? If I could get out of the car, maybe I could find Uncle Frederick and Annabeth, assuming they were any less insane than Randolph.

We turned onto Charles Street, heading north between the Public Garden and the Common. Randolph could've been taking me anywhere—Cambridge, the North End, or some out-of-the-way body dump.

I tried to keep calm. "Two thousand years . . . that's a longer lifespan than your average dad."

Randolph's face reminded me of the Man in the Moon from old black-and-white cartoons: pale and rotund, pitted and scarred, with a secretive smile that wasn't very friendly. "Magnus, what do you know about Norse mythology?"

This just gets better and better, I thought.

"Uh, not much. My mom had a picture book she used to read me when I was little. And weren't there a couple of movies about Thor?"

Randolph shook his head in disgust. "Those movies . . .

ridiculously inaccurate. The real gods of Asgard—Thor, Loki, Odin, and the rest—are much more powerful, much more terrifying than anything Hollywood could concoct.”

“But . . . they’re myths. They’re not real.”

Randolph gave me a sort of a pitying look. “Myths are simply stories about truths we’ve forgotten.”

“So, look, I just remembered I have an appointment down the street—”

“A millennium ago, Norse explorers came to this land.” Randolph drove us past the Cheers bar on Beacon Street, where bundled-up tourists were taking photos of themselves in front of the sign. I spotted a crumpled flyer skittering across the sidewalk: it had the word MISSING and an old picture of me. One of the tourists stepped on it.

“The captain of these explorers,” Randolph continued, “was a son of the god Skirnir.”

“A son of a god. Really, anywhere around here is good. I can walk.”

“This man carried a very special item,” Randolph said, “something that once belonged to your father. When the Norse ship went down in a storm, that item was lost. But you—you have the ability to find it.”

I tried the door again. Still locked.

The really bad part? The more Randolph talked, the less I could convince myself that he was nuts. His story seeped into my mind—storms, wolves, gods, Asgard. The words clicked into place like pieces of a puzzle I’d never had the courage to finish. I was starting to believe him, and that scared the baked beans out of me.

Randolph whipped around the access road for Storrow

Drive. He parked at a meter on Cambridge Street. To the north, past the elevated tracks of the Mass General T station, rose the stone towers of the Longfellow Bridge.

"That's where we're going?" I asked.

Randolph fished for quarters in his cup holder. "All these years, it was so much closer than I realized. I just needed *you!*"

"I'm definitely feeling the love."

"You are sixteen today." Randolph's eyes danced with excitement. "It's the perfect day for you to reclaim your birthright. But it's also what your enemies have been waiting for. We have to find it first."

"But—"

"Trust me a little while longer, Magnus. Once we have the weapon—"

"Weapon? Now my birthright is a *weapon*?"

"Once you have it in your possession, you'll be much safer. I can explain everything to you. I can help you train for what's to come."

He opened his car door. Before he could get out, I grabbed his wrist.

I usually avoid touching people. Physical contact creeps me out. But I needed his full attention.

"Give me one answer," I said. "One *clear* answer, without the rambling and the history lectures. You said you knew my dad. Who is he?"

Randolph placed his hand over mine, which made me squirm. His palm was too rough and calloused for a history professor's. "On my life, Magnus, I swear this is the truth: your father is a Norse god. Now, hurry. We're in a twenty-minute parking spot."



I've Always Wanted to Destroy a Bridge

"YOU CAN'T DROP a bombshell like that and walk away!" I yelled as Randolph walked away.

Despite his cane and his stiff leg, the guy could really move. He was like an Olympic gold medalist in hobbling. He forged ahead, climbing the sidewalk of the Longfellow Bridge as I jogged after him, the wind screaming in my ears.

The morning commuters were coming in from Cambridge. A single line of cars was backed up the length of the span, barely moving. You'd think my uncle and I would be the only ones dumb enough to walk across the bridge in subzero weather, but this being Boston, half a dozen runners were chugging along, looking like emaciated seals in their Lycra bodysuits. A mom with two kids bundled in a stroller was walking on the opposite sidewalk. Her kids looked about as happy as I felt.

My uncle was still fifteen feet ahead of me.

"Randolph!" I called. "I'm talking to you!"

"The drift of the river," he muttered. "The landfill on the banks . . . allowing for a thousand years of shifting tidal patterns—"

"Yo!" I caught the sleeve of his cashmere coat. "Rewind to the part about a Norse god being my pappy."

Randolph scanned our surroundings. We'd stopped at

one of the bridge's main towers—a cone of granite rising fifty feet above us. People said the towers looked like giant salt and pepper shakers, but I'd always thought they looked like Daleks from *Doctor Who*. (So I'm a nerd. Sue me. And, yes, even homeless kids watch TV sometimes—in shelter rec rooms, on public library computers. . . . We have our ways.)

A hundred feet below us, the Charles River glistened steel gray, its surface mottled with patches of snow and ice like the skin of a massive python.

Randolph leaned so far over the railing it made me jittery.

"The irony," he muttered. "Here, of all places . . ."

"So, anyway," I said, "about my father . . ."

Randolph gripped my shoulder. "Look down there, Magnus. What do you see?"

Cautiously I glanced over the side. "Water."

"No, the carved ornamentation, just below us."

I looked again. About halfway down the side of the pier, a shelf of granite jutted over the water like a theater seating box with a pointy tip. "It looks like a nose."

"No, it's . . . Well, from this angle, it *does* sort of look like a nose. But it's the prow of a Viking longship. See? The other pier has one too. The poet Longfellow, for whom the bridge was named—he was fascinated by the Norse. Wrote poems about their gods. Like Eben Horsford, Longfellow believed the Vikings had explored Boston. Hence the designs on the bridge."

"You should give tours," I said. "All the rabid Longfellow fans would pay big bucks."

"Don't you see?" Randolph still had his hand on my shoulder, which wasn't making me any less anxious. "So many

people over the centuries have known. They've *felt* it instinctively, even if they had no proof. This area wasn't just *visited* by the Vikings. It was *sacred* to them! Right below us—somewhere near these decorative longships—is the wreck of an *actual* longship, holding a cargo of incalculable value."

"I still see water. And I still want to hear about Dad."

"Magnus, the Norse explorers came here searching for the axis of the worlds, the very trunk of the tree. They found it—"

A low *boom* echoed across the river. The bridge shook. About a mile away, amid the thicket of chimneys and steeples of Back Bay, a column of oily black smoke mushroomed skyward.

I steadied myself against the railing. "Um, wasn't that close to your house?"

Randolph's expression hardened. His stubbly beard glistened silver in the sunlight.

"We're out of time. Magnus, extend your hand over the water. The sword is down there. Call it. Focus on it as if it's the most important thing in the world—the thing you want the most."

"A sword? I—look, Randolph, I can tell you're having a hard day, but—"

"DO IT."

The sternness in his voice made me flinch. Randolph *had* to be insane, talking about gods and swords and ancient shipwrecks. Yet the column of smoke over Back Bay was very real. Sirens wailed in the distance. On the bridge, drivers stuck their heads out their windows to gawk, holding up smartphones and taking pictures.

And as much as I wanted to deny it, Randolph's words

resonated with me. For the first time, I felt like my body was humming at the right frequency, like I'd finally been tuned to match the crappy soundtrack of my life.

I stretched my hand out over the river.

Nothing happened.

Of course nothing happened, I chided myself. *What were you expecting?*

The bridge shook more violently. Down the sidewalk, a jogger stumbled. From behind me came the *crunch* of one car rear-ending another. Horns blared.

Above the rooftops of Back Bay, a second column of smoke billowed. Ash and orange cinders sprayed upward as if the explosion were volcanic, spewing from the ground.

"That—that was a lot closer," I noted. "It's like something is zeroing in on us."

I really hoped Randolph would say *Nah, of course not. Don't be silly!*

He seemed to get older before my eyes. His wrinkles darkened. His shoulders slumped. He leaned heavily on his cane. "Please, not again," he muttered to himself. "Not like last time."

"*Last time?*" Then I remembered what he'd said about losing his wife and daughters—a storm out of nowhere, fires.

Randolph locked eyes with me. "Try again, Magnus. Please."

I thrust my hand toward the river. I imagined I was reaching for my mom, trying to pull her from the past—trying to save her from the wolves and the burning apartment. I reached for answers that might explain why I'd lost her, why my whole life since then had been nothing but a downhill spiral of *suck*.

Directly below me, the surface of the water began to steam.

Ice melted. Snow evaporated, leaving a hole in the shape of a hand—*my* hand, twenty times larger.

I didn't know what I was doing. I'd had the same feeling when my mom first taught me to ride a bike. *Don't think about what you're doing, Magnus. Don't hesitate, or you'll fall. Just keep going.*

I swept my hand back and forth. A hundred feet below, the steaming hand mirrored my movements, clearing the surface of the Charles. Suddenly I stopped. A pinpoint of warmth hit the center of my palm as if I'd intercepted a beam of sunlight.

Something was down there . . . a heat source buried deep in the frigid mud of the river bottom. I closed my fingers and pulled.

A dome of water swelled and ruptured like a dry-ice bubble. An object resembling a lead pipe shot upward and landed in my hand.

It looked nothing like a sword. I held it by one end, but there was no hilt. If it had ever had a point or a sharp edge, it didn't now. The thing was about the right size for a blade, but it was so pitted and corroded, so encrusted with barnacles and glistening with mud and slime, I couldn't even be sure it was metal. In short, it was the saddest, flimsiest, most disgusting piece of scrap I'd ever magically pulled from a river.

"At last!" Randolph lifted his eyes to the heavens. I got the feeling that, if not for his bum knee, he might've knelt on the pavement and offered a prayer to the nonexistent Norse gods.

"Yeah." I hefted my new prize. "I feel safer already."

"You can renew it!" Randolph said. "Just try!"

I turned the blade. I was surprised that it hadn't already disintegrated in my hand.

"I dunno, Randolph. This thing looks *way* past renewing. I'm not even sure it can be recycled."

If I sound unimpressed or ungrateful, don't get me wrong. The way I'd pulled the sword out of the river was so cool it freaked me out. I'd always wanted a superpower. I just hadn't expected mine to entail retrieving garbage from river bottoms. The community service volunteers were going to love me.

"Concentrate, Magnus!" Randolph said. "Quickly, before—"

Fifty feet away, the center of the bridge erupted in flames. The shock wave pushed me against the rail. The right side of my face felt sunburned. Pedestrians screamed. Cars swerved and crashed into one another.

For some stupid reason, I ran toward the explosion. It was like I couldn't help myself. Randolph shuffled after me, calling my name, but his voice seemed far away, unimportant.

Fire danced across the roofs of cars. Windows shattered from the heat, spraying the street with glass gravel. Drivers scrambled out of their vehicles and fled.

It looked like a meteor had hit the bridge. A ten-foot-diameter circle of asphalt was charred and steaming. In the center of the impact zone stood a human-size figure: a dark man in a dark suit.

When I say dark, I mean his skin was the purest, most beautiful shade of black I'd ever seen. Squid ink at midnight would not have been so black. His clothes were the same: a well-tailored jacket and slacks, a crisp dress shirt and tie—all cut from the fabric of a neutron star. His face was inhumanly handsome, chiseled obsidian. His long hair was combed back

in an immaculate oil slick. His pupils glowed like tiny rings of lava.

I thought, If Satan were real, he would look like this guy.

Then I thought, No, Satan would be a schlub next to this guy. This guy is like Satan's fashion consultant.

Those red eyes locked on to me.

"Magnus Chase." His voice was deep and resonant, his accent vaguely German or Scandinavian. "You have brought me a gift."

An abandoned Toyota Corolla stood between us. Satan's fashion consultant walked straight through it, melting a path down the middle of the chassis like a blowtorch through wax.

The sizzling halves of the Corolla collapsed behind him, the wheels melted to puddles.

"I will make you a gift as well." The dark man extended his hand. Smoke curled off his sleeve and ebony fingers. "Give me the sword and I will spare your life."