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ONE

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 defences 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 got 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 towards the harbour 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 favour 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 paralysed, 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 ribcage 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 harbour 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 shirt, and a chequered skinny tie as loose as a necklace. With his thick black Ray-Bans and his choppy green hair, he looked like he'd stepped out of 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 towards Annabeth, his

blade twitching as if he was sniffing the air. 'Where is she? Where are you hiding the babe?'

Annabeth backed towards 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? Enquiring 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 towards 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?'