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Opening extract from

Magnus Chase and the Sword of Summer

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ONE

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Could You Please Stop Killing My Goat?

LESSON LEARNED: if you take a Valkyrie out for coffee, you'll get stuck with the cheque and a dead body.

I hadn't seen Samirah al-Abbas in almost six weeks, so when she called out of the blue and said we needed to talk about a matter of life and death, I agreed right away.

(Technically I'm already dead, which means the whole life-and-death thing didn't apply, but still . . . Sam sounded anxious.)

She hadn't yet arrived when I got to the Thinking Cup on Newbury Street. The place was packed as usual, so I queued up for coffee. A few seconds later, Sam flew in – literally – right over the heads of the café patrons.

Nobody batted an eye. Regular mortals aren't good at processing magical stuff, which is fortunate, because otherwise Bostonians would spend most of their time running around in a panic from giants, trolls, ogres and *einherjar* with battleaxes and lattes.

Sam landed next to me in her school uniform – white sneakers, khaki slacks and a long-sleeve navy shirt with the King Academy logo. A green hijab covered her hair. An axe hung from her belt. I was pretty sure the axe wasn't standard dress code.

As glad as I was to see her, I noted that the skin under her eyes was darker than usual. She was swaying on her feet.

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'Hey,' I said. 'You look terrible.'

'Nice to see you, too, Magnus.'

'No, I mean . . . not terrible like *different than normal* terrible. Just terrible like exhausted.'

'Should I get you a shovel so you can dig that hole a little deeper?'

I raised my hands in surrender. 'Where have you been the last month and a half?'

Her shoulders tightened. 'My workload this semester has been killing me. I'm tutoring kids after school. Then, as you might remember, there's my part-time job reaping souls of the dead and running top-secret missions for Odin.'

'You kids today and your busy schedules.'

'On top of all that . . . there's flight school.'

'Flight school?' We shuffled forward with the line. 'Like *aeroplanes*?'

I knew Sam's goal was to become a professional pilot someday, but I hadn't realized she was already taking lessons. 'You can *do* that at sixteen?'

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. 'My grandparents could never have afforded it, but the Fadlans have this friend who runs a flight school. They finally convinced Jid and Bibi –'

'Ah.' I grinned. 'So the lessons were a gift from Amir.'

Sam blushed. She's the only teenager I know who has a *betrothed*, and it's cute how flustered she gets when she talks about Amir Fadlan.

'Those lessons were the most thoughtful, the most considerate . . .' She sighed wistfully. 'But enough of that. I

didn't bring you here to talk about my schedule. We have an informant to meet.'

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'An informant?'

'This could be the break I've been waiting for. If his information is good –'

Sam's phone buzzed. She fished it out of her pocket, checked the screen and cursed. 'I have to go.'

'You just got here.'

'Valkyrie business. Possible code three-eight-one: heroic death in progress.'

'You're making that up.'

'I'm not.'

'So . . . what, somebody thinks they're about to die and they text you *"Going down! Need Valkyrie ASAP!"* followed by a bunch of sad-face emojis?'

'I seem to recall taking *your* soul to Valhalla. You didn't text me.'

'No, but I'm special.'

'Just get a table outside,' she said. 'Meet my informant. I'll be back as soon as I can.'

'I don't even know what your informant looks like.'

'You'll recognize him when you see him,' Sam promised. 'Be brave. Also, get me a scone.'

She flew out of the shop like Super Muslima, leaving me to pay for our order.

I got two large coffees and two scones and found a table outside.

Spring had arrived early in Boston. Patches of dirty snow still clung to the kerbs like dental plaque, but the cherry trees popped with white and red buds. Flowery pastel clothing

displays bloomed in the windows of high-end boutiques. Tourists strolled by enjoying the sunshine.

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Sitting outside, comfortable in my freshly laundered jeans, T-shirt and denim jacket, I realized this would be the first spring in three years that I hadn't been homeless.

Last March, I had been scrounging from dumpsters. I'd been sleeping under a bridge in the Public Garden, hanging out with my buddies Hearth and Blitz, avoiding the cops and just trying to stay alive.

Then, two months ago, I died fighting a fire giant. I'd woken up in the Hotel Valhalla as one of Odin's *einherji* warriors.

Now I had clean clothes. I took a shower every day. I slept in a comfortable bed every night. I could sit at this café table, eating food I'd actually paid for and not worry about when the staff would force me to move along.

Since my rebirth, I'd got used to a lot of weird stuff. I'd travelled the Nine Worlds meeting Norse gods, elves, dwarves and a bunch of monsters with names I couldn't pronounce. I'd scored a magical sword that presently hung around my neck in the form of a runestone pendant. I'd even had a mind-melting conversation with my cousin Annabeth about the *Greek* gods who hung out in New York and made *her* life difficult. Apparently North America was lousy with ancient gods. We had a full-blown infestation.

All of that I'd learned to accept.

But being back in Boston on a nice spring day, hanging out like a regular mortal kid?

That felt strange.

I scanned the crowd of pedestrians, looking for Sam's

informant. *You'll recognize him when you see him*, she'd promised. I wondered what kind of information this guy had and why Sam considered it life-and-death.

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My gaze fixed on a storefront at the end of the block. Over the doorway, the brass-and-silver sign still gleamed proudly: BLITZEN'S BEST – but the shop was shuttered. The front door window was papered over on the inside, with a message hastily scrawled in red marker: *Closed for remodelling. Back soon!*

I'd been hoping to ask Samirah about that. I had no idea why my old friend Blitz had abruptly disappeared. One day a few weeks ago, I'd just walked by the shop and found it closed. Since then, there'd been no word from Blitzen or Hearthstone, which wasn't like them.

Thinking about this made me so preoccupied I almost didn't see our informant until he was right on top of me. But Sam was correct: he kind of stood out. It's not every day you see a goat in a trench coat.

A porkpie hat was wedged between his curly horns. A pair of sunglasses perched on his nose. His trench coat kept getting tangled in his back hooves.

Despite his clever disguise, I recognized him. I'd killed and eaten this particular goat on another world, which is the sort of bonding experience you don't forget.

'Otis,' I said.

'*Shhh*,' he said. 'I'm incognito. Call me . . . *Otis*.'

'I'm not sure that's how *incognito* works, but okay.'

Otis, aka Otis, climbed onto the chair I'd reserved for Sam. He sat on his back haunches and put his front hooves on the table. 'Where is the Valkyrie? Is she incognito, too?' He peered at the nearest pastry bag as if Sam might be hiding inside.

'Samirah had to go reap a soul,' I said. 'She'll be back soon.'

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'It must be nice having a purpose in life.' Otis sighed. 'Well, thank you for the food.'

'That's not for –'

Otis snapped up Sam's scone bag and began to eat it, paper and all.

At the table next to us, an older couple glanced at my goat friend and smiled. Maybe their mortal senses perceived him as a cute child or a funny pet dog.

'So.' I had a hard time watching Otis devour the pastry, spraying crumbs across the lapels of his trench coat. 'You had something to tell us?'

Otis belched. 'It's about my master.'

'Thor.'

Otis flinched. 'Yes, him.'

If I worked for the thunder god, I, too, would have flinched when I heard Thor's name. Otis and his brother, Marvin, pulled the god's chariot. They also provided Thor with a never-ending supply of goat meat. Each night, Thor killed and ate them for dinner. Each morning, Thor resurrected them. This is why you should go to college, kids – so when you grow up you do not have to take a job as a magical goat.

'I finally have a lead,' Otis said, 'on that *certain object* my master is missing.'

'You mean his ham–?'

'Don't say it aloud!' Otis warned. 'But, yes . . . his *ham*.'

I flashed back to January, when I'd first met the thunder god. Good times around the campfire, listening to Thor fart,

talk about his favourite TV shows, fart, complain about his missing hammer, which he used to kill giants and stream his favourite TV shows and fart.

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'It's *still* missing?' I asked.

Otis clacked his front hooves on the tabletop. 'Well, not *officially*, of course. If the giants knew for certain that Thor was without his you-know-what, they would invade the mortal worlds, destroy everything and send me into a very deep funk. But unofficially . . . yes. We've been searching for months with no luck. Thor's enemies are getting bolder. They sense weakness. I told my therapist it reminds me of when I was a kid in the goat pen and the bullies were sizing me up.' Otis got a faraway look in his yellow slit-pupil eyes. 'I think that's when my traumatic stress started.'

This was my cue to spend the next several hours talking to Otis about his feelings. Being a terrible person, I just said 'I feel your pain' and moved on.

'Otis,' I said, 'the last time we saw you, we found Thor a nice iron staff to use as a backup weapon. He's not exactly defenceless.'

'No, but the staff is not as good as the . . . *ham*. It doesn't inspire the same fear in the giants. Also, Thor gets cranky trying to watch his shows on the staff. The screen is tiny, and the resolution is terrible. I don't like it when Thor is cranky. It makes it hard for me to find my happy space.'

A lot about this did not make sense: why Thor would have so much trouble locating his own hammer; how he could possibly have kept its loss a secret from the giants for so long; and the idea that Otis the goat would have a happy space.

'So Thor wants our help,' I guessed.

'Not officially.'

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'Of course not. We'll all have to wear trench coats and glasses.'

'That's an excellent idea,' Otis said. 'Anyway, I told the Valkyrie I would keep her updated since she is in charge of Odin's . . . you know, special missions. This is the first good lead I've got to the location of the *certain object*. My source is reliable. He's another goat who goes to the same psychiatrist. He overheard some talk in his barnyard.'

'You want us to track down a lead based on barnyard gossip you heard in your psychiatrist's waiting room.'

'That would be great.' Otis leaned so far forward I was afraid he might fall out of his chair. 'But you're going to have to be careful.'

It took all my effort not to laugh. I'd played catch-the-lava-ball with fire giants. I'd eagle-skied over the rooftops of Boston. I'd pulled the World Serpent out of Massachusetts Bay and defeated Fenris Wolf with a ball of yarn. Now this goat was telling me to be careful.

'So where is the *ham*?' I asked. 'Jotunheim? Niflheim? Thorfartheim?'

'You're teasing.' Otis's sunglasses slipped sideways on his snout. 'But the *ham* is in a different dangerous location. It's in Provincetown.'

'Provincetown,' I repeated. 'On the tip of Cape Cod.'

I had vague memories of the place. My mom had taken me there for a weekend one summer when I was about eight. I remembered beaches, saltwater taffy, lobster rolls and a bunch

of art galleries. The most dangerous thing we'd encountered was a seagull with irritable bowel syndrome.

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Otis lowered his voice. 'There is a barrow in Provincetown – a *wight's* barrow.'

'Is that like a wheelbarrow?'

'No, no. A wight . . .' Otis shuddered. 'Well, a wight is a powerful undead creature that likes to collect magical weapons. A wight's tomb is called a – a *barrow*. Sorry, I have a hard time talking about wights. They remind me of my father.'

That raised another batch of questions about Otis's childhood, but I decided to leave them for his therapist.

'Are there a lot of lairs of undead Vikings in Provincetown?' I asked.

'Only one, as far as I know. But that's enough. If the *certain object* is there, it will be difficult to retrieve – underground and guarded by powerful magic. You'll need your friends – the dwarf and the elf.'

That would have been great, if I had any idea where those friends were. I hoped Sam knew more than I did.

'Why doesn't Thor go and check this barrow himself?' I asked. 'Wait . . . let me guess. He doesn't want to draw attention. Or he wants us to have a chance to be heroes. Or it's hard work and he has some shows to catch up on.'

'To be fair,' Otis said, 'the new season of *Jessica Jones* did just start streaming.'

It's not the goat's fault, I told myself. *He does not deserve to be punched.*

'Fine,' I said. 'When Sam gets here, we'll talk strategy.'

'I'm not sure I should wait with you.' Otis licked a crumb

off his lapel. 'I should have mentioned this earlier, but, you see, someone . . . or *something* . . . has been stalking me.'

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The hairs on my neck tingled. 'You think they followed you here?'

'I'm not sure,' Otis said. 'Hopefully my disguise threw them off.'

Oh, great, I thought.

I scanned the street but saw no obvious lurkers. 'Did you get a good look at this someone/something?'

'No,' Otis admitted. 'But Thor has all sorts of enemies who would want to stop us from getting his – his *ham* back. They would not want me sharing information with you, especially this last part. You have to warn Samirah that –'

THUNK.

Living in Valhalla, I was used to deadly weapons flying out of nowhere, but I was still surprised when an axe sprouted from Otis's furry chest.

I lunged across the table to help him. As the son of Frey, god of fertility and health, I can do some pretty awesome first-aid magic given enough time. But, as soon as I touched Otis, I sensed that it was too late. The axe had pierced his heart.

'Oh, dear.' Otis coughed blood. 'I'll just . . . die . . . now.'

His head lolled backwards. His porkpie hat rolled across the pavement. The lady sitting behind us screamed as if just now noticing that Otis was not a cute puppy dog. He was, in fact, a dead goat.

I scanned the rooftops across the street. Judging from the angle of the axe, it must have been thrown from somewhere up there . . . yes. I caught a flicker of movement just as the

attacker ducked out of sight – a figure in black wearing some sort of metal helmet.

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So much for a leisurely cup of coffee. I yanked the magical pendant from my neck chain and raced after the goat-assassin.

TWO

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Your Standard Rooftop Chase Scene with Talking Swords and Ninjas

I SHOULD introduce my sword.

Jack, these are the peeps. Peeps, this is Jack.

His real name is *Sumarbrander*, the Sword of Summer, but Jack prefers *Jack* because reasons. When Jack feels like snoozing, which is most of the time, he hangs out on a chain around my neck in the form of a pendant marked with *fehu*, the rune of Frey:

When I need his help, he turns into a sword and kills things. Sometimes he does this while I wield him. Other times he does this while flying around on his own and singing annoying pop songs. He is magical that way.

As I bounded across Newbury Street, Jack sprang to full form in my hand. His blade – thirty inches of double-edged bone-forged steel – was emblazoned with runes that pulsed in different colours when Jack talked.

'What's going on?' he asked. 'Who are we killing?'

Jack claims he doesn't pay attention to my conversations when he is in pendant form. He says he usually has his headphones on. I don't believe this, because Jack doesn't have headphones. Or ears.

'Chasing assassin,' I blurted out, dodging a taxi. 'Killed goat.'

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'Right,' Jack said. 'Same old, same old, then.'

I leaped up the side of the Pearson Publishing building. I'd spent the last two months learning to use my einherji powers, so one jump took me to a ledge three storeys above the main entrance – no problem, even with a sword in one hand. Then I hop-climbed from window ledge to cornice up the white marble facade, channelling my inner Hulk until I reached the top.

On the far side of the roof, a dark bipedal shape was just disappearing behind a row of chimneys. The goat-killer looked humanoid, which ruled out goat-on-goat homicide, but I'd seen enough of the Nine Worlds to know that humanoid didn't mean human. He could be an elf, a dwarf, a small giant or even an axe-murderer god. (Please, not an axe-murderer god.)

By the time I reached the chimneys, my quarry had jumped to the roof of the next building. That might not sound impressive, but the next building was a brownstone mansion about fifty feet away across a small parking lot. The goat-killer didn't even have the decency to break his ankles on impact. He somersaulted on the tar and came up running. Then he leaped back across Newbury Street and landed on the steeple of the Church of the Covenant.

'I hate this guy,' I said.

'How do you know it's a guy?' Jack asked.

The sword had a point. (Sorry, I keep stumbling into that pun.) The goat-killer's loose black clothes and metal war helmet made it impossible to guess his or her gender, but I decided to

keep thinking of him as male for now. Not sure why. I guess I found the idea of a bro goat-assassin more annoying.

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I backed up, took a running start and leaped towards the church.

I'd love to tell you I landed on the steeple, slapped some handcuffs on the killer and announced, *You're going away for livestock murder!*

Instead . . . well, the Church of the Covenant has these beautiful stained-glass windows made by Tiffany in the 1890s. On the left side of the sanctuary, one window has a big crack at the top. My bad.

I hit the church's slanted roof and slid back, grabbing the gutter with my right hand. Spikes of pain shot up my fingernails. I dangled from the ledge, my legs flailing, kicking the beautiful stained-glass window right in the Baby Jesus.

On the bright side, swinging precariously from the roof saved my life. Just as I twisted, an axe hurtled from above, slicing the buttons off my denim jacket. A fraction of an inch closer and it would've opened up my chest.

'Hey!' I yelled.

I tend to complain when people try to kill me. Sure, in Valhalla we einherjar are constantly killing each other and we get resurrected in time for dinner. But outside Valhalla I was very much killable. If I died in Boston, I would not be getting a cosmic do-over.

The goat-assassin peered down at me from the peak of the roof. Thank the gods, he appeared to be out of throwing axes. Unfortunately, he still had a sword at his side. His leggings and tunic were stitched from black fur. A soot-smeared chain-mail coat hung loosely on his chest. His black iron helmet had a

chain-mail curtain around the base – what we in the Viking business call an *aventail* – completely covering his neck and throat. His features were obscured by a faceplate fashioned to resemble a snarling wolf.

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Of course a wolf. Everybody in the Nine Worlds loves wolves. They have wolf shields, wolf helmets, wolf screen savers, wolf pyjamas and wolf-themed birthday parties.

Me, not so much loving the wolves.

'Take a hint, Magnus Chase.' The assassin's voice warbled, modulating from soprano to baritone as if going through a special-effects machine. 'Stay away from Provincetown.'

The fingers of my left hand tightened on the hilt of my sword. 'Jack, do your thing.'

'You sure about that?' Jack asked.

The assassin hissed. For some reason, people are often shocked when they find out my sword can talk.

'I mean,' Jack continued, 'I know this guy killed Otis, but *everybody* kills Otis. Getting killed is part of Otis's job description.'

'Just chop off his head or something!' I yelled.

The assassin, not being an idiot, turned and fled.

'Get him!' I told Jack.

'Why do *I* have to do all the hard work?' Jack complained.

'Because I'm dangling here and you can't be killed!'

'Just because you're right doesn't make this cool.'

I flung him overhead. Jack spiralled out of view, flying after the goat-killer while singing his own version of 'Shake It Off'. (I have never been able to convince him that the line isn't *cheese graters gonna grate, grate, grate, grate, grate*.)

Even with my left hand free, it took me a few seconds

to haul myself up to the roof. Somewhere to the north, the clanging of blades echoed off brick buildings. I raced in that direction, leaping over the church's turrets, launching myself across Berkeley Street. I bounced from rooftop to rooftop until I heard Jack yell in the distance, 'OW!'

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Most people might not run into battle to check on the welfare of their swords, but that's what I did. At the corner of Boylston, I scrambled up the side of a parking garage, got to the roof level and found Jack fighting for his . . . well, maybe not his life, but at least his dignity.

Jack often bragged that he was the sharpest blade in the Nine Worlds. He could cut through anything and fight a dozen enemies at once. I tended to believe him, since I'd personally seen him take out giants the size of skyscrapers. Yet the goat-killer was having no trouble forcing him back across the roof. The assassin might have been small, but he was strong and quick. His dark iron sword sparked against Jack. Every time the two blades connected, Jack yelped, 'Ow! Ow!'

I didn't know if Jack was in real danger, but I had to help. Since I didn't have another weapon and I didn't feel like fighting empty-handed, I ran to the nearest lamp post and ripped it out of the cement.

That sounds like I was showing off. Honestly, I wasn't. The pole was just the handiest weapon-like object I could find – except for a parked Lexus, and I wasn't quite strong enough to wield a luxury automobile.

I charged the goat-killer with my twenty-foot-long jousting light fixture. That got his attention. As he turned towards me, Jack lashed out, opening a deep cut in the assassin's thigh. The goat-killer grunted and stumbled.

That was my chance. I could have taken him down. Instead, when I was ten feet away, a distant howl cut through the air and froze me in my tracks.

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Jeez, Magnus, you're thinking, *it was only a distant howl. What's the big deal?*

I may have mentioned I don't like wolves. When I was fourteen, two of them with glowing blue eyes killed my mother. My recent encounter with Fenris hadn't done anything to increase my appreciation for the species.

This particular howl was *definitely* that of a wolf. It came from somewhere across the Boston Common, reverberating off the high-rises, turning my blood to coolant. It was *exactly* the same sound I'd heard the night of my mother's death – hungry and triumphant, the baying of a monster that had found its prey.

The lamp post slipped from my grip, clanging against the ground.

Jack floated to my side. 'Uh, *señor* . . . are we still fighting this guy or what?'

The assassin staggered backwards. The black fur of his leggings glistened with blood. 'And so it begins.' His voice sounded even more garbled. 'Beware, Magnus. If you go to Provincetown, you will play into your enemy's hands.'

I stared at that snarling face mask. I felt like I was fourteen again, alone in the alley behind my apartment the night my mother died. I remembered gazing up at the fire escape from which I had just dropped, hearing the wolves howl from our living room. Then flames exploded from the windows.

'Who – who are you?' I managed.

The assassin let out a guttural laugh. 'Wrong question.

The right question: are you prepared to lose your friends? If not, you should leave Thor's hammer lost.'

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He backed to the edge of the roof and toppled over.

I ran to the ledge just as a flock of pigeons surged upward, rising in a blue-grey cloud, swirling away over the Back Bay's forest of chimneys. Down below: no movement, no body, no sign of the assassin.

Jack hovered next to me. 'I've could've taken him. You just caught me unprepared. I didn't have time to do my stretches.'

'Swords don't stretch,' I said.

'Oh, excuse me, Mr Expert on Proper Warm-up Techniques!'

A tuft of pigeon down helicoptered to the ledge and stuck in a smear of the assassin's blood. I picked up the tiny feather and watched red liquid soak into it.

'So what now?' Jack asked. 'And what was that wolf howl?'

Ice water trickled down my eustachian tubes, leaving a cold, bitter taste in my mouth. 'I don't know,' I said. 'Whatever it was, it's stopped now.'

'Should we go check it out?'

'No! I mean . . . by the time we figured out where the sound came from, we'd be too late to do anything about it. Besides . . .'

I studied the bloody pigeon feather. I wondered how the goat-killer had disappeared so effectively and what he knew about Thor's missing hammer. His distorted voice reverberated in my mind: *Are you prepared to lose your friends?*

Something about the assassin had seemed very wrong . . . yet very familiar.

'We have to get back to Sam.' I grabbed Jack's hilt and exhaustion washed over me.

The downside of having a sword who fights on his own: whatever Jack did, I paid the price as soon as he returned to my hand. I felt bruises spreading across my arms – one for each time Jack had been struck by the other sword. My legs trembled like they'd been doing lunges all morning. A lump of emotion formed in my throat – Jack's shame for letting the goat-killer fight him to a standstill.

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'Hey, man,' I told him, 'at least you cut him. That's more than I did.'

'Yeah, well . . .' Jack sounded embarrassed. I knew he didn't like sharing the bad stuff with me. 'Maybe you should rest for a minute, *señor*. You're in no shape –'

'I'm all right,' I said. 'Thanks, Jack. You did good.'

I willed him to return to pendant form, then reattached the runestone to my neck chain.

Jack was right about one thing: I needed rest. I felt like crawling inside that nice Lexus and taking a nap, but if the goat-assassin decided to double back to the Thinking Cup, if he caught Sam unaware . . .

I took off across the rooftops, hoping I wasn't too late.