

THE RAIDERS



OF FOLKLORE

AN  
EYE  
OF  
ODIN  
PREQUEL

# DOUBLE CROSS

DENNIS STAGINNUS

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OF FOLKLORE

# DOUBLE CROSS

DENNIS STAGINNUS



**Double Cross:  
An Eye of Odin Prequel**

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Four weeks before the events in *The Prisoners of Sparta*

Fifteen-year-old witch-for-hire Sarah Finn finds herself atop the Athenian Acropolis, exchanging money for an ancient Spartan helmet said to contain extraordinary powers. But when the exchange ends in a double-cross, it exposes a conspiracy that could reignite a two thousand-year-old war between Athens and Sparta.

## Double Cross - Chapter 1

*Athens, Greece*

I counted at least a dozen ways I'd rather spend my fifteenth birthday. Surrounded by smugglers out to kill me wasn't one of them.

*I still have things under control*, I told myself, even though the khopesh sword pressed against my jugular suggested otherwise.

At the other end of the long, sickle-like blade was an Egyptian named Faruq. He wore a white suit complete with a fedora, red tie, and matching red kerchief that poked from his front left pocket. He kept me still while another smuggler—a tall, lanky Frenchman named Gaspard—poured salt in a wide circle around us.

Salt had magic-draining properties. It cut a witch's connection to the ambient energy nature gave off—the source of my power. Once contained in a circle, the salt line would become a prison.

My eyes darted from Faruq's glinting blade to the interior of the Parthenon. Chipped columns held up bits and pieces of what used to support the ancient Greek temple's roof. I guessed at the distance between me and the columns—maybe twenty paces, five more down the crumbling steps, and then straight for the pedestrian pathway leading away from the temple. All I had to do was conjure a little pulse spell and...

"If you're thinking of using your magic, let me assure you"—Faruq pressed the khopesh deeper against my skin—"a spell won't pass your lips before I cut off your pretty, little head."

He wasn't kidding. I felt a blood drop trickle down my neck from where he nicked it with the icy blade.

"The circle's done," Gaspard announced, tossing the empty salt bag aside.

The ring's effects hit me instantly. I sucked in a breath. Even though my legs remained firmly in place, I thought I might faint. It was like a part of me had suddenly been torn away, an amputation of my magic.

Satisfied I was trapped, Faruq stepped away and returned the khopesh to his belt.

"Hamadi, search her."

A fat Turk clumsily stepped over the ring, almost brushing it with his heel.

"You idiot," Faruq warned. "If you break the circle, she'll be free to use her magic again."

Hamadi cringed. "Apologies, Effendi. I will be more careful." He bent down and began frisking my cargo pants.

"We had a deal, Faruq," I said, ignoring the Turk's searching hands. "Money in exchange for the artifact."

I peered over Faruq's shoulder, fixing my gaze on the two thousand-year-old helmet set on a marble slab behind him. It was Spartan, made of bronze with a crest of red-dyed horse hair pluming down its back.

The Turk's sausage fingers reached into my leg pocket and fished out a pouch containing Spartan gold. "Here, Effendi." The man tossed the small leather bag to Faruq.

The Egyptian smiled, slipping the pouch into his suit pocket. "Deals are not like hieroglyphs written in stone. They are more like scribbles on papyrus—easy to burn."

He struck a match and lit a thick cigar between his lips. The flickering flame magnified the craters on his pock-marked face. "You know, I met your mother once. She was a beautiful and talented woman."

I put my hands on my hips and huffed.

Apparently, I shared my mother's blue eyes, black hair, and lean figure, leading many to believe I'd also inherited her exceptional skills. Too bad the similarities ended with our looks. Mum had been a badass witch, the ultimate witch-for-hire. To say she was "talented" was like saying Adele made okay music.

"Your mother was also known for her intelligence," Faruq added. "Unlike you."

Gaspard and Hamadi started laughing like two hyenas. The auras surrounding all three men darkened to a sinister shade of red, a sure sign they wished to do me harm. Unlike Mum, I was also an Auralex—someone who could see and feel the aural projections created by living things.

"What makes you think I'm not intelligent?" I asked, thrusting my chin out. I wasn't about to let these goons think I was scared—even though I was.

Faruq smiled, revealing a row of yellow-stained teeth. "For one, you thought you could trust us."

"Besides that, Captain Obvious," I said.

"You conveniently came to meet us here—alone—where no one will hear you scream."

I swallowed. Meeting on the Acropolis had seemed like a good idea. On any other day, the Parthenon, and the hilltop citadel on which it was built, would have been swarming with tourists. Not today. Today, the Acropolis was closed for restorations. The entire place was quiet and empty of life.

Okay, so maybe it was stupid of me not to plan this exchange more carefully.

"The Spartans won't be happy if I don't deliver the helmet to them soon," I said, attempting to divert his attention back to the deal and away from whatever he had planned for me.

Faruq smiled, blowing smoke from his nostrils like a dragon. "I wager they won't be too particular about who brings it to them."

"You think they'll deal with you, a smuggler from the Egyptian Folklore who traps witches?"

Faruq stuck out his lower lip, giving me a wounded look. “I’m sure they will deal with whoever actually *has* the artifact.” He took another long drag from his cigar. “That is, if I were bringing it to them in the first place.”

A sinking feeling grew in my gut. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you ever stop to think there would be other, more powerful people interested in acquiring the helmet? People who would pay more? Of course not. You are too concerned with following rules and doing as you are told.”

“Selling the helmet to someone else is against the Law of Mystical Artifacts, Faruq,” I said. “Not to mention whoever you sell it to will incur the wrath of the Spartans. We need to keep the peace in order to—”

“Peace is overrated,” said Faruq. “A little war now and then can be good for business.” He took a step closer to the salt ring. An ugly sneer spread across his face. “You know what else is good for business?” he asked.

I didn’t answer. I knew it wouldn’t be good.

He smiled. “A dead witch.”

If Faruq wanted to kill me, he would have done it already. There was something else he needed. It couldn’t be money. They already took all I had.

*What then? Information? Does he even know how powerful the helmet is?*

Only one way to find out.

“You don’t know what you’ve got there, do you?” I said, nodding at the artifact.

Faruq plucked the helmet from its perch. “What does it do?” he asked, turning it over in his hands. “I suppose its purpose is of no concern. It is valuable. That’s all that matters.”

I tsked and shook my head. “That’s why you’ll never be more than a small fish in a big sea, Faruq. You’re too short-sighted, never an eye on the bigger picture. What you’re holding isn’t just some rare artifact. It belongs to Leonidas, the king of Sparta.”

Faruq’s expression remained blank.

“Are you kidding me? You don’t know about Leonidas? He led three hundred Spartan soldiers against the entire Persian army before the Battle of Thermopylae. No one suspected the reason such a small force managed to hold off the Persians was because of their magical armor and weapons. This was one of them.”

“So. What. Does. It. Do?” the smuggler repeated.

“Put it on, and find out for yourself.”

Faruq rushed into the circle and backhanded me hard across the face. “You’re trying to trick me!” he spat.

I held my throbbing cheek. “Fine,” I said, sneaking a glance at the salt ring. It was still intact. “Then let me put it on, or give it to one of them. I don’t care.”

As if on cue, Gaspard and Hamadi took a step back.

*Would Faruq be stupid enough to hand over the relic to me?*

I wasn’t sure I’d be able to escape the salt ring, even with the helmet’s powers.



Faruq bit on his cigar, chewing over what to do. “Hamadi, come here.”

The Turk who’d frisked me stumbled forward. “Y-yes, Effendi?”

Faruq held out the helmet. “Put this on.”

A sweaty sheen glistened across Hamadi’s brow. Hands shaking, he took the artifact. “Y-yes, Effendi.” The helmet magically grew in size and shape to accommodate his bulbous head.

Faruq stared, clearly expecting Hamadi to undergo some physical transformation after he slipped it on. “Nothing is happening. He looks just as useless as before.”

I rolled my eyes. “Now try to attack him.”

Faruq’s eyes narrowed. He switched the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other then snapped his fingers. “Gaspard.”

The lanky smuggler unsheathed his rapier, the kind of sword musketeers used centuries ago. He whipped the blade expertly around his body in an impressive display of swordsmanship.

Hamadi shakily drew his khopesh, almost dropping it.

Obviously, Faruq had offered up the more expendable of his two goons to test the artifact.

Gaspard lunged, thrusting his rapier at Hamadi’s midsection.

Hamadi would have been skewered like a shish kebab if it hadn’t been for the helmet’s power. Despite his earlier awkwardness, the Turk’s movements suddenly became fluid, confident. He parried Gaspard’s strike with a loud clang, then smoothly shifted his feet and delivered a skillfully-executed counterstrike. Gaspard had to react quickly, barely lifting his blade in time to keep Hamadi from chopping his head off.

No one seemed more surprised at his sudden fighting skills than Hamadi himself. He stood there for a moment, looking at his khopesh as if the weapon had grown a mind of its own.

Faruq stared at the spectacle, the cigar dangling from his mouth.

“The helmet turns its wearer into a first-class warrior,” I said, keeping my voice casual. “Imagine what it can do for whoever owns it. I can help you get double the amount from whoever you were planning to sell it to.”

“You’re just saying that so I don’t kill you,” Faruq shot back.

“Of course I am.” At least that wasn’t a lie. “But face it—you can use me. Having a witch represent your interests will bring you more... legitimacy. And I wouldn’t mind making some extra quid on the side.”

Faruq processed my offer as he watched the two men dueling.

Gaspard’s face contorted in frustration. He slashed at the Turk repeatedly, each strike becoming deadlier than the last. Hamadi cowered at first, raising his sword in a feeble attempt to block the oncoming assault. But, as before, his weapon swept Gaspard’s blade aside. Then he stepped in, elbowed Gaspard’s chin and—faster than I thought possible—twirled and slashed his khopesh in a wide arc. The edge of his blade cut across Gaspard’s shirt, almost spilling his guts.

Faruq nodded. “Perhaps you may be of some use after all.” He raised a hand, signaling for an end to the duel.

Gaspard lowered his sword, but Hamadi continued his attack like a frenzied shark—just as I’d hoped. The Turk came on without mercy, the khopesh scything smoothly through the air in a deadly arc, slicing his companion’s bicep. Gaspard hissed in pain and backed away.

“Enough!” Faruq ordered.

Weakened and bleeding, Gaspard backpedaled.

Caught up in watching the fight, no one noticed his foot disturb the salt ring binding me. My body soaked in the surrounding ambient energy like a sponge as the salt’s effect dissipated. The hum and tingling sensation of magic filled my core, curling through every limb, charging each molecule with an energy few people possessed.

I balled my fists.

Time to end this.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. If anyone other than a disciplined Spartan puts on the helmet, it kinda starts taking over their body.” I smirked. “I guess I should’ve mentioned that.”

Faruq spat out his cigar and charged into the broken circle. He grabbed me roughly by the neck and pulled me toward him until we were face to face. “You get him to stop before I gut you like a pig.” He unsheathed his khopesh and pressed the tip against my stomach.

The sour stench of his breath made me cringe more than his threat.

I gathered my magic, focusing it into a single spell. Through gritted teeth, I growled, “*Vanya.*”

## Double Cross - Chapter 2

My pulse spell sent Faruq flying through the air like a discarded rag doll. He crashed with a grunt on the Parthenon's floor, losing his hat and khopesh in the process.

Locked in combat, Gaspard and Hamadi were unaware of what I'd done.

I hopped over the salt ring and ran to where Faruq lay dazed on his back. I squished his fedora under my foot before kneeling next to him. "You should read up on the artifacts you plan to double-cross people with," I said, reaching inside his jacket pocket. I felt the silk lining until...

*There it is.*

I pulled out the leather pouch taken from me earlier.

"So, about me not being as smart as my mum—" I jingled the coins in Faruq's face. "Way off on that, don't you think?"

I noticed another pouch peeking from a different suit pocket.

*What's this?*

I snatched it and undid the leather cord. Inside were gold coins bearing the stamped impression of an owl—the symbol of Athens.

*Was an Athenian behind this double-cross?*

If that were true, things just reached a whole new level of complicated.

I tucked both pouches into the pockets of my cargo pants then grabbed Faruq by the collar. "You've been paid by an Athenian. Who is it? Who hired you?"

The smuggler's eyes fluttered. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

I backhanded him across the face.

It felt satisfying.

"Tell me what I want to know!"

Faruq smiled. "What are you going to do? Kill me?"

I slapped him again.

He only laughed then shouted, "*Hujum!*"

At first, I thought his cry was meant for Gaspard or Hamadi, but they were still too busy trying to kill each other to notice.

Then I heard running feet behind me.

*That can't be good.*

I looked over my shoulder. A dozen men came pouring into the Parthenon's northern entrance, each brandishing a khopesh. One aimed a gun.

*Who are these guys?*

I wasn't going to stick around to find out.

I scrambled away in the opposite direction, bolting for the edge of the ruined temple.

“Kill her!” Faruq shouted. “Kill the witch!”

A bullet whistled by, lodging into a wall inches from my shoulder. I sprinted between the Parthenon’s massive columns bathed pink in the setting sun. Bits of marble blasted in my path. Another bullet exploded into a pillar to my right.

I rushed down the temple’s steps, leapt over shrubs growing between the cracks, and raced across the Acropolis. The sun sat low on the horizon, casting tangled shadows over the ancient citadel. The rocky outcrop contained the Parthenon and a few other temple structures but nothing that offered refuge. With sheer drops of almost sixty feet on either side, I chose the safest way off this sacred rock—the way I came in.

I dashed for the Propylaea, a building that had served as the Acropolis’s gateway for centuries. The remnants of its weathered columns and broken walls were silhouetted against the sunset.

Shouts erupted behind me. “*Baedaha!*”

I didn’t think I could run faster, but my legs pumped like pistons until I reached the grand entryway. Most of the entrance was already thick with shadows. Scaffolding crisscrossed its inner walls. Restoration teams had left canvas canopies hanging from the metal pipes to shield them while they worked in the sun. Beyond that, four flights of marble stairs zigzagged to a pathway snaking down to the Outlander city of Athens. Once there, I’d be able to lose Faruq and his henchmen in the city’s twisting streets and alleyways.

I smiled, thinking I was going to make it—until I heard the sound of pounding feet rushing *up* the entrance. More smugglers emerged from the narrow pathway ahead, coming straight for me.

I gasped and wheeled around, ready to head back the way I came, only to find Faruq and his goons had caught up. Trapped by scaffolding and walls on either side with Faruq’s hired thugs stalking from above and below, I had nowhere left to go.

“There is no chance of escape, witch,” Faruq shouted, pushing past his smugglers. He hobbled to the edge of the stairs and leered down at me. “I imagine Leonidas didn’t have to contend with bullets at the Battle of Thermopylae.” He held the Spartan helmet over his head. Blood glistened off its bronze surface. “A deadly lesson for Hamadi to learn.”

I scowled. My willingness to sacrifice the artifact in exchange for escape had led to Hamadi’s death. That was never part of the plan.

“What? Nothing to say?” Faruq jeered. “No witty comeback?”

The wind picked up, whipping my hair across my face. As if trying to get my attention, a canvas sheet flapped and snapped to my left. I eyed the canopy, my knees growing weak as I thought of one last plan to get myself out of here alive. “The helmet belongs to Leonidas, Faruq. You can still do the right thing and give it to the Spartans.”

He laughed, drawing additional snickers from the other smugglers. “The right thing to do is to kill you,” he said coldly. “Like I said before, a witch-for-hire is bad for business.”

Twenty plus smugglers closed in around me, too many to fight off by hand or magic. Like Faruq, the only thing they cared about was...

I dug into my pants pocket and removed the pouch with Athenian gold.

“You really are stupid, Faruq,” I said, undoing the leather cord, “for choosing friends as greedy as you are.” With that, I flung the contents of the pouch at their feet.

Faruq’s thugs pounced on the coins like vultures on a carcass.

The distraction was all I needed. I wove, jumped, and twisted my way past the smugglers. I ripped the nearest canvas tarp from the scaffolding.

“Stop her, you idiots!” Faruq shouted.

Dragging the canvas sheet behind me, I thrust out my elbows and broke past the last few smugglers who blocked my path. I flew down the remaining stairs three at a time, heading for the Acropolis’s ledge. From here, I knew the drop was considerably less than sixty feet, but still high enough to cause serious injury. Not that I had a choice. The alternative was facing thirty PO’d smugglers with sharp, stabby swords.

No time to rethink my plan, I gripped the four corners of the canvas and jumped.

My stomach lurched, and a scream caught in my throat.

I was free-falling.

Weightless.

I prepared for the bone-shattering impact that would end my life when the canvas suddenly billowed like a parachute, catching an updraft and slowing my plunge. The painful jerk almost dislocated my shoulders. With no way to steer or prevent gravity from doing its job, I plummeted straight for a pine tree growing at the base of the Acropolis. My legs struck the topmost branch first, followed by my waist and then every other part of my body. I let go of the canvas and hit each branch like a Plinko chip. An explosion of pinecones and pine needles smothered me as I collapsed on the rocky ground below.

My chest heaved. Eyesight blurred, I rolled onto my back and lay there for a moment, spitting needles from my mouth and staring at the torn canopy flapping in the tree. Every muscle hurt. I was certain I’d fractured, if not broken, several ribs.

But I was alive.

“Happy birthday to me,” I wheezed and started laughing, regretting it instantly as pain wracked my body.

### Double Cross - Chapter 3

It took some time winding through the streets of Athens before I was confident none of the smugglers had followed me. The sun had dipped below the horizon when I finally stumbled into the Athenian Folklore. I was supposed to meet Grigsby here to take a ship back to Sparta—with the helmet. Not only did I *not* have the artifact, I was late too.

Like the other Kingdoms spread throughout the world, the Athenian Folklore was hidden from Outlanders by means of invisibility incantations and clever teleportation spells. If trespassers from Athens happened to stray too close to its borders, they were magically transported across the site without sensing what had happened. As a Folklorian, I passed through the barrier without incident. One minute, gravel from a deserted road crunched beneath my feet. The next, I found myself in front of a stone archway with a beautiful city of white marble rising behind it.

This was New Athens—the heart of the Athenian Folklore.

Two Greek soldiers stood guard on either side of the entrance. Their bronze shields, helmets, spears, and shin greaves glinted in the day's last light. Their posture remained rigid, giving no sign of noticing me, except their eyes—they studied me as I hustled by.

I must have looked like someone who'd gone to Tartarus and back. My clothes were ripped and stained with blood, my lip had swollen from where Faruq had slapped me, and I was sure pine needles were still tangled in my hair. But despite my appearance, the guards made no attempt to stop me.

I quickened my pace, putting distance between myself and the archway. Once out of eyeshot, I ducked into a darkened alley. I spotted laundry suspended from a clothesline spanning the narrow corridor. I reached up and tugged free a large blue sheet. I did my best folding the material in the traditional Greek chiton style, taking special care wrapping it around my tender ribs. Then I took a thinner, white sheet and draped it over my head like a shawl.

Satisfied my Outlander clothes were covered, I poked my head out of the alley and scanned the way ahead. Apart from a few pedestrians and a stray dog, the coast was clear.

I hurried down the street.

Minutes later, I reached the agora, an open area in the heart of the city. The place reminded me of an ancient strip mall. Long, two-storied buildings containing shops bordered part of the square, and market stalls covered by canvas awnings dotted the open space. All of these were dwarfed by the surrounding temples dedicated to various Greek gods and goddesses. They stood majestically—grand monuments defying the passage of time. Their marble façades gleamed a soft bluish-white.

Women with elegant hairstyles tied in ribbons moved about the square. Their brightly colored chitons flowed delicately in the early evening breeze. The men gathered in clusters,

debating politics or maybe the merits of non-chafing togas. I couldn't be sure. My ancient Greek was poor-to-nonexistent.

I stuck to the agora's periphery, doing my best to blend in. I walked at the same pace as everyone else, stopping occasionally to glance at items for sale—all the while keeping an eye out for Grigsby. It didn't take long to spot my Caretaker haggling with a merchant. Despite the humidity, Grigs wore his cowboy hat and a heavy leather duster.

The merchant handed him a small red box which Grigs quickly stuffed into his pocket.

I sidled next to him and pulled back my shawl, revealing my grimy face and knotted hair.

The elf did a double take. "What in tarnation? What the hell happened to you?"

I grabbed his elbow and steered him away from the merchant. "Ran into some trouble," I said.

Grigsby searched my hands. "Where's the helmet?"

"The whole thing was a double-cross."

I told him about Faruq's treachery and how he had a bag of Athenian gold. Grigs knew as well as I did what it meant. Someone in the Athenian Folklore paid Faruq to get the Spartan helmet and kill me to cover their tracks.

"Any idea who might want to do that?" I asked.

Grigs shook his head. "World's full of double-crossin' weasels, Sarah," he said in his Texan drawl. "We best be gettin' outta here before whoever paid'im finds out yer still alive. The Coven's already got another mission for us."

"Another mission... so soon?"

I needed time for my wounds to heal. And without food or a decent sleep, my magic wouldn't last much longer.

As attractive a prospect it was to flee the city, I couldn't leave just yet. "I have to get word to the Spartans that I failed my mission." The words tasted dry in my mouth. I wasn't used to losing.

Grigsby made a face. "Have you thought about what might happen if you do? The Spartans could just as well gather their forces an' come attack the Athenians."

"It's a possibility."

"A possibility? Spartans are warlike—brutal—with no respect for other Kingdoms."

I pinched my lips together. "So what do you expect me to do? Stand by and do nothing while the Athenians collect artifacts that threaten the future of Sparta?"

"Think about yer actions. That's all I'm sayin'. I've told you before that blindly doin' as the Coven asks isn't always the best for Folklore."

"In case you've forgotten, doing as they ask is what keeps food on the table."

"I haven't forgotten. But you fail to see that not everythin' is black an' white. There are gray areas of morality in the world, Sarah. The sooner you wake up to that fact, the sooner you'll become the witch yer mother wanted you to be."

“And look where that got her. You don’t end up dying and leaving your then-five-year-old daughter an orphan by following the rules.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No, but what I do know is that the Spartans trusted me to get their helmet back. It’s only fair to let them know I failed. Where’s the nearest oracle?”

The elf grudgingly pointed to a palace spanning the hilltop overlooking the city. “It won’t be easy to get in there, not if there’s someone here who wants you dead.”

“The way today is going, I don’t expect anything to be easy.”

Grigsby harrumphed and pulled the brim of his Stetson over his forehead. “Well, I reckon if we’re goin’, we best be—”

“Wait.” I sensed a familiar aura drawing closer. It was faint, hard to pick out amid the crowd gathered in the agora. Pushing Grigsby farther into the shadows, I scanned the open square.

Weaving past pedestrians, with Gaspard and three other smugglers surrounding him, was Faruq. His flattened fedora sat slightly askew on his head, and he was carrying a sack. The faint outline of the Spartan helmet pressed against the fabric.

“C’mon,” I whispered. “We might be able to salvage this mission after all.”

“Oh, for the love of... what’re you goin’ to do now?”

“Don’t worry,” I reassured him. “I have a plan.”



## Double Cross - Chapter 4

The only plan I had was to engage the smugglers in a full frontal assault, snatch the helmet, and make for the harbor where our getaway ship waited. It wasn't one of my best plans—or the smartest—but with Grigsby at my side, overwhelming five smugglers should be easy.

*Clip. Clop. Clip. Clop.*

That is if they didn't hear us coming first.

Grigsby's boots were like horse hooves tramping along the cobblestones. At the moment, there were enough people bustling about to drown out the sound. That wouldn't be the case once we reached the palace gates.

*Clip. Clop. Clip. Clop.*

I spun around. "Will you stop that?"

"Stop what?"

"Your boots and—" I looked him up and down. "This... what you're wearing. You stick out like... like..." A comparison wasn't coming to me. "Like a cowboy in Greece."

Being a centuries-old elf, Grigsby liked to reinvent himself every fifty years or so. I didn't blame him. It must be boring being the same person day in and day out for hundreds of years.

*But why did he have to be a cowboy, taking on a Texan slang and wearing cowboy clothes?*

He stuck out like a sore thumb wherever we went.

I put my hands on my hips, looking Grigs over. There wasn't much I could do about his boots, so I plucked the dusty Stetson from his head, revealing his blond, shoulder-length hair and pointed ears.

Pushing the hat against his chest, I turned and surveyed the route ahead.

The crowd thinned the closer one got to the palace. Another hundred feet, and the only thing between us and the smugglers would be an empty street.

No pedestrians. No anti-boot clopping barrier.

*Should we make our move before then? Confront them in front of all these people?*

Faruq and the others never bothered looking over their shoulders.

*Determined to finish their deal*, I figured.

Which still left one question. *Who are they delivering the helmet to?*

The sounds of running sandals and rattling armor interrupted my thoughts. A hoplite squad came marching double time down the avenue.

I nudged Grigsby into a side street just as two dozen muscled hoplites approached. As a witch, I made it a rule to keep a low profile whenever the authorities were around. Witches couldn't be sure whether they were there to help or take us away to be burned at the stake.

Centuries of witch hunts made us super paranoid. And since someone in the Athenian Folklore wanted me out of the way, I thought it best to stay hidden.

The hoplite squad came to a stop in front of Faruq. Each soldier wore bronze armor and a light-blue cloth draped over one shoulder. The frightening head of Medusa decorated their shields. Her tangled snake hair seemed to writhe on the surface.

“What is happening?” the smuggler asked.

“Diocles has raised the alarm,” replied the lead soldier. The plume running lengthwise across his helmet identified him as the hoplite captain.

“For what reason?” Gaspard asked.

“The Loremaster has detected a rogue witch inside the Kingdom.”

*Rogue? How could they say that? If they checked with the Coven, they’d know I was in the area on a mission—albeit for a rival kingdom, but that was beside the point.*

Grigsby’s aura shifted from red to pink. He reached for the Winchester rifle hidden beneath his duster.

I put my hand on his arm. “What are you doing?”

“The hoplite captain—that’s Themistocles,” Grigsby whispered. “He used to be an Athenian general. Saved all of Greece from bein’ overrun by Persians two thousand years ago.”

“I know who Themistocles is,” I said. I studied enough history textbooks about famous historical figures. “But if he’s a general, what’s he doing leading a simple hoplite squad?”

“Hell if I know. Maybe he’s fallen outta favor with the rulin’ class.”

As good a guess as any, but Folklore politics was the last thing on my mind. How to get the helmet back without being spotted or killed was priority number one.

“What are you carrying?” Themistocles asked, spotting the bag in Faruq’s hand.

Faruq pulled it away. “An item of great importance to Diocles.”

*Diocles... the Athenian Loremaster? What does he want with the helmet?*

There was a pause as both men scowled at one another.

“I presume you were ordered to hunt down the witch?” Faruq finally said. “Why don’t you run along and do as you’re told.”

Anger flashed across Themistocles’s face. He took a threatening step toward Faruq then stopped, visibly taking a breath and checking his emotions. He raised a hand, signaling his hoplites to continue on. The captain followed, but not before giving Faruq one last, murderous glare.

“It’s only a matter of time before they catch us, Sarah,” Grigsby warned. He still had a hand on his rifle.

“Well, we’re not going to shoot our way out of here, if that’s what you were planning.” I waited for the sounds of marching feet to fade. “We have more pressing things to worry about at the moment, like what does an Athenian Loremaster want with a magical helmet belonging to Sparta?”

“There could be a dozen reasons, all of ’em bad.”

“Like?”

“Best case scenario—destroyin’ it so no one else can use it.”

“And worst case?” I hated to ask, but I needed to know.

“Learnin’ how to duplicate the helmet’s magic.”

I shuddered. The thought of an entire army wearing helmets like that one was enough to make any Kingdom in Folklore nervous. Diocles’s plan, whatever it was, could cause a ripple effect in the region, disturbing the peace that has existed between Athens and Sparta for over two thousand years.

I couldn’t let that happen.

Grigs must have read my mind. “It’s too risky to attack Faruq with those hoplites so close by. If Diocles is involved, we should get outta the city, pronto.”

“I still need to get into the palace and reach the oracle. I *have* to let the Spartans know what’s happening. *Not* telling them doesn’t feel right.”

Grigs let out a long sigh. He knew it was useless to argue once I’d made up my mind. “Then follow me,” he said, fitting the Stetson back on his head. “I know another way in.”

## Double Cross - Chapter 5

Caretakers familiarized themselves with the locations of every mission their witches went on. Grigsby was especially thorough about his research. When not supervising my training, he spent his free time planning for different scenarios, just in case a mission went sideways.

Like now.

I followed him through a maze of alleys and side streets. It didn't take long for the worn-out cobblestones to give way to a dirt trail. We circumnavigated the palace walls onto a rough hillside, careful to stay hidden from sentries patrolling the palace ramparts above.

We climbed a narrow track, threading through dry underbrush, olive groves, and manicured trees shaped like spearheads growing along the embankment. The buildings of New Athens fell away behind us, and the noise of the agora faded to faraway echoes. The swish of leaves moving in the stiff breeze was the only sound disturbing the warm night.

Grigs stopped at a portion of the wall where no sentry could be spotted. "How much mojo you got left?" he asked.

Mojo—his word for magic.

"Some... why?"

He tipped his hat back and scanned the forty-foot wall.

I followed his gaze. "Oh gods. You want me to climb *that*?"

"Goin' through the front gates was never an option, Sarah. 'Specially not after findin' out Diocles may be involved in all o' this."

I clenched my teeth. I knew he was right, but I'd had enough of heights for one day.

Grigs took his Winchester from its holster. The silver barrel and bullet chamber sparkled under the dim moonlight. "Don't take any unnecessary risks. Got me? It's too late to go after the helmet. No mission is worth gettin' killed over."

He rarely showed such concern, so I took his warning seriously.

"To reach the Oracle, you have to take the corridor to the left, follow it all the way to the end, take a right, go down the stairs, an' turn left again. From there, you'll see the Oracle's flames." He held the Winchester by the stock and barrel in front of him. "Yer gonna need to take a good run at me."

Heart thumping, I barely managed a nod. I stepped several paces away from him and the wall. I unwrapped my stolen chiton and shawl, dropping them both onto the dry grass. Then I slipped off my Outlander clothes, revealing my black witch's outfit underneath. The skin-tight material was made from enchanted threads and laced with tiny dragon scales. It regulated my body temperature, offered mobility for combat, and matched my hair color.

"Ready?" Grigsby called.

I tightened my ponytail and shook out my arms, mentally preparing myself.

“C’mon,” the elf pressed. “Quit stallin’.”

“Just give me a second.”

*Ugh. He could be so annoying.*

I took three sharp breaths and focused on the topmost edge of the wall.

Some days I hated this job.

I rocked nervously on the balls of my feet, then started running. Picking up speed, I crossed the space between us at a sprint.

Grigs stood with his back to the wall. I sprang, jumped on his rifle and, with his brute strength and my magic, was boosted high into the air. I stretched out, reaching into empty air for the ledge. My fingers caught the rampart. Then my ribs pounded against the stones. The resulting painful spasm upset my right hand. Bits of weathered mortar crumbled away. I stifled a shriek as my precarious grasp began to slip. Feet bicycling, my shoes scraped on the wall’s rigid surface, trying to gain traction. Muscles straining, stomach churning, fingers losing all feeling, I finally caught a brick sticking out farther than the rest with my foot. I heaved myself up and plopped over onto the other side.

I slumped there for a moment, massaging my ribs. Luckily there were no guards to catch my less-than-graceful jump. The only movement came from a string of flickering torches mounted on wall brackets to my left.

I rose shakily to my feet and peered over the wall’s edge, giving Grigs a thumbs-up. He nodded back then pointed left—the direction I was supposed to go. I slinked down the corridor, hoping the shadows between each torch offered enough darkness to hide me in case anyone walked by.

I sensed a single aura ahead. Pressing against the wall, I stole a brief glance around the corner. A guard stood at the far end, facing away in the opposite direction.

I sneaked up behind him and wrapped a hand around his throat.

“*Rauco-balan*,” I whispered.

An electric shock zapped from my fingers. The charge was weak, but the guard’s bronze armor worked like a conductor, amplifying the electricity now coursing through his body. He vibrated for a brief second then sagged in my arms. I eased him to the floor, careful not to make a sound. He’d be out for a while.

My magical reserves were nearing the red zone. I needed rest. But now wasn’t the time.

I padded down the rest of the passageway. The empty space between the columns to my left offered a view into the palace courtyard below. I could see the Oracle. Small in comparison to the buildings surrounding it, the temple gleamed in flawless white marble. Burning incense and expertly carved statues decorated its steps. For a price, the priestess inside would magically relay my message to a similar oracle in the Spartan Kingdom.

I hadn’t worked out exactly what I was going to tell them. If I alerted the Spartans of Diocles’s treachery, they’d probably retaliate and attack New Athens, just as Grigs predicted.

*And if I don't warn them, I'll be responsible for whatever happens next. Maybe an attack on Sparta or even a full scale war.*

I shook my head in frustration. The Coven's rules and my witch's training never covered stuff like this.

I glided down a spiral staircase and headed left again. Shadows emerged at the far edge of the next corridor. I heard a man's gravelly voice and ducked back.

"—much will we get for it?"

"Enough to hold us over for months."

I balled my fists.

That voice. That aura.

It was Faruq.

"But we didn't take care of the witch," a different smuggler pointed out. "That won't make the Loremaster happy."

"No," Faruq snarled, "so be on your guard. We will insist on being paid our full amount. If Diocles tries to double-cross us, we need to be ready..."

Their voices trailed off.

*What am I going to do? I can't let Diocles get his hands on the helmet.*

With the hoplites searching the city for me, there'd be fewer guards patrolling the palace. Getting to the Oracle would be easy. Another fifty yards, and I'd be there. But the helmet's so close. Instead of alerting the Spartans, I could try to get it back.

*Imagine how grateful they'd be if I did.*

But Grigsby had said, *Don't take any unnecessary risks.*

"Sorry," I whispered, both to his warning and my better judgment.

I tiptoed to where the smugglers had been only moments ago. The stench of Faruq's tobacco still lingered in the air. I glanced around the corner. The smugglers' shadows disappeared over a set of wide, marble stairs that led into the palace. I started after them, stopping short of the top stair to scan the way ahead again.

There they were—five smugglers, maybe thirty feet away, entering the palace's antechamber.

I took a deep breath. If I was going to fight them and take the helmet, speed would be key—shock and awe. If I got bogged down in a prolonged struggle, my magical reserves would drain before I had a chance to escape. Then I'd be in real trouble.

I was about to make my move when a shout from behind startled me.

"You there! Stop where you are!"

I whipped around to see two palace guards coming up the stairs. Their spears pointed menacingly in my direction.

## Double Cross - Chapter 6

My heart pounded out a frantic beat. I glanced over my shoulder. The guard's shouting had alerted the smugglers. Faruq's lip curled into a snarl. He snapped his fingers and three of his goons headed my way, drawing their swords.

*So much for shock and awe.*

Losing the element of surprise complicated matters, but it didn't change my objective. There was no turning back. It was either retrieve the helmet or be captured trying.

I gathered my magic, focusing on the guards rushing up the stairs. The higher ground gave me a tactical advantage.

*"Vanya!"*

My pulse spell slammed into them like an invisible wave, sending their bodies crashing down the steps.

I spun, preparing to do the same to the henchmen Faruq sent after me. But before I could muster another spell, the magic surrounding my hands sputtered like two dying lightbulbs.

*Dammit.*

One of the smugglers, a burly man with a deep scar running down one cheek, was already on me. His khopesh raised, Scarface plunged the blade at my skull. Rather than leaping clear, I charged and grabbed his wrist with both hands. We struggled for several seconds, me trying to wrench the sword from his grasp, and Scarface trying to cut me in two. But he refused to be disarmed so easily.

I winced. A sharp pain shot through my ribs. I couldn't wrestle like this much longer.

Scarface managed to jerk his hand free and, with a roundhouse swing, punched me hard across the face.

The impact rattled my skull.

Before he could hit me again, I hooked my right arm under his elbow, twisted the joint, and dropped my shoulder.

Crack.

The force snapped his elbow.

Scarface cried out. I pushed him aside, focusing on the next two smugglers.

Rather than flanking me from two directions, making it harder for me to deal with them, both goons were nice enough to attack me head on.

*Thank you.*

Managing to conjure another pulse spell, I knocked them back, sending both skidding on the polished floor until they hit the far side of the chamber wall.

That left only Faruq and Gaspard standing in the antechamber.

"You have something of mine," I called out. My breath wheezed in painful spasms.

The blue glow surrounding my hands sputtered again.

I had enough power for one more spell. If I used it now, I'd have nothing left for my escape.

Faruq smirked, clutching the sack to his body. "And how do you propose to escape the city with so many soldiers hunting you?"

"I'll worry about that later," I said. "Now give me the helmet."

"Very well." Faruq lobbed the sack high in my direction.

I realized too late it was meant as a distraction.

Gaspard rushed forward, cracking his fist across my face and splitting my other lip. Without hesitating, he grabbed my shoulders, yanked me down, and thrust his knee deep into my stomach. Once. Twice. The third blow sent me crumpling to the floor.

Spots dotted my vision. My ribs, already bruised from everything that happened today, felt like mush.

Gaspard unsheathed his rapier. Tightening his grip on the hilt, his lips curled into an ugly grin. He raised the blade high in the air, preparing to split my skull.

I couldn't move, paralyzed by pain and fear.

"Stop!" a voice shouted.

The sword flew out of Gaspard's hands.

Palace guards hurried into the antechamber, surrounding me, Gaspard, and Faruq. The circle parted for a man in his mid-thirties wearing a white toga. He had black hair, impeccably styled into little curls and held in place with oil. The same had been done with his beard, fashioned to a point on his chin. Silver bracelets adorned his wrists, decorated with the Loremaster insignia—a sun flanked by two eagle wings.

This was Diocles, the Athenian Loremaster.

Any other time, I would've been happy to see a Loremaster arrive to save my life.

Not this time.

This one wanted me "out of the way".

There was something else. His aura. The red luminescence surrounding him was tainted, the way black ink swirls and bleeds when it comes in contact with water.

The blood drained from my face. *He's used magic to kill.*

Diocles strode into the circle, using Gaspard's sword like a cane. The metal tip clinked on the marble floor.

"She was mine, you *ibn il-kalb!*" Gaspard shouted. The smuggler's rage amplified his aura to a blazing red.

"You want your sword back?" the Loremaster asked. His tone remained calm, even.

"Give it to me!"

The rapier floated from Diocles's hands. It hovered in front of him for a moment, then faster than my eyes could follow, the Loremaster magically launched the sword like an arrow. All I could do was watch in horror as the blade sliced through the air in a blur. With an almost



imperceptible squelch, it impaled Gaspard through the chest. The smuggler stumbled back, eyes wide, gawking at the weapon lodged in his sternum. His shock lasted only a second before his eyeballs rolled back and he collapsed to the floor in a bloody heap.

Faruq reached for his khopesh.

“Your friend was stupid and insolent,” Diocles said, thrusting a finger in the smuggler’s direction. “Don’t make the same mistake he did.”

Faruq slowly withdrew his hand.

Then Diocles turned his attention to me.

Horrified by his brutality, I tried to crab-crawl away. The palace guards blocked my path. Diocles must have noticed my revulsion. Raising both hands, he came toward me as if I was an animal in need of rescue.

“Do not be alarmed, my dear. Do you know who I am?”

“Diocles,” I wheezed.

“Ah, you’ve heard of me.”

“I heard you’re behind all this.”

Diocles grimaced. “Behind what exactly?”

I swallowed my fear and glanced at Gaspard’s corpse. His aura had winked out. “You’re planning to keep the Spartan helmet for yourself.”

The Loremaster straightened. “I only seek to maintain the balance between the Spartan Kingdom and our own. Should the Spartans gain possession of Leonidas’ helmet, it could incite an attack against us.”

“Folklorian artifacts belong to their rightful Kingdoms,” I said. “The rule was made ages ago by the Coven, *and* the Council of Loremasters, which you’re supposed to serve.”

“But not all rules are meant to be followed,” Diocles countered. “The same can be said for returning all artifacts to their respective Kingdoms. Doing so can have dire consequences.”

“So can not returning them,” I shot back, slowly rising to my feet. I wavered, the pain in my ribs making me dizzy.

The surrounding guards took a measured step toward me.

“Answer me this then,” Diocles said. “Why do the Spartans want their helmet back now? After two millennia?”

“It’s not my job to ask why a Kingdom wants their artifacts returned. My job is to retrieve them. That’s it.

A broad smile stretched across his face, like a wolf ready to devour a lamb. “Ah, ever the obedient witch, aren’t you?”

I sneered at the comment. “At least I’m not breaking the law. Why did you do it? Why turn your back on principles that have existed for hundreds of years?”

“Mind your tone, witchling,” Diocles said, wagging his finger. “You are still addressing a Loremaster. As for my reasons for taking the helmet, suffice it to say, there are power shifts

happening throughout Folklore, and I want to be sure New Athens, not Sparta, finds itself at the pinnacle of that power.”

I didn’t know what power shifts he was talking about. Frankly, I didn’t care.

“But why risk antagonizing the Spartans? You’ve been in conflict with them ever since the Peloponnesian Wars. Taking the helmet will only make things worse.” I fought to keep my voice from trembling. “I’m going to stop you,” I said. The words must have sounded pathetic coming from a bleeding fifteen-year-old who could hardly stand straight.

The Loremaster’s eyes narrowed. “That is unfortunate. I was hoping we could come to terms.” He folded his hands behind his back. “So what am I to do with you then?”

“How about letting me go?” I knew Diocles was toying with me. He’d made up his mind about what to do with me long before I was captured.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible. If I do, your first stop will undoubtedly be to an Oracle or to Sparta itself, alerting them of what has transpired here. Although I imagine the Spartans won’t be pleased with you for letting their artifact fall into my hands.”

I huffed. “Let? That’s a good one.”

“We could lock you in our dungeons,” Diocles continued as if I hadn’t interrupted, “or perform a mind-wiping spell. Each has its drawbacks. However unlikely, you could escape our dungeons with the help of your Caretaker, who I imagine is somewhere nearby. And mind-wiping spells aren’t one hundred percent effective. Memories always have a way of trickling back.” He stroked his beard. “I suppose our only option is to kill you.”

The way Diocles said it was so cold and matter-of-fact it made my skin crawl.

“If you kill me, the Coven will—”

“Will what? Punish me?” He laughed. “The Coven’s interests lie in keeping the status quo between Kingdoms, to prevent one from becoming more powerful than the other. They don’t care about anything else. You, of all people, should know that.”

*Me of all people?* I felt a tightness in my chest. “What do you mean?”

“Your mother’s murder. I know the Coven did little to capture her killer.”

I opened my mouth, but didn’t know what to say. Mum was killed on a routine retrieval mission in Iraq ten years ago. The man responsible was never brought to justice.

“Did you know her killer was an Outlander with close ties to the Inquisition? Of course, you did. You probably wanted to go after him yourself.”

He was right—I had. I wanted to make him pay for turning me into an orphan, for taking the only parent I had.

“It is unfortunate that those pesky rules you live by keep getting in the way. Tell me, what is the Coven’s sixth rule?”

“Witches are forbidden from seeking vengeance,” I whispered.

Diocles snickered, enjoying himself. “Convenient, don’t you think?” He strolled around the circle as if he was giving a lecture. “And do you know why the Coven didn’t do anything?”

I took a step back, inching closer to the guards behind me.

“Because they didn’t want to,” he snapped. “Because seeking justice would upset the delicate peace between Folklore and the Inquisition—the status quo. Frankly, your mother wasn’t worth it.”

I knew he was trying to get me worked up, using Mum’s murder to drive a wedge between my beliefs and the Coven. Still, I’d be lying if I didn’t resent them for doing nothing to avenge her death.

“The Spartans started this by hiring you to retrieve their helmet,” Diocles went on. “*They* were the ones prepared to upset the balance between our Kingdoms. So you see, I doubt my stealing one little artifact and killing one little witch for the sake of restoring balance will provoke any response from the Coven. Nobody’s going to kill me. Nobody is going to help you. And nothing can stop me from—”

I moved like a flash. Ribs throbbing, I lunged at the guard closest to me and caught him with a kick to the knee. He cried out and lost his balance. I yanked the spear from his grip and, like a caged tiger, used it to lash out at anyone who dared come too close.

“Come now,” Diocles said, picking at a stain on the sleeve of his toga. He seemed more concerned with his appearance than any threat I posed. “Resorting to weapons is beneath any witch, even for one as young as you.”

I pointed to Gaspard, the rapier still imbedded in his chest. “Didn’t seem to stop you. You used magic to kill. Tell me, what’s the Coven’s first rule?”

The Loremaster scowled. He knew exactly what it was. *No magicker will use magic to kill*. To do so would distort our link to the ambient energy, twisting it and the user into something evil.

Looking at his tainted aura, I knew Gaspard wasn’t the first person he’d killed with magic.

“Any more of this nonsense will only delay the inevitable,” Diocles said through clenched teeth. “Drop the weapon, and I will make your death quick and painless.”

My limbs trembled. Outnumbered and in the condition I was in, there was no chance of getting out of this alive. The futility of it all made me want to burst out and cry. A tear ran down my cheek, and I gripped the spear even tighter.

Diocles sighed. “Very well.” He thrust out his hand. An invisible force clenched my throat, cutting off my airway.

I dropped the spear and shot both hands to my throat.

“Did you actually think you could stop me?” Diocles said, tilting his head as if I was an amusing plaything. His fingers curled into claws, squeezing tighter.

My body lifted off the floor, his magic suspending me in midair.

Forcing a hand free, I tried to reach out in Diocles’s direction, muster my last ounce of magic. But my arm fell limp at my side, too heavy to move.

The hollow effort made the Loremaster laugh. “I admire your spirit, witchling, but you simply cannot harm me.”

With my vision blurring, the Loremaster's white toga and Faruq's figure beside him turned into hazy blobs. My eyes flitted across the floor, resting on the sack the smuggler had tossed earlier. A flash of bronze peeked from its opening.

My pulse thudded in my ears. I had enough power for one last spell, one last desperate attempt to save myself.

I flicked my hand. "*Toltha!*"

The Spartan helmet flew across the room.

## Double Cross - Chapter 7

The helmet felt cool when it reached my hand. Odd that the sensation would be so palpable, especially while the life was being choked out of me.

The retrieval spell surprised Diocles. His stranglehold loosened, long enough to slide the helmet over my head. The supernatural grip choking me disappeared instantly.

I dropped to my feet. The antechamber sharpened. My body tingled. Energy rushed to my aching muscles, and my magic returned to full power.

*Amazing.*

I knew the helmet increased its wearer's combat skills, but I never expected it to amplify my strength and magic too.

I snatched the spear I'd let go of earlier. A combination of killing blows and ways to injure my opponents flashed in my mind. I spun, whipping the spear's bronze tip in a wide arc. The weapon became an extension of my body.

Seeing the danger I posed, a guard to my left attacked first.

Before he made it within five feet, I stabbed the spear's point into the ground and used it as leverage to propel me forward, delivering a kick to his throat. He collapsed, gasping. Without stopping, I wheeled and smacked the shaft at another guard's ankles, tripping him to the stone floor. I threw a back fist at the next closest guard. His nose crunched on impact. Reaching down, I slipped the short sword from his scabbard. In one smooth motion, I cut another soldier along the arm, forcing him to drop his weapon.

More guards came at me. I backflipped effortlessly out of their way, landing in a crouched position with both spear and sword extended to either side.

My heart beat at a regular rhythm. My breath was steady.

I smiled.

*This is awesome.*

I'd just taken out six Athenians without breaking a sweat. Not even on my best day, fully charged with magic, could I have accomplished what I just did.

"You fools!" Diocles shouted, watching the guards struggle to subdue me. He stretched back his arm, conjured a fireball in his palm, and threw it.

I somersaulted out of its path in one lithe movement. The flame caught a soldier behind me, first igniting his uniform, then his flesh. His screams echoed throughout the chamber.

Diocles never flinched. He let out a strangled cry. "Give me that helmet!"

He conjured flame after flame and hurled them at me, showing no remorse for those caught in the crossfire. Time and again, I managed to leap clear. Soldiers scrambled out of the way. Stray fireballs torched tapestries decorating the chamber walls. The flames spread quickly,

engulfing much of the antechamber in seconds. If I stayed any longer, I'd be trapped in the burning carnage.

I saw an opening—a chance to escape. But something held me back. *I have the helmet, what am I waiting for?*

What happened next scared me more than the Loremaster, guards, and fireballs put together.

I lost control of my actions. My body worked automatically. The helmet commanded my actions. Rather than running clear, I launched headlong at three more guards. They quaked in their sandals, and I could smell their fear. A jab from my spear into a guard's shield sent him tumbling backward. I twirled, cutting another across his chest plate, and ducked as a fireball glanced over my shoulder.

It was like being in a dream, seeing everything happen in front of you, but unable to stop it. The lust for battle replaced my will to escape, as if the helmet wasn't programmed to retreat. It wanted to maim everyone in sight, no matter what happened to the person wearing it.

No wonder Spartans trained their whole lives to control the magic their weapons and armor possessed.

This is what happened to Hamadi. He'd been consumed by the artifact's thirst for battle. *I can't let that happen to me.*

Thinking about Hamadi's fate, I regained a measure of control over my body. Tossing the sword aside, I switched the grip on my spear and flung it at Diocles. The spear missed, slicing through the folds of his toga. I bent down, grabbed a discarded hoplite shield, and pounded down the palace stairs.

I picked up speed once I reached the open courtyard. In my peripheral vision, I made out a column of archers gathering along the ramparts. They readied their bows and let loose a simultaneous volley of arrows that sliced the air and arced toward me like mini-missiles.

*"Vanya!"* I shouted, thrusting my spell skyward.

The pulse altered most of the arrows' trajectories, but some remained unaffected. I ducked under the safety of my stolen shield. Some arrows slammed into its bronze surface, others sparked off the marble flagstones around me. Certain the first volley had passed, I got up and kept running, crossing the square with the speed of an Olympic sprinter. More arrows flew past. I dodged some and deflected others before finally arriving at the main gates.

I slid to a stop. The hoplites Grigsby and I encountered earlier were marching up the avenue. The noise and commotion must have drawn them back to the palace.

Themistocles shouted orders. Soldiers in the first row knelt on one knee while the second row stood behind, resting their spears on the shoulders of those in front. They formed a phalanx—a dense wall of shields and spears.

I didn't care.

They stood between me and completing my mission.

*No. That's not me. I don't want to attack them.*

The helmet's power was fighting to take back control.

Gripping the shield tight to my body, I prepared to plow through the man-made blockade. I was a machine fueled by bloodlust, an unstoppable force consumed by combat.

To get to the harbor and freedom, I'd have to go through them.

I calculated the odds of making it through. They weren't good. All it took was one lucky cut, one wayward blade, and it would be game over.

*Don't do it. We can't win.*

My body hurled itself at the phalanx anyway. Using my shield, I knocked several spears out of the way. The first row of soldiers pushed forward. Their shield wall knocked me back, allowing their spears room to thrust. I jerked sideways, preventing a spearhead from stabbing my arm. As I was crouching low, a second spear almost sliced my neck.

I backed off.

Magic helmet or not, I wasn't impenetrable to that many spears. These soldiers were quick, skilled, and motivated. I couldn't fight them all.

"Surrender yourself, witch," Themistocles called out.

I hesitated, scanning the tense faces along the phalanx staring back at me.

Running footsteps from behind told me Diocles, Faruq, and a dozen palace guards had arrived.

"Stop her! Don't let her leave," the Loremaster ordered. "If she takes another step, kill her."

I couldn't go forward. I couldn't retreat. There were no side paths, scaffolding, or canvas sheets to use as parachutes this time.

I slid the bronze shield from my forearm, dropping it on the cobblestones with a loud clang. The move was unexpected. The hoplites along the phalanx tensed and readjusted the grips on their spears, preparing for whatever came next.

Taking a deep breath, I forced the helmet to release its hold over me.

*No. Without it I'm as good as dead. I'd never be able to escape.*

I fought to lift it off my head. I was done being its puppet, but the artifact refused to leave its host so easily. The metal squeezed against my forehead and temples. I yanked harder.

*I want you off!*

As if pushing through some mental barrier, it finally popped free.

Released from the helmet's effects, the pain in my ribs throbbed, the dull ache in my face returned, and my legs buckled. Exhausted and demoralized, I fell to my knees. I was burned out. More than that, my magic reserves had completely drained. I had nothing left.

Just my wits.

The fate of the mission and my life depended on the next few moments. If I wasn't careful, Diocles could order Themistocles to arrest me, and the helmet would be his. Then again, if he wanted to, the Loremaster could order my execution right on the spot. I liked that scenario even less.

“I surrender!” I said, raising both arms.

Themistocles stepped out from behind his phalanx. A hand rested on the hilt of his sword. “Why have you come here? Why have you attacked the palace guards?”

His gaze drifted over my shoulder.

I looked back. Thick smoke billowed from where the Loremaster’s fireballs had set fire to the palace.

I winced as I got back on my feet. It hurt to stand, hurt to breathe. “I had to stop him from bringing war to your Kingdom.”

“Who?”

“Him.” I pointed at Faruq. “He brought Leonidas’ helmet into your Folklore. A direct violation of the Law of Mystical Artifacts.”

“Stupid wench!” Faruq reached for his khopesh and sprang toward me. A sharp crack sounded and a spatter of crimson mushroomed from his shoulder. Faruq crumpled, writhing in pain at my feet.

“You better leave my witch alone, you varmints,” a familiar voice called from atop the palace gates, “or I’ll turn the next person who moves into coyote bait.” The threat was followed by a loud *chi-chik* as Grigsby cocked his Winchester. “I figured you weren’t gonna listen to me,” he directed at me, keeping his rifle trained on the guards and soldiers. I heard the disapproval in his voice. “How many times do I have to tell you—”

*Oh gods. He’s going to lecture me in front of the Athenians.*

“Not now,” I said through clenched teeth.

I faced Diocles. Nothing would’ve made me happier than to blame him for everything that had happened. But I couldn’t, not if my plan was going to work. “Thank you, Loremaster, for exposing the smugglers and their plot against the Athenian people.”

Diocles’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You’re welcome,” he said. “I’ll take the helmet now. After all, it’s what started all of this.” He reached out, waiting for me to hand it over.

“That’s gracious of you. But we all know the rules we witches live by: ‘Retrieve artifacts for their respective Kingdoms.’ I’ll make sure the helmet is brought to a place of safety. We can’t have mercenaries like this”—I gestured to Faruq—“trying to shift the balance of power so vital to the peace of New Athens. Don’t you agree?”

Diocles’s face remained frozen, but his eyes fixed me with a murderous stare. “If you bring the helmet to Leonidas, the peace you speak of will be threatened.”

No matter how much I hated to admit it, he had a point.

*Why did the Spartans want the helmet? Why now?*

In the few minutes I’d worn it, the artifact had consumed my thoughts and actions. It had fed off me like a leech. Its single purpose was to help its wearer kill, destroy and wage war. Returning the helmet to the Spartans didn’t feel right anymore, and I definitely wasn’t going to leave it with Diocles.

*So what am I going to do?*



The answer came in a flash, but it meant forsaking another one of the Coven's rules.

I lifted the helmet high above my head and raised my voice so all could hear. "I give you my word as a Witch of Folklore, in order to preserve the peace that exists between the great city-states of Athens and Sparta, I will not give the Spartans this helmet. But you must promise not to speak of this to anyone. If word of what has happened here reaches Leonidas, war may come anyway." I turned, locking eyes with Diocles. "And no amount of magic will save you if that happens."

The muscles along the Loremaster's jaw hardened. "You are no longer welcome in New Athens, magicker. You and your Caretaker are henceforth banished from our Kingdom. Captain, escort them to the harbor and make sure they leave."

Themistocles saluted.

Diocles eyed me one last time before spinning on his heels. He trudged back through the palace gates.

Faruq lurched unsteadily to his feet. The blood from his bullet wound bloomed through his white suit. He was about to follow the Loremaster when a group of hoplites broke formation and surrounded him.

"Take him to the dungeons," Themistocles ordered.

Two soldiers grabbed Faruq roughly by each arm, ignoring his injuries. He howled in pain as they led him away. He swung back to face me, hostility twisting his features.

"You'll pay for this, witch," he shouted. "One day, our paths will cross again. And then I won't think twice about killing you! You hear me? I'll kill you!"

## Double Cross - Chapter 8

Flanked by hoplites on the way to the harbor was the safest I'd felt all day. They led us down a steep path to a sheltered bay on the edge of New Athens. The water shifted from black to a dark blue. Whitecaps caught in the crescent moonlight picked out individual waves. Beyond, I could make out where the sea ended and the sky began, a shade of black giving way to an even darker black filled with stars.

*Too bad I've been banished from this place. It's beautiful.*

Six triremes lay moored in the harbor. At a length of one hundred twenty feet, the Greek battleships dwarfed the surrounding fishing and merchant vessels. A seven-foot-long bronze ram jutted from the nose of each ship. Together with an eye painted on the bow, the ram reminded me of a funny-looking, half-submerged duck bill. Only these duck bills slammed and tore apart the hulls of enemy ships, sending them and their crew to a watery grave.

*Not so funny.*

We came to a smaller Viking longship floating among the triremes. I knew the ship, having traveled on it a few times before. A menacing dragon's head, carved from a single tree, peered down from the bow. It bared a toothy snarl as we approached.

I groaned. "Our next mission is for the Vikings?" They were difficult employers even at the best of times.

Grigsby nodded. He hadn't said a word since we left the palace gates. I know he wasn't thrilled with my decision to ignore his advice and go after the helmet. I was in for quite a lecture later on.

We stopped where a gangplank spanned the gap between the longship and pier. Grigs continued onboard, readying the vessel for departure.

"Thank you, General," I said, turning to Themistocles.

The captain drew himself taller at being called General. "Our thanks should be to you and your Caretaker for uncovering the plot in our kingdom. We were lucky that you happened to be in the area."

His tone told me he didn't believe it was luck at all.

"There's something disturbing happening in your Folklore, General, some conspiracy or shifts in power, that threaten the Kingdoms in this region. It's reached the top levels of your government." I didn't want to come right out and say that Diocles was a scheming, double-crossing turd or that it was he, not Faruq, who arranged for the helmet to enter the city.

Themistocles averted his eyes, fixing them on the Viking ship. The dim moonlight muted the bronze hues of his helmet, making it appear almost black. Most of his face was obscured in shadow.

“I have felt a darkness entering these lands for some time,” he said. “My men and I will keep vigil. I know Lord Diocles is not to be trusted, but he is powerful and carries much sway with our rulers. I have to believe he has the Kingdom’s best interests at heart.”

Best interests?

I let out a long, drawn out breath, thinking about the relics I’d recovered over the past year.

*In whose best interest were they? Did the Kingdoms want them merely for safekeeping, or were they going to be used for something else? A way to keep the balance of power, or worse, a means to tip the balance in their favor?*

*In favor of what?*

That question troubled me most.

I held out the pouch with the Spartan coins inside. “Could you make sure these are returned to the Spartan Kingdom? Anonymously, of course.”

Themistocles took the money, then gave me a sideways glance. “I do not know you, Sarah Finn, but your wisdom and bravery has gained you a friend today. Safe journey.” His eyes lingered on the helmet nestled in the crook of my arm. “And we will hold you to your word.”

“I will do as I promised,” I said.

Themistocles pursed his lips and nodded. He and the hoplites turned and exited the pier.

I joined Grigsby on the longship.

“Drakkar, prepare to cast off,” he ordered as soon as I was onboard.

The ship responded with a groan. Ropes magically untethered themselves from the pier, and the mainsail unfurled on its own. A wind gust eased us out of the harbor. Waves slapped against the wooden hull, sending sea spray misting over me as the vessel gained speed.

“Why didn’t you blame Diocles for all this?” Grigs asked, frowning. “You could’ve gotten rid of that scoundrel.” He squinted at me, eyes serious under his Stetson.

“If I accused him of illegally withholding the helmet in front of Themistocles and the hoplites, he would’ve retaliated, tried to get them to side against me. By making him out as the hero, I gave him a way to save face.”

Grigs’s expression softened. “Savin’ both our hides in the process?”

I nodded. “And we walk away with the helmet. It’s out of his possession,” I stared at the artifact resting in my hands, “but ours too.”

“You really goin’ to get rid of it?” he asked.

I wasn’t so sure anymore. I ran a fingertip tenderly along its surface, remembering the awesome power it gave me.

*What if I keep it, use it only when I need to? The helmet made me faster, stronger, sharper. My magic could last twice as long while I wore it. And after everything I’ve been through, didn’t I deserve it?*

I shook my head, clearing my thoughts.

*No. No one should have this kind of power.*

I let the helmet go and dropped it into the sea. It hit the water with barely an audible plop. A glint of bronze flashed, then it submerged and disappeared in the ship's wake.

"I gotta admit," Grigs said, patting my shoulder, "sometimes you sure are a smart little witch—just like yer mother."

The compliment brought a smile to my face. I had defied several of the Coven's most sacred rules today. Doing so had probably saved my life and stopped a potential war between two rival kingdoms. But I was treading in dangerous waters. If the Coven learned of what I'd done, I could face charges of insubordination and be brought before the Wiccan Court. They could expel me, brand me a traitor.

After what I'd experienced today, my feelings toward the Coven had changed.

*Did their rules actually do more harm than good? Was Diocles telling the truth—were they more interested in keeping the peace than doing what was right?*

Diocles also said that not all rules were meant to be followed. Maybe he was right. Maybe not everything was as black and white as I thought.

*And maybe I'm closer to being like Mum than I realized.*

"Here." Grigs handed me a red, gift-wrapped box the size of a paperback book. It was the item he'd bought in the agora. "Happy birthday."

My first thought was he was giving me some training manual to read or a history text about the injustices toward elves.

I tore away the wrapping. "A smartphone!"

"Shoulda given you one before you went to the Acropolis."

I laughed. "Yeah, no kidding. Thank you!"

Grigs nodded. He pulled his Stetson farther over his face and made his way aft.

"Drakkar," he called out, "let's get the hell outta these waters. Twenty degrees starboard."

The rectangular sail angled to catch the wind, and the rudder turned, steering the ship westward.

I leaned wearily against the railing, examining my new present. "Where are the Vikings sending us anyway?" In all the excitement, I never thought to ask about our next mission.

"Put on yer long johns, kid," Grigsby yelled over his shoulder. "We're goin' to Canada."



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## About the Author



Dennis Staginnus dreamed of becoming an archaeologist, an intergalactic smuggler, or a covert operative. He became a teacher and librarian instead, at least until the CIA calls or he's abducted by aliens. He's the author of *THE EYE OF ODIN*, *THE EMERALD DAGGER*, and *THE RAIDERS OF FOLKLORE ADVENTURES: AN EYE OF ODIN PREQUEL*, the first three books in *THE RAIDERS OF FOLKLORE* series. He lives in British Columbia, Canada, with his wife and a clowder of cats.

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