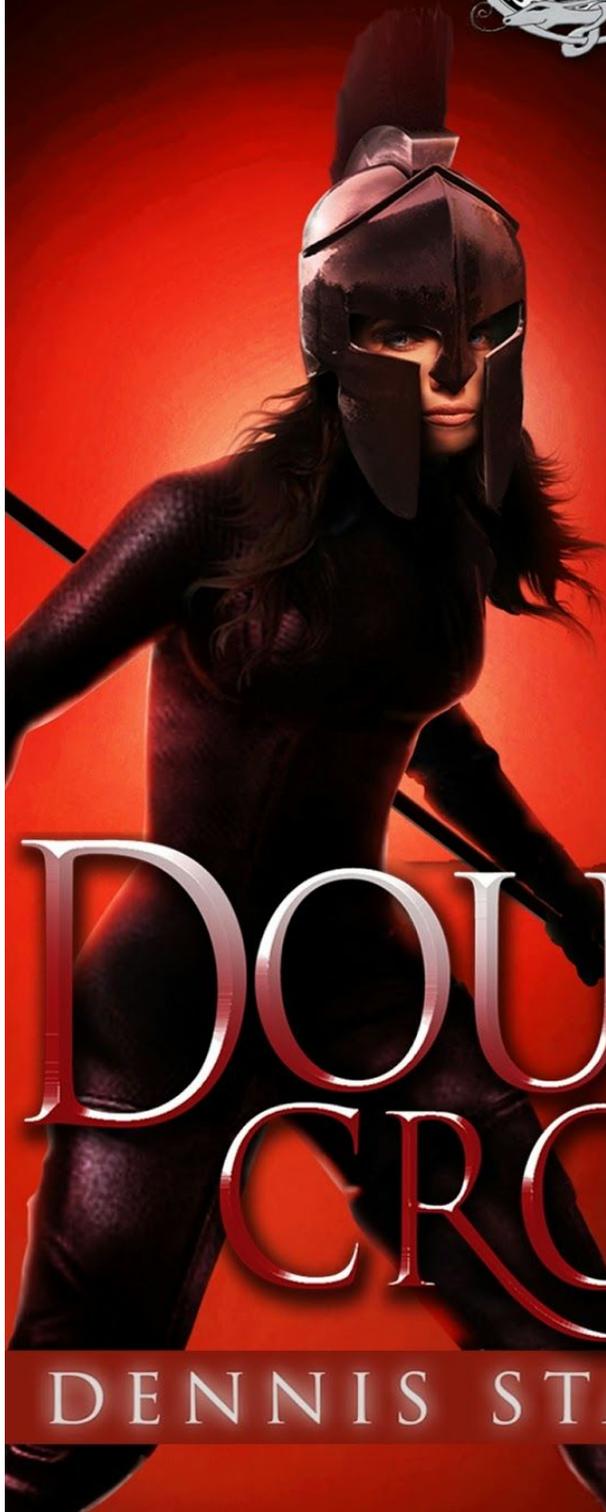


THE RAIDERS



OF FOLKLORE



AN
EYE
OF
ODIN
SHORT PREQUEL

DOUBLE CROSS

DENNIS STAGINNUS

AN
EYE
OF
ODIN
SHORT PREQUEL
DOUBLE
CROSS

DENNIS STAGINNUS



Double Cross:
An Eye of Odin Prequel
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For Taitem, Isabelle, Kaden, Connor, and Tye.
The realms of wonder are limited only by your imagination.

Four weeks before the events in
The Eye of Odin

Chapter 1

Athens, Greece

Sarah Finn counted at least a dozen ways she'd rather spend her fifteenth birthday. Surrounded by smugglers intent on killing her wasn't one of them.

She knew the hazards that came with being a witch-for-hire, but this was supposed to be a simple money-for-artifact exchange—the easiest kind of mission. Apparently the smugglers didn't get the memo.

I still have things under control, Sarah tried to convince herself, even though the khopesh sword pressed against her jugular suggested otherwise.

At the other end of the long, sickle-like blade was an Egyptian named Mensah. He wore a white suit, complete with a felt Panama hat, red tie, and matching red kerchief that poked from his left front pocket. He looked more like Al Capone than a lowly, Folklorian smuggler. "I met your mother once." His breath reeked of stale tobacco as he spoke. "She was a beautiful and talented woman."

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

Mensah leaned in closer. "Your mother was also known for her intelligence... unlike her daughter."

The two henchmen Mensah had brought along—a tall, lanky Egyptian and a fat, sweaty Turk—started laughing. The auras surrounding all three men darkened to a deeper shade of red. Unlike her mother, Sarah could see and feel the aural projections created by all living things. The darkening color told her these men had something sinister in mind.

Sarah swallowed. "Oh yeah? What makes you think I'm not intelligent?"

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

"Besides that, Captain Obvious," Sarah said sarcastically. "But that doesn't automatically make me stupid."

"And," Mensah continued, "you so conveniently came to meet us here—where no one will hear you scream."

Meeting inside the Parthenon atop the Acropolis had seemed like a good idea. On any other day, the ancient temple, and hilltop citadel on which it was built, would have been swarming

with tourists, but it was closed due to restorations. The entire Acropolis was quiet and empty of life.

Okay, so maybe I was stupid for not planning this exchange more carefully.

Sarah's eyes darted from Mensah's glinting blade to the Parthenon's interior. The ravages of time and pollution had caused much of the ancient Greek temple to crack and crumble. Chipped columns held up the bits and pieces of what used to support the roof. It was gone now, allowing the sky's fading light to reflect off the uneven floor.

She guessed at the distance between herself and the columns. Twenty paces, five more down the crumbling steps, and then straight for the pedestrian pathway leading away from the temple. All she needed to do was conjure a little spell and...

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

Sarah felt a blood drop trickle down as the blade bit into her neck.

From the corner of her eye, she caught the tall, lanky smuggler pouring something white and granular in a wide circle around them.

Salt.

For a moment, Sarah thought she might faint, even though her legs remained firmly in place. Salt contained magic-draining properties, cutting a witch's connection to nature's ambient energy, the source of her power. Once she was contained in the circle, the salt line would become a prison, an impenetrable barrier. The only way to escape would be to break the circle, something she couldn't do herself.

When the lanky smuggler completed the circle, Mensah stepped back and returned his sword to its scabbard. He snapped his fingers and the fat Turk stepped over the salt ring, almost brushing it with the heel of his shoe.

"Careful, you idiot," Mensah warned. "If you break the circle, she'll be free to use her magic."

The Turk cringed. "Apologies, Effendi. I will be more careful." He bent down in front of Sarah and began frisking her cargo pants.

"We had a deal," Sarah said, keeping her voice even and ignoring the man's searching hands. "Money in exchange for the helmet."

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

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. "Besides, did you think I was just going to hand over the helmet so easily?"

Sarah peered over his shoulder, her gaze fixing on the two thousand year-old helmet perched on a marble slab behind him. It was Spartan, made of bronze with a crest of red-dyed horse hair pluming down its back. Almond-shaped eye holes, separated by a nose guard, allowed its wearer enough peripheral vision for combat.

Looking at it now, Sarah found it hard to believe the helmet was a Class 3 artifact. More powerful than Class 1 relics, which hardly contained any magical properties, but significantly less terrifying than Class 5's—objects that could have apocalyptic consequences for the entire world.

“What are you planning on doing?” she asked. “The Spartans won't be happy if I don't deliver the helmet to them soon.”

Mensah smiled, blowing smoke from his lips and 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?”

Mensah stuck out his lower lip, giving her a wounded look before taking another drag from his cigar. “I'm sure they will deal with whoever actually *has* the artifact. That is... if I were bringing it to them in the first place.”

Sarah knit her eyebrows. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you ever think there would be other, more powerful people, interested in acquiring the helmet? People who could pay more?”

A sinking feeling grew in Sarah's stomach. “Think hard about what you're doing, Mensah.”

“I know exactly what I'm doing. You should have done the same. Lord Diocles doesn't look kindly upon witches who aid the enemy.”

“Diocles?” Sarah repeated. He was the Athenian Loremaster—magickers who served the rulers of each Kingdom in Folklore. “Why would he risk antagonizing the Spartans?” Every Folklorian, from a king to pig farmer, knew that artifacts belonging to a Kingdom had to be returned to that Kingdom. Failure to do so could start wars and invite the wrath of the Coven—the Supreme Order of Witches.

It didn't seem to bother Mensah.

“The Athenians and Spartans have hated each other since the Peloponnesian Wars, Mensah,” Sarah said, trying to get through to him. “Taking the helmet will only spark another conflict between them. I won't stand by and let you—” She stopped and stared at the white circle binding her. *Crap. It all made sense now.* “You already knew I'd try to stop you. That's why you came prepared... with salt.”

Mensah's silence was proof she was right. He blew another puff of smoke, this time in her face.

Sarah coughed. “You can still make things right by selling the helmet to the Spartans, Mensah.” She tried to hide the desperation in her voice and failed miserably. “Imagine how much they would reward you for returning it. They’d pay you double what Diocles is offering.”

“Ha. You and I both know the Spartans are nearly bankrupt.”

His indifference was beginning to anger her. “You know Diocles won’t think twice about killing you once he has the helmet,” she said through clenched teeth. “He can’t afford to leave anyone alive to reveal his plans, especially after murdering a witch. If anyone found out, he’d be burned at the stake—along with those who helped him. Face it. This deal is not going to end well for you.”

Mensah’s eye twitched. “Well, if that is the case, I’m sure there will be other, more willing buyers for such an artifact. Like the Inquisition perhaps.”

Sarah’s heart leapt to her throat. Selling the helmet to a rival Kingdom was bad enough, but the Inquisition? An organization committed to killing witches and destroying Folklore? If they got their hands on magical artifacts, the results could be devastating.

Mensah stepped over the salt ring and picked up the helmet.

Time for a different approach. “You don’t know what you’ve got there. Do you?” Sarah nodded to the artifact.

“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.”

Sarah sneered, shaking her head. “That’s why you’ll never be more than a middleman. You’re too short-sighted... never an eye on the bigger picture. What you’re holding is more than some rare artifact. It once belonged to Leonidas, the king of Sparta.”

Mensah’s expression remained blank.

Good. Her plan hinged on his ignorance.

“Leonidas led three hundred Spartan soldiers against the entire Persian army before the Battle of Thermopylae,” she explained. “No one suspected the reason such a small force managed to hold off the Persians was because of their magical weapons and armor. This was one of them.”

The smuggler spun to face her. “So. What. Does. It. Do?”

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

Mensah rushed forward and backhanded Sarah hard across the face. “You’re trying to trick me.”

Sarah spat blood, sneaking a glance at the salt ring. It was still intact. “Fine,” she said, holding her throbbing cheek. “Then let me put it on, or give it to one of them. I don’t care.” She motioned to the goons behind him.

As if on cue, the other two smugglers took a step back.

Mensah bit on his cigar, chewing over what to do next. “Hamadi, come here,” he said finally.

The fat Turk who had frisked Sarah earlier took a hesitant step forward. He stumbled on the temple's uneven surface. "Y-yes, Effendi."

Mensah held out the helmet. "Put this on."

"Y-yes, Effendi."

A sheen of sweat glistened across the Turk's brow. Hands shaking, he took the artifact. Before slipping it on, the helmet magically changed in size and shape to accommodate his bulbous head.

Mensah stared, clearly expecting Hamadi to undergo some physical metamorphosis. "Nothing's happening. He looks just as useless as before."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "Now try to attack him."

Mensah's eyes narrowed. He switched the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other, then snapped his fingers. "Abu."

The lanky smuggler dutifully unsheathed his khopesh. The weapon danced in his hands in an impressive display of swordsmanship as he whipped the blade expertly around his body.

Hamadi's eyes grew wide. He drew his own sword, almost dropping it. Obviously, Mensah had offered up the more expendable of his two goons to test the artifact. To anyone else, it would have looked like Hamadi didn't have a hope in hell against his skilled counterpart. But Sarah knew better.

Abu shot forward, thrusting his khopesh at Hamadi's midsection. Abu stood two feet taller than the Turk, with at least a ten inch reach advantage. Without the helmet, the fat smuggler would've been skewered like a shish kebab. But despite Hamadi's earlier awkwardness, his movements suddenly became fluid, confident. He parried Abu's strike with a loud clang, then smoothly shifted his feet, delivering a skilfully executed counterstrike. Abu had to react quickly, barely lifting his curved blade in time to keep Hamadi from chopping his head off.

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

"The helmet turns its wearer into a first-class warrior," Sarah said, keeping her voice casual. "I can help you get double the amount Diocles is offering without having to go to the Athenians or the Inquisition."

"You're just saying that so I don't kill you," Mensah shot back.

"Of course I am." *At least that wasn't a lie.* "But face it, you need me. Having a witch represent your interests will bring you more... legitimacy. And I wouldn't mind making some money out of this deal."

Sarah saw Mensah processing her offer as he watched the two duelling men.

Abu's features had contorted in frustration. His continued attempts to defeat Hamadi became more deadly. He slashed at the Turk repeatedly. Hamadi cowered, raising his sword in a feeble attempt to block the oncoming assault. As before, his weapon swept the other blade aside. Then

he stepped in, elbowed Abu's chin, and faster than Sarah thought possible, twirled and slashed his khopesh in a wide arch. The edge of his blade cut across Abu's shirt, drawing blood and almost spilling his guts.

Mensah nodded. "Perhaps you may be of some use after all." He raised a hand, signalling for an end to the duel. "Enough."

Abu lowered his khopesh. Hamadi ignored the command. The Turk angled his sword in another wide arch, slicing his companion's bicep. Abu hissed in pain and backed away.

"I said enough," Mensah ordered.

Like a shark who'd tasted too much blood, Hamadi continued his frenzied attack. Weakened and bleeding, Abu backpedalled.

No one except Sarah noticed his foot disturb the salt ring imprisoning her.

The salt's effects dissipated instantly. Her body soaked in the surrounding ambient energy like a sponge. She felt the tingling sensation of magic filling her core, curling through every limb, charging every molecule with an energy few people possessed.

Sarah clenched her fists. *Time to end this.* "Oh, I forgot. If anyone other than a disciplined Spartan puts on the helmet, it kinda starts taking over your body." She smirked. "I guess I should've told you."

Mensah spat out his cigar and charged into the broken circle. He grabbed Sarah roughly by the neck and pulled her toward him. "You get him to stop before I gut you like a pig." He unsheathed his khopesh and pressed the blade's tip against her stomach.

The sour stench of his breath made Sarah cringe more than his threat. She gathered her magic, focusing it into a single spell. Placing her palm against his chest, she smiled and whispered one simple word:

"Vanya."

Chapter 2

Sarah released her spell in one intense burst.

Before Mensah even realized what was happening, a magical pulse sent him careening through the air like a discarded rag doll. He crashed with a grunt on the Parthenon's floor, losing both his hat and khopesh in the process.

Sarah hopped over the salt ring and ran to the fallen Egyptian. She knelt next to him, purposely squishing his Panama hat under her foot.

"You should really read up on the artifacts you plan to double-cross people with." She reached inside his jacket pocket and felt the silk lining until...

There it is.

She pulled out the small, leather pouch taken from her earlier.

"So about me not being as smart as my mum—" She jingled the coins inside. "Way off on that, don't you think?"

She dove her hand into a second pocket and found another pouch. She peeked inside, recognizing the stamped impressions of an owl—the symbol of Athens—on each gold piece. She tucked both bags into the leg pockets of her cargo pants, then grabbed Mensah by the collar. "You've already been paid. For what? My death?"

The smuggler's eyes fluttered. "Wouldn't you like to know. Tali-hone!" he shouted.

Sarah thought his plea for help was meant for Abu and Hamadi, but they were too busy trying to kill each other to notice. "You're pretty stupid thinking they'll—"

She heard running feet behind her.

That can't be good.

Sarah looked over her shoulder. About a dozen men poured into the Parthenon's northern entrance, each brandishing a khopesh. One aimed a gun.

"Kill her!" Mensah sputtered. "Kill the witch!"

Sarah scrambled away in the opposite direction, bolting for the edge of the ruined temple. A bullet whistled by, lodging in a marble wall inches from her shoulder. She sprinted between the Parthenon's massive columns bathed pink in the setting sun. Another bullet exploded into the pillar to her right. Pieces of marble blasted in her path.

She rushed down the temple's steps, leaping over shrubs growing between 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 could offer refuge. With sheer drops of almost sixty feet on either side, she chose the only way off the sacred rock—the way she'd come in.

Tramping onto a level pathway, she dashed for the Propylaea, a building that had served as a gateway to the Acropolis for centuries. Shouts erupted behind her, drawing closer. Sarah hadn't thought she could run faster, but her legs pumped like pistons until the Propylaea's silhouette came into view.

She ran into the grand entryway. Most of the entrance was already thick with shadows. Scaffolding criss-crossed 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.

Sarah smiled. She was going to make it—that is until the sound of pounding feet rushing *up* the entrance dashed her hopes. New smugglers emerged from the narrow pathway ahead, coming straight for her. Sarah gasped and wheeled about, ready to head back the way she came, only to find Mensah and his men had caught up to her. Trapped by scaffolding and walls on either side with Mensah's hired thugs stalking from above and below, she had nowhere left to go.

"There is no chance of escape, witch." Mensah pushed through his smugglers, hobbling to the edge of the stairs above Sarah. "I imagine Leonidas didn't have to contend with bullets at the Battle of Thermopylae." He held up the Spartan helmet. Blood glistened off its bronze surface. "A deadly lesson for Hamadi to learn."

Sarah grimaced. Her willingness to sacrifice the artifact in exchange for escape had led to Hamadi's death. She hadn't planned it that way, but she *was* indirectly responsible for his murder. She would have to come to terms with that later.

The wind picked up, whipping her hair across her face. As if trying to get her attention, a canvas sheet flapped and snapped to her left. She eyed the canopy, her knees growing weak as she thought of one last plan to get herself out of there alive.

"What? Nothing to say?" Mensah jeered.

"The helmet belongs to the Spartan Kingdom, Mensah. You can still do the right thing."

He laughed, drawing additional snickers from the smugglers around him. "Who's the stupid one now? Unfortunately, I cannot let you live. You know too much of Diocles's involvement, and a witch-for-hire is bad for business."

Twenty plus smugglers closed in around her, too many for Sarah to fight off by hand or magic. Like Mensah, the only thing they responded to was...

Money.

She dug into her pants pocket and removed one of the pouches she'd taken from him earlier. "You *are* stupid, Mensah." She opened the smaller pouch and faced the other smugglers. "For choosing goons even greedier than you are." With that, she flung the pouch's contents at their feet. Mensah's hired thugs pounced on the coins like vultures on a carcass.

Using the distraction to her advantage, Sarah stepped on their bent-over backs and ripped a canvas tarp from the scaffolding.

“Stop her, you idiots!” Mensah shouted.

Sarah dragged the canvas sheet, thrusting out her elbows and breaking past the few smugglers who blocked her path. She flew down the remaining stairs three at a time, heading for the Acropolis’s ledge. From there, the drop was considerably less than sixty feet but still high enough to cause serious injury.

Without allowing herself time to think, she gripped the four corners of the canvas and jumped.

She was freefalling, weightless. Her stomach lurched, and a scream caught in her throat. As she prepared for the bone-shattering impact that would end her life, the canvas suddenly billowed like a parachute, catching an updraft and slowing her plunge. But with no way to steer or prevent gravity from doing its job, she plummeted straight for a large pine tree. Her legs struck the topmost branch, followed by her waist and then every other part of her body. She let go of the makeshift parachute and hit each branch like a plinko chip before collapsing on the ground below. An explosion of pine cones and needles rained over her.

Sarah’s chest heaved, and her eyesight blurred. She rested for a moment, spitting needles from her mouth and watching the torn canopy flapping in the tree. Every muscle hurt. She was certain she’d fractured, if not broken, several ribs. But she was alive.

Tears of relief welled in her eyes. “Happy birthday to me,” she wheezed and started laughing, regretting it instantly as pain wracked her body.

Chapter 3

An hour had passed by the time Sarah stumbled into the Athenian Kingdom. Like the other Kingdoms in Folklore spread throughout the world, it was hidden from Outlanders by means of invisibility incantations and clever teleportation spells. If trespassers happened to stray too close to its borders, they were magically transported across the site without sensing what had happened.

As a Folklorian, Sarah passed through the barrier without incident. One minute, gravel from a deserted road crunched beneath her feet. The next, she found herself in front of a stone archway with a beautiful city of white marble rising behind it. Two Greek soldiers stood guard on either side of the entrance. Their bronze shields, helmets, spear tips, and shin greaves glistened in the day's last light. Their posture remained rigid, giving no sign of noticing Sarah, except their eyes—they studied her as she hustled past.

Sarah imagined she looked like someone who'd gone to Tartarus and back. Her clothes were ripped and stained with blood, her lip had swollen from where Mensah had slapped her, and she was sure pine needles were still tangled in her hair. But despite her appearance, the guards made no attempt to stop her.

She quickened her pace, putting distance between herself and the archway. Once out of eyesight, she ducked into a darkened alley. She spotted laundry suspended from a clothesline spanning the narrow corridor. She reached up and tugged free a large blue sheet. Sarah did her best to fold the material in the traditional Greek style, taking special care while wrapping it around her ribs. Then she took a thinner, white sheet and draped it over her head like a shawl.

Satisfied her Outlander clothes were covered, she poked her head out of the alley and scanned the way ahead. Apart from a few pedestrians and the occasional stray dog, the coast was clear. She hurried down the street.

Minutes later, Sarah reached an open area in the heart of the city. Called an agora, the place reminded her 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 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 neat hairstyles tied up in ribbons moved about the square. Their brightly colored chitons flowed elegantly in the early evening breeze. The men gathered in clusters, debating politics or maybe the merits of non-chafing togas. Sarah couldn't be sure. Her ancient

Greek was poor-to-nonexistent. She did her best to blend in, sticking to the agora's periphery, walking at the same pace as everyone else, and stopping occasionally to glance at items for sale—all the while keeping an eye out for Grigsby.

It didn't take long to spot her Caretaker haggling with a merchant. Despite the humidity, Grigsby wore his usual cowboy hat and a stiff, leather duster. As a centuries-old elf, he was prone to reinvention. Currently, he fancied himself as John Wayne, taking on the famous western actor's speech and dress.

She sidled next to him and pulled back her shawl, revealing her grimy face and dishevelled hair.

The elf did a double-take when he saw her. "What in tarnation? What the hell happened to you?"

She grabbed him by the elbow. The motion tweaked a bruised muscle. A sharp pain streaked through her shoulder. "Ran into some trouble." She winced.

Grigsby searched her hands for the relic. "Where's the helmet?"

She shook her head. "Double-cross." She quickly told him of Mensah's treachery, Diocles's involvement, and her daring escape.

Before the elf could ask for specifics, she produced the pouch from her pocket. "It wasn't a total loss though." She shook the bag, jingling the remaining coins.

Grigsby took the pouch and stuffed it inside his duster. "Then let's get outta here before Diocles finds out we're here. The Coven's given us another mission."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. *Another mission so soon?* She needed time to recuperate, to give her magic time to heal her wounds. Gods knew her body needed it.

"Who's the mission for?" she asked wearily.

"The Norse Folklore."

Ugh, Vikings. The thought of working for them didn't make Sarah feel any better. They were difficult employers even at the best of times. But it's not like she ever had a choice which missions to accept and which to turn down. The Coven chose for her. And Sarah's special gifts as a witch and an Auralex, someone who could see and feel auras, made her especially popular.

At least it'll get us out of here, she thought.

But as attractive a prospect it was to flee the city right away, Sarah knew she couldn't leave just yet. "I have to get word to the Spartans first," she said. "Diocles is up to something—I don't know what exactly—but I need to let them know."

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

"It's a possibility."

“A possibility? Spartans are warlike, brutal, with no respect for other Kingdoms or the Mythic Races.” Grigsby never wanted to come to Greece, grumbling something about how the Greeks treated their Mythic Races—the non-human species unique to each Folklore.

Sarah pinched her lips together. “So what do you expect me to do... stand by and do nothing while the future of Sparta is threatened?”

“Think about yer actions. That’s all I’m sayin’. I’ve told you before that Loremasters can’t be trusted, an’ 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 I see the world as it is, Sarah. You see it how you wanna see it. The sooner yer eyes open to this fact, the sooner you’ll become the witch yer mother wanted you to be.”

“Yeah... and look how that turned out for her. You don’t end up dying and leaving your daughter an orphan if you follow the rules.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Well, what I *do* know is that the Spartans trusted an outsider like me to get the helmet back for them. It’s only fair to tell them 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 they’re already lookin’ for you.”

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

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

“Wait,” Sarah said abruptly. She sensed a familiar aura drawing close. Pushing Grigsby farther into the shadows, she scanned the open square.

There, weaving past pedestrians, with Abu and three other smugglers surrounding him, was Mensah. His flattened Panama hat sat slightly askew on his head and he was carrying a sack. The faint outline of the Spartan helmet pressed against its fabric.

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

“Oh for the love of... What’re you plannin’ on doin’ now?”

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

Chapter 4

Sarah lied. There was no plan. *Not yet anyway.*

She hoped something would come to her as she and Grigsby followed the smugglers at a safe distance through the agora.

Clip. Clop. Clip. Clop.

Grigsby's cowboy boots sounded like horse hooves tramping along the cobblestones.

Out of all the Caretakers in Folklore, I'm stuck with one wearing the loudest getup ever.

Luckily, there were enough people bustling about to drown out the sound. That wouldn't be the case when they reached the palace gates.

Clip. Clop. Clip. Clop.

Sarah spun around. "Will you stop that?"

"Stop what?"

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

She put her hands on her hips. There wasn't much she could do about his boots, so she plucked the dusty Stetson from his head, revealing the elf's pointed ears and shoulder-length blond hair.

Pushing the hat against his chest, she turned and surveyed the route ahead. The crowd thinned the closer one got to the palace. Another hundred feet, and the only thing between them and their quarry would be empty street.

No pedestrians. No anti-boot clopping barrier.

Should we make our move before then?

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

They exited the agora. Thankfully, Mensah and the others were focused on the path ahead, never bothering to look over their shoulders.

Determined to finish their deal, Sarah figured.

Which still left one question: What *did* Diocles want with the helmet?

There could be a dozen reasons, from destroying it so no one else can use it, to learning how to duplicate its magic.

Sarah shuddered.

The thought of an entire army wearing helmets like that one was enough to make any Kingdom in Folklore nervous. Diocles's plans, whatever they were, could cause a ripple effect in the region, disturb the peace that's existed for over two thousand years.

She couldn't let that happen.

Shouts came from inside the palace. A frenzy of shadows and silhouettes suddenly rushed past the exposed colonnades. The sounds of running sandals and rattling armor drew closer.

Sarah glimpsed a hoplite squad marching double-time down the avenue.

"This way." She nudged Grigsby into a side street. They slipped into the shadows and flattened against a wall.

Nearly two dozen muscled soldiers came into view. Besides wearing the usual bronze armor, each hoplite also had a blue cloth draped over one shoulder. The frightening head of Medusa decorated their circular shields.

The squad halted in front of Mensah.

"What is happening?" Sarah heard the smuggler ask.

"Loremaster Diocles has raised the alarm," answered a gruff-looking soldier. The plume running length-wise across his helmet identified him as the hoplite captain. He had battle scars on his shoulder and chest, but his handsome face looked intelligent, as if his body was made for war, but his mind was made for more peaceful pursuits.

"Why has he raised the alarm?" Abu asked.

"The Loremaster detected a witch inside the Kingdom."

Sarah ducked farther into the shadows. She felt a shift in Grigsby's aura beside her. He reached for the Winchester rifle hidden beneath his duster.

Sarah put her hand on his arm. "What are you doing?"

"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."

"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 Sarah's mind. How to get the helmet back without getting killed was priority number one.

"What are you carrying?" Themistocles asked, spotting the bag containing the Spartan helmet.

Mensah pulled it away. "Nothing of your concern." There was a pause as both men scowled at one another. "I presume you were ordered to hunt down the witch?" Mensah added. "Why don't you run along and do as you're told."

A flash of anger crossed the captain's face. He took a threatening step toward the smuggler then stopped, visibly taking a breath and checking his emotions. He raised a hand, signalling his hoplites to continue on. The captain followed, not before giving Mensah a final glare.

“The general’s a skilled soldier an’ tracker, Sarah,” Grigsby warned. “He’s goin’ to find us.” The elf still had a hand on his rifle.

“Well, we’re not going to shoot him, if that’s what you’re planning.” Sarah waited for the sounds of marching feet to fade. “We can’t attack Mensah now. It’s too risky with the hoplites so close by. I still need to get into the palace though.”

Grigsby replaced the Stetson on his head. “I know another way.” He stalked deeper into the alley. Sarah followed him through a maze of cobblestone paths and side streets.

Caretakers familiarized themselves with the locations of every site they visited. Grigsby was especially meticulous about his research. When not supervising Sarah’s magic and physical training, he spent his free time planning for different scenarios, just in case a mission went seriously wrong.

Like now.

It didn’t take long for the worn cobblestones to give way to dirt. They circumnavigated the palace walls onto a rough hillside, careful to stay hidden from sentries patrolling the palace’s ramparts above.

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

Grigsby stopped at a portion of the palace wall where no sentry could be spotted. “How much mojo you got left?” he asked. Mojo was his word for magic.

“Apart from trying to heal myself, I still have some... why?”

Grigsby lifted his hat and scanned the wall.

She followed his gaze. “Oh, gods.” She knew what he was thinking.

“Goin’ through the front gates was never an option, Sarah. You knew that.”

She clenched her teeth. She’d had enough of high places for one day.

Grigsby took his lever-action Winchester from its holster. Its 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 Sarah took his warning seriously. “To reach the Oracle, you have to get over the wall, take the passageway 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 his Winchester in front of him by the stock and barrel. “Yer gonna need to take a run at me.”

With her heart thumping in her ears, Sarah could barely manage a nod. She stepped several paces away from him and the wall. She discarded her stolen chiton and shawl, dropping both onto the dry grass. She slipped off her Outlander clothes too, revealing her black witch’s outfit

underneath. The skin tight material was made from enchanted threads and laced with tiny dragon scales.

“Ready?” Grigsby called.

She tightened her ponytail and shook out her arms, mentally preparing herself.

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

“Just... give me a second.” Sarah took three sharp breaths and focused on the top of the wall.

Some days I hate this job.

She rocked nervously on the balls of her feet, then raced for Grigsby, crossing the space between them at a sprint. Bracing his legs, the elf stood with his back to the wall. Sarah sprang, jumped on his rifle, and with his brute strength and her magic, boosted herself high into the air. Stretching out, her fingers caught the edge of the stone ramparts. Her ribs pounded against the wall. The unexpected and painful spasm upset her right hand. Bits of weathered stone crumbled away. She stifled a shriek as her precarious grasp began to slip. Her feet bicycled along the wall. Her shoes scraped on its rigid surface, trying to gain traction. Muscles straining, stomach churning, fingers losing all feeling, she finally caught a brick sticking out slightly farther than the rest with her foot. She heaved herself up and plopped over onto the other side.

She slumped against the rampart’s parapet for a moment, massaging her ribs. Luckily there were no guards to catch her less-than-graceful jump. The only movement came from a string of flickering torches placed in sconces on a wall to her left.

Sarah rose shakily to her feet and crept toward the passageway Grigsby had mentioned. She slinked down its length, hoping the shadows between each torch would offer enough darkness should anyone decide to walk by.

About to turn into the corridor to her right, she sensed a single aura ahead. Pressing herself to the wall, Sarah stole a brief glance around the corner. A guard stood at the far end, facing the other direction. She sneaked up behind him and wrapped a hand around his throat.

“Rauco-balan,” she whispered.

An electrical jolt zapped from her fingers. The charge was weak, but the guard’s bronze armor worked like a conductor, amplifying the electricity coursing through his body. He vibrated for a brief second then sagged in her arms. She eased him quietly to the floor, careful not to make a sound.

She padded down the passageway. The empty spaces between columns to her left offered a view into the palace courtyard. She glimpsed the Oracle temple below, small in comparison to the buildings surrounding it, but gleaming in flawless white marble. Burning incense and expertly carved statues decorated its steps. For a price, the priestess inside would magically relay Sarah’s message to a similar oracle in the Spartan Kingdom.

She hadn’t worked out exactly what she was going to tell them. *If I alert the Spartans of Diocles’s treachery, they’ll probably retaliate and attack New Athens, just like Grigsby said. And*

if I don't warn them, I'll be responsible for what happens next. Maybe an attack on Sparta or even a full scale war. She shook her head in frustration. *The Coven's rules never covered this kind of stuff.*

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

“—much will we get for it?”

“Enough to hold us over for months,” Mensah replied.

Sarah balled her fists.

“But we failed to kill the witch,” a different smuggler pointed out. “That won't make the Loremaster happy.”

“No,” Mensah snarled, “so be on your guard, boys. If Diocles tries to double-cross us, we need to be ready...”

Their voices trailed off.

What am I going to do? With the hoplites combing the city for her, there would be fewer guards patrolling the palace. Getting to the Oracle would be easy. Another fifty yards, and she'd be there. *But the helmet's so close. Instead of warning the Spartans, I can try to get it back. Imagine how grateful they'd be.*

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

“Sorry,” she whispered, both to her Caretaker's warning and to her better judgment.

She tiptoed to where Mensah and his men had been only moments before. His tobacco stench still lingered in the air. She had to reach them and take the helmet back before they handed it over to Diocles. She took a deep breath. Speed would be key—shock and awe. If she got bogged down in a prolonged struggle, her magical reserves could drain before she had a chance to escape.

Then I'd be an easy target for sure.

Sarah glanced around the corner. Wide stairs led up to the main palace. The smugglers' shadows moved away. She started after them, stopping short of the top stair to scan the way ahead. Her heart pounded. There they were, maybe thirty feet away, entering the palace's antechamber.

She went to take another step when a voice from behind startled her. “You there! Stop where you are!”

Sarah whipped around to see two palace guards coming up the stairs. Their spears pointed dangerously in her direction.

Chapter 5

Sarah's heart pounded out a frantic beat. She glanced over her shoulder. The shouting had alerted Mensah and the others. They were already heading her way, drawing their swords.

So much for shock and awe.

Losing the element of surprise complicated matters, but Sarah couldn't turn back now. It was either retrieve the helmet or be captured trying.

She gathered her magic, focusing on the guards rushing up the stairs first.

"Vanya!"

The pulse slammed into them so hard it sent their spears flying and their bodies crashing down the stairs.

Sarah spun, preparing to do the same to the smugglers behind her. But before she could focus another spell, a burly man with a deep scar running down one cheek was already on her. His khopesh raised, Scarface plunged its sharp edge at her skull. Rather than leaping clear, Sarah charged. She blocked his blow and grabbed the man's wrist with both hands, trying to wrench the sword from his grasp. But Scarface refused to be disarmed so easily. He balled a fist and, with a roundhouse swing, punched Sarah hard across the cheek.

The impact stunned her.

Before he could hit her again, she hooked her right arm under his elbow, twisted the joint, and dropped her shoulder. Scarface cried out as the force snapped his elbow.

Pushing him aside, Sarah saw the other two smugglers closing in. She cast another pulse, knocking them back twenty feet. They landed with a thud and skidded on the polished floor until they hit the far side of the chamber wall.

Only Mensah and Abu remained.

"You have something of mine," Sarah called out. The blue glow surrounding her hands sputtered. Her magic was running out.

Mensah smirked, clutching the sack to his body. "And how do you propose to escape with so many soldiers searching for you?"

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

"Very well." Mensah lobbed the sack high in her direction.

Sarah realized too late it was meant as a diversion.

Abu rushed forward, cracking his fist across her face, splitting her lip. Then he grabbed her shoulders, yanked her down, and thrust his knee deep into her stomach.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

After the fourth blow, he pushed her to the floor.

Sarah's breath came out in painful spasms. Spots dotted her vision.

Abu took out his khopesh. A crazed look came over him. His lips curled into an ugly, satisfied grin. His body trembled with anticipation. He twisted his hands on the sword's hilt and thrust the blade high in the air, ready to slice down and cleave her in two.

"Stop!" a voice ordered.

The khopesh flew out of Abu's hands before he could deliver his final blow.

Palace guards hurried into the antechamber, surrounding Sarah and the two smugglers. The circle parted for a man in 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, which stuck out from his chin to a point. Silver bracelets adorned his wrists, decorated with the Loremaster insignia—a sun flanked by two eagle wings.

Diocles.

Using Abu's sword like a cane, he strode into the circle. The metal tip clinked on the floor.

"She was mine, you pompous *ibn il-kalb!*" Abu shouted. His rage amplified his aura to a blazing red.

"You want your sword back?" Diocles asked.

"Give it too me!"

Faster than Sarah's eyes could follow, the Loremaster hurled the khopesh. It shot through the air, spinning end over end. No time to dodge the flying blade, it impaled Abu through his chest. The lanky smuggler stumbled back, eyes wide, gawking at the weapon dug into his sternum. His shocked expression lasted only a second before his eyeballs rolled back and he collapsed in a bloody heap on the floor.

Mensah's reached for his sword.

"Your friend was stupid and insolent," Diocles said, thrusting a finger at the smuggler. "Don't make the same mistakes."

The Egyptian reconsidered and slowly withdrew his hand.

Diocles turned his attention to Sarah still lying on the marble floor, helpless and bleeding. She gasped, trying to crab-crawl away, horrified by his display of brutality.

He must have noticed her revulsion. Raising both hands, he came toward her as if she was an animal in need of rescue. "Do not be alarmed, my dear. Do you know who I am?"

"Diocles," Sarah wheezed.

"Ah, so you've heard of me."

"More like I've heard what you're planning to do."

“Is that a fact.” Diocles grimaced in Mensah’s direction. Clearly, the smuggler’s revelations on the Acropolis were meant to be kept a secret. “Whatever you might have heard,” Diocles said, focusing on her again, “you must understand that I only seek to maintain the balance between the Spartan Kingdom and our own. Should they gain possession of Leonidas’ helmet, it could incite an attack against us.”

Sarah didn’t buy it. Swallowing her fear, she glanced at Abu’s corpse. His aura had winked out. “F-Folklorian artifacts belong to their r-rightful Kingdoms,” she stammered. “The rule was made for a reason.”

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

“So can *not* returning them,” Sarah shot back. She slowly rose to her feet, wavering slightly as the pain in her face and ribs made her dizzy.

The surrounding guards took a measured step toward her.

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

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me?”

A broad smile stretched across his face. “You’d like me to connect the dots for you, wouldn’t you?” He wagged a finger at her. “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.”

Sarah fought to keep her voice from trembling. “I’m going to stop you,” she said. The words must have sounded pathetic coming from a fifteen-year-old who could hardly stand straight, with blood oozing from her lip and bruises swelling her face.

The Loremaster’s eyes narrowed. “How unfortunate. It appears we will not come to terms then.” He folded his hands behind his back. “So what am I to do with you?”

“How about letting me go?”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible. If I do, your first stop will undoubtedly be to an oracle or to Sparta itself, although I imagine the Spartans won’t be pleased to learn you let their artifact fall into my hands.”

“Let?” Sarah huffed. “That’s a good one.”

“We could lock you in our dungeons,” Diocles continued, “or perform a mind wiping spell on you. Each has its drawbacks though. However unlikely, you could escape our dungeons, and mind wiping spells aren’t one hundred percent reliable. Memories always have a way of trickling back.” He stroked his beard. “I suppose our only option is to dispose of you.”

The way he said it was so matter-of-fact it made Sarah’s skin crawl. “If you kill me, the Coven will—”

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

Sarah felt a tightness in her chest. “What do you mean by that?”

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

She opened her mouth, but didn’t know what to say. Her mother had been killed on a routine artifact retrieval mission in Iraq ten years ago. The man who murdered her was never brought to justice.

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

He was right. More than once, Sarah had wanted to go after him, make him pay for turning her into an orphan, for taking the only parent she had left.

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

“No witch will ever seek vengeance,” Sarah whispered.

“How convenient,” Diocles said. He strolled around the circle of guards as if he was giving a lecture. “And do you know why the Coven didn’t do anything?”

“I have a feeling you’re going to—”

“Because they didn’t want to,” he cut her off. “Because seeking justice would upset the delicate peace between Folklore and the Inquisition. Frankly, your mother just wasn’t worth it.”

Sarah took a step back, pretending his words affected her. She knew he was trying to get her worked up, using her mother’s murder to drive a wedge between her beliefs and the Coven. Still, she’d be lying if she didn’t resent them for not bringing her mother’s killer to justice.

She took another step, inching closer to the guards behind her.

“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 helmet 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 will help you. And nothing can stop me from—”

Sarah moved like a flash. She lunged at the guard closest to her, catching him with a kick to his knee. He grunted and lost his balance for a second, but that was all it took for her to yank the spear from his grip. Like a caged tiger, Sarah used it to lash out at anyone who dared come too near.

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

Sarah pointed to Abu and the khopesh still imbedded in his chest. “Didn’t seem to stop *you*.”

“Any more of this nonsense will only delay the inevitable,” Diocles warned. “Drop the weapon, and I will make your end quick and painless.”

She refused to let the spear go.

The Loremaster sighed. “Very well.” He thrust out his hand, and an invisible force clenched Sarah’s throat, cutting off her airway. She squirmed, dropped the spear, and shot both hands to her throat. It took her a moment to realize the sickening, retching sounds she heard were coming from her.

Her body lifted off the floor, the Loremaster’s magic suspending her in midair.

His fingers curled claw-like, squeezing tighter.

Sarah’s vision blurred, her pulse thudded in her ears. She could just make out the Loremaster’s white toga and Mensah’s figure beside him. Forcing a hand free, she tried to reach out in Diocles’s direction, muster her last bit of magic in a desperate attempt to save herself. But her arm fell limp at her side, too heavy to move.

Her futile effort made the Loremaster laugh. “I admire your spirit, young one, but you simply cannot harm me.”

Sarah’s eyes flitted across the floor, resting on the sack Mensah had tossed earlier. A flash of bronze peeked from its opening.

She flicked her hand. “Toltha!” she croaked.

And the helmet flew into her hand.

Chapter 6

The Spartan helmet felt cool in Sarah's hand. Odd that the sensation would be so palpable, especially while the life was being choked out of her.

The retrieval spell had surprised Diocles. His strangle hold loosened for a fraction of a second, enough time for Sarah to slide the helmet over her head.

Its effects were immediate. The supernatural grip choking her all but disappeared, as though the helmet's power repelled the Loremaster's magic. She dropped onto her feet. Her vision sharpened. Energy returned to her aching muscles.

She picked up the spear she'd dropped moments before. The possibilities of how to use it multiplied. A combination of killing blows and ways to injure her opponents flashed in her mind. The weapon became an extension of her body. Sarah spun, whipping the spear's bronze tip in a wide arch.

A guard to her left attacked first.

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

More guards came at her. Sarah easily backflipped out of their way, landing in a crouched position with both the spear and sword extended to either side.

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

The helmet's power was intoxicating, magnifying her skills tenfold. Not even on her best day, fully charged with magic, could she have accomplished what she just did.

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

Sarah somersaulted out of its path, but the flame caught a soldier behind her, igniting first his uniform, then his flesh. His screams echoed throughout the chamber. Diocles never flinched. He conjured flame after flame and hurled them at Sarah, showing no remorse for those who were caught in the line of fire. Time and again, Sarah managed to leap and roll clear. Soldiers scrambled out of her way. Stray fireballs torched curtains hanging between columns and decorating the chamber's walls.

In the turmoil, Sarah saw an opening—a chance to run clear and escape. But something held her back.

I have the helmet, what am I waiting for?

A part of her couldn't stop the assault, 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.

This is what happened to Hamadi. He'd been consumed by the artifact's magic.

Sarah switched the grip on her spear and flung it at Diocles. The spear glanced by him, cutting through a folds of his toga. She bent down, grabbed a discarded hoplite shield, and pounded down the palace stairs.

Reaching the courtyard, Sarah increased her speed. In her peripheral vision, she made out a column of archers gathering along the ramparts. They readied their bows and let loose a simultaneous volley of arrows. They sliced the air, arching toward her like mini-missiles.

“Vanya!” Sarah shouted, thrusting her spell skyward. The pulse altered most of the arrows' trajectories, but some remained unaffected. She ducked under the safety of her stolen shield. The arrows slammed into its bronze surface and sparked off the marble ground around her. Certain the first volley had passed, she got up and kept running.

She crossed the square with the speed of an Olympic sprinter. More arrows flew past. Sarah dodged some and deflected others with her shield before finally passing through the main gates. Her shoes skidded to a stop. The hoplites she and Grigsby had seen earlier were marching up the avenue. The noise and commotion must have drawn them back to the palace.

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

Sarah didn't care. The urge to keep fighting was overwhelming. She was a machine fueled by bloodlust, an unstoppable force consumed by combat. Gripping the shield tight to her body, she prepared to plow through the man-made blockade. But magic helmet or not, her body wasn't impenetrable to that many spears. She 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 over.

“Surrender yourself, witch,” Themistocles called out.

Sarah hesitated, scanning the tense faces staring back at her along the phalanx.

Footsteps from behind alerted her Diocles, Mensah, and a dozen palace guards had arrived. For the second time that day, she was trapped.

Sarah knew she couldn't fight them all.

Struggling to regain control of her actions, she managed to slide the shield from her forearm. She let it drop on the cobblestones with a loud clang.

The unexpected move unnerved the phalanx. The hoplites tensed their muscles and readjusted the grips on their spears.

Next, Sarah reached up and fought to lift the helmet off her head. She was done being the helmet's puppet, but the artifact refused to leave its host so easily. The metal squeezed against her forehead and temples. She yanked harder. Finally, as if pushing through some mental barrier, it popped free. Released from the helmet's effects, the pain in Sarah's ribs and the dull swelling in her face returned. More than that, she sensed that her magic had completely drained. She had nothing left.

Only her wits.

The fate of the mission and her life depended on the next few moments. If she wasn't careful, Diocles could order Themistocles to arrest her, and the helmet would be his. Then again, the Loremaster could order her execution on the spot. Sarah liked that scenario even less.

Only one way out of this.

"I surrender," she said, lifting her arms, "but only to you, Themistocles. No one else."

The Greek captain stepped out from behind the phalanx, a hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "Why have you come here? Why have you attacked the palace guards?" His gaze drifted over Sarah's shoulder.

She looked back. Thick smoke billowed from where the Loremaster's fireballs had set fire to the palace. "I had to stop him from bringing war to your Kingdom," she said.

"Who?"

"Him." Sarah pointed to Mensah. "He brought Leonidas' helmet into your Folklore. A direct violation of the—"

"Stupid brat!" Mensah reached for his khopesh and sprang toward her. A sharp crack sounded and a spatter of crimson exploded from his shoulder before he could reach her. The smuggler crumpled, writhing in pain at Sarah's feet.

"You better leave my witch alone, you varmint," 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.

No one moved.

"I figured you weren't gonna listen to me," the elf said, keeping his rifle trained on the guards and soldiers below. Sarah heard the disapproval in his voice.

"Not now," she answered through clenched teeth. She loved Grigsby's sense of timing, but even in tense situations, he could be annoying.

She faced Diocles. Nothing would make her happier than to blame him for everything that had happened. She couldn't, not if her plan was going to work. "Thank you, Loremaster, for exposing the smugglers and their plot against the Athenian people."

"You're welcome," he said slowly. Clearly, he was trying to figure out what she was up to. "I'll take the helmet now. After all, it's what started all of this." He reached out, waiting for Sarah 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” —she pointed to Mensah— “trying to shift the balance of power so vital to the peace of New Athens. Don’t you agree?”

The Loremaster’s expression remained cold, frozen, but his eyes blazed with rage. “If you bring the helmet to Leonidas, the peace you speak of will be threatened.”

No matter how much she hated to admit it, Sarah knew he was right. *Why did the Spartans want the helmet? Why now?*

In the brief time she’d worn it, the artifact had consumed her thoughts and actions. It had fed off her magic like a leech. *What other purpose could it have other than to kill and destroy?*

Sarah couldn’t help thinking about the other relics she’d returned over the past year. 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 Sarah most.

Giving the helmet to the Spartans didn’t feel right anymore, and she definitely wasn’t going to let Diocles have it. So what option did she have left?

The answer came to her in a flash, but it meant forsaking another of the Coven’s rules.

Sarah lifted the helmet high above her head and raised her 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 Sparta, war may come anyway.” She turned, locking eyes with Diocles. “And if that happens, no amount of magic will save you.”

The Loremaster fixed her with a murderous stare. The muscles along his jaw hardened. “You are no longer welcome in New Athens, magicker,” he growled. “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 Sarah one last time before spinning on his heels. He trudged back through the palace gates. Mensah dragged himself to his feet, the blood from his bullet wound bloomed through his white suit. He was about to follow Diocles when a group of hoplites broke formation and surrounded him.

“Take him to the dungeons,” Themistocles ordered.

The soldiers grabbed Mensah roughly by each arm. He howled in agony.

“You’ll pay for this, witch,” the smuggler shouted as he was forced away. “One day, our paths will cross again, and then I won’t think twice about killing you! You hear me? I’ll kill you!”

Chapter 7

Flanked by hoplites on the way to the harbor was the safest Sarah had felt all day. They wound down a steep path to a sheltered bay. The water below shifted from black to a dark blue. Whitecaps caught in the crescent moonlight picked out individual waves. Beyond, Sarah could just 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 she'd been banished from this place. It was beautiful.

It may not be my only banishment. Sarah imagined the Coven wouldn't be pleased if they discovered what she'd done. *Would they even trust me with another mission? Would they actually kick me out of the Order?* She knew rogue witches seldom survived without the Coven's protection. *A lot their 'protection' did for me today...or from Mum all those years ago.*

Six triremes were moored in the harbor. At a length of one hundred twenty feet, they dwarfed the surrounding fishing and merchant vessels. A seven-foot-long bronze ram jutted from the nose of each battleship. Together with an eye painted on the bow, the ram reminded Sarah 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, she thought.

They approached a smaller Viking longship floating among the triremes. Sarah knew the ship, having traveled on it many times before. A menacing dragon's head carved from a single tree trunk peered down at them from the bow. It bared a toothy snarl as they came closer.

They stopped where a gangplank spanned the gap between the ship and pier. Grigsby continued onboard, readying the Viking vessel for departure.

"Thank you, General," Sarah 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."

Something in his tone told Sarah he didn't believe it was luck at all.

"There's something disturbing happening in the Greek Folklore, General—some conspiracy, shifts in power, that threaten the Kingdoms in this region." She didn't want to come right out and say that Diocles was a scheming, double-crossing turd. That it was *he*, not Mensah, who arranged for the helmet to enter their city.

Themistocles averted his eyes and focused on the Viking ship. The dim moonlight muted the bronze hues of his helmet, making it look 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 ruling elite. I have to believe he has the Kingdom’s best interests at heart.”

Sarah let out a long, drawn out breath. “I don’t know what to believe in anymore.” After what she’d experienced today, her feelings about the Coven had changed. Did their rules actually do more harm than good? Were they more interested in keeping the peace than doing what was right? And why hadn’t they done anything to capture her mother’s killer?

Themistocles gave her a sideways glance. “Such a bleak statement for someone so young.” His gaze fell on the smouldering palace in the distance. “But perhaps wise under the circumstances. Safe journey, magicker. I will hold you to your word.” His eyes lingered on the helmet nestled in the crook of her arm.

“I’ll do as I promised,” she said.

Themistocles pursed his lips and nodded.

Sarah watched him and the hoplites turn and exit the pier, then she joined Grigsby on the longship.

“Drakkar, prepare to cast off,” the elf ordered.

The ship responded with a groan. Ropes magically untethered themselves from the pier, and the main sail unfurled on its own. A magical breeze eased the vessel out of the harbor. Waves slapped against its wooden hull, sending sea spray misting over Sarah.

“Why didn’t you blame Diocles for all this?” Grigsby asked, coming up behind her. “You could’ve gotten rid of that scoundrel.”

“If I accused him 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.”

Grigsby smiled. “Savin’ both our hides in the process.”

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

“You really goin’ to get rid of it?”

She wasn’t sure anymore. *What if I keep it, use it only when I need to?*

She ran a fingertip tenderly along its surface, remembering the awesome power it gave her. No one could match her skill and strength.

I deserve to have it after everything I’ve been through.

She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. The helmet was messing with her mind.

No one should have that kind of power.

She let the helmet go, dropping 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 must admit,” Grigsby said, padding her shoulder, “sometimes you sure are a smart little witch—just like yer mother.”

The compliment brought a smile to Sarah's face. She had defied several of the Coven's most sacred rules, and doing so had probably saved her life and stopped a potential war between two kingdoms. Diocles had said that not all rules were meant to be followed. Maybe he was right. Maybe not everything was as black and white as Sarah had thought.

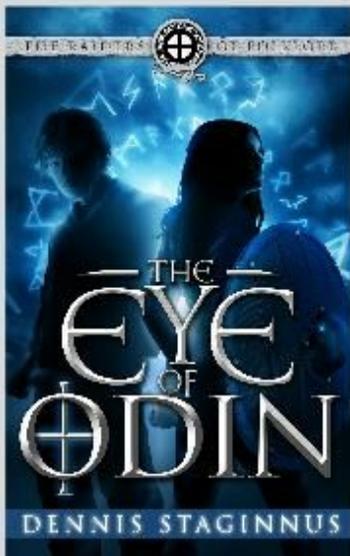
Maybe I'm closer to being like Mum than I realized.

"Drakkar," Grigsby called out again, "let's get the hell outta these waters. Twenty degrees starboard." The rudder automatically steered the ship westward and the rectangular sail angled to catch the wind. The elf pulled his Stetson down further over his head and made his way aft.

Sarah leaned wearily against the railing. "Where are the Vikings sending us anyway?" In all the excitement, she never thought to ask.

"Put on yer longjohns, kid," he yelled over his shoulder. "We're goin' to Canada."

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES...



The Eye of Odin

The Raiders of Folklore: Book 1

On probation for burglary, disliked by everyone at school, and with no memory of his past, fifteen-year-old Grayle Rowen thought his life couldn't suck more than it already did. He was wrong—it was about to get worse. Much worse.

While on a field trip to the Vancouver Museum, Grayle is forced to steal a Viking runestone from the museum's newest exhibit. Should've been an easy job, especially for a master thief like Grayle. What he didn't expect was another student, Sarah Finn, tagging along, or the Viking goddess of death showing up to steal the same artifact.

Now in a fight for their lives, Grayle and Sarah learn the runestone is one of five markers describing the whereabouts of the Eye of Odin, a mystical orb said to give its owner infinite knowledge of the past, present, and future. Though Grayle would love nothing more than to ditch Sarah, he knows he'll have little hope of finding the Eye and unlocking his mysterious past without her.

Dodging Hel-hounds, Frost Giants, and a cannibal Hex, the two teenagers race from Canada to the frozen reaches of Norway in an effort to recover the remaining runestones. The stakes are clear: find the markers in time and save the world. Fail, and the Viking goddess will use the Eye to destroy mankind.

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About the Author

Dennis Staginnus was born in West Germany, but raised in Canada. He graduated from the University of British Columbia's School of Education, deciding to go into teaching until he knew what he really wanted to do. Fifteen years later, he started writing stories for tweens and teens. He's the author of the MG series, RAIDERS OF FOLKLORE. He's also written DOUBLE CROSS and FATED, two short prequels to THE EYE OF ODIN, the first book in the RAIDERS OF FOLKLORE series. He continues to live in beautiful British Columbia with his wife and a clowder of cats.

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