

**TALISMAN  
OF  
EL**

BOOK ONE  
ARCADIA SAGA

TALISMAN  
OF  
EL

AL STONE



CENTRINIAN

Published in Great Britain by:  
Centrinian Publishing Ltd  
63/66 Hatton Garden, Fifth Floor, Suite 23  
London, EC1N 8LE  
www.centrinian.com

Copyright © 2020 Al Stone  
Cover Design © 2020 J William

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing from its publisher, nor be otherwise circular in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

First published 2012

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:  
a catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library

ISBN-13: 978-0-9954941-1-4  
ISBN-10: 0995494118

*For my mother, Pauline, the first to bear the story.  
Thank you for all your wonderfully weird tales.*

## PROLOGUE

Manhattan, New York  
January 25, 2013, 11:15 P.M.

**D**ERKEIN ODESSA SAUNTERED INTO a study lined with bookshelves and a high ceiling of gold leaf and bas-relief sculptures. He stopped when he saw his father standing behind the large mahogany desk at the back of the room, rifling through the wall safe. A muscle in his jaw ticked. ‘You’re alive then,’ he said.

‘Not now, Derkein.’ His father closed the safe, concealing it with a portrait of his wife.

Folding his arms across his chest, Derkein advanced on him, his footsteps echoing off the hardwood floor. ‘Not now.’ He chuckled without humour. ‘Well, why don’t you give me your card and I’ll book an appointment?’

‘I’m sorry I didn’t call, but I can’t talk right now. I have a flight to catch.’

When his father turned around, Derkein stopped, his eyes widening. A blood-soaked plaster covered the right side of his father’s neck, red stains on the collar of his white shirt. Derkein hurried over to him. ‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘I’m fine. It’s just a scratch.’

‘You don’t look fine. Where have you been ...?’ Derkein paused, the strong smell of tobacco assailing his nose. He

scrutinised his father – the purple bags under his eyes, scratch marks on his chin. ‘You’re still searching for it, aren’t you?’ He sighed, raking a hand through his shoulder-length black hair as he lifted his head back. ‘You gave me your word.’

‘I know you disagree with my decision, but you have to understand –’

‘Understand what? Dad, this is not normal.’ Derkein grabbed the bag at his father’s feet, lifted it onto the desk, and tipped it onto its side, scattering the contents over the surface. Surveying a collection of guns and daggers, he picked up a black leather sheath and pulled out a knife, its broad, stainless blade honed until the cutting edge was almost invisible. He dropped the knife and sheath among the other weapons. ‘You have to stop this.’

‘Luther’s dead.’

Derkein’s heart skipped a beat. ‘What ... What happened?’

‘Natural causes. Apparently, his heart gave out.’

‘What do you mean “apparently”?’

With a hesitant glance at Derkein, his father opened the front pocket of his bag and pulled out a burnished copper talisman with an engraved steel band and a circular crevice. ‘Luther and I dug this up in the Roncador Mountains in Mato Grosso, Brazil. The earthquake that hit South America two months ago ... We caused it when we removed this from the earth.’ He looked down at the talisman and then back at Derkein, distress clouding his features. ‘The moment the earthquake struck, we passed out. Two hours later, we woke up on Manhattan Bridge.’

‘I don’t understand what you’re saying.’

‘We didn’t fly to New York.’

‘Then how did you get here?’

His father started packing the weapons back inside the bag. ‘I don’t know. Three weeks ago, Luther called me and told me that someone was following him. I think whoever was after him wanted the talisman, and when they didn’t find it, they killed him. Now they’re after me.’

‘So give it to them. Dad, this isn’t worth your life.’

‘I can’t. This is my only connection to Arcadia.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘England,’ his father replied. ‘Thomas might be able to help me. If what he told me about these beings is true, I can’t be around you. They got to Luther. I won’t lose you too.’ He turned around and stared at the portrait covering the safe.

‘I miss Mum too, but it’s been five years. Give up before you end up killing yourself. Arcadia doesn’t exist.’

His father looked at him. ‘It’s out there. I’m going to find it. I will bring her back.’

‘Mum’s dead,’ Derkein snapped. ‘When are you going to get that?’

‘I have to go,’ his father said in a calm voice. ‘I’ll call you when I get there.’

‘Dad –’

‘I’ll be fine. I always am.’

‘Dad, please –’

An ear-piercing scream ripped through the building. Derkein froze, his eyes the only things that moved. His gaze fixed on his father, who was rummaging through his bag. He took out a black pistol and turned to Derkein, a tortured expression on his face as he placed the weapon in his son’s trembling hand.

‘Shoot anything that moves,’ his father instructed. He placed the talisman around Derkein’s neck, tucking it inside his shirt. ‘Don’t let it out of your sight.’ Cupping Derkein’s face in his hands, he made him meet his gaze. ‘I’m so sorry I got you involved in this.’ He grabbed another gun from the bag.

‘What exactly have you got yourself into, Dad?’

His father looked at him with a solemn expression. ‘If anything happens to me, you find Thomas. Tell him ... Tell him he was right.’ He headed towards the door.

‘Dad, wait.’ Derkein went after him. ‘Dad –’

The double doors burst open with a bang.

His father opened fire. ‘Derkein, shoot!’ he yelled.

Derkein glanced around the room in panic and confusion. He saw no one but his father. Then he felt a sharp pain in his arm, heard his shirt tear, and cried out. Something warm dribbled down his arm, and when he placed his hand on it, he saw blood. His father screamed, and he looked up and saw him flying across the room, crashing into a bookshelf that collapsed under him.

'Dad!' Derkein sprinted towards him but felt a powerful blow across his chest that sent him flying backwards, and he landed hard on the floor, his gun falling out of his hand. Staggering to his feet, he glanced around for whatever had attacked him but saw nothing. His gaze landed on his father, who was groaning ... and then he was gone. There were no bright lights or loud noise. He had just vanished.

As Derkein stared wide-eyed at the spot where his father had been lying only moments before, something like a blast of electricity stunned him, and he felt an intense burning inside his chest. He let out a cry as his body lifted off the ground and hung in midair. Seconds later, he came crashing down ...

## CHAPTER ONE



### Substitute

**T**HREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY, Charlie Blake jolted awake. He clutched at his chest as he tried to catch his breath. His heart was racing, his body trembling. He looked up at the bearded, heavy-set man standing over him, and it was then he realised he was on the floor.

‘It’s all right,’ said his guardian, Jacob Willoughby, as he helped Charlie onto the bed. ‘I’m going to call the doctor.’

‘No,’ Charlie protested. ‘I’m okay.’

‘Are you sure?’

Charlie nodded.

‘I’ll get you some water,’ Jacob said, and he left the room.

Running a hand through his unkempt black hair, Charlie pulled it back from his face and looked at the clock hanging on the cream wall above the walnut chest of drawers opposite him. It had just gone three thirty in the morning. Taking hold of the chain around his neck, he looked down at the two silver rings attached to it, clenching his fist around them. A feeling of despair overwhelmed him, and he took a deep breath. He’d had nightmares before, but only once had he woken up feeling this way. That was four years ago – the day before his tenth birthday. The day before his dad died.

Jacob returned to the room. 'Here you go,' he said, handing Charlie a glass of water.

'Thanks.' Charlie took a sip and rested the glass on his bedside table.

Jacob stood with his arms crossed, his paunch hanging over his belt, his short brown hair damp, as if he had just stepped out of the shower. 'Feeling better?'

Charlie nodded, forcing a smile. It had only been a week since he'd moved into the three-bed cottage, yet he was already waking the man up at the most inconvenient time. If he was planning on this adoption succeeding, he was going about it the wrong way. 'Sorry I woke you.'

'You don't need to apologise.' Jacob's face assumed an amiable expression. 'Do you need me to get you anything?'

'No, I'm fine.'

'If you do need anything, I'm right across the hallway.' Jacob smiled and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Charlie waited until the light under the door vanished before getting up and splashing the glass of water on his face. He opened the window, which overlooked the back garden and the vast stretch of woods that lay beyond the fence, and cold air poured into the room, carrying with it a rich, wet, earthy scent.

**D**aylight came sooner than expected. The sun shone with brilliance through the wafting curtains. Charlie was sitting in bed, rifling through a black box with metal embellishments – a tenth birthday gift from his mother. Inside the box, he kept letters his mother had written to him before she died.

He shivered, his pyjamas like ice against his skin, but he didn't mind the cold; it had a way of calming his nerves. Hearing footsteps on the stairs, he looked up at the wall clock nestled between two pictures – a bucket of daffodils and swans in a lake. It was almost eight – four hours since the nightmare – and he hadn't slept a wink. Replacing the letters

inside the box, he got up and walked over to the walnut chest of drawers, set the box on top of it, and then headed across the room.

He opened the door and paused, glancing back to survey the small room, as he had done every morning since he arrived at Spring Drive. A tingle of anticipation rippled through him as he thought about how far away he was from Alpha Children's Home. His gaze shifted to the TV and game console beside the chest of drawers, and he smiled.

As soon as Charlie entered the bright yellow farmhouse kitchen, the flagstone floor cold under his bare feet, the smell of bacon grease hit him, and his stomach turned. As always, neither the windows nor the door to the back garden were open.

A shrill whistle filled the air, and he glanced to his left at the kettle on the range cooker behind the oak table where he spotted Jacob sitting down reading the *West Sussex Gazette*.

'Hi,' Charlie greeted him.

'Morning,' Jacob replied. His gaze shifted to the kettle, and he set the newspaper down on the table, got up, and went over to the cooker. 'How are you feeling?'

'Good,' Charlie said as he approached the chair in front of him. Sitting down, he grabbed a saucer from the stack in the centre of the table and two slices of toast from the rack.

Jacob returned to his seat with a steaming cup of coffee. 'You look tired. Did you get any sleep?'

Charlie paused in the middle of buttering his toast. 'Yep.'

Jacob's beady brown eyes studied him a moment. 'Marz mentioned that you have trouble sleeping.'

*Oh great,* Charlie thought. *He thinks I'm disturbed.*

'Are these nightmares regular?' Jacob asked.

*Here we go again.* 'No. Just your average nightmare. Who doesn't have them, right? It's no big deal.' Charlie clenched his jaw and looked down at his plate.

'All that city noise, I bet. Maybe you just needed a change of scenery.' Jacob took a bite of his bacon sandwich. 'I thought we had a break-in with all that screaming last night.'

Gave me a right fright, you did. That must have been a terrifying dream you were having. What was it about?’

Charlie looked at him, apprehensive. ‘I ... uh ... I can’t remember.’ His weary voice broke at the end.

A speculative look came into Jacob’s eyes, and his lips parted, as if he was about to say something; instead, he took another bite of his sandwich. ‘Are you looking forward to school on Monday?’

‘I guess so.’

‘Well, you have nothing to worry about. The kids here are great. Besides, Oakwood is a lot smaller than your last school, so you’ll make friends in no time.’ Jacob gave Charlie an encouraging smile.

Charlie bit into his cold toast and leaned back against the hard chair. According to Oakwood’s website, the total enrolment was exactly four hundred and seventy-five – about one-third of the total population of his last school – who most likely knew everything about one another. Being the new kid was a certified way of attracting attention, but being an outsider *and* an orphan, well, he’d be a headliner.

Charlie felt a swirling sensation inside his chest as he pondered that thought. Tasting something sour in his mouth, he set the toast down on the saucer. ‘Is Oakwood really the only secondary school in Capeton?’ he asked.

Jacob nodded. ‘It’s a small town, but that’s why I moved here. It’s quiet. People respect your privacy. You’ll settle in soon enough. Just think of it this way. You’ll have all your friends under one roof. Just promise me you won’t throw any house parties while I’m at work.’

Charlie smiled and took a deep breath, relaxing a little.

‘Speaking of which,’ Jacob went on. ‘I have to pop into work this morning. You don’t mind having the house to yourself for a few hours, do you?’ Charlie shook his head. ‘Good. I have a wake I need to organise.’

‘A wake?’

‘Yes. It’s a gathering of family and friends, a way of showing respect for the deceased.’

*So that's what you call it*, Charlie thought. When he had attended his dad's wake, he had thought it had been a surprise party for him, believing that his dad had played a terrible trick on him. It had taken him over a year to accept that his dad wasn't coming back. 'Did you have a wake for your wife?'

Jacob's shoulders stiffened. 'I did,' he answered, his voice choked.

'What was she like?'

Jacob looked at his watch. 'You know, I should get going. I have so much to do. You have my work number.' He got up and rushed out of the kitchen far faster than he looked capable of moving. Charlie heard him say goodbye, but the door slammed before he could respond. He hadn't given much thought to it before, but he realised then that he and Jacob had a shared understanding: neither of them liked to talk about their loved ones because it was as if they no longer existed. He was surprised Jacob hadn't quit his job as a funeral director, considering he had to deal with death all the time.

Charlie paced back and forth across the road from Spring Drive, a twisting dirt lane bordered by a stone wall and trees on either side. Perhaps it was the thick maroon blazer and black coat he had on, or that he wouldn't keep still, but even in the biting January air, he felt a bead of sweat trickle down the back of his neck.

Hearing a low rumbling noise, he stopped pacing and turned around. When he saw the yellow single-decker bus approaching, his heart skipped a beat. High at the top of the flat-faced vehicle were the words **SCHOOL BUS** in bold black lettering.

The bus pulled up in front of him, and the folding door opened. Behind the wheel sat a frighteningly gaunt black man. Charlie took a deep breath and entered.

'Noo 'ere's a new face,' the driver said in a strong Northern accent. 'W's yer name, son?'

'Charlie,' he replied.

'Great ter 'ave yeh on board, Charlie. The name's Ernie. Grab yerself a seat.'

Charlie glanced around the half-full bus and then hurried along the aisle, keeping his head down. Finding an empty seat halfway down the bus, he settled into it. Two girls in front of him looked back and giggled. He felt his cheeks heat up when one of the girls chanted, 'Carla likes the new boy.'

The bus rumbled along a deserted country lane lined on both sides by a low barbed-wire fence protecting large fields. Hearing a noise, Charlie averted his gaze from the window and observed the two tall boys who had just walked past him from the back of the bus. They stopped three rows ahead of him where a smaller lad sat slumped in his seat. The larger of the two boys sat in the seat behind the small lad and startled him with a whack on the back.

'Wake up, Sunshine,' the boy standing up said – the leader most likely from the way his friend was watching him with admiration. He had broad shoulders and glossy slicked-back black hair, a stark contrast to his pale skin. He grabbed the lad's bag and opened it.

'Give it back,' the lad murmured, his cry reduced to a mere whisper out of fear.

Charlie looked towards Ernie, who, singing along to the radio, seemed to be in a world of his own.

The leader pulled a book out of the lad's bag. 'You want it?' he teased. He raised and dropped his eyebrows at his sidekick, a dark-skinned boy with a shaved head, who got up and opened the window. The leader glanced towards the front of the bus at Ernie, who was still oblivious to the scene behind him, and then back at the lad. 'Go get it.' He tossed the book out the window.

Charlie clenched his fists and sat forward. Knowing how foolish it would be to march up to the leader and his giant sidekick, however, he sank back in his seat.

‘That’s my homework,’ the lad cried.

‘Someone’s getting detention,’ the leader taunted. The lad made a move, but the sidekick forced him back into his seat.

‘STOP!’

All the students froze.

Charlie was standing in the aisle, his fists clenched.

The leader dropped the bag and turned to him. ‘You got a problem?’

Charlie didn’t respond. He hadn’t thought that far ahead.

‘Yeh kids behave back the’er,’ Ernie called, gazing through the rear-view mirror. The bus slowed as it neared the next stop.

‘Oi, you deaf? I said have you got a problem?’ the leader repeated, his voice fierce. He stepped forward, narrowing the distance between him and Charlie, who stood his ground, though he didn’t have much choice, for there was nowhere to run.

‘Could you be any more predictable, Josh?’ a brave voice said.

To Charlie’s relief, the bullies turned away from him. His eyes rested on a girl about four inches shorter than him at 5’2”, wearing baggy trousers and black Converse shoes, and were it not for her long brunette hair that covered most of her olive-toned face, he might have thought she was a boy. She gave the leader, Josh, a hard look.

‘Funny how bullies only pick on those who won’t fight back,’ the girl went on. ‘Makes you wonder who the real coward is.’ Her mouth twitched as she suppressed a smile. Then her eyes fixed on Charlie.

Feeling sweat gathering beneath his clenched fists, Charlie relaxed his fingers. As he stared into the girl’s big cinnamon-brown eyes, framed by thick lashes, he half smiled, which quickly faded when he heard the leader’s voice.

‘I don’t fight girls,’ the boy named Josh said. ‘If that *is* what you are.’

‘I’ll pretend I’m a boy if you pretend you are,’ the girl shot back. Some students laughed, but when the bullies glared at them, they fell silent. Charlie sat back down while Josh’s sidekick retreated to the back of the bus.

Josh’s jaw tightened as he glared at the girl. ‘This ain’t over.’ He backed off, frowning.

Charlie stared at the girl, who was helping the small boy pack his books back into his bag. When she finished, she walked towards the back, stopped next to Charlie, and leaned over him. Gazing into her eyes, he felt his heart leap.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said with a smile. ‘He’s a lot less scary than he looks.’

Charlie’s eyes followed her as she sat one seat behind him on the opposite side, listening to her pocket-sized music player. When she lifted her head and met his gaze, he looked away quickly, heat rising to his cheeks again.

Twenty minutes later, the bus turned down a narrow, tree-lined road signposted Oakwood Secondary School. Charlie observed the medieval-looking building ahead that looked more like a library than a school, but when the bus veered left into the car park, giving him a wider view of the complex, he noticed the modern red brick buildings neighbouring the entrance building.

As soon as the bus stopped, Charlie made a quick exit, for the bullies kept giving him the evil eye – a sign of unfinished business, no doubt. He moved along the side of the bus, heading around the crowd that had gathered outside the entrance. To avoid scrutiny, he kept his head down as he made his way inside the building. He managed to find the office, a small cream room just right of the entrance, and collected his class schedule and school map.

Arriving two minutes late for his first and least favourite lesson, maths, he found himself the centre of attention, but apart from the prolonged discomfort of having to stand at the front of the classroom while the overzealous Mr. Springer added his name to the register, he got through it.

His next class, French, he spent with his head ducked behind his book, avoiding Mrs. Gregg, who had an annoying trait of picking the least enthusiastic person to answer questions. All he gained from that class was an aching neck.

When the bell rang, he waited for the room to empty before heading to lunch. Chattering teens had already filled most of the tables by the time he entered the canteen. His heart drummed as he searched the large orange room for a place to sit, his tray consisting of a veggie burger, an iced sponge cake and a cup of orange juice.

Spotting an empty table in the corner lined with windows and a double door that led to the playground, he headed towards it. As he neared the table, he felt a thud against his back that sent him plummeting forward. His tray slipped out of his hand and flipped over, the entire contents scattering over the floor.

Shocked gasps echoed around the room, and everyone – even the dinner ladies – stopped what they were doing to watch.

Charlie scrambled to his feet and came face to face with the bullies from the bus.

Josh sneered. ‘Clumsy, aren’t you?’

Charlie’s pulse quickened, and a warm sensation shot through his body. Feeling a tremor beneath his feet, he paused. For a moment, he wondered if he had imagined the ground shaking, but then Josh’s expression changed; confusion replaced the amusement on his face as he glanced down.

‘*Calm down,*’ a voice in Charlie’s head said. It wasn’t the first time he was hearing the voice, so it didn’t alarm him. What puzzled him was the fact that it was a female voice. It always made him feel as if he had two minds.

‘What’s going on here?’ a rasping voice barked.

Charlie glanced at a stout woman holding a mop and a bucket, wearing a blue and white striped apron and a white hairnet. She stood with one hand on her hip, a stern look on her face.

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

