

PROLOGUE

The hooded man picked his way along the cliffs, keeping his head down since the light from the blazing sun irritated his eyes. He was also looking down so he wouldn't trip over an errant rock or hidden root and drop the precious treasure clutched so tightly to his chest. Above his head, a seagull squawked, and the ocean breeze brought the scent of salt to his nose, together triggering unpleasant memories from long ago. He hadn't been to this place in years, but the irony was not lost on him that the cave he was seeking represented the lowest point in his illustrious life. Because what he held so carefully in his arms would help him achieve the greatness that he had only dreamed about before the universe consigned him to the living death of the here and now.

The familiar sight of bleached rat bones mixed in with the rocks and roots on the trail let him know he was getting close, and after a few minutes more, the cavern was finally in view. Picking his way back into the darkness of a place he knew by feel, the resting place for his prize possession became visible in the eerie light of the phosphorescent fungus on the cave walls. He kissed his treasure and set it down carefully. "I will be back for you when it is your time," he rasped. "Together, you and I, who were joined by cruel fate centuries ago, will wreak our revenge upon this world. And, we are going to start with the downfall of the one and only Sirius Sinister."

CHAPTER 1

I hurtled through the wormhole, leaving Hades's throne room and feeling a great rush of oddly frigid air before I was flung headfirst into a snowdrift. What? How could my vampire Maltese, Garlic, and I be stuck in a blasted snowdrift? Well, Hades's last words were to enjoy the cold and that it was to die for. The Lady of the Underworld's dark humor had sent us on a little icy escapade before we got back to the warmth of Sa Dragonera. The harsh bite of a cold wind blew right through my breeches, and my back half was now being chomped on by the enthusiastic teeth of winter. I spit out some snow and became conscious of Garlic huddled close to me, wriggling to get free. I pushed out with my arms and freed us from our snowy tomb. My boots dropped onto a rocky ledge covered with ice and snow, and it took all of my vampire agility not to slide off the edge to a painful landing on the jagged rocks hundreds of feet below. I looked around and saw nothing but beautiful azure sky and massive snowcapped mountains in every direction. My wager was that Hades had sent me as far from warmth as possible, and with mountains this bloody high, I had to be in the Himalayas.

We had landed halfway up one of the aforementioned massive snowcapped mountains, and I could see down to where a patch of brown marked where the snow line ended. I pulled my now all too thin cloak around me, and set an unhappy, completely snow-covered Garlic down on the ice, and she promptly added a little color to it in her disgust. She opened her mouth to unleash another wormhole. "Good 4

girl,” I said. “Sa Dragonera and warmth, here we come!” The last place we wanted to be was here!

I stepped carefully into the wormhole, hoping that it would not return us to the nether realm that we had just escaped. Family and warmth, then Hedley Edrick’s school—yes. Eternal inferno—a definite no! Instead, we found ourselves buried in the same snowdrift we had just escaped, but now we were buried even deeper. Garlic barked angrily, and I had to agree with her sentiment. “Let’s try that again,” I said, petting her softly to calm her down and get her focused. “For some reason, we cannot get to Sa Dragonera. Think of Harvis’s barn. That is the first place you ever traveled from by crystal. You have been there a lot. You know its smells as well as that barn in London where I first found you. So, either place will do! Just not here!”

She yelped happily and barked again, forming another wormhole. Her collar was completely covered in snow, but surely that couldn’t be messing with her focus, and we jumped through the wormhole together in our eagerness to escape this winter wasteland. I did not see Sa Dragonera, or Harvis’s barn, or even that first barn in London—just snow. Lots of snow. A forlorn vampire Maltese howled as we slowly dug our way out of the snowdrift once again. I rather think she even preferred the heat of Hell to this forsaken place. She barked even louder at the wind, and I worried her canine expression of displeasure would bring down half a mountain of snow on us.

“Easy girl,” I said, but this time she had been answered by what sounded like a rabid and hungry dire wolf. The challenge of the beast came again, but this time closer. It was quickly answered by its pack, and from the angry and guttural sound of the howls, it was a pack of big and very hungry wolves. Understandably, I was well over all things wolf. I brushed the snow off of Garlic’s collar with my bare, cold hands, and saw that the once red crystals had turned to black. Hmmm, any guess as to the perpetrator of such a dastardly deed? The chances of us seeing family and then heading to Hedley’s school were now about as remote as where we were!

“Damn you, Hades,” I said to the mountains and the heavy snow which had just begun to fall. “You just could not help yourself, could you?” There was no answer but the whistling wind announcing a blizzard was coming. We had to get down this mountain before it struck 5

and we ended up frozen in place, preserved for all antiquity like a couple of statues, unless the wolves got to us first. We picked our way along the ledges, half sliding, half jumping down the mountain. We were making great time, and the exertion was keeping us warm—at least that's what I kept telling myself.

The leader of the pack howled again, but this time he was farther away, and Garlic snorted happily hearing the frustration in his voice. These wolves had not tracked vampires before, and clearly they had thought us to be easy prey. I shuddered against the cold for a moment, considering stopping to confront the wolves to add a fur coat to my wardrobe. I hated to kill even one of the beasts, since they were just trying to survive in this desolation. But then again, so was I. Fortunately for the wolves, I spotted a stone-walled monastery—presumably Tibetan—down below us on the mountain, and Garlic and I doubled our pace to get to the safety and warmth it represented. The snow pelting us in the face was stinging like thousands of angry white bees, and even my vampire constitution was struggling to keep my handsome face warm and free of frostbite. I would be a whole lot less attractive without the tip of my nose, and kissing was something I preferred to do—with lips.

We reached the small plateau in front of the monastery and found a wide path had been cleared, leaving mounds of snow piled to either side. My assassin's intuition was screaming that this was a trap, but as I looked down at the shivering Maltese by my wet, cold feet, I became willing to take my chances. A wolf howl sounded suddenly close behind us, and Garlic and I broke into a sprint, heading for the monastery gate.

Just as we neared it, we saw, dropping down from the wall and landing soundlessly on the snow below, a solitary figure garbed in white furs, hat, and a scarf covering all the face but leaving a small slit for the eyes. It backed away from the wall slowly and turned, freezing in place as it saw Garlic and me, who were simply just freezing. "Is the front door broken?" I called to the figure in Tibetan. In my experience anytime you left a building by climbing over a wall, you were either escaping, or murder, theft, or some other form of subterfuge was in play. "I don't know what language you speak," I said, this time in Spanish. "But there are some hungry wolves we are going to have to deal with unless we get back into the monastery!"⁶

“Rakshas!” the definitely female voice shouted. She pointed behind us. “Rakshas!”

I turned and saw a pack of the biggest, nastiest, angriest, and apparently hungriest wolves I had ever laid eyes on, pacing at the edge of the plateau, just licking their chops, thinking about the prey they had cornered. It was almost enough to make me a cat person right then and there—well, almost.

“Oh right,” I said. “Rakshas.” I knew some Tibetan, but I didn’t know what *Rakshas* meant. But I did know how to deal with hungry wolves and drew out the Blade of Truth, which reflected the falling snow so well that it appeared to be part of the storm. But the wolves had no problem seeing it, and Garlic let out a vicious growl that belied her small stature, and showed her fangs that were more than a match for the many canines of the mountains. The pack leader yelped and fled back up the mountain, his mates sprinting behind him.

“Well that was easy,” I said to the girl and to Garlic, this time in French. “So much for the Rakshas. They ran away like the mangy mutts they are, right Garlic?”

“No,” the girl said, shaking her head. “No.” She looked up at the wall, and put a gloved hand on it as if contemplating climbing back up the smooth surface. Then she ran to the gate and pulled on it, once, twice, but to no avail.

“Now you have the right idea,” I said in German. “Is there another way to get into the monastery?”

She did not answer but took a deep breath and sprinted down the path toward us. And that was when the plateau erupted, sending huge chunks of snow and ice skyward to crash down all around us. The girl skidded to a stop no more than a few feet from me, and her scarf dropped to her neck. I found myself looking into a very pretty face—a face with skin the color of the snow and whose big, beautiful brown eyes suddenly went wide with absolute horror.

“What?” I said. “What is it?” Garlic growled a warning and bared her teeth. From out of the snowstorm crept several white-furred, apelike creatures, easily fifteen feet tall with huge hands, massive muscles and, by the look on their fanged, crazed faces, a whole lot of bad attitude. “Oh, those are the Rakshas,” I said, pushing the girl behind me and Garlic, and raising the Blade of Truth. “Stand back! One taste of 7

the truth, and these overgrown mountain monkeys will run like those wolves did!”

I screamed my best challenge, bared my fangs, and waved the sword wildly, hoping to scare them off and avoid a fight. The Blade of Truth glowed white and then became so bright that I had to avert my eyes. When I saw that the light from the sword had faded, I realized with horror that the Blade of Truth had disappeared from my hand, leaving me quite unarmed. “Are you kidding me?” I yelled to the cosmos. “How is this moment not one of need? Who could use the Blade of Truth more than us right now? What am I supposed to do, throw snowballs at them?” The cosmos did not answer. I turned to Garlic, seeing she was a snarling mass of small white fur and gnashing fangs ready for a fight. The Rakshas came closer, surrounding us, and I realized I was still very cold, very wet, and now I was very much in trouble.

So I did what I figured these snow monkeys would not expect from any sane, and seemingly unarmed, mountain traveler—I attacked. With a wink at Garlic, I leaped forward, sliding under the awkward grasping hands of one of the Rakshas, and placed a perfectly aimed kick to the side of its knee. It felt like I was kicking the side of a mountain, but the Raksha howled in pain and collapsed on the snow in a heap like a great furry snowdrift. Garlic hurtled forward and sliced an Achilles tendon of the nearest Raksha, dropping it to the ground. The other Rakshas froze, clearly stunned by the sight of the pure white snow now stained crimson by the blood of one of their own.

I saw our cute new friend was still smack dab in the midst of the stunned snow monkeys. “Come on,” I said to Garlic. “Now is our chance.” I took down another Raksha with a swift kick to where I guessed his furry baby-Raksha makers would be, and Garlic found the leg of another to be a tasty treat. I grabbed the girl by the hand. “Let’s go,” I said. “Down the mountain! Before they regroup! We have to outrun them!”

“You can’t!” she said to me in perfect Spanish, pulling me back toward the monastery with surprising strength in her grip. “You can’t outrun them!” She couldn’t intend to go back to the locked, gated, and high-walled monastery?

“What do you mean we can’t?” I exclaimed. “What choice do we have?”⁸

She looked at me blankly, or as it turns out quite knowingly, as the futility of outrunning these beasts became quite clear when I turned back to the Rakshas and saw that they were changing right before my eyes. No longer furry and simian, the Rakshas that Garlic had drawn blood from rose from the snow, shimmering and shifting like a snowstorm. I could see patches of red stains where Garlic had cut them, but they were bleeding no longer. Behind them rose the two beasts I had crippled, and together with the other Rakshas, they rushed us like a great avalanche of fangs and claws.

“Run,” I shouted. “Run!” But they were on us in an instant, and despite the claws I parried and dodged, other claws raked my body all over, shredding my clothes and opening wound after gaping wound. I dropped to my knees in pain and saw my own blood run scarlet upon the snow. Garlic had shot ahead, but returned and let out a massive bark, which blasted into the storm of Rakshas, momentarily scattering them. I turned toward the girl, bracing to see her cut to ribbons by these foul beasts, but instead saw her standing there with nary a scratch on her alabaster-white and impenetrable skin. She was a faerie!

She looked at me with those beautiful brown eyes and shook back her cowl, sending waves of white hair cascading over her shoulders. Her white fur coat hung in tatters on her torso, which she discarded in one fluid motion. I gasped both in pain and admiration, for she was clad in some sort of one-piece garment that showed every inch of a muscular, voluptuous, and literally diamond-hard frame. Our gazes locked for a brief second, and I took strength from what I felt in return. All along she had not been in fear of the Rakshas, as they could not harm her, but she had known all too well what they could do to me and Garlic.

I struggled to my feet, and Garlic stood growling between me and the Rakshas that were reforming, getting ready to attack once again. On they came, and I summoned every ounce of my ebbing strength and ran toward the monastery. Garlic stayed beside me, barking volleys of sound at the Rakshas who quickly exploded into a thousand fragments of ice before reforming—this time in but an instant. But many more claws had gotten to me and done more damage. I was not going to make it to the monastery gate. I fell to the ground and rolled on my back, the hard cold rock of the plateau jutting into my back. Garlic 9

skidded to a stop, and I saw she, too, was cut and heavily bleeding. But instead of saving herself, she leaped upon my chest, ready to defend me to the bitter, cold end. Our blood ran together, which seemed fitting if this was to be our ultimate end, and it pooled on the snow beneath me. My eyes closed of their own volition, and all I wanted was merciful sleep to come and take me. Garlic let out a low growl, but she wasn't barking in the direction of the oncoming demons.

Groggy from blood loss, I forced my eyes open. I looked toward the edge of the plateau and saw walking toward me a little girl, her blonde hair braided into pigtails. She wore only a simple ivory tunic, and her bare feet did not seem bothered by the biting chill of the snow that was slowly numbing my pain. She dragged behind her a rag doll, and the barest trace of a smile creased her lips. Was I deliriously imagining meeting Maria?

An angry shout from the faerie drew my eyes from the child, and I saw that the faerie had pulled a jeweled dagger from her belt. She did not attack the Rakshas with it, but merely glared angrily at me—like she thought this attack from the snow demons was my fault—before she hurled it high in the air over the monastery, where it disappeared in a great explosion of golden light. I raised my head, and I could almost feel the cold, fetid breath of the Rakshas as they rushed Garlic and me to deliver their killing strokes, but they simply had stopped the moment the faerie threw the dagger.

I could not believe it! The Rakshas had not randomly attacked us. They were the guardians of the temple. It seemed the beautiful faerie was a thief! She had clearly gone through great lengths to steal the jeweled dagger from the temple. But why did she return it? Why not escape with her prize and leave me to the Rakshas? The thief darted to the side of the plateau. She shook her head as if in disbelief and smiled, blowing a kiss to me before she jumped over the edge, with the Rakshas now in pursuit. If I lived one thousand years, I would never understand women.

With the Rakshas gone, the storm abated immediately, and I could see the sun setting behind one of the mountain peaks, and with every second the air seemed to grow colder and colder. I could feel my heart beating strong, but every beat was pushing more and more of my blood upon the snow. That thousand years was about to be a 10

thousand seconds. Garlic whimpered and curled up on my chest, licking my many wounds as best she could. Then, the triumphant howls of the wolves echoed as they made their return. It was only going to be minutes before they wrought their revenge on Garlic and me and tore us to shreds in a victory feast that we would never recover from.

But I could not let that happen. I was fading in and out of consciousness, yet I felt a presence deep within, comforting me, encouraging me, and loving me. I looked to where the blonde child had been and saw she was gone. Although I had clearly been seeing things, this time I had no doubt I was *feeling* the presence of Maria! It was her—my little unborn merpire! She wanted to see me, know me, and hug me, which she could not do if I became dinner for the wolf pack.

“Come on, Garlic,” I said, rolling onto my knees. “We have to bang on that gate. If we cannot get in, we can at least fight with our backs to the gate! There is not much time.” The wolves howled again, this time so close, so very close it sounded like they were right upon us. I braced for the sensation of teeth ripping into me, but felt nothing but calmness. I could not walk, so I crawled with Garlic limping beside me. Suddenly, she collapsed in the snow, and I scooped her up in one arm and kept moving.

Behind us, I heard the thud of wolf paws pounding the snow, growing closer and closer, louder and louder, but I had made it to the gate. I turned, taking strength from its solid feeling behind my back. I raised a fist, holding Garlic tight against my chest and bared my fangs at the oncoming wolves. They skidded to a stop as the gate opened behind us, bathing Garlic and me in a warm, inviting light. Hands were upon me, pulling me out of the snow and harm’s way. And the last thing I saw before I succumbed to darkness was a host of maroon-robed, bald figures, carrying us into a great temple. There were two monks standing to the side of the others, having a rather heated debate. “Master Lobsang,” the bigger and much younger of the two men pleaded. “I can see the wisdom in saving the animal, but we should have left the vampire to the wolves! Wait a second—I saw a little blonde child with them. The last thing I saw her do was 11

pound the snow like she was having a temper tantrum. She is gone now. Odd.”

“You saw the child, Kunchen,” Lobsang said, more as a statement than a question.

“I saw wolf food,” Kunchen replied. “Ah well, such is life, or really such is death, but she is not my concern.”

Lobsang’s wizened face was so full of wrinkles that it hid all traces of expression and his absolute exasperation toward his young charge. “My dear Kunchen,” he said. “Is not all life precious?”

“Yes, Master Lobsang,” Kunchen said remorsefully.

“That lesson is why you were sent to me and not killed for your transgressions,” Lobsang said.

“I am not afraid of death, if that is what is meant for me. I am not afraid to stare death in the eyes,” Kunchen said, his face growing dark and cold.

“Clearly,” Lobsang said. “But they spared you nonetheless.”

“Spared?” Kunchen questioned. “That is making the assumption that they could have succeeded in killing me in the first place.”

“Well, they deemed your life precious, so it did not come to that,” Lobsang said. “So, we will never know now, will we?”

“No, I guess we won’t,” Kunchen answered, failing to hide his disappointment. “But yes, you have taught me that all life is precious, and that includes mine.”

“Indeed, I have,” Lobsang said quietly. “Indeed I have.” The old man nodded to himself, not remotely convinced his pupil shared in that philosophy.

“But again, Master Lobsang, the vampire was helping the thief!” Kunchen exclaimed. “A thief that, but for the Rakshas, would have stolen the Dagger of Dorje! A thief of the Dagger should feel its bite in his heart and truly know death, and then be ripped asunder, and his bones scattered across the mountains so the Rakshas can trample his essence into dust, which the winds will then scatter to the very ends of the earth!”

Lobsang reached a hand out to tug on Kunchen’s robe. “My sweet boy, it is my hope that you will grow into your name. But I see you are in need of more lessons. My eyes are old and nearly blind, but you are the one that cannot see.”¹²

“See what, Master Lobsang?”

“That the two vampires happened upon our heavenly abode by demonic intervention.”

“Two vampires?” Kunchen said, confused. “Was the thief a vampire?”

“No, the thief was a faerie,” said Lobsang. “But mind you that the dog is no ordinary cur. She is a vampire too.”

“I say kill them both with the Dagger of Dorje,” Kunchen said. “It is one of the Seven Sacred Relics and one of the few weapons that can kill an immortal such as that vampire with a single stroke to the heart.”

Lobsang actually looked sad for a moment before he grabbed Kunchen’s smooth baby face, forcing him to look deep into the temple master’s eyes. Kunchen struggled for a moment, but his young, strong muscles were no match for the old man’s iron grip. “Listen to me, boy,” Lobsang said. “If you are so full of anger and hate, it will cloud your inner vision. You will never be able to truly see. You will never be all-knowing.”

“I am sorry, Master Lobsang,” Kunchen said, tears forming in his eyes. “What did you see?”

“I saw a great warrior vampire from a far-off land arrive at our door, wielding one of the Seven Sacred Relics. He sought to save the thief from the Rakshas. He did this of his own free will, and thus his character should not be questioned. There was no way he could have known that not only had she stolen the Dagger, but that she was also a faerie that could not be harmed by the Rakshas.”

“He had one of the Relics? Which one?”

“Indeed he did,” Lobsang said, troubled by Kunchen’s interest. “The vampire wielded the Blade of Truth. And the thief knew he would survive with the Relic in hand against the Rakshas. So, she was planning her escape with the Dagger, until the universe took his Relic from him. Though he fought admirably with his bare hands, ironically trying to protect she who is nearly indestructible, he was soundly defeated. She knew then the Rakshas would kill him if she did not return the Dagger to the temple.”

“She had what she came for. Why didn’t she just let him die and escape with the Dagger?”¹³

“I don’t think even she knows the answer to that question, young Kunchen. But as you can see, it all worked out in the end. The thief is gone. The Dagger of Dorje is safe. And two precious lives are now in our hands.”

“But they are a danger to us,” Kunchen protested. “If the vampire regains his strength, there is no telling how many of us he will kill. We are mere dung beetles that he can crush under his boots. Even me. Then, he will take the Dagger from us.”

“He will not. It is not his way.”

“How can you be so sure? And if not him, then another will follow, until we are dead and the Dagger is theirs to command. An immortal with the Dagger would be near unstoppable even against other immortals. They will rule the world, enslave humanity, and we will all die. What say you to that, Master?”

“An immortal with the Dagger is not unstoppable, nor a danger to humanity—now the Blood of the One, that is an entirely different story,” Lobsang said.

“What is the Blood of the One?” Kunchen pressed. “And can the Blade of Truth also kill an immortal forever with but a single stroke?”

Lobsang was nearly speechless at what he had just heard. How had this tortured young disciple gotten such a poisoned mind? What had driven this man to commit the atrocities he had prior to coming to the temple? He sighed, knowing he had so far failed in his teachings. But could you teach someone to overcome their true nature? Lobsang had lived a long time and realized man only has so much capacity for change. A man changes only when he is willing to do so. But some, perhaps that included Kunchen, had savagery in their souls that no amount of teaching or prayer would ever eradicate. “Kunchen,” he said softly, “your anger will consume you. Go to the Inner Sanctum and pray until you find clarity in your soul.” Lobsang paused—realizing that perhaps the only thing that was clear in Kunchen’s soul was his rage—and sighed deeply. “You must find peace in your heart,” Lobsang continued. Could a heart so cold and dark find such a thing called peace?

“I only find peace when I am with Sonam,” Kunchen answered, his face drawn and resolute.¹⁴

“Sonam cannot accompany you to the Inner Sanctum,” Lobsang said. The old monk questioned if even Sonam could truly give Kunchen peace. Had he made a mistake taking this troubled soul into their midst? “You are focused on the death the Dagger can bring, but there are two edges to every blade,” he said. “Sonam and your other brothers and sisters of the temple will be joining me in the Forge of Souls, for the Dagger of Dorje will choose a healer to save the vampire from the Raksha poison that is killing him as we speak. The thief took the Dagger. The vampire would have given his life for the thief. The Rakshas accepted his noble sacrifice and gave him death. And now, one of the Disciples of the Dagger of Dorje will become the Healer and give the vampire life, thus completing the circle.”

“Sonam, but . . . without Sonam I cannot find peace in my heart . . . only anger,” Kunchen protested before bowing his head quickly for his disrespect.

“You must find it in your heart to end the anger inside you,” Lobsang said. “When you have no more anger inside you, Kunchen, only then will you have your peace.”

“Sonam cannot be the Healer,” Kunchen snapped angrily. “She is mine and mine only. She is a love I would kill for!”

“It is not for any of us to say who serves as the Healer,” Lobsang said. “And killing because you thought you had to do so, well, that is precisely why you are here. You must learn love and duty.”

“I don’t understand, Master Lobsang,” Kunchen said. And Lobsang actually felt that these words were as genuine as they were prophetic.

“Kunchen, all of us have a duty to the vampire—even you. So honor our guest and go find peace in your heart,” Lobsang said, releasing his hand from the young man’s face. “Now go to your duties and pray in the Inner Sanctum.”

“Your will be done,” Kunchen said with a heavy heart, retreating into the temple but not going to the Inner Sanctum as he was ordered to do, instead disobeying the old master for the final time by going to the Forge of Souls where he hid in an empty urn.

The Forge of Souls lay deep within the monastery, down a staircase into a chamber hewn out of the bedrock of the mountain by the bare hands of the Disciples of the Dagger of Dorje. A large stone anvil streaked with veins of strange crystals held vigil in the Forge of Souls, 15

emitting a sense of great power as if it had been thrust out from the mantle and crust of the earth by some powerful force. Great urns filled with sacred salts dotted the chamber, which was lit by only a single brazier of fire, its flickering flames an eerie green as they hungrily devoured fragrant wood bathed in the mystic salts of the mountains. In the back of the chamber was the armory, which housed the ancient Dagger of Dorje.

Lobsang sensed Kunchen's presence the moment he entered the Forge, for the young monk's hate for him radiated so strongly, and even stronger still for the vampire. He shook his head sadly before ordering Kunchen to be beaten severely and then chained to the walls of the Inner Sanctum. They would vote on his banishment later if he did not find his peace. Lobsang looked to Sonam during this great disturbance of the Disciples' way, and saw nothing in her blank expression that conveyed to the old master any bit of emotion. She was indeed a true Disciple of the Dagger.

Master Lobsang opened the armory door, and brought out the ancient Dagger of Dorje, which he held high for all the assembled men and women of the Temple of Dorje to see. He walked in front of the large stone anvil that had but a single slit carved into its center into which he inserted the Dagger of Dorje. All the monks began chanting in unison as Master Lobsang swayed back and forth, his hands now raised high in the air. The flames in the brazier grew higher and higher, and soon a warm, golden light shone from the hilt of the Dagger.

"Disciples of the Dagger of Dorje," Lobsang cried above the chanting. "Open your hearts to the Dagger. Let it choose the monk who is the purest and most giving among you! Let the Dagger choose the monk who is the Healer!"

One by one the monks paraded by the Dagger of Dorje, and the light either dimmed or grew brighter as they passed. One monk, much larger than any of the others, drew a great light from the Dagger, and he reached to take it triumphantly from the anvil only to see its light fade away. He did not entirely hide his feelings about not being worthy to be the Healer. Lobsang stifled a smile at his reaction, knowing his day would soon come. The Dagger was all about patience.

Finally, all of the monks had passed by save one, and Lobsang was not surprised to see Sonam was that monk. She reached out a hand

for the Dagger of Dorje and plucked it from the anvil. “The Healer, the Healer, the Healer,” the monks all chanted as the starry light of the Dagger grew brighter and brighter, running down Sonam’s arms before surging into the monk’s mouth and eyes with the heat and energy of a thousand suns. Sonam collapsed to the ground, and Lobsang plucked the Dagger from where it had fallen and placed it back in the armory. He turned and faced the monks who continued chanting over Sonam’s body. “The Healer, the Healer, the Healer . . .”

The monks left Sonam and filed out of the temple still chanting for her. Lobsang went to an urn, scooped out a handful of salts, and threw it into the brazier. He smiled as the fire changed from green to red, then breathed deeply and went to Sonam’s side, seeing the little monk was beginning to stir. Sonam’s eyes flickered, then opened wide, and Lobsang could see the power of the Dagger within them.

“Healer,” Lobsang addressed Sonam. “Are you ready to perform your sacred duty?”

“I am, Master Lobsang,” Sonam replied, her luminous eyes reflecting the red fire of the brazier, or perhaps, thought Lobsang, the fire of the Dagger smoldering deep within the monk.

“The Dagger of Dorje has chosen you as the Healer,” said Lobsang. “And as the Healer, you are the vessel carrying the fire of the Dagger that will give the vampire life by extinguishing the cold death of the Rakshas.”

“I understand, Master Lobsang.”

“You must complete the circle with the vampire,” said Lobsang. “So let the Dagger command your body and possess your soul. Join with the vampire and pass the fire to him. You are the vessel of life. You are the Healer. Let it be so.”

Sonam rose to her feet, her golden eyes glinting. “It will be so.”

Lobsang bowed deeply as Sonam left the Forge of Souls, praying she would have the internal strength to fulfill the duty of the Healer. For if Sonam did not, the wrath of the Dagger would be unleashed upon the temple. One way or another, the Dagger would see to it that the circle was completed. He exhaled slowly. The Dagger had picked Sonam for a reason, so she would not fail in her duties, but the old master wondered what the cost would be.¹⁷

Sonam entered the vampire's chamber, and she saw the dog lying in a pool of green ooze. The little monk reached down a hand to touch the Maltese's chest and felt a faint but steady heartbeat. Sonam rubbed the dog's belly slowly at first, and an ember sparked to life as she rubbed. Garlic stirred, a low growl coming from her throat as her eyes opened reflecting the auric energy lighting up the monk's eyes. The vampire Maltese felt her strength return as the vile, green ooze dripped out of her wounds. She rose to all fours and shook her fur violently, sending the last bit of poison to the floor. Garlic licked Sonam's lips hungrily, devouring the golden light coming forth from them. She barked and ran in a circle, celebrating her happiness with being alive until she saw her master lying motionless on the bed in front of her. She whimpered as Sonam approached the bed, the monk's sparkling eyes aglow with the power of the Healer.

Inside one of the chambers of the great temple, I lay covered in many warm furs, my wounds bound tight and no longer bleeding, but as I faded in and out of the blackness, I felt so incredibly cold. Though barely conscious, I knew I was shivering under the furs as I fought against the Raksha poison coursing through my veins. Then the dreams came. First I saw the Queen, resplendent on her throne, a flaxen-haired little girl at her side. Maria!

But ever so quickly and cruelly that image faded, and I was pinned to the door of Hades's castle. The ghastly rotting faces of those I had slain paraded in front of me, stabbing hard into my exposed torso with daggers and swords, opening wound after bloody wound. Big Belly Bart and the Trouble brothers appeared, leering and laughing maniacally. They each took hold of one of my limbs and pulled harder and harder until I felt I was going to be ripped into pieces. I cried out loudly, awoke, and rose for a moment, seeing nothing but pale white candles dimly lighting a dark room. I breathed in fragrant incense, taking it deep into my lungs. I was safe in the temple. But then I looked down at my legs and saw an ochreous pus oozing from the deep gashes that had not even begun to heal but kept festering with the venom of the Rakshas. If I could rid my body of the cold I felt to the very depths 18

of my soul, I could purge the Raksha poison from my veins. I gasped in pain, and dropped back on the furs, fading into the darkness once again.

I dreamed again, but this time I was with the Queen in our cave near Malta. She was rubbing my legs and arms and kissing me deeply and passionately. Then, as I was looking at her longingly, she shimmered and became the Thief from the plateau, who had shed her one-piece garment. The candlelight flickered across her naked torso, illuminating her pale skin. I could not move as her capable hands brought great warmth to my body with every lingering caress. She dipped her head forward, and I could feel her soft, white, diamond-spun hair on my chest. The body that looked so hard and unyielding on the snowy plateau was warm, curvy, and ever so comforting as she pressed breasts as full and resplendent as two perfect moons against my heaving chest. But still the cold was deep within me. I opened my mouth to speak to the Thief, comforted in the warmth she gave that was bringing me back to life, but my heart was conflicted with how I felt about the now absent Queen.

The Thief sat astride my hips, facing away from me, and lay back on my chest, her shimmering hair cascading over me like a silky rain. The touch of her skin against my own torn up body awakened a small spark of warmth within me. Encouraged, she rose and sat, straddling me before she stretched out her body toward my legs. I felt first her mouth, then her nipples like droplets of sunlight caress me, and the fire within me began to smolder and burn. Before my eyes, a great gash on my arm started to heal with a flash of golden light. But then it stopped, and the swampy green sickness started oozing from it once more.

The Thief rubbed me harder and harder with her hands on my legs and inner thighs, finally focusing on my manhood, which glowed irradant with her efforts. She slid forward in one quick motion, grabbing my ankles and putting me inside her tight hindquarters. Up and down she thrust, hands rubbing my legs as she rode me. Miraculously with every thrust, every stroke, the golden light returned, and the poison ran like a foul chartreuse river from my wounds, and as my climax built to a heart-pounding finish, my wounds healed, leaving only fresh patches of clean pink skin in their place. I exploded inside the Thief, and she turned and looked back at me without any trace of expression 19

on her face, merely staring at me with prismatic eyes that looked like an insect's not a human's. My eyes rolled back in my head, and I fell back upon the furs, and mercifully slept deeply once more.

I do not know if I slept for hours or days, but this time it was a sleep thankfully not haunted by any bad dreams. I once again awoke buried under warm furs in a room that was lit with dozens of candles, and I took comfort in the calming aroma coming from the many bundles of incense surrounding the platform I was on. I felt movement under my right arm and sat up to find Garlic nestled beside me. I picked her up and held her close, hearing her grunt with happiness. Her wounds had healed, and her black eyes reflected the candlelight back at me along with a familiar mischievous glint. I pulled back the furs and examined my wounds and found the freshly healed pink skin from my dream now had a slight green cast to it. The poison was not gone. It was still within me. A slight breeze blew in from the window, and I shuddered, draping the furs around me, desperately trying to shut out the cold that seemed to be boring into my very soul. I felt tears come to my eyes. It was going to be a while before I was strong enough to leave this place. Would I ever see my family and the hallowed halls of Hedley Edrick's school?

I felt my stomach rumble, and my insides felt completely empty as if I had not eaten for days—no, weeks! I was also craving meat. Any kind of meat. There was the sound of a gong from outside my chamber, then a maroon-robed monk entered, carrying a great platter. He was favoring his left leg and had a wicked scar that ran the length of his jawline. In his past, this man had lost a battle that he had never recovered from.

I had never been so drained of energy and life, or for that matter hurt so badly as from what the Rakshas had done to me. This beating was worse than any I had any suffered. I had lost much energy—energy that I desperately needed to replenish. Would I ever truly recover from my battle with the Rakshas?

The monk put down the platter, which was adorned with the rawest of meats, in front of me. Primal instinct took over, and Garlic and I tore into the feast with a vengeance. The monk jumped back in shock and fell to the floor in a jumbled confusion of crooked legs and robes. Another monk entered our chamber, and his eyes widened as he saw 20

the blood dripping from my mouth and his companion struggling to get to his feet. This new monk was thickly muscled and stood nearly as tall as Oliver and, come to think of it, was nearly just as wide. He too was carrying a platter, but this one was steaming and full of cooked meats and vegetables. Good for a civilized meal, I thought, and meant for me, but not what I wanted. He dropped the platter with a clatter and leaped in front of the other monk to protect his crippled comrade from my savagery. His round brown eyes were deep and soulful, and he showed no fear for himself as he stood with his hands balled into meaty fists the size of small boulders.

I did not want a fight, particularly with this monk mountain of a man. I wanted more raw meat. I pointed at the empty tray in front of Garlic and me—a message that could be delivered in any language—and I laughed as the two monks scurried away to quickly return with two platters of raw, deliciously bloody meat, and set them before us warily. I did not care if it was wolf, yak, goat, monkey, or even monk. It was simply delicious. When I looked up from my feast, the monks were gone, and my belly was distended from having consumed so much, so quickly. I patted it happily and felt sleepy once again. I looked down at my legs, which seemed to be growing more sickly looking by the minute. I fought to keep consciousness, and my last action was pulling Garlic close to me for comfort.

The call of nature awoke me with a start, strong pangs squeezing my stomach, and I barely found the strength to make it to a chamber pot situated next to a window. Garlic had apparently found the pot's utility before I did, and it was all I could do to try and relieve myself with my legs shaking so hard, and I began to sweat. Though it was winter, and snow still adorned the mountaintops, for the moment the wind was not blowing its ill coldness in my chamber. What came out of me was quite foul, and I alternated retching with defecating before bringing the pot to the window to jettison its putrid contents to a gorge far below. I hoped that was the last of the Rakshas' toxic gift to me. Tomorrow, I promised myself I would feel better. But what if I didn't?

I crawled over to a basin and found several buckets filled with fragrant water. One was dedicated to cleansing the nastiness from my nether regions, and I found the strength to send its contents after those of the pot. I crawled back to the buckets with the intent to wash the 21

dried blood from my body, but fatigue overcame me, and I collapsed on my stomach just short of the buckets and lay exhausted with my efforts, spread-eagle and naked on the cold stone floor. I heard the door to my chamber open, and I cursed my all too vulnerable position. I heard a whimper and saw Garlic lying on her side in my field of vision, but not attacking. A thin curl of green ooze ran from her mouth. The poison of the Rakshas was still within her as well. I blinked and Garlic was gone. Instead I saw only a yellow light as bright as the sun, and I turned away fearing I would go blind. But then I heard soft footsteps come closer, approaching from behind.

A wooden bucket was placed next to my head, and a cloth placed underneath it. My left arm was next to my head, and I saw a pair of very small, soft hands lift my arm ever so gently to examine the now absent gash that had been there courtesy of the Rakshas, and wash the dried blood from it before placing it back by my side. I always thought that only men were monks, but these hands didn't look or feel like a man's hands. I was able with great effort to turn my head and found myself looking at a figure with a bald head and a maroon robe, reaching for a couple of fresh buckets. Okay, it was a man. This monk was definitely smaller than the other two but had the same stocky build. I grunted and rolled to my side, and the monk turned, and I saw a kindness in his eyes and a softness to his face. Was this monk a man? I just couldn't tell from the facial features. What kind of temple was this?

The monk struggled to bring the heavy buckets to me, setting one down next to me so hard a small wave of warm water slopped over the side and onto my face. I sputtered and tried to blink the water away, but the monk was quick with a cloth. I opened my eyes and saw with surprise long fluttering eyelashes and a great set of lips. Male or female, this monk was simply attractive. "Thank you," I rasped in Tibetan. "Can you understand me?"

The monk merely shrugged and pushed me gently onto my back. The effort it took to bring the buckets over had loosened the front of the monk's robe, and as the monk reached over me, I saw what I swore was the barely there roundness of two tiny breasts topped with completely erect nipples. How could this be? There were no female monks that I had ever heard of.²²

In no time I was expertly cleaned of all blood, and my skin fairly glistened with a shiny wetness as the monk helped me to a sitting position. My manhood had moved during my cleaning, but I was okay with it, because it meant that I wasn't so dead after all. If the monk was really just a very pretty, bald, and feminine man, so be it! Suddenly, a cold wind blew into the chamber, knocking a candle onto the sleeping platform where a small fire erupted on the oil-tanned furs. The monk used the maroon robe to smother the flames in an instant. And the mystery was solved—the monk was a woman. “A lady monk. Who knew?” I said in Tibetan, my teeth suddenly chattering uncontrollably as the cold wind continued unabated.

“I am not just a lady monk,” she said. So I looked at her again. Yes, she was bald, had thick legs and shoulders, and flatness of chest, but I knew a vagina when I saw one.

“Who are you?” I asked. “What is your name?”

“I have no name,” she said. “I am simply the Healer.”

I could not stop shaking, and she stripped the ruined furs off the platform and laid me on the bed, climbing on top of me. She began rubbing my arms and legs, her bald head nestled in the crook of my neck, but still the cold did not abate. “Tell me your name,” I pleaded.

“My name is Sonam, and you are not healed, vampire,” she said. “The cold is still within you yet. I must heal you.”

“Stop the wind, and I will be fine,” I said, arching my body to come into closer contact with her warm body. My hands felt her firm strong back and ran down over thick legs and calves. I stared into Sonam's eyes and saw a fiery glow in her pupils, growing bigger and bigger. “It was not a dream,” I said as Sonam brought her face close to mine. “It was you that got the poison out of me. Thank you for saving me!” I said through chattering teeth.

“I have not saved you yet. I have not fulfilled my duty. The wind of the Rakshas has found you! It is drawn to you by the poison still within you. The cold will stop your heart and kill even you, vampire. I must finish the healing or you will die, and the circle will not be complete. I must not fail in my duty!”

Sonam's lips found my own, and I enjoyed how soft and supple they felt. Her tongue darted into my mouth like a golden snake and encircled my own. I looked into eyes that resembled twin suns, and gasped

for breath. Again the flame within me grew hot as I felt my manhood growing, yearning to be inside her. Her hands were upon me as she stroked me into an inferno of pleasure, and I felt the cold ill chill of the Rakshas no more. I arched my hips, desperate now to enter her womanhood, but she drew back, and the shining light faded from her eyes, and the cold returned to my soul.

“I cannot give that to you,” she cried, tears running from her face. “That is for my chosen one and no other!”

I felt myself slacken and the cold begin to close a tight fist around my heart. “Then, I will not ask that of you, Sonam,” I said, struggling to speak, let alone breathe. “I would rather die than take your maidenhead if that is promised to another. Why can’t you do what we did before? Will that not work?”

The wind whistled into the chamber, but no candles fell over, and nary a stray piece of fabric moved. This time the Raksha wind was coming for me to finish what the snow demons had started. Sonam remained atop me, sobbing, so I pushed her to the side and headed for the embers that remained in the brazier, intent on starting a fire to battle this demonic cold. But as I reached the brazier, the wind shifted, extinguishing them of every bit of life-giving flame. I turned toward the door and saw that Garlic was of a similar mind. “Come on,” I said. “We must escape this wind.” I reached for the handle as a massive blast of cold air pinned me to the door, sucking the very air from my lungs. It was as if I was atop the highest peak of this mountain range, closer to the sky than the earth, closer to death than to life. I gasped for breath, dropping to my knees, then the floor. Garlic barked sharply at the door, but the wind surrounded her sound, quelling it, quashing it, and then it came for me—came for my soul.

Suddenly, the barest flicker of warmth cut through the cold as Sonam took my hand in hers, and a great golden light shot up my arm into my chest and deep into my heart. Her eyes ablaze again, Sonam led me back to the bed platform. “I am the Healer,” she said, kissing me long and deep. “You cannot escape the wind. I must complete the circle. I must fulfill my duty! It will be as the Dagger of Dorje commands!”

She touched my cheek gently and ran her finger over my chapped lips. “You can never escape the wind as long as the poison is within you.” She lay down on the bed and pulled me to her. “Let the flame

within you grow into an inferno, vampire,” she said, sliding my throbbing manhood into her with a gasp. “Know the Healer and be healed.”

“Sonam,” I started, but she dug her strong hands into my buttocks and pushed me deeper into her.

“Feel the fire of the Dagger of Dorje within you,” she commanded. “I give myself to you freely to complete the circle. I give you—life.” She moaned as I gave her the first of many pleasures, and slowly, steadily the heat of my passion was stoked ever higher. She pressed her thighs tight against me and locked her ankles behind me, forcing me into her ever harder, ever faster, ever quicker, until I exploded inside her with the heat of the Dagger of Dorje burning inside me, and I knew then that the cold death of the Rakshas was forever banished from my soul.

We lay there not speaking, I on top of her, and I felt Garlic curl up by our feet, her white coat still aglow with a glimmer of golden light. Finally, I broke the silence and turned the monk’s face to me. “You did not have to do that, Sonam,” I said. “I am a vampire. I would have survived. I would have found another way. I always do.”

She touched my jawline and traced it with her finger. “There was not another way. You would not have survived, vampire or not,” she said, tears once again welling up in her soft, sweet eyes. “My chosen one will have to understand. The circle is now complete. I have brought much honor to the temple. I have done my duty.”

“Indeed,” I said, holding this sad little monk ever so tight. “Indeed.” There were no words I could find in my brain that could make Sonam feel better. She had given me something sacred to her and her chosen one, and with it, she had given me life. She had taught me much about sacrifice, and thus I was going to show her the utmost in respect, grace, and humanity.