

CHAPTER 1

I left England in the spring of 1761, my ears still ringing with the all-consuming pub gossip of when the royals would find the proper bride for newly crowned King George III. His grandfather was now a distant memory thanks to yours truly. As Garlic and I waited in a field outside the College of Immortals to rendezvous with Malakar and one of his thunderbirds, I pondered how mortals viewed their monarchs as rather disposable. Nonroyals enjoyed being voyeurs of royal life, and crotchety King George II had no longer been so exciting in his “old” life. His death, however . . . well, that was good for weeks of gossip. He had been a bit shy of his seventy-seventh birthday—a good run, they said. Foul play was not even a consideration, which frankly was the calling card of any master assassin!

I knew London and all of England could not stand for King George III to remain unmarried for very long. What would any respectable Londoner talk about? The king would be married to the perfect bride for the country. Alliances were crucial—his wishes and his loins not so much. I had an uncertain amount of time until his coronation to get my trap for Scorn set. But before I did so, I had to reach out to the Thief and, once and for all, make her declare her allegiance. I knew she was good at heart, but there was something, or someone, controlling her. Scorn, of course, was the obvious answer, but that begged the question—how was he doing it? Or maybe I was completely wrong about Scorn’s involvement, and the Thief was just doing what suited her.²

The reality was that I didn't know anything about the Thief besides the fact that she was the daughter of the dearly departed Lobsang. Kunchen had killed the old monk, but Norbu and Choden had told me that a few nights after they had returned to the Temple of Dorje, they heard the unmistakable sound of chanting coming from the Forge of Souls. When they investigated, they saw a golden ball of light hovering over the small, round stone stupa that housed the remains of Lobsang. I was convinced that somehow the old monk, or at least a part of him, remained here on earth. Norbu was now too weak to make the journey back to the Temple of Dorje, and Choden would not leave his side, so I found myself winging via thunderbird toward the Himalayas without them. Lobsang would talk to me—I could feel it. And the one thing that he would be able to tell me was the whereabouts of his daughter, the Thief!

I had expected the thunderbird ride to be beyond chilly, thinking it had to be colder than riding on Tempest. But the great bird's feathers that surrounded the saddles provided much in the way of comfort and warmth. No wonder Malakar was able to have first-class air parties with wine and women while traveling by thunderbird. Atop Tempest, any herd animals below appeared as mere dots, but the thunderbird flew so high, a great river seemed no more than a thin black snake, and even the approaching Himalayas looked so small I felt I could step over them.

Malakar landed the bird on the small plateau in front of the Temple of Dorje. Summer was still a long way off, but today was mild by Himalayan standards, in spite of the persistent bite of the chill wind coming down the mountains, nipping at any bit of exposed skin. Nevertheless, the wind was more palatable than the harsh and deadly bite of the Rakshas. Norbu had reassured me again and again that the snow demons would likely stay dormant, as long as there were no monks in the temple who required their protection. Choden had grumbled that he and Norbu were all that was left, and they were as good as dead, languishing away the last vestiges of their lives in Oxford. But as I dismounted from the thunderbird, I could not help wondering that should Lobsang be partially alive, would the Rakshas try to prevent me from entering the temple? Garlic gave a low growl as she pawed at the 3

snow angrily. She looked at me and sniffed the air. I knew she could sense the deadly snow demons' presence all around us.

"Coming?" I said to Malakar.

He shivered, but not from the cold. "Oh no," he said. "We'll be circling above, and we'll return when the thunderbird sees you wave."

As the thunderbird beat her massive wings and lifted off from the snowy plateau, I heard the howl of a lone wolf. "Not those lupine loudmouths again, because I have had it up to here with those calamitous curs," I said to Garlic as I walked boldly up to the gate of the temple and yanked it open. Norbu had told me there was no need for a lock, because the locals considered the temple cursed after the great Lobsang had been slaughtered there. I think that deep down, he and Choden felt the exact same way.

Just in case, I did bar the gate behind me once inside and lit the torch lying in a cold brazier. My footfalls echoed eerily on the stone floors, and memories flooded back of my recovery from the assault by the Rakshas. There were bloodstains on the stone, some of which were mine. But most of it was from Lobsang and the monks who had met their demise here. I continued walking through the temple, passing by the Forge of Souls. I heard nothing, but Garlic gave a small whimper, and I knew then that Norbu and Choden were right—something otherworldly now dwelled there.

I circled through the temple, lingering for a moment in the room where I had fought for my life and then shared intimate moments with Sonam. It was then that I realized that our most intimate moments were not physical. Her remains were outside in the garden, in the open temple courtyard, and it was there that I traveled, kneeling before her own small stupa. I saw a flash of color under the snow next to her burial mound and brushed it away gently. My careful hands found the first eager buds of bright spring flowers pushing through the oddly warm soil. Sonam. At that moment I was glad I came, and as I put out a hand and rested it upon her stupa, I didn't care if I found old Master Lobsang in the Forge of Souls or not. I had connected with one lost soul already.

"You will never be forgotten, sweet Sonam," I said. "When your brother and his husband are no more on this earth, I will continue to tell everyone who you were and what you sacrificed. The world is a better place for you having been in it." The flowers seemed to grow 4

just a little more as I spoke these sincere words of praise, and now were visibly poking through the snow. “Good-bye, Sonam. I don’t know how I will do it, but rest assured, I will find a way to honor your name.”

I turned and headed back into the temple, and it was then that I heard chanting coming from the Forge of Souls. I raced back to the entrance and carefully descended the steps. Garlic was not so cautious and raced down into the forge before me. When I caught up to her, I found her lying next to Lobsang’s stupa. Behind it, the anvil built to house the Dagger of Dorje was painfully cold and empty. But the chanting had stopped, and I gasped as I saw a ball of golden light above the stupa.

“Lobsang? Is that you?” I asked. “I need to know where your daughter is.” The ball hovered in the air but did not answer my plea. If a golden ball of light could look agitated, this one sure did, bobbing and weaving sharply as it orbited over my head. Was this Lobsang?

“Listen, Lobsang,” I tried again. “Let me explain. I don’t even know what her name is—I call her the Thief! For the record, you never told me that she was your daughter when I was here, even when she returned the Dagger to you, and it saved my life! I have since run in to her in London, but she left without me convincing her to join the fight against Scorn. I have a plan to draw him out, and I need to know that she will not interfere. The fate of the entire world rests on the success—or failure—of this plan!”

The ball abruptly stopped moving, dropped into the stupa, and vanished. Garlic began pawing at it, whimpering. “Girl,” I admonished her. “Please show some respect for the dead! If Lobsang wants to help us, he will.” Garlic stopped, and we waited in silence for something, anything to happen. “Of course,” I said loudly, “if Master Lobsang were to help us, now would be the time! If I wore one of those fancy watches you can wear on your wrist, I would probably be looking at it right now, just saying . . .”

A bright ray of golden light shot from Lobsang’s stupa and struck the anvil. Rising up from the space where the Dagger of Dorje formerly resided was a shimmering gold specter that slowly got more corporeal until I found myself staring at Master Lobsang. “You are an impatient one, Sirius Sinister,” Lobsang said. “Did you not learn any self-restraint 5

in your time here? A man moves a little slower when he's dead, you know."

"Are you truly dead, Lobsang? Because we seem to be having a conversation, if you haven't noticed." I folded my arms across my chest and bowed to the master of the temple.

"Dead is a matter of perspective," Lobsang said. "What is *truly* dead?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I think you are a bit more qualified than I to answer that particular question."

The spirit Lobsang laughed, which was rather unsettling to see as his whole golden countenance shimmered and phased between this world and another. "Death is ironically a mortal construct," he said. "Because I have to tell you, when you are actually dead, you certainly don't look at it that way. What do you want with the one you call the Thief?"

I shrugged. "Well, her name to start with, since I have you here, because I am fairly certain you did not name her—the Thief."

"Stupid question. You don't need to know what her name is," Lobsang retorted. "My time is limited here. Do you want my help or not?"

"I do," I said. "I need to find her and talk to her. It is of prime importance that I do so."

"Just talk to her?" Lobsang said. "That is not usually your thing. Are you turning over a new leaf perhaps?"

"Yes, of course I mean just talk," I replied. "You are not seriously going there, are you? The time thing, remember?"

Lobsang waved his hands. "I may be a ghost, but I am still her father," he said. "I must ask you what your intentions are."

"To save the world," I said. "Is that honorable enough?"

The old master smiled, and seemed to glow a little brighter. "That is always an honorable pursuit," he said. "Sonam sends her love and wishes you luck, and we shall both enjoy watching you try to save the world."

That caught me a bit off guard. "She does? Oh, thank you for that, Master Lobsang," I said. "Now, are you going to tell me where I can find your daughter?"⁶

“Sure,” Lobsang said. “She’s right behind you.” And with that, the old master was gone, and the Forge of Souls was silent once more.

I turned around very slowly to find a smiling Thief looking at me. “How long have you been here?” I asked.

She threw back the hood of a mountain coat trimmed with wolf pelts and shook out that delightful long white hair. “You mean, just now, or in general?” she asked.

“Both,” I replied as Garlic licked her hand and sat down on her foot.

The Thief took off her heavy coat, dropped it to the floor, and reached down to pet the happy Garlic. “Long enough that now I am curious what your intentions are. As for me being here at the temple, well, when Choden and Norbu left, I felt the presence of my father calling to me, so I returned to him, though he has not spoken to me yet. But I guess you are as special as ever since he granted you that honor.” She ceased petting the now disappointed Garlic, stood up, and looked at the anvil with undisguised irritation. “I cannot believe my father felt the need to talk to you. Yet I have been here countless days waiting ever so patiently, and he has not given me the courtesy of one single word.”

“Cheese!” Lobsang called out from deep within the anvil.

It was all I could do not to laugh; I knew the Thief would not find that funny, and that would get us off to an exceedingly bad start. “It is not my place to comment on the workings of your father’s essence,” I said. “When he was in this world, everything he did had a purpose, and I can only gather that he is the same in the next world.”

“He is as impossible in the next world as he was in this one,” the Thief said.

“Why is it that as adults we judge our parents so harshly?” I asked her. “What do we want from them?”

The Thief wore a slight frown that did absolutely nothing to distract from how beautiful she was at this moment, or any moment. And those tight, white snow leathers she was wearing could certainly start a few avalanches. “Forget my father, because I want to know—what do *you* want from me?” she asked. “Besides the obvious—my face is up here, Sinister.”

“Isn’t that a bit sanctimonious for a girl who swished her hand through my bathwater, not taking her eyes off my objectified body for 7

one second while we were conversing in London?" I stared deep into her eyes.

The Thief smiled. "I wasn't objectifying you," she said. "I was appreciating you. There is a dearth of attractive men in this world, so you have to take your opportunities to gaze upon a naked one when you can."

"Well, I was appreciating you from head to toe just now," I offered.

"Hmm, I don't think so," she replied. "I know debauchery when I see it. I had no intent of such when I was looking into your bath. You have intent. In fact, I bet you always have intent."

"Ah yes, the intent to appreciate you," I said with a grin. "Do you want to know why I am here—other than that, of course?"

"If you *must* tell me," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"A lot has happened since you last popped into my life," I said. "Did you mean to wave with your *tub* hand?"

"It's my dominant hand," she said. "I do lots of things with it. Our tub incident was not special."

"Just to be clear, you didn't even bother to knock at my door. You were the one that kissed me, and I beg to differ on the actual special quality of the tub kiss, because your lips certainly acted like the kiss was special," I replied.

"You are an expert lip-reader now?" she said. "Is that part of your assassin training?"

"Of course it is," I said. "You have to know how to be able to communicate when you are unable to speak."

"Is this another of your kissing references?" the Thief asked. "Because if that is a hint, it is the worst one ever, and I am *not* interested in kissing you."

"I am not talking about kissing those full, soft, wet lips of yours, but you do seem to have kissing me on your mind, no matter what your intent is, my dear Thief," I said. "But don't worry, I am going to respect the wishes of your nearly departed father and do my best to resist your feminine wiles." And, if I did have a chance with the Thief, I certainly didn't want the old master being able to see that happening from whatever dimension he was in!

"Feminine wiles, my ass." The Thief was still peeved that her father had talked to me and not her, but once I told her about what Scorn 8

and Orcinus had done to Lisbon, she quickly saw the reason for my visit to Nepal. “I will not interfere in London,” she said somberly. “The Heart of Kings will be safe from me.” She looked at the empty Forge of Souls. “Perhaps, if you are successful in killing Scorn, I can reclaim the Dagger and return it to its rightful place.”

“I would have a better chance if you joined me,” I said. “Wait a minute. You had stolen the Dagger when I first met you! Why would you return it here?”

She pointed to the stupa of Lobsang. “Because I hope it will bring him back from the dead, or whatever he is.”

“Why won’t you help me then?” I asked. “What’s stopping you?”

“You know I kind of like to do my own thing,” she said. “And others like me think doing something safe with the Relics is the way to go, but now I have to try and save the only family I know—my father. All you need to know is that I won’t interfere in London. In fact, I won’t even be in London, because I am going to stay here in the Himalayas until my father speaks to me.”

I stepped forward and grabbed her hand. “You know that this is not the end of the story with us, right?”

She shook her head. “Like I said before, I do not intend for anything to ever happen between us,” she said. “It is not ever going to happen, so don’t even try.”

I leaned forward and kissed her, this time longer and more passionately than the first time, and I wasn’t even naked in a tub. When the kiss ended, the Thief’s eyes were still closed, and a little murmur escaped her throat. “I guess now it’s my turn to say good-bye,” I said.

“That is probably a really good idea,” the Thief said, her eyes slowly opening. “Good luck, Sinister. And fine, I will admit it: we both know that we will meet again.”

I nodded and walked to the stairs leading up from the Forge of Souls. “You can count on that, my dear Thief.”

As I put my foot on the first step, the Thief called to me. “You are still beautiful, Sinister.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” I said with a laugh, and walked outside, waved at the sky, and waited for Malakar and his thunderbird to land. He found me strangely silent on the flight back to Oxford and the college. The Thief had failed at pilfering the Moon of Madrid and pledged 9

not to interfere when I baited Scorn with the Heart of Kings. Yet the reality that I was choosing to ignore was that somehow, despite all my best efforts to keep it safe and secure, she had stolen the tiniest bit of my heart, be it with intent or not. I would have lots to think about while I waited for England's king to be a bachelor no longer. Better him than me.

Finally, in early September 1761, news came to us at the college that the royals had succeeded in finding a bride for young King George III. The wedding would take place on September 8 and the couple's coronation two weeks later on the twenty-second. Word had it that George was going to meet his future wife for the first time at the wedding. I don't know if the king was ready for marriage, but I was sure ready to face Scorn. In the end, I had considered, then rejected Hedley's offer of an army to face Scorn. All I needed from the Master of Masters to make my plan to take down Scorn at the coronation complete was for the goblin envoy to be present, wearing the Heart of Kings as conspicuously as possible.

"Your will is done despite my misgivings, Sirius," he said. "Ignatious Murfield will be attending the coronation in the name of the royals of Portugal, and he will be wearing the Heart of Kings around his neck. Good enough bait for you?"

"Ignatious knows the risks, and I am sure he is coming with a royal detail of goblin guards," I said. "Scorn would not expect anything less. I will be there, representing Oxford as per usual."

"Just you?" Hedley proffered. "You said 'team,' remember?"

I had considered enlisting the girls, Lovely, the Wood brothers, Jova, Harvis, Oliver, and even Malakar. The truth was I didn't want any of them to risk their lives in a battle I felt was all too personal. As the coronation loomed closer, whenever I walked outside the college in the streets of Oxford, it was as if I could feel Scorn's presence, and several times I know I heard the call of the dreaded basilisk. My hand went to the Blade of Truth, but the call of that foul demon bird would not be answered by me until London. Scorn was trying to draw me out, but it wasn't going to work. So in the end, amidst much protest from friends and family, I chose to go with Garlic, who would ride hidden in the sleeves of Contessa—now a full professor at the college—and the greatest master assassin the world had ever known: my father.¹⁰

We skipped King George's wedding, and on the day of the coronation, found ourselves in the utter chaos that was the greater London area near Westminster Abbey. I had bought the inn nearest the abbey many months prior, and had staged *Tempest* in its finest stable in case I needed her. From a window of the inn that provided the perfect vantage point, Contessa and I looked down upon the streets of London, clogged with carriage after carriage, drivers battling each other with whips and curses to deliver their wealthy cargo to the abbey. Collisions nearly shut down several main thoroughfares, and I thought that this would be the perfect time for Scorn to strike. This coronation seemed busier, more popular, and even more chaotic than the prior two I had attended. My father had infiltrated the abbey the day before, and I saw him sitting up on the altar amidst the assistants to the Archbishop of Canterbury, but as was his gift, no one seemed to be paying him any attention. He was the only man I ever knew that could hide in plain sight that well. Was that a Death-given talent? If so, that might be something I would need down the line. But I sure as hell wasn't going to be taking my orders from Old, Hooded, and Bony!

Contessa and I sat in the prime seats reserved for the academics of Oxford, and all I saw of Garlic was a black shadow of a nose popping out time and again from Contessa's sleeve to scent the air for any olfactory danger. I did the same and nearly gagged—the amount of perfume and cologne had nearly reached the saturation point in the crowded abbey. I turned my head and coughed, making some unfortunate eye contact with a man across the aisle who had a face like a beagle.

"You," he said, rising as quickly as his bent elderly body would permit with a cane. "I remember you—or shall I say my privates do! It is time to settle our score once and for all!"

I could not believe that the former Commander Beagle Face whom I had cracked in the family stones at the last coronation was seated right next to us. It was an unfortunate bit of bad luck, and, judging by the ermine on his cloak, Commander Beagle Face had worked his way up to Lord Beagle Face. "I know not of what you speak, kind sir," I said, rising to my feet and taking the old man's arm. "But surely we can speak about this matter in the alcove yonder."

"I say again that we will settle my grievance this instant," he grumbled, unsuccessfully trying to dislodge my vise grip on his shoulder. 11

“You will unhand me so we can duel like proper gentlemen!” He felt at his belt for his dueling pistol and frowned when his weak eyes confirmed it was not there. Old age had not been kind to Lord Beagle Face’s faculties!

“Where are you going?” Contessa whispered. “The royal couple will be brought in any minute now on those canopied sedan chairs we saw earlier!”

“Lord Beagle Face is about to blow our cover,” I said, leaning in. “Besides, I don’t see Ignatious anywhere. Keep a lookout, and if things get out of hand, you and Garlic need to get out of here.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right, like that is going to happen,” she said, trying to ignore my insistent gaze. She plumped out her lips in a little pout. “Okay, fine,” she agreed. “We will.”

I saw the flash of some fangs in her sleeve and knew Garlic felt the same way. Those ladies did not know how to run from trouble. I half guided, half dragged Lord Beagle Face into an alcove to the great amusement of the gallery. I motioned like I was tipping back a bottle and received a few knowing glances in return. We dodged out of the sanctuary and into the Poet’s Corner, where Lord Beagle Face’s actual face got up close and personal with the ornate tomb of Geoffrey Chaucer. A passing servant eyed me suspiciously as I lowered Lord Beagle Face to the floor.

“He’s just resting,” I said, taking a bottle of wine from the servant. “His lordship will want this when he wakes up from his little nap.”

“Uh, yes, sir.” The servant must have noticed that the glint in my eye matched that of my blade.

I ran back toward the high altar when a familiar hand reached out from a deserted side chapel and pulled me in. “I need your help,” the Countess breathed, pulling me deeper into the side chapel. “The Heart of Kings . . .” she said, looking around to see that we were quite alone. There was but a single candle lighting the side chapel, and the Countess’s perfectly white teeth fairly glowed against her deliciously dark skin. But I was not going to let myself be distracted by such details, or that was my intention.

“What about the Heart of Kings?” I pressed her, moving closer and dropping my voice, which the Countess took as an invitation to do the 12

same. “And, just where is Ignatious Murfield?” I continued. “What has happened here, Countess?”

She looked around the side chapel, eyes lingering on the altar. “Nothing yet, or probably ever,” she said. “As to Ignatious, tragically, he fell ill right before he was to leave Lisbon, so here I am,” the Countess said, running a finger over my lips.

“Stop that!” I said, irritated that my brain wanted my hand to push her away, but my hand wasn’t listening, or was it the other way around? Suddenly, a great cheer rose up from the direction of the high altar. The king and his bride were here, but where were the Heart of Kings and Ignatious? “I hope Ignatious is not going to be delayed much longer, because the coronation is happening now!”

The Countess did not stop touching my lips, which frankly was not altogether unpleasant, but I had a job to do. “He is more than delayed,” she said. “He is unable to travel. It’s quite horrible really. You will just have to make do with me.”

“Why didn’t you let us know?” I whispered, feeling myself grow all hot with anger, or it could have been the Countess’s pheromones having their intended effect in such close quarters. Damn, she smelled good. That was the moment my brain remembered how she tasted too. “And where is that confounded goblin guard?” I sputtered, trying to regain my composure and quell my excitement. “Scorn has spies here—this will ruin all of our plans!”

“There wasn’t any time, and the goblin guard is all sick too,” she said. “I had to come all alone, which you know is not nearly as fun as coming together.” Her big, soft, lush eyelashes fluttered like twin butterflies, which I found absolutely fetching. “Curious, I was the only one left that did not fall ill.”

Now, I was beginning to suspect that wasn’t a coincidence. What kind of person would poison an entire squadron of guards, and one of the most powerful men in all of Lisbon in the person of one Ignatious Murfield? “Well then, Countess, why are you not out there in the sanctuary where I can properly keep an eye on you and the Heart of Kings?” I looked at her closely. “Did you even bring the Heart of Kings?”

She ran her fingers over the front of her dress and pulled back the lace to remind me what an impressive cleavage she possessed. I had not 13

forgotten. “Do you want to try and find it?” she uttered, licking her lips. “I have really, really missed you, Sirius.”

I could not believe the Countess had waylaid Ignatious just so she could try to be way laid by me. Who does that? Was I that amazing in Toledo? Well, of course I was. I mean, there was no other possibility, so I really couldn’t blame her. Or punish her. Or even spank her excellent ebon ass. Oh damn it all to Hades’s house of whore . . . er . . . I could hear the archbishop beginning to speak. The coronation had started! “No, I don’t want to try and find it!” I said, doing a masterful job of convincing neither one of the two people in the side chapel of that! “Well, I do want to find the Heart of Kings, I mean,” I said, staring at the full, spectacular breasts that appeared in front of me as the Countess’s bodice found its way to the floor. Damn it—such fond memories of fondling her, indeed! “But, not now, this is serious business, Countess!”

“You were a lot more fun in Toledo when you had absolutely no qualms about giving *me* the Sirius business,” she said. “Yam, yam . . . big boy!”

“Countess,” I pleaded, “can you please show me the Heart of Kings, so I at least know that it is safe?”

“If you insist,” she said, lifting up her skirt to reveal the red ruby Relic resting on a gold chain around her petticoat-less waist, hanging right above the jewel of her womanhood. “Go ahead and touch it . . . I know you want to.”

“That jewel is hardly in a conspicuous place,” I said, not remotely doing my damned best to resist falling prey to her skilled seduction that was clearly carrying the day. My resolve to resist had been defeated, but why then did I feel so good? Oh, right, the Countess was topless. “The plan was to draw attention to you wearing the Heart of Kings so Scorn would try and take it,” I continued, winning my own personal futility award.

“I think I have your full attention,” the Countess purred. “And, I think you want to take it.”

I couldn’t disagree. My hand went first to the Heart of Kings that was strangely warm to the touch, but it wasn’t as hot as the Countess. The archbishop droned on, and I rationalized, as I slipped a finger inside the Countess, that the Heart of Kings could not be any safer right now. Plus, the ceremony had started, so no one could leave nor 14

enter the area of the high altar without risking a rather public flogging. I preferred private snogging to public flogging anyway.

“Oh, this is so naughty,” the Countess whispered, running her hand inside my robe and down into my trousers. “You felt the Heart of Kings, and I am feeling the king of hards.” There was a great cheer as the crown was placed on George’s head, and the archbishop began his sermon. Her hands loosened my trousers, and her mouth was on mine. She grabbed my phallus and thrust it inside her. “Why coronate when you can fornicate,” she moaned. With the Heart of Kings safely between us, we went on for as long as the archbishop droned on, giving us the cover we needed. We finished just as the archbishop did, and slipped back unnoticed into the high altar to our seats.

“Where were you?” Contessa asked me right before she saw the Countess, who was now wearing the Heart of Kings around her neck. “What are you doing here with the Heart of Kings?” my daughter said to the Countess. I decided I liked it better in the first place I saw it.

“Ignatious was gravely ill, as was the rest of the guard, so I had to try and save the day and come alone,” she said. “I was afraid to wear this in full view without having made contact with your father, so I remained hidden in a side chapel until I saw him go running past. Once I saw him, I knew my jewel would be well taken care of!” The Countess reached up and patted my sweating forehead with her kerchief. “Robes and the like do not suit you, Sirius,” she said. “The collective heat of all these people is making you burn up.”

Contessa nodded and waved a hand in front of her face. “It is hot in here,” she agreed. “Father, you look like you just ran a league or two.”

“Yeah, well, it’s on to Westminster Hall for all of us for the coronation banquet,” I said, making eye contact with my father, who trailed behind the archbishop. He shook his head disapprovingly and blessed himself before giving me a wry grin. He didn’t miss a trick. We had the Heart of Kings, I had the Countess both figuratively and literally, and the coronation had gone off without a hitch. The only question remaining was when would Scorn strike, for as we walked toward the hall the very air seemed to get a little thicker, a little danker, and, perhaps it was in my head since no one else reacted, I was pretty sure I heard the cry of that damned basilisk. The flush of my fun with the Countess was 15

quickly doused with the icy-cold, harsh reality that something evil was afoot—and that evil was Scorn.

I found myself at a privileged table with the rest of Oxford's elite. The coronation banquet was hosted by the Lord Steward, the Lord High Constable, and the Deputy Earl Marshal. I chuckled as they rode in on horseback, trying to look as regal and impressive as possible. I thought it would have been great fun to swoop down atop Tempest and thunk the king's champion on his armored head, as he theatrically threw down his gauntlet to challenge anyone who wanted to usurp King George's throne. Not that I wanted to be king. At this point, I would settle for saving the world, then retiring to somewhere to do a whole lot of somethings involving a whole lot of beautiful somebodies.

Up in the galleries, spectators who did not have a seat at the privileged tables dropped down nets, baskets, and whatever else they could manage to friends who had made the royal cut and were willing to share their royal wine and foodstuffs. At one point I saw a whole cooked chicken get hurtled skyward by one enterprising royal with a fine bottle of wine right behind it.

I did not feel Scorn's presence anymore and certainly could not hear a basilisk cry above all the noise in the hall. I saw my father standing nonchalantly outside of the main hall and excused myself to go speak with him. "I have searched the perimeter and do not see signs of anything unusual," he said. "It seems Scorn has not taken your bait."

I shrugged. "What did you expect him to do? Perhaps burst into the abbey or this great hall, riding atop his blasted bird demon, and try to pluck the Heart of Kings from the Countess's neck? No, he is still in the vicinity. I don't feel him near quite as strongly, but I am telling you, he will make his move tonight!"

"Good thing you already made yours with the Countess," my father quipped. "When you walked back into the abbey, apparently I was the only one that noticed your copulation countenance."

"It was all business in that side chapel," I said sternly. "I simply wanted to see her jewel and ensure its safety."

"I am pretty sure you saw more than her jewel when you were giving her the business in that side chapel, my son," my father said. "What is your plan, now that Scorn has not struck before the coronation? Wait a second. Where did Contessa and the Countess go just now?"¹⁶

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Perhaps to powder their noses with the rest of this tepid crowd?”

“Well, I have a feeling that would be an ideal place for someone to purloin our prized jewel. Don’t you think?” my father answered. “Let’s go!”

We burst through the door of the women’s parlor just in time to see the Countess vanish through a wormhole as Contessa fell to the floor holding the Countess’s gloves. Contessa had clearly failed in her effort to keep the Countess and the Heart of Kings in Westminster Hall. Garlic, for all of her efforts and experience with wormholes, spit out a piece of the Countess’s dress.

Garlic’s collar lit up. She barked, and another wormhole began to open. “No, girl,” I yelled. “It’s a trap—that’s what he expects us to do!” The tiniest bit of wormhole formed, leading to wherever Scorn was, and the only thing I could see were the talons of the basilisk. It screamed in rage that it would not feast on us this night. Garlic barked again, and her creation began to close, but not before a rolled scroll came flying through the now closed wormhole and landed at my feet.

“Damn it,” Contessa said. “I should have seen that one coming. Sorry, Father.”

“I knew he was here,” I said, reaching to pick up the scroll. “It is not your fault. I should have been here with you and not have left your side.”

“In the powder room?” she said. “That is not your domain, and there was nothing you could do. I sure wish I had told the Countess that her nose was not in need of a powdering, but she insisted. This debacle is surely all my fault.”

I unfurled the scroll and read the challenge therein. “It’s Scorn,” I said—like there had been any doubt. “He’s got the Countess and the Heart of Kings. He’s willing to trade her life for the Blade of Truth.”

“No, he’s not,” Contessa said. “He knows you are going to come after her, and he is going to try and kill you. It’s like you said. The lure of two Relics was too strong for him. I think we should call for reinforcements.”

“I am to meet him at Stonehenge in two hours, or the Countess will be killed,” I said. “There is no time to call for reinforcements.”¹⁷

“That’s an impossible distance for even an immortal to cover that quickly,” my father said quietly. “And her blood has probably already been let by that foul beast.”

“The basilisk or Scorn?” Contessa asked.

“Yes,” my father replied.

“He knows I can get there,” I said as Garlic barked again. “Tempest can get me and Garlic there easily in that time. It’s him versus me, just like he wants it.”

“I just don’t like the idea of you taking on Scorn by yourself,” my father said, losing his normally cool and collected manner. “You don’t know what he is capable of!”

“And you do, Father?” I asked. “I guess now would be an excellent time for you to share your thoughts, experiences, or what have you about Scorn.”

“Sirius, come on. I beg you to reconsider,” my father pleaded. “You don’t know him like I do. And he knows your every trick, because he is the one that taught them all to me!”

“I have some new tricks, Father,” I replied, patting the Blade of Truth where it lay on my hip. “And Scorn, well, he is an old dog, or bird, as it appears to be.”

“That bird, as you call him, was one of the greatest champions the world has ever known,” he protested. “Without him, I wouldn’t be half the man I am today!”

“I guess that bit of crap flows down the experience hill to me now, doesn’t it?” I said, my irritation growing with each moment I was wasting. “Just say it, Father. You think he is better than me, and you don’t think I can beat him.”

“No, that is not what I am saying,” my father exclaimed. “That is not what I am saying at all—”

“Time is wasting, Pops,” I said. “What *are* you saying then?”

He rushed forward and hugged me tight. “Just that I love you more than words can ever express,” he said, tearing up. “And be careful. Scorn is one dangerous man.”

“That is where you are wrong, Father. Because he is far from the man, trainer, champion, legend, and the like you knew way, way, way back, whenever in the hell,” I said, breaking his grasp. “In fact, he is not a man at all. So this is new territory all around, it seems.”¹⁸

“Well, then you could try having Garlic get all of us a little bit closer,” my father suggested. “Then you would have the reinforcements you need.”

“Too risky. And who says that I need reinforcements?” I replied. “It appears the basilisk is still connected to the main crystal at the college. Garlic’s collar is made from the same type of crystal. So, when the basilisk and its foul venom turned the crystal black, it seems to have retained the ability to sense when wormholes are about to open. I don’t know if it controlled Garlic’s collar and opened a wormhole, or if that was Scorn’s doing.”

Garlic barked and tried to glare at her collar for its treachery. “No,” Contessa said. “It was Scorn opening a wormhole from the other side. Garlic’s collar did not start to glow until the wormhole was already opening. It was like the basilisk was homing in on it, though.”

“Pretty scary, if that foul beast could have done that at any time,” my father said. “That is one hell of a competitive advantage and was played perfectly. Regardless of whether the Countess lives, we have to kill that beast before it strikes us again. Garlic is going to have to go collarless in the interim.”

“I think the Countess lives,” I said. Garlic barked in agreement. I could see she had no intent to give up her collar. “And, yes, the basilisk must die—regardless.”

“Maybe we should think a while, and come up with a plan,” my father said. “Showing up just when and where Scorn wants you to is an exceedingly bad idea, my son!”

“But the Countess,” Contessa said. “We have to go now—she could be dying, or already dead!”

“He’s not going to kill her just yet,” I said.

Contessa looked at me like I was the town idiot. “How in the world can you say that?” she exclaimed.

“Scorn knows that if I don’t see her alive from atop Tempest, then he doesn’t get a shot at me,” I said. “He needs her to get me close to him, and that is exactly what I want anyway. He would like nothing more than to slit her throat as he looks right into my eyes.”

“That’s twisted,” Contessa said, shaking her head.

“No, that is Scorn,” I replied.

“What’s your plan?” Contessa said.¹⁹

I heard a familiar whinny from outside and reached in my pocket for a special sugar cube. “Not sure, yet,” I answered. “But I am sure I will think of something on the way to greater Wiltshire.”

My father exchanged a glance with Contessa. “With the basilisk at Stonehenge, it’s safe for Garlic to get us to the village of Andover. That should be safe enough distance. From there, we shall travel by horseback to Stonehenge.”

“Good,” I said, kissing Contessa on the forehead as Garlic opened them a wormhole to Andover. “See if between then and now, you can turn the two of you on horseback into an entire regiment of basilisk-beating cavalry.”

I mounted Tempest, and off we went as I steeled myself against the cold September night and my own father’s total lack of faith in my abilities. My cloak was woefully thin, and any heat that was left from my encounter with the Countess evaporated by the time we passed over Cobham. The truth was that I did not know what Scorn was capable of. But neither Scorn nor even my own father knew what *I* could do. Scorn was a past legend, but I was the present. I didn’t care about being a legend, but only saving the Countess and killing that beast, or beasts. But, if I could take out Scorn and his basilisk, that would indeed be legendary.

It was reassuring to feel the Blade of Truth on my hip, but Scorn had possessed this weapon, too. Assuming we were equally adept with the blade, the theory was that I was surely doomed. During Scorn’s go-around with the foul creature, he did not have a psychotic ex-Head Magistrate to contend with, nor a damsel in distress as a hostage. It had been just him versus the basilisk, and he had lost. I wished I had time to take a side detour to Oxford, and purloin Oliver and Arthur’s now working mobile blowtorch. If it could cut titanium, it could kill a basilisk.

My leg kept bumping up against something in the saddlebag, and Garlic began pawing at its buckles. “Easy,” I said. “You don’t want to dislodge that bag and drop it on somebody’s head.” But that was an idea—I could drop a cannonball or two on the basilisk. If it would stand perfectly still and let that happen. In the distance, I saw lightning from where Wiltshire and Stonehenge lay. “A storm—perfect,” I said. Garlic barked and continued pawing at the saddlebag. “What is it, 20

girl?” I flipped open the top of the bag and saw the lightning rod from Znojmo. I should say more accurately that I saw what used to be the lightning rod from Znojmo, but now was a remarkably built hinged spear. A lightning-conducting spear was better than a cannonball, other than I had to put myself in the way of the basilisk’s venom to get a clear shot at it, all the while dealing with whatever evil plan Scorn had cooked up for me. I eased Tempest into her descent to Stonehenge—no problem.

From the sky, I could see the basilisk patrolling the perimeter of great bluestone that made up the ancient monument. The beast’s terrible talons tore great gashes in the green grass as it walked, its deadly head jutting back and forth just waiting for the kill command. I didn’t know the range of the basilisk’s fatal vision, so I quickly looked away and commanded Tempest and Garlic to do the same. The beast seemed calm until it saw us, further rending the earth and crying bloody murder in anticipation of our bloody murders.

In the center of the monument, I could see the hooded figure of the old Head Magistrate and next to him, trussed up quite helplessly, was the Countess. I rationalized that with Kunchen dead, Scorn was not about to take me on by himself, further evidenced by the movement I sensed in the shadows of the circle of stones. What was I seeing there? Sentient shadow creatures and yet unknown minions of Scorn, waiting to do his bidding was my guess.

We landed on the great green field in front of the monument. I took the lightning-rod spear, unfolded it, and locked it into place. The basilisk stayed on the other side of the monument and, oddly, did not challenge us. I patted Tempest on the rump as Garlic dropped to her feet. “Go on, Tempest, we got this from here,” I said. But the horse just folded her wings back and whinnied. She was not going anywhere. “Suit yourself, you foolish creature,” I said. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I unsheathed the Blade of Truth and walked to the outskirts of the great monoliths with the spear in one hand and the Blade of Truth in the other. The oncoming storm was growing near, and lightning flashed in the sky, casting even more strange and spooky shadows all over the monument. But I felt there was more than just a shadow haunting these grounds. The Blade of Truth shone as bright as a full 21

moon, and the strange runes on the blade that had announced the presence of Hell's creatures on Sardinia began to glow. I looked to my left and saw that Garlic was snarling loudly, her teeth and bark ready to take on all comers, and to my right, Tempest was not to be outdone, as her hooves glinted sharply.

Scorn waved me closer, and I welcomed his challenge, coming forward until he and I stood only ten feet apart. The Countess and I exchanged a quick glance, and there was no mistaking the fear in her eyes. Scorn pushed back his cowl, and I gasped, for he had changed so much since my last encounter with him so long ago. He had metamorphized from an old, beaten man with soulless eyes into something that was definitely more dead than alive, or at least not an alive I was familiar with. His head was misshapen and resembled a rotten, flesh-colored pumpkin, and his skin was incredibly pale with bulging veins visibly pumping black blood throughout his corrupted body. One such vein ran up the right side of his face to his temple and pulsed like a netherworld nematode trying to get free. But it was his eyes that were the creepiest looking. Before, when Scorn was the judgmental jurist, his eyes were black, cold, and devoid of any emotion, but now they were the red of blood, anger, war, and pain. They connoted the all-consuming hate of a creature that wanted nothing more than to bring death to the world, starting with me.

"What kind of master assassin shows up with just an equine and a canine to back him up?" Scorn said with a laugh. "Are you a highly trained killer of man and beast, or a man that highly trains beasts?"

I looked to the Countess, who seemed to take strength from my presence. "Well, I don't think it would take any training on my part for Garlic to take a leg off, assuming you still have legs under that robe and not chicken feet."

"You actually think you are funny," Scorn said. "You are not."

"You actually think you will win here today, and you will not," I replied. "So, do you want to trade the Blade of Truth for the Countess's life or not?" I made as if to hand him the Relic, which actually seemed to catch Scorn off guard. I dropped the lightning-rod spear to the ground in front of me, still within reach.

"No, no, I really don't, if I have the choice," Scorn said. "I want you dead, of course."²²

“Of course,” I said. “The feeling is mutual. The world will be a better place without you in it.”

“Evil always has a place in the world,” Scorn said. “And if it wasn’t me, then another would be here. You know—all the world’s a stage, and the rest of that utter nonsense.”

“So, we are just playing a part, and didn’t choose to be here,” I replied. “You have a massive ego. Like you would ever think the universe would be subjecting *you* to its whims.”

Scorn smiled, or maybe his pumpkin face just cracked a bit. “True, none of that destiny garbage applies to me,” he said. “Just you. You are here to die. You are the insignificant one. If not you, there would be another fool to kill.”

“Maybe my ego is even more massive than yours,” I said, “and I am thinking the same thing about you.”

“Oh, it is possible,” Scorn said. “But I am too self-important to even consider that possibility. You are just a little bit lucky is all.”

“Actually, I am lucky *and* good, and it drives you even crazier than you already are,” I said. “If that is even possible.”

He fingered the Heart of Kings he wore around his neck. “It’s not, and that is why I need to take out my vengeance on you, and well— her,” Scorn said, motioning to the Countess. “Her life means nothing to me.” He eyed the Blade of Truth. “That, of course, is rightly mine.”

“Then why does the Blade stay with me?” I asked, waving it back and forth for emphasis. “If it was not mine to possess, it would be gone. Apparently it thinks that I am still in need—”

“Oh, you are in need.” Scorn snickered. “But even the Blade of Truth cannot save you now.”

A brilliant flash of lightning lit up the night sky, thunder crashed, and a harsh, cold rain began to pelt down. Behind me, reflected in the shining Blade of Truth, were black amorphous shadows closing in on me. I whirled and saw nothing and heard Scorn cackle as he drew a dagger and limped toward the Countess. “Choices, Sinister, choices . . .” he said. The shadows did not come for me but encircled Tempest and Garlic, enveloping them in cold, airless darkness.

“Choose this, Scorn!” I aimed a dagger of finest Toledo steel at the ex-Head Magistrate’s feet. The dagger ripped through the cloth of his robe into a foot that looked like it belonged on the basilisk and bled the 23

same black ochre of that ancient menace as the Spanish steel staked Scorn into the earth. The basilisk screamed as if it, too, was in pain and stumbled for a moment before recovering. It rushed at me, and I thought my choice was about to be made for me, but the basilisk stopped, unable for some reason to enter the stone circle.

Not questioning my luck, I turned back to Garlic and Tempest, who were clearly succumbing to the black shadows that I was unable to see. I slashed fruitlessly around them, but to no avail. Then it hit me—they didn't come for me because of the light of the Blade of Truth. I had to trust it, so I turned my back on my animal friends and, looking in the reflection of the Blade, slowly backed up. Reaching behind me, I plucked Garlic from the shadow and tossed her forward where she recovered and promptly slashed the back of Scorn's free leg with one sharp claw.

He screamed in pain, and the basilisk stomped and screamed so loudly it drowned out the thunder. I ignored them both and found Tempest's reins, then led her forward into the light. She snorted loudly, and I saw she was in her mundane mare form. I felt in my pocket for more cubes and got nothing but a wet sticky hand. The rain had dissolved the last cube I had. "Stand down, girl," I said. "You know you can't fight very well like this!"

I looked in the Blade again, and saw the unmistakable reflection of Kunchen's face in the black shadow as it slowly was enveloped by the light. I wasn't sure if that was really him, or just what my mind thought of as black, shadowy evil. Then we made eye contact, and it was clear from the animus I felt that it was indeed Kunchen, and though he was not quite corporeal yet, the look in his eyes promised me that time was not far off. I was happy when he completely dissipated, but in my heart, I knew that if I survived the basilisk, I would be facing one of my greatest enemies in the uncertain future.

Scorn had pulled the dagger from his foot, right as I reached the Countess. He went to throw it at me but was knocked off balance by a weakened Tempest, who promptly collapsed with the effort. I sheathed the Blade of Truth, ripped the Countess's bonds into shreds, then rushed for Scorn, kicking the dagger out of his reach. "It's time we settle this, you and I," I said, lifting him to his feet and smashing him 24

against a monument stone. I ripped the Heart of Kings from his neck and threw it to the Countess.

“I agree,” Scorn spat. “But not here.”

And suddenly we were out of the protective circle of Stonehenge and right in front of the shrieking basilisk. I let go of Scorn and drew the Blade of Truth right as the foul bird-beast separated me from him with one vicious swipe of its leg. I hurtled through the air, losing my grip on the Blade and my only chance to defend myself from this evil creature. Rolling to my feet, I barely avoided the rush of the foul beast as it lunged at me, intent on snapping me in two with its sharp beak. My body felt drained being so close to this evil creature, but I wasn't done by a long shot. Keeping my eyes on its feet and away from its lethal eyes, I fainted quickly one way then another as we faced off in a most deadly dance. It cried out in rage, its steely talons clawing the ground in frustration as it failed to get me in its grasp. I had to get to the Blade of Truth! Scorn had similar thoughts as he limped in the direction of the Blade, which shone like a great white beacon on the green grass on the other side of the basilisk. He would get to it before I could. I tucked my head into my chest and rolled under the basilisk, which stomped at me with its talons in frustration, spitting great goutts of venom that hissed and burned all around me. I sprinted for Stonehenge and the lightning-rod spear, but I could see that I wasn't going to make it.

“Take this,” the Countess screamed, throwing the lightning-rod spear toward me. I leaped and caught it in midair. Sliding to a stop, I whirled around, looking only at the feet of the oncoming basilisk. A blast of thunder drowned out the cries of the ghastly beast now directly in front of me, and I unleashed the spear before tumbling to safety. It flew true to its mark, and caught the basilisk full in the chest. The basilisk stumbled backward clutching at its chest and trying to dislodge the spear, until lightning erupted where the rod had met its mark, causing the beast to tremble in horrible convulsions as it crashed to the ground, its entire carcass a steaming mass of burning flesh. A horrible stench washed over the field, and I covered my mouth and turned to look for the Countess just as Scorn swung the Blade of Truth right at my exposed chest. But the Blade simply disappeared, and in its sudden absence, Scorn's momentum spun him to the ground at my feet. I proceeded to pound him into next week across the great green field, right 25

up to the ancient stone circle of Stonehenge, when a rather hard object impacted the back of my head, sending me into darkness of my own.

I awoke looking up into the night sky with Garlic licking my face. I felt the knot on the back of my head and, grimacing, slowly sat up. My hand came away with blood, and Scorn was nowhere to be seen, probably having escaped with the help of my assailant. My only solace was the Blade of Truth had disappeared when Scorn had swung it at me, to reappear to me when it so chose, or to another it deemed more in need. Until then, I was still its rightful possessor as far as I knew. If it had gone to someone else it deemed more in need, there was nothing I could do to stop it. But who could be more in need than someone trying to save the world?

The wind changed directions and blew a wave of noxious-smelling burnt basilisk in my direction. I held my nose, happy the venomous creature resembled a rather overcooked goose and would not terrorize anyone ever again. I looked over and saw the Countess lying face down in the field next to the monument, and as I came over to her, she shook out the cobwebs in her head and sat up.

“What in the hell happened?” I asked her. “What did you see?”

She frowned. “Right as you got up to the stones, someone dressed in all black leaped out and cracked you on the noggin. I rushed her—”

“Her?”

“Yes,” the Countess said. “Judging by the length of this long, white hair I pulled from her head before she kicked my ass—yes, her. Why, do you know her?”

“No,” I said, my heart sinking with disappointment. The Thief had given me her word. “But I thought I did.”

Garlic had not stopped licking my hand and would not stop until the blood was all gone. “My faithful pup, why didn’t you take down the lady that took me out?”

“Oh, she tried,” the Countess said. “And let me tell you, it was only by the barest of moments that your assailant avoided having her throat ripped out. Right as Garlic got to her, that white-haired bitch threw a cloud of some strange powder in the air that stopped Garlic in her tracks. Garlic was hovering there unable to move as we fought. She tried barking her way out, but only succeeded in knocking down some of the monument stones. And every time she would form a wormhole, 26

it would drop her right back to the cloud of powder that immobilized her.”

Garlic snarled, clearly still annoyed by the whole process. “That sounds like Scorn’s work all right,” I said. “Shadows that are alive, evil powder, and altered wormholes—he seems to have mastered all the tricks in the book of evil.”

“And he has an ally that can punch,” the Countess said, rubbing her chin. “I can take a lot of punishment as you know.”

“You don’t say,” I replied, mustering a smile that quickly evaporated when I noticed that the Countess was not wearing the Heart of Kings. “Oh, damn Scorn to Hell, she got your Relic too!”

“No, no, she didn’t,” said the Countess, lifting up her dress. But I didn’t see the Heart of Kings hanging above her womanhood. She grinned at me, and produced the Heart of Kings from a place I was intimately familiar with. “The one place she didn’t think to look.”

“Now, there is a moral victory if there ever was one,” I said grumpily, but down deep I was happy to know the Heart of Kings was safe for the moment, and I was admittedly quite turned on by how the Countess had hidden it.

The Countess pointed to the carcass of the basilisk, which was now quite on fire. “That does not look like a moral victory to me, Sirius. See, it is a good thing that Contessa dragged me to that powder room to see how she looked. She said if Don Indigo didn’t get to it soon, she could find an alternate at the coronation banquet.”

My dear Contessa had not told me the truth about who really wanted to go to the women’s parlor. Her mania for matrimony was almost our undoing. But the reality was that the Countess was right! I thought about what we had accomplished. “Scorn may have escaped, but his beast is dead. That is cause for celebration after all for many reasons, because now Scorn can no longer track us via crystal,” I said, rising to my feet as billowing clouds of smoke laced with basilisk venom, which I knew would weaken me or worse, were beginning to blow in our direction. “We had best get out of here,” I continued.

“Don’t you want to look around for your sword?” the Countess asked.

I saw no reason to identify my weapon as the Blade of Truth. I was not sure if the Countess had seen it vanish, but I nodded and did 27

a perfunctory search of the area, and finally made as if giving up. “He may have taken it,” I said. “No matter, I will get another.”

The Countess was not convinced. “That was no ordinary sword,” she said.

“I am no ordinary man,” I replied. She looked to me either for confirmation or explanation, and I gave her neither. I could have her a million times more, and I still wasn’t going to offer up any information.

“You can trust me, you know,” the Countess said.

“Can I?” I replied. “No offense, Countess, but centuries of drama have taught me otherwise.”

She nodded in understanding. “Time goes on and on for us immortals, and we get so set in our ways that we are very hesitant to change or trust.”

“Ultimately, you have to do what works for you,” I said. “And in my case, keeping my circle small has helped me stay alive.” The fact remained that outside my family and friends, Hedley Edrick and I were a very odd circle of two.

The Countess smiled ever so winsomely. “I should be able to get in your circle, Sirius, since you have been in my triangle.”

“Are we talking anatomy or geometry?” I replied.

She thought for a moment. “Neither,” she said. “Biology.”

I laughed and grabbed Tempest’s reins and led the snuffling mare down the road to Andover with Garlic walking next to the Countess. I heard the thunder of hooves up ahead, and from around a corner came my father and Contessa on horseback. I had half a mind to admonish Contessa for almost botching our mission and getting the Countess killed, all for an unfocused moment because she wanted to primp for a potential suitor. But something told me to just let it go.

“Here comes the cavalry,” I said. “Although our cavalry is several moments too late, we did kill a basilisk. That doesn’t happen every day, you know.”

“*You* killed the basilisk,” the Countess said. “I simply got my behind whipped, and not in the fun way. But I see a few extra horses with them! I was hoping we wouldn’t have to walk all the way back to London. Let’s get a hot meal, get out of these clothes, and if you are lucky, dear Sirius, you can see my jewel again.”