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Michael Scott

THE ENCHANTRESS

The Secrets of
THE IMMORTAL
NICHOLAS FLATTEL



ALSO BY MICHAEL SCOTT

The Alchemyst

The Magician

The Sorceress

The Necromancer

The Warlock

THE ENCHANTRESS

The Secrets of
THE IMMORTAL
NICHOLAS FLATTEL



Michael Scott

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v3.1

To the memory of my father,
Michael Scott.
Consummatum est.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Other Books by This Author](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Thursday, 7th June](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[Chapter Thirty-two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-one](#)

[Chapter Forty-two](#)

[Chapter Forty-three](#)

[Chapter Forty-four](#)
[Chapter Forty-five](#)
[Chapter Forty-six](#)
[Chapter Forty-seven](#)
[Chapter Forty-eight](#)
[Chapter Forty-nine](#)
[Chapter Fifty](#)
[Chapter Fifty-one](#)
[Chapter Fifty-two](#)
[Chapter Fifty-three](#)
[Chapter Fifty-four](#)
[Chapter Fifty-five](#)
[Chapter Fifty-six](#)
[Chapter Fifty-seven](#)
[Chapter Fifty-eight](#)
[Chapter Fifty-nine](#)
[Chapter Sixty](#)
[Chapter Sixty-one](#)
[Chapter Sixty-two](#)
[Chapter Sixty-three](#)
[Chapter Sixty-four](#)
[Chapter Sixty-five](#)
[Chapter Sixty-six](#)
[Chapter Sixty-seven](#)
[Chapter Sixty-eight](#)
[Chapter Sixty-nine](#)
[Chapter Seventy](#)
[Chapter Seventy-one](#)
[Chapter Seventy-two](#)
[Chapter Seventy-three](#)
[Chapter Seventy-four](#)
[Chapter Seventy-five](#)
[Chapter Seventy-six](#)
[Chapter Seventy-seven](#)
[Chapter Seventy-eight](#)

[Friday, 8th June](#)

[Chapter Seventy-nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Note: Atlantis \(Danu Talis\)](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

I am legend.

There was a time when I said that death had no claim over me, that illness could not touch me.
That is no longer true.

Now I know the date of my death, and that of my wife, too: and it is today.

I was born in the Year of Our Lord 1330, more than six hundred and seventy years ago. Long-lived, yes; immortal, too, but not invulnerable. Perenelle and I always knew this day would come.

I have had a good life, a long life, and have few regrets. I have been many things in my time: a physician and a cook, a bookseller and a soldier, a teacher of languages and chemistry, both an officer of the law and a thief.

And I was *the* Alchemyst.

Gifted—or was it cursed?—with immortality, Perenelle and I fought the evil of the Dark Elders and kept them at bay while we searched for the twins of legend, the Gold and Silver, the sun and moon. We always thought they would help us defend this planet.

We were wrong.

Now the end is upon us and the twins have vanished, gone back in time to the Isle of Danu Talis, back ten thousand years, back to where it all begins....

Today, the world ends.

Today, Perenelle and I will die, if not by the hand or claw of some Elder or monster, then by old age. My dear wife has extended my life by a single day, but at a terrible cost to herself.

And if there is some consolation, it is that we will die together.

But we are not dead yet, nor will we go down without a fight, for she is the Sorceress, and I am the immortal Nicholas Flamel, the Alchemyst.

*From the Day Booke of Nicholas Flamel, Alchemyst
Writ this day, Thursday, 7th June,
in San Francisco, my adopted city*

Thursday,

7th June

CHAPTER ONE

*T*he small crystal mirror was ancient.

Older than mankind, it predated the Elders, the Archons and even the Ancients who had come before them. This was an Earthlord artifact, washed up when the Isle of Danu Talis was ripped from the primeval seabed.

For millennia the mirror had hung on a wall in a side room in the Palace of the Sun on Danu Talis. Generations of Great Elders, and then the Elders who had come after them, had puzzled over the small rectangle of crystal in the plain black frame that was not wood, not metal, nor was it stone. Although it had all the appearance of a mirror, it wasn't a true reflecting glass: its surface showed only shadows, though those who peered closely claimed they caught a hint of their skulls beneath their flesh, of the impressions of bones beneath skin. Occasionally—infrequently—some claimed to catch glimpses of distant landscapes, polar ice caps, expanses of deserts or steaming jungles.

At certain times of the year—at the fall and summer equinoxes—and during solar and lunar eclipses, the glass would shiver and show scenes of times and places beyond comprehension and understanding, exotic worlds of metal and chitin, places where there were no stars in the heavens and a black sun hung unmoving in the skies. Generations of scholars spent their entire lives trying to interpret those scenes, yet even the legendary Abraham the Mage could not decipher its mysteries.

Then one day, when the Elder Quetzalcoatl was reaching out to straighten the glass, he had caught the side of his hand on the edge of the frame. He felt a sting and pulled away in surprise to see that he'd wounded himself. A single drop of blood spattered onto the crystal and suddenly the glass cleared, the surface rippling under the curling thread of sizzling blood. In that instant, Quetzalcoatl had seen wonders:

... the Isle of Danu Talis at the heart of a vast empire stretching unbroken across the globe ...

... the Isle of Danu Talis burning and shattered, rent asunder by earthquakes, the great streets and massive buildings swallowed by the sea ...

... the Isle of Danu Talis just visible beneath a sheath of ice, huge spike-nosed whales drifting over the entombed city ...

... Danu Talis rising pure and golden in the center of a limitless desert ...

The Elder had stolen the mirror that day and never returned it.

Now, slender and white-bearded, Quetzalcoatl spread a blue velvet cloth over a plain wooden table. He smoothed the cloth flat with a black-nailed hand, picking off threads and dust. Then he placed the black-framed rectangle of crystal in the center of the cloth and gently wiped it clean with the edge of his white linen shirt. The glass did not reflect the Elder's hawk-nosed face: the polished surface twisted with a gray smoke-scape.

Quetzalcoatl leaned over the glass, pulled a pin from the sleeve of his shirt and pressed the tip of the pin into the fleshy pad of his thumb. "By the pricking of my thumbs ...," he muttered in the ancient language of the Toltec. A ruby droplet of blood slowly gathered on his smooth flesh. "... something wicked, this way comes." Holding his hand out over the glass, he allowed the drop to spatter onto the

mirror. The surface instantly trembled and shimmered, the ancient crystal running with a rainbow of oily colors. Red smoke steamed off the glass; then the colors settled into images.

Millennia of experimentation and vast quantities of blood—very little of it his—had taught the Elder how to control the images in the crystal. He had fed it so much blood that he had come to believe that it was somehow sentient and alive. Staring into the glass, he murmured, “Take me to San Francisco.”

The mirror blurred, then washed with white and gray light, and suddenly Quetzalcoatl found himself floating high over the city, looking down over the bay.

“Why isn’t it burning?” he wondered aloud. “Why are there no monsters in the streets?” He had permitted the immortal humani Machiavelli and Billy the Kid to return to San Francisco in order to release the creatures on Alcatraz Island into the city. Had they failed in their mission? Or was he too early?

The image in the crystal shifted once again and settled on the narrow length of Alcatraz, and Quetzalcoatl spotted a line of movement in the water. A shape moved across the bay, leaving the smudge of Alcatraz and heading toward the city. Quetzalcoatl rubbed his hands together. No, he wasn’t too late: he was just in time to witness a little chaos. It had been a long time since he had seen a city destroyed, and he did love a spectacle.

The color image suddenly flickered and faded. The Elder pierced his finger with the pin again and then again, dripping more of his lifeblood onto the glass, feeding it. The mirror blinked to life once more and the image of the city re-formed, three-dimensional in its clarity. Quetzalcoatl focused and the image spun downward, pulling him toward choppy white-capped water. A creature lurked beneath the waves, something huge and sinuous: a sea serpent. The Elder squinted. It was hard to make out any details, but it seemed as if the creature had more than one head. He nodded in approval; he liked that. It was a nice touch. It made sense to send the sea creatures to the city first. He smiled, showing savage teeth as he imagined the monster rampaging through the streets.

Quetzalcoatl watched the sea serpent sweep across the bay and curl toward one of the piers that jutted out into the water. He frowned and then nodded in understanding. It would crawl ashore on the Embarcadero. Excellent: lots of tourists, high profile.

Light shifted on the sea. He spotted the faintest shimmer of a blue and red oily stain on the water and abruptly realized that the sea serpent was heading straight for it.

Unconsciously, Quetzalcoatl dropped lower still. His head dipped toward the glass, hawk nose almost touching the surface. He could smell the sea now, salt with the faintest hint of rotting fish and seaweed ... and something else. Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply. A city should smell of metal and traffic, burnt food and too many unwashed bodies. But what was he smelling here—these were odors that had no place in the city: the tartness of mint, the sweetness of aniseed, the flowery scent of green tea.

Realization struck him as the monstrous creature—the Lotan—rose from the sea, seven heads darting toward the swirling red and blue stain on the water. Quetzalcoatl recognized the auras and the colors now: the red was Prometheus, while the blue was the immortal humani Niten. And the sickening odor of mint in the air could belong to only one man: the Alchemyst, Nicholas Flamel.

Quetzalcoatl saw them then, standing on the end of a pier. And yes, the woman was there also, Perenelle the Sorceress, whom he knew from bitter experience. His tongue automatically found the space in his teeth where she’d knocked out one of his big back molars. This was not good, this was not good at all: a renegade Elder and three of the most dangerous and deadly humani in the Shadowrealm.

Quetzalcoatl's hands clenched into tight fists, razor-sharp nails biting into the flesh of his palms, dripping thin blood onto the glass, keep the images alive. His dark eyes watched unblinkingly.

... the Lotan turning to feed on the auras ...

... the creature rising from the water, balancing on its tail, all seven heads darting in to feed, mouths agape ...

... the flash of green fire and the overwhelming stink of mint.

"No!" the Elder hissed as he watched the Lotan transform into a small blue-veined egg. He saw the egg drop into the Alchemyst's outstretched hand. Flamel tossed it triumphantly in the air ... and a circling seagull snatched it and swallowed it whole.

"No! Nonononono ..." Quetzalcoatl howled his rage, his face darkening, contorting into the flat serpent image that had terrified the Maya and the Aztec. Ragged teeth jutted from his mouth, his eyes narrowed and his dark hair stiffened in spikes about his face. He pounded on the table, the ancient wood cracking and only his lightning-fast reflexes saved the mirror from falling to the floor and shattering.

As quickly as it had begun, the rage passed.

Quetzalcoatl breathed deeply and ran a hand through his stiff hair, flattening it. All Billy and Machiavelli had to do was to release a few monsters into the city—three or four would have sufficed. Two would have been fine; even one, preferably something big with scales and teeth, would have been a start. But they'd failed, and they would pay for that failure later—if they survived!

He needed to get the beasts off the island, but to do that he would have to keep the Flamels and their Elder and immortal friends busy.

It was obviously time now for Quetzalcoatl to take matters into his own hands. A sudden smile revealed the Elder's needlelike teeth. He had collected a few pets in his Shadowrealm—the humani would call them monsters—and he could allow them out to play. But no doubt the Alchemyst would deal with them in the same way he'd dealt with the Lotan. No, he needed something bigger, something much more dramatic than a few mangy monsters

Quetzalcoatl found his cell phone on the kitchen table. He dialed the Los Angeles number from memory. It rang fifteen times before it was answered with a snarling rasp. "Do you still have that bag of teeth I sold you millennia ago?" Quetzalcoatl started in. "I'd like to buy it back. Why? I want to use it to teach the Flamels a lesson ... and of course keep them busy while I get our creatures off the island," he added hastily. "How much for the bag? Free! Well, yes, of course you can watch. Meet me at Vista Point; I'll make sure there are no humani around.

"Something wicked this way comes ...," Quetzalcoatl whispered. "Heading your way, Alchemyst. Heading your way."

CHAPTER TWO

Sophie Newman opened her eyes. She was lying facedown on grass that was too green to be natural and had the texture of silk. Crushed beneath her face were flowers the likes of which had never grown on the earth, tiny creations of spun glass and hardened resin.

She rolled over on her back and looked up ... and then immediately squeezed her eyes shut again. A moment ago, she had been on Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay, the cool salt-scented air stinking with raw power and the zoolike odors of too many beasts crammed together. Now the air was clean and crisp, filled with exotic smells, and the sun was warm on her face, searing blinding afterimages on her retinas. She opened her eyes again and watched a shape move across the face of the sun. Squinting, she made out an oval of crystal and metal. "Oh!" she breathed, surprised, and reached over to nudge her twin. "You better wake up...."

Josh was lying on his back. He opened one eye and groaned as the sunlight hit his face, and then, when the realization of what he'd just seen sank in, he snapped awake and sat bolt upright. "That's a ..."

"... a flying saucer," Sophie finished.

There was movement behind them and they both turned to see they were not alone on the grassy hillside. Dr. John Dee was on his hands and knees, staring wide-eyed into the sky, while Virginia Dare sat cross-legged beside him, jet-black hair rippling in the wind.

"A vimana," Dee breathed. "I never thought I'd see one in my lifetime." He crouched on the grass, staring in awe at the fast-approaching object.

"Is this a Shadowrealm?" Josh asked, looking from Dee to Dare.

The woman shook her head slightly. "No, this is no Shadowrealm."

Josh stood and shaded his eyes, staring at the craft, mesmerized. As the vimana drew closer, he could see that it was made from what appeared to be a milky crystal encircled by a thick band of gold. The saucer dipped and dropped to the ground, filling the air with a low subsonic buzzing that fell to a deep rumbling as it hovered inches over the grass.

Sophie climbed to her feet and stood alongside her twin. "It's beautiful," she whispered. "It's like a jewel." The opalescent crystal was flawless, and the gold rim of the vehicle was inscribed with tiny sticklike characters.

"Where are we, Josh?" Sophie whispered.

Josh shook his head. "Not where ... *when*," he murmured. "Vimanas belong to the oldest of all the myths."

Without a sound, the top half of the oval flipped open and the side of the craft retracted, revealing a blinding white interior.

A man and a woman appeared in the opening.

Tall and slender with deeply tanned skin, they both wore white ceramic armor etched with patterns, pictographs and hieroglyphs from a score of languages. The woman wore her black hair short, in a style cropped close to her head, whereas the man's skull was smooth shaven. Their eyes were a bright, brilliant blue, and when they smiled, their teeth were small and perfectly white, except for the incisors, which looked unnaturally long and sharp. Hand in hand, they stepped off the vimana and

walked across the grass. The glass and resin flowers melted to globules beneath their feet.

Unconsciously Sophie and Josh stepped back, squinting against the low sun and the blinding reflection off the couple's armor, trying to make out their features. There was something so terribly familiar....

Suddenly Dee gasped, then drew in his arms and legs, trying to make himself as small as possible. "Masters," he said. "Forgive me."

The couple ignored him. They continued on their path, staring at the twins pointedly, until their heads blocked the sunlight, revealing their features in a halo of light.

"Sophie," the man said, bright blue eyes twinkling with delight.

"Josh," the woman added, shaking her head slightly, lips curling into a smile. "We've been waiting for you."

"Mom? Dad?" the twins said simultaneously. They took another step backward, confused and frightened now.

The couple bowed formally. "In this place we are called Isis and Osiris. Welcome to Danu Talis, children." They stretched out their hands. "Welcome home."

The twins looked at one another, eyes and mouths wide in fear and confusion. Sophie reached out and gripped her brother's arm. Despite a week of extraordinary revelations, this was almost too much to take in. She tried to form words and ask questions, but her mouth was dry, and her tongue felt thick and swollen.

Josh kept looking from his father to his mother and back again, trying to make some sense of what he was seeing. The couple looked like his parents, Richard and Sara Newman. They sure sounded like them too, but his parents were in Utah ... he'd spoken to his father only a few days ago. They'd talked about a horned dinosaur from the Cretaceous period.

"I know this is a lot to take in," Richard Newman—Osiris—said with a grin.

"But trust us," Sara—Isis—said, "it will all make sense." Her voice was reassuring as she smiled at the boy and girl. "All your lives have been leading up to this moment. This, children, is your destiny. This is your day. And what have we always said about the day?" she asked, smiling.

"Carpe diem," they both responded automatically. "Seize the day."

"What—" Josh began.

Isis raised her hand. "In time. All in good time. And trust us—this is a good time. This is the best of times. You have stepped back ten thousand years into your past."

Sophie and Josh looked at one another. After everything they'd been through, they knew they should be delighted to be reunited with their parents, but there was something terribly wrong here. They had a hundred questions ... and the two people standing in front of them hadn't exactly answered any of them.

Dr. John Dee scrambled to his feet and fastidiously brushed himself off before pushing past the twins and bowing deeply to the white-armored couple. "Masters. I am honored—deeply honored—to stand in your presence again." He raised his head to look from face to face. "And I trust you will acknowledge that I was instrumental in bringing the twins of legend to you."

Osiris looked at Dee, flashing a ghost of the smile he'd shown the twins. "Ah, the dependable Dr. Dee, always the opportunist ... " He stretched out his right hand, palm downward, and the Magician scrambled to take it in both of his and press his lips to the back of the fingers. "... and ever the fool."

Dee looked up quickly and attempted to pull away, but Osiris had caught his hand. "I have always—" the Magician began in alarm.

"—been a fool," Isis snapped.

A shadow crossed Osiris's face, and as his lips drew back from sharp white teeth, it transformed in an instant into a cruel mask. The shaven-headed man suddenly took hold of Dee's head on either side, thumbs on the immortal's cheekbones, and pulled him up until the human's feet left the ground. "And what use have we for a fool ... or worse, a flawed tool!" Osiris's blue eyes were level with the Magician's. "Do you remember the day I made you immortal, Dee?" he whispered.

The doctor started to struggle, eyes suddenly wide with terror. "No," he gasped.

"When I told you I could make you human again?" Osiris said. "*Athanasia-aisanahta*," he breathed, and then he flung the Magician away from him.

The Magician sailed through the air, and by the time he hit the ground at Virginia Dare's feet, he was an old man: a shriveled, wizened bundle of rags, face lost in wrinkles, gray hair scattered in clumps on the silken grass around him, eyes milky white behind cataracts, lips blue, teeth loose in his gums.

Sophie and Josh looked in horror at the creature who only moments before had been a vibrant human. Now he was ancient beyond belief, but still alive, still aware. Sophie turned back to stare at the man who looked like her father, who sounded like him ... and realized that she did not know him at all. Her father—Richard Newman—was a loving, gentle man. He would have been incapable of such casual cruelty.

Osiris saw the look on Sophie's face. "Judge me when you are in possession of all the facts," he said icily.

"Sophie, something you haven't learned yet is that there are times when pity is a weakness," Isis said.

Sophie started to shake her head. She didn't agree. And although the voice was Sara Newman's, the sentiment was not. Sophie had always known her mother to be one of the kindest and most generous of people.

"The doctor has never been worthy of pity. This is the man who killed thousands in his search for the Codex, the man whose ambition sacrificed nations. This is the man who would have slain you both without a second thought. You must remember, Sophie, that not all monsters wear bestial shapes. Don't waste your pity on the likes of Dr. John Dee."

Even as the woman was speaking, Sophie caught flickering hints of the Witch of Endor's memories about the couple known as Isis and Osiris. And the Witch despised them both.

With a tremendous effort, Dee raised his left hand toward his masters. "I served you for centuries ...," he croaked. The effort exhausted him and he fell back on the grass. His wrinkled skin had tightened across his head, emphasizing the skull beneath.

Isis ignored him. She looked at Virginia Dare, who had remained unmoving throughout the brief encounter. "Immortal: the world is about to change beyond all recognition. Those who are not with us are against us. And those who stand against us will die. Where do you stand, Virginia Dare?"

The woman gracefully climbed to her feet, twirling her wooden flute lightly in her left hand, leaving a single note shimmering on the air. "The doctor promised me a world," she said. "What do *you* offer?"

Isis moved and the sunlight blazed white off her armor. "Are you attempting to bargain with us?" The Elder's voice began to rise. "You are in no position to negotiate!"

Dare spun the wooden flute again and the air shivered with an unearthly keening. All around them the glass flowers shattered to dust. "I am not Dee," Virginia said icily. "I neither respect you nor like you. I am certainly not afraid of you." She tilted her head to one side, looking from Isis to Osiris. "And you should remember what happened to the last Elder who threatened me."

“You can have your world,” Osiris said quickly, reaching out to rest his hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“Which world?”

“Any world you wish,” he said, a broken smile fixed on his face. “We will need someone to act as a replacement for Dee.”

Virginia Dare stepped daintily over the ancient wheezing man. “I will do that. Temporarily, at least,” she added.

“Temporarily?” Osiris smiled.

“Until I get my world.”

“You will have it.”

“Then we are done and I will never see you again, nor will you ever bother me.”

“You have our word.”

Isis and Osiris turned to the twins and held out their hands again, yet neither Sophie nor Josh made any attempt to take them. “Come now,” Isis said, a touch of impatience in her voice, making her sound like the Sara Newman they knew. “We need to go. There is much to do.”

Neither twin moved.

“We need some answers,” Josh said defiantly. “You can’t just expect us to—”

“We will answer all your questions, I promise you,” Isis interrupted. She turned away and the warmth in her voice disappeared. “We must go now.”

Virginia Dare was about to step past the twins, when she stopped and looked at Josh. “If Isis and Osiris are your parents ... what does that make you?” she asked. She glanced over her shoulder at Dee, then turned away to walk toward the crystal ship.

Sophie looked at her brother. “Josh ...,” she started.

“I have no idea what’s going on, Sis,” he said, answering her unspoken question.

A dry, rasping cough drew their attention back to Dee. Although the sun was blazing in the sky and the air was warm, the ancient man had curled up in a ball and was shivering violently, arms wrapped around his body for warmth. They could hear his teeth rattle in his head. Without a word, Sophie pulled off her red hooded fleece and handed it to her brother. He looked at it for a moment, then nodded and stepped forward to kneel down beside Dee. Gently he draped the fleece over the Magician, tucking it in around his shoulders. The Magician nodded his thanks, his white eyes wet with emotion, and clutched the fleece to himself tightly.

“I’m sorry,” Josh said. He knew what Dee was, knew what he was capable of, but no one deserved to die like this. He looked over his shoulder. Isis and Osiris were climbing into the vimana. “You can’t just leave him like this,” he called.

“Why? Would you rather I kill him, Josh?” Osiris asked with a laugh. “Is that what you want? Dee, is that what you want? I can kill you now.”

“No,” Josh and Dee said simultaneously.

“His four hundred and eighty years are catching up with him, that’s all. He will die of natural causes soon.”

“It’s cruel,” Sophie said.

“To be honest, considering the trouble he’s caused us over the past few days, I think I’m being rather merciful.”

Josh turned back to Dee. The old man’s withered lips moved, his breath coming in great heaving gasps. “Go.” A clawlike hand wrapped around Josh’s wrist. “And when in doubt, Josh,” he whispered, “follow your heart. Words can be false, images and sounds can be manipulated. But

this ...” He tapped Josh’s chest. “This is always true.” He touched the boy’s chest again, and the sound of paper crackling under his red 49ers Faithful T-shirt was clearly audible. “Oh no, no, no.” The Magician’s face fell. “Tell me that’s not the missing pages from the Codex,” he whispered, voice cracking.

Josh nodded. “It is.”

Dee erupted in what began as a laugh, but the effort sent a wracking cough through his body and he folded in on himself, struggling to catch his breath. “You had them all along,” he murmured.

Josh nodded again. “Right from the beginning.”

Shaking with silent laughter, Dee closed his eyes and lay back on the silken grass. “What an apprentice you would have made,” he breathed.

Josh watched the dying immortal until, finally, Osiris interrupted. “Josh,” he said firmly. “Leave him. We must go now—we have a world to save.”

“Which world?” Sophie and Josh asked simultaneously,

“All of them,” Isis and Osiris replied together.

CHAPTER THREE

*T*he screams were piercing.

A flock of parrots, green-bodied and red-faced Cherry-Headed Conures, swooped low over the Embarcadero in San Francisco. They buzzed past the three men and the woman standing at the wooden rail by the water's edge. The shrill, high-decibel shrieking echoed through the late-afternoon air. One of the men, bigger and more muscular than the others, pressed his hands to his ears.

"I hate parrots," Prometheus grumbled. "Noisy, filthy—"

"Poor things; they're upset." Nicholas Flamel didn't let the Elder finish his complaint. His nostrils flared as he breathed deeply. "They sense the auras in the air."

Prometheus dropped a heavy hand on the Alchemyst's shoulder. "I've nearly been eaten by a seven-headed sea monster. I'm a little upset myself, but you don't hear me screaming about it."

The third man, slender and black-suited, with delicate Japanese features, looked up into Prometheus's broad lined face. "No, but you *will* grumble about it for the rest of the day."

"If we survive the rest of the day," Prometheus muttered. A parrot flew by, close enough to ruffle the Elder's graying hair, and a spatter of sticky white appeared on the big man's checked shirt. His face wrinkled into a grimace of disgust. "Oh, great—that's just perfect! Could this day get any worse?"

"Will you three be quiet!" the woman snapped. She pushed a coin into the slot beneath the blue metal viewing binoculars, then tilted them toward the island of Alcatraz, which lay directly ahead of them across the bay. She turned the wheel and the buildings swam into focus.

"What do you see?" Nicholas asked.

"Patience, patience." Perenelle shook her head. Her long hair had shaken loose from its braid, and shimmered black and silver across her back. "Nothing unusual. There's no movement on land and I can see nothing in the water. There are no birds in the air over the island." She stepped away from the binoculars and allowed her husband to take her place. She stood thinking for a moment and frowned. "It's too quiet."

"Calm before the storm," Nicholas muttered.

Prometheus leaned his massive forearms on the wooden rail and looked across the bay. "And yet we know those cells are full of monsters, and Machiavelli and Billy along with Dee and Dare are there. Mars, Odin and Hel must be there by now...."

"Wait," Nicholas said suddenly. "I see a boat...."

"Who's driving?" Prometheus asked.

Nicholas turned the big metal binoculars and focused on a small craft that had appeared from behind the island, white waves foaming in its wake.

Niten climbed onto the lower rail of the wooden fence and leaned forward, hands shading his brown eyes. "I can see one person in the boat. It's Black Hawk. He's alone...."

"So where is everyone else?" Prometheus wondered aloud. "Is he fleeing?"

"No, this is Black Hawk...." Niten stopped the Elder before he could finish the thought. "Do not dishonor his name." He shook his head firmly. "Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak is one of the bravest warriors I've ever encountered."

The three immortal humans and the Elder watched the boat bounce over the waves, heading toward the shore.

“Wait ...,” the Alchemyst said suddenly.

“Is there something in the water?” Niten asked.

Though the binoculars, Nicholas could see a dozen seal-like heads bobbing on the surface of the waves surrounding the boat. He squinted to get a better look. Though his eyes were aging, he could clearly see that the heads belonged to green-haired young women who were beautiful until they opened their mouths to reveal piranha-like teeth.

“Seals?” Prometheus asked.

“There are Nereids in the water,” he announced. “And more are coming.”

Soon the boat was close enough that the group on the pier could all see the creatures surrounding it. They watched in silence as one rose out of the sea and attempted to climb aboard. The stocky copper-skinned immortal nudged the boat to one side and the hull of the craft slammed into the fish-tailed creature, sending her crashing back into the water. Black Hawk turned the boat in a tight circle, almost tipping it over, bringing it around to head back into the group of Nereids, driving it directly toward them. Water foamed as they scattered.

“He’s deliberately engaging the Nereids,” Niten said. “He’s keeping them away from the island.”

“Which means Mars and the others must be in trouble,” Prometheus said. The big Elder turned to Nicholas. “We have to help them.”

Nicholas looked at Perenelle. “What do you think we should do?”

The Sorceress’s face lit up with a dangerous smile. “I think we should attack the island.”

“Just the four of us?” he asked lightly.

Perenelle leaned forward until her forehead touched her husband’s, and looked deep into his eyes. “This is the last day of our lives, Nicholas,” she said softly. “We have always lived quietly, keeping to the shadows, hoarding our energy, rarely using our auras. We don’t have to do that anymore. I think it is time we reminded these Dark Elders why they once feared us.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rukma vimana shuddered, engine whining. The huge triangular flying ship had been damaged in the fight outside Abraham's crystal tower. One side of the craft was peppered with scars, portholes were shattered and the door no longer sat flush in the frame. Icy air howled and shrieked through the opening. The screens and control panels along one wall were black, and most of those still working pulsed with a jagged red circular symbol.

Scathach the Shadow stood behind Prometheus. She knew him as her uncle, but he had no idea who she was. In this time stream, she had not yet been born—and would not be born until after the island fell. The Elder was struggling to control the craft. Scathach had both hands clasped behind her and refused to grip the back of the Elder's chair. She was also desperately trying to prevent herself from throwing up. "Can I help?" she asked.

Prometheus grunted. "Have you ever flown a Rukma vimana before?"

"I've flown a smaller one ... a long time ago," Scathach admitted.

"How long?" Prometheus asked.

"Hard to tell, really. Ten thousand years, give or take a century or so."

"Then you can't help me."

"Why, has the technology changed at all?" she asked.

William Shakespeare was sitting on the right-hand side of the craft, next to the bulky Saracen Knight, Palamedes. The English immortal looked at Scathach, his bright blue eyes huge behind his overlarge glasses. "You know, I'm a curious person," he said. "Nosy, some would say."

She nodded.

"Always been my biggest failing ... and my greatest strength." He smiled, revealing his bad teeth. "I find you learn so much more by asking questions."

"Just ask the question," Palamedes muttered.

Shakespeare ignored him. "Experience has taught me that there are some questions one should never ask." He pointed toward the circular symbol flashing red on the few working screens. "But I really do think I want to know what that means."

Palamedes rumbled a laugh. "I can answer that, William. I'm no expert in ancient languages, but in my experience, when something is red and blinking, that means trouble."

"How much trouble?" Shakespeare asked.

"It means abandon ship," Prometheus answered. "But you don't want to pay too much attention to that. These old ships are always throwing up warnings."

The left-hand wing dipped and they heard something bang and scrape along the underside of the craft.

Joan of Arc shifted in her seat to peer through one of the broken portholes on the left side. The vimana was skimming treetops, leaving a trail of leaves and broken branches tumbling in its wake. She glanced sidelong at her husband and raised pencil-thin eyebrows in a silent question.

The Comte de Saint-Germain shrugged. "I am a great believer in only worrying about those things we have control over," he said in French. "And we have no control over this craft; therefore, we should not worry."

“Very philosophical,” Joan murmured.

“Very practical.” Saint-Germain shrugged elegantly. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

“We crash, we die,” she suggested.

“And we die together.” He smiled softly. “I would prefer that. I do not want to live in this world—or any other world, for that matter—without you.”

Joan reached over and the man caught her hand in his. “Why did it take me so long to marry you?”

“You thought I was an arrogant, ignorant, boastful, dangerous fool.”

“Who told you that?” she demanded.

“You did.”

“And I was right, you know.”

“I know.” He grinned.

There was another bang and the entire craft shuddered. Glossy green leaves drifted in through the ill-fitting door.

“We need to put down now,” the Shadow said.

“Where?” Prometheus demanded.

Scathach lurched over to one of the portholes and gazed out. They were racing over a dense primeval forest. Enormous leathery winged lizards spiraled lazily through the skies while brilliantly plumaged birds burst through the treetops in splashes of color. Humanoid creatures that looked vaguely simian, though they were coated in feathers, scampered along the crown of the forest, shouting and calling. And from the shadows behind leaves and branches, huge unblinking eyes stared up at the vimana.

The Rukma vimana lurched again, then plunged, and the right wing ripped a narrow slice out of the canopy. The entire forest screeched, howled and bellowed its disapproval.

Scathach ducked her head, eyes darting left and right. The forest stretched unbroken in every direction until it was swallowed up by dense billowing clouds on the horizon. “There’s nowhere to land,” she said.

“I know,” Prometheus said impatiently. “I have flown this route before.”

“How much farther?” she called.

“Not far,” Prometheus said grimly. “We need to get to the clouds. We just need to stay in the air for a few more minutes.”

William Shakespeare turned away from one of the portholes. “Could we settle down atop the trees?” he asked. “Some of them look strong enough to support the weight of the craft. Or perhaps if you were to hover, we could climb down on ropes.”

“Look again, Bard. Can you see the forest floor? These redwoods are over five hundred feet tall. And even if you did manage to reach the ground unscathed, I doubt you’d get more than a few feet before something with teeth and claws ate you. If you were extremely unlucky, the forest spiders would get to you first and lay their eggs in you.”

“Why is that considered extremely unlucky?”

“You’d still be alive when the eggs hatched.”

“That is probably the most disgusting thing I’ve ever heard,” Shakespeare muttered. He pulled out a scrap of paper and a pencil. “I’ve got to make a note of that.”

A trio of huge black vulture-like creatures flapped up from enormous nests in the trees and flew alongside the vimana. Scathach’s hands fell to her swords, though she knew that if the creatures attacked she’d be able to do nothing about it.

“They look hungry,” Saint-Germain said, leaning across Joan to stare through the porthole.

“They’re always hungry,” Prometheus said. “And there are more of them on this side.”

“Are they dangerous?” the Shadow asked.

“They’re scavengers,” Prometheus said. “They’re waiting for us to crash so they can feast off the remains.”

“So they expect us to crash?” Scathach watched the huge birds. They looked like condors, though they were three times the size of any condor she’d ever seen.

“They know that sooner or later, every vimana crashes,” Prometheus said. “Over the generations they’ve seen so many crashes, the knowledge is now bred into them.”

Suddenly, the glass screen directly in front of the Elder turned black, and then, one at a time, all but one of the pulsing red screens winked out.

“Hang on!” Prometheus called. “Strap yourselves in!” He jerked back the controller and the Rukma vimana lurched up into the sky, engine straining. The entire ship started to vibrate once again, and everything that wasn’t tied down went crashing to the back of the craft. As the ship rose higher and higher, the wispy white clouds turned thick and solid, plunging the interior of the craft into gloom, and the windows were suddenly streaked with curling rivulets of rain. The temperature within the craft plummeted, and a speckling of water droplets covered everything. The single functioning screen bathed everyone in crimson alternating with blackness.

Scathach flung herself into a seat that had not been designed for a human body and clutched the arms hard enough to crack the ancient leather. “I thought we were going down!”

“I’m going to take us up, as high as we can go,” the Elder grunted. His broad face was sheened with sweat turned the color of blood in the screen’s light, and his red hair was plastered to his skull.

“Up?” Scathach’s voice was a high-pitched squeak. She swallowed hard and tried again. “Up?” she repeated, her voice normal. “Why up?”

“So that when the engine gives out we can glide,” Prometheus answered.

“And when you do think that will—” Scathach began.

There was a loud bang and the interior of the Rukma vimana was suffused with the stench of burning rubber. And then the low buzzing drone of the vimana’s engine cut to silence.

“Now what?” Scathach demanded.

The Elder sat back in his chair, which was far too small for him, and folded his arms across his massive armored chest. “Now we glide.”

“And then?”

“Then we fall.”

“And then?”

“Then we crash.”

“And *then*?” Scathach demanded.

Prometheus grinned. “Then we’ll see.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“*Niten*.” Nicholas turned to the Japanese man. “You are the master strategist. What do you suggest?”

Niten tilted the binoculars and scanned the island across the bay, moving from right to left and back again. “Did you ever read my book?” he asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, he continued. “There are three ways to counter an enemy. There is *Tai No Sen*, when you wait until he attacks and then counterattack. There is *Tai Tai No Sen*, when you time your attack to his, so that you enter battle together. And then of course, there is—”

“*Ken No Sen*,” Prometheus said. “To attack first.”

Niten glanced over his shoulder at the Elder. “You *did* read my book. I’m flattered.”

Prometheus grinned. “Don’t be. I found some mistakes in it. And of course, Mars disagreed with just about everything you said.”

“He would.” Niten turned his attention back to the binoculars. “*Ken No Sen*. I think we should attack first, but we need to know the disposition of our enemy before we make our move. We need eyes on the island.”

“Can I remind you that there are only four of us?” Prometheus said.

“Ah.” Niten turned from the binoculars to look at the group. “But I am guessing that our enemies do not know that.” He smiled. “We can encourage them to believe that there are many more.”

“The ghost of Juan Manuel de Ayala is trapped on the island,” Perenelle said, “forever tied to the place. There are other shades there also. They helped me escape. He would help, I’m sure of it. He will do anything to protect his island.”

Niten smiled. “Ghosts and spirits are a useful distraction. But to battle the monsters we will need something a little more tangible. Preferably something with teeth and claws.”

Slowly Perenelle’s lips turned up in a smile that was terrifying. “Well, of course, Areop-Enap is on Alcatraz.”

Prometheus spun around. “Old Spider! I thought she was dead.”

“When I last saw her, she had been poisoned by the bites of millions of flies. She’d cocooned herself in a hard shell to heal. But she is alive.”

“If we could awaken her ...,” Prometheus murmured. “She is ...” He paused, shaking his head. “She is fearsome in battle.”

“When you say Old Spider ...,” Niten began, “are we talking about a big spider?”

“Big,” Nicholas and Perenelle answered together.

“*Very* big,” Perenelle added. “And incredibly powerful.”

Prometheus shook his head. “I knew her when she was beautiful, before the Change took her. The Change is rarely kind, but I think it was particularly cruel to her.”

A large party of smiling Japanese tourists gathered nearby and began photographing the island, each other and the swooping red and green parrots overhead. The immortals and the Elder took this as their signal to move farther down the pier.

“We need to contain the monsters on the island,” Nicholas said quietly as they walked. “If they’re all in one place, it will be easier to defend the city.”

Prometheus shook his head. "This is about more than just defending the city, Nicholas. We need to destroy these beasts. And time is not our friend. I can guarantee you that every evil thing on the West Coast of America is heading here now. Every Dark Elder and his servant are on their way. We cannot fight them all."

"We don't have to," Niten said firmly. "We should focus on one enemy at a time. Let us address what is before us first." He tilted his head toward the island. "The Dark Elders intended those creatures to spread terror and confusion throughout the city. If we can prevent that, then already we have hurt their plans. And yes, I am sure there are others coming, but they are individuals, and we are more than capable of handling them."

"And we don't have to be just four," Perenelle said. "There are others—immortals like us, or immortals loyal to peaceful Elders or Next Generation—who will stand with us. We should get in touch with them."

"How?" Prometheus asked.

"I have their phone numbers," Perenelle said.

"Tsagaglalal will fight with us," Nicholas continued, "and no one knows the extent of her powers."

"She is an old woman," Niten said, shaking his head.

"Tsagaglalal is many things," Perenelle said, "but it would be a mistake to think that she is just an old woman."

"If you have contacts, then call them," Niten said decisively. "Get them all here." He turned to the Elder. "Prometheus, you are a Master of Fire. Could you rain fire onto the island?"

The big Elder shook his head sadly. "I could, but it would be a thin rain, and would utterly destroy me. I am old, Niten, and I am dying. My Shadowrealm is lost and I have little aura left ... enough perhaps for one final blaze of glory." He bared his teeth in a grim smile. "And I want to save that until the very end."

The Japanese immortal nodded. "That I understand."

"So we focus our efforts on the island," Nicholas announced. "But before we do that, we need to know what's going on over there."

"We could try scrying," Perenelle suggested.

Nicholas shook his head. "Too limiting and too time-consuming. We would only be able to see whatever was reflected in glass or pools of water. We need a bigger picture." He stopped suddenly and grinned. "Do you remember Pedro?" he asked.

Perenelle looked blankly at him, and then her face lit up with a smile. "Pedro. Of course I remember Pedro."

"Who is Pedro?" Niten asked.

"Was. Pedro is no more. Gone almost a hundred years," Perenelle said.

"King Pedro of Brazil?" Prometheus asked. "Pedro of Portugal? The explorer, the inventor?"

"The parrot," Perenelle said, "named in honor of our great friend, Periquillo Sarniento. For decades we had a Timor Sulphur Crested Cockatoo. I say 'we,' though in truth, he was bonded to Nicholas and only tolerated me. We found him as an abandoned chick when we were searching the ruins of Nan Madol in the eighteen hundreds. He was with us for almost eighty years."

Prometheus shook his head. "I really do not see—" he began.

"Parrots are the most remarkable birds," Nicholas continued, ignoring him. He stretched out his left arm and the merest hint of mint touched the salt air. His lips moved, his breath hissing softly between them. There was a sudden flutter of wings and a spectacular red-headed green-bodied parrot settled onto his outstretched hand. It tilted its head to one side, and a large silver and gold eye regarded him

quizzically; then it slowly began to sidle up his arm. The Alchemyst ran the back of his finger down its breast. “Parrots are extraordinarily intelligent. And their eyesight is marvelous. There are some species whose eyes weigh more than their brains. They can see into the infrared and ultraviolet spectra; they can even see waves of light.”

“Alchemyst ...,” Prometheus said.

Nicholas focused on the parrot, blowing gently across its iridescent plumage. The parrot rubbed the top of its head across Flamel’s forehead and started to groom his bushy eyebrows.

“Alchemyst,” Prometheus repeated, a note of irritation in his voice.

“John Dee and his kind use rats and mice as eyes to spy for them,” Perenelle explained. “But over the years, Nicholas learned to see through Pedro’s eyes. It’s a simple transference process. You wrap the creature in your aura and then gently direct it.”

“Pedro saved our lives on more than one occasion,” Nicholas said quietly. “It got so that he would scream at even the hint of Dee’s sulfur stench.” He brought his face close to the Cherry-Headed Conure and it ran its beak back and forth across his forehead, now grooming his close-cropped hair. “Prometheus, would you hold on to me now?” he continued. “I’m going to get a little dizzy.”

“Why?” Niten asked, puzzled.

“I’m going flying,” the Alchemyst whispered. He cocked his head and the parrot mimicked the movement. For an instant, they were eye to eye. The salt air turned sharp with mint and the conure shivered. As he stroked the bird, Flamel’s fingers left shimmering trails of green that were almost invisible against the parrot’s feathers. Nicholas closed his eyes ... and the parrot’s yellow eyes turned pale, almost colorless.

Then, with a sudden flapping of wings, the bird took to the air, and Prometheus caught the Alchemyst as he slumped to the ground.

CHAPTER SIX

“Are you really our parents?” Sophie asked.

“What a question!” Isis snapped.

Sophie and Josh looked at one another. The twins were sitting in two narrow seats directly behind Isis and Osiris. Virginia Dare crouched on the floor behind them. Josh had attempted to give her his seat, but she’d told him she preferred not to be strapped in. She patted his face as she thanked him, and the touch sent a flush of heat through his entire body.

Richard Newman—Osiris—swiveled around in the black leather seat and smiled. “Yes, we really are your parents. And we really are archaeologists and paleontologists—or at least, we are in your Shadowrealm. Everything you know about us is true.”

“Except the Isis and Osiris, rulers of Danu Talis, part,” Josh said. “Or the whole aging and immortality thing.”

Osiris’s smile broadened. “I said everything you knew about us was true. But I didn’t say you knew everything about us.”

“What do we call you?” Sophie asked.

“What you’ve always called us,” Isis said. She was controlling the crystal and gold vimana, her long-fingered hand flat on a glass panel, tiny movements of her thumb and forefingers sending the craft buzzing through the air.

Sophie stared at the back of the woman’s head. This woman looked like her mother, talked and moved like her mother ... and yet ... there was something different, something wrong. She glanced sideways at her twin and knew instinctively that he was feeling exactly the same way. The man who looked like her father was smiling at them. And the smile was identical to the one she knew so well in her own Shadowrealm, Earth—wrinkles creasing the corners of his eyes, little lines at the corners of his mouth. His lips were tightly shut, just like those of her father, who never opened his mouth when he smiled. She’d always thought he was self-conscious of his long eyeteeth. “Vampire teeth,” he’d called them when she was a child. She’d laughed at it then, but now the words were chilling.

“I think I’ll call you Isis and Osiris,” she said eventually—it felt *right*—and from the corner of her eye, she could see Josh nodding in agreement.

“Of course,” Osiris said evenly. “I’m sure this is a lot to take in. Let’s get you back to the palace and get some food into you. That’ll make things easier.”

“Palace?” Josh asked.

“Just a small one. The bigger one is in a nearby Shadowrealm.”

“So you are the rulers here?” Virginia Dare called up from her place on the floor.

The tiniest flicker of annoyance danced across Osiris’s face at the question. “We are rulers, yes, but we are not the ultimate rulers. Another rules.”

“Though not for much longer,” Isis said. She turned her head to smile at her husband.

This time Osiris’s pointed incisors appeared against his lower lip as he grinned. “Not for very much longer,” he agreed. “And then we will be the rulers of this world and all the worlds beyond.”

“So we are definitely on Danu Talis,” Josh said, almost talking to himself. He raised his head to look out the speeding vimana. All he could see from his side was the mouth of a massive volcano, a

thin thread of gray-white smoke curling into the skies. “The famous source of all the legends of Atlantis.”

“Yes, this is Danu Talis.”

“When?” he pressed.

Osiris shrugged. “It’s hard to say, really. The humani have adjusted and readjusted their calendars so often that a precise measurement is impossible. But roughly ten thousand years before your time on Earth.”

“From *our* time?” Josh said. “Not your time?”

“This is our time, Josh. Your world is just a shadow of this one.”

“But you lived in our world also.”

“We have lived in many worlds,” Isis said, “and many times, too.”

“Your mother is right,” Osiris said. “We have walked between the worlds for millennia. Between us we have probably explored more of the Shadowrealms than any other Elders.”

“So you’re Elders?” Sophie asked.

“Yes, we are.”

“And what does that make us?” Josh asked. “Are we Elders or Next Generation?”

“That remains to be seen,” Osiris said. “At this particular point in time, there are no Next Generation. And if all goes according to plan, then there will be no Next Generation. They only arrived after the sinking of the island.”

“All that matters is that you are here and that you have both been Awakened and trained in many of the Elemental Magics,” Isis said.

The craft dipped and suddenly a vast circular, mazelike city appeared before and below them. Sunlight ran silver and gold off stretches of canals and waterways that ringed a huge pyramid at the center of the city. The streets were teeming with people, and the tops of scattered small pyramids blazed with fire from torches, while others were bright with flags. There seemed to be houses, palaces, temples and mansions in dozens of architectural styles. At the fringes of the city lay a vast warren of low tumbledown buildings.

“It’s huge,” Josh breathed.

“The largest city in the world,” Osiris said proudly. “In fact, it is the center of the world.”

Josh pointed toward the enormous pyramid the city was obviously built around, and the sprawling palace that lay beyond. “Is that where we’re going?”

“Not yet.” Osiris smiled. “That is the royal Palace of the Sun, currently home to Aten, the ruler of Danu Talis.”

“It looks busy ...,” Josh began.

Isis suddenly sat forward and the vimana dipped sharply. “Husband!” she called, alarm clear in her tone.

Osiris spun around and leaned forward to stare at the pyramid. The air above the palace was busy with vimanas of all shapes and sizes, and lines of black-armored guards were taking up position on the ground. An enormous crowd milled in front of the building, and there were people streaming in from all the surrounding streets.

Isis glanced sidelong at Osiris. “Looks like something happened while we were away,” she said quietly.

“Bastet!” he hissed. “I should have known she’d not leave well enough alone. Change of plans: take us down. We need to attend to this immediately.”

“Down?” Isis said, even as the vimana’s engine dulled to a low whine and the craft gently

seesawed over a broad market square full of stalls bright with colored awnings. The space was thronged with short, squat, deeply tanned people, the majority of whom wore plain white woolen robes or white shirts and trousers. A few glanced at the vimana, but no one paid it any particular attention. Two anpu guards in leather armor, carrying shields and spears, came running toward the vimana, but when they saw who was aboard, they abruptly turned away and disappeared down a side street. Dust swirled as the craft settled in the center of the square.

“Virginia, I am leaving the twins in your care,” Osiris said as the top of the craft peeled back.

“Mine!” Virginia Dare blinked surprise.

Osiris nodded. “Yours.”

Isis swiveled around in her seat to look at Sophie and Josh. “Go with Virginia. Your father and I will be back soon, and then we’ll have a family supper and catch up. We’ll answer all your questions, I promise. There are great things in store for you. You will be recognized as Gold and Silver. You will be worshipped. You will rule. Go now, go.”

The twins unstrapped from their seats and stepped out into the late-afternoon air. They breathed deeply, clearing their lungs of the dry, metallic ozone odor of the vimana. The market square was filled with a thousand strange and not entirely pleasant smells: fruit—some of it rotting—exotic spices and too many unwashed bodies crammed close together.

“Where are you going?” Virginia asked Osiris.

The Elder stopped in the vimana’s doorway. “We have to get to the palace, and I don’t want to bring the children into danger,” he said. He pointed to where a gold spire rose over the rooftops. The spire was topped with a billowing flag, and stitched into it was what looked like an ornate eye. “That’s our home. Go there. Wait for us.” He looked around the square. Most of the stall holders had turned to gaze at the tall bald-headed man. Not all were able to conceal the expressions of loathing on their faces. Osiris took his time to look over the crowd. No one would meet his eyes. “No one will harm you,” he said loudly, voice echoing across the square. “No one will even try. They know my vengeance would be terrible indeed.” He leaned forward and rested a hand on Virginia’s left shoulder. She immediately shrugged it off. “Protect my children, immortal,” he said quietly. “If anything were to happen to them, I would not be pleased. Nor would you.”

Virginia Dare stared into the Elder’s blue eyes. He dropped his gaze first. “I don’t like threats,” she breathed.

“Oh, this is not a threat,” he said softly. He stepped out of the vimana, and a low moan ran through the crowd. “Let it be known,” he boomed, “that these three are under my protection. Assist them, guide them, protect them, and I will be bountiful. Hinder them, misdirect them, harm them, and you—all of you—will know my vengeance. This is my word, and you know my word is law.”

“Your word is law,” the crowd murmured. Some of the older men and women got down on hands and knees and pressed their foreheads to the stones paving the ground; some of the younger people only bowed their heads.

Osiris glared at a group of youths. “If I had more time, I would teach them a lesson for their insolence ...,” he muttered. He stepped back into the vimana. “Go now. Do not delay. Head straight for the building with the pennant. We’ll be back as quickly as possible.”

The side of the Rukma vimana closed behind him and the craft hummed into the air, leaving Sophie, Josh and Virginia Dare standing alone in the center of the square. The vimana had barely disappeared over the rooftops when a tomato came sailing over the heads of the crowd and spattered onto the ground at Josh’s feet. A second and a third followed.

“I’m glad to see Isis and Osiris really command the crowd’s respect,” Josh said.

“Let’s go,” Virginia called, catching them both by the arms and pulling them back. “It usually starts with fruit ...”

A rock clattered off the ground and shattered.

“... but it always ends with stones.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Colors.

Bright, brilliant colors ...

Shimmering, dancing threads of iridescence ...

Pulsating bands of light ...

Nicholas rose over the pier, riding higher and higher on nearly invisible curling waves of air that spun and twisted beneath him. He looked down and saw the huddle of people below and recognized himself in the middle of the group.

He was flying.

And the feeling was extraordinary.

There had been a time when he had taken to the skies almost every day and seen the world through Pedro's eyes. He had never truly understood the lure of flight until he had soared over the island jungles of the Pacific, the winding, ruinous streets of Rome and Ireland's patchwork green fields and looked down through Pedro's huge eyes. Nicholas knew then why Leonardo da Vinci had invested so much time in creating machines that would allow man to fly. Maybe the rumors were true; maybe Leonardo had been immortal and had learned to see the world through a bird's eyes.

Although it was late afternoon and the light was fading, the world seen through the parrot's eyes was alive with vibrating flares and streamers of color. The Embarcadero blazed yellow and gold, sending lines of heat billowing out over the water.

Nicholas could feel the wind moving over his body, the whispering ripple of feathers flickering against one another. Years of flying with Pedro had taught him not to think, to simply focus on a destination and then allow the parrot's nature to take over. Below him, the water was cloudy with phosphorescent bubbles, alive with streaks of hot and cold channels.

Alcatraz was less than a mile from shore, which was no distance for wild parrots, but Flamel knew the bird would not be comfortable flying out over the water. Even the vague thought of land made the conure turn sharply and head back to the Embarcadero's blaze of lights. The parrot squawked, and the birds on the shore lining the roofs in washes of color screamed in welcome.

Nicholas visualized the distinctive shape of Alcatraz again and the bird swerved—almost reluctantly—and headed away from land. It rose higher, farther from the salt spray, allowing the Alchemyst to see the island clearly: a long, low, ugly shape topped by the white prison building with the tall finger of the lighthouse jutting into the sky. Behind him and to his right, the Bay Bridge was a ribbon of red and white streaks, while off in the distance, the Golden Gate Bridge was a horizontal smudge picked out in shimmering lines of heat and warm air.

In contrast, Alcatraz was in total darkness, and no heat radiated off the ground

As he got closer to the island, the Alchemyst realized that Perenelle had been right. There were no other birds in the air over the shores. The ever-present Western gulls that haunted the island's rocks, coating them in white, were missing, and as he coasted in closer, he realized that nothing was moving. There were no cormorants or pigeons. But Alcatraz was a bird sanctuary; hundreds of birds nested there every year.

Nicholas shuddered and felt the shudder ripple through the little bird's frame. Something had fed.

When it reached the rocky shoreline, the conure dipped and rose on air currents, then swooped in over the dock and dropped down to land on top of the map and guide stand. Nicholas let the bird rest for a moment. Hopping from foot to foot, it turned in a full circle, allowing him a complete view of the docks. They were deserted. Nor was there any sign of Black Hawk's boat. He took some consolation from the fact that he could see no wreckage, either, and he hoped the immortal hadn't fallen to the Nereids.

Nicholas urged the bird upward with a single thought and it flew in slow circles over the bookshop and Building 64. Going higher still took him over the ruined Warden's House, and for the first time since reaching the island, he spotted a low pulse of light. The conure landed on one of the metal beams that supported the ruined house, then sidled along the bar, claws scratching on the metal, and peered down. In the corner of the ruins, covering the tumbled walls and gaping floor, was an enormous mass. It looked like a ball of hardened mud. With the parrot's enhanced sight, Nicholas could just about make out a shape within the mud: a massive creature, tightly curled into a ball wrapped around with too many legs. It was a spider. It throbbed with a slow, regular light: Areop-Enap was still alive.

Yet where was everyone?

Black Hawk had dropped Mars, Odin and Hel on the island. They couldn't all be dead, could they? And where were the monsters? Perenelle had spotted boggarts, trolls and cluricauns in the cells. She'd seen a child minotaur, at least one Windigo and an oni. Another corridor held dragon-kin, wyverns and firedrakes.

The parrot was tiring now, and Nicholas knew he'd have to get it back to the mainland soon. He would have one quick look around and then head back before night fell. He circled the lighthouse, then, catching a sudden spark of light, soared over the prison building and dropped into the recreation yard.

The yard was awash with energy.

The ghostly remains of incredibly powerful auras snaked and coiled across the huge flagstones, writhing like serpents. There was pure gold and shining silver, the stinking yellow of sulfur and a thread of pale green scattered across the ground. And in the center of the yard, there was the fading impression of a rectangle, shimmering with the remnants of ancient energies. The merest hint of the outlines of four swords was etched into the stones.

A door slammed open. The parrot started upward as light blazed, and Nicholas turned to see Odin race through a narrow doorway and down a flight of stone steps. The one-eyed Elder stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned to face the way he had come, a short spear in either hand.

Mars appeared in the door and held it open, and then Machiavelli and Billy the Kid raced through, carrying Hel between them. The Elder's arms were draped over both immortals' shoulders, and her legs were dragging on the ground, trailing a dark liquid in their wake. Mars slammed the metal door shut and put his back to it. The warrior's black leather jacket hung in shreds, and the short sword in his hand dripped a bright blue liquid. Even in the gathering gloom, Nicholas could see that his eyes were bright with excitement. The door behind Mars shuddered in its frame, but the Elder braced himself and held it shut until Machiavelli and Billy had reached the end of the steps and Odin stepped out to protect their back.

The one-eyed Elder gestured to Mars and the big man launched himself away from the door—just as a spiky tusk burst through the metal and ripped upward, shredding it like paper.

Mars and Odin took up positions at the bottom of the steps, protecting Machiavelli and Billy, who were tending to Hel's wounds on the steps of the exercise yard. Billy had pulled off his belt and

wrapped it around the Elder's torn legs, and his hands were dark with her blood.

Silent and invisible, the parrot circled overhead.

Nicholas tried to make sense of what he was seeing: Mars and Odin working together with Billy and Machiavelli, protecting them while the American worked on Hel's wounds. Nicholas was confused: the Italian was no friend to the Flamels or their cause and had fought on the side of the Dark Elders all his long life. Maybe Machiavelli had somehow tricked the others? The Alchemyst shook his head and the parrot mimicked the movement. Fooling Mars was a possibility; maybe Hel, too. But no one could fool Odin. Maybe Machiavelli and Billy had finally chosen the right side. What was it Shakespeare had said about misery making strange bedfellows?

It took an enormous effort of the Alchemyst's will to urge the parrot to drop lower. The bird's every instinct was to flee. The yard was now alive with buzzing colored auras, the stink of Elder blood and the stench of beasts.

The creature that filled the shattered doorway was huge. It looked like a boar, but it was the size of a bull and its tusks were the length of a man's arm.

"Hus Krommyon," Mars said. "The Crommyonian Boar. Not the original, of course. Theseus killed that one."

Odin's single eye blinked. "It's big," he muttered. "Strong."

The beast came slowly down the steps. It was so broad that its flanks rubbed against the wall on either side, coarse hair rasping against the stones.

"It will rush us," Mars warned.

"And we're not going to be able to stop it," Odin added. "I've hunted boar. It will attack with its head down and then rip upward. The muscles around its neck and shoulders are especially thick. I doubt our swords or spears will be able to do anything against it."

"And if we use our auras, that will draw the sphinx and she will feast off our energies," Mars said. He gently pushed Odin to one side. "Both of us do not have to die here. Let it charge me. I'll grab its head and hold on. You take it from the side with your spears. See if you can get in underneath. The flesh there is softer."

Odin nodded. "It's a good plan, except ..."

"Except?"

"You will not be able to hold its head. It will gore you."

"Yes. Probably. And then you stab it."

"And you saw what it did to the metal door," Odin said quietly.

"I'm tough," Mars grinned.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"I've spent millennia trapped within a hardened shell, unable to move." He flicked his wrist and spun the short sword. "I haven't had this much fun since ... well ... I can't remember."

The Hus Krommyon's hooves scrambled on the steps, striking sparks off the stones, and then it charged.

There was a sudden flash of green and red, and what appeared to be a small parrot darted in front of the beast, claws raking along its snout and up between its ears. The boar squealed, slowed and raised its head, jaws snapping, spraying thick saliva. The bird swooped in again, its powerful beak nipping a chunk out of the creature's hairy ear. The Hus Krommyon bellowed and reared up on its hind legs to snap and bite at the darting creature.

And Odin's spear took the monster through its exposed throat. It was dead before it hit the ground.

"Way to go!" Billy hollered.

“Billy, why don’t you shout a little louder. I’m sure you can bring some more monsters down on us,” Machiavelli said quietly.

The American punched his shoulder. “Sometimes you just have to loosen up and celebrate.” He looked down at Hel. “Did you see the size of that thing!”

“I’ve seen bigger,” she lisped.

The parrot flapped down to land on the Hus Krommyon’s head. It tilted its tiny red head to one side, looking first at Mars and then Odin.

“Who are you, little bird?” Mars asked, and then his nostrils flared. “Mint.” he said in astonishment. “Nicholas?”

The conure’s beak opened and closed and then it squawked, “Flamel.”

Mars saluted the little bird with his sword. “Alchemyst. It is good to ... ahem ... see you. We are alive, as you can see. Our numbers have swelled by two, but we are in dire straits. There are too many of them, far too many, and the sphinx is prowling.” He stopped, then added, “I cannot believe I am giving a report to a parrot.”

“Areop-Enap,” the bird chirruped.

Mars looked at the one-eyed Elder. “Did it just say ‘Areop-Enap’?”

The parrot danced from foot to foot. “Areop-Enap, Areop-Enap, Areop-Enap.”

Odin nodded. “It said ‘Areop-Enap.’ ”

“Where? Here?” Mars demanded.

The bird flew into the air and circled the two Elders. “Here, here, here.”

“That’s a yes,” Odin said. “What an ally, if she’ll fight with us.” He clapped Mars on the back. “Go get the Old Spider. She can’t be that hard to find. Let me tend to Hel’s injuries.” He grabbed the Hus Krommyon by one massive tusk and dragged it off the steps.

“What are you doing to do with that?”

“Hel isn’t a vegetarian.” Odin grinned. “And she loves pork.”

“Raw?”

“Especially raw.”

The Cherry-Headed Conure dropped out of the evening sky toward the Embarcadero, wings flapping tiredly, and alit on the Alchemyst’s head. Its red head dipped and it tapped his skull with its closed beak.

Nicholas shuddered and drew in a deep breath, and Prometheus held him while he straightened and shook pins and needles from his fingertips. Then he lifted his right hand and the parrot hopped onto his fingers. “Thank you,” he breathed. Mint-green mist smoked off the red and green feathers. The bird shivered and took to the air, calling, “Areop-Enap, Areop-Enap, Areop-Enap.” Flamel’s eyes followed its path into the evening sky.

“Within a couple of days every parrot on the Embarcadero will be screaming that,” the Alchemyst said.

“Did you learn anything?” Perenelle asked.

Nicholas nodded. “The monsters are in the main cell block. I saw Mars, Odin and Hel. There was no sign of Black Hawk anywhere, and Hel is injured. But we seem to have two new allies: Machiavelli and Billy the Kid were helping her.”

Perenelle blinked in surprise. “Machiavelli has been no friend of ours.”

“I know that. But he is an opportunist. Perhaps he realizes that it would be better to throw in with