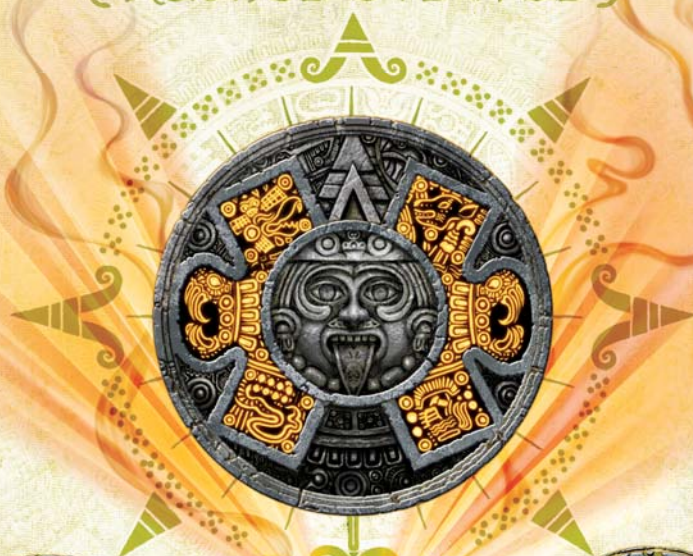


THE NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING SERIES

Michael Scott

THE NECROMANCER

The Secrets of
THE IMMORTAL
NICHOLAS FLATTEL



CHAPTER SAMPLER

THE NECROMANCER

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Michael Scott

DELACORTE PRESS

I am frightened.

Not for myself, but for those I will leave behind: Perenelle and the twins.

I am resigned that we will not recover the Codex in time to save my wife and me. I have perhaps a week, certainly no more than two, left before old age claims me; Perenelle will have a few days more. And now that death is almost upon me, I have discovered that I do not want to die.

I have lived upon this earth for six hundred and seventy-six years and there is still so much that I have not seen, so much that I wish I still had time to do.

I am grateful, though, that I have lived long enough to discover the twins of legend, and proud that I began their training in the Elemental Magics. Sophie has mastered three, Josh just the one, but he has demonstrated other skills and his courage is extraordinary.

We have returned to San Francisco, having left Dee for dead in England. I am hoping we have seen the last of him, and even if his encounter with the Archon did not destroy him, I know that his masters will not tolerate failure on this scale. I am disturbed, however, to learn that Machiavelli is here in this city. Perenelle trapped him and his companion on Alcatraz along with the other monsters, but I am not sure how long the Rock can hold someone like the Italian immortal.

Both Perenelle and I are in agreement that Alcatraz is a threat we must try to deal with while we still can. It chills me to know what the prison's cells hold. Legends tell of times in the past when the Dark Elders unleashed monsters into human cities—and I believe that Dee is insane, and desperate enough to do just that.

Even more disturbing is the news that Scathach and Joan of

Arc are missing. The Notre Dame leygate should have brought them to Mount Tamalpais, but they never arrived. When I spoke with Saint-Germain earlier, he was frantic with worry, but I reminded him that Scathach is over two and a half thousand years old, and she is the ultimate warrior. Joan, too, is one of the greatest soldiers ever to walk this earth. Francis has examined Point Zero and found what he believes to be the remnants of the crushed bones of prehistoric animals. I suspect Machiavelli sabotaged the gate using the ancient alchemical spell of Attraction. Saint-Germain believes, and I agree with him, that Scathach and Joan have been pulled back in time . . . but to when?

My most pressing concern still lies with the twins. I am no longer sure how they view me. It was always clear that Josh harbored reservations about me, but now I am sensing that they are both fearful and mistrustful. It is true that they discovered portions of my history that I would have preferred be left uncovered. Perhaps I should have been more honest with them. I am not proud of some of the things I have done, but I regret nothing. I did what I had to do to ensure the survival of the human race. I would do it again.

The twins have returned to their aunt's house in Pacific Heights. I will give them a day or two to rest and recuperate—but no more, for Perenelle and I do not have the luxury of time. Then we will begin again. Their training must be completed; they must be prepared for the day the Dark Elders return.

Because that day is almost upon us.

The time of Litha approaches.

*From the Day Booke of Nicholas Flamel, Alchemyst
Writ this day, Tuesday, 5th June, in
San Francisco, my adopted city*

TUESDAY,
5th June



CHAPTER ONE

*N*ever thought we'd ever see this place again." Sophie Newman grinned and looked at her brother.

"Never thought I'd be so happy to see it," Josh said. "It looks . . . I don't know. Different."

"It looks the same," his twin answered. "We're the ones who've changed."

Sophie and Josh were walking down Scott Street in Pacific Heights, heading for their aunt Agnes's house on the corner of Sacramento Street. They had last seen the house six days earlier—Thursday, May 31—when they had left for work, Sophie at the coffee shop, Josh in the bookstore. It had started as just another ordinary day, but it had turned out to be the last ordinary day they would ever experience.

That day their world had changed forever; they too had changed, both physically and mentally.

"What do we tell her?" Josh asked nervously. Aunt Agnes

was eighty-four, and although they called her aunt, she was not actually related to them by blood. Sophie thought she might have been their grandmother's sister . . . or cousin, or maybe just a friend, but she had never been quite sure. Aunt Agnes was a sweet but grumpy old lady who fussed and worried if they were even five minutes late. She drove both Sophie and Josh crazy and reported back to their parents about every single thing they did.

"We keep it simple," Sophie said. "We stick to the story we told Mom and Dad—first the bookshop closed because Perenelle wasn't feeling well, and then the Flamels . . ."

"The *Flemings*," Josh corrected her.

"The Flemings invited us to stay with them in their house in the desert."

"And why did the bookshop close?"

"Gas leak."

Josh nodded. "Gas leak. And where's the house in the desert?"

"Joshua Tree."

"OK, I got it."

"Are you sure? You're a terrible liar."

Josh shrugged. "I'll try. You know we're going to get grilled."

"I know. And that's even before we have to talk to Mom and Dad."

Josh nodded. He glanced over at Sophie. He'd been mulling something over for the past few days, and figured this would be the perfect time to bring it up. "I've been thinking," he said slowly. "Maybe we should just tell them the truth."

“The truth?” Sophie’s expression remained unchanged and the twins continued walking, crossing Jackson Street. They could see their aunt’s white wooden Victorian house three blocks away.

“What do you think?” Josh asked, when his sister said nothing more.

Finally Sophie nodded. “Sure, we could.” She brushed a few strands of blond hair out of her eyes and looked at her brother. “But just let me get this straight first. We’re going to tell Mom and Dad that their entire life’s work has been for nothing. That everything they have ever studied—history, archaeology and paleontology—is wrong.” Her eyes sparkled. “I think it’s a great idea. But I’ll let you go ahead and do it, and I’ll watch.”

Josh shrugged uncomfortably. “OK, OK, so we don’t tell them.”

“Not yet, in any case.”

“Agreed, but it’ll come out sooner or later. You know how impossible it is to keep secrets from them. They always know everything.”

“That’s because Aunt Agnes tells them,” Sophie muttered.

A sleek black stretch limousine with tinted windows drove slowly past them, the driver leaning forward, checking addresses on the tree-lined street. The car signaled and pulled in farther down the block.

Josh indicated the limo with a jerk of his chin. “That’s weird. It looks like it’s stopping outside Aunt Agnes’s.”

Sophie looked up disinterestedly. “I just wish there was

someone we could talk to,” she murmured. “Someone like Gilgamesh.” Her blue eyes magnified with sudden tears. “I hope he’s OK.” The last time she had seen the immortal, he’d just been wounded by an arrow fired by the Horned God. She looked at her brother, irritated. “You’re not even listening to me.”

“That car *is* stopping outside Agnes’s house,” Josh said slowly. A vague warning tingled at the back of his skull. “Soph?”

“What is it?”

“When was the last time Aunt Agnes had a visitor?”

“She never has visitors.”

The twins watched a slender black-suited driver get out of the car and climb the steps, his black-gloved hand trailing lightly on the metal rail. Their Awakened hearing clearly heard the knock on the door, and unconsciously they increased their pace. They saw their aunt Agnes open the door. She was a slight, bony woman, all angles and planes, with knobby knees and swollen arthritic fingers. Josh knew that in her youth she had been considered a great beauty—but her youth had been a long time ago. She had never married, and there was a family story that the love of her life had been killed in the war. Josh wasn’t sure which one.

“Josh?” Sophie asked.

“Something’s not right,” Josh muttered. He broke into a jog; Sophie fell into step beside him, easily keeping up.

The twins saw the driver’s hand move and Aunt Agnes take something from him. She leaned forward, squinting at

what looked like a photograph. But when she bent closer to get a better look, the driver immediately slipped around behind her and darted into the house.

Josh took off at a sprint. “Don’t let the car leave!” he shouted at Sophie. He raced across the street and up the steps into the house. “Hi, Aunt Agnes, we’re home,” he called as he ran past her.

The old woman turned in a complete circle, the photograph fluttering from her fingertips.

Sophie followed her brother across the street but stopped behind the car. She stooped and pressed her fingertips against the rear passenger tire. Her thumb brushed the circle on the back of her wrist and her fingers glowed white-hot. She pushed; there was the stink of burning rubber, and then, with five distinct popping sounds, the rubber tire was punctured. Air hissed out and the tire quickly settled onto its metal rim.

“Sophie!” the old woman shrieked as the girl ran up the steps and grabbed her confused aunt. “What’s going on? Where have you been? Who was that nice young man? Was that Josh I just saw?”

“Aunt Agnes, come with me.” Sophie drew her aunt away from the door, just in case Josh or the driver came rushing out and the old woman was accidentally knocked down. She knelt and picked up the picture her aunt had dropped, then helped the older woman a safe distance away from the house. Sophie looked at the photograph: it was a sepia image of a young woman dressed in what looked like a nurse’s uniform.

The word *Ypres* and the date 1914 had been written in white ink in the bottom right-hand corner. Sophie caught her breath—there was no doubt who the person was. The woman in the photograph was Scathach.

Josh stepped into the darkened hallway and pressed flat against the wall, waiting until his eyes had adjusted to the gloom. Last week he wouldn't have known to do that, but then, last week he wouldn't have run into a house after an intruder. He would have done the sensible thing and dialed 911. He reached into the umbrella stand behind the door and lifted out one of his aunt's thick walking sticks. It wasn't Clarent, but it would have to do.

Josh remained still, head tilted to one side, listening. Where was the stranger?

There was a creak on the landing and a young-looking man in a simple black suit, white shirt and narrow black tie came hurrying down the stairs. He slowed when he spotted Josh, but didn't stop. He smiled, yet it seemed more of a reflex than a voluntary gesture—it didn't move past his lips. Now that the man was closer, Josh saw that he was Asian; Japanese, maybe?

Josh stepped forward, the walking stick stretched out in front of him like a sword. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Past you or through you, makes no difference to me," the man said in English tinged with a strong Japanese accent.

"What are you doing here?" Josh demanded.

“Looking for someone,” the man answered simply.

The intruder came off the bottom step into the hall and moved to walk out the front door, but Josh barred his route with the stick. “Not so fast. You owe me an answer.”

The black-suited man grabbed the stick, yanked it from Josh’s grip and snapped it across his knee. Josh grimaced; that had to hurt. The man tossed the two pieces on the floor. “I owe you nothing, but you should be thankful that I am in a good mood today.”

There was something in the man’s voice that made Josh step back. Something cold and calculating that made him suddenly wonder if the man was entirely human. Josh stood in the doorway and watched the man move lightly down the steps. He was reaching for the car door when he spotted the back tire.

Sophie smiled and wagged her fingers at him. “Looks like you have a puncture.”

Josh hurried down the steps and joined his sister and their aunt. “Josh,” Agnes said querulously, “what is going on?” Her gray eyes were huge behind thick glasses.

The rear passenger window eased down a fraction and the Japanese man spoke urgently into it, gesturing toward the tire.

Abruptly the door opened and a young woman climbed out. She was dressed in a beautifully tailored black suit over a white silk shirt. There were black leather gloves on her hands and a pair of tiny round black sunglasses perched on her nose. But it was her spiky red hair and pale freckled skin that gave her away.

“Scathach!” both Sophie and Josh cried in delight.

The woman smiled, revealing a mouthful of vampire teeth. She pushed down the glasses to reveal brilliant green eyes. “Hardly,” she snapped. “I am Aoife of the Shadows. And I want to know what has happened to my twin sister.”



CHAPTER TWO

*N*ever thought I'd see this place again," Nicholas Flamel said, pushing open the rear door to the Small Bookshop.

"Nor I," Perenelle agreed.

The bottom of the door stuck and Nicholas pressed his shoulder against it and shoved hard. The door scraped on the stone floor and the stench hit them immediately: the slightly sweet stink of rotten wood and moldering paper mixed with the cloying rancid odor of decay. Perenelle coughed and pressed her hand to her mouth, blinking sudden tears from her eyes. "That's foul!"

Nicholas inhaled cautiously. He could still smell traces of Dee's brimstone odor on the dry air, the rotten-egg smell of sulfur. The couple moved down a dark corridor piled high on both sides with boxes of secondhand books. The cardboard boxes were streaked with black rot and the tops had

started to curl. Some had burst apart, spilling their contents onto the floor.

Perenelle brushed a fingertip against one and it came away black with mold. She held it up for her husband to see and said, “Tell me?”

“The doctor and I fought,” he said softly.

“I can see that,” Perenelle said with a smile. “And you won.”

“Well, winning is a relative term. . . .” Nicholas opened the door at the end of the corridor and stepped into the bookshop. “I’m afraid the shop did not fare too well.” Reaching back, he took his wife’s hand and led her into the large book-filled room.

“Oh, Nicholas . . . ,” Perenelle breathed.

The bookshop was ruined.

A thick layer of furry green-black mold covered everything, and the smell of sulfur was overwhelming. Books lay everywhere—pages torn, covers shredded, spines broken—among the crushed and splintered tables and shelves that had held them. A huge swath of the ceiling was missing, the plaster hanging like tattered cloth, revealing wooden joists and trailing wires, and where the entrance to the cellar had been was now a gaping hole, the wood around it rotted to a foul black mess speckled with mushrooms. Tiny wriggling white maggots crawled through the muck. The brightly colored rug that had once covered the center of the floor had shriveled to an ugly gray threadbare cloth.

“Destruction and decay,” Perenelle murmured, “Dee’s

calling card.” The tall elegant woman picked her way carefully into the room. Everything she touched either crumbled to dust or dissolved into a powder that gave off spores. The floorboards were spongy and sticky and creaked ominously with each step, threatening to send her into the basement below. Standing in the middle of the room, she put her hands on her hips and turned slowly. Her huge green eyes filled with tears. She had loved this bookshop; it had been their home and their life for a decade. They had worked at many careers through the centuries, but this bookshop more than any other reminded her of her early life with Nicholas, when he had been a scrivener and bookseller in Paris in the fourteenth century. Then, they had been simple, ordinary people, living unremarkable lives, until that fateful day when Nicholas had bought the Codex, the Book of Abraham the Mage, from the hooded man with astonishingly blue eyes. That was the day their mundane lives ended and they entered the world of the extraordinary, where nothing was as it seemed and no one could be trusted.

She turned to look at her husband. He hadn't moved from the door and was staring around the shop with a stricken expression on his face. “Nicholas,” she said softly, and when he looked up, she realized just how much the last week had aged him. For centuries, his appearance had changed very little. With his close-cropped hair, unlined face and pale eyes, he'd always looked around fifty years old, which was the age he'd been when they started to make the immortality potion. Today, he looked at least seventy.

Much of his hair was gone, and there were deep wrinkles on his forehead; more lines were etched into the corners of his sunken eyes, and there were dark spots on the back of his hands.

The Alchemyst caught her looking at him and smiled ruefully. “I know. I look old—but still, not too bad for someone who’s lived for six hundred and seventy-seven years.”

“Seventy-six,” Perenelle corrected him gently. “You’re not seventy-seven for another three months.”

Nicholas stepped forward and gathered Perenelle into his arms, hugging her close. “I don’t think that’s a birthday I’ll be celebrating,” he said very softly, his mouth close to her ear. “I’ve used more of my aura in the past week than I’ve done in the last two decades. And without the Codex . . .” His voice trailed away. He didn’t need to finish the sentence. Without the immortality spell that appeared once a month on page seven in the Codex, he and Perenelle would both begin to age, and death would follow quickly afterward as their accumulated years caught up with them.

Perenelle suddenly pushed her husband away from her. “We’re not dead yet!” she snapped, anger making her revert to the provincial French of her youth. “We’ve been in bad situations before—we survived.” The merest suggestion of her aura crackled around her, icy tendrils smoking off her flesh.

Nicholas stepped back and folded his arms across his narrow chest. “We’ve always had the Codex,” he reminded her in the same language.

“I am not talking about immortality now,” Perenelle said, her Breton accent thickening. “We have lived centuries,

Nicholas, *centuries*. I am not afraid to die because I know that when we go, we will go together. It is living without you that would be unbearable.”

The Alchemist nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He could not imagine a life without Perenelle.

“We need to do what we have always done,” she insisted, “fight for the survival of the human race.” Perenelle reached out and caught her husband’s arms, her fingers biting painfully into his flesh. “For six hundred years we have protected the Codex and kept the Dark Elders off the earth. We will not stop.” Her face turned hard. “But now, Nicholas, we have nothing to lose. Instead of running and hiding to protect the book, we should attack,” she said fiercely. “We should take the fight to the Dark Elders.”

The Alchemist nodded uncomfortably. It was at times like these that Perenelle frightened him. Although they had been married for centuries, there was still so much he didn’t know about his wife and the extraordinary gift that allowed her to see the shades of the dead. “You’re right, we have nothing to lose,” Nicholas said softly. “We have lost so much already.”

“This time we have the advantage of the twins,” Perenelle reminded him.

“I am not sure they will entirely trust us,” the Alchemist said. He took a deep breath. “In London, they learned about the existence of the previous twins.”

“Ah,” Perenelle said. “From Gilgamesh?”

The Alchemist nodded. “From the King. Now I’m not sure they will believe anything we tell them.”

“Well then,” Perenelle said with a grim smile. “We tell them the truth. The whole truth,” she added, looking hard at her husband.

Nicholas Flamel held her eyes for a moment and then nodded and looked away. “And nothing but the truth.” He sighed. He waited until she had left the room and then added softly, “But the truth is a double-edged sword; it is a dangerous thing.”

“I heard that,” she called.



CHAPTER THREE

*Y*ou phone your parents right now.” Aunt Agnes glared nearsightedly at Sophie and then turned to Josh, who was closer. “They’ve been worried sick about you. Phoning me every day, twice, three times a day. Only this morning they said if you weren’t home today they were going to contact the police and report you as missing.” She paused and then added dramatically, “They were going to say you’d been kidnapped.”

“We weren’t kidnapped. We talked to Mom and Dad a couple of days ago,” Josh muttered. He was desperately trying to remember just when he’d talked to his parents. Was it Friday . . . or was it Saturday? He glanced sideways at his sister, looking for help, but she was still staring at the woman in black who looked so astonishingly like Scathach. He turned back to face his aunt. He knew he’d gotten an e-mail from their parents on . . . was it Saturday when they were all in

Paris? Now that he was back in San Francisco, the last few days were beginning to blur together. “We just got back,” he said finally, settling on the truth. He kissed his aunt quickly on both cheeks. “How have you been? We missed you.”

“You could have called,” the tiny woman snapped. “You *should* have called.” Flint-gray eyes magnified behind enormous spectacles glared up at the twins. “Worried sick, I’ve been. I phoned the bookshop a dozen times looking for you, and you never answered your cell. Not much point in having a cell if you don’t answer it.”

“We had no reception most of the time,” Josh said, sticking to the truth, “and then I *lost* my phone,” he added, which was also the truth. His phone and most of his belongings had disappeared when Dee had destroyed the Yggdrasil.

“You lost your good phone?” The old woman shook her head in disgust. “That’s the third phone this year.”

“Second,” he muttered.

Aunt Agnes turned and climbed slowly up the steps. She waved away Josh’s offer of help. “Just leave me be; I’m not helpless,” she said, and then reached out to grip his arm. “You could help me, young man.” When they reached the door, she turned and looked down to where Sophie was still standing in front of the red-haired woman. “Sophie, are you coming?”

“In a minute, Aunty.” Sophie looked at her brother, then her eyes drifted toward the open door. “I’ll be there in a minute, Josh. Why don’t you take Aunt Agnes inside and make her a cup of tea?”

Josh started to shake his head, but the old woman's fingers bit into his arm with surprising strength. "And while the kettle is boiling, you can phone your parents." She squinted at Sophie again. "Don't be long."

Sophie Newman shook her head. "I won't be."

As soon as Josh and Aunt Agnes had disappeared inside the house, Sophie turned to the stranger. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Aoife," the woman said, pronouncing the name "E-fa." She bent and ran black-gloved hands over the limo's punctured tire, then spoke in a language Sophie recognized as Japanese. The young-looking man Josh had encountered in the house took off his jacket, flung it onto the front seat and then popped the trunk and pulled out a brace and jack. Fitting the jack under the heavy car, he levered it up with ease and started to change the tire.

Aoife brushed her gloved hands together, then folded her arms across her chest and tilted her head to look at Sophie. "There was no need to do that." There was a hint of a lilting foreign accent in her voice.

"We thought you were kidnapping our aunt," Sophie said quietly. The name Aoife had sent a dozen strange thoughts and images whirling through her brain, but Sophie was finding it hard to distinguish between memories of Scathach and those of Aoife. "We wanted to stop you."

Aoife smiled without showing her teeth. "If I had wanted to kidnap your aunt, would I have turned up here in the middle of the day?"

“I don’t know,” Sophie said, “would you?”

Aoife pushed her small dark glasses up her nose, covering her green eyes, and considered for a moment. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. But,” she added with a smile that exposed her vampire teeth, “if I had wanted your aunt, I would have taken her.”

“You are Aoife of the Shadows,” Sophie said.

“I am Scathach’s sister. We are twins. I am the elder.”

Sophie took a step back, the Witch’s memories of Aoife finally falling into place. “Scathach told me about her family, but she didn’t say anything about a sister,” she said, unwilling to reveal to the woman that she knew about her.

“No, she wouldn’t. We had a falling-out,” Aoife muttered.

“A falling-out?” Sophie asked although she already knew they had fought over a boy, and even knew his name.

“Over a boy,” Aoife said, with just a hint of sadness in her voice. She looked up and down the street before turning back to Sophie. “We’ve not spoken in a very long time.” She shrugged, a quick roll of her shoulders. “She disowned me. And I her. But I’ve always kept an eye out for her.” She smiled again. “I’m sure you know what it is like to look out for your sibling.”

Sophie nodded. She knew exactly what Aoife was talking about. Even though Josh was bigger and stronger than she was, she still thought of him as her baby brother.

“He’s my twin.”

“I did not know that,” Aoife said slowly. Dipping her head slightly, she looked at Sophie over the top of her dark glasses. “And you are both Awakened, too,” she added.

“What brought you here?” Sophie asked.

“I felt Scathach . . . *go*.”

“Go?” Sophie didn’t understand.

“Vanish. Leave this particular Shadowrealm. We are connected, my twin and I, by bonds similar to those which undoubtedly exist between you and your brother. I have always known when she was in pain, when she was hurt or hungry or frightened. . . .”

Sophie found herself nodding. She had felt her brother’s pain at times: when he had broken his ribs playing football, she’d felt the sting in her side, and when he’d nearly drowned in Hawaii, she’d woken up breathless and gasping. When she’d dislocated her shoulder in tae kwan do, her brother’s shoulder had swelled up and discolored with a bruise that matched hers precisely.

Aoife barked a question in rapid-fire Japanese, and the driver answered with a single syllable. Then she turned to Sophie. “We can stand here and talk in the street,” she said, smiling, flashing the tips of her canines, “or you can invite me inside and we can talk in comfort.”

A tiny alarm bell went off at the back of Sophie’s head. Vampires could not cross a threshold unless they’d been invited to do so, and she instantly knew she was not going to invite this vampire into her aunt’s house. There was something about her. . . . Slowly and deliberately, Sophie allowed the remainder of the memories that had been crowding at the back of her head to come surging forward. Suddenly—shockingly—she knew everything the Witch of Endor knew about Aoife of the Shadows. The images and memories were

terrifying. Eyes wide with horror, Sophie took a step back, away from the creature, realizing just in time that the driver was behind her. Immediately, she reached for the trigger tattoo on her wrist, but the man caught her arms, holding them to her sides, before she could make the connection. Aoife stepped forward, caught Sophie's wrists and twisted them to expose the design Saint-Germain had burned into her flesh. Sophie tried to struggle, but the driver held her tightly, squeezing her arms so hard that she could feel her fingers begin to tingle. "Let me go! Josh will—"

"Your twin is powerless." Aoife pulled off one leather glove and took the girl's hand in her cold fingers. Filthy gray smoke coiled off the vampire's pale skin. She rubbed her thumb across the ornate Celtic-looking band that wrapped around Sophie's wrist, and stopped on the underside at the gold circle with a red dot in the center. "Ah, the sign of *tine*. The Mark of Fire," Aoife said softly. "So you would have tried to burn me?"

"Let me go!" Sophie tried to kick out at the man holding her, but his grip on her arms tightened and she suddenly grew frightened. Even the Witch of Endor was wary of Aoife of the Shadows. The vampire turned Sophie's wrist painfully and bent forward to examine the tattoo. "This is the work of a master. Who gave you this . . . gift?" Her lips curled in disgust as she said the word.

Sophie pressed her lips together. She wasn't telling this woman anything.

Aoife's glasses slipped down her nose, revealing eyes that were like chips of green glass. "Maui . . . Prometheus . . .

Xolotl . . . Pele . . . Agni . . .” Aoife shook her head quickly. “No, none of those. You have just returned from Paris, so it is someone in that city. . . .” Her voice trailed away. She looked over Sophie’s shoulder at the black-suited driver. “Is there a Master of Fire in the French capital?”

“Your old adversary, the count, lives there,” the man said softly in English.

“Saint-Germain,” Aoife snapped. She saw Sophie’s eyes widen and she smiled savagely. “Saint-Germain the liar. Saint-Germain the thief. I should have killed him when I had the chance.” She looked at the driver. “Take her. We will continue this conversation in private.”

Sophie opened her mouth to scream, but Aoife pressed her forefinger to the bridge of the girl’s nose. The vampire’s gray aura leaked from her fingers, the smoke curling around the girl’s head, seeping into her nostrils and mouth.

Sophie tried to bring her own aura alight. It crackled faintly about her body for a single heartbeat before she slumped unconscious.

CHAPTER FOUR

Agnes hit a speed-dial number on the phone and handed it to Josh. “You speak to your parents, right now,” she ordered. “And where is Sophie? Who is that girl she’s talking to outside?”

“The sister of someone we know,” Josh said, pressing the phone to the side of his face. The line rang only once before it was answered.

“Agnes?”

“Dad! It’s Josh.”

“*Josh!*”

The boy found himself smiling—the relief in his father’s voice was clearly audible—and then a wave of embarrassment washed over him and he felt guilty for not getting in touch with his parents sooner.

“Is everything all right?” Richard Newman’s voice was almost lost in a crackle of burbling static.

Josh pressed his finger to his ear and concentrated hard on the sounds. “Everything is fine, Dad. We’re OK. We just got back to San Francisco.”

“Your mother and I were starting to get worried about you. Seriously worried.”

“We were with the Fla—Flemings,” Josh quickly corrected himself. “There was no cell-phone reception,” he added truthfully, “though we did manage to get your e-mail on Sunday night. I got the jpeg of the shark teeth. I didn’t recognize the type, but from the size, I’m guessing a fresh-water shark?” he asked quickly, deliberately changing the subject.

“Well done, son. It’s a *Lissodus* from the Upper Cretaceous period. It’s in very nice condition too.”

“Is everything OK with you?” Josh pressed on, trying to keep his father talking. He glanced at the door, wishing his sister would come in. He could distract his father with questions, but the same trick wouldn’t work with his mother, and he guessed that she was hovering at his father’s shoulder and would pluck the phone from his fingers at any moment. “How’s the dig going?”

“It’s been great.” Wind howled at the other end of the line, and dust and grit crackled against the phone. “We discovered what we think is a new ceratopsid.”

Josh frowned. The name was familiar. When he’d been younger, he used to know the names of hundreds of dinosaurs. “Is that a horned dinosaur?” he asked.

“Yes, from the Cretaceous, about seventy-five million years old. We also found a small and possibly untouched

Anasazi site in one of the canyons, and some extraordinary Fremont-culture petroglyphs outside of the Range Creek Canyon site.”

Smiling at his father’s bubbling enthusiasm, Josh walked toward the window. “Which race are called the Ancient Ones in Navajo?” he asked, although he already knew the answer. “Fremont or Anasazi?” He wanted to keep his father talking, to give Sophie more time.

“Anasazi,” Richard Newman said. “And actually, the proper translation is ‘Enemy Ancestors.’ ”

The two words shocked Josh to a standstill. A couple of days ago, the name would have meant nothing to him, but that was before he’d learned of the existence of the Elders, the race who had ruled the world in the distant past. He had come to realize that there was more than a grain of truth to every myth and legend. “Enemy Ancestors,” he repeated, trying to keep his voice steady. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” Richard Newman said, “but I prefer the term Ancient or Ancestral Pueblo or Hisatsinom.”

“But it’s such a strange name,” Josh persisted. “Who do you think used it? They wouldn’t have referred to themselves that way.”

“Probably another tribe. Strangers, outsiders.”

“And who came before them, Dad?” Josh said quickly. “Who came before the Anasazi and the Fremont?”

“We don’t know,” his father admitted. “That’s known as the Archaic period. Why the sudden interest in ancient America? I thought archaeology bored you.”

“I guess I’ve started to be more interested in history and

the ancient world,” Josh said truthfully. He headed toward the window again . . . and was just in time to see Scatty’s sister press her hand to Sophie’s forehead and his twin slump into the black-suited driver’s arms. He watched in horror as the vampire’s head snapped around to look at him and she bared her fangs in what might have been a grin. Then she jerked open the rear door of the car and held it as the driver dropped Sophie onto the backseat. Standing by the open door, Aoife waved a mocking salute at Josh.

Josh felt as if he’d been punched in the stomach. He could not draw breath and his heart was pounding. “Dad—I’ll be back in a sec . . .,” he whispered hoarsely. He dropped the phone on the floor, then raced out of the room and down the hallway. Snatching up the two pieces of the walking stick the limo driver had broken, Josh jerked open the door and almost fell down the steps. He’d half expected to see the car driving away, but Aoife was waiting patiently for him. “Give me back my sister!” he shouted.

“No,” Aoife said lightly.

Josh ran toward the car, trying to remember everything Joan of Arc had taught him about sword fighting. He wished he had Clarent with him now. Even Scatty—who was frightened of nothing—had been terrified of the stone blade. But all he had were the two halves of the walking stick.

The vampire tilted her head to one side, watching the boy run toward her, and smiled.

As Josh raced across the street, terror alighted his aura and the faintest of golden glows surrounded his body. He could see his sister lying unmoving on the backseat of the car,

and his fear turned to a raging anger. Abruptly, his aura blazed, steaming gold threads smoking off his skin, his eyes turning to molten coins. His aura hardened around his hands, sheathing them in metallic gloves, and then it flowed down the wooden sticks, turning them into golden rods. He tried to speak, but his throat was tight, and the voice that came from his mouth was deep and gravelly, more beast than human. *“Give . . . me . . . back . . . my . . . sister. . . .”*

Aoife’s arrogant smile faded. She shouted a single word in Japanese, turned and flung herself into the limousine, slamming the door behind her. The engine immediately roared to life, the rear tires spinning and smoking on the street.

“No!” Josh reached the car just as it took off. Lashing out with one golden rod, he shattered the rear window nearest him, the glass exploding into white powder, the stick leaving a long gouge in the shining black metal. Another blow left a deep impression in the trunk and cracked a rear light. The car squealed down the street, and in desperation Josh flung the two golden sticks after it, but the moment he released them, they returned to plain wood and bounced harmlessly off the fender.

Josh raced after the car. He could feel his aura surging through him, lending him speed and strength as he pounded down the road. He was conscious that he was moving faster than he ever had before, but the limo kept accelerating. It shot through an intersection, then rounded a corner with a squeal of protesting tires and disappeared.

And just as quickly as it had come, Josh’s strength left him. He collapsed on his hands and knees at the bottom of

Scott Street, lungs heaving, heart thundering, every muscle in his body stressed and burning. Black spots danced before his eyes and he thought he was going to throw up. He watched the golden glow fade from his hands, his aura drifting off his flesh like yellow vapor, leaving him aching and exhausted. He started to tremble and a sudden cramp caught his calf muscle behind his knees. The pain was excruciating, and he quickly rolled over and dug his heel into the ground, pushing down hard, trying to ease it. Climbing to his feet, feeling sick and miserable, he started to hobble back to his aunt's house. Sophie was gone. Kidnapped by Aoife. He had to find his twin.

But that meant returning to Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel.

CHAPTER FIVE

*T*he Shadowrealm was called Xibalba.

Even among the countless ancient Shadowrealms, it was old, and unlike so many of the others, which were beautiful and complex, it was crudely simple.

Xibalba was a single cave, impossibly vast, unimaginably high, speckled with slowly bubbling pits of black-crustled lava. Occasionally, one of these would rupture, spitting thick globules of liquid rock high into the air, sending shadows dancing red and black on the walls. The air stank of sulfur, and the only illumination came from a gelatinous yellow-white fungus that coated the walls and the massive stalactites hanging from the distant and barely visible ceiling.

Every Shadowrealm opened onto at least one other realm. Some connected with two. Xibalba was unique: it touched nine other Shadowrealms and was sometimes referred to as the Crossroads. Arranged at regular intervals around the cave

were nine separate openings in the walls. The entrances to each of the cave mouths were carved and etched with crude and blocky glyphs, and although the sticky glowing fungus covered most of the dark walls, none of it even came close to any of the symbols. They were the gates to the Shadow-realms.

Usually, nothing moved in Xibalba except the bubbling lava, but now a steady stream of messengers was flitting and scabbling from one cave mouth to the other. Some were leathery and resembled bats, others were furred and looked like rats, but they were neither, and none were truly alive. They had been created for one purpose: to carry a message from the heart of the Dark Elders' Shadowrealm out into every connected world. Once the messengers' task was complete, they would melt back into mud, sticks and scraps of hair and skin.

The messengers were carrying news of Dr. John Dee's death sentence.

And none of those who heard it—Elder, Next Generation or immortal human—were surprised. There was only one price for failure, and Dr. John Dee had failed spectacularly.

CHAPTER SIX

*T*here have been worse days,” Dr. John Dee said, though he couldn’t remember when.

Following the disaster at Stonehenge and the twins’ escape through the leygate, the Magician had spent the remainder of the night and the early part of the following day in the tumbled ruins of the barn where, only a few hours previously, Flamel and the twins had been hiding out. Helicopters buzzed overhead and police and ambulance sirens howled along the nearby A344. When all the police activity had finally died away in the early afternoon, Dee had left the barn and started walking toward London, keeping to the back roads. Beneath his coat, wrapped in a ragged cloth, he carried the single stone sword that had once been two, Clarent and Excalibur. It throbbed and pulsed against his skin like a beating heart.

There was little or no traffic on the narrow country lanes, and he was just beginning to think that he would have to steal

a car in the next town or village he came to, when an elderly vicar in an equally ancient Morris Minor stopped and offered him a lift.

“You’re lucky I came along,” the old man said in a crackling Welsh accent. “Not many people use these side roads now, with the motorway so close.”

“My car broke down, and I need to get back into London for a meeting,” Dee said. “I got a bit lost,” he added, consciously shifting his accent to match the vicar’s.

“I can take you. I’m glad of the company,” the white-haired man admitted. “I’ve been listening to the radio—and all this talk about the security scare was making me nervous.”

“What’s happened?” Dee asked, keeping his voice light and casual. “I thought there was a lot of police activity.”

“Where have you been for the past twelve hours?” the vicar asked with a grin that shifted the false teeth in his mouth.

“Busy,” Dee said. “Met up with some old friends; we’d a lot of catching up to do.”

“Then you missed all the excitement. . . .”

Dee kept his face expressionless.

“A major security operation closed down the city yesterday. The BBC were reporting that the same terrorist cell that had been operating in Paris were now in London.” Gripping the big steering wheel tightly, he glanced at his passenger. “You *did* hear about what happened in Paris?”

“I read all about it,” the Magician murmured, unconsciously shaking his head. Machiavelli controlled Paris—how could he have let Flamel and the twins slip through the net?

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.
ISBN 978-0-385-73531-5 (hc) — ISBN 978-0-385-90516-9 (lib. bdg.)
ISBN 978-0-375-89660-6 (e-book)

The text of this book is set in 11.5-point Galliard.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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