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*Michael Scott*

# THE WARLOCK

*The Secrets of*  
THE IMMORTAL  
NICHOLAS FLATTEL



Chapter Sampler

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Nicholas Flamel is dying.

This is the time I have feared for so long; this is the night when I might finally become a widow.

My poor brave Nicholas. Even though he's aged, weakened and utterly exhausted, he sat with Prometheus and me and poured the last of his strength into the crystal skull so we could track Josh into the heart of San Francisco, deep into Dr. John Dee's lair.

We watched in horror as Dee turned the boy into a necromancer, a summoner of the dead, and urged him to call forth Coatlicue, the hideous Archon known as the Mother of all the Gods. We tried to warn Josh, but Dee was too strong and cut the boy off from us. And when Aoife, Niten and Sophie arrived, Josh sided with Dee and his deadly companion, Virginia Dare. I cannot help wondering if he did so voluntarily.

Watching Josh—our last hope, our final chance to defeat the Dark Elders and protect the world—leave with the enemy was too much for my husband, and he collapsed into unconsciousness. He has not awakened, and I no longer have the strength to revive him. What little power remains within me I must conserve for what is to come.

One by one, we have lost those who might have fought alongside us: Aoife is gone, trapped in a Shadowrealm, forever locked in combat with the Archon Coatlicue. Scathach and Joan are in the distant past, there has been no communication from Saint-Germain, and we have now lost contact with Palamedes and Shakespeare. Even Prometheus is so weakened now after using the skull that he no longer has the strength to hold his Shadowrealm together, and it is beginning to disintegrate around him.

Only Sophie remains, and she is completely distraught by her brother's betrayal. She is somewhere in San Francisco, I don't

know where, but at least she has Niten to protect her. I must find her—there is much she needs to know.

So it comes down to me, as I have always known it would.

When I was a child, more than six hundred and eighty years ago, my grandmother introduced me to a hooded man with a hook in place of his left hand. He told me my future, and the future of the world. And then he swore me to secrecy. I have been waiting for this day my entire life.

Now that the end is almost upon us, I know what I have to do.

*From the Day Booke of Nicholas Flamel, Alchemyst  
Writ this day, Wednesday, 6th June, by  
Perenelle Flamel, Sorceress,  
in the Shadowrealm of the Elder Prometheus,  
adjoining San Francisco, my adopted city*

WEDNESDAY,

*6th June*



## CHAPTER ONE

*T*he anpu appeared first, tall jackal-headed warriors with solid red eyes and saber-teeth, wearing highly polished black glass armor. They poured out of a smoking cave mouth and spread around Xibalba, some taking up positions in front of each of the nine gates that opened into the enormous cave, others sweeping through the primitive Shadowrealm, ensuring that it was empty. As always, they moved in complete silence; they were mute until the final moments before they charged into battle, and then their screams were terrifying.

Only when the anpu were satisfied that Xibalba was deserted did the couple appear.

Like the anpu, they were wearing glass and ceramic armor, though theirs was ornate rather than practical, and in a style that had last been seen in the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt.

Minutes earlier, the couple had left an almost perfect facsimile of Danu Talis to travel across a dozen linked Shadow-

realms, some remarkably similar to earth, some completely alien. And although the couple were both by nature intensely curious about the myriad worlds they ruled, they did not linger. They raced through a complex network of leygates that would lead them to the place known as the Crossroads.

There was so little time left.

Nine gates opened out into Xibalba, each one little more than a roughly carved opening in the black rock wall. Avoiding the bubbling pits of lava that spat sticky strings of molten rock across their path, the couple traversed the width of the Shadowrealm from the ninth gate to the third, the Gate of Tears. Even the anpu, which were by nature fearless, refused to approach this cave. Ancient memories rooted deep in their DNA warned them that this was the place where their race had almost been exterminated after they'd fled the world of the humani.

As the couple neared the circular cave mouth, the crude and blocky glyphs carved over the opening began to glow with a faint white light. It reflected off their mirrored armor, illuminating the interior of the cave, painting the couple in stark black and white and, in that instant—briefly—they were beautiful.

Without a backward glance, the couple stepped into the dark cave mouth . . .

. . . and less than a heartbeat later, a couple dressed identically in white jeans and T-shirts winked into existence on the circular stone known as Point Zero before Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France. The man took the woman's hand

in his and together they set off at a brisk pace, picking their way through the debris of stones and broken statues that still littered the square where Sophie and Josh Newman had used Elemental Magic to defeat the cathedral's animated stone gargoyles.

And because this was Paris, no one looked twice at a couple wearing sunglasses at night.

## CHAPTER TWO

*F*ire raged through the building. Dozens of alarms howled and shrieked and the air was filled with choking black smoke, thick with the reek of burning rubber and melting plastic.

“Out, out, now!” Dr. John Dee used the short sword in his right hand to rip apart a heavy steel and wooden door, carving through it as if it were paper. “Down the stairs,” he ordered.

Virginia Dare leapt into the opening without hesitation, sparks hissing in her long dark hair.

“Follow me,” Dee commanded Josh, and ducked through the shredded door. Tendrils of the doctor’s yellow aura visibly streamed from his flesh, its rotten-egg stench hitting Josh Newman in the face as he hurried close behind.

Josh was feeling sick to his stomach, and not just from the foul sulfurous cloud leaking from Dee. His head was pound-

ing and tiny dots of color pulsed before his eyes. He was dazed, still shaking after his encounter with the beautiful Archon Coatlicue. And try as he might, he still couldn't make any sense of the events of the past few minutes. He only had the vaguest idea how he'd ended up in this place. He remembered driving down country roads . . . on the freeway . . . and into the city. But he'd had no idea where he was going. All he'd known was that he was supposed to be somewhere.

Josh tried to focus on the sequence of events that had brought him to the burning building, but the more he concentrated, the hazier those events became.

And then Sophie had appeared. Foremost in Josh's mind was the terrible change that had overtaken his twin. When Sophie had stepped into the doctor's apartment moments earlier, Josh had been thrilled . . . but confused. Why was she there? How had she found him? The Flamels must have sent her, he realized. But it didn't matter; she was with him and she could help him bring Coatlicue into this world. That was the most important thing.

His happiness had been short-lived, though. It had quickly turned to fear, disgust and even anger at his sister's actions. Sophie hadn't come to help him, she'd . . . well, Josh didn't know *what* she wanted. He'd watched, stunned, as her aura hardened to a sinister-looking silver armor around her body, and then she'd callously used a whip on the beautiful and defenseless Archon. Coatlicue's agonized cries had been heartbreaking, and when she'd turned to Josh and stretched out her hand, the look of pain and betrayal in her huge eyes

had been too much to bear. He was the one who'd called her from her Shadowrealm; he was responsible for her pain. And he was unable to help her.

Aoife had leapt onto Coatlicue's back and held her while Sophie beat her again and again with the terrible whip. And then Aoife dragged the wounded Archon back into her Shadowrealm. When Coatlicue disappeared, Josh had felt a moment of horrible loss. He had been close, so close to doing something remarkable. If Coatlicue had been allowed to return to this world, she would have . . . Josh swallowed a great mouthful of rubbery-tasting smoke and coughed, eyes watering. He wasn't sure what she would have done.

Two steps below, Dee turned to look back up at him, gray eyes wide and wild in the gloom. "Stay close," he snarled. He raised his chin back toward the burning room. "You see? They did what they always do! Death and destruction follow the Flamels and their minions."

Josh coughed again, struggling to get fresh air into his lungs. It wasn't the first time he'd heard the accusation. "Scathach said that."

"The Shadow's mistake was choosing the wrong side." Dee's smile was ugly. "A mistake you too almost made."

"What happened up there?" Josh asked. "It was all so fast, and Sophie—"

"This is hardly the time for explanations."

"Tell me," Josh demanded angrily, and the foul air was now touched with the odor of oranges.

Dee stopped. His aura was so bright his eyes and teeth appeared yellow. "Josh, you were moments away from chang-

ing the world forever. We were about to begin a process that would have turned this earth into a paradise. And you would have been the instrument of that change.” The doctor’s face transformed into a hard mask of anger. “Today the Flamels thwarted me. And do you know why? Because they—and the others like them—do not want the world to be a better place. The Flamels thrive in the shadows, they exist on the outskirts of society, living secret lives, living lies. They grow strong on the pain, the needs of others. They know that in my new world, there would be no shadows for them to hide in, no suffering for them to exploit. They do not want me—and the others like me—to succeed. You helped us to get perhaps closer than we have ever been.”

Josh frowned, trying to make sense of what the doctor was saying. Was Dee lying? He had to be . . . though Josh couldn’t push away the feeling that there was an element of truth in what the immortal was saying. What did that make the Flamels?

“Tell me this,” Dee said. “You saw Coatlicue?”

Josh nodded. “I saw her.”

“And was she beautiful?”

“Yes.” He blinked, remembering. She was so beautiful, like no one he’d ever seen before.

“I too have seen her true form,” Dee said softly. “She was one of the most powerful of the Archons, an ancient race, perhaps even an alien race, who ruled this world in the Time Before Time. She was a scientist using technology so advanced it was indistinguishable from magic. She could manipulate pure matter.” Dee eyed Josh carefully and

continued slowly. “Coatlucue could have remade this world today, repaired it, restored it. But you saw what Aoife did to her?”

Josh swallowed hard. He’d watched Aoife leap onto the Archon and drag her back toward the gaping entrance to her Shadowrealm. He nodded once more.

“And you saw what your sister did to her?”

“Yes.”

“Sophie whipped her—and that was no ordinary whip, either. I’ll wager it was Perenelle’s tool, woven from snakes pulled from the hair of Medusa. The merest touch of it is agony.” Dee reached out and placed his hand on the boy’s shoulder and Josh felt heat flow down his arm. “Josh, Sophie is lost to you now. She is deep under the Flamels’ spell. She is their puppet, their slave. They will use her up, as they have used so many in the past.”

Josh nodded for the third time. He knew there had been other twins before them, and knew also that they had not survived.

“Do you trust me, Josh Newman?” Dee suddenly demanded.

Josh looked at the Magician, opened his mouth to respond, but said nothing.

“Ah.” Dee smiled. “A good answer.”

“I didn’t answer.”

“Sometimes no answer is an answer,” the immortal said. “Let me rephrase the question: do you trust me more than you trust the Flamels?”

“Yes,” Josh said instantly. Of that he had no doubt.

“And what do you want?”

“To save my sister.”

Dee nodded. “Of course you do,” he said, unable to keep a touch of scorn from his voice. “You are humani.”

“She’s under a spell, isn’t she? How do I break that spell?” Josh demanded.

Dee’s gray eyes turned to yellow stone. “There is only one way: you have to kill whoever controls her—either Nicholas or Perenelle Flamel. Or both.”

“I don’t know how. . . .”

“I can teach you,” Dee promised. “All you have to do is trust me.”

Glass exploded deep in the building, tiny, tinkling, almost musical sounds, and then the door above them burst open with the heat and a blast of air flowed down the stairwell. A series of rattling explosions shook the building, and cracks spiderwebbed the plasterwork. The metal handrail was suddenly too hot to touch.

“What are you storing up there?” Virginia Dare yelled from the stairwell below. The immortal was outlined with a translucent green aura that lifted her fine black hair off her back and shoulders like a cloak.

“Just a few small alchemical experiments . . . ,” Dee began.

A thunderous explosion dropped the trio to their knees. Bits of plaster rained down from the ceiling and a heavy smell of sewage filled the stairwell.

“And one or two big ones,” he added.

“We need to get out of here. The entire building is going to collapse,” Dare said. She turned and continued down the stairs, Dee and Josh close on her heels.

Josh breathed deeply. “Am I smelling burning bread?” he asked, surprised.

Dare glanced back up at Dee. “I don’t even want to know what that smell is coming from.”

“No, you don’t,” the doctor agreed.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Virginia flung herself against the double doors but bounced off them. They were padlocked, a thick chain woven through their handles.

“I’m sure that breaches a fire code,” Dee murmured.

Virginia Dare spoke in a language that had not been used on the American continent for centuries, then quickly shifted back to English. “Could this day get any worse?” she muttered.

There was a click and then a hiss, and the sprinklers built into the ceiling spun to life, spraying water on the trio, laying an acrid-scented blanket over everything.

“I guess it could,” she said. She poked her index finger into Dee’s chest. “You are more like the Flamels than you care to admit, Doctor: death and destruction follow you, too.”

“I’m nothing like them.” Dee wrapped his hand around the padlock and squeezed. His aura flared yellow around his fingers, dripping to the floor in long sticky streamers.

“I thought you didn’t want to use your aura,” Dare said quickly.

“I guess it doesn’t really matter who knows where I am

at this point,” the doctor said, ripping the padlock down the center as if it were made of cardboard and tossing it aside.

“Now everyone knows where you are,” Josh said.

“They’ll come for me,” Dee agreed. He pushed open the doors and stood back to allow his fellow immortal and Josh to precede him outside. Then, with a glance at the flames burning despite the sprinklers, he darted through the doors . . . straight into Josh and Dare, who had stopped just over the threshold.

“I think they might already be here,” Josh muttered.

## CHAPTER THREE

*"Mars Ultor."*

He had been imprisoned for so long now that he had lost the ability to tell whether he was dreaming or remembering. Were these images and thoughts swirling around inside his head really his, or had they been implanted by Clarent? When he recalled the past, was he remembering his own history, that of the sword, or the histories of those who had carried the sword before him? Or was it a confused mixture of all three? What was the truth?

And while there was so much Mars Ultor was unsure of, there were a few memories he clung to. Memories that were an essential part of him. These were the memories that made him.

He remembered his sons, Romulus and Remus. Those memories never left him. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not remember his wife's face.

*“Mars.”*

He could recall certain battles in exquisite detail. He knew the name of every king and peasant he had fought, every hero he had slain and every coward who had run from him. He remembered the voyages of discovery, when he and Prometheus had traveled across the unknown world and even out into the newly created Shadowrealms.

*“Lord Mars.”*

He had witnessed wonders and horrors. He had fought Elders and Archons, Ancients, even the scattered remnants of the legendary Earthlords themselves. In those days he had been worshipped as a hero, the savior of the humani.

*“Mars. Wake up.”*

He did not like to wake, because that brought the pain, but worse than the pain was the realization that he was a prisoner, and would remain one until the end of time. And when he was awake, his punishment, his pain, reminded him of the times when the humani had come to fear and loathe him.

*“Wake up.”*

*“Mars . . . Mars . . . Mars . . .”*

The voice—or was it voices?—was insistent, irritating and vaguely familiar.

*“Wake up!”*

In his prison of bone, deep in the catacombs far below Paris, the Elder opened his eyes. They were bright blue for a single instant before they burned red. “What now?” he snarled, voice echoing inside the helmet that never left his head.

Directly in front of him were what looked like a humani

couple. They were tall and slender, their deeply tanned skin stark against pristine white T-shirts, white jeans and white sneakers. The woman wore her dark hair short against her skull, whereas the man's head was smooth shaven. The couple's eyes were hidden behind matching wraparound sunglasses.

Simultaneously, they took off their glasses. Their eyes were bright, brilliant blue, the pupils tiny black dots. Even through the pain of his perpetually burning and hardening aura, Mars Ultor remembered them. These were no humans: they were Elders. "Isis?" he rasped in the ancient language of Danu Talis.

"It is good to see you, old friend," the woman said.

"Osiris?"

"We have been searching for you for a very long time," the man added. "And now we've found you."

"But look at what she has done to you," Isis breathed, obviously distressed.

The Witch of Endor had trapped Mars in this prison cell, which she had created from the skull of a creature that had never roamed the earth. But imprisoning him had not been enough for her: she had created an extra torment for her prisoner. The Witch had caused Mars's aura to continually burn, then harden on the surface of his skin, like lava bubbling from the earth's core, leaving him trapped in the skull cell and in constant agony beneath a leaden crust.

Mars Ultor laughed and the sound came out like an echoing growl. "For millennia I see no one, and now it seems I am popular again."

Isis and Osiris separated and moved to either side of what looked like an enormous gray statue forever frozen in the act of trying to rise. The lower half of Mars's body, from the waist down, was sunk deeply into the ground, which Dee had turned to liquid bone and then frozen solid again, trapping him. The Elder's outstretched left arm dripped stalactites of ivory, and clinging to his back were the petrified shapes of the hideous satyrs Phobos and Deimos, their jaws gaping. Behind the Elder was a long rectangular stone plinth, where he'd lain undisturbed for thousands of years. Now the thick slab was cracked in two.

"We know Dee was here," Isis said.

"Yes. He found me. I am surprised he told you where I was," Mars rasped. "We fought. He is the one who trapped me here in the ground."

"Dee told us nothing," Osiris said. He was standing behind Mars, examining in almost minute detail the statues of the satyrs. "He betrayed you. He betrayed us all."

Mars hissed in pain. "I should never have trusted him. He asked me to Awaken a boy, a Gold."

"And then he used the Gold to summon Coatlicue to this Shadowrealm," Isis whispered.

Red-black smoke curled from Mars Ultor's eyes. A spasm wracked his body and huge chunks of hardened aura fell off, only to instantly re-form. The dry air stank of burnt meat. "Coatlicue: I fought the Archon the last time she ravaged the Shadowrealms," he gasped through the pain of his burning aura. "I lost many good friends."

The woman in white nodded. "We all lost friends and

family to her. The doctor somehow discovered her location and summoned her.”

“But why?” Mars rumbled. “There are not enough Elders in this earth Shadowrealm to satisfy her appetite?”

Osiris rapped on the Elder’s back with his knuckle, as if testing its strength. “We believe he wanted to loose her into the Shadowrealms. We have declared Dee *utlaga* for his many failures. Now he wants revenge, and there is a danger that his vengeance will destroy all the Shadowrealms and ultimately this world. He seeks to end us all.”

Isis and Osiris had walked full circle around the Elder and now stood facing him again. “But by following his stink, we were able to track him here . . . to you,” Isis said.

“Free me,” Mars pleaded. “Let me hunt the doctor.”

The couple shook their heads in unison. “We cannot,” Isis said sadly. “Zephaniah bound you using Archon lore and Earthlord spells that are unknown to us. Something Abraham taught her, no doubt.”

“Then why are you here?” Mars growled. “What brings you from your island Shadowrealm?”

A shape moved in the doorway. “I asked them here.”

An elderly-looking woman in a neat gray blouse and skirt stepped into the cave. She was short and round, and her blue-tinged hair was tightly permed. Overlarge black glasses covered much of her face, and she held a white cane in her right hand. Tapping her cane before her, she stepped up to the trapped Elder, stopping when the white stick struck stone.

“Who are you?” Mars demanded.

“Do you not recognize me?” Wisps of brown aura rose

from the old woman's flesh, and the air was touched with the bittersweet odor of woodsmoke.

Mars drew in a deep shuddering breath as long-forgotten memories came flooding back. "Zephaniah!"

"Husband," the Witch of Endor said very softly.

Mars's eyes flickered red to blue to red again, and smoke poured from beneath his helmet. His stone-hard skin ran with countless burning cracks and began to fall away in stinking sheets. The trapped Elder managed to inch forward before his new skin hardened once more. The Elder howled and screamed until the cave stank of his rage and fear, a fetid mixture that reeked of burnt meat and seared bone. Finally, when he was exhausted, he looked at the woman who had been his wife, the woman he had loved above all others and the woman who had bound him to this eternity of suffering. "What do you want, Zephaniah?" he asked in a ragged whisper. "Have you come to mock me?"

"Why, husband," the old woman said with a gap-toothed smile. "I have come to free you. It is time: this world needs a warlock again."

## CHAPTER FOUR

*T*wo San Francisco police officers stopped as the odd trio—a woman, followed by a teenage boy and then an older man—burst through a set of side doors into the ruined glass and marble foyer of the burning building.

“Anyone else in the buil—” one of the officers began, and then saw that the man facing him was holding a short sword in his hand and had a second sword shoved into his belt. Even as the officer was reaching for his gun he saw that the boy also had two short swords in his belt, one on each hip. Bizarrely, the long-haired woman was carrying what looked like a wooden flute.

“Hold it right there,” the second officer ordered. “Drop those weapons.” Both policemen raised their guns.

“Gentlemen, thank goodness you’re here.” The small gray-haired man stepped forward.

“Stay where you are.”

“I am Dr. John Dee, and I am the owner of this company, Enoch Enterprises.”

“Put the swords on the ground, sir.”

“I don’t think so. These are priceless antiques from my personal collection.” The Magician took another step forward.

“Stay there! I don’t know you,” one of the officers said, “but I do know I don’t want anyone coming close to me holding a sword. Put the weapons on the ground and then move over here. And quickly,” he added, as a curl of foul smoke leaked out from between the lobby elevator’s closed doors.

The last words the policemen heard came from the woman: “John, why don’t you do what the officer says?” Even as she was speaking, she was bringing her wooden flute to her lips. The two men only heard a single note before they dropped to the ground, unconscious. “And stop wasting time,” Virginia Dare snapped. She stepped over the bodies of the men, through a gaping hole where the main door to the building should have been and out into the street. “Let’s go.”

“We’ll take the car.” Dee started toward Telegraph Hill but paused midstride, realizing that Josh had remained behind. The boy was standing over the two unconscious police officers in the foyer. “Come on, we have no time!”

“You’re just going to leave them here?” Josh asked, clearly upset.

Dee looked at Dare and then back at Josh. The two immortals nodded in unison.

Josh shook his head. “I’m not leaving them. This whole building is about to collapse on top of them.”

“We don’t have time for this . . . ,” Dare began.

“Josh.” Dee’s aura crackled around his body—his anger was palpable.

“No.” Josh’s left hand fell onto the leather-wrapped hilt of the sword tucked into his belt. Immediately the rich citrus odor of oranges filled the ruined foyer and the stone blade pulsed with a slow steady heartbeat of dull crimson. Josh felt the shudder of heat flow up his left arm and across his shoulders and settle into the base of his neck. His fingers tightened around the familiar hilt: this was Clarent, the ancient weapon known as the Coward’s Blade.

Memories gathered. . . .

*Dee, in the clothing of another era, running through a burning city, clutching a handful of books.*

*London, 1666.*

Josh’s other hand dropped to the sword on his right hip. A chill seeped into his flesh and instantly he knew its name. This was Durendal, the Sword of Air, once carried by some of the finest knights the world had ever seen.

New memories flickered and blossomed. . . .

*Two knights in shining silver and gold armor standing on either side of a fallen warrior, protecting him from the ravening beasts that circled in the shadows.*

A raw burning rage settled into the pit of his stomach. “Carry them outside,” Josh commanded. “I won’t leave them here to die.”

For a moment it looked as if the English doctor was about to challenge him, but then he nodded and his lips curled into

a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Of course. You're right. We could not leave them, could we, Virginia?"

"I could," she said.

Dee glared at her. "Well, I could not." He shoved his sword into his belt and went back into the building. "You have a conscience, Josh," he said, bending to grab one of the officers under the arms. "Be careful of it: I've seen good men die because of their scruples."

Josh easily pulled the second officer across the marble floor and outside. "My father taught me and Sophie that we had to follow our hearts and do what we knew was right."

"He sounds like a good man." Dee grunted. He was breathless with the effort of dragging the officer across the road. They laid out both men behind their police cruiser.

"Maybe you'll meet him someday," Josh said.

"I doubt it."

Virginia Dare had climbed into the limousine that was still parked on the street. The roof of the car was now dusted with cinders and ash, glittering beneath a fine coating of broken glass. "We need to get out of here—now!"

Dee slid into the rear of the car next to Dare, and Josh pulled both swords from his belt and laid them on the floor in front of the passenger seat before climbing into the driver's seat. "Where to?" he asked.

Virginia Dare leaned forward. "Just get off the Hill first." Even as she was speaking, a plume of green-tinged smoke erupted from the roof of the building. Immediately, all three of their auras flickered—yellow, pale green and gold. "We

need to get out of this city. That will have alerted everything on the West Coast of America. Everything is coming.”

The morning air came alive with the sounds of approaching sirens.

“And I wasn’t including the police,” she added.



## CHAPTER FIVE

*T*he world was ending.

A dirty white 1963 Jeep Wagoneer raced across a landscape that was rapidly losing every vestige of color. Prometheus sat in the driver's seat, huge hands locked onto the steering wheel, holding it tightly enough to crack the plastic and metal. Perenelle Flamel sat behind him, with Nicholas stretched out beside her, his head in her lap.

Prometheus's Shadowrealm was collapsing. The robin's-egg-blue sky had paled to chalk; clouds had taken on the appearance of curled tissue and faded to monochromatic smudges. In the space of a single heartbeat, the sea had stopped moving. Waves had peaked and frozen, blue-green dissolving to white before turning to cascades of gray dust, while the golden sands and polished pebbles had taken on the appearance of burnt paper and charred lumps of coal. A ghost wind scattered the ashes, spiraling them up into the air. They

fell on trees and grasses already losing form and definition, turning them the color of parchment; anything that grew was fading to the yellow of brittle bone before finally dissipating into chalky gray powder.

And when all traces of color had vanished, the shades of gray started to fade, and the horizon fractured into a million sparkling dust motes that fell like a dirty snow, leaving nothing but a solid impenetrable blackness behind it.

The Wagoneer bounced along a narrow coast road, engine howling, tires spinning to find purchase on the rapidly fading roadway. The interior of the car stank of anise and the Elder's aura glowed around him, bright red and hot enough to scorch the seats and melt the roof over his head. He was desperately attempting to hold his Shadowrealm together long enough to get the car back into the earth Shadowrealm at Point Reyes. But it was a losing battle; the world he had created millennia ago was dying, returning to its Unmade state.

The events of the previous hours had exhausted Prometheus, and using the vampire-like crystal skull to help the Flamels track Josh into San Francisco had sapped his energy. He had known how dangerous the skull was—his sister, Zephaniah, had warned him about it often enough—but he'd chosen to help the Alchemyst and his wife. Prometheus had always sided with the humani.

And so he had laid his hands on the ancient object and used its powers . . . and in return the skull had drunk his memories and feasted off his aura. He was weakened now,

desperately weakened, and he knew he was dangerously close to being overwhelmed by his own aura, reduced to flame and ashes. In a matter of a few hours, the Elder's once-red hair had turned snow-white, and even his brilliantly green eyes had paled.

He was close, so close to the edge of his world . . . but even as the thought was forming, an opaque gray mist abruptly enveloped the car.

Prometheus's startled reaction almost sent the car off the narrow road. For a moment he thought the dissolution of the Shadowrealm had caught up with him; then he breathed in cold air and the odor of salt and realized the mist was only the natural sea fog that regularly rolled into Point Reyes in the earth Shadowrealm. Occasionally it leaked from one world into the other. It was another sign that he was close to the edge of his Shadowrealm.

Vaguely human shapes suddenly appeared out of the fog, shadows in the gloom lining the last stretch of roadway. "My children," the Elder breathed. These were the remnants of the First People. In a distant age, in the Nameless City on the edge of the world, the Elder's blazing aura had injected a spark into inert clay and brought it to shambling life. The clay folk had become the First People: monstrous in appearance, but not monsters—unlike anything the world had ever seen. Created from mud, ill-shaped, with bald heads too large for narrow necks and blank unfinished faces with just the vaguest impressions where a mouth or eyes would normally be, they had trailed Prometheus across the Shadowrealms,

inspiring myths, legends and terror in their wake. They had survived millennia. Now only a handful of the creatures remained, roaming Prometheus's Shadowrealm in search of the life and the light of auras. The sound of the car's engine had drawn them, and now, like flowers tracking the sun, their faces turned toward the rich stew of auras in the car—especially the familiar odor of aniseed, the source of their life eternal.

But without the Elder's tremendous will keeping the world and its inhabitants alive, their mud skin cracked and chunks began to break away, disintegrating to dust before hitting the ground. Watching the last of the First People dissolving into nothingness, Prometheus wept, bloodred tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. "Forgive me," he whispered in the ancient language of Danu Talis.

One of the mud creatures stepped onto the road directly behind the car and raised an unnaturally long arm in what might have been a salute or a farewell. The Elder tilted the rearview mirror to watch the figure. He had never given them names, but he knew this one by the scarred pattern across his chest. This was one of the first creatures his aura had brought to life in the desolate Earthlord city. Black nothingness blossomed behind the figure, and brown mud turned the color of salt as the creature spilled away into oblivion. "Forgive me," Prometheus begged once more, but by then the last of the First Race, the race he had brought to unnatural life, were gone, all traces of their existence wiped away.

The interior of the car blossomed with the Elder's aura,

and tiny sparking flames danced across every metal surface. His burning fingertips left deep impressions in the rearview mirror as he tilted it down to look at the two figures in the back of the car. “Scathach was right,” he snarled. “She always said that death and destruction followed Nicholas Flamel.”

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