

*The Secrets of the Immortal  
Nicholas Flamel*

MICHAEL SCOTT

THE  
SORCERESS



*Darkness approaches . . .*



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## About the Book

**Pursued by flesh-eating werebeasts, the twins of prophecy need to fight to survive.**

Josh and Sophie arrive in London, where they must find Gilgamesh, the ancient king of legend. But he is said to be mad. And the trap is closing . . .

Join the teenage twins as they . . .

- Explore a world of magic and prophecy
- Encounter ancient beings and dangerous creatures
- Struggle to control new powers and weapons

*Sometimes legends are true . . .*

Step into the greatest legend of all time in the third action-packed thriller in the *New York Times* bestselling series.

*The Secrets of the Immortal  
Nicholas Flamel*

BOOK 3

◊ ◉ ☍ ⊗ ⊞ THE ∇ ◊ ◉ ☍ ⊗  
**SORCERESS**



MICHAEL SCOTT

**RHCP DIGITAL**

For Courtney  
*ex animo*

## *Character profiles*

### *Josh Newman*

Josh Newman was born on December 21st 1991, just seconds after his twin sister, Sophie, with whom he has a very strong bond, as is often the case with twins. Tall, athletic, with blond hair and blue eyes, Josh is quite impulsive, hates snakes, rats, spiders and scorpions and sometimes suffers from claustrophobia. He is not at all sure that he trusts Nicholas Flamel and he really dislikes what's happened to Sophie since she's had her magical powers awakened. His aura is gold, with a scent of orange.

### *Sophie Newman*

Also blonde, with blue eyes, Sophie Newman tends to be more trusting and less quick to judge than her twin brother, Josh. She is still learning how to control her new powers of the Magic of the Air and the Magic of Fire. Sophie is aware that Josh seems strangely jealous of her magical powers. Her magical aura is silver, with a scent of vanilla.

### *Nicholas Flamel*

Nicholas Flamel was born in France in 1330 and is a powerful alchemist. With his wife, Perenelle, he discovered the secret of immortality contained within the Book of Abraham, the Codex, which also contains the spell which would allow the Dark Elders to regain control of our world. The Flamels have spent centuries protecting the Codex while searching for the twins of prophecy, whose magical powers, once fully awakened, could banish the Dark Elders forever. Flamel believes that Josh and Sophie are those



twins and has escaped with them to London. His magical aura is green with a scent of peppermint.

### *Perenelle Flamel*

Tall, elegant, with black hair and green eyes, the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter and over 600 years old, Perenelle Flamel is a powerful alchemyst and sorceress. Like her husband, Perry uses the spells in the Codex to become immortal. Without the book, which was stolen a few days previously by Dr. John Dee, neither of the Flamels can renew their immortality and will soon begin to age rapidly. Perry's aura is white, without a specific scent.

### *Dr. John Dee*

Originally magician and advisor to the Tudor queen, Elizabeth I, Dr. John Dee is an immortal, bound to serve the Dark Elders. Having once served as an apprentice to Nicholas Flamel, from whom he learned alchemy and other arcane secrets, Dee now has an abiding hatred for his former teacher. His Dark Elder master is getting increasingly impatient with his failure to recapture the final two pages of the Codex. Dee's magical aura is yellow with a scent of brimstone.

### *Scathach*

Also known as Scatty, The Warrior Maid or The Shadow, this slight, athletic girl with spiky red hair appears to be about 17 years old but has been in this world for millennia. She is both a Next Generation Elder and a vampire. She has trained generations of warriors and heroes of legend, she has sung in a punk rock band, she has defeated monsters and servants of the Dark Elders time and time again. She is an implacable foe while being capable of strong love and friendship. Her magical aura is grey of unknown scent.

## *Joan of Arc*

The history books will tell you that the heroine of France, Joan of Arc, was burned at the stake in 1431 at the age of nineteen. In fact, she was rescued in the last seconds by her close friend, Scathach, (see *The Death of Joan of Arc* ebook) and became an immortal. Josh and Sophie meet Joan and her husband, Francis, for the first time in Paris. Joan is very thin, about Sophie's height, with auburn hair and grey eyes. Like Sophie, her aura is silver, but with a scent of lavender.

## *Francis, Comte de Saint-Germain*

The chart topping techno-music star, known to his legions of fans as "Germain", is in fact the immortal Francis, Comte de Saint-Germain. A performer since his time in the salons and theatres of 18th century London, Germain also spent time with Nicholas Flamel, studying alchemy. He has long, curly black hair, blue eyes and tattoos of butterflies around his wrists. He uses the Magic of Fire and is married to Joan of Arc. His aura is red, with the scent of burnt leaves.

## *Niccolò Machiavelli*

Methodical and calculating, the immortal Niccolò Machiavelli, once the most influential philosopher and politician in the 16th century, is now the head of the DGSE (*Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure*), the French external intelligence agency. His Elder Master has brought him into an uneasy alliance with Dr. John Dee. Machiavelli's aura is grey with the scent of snakes.

More information about the characters in these books can be found at <http://www.j.mp/flamelcharacters>

I am tired now, so tired.

And I am aging fast. There is a stiffness in my joints, my sight is no longer sharp and I find I have to strain to hear. Over the past five days I have been forced to use my powers more times than I have used them in the entire previous century, and that has speeded up the aging process significantly. I estimate that I have aged by at least a decade—perhaps more—since last Thursday. If I am to live, I have to retrieve the Book of Abraham, and I cannot—I *dare* not—risk using my powers again.

But Dee has the Codex, and I know that I will be forced yet again to use my waning aura.

I must, if we are to survive.

Every time I use it I grow closer to death . . . and once I die, and Perenelle, too, no one will stand against Dee and the Dark Elders. When we die, the world will end.

But we are not dead yet.

And we have the twins. The real twins this time, the true twins of legend with auras of pure gold and silver. While the twins survive, there is still hope.

We are about to enter London. I fear this city above all others, for it is at the very heart of Dee's power. The last time Perenelle and I were here, in September 1666, the Magician almost burned the city to the ground trying to capture us. We've never been back. London has attracted Elders from around the globe: there are more of them in this city than in any other on earth. Elders, Next Generation and immortal humans move freely and unnoticed through the streets, and I know of at least a dozen Shadowrealms scattered across the British Isles.

More ley lines meet and converge over these Celtic lands than over any other country, and I pray that with the

twins' Awakened powers, we can use those lines to return to San Francisco and my Perenelle.

And here too is Gilgamesh the King, the oldest immortal human in the world. His knowledge is incalculable and encyclopedic. It is said that he was once the Guardian of the Codex, that he even knew the mythical Abraham who created the book. Legend has it that Gilgamesh knows all the elemental magics—though, strangely, he has never possessed the power to use them. The king has no aura. I've often wondered what that must be like: to be aware of so many incredible things, to have access to the wisdom of the ancients, to know the words and spells that could return this world to the paradise it once was . . . and yet to be unable to use them.

I have told Sophie and Josh that I need Gilgamesh to train them in the Magic of Water and find us a ley line that will take us home. But they do not know that it is a desperate gamble; if the king refuses, then we will be trapped in Dee's domain, with no possibility of escape.

Nor have I told them that Gilgamesh is quite, quite insane . . . and that the last time we met, he thought I was trying to kill him.

*From the Day Booke of Nicholas Flamel, Alchemyst  
Writ this day, Monday, 4th June,  
in London, the city of my enemies*

MONDAY, *4th June*



## CHAPTER ONE

"I THINK I see them."

The young man in the green parka standing directly beneath the huge circular clock in St. Pancras station took the phone away from his ear and checked a blurred jpeg on the rectangular screen. The English Magician had sent the image a couple of hours ago: date-stamped June 04, 11.59.00, its colors washed and faded, the grainy picture looked like it had been taken by an overhead security camera. It showed an older man with short gray hair, accompanied by two fair teens, climbing onto a train.

Rising up on his toes, the young man scanned the station for the trio he'd briefly glimpsed. For a moment he thought he'd lost them in the milling crowd, but even if he had, they wouldn't get far; one of his sisters was downstairs, and another was on the street outside, watching the entrance.

Now, where had the old man and the teenagers gone?

Narrow pinched nostrils flared as he sorted through the countless scents in the station. He identified and dismissed the mixed stink of too many humani, the myriad perfumes and deodorants, the gels and pastes, the greasy odor of fried food from the station's restaurants, the richer aroma of coffee, and the metallic oily tang of the train engines and carriages. Nostrils opened unnaturally wide as he closed his eyes and tilted his head back. The odors he was seeking were older, wilder, unnatural. . . .

There!

Mint: just the merest suggestion.

Orange: no more than the vaguest hint.

Vanilla: little more than a trace.

Hidden behind small rectangular sunglasses, his blue-black pupils dilated. He sniffed the air, tracing the gossamer threads of scent through the vast train station. He had them now!

The older man from the image on his phone was striding down the station concourse directly toward him. He was wearing black jeans and a scuffed leather jacket and carried a small overnight case in his left hand. And just as in the picture taken earlier, he was followed by two blond teenagers alike enough to be brother and sister. The boy was taller than the girl, and they both wore backpacks.

The young man snapped a quick picture with his cell phone camera and sent it to Dr. John Dee. Although he had nothing but contempt for the English Magician, there was no point in making an enemy of him. Dee was the agent of one of the more senior and certainly the most dangerous of all the Dark Elders.

Pulling the hood of his green parka over his head, the young man turned away as the trio drew near him, and dialed his sister, who was waiting downstairs. "It's definitely Flamel and the twins," he murmured into the phone, speaking the ancient language that had eventually become Gaelic. "They're heading in your direction. We'll take them when they get onto Euston Road."

Snapping his phone shut, the young man in the hooded parka set off after the Alchemyst and the American twins. He moved easily through the early-afternoon crowd, looking like just another teenager, anonymous and unnoticed in his sloppy jeans, scuffed sneakers and overlarge coat, his head and face concealed by a hood, eyes invisible behind the dark sunglasses.

Despite his appearance, however, the young man had never been remotely human. He and his sisters had first come to this land when it was still joined to the European mainland, and for generations they had been worshipped as

gods. He bitterly resented being ordered around by Dee—who was, after all, nothing more than a human. But the English Magician had promised the hooded boy a delectable prize: Nicholas Flamel, the legendary Alchemyst. Dee's instructions were clear; the boy and his sisters could have Flamel, but the twins must not be touched. The boy's lips twisted. His sisters would easily capture the twins, while he would have the honor of killing Flamel. A coal black tongue darted out of the corner of his mouth to lick his lips at the thought. They would feast off the Alchemyst for weeks. And, of course, they would keep the tastiest morsels for Mother.

Nicholas Flamel slowed, allowing Sophie and Josh to catch up with him. Forcing a smile, he pointed to the thirty-foot-tall bronze statue of a couple embracing beneath the clock. "It's called *The Meeting Place*," he said loudly, and then added in a whisper, "We're being followed." Still smiling, he leaned into Josh and murmured, "Don't even think about turning around."

"Who?" Sophie asked.

"What?" Josh said tightly. He was feeling nauseous and dizzy; his newly Awakened senses were overwhelmed by the scents and sounds of the train station. A throbbing headache pulsed at the base of his skull, and the light was so bright he wished he had a pair of sunglasses.

"Yes—'What?' is the better question," Nicholas said grimly. He raised a finger to point to the clock, as if he were talking about it. "I'm not sure what's here," he admitted. "Something ancient. I felt it the moment we stepped off the train."

"Felt it?" Josh asked, disoriented, and getting more confused by the second. He hadn't felt this sick since he'd got heatstroke in the Mojave Desert.

"A tingle, like an itch. My aura reacted to the aura of whoever—whatever—is here. When you have a little more

control of your own auras, you'll be able to feel the same."

Tilting her head back, as if she were admiring the metal-and-glass latticework ceiling, Sophie slowly turned. Crowds swirled around them. Most seemed to be locals—commuters—though there were plenty of tourists, many stopping to have their pictures taken in front of *The Meeting Place* statue or with the huge clock in the background. No one seemed to be paying her and her companions any particular attention.

"What will we do?" Josh asked. He was starting to feel panicked. "I can boost Sophie's powers," he babbled, "just like I did in Paris—"

"No," Flamel snapped, gripping Josh's arm with iron fingers. "From now on, you can only use your powers as an absolute last resort. As soon as you activate your aura, you will alert every Elder, Next Generation and immortal within a ten-mile radius to your presence. And here, in England, just about every immortal you encounter is allied with the Dark Elders. Also, in this land, it could awaken others, creatures best left sleeping."

"But you said we're being followed," Sophie protested. "That means Dee already knows we're here."

Flamel urged the twins to the left, away from the statue, hurrying them toward the exit. "I would imagine there are watchers in every airport, seaport and railway station across Europe. Although Dee might have suspected that we'd head to London; the instant either of you activates your aura, he'll know for certain."

"And what will he do then?" Josh asked, turning to look at Flamel. In the harsh overhead lights, the new lines on the Alchemyst's forehead and around his eyes were sharp.

Flamel shrugged. "Who knows what he is capable of doing. He is desperate, and desperate men do terrible things. Remember, he was on top of Notre Dame. He was prepared to destroy the ancient building just to stop you . . . prepared to kill you to prevent you leaving Paris."

Josh shook his head, confused. "But that's what I don't understand—I thought he wanted us alive."

Flamel sighed. "Dee is a necromancer. It is a foul and horrible art that involves artificially activating a dead body's aura and bringing that body back to life."

An icy coldness washed over Josh at the thought. "You're saying he would have killed us and brought us back to life?"

"Yes. As a last resort." Flamel reached out and squeezed the boy's shoulder gently. "Believe me, it is a terrible existence, the merest shadow of life. And remember, Dee saw what you did, so he now has some inkling of your powers. If there were any doubts in his mind that you are the twins of legend, they have vanished. He *has* to have you. He needs you." The Alchemyst poked Josh in the chest. Paper rustled. Beneath his T-shirt, in a cloth bag hanging around his neck, Josh carried the two pages he'd torn from the Codex. "And above all else, he needs those pages."

The group followed the signs for the Euston Road exit, and were swept along by a crowd of commuters heading in the same direction. "I thought you said there would be someone to meet us," Sophie said, looking around.

"Saint-Germain told me he'd try and contact an old friend," Flamel muttered. "Maybe he couldn't get in touch."

They stepped out of the ornate redbrick train station onto Euston Road and stopped in surprise. When they'd left Paris just over two and a half hours ago, the skies had been cloudless, the temperature already creeping into the seventies, but in London it felt at least ten degrees cooler and it was raining hard. The wind whipping down the road was cold enough to make the twins shiver. They turned and ducked back into the shelter of the station.

And that was when Sophie saw him.

"A boy in a green parka, with the hood pulled up," she said suddenly, turning to Nicholas and concentrating fiercely on his pale eyes. She knew that if she looked away,



she would involuntarily glance at the young man who had been hurrying after them. She could still see him from the corner of her eye. He was loitering close to a pillar, staring at the cell phone in his hand, fiddling with it. There was something wrong about the way he was standing. Something unnatural. And she thought she caught the faintest scent of spoiled meat on the air. Her nose wrinkled. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the odor. "It smells like something rotten, like roadkill."

The smile on the Alchemyst's face grew strained. "Wearing a hood? So, that's who's been following us." The twins heard the slightest tremor in his voice.

"Except he's not a boy, is he?" Sophie asked.

Nicholas shook his head. "Not even close."

Josh took a deep breath. "Well then, do you want me to tell you that there are now two more people wearing green hooded parkas, and they're both heading this way?"

"Three?" Flamel whispered in horror. "We've got to go." Grabbing the twins' arms, he pulled them out into the sleeting rain, turned to the right and dragged them down the street.

The rain was so cold it took Josh's breath away. Pellets of hard water stung his face. Finally, Flamel pulled both twins into an alley, out of the downpour. Josh stood catching his breath. He brushed his hair back out of his eyes and looked at the Alchemyst. "Who are they?" he demanded.

"The Hooded Ones," the Alchemyst said bitterly. "Dee must be desperate, and more powerful than I thought if he can command them. They are the Genii Cucullati."

"Great," Josh said. "That tells me everything I need to know." He looked at his sister. "Have you ever heard . . .," he began, and then stopped, seeing the expression on her face. "You have!"

Sophie shivered as the Witch of Endor's memories flickered at the edges of her consciousness. She felt

something sour at the back of her throat, and her stomach twisted in disgust. The Witch of Endor had known the Genii Cucullati—and she had loathed them. Sophie turned to her brother and explained. “Flesh eaters.”

## CHAPTER TWO

THE STREETS WERE empty, the squall having driven most people into the station or the nearby shops. Traffic on Euston Road had ground to a halt, and windshield wipers beat furiously. Horns blared, and a nearby car alarm began to howl.

"Stay with me," Nicholas ordered, then turned and darted across the road, weaving through the stopped traffic. Sophie followed close behind. Josh paused before he stepped off the curb, and looked back at the station. The three figures had gathered together in the entrance, their heads and faces hidden by the hoods of their coats. As the water stained the parkas dark green, Josh could have sworn they briefly took on the appearance of cloaks. He shivered, and this time the chill came from more than just the icy downpour. Then he turned and darted across the road.

Head ducked against the driving rain, Nicholas led the twins between vehicles. "Hurry. If we can put enough distance between us, the smells of the traffic and the rain might wash away our scents."

Sophie glanced over her shoulder. The hooded trio had left the shelter of the station and were closing in fast. "They're coming after us," she panted, voice rising in alarm.

"What do we do now?" Josh asked.

"I've no idea," Flamel said grimly. He stared down the long straight road. "But if we stay here, we're dead. Or at least I am." His teeth flashed in a humorless smile. "Dee

will still try to get you both alive, I'm sure." Flamel glanced around, then spotted an alleyway to the left and motioned for the twins to follow him. "This way. We'll try and lose them."

"I wish Scatty were here," Josh muttered, truly realizing the magnitude of their loss. "She'd be able to deal with them."

It was dry in the narrow high-walled alleyway. Blue, green and brown plastic trash cans lined one wall, while the remains of wooden pallets and overflowing black plastic trash bags were piled against the other. The smell was foul, and a wild-haired cat sat on top of one bag, methodically shredding it with her claws. The cat didn't even look up as Flamel and the twins ran by. A heartbeat later, however, when the three hooded figures entered the alleyway, the cat arched its back, fur bristling, and disappeared into the shadows.

"Do you have any idea where this leads?" Josh asked as they raced past a series of doors to their left, obviously the rear entrances to businesses on the main road.

"None at all," Flamel admitted. "But as long as it takes us away from the Hooded Ones, it doesn't matter."

Sophie looked back. "I don't see them," she announced. "Maybe we've lost them." She trailed Nicholas around a corner only to run straight into him when he stopped suddenly.

Josh then rounded the corner, narrowly missing the two. "Keep going," he gasped, dodging the pair to take the lead. And then he realized why they'd stopped: the alley ended in a tall red brick wall topped with curling razor wire.

The Alchemyst spun and put his finger to his lips. "Not a sound. They might have run past the alley altogether. . . ." A flurry of cold rain spattered onto the ground and carried with it a peculiar rancid smell: the foul scent of spoiled meat. "Or maybe not," he added as the three Genii Cucullati loped silently around the corner. Nicholas pushed

the twins behind him, but they immediately took up positions on either side of him. Instinctively, Sophie moved to his right and Josh to his left. "Stand back," Flamel said.

"No," Josh said.

"We're not going to let you face these three alone," Sophie added.

The Hooded Ones slowed, then spread out to block the alleyway and stopped. They stood unnaturally still, faces concealed by the overlarge hoods.

"What are they waiting for?" Josh murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. There was something about the way the figures stood, the way they held themselves: something that suggested an animal. He'd seen a National Geographic documentary in which an alligator had been waiting in a river for deer to cross. It too had stayed completely still—until it had exploded into action.

Abruptly, a sound like snapping wood cracked shockingly loudly across the quiet alleyway, followed by what seemed to be the sound of cloth tearing.

"They're changing," Sophie breathed.

Beneath the green coats, muscles rippled and spasmed, arching the creatures' spines, pushing their heads forward. Arms visibly lengthened, and the hands that poked out of the overlong sleeves were now thickly furred and tipped with ragged curling black claws.

"Wolves?" Josh asked shakily.

"More bear than wolf," Nicholas answered quietly, looking around the alleyway, eyes narrowed. "And more wolverine than bear," he added as the vaguest hint of vanilla touched the air.

"And no threat to us," Sophie announced, suddenly standing straighter. Raising her right hand, she pressed the thumb of her left hand against the gold circle burned into the flesh of her wrist.

"No," Nicholas snapped, reaching out to push the girl's hand down. "I've told you; you cannot use your powers in



this city. Your auras are too distinctive.”

Sophie shook her head indignantly. “I know what these things are,” she said firmly. Then a tremor crept into her voice. “I know what they do. You can’t expect us just to stand here while these things eat you. Let me take care of them—I can cook them to a crisp.” Her anger quickly turned to excitement at the prospect, and she smiled. For an instant her bright blue eyes winked silver and her face became hard and sharp, making her look far older than her fifteen years.

The Alchemyst’s smile was grim. “You could do that. And I doubt we’d get a mile down the road before something much more lethal than these creatures caught up with us. You have no idea what walks these streets, Sophie. I’ll take care of it,” he insisted. “I’m not entirely defenseless.”

“They’re going to attack,” Josh said urgently, interpreting the creatures’ body language, watching how they moved into an assault pattern. Somewhere at the back of his mind, he found himself wondering how he knew this. “If you’re going to do something, you need to do it now.”

The Genii Cucullati had spread out, each taking up a position before Flamel and the twins. The creatures were hunched over, their backs arched, parkas stretched across broad chests, bulging shoulders and muscular arms. In the shadow of their hoods, blue-black eyes glowed over jagged teeth. They spoke to each other in what sounded like yips and growls.

Nicholas pushed up the sleeves of his leather jacket, revealing the silver link bracelet and the two frayed multicolored friendship bracelets he wore around his right wrist. Twisting off one of the simple string bracelets, he rolled it between the palms of his hands, brought it to his lips and blew on it.

Sophie and Josh watched as he tossed the little ball onto the ground in front of the Hooded Ones. They saw the colored strands fall into a muddy puddle directly in front of

the largest of the creatures and braced themselves for an explosion. Even the terrifying creatures scrambled back from the tiny pool, claws slipping on the pavement.

And nothing happened.

The sound that came from the largest creature might have been a laugh.

"I say we fight," Josh said defiantly, though he was shaken by the Alchemyst's failure. He'd seen Flamel throw spears of pure energy, he'd watched him create a forest out of a wooden floor—he'd been expecting something spectacular. Josh glanced over at his sister and knew that she was thinking exactly the same thing he was. In Flamel's aging and weakened state, his powers were fading. Josh nodded slightly and saw Sophie tip her head in return, then flex her fingers. "Nicholas, you saw what we did to the gargoyles," Josh continued, sure of his sister's and his own powers. "Together, Sophie and I can stand against anyone . . . and anything."

"The line between confidence and arrogance is very fine, Josh," Flamel said quietly. "And the line between arrogance and stupidity even finer. Sophie," he added, without looking at her, "if you use your power, you condemn us to death."

Josh shook his head. He was disgusted at Flamel's obvious weakness. Stepping away from the older man he shrugged off his backpack and tugged it open. Sticking up out of one side of the backpack was a thick cardboard tube, usually used to carry posters and rolled maps. Ripping off the white plastic cap, he reached in, grabbed the bubble-wrapped object inside and pulled it out.

"Nicholas . . .?" Sophie began.

"Patience," Flamel whispered, "patience . . ."

The largest of the Hooded Ones dropped to all fours and took a step forward, filthy long-nailed claws clicking on the pavement. "You have been given to me," the beast said in a voice that was surprisingly high-pitched—almost childlike.

“Dee is very generous,” Flamel said evenly. “Though I am surprised that the Genii Cucullati would deign to work for a humani.”

The creature took another clicking step closer. “Dee is no ordinary humani. The immortal Magician is dangerous, but he’s protected by a master infinitely more so.”

“Perhaps you should fear me,” Flamel suggested with a thin smile. “I am older than Dee, and I have no master to protect me—nor have I ever needed one!”

The creature laughed and then, without warning, leapt for Flamel’s throat.

A stone sword hissed through the air, slicing cleanly through the parka hood, cutting away a huge chunk of green cloth. The creature yelped and twisted its entire body in midair, curling away from the returning blade, which slashed across the front of the coat, chopping through buttons and destroying the zipper.

Josh Newman stepped directly in front of Nicholas Flamel. He was holding the stone sword he’d pulled from the cardboard tube in both hands. “I don’t know who you are, or what you are,” he said tightly, voice trembling with adrenaline and the effort of holding the weapon steady. “But I’m guessing that you know what this is?”

The beast backed away, blue-black eyes fixed on the gray blade. Its concealing hood was gone, cut to ribbons, the remnants hanging around its shoulders, revealing its head. There was nothing even vaguely human about the planes and angles of its face, Josh noted, but it was extraordinarily beautiful. He’d been expecting a monster, but the head was surprisingly small, with huge dark eyes sunk deep behind a narrow brow ridge, cheekbones high and sharp. The nose was straight, nostrils flaring. The mouth was a horizontal slash that now hung slightly open to reveal misshapen yellowed and blackened teeth.

Josh’s eyes flickered left and right at the other creatures. They too were focused on the stone sword. “This

is Clarent," he said quietly. "I fought the Nidhogg in Paris with this weapon," he continued. "And I've seen what it does to your kind." He moved the sword slightly and felt it tingle, the hilt growing warm in his hands.

"Dee did not tell us that," the creature said in its childlike voice. It looked over Josh's shoulder to the Alchemyst. "It is true?"

"Yes," Flamel said.

"Nidhogg." The creature almost spat the word. "And what happened to the legendary Devourer of Corpses?"

"Nidhogg is dead," Flamel said shortly. "Destroyed by Clarent." He stepped forward and put his left hand on Josh's shoulder. "Josh killed it."

"Killed by a humani?" it said incredulously.

"Dee has used you, betrayed you. He didn't tell you we had the sword. What else has he not told you about: did he mention the fate of the Disir in Paris? Did he tell you about the Sleeping God?"

The three creatures slipped back into their own language, yipping and growling among themselves; then the largest turned to regard Josh again. A black tongue danced in the air. "These things are of little consequence. I see before me a frightened humani boy. I can hear his muscles straining as he struggles to hold the sword steady. I can taste his fear on the air."

"And yet, despite the fear you can smell, he still attacked you," Flamel said quietly. "What does that suggest?"

The creature's shoulders moved in an awkward shrug. "That he's either a fool or a hero."

"And you and your kind have always been vulnerable to both," Flamel said.

"True, but there are no more heroes left in the world. None to attack us. Humani no longer believe in our kind. That makes us invisible . . . and invulnerable."

Josh grunted as he brought the tip of the sword up. "Not to Clarent."

The creature tilted its head and then nodded. "Not to the Coward's Blade, that is true. But there are three of us and we are fast, so fast," it added with a grin that exposed its jagged teeth. "I think we can take you, boy; cut the sword from your hands before you even know it's—"

Instincts Josh didn't know he possessed warned him that the creature was going to attack the moment it stopped speaking. Then it would all be over. Without thinking, he jabbed straight out in a thrust Joan of Arc had taught him. The blade hummed as the point stabbed at the monster's exposed throat. Josh knew that all he needed to do was to scratch the horror with the sword: a single cut had all but destroyed Nidhogg.

Laughing, the creature danced back out of range. "Too slow, humani, too slow. I saw your knuckles strain and whiten the moment before you thrust."

And at that instant Josh knew they had lost. The Genii Cucullati were just too fast.

But over his left shoulder, he heard Flamel chuckle.

Josh stared directly at the creature. He knew that the last thing he could do was turn around, but he wondered what had amused the Alchemyst. He looked closely at the Hooded One. But nothing had changed . . . except that when the monster had darted out of range, it had landed in the puddle of dirty water.

"Has fear driven you mad, Alchemyst?" the creature demanded.

"You must know the Elder Iris, the daughter of Electra?" Flamel asked conversationally, and stepped around Josh. The Alchemyst's narrow face had turned hard and expressionless, lips a thin line, pale eyes closed to little more than slits.

The creature's blue-black eyes widened in horror. It looked down.

The dirty water curling around the creature's feet had suddenly bloomed with a rainbow of colors bleeding out of



the ragged strands of Flamel's woven bracelet. The Genii Cucullati attempted to leap back, but its two front paws were stuck fast in the puddle. "Release me, humani," it screeched, its childlike voice filled with terror. The creature frantically tried to push itself free. Digging in with its claws, it tried to get traction, but the tip of one of its rear legs touched the edge of the pool and it howled once more. It yanked its paw back and a curling claw ripped off, stuck at the edge of the water. The creature barked and its two companions darted forward to grab hold of it, attempting to pull it away from the swirling colored liquid.

"Decades ago," Flamel continued, "Perenelle and I rescued Iris from her sisters and in return, she gave me these bracelets. I watched her weave them out of her own rainbow-hued aura. She told me that one day they would bring a little color into my life."

Twisting swirls of color began to creep up the Genii Cucullati's leg. Black nails turned green, then red, then filthy purple fur changed to shimmering violet.

"You will die for this," the creature snarled, its voice even higher, bright blue eyes wide with terror.

"I'll die someday," Flamel agreed, "but not today, and not by your hand."

"Just you wait till I tell Mother!"

"You do that."

There was a pop, like a bubble bursting, and abruptly the rainbow colors raced up the monster's body, bathing it in light. Where the two others held it, the color spread to the claws and washed up over their skins, turning the green parkas into spectacular multicolored coats. Like oil on water, the colors shifted in mesmerizing patterns, forming new bizarre shades and incandescent hues. The creatures managed a single terrified howl of terror, but their cry was cut short and they slumped onto the sidewalk in a heap. As they lay unmoving on the ground, the riot of colors quickly flowed out of their flesh, returning their

coats to their former drab green, and then their bodies started to change, bones cracking, muscles and sinews reforming. By the time the color had seeped back into the pool, the creatures had resumed their semblance of humanity.

Rain spattered along the length of the alleyway, and the surface of the multicolored puddle danced and shattered with the drops. For a single instant a perfect miniature rainbow appeared over it before fading away, leaving the puddle its previous muddy brown.

Flamel stooped to pluck the remains of the friendship bracelet from the street. The entwined threads were now off-white, leached of all color. He straightened and looked back over his shoulder at the twins. Flamel smiled. "I'm not quite as helpless as I look. Never underestimate your enemy," he advised. "But this victory is yours, Josh. You saved us. Again. It's becoming quite a habit: Ojai, Paris and now here."

"I didn't think—" Josh began.

"You never think," Sophie interrupted, squeezing his arm.

"You acted," Flamel said. "That was enough. Come; let's get out of here before they're discovered."

"Aren't they dead?" Sophie asked, stepping around the creatures.

Josh quickly wrapped Clarent in the bubble wrap and shoved it back into the cardboard tube. Then he pushed the tube into his backpack and heaved the bag onto his shoulders. "What happened?" he asked. "That colored water. What was that?"

"A gift from an Elder," Flamel explained, hurrying down the alleyway. "Iris is called the goddess of the rainbow because of her multicolored aura. She also has access to the Shadowrealm waters of the river Styx," he finished triumphantly.

"And that means?" Josh asked.