

CHAPTER 1

DREAMS OF FIRE

*A*braxas, dragon of ancient Trocea, bared his long, yellowed teeth with strain and fear. His wings pulled hard against the currents of the air, rising and tumbling around him in unpredictable gales. Dense smoke mixed with the clouds, the glowing embers caught in the heat of their updraft whirling and vanishing, then falling again as leaden ash that made the dragon's flight even more difficult. The dull orange glow beneath the obscuring clouds and smoke was often the only reference he had to whether he was flying upright or inverted.

It had been this way in Trocea, Abraxas remembered. He had smelled the burning of wood and flesh and could taste the end of joy at the edges of his lips. His eyes there, too, had stung as much from his own despair as from the ash. Dragon tears are magical and their powers are great, but they are hard won

and not easily elicited from any of the dragonkind.

Abraxas had wept easily that day for the senseless loss of the noble city, whose streets were lined with trees and filled with the sound of children playing between the statues of the Gardens of the Air. All that had ended in 4891 when the Kurgan tribes descended on the city and lay siege to it. Its walls withstood the assault, but by subterfuge and betrayal the tribes gained access to the city and opened its gates from within. In the end, they left nothing and no one behind. Abraxas had arrived too late and had only his own tears to console him as he made his way back to Atlantis with the news of what had befallen the colony they had called the Jewel of the Northern Shores.

Now the world itself was ending, its life writhing beneath him in fire and agony.

Abraxas craned his long neck around, his eyes desperately searching the roiling billows. Where were his broodmates—his brother dragons born of the same clutch? They were bound to him as he was to them—the powers of their inherited karma woven tightly into the fabric of their common life-force. They were his strength and his might, just as he was theirs. He could feel the threads unraveling in the karma itself and knew in his heart that there was little time remaining in which to act. That he could not see them worried Abraxas, for the world was collapsing beneath them and he would need them if there were to be any hope for a dawn.

A sudden explosion of fire shook Abraxas's right wing, flipping the dragon nearly on his side. He roared with indignation and frustration, beating his right wing furiously in compensation. He had barely righted himself in the air when the clouds and smoke suddenly parted.

Atlantis lay dying beneath him.

The city was on fire. The heat in many places had grown so intense that firestorms had erupted in several areas—impossible cyclones of flame twisting into the sky. Each pulled air into its base to feed its voracious appetite, mostly from the cooler atmosphere above the waters of the sea and the bay of the city, resulting in hurricane force winds that whipped the waters off the Atlantis coasts into angry whitecaps of terrifying size. The still waters of the fabled reflecting pool running from the bay to the base of Temple Peak had been drawn completely dry. Nearly half of the 365 great stone statues—each representing a different attribute of Hesirus, the Sun-King—had fallen over, and many lay broken in the empty pool.

Abraxas cursed the keenness of his eyes. He could see the Atlantean humans clearly as they ran in panic in the streets below. Great fissures were opening everywhere, buildings collapsing into their maws. Throngs of people fleeing were suddenly cut off in their retreat, piling up on the verge of the crevasses, some tumbling with horrific cries into the molten depths below. Despite the obstacles, thousands had reached the shores of the bay, the cacophony of their

cries rising up to fill the dragon's ears. The bay had offered no better hope for them, as they confronted the waters of an angry sea that was already laying claim to the ships foundering at their moorings.

A trumpeting caused Abraxas to glance behind him. Fafnir and Apalala—his two broodmates—were with him still, their leathery wings illuminated by the conflagration below. They beat fiercely against the turbulent air around them, desperate to gain more altitude. They called him higher, for there was safety in distance from the calamitous ground beneath them.

Ground, Abraxas knew, on which he must land one last time.

The ancient dragon of Trocea banked suddenly, pulling up hard and soaring around a whirling column of the firestorm. The concentric canals of Atlantis were broken, their waters rushing down the remaining streets and crashing into the fires and molten fissures. Explosions of steam now obscured many parts of the city. The towering obelisks that had once watched over the walls of the city were no more.

The dragon watched the desolation as yet another earthquake rolled through the city, felling more buildings and opening even further the cracks in the face of the dying world.

Abraxas fixed his enormous head forward. There was nothing he could do for them today. He had to remember that his task dealt with what lay beyond the end.

Before him rose Temple Peak. At its pinnacle, rising to a height of over twelve hundred feet, stood the remains of the greatest achievement and glory of Atlantis. But the marble façade of the pyramid was crumbling, sliding down its sides with each successive quake. The statue of the dragon which had once graced its peak was nowhere to be seen; even from this distance, Abraxas could see that the carefully and closely fitted stones were beginning to separate in places.

But the pyramid was not his objective. Several hundred yards down the ridge of Temple Peak stood the Temple of the Sun, for which the mountain had its name. Abraxas fixed his gaze upon it. One of its towering spires had fallen completely. Two others swayed precariously while a third stood at an odd angle. The dome over the central courtyard had collapsed, but even from this distance he could see the Master Priests moving at the edge of the great gardens.

They were looking for him. They had called him.

Abraxas spread his wings further, slowing as he approached the summit.

A great roaring sound welled up from behind him.

The world groaned beneath him—and fell.

A great finger of land dropped downward below him. The waters of the Inner Sea rushed forward into the sudden absence of land, an enormous wave crashing downward and burying for all time the images of Hesirus and the basin of the reflecting pool that would never again shine with the light of the stars.

The upward rush of the heated air from the firestorms vanished, pulled downward as the land fell away.

Abraxas felt himself being dragged downward with it...down with the fire and water at the end of all things.

The turbulence jostled him awake.

Ethan Gallows shivered then sat up suddenly, gasping for air.

“Excuse me, sir, are you all right?”

Ethan looked up into the face of the stewardess. He took her in all at once, noting details and framing her face instinctively as he would have captured it with his camera. She was in her late twenties, he guessed, caucasian, with short-cut hair dyed blond, showing mouse-brown roots. She was unhealthily thin; her British Airways uniform, threadbare and stained, sagged slightly on her frame. Her tarnished name tag proclaimed her to be Alicia Murdock. She wore no makeup and her eyes were sunken with dark circles under them.

He also noticed that she had her right hand held behind her back—no doubt fingering the Glock 27 subcompact automatic that all the British Airways stewardesses kept tucked under their jackets. They were light, relatively small, and packed nine rounds of .45-caliber stopping power.

Ethan guessed someone at British Airways had figured that nine rounds would be sufficient to fire inside an aircraft cabin at pressure altitude. Contrary to popular belief, airframes of commercial aircraft were designed to prevent any kind of explosive—or even rapid—decompression from bullets fired inside a cabin. No one would get sucked out or blow up from the infamous “sudden loss of cabin pressure.” The best you could hope to achieve was a bad leak.

There were far worse things in the world than a hole in an airplane in flight—which was why stewardesses now answered every call from a passenger with one hand on a gun.

“I’m fine,” Ethan answered through a slow yawn. It was best not to make sudden movements on an aircraft these days. “Just a nightmare.”

Could have been worse, Ethan thought with a shudder. At least she hadn’t touched him. He hated being touched, and their combined skittishness might have ended very badly for him.

The stewardess breathed in through her nose and nodded without interest. “We will be landing at Heathrow in approximately forty minutes. Please have your passport and documents in order before we land. Have you been to the lavatory?”

“Uh, no—not yet...”

“There is a vial in the seat pocket in front of you,” she said. “You need to deposit your urine into it and secure the stopper before we land. There’s the devil to pay if you don’t have that in hand once you reach

Immigration. New regulations, you know.”

“Thank you, Alicia,” Ethan said. “I’ll do that right now.”

The stewardess nodded without a smile and stepped wearily toward the back of the economy cabin. Ethan undid his seatbelt and turned to watch her go down the aisle.

He eyed the bulge at the small of her back. *That’s definitely a Glock 27.*

He was turning back forward when his eye caught sight of a young boy lying across three seats several rows back opposite him on the aisle. The boy could not have been more than eight years old. He was curled up tightly across the chairs with an “unaccompanied minor” slip pinned to his jacket.

Ethan stood up in the aisle and stepped back toward the boy. The 767-300ER was nearly empty; if it were full there might have been as many as three hundred and seventy passengers aboard, but he had counted fewer than fifty in the waiting area when they had boarded in Atlanta.

The boy had kicked off his blankets.

Ethan glanced at the stewardess. She was standing back by the aft galley, and her gaze was fixed on Ethan. She looked casual, but Ethan noted that she was standing sideways and had spread her legs slightly in her stance. It was a firing position. *That Glock must have quite a kick for someone as slight as she.*

Move slowly, Ethan told himself, *and whatever*

you do, be obvious.

Ethan carefully reached down and picked up the blankets. He stood up so that the stewardess could see them as he spread them back over the child.

Why would anyone risk sending their child unaccompanied on an airline these days, especially to London? He figured it was best to let him keep sleeping for now—any nightmares he was having couldn't be worse than the waking world.

“Hey, Gallows!” came an entirely-too-chipper voice behind him. “I'm glad to see you're up and ready to go.”

No good deed goes unpunished, Ethan thought as he turned.

“Morning, Collette,” he said flatly.

Ethan already knew more than he needed to know about Collette Montrose. He had not had much time at CNN to get intel on his latest babysitting job but what he had learned, he did not like. Collette was twenty-four years old, and kept her brown hair short because it looked better on camera and would key out better in front of a weather map. Her eyes were a bright, striking green—which as far as Ethan was concerned was her most interesting feature—set in a pleasant olive complexion. She was officially a meteorologist at the CNN Weather Center, although her degree was in Art History. Someone thought she was bright enough, clever enough on camera, and eager enough to work weekends, holidays, and the 3 a.m. shifts most weekdays. She was too eager, too chatty,

and too focused on her non-existent career. She was the kind of woman that Ethan rarely met on field assignments.

Which, he reminded himself, was just another of the several million reasons he preferred to be in the field.

“Come on and sit down, you!” Collette said, patting the seat cushion next to her. “I’ve got a need to talk.”

“Collette, I’ve got to go take care of a little ‘business,’” he said, waving the small sealed box with the plastic vial inside.

“Oh, that can wait a few minutes,” she said with a flash of her smile. Her mouth was wide and seemed to have too many teeth. She patted the seat cushion again. “We need to discuss the assignment. Just for a few minutes. I promise I won’t bite.”

Ethan eased his large frame down into the narrow seat.

“My, you *are* in good shape,” Collette smiled. “Do you work out, like, all the time?”

“I’m a field cameraman, Collette,” Ethan said, his tone making it clear he was stating the obvious. “Equipment is heavy and sometimes you have to move pretty fast. The job’s a workout on its own.”

“Yeah,” she said, her voice falling into concern. “I was so sorry to hear that you were called back. It’s so unfair. Do you think it was...racially motivated?”

Ethan closed his eyes. He could hear his father saying those same words. It seemed to be part of the

roots of his African-American experience. His skin was a deep chocolate color and, according to his mother as well as a few other opinions he valued in other ways, a lovely texture. He kept his black hair short because it was easier in the field. He preferred several days' worth of growth on his beard before he shaved because a razor was sometimes hard to come by in the places his job required him to go. It was his dark brown eyes, however, that were his special gift—the perfect windows, he thought, through which he could look out on the world through a lens.

He'd experienced the effects of discrimination and racism growing up, but it had been mitigated by the closed circle of the academic community in which his parents both orbited as teachers in Spokane, Washington. When he'd left Spokane to find a larger world, his parents had sent him on his way with a tough hide and a proper grounding in his African heritage and roots.

“No, Collette,” Ethan said. “I do not think it was racially motivated.”

“But you're the most honored field cameraman in this business—no, it's true and you know it,” Collette said. “You were *the* most sought after cameraman in all of CNN. There wasn't a field reporter that wouldn't give a month's pay to get you assigned to them. And now here you are working *features*. I mean, what Jonas Farben did to you may have been well intentioned, but—”

“Could we please not talk about this?” Ethan said. After the public pummeling he had received from Farben, he was surprised that his assignment editor would let him out of Atlanta—let alone cover an art exhibition in London. However, a series of recent disappearances from the CNN Bureau in London had left them short-staffed—and the British government wanted the exhibition prominently featured around the world as a symbol of the stability of London and the government’s efforts to “normalize” the situation there. Ethan knew there was nothing normal about London any longer—or anywhere else in the world for that matter.

“I guess your luck can’t work every time,” Collette said.

“What luck?” Ethan asked, almost as if he cared.

“Everyone says that you’ve got a special luck,” Collette said. “You know...always in the right spot to get the money shot, even in the most horrible of circumstances. Wherever the worst of things is going down, you seem to be there with tape already rolling.”

Ethan sighed. “Some people would call that bad luck.”

“Not in our profession,” Collette said with what seemed like genuine admiration.

Ethan wanted to change the subject. “You said you wanted to talk about the assignment—and I’ve still got to go pee for Queen and Country.”

“Oh, right,” Collette said, pulling out her notepad.

Ethan drew in a deep breath. *Ace cub reporter on the job.*

“We’re scheduled to meet Dr. Rene Benoit at the National Gallery—that’s in Trafalgar Square—”

“I know where the National Gallery is.”

“—at 1:00 p.m. local time. There won’t be time for us to go by the hotel and drop off our things, so we should go straight there. Dr. Benoit has arranged for us to be admitted to the exhibit ahead of time... You know, they say that this is the first time he has agreed to show his private collection. It is supposed to be amazingly controversial. ‘A bizarre and frightening juxtaposition of the common and the occult...’”

Ethan chuckled.

“What?”

“I’ve seen a lot of things lately,” Ethan said. “It’s hard to imagine what people might think of as ‘bizarre and frightening’ in art any more—especially in London.”

The plane jostled suddenly.

The seatbelt light came on immediately.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, I had better get back and prepare this little souvenir,” Ethan said, rising into the aisle. “Tighten that belt, Miss Montrose. There’s no such thing as a smooth landing anymore.”

Ethan held the seat backs as he made his way aft. The plane lurched again under his feet. As he reached the lavatory he saw the stewardess already strapped tightly into her jumpseat, the harness tight across her uniform. She did not look up or acknowledge him

in any way, her eyes fixed forward as she shook in abject terror.

The plane shuddered again, violently.

We must be getting close to London, Ethan thought as he closed the lavatory door behind him, sliding the lock to “occupied.”