

THE IMMORTALS

Trilogy

Book One

Pathway of the Gods

BY

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Prologue

A piercing cry invaded the silence of the night. A sound of pain!

Istania lay in the birthing chamber, perspiration dripping from her brow as she wrenched violently at the bedding; the sheets beneath her tearing with the force. Another barb of pain, sharp and intense, shot through her body like a fine bladed knife. With effort, she refocused her thoughts, battling to remain calm. Why had she been so willing to make this sacrifice?

A second contraction, more cutting racked at her body, she grimaced with the suffering. Was this child worth this torment? Suddenly her travail and the shout of the midwife brought her back to reality as she bore down yet again.

‘The child, I see the crown of the head,’ relayed the midwife. ‘It’s time, Istania, push now.’

Istania forced herself to concentrate, wanting nothing more than to rid herself of both the child and the pain of its associated birth. She felt the baby’s head pass through her birth canal. With one final exhausting push, the mucus covered infant slid from her body and into the waiting hands of the midwife. Istania let out a grateful sigh of relief. It was a boy!

Exhausted but content, she relaxed, lying back against the crumpled linen, perspiration soaking the bedding beneath her. She recollected with clarity the events leading up to the conception of her son. They were now fixed forever in her mind. That particular night had been laced with power. Istania recalled the moment the seed had planted itself firmly within her—in that one brief moment her body and soul had divided.

There had never been a night when she had felt the substance of the Craft so strong, it had been overpowering, its dynamism and ascendancy potent; she had never known its force so virile.

The Oracle had fathered her son, yet the goddess knew the child had not been conceived in love. The boy's father's only interest lay in the Immortals' ultimate goal—to gain a pathway to the greater gods.

The Oracle drove the Immortals; he was their divine leader, their patriarch and *her lover*. Yet Istanina knew he was incapable of loving anyone.

As Istanina lay quietly, her thoughts concentrating on the past, an unexpected stabbing pain gripped her yet again. Instantly she was brought back to reality, back to a horror of her own choosing. Pain tore her apart once again, shooting like arrows of steel through her lower abdomen; holding her like a lover in its embrace. The pain was felt with far more severity than the pain she had suffered only moments earlier. She cried with terrifying alarm, 'No, not more.' Panic coursed through her body. What was happening?

For a sinking moment Istanina was unsure, until she felt herself bearing down once again. The midwife stood frantic, as disbelief unfolded across the room. Moments later, amid the mayhem a second child forced itself from Istanina's pain-shattered body: the child struggling to escape the confines of its prison. Shock registered with the midwife as she quickly summoned a nursemaid who ran forward and gathered up the second infant. With dexterity she wrapped it securely in soft blankets. Both women now stared accusingly at Istanina; this was not part of the plan.

Gently, the nurse wiped the mucus from the infant. Both boys screamed in protest, their piecing cries heard by all. The midwife glanced nervously at Istanina, her accusation clearly written in the expression, which now marred her porcelain features.

The first child continued with his stream of protest, while the other now lay silent by his brother's side. The second infant; his eyes open wide, searching, seemed to be taking in his surroundings, a sense of knowing etching his features. An understanding smile spread for an instant across his lips as his mother watched the boy in disbelief.

The midwife sensed the power of the younger infant and backed away, the tiny babe giving her a casual, yet dismissive glance. The woman needed no second appraisal, something about this child instilled fear and darkness.

'Hand them to me.'

It was the Oracle. His towering form stood in the doorway, his proud stance conveying his authority. The patriarch's silvery white hair, long and flowing, caught like slivers of gossamer in the dim light of the room, as its length spread down across his chest. His powerful body silhouetted beneath his sheer garments.

Istanina grew hesitant, afraid as she lay amidst the afterbirth. Her eyes followed the Oracle as he moved with silent footsteps toward her. Fear, born of knowing, licked at the confines of her immortal soul; something had gone terribly wrong. Only one child was meant to be conceived, a boy, so how did she birth twins? She raised herself gingerly onto her elbows; her strength weakened but her resolve high.

'I do not understand! How did this travesty come about? Why are there two?'

The Oracle fought back his immediate response; he would not accuse her in front of servants, there was no way he had fathered both children.

When she did not receive an answer, Istanian realised that he thought she had deceived him in some way. She realised then that her sons were in mortal danger. For the Oracle would think she was to blame, she could tell by the look of contempt he now bore. The fear of her predicament seized hold of her heart; somehow she would have to devise a way of protecting her sons. Suddenly she had a thought!

‘May I name them?’ she asked. ‘Surely after all I have sacrificed, you owe me that much?’ Istanian watched, wondering if her plea had reached fertile ground. Would he even acknowledge her?

The Oracle took the babies from the fearful nursemaid, cradling them in his arms. Istanian watched with trepidation; her sorrow building as the Oracle methodically scrutinised each boy. A deep frown furrowed his brow. She could tell he was enraged, could sense his feelings, she realised he thought he had been deceived.

‘Name them if you must, but it will not save them or you from your fate.’ With that he looked down at the boys. ‘You have condemned both yourself and them, and for your actions, you all will suffer.’ His words were spoken calmly, maliciousness hidden in his tone as he gazed once more toward the boys’ mother.

‘Istanian this was meant to be for the good of all, and you betrayed me.’

The accusation was meant for all to hear, and with those words her guilt established.

Istanian pulled herself upright. She would not allow his accusation to go unheeded. The choice to give birth had been hers, and she had participated willingly, yet the great Oracle and the other Immortals had given her no leeway. At the time it seemed the only possible way, but now as she looked toward the two infants curled in the Oracle’s

embrace, she knew something had gone horribly wrong. Never were there meant to be two.

‘Name them before I change my mind.’ It was said with venom.

She hesitated momentarily, giving thought to her choice.

‘I will call one Theron, ‘Bearer of Wisdom’, and the other, Ommran, ‘Bearer of Truth’.

As she spoke their names aloud, she filled her breath with the vapours of the Craft, hoping it might protect her sons; it was all she could do for now. The air in the room became thick and claustrophobic, as the names settled individually on the boys.

With a look of utter contempt, the Oracle handed the two boys over to the nurse’s care. If the truth were told, he should have been alert to the presence of two life forms himself. He knew he had only planted one seed, so who fathered the second child?

Obviously Istanía had taken another lover, but who?

‘You will rue the day you mislead me,’ he said, with bitterness in his voice. He turned and left the birthing chamber. His resolve; never to forgive her.

Istanía fell back against the pillows; confusion marred her senses, why would the Oracle accuse her of betrayal?

Several days later, Istanía sat alone in her private apartment nursing her sons. None of the other Immortals had come to aid or attend to her in her confinement, not even to congratulate her. Even the Oracle kept his distance. She acknowledged that they all probably believed her guilty of deception. But she knew she had betrayed no one.

For hundreds of years, the Immortals had planned for a child. Great care had been taken to weave the fabric of forces present within the Craft; the moons, stars and mists

had been aligned; nothing had been overlooked. All this was done with the hope of creating the perfect being, an Immortal worthy of a place amongst the Greater Gods; one worthy individual that could orchestrate their plans – a perfect being that would lead them to the pathway created by the gods.

Yet now as she sat alone, spurned by her peers, Istanian sensed that she was somehow, someone else's pawn in a much more complicated game than any of her companions realised. A burning sense of abandonment consumed her as she reread the hand written message the Oracle had sent her earlier that day. He demanded she offer up one of her sons as a sacrifice. The wording left her with no choice.

She glanced at Ommran; his dark curls swirling defiantly about his tiny face, his fingers held on lovingly about her thumb, she met the stare of his piercing sapphire blue eyes as they watched her intently. Istanian sensed his recognition as his lips parted, giving a mere hint of a smile. She understood the enormous power, which emanated from this child; he was gifted. A strange alien sensation passed over her as Ommran turned to seek sustenance at her breast. Turning him aside Istanian called for the nursemaid to come and remove the boy.

Something dark stirred beneath the surface something mysterious, the boy too small to manipulate the force within him

She bent to kiss him goodbye, but hesitated—she could not allow herself to feel affection for him. She handed the boy quickly to the waiting maid.

‘Take him to the Oracle; tell him I have made my decision. Now go.’

A single tear rolled down Istanian's cheek.

She gathered Theron to her breast and the comfort of his suckle kept her heart from overflowing with regret. She knew the Oracle would soon come and take Theron too. The boy would be suspended in time with the power of the Craft's Ilisinic Magic, she knew he would never know she was his mother; the Oracle would make sure of that. The patriarch would wait for another time to bring him forth yet again, a time when the Immortals had created a mate worthy of him.

Istania wondered if she could live with what she had done. Could any of them live with this travesty?

The great Oracle stood alone in his tower; his son perched high on his hip. Three thousand years had passed since the boys' original birth, yet the Oracle still could not forget Istania's betrayal. Time would never erase her deceit.

He held Theron close, this was his son; it had to be. Ilisinic magic had held the boy frozen in time until now. With his rebirth he would be united with Azrah, Goddess Immortal, and together these two would bring about the greatest mystery of the universe, the discovery of the ancients and the path by which they traversed. It had taken all this time to perfect a second child, the infant female known as Azrah. This child conceived through a mortal, one he knew would not betray him.

He frowned as he thought about how close he had come to losing it all.

His thoughts turned to Istanian; he had trusted his instincts yet she had betrayed him. Her bastard son however had paid the price. The Oracle's face turned sour, a bittersweet smile edging his mouth, he had no regrets about disposing of Ommran; that had been a necessity. No one but his own offspring would inherit the powers of the universe.

Theron let out a cry as the Patriarch's fingernails dug into the boy's flesh, the pain the product of a moment's lapse of concentration on the Oracle's behalf. Standing on her balcony, Istanian heard Theron's cries. Tears suddenly blurred her vision. How could she have betrayed his brother? Her heart would carry guilt forever, the guilt of abandoning Ommran. Why had she not fought to keep him?

Istanian stood rigid, her mind consumed, as she realised that the Oracle still firmly believed she had taken another lover, but that could not have been further from the truth. Something mysterious had transpired that fateful night when both boys were conceived. At the time Istanian thought it had merely been a surge in the Oracle's powers. Now thousands of years later she knew it had been far more than that. The force of the power wielded that night had been enough to compel her soul to momentarily leave her body. Something or someone with skills far greater than the Immortals, had conceived Ommran, she knew that now with certainty. But how could she prove it?

Istanian looked longingly at the tower where the Oracle resided. Thousands of years ago she had stood in this very same spot and watched as her tiny son Ommran was cast into the dark void of the unknown universe. The Immortals believing he would perish. She recalled with clarity the emotional strain she felt at the time as Ommran's silent pleas of hopelessness and rejection had called out to her to help. She had done

nothing; simply watched as his tiny form was set adrift, alone, afraid and helpless. Her silent prayers had followed him, yet she had not lifted a finger in his defence and she had lived her life ever since begging him for forgiveness.

Now Ommran's twin, Theron, would walk the hallowed halls of Nibulus. Istanian knew the Oracle would never allow her close enough to convey the truth of their births. She would have to find another way of gaining both their trust and absolution.

Thousands of years have passed. And far away in a distant universe, beyond the reach of the Immortals, sails of an enchanted ship unfold.

The fierce southerly winds blew with ferocity, filling the majestic sails of the mystical black ship. With each gust, the ship's timbers vibrated as it tossed and ploughed through the tempestuous seas like a cork on the surface of a boiling pot. With each wave the mighty ship rode high, propelled further toward its destination.

'Dragon Wing' was emblazoned into the timberwork of the ship's bower. On either side of the hull, was an image of a golden dragon, its fearsome features crafted by the hands of a master painter to be a warning to those who passed by. The sails of the ship were also painted to resemble a dragon's wings, so the ship seemed like a veritable dragon searing through the water. Barnacles could be seen encrusted on the ship's underbelly as it rose above the waves. They became lost to sight as the ship's hull sank once more below the surface.

Dragon Wing was a vessel built to ride the violence of sea and space; it was a ship swathed in ancient magic, a ship created by the power and cunning of the dark lord with magic long forgotten in time. This living vessel had carried Ommran for thousands of years—helping him seek his revenge. Those who stood in Ommran's way either died or became one of his hordes. *Dragon Wing* and its master had a single obsession: to destroy those who had given Ommran life.

An inky raven perched on the mast stood on spindly legs swaying to the rhythm of the waves. With avid curiosity, it watched the dark lord who stood firmly on his two feet at the helm.

Ommran watched from the bower. He stood tall and imposing, with his head held proud. His long dark hair, gathered back with a strip of leather, billowed out behind him in the wind. He was clothed in black moleskin trousers tucked into knee-high black leather boots; his sweater taut across his chest, the salt and sea mist clinging to the fibres like fleas on a dog. He wore a long black leather coat unbuttoned down the front, blown open by the blustery winds. His eyes were the colour of azure skies, his chiselled chin concealed by the dark growth of a Beard.

Both man and ship knew each other well—as a man knows a woman he has been married to for many years. They had long been united in their cause, and now they concealed themselves beneath turbulent clouds that protected them from the preying eyes of those who would hinder their plans. Ommran, discarded and forgotten by his creators, sought retribution for the rejection he had suffered by the Immortals.

Ommran looked to the south. His attention focused on a distant world: the world of Asserian. His thoughts turned to Azrah, its creator. He could sense her power and her strength somewhere out there—yet Ommran felt her presence was somehow incomplete.

Warmth, just a mere semblance of emotion, touched his soul when he thought of her, but he quickly turned it aside. There was no place in his world for feelings, for emotion, most of all not *love*. Ommran had never been shown love by the Immortals and he had never given any in return. He thought of a time long ago when he came close to knowing such feelings, only to lose them to another, his brother Theron. Ommran believed it was his destiny to be with Azrah and take what should have been

his by birthright: her seed belonged to him. With anger in his heart he hastened into the wind, picking up speed toward Asserian.

Azrah stretched out across the settee; she mourned that time long ago, when she believed her world was unmarred and she untarnished. It was a time when she and Theron first knew one another, when life seemed carefree and unblemished, a time when they had both co-existed with the Immortals on Nibulus.

Azrah reminded herself that she was meant to be a perfected being. The Oracle had often said so. Did the great Oracle actually lie? Theron was given the same impression. So why did their lives—hers and Theron’s—now appear so tainted? Something was wrong; she felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness, as if a part of the puzzle was missing.

Azrah ran her hands over her long sensuous limbs. Everything about her appeared flawless: her skin was smooth as velvet and not one imperfection marred her body. Her stomach lay flat and taunt, her breasts firm, round and perfectly formed. Azrah glanced over at herself in the mirror as she stood. Her long golden hair cascaded down her length, shadowing the perfect body beneath. If the Immortals had made her perfect, why did she now feel totally flawed?

She walked to the platform that looked out across the great expanse of her worlds. Worlds she helped create. Before her lay the culmination of hundreds of years of devotion, their worlds: the worlds she and Theron had made.

Azrah could see Asserian off in the distance, floating like a giant bubble in the depths of space. It was her favourite world, a place where she had instilled peace, and happiness—a world dominated by women, where the males paid homage to their priestess and queen. A perfect world!

With a sigh, Azrah glanced toward the world of Sansinus. It lingered in a dark and ominous corner of the universe. Sansinus was the world of the mages, a world where the Craft dominated. She wondered whether she would live to regret her benevolence towards that race.

A smile spread across her face as she thought of Nepthany, a world that held her greatest secret. She smiled; it was out there, even though she could not see it from where she stood. On Nepthany she believed she had found real love. Azrah's faint smile masked the pain hidden in her heart. Out there in the expanse of space lay many worlds, all created by herself or Theron, but all she could do now was stand and admire the Beauty of them all.

Azrah sensed, rather than saw, Theron as he appeared opposite her. She did not turn to look at him; she didn't need to, since she knew him well. His nakedness revealed that he was her complete opposite—tall, broad shouldered and sinewy. His facial features complimenting his fine bone structure. He had a strong chin and mesmerising eyes, eyes the colour of azure skies. Azrah smiled; she found him Beautiful—not Beautiful like a woman, but rather like a magnificent work of art.

Azrah remained motionless. She secretly shifting her weight from one bare foot to another, making sure the movement showed off the lines of her body beneath her

sheer gown. Even with him so far away, she could sense his need and desire. He couldn't help but be aroused.

Theron emerged from behind the pillar of Trayon. The darkness of the pillar's shadow blended with his honey-coloured complexion. Azrah turned and gazed into his eyes. She missed him.

Theron didn't speak; he merely smiled and moved toward her, his movements graceful and deliberate like a cat stalking prey. Before Azrah could catch her breath he had drawn her gently into his arms. His bare body wrapped itself about hers as a snake would about its prey. He ran his tongue up the nape of her neck. Azrah's gown dissolved into nothing, leaving the two of them naked, entwined in desire. He gently lifted her high in his arms.

Theron carried her to the settee. He arched her body over the length of the chair, running his hand over the roundness of her buttocks, teasing and taunting. His tongue gently licked the trough between her breasts. Slowly he worked his way to her nipples, taking them one by one into his mouth and rolling his tongue around their edges slowly, deliberately. Azrah let out a joyous moan. Theron watched her eyes as they rolled back into her head: the obvious pleasure was there. His manhood pulsed, wanting nothing more than to enter her and take his pleasure. He forced himself to hold off. He continued to tease her, waiting to hear the pleasure of her cry. As her body shuddered and convulsed with passion, he penetrated with force, thrusting with quick and deliberate motions. Fulfilment was their final destiny.

Theron released his hold; he was spent by the passion of the moment. He rolled to one side and loosened his grip on Azrah. Did he love her? He was no longer sure,

yet he had an obligation. How he longed to be freed of his responsibilities on Venra. He knew now he had been gone far too long from this place. Yet coming back to this world, the world he shared with Azrah, was somehow painful no matter how much he tried to convince himself that he cared about her. Coming here held no meaning anymore and he felt guilty. He now lived a life separate and distinct from this life as a god. It was a mortal life, a life he loved: a life as Sirius, Prince of Eshtah on the world of Romanie.

The Immortals had given him a life but it held restrictions and fundamental responsibilities. He wanted more freedom and on Romanie he found it. With those thoughts he departed in the magic vapours of the Craft, without an affectionate word or glance toward Azrah.

Tears welled instantly in Azrah's eyes. Would she ever know happiness? Would she ever know normality? She had had those feelings only once, yet now it seemed like another lifetime. Long ago she knew she had shared something special with Theron on Nephany. She thought Theron had shared it too, but now it seemed as if it had never happened. He never spoke of it and she never referred to it.

For the first time Azrah wanted so much more, and she knew that could only come about by finding out the truth. Azrah knew something was wrong. She needed to return to Nibulus, to confront the seven Immortals to seek the truth – that was her only hope. Theron had weakened her powers by setting up a powerful veil to stop anyone from finding them. She needed help to find her way back. Maybe on Sansinus she could enlist the help of the mages. By now those beings should have mastered the powers of the Craft and she hoped they would be her allies. It was her only chance.

Azrah summoned the powers of the Craft. Within the magic of the Craft's vapours she too could manoeuvre through time and space within her worlds. She would pay a visit to the Sansinites; she hoped their powers combined with hers would be strong enough to break the spell Theron had cast long ago.
