

THE INFERNO

(c1998 David Camp)

PART ONE : DAEMON

1

Pietr passed through a theater door onto a street late at night. He heard sounds and saw lights, but most of all he saw fog, a dense, clinging mist that obscured all but the nearest buildings. The vehicles whooshing by sounded so much like waves, and their headlights looked so much like beacons, that, for an instant, he thought himself by the sea, but then a red light came on and shattered the illusion. It was late, and he had to get home.

Pietr turned onto a quiet side street. The farther he walked, the more desolate the street looked until there was no sign of anyone, just the outlines of buildings and hazy spheres of light clinging to pale globes in the mist. As he walked on, even those began to fade, leaving him with only the clack of his own steps. Their hollow ring echoed off unseen walls until it sounded like someone followed him.

At last Pietr reached his building. He couldn't make out much more than the light above the entrance, but that was enough, he knew he was home. It wasn't until he stepped inside that he realized something was wrong. The hallway, which had looked familiar at first, was now a maze of small rooms. He tried to retrace his steps, but the front door was gone. There were rooms where the street should have been.

Pietr checked all the rooms, but he still couldn't find a way out. Instead, he began to recognize this place. He'd been here before, and he wasn't alone. A shrouded figure was in the maze with him, and it wanted to harm him. No sooner did he remember this than he burst into the room where the figure stood waiting for him. He just barely had time to cry out before the floor gave way, and he started to fall.

Pietr woke with a start in the darkness of a small, cluttered room. At first, he thought he was at his grandfather's, in the bed the old man had allowed him to use after his mother had died, but then his eyes focused on his drawings and glass sculptures, and his memory returned. He was no longer the child who'd been shunned at school because he looked like a native. He was on his own, an aspiring artist with no one to answer to but himself and his boss at the bookstore. He no longer had to hide his drawings from his grandfather's prying eyes.

Pietr should have been relieved, but he wasn't. Perhaps it was because the figure had been so vivid this time. Whether because of the nightmare or because he hadn't sold any drawings, he wondered about the life he'd carved out for himself. He wondered about not only his talent, but also about his other obsession, the native magic he'd felt drawn to since learning his father had been a shaman. Maybe his schoolmates had been right. Maybe there was something unclean about his father's kind. Between his nightmares and the way his drawings disturbed people, his attempts to commune with the forest spirits hadn't done him much good. He felt cut off from his own kind.

The thud of his upstairs neighbor moving about added to Pietr's unrest. He wished he could have ended up under someone quieter, someone like Shara, the new cleaning girl at work. If there was one encouraging development in his life, it was her appearance at the bookstore. Her long, black hair and pale green skin made her look even more like a native than he did. The fact that no one bothered her added to her mystique. She seemed to possess the shaman skill of blending in with her surroundings that was one of things he was trying to learn. For all he knew, she really was from the forest that surrounded their provincial city and returned there after work. He'd never seen her outside the store.

The sound of his next-door neighbor entering their shared bathroom snapped Pietr back to his apartment. He and Micklo had barely known each other when they'd first moved in, but because they

were both interested in magic they'd ended up friends. Micklo, a math student on sabbatical, enjoyed talking about anything macabre. Just the night before he'd gone on at length about daemonic possession. He'd argued that being possessed was being in touch with a mind force that was present in all matter. He'd even suggested that they try it themselves.

"It can burn like a fire inside you," Micklo had said at one point. "Because it's so pervasive it can open the door to anything in the world."

Pietr had found Micklo's idea unnerving enough at the time, but now he felt sick. Encountering the dark figure in his dream had been like reaching into an innocent looking bag and grabbing hold of something warm and alive. He didn't believe in Micklo's mind force, but he did believe in spirits. One seemed to be invading his dreams, and he didn't like it.

Shivering, Pietr stepped to his window. Drawing back the curtain he saw that the air outside was heavy with fog. He'd just dreamed of fog, but the way this mist softened everything from the plow-drawn wagon and the cobbled street to the building across from his calmed him. Sorely in need of soothing, he decided to go for a walk. Work wasn't until noon, and instead of drawing in his room he could take his sketchbook with him. In the forest, he could forget his nightmare and work up the nerve to talk with Shara. He'd put that off too long. Today he'd find out where she came from.

Stepping into the fog was like slipping into a pool and pushing away from the edge. Only a handful of buildings were visible in the thick mist. As he walked new structures loomed up out of the cloud like great, half-submerged boulders. Treetops were lost in the soft sea of gray.

Pietr savored the smell of damp leaves plastered to the cobbles beneath his feet. At a park at the edge of town the buildings gave way to an ill-kept lawn. The city of Tarnahue was stirring behind him, but here silence still reigned. This was his gateway to the rugged, seaside bluffs and ravines where he liked to explore.

Undaunted by the superstitions surrounding this forest, Pietr reached the edge of it and started up the first hill. He used his hands to clear away brush as he waded through the ankle-deep leaves. He was so absorbed in the beauty of the dew-laden trees that he was halfway down the far side of the hill before he realized he wasn't alone. Something had moved in the fog.

Pietr turned. Before he could focus, a wraith-like figure slipped behind a tree trunk. The movement was too quick and fluid for a person. The phantom had floated rather than run.

Heart pounding, Pietr crept towards the tree trunk. The figure reminded him of the one in his dreams, but he'd wanted to make contact with a forest spirit and sensed that this was his chance. He was disappointed when he reached the tree and found nothing there. The air was unnaturally cold, but the figure was gone.

Pietr might have dismissed the figure as an illusion if it weren't for the chill, but it was too strong to ignore. In one spot and one spot only, it clung like a damp, clammy sheet. The sensation was enough to convince him that the phantom was real. He'd finally encountered a forest spirit.

Pietr was frustrated that he had nothing to show for the encounter so he scraped at the dirt at his feet. He didn't know what he was looking for until he unearthed an unusual stone. It was gray, egg-shaped, and icy cold to the touch. The chill in the air seemed to be coming from it.

Pietr stuck the stone in the sack with his drawing supplies and resumed digging until he noticed that the chill in the air was gone. He looked around and saw only trees and fog. Whatever had been here had vanished, so he resumed his trek. He would return another time.

Pietr decided against climbing the next hill. Instead, he followed a ragged gully west to the sea. On a wedge of beach sheltered from the city by a high bluff, he sat down on a log. Soon he was so absorbed in the lap of the waves against the shore that he forgot everything else. He wished he could preserve the peace of this moment forever, for he vaguely sensed he might not know it again. Something was at work deep within him and about to claw its way out.

Eight counts nine counts, ten, then Micklo lowered his head to the floor and let out a breath. His exercises done, he pondered what to do next. His desk was covered with sheets of equations, but now that he'd solved the math problem he'd been working on, writing down a proof could wait, as could studying for his scholarship exam. He had better things to think about.

If only there were a university where he could study both mathematics and magic, then maybe he wouldn't feel so guilty about spending most of his time on magic instead of preparing for his exam. Then he could delve into math and magic and get paid for both. As it was, his two obsessions competed for his attention, and magic was winning out. If he could master it, then everything else would become trivial.

He was getting close to a breakthrough. He knew that much. Something potent was taking shape in his mind. He just wished he hadn't said so much to Pietr. Words were such a poor medium, and Pietr was so dull-witted, that trying to explain an all-encompassing world mind had been a waste of time. Pietr would never grasp the notion that everything around him could react like a single conscious being.

It was just hard to keep everything inside. He'd have to be more careful from now on. He'd have to learn to keep his thoughts to himself in the same way that he was learning how to control his body through breathing and postures. He could get in to trouble if the wrong people found out what he was thinking.

The last book he'd read, a treatise on the daemonic, had greatly clarified things for Micklo. Genius, the daemonic, the world mind, they were all the same. It was just a matter of digging deep enough inside to touch the primordial fire. Feeling inspired, Micklo sat down at his desk and sifted through his papers until he located the scrap of paper he'd found in the book. He'd been feeling an urge to take a look at the slip, and now he understood why. A date was scribbled on it, and that date had arrived. He hadn't given it any thought before, but now he was curious. If there really were a world mind, then maybe it was responsible for the slip being in his book. Maybe he was supposed to do something today. He didn't want to jump to foolish conclusions, but he didn't want to blindly rule anything out either. He'd just gotten through trying to tell Pietr that this was one of the ways the world mind could work.

Magic and coincidence aside, the occult shop where Micklo had purchased the book was rumored to be a secret meeting place for the Drenga. He didn't know for certain if that banished cult still existed, but if it had resurfaced here in Tarnahue, The Necromancer was the kind of place where its members might meet. Even if the slip had been left in the book by accident, inquiring about a meeting might put him in touch with the kind of people he wanted to meet. In the absence of university courses on the occult, a secret society might be the best he could do.

Micklo decided he would return to the shop today, then straightened his papers and leaned back to survey the rest of his room. It was cramped, but as long as he had a large case full of books and a desk to scribble on, he was satisfied. The grainy, black-and-white photos of ancient ruins taped to the wall helped. Looking at the pictures and dreaming of distant places made him feel less confined.

On this particular morning, it was a photo of a crumbling Dorienga temple caught Micklo's eye. It was from one of the planet's oldest civilizations, and it moved him more than the other pictures. Staring at it, he could vividly see the temple not as it was now, but as it had looked whole. He was there. He could feel the robes of a priest on his shoulders, the sand beneath his feet and the hot air in his lungs. Then he was back in his room. The scent of baked earth and stone were gone.

Micklo leaned in closer. As on other occasions his eyes were drawn to the four by four grid of squares above a central door in the photo. The pattern had inspired him to design a three-dimensional sculpture for Pietr and still it made him wonder. He felt like he was forgetting something he should know.

Micklo turned to an ancient history book for an answer. He knew that magic been important to the

Dorienga. They'd even practiced human sacrifice. Re-reading a few pages reminded him that mathematics had also been central to their religion and architecture. He'd always liked that aspect of their civilization. What the book didn't tell him was how a picture of one of their temples could make him feel like he was there. He hadn't just imagined how the temple might have looked, he'd seen and smelled the paint that had long since faded from its walls.

Micklo scoffed at the idea that he was reliving a memory from another life. If he really had peered into the past it was more likely because the Dorienga had figured out a magical way to imprint memories on objects. Such a thought was easier to reconcile with his beliefs than the notion of reincarnation. If all matter were latently consciousness, then, theoretically, anything could be imprinted with a memory.

Intrigued by the possibility that he'd discovered something about the Dorienga no one else had thought of, Micklo sifted through his papers again. This time he was looking for the sketch of the sculpture he'd designed for Pietr. Its three-dimensional arrangement of sixteen cubes in four colors had occurred to him the first time he'd noticed the grid in the picture. He'd regarded the design as an idle geometric exercise in symmetry, but now he wondered if it might be linked to the memory he'd felt. As he continued to shift his gaze back and forth between his sketch and the photo, he wondered about the people who'd built the temple and what kind of thoughts they had thought.

2

Pietr took a deep breath and stepped through the service door at the rear of the bookstore. To his relief, Shara was nowhere in sight. He wanted to talk to her, but not until he'd figured out what to say. He didn't want to make a mistake.

Vork, the stocky clerk who was near the time clock, looked up from a book. "Hi, Pietr, how's it going?" he said in his gruff voice.

"Good," Pietr said. "It was sure nice out this morning." He was surprised by the friendliness of Vork's greeting.

"Nice! It was foggy as hell."

"It was peaceful."

"You know, sometimes I wonder about you, Pietr. You're so quiet no one ever knows what you're thinking, and when you do talk it's always strange."

"Strange?"

"Yeah, like the crappy weather this morning. Most people like it when it's sunny out, but not you. You like it so foggy you can hardly see to piss. And you're like that about everything. When you aren't doing your work you're poking through books on native magic. God only knows why you're interested in that crap."

Pietr was too flustered to reply. Vork had stepped so close that their chests were practically touching, and the longer Pietr stared into Vork's face with its pasty cheeks and thick lips, the more that face seemed a grotesque, plastic mask. He wanted to reach out and tear the mask off. His fists clenched as he stood there wishing Vork would leave him alone.

"Hey, you can have your stinking fog if it means that much to you," Vork finally said. "I don't give a crap. Lemb wants to see you. He wants you to restock the supply shelves up front."

Pietr watched as Vork shuffled off. Something about the clerk's lumbering gait that suggested callousness towards everything around him made Pietr wish he could make Vork do something stupid, like take out his pocket watch and smash it. When Vork stopped, pulled out his watch, and then quizzically scratched his head, Pietr could hardly suppress an impulse to laugh. The link between what he'd envisioned and what Vork had almost done was too strong to ignore.

Pietr moved to the next aisle before Vork could look back and see him grinning. He reflected on what had happened as he walked. First the dream, then the phantom in the woods, and now this.

Perhaps he really was becoming a shaman like his father. He didn't want to hurt anyone. He just wanted to feel a connection with the spirit world. One day he would leave the city, and when he did he would need an inner guide to survive in the forest.

Hoping that day would be soon, Pietr skirted several aisles until he spotted his boss. Lemb, a tall, spry man with an impish grin, was checking the books on a shelf against a list in his hand.

"Ah, Pietr, I was looking for you," Lemb said in a mischievous voice. "Here's just the book for you."

"What is it?" Pietr said warily.

"It's called The Void. It's by a crackpot who thinks his mind's inhabited by some sort of spirit."

"It's not inconceivable," Pietr said. "I mean, you can't automatically assume someone's crazy just because they say they've experienced something you haven't."

"Like ghosts telling us what to do?" Lemb said with a smirk. "Yes, this is just the kind of book I thought you'd like. I was even going to make a bet with Vork about whether or not you'd buy it."

His thrill at having touched Vork's mind shattered by how easily Lemb could make him feel foolish, Pietr shrugged. "You wanted to see me?" he finally said. "Something about restocking the shelves up front?"

"Yes," Lemb said, a little disappointed. "There were two things, actually. First, I need you to check all of the paper supplies."

"O.K."

"And later I need you to do the mopping and dusting like you used to."

"What about Shara?"

"She's not here anymore. Turns out she wasn't legal."

"Wasn't legal?"

"When I tried to file her forms, they had no record of her."

Lemb would have said more, but he saw a puzzled woman near the front of the store and hurried off to help her. Pietr could only agonize over what might have been. Not only had he missed out on a chance to talk to someone pretty who might have liked him, he'd very possibly also wasted an opportunity to learn about native magic. He was surer than ever that Shara knew about such things. The fact that she'd won Lemb's trust and had avoided Vork's ridicule despite her green skin was a remarkable feat in itself.

Pietr was about to head for the front of the store when he remembered The Void. A new book was the last thing he needed right now, but he wanted to see this one for himself. Lemb wasn't as nasty as Vork, but neither believed in things they couldn't touch. If they thought this book was foolish it probably was about spirits and magic.

It took Pietr a long time to find The Void. He was looking for something with a garish cover, but what he finally found was a very thin volume with a black-and-white spine. As he pried it free from the other books, he gasped. Its cover bore a picture of a shadowy figure superimposed on a stone like the one he'd just found.

His pulse quickening, Pietr leafed through the book spotting numerous references to natives and to the Drenga, a secret cult he'd heard rumors about. He wasn't familiar with Danu, the book's author, but that did little to dampen his interest. He picked out a page at random and started to read.

It was at the very instant that Pietr let himself wonder whether he was awake or dreaming that the rocks and snow around him began to slip away...

Pietr had to stop reading and grab the shelf for support. The sensation of being surrounded by swirling rocks and snow had welled up so vividly he'd gotten dizzy. He didn't know how a passage in a book could affect him so strongly, but between the sensation and the picture on the cover he intended to read more. Lemb and Vork could laugh all they wanted. He would take The Void home.

Micklo had visited The Necromancer several times because scattered among its superficial books were a few of substance, but that did little to lessen his disdain as he passed under its tinkling bell into a long, narrow space filled with cheap trinkets. The sight of hundreds of candles, statues, charms, and fake jewels made him want to wretch. He was determined to find out if the slip he'd found in his newest book meant anything, so he stepped up to the counter. It was closing time. There was no one in the shop but the scrawny, dark-haired clerk behind the counter. His deep-set eyes, pointy nose, and thin face gave him the look of a carrion eater.

"Can I help you?" the clerk asked. He'd been immersed in a chart of symbols and didn't sound happy about being interrupted.

"Maybe. Is there a meeting here tonight?"

"A meeting? What kind of meeting?"

"Any kind. Is there anyone who meets here?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm interested in real magic. If there's a group of magicians that meets here, I'd like to join them."

"If there were such a thing, you'd need an invitation."

"Like this?" Micklo said, pulling out his slip. In addition to the date and time scribbled on one side, there was an indecipherable design sketched on the other.

"Where did you get that?" the clerk said suspiciously.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"It's all right, Rewick," a deep voice boomed from the rear of the store. A tall, baldheaded man had silently emerged from behind a thick curtain. As the man approached, his long, black robe hissed across the stone floor. His reddish eyes glowered like embers beneath a pale, hairless brow.

Micklo returned the magician's stare without flinching. For one brief instant, he thought he detected a pause in the robe's swishing hiss, a silence devoid of street noise. Then a wave of malice washed over him. He had the fleeting impression of staring into another face, a darker, swarthier face from another time, and then he blacked out.

The next thing Micklo felt was the cold, hard pressure of the stone surface he seemed to be lying on. The back of his head, his seat, and his heels ached as though they'd been pressed against that surface for a long time. Not yet fully conscious, he focused on the sensation. In the darkness of the space between dreams it was all that he knew.

An instant later Micklo remembered the bald magician and snapped his eyes open, seeing but failing to recognize the torch-lit walls of a stone cell. He was lying on a shelf carved out of an icy-cold wall. A crude doorway in the opposite wall opened into what looked like a tunnel. The only motion was the flicker of shadows, and the only sound the rasp of his breath.

Micklo heard a new sound, two faint male voices moving his way. He considered fleeing, but stayed where he was. He'd wanted to make contact with some magicians and apparently had. He'd gotten himself into their secret stronghold.

Achieving that goal did little to ease Micklo's anger at being bested by the bald magician. He was furious with himself about that, but this was what he'd wanted, so he was also guardedly pleased. He just wished he knew where he was. Either he'd been carried out of Tarnahue or else he was under it. None of its older buildings had basements, so he could be under the Necromancer. On the other hand, the faintness of the voices suggested a tunnel of some length, so it was hard to be sure about anything. If he were in a subterranean part of Tarnahue, then someone had gone to great lengths to carve out this place. Perhaps this really was where the Drenga had ended up when they'd been banished from the rest of the world. If they'd been the first settlers in this region they could have carved out a network of

tunnels and cells and kept them secret.

"Do you think he can be trusted?" one of the approaching voices was said.

"There may be some question about his father," the other voice answered, "but his mother comes from good stock. Her grandfather was one of the founders."

The news that one of his great-grandfathers had been an important figure in this secret society reassured Micklo. It meant he was probably safe. The way that he'd gotten here still bothered him, but now that he was here he would learn everything that he could. He didn't want to be bested again.

Before he could dwell on that indignation any longer two men dressed in the same black robes as the bald magician entered the cell. The second voice he'd heard turned out to be that of a young math instructor Micklo had taken a class from. "You're awake," Rankin said in a startled voice. "I thought we'd have to rouse you."

"Where am I?"

"All in good time," Rankin said. "Do you know who we are?"

"Drenga?"

"Yes. So you understand our need for secrecy."

"Not entirely. I mean, I know the Drenga weren't popular, but that was years ago. Nobody cares anymore now, do they?"

"We prefer to remain out of sight. Did your mother never speak of us?"

"No. I've only heard rumors."

"You can forget them. Suffice it to say that we've been more aware of you than you of us. Especially me. You're a lot like me, you know, maybe even brighter. That's why I decided to sponsor you. I'm going to give you what you want."

"What I want?"

"You do want to be a magician, don't you? That is why you came to the shop?"

"Yes, but I'd hoped to find out more about you, first."

"It doesn't work like that. We show ourselves to people and then let them go their own way. Our strength lies in our secrecy."

"But you've got me here now."

"Yes, with the understanding that you already had it in your heart to join us."

"You're right about that."

"So you will take the initiation?"

"Initiation?"

"The first step in joining our ranks."

"When?"

"As soon as everyone gathers."

"All right."

Rankin's implied threat angered Micklo as much as it disturbed him, but he didn't want to appear uncertain. He would play along with these people and then make up his mind about what to do next.

"You're sure?" Rankin said suspiciously.

"Yes."

"All right, then put this on," Rankin ordered, handing over a robe he'd been carrying. "The others are waiting."

Micklo slipped the coarse, black material on over his clothes and then followed Rankin and his burly companion out of the cell. Like the first torch, the ones that lined the tunnel were burning cleanly. There was little odor or smoke. The flickering light and shadows combined with the dark robes and the stone walls made Micklo feel like he'd stepped back in time. He felt at home.

Slowing his own pace to match that of the men, Micklo followed them around two corners and down several steps into a chamber larger than any of the cells he'd passed. There were at least a dozen other men in the chamber, including the bald magician from the shop. Half a head taller than anyone

but Micklo, the magician glowered at him from behind a stone altar. Micklo followed Rankin's cue and stepped up to the stone.

Although Micklo's attention was focused on the magician, he couldn't help but notice the design etched into the surface of the altar. It was a four-by-four grid of squares like the one in his picture. Creating a three-dimensional design based on the pattern had been a game to Micklo, but to the men in this chamber seemed to take it seriously. The pattern's grooves were stained with what looked like dried blood.

As if that weren't enough to make Micklo nervous, the fact that the other men in the chamber were moving into some sort of formation around him added to his uneasiness. They lined up in rows of four that mirrored the grid with him, the two men he'd entered with, and the magician forming a small square inside a larger square. At a sign from the magician, the twelve men in the outer square began to chant the word "droom." The magician uttered some syllables Micklo couldn't make out.

The low, droning chant began to make Micklo light-headed in much the same way that the bald man's stare had earlier. He fought to remain upright, but it was too hard. As the chanting grew louder, he slumped forward across the altar. The chamber seemed to collapse in upon him.

Instead of blacking out, Micklo found himself in a new three-dimensional array of chambers and tunnels where he could see hundreds of rooms. He didn't seem to have any hands or feet. He'd somehow become a part of the maze. That was how he could view all the rooms. He'd become the stone in the walls.

Micklo rebelled against the sensation. He felt trapped, pinned inside a mountain of rock. Arms and legs that used to be supple seemed to weigh tons. He sensed that he should be able to move in spite of the weight, but he couldn't, and that enraged him. Something was eluding him, something he should know. A frightening part of him had been asleep for a long time. He regained consciousness just long enough to see that he couldn't move because he was being held down. Then he felt the sting of a knife.

3

When Pietr woke from yet another nightmare about the dark figure and maze, he didn't know what time it was. He'd been reading The Void, and he'd dozed off. Judging from the icy stillness, it was early morning. He'd slept for hours without turning off his light or crawling under the sheets.

Now that he was awake, Pietr was too upset by the lingering image of a black-robed magician lying in wait for him to go back to sleep. He glanced around at his drawings, sculptures, and plants to make sure that everything was as he'd left it. It wasn't. The bathroom door was ajar, and his book was gone.

Micklo had taken it while he'd slept.

Pietr stormed into the bathroom and tried to open Micklo's door, but it was locked. That added to his indignation. He raised his hand to knock, but then he remembered his other neighbors. They wouldn't appreciate being roused at this hour.

Pietr returned to his room and saw that it was later than he'd thought. His neighbors would be stirring by the time he could get back to sleep, so there was no point in even trying. A walk in the woods would do him more good. It was a holiday, so he could stay out longer than usual. He could hike up the coast and find new places to draw.

Pietr wanted to be in the forest when the sun rose, so he freshened up quickly and then stuffed a jar of water and some bread in the sack with his drawing supplies and headed out the door. He crept down the stairs without making a sound. There was enough fog to give the street lanterns faint halos in the dark, but not a thick mist like the day before. It was warmer, and that meant he could look forward to a comfortable hike.

In the eerie stillness of the pre-dawn hour Pietr headed for the park that bordered the forest. A drinka yapped to his left, and a solitary door slammed somewhere to his right, but those sounds faded as he entered the park. Moving as much by memory as sight, he found his favorite path into the woods

and started to climb. His stomach growled, but he ignored his hunger and focused on the first, pale streaks of red in the eastern sky.

Pietr slowed as he descended into that part of the woods where he'd seen the phantom. He was barely breathing for fear the sound would alert the spirit to his presence. He reached the tree where he'd found the stone without spying anything, so he decided to wait. This was as good a place as any to greet the new day.

Pietr scraped away the damp surface leaves at the base of the tree and sat down, his back comfortable against the thick trunk. He'd chosen this spot because of the phantom, but he tried to open himself up to all of the moist, earthy smells and sounds around him. While he waited, he thought about The Void. The few pages he'd been able to read had spoken of a similar forest with unusual beings lurking about.

Gradually, the red streak near the horizon lightened and spread. The change was so slow that Pietr only noticed it because of the tangle of branches that became visible overhead. As it grew lighter the forest filled with small, rustling sounds. He'd been still long enough so that the small, scurrying animals on this side of the hill no longer viewed him as a threat.

For a time, Pietr was content to savor the tranquil sights and sounds of trees shrouded in mist, but once the whole sky was light he grew restless. He was glad when a faro gave him with an excuse to get up. The delicate, hoofed creature ventured right up to him, its face even with his own. It stared straight into his eyes and then retreated back down the slope. Because of the way it kept pausing and looking back, he got the distinct impression that it wanted him to follow.

Pietr obliged. The faro could have easily outpaced him, but it moved slowly so he could keep up. He lost sight of it when it climbed onto a rock ledge at the top of the next hill, but when he scrambled over the stony lip he found that the faro had paused. It stood there while he caught his breath and then continued deeper into the woods.

Tarnahue had been built at the southern end of a mountain range that stretched all the way up the coast to the frozen wastelands of the north, so it wasn't long before Pietr was climbing hills that made his legs ache. By mid-morning, he'd followed the faro far enough up the side of the first mountain so that he had a good view of the sea. The faro seemed tireless, but it continued to stay within view. On the one occasion when it did disappear behind a boulder halfway up the seaward side of the mountain, Pietr was startled to find Shara standing on the path just beyond the huge rock.

In the bookstore, Pietr hadn't paid much attention to Shara's clothes. He cared little about outer trappings. He'd been too taken by Shara's thick, black hair and piercing brown eyes to remember what she'd worn. Here there was no mistaking her tan, hand-sewn hides for anything other than those of a native. With skin the color of light moss and hides that matched the mountain, she was in her true element.

It was still Shara's eyes that struck Pietr the most. She stared at him in exactly the same way that the faro had making him wonder if it had been her. He'd heard of natives who could supposedly change into animals, but he'd never expected such a talent in someone so young. If Shara were such a gem among her own people, then why was she bothering with a city-dweller like him?

Before Pietr could ask, a wrinkled, white-haired native stepped out of a cave beside her and stared at Pietr. There was no hostility in his gaze, just the wariness of someone who'd seen many things.

"My name is Torral," the old man said in a dialect Pietr could make out thanks to his mother and some books. "Shara's right. You are of the blood."

"Of the blood?" Pietr asked, wondering if he'd translated the word right.

"Shaman blood. Like your father."

"You know my father?" Pietr said.

"Knew him, yes. Taught him when he was young. Would have been a great shaman if he hadn't been killed."

"Killed?" Pietr said. His mother had never mentioned that. All she'd said was that his father had

been a wonderful man and a shaman and that he'd gone away. Pietr had long dreamed of finding him one day.

"Not know? Killed by bad magics in city. Surprised they haven't killed you."

A chill ran through Pietr. One moment he'd been ecstatic to find Shara, and the next he was being told that he was lucky to be alive. Once the shock of finding out he was in danger passed, anger shook his body. He never would meet his father. Some magicians had seen to that. His fists tightened into knots at the thought of hunting the murderers down and making them pay for their crime.

"Must not let anger rule," Torral said sharply. "Come into our cave. We will talk there."

Pietr solemnly followed the frail old native and the graceful young one into the cave. The opening was so narrow he had to turn sideways to squeeze through, but once inside he found himself in a space large enough for several people to sit or lie down. There were three straw mats spread out around the embers of a dying fire. There were also several clay pots, but not as Pietr would have expected in a permanent home.

Torral and Shara carefully seated themselves on two of the mats, and Pietr sat down on the third. Being in a cave with two hide-clad members of his father's race made him feel more like a native himself. His clothes might be those of the city, but that didn't matter. His soul had long ached for his father's kind, and now that he'd found them he felt like he'd come home.

"Was I led here because I'm of the blood?" Pietr finally asked. "I want to be a shaman. I want to be like you."

Shara, who'd still hadn't spoken, continued to eye Pietr with the same questioning, beckoning glance the faro had fixed upon him while Torral regarded him more evenly. When Torral did speak, it was in the same dry, wispy voice as before.

"These are troubled times. Many people have died; your father, Shara's parents, others. Not many of the blood left. That's why we came to the city place when my stones spoke of you. That's why Shara risked her life to find and see you. You felt her pull. You came. But we must be careful. My stones speak of danger. We must be sure you aren't the danger."

"The danger?"

"The cause of the horrible things I see."

"Oh, but I'm not," Pietr said, guiltily thinking of his relationship with Micklo.

"Then take our hands."

Torral and Shara slid in as close to the fire as they could, so Pietr did the same and took Shara's warm, firm hand in one of his and Torral's wrinkled paw in the other. When the two natives closed their eyes and began to hum and sway back and forth, Pietr gave into the gentle motion. His companions' voices blended so well with the wind whistling outside the cave that he lost himself in the sound. He couldn't tell where the voices ended and the soft breeze began.

Mesmerized, Pietr let his imagination soar. No longer conscious of his own body, he flew out over the sea in the form of a shrell. The sensation of being one of those great, winged creature was so vivid that he could feel its feathers. He was conscious of the sky above, the sea far below and nothing more.

Pietr immersed himself in this mystical flight for what could have been ages, but then he remembered Torral and Shara. He felt guilty about leaving them for so long, so he turned and headed back for the cave. From his great height, he could see not only the ribbon of coastal mountains stretching to the north, but also a second, wider range further inland. The nearest of its snow-capped peaks were often visible from Tarnahue, but this was the first time he'd seen just how massive that second string of mountains was. Far to the north, it merged with the coastal spine, while to the south it formed a backdrop to a narrow band of green land. Those partially settled lowlands were dwarfed by the hulking mountain range.

As Pietr flew back to the coast it was his own city, sprawling like a scab on the land, that drew him in. There was a cloud above it he hadn't noticed before. There were other clouds in the sky, but this one was different. It was dark, circular, and slowly swirling around a fixed point.

Curious, Pietr swooped in for a closer look. A faint voice told him not to, but he headed for the cloud anyway. The instant he touched it, he felt a sting, and then he started to fall. The next thing he knew he was back in the cave staring up at Torral.

"What happened?" the old shaman said in a worried voice.

"I flew. I was a shrell, and I flew far out over the sea. But then I started back and I saw a cloud over the city. I got too close to it and something happened to me."

"A shrell is good," Torral said. "Your spirit is clean. But the crowded place still calls to you. You're not ready to leave."

"Not ready to leave!" Pietr hadn't thought about staying with Torral and Shara. This had all happened too fast, but now that he was being told he couldn't, he was crushed. He wanted to stay with them, especially Shara. They'd gone to all this trouble to find him and lure him out here, and now they were going to send him home.

"You must learn our ways first."

"I'll do whatever you want," Pietr said in a resigned voice.

"You must return to the crowded place. It is still in you. But you must be careful. Bad people there."

"I understand."

"You can join us when you are ready, but not now. Not yet."

"I understand," Pietr said again, reassured by the news that he could join Shara and the old man eventually. In the meantime, returning to the city would give him a chance to hunt down his father's killers. It would also give him time to learn enough magic so that he could approach Shara as an equal. He didn't know if he'd ever be able to turn into an animal like she had, but he would try. Between his desire to impress her and his hunger for revenge, he would learn everything that he could.

"Must go, now," Torral said. "Must fetch something. You stay here with Shara."

With that, Torral crawled out of the cave and left the two young people alone. Pietr finally had his chance to talk to this young woman who evoked feelings no one else ever had. "I'm sorry about your parents," he said thinking of the pain he had in common with her. He truly was sorry, but he also wanted to find out about her parents. He had to know if he was related to her.

"And I of your father," Shara said haltingly.

In the bookstore, Pietr had taken her silence for shyness like his own, but now he realized that she probably didn't know his language any better than he knew hers. Now that he thought about, he was surprised that she could speak it at all, since Torral couldn't. Perhaps her parents had taught her.

"Is Torral your grandfather?" Pietr said, still wondering if "of the blood" meant he was related to either Shara or the old man.

"No. He took me in when my parents died."

"Was my father part of your tribe?"

"No."

"Oh," Pietr said, relieved. "Do you think I'll ever be able to turn into an animal like you? That was you I followed here, wasn't it?"

"That was me, but it wasn't me you saw. I thought of what I wanted you to see, and that is what you saw."

"So you didn't really change into a faro?"

"No. You just saw what I wanted you to see."

"Oh."

"As for you, I don't know. There are many magics. Some have one gift, and some another. I've heard of people in some tribes who can disappear altogether. I prefer to be seen in a form that I love."

"You say some people can disappear altogether?"

"Make others not see them at all. It is, how do you say, telepathy?"

"I think I understand," Pietr said, recalling how he'd seemingly touched Vork's mind. "Is all of your

magic like that?"

"No, but it all starts in the mind. Even herbs work in the mind. That's where the real magic is."

"I see."

Feeling better by the moment, Pietr gazed at this young woman who was so much easier to talk to than he'd expected. Everything from her prominent cheekbones and thick, black hair to her green skin and piercing eyes pleased him. He was still in awe of her, but now that they were talking, he was no longer afraid of making a bad impression. Her face showed none of the mistrust he'd seen in the eyes of all of the girls at school. Just the opposite. Unless he was mistaken, she was as nervous and hopeful he would like her as he was desperate for her to like him. He wanted more than ever to become like her and Torral so he could be worthy of her affection. He wanted to be her equal.

"I brought some tringa weed," Torral said. His bulk blotted out the sunlight as he squeezed back into the cave. "Chew on these. They will give you strength."

Badly in need of nourishment after his long climb, Pietr put a couple of the thumb-sized leaves in his mouth. They were terribly bitter, but he didn't want to offend Torral, so he kept chewing. A warm glow quickly spread through his body, healing and soothing as it reached his fingers and toes. He tried to stay upright, but the desire to sleep was too strong. The last thing he saw was two moss-colored faces hovering over him. He couldn't tell if they were real or part of a dream.

4

Roused from his sleep by a splash of light on his eyes, Pietr woke to find Torral and Shara gone. He wondered if he'd imagined them. It took the tringa leaves near his hand convinced him that he hadn't. Strange as the morning had been, he really had followed a disguised Shara up the mountain and had eaten some leaves an old shaman had given him. And he'd learned that his father had been murdered.

Disappointed that his new friends were gone, Pietr stuffed the remaining leaves in his sack and crawled out of the cave. The sun had stabbed through a crack in the clouds, but it was getting overcast so he decided to return home before it rained. He'd slept for several hours and would probably just make it before dark. He called Torral and Shara's names several times and then set off down the mountain.

Descending was easier than climbing had been. Pietr's legs were tired, but he made it back with an hour to spare. There was no sign of the dark cloud he'd seen in his vision, but he sensed that it was still there above Tarnahue. Sobered by the knowledge that there could be killers among the people he was passing, he tried to project the thought that he was not worth noticing. Shara's trick helped, for no one gave him a second look despite his soiled clothes and long, black hair.

Once he was safely in his room and had eaten some bread, Pietr tried to draw Shara. He wanted to capture the strong yet gentle curves of her face while they were still fresh in his mind. He started several sketches before he produced an outline he was satisfied with. Then he fleshed it out, shading and adding a stone background until the face stood out from the page.

Once he was done Pietr thought about giving the drawing to Shara. He wanted to give her something. She'd put herself in danger to seek him out. A drawing wouldn't last through a single rainstorm, so he seized upon the idea of giving her a stained glass sculpture instead. The one Micklo had designed for him would be his best, so he decided to finish it before he returned to the cave.

Although Micklo's symmetrical design was too sterile for Pietr's tastes, the sculpture was turning out nicely because of the glass. There was something jewel-like about the way light filtered through its interlocked cubes. The fact that the red, blue, green, and golden glasses he was using each had a subtle texture distorted the light just enough to satisfy him. He'd spent hours holding the half-finished sculpture up to the light while he waited for glue to dry.

Once he started working Pietr became so absorbed in the painstaking process of cutting small

squares of glass and strips of wood to the right size and then holding each new piece in place while glue set that he didn't notice Micklo come in. One moment Pietr was alone, and the next moment Micklo was leaning down over his shoulder.

"I see it's coming along nicely," Micklo said in a haughty tone that bothered Pietr after the previous night's intrusion. "I could design more for you if you'd like."

"Thanks, but I'd rather just get my book back."

"The Void?"

"Yes. I wasn't done with it."

"Sorry. Your light was on so I came in. The book caught my eye, and I didn't want to wake you. Its cover was very interesting"

"Its cover?"

"Yes. It made me think of what we were talking about two nights ago."

"The daemonic?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Struck me as symbolic," Micklo said, leaning in closer. "As you know, I prefer not to attribute anything in this world to anything non-material, so that means everything in this world, including consciousness, springs from energy. If some energy can be consciousness, then all energy must be at least latently conscious since all forms of energy are interchangeable. That's why the cover caught my eye. It's a representation of an inanimate object that is conscious."

"Couldn't it mean something else?"

"Only if you believe in spirits. I prefer to think of energy and consciousness as two sides of a single thing. Since energy is all around us, then everything around us must be at least latently conscious. That's what I meant by the daemonic, the consciousness all around us. Some people tap into this sea of energy and they can't handle it, so they go mad. But it doesn't have to be like that. If you're strong enough you can control it. You can work magic by bending the consciousness to your will."

"How do you know all of this?"

"Just a theory, but I'm trying to test it. I'm watching for patterns. Take this sculpture, for example. I was thinking about it yesterday, wondering if was anything magical about the pattern that inspired it, and the next thing I knew I was in the middle of that same four-by-four pattern. It had manifest around me"

"That doesn't prove anything."

"Not by itself. But you have to remember that we live in a world where things run deeper than what we see on the surface. What we see isn't very real. Take your body, for example. You probably think it is solid. That's an illusion. In reality the solidity you feel is the product of force fields repelling each other. Force fields in largely empty space. You're no more solid than the magnetic field around a magnet. Add to that the fact that the energy that produces that illusion is consciousness, and things get interesting. I'm just trying to figure out what it all means so I can tap into the magic around me."

"I prefer to think of myself as something more than just energy and magnetic fields," Pietr said defensively.

"And you are! Consciousness is a magical thing. Just don't go confusing its existence with spirits. You won't ever learn any real magic until you realize that you're a part of everything around you."

"I don't know. I've seen things that make me think otherwise. For now I'd just like my book back."

"I'd like to keep it just a little longer if you don't mind."

"I do mind. I just got it, and I wasn't done."

"I'll get it back to you soon, I promise. I just want to keep it a little longer."

"All right," Pietr finally said, thinking of how he'd be too busy working on his sculpture to read

now anyway. "But don't take too long."

"Of course not. In the mean time, think about what I've said. I'm on the verge of something big, and you could be part of it. Between my genius and your sensitivity to what's around you we could work together. I don't know about you, but I want to know everything. I'll help you understand things if you tell me about anything unusual that you see or feel."

"O.K.," Pietr said, not quite ready to actually do that, but suspecting that he could learn from Micklo.

"And let me know when you finish the sculpture. I'm anxious to see how it looks."

With that Micklo left, but his words continued to run through Pietr's mind. The young artist wasn't ready to accept Micklo's notion of conscious energy, but he did share Micklo's hunger for all forms of magic, and the idea of teaming with someone so clever was tempting. Armed with both Micklo's knowledge and Torral's he could win Shara's love and avenge his father's death. He could be more powerful than any shaman who only knew about disguises and herbs.

Too agitated to sit still, Pietr pushed his sculpture aside. He was hungry again, so he stuffed himself as best he could on bread, cereal, and his last two pieces of fruit. Then he pulled out the Tringa weed leaves and chewed one of them. As its bitter juice filled his mouth he wished he hadn't left the mountain without speaking to Shara again. It was Harvest Day, one of Tarnahue's most festive holidays, and he'd much rather have spent the rest of it with Shara than by himself. He could talk to Micklo some more, but that wasn't the same. Only Shara made him feel like he wasn't alone.

By the time Pietr finished the leaf he felt even more restless. Not only were his neighbors getting noisy, the herb was affecting him differently than it had before, heightening his nervous energy instead of dampening it. Feeling caged, he decided to head for the center of town. There would be tents with games and entertainment in the central square. That would be better than listening to parties in other rooms.

Pietr grabbed his cloak and left, sticking the stone he'd found the day before in his pocket for luck. The sky was so dark and thick with surely clouds he nearly turned back, but the sound of shouts and laughter in the building behind him prodded him on. Leaves skittering across the cobbled street added to his restlessness. He pressed on, no longer caring if he got wet.

Although Pietr had never been in any other part of the world, he that knew Tarnahue was backward compared with other cities, and he was glad of it. He couldn't imagine being in a place that wasn't in the middle of the surrounding mountains and forest. Nor could he imagine being in a city filled with the sputtering mechanical vehicles that had begun to dot Tarnahue's streets. His home was changing so fast that even it made him feel too hemmed in.

A sign of the change was the rowdiness of the crowd that blocked Pietr's way to the square. There were not only people from the city, but also farmers and their families from the lowlands to the south. As was often the case with such crowds, Pietr heard words like "greeny" and "freak" as he tried to push his way through. Three former classmates tried to pick a fight, but they were too drunk to keep up when he finally able to move. After that he remembered Shara's trick and tried to project the thought that he looked just like everyone else. That helped. No one else stared or called him names.

Trying his best to share in the mood of a crowd he didn't feel part of, Pietr stepped onto the square's grassy lawn. Most of the freshly erected tents held games and food, but a few also had music. One was drawing a crowd of youths his own age, so Pietr headed for it. The garishly dressed musicians inside were playing a loud version of a folksong he'd learned as a child.

Then they started a new song. Between the strumming of stringed instruments, the pounding of drums, and the buzz of the crowd, it was hard to make out the words. Pietr did hear "shrell" and "cave," but most of the lyrics were indecipherable. He tried to get closer, but the crowd was too thick.

So Pietr focused on the musicians. He knew that a jarring, new kind of music was sweeping the city, and these young performers were obviously part of that trend. The song before they'd taken a familiar melody and turned it into something abrasive and loud. Even the colors of their baggy vests,

shirts, and trousers seemed chosen to clash rather than blend.

In spite of that there was something about the musicians Pietr did like. Perhaps it was the way their clothes mirrored his alienation, or maybe it was just the beat of their song. Whatever it was, he wanted to move and twitch to the music even if he didn't know what it was about. The fact that some of the words seemed to tie in with his adventure earlier in the day added to the bond he felt with the group.

That bond quickly faded with the next song. It started out ominously with one of the musicians strumming the same loud chord over and over again while another plucked out low, brooding notes and the percussionist shook something that hissed. The lyrics, once they did start, spoke of violence and hate. The beat and the low notes were so compelling that they tugged at Pietr in spite of the words.

The crowd stomped and howled when the song ended and cheered even more loudly when yet another began. It was even worse. It spoke of the murder and rape. Pietr had given in to the crowd's mood enough to move to the music, but while everyone else seemed to like it, he was dancing in defiance of it. Thinking of his father's murder, he pushed back whenever one of the youths near him bumped into him.

Appalled by his sudden urge to fight, Pietr pulled free from the music and left. It was just starting to rain as he stepped outside and quickly began to pour. No longer in the mood for getting wet, he ducked into the next tent. He was glad that pounding rain drowned out the music.

Pietr didn't like the ripe smell of caged animals and their droppings in the new tent, but he was stuck, so he began to look around. Most of the livestock was domestic, ranging in size from hand hens to several large, lumbering ploths in wooden pens, but there were wild animals, as well. It was one of these that drew Pietr in. A young fierce-looking shrell was in a cramped cage near the middle of the tent.

Pietr felt sorry for the creature. Its wingspan was probably wider than his arms, but it couldn't spread them because it was crammed into a cage with four bars to a side. Compared with its plight, his troubles seemed small. He stared at the shrell until he noticed a girl with dark hair and faintly green skin like his own on the far side of the cage.

Pietr had never seen this girl before. She was perhaps two or three years his junior and very raggedly dressed. Short and a bit too heavy for her height, she looked sad. He wanted to comfort her.

But he couldn't. Now that he'd found Shara he didn't want to get involved with anyone else. He looked away when the girl tried to lock eyes with him. He was still pretending not to see her when the classmates he'd encountered earlier stepped up to her.

Instead of recoiling, the girl seemed pleased. Flattered by the attention, she flirted with the young men and laughed at their jokes. Pietr retreated, but watched from a distance until the rain let up and the girl left with the youths. Unsure she knew how dangerous they were he trailed after her.

Pietr followed the group down streets slick with rain. Projecting the thought that he wasn't worth noticing, he lagged nearly a block behind until the young men steered the girl into an alley. Pietr nervously peered into the alley just in time to see a door close at the top of a long flight of stairs. There was a thunk, and then it was quiet except for sprinkles of rain.

If the girl had been older, or if she hadn't looked at him so sadly before the young men had swooped in on her, Pietr might have walked on. As it was, he felt compelled to try to help her. Trembling, he crept up the slippery wood stairs. He knew these youths, so he was going to try to crash their party.

At least that's what Pietr was thinking when he started up the stairs. His nerve failed once he reached the second story landing. Too scared to breathe, he peeked in through a small glass pane in the door. The sight of two of the young men pressing the girl against a kitchen counter and pawing at her clothes made him gasp. Her legs were fully exposed.

It was the first time Pietr had any woman's intimate place, let alone that of someone so young. Too stricken to move, he watched as the similarly bare third youth stepped into view and then fled down the stairs. At the bottom, Pietr pulled out his stone and hurled it up towards the door. His aim was good, better than he'd intended, for the sound of breaking glass instantly filled the night air.

The last shreds of his courage shattering like the glass, Pietr ran. He was so afraid of being hunted down and beaten by the enraged youths that he barely saw where he was going. At one point he glanced down saw what looked like Micklo's face reflected up from a puddle. He didn't stop running until he was home.

Exhausted but safe, Pietr shed his cloak and crawled into his bed. He tried to sleep, but he kept seeing the girl's face. He lay awake for hours, and when he did finally sleep, he dreamed of the maze. He back was in, but instead of being threatened by one dark figure he was being chased by a whole group of men in dark robes. Dozens more were issuing from rooms in the maze.

Pietr recognized one of the robed figures as Micklo, and then the scene changed. Pietr was back in his room, and Micklo was laughing at him. Pietr tried to explain that hadn't been able to save the girl because he'd been outnumbered, but Micklo wouldn't listen. He said there was a way to defeat anyone and then burst into flame.

THE INFERNO

(c1998 David Camp)

PART TWO : INTO THE SUN

1

"Are you ready?" Rankin asked.

Micklo nodded and followed his mentor out of the cloakroom, past the stairs to The Necromancer, and down a dank, torch-lit corridor to an empty cell. Micklo was glad the magician overseeing his apprenticeship was someone who understood math. It had accelerated his progress. Much of his time in the underground Drenga tunnels was wasted on chores like replacing torches and cleaning the latrine, but when he was shown something with numbers or a pattern he was able to see to its core. Being able to grasp what he was shown was important because he wasn't being shown very much. There was far more going on in these tunnels than he was being told about.

Hopefully today's lesson would be different. Micklo could sense a change in Rankin's bearing; a tension in the magician's walk that made it obvious this spell was special. Under Rankin's watchful eye, Micklo used chalk to draw a complex pattern on the floor and then set four candles at the corners of the pattern he had designed. Then he lit the candles and sat down in the middle of the design. As a final step he pulled out the ceremonial knife Rankin had given him. He was ready to begin.

It disturbed Micklo that he would have to cut himself. It also troubled him that he'd be chanting words he didn't understand. But Rankin was waiting, so Micklo drew the blade across his wrist hard enough to draw blood and then began to chant the words Rankin had given him. As Micklo's blood slowly dripped on the floor, the vibration in his chest from the long, drawn-out vowels made him dizzy. He felt like he was peering out at his wrist from a tunnel deep inside his head. Then he receded further into the tunnel and lost sight of the cell altogether.

Only it wasn't a tunnel Micklo fell back into, and it wasn't dark. The place he seemed to wake into was gray with patches of black and brown. He just couldn't focus on the patches. He was too dizzy. Only gradually did the spinning in his head slow enough for him to recognize the dark pattern as branches against a gray sky. He was standing in a forest staring up at some clouds. What startled him was who he was. He was staring up at the sky through Pietr's eyes.

Unaware that someone was in his head with him, Pietr resumed his search. He'd been able to find Torral and Shara the other times he'd looked for them, but he was having trouble this time. He'd spotted several herbs Torral had told him to watch for, but no trace of his friends. The link he thought he'd established with them was failing him.

Pietr continued towards the mountain looming ahead worried that something had happened to his friends. He was part way up the last foothill when he heard a sharp snap. Something large had stepped on a twig just beyond the crest of the hill. If it were moving towards him, it would soon be in sight.

Pietr crouched behind a boulder and waited. Within moments two natives armed with bows and arrows came into view. Pietr was part native himself, but that didn't make him feel safe. He was dressed like a city person, and dozens of people from the city had disappeared in these woods.

Pietr crouched down further hoping the two braves weren't part of a larger party. As they got closer, he tried to imagine himself part of the rock he was behind. Just when he thought he'd avoided detection, one of the braves stopped, stared in his direction, and ordered him to stand up. Pietr had to obey.

No sooner had Pietr stood up than he heard a twang from the other brave's bow. The next instant Pietr felt a burning pain in his wrist. The fire flared up through his arm to his head, and then he blacked out. The next thing he knew, he was on the ground staring up at Torral and Shara.

"What happened?" Pietr asked as he frantically felt for the wound that should have been in his wrist but wasn't.

"Bad magic," Torral said. "Drive bad magic away."

"Bad magic? But the arrow, what about the arrow?"

"No arrow. Drive bad magic away."

"That was you!" Pietr said, comprehending at last. His relief at not being wounded was tempered by the worried look in Shara's eyes. "Am I all right now?" he asked as he let Torral and Shara help him to his feet. The sensation of Shara's warm hands on his arm made him blush.

"Don't know yet," Torral said.

"You don't know!" Pietr said with a sharpness he regretted. It was hard enough facing his daemon alone. The prospect of losing Shara because of it was intolerable. Instead of being grateful to Torral Pietr felt betrayed. He felt as though the most awful thing about him had been laid bare before Shara's eyes.

"It's up to you."

"What can I do?" Pietr said, more scared, now, than angry.

"You must become your own master."

"How?"

"I think it's time for a vision quest."

"A vision quest?"

"Like when you flew out over the ocean, only longer, and by yourself."

"Then that's what I'll do."

"This is serious."

"I understand. I want to be like you. I'll do whatever you say."

"Not like me! You must be yourself. You must find your own way."

"I understand. I'll do whatever I have to."

"Very well. First, you must find a sancha root..."

"A sancha root?"

"You must find a sancha root. Then you must find a power place. You must build a fire, eat the root, and stare into the fire. A vision will follow."

"What do you mean by power place?"

"A place where you feel power. Do you know of such a place?"

"Your cave. I feel power there."

"It must be your own place."

"The only other places I can think of are too close to the city. Someone might find me, especially if build a fire."

"Look again. If no other place calls to you as strongly as the cave, then use it."

"All right, but what about the root? You haven't taught me about sancha roots."

Torral was already drawing a pale, dirty root the size of a finger from the pouch that hung by his side. As Pietr examined the root, Torral explained what the visible portion of the plant looked like and where it was likely to be found. Torral warned that there was a poisonous variety of the plant distinguishable from the good one only by its aura and its slightly wider leaves. Finding the right plant would be a test of how much Pietr had learned.

Wishing that he could have spend more time with his friends, especially Shara who was still eyeing him warily, Pietr said he understood and headed back down the slope. The arduous search that followed reinforced one of the things Pietr had learned, and that was how tedious being a shaman could be. Casually spotting herbs while hiking through the woods was one thing, but actively seeking out a rare and well-hidden plant was another. He tried to watch for the aura Torral had described, but he hadn't yet learned how to see auras so all that he got for his efforts were sore feet and the feeling that he would never be a shaman. It wasn't until mid-afternoon that he spotted some sancha root leaves, and

they were so withered he couldn't tell if they were the good kind or the bad. He still couldn't see an aura.

Pietr doubted that he'd find any more of the plants, and it was getting late, so he dug up one of the roots. It didn't feel dangerous and looked like the one Torral had shown him, so he stuck it in his sack. Then he stood up and glanced around trying to shake the feeling that he was being watched. He didn't see anyone, so he started towards the cave where he would be found if he got sick.

The memory of the trees and rocks he'd passed during his climb fresh in his mind, Pietr paused on the ledge outside the cave to catch his breath. Once inside, he set down the twigs and branches he'd gathered and sat on one of the mats. Even more than on previous visits he felt like he'd stepped backwards in time. The mats, pots, and charred wood around him made Tarnahue seem like part of another life.

Pietr wished he could rest, but Torral and Shara would be returning soon so he pulled a knife from his sack and began to shave some kindling. Then got out the kindling stick he'd made a few days before and set about trying to start a fire. He nearly rubbed his hands raw in the process, but was eventually able to produce a wisp of smoke. He nursed the tiny flame into a fire and then got out the root.

Pietr washed the root with the last of his water and then bit into it. The taste was surprisingly sweet. He waited to see if he was going to get sick and then ate the rest of the root. When he finally did feel something it was an overpowering urge to lie down.

Pietr remembered that he was supposed to stare into the fire and strained to keep his eyes open so he could. Soon he was pressing so heavily into his mat that he felt like stone. Too heavy to move, he was aware of the fire and nothing more. All else seemed like a dream...

A dream that came back to him in crystalline fragments. From the frightened look in Shara's eyes to a patch of mold he'd seen on a log, his memories felt so heavy that they began to weigh him down into the floor of the cave. Its surface didn't resist. Sinking into it, he found that it was made up of more memories and scenes.

Conscious despite the dream-like quality of what he was experiencing, Pietr sank deeper into the earth experiencing each scene vividly before dropping down to the next. Some of the scenes were rigid, but others were fluid, changing like the maze in his dreams. The maze itself took shape around him. No longer just a string of empty rooms, it began to seem like something living that had swallowed him up.

And all the while Pietr was sinking deeper into the ground, closer to the molten rock at its core. As he sank the rooms grew more ominous, as though colored by an evil presence. It was the same presence he always felt in the maze, and it was getting closer. He was sinking to the depths where it dwelled.

Pietr was so alarmed by the presence he barely noticed that many of the scenes interspersed with the rooms were unfamiliar. The maze was still there most of the time, but even it looked different. Its walls were smoother and there were designs etched into them. When they fell away he was on the parched street of a city with beleaguered slaves and merchants in colorful robes.

Something about this ancient city felt wrong. Pietr half expected to find his daemon lurking among its tan, dusty streets. Instead he rounded a corner and caught sight of the temple on Micklo's wall. The triangular shape in the center of it evoked a strange feeling of pride.

Sensing that if he stayed here he would forget who he was, Pietr struggled back up towards the cave with the fire. Something grabbed at him, but he pulled free and clawed his way towards the floor of the cave. As he climbed the city grew dim and then fell away. He caught a glimpse of Torral leaning over him and then lapsed into a dreamless sleep.

Micklo shook his head and glanced around at the walls of the fire-lit cell. At first he thought he still

in the maze he'd viewed through Pietr's eyes, but then he saw the candles he'd lit. They'd burned down, but it were where he'd left them, as was the knife he'd used to cut his wrist. Rankin was still in the chamber.

"Again you surprise me," Rankin said in a voice Micklo couldn't ignore. "Your trance was deep. What did you see?"

"A great deal," Micklo said half against his will. "It was like I was someone else."

"Someone else?"

"I saw a temple, a Dorienga temple, and I felt like it was mine."

"Yours?" Rankin said, stepping in closer.

"It was just a dream," Micklo said, regaining control over his voice. "I have a picture of a temple in my room, and it was what I saw."

"Are you sure that's all there was to it?" Rankin said. "For a moment there you sounded awfully proud."

"It was just a dream."

"Were there people in this dream of yours?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Were any of them priests?"

"Priests? I remember slaves and merchants, but it was only a dream. I didn't focus on anyone."

"I'm not sure it was just a dream," Rankin said. "The spell was intended to jar you loose, and you were entranced a long time. You may have traveled back in time. The fact that you saw a Dorienga temple is significance. Only the Grand Mage has gone back that far."

"The Grand Mage?"

"Yes. And I'm sure he'd like to hear what you saw."

"But it was only a dream!" Micklo protested. Whatever pride he might have felt at seeing the temple was overshadowed by the thought of having the vision ripped from his mind. Not only was his vision likely to be laid bare, so were his true feelings towards the Grand Mage. He might fall under the magician's spell and never wake up.

That fear was in Micklo's mind as he accompanied Rankin to the Grand Mage's cell. Like a condemned prisoner, he wound his way through the tunnels to a place where all of the cells had wood doors. All-too-quickly Rankin was knocking on and opening one of the doors. Then Micklo was trying to focus on the books that lined the walls instead of on the man behind the wood desk.

Rankin told the Grand Mage what Micklo had said, and then Micklo felt the full weight of the Grand Mage's keen glare. Still stiff from sitting for so long, Micklo tried to explain about his picture and how it was the cause of what he'd seen.

"And why do you think this picture should have such an effect on you?" the Grand Mage asked, drawing Micklo out by the sheer force of his voice.

"I don't know. Perhaps it was the design."

"Design?"

"The sixteen squares on one of the walls."

"Ah yes. That design. A pattern we know very well. That's why I think there's more to this vision of yours than you're letting on."

"There isn't. I swear!"

"But your eyes say differently. I can see you're hiding something, and, given how well you're doing it, I can also see that you're very strong. I've been waiting for the appearance of an old enemy. I thought he would appear in another form, something more primitive, but you remind me of him. So tell me again, what did you see, and how did it make you feel?"

"It..."

"Did this temple look familiar, like a place you knew but had forgotten about?"

"It..."

"Was there a young woman in this dream of yours, a slender, dark-haired girl?"

A chill came over Micklo at the mention of a dark-haired girl. All he could think of was the young native woman he'd seen through Pietr's eyes. But everything was so mixed up that he wasn't sure if he'd really been Pietr or dreamed the whole thing. He struggled to make sense of his vision. Then Grand Mage spoke again, in a deeper, more commanding voice, and Micklo unwillingly described what he'd seen.

2

As the gray chill of fall gave way to the first white snow of winter, Pietr continued to rendezvous with Torral and Shara. They still made him return to the city, and that led to the feeling that he was leading two separate lives. One was filled with trees, herbs, and people who could seemingly change their form, and the other revolved around his cramped room and his job. Some nights as he sat alone in his room he couldn't help but wonder if he'd dreamed his other life up.

But he hadn't. Torral and Shara were real, and the attraction that Pietr felt towards Shara made it hard for him to concentrate on anything else. All too often he'd be thinking of Shara when he should have been listening to Torral. He'd never given her the sculpture, deciding it was too impractical, or told her how he felt. They talked, but only about magic and herbs.

As for his learning, Pietr was making strides despite Shara's distracting beauty. Some skills, like seeing auras, seemed beyond him, while others, like using his mind to help start fires, came naturally. When he wasn't with his friends, he was reading Micklo's books. If he had one regret, it was that he hadn't been more insistent about getting The Void back. Micklo had lost it, and a new copy hadn't come in.

Some nights as he lay in bed Pietr wondered why what little he'd read of The Void had affected him like it had. There'd been allusions to a guiding spirit in it as well as a daemon, and sometimes he wondered if he didn't have both in his life. Ever since his vision of soaring over the sea like a shrell he'd begun to see a large white shrell in both his dreams and the woods. Following it in the woods had helped him find what he was looking for.

But Shara, The Void, and magic weren't the only things Pietr thought about. He also wondered about the father he was trying so hard to be like. In spite of a growing awareness of how his father had lived, Pietr still didn't know much about what his father had been like. Torral wasn't much help. He only said that his former student had been bright and learned very fast.

It was growing frustration with Torral's silence on the subject that led Pietr to seek out his grandfather one night after work. Pietr had stayed away from his grandfather for more than a year, but now he had questions to ask. His mother had warned against such questions, but he no longer cared. If he didn't ask them soon he might not get the chance.

The fear that he might already be too late tugged at Pietr as he entered the neighborhood of low, wooden houses where he'd grown up in. It seemed like only days since he'd walked these streets with their scattered trees and tightly packed cobbles. Painful memories, including his mother's death, welled up as he approached his grandfather's house. He longed for the warmth of a woman's touch.

Pulling his cloak more tightly around him, Pietr stepped up to his grandfather's door. There he paused. The lights were on, but he had to knock several times before he heard someone approach. Then that person was on the other side of the door, and it swung open an inch.

"So, you came back," a familiar, raspy voice said through the crack. "What do you want?"

"To talk."

"Talk?"

"Yes."

"Well, come in, then. I can't hold this open all night."

"Thank you," Pietr said, stepping into the warm entryway. The smell of hot food reminded him that

living here hadn't been all bad. He hadn't always been hungry like he was now. He just hadn't been able to be himself.

"What did you want to talk about?" an obviously irritated man who looked shorter and more withered than Pietr remembered asked he as closed the door.

"My father," Pietr said, afraid to look the old man in the eye. "I know you didn't like him, but I've been wondering what he was like, and you're the only person I could think of to ask."

"If I didn't like that monster, it was with good reason," the old man said, spitting out his words like shooa seeds. "He was a beast, a dirty, filthy beast. Your mother was young, and he took advantage of her. I was glad when he disappeared."

"I shouldn't have come, then," Pietr said stiffly. "I know you'd rather my mother had loved someone else, but my father was what he was, and I am what I am. I thought that maybe after all these years you'd come to accept that."

"Never! I'll never accept him! Nor will I forgive your mother for wasting her life. I may not be very smart, but my father was, and so was your mother. She could have anyone in this city, but she was too wild. It was all I could do to cover her tracks so you weren't killed."

"You protected me?"

"Of course," the old man said, sounding frail in spite of his bitterness. "You may think I hated you, but I didn't. If I was hard on you, it was for your own good. You're smart like my father, but you're too wrapped up in stupid things like art. I didn't want you to end up like your mother. I wanted you to be strong, so I did what was best."

"But you protected me? You kept my father's identity a secret?"

"Yes."

"What about him? Did you protect him, too?"

"What do you mean?"

"Were you just glad that he disappeared, or did you help it to happen?"

"He left. That's all I know. But by then the damage was done."

"Then I guess there's nothing for us to talk about," Pietr said sadly. "I won't bother you anymore."

"Wait!" the old man said, moving to block Pietr's departure. "I know we didn't get along, that I was harder on you than you think I should have been, but I'm old. I don't have much time left, and I don't want to spend those years thinking my only grandson hates me. I can't tell you what you want to know, but I know someone who can."

"You do?"

"Yes. You remember Morta, your mother's friend from work?"

"Yes."

"Try her. Your mother used to tell her a lot more than she ever told me. If there's one person who'd know about your father, it would be her."

"You're right. I'd forgotten about her."

"And one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Be careful. It doesn't matter that my father was an influential man. If the wrong people find out what you are they'll kill you, and I'd hate to see that. I really would."

"I appreciate your concern. It must be hard for you considering what I am."

"It's not like you think. I don't hate you, just the monster who ruined your mother's life."

"But he's part of me."

"Don't say that! You could be so much more if you wanted to."

"I have to go now," Pietr said, pushing past his grandfather and opening the door. "I want to visit Morta. Does she still live near the packing house?"

"I think so."

"Well, good-bye, then."

"You don't want something to eat?" the old man said, fear now clouding his voice.

"No. I won't bother you anymore."

"That sounds so final."

"I'll see you again when I can."

"Well, good-bye, then."

"Good-bye."

Feeling like a tremendous weight had been lifted from his shoulders, Pietr took one final look at the man he used to fear and then stepped out into the cold. On the slippery gravel path he shuddered as years of anger spilled out. He felt pity for the old man, but he also felt rage. Why did his only relative have to hate the part of himself he prized most?

Pietr suppressed his anger as best he could and thought about Morta. He wondered if he should seek her out after so many years, but was pretty sure she was someone he could trust. She'd been so nice to him as a child he regretted not having sought her out sooner. Her cheerful nature and homemade breads could have eased the pain of his youth.

Pietr wasn't able to dwell on the matter, for the factory and warehouse district he soon entered was a rough neighborhood. It was the supper hour, but there were still enough figures in doorways and on the street to make him uncomfortable. He'd been attacked in this neighborhood, so it was a while he could focus on the buildings instead of on the hulking figures he passed. When he did finally look at the bleak buildings and smokestacks, he was reminded of why he wanted to leave this dreary town.

Morta's apartment was a low brick structure just beyond a large packinghouse. Pietr found the building easily enough and ducked inside. The tiny glass ornament he remembered was still dangling from her doorframe, so he knocked. He wondered if his mother's friend would recognize him now that he'd grown up.

"Who is it?" a high-pitched voice asked.

"Pietr, Clair's son, I'd like to talk."

"Just a minute."

There was a click, and then the heavy door swung inward to reveal a shorter, plumper woman than the one Pietr expected. Her hair was grayer, too, but her colorful garments were the same. Smelling of strong perfume, she squinted at Pietr and then smiled and beckoned him in. While he was staring at the cloth tapestries that covered the walls, Morta closed and re-locked the door.

"I was beginning to wonder when you'd come," Morta said as the dizzying smells and colors of her living room made Pietr reel.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain, but first let me get you some bread. You look starved"

Pietr smiled. While Morta was limping slightly off to the kitchen, he shed his boots and cloak and then stepped all the way into the living room and sat in one of the thick chairs. When Morta returned with tea and an assortment of breads, he helped her set the tray on the table in the middle of the room and then helped himself to a slice. Seeing that Morta was waiting for him to eat, he took a bite.

"I was beginning to wonder when you'd come," Morta repeated as Pietr swallowed his bread and sipped at his tea. "Your mother left some things here for you here."

"She did?" Pietr said, forgetting his hunger.

"Some of your father's things. She thought they'd be safe with me."

Pietr gasped. He'd been hoping for information about his father. The prospect of actually getting his hands on some things that had belonged to this mysterious man exceeded Pietr's wildest dreams. They would make his father seem far more real.

"I'll get them, but first tell me how you are and what you've been up to. You've changed a great deal."

Containing his impatience as best he could, Pietr described how he'd endured school and life with his grandfather until he'd been old enough to move out. Without telling that he, like his mother, had

met someone in the forest, he explained that magic had recently become the focus of his life. He said that curiosity about his father had prompted him to make this visit. He was surprised to find Morta nodding as though this was what she expected.

"I'm sorry I can't tell you much about your father," Morta said when Pietr finished. "I never met him. I just know he was kind, and that you have his eyes."

"His eyes?"

"That's what your mother said, that they were deep-set like yours and that looking into them was like looking into another world. Tell me, have you noticed anything unusual about yourself lately, any new abilities or talents?"

"Yes, but I don't think you'd understand."

"Don't be so sure. Your mother told me some very strange things."

"What kind of things?"

"About your father, and about herself, too."

"Herself?"

"Yes. She had talents, too, you know. Living in this city was as hard for her as it's been for you. That's why she was drawn to your father, that and the fact that he was a kind man. With parents like them, I'd be surprised if you weren't strange yourself."

"I do seem to have a talent for magic, but I thought it was from my father."

"Not all of it. I can see a great deal of your mother in you, too. Maybe it's easier for you to want to be like your father. He was a man, after all, and a mystery, but you're also like your mother. You have the same restlessness."

"I guess I never really thought of her as being unhappy. She was just my mother."

"Well she was a remarkable person. There's as much of her in you as your father, and perhaps something else, too. I don't know what your talents are, but it's important to keep them hidden. There are people who'd kill you if they knew what you are."

"I know. I also know they killed my father, and I plan to make them pay for their crime."

"Don't say that! Your mother used to talk like that."

"She did?"

"Yes. She was very angry. Try as she did to shield you, I'm afraid she may have passed some of her hate on to you."

"I don't need her for that. There are plenty of people who've made me feel unwanted all by themselves."

"I suppose they have," Morta said, sounding sad. "Go ahead and finish your bread. I'll get your father's things."

While Morta was out of the room for a second time Pietr ate some more bread, but without much enthusiasm. He was too agitated to sit still. Not only was he about to get his hands on some of his father's things, he'd also learned something unsettling about his mother. Could she really have been as hateful as Morta said? It didn't seem possible. She'd always been gentle with him. He was aware of his dark side, but he thought it was from his grandfather, not from his mother. The thought of her wishing ill towards others made him feel strange.

The flimsy box Morta returned with excited Pietr like no other present he'd ever gotten. Barely breathing, he watched as she set the box next to the tray. Still holding his breath, he opened the box. Inside he found a knife, a medicine pouch like Torral and Shara's, and a weathered hide vest. "Mind if I try this on?" he said as he held up the vest, noticing the outline of a shrell on the back. When Morta offered no objection, he stood and slipped the vest on over his shirt.

It fit. Wearing it made Pietr feel like a full-blooded native for the first time in his life. He stood there for a moment adjusting the shirt he had on beneath it and then turned to Morta. "Did my mother say anything when she gave these to you, anything about how they should be used?"

"Only that you'd know. I can sense things about people. It's the gift I have, and I can sense that

there are people around you who can help. Is this true?"

"Yes."

"I can also sense that one of them is more than just a friend, that she's like what your father was to your mother. You've found your mate"

Pietr blushed. Hearing Shara spoken of in such an intimate way made him long to be with her. He felt an overpowering urge to be outside making his way back to her. The room, which had seemed cozy moments earlier, now seemed too warm, too full of sweet smells. He had to get out. It was closing in.

So he apologized, thanked Morta, and left as quickly as he could. Back out on the street he found the stench of the packing plant intolerable. Every sensation seemed magnified, from the deafening crunch of the snow beneath his feet to the glow of the streetlights. His vest seemed to be affecting him like an herb. He felt like he was in one of his dreams.

But he wasn't. The air was stinging his lungs, and the two men glaring at him from the end of the street were far too real. As soon as Pietr started in the other direction, they began to close in. When two men appeared at the other end of the street blocking his way, his wariness turned to fear. He tried to seem invisible like he had on several other occasions, but he was too scared. He couldn't make the men go away. Panicking, he ducked into a dark alleyway. When the men reached the alley, they let out a shout. Their prey had disappeared.

3

Micklo slumped down exhausted on his chair and stared at the books on his desk. He'd been pushing himself hard, studying every book on magic he could find, because the Drenga weren't helping him much. It was obvious that they didn't trust him. Except for his initiation they hadn't allowed him to participate in any rituals. Rankin kept saying that he was too young.

Micklo wasn't sure he wanted to participate in any of the late mysterious night ceremonies, but he didn't like being excluded. It made him wonder if the Grand Mage had seen through his charade. It also made him wonder about the special sacrifice he'd overheard two men talking about. It was apparently to take place in the spring and involved a young woman. The fact that he wasn't being told about it made him nervous.

If only he hadn't let the Grand Mage get the best of him then maybe he wouldn't feel so ill at ease. He'd considered trying to leave the Drenga, but he knew that they'd come after him. Since he couldn't leave them, the next best thing was to pretend to be loyal and learn what he could. He wanted to find out what they knew of the Dorienga and why the temple was important to them.

If there was one thing Micklo did feel good about it was the fact that he'd glimpsed the Dorienga temple in a way only one of the black-robed men had. These modern day imitators had copied much from the Dorienga, even going so far as to carve the temple's four-by-four grid into an altar, but none of them had thought to turn that grid into a three-dimensional design. Micklo suspected that doing so had triggered his visions. He suspected he'd stumbled onto an ancient design, and that by reproducing the design he'd forged a link with the world mind the designer had been in touch with.

But there was still so much to learn, so much about the Dorienga and their design that Micklo didn't understand. He'd studied what he could, but the closest he'd come to finding anything useful had been in Pietr's book. It had spoken of a world mind, but even it had been vague. It had said that consciousness was subject to laws and that those laws could be bent. That was something Micklo didn't like. He wanted a world where rules always applied.

So he'd delved deeper into the issue, focusing on consciousness its relationship to energy. Only some of the things he was beginning to experience were getting hard to explain. He was beginning to have visions of the Dorienga girl the Grand Mage had mentioned, and he was sure he knew her even though she was from another time. Other dreams were beginning to bring him face-to-face with a

priest who reminded him of the Grand Mage. The priest was shorter and darker-skinned than the Grand Mage, but something about his eyes was the same.

This could be explained if Micklo had made contact with the same world mind the sculpture's original designer had been in touch with, if he'd somehow dredged up memories stored in that world mind. But the fact that he also seemed to know the green-skinned girl he'd seen through Pietr's eyes was harder to explain. Seeing her more than once was beside the point. The familiarity he felt was from some other time. Frustrated, Micklo closed his eyes and tried to view her again. There was a jolt, a shift in his surroundings, and then he was in the woods scratching at the ground with a stick. The green-skinned young woman and her teacher were standing near by.

"Like this?" Pietr asked as he shook a sudden image of Micklo's desk from his mind and looked up from the circle, flames, and figure he'd etched in the frozen dirt.

"That will do," Torral said, his breath coming out in icy puffs. "And now the hair."

Eager to see if he'd mastered Torral's warming spell as well as the invisibility spell that had saved him the night before, Pietr yanked out one of his hairs. Then he blew on it and set it on the vested figure. After covering both with kindling, he tried to start a fire using his mind and a stick. He closed his eyes and rubbed, envisioning flames until a whiff of smoke told him they were real.

The exertion would have been enough to make Pietr warm, but the heat that enveloped him the hair burned was greater than what friction alone could have produced. It continued even after the hair was gone. Torral and Shara looked pleased.

"You learn quickly," Torral said. "Each shaman has his gifts. The drawing seems to be one of yours."

"I've always liked to draw."

"The lines are important, but the real magic comes from within. The lines just help it along. You're learning that."

"Have I learned enough to join you, then?" Pietr said, voicing the question that had been on his mind since being chased the night before. "With this spell I can keep from freezing, and I know what plants to look for, so I could survive on my own if I had to. That is what you've been waiting for, isn't it, for me to learn how to survive on my own? Well now I think that I can."

"That's one of the things I've been waiting for, yes," Torral said in a disparaging voice, "but not the only one."

"It's not?"

"No. I have to be sure that you're like us, that you won't bring the city with you."

"Oh, but I won't! There may be something of the city in me. That can't be helped. It's where I grew up. But this is where I belong. I don't feel safe in the city anymore. Can't you cast your stones and see if I'm ready? I'm afraid of what might happen if I go back."

"Afraid?"

"Yes. I could have been killed last night. I'd never really thought that possible. I thought that if I'd survived this long I could always come and go as I pleased, but now I'm not sure. If my father could be killed, then maybe I could be, too."

"Very well. I'll see what the stones have to say, but it will take time. I'll have to prepare."

"I could show him the muckberry patch we passed," Shara said, glancing from Torral to Pietr and then back again. "That way we won't disturb you."

"Very well, but don't be too long."

Pietr followed Shara off the raised clearing he'd chosen for his spell and into the brush that surrounded it. Morta's words about finding his "mate" filled his head as Shara's hair blew in the wind. Walking so close behind her, he couldn't help but notice how alluringly her hips were curved and how graceful she was. He longed for the day when he'd be able to touch her.

At the base of a slope Shara angled north, following a gully until a jagged shelf of rock came into view. As they drew nearer, Pietr noticed branches and specks of red among the uneven rocks. Shara

was slowing, so Pietr realized they'd reached their goal. He remembered Torral telling him about muckberries, but he'd never seen any before.

"They're for treating pest bites," Shara said as they stepped up to the thorny branches dotted with small, withered fruit.

"Should I pick some?"

"Yes. They're good to have."

Still warm from his spell, Pietr slipped off his cloak to get at the pouch he now wore under it. As he handed his cloak to Shara, he noticed that she was staring at his new pouch. Torral had examined it, but she hadn't gotten a good look. She seemed fascinated.

"That was your father's?" she said, her eyes still fixed on the pouch.

"Yes."

"It makes you look different, more like a shaman somehow."

"It makes me feel different."

"Sometimes I look at you and I see someone else, someone who scares me, but not now. Your father's things make you look like the person I saw when I found you. How is it you can look dangerous one moment and harmless the next? Are you trying to trick us?"

"No. I wouldn't hurt you."

"Then who is this other person I see? Which one is really you?"

"This is me. I'm just so used to concealing myself from people in the city that it's hard to let the real me out. It would be so much easier if I could live with you and Torral in the woods. Then I could be myself all of the time."

"Then I hope you can join us. I think I'd like being with you more. There are so many things I want to show you. It's so long since I've had a friend my own age."

"There are things I'd like to show you, too," Pietr said, "but I can't. They're in the city, and I'm not going to be able to bring them along."

"What kinds of things?"

"Things I've made. I was going to be an artist, you know. I've made some very pretty things, but they're too bulky to drag all over, so I'm going to have to leave them behind."

"That's too bad. You can make other things, though, things you haven't even thought of, yet. If you like art, you can use it for magic. I've heard spells that were cast by painting on hides. You could do something like that."

"Maybe."

"Can I see that?" Shara said, draping Pietr's cloak over a forearm and reaching for the pouch with her other hand. "I'd like to see what's inside."

"Of course."

Opening it, Shara carefully sifted through the pouch until she found what she was looking for. Delicately lifting out a tiny inner pouch that held some powder, she warned Pietr that he should be careful with it. She said it had been mind-mixed.

"Mind-mixed?"

"Torral hasn't told you about that, yet. It's hard. It takes an ability to become what you're mixing while you're mixing it. There aren't many that can do this. Those who can are able to make strong medicines. I think this one's for visions. I can tell by holding it that it's strong. It could kill you."

"You can tell that just by holding it?"

"Yes. That's one of my gifts. I could tell there was something like this in your pouch just by looking at it. Now that I can feel that it's even stronger than I thought."

"I couldn't see or feel anything like that when I looked through the pouch last night."

"You're not used to looking for it. Here, try it again, only this time try to sense what's inside. Try to become the powder."

Pietr took the tiny pouch from Shara, and this time he did feel something, a faint tingle similar to

what he was feeling from his warming spell. Only this was more of a vibration, and it was just in his hand. The sack seemed to be trembling, almost as though it was alive. "Did you do something to this?" he asked, puzzled that he'd missed it before.

"No. You're just looking for it."

"It feels like it's vibrating."

"Yes," Shara said, brushing some hair from her face. "It will be fun when we can spend more time together. There are many things like this I want to show you."

"I'm looking forward to it. I like being with you."

"And I like being with you. It's the other person I see that makes me uncomfortable. I don't know if you look like that as a camouflage or if you really are someone else. I don't know you well enough, yet."

"I want you to know me. It's just that I'm so used to having to hide that it's hard to let the real me out. I've spent my life among people who don't like me."

"I do. Just be who you are. The rest will take care of itself."

"Is there anyone special in your life?" Pietr said, his heart racing as he at last began to ask what he'd wanted to ask for so long.

"No."

"No one waiting for your return?"

"No. I'm more like you than you realize. Most of the children I grew up with were afraid of me."

The pain in Shara's eyes made Pietr want to comfort her, but he held back. She'd just spoken of her mistrust of him, so he wasn't sure how she would react. He was just as worried she might think him cold if he did nothing, so he reached out and squeezed her free hand. When she responded by sending a pulse of warmth into his hand, he leaned in for a kiss. The contact was light, barely more than a touch, but combined with the energy passing through their hands made him feel loved. Amazed that she really did like him, he drew back and looked into her eyes. The pain that he'd seen there was gone.

"I think we should go back, now," Shara said, giving Pietr's hand a squeeze and then letting go. "Torrall's waiting for us."

"I suppose," Pietr said reluctantly.

The walk back to the clearing was uneventful. Pietr was too wrapped up in what had passed between him and Shara to notice anything. The kiss had been his first intimate contact with Shara, and yet, there'd been something familiar about it, a sense of experiencing something he'd experienced with her before. It was as if he had kissed her before, if not in a dream, then in some other life. His fear was that now that he'd found her again, she would be taken from him. He had the horrible feeling that something bad was about to happen.

As a result, Pietr was terribly nervous as he accompanied Shara to the clearing and saw that Torrall had assembled a pile of stones. The two young lovers looked on silently as Torrall drew several figures in the dirt and then scooped up some of the stones. As Pietr and Shara continued to watch, Torrall began to moan and sway back and forth. Then he abruptly scattered the stones so wildly that one of them ended up on the figure Pietr had etched.

"These stones speak of danger," Torrall said after a time. "And of great magic. Never before have they spoken of such magic. It's like a whirlwind, a storm that rips time apart. I can see fire and death, but none of it makes any sense. I can only tell you that we can't stay here anymore. It isn't safe."

"You say we," Pietr said. "Does that mean I can come along with you?"

"You should leave with us, yes, that much is clear. You should ready yourself."

"Now?"

"Yes."

Pietr's heart leaped. This was what he'd been waiting for, and yet now that the moment had come, he felt scared. "You said I should ready myself. Does that mean I should go back for my things? I was going to bring some things along."

"Go back if you must, but be fast. We will wait in the cave."

"I'll hurry."

"And you must promise me something."

"What?"

"If anything happens to me, you two must look after each other. You need to be together."

"Of course!" Pietr and Shara said at the same time.

"Is something going to happen to you?" Shara added in an alarmed voice.

"I am old. My journey is almost over."

"But is something going to happen to you?" Shara repeated.

"I don't know. Great change awaits."

"I won't let anything happen to you! I'll stop it."

The fear in Shara's eyes almost made Pietr change his mind about getting his things. Part of him wanted badly to get the things he thought he'd need, but another part was reluctant to leave his friends. He felt so uncertain that he almost turned around at the foot of the low hill, but instead of stopping he walked on as fast as he could. He sped through the woods like a ghost.

The sun was low by the time Pietr reached the city, and that added to his anxiety. It would be dark when he returned to the mountain, and that would make finding the cave hard. But it would be dark whether he turned around now or kept going, so he continued on to his apartment and began to sort through his things. He pulled out only the most practical items, utensils and clothing it would be hard to replace, and ignored the rest.

Once Pietr had stuffed as much into his sack as he could, he rolled up the blanket from his bed and tied it to his sack. Then he surveyed his room. The thing he felt worst about leaving was the sculpture he'd almost to given to Shara. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered if it wasn't the real reason he'd come back. If he didn't give it to her now, he'd never get another chance.

Feeling that he had to make up his mind, Pietr decided to bring the sculpture along. It could be left in the cave if it was too bulky to carry farther than that. He was about to pick it up when he noticed that one of the strips of wood had come loose. He didn't want to give Shara something that was broken, so he ripped off his cloak and sat down to repair the sculpture.

As Pietr sat waiting for cement to set, he realized how much his life was going to change. His art, his bed, store-bought food, all would be ripped away along with the things he didn't like. The sight of his books made him feel sad. From now on he'd have nothing to read but tracks in the snow and clouds overhead.

Pietr thought about the people that he'd be meeting, too. Mixing with full-blooded natives would be hard, especially if they viewed him with as much suspicion as people in the city had. The thing that made facing a new culture worthwhile was the thought of being with Shara. He blew on the loose piece of wood she would like his present.

4

It took Pietr longer than he planned to fix the sculpture. While he was waiting for the first piece of wood to set he noticed others that were a little loose decided to fix them, too. Satisfied, at last, that the sculpture was ready, he put on his cloak and grabbed his bundle and left. It was awkward trying to carry both the bundle and sculpture, but bringing along his final piece of art made it easier to abandon the rest.

Pietr tried not to think about the time that he'd wasted as he raced towards the edge of town. Projecting the thought that he wasn't worth noticing, he sped past dozens of bundled figures without drawing a single stare. By the time he reached the woods his legs ached, but he felt safe. There was nothing between him and the mountain now but trees and snow.

The stars were so bright that Pietr had little trouble picking out the dark trees against the crusted

snow. Hindered only by the brush that kept snagging his cloak, he scrambled up one hill after another on his way to the mountain. He wanted to make up for the time he'd lost, but his legs were too tired. It was all he could do to keep going at all.

Because much of his attention was focused on his own footing, Pietr didn't notice the trail of multiple boot prints near the clearing until he was almost on it. A sound made him stop in his tracks, but it was just a branch creaking in the wind. An instant later he'd dropped his things and started to run. The boot prints continued on towards the cave, and he wanted to get there first.

Pietr slipped more than once in his haste, but he was too scared to feel much pain. What he couldn't ignore was his fatigue. He could run, but only in spurts. By the time he began climbing he could no longer run at all.

Trying to find his way in the dark further slowed Pietr. The men had taken his usual path, so he had to scramble up over rocks wherever he could. He did hear voices once point, but he couldn't tell whether they were going up or coming down. He couldn't tell whether he was passing them or already too late.

After what seemed like an eternity Pietr finally found the ledge with the cave. The sight of trampled snow stabbed at him like a knife, but he called out anyway. No one answered, so he crawled into the cave. There was just enough light from the scattered embers of a fire to reveal Torral's limp form.

Pietr tried to rouse his teacher, but couldn't. A blow to the old man's head had taken his life. Pietr sagged to the ground feeling as though he was to blame. If he hadn't returned to the city Torral wouldn't have been trapped in the cave.

It took the sight of Shara's pouch to get Pietr moving again. Finding Torral's body was bad enough. The thought of Shara being dragged off was even worse. Frantic to catch up with her Pietr scrambled back out of the cave. He didn't know how he could wrest her away from five or six men, but he'd do what he could.

Following a trampled trail down the mountain wasn't as difficult as climbing had been, but it was more treacherous, and more than once Pietr came close to flying off of a ledge. After one particularly painful fall he decided to be more careful. He continued to move cautiously even after he reached the base of the mountain. He wanted to catch the men by surprise.

It was during a stretch where Pietr wasn't being careful that he was caught by surprise. A dark figure sprang from behind a tree brandishing a club. Pietr veered just enough for the club to miss him and sped on. The stocky attacker couldn't keep up.

What followed was a blur. Pietr was closer to the spot where he'd dropped his things than he realized and ended up kicking his sculpture. Unnerved by the sound of the glass smashing against a tree, he raced on. He ran until his legs gave out.

Too dazed to think clearly, Pietr raised his head from the snow and saw that the forest had changed. Where there had been just one man, dozens of shadowy figures now flitted about. Pietr wiped his eyes, but the phantoms remained. They were like the one he'd seen in the fog the day he'd found the gray stone.

Desperate to escape and save Shara, Pietr ripped open his pouch. He was exhausted and needed something that would give him new strength. He didn't remember Shara's warning about the mind-mixed powder until after he'd swallowed too much. Almost instantly he began to feel as though he was dreaming and about to wake up.

It was at the very instant Pietr let himself wonder whether he was awake or dreaming that the rocks and snow around him began to slip away. He tried to clutch at the ground, but his hands passed through it. Hoping this was a dream, he tried to wake up. He tried to wake to a world where Torral and Shara were safe.

Roaring flames sprang up around Pietr as the forest fell away. Recognizing the flames, as though they'd been there all along, he in a huge fire. There were scenes in the flames, but he couldn't focus on

them. They were shifting and swirling too fast.

Even more frantic to escape this fire than he had been to wake from the forest, Pietr tried to concentrate on the scenes. For as long as a second or two he'd be in a room or on a strange street, but then the roaring would return, and he'd be back in the flames. No matter how real the room or street might feel, it would fall away. It would peel away like the forest had, and he'd be in the fire again.

Pietr felt trapped, caught in a horror he couldn't escape. There was only one scene potent enough to hold him, and it terrified him. It was a room with a door that opened into a void. If he stayed in that room he would get sucked through the door and would die.

But he didn't have much choice. Each time the room coalesced around him he was closer to the door, closer to the void beyond it. He knew that this was what death was, plunging through this door into nothingness. His horror turned to panic when he realized that he'd already plunged through the door. He was only remembering being alive.

Pietr was falling. The flames licking at him were so familiar that he wondered if anything else had ever been real. His life in Tarnahue might have been real, but that was before he'd died. Ever since swallowing the poison he'd been trying to relive his life so he wouldn't cease to exist.

But it was hard. There were so many memories, and they were shifting so fast. Anything was better than this chaos, so he embraced a new scene. As if having actually dropped from one floor in a building to another, he woke with a start on the bed of a small, cluttered room. At first, he thought he was at his grandfather's, in the bed the old man had begrudgingly allowed him to use after his mother had died, but then his eyes focused on his drawings and glass sculptures, and his memory returned. He was no longer the child who'd been shunned because he looked like a native. He was on his own, now, a budding artist with no one to answer to but...

But something was pulling at him, and it hurt. It always jarred him when he was torn out of one scene and sucked into another. Everything was so tangled. He had no words for it, no understanding of what he was seeing. But that was all right. He was safe, now, protected by the arms of the big-soft-warm person who was lifting him from his crib. The bad things were fading, replaced by the smoke of the hut and the soft coo of the big-soft-warm person's voice. This was where he belonged. But something was wrong! The bad things were pulling at him again, tearing at him like that awful roar he remembered from somewhere, and it...

Burned! It always burned when he was torn out of one scene and left gasping for air in another. And the roar! The roar was deafening. When his vision cleared, he was standing over a body that looked familiar in a cell that looked familiar, and he felt trapped. He felt as though he'd been standing over this robed body with his hands tied for ages, and he didn't know how to escape. Then another feeling came over him, the sensation that something was pulling at him, and as the sickening roar once again rose up around him, the cell gave way...

Peeled away like the skin of a fruit to leave him standing on a street he recognized. It wasn't one of Tarnahue's cobbled streets, but rather the wide, brick avenue of a larger city he knew just as well. As a shiny, black carriage clattered past in exactly the same way he remembered it clattering past in some other life he felt frozen in time, as though he'd been standing on this corner watching the carriage roll past for eons and had dreamed all the rest. His whole existence seemed bound up in this moment, an instant so vivid that he seemed on the verge of falling into the wheel, of falling through its blurred spokes into blackness and flames, and...

His fever had returned, and with it the feeling that his hold on the mountainside around him was tenuous, at best. He felt as though the valley and sea before him could all-too-easily slip away, as though the very ground beneath him could cease to exist, and he wasn't sure he could survive another plunge into madness. Trying with all his might to hang onto these surroundings, he stared at the sea, viewing it not as water, but as part of something alive. Dimly recognizing this moment as part of a living being, he tried to merge with the being, and something gave way. He had the fleeting impression of being in millions of places, and then...

Another scene drew him in, and he was back in the room with the beckoning door. Of all of the scenes that kept sucking him in, this was the one that caught him the most, and each time that it pulled him in he saw something more. This time he noticed that he was wearing a robe, and that the room had a grid of squares etched above the door. But it was still the door that held his attention. He was directly in front of it, so close now that he could feel the immense forces just beyond it. There might be nothing there, but it was a nothingness filled with the most powerful forces imaginable, a churning sea of fire and light. And he was being sucked into it, into an inferno that would tear him apart...

And it hurt! Being torn to pieces cut like a knife! He'd plunged through the doorway, so long ago now that he was no longer sure there'd ever been a real side. He wanted to think he'd been alive once, but that had been before he'd poisoned himself. Now he only had memories, scenes so unstable that he was simultaneously in thousands of places and nowhere at all. He kept reaching for one stable scene, and the more he grasped, the more he began to sense a unity to the seemingly chaotic whole. The forces tearing at him might be immense, but it wasn't because he was trying to stave off death, it was because they were part of something truly immense. For one, brief instant he seemed poised at the apex of a huge wheel, a wheel made up of everything he and everyone else who'd ever lived had ever experienced, and then...

Everything was in pieces again, and he was bleeding. It always cut him when he was torn out of one scene and left gasping for breath in another. And the roar! The roar was so deafening it blinded him. When his vision cleared, he was standing over a body that looked familiar in a cell that looked familiar, and he felt trapped. He felt as though he'd been standing over this dead man with his own hands tied together for years, and he didn't know how to break free. Then a worse feeling came over him, the sensation that something was pulling at him, and as the flames once again sliced into him the cell fell away...

Burst like a bubble to leave him sprawled on the sand of a wrestling pit. He felt as though he'd come to his senses on the burning sand of this pit hundreds of times, perhaps even thousands of times, and he couldn't get up. He couldn't even breathe! He felt paralyzed, suffocated by the heat of the pit. Frantic for air, he grasped for someplace cooler...

And was sitting in ankle-deep snow beneath a dark canopy of branches and stars. But he still couldn't breathe! His lungs wouldn't work! Desperate for air, he reached out for another scene, and the woods fell away. He clutched at the snow, but his hands passed through it. A sickening roar filled his head...

More scenes flared into being and then slipped away. His arms and legs didn't even feel like arms and legs anymore, but rather a net that was being stretched. He had the impression of being dragged, of feeling stretched because he really was being pulled, and then the scene shifted again. He woke in a chamber where he felt bound because he really was being held down. Micklo was in a stone room, and several men were pressing him down. The drone of their chant filled the air, filled it with a "droom" that swelled to a roar, and then...

Everything was in pieces again, and he ached. And everything was changing so fast. He was on a street one instant, standing over a prone figure the next, and falling through a doorway the moment after that. There were more scenes than he could count and they all felt real despite the fact that they kept slipping away. He recognized some of them from his life as Pietr, but others were harder to place. In one of them he was sitting at a desk with cards containing scenes spread out before him, and as he tried to make sense of the cards, he realized that he was in his own mind. He'd died, and the only way he could continue to exist was by stringing the scenes into a life. That was what the cards were for. There were memories of a life he was trying to piece back together again. He'd always known he'd die, but he'd never thought about what kind of world he'd create for himself when he did, so he wasn't prepared. That was why he was having so much trouble. He couldn't weave the scenes back into a coherent life because he wasn't prepared...

So he was trapped, stuck in an inferno of shattered scenes. Only the roar of the inferno persisted,

that and the pain. He wanted stay in one scene, any scene, but there were so many to choose from. They weren't even from one single life, they were from many. Reeling, he reached out again...

And the next thing he became conscious of was the cold, hard pressure of the stone he was lying on. The back of his head, his seat, and his heels ached as though they'd been pressed against that stone for a long time. Not yet conscious enough to wonder where he was, he felt the stone and nothing more. He was content to focus on the sensation, for it was all that he knew.

But then he remembered the bald magician and jolted awake, and as he opened his eyes and saw a cell, it fell away, was wrenched away like all of the other scenes leaving him back in the fire. Micklo could remember more of his shattered life, now, more of how he'd tried to infiltrate the Drenga and how it had led to disaster. He'd been used, and now he was dead. But he'd swallowed the poison from his father's pouch years ago, so long ago that it no longer seemed real. Even now another scene was pulling at him, drawing him into a room...

The room with the beckoning door. As he reeled towards the gaping void, he was no longer afraid. He was eager. He felt pride, a sense of peering not into the past, but into the future, and then he was in the flames. He was wrestling with forces no other Dorienga magician had ever wrestled with. Only something was wrong! There were too many scenes, and they were shifting too fast! As he fought for control, he felt a wrenching, and then he shifted again. He was no longer Micklo, the Dorienga priest who would cheat death; he was Pietr, the young shaman he would one day become...

The pain was unbearable! He saw Drenga tunnels, felt like he was being dragged through those tunnels, and then he was burning again. Even the fire couldn't hold him. There were moments when he rose above it, instants of clarity when he could look down and see a cauldron of flames. Then he'd be back in the inferno, and as one scene after another slipped from his grasp he was no closer to stringing the scenes into a single, coherent life than he'd been before. Certain, now, that he was dead, he reached out again, reached out with all his might, and fell through a doorway into a place that felt hard.

THE INFERNO

(c1998 David Camp)

PART THREE : AN ESCAPE

1

For what seemed like years nothing had existed for Pietr except the roar of the flames and a torrent of scenes so chaotic that trying to grasp one had been like trying to grab wreckage in the middle of a storm-tossed sea. Each scene had seemed real while he was in it, but no matter how real it had felt he'd invariably been yanked out of it and into some other scene. That's why he doubted that the torch-lit cell he was in now would last. Indeed, for a time it kept giving way to other scenes, but when he kept returning to it he began to wonder if it might not be real. Like a drowning man who'd finally grasped his wreckage, he clung to the sensation of being in the cell with all of his might.

Among the things Pietr noticed as the cell grew more stable were numerous pains and the fact that his hands were tied. He also saw the coarse, black fringes of the robe of someone standing near where he lay, and when he finally understood that he hadn't died, he wished that he had. He kept seeing Torral's body and thinking of Shara. For a time he'd try to block out those horrors by slipping back into the inferno, but it was worse.

As the cell grew more solid around him, Pietr had little choice but to accept the reality of Torral's death. The knowledge that he was responsible cut at him worse than his bruises and scrapes. It took the thought of Shara lying bruised and scared in some other cell to give him the will to survive. She was undoubtedly the young woman who would be killed in the spring, and he had to stop it.

Pietr was less certain of when he would be killed, so he lay still. He squinted at his guard and tested the chord wrapped around his hands, but only when his guard wasn't looking. Confused by the fact that he seemed to be both himself and Micklo, he felt powerless. There had to be something he or Micklo could do, he just couldn't figure out what.

His situation changed before he could figure it out. A new sound replaced the dull roar in head. It was a man's voice. The same man who'd accompanied Rankin into his cell the night he'd made contact with the Drenga was telling him to get up.

"Never did trust you," the burly man said as Pietr stopped squinting and opened his eyes. "Rankin was swayed by your cleverness. Thought you'd be like your great grandfather. But I could see you for the filthy little bastard you really are. Now that you're awake, we're going to have some fun. I've been waiting for this a long time."

As Pietr struggled, first to sit up, and then to get to his feet with his hands tied, the man drew out a knife. It gleamed menacingly in the torchlight as the man started forward. Pietr stumbled backwards and hit a wall. As the knife drew closer, his terror grew mindless and leaped out...

Flashed like a bomb, and it... Hurt! It always burned when he was torn out of one scene and left gasping for air in another. And the roar! The roar was deafening. When his vision cleared, he was standing over a body that looked familiar in a cell that looked familiar, and he felt trapped. He felt as though he'd been standing over this body with his hands tied forever, and he didn't know how to break free. Then another feeling came over him, the feeling that something was pulling at him, and as the inferno's sickening roar once again rose up around him, the cell gave way...

Peeled away like a sheet of paper consumed by flame. Pietr caught a glimpse of a temple, the temple he'd known as Micklo, and then Rankin's voice drew him back to the cell. Tingling as though an electric current had passed through him, he wedged the dead man's knife between his feet and cut the rope from his hands. Then he picked up the knife and stepped to the door.

Rankin was approaching. He called out again and then drew his own knife. Pietr tried to kill

Rankin like he'd killed his guard, but nothing would come. He was too weak to fight Rankin, so he ran.

The tunnel branched, and there were two magicians in one of the branches, so Pietr fled down the other. It led to the latrine. If Shara were in one of the cells near the latrine, then perhaps he could free her and they could escape. The latrine emptied into the city's sewers.

But Pietr couldn't find Shara! All the cells he passed were empty, and Rankin and the other two magicians made it impossible to turn back. Pietr thought as he ran, weighing his chances of taking on several strong men now, in a weakened condition, against his chances of freeing Shara later, and decided to keep running. He felt like a coward, but he didn't have any choice. He couldn't help Shara if he was dead.

Pietr entered the latrine and turned and slashed at the first magician to follow. Then he took advantage of the ensuing confusion to make his escape. There were waist-high holes in one of the walls, and he dove through one of them. The cold liquid he landed in stank, but he ignored the stench and got to his feet. He was barely underway again before a torch was thrust through one of the holes.

The sewer tunnel was similar to a Drenga tunnel, only longer, darker, and filled with ankle-deep sludge. Pietr could make out openings high up in the wall, but they were too small to squeeze through. Frantic to escape, he ducked into the blackness of the first side tunnel that he reached. Behind him, Rankin and the other uninjured magician were arguing about who should follow and who should go for help.

The argument saved Pietr. Fear had carried him this far, but he was too sore and exhausted to run anymore. Feeling his way along in the darkness, he turned several more times. His clothes were wet and his feet numb, but his body still tingled from the energy he'd conjured up.

Pietr could still hear voices from time to time in the distance behind him, so he groped his way towards some waves that he heard. It took a long time to get close to the waves, but eventually the sound was echoing all around him. One moment he was wondering what he'd do when he reached the sea and the next moment one of his feet was dangling in nothingness. He floundered helplessly for an instant and then fell.

The icy surface of a wave slammed into Pietr, and then he was fully submerged. The cold knocked the air from his lungs, but he was able to keep from drowning. He clawed up to the surface, and then he inhaled. His wrist hit a wood post in the darkness, and he grabbed onto it.

For a few terrifying moments it was all Pietr could do to keep from drowning in the swells of water that were splashing off the seawall. Then he saw where he was. A pier loomed over him and the dark outline of a ship was visible to his right. It was so far up to the pier and the top of the seawall that he wondered if he would bob until he died.

But at least it was getting light enough so he could see where he was. It was dark under the pier, but there was some grayness to his left, and in that grayness he could make out a rope. Pietr knew he had to do something before he got too numb to swim, so he let go of the post and made for the rope. Once there, he somehow managed to drag himself out of water and into the even more frigid air.

His clothes turning to ice, Pietr lay shivering on the pier until someone approached. At first he thought the Drenga had found him, but then he saw that the man was a sailor. He knew that the next person to come along might be out to kill him, so he struggled to his feet. Numb and exhausted, he limped towards the sailor who'd stopped at the edge of the pier.

Pietr tried to make himself invisible, but he was too tired. He only succeeded in scaring the man. Pietr knew he wouldn't last long in wet clothes, so he made for his room. He had to get into something dry and warm.

It was light by the time Pietr reached his room. No longer able to feel his body, he stepped into the shower fully clothed. At first he only felt the dull pressure of the water, and then he felt like he was on fire. Back out in his room he glanced at the picture of the temple he once ruled over and then changed into dry clothes.

Pietr's cloak was gone, lost somewhere in the woods, so he put on three shirts. His vest had

repelled the seawater, so he put it back on over the shirts. Then he drank some water, grabbed some bread, and left. He didn't even bother to close the door.

Back out on the street Pietr had to choose between using what little magic he had left to stay warm or be invisible. He'd come so close to freezing that he focused on staying warm and walked as fast as he could. People stared, but as long as none of them were magicians he didn't care. If he could get to the woods quickly enough he might be safe.

He succeeded. Aside from the Grand Mage none of the Drenga actually lived in the tunnels, so he guessed there hadn't been enough men to mount a quick search. That would change, so he limped on as fast as he could. Following the same path he'd used the night before, he headed for his bundle.

It had only been half a day since Pietr had walked through these woods, but it felt like years. Whole lives seemed to fill the gap between that hike and this one. The inferno's flames were gone, but the things he'd seen in them remained. He could remember being Micklo, a priest from another time.

Aware, now, of the source of the thoughts and impulses that had been impinging on his own, Pietr scrambled up one hill after another much as he had the night before. If he could stay ahead of the Drenga, then maybe he could draw on his former magic to defeat the Drenga. The Dorienga magician in him had killed one man, and maybe he could kill the rest. Maybe he could make the Drenga pay for their crimes.

A glimmer of light off a glass shard drew Pietr's attention back to the woods. He'd been so intent on killing the Drenga and saving Shara that he'd reached the clearing without realizing how far he'd come. There was still no one behind him, so he picked up his bundle he went to look for his pouch. His widely spaced footprints were easy to spot.

Pietr found his pouch, knife, and cloak in the gully where he'd fallen. That pleased him because he'd thought he'd lost everything. Confident, now, that he could survive, he returned to the clearing and then picked up the trail to the cave. He wanted to do something about Torral before animals got at the corpse.

Pietr would have enjoyed the climb under different circumstances. It was sunny, and increasingly elevated views of the sea made him feel like part of a godly design. He had to live to help Shara, but he was no longer afraid of dying himself. He knew, now, that he couldn't die.

It was mid-day by the time Pietr reached the cave. He didn't want to enter, but forced himself to. Avoiding Torral, he transferred the contents of Shara's pouch to his own and then covered Torral's body with a mat and weighed down the corners with stones. Back outside he filled in the mouth of the cave with the largest rocks he could lift.

Then Pietr resumed his flight. He was soon farther around the mountain than he'd ever been before. Instead of looking back and seeing the city and lowlands beyond it, he could look ahead and see another mountain. There was an intervening valley, and he hoped it would provide him with some shelter.

Pietr's descent was painful. He was not only sore and exhausted, he was also trying to scramble down over icy rocks and ledges without a trail. He'd eaten what little food he'd brought, and he was getting cold. He considered stopping to cast a new warming spell, but he was afraid that if he did stop he wouldn't get going again.

Pietr was determined to put as much distance between himself and the Drenga as possible, so he dragged himself on until the light began to fade. Barely conscious, he descended into a thick grove of evergreens as scenes from the inferno once again nudged at his mind. He found and ate some berries, but they did little to ease his hunger or clear his head. He wanted to lie down and die.

At some point Pietr did stop. Unable to continue any deeper into the valley, he built a small fire and worked a new warming spell. After nibbling on some bark, he curled up under an evergreen. Secure in his blanket, he finally let go.

The inferno had been a loud, wrenching set of visions, but the scenes that enveloped Pietr now were gentle. At first formless, they coalesced into a Dorienga city with dusty streets and parched walls.

Pietr floated through the streets looking for the home he'd left behind much as he'd floated through the maze in his dreams. Then he was in his home moving among things he recognized but no longer felt attached to.

Like the rooms in the maze, the ones in the house changed as Pietr drifted through them. He sensed that Shara was near and searched until he found her. At least he thought it was Shara until he saw she had tan skin and a Dorienga gown. He tried to speak to this girl Micklo had known, but no words would come out.

So he tried to rouse the sleeping girl, but someone got in his way. Several men crowded into the room and surrounding him. Pietr pushed his way through the men, but the young woman was gone. The Grand Mage stood in her place.

So Pietr fled. He was back in the Drenga tunnels, so he again headed for the latrine. Then he remembered that he was asleep. The Drenga had entered his dream and were trying to kill him.

Pietr jolted awake to the sound of howling. A pack of wild drinkas was wailing in the distance. They weren't close, but the night was young, and it was hard to tell how far they would roam. Pietr couldn't help but wonder if his enemies were using drinkas to hunt him down.

Pietr listened to the pack until fatigue overcame him again. Weaving the best invisibility spell he could muster, he surrendered to his dreams. He found Shara again, but this time it was in a city with carriages and brick avenues. She had pale skin and a red coat and was standing on a corner waving at him.

At least Pietr thought it was Shara. As with the Dorienga girl, this young woman's skin and clothes were different, but the person within was the same. Pietr crossed the street to greet the young woman. Before he could get to her the Grand Mage intervened, and Pietr jolted awake.

Pietr spent the rest of the night slipping in and out of similar dreams. At times he'd be conscious of the forest and drinkas, and at other times he'd be looking for Shara and avoiding the Grand Mage. The one constant thread was the sense that he was being sought. Once, in a state between sleep and wakefulness, he thought he saw Torral, but the vision faded. Pietr curled up and wept.

2

The next morning Pietr crawled out of his hiding place wishing he were dead. Fresh snow dusted the ground obscuring his half-day-old tracks. Stiff and weak, he scavenged for berries and then resumed his flight. He wanted to find a better place to hole up.

A day earlier Pietr had been running for his life. Now guilt and worry had replaced fear as his primary emotions. He was tortured by what he'd done and worried that he'd survived a quick death only to endure a slow one. He was alone and hungry in a vast wilderness that didn't care if he died.

Pietr picked his way through the rocks, brush, and snow of the forest floor as well as he could. He wished he could seek out his father's people, but doubted that would be wise. Too many people had ventured into this wilderness and never returned. The people whose land he was trespassing on hated his mother's people as much as his mother's people hated them.

Despite his need for food and shelter, Pietr decided to avoid all human contact. He focused instead on looking for berries and thinking about the Drenga. He didn't like having to kill, but had little choice. He'd failed one girl the night of the festival and didn't want to let Shara fall prey to an even worse fate.

The problem was that Pietr didn't know how he'd killed the man in the cell. The inferno had faded and with it the certainty that he'd really been a magician in an earlier age. If he had been Micklo, then he had very possibly been the Grand Mage of his time. He'd been as ruthless as the Drenga were now.

There was also the puzzling matter of the other city he'd seen in his dreams. All he knew for sure was that someone he recognized as Shara seemed to inhabit both it and the Dorienga city and that each time he got close to his young woman something would go wrong. He felt as though understanding was close, but no vision would come. Whatever his father's powder had jarred loose was still locked

inside.

Around mid-morning Pietr slumped down on a rock. The combination of hunger, fatigue, and guilt was making it hard for him to focus on where he was putting his feet. The loss of motion added to his delirium. A sudden feeling that he knew this place, that he'd slumped down on this same rock before, rekindled the feeling that he was in the inferno and about to wake up.

Some irrational part of Pietr's mind wondered if this might not be the key to magic, if recognizing the world as a state of consciousness instead of matter might not have been how he'd killed his guard. Overhead a shrell was circling, dipping and swerving in lazy arcs that mesmerized him. For a time, he was the one who was gliding through the air on powerful wings.

When the shrell drifted north towards the second mountain in the range, Pietr got up and followed. He started to climb the huge mountain remembering the times a shrell had led him to what he'd sought. He avoided brush by keeping to the rocky edge of a stream. It was a sunny day, and water was gurgling beneath the icy surface of the stream.

Pietr eventually lost sight of the shrell, but not before he scrambled over a ledge and discovered a large pool. Much of it was frozen, but a narrow waterfall was keeping the far end open. As Pietr approached the open water he could see silvery forms beneath the surface. There were kresh in the pool, and if he could scoop out one he'd have the food he needed.

Pietr rolled up his sleeves and reached into the frigid water. The kresh were sluggish, but avoided his grasp. He had to imagine himself invisible to get his hands under one of them. Then, with a single swift movement, he scooped it onto the snow.

The scaly, forearm-sized creature flopped about for a time and then stopped. Pietr scooped out a second, but was too cold to try for a third. He considered building a fire, but was too hungry to wait. He used his knife to decapitate, open, and gut his catch and then ate.

After tossing the remains back into the pool for the other kresh to nibble on, Pietr sat down to think. He was still tormented by Shara's plight, but knew that he'd had to flee. A full stomach made his chances of survival seem a little less bleak. He'd found a place to gather his strength until he was well enough to return.

Pietr's meal made him drowsy, but he was still alert enough to see something move at the far end of the pool just before he heard a sharp twang. He ducked as an arrow whizzed by his head, and then he was up and running. He scrambled over the waterfall's ledge and kept on going. Behind him several braves had swarmed over the lower ledge and were giving chase.

Pietr wove a new invisibility spell and began to hop from rock to rock so he wouldn't leave any tracks. The braves stopped at the top of the second ledge and stared at where he'd been in disbelief. He knew they wouldn't stop long, so he kept on climbing. He was moving faster than the braves and soon lost sight of them.

Pietr eventually stopped climbing and doubled back towards the sea. He was disappointed about losing both his bundle and the kresh, but was relieved that he was beyond the reach of the Drenga. By late afternoon he'd resumed climbing and had a good view of the sea. There was still no sign of the braves.

For most of the afternoon Pietr drew energy from his meal, but by the time the sun began to sink into the sea his legs felt like lead weights. His fever had returned, and with it the feeling that his hold on the mountainside around him was tenuous, at best. He felt as though the valley and sea before him could all-too-easily slip away, as though the very ground beneath him could cease to exist, and he wasn't sure he could survive another plunge into madness. Trying with all his might to hang onto his surroundings, he stared at the sea, viewing it not as water, but as part of something alive. Dimly recognizing this moment as part of a living being, he tried to merge with the being, and something gave way. He had the fleeting impression of being in millions of places, and then...

One of them drew him in, and he was back in the room with the beckoning door. Of all of the scenes that kept pulling him in, this was the one that scared him the most. It was Micklo's room, and it

seemed to be the source of his madness. For one, brief instant Pietr was Micklo, a magician powerful enough to reach into the future, and then Pietr was just himself again. He was standing on a frozen mountainside staring up at a shallow cave he'd seen before.

This wasn't Torral's cave. It was barely a cave at all, more of a hollow in the side of the mountain, and yet it looked as familiar to Pietr as the ancient city he'd seen in the inferno. For years he'd wanted to become a magician, and now he felt like one. He was beginning to visit places he'd seen in his dreams. Either that or he really was Micklo asleep in some chamber and this was a dream.

The sensation of reliving a moment for a second time was so unnerving that Pietr seriously wondered if he was still in the inferno and about to wake up. But then the feeling passed, and he was left shivering on the cold mountainside. As he tried to take another step he realized how weak he'd become. He could barely stand let alone hike anymore.

The decision to spend the night in the shallow cave was thus an easy one. As the sun finished setting Pietr collected some brush and built a small fire. He had trouble concentrating, but was able to weave a new warming spell. As its comforting heat spread through his body, he leaned back and closed his eyes.

Memories of his escape from the Drenga and the braves soon began to mingle with images of the Dorienga city in Pietr's mind. It was so cold on the mountain that the relentless heat of that city would have felt good. Pietr couldn't remember many details, but he could remember the sun. It never seemed to let up.

As for the mountain, it was so firmly imprinted on Pietr's mind that when he did finally sleep, he dreamed of another like it. He was following a faro up a steep path in much the same way he'd once followed Shara. He tried to catch up, but the faro kept bounding ahead. This went on until the delicate creature slipped behind a large rock.

Pietr rounded the rock and spotted Torral in front of a cave. Pietr's joy at finding his teacher was tempered by the faro's absence. Torral saw Pietr's concern and pointed towards the cave. Pietr nodded and stepped inside.

The cave looked darker from the outside than it really was. Its walls glowed like hot rock. There was also an ominous rumble, but Pietr kept on going. He had to find the faro.

By the time Pietr recognized the cave as a Drenga tunnel, it was too late to turn back. Robed figures had issued from doorways behind him. He tried to run, but there was no escape. The layout of the tunnels had changed.

But this was a dream. Some part of Pietr knew that, so he ducked into a side tunnel where he floated to the ceiling and became invisible. Moments later the Drenga magicians passed under him. Then he was by himself again.

Pietr could have woken at this point, but he hadn't found Shara yet, and he didn't want to abandon her. He searched the tunnels until he spotted a door with a guard. He could sense Shara in the room. The faro had led him to her.

At first Pietr wasn't sure how he'd get past the guard, but then the scene shifted, and he was in Shara's chamber. She was lying unconscious on the floor. Pietr tried to move closer, but something got in his way. An invisible barrier seemed to be surrounding his love.

That angered Pietr. Remembering that this was a dream and that he could change it, he tried to wipe out not only the barrier, but also the rest of the maze. He succeeded. There was a wrenching, and then he was in the inferno again. The next thing he knew, he was back in the cell with the magician he'd killed, and he was still bound.

At this point Pietr became frightened that he'd only imagined escaping from the cell with the dead guard, so he tried to wake up, but he couldn't. He really was in the inferno. He could make out robed figures among the flames, but he couldn't focus on them. Too many other scenes were pulling at him.

Then one of the other scenes drew him in. He was on a street, a wide, brick street with ornate buildings and dozens of people. As a shiny, black carriage clattered past in exactly the same way that

he remembered, he felt frozen in time, as though he'd been standing on this corner watching the carriage roll past forever. His whole existence seemed bound up in this moment, an instant so vivid he seemed on the verge of falling into the wheel, of falling through it into madness...

And then another scene drew him in, and he was in the room with the beckoning door. Each time he ended up in this room he saw a little bit more. This time he saw that the door was wavering, as though it wasn't real, but rather a product of his own mind. He seemed closer to the door, so close he could feel the forces at work beyond it, and they were immense. There might be nothing there, but it was a void filled with the most powerful forces imaginable. He was being sucked into a fire that would tear him apart...

And it burned. It always tore into his flesh when he was wrenched out of one scene and sucked into another. There was another shift, and then the flames fell away. He was in a candle-lit study with a desk and hundreds of books lining the walls.

This room was very familiar. Like Micklo's chamber, it felt like a place where he'd worked potent magic. That was odd, because the hand-written papers on the desk looked like part of The Void. Some part of his mind was telling him that he'd written this book. No sooner did it occur to him that he must have been Danu than he realized that he'd lived in the city with the brick avenue. He'd lived comfortably, studied magic, and...

He'd lost his love! Violently yearning for the young woman with the pale skin and fine clothes, he felt another tug, and then he was back in the cell where Shara lay. Only now the Drenga were there, too. The cell was full of them, and they were grabbing at him. They seemed to be weaving a spell.

But Pietr now remembered magic he'd forgotten about. Drawing on that magic, he pulled free. Trying to run was like moving through water, but he was able to stay a few steps ahead of the magicians and force his way up to the mouth of the cave. The last thing he saw was Torral framed by sunlight, and then he woke up.

3

There was indeed someone standing the sunlit mouth of a cave, but it wasn't Torral, it was one of the braves who'd shot at Pietr by the pool. All four of the braves were standing outside peering in at him. Pietr tensed, but then saw that the brave's hands were extended as a greeting and relaxed. None of the braves were holding weapons.

"Friend?" the tall man with a scarred cheek said as Pietr got to his feet.

"Friend," Pietr said uncertainly.

"Shaman?" the brave said, gesturing towards Pietr's pouch.

"Yes."

"Not know you were shaman. See scrawla," the brave said, using a word Pietr guessed to mean evil spirit. "Shoot at scrawla, not you."

"Bad magics chase me," Pietr said.

"Hide here, in magic place?"

"Magic place?"

"Legend says we find great shaman here."

"When?"

"Not know, but we bring offerings this time every year. Legends speak of snow."

"Snow?"

"A dark cloud and snow."

Glancing past the braves Pietr could indeed see the dark cloud he'd noticed the first time he'd flown like a shrell. This was the first time he'd seen it while awake, and he couldn't tell whether he was seeing it with his inner eyes or his outer ones. The last few days had blurred the line between vision and reality so badly that the two overlapped. "My name is Pietr," he said as he pulled his eyes away

from the cloud. "I doubt if I'm the shaman you're looking for, but I am a shaman, and I'll help you if I can."

"I am Borka. This is Drew, Krippa, and Melka," Borka said, gesturing towards the other three braves. "Sit down. Eat. You need food."

Pietr gratefully accepted the grain cakes and dried meat Borka offered. While he ate, he explained his clothes and pouch by saying that he was from the city, but that his father had been a shaman. He went on to explain about his two native teachers and how they'd been ambushed. He didn't reveal his own role in the tragedy or say that Shara was still alive. He wanted to join up with Borka's group until he was strong enough to return for Shara by himself.

Pietr was thus pleased when Borka extended an invitation to accompany the braves back to their village. Their own shaman was dead, and they needed a new one. Pietr explained that he was still learning, but said he'd do what he could. He'd help the tribe until he was called away.

Sore, but able to move, Pietr braced himself for a fourth day of hiking. Before the group got underway, he worked a new warming spell. He etched four extra figures and included hairs from each of the braves. He didn't know if the spell would work for more than one person, but it did, and the braves were impressed.

Pietr ended behind Borka in the line that wove its way down the mountain. He soon became as familiar with Borka's hides, hair, and angular body as he'd been with Shara's more pleasing form. Up to this point living with natives had been a dream, but now it was about to become real. He was walking through the wilderness with four braves as though this was where he belonged.

But this was also where Shara belonged, and following behind someone with hair and clothes like hers made it impossible for Pietr to forget about her. Three days had passed since he'd kissed her in the woods, but that kiss was still vivid in his mind. His guilt at betraying her distracted him from the growing pain in his legs. By the time the group reached the pool with the kresh he could barely walk.

A break for food and water didn't help. If anything, getting off his feet and then having to get up again with the added burden of his bundle made him feel worse. He didn't want to appear weak, so he masked his pain as well as he could. By mid-afternoon his delirium of the previous day had begun to return.

And still the braves hiked on. Keeping to the foothills of the second mountain, they moved inland and north. Pietr could still see the unnatural cloud whenever he looked back. He was glad they were moving away from the dark, swirling mass.

The braves' village was a day's hike to the north, and the longer Pietr struggled on, the more feverish he got. Interspersed with his thoughts of Shara were inferno-like glimpses of the village. At times he thought he'd already reached the village and was only remembering the hike. One of his legs felt like it had been kicked. It took all his will to keep moving forward.

And then the village really was there. After what seemed like an eternity, Pietr accompanied Borka and the other braves into the midst of the tents he'd been seeing all day. Excited children announced the band's arrival, and a crowd quickly gathered. Amid the smell of food, smoke, and animals Pietr found himself being gawked at like some sort of monster.

Pietr ignored the belligerent stare of one youth in particular and focused on the old woman in the center of the crowd instead. Because the way all the other adults flanked her, he gathered that she was an important figure in the tribe. Heavy-set like Morta, but hide-clad and green-skinned like a native, she studied Pietr as he approached. Then Borka brought the braves to a halt in front of her and explained how Pietr had come to be with the band.

"Is this true? Are you the one whose coming was foretold?" the old woman said in a voice as thin as Torral's.

"I never said that. I only said that I'm a shaman," Pietr replied.

"Ah, but you are something more."

"More?"

"You're not like any shaman I've ever seen."

"I grew up in a city, so my clothes are strange."

"That's not what I mean. I've never heard of anyone so young eluding our best hunters. It takes a great gift."

"I'm used to hiding."

"Yes. Even now you hide. You don't show your true self."

"I don't?"

"What stands before me is a mask. I can't see the real you."

"I've had to spend my whole life hiding myself. Now I've had to flee the city because people there want to kill me. I'd like to stay with you. I want to be a shaman like my father"

"You will be our shaman, then?"

"I'll help you in any way that I can."

"Your words sound true. I don't know if you are what Borka says you are, but he vouches for you, so you will stay with him."

Pietr thanked the old woman and then turned to Borka. The brave nodded and moved through the crowd towards one of the tents. Pietr followed, aware that one youth was still glaring at him more belligerently than anyone else was. Pietr's discomfort increased when Borka embraced a young woman whom he introduced as Tula, his mate. Pietr hadn't planned on living in a tent with a couple. He hadn't really thought about where he'd end up, but was too tired to worry, so he followed Borka and Tula to their tent. He was relieved to find no children, just an assortment of pots and furs and two mats. It took some rearranging to create room for his blanket. Then he finally settled down for a much-needed rest.

Too tired to talk, Pietr listened as Borka repeated the tale of his vanishing and great warming spell. It was obvious that Borka believed the shaman described in the legend had been found. At one point Pietr ate some grain cakes, but for the most part he just watched. Borka and Tula didn't seem to mind. On the contrary, sensing how close he was to sleep, they were soon touching and kissing as though he wasn't there. To a large extent he wasn't. The tent with its smoke and clutter and sounds of people talking in the growing darkness outside was so foreign that it seemed unreal. It seemed like a dream.

Tula's face was rounder than Shara's and older, but her hair and figure were enough like those of the young woman Pietr loved so that he began to mistake Tula for Shara. The fact that the tent was the same size as the cave he'd sat in with Shara added to his confusion. By the time he closed his eyes thoughts of the cave were beginning to give way to another, much more dimly remembered enclosure. He began to think he was a baby in a hut watching as his parents made love.

After waiting, in vain, for a kiss from his mother, Pietr gave in to the other scenes that were taking form in his mind. Rising, not just into the night, but into a tangled web of dreams, he began to shift from one scene to the next. He felt like this was what he'd always been doing, as though the tent and the hut had just been absorbing fragments in an unending series of dreams. Doors were opening in his mind, and he was passing through them.

More awake than he usually was in his dreams, Pietr began to explore. He wasn't sure whether he was changing into other people like Micklo or just remembering other lives, but he was no longer just himself. He'd think of something, and it would be there. He thought of his love, and she was lying in bed beside him.

Aching to touch Sierra, Danu rolled over, rolled and fell through the bed onto a surface of hot, gritty sand. Micklo, now, he surged to his feet and eyed the youth who was trying to hurt him. What he saw was the twisted face of someone rejected in love. It wasn't enough that Nygul wanted Shoora dead, he wanted to hurt her young lover, too. The son of a high priest, Nygul was used to getting his wishes fulfilled.

Micklo was smaller than Nygul, so he circled his opponent looking for a weakness. He couldn't find one. Nygul's physical superiority was as great as his social advantage. Nygul wasn't as clever as

Micklo. None of the other young priests were. But that didn't matter. What mattered was Nygul's great size and strength.

Blinded by thoughts of what he'd do if Shoora were killed, Micklo let down his guard. He only thought of Shoora for an instant, but that was enough for Nygul to score a quick kick. As the pain tore into Micklo, he fell forward, fell through the sand like he'd fallen through the bed, and then he was someone else. He was Fruel, a peasant living among fields and thatch huts.

Only something of the wrestling pit remained. It was the pain, the sharp, piercing pain in his leg. There were other injuries, as well, along with the faint sensation of rain, so Fruel opened his eyes. He was on the hill where one of the barbarians had felled him, and he couldn't get up. He had to turn his head to see his fallen comrades.

Tormented more by the horrible fate of the women and children in the village than by his own death, Fruel looked up at the branches of the tree overhead. As he looked, the beauty of the branches struck him. Never before had they looked so perfect. Everything around him seemed precious now he was about to die. His elders had spoken of life after death, but he didn't believe it. He was a man with arms, and legs, and a heart, and once his heart stopped that would be it. Wishing that he didn't have to die he closed his eyes and tried to forget. He tried to forget everything.

He woke one more time, but he didn't know where he was. He seemed to be in a tent. He searched his mind for the pain in his leg, and he found it. Then he was on the hillside again. He tried to sit up, but he was too weak. He closed his eyes and gave up.

Only to be roused by the sensation of being shaken. Opening his eyes, Pietr found that he really was in a tent. He couldn't see it very clearly; he was too weak, but he really was in a tent, and someone was propping him up to give him a drink. As he sipped at the water, he saw that the person holding him up was a woman with green skin and dark hair. Then another scene crystallized before his eyes. He saw not a green-skinned woman, but rather his mother, and as the comforting sight of the smoky hut filled his eyes, he lay back. He was tired, and he wanted to sleep. His dreams were calling him...

Calling him to a life in a bustling city. Vaguely aware that his name was Danu, he grasped at memories he'd lost. They were there; hidden among images of broad avenues and polished wood rooms, but they kept slipping away. They were as hard to see clearly as the details the other lives in this long, twisted dream.

But he had to remember. Someone would die if he didn't, so Danu thought of Sierra and more visions came. He recalled how he'd left Sierra in her rooms while he visited the Drenga temple. Looking around, he saw that he wasn't in the marble-floored Drenga library, but rather in his own private book room. He was an old man remembering the day his love had been murdered while he'd read in the temple.

Wishing for the millionth time that he could relive that day spending it with Sierra instead of in the Drenga library, Danu looked at the manuscript of The Void on his desk. Hoping that it would make his next life better, he closed his eyes and pictured Sierra. As he reached for her, she fell away, was torn away like she had been so many other times, and he was in the inferno again. He was in that place where time fell apart.

No longer sure who he was, he jumped from persona to persona the way Shara sometimes changed form. More and more, he was drawn to his most vivid memory, the room with the beckoning door. He was the high priest of a powerful empire, and his name was Micklo. He was in his private room staring at the magical symbol he'd etched on his wall.

Great pride filled Micklo. No other priest could see into or manipulate the future like he could. But he felt troubled, too. What he was seeing disturbed him. He could have Nygul's child killed, but it would fold back in upon him. His reunion with Shoora would be severely impaired.

Micklo looked again. There had to be way to make Nygul pay for taking Shoora from him and to be with her again. Determined to find a way, Micklo stepped towards the door. As the familiar roar engulfed him, he stepped into the flames. He slipped back in the madness and pain.

He spent an eternity in those flames. At times he seemed to be Pietr, and he seemed to be in a tent, but only slowly did that tent become more real than the other scenes. Even after his fever broke and he woke as Pietr, memories of the other places remained. He kept seeing the eyes of the infant he'd killed. They were the eyes of the young native brave.

4

During the weeks that followed, Pietr learned what it was like to live as a native. He continued to wear his own clothes, but, except for Rula, the young brave, everyone accepted him as he was. He earned his keep by performing spells and helping on hunts. His ability to become invisible helped him to get close to animals and then scare them towards the hunters.

When Pietr wasn't eating, sleeping, or performing his spells, he was looking for herbs and testing his powers. Two days of delirium had fleshed out what he'd seen his first time in the inferno making him sure those lives had been real. Now that he knew what it felt like he was able to slip into the inferno without being sick or using herbs. His visions weren't as vivid this way, but they were easier to control.

The more Pietr learned of his other lives, the more the tents, woods, and snow of his current one seemed like a dream. He began to wonder whether he'd ever left the inferno or just slowed it down. He drifted from one day to the next as if in a dream, but it was a dream he couldn't enjoy. He couldn't stop thinking of Shara.

As a result, once Pietr became adept at viewing the past, he began to turn his attention to moving around in the present. He remembered how he'd gotten close to Shara that one night on the mountain and tried to approach her again. The more he left his body, the more he realized there were two realities, one sluggish and the other fluid. He could find the Drenga tunnels in the other world, but they weren't always in the same place.

Pietr could also work stronger magic in the other world, but so could the Drenga. They knew he was looking for Shara and set up force fields. When Pietr eluded the traps, the Drenga came looking for him. The same, dark figures that had surrounded him in Shara's cell scoured the forest for him.

So Pietr grew wary. He did find Shara once and see that she was alive, but he had such a hard time getting away that he was reluctant to approach her again. Now that he was with other people, he had to think of their safety as well as his own. The dark cloud was sending out tendrils, and some were getting close to the tribe.

Fortunately, Pietr was able to extend his invisibility to the tribe in much the same way that he could extend his warming spells. The Drenga were still looking for one person instead of fifty. That was good because the tendrils were getting closer each day. No one had been hurt, but some of the wildlife was beginning to act strange.

Pietr was getting stronger as a magician, but he was still no match for the Drenga. He had to rely on stealth instead of sheer force. He could have drawn on his memories as Micklo, but he was reluctant to do that. Much of the magic he'd worked in that life had come at a price.

Still, it was hard to think of a way to rescue Shara when all he could do was disappear. The Drenga had altered their traps to ensnare him even when he couldn't be seen. The Grand Mage had spent years studying his magic and had become very strong. He kept sending out tendrils until the forest was writhing with them.

So, although Pietr wasn't ready to turn back into Micklo, he did continue to conjure up memories of that life. The more he remembered of it, the more he realized his power had come from outside of himself. There really was a world mind, and it was in everything. It would serve him if he would pay its price.

Knowing that the price might be Shara, Pietr looked to his life as Danu. In that life his enemy had lured him into a temple and then murdered Sierra. Danu hadn't sought revenge like Micklo had. He'd

spent his life studying white magic so he could make things turn out better the next time around. He'd even written a book to himself so would get everything right. The Void was supposed to serve as his guide.

And still something had gone wrong. Pietr's mind had hidden the real meaning of The Void from him, and his desire to avenge his father's death had played into his enemy's hands. Unable to bring back Torral, Pietr could only try to remember what he'd known of the void and hope that it would be enough. If he reached deep enough into the void, then perhaps he could still save his love.

It was while Pietr was sitting in the forest thinking of The Void that he felt a tug. At first he thought it was the pull of one of the inferno's scenes, the nauseous wrench he always felt when he about to shift, but then he heard a girl's voice. Focusing on the voice, he woke back into a world of trees and snow. A young native girl was frantically yanking at one of his arms.

"Quick! Come quick!" she was wailing. "Rula is sick!"

Alarmed by the girls' intensity, Pietr raced back to the village ahead of her. She'd said something about Rula being bitten, and all Pietr could think of was a Drenga tendril. He would have felt nervous trying to save anyone, but this was a person he's already wronged. He didn't want to be responsible for Rula dying gain.

A crowd had gathered in front of Rula's tent. Worried adults made way as Pietr ran up. He was glad to escape their stares until he saw how sick Rula was. The youth's body was rigid and his skin nearly white.

Even more chilling than Rula's complexion was the blood on his lips and the gurgling sound in his throat. Rula's mother said her son had been bitten by a knipf. Such bites were rare, but always fatal. Pietr had no cure, so he could only apply a root used for weaker poisons and hope it would help.

Shaking worse than Rula, Pietr dug the root out of his pouch and asked for hot water. Then he examined the bite on Rula's leg. Someone had tried to suck out the poison, but it hadn't helped. The skin was black and swollen.

Pietr tried to think of what Torral would do and then cleared a space around his patient so he could carve a circle in the dirt. Once the water was ready he mashed the root into a bowl of it. He applied the root mush to the wound and then tried to get Rula to drink some of the broth. He couldn't get Rula to swallow, so he set the bowl aside and turned his attention to a warming spell.

As he kindled the fire necessary to trigger the spell, Pietr closed his eyes and pictured flames around his patient. Instead of thinking of them as hot like he usually did, he envisioned them as cool and healing. The result was immediate. He felt a jolt, and then he was in the inferno again.

By concentrating Pietr was able to remember where he really was and what he was trying to do. In the midst of familiar scenes he began to see some that were new. Sensing these to be Rula's memories, he homed in on them. As his hands sought out Rula, his thoughts merged with the youth's.

Not all of Rula's emerging memories were unfamiliar. One Pietr began to find himself in was inside a Dorienga chamber, and the man standing over him looked like Micklo. The infant Pietr had become may not have known what was coming, but he did. He'd lived this same scene through Micklo's eyes.

At the sight of the descending knife Pietr nearly broke his link with Rula. He almost pulled free, but not quite. As the knife pierced his flesh he cursed and held on. The pain was hideous, and then he was Rula lying a mat in a tent.

Normally an inferno scene would seem real for a second or two and then Pietr would shift. Not this time. This time he was so firmly rooted in Rula that Rula's body felt like his own. Pietr could feel the agony of each breath and the fire in his flesh. He tried to move, but he was too weak.

Pietr tried to use his magic to counter the poison, but it was too strong. It had already spread through the nervous system and destroyed vital nerves. Pietr could slow the destruction, but he couldn't reverse it. All he could do was help Rula live a little longer than he would have lived by himself.

The real horror for Pietr was the discovery that he, too, was dying. A Drenga tendril had attached itself to Rula, and Pietr had fallen prey to its poison. He realized, too late, that it had been no ordinary knipf that had bitten Rula. It had been an animal the Drenga had been using as a puppet.

So Pietr died along with Rula. Succumbing to magic he couldn't fight, his blood boiled and his flesh sagged. The next thing he knew, he was in his subtle body standing on a broad plane. He still felt hot, but it was because he was in a desert.

There were mountains on the distant horizon, purplish peaks that swam in the heat, but before Pietr could think about them, a crash shattered the stillness. The ground shook and split at his feet. Knocked off his feet, Pietr slid towards the crevice. He clawed at the crumbling ground, but it slid with him.

And then he was falling. He was in the crevice, and he was falling towards the planet's core. He tried to wake up, but he couldn't. He had no body to wake up to.

So he fell. He was in the inferno, and he was falling like he'd always been falling. The forest hadn't been real. Only the inferno was real.

Only this time the inferno's scenes more wrenching than he remembered. They were rising and bursting around him like bubbles of boiling water. One moment he'd be in one bubble and think he was with Shara, or on a street, or in a room, and the next instant he'd be in another. He didn't know who he was.

All he knew was that there were patterns, two individuals who kept reappearing. Their faces changed, but one was the Grand Mage and one was Shara. His love was always just beyond his reach, but the Grand Mage was getting closer. Like a predator the Grand Mage was moving in for the kill.

Only it wasn't the Grand Mage himself that was getting closer. It was one of his tendrils. It had attached itself to Pietr and was drawing him in. Pietr could dimly see the cloud the tendril was emanating from, and then the cloud engulfed him. There was a rush of sound, and then he landed in a hard and dark place.

For a time, Pietr couldn't see anything in the blackness. The warm, eerie silence of this place was as quiet as the inferno had been loud. But then his eyes adjusted, and he saw that he was in a cavern. The only light came from the pale, orange-red glow of its distant walls.

The heat and silence were stifling. Feeling as though he really had fallen into a cavern deep in the heart of the planet, Pietr looked for a way out. He couldn't find one. Instead he began to see that the cave was shrinking. Like the maze in his dreams, it was changing. It was closing in on him.

Pietr searched more frantically, but he still couldn't find a way out. Soon the cavern was the size of a room, then a closet, and then he was encased in the rock. He tried to breathe, but he couldn't. The rock was compressing his lungs.

And still the space shrank. Pietr fought against the pressure, but it was like a vice. His lungs collapsed and his bones broke. He was crushed.

The instant Pietr gave up a great coldness filled him, a chill more frightening than the pressure, and then there was light. As if in the center of a star, he was suddenly bathed in white light. The energy was blinding, like the inferno, only softer and luminescent. The scenes swirling around him now looked more like whole worlds than memories of fleeting lives.

Whatever Pietr imagined was there along with a symphony of wondrous sounds. There were flutes, and bells and great throbbing hums. He was in a million places and no where at all. He was a part of the light.

Only something was missing. Shara wasn't there. She should have been with him to share in this beauty, but she wasn't. She'd been left behind.

The instant that Pietr thought of Shara he began to fall. Light turned to flame, and he was in the inferno again. He dropped through veil-like layers of worlds until he found his body. Then he was in it. He was back in his body desperately clinging to life.

Angered by the loss of the beauty Pietr reached up into the heavens for it. He drew it down into himself and then filled Rula's body with energy so pure it healed. It burned away the poison and

restored the dead flesh. Pietr continued to channel the energy until Rula was well and then collapsed back into his own weary shell.

The sleep that followed was so deep that Pietr had no awareness of being carried back to his own tent. When he did finally wake the slumbering forms Borka and Tula looked so much like they always did that he wasn't sure whether he'd really been with Rula or dreamed the whole thing. It took the sensation of a lump on his leg, a wound he'd somehow absorbed from Rula, to convince him that he really had healed the young brave. He'd found a pure light and used it to heal.

Pietr's need to relieve himself forced him to crawl out of the tent. It had been a warm winter day, and moisture from melted snow had condensed into fog. Pietr made his way between ghost-like tents until he reached the edge of the village. Then there was nothing but snow, trees and fog.

Pietr swallowed a handful of snow and then continued on in a trance. Feeling detached, as though he hadn't quite settled back into his body, he walked through the woods. Trees glowed eerily in the mist, and still he marched on. The only sound was the faraway crunch of his feet in the snow.

Eventually Pietr came to rest at the edge of a spring-fed pond. He could hear water gurgling, but aside from the pressure of the log he ended up sitting on he felt nothing at all. He sat there for a very long time reliving all that he'd seen and felt. When Danu rose to leave, the fog had lifted and the sun was shining.

THE INFERNO

(c1998 David Camp)

PART FOUR : THE CHAMELEON

1

Danu, Micklo, Fruel, all were there inside Pietr along with Pietr himself. He was aware of a body, a lean, healthy body, and it felt good. The sun was shining on his face, and that felt good, too. It had been months since he'd felt so good without creating the warmth himself.

But his euphoria quickly passed. Spring was starting, and that meant Shara would die. Pietr didn't know when, but he knew it would be soon. The Drenga had been waiting for this day.

So it was time to return. Pietr had spent the winter trying to get ready for this day, and now it was here. He turned around and walked back to the village. He wanted to say good-bye to his friends.

It would have been easier to just leave, but Tula and Borka would have been worried. They might have thought that the poison had affected him. He could see the smoke from cooking fires, and then he could see the tan-colored tents. He hadn't wandered as far as he'd thought.

Feeling no ill effects from the healing aside from a ravenous hunger, Pietr walked into the clearing. Villagers were staring at him in much the same way that they had when he'd first arrived, but he ignored them and sought out Borka's tent. Borka and Tula were inside, along with Rula. Pale, but well, the young brave was talking to his sister.

This was something new. Rula had avoided his sister's tent ever since Pietr had arrived, but now he was here. He looked at Pietr for a moment and then stared at the ground. Borka and Tula were also uncomfortable.

"I've got to go away," Pietr said, hoping the strained looks were because he'd done something remarkable and not because of something he'd said while delirious.

"Go away?" Borka said. "You're leaving us?"

"I've got to go to the city. There's something there I have to do."

"Is it dangerous, this thing you have to do?" Borka said.

"Yes."

"Then I'll go with you," Rula said, finally looking into Pietr's eyes.

"I have to do this alone."

"No. I'll go with you. I owe you my life."

"You don't own me anything. I have to do this myself."

"No. I'll go with you. I'll follow even if you say no."

Something in Rula's voice told Pietr it was useless to argue, so he didn't. He was in too much of a hurry to waste the time. He told Rula to fetch what he needed then gathered up his own things. He hoped he hadn't saved Rula from one threat only to see him succumb to another.

Borka scowled while Pietr was collecting his things, perhaps sensing the nature of Pietr's secret. Tula looked hurt, too, but she tried to help. She gave Pietr a grain cake to eat and packed more for the trip. By the time Rula returned Pietr was ready to go.

Pietr was glad word of his departure hadn't spread. He wasn't close to anyone else in the tribe and didn't want to be slowed by questions or people wishing him well. Guilt had made him keep quiet about what had happened to Torral and Shara, and he didn't want to ruin his reputation now. He wanted to be remembered as a good person if he didn't come back.

The audible trickle of the melting snow added to Pietr's impatience as he and Rula left the village. Rula labored to match Pietr's pace, but Pietr could see the young brave was weak. Walking slower wasn't easy. The warmth, the thought of seeing Shara and the prospect of being killed all combined to

make Pietr want to run.

To keep his emotions in check Pietr focused on the young brave whose life seemed bound up with his own. Rula was perhaps two years his junior, but the young native's eyes had the same, far-away look as his own. Rula was similar enough to him in size and personality so that looking at the young brave was like looking at a younger version of himself. Pietr couldn't help but wonder if this was how he might have looked if he'd grown up as a native.

"You don't have to do this," Pietr finally said, still wishing he could change Rula's mind.

"Yes I do."

"You didn't seem to like me before today. Why was that?"

"I don't know. Seeing you made me feel funny, but I was wrong. You're not bad like I thought"

"I'm neither as bad as you thought nor as good as you think I am now. I'm human. I try to do the right thing, but I make mistakes"

"No. You're good. You heal people."

"Not always. I've killed, too."

"You?"

"Yes. The last one was going to kill me, so I killed him first."

"Then you were justified."

"Maybe. But it didn't make me feel any better about it afterwards."

Pietr and Rula, who could indeed have passed for brothers despite the differences in their clothing and skin, walked on in silence for a time.

"Where we're going, will there be other people trying to kill you?" Rula finally said. "Is that why you don't want me along?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry. I'm not afraid. I died yesterday. I died and yet I didn't die. Death no longer scares me."

"It shouldn't. It's not the end, just a change, like putting on new clothes and moving to a new place."

"I want to be like you," Rula said. "My uncle was a shaman. He would have taught me if he hadn't died."

"I'll teach you after this is over," Pietr said, at last realizing what it was about Rula that he recognized. I'm still learning, but I'll teach you what I can."

"I'd like that."

"You may be of the blood. You may have been a shaman in some other life."

"I think I was. I have dreams where I see myself as a shaman, only it's with another tribe, one I don't recognize."

"Do you ever have dreams of places that are totally different, like they're in another part of the world?"

"No. At least I don't think so, but it's hard to tell. Some of my dreams are so strange."

"We've lived before, I'm quite certain of this. I don't know what's going to happen when we get to the city, but you can't let things you might suddenly remember interfere with what's happening now. My enemy is powerful. He might try to turn you against me. Whatever happens, you must remember that he's the one who almost killed you."

"I thought I was bitten?"

"There was more than poison in that knipf's bite. There was magic, too."

"I won't fail you. I'll help you kill this magician."

"That's not what I'm asking. Just don't turn against me. And don't get killed yourself. I'm trying to save someone. I don't want to save one life at the cost of another. That's why I'd rather you weren't coming along."

"No. I want to help."

"Then we'll have to figure out a way to sneak you into the city. I can make myself invisible, but you'll stick out. You said you want to be a shaman. Have you ever done any magic, made people think you were an animal, or anything like that?"

"No. Sometimes I imagine I'm an animal. I see myself flying or running through the woods in some other body, but I don't think I look like an animal to anyone else."

"That's a start. The trick is to make people see what you're imagining. Maybe I can teach you while we walk."

Feeling like he was teaching a younger version of himself, Pietr explained the trick of projecting mental images. Knowing that both their lives could depend on how well Rula learned this trick, Pietr urged his student on until Rula was able to at least make his skin look less green. As they hiked south Pietr wondered if this would be enough. They'd have to steal some clothes, but it might allow Rula to enter the city without being noticed.

Pietr's other two concerns were the menacing cloud above Tarnahue and how slow they were moving. The slushy snow made travel so difficult that reaching their goal in one day was impossible. By mid-afternoon they were less than half way there. They'd skirted one mountain, but still had another to get by followed by a long, hilly stretch.

So Pietr altered their course. Wary of the cloud's tendrils, he decided to climb to the cave where he'd once slept. Borka had said the cave was magical. Pietr himself had felt its power and hoped it would somehow help Rula.

Although the days were longer than during Pietr's first night on this mountain, the climb lasted until dark. It was Rula who spotted the cave. He'd never seen it, but he recognized it from a dream. Taking that as a positive sign, Pietr gathered some wood. Rula sat down to rest.

Pietr started a fire, worked a warming spell, and then rested, too. As he chewed on a grain cake he wondered if his dazed companion was experiencing the same kind of time disorientation he'd experienced in this place. He also thought about Shara. Being in a cave with a young native reminded him of the times that he'd been in a cave with Shara.

Pietr couldn't stop thinking about Shara, so he decided to let her know he was on his way. He'd reached out to her from this cave before and hoped its magic would protect him again. He waited until Rula was asleep and then slipped into a trance. Almost immediately he was floating above his body.

Then he was moving. Eager to see Shara, he was soaring over the valley and Torral's mountain towards the city. The dark, circular cloud loomed straight ahead. It was blotting out thousands of stars.

But Pietr wasn't scared. He'd survived an encounter with one of the cloud's tendrils the day before, so he kept on going. Thinking himself stronger than the cloud, he swept down towards its base. The tendrils were thicker there, but he flew between them.

The cloud itself was another matter. It was narrower at its base, but it reached all the way to the ground and covered several blocks. Pietr couldn't reach the Drenga tunnels without entering it, so he flew into it. He was immediately caught up in a cyclone.

Pietr was aware of a thin thread connecting him to his body, and his first thought was that the thread would break. He didn't know what would happen if it did, but suspected he would die. He tried to return to his body, but the storm was too strong. It was drawing him down like a whirlpool.

For a few moments Pietr felt like he was back in the inferno. He was at the mercy of the storm. Then he was falling, and then he hit something hard. When his vision cleared he was in a dark cell.

Pietr was so shaken he wasn't sure whether this cell was part of the magical realm or the physical world. The fact that he could see a trail of afterimages when he moved his hands told him that there was magic at work here. He could walk, but it was hard. The air was thick like water.

Pietr had encountered this resistance before and tried to break through it again. There were no doors, so he waded towards one of the walls. When he reached the wall he kept on going. The stone had the same consistency as the air so he started to walk right through it.

But then the stone hardened. It became solid trapping him in the wall. He remembered feeling

something similar the night of his Drenga initiation, and when he listened for chanting he heard it. The same low "droom" that had held him in place the night of his initiation was binding him now.

Soon it wasn't Pietr who was stuck in the wall, but rather Micklo. The Drenga had summoned up the magician who shared their dark lusts. Pietr was still there, but only as a small voice. All of the cravings he'd known as Micklo were alive inside him again.

As much as he hated being bound in a wall, Micklo loved being alive. He was momentarily trapped, but because he was part of the maze he could see things that he wouldn't have been able to see otherwise. He could see that the Grand Mage's real target was the shaman whose coming had been foretold. That shaman lay asleep in a cave.

Micklo cast his thoughts towards the cave and began to move. He couldn't leave the stone wall, but he could travel through it into the ground and then through the ground to the cave. One moment he was in the cave's wall and the next he'd re-entered Pietr's body. He was staring down at Rula thinking the young shaman should die.

For now that Micklo was in control of Pietr's mind and body he was jealous of Rula. He wanted to be the shaman the tribe worshipped, not this feeble rival. If Rula weren't killed he would not only supplant Micklo; he'd also tell the tribe about Micklo's crimes. He'd turn Micklo from the revered figure he was used to being into a hated outcast.

A single stab could prevent that, but something held Micklo back. His other selves were fighting for control. Suppressing those selves, Micklo drew his knife and stepped towards Rula. All Pietr and Danu could do was cry out in alarm.

But the "droom" was too loud for those cries to be heard. It was coming in waves, now, making him feel like the skin of a vibrating drum. Pietr and Danu were feeling the vibration, too. The only way they could stop it was to stab at Rula.

Driven mad by the sound Pietr finally did lash out. He couldn't wrestle control of his body from Micklo, so he directed his blow inward towards the door to his furnace. He felt its white-hot fire, and then the chanting turned to cries of anguish. He'd enveloped the Drenga in his own madness and flames.

Pietr had nearly died the first time he'd experienced the inferno. That had been because he hadn't known where he was. He felt panic now because the inferno was more intense than that first time. Micklo had been caught off guard, and without his help in containing the flames they were raging out of control.

Pietr had forgotten how terrifying it was to be in a place where nothing existed but shifting scenes. No longer aware of his body, he wondered if he'd ever had one. He felt like the void, a formless nothing struggling to be born. If he couldn't dream up a world out of nothing he would cease to exist.

Pietr was overwhelmed and Micklo was fighting the Drenga, so it was Danu who took control. More used to creating a world out of the void than Pietr, he embraced its slippery power. He imagined himself in the room where he'd written The Void, and that's where he was. As the inferno raged outside, nothing existed but that room with its lamp, desk, and papers.

Amid the roar of the flames outside the walls of the room, Danu felt the way he imagined God must have felt when nothing existed but It. Then he thought of Shara. He remembered the mountain path she'd appeared on as a faro and he was on that path with her again. In much the same way that Pietr had followed her, Danu let her lead him up to a cave. When he woke as Pietr on the dark floor of the cave, it was Rula who was standing near by. Shara had faded with the flames.

2

When Pietr woke the next morning, the horror of almost killing Rula was a dim memory. He remembered lapsing into a normal sleep and dreaming about his father. His father turned into Rula and stood over him. Now that he was awake Pietr studied Rula. Was this really his father? Had his father

been reborn again so quickly?

Pietr would have liked to question Rula, but he had a more pressing concern. Shara needed him. Pietr was determined that at least one shaman would survive this day, so he set his father's pouch next to Rula and slipped out of the cave. He was going to confront the Drenga alone.

Torrall's mountain stood across the valley, but it looked different. The dark cloud that had loomed beyond it was gone. There were angry streaks of red in the sky, but they were mere wisps. The cloud itself was in shreds.

Pietr put distance between himself and Rula as fast as he could. He didn't relish facing the Drenga, but he was even more worried about how Shara would look at him when she saw him. She'd said he had another side, and she'd been right. His desire for vengeance had led to her capture and Torrall's death.

Wanting very badly to make things right with her, Pietr swooped down off the mountain. The air was still cool, so the valley was shrouded in fog. At the foot of the mountain he turned east. He'd never been on the eastern side of Torrall's mountain, but wanted to avoid Torrall's cave.

The fog had burned away by mid-morning. The valley between the first two mountains in the range was higher than the land to the east, and by the time Pietr descended down into the lowlands the sun was high in the sky. With snow again turning to slush his shoes began to squish. He no longer had the energy to hop over wet spots like he'd done the day before.

The forest on Torrall's mountain was untouched, but the trees Pietr suspected had stood to the east of the mountain had been cleared for farms. The muddy fields reminded him of his life as Fruel. The climate had been milder in that life, but the fields were much the same. More than once he saw a hill like the one he'd died on.

As Pietr drew closer to Tarnahue he wracked his brain for a plan. He had none aside from making himself invisible and sneaking up on the Drenga. There were no authorities he could turn to because natives were outside the law. If he got killed, no one but Morta and his grandfather would care.

The ugly streaks in the sky didn't help Pietr's mood. They reminded him of a volcano's plumes. He knew they were invisible to Tarnahue's residents, but that didn't alter his feeling that everyone in the city was against him. He was approaching a place as cancerous as the one he'd once lorded over as a high priest.

Pietr's attention was drawn from his past to his surroundings by a sudden movement. A man had emerged from a shed near the edge of a field. Pietr stopped and tried to blend in with the trees at the edge of the woods. The last thing he wanted was for word to spread that a strange native was lurking about.

Once the farmer re-entered his shed Pietr resumed his trek. It was exhausting to remain invisible for a long time, but he was getting close to Tarnahue so he continued to mask his mask himself. He was tired of wading through slush, so he left the edge of the woods for a gravel road. He hoped his shoes would dry out by the time he reached the city.

Being out in the open gave Pietr his first clear view of Tarnahue. He'd never approached it from this direction and was surprised at how far into the lowlands it had spread. The older part of the city was still obscured by trees, but what was visible seemed huge compared to the native village he'd been living in. Land that used to be forest was dotted with hundreds of homes.

It was inevitable that Pietr would encounter traffic on the road, and as the first plow-draw wagon approached, he held his breath. He was more worried that the bulky beast would smell him than that he'd be seen. It plodded past, saliva dripping from its thick mouth, and Pietr let out his breath. At length he reached the city and headed for his old neighborhood.

The sight of the grocery store he'd shopped in for years reminded Pietr of how hungry he was. He had been thinking about how strange the city looked, but now, with a familiar building in front of him, all he could think of was the food inside it. He headed for the rear service entrance hoping to sneak in and grab something to eat. It had been hours since he'd had his last cake.

The city's streets had been muddy enough to hide Pietr's tracks, but now that he was about to enter a building he had to be careful. He used some trash to scrape off his shoes, but they were still wet. The sight of three men unloading a wagon behind the store added to his concern. It would be hard to slip inside without leaving tracks they would see.

His mouth watering at the smell of the meat being unloaded, Pietr crouched behind some crates. The youngest of the workers was one of the classmates whose window he'd broken, and that made him nervous. He kept telling himself no one could see him and finally did sneak inside. While the men cracked jokes about women they knew he hid in a corner of the storage room.

Eventually the men left. One drove off in the wagon while the other two closed the door, turned out the light, and passed into the front of the store. Pietr was afraid they'd come back, so he made himself comfortable. He rested and nibbled on some bread while he waited for the store to empty out.

Eventually the light filtering into the storage room dimmed and Pietr got up. He couldn't find anything to drink in the darkness, so he entered the front of the store. The owner was still there, but soon left. After waiting far longer than he'd intended, Pietr had the full run of the store.

Guilty about how long he had waited, Pietr drank some juice, ate a sweet roll, and headed for the front door. It was not only dark outside, but also foggy. Pietr found the lock and stepped out into the cold. The chill that greeted him caught him by surprise.

Pietr had become immune to ordinary cold, but there was nothing ordinary about this chill. It was man-made, an icy sense of despair that stabbed at the heart. It was not only cold, but also deathly quiet. There was no one else in the fog.

Feeling like he'd slipped into one of his nightmares, Pietr wove his way through the dense mist. He passed one hovering sphere of light after another much as he always did in his worst dreams. Whatever magic was at work was affecting the whole city because every street was as desolate as the first. Pietr made it to the alley behind The Necromancer without encountering anyone.

As he crept up to The Necromancer's door, Pietr wished he had more than a knife to fight with. He could sense a second spell around the door, a powerful barrier that made him feel as though it was useless to go on. He was so unsure of himself that he came to a complete stop in front of the door. He wanted to give up without a fight.

It took the threat of discovery to get him moving again. Two wraith-like figures emerged from the fog and approached the door. Pietr flattened himself against a wall as they passed by. Still holding his breath, he watched as they tapped out a code on the door.

Almost immediately the door opened spilling red light into the fog. Pietr tried to slip in behind the two magicians inside, but he was too slow. As something was said about a third man who would be late, the door shut in Pietr's face. All he gained was the code for entry and the news that another magician was on the way.

But that was enough to give Pietr an idea. Projecting the thought of looking like someone or something else was no more difficult than seeming invisible, so he could pose as the third man and knock on the door. The only problem was that the real man would show up and an alarm would be raised. To prevent that, Pietr would have to see that the magician never arrived.

So he picked up a loose cobble and waited. He didn't want to kill the man; he just wanted to buy enough time to get inside and free Shara. Eventually he heard footsteps and tensed. He might have been ruthless as Micklo, but now he abhorred violence.

When Pietr struck the man's head, it was as though someone else was moving his arm. There was a sickening thunk, and then the man slumped to the ground. Pietr dragged the body out of the alley and across the street. There he bound and gagged the man with cloth from a pile of trash.

Pietr was exhausted from hours of masking his presence, but taking on the man's identity made it easier to approach the door. For some reason, thinking himself a Drenga magician instead of a shaman disarmed the resistance he'd felt. He fixed the man's voice in his mind and then rapped on the door. For a second time it swung open spewing a slit of red into the fog.

The sight of Rankin unnerved Pietr as he stepped into the entry. If anyone could see through his disguise it would be his teacher. "I see you made it," Rankin said as he pushed the door shut. "I was beginning to wonder about you."

"Couldn't be helped," Pietr said in a gruff voice.

"Well, hurry up, then. They're anxious to start."

"Of course."

Pietr briefly locked eyes with Rankin in the scarlet light of the entry and then turned towards the stairs. As he turned he noticed Rankin starting to frown. That was unsettling, but the sight of a street where the stairs should have been was even worse. As he stopped he could hear Rankin starting to move.

Instinctively making himself invisible Pietr ducked a fraction of a second before a knife sliced through the air. Then he was jamming his elbow up into Rankin's stomach and was driving the magician backwards as hard as he could. Rankin slammed into a wall and doubled over in pain. He tried to slash out again, but Pietr drew his own knife and stabbed first.

Shaking even more violently than he had when he'd hit the other man, Pietr dragged Rankin's corpse to the front of the store. Then he sheathed his knife and returned to the entry. The sight of a street still unnerved him, but he knew it wasn't real. The stairs down into the tunnels were there even if he couldn't see them.

Pietr inched his way forward trying to find the first step. The street's resemblance to the one in his nightmares made him feel like he was dreaming again. There were lights and sounds, but most of all there was fog, a dense, chilling fog that obscured most of the street. Pietr wondered if he'd taken a wrong turn and stepped out into the night.

But he hadn't. Aside from the fog this wasn't at all like the streets he'd come on. There were vehicles, and they weren't like the real ones he knew. They were low and sleek like the ones in his dream.

One of these vehicles swerved towards Pietr. Changing from metal and glass to a fiery-eyed monster as it swerved, it came right at him. Pietr jumped back and slipped in Rankin's blood. The monster dissolved as it reached the door.

Pietr calmed himself and tried again. Imagining himself as Rankin, he approached the stairs for a third time and saw them. There was still a street there, but it was superimposed on the stairs. No one was rushing up to meet him, so he began to descend.

Pietr counted the usual sixteen steps as he dropped below street level, but the passage at the bottom had changed. A wall covered with Dorienga carvings stood where the door to the cloakroom should have been. There weren't any doorways, just the walls of a passage in Micklo's temple. Feeling Micklo stir within in him, Pietr started down the long corridor.

Each step down the Dorienga corridor brought Micklo closer to the surface of Pietr's mind. The ancient passage was so familiar he could almost feel his gold robes on his back. If this were an illusion, it was very good. He didn't know whether he was dreaming or had been transported backwards in time.

The passage ran for about thirty paces and then opened into a circular chamber deep in the heart of the temple. As with the tunnel, there were Dorienga designs on the fire-lit wall. There were animal-headed men and women, symbols, and a depiction of the world's overlord. The sight of his god enabled Micklo to finish pushing Pietr aside.

For this was the moment he'd been waiting for. After all these centuries he could finally face his enemy and stop the string of murders that kept stealing his love from his life. Doubting that any magician could stand up to him, Micklo bowed before the image of the god he knew better than anyone else and then entered the tunnel on the far side of the chamber. It led to a sacrificial chamber that was occupied.

As Micklo drew closer to the second chamber, the sound emanating from it grew louder. It was the

same, low "droom" the Drenga had used twice before. To his dismay, the chant was starting to work again. By the time he reached the chamber, he could barely move.

The room itself was spinning so madly Micklo couldn't tell whether it was the one he knew or a new one filled with Drenga magicians. The chamber he'd shed blood in lay like a veneer over the one the Drenga had initiated him in. He also couldn't tell whether the man behind the altar was Nygul or the bald-headed Grand Mage. All he knew was that Shoora lay on the altar.

Micklo was appalled at how emaciated his love looked. As he was grabbed and thrust towards the altar, he saw that her lips were parched. Then he was on the altar himself, able to feel Shoora next to him, but unable to move. He felt like part of the stone.

Micklo's consciousness began to fade, and as it did he fought against the spell that bound him. He turned his gaze inward towards the door to his furnace. In his mind, he was in his private chamber standing before his portal to time. Screaming out in pain, he lurched forward into the flames.

3

As Micklo lurched, time collapsed. All of the scenes he was thrust into were equally real, as though they all existed at once. Time was no longer linear; it was millions of simultaneous NOW's. His love in was in many of them, so he reached out towards her...

Reached out and fell onto the burning sand of the wrestling pit. Amid the sound of jeers, he tried to scramble to his feet before Nygul attacked. He started to rise, but he wasn't able to get up quick enough. He felt a blow to his leg, and then the ground was rushing up towards his face...

Only it wasn't the sand of the wrestling pit that was rushing up to slam against him, it was the dirt of the old Market Street. An eight-year-old boy now, he landed at Nygul's feet. Nygul laughed, poked Micklo one last time with a foot, and then wandered off to join Shoora and her friends. Micklo could only watch...

Watch through Danu's eyes as the scene shifted from a dirt street to the corner of a brick avenue. Radiant as ever, Sierra waved at Danu where he stood and then turned and started to walk as a black carriage clattered past. Danu watched until Sierra was out of sight and then turned towards the Drenga temple with its half-open door. He thought he caught a glimpse of someone looking down the street Sierra had been on, but the figure quickly retreated into the darkness of the temple.

Danu started towards the marble stairs that led up to the door only to have the scene shift again. Jumping from one scene to another, he passed through dozens of doors. Shoora, Sierra, or Shara was in each scene like a single person in different clothes. Each time Pietr saw his love, she was closer to a moment of death.

Try as he might to slow the shifting, Micklo was drawn towards each of his love's deaths. One moment he was struggling to break free from the mob of onlookers gathering around the Dorienga temple that held Shoora, the next he was running down a street to the apartment where Sierra was being killed, and the next he was lying on an altar next to Shara. The room with the altar was neither more nor less real than the other scenes were. It was simply a place that he kept returning to.

Then something clicked in Micklo's mind. In a moment of clarity, he recalled how he'd used the inferno to strike down a magician who'd tried to kill him. Reaching deep into the fire, he lashed out again. Only this time a mind as strong as his own rose up to meet him.

Rose up to attack him like Nygul in the wrestling pit. Everything erupted in flame, and then he and his foe landed on a marble floor. Knocked loose from Nygul by the impact, Micklo looked around and saw that they were in a massive hall. It was twenty feet high and stretched for miles with thousands of doors.

As Micklo jumped to his feet, he noticed that he felt strange. His body felt light and was vibrating with the same electric energy as the hallway's gold-veined walls. He could not only pretend to look like someone or something else; he could actually alter his form. Nygul had a similar ability and was

sprouting talons and fangs.

In the wrestling pit, Nygul had always had an advantage because he was older. Here, too, he seemed surer of himself, as though he'd been here before. Finding himself attacked by a fierce beast Micklo had little choice but to run. Turning his arms to legs, he dropped down on all fours and leaped through a door into a steamy jungle.

Nygul charged after Micklo. He'd retained just enough of his face so that he looked like a daemon. Micklo hadn't yet figured out the rules of this realm, so he kept on running. Confident that he'd eventually prevail, he was enjoying the chase.

For it felt good to be bounding through a jungle on all fours. This was a magical place. Micklo could envision a branch he was passing under falling on Nygul, and it would fall. But before it could hit Nygul would turn it to dust.

Everything was happening so fast. Micklo heard other beasts in the jungle around him, and they began to close in. Micklo recognized the faces of Drenga magicians on some of the monsters. He couldn't tell whether they were after him or after the faro he spotted ahead in the brush.

The sudden appearance of a wall farther ahead in the jungle made Micklo's plight more desperate. It looked like he was going to be cornered. When the faro leaped through a hole in the wall, he followed. He ended up sliding across the floor of a hallway like the one he'd first landed in.

Before Micklo could figure out which way the faro had gone the beasts burst into the hall. He was just able to get out of the way before some of them skidded into the far wall. Micklo took off down the hall just ahead of the drinka-like pack. A different world lay beyond each of the hall's doors, but none held the faro.

Micklo was afraid he was getting farther away from the world the faro had entered, so he leaped through one of the doors. He landed on a narrow strip of beach beneath a steep cliff. The beach and cliff reminded him of the coast north of Tarnahue, but that wasn't where he was. The sky was too purple, and the rocky cliff was too orange.

With snarling beasts spilling onto the sand behind him, a cliff on his left, and sea on his right, Micklo had only one way to go. All-too-quickly a collapsed pile of rock blocked his way. As he scrambled up the rock he tried to pummel his pursuers with stones, but it did more good than the branches in the jungle. Some of the stones even shot back at him.

Micklo continued up the face of the cliff carving out steps as he climbed. At the top he spied a castle and headed for it. He hoped that he could get inside and then bar the door. The forest that covered the rest of the plateau offered little hope of escape.

Micklo used his mind to begin raising the castle's drawbridge the instant he reached it, but he was too slow. Nygul made it onto the drawbridge and into the courtyard right behind him. Micklo was tired of fleeing, so he changed back into human form and armed himself with a shield and a sword. Nygul did the same and attacked.

Metal clashed against metal until Nygul began to beat Micklo back. When the other magicians spilled into the courtyard, Micklo had to resume his flight. He dropped his shield and sword and entered the main structure of the castle. A gloomy corridor led to an expansive, fire-lit hall.

The vaulted chamber was as devoid of inhabitants as the courtyard had been, but there were figures in the murals on its walls. Startlingly lifelike, the figures moved as he viewed them. Each mural depicted a scene from one of his lives. Combined with the heat of the room's fire, they made him feel like he was in the inferno.

It took Micklo a moment to realize that some of the heat was coming from Nygul. The magician had turned himself into a dragon and was starting to spout fire. Micklo turned his skin to scales and rushed towards one of the murals. In it Shoora was lying on an altar like the one he'd last seen her on.

As Micklo lunged into Shoora's cell he assumed his own form. He didn't want to frighten his love. She was dazed, but responded to his touch. He shook her until she sat up.

Shoora recoiled at the sight of Micklo. Realizing that he looked older than the person she

remembered, he made himself sixteen again. The arrival of the other magicians was harder to fix. Micklo pulled Shoora to her feet, and the two of them fled from the cell.

Micklo had had years to plot his revenge the first time Shoora had been killed, but here everything was happening too fast. Here he and Shoora could only run. If they could reach his chamber, then he could fight. He'd woven spells into its walls and could defeat anyone there.

But first he and Shoora had to reach the cell. As he led her towards it, he began to trigger its spells by linking with his god. By the time he reached his chamber the link was complete. He turned and unleashed his dark fire.

For his mind was a furnace. Its flames touched everything. Neither knowing nor caring whether his god was a separate being or a part of himself, he tried to burn his enemies. He tried to engulf them in flame burning himself or Shoora.

But Micklo had forgotten just how powerful the fire could be. Amid the roar of the inferno, he lost sight of not only his enemies, but also Shoora. Sensing her somewhere near-by, he tried to reach out to her. He tried to find her in the searing flames.

Everything from the moment when Micklo had been thrust onto an altar next to Shara until now seemed to have happened in a single instant, as though, in trying to strike out at his enemies, his mind had embraced more than it could hold. Overwhelmed, he tried to focus on the altar he guessed he was still on. He tried to use it as an anchor in the midst of the flames. Without a clear picture of his enemies, he couldn't strike out at them.

For this inferno was different from the one Pietr had known. At the same time that Micklo was in millions of scenes, he was the stuff they were made up of. At last sensing one of his enemies in the flames, he homed in on the man. The inferno coalesced into a jungle.

Simultaneously in the jungle and above it, Micklo chased after the man. He gave daemon-like form to the man's worst crimes and made them join in the hunt. The man reached a river and had to jump in. The daemons jumped in after him and tore him apart.

Like all of the other scenes tearing at Micklo the jungle quickly fell away, but something had changed. That part of him that still lay on an altar saw one of the Drenga crumple to the ground. Sensing victory, Micklo embraced the flames and sought out another man. He located his second victim in a forest and swooped in for the kill.

These woods weren't as dense as the jungle had been. They were more like the woods Fruel had lived near, sparse and hilly with numerous rocks. Knowing that the man he was after now had been cruel to women, Micklo conjured up a dozen strong ones and armed them with spears. They cornered the man in a gully and unleashed their spears.

Back in the room with the altar, a second magician began to sag. The first had barely dropped to the floor, and already a second was dead. Micklo still couldn't move, but the spell binding him was starting to break. In another minute he would be free.

But before Micklo could seek out a third magician the roar of the inferno was pierced by a shriek from the Grand Mage. The bald magician had raised a knife and was plunging it towards Micklo's chest. Micklo focused his attention on this new threat. As the knife descended, he engaged the Grand Mage's mind in much the same way that he'd grappled with Nygul in the wrestling pit.

As Micklo touched the Grand Mage's mind there was a horrible wrenching, and then he was no longer himself. In much the same way that Pietr had merged with Rula two days earlier, Micklo was now linked with the Grand Mage. He could remember things the Grand Mage had lived through as Nygul as vividly as he could remember his own life. He felt the same consuming desire to possess Shoora that Nygul had felt.

For although he was Nygul, son of the high priest, Shoora was one young woman he would never have. He'd never lure her to the privacy of his chambers because she loved someone else. Her rejection would be avenged. If he couldn't have her, then nobody could.

So she's paid for her rejection, her and countless others like her. In each of his lives he'd seen

dozens of young women pay for the pain their beauty caused. He was about to see it again, only something was wrong! His enemy was challenging him!

Infuriated, the Grand Mage plunged his knife down towards the young magician on the altar. As he stabbed, he felt a jolt in his mind. He felt his enemy trying to take control of his mind. Together they plunged into madness and fire.

Micklo, the Grand Mage, the nameless one who sustained the world, all existed within the flames. Micklo could simultaneously see a blade plunging down towards him and feel the knife in his hand. Nygul was kicking Micklo and feeling the pain in his own leg. The two priests had become one.

Feeling his victory start to slip away, the Grand Mage shrieked again. He screamed and focused on the knife's downward plunge. Halfway to his goal, he had the horrible vision that he was stabbing his own infant son. The heir who'd been taken from him so many centuries ago had been reborn and was lying on the altar.

Suddenly unsure whether it was his timeless enemy who lay on the altar next to the native girl or his own son, the Grand Mage changed the course of his knife. He aimed for the young woman instead of the young man. As the knife swerved the Grand Mage's scream echoed in Micklo's throat. His attempt to deflect the knife had gone badly awry.

For Micklo had lived through this horrible moment before. He remembered that, now. He'd lived through this bloodshed hundreds of times. Shocked, he fell back into his own mind. He imploded into himself and became Pietr again.

Only something had changed. More of the Drenga were falling, and Pietr thought for an instant that it was Micklo he was staring up at. The magician he'd once been was stabbing at him with a knife. Stabbing at him and Shara.

Pietr tried to fight back. He tried to reach out with his mind and stop the assault, but it was too late. He'd found Shara only to lose her again. He felt her hand squeeze his, and then fire enveloped them.

4

Fire and a flood of unstable scenes. Pietr had experienced the inferno before, but never like this. He felt severed from his body, cut off from the anchor that could draw him back to the world. He had nothing to grab onto.

Nothing but Shara, that is. He couldn't tell if he was still holding her hand, but as scene after scene flared in to being around him, he felt her presence. Sometimes she was there in one of her womanly forms, sometimes she appeared as a faro, and sometimes she was present only in spirit. Every lake, stream, and tree seemed imbued with her presence.

Pietr felt as malleable as Shara. At the same time that he was standing on a street or sitting on a rock next to a cascading stream, he was also in a raging furnace. A particular scene would hold his attention for an instant, and then it would slip away. It would burn away like paper tossed into a fire leaving him in madness and pain.

So many scenes were tearing at Pietr that he began to wonder if he'd ever been anywhere else. Each scene would seem real for an instant. The roar would subside just enough for him to hope that he'd woken, and then he'd think of the flames and he'd be in them again. Each flame was a scene, and a new one would envelop him.

Only gradually, over what could have been years, did the flames lose their sharp edge. Pietr became so numb that he could no longer feel anything. He was no longer Pietr. He was simply an observer in a long, twisted dream.

An observer in a city with jeweled buildings and gold-tiled streets. It looked like a city he'd known as Danu, but it wasn't the same. That city had been dark while this one was light. He'd forgotten something important, and he couldn't think of what it was.

Like why it pained him to look at Sierra. As he walked down the street next to her, she was bathed

in white light. But then darkness tugged at him, a hunger for sensation, and he was falling through a door. Dragging Sierra with him, he was falling into madness and flames.

The madness and flames of the inferno. This was where he'd always been, living, and breathing and changing form as he melted from one flame to the next. He ate to live, and he lived until he died. Then he emerged in a new form and lived all over again.

Only slowly did self-awareness emerge. His attention was so focused on each moment, on filling his stomach and avoiding danger, that only slowly did he begin to fear ceasing to exist. That fear led to questions. As one dream gave way to another in endless succession, he began to look around wonder what he was.

No answer came. Try as he might, he was too distracted by the realness of each dream to remember where he'd come from or fathom where he was going. It was in this twilight state that he became aware of himself as a small child. Emerging from his dreams, he became aware of his surroundings and the fact that he was special.

He was special because his father was a Dorienga priest. He would be, too, when he was older. Until then, he thought of Shoorra and dreamed of what would be. When he grew up, she would be his wife.

But there was one problem, an intrusion that made his life difficult. An older boy who also liked Shoorra kept on picking on him. The boy's father was powerful, so there was nothing Micklo could do. Even when Shoorra's life was threatened, there was no way to intervene.

During the years following Shoorra's death Micklo was consumed by a desire to be the one in control. The more ruthless he became, the more he hurt causing him to strike out more viciously. Too blind to see that he was hurting himself, he became like his enemy. He set up chains of events that reached into the future.

And plunged ever deeper into his private hell until he was lost. Life had no meaning outside of his visions and pain. Repeatedly finding his love and then losing her again, he became trapped in his web. The inferno became a nightmare from which he couldn't escape.

It was a scene from that nightmare that Micklo was caught up in now. He was walking down a hallway lined with huge doors. Unmoved by the gold-veined beauty of the hall he entered a room with a massive throne. The deity on it changed form as Micklo approached.

Confronted by a towering figure that looked like the Grand Mage one moment and himself the next, Micklo guessed that he was in the presence of the lord of this realm. Streams of light were flowing from the deity's hands and eyes into the air around it. A loud hum, similar to the Drenga chant, was making the hall vibrate. Invisible fingers were ripping Micklo apart.

Ripping him into all of the people and creatures he'd ever been. A pure dreamer now, he was feeling all of the pain he'd ever inflicted. Repulsed by his pain and stupidity, he tried to wake up. He tried to return to the room where he remembered writing *The Void*.

And plunged instead deeper into the fire. He had a fleeting vision of a luminous city, a place that felt like home, and then he was falling again. Splitting in half, he became both dreamer and dream. He created a cage and became trapped inside it.

And ended up in a garden. A child again, he was in a garden with his love. Everything was beautiful until they discovered a cave and wandered into it. The next thing that they knew, they were in a maze running from knife-welding men.

The carvings on the walls of the maze were familiar, for the dreamer had helped to create them. He and his love were in the tunnels beneath his ancient temple. Then the scene shifted and they were on an altar. Someone who looked like himself was stabbing at them with a knife.

It was himself. The Dorienga magician the dreamer had once been was killing them. Unable to break free, the dreamer squeezed his love's hand. Then the inferno fell away and he was Pietr again in the wintry forest where he and Shara had found some berries.

The pain in Shara's eyes made Pietr want to comfort her, but he held back. She'd just expressed

misgivings about what she sometimes saw in him, so he didn't know how she would react. Worried that she'd think him cold, he at last reached out and squeezed one of her hands. When she responded by not only squeezing back, but also sending a pulse of warmth into his hand, he leaned in for a kiss. The contact was light, barely more than a touch, but combined with the warmth made him feel loved. Amazed that she really did like him, he drew back and looked into her eyes. The pain that had been there was gone.

"I think we should go back, now," Shara said, giving Pietr's hand a final squeeze that cemented him into this world of trees and snow. "Torrall's waiting for us."

"I suppose so," Pietr said.

The walk back to the clearing where Torrall was preparing his stones was magical. Pietr was so caught up in the beauty of the wintry forest and the nearness of his love that he could hardly believe this was real. To his conscious mind, which was filled memories of his life in Tarnahue instead of the inferno, the kiss had been his first intimate contact with Shara. After weeks of meeting with her and Torrall it had been the first time he'd shown how he felt, and yet he felt like he'd been intimate with her before. For a moment by the berries he'd caught a glimpse of other lives, frightening lives, and then Shara had drawn him back to this world. His biggest fear now that that he knew she liked him was that something would take her away. He didn't want to lose her.

Feeling like he was dreaming, Pietr accompanied Shara to the clearing where Torrall had gathered some stones. Silently, Pietr and Shara looked on as the old shaman finished etching a design in the ground and then scooped up the handful of stones. As Pietr and Shara continued to watch, Torrall moaned and swayed back and forth. Then the old magician yelled and scattered the stones so wildly that one of them ended up on the figure Pietr had etched.

"These stones speak of danger," Torrall said after grimacing at them for a time. "Danger and powerful magic. Never before have they spoken of such magic. It is like a great whirlwind, a storm that rips time apart. I can see fire and death, but none of it makes any sense. I can only tell you that we can't stay here. It isn't safe."

"You say we," Pietr said. "Does that mean I can come with you?"

"You should leave with us, yes. You should come with us now."

"Now?"

"Yes."

Pietr felt a chill despite the warmth of his recent spell. This was what he'd been hoping for, and yet, as he thought about leaving his apartment and possessions forever, he felt a stab of regret. He'd be abandoning everything, his art and books, and even his clothes. He wanted to return for at least a few things, but something inside him said "no." The price would be too great.

So Pietr headed north with Torrall and Shara. Fighting off the frightening visions that were tugging at his mind, he accompanied the two natives to their mountain. The crisp air and speckles of light reflecting off the snow made his head spin. He barely dared breath for fear of waking from this beautiful dream.

And slipping back into the fire. Pietr's visions of the inferno were stronger now, so strong that he began to suspect it was real and the rocks and snow weren't. At one point he grabbed hold of Shara's hand. He barely noticed that Torrall was no longer with them.

For in some subtle way, the old magician still was still with them. No longer visible, he was present in the sunlight and the whistle of the wind through the trees. Holding on tightly to each other, Pietr and Shara climbed the mountain. The scenery changed as they rose.

Changed like the malleable hallway in Pietr's dreams. At one point Pietr and Shara rounded a boulder and found a whole world spread out before them, a lush jungle world filled with gardens and temples. Pietr vaguely remembered fleeing through such a jungle and recoiled. He was afraid a swarm of beasts would close in on him and Shara.

But then he remembered lives he and Shara had spent in this place. His mind cleared, and he

remembered how they'd often returned to this place. The lives here had been magical, but they'd always come to an end. He and Shara had inevitably blundered back into a realm of fire and pain.

And forgotten about this place except in visions and dreams. Now, as Pietr stood gripping Shara's hand, a dozen figures approached. They were luminous beings clothed in gold robes. Foremost among the figures was a priest who looked like Micklo. He was coming to welcome the new arrivals back to his realm.

The lure of this magical world was hard to resist. Equally strong was the sensual pull of the realm below. More of a wraith, now, than a creature of flesh and blood, Pietr remembered how wonderful his love could feel. He was afraid that if they kept climbing he'd never feel her soft body again.

For the two of them were turning to light. Warmth was emanating from the place where they touched, but he could no longer feel a hand. He felt hunger instead, a thirst for something more, but he wasn't sure whether it was for what lay higher up on the mountain or what lay below. He wanted to stop and enjoy Shara before she turned completely to light.

That seemed to be what the priest of this realm was offering. Pietr and Shara had suffered enough. They could stop here. They could be together for a long time.

But the mountain path continued on into the clouds. Pietr and Shara could stop and eventually succumb to the pull of the world below, or they could keep going. Not wanting to lose Shara again, even for a time, Pietr gave in to her urging and kept going. He and Shara turned away from the jungle and resumed their climb.

Until they broke through some clouds and found themselves on the threshold of an even broader, more luminous plane. The inferno still tugged at Pietr. If anything, the lure of its sensual pleasures was stronger, for he and Shara had become little more than pure light. This misty realm was an even more magical place than the jungle. It was very possibly the world they'd originally fallen from. As Pietr hovered at the edge of it, he wasn't sure anything else had ever been real.

For time no longer made any sense. Heaven and earth, past and future, all seemed the same. He was at the edge of a world filled with jeweled buildings and sparkling waters, and he was standing near a mountain cave gazing at a valley and sea. A maddening roar filled his head.

For his fever had returned. He was standing on the mountain with the shallow cave, and his fever had returned. And with it the feeling that his hold on the landscape around him was tenuous, at best. He felt as though the very ground beneath him was about to cease to exist, and he wasn't sure he could survive another plunge into madness. Trying with all of his might to hold off the inferno, he stared out at the sea viewing it not as something physical, but as part of something alive. This whole, conscious moment seemed like part of something alive, and when he tried to merge with what it was part of, something gave way. He had the impression of being in a million places at once, and then...

One of them drew him in, and he was back in the room with the fiery door. Of all of the places that kept pulling him in, this was the one that caught him the most, and each time it drew him in, he saw a little bit more. This time he saw that he was clothed in a Dorienga robe and that there was a grid of sixteen squares above the door. But it was still the door that absorbed him the most. He was closer to it, now, so close that he could feel the fire just beyond it. There might be nothing there, but it was a nothingness filled with the most powerful forces imaginable, a black hole of fire and pain. And he was moving into that fire, into a place where nothing had any form...

For one, awful moment, Pietr almost forgot that he was really on a mountain with Shara. He almost succumbed to the pull of the fire. But then he felt Shara, felt that part of her where they were linked, and he was back on the mountain again. He was back at that place where he and Shara could either step off into a luminous realm or turn around.

Though subtle, the lure of the luminous realm was as strong as than that of the worlds below. Once Pietr and Shara left the mountain path and entered a city with buildings and streets they recognized, they realized they'd been here before. A carriage rolled by, but it wasn't black like the one Pietr usually remembered. This one was white. It melted past, and then it was gone. Pietr and Shara were in a

bright, sunlit cloud.

Without Shara Pietr might have fallen again like he had when he'd returned to heal Rula. Nothing in this cloud seemed solid or real. He and Shara could imagine something, and it would be there. Then they'd imagine something else, and it would be there, too.

For Pietr and Shara had become intertwined spheres of pure light. The inferno still raged somewhere in the dimness below, ready to draw them in if they faltered, but here there was only light. The light was a sun, and they were entering it. Then they were in it. In some inexplicable way, it seemed like they'd always been in it, and the rest had just been a dream. They'd dreamed they were apart, but now they were together again.

For Shara was the light. She was all around Pietr, and he was all around her. No longer separated by flesh, they were one. They were bathing each other in warm glowing love.

And they were creating. They were nothing, a void shining with the brilliance of a million suns, and they were creating worlds out of pure light and sound. A city with a gold-tiled avenue coalesced out of the light, and they were on a glittering street. They were walking hand-in-hand through the light.