

THE INFERNO

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PART ONE : DAEMON

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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.