

THE INFERNO

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PART ONE : DAEMON

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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.