

THE INFERN

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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 ploth-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 conscious, 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.

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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.

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 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, hooved 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 there 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 manifested 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 plots 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 staring 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.