

THE INFERNO

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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 shoo-pa 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. "Torral'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 Torral had assembled a pile of stones. The two young lovers looked on silently as Torral drew several figures in the dirt and then scooped up some of the stones. As Pietr and Shara continued to watch, Torral 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," Torral 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.