

THE INFERNO

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PART ONE : DAEMON

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

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

Micklo had taken it while he'd slept.

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

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

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

In the eerie stillness of the pre-dawn hour Pietr headed for the park that bordered the forest. A drinka yapped to his left, and a solitary door slammed somewhere to his right, but those sounds faded as he entered the park. Moving as much by memory as sight, he found his favorite path into the woods and started to climb. His stomach growled, but he ignored his hunger and focused on the first, pale streaks of red in the eastern sky.

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

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

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

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

back, he got the distinct impression that it wanted him to follow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shaman blood. Like your father."

"You know my father?" Pietr said.

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

"Killed?" Pietr said. His mother had never mentioned that. All she'd said was that his father had been a wonderful man and a shaman and that he'd gone away. Pietr had long dreamed of finding him one day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The danger?"

"The cause of the horrible things I see."

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

"Then take our hands."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You must learn our ways first."

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

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

"I understand."

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

"I understand," Pietr said again, reassured by the news that he could join Shara and the old man

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Was my father part of your tribe?"

"No."

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

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

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

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

"Oh."

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

"You say some people can disappear altogether?"

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

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

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

"I see."

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

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

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