

THE INFERNO

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PART ONE : DAEMON

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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 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 manifest 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 ploths 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.