

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Mikulov: Brothers in Arms

A Diablo III: The Order prequel

by

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Pain, be welcome in my home. You shall not live here long, yet while you stay with me, I receive you like an honored guest. You will know peace in this house, but only until the completion of my task, and at that point you must go. Yet until that moment arrives, I greet you like an old friend.

Sweat streaking down his face, the young novitiate recited the words in his head and struggled against the distraction of the pain lancing outward from the spot where his knees knelt on unyielding stone. The throbbing ache seemed to encompass his entire world, gathering intensity and radiating upward, but he struggled to shut it out of his awareness. Complaint achieved nothing; worse, it would prevent him from accomplishing his task. Kneeling for hours on the unforgiving surface had produced pain nearly so intolerable that it could keep him from recognizing his test, much less passing it. If the sensation stood in his way and he could not end it, he must therefore alter his perception of it. Only by embracing the pain could he surmount it.

Already I would have failed, the novitiate lamented, *if the masters could but read my thoughts.* The Ivgorod monks held a legendary control over their bodies, and in moments of stress their minds surpassed the physical realm to a higher state of being. They would tell him he must clear his mind, not so that he might achieve his goal but so that he might hear the gods when they spoke. They communicated to all who listened, using the wind, the rain, the rivers, wildlife, and in Ytar's case, even fire as their voice.

Yet now, the only thing that spoke in this vast, dark chamber was the pulse in Mikulov's ears, beating in sympathetic accord with the pain in his knees. Still, those paired

sensations and the beads of sweat on his brow were all signs that his body and mind were in less than perfect harmony. Mikulov forced calm on himself once more.

Pain, be welcome...

Grimacing, he feared he would never overcome it. How could one welcome that which was all but unendurable? He'd been a fool to think he could, just as he'd been a fool the moment he'd walked into this chamber when he saw that it had no way out...

In the Floating Sky Monastery, the home of the fabled monks of Ivgorod, located on the western main continent of Sanctuary, in the mountains on the edge of the Gorgorra forest, children grew up knowing loneliness without end. Whatever their reason for being there, they all knew well the intense hunger for family. The yearning bonded them, teaching them to cherish the ways they were alike. A single desire unified them—the expectation of one day becoming monks of the order. Those who showed insufficient aptitude for study endured a rude awakening when they were instructed to leave the monastery, but they were given one final chance: prevail over a physical challenge, thus earning the right to return by demonstrating a previously unseen talent for training, or be forsaken by the monastery forever.

Gachev, an older boy, had tormented Mikulov for years, until his mulishness and indifference to the monastery's discipline at last provoked the monks to test him. The weather had been brutally cold the day he was ordered to confront his challenge, and Gachev's provisions were few. The abject look of fear on the youth's face told Mikulov not to expect his return. And no one inside the order had heard from Gachev since. At first,

Gachev's being turned out had brought Mikulov joy, until he realized that he, too, questioned authority and that he, too, would likely face a similar challenge.

While the monastery's great portal had remained open and Gachev's form had dwindled in the barren distance, Mikulov had looked into the face of wizened old Master Vedenin. The monk's ancient robes, long, white beard, and smooth head made him nearly indistinguishable from his brethren. What set Vedenin apart, in an order known for its tranquility, was his harshness. His vehemence lurked in Mikulov's memory. *You are foolish,* Vedenin would rasp. Vedenin managed to keep his voice toneless but still inflect single words with vitriol, his timbre with contempt. *You have speed, agility, and a sharp mind, yet you are proud and impulsive and weak. You focus ever on slights and frustrations and make yourself deaf to the gods. Your actions will bring shame on you and on the monastery.*

Mikulov heard the words again that day as Vedenin cast his disdainful gaze toward Gachev's departure. The monk clearly looked forward to delivering him someday to the same fate. By instinct or prescience, Mikulov understood that when his time came, Vedenin would dispatch him on his test.

That moment, Mikulov vowed not to fail. As young as he was, he would devote the rest of his days in the monastery to readying himself for the ordeal he knew he must eventually face.

The monks taught that every person was a living, breathing weapon, but relying on a single resource at all times was folly. A monk's true power, they taught, came from self-discipline and the spirit. The order therefore required its acolytes to master arms from three realms: weapons of the mind; weapons of physical combat; and the most potent,

weapons of spirit, calming their souls and tapping into the power the gods shared with their proven servants. When monks achieved this, they could wield more mundane weapons as an extension of their balanced spirit. Mikulov swore he would do likewise.

From the time they could walk, the children of the order were brought up in the company of physical weaponry. Mikulov particularly favored the punch dagger, the short blade wielded in one hand, gripped so its lethal tip protruded directly out from the fist, passing between his fingers. His rapport with the weapon came swiftly—even in an instant—though he at first balked at its imposition on him by Vedenin, of course. Originally Mikulov had wanted to use a bow.

"The bow is excellent for long-range use yet utterly ineffective up close," the old monk said with contempt.

Mikulov disagreed; the bow would keep his enemies at bay, denying them any opportunity to close the distance.

Vedenin countered that better choices for long-range combat rendered the bow a weakling's preference.

When Mikulov scoffed, the old man seized the chance to humiliate him before all the boys and girls present. Instructing him to take a bow and two arrows, Vedenin marched ten paces off and stood with his arms crossed, hands hidden within his robe's voluminous sleeves. "What would you use to attack me from this distance?" he asked.

Mikulov held up the bow.

"Do so."

Mikulov, in front of his fellow novitiates, heard the slight shift in Vedenin's voice from bandied words to a true test. He moved to nock the first arrow but kept his eyes on

Vedenin. A brief gesture within one sleeve, and the arrow's shaft snapped in Mikulov's hand.

Vedenin closed the gap between them to five paces. "And what would you use to attack me from this distance?"

Mikulov fumbled with his remaining arrow.

"Bows take time to prepare," Vedenin declared. "The spirit is instantaneous." His next gesture was so deft and subtle that Mikulov did not see it. Both the arrow and the bow exploded in Mikulov's hands. His ears burned with the other pupils' laughter.

The old man now stood an arm's length away. With smug condescension he asked, "And from this distance?"

Mikulov glared at him angrily. "My bare hands."

The movement of Vedenin's hand came more swiftly than his years should have allowed. The infinitesimally fine point and razor edges of a punch dagger passed so close to Mikulov's eyes he felt the blade slice the air.

"Try it," Vedenin murmured, softly, his words reaching Mikulov alone.

Humiliated though Mikulov had been by that lesson, he was acute enough to grasp its wisdom. His uncanny grace and balance soon made him formidable with this close-combat weapon, the sound of his exertions heard often on the practice field. In time, he found himself the dagger's master.

Mastery of the mind and of the spirit, however, eluded him.

True prowess came from more than incantations over arcane scrolls. No, the ancient order believed that the force of the gods was in all things, be they living or inert, and that

power must therefore flow over everything in creation. Thus, practitioners within the Floating Sky Monastery spent their lives learning to sense that force wherever it lay and manipulate it to whatever purposes served the Patriarchs, the voice of the gods in Ivgorod.

One day, when his punch dagger was a blur to those who watched it hammer the wooden post he used as a stand-in enemy, so unalloyed was Mikulov's concentration that he reflexively reached out with his mind, into the kinetic resonance of the gods' power. Though the action came about by chance, and though it harnessed only a fraction of the available force, his weapon struck the post with more than physical strength. A blue light crackled out of Mikulov's blade, and a shockwave knocked several onlookers off their feet. Ripples carried outward into the monastery's walls. Two stunned orphans ran, calling their wizened masters, though they needn't have bothered. Monks of the Floating Sky spent every day in rapt contemplation of their surroundings, waiting for signs from the gods. Such clear evidence of the divine could scarcely escape their notice.

Mikulov, already proficient with physical weapons, had sufficiently mastered both his mind and spirit to do something extraordinary. His test, he knew, would likely be upon him soon. When the stern, unyielding face of Vedenin arrived and stared down into his own on the practice field, Mikulov grasped that the likelihood had just become a certainty.

In the days that followed, Mikulov pushed himself to master this newly discovered ability so he could summon the power at will.

The force came more rapidly and reliably when he concentrated entirely on the intended effect. His initial contact had been clumsy and awkward and so maddeningly brief—had it been a physical thing, he would have fumbled it through his fingers and

dropped it—but it nevertheless taught him that he could draw forth that power and direct it, even magnify it.

He devised his own drill and put himself through it relentlessly.

Fasten your mind firmly on the need to release the power through the blade itself.

Concentrate on that requirement. Focus your determination; let your yearning to release that energy flow outward from your mind to every fiber of your body and your spirit.

After achieving a few further, if limited, successes, he learned that the key was not concentration alone.

You must concentrate yet never hurry, move without haste but with fixed determination.

He sought always to remember that because the power of the gods was a gift, rushing their largesse was vain and disrespectful.

The gods will grant you what you need when you require it. Your duty is simple, to be focused in the instant the gods choose.

Details of how the initiates' trials were composed remained among the monastery's most closely guarded secrets. Those who failed were immediately cast out, but the few who succeeded were sequestered in diligent study, often decades of it, no longer accessible to their curious younger counterparts.

Still, rumors of general rules emerged.

Along with a single weapon of their choice—in Mikulov's case, the choice was hardly an issue; it must be the punch dagger—the initiates were granted one mantra, inscribed on a scroll by the masters, to carry with them. It could be of whatever nature they chose. Try

as he might, Mikulov could not decide which one to select. Each night he tossed and turned and taxed his mind as he sought the ever-elusive answer.

What will be essential to my survival?

In the end, the choice was determined not by thinking but by fear.

When he stood before the assembled masters of the Floating Sky Monastery, he was offered a vast array of scrolls. Because the sun had not yet risen, the scrolls glowed in torchlight. Some were voluminous; others were barely larger than his little finger; a few were ornately bound and sealed with intricate insignia.

"The purpose of your ordeal," Vedenin said (and naturally it was Vedenin who challenged him), "is to prove your ability to submit your mind, your weapon, and your spirit to the will of the gods. To turn away from your own altar and bow down at theirs." The smirk on his outwardly benign face bespoke how little faith the man held in the novitiate.

When Mikulov hesitated, he felt the masters' judgment from within the walls, and from without, lurking uncertainties and physical dangers. His vacillation gave way to what became in that moment an obvious pick: the healing mantra.

With the rolled parchment, he was handed a folded sheet of paper, sealed with an impression of the monastery's sigil in wax. His directive was clear: open the paper seven days hence, after a week of prayer and meditation, during which he was to prepare himself. Only at sunrise on the eighth day was he to break the wax seal and receive further instructions.

At dawn, Mikulov emerged from the sanctuary. Instinctively, he strode east, deeper into the mountains surrounding Ivgorod. He carried only the scroll and the folded paper, and at his hip, the punch dagger in its sheath. He had no food, for it was to be a week of fasting, and no water, for anyone who could not find the means to slake his thirst could never hope to achieve the wisdom required of monks of the Floating Sky Monastery.

Should he prove unable to locate water in the first week of his trial, so it would be. He would have failed—and died—before so much as hearing the voices of the gods, let alone striving to do as they willed.

The week began in calm and tranquility. Mikulov made water his first priority, and so he traveled toward a ridge of steep hills he had seen for years from his dormitory window, a range that ultimately met the Kohl Mountains to the south. He felt confident of finding a stream at the base, though he had no reason to be sure other than that water would always find its way downhill.

He could hear the masters telling him that the gods often spoke thus, through the mix of knowledge, instinct, and intuition that was the adept's method of thought. His confidence was rewarded: at the base of the range lay a tarn, its water dark but clear, fed by a trickle descending through massive rocks. Showing obeisance in the direction of the gift, Mikulov drank deep to refresh after a long day's walking and to replenish for the week ahead. He was happy to have made the discovery so quickly, for he knew it was likely the most important of his trial; in the punishing summer heat, water was his essential need.

He chose to look for shelter near the water, for staying close to the source of the gods' munificence seemed in keeping with a grateful heart.

In the mountains, he knew darkness fell swiftly, and he soon found a stretch of ground less hard than others, beneath an overhanging rock. These, too, he recognized as gifts, and he gave thanks before he lay down.

Waking, he established the routine he would observe for the next six days. He went to the tarn and washed away the previous day's trek. This was the year's hottest month, when even the nights remained harshly uncomfortable. He would be sweating with no exertion whatsoever, and Mikulov wanted to approach the gods each day clean and unstained. At the faintest hint of light, he stepped into the water and submerged. He held his breath for as long as he could, praying to the gods all the while that he might be worthy of them. He bathed and renewed the prayer with each successive dawn.

He expected the days to pass in contemplative calm and silence. He felt utterly tranquil and completely at peace, having seen no obstacles to surmount, no predators he must vanquish. In the stillness of his time alone, he spoke not a word.

Yet the week was far from quiet, for Gachev came to visit, and Gachev was, as he had always been, loud.

On the fourth day, when the sun was at its zenith and the temperature brutally hot, his fellow orphan first spoke to him. Mikulov had made it his practice to stay close to his resting area, its overhang providing him with many hours of shade even at the sun's apex, near an abundant supply of water. He knew that the longer he spent in direct sunlight, the more he would deplete himself. He emerged from shadow only as needed and walked to the pool, restoring the water that had flowed out of him in the heat of both day and night. Despite his precautions, he was soon feeling the effects of slow dehydration.

It was in Mikulov's first moment of apprehension, stretching toward doubt, that the taunting voice spoke to him.

"What makes you think you can succeed where I failed?"

Mikulov opened his eyes and peered out of the shadow. Across his campsite, splayed out in direct sunlight, lay Gachev, clad in the clothes he had worn the day he left the monastery. He looked no different. How, after so many months in the mountains, could Gachev's tunic not be tattered and his skin not be filthy and raw? Yet he reclined at his ease, as if relaxed by the blistering heat, and observed Mikulov casually. "My first day here, I was miserable, too, sure I would never experience another instant of joy. Yet the sight of other fools trying to survive these hellish weeks in the wild taught me to laugh again." Raising an eyebrow as if in dismay, he studied Mikulov. "Heartily," he added.

Mikulov was so surprised that he nearly spoke aloud.

He was under no vow of silence, though it was understood that only in stillness would the gods allow themselves to be heard. So despite the mockery, Mikulov held his tongue. He merely stared at Gachev through the sweat that stung his eyes, this boy who should have been dead.

This boy, or this apparition? Given his unchanged appearance and the soundless stealth of his approach, Mikulov considered that Gachev might be a figment of his imagination, a mirage conjured by heat and isolation.

When Gachev spoke further, his voice lost its taunting edge, and his words touched a fear so well hidden it shocked Mikulov. Speaking flatly, Gachev said, "None of us succeeds. No novitiate has ever come through their trial. None ever will."

Days of hunger quickly turned to days of mind-rending doubt, every sensation made worse by Gachev's wry commentary. The implications of what Gachev said, and said repeatedly, fed a rising desire to break the seal and undertake his trial prematurely, or even to tear the folded paper, unopened, to shreds. Mikulov began to venture farther from his sheltering rock and the tarn, but Gachev was always nearby, laughing mirthlessly at the other boy's efforts to maintain his vigil.

Over the days, the mockery and questioning bred all-too-plausible theories. The masters of the Floating Sky Monastery never advanced anyone from among the younger, rebellious ranks; acolytes never became monks. The masters were, after all, inordinately selective when choosing which monks to accept. As submissive acolytes completed their studies, they served merely as free labor until they became too much trouble, at which point they were sent off on deadly trials, to be replaced by a new generation of gullible devotees. Was that how the Floating Sky Monastery had survived throughout the centuries?

Mikulov understood that his fears were running away with him, making his mind see portents and schemes that didn't exist. He sought to refute the doubt by recalling some orphan who had returned victorious from his or her testing, but could not. It was said that those who succeeded were separated from their former fellows so as to eliminate the least distraction from higher studies, which were to be their reward for years to come.

Gachev's insinuations made sense.

"You are a fool, Mikulov," he said. "You are proud and impulsive and weak. Your actions out here will not make you a monk. They will only lead you to the anonymous grave you will share with your brethren."

The ominous pronouncement called to mind Vedenin's countless dire predictions that Mikulov's actions would bring disgrace on himself and his fellow novitiates. Now, as then, Mikulov chose to believe otherwise, taking in once more Gachev's unsoiled appearance and the echo of the words of his most unrelenting master. Together, their admonitions named the dread Mikulov harbored: not death, but shame before death. The boy who would be a monk decided Gachev was a figment of his imagination, an illusory companion to remind him of his loneliness through this preparatory week in the mountains.

His taunts are my own fears given voice.

And so, for the final day, whenever Gachev opened his mouth, Mikulov hardened his heart against him. Gachev mocked him for his efforts, but Mikulov told himself the boy was no more than a chimera born of sweat and pain and unbanished doubt. By the seventh day of his ordeal, Mikulov had made Gachev unreal.

But then the boy saved his life.

The more Mikulov anticipated the next morning, when he would break the wax seal and receive his instructions, the more he longed to seize his destiny at the first possible moment. He would greet the day from the very summit of the mountain, where dawn would come earlier than below. Though it would be an arduous journey up a stony incline, the challenge seemed worth it, if only to end his agony a few minutes sooner.

And so he embarked. The sun was past its zenith, yet the heat persisted and seemed only to worsen. Still he began his ascent, to arrive at the peak with plenty of daylight left and to spend his final night of prayer and meditation closer to the gods. He gave little

thought to water, for the route he had charted would keep him close to the trickle that fed the tarn in his camp.

Gachev let pass no opportunity to tell him he had set out unprepared.

At first Mikulov was confident water would remain accessible as he rose higher, but inevitably the heat and his exertions made his tongue swell from thirst. He was tempted to return, but when he looked back and saw how much closer he was to the summit than to camp, he pressed on.

"This is ridiculous, all this effort."

Mikulov, his breath now coming in gasps, ignored his unwanted companion.

"You rush toward nothing but an earlier death."

Each rock sought to wrench Mikulov's ankle, each fissure to trap and hobble a foot.

"You provide the gods with nothing but amusement."

So enfeebled was Mikulov by the sun and his exhaustion that he feared succumbing to the dangers of the terrain. If he broke a bone, he would be forced to use his healing mantra prematurely and would be left unprepared at a time of greater need.

"The thousand and one gods are powerless."

Hearing that unforgivable insult, Mikulov felt the impulse to vent his fury but remembered another of Vedenin's litany of admonitions: *The gods are in all things, both physical and spiritual*. If so, then they must also be in Mikulov's rage, which provided him newfound energy to shout at Gachev. This was energy to be channeled and utilized, not squandered on a wraith. *Do not swallow the anger or cast it away. Feel it. Use it.*

With a new source to draw upon, Mikulov drove himself upward.

He reached the summit as night fell, a promontory that ended in a cliff. So enervated was he that he could spare no time to look for a site to rest. Squinting past the fierce burning in his eyes, he crawled far enough away from the edge that he had no fear of falling, and collapsed to the stony surface.

He awoke in cold darkness. Stiffness in his joints told him he had not moved. Several attempts were necessary to open his eyes, and when he did, he saw Gachev sitting on a nearby rock, shaking his head in precious silence. When first light brought a soft blue to the eastern horizon, Mikulov made a move to rise but could not. Sleep had made little difference. He was depleted. Mikulov lay under the sky and contemplated his circumstance. The sun would crest the horizon soon, but he felt nothing, cut off from his body. Strangely, he did not even feel the familiar morning compulsion to relieve himself. This he took as a bad sign. His body lacked the water it needed to survive out in the mountains; he had failed to bolster himself for these extreme conditions. His thoughts were an echo of Vedenin's curse: *You will fail before you have even begun*. Mikulov added his own, silent imprecation.

"Yes," Gachev agreed, voicing the words in Mikulov's mind. "You are a fool."

Once more, anger came. *He wants me to fail*, Mikulov thought, but he directed his fury again. Despite his body's pain, Mikulov used his rage to rise. As he got to his feet, the first rays of dawn touched his brow.

He paused while dizziness passed, looked down, and saw the folded paper in his hand. It had been secure in his tunic pocket for seven days, and he had no memory of retrieving it. His fingers shook as he struggled to insert them beneath the fold at the seal.

He was shamed by the effort it took to break the lump of wax. He closed his eyes for just a moment, then spread the paper wide to read its contents.

Inside.

Mikulov was suddenly too tired to feel even anger. The paper bore just one word? What sort of nonsense was this? "Inside" was no instruction; it was a mistake. His masters had erred, perhaps muddling what they were supposed to give him with a more mundane order for another boy in their service. Even at that moment one of his fellow orphans, expecting to find the directions for his daily chores, might instead be marveling at the meticulous instructions for Mikulov's ordeal in the wilds. The absurdity of the idea was comic. It threatened to undo him, leaving him frenzied and bewildered there on the mountaintop. Mikulov suppressed the hard mirth that rose within him. His laughter would only give Gachev satisfaction.

He dared not affront the gods. This message could not have come in error. He racked his brain to see how this word fit his circumstances. He must be overlooking something.

Inside.

As his mind formed the question *Inside what?* Mikulov's eyes fell on what looked like the mouth of a cave. It opened in the rock half a hundred paces below, on the side of the summit opposite the one he had climbed. Jutting up out of the incline's face, roofed by an intricately wrought arch no more than an arm's length across, the cave's mouth beckoned him.

Inside.

How could his masters have known he would ascend this mountain? They had given no instructions about what direction to walk. He'd been sent out guided only by instinct.

Vedenin's words from Mikulov's youth came unbidden to his mind. *What you sense as instinct is rather the gods' divine direction.* Had his travels been steered by communication he had not known he heard? If so, it stood to reason that his masters, too, had been so guided, preparing this one-word message without knowing what, when the moment came, it would mean to the novitiate undergoing the trial.

The portal offered no answers. The morning's rays, descending the slope below him, quickly warmed the surrounding rock. This day, he saw, would be yet more intense, more searing than before. Whether it was the place the gods had ordained for his trial or merely blind chance, Mikulov knew the cave would provide protection from the heat, if nothing else.

Exhaustion and volition warring within his depleted muscles, Mikulov awkwardly stumbled downward. Gravity more than will carried him to the portal. Knowing nothing of what lay in the darkness, Mikulov lurched forward and let it gather him in. *Inside.*

Only dimly did he wonder why Gachev remained behind.

As he moved down, the impression he got of his surroundings was of inconceivability; these halls could not exist. That they had been hewn—no, intricately carved from the gutrock of this mountain—was hard enough to ken, yet the fact that he could still see, now deep beneath the surface, was even more difficult. At first, following the rough stairs' descent, he assumed daylight was filtering through, though after what must have been one hundred paces downward, he knew this could not be. Even the fierce sunlight of the mountaintop was too weak to penetrate this far, and hidden shafts or unseen clefts in the rock could not account for this strange illumination. Finally, a long and

level hallway stretching out before him, Mikulov understood that what his eyes beheld was utterly different from any of these notions, though every bit as impossible: the walls themselves contained a soft glow that surged within them.

What is this? Mikulov asked. He studied the stone of the walls around him. The light did flow indeed, like blood. The illumination moved in a steady rhythm, pulsations following the beat of his own heart.

What hell have I blithely entered?

Mikulov asked himself if what he had witnessed thus far aligned with what he knew about the gods' behavior. *I know that the gods speak to us through signs, both in nature and through the works of men. Further, the gods are in all things*, he thought, and the light within the stone seemed to fairly scream that it was the work of the gods. Therefore these steps, this hall—clearly hewn by men—must be a manifestation of the gods' will. Seeing nothing to contradict this, Mikulov took a moment to ponder their message.

Concentration was difficult; thirst kept intruding into his thoughts, and even though he stood motionless, his thigh muscles shook with strain. The deprivation he had endured for seven days and nights had taken a deep toll on his body, and therefore on his mind as well. Even when he exerted a tremendous effort to suppress his discomfort, he still could not focus.

His thoughts returned to Gachev, Mikulov at last wondering why the boy had not followed him down. And the more he exhorted himself to ponder the gods' message, the farther into his concentration Gachev seemed to run. The boy had anticipated, even savored, Mikulov's disappointment for days, so how could he now forgo the chance to revel in the novitiate's confusion and imminent failure?

Mikulov turned his face upward to the smallest flicker of light at the top of the stairs he had just descended. Craning his neck to see past outcroppings of stone, Mikulov saw his tormentor. The older boy stood solemnly, silently staring down at him. No barbs, no jibes, no provocation. Simply mute vigil. Gachev seemed to defend the stairs from anything that might follow Mikulov to his doom.

Or did he bar Mikulov's ascent back to open air and daylight?

Seeing Gachev so distant above, sensing how far into the dark depths of the mountain he had come, Mikulov was afraid. He gestured to Gachev. Pointing ahead to the shadows of the hall, he beckoned the older boy to follow.

Gachev remained where he stood. He merely shook his head. His words, "This test is yours," fell to Mikulov like rain, heavy and cold. "I go no farther."

A lump forming in his throat, Mikulov turned back to face the hallway. He concentrated once more on the light that seemed to live within the walls. The pulsations' rhythm, though soft, came to him as sound, not just as sight. Studying this, Mikulov saw and heard how the beats indicated a direction toward the shadows at the corridor's end. Although this was not the sign he had hoped for, he knew it for what it was: a clear suggestion to go forward. Mikulov forced his limbs into action and stepped haltingly toward the darkness to which the moving light summoned him.

He anticipated a labyrinth waiting for him, or a baleful necropolis that would rise up and swallow him, but Mikulov soon found himself at the entrance to an empty chamber paved with stone blocks. Although the room, so deep into the mountain, had no other door, it shone with a nacreous light in a vast array of colors, all of them tinged with red. The room held the most wondrous display of subtle shades of a single hue, reds Mikulov had

never seen or imagined, offset and emphasized by occasional shoots of green lichen growing between the stones. The color suffused the light, its burning beat now pounding from the walls.

Can this be my test? There is nothing here.

As Mikulov lifted his foot to step into the chamber, Gachev's voice rose around him. "Will you so blithely stumble into a room with no way out?"

Mikulov was tempted to look back in the direction from which he had come, but he knew Gachev had not followed. The voice was in his mind, the voice of his fear.

He weighed that fear against everything he believed to be true. Having trusted thus far that the gods had been sending him signs, he would not change course now. Mikulov stepped boldly onto the room's stone floor.

No bars dropped into place behind him; no water flooded the chamber, nor did the walls move to crush him. Instead, the coruscating energy they contained beat with a regular rhythm. The direction of the pulse ceased as he entered the room. He was where the gods wanted him to be.

But what was he here to do?

He waited. Even with the walls keeping time, he lost any sense of how long he had stood in place, for his circumstances, moment to moment or hour to hour, were maddeningly the same. He had followed his instincts, what he took for the will of the gods, yet Mikulov had come, exhausted, to a dead end. The blood in his temples reignited as the pace of his heart increased. His anger brought back his awareness of time. He'd been standing here an eternity. Frustration told him to leave the chamber immediately.

Still, something stayed him. He looked into his mind and saw the face of Vedenin, smirking at his arrival at the monastery gates, wrapped in a mantle of failure. He would not endure such shame, even if he had to wait infinite eternities. The gods would speak, but in their own time, not in a mere novitiate's.

The radiance around him took on a somber quality. *Abide the gods' determinations*, it seemed to say. *Be still and await their will.*

Patience had never been Mikulov's best attribute. He forced his knees to bend and assumed a submissive posture on the floor. When the ache grew too much for his enervated body, he silently voiced words to calm his spirit and separate himself from pain. *Pain, be welcome in my home. You shall not live here long, yet while you stay with me, I receive you like an honored guest.*

For what seemed an age, Mikulov stayed thus. It was a losing battle. The throbbing soreness pervaded his consciousness and kept him rooted to this plane, not the gods'. Sweat poured into his eyes, dripping freely onto his bare knees where he knelt on the stone. The throb and the drip distracted him, intruding into the walls' lulling rhythm. The steady pulsation became like Gachev's taunts. Mikulov was besieged by unrelenting sameness: light beating within the walls, stones glistening with a dank sheen, moisture seeping from their gaps, hanging lichen that swayed—

Swayed?

Mikulov blinked and tried to recall everything he had seen in the last several moments. Yes, he perceived a small and subtle alteration to the chamber's oppressive monotony. He sought furiously to identify this variation.

Had the green shoots of feeble, tenacious life been swaying when he'd first knelt down? If so, how? There was not the slightest current in the air.

As he stared at them, Mikulov was certain. *No, they were still when I entered.* He soon beheld what put the hanging strands in motion.

Murky and insubstantial vapor leaked between the bricks before his eyes. Hovering in the air above him, it was frail enough to be banished with a breath, yet it conveyed an impression of substance and menace. Mikulov saw minute vibrations ripple through it, echoes of the pulsations of light within the walls.

Impossibly, the thing seemed to be taking form from the source of that nacreous light, and something within it festered, for it now dripped with contagion.

There was a new mix of colors in the room—yellow, green, and blue, yet sickly shades of each. The colors, and whatever gave them form, oozed together and coalesced. The impression of disease growing stronger as he watched, Mikulov's mind struggled with a concept that would encompass this seeping presence: it was an abscess. The heart of the undulating mass challenged his perception, its very center seemingly a void. This was a *wound*, Mikulov grasped, a gash long and thin, hanging in the air. It confronted both his senses and his expectations, for it was not vaguely human in shape, or a malformed blob, or even a cloud-like apparition. Instead, it was a disembodied lesion suspended in midair. But there was no body, no flesh to have received this injury. Rather, it was as though the air itself had been hacked savagely by some unseen weapon. He considered any blade that could produce such a laceration and reached instinctively for the punch dagger at his side.

As Mikulov stood paralyzed, his hand poised above his weapon's grip, the lesion pulsed, expectant. In his physically depleted condition, Mikulov felt overwhelmed by it,

threatened by its existence. An affront to the reality he understood, the gash was clearly alive, a mystical being sent to rend Mikulov's sanity as violently as the air had been rent by a blade.

When the apparition moved, Mikulov backed away from it. Fascinated in equal measure to his revulsion, Mikulov was not aware that he was being maneuvered and so was slow to act. When the knowledge dawned on him, Mikulov grasped the punch dagger in his right fist and aimed it at the lesion. Once he had done so, the attitude of the floating wound shifted; it countered the boy's movements, advancing or retreating in a macabre dance with the weapon. Its feints and withdrawals, Mikulov saw too late, gave it a position that put him at a great disadvantage. The lesion now blocked the door, the only way out of this room.

Mikulov looked all around, reassuring himself that there were no more of these things seeping from the walls. The weakness in his legs, back, and shoulders was too intense to ignore; his strength and stamina were finite and rapidly reaching their ends. Stalemates were not the monks' way at the Floating Sky Monastery. The masters taught their adepts to seek solutions to life's problems, not remain mired in them. He must pass this test as soon as possible, while strength endured. *The lesion's threatening posture be damned*, Mikulov thought as he abruptly raced toward the exit from the chamber.

The apparition prevented him. Not satisfied to merely block his way, it launched itself at him in return and dealt Mikulov a savage attack. It seemed to strike him with its entire being. The lesion's touch was wet, and it burned. The novice was furious at himself for being taken off guard. Despite his last-moment attempt to duck away, he had taken the blow on his cheek, and he felt a viscid wetness trickle down his neck. His heart clenched at

the thought he had been infected. He snatched at the tunic that hung from his shoulders and mopped up the rank liquid, but its burn lingered. Thrown back, he could feel its presence everywhere, the gory sickness of it on his skin, even dripping from his lank, oily hair. Sprawled on the floor, he belatedly raised his punch dagger to fend off any subsequent attack, and doing so, he instantly felt foolish. Why had he not led with the weapon?

He would correct that mistake now. He struggled to his feet and hurled himself at the foul apparition. Yet so swiftly did the being counterstrike that, although Mikulov was prepared, he managed to use the weapon in its simplest way only: he sliced the contagion savagely but without a release of energy. Overwhelmed with fear, Mikulov had failed to focus and channel his spirit, the power he had never before so urgently needed to call on.

As he scrambled back, expecting a follow-up blow, he measured the blade's effect. Even his feeble use of the dagger was sufficient. The spectral form shook and seemed to wither. The rent in the air was even larger than before, and from its unseen font, the wound bled, spattering the stones beneath. Mikulov stared in horror, for as it bled and suffered, it grew before his eyes. With his blood pounding in his temples, still feeling the adrenaline from his last attack, he knew this was his opportunity, now, while the creature paused to gather itself; he must strike again, this moment! And so he thrust his blade before him once more, and this time, he focused his mind to summon the energy he needed.

This trial was pivotal and clearly a test of his prowess as much as his resourcefulness. Somewhere in its execution, this encounter was essential in demonstrating to the masters that he was worthy of further study, and by the thousand and one gods, he would prove it.

But to his shame, he was not immediately successful. Although harnessing the power had become instinctive on the practice grounds of the Floating Sky Monastery, this was no longer practice. *Concentrate*, he berated himself. *Focus on its release*. He listed the steps in his mind swiftly but with desperation. *Fasten your mind on the requirement. Focus your determination; let your yearning release the energy from every inch of your body*. Yet so great was his need that he forgot the process could not be rushed, forgot that he must move without haste, only with determination. Therefore, his attack was impotent, mundane, unaided by power.

Until the last moment, that was. Ultimately the lesion gathered itself to strike again, and it was Mikulov's fear of counterattack that drew the energy forth. It came the instant he felt the creature start to riposte; the panic at his inability to fend it off beckoned the energy within his blade, and a brief pulse of power lanced outward in all directions. Shocked by its arrival, Mikulov lost control and was blown backward by its force.

His skull struck the floor viciously as he rolled, and though he instinctively tried to rise, he paused for a very long while, his head hung low, spinning wildly. What had happened to his prowess with the blade? Was his mastery of it all in his imagination? Or were the intensity and danger of this test simply too much for him? And though he could not see for himself how badly he had been injured, a glance at his opponent proved it had not been a one-sided encounter.

As horrid as it appeared, Mikulov was stunned by a single fact, immediate and nightmarish: it was even larger and more pestilent than before.

The lesion now towered over him. It was hot and inflamed; every visible inch of it burned; it fairly glowed with violation. The lines of shredded flesh were not clean, as

though sliced by a blade, but instead were jagged and torn, as though pulled apart by hand. The creature seethed violently, unseen, ragged breaths heaving inside it. The sense of wrongness was even more pronounced, and for the first time, Mikulov found it difficult to breathe, as though every intake sullied his lungs with contagion. And worst of all, the lesion's tattered guts leaked burning acid everywhere now. Mikulov slipped on a spill, and its touch was fire.

Mikulov's mind reached out, and instead of locating his determination, he embraced the font of his fury and discovered it was a teeming lake within him. Yet after his experience climbing to the summit with Gachev, he knew that even rage was a gift of the gods. Turning away from mindless abandon, he mastered his wrath and channeled it.

The blade's outburst was pure, and Mikulov's aim was true. A great, heaving gout of white-hot, incendiary flame shot forth, more potent than any he had achieved before. Knocking both combatants backward, power leapt from the blade like personified wrath. The wave of force pulsed outward until it broke upon the chamber's walls and folded back on itself, hitting Mikulov and the lesion from two sides simultaneously. The boy who dreamt of becoming a monk became lost momentarily in the conflagration, ultimately finding himself on his back, opening his eyes in weakness and shock.

Breaths came in gasps, and he was grateful for life. Unquestionably that had been enough; surely the creature had been vanquished. He wanted to turn his head to see yet couldn't. Powerless, Mikulov felt despair's bitter bite as the lesion floated into view overhead. The creature was vile, and it was larger and stronger than ever. How was this possible? Were the gods toying with him? He gazed once more at the dripping entrails and saw that where they hit the stones, they sizzled and spattered. Even the force of its excreta

had grown more potent. It was as though he were feeding a fire rather than extinguishing it.

And Mikulov had nothing left. So spent was he that when the creature dripped its corruption upon him, the searing flares of agony he felt could not draw forth enough energy for him even to flinch. He saw his fate with absolute clarity: a lingering death mired in disease and suffering.

"You are foolish," he heard a voice say. "You are proud and impulsive and weak." Mikulov knew who it was. *Gachev, come to see my end at last.* Only the smallest portion of his mind remained strong enough to wonder, *What happened to him going no farther than the entrance above?* He assumed it was merely a memory, his own fears given voice at his most vulnerable moment, and dismissed it. But Gachev would not stop.

"You will bring shame on your brethren, not merely on those you left at the monastery but on all who have faced this test before you." The words seared into him, for he knew them to be correct. In his pride, Mikulov had dared to think he would succeed where so many before him had failed, but he was no different. "Focusing on your meager pain prevents you from hearing the gods." Yes, it was true; Mikulov still could not hear them above his agony, had never truly heard them. Even his choice of a mantra to bring with him—had he but spent more time seeking the gods' guidance, he would have made another, better selection. He would have based his choice on offense, an arcane onslaught that would annihilate the lesion utterly. "If you follow your impulses rather than the gods, then you will never save me." He saw how foolish he'd been; how could healing save him now? It would merely prolong his agony, reviving him for another attack that would only make the creature larger...

Mikulov's thoughts faltered as Gachev's words sank in. *You will never save me.* What did he mean, *save* him?

"If you follow your impulses, you will die too."

My impulses. Mikulov looked down. The healing scroll was in the pocket of his torn and shredded tunic, and when he drew it forth, he saw that the parchment was charred and stained, almost ruined by conflagration and power before it had even been used.

His eyes rose once more to the infernal abomination floating above him, the horrid, base lesion that rent the very air of this dismal chamber, the wound that kept growing and growing and growing.

And in that instant, Mikulov understood.

Indeed, he would *not* follow his own impulses.

Blackened fingers trembling, he broke open the scroll and read from it. "Jaz vay pozdravju." The words were obscure, unwieldy on his tongue. "Prelusjem vaz dobrey." One hand made gestures he had learned from the masters, though in his weakness those movements were flawed and his concentration was imperfect. "Vimenju te teysoc in enje bogev obnovium vash." The single thing Mikulov achieved with perfection: the words and gestures were aimed with precision at the lesion floating above him, rather than at himself.

As he lay on the floor, his strength slowly ebbing, it made sense. The creature's very nature seemed to cry out for this action. Was it possible to rid oneself of a wound by striking it? No, that would merely create a bigger wound. To rid himself of a wound could be accomplished only by *healing* it.

His deeds had been irrational, dangerously so. In retrospect, Mikulov recognized that the creature had not once initiated an attack. Rather, it simply countered his own.

Mikulov felt foolish for leaping to conclusions and fearing the creature's mysterious, macabre intent. Other than warding the chamber's exit, it had never made any offensive movement.

Of course. A wound itself was not aggressive; the person who dealt it was.

As his mouth formed the final words and the scroll turned to dust in his hands, Mikulov raised his eyes and saw that the wound's ragged edges had been stitched together cleanly, saw that the viscid suppuration had lessened, saw that the massive creature was now smaller, so much smaller, yet it remained potent, livid, and most important, still poised in the chamber's exit. When he accepted the evidence of his eyes, Mikulov's heart sank, for the mantra's effectiveness was at its end. His mind clung desperately to the unfathomable words that were already fading from his memory.

The mantra was not enough, and he had no others. Silently, he shouted in wild supplication, mentally aiming it at the gods, *Please, answer me in my need!*

The desperation caused a door in his mind to open. He heard a voice lecturing him, *Fasten your mind firmly on the need*, and understood distantly that they were his own words from his days on the practice field. *Concentrate on that requirement*. And requirement it was, for he would never leave this chamber alive if he failed to vanquish this supernatural aberration. No, not vanquish, *heal* it. *Let your yearning to release that energy flow outward from your mind to every fiber of your body and your spirit*.

Mikulov expelled all stray thoughts from his consciousness and focused wholly on the necessity to heal this blight. He performed any small act he could think of, no matter how meaningless. He lifted his hands to the creature. He moved his lips in unintelligible speech, mumbling words that were vaguely comforting and reassuring, and when he saw

how low it hovered above him, he stretched out his arms and embraced the creature, feeling energy flow through him to it. Finally, after seemingly endless minutes of excruciating concentration, his eyes closed and his arms slumped to the floor as exhaustion overcame him.

He lay insensate, too weak to move. Sleep claimed him at last, a gossamer kiss upon his brow.

He knew not how long he lay there, nor did he know how it came to be that he recovered enough strength to open his eyes and lift his head, but finally he did so and saw that he was alone. Nothing floated above him or menaced him in any way. Long he waited, yet at last he accepted what his instincts told him. The lesion was no more. The wound, healed, was gone.

Rising to an elbow, he beheld a second, smaller room he had not seen before, hardly larger than a monk's cell at the monastery; apparently, healing the lesion had triggered this chamber's opening. Within, Mikulov found sustenance—a pitcher of water to slake his thirst and salted meat to nourish his body. As weak as he was, Mikulov took no joy in replenishing himself. Instead, he ate and drank slowly, passionlessly, each moment spent contemplating all he had learned. He examined the hidden chamber and pondered the instrument that provided for its concealment. Power it was, clearly, perhaps prepared by the masters, crafted to thrive in perpetuity. Mikulov could feel it with his nascent abilities; his trial this day had thrown a door wide open within his mind, and he found he could now sense the force of the gods where it flowed, to a minor degree at least. And as he mechanically chewed the tough meat and washed it down with water, he peered around

the room and discovered that more power surrounded him than he had initially thought. Far more.

Swallowing, he tightened his scrutiny.

Mikulov understood instinctively that the summoning of a mystical being such as the lesion required both control and command; its appearance must coincide roughly with that of new arrivals from the monastery, while its disappearance—depending on whether it had been healed—must signal the opening of the inner chamber to nourish the victor.

Or carry away the corpse of the vanquished.

Not only could Mikulov feel the power, but he now recognized its purpose as well: concealment. The masters had hidden something else down here. Mikulov's heart began to pound as he contemplated what it could be, but he instantly imposed calm upon his thoughts and emotions, reminding himself of the means through which the monks of the Floating Sky Monastery could channel the force of the gods—a balanced spirit.

Without haste, Mikulov breathed deeply and evenly, and when he was completely at peace, he reached out and touched the power and, with a wave of his hand, bid it, *Begone*.

Thus was another chamber laid bare, and the corpses of his fellow novitiates that lay within.

Many there were, all of them stark, gruesome in their decay, yet plaintive as well, bereft in their abandonment. Given how few novitiates underwent this challenge, the bodies in this chamber—some were skeletons thick with dust; others, desiccated corpses in various stages of decomposition—must represent all of the rebellious children who'd dreamt of becoming monks since ages past. His eyes took each of them in, and he finally

found one that captured his attention, for it was apparently more recent than the others, and larger as well.

Gachev was always taller than the rest of us.

Looking into his former tormentor's eyes, Mikulov recalled hearing the boy's voice in his mind. *If you follow your impulses rather than the gods, then you will never save me.* At the time, Mikulov had been confused by the use of the word *save*, but he understood it now.

In truth, Mikulov realized, by that warning, Gachev saved me.

Like their bodies lying in a heap within the hidden chamber, had the spirits of all those children been trapped? Was that what Gachev meant by *save*? If so, they were trapped no longer. After the provisions had restored vitality to his body and mind, Mikulov returned to the surface to locate a suitable spot. He was not surprised that Gachev was not waiting for him, but he felt lonely nonetheless.

He would never be able to assemble sufficient wood for a funeral pyre, not for so many bodies, but he hoped it would be enough that they emerged from their hidden chamber and experienced the heat of the sun once more upon their bones before being laid to their enduring rest.

Long it took him to carry them in his arms; many trips he was forced to make, and it was well past nightfall when he finished. He carried out Gachev after all the rest and laid his body atop the others. He rested for the night, for he was in no hurry. Finally the morning came, and after they felt the sun's kiss one last time, Mikulov covered them with stones, creating a massive monument to the monastery's dead. He spoke no words over it when he was done. He felt capable of none. Instead, he turned and staggered in the direction of home, bidding a brief farewell to the former novitiates, his lost brothers and sisters.

It was a day and a half after his victory when Mikulov made his triumphant, unhurried return to the Floating Sky Monastery. The sun had long since passed its zenith and seemed to plummet toward the western horizon, but it still illuminated the portal through which he had departed. There, he found Vedenin, hunched and wizened, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. Mikulov had the impression that he had stood vigil thus for many hours, though the scowl on his face appeared to give the ancient monk strength.

"It has been more than a full day since the test was finished," he said, and in those words Mikulov indeed learned a great deal. As he had suspected, the lesion's disappearance had signaled an end to the test, which not only triggered the hidden portal's opening but alerted the masters as well. They had been waiting all this time.

"The rest of my brethren grew tired; therefore only I remain," Vedenin said. *Of course*, Mikulov thought. *How could he pass up an opportunity to criticize my performance against the lesion? It must pain him enormously that I return in triumph.*

Mikulov walked slowly and silently toward him. "I had much to do, my brother," he said, and though his voice was hoarse from nine days of disuse, still he took tremendous satisfaction out of the new honorific he used. No longer was the old man *Master Vedenin*, but brother, for Mikulov had earned the right to be a monk of the Floating Sky Monastery. Yet he knew that his education had only just begun, that the masters often spent decades instructing new monks, so he was careful not to inflect his voice with brashness or pride; instead, he spoke to Vedenin with all proper respect.

And just enough self-righteous rage to prevent the older monk from responding.

"I found a great deal more than food and water in the hidden chamber," Mikulov continued, and he saw the monk's eyes widen slightly.

"Enough to occupy you for a night and a day?" the old man said, his indignation apparently not quite as justified as his anger moments ago.

Mikulov gazed deeply into the man's eyes and never wavered. At long last he nodded and said, "Indeed there was, for there is little wood in the mountains, and I had many of my brethren to bury."

The memory was fresh in his mind, and from the stunned look on Vedenin's face, it must have been visible on his own visage as well.

Vedenin and his fellow masters might or might not have believed Mikulov would succeed, but clearly they had not intended for him to discover the hidden dead.

Mikulov pushed past Vedenin. It was neither hasty nor brusque, yet it brought the old monk out of his shocked reverie. "You are late and your studies await," the man barked behind him. "You will go to the lyceum immediately."

Mikulov shook his head wearily, all of his labors suddenly burdening him at once. "Not yet, Vedenin," he said. "First, I will eat; then I will bathe."

The monk's eyes narrowed in fury, and it was with visible effort that he maintained even a semblance of his usual authority. "You will address me as..." He faltered. "As Brother Vedenin."

Mikulov allowed himself a smile. *Oh, how it must gall him to be unable to say master,* he mused. *How he must hate the fact we are now brothers.* But then a new thought struck him, and his smile faded. *I am one of the youngest to ever become a monk.* Gratitude overcame him.

"Study I shall, Brother," he said with genuine humility and respect. "But I reek of the dead and would not insult the gods by approaching them so befouled. First I shall eat; then I shall bathe, and then I shall study." He would not be baited, and his days of accepting condescension were over. And while the old man sputtered, Mikulov walked away, offering over his shoulder, "Good night, Brother."

On his return to the Floating Sky Monastery, Mikulov had thought long and hard about the loneliness that had suffused his life, and realized that with his success in the mountains, he had at last gained the family he had sought for so many years. Yet it had not happened as he'd planned. Though he would be expected to address his fellow monks as "brother" or "sister" from now on, Mikulov's true family lay elsewhere. His closest kin rested behind him, at the mountain's summit, not inside this monastery.