

THE INFERNO

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PART THREE : AN ESCAPE

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There was indeed someone standing the sunlit mouth of a cave, but it wasn't Torral, it was one of the braves who'd shot at Pietr by the pool. All four of the braves were standing outside peering in at him. Pietr tensed, but then saw that the brave's hands were extended as a greeting and relaxed. None of the braves were holding weapons.

"Friend?" the tall man with a scarred cheek said as Pietr got to his feet.

"Friend," Pietr said uncertainly.

"Shaman?" the brave said, gesturing towards Pietr's pouch.

"Yes."

"Not know you were shaman. See scrawla," the brave said, using a word Pietr guessed to mean evil spirit. "Shoot at scrawla, not you."

"Bad magics chase me," Pietr said.

"Hide here, in magic place?"

"Magic place?"

"Legend says we find great shaman here."

"When?"

"Not know, but we bring offerings this time every year. Legends speak of snow."

"Snow?"

"A dark cloud and snow."

Glancing past the braves Pietr could indeed see the dark cloud he'd noticed the first time he'd flown like a shrell. This was the first time he'd seen it while awake, and he couldn't tell whether he was seeing it with his inner eyes or his outer ones. The last few days had blurred the line between vision and reality so badly that the two overlapped. "My name is Pietr," he said as he pulled his eyes away from the cloud. "I doubt if I'm the shaman you're looking for, but I am a shaman, and I'll help you if I can."

"I am Borka. This is Drew, Krippa, and Melka," Borka said, gesturing towards the other three braves. "Sit down. Eat. You need food."

Pietr gratefully accepted the grain cakes and dried meat Borka offered. While he ate, he explained his clothes and pouch by saying that he was from the city, but that his father had been a shaman. He went on to explain about his two native teachers and how they'd been ambushed. He didn't reveal his own role in the tragedy or say that Shara was still alive. He wanted to join up with Borka's group until he was strong enough to return for Shara by himself.

Pietr was thus pleased when Borka extended an invitation to accompany the braves back to their village. Their own shaman was dead, and they needed a new one. Pietr explained that he was still learning, but said he'd do what he could. He'd help the tribe until he was called away.

Sore, but able to move, Pietr braced himself for a fourth day of hiking. Before the group got underway, he worked a new warming spell. He etched four extra figures and included hairs from each of the braves. He didn't know if the spell would work for more than one person, but it did, and the braves were impressed.

Pietr ended behind Borka in the line that wove its way down the mountain. He soon became as familiar with Borka's hides, hair, and angular body as he'd been with Shara's more pleasing form. Up to this point living with natives had been a dream, but now it was about to become real. He was

walking through the wilderness with four braves as though this was where he belonged.

But this was also where Shara belonged, and following behind someone with hair and clothes like hers made it impossible for Pietr to forget about her. Three days had passed since he'd kissed her in the woods, but that kiss was still vivid in his mind. His guilt at betraying her distracted him from the growing pain in his legs. By the time the group reached the pool with the kresh he could barely walk.

A break for food and water didn't help. If anything, getting off his feet and then having to get up again with the added burden of his bundle made him feel worse. He didn't want to appear weak, so he masked his pain as well as he could. By mid-afternoon his delirium of the previous day had begun to return.

And still the braves hiked on. Keeping to the foothills of the second mountain, they moved inland and north. Pietr could still see the unnatural cloud whenever he looked back. He was glad they were moving away from the dark, swirling mass.

The braves' village was a day's hike to the north, and the longer Pietr struggled on, the more feverish he got. Interspersed with his thoughts of Shara were inferno-like glimpses of the village. At times he thought he'd already reached the village and was only remembering the hike. One of his legs felt like it had been kicked. It took all his will to keep moving forward.

And then the village really was there. After what seemed like an eternity, Pietr accompanied Borka and the other braves into the midst of the tents he'd been seeing all day. Excited children announced the band's arrival, and a crowd quickly gathered. Amid the smell of food, smoke, and animals Pietr found himself being gawked at like some sort of monster.

Pietr ignored the belligerent stare of one youth in particular and focused on the old woman in the center of the crowd instead. Because the way all the other adults flanked her, he gathered that she was an important figure in the tribe. Heavy-set like Morta, but hide-clad and green-skinned like a native, she studied Pietr as he approached. Then Borka brought the braves to a halt in front of her and explained how Pietr had come to be with the band.

"Is this true? Are you the one whose coming was foretold?" the old woman said in a voice as thin as Torral's.

"I never said that. I only said that I'm a shaman," Pietr replied.

"Ah, but you are something more."

"More?"

"You're not like any shaman I've ever seen."

"I grew up in a city, so my clothes are strange."

"That's not what I mean. I've never heard of anyone so young eluding our best hunters. It takes a great gift."

"I'm used to hiding."

"Yes. Even now you hide. You don't show your true self."

"I don't?"

"What stands before me is a mask. I can't see the real you."

"I've had to spend my whole life hiding myself. Now I've had to flee the city because people there want to kill me. I'd like to stay with you. I want to be a shaman like my father"

"You will be our shaman, then?"

"I'll help you in any way that I can."

"Your words sound true. I don't know if you are what Borka says you are, but he vouches for you, so you will stay with him."

Pietr thanked the old woman and then turned to Borka. The brave nodded and moved through the crowd towards one of the tents. Pietr followed, aware that one youth was still glaring at him more belligerently than anyone else was. Pietr's discomfort increased when Borka embraced a young woman whom he introduced as Tula, his mate. Pietr hadn't planned on living in a tent with a couple. He hadn't really thought about where he'd end up, but was too tired to worry, so he followed Borka and Tula to

their tent. He was relieved to find no children, just an assortment of pots and furs and two mats. It took some rearranging to create room for his blanket. Then he finally settled down for a much-needed rest.

Too tired to talk, Pietr listened as Borka repeated the tale of his vanishing and great warming spell. It was obvious that Borka believed the shaman described in the legend had been found. At one point Pietr ate some grain cakes, but for the most part he just watched. Borka and Tula didn't seem to mind. On the contrary, sensing how close he was to sleep, they were soon touching and kissing as though he wasn't there. To a large extent he wasn't. The tent with its smoke and clutter and sounds of people talking in the growing darkness outside was so foreign that it seemed unreal. It seemed like a dream.

Tula's face was rounder than Shara's and older, but her hair and figure were enough like those of the young woman Pietr loved so that he began to mistake Tula for Shara. The fact that the tent was the same size as the cave he'd sat in with Shara added to his confusion. By the time he closed his eyes thoughts of the cave were beginning to give way to another, much more dimly remembered enclosure. He began to think he was a baby in a hut watching as his parents made love.

After waiting, in vain, for a kiss from his mother, Pietr gave in to the other scenes that were taking form in his mind. Rising, not just into the night, but into a tangled web of dreams, he began to shift from one scene to the next. He felt like this was what he'd always been doing, as though the tent and the hut had just been absorbing fragments in an unending series of dreams. Doors were opening in his mind, and he was passing through them.

More awake than he usually was in his dreams, Pietr began to explore. He wasn't sure whether he was changing into other people like Micklo or just remembering other lives, but he was no longer just himself. He'd think of something, and it would be there. He thought of his love, and she was lying in bed beside him.

Aching to touch Sierra, Danu rolled over, rolled and fell through the bed onto a surface of hot, gritty sand. Micklo, now, he surged to his feet and eyed the youth who was trying to hurt him. What he saw was the twisted face of someone rejected in love. It wasn't enough that Nygul wanted Shoorra dead, he wanted to hurt her young lover, too. The son of a high priest, Nygul was used to getting his wishes fulfilled.

Micklo was smaller than Nygul, so he circled his opponent looking for a weakness. He couldn't find one. Nygul's physical superiority was as great as his social advantage. Nygul wasn't as clever as Micklo. None of the other young priests were. But that didn't matter. What mattered was Nygul's great size and strength.

Blinded by thoughts of what he'd do if Shoorra were killed, Micklo let down his guard. He only thought of Shoorra for an instant, but that was enough for Nygul to score a quick kick. As the pain tore into Micklo, he fell forward, fell through the sand like he'd fallen through the bed, and then he was someone else. He was Fruel, a peasant living among fields and thatch huts.

Only something of the wrestling pit remained. It was the pain, the sharp, piercing pain in his leg. There were other injuries, as well, along with the faint sensation of rain, so Fruel opened his eyes. He was on the hill where one of the barbarians had felled him, and he couldn't get up. He had to turn his head to see his fallen comrades.

Tormented more by the horrible fate of the women and children in the village than by his own death, Fruel looked up at the branches of the tree overhead. As he looked, the beauty of the branches struck him. Never before had they looked so perfect. Everything around him seemed precious now he was about to die. His elders had spoken of life after death, but he didn't believe it. He was a man with arms, and legs, and a heart, and once his heart stopped that would be it. Wishing that he didn't have to die he closed his eyes and tried to forget. He tried to forget everything.

He woke one more time, but he didn't know where he was. He seemed to be in a tent. He searched his mind for the pain in his leg, and he found it. Then he was on the hillside again. He tried to sit up, but he was too weak. He closed his eyes and gave up.

Only to be roused by the sensation of being shaken. Opening his eyes, Pietr found that he really was in a tent. He couldn't see it very clearly; he was too weak, but he really was in a tent, and someone was propping him up to give him a drink. As he sipped at the water, he saw that the person holding him up was a woman with green skin and dark hair. Then another scene crystallized before his eyes. He saw not a green-skinned woman, but rather his mother, and as the comforting sight of the smoky hut filled his eyes, he lay back. He was tired, and he wanted to sleep. His dreams were calling him...

Calling him to a life in a bustling city. Vaguely aware that his name was Danu, he grasped at memories he'd lost. They were there; hidden among images of broad avenues and polished wood rooms, but they kept slipping away. They were as hard to see clearly as the details the other lives in this long, twisted dream.

But he had to remember. Someone would die if he didn't, so Danu thought of Sierra and more visions came. He recalled how he'd left Sierra in her rooms while he visited the Drenga temple. Looking around, he saw that he wasn't in the marble-floored Drenga library, but rather in his own private book room. He was an old man remembering the day his love had been murdered while he'd read in the temple.

Wishing for the millionth time that he could relive that day spending it with Sierra instead of in the Drenga library, Danu looked at the manuscript of The Void on his desk. Hoping that it would make his next life better, he closed his eyes and pictured Sierra. As he reached for her, she fell away, was torn away like she had been so many other times, and he was in the inferno again. He was in that place where time fell apart.

No longer sure who he was, he jumped from persona to persona the way Shara sometimes changed form. More and more, he was drawn to his most vivid memory, the room with the beckoning door. He was the high priest of a powerful empire, and his name was Micklo. He was in his private room staring at the magical symbol he'd etched on his wall.

Great pride filled Micklo. No other priest could see into or manipulate the future like he could. But he felt troubled, too. What he was seeing disturbed him. He could have Nygul's child killed, but it would fold back in upon him. His reunion with Shoora would be severely impaired.

Micklo looked again. There had to be way to make Nygul pay for taking Shoora from him and to be with her again. Determined to find a way, Micklo stepped towards the door. As the familiar roar engulfed him, he stepped into the flames. He slipped back in the madness and pain.

He spent an eternity in those flames. At times he seemed to be Pietr, and he seemed to be in a tent, but only slowly did that tent become more real than the other scenes. Even after his fever broke and he woke as Pietr, memories of the other places remained. He kept seeing the eyes of the infant he'd killed. They were the eyes of the young native brave.