

THE INFERNO

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PART THREE : AN ESCAPE

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During the weeks that followed, Pietr learned what it was like to live as a native. He continued to wear his own clothes, but, except for Rula, the young brave, everyone accepted him as he was. He earned his keep by performing spells and helping on hunts. His ability to become invisible helped him to get close to animals and then scare them towards the hunters.

When Pietr wasn't eating, sleeping, or performing his spells, he was looking for herbs and testing his powers. Two days of delirium had fleshed out what he'd seen his first time in the inferno making him sure those lives had been real. Now that he knew what it felt like he was able to slip into the inferno without being sick or using herbs. His visions weren't as vivid this way, but they were easier to control.

The more Pietr learned of his other lives, the more the tents, woods, and snow of his current one seemed like a dream. He began to wonder whether he'd ever left the inferno or just slowed it down. He drifted from one day to the next as if in a dream, but it was a dream he couldn't enjoy. He couldn't stop thinking of Shara.

As a result, once Pietr became adept at viewing the past, he began to turn his attention to moving around in the present. He remembered how he'd gotten close to Shara that one night on the mountain and tried to approach her again. The more he left his body, the more he realized there were two realities, one sluggish and the other fluid. He could find the Drenga tunnels in the other world, but they weren't always in the same place.

Pietr could also work stronger magic in the other world, but so could the Drenga. They knew he was looking for Shara and set up force fields. When Pietr eluded the traps, the Drenga came looking for him. The same, dark figures that had surrounded him in Shara's cell scoured the forest for him.

So Pietr grew wary. He did find Shara once and see that she was alive, but he had such a hard time getting away that he was reluctant to approach her again. Now that he was with other people, he had to think of their safety as well as his own. The dark cloud was sending out tendrils, and some were getting close to the tribe.

Fortunately, Pietr was able to extend his invisibility to the tribe in much the same way that he could extend his warming spells. The Drenga were still looking for one person instead of fifty. That was good because the tendrils were getting closer each day. No one had been hurt, but some of the wildlife was beginning to act strange.

Pietr was getting stronger as a magician, but he was still no match for the Drenga. He had to rely on stealth instead of sheer force. He could have drawn on his memories as Micklo, but he was reluctant to do that. Much of the magic he'd worked in that life had come at a price.

Still, it was hard to think of a way to rescue Shara when all he could do was disappear. The Drenga had altered their traps to ensnare him even when he couldn't be seen. The Grand Mage had spent years studying his magic and had become very strong. He kept sending out tendrils until the forest was writhing with them.

So, although Pietr wasn't ready to turn back into Micklo, he did continue to conjure up memories of that life. The more he remembered of it, the more he realized his power had come from outside of himself. There really was a world mind, and it was in everything. It would serve him if he would pay its price.

Knowing that the price might be Shara, Pietr looked to his life as Danu. In that life his enemy had

lured him into a temple and then murdered Sierra. Danu hadn't sought revenge like Micklo had. He'd spent his life studying white magic so he could make things turn out better the next time around. He'd even written a book to himself so would get everything right. The Void was supposed to serve as his guide.

And still something had gone wrong. Pietr's mind had hidden the real meaning of The Void from him, and his desire to avenge his father's death had played into his enemy's hands. Unable to bring back Torral, Pietr could only try to remember what he'd known of the void and hope that it would be enough. If he reached deep enough into the void, then perhaps he could still save his love.

It was while Pietr was sitting in the forest thinking of The Void that he felt a tug. At first he thought it was the pull of one of the inferno's scenes, the nauseous wrench he always felt when he about to shift, but then he heard a girl's voice. Focusing on the voice, he woke back into a world of trees and snow. A young native girl was frantically yanking at one of his arms.

"Quick! Come quick!" she was wailing. "Rula is sick!"

Alarmed by the girls' intensity, Pietr raced back to the village ahead of her. She'd said something about Rula being bitten, and all Pietr could think of was a Drenga tendril. He would have felt nervous trying to save anyone, but this was a person he's already wronged. He didn't want to be responsible for Rula dying gain.

A crowd had gathered in front of Rula's tent. Worried adults made way as Pietr ran up. He was glad to escape their stares until he saw how sick Rula was. The youth's body was rigid and his skin nearly white.

Even more chilling than Rula's complexion was the blood on his lips and the gurgling sound in his throat. Rula's mother said her son had been bitten by a knipf. Such bites were rare, but always fatal. Pietr had no cure, so he could only apply a root used for weaker poisons and hope it would help.

Shaking worse than Rula, Pietr dug the root out of his pouch and asked for hot water. Then he examined the bite on Rula's leg. Someone had tried to suck out the poison, but it hadn't helped. The skin was black and swollen.

Pietr tried to think of what Torral would do and then cleared a space around his patient so he could carve a circle in the dirt. Once the water was ready he mashed the root into a bowl of it. He applied the root mush to the wound and then tried to get Rula to drink some of the broth. He couldn't get Rula to swallow, so he set the bowl aside and turned his attention to a warming spell.

As he kindled the fire necessary to trigger the spell, Pietr closed his eyes and pictured flames around his patient. Instead of thinking of them as hot like he usually did, he envisioned them as cool and healing. The result was immediate. He felt a jolt, and then he was in the inferno again.

By concentrating Pietr was able to remember where he really was and what he was trying to do. In the midst of familiar scenes he began to see some that were new. Sensing these to be Rula's memories, he homed in on them. As his hands sought out Rula, his thoughts merged with the youth's.

Not all of Rula's emerging memories were unfamiliar. One Pietr began to find himself in was inside a Dorienga chamber, and the man standing over him looked like Micklo. The infant Pietr had become may not have known what was coming, but he did. He'd lived this same scene through Micklo's eyes.

At the sight of the descending knife Pietr nearly broke his link with Rula. He almost pulled free, but not quite. As the knife pierced his flesh he cursed and held on. The pain was hideous, and then he was Rula lying a mat in a tent.

Normally an inferno scene would seem real for a second or two and then Pietr would shift. Not this time. This time he was so firmly rooted in Rula that Rula's body felt like his own. Pietr could feel the agony of each breath and the fire in his flesh. He tried to move, but he was too weak.

Pietr tried to use his magic to counter the poison, but it was too strong. It had already spread through the nervous system and destroyed vital nerves. Pietr could slow the destruction, but he couldn't reverse it. All he could do was help Rula live a little longer than he would have lived by

himself.

The real horror for Pietr was the discovery that he, too, was dying. A Drenga tendril had attached itself to Rula, and Pietr had fallen prey to its poison. He realized, too late, that it had been no ordinary knipf that had bitten Rula. It had been an animal the Drenga had been using as a puppet.

So Pietr died along with Rula. Succumbing to magic he couldn't fight, his blood boiled and his flesh sagged. The next thing he knew, he was in his subtle body standing on a broad plane. He still felt hot, but it was because he was in a desert.

There were mountains on the distant horizon, purplish peaks that swam in the heat, but before Pietr could think about them, a crash shattered the stillness. The ground shook and split at his feet. Knocked off his feet, Pietr slid towards the crevice. He clawed at the crumbling ground, but it slid with him.

And then he was falling. He was in the crevice, and he was falling towards the planet's core. He tried to wake up, but he couldn't. He had no body to wake up to.

So he fell. He was in the inferno, and he was falling like he'd always been falling. The forest hadn't been real. Only the inferno was real.

Only this time the inferno's scenes more wrenching than he remembered. They were rising and bursting around him like bubbles of boiling water. One moment he'd be in one bubble and think he was with Shara, or on a street, or in a room, and the next instant he'd be in another. He didn't know who he was.

All he knew was that there were patterns, two individuals who kept reappearing. Their faces changed, but one was the Grand Mage and one was Shara. His love was always just beyond his reach, but the Grand Mage was getting closer. Like a predator the Grand Mage was moving in for the kill.

Only it wasn't the Grand Mage himself that was getting closer. It was one of his tendrils. It had attached itself to Pietr and was drawing him in. Pietr could dimly see the cloud the tendril was emanating from, and then the cloud engulfed him. There was a rush of sound, and then he landed in a hard and dark place.

For a time, Pietr couldn't see anything in the blackness. The warm, eerie silence of this place was as quiet as the inferno had been loud. But then his eyes adjusted, and he saw that he was in a cavern. The only light came from the pale, orange-red glow of its distant walls.

The heat and silence were stifling. Feeling as though he really had fallen into a cavern deep in the heart of the planet, Pietr looked for a way out. He couldn't find one. Instead he began to see that the cave was shrinking. Like the maze in his dreams, it was changing. It was closing in on him.

Pietr searched more frantically, but he still couldn't find a way out. Soon the cavern was the size of a room, then a closet, and then he was encased in the rock. He tried to breathe, but he couldn't. The rock was compressing his lungs.

And still the space shrank. Pietr fought against the pressure, but it was like a vice. His lungs collapsed and his bones broke. He was crushed.

The instant Pietr gave up a great coldness filled him, a chill more frightening than the pressure, and then there was light. As if in the center of a star, he was suddenly bathed in white light. The energy was blinding, like the inferno, only softer and luminescent. The scenes swirling around him now looked more like whole worlds than memories of fleeting lives.

Whatever Pietr imagined was there along with a symphony of wondrous sounds. There were flutes, and bells and great throbbing hums. He was in a million places and no where at all. He was a part of the light.

Only something was missing. Shara wasn't there. She should have been with him to share in this beauty, but she wasn't. She'd been left behind.

The instant that Pietr thought of Shara he began to fall. Light turned to flame, and he was in the inferno again. He dropped through veil-like layers of worlds until he found his body. Then he was in it. He was back in his body desperately clinging to life.

Angered by the loss of the beauty Pietr reached up into the heavens for it. He drew it down into

himself and then filled Rula's body with energy so pure it healed. It burned away the poison and restored the dead flesh. Pietr continued to channel the energy until Rula was well and then collapsed back into his own weary shell.

The sleep that followed was so deep that Pietr had no awareness of being carried back to his own tent. When he did finally wake the slumbering forms Borka and Tula looked so much like they always did that he wasn't sure whether he'd really been with Rula or dreamed the whole thing. It took the sensation of a lump on his leg, a wound he'd somehow absorbed from Rula, to convince him that he really had healed the young brave. He'd found a pure light and used it to heal.

Pietr's need to relieve himself forced him to crawl out of the tent. It had been a warm winter day, and moisture from melted snow had condensed into fog. Pietr made his way between ghost-like tents until he reached the edge of the village. Then there was nothing but snow, trees and fog.

Pietr swallowed a handful of snow and then continued on in a trance. Feeling detached, as though he hadn't quite settled back into his body, he walked through the woods. Trees glowed eerily in the mist, and still he marched on. The only sound was the faraway crunch of his feet in the snow.

Eventually Pietr came to rest at the edge of a spring-fed pond. He could hear water gurgling, but aside from the pressure of the log he ended up sitting on he felt nothing at all. He sat there for a very long time reliving all that he'd seen and felt. When Danu rose to leave, the fog had lifted and the sun was shining.