

THE INFERNO

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PART TWO : INTO THE SUN

1

"Are you ready?" Rankin asked.

Micklo nodded and followed his mentor out of the cloakroom, past the stairs to The Necromancer, and down a dank, torch-lit corridor to an empty cell. Micklo was glad the magician overseeing his apprenticeship was someone who understood math. It had accelerated his progress. Much of his time in the underground Drenga tunnels was wasted on chores like replacing torches and cleaning the latrine, but when he was shown something with numbers or a pattern he was able to see to its core. Being able to grasp what he was shown was important because he wasn't being shown very much. There was far more going on in these tunnels than he was being told about.

Hopefully today's lesson would be different. Micklo could sense a change in Rankin's bearing; a tension in the magician's walk that made it obvious this spell was special. Under Rankin's watchful eye, Micklo used chalk to draw a complex pattern on the floor and then set four candles at the corners of the pattern he had designed. Then he lit the candles and sat down in the middle of the design. As a final step he pulled out the ceremonial knife Rankin had given him. He was ready to begin.

It disturbed Micklo that he would have to cut himself. It also troubled him that he'd be chanting words he didn't understand. But Rankin was waiting, so Micklo drew the blade across his wrist hard enough to draw blood and then began to chant the words Rankin had given him. As Micklo's blood slowly dripped on the floor, the vibration in his chest from the long, drawn-out vowels made him dizzy. He felt like he was peering out at his wrist from a tunnel deep inside his head. Then he receded further into the tunnel and lost sight of the cell altogether.

Only it wasn't a tunnel Micklo fell back into, and it wasn't dark. The place he seemed to wake into was gray with patches of black and brown. He just couldn't focus on the patches. He was too dizzy. Only gradually did the spinning in his head slow enough for him to recognize the dark pattern as branches against a gray sky. He was standing in a forest staring up at some clouds. What startled him was who he was. He was staring up at the sky through Pietr's eyes.

Unaware that someone was in his head with him, Pietr resumed his search. He'd been able to find Torral and Shara the other times he'd looked for them, but he was having trouble this time. He'd spotted several herbs Torral had told him to watch for, but no trace of his friends. The link he thought he'd established with them was failing him.

Pietr continued towards the mountain looming ahead worried that something had happened to his friends. He was part way up the last foothill when he heard a sharp snap. Something large had stepped on a twig just beyond the crest of the hill. If it were moving towards him, it would soon be in sight.

Pietr crouched behind a boulder and waited. Within moments two natives armed with bows and arrows came into view. Pietr was part native himself, but that didn't make him feel safe. He was dressed like a city person, and dozens of people from the city had disappeared in these woods.

Pietr crouched down further hoping the two braves weren't part of a larger party. As they got closer, he tried to imagine himself part of the rock he was behind. Just when he thought he'd avoided detection, one of the braves stopped, stared in his direction, and ordered him to stand up. Pietr had to obey.

No sooner had Pietr stood up than he heard a twang from the other brave's bow. The next instant Pietr felt a burning pain in his wrist. The fire flared up through his arm to his head, and then he blacked out. The next thing he knew, he was on the ground staring up at Torral and Shara.

"What happened?" Pietr asked as he frantically felt for the wound that should have been in his wrist but wasn't.

"Bad magic," Torral said. "Drive bad magic away."

"Bad magic? But the arrow, what about the arrow?"

"No arrow. Drive bad magic away."

"That was you!" Pietr said, comprehending at last. His relief at not being wounded was tempered by the worried look in Shara's eyes. "Am I all right now?" he asked as he let Torral and Shara help him to his feet. The sensation of Shara's warm hands on his arm made him blush.

"Don't know yet," Torral said.

"You don't know!" Pietr said with a sharpness he regretted. It was hard enough facing his daemon alone. The prospect of losing Shara because of it was intolerable. Instead of being grateful to Torral Pietr felt betrayed. He felt as though the most awful thing about him had been laid bare before Shara's eyes.

"It's up to you."

"What can I do?" Pietr said, more scared, now, than angry.

"You must become your own master."

"How?"

"I think it's time for a vision quest."

"A vision quest?"

"Like when you flew out over the ocean, only longer, and by yourself."

"Then that's what I'll do."

"This is serious."

"I understand. I want to be like you. I'll do whatever you say."

"Not like me! You must be yourself. You must find your own way."

"I understand. I'll do whatever I have to."

"Very well. First, you must find a sancha root..."

"A sancha root?"

"You must find a sancha root. Then you must find a power place. You must build a fire, eat the root, and stare into the fire. A vision will follow."

"What do you mean by power place?"

"A place where you feel power. Do you know of such a place?"

"Your cave. I feel power there."

"It must be your own place."

"The only other places I can think of are too close to the city. Someone might find me, especially if build a fire."

"Look again. If no other place calls to you as strongly as the cave, then use it."

"All right, but what about the root? You haven't taught me about sancha roots."

Torral was already drawing a pale, dirty root the size of a finger from the pouch that hung by his side. As Pietr examined the root, Torral explained what the visible portion of the plant looked like and where it was likely to be found. Torral warned that there was a poisonous variety of the plant distinguishable from the good one only by its aura and its slightly wider leaves. Finding the right plant would be a test of how much Pietr had learned.

Wishing that he could have spend more time with his friends, especially Shara who was still eyeing him warily, Pietr said he understood and headed back down the slope. The arduous search that followed reinforced one of the things Pietr had learned, and that was how tedious being a shaman could be. Casually spotting herbs while hiking through the woods was one thing, but actively seeking out a rare and well-hidden plant was another. He tried to watch for the aura Torral had described, but he hadn't yet learned how to see auras so all that he got for his efforts were sore feet and the feeling that he would never be a shaman. It wasn't until mid-afternoon that he spotted some sancha root leaves, and

they were so withered he couldn't tell if they were the good kind or the bad. He still couldn't see an aura.

Pietr doubted that he'd find any more of the plants, and it was getting late, so he dug up one of the roots. It didn't feel dangerous and looked like the one Torral had shown him, so he stuck it in his sack. Then he stood up and glanced around trying to shake the feeling that he was being watched. He didn't see anyone, so he started towards the cave where he would be found if he got sick.

The memory of the trees and rocks he'd passed during his climb fresh in his mind, Pietr paused on the ledge outside the cave to catch his breath. Once inside, he set down the twigs and branches he'd gathered and sat on one of the mats. Even more than on previous visits he felt like he'd stepped backwards in time. The mats, pots, and charred wood around him made Tarnahue seem like part of another life.

Pietr wished he could rest, but Torral and Shara would be returning soon so he pulled a knife from his sack and began to shave some kindling. Then got out the kindling stick he'd made a few days before and set about trying to start a fire. He nearly rubbed his hands raw in the process, but was eventually able to produce a wisp of smoke. He nursed the tiny flame into a fire and then got out the root.

Pietr washed the root with the last of his water and then bit into it. The taste was surprisingly sweet. He waited to see if he was going to get sick and then ate the rest of the root. When he finally did feel something it was an overpowering urge to lie down.

Pietr remembered that he was supposed to stare into the fire and strained to keep his eyes open so he could. Soon he was pressing so heavily into his mat that he felt like stone. Too heavy to move, he was aware of the fire and nothing more. All else seemed like a dream...

A dream that came back to him in crystalline fragments. From the frightened look in Shara's eyes to a patch of mold he'd seen on a log, his memories felt so heavy that they began to weigh him down into the floor of the cave. Its surface didn't resist. Sinking into it, he found that it was made up of more memories and scenes.

Conscious despite the dream-like quality of what he was experiencing, Pietr sank deeper into the earth experiencing each scene vividly before dropping down to the next. Some of the scenes were rigid, but others were fluid, changing like the maze in his dreams. The maze itself took shape around him. No longer just a string of empty rooms, it began to seem like something living that had swallowed him up.

And all the while Pietr was sinking deeper into the ground, closer to the molten rock at its core. As he sank the rooms grew more ominous, as though colored by an evil presence. It was the same presence he always felt in the maze, and it was getting closer. He was sinking to the depths where it dwelled.

Pietr was so alarmed by the presence he barely noticed that many of the scenes interspersed with the rooms were unfamiliar. The maze was still there most of the time, but even it looked different. Its walls were smoother and there were designs etched into them. When they fell away he was on the parched street of a city with beleaguered slaves and merchants in colorful robes.

Something about this ancient city felt wrong. Pietr half expected to find his daemon lurking among its tan, dusty streets. Instead he rounded a corner and caught sight of the temple on Micklo's wall. The triangular shape in the center of it evoked a strange feeling of pride.

Sensing that if he stayed here he would forget who he was, Pietr struggled back up towards the cave with the fire. Something grabbed at him, but he pulled free and clawed his way towards the floor of the cave. As he climbed the city grew dim and then fell away. He caught a glimpse of Torral leaning over him and then lapsed into a dreamless sleep.

Micklo shook his head and glanced around at the walls of the fire-lit cell. At first he thought he still

in the maze he'd viewed through Pietr's eyes, but then he saw the candles he'd lit. They'd burned down, but it were where he'd left them, as was the knife he'd used to cut his wrist. Rankin was still in the chamber.

"Again you surprise me," Rankin said in a voice Micklo couldn't ignore. "Your trance was deep. What did you see?"

"A great deal," Micklo said half against his will. "It was like I was someone else."

"Someone else?"

"I saw a temple, a Dorienga temple, and I felt like it was mine."

"Yours?" Rankin said, stepping in closer.

"It was just a dream," Micklo said, regaining control over his voice. "I have a picture of a temple in my room, and it was what I saw."

"Are you sure that's all there was to it?" Rankin said. "For a moment there you sounded awfully proud."

"It was just a dream."

"Were there people in this dream of yours?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Were any of them priests?"

"Priests? I remember slaves and merchants, but it was only a dream. I didn't focus on anyone."

"I'm not sure it was just a dream," Rankin said. "The spell was intended to jar you loose, and you were entranced a long time. You may have traveled back in time. The fact that you saw a Dorienga temple is significance. Only the Grand Mage has gone back that far."

"The Grand Mage?"

"Yes. And I'm sure he'd like to hear what you saw."

"But it was only a dream!" Micklo protested. Whatever pride he might have felt at seeing the temple was overshadowed by the thought of having the vision ripped from his mind. Not only was his vision likely to be laid bare, so were his true feelings towards the Grand Mage. He might fall under the magician's spell and never wake up.

That fear was in Micklo's mind as he accompanied Rankin to the Grand Mage's cell. Like a condemned prisoner, he wound his way through the tunnels to a place where all of the cells had wood doors. All-too-quickly Rankin was knocking on and opening one of the doors. Then Micklo was trying to focus on the books that lined the walls instead of on the man behind the wood desk.

Rankin told the Grand Mage what Micklo had said, and then Micklo felt the full weight of the Grand Mage's keen glare. Still stiff from sitting for so long, Micklo tried to explain about his picture and how it was the cause of what he'd seen.

"And why do you think this picture should have such an effect on you?" the Grand Mage asked, drawing Micklo out by the sheer force of his voice.

"I don't know. Perhaps it was the design."

"Design?"

"The sixteen squares on one of the walls."

"Ah yes. That design. A pattern we know very well. That's why I think there's more to this vision of yours than you're letting on."

"There isn't. I swear!"

"But your eyes say differently. I can see you're hiding something, and, given how well you're doing it, I can also see that you're very strong. I've been waiting for the appearance of an old enemy. I thought he would appear in another form, something more primitive, but you remind me of him. So tell me again, what did you see, and how did it make you feel?"

"It..."

"Did this temple look familiar, like a place you knew but had forgotten about?"

"It..."

"Was there a young woman in this dream of yours, a slender, dark-haired girl?"

A chill came over Micklo at the mention of a dark-haired girl. All he could think of was the young native woman he'd seen through Pietr's eyes. But everything was so mixed up that he wasn't sure if he'd really been Pietr or dreamed the whole thing. He struggled to make sense of his vision. Then Grand Mage spoke again, in a deeper, more commanding voice, and Micklo unwillingly described what he'd seen.