

THE INFERNO

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PART TWO : INTO THE SUN

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It took Pietr longer than he planned to fix the sculpture. While he was waiting for the first piece of wood to set he noticed others that were a little loose decided to fix them, too. Satisfied, at last, that the sculpture was ready, he put on his cloak and grabbed his bundle and left. It was awkward trying to carry both the bundle and sculpture, but bringing along his final piece of art made it easier to abandon the rest.

Pietr tried not to think about the time that he'd wasted as he raced towards the edge of town. Projecting the thought that he wasn't worth noticing, he sped past dozens of bundled figures without drawing a single stare. By the time he reached the woods his legs ached, but he felt safe. There was nothing between him and the mountain now but trees and snow.

The stars were so bright that Pietr had little trouble picking out the dark trees against the crusted snow. Hindered only by the brush that kept snagging his cloak, he scrambled up one hill after another on his way to the mountain. He wanted to make up for the time he'd lost, but his legs were too tired. It was all he could do to keep going at all.

Because much of his attention was focused on his own footing, Pietr didn't notice the trail of multiple boot prints near the clearing until he was almost on it. A sound made him stop in his tracks, but it was just a branch creaking in the wind. An instant later he'd dropped his things and started to run. The boot prints continued on towards the cave, and he wanted to get there first.

Pietr slipped more than once in his haste, but he was too scared to feel much pain. What he couldn't ignore was his fatigue. He could run, but only in spurts. By the time he began climbing he could no longer run at all.

Trying to find his way in the dark further slowed Pietr. The men had taken his usual path, so he had to scramble up over rocks wherever he could. He did hear voices once point, but he couldn't tell whether they were going up or coming down. He couldn't tell whether he was passing them or already too late.

After what seemed like an eternity Pietr finally found the ledge with the cave. The sight of trampled snow stabbed at him like a knife, but he called out anyway. No one answered, so he crawled into the cave. There was just enough light from the scattered embers of a fire to reveal Torral's limp form.

Pietr tried to rouse his teacher, but couldn't. A blow to the old man's head had taken his life. Pietr sagged to the ground feeling as though he was to blame. If he hadn't returned to the city Torral wouldn't have been trapped in the cave.

It took the sight of Shara's pouch to get Pietr moving again. Finding Torral's body was bad enough. The thought of Shara being dragged off was even worse. Frantic to catch up with her Pietr scrambled back out of the cave. He didn't know how he could wrest her away from five or six men, but he'd do what he could.

Following a trampled trail down the mountain wasn't as difficult as climbing had been, but it was more treacherous, and more than once Pietr came close to flying off of a ledge. After one particularly painful fall he decided to be more careful. He continued to move cautiously even after he reached the base of the mountain. He wanted to catch the men by surprise.

It was during a stretch where Pietr wasn't being careful that he was caught by surprise. A dark figure sprang from behind a tree brandishing a club. Pietr veered just enough for the club to miss him

and sped on. The stocky attacker couldn't keep up.

What followed was a blur. Pietr was closer to the spot where he'd dropped his things than he realized and ended up kicking his sculpture. Unnerved by the sound of the glass smashing against a tree, he raced on. He ran until his legs gave out.

Too dazed to think clearly, Pietr raised his head from the snow and saw that the forest had changed. Where there had been just one man, dozens of shadowy figures now flitted about. Pietr wiped his eyes, but the phantoms remained. They were like the one he'd seen in the fog the day he'd found the gray stone.

Desperate to escape and save Shara, Pietr ripped open his pouch. He was exhausted and needed something that would give him new strength. He didn't remember Shara's warning about the mind-mixed powder until after he'd swallowed too much. Almost instantly he began to feel as though he was dreaming and about to wake up.

It was at the very instant Pietr let himself wonder whether he was awake or dreaming that the rocks and snow around him began to slip away. He tried to clutch at the ground, but his hands passed through it. Hoping this was a dream, he tried to wake up. He tried to wake to a world where Torral and Shara were safe.

Roaring flames sprang up around Pietr as the forest fell away. Recognizing the flames, as though they'd been there all along, he in a huge fire. There were scenes in the flames, but he couldn't focus on them. They were shifting and swirling too fast.

Even more frantic to escape this fire than he had been to wake from the forest, Pietr tried to concentrate on the scenes. For as long as a second or two he'd be in a room or on a strange street, but then the roaring would return, and he'd be back in the flames. No matter how real the room or street might feel, it would fall away. It would peel away like the forest had, and he'd be in the fire again.

Pietr felt trapped, caught in a horror he couldn't escape. There was only one scene potent enough to hold him, and it terrified him. It was a room with a door that opened into a void. If he stayed in that room he would get sucked through the door and would die.

But he didn't have much choice. Each time the room coalesced around him he was closer to the door, closer to the void beyond it. He knew that this was what death was, plunging through this door into nothingness. His horror turned to panic when he realized that he'd already plunged through the door. He was only remembering being alive.

Pietr was falling. The flames licking at him were so familiar that he wondered if anything else had ever been real. His life in Tarnahue might have been real, but that was before he'd died. Ever since swallowing the poison he'd been trying to relive his life so he wouldn't cease to exist.

But it was hard. There were so many memories, and they were shifting so fast. Anything was better than this chaos, so he embraced a new scene. As if having actually dropped from one floor in a building to another, he woke with a start on the bed of a small, cluttered room. At first, he thought he was at his grandfather's, in the bed the old man had begrudgingly allowed him to use after his mother had died, but then his eyes focused on his drawings and glass sculptures, and his memory returned. He was no longer the child who'd been shunned because he looked like a native. He was on his own, now, a budding artist with no one to answer to but...

But something was pulling at him, and it hurt. It always jarred him when he was torn out of one scene and sucked into another. Everything was so tangled. He had no words for it, no understanding of what he was seeing. But that was all right. He was safe, now, protected by the arms of the big-soft-warm person who was lifting him from his crib. The bad things were fading, replaced by the smoke of the hut and the soft coo of the big-soft-warm person's voice. This was where he belonged. But something was wrong! The bad things were pulling at him again, tearing at him like that awful roar he remembered from somewhere, and it...

Burned! It always burned when he was torn out of one scene and left gasping for air in another. And the roar! The roar was deafening. When his vision cleared, he was standing over a body that

looked familiar in a cell that looked familiar, and he felt trapped. He felt as though he'd been standing over this robed body with his hands tied for ages, and he didn't know how to escape. Then another feeling came over him, the sensation that something was pulling at him, and as the sickening roar once again rose up around him, the cell gave way...

Peeled away like the skin of a fruit to leave him standing on a street he recognized. It wasn't one of Tarnahue's cobbled streets, but rather the wide, brick avenue of a larger city he knew just as well. As a shiny, black carriage clattered past in exactly the same way he remembered it clattering past in some other life he felt frozen in time, as though he'd been standing on this corner watching the carriage roll past for eons and had dreamed all the rest. His whole existence seemed bound up in this moment, an instant so vivid that he seemed on the verge of falling into the wheel, of falling through its blurred spokes into blackness and flames, and...

His fever had returned, and with it the feeling that his hold on the mountainside around him was tenuous, at best. He felt as though the valley and sea before him could all-too-easily slip away, as though the very ground beneath him could cease to exist, and he wasn't sure he could survive another plunge into madness. Trying with all his might to hang onto these surroundings, he stared at the sea, viewing it not as water, but as part of something alive. Dimly recognizing this moment as part of a living being, he tried to merge with the being, and something gave way. He had the fleeting impression of being in millions of places, and then...

Another scene drew him in, and he was back in the room with the beckoning door. Of all of the scenes that kept sucking him in, this was the one that caught him the most, and each time that it pulled him in he saw something more. This time he noticed that he was wearing a robe, and that the room had a grid of squares etched above the door. But it was still the door that held his attention. He was directly in front of it, so close now that he could feel the immense forces just beyond it. There might be nothing there, but it was a nothingness filled with the most powerful forces imaginable, a churning sea of fire and light. And he was being sucked into it, into an inferno that would tear him apart...

And it hurt! Being torn to pieces cut like a knife! He'd plunged through the doorway, so long ago now that he was no longer sure there'd ever been a real side. He wanted to think he'd been alive once, but that had been before he'd poisoned himself. Now he only had memories, scenes so unstable that he was simultaneously in thousands of places and nowhere at all. He kept reaching for one stable scene, and the more he grasped, the more he began to sense a unity to the seemingly chaotic whole. The forces tearing at him might be immense, but it wasn't because he was trying to stave off death, it was because they were part of something truly immense. For one, brief instant he seemed poised at the apex of a huge wheel, a wheel made up of everything he and everyone else who'd ever lived had ever experienced, and then...

Everything was in pieces again, and he was bleeding. It always cut him when he was torn out of one scene and left gasping for breath in another. And the roar! The roar was so deafening it blinded him. When his vision cleared, he was standing over a body that looked familiar in a cell that looked familiar, and he felt trapped. He felt as though he'd been standing over this dead man with his own hands tied together for years, and he didn't know how to break free. Then a worse feeling came over him, the sensation that something was pulling at him, and as the flames once again sliced into him the cell fell away...

Burst like a bubble to leave him sprawled on the sand of a wrestling pit. He felt as though he'd come to his senses on the burning sand of this pit hundreds of times, perhaps even thousands of times, and he couldn't get up. He couldn't even breathe! He felt paralyzed, suffocated by the heat of the pit. Frantic for air, he grasped for someplace cooler...

And was sitting in ankle-deep snow beneath a dark canopy of branches and stars. But he still couldn't breath! His lungs wouldn't work! Desperate for air, he reached out for another scene, and the woods fell away. He clutched at the snow, but his hands passed through it. A sickening roar filled his head...

More scenes flared into being and then slipped away. His arms and legs didn't even feel like arms and legs anymore, but rather a net that was being stretched. He had the impression of being dragged, of feeling stretched because he really was being pulled, and then the scene shifted again. He woke in a chamber where he felt bound because he really was being held down. Micklo was in a stone room, and several men were pressing him down. The drone of their chant filled the air, filled it with a "droom" that swelled to a roar, and then...

Everything was in pieces again, and he ached. And everything was changing so fast. He was on a street one instant, standing over a prone figure the next, and falling through a doorway the moment after that. There were more scenes than he could count and they all felt real despite the fact that they kept slipping away. He recognized some of them from his life as Pietr, but others were harder to place. In one of them he was sitting at a desk with cards containing scenes spread out before him, and as he tried to make sense of the cards, he realized that he was in his own mind. He'd died, and the only way he could continue to exist was by stringing the scenes into a life. That was what the cards were for. There were memories of a life he was trying to piece back together again. He'd always known he'd die, but he'd never thought about what kind of world he'd create for himself when he did, so he wasn't prepared. That was why he was having so much trouble. He couldn't weave the scenes back into a coherent life because he wasn't prepared...

So he was trapped, stuck in an inferno of shattered scenes. Only the roar of the inferno persisted, that and the pain. He wanted stay in one scene, any scene, but there were so many to choose from. They weren't even from one single life, they were from many. Reeling, he reached out again...

And the next thing he became conscious of was the cold, hard pressure of the stone he was lying on. The back of his head, his seat, and his heels ached as though they'd been pressed against that stone for a long time. Not yet conscious enough to wonder where he was, he felt the stone and nothing more. He was content to focus on the sensation, for it was all that he knew.

But then he remembered the bald magician and jolted awake, and as he opened his eyes and saw a cell, it fell away, was wrenched away like all of the other scenes leaving him back in the fire. Micklo could remember more of his shattered life, now, more of how he'd tried to infiltrate the Drenga and how it had led to disaster. He'd been used, and now he was dead. But he'd swallowed the poison from his father's pouch years ago, so long ago that it no longer seemed real. Even now another scene was pulling at him, drawing him into a room...

The room with the beckoning door. As he reeled towards the gaping void, he was no longer afraid. He was eager. He felt pride, a sense of peering not into the past, but into the future, and then he was in the flames. He was wrestling with forces no other Dorienga magician had ever wrestled with. Only something was wrong! There were too many scenes, and they were shifting too fast! As he fought for control, he felt a wrenching, and then he shifted again. He was no longer Micklo, the Dorienga priest who would cheat death; he was Pietr, the young shaman he would one day become...

The pain was unbearable! He saw Drenga tunnels, felt like he was being dragged through those tunnels, and then he was burning again. Even the fire couldn't hold him. There were moments when he rose above it, instants of clarity when he could look down and see a cauldron of flames. Then he'd be back in the inferno, and as one scene after another slipped from his grasp he was no closer to stringing the scenes into a single, coherent life than he'd been before. Certain, now, that he was dead, he reached out again, reached out with all his might, and fell through a doorway into a place that felt hard.