

# THE INFERNO

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## PART THREE : AN ESCAPE

### 1

For what seemed like years nothing had existed for Pietr except the roar of the flames and a torrent of scenes so chaotic that trying to grasp one had been like trying to grab wreckage in the middle of a storm-tossed sea. Each scene had seemed real while he was in it, but no matter how real it had felt he'd invariably been yanked out of it and into some other scene. That's why he doubted that the torch-lit cell he was in now would last. Indeed, for a time it kept giving way to other scenes, but when he kept returning to it he began to wonder if it might not be real. Like a drowning man who'd finally grasped his wreckage, he clung to the sensation of being in the cell with all of his might.

Among the things Pietr noticed as the cell grew more stable were numerous pains and the fact that his hands were tied. He also saw the coarse, black fringes of the robe of someone standing near where he lay, and when he finally understood that he hadn't died, he wished that he had. He kept seeing Torral's body and thinking of Shara. For a time he'd try to block out those horrors by slipping back into the inferno, but it was worse.

As the cell grew more solid around him, Pietr had little choice but to accept the reality of Torral's death. The knowledge that he was responsible cut at him worse than his bruises and scrapes. It took the thought of Shara lying bruised and scared in some other cell to give him the will to survive. She was undoubtedly the young woman who would be killed in the spring, and he had to stop it.

Pietr was less certain of when he would be killed, so he lay still. He squinted at his guard and tested the chord wrapped around his hands, but only when his guard wasn't looking. Confused by the fact that he seemed to be both himself and Micklo, he felt powerless. There had to be something he or Micklo could do, he just couldn't figure out what.

His situation changed before he could figure it out. A new sound replaced the dull roar in head. It was a man's voice. The same man who'd accompanied Rankin into his cell the night he'd made contact with the Drenga was telling him to get up.

"Never did trust you," the burly man said as Pietr stopped squinting and opened his eyes. "Rankin was swayed by your cleverness. Thought you'd be like your great grandfather. But I could see you for the filthy little bastard you really are. Now that you're awake, we're going to have some fun. I've been waiting for this a long time."

As Pietr struggled, first to sit up, and then to get to his feet with his hands tied, the man drew out a knife. It gleamed menacingly in the torchlight as the man started forward. Pietr stumbled backwards and hit a wall. As the knife drew closer, his terror grew mindless and leaped out...

Flashed like a bomb, and it... Hurt! 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 body with his hands tied forever, and he didn't know how to break free. Then another feeling came over him, the feeling that something was pulling at him, and as the inferno's sickening roar once again rose up around him, the cell gave way...

Peeled away like a sheet of paper consumed by flame. Pietr caught a glimpse of a temple, the temple he'd known as Micklo, and then Rankin's voice drew him back to the cell. Tingling as though an electric current had passed through him, he wedged the dead man's knife between his feet and cut the rope from his hands. Then he picked up the knife and stepped to the door.

Rankin was approaching. He called out again and then drew his own knife. Pietr tried to kill

Rankin like he'd killed his guard, but nothing would come. He was too weak to fight Rankin, so he ran.

The tunnel branched, and there were two magicians in one of the branches, so Pietr fled down the other. It led to the latrine. If Shara were in one of the cells near the latrine, then perhaps he could free her and they could escape. The latrine emptied into the city's sewers.

But Pietr couldn't find Shara! All the cells he passed were empty, and Rankin and the other two magicians made it impossible to turn back. Pietr thought as he ran, weighing his chances of taking on several strong men now, in a weakened condition, against his chances of freeing Shara later, and decided to keep running. He felt like a coward, but he didn't have any choice. He couldn't help Shara if he was dead.

Pietr entered the latrine and turned and slashed at the first magician to follow. Then he took advantage of the ensuing confusion to make his escape. There were waist-high holes in one of the walls, and he dove through one of them. The cold liquid he landed in stank, but he ignored the stench and got to his feet. He was barely underway again before a torch was thrust through one of the holes.

The sewer tunnel was similar to a Drenga tunnel, only longer, darker, and filled with ankle-deep sludge. Pietr could make out openings high up in the wall, but they were too small to squeeze through. Frantic to escape, he ducked into the blackness of the first side tunnel that he reached. Behind him, Rankin and the other uninjured magician were arguing about who should follow and who should go for help.

The argument saved Pietr. Fear had carried him this far, but he was too sore and exhausted to run anymore. Feeling his way along in the darkness, he turned several more times. His clothes were wet and his feet numb, but his body still tingled from the energy he'd conjured up.

Pietr could still hear voices from time to time in the distance behind him, so he groped his way towards some waves that he heard. It took a long time to get close to the waves, but eventually the sound was echoing all around him. One moment he was wondering what he'd do when he reached the sea and the next moment one of his feet was dangling in nothingness. He floundered helplessly for an instant and then fell.

The icy surface of a wave slammed into Pietr, and then he was fully submerged. The cold knocked the air from his lungs, but he was able to keep from drowning. He clawed up to the surface, and then he inhaled. His wrist hit a wood post in the darkness, and he grabbed onto it.

For a few terrifying moments it was all Pietr could do to keep from drowning in the swells of water that were splashing off the seawall. Then he saw where he was. A pier loomed over him and the dark outline of a ship was visible to his right. It was so far up to the pier and the top of the seawall that he wondered if he would bob until he died.

But at least it was getting light enough so he could see where he was. It was dark under the pier, but there was some grayness to his left, and in that grayness he could make out a rope. Pietr knew he had to do something before he got too numb to swim, so he let go of the post and made for the rope. Once there, he somehow managed to drag himself out of water and into the even more frigid air.

His clothes turning to ice, Pietr lay shivering on the pier until someone approached. At first he thought the Drenga had found him, but then he saw that the man was a sailor. He knew that the next person to come along might be out to kill him, so he struggled to his feet. Numb and exhausted, he limped towards the sailor who'd stopped at the edge of the pier.

Pietr tried to make himself invisible, but he was too tired. He only succeeded in scaring the man. Pietr knew he wouldn't last long in wet clothes, so he made for his room. He had to get into something dry and warm.

It was light by the time Pietr reached his room. No longer able to feel his body, he stepped into the shower fully clothed. At first he only felt the dull pressure of the water, and then he felt like he was on fire. Back out in his room he glanced at the picture of the temple he once ruled over and then changed into dry clothes.

Pietr's cloak was gone, lost somewhere in the woods, so he put on three shirts. His vest had

repelled the seawater, so he put it back on over the shirts. Then he drank some water, grabbed some bread, and left. He didn't even bother to close the door.

Back out on the street Pietr had to choose between using what little magic he had left to stay warm or be invisible. He'd come so close to freezing that he focused on staying warm and walked as fast as he could. People stared, but as long as none of them were magicians he didn't care. If he could get to the woods quickly enough he might be safe.

He succeeded. Aside from the Grand Mage none of the Drenga actually lived in the tunnels, so he guessed there hadn't been enough men to mount a quick search. That would change, so he limped on as fast as he could. Following the same path he'd used the night before, he headed for his bundle.

It had only been half a day since Pietr had walked through these woods, but it felt like years. Whole lives seemed to fill the gap between that hike and this one. The inferno's flames were gone, but the things he'd seen in them remained. He could remember being Micklo, a priest from another time.

Aware, now, of the source of the thoughts and impulses that had been impinging on his own, Pietr scrambled up one hill after another much as he had the night before. If he could stay ahead of the Drenga, then maybe he could draw on his former magic to defeat the Drenga. The Dorienga magician in him had killed one man, and maybe he could kill the rest. Maybe he could make the Drenga pay for their crimes.

A glimmer of light off a glass shard drew Pietr's attention back to the woods. He'd been so intent on killing the Drenga and saving Shara that he'd reached the clearing without realizing how far he'd come. There was still no one behind him, so he picked up his bundle he went to look for his pouch. His widely spaced footprints were easy to spot.

Pietr found his pouch, knife, and cloak in the gully where he'd fallen. That pleased him because he'd thought he'd lost everything. Confident, now, that he could survive, he returned to the clearing and then picked up the trail to the cave. He wanted to do something about Torral before animals got at the corpse.

Pietr would have enjoyed the climb under different circumstances. It was sunny, and increasingly elevated views of the sea made him feel like part of a godly design. He had to live to help Shara, but he was no longer afraid of dying himself. He knew, now, that he couldn't die.

It was mid-day by the time Pietr reached the cave. He didn't want to enter, but forced himself to. Avoiding Torral, he transferred the contents of Shara's pouch to his own and then covered Torral's body with a mat and weighed down the corners with stones. Back outside he filled in the mouth of the cave with the largest rocks he could lift.

Then Pietr resumed his flight. He was soon farther around the mountain than he'd ever been before. Instead of looking back and seeing the city and lowlands beyond it, he could look ahead and see another mountain. There was an intervening valley, and he hoped it would provide him with some shelter.

Pietr's descent was painful. He was not only sore and exhausted, he was also trying to scramble down over icy rocks and ledges without a trail. He'd eaten what little food he'd brought, and he was getting cold. He considered stopping to cast a new warming spell, but he was afraid that if he did stop he wouldn't get going again.

Pietr was determined to put as much distance between himself and the Drenga as possible, so he dragged himself on until the light began to fade. Barely conscious, he descended into a thick drove of evergreens as scenes from the inferno once again nudged at his mind. He found and ate some berries, but they did little to ease his hunger or clear his head. He wanted to lie down and die.

At some point Pietr did stop. Unable to continue any deeper into the valley, he built a small fire and worked a new warming spell. After nibbling on some bark, he curled up under an evergreen. Secure in his blanket, he finally let go.

The inferno had been a loud, wrenching set of visions, but the scenes that enveloped Pietr now were gentle. At first formless, they coalesced into a Dorienga city with dusty streets and parched walls.

Pietr floated through the streets looking for the home he'd left behind much as he'd floated through the maze in his dreams. Then he was in his home moving among things he recognized but no longer felt attached to.

Like the rooms in the maze, the ones in the house changed as Pietr drifted through them. He sensed that Shara was near and searched until he found her. At least he thought it was Shara until he saw she had tan skin and a Dorienga gown. He tried to speak to this girl Micklo had known, but no words would come out.

So he tried to rouse the sleeping girl, but someone got in his way. Several men crowded into the room and surrounding him. Pietr pushed his way through the men, but the young woman was gone. The Grand Mage stood in her place.

So Pietr fled. He was back in the Drenga tunnels, so he again headed for the latrine. Then he remembered that he was asleep. The Drenga had entered his dream and were trying to kill him.

Pietr jolted awake to the sound of howling. A pack of wild drinkas was wailing in the distance. They weren't close, but the night was young, and it was hard to tell how far they would roam. Pietr couldn't help but wonder if his enemies were using drinkas to hunt him down.

Pietr listened to the pack until fatigue overcame him again. Weaving the best invisibility spell he could muster, he surrendered to his dreams. He found Shara again, but this time it was in a city with carriages and brick avenues. She had pale skin and a red coat and was standing on a corner waving at him.

At least Pietr thought it was Shara. As with the Dorienga girl, this young woman's skin and clothes were different, but the person within was the same. Pietr crossed the street to greet the young woman. Before he could get to her the Grand Mage intervened, and Pietr jolted awake.

Pietr spent the rest of the night slipping in and out of similar dreams. At times he'd be conscious of the forest and drinkas, and at other times he'd be looking for Shara and avoiding the Grand Mage. The one constant thread was the sense that he was being sought. Once, in a state between sleep and wakefulness, he thought he saw Torral, but the vision faded. Pietr curled up and wept.

## 2

The next morning Pietr crawled out of his hiding place wishing he were dead. Fresh snow dusted the ground obscuring his half-day-old tracks. Stiff and weak, he scavenged for berries and then resumed his flight. He wanted to find a better place to hole up.

A day earlier Pietr had been running for his life. Now guilt and worry had replaced fear as his primary emotions. He was tortured by what he'd done and worried that he'd survived a quick death only to endure a slow one. He was alone and hungry in a vast wilderness that didn't care if he died.

Pietr picked his way through the rocks, brush, and snow of the forest floor as well as he could. He wished he could seek out his father's people, but doubted that would be wise. Too many people had ventured into this wilderness and never returned. The people whose land he was trespassing on hated his mother's people as much as his mother's people hated them.

Despite his need for food and shelter, Pietr decided to avoid all human contact. He focused instead on looking for berries and thinking about the Drenga. He didn't like having to kill, but had little choice. He'd failed one girl the night of the festival and didn't want to let Shara fall prey to an even worse fate.

The problem was that Pietr didn't know how he'd killed the man in the cell. The inferno had faded and with it the certainty that he'd really been a magician in an earlier age. If he had been Micklo, then he had very possibly been the Grand Mage of his time. He'd been as ruthless as the Drenga were now.

There was also the puzzling matter of the other city he'd seen in his dreams. All he knew for sure was that someone he recognized as Shara seemed to inhabit both it and the Dorienga city and that each time he got close to his young woman something would go wrong. He felt as though understanding was close, but no vision would come. Whatever his father's powder had jarred loose was still locked

inside.

Around mid-morning Pietr slumped down on a rock. The combination of hunger, fatigue, and guilt was making it hard for him to focus on where he was putting his feet. The loss of motion added to his delirium. A sudden feeling that he knew this place, that he'd slumped down on this same rock before, rekindled the feeling that he was in the inferno and about to wake up.

Some irrational part of Pietr's mind wondered if this might not be the key to magic, if recognizing the world as a state of consciousness instead of matter might not have been how he'd killed his guard. Overhead a shrell was circling, dipping and swerving in lazy arcs that mesmerized him. For a time, he was the one who was gliding through the air on powerful wings.

When the shrell drifted north towards the second mountain in the range, Pietr got up and followed. He started to climb the huge mountain remembering the times a shrell had led him to what he'd sought. He avoided brush by keeping to the rocky edge of a stream. It was a sunny day, and water was gurgling beneath the icy surface of the stream.

Pietr eventually lost sight of the shrell, but not before he scrambled over a ledge and discovered a large pool. Much of it was frozen, but a narrow waterfall was keeping the far end open. As Pietr approached the open water he could see silvery forms beneath the surface. There were kresh in the pool, and if he could scoop out one he'd have the food he needed.

Pietr rolled up his sleeves and reached into the frigid water. The kresh were sluggish, but avoided his grasp. He had to imagine himself invisible to get his hands under one of them. Then, with a single swift movement, he scooped it onto the snow.

The scaly, forearm-sized creature flopped about for a time and then stopped. Pietr scooped out a second, but was too cold to try for a third. He considered building a fire, but was too hungry to wait. He used his knife to decapitate, open, and gut his catch and then ate.

After tossing the remains back into the pool for the other kresh to nibble on, Pietr sat down to think. He was still tormented by Shara's plight, but knew that he'd had to flee. A full stomach made his chances of survival seem a little less bleak. He'd found a place to gather his strength until he was well enough to return.

Pietr's meal made him drowsy, but he was still alert enough to see something move at the far end of the pool just before he heard a sharp twang. He ducked as an arrow whizzed by his head, and then he was up and running. He scrambled over the waterfall's ledge and kept on going. Behind him several braves had swarmed over the lower ledge and were giving chase.

Pietr wove a new invisibility spell and began to hop from rock to rock so he wouldn't leave any tracks. The braves stopped at the top of the second ledge and stared at where he'd been in disbelief. He knew they wouldn't stop long, so he kept on climbing. He was moving faster than the braves and soon lost sight of them.

Pietr eventually stopped climbing and doubled back towards the sea. He was disappointed about losing both his bundle and the kresh, but was relieved that he was beyond the reach of the Drenga. By late afternoon he'd resumed climbing and had a good view of the sea. There was still no sign of the braves.

For most of the afternoon Pietr drew energy from his meal, but by the time the sun began to sink into the sea his legs felt like lead weights. 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 his 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...

One of them drew him in, and he was back in the room with the beckoning door. Of all of the scenes that kept pulling him in, this was the one that scared him the most. It was Micklo's room, and it

seemed to be the source of his madness. For one, brief instant Pietr was Micklo, a magician powerful enough to reach into the future, and then Pietr was just himself again. He was standing on a frozen mountainside staring up at a shallow cave he'd seen before.

This wasn't Torral's cave. It was barely a cave at all, more of a hollow in the side of the mountain, and yet it looked as familiar to Pietr as the ancient city he'd seen in the inferno. For years he'd wanted to become a magician, and now he felt like one. He was beginning to visit places he'd seen in his dreams. Either that or he really was Micklo asleep in some chamber and this was a dream.

The sensation of reliving a moment for a second time was so unnerving that Pietr seriously wondered if he was still in the inferno and about to wake up. But then the feeling passed, and he was left shivering on the cold mountainside. As he tried to take another step he realized how weak he'd become. He could barely stand let alone hike anymore.

The decision to spend the night in the shallow cave was thus an easy one. As the sun finished setting Pietr collected some brush and built a small fire. He had trouble concentrating, but was able to weave a new warming spell. As its comforting heat spread through his body, he leaned back and closed his eyes.

Memories of his escape from the Drenga and the braves soon began to mingle with images of the Dorienga city in Pietr's mind. It was so cold on the mountain that the relentless heat of that city would have felt good. Pietr couldn't remember many details, but he could remember the sun. It never seemed to let up.

As for the mountain, it was so firmly imprinted on Pietr's mind that when he did finally sleep, he dreamed of another like it. He was following a faro up a steep path in much the same way he'd once followed Shara. He tried to catch up, but the faro kept bounding ahead. This went on until the delicate creature slipped behind a large rock.

Pietr rounded the rock and spotted Torral in front of a cave. Pietr's joy at finding his teacher was tempered by the faro's absence. Torral saw Pietr's concern and pointed towards the cave. Pietr nodded and stepped inside.

The cave looked darker from the outside than it really was. Its walls glowed like hot rock. There was also an ominous rumble, but Pietr kept on going. He had to find the faro.

By the time Pietr recognized the cave as a Drenga tunnel, it was too late to turn back. Robed figures had issued from doorways behind him. He tried to run, but there was no escape. The layout of the tunnels had changed.

But this was a dream. Some part of Pietr knew that, so he ducked into a side tunnel where he floated to the ceiling and became invisible. Moments later the Drenga magicians passed under him. Then he was by himself again.

Pietr could have woken at this point, but he hadn't found Shara yet, and he didn't want to abandon her. He searched the tunnels until he spotted a door with a guard. He could sense Shara in the room. The faro had led him to her.

At first Pietr wasn't sure how he'd get past the guard, but then the scene shifted, and he was in Shara's chamber. She was lying unconscious on the floor. Pietr tried to move closer, but something got in his way. An invisible barrier seemed to be surrounding his love.

That angered Pietr. Remembering that this was a dream and that he could change it, he tried to wipe out not only the barrier, but also the rest of the maze. He succeeded. There was a wrenching, and then he was in the inferno again. The next thing he knew, he was back in the cell with the magician he'd killed, and he was still bound.

At this point Pietr became frightened that he'd only imagined escaping from the cell with the dead guard, so he tried to wake up, but he couldn't. He really was in the inferno. He could make out robed figures among the flames, but he couldn't focus on them. Too many other scenes were pulling at him.

Then one of the other scenes drew him in. He was on a street, a wide, brick street with ornate buildings and dozens of people. As a shiny, black carriage clattered past in exactly the same way that

he remembered, he felt frozen in time, as though he'd been standing on this corner watching the carriage roll past forever. His whole existence seemed bound up in this moment, an instant so vivid he seemed on the verge of falling into the wheel, of falling through it into madness...

And then another scene drew him in, and he was in the room with the beckoning door. Each time he ended up in this room he saw a little bit more. This time he saw that the door was wavering, as though it wasn't real, but rather a product of his own mind. He seemed closer to the door, so close he could feel the forces at work beyond it, and they were immense. There might be nothing there, but it was a void filled with the most powerful forces imaginable. He was being sucked into a fire that would tear him apart...

And it burned. It always tore into his flesh when he was wrenched out of one scene and sucked into another. There was another shift, and then the flames fell away. He was in a candle-lit study with a desk and hundreds of books lining the walls.

This room was very familiar. Like Micklo's chamber, it felt like a place where he'd worked potent magic. That was odd, because the hand-written papers on the desk looked like part of The Void. Some part of his mind was telling him that he'd written this book. No sooner did it occur to him that he must have been Danu than he realized that he'd lived in the city with the brick avenue. He'd lived comfortably, studied magic, and...

He'd lost his love! Violently yearning for the young woman with the pale skin and fine clothes, he felt another tug, and then he was back in the cell where Shara lay. Only now the Drenga were there, too. The cell was full of them, and they were grabbing at him. They seemed to be weaving a spell.

But Pietr now remembered magic he'd forgotten about. Drawing on that magic, he pulled free. Trying to run was like moving through water, but he was able to stay a few steps ahead of the magicians and force his way up to the mouth of the cave. The last thing he saw was Torral framed by sunlight, and then he woke up.

### 3

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 Shoora 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 Shoora were killed, Micklo let down his guard. He only thought of Shoora 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.

#### 4

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.