

THE INFERNO

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PART FOUR : THE CHAMELEON

1

Danu, Micklo, Fruel, all were there inside Pietr along with Pietr himself. He was aware of a body, a lean, healthy body, and it felt good. The sun was shining on his face, and that felt good, too. It had been months since he'd felt so good without creating the warmth himself.

But his euphoria quickly passed. Spring was starting, and that meant Shara would die. Pietr didn't know when, but he knew it would be soon. The Drenga had been waiting for this day.

So it was time to return. Pietr had spent the winter trying to get ready for this day, and now it was here. He turned around and walked back to the village. He wanted to say good-bye to his friends.

It would have been easier to just leave, but Tula and Borka would have been worried. They might have thought that the poison had affected him. He could see the smoke from cooking fires, and then he could see the tan-colored tents. He hadn't wandered as far as he'd thought.

Feeling no ill effects from the healing aside from a ravenous hunger, Pietr walked into the clearing. Villagers were staring at him in much the same way that they had when he'd first arrived, but he ignored them and sought out Borka's tent. Borka and Tula were inside, along with Rula. Pale, but well, the young brave was talking to his sister.

This was something new. Rula had avoided his sister's tent ever since Pietr had arrived, but now he was here. He looked at Pietr for a moment and then stared at the ground. Borka and Tula were also uncomfortable.

"I've got to go away," Pietr said, hoping the strained looks were because he'd done something remarkable and not because of something he'd said while delirious.

"Go away?" Borka said. "You're leaving us?"

"I've got to go to the city. There's something there I have to do."

"Is it dangerous, this thing you have to do?" Borka said.

"Yes."

"Then I'll go with you," Rula said, finally looking into Pietr's eyes.

"I have to do this alone."

"No. I'll go with you. I owe you my life."

"You don't own me anything. I have to do this myself."

"No. I'll go with you. I'll follow even if you say no."

Something in Rula's voice told Pietr it was useless to argue, so he didn't. He was in too much of a hurry to waste the time. He told Rula to fetch what he needed then gathered up his own things. He hoped he hadn't saved Rula from one threat only to see him succumb to another.

Borka scowled while Pietr was collecting his things, perhaps sensing the nature of Pietr's secret. Tula looked hurt, too, but she tried to help. She gave Pietr a grain cake to eat and packed more for the trip. By the time Rula returned Pietr was ready to go.

Pietr was glad word of his departure hadn't spread. He wasn't close to anyone else in the tribe and didn't want to be slowed by questions or people wishing him well. Guilt had made him keep quiet about what had happened to Torral and Shara, and he didn't want to ruin his reputation now. He wanted to be remembered as a good person if he didn't come back.

The audible trickle of the melting snow added to Pietr's impatience as he and Rula left the village. Rula labored to match Pietr's pace, but Pietr could see the young brave was weak. Walking slower wasn't easy. The warmth, the thought of seeing Shara and the prospect of being killed all combined to

make Pietr want to run.

To keep his emotions in check Pietr focused on the young brave whose life seemed bound up with his own. Rula was perhaps two years his junior, but the young native's eyes had the same, far-away look as his own. Rula was similar enough to him in size and personality so that looking at the young brave was like looking at a younger version of himself. Pietr couldn't help but wonder if this was how he might have looked if he'd grown up as a native.

"You don't have to do this," Pietr finally said, still wishing he could change Rula's mind.

"Yes I do."

"You didn't seem to like me before today. Why was that?"

"I don't know. Seeing you made me feel funny, but I was wrong. You're not bad like I thought"

"I'm neither as bad as you thought nor as good as you think I am now. I'm human. I try to do the right thing, but I make mistakes"

"No. You're good. You heal people."

"Not always. I've killed, too."

"You?"

"Yes. The last one was going to kill me, so I killed him first."

"Then you were justified."

"Maybe. But it didn't make me feel any better about it afterwards."

Pietr and Rula, who could indeed have passed for brothers despite the differences in their clothing and skin, walked on in silence for a time.

"Where we're going, will there be other people trying to kill you?" Rula finally said. "Is that why you don't want me along?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry. I'm not afraid. I died yesterday. I died and yet I didn't die. Death no longer scares me."

"It shouldn't. It's not the end, just a change, like putting on new clothes and moving to a new place."

"I want to be like you," Rula said. "My uncle was a shaman. He would have taught me if he hadn't died."

"I'll teach you after this is over," Pietr said, at last realizing what it was about Rula that he recognized. I'm still learning, but I'll teach you what I can."

"I'd like that."

"You may be of the blood. You may have been a shaman in some other life."

"I think I was. I have dreams where I see myself as a shaman, only it's with another tribe, one I don't recognize."

"Do you ever have dreams of places that are totally different, like they're in another part of the world?"

"No. At least I don't think so, but it's hard to tell. Some of my dreams are so strange."

"We've lived before, I'm quite certain of this. I don't know what's going to happen when we get to the city, but you can't let things you might suddenly remember interfere with what's happening now. My enemy is powerful. He might try to turn you against me. Whatever happens, you must remember that he's the one who almost killed you."

"I thought I was bitten?"

"There was more than poison in that knipf's bite. There was magic, too."

"I won't fail you. I'll help you kill this magician."

"That's not what I'm asking. Just don't turn against me. And don't get killed yourself. I'm trying to save someone. I don't want to save one life at the cost of another. That's why I'd rather you weren't coming along."

"No. I want to help."

"Then we'll have to figure out a way to sneak you into the city. I can make myself invisible, but you'll stick out. You said you want to be a shaman. Have you ever done any magic, made people think you were an animal, or anything like that?"

"No. Sometimes I imagine I'm an animal. I see myself flying or running through the woods in some other body, but I don't think I look like an animal to anyone else."

"That's a start. The trick is to make people see what you're imagining. Maybe I can teach you while we walk."

Feeling like he was teaching a younger version of himself, Pietr explained the trick of projecting mental images. Knowing that both their lives could depend on how well Rula learned this trick, Pietr urged his student on until Rula was able to at least make his skin look less green. As they hiked south Pietr wondered if this would be enough. They'd have to steal some clothes, but it might allow Rula to enter the city without being noticed.

Pietr's other two concerns were the menacing cloud above Tarnahue and how slow they were moving. The slushy snow made travel so difficult that reaching their goal in one day was impossible. By mid-afternoon they were less than half way there. They'd skirted one mountain, but still had another to get by followed by a long, hilly stretch.

So Pietr altered their course. Wary of the cloud's tendrils, he decided to climb to the cave where he'd once slept. Borka had said the cave was magical. Pietr himself had felt its power and hoped it would somehow help Rula.

Although the days were longer than during Pietr's first night on this mountain, the climb lasted until dark. It was Rula who spotted the cave. He'd never seen it, but he recognized it from a dream. Taking that as a positive sign, Pietr gathered some wood. Rula sat down to rest.

Pietr started a fire, worked a warming spell, and then rested, too. As he chewed on a grain cake he wondered if his dazed companion was experiencing the same kind of time disorientation he'd experienced in this place. He also thought about Shara. Being in a cave with a young native reminded him of the times that he'd been in a cave with Shara.

Pietr couldn't stop thinking about Shara, so he decided to let her know he was on his way. He'd reached out to her from this cave before and hoped its magic would protect him again. He waited until Rula was asleep and then slipped into a trance. Almost immediately he was floating above his body.

Then he was moving. Eager to see Shara, he was soaring over the valley and Torral's mountain towards the city. The dark, circular cloud loomed straight ahead. It was blotting out thousands of stars.

But Pietr wasn't scared. He'd survived an encounter with one of the cloud's tendrils the day before, so he kept on going. Thinking himself stronger than the cloud, he swept down towards its base. The tendrils were thicker there, but he flew between them.

The cloud itself was another matter. It was narrower at its base, but it reached all the way to the ground and covered several blocks. Pietr couldn't reach the Drenga tunnels without entering it, so he flew into it. He was immediately caught up in a cyclone.

Pietr was aware of a thin thread connecting him to his body, and his first thought was that the thread would break. He didn't know what would happen if it did, but suspected he would die. He tried to return to his body, but the storm was too strong. It was drawing him down like a whirlpool.

For a few moments Pietr felt like he was back in the inferno. He was at the mercy of the storm. Then he was falling, and then he hit something hard. When his vision cleared he was in a dark cell.

Pietr was so shaken he wasn't sure whether this cell was part of the magical realm or the physical world. The fact that he could see a trail of afterimages when he moved his hands told him that there was magic at work here. He could walk, but it was hard. The air was thick like water.

Pietr had encountered this resistance before and tried to break through it again. There were no doors, so he waded towards one of the walls. When he reached the wall he kept on going. The stone had the same consistency as the air so he started to walk right through it.

But then the stone hardened. It became solid trapping him in the wall. He remembered feeling

something similar the night of his Drenga initiation, and when he listened for chanting he heard it. The same low "droom" that had held him in place the night of his initiation was binding him now.

Soon it wasn't Pietr who was stuck in the wall, but rather Micklo. The Drenga had summoned up the magician who shared their dark lusts. Pietr was still there, but only as a small voice. All of the cravings he'd known as Micklo were alive inside him again.

As much as he hated being bound in a wall, Micklo loved being alive. He was momentarily trapped, but because he was part of the maze he could see things that he wouldn't have been able to see otherwise. He could see that the Grand Mage's real target was the shaman whose coming had been foretold. That shaman lay asleep in a cave.

Micklo cast his thoughts towards the cave and began to move. He couldn't leave the stone wall, but he could travel through it into the ground and then through the ground to the cave. One moment he was in the cave's wall and the next he'd re-entered Pietr's body. He was staring down at Rula thinking the young shaman should die.

For now that Micklo was in control of Pietr's mind and body he was jealous of Rula. He wanted to be the shaman the tribe worshipped, not this feeble rival. If Rula weren't killed he would not only supplant Micklo; he'd also tell the tribe about Micklo's crimes. He'd turn Micklo from the revered figure he was used to being into a hated outcast.

A single stab could prevent that, but something held Micklo back. His other selves were fighting for control. Suppressing those selves, Micklo drew his knife and stepped towards Rula. All Pietr and Danu could do was cry out in alarm.

But the "droom" was too loud for those cries to be heard. It was coming in waves, now, making him feel like the skin of a vibrating drum. Pietr and Danu were feeling the vibration, too. The only way they could stop it was to stab at Rula.

Driven mad by the sound Pietr finally did lash out. He couldn't wrestle control of his body from Micklo, so he directed his blow inward towards the door to his furnace. He felt its white-hot fire, and then the chanting turned to cries of anguish. He'd enveloped the Drenga in his own madness and flames.

Pietr had nearly died the first time he'd experienced the inferno. That had been because he hadn't known where he was. He felt panic now because the inferno was more intense than that first time. Micklo had been caught off guard, and without his help in containing the flames they were raging out of control.

Pietr had forgotten how terrifying it was to be in a place where nothing existed but shifting scenes. No longer aware of his body, he wondered if he'd ever had one. He felt like the void, a formless nothing struggling to be born. If he couldn't dream up a world out of nothing he would cease to exist.

Pietr was overwhelmed and Micklo was fighting the Drenga, so it was Danu who took control. More used to creating a world out of the void than Pietr, he embraced its slippery power. He imagined himself in the room where he'd written The Void, and that's where he was. As the inferno raged outside, nothing existed but that room with its lamp, desk, and papers.

Amid the roar of the flames outside the walls of the room, Danu felt the way he imagined God must have felt when nothing existed but It. Then he thought of Shara. He remembered the mountain path she'd appeared on as a faro and he was on that path with her again. In much the same way that Pietr had followed her, Danu let her lead him up to a cave. When he woke as Pietr on the dark floor of the cave, it was Rula who was standing near by. Shara had faded with the flames.

2

When Pietr woke the next morning, the horror of almost killing Rula was a dim memory. He remembered lapsing into a normal sleep and dreaming about his father. His father turned into Rula and stood over him. Now that he was awake Pietr studied Rula. Was this really his father? Had his father

been reborn again so quickly?

Pietr would have liked to question Rula, but he had a more pressing concern. Shara needed him. Pietr was determined that at least one shaman would survive this day, so he set his father's pouch next to Rula and slipped out of the cave. He was going to confront the Drenga alone.

Torrall's mountain stood across the valley, but it looked different. The dark cloud that had loomed beyond it was gone. There were angry streaks of red in the sky, but they were mere wisps. The cloud itself was in shreds.

Pietr put distance between himself and Rula as fast as he could. He didn't relish facing the Drenga, but he was even more worried about how Shara would look at him when she saw him. She'd said he had another side, and she'd been right. His desire for vengeance had led to her capture and Torrall's death.

Wanting very badly to make things right with her, Pietr swooped down off the mountain. The air was still cool, so the valley was shrouded in fog. At the foot of the mountain he turned east. He'd never been on the eastern side of Torrall's mountain, but wanted to avoid Torrall's cave.

The fog had burned away by mid-morning. The valley between the first two mountains in the range was higher than the land to the east, and by the time Pietr descended down into the lowlands the sun was high in the sky. With snow again turning to slush his shoes began to squish. He no longer had the energy to hop over wet spots like he'd done the day before.

The forest on Torrall's mountain was untouched, but the trees Pietr suspected had stood to the east of the mountain had been cleared for farms. The muddy fields reminded him of his life as Fruel. The climate had been milder in that life, but the fields were much the same. More than once he saw a hill like the one he'd died on.

As Pietr drew closer to Tarnahue he wracked his brain for a plan. He had none aside from making himself invisible and sneaking up on the Drenga. There were no authorities he could turn to because natives were outside the law. If he got killed, no one but Morta and his grandfather would care.

The ugly streaks in the sky didn't help Pietr's mood. They reminded him of a volcano's plumes. He knew they were invisible to Tarnahue's residents, but that didn't alter his feeling that everyone in the city was against him. He was approaching a place as cancerous as the one he'd once lorded over as a high priest.

Pietr's attention was drawn from his past to his surroundings by a sudden movement. A man had emerged from a shed near the edge of a field. Pietr stopped and tried to blend in with the trees at the edge of the woods. The last thing he wanted was for word to spread that a strange native was lurking about.

Once the farmer re-entered his shed Pietr resumed his trek. It was exhausting to remain invisible for a long time, but he was getting close to Tarnahue so he continued to mask his mask himself. He was tired of wading through slush, so he left the edge of the woods for a gravel road. He hoped his shoes would dry out by the time he reached the city.

Being out in the open gave Pietr his first clear view of Tarnahue. He'd never approached it from this direction and was surprised at how far into the lowlands it had spread. The older part of the city was still obscured by trees, but what was visible seemed huge compared to the native village he'd been living in. Land that used to be forest was dotted with hundreds of homes.

It was inevitable that Pietr would encounter traffic on the road, and as the first plow-draw wagon approached, he held his breath. He was more worried that the bulky beast would smell him than that he'd be seen. It plodded past, saliva dripping from its thick mouth, and Pietr let out his breath. At length he reached the city and headed for his old neighborhood.

The sight of the grocery store he'd shopped in for years reminded Pietr of how hungry he was. He had been thinking about how strange the city looked, but now, with a familiar building in front of him, all he could think of was the food inside it. He headed for the rear service entrance hoping to sneak in and grab something to eat. It had been hours since he'd had his last cake.

The city's streets had been muddy enough to hide Pietr's tracks, but now that he was about to enter a building he had to be careful. He used some trash to scrape off his shoes, but they were still wet. The sight of three men unloading a wagon behind the store added to his concern. It would be hard to slip inside without leaving tracks they would see.

His mouth watering at the smell of the meat being unloaded, Pietr crouched behind some crates. The youngest of the workers was one of the classmates whose window he'd broken, and that made him nervous. He kept telling himself no one could see him and finally did sneak inside. While the men cracked jokes about women they knew he hid in a corner of the storage room.

Eventually the men left. One drove off in the wagon while the other two closed the door, turned out the light, and passed into the front of the store. Pietr was afraid they'd come back, so he made himself comfortable. He rested and nibbled on some bread while he waited for the store to empty out.

Eventually the light filtering into the storage room dimmed and Pietr got up. He couldn't find anything to drink in the darkness, so he entered the front of the store. The owner was still there, but soon left. After waiting far longer than he'd intended, Pietr had the full run of the store.

Guilty about how long he had waited, Pietr drank some juice, ate a sweet roll, and headed for the front door. It was not only dark outside, but also foggy. Pietr found the lock and stepped out into the cold. The chill that greeted him caught him by surprise.

Pietr had become immune to ordinary cold, but there was nothing ordinary about this chill. It was man-made, an icy sense of despair that stabbed at the heart. It was not only cold, but also deathly quiet. There was no one else in the fog.

Feeling like he'd slipped into one of his nightmares, Pietr wove his way through the dense mist. He passed one hovering sphere of light after another much as he always did in his worst dreams. Whatever magic was at work was affecting the whole city because every street was as desolate as the first. Pietr made it to the alley behind The Necromancer without encountering anyone.

As he crept up to The Necromancer's door, Pietr wished he had more than a knife to fight with. He could sense a second spell around the door, a powerful barrier that made him feel as though it was useless to go on. He was so unsure of himself that he came to a complete stop in front of the door. He wanted to give up without a fight.

It took the threat of discovery to get him moving again. Two wraith-like figures emerged from the fog and approached the door. Pietr flattened himself against a wall as they passed by. Still holding his breath, he watched as they tapped out a code on the door.

Almost immediately the door opened spilling red light into the fog. Pietr tried to slip in behind the two magicians inside, but he was too slow. As something was said about a third man who would be late, the door shut in Pietr's face. All he gained was the code for entry and the news that another magician was on the way.

But that was enough to give Pietr an idea. Projecting the thought of looking like someone or something else was no more difficult than seeming invisible, so he could pose as the third man and knock on the door. The only problem was that the real man would show up and an alarm would be raised. To prevent that, Pietr would have to see that the magician never arrived.

So he picked up a loose cobble and waited. He didn't want to kill the man; he just wanted to buy enough time to get inside and free Shara. Eventually he heard footsteps and tensed. He might have been ruthless as Micklo, but now he abhorred violence.

When Pietr struck the man's head, it was as though someone else was moving his arm. There was a sickening thunk, and then the man slumped to the ground. Pietr dragged the body out of the alley and across the street. There he bound and gagged the man with cloth from a pile of trash.

Pietr was exhausted from hours of masking his presence, but taking on the man's identity made it easier to approach the door. For some reason, thinking himself a Drenga magician instead of a shaman disarmed the resistance he'd felt. He fixed the man's voice in his mind and then rapped on the door. For a second time it swung open spewing a slit of red into the fog.

The sight of Rankin unnerved Pietr as he stepped into the entry. If anyone could see through his disguise it would be his teacher. "I see you made it," Rankin said as he pushed the door shut. "I was beginning to wonder about you."

"Couldn't be helped," Pietr said in a gruff voice.

"Well, hurry up, then. They're anxious to start."

"Of course."

Pietr briefly locked eyes with Rankin in the scarlet light of the entry and then turned towards the stairs. As he turned he noticed Rankin starting to frown. That was unsettling, but the sight of a street where the stairs should have been was even worse. As he stopped he could hear Rankin starting to move.

Instinctively making himself invisible Pietr ducked a fraction of a second before a knife sliced through the air. Then he was jamming his elbow up into Rankin's stomach and was driving the magician backwards as hard as he could. Rankin slammed into a wall and doubled over in pain. He tried to slash out again, but Pietr drew his own knife and stabbed first.

Shaking even more violently than he had when he'd hit the other man, Pietr dragged Rankin's corpse to the front of the store. Then he sheathed his knife and returned to the entry. The sight of a street still unnerved him, but he knew it wasn't real. The stairs down into the tunnels were there even if he couldn't see them.

Pietr inched his way forward trying to find the first step. The street's resemblance to the one in his nightmares made him feel like he was dreaming again. There were lights and sounds, but most of all there was fog, a dense, chilling fog that obscured most of the street. Pietr wondered if he'd taken a wrong turn and stepped out into the night.

But he hadn't. Aside from the fog this wasn't at all like the streets he'd come on. There were vehicles, and they weren't like the real ones he knew. They were low and sleek like the ones in his dream.

One of these vehicles swerved towards Pietr. Changing from metal and glass to a fiery-eyed monster as it swerved, it came right at him. Pietr jumped back and slipped in Rankin's blood. The monster dissolved as it reached the door.

Pietr calmed himself and tried again. Imagining himself as Rankin, he approached the stairs for a third time and saw them. There was still a street there, but it was superimposed on the stairs. No one was rushing up to meet him, so he began to descend.

Pietr counted the usual sixteen steps as he dropped below street level, but the passage at the bottom had changed. A wall covered with Dorienga carvings stood where the door to the cloakroom should have been. There weren't any doorways, just the walls of a passage in Micklo's temple. Feeling Micklo stir within in him, Pietr started down the long corridor.

Each step down the Dorienga corridor brought Micklo closer to the surface of Pietr's mind. The ancient passage was so familiar he could almost feel his gold robes on his back. If this were an illusion, it was very good. He didn't know whether he was dreaming or had been transported backwards in time.

The passage ran for about thirty paces and then opened into a circular chamber deep in the heart of the temple. As with the tunnel, there were Dorienga designs on the fire-lit wall. There were animal-headed men and women, symbols, and a depiction of the world's overlord. The sight of his god enabled Micklo to finish pushing Pietr aside.

For this was the moment he'd been waiting for. After all these centuries he could finally face his enemy and stop the string of murders that kept stealing his love from his life. Doubting that any magician could stand up to him, Micklo bowed before the image of the god he knew better than anyone else and then entered the tunnel on the far side of the chamber. It led to a sacrificial chamber that was occupied.

As Micklo drew closer to the second chamber, the sound emanating from it grew louder. It was the

same, low "droom" the Drenga had used twice before. To his dismay, the chant was starting to work again. By the time he reached the chamber, he could barely move.

The room itself was spinning so madly Micklo couldn't tell whether it was the one he knew or a new one filled with Drenga magicians. The chamber he'd shed blood in lay like a veneer over the one the Drenga had initiated him in. He also couldn't tell whether the man behind the altar was Nygul or the bald-headed Grand Mage. All he knew was that Shoora lay on the altar.

Micklo was appalled at how emaciated his love looked. As he was grabbed and thrust towards the altar, he saw that her lips were parched. Then he was on the altar himself, able to feel Shoora next to him, but unable to move. He felt like part of the stone.

Micklo's consciousness began to fade, and as it did he fought against the spell that bound him. He turned his gaze inward towards the door to his furnace. In his mind, he was in his private chamber standing before his portal to time. Screaming out in pain, he lurched forward into the flames.

3

As Micklo lurched, time collapsed. All of the scenes he was thrust into were equally real, as though they all existed at once. Time was no longer linear; it was millions of simultaneous NOW's. His love in was in many of them, so he reached out towards her...

Reached out and fell onto the burning sand of the wrestling pit. Amid the sound of jeers, he tried to scramble to his feet before Nygul attacked. He started to rise, but he wasn't able to get up quick enough. He felt a blow to his leg, and then the ground was rushing up towards his face...

Only it wasn't the sand of the wrestling pit that was rushing up to slam against him, it was the dirt of the old Market Street. An eight-year-old boy now, he landed at Nygul's feet. Nygul laughed, poked Micklo one last time with a foot, and then wandered off to join Shoora and her friends. Micklo could only watch...

Watch through Danu's eyes as the scene shifted from a dirt street to the corner of a brick avenue. Radiant as ever, Sierra waved at Danu where he stood and then turned and started to walk as a black carriage clattered past. Danu watched until Sierra was out of sight and then turned towards the Drenga temple with its half-open door. He thought he caught a glimpse of someone looking down the street Sierra had been on, but the figure quickly retreated into the darkness of the temple.

Danu started towards the marble stairs that led up to the door only to have the scene shift again. Jumping from one scene to another, he passed through dozens of doors. Shoora, Sierra, or Shara was in each scene like a single person in different clothes. Each time Pietr saw his love, she was closer to a moment of death.

Try as he might to slow the shifting, Micklo was drawn towards each of his love's deaths. One moment he was struggling to break free from the mob of onlookers gathering around the Dorienga temple that held Shoora, the next he was running down a street to the apartment where Sierra was being killed, and the next he was lying on an altar next to Shara. The room with the altar was neither more nor less real than the other scenes were. It was simply a place that he kept returning to.

Then something clicked in Micklo's mind. In a moment of clarity, he recalled how he'd used the inferno to strike down a magician who'd tried to kill him. Reaching deep into the fire, he lashed out again. Only this time a mind as strong as his own rose up to meet him.

Rose up to attack him like Nygul in the wrestling pit. Everything erupted in flame, and then he and his foe landed on a marble floor. Knocked loose from Nygul by the impact, Micklo looked around and saw that they were in a massive hall. It was twenty feet high and stretched for miles with thousands of doors.

As Micklo jumped to his feet, he noticed that he felt strange. His body felt light and was vibrating with the same electric energy as the hallway's gold-veined walls. He could not only pretend to look like someone or something else; he could actually alter his form. Nygul had a similar ability and was

sprouting talons and fangs.

In the wrestling pit, Nygul had always had an advantage because he was older. Here, too, he seemed surer of himself, as though he'd been here before. Finding himself attacked by a fierce beast Micklo had little choice but to run. Turning his arms to legs, he dropped down on all fours and leaped through a door into a steamy jungle.

Nygul charged after Micklo. He'd retained just enough of his face so that he looked like a daemon. Micklo hadn't yet figured out the rules of this realm, so he kept on running. Confident that he'd eventually prevail, he was enjoying the chase.

For it felt good to be bounding through a jungle on all fours. This was a magical place. Micklo could envision a branch he was passing under falling on Nygul, and it would fall. But before it could hit Nygul would turn it to dust.

Everything was happening so fast. Micklo heard other beasts in the jungle around him, and they began to close in. Micklo recognized the faces of Drenga magicians on some of the monsters. He couldn't tell whether they were after him or after the faro he spotted ahead in the brush.

The sudden appearance of a wall farther ahead in the jungle made Micklo's plight more desperate. It looked like he was going to be cornered. When the faro leaped through a hole in the wall, he followed. He ended up sliding across the floor of a hallway like the one he'd first landed in.

Before Micklo could figure out which way the faro had gone the beasts burst into the hall. He was just able to get out of the way before some of them skidded into the far wall. Micklo took off down the hall just ahead of the drinka-like pack. A different world lay beyond each of the hall's doors, but none held the faro.

Micklo was afraid he was getting farther away from the world the faro had entered, so he leaped through one of the doors. He landed on a narrow strip of beach beneath a steep cliff. The beach and cliff reminded him of the coast north of Tarnahue, but that wasn't where he was. The sky was too purple, and the rocky cliff was too orange.

With snarling beasts spilling onto the sand behind him, a cliff on his left, and sea on his right, Micklo had only one way to go. All-too-quickly a collapsed pile of rock blocked his way. As he scrambled up the rock he tried to pummel his pursuers with stones, but it did more good than the branches in the jungle. Some of the stones even shot back at him.

Micklo continued up the face of the cliff carving out steps as he climbed. At the top he spied a castle and headed for it. He hoped that he could get inside and then bar the door. The forest that covered the rest of the plateau offered little hope of escape.

Micklo used his mind to begin raising the castle's drawbridge the instant he reached it, but he was too slow. Nygul made it onto the drawbridge and into the courtyard right behind him. Micklo was tired of fleeing, so he changed back into human form and armed himself with a shield and a sword. Nygul did the same and attacked.

Metal clashed against metal until Nygul began to beat Micklo back. When the other magicians spilled into the courtyard, Micklo had to resume his flight. He dropped his shield and sword and entered the main structure of the castle. A gloomy corridor led to an expansive, fire-lit hall.

The vaulted chamber was as devoid of inhabitants as the courtyard had been, but there were figures in the murals on its walls. Startlingly lifelike, the figures moved as he viewed them. Each mural depicted a scene from one of his lives. Combined with the heat of the room's fire, they made him feel like he was in the inferno.

It took Micklo a moment to realize that some of the heat was coming from Nygul. The magician had turned himself into a dragon and was starting to spout fire. Micklo turned his skin to scales and rushed towards one of the murals. In it Shoora was lying on an altar like the one he'd last seen her on.

As Micklo lunged into Shoora's cell he assumed his own form. He didn't want to frighten his love. She was dazed, but responded to his touch. He shook her until she sat up.

Shoora recoiled at the sight of Micklo. Realizing that he looked older than the person she

remembered, he made himself sixteen again. The arrival of the other magicians was harder to fix. Micklo pulled Shoora to her feet, and the two of them fled from the cell.

Micklo had had years to plot his revenge the first time Shoora had been killed, but here everything was happening too fast. Here he and Shoora could only run. If they could reach his chamber, then he could fight. He'd woven spells into its walls and could defeat anyone there.

But first he and Shoora had to reach the cell. As he led her towards it, he began to trigger its spells by linking with his god. By the time he reached his chamber the link was complete. He turned and unleashed his dark fire.

For his mind was a furnace. Its flames touched everything. Neither knowing nor caring whether his god was a separate being or a part of himself, he tried to burn his enemies. He tried to engulf them in flame burning himself or Shoora.

But Micklo had forgotten just how powerful the fire could be. Amid the roar of the inferno, he lost sight of not only his enemies, but also Shoora. Sensing her somewhere near-by, he tried to reach out to her. He tried to find her in the searing flames.

Everything from the moment when Micklo had been thrust onto an altar next to Shara until now seemed to have happened in a single instant, as though, in trying to strike out at his enemies, his mind had embraced more than it could hold. Overwhelmed, he tried to focus on the altar he guessed he was still on. He tried to use it as an anchor in the midst of the flames. Without a clear picture of his enemies, he couldn't strike out at them.

For this inferno was different from the one Pietr had known. At the same time that Micklo was in millions of scenes, he was the stuff they were made up of. At last sensing one of his enemies in the flames, he homed in on the man. The inferno coalesced into a jungle.

Simultaneously in the jungle and above it, Micklo chased after the man. He gave daemon-like form to the man's worst crimes and made them join in the hunt. The man reached a river and had to jump in. The daemons jumped in after him and tore him apart.

Like all of the other scenes tearing at Micklo the jungle quickly fell away, but something had changed. That part of him that still lay on an altar saw one of the Drenga crumple to the ground. Sensing victory, Micklo embraced the flames and sought out another man. He located his second victim in a forest and swooped in for the kill.

These woods weren't as dense as the jungle had been. They were more like the woods Fruel had lived near, sparse and hilly with numerous rocks. Knowing that the man he was after now had been cruel to women, Micklo conjured up a dozen strong ones and armed them with spears. They cornered the man in a gully and unleashed their spears.

Back in the room with the altar, a second magician began to sag. The first had barely dropped to the floor, and already a second was dead. Micklo still couldn't move, but the spell binding him was starting to break. In another minute he would be free.

But before Micklo could seek out a third magician the roar of the inferno was pierced by a shriek from the Grand Mage. The bald magician had raised a knife and was plunging it towards Micklo's chest. Micklo focused his attention on this new threat. As the knife descended, he engaged the Grand Mage's mind in much the same way that he'd grappled with Nygul in the wrestling pit.

As Micklo touched the Grand Mage's mind there was a horrible wrenching, and then he was no longer himself. In much the same way that Pietr had merged with Rula two days earlier, Micklo was now linked with the Grand Mage. He could remember things the Grand Mage had lived through as Nygul as vividly as he could remember his own life. He felt the same consuming desire to possess Shoora that Nygul had felt.

For although he was Nygul, son of the high priest, Shoora was one young woman he would never have. He'd never lure her to the privacy of his chambers because she loved someone else. Her rejection would be avenged. If he couldn't have her, then nobody could.

So she's paid for her rejection, her and countless others like her. In each of his lives he'd seen

dozens of young women pay for the pain their beauty caused. He was about to see it again, only something was wrong! His enemy was challenging him!

Infuriated, the Grand Mage plunged his knife down towards the young magician on the altar. As he stabbed, he felt a jolt in his mind. He felt his enemy trying to take control of his mind. Together they plunged into madness and fire.

Micklo, the Grand Mage, the nameless one who sustained the world, all existed within the flames. Micklo could simultaneously see a blade plunging down towards him and feel the knife in his hand. Nygul was kicking Micklo and feeling the pain in his own leg. The two priests had become one.

Feeling his victory start to slip away, the Grand Mage shrieked again. He screamed and focused on the knife's downward plunge. Halfway to his goal, he had the horrible vision that he was stabbing his own infant son. The heir who'd been taken from him so many centuries ago had been reborn and was lying on the altar.

Suddenly unsure whether it was his timeless enemy who lay on the altar next to the native girl or his own son, the Grand Mage changed the course of his knife. He aimed for the young woman instead of the young man. As the knife swerved the Grand Mage's scream echoed in Micklo's throat. His attempt to deflect the knife had gone badly awry.

For Micklo had lived through this horrible moment before. He remembered that, now. He'd lived through this bloodshed hundreds of times. Shocked, he fell back into his own mind. He imploded into himself and became Pietr again.

Only something had changed. More of the Drenga were falling, and Pietr thought for an instant that it was Micklo he was staring up at. The magician he'd once been was stabbing at him with a knife. Stabbing at him and Shara.

Pietr tried to fight back. He tried to reach out with his mind and stop the assault, but it was too late. He'd found Shara only to lose her again. He felt her hand squeeze his, and then fire enveloped them.

4

Fire and a flood of unstable scenes. Pietr had experienced the inferno before, but never like this. He felt severed from his body, cut off from the anchor that could draw him back to the world. He had nothing to grab onto.

Nothing but Shara, that is. He couldn't tell if he was still holding her hand, but as scene after scene flared in to being around him, he felt her presence. Sometimes she was there in one of her womanly forms, sometimes she appeared as a faro, and sometimes she was present only in spirit. Every lake, stream, and tree seemed imbued with her presence.

Pietr felt as malleable as Shara. At the same time that he was standing on a street or sitting on a rock next to a cascading stream, he was also in a raging furnace. A particular scene would hold his attention for an instant, and then it would slip away. It would burn away like paper tossed into a fire leaving him in madness and pain.

So many scenes were tearing at Pietr that he began to wonder if he'd ever been anywhere else. Each scene would seem real for an instant. The roar would subside just enough for him to hope that he'd woken, and then he'd think of the flames and he'd be in them again. Each flame was a scene, and a new one would envelop him.

Only gradually, over what could have been years, did the flames lose their sharp edge. Pietr became so numb that he could no longer feel anything. He was no longer Pietr. He was simply an observer in a long, twisted dream.

An observer in a city with jeweled buildings and gold-tiled streets. It looked like a city he'd known as Danu, but it wasn't the same. That city had been dark while this one was light. He'd forgotten something important, and he couldn't think of what it was.

Like why it pained him to look at Sierra. As he walked down the street next to her, she was bathed

in white light. But then darkness tugged at him, a hunger for sensation, and he was falling through a door. Dragging Sierra with him, he was falling into madness and flames.

The madness and flames of the inferno. This was where he'd always been, living, and breathing and changing form as he melted from one flame to the next. He ate to live, and he lived until he died. Then he emerged in a new form and lived all over again.

Only slowly did self-awareness emerge. His attention was so focused on each moment, on filling his stomach and avoiding danger, that only slowly did he begin to fear ceasing to exist. That fear led to questions. As one dream gave way to another in endless succession, he began to look around wonder what he was.

No answer came. Try as he might, he was too distracted by the realness of each dream to remember where he'd come from or fathom where he was going. It was in this twilight state that he became aware of himself as a small child. Emerging from his dreams, he became aware of his surroundings and the fact that he was special.

He was special because his father was a Dorienga priest. He would be, too, when he was older. Until then, he thought of Shoorra and dreamed of what would be. When he grew up, she would be his wife.

But there was one problem, an intrusion that made his life difficult. An older boy who also liked Shoorra kept on picking on him. The boy's father was powerful, so there was nothing Micklo could do. Even when Shoorra's life was threatened, there was no way to intervene.

During the years following Shoorra's death Micklo was consumed by a desire to be the one in control. The more ruthless he became, the more he hurt causing him to strike out more viciously. Too blind to see that he was hurting himself, he became like his enemy. He set up chains of events that reached into the future.

And plunged ever deeper into his private hell until he was lost. Life had no meaning outside of his visions and pain. Repeatedly finding his love and then losing her again, he became trapped in his web. The inferno became a nightmare from which he couldn't escape.

It was a scene from that nightmare that Micklo was caught up in now. He was walking down a hallway lined with huge doors. Unmoved by the gold-veined beauty of the hall he entered a room with a massive throne. The deity on it changed form as Micklo approached.

Confronted by a towering figure that looked like the Grand Mage one moment and himself the next, Micklo guessed that he was in the presence of the lord of this realm. Streams of light were flowing from the deity's hands and eyes into the air around it. A loud hum, similar to the Drenga chant, was making the hall vibrate. Invisible fingers were ripping Micklo apart.

Ripping him into all of the people and creatures he'd ever been. A pure dreamer now, he was feeling all of the pain he'd ever inflicted. Repulsed by his pain and stupidity, he tried to wake up. He tried to return to the room where he remembered writing *The Void*.

And plunged instead deeper into the fire. He had a fleeting vision of a luminous city, a place that felt like home, and then he was falling again. Splitting in half, he became both dreamer and dream. He created a cage and became trapped inside it.

And ended up in a garden. A child again, he was in a garden with his love. Everything was beautiful until they discovered a cave and wandered into it. The next thing that they knew, they were in a maze running from knife-welding men.

The carvings on the walls of the maze were familiar, for the dreamer had helped to create them. He and his love were in the tunnels beneath his ancient temple. Then the scene shifted and they were on an altar. Someone who looked like himself was stabbing at them with a knife.

It was himself. The Dorienga magician the dreamer had once been was killing them. Unable to break free, the dreamer squeezed his love's hand. Then the inferno fell away and he was Pietr again in the wintry forest where he and Shara had found some berries.

The pain in Shara's eyes made Pietr want to comfort her, but he held back. She'd just expressed

misgivings about what she sometimes saw in him, so he didn't know how she would react. Worried that she'd think him cold, he at last reached out and squeezed one of her hands. When she responded by not only squeezing back, but also sending a pulse of warmth into his hand, he leaned in for a kiss. The contact was light, barely more than a touch, but combined with the warmth made him feel loved. Amazed that she really did like him, he drew back and looked into her eyes. The pain that had been there was gone.

"I think we should go back, now," Shara said, giving Pietr's hand a final squeeze that cemented him into this world of trees and snow. "Torrall's waiting for us."

"I suppose so," Pietr said.

The walk back to the clearing where Torrall was preparing his stones was magical. Pietr was so caught up in the beauty of the wintry forest and the nearness of his love that he could hardly believe this was real. To his conscious mind, which was filled memories of his life in Tarnahue instead of the inferno, the kiss had been his first intimate contact with Shara. After weeks of meeting with her and Torrall it had been the first time he'd shown how he felt, and yet he felt like he'd been intimate with her before. For a moment by the berries he'd caught a glimpse of other lives, frightening lives, and then Shara had drawn him back to this world. His biggest fear now that that he knew she liked him was that something would take her away. He didn't want to lose her.

Feeling like he was dreaming, Pietr accompanied Shara to the clearing where Torrall had gathered some stones. Silently, Pietr and Shara looked on as the old shaman finished etching a design in the ground and then scooped up the handful of stones. As Pietr and Shara continued to watch, Torrall moaned and swayed back and forth. Then the old magician yelled and scattered the stones so wildly that one of them ended up on the figure Pietr had etched.

"These stones speak of danger," Torrall said after grimacing at them for a time. "Danger and powerful magic. Never before have they spoken of such magic. It is like a great whirlwind, a storm that rips time apart. I can see fire and death, but none of it makes any sense. I can only tell you that we can't stay here. It isn't safe."

"You say we," Pietr said. "Does that mean I can come with you?"

"You should leave with us, yes. You should come with us now."

"Now?"

"Yes."

Pietr felt a chill despite the warmth of his recent spell. This was what he'd been hoping for, and yet, as he thought about leaving his apartment and possessions forever, he felt a stab of regret. He'd be abandoning everything, his art and books, and even his clothes. He wanted to return for at least a few things, but something inside him said "no." The price would be too great.

So Pietr headed north with Torrall and Shara. Fighting off the frightening visions that were tugging at his mind, he accompanied the two natives to their mountain. The crisp air and speckles of light reflecting off the snow made his head spin. He barely dared breath for fear of waking from this beautiful dream.

And slipping back into the fire. Pietr's visions of the inferno were stronger now, so strong that he began to suspect it was real and the rocks and snow weren't. At one point he grabbed hold of Shara's hand. He barely noticed that Torrall was no longer with them.

For in some subtle way, the old magician still was still with them. No longer visible, he was present in the sunlight and the whistle of the wind through the trees. Holding on tightly to each other, Pietr and Shara climbed the mountain. The scenery changed as they rose.

Changed like the malleable hallway in Pietr's dreams. At one point Pietr and Shara rounded a boulder and found a whole world spread out before them, a lush jungle world filled with gardens and temples. Pietr vaguely remembered fleeing through such a jungle and recoiled. He was afraid a swarm of beasts would close in on him and Shara.

But then he remembered lives he and Shara had spent in this place. His mind cleared, and he

remembered how they'd often returned to this place. The lives here had been magical, but they'd always come to an end. He and Shara had inevitably blundered back into a realm of fire and pain.

And forgotten about this place except in visions and dreams. Now, as Pietr stood gripping Shara's hand, a dozen figures approached. They were luminous beings clothed in gold robes. Foremost among the figures was a priest who looked like Micklo. He was coming to welcome the new arrivals back to his realm.

The lure of this magical world was hard to resist. Equally strong was the sensual pull of the realm below. More of a wraith, now, than a creature of flesh and blood, Pietr remembered how wonderful his love could feel. He was afraid that if they kept climbing he'd never feel her soft body again.

For the two of them were turning to light. Warmth was emanating from the place where they touched, but he could no longer feel a hand. He felt hunger instead, a thirst for something more, but he wasn't sure whether it was for what lay higher up on the mountain or what lay below. He wanted to stop and enjoy Shara before she turned completely to light.

That seemed to be what the priest of this realm was offering. Pietr and Shara had suffered enough. They could stop here. They could be together for a long time.

But the mountain path continued on into the clouds. Pietr and Shara could stop and eventually succumb to the pull of the world below, or they could keep going. Not wanting to lose Shara again, even for a time, Pietr gave in to her urging and kept going. He and Shara turned away from the jungle and resumed their climb.

Until they broke through some clouds and found themselves on the threshold of an even broader, more luminous plane. The inferno still tugged at Pietr. If anything, the lure of its sensual pleasures was stronger, for he and Shara had become little more than pure light. This misty realm was an even more magical place than the jungle. It was very possibly the world they'd originally fallen from. As Pietr hovered at the edge of it, he wasn't sure anything else had ever been real.

For time no longer made any sense. Heaven and earth, past and future, all seemed the same. He was at the edge of a world filled with jeweled buildings and sparkling waters, and he was standing near a mountain cave gazing at a valley and sea. A maddening roar filled his head.

For his fever had returned. He was standing on the mountain with the shallow cave, and his fever had returned. And with it the feeling that his hold on the landscape around him was tenuous, at best. He felt as though the very ground beneath him was about to cease to exist, and he wasn't sure he could survive another plunge into madness. Trying with all of his might to hold off the inferno, he stared out at the sea viewing it not as something physical, but as part of something alive. This whole, conscious moment seemed like part of something alive, and when he tried to merge with what it was part of, something gave way. He had the impression of being in a million places at once, and then...

One of them drew him in, and he was back in the room with the fiery door. Of all of the places that kept pulling him in, this was the one that caught him the most, and each time it drew him in, he saw a little bit more. This time he saw that he was clothed in a Dorienga robe and that there was a grid of sixteen squares above the door. But it was still the door that absorbed him the most. He was closer to it, now, so close that he could feel the fire just beyond it. There might be nothing there, but it was a nothingness filled with the most powerful forces imaginable, a black hole of fire and pain. And he was moving into that fire, into a place where nothing had any form...

For one, awful moment, Pietr almost forgot that he was really on a mountain with Shara. He almost succumbed to the pull of the fire. But then he felt Shara, felt that part of her where they were linked, and he was back on the mountain again. He was back at that place where he and Shara could either step off into a luminous realm or turn around.

Though subtle, the lure of the luminous realm was as strong as than that of the worlds below. Once Pietr and Shara left the mountain path and entered a city with buildings and streets they recognized, they realized they'd been here before. A carriage rolled by, but it wasn't black like the one Pietr usually remembered. This one was white. It melted past, and then it was gone. Pietr and Shara were in a

bright, sunlit cloud.

Without Shara Pietr might have fallen again like he had when he'd returned to heal Rula. Nothing in this cloud seemed solid or real. He and Shara could imagine something, and it would be there. Then they'd imagine something else, and it would be there, too.

For Pietr and Shara had become intertwined spheres of pure light. The inferno still raged somewhere in the dimness below, ready to draw them in if they faltered, but here there was only light. The light was a sun, and they were entering it. Then they were in it. In some inexplicable way, it seemed like they'd always been in it, and the rest had just been a dream. They'd dreamed they were apart, but now they were together again.

For Shara was the light. She was all around Pietr, and he was all around her. No longer separated by flesh, they were one. They were bathing each other in warm glowing love.

And they were creating. They were nothing, a void shining with the brilliance of a million suns, and they were creating worlds out of pure light and sound. A city with a gold-tiled avenue coalesced out of the light, and they were on a glittering street. They were walking hand-in-hand through the light.