

THE INFERNO

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PART THREE : AN ESCAPE

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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.