

THE INFERNO

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PART THREE : THE CHAMELEON

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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.