

# THE INFERNO

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## PART THREE : THE CHAMELEON

### 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 Shoora'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, Torral 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," Torral 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 Torral 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 Torral 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.