

THE INFERNO

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PART TWO : INTO THE SUN

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Micklo slumped down exhausted on his chair and stared at the books on his desk. He'd been pushing himself hard, studying every book on magic he could find, because the Drenga weren't helping him much. It was obvious that they didn't trust him. Except for his initiation they hadn't allowed him to participate in any rituals. Rankin kept saying that he was too young.

Micklo wasn't sure he wanted to participate in any of the late mysterious night ceremonies, but he didn't like being excluded. It made him wonder if the Grand Mage had seen through his charade. It also made him wonder about the special sacrifice he'd overheard two men talking about. It was apparently to take place in the spring and involved a young woman. The fact that he wasn't being told about it made him nervous.

If only he hadn't let the Grand Mage get the best of him then maybe he wouldn't feel so ill at ease. He'd considered trying to leave the Drenga, but he knew that they'd come after him. Since he couldn't leave them, the next best thing was to pretend to be loyal and learn what he could. He wanted to find out what they knew of the Dorienga and why the temple was important to them.

If there was one thing Micklo did feel good about it was the fact that he'd glimpsed the Dorienga temple in a way only one of the black-robed men had. These modern day imitators had copied much from the Dorienga, even going so far as to carve the temple's four-by-four grid into an altar, but none of them had thought to turn that grid into a three-dimensional design. Micklo suspected that doing so had triggered his visions. He suspected he'd stumbled onto an ancient design, and that by reproducing the design he'd forged a link with the world mind the designer had been in touch with.

But there was still so much to learn, so much about the Dorienga and their design that Micklo didn't understand. He'd studied what he could, but the closest he'd come to finding anything useful had been in Pietr's book. It had spoken of a world mind, but even it had been vague. It had said that consciousness was subject to laws and that those laws could be bent. That was something Micklo didn't like. He wanted a world where rules always applied.

So he'd delved deeper into the issue, focusing on consciousness its relationship to energy. Only some of the things he was beginning to experience were getting hard to explain. He was beginning to have visions of the Dorienga girl the Grand Mage had mentioned, and he was sure he knew her even though she was from another time. Other dreams were beginning to bring him face-to-face with a priest who reminded him of the Grand Mage. The priest was shorter and darker-skinned than the Grand Mage, but something about his eyes was the same.

This could be explained if Micklo had made contact with the same world mind the sculpture's original designer had been in touch with, if he'd somehow dredged up memories stored in that world mind. But the fact that he also seemed to know the green-skinned girl he'd seen through Pietr's eyes was harder to explain. Seeing her more than once was beside the point. The familiarity he felt was from some other time. Frustrated, Micklo closed his eyes and tried to view her again. There was a jolt, a shift in his surroundings, and then he was in the woods scratching at the ground with a stick. The green-skinned young woman and her teacher were standing near by.

"Like this?" Pietr asked as he shook a sudden image of Micklo's desk from his mind and looked up from the circle, flames, and figure he'd etched in the frozen dirt.

"That will do," Torral said, his breath coming out in icy puffs. "And now the hair."

Eager to see if he'd mastered Torral's warming spell as well as the invisibility spell that had saved

him the night before, Pietr yanked out one of his hairs. Then he blew on it and set it on the vested figure. After covering both with kindling, he tried to start a fire using his mind and a stick. He closed his eyes and rubbed, envisioning flames until a whiff of smoke told him they were real.

The exertion would have been enough to make Pietr warm, but the heat that enveloped him the hair burned was greater than what friction alone could have produced. It continued even after the hair was gone. Torral and Shara looked pleased.

"You learn quickly," Torral said. "Each shaman has his gifts. The drawing seems to be one of yours."

"I've always liked to draw."

"The lines are important, but the real magic comes from within. The lines just help it along. You're learning that."

"Have I learned enough to join you, then?" Pietr said, voicing the question that had been on his mind since being chased the night before. "With this spell I can keep from freezing, and I know what plants to look for, so I could survive on my own if I had to. That is what you've been waiting for, isn't it, for me to learn how to survive on my own? Well now I think that I can."

"That's one of the things I've been waiting for, yes," Torral said in a disparaging voice, "but not the only one."

"It's not?"

"No. I have to be sure that you're like us, that you won't bring the city with you."

"Oh, but I won't! There may be something of the city in me. That can't be helped. It's where I grew up. But this is where I belong. I don't feel safe in the city anymore. Can't you cast your stones and see if I'm ready? I'm afraid of what might happen if I go back."

"Afraid?"

"Yes. I could have been killed last night. I'd never really thought that possible. I thought that if I'd survived this long I could always come and go as I pleased, but now I'm not sure. If my father could be killed, then maybe I could be, too."

"Very well. I'll see what the stones have to say, but it will take time. I'll have to prepare."

"I could show him the muckberry patch we passed," Shara said, glancing from Torral to Pietr and then back again. "That way we won't disturb you."

"Very well, but don't be too long."

Pietr followed Shara off the raised clearing he'd chosen for his spell and into the brush that surrounded it. Morta's words about finding his "mate" filled his head as Shara's hair blew in the wind. Walking so close behind her, he couldn't help but notice how alluringly her hips were curved and how graceful she was. He longed for the day when he'd be able to touch her.

At the base of a slope Shara angled north, following a gully until a jagged shelf of rock came into view. As they drew nearer, Pietr noticed branches and specks of red among the uneven rocks. Shara was slowing, so Pietr realized they'd reached their goal. He remembered Torral telling him about muckberries, but he'd never seen any before.

"They're for treating pest bites," Shara said as they stepped up to the thorny branches dotted with small, withered fruit.

"Should I pick some?"

"Yes. They're good to have."

Still warm from his spell, Pietr slipped off his cloak to get at the pouch he now wore under it. As he handed his cloak to Shara, he noticed that she was staring at his new pouch. Torral had examined it, but she hadn't gotten a good look. She seemed fascinated.

"That was your father's?" she said, her eyes still fixed on the pouch.

"Yes."

"It makes you look different, more like a shaman somehow."

"It makes me feel different."

"Sometimes I look at you and I see someone else, someone who scares me, but not now. Your father's things make you look like the person I saw when I found you. How is it you can look dangerous one moment and harmless the next? Are you trying to trick us?"

"No. I wouldn't hurt you."

"Then who is this other person I see? Which one is really you?"

"This is me. I'm just so used to concealing myself from people in the city that it's hard to let the real me out. It would be so much easier if I could live with you and Torral in the woods. Then I could be myself all of the time."

"Then I hope you can join us. I think I'd like being with you more. There are so many things I want to show you. It's so long since I've had a friend my own age."

"There are things I'd like to show you, too," Pietr said, "but I can't. They're in the city, and I'm not going to be able to bring them along."

"What kinds of things?"

"Things I've made. I was going to be an artist, you know. I've made some very pretty things, but they're too bulky to drag all over, so I'm going to have to leave them behind."

"That's too bad. You can make other things, though, things you haven't even thought of, yet. If you like art, you can use it for magic. I've heard spells that were cast by painting on hides. You could do something like that."

"Maybe."

"Can I see that?" Shara said, draping Pietr's cloak over a forearm and reaching for the pouch with her other hand. "I'd like to see what's inside."

"Of course."

Opening it, Shara carefully sifted through the pouch until she found what she was looking for. Delicately lifting out a tiny inner pouch that held some powder, she warned Pietr that he should be careful with it. She said it had been mind-mixed.

"Mind-mixed?"

"Torral hasn't told you about that, yet. It's hard. It takes an ability to become what you're mixing while you're mixing it. There aren't many that can do this. Those who can are able to make strong medicines. I think this one's for visions. I can tell by holding it that it's strong. It could kill you."

"You can tell that just by holding it?"

"Yes. That's one of my gifts. I could tell there was something like this in your pouch just by looking at it. Now that I can feel that it's even stronger than I thought."

"I couldn't see or feel anything like that when I looked through the pouch last night."

"You're not used to looking for it. Here, try it again, only this time try to sense what's inside. Try to become the powder."

Pietr took the tiny pouch from Shara, and this time he did feel something, a faint tingle similar to what he was feeling from his warming spell. Only this was more of a vibration, and it was just in his hand. The sack seemed to be trembling, almost as though it was alive. "Did you do something to this?" he asked, puzzled that he'd missed it before.

"No. You're just looking for it."

"It feels like it's vibrating."

"Yes," Shara said, brushing some hair from her face. "It will be fun when we can spend more time together. There are many things like this I want to show you."

"I'm looking forward to it. I like being with you."

"And I like being with you. It's the other person I see that makes me uncomfortable. I don't know if you look like that as a camouflage or if you really are someone else. I don't know you well enough, yet."

"I want you to know me. It's just that I'm so used to having to hide that it's hard to let the real me out. I've spent my life among people who don't like me."

"I do. Just be who you are. The rest will take care of itself."

"Is there anyone special in your life?" Pietr said, his heart racing as he at last began to ask what he'd wanted to ask for so long.

"No."

"No one waiting for your return?"

"No. I'm more like you than you realize. Most of the children I grew up with were afraid of me."

The pain in Shara's eyes made Pietr want to comfort her, but he held back. She'd just spoken of her mistrust of him, so he wasn't sure how she would react. He was just as worried she might think him cold if he did nothing, so he reached out and squeezed her free hand. When she responded by 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 energy passing through their hands made him feel loved. Amazed that she really did like him, he drew back and looked into her eyes. The pain that he'd seen there was gone.

"I think we should go back, now," Shara said, giving Pietr's hand a squeeze and then letting go. "Torrall's waiting for us."

"I suppose," Pietr said reluctantly.

The walk back to the clearing was uneventful. Pietr was too wrapped up in what had passed between him and Shara to notice anything. The kiss had been his first intimate contact with Shara, and yet, there'd been something familiar about it, a sense of experiencing something he'd experienced with her before. It was as if he had kissed her before, if not in a dream, then in some other life. His fear was that now that he'd found her again, she would be taken from him. He had the horrible feeling that something bad was about to happen.

As a result, Pietr was terribly nervous as he accompanied Shara to the clearing and saw that Torrall had assembled a pile of stones. The two young lovers looked on silently as Torrall drew several figures in the dirt and then scooped up some of the stones. As Pietr and Shara continued to watch, Torrall began to moan and sway back and forth. Then he abruptly 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 a time. "And of great magic. Never before have they spoken of such magic. It's like a 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 anymore. It isn't safe."

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

"You should leave with us, yes, that much is clear. You should ready yourself."

"Now?"

"Yes."

Pietr's heart leaped. This was what he'd been waiting for, and yet now that the moment had come, he felt scared. "You said I should ready myself. Does that mean I should go back for my things? I was going to bring some things along."

"Go back if you must, but be fast. We will wait in the cave."

"I'll hurry."

"And you must promise me something."

"What?"

"If anything happens to me, you two must look after each other. You need to be together."

"Of course!" Pietr and Shara said at the same time.

"Is something going to happen to you?" Shara added in an alarmed voice.

"I am old. My journey is almost over."

"But is something going to happen to you?" Shara repeated.

"I don't know. Great change awaits."

"I won't let anything happen to you! I'll stop it."

The fear in Shara's eyes almost made Pietr change his mind about getting his things. Part of him wanted badly to get the things he thought he'd need, but another part was reluctant to leave his friends.

He felt so uncertain that he almost turned around at the foot of the low hill, but instead of stopping he walked on as fast as he could. He sped through the woods like a ghost.

The sun was low by the time Pietr reached the city, and that added to his anxiety. It would be dark when he returned to the mountain, and that would make finding the cave hard. But it would be dark whether he turned around now or kept going, so he continued on to his apartment and began to sort through his things. He pulled out only the most practical items, utensils and clothing it would be hard to replace, and ignored the rest.

Once Pietr had stuffed as much into his sack as he could, he rolled up the blanket from his bed and tied it to his sack. Then he surveyed his room. The thing he felt worst about leaving was the sculpture he'd almost given to Shara. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered if it wasn't the real reason he'd come back. If he didn't give it to her now, he'd never get another chance.

Feeling that he had to make up his mind, Pietr decided to bring the sculpture along. It could be left in the cave if it was too bulky to carry farther than that. He was about to pick it up when he noticed that one of the strips of wood had come loose. He didn't want to give Shara something that was broken, so he ripped off his cloak and sat down to repair the sculpture.

As Pietr sat waiting for cement to set, he realized how much his life was going to change. His art, his bed, store-bought food, all would be ripped away along with the things he didn't like. The sight of his books made him feel sad. From now on he'd have nothing to read but tracks in the snow and clouds overhead.

Pietr thought about the people that he'd be meeting, too. Mixing with full-blooded natives would be hard, especially if they viewed him with as much suspicion as people in the city had. The thing that made facing a new culture worthwhile was the thought of being with Shara. He blew on the loose piece of wood she would like his present.