

THE INFERNO

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PART THREE : AN ESCAPE

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For what seemed like years nothing had existed for Pietr except the roar of the flames and a torrent of scenes so chaotic that trying to grasp one had been like trying to grab wreckage in the middle of a storm-tossed sea. Each scene had seemed real while he was in it, but no matter how real it had felt he'd invariably been yanked out of it and into some other scene. That's why he doubted that the torch-lit cell he was in now would last. Indeed, for a time it kept giving way to other scenes, but when he kept returning to it he began to wonder if it might not be real. Like a drowning man who'd finally grasped his wreckage, he clung to the sensation of being in the cell with all of his might.

Among the things Pietr noticed as the cell grew more stable were numerous pains and the fact that his hands were tied. He also saw the coarse, black fringes of the robe of someone standing near where he lay, and when he finally understood that he hadn't died, he wished that he had. He kept seeing Torral's body and thinking of Shara. For a time he'd try to block out those horrors by slipping back into the inferno, but it was worse.

As the cell grew more solid around him, Pietr had little choice but to accept the reality of Torral's death. The knowledge that he was responsible cut at him worse than his bruises and scrapes. It took the thought of Shara lying bruised and scared in some other cell to give him the will to survive. She was undoubtedly the young woman who would be killed in the spring, and he had to stop it.

Pietr was less certain of when he would be killed, so he lay still. He squinted at his guard and tested the chord wrapped around his hands, but only when his guard wasn't looking. Confused by the fact that he seemed to be both himself and Micklo, he felt powerless. There had to be something he or Micklo could do, he just couldn't figure out what.

His situation changed before he could figure it out. A new sound replaced the dull roar in head. It was a man's voice. The same man who'd accompanied Rankin into his cell the night he'd made contact with the Drenga was telling him to get up.

"Never did trust you," the burly man said as Pietr stopped squinting and opened his eyes. "Rankin was swayed by your cleverness. Thought you'd be like your great grandfather. But I could see you for the filthy little bastard you really are. Now that you're awake, we're going to have some fun. I've been waiting for this a long time."

As Pietr struggled, first to sit up, and then to get to his feet with his hands tied, the man drew out a knife. It gleamed menacingly in the torchlight as the man started forward. Pietr stumbled backwards and hit a wall. As the knife drew closer, his terror grew mindless and leaped out...

Flashed like a bomb, and it... Hurt! It always burned when he was torn out of one scene and left gasping for air in another. And the roar! The roar was deafening. When his vision cleared, he was standing over a body that looked familiar in a cell that looked familiar, and he felt trapped. He felt as though he'd been standing over this body with his hands tied forever, and he didn't know how to break free. Then another feeling came over him, the feeling that something was pulling at him, and as the inferno's sickening roar once again rose up around him, the cell gave way...

Peeled away like a sheet of paper consumed by flame. Pietr caught a glimpse of a temple, the temple he'd known as Micklo, and then Rankin's voice drew him back to the cell. Tingling as though an electric current had passed through him, he wedged the dead man's knife between his feet and cut the rope from his hands. Then he picked up the knife and stepped to the door.

Rankin was approaching. He called out again and then drew his own knife. Pietr tried to kill

Rankin like he'd killed his guard, but nothing would come. He was too weak to fight Rankin, so he ran.

The tunnel branched, and there were two magicians in one of the branches, so Pietr fled down the other. It led to the latrine. If Shara were in one of the cells near the latrine, then perhaps he could free her and they could escape. The latrine emptied into the city's sewers.

But Pietr couldn't find Shara! All the cells he passed were empty, and Rankin and the other two magicians made it impossible to turn back. Pietr thought as he ran, weighing his chances of taking on several strong men now, in a weakened condition, against his chances of freeing Shara later, and decided to keep running. He felt like a coward, but he didn't have any choice. He couldn't help Shara if he was dead.

Pietr entered the latrine and turned and slashed at the first magician to follow. Then he took advantage of the ensuing confusion to make his escape. There were waist-high holes in one of the walls, and he dove through one of them. The cold liquid he landed in stank, but he ignored the stench and got to his feet. He was barely underway again before a torch was thrust through one of the holes.

The sewer tunnel was similar to a Drenga tunnel, only longer, darker, and filled with ankle-deep sludge. Pietr could make out openings high up in the wall, but they were too small to squeeze through. Frantic to escape, he ducked into the blackness of the first side tunnel that he reached. Behind him, Rankin and the other uninjured magician were arguing about who should follow and who should go for help.

The argument saved Pietr. Fear had carried him this far, but he was too sore and exhausted to run anymore. Feeling his way along in the darkness, he turned several more times. His clothes were wet and his feet numb, but his body still tingled from the energy he'd conjured up.

Pietr could still hear voices from time to time in the distance behind him, so he groped his way towards some waves that he heard. It took a long time to get close to the waves, but eventually the sound was echoing all around him. One moment he was wondering what he'd do when he reached the sea and the next moment one of his feet was dangling in nothingness. He floundered helplessly for an instant and then fell.

The icy surface of a wave slammed into Pietr, and then he was fully submerged. The cold knocked the air from his lungs, but he was able to keep from drowning. He clawed up to the surface, and then he inhaled. His wrist hit a wood post in the darkness, and he grabbed onto it.

For a few terrifying moments it was all Pietr could do to keep from drowning in the swells of water that were splashing off the seawall. Then he saw where he was. A pier loomed over him and the dark outline of a ship was visible to his right. It was so far up to the pier and the top of the seawall that he wondered if he would bob until he died.

But at least it was getting light enough so he could see where he was. It was dark under the pier, but there was some grayness to his left, and in that grayness he could make out a rope. Pietr knew he had to do something before he got too numb to swim, so he let go of the post and made for the rope. Once there, he somehow managed to drag himself out of water and into the even more frigid air.

His clothes turning to ice, Pietr lay shivering on the pier until someone approached. At first he thought the Drenga had found him, but then he saw that the man was a sailor. He knew that the next person to come along might be out to kill him, so he struggled to his feet. Numb and exhausted, he limped towards the sailor who'd stopped at the edge of the pier.

Pietr tried to make himself invisible, but he was too tired. He only succeeded in scaring the man. Pietr knew he wouldn't last long in wet clothes, so he made for his room. He had to get into something dry and warm.

It was light by the time Pietr reached his room. No longer able to feel his body, he stepped into the shower fully clothed. At first he only felt the dull pressure of the water, and then he felt like he was on fire. Back out in his room he glanced at the picture of the temple he once ruled over and then changed into dry clothes.

Pietr's cloak was gone, lost somewhere in the woods, so he put on three shirts. His vest had

repelled the seawater, so he put it back on over the shirts. Then he drank some water, grabbed some bread, and left. He didn't even bother to close the door.

Back out on the street Pietr had to choose between using what little magic he had left to stay warm or be invisible. He'd come so close to freezing that he focused on staying warm and walked as fast as he could. People stared, but as long as none of them were magicians he didn't care. If he could get to the woods quickly enough he might be safe.

He succeeded. Aside from the Grand Mage none of the Drenga actually lived in the tunnels, so he guessed there hadn't been enough men to mount a quick search. That would change, so he limped on as fast as he could. Following the same path he'd used the night before, he headed for his bundle.

It had only been half a day since Pietr had walked through these woods, but it felt like years. Whole lives seemed to fill the gap between that hike and this one. The inferno's flames were gone, but the things he'd seen in them remained. He could remember being Micklo, a priest from another time.

Aware, now, of the source of the thoughts and impulses that had been impinging on his own, Pietr scrambled up one hill after another much as he had the night before. If he could stay ahead of the Drenga, then maybe he could draw on his former magic to defeat the Drenga. The Dorienga magician in him had killed one man, and maybe he could kill the rest. Maybe he could make the Drenga pay for their crimes.

A glimmer of light off a glass shard drew Pietr's attention back to the woods. He'd been so intent on killing the Drenga and saving Shara that he'd reached the clearing without realizing how far he'd come. There was still no one behind him, so he picked up his bundle he went to look for his pouch. His widely spaced footprints were easy to spot.

Pietr found his pouch, knife, and cloak in the gully where he'd fallen. That pleased him because he'd thought he'd lost everything. Confident, now, that he could survive, he returned to the clearing and then picked up the trail to the cave. He wanted to do something about Torral before animals got at the corpse.

Pietr would have enjoyed the climb under different circumstances. It was sunny, and increasingly elevated views of the sea made him feel like part of a godly design. He had to live to help Shara, but he was no longer afraid of dying himself. He knew, now, that he couldn't die.

It was mid-day by the time Pietr reached the cave. He didn't want to enter, but forced himself to. Avoiding Torral, he transferred the contents of Shara's pouch to his own and then covered Torral's body with a mat and weighed down the corners with stones. Back outside he filled in the mouth of the cave with the largest rocks he could lift.

Then Pietr resumed his flight. He was soon farther around the mountain than he'd ever been before. Instead of looking back and seeing the city and lowlands beyond it, he could look ahead and see another mountain. There was an intervening valley, and he hoped it would provide him with some shelter.

Pietr's descent was painful. He was not only sore and exhausted, he was also trying to scramble down over icy rocks and ledges without a trail. He'd eaten what little food he'd brought, and he was getting cold. He considered stopping to cast a new warming spell, but he was afraid that if he did stop he wouldn't get going again.

Pietr was determined to put as much distance between himself and the Drenga as possible, so he dragged himself on until the light began to fade. Barely conscious, he descended into a thick grove of evergreens as scenes from the inferno once again nudged at his mind. He found and ate some berries, but they did little to ease his hunger or clear his head. He wanted to lie down and die.

At some point Pietr did stop. Unable to continue any deeper into the valley, he built a small fire and worked a new warming spell. After nibbling on some bark, he curled up under an evergreen. Secure in his blanket, he finally let go.

The inferno had been a loud, wrenching set of visions, but the scenes that enveloped Pietr now were gentle. At first formless, they coalesced into a Dorienga city with dusty streets and parched walls.

Pietr floated through the streets looking for the home he'd left behind much as he'd floated through the maze in his dreams. Then he was in his home moving among things he recognized but no longer felt attached to.

Like the rooms in the maze, the ones in the house changed as Pietr drifted through them. He sensed that Shara was near and searched until he found her. At least he thought it was Shara until he saw she had tan skin and a Dorienga gown. He tried to speak to this girl Micklo had known, but no words would come out.

So he tried to rouse the sleeping girl, but someone got in his way. Several men crowded into the room and surrounding him. Pietr pushed his way through the men, but the young woman was gone. The Grand Mage stood in her place.

So Pietr fled. He was back in the Drenga tunnels, so he again headed for the latrine. Then he remembered that he was asleep. The Drenga had entered his dream and were trying to kill him.

Pietr jolted awake to the sound of howling. A pack of wild drinkas was wailing in the distance. They weren't close, but the night was young, and it was hard to tell how far they would roam. Pietr couldn't help but wonder if his enemies were using drinkas to hunt him down.

Pietr listened to the pack until fatigue overcame him again. Weaving the best invisibility spell he could muster, he surrendered to his dreams. He found Shara again, but this time it was in a city with carriages and brick avenues. She had pale skin and a red coat and was standing on a corner waving at him.

At least Pietr thought it was Shara. As with the Dorienga girl, this young woman's skin and clothes were different, but the person within was the same. Pietr crossed the street to greet the young woman. Before he could get to her the Grand Mage intervened, and Pietr jolted awake.

Pietr spent the rest of the night slipping in and out of similar dreams. At times he'd be conscious of the forest and drinkas, and at other times he'd be looking for Shara and avoiding the Grand Mage. The one constant thread was the sense that he was being sought. Once, in a state between sleep and wakefulness, he thought he saw Torral, but the vision faded. Pietr curled up and wept.