

THE INFERNO

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PART THREE : THE CHAMELEON

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When Pietr woke the next morning, the horror of almost killing Rula was a dim memory. He remembered lapsing into a normal sleep and dreaming about his father. His father turned into Rula and stood over him. Now that he was awake Pietr studied Rula. Was this really his father? Had his father been reborn again so quickly?

Pietr would have liked to question Rula, but he had a more pressing concern. Shara needed him. Pietr was determined that at least one shaman would survive this day, so he set his father's pouch next to Rula and slipped out of the cave. He was going to confront the Drenga alone.

Torrall's mountain stood across the valley, but it looked different. The dark cloud that had loomed beyond it was gone. There were angry streaks of red in the sky, but they were mere wisps. The cloud itself was in shreds.

Pietr put distance between himself and Rula as fast as he could. He didn't relish facing the Drenga, but he was even more worried about how Shara would look at him when she saw him. She'd said he had another side, and she'd been right. His desire for vengeance had led to her capture and Torrall's death.

Wanting very badly to make things right with her, Pietr swooped down off the mountain. The air was still cool, so the valley was shrouded in fog. At the foot of the mountain he turned east. He'd never been on the eastern side of Torrall's mountain, but wanted to avoid Torrall's cave.

The fog had burned away by mid-morning. The valley between the first two mountains in the range was higher than the land to the east, and by the time Pietr descended down into the lowlands the sun was high in the sky. With snow again turning to slush his shoes began to squish. He no longer had the energy to hop over wet spots like he'd done the day before.

The forest on Torrall's mountain was untouched, but the trees Pietr suspected had stood to the east of the mountain had been cleared for farms. The muddy fields reminded him of his life as Fruel. The climate had been milder in that life, but the fields were much the same. More than once he saw a hill like the one he'd died on.

As Pietr drew closer to Tarnahue he wracked his brain for a plan. He had none aside from making himself invisible and sneaking up on the Drenga. There were no authorities he could turn to because natives were outside the law. If he got killed, no one but Morta and his grandfather would care.

The ugly streaks in the sky didn't help Pietr's mood. They reminded him of a volcano's plumes. He knew they were invisible to Tarnahue's residents, but that didn't alter his feeling that everyone in the city was against him. He was approaching a place as cancerous as the one he'd once lorded over as a high priest.

Pietr's attention was drawn from his past to his surroundings by a sudden movement. A man had emerged from a shed near the edge of a field. Pietr stopped and tried to blend in with the trees at the edge of the woods. The last thing he wanted was for word to spread that a strange native was lurking about.

Once the farmer re-entered his shed Pietr resumed his trek. It was exhausting to remain invisible for a long time, but he was getting close to Tarnahue so he continued to mask his mask himself. He was tired of wading through slush, so he left the edge of the woods for a gravel road. He hoped his shoes would dry out by the time he reached the city.

Being out in the open gave Pietr his first clear view of Tarnahue. He'd never approached it from

this direction and was surprised at how far into the lowlands it had spread. The older part of the city was still obscured by trees, but what was visible seemed huge compared to the native village he'd been living in. Land that used to be forest was dotted with hundreds of homes.

It was inevitable that Pietr would encounter traffic on the road, and as the first plow-draw wagon approached, he held his breath. He was more worried that the bulky beast would smell him than that he'd be seen. It plodded past, saliva dripping from its thick mouth, and Pietr let out his breath. At length he reached the city and headed for his old neighborhood.

The sight of the grocery store he'd shopped in for years reminded Pietr of how hungry he was. He had been thinking about how strange the city looked, but now, with a familiar building in front of him, all he could think of was the food inside it. He headed for the rear service entrance hoping to sneak in and grab something to eat. It had been hours since he'd had his last cake.

The city's streets had been muddy enough to hide Pietr's tracks, but now that he was about to enter a building he had to be careful. He used some trash to scrape off his shoes, but they were still wet. The sight of three men unloading a wagon behind the store added to his concern. It would be hard to slip inside without leaving tracks they would see.

His mouth watering at the smell of the meat being unloaded, Pietr crouched behind some crates. The youngest of the workers was one of the classmates whose window he'd broken, and that made him nervous. He kept telling himself no one could see him and finally did sneak inside. While the men cracked jokes about women they knew he hid in a corner of the storage room.

Eventually the men left. One drove off in the wagon while the other two closed the door, turned out the light, and passed into the front of the store. Pietr was afraid they'd come back, so he made himself comfortable. He rested and nibbled on some bread while he waited for the store to empty out.

Eventually the light filtering into the storage room dimmed and Pietr got up. He couldn't find anything to drink in the darkness, so he entered the front of the store. The owner was still there, but soon left. After waiting far longer than he'd intended, Pietr had the full run of the store.

Guilty about how long he had waited, Pietr drank some juice, ate a sweet roll, and headed for the front door. It was not only dark outside, but also foggy. Pietr found the lock and stepped out into the cold. The chill that greeted him caught him by surprise.

Pietr had become immune to ordinary cold, but there was nothing ordinary about this chill. It was man-made, an icy sense of despair that stabbed at the heart. It was not only cold, but also deathly quiet. There was no one else in the fog.

Feeling like he'd slipped into one of his nightmares, Pietr wove his way through the dense mist. He passed one hovering sphere of light after another much as he always did in his worst dreams. Whatever magic was at work was affecting the whole city because every street was as desolate as the first. Pietr made it to the alley behind The Necromancer without encountering anyone.

As he crept up to The Necromancer's door, Pietr wished he had more than a knife to fight with. He could sense a second spell around the door, a powerful barrier that made him feel as though it was useless to go on. He was so unsure of himself that he came to a complete stop in front of the door. He wanted to give up without a fight.

It took the threat of discovery to get him moving again. Two wraith-like figures emerged from the fog and approached the door. Pietr flattened himself against a wall as they passed by. Still holding his breath, he watched as they tapped out a code on the door.

Almost immediately the door opened spilling red light into the fog. Pietr tried to slip in behind the two magicians inside, but he was too slow. As something was said about a third man who would be late, the door shut in Pietr's face. All he gained was the code for entry and the news that another magician was on the way.

But that was enough to give Pietr an idea. Projecting the thought of looking like someone or something else was no more difficult than seeming invisible, so he could pose as the third man and knock on the door. The only problem was that the real man would show up and an alarm would be

raised. To prevent that, Pietr would have to see that the magician never arrived.

So he picked up a loose cobble and waited. He didn't want to kill the man; he just wanted to buy enough time to get inside and free Shara. Eventually he heard footsteps and tensed. He might have been ruthless as Micklo, but now he abhorred violence.

When Pietr struck the man's head, it was as though someone else was moving his arm. There was a sickening thunk, and then the man slumped to the ground. Pietr dragged the body out of the alley and across the street. There he bound and gagged the man with cloth from a pile of trash.

Pietr was exhausted from hours of masking his presence, but taking on the man's identity made it easier to approach the door. For some reason, thinking himself a Drenga magician instead of a shaman disarmed the resistance he'd felt. He fixed the man's voice in his mind and then rapped on the door. For a second time it swung open spewing a slit of red into the fog.

The sight of Rankin unnerved Pietr as he stepped into the entry. If anyone could see through his disguise it would be his teacher. "I see you made it," Rankin said as he pushed the door shut. "I was beginning to wonder about you."

"Couldn't be helped," Pietr said in a gruff voice.

"Well, hurry up, then. They're anxious to start."

"Of course."

Pietr briefly locked eyes with Rankin in the scarlet light of the entry and then turned towards the stairs. As he turned he noticed Rankin starting to frown. That was unsettling, but the sight of a street where the stairs should have been was even worse. As he stopped he could hear Rankin starting to move.

Instinctively making himself invisible Pietr ducked a fraction of a second before a knife sliced through the air. Then he was jamming his elbow up into Rankin's stomach and was driving the magician backwards as hard as he could. Rankin slammed into a wall and doubled over in pain. He tried to slash out again, but Pietr drew his own knife and stabbed first.

Shaking even more violently than he had when he'd hit the other man, Pietr dragged Rankin's corpse to the front of the store. Then he sheathed his knife and returned to the entry. The sight of a street still unnerved him, but he knew it wasn't real. The stairs down into the tunnels were there even if he couldn't see them.

Pietr inched his way forward trying to find the first step. The street's resemblance to the one in his nightmares made him feel like he was dreaming again. There were lights and sounds, but most of all there was fog, a dense, chilling fog that obscured most of the street. Pietr wondered if he'd taken a wrong turn and stepped out into the night.

But he hadn't. Aside from the fog this wasn't at all like the streets he'd come on. There were vehicles, and they weren't like the real ones he knew. They were low and sleek like the ones in his dream.

One of these vehicles swerved towards Pietr. Changing from metal and glass to a fiery-eyed monster as it swerved, it came right at him. Pietr jumped back and slipped in Rankin's blood. The monster dissolved as it reached the door.

Pietr calmed himself and tried again. Imagining himself as Rankin, he approached the stairs for a third time and saw them. There was still a street there, but it was superimposed on the stairs. No one was rushing up to meet him, so he began to descend.

Pietr counted the usual sixteen steps as he dropped below street level, but the passage at the bottom had changed. A wall covered with Dorienga carvings stood where the door to the cloakroom should have been. There weren't any doorways, just the walls of a passage in Micklo's temple. Feeling Micklo stir within in him, Pietr started down the long corridor.

Each step down the Dorienga corridor brought Micklo closer to the surface of Pietr's mind. The ancient passage was so familiar he could almost feel his gold robes on his back. If this were an illusion, it was very good. He didn't know whether he was dreaming or had been transported

backwards in time.

The passage ran for about thirty paces and then opened into a circular chamber deep in the heart of the temple. As with the tunnel, there were Dorienga designs on the fire-lit wall. There were animal-headed men and women, symbols, and a depiction of the world's overlord. The sight of his god enabled Micklo to finish pushing Pietr aside.

For this was the moment he'd been waiting for. After all these centuries he could finally face his enemy and stop the string of murders that kept stealing his love from his life. Doubting that any magician could stand up to him, Micklo bowed before the image of the god he knew better than anyone else and then entered the tunnel on the far side of the chamber. It led to a sacrificial chamber that was occupied.

As Micklo drew closer to the second chamber, the sound emanating from it grew louder. It was the same, low "droom" the Drenga had used twice before. To his dismay, the chant was starting to work again. By the time he reached the chamber, he could barely move.

The room itself was spinning so madly Micklo couldn't tell whether it was the one he knew or a new one filled with Drenga magicians. The chamber he'd shed blood in lay like a veneer over the one the Drenga had initiated him in. He also couldn't tell whether the man behind the altar was Nygul or the bald-headed Grand Mage. All he knew was that Shoora lay on the altar.

Micklo was appalled at how emaciated his love looked. As he was grabbed and thrust towards the altar, he saw that her lips were parched. Then he was on the altar himself, able to feel Shoora next to him, but unable to move. He felt like part of the stone.

Micklo's consciousness began to fade, and as it did he fought against the spell that bound him. He turned his gaze inward towards the door to his furnace. In his mind, he was in his private chamber standing before his portal to time. Screaming out in pain, he lurched forward into the flames.