

THE INFERNO

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PART THREE : THE CHAMELEON

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As Micklo lurched, time collapsed. All of the scenes he was thrust into were equally real, as though they all existed at once. Time was no longer linear; it was millions of simultaneous NOW's. His love in was in many of them, so he reached out towards her...

Reached out and fell onto the burning sand of the wrestling pit. Amid the sound of jeers, he tried to scramble to his feet before Nygul attacked. He started to rise, but he wasn't able to get up quick enough. He felt a blow to his leg, and then the ground was rushing up towards his face...

Only it wasn't the sand of the wrestling pit that was rushing up to slam against him, it was the dirt of the old Market Street. An eight-year-old boy now, he landed at Nygul's feet. Nygul laughed, poked Micklo one last time with a foot, and then wandered off to join Shoorra and her friends. Micklo could only watch...

Watch through Danu's eyes as the scene shifted from a dirt street to the corner of a brick avenue. Radiant as ever, Sierra waved at Danu where he stood and then turned and started to walk as a black carriage clattered past. Danu watched until Sierra was out of sight and then turned towards the Drenga temple with its half-open door. He thought he caught a glimpse of someone looking down the street Sierra had been on, but the figure quickly retreated into the darkness of the temple.

Danu started towards the marble stairs that led up to the door only to have the scene shift again. Jumping from one scene to another, he passed through dozens of doors. Shoorra, Sierra, or Shara was in each scene like a single person in different clothes. Each time Pietr saw his love, she was closer to a moment of death.

Try as he might to slow the shifting, Micklo was drawn towards each of his love's deaths. One moment he was struggling to break free from the mob of onlookers gathering around the Dorienga temple that held Shoorra, the next he was running down a street to the apartment where Sierra was being killed, and the next he was lying on an altar next to Shara. The room with the altar was neither more nor less real than the other scenes were. It was simply a place that he kept returning to.

Then something clicked in Micklo's mind. In a moment of clarity, he recalled how he'd used the inferno to strike down a magician who'd tried to kill him. Reaching deep into the fire, he lashed out again. Only this time a mind as strong as his own rose up to meet him.

Rose up to attack him like Nygul in the wrestling pit. Everything erupted in flame, and then he and his foe landed on a marble floor. Knocked loose from Nygul by the impact, Micklo looked around and saw that they were in a massive hall. It was twenty feet high and stretched for miles with thousands of doors.

As Micklo jumped to his feet, he noticed that he felt strange. His body felt light and was vibrating with the same electric energy as the hallway's gold-veined walls. He could not only pretend to look like someone or something else; he could actually alter his form. Nygul had a similar ability and was sprouting talons and fangs.

In the wrestling pit, Nygul had always had an advantage because he was older. Here, too, he seemed surer of himself, as though he'd been here before. Finding himself attacked by a fierce beast Micklo had little choice but to run. Turning his arms to legs, he dropped down on all fours and leaped through a door into a steamy jungle.

Nygul charged after Micklo. He'd retained just enough of his face so that he looked like a daemon. Micklo hadn't yet figured out the rules of this realm, so he kept on running. Confident that he'd

eventually prevail, he was enjoying the chase.

For it felt good to be bounding through a jungle on all fours. This was a magical place. Micklo could envision a branch he was passing under falling on Nygul, and it would fall. But before it could hit Nygul would turn it to dust.

Everything was happening so fast. Micklo heard other beasts in the jungle around him, and they began to close in. Micklo recognized the faces of Drenga magicians on some of the monsters. He couldn't tell whether they were after him or after the faro he spotted ahead in the brush.

The sudden appearance of a wall farther ahead in the jungle made Micklo's plight more desperate. It looked like he was going to be cornered. When the faro leaped through a hole in the wall, he followed. He ended up sliding across the floor of a hallway like the one he'd first landed in.

Before Micklo could figure out which way the faro had gone the beasts burst into the hall. He was just able to get out of the way before some of them skidded into the far wall. Micklo took off down the hall just ahead of the drinka-like pack. A different world lay beyond each of the hall's doors, but none held the faro.

Micklo was afraid he was getting farther away from the world the faro had entered, so he leaped through one of the doors. He landed on a narrow strip of beach beneath a steep cliff. The beach and cliff reminded him of the coast north of Tarnahue, but that wasn't where he was. The sky was too purple, and the rocky cliff was too orange.

With snarling beasts spilling onto the sand behind him, a cliff on his left, and sea on his right, Micklo had only one way to go. All-too-quickly a collapsed pile of rock blocked his way. As he scrambled up the rock he tried to pummel his pursuers with stones, but it did more good than the branches in the jungle. Some of the stones even shot back at him.

Micklo continued up the face of the cliff carving out steps as he climbed. At the top he spied a castle and headed for it. He hoped that he could get inside and then bar the door. The forest that covered the rest of the plateau offered little hope of escape.

Micklo used his mind to begin raising the castle's drawbridge the instant he reached it, but he was too slow. Nygul made it onto the drawbridge and into the courtyard right behind him. Micklo was tired of fleeing, so he changed back into human form and armed himself with a shield and a sword. Nygul did the same and attacked.

Metal clashed against metal until Nygul began to beat Micklo back. When the other magicians spilled into the courtyard, Micklo had to resume his flight. He dropped his shield and sword and entered the main structure of the castle. A gloomy corridor led to an expansive, fire-lit hall.

The vaulted chamber was as devoid of inhabitants as the courtyard had been, but there were figures in the murals on its walls. Startlingly lifelike, the figures moved as he viewed them. Each mural depicted a scene from one of his lives. Combined with the heat of the room's fire, they made him feel like he was in the inferno.

It took Micklo a moment to realize that some of the heat was coming from Nygul. The magician had turned himself into a dragon and was starting to spout fire. Micklo turned his skin to scales and rushed towards one of the murals. In it Shoora was lying on an altar like the one he'd last seen her on.

As Micklo lunged into Shoora's cell he assumed his own form. He didn't want to frighten his love. She was dazed, but responded to his touch. He shook her until she sat up.

Shoora recoiled at the sight of Micklo. Realizing that he looked older than the person she remembered, he made himself sixteen again. The arrival of the other magicians was harder to fix. Micklo pulled Shoora to her feet, and the two of them fled from the cell.

Micklo had had years to plot his revenge the first time Shoora had been killed, but here everything was happening too fast. Here he and Shoora could only run. If they could reach his chamber, then he could fight. He'd woven spells into its walls and could defeat anyone there.

But first he and Shoora had to reach the cell. As he led her towards it, he began to trigger its spells by linking with his god. By the time he reached his chamber the link was complete. He turned and

unleashed his dark fire.

For his mind was a furnace. Its flames touched everything. Neither knowing nor caring whether his god was a separate being or a part of himself, he tried to burn his enemies. He tried to engulf them in flame burning himself or Shoorā.

But Micklo had forgotten just how powerful the fire could be. Amid the roar of the inferno, he lost sight of not only his enemies, but also Shoorā. Sensing her somewhere near-by, he tried to reach out to her. He tried to find her in the searing flames.

Everything from the moment when Micklo had been thrust onto an altar next to Shara until now seemed to have happened in a single instant, as though, in trying to strike out at his enemies, his mind had embraced more than it could hold. Overwhelmed, he tried to focus on the altar he guessed he was still on. He tried to use it as an anchor in the midst of the flames. Without a clear picture of his enemies, he couldn't strike out at them.

For this inferno was different from the one Pietr had known. At the same time that Micklo was in millions of scenes, he was the stuff they were made up of. At last sensing one of his enemies in the flames, he homed in on the man. The inferno coalesced into a jungle.

Simultaneously in the jungle and above it, Micklo chased after the man. He gave daemon-like form to the man's worst crimes and made them join in the hunt. The man reached a river and had to jump in. The daemons jumped in after him and tore him apart.

Like all of the other scenes tearing at Micklo the jungle quickly fell away, but something had changed. That part of him that still lay on an altar saw one of the Drenga crumple to the ground. Sensing victory, Micklo embraced the flames and sought out another man. He located his second victim in a forest and swooped in for the kill.

These woods weren't as dense as the jungle had been. They were more like the woods Fruel had lived near, sparse and hilly with numerous rocks. Knowing that the man he was after now had been cruel to women, Micklo conjured up a dozen strong ones and armed them with spears. They cornered the man in a gully and unleashed their spears.

Back in the room with the altar, a second magician began to sag. The first had barely dropped to the floor, and already a second was dead. Micklo still couldn't move, but the spell binding him was starting to break. In another minute he would be free.

But before Micklo could seek out a third magician the roar of the inferno was pierced by a shriek from the Grand Mage. The bald magician had raised a knife and was plunging it towards Micklo's chest. Micklo focused his attention on this new threat. As the knife descended, he engaged the Grand Mage's mind in much the same way that he'd grappled with Nygul in the wrestling pit.

As Micklo touched the Grand Mage's mind there was a horrible wrenching, and then he was no longer himself. In much the same way that Pietr had merged with Rula two days earlier, Micklo was now linked with the Grand Mage. He could remember things the Grand Mage had lived through as Nygul as vividly as he could remember his own life. He felt the same consuming desire to possess Shoorā that Nygul had felt.

For although he was Nygul, son of the high priest, Shoorā was one young woman he would never have. He'd never lure her to the privacy of his chambers because she loved someone else. Her rejection would be avenged. If he couldn't have her, then nobody could.

So she's paid for her rejection, her and countless others like her. In each of his lives he'd seen dozens of young women pay for the pain their beauty caused. He was about to see it again, only something was wrong! His enemy was challenging him!

Infuriated, the Grand Mage plunged his knife down towards the young magician on the altar. As he stabbed, he felt a jolt in his mind. He felt his enemy trying to take control of his mind. Together they plunged into madness and fire.

Micklo, the Grand Mage, the nameless one who sustained the world, all existed within the flames. Micklo could simultaneously see a blade plunging down towards him and feel the knife in his hand.

Nygul was kicking Micklo and feeling the pain in his own leg. The two priests had become one.

Feeling his victory start to slip away, the Grand Mage shrieked again. He screamed and focused on the knife's downward plunge. Halfway to his goal, he had the horrible vision that he was stabbing his own infant son. The heir who'd been taken from him so many centuries ago had been reborn and was lying on the altar.

Suddenly unsure whether it was his timeless enemy who lay on the altar next to the native girl or his own son, the Grand Mage changed the course of his knife. He aimed for the young woman instead of the young man. As the knife swerved the Grand Mage's scream echoed in Micklo's throat. His attempt to deflect the knife had gone badly awry.

For Micklo had lived through this horrible moment before. He remembered that, now. He'd lived through this bloodshed hundreds of times. Shocked, he fell back into his own mind. He imploded into himself and became Pietr again.

Only something had changed. More of the Drenga were falling, and Pietr thought for an instant that it was Micklo he was staring up at. The magician he'd once been was stabbing at him with a knife. Stabbing at him and Shara.

Pietr tried to fight back. He tried to reach out with his mind and stop the assault, but it was too late. He'd found Shara only to lose her again. He felt her hand squeeze his, and then fire enveloped them.