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## 1: CIRCLE OF SORCERY

*What's the worst that could happen?* Pran asked himself as he lay in bed waiting for his parents to fall asleep so he could sneak out of the house. Even if he got caught, his father wouldn't expel his own son from magic school just for going to a circle of sorcery. Would he? He had to assume his father knew spells to detect if someone had been using black magic, so if he didn't want to get caught, he'd have to just not cast any spells himself.

When at last he heard his father's snores from across the hall, he slid out from under the covers and tiptoed across the room, shoes in hand, the oak floor cool beneath his bare feet. He didn't dare cast a Mage-Light spell or light the lantern his brother had sent him for his sixteenth birthday (a genuine Eldorean Army field lantern, designed to burn the new fuel called kerosene instead of whale oil). With one foot in the hallway, Pran hesitated, deciding to use a Silence spell so he wouldn't be betrayed by creaking stairs or bumping into something in the dark. Besides the risk his parents would hear him, there was also a chance his shorthaired pointer, Nako, would pick tonight to redeem his sorry reputation as a watchdog.

Closing his eyes, Pran cast the spell by placing his right hand just above his left hip, palm down, and slowly rotating it in a half-circle while picturing himself walking through the house in total silence. He felt a tingle at his neck as several links in the silver chain he was wearing turned to iron, releasing the magic.

When he sensed the spell's power flowing through him, Pran opened his eyes, put on his shoes, and exited the bedroom more confidently, enveloped in a sphere of silence. He wondered if his father had ever imagined, when he'd taught that spell to their class, that Pran might use it to sneak out to attend a circle of sorcery!

Guided more by memory than by the moonlight seeping through the windows of the former farmhouse, Pran made his way carefully down the upstairs hall. As he passed by his brother's empty room, he felt a stab of guilt. Here he was, sneaking out to watch sorcery for fun, while his older brother was off defending the kingdom from enemy Sorcerers! Ashamed, he almost turned back, but he worried what his friends would think if he chickened out. His brother would never know if he went to the circle of sorcery, but his friends would sure notice if he didn't. Pran appeased his conscience with a silent prayer for his brother's safe return from the war, then continued down the hall.

Just as he reached the top of the stairs, his foot struck a bone Nako had left lying there. To Pran's horror, it tumbled down the stairway, out of his magical sphere of silence, sounding to his panicked ears like the paddling he'd get from his father if he were caught. He froze in place, expecting at any moment that Nako would start barking, and his parents would come rushing out of the bedroom.

He stayed still as a statue for several minutes, listening for any sign that he'd been detected. All he heard were snores from his parents' room, so he continued down the stairs and past the living room, where his dog lay asleep by the hearth. He opened the hall closet and grabbed his hickory hiking stick, as he wouldn't want to walk in the night woods without something to fend off branches, feel for holes, or help defend himself. When Pran finally stepped out the front door into the cool, night air, he gave a huge sigh of relief.

High above the world of Rados, the full moon beamed down on the Kingdom of Eldor, and the fertile farms of Pran's neighbors lay awash in its milky glow. Pran glanced up at the second floor windows of the white clapboard house, worried that if his parents chanced to look out,

they'd see him in the moonlight. He walked quickly to the front gate of the picket fence, opened and closed the latch silently, and stepped out onto Carpenter Road, turning right to head west on the dirt road.

With summer nearly at an end, the air was pleasantly cool, still, and fragrant with the scent of newly cut hay. Pran saw bats flutter by in the moonlit sky, silently seeking their meal of mosquitoes. Earlier that night, he'd heard farmer Efrom's dogs raising the alarm about something, but all was quiet at the moment except for the usual nighttime sounds: the music of crickets and frogs, snorting of horses left outside to spend the pleasant night in a pasture, and rustling of rabbits bounding into the roadside brush at his approach.

Pran stopped at the third farmhouse, the home of his best friend, Kimbar. He stood just outside the fence, canceled his Silence spell with a simple act of will, and gave a hoot-owl call to signal his arrival.

Kimbar stepped out of the shadow of an ancient maple tree, also carrying a hiking stick, and pushed open the gate to join Pran, his blond hair shining under the full moon. He and Pran were built alike: a bit shorter than most sixteen-year-olds, but as Kimbar liked to say, compact, athletic, and strong for their size. They were fellow Conjurers, having just begun their fourth and final year at the magic school taught by Pran's father.

"You're late," Kimbar whispered. "I was beginning to think you'd chickened out."

"I was waiting for my parents to fall asleep. I didn't think of casting a Silence spell 'til I was on my way out."

Kimbar snickered, his green eyes flashing. "You wasted a Silence spell *after* they were asleep?"

"Well, there's also Nako."

"Didn't you tell me he's the world's worst watchdog? And even if he heard you, all he'd do is follow you, Pran. You're way too cautious! Now we've gotta hurry, or we'll be late." When they reached the next house on their left, Kimbar whispered, "Garwin's already on his way. He got tired of waiting for you."

As they walked beside the extensive corrals and pastures of Garwin's family horse ranch, the full moon looming over Pran's shoulder made his

shadow tall, but in his heart he felt small, vulnerable, and uncertain of what he was getting himself into. Every year, his father warned their class against the dangers of using black magic, or of associating with those who did. Pran tried to calm himself with the thought that Kimbar and Garwin had gone to this circle of sorcery before, and they seemed none the worse for it.

They passed the far boundary of their classmate Garwin's horse ranch, crossed a short bridge over the Otter Creek, and turned right to head north on Mellenville Road. Soon, the pastures beside the road gave way to forest and rolling hills. A loud noise in the roadside bushes startled Pran, but it was only a trio of deer, which bounded across the road ahead of them and disappeared into the woods on the other side. After they'd walked nearly a mile, Kimbar paused to point out a huge oak tree on their left, its gnarled roots reaching out toward the road like skeleton fingers. Just after passing it, he led Pran off the road and into the woods.

Once they'd cleared the roadside brush, a path became visible leading off into the forest. Even in daylight, it would be difficult to see from the road, but on the far side of the bushes it was clear enough. With tonight's full moon, enough light filtered down through the trees overhead to follow the path without the need for a lantern or Mage-Light spell.

Inside the forest, the air was nearly still, but up above, treetops swayed in the night breeze, and the large, old trees creaked and groaned. An object crashed through the branches above them, and Pran instinctively held his hiking stick overhead with both arms to protect himself from a falling tree limb. When it landed next to him, the branch turned out to be little more than a twig, as forest sounds barely noticeable in the daytime seemed amplified tenfold at night. Pran felt silly for his reaction, until he heard Kimbar mutter, "I can't believe I just wasted silver on a Shield spell for that!"

The path soon passed through a small clearing. Before they could reenter the woods on the other side, a small figure slipped out of the shadows as silently as an elf, displaying empty palms forward, elf fashion, to indicate he was no threat. Pran's eyes widened, for these days it was rare for an elf to venture off the reservation. However, when he and Kimbar

drew closer, Pran saw that it was merely a young boy, perhaps twelve years old, his light, blond hair appearing silver in the moonlight.

Kimbar asked, "Hey, little feller, you lost? What are you doing out in the woods in the middle of the night?"

"I might ask you the same thing," the boy said cheekily.

"We asked first," Pran countered. "Where are you going?"

"The same place as you, I'd imagine."

"You mean the circle of—" began Pran, before a nudge in the ribs from Kimbar made him stop short.

"Yep," the small boy said, "the circle of sorcery. Why else would you be on this path tonight?" Pointing to the silver hexagram pendant Pran wore around his neck, he said, "I'm a magic student too, Master Alimar's school, but I kept my hexagram under my shirt tonight to attract less attention."

"You look too young to be in magic school," Pran observed. Seeing the boy's hurt look, he quickly added, "No offense."

The boy sighed. "Don't worry; I'm used to hearing that. I started a year early, plus I'm short for my age—always have been, probably always will be. But I make up for it in brains, and though I may be small, I'm no weakling. I can whip boys twice my size in a fair fight—*several* of them if I fight *unfairly*," he said with a sly grin. "My name's Jelal."

There was something peculiar about this boy, but Pran liked him. "I'm Pran, and this is my friend Kimbar. We're Conjurers in the school run by my father, Master Gilamond."

"Wow, fourth year students, *and* you're the teacher's son," Jelal observed, sounding impressed. "I'm just a Novice."

"Obviously," Kimbar snickered. "But being a magic teacher's son won't help where we're going, and neither will being a Conjuror. Pran, you should hide your hexagram too. It's best not to show it at a circle of sorcery 'cause some kids there think magic school students are snobs."

After slipping his silver pendant and chain under his shirt, Pran asked, "So, Jelal, what made you stop here? You lose your way?"

"No, I was supposed to be going to the circle of sorcery with a couple classmates, but they chickened out. I was scared to go on by myself, so I waited on the path until I saw you."

Kimbar observed, "You didn't *look* scared."

"Well, I'm not afraid of just the two of you. But if I went to the circle of sorcery alone, I'd be surrounded by older boys who don't mind breaking rules and might enjoy tormenting a small boy like me. If they see I'm with two big kids like you, they won't bother me. Can I go with you, please?" Jelal looked up at them with his big, blue eyes like a lost puppy and promised, "I'll be your best friend."

Pran looked questioningly at Kimbar, who shrugged indifferently. "The position of *best* friend's already taken," Pran said, "but I guess you can join us tonight."

Jelal's small face lit up. "Thanks; you won't regret it! I'll do you a favor in return."

Pran smiled down at him and said, "Come along then, little friend, or we'll be late." At that moment, an owl swooped down low into the clearing, pounced on a mouse, and then soared back into the moonlit sky, talons grasped tightly around its prey. Seeing Jelal shudder, Pran said, "Don't tell me you're scared of *owls*."

"No, I just fear it's a bad omen," Jelal said darkly, refusing to say more.

Pran was taken aback, and hoped Jelal was wrong about this.

They continued along the forest trail, which rose briefly and then dipped down. After a few minutes of very gradual descent, the orange glow of a fire filtered through the trees ahead. As they advanced, the glow loomed brighter, until between the trees directly ahead, Pran saw a clearing with a large bonfire in the middle. "Hold on a minute," he said to his friends, suddenly unsure whether to go any farther.

As the three boys paused in the darkness at the edge of the clearing, Pran looked closely at his companions' faces, lit faintly by the light of the full moon and the glow of the bonfire, to see if they shared his fears about being there. Kimbar's face showed only eagerness and excitement. Jelal's was harder to read, but Pran thought it showed a mixture of apprehension and anticipation. Pran hoped his own face didn't betray his trepidation. Far away, a wolf howled at the moon, and Pran shivered in spite of himself.

Kimbar asked, "What's wrong, Pran, getting cold feet?"

"Maybe," he confessed.



Kimbar looked surprised. “Are you afraid of a spell backfiring on you, your first try at black magic? Don’t worry; nobody here has turned himself into a frog yet.”

“Well, I don’t want to be the first!” Pran joked nervously. “Actually, I’m more worried what will happen to me if I use black magic and my father finds out. I took enough risks just sneaking out here tonight. Maybe I’ll watch to see what it’s all about, but I’m not ready to try any spells.”

“Now that you’re here,” Kimbar said, “you should worry less about your father and more about what these kids will think if you don’t join in the spell casting. They’ll say you’re just here to spy on them for your father.”

Jelal seemed strangely frightened by Kimbar’s words. “Come on,” he urged, “let’s join the others before they see us standing here watching and get suspicious.”

Kimbar led Pran and Jelal into the clearing to a circle of logs where over two dozen other boys, mostly teenagers, were already seated around the bonfire. On the far side of the fire, their classmate Garwin held space open for them on a log, as he’d promised them earlier. He was also a Conjuror, in his final year of magic school. Although he was taller than Pran, the two boys looked enough alike to be cousins, with the same dark brown hair and caramel eyes.

Even though he’d confided to Pran during the summer that he’d gone to the circle of sorcery, Pran still found it hard to believe that Garwin, the smartest and most talented student in the school, would be there. Garwin had cultivated a friendship with the teacher’s apprentices, who’d taught him magic that Pran’s father didn’t seem to think his class, or even his son, was ready to learn. Now he’d apparently decided to broaden his knowledge even more by learning the forbidden black magic, or sorcery.

On a nearby log sat Samir, their red-haired classmate, Pran’s former friend. His father taught in a one-room country schoolhouse about the same size as Pran’s father’s magic school in town, although Samir’s father had more pupils to teach, as he taught grammar school. Samir smiled and waved at Kimbar, but when he saw Pran, his face hardened.

Pran and Samir had been close friends until fairly recently. After all, they'd grown up together, whiling away countless carefree summer days in the woods with Kimbar and Garwin as the four boys played their favorite game, "Elves and Goblins." However, last year, their longtime friendship had first strained and then broken. The problems had started when Samir began associating with the wrong crowd, particularly Sekar and his fat friend, Pathik. Those two were also classmates in their magic school, but marginal students, boys known to be experimenting with sorcery. Before long, Samir had apparently valued being in Sekar's gang so highly that he'd seemed to have no more use for Pran's friendship.

Not surprisingly, tonight Sekar and Pathik, the two classmates Pran blamed for breaking up the friendship, sat next to Samir on the same log. They looked at Pran suspiciously when he approached, not bothering to wave or say hello.

Jelal looked around the circle and whispered, "Just as I feared, I'm the only one here from my school." That told Pran that the rest attended grammar schools—some for lack of magic talent or ambition, others just because their families couldn't afford the tuition and lab fees for magic school.

Pathik said snidely, loud enough to get everyone's attention, "Well looky who's here: Pran, the magic teacher's son. Who invited *him*?"

"I did," Kimbar said boldly, "and I'll vouch for him personally."

Dhruti, a farmhand's son, hollered, "We don't need no stuck-up *Magician's* kids here," spitting the word "Magician's" like it was a curse. "He's probably just spying for his lily-white Magician papa."

Pran was tempted to turn around and leave, but Sekar stood up and yelled, "Enough!"

Instantly, the clearing fell silent except for the crackling of the flames. Tall and lean at seventeen, Sekar was the self-styled leader of this circle of sorcery. Although far from the best student in Pran's magic school, he obviously commanded respect, if not fear, from the boys gathered here tonight.

The son of a wealthy bank owner, Sekar had an arrogant bearing and shoulder length, sandalwood hair. He obviously knew he was handsome, for he sometimes used his looks to get what he wanted, the same way he used his father's money and influence. His ice blue eyes, set like jewels in a flawless pale face, remained cold and calculating even on the rare occasions that he smiled. Tonight, instead of the silver chain and hexagram of a magic student, Sekar wore the bone necklace of a Sorcerer, which Pran found vaguely unsettling.

"If Kimbar says Pran's okay, I believe him. I know he wouldn't jeopardize his *own* welcome by inviting someone here who can't be trusted," Sekar said pointedly.

Pran didn't need a Telepathy spell to know this was another one of Sekar's thinly veiled threats.

Kimbar led Pran and Jelal around the fire to where Garwin sat alone at the left end of a log. When he saw them approaching, Garwin welcomed Pran and Kimbar with a warm grin, beckoning them to come sit beside him, while ignoring Jelal just as the others had. Kimbar took a seat next to Garwin, and Pran sat on his right.

When Jelal sat down next to Pran, Garwin snapped, "Hey, these seats are saved for my friends. Go over there where the other little boys are sitting," he said, pointing to a log on which a group of scared looking, pre-teen boys huddled together whispering nervously.

"It's okay," Pran said, "he's with us. This is our new friend Jelal, a Novice in Master Alimar's school. Jelal, meet our friend Garwin, the top student in our school."

Jelal said wide-eyed, "Honored to meet you, Garwin."

An amused smile played at the corners of Garwin's lips. "Okay, you can stay. Any friend of Pran's and Kimbar's is a friend of mine."

The boys seated on the other logs had gone back to talking and laughing amongst themselves, but many of them still looked at Pran suspiciously. Kimbar said, "See what I meant, Pran? Now that you're here, you'll have to use sorcery too or they'll think you're here to snitch on them."

Pran shook his head, speaking just loudly enough for his friends on the same log to hear him. “I can’t use black magic tonight, or my father will know. Doing sorcery impairs your ability to do white magic the next day, and tomorrow’s a school day. *You* guys might get by unnoticed, but my father keeps a very close eye on *me* in Magic Lab—and the rest of the day too, for that matter,” he said with a sigh.

Before they could talk further, Sekar called the meeting to order, saying, “Good evening, friends, and thanks for coming. I see some new faces, including my magic school classmate, Pran. Tonight, you will be attending *my* magic school,” he joked, “where, I, Sekar, will give you an education you can’t get from Gilamond, Alimar, or the other white Magicians. You’ll learn something about the power and promise of black magic, and most of all, you’ll learn that sorcery can be fun.

“I think you’ll like the demonstration I’ve set up for tonight,” Sekar said as he reached into his satchel and took out a human skull. Holding it out toward the fire with his left hand, he began walking around the circle of stones that ringed the fire pit, chanting in a foreign language.

Jelal whispered to Pran, “He’s speaking Maraknese!”

Hearing the language of Eldor’s enemies spoken openly here sent a chill down Pran’s spine, and he shivered despite the heat of the bonfire. He thought of his older brother, Kavik, an Eldorean Army Lieutenant, currently in a front line unit fighting back the Maraknese invasion. Could Sekar have somehow learned black magic from an enemy Sorcerer?