

The Power of a Circle

by John Rayno

Silence. In the middle of an ancient forest at mid-day, there was almost complete silence. Being able to hear the distant surf didn't fool Jaren. He knew that the Halvan Trackers were closing in. The short stature of that race did not interfere with their ability to chase him down. They would catch him. It was only a matter of time. Standing cautiously, from a crouch to his full six and a half feet, the elf scanned the surrounding woods.

It was imperative that Jaren reach the stone circle of the Conclave, at the center of the island. Only there could he activate the sphere he had been entrusted with. Noise was his biggest problem. The snap of a fallen twig or a footfall on dried leaves would give the Trackers everything they needed to pinpoint his location. Jaren's only solution was to silence his movements with magic.

Into his open hand he placed some hair taken from a living panther and the wing feather from a living owl. Focusing his attention, he drew energy from the earth into himself. "Reneezh." As he spoke the Elven word for silence, the hair and the feather vanished in a small, arcane flash. A tingling ring of light, the same living green as the flash, scanned up his arm and over his entire body, feeling like a gentle wave of lightning.

Jaren started to move quickly but carefully. Even though the years last harvest had arrived and the ground was covered with natural debris, his movements were now as silent as the sun that peered through the half-naked branches.

As he began to wade through a small thicket, the low sounds

of voices from the other side brought him to an immediate standstill. Jaren peered through the leaves and branches and his entire body tensed as he saw a Human spell caster, known as an Incanter, glaring down at a four foot tall Halvan.

"I thought your Trackers were good, Bahkar." The mage said as he scanned the dozens of Human and Halvan troops surrounding the Conclave.

"Is tha' a truth, Kieran. An' I thought you magic people were suppos'd ta help us fin' this elf."

Spinning back to face Bahkar, the mage aimed an angry finger at him. "We are here to deal with him if your little ground sniffers ever get around to letting us know where he is!"

Slapping the finger aside, Bahkar hissed "Now keep yur voice down, idiot! We're tryin' not ta let the elf kno' tha' we found 'is trail."

"I just want to be done with this. He's the last one and then we can all go home. Eight years is too long to deal with this foolish war." Wiping his forehead, the mage continued, "I don't know what this elf is up to, but I've felt strange, hidden energy both times that I've caught sight of him."

"Aye, and tha's not all tha's bin strange. My Trackers 'ave bin talkin' 'bout earth signs that none o' them 'ave ever come across b'fore." The halvan squatted down and ran his hand over the grass. "'Is tracks up an' disappear only ta sprout back up 'alf a league away goin' in anoth'r d'rection. An' we've seen differ'nt critt'rs appear outta nowhere an' mess up signs by scratchin' 'em out or coverin' 'em up. My troops are all confus'd 'bout it. We migh'

as well go back an' check aroun' the docks one more time." A heavy sigh escaped the Tracker as the pair turned and headed towards the ocean.

Jaren was now more determined than ever to reach the sacred stone circle and activate the magic sphere that he carried in his woven shoulder bag. While his pursuers moved from sight, he thought about the sphere. It was a smooth, opaque, black stone that looked like a huge black pearl about the size of both of his fists put together. It felt unusually cold to the touch, as if it was pulling the heat out of your hand. There were no markings of any sort on its surface and no indication of a purpose. All that Jaren knew about it was where he had to be and the words he had to say to bring the sphere to life. The elven Grand Council had told him nothing about its purpose except that this would make sure that his people would always be remembered.

Jaren moved more cautiously as he neared the Conclave and began skirting the edge of the clearing in search of sentries. After sliding almost all the way through a dense wall of tangled foliage, Jaren froze in place. He was looking at the back of a Tracker sentry who had not heard him.

This was his only chance to open a path to the Conclave. Jaren decided what must be done and drew his dagger. Covering the halvan's mouth, Jaren lifted him off the ground into the bushes and onto the waiting dagger, instantly severing his spinal cord. As he wished a silent prayer for the halvan's spirit to journey safely, Jaren laid the lifeless body on the ground. Setting his bag

down next to the body, he took out the sphere. Once the magic of the sphere was activated, he knew that whatever happened to him afterward would probably be brief and fatal. He would no longer need the traveling bag or its contents.

He paused, cleared the dark hair from in front of his eyes and gazed in wonder at the giant stones through the leaves. Only once before had he seen this wide mystic circle. Eight arches, of three huge stones each, formed silent sentinels around the top of a small rise. The simple layout and appearance of the silent monoliths was misleading. Even from this distance Jaren could feel the flowing warmth of the earth's magic radiating from the eight-foot tall stones. The powers of all creation could be felt here, as if unknown lines of invisible energy converged at the top of this sacred hill.

Jaren whispered another prayer to the Creator, tensed, and then launched himself from the trees. Before his third footfall hit the ground, he reached a full run as he heard the horn calls of the watchful Trackers echo through the woods. He entered the circle of gray stones and heard the many voices of his pursuers closing in around the base of the grass covered hill.

When he stopped in the center, he raised the black sphere over his head with both hands. An astonished cry rang out as the circle of the Conclave ignited with a green energy that pervaded the whole area with the unusual scent of fresh turned earth.

Continued on page 19