

# Circle of Darkness

-by Jenari Skye

“Greed. It is not possible to purge the greater evil that lies within us. We seek that which is forbidden – power, despotism, and hedonism.” The fire gleamed in the mysterious eyes of the ancient wizard.

“Why do many succumb to the temptation? Do they consider life too bleak?” I asked, searching for the true topic of my interest.

“That is possible. Let me relate to you a past incident which may help you discover your own answer.” He took a prolonged puff from his long narrow pipe.

Perhaps my search had ended. I only knew the name of what I sought – the Circle of Darkness. I relaxed, knowing I might be here for awhile... old men seem to speak for an eternity.

“My sister, Ariana, was amassing her mercenaries, for, her greatest adversary in battle – Eldrith, ruler of the Circle of Darkness – was preparing to abandon his forest home to wreak havoc upon the world – the Katra.” His striking green eyes transferred their focus from afar to my shadowy figure. “Do you know of whom I speak?”

“I have not yet studied the Age of Darkness,” I stated carefully; I wished to conceal that which I sought, to ask merely casual questions.

The wizard smiled, friendly, amused, and sharp, despite the crow’s feet that told of his age. “History is apparently not a subject you are inclined to study; this incident occurred during the Age of Elves.”

“My area of expertise lies more toward the Silver Dragons, in the Age of Enchantments,” I smiled, covering my supposed embarrassment.

Tarlan’s eyes lit up. “That’s quite an interesting Age. My grandfather, Sardonis, helped create the Silver Dragons-“

“Yes, he provided the key element of their usefulness: invisibility. Who is this Circle of Darkness?” I interjected quickly; I did not need an old man rambling about events I had already mastered.

Tarlan straightened. Indignance filled his eyes, and was gone, leaving a scholarly wizard.

“The Circle of Darkness was comprised of persons half elf and half man. Of course, not all Sharaan were a part of the Circle, though most were outcasts at the time. The Circle was paradoxically hedonistic in their ways. ‘We do what we please,’ was a line every ready upon their lips, and yet they served only their ruler – Eldrith.

“Ariana’s mercenaries had assembled on the crest of a hill leading downward to the dwelling of Eldrith and his servants – the Black Forest...”

“So whats we gonna do?” Sarlen, a mischievous elf asked the unlikely circle of friends.

“Scoutin’ the forest sounds a right bit of a good start to me,” offered Leltek, gazing through the amber eyes of a short male dryad around the motley crew, halting at Ariana, a tall rigid fiery haired woman with piercing green eyes.

“Indeed,” acknowledged the green dragon Rashel in his quietest whisper. “Who shall go and what tasks shall we endeavor to accomplish afterwards?”

“It t’aint no start a t’al,” scorned Larmas. “We a’ready know dere layout. It’s not like we ne’er ‘ad a fight wi’ dem scum!”

“Relax, Larmas, you pitiful excuse fors a dwarf! I gots an idea,” Sarlen chided, unconsciously mediating. “I can takes the two guards on the left flank, Leltek can takes the two as is on the right, and Larmas, the two in back. Rashel can dives down from behind, and Ariana conjures whatever she wants. We’ll drives them from the forest and rains arrows on their retreating backs. That will takes them down to size enough to fights them in hand to hand combat. We can dos it at night and haves the element of surprise on our side as well!” Sarlen slapped her knee emphatically.

“Now dat sounds like a idea worth tryin’!” Larmas unconsciously snatched his axe and stood in his excitement. All agreed.

Ariana lifted a silencing hand. “It is, indeed, a great plan of action. However, I cannot in good conscience, attack without first offering a parley.”

The friends sighed inwardly; they were accustomed to action, but they were also well acquainted with Ariana’s conscience.

“Very well. I shall escort you, Ariana; meeting your enemy on a *dragon’s* back will further elevate your standing.”

“I thank you, Rashel. Shall we leave promptly?”

Larmas, Leltek, and Sarlen set about polishing their weapons and armor as Rashel crouched for Ariana to mount him. With a rush of wind, Rashel rose, beating his massive wings that shone in the noonday sun. Ariana struck a daring figure riding the reptile.

Eldrith started at the woman’s voice that surrounded him at a conversational level. He peered through the darkness of the choking trees to catch glimpses of a figure dressed in man’s clothing, angry hair flaring in the wind, riding a circling green dragon just beyond bowshot.

“Eldrith, I am sure you have received news of the presence of my party. Meet me at the western edge of the forest, and we shall present our terms.”

He caught a glimpse of the figure turning west, and the duo disappeared.

Eldrith stretched and stood, yawning, refusing to let the encounter irritate him. He needed a break from his stratagems, hoping to convince the people of the Katra that if they would serve him now, they would rule once he attained dominion over the Katra. He would avenge his father, the first Elven King, whose throne had been wrested from him by his mother's race – men. The Katra was an attainable bonus.

He leapt nimbly from the gnarled tree and landed lightly upon the leaves of the soft forest floor. His elven blood came in handy for that sort of thing.

"Tarkel! I'll be back in an hour," Eldrith told his unusually short assistant.

"Yes, sir," Tarkel acknowledged obediently, concealing his plans to mutiny.

Eldrith smiled, considering how he could torture that fool woman of the race of men, as he thrust his dagger into his belt. He paused, frowning, remembering the dragon.

"Tarkel, come with me. I'm going to talk to the enemy," Eldrith admitted reluctantly.

"Yes, sir," Tarkel nodded as he buckled his sword belt on and fell in behind Eldrith, expression never changing, though disappointment irked him.

Rashel landed menacingly one hundred feet away from the edge of the trees who strangled one another, as Eldrith and Tarkel broke the cover of the trees, immediately slowing from a neck-breaking run in the forest they knew so well, to a leisurely walk.

Ariana flipped off Rashel's back before he could kneel for her descent, and he followed once he realized she had hit the ground walking. Eldrith schooled his face, revealing no emotion, whether by expression, twitch, or gesture.

"Well met, Eldrith. I propose you remain in your forest, and in return we shall depart." Ariana exerted a commanding air, leaving no room for argument.

Eldrith's cheek twitched and he mentally cursed himself. "We can't stay trapped in a suffocating forest our entire lives. We won't accept your terms. I suggest you go back to your friends," he sneered, "before I decide to kill you."

Rashel began to take a deep breath, but Ariana glanced a warning back at him; Eldrith's army would more than likely be watching in the trees.

"You have made a decision that will bode ill for you and your supposed Circle. You will only live long enough to regret it," Ariana promised calmly as she lifted herself onto Rashel's back using magic. Ariana saw the ground fall away beneath her from the corners of her eyes as she kept a challenging gaze upon Eldrith.

When Ariana returned to the camp, she gave the affirming nod. None of them were surprised; they had expected nothing short of a flat refusal from Eldrith.

That night, Sarlen's plan was executed. Ariana created an illusion of thousands upon thousands of cavalymen riding straight through the trees, images never flickering. The trees, however, did flicker, seemingly the true illusion, and reality gave way to insanity for those who looked upon them. The illusion was the rest of Ariana's party's cue to take down the guards. The thunder of the hooves of the illusions and the battle cries Ariana spoke from their lips, woke the rest of the sleeping Circle of Darkness.

Those who did not look upon the imposing insanity of the illusion either ran because they knew that their fellows were running, or never made it to the edge of the forest due to the raining arrows of Sarlen, Leltek, and Larmas.

Before Rashel stalked the retreating army, according to his portion of the plan, he chanced a quick study of Ariana, worried over the effort she must be exerting. Ariana's entire body was convulsing, but her thoughts remained completely bent upon her spell; her eyes intent upon her prey, creating the will to remain upright.

Rashel tracked the screaming flight of the Circle of Darkness until the first gleam of weapons reflecting the full moon came within sight. He spewed bright green flame upon the forms wracked by nameless fear until they met their doom, whether by streaking arrows, green flame, or contact with the phantoms, whose swords, maces, and spears felt real. Chaos had been sewn among the once organized army, and the Circle of Darkness was no more...

The wizard fell silent, recalling his sister relating the same tale to him.

Attempting to bring the man back to the present, I concluded, "So from within this story, we can extract the hypothesis that many succumb to the temptation due to the fact that nothing stands between them and their goal."

His eyes focused upon me. "Correct."

"Is this a natural deduction, or were they brought up not to care?" I hazarded, trying to throw the wizard off the scent.

The wizard smiled conspiratorially, and sucked long on his pipe before releasing smoke rings, one inside another. His eyes sparkled.

"That, my dear pupil, is your decision."