



The Ring
of Fate

ZVI ROSENFELD



Charlie, a vampire and son of a palace minister, finds himself dragged into a dark secret, which was responsible for his father's murder nearly twenty years before - the Ring of Fate. Meanwhile, the empire of Allace is thrust into war. The humans ally themselves with the Dwarves against the advancing forces of darkness, but the missing ring may be the only hope for mankind.

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Chapter 1

The Hall of Spirits

To the west, a reddish sun was slowly sinking below the treetops of the Mirror Woods along the horizon, and a chilly wind was picking up, as if gaining its liberty from the dying day. But Charlie, returning from his workday at the palace, ignored it all. He had just come to realize what had been bothering him for the last twenty years. Inside, of course, he had been aware of it all along, yet only now had he managed to place a finger on it. *‘They’* simply did not consider him a human – not a worthy one at any rate. Not unlike the way most of the people he knew viewed the servants.

Oh, what’s the use?

Of course, it wasn’t his fault he’d been born a vampire¹ – as most people seemed to enjoy telling him while explaining to him, by using too many words to say nothing at all, why he couldn’t be trusted, treated as an equal, or whatever the particular issue was. Thank heavens it had somehow become ‘unintellectual’ to look down on vampires, which meant that most people were simply forced to disguise their feelings

¹ Approximately one in three hundred human births result in a vampire. Vampires are a sort of mutant sub-race of the human one. They generally have better eyesight and hearing, and require significantly more sleep. In addition, they have the stereotypical pointed ears and fangs, and a strong thirst for blood to aid their physical prowess and mental acuity. (Animal blood would generally do – and most self-respecting vampires accustom themselves to no more, although human blood is admittedly far more effective.)

under a heap of diplomatic words. And of course, they didn't always manage to do so – or make the effort in the first place. On the other hand, vampires *were* currently receiving far better treatment than they had a century ago, when the vast majority of them were in prison before the age of ten, sometimes for crimes they had committed.

Of course, there were a few nobles who *did* view him as an equal and the simple folk *never* seemed to mind vampires, or werewolves for that matter, but they were few, and didn't carry nearly enough influence.

Around Charlie, night was quickly settling in. He muttered a spell and a pool of light formed around him (it was customary in those days for nobles to teach their children the basics of magic, namely, a handful of useful charms and spells). Of course, tomorrow a new day would spread its wings over heaven, and no doubt would inspire in him a much better frame of mind. But for the time being he preferred letting his depressed thoughts – his 'dark side' – take control of him; unfortunately, all too common for him.

"Hey, vampie!" Charlie suddenly heard Roy's familiar, mocking voice calling him. *Just the person he needed.*

Annoyed, he turned slowly towards the voice. Surprisingly, Roy was accompanied by a tall man clad in a long black cloak. The man wasn't armed, yet for some reason he immediately gave Charlie an uneasy sense of déjà vu – as if the man's presence unlocked some uncomfortable memories within him – although perhaps the discomfort was only a matter of his being accompanied by Roy. Instinctively, Charlie reached a hand into his pocket where he had a number of throwing-knives.

The Ring of Fate

“Is this the child?” the man asked. His voice was soft and low. At twenty, Charlie wasn’t exactly a child, but for some reason older people enjoyed calling pretty much anyone younger than they children – perhaps because it made them feel younger themselves.

“Yup, that’s the devil,” Roy returned with his characteristic silly smirk (apparently, some people *deserved* to be called ‘child’). Against his will, Charlie laughed, because the reaction was so Roy. There was something Charlie could never figure out about Roy. Most of the time they palled around like the best of buddies – and they shared so much together in the palace. Yet their difference in race was never far beneath the surface. In fact, Roy seemed to enjoy tormenting Charlie about it; sort of a metaphor for human-vampire race relations in general.

“Your so-called aristocratic education leaves much to be desired. When you mature you may learn that outer appearances are a poor judgment of true human character,” the man hissed, with obvious annoyance.

Well, that was a noble thing to say – or is the stranger putting on an act? “And now, may you leave us alone for a moment?”

“As you wish,” Roy mumbled somewhat frightened and darted away.

“Some people,” the man muttered more to himself.

Charlie said nothing. He still wasn’t certain what to make of the man. Apparently, he had nothing to do with Roy; or, at least, that’s what he wanted Charlie to think. But then who was he? He could mean either good or ill; although, if the majority was any sort a judge he no doubt meant ill. Most people wouldn’t trouble themselves for the good.

“You’re thinking way too much instead of simply accepting events as they occur,” the stranger laughed.

Charlie gazed up. “Well, then what do you want?”
The man couldn’t be seeking ill if he’d let Roy know of his visit; unless, of course, Roy was already working for him.

“I need help, and I’m willing to pay for it,” the stranger went on, turning immediately serious. His voice didn’t seem evil, but then, that could be misleading. “Many figures in the palace mean ill and I must stop them.” *Of course, there weren’t many people in the palace who did not mean ill in one way or the other. The only question was whether this stranger wasn’t one of them.*

The stranger muttered something and Charlie’s light flickered and died. Obviously he was a magician – or from the looks of him, a wizard.

“I’ll give you a golden a month to keep an eye on certain persons in the palace,” the stranger finally put down an offer.

Charlie said nothing. *Should he?* It was tempting, and not only for the money...

“Some of them may be attempting to take vampires as slaves,” the man went on softly. From the way he said it, Charlie thought he was lying – just attempting to tempt Charlie with a noble mission; not that it really mattered.

Charlie finally responded. “How could I possibly know if I want to help you? I mean, who are you and what is your aim?” Charlie could hear the quiver in his voice. Whatever he would choose, he couldn’t join arms with someone whose intentions were so unknown. It would be another question whether he could trust the stranger’s reply, but at the very least he needed to get one.

The Ring of Fate

“I’ll reveal all if you agree to join me,” the stranger replied enigmatically. “But I’ll make it clear from the start, if you think my purposes be ill, you’ll be fully permitted to withdraw your involvement.” ...*And be killed as so not to expose the knowledge*, Charlie thought bitterly. He already began to feel as if he were doomed no matter how he would react.

For a long moment he was silent. This was too grave a decision to be taken on a moment’s notice. Spying on others in the palace was officially an act of treason – though there was certainly no shortage of intrigue going on there daily. Yet at worst, such acts, common as they were, were viewed merely as misdemeanors. Even if caught red-handed Charlie would likely not receive more than exile for it, perhaps not even that. Still, there was no real telling what the stranger had in mind for him at this point – though his vampire’s intuition did not give him the impression at wicked intent. The simplest – and easiest – solution would be to politely decline, so as not to invite trouble. Yet the offer was tempting, very tempting.

“Can I give you a reply tomorrow?” Charlie finally asked, nearly pleading. It would be easier to say no that way.

“Very well. I’ll be back here at this time tomorrow,” his voice was fainter than ever.

The man whispered something and Charlie’s light returned. “Farewell Charlie, farewell,” he muttered and then turned and slipped away. As he recited those last words Charlie imagined seeing a wicked glow pass over the stranger’s face, although, of course, it may have been a nighttime illusion.

For a long moment Charlie stood there lost in thought. *Would it be right to join the man?* A light breeze passed over the darkening plane. *Oh, would it be right?*

Zvi Rosenfeld

If half the nobles in the palace could have double alliances, if the last three kings had been victims of assassins, then why couldn't he join? That seemed to just be part of a noble's life.

Charlie's mother met him by the door as he stepped in. She was a tall woman with long black hair and fair complexion.

"I've heard you've met Hellray," she said pleasantly.

"Is that the name of the man in the black cloak?" Charlie questioned. As he spoke, Charlie was vaguely aware of the fact that she wasn't meant to know of their encounter. He didn't bother pointing that out. It was hardly his concern at the moment.

His mother nodded. "He was a good man, a good friend of your father and a great warrior for good until, oh until-" she stopped short.

"Until what?"

His mother patted his head gently. "Until the day your father died. Many thought he was the murderer, and the King - under the influence of Lord Shayde - had Hellray stripped of all power." He's been a vagabond ever since."

"Do you believe he killed father?" Charlie asked anxiously. He felt he shouldn't be asking such questions, yet this was the first time his mother had spoken to him openly of his father's death, and he was eager to find out as much as he could. For reasons unknown to Charlie, the death had gone down in history as one of the great mysteries of the capital city of Allace; even the mystery itself was shrouded in secrecy.

She shook her head. "No, dear."

The Ring of Fate

“Well he asked if I could help him,” Charlie said quickly; although he was quite sure his mother already knew that.

“It might be a nice way to avenge father’s death,” she said softly. From the expression on her face Charlie read that she understood the matter completely.

“Then you think I should?” Until now he hadn’t been certain whether he really wanted the task. But now the excitement which passed through him at the thought of accepting it told him that he did.

“It would be dangerous, but I trust it is the noble thing to do,” his mother answered carefully.

“And you don’t think he means ill?”

She shook her head. “But I will admit, a lot of mystery surrounded Hellray even back then, and no one really knows what he’s been up to in the ensuing eighteen years.”

Charlie smiled lightly. “Then I will.” The next thing he knew he was embraced in a tight hug.

Despite his mother’s reassurances Charlie was worried. That night in bed he tossed all of the facts – the few that he knew – about in his mind. Was he about to be drafted for the case that his father had fought – and very likely died – for? On the other hand, how could his mother know that he wasn’t about to aid his father’s assassin? He’d been only two when his father had died in the Plane of Long Shadows. No one seemed to know what had happened there; no one who was willing to tell, at any rate. Some spoke of an attempt to overcome Donul, a filthy magician and one of the few men everyone in the palace considered evil. Others said they were after the Stone of Power; although no one seemed to know what the stone was anyway. At any rate, several songs had even been written of his last

Zvi Rosenfeld

battle, of which everyone seemed to know so little. The fewer the facts, the more fanciful the tales.

Oh, never mind! In truth Charlie had already made up his mind to go the moment his mother encouraged him, but then that didn't mean he was relaxed about the decision; indeed, he probably never would be.

The following day was probably one of fall's last. Overhead, the skies were partly cloudy, and a chilly breeze ruffled the fresh morning air as it blew the nearly-bare trees branches of the palace garden to and fro. Yet Charlie barely noticed it as he rushed through the scene on his way to the palace. He worked as an assistant to Lord Tyrin, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Had it not been for the man's offer yesterday, his mood might have even been good.

Ever since he could remember, the palace had been a second home to him. Apparently, his mother had decided that he was to become Minister of Foreign Affairs – and still wielded the influence to see it through. Thus, the bulk of his education consisted of international relations, much of it right in the palace together with the crown prince – the only prince, for that matter – his dear friend Mark.

Oh, the man's offer lay so heavily over his thoughts, as a long, ominous shadow. He knew he would agree, yet still he was both hesitant and anxious.

As Charlie arrived at the palace gates the guards bowed lightly. A moment later the high iron gates opened as if of their own accord. He mumbled a greeting – which could have meant anything – to the two armed men and then entered.

The high-ceilinged hall beyond greeted Charlie with a friendly gust of warm air. From a height of some thirty feet overhead golden chandeliers swung gently

The Ring of Fate

beneath a wood-clad ceiling. Straight ahead of him a water fountain was glowing in the light of the chandeliers. Beyond it a wide column of white marble stairs led up to a second section of the same hall. To either side was a disorganized array of couches and tables, flanked on all sides by an even more confused array of marble pillars. Overall, however, it was a magnificent hall which had existed since well before anyone living could remember.

For Charlie at least, this was much more than a royal lounge. So many of his childhood memories were tied up with it. One of his favorites – which came to his mind now for no particular reason – was when an instructor had asked Mark and Will, another scion of the local aristocracy, to perform a sociological experiment. What they chose to do was to pour a giant mound of mud on the hall's floor and observe (from a distance) the reactions of passersby. Charlie had only joined them near the end of their task. Most of the reactions were, not surprisingly, to simply to ignore it. Still, there were some exceptions. Lord Urr spent some time cleaning it up, grumbling all the while, while Lord Shayde actually waited for some other hapless passerby to come along so that he could lecture over the matter – for no less than twenty minutes.

“What did that man want from you, vampire?” Roy asked eagerly as he emerged from the forest of pillars. Heaven knows what he'd been doing there.

“He was a messenger of the Yivus, and he came to offer me a position in their realm,” Charlie fibbed. Lying had always been a required skill of nobles; perhaps their most importing one.

“Did you accept it?” There was a degree of envy in his voice – though Charlie wondered if Roy actually believed him.

Zvi Rosenfeld

Charlie shook his head. "I suspected my departure would make you too happy."

"And the real reason?" Roy inquired, smiling.

Charlie laughed as he sat down on the fountain's white stone railing. "Would you have?"

"Wouldn't have considered it," Roy answered, with only slightly-affected indignation. *Well, accepting it would have been out and out treason.*

"So why did you think I would have done differently?" *Oh, that was obvious.*

"Well, *I'm* not a vampire," Roy replied slowly, half-seriously half-mockingly.

"And you don't seem to know what one is either," Charlie exclaimed.

Roy was about to reply, but just then Lord Shayde entered the hall with his characteristic huge strides. He was well over six feet tall and quite broad. Rumor had it that his family descended from the barbaric northern tribe of Kanan, though, of course, he would never admit to such a so-called crime.

"How many times do I catch you good-for-nothings just loafing about in the palace?" he roared at them in his deep bass voice. He seemed to make a hobby out of criticizing people, not necessarily kids. Consequently, no one in the palace seemed to like him – nor pay much attention to him. Unfortunately though, he assumed a magnificent, wholly fictitious, gentle nature when interacting with the king, and as a result had far more power than he deserved.

Both boys mumbled some words of apology as they dashed off. In the background, the lord watched them, no doubt while muttering to himself all sorts of comments of how the young generation was intolerant, ill-mannered, arrogant, lazy, wasteful, and just about every other negative word he could think of, which was

The Ring of Fate

quite a lot, considering the amount of practice he had with them. *Oh, whatever!*

“You must have met Lord Shayde,” Gail exclaimed as they reached the far end of the upper hall. She was leaning on the doorway, holding some odd device whose function she was probably the only one in the world to be aware of. She was the palace magician, forty-something but slender, with long golden hair, bright eyes and fair complexion. She was a rather likeable woman, and for the most part – when her abilities weren’t required – stuck to harmless experiments, which normally passed without the palace dwellers’ notice. At times, though, her experiments would fail in some terrible way, such as the time she accidentally created a flock of roaring geese which scattered around the palace for nearly a week – mainly stealing food – till the last of them was caught and exiled.

“How do you know we met Shayde?” Roy wondered.

Gail laughed. “He’s the only one who can cause the two of you to walk together.” The two of them joined in her laughter.

“Just a word of warning,” Gail said, her voice growing suddenly serious. “The Magical Magnitude² over the empire has been extraordinarily high these last few days. I don’t mean to sound threatening, as I definitely am, yet the last time such a surge occurred was before the three day fire. Beware of the future, beware!”

² A sort of unseen property of nature which was known to affect the casting of magic. Only experienced witches or wizards can sense its level. Since the Magnitude was suspected to be altered by the movement of the stars, it was generally assumed it could hold some hint as to the future.



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