

## The Seventh Circle by Todd Cheney

### **Chapter Three**

#### *A New Friend*

Aridhar put one foot in front of the other as he had done continuously for the last several miles. Although he had only been walking for two hours after his run and a fitful nap on the forest floor, it seemed his legs became heavier with each step. His shirt clung to his body with the sweat of his journey. His mouth ached with dryness and he would give anything for a drink of water. He had been a soldier most of his life, but no one would enjoy walking under these conditions.

The old man, who had so mysteriously rescued him from a terrible and certain fate, puzzled him to no end. He couldn't imagine why anyone would come to his rescue so suddenly and with no cause. How could he have known he was inside the sack? It had to be connected to the marks in some way, absurd as that sounded.

He topped a small knoll; the trees broke and he saw down into a ravine where a bubbling brook lay among craggy rocks. He began the short but grateful descent to the water source.

He cupped his hands together after reaching the stream and with a swoop downward, he scooped up a great handful of water. The cool water slid down his throat and quenched his heavy thirst. He drank fully for about five minutes. Then he removed his clothes down to his undergarments and went for a swim.

Despite the shallowness of the stream, having the cool water on his body refreshed him. He began to think about what to do next. The old man had said to go southeast, the direction he had come from, the direction of his farm. If it still stood. But why? His instincts told him going back to the farm now would be fruitless. His family had been taken by the black riders, they had to be, and he prayed he would find help soon to come to their aid. They wouldn't just take him and leave the others behind to gather opposition. They would need them alive to ensure that he would follow, and had said as much. What else? They had spoken his name. Killing his family would serve them no purpose.

Feeling rejuvenated, Aridhar put his clothes back on after his swim. He pulled his breeches on over his wet body and then his shirt. When his head poked through the top of his shirt his heart sank to his stomach. The marks were glowing again.

Aridhar recalled the last time the marks glowed this way. Yesterday he had come near to death. He did not want to take that chance again. At least the marks had started to become useful. Until yesterday and the appearance of the riders, the marks had simply been strange tattoos to him and everyone else. But now they were something more. They had to be magic of some kind. No other explanation.

Over to his left and just before the tree line a small outcropping of rocks poked out of the streambed. It would be a good place to hide for the time being. Even if he had had a weapon, he doubted very much it could save him from recapture by the men who had raided his farm yesterday. He slipped into a crevice between the rocks and kept low. Here he became well hidden from view. If he waited long enough, whoever or whatever made the marks glow would pass by without noticing him.

For fifteen minutes Aridhar crouched between the rocks, keeping his ears perked and eyes open. He looked this way and that for any sign of men approaching. Nothing. He stood up halfway. Getting some distance between him and whoever or whatever made the marks glow would calm

his nerves. Slowly, he rose from between the rocks and started back to the trees in a low crouch. But then he heard something.

It sounded like a child's cry or whimper. But it had more throat, almost like a man's sobbing but not completely. He could not quite put his finger on it. Nearly human, but not absolutely human. It came from down by the streambed, about fifty yards from the place where he had swum. In a weird way, it drew him toward it.

Unsure of what else to do, he started to edge his way along the tree line. He had to get a look at who expressed such terrible sadness. But he kept caution in mind. He had heard of many a wayward traveler who, hearing the sobs or cries of a young girl, had foolishly gone to investigate. When the prey came close enough, tentacles would reach out to envelop him and draw him into the maw of a Cirklen plant. The unlucky food would then sit in the Cirklen's underground belly for five years while it digested him. He certainly did not want to end like that.

He stopped and put his back to a tree. The sobbing creature sat on a rock not twenty feet away. When he came out from behind this tree, he would be able to see the object of his curiosity. He took a deep breath and poked his head out from behind the tree.

No normal child cried by that streambed. The shape of it defined neither Cirklen nor monster. Yet it did not strike him as human in every regard. It sat on a rock by the stream with its hands over its head and its knees drawn up to its stomach. Dirty rags hung off its body, its only clothing. Its chest heaved with sobs and moans of dismay.

Unusually long hands and feet were not the oddest thing about it. The dark, matted fur, which covered most of its body except for the face, did not startle him. Not even finding this creature here alone, sobbing, shocked Aridhar. From this distance, he could make out marks like his on this creature's wrists—half-moons.

He took one short, surprised breath. He still didn't have any clue what these marks could mean or why he had been chosen to bear them. But it gave some small comfort, amidst the confusion that he had experienced since receiving the marks, to know that another being in the world possessed them. His curiosity grew by the second as he observed the strange creature on the rock. Although he knew it was probably not the best course of action in light of recent events, he had to find out if the creature knew anything more about the marks than he did. He approached the creature to try to communicate.

He came closer and closer to the creature. Inch by inch he reached the rock it sat on. Its back to him, it had not noticed him yet. But within five feet, the crying ceased and it turned its head to him. It gazed at him with round, sad, terrified eyes.

"Who . . . ah . . . what are you?" Aridhar stammered.

"Rumnel," came the creature's short reply, "Mehari."

He took a sudden step back. This creature knew the language he knew! The fact that it could speak at all came as a greater shock.

"Rumnel. Is that your name? What are you doing here? Why are you crying?"

"My Mama, she's gone. They took her!" Rumnel hid his head in his arms once again and began another round of sobs. Aridhar knelt on the ground next to him. His arm came up to just behind Rumnel's back, almost involuntarily. He snatched it back to his side. What had come over him? He wished to comfort his new acquaintance, but until he knew more of the situation, he couldn't help.

After a short time, Rumnel calmed down. He turned his head back to Aridhar. "Who are you?" he asked.

“Aridhar Yelenti. I was kidnapped by some bad men who wear all black. They also might still have my family, but I don't know. Have you seen anyone like that around here lately?”

“Yes, they took my Mama! I hate them!” Rumnell slammed his balled fists into the ground in front of the rock. He tore up clods of dirt and threw them in the stream.

“They did? Do you know where they are?”

“No. I only escaped because they were too busy fighting off Mama to go after me. That was two days ago and I have been walking around ever since. I'm so hungry. Do you have any food?”

“No, I don't have any food. I'm sorry. They were fighting off your mother?”

“She's really big.” Rumnell spread out his arms to demonstrate his mother's size as if she were a fish.

“Oh?” Aridhar raised an eyebrow at Rumnell. “You said you are Mehari. Is that your last name?”

“No, Mehari is my people. We live in the caves beneath the mountains. There are many of us but we never leave the mountains. We have tended the earth for the Great Gods since time began.” With this Rumnell smiled in proud satisfaction.

“Ah yes,” Aridhar scratched his chin. “I believe I have heard of your race. When I was young, the schoolmasters told us of the mountain people.”

Rumnell leaped to his feet and pointed to his chest. “I'm mountain people! Clan Ushaki Mehari.”

He followed the excitable creature up a little more slowly. “I see that you are. How did you get those marks on your hands and wrists by the way?”

Rumnell shrugged. “I don't know. They were just there one day. I woke up and they were just there. Then my Mama saw them and she said that I was a most special and important person. We had to go before the Enclave so that they could decide what we should do. My Mama has the marks too.”

“The Enclave?”

“The Enclave rules the Mehari. They make all the important decisions about who does what and who goes where and everything like that. Anyway, they said we had to go to the lighted lands for a while. Me and my Mama. They said that we had an important purpose but they didn't say exactly what it was. So, we packed up our things and left anyway.”

The fact that he, Rumnell, and his mother all had the same strange marks, let alone how they had all gotten them, had to be more than just a huge coincidence. Or so Aridhar believed. Determination to find out how these marks may have been involved with his kidnapping, the kidnapping of his family, and the kidnappings of Rumnell and his mother, had cemented into resolve. But standing here and talking with Rumnell would not get any of those questions answered. Rumnell didn't have any more of an inkling as to what the marks could mean than he did. He was just a child. Aridhar wondered how the old man tied in with all of this. There had to be a reason.

“Do you want to find your Mama, Rumnell?” Aridhar offered.

“Yes,” Rumnell said. A spark of hope flashed in his eyes. Aridhar felt good about his new friend. He thought things might get better, despite everything that had happened.

“Then come with me and we'll find your Mama, somehow,” said Aridhar.

The two new companions sat for at least an hour, probably more, by the stream. They both related their tales of how they came to be at this particular spot at this particular time. Aridhar told Rumnell all about his farm and his family. He told him of the kidnapping and described the men who had captured him in some detail. He told of the miraculous rescue by the old man also. Rumnell told him of the caves and his clan. He told him of the underground gardens where Mehari grew

the mushrooms that were their favorite dish. He told him of the crevasses he and his Mehari friends used to climb in and around before the Enclave said that he and his mother had to leave the clan. Even though they were of two different races and ages, they discovered that they both had a lot in common. The marks, the foremost.

They had both been surprised to learn the other had the marks. Because neither knew the exact significance of them they had both believed no one else could have had them, outside their own circles, of course. Their meeting both surprised and puzzled them. It seemed somehow that they were meant to meet one another. The marks on their palms and wrists only furthered that belief. Only natural that they should travel together now. Discovering what the marks meant had become their common goal. At least they knew they were not alone in their journeys.

After some time, Aridhar decided they should be going. Although his rescuer's advice had rung untrue with his intuition, he could do nothing else at the moment. Alone with a Mehari in the wilderness, weaponless and far from shelter, food became a great concern for both of them. He knew he could go without for days, but Rumnel said he had not eaten in at least three. He also felt that the raiders of his farm would not give up so easily, considering they went through all the trouble, to begin with. And staying in the same spot would only get them caught again.

So Aridhar and the furry little Mehari known as Rumnel headed southeast. They stuck to the trees, and for fear of meeting the black riders, they avoided the open spaces whenever they could. They walked all the rest of the day and further into the night without seeing another person. There were plenty of animals and birds around. But without weapons or any means to catch or clean them, they could not stop to hunt. They ran across two more streams, where they did not hesitate to stop and drink their fill each time. Hours after the sun went down, they decided to stop, and hunger had only tightened its grip.

"This looks as good a place as any," Aridhar noted as the forest broke around them to reveal a small clearing.

Rumnel plopped down on the grass next to a large oak tree. To Aridhar, looked out of place in the forest. A creature of the underground belonged just there, not scurrying around the woods and fields of Creibis on some crazy adventure.

"Where's food?" Rumnel protested. He clutched his stomach as if it pained him. "In the caves, I always know what to eat and what not to eat. But up here . . ."

"Don't worry. Soon, maybe tomorrow, we'll find a village or maybe a traveler. There will be food then. I do have some money—they didn't take it—and we can find a warm bed to sleep in. Until then, let's get some rest." Aridhar lay down on the grass and closed his eyes. He did not need a blanket or cloak, for the summer nights in Creibis were as warm as day. Warm enough to sleep without such aids.

A few feet away Rumnel had imitated his new friend. He lay on his side with his back to Aridhar. "Good night Rumnel," Aridhar murmured. Rumnel said nothing. His snores could already be heard.

\* \* \* \* \*

The small, armed party, which had ridden out from the Untar estates only three days earlier, had not had much luck yet in finding their quarry. The pack train had caught up with them two days ago and the men were glad that nothing untoward had happened since the trek began. Yet the question on everyone's mind could be read on their faces. If Aridhar were not simply kidnapped, but already dead, then what was the point of this hunt?

Yesterday they had come across a small, overturned cart. The horses and drivers were nowhere to be seen. But in the back of the cart lay a burlap sack, discarded and split from end to end. Nikolaus had insisted they had found their first clue and they were getting close, that possibly one of Aridhar's family, or Aridhar himself, had escaped. But no one could be certain of this. It could have been nothing more than an abandoned merchant's cart and they had found little to indicate otherwise.

Soon, the party would travel out of the lands of its leader's influence. This made the ten men-at-arms and six servants edgy. Most felt that this was a wild goose chase. But as long as their lord told them to press on, they would. They did not, after all, question the motives of their lord.

Tyron, the wretched old man who led the pack train, had decided that, despite all, it had come time to say something to Lord Untar. It had to be said with tact, however. He did not want to imply that he had no faith in his lord. The party had camped by a small bridge crossing the river Balarc. To the west could be seen the rising peaks of the Barrier Mountains. Several small tents spread out around a large campfire, which had been used to do the night's cooking. The fire's embers died low, giving off their ashen smell. The moon cast eerie shadows among the encampment. Tyron walked to the largest of the tents, the one which flew the standard of the house Untar. Here Nikolaus slept with his son, Metriv. Most of the rest of the camp slept as well.

"What do you want?" one of the armed men called out as Tyron approached. It was his turn to pull guard duty for his lord tonight. It looked as if he resented his lot this evening.

"I'm here to have a word with Lord Untar," Tyron replied. He crossed his arms and spread his feet apart.

"Very well," the guard sighed as he disappeared into the tent for a minute. Grumbles could be heard from inside and shortly he reappeared with Lord Untar in tow.

Lord Untar came out in his nightshirt, looking ruffled and annoyed. Sleep clung yet heavily to his eyes. "Yes? What is it?"

"Lord Untar," Tyron began, "I know that it is very important to you that you find your missing friend." He paused, uncertain if he should go on. "But some of the men have been thinking that this is all a waste of time—that our resources and protections could better be used at home. They don't see the point in this."

"What are you saying?" said Nikolaus. The rube always believed his men had absolute faith in him. His face began to turn red. "Do they want to turn back? I am sure we are close. The cart yesterday . . ."

"It's not so much that they want to turn back. I'm sure that they are all hardened souls who would crave a good adventure now and then," Tyron soothed, "but this, my lord, is hardly one." With this last sentence, Tyron spread his arms wide and looked at the ground.

"Yes well . . ." Nikolaus stared up at the stars in the night sky.

Inwardly, Tyron acknowledged that Aridhar could be near, had been kidnapped by the mysterious black riders. But if the men were not behind their lord in this, should they not have to turn back?

Lord Untar spoke again, "I make this promise then. We ride all of tomorrow and if we still haven't found certain signs of the riders or Aridhar then we will return to my land."

"Thank you, my lord." Tyron gave a short bow and then shrugged his shoulders as he walked away. One of Nikolaus's greatest qualities, which made him such a leader, had always been the art of compromise. What else could be expected from such a man? He had known Nikolaus all of the younger man's life. And although he had always known his lord would be great among men one

day, he had begun to wonder if that day would ever come. Especially if he chose to send his men off on wild and dangerous chases when there were more important matters to take care of.

He had to be careful around his lord, Tyron reminded himself. There were many things he knew that would get him executed if they were found out. He had been around a long time and had served two lords of Untar before Nikolaus.

He looked at the sleeve of his coat. Just under his right elbow, an old scar reminded him of earlier days. He had jerked away from a hot iron plate once before it could burn him completely. Once he had been a young man. And he had heard of a powerful cult of magic-makers who drew their magics from the pain of others. He had joined their ranks. But what had ever happened to his black robes?