

OCCULT JENGA

By Patrick Bohan

## CHAPTER 1

There's a storm demon in my shed. San Francisco is pouring rain, my eye bags have eye bags, and I still don't have a prom date. That all changes tonight.

I check my watch. 2:12 a.m. I've got less than forty-eight minutes till the witching hour begins. Perfect.

I stare at my shipping container shed, the huge steel box poking out of the muck like an ugly tombstone. Never was big on ambiance. I've slept in that big metal room for three years, and it still creeps me out. Dropping Jimmy the duffel bag on the shed's stoop, I root through the tools, making sure everything I need is in there. Yeah, I named my duffel bag. I get lonely sometimes.

Thunder roars in the distance, sending another chill down my spine. If I make the tiniest misstep tonight, one of those bolts is going to land on my big head instead of my potion, leaving Jimmy all alone in this world. That's where my demon roomie comes in. Nobody does desperate, dangerous, morally gray love spells like a storm demon.

Never on an empty stomach, though.

Digging through the bag, I find three red candles, two feathers, four chunks of chalk, and a box of fresh cinnamon rolls. God, they look so delicious. My stomach lets out an annoyed grumble, and I poke it, reminding the little guy we ate an hour ago. Besides, there's no bigger no-no than waking up a cranky demon without a juicy offering. Especially when the host can bring a thousand volts down on your head. Just another day at the office.

I should introduce myself. My name's Paul Bernelli, and I'm a sorcerer. Sorcerer is the fancy way of saying I cast spells. I do magic. It means I brew love potions, summon

demons, and sneak into shipping containers to shout biblical Aramaic at three in the morning. But to everyone else, *sorcerer* just means I'm crazy. I've gotten pretty used to the snickers and dirty looks.

I shudder again as a gust of cold wind slaps my face. I wrap my striped scarf tighter around my neck and scan the abandoned lot, making sure nobody's following me or rubbernecking. It's unlikely since this old shipyard has become, more or less, a humongous junkyard, but when you're playing with otherworldly forces, you can never be too careful. I look both ways and rest my hand on the huge metal door.

I live in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. The name comes from Mario Fillipi, a Mafioso who'd bribe the broke police force with household items. As he famously put it, in the Tenderloin district, or "TL," you can "pay the sumbitches in steak." The name stuck.

Drugs. Crime. Hookers. None of those are in short supply in the Tenderloin. It's not all bad, though. There's great Indian food and a few cheap theatres. But the best part: anonymity.

Here, nobody cares if you sneak into abandoned shipping containers, screech Latin, or summon demons from the pits of hell. Everyone has something to hide, and nobody gets looked at too closely.

Which is perfect, because I'm about to do all of those things.

Tonight, I'm evoking Paimon, a demon of storms and forbidden knowledge. Pai grants me the occasional wish or occult secret in exchange for goodies. He's also one of my only friends.

The container's combination lock clicks open under my fingers, and I step inside. The shed doesn't have any windows, so for a few uncomfortable seconds, I'm surrounded by total

blackness. My hands fumble in darkness until they land on an extension cord dangling from the ceiling. I flip the switch.

A string of lightbulbs reveals the shipping container's waffled walls, cool metal floor, and low ceiling. A beat-up wood table sits in the center of the container, a purple curtain draped over the top, *Sound of Music* style. Thrift shop candleholders circle the table, stained overhead cabinets stuffed with vials, jars, and even a vintage Godzilla action figure.

Ripped notebook pages litter the floor like indoor snow. Occult symbols are scratched into the metal walls, jagged stars and poorly drawn eyes covering every square inch, as if my shipping container home is secretly a fifth-grade demon's doodled-on desk. A gas stove sits in the far corner, piled high with jars and teapots covered in even more occult symbols.

Welcome to the shed. It's my Fortress of Solitude, Bat Cave, and sanctuary all rolled into one. In here, I have all the space and privacy I need for my rituals.

I plop my duffel bag onto the table and yank the zipper open, pulling out my feathers, chalk, candles, and cinnamon rolls. I slide them to the edge of the circle. Light the candles.

I tear off a piece of cinnamon roll and place it in the center of the circle. Next, I pour a half cup of water into a chalice and give it a good stir. Finally, I dip the pastry into the water and, once the roll is thoroughly soaked and spongy, place it back in the center.

Dinner is served.

"May this circle represent the crabby cosmos, and may he who stands in this circle represent the all. May I be that representative," I say. In magic, a circle is a way to contain and direct the powers of the universe. It means you become a god. For a few beautiful moments, standing inside the circle, you're perfect. Energy and passion course through your veins as all worries wash away. It's beyond exhilarating.

You do need a sigil though.

I reach into my stack of loose pages and notebooks and pull out a tiny scrap of paper, red squiggles and dashes coming together to form a snake. This is a sigil. It's like a calling card for the supernatural. A phone number for demons.

I place the paper inside the circle and take a deep breath, feeling Paimon's presence in the shed, close but hidden.

"Paimon, Demon of Storms, Don of Darkness, Sultan of Snark—I summon you."

An ominous gust of wind blows through the metal box, rustling papers and sweeping dust into the air. The shipping container shakes back and forth, creaking and crunching for a good thirty seconds.

"Pai?" I say, standing up. "Pai, come on. I'm in a hurry."

I reach up and pull a small speaker down from the shelf. Plugging it into my phone, I select "Dancing Queen" from the playlist. Disco fills the air.

Whenever I'm feeling blue, I go out to this shed, light a few candles, and cast spells. They usually work. Besides, if a ritual doesn't solve my problem, a part of me still enjoys having a dark secret. It's like being a superhero, without having to fight crime or wear underwear outside my pants. Even if everyone thinks I'm nuts, I know the truth, and the power is nice. Who wouldn't want to be able to whip up a luck spell, or talk to spirits with a Ouija board? Everybody needs an escape. My escape just happens to involve pentagrams and storm demons.

"Pai?" I say again. "Don't let this roll go waste."

Total silence. Did I do something wrong? Miss a step?

The candles flicker and hiss as smoke begins to form a thick cloud inside the circle.

"It's about time," the cloud says, looking dissatisfied with tonight's offering. "More sweets? It's inhuman to go this long without a good lobster. Or steak..." The spirit stares longingly at the roll. "I'd kill for a good steak."

"Beggars can't be choosers," I say. "You're lucky I'm bringing you anything. Besides, we're going to be busy tonight."

"Did you soak it?" The cloud asks, swirling around the pastry like a prickly restaurant critic.

"Completely drenched and gooey." I grimace, lifting the roll with one dainty finger. "Just the way you like it."

"Oooh, good." The cloud whirls around the roll. "Doesn't look half bad. Be a good lad and toss me a piece."

The cloud of smoke is Paimon. He's a demon. An underworld prince from the ninth and lowest circle. Commander of seventy-seven goetic legions, thirteen beasts of the pit, and occult wisdom of infinite power. Pai's even got his own trumpet band.

Except now he's trapped. And no one knows why.

"ABBA?" The creature perks a smoky ear to the music. "I love ABBA."

"Yeah. At least we can agree on something."

For years, Paimon was one of the greatest and most powerful spirits, appearing before any sorcerer who summoned him. The world feared Pai, constructing temples and sacrificing souls in his honor. But one day, he vanished.

Some think he did battle with a great sorcerer and lost. Others say he overstepped his boundaries and was stripped of his power. The most popular theory, though, is with the decline of the occult and religion, there wasn't enough belief to keep him going. Pai had been

replaced by technology, televangelists, and little green pieces of paper. He wound up stranded, lacking the energy necessary to terrorize our world or return to his. And that's how the great Paimon ended up living in a teenager's messy shed.

He always appears when I call him, though. And he's never told me why.

Bang! Something porcelain shatters outside. While my shed is super convenient and spacious as hell, its location behind my drunk aunt's apartment is anything but prime real estate. I come out here to avoid her trainspotting antics, not get front row seats. Sometimes I wish I could ship the shipping container far away, with me in it.

"It's not here, Linda. Where the hell is it?"

"Jesus, Randy, I'm not responsible for your stash."

Uh-oh. My aunt's fighting with her boyfriend. Again. And judging from the horrible noises outside, I should lay low. Whenever I get involved in these smoking lounge scuffles, somebody always gets punched in the face. It's probably not going to be my aunt's new ex-con boyfriend who gets the knuckle sandwich. Better just mind my own business.

I turn back to the gray ball of demon whirling around my shed, a frown plastered on his smoky face.

"Water? You used water? Where's my blood!" Paimon slaps at the pastry, his smoky tendril passing right through.

"Sorry Pai, but there's no blood tonight. I'm anemic enough as it is."

"I'm a storm demon, not a storm vegan. Cough up some blood or I won't help."

"I don't have any to spare. Honest! Isn't there something else you want?"

The demon sighs a big angry sigh. "Well, if you won't pay in blood, I suppose cash will have to suffice. I'll take a twenty."

My eyes go wide. “What could you possibly want money for?”

“Flavor. I want to taste the silky bitterness of a well-loved bill with that spice roll of yours, blending the two disparate doughs.”

“That’s an expression, Pai. People don’t eat cash.”

“Forbidden fruit. My palate craves more dough.”

“But you don’t even have a palate!”

“Rude. Fetch me a twenty, and I’ll help.”

“Real gourmet, aren’t you?” I pull out my wallet and remove my last twenty-dollar bill, which also happened to be my last bill period. This better be worth it. “By the forces of—“

The candles flicker out as the container ship door creaks open. Aunt Linda steps into the room and, seeing the twenty, her beady eyes light up like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Give it to me, Paul,” she says. “Don’t make me ask twice.”

“No! I need this for my ritual. It’s important.” I duck away, cradling the bill in my hands. With the candles gone out, Pai’s gone too. He never sticks around for trouble. Never sticks his neck out for me. A twitchy kid in an occult shed, talking to himself, surrounded by blood and pastries and disco? Christ, I’ve got to look nuttier than aunt Linda’s lousy peanut butter dinners.

“What’s important is you learn to show your aunt some respect! Sixteen is old enough to help out with the bills, bug-eyes.” She shudders at my ritual tools spread all over the floor. “Besides, I thought I told you I didn’t want to see any more this freaky Satan stuff. Gives me the creeps.”

Aunt Linda isn't exactly religious, but she still can't stand seeing my occult stuff near the apartment. I never understood why. As hobbies go, magic is harmless. It has me learning all about history, Latin, and sometimes anatomy. Sure, most of those anatomy lessons involve voodoo dolls and goat dissections, but it all seems pretty edifying to me.

"I'm not giving it to you. I need it!"

"Why you ungrateful little weasel..." Aunt Linda reaches for the twenty, but I dodge out of the way. Her frown turns brittle. She makes a few more clumsy grabs, tripping over her feet. I smirk. Dodging my drunk aunt is the closest thing I get to family time. In life, you've got to enjoy the little things.

"You lousy disappointment. Just you wait!" Linda yells something about cash and fire from the doorway, summoning Randy, her scary-looking boyfriend of the month. His backward baseball cap and skin-tight V-neck are about three sizes too small, making him look like a big bearded toddler, draped in edgy hand me downs.

"You was gonna burn a twenty?" Randy asks, his huge jaw clenched.

I cross my arms. "No, I was not *gonna buwn a twunty*, it was for a ritual. I was giving the bill to a demon. He's something of a celebrity."

Randy scratches at his head. "Where is he then?"

"It's not that simple. Demons are subtle magical creatures. They appear in smoky incense, and they're invisible to all but the practitioner—"

Randy bursts out laughing, slapping his knee and pointing like I'm the newest freak in his ghetto circus.

"I'm not crazy!"

"Sure buddy."

I hide all traces of hurt behind the scariest scowl I can muster. He doesn't look impressed. "Look, chuckles, I'm not giving this to you. Go punch somebody you can sue for disability afterward, that's more your speed." This twenty isn't only the last of my cash, but the fruits of some seriously arduous labor. It took me a whole week of newspaper peddling, hustling, and measly yard sales to pile this up—I can't just let them take it!

"Ya gonna let him talk to you like that, Randy?"

"Give it, fruitcake." Randy raises a huge fist and I yelp, throwing both hands into the air like a total clown. Randy grabs my right arm, twists, and pulls the bill away. The two go back to bickering, this time about what pills they can buy with my cash.

"Thanks for the help back there, Pai." I bolt the shed door and remind myself to change the locks. Light the candles again. Pai's ball of smoke reforms in the circle.

"Now I know where you get your charm."

"Couldn't you have flicked the lights on or something?"

"If I were a wise man I'd tell you, *life gets better*. But I'm a demon, so I'll tell you the truth: *life doesn't give free lunch*. Time to pay the piper, Paul."

Dammit. Getting my cash snatched sucks, but it also means I'll have to use more of my blood tonight. Without any money, blood is the only valuable I have. With all the rituals I've been doing lately, I've given away more blood than I can spare. Sooner than later it's going to catch up with me. Another reminder to always play it safe when it comes to magic.

"Come on, Pai. Can't you make an exception? Just this once?"

"No blood, no shoes, no service."

"Cheapskate."

"Why thank you."

I clap my hands together and push the cinnamon roll back into the circle's center. I prick my wrist. Blood drips into the circle, scarlet flowing down my fingers and pooling around the pastry like gory enchilada sauce.

Dinner is served, again.

“Bloody good service.”

“Don't choke on it.” I hold the bloody roll over the fire. It crackles and turns to ash in my hand. “I'm going to need your help brewing up a potion. Is that something you can do?”

“Pu-lease, Paul. I wrote the book on potions. What's it for this time?”

He's right. Paimon schooled the ancient Egyptians on brewing, teaching scores of magicians and physicians his secrets. I couldn't pull off this ritual without him.

“It's a, uh.” I cough, uncomfortable. “For a girl.”

The demon lights up. “A girl? Who is she? Is she pretty?”

“Uh, yeah. But the spell is for a dance.” I stammer. “A school dance. It's, like a big event for high school students.”

“You should bring more dates over. This place could use a woman's touch,” he says. I cringe.

Pai's old fashioned. He's got a posh accent, and most of the time, he sounds like a grumpy old man trying to send back cold soup at a deli. He's sharp, though, and I like the company.

“Show her your magic. Women love magic.” Pai's smoke whirls faster. “I could help. Woo the girl, lead her into the circle, and I'll use my smoky hands to—”

“Hold it right there, demon. You better not say anything you'll regret.” He does get carried away sometimes. I've heard him go on long rants about the proper texture for steak,

or the most appealing shape of his favorite silent-era actresses. I shake the leftover box of pastries. “Remember who controls the cinnamon rolls.”

“Fine, it wouldn’t work for you anyway,” Pai smirks. “Love potions are black magic. And unless you’ve found a backbone in this trash pile, I doubt you’re interested.” The smoke looks satisfied with its quip, swirling smugly back and forth.

“You know the drill. No black magic,” I say.

“Such a ludicrous hang-up. Why not use your magic for something *important*,” Pai says, smoke drooling. “Like opening a glorious Sizzlers Steakhouse.”

“I said no black magic. I don’t want to hurt anyone if I can help it. People are like that.”

A spell that violates somebody’s will is black. Black magic has a way of spreading, and nobody, including the caster, gets to walk away unharmed. Enough dark spellcasting can twist the sorcerer’s soul, turning it monstrous. It can even change the sorcerer’s look. I’d prefer not to sprout a tail and an evil laugh, thank you very much. Supposedly, there are ways for advanced sorcerers to avoid the recoil of a black spell, but I stay away from the stuff, just to be safe.

“Not all people...” Pai says with his trademarked stuffy grumble. “If this is the usual practice, why not brew up a fortune potion? Something that *attracts*.”

“A loophole! Nice.” I shoot Pai a thumbs up he pretends not to notice.

“Plus, if you’re lucky, you’ll attract better fortune than just a date.” The smoke spins around, taking in the dreary shipping container. “Your rituals deserve more than a scrap heap.”

“You think?”

“I know. Your destiny lies outside this junkyard.”

“Awww, sweet.” I laugh. “Maybe I’ll invite you to my mansion when I’m bigger than Criss Angel.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Mr. Hollywood. Grab the pot, we’ve got work to do.”

Since I’m self-taught, potions are always tricky as hell. All the old Latin and Aramaic grimoires might as well be gibberish. Fortunately, I have access to the most magical tool of all: the internet. It’s taken me years of pouring through Wikipedia pages and occult blogs written in all caps, separating the real spells from the fake, but I’ve finally got it down. You can learn just about anything online these days. I guess that’s why moms and dads put parental controls on their kids’ computers. But I never had parents. I had an aunt, who was just glad I wasn’t breaking into homes like mom and dad.

“Grab the lemon,” Pai says. I stand over the grimy stove, waving my hand above the teapot. I feel my energy pour into the water. “Lots of lemon. Our potion needs to be sour as a demon indentured to a pining pubescent ninny.”

I pretend not hear, turning the burner up as high as it will go. So long as Pai does what I ask, I’ll suck up the complaints. If I was a king-turned-assistant, I bet I’d be salty too.

“We’re simulating a storm here,” Pai says. “Don’t forget the wind.”

I close my eyes and visualize good fortune. Luck. Money. A date to the dance. A nicer ritual space. When I can see the image clearly in my mind, when I can practically taste the juicy steak I’ll be buying with my good fortune, I start to blow like I’m in front of an imaginary birthday cake. When my vision to blur, I stop hyperventilating and collapse into my chair.

My teapot rumbles like something out of a Disney movie, spout hissing with life.

“Is that good?” I ask.

“Close. But this *is* a lightning spell, after all.”

My stomach turns. “Oh. How could I forget?”

Easy – I wanted to. Flesh and electricity don’t exactly mix. Even with my state of the art lightning rod securely fastened to the shed’s roof, the thought of being so close to one billion volts terrifies me. I’ve been dreading this all week.

Pai’s smoke twists into a smirk. “Hope you’ve got a good lightning rod.”

Jerk. I pick up the teapot and pour about half a cup of the cloudy liquid into a coffee mug with *Chemistry: It’s Mole-cool!* printed on the side. Mug in one hand, I climb up the container’s ladder until I reach a porthole in the ceiling. Thunder booms in the distance. Sticking my arm through the hole, I feel like a big fleshy lightning rod. Fog tickles my forearm. I raise the mug and gulp.

“By the fury of the storm and forces of magic, I demand to find fortune in my future. Bring me a charmed life!” I shout, holding my mug up to the sky. The storm rages in response, lightning flashing on the horizon. My arm starts to tremble.

This is the biggest, baddest ritual I’ve ever performed. The stakes are high and the danger is higher. Some might call it suicidal.

See, I’m about to electrocute myself. Don’t worry, I’m not going to take a toaster bath or cut telephone wires. I’ll be tapping into the raw energies of the storm, powering my potion with the juice a lightning bolt leaves behind. It’s delicate work. If my timing is off, if I’m a fraction of an inch too tall or too close, the lightning will strike me instead of my rod, burning me to a crisp. I’ll be like magic Ben Franklin if this works, and burnt toast if it doesn’t.

More thunder rumbles in the distance, closer this time. The hairs on my arm stand at attention.

Reckless storm magic is a serious no-no. Magic rituals are supposed to stay separate from the physical world, a long list of mental and verbal cues, like prayer. There's usually more Latin than lightning.

But I need results. Pai says the storm will make the ritual more real for me, more powerful and potent. I'm desperate enough to believe him.

I've been lonely for as long as I can remember. For starters, I've always been a pretty awkward guy, not too great at making friends or playing sports. No money, family, or girlfriend. I've learned to tolerate a big, aching lump of emptiness in my chest, but lately, it's been growing. Nagging me, keeping me awake at night. With prom coming up and me dateless, it's feeling like this is how things will be. Forever.

I can't take it any longer. Tonight, I'm going to escape the social pariah box or die trying. Fingers crossed.

"Fortune," I yell into the rain. "Bring me fortune!"

The storm comes crashing down.

Light everywhere. Lightning, a tidal wave of pure power, slams into the shed's lightning rod, scorching it black. I watch in terror as the bolt shakes the rod and travels down the iron, a smidge of leftover lightning spilling onto the roof and towards my arm. The first jolt of energy reaches my fingers. I scream.

Energy flows through my wrist and down into my chest, power coursing through my veins. But it's not lightning anymore. It's magic. I focus on the results, visualizing fortune as

the light begins to fade. Rain pours down on my head as the world starts to wobble. I hold my arm up and keep focusing. More space. Money. A date to the dance. Fortune.

When my arm is too sore to hold on any longer, I shout, “So mote it be.”

A wave of calm passes over my body. I wiggle my fingers and climb down the steps.

“Is that it?”

Pai nods.

“Bottoms up.” I swallow the potion in two gulps. It tastes like tea and cat piss. “Huh. I don’t feel any different.”

“Fortune potions are slow to take effect. You have to wait for the right opportunity to appear.” The smoke circles around the remaining roll. “Now, if you don’t mind, I think it’s time for me to be on my way.”

“Yeah, of course.” I burn the rest of the cinnamon roll and douse all the candles.

“I hereby release the energy of this circle, to bring about my will. Go!”

The smoke rises from the circle, flowing out the porthole and into the cold night air, free until morning. A little blood and time away from the shed aren’t much of a reward, I know. But every night, Paimon still helps, savoring the blood and junk food like a fine wine. I guess Pai’s learned to enjoy the little things too.

“Good fortune...” Pai disappears, along with the magic.

And just like that I’m a lonely kid in an empty shed again.