

*Shadow Over Shandahar*  
*Warrior of Destiny*  
*Excerpt*

**Chapter 1**

*8 Chanteren CY593*

The wind whispered softly through the silver trees. A hush had fallen, and all that could be heard was the rustle of her white ceremonial cloak as it moved over the leaf-littered ground. She looked down at the winter ivy clutched in her gloved hands, the dark green leaves starkly contrasting against the white satin. She could not bring herself to lift her eyes, for she knew that *his* gaze would be waiting. Upon meeting, the depths of his eyes would suck her within and she would become lost . . . lost within a pool of amber. However, she surmised to herself, it could not be all that bad. The pool was warm and the love that she found there complete. Yet, Adrianna wanted all of her wits about her for one of the most important ceremonies of her life.

Finally, Adrianna stopped. The pair of fur-lined suede boots that entered her line of vision told her that she now stood before Sirion. It was easy for her to obtain some idea of what he was thinking, for a whisper of the connection she had shared with the beast Cortath had somehow been retained when Sirion had become transformed back into a man. He urged her to look up at him, wanting to see her face, to look into her eyes. Then his thoughts were running with him, the touch of her lips on his, the feel of her hair through his fingers . . .

Adrianna found herself slamming her barriers up as she felt the heat rise to her face. Damn Sirion! Would he always have this power over her? His passion was all encompassing, and in the deep of the night that was fine. But even during the daylight hours she would find herself thinking of him, and their nights of passion would come creeping up on her. Most of the time, she could chuckle it away; but sometimes it was a burden, and she knew that Sirion took pleasure in seeing her thusly discomfited.

So Adrianna kept her head lowered, and as Sirion took her ivy-laced hands in his, the shaman began to speak. He spoke in Hinterlic, the melodic nuances of the language flowing from his lips like a river. She knew that most of the Wildrunners would not understand what was being spoken, but she hoped that the finer nuances and tones would somehow get through to them. It was a passage that spoke of love, trust, and the deepest of commitments. It was a passage reserved only for a time such as this one, when a man loved a woman and wished to speak a promise to her. As Sirion held her hands in his, Adrianna felt the power of the shaman's words sweep through her. The winds stirred in the treetops and the soft, pale auburn fur lining the hood of her cloak caressed her face. The sounds the winds made became musical in quality and Adrianna felt Sirion's thumbs stroking the tops of her gloved hands. She could feel the magic of this place, the grove where all of the Promising Ceremonies took place.

Suddenly the shaman was finished speaking. Once again, there was a hushed quality about the place, tinged with a hint of expectancy. Then Adrianna felt Sirion pulling her towards him. In her moment of mild surprise, Adrianna looked up into Sirion's face. His gaze captured hers and his lips curved up into a smile of triumph. She

felt herself smiling in response, and Sirion lowered the hood of her cloak. Just as she knew she would, she found herself melting towards him, already becoming lost within the depths of his gaze. Sirion wrapped his arms around her, steadying her as she leaned into him. Adrianna breathed deeply, inhaling his masculine scent. Then she felt the pressure of his mouth on hers, his lips entreating her to let him in. She responded and felt herself being swept away in the moment, the first moment that they would spend in an entire lifetime of moments together.

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The cavern reeked of death. He liked it that way, the stench of rot and decay filling his nostrils day in and day out invigorating him. The cesspool before him bubbled from deep within, a rank bubble of globular material popping sickeningly upon the greenish surface. Reaching out a hand, he pointed a long knobby finger towards the pool. The appendage lengthened upon demand, and once the tip of his jagged fingernail reached the surface of the murky liquid, he began to swirl it around in a circle. He felt the corners of his mouth turn upwards in the parody of a grin, knowing that he would be pleased by what he saw within the pool.

As the image came into view, his smile widened with pleasure. Before him was an army, the greatest one that he had ever created. Deep within the catacombs below him, his army waited. When the winds swept through the caverns just right, he could hear their moans and smell the nearly overpowering stench of their decaying flesh. With his awesome power he had bade them rise from deep within the ground, dead, but now undead. At his disposal, he had human, faelin, halfen and oroc warriors from past battles, knights who had fought for their kingdoms and soldiers who had fought for their friends and their families. Not the least there were heroes who had once fought for all that was good. Now they would fight for the Deathmaster . . . he who had brought them back from death to have some semblance of life once again on the face of Shandahar.

Lord Aasarak turned away from the pool, and he slowly began to make his way to the upper tier of the cavern. It was there that he had brought into undead life his most magnificent creation . . . Thane Darnesse. That man's intense anger and savagery had made him ripe for the picking. Aasarak had taken the opportunity to barter for Thane's soul as he lay dying on the ground in the forest all those moons ago.

As Thane sold his soul, Aasarak became his new Master. Mere days after Thane's rebirth, Aasarak began to realize the strength that his creation possessed. Thane quickly became his right-hand man, a force with which to be reckoned. Under Aasarak's guidance, he brought into service the clans of oorgs that surrounded the immense caverns in which Aasarak had made his base. Quickly, he stepped up as their chief and, until the other Azmathous were created, Thane led them on raids throughout the surrounding kingdoms.

But all of that was short lived. After a while, Thane seemed to have only one thing on his mind . . . revenge. With time, Aasarak began to see that Thane's desire for revenge often was at odds with the commands given him. But Thane was smart and he began to find ways to combine his two priorities.

Aasarak growled deep within his throat, anger coursing through him. He hated the fact that he had been unable to control Thane despite the depth of his power. After

Thane, Aasarak had created others and called them Azmathous. Thane stepped up as Lord of the Azmathous, leading his followers on rampages of death and destruction. Aasarak had no problems controlling the other Azmathous, but when it came to Thane, there was no chain strong enough to bind him. At the end of his existence, as Thane found himself closer to his target of revenge, he somehow became detached from his Master. It was strange that the target happened to be Thane's own daughter. Even someone as twisted and evil as Aasarak had a difficult time believing a man could hate his own offspring so much.

Lady Adrianna Darnesse. Yes, he was quite familiar with her. For four Cycles he had fought against her and her group of rag-tag companions and it would be the same this Cycle as well. As each Cycle passed, he grew in strength and power. This Cycle was the first time he had created anything like the Azmathous, for he had never come into contact with Adrianna's father in previous cycles. The next cycle, he would use Thane more effectively and be sure that nothing would be able to stop him. The only reason why Adrianna had been able to defeat her father was because of the Ring of Aboleth.

Damn that artifact! Aasarak had thought the ring to be gone long ago. He had been wrong and the young sorceress had not succumbed to its power. Her anchor had been strong enough to pull her away from the temptation that the ring offered. Sirion Timberlyn. Yes, he knew Sirion as well. However, this was the first Cycle that the ranger had allied himself with Adrianna's group.

Oh well. It was of no consequence. Aasarak would defeat Adrianna and her comrades yet again, and the world would begin itself anew. With the addition of Sirion and his companions to the group, Aasarak was sure he would find them to be more formidable. But he had grown in power as well, and with his undead army larger than ever before, he would crush any possible opposition. The puny machinations of Master Tallachienan Chroalthone and Lord Trebexal Phesackmet would mean nothing to him, and they would fail just as they had in previous Cycles. Master TC could give nothing to Lady Adrianna that he had not given her already, and his journeyman, Dinim Coabra would still be too young to be a force with which to be reckoned.

Aasarak reached the uppermost tier of the cavern and approached the warrior waiting there. The death knight was tall, with tangled ropes of long hair escaping his helm. He was Azmathous, one of the several created after the destruction of Thane and his group. He was not as powerful as Thane, but Aasarak hoped that, with time, he could be. He drew close to his minion and gave him his next assignment. Hodorin only nodded in affirmation to the command and, when Aasarak was finished, the warrior turned on his heel and left to gather the other Azmathous. Aasarak felt the corners of his mouth turn up into another smile, imagining the destruction soon to take place. It was good . . . very good.

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Adrianna stood upon the balcony of the alcove that she shared with Sirion, looking out at the rest of the fortress. Above, beneath, and alongside her there were other balconies that belonged to other alcoves. Interconnecting bridges spanned from one giant tree to the next, affording people the ability to travel freely throughout the Sherkari

Fortress. This was indeed a wondrous place, for it contained sights one would never see anywhere else upon Shandahar. The magic surrounding the fortress served to regulate the climate within the boundaries, and probably other functions as well. However, it was still very apparent that winter was quickly approaching. The climate control only protected the inhabitants from the coldest of winter winds and the strongest of rainy gales. So blankets and furs were piled high on the beds, glow-spheres were taken out of summer storage, and the warmth-giving ales and brews taken from their places on the shelves.

Adrianna wrapped her winter cloak more tightly around her. It seemed like many months had passed since she and her companions had defeated Lord Thane. However, only a mere five weeks had gone by. After several days of traveling, they had finally reached Sangrilak. The first days they were there had been spent in celebration. The news of Thane's defeat had traveled faster than they could have ever imagined. The city-folk had gathered at the Inn of the Hapless Cenloryan the day after their arrival, everyone applauding their victory. Then other people had come, people representing several of the provinces within the realm of Monaf. The Wildrunners were given gold and other tokens of goodwill from the people that Thane had devastated. And that is what they had become . . . the Wildrunners. Despite initial protestations, the people continued to call them by that name. Then, after a few days it didn't really seem to matter anymore, and the name began to stick. By the time that their stay in Sangrilak was done, the group had even begun to call themselves by that legendary name. If it was so important to people that the Wildrunners still be in existence, who were they to deny them that?

After their five days sojourn in Sangrilak, the Wildrunners decided that it was time to go to Elvandahar. Sirion and Anya were anxious to go, their mother, Lilandria, not having seen her two children together in almost a decade. Sheridana's friend, Carli, was anxious to be back there as well, she having been Promised to one of the palace isterian. She missed the man she had left behind when she answered Sheri's summons to meet her in Sangrilak with Fitanni. Carli had been more than happy to come, glad that Sheri and the rest of the group were well; but now she felt the pull to return to the place she had begun to call home.

A gentle wind swept through the area, moving the treetops overhead. The leaves rustled and Adrianna watched as several of them drifted into her view, falling to the ground far below. She then glanced at the hand that rested upon the balustrade. Around the middle finger there was a beautiful ring, gifted to her by Sirion just yesterday at their own Promising Ceremony. The silver wrought leaves were perfect in every detail, each one intricately interwoven with the next. The artist was obviously a master in his craft, and Sirion must have spent a good portion of the monies that had been awarded them in Sangrilak. It was a symbol of his love and his devotion to her. It was his promise that she would one day be his wife.

Suddenly Adrianna found her mind beginning to reel. It was hard to believe that her life had come to this. Sirion was more than she could ever have hoped for. There were so many things that could have kept them apart, yet here they were, making plans for a future together. Adrianna felt herself starting to become slightly disoriented. She clutched at the balustrade, seeking to steady herself. And then, just as quickly as it had come, the strange feeling had dissipated.

"Adrianna, are you all right?"

Startled, Adrianna turned around. She had not heard him coming, probably too engrossed within her thoughts to pay any heed. She nodded and smiled. Sirion's expression of concern melted away, and the next moment she was in his arms. Adrianna put her head on his shoulder and leaned herself into him. Just like always, she felt safe in his embrace, safer than she felt anywhere else. However, her thoughts still continued to swim about in her mind, thoughts of the differences between them, things that she feared could someday come to separate them.

"Sirion . . ." Adrianna found herself asking the question that had been in her mind since before they had been Promised. "How did you come to love me?" Adrianna felt him deeply inhale, his chest expanding beneath the thick fabric of his tunic. Then he let the breath out, slowly releasing her from his embrace. Feeling suddenly bereft, Adrianna looked up at him as he turned from her to face the balustrade. He leaned his body against it, looking out onto the scene she had been contemplating just moments before.

"It seems that I have always loved you." Sirion spoke ominously, his voice low. His expression was serious, his brows pulled together over his eyes.

Adrianna regarded him quizzically before responding. "Sirion, what do you mean? We only just met several months ago in Sangrilak, my first day back from Andahye."

Sirion shook his head. "No. I knew you before that . . . before you ever left for Andahye."

Then it was her turn to shake her head. "Sirion, I would have remembered you had we met."

Sirion looked over to her. "So you remember then?"

Adrianna frowned. "Remember what?"

Sirion sighed heavily, shaking his head. "We met once, when you were still yet a child. Don't you remember?"

Adrianna's frown deepened. For the life of her, she could not remember this meeting. Was Sirion going crazy?

"I called for Dramati . . . kept calling for him," began Sirion. "It was time for us to leave. I had completed my business in town and he was holding us up. I continued to call his name as I walked out of Sangrilak and into the surrounding countryside. I knew that he was near, for he had told me that much via our telepathic link. However, he would not answer me with the usual bark to tell me of his location, and he would not come to me."

Sirion paused thoughtfully and then continued. "Finally I found him. He was lying down in the tall prairie grasses. Next to him laid a small child. She was sleeping." Sirion searched Adrianna's face, hoping to find some sign of recognition . . . that she had begun to remember the account. Her expression remained blank, yet she listened to his story interestedly.

"Adria, that child was you. It was the first time I met you, and it seems that ever since that day, I have loved you." Sirion turned away from her then, despondent that she had not remembered, and grasped the balustrade before him. Somehow, the more terrible events of her life that had come after had buried it.

Adrianna pondered the story. She imagined it just as Sirion told it. Dramati lying in the tall grasses and she lay beside him, sleeping. He must have been warm and soft, and probably had made her feel safe . . .

Suddenly she remembered. Like a ray of sunshine, the memory came back to her. She remembered hearing something and she awoke. She sat upright when she saw a man standing several feet away. The large animal that had rescued her from the schoolboys still lay beside her.

Adrianna snapped out of the memory and looked at the man who stood beside her on the balcony. She placed her hand on his arm, and when he turned to look at her she smiled. "I remember, Sirion. I was running from some boys from school, and suddenly Dramati was there. He let me climb on his back, and he took me away to the safety of the countryside. I remember feeling safe. His thick fur was so inviting, I lay against him and fell asleep."

Sirion's mouth curved up into a smile. "At first, I thought that you were a sprite or a nymph, but when you awakened and did not run away, I realized that you were merely a girl-child. You were in my thoughts often since that day, and I watched as you grew older. Whenever I was in the city, I would look for you, and each time I saw you, the more deeply I found myself enamored by you."

Adrianna grinned. "Sirion, you are funning me! That's not fair. I asked you a legitimate question!"

"And I answered it truthfully." Sirion's expression became serious once more.

Adrianna's smile also left her face and she regarded Sirion intently. *By the gods . . . he was serious.* "Sirion, are you trying to tell me that you were following me?"

"Well, not exactly. But yes, in a way I guess you could say that."

Adrianna's eyes widened incredulously. "But why?"

Sirion shrugged his shoulders. "In the beginning, I wanted to be sure that you were all right. Your vulnerability that day I saw you with Dramati stayed with me, and my protective instincts took over. However, after a while, it became more than that. You are a beautiful woman, Adrianna, and I could not help but seek you out when I was in the city, just to look at you. Somehow, I was drawn to you, and I had never met you . . . not really."

Sirion looked into Adrianna's eyes. His voice was low as he spoke again.

"Everything good I have done in my life was for you Adria. It was all for you."

Adrianna looked back at him, felt the intensity emanating from him. Over the past few months, he had come to mean so much to her. Now, hearing what he had to say, those words having been locked inside of him for so long, burned her to the core. She could see the questions in his eyes, wondering if he should have told her, wondering how she would respond, wondering if she would still feel the same way about him.

Adrianna stepped into the space that separated them, putting her face next to his. "I love you, Sirion." She breathed the words softly against his face, brushing her lips against him as she spoke. She sensed his momentary hesitation, and then his arms were around her and he was clutching her to him. Adrianna wrapped her arms around his neck as the tears began to fall down her cheeks. She would never question his love for her again. Never.

As he held her, Sirion ran his knuckles down the side of her face, and she felt herself tremble at his touch. Somehow he was always able to hold back the night,

protecting her always. All of a sudden Adrianna felt herself being lifted from the floor. Sirion carried her from the balcony back into the room. He laid her gently onto the bed, following her down with his body. There was a story in his eyes that turned the pages of her desire, and she could feel the hand of Fate reaching out for them. The rush of passion's fire swept through her, and she could feel her heart rate increase. Passionately, he took her mind, body, and soul. Adrianna couldn't have asked for anything more, and she knew that he loved her like no other. For her, there could never be anyone else, and she knew with all of her heart that this was meant to be.

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Dinim stared at the open tome that Sabian and Armond had just placed before him. He sighed and rubbed his eyes wearily. Truth be told, he had been too long at this task and desperately needed a break. But he had given himself no such respite. He knew that he was close, their literature search having taken them so far. And now, here lay the culmination of all of their efforts. The Rod of Atlenbos. Many of the texts had only vaguely alluded to the artifact, but with several days' worth of perseverance, they had finally found the texts that lead them to this one. And here it was, a full description of the artifact, including a crude representation on the leading page.

Dinim skimmed over the text while Sabian and Armond looked on. Only Dinim had the ability to read the ancient script upon the pages of the book, he having received training in the ancient languages from Master TC. It was written in an early form of Denedrian, not too different from what the language was today. However, in order to decipher the details of the notes written, one had to know how to translate the different meanings of some of the words. Depending upon the context, two words, written the same, could have entirely different meanings, or two words, written very differently, could have the same meaning. It was all sometimes very difficult to translate, especially when it came to some of the earlier prophecies; but Dinim somehow always made due.

Finally Dinim looked up from the pages. "This is it."

Sabian and Armond looked at one another and grinned widely. All of them had put in long hours of research and dedication to a task that Dinim had explained to them was worthy. Early on, they had stumbled onto a reference of the rod. Then, upon further study, Dinim realized that it might be something worth looking further into. And now, looking at the descriptions upon the pages before him, he realized that all of their hard work had paid off. This rod could be the defining factor in their fight against Aasarak, and now all they had to do was procure it, and then learn to use it.

Upon first arriving to Elvandahar, Dinim had a nocturnal visit from his mentor. Usually Master TC communicated to him via the Notebook, but in some rare instances he would pay Dinim a visit. TC warned him about Aasarak . . . that the dark sorcerer was stirring up some trouble in the north. He also told Dinim that his preparations for Adrianna were almost complete, and then he would soon be coming for her.

Dinim closed the book and then sat back in his chair. "Let me look over this tonight. The text should give me an idea of where we should start looking for the rod. Once we know where we will be going, we will need to make preparations, and then find out who is going to be joining us."

Armond and Sabian both nodded and then began to stack the multitude of books, loose-leaf parchments, and scrolls on the table into piles. Once they were finished with this task, they left the library, seeking the sanctuary of their alcoves. Dinim also went to his alcove, thinking about how he was going to tell Adrianna about TC's plan for her. He knew that she would balk at the concept of leaving the group, especially when they had the threat of Aasarak looming over them. Not only that, but she was Sirion's betrothed now. She would not want to leave his side, despite the benefits that she would incur upon studying under TC.

Dinim sighed as he opened the door to his alcove. Adrianna was not the easiest person for him to talk to these days. Ever since their argument about the Ring of Aboleth, she had been distant and withdrawn from him. He didn't really blame her, since he had thrown one of his most powerful spells at her and would have killed her had she not been wearing her protective talisman. Whatever that thing was, it had also protected her from the spells that had been thrown back at them by the Deathmage in their battle against Lord Thane and his minions. However, there were many more spells that it did not protect her against, and Dinim was left wondering about the true nature of the serpentine object. Where did it come from? What was its primary purpose? And why did it pick and chose when to offer its protective services?

Dinim entered and closed the door behind him. Adrianna was actually one of the reasons why he had thrown himself so purposefully into his research of the rod. Without the warmth of her friendship, he felt desolate inside, and he hated himself for what he had done, despite the influence under which he had been subjugated at the time of his transgression. The research took his mind off of her, at least for a little while. But still he had to sleep, and it was within his dreams that his mind returned to her.

Dinim had to admit, Adrianna had handled herself quite nicely in her fight against Lord Thane. She had persevered against a man who had murdered countless others, not to mention that he was her father. Against Dinim's wishes, she had taken the ring from him and used it to her advantage in a battle that could have cost the lives of more than just one group member. Because she had taken the risk, only Zorg's life had been forfeit. He still continued to feel that the risk was not worth the potential consequences, but he would not change the outcome of the fight for anything. During their initial argument about the ring, Adrianna had suggested an anchor for the ring wielder, someone who could bring the wielder back from the temptation of power that the ring offered. He had ignored her, thinking her a silly girl with very little experience. But her strategy had held true, and Sirion had brought Adrianna back from the brink of insanity, their love for one another conquering the pull of the ring.

Now, as Dinim sat back and reflected upon it all, he had nothing but respect for Adrianna. She had stepped forward and taken the role of a leader at a time that it was most needed. He regretted his cruel words to her during their argument, not to mention his unfriendly thoughts towards her and subsequent action that would have killed anyone else. He respected her as a person and as a magic user. He respected the relationship she shared with Sirion, knowing that it had been the only thing that could have possibly saved her from the ring. He only wished that it could have been him.

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Armond shouldered his way into the alcove, depositing the pile of books, parchments, and scrolls onto the bed as he made his way to the balcony. There he stood for a few moments, taking in the scenery, and letting the gentle winds flow over him. He would not stay out there long, the winds being cold at this time of year. Yet, they did not seem to bother him, his mind so focused upon what he, Sabian, and Dinim had accomplished over the past few weeks. Once, he would not have even begun to imagine himself working so closely with a Cimmerean. But recent events had changed his perception of that race, not to mention the entire world.

When Armond first met Dinim he could not help but feel grateful to the Cimmerean. He had saved them from certain doom in the Temple of Gaknar, and he was indebted to the man. Yet, Armond's childhood conditioning had continued to war with his reasoning, not to mention the situation from which he and the rest of his newfound companions had found themselves. The first man they had thought to be Dinim had turned out to be an imposter. During their struggle in the temple, the genuine Dinim had been revealed, and then he had placed them all in danger by bringing the ceiling down upon them. However, the Cimmerean had risked his life to return for them, and subsequently led them out of the temple. That had to mean something, and in Armond's mind, it gave the Cimmerean a chance to further redeem himself.

And Dinim had done just that. He had fought alongside the Wildrunners to end the threat of Gaknar and then returned to them in order to help Adrianna in her plight against her father. Many of Dinim's actions had proven to be questionable, but Armond had fought by his side and found him to be a man of inherent goodness despite the race to which Dinim had been born. Armond had seen Dinim make many a poor choice, especially when it came to the Lady Adrianna, but Armond had learned that it was only because the man was in love with her.

Stepping back inside the alcove, Armond pulled his cloak around him and collected his swords before seating himself upon the bed. He gently pushed the pile of texts aside as he drew forth the first blade. The steel hissed as it glided over the interior surface of the sheath, and once it was free the sword lay, silently silver, upon the blanket before him. Armond picked up the blade, examining it this way and that, being sure that there were no nicks, scratches, or smudges upon the smooth surface. With the knuckle of his left hand he caressed the shining steel, unable to resist touching the blade. It was his life, and his livelihood. This sword, as well as its brother, had saved his life countless times in countless situations. The swords had become a part of him, an integral aspect of his life that he would no sooner be able to part with than his right leg.

Armond began to hum to himself, a song that he knew from boyhood. He lay the first sword back down onto the bed and then unsheathed the second one. Just as he did the first, he examined the blade for any imperfections, although he knew that none would be there. He had cleaned and serviced both blades honorably after their battle with the Azmathous. He had done well for himself in that fight, his unique Talent giving him the opportunity to defeat an enemy that anyone else could have died attempting. Not that he had been immune against the Deathmage, but he definitely had an advantage that none of the others possessed.

Armond continued humming, and within moments the blade within his grasp began to react to the song. The steel began to glow blue within the dim light of the alcove. He could feel the sword hum back, felt the energy respond to him. Feelings of

peacefulness began to suffuse Armond and he could not help but smile to himself. He remembered himself as a much younger man, merely a boy actually, watching as the swords were made for him. And the first blood that the swords tasted was his, so that they would always know him as their master.

Armond placed the blade next to its sister on the bed. Soon after they had been made, Armond's training had begun. His grandfather taught him many things about being a bladesinger, but after his training was complete, Armond had taught himself so much more. His skill with the weapons had increased, as well as his ability to harness magic into them. It was this increase in his power and subsequent confidence in himself that enabled him to defeat the Deathmage. Not only had he impressed the Wildrunners, but himself as well. Finally he had become a power to be reckoned with, and no longer merely an amateur.

Armond slid the weapons back into their sheaths. His mind settled onto the battle with the Azmathous, picking over the details. When Sabian had used his power to cast a protective spell over him, instead of choosing to use it upon himself, Armond had felt invigorated. Sabian knew that Armond might have a chance against the Deathmage, more so than anyone else in the group. With that knowledge in the forefront of his mind, he made over to the Azmathous wizard. The enemy did not bother to back down, not yet perceiving Armond as a threat. But that was the creature's gravest mistake. Armond remembered the widening of the eyes as his blades cut into the enemy, the disbelief reflected there. And that had been the beginning of the end for the Azmathous. While he fought with the mage, Adrianna and Sheridana defeated their Lord. The only one to perish in the fight was Zorg.

Armond felt the ache in his heart as his mind recalled his friend. The big man had died a warrior's death, and he would be honored forever. Yet, Armond could not help but think that Zorg had died before his time. More than once, Armond entertained thoughts in which Adrianna had brought him back to life with the Ring of Aboleth instead of just leaving him to lie on the battlefield. However, Armond knew that these were not good thoughts, for if she had used the ring in that way, she would never have returned to them. Moreover, Zorg would have been stripped of the honor he had gained upon his warrior's death. Armond sighed as he returned the blades to their place beside the bed. He then lay down and closed his eyes. When he slept the loss was not quite so great, and his conscience not so ridden by guilt.

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### *11 Chanteren CY 593*

Dinim walked in the direction that he knew Adrianna to be. It was quiet in the library and Dinim found that he was glad that there was no one else about. He couldn't wait any longer to tell her about Tallachienan's plans for her. Any time now, TC would come for her, and she needed to know what to expect. Dinim was sure that she would be surprised when he told her about the master's plans, especially since she had sustained no contact with TC before.

Dinim paused when he finally caught sight of her. This could prove to be rather difficult for him, hence the reason why he had been procrastinating in telling her about

TC's desire to make her his apprentice. She had made it abundantly clear that she wanted nothing to do with him, and he had subsequently taken himself away from her. He had entertained thoughts of leaving the group altogether but then thought better of it, knowing that they would need him in the battle ahead. Despite his discomfort and her dislike, he had stayed, placing his and her emotions aside for now, for the greater good of the cause. If not for that, he would have been gone weeks ago.

Hesitantly Dinim approached Adrianna. She looked up from the book she was looking at, her expression remaining neutral as he stopped in front of her. He glanced at the book in her hands and saw the depiction of a silver dragon adorning the cover. He then looked back up to her face, noting her shielded demeanor. Dinim smiled pleasantly despite knowing that it would not quite reach his eyes. "I have been searching for you. You can be rather difficult to track down, you know."

Adrianna closed the book and tucked it beneath her arm. She regarded him intently for a moment before she began to walk towards the entrance to the library. "Sheri doesn't need me does she? I can't imagine that she would; she usually sends Carli when she needs something. Is it Sirion? What does he want?" Adrianna then turned to him, an expression of concern on her face.

"No. No one sent me. I came to speak with you about something."

Adrianna schooled her expression into one of nonchalance before turning away from him and continuing through the library. "What would that be? Is it important?" She said the last as though she hoped that it would be. She did not want to consider that Dinim would want to track her down for something that was of little consequence.

"Actually, yes. It is rather important."

Adrianna continued walking for a moment longer before stopping and turning to face him. She regarded him expectantly, patiently waiting for him to tell her what was on his mind. "You may be more than a little surprised when I tell you this. It came as a surprise to me, and I know TC rather well."

Adrianna's brows pulled together into a frown. "What is it?"

"Over the past several months I have been keeping Master TC apprised of our activities. Upon several occasions I spoke to him about the people with whom I have been keeping myself, including you. It seems he has garnered quite an opinion of you and has requested that you join him at his citadel as his apprentice."

Dinim watched her intently as he said the last. A myriad of expressions passed over Adrianna's face before she finally settled upon a single emotion. She shook her head as she made her reply, her eyes continuing to mirror her incredulity. "Dinim, you know I can't leave now. Our fight with Aasarak is just around the river bend. How can I . . ."

Dinim held up his hands, forestalling any additional comments. "Adrianna, I know how you feel about leaving the group, especially now, but let me tell you how important this decision is. An apprenticeship with TC is not one to be considered lightly. Very few people are ever asked to study with him, and many would give an arm or a leg to be his apprentice. With him, you will gain knowledge and skill you have never even dreamed of, and with that type of power you will be able to aid the group in a way that you never will if you decide not to go. Ultimately the decision is up to you, but in my opinion, you would be a fool not to accept."

Adrianna frowned and narrowed her eyes. “As I recall, you seem to think that I am a fool already.”

The words slammed into Dinim like an umberhulk wagon. He was not prepared for the pain he heard in her voice, or the bitterness. It was suddenly difficult for him to breathe, and he had to clear his throat before he could speak once more. “Adrianna, please let’s . . .”

Adrianna shook her head. “You are right. Let’s not go there.” She sighed heavily. “But my answer remains the same. The Wildrunners need me now, and I will not desert the group so that I may have some bit of personal satisfaction. Don’t get me wrong, under any other circumstance I would leap at this opportunity, but not right now. There is too much at stake . . .”

“But that’s just it. The group doesn’t need you right now. I have discovered the location of the rod and we can take the journey to obtain it without you. We can spare you for a few months while you study, and by the time you return to us, we will be ready to fight Aasarak. You will have some heavier weaponry under your sash, and you may be able to turn the tide of the battle.”

Adrianna pondered his words for a moment, her mind mulling over the possibilities. What if Dinim was right? It seemed reasonable that the group would be able to collect the rod without her. It would probably take several weeks to obtain it, and then they could prepare for the battle in the remainder of the time it would take her to complete her studies. Adrianna returned her attention to Dinim, who continued to stand by, waiting for her to decide.

Finally Adrianna nodded. “I will speak to Sirion about it. Once I have his opinion, I will let you know what I have decided. Are you sure that you won’t need me for the journey?”

Dinim nodded. “Adrianna, have some faith in the rest of us. We can get the job done. Then we will figure out how to use the rod. When the time comes, we will move against Aasarak. When TC has deemed your studies complete, he will be able to return you to us wherever we may be.”

“But are you sure that he wants *me*? I have already been an apprentice to another master.”

Dinim shook his head. “Yes, but your time was cut short. You never completed your last test, having left Andahye before you could undergo it. Not to mention that you may not have been entirely prepared for it anyway. TC will show you another level of spell-casting, one that is known by few others. You will undergo your tests with him, and once they are complete, you will leave his side to make your mark in the world as a journeyman.”

Adrianna nodded. “I will let you know.”

Dinim nodded in return. Adrianna turned and began to walk away. “Adrianna . . .”

She stopped and looked at him over her shoulder. Dinim swallowed heavily before continuing. “I am sorry for everything that has happened between us, and I wish that you could find it in your heart to forgive me.”

Adrianna was silent for a moment before she replied. “I *have* forgiven you Dinim. But it is not so easy to forget.”

Dinim silently watched as she walked out of the library. His heart ached. He had seen the sadness in her eyes when she responded to his plea, and it cut him to the core of his being. He hoped that one day he would be able to make everything up to her, and perhaps, just perhaps she would finally allow herself to forget.