

Excerpt from
Dark Mists of Ansalar: Blood of Dragons
by T.R. Chowdhury and T.M. Crim

Aeris walked deeper into the Silverwood. The air was cool, and the rays of the newly risen sun were just beginning to break over the horizon. The silver leaves on the great oak trees of her homeland glistened brightly with early morning dew. Soon, it would dazzle her eyes and she would begin to squint through the cacophony of prismatic light. But until then, she could enjoy the sheer glory of it.

Aeris shrugged her travel pack more firmly up onto her shoulder. Despite the beauty that surrounded her, Aeris was unable to find much joy in it. In the darkness of predawn, she had awakened to find herself lying on the ground. Almost immediately she knew where she was, but how she got there was an enigma to her. She remembered the deaths of her comrades, but not how she had been able to escape the behiraz. She didn't know how her wound had become healed, or how she came to be wearing a set of clothes that were not her own. And even more mystifying was the ring that circled the middle finger of her left hand. The opalescent stone at the center swirled with pale blue and green color, and she knew that it must be worth a small fortune.

Aeris traveled west through Elvandahar. It wasn't long before she realized how close she was to Sefranim, her father's village. The closer she approached, the harder her heart pounded in her chest. Any moment her father's rangers would materialize out of the trees. They would escort her to Sirion, perhaps asking questions about her journey. They would want to know about Raissa, Lorak, Doran and Mavik. Once reaching the village, she would be forced to make a public statement concerning the deaths of the four young people. Many would wonder the same thing she did herself . . . how did she escape when no one else was able? Why did the others die with only Damaeris Timberlyn left alive to tell the tale?

Aeris stumbled over an exposed tree root, but was able to catch herself against one of the massive oaks before she fell. She laid her forehead against the tree and dug her fingernails into the rich silvery bark. She took a deep breath, inhaling the scents all around. The calm she sought was elusive, and before she knew it, the tears were flowing. Her body trembled and she began to

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doubt her sanity. She didn't feel ill, but she knew that somehow she must be. Otherwise, how could she have forgotten the past several weeks of her life? Even though she couldn't recall them, the weeks must have passed in order for her terrible injury to heal so completely.

Aeris pushed away from the tree and started to move again. Half-blinded by tears, she weaved around exposed roots, low-lying scrub, and more trees. She stumbled a couple more times before she finally stopped over a rumo bush and vomited. She waited a few moments for her stomach to settle, and then moved on again. She didn't realize that she was surrounded until she heard a voice speak to her.

“Princess Damaeris, is that you?”

Aeris looked up to find that an entourage of rangers had formed a semi-circle before her. It was just as she had envisioned. The men should have had their bows drawn and arrows ready, but they must have recognized her in spite of her pathetic appearance. Longbows remained slung over their shoulders, and daggers sheathed at their narrow hips. The men regarded her expectantly, and with more than a little concern. None of them stepped towards her, and she realized the reason why when another man walked out from behind them.

It was her father.

Aeris felt an ache start in her chest that slowly made its way up to form a lump in her throat. His beloved face started her tears anew, and her body began to tremble. With a muttered curse, Sirion dropped his long-bow and ran to her. Before she could fall, Aeris found herself caught up in his embrace. She inhaled the familiar scent of him as he crooned soothingly to her in hinterlic, and then swung her up in strong arms that she remembered tossing her up into the air as a small child.

Pitching his voice away from her ear, Sirion shouted at his rangers to go tell Adrianna that their daughter was home. Aeris clutched at his navy vest and she started to cry great heaving sobs that left her breathless. Her father held her close and told her that everything would be all right. *Though she doubted them, she knew they were just the words she wanted to hear.*

* * * * *

Aeris stared up at the ceiling of the chamber. What little light that entered the room through the curtains leading out onto the balcony swayed and shifted with the material hanging

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there. Gentle breezes eddied through every once in a while, sometimes bringing a scent here or there. But she had neither interest in the light nor the fresh air. She heard the noises of everyday living going on in the village outside the daladin, but she cared not for that either. She knew that her mother and father worried about her, but she wouldn't be moved to ease them of their concern. All she wanted to do was lie there and forget the world.

She knew that three days had passed since her return to Elvandahar, for her mother made it a point to tell her at the break of every dawn that a new day had come. Just that morning, Aeris had watched Adrianna while she placed a tray of food on the desk, pulled aside the curtain, and poured fresh water in the washbasin. Her mother's pale, curling hair was pulled back with a decorative pin, and then allowed to fall haphazardly down her back. As a child, Aeris remembered thinking that her Ama was the most beautiful mother in the world. Aeris still believed it to be so.

Aeris had watched her mother perform tasks that were ordinarily set aside for others to complete. Aeris knew that she did them because she wanted to be there for her daughter, to show Aeris that she loved her and wanted to share her company. Aeris knew that Adrianna should be at the academy, instead choosing to be at the daladin. Finally feeling the weight of Aeris' gaze, Adrianna had turned around and smiled. She then came to sit on the edge of the bed. Aeris was silent as her mother brushed the hair back from her face, and then pressed cool lips to her brow. Aeris noticed the unshed tears in her mother's eyes when she left, but Aeris made no move to stop her.

After Adrianna finally left, Aeris got up and closed the curtains. Then she went back to bed, lay on her side, and pulled the covers up to her chin. She didn't really need them, for it was warm enough. Somehow, she felt more protected with them covering her; at least for now, she did not feel the need to hide beneath them. In spite of her troubled dreams, Aeris closed her eyes and dozed. . She knew that she was tormenting herself by replaying the deaths of her friends over and over again in her mind, but she couldn't bring herself to stop. And these memories were reiterated in her dreams. It was penance, she thought, for being alive when she should really be dead.

A while later Aeris awoke when she felt a presence behind her. She opened her eyes and looked over her shoulder to see Asgenar sitting in a chair beside her bed. She cursed to herself,
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rolled her eyes, and turned away from him. Asgenar was one of the last people she wished to see. Before leaving for Andahye, they had fought bitterly, and she hadn't the patience for him.

Asgenar was her eldest brother, at least ten years her senior, and quite possibly the most beautiful man she had ever known. Like their mother, he had hair the color of palest gold and eyes a deep brown. In almost every way he was Adrianna's child, even in temperament. However, he was also his own person. Even in childhood, Aeris remembered him as always being the dictatorial older brother, and he never seemed to tire of telling her what to do and how to go about doing it. As it turned out, those qualities were good for him, for he was the heir to the realm of Elvandahar.

When Asgenar came of age, he was sent to the Sherkari Fortress to take his place as the Prince of Elvandahar. Rigorous training ensued as he began to learn the ways of ruling a kingdom. He visited home often, and it seemed that each time he did so, the more authoritative he became. Aeris and Alasdair, her second eldest brother, often found themselves at odds with Asgenar, and a rift appeared. Over the years, as Asgenar spent lengthier times away from home, the siblings became ever more distant from one another.

However, in the past couple of years, Asgenar had begun to change. Her eldest brother had begun to curtail some of his dictatorial habits and even showed some measure of respect for their opinions. Unfortunately, old ways are difficult to alter, and on the eve of her leave-taking, Aeris and Asgenar had a disagreement. It was the same old story, Asgenar attempting to enforce his will. Aeris had become a grown woman, and was independent in many ways. His stubbornness battered at her resolve to see him in a more favorable light. She had left Elvandahar feeling angry towards him, and her reaction to his presence in her chamber was testimony to the fact she had yet to forgive the harsh words he had spoken on the eve of her first foray away from home without the company of her elders.

Asgenar surely must have noticed her reaction, but he said nothing of it when he spoke. "Ama and Babu have a hard time keeping things from me. I came as soon as I found out you were home." His voice was as beautiful as his face, and Aeris found herself grimacing. She said nothing in reply, and silence reigned between them for several moments before he spoke again.

"Aeris, I am sorry about Raissa, Doran, Lorak and Mavik. I know what they meant to you."

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Keeping her back to him, Aeris gave an exaggerated sigh. “What are you doing here, Asgenar? Don’t you have anything better to do with your time?”

“Right now, nothing matters more to me than your well-being, Aeris.” She was pleased to hear the note of annoyance in his voice. She had gotten to him already and he was barely several moments into their reunion.

She said nothing despite all of the possible retorts that ran through her mind. What was the point? Another battle would be waged between them. And for what? A simple few moments of glory when she had made Asgenar so angry that she felt she had won the fight? She found that she just didn’t care anymore. Or maybe she had simply grown up a bit since she saw her bothersome brother last.

Once more the chamber rang with silence. He had said that he knew what her friends meant to her. That was wrong. He knew nothing of them, and even less of their relationship with her. Aeris hated it when people said things that they imagined were the right things to say, even if it wasn’t the truth.

Finally she heard him sigh, a soft sound that made her think that he had intended to keep it to himself. “I know that things aren’t right between us, but I want you to know that I am here for you. I’m not returning to the fortress until I know you are well.”

Aeris considered saying nothing, but then she said, “Asgenar, don’t stay here because of me. I have gotten this far in life without you, and I am sure that I will continue to live many more years the same way. Go back to your fortress. I don’t need you.”

Aeris cringed when she heard the tone of her voice, but she was unable to stop it from sounding the way it did. It was sorrowful, with a tinge of despair. She hated that, and hated even more that Asgenar had heard it. He was nothing if not perceptive.

At first her brother said nothing. But she could feel that he pondered her words. She knew not what he was thinking, and refused to turn around to look at his face. Finally, he cleared his throat and rose from the chair. “You think that you don’t need me. That’s fine, but I will be here anyway.” His tone was devoid of emotion, and somehow she knew that he schooled it to be that way. It was one of the things that he learned in order to be a king one day. Aeris heard him walk to the door. He opened it and then was gone. The room was silent. For a long time she lay there before she fell asleep again.

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It didn't seem much later before Aeris heard a pounding at the door. She didn't know how much time had passed, only that she barely had occasion to realize what was happening before the door abruptly swung open. She stared at the figure standing at the threshold with sleep-bleary eyes. The man strode purposefully towards the bed, and once standing before it, he reached down with both hands and tore the covers away from her.

Aeris shrieked with indignation and scrambled for the blanket that Alasdair wadded into a large mass and threw across the room. It landed in a pitiful heap in the far corner. From the middle of the bed, she looked up at her brother, the one person she loved more than anyone else in her life. Just as Asgenar was the image of their mother, Alasdair looked like their father. His hair was copper red, and his eyes were the color of molten amber. He stood over her with his hands at his hips. It was a stance so much like Sirion's that, if she had been anyone else, she would have thought that it was the older man who stood there.

"By the gods, Aeris. What in the Hells are you doing holed up in here?"

"Get out, Alasdair," Aeris spat. "I told Ama and Babu I didn't want to see anyone."

Alasdair's brows pulled together into a frown. "That doesn't include your family, especially me. Besides, I know that Asgenar has been to see you already."

"Our parents are weak. He must have noticed something amiss, and then pressured them to tell him what had happened. They broke down and told him I was here," she replied disdainfully.

Alasdair's frown deepened. "Our parents are *worried* about you, and they shouldn't have kept this particular information from us."

"Oh, so you are on *his* side now."

"No. I am on your side, but that happens to be Asgenar's side as well." Alasdair paused. "This time at least."

Aeris rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Give me back my blanket." She pointed to the far corner.

"No. Get up and get it yourself."

“Effin calotebas,” she growled. “Just get out.” She stood up from the bed and walked towards the blanket. She barely noticed her state of undress, and it wouldn’t have mattered if she did. Her brother had seen her without clothes more times than she could count.

“No. I can’t believe that Ama and Babu let you stay in here this long. Life is going on outside this daladin, Aeris, and it’s time you rejoined it.”

Aeris stopped before she reached the blanket, pursing her lips. “Haven’t they told you? There is something wrong with me. I can’t remember anything after they died.”

Alasdair spread his arms. “Aeris, we can get through this together! I will go with you to see the nivorlan and help you to remember.”

She shook her head, picked up the blanket, and moved back towards the bed. “Talemar and Cedric have been beside themselves,” continued Alasdair. “Ama and Babu have been keeping visitors away. When I found out that it was at your request, I just had to come up here to find out what was going on with you.”

Aeris slumped back onto the bed and began to pull the blanket over her. “Other than memory loss, nothing is going on with me. I just want to be left alone.”

Alasdair grabbed the blanket again and kept her from covering herself completely. “Left alone to die?”

The words rang through the chamber, words that she had thought but never said. Alasdair knew her so well, too well. Finally she looked up at him, locked her gaze onto his. “Let go, Alasdair.”

“No. I won’t let you do this to yourself.”

Aeris felt her lips begin to tremble. She despaired that she had become so weak and pathetic. She couldn’t even keep herself from crying anymore. She knew that she should somehow find it within her to be thankful that someone had found her after the ordeal and healed her wounds. But she just couldn’t do it. She lashed out, her tone scathing. “I hate you.”

Alasdair swallowed convulsively and then was quiet for a moment, almost as though it took a great effort for him to control his emotions. “But I love you very much, dearest Sister,” he said softly. “I am forever indebted to the one who made it possible for you to come home to me.”

Aeris could see the pain in his eyes, pain that she caused him. She looked away from his handsome face, and instead focused on the sun-darkened hand that continued to hold the blanket.

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“I just don’t think I can go on. My dreams, they . . .” Her voice cracked and she stopped speaking. She knew the tears would soon follow. The hand moved out of her sight and she felt her brother settle himself beside her on the bed.

“Like I said, we are going to do this together. I will be right here with you every moment of the journey.”

Aeris shook her head, her low voice reflecting the grief she felt. “I should be lying in that pass. I shouldn’t be here, alive, while the rest are dead.” Said out loud, the words sounded so harsh. She felt her brother’s body stiffen and heard the rush of his breath as he expelled it all at once. She felt the tears begin to fall, the first ones after her breakdown almost four days ago when their father found her struggling to make her way through the forest.

Aeris felt his arms wrap securely around her. He pulled the blanket over them, and she rested her head on his solid chest. She cried silent tears that wet the fabric of his vest, yet he said nothing, merely holding her until the sobbing subsided. Afterwards, he continued to cradle her against him. Her eyelids drooped as she began to fall into sleep. But there was something on her mind, something she needed to say. She spoke the short name she always used when they were children. “Dair?” she whispered.

“Yeah?” he whispered back.

“You know I didn’t mean it.”

Alasdair shifted slightly as he turned towards her. “Mean what?”

“That I hate you.”

There was a brief pause, followed by a tightening of his arms around her. “I know.”

Aeris gave a deep sigh and allowed her eyes to close. With Alasdair’s arms around her, there were no dreams. With his arms around her, she thought that, maybe, just maybe, she would find the strength to go on.

* * * * *

Tallachienan sat silently within the confines of the massive oak chair. It was his favorite one, the one he always sought when he was broody. It had been his companion throughout the centuries, and the faded velvet upholstery was testament to that fact. He could scarcely remember when he had acquired the chair, or why he had chosen it in the first place. Perhaps because it was so deep, he could become hidden within it if he so chose. Or maybe it was the

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quality of the workmanship that shaped the fine wood into the image of dragons, carefully polished with a chestnut sheen. It had been so long ago, and the chair had served him for so long, he had forgotten. TC could only wish that other, more unpleasant, memories would meet the same fate .

TC steeped his hands, his fingers meeting just beneath his nose. He couldn't stop thinking about her --- the way she moved in the shadows of all his dreams, her perfumed scent like the sweetest of desert blossoms at midnight, and the way her smile lit up those darkest corners of his soul. She would be here with him still . . . if only he had not sent her away.

TC exhaled slowly, closing his eyes with the sudden pain that arced through him. He had tried telling himself that it was for the best --- that she deserved more than he could give her there at the citadel. He had tried to tell himself that he didn't really need her, that it was only the fact that she was Adrianna's daughter that drew him to her in the first place. Yet, he still couldn't shake the feeling that he was his own worst enemy and that she was the *one* . . .

TC lowered his hands and gripped the horned armrests. He considered succumbing to the urge to go to Aeris despite knowing that she wouldn't remember him even if he stood before her. He had cast a spell, one that would suppress memories of her tenure at the citadel. He hated to do it, but at the time he saw no other way, and he didn't relish the thought that she might suffer through her life without him. Now he questioned himself and wished that he'd never cast the spell. He remembered the desolate expression in her eyes when she realized he wanted her to leave, followed by distrust. TC scoffed to himself. He may not have deserved it then, but he certainly earned that lack of trust when he cast the *Memory Lapse* spell. He had taken away a portion of her free will--- even her ability to make the decision to remember him.

But by now, TC was accustomed to making decisions for others.

Unbidden, the memories resurfaced, memories of another time and another place. They were memories of a time long passed . . . of when he was young. Gods, that was centuries ago--- centuries of *cycles* ago. He had lived and become powerful within the *first cycle*, didn't even know the truth about his heritage until he began to notice strange things about himself, things that didn't happen to normal folk. Then there was the day his mother told him about the time she had been seduced by a god.

Since then, TC had outlived hundreds of lives. His mortal half-sister had lived and died during the *first cycle*, as had his own mother. With his newly emergent power, he was able to withstand the merge of the *first cycle* into the second. It was a painful experience, both mentally and physically, one he would undergo four more times until Adrianna and the Wildrunners finally broke the curse in the *fifth cycle*.

Tallachienan rubbed a hand over his face and then swept it back through his ebony hair. His power had only grown after that *first cycle*. He went on a quest---a mission to discover the truth of his identity. He discovered that he was the son of Odion, one of the most ancient of the gods, the one who had cursed the world to repeat itself over and over again until the Balance could be shifted back into alignment. It wasn't until the *third cycle* that he met Adrianna Darnesse for the first time. Right from the start, he was intrigued by her strength, determination, and pride. He had made it his purpose in life to aid her in the struggle against Aasarak, another man who had matured in power since the *first cycle*. TC always thought how unfair it was that Aasarak was allowed to grow in power with each passing *cycle*, in spite of his inability to survive each one as did Tallachienan ---when the one who was destined to defeat him was made to be reborn with each change. Yet, Adrianna had finally persevered despite the odds against her. TC liked to think that he had a hand in her success, but he could never truly be sure. In that regard, he reveled in his ability to thwart his father, and he had to admit that he didn't even like Odion.

Tallachienan looked at his hand in the flickering torchlight. He didn't look any different from any other cimmerean. However, he knew that there was a world of difference within him and that his exterior was merely a shell. He was not entirely faelin, nor was he wholly a being of Shandahar. He was a *god*, a being that was often called immortal, though he knew that he was not undying, for he could be killed or one day die of old age. Moreover, he had studied enough of the gods to know that they were not always what they seemed to be; they appeared to people as simple humans and faelin when, in fact, they were something much, much more.

In part, TC had dared not explore that aspect of himself. Long ago, he had decided that he was happy with the form which he had been given at birth. He never shifted it, nor did he find a reason to do so. Others of his station shifted form without thinking twice. Tholana was one of those, sometimes altering her shape into that of a huge spider with the head and torso of a faelin woman. Trebexal was the same, shifting from dragon to faelin form with ease. There were many

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others . . . those of which he had little knowledge . . . those who would one day make themselves known. They were the children of the gods, and eventually they would rule over Shandahar. At least, that is what Tallachienan used to think. But now---now things had changed. With the Pact of Bakharas broken, daemon-kind was free to roam Shandahar again. Once more, the future of the world was in a precarious balance. Where were the legendary Wildrunners now that they were needed again? He knew that many of them were dead and gone. All that remained were their children.