

Excerpt for
Dark Mists of Ansalar: Shade of the Fallen
by T.R. Chowdhury and T.M. Crim

The Twisted Tankard Tavern was full of people, patrons coming and going at a steady rate. Many would stay for a short while and then move on to the next tavern or inn, hopping from place to place to visit different groups of friends or to experience different forms of entertainment each had to offer. Others would stay at a single establishment the entire evening. Cervantes and the rest of the group had been going back and forth from the Falcon's Crest Inn across the street to the Twisted Tankard. The atmosphere at the tavern was more casual and relaxed, and Cervantes found that he preferred it to the more decorous nature of the inn.

But there was another reason why Cervantes chose to stay at the tavern this evening. His three competitors sat across the room, and this was the group's final evening in the city. They had packed up and were prepared to leave Gulshaan on the morrow. With the daemundai moving ever closer, it was no longer safe for them to stay. Not only had they earned enough gold to buy provisions, but combined with the coin brought by Aeris' brother, they had more than enough to stock up for their journey to something called 'portal'. Aeris explained that it was a magical doorway that would take them all back to the western side of the continent.

The arrival of Alasdair, Talemar, and Cedric had put Cervantes into a tail-spin. Everything was suddenly changing, and Cervantes had a big decision to make. Either he could stay in Gulshaan to risk being hunted by the daemundai and eventually killed for the association he had with the crystals and Aeris' group, or he could go with them to Elvandahar and find some semblance of safety with magic-users and warriors of renown. Everyone, including Cervantes, had heard of the legendary Wildrunners, and it was disconcerting to realize that the people with whom he had made his company were direct descendants.

Justifiably, recent events had put Cervantes on edge. Through narrowed eyes he watched his competitors. Just like Cervantes, they also were a part of a larger group. This night, all of them had decided to settle in this tavern to partake in general camaraderie. Taking a cursory count, Cervantes noted at least thirteen or fourteen in their party, and that included the wives of two of the men.

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Unexpectedly, the table before him was reverberating with the impact of several fists followed by shouts of laughter on both sides. Cervantes swung his gaze over to Cortes. His brother was a big man, and as such, his voice happened to be loud. It was joined by the voices of the halfen brothers, Dramid, Jezibel, and Goldare. Half of the patronage in the tavern glanced over to see what was going on at their table, and Cervantes noticed that his competitors looked over as well. He saw one of the men nudge his comrade, and both of them grinned.

Cervantes immediately felt himself becoming annoyed. What in the Hells were those two so amused about? And why did Cortes happen to be in possession of the loudest mouth on this side of Ansalar? Cervantes rose from his seat. He suddenly felt stifled and just needed to get some fresh air. Looking over at the adjoining table, Cervantes saw Aeris and Magnus sitting there with Alasdair, Levander, Mateo, Tigerius, and Jonesy. At yet another nearby table, the men called Talemar and Cedric sat apart. It was easy to see that both seemed somewhat subdued, but Cervantes didn't stop to wonder as to the reason why.

Nudging past the halfen brothers, Cervantes began to make his way to the entrance to the tavern. He had taken several steps when someone bumped against him. It wasn't unusual for a man to be nudged here and there as he made his way through a crowded room at a tavern, but the bump had been a trifle rougher than he expected. Cervantes swung around towards the offender, and much to his aggravation he found it to be the man who had been flirting with Jonesy a couple evenings before. The man's original expression of apology turned into one of insolence. "You better watch where you're going, *friend*." The last word was said with a tone oozing with sarcasm.

Cervantes snorted derisively. "You seem to be the umberhulk in question, so you should be the one to back off, *friend*." Cervantes spat the word back at him. He felt the coiled energy within him begin to swell.

The other man's voice lowered to a growl. "If I were you, I would be careful. You don't know who you're dealing with, and when you find out, you might wish that you hadn't." He then grinned mirthlessly, showing his teeth in a universal gesture of aggression.

Cervantes rose to take the bait. "I assure you, I will have no regrets."

As the two men squared off, people swiftly moved aside. Within moments Cervantes felt someone at his side. Tiger put a hand on his shoulder and spoke in a light-hearted tone. "Hey,
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Cervantes, let's head back over to the tables. We just got a fresh round of ale, and my boyhood friends have a story or two to tell us about their journey here."

Cervantes shrugged Tiger away. The anger within him had already begun to spill forth. His life had taken a radical downturn since the day he met Aeris and her group. Then, when the *Sea Maiden* was stolen, he had been forced to realize that nothing would ever be the same for him again. With the loss of his ship, all of his hopes and dreams had sailed away without him. Now here he was, forced to make decisions he felt he should never have had to make. Everything was being thrown at him so fast, and he felt he had no control over anything. Until now, he had kept all of his anger and all of his aggression suppressed deep inside. He didn't want to quash it anymore. He wanted a fight, and he didn't care about what the consequences might be.

"Hey, you . . ." The members of the other man's party had risen to stand behind their comrade. The speaker gestured towards Tiger; he was a man Cervantes had never seen before this night. "You better keep your friend in line. We don't want any trouble here."

Tigerius frowned. "I assure you, we want no trouble either, but perhaps it would serve you equally as well if you kept your own comrade in his place."

Cervantes exploded. "What in the Hells is wrong with you people? What right do you have to speak about me when I am standing right here?" He pointed to the offending man standing before him. "This man is a bastard sea-whore, and *I* will be the one to see he is put in his place!" With that said, Cervantes swiftly cocked back his fist and swung.

As Cervantes' knuckles connected with the man's face, the tavern was suddenly in an uproar. There were people moving in all directions--- most to the entrance so as to escape the brawl that was about to ensue. Others scrambled to join comrades at distant tables, and a few went towards the fight itself. While Aeris, Jonesy, Mateo, and Jezibel moved well out of the way, Magnus, Cortes, and Dramid leaped into the fray with intentions to stop the fight. However, it was soon apparent that such an opportunity had already come and gone. Tiger was already at fisticuffs with a member of the rival party, and the halfen brothers had rushed in with no thoughts towards diffusing the situation.

Circumstances rapidly went from bad to worse. The rival party moved to close around Cervantes, Tiger, Vikhail, and Vardec. Cortes burst through the opposition, his arms flailing.

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One man went flying into a table, splintering it into two as his body crashed through the center. Another man was sent into the nearest wall, his head striking the stone with a sickening thud before he crumpled to the floor.

Passing by the remains of the broken table, Magnus picked up one of the legs from off the ground. It was a bit on the unwieldy side, but he would make it work. Using the table-leg as a staff, he swung it at the first opponent he reached, a man that had Vikhail in a stranglehold. Magnus hit the man in the leg, sending him immediately to the floor. The man screamed in agony, holding the leg in both his hands. Magnus felt a momentary pang of regret. These people shouldn't be their enemies. It was all a big mistake and now everyone would pay the price for Cervantes' recklessness. Magnus had struck his opponent harder than he meant, and now the man would probably be crippled for the rest of his life. Depending on his profession, that could mean life or death for his family, and Magnus hated being responsible for that.

From her position at the wall near the entrance to the tavern, Aeris watched the brawl with increasing trepidation. People were being seriously wounded even without the use of steel weapons. Jaxom was hit over the head with a stool as he was engaging another opponent, and he never rose from the blow. Meanwhile, Dramid was thrown over the bar. With a loud crash, his body slammed into plates, bowls, and mugs that were stacked on the other side. Aeris never saw him reappear. She saw Tigerius twist the arm of his opponent savagely behind him, and he released the arm only when the man screamed. It hung unnaturally at his side, unmoving. She swallowed the lump that rose in her throat. What were they doing?

Out of the corner of her eye, Aeris suddenly noticed activity along the wall on the other side of the door. It had been propped open to make it easier for people to exit the establishment at the onset of the fight, and she was partially hidden behind it. She saw two men enter the tavern in spite of the fight, deciding to take advantage of the fact that no one would notice the disappearance of some women. Aeris turned to see Jonesy being struck forcefully on the head and then slung over the shoulder of one of the men. In the meantime, the other had subdued Jezibel, and both were jauntily walking out the door with their prizes.

Frantically glancing around, Aeris looked to see who might be nearby, someone who could help. It would be foolhardy for her to go after the men alone, despite her arcane skills. She

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couldn't know what might be out there, waiting for a lone female to exit the chaotic establishment, and she could easily be caught unawares. She saw Talemarr standing close by, calmly assessing the situation in the tavern. She shouted his name as she rushed up to him, took his arm, and began to pull him in the direction of the door.

Levander stood silently by, stoically watching the destruction being wrought. The ridiculousness of the situation wasn't lost on him, and he hated seeing people he had come to respect denigrating themselves like they did now. He stayed out of the fray, unwilling to become entrenched in something he felt to be utter foolishness. Of course, he would help them mend from the myriad cuts, bumps, and scrapes they would acquire from the event. How could he deny them that? But he refused to be involved with the idiocy he currently witnessed.

But then Lev noticed something else going on. Across the room, he saw Aeris pulling Talemarr towards the open door of the tavern. Her expression was one of alarm, and he could see that she was saying something to him and gesturing wildly with her other hand. The expression on Talemarr's face became equally as concerned as he promptly rushed out of the establishment with her.

Lev frowned. Something was happening, something he should have sensed before. But he had been so wrapped up in his feelings concerning the tavern brawl, he'd ignored his perceptions. Chastising himself, Lev began to move in the direction of the door when he felt himself being roughly pushed to the side. It was Goldare and his opponent, each grappling with the other to achieve the upper hand. Lev lost his balance and he fell, the others with him. As the men landed on top of him, Lev felt something enter his side just above his hip and below his ribs. He was overcome with nausea, and he almost wretched onto the floor so near his face. He struggled to be away from the two men pinning him to the ground, and once he obtained enough leverage, he was able to pull himself free.

Lev crawled away from the men, the pain in his side excruciating. Putting his hand there, he felt the hilt of a dagger protruding from his side. Once he was far enough away, Lev gripped the hilt and began to pull the blade from his ribs. He clenched his teeth against the pain, but he was able to withstand it until he felt a snap. He slowly brought the broken blade into view, his

heart sinking with the realization of what had just occurred. A portion of the dagger remained deep within his side, and he had no way of extracting it.

Shaking his head, Lev quickly got a hold of himself. He still felt the peril to Aeris and Talemar, and knew without a shadow of a doubt that terrible danger awaited him beyond the walls of the tavern. Struggling to his feet, Lev staggered out the door and into the cold air of the street outside. It was dark, and only the night lamps were lit. Following his instincts, he turned left, keeping one hand against the buildings as he walked. It wasn't long before he came across the still forms of Jonesy and Jezibel. Kneeling before them, Lev put his fingers against their necks to determine whether their hearts still beat in their bodies. Satisfied that both women still lived, he rose and continued onward toward the danger he felt.

Only a few moments later, Lev saw a light down the alley up ahead. He knew it was magic cast by one of the two spellcasters. He increased his pace, hoping he wasn't too late. He sensed power, magnificent power he had felt only once before at another place and another time long ago. Urgency filled him and he moved even faster. When he finally reached the scene, he felt the breath rush out of his air sacs. Both Aeris and Talemar hung limply from the arms of two dark-robed priests. A woman stood before them and she turned at his approach. She regarded him only cursorily, taking in the tattoos on his face and the baldness of his head. A flash of recognition passed over her face, but she then gestured towards the women standing around her. "Kill him," she drawled.

Levander slowly came into consciousness, finding himself lying in a cold, dark alleyway. Grabbing hold of some protruding stones from a nearby wall, he pulled himself up to his feet, and then began stumbling through the dark streets back to the tavern. He kept one hand pressed against his side, and he could feel the warm stickiness of his blood seeping through the fabric of his tunic. His other arm hung loosely at his side. He could hardly move it, and he was certain that it was broken. Lifting his shoulder, he wearily tried to wipe away the blood that wanted to flow into his eye, and his entire body shook with the effort it took. He knew that it was the terrible wound in his side that was stripping him of energy, and it had been the same when he faced the dark priestesses. He simply couldn't muster the strength to fight them, and it was degrading for him to know how little it took for them to take him down and declare him deceased.

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But they were sloppy. They left him for dead, and their queen didn't even bother to check and see if their assumptions were correct. Or perhaps Tholana simply didn't care. He meant nothing to her, a simple member of the Brotherhood, and a dishonored one at that. Now the Queen of Darkness was taking his companions to her dread stronghold. He cringed at the thought, for he'd heard the stories. Many times, the cimmereans were worse to their prisoners than were the kronshue.

It seemed like forever before Lev found himself standing outside the tavern. The door was closed and locked, testimony to the amount of time he must have spent unconscious and then making it back to the establishment. He pushed himself off the wall and careened towards the Falcon's Crest Inn across the street. With any luck, at least some of his comrades resided within. He was sure that many of them were out looking for him, Aeris, and Talemar; hopefully, they had already found Jezibel and Jonesy.

Reaching the door, Lev slumped wearily against it. His breath misted in the air before him. He was tired . . . so tired. All he wanted was to lie down and rest. But he had a mission. Talemar he didn't know, but Lev owed Aeris at least that much.

Suddenly the door swung open. Lev fell into the entrance, landing heavily on his sore side. He groaned with the impact and his world went black for a moment. He knew the wound was killing him, but he still had that mission. He felt hands gripping his arms and then a man shouting for some help. He felt himself being lifted, carried, and then deposited gently onto a cushioned surface. A face swam before him, a masculine one. His eyes were a stunning shade of green . . .

Magnus entered the room to find Cedric hovering above Lev. Rushing to the bedside, he looked into the horribly beaten face of the man that had become his comrade. He leaned over and placed his lips near Lev's ear, hoping the man would hear him. "Lev, please tell me. Where is Aeris?"

Magnus saw the man struggle to remain conscious. Grasping Lev's bloody hand, he asked the question again. He hated to keep Lev conscious any longer, but he knew the man had information as to Aeris' whereabouts. And if Levander happened to slip into a sleep from which he would never awaken, Magnus would be faced with the possibility of never seeing her again.

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Then Lev spoke, his voice a mere whisper in the silence of the chamber. “It was the Dark Queen . . . she . . . she . . .” Lev struggled for a moment and then continued. “She took them both.”

It was all Magnus needed to hear. The Dark Queen, Tholana. He had encountered her once before, and since then, he had made efforts to learn more about her. He knew, without a shadow of doubt, that it was only a matter of time before both Aeris and Talemar met their demise in her wretched stronghold in the underdark.

Magnus rose from the bed and glanced down at Lev. The poor man had already slipped away into deep slumber. As soon as Magnus had all of his provisions in order, he would leave Gulshaan in pursuit of Aeris and Talemar. He was certain that Alasdair, Cedric, and Tigerius would be in accompaniment.