

Shadow Over Shandahar - Embers At Dawn

Prologue

29 Jicaren CY571

Servial struggled to keep his voice impassive. “What do you want, Sydonnia?”

His wretched brother shrugged his wide shoulders. “It's been so long, but I vividly recall when last we met. I stood as victor at the end of our little skirmish.” Sydonnia paused for a moment, then continued. “Oh, and so sorry about the leg, brother. Sometimes I don't know my own strength.” Sydonnia smiled, his canines glinting in the firelight as he turned to look at Sirion where he sat at the other side of the fire with his corubis companion. He stared coldly at the boy for a moment, and Servial wondered what he was thinking.

“I see you have brought your whelp,” Sydonnia said in a monotone. “It surprises me you would place him at risk knowing that me and mine are loose within these forests. You *are* a fool, Servial.” Sydonnia growled the last, swinging his gaze back.

Servial shook his head, curling his lips with a sneer. “You are only jealous because Lilandria chose *me* and never bothered to give you a second glance. She warmed my bedfurs for years, and bore me a son. Your life is pathetic, Sydonnia. You have accomplished nothing, and no one cares about you. I *almost* feel sorry for you.”

He felt it immediately, a sudden change in the surrounding air. Sydonnia's stature increased and his voice deepened. “No. You are the pathetic one, Servial. You left her, just as I knew you would. One day, your son will discover the truth about you, and he will come to despise you.” Sydonnia paused and then continued. “I wonder if you will live long enough to experience it.”

With unnatural grace and power, Sydonnia leaped at Servial. The man was monstrous to behold, standing at least two hands higher than when he'd first entered the encampment. His body was now covered with hair, and his face strangely elongated. The most terrifying changes were the wickedly clawed hands and sharp canines protruding from his upper jaw. Servial had barely enough time to raise his dagger before Sydonnia was upon him. As their bodies collided, Servial felt his brother wrap his arms around him and sink his sharp claws deep into his back. At such close range, the studded leather offered only minimal resistance. Sydonnia raked them around to his sides and then savagely thrust Servial back.

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He landed heavily on the ground. Blood already stained the light brown vest around the huge tears at the sides and back. Meanwhile, Sirion found the courage to rush to his feet. With dagger drawn and the corubis beside him, his son sprang towards the lycan. Sydonnia easily blocked the attack. With one hand he grabbed Sirion by the throat, and with the other he swept at Dramati. The corubis flew through the air. Servial heard a heavy thud followed by a sharp yelp as the animal landed about a farlo away.

With growing horror, Servial watched the boy scrape at the large hand closed around his throat, desperate to free himself. Sydonnia's gaze was enraged, and Servial knew he had to do something. It was then Sirion seemed to remember that he still held a dagger. He pulled back and plunged the blade into Sydonnia's unprotected abdomen.

The lycan gave a vicious snarl. Servial managed to rise just as the wicked claws sliced across Sirion, starting at his shoulder and ending just above his navel. The hand around the boy's throat continued to squeeze. Servial knew he was running out of time. He drew his own dagger, a weapon he had hoped to use only at his most desperate moment. He flung it at Sydonnia and watched it embed deeply into the back of the monster's neck.

Sydonnia howled in rage and flung Sirion away. The lycan swung around to face him, finally completing the transition into beast form. Servial just stood there in the middle of the encampment. There was no use resisting, for he had no weapon left to use, and his strength swiftly ebbed away with each beat of his heart. Blood stained the thick, white fur surrounding the huge wemic's neck, but it was obvious Servial's blade hadn't hit a vital spot.

Sydonnia growled deep in his throat. Servial felt a momentary pang of regret. This wemic possessed a rare beauty. He had never before seen one that had such pale coloring, one that also happened to be his brother. How had it come to this? Once they had been the best of friends, the most stalwart of comrades. For so long everything had gone the way Servial wanted it. Only when Sydonnia began his bickering did their relationship take a downward turn. It was such a shame that Sydonnia felt the need to counter him on everything, and that he encroached on his territory . . .

Servial sensed when the wemic was about to attack. However, at the last minute Sydonnia paused. From fathomless deep brown eyes the beast regarded him with such intensity that Servial felt it within his very soul. But then it was over and the wemic leaped forward. The massive jaws closed around Servial's shoulder close to his neck. With great sweeps of his head, he savagely

shook his brother back and forth. Servial heard the sickening sound of breaking bones, and blood sprayed onto the thick pale fur of the animal's chest. Then Sydonnia flung him away and left.

Servial lay broken on the blood-soaked ground. He struggled to breathe, and he knew he was dying. Judging by the placement of the moons, he figured that his damned brother had left at least an hour ago. During that time, Servial's lifeblood seeped onto the ground where Sydonnia had dragged him after the brutal attack. Somewhere in the distance lay the body of his son. Servial prayed that Sirion was still alive. Hells, he hadn't worked so hard for so many years to make Sirion the perfect assassin, only to have the boy die. It would be the worst of injustices. The boy had been trained to kill Sydonnia, only the lycan had beaten him to the punch.

Servial's awareness shifted and wavered. He sensed he lay near a flowing body of water, for he heard the sound of its movement in the background. The pain he felt was almost overwhelming. The countless surface lacerations and abrasions were small with respect to the injuries he suffered deep within. Sydonnia's wickedly curved claws had gouged into his belly, and only a hand held tightly over the wound kept his entrails from creeping out. His broken ribs had pierced the sacs within his chest, making it hard to breathe. He imagined the sacs filling with blood and that he would soon drown in the thick red substance essential for his survival.

Servial suddenly gasped for breath. He stared at the moons above him. Hestim hung close, and Meriliam was beginning to make her ascent. His mind swept through the events of his life, in particular the regrets. In spite of his duty, he should have gone after Keilah Laremion like he had wanted. Over the years he had never been able to forget her, even after the birth of a son and daughter with Lilandria. In his mind, Keilah would always be the one that got away, the one who had resisted his charm. Out of all the women he'd wooed, she was the *only* one who had managed to thwart him.

Servial's vision went dark. He heard a gurgling sound deep within his chest every time he struggled for his next breath. This was the end and he hated that he would perish by the hand of his beastly brother. Sydonnia had always been second rate. Why should he win now when it was a matter of life or death?

Why should Sydonnia have such an honor?

The dreaded moment came when he could no longer breathe. The world seemed to come to a stop. What little air he had left vacated his chest, and when Servial couldn't take another

inward breath, his eyes rolled to the back of his head. He drifted for the barest moment before he felt . . . something . . . touching his consciousness . . . something cold, wet, and slithery.

Servial was abruptly thrust back into his tortured body. He agonized, feeling something attacking the back of his neck. At the same time he struggled for the air he needed to sustain his life. Then something pierced the back of his neck where his skull met his spine. He opened his mouth and silently screamed into the still night air as something snaked its way down his back, along the rear of his skull, and deep into his mind. His senses came to a screeching halt for a brief moment as a new presence took over . . .

It was something horrifying, something wonderful, something *living*. His sensory perception suddenly heightened and he felt the agony of his wounds more acutely than ever. He heard the flow of the stream behind him, felt the tickle of the water as it passed the hand partially submerged there. He smelled the soil beneath him, the blood that permeated it, and the lilyacs that grew several farlo away.

Once again, Servial felt himself drifting and the sensations he had begun to feel became distant. The pain melted away and only vaguely did he feel something continuing to make its way through him, down the remainder of his back and along his sides. Meanwhile, he felt himself being pulled more deeply into the void. Everything fell away until there was nothing . . .

His heart stopped beating. One, two, three . . .

A sudden burst of energy pulsed through him. Four, five, six . . . another burst. His heart beat erratically for a moment before adjusting to a steady drum. Driven by instinct, Servial attempted to take a breath . . .

. . . and his chest unexpectedly filled with air.

Servial's eyes snapped open. He took several more deep breaths, his air-starved body demanding it. Laying there on his back, he looked up into the sky. He could scarcely believe that hardly any time had passed. Judging by the position of the moons, it had been less than an hour. What the Hells had happened to him? Why hadn't he died?

His wounds should have made certain of it.

He moved first an arm, and then a leg. When he tried to move anything else, nothing happened. His body was still just as broken as before, only somehow he was able to withstand the pain. It was then he remembered the sting he had felt at the back of his neck. Now that his attention was focused there, he sensed something . . .

Servial slowly brought his hand to the base of his skull. His eyes widened at what he felt because it was like nothing he had ever experienced before. The thing was warm and damp, the flesh of it pulsating beneath his fingertips as he brushed the surface. His heartbeat increased as fear suffused him. By the gods, what was it? He traced his fingertips along its body and then along the several parts that extended from it into the flesh of his neck and back. The flesh where it entered was still sore but seemed to be healing at an extraordinary rate.

Servial suddenly realized he was extremely thirsty.

The desire for water was extraordinary. Without even realizing he could, he turned his head towards the source of water flowing so close behind him. When he couldn't move enough to get closer to it, he took his hand, scooped up some of the precious liquid, and brought it to his mouth. He drank greedily of the small bit that splashed onto his face. He could taste the uncleanliness of it, and felt the dirt grinding between his teeth. However, it didn't seem to matter, the need for it far outweighed the possibility that it could sicken him. And then there was the thought that, even if he did become sick, he would swiftly heal.

Servial paused over that thought. It wasn't entirely his own. How could it be? Why would he suddenly think that he would easily withstand a water-based illness? Not many could, especially faelin-kind. He took another handful of filthy water, and then another. The taste bothered him a little, but it really didn't matter. He needed it more than he ever had before. He didn't understand it, nor did he care. All that mattered was that he was alive to fight another day.