

**Excerpt for**  
***Shadow Over Shandahar: Breaking Destiny***  
**by T.R. Chowdhury and T.M. Crim**

She awoke to find herself lying in a bed. Adrianna looked around, seeing that she was in a small room. She continued to lie there for quite some time, simply taking in the ambiance of the place. She knew that she was in Krathil-Ion, somewhere in the apoptos. She vaguely remembered the pain of the sickness she had endured, the intensity of it making her cry like an infant, breaking her down to the point that she actually wanted her life to end. But then Tianna had been there, Father Dremathian, and Xebrinarth. She found the strength to rise above the agony, and then fell into a trance-like sleep.

Adrianna slowly sat up in the bed. None of the pain accosted her, and she realized it was finally passed. She had thought that it would never end, but here she was with nothing left of it but a fading memory. Adrianna suddenly sensed movement just outside the door to the room. It opened to admit Tianna, who carried an armful of fresh linens. At first, the other woman was unaware of Adrianna's wakefulness as she bustled quietly around the room. However, it didn't take long for her to realize that someone watched. Tianna looked towards the bed, and when she saw Adrianna's eyes on her, Tianna's mouth turned up into a smile. She rushed over to the bed, sat on the edge, and took Adrianna's hand. "By the gods, we were so worried about you. I'm glad I was able to help, if even it was just a little."

Adrianna felt her breath catch in her throat. It had been so long since she had seen Tianna last, and having her there now tugged at Adria's heart. She remembered the good times they had shared before their mutual love for Sirion came between them. Tianna had still been so despondent when last they had shared company, and now her friend looked down at her from tear-filled eyes that reflected nothing but happiness.

"You . . . helped me?" Adrianna's words were broken and thick.

Tianna nodded. "Father Dremathian and I sent you to sleep so the pain wouldn't consume you so much. It seemed to help a little, for your mind wasn't quite so aware." Tianna's eyebrows then drew together into a frown. "What caused such you pain, Adrianna? What happened to you?"

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Adria felt her own brows pull together. It would take a lot to explain everything to her friend, and she didn't know if she had the energy to do it. "I will have to tell you some time." Her tongue still felt thick, even though the words were no longer broken.

Tianna nodded. "You must still be tired. You have been asleep for a few days now. The pain seems to have abated, and has been gone for at least a day or two. Just rest. I will let the others know that you have awakened."

"Could you get me some water?" Adrianna hoped that it would help the strange sensation in her mouth.

Tianna reached beside her and took a mug from the small table situated there. She placed it to Adrianna's mouth, holding it while she drank. When she was finished, Tianna took another moment to smooth the furs around her in an endeavor to keep her comfortable.

"It is good to see you Tianna. It's been so long."

Tianna smiled and shook her head. "Not too terribly long; only a few moon cycles. But it does seem like longer, does it not?"

Adrianna only nodded, scooting back down in the bed and pulling the covers up to her chin. If only Tianna knew how long she had been away, how many years she had been without the Wildrunners. She felt her eyelids begin to drift shut against her will, and when next she awakened, Tianna was no longer there. Adrianna sat up, feeling stronger than the last time she was awake. She wondered how much time had passed since then.

Adrianna swung her legs over the side of the bed, and when she stood up, she found herself falling. She clutched the bedpost, willing her legs to straighten and stop shaking from the effort it took for them to hold her up. She wondered what was wrong with her, and then came to the realization that it must have something to do with the *travel sickness*. She heard a knock on the door, but before she could say anything, Sheridana was entering the room. Her eyes lit up when she saw Adrianna standing near the bed and rushed over. Sheri wrapped her arms around Adrianna in a gentle embrace and then helped her to sit back down.

"Adria, I've missed you so much! We were all so worried when Sirion brought you back here."

Adrianna nodded, her throat unexpectedly closing up. *Sirion. Where is he?* She knew he had moved on without her and found another with whom he could share his affection, but did  
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he care so little for her that he couldn't even come to see her?

Sheridana took Adrianna's hands and then regarded her intently. Adrianna became slightly tense under the scrutiny, and then finally said, "Sheri, I missed you too, but you're looking at me like you haven't seen me in years." Once again Adrianna noticed the thickness of her tongue, and when she gestured to the water on the bed-stand, Sheri appropriated it and handed it to her. As she drank, Sheri continued to stare.

When Adrianna finally lowered the mug, Sheridana reached out a hand and brushed some errant strands of hair away from Adrianna's face. "It seems like it's been years," whispered Sheri. "And you have changed . . . aged somehow. I can see it from these lines on your face that were never there before." Sheridana traced around the corners of Adrianna's mouth and alongside her eyes.

Adrianna stared at her sister. Could it be that, somewhere deep inside, her twin knew how long Adrianna was gone? Was the connection between them that strong?

"And there is a change in the aura that surrounds you. Even though we haven't spoken about your time away, I know you're not the same person you were when we parted ways six moon cycles ago."

Adrianna took Sheri's hand into her lap, enveloping it with both of hers. "You are right. I've been gone a long time."

Sheridana's eyes stopped their perusal and flew to meet Adrianna's gaze. "How long?"

"Almost seven years."

Sheri was silent for a moment. "I knew it." She lowered her eyes from Adrianna's and was quiet again for a while before she continued. "It must have been difficult." She then looked back up at her. "He must have been very hard on you."

Adrianna pulled her brows into a frown. "Who?"

"Your Master. I expected you to tell me that you have been away much longer than that, for you appear to have aged at least a decade."

Adrianna nodded. "Yes, he was a difficult Master." This time it was she who broke the eye contact. She didn't want her sister to see the shadows in her eyes, the hardship she had endured in TC's citadel.

Then she remembered. Adrianna pointed to the pack that rested on the chair near the  
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window. “Sheridana, I have something to show you. Could you bring my pack?”

Sheridana brought the pack and Adrianna opened it to remove the book she had heisted from the citadel, *Cycles of Prophecy*. She opened the volume to the appropriate page and then laid it in her sister’s lap. Sheri stared at it for a moment before looking up at her sister. “Adria, I can’t read this.”

Adrianna looked from her sister to the book and then remembered that her sister could only read in common. This book was written in savanlean, one of the faelin languages she had learned as an apprentice under Master Tallek. She tended to forget that many people could only read in their native tongue, or knew not how to read at all.

Adrianna cleared her throat. “It is a prophecy, written by a savanlean scholar over three hundred years ago.” She read the prophecy to her sister, the one she had read the day after the citadel gave her its revelation. When she was finished, she gave Sheri some time to digest the words, watching her sister’s face for any clues to her thoughts.

Finally, Sheri looked up into Adrianna’s eyes. Her expression was solemn and her expression haunted. “I think that you should show this to Dinim.”

Adrianna was taken aback. She had read the text to Sheri so that her sister could offer her thoughts on the prophecy. Instead, she told Adria to show the prophecy to Dinim. Six moon cycles ago, Sheri would never have made that suggestion. It showed Adrianna that she wasn’t the only one who had changed during the time they were apart.

Adrianna nodded. “I will, but I want to know what you think about it first.”

Sheri shook her head. “I don’t know what to think. You came back to us in the throes of great pain, told me that you have been gone for over six years instead of six moon cycles, and then show me this . . . this strange mixture of words that sounds like . . .”

Sheri went silent.

“Sounds like what?” Adrianna pressed.

Sheridana frowned. “It sounds like a description of you when you wielded the Ring of Aboleth against our father.”

Adrianna nodded. “I know. I just wanted to get someone else’s opinion. I thought maybe I was going crazy . . .”

Sheri interrupted her. “Adrianna, I’m scared. What’s happening here? What have you  
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brought back with you from that place where you were?" Sheridanana's voice was accusing.

Adrianna frowned. "What do you mean? You think that I've brought a curse back with me? That's ridiculous!"

Sheridana shook her head and sighed. "Yes, you're right. Our bad fortune started quite a while ago as we made our way back from the temple."

Adrianna's eyes brightened. "The rod was in a temple? Ooooh! How did that go? Has Dinim figured out how to use it?"

Sheri stared at Adrianna from desolate eyes. "No. The rod was destroyed when we went into the temple to get it."

Adrianna did a quick intake of breath, and then slowly let it out. Damn. She wasn't expecting this news. She had rather hoped that they would have something of arcane value to use when they met Aasarak. Suddenly feeling tired, she lay back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

Sheri lay next to her for a few moments. Neither one of them spoke in the pervading silence. Finally Sheri touched her shoulder with a gentle hand. "I'm going to let you get some rest. I'll come back in a couple of hours and bring you something to eat."

Adrianna nodded and then gestured around herself. "Could you help me?"

Sheri nodded and helped Adria into a more comfortable position. She then smoothed the furs over her the way Tianna had when last she was awake. Adrianna closed her eyes and heard the door softly close as Sheri left the room. Despite her fatigue, it took her a while to fall asleep. Her mind was restless with the knowledge that they were in big trouble. Without the rod, they had no real weapon against the Deathmaster. All they had were the skills and *talents* of the members of the group.

Every *cycle* before, it hadn't been enough . . .

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Adrianna walked slowly down the corridor. She was lucky, for the room Dinim had acquired for his use during the Wildrunners' stay in Krathil-Ion was close to her own. The only reason she knew was because Tianna happened to mention it during her next visit. Dremathian was in accompaniment, making certain she was resting comfortably and eating heartily.

Dartanyen and Armond had then come to see her, their crazy antics making her smile. In her  
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own time, even Amethyst came, creeping in without Adria hearing a single sound until the girl stood beside her bed.

“Adrianna, it’s so good to see you with us again,” she spoke so low it was almost a whisper.

Adrianna couldn’t help smiling with the sincerity she heard in the girl’s voice. Amethyst gently sat beside her on the bed, tentatively reaching out to touch a curl of her hair where it lay in a pale mess all around her shoulders. “It was hard when you left.”

She regarded Amethyst intently, sensing the solemnity pervading the air around them. “I know, and I’m really sorry . . .”

Amethyst quickly shook her head and interrupted. “No. You have no reason to apologize because it wasn’t your fault. You had to go.”

Adrianna continued to look at Amethyst, knowing there was something more she needed to say. Then, “I know it isn’t my business, but . . .” she paused for a moment before continuing, “. . . Sirion needs you.”

Adrianna nodded, immediately feeling a sense of loss sweep over her. He still hadn’t come to see her. Then, in a show of affection she had never experienced with Amethyst before, the girl leaned over to give her a brief kiss on the forehead. “I missed you, Adria.” More swiftly than she would have imagined, the girl had risen from her place on the bed, moved across the room, and slipped out the door.

Now, as Adrianna struggled to reach her destination, she knew she never would have made it if it were any further. Her legs shook as she moved, straining with the effort it took them just to keep her upright. Tianna had told her the convulsions she endured for so long had weakened them, but then swiftly assured her that their strength would slowly return. Adrianna was very much looking forward to it.

She finally stopped before the door belonging to Dinim’s chamber and knocked. His familiar voice bid her enter, and she swallowed nervously before pushing it open. Adria walked into a room very similar to her own, and once glancing around she saw Dinim sitting at the small desk across from the bed. His eyes widened with surprise when he saw her, and he quickly rose and crossed the room to take her arm, leading her to the bed and sitting her down on it. She couldn’t contain her sigh of relief when she felt her muscles finally relax from the strain of  
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keeping her upright.

Dinim looked down at her with a worried frown. “Adrianna, I didn’t expect to see you about so soon. You suffered so much on your return to us. I thought you would be still abed.”

She nodded. “I should be, but I needed to come see you.” Adrianna regarded him intently as she spoke. She was surprised to see how haggard he looked. He was paler than she remembered, and the dark circles under his eyes more pronounced. He was thin, she could tell despite the billowing tunic and trousers he wore. In part, she knew his decline was because of her. She had noticed it before the group split ways, before she went to study with Master TC.

Back then, the pain of his betrayal had been too fresh, but now almost seven years had gone by. Not only was she able to forgive Dinim for what he had done, she had nearly forgotten it. For so long she had heard praises sung about the young Dinim Coabra from all the masters in the citadel, and she knew him to be a commendable man. Adrianna also carried memories of him from the *third* and *fourth cycles*. They had shared an intimate relationship in the *third*, and even though they didn’t share anything like that in this *cycle*, she found that she didn’t want to just discard all she knew he was and what he could have been. She cared a great deal for Dinim, and she wanted to try to bridge the rift that had come between them.

Dinim took the chair on which he had been sitting when she entered the room and pulled it closer to the bed. He turned it around and seated himself on it, resting his forearms on the back. He then gave her a small smile. “What has happened that requires you to come in search of me?”

His gaze locked onto hers, a resigned expression on his face. Adrianna could feel the sadness emanating from him, and she knew he thought she visited only to discuss business. Seeing him now, after so long, the memories welled up inside of her. It was the curve of his expressive mouth, how he regarded her from dashing lavender eyes, and the way he cocked his head slightly to the right. She remembered laughing with him in the back of one of the wagons of a gypsy caravan, and the funny way he had made amends with her after his foolish introduction to her sister.

Adrianna breathed deeply, her thoughts having stolen away her ability to form coherent speech. She then lowered her eyes, unconsciously placing a hand on top of the book she brought. Her primary reason for seeing him was the prophecy, but there were so many things

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she wanted to say. “I heard about the Rod of Atlenbos. It meant so much to us. How did it happen?”

Dinim gave a heavy sigh. “It was trapped, and when the group stepped over the magical seal on the temple floor, a mechanism was activated.”

Adria shook her head. “Couldn’t you warn them?”

Dinim also shook his head. “There was a spell in effect that took hold of me before I could enter the chamber. I was asleep before I hit the floor.”

Adrianna nodded and then was quiet for a moment as she collected her thoughts. It was important that she tell Dinim everything she knew. It was possible that he knew some of it already, but simply kept it to himself. “Do you know what a *cycle* is?”

Once more Adrianna watched him intently for any change in his expression. He suddenly became more alert, and his eyes seemed to brighten. “Perhaps. What do you know of the subject?”

Adrianna felt her eyes narrow slightly. She wondered what he knew and if he had any intention of treating her as his equal. She suddenly recalled how their fighting had started; he hadn't respected her opinions, and felt her an unworthy equal in battle. She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, just this time.

Adrianna held up the book. “I know a lot about the *cycling* of Shandahar.”

Dinim’s eyes widened. He reached out a tentative hand and then took the book from her. He caressed the faded binding, and then put the book to his nose, breathing deeply.

“We are currently in the *fifth cycle*,” she said.

Dinim nodded his head. “I thought as much. I have read texts that have only alluded to the *cycling* of the world, and unable to find one that describes it in detail. I know only bits and pieces, and some of that may not even be fact.”

“Not all of what I know is described in the book.”

Dinim regarded her intently. “Then how do you know the rest?”

Adrianna hesitated. She didn’t know how to tell him that the citadel had provided her with the information, not knowing what he knew of the place. Tallachienan had conceded that there was something extraordinary about the citadel, but he hadn't elaborated.

“It is something I discovered while I studied with the Master.”

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Dinim smiled. “It’s interesting to hear you refer to TC as your Master. I knew you before he did, told him about you. He took my advice when I told him that you would be a good apprentice.”

“You told him that?”

“Of course. You have great *talent*. I would say that you are a Prime.”

“What is a Prime?” she asked.

“Someone whose *talent* excels above that of most others.”

“Are you a Prime?”

Dinim nodded. “Yes.”

Adrianna was silent, taking in his words. Dinim thought that he had known her before the Master. He knew very little about the *cycles*. Either that, or he hadn’t thought much about how it worked. She would have to educate him.

“Like I said, we are in the *fifth cycle*. Many of the events that have taken place this *cycle* have taken place already in previous *cycles*.”

Now Dinim was quiet. Finally he spoke. “But not everything.”

“No. There are some small changes between the *cycles*, most likely as a result of immortal intervention.” Adrianna paused before she continued. “There are some who are capable of withstanding the turn of a *cycle*. Master TC is one of those people.”

Dinim nodded. “So he knew you in previous *cycles* . . . knew *me* in previous *cycles*.”

Adrianna nodded.

Dinim looked past her as he continued to ponder her words. She could see him piecing together some of the pieces of the puzzle, saw it in the expressions that flitted across his face.

“Most likely, we knew one another in previous *cycles* as well.”

Adrianna nodded again. Something must have passed over her face because he stopped to look at her.

“What is it? Tell me what you know.”

Adrianna knew that she had to tell him, knew that it was one of the reasons why she had sought him out. She need to do more than offer him her forgiveness. She needed to let him know that they had once shared something between them and that she carried those memories with her. She didn’t know exactly how much she could tell him, but she needed to at least try.

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“Something happened to me within TC’s citadel.”

Dinim stared at her for a moment. “What happened?”

“Somehow, I was able to obtain my memories from previous *cycles*.” Adrianna kept it at that, not willing to give him the details of her revelation. Perhaps later, when their time wasn’t so pressing.

Once again, Dinim was silent. She also remained quiet, letting Dinim think through what she had just told him. Several moments passed before he replied. “So, you have memories of yourself in the *fourth cycle*?”

Adrianna nodded. “And the *third cycle*.”

“So what happened at the end of the other two *cycles*?”

“I don’t know. I only remember the time I spent in the citadel.”

Dinim nodded pensively. “So, each *cycle* is slightly different, eh? The gods have been playing a role with each subsequent *cycle*, and now here we are the fifth time around. Does anyone know why this started happening in the first place?”

Adrianna shook her head. That was one question for which she had never been able to find the answer. However, her attention was focused upon another issue, one that Dinim had not yet addressed. If she had memories of the previous two *cycles*, did she have memories of him as well?

Yet, Dinim was quick to make the connection. “So, do you happen to remember me in the *third* and *fourth cycles*?”

Even though she had prepared herself for the question, expected it even, she found herself floundering for the right words. “Yes. We studied together at the citadel.”

Dinim grinned. “I bet we had some good times.”

Adrianna smiled in return. “Indeed, we did. I only wish that you could remember it as I do.” Adrianna stopped, feeling a slight wrenching in her chest. Dinim would never have the memories she had. She was the only one who would ever remember what had been between them. To him, it had never happened, or it had happened to an entirely different man. Only she would think of that man as Dinim despite the fact that he was dead and gone for several centuries.

Adrianna refocused her gaze onto Dinim’s face, only to find him regarding her intently. Copyright T.R. Chowdhury and T.M. Crim. All rights reserved. No content may be used without permission.

He knew that she was keeping some things from him, but he didn't pursue it. Instead, he turned back to the book in his hands and opened it.

“There is more to that book than just some information about the *cycles*,” she said.

Dinim glanced up at her. “Perhaps some prophecies?” He grinned slightly as he pointed out the word to her on the binding.

Adria grinned in response. Of course he would have figured that the book contained prophecy. She felt herself starting to relax a little, beginning to experience a little bit of the camaraderie they had once shared before their fighting had started.

“The ones mentioned in this book were given by a man with the name of Johanan Chardelis.”

“Oh yes. I have heard of him,” said Dinim. “He was a prophet of some renown who lived near the turn of the second century.”

Adrianna gestured to the book. “I read some of his prophecies. I was hoping that you could read them as well, and then tell me what you think.”

He nodded. “All right. Show me where they are.”

Adrianna showed Dinim the appropriate pages. She leaned back on the bed as she waited for him to read the text. After a few moments, she began to watch his face, wanting to see what type of reaction he would have. She saw his eyes widen and then he began to flip back and forth between the pages containing the three prophecies. By the expression on his face, she knew that if his complexion could have become even paler, it would have.

Finally he looked up at her, his eyes haunted. “Adrianna, you know that these prophecies are about us . . . about *you* . . .”

Her tone was grim. “Actually, I was hoping that you would tell me that they weren't.”

Dinim swallowed convulsively and turned to one of the prophecies. He rose from his chair and then seated himself next to her on the bed. Adrianna attempted to straighten herself, but Dinim only shook his head, situated his arm and shoulder behind her back, and pulled her against him.

Dinim thrust the book before her and began to read. “*The world will cycle and the fifth will come . . . Chardelis is referring to this cycle.*” Dinim paused and then continued. “*Fourteen they will be, a number of strength . . . remember, we used to be fourteen, before Zorg died.* In Copyright T.R. Chowdhury and T.M. Crim. All rights reserved. No content may be used without permission.

the next verse that is mentioned . . . *One will be taken away in death . . .*”

Adrianna nodded. She felt her own eyes begin to widen, realization finally setting in.

Dinim went on to another verse. “*The third carries a daemon deep inside . . .* Adrianna, Chardelis is referring to Triath. In his earlier days with the Wildrunners, he battled a daemon. Something happened, and an aspect of the daemon was incorporated into him. To this day, he carries the essence of the daemon within him and even has some of the powers that type of daemon possesses. And look down here.” Dinim pointed to yet another verse. “*Clerics will fight alongside assassins . . . And faelin, human, and oroc . . .* Tianna is a cleric, Sorn is an assassin, and Naemmious is of orocish descent.”

Silence reigned for a moment as Adrianna collected her thoughts. But once again, Dinim spoke. “Adrianna, there is no doubt to whom this prophecy is referring.”

Adrianna frowned. “But who is the Dreamer?”

Dinim stared at her for a moment, his expression telling her he wondered if she was truly serious. “It's the same person as the Warrior spoken about in the other prophecies.” Dinim then turned to one of them. “*The Warrior of Destiny will come . . . With a talisman of magnificent power . . .*”

Adrianna pulled her lips into her mouth, an attempt to keep her emotions at bay. Denial was futile. She would accept her fate, but she didn't have to like it. Despite her attempts, the tears fell down her face. Then she shook her head. “I am no warrior. I'm not strong enough to be what this prophecy says I should be.”

Adrianna heard the bitterness in her voice, knowing her words to be the truth. She felt Dinim's hand at her jaw and then he was moving her to face him. She stared into eyes full of sadness and regret. Dinim shook his head. “You are wrong. You are everything that prophecy says you are. You are the Child, the Warrior, and the Dreamer. Without even really knowing why, we have rallied to you, and here we are, preparing ourselves to fight the Deathmaster. You are strong, have proven it time and time again, despite the odds against you. You will lead us into this fight, and with your magic, we will defeat Aasarak.”

Adrianna shook her head yet again. “What have I done that has changed your opinion of me so much?”

Dinim rubbed his thumb across her cheek, wiping away the wetness there. “I was a fool. I let my emotions control me, allowed them to dictate my thoughts and actions. I could have killed you, and I have known regret every day of my life since then. I have lived without your friendship for only a few moon cycles now, but it seems like many years have gone by. What I am trying to say is that my opinion of you never changed. I never had a poor opinion of you to begin with. Only then, I had no way to tell you how I truly felt. But now, with everything that has happened, and in light of what I have learned, I know that I need to tell you these things.”

“Dinim, you must know I have already forgiven you.” Adrianna reached up to cup the hand at her jaw.

Dinim shook his head. “But I can’t forgive myself.”

Adria frowned. “But you must. I need you to be strong.”

“I know. But I just don’t know if I have the strength left in me anymore.”

Adrianna deepened her frown. “I have endured so much so we can win this fight. Am I really hearing you say that you are giving up? For over six years I have studied under Master Tallachienan. Mercilessly, he taught me everything he could before I left his citadel. I come back home to discover that the rod has been lost, and our most powerful sorcerer may be almost useless?”

“What do you mean, six years have passed?” Dinim interjected.

Adrianna gave a heavy sigh. “The Master knew our time here in the present was limited. He took me back into the past so that I would have the time necessary to learn all he had to teach me before our battle. For me, over six years have gone by, while for you it's been only a few moon cycles. That's why I suffered so much on my return from his citadel. My body was reacting to being thrust forward in time by almost fifty-two years.”

Dinim stared at her for a moment. TC was more powerful than he thought; either that, or he had great connections. Tallachienan obviously knew that Adrianna’s role in the upcoming battle with Aasarak was of paramount importance. Otherwise, he wouldn't have bothered to go through the effort to take her back in Time. He glanced back down at the book in his hands, knowing they still didn't have all the facts. However, he had a feeling that the book contained much of the information they needed to know.

Dinim rose from his position on the bed. “How much of this have you read?”

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“Not enough. I've only had the chance to read a few of the chapters; some of them I skimmed through, and a couple I haven't been able to look at yet.”

“Let me borrow this for the evening. Get some rest tonight and I will come to you tomorrow. By then I can tell you all I have gleaned from this book.”

Adrianna nodded. “I guess you can tell I'm pretty tired.”

Dinim grinned. “It's all right. Based on what you described to me, I'm surprised you've been able to make it this long without falling asleep already.”

Adrianna stood up from the bed, Dinim holding onto her supportively. Once realizing her legs couldn't sustain her weight, he lifted her in his arms and carried her back to her own room. He gently deposited her on the bed, and noticing a plate of food on the desk, brought it over. He watched as Adrianna took a chunk of bread and then drank the water that sat on the nightstand. After making sure she was comfortable, Dinim then bade her a good rest. Adrianna was closing her eyes before he left the room . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

Adrianna slowly walked the periphery outside the apotos. It was early morning, and the first rays of dawn had begun to crest above the horizon. The cold wind blew through her hair, attempting to burrow into her cloak. The season would be changing soon, the icy grip of winter slowly loosening its hold. But until then, the night and early morning hours would still be cold. Adrianna wrapped the fur lined cloak more tightly around her to shut it out.

After Dinim carried her back to her room, she had slept for the rest of the day and into the night. She had awoken sometime in the wee hours, hunger driving her out of bed to seek the plate of food she remembered sitting on the desk. Ravenously, she ate what remained of the bread, cheese, and papas fruit. She tried to settle back down for the remainder of the night, only to find herself unable to sleep. She felt her strength returning and her legs had not shaken so much when she got up to get the food. After a while, she decided that despite the darkness she would go for a walk. She needed the physical stimulation, and perhaps it would tire her enough that she would be able to sleep again.

Adrianna found her clothes resting inside the chest at the foot of the bed, as well as her pack, belt-pouches, and sword. She donned only tunic and trousers, not bothering with the rest. Momentarily she had considered the belt with her pouches and sword, but quickly discarded that  
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idea. Heavens, she was only going for a walk . . . what did she need with spell components and a blade here within the sanctified confines of Krathil-lon?

Adrianna chuckled to herself as she walked. Yes, indeed. What would she do with those things? Krathil-lon was highly fortified. There wasn't much that would have a chance to get a foothold. The power of the druids that resided here was too strong. And there was another reason why she felt so protected. It was the presence of Sirion.

Adrianna felt the familiar ache in her chest. She had tried to leave most of her pain behind in Tallachienan's citadel, but obviously she wasn't very successful. With him so near, Adrianna couldn't help feeling this way. She didn't understand why he wouldn't come to see her, especially since he had been the one to find her and bring her safely back to the apoptos. Even if he no longer had romantic inclinations towards her, didn't he at least respect the friendship that could still exist between them?

Suddenly Adria felt a stirring in her mind. It was Xebrinarth, responding to the strong emotion that he felt through their link. He knew the cause of her distress, for they had spoken for quite some time before she went to see Dinim the day before. He sent her soothing thoughts, hoping to dispel some of the sadness she felt. He was sorry about Sirion, knew how much the man meant to her. He had once called Sirion her life mate, the person who would one day sire her children. Yet, that dream had become a distant memory, just like so many of the other dreams that had come before it.

Adrianna shuffled her feet, wondering how much longer it would take for her to continue the circuit around the apoptos. Hells, she was a fool to think she would be able to walk around the entire structure without even knowing how large it was. It was obviously too far, and she was beginning to get tired. She was so deep in her thoughts that she didn't realize someone was near, and when she finally perceived that she wasn't alone, the man was standing close enough to harm her if he chose.

Adrianna jerked her head up, her heart suddenly racing in her chest. By the gods, he had frightened her, coming out of the darkness that way. When she saw that the man who stood before her was Sirion, her heart did a curious flip. She put a hand to her chest and exhaled an exclamation.

“Sirion . . . you startled me.”

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Despite the increase to his heart beat and his heightened sense of awareness, Sirion attempted to keep his face expressionless. Finally she was awake and standing before him for the first time in far too long. He hadn't meant to frighten her, so sure that she would notice him as he approached her from out of the forest. But her faelin senses hadn't notified her of his presence, and he had forgotten that her senses may not be as they should be since she was still recovering from her illness.

Sirion had been shocked to find her alone in the woods, and even more to discover that she was in such agony. After calling for Dramati, the corubis had swiftly carried them to the apoptos. By that time, fear had overtaken Sirion. Something was seriously wrong with Adrianna. He yelled for someone to find Tianna and bring her to him. One of the nearby tyros rushed off, and when he returned, Father Dremathain and the rest of the Wildrunners were following closely behind. After examining her and praying to her goddess, Tianna could find nothing physically wrong with Adrianna. The malady that afflicted her was unnatural, beyond what Tianna could understand. Father Dremathain said the same. However, the two of them together decided that they could put Adrianna into a slumber, make it so that she didn't feel her pain so acutely.

Even in her deep sleep, Adrianna continued to convulse with pain. It took two days for it to pass, and after that she slept for another two days. Tianna came to him when Adrianna awoke for the first time, but by the time he made it to her room, Adrianna was sleeping again. He sat with her for a few hours, hoping that she would awaken again. When she didn't, he whispered in her ear that he would return the next day.

But that hadn't happened. Or it did, but every time he came, she was either not in her quarters or sleeping. He neither had the heart to wake her from her healing rest, nor the inclination to hunt her down. So now here he was, standing before Adrianna with a vague sense of disquiet. Just by looking into her eyes he could sense the change in her, a change he had been warned about by many of his comrades. Regarding him out of those dark eyes, she seemed so much older now, wiser. There was a solemnity that was never there before, and a reservedness. He didn't know how to respond to those things so he said the first mundane thing to enter his mind.

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Sirion shook his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't intend to alarm you."

Adrianna nodded. For a moment they just stood there, silently regarding one another. Under normal circumstances, she would have smiled a greeting, perhaps rushed to embrace him. However, this situation was anything but ordinary. She was no longer the same person that she was when she left, Sirion had moved on without her, and she had made her own mistakes to nullify their betrothal. No matter how much she tried to remind herself that she was under the influence of stronger forces when she made the decision to sleep with Tallachienan, she still couldn't eradicate all wrongdoing within herself. Even if Sirion himself had not chosen to take another to his bed, he had every right to break their betrothal based on her confessions alone.

Adrianna took a deep breath. "It's been a long time."

Again, more silence. Adrianna broke eye contact, spoke the words even though it seemed Sirion no longer had feelings for her. "I missed you."

The air itself seemed to become still for a moment. Adrianna's heart stuttered in her chest when he was suddenly reaching out to her, bridging the space between them. Sirion pulled her close and breathed into her hair. "Gods, Adria. I've been wanting to see you since yesterday morning."

She sighed deeply, settling herself into his side. She inhaled the familiar scent of him, never wanting it far from her again. "Then why didn't you come?"

"I *did* come, but you were either sleeping or not in your room."

Adrianna pulled away and looked into his face. "Why didn't you just wake me up?"

Sirion shook his head. "You were sleeping a healing sleep. In my right mind I could never do that."

She almost whispered the words, her voice taking on a sad tone. "But I've been waiting for you."

Sirion pulled her close again and just held her there for a while, reveling in her presence. The cool winds swept against them and he tightened his embrace. A part of him had stagnated with her gone, had been only half the man he knew he could be. He would never let her go again, never.

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“I am so glad that you found me in the forest,” she said. “I was afraid no one would hear me.”

“Why did your Master send you back like that? Why were you in so much pain?” Sirion asked, unable to keep the gruff tone from his voice.

Adrianna shook her head where it rested against his chest. “It wasn’t his fault.” Then she pulled away, looking into his eyes. “I have so many things I want to tell you.”

Sirion noticed the tumult in her eyes and the minute trembling in her body before she turned away. He just stood there for a moment, a feeling of unease sweeping over him. He could sense the disturbance all around her, and he didn't know what to do. She was upset, that much was obvious. And when he noticed a tear falling down her face, he pulled her back around to look at him.

“*Shendori*, please tell me what’s going on.”

Adrianna pulled out of his embrace, refusing to be comforted. She shook her head, several more tears following the first one. “I can’t. So many things have happened, and I can’t think of what needs to be said first.”

“That's all right,” he said. “We can work through it all together.”

Once more Adrianna shook her head. “No, not now . . . not yet.” She sniffed and then wiped away the tears on her face. “Please, I am so terribly tired, Sirion. Can you help me back to my room?”

Mutely, Sirion nodded. Slowly he approached her, took her in his arms, and then lifted her up. Adrianna wrapped her arms around his neck as he carried her back into the apertos. He felt the gentle shuddering of her body as her sobs began anew. His heart ached with the knowledge that she felt she couldn't confide in him, and once more he rued the day he let her go.

Once they reached her small chamber, he opened the door and carried her to the bed. When he lay her there, he stood over her for a moment, taking in the beauty of her face, the golden halo of her hair splayed all around, and the darkness of her tear-dampened eyes. He lowered his lips to hers and brushed them softly in a loving caress. He wanted more, but restrained himself. He slowly straightened and then walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Adrianna stared up at the ceiling. Her heart ached with the depth of her melancholy. What was Sirion doing, holding her and talking to her like that when he had moved on to another lover? But also, what was *she* doing? Sure, she wanted to tell Sirion everything about the years she spent in the citadel, but she knew that she would also have to tell him about what happened between herself and the Master. That wasn't a story she was ready to tell him yet. She would gather her thoughts, and then talk to him another day.

Some day after she told the Wildrunners about the scary prophecies she had discovered . .

Then she and Sirion could address the state of their relationship . . . if they even had one any more.

\* \* \* \* \*

The knock sounded for the second time. Then she heard Dinim's voice, "Adrianna, can I come in? It's important."

She approached the door and opened it just wide enough for Dinim to enter before closing it behind him. It was just before mid-day, and she'd been starting to wonder when he would come. Dinim swiftly moved to the bed and she followed. Adrianna then seated herself beside him. Dinim turned towards her, and by the intensity of his stare knew that he had nothing good to tell her.

"Adrianna, I have read the text in its entirety. Some things that I am about to tell you, you will already know. The others you will not."

Adrianna gave a brusque nod. She was ready.

"The turning of this *cycle* is near. I have looked at the timeline of events leading up to the turns in the other four *cycles* and it coincides with what has been happening *now* in this *cycle*. At first, the events leading up to the turning of a *cycle* were unclear to me, but as I continued to study the text, it all began to fit together."

Adrianna nodded. This was the part she knew she didn't want to hear, but knew she must. This was where Dinim was going to tell her about her destiny.

"I still don't know how the *cycling* started, but supposedly there is a way to end it. Many say that it has to do with the Balance, which must be tipped back towards equality. Others say it hasn't much to do with the Balance at all, but simply a series of events that must take place in  
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order for the curse to be broken.

“In every *cycle* preceding this one, there has always been a small cohort of individuals that have gone against the Deathmaster. It has always been comprised by a young woman, whom they call the Dreamer, and her comrades. In every *cycle* thus far, they have failed. The reign of Aasarak then went unchecked, the world eventually plummeted into chaos, and after a while, the *cycle* turned.”

For a moment, Adrianna just sat there. Then she said, “The Dreamer and her companions died in their battle.” She made it a statement, for she already knew how the story ended. She had asked Tallachienan as much before she left his citadel. She watched as Dinim hesitated. Mayhap she knew more than he thought she would.

“Yes, but this *cycle*, Johannan Chardelis prophesied about the Dreamer and her battle against Aasarak. It could mean that, this time, we actually have a chance.”

Adrianna swallowed despite the lump lodged painfully in her throat. She wasn't heartened by Dinim's statement and had just realized she would be the one to tell her friends they would probably die in their fight against Aasarak. Some of them, she was sure, had already faced that reality. Regardless, she still had to tell them what she and Dinim already knew . . . they had always failed before. The one thing that may have helped them, the Rod of Atlenbos, was gone, and their chances of success were desolate.

Adrianna cocked her head to the side. “It's good to know that you have suddenly become an optimist.”

Dinim shook his head. “No. Not just optimism. *Hope*. Without hope, what would we strive to live for?”

Adrianna sighed and then nodded. “I'm just afraid of letting everyone down. These prophesies build me up . . . Dinim, no matter what you say, I just don't think of myself this way.”

Dinim put a hand on her shoulder. “That is what makes you so genuine. Believe me, there is no one better suited for a prophecy such as this one, than you.”

Adrianna placed her hand on top of the one on her shoulder, grinning tremulously. “Well, at least I have one staunch supporter.”

Dinim shook his head. “When all is said and done, I'll almost guarantee you have twelve.”

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Adrianna rose from the bed. “Well, we had best tell the others as soon as we can. The longer we stay here, the closer that Aasarak will be to completing his army.”

Adrianna barely noticed Dinim's silence as she prepared to leave the chamber. She stepped into her boots and then placed a sash around her waist, sliding the loop of the scabbard through before she tied it. She completed the rest of her preparations before she picked up her sword and slid it into the sheath.

Dinim's questioning voice broke the silence. “Adria, where did you get that blade?”

She turned to face Dinim, saw the look of incredulity on his face. “I found it in the dungeons of TC’s citadel. The Master prepared a test for me and lured me down there. I found myself up against a monstrous spider. I defeated it with an *Ice* spell and this sword I found lying on the floor. I've kept it ever since.”

Dinim grinned widely. “It seems that you have become a warrior in more ways than one.”

Adrianna drew her brows together for a moment, suddenly viewing herself the way Dinim did. Yes, she imagined he might see her that way. She carried a sword, had the skills of an amateur warrior. “Yes, well, I am not very good.”

“You were good enough to wield it against your enemy and defeat it.”

“I suppose,” she acceded.

Dinim raised his hands from his sides. “That is the definition of a warrior . . . someone who wields a weapon of war and uses it effectively against the enemy.” He then gestured towards the sword. “That blade once belonged to me.”

Adrianna’s eyes widened. “No way! Like I said, I found it in the dungeons.”

Dinim nodded. “As I recall, that is where I lost it. I had my own test down there once.”

Adrianna fingered the hilt. That was something, finding the sword that had been left there by Dinim, just to have it save her from the monster that was her test. She truly believed that, for she had been too weak from her sickness to summon her magic. The sword had definitely saved her life. Without it, she wouldn't have found something strong enough to shatter the spider’s leg.

Adrianna found herself untying the sash. She removed the sheathed sword, and held it out towards Dinim, offering the blade to its rightful owner. He said nothing for a moment before  
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laying his hands over hers. He then slowly curved her fingers around the weapon.

“No. It is yours now. Besides, I have another.” Dinim indicated the short sword at his hip.

Adrianna nodded mutely as she retied the sash around her waist. She then stepped closer to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Thank you, Dinim. The sword means so much to me. I’m so glad to have you as my friend again.”

Dinim returned the embrace, holding her tightly in his arms. He breathed deeply, happy that they had finally come to terms with what happened before their battle with Thane. Finally, Adrianna released him and stepped away. She took her cloak from the nearby chair and proceeded to fasten it onto the reinforced shoulders of her tunic. He watched her for a moment, knowing that he needed to tell her something before they left to meet with the rest of the group.

*Adrianna didn’t know that Aasarak had already completed his army . . .*

“Before we go there are some things I think you need to know.”

Adrianna looked up at him, taking in his solemn countenance. “What are they?”

Dinim solemnly stepped up to her and took the fasteners from her fingers. “Events in this *cycle* have taken place much more swiftly than the ones before.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “Aasarak has already completed his army. As we speak, it is marching through the Kingdom of Cortubro, laying waste to whatever stands in its way.”

Adrianna blinked and her dark eyes widened. Dinim watched the horror wash over her face as she shook her head. “No, this can’t be happening already. How do you know? Have you seen it? Perhaps it isn’t what you think. Maybe . . .”

Dinim sighed heavily. “Adrianna, there is no doubt as to the origins of this army.”

“Then it is . . . they are . . .”

Dinim nodded. “They are abominations . . . dead, but not dead. They are the poor souls that Aasarak has brought out of the grave. Many of them are nothing but skeletons, while others are endowed with swaths of rotting flesh. They are human, faelin, halfen, and oroc. There are even some animals . . . thritean, kyrrean, bruin, corubis, and wemic.”

“We need to stop them,” Adrianna whispered the words from a dry throat.

Dinim shook his head. “They can’t be stopped. Even with an arm severed, a leg  
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removed, a sword through the middle . . . they keep coming. Only when they lie in pieces on the ground will they lose their animation.”

Adrianna suddenly turned away from him. She put a hand to her forehead as the gravity of the situation slammed into her. Meanwhile, Dinim kept his calm as he continued with what he had to say. “The druids knew when the army began its movement. The world seemed to shudder as it marched. All life sought to escape it. Only the birds were able to fly fast enough to come and tell the tale. The plants and animals in the path of the army withered and died, and when it encountered villages and towns, those were quick to succumb as well.

“Krathil-lon sent out a summons, and druids from around the continent rallied. This place was swarming with druids from Reshik-na, Halith-shin, and Dregil-zan. They went out to meet Aasarak’s army.” Once again Dinim paused for a moment. “The army was so vast . . . there were so many of the undead that the druids didn’t have a chance. More than half of them fell before they retreated and returned home.”

The room was suddenly quiet for a moment before she spoke. “How many are there?”

“At least a couple thousand,” he replied.

She regarded him dejectedly. “Then we are too late.”

Dinim shook his head. “No! It is never too late. But I just wanted you to know that Aasarak’s army has already begun to march. I didn’t want you to be shocked when you heard it from the others today when we go to meet them.”

Adrianna gave a heavy sigh. “How is it not too late? Will Aasarak's destruction stop the army?”

“No, I don’t think so. But with Aasarak gone, at least the dead will no longer rise.”

“How is he doing this? How has Aasarak been able to animate so many of the dead? How can he go to every individual to make the incantation that will bid it rise?” she asked.

“While I studied under TC, there was a time I was fascinated with necromancy. It was then that I learned about the Ring of Aboleth, as well as an artifact known as the Azmathion. The powers of this artifact are very difficult to harness, and one of those powers is very similar to that of the Ring of Aboleth. I am certain Aasarak has possession of the Azmathion and that he has learned to use many of its powers. One of those was the creation of the azmathous, which we saw in the twisted guise of your father. Another is the power to raise the dead. By now he

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doesn't have to seek out each individual. He has the strength to focus the power of the Azmathion onto an *entire group* of individuals and make them rise to do his bidding." Dinim shook his head. "Heavens forbid he has mastered the ability to do it from afar."

Adrianna bowed her head with the weight of this newfound knowledge. What they were up against was far greater than just a master sorcerer deep within his lair. Even if they somehow defeated Aasarak, which was far unlikely, they would still have to find some way to incapacitate his undead legions. Hellfire, this was something that was going to take more than just her and the rest of the Wildrunners.

They needed their own army.