

Excerpt from
Shadow Over Shandahar: Dark Storm Rising
by T.R. Chowdhury and T.M. Crim

Thane wiped a shaking hand over his face. Just like the rest of him, it was damp with sweat. The forest floor crackled as he turned in place once more, his breaths shallow and ragged. Even in his sickened state, he could sense that something followed him, something dark and sinister. It was the faelin part of him that sensed it, for he knew no human would have the intellect to perceive such things. Unfortunately, it was the weaker human blood that made up his other half.

Mayhap it was the human part of him that made Thane feel as though he was going mad.

What started out as a soft chuckle ended up being a hearty laugh. Yes, mayhap it was insanity that caused him to see shadows at the periphery of his vision, to hear whisperings just barely within his auditory capacity, and to sometimes catch the brief scent of rot. It was a good excuse for why, even after all these years, he couldn't let *her* go.

Thane resolutely turned back to his path. Darkness was falling, and he needed to make it back to the encampment before they started to wonder about him. He remembered the expressions of concern on the faces of his half-brother and daughter, and knew they awaited his return. Ian had been overly solicitous of late, and Thane had finally questioned him about it. Ian proceeded to say that Thane had been acting rather strangely the past few fortnights and that he was worried.

Thane had simply stared at Ian for a few moments before turning away. Ian obviously thought him to be a fool. Thane had seen the glances Ian had begun to share with his young daughter, noticed the way his brother often stared at her when he thought no one noticed. Thane had always thought their relationship to be rather close, even when Sheri was but a child first learning the rudimentary skills of a fine sword-wielder.

Ian claimed that he was concerned about his brother because of 'strange'

behavior. But Thane knew better. Ian felt guilty for wanting to fornicate with his daughter, a girl who was nineteen years his junior, a girl still in her adolescence.

It was despicable, and Thane considered it a betrayal.

Once again he stopped. Thane brought his hands to his temples and squeezed his eyes shut. By the gods, the images that arose in his mind . . . terrible images of blood, torment, and death. He shook his head to free it of the ugliness. He hated that he was so drawn to the visualizations, and that he was pleased by their grisly outcomes. To say that they were macabre was an understatement, and for a moment he wondered if perhaps Ian was right to be concerned about him.

Thane suddenly jerked his head up, his blood-shot eyes raking across his field of vision. He heard it again, a whispering just out of his auditory perception emanating from the gnarled trees surrounding him. He thrust his fingers through greasy brown hair, most of which had escaped the loosely made plait that rested over his leather-clad shoulder. The other hand he rested on the hilt of his broadsword.

By the gods, what was wrong with him?

Shaking his head, he continued onward through the lengthening shadows, the canopy overhead rustling in the gentle evening breeze. After a short while he began to wonder why he had not yet seen the landmarks telling him he was getting closer to the encampment. Thane frowned into the approaching night. It was possible that, with the dimming light combined with his gruesome musings, he had shifted course. Swiftly deciding that was the case, Thane began to move in a more southerly direction, intuition telling him how he should proceed. As he walked, Thane couldn't keep his thoughts from gravitating to the same person it did at the end of every day.

Gemma, his beloved wife . . . gone almost two decades.

It had been about this time of day when she went into labor. Even now he could hear her agonized cries through the sturdy oak door of the bedchamber. Right from the start Thane had sensed something was wrong, terribly wrong. Gemma had brought the first child into the world, but the second resisted. Gemma had continued to labor, her body weakening as the hours passed. Finally she had birthed the second twin, but at a

terrible cost. The midwife was unable to stop the bleeding that persisted after the difficult labor, and Gemma died in his arms.

Thane had been devastated. The woman he loved more than life itself was gone. For the first twin he had given no blame. It was towards the second twin that he felt anger, for it was she who had killed his beloved wife. However Gemma's sister, Sharra, had championed the second-born infant, claiming the baby wasn't at fault, that it was the will of the gods that Gemma's life was ended. With her life finished, it would be up to the daughters Gemma had borne to continue her legacy.

Thane had forcefully cast the woman from his house. He couldn't stand Sharra's idiocy. Gemma was dead because the second-born child had made it that way. Meanwhile, Gemma's good friend, Mairi, had offered to help care for the newborn babies. Thane took the woman up on her offer, knowing he was unable to care for them himself. It wasn't until the girls were old enough that he had taken the first-born under his wing to train her as a warrior. The second-born he had ignored.

Thane seethed to himself. Over the years he had come to despise his youngest daughter. In truth, he hated to claim her as his own. Hells, why would he want to keep her . . . the child that fought so hard against her mother that she refused to be born soon enough to save her? If Thane had it his way, he would have abandoned the second twin to the elements. Instead he had been forced to endure the sight of her, making him relive the night of Gemma's death over and over and . . .

Thane stopped again, wiping a hand across his face. He hissed when the fingernails raked across his cheek, not noticing the stiff curve of his fingers until it was too late. He shook his head at the absurdity, when he saw something from the periphery of his vision. He instantly felt a tingling along his shoulders and back, his body's reaction to imminent danger.

Thane turned just as a dark robed figure glided out from the shadows of the trees a few farlo ahead. He felt his eyes widen and his heart began to race in his chest. The familiar odor of decay he had been sensing every now and again during the past few days intensified. His every instinct told him to run, but his mind had already rationalized

it would do him no good. It seemed that Death had found him, and everyone knew there was no escape from Death.

Thane just stood there as the cloaked form approached. It seemed to float over the ground, for it had no discernible stride and made no sound as it passed. The tattered black robes fluttered eerily about it, the edges having a strange ethereal glow that shifted and wavered to distort one's perception. As it got close enough, the face within the recesses of the hood slowly became more visible.

The image within was something from his most hideous of nightmares.

Thane felt his heart skip a beat and his breath caught in his throat. The flesh was shrunken around the skull, giving sharp definition to the cheekbones and making the lips almost nonexistent. The nose was almost gone, represented in part by a dark hole, and the ears were missing. The most disturbing feature were the eyes, glowing like hot coals from a banked fire. Thane finally caught his breath as the apparition stopped before him, the eyes burning right into the very depths of his soul. Then it spoke.

The voice was like the whisper he had been hearing, only magnified. It was creepy, chilling him to the core of his being. "I have heard your cries, Thane Darnesse. I have felt your sorrow, tasted your bitterness, and smelled your despair."

Thane swallowed heavily. "Wh . . . who are you?" he said shakily. "Why have you come to me?"

The figure cocked his hooded head to the side and regarded him intently from smoldering eyes. "I am called Aasarak, and I am here to offer you a bargain."

Thane composed himself for a moment before making a reply. "Wh . . . what kind of bargain?"

The hideous face grinned widely, showing a row of perfect teeth. "I have seen your innermost soul. You want strength to persevere over your opponents, skill to be the best at your profession, and power to influence those who surround you. I can give you all of these things, ten-fold!" Aasarak paused and then continued. "But even more than these things, you yearn for *vengeance*. The newfound power I can grant will give you the means to achieve your desire."

Thane gave a swift inhalation of surprise. By the gods, how did this being know so much about him? How could it possibly know his innermost secrets? And why would Death be striking bargains with his victims? Thane shook his head slowly. "What is your price for these things?"

The smile disappeared from Aasarak's face. "Only your soul."

Thane frowned. "What?"

Aasarak regarded him intently. "Your soul is all I require to transfer these gifts to you. Then, to make it permanent, I need your sworn allegiance to me."

Thane eyed Aasarak speculatively. "You promise to give me all of these things?"

"And moooore." Aasarak breathed the words and then held out a skeletal hand. "Come to me, and you shall have what your soul most desires."

Thane hesitated for a moment. He noticed the word Aasarak used . . . soul. The sorcerer would give Thane what his soul desired, but not his heart. He supposed no one could give life to something that had already known Death, no matter how powerful he might be. But at least he would have his revenge. "So how do I know you will keep your end of our bargain?"

Aasarak cocked his head to the side once more. "You won't."

Thane frowned. "So how do I give you my soul? Is it by some kind of magic?"

Aasarak reached within his voluminous robes and brought forth an intricately carved object that appeared to be made of bone. The runic designs danced over the eight faces, each one melding artistically into the next. It was a geometric work of art, and Thane wondered at the significance of it. "My Azmathion shall help you," he said.

Thane paused. If he swore his allegiance to Aasarak, he knew he would be leaving Ian and Sheridana behind. He supposed he didn't really care all that much, for he already felt that his brother deceived him. And Sheri . . . mayhap her loss was worth the gain. "How do we start?"

Aasarak regarded him intently. "Do you agree to the terms, then?"

Thane nodded his agreement.

"You must speak the words aloud," breathed Aasarak.

"I agree to the terms of your agreement," replied Thane.

The thing sitting in the palm of Aasarak's skeletal hand flared with a red luminescence for a moment before subsiding to a paler glow. Aasarak gave a small smile. "Now we can begin."

Thane swept a hand across his damp forehead and repeated the question he had asked earlier. "What do I need to do?"

Aasarak grinned more widely, and Thane felt a shiver of trepidation race up his spine. As the sorcerer reached his other hand towards him, Thane felt a sudden tension surrounding him. He tried to move his arms and legs but found that they had been bound by some invisible force. "There is only one way a man can surrender his soul," said Aasarak. "*He needs to die.*"

Thane felt his eyes widen in alarm just as a wave of pain swept over him. The Azmathion glowed a dark blue, and his body contorted with agony. He could feel a pulling sensation from deep within him, felt his insides being sucked away. He wrapped his arms around his abdomen and sunk to his knees. He never imagined he would die this way. What would Ian and Sheri think had happened to him?

Gods, what have I done?

Sweat dribbled down the sides of his face and down his neck. He was barely able to recover for a moment before the second wave struck. He fell onto his back and lay there upon the ground, unable to move through the agony gripping his every muscle. Aasarak moved to stand over him, the glowing Azmathion illuminating a hideous grin stretched across the skeletal face.

Thane was only able to gasp a few more breaths before the third wave washed through him. This time he screamed, the pain ripping through him like a scythe. Now he knew what Gemma had endured when she birthed his children. Now he knew what she endured when the child Adrianna refused to be born. He barely had a moment to breathe before the fourth wave came . . .

The torment was unbearable. All he could do was stare at the form above him, at the burning eyes that cruelly watched his suffering.

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The fifth wave came and he struggled for breath. He heard his heart begin to stutter within his chest, felt it struggle to maintain him. Adrianna, Adrianna . . . the wretched child who had become his ultimate downfall. Without her, Gemma would have lived. Without her, he would have kept his sanity, human blood or no.

The sixth wave crested over Thane. His heart slowly shuddered to a halt. Time seemed to become still as he lay there, his tortured body sprawled on the ground. Blood trickled from his nostrils, and urine wet the front of his trousers. Then there was a moment when Time had no meaning . . .

. . . . and as Thane's consciousness shifted to darkness he only saw those burning eyes.