

Excerpt from
Shadow Over Shandahar: Echoes of Time
by T.R. Chowdhury and T.M. Crim

Another day had passed and the group made camp for the night. Sirion dropped his pack and looked out into the forest contemplatively. Just that morning, Tianna and Armond had departed for the southern reaches of the domain of Filopar in the company of three of Thalios' men. Just as he predicted, Dramati and the warriors had arrived in the early hours of the morning, and even before everyone was awake, Tianna and her escort had left. Tianna had embraced him before leaving, kissing him on the mouth, and then quickly turning away. Sirion was a bit surprised, for she'd never been quite so demonstrative before. He decided that she was distraught about her journey to Reshik-na. In light of their situation, he couldn't blame her.

Sirion frowned as he felt the tension in his body beginning to build. They were close. He had noticed signs of a lycan pack, and he and could sometimes smell Sydonnia's distinctive odor. Sirion glanced cursorily about the encampment, told Dramati to stay there, and then began to walk into the forest. He would just take a quick look. Perhaps that was all that Sydonnia wanted . . . to catch him alone.

Sirion's footfalls were silent as he moved. He allowed his senses to extend outwards, to encompass the world around him. Then, not only did he hear the wind in the trees, he heard the movement of the animal-life in the leaf-litter, saw the scat of a leshera, followed the tracks of an alothere, and smelled the scent of rain on the wind. Suddenly he realized he was being followed.

"Sirion?"

He turned around to face Adrianna. She had stopped, and stood about half a farlo away. He had heard the fear in her voice when she spoke his name, the unspoken questions. Now he saw the same reflected in her eyes.

"Sirion, where are you going? Is something out here?"

He pulled his hand through his hair. He probably shouldn't have left like this, without telling anyone. His thoughts were so full of Sydonnia, he couldn't be bothered to remember anything or anyone else. "No, I don't think so. I just wanted to be sure before we camped for the night."

Adrianna nodded. He was just doing a perimeter check, like the one Zorg tended to do in the evenings as they set up camp. But this night Sirion was doing it, probably hoping to be alone, needing some time to think to himself despite the fact that he had been doing it all day. "Do you want me to leave you alone then?"

Sirion regarded her solemnly for a moment before his lips pulled up into a small smile. "No," he replied. "You know I always enjoy your company."

Adrianna was surprised when Sirion took her hand in his, and a weight lifted from her as they walked together in silence, making a wide circle around the periphery of the encampment. It bothered her that he had become so distant since the night of their passionate encounter, and she had begun to think he had regrets over what happened. However, in light of the rather dangerous situation, she supposed she couldn't blame him for the aloofness. A huge strain had been placed on Sirion, just as much mental as physical. She could understand how he felt, because she was currently going through the same hardship.

Thane weighed on her much the way Sydonnia weighed on Sirion . . . because it went deep, *family* deep. They walked for several more moments before Adria spoke again. "Sirion, what's going to happen?"

Sirion turned to the woman beside him. "I don't know." He wanted to give her more of an answer, but he didn't want to alarm her unnecessarily. Of course he had some idea of how events could play out. His uncle was very cunning and his strength equaled that of several men. Sirion was no fool. It was very possible he wouldn't return to the group alive. He had lied to Tianna when he told her to go. The group would be very hard-pressed without her healing

abilities. But it would have been wrong for him to keep her with them when the welfare of her family weighed so heavily on her.

Suddenly Sirion was afraid. If he lost against his uncle, Sydonnia and his minions would come for the rest of the group in retaliation. Adrianna would be a valuable commodity for Sydonnia, not only because she was beautiful, but because she had meant something to Sirion. And then there were the others. Sydonnia and his lycan would certainly crush them.

Sirion fiercely ran his fingers through his hair and then clenched his hands into fists. Adrianna startled with the force of his expletive. "Ugh! Why me? Of all of the people of Shandahar, why me? He is out there waiting for me, uncaring of the position in which he has placed me . . . the position for which my father trained me. You never asked, but I know you've thought about it. You wondered what Sydonnia meant when he said that I was a killer."

Adrianna regarded him impassively. She said nothing, just waited for him to continue.

Sirion shook his head. "For years my father trained me to be a fighter, a damn good one. He took me to some of the best warriors he knew. I trained every day, stopping only when we were on the road to my next mentor. But even then it wasn't a real break because he was the one who taught me all my skills as a ranger. It was all done for one purpose . . . to kill his brother. He knew that I was the only one who could do it; he was too weak to do it himself." Sirion chuckled dryly. "Servial was always the selfish one."

Sirion stopped. He saw the compassion in Adrianna's eyes, and was glad she had decided to follow him. He needed someone to listen, and she proved that she was good at it. Before he realized it, she was closing the distance between them, wrapping her arms around him in a gentle embrace. With a small smile he reciprocated, and she put her head on his shoulder. Holding her made him feel so much better about what he had done a few nights ago when he took advantage of her.

Finally they stepped apart. "We should go back," she said. "The others will be wondering about us."

“You go on ahead. I will follow in a moment.” Sirion gestured for her to go on without him. “I just need to be sure the area is secure.” Adrianna nodded in reply and then turned away towards the encampment.

Sirion stood there for quite some time, deep in thought. Memories of his days as a boy went through his mind. He couldn't recall a time he hadn't known the terrible story of how Sydonnia was made into the monster Sirion had come to know as his uncle. What exactly had happened all of those years ago? Did Servial really betray his own brother? He would never know. Servial was dead, and soon Sydonnia would be as well.

Sirion knew when he was being watched. All his senses on the alert, he slowly began moving in the direction Adrianna had taken back to camp. Moments later, from out of the darkening shadows before him, two forms stepped out from among the trees. The brawny faelin eyed him speculatively. “Your day of reckoning has come,” said one.

Sirion's mind reeled. Adrianna! He berated himself for his idiocy. He had known Sydonnia was near, but allowed her out of his sight to return to the encampment alone. She was in serious danger. He was about to call out to her when he sensed a third man stepping up behind him. He felt the point of a sword at the center of his back and imagined there were others behind him. “I wouldn't do that if I were you,” said the same man. “Besides, it's too late. Sydonnia already has her.”

“Where is Sirion?” Dartanyen looked around the camp and frowned. “And where is Adrianna?”

Sheridana looked up from her plate, also glancing around the camp. Both Sirion's and Adrianna's packs lay on the ground at opposite sides of the fire. Neither one had unfurled their bedrolls, telling Sheri that they had been gone for a while. Dramati lay next to Sirion's pack, his head on his paws. Sirion must have told him to stay there.

A bad feeling began to suffuse through her. She saw Dinim looking around the camp as well, and then back at her. Almost as one, they stood. “I don't know,” said Sheri, walking over to Dartanyen.

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"I'm thinkin' I remember seein' Sirion head off innat direction when we first got 'ere," mentioned Zorg, pointing into the trees to the right of the camp.

"But that was over an hour ago," said Dartanyen.

"What about Adrianna? Did anyone see her leave?" asked Dinim.

"I can only assume that she must have followed Sirion," said Sheridanana.

Dinim frowned. "Why would she do that?" His voice sounded oddly strained.

Sheri glanced at Dinim. She wasn't going to spell it out for him. Besides, he knew just as well as she what had begun to transpire between Sirion and her sister, whether he liked it or not.

Dartanyen put his hands up. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Let's just find them before *all* of our light is gone."

Sheridana shivered involuntarily as she watched Dartanyen get his weapons and vest. He was right; the sun was beginning to set. They would have the light of Steralion, but it wouldn't be enough. This night, the air was cooler than usual. Unaccustomed to the mild chill, she slipped on her cloak and couldn't help but wonder if Adrianna had hers.

"Well, we might as well all go," said Zorg. "If they're in some kinda trouble, they're gonna need as many o' us as possible."

"This is ridiculous," grouched Amethyst. "Sirion is a big boy. I am sure he can take care of himself."

"And what about Adrianna? She doesn't know how to protect herself against a lycan!" Dinim snarled.

"I am sure that the ever-so-brave Sirion would come to her rescue," Amethyst spat nastily.

"Amethyst," shouted Dartanyen, "Shut your face. We don't need your censure right now. Just get your belt and let's go."

Amethyst stomped over to her bedroll, mumbling under her breath and shaking her head. Sheri rolled her eyes. Sometimes Amethyst could be a great person to have around, but when she was sick or just simply tired, the girl was best left alone. Sheri wondered which one it

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was, and then thought it might be neither. Human women tended to be rather hateful during their menses. Perhaps it was Amethyst's moon-time.

The group filed out of the camp, Dramati in the lead. Sheri found herself wishing that Tianna and Armond were with them. Sheri and Armond tended to be at odds much of the time, but she respected him as a fellow warrior. In spite of her increasing exasperation with the man, she was glad that they were on the same side. She often wondered if he felt the same.

Sheri's agitation increased as they walked, the shadows lengthening with the setting sun. She suddenly heard a whine in front of her and Dramati looked back. His head and tail were held high, and she knew he sensed something. The snap of a branch to Sheri's right warned her of something approaching. She drew her swords from their sheaths at her back just as an arrow came slicing through the air, embedding itself deeply in Dramati's left side. He cried out as he fell, immediately beginning to tear the arrow free of his flesh.

Sheri ran over to him; behind her she heard shouts from the others. Just as she was about to reach Dramati, she suddenly found her way blocked. She jumped out of the way as the large form lunged for her. It barreled past and she did a quick turnaround, smacking the broadside of her right sword onto the person's back.

Quick as lightning, the man turned to face her, and she was met with a terrible visage. The man was no longer simply faelin, having features that were also those of an alothere. The flesh was grayish, and short wiry hairs sprouted from the exposed flesh on his arms. The eye-teeth in the lower jaw were elongated, coming up over the upper lip. His muscles were hyper-developed, and Sheri was certain he could be easily overpower her. But the most frightening thing about him was his eyes. They were black as pitch, seemingly without emotion. The alothere-man was about to move towards her when a shrill scream pierced the air.

It was Adrianna.

Sheri's heart skipped a beat and her flesh turned cold. It was the distraction that she needed. She ran past the alothere-man, back towards the group. She saw Dinim running towards her, and in the distance behind him, she could see five other monsters that had Zorg,

Dartanyen, Amethyst, and Sabian surrounded. As Dinim flew by her, he grabbed her hand and they sprinted in the direction from whence they had heard Adrianna.

Adrianna screamed again. She didn't mean to . . . it just happened. She liked to think mayhap it would turn out to be a good thing, for the group may have heard her. Or maybe even Sirion. However, when she saw the expression on Sydonnia's hideous face, she instantly changed her mind. He grabbed her roughly by the arm and hauled her to him. His breath stank and she couldn't keep herself from averting her face, squeezing her eyes tightly shut. He was terrible to behold, not quite man, not quite wemic. And he was strong, so strong that she was certain he would break her if he pressed even the littlest bit more . . .

Sydonnia chuckled maliciously in her left ear, sending chills down her spine. "Little whore," he spat, his spittle drizzling her face. "My nephew, the philanderer. It seems he always has a woman hanging around."

Adrianna stiffened. Noting her reaction Sydonnia laughed again. "But don't worry, my dear. I will have you. I am beginning to sicken of Joselyn. She is a weak woman, not worthy of the powerful icon I will soon become."

Adrianna began to tremble, the situation in which she found herself terribly reminiscent of one she had endured several years before. With a sudden feeling of desperation, she began to struggle. Sydonnia tightened his grip, and she cried out in pain. Once more he laughed, watching her try in vain to escape him. But then he suddenly stopped, roughly taking her face in his large hand and holding it still. He studied her intently, his feral eyes narrowing into slits.

"We have met before, have we not?"

Adrianna nodded her head, eyes wide.

"When? Where?" Sydonnia demanded.

"At the Inn of the Hapless Cenloryan, several moon cycles ago."

Sydonnia shook his head and frowned. "No, no. It was some other time, some other place."

Adrianna shook her head, knowing that if she had met him before then, she would have remembered.

Sydonnia shook his head as well. "I know I have met you before. But it doesn't matter now. My nephew will be here any moment. I will kill him and finally be rid of my treacherous brother's offspring."

The last Sydonnia said disdainfully, a smirk on his ugly face. His teeth were yellow, the canines elongated and sharp. His eyebrows had thickened, as had the hair everywhere else on his body. His stature had increased, and his muscle mass had nearly doubled. Adria knew he was in his transitional form, the one he assumed before reaching animal-state. He was very powerful in this hybrid form, having the best of both faelin and animal worlds.

Adrianna made no reply, barely able to tolerate his proximity. He was an abomination, a freak of nature, a monster created by parents to scare their children into obedience. He was an anathema to her, and she would escape him at her earliest opportunity. If needed, she would then help Sirion kill him, just to be certain the world was rid of such an abhorrence.

All of a sudden, Adrianna heard a commotion in the near distance. Sydonnia barked an order to one of his men to have it checked out. He gripped her tightly once more and began to drag her down the trail with him. Adrianna struggled. He snarled and raised his hand to her. Then, from out of the trees before them, Adrianna heard Sirion's voice. "Don't you dare touch her. I swear I will cut your hand off and shove it down your throat."

Sydonnia lowered his hand, an evil smile suffusing across his hideous face. "Sirion, it is so good of you to join us."

The commotion behind them got closer, and within moments, Sheridana and Dinim emerged on the scene, three shirwemic following close behind. Sirion and his own captors had emerged out of the trees to the right of her and Sydonnia. His hands were bound behind his back. Two shirkyrrean followed, each holding one of his arms. In the other hand, each held a sword to Sirion's back.

Dinim watched Sheridana recklessly sprint towards Adrianna and her captor. Sydonnia barely had time to position himself for the attack before Sheri was upon him. She slashed out with her long-sword, slicing across his forearm and driving him back. Meanwhile, Sydonnia released his grip on the struggling Adrianna. He snarled in anger and retaliated. With his wickedly clawed hand, he reached out and gouged Sheri's shoulder and upper arm, sending her spinning to the ground.

Dinim fearfully called out to Sheri as he ran to her side. Kneeling there, he quickly began the incantation to his spell, weaving the magic between his hands. Suddenly a large weight slammed into his back. Dinim slowly removed his face from the dirt. Damn, he had conveniently forgotten the two shirwemic that were trailing himself and Sheri.

He helplessly watched as the other shirwemic stooped to pick Sheri up from the ground. His hybrid form had progressed; and his face was more wemic-like, as were his legs and hands. With some hidden reserve, Sheri lunged for her sword, but was snatched roughly up from the ground before she could reach it. She fought until the creature wrapped his large, clawed hand around her throat and began to squeeze. Dinim struggled against the weight on top of him as the shirwemic leered evilly at her. Somehow, the clasps of her plate had broken, and the armor had slumped down over her hips.

The monster snarled. He opened his maw wide and sank his teeth into the vulnerable flesh above her left breast. Sheridana shrieked. Having extracted her dagger from its sheath about her upper thigh, she raised it above her head. She slammed it down into the foul creature's neck and was immediately sprayed with dark blood. The shirwemic screamed, the sound of his voice a long drawn-out howl. Her throat released, she began to fall. Sheri awkwardly caught herself and scrambled against the shirwemic, struggling to keep the blood-slicked dagger in his neck.

Dinim suddenly felt the weight of the shirwemic leave his back. He jumped up in hot pursuit, drawing his short-sword as he ran. The shirwemic reached his injured companion, reaching out towards Sheri. Dinim called out a warning just as a crackling black bolt of energy passed before him, striking the monster about to attack Sheridana. Dinim jumped back and

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looked into the trees to his left. Adrianna was standing there with an expression he had never seen on her face before.

Sheridana continued to hold on to her weapon, resisting the creature's attempts to be rid of her. She knew that she was at risk, not only because she had already suffered his bite, but because she knew that he would finally use his clawed hands to escape from her. But she refused to let go. Her weight pulled the weapon down, tearing the flesh of his neck, severing the blood vessels. Each moment that passed made him weaker, more vulnerable to other attacks.

And then it happened. Sheri felt the shirwemic give one last valiant attempt to disengage from her. His claws raked across her unprotected side just above the fallen plate. She hissed with the pain and her grip on the dagger began to slip. All of a sudden she felt something topple into them, and they went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

Sheri struggled against the heavy weight of the shirwemic. The smell of the creature was rank and she began to get a feeling of panic. She felt a hand grasp her upper arm and she looked up to see Dinim trying to help her out from beneath, while Adria pushed against the weight of the shirwemic. When she was finally free, she picked up her closest sword. She looked down at the monster where he knelt, a hand held against the jagged wound to his neck. Without a second thought, Sheridana swung her sword in a shallow arc. His head rolled onto the ground, the body slumping to rest beside it.

Breathing heavily, the three of them stood there for a moment. As they looked on, the bodies of the dead shirwemic slowly began reverting to their faelin state. Sheri saw that the other one had been gutted, and by the look of Dinim's blade she knew who had been the one to do it. She stepped up to the body and severed the head from the neck. With creatures this powerful, she simply didn't want to take any chances.

Sheri gave her companions a wan smile as they turned away from the bodies to go in search of the rest of the group. The bite wound above her breast throbbed mercilessly and the

claw wounds along her side burned as though on fire. She could only pray nothing would come of them.