

Excerpt from
Shadow Over Shandahar: Whispers of Prophecy
by T.R. Chowdhury and T.M. Crim

The temple was still standing. Everyone had thought that it might not be, despite what he described of his *Impression*. Triath nudged his mount past Sheri and Dartanyen, and over to the foot of the staircase leading up to the massive double doors at the top. The rest of the group silently followed as he walked up the stairs. It was hard to believe that after so many hardships they had found the temple . . . and that the rod was finally within their grasp.

Triath methodically examined the doors, checking to be sure they wouldn't set off any unknown traps when they were opened. Places such as this one were renowned for such petty contrivances, some much more elaborate than others. He was just pleased that he had the skills to defuse them. In his earlier days, Triath had been a common thief, living off of the streets much the same as Amethyst before she met up with Adrianna and the rest of her group. He had learned many of his skills during that time: how to pick pockets, move in the shadows, and defuse simple traps.

A few years later, Triath broadened his horizons and learned some of the skills of a bard from a young gypsy man who traveled with a caravan that passed through the city every few moon cycles. However, Triath never forgot his earlier training, and as he became proficient within his new profession, he began to revisit the skills he had learned as a boy. After a while, he began to twine the two professions together into one. He would use the music of his harp to draw customers into the inn he was visiting. Then, after his performance, he would go around, making small talk with the patrons. It was then, after they were relaxed and full of ale, that he would steal their money pouches. It was a good life . . . and then he joined a group of wanderers that would one day be known as the Wildrunners . . .

After examining the handles and hinges of the doors, Triath found himself focusing on the carvings etched into the wood. It was the image of a deity he didn't recognize in spite of his knowledge pertaining to much of the lore associated with western Ansalar. He turned and

gestured to Tianna.

Within moments, she was at his side. Her brows furrowed as she took in the carved deity. "I don't recognize it either," she said. "Is the door trapped?"

Triath shook his head. "I don't think so, but let me get a closer look . . ."

Triath placed his hands gently on the doors and suddenly felt himself being swept away. The psionic *Impression* was strong, much stronger than the one he had felt when touching the map. He saw a priest wielding a rod, summoning creatures . . . no, *daemons* and bringing them into his fold. He saw a sorcerer, partner to the priest and creator of the rod. The priest and the wizard stood side-by-side, the sorcerer instructing the priest upon the use of the arcane device.

The image flashed. Triath saw a stone-worker in the process of creating two statues. Into one, the aging priest placed the rod. By his side was a daemon, the likeness of which was being carved into the second statue. The image then shifted to that of a ceremony. A small congregation of approximately fifty priests walked slowly into the hall, chanting in a tongue he couldn't identify. They began to circle the statues, and a glowing seal began to form upon the ground at their feet . . .

Suddenly, Triath felt himself being swept away once more. He heard the voices of his companions: Dinim trying to tell the others that they shouldn't touch him, and Tianna telling everyone to stand back and give him room to breathe. He felt the concern clouding their minds, and the pressure of their thoughts forced the other images out of his mind. Triath broke out of his trance and once more he was able to see his friends. He groaned and began to sit upright from where he must have fallen when the psionic vision took him. "Damn, I wish you all hadn't touched me. I was getting an *Impression* from the door."

Dartanyen frowned. "Can you touch it again and get another *Impression*?"

Triath shook his head and began to stand. "No. It's gone."

"Are you going to be alright?" asked Tianna.

Triath turned to her, saw the worried expression on her face. He couldn't help but smile. "I imagine I will be."

"Is the door trapped?" asked Sheridana with a note of irritation in her voice.

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Triath refused to rise to the bait. “No, I don’t think so.”

With that said, Naemmious put his hands on the door and pushed. The huge doors slowly opened, and after a few moments more the interior of a large hall stood before them. The group filed in, Naemmious waiting until everyone was through the door before leaving his post beside it and taking up the rear of the procession.

The place was strangely empty of furniture; the only decor were rugs on the floor and tapestries on the walls, all covered with a layer of dust. At the end of the hall was a stairway leading downwards. Noticing nothing of interest, the group began to make their way down, Triath in the lead just in case he noticed anything out of the ordinary.

The Wildrunners stepped off of the staircase to find themselves in a hall larger than the one above. Interestingly, the place was well-lit, with flames in the wall sconces and in the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling throughout the room. The furnishings were ornate, decorated with bronze and onyx. Within the golden wood of the pews, intricate designs were carved. At the front of the worship hall was a raised dais upon which stood several tables, all sporting designs similar to those on the pews. A few of them were covered with black cloths trimmed in bronze.

Dinim stepped forward to stand next to Triath. “Can you detect anything?” The sorcerer spoke in a semi-whisper, as though fearful of disturbing the air. It was weird . . . everything upstairs had been coated in dust, but down here, everything was pristine and polished. It was as though it had been cleaned recently . . . very recently. Triath would have liked to imagine it to be the work of magic, but he thought Dinim would have sensed that. This place gave him a bad feeling, and he didn’t like it.

After a moment, Triath shook his head. “The only thing I detect here is us.”

“Triath, maybe this would be a good time to tell us the full extent of your capabilities,” said Sheri, a tone of confusion and irritation to her voice.

Triath turned to face her. “Believe me, if I knew that, I would surely tell you. It seems that every now and then I discover another thing that I can do. Yet, even those abilities are sporadic and don't come to me whenever I want them.” His voice reflected his own measure of

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irritation. “My abilities are developing and becoming stronger, just as I am becoming more adept at my natural skills as time goes by. Unfortunately, now really isn’t the time or place for me to explain all of the things that I can and cannot do.”

Triath then turned away from Sheridana. He didn't care to get into this now. He dared not tell them that, not only was he becoming stronger, but the thing inside him was as well. He felt someone watching and looked up to find Sabian staring at him. After a moment, the wizard looked away, but not before Triath saw the expression of extreme interest reflected in his dark eyes.

“Hey everyone, come and have a look over here.” Naemmious waved at them from the front of the room behind the dais.

The group followed the big man into a short corridor that led to yet another room. As they approached the entryway, Triath felt himself becoming faint. He held up a hand and was about to say something, when he felt the energy suddenly drain from his body. He put his hand against the wall to hold himself up and noticed that Dinim and Sabian were having a similar reaction. The rest of the group continued into the chamber without them, not knowing they left three of their companions at the entrance. Triath first caught a glimpse of the statues, quickly followed by the seal on the floor. With sudden clarity, he knew that it was part of what his *Impression* had shown him earlier. Triath tried to speak, but the words were so weak they couldn't reach the others.

Triath slumped onto the floor. “Don't cross the seal . . .”

The Wildrunners entered the room. Painted on the vaulted ceiling was a mosaic depicting mystical beasts, beautiful wooded glens, and ethereal water-pools. Gorgeous tapestries hung on the walls, and a series of wonderfully carved shelves lined the wall farthest from them. The floor was paved in beige stone. In the center of the room were two statues that stood approximately twice their height, each carved artfully in every detail. The wizard was male, his voluminous robes touching the floor at his feet. He appeared to be human. He held a tome under one arm and a staff in the opposite hand.

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The other statue was much more interesting, carved in the image of a creature they had never seen the likes of before. It was hideous despite the skill of the artwork. The face was horrible, tentacles sprouting from the place where a nose and mouth should be. Like the wizard, it wore long robes with a hood covering the rest of the head. In one hand it carried a palm-sized orb, and in the other it held a crooked staff. Both statues bore such exquisite detail they looked as though they could be real.

Suspended in the air a little over a farlo in front of the statues was a blue sphere. Descending from the ceiling directly over the sphere was a band of faintly glowing light. In the center of the sphere was an indentation that appeared to be in the shape of a hand. The group walked slowly towards the sphere and the statues, looking around themselves in wonderment.

“Well, I would assume that the rod is somewhere here,” stated Armond brusquely. He didn't know why, but he had felt strangely weakened when he first entered the room. However, he fought the urge to rest, thinking he felt drained simply because he hadn't received adequate rest the night before.

“Yes, maybe we should spread out,” said Dartanyen.

The group mumbled their assent. Armond nodded and stood there for a moment, slowly taking in the area. Meanwhile, Dartanyen continued towards the statues, most likely hoping to get a closer look. The other man walked beneath the sphere, and onto a part of the floor that was set with paler stone. Armond suddenly felt a ripple in the air. His scalp began to prickle, and he knew that magic had been activated. *Damn . . .*

Suddenly the sphere that had been suspended in mid-air began to rise towards the ceiling. “Dartanyen!” Armond's eyes widened as he saw the chain reaction begin to take place.

“Something is happening!”

Dartanyen spun on his heel. “What?”

The statues suddenly burst to life. His heart pounding, Armond drew his blades, still trying to dissipate the intense fatigue he'd begun to feel the moment he entered the chamber. Dartanyen retreated backward and swiftly drew his crossbow. He fired it, the bolts harmlessly deflecting off of the stone wizard. Armond struggled to concentrate on his magic, heard

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Dartanyen mutter a curse as the statue raised its hands. Armond sang to his blades and they began to glow softly silver. He sought to *sharpen* the swords, make them so sharp they could cut through stone . . .

Armond moved towards the statue just as a spurt of fire erupted from its hands. He felt the heat as the spell swept by, engulfing Dartanyen within a wall of flame. Armond leaped and swung at the stone sorcerer. First one and then the other blade sliced into the construct. The right arm disconnected from the stony figure and fell to the floor with a loud crash.

Naemmious rushed forward with a battle cry on his lips. He sought to divert the stone daemon's attention away from Tianna, who now stood in its path. It had already knocked Sheridana across the room after her foolhardy, yet valiant, attempt to attack. He pulled Bloodspiller free of her harness and raised the mace over his head. The statue raised a hand, and Naemmious saw Tianna also get flung back, her body slamming into the wall less than half a farlo away from Sheri's. Naemmious was confounded, realizing that the statue hadn't physically touched her. *Hells, this thing has the same type of power as Triath!*

Then Naemmious was upon it. With another mighty roar, he swung Bloodspiller with all of his might. He grunted when the weapon crashed into the grotesque head of the statue. The rock splintered and flew away in every direction. One large shard became embedded into the meat of his forearm, and he growled and pulled it out. He then cast it to the floor where the rest of the statue was crumpling into a lifeless heap.

Naemmious turned away from the felled enemy, getting his bearings for the remaining situation. He wasn't pleased by what he saw: the fallen body of Armond, Anya helping a scorched and sodden Dartanyen to his feet, an unconscious Tianna and Sheri against the far wall, and the slumped forms of Dinim, Sabian and Triath at the entrance to the chamber. How had they missed the presence of three of their companions once in the chamber? Hells, their magic-users were incapacitated before the trap was even triggered.

Desperately, Naemmious glanced around the room, hoping for something . . . anything that could help. The wizard statue had taken note of him, and even now it was probably casting a

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spell. Naemmious fumbled at his belt, disengaging the grappling hook he always wore there. Connected to a rope, he was able to swing the tool overhead. When it gained enough momentum, he let it fly with an upward twist of his wrist. The tool caught the side of the nearest chandelier, and the rope came tumbling down. Naemmious took several backward steps and then ran, jumping up to grasp hold of the dangling rope. He swung away just in time, the spell cast by the wizard exploding around and behind him as he made his escape.

Naemmious hung suspended from the chandelier, knowing it wouldn't be able to hold his weight for very long. He hoped that it would keep the enemy's attention away from his comrades, giving them a chance to regroup and think of a plan. He saw Dartanyen and Anya rush over to the fallen Sheri and Tianna, not daring to approach Armond, who lay on the other side of the sorcerer. Naemmious swung his legs back and forth, increasing his momentum. Within moments, the expected began to take place. Naemmious felt the shifting of the chandelier and glanced overhead to see the ceiling to which it was anchored beginning to crumble. He continued to swing his legs, hoping to use the momentum to bring himself clear of the thing before it fell. He didn't wish to be crushed beneath its mighty weight.

Finally the chandelier tore loose from its anchor. Naemmious found himself swinging towards the wizard statue, the chandelier just behind. *Damn . . .* He released the rope and sailed past the statue. A brief moment later he heard the crash of the chandelier just as he hit the floor. Naemmious rolled with the impact, placing some of it onto his hip and shoulder. His body slid along for over a farlo before he finally stopped. He lay there for a moment, vaguely taking note of the dust in the air. The light in the room had dimmed, and he realized it must be from the torches that were brought down when the chandelier fell.

Naemmious rose to his feet and he joined his comrades where they congregated next to the fallen chandelier. As he made his way over to them, he looked for the stone sorcerer. Once he reached his friends, he looked down to where they stared and saw the remains of the statue lying beneath the chandelier. He heaved a massive sigh of relief. He couldn't have hoped for anything better.

Triath was silent as he, Dinim, and Sabian walked towards their companions. He surveyed the destruction that had been wrought, noting the massive chandelier lying on the floor, the scorched stone, and the headless daemon statue. Armond seemed to be the one who had suffered the most against the temple's defense system. Naemmious carried him to a location clear of debris while Tianna prayed to her goddess for self-healing. Meanwhile, Anya applied medicinal salves to the burns Dartanyen had sustained, and Dinim helped Sheri bind the ribs she'd broken during her collision with the wall.

Once everyone had been tended, they spoke about the battle, each of them recounting their personal version. The group then went over to the statue that lay crushed beneath the chandelier, applauding Naemmious for his quick thinking. Triath took in all of the information, piecing together what exactly had happened. He shook his head as he looked down at the statue, now only dust beneath the chandelier. Dartanyen noted his demeanor. "What is it, Triath? You look ill. Do you need to sit down?"

Triath looked up at Dartanyen, noting the concerned expression on his face. Once more he shook his head. "Slightly ill, yes. But I don't need to sit down. However, the rest of you may feel the need to do so when I've finished telling you what I have to say."

"What is it?" asked Sheri in a hushed voice.

Triath sighed deeply. "Dinim, Sabian and I succumbed to a spell that made us lose consciousness. It was the first of the defense mechanisms that had been created here. Before I blacked out, I was able to make some sense out of the *Impression* I had when I touched the door. Much too late, I realized that this room was trapped. The seal was the trigger, and the blue sphere that once hung overhead was the safety mechanism."

"What seal?" Sheri asked with a frown.

Dartanyen frowned as well. "The one I crossed on my way past the sphere to have a look at the statues," he said with an expression of chagrin on his face.

Triath continued. "The two stone statues were the guardians of the rod, which was embedded within the center of the sorcerer. When the seal was crossed without the sphere being deactivated, the guardians were awakened. The statues drew their energy from the

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strongest sources. The wizard statue obtained his from Dinim and Sabian.”

Triath stopped for a moment and glanced around the group. Then, “The daemon statue drew his from me.” He saw Naemmious nod in understanding. “If the sphere had been deactivated before the seal was crossed, a task may have been requested of us. Upon completion, the rod would have been ours for the taking. It probably would have been a task involving our arcane and psionic abilities. However, the trap was triggered. The guardians were awakened and subsequently destroyed,” Triath paused for a moment, “. . . along with the rod.”

He swallowed heavily as he said the last. Triath knew that this information wouldn't sit well with the rest of the group. Unintentionally, they had destroyed the thing they needed most to help in their battle against Aasarak.

Sheridana's eyes widened with shock. “No. No. I don't believe you. If the rod was hidden inside the statue, it must be lying here beneath this chandelier. We only have to retrieve it . . .”

Triath shook his head. “Nothing could have survived the weight of this thing.”

“But the rod is an object of magic. It surely has some measure of resistance to such things. Come on. Let's move some of this debris out of the way and get it.”

Triath continued to shake his head. “I am truly sorry.”

Sheri's face contorted into one of rage. She rushed at Triath, her hands outstretched. “You bastard!” Naemmious quickly reached out and grabbed her, pulling her back. “You knew about this and didn't tell us? This is dung-eaten, and so is your pathetic ability! You haven't told us even a little about these 'powers' of yours, and now here we are left in the lurch.”

Triath gamely stood his ground. He placed a hand on Naemmious' arm, and the big man released her. Triath approached her and removed the black patch that covered his left eye. “Take a good look, Sheridana Darnesse. I know that you have wanted to for quite some time.”

Startled, Sheri stared at the black eye that regarded her from beneath the patch. One could usually garner some emotion from another person's eyes, but not this one. It was eerily emotionless . . . maybe even soulless. However, when she looked into Triath's other eye, his normal eye, she could see that he did, indeed, have a soul. She could also see that he was

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angry, irritated, and more than a little saddened by what had happened this day. Above and beneath the dark eye, she also saw what appeared to be scarred claw marks that damaged his otherwise smooth face. Much of this tended to be hidden by the patch, so usually it didn't detract from his overall beauty.

“Yes, take a long deep look. Do you want to know what it is? It’s a monster, a daemon that lives inside of me. It has been almost two years now since the battle, but I remember it like it was yesterday. Something happened during that battle. I neither know exactly what it was, nor do I care, but a part of my adversary now resides within me. He affects my attitudes and decisions, has made me more resilient, and has bequeathed to me his power. Even now, after two whole years, I still don't know what all of those powers are. My abilities continue to grow and develop, especially this newer ability to ‘read’ objects and obtain *Impressions* from them.”

Triath placed the patch back over his eye. “The other powers are diverse, and more importantly, they are sporadic. Oftentimes, I have no control over them. I can read the surface thoughts of peoples’ minds and can make mental *Suggestions* to them. I can move objects with a mere thought, and I can create a protective shell out of my mental energy. I don’t know all of the abilities I possess because I haven't had the time to sit down and sift through them.

“You are wrong when you say that I haven't told anyone about my abilities. You have legs, hands, and a mouth. At any time within the past several weeks, you could have simply walked up to me, tapped me on the shoulder, and asked me about my powers. Or you could have just as easily asked Anya, Dinim, or Naemmious.”

Abashed, Sheri regarded Triath. He was right. She could have simply asked about his abilities, but she had been too timid. Now at a time when everyone was unduly strained about their predicament, she was lashing out. Feelings of shame rushed through her, and when Triath started moving away, back to where they left Tianna and Armond, she found herself reaching out and grabbing his arm.

“Triath, wait. I'm sorry I gave you a hard time. I didn’t know this was so difficult for you. I assumed some things, and now I feel like an idiot. I never truly intended to hurt your feelings . . . didn’t understand . . .”

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Triath placed his hand over hers and pulled her closer to him. He placed a forefinger over her lips, quietly shushed her, and replied, “No worries, Sheridana. I am no longer angry, and I don’t entirely blame you. I know you thought to approach me, but didn’t quite know how to do it. I could have made it easier and come to you instead.”

Sheri offered him a tremulous grin, somehow disquieted by his response. Anya and Naemmious had always said Triath was a charismatic man, one who could easily overcome the most difficult merchant with but a simple smile. Now she knew why. With his charm, she knew how he would find it easy to obtain whatever it was that he desired.

Dartanyen cleared his throat. “Well, let’s have a look under this chandelier anyway, just to be certain we aren't missing anything.”

Anya nodded her agreement, and the two began to clear away some of the debris. Anya stepped within the outermost rim of the chandelier, kicking away the stone remains of the statue with her boots. Then, from beneath the rubble, Dartanyen found some shiny bits of metal and glass. He bent to pick up the shards, his expression downcast. Indeed, the Rod of Atlenbos had been destroyed upon impact with the chandelier.

Their most valuable weapon against Aasarak was gone.