

Leverage

A Short Story of the Thelenic Curriculum

Featuring events and characters from *The Wake of Manadar* and *The Third Mirror*.

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Author's Note: The events of this story largely coincide and overlap with those of *The Oath of Sherenith*. This story contains minor spoilers for that one, as well as revealing some secrets left untouched in *The Wake of Manadar*.

1941 I.C.

The sounds of an army at rest filtered through the still evening air as the men and women of the Seventh Volume prepared to bed down for the night. Reports that the armies of the Royalists were making a fresh advance on the Fields of Sommerlan had sent the College scrambling to reinforce the vital position, and the Seventh, the Sea Guard, were finally being committed to action along with the Second to allow the badly-mauled First and Fourth to retire to their home cities to regroup.

Settled down in her tent, Master Amilea Levell read the letter that had arrived that morning for the third time. She still couldn't quite believe it, couldn't come to terms with how happy it made her feel. Her sister, Chania, had finally given birth to a son, having lost two previous children to miscarriages. The Healers had told her that there was probably some incompatibility between her Pattern and that of her husband, but no less a Magister than the High Chirurgeon of Phyre, Anthyssa Dar, had taken an interest in the case and her work had borne healthy, wailing fruit. Chania spent two pages of the letter complaining about the noise and the smells, and the lack of sleep, but they were the happy complaints of one who had finally found contentment in a life of disappointments. She hadn't decided on a name yet- they had thought naming the child before the birth might be tempting fate- and Chania had asked if Amilea had any suggestions.

She sat there for a few more minutes, happy tears streaming down a face framed by long, slightly curly, brown hair. Next to her bedroll lay her silver great-sword, *Yorick*, which she had named after her father. Now it was the only name she could think of. Never mind, she'd sleep on it and see if she could come up with anything better before they broke camp.

There was a rustling at the tent-flap, and her friend Mally slipped in. The little Scout was one of Amilea's oldest friends, but right now her honest face was creased with worry.

“Oh, you're in here- why do you look so happy?”

Amilea smiled at her friend, even as a faint prickle of alarm began to grip her. The camp was getting noisier, when she would have expected it to quieten down for the night. “I got a letter from Chania, Mally. She's had the baby, a healthy boy!”

Mally gasped with joy, the frown briefly vanishing. “That's great news, Ami! I know they'd been trying for ages... wait... oh shit..”

Now it was Amilea's turn to frown. “What? What's wrong?”

Mally sank down onto her bedroll. “Chania.. she's still living in Phyre, right? With that Smith?”

“Dorik, yes. He works at the barracks down by the east gate.. Mally! Mally, what the fuck's the matter with you?”

The Scout's face was creased into an expression of utter misery. "Ami.. Amilea, I.. I just heard...."

"Heard what? Answer me!"

"An Outrider came in whilst I was outside Magister Gamia's tent. Ami, something's wrong in Phyre. Something really bad, so bad Magister Haran didn't dare send the news by Crystal."

Cold dread seized Amilea, forming a solid ball in the pit of her stomach. "W-what happened?"

"I don't know, exactly." said Mally, tears running down her cheeks. "From what I heard the Magister telling Captain Wallis, it's some sort of magical plague. The Second Volume has surrounded the city and placed it under a quarantine, and they're killing anyone who tries to get out as soon as they come within bowshot."

Amilea knew that the implications of the Second Volume being delayed could be very serious for the war, but such thoughts could find no purchase in her mind. All she could think of was the child, mere days old, who she would never see. Of course, the Magisters in the city would do all they could, but from the sound of the quarantine, Magister Haran was not hopeful- and he was the husband of the High Chirurgeon herself.

For a moment, she wanted to scream and rage, to storm into the Magister's pavilion and demand that she do.. something. That would, of course, be utterly foolish, even if Gamia Dar were not as powerful and short-tempered as she was. She thought back, instead, to her lessons under Master Yukan, the Daxalai exile who had revolutionised Swordmaster training. *"Do not be the stone that is broken by the enemy's assault. Rather, be the wave that crashes on the shore. Where the stone seeks only to resist and defy, the water flows around. Stone stands, and breaks. Water adapts, and survives."*

Controlling her temper had been the one way in which Amilea had exceeded Master Yukan's adopted daughter, Delys. Given how soundly the little foundling had beaten everyone in the class, that was probably for the best, though Amilea had always thought that Yukan indulged the girl's temper too much.

Mally passed her a canteen. "Here. Swiped some Verge Green Wine from the stores on the way back in case you needed a drink. I think right now you need one more than anyone."

Amilea nodded her thanks, and took a quick slug, letting the potent drink slide down her throat. It didn't come close to melting the ice in her stomach, but she didn't expect it to, and anyway, she had no plans to sleep.

By dawn, she was well on the way to Phyre, having waited in the tent only long enough for the wine to put Mally to sleep. The Scout had never suspected that even though they passed the canteen back and forth only one of them was drinking, and she never had been able to hold her liquor. Getting past the Sentries had been harder, but Yukan had trained his students in the art of silent movement, and whilst Delys had of course been the star pupil, Amilea had learned her lessons well. The Seventh had been encamped some hundred miles south of the city, in the golden fields known locally as the Barley Basket that lay to the north of the Great East Road, but with their Seal enhancing their endurance any determined Swordmaster or even Guard of any ability could cover such a distance in about a day.. providing they didn't have to fight a battle at the end of it. For a marching army, that was where the Magisters came in.

Even though she had managed to retain the presence of mind to slip away quietly, leaving her noisy chain armour behind in favour of a tunic, leggings and the waxed leather undergarments all Sea Guards wore to allow them to swim unencumbered, Amilea knew that her actions were foolish. As a deserter in time of war, she could expect no quarter if College troops caught her, and even the Royalists would probably just execute her as a spy. Then there was the fact that she was going to try to break in to a city under quarantine by an entire Volume of veteran troops- and then attempt to get out again. At least there was little chance of her spreading the plague if she did escape, because going anywhere near civilisation would probably see her flung into the deepest prison cell in Lore if she wasn't killed on sight. Nonetheless, she had to try.

By nightfall, she had reached the cliffs. This part of what little plan she had appeared to have worked- whilst the city was under quarantine, the lighthouse that stood on the cliffs was outside the walls, as were the docks. Sneaking into the lighthouse after giving the pickets a wide berth, she found the building unoccupied though someone had clearly visited recently to activate the enchantments for the beacon which now swept over the sea. She took out the small, portable spy-lens she had swiped from Mally and looked down into the city. The docks themselves, which were small in comparison with those of Damisk or even Mernas, were a smouldering ruin, and several little boats holding Archers bobbed about just off the shore. Obviously the Second were taking no chances on anyone escaping that way.

She was about to adjust the lens to look further when a noise from below set her whirling to grab at her sword. Even as *Yorick* hissed out of the scabbard, she realised that she had no idea what she was going to do if discovered. If it was just a Guard or two she could almost certainly deal with them, even depleted as she was, but to kill fellow College troops in pursuit of a rescue that was probably already doomed was a step she was reluctant to take... and yet, the life of an infant was at stake. Assuming, of course, that he was still alive, not to mention the rest of the family.

The wooden stairs creaked. There was nowhere to hide at the top of the lighthouse, and as it was she had to crouch down uncomfortably to prevent her shadow being cast over the city and giving her away. All she could do was circle around to keep the huge lighting crystal between her and the top of the stairs, but unless the incoming party consisted of a single imbecile that would buy her seconds at best.

Unexpectedly, a low voice spoke from the top of the stairs. "Hey up there. Don't worry, we're not with the Second. In fact, if you're here it's probably for the same reason as us. Got some business in Phyre, right?"

"I... might have." replied Amilea, non-committally.

"Name's Jonas." said the other. "And the two charmers down below who've spent the last five minutes trying to persuade me that we should kill you are Gelt and Erika. Thing is, to slip around the quarantine and get this far takes talent, and that's talent my... *I* can use. Perhaps we can work together? Come down to the keepers' quarters and we'll see what we can do for each other."

"Won't the keeper have anything to say about that?"

"He won't be back until dawn- the Second are ferrying him out here to work the lighthouse and then taking him straight out again. This plague's got everyone shit-scared, and from what I've seen, I don't blame them."

The Swordmaster considered for a moment. Clearly 'Jonas' and his companions were not the most

savoury and upstanding citizens of the Empire, but no-one seriously considering breaking into a city under quarantine was ever likely to be. That he had been so up-front about his colleagues' antipathy towards her spoke of a team with some confidence in its abilities, and in any case she wasn't going to achieve anything without going back down eventually.

“Very well, I'm coming down, but I'm doing it armed. And if you've seen me, you know exactly what that means if either of your friends try anything.”

“Yeah, we've seen the sword. Don't worry, if I was going to let them off you they'd have done it when you weren't looking.”

As reassurances went, it wasn't exactly encouraging, but Jonas' words had the ring of sincerity about them. Of course, Amilea considered as she stepped carefully down the stairs, in his line of work you probably got to be a good liar. Awaiting her in the dimly-lit room below were three figures, two men and a woman. They were all dressed in dark clothes, though the exact colour was hard to make out in the gloom. All three were slender and wiry, and the taller man and the blonde woman both stood in a posture that suggested that if a fight were to break out, even a Swordmaster who had passed the Dance of Eight Blades might be hard-pressed to prevail. The smaller man looked less threatening, slouched against the wall nursing a roll-up cigarette, but the large hooded robe he was wearing fit in such a loose fashion that it might well conceal all manner of unpleasant surprises, and under the circumstances it probably did.

The tall man, who stood well over six feet and had the sort of nondescript, blandly handsome features that were certainly an asset for one who worked on the far side of the law, stepped forwards, hands held palm-up to show they were empty.

“Like I said, I'm Jonas.” he began. “You can work out the rest from there. What do we call you?”

“I'm-” began Amilea, and then broke off, realising that the chances anyone else was actually using their real name in such a situation were remote. “Er, that is, call me... Silver.”

Erika snorted, her otherwise pretty face twisting into a cruel leer. “Shit, she's new to this work, Jonas. You might as well call yourself 'Sword', girl.”

“Coming from the woman who went by 'Velvet Kiss' for a whole year because it was the name of her favourite Abelian liquor.” chuckled Gelt, from the shadows of his hood.

“Fuck you Gelt!” snapped back the blonde, and Amilea mentally promoted her to the top of her threat list. This one had a temper, and judging by the two long knives that rode at her hips, she went equipped to express it.

“In my dreams...” sighed the little man.

Jonas rolled his eyes, and favoured the Swordmaster with a *see what I have to put up with* look. She wasn't fooled. These three might bicker and argue, but everything in how they looked, moved and acted warned her that in a crisis, they would work as a smoothly-drilled unit and anyone who underestimated them would regret it. Probably very briefly.

“So.. Silver.” continued Jonas, once it was clear that his comrades were keeping their sparring on the verbal level for now. “What brings you here? I'm guessing a Swordmaster of the Seventh Volume doesn't desert just to satisfy morbid curiosity.”

Amilea went to reply, then started. “Wait- how did you..?”

Gelt chuckled again, a dry sound like gravel rattling in a sack which contrasted with his high, reedy voice. “Well, the Swordmaster bit's a little fucking obvious. As for your Volume, those leggings fit pretty snug and the lines of those waxed undies your mob wears are distinctive enough. Plus, you're wearing slip-on boots that you can kick off to swim, whereas most other Volumes wear laces.”

In spite of herself, Amilea glanced down at her lower body. The tunic, belted at the waist, covered the first foot or so of her thighs. “But-”

Erika sighed. “Your tunic rode up when you climbed the stairs. Gelt's not the sort to miss a chance to see something like that.”

“Thank you.” said Gelt, with a slight bow of his head.

“That wasn't a compliment.”

“Still taking it as one.”

“Children, *please.*” groaned Jonas. “Silver was just telling us why she was here?”

“No she wasn't.” shot back Amilea, not falling for the oldest trick in the book. “She was asking you to answer the same question first.”

Jonas grinned, and shrugged. “Fair enough. It's a simple recon job for us- the Boss wants us to get into the city, find out what exactly this plague is, and get out again without catching it. From what we know, it takes exposure to a living subject to be infected, so if we're quick and quiet, we should be able to pull it off. Your turn.”

Amilea considered. If these people were going to be any help to her, she had to tell them sooner or later. “I need to get to the East Gate Barracks. My sister's a Bard in the city. She's just had a baby, and I want to get her and her family out... if they're even still alive.”

“And uninfected.” said Erika, firmly. “Look, I get that you want to save them, but this thing is completely lethal and very contagious. If there's even a chance your family have got it, there's no fucking way we get them out, and it'd do no-one any good even if we did. You got that?”

The Swordmaster nodded. It wasn't what she wanted to hear, but the other woman's reasoning was unassailable.

“So, why the East Barracks?” said Jonas, after a long moment.

“Her husband works there as a Smith, and they have rooms there.” replied Amilea. “It's defensible, and it stands in the middle of a drill-yard. From what I know about the quarantine the Second set up, there's a chance that if enough of the City Guard are there they could hold off the infected citizens with bows. I was about to look and see if there were any signs of life there when you showed up.”

Jonas looked over at Gelt, and jerked his head towards the stairs. “Check it out.”

The little man levered himself off the wall with every indication that this required an intolerable amount of effort on his part, and stubbed out the roll-up on the stonework. Casual as the movements

looked, Amilea noticed that at no point was the glowing tip of the cigarette exposed to the window.

“Yeah, yeah.” muttered Gelt, ambling towards the stairs and drawing a compact spyglass from his robe. “You want me to steal a pair of the Queen of Abelia's undies for you whilst I'm at it?”

“Just get on with it.”

“That scrawny little bastard has an unhealthy obsession with women's underwear, if you ask me.” murmured Erika as Gelt disappeared upstairs.

“No-one did.” replied Jonas.

Amilea was still trying to work the three rogues out. Erika, she was pretty sure by now, was either a Soldier or a Swordmaster, probably the latter judging by how she moved. Gelt, from the fact that he seemed to be carrying several magical devices, was almost certainly an Operator, which made sense given that any unit of spies needed some way to keep in touch with their masters. Jonas, for the moment, remained an enigma. He was dangerous, that much she could tell.

After a few moments of silence, Gelt appeared at the top of the stairs. “Well, looks like Silver here is in luck. You were right about the East Barracks, girl, there's definitely someone alive in there and they're using bows to try and stay that way. It looks like they're in the clear for the moment, but there's a lot of dead bodies piled up in that yard.”

“Maybe they're safe..” said Amilea, hopefully. “Maybe the plague is already burning itself out?”

Gelt shook his head. “No such luck. There's great fucking hordes of people still milling about the streets and they look like they're hunting in packs. It's only a matter of time before another mob finds them.”

“Then we'd better get on with this.” said Jonas. “Fortunately for you, Silver, our orders and your own... mission line up pretty nicely. If we can get a couple of healthy survivors out for the Boss to chat to, that'll beat anything we might be able to find out for ourselves.”

“So, how do you plan to get in?” asked Amilea.

“How did *you* plan to get in?” countered Gelt. The Swordmaster shrugged.

“Plan' is too strong a word. I was hoping to swim to the docks and sneak in from there, but I wasn't counting on the Second being out there on fucking boats.”

“Could still work, though.” mused Jonas. “If we time it so that we move in just after the lighthouse beam has swung across the docks, the night vision of the sentries shouldn't have recovered in time to make us before we can reach cover.”

“Swim in?” groaned Gelt. “That's going to be fucking cold. My balls are going to shrivel up into kalaberries.”

“Don't worry, Gelt.” laughed Erika. “No-one's going to notice. It's not like it'd be much of a change anyway.”

By midnight, four figures bobbed in the water just off the docks of Phyre. As Jonas had suggested, by waiting until just after the beam of the lighthouse had swept across the area before moving, they

had avoided drawing the attention of the guards in the boats that rode a little off the shore. Of course, those guards were also watching primarily for anyone attempting to escape the city, rather than break into it.

Amilea had stripped down to her underclothes for the journey, and the spies had clearly already been considering a waterborne approach, for they too had similar suits. Any pleasure Gelt might have felt at seeing so much of the two women in the party was more than eclipsed by the misery of having to leave his robe stashed in the lighthouse, which revealed a lattice of leather straps across his body and upper legs which supported an assortment of small equipment pouches.

Though she had little time to consider the implications, the lack of clothing also allowed Amilea to see that Jonas carried only a dagger at his hip for protection, whilst at the other a stout wooden rod rode in a leather carrying loop. He also bore the Seal of the Soldier on his shoulder, which surprised her a little.

The lighthouse flashed at a rate of three times a minute, a sequence unique to this particular beacon in order to aid mariners in working out which light they were seeing, which left roughly fifteen seconds of darkness between each sweep. Though the docks had been burned, enough shattered carts and ruined, upturned boats were dotted about to provide cover for the little group until they reached the lee of the wall that guarded the entrance to the city proper. Since the docks were not large enough for an invasion force of any size to land and were overlooked by several towers which in normal circumstances would be well-garrisoned with Archers, the north-facing wall was not especially large or well-fortified, standing a little over twelve feet tall.

Picking his moment expertly, Gelt darted out of the cover of a pile of smashed shipping crates to throw a small device from one of his pouches at the top of the wall. As it flew, the spies and Swordmaster already dashing in its wake, the collapsible grappling hook expanded, trailing a fine but strong rope behind it. Before five seconds had passed, the line was secure at the top of the wall, and just as the light swept across again, Jonas' bare feet disappeared from the view of any observer over the battlements. Perhaps a particularly diligent Sentry or Archer, using the augmented vision that came with their Seal, might have seen the fine rope still dangling, but as soon as the light passed Gelt removed even that evidence of their passage.

“Okay.” whispered Jonas as they crouched in the shadows of the battlements. “We'll move around to the east gatehouse on top of the walls, that should give us as little chance as possible of running into any infected people. Keep low, and quiet. Erika, you take lead, I'll bring up the rear.”

“I'm fucking frozen.” moaned Gelt, and Amilea had to admit he had a point. Though the spring had not been cold, the clear night sky had allowed the temperature to drop significantly since daylight, and wet, bare skin was hardly ideal for keeping warm. Even Erika nodded agreement.

“Yeah, Jonas, we're going to need to dry off if we're going to concentrate on this thing. Gelt's teeth are chattering loud enough to give us away.”

The leader of the spies drew the wooden rod from his belt, and suddenly a wave of warmth washed over the group. Amilea's eyebrows shot up in shock. “You-you're a *Magister*?”

“My training was.. less formal.” said Jonas, softly. “Tolerated Warlock' might be more accurate. Now, unless you ladies have anything else you'd like to chat about, we need to get moving.”

“But your Seal...?”

“Fake.” said the tall man, supplying no further explanation.

Whilst the swimming outfits might not have granted much protection from the elements, they were eminently suited to quick and silent movement. Even Gelt's straps and pouches had clearly been designed not to jangle or rattle as he ran. After a few minutes of running, crouched low to avoid being spotted, Erika suddenly held up a hand for a halt. Even as she did so, an eerie sound came to Amilea's ears. It was a screaming, keening wail, borne on the wind, and even heard faintly it had a quality that made every hair on her skin stand on end.

“It's coming from that guard tower up ahead.” said Erika without preamble. “Looks like at least one of the garrison stayed at his post.”

Jonas nodded. “Seems like it. I don't like the sound of that scream... I think there might be more to it than simple sound. I'm going to cast a silencing spell so we can't hear anything, just in case.”

Amilea looked at Jonas as if he had gone mad. “What? You told me that this plague could only be caught by direct contact with the infected, and now you want to make it so we can't hear them coming?”

They were good, she had to admit it. Even with the finely-tuned senses Master Yukan had drilled into his students, she almost missed the meaningful glance that flashed between the three spies.

“I think... no, I'm certain that the sound is the way that the plague spreads.” said Jonas. “That's why the quarantine is being imposed from such a distance, and without any warning being given. Normally, even with a really virulent plague, you'd give the infected a warning to turn back before you killed them, but the Second are shooting them down as soon as they come into bowshot.”

“Yeah, it looked that way when I was looking into the city too.” agreed Gelt. “The folks in the Barracks have been firing some pretty long-range shots, rather than letting anything get close enough to make sure of them.”

By now, Amilea was starting to suspect that the spies knew more than they were letting on, but her own mission was too important to let concerns about theirs stop her. She shrugged, being careful not to let her conclusions show. “Fine. I assume you know College battlefield sign-language?”

Jonas flicked a sign back at her. *Yes.*

They reached the tower a few minutes later, still moving as quietly as possible to reduce the strain on Jonas. Even so, just as they reached the door, the Warlock flicked a quick sign to Erika. *Take them. Quickly.*

Erika kicked in the door, and dashed into the tower, knives drawn. Amilea followed close on her heels, *Yorick* in her hands as it had been since they had entered the water, a scabbard being a particularly serious impediment to swimming. The weapon turned out not to be needed. The man slumped on a chair by one of the tower's arrow-slits was emaciated, as if he had not eaten for days. A fine, silver-inlaid longbow lay on the floor, but the wretch made no move to grasp at it, instead turning his head slowly and painfully to stare at the intruders. His mouth was open in an horrific gape, the jaws practically distended, his eyes bulging with effort as he screamed, and behind them Jonas staggered against the door-frame. Without further preamble, Erika leapt forward, her long, slightly curved knives scissoring first forwards, and then back, and the man's severed head flopped to the wooden floor.

Gelt dashed in, signing frantically. *Cover your ears!*

As soon as the two women complied, Jonas released the silencing spell. Staggering into the tower, he kicked the corpse off the chair and sank down onto it, heedless of the gore that his bare feet stepped in.

Gelt experimentally moved one hand slightly away from his ear. After a moment, he nodded, and signed. *Safe.*

“Shit.” gasped Jonas. “That proved to be... less effective an idea than I had hoped.”

“It worked, didn't it?” said Erika.

“You.. have no idea.” replied the Warlock. “You probably couldn't tell, but by the time we got to the tower the screaming was so loud that even if it wasn't magical, we'd all have been deafened and bleeding from the ears without the silence spell. When the door opened... it was like you'd kicked *me*, Erika. I couldn't have held it for more than a couple more seconds, and that was *one* of these fucking things.”

“We could always borrow this poor fucker's bow... shit, no arrows.” said Gelt, checking the quiver propped against the wall. “He must have used them all up and then when he ran out, they got too close.”

“So, what do we do?” said Erika. “Pull out? Even if you tap all of our Seals, I doubt you'll get enough juice to deal with more than one more of these things.”

“How about an old-fashioned method?” said Amilea, bending down to pull at the corpse's tunic. “We take this guy's clothes, rip them into strips, and bandage our ears up.”

Jonas nodded, thoughtfully. “That... could work. There's a candle over there, we can use that to plug our ears with warm wax first, then bandage them over. If we run into any more of these things, though, dealing with them is down to you and *Myrka*, Gelt.”

Gelt grimaced, whilst Amilea just looked confused. “Myrka? The Crown Princess?”

“Nah.” said Gelt, reaching to the largest pouch in his belt and bringing out a device that looked like a sturdy wooden fork with a strap attached to it. “This is *Myrka*. I call her that because she's a real bitch if you get on the wrong side of her. It's a Jandallan weapon, called a Catapult, uses stretched rubber to fire steel balls. I'm no Archer, but I can make a hit at a decent range.”

“Yeah, but it's not that that makes it useful.” said Erika, with what sounded oddly like a note of pride. “It's the fact that the balls Gelt uses are packed with all sorts of nasty surprises.”

Further discussion was cut short by Jonas coming forwards with the warmed wax. Working quickly, he plugged each other member of the team's ears with it, before finishing with his own. Once the cloth bandages had also been applied, Erika tested the effect by banging her knives together. Even at very close range, the sound was practically inaudible.

Thus protected, they moved on hurriedly. Ten more minutes of running brought them within sight of the East Barracks, and from what they could see and, worryingly, hear, not a moment too soon. From the road that led towards the centre of the city, a large pack of the infected, looking to be almost a hundred strong, was advancing into the drill yard. Arrows were already flying from the

barracks, but they did not blaze with the silver fire of military ammunition. Nonetheless, when they found their mark the impact was generally enough to knock the victim from his or her feet, and such was the press of bodies that few missed, and few of those who went down were allowed time to attempt to rise before being trampled by their fellows.

For all of this, though, the shooting from the barracks was sporadic, and even at a distance of several hundred metres the terrible scream was filtering faintly through their ear protection. Jonas gave Gelt a questioning glance, but the little man shook his head. *Too far.*

They broke in to a run, scrambling down the gatehouse stairs three at a time and dashing down the wide street towards the barracks. Ahead of them loomed a guard post with a battlemented tower, and Gelt, pulling ahead of Erika, pointed at the roof. Nodding understanding, the blonde skidded to a stop and cupped her hands to receive the little man's leap, hurling him upwards towards the tower with all her Seal-enhanced strength. As he sailed into the air, the grapple lashed out, and Gelt swarmed up to the top of the building. Mere moments later, an explosion erupted within the pack of infected, hurling smouldering bodies in all directions. There were still a few moving, but Erika and Amilea, finding the protection of the plugs and bandages was now sufficient to approach, charged in and set about them with their blades. Disconcertingly, rather than attempting to fight back, the wretched creatures seemed to be trying to clutch at the cloth wrappings, seeking to expose their ears to the terrible scream, but their bodies were weakened by malnourishment and their numbers too few. By the time Jonas and Gelt caught up, it was over.

Flushed and panting with effort, the two Swordmasters turned back towards the barracks, to be faced by several bows pointed in their direction from the windows. Before anyone could do anything more, the door of the fortified building flew open and a woman ran out, an expression of disbelief mixed with elation on her face. The brown hair and similar features would have confirmed to anyone what the body language already suggested- that the woman was Amilea's sister, Chania.

Almost an hour later, after the four grim-faced City Guards who had been holding the barracks made a quick survey of the drill-yard to retrieve any arrows that might be salvageable and satisfied themselves that no more infected were immediately nearby, the survivors met in the main dormitory room of the barracks. Though there were bedsheets, blankets and pillows in some abundance, the only remaining furniture was a small, wooden cot, within which slept the object of Amilea's quest. Both of the child's parents had also survived, a fact for which more than one person had cause to be grateful. As a Smith, Dorik was also skilled in fletching, and had repurposed every scrap of silver and wood to keep the bows of the two Archers in the barracks supplied with arrows long after their own supply of ammunition had been exhausted. Even then, by hardening their tips in his forge, he had managed to create a large supply of wooden hunting arrows that both the Archers and Guards, the latter armed with simple composite bows, had put to good use. As well as being easier to make, the non-magical arrows were also re-usable, whereas the magic of military arrows detonated on contact.

The short, sturdy man now sat with his wife and their wood-be rescuers on a blanket on the floor of the barracks. Chania had taken out the baby to feed, and after a glare from Erika, Gelt was making a point of looking at something else. The survivors had supplied their visitors with fresh clothes, and even boots.

“So you came to get us out?” asked Chania, incredulously. They had removed the ear protection for now but kept it close at hand. The defenders of the barracks had also come up with a similar solution, but the wax plugs hadn't occurred to them and now a lit candle stood by every defender's position.

"I did." grinned Amilea. "This lot were just... curious."

"*Professionally* curious." clarified Jonas. "To the tune of a quite sizeable number of Quoits. I'd appreciate hearing the story of what happened here, ma'am."

Chania, helped by occasional interjections from Dorik, told the tale of the plague as best she could. How first the prison had gone silent, and then, shortly afterwards, the tide of screaming, scrambling things had poured out of the Garnet Keep. All that had saved the occupants of the barracks was the fact that the dormitory, being situated so close to the forge and a drill-yard, was heavily sound-proofed to allow the Night Watch to get some sleep, as was the small private room reserved for the Smith and his wife. Still recovering from giving birth, Chania had been in the room on the morning of the attack, and Dorik had been already up and working the forge. He had avoided infection long enough to warn his wife and the Night Watch only by virtue of having been born almost completely deaf, a disability that he considered to be practically a boon in a job that involved loudly hammering metal all day.

"Of course, these days the Healers can usually fix something like that, but Dorik says he'd got used to everything being so quiet." said Chania. Her husband, who was watching her mouth as she spoke, nodded and smiled.

"Never thought it would save me life, though." he said, with the exaggerated delivery of one who could barely hear his own voice.

"Still, there must have been more of you." said Jonas, looking around. "I know the Night Watch generally isn't as big as the day shift and there're other barracks, but there should be at least ten of them stationed here."

"Some of them got transferred into the Second." said Chania. "There were seven when the plague hit, but Sergeant Dodd decided the best thing to do would be to lie low and not attract attention, and a couple of days later a pack of infected tried to break in. To his credit, it was Dodd and his corporal who tried to hold the door shut whilst the rest of us covered our ears, and we lost another Guard during the fight. You have to understand," she continued, eyes wide, "this thing isn't some sort of disease, it's like a... a living thing. It *learns*. During the first few days, if someone thought to cover their ears well enough, they could get past the infected with ease- all they did was just stand there and keep screaming at you. Then, as if the idea had occurred to them all at once, they started chasing people down and trying to rip the cloth off their ears."

"Yeah, we noticed that trick." grunted Erika.

"First time I haven't been grateful not to have been conscripted into the Second." said Chania. "I'd thought I was lucky to have a Seal that couldn't be turned to military use, but right now I'd trade it for the Seal of the Sword if I could."

Gelt shook his head, surprising Amilea. "Nah, girl. Seals didn't save those poor bastards out there. You ask me, you're well out of it. So you're a singer, then?"

Chania stiffened slightly, and Erika cuffed Gelt around the back of the head. "She's a Bard, you dolt. Singers are-"

"-those poor souls who're slaved to Choirmasters." finished Chania, with an expression of obvious distaste. "When this war is finally over, the Musicians' Guild is going to be putting some serious

pressure on the Symposium to change the name of that damned Seal, or get rid of it altogether.”

“Good luck with *that*.” said Gelt. “Give the Magisters a new toy and it's a devil of a job to get them to put it back in the box.”

“Well, they haven't created all that many yet.” said Amilea. “Maybe the idea won't catch on?”

Jonas sighed, and glanced at the window. “It'll start getting light soon. We're going to have to stay here until tomorrow night, I think, then we can make a break for the north gate, get out the way we came in.”

“You swam in by the docks?” said Chania. “I suppose that would explain the clothes.”

They settled down to wait, and to get some sleep if possible. Chania retired to her room with the baby, and two of the guards also came in to rest, with the remaining Archer stationed on the roof of the barracks as a lookout. After a few hours of fitful rest, Amilea was awakened by a gentle shake. She opened her eyes to find the Smith squatting by her bedroll.

“Amilea, listen to me.” murmured Dorik, his voice taking on an oddly sing-song quality. “You must realise, they're going to come again today, probably before sunset. We don't have the arrows left to stop another rush.”

“So we get moving earlier, find some place to hide out until night?”

Dorik shook his head. “We already tried that- a few nights after we lost Dodd we went and hid out at an inn a few streets away. They found us almost immediately- it's like they're drawn to large groups of people. Perhaps they can sense our Aether.”

Amilea sat up. “Dorik... what are you saying?”

The Smith sighed. “Ami... there's no way all of us can go the way you did. You and your friends are trained in this sort of thing, but most of those Guards can't even swim- I can't. When you go, I want you to take Chania and the baby with you, and the rest of us will stay here and keep those things looking the other way.”

“Dorik- I..”

“It's the only way, and you know it!” snapped the Smith, slightly louder than he probably intended. “If the rest of us could get out the way you're going, we'd already have done it.”

He stood up and stalked off before she could argue further.

“He's right, you know.” came Gelt's voice from the next bed.

“You were listening?” hissed Amilea.

“We all were.” said Jonas. “Comes with the job, girl.”

“Yep.” agreed Erika. “We're professionally nosy bastards who don't give a flying fuck about anyone's privacy unless they're paying us to guarantee it.”

The interruption, coupled with the fact that by now the sun was high in the sky, removed any chance

of anyone getting any more sleep, and soon Chania brought them a simple meal. If Dorik had said anything to her about their plans to escape, she gave no sign of it.

“It's only slightly stale bread, a bit of ham, and some hard cheese, but it'll fill a hole.” she said. “We were running low on supplies, but I suppose after tonight it won't matter.”

The spies exchanged another of their furtive glances, but none of them spoke. As if wanting to change the subject, Erika looked down at *Yorick*, which lay at Amilea's side.

“You're a traditionalist, aren't you.. Silver?” she said, still using the assumed name even though Amilea was sure they must have overheard her real one by now.

“What, the sword? Actually, Master Yukan lets people pick just about any weapon they're comfortable with, but this seemed to be the best fit for me. Didn't you train with him?”

Jonas gave a pointed cough. “Our training was.... specialist. Not something we can really talk about.”

Erika nodded. “I'd heard Yukan uses one of those little Dax swords... what do they call them, ikes?”

“It's an *eiken*.” corrected Amilea. “It means 'lightning sword' or something like that in Daxalai, I think. And it's not that little, but it is slender.”

“So how can he train Swordmasters in so many different weapons, when the one he uses himself isn't even made in this country?” said Gelt, looking puzzled.

“That's... hard to explain.” said Amilea. “He shows you the basic techniques, and then your bond with your weapon helps to reinterpret them to suit your own style. Whatever the weapon, though, the principles remain the same- basically, combat boils down to control, anticipation, and leverage. You have to know what you're doing at all times, anticipate what your opponent will do at any moment, and then use the leverage of your weapon to turn that situation to your advantage.”

Erika nodded again. “Yeah, that's what Ma- how I was trained, too.”

Amilea considered pressing the blonde on what she had been going to say, but events took the decision out of her hands.

“They're coming again!” yelled the Archer watching from the barracks roof. “Yar's tits, there's fucking hordes of them this time!”

Jonas reached the door in two quick strides, and looked out. “Right, that's our cue to leave. There's too many of them to stop this time, even with the catapult.” He turned, to find Gelt and Dorik in hurried conference, their heads together.

The Smith straightened up. “Yes. I have spoken with this little one, and he has given me something to buy you some time. Go, now!”

Chania recoiled. “Dorik? What are-”

The Smith rounded on her, thrusting the cloth-wrapped bundle that was his son into her arms. “Woman, for once in your life obey me! Take the boy, and flee with these people. I.. will be fine.”

The Bard looked like she wanted to argue more, but Amilea grabbed her by the arm. “Come on, Chani! He's right, there's no time!”

The spies, with the sisters in tow, dashed from the barracks practically at the last possible moment. Already the pack of screaming figures was pouring through the shattered gates of the drill-yard, barely slowed by the arrows flying from the barracks, and given no time to don their ear protection the noise was already nearly deafening. Grimacing, Jonas cast his silence spell again before Gelt bought them some time with another explosive catapult shot. They ran, heading back towards the gatehouse, the Warlock dropping the spell as soon as he dared to conserve his flagging Aether. Instead of chasing them, the pack poured into the barracks, the barred door proving to be no match for the mass of bodies.

“Dorik!” screamed Chania, almost stopping before Amilea pulled her onwards. “He can't-”

Even as she spoke, there was a dull 'whomp' sound from the building, and something blew every boarded-up window out into the yard and sent several broken bodies hurtling back out of the door. Gelt gave a nod of satisfaction.

“Stone cold, that brother-in-law of yours, Silver. I left him a few of *Myrka's* bombs, and he didn't screw up when the time came.”

Chania stared at him in shock. “I... you-!”

“It was the only way to take all of them out at once.” said Gelt.

“Or not...” hissed Erika, pointing towards the gatehouse. Another group of infected, eight-strong, had emerged from one of the bastions. Already the screaming was getting louder.

“It learns....” said Gelt, quietly.

“Shit!” cursed Jonas. “I knew we should have tried to block our ears again, but there just wasn't time. Okay, I'll have to try the silence spell...”

Gelt pulled out *Myrka*. “Yeah, like that'll work, you could only just handle one. Right now I'm wishing I had some explosive balls left, but all I've got is stun-bombs and steel. Speaking of wishing, I wish I could say it'd been nice knowing you lot, but..”

“Wait.” said Chania, stepping forwards. “I think I can do... something..”

Amilea stared at her. “Chani, what're you doing? You said it yourself, you're no fighter!”

Chania shook her head. “No, I'm not. But I think....”

Without saying another intelligible word, the Bard opened her mouth, and screamed. For a terrible moment Amilea thought her sister had already succumbed to the infection, but Jonas cocked his head and his eyes went wide as the scream wavered in pitch.

“Ahhh.. I see. Keep going, I think.... there!”

Without warning, both the sound of the approaching infected, and the scream coming from Chania, were silenced. It took Amilea a moment to realise that both were still screaming, but no sound seemed to be coming from them. Jonas placed his hand on Chania's glowing Seal.

“What-?” began Amilea.

“Not now- get them!” hissed Jonas, as Chania began to flush red with effort.

Needing no further prompting, Erika and Amilea dashed forwards, weapons ready. There was something disconcerting about the air, which seemed almost to be alive as they ran, but there was no time to think about it. As they closed, a steel ball whizzed past Erika's ear to smash into the forehead of the nearest enemy, followed by several more. And then the blades were amongst them, and the weapons did their grim work, Erika's knives flashing a deadly pattern as Amilea whirled *Yorick* to the attack. Though the scream was somehow still silenced by whatever Chania was doing, her sister thought she heard occasional blasts of something impossibly loud as she fought, but only for brief instants. And then it was over. The moment the last keening wretch fell, Chania's scream roared back to full volume before she stopped and sank, wheezing, to her knees, setting her crying son down on the flagstones beside her. Jonas, standing beside her, didn't look much better.

Amilea hurried back to support her sister, whilst Erika helped the Warlock. Gelt, another ball loaded into *Myrka*, looked about with wild eyes.

“What... what the fuck just happened?” asked the little man.

“She.. Chania cancelled out the sound.” replied Jonas. “All sounds have a... unique signature to them, and another sound pitched exactly opposite to that can reduce them to silence. No normal voice is capable of doing such a thing, but the Seal of Song would appear to possess the ability. You, my lady, are a Bard of rare talent.”

“She's like me.” said Amilea, a note of pride in her voice despite the circumstances. “We both passed up Magister training to follow our own paths. Our parents were furious.”

“This is all very fucking charming,” said Gelt, “but can we *please* get a move on before any more of those things show up to see why their mates forgot the words?”

They hurried on, Erika and Amilea taking turns to support Chania as she ran. Her Seal was shining pure white, a sure sign that she had taxed herself to the very limit. Once they had gained the relative safety of the city walls, they slowed to a brisk walk to allow Jonas and the Bard to recover.

“We still have a problem here, ladies and gent.” mused Gelt, quietly. “Unless we plan to wait up here and hope no more of those bastards show up, we're looking at trying to get out of the city in daylight, which you might have spotted hasn't gone too well for any...thing that's tried it so far.”

“Yeah.” nodded Erika. “And in case anyone hadn't noticed, babies can't swim.”

“Leave that part to me.” said Jonas. “For now, we need to concentrate on getting to the north gate without any more unpleasant surprises.”

The journey to the dock gate was surprisingly uneventful, though the faint wailing on the wind made it clear that any respite from the prowling packs of infected must be temporary. By the time they made it to their destination, both Jonas and Chania seemed much improved. It was early evening by this time, but true darkness would not fall for some hours yet. After waiting until Chania had fed her son, who had started to fret a little, Jonas unhooked the rod from his belt and removed his tunic.

“Now, my lady, I must ask that you return a little of the loan I made to you earlier. Gelt, Erika, present your Seals and get ready to swim.”

As Jonas touched the wand to Chania's Seal, which glowed softly as he drew Aether from it, Erika and Gelt removed their tunics, the little man grumbling about the evening chill.

“What about me?” asked Amilea, stripping off her own clothes.

“You will have the most trying task.” said Jonas, as he touched the rod to Erika's Seal. “Swimming from the docks to the lighthouse whilst keeping the child just above the surface of the water. Can you do it?”

The Swordmaster nodded. “Of course. But unless you plan to wait here for another few hours, the Second are going to see us.”

“They're going to be busy.” said Jonas. “Gelt, get your grapple ready. As soon as those boats are distracted, all of you head down to the docks and make for the lighthouse as fast as you can, and don't stop for anything.”

“Gotcha.” said Gelt. “Don't get yourself killed.”

“I didn't know you cared, Gelt.”

“I don't, but you're the only one who knows where we're going to get paid.”

Jonas gave a quick, mirthless grin, tapped the rod to his forehead, and vanished.

“That's.. that's a good trick..” said Chania, slowly, trying not to show her surprise and mostly failing.

They watched for a while, but could see no sign of where the Warlock had gone.

“He's a fucking show-off, that one.” grumbled Erika without heat. “As much as you can show off when you're invisible, anyway.”

“Surely he can't keep that up for long, though?” said Amilea. “Even full Magisters can't keep an invisibility spell going for long enough to get out of the city.”

“If I know Jonas, he only used it to make the water.” said Erika. “Then he'll swim underneath it until...”

There was a sudden chorus of shouts from one of the boats. Somehow, something on board the one nearest the docks seemed to have caught fire.

“..he's close enough to do that.” finished Erika.

“Do we go?” asked Chania.

“Wait for it...” said Gelt, watching through his spyglass. “Thing with the Second is they ain't sailors, and that middle boat is rocking something fierce whilst they're trying to go to help, and whoops, there they go!”

The middle boat, struggling to manoeuvre, abruptly capsized. The crew of the third boat, already moving to try to assist the burning vessel, changed course to pick up the men and women floundering in the water, only for the first man they reached to yank too hard on his would-be rescuer's outstretched arm and pull him overboard, disappearing underwater as he did so.

“Yep.” said Gelt, in satisfaction. He took out *Myrka*, and fired a bomb into the docks that burst to add more thick smoke to the billows already drifting around the area. “Now it's time to move.”

“I wouldn't like to be those poor bastards when Magister Haran hears about this..” chuckled Erika, as they hurriedly descended the rope into the smoke.

It was almost half an hour later when Jonas arrived back at the lighthouse. By that time, Erika and Gelt had finished retrieving a boat from its hiding place a little further up the shore. The boat was equipped for fishing, but one of the bait buckets contained a compact but fully capable Messaging Crystal, which Gelt used to send a report after a full five minutes of moaning about having to rummage around in a mass of live worms to get to it.

“What took you so long?” asked Erika, somewhat crossly. “We need to move soon, before the Second bring the lighthouse keeper back.”

“I was a little too effective.” admitted Jonas, shrugging into his clothes. “I caused so much confusion pulling one of them overboard when he tried to 'rescue' me that the Second lost control of the fire on the first boat completely. Trust ground-pounders to manage to fail to put out flames when they're sitting on top of an unlimited supply of water. If those boats had all gone down the quarantine could have collapsed and that's something I think we can agree we do not fucking want, so I gave them a little subtle help and kept an eye on Phyre to make sure you were the only ones to take advantage of the distraction.”

Chania looked from one to the other of her rescuers. “I- I don't know how we can possibly thank you all. If you hadn't come, I... my son would..”

Amilea laid a hand gently on her sister's shoulder. Wearing only a light dress, Chania had been shivering until Gelt loaned her his cloak. “Don't worry, Chani. They already have something in mind, don't you, Jonas?”

Gelt gave a dry chuckle. “That's a quoit you owe me, Erika.”

“What gave it away?” asked Jonas, softly.

“Firstly, you knew far more about that plague than you should have. You couldn't wait to cast that silence spell on nothing more than a guess, even though you're not powerful enough to hold it for long. Then you were far too eager to help me if all you were supposed to be doing was investigating the city. Even when things went wrong and you could easily have slipped away, you stayed to get Chania and I out.”

“Would you believe we're just kind-hearted?” said Gelt with a wry smile.

“Gelt, I wouldn't believe you if you said the sky was blue and ox-shit smells bad.” said Erika.

“Then there's this boat,” finished Amilea “which is far bigger than a team of three needed, even allowing for the equipment. You were expecting passengers. You knew I was going to be here and

why, and you made sure that I succeeded. So, what do you want?"

Jonas shrugged. "For now, I want to get this thing out to sea before the Second find us, but not so far that we piss off the Whales. Then, the Boss wants to talk to you."

It was several days later when Amilea, now well-rested and dressed in fresh, clean clothes, was shown into the study of Anneke Belus. The voluptuous, dark-haired Magister, thought to be young for the six Leaves of rank she had earned, was considered a rising star in both her House and the College.

"Ah, Amilea, my dear! Please, do sit down- oh, the scabbard does rather fight the chair, doesn't it? Just prop it up against my desk."

"I'm surprised that your.. staff even let me keep my sword, Learned Magister." admitted Amilea, slipping off the scabbard to sit. "I understood I wasn't allowed to leave your mansion."

"Just a precaution against anyone seeing you- you are a wanted deserter, remember? Do you know," said the Magister, almost absently "that in Daxalai they consider it a grave dishonour to attend a superior unarmed?"

Amilea was curious in spite of herself. "What? Why?"

Anneke gave her a penetrating look. "It implies that *were* they armed, they would present a threat. Now, you'll be pleased to hear that your sister and little Dorik are safe and well."

Amilea's heart leapt. Chania had declared that under the circumstances, the name was obvious. "Where are they?"

"By now, most of the way to the Eastern Vigil." replied Anneke. "The Abelian Ambassador has chosen to take over as resident Gifted there until the war is over to avoid being seen to take sides, and has been hiring the finest entertainers to relieve his boredom. Chania fits the bill very nicely, and young Dorik will have a lot of doting aunts and uncles, unless I miss my guess."

"But.. that means going through Royalist territory!" gasped Amilea.

"Yes, it does." agreed Anneke. "But as civilians they have little to fear from the Royalists so long as they stay clear of the cities and the party has a personal invitation from Sir Matthew, who the Tydasks are deeply anxious to avoid alienating. I've also had a few records altered, and a sizeable number of witnesses will, if pressed, confirm that Chania was performing for the troops at Jensen's Rest when the Howling Plague took Phyre."

"So where does that leave me?"

"A fine question." said Anneke. "To put it simply, Master Amilea, I am building a network of informants, spies, assassins, skullduggers, scoundrels and ruffians which will make me the most powerful clandestine force in the Empire. When that network is complete, I will gain a seat on the High Council and employ it to make the College more secure than it has ever been. Crime will not threaten us because we will be the criminals. Spies will not threaten us because they will find nothing they learn can be trusted, unless I desire it so. I have already used this organisation to find out that you were going to Phyre, and why, and to help you succeed."

“And in return, you want me. The problem is, the moment I go through a Lens, the College is going to execute me as a deserter.”

Anneke smiled at her. “Why, of course! Fear not, Amilea Levell will never again pass through a Lens. But Damia Render will.”

“Who?”

“A Swordmaster of some talent, one of the last to leave the Academy before Yukan took over their training there. She was assigned to the new Fourth to lead a flanking force, and was the sole survivor of a Royalist ambush. The last part isn't true, of course, she died horribly with the rest of them, but a little subtle editing of the reports and a bit of cosmetic Folding of your Pattern, and you'll fit the new facts, and her description, quite nicely.”

“I... won't her friends know I'm not her?”

“Her old unit in the First was largely destroyed in the Fields of Sommerlan in the last battle.” said Anneke. “Her family moved to Abelia some years ago after the last War and got caught up in an outbreak of the Winnowing Ague. There's almost no-one left alive who knows the old Damia Render, and even so, you won't be taking on the role straight away in public. Damia is being recalled to the Academy to undergo officer training in light of the lack of experienced leaders, and that will take several months, during which time you'll receive some.. other training. Eventually, you'll be assigned to a Volume in need of a new Captain, and then you will be my eyes and ears there.”

“And if I don't agree?”

“Well, after you and your friend Mally fell into a drunken slumber, it seems a unit of Royalist spies sneaked into your camp. They bound the pair of you, and were dragging you away when you broke free of your bonds and attacked them. Mally woke up in time to see the spies flee and you go in pursuit, and the bodies of two of the spies and someone who looked enough like you to pass muster were found a short distance away the next morning. A ruse, of course. Your parents are sad, but very proud, and are the grateful recipients of the standard College war compensation. Of course, should the facts of your desertion suddenly come out.... should someone notice that the corpse found in your armour wasn't you, that your sister was in fact in Phyre when the plague broke out.... well, I surely don't need to go on, do I?”

“No.” said Damia Render. “You don't.”

In the end, not only sword-work ultimately came down to leverage.