

The Oath of Sherinith
A short story of the Thelenic Curriculum
Featuring events and characters from “The Wake of Manadar”
By Tim Peers

Magister Anthyssa Dar pushed her chair back from her desk, looked across the infirmary, and sighed. For now, the room was vacant, tranquil, and peaceful, cots empty of casualties and dressed in clean, crisp, white sheets. But this was a time of war, and that would soon change. Not two days before, her husband, Haran, had led the ten thousand troops of the Second Volume from their barracks to muster at the nearby hamlet of Jensen's Rest, ready to march towards the strategically important grain fields that surrounded the city of Sommerlan. Anthyssa thought that moving the whole Volume so far south must leave Phyre vulnerable to attack from the eastern city of Verge, which had declared for the Royalists, but she had never been much of a player of Impose, so she left strategy to those better qualified for it.

Sunlight streamed in through the high windows that were the hallmark of the Garnet Keep, the great red pre-Imperial fortress that formed the heart of what had grown into the city of Phyre. Though the Keep itself was built mostly in the marble that was the mainstay of most architecture in the Empire of the Thelenic Curriculum, the walls of the upper towers were studded with the gemstones that gave it its name. When sunlight caught it just right, the Keep almost appeared to be ablaze, which some scholars believed had led to the city's own name. Anthyssa had never liked the effect much, and now that war was upon them it seemed an even less attractive illusion.

There was a gentle tap at the door, and after a respectful moment her aide, Temeris, pushed it open and came in. In contrast to the green robes decorated with white flowers that marked Anthyssa as a Magister, he wore the simple brown of a Healer. He cleared his throat nervously.

“Learned Magister, there has been an... incident.”

There was something in the tone of his voice that made Anthyssa feel that the sense of foreboding which had been growing since Haran's departure was well-justified. She sighed, running her hand through long, black hair. There was no grey in it yet despite her forty-two years, but recent events seemed destined to change that.

“I take it you are not referring to a simple street brawl, my friend. What has happened- will our healing skills be required?”

“I fear it is altogether too late for that, Anthyssa.” replied Temeris. The Magister's eyes widened- Temeris was the most hide-bound member of her staff, a stickler for protocol, so for him to drop the formal means of address was almost unheard of. She rose from her writing desk, and snatched up her staff.

“You are worrying me, Temeris. What has happened?”

“The Guards at the East Bastion relieved the night shift early this morning.. Learned Magister.” replied Temeris, regaining a little of his composure. “They found the entire place empty of life.”

“What? Where were the Guards, the prisoner?” This was a serious reverse- the capture of a Royalist Magister, reputed to be the three-Leaf ranked Desdemona Jain, had been a significant coup for the intelligence services of the Lily College and the famed White Riders had been scheduled to oversee her transportation to the capital, Lore.

“I said empty of *life*, Learned Magister.” said Temeris “Death, they found there in plentiful supply. All the Guards, the serving staff, the prisoner herself, a few other petty cut-purses and suspected spies. Every one slain.”

“A failed escape attempt?” asked Anthyssa. It was notoriously difficult to keep a Magister contained, especially one as powerful as a three-Leaf, but the Guards at most College prisons were well-trained in the necessary skills and preparations, and the East Bastion was also capably overseen by Magister Darius Thane. “What of Magister Darius?”

Temeris shook his head. “Not present at the time- the night watch of the Bastion is.. was under the

command of Magister Gentris Dar. He is as dead as the rest. Magister Darius has requested the aid of the Infirmary for the investigation.”

Anthyssa swallowed, hard. House Dar was large, and she hadn't known Gentris, but the loss would still be felt. “He suspects a contagion, then?”

“I am not privy to the thoughts of Magister Darius, Learned Magister, but that would be my guess.” “Very well, then.” said Anthyssa. “Let us not keep him waiting.”

In the event, Magister Darius was not waiting for them at the East Bastion, and nor was any other Magister. A cordon had been hastily thrown up around the building by the City Guard, and the Sergeant in charge saluted loosely as Anthyssa and Temeris climbed out of their carriage.

“Learned Magister Anythssa, I am Sergeant Kanis Hale, City Guard. My men and I have prevented anyone from entering or leaving the building since the.. er.. discovery.”

Anthyssa was about to carry on past the man when she realised what he had said. “Wait- entering *or leaving*?” She turned to Temeris “I thought you said everyone in there was dead?”

The Healer spread his hands helplessly. “That is what I was told, Learned Magister.”

“There's a Scout from the Second Volume in there, went in to see what was up when the night watch didn't open up to be relieved.” said Sergeant Hale. “Magister Darius ordered us to keep him in there in case he was infected with.. well, whatever did this. He's a good man though, experienced. After we told him he had to stay put he just nodded and we've not had a peep out of him since. Name's Sandar.”

Temeris was shocked. “Sergeant, if there is some sort of plague in there, preventing Scout Sandar from leaving amounts to a death sentence!”

“True.” agreed Anthyssa, sadly, “But if it is indeed a plague, letting him out might mean dooming the entire city. Magister Darius may have made a harsh decision, but I cannot in good conscience say it was the wrong one. Temeris, I will employ Gandel's Ward to repel the contagion, but if you would rather not accompany me..”

“I will come with you, Learned Magister.” said Temeris, slowly. “You may well need more hands and eyes in there, and if the skills of the Infirmary's High Chirurgeon are insufficient to defend us, then such is Thelen's will.”

Before they entered the Bastion, Sergeant Hale passed Anthyssa a message cylinder. “Compliments of Magister Darius, Learned Magister.”

She broke the seal, which a quick glance confirmed was keyed to her Pattern, and read the message inside.

“Magister Anthyssa. To prevent any inquisitive or acquisitive elements from entering the Bastion, I have Pattern Locked the door. The unlock glyph is inscribed on the reverse of this note. I would suggest that you similarly lock the door behind you as a further precaution. Remember the Oath of Sherinith. D.T.”

It was just as well Haran wasn't here, thought Anthyssa, even as her heart ached that he wasn't. For Darius to imply that she might forget her oath as a Chirurgeon-Magister, to place herself between those in her care and any disease, and to treat any injury regardless of personal cost.. well, it just showed the sort of man he was. Capable, yes. Shrewd, most certainly, and politically astute, but not a man to give trust or receive it often. He would thrive on this war, she thought, sadly. Then there was the matter of the locking spell on the door. Though a sufficiently skilled Magister could unravel it given time, the only way to open it quickly was through a complicated glyph which was inscribed by transferring its entire essence, including the memory of its structure, into the paper it was written on. The act of reading the glyph would cause it to disappear and create the Pattern of the unlocking spell in the mind of the reader. Once the glyph was written on a paper inside a message cylinder that only she could open safely, Darius had virtually guaranteed that she would have to be the one to enter the Bastion, or at the very least to be the one to unlock the door. It was political manoeuvring in the guise of a simple security precaution. Of course, she could simply write the thing down again

for someone else to read, but that would be considered in many circles to be a violation of her oath. Well, Magister Darius had no need to worry. Without his elaborate precautions she would still have done her duty, and she certainly wasn't going to shirk it just to spite the man.

The cordon was set some fifty feet back from the main entrance to the East Bastion, and Sergeant Hale was well out of earshot by the time Anythssa and Temeris reached it.

"You don't have to do this, Temeris." said Anythssa, quietly. "If you like, I can find some important errand to send you on."

Temeris set his jaw firmly. "Learned Magister, even if I were such a coward as to leave you to face this alone, I am not brave enough to explain myself to Magister Haran should I do so and something were to happen to you in there. Now, shall we proceed?"

She smiled despite the danger. Before retiring to serve in the Keep staff, Temeris had been attached to the Tenth Volume, based at what was now the Royalist city of Manadar, and had accompanied several sorties into the blasted eastern lands beyond the Abelian Mountains, home to the nomadic Expelled. A Healer assigned to such a combat patrol saw a lot of horrors, and Temeris rarely spoke of those days, but Anythssa knew his valour was not in question. Without further argument, she turned to the Bastion door. As with most secure doors in the Empire, it was made of steel clad in silver, the first for its mundane strength, and the second for its excellent suitability for enchantment. Pattern-locked as it currently was, the door seemed to have no hinges, and simply blocked the entrance as if someone had merely decided to make part of the wall out of a different material. The glyph roiled in her mind, prowling her thoughts like a restless cat, and this close to its purpose seemed if anything to become even more truculent. Either she unlocked the door now, or she was soon going to have the very mother of all headaches.

"Thelen's blood." muttered Anythssa "You're determined that I shouldn't have second thoughts, aren't you, Darius?"

"I'm sorry, Learned Magister?" said Temeris, having only half heard her.

"Nothing, old friend. Remember to give me a moment after I unlock this to cast the Ward, I can't so much as light a candle with this glyph rattling around in my head."

As Temeris bowed his assent, standing ready in case someone (or even *something* said a mischievous voice in her head) should try to barge through the door, she released the glyph into the Pattern-lock. With a blaze of silver Aether that it seemed the whole Empire should be able to see, the magic whirled into the Pattern of the door, restoring the hinges the locking spell had removed and dispelling other, less visible barriers. No rush came against the door, and all within was still silence.

Gandel's Ward was one of the most vital tools in the magical inventory of the Chirurgeon-Magister. Named after the first known High Chirurgeon of the Empire, it created a subtle barrier of Aether that protected those within against contagious disease, as well as shielding them against most magic that relied on directly damaging their Patterns. Since the spell was often used to protect not only the Magister themselves, but also Healers and any other College citizens who might have been pressed into service as orderlies, the barrier was also represented visually as a hemisphere of blue light, or more accurately a sphere which had its widest point at roughly ground level. As most Sealed individuals were unable to perceive Aether, or in the case of Healers could only see it within the Patterns of living beings, this made it simple for them to judge if they were within the Ward's protected area. It had the additional advantage of being bright enough to illuminate dark spaces like the interior of the Bastion's Great Hall.

The room should have been bright with late-morning sun by now, the shutters on the high windows opened with the hooked poles that still waited on their racks, unused. At first, Anythssa thought the lighting crystals which would normally illuminate the hall at night had been turned off, but as she looked closer she could see that every one was broken, some criss-crossed with a spider-web of fine cracks, others shattered completely. But such concerns were sent reeling from her mind when she

saw the bodies. The Great Hall was the only way out of the East Bastion, and it also served as the main dining hall for the garrison as well as the audience chamber of the presiding Magister, whose high ebony throne rested on an elevated dais at the back of the room. One way or another, this meant that there would always be a significant number of Guards present, and often the Magister themselves, making any escape attempt fraught with difficulty. In one respect the system had worked perfectly, because they were still there.

They sat in rows at the feasting-tables, dressed in the leather jerkins and silver chain-mail worn by most City Guards, as opposed to the heavy silver battle plate of the battlefield forces of the College Guard. Some wore only the leather, their mail heaped on vacant chairs or roughly shoved under them. It had made no difference, for no armour, save perhaps the heavily-warded pure silver of the Scholastic Guard who patrolled the High Campus in Lore, would have protected them from the doom which had come upon them.

“Great Thelen..” breathed Temeris, walking just behind Anthyssa not out of cowardice, but to be sure of staying within the Ward. “Look at their faces!”

The head of every man and woman of the Guard, without exception, was flung back, eyes wide and staring up at the vaulted ceiling, mouth so far open it seemed the jawbones must crack. Here and there across the room lay other bodies, presumably those who had not been seated when the terrible event struck. As gently as she could, Anthyssa turned over the body of a young serving girl who lay face-down, a tray of spilled beer paying mute testimony to her last errand. Those same staring eyes and the same impossibly gaping mouth leered back at her.

“Learned Magister,” said Temeris quietly as she studied the young woman for any sign of what had killed her “we are not alone.”

“Took you... long enough to... notice.” came a voice from a far corner of the room. As they approached the source of the voice, it became clear that the reason for the pauses was that the speaker was in the process of eating a leg of chicken. He was a lean, wiry man, not in the first flush of youth but still with the vitality of it. He wore a light leather jerkin, his bare arms revealing the Seal of the Scout on his shoulder. He leaned back in his chair, boots up on a small side table.

“Scout Sandar?” asked Anthyssa, somewhat redundantly, but the man's casual demeanour amongst such a scene of horror had briefly knocked her off her already unsteady stride.

“How can you.... *eat*?” said Temeris, which she had to admit was a more pertinent, if no more incisive, inquiry.

“Oh, this lot aren't such bad company, Healer. Thing with Guards is if they have too much of the old Phyre's Pride, they start having a bit of fun. Being in arms reach of a drunken oaf whose Seal makes him five times stronger than he should be ain't exactly the smartest move if a man wants to keep on living, which is a hobby of mine. This fine body of, well, bodies might not talk much, but none of 'em has playfully broken my arm yet either.”

“If you are so fond of your life, you might have avoided sitting right next to possible plague victims and eating the same food as them.” pointed out Temeris, a little testily. Sandar gave him a pitying look, and took a sizeable slug of a flagon of beer before replying.

“This ain't no disease, Healer. The Learned Magister there has already figured that out, but I'll help you catch up. See, all these fine folks died where they sat or fell where they stood, so whatever killed 'em, killed 'em quick. Plague don't do that, it likes to hide, take its time, so it can spread. Me, I've been here, ooh, a couple hours now maybe, and I'm still right as rain.”

“Hmm.” said Temeris, doubtfully.

“Top of that” carried on Sandar “every lighting crystal in the place is fucked. So're all the glasses, but I'm a beer man so that's no problem. The Pride ain't right out of a glass and any man'll tell you otherwise is a damn liar. Anyway, unless you've heard of a disease what kills wine-flutes and people, I reckon that closes the book on that one.”

“He's right, Temeris.” said Anthyssa. “There's nothing in the Pattern of the victims to suggest a plague either, in fact there's nothing much wrong with their bodies at all.”

“Other'n them being dead and all.” put in Sandar. Temeris glared at him.

“What the Learned Magister means, Scout Sandar, is that the Patterns of these bodies are intact. A living being has effectively two Patterns, one which is that of the physical form, and one which is that of the mind and soul. The former persists for some time after death, the latter breaks down into nothingness almost immediately as the soul joins Thelen's in the winds of Aether.”

“You're a Breather, then, eh?” said Sandar. “Thought the Magisters didn't like that sort of talk.”

“Temeris is a good friend and a skilled Healer, Scout Sandar.” said Anthyssa. “That he chooses to follow the teachings of the Church of the First Breath is of no consequence to me. Anyway, you should remember that the Rite of Committal comes from Breather teachings and a Magister is required to perform it.”

“Hope you don't get the job of Committing this lot, Learned Magister.” replied the Scout. “That might be a long day's work. Anyways, I expect you'll be wanting to go see the prisoner?”

“Isn't she dead?” said Temeris, aghast.

“Of course she fucking is!” laughed Sandar. “But if her turning up here the other day and everyone dropping dead is a coincidence I'll eat me boots.”

“Just a moment please, Scout Sandar.” said Anthyssa, walking back to the doorway.

“She going to lose her lunch outside?” whispered Sandar to Temeris, who was already hurrying after the Magister to stay within the Ward.

“Don't be an idiot. She's just locking the door behind us.”

“Why? There's no plague here.”

“Just a precaution, and anyway we wouldn't want you running away and depriving us of your charming company.”

After Anthyssa had locked the door, which she did by simply jamming the mechanism with Aether so that only another Magister could easily open it, they went to pay their respects to Magister Gentriss. He had been sitting in his throne at the head of the room when death had suddenly overtaken him, and his staff still lay propped against it. A ring of silver keys hung from his belt, and she retrieved them for future use.

“This is deeply troubling.” said Anthyssa, looking more at the staff than at the man.

“What? We knew he was dead.” said Sandar, reaching towards it. Anthyssa shoved him away with a surge of Aether.

“Don't touch it! A Magister's staff is not for any but the owner to hold.”

“Wh-what would it have done to me?” asked Sandar, seemingly afraid for the first time since they had met him.

“I don't know. Possibly nothing, possibly killed you on the spot, possibly just pain. Since our House symbol is a Dragon, many Magisters of House Dar enchant their staff to burn the thief to ash.”

Sandar looked from Anthyssa's staff to the one propped against the throne. “His is broken, isn't it? Would it still work?”

It took a moment for Anthyssa to realise what the Scout meant. The light green Aether-sensitive crystal clutched between the Dragon's claws on Gentriss' staff was cracked and broken like the lighting crystals and glassware. In actual fact, though the crystal glowed as power was drawn through the staff, the effect was largely cosmetic as well as providing the staff bearer with a helpful source of light.

“Damaged, not broken. That isn't the concerning thing. I only know of Gentriss by reputation, but he was a three-Leaf Magister like myself. In the event of any threat or attack, he would have called upon his magic to protect him and taken up his staff. It would appear that he never got the chance.”

“Learned Magister” said Temeris, softly “would Magister Gentriss have known how to erect Gandel's Ward?”

“It does not form part of a Magister's core training, only that of a Chirurgeon.” said Anthyssa. “I would expect a three-Leaf to know of it, and many learn it as a precaution, but it is not a spell that can be thrown up reflexively against a threat.”

“Why?” asked Sandar. “I've seen Magisters stop all kinds of sneak attacks with their magic.”

“A Ward is more complex.” said Anthyssa, patiently. “What you would have seen is the equivalent of throwing your arm, or a shield, up to block a blow. A Ward is more like building a fortress- a stronger, more comprehensive defence, but more time-consuming to erect, which is why, even though I am fairly certain it is unnecessary, I am maintaining my own ward for now.”

As they turned to leave, Temeris grabbed Sandar's arm and drew him aside. “Scout Sandar, I will warn you of this once. You will refer to Magister Anthyssa at all times as 'Learned Magister', is that clear?”

“She doesn't seem to care, Temeris.” said Sandar with a grin.

“I do. You will show her office the proper respect!”

“And what if I don't.. Healer?”

“Then, Scout, you will learn that the expertise of the Healer does not lie in merely repairing damage to the Patterns of the sick.” said Temeris, setting off after Anthyssa. “It lies in changing that Pattern, which can be done in ways both inventive and unpleasant.”

They carried on into the depths of the fortress, the light from the ward casting long shadows into dark, silent rooms. Everywhere was death, the strange, bloodless, clinical death that seemed to have taken every living thing in the Bastion at once. Here, the great kitchen area, cooks sprawled over still-hot stoves, pots of soup boiling dry, scullions dead at the heels of their masters and every bottle of oil or vessel of spice cracked, smashed or shattered. It had been a mercy, thought Anthyssa, that the guard force did not sleep in the Bastion, but at the main barracks, for otherwise the death toll would have been near doubled. As it was, almost five-hundred citizens of the Lily College seemed to have lost their lives in a heartbeat. Further on, deeper down, and they came to the solid oak, silver-bound door that led to the keep dungeon. It stood ajar.

“It was like this when I found it.. Learned Magister.” said Sandar. “Odd thing- that door is always kept shut and locked, and look here.” He pointed down to a body that lay some distance from the doorway. “That fellow has the keys to the dungeon on the ring on his belt. Only him and the Magister in charge would have a set.”

“So.. “ mused Temeris. “He unlocked the door, opened it, then somehow made it... what, twenty feet away before he died? If he was fleeing something within, why not just slam the door and lock it again?”

“There are still no marks on the body.” observed Anthyssa. “His face bears the same aspect as every other we have seen in this place. He was overcome by the same thing as everyone else. Perhaps he merely unlocked the door a few moments before whatever happened?”

Sandar shook his head firmly. “Nope, Learned Magister. That's not how they do.. did things in here. Guard inside the door comes up to it, knocks, the little shutter there slides back” he pointed at the shutter, which was firmly closed “then they exchange the password of the day, and he unlocks the door. Soon as they're done, he locks it again. If that door is unlocked, he's supposed to be right there holding the key or a blade.”

“How do you know so much about this place?” asked Temeris.

“Told you, I like a bit of the Pride.” said Sandar with a grin “In peacetime, they mostly use these cells for drunks. Magister Darius always insists on full security to keep the Guards on their toes. Typical Thane, if you ask me.”

Despite its great weight, the dungeon door swung open smoothly and silently on well-oiled bearings. Sandar was right on that front, thought Anthyssa- the Thanes might have been, until recently, a mediocre House of Magisters of only middling talent, but they had always been meticulous and well-organised. No Thane would allow any door in his domain to be befouled by a squeaky hinge. The current head of the House, Derelar, was considered likely to make Symposium Chair rank soon, though he was unlikely to challenge Arch-Chancellor Gheris during wartime. She put such thoughts from her mind, and stepped forwards into the dungeon. What shocked her most about what she saw was that it had lost the capacity to shock her. The wide, stone corridor led off

ahead, flanked on either side by small cells. These were the lower security cells, the wall facing the corridor replaced completely by simple iron bars with locked metal gates. There were no windows, for by now they were some distance below ground level, but the light from the Ward revealed enough to see that most were empty. Those that were not simply contained another sad corpse, each mouth gaping wide.

There were Guards too, of course, and the bodies of several lay in that corridor. Sandar hurried forwards. "Aha! Now that's interesting. Couldn't see that before when I was poking around down here, it was too dark."

"How were you seeing anything?" asked Temeris in spite of himself.

"Matches, Healer. Went through almost the whole box, but you don't get to be a Scout if you can't find your way in the dark. Anyway, notice anything about these lads?"

"Nothing in particular." said Temeris. "Wait... actually there is a little something in their Patterns, but I very much doubt you have seen what I have."

"No food trays." said Sandar. "Like I told you, Darius runs this place very strict. Start of last watch, the Guards get their evening meal- going to bed as the sun is rising stinks, but it stinks a lot less on a full stomach. Before that, food trays for the prisoners are prepared by the kitchens and sent down here on a dumb-waiter. Prisoners get their breakfast, then the Guards down here get to eat." He gestured to the dead Guards. "No trays. None of the poor saps in the cells got fed and none of the Guards are carrying the trays."

"And that is supposed to happen before the evening meal?" asked Anthyssa, making sure she understood. She was looking at the Patterns of the dead Guards, and coming to the same conclusion as Temeris.

"Yep." said Sandar. "So, unless Magister Gentris had been ignoring Darius' orders, which wouldn't be smart, everyone down here died a little before everyone up there."

"Not quite, Scout Sandar." said Anthyssa. "As I'm sure Temeris has also noticed, the Patterns of these bodies are notably more degraded than that of the Guard outside in the corridor, meaning that they have been dead a little longer. Whatever happened, it started here, in this Dungeon."

"Magister Desdemona?" asked Temeris.

"That would seem the obvious conclusion." agreed Anthyssa. She sent a small surge of Aether into her staff, lighting the crystal. "I think we need to be able to see this scene in more detail."

They moved on into the central chamber of the dungeon. The room was ringed by several high-security cells, these with solid doors much like those of the dungeon itself. In the very centre of the room, though, was the most important prison- a large, silver cage. The bars of the cage, unlike those in the rest of the dungeon, were made of pure silver, and reinforced with powerful protective enchantments. Even the strongest Guard, or a Magister boosting their strength through magic similar to the Seal of the Soldier which the Guards bore, would struggle to bend them enough to escape the cage. Similarly, the bars were comprehensively warded against the direct action of magic. Such devices were made by the Artificers of the Lily College, several powerful Artisan-Magisters working in concert with the College Smiths who were their Sealed counterparts, and it was rare for a city to possess more than a brace of them. This cage had done its job well, for still sitting cross-legged in its centre was the body of Magister Desdemona Jain. She was quite young, perhaps a little plump, with blonde hair plaited and rolled into 'snailshells' over her ears. She had at least been afforded the dignity of her robes, which unlike Anthyssa's were of a rich, deep purple.

"Hmm." said Temeris. "She is as afflicted as all the others- observe the open mouth and eyes. If this was some deliberate attack, it was a suicidal one."

"Where's her staff?" asked Sandar, looking around a little nervously.

"Probably destroyed." replied Anthyssa. "It is fairly common, when a Magister is taken prisoner, for them to be forced to transfer most of their Aether into their staff, which is then taken from them and broken. It is a simple way to weaken them for a time, and since the staff is one of the most personal

possessions a Magister can have, it is a particularly wounding loss to inflict without actually physically harming the prisoner.”

“I thought you said touching another Magister's staff was dangerous, Learned Magister?” said Sandar.

“It is. Generally, though, any Magister powerful enough to defeat another is also powerful enough to deal with their staff-” She stopped short, realising something for the first time. “Temeris, it has just occurred to me- who captured Magister Jain?”

“I believe she was found unconscious by a patrol of the Scarlet Reavers.” said Temeris.

“Oh, those bastards.” said Sandar, with feeling. “Light cavalry Dispensation, all Outriders so they can't fight for shit but they move like the same off a shovel and if they get you with a spear at full gallop it's instant *Kallouris*.”

“*Kallouris*?” asked Temeris, unable to let the unknown word pass him by.

“Delicacy from Jandalla, way down south. Jandi-speak for 'meat on a stick'.”

“Well, ordinarily I would say it was fortunate that the Reavers refrained from turning their prisoner into an impromptu Jandallian foodstuff, but given the circumstances, perhaps not.” said Anthyssa.

“Hmm, she's even still wearing silver rune-cuffs. Those should stop a Magister casting most magic- they get incredibly hot if you try. It's possible to melt them off with enough Aether, but doing that, healing the damage, not passing out from the pain and still having enough Aether left to do anything useful is beyond anyone short of a five-Leaf, I'd say.”

A creaking sound made Anthyssa and Temeris whirl, but the source turned out to be Sandar, who was inspecting the dumb-waiter set into the wall. “Ah, thought so.”

“What?” asked Temeris.

“Sallak-spiced ham!” said Sandar, triumphantly. “They often give it to the prisoners 'cos it keeps well, but you get a bit of a taste for the stuff.”

Temeris frowned. “Couldn't someone use that thing to escape from the dungeon?”

“Nah.” replied the Scout, around a mouthful of ham. “Got some sort of trick mechanism, only goes down.”

“Well, it must go back to the kitchens eventually!” snapped Temeris.

“Yeah, but only after it's dunked the dirty plates in a big old water tank buried under this thing.” said Sandar. “Gives them a head start on the washing up and drowns any silly bugger who tries to use it to get out into the bargain.”

“This isn't getting us anywhere.” said Anthyssa. “I think we have established Magister Desdemona as the vector for the attack, whatever it was, but as for its nature..”

“I reckon it's the sound.” said Sandar.

“The sound?” Both Magister and Healer stared at him.

“Yeah. So something happens to Magister Desdemona here and she opens her mouth real wide and screams. All these poor bastards” he gestured with the remains of the ham “hear the sound, and it gets in their heads and makes them scream too. It's not exactly magic, so the cuffs and the cage bars don't stop it.”

“Go on.” said Anthyssa, her mind working.

“So then Jangles outside hears this bloody weird noise and he thinks, what the bloody hell is that, so he opens the door and then he gets it too..”

“Wait, wait.” said Temeris. “If.. Jangles?”

“Cos he has a big bunch've keys.” supplied Sandar. Temeris grimaced.

“If the door guard heard the noise, and the noise is what spreads this.. thing, why wasn't he already infected? Why open the door?”

“Perhaps there is a certain requirement for volume.” ventured Anthyssa. “The dungeon door is extremely thick- the sound would have been significantly muffled.”

“Yes!” said Temeris, slamming a hand into his palm. “Learned Magister, two years ago, do you remember the research project House Jain submitted to the Symposium for review?”

“*Transmission of Pattern Data via the hearing receptors of the brain*. Yes, I remember it. As I

recall, the theory was that past a certain volume, the ears can be damaged by a loud noise and so the mind shuts them down, creating a temporary link between the sense of hearing and the subconscious. Arak Jain wanted to see if that effect could be used to overload the mind of a subject and allow the sound to create the Pattern of a spell within the mind of the hearer.” Anthyssa gave a short, mirthless laugh. “It was turned down on the grounds that the research would be inhumane, and that there are far more efficient ways to teach someone a spell than by deafening them permanently.”

“What if they carried on that research, and succeeded?” said Temeris, both excited and repulsed. “A spell, that causes the victim to scream at deafening volume before killing them. A scream, that if heard at sufficient volume writes a copy of that spell in the mind of the new victim.”

“You weren't bloody kidding earlier, were you Temeris?” said Sandar softly.

They paused on the way out of the dungeon to look again at the Guard Sandar had named 'Jangles'. “This one is still bothering me.” said Sandar. “So he hears the scream, it gets in his head.. how does he end up here?”

“Look at his Seal.” said Anythssa “It's coal-black. None of the other Guards' Seals that we've seen have been.”

“That means he used up all his Aether doing something, right? It looks like that once the Seal starts to kill you.” said Sandar with a shudder. “Of course, since my Seal makes me silent when I use it, some smart-arse decided to make ours get hot instead of glow silver and give us away, so that can't happen to me.”

“That's true.” agreed Temeris. “I've seen several young Scouts badly burned by their own Seals though, sometimes fatally.”

“I think this spell has.. a sense of purpose.” said Anthyssa, softly. “I suspect that if it enters a victim and there is no-one around to hear it, it makes them seek an... audience.”

“To compel an unwilling mind like that would take a lot of Aether.” said Temeris, doubtfully.

“True.” said Anthyssa. “Look where this one fell, though- at the end of the corridor, at a junction, and from where we stand we can see two other victims.”

“Y'know what I think?” said Sandar. “I think everyone in here who heard this thing is very fucking dead, and that's a bloody good thing. Now, can we get out of here?”

“Soon, Scout Sandar.” said Anthyssa, trying to keep the rising fear she was feeling out of her voice. “There's just one more thing I need to do.”

With Sandar grumbling ahead of them, they worked their way back up through the Keep, this time carrying on to the upper floors which housed the administrative offices. Not all such buildings in the Empire kept track of every prisoner to enter them, but this was a prison run by a Thane. They soon found what they were looking for, a great, open room at the top of the building. Shelves stretched off along every wall, crammed with thick books organised by date. Anthyssa was about to see about activating the room's Librarian magic, which would make the process of searching the records considerably faster, when she realised both that the activation crystal was shattered, and that the book she needed was still sitting open on the desk next to it. There was, mercifully, no body to push from the chair, though they had stepped over or around so many on the way there that they were getting terribly accustomed to it. She sat down, and looked at the last entry in the book.

687 CC, 2nd Day of Mendarant. Dusk Watch. Name of Prisoner: Magister Desdemonia Jain. Misdemeanour: Known member of a House affiliated to the Royalist Rebels. Particulars: Delivered bound and gagged, unconscious, by Corporal Faris of the Scarlet Reavers. Effects: Robes, Royalist Purple. Pouch containing 25 silver coin, medicinal herbs. Staff, Magister's, sundered. Silver rune-cuffs, standard College issue, to be returned to Reavers. Incarceration notes: Considered extremely dangerous, consigned to Silver Cage. Prisoner is to receive no medical attention nor are her bonds or gag to be removed until Magister Darius Thane has attended her personally.

“Oh great Thelen, no.” said Anthyssa, softly, falling back into the chair.

“Learned Magister?” said Temeris, concern lining his face. Receiving no reply, he quickly looked at the book himself. “I... wait, this says...”

Anthyssa stood up sharply. “I know, Temeris. If what this says is correct, Desdemona was brought to the Bastion yesterday evening bound and gagged, and was to remain that way until Darius had a chance to question her in person. We saw no such restraints when we were in the dungeon, at least not on her person. So Darius must have spoken with her.”

“Yeah, so what?” asked Sandar. “It's his prison. He was probably trying to get a leg-up on everyone else, see what he could find out.”

“The thing with the Thanos is they pride themselves on being early risers. Darius would always make a point of being hard at work before sunrise, so assuming that Desdemona was brought in too late for him to see last night, he would have been here before the day shift arrived to interrogate her.”

“So he would have been here when.. oh shit.” said Sandar.

They left the Bastion at a dead run, leaving the shouted questions of Sergeant Hale behind them. From the soft pulse of the Waycrystal buried deep beneath the city, Anthyssa could tell that it was nearly the beginning of Day Watch. In the council chamber of the Garnet Keep, the High Seminar would be assembling to discuss the day's business, and they would expect a report from the Master of the East Bastion. Well, thought Anthyssa bitterly, they were certainly going to get one. Desperately, they rushed across the Keep's lowered drawbridge, over a moat designed to prevent any invader from entering and past thick walls which had similarly utterly failed.

“Learned Magister...” huffed Temeris, struggling to keep up. “What.. what can we do?”

“Kill 'im.” panted Sandar from just ahead. “Before he opens his mouth, we kill the bastard.”

Anthyssa hated Sandar's conclusion, but he was right. The Howling Plague, as she decided to name it, must be draining even Darius' prodigious reserves of Aether. It was just possible that she might be able to kill him before-

“Halt!”

They had reached the entrance to the council chamber. The Guard, knowing who was scheduled to speak, was the first to challenge them despite Anthyssa's position as High Chirurgeon.

“Guard Pieter.” panted Anthyssa, using the old Magister trick of reading a person's name from their Pattern to save time. “I must speak with the Seminar. Has Magister Darius-”

Suddenly, there he was. Darius Thane, dressed in the usual green robes trimmed with silver lilies, neatly groomed black beard perhaps not as neat as usual. His staff crystal, bearing several tell-tale cracks, was glowing, the effect hidden somewhat by the sunlight streaming through the windows of the council chamber. He looked ruffled, tired, worn out, like a man coming to the end of a long fight.

A fight which he was losing.

He began to open his mouth, eyes bulging wide. She was too late, she was no warrior, couldn't bring lightning to her fingertips the way some Magisters could, like Haran could. How long would he need to scream before the entire Seminar were infected- before she was infected?

Everything happened so slowly. She began to bring up her hand, felt the killing power beginning to rise. The Guard, seeing her intent, began moving, moving so slowly to try to stop her, but Temeris clattered into him. Then Sandar was there, running through the chamber door and tackling Darius. As the two crashed together, the Magister's mouth opened wide, but no sound came, for clutched tight by the Scout he was affected by the silencing power of Sandar's active Seal. Hoping Sandar could forgive her, hoping Sherinith, patron of Healers, could forgive her, hoping, above all, that Haran would forgive her, Anthyssa unleashed the lightning to blast Darius to ashes. It did not strike home.

Behind Darius, the senior Magisters of the Seminar watched the apparent assassination attempt on

their colleague by their own High Chirurgeon, aghast. But these were men and women of power, and many had the reflexes of a master duellist, for political power in the Lily College was rarely won without personal conflict. Anthyssa's strike would have slain most men on the spot, but to them it was a clumsy lunge, and they thwarted it with ease. Darius, his Aether lending him monstrous strength, flung Sandar from him, the Scout's Seal blazing agonisingly, and opened his mouth wide once more. Even as the Chancellor began to shout, Temeris somehow struggled free of the Guard and yanked the heavy doors firmly shut.

“Anthyssa, run!”

Shame tearing at her heart, she did.

Anthyssa fled down the wide hallway of the Garnet Keep, not pausing to look back. Already, muffled though it was by the doors of the council chamber, she could hear the scream, the terrible sound wailing and keening, echoing off marble walls. She dared hope that somehow Temeris might keep the door shut long enough for the plague to burn itself out, and for the briefest of moments wondered if she should have stayed to help him rather than following her primal instinct to flee. As she reached the gatehouse she slowed to turn, crying with exhaustion and terror, and risked a glance back as she caught her breath. For a moment, one last beautiful moment, it looked like the doors might hold. Temeris had been joined both by the door Guard and several others, these in the bulky College battle-plate, and together they exerted formidable force on the door. But even as she drew a sobbing breath that was half relief, and half grief, the doors themselves were blasted open with a terrible, crashing boom of Aether, and the screaming remains of the High Seminar lurched out. In the last glance before she ducked into a side hall and slammed the door behind her, she saw the Guards and Temeris, poor, brave, faithful Temeris, thrash briefly where they had fallen, and then lie still.

She fought for calm. Turning, she fused the door shut with a quick jolt of lightning- how quickly it came now- and strode on. All around her, the halls were echoing with the screams. She forced herself to ignore it, concentrate on her mental map of the Garnet Keep, sealing each door she passed as efficiently as possible. She must buy time, slow them down, until she could reach her goal. And suddenly, there it was- the Crystal Chamber, the main hub of communications from Phyre to the outside world and also for that reason one of the most sound-proof in the entire Campus. A young Operator looked up in surprise as she entered.

“Learned Magister, what can I- what are you doing?” he said, voice rising from curiosity to shock as Anthyssa slammed the doors behind her and sealed them shut.

“This city is lost, Operator Lukas.” said Anthyssa. “You will put me in touch with the Second Volume, and you will do it swiftly.”

Lukas, a darkly handsome young man, blanched at her words, but knew better than to argue with a Magister. He reached a hand to the large magical crystal that formed the nexus of the system, and closed his eyes, mouth moving silently. After a moment, he opened his eyes again, holding out a smaller relay gem.

“Learned Magister, I have Operator Magritte with the Second.”

She took the proffered crystal. The words of the conversation formed in the minds of the participants, almost but not quite like actual sound.

“*Operator Magritte?*”

“*Yes, this is Operator Magritte Dantis of the Second Volume. Who is this?*”

“*Magister Anthyssa Dar, Magritte. Is Magister Haran there?*”

“*One moment, Learned Magister*” replied Magritte. It seemed an aeon before the crystal pulsed again.

“*Anthyssa? What in Thelen's name is going on in Phyre? We're seeing flames, smoke-*”

“*First, Haran, you must quarantine the city. Do it now. Tell your Archers to shoot anyone who tries to escape, especially from Second Gate East, nearest the council chambers. You must do this now, Haran. I'll explain all I can once you have.*”

“My love-”

“NOW Haran!” She wasn't even sure if it was possible to shout through a crystal, but she tried. The crystal went silent again.

“I have issued the orders.” came a message a few, endless minutes later. *“Now, Wife, you will tell me why my troops now think I have gone mad.”*

“It is a contagion, Haran, the Howling Plague, a magical disease sent by the Royalists. It spreads through the sound of a scream- if the sound is close enough and loud enough to hurt, then the hearer will contract it.”

“Thelen's blood!”

“It gets worse, my love. The spell compels the victim to seek out those who are uninfected. The Sealed seem merely to run until they exhaust their Aether and die, but a Magister will use all their guile and power to find as many victims as possible.”

“I have sent Magritte to gather the plans to the city, Anthyssa. You are in the Crystal Chamber, yes? Stay there, and I shall come for you.”

“No! No, Haran, no. It is too late for me. The entire High Seminar is gone, and their power was enough that most of the Keep is already infected by now. All we can do is contain it until it burns itself out.” There was a dull thump at the door. *“I must go now, Haran. Remember, let none escape the city and do not enter!”*

“Anthyssa, I-”

“Promise me, Haran!”

But there was no time to listen for the answer. The door thumped again, and this time a small crack appeared. Instantly, the scream began to leak through, faint but audible.

She looked around, desperately. Magister Anthyssa Dar was not yet ready to succumb to her fate.

“Is there another way out of this room?”

Lukas was staring at the door, horrified. *“Y-yes, Learned Magister. Climb the ladders to the upper gantry, and there is an access hatch that leads to the roof storage space. From there, you can get through to the roof of the Keep itself.”*

“We can get through, Lukas. You're coming with me.”

Lukas shook his head firmly. *“No, Learned Magister. Forgive me, but I was listening to your conversation through the master Crystal. I cannot allow those.. things.. to possess it in case they can use it to spread their poison to the rest of the Empire. Go. I will slow them down, and keep this room from their hands. The Lily blooms on blooded ground.”*

Another, louder thump from the door ended the argument. As Anthyssa climbed, she looked down and saw Lukas deep in communion with his device. A glow was building in the central crystal, and the smaller satellite gems were glowing too, in sympathy. Suddenly, she realised what was happening- Lukas was making the device contact itself, sending the same message around and around, building a wave of feedback fuelled by the Aether of the Keep itself. She redoubled her pace, and as the hatch slammed shut below her a massive shockwave shook the entire Keep, accompanied by a deafening roar. And then, silence.

Over the next three weeks, Magister Anthyssa Dar watched from the roofs of the Garnet Keep as her city slowly died. The first few days were the worst, of course. From her high vantage point, her eyesight magnified through her magic, she saw the howling, screaming creatures running through the streets, spreading the plague to all they could get near. Where they met a barricaded door or other obstacle, they would mass to either tear it down or make a cacophony of sound loud enough to be heard within. There were, of course, some in the city who by luck or wisdom managed to guess what was happening and take precautions. She saw a woman, a Swordmaster from the great weapon she carried, who had bound cloth over her ears to dampen the sound. She cut down some twenty in skirmishes across the city before they trapped her and tore the protection from her head. Another, a Magister, used a silence spell to deaden a large area around him. This confounded the plague for a while, but such a spell required more Aether to maintain the louder the sound it was dampening

became, and eventually a crowd of the things surrounded him and bled him dry. She realised that she was thinking of the plague as a living thing in its own right now, and with good reason- it was clearly learning.

By the second week, the few survivors had banded together. One of the barracks was held in force by archers who shot any of the creatures- they no longer resembled humans- who came near. But the plague had long since stopped killing its victims, it had a city of fifty thousand at its command, and eventually the defenders simply ran out of arrows. The same could not be said for the Second Volume, who kept up their quarantine with deadly efficiency. From what she could see, every member of the Volume, from the specialist Archers who shot arrows that blazed with silver fire, to the common Guards and even Scouts, was taking his or her turn on the pickets, and they had lines of supply from the Empire. Every attempt the plague made to escape, by massed sorties or by the recently infected loved ones of the soldiers, was met with the same deadly reply. Her heart swelled with fierce pride for Haran and his troops, even as she knew how much this task must be hurting them. She had long since stopped eating or drinking- a Magister could survive for long periods on Aether alone and she stood above the most abundant source in the city- and she craved the taste of a little wine or real food. She even created some Aether rations, a basic foodstuff Magisters could give to others in emergencies, to munch on to keep her mouth busy. It tasted like stale bread.

The plague host bodies had no such recourse. Every day, she saw more simply fall to their knees and stop moving as the plague burned through their Aether. By the middle of the fourth week, she dared to believe it might be over. Nothing seemed to move in the streets, and the screams had long since faded into silence. Then she saw him, walking towards the main north gates- the figure of a man. She strained her eyes, pouring as much Aether into them as she dared to get a closer look. It was the Chancellor, of course, Henrik Thule, at six Leaves by far the most potent Magister in the city. Even at this distance, she could see the power that blazed from his Pattern. The plague had learned again, and from many hosts had consolidated itself back into one. As she watched, Henrik reached out a hand to a fallen corpse, which shimmered and vanished. Could this being hold off the arrows of Haran's men long enough to infect them? It was certainly possible.

She sighed, sadly. Deep inside, she had harboured the hope that once the plague had burned out she might simply be able to walk away. In her dreams, the Dragons themselves intervened and swooped down to rescue her, or Haran defied the ancient treaty with them forbidding humans from flight to come and save her himself. It was not to be. There was only one way to stop this now. Tapping all of the Keep's power, she sent a wave of Aether roiling through the city, questing, searching for life. Against all odds, she found a few souls hiding in deep cellars and dark corners, still untouched by the plague, but there was no more trace of the creatures that bore it. None, but for Henrik himself, or whatever he had become. She had resisted searching in this manner before because even with the wellspring of Aether the Keep provided, it took most of her strength, and because there was no way to hide what she was doing from any other Magister in the city. Or, for that matter, of hiding where she was. Sure enough, in the streets below, the thing that had once been Chancellor Henrik stopped, considered, and turned back.

Now was the time, and for a shameful moment her resolve wavered. Then she was off and running, drawing what Aether she could from the Keep one final time. Down she went, down through the sad ruin of the Crystal Chamber, down through silent corridors full of bodies and shattered glass and crystal, down into the depths to the great foundry where a few weeks ago men had sweated and toiled to forge the weapons and armour for the Second Volume to go to war. Here, closest to the earth, the power of the Keep was at its greatest. It was a fine place for any Magister to make her last stand. She climbed to a high gantry with a view of the entrance door, and waited, repeating the Oath of Sherinith to herself. She had not managed to live up to it before, but she would now.

"In the name of Sherinith, third child of Thelen and second of his daughters, I pledge myself as she

did to the art of Healing.”

Somewhere in the distance a door boomed open.

“I shall allow no disease to harm those in my care whilst I still live.”

More doors, one after the other in rapid sequence. She wrapped the words around her mind, building them into a fortress to strengthen her will. She bolstered the walls with the memories of Temeris, Sandar, and Lukas, and their sacrifices.

“I shall treat any injury of any who suffer one, regardless of pain, threat, or personal danger.”

The barred door of the foundry shuddered once, then bulged out and exploded into shards.

“This I swear in the name of Thelen, in the name of Sherinith, and on the honour of House Dar.”

Henrik stepped through into the foundry. He looked up at her, and a smile formed on his face that immediately began to split into the terrible rictus that had become so familiar to her.

She threw a blast of lightning that slid off the thing's defences like water striking oil, and put everything she had left into a silence spell. Henrik screamed with such force that the entire Keep seemed to shake, and the crystal in her staff flared briefly and shattered. Feeling her strength beginning to fail, she desperately reached into her sleeve and hurled the tiny silver dagger sheathed there at the distended thing that now only vaguely resembled a man. She was no Archer, but the enchanted weapon was made to seek its target and sank home in the mass of flesh, but to no avail. And then, her magic was gone, and everything was the scream.

It bored through her ears like a white hot needle, so loud that she was unable to process it as a sound at all. It was simply pain, pain that made up the totality of her existence, and it formed into a thought that squatted outside the fortress she had built in her mind and smashed it to rubble in a gesture.

“Yes.” it said *“I shall wear this shape, and walk amongst them, and I shall find my beloved, and I shall share this gift with him, this beautiful, precious gift. And then I shall go on. Those who created me and those they created me to destroy, all shall know my magnificence. All shall join me in my song.”*

And somewhere, deep within the ruins of her mind, the tiny, dwindling spark that was all that was left of Magister Anthyssa Dar said *“I love you, Haran.”* and somehow made the body that was once hers take one, final step backwards.

A week later, the Symposium finally acceded to Magister Haran's pleas, and allowed the Second Volume to send search parties into the city. There was little to find. Here and there lay the ruined, twisted corpses of the plague victims, some piled together behind hasty barricades, some, terribly emaciated, lying where they had fallen. They found the few, the terribly few, half-starved survivors. They found the Crystal Chamber, its contents destroyed utterly, and marvelled at the devastation. And far below, they found the now cold foundry. Magister Haran crunched over the sundered glass and broken crystal and stepped into the room. High above, cracked and shattered windows caked with soot allowed a grey light to filter down.

“You have touched nothing?” he said to the corporal in charge of the patrol.

“Nothing, Learned Magister. As soon as we saw that, we sent for you.”

Haran squatted down, poking the sad bundle of cloth and rotting flesh with his staff. “Yes, these are the robes of the Chancellor himself, and that- don't touch it, man! That is his staff. The horse on the top is the symbol of House Thule.” Something caught his eye, and he pocketed it swiftly.

Another Warden- they were calling the Second the Wardens of Phyre now- had climbed a high gantry. “Learned Magister, you had best take a look at this.”

Haran climbed the gantry, and looked down where the woman pointed. The great vat below had held molten silver, ready to be poured into moulds or cast into billets which would then be forged into weapons and armour. Now, the silver was cold and solid, and gleamed in the half-light, making it just possible to see the shape of a slender, feminine hand, completely encased in the metal, protruding from the mass.

“Looks like whoever she was, she jumped in there from up here.” observed the Warden.

“Yes.” agreed Haran. “There are parts of another staff down there, burned beyond recognition. I would guess this was a Magister, who sacrificed herself to stop the plague once and for all.”

“Damn brave thing to do, Learned Magister.” said the Warden, approvingly. “I wonder who she was?”

“That, Guardsman” said Haran, the tiny silver dagger and charred Dragon nestling safely in his robes “is something we shall never know.”

He turned his back swiftly and marched away to hide his tears.