

Foundation Day

A short story of the Thelenic Curriculum by T.R. Peers

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21 Years before the Disaster of the Wake

Magister Talion Daran looked out from the balcony of the Silver Tower of Gyre as the dawn broke on Foundation Day. A light dusting of snow had fallen overnight, and rime coated the balcony rail and glittered in the rising sun. Already the bells of the city's Breather Cathedral were tolling out in welcome. The Church of the First Breath had long claimed the last day of the year as the official birthday of Thelen despite the fact that no authoritative source existed to prove it. When the founding Magisters of the Lily College had chosen the exact same date to officially establish the Empire of the Thelenic Curriculum, they had made certain the event would never be forgotten. It didn't stop the Breathers, though, and no small number of Magisters who still clove to the old religion would be having a hectic day as always, trying to attend both the theological and secular events of the season which often took place within an hour of each other at opposite ends of the city.

Talion Daran was a tall, imposing figure though few would have called him exactly handsome. At twenty-nine years of age he was in his physical prime and unlike many Magisters had chosen to maintain it. Many hours of training and exercise with his friend and bodyguard Jonal Rill had left hard muscle under his soft green silk robes and though he wore one rarely a sword was no stranger to his hand. Despite the early hour his short, slightly curly, black hair was neat in the military fashion, mostly because it had an irritating habit of turning into an unruly mop if allowed to grow to any length. His daughter, Thalia, had inherited that quality if not the colour and they were forever combing her hair out of her eyes.

The sound of bare feet on the carpeted floor behind him announced the arrival of Thalia's mother, Isadora, and she emerged, bearing two steaming cups of tea. Unlike Talion, who was already fully-dressed in the robes of a five-Leaf Magister, she wore only a satin night-gown and shivered slightly as the chill morning air bit. Even as she passed Talion one of the cups, however, he felt his wife's magic surge gently as she warmed herself. They passed a quiet moment of peace, watching the light spill across the city.

"It is still a beautiful sight, isn't it?" said Isadora, finally. Talion had been married long enough to spot his cue.

"It pales in comparison to you, my love." he responded. It would have been entirely true even if saying so hadn't been necessary to keep the peace.

"Psh!" she snorted, her nose wrinkling. "Then why do you always leave our bed to see it?"

"Because your beauty is there all the time." said Talion. "It is constant and unwavering, however you may choose to conceal or reveal it, whereas this-" he gestured at the brightening sky "this is fleeting. And I know that, comely as you are, you are not so vain as to find gazing at your own reflection in the mirror more appealing than this."

She smiled. "Perhaps I, too, find something else I am looking at more attractive than the dawn. But I cannot *imagine* what it might be."

Talion took a sip of tea before responding, knowing his next words would irritate his wife and wishing he did not have to speak them. "You slipped again, on 'imagine' this time."

“Did I? *Zualor!*” cursed Isadora, dropping completely into her native tongue in anger at herself. Talion decided to take swift remedial action.

“Yes, but it was a minor one. If I didn't know you still had a faint Abelian accent I doubt I would have noticed. Still, it would not do for the Chair of Aurantus to be seen with an Abelian on his arm in the current climate, so you need to be wary.”

“I know, I know, I- wait, for *what?* When did this happen?”

“I received the confirmation last night from the Chancellor.” said Talion with a grin. The appointment put him in charge of Gyre's treasury, and since the city was responsible for mining much of the Empire's silver, also came with stewardship of the Imperial Mint. Money, of course, meant little to a Magister who could create almost anything they needed with Aether, but the prestige and influence that came with the position were considerable.

Isadora's eyes suddenly narrowed. “Wait.. was my.. *father* involved in this?”

Her accent slipped again on *father*, and Talion was hardly surprised. Some six years ago, Talion had been visiting the Kingdom of Abelia in a party led by Magister Soloman Thule. Approaching the city of Aquila they had encountered a group of brigands attacking a coach. Though Magister Soloman's retinue had been necessarily small, consisting merely of himself, five Guards and Talion, he was a four-Leaf Magister and Talion himself had already achieved three and between them they soon dispatched the attackers and investigated the coach, from which several blasts of flame and curses of near-equal intensity had been emanating. Inside, they found the corpse of Sir Anthony D'Alembert and his grieving nineteen-year-old daughter, Lady Isadora.

It emerged, once the young woman had mastered herself, that Sir Anthony had, through various political missteps, found himself in peril for his life and chosen to flee the Kingdom with his daughter. Since Royal Knights could control their enchanted battle-armor from a considerable distance, he had sent his to attend a public tourney to deceive his enemies whilst he made good his escape. Whether his plan had been foiled through sheer bad luck or by the machinations of his foes was a mystery none could answer, for no bandit survived the skirmish to do so, but it was abundantly clear that Isadora would be in mortal danger should she stay in the country of her birth. Fortunately, though her training as an Abelian Wizard was considered lacking by College standards, the young noblewoman was clearly of sharp mind and significant power, and so Soloman Thule chose to adopt her into his House.

It was to Magister Soloman, then, that Isadora referred when she said 'my father'. Quite elderly now, Magister Soloman nonetheless retained considerable influence among the Numismatists, the faction of Magisters involved in maintaining the Imperial Mint, and being otherwise childless was ambitious for his adopted daughter's future. Fortunately the old man was also, as was invariably the case with veteran Magisters, a skilled politician and adept at covering his tracks.

“Magister Soloman had nothing to do with it, as far as I know.” said Talion, completely truthfully. “The Chancellor considered the balance of power in the Seminar to be such that giving the post to House Daran was politic, and Magister Tomas is far too involved in his research to be interested, as always. As a five-Leaf, I was next in line.”

Isadora put her hands on her hips in mock irritation. “Talion Daran, if you think for one moment that I believe that meddling old goat had nothing to do with this you must imagine you married a simpleton. Ah, but what does it matter? Opportunity should be seized, whatever the source. Now, we must be getting ready for the Foundation Breakfast. We shall let Thalia sleep for now, the maid

will keep an eye on her.”

By the time they returned, Thalia was awake and making the maid's life interesting as always. At five years old, the girl was at the stage of asking complicated questions to which she could only understand simple answers and was already driving her tutors to distraction. Talion fervently hoped her reaction to her present would be positive. For that matter, he hoped the rest of the day's festivities would help to take his mind off the alarming developments in relations with the Abelians. He had always thought that the Empire and the Kingdom had far more in common than they liked to admit, but in recent times King Tobias had become increasingly belligerent. With all the recent gossip about Emperor Adramion's latest son, Ullarth, and the concubine who was the child's mother whatever the official records might claim, it was expected that both sides might desire another war as a distraction from their domestic problems.

He remembered the last war far more vividly than any four-year-old child should. The Daran Manse, where his family had taken refuge, was close enough to site of the last battle at Sommerlan that he had seen some of the aftermath when the Abelian Golems went berserk and attacked their own side. No-one in the College seemed prepared to admit how close they had come to defeat on that occasion, though it was generally believed that improvements to the Pentus Line made another such event unlikely and the Abelians had been weakened by recent civil strife. Nonetheless, it seemed foolish to start another war simply to silence a few wagging tongues.

It was traditional before the main Foundation Day meal to exchange gifts. Amongst the common folk, and particularly the merchant families, this was a focal point of the day but Magisters had little interest in material goods that could be easily created or obtained when needed. So to Talion, Isadora gave only a silver pendant set with a large diamond, into which she had used her magic to set entwined locks of her own and Thalia's hair. In return, Talion gave her a fine gold necklace from which hung several small rubies, each of which had been transmuted from a single drop of his own blood. Thalia wrinkled her tiny nose at this idea, but soon lit up in delight at her own gifts, a set of miniature animals hand-carved from khile-wood by a skilled artisan, before being imbued with a touch of Aether by her parents. When played with, the magic made the horses, cows, dogs and cats seem to come briefly to life, just as the carvings on a Magister's staff seemed alive even though they never moved. There was also a gift for Jonal Rill, who arrived with his wife for the meal, of a richly-bejewelled sword for ceremonial wear, though both Talion and Isadora had worked enough magic into the weapon than anyone mistaking it for a harmless affectation would find themselves fatally corrected.

There was, however, the question of the final and most important gift of the day, which Talion waited until the end of the meal to present. Already Thalia was happily sipping a cup of Daxalai tea, which until now she had been forbidden to try, but now it was time to truly lead her towards her future. He hoped. Some families preferred to use a birthday to do what he was about to attempt, but he and Isadora had decided the girl was not quite ready then. This was something that had to be done at the correct time- and in the correct company.

“Thalia.” said Talion, waiting until the girl was giving him her full attention before continuing. “There is something else your mother and I would like to give you, but only if you are ready to accept it. Are you?”

The child's brow wrinkled in confusion. “Dunno.”

Talion smiled. “Are you willing to try?”

Isadora gave Thalia an encouraging smile, and the girl nodded. “Yes, papa.”

Without another word, Talion took a small sandalwood box out of his robe, and placed it on the table. Without touching it, he used his Aether to open the box, and lift a small crystal out of it. Responding to the magic, the crystal glowed softly as it floated across the table towards Thalia. The child's eyes widened in wonder as the blue light bounced off the faces of her family and their friends, refracting from glasses and reflecting in silver cutlery. When the crystal was just out of reach of the girl's outstretched hands, it stopped, bobbing gently in mid air and revolving slowly. With a look of annoyance, Thalia made as if to clamber onto the table to get it, but Isadora pushed her back gently.

“No, Thalia. To receive this gift, you must reach out for it with your magic, as your papa is doing.”

“Huh?” said the girl, her confusion showing again. “How?”

“How do you breathe?” said Talion, softly. “How do you walk? Do not concern yourself with how. Merely do.”

There had been signs for some time. A desired toy moving a short distance across the floor, a small spark of flame in a moment of irritation, a surge of strength no normal child might possess. There was power in Thalia Daran, that much was certain, but could there be control? Did the future hold staff and robe, or a Seal and whatever that brought with it?

For a few long, silent moments nothing seemed to happen. Talion could feel the tiny spark of Thalia's power rising, but it lacked form or direction. Suddenly the child's napkin, folded on the table next to her, began to smoulder. Her attention fixed firmly on the crystal, Thalia didn't even notice as her mother gently put it out. Then came a snatching surge, and the crystal, caught a glancing blow, began to spin rapidly but didn't otherwise move. Isadora shot Talion a worried glance. “My love, perhaps we-”

Before she could finish the sentence the crystal hurtled towards Thalia. The child shrieked in alarm and ducked, and the fragile stone slammed full-force into the headboard of her chair and shattered. More from shock than from injury the girl burst into tears, and Isadora swept her up to comfort her.

“There there, my sweet, you're all right, it's all right. Come now, don't cry, not today!”

Thalia mumbled something between sobs.

“What is it, Thalia? What's the matter?”

“broke my present..” murmured the child. Talion laughed.

“This? The merest of things, and anyway, what is broken can be remade. Thalia, look!”

As the child looked up from her mother's breast, still rubbing at tear-filled eyes, Talion swept up the glittering shards with his Aether. The testing crystals were simple constructs, easily made from nothing but pure magic, and reassembling one was a simple feat for any Magister. Within moments, the crystal was whole again, and Talion sent it drifting back towards the open box. “In any case, that was not the whole of the gift” he continued, as four more crystals lifted themselves out of their berth to join the first. “as you can see. These are yours now, Thalia, yours to learn and test yourself with before you take your place alongside us as a Magister.”

The crystals settled themselves back into the box and he gave it to the child, who gazed at her new possessions in wonder. Not daring to try to move the crystals again, she contented herself with lightly touching each one, causing them to glow with different colours and emit soft, pleasing tones. With each new expression of her daughter's control, the look of quiet, gentle pride on Isadora's face grew, even though the child who still nestled in her arms seemed to have almost forgotten that she existed.

That evening, Thalia having been dispatched to bed and their wives having retired to Isadora's sitting room, Talion and Jonal Rill stood together on the balcony, watching the lights of the city glimmer in the night's darkness. Jonal fished a cigar out from his jacket and offered one to Talion, who shook his head. At his friend's gesture, he lit the cigar with a tiny spark of Aether.

“So, looks like I'll be getting a pay rise, eh?” said Jonal with a chuckle. He was some five years older than Talion, more powerfully-built though not as tall, with a face that bore more than one battle-scar. College Healers were more than capable of invisibly healing most injuries, so any scar a Guard chose to keep told a story they wanted to remember. Some of those stories Talion knew. Others, the veteran didn't talk about. If pressed, he claimed he kept them because his wife liked them and 'it helps her recognise me in the dark'.

Talion didn't actually know how much House Daran paid Jonal for his duties, but the rich green dress uniform he wore suggested it was no pittance. Still, the right-hand man of the High Treasurer of the Imperial Mint was certainly likely to be well-compensated. If nothing else, it would remove a source of obvious temptation. “I'd imagine so.” he agreed.

“Little Thalia did well, yeah? Pity.”

“What?”

“Hey, I was looking forward to teaching her swordsmanship!” laughed Jonal. “By the time she joined the Academy I'd have her dancing well enough to run rings around those lumps they call instructors.”

“That may not be the case for much longer.” said Talion, remembering something he'd heard. “The Academy has appointed a new Master for the Dancing Halls- a Daxalai, no less.”

Taken by surprise, Jonal coughed up smoke. “Yar's tits, really? One of those Generals of theirs with those slender little swords you can't see move? That'll put foxes in more than one hen-house, if I'm any judge.”

“I'd certainly like to have been a cat under the table when House Adaran heard about it.” agreed Talion. “Let us hope that the skills this 'Master Yukan' teaches will not be soon needed.”

“Slim chance of that, I'm afraid.” said Jonal, sourly.

“You've heard from your Abelian contacts?”

“Yeah. King Tobias is having nineteen shades of trouble trying to keep the Great Families in line and his own daughter is stirring the shit into the bargain. Keeps pushing to get womenfolk accepted back into the military but dear old Dad's having none of it, thinks they should stick to talking and breeding.”

“A backwards proposition. He always seemed a reasonable man to me.”

“Yeah, but he's worried about the bloodlines. There're less and less Knights in each generation so they need the Noble Ladies to keep squeezing new ones out, not riding about with swords and lances. Little Princess Tondarin thinks she can do both, so looks like Tobias is going to start something to keep her quiet. Anyway, most of the Families are in- the D'Honeurs, the Orsinio, the Egrets, the D'Grace- the D'Alemberts are staying out of it, say they need to watch the southern border.”

“A small mercy.” said Talion. At least his wife's family might be spared the coming insanity. They might even profit by it. “What of their Golems?”

“They've rebuilt to twenty Demolitions of War Golems and at least that many Assemblages of Wood.” said Jonal. “Reckon they'll use them on the front, keep the precious Royal Knights in reserve. Thelen willing they'll go wrong again and save everyone some bother.”

“I doubt we could be that lucky.” said Talion. “You've seen to it that the Chair of Yar receives this information?”

“She'll have a Foundation Day present on her desk tomorrow morning.” said Jonal. Talion sighed.

“Then we have done all we can for now. Let us at least enjoy the end of Foundation Day in peace and talk no more of war. I have some fine Kathian brandy in my study.”

“That's a coincidence, I've got some in my jacket.” chuckled Jonal, drawing out a silver flask. They shared the fiery liquor, watching as the snow began to fall again.

“You know, this time of year it's almost like you can... feel the magic in the air.” said Jonal, after a long, companionable silence.

“I can always feel it.” pointed out Talion. “That's what being a Magister means.”

“No.. I mean..” said Jonal. “Look.. my old schoolteacher used to say that there was one day a year that was truly special, where the magic that ties everything together reached out and touched everyone and everything. Maybe it's because of the Seals or Magister training cutting us adults off, but it's kids in particular who really feel it. And it's not just here, it's.. everywhere.”

“Everywhere? The Daxalai or Jandallans don't celebrate Foundation Day.”

“No.. I mean everywhere that exists. Every world that exists. Oh fuck it, I don't know, I mostly just drew on the desks and tried to put frogs in girls' hair.”

“I don't know if your schoolteacher was deeply wise, or deeply foolish.” said Talion, “But I admire their patience, at least.”

Jonal snorted, and took another pull of brandy. “Yeah, that's Thelen's own truth. Hey, you know what you told Thalia, about being able to remake anything that's broken? Do you really think that's true?”

Talion shrugged. “I don't know. Perhaps it was the magic of the season talking.”

And yet, as he stood beside his friend and looked out into the glittering night, he wondered. What might the future hold for him and his little family? Would Thalia succeed, and become the great Magister he saw in her? Would the growing sense of foreboding he felt about the coming war prove to be anything more than simple apprehension?

After Jonal had finally said his goodbyes, and he and his wife had returned home, Talion looked in on his daughter. The wooden animals and testing crystals were carefully arranged on her bedside table and he noticed the crystals occasionally glowing softly as the child slept. That was a good sign.

“Happy Foundation Day, Thalia.” he whispered. “Know that wherever you go from here, and whatever the future may bring, I will always be there for you. Thelen willing, I will stand by your side through all the storms life may bring to see you through to the calm waters.” Unbidden, tears brimmed in his eyes and as he turned away, he heard the child murmur, though she seemed not to wake.

“Thank you, papa.”

Without another word, he walked softly away. There was nothing more a father needed to hear.