

The Coming of Three

(excerpt: chapters 1 and 2)

by Danny Wall
and
Marc Washington

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Chapter 1 Nightmare

It was a cool autumn day with not single cloud marring the perfect sky. The children of Theria played and the sounds of their games and laughter were heard in almost every corner of the city – except one.

The twang of a bowstring and the hiss of an arrow flying through the air broke the silence of the warrior's practice yard. The arrow embedded itself dead center of the target's bull's eye... that made two in a row for the young archer. The girl wore a simple, boyish outfit, with her blond hair tied in a ponytail to keep it out of her way.

"KATRINA! By the ten..." her father swore as he strode into the practice yard. "What are you doing out here?"

Katrina ignored him and notched another arrow. She brought the bow up and peered at the straw target several yards in front of her. She focused on the concentric red and white rings...

"Katrina!"

Still Kat ignored her father and concentrated on the center ring. Just as she prepared to release the arrow, the target began to waver and ripple... like the air above a hot stone. The red and white cloth darkened, as if a shadow had passed over it. The color changed to a deep green so dark that it was almost black. Then came the scales. The target was covered with them. Dark green scales.

And in the center, a monstrous reptilian eye slid open and stared back at her.

"NO!"

She released the bowstring and again the arrow hissed through the air – to sink into the perfectly normal target, coming just short of hitting yet another bulls-eye.

"Kat, why did you not answer me," asked her father.

"I'm practicing my archery" Kat replied as she notched another arrow. "And you were ... or should I say ARE ... breaking my concentration."

"Why aren't you out playing with your friends? Or preparing for the ball?"

"Because all they want to do is sit and talk about boys. And boys are Boring, *especially* the Prince's ... I'd rather stay here and practice my archery."

"I don't understand why, at your age, you are still more interested in the affairs of men than of women. Archery! Swordplay! BAH! I've seen you with a bow more often than I seen your older brother with one. I want you to put that thing away, get yourself into some clothes proper for one of your station, and go play with your friends. The Prince's party

is tonight, and I won't have you tired out from *this* nonsense."

"But Daddy!"

"Look at you... your skin is red from the sun," Neeran grabbed his daughter's hand and examined it. "Your hands are all hard and calloused... people will mistake you for a SERVANT! You'll embarrass yourself!"

"Then I WON'T GO to the party!"

"Perhaps you WON'T! But you will certainly not stand out here turning yourself into a commoner! AWAY!"

Dejected, she threw down the bow, slung the quiver off her shoulders and tossed it down. "You never let me do what I want." Tears filled her eyes as she ran away toward Camden Hall.

Neeran watched her, then turned back to the target. Two arrows protruded from dead center and a third was just a finger's width away. Neeran blinked, as if expecting the arrows to re-arrange themselves into something a little more appropriate for the work of a child. HIS child. His baby girl.

"She really is quite an archer," said a voice from behind him. The man was plainly-dressed, but the golden braid on his shoulder marked him as a high general... one of only eight such men in the kingdom.

"I regret letting you teach her, now, Gwithion"

"You don't mean that."

"I wonder sometimes."

"I understand that Katrina is your daughter, and far be it from me to meddle in your private family matters, but women are on occasion warrior's. It isn't often that we accept women into the warrior caste, but it does happen. After all, the first leader of Shinarie was a woman ... and a warrior."

"Your point being?"

"My point is that your daughter shows much promise. She may very well be an asset to the kingdom if she were to become a warrior. With the dragon population once again becoming dangerous we will need all the help we can get – especially help as skilled as your daughter."

"You are saying that my daughter, as young as she is, would be accepted into the warrior school then asked to go out and fight! Maybe even against those THINGS!?! Are you INSANE!?! You as well as anyone knows she STILL has nightmares after what they did

to her mother!"

"I have watched her myself. She is a fast learner."

"Never. You hear me... NEVER! Not after what happened. Not after the way I lost Helena and my son."

"Neeran, what happened to Helena and Rindle was a long time ago."

"It shouldn't have happened at ALL! They... they should have WARNED us! But... but they didn't, and now..." Neeran took a few deep breaths, then turned away. "I will not allow it," he said finally.

"If that is how you feel, then why allow her any freedom at all? Why not keep her locked away in some—"

"I indulged her *hobbies* because she enjoyed them, and because no child of mine, male OR female, will ever leave my house without being able to fend for themselves. NOT so that she could run off and join the ranks of your warriors!"

"Our warriors," Gwithion corrected. "And she has expressed interest in this being more than mere a hobby."

"Expressed"? To whom? You?"

"She expresses it every time that she picks up a sword instead of a hand mirror. Give the matter some thought, old friend. She can enter the school this year with your blessing... or enter in two years without it."

"She wouldn't do that."

"You know her better than that. You never were a very good liar, Neeran... especially to yourself. Talk to her. Listen to her now... or you will certainly lose her."

"Perhaps, but I am still her father and she will respect my wishes. Now if you will excuse me, you and I still have a party to prepare for... unless you're going dressed like that."

"Will Kat be attending?"

"Unless she changes her attitude... no. She can spend the night here with the servants."

Gwithion grinned and shook his head.

"What?" said Neeran.

"Nothing, Lord Camden... I shall see you at the ball."

It was the dream again. Kat could tell it was the dream by the clouds. An unfelt wind was blowing them across the sky like tumbleweeds.

She recognized it as *the dream* even though there had been no wind that day. No clouds were in the sky then. But it was the same dream. It would end the same way. The blood... the blood was coming... and so was the screaming...

They were walking by a rocky shore, which was strange considering that the orcs had moved all of the rocks to the blasted lands long ago for some reason no one understood. The farmhouse was as it always had been. Large and safe. Her mother, father, and two brothers were walking with her, inspecting the home that was strangely vacant. Though it was almost sunset the sky had no sun or moon. Just the clouds.

"Daddy look at the funny people," said Kat. Her voice was tiny. Had she really sounded like that? So... weak? She pointed at tiny shapes emerging from the high grass in the distance. The shapes that looked like tall men hunched over and running... fast. Toward them. Teeth and claws flashed; long tails whipped the air behind them as they darted toward her and her family.

"Daddy look!"

"Run, Kat!" shouted her father in sudden panic. "Helena! Josh! Rindle... back to the farmhouse!"

The others turned to flee, but Kat simply watched the dragons come. She wasn't afraid. She was too young to be afraid.

That would change very soon.

"KAT," her mother screamed. It was a strange sound, almost strangled. Kat had never heard her mother scream before.

Suddenly, she was jerked violently into her mother's arms. Her mother was breathing hard, like a frightened horse as she ran back toward house.

"NEERAN!" shouted her mother. "NEERAN WAIT!"

Her father stopped and spun around. The expression on his face...

"Why is daddy afraid?" Kat heard herself saying. "Mommy, why is daddy—"

"HELENA, BEHIND YOU!"

Her father and her oldest brother ran towards them. But suddenly, Kat's mother went

stiff. She fell forward, and Kat tumbled from her suddenly stiff arms.

They both hit the ground. Kat rolled... and looked up at the sky.

Her mother was screaming, laying face down on the rocky soil. There was a wet spot on her back, and she couldn't move. Her muscles were locked... and she was screaming. A huge...thing... loomed over her. It looked down, and then reared back on its hind legs. The reptilian head shot downward towards her mother's back.

...the blood and the screaming would begin ...

"MOMMIEEEE!"

...now.

"Get OFF of HER!" Rindle threw himself at the giant lizard, trying to push it away. The beast's mouth, already dripping blood and strips of flesh, didn't even pause before it turned and snapped at him.

"Rindle, NO!" screamed her father. He grabbed Kat and ran the other direction. Just as he turned, Kat saw the other dragons converge on her oldest brother. He had tried to save their mother...

In return, they tore him apart.

"Don't look, baby." said her father.

They ran. Her father was carrying her, and her other...only... brother ran just ahead of them. They ran for the farmhouse, but they never got there. They ran as fast as they could, but the house stayed on the horizon... it never got any closer. It was as if they were running in place... they couldn't get away. The dragons were coming and they couldn't get away. No one can run away in nightmares. The monsters were always faster...

"DADDIEEEE!"

They tried... their legs were moving, but the dragons kept getting closer and more of them began appearing out of the grass. There had only been four that day, but now they were everywhere now... hundreds of them. Thousands. Everywhere. Their snarling mouths reached for them... each one dripping her mother's blood. They were everywhere. The blood was everywhere and the only sounds were the shouts and the screams. And the hiss of the dragons.

The sky turned dark green and became a blanket of scales. The clouds transformed into huge reptilian eyes... and as Kat screamed, a giant mouth opened up above them. It had teeth... it wanted them. The mouth dripped blood like a heavy rain and then it came down... down out of the sky... straight for them...

Kat awoke just as the scream burst from her lungs. She clamped her mouth shut before the cry could escape. For the next few minutes, Kat sat up in her bed, her chest heaving frantically. Remnants of the nightmare skittered across her memory like insects... tiny bits of fear. Kat shuddered, and tried to force her breathing to return to normal. She had achieved only a small measure of success when the door to her bedroom slammed shut.

"WHO'S THERE!"

Her father lit the lamp by the door, which bathed the duchesses' room in a dim, orange light. The Duke of Ulness was dressed in his most expensive finery in preparation for the Prince's ball.

"Father. You scared me."

"Not as much as you seemed to have frightened yourself," said Neeran. He sat down on the edge of his daughter's bed and began wiping her face with his handkerchief. Kat drew back and pushed his hand away.

"I'm not a little girl," she said protesting.

"But yet you still act like a spoiled child. Why is that?"

Kat sighed and folded her arms across her chest.

"The nightmare again?"

Kat nodded.

"Kat, what happened—"

Katrina interrupted her father with an annoyed. "Was a long time ago. I know. And it wasn't my fault... I know that too."

"Then why do you dwell on it so? Why do you let it drive you—"

"I do not, and IT does not."

"Really? The upstairs maid found this under your pillow this morning."

Neeran pulled a small leather-bound book from his jacket pocket and tossed it onto the bed. Kat glanced down at it, then looked away.

"The DragonWinter," Neeran said reading the cover of the book. "Diaries of the great dragon invasion... Kat, can you even COUNT how many times I have forbidden you to

read this book?"

"Why? It's history. It's the truth."

"It's ancient history."

"The Great Wars and The Turning are also ancient history ... more ancient by far than the... the Winter ... yet you insist I learn about those. The Winter was only a hundred years ago yet I am forbidden to learn about that. Why?."

"It's not for your eyes."

"Why?"

"Because I'm your father." Neeran picked up the book. "This book will be burned, and no more copies of it will be allowed in this house."

"Then I'll find a copy OUTSIDE the house and read it there."

"Kat—"

"Did you know that Gwithion is doubling the number of warriors in the Western Provinces? Why do you think he's doing that? We have no enemies there. Except the dragons, of course."

"That is none of your concern. You are a duchess, not a warrior."

"Not yet."

"Not ever." Neeran stood and straightened his clothes. "I shall be at the ball. The servants can tend to you. I shall see you in the morning. You are confined to your room. If I learn that you have disobeyed me your punishment will be severe." Neeran walked to the door, then paused before blowing out the lamp. He turned to back to Kat.

"Were you serious?" he said.

"About the reading the book?"

"No, about wanting to be a warrior."

"Yes. Were you serious about not letting me?"

"Yes."

Neeran extinguished the lamp, leaving Kat alone in the dark.

Chapter 2 Tools of the Trade

"This is our night," Bottone whispered. The tall thief leaned over the edge of the rooftop and studied the torch-lit street below. Just across from them was their target for the evening... Camden Hall. Getting past the guards at the main gate had been predictably easy, and now he and his partner perched motionless atop the stables like gargoyles waiting to spring to life.

"You say every night is *our night*," answered Tylar sarcastically.

"I mean it this time. You got the tools?"

"I couldn't possibly have lost 'em since the last time you asked."

"Let me see the scryer..." Without taking his eyes off of the street Bottone held out his hand and wiggled his nimble fingers expectantly. Tylar shrugged the leather sack off of his shoulder and undid the drawstring. He retrieved a small metal-rimmed lens about an inch and a half in diameter and handed it to Bottone.

"Are they gone yet?" he whispered.

"Shhh..." said Bottone. "Let me see... ahhh, there they go."

A large party of over-dressed aristocrats, accompanied by guards, attendants and lackeys of every sort, emerged from the front entrance and slowly made their way around to the courtyard where a large carriage waited.

"Let me see..."

"Shhh!" Bottone waved his hand behind him in annoyance.

The carriage pulled off, and the two remaining servants made their way back to the manse.

Bottone put the scryer lens up to his eye and held it in place with a peculiar wrinkling of his cheek and eyebrow. As he looked through the lens, the street and courtyard brightened to twice their previous brilliance. He twisted the lens slightly, and the image grew larger as he focused on the door to the manse.

The servants entered and the large iron-oak door swung closed. A second later, Bottone saw a flash of light.

Several bands of emerald energy pulsed around the doorway, sealing it tightly against unwanted guests.

"Fools," mumbled Bottone. He removed the scryer and tossed it over his shoulder. Tylar

deftly snatched it out of the air and, instead of placing it back into the sack, put the lens to his own eye. He wiggled up to the ledge beside Bottone and peered down.

"What do you see, lad?" said Bottone.

"Magic."

"What kind?"

"The bands... hard to break, but easy to pick."

"And?"

Tylar frowned and looked closer.

"I don't—"

"Around the doorway."

That was when Tylar noticed a thin line of glowing green outlining the door. It was so faint that he had missed it at first glance.

"Didn't see it did you?"

"No."

"That's what gets you caught boy. Always look twice. Then look twice again. The thin line is a trip-wire. We break that line and we'll be up to our necks in guards by the time we've pocketed our first jewel."

"So how are we going to get in? Is there a back way?"

"Back way? Have you even been paying attention to *anything* I've taught you? The back way is *always* trapped. They expect you to come in the back way, so they put their best wards on it. Not even *I* could get in the back way. These nobles think we're stupid... but we're not."

"Well, how are we getting in, then?"

"We're going in that door right down there. I can get around the magic. With the masters of the house gone to the Prince's party, the servants will all be sneaking away or turning in early. Half the guards will be drunk or asleep at their posts. The other half..."

"... will never even see us." finished Tylar.

"So what's our next course of action, boy?"

"We wait?"

"Exactly."

Two hours later, the pair of thieves were crouching outside the main door of Camden Hall.

"Gimme the blade..."

Tylar pulled a small, runed knife from his sack and handed it to Bottone. With the scryer once again settled against his eye, Bottone took the blade and began undoing the complex wards that sealed the door. Tylar peered over his arms, eyes wide with curiosity. Even though he couldn't see the wards without a scryer, the master thief's work was still amazing to watch.

Suddenly, Bottone stopped. "What are you doing, lad?"

"I'm watching you."

"Don't. You're too young to see this."

"Why?"

"Because... if you learn how to crack wards, you'll run off and start doing it for yourself. Then you'll get your fool self caught, and when the Clerics of Shrika interrogate you the first name you give up will be mine. Then I'll have to kill you."

"Oh."

"Now step back. Go watch the front guard shack while I do this."

Tylar sighed and quietly made his way along the hedgeline of the curving walkway that lead to the guard shack. About halfway there he took a small gray stone out of his pocket and placed it just inside his slightly pointed ear. He knelt down on one knee and waited. The stone vibrated softly, re-producing the faint, barely audible sounds all around him. He heard the insects shuffling in the grass on the far side of the courtyard. A guard snoring in the guard shack several feet in front of him. The whispered words of young lovers walking past the main gate.

Tylar smiled and focused on the couple. Their whispers were almost inaudible, but with a little concentration he could make out their words. They were looking for a place to be alone without the watchful eye of parents. Obviously, Camden Hall was not such a place, so they kept walking. Tylar strained to hear where they were going...

"YOU GONNA STOP EAVESDROPPING AND HELP ME CARRY THE LOOT."

Tylar winced and snatched the stone out of his ear. His head was ringing, the echo of Bottone's voice was like thunder. "aaahh!!"

"Shhh!" Bottone was right behind him. What previously sounded like maniacal shout, was really just a soft spoken voice amplified by the stone to ear-splitting levels.

"That wasn't funny!" whispered Tylar, who was yanking at his earlobe.

"Yes it was. Come on... door's open."

Tylar followed his mentor back to the main door, which was slightly ajar. Bottone pushed the door open and the pair stepped inside. The hallway was dim, although most of the rooms had bright light beaming out of them. The walls were decorated with ornate tapestries and paintings of rich, dead people. The carpet was thick and soft, Tylar reached down and ran his fingers across the pile.

"Carpet's thick." said Bottone. "That's good... we won't need the silencing rags. Did you hear any guards?"

"Yea ... but only in the guard shack ... he was still snoring."

"Good. If the guards and servants were awake, they'd be gossiping their heads off. Time to get to work.

Tylar pulled two empty sacks out of his bag and handed one to Bottone.

"We'll split up," said Bottone. "I'll go after the safe. You gather whatever you can. You know what to get..."

"Anything gold, silver, or bejeweled, but unbreakable and nothing larger than my hand."

"Good. Put the listening stone back in and throw me mine."

Tylar replaced the stone in his ear, then tossed a similar one to Bottone.

"Whispers only." said Bottone, who's amplified voice sounded like a shout in Tylar's ear.

Tylar nodded, and the two thieves split up. Tylar made his way from room to room. His own footsteps sounded like a horde of invading orcs, but he knew that no one beside Bottone could hear them. He quickly found the dining room, where all manner of bejeweled curios sat safely in their locked display cases. Tylar quickly picked the locks and pocketed everything that was smaller than his fist.

When he finished, his bag was half-full of stolen goods. This was good... because there was another entire floor just waiting for him. Tylar smiled in satisfaction. By tomorrow he and Bottone would be the first thieves to EVER successfully break into Camden Hall.

"..found the safe..." Bottone's voice buzzed in Tylar's right ear. "Wards. I'm cutting them now."

Tylar nodded without responding, and then waited. Bottone had taught him long ago to be cautious with wards, even if he wasn't dealing with them directly. If something went wrong and Bottone set off an alarm, Tylar had to be ready to move instantly.

"...got it..." said Bottone.

Tylar breathed a sigh of relief.

"...stop breathing so damned loud..."

"...sorry..." said Tylar.

The young boy started up the stairs to where the masters of the house slept. The carpet there was even thicker and more luxurious than that on the first level. Tylar found the master bedroom, which he quickly entered. He closed the door behind him and started rifling through the belongings, taking the jewelry and the few coins he found, but leaving everything else. With that completed he made his way quickly to a bookshelf against the far wall. Tylar knew that Bottone would chastise him for taking time on something that couldn't be sold, but he didn't care. He had learned to read at the foot of his mother, who had told him that knowledge would make him rich one day. At the time, Tylar had dismissed her words as the musings of a poor old woman. Since then however, he'd noticed that every house he and Bottone had broken into had books in it... and the more books they had, the more riches they had to steal. Tylar wanted to know what the rich people read that made them ... well ... rich. The first book he grabbed was *old*. The cover was missing, and the title page was so worn that only two letters were legible – “ar”.

‘I wonder what this thing is’ He thought as he began leafing through the pages. The book was obviously some form of journal or diary about a war. Tylar recognized the language, but only half the words made sense. The sentences were long and convoluted, and there were some sections that looked like poetry. It wasn't like anything he'd ever read before. He was so engrossed in it that he realized he hadn't even heard Bottone moving around. Tylar decided he would keep this one no matter what Bottone said. He put the book in his bag and was just about to exit when he heard something.

Footsteps.

Kat was unsure of what woke her up. A quick look out her window said that it was well into the night, and her ears told her that her father had left for the party. She smiled... her small tantrum had gotten her out of yet another boring royal event. ‘It just keeps getting easier and easier,’ she thought to herself happily.

She was still considering getting out of bed when she heard it -- the sound of a closing door. Alarm bells went off in her head. Instinctively she knew it was late enough that the remaining servants would be sleeping so the sound of a door closing was very out of place.

‘Some fool is trying to burglarize my home,’ She thought angrily, remembering that an attempt was made only a few months ago. ‘THIEVES!’

Wearing only the sheer bed-gown she had gone to bed with, she crept out of her bedroom, through her sitting room where she grabbed her bow before continuing out into the main hall. As she made her way down the hallway, she stopped for a short moment to listen at the doors.

Tylar froze and listened intently. He heard the soft shuffle of Bottone's cautious footsteps on the floor below him. But there was another sound... a separate set of footsteps.

"...don't move..." whispered Tylar. Bottone's footsteps vanished, and Tylar knew that, somewhere downstairs, his mentor was standing absolutely still.

The remaining sounds were close, but light and very muffled. They sounded a lot like his own cautious footsteps, but of course Tylar wasn't moving. This could only mean that whoever it was, was trying to be as quiet as the thieves.

"...trouble..." whispered Tylar. "...somebody knows we're here."

"...I can't hear them..." replied Bottone.

"...they're up here with me. The carpet's softer..."

Tylar listened, trying to get a fix on the person.

Door creak... silence... footsteps... door creak... silence ...footsteps.... door creak... silence... footsteps... door creak... silence...

"Room-to-room search," said Tylar. "One person. And getting closer."

Tylar cast around, looking for a place to hide.

"I hear them now," said Bottone "let's go, boy..."

"...I-I can't... they might see me."

"So let them... listen at the footfalls, boy... they sound like yours..."

"Yeah, but..."

They sounded like his. Small and light. No boots. Either a servant..."

"It's got to be a girl or a child," said Bottone after hearing them again. A servant would have raised an alarm by now and neither a girl nor a child is any match for that speed of yours. Forget about stealth... just run for the door and make for the escape route." said Bottone.

Tylar nodded to himself and crept towards the bedroom door. He remembered the layout of the house and knew that once he reached the stairs he had a straight shot to the front door. He also knew from the sudden burst of noise below him that Bottone was headed that direction right now.

Tylar flung the bedroom door open and ran down the hall. His bag of purloined goods rattled noisily on his shoulder, sounding like an earthquake to his amplified hearing. As he approached the stairs, he saw the girl. About his age, tall, and dressed in a gown that was so sheer she may as well have not been wearing anything at all – and not looking the least bit frightened. She was further down the hallway... and when she saw the thief she immediately started to run towards him.

It was a race to see who would reach the staircase first. Tylar had a running headstart, plus he wasn't as far down the hall as the girl. The girl however, was fast. Very fast, possibly as fast as he – when not weighted down with a bag of stolen property. In the end, Tylar's advantages won out over her raw speed. As he spun on his toes and launched himself down the stairs, Tylar saw the girl had something in her hand. He was halfway down the stairs when he realized that the object was a bow.

Tylar screamed and suddenly hurled himself over the railing just as something whizzed past his head and embedded itself in the far wall. He landed on his feet, the impact knocking the silencing stone out of his ear, and ran for the door, which was straight ahead. Behind him, he could hear the servants, awakened by his screaming flight, as they emerged from their quarters. Ahead, he saw Bottone emerge from the living room... and at the same time a large woman wielding a huge iron skillet burst into the hallway. At first, Tylar thought Bottone was going to run past the woman or push her out of the way. Instead, he paused just long enough to open her throat with a slash of his blade.

"NO!" Cried Tylar.

He'd seen people die before. He'd seen people *killed* before, but never by Bottone. They were thieves, and thieves didn't kill. It wasn't supposed to happen.

Bottone was unfazed by his act. He didn't even look back as he continued running for the front door.

Suddenly, Tylar remembered the girl. She had a clear shot at both of them... and there was little doubt who she would be aiming at now.

"BOW!" Tylar screamed. He saw Bottone stop and wince, and knew that his warning had probably deafened him in the ear that held the stone. Tylar shot past the dead woman, rapidly gaining on his mentor. "RUN!"

The arrow just...appeared... in the center of Bottone's back. In one instant, the master thief went from a run to a stumbling fall.

"BOTTONE!"

Bottone hit the ground at the doorway, dropping his sack of loot. His mouth quivered... trying form words but failing as death claimed him. Fear slammed into Tylar and poured energy into his limbs.

Tylar ran as fast as he could. He sprinted out of the door, hooked left, then hooked left again at the corner of the house. From there it was a straight shot to the wall. He hit the main wall, the section with the ladder he and Bottone had placed much earlier, and scaled it easily. His eyes still holding the image of Bottone's death, but his mind couldn't spare the energy to mourn. He was trying to put as much distance between him and Camden Hall as he could. He had to get away. Far away. He ran, not knowing how far or how fast he was going. Could he slow down? Could anyone still be back there? Surely no one had kept up with him all this way. Suddenly, a single frantic thought shoved its way to the front of Tylar's mind...

Remember how fast the girl was in the hallway.

That was when pain shot through his shoulder. A single arrow impaled him from behind; the bloody point was protruding from his flesh. Tylar stumbled, but miraculously did not fall. Knowing the loot was slowing him down; he dropped the bag of stolen goods, but managed to keep hold of the satchel containing Bottone's tools. He kept running, stumbling every few steps... His vision blurred. He rounded another corner and saw a building up ahead. A temple? He couldn't tell. He had only taken five steps toward it when world vanished from beneath his feet and everything went dark...

Tylar dreamed that he was drowning. Not in water, but in darkness and pain. He flailed and kicked, trying to fight his way to the surface, but he sank deeper with every effort. He opened his mouth to scream, but the filth rushed into his lungs. He was dying... yet it was not a peaceful, numbing death. His whole body throbbed with agony. His mind reeled, reaching out for something...anything that could save him.

'HELP ME!' But his mental cries were lost in the current of black pain. Then, everything went still. The pain was still there, but it was...frozen, somehow. He could not move, or breathe, or even think. All he could do was listen...

OBEY

The voice was not a voice at all, it was more like a...force inside his mind. Something deep and primal. Powerful. Tylar tried to reply, to cry out, but could do neither.

YOU ARE CALLED *OBEY*

Suddenly, Tylar felt himself rising. No...flying! The dark waters of pain cleared and became like crystal. Tylar shot to the surface... and beyond...

"UNNGGH!" Tylar opened his eyes sat up. He was in a small room filled with beds, all of which were empty except for his. Two large white sheets were hung as walls, which gave the impression that this 'room' was just a corner of a much larger space. There were voices on the other side of the sheets... a continuous murmur, as if a large crowd had been assembled.

"You are awake," said a voice. Tylar looked at the brown-robed cleric that was sitting in a chair at the foot of his bed. The man wore a silver icon around his neck, and had a large un-jeweled ring on the third finger of his left hand. He had no other adornments, and the shape of his body was lost in the thick, concealing robe.

"Who—"

"Onir." the cleric bowed his head slightly. "You are in the Temple of Shilathi, at the time of the Gathering. You were found outside two nights ago, and have been here ever since. We saw to your wounds and allowed you to rest."

Tylar shrugged his injured shoulder, bracing himself for the pain. Only there was none. His shoulder had been completely healed, without the slightest bit of soreness.

"You healed me?"

"Oh no! I was the one that found you, but the healing was done by another."

"I'm sorry," Tylar said, sure he knew where this was going. "But I cannot pay you. I am but a poor orphan."

"Really?" Onir reached down beside him and lifted a satchel. It was Tylar's ... or Bottone's. The cleric dumped the contents out onto the bed, where they tumbled over Tylar's outstretched legs.

"Silencing rags. Lockpicks. Mage-mirrors. A few scraps of numb-cloth..."

"They're—"

"Not yours? Just found them, did you?"

"No. I..."

"Where are your parents, boy?"

"Dead."

Onir nodded, as if he were judging the truth of Tylar's words.

"I still cannot pay you," said the young thief.

"Money is not necessary. The help of the gods is free to all... the temple merely charges a pittance to those who can afford it. Right now, you have more important matters to consider."

"Are you going to turn me in?"

"For what? Have you done something?"

Tylar glanced at the satchel, and the thief's tools scattered about on his bed.

"The Church will track these items back to the *mage* that created them." Onir spat the word 'mage' as if it were a rancid piece of beef. "No one need know where we found them."

"Why," asked Tylar. His suspicions aroused.

"At any OTHER time, we would be bound by our oaths to turn you in. But this is the Gathering."

"I don't understand."

Onir smiled. "Once a year, those who would devote their lives to the Gods... those who have heard the call, will gather in the temple of Shilathi."

"...Call..." repeated Tylar.

"People from all stations in life... Male and female. Rich and poor. Noble and thief... at the time of the Gathering they will all come. Some will be drawn by their own conscience; others will be driven here by fate. It is all the will of the Gods... and we have learned that it is best not to ask too many questions during that time."

"I see."

"Byzantan himself is on the other side of these curtains. He greets the Gathered, and will travel with them to the Temple of the Divining."

Tylar nodded.

"You don't know what I'm talking about do you," Onir asked with a smile. "Did your parents not teach you?"

"Not that."

"The Divining shows us the way. We know we have been called, but we do not know to which of the gods we are called. When I was just a boy of just fourteen, I heard the Call while standing in a field assembling a scarecrow for my father. I was struck dumb, and then I heard this voice... more like a feeling than a voice really. It told me that I was called, and when I awoke it was dark. I had been missing for three days and my parents were dismayed to say the least. I could have said nothing of my experience in the field and continued my life as a farmer, but I knew that the Gods had selected me. I took leave of my family and journeyed here for the Gathering. Then I traveled to the Temple of the Calling, where I learned that it was Shilathi's voice that I had felt in the field. Since that day, I have devoted every fiber of my being to the Goddess."

"Good for you." said Tylar.

"And right now, the Called are gathered here. Tell me, boy... what brought you to this temple?"

"I thought you didn't ask questions?"

"True. But... did you hear the voice of the Gods? Answer truthfully."

"What if I did?"

"Then you are Called. Nothing more, nothing less."

"And if not."

"Then you are not Called. Either way, what happens next is up to you."

"Is it? You think I'm—You want me to join the Clericy?"

"It is not about what I want. My wants are insignificant compared to the will of the Gods."

"But what about what I want?"

"As I said, what happens next is up to you. Anyone can ignore the Call and continue onward... wandering blindly in that forest of confusion that is their life. Perhaps they will find happiness. Perhaps not. But to obey the Call and devote yourself to the Gods is bliss itself!"

"So... Called or not... I can leave? And owe you nothing?"

"Correct. You can leave this temple and walk back out into the world to resume whatever life you had before."

"Well ... I think I—"

"But I might add that Camden Hall is a very bad place from which to be caught stealing."

"What!"

Onir shrugged... and smiled. He knew.

"Are they looking for me?"

Onir only shrugged again.

"So, boy... tell me the truth. Why are you here... Were you Called?"

"I... heard something. A Voice, like you said. But I don't know—"

"You know."

"I..."

The vivid memories flooded back... The sea of pain. The voice that wasn't a voice.

"I heard a voice and it said I was called. But I was hurt and bleeding—"

"I knew it!" Onir leapt from his chair and Tylar honestly thought that the aged cleric was about to start dancing.

"But what about Camden Hall," asked Tylar feeling as if he were being tricked.

"All that is behind you now."

"What if the Arch-Cleric finds out that I was a—"

"Dear boy," said Onir silencing him, "Who do you think it was that healed you?"