

The
Coming
of
Three

by
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and
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Chapter 1 Nightmare

They day was cool and bright... perfect for the exertions of both work and play. The sounds of childrens' games and laughter filled every corner of the Theria – except one.

The twang of a bowstring broke the silence of the warrior's practice yard. The arrow struck dead center of the target's bull's eye... making 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 eyes.

"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.

She released the bowstring and again the arrow hissed through the air – to sink into the red and white 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 ... 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 balls 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 brother with one. I want you to put that thing away, get yourself into some proper clothes. 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!”

Kat threw down the bow, slung the quiver off her shoulders and tossed it down beside the weapon.

"You never let me do what I want!" She spat before running 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 matters, but women are on occasion warriors. 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--"

“An asset? You speak of my child as nothing more than common footsoldier?”

Gwithion stiffened.

“Apologies, friend,” said Neeran. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“You need not explain yourself, sir. But the girl is neither common nor a child. As for whether she is a soldier or not... The kingdom still has its enemies, and the people need to know that magic is not the ONLY force we can bring to bear against what threatens

them. A steady hand, a keen eye, and a brave heart have won more battles than spells and prayers combined. 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 by the clouds. An unfelt wind blew unfurled them across the sky like long white banners.

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...

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 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," 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 Dragon Winter," Neeran said reading the cover of the book. "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 is fanciful nonsense based on an unfortunate bit of history. 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? These eyes have already seen-"

"More than THIS book will ever tell you. You will speak no more of it."

"But WHY!?"

"Because I'm your father." Neeran picked up the book. "This 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.

"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. 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. "I'm cutting the wards 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.

'Someone is here. In 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....

"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 woman 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. We found you outside two nights ago, and you've 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.

"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. Some Clerics could do that, but Tylar didn't know if this was one of them. Either way, he was safe... his words had been true.

"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?"

"They're dead," Tylar said again. It was all the explanation he would give.

"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 the confusion that is their life. Perhaps they will find happiness. Perhaps not. Usually 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?"

" 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?"

Chapter 3 Improper Dress

After losing her quarry, Katrina trudged back to Camden Hall where word had already traveled to the Prince's party. Gwithon and his men greeted Kat at the main gate.

"Katrina, what you are doing here dressed that way," Challenged Gwithon

"Two people tried to rob MY HOME and they killed KARLA! I got one of them but the other got away ... not with anything, but he did get away. He was almost to the Temple of Shilathi when he vanished. He must have ducked into the shadows at the church when... I don't know. He was fast, I got him, made him drop my belongings. At least the little *rat* didn't get to keep anything," she held up the bag containing the stolen goods.

"You ran out of your home dressed like that?"

"THEY WERE BURGLARIZING MY HOME! AND THEY KILLED KARLA! I WOULDN'T HAVE CARED IF I WAS NAKED AS A BIRD!"

Her words brought more than a few snickers from the assembled guards that were gawking openly at her. As sheer as her gown was she may very well have been wearing nothing.

That was when her father arrived. He stood before Kat with his mouth hanging open. Then the yelling started.

"Katrina by the gods! What are you doing out here like that!" He yanked a cloak from one of the guards and threw it around her shoulders.

"Two men tried to rob our home" she said taking a deep breath so that she would speak calmly as she adjusted the cloak. "One of them is laying dead at the front door – not far from where he killed Karla. The other escaped, but not with any of our belongings. See?" Kat showed him the bag.

"I don't care about a sack full of trinkets! You're my only daughter and you went charging out of the hall half naked to chase some criminal that was running away! What in the name of the Nine Gods possessed you to do that!?"

"I wasn't going to allow anyone to get away with murder in our HOME!"

"YOU SHOULD HAVE! LOOK AT YOU! YOU'RE NAKED!"

"I DON'T CARE!!!"

"May I interject." said Gwithon. "Kat was protecting herself and the manse-"

"They were running AWAY!"

"Being caught once has never deterred any thief. They may have returned... and they certainly would have gone on to commit more crimes elsewhere. Kat has done a service to the kingdom... Now there is one less thief... one less murderer in the realm. Is that such a bad thing? Is it not exactly what you or I would have done?"

"But she is a young girl! My daughter! She should not be placing herself at risk in such a way! And now I arrive to find her NAKED in front of my guards – all of which are staring at her like a wolf pack eyeing a sheep!"

"You are acting like the guards have never seen a woman before," yelled Kat. "Would you have liked me to GET DRESSED before defending my house from thieves and murderers!? That's absurd! And why are we talking about CLOTHING when our cook and another man are both DEAD and laying at our front door!"

"Katrina—"

"No, father! This is exactly the kind of petty NONSENSE that I want NO PART OF!! THIS is why I don't go to the Prince's ridiculous parties! And THIS is why I am going to be a warrior... so I can do something SIGNIFICANT instead of standing around worrying about... about CLOTHES while BODIES are cooling in the foyer!"

"Katrina, this is not about clothes! And you will NOT—"

"Well STOP me, then! Stop me while you still CAN, because the day is coming when you will NOT be able to!"

Kat stormed off towards the house. Neeran started after her, but Gwithion grabbed his arm and held him back. "Let her go, old friend," Gwithion said calmly.

Neeran yanked his arm out of his friend's grasp. "This is nonsense Gwithion and I don't care WHAT you say! a girl has no place—"

"That *woman* defended your house in your absence. I would be happy to have her patrolling any road or border in the kingdom."

"Or hunting dragons in the Provinces, eh Gwithion? Let's not forget about THAT little function of the warriors. That's what this is all about isn't it. You want a few more bodies in the provinces. One more body? My daughter's!?"

"I notice that YOU are the one who brought it up just now... with not a single mention of it from Kat."

"She wants to go off and fight dragons, we ALL know that. Everyone in the HOUSE knows it."

"And if that is the will of the gods, will you stand in her way?"

"The gods? Why are you trying to throw the gods into this, Gwithion, you're not a religious man?"

"Ahh, but you are. Or you were, once. And, like all warriors, I use whatever tools I feel are necessary to achieve my objective."

"Which is to get my daughter killed, apparently."

"No. I care for Katrina as if she were my own. I want her to live... but there is more to living than the simple drawing of breath. Life is in the spirit... and you kill her spirit every time you stand in the way of what she drives and works for so hard. You kill her spirit and you break her heart. But the matter is moot, anyway... in two years she will go her own way without your blessing and then—"

"And then she'll hate me," Neeran finishing the sentence. "She'll hate me and I'll have lost her forever."

"No... she loves you too much for that. But she will resent you for stopping her. I must return to the party. I'll explain your sudden absence to the Prince. I'm sure he'll understand."

Gwithion turned, and accompanied by his own personal guard, walked off into the night.

With clenched teeth and downcast eyes, Neeran returned to Camden hall.

"I can really hate that man at times," he mumbled. "Especially when he's right."

Chapter 4 Dancing Stones

Desson made his way through the crowd as inconspicuously as possible, squeezing his muscular frame between the gawking adults while trying not to knock over any of the children. Many had gathered to watch the spectacle. His father had given him the afternoon off, but by that time at least two hundred people stood in the courtyard to watch the mages repair the Temple of Sol. Since Torendale such a small town situated in the center of the kingdom, mages were rarely seen, and the Temple of Sol was the only church.

Even though Desson was already taller than almost everyone there, he still couldn't see a thing at the rear of the crowd. Desson worked his way closer to the front, figuring that just because he had to work this morning didn't mean he had to miss all of the excitement. Besides, the mages had been working since dawn, so everyone else had already had plenty of time to watch.

The temple had been severely damaged several weeks ago in a storm, and the Clerics had chosen to hire the mages to come and assist with the rebuilding. This in itself was a once-in-a-lifetime event, since it was well-known that the Magistry and the Clerics could not stand one another. Except for the Arch-Clerics and the Council of Nine, the Clerics and Mages usually couldn't stand within shouting distance of each other unless a warrior was present to browbeat them into cooperating.

Usually it ended with just words... but sometimes the Clerics pushed the mages too far, and vice-versa. Desson figured that the majority of the adults in the crowd were here to see just such an exchange. The younger ones just wanted to see the mages perform their craft. Desson's expectations were somewhere in between.

For now, everything was running smoothly. The eight mages, dressed in the plain dark blue robes of the Magistry, had arrived just after dawn, and had been hard at work for the better part of the morning. Six of them, who couldn't have been much older than twenty five, stood between the crowded courtyard and the demolished west wall of the temple. At their direction, huge blocks rose from the carefully stacked piles and floated high up into the air, while streams of mortar danced and flowed nearby, depositing globs wherever necessary. The mortar smoothed itself out and waited the laying of the next stone. Four of the students were working exclusively on the west wall of the temple, which was almost complete. Two more were engaged in the more precise work of repairing the dome. Their work was slower... their accuracy had to be exact, or the whole structure would come tumbling down by nightfall.

Nearby, a gaunt, gray-haired mage was acting as supervisor. He was doing what supervisors did best... pacing back and forth, barking orders and reprimands. The eighth mage was a tall, dark-haired youth. He was younger than the builders, in fact, Desson guessed he was only a year or less older than he, yet he appeared to hold a superior rank. He must have been a low or mid-level apprentice, and the others were just advanced novices. The apprentice's job was to refer to the complex schematics and assist the

supervisor in keeping a close eye on the workers. Occasionally he would join the builders and lend a bit of assistance: straightening a mislaid block with a wave of his hand, or stepping in while one of the young ones took a well-deserved break. Watching him work was fascinating. The mage would push up the sleeves of his robe and reach forward to grab one of the huge blocks... not with his hands, but with the magic that flowed through them. He'd place one and then deposit the mortar himself, without having one of the other mages to do it. Apparently that was the difference between him and the builders... though he was a student just as they were, he had advanced to the point where he could do several things at once. Like laying stones and spreading mortar simultaneously, while the others had to work in pairs in order to get anything done. Still, after just a few moments of work, the front of the apprentice's robe would be soaked with sweat, and he would step back to do something less strenuous.

Even though Desson knew absolutely nothing of magic, he could see that the work was exhausting. He certainly knew hard work when he saw it. All of the mages, except the supervisor of course, were as weary as they would have been had they been using muscle instead of magic.. They consumed massive amounts of water, and their breaks got longer and longer as the afternoon wore on ... which meant the apprentice was helping out for longer periods of time. Desson felt for them. Magic or not, he knew what hard work was. Unfortunately, at their current pace it would take them the rest of the afternoon to finish the rebuilding. Yet, this was still a vast improvement over the several weeks it would have taken to do it by hand. Magic definitely had its advantages.

The High Priest of the temple thought differently.

Efften stood a small distance away, looking disgusted at the entire process. The large man fingered the gold icon around his neck as he sighed, scowled, and grumbled at anyone who happened to get within earshot.

Efften was a good priest (as priest's go), and he ran a clean, efficient temple. Unfortunately he was bull-headed and opinionated, even for a Cleric. And, like most Cleric's, Efften could not stand mages. It was certainly not his idea to involve the Magistry, but word about town was that the presence of mages was more about teaching Efften a lesson about pride than about rebuilding the temple quickly. That certainly explained the pained expression on Efften's face.

The afternoon wore on and the wall was soon completed. The younger students all began to concentrate their efforts on the dome, while the apprentice helped the wall... somehow. Meanwhile, the supervisor yawned, checked the schematics, and occasionally shot nasty looks at Efften. The looks were returned in kind, and both men grumbled under their breaths. Suddenly, a gasp went through the crowd. One of the novices yelled out, and then all of them scattered like startled flies...

Someone had dropped one of the large stone blocks.

The huge rock fell toward the mages. Desson braced himself, for the ground would surely shake when the block hit. He then noticed that one of the novices had slipped and

fallen... he was grabbing his ankle. Desson couldn't tell for sure, but it seemed as if the deadly stone was headed right for the youth.

Alerted by the gasps, the apprentice spun around and pointed at the descending stone. His eyes narrowed... and the block halted in mid air, less than a yard above the injured mage's head. With a slow movement of his arm he swung the block over to one side and gently lowered it to the ground. He then walked over to the youth, which was still rubbing his ankle.

"WHO dropped that damned STONE!" The supervisor stormed up to the novices and immediately began pointing and screaming. "Didn't I teach you boys BETTER than that?!? You've got to KEEP FOCUS, DAMMIT! FOCUS!!! We've got HUNDREDS of PEOPLE out here; somebody could have been KILLED!! I ought to take EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU back to the Tower RIGHT NOW..."

The lecture quickly degenerated into oaths and curses.

Off to one side, Efften's frown deepened. The High Priest walked over and stood beside the supervisor with his hands on his oversized hips. He tapped his foot expectantly, but the supervisor ignored him and continued his scathing rebuke.

"If you DON'T mind," interrupted Efften. "Would you please not use those words *or that tone* on Holy Ground."

"WHAT!?" the supervisor turned, saw that it was Efften, and calmed down slightly. Very slightly. "I'll use whatever tone and words I please, wherever I please." he replied. "Now step back out of the way."

"But you've got an injured boy over there. I can help." The offer, though spoken through clenched teeth, was a genuine. He was trying very hard to learn his 'lesson.'

"Nonsense." The supervisor yelled to the apprentice: "Thelonious!"

Thelonious, the dark-haired apprentice, was helping the wounded novice to his feet. He looked up when he heard his name.

"Just a sprained ankle, sir. He twisted it."

"See. Sprained ankle. Nothing you need concern yourself with. Now go away... go say some prayers or something."

"Please, allow me." Efften brushed past the supervisor, who quickly turned and clamped a bony hand onto the priest's meaty shoulder.

"I don't think so."

Efften stopped. His eyes grew narrow, but the priest took a deep breath and tried to speak calmly.

"I was just trying offer the help of the gods. I can heal the boy's ankle and you can all get back to work."

"And what god would that be? The god of rabbit-eggs?"

"Excuse me?" The look of enraged shock on Efften's face was apparent to all.

"I'll not have you touching my charges. Some of your ignorance might rub off on them, and they're enough trouble to deal with already."

"*Ignorance!* Now, see here sir!"

"The name is Amnemon. Third Level Master and Instructor. These boys belong to me... and I'll not have you corrupting them with your foolishness!"

"Well perhaps if you'd teach them a little BETTER then one of your charges wouldn't have a broken leg right now!"

"...Sprained ankle..." corrected Thelonious.

"It is by the grace of the gods that the boy isn't DEAD!"

"GODS!?! " howled Amnemon. "THELONIOUS caught that stone! Your so called gods had nothing to do with it!"

"But it was the will of... oh, never mind. I wouldn't expect a MAGE to know the slightest thing about the workings of the gods."

"With Good Reason! The gods DON'T EXIST!"

"I will NOT have blasphemy of that sort on the grounds of the temple! This is Holy Ground and it *belongs* to the gods."

"Then why are we here!?! Why don't the gods fix their OWN DAMNED temple! Or better yet... why'd they tear it down in the FIRST PLACE, eh? Answer me that!!"

"I owe you NO such explanations!"

"Because you don't KNOW!"

"The gods—"

"DON'T EXIST! You people steal a few spells from the Magistracy centuries ago, call them miracles, and then think that gives you the right to start slinging ignorance at everyone from here to the southlands!"

"SACRILEGE!!!"

"DAMN RIGHT!"

"There were miracles WELL BEFORE there was a Magistry to steal them from! Explain that! Clerics, and the Gordega before them, have called on the power of the gods since the dawn of time, when there WERE NO MAGES!"

"Bah! The power of your imaginary gods is just a diluted, bastardized version of what every novice mage learns in his FIRST YEAR!"

"How DARE you compare yourself to the gods! And on Holy Ground!"

"Compare myself to the gods, why would I do that? That would be like comparing myself to a hen's tooth! It's all made up fantasy. The Council knows it. The Warriors know it -- or at least the smart ones do. The Clerics are walking around casting common spells, calling them miracles, and collecting fees on behalf of deities that don't exist!"

"Common Spells!?!"

"Anything you can do, the mages can do faster, more efficiently, and without all that ridiculous shouting and praying."

"Then DO it. Repair the temple and get OFF of the gods' property!"

"Gladly. Boys, get back to work!"

"NOW! You dare liken your power to the gods... well then I want you to repair it right NOW! Instantly! If you're so powerful, snap your fingers and make it so!"

Amnemon glared at Efften for a moment, and then nodded. When he spoke again, the shouts were gone... which somehow made him seem even angrier.

"All right, if you really want me to embarrass you and your gods, I'll repair the temple. Right now. Apprentice.."

"Yes, sir?"

"Teamed Draw and Focus, just like I taught you. You will be the Focus. I'll show this pompous ass that even an APPRENTICE can best his so-called *gods*."

"But sir, I-"

"Just DO it. Take position... the rest of you move out of the damned way!"

The novices scattered, and Amnemon walked to grassy area just outside the perimeter of the courtyard. Thelonious pushed up his sleeves once more and stood several yards in front of him, facing the dome. Desson noticed the straight line formed by the Master, the Apprentice, and the temple.

"Watch this..." Desson heard someone mumble behind him. "Old Efften's going to get his wish!"

Thelonious looked over his shoulder at Amnemon. The supervisor nodded, and then the apprentice focused his eyes on the dome in front of him.

Amnemon took a deep breath and began slowly raising his arms straight out to either side. When they were at shoulder level, he bent his elbows and began bringing them inward. The movement was agonizingly slow...

"What's he doing?" said someone in the crowd.

"I don't know," replied another.

The supervisor was now extending his arms straight out in front of him, palms facing outward towards Thelonious' back. The apprentice, suddenly stiffened as if he had been bitten. His eyes glowed and took on a distant look as he focused on the scene before him. Thelonious took a few shallow breaths then reached forward and began assembling the dome.

About a dozen stone blocks launched themselves into the air simultaneously and were quickly joined by twirling arcs of mortar that arced up from the troughs and spread themselves evenly just instants before each block landed. More and more stones rose and placed themselves at Thelonious's gestured commands. The apprentice was soon juggling twenty... thirty... forty massive stones at one time, doing the work of fifty of the novice builders.

Desson gasped as he and the rest of the crowd looked up in awe. Thelonious' arms waved about, drawing delicate arcs in the air. Each block ended its in perfect position, with not a drop of mortar wasted.

Desson was one of the few onlookers to notice the true complexity of what was going on. The apprentice was the Focus, he gave the magic its direction. Amnemon, who was standing far behind with his arms stretched forward towards Thelonious's back, was merely the source of that magic. The supposedly empty air between the men rippled and shimmered, like the heat emerging from an open kiln. Desson could almost see the eddy currents stirring as the huge amount of energy collected by Amnemon flowed continuously to Thelonious. Desson wondered what would happen if someone walked between the two men.

The work continued for a half hour before the dome was completed. Thelonious ceased his spellweaving; Amnemon dropped his arms. Both men breathed heavily as sweat rolled down their faces. For a few moments, neither man spoke. It didn't take long for Amnemon to catch his breath, however.

"Novices, attend! We... are done." He turned to red-faced priest. "You can clean up the supplies yourself! Oh, and if your GODS ever need any more help... you know were to find us."

Efften's red hue deepened even further. He stuttered a few syllables, but ended up saying nothing.

Desson wanted to clap, but decided against it. Instead, he watched the mages as they gathered in a rigid line and walked away. The supervisor was in front, with the novices lined up behind him like ducklings. The last to leave was the very tired apprentice, who was supporting the novice with the sprained ankle. When they were gone, the crowd began to disperse.

Desson was a little disappointed at the brevity of his afternoon entertainment, but he was still marveling at what he had seen. Dozens of huge stone blocks flowing through the air. Blistering amounts of power passing harmlessly from one mage to the next. And, of course, bullheaded Efften left speechless. He wondered what it felt like to be a mage... to command that much power with just a wave of a hand.

'Oh, well' Desson thought. 'I'll never know. Time to get back to work.'

The hot day had given way to a cool night, for which Desson was grateful. As he had expected, his father had made him work extra hard to make up for having the afternoon off. He was on his way home, leaving his father to finish shutting down the works, when he saw a man walking towards him.

As the stranger approached, Desson recognized him. It was the apprentice mage, Thelonious. Since the events at the temple, the young mage had changed out of the dark blue working robe and now wore a black cloak and a rather feminine-looking set of black gloves.

"Good evening," said Desson as they approached one another.

The apprentice stopped and scrutinized Desson for a moment.

"I know you..." he said. "The temple this afternoon ... correct?"

"I was there for the end... although I don't recall you ever looking my direction."

"Mages learn to see all kinds of things without having to look for them," Thelonious answered cryptically.

"Well then, you have a good memory."

"Rather poor, actually. It seems I've already forgotten to introduce myself—"

"Thelonious. Apprentice mage. My name is Desson."

The two shook hands and Desson noted that Thelonious's grip was weak... not a hand accustomed to labor.

"You caught my name at the temple? Those ears of yours serve you well."

Desson ran his fingers through his hair, feeling the edge of his left ear. Desson's ears were big and slightly pointed ... a trait that, according to popular sentiment, made him ugly. He kept his dark hair combed over them most of the time, but he must have absently swept his hair back while working in the smithy.

"What brings you back to town so late?"

"Ahh..." Thelonoious smiled. "It seems we left in such a hurry that Annemon forgot to collect the fee from Efften."

"So he sent you?"

"Good thing, too. If he had come himself then we'd be right back out here in the morning repairing that temple again. Not to mention the fact that I wouldn't get the chance to have a break from him."

Desson chuckled.

"Do you enjoy riddles, Desson?" said Thelonious.

"I... suppose..." Desson frowned cautiously. "Why?"

"Answer me this: If 7 minstrels sing 7 songs in 2 turns of an hour glass, how many minstrels would it take to sing 13 songs of the same length in the same amount of time?"

Desson laughed when he heard the odd question. It was unique... he certainly hadn't heard it before. But it was far too easy to be a challenge. Was this how mages amused themselves? He decided he would play along. "Well sir, I believe that you would need 13 minstrels. 7 minstrels for 7 songs so 13 minstrels to sing 13 in the same amount of time."

The apprentice mage looked at Desson intensely, as if studying him. "You've heard that one before?"

"No," Desson answered. "But I've heard better. Perhaps--"

"Answer this one then: A man on a horse and has been journeying for days with no water. He rides into a town and hitches his steed at the nearest inn. The man then walks in, obtains a pale of water for the horse only when he walks back out of the inn he pours the water on the ground then storms back into the inn. Assuming this man is perfectly sane, why would he do such a thing?"

Desson thought for a moment when it hit him. "The horse had been stolen."

"Again you are correct! Another?"

"You do enjoy your riddles," Desson chuckled. "I've got a few you can take back--"

"A woman had two sons who were born on the same hour of the same day of the same year. But they are not twins. How could this be so?"

Desson thought for a moment...

"They were a set of three!" he replied.

At his answer, the young mage beamed. "You are absolutely correct!"

Desson just shook his head and wondered when the apprentice would get to the point... if there was one. It appeared that there wasn't, for Thelonious chose that moment to change the subject.

"I feel I should apologize for Amnemon's behavior at the temple, but then in all fairness I'd have to do the same for Efftin, and I have no right to do that. Clerics certainly are a pain... wouldn't you agree?"

Desson shrugged.

"We don't follow... at least not..." In the midst of choosing careful words, Desson decided to not choose any. This man was a stranger, after all.

"Not a man of the gods, I see."

"No."

"Then you have no opinion?"

"You may as well ask me my opinion of... what was it that Amnemon said ... Rabbit Eggs ... Or Chicken Teeth."

Thelonious laughed. "Oh, Amnemon would LIKE you! Sharp AND a sense of humor!"

"Give him my regards then... if he noticed me. "

"Oh, he did. Mind if I ask another question?"

"Only if this riddle is better than the others."

"Not a riddle this time. But first you must show me the way to your parents."

"Why?"

"Because I never said the questionw as for YOU, now did I?"

"Ahh, more games."

"Not really. But you do have to be careful about what you assume." Thelonious bowed. "Lead the way."

Desson shrugged, and lead the short distance to the smithy. His father was still busy cleaning the kiln when they walked in.

"What can I do for you sir?" Desson's father said as he looked up. "Come to place an order for a sword or maybe a sturdy axe..." The look on his father's face showed that he was truly taking in the thin form of the mage for the first time. "Or mayhap you are after a good quality dagger? Something light and balanced?"

"Actually, I would like to talk to you about your son, here." Thelonious. The mage's smile arrested the look of concern before it fully settled onto the old smith's face.

"I am Thelonious Firehand of the Magistry."

"Firehand? Not one of THE Firehand's surely?"

"I am from the more enlightened branch of the family, the original branch actually, ... but yes I am one of THE Firehand's as you put it."

Desson flashed a confused look. Firehand? What did that mean. His father waved him to silence before he could interrupt.

"I'd like to say that you have a rather intelligent son here," said Thelonious.

"Why thank you, sir," his father said beaming. "I've thought so myself a good many times."

"In fact he is so intelligent that I would like for him to come to Drysdale."

"For... what purpose?"

"I am a student there ... an apprentice. A very good one, I am told." Thelonious smiled.

"Of course you are," said Desson's father. "You're a Firehand."

"I can assure you that my family name has made it no easier for me. But I DO have some influence with the instructors and I'm certain Desson here will be accepted as a novice in the next class."

Desson's father was so surprised at the offer that he couldn't even speak.

"But..." Desson stammered. "I can't! The smith!"

"Damn the smith, son! This offer... from a FIREHAND, no less..."

"I understand the offer is rather sudden, but your son appears old enough, and we must hurry, or the window of opportunity will close. We accept students in two year intervals... and this one closes in two weeks."

"This must be some kind of joke," said Desson. "One of your riddles, right? And even if it were true... what about the shop?"

"Oh, BAH! I'm not so old that I can't still run this place alone."

"And I assure you the offer is legitimate," added Thelonious. "Would you like to learn magic, Desson?"

Desson's pause was not for thought. He already knew the answer... but belief was a bit slower in coming...

"It it's true..." he said.

"You come back in one week, and he'll be ready," Desson's father said firmly.

"But now I have a question..." Desson turned to Thelonious. "Is this how the Magistry usually accepts students? Answer a few riddles and you're in?"

Thelonious paused, but the smile never left his face. "Actually... yes. But you'll find that getting in and STAYING in are two entirely different matters."