

Darkness Comes Together

by Mickey Zucker Reichert

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Darkness smothered the world outside Lord Karthorian's mansion, and the thin crescent of moon drew scribbly lines along the ramparts. Dressed in tight-fitting browns and blacks, Josafah Rayta's son studied the layout through the meager light, his sandy hair tucked neatly beneath his hood. In his pocket, his advance lay swaddled in a cloth pouch to prevent the coins from clinking. The tools of his trade nestled beside it, including the thinly hammered steel garrote that had become his trademark weapon. Years ago, it would never have occurred to him to leave identifying marks on his victims; secrecy had always seemed an assassin's best friend. Then, Nightfall had come.

Within a short time, Nightfall the man had become more legendary than the night-stalking demon from the nursery rhyme that spawned his name. Rumors claimed his clients only had to whisper their needs to the night wind, that Nightfall would come if he found their victims worth his effort; but woe be to the man who wasted Nightfall's time. Reliable sources had reported to the swagsmen and tenders who fronted Josafah that Nightfall would as soon destroy his hire as his target should he judge the former unworthy.

Josafah flashed a gap-toothed grin to no one. He envied Nightfall his notoriety, longed for the day when people would speak of him, too, with a humble and terrible reverence. Peasants would shudder at the mere thought of him. Kings would quail when they saw him, knowing their reigns and their lives had ended. His fee would grow ten times over, and he would become wealthy enough to retire... or to kill for slights and sports instead of money.

Shaking the thoughts from his mind, Josafah turned his attention fully to the task at hand. Drawing the familiar iron claws from his bag of tools, he pressed them expertly against his palms and fingertips. Easing them onto jutting irregularities in the stones or into rare cracks in the mortar, alternately with the wedges on his shoes, he inched his sinewy body up the stone wall at a slow but steady pace. Reaching the top, he crouched against the flat stonework to survey and anticipate. Below him lay a wide moat that stretched to another distant wall. The water appeared an inky green-black in the darkness, too thick for his vision to penetrate. He had no idea what swam in those brackish, oily-smelling waters, but research suggested alligators or savage, flesh-eating fish. That fact alone had deterred lesser thieves and assassins.

Josafah secured his climbing claws, then looked toward the next wall. A branch, trunk, or ladder long enough to reach both walls and support his weight would prove too heavy to maneuver. He considered a rope but doubted he could toss a grapple that far with any accuracy. Trying would likely result in enough noise to draw the guards. Securing it would prove difficult as well. Unless he drew it unwaveringly tight, his weight would bear it down into the moat.

Mumbling curses under his breath, Josafah studied the water and invoked his natal talent. He sensed a seething mass of potential energy, apparently small fish poised to attack any hapless creature that leaped or fell into the water. Such an ability, extremely rarely, came to children at birth and made them desperately vulnerable to sorcerers, who gained their powers through ritualistic slaughter and soul-binding of the natively gifted. Josafah had never heard of any other having his particular power; but, for all he knew, they all did. Those born with such abilities hid them for their own safety. Sorcerers usually remained cloistered as well, since they could also torture the collected talents from one another. Josafah's

ability had alerted him to traps, guards, creatures, and attacks in the past. He was not particularly strong, small, or as dexterous as many thieves. Without his talent, he would not have such a solid edge over others in his field.

Josafah shook his head, knocking down his hood and spilling his sandy hair to the wind. He could scarcely believe the mansion had thwarted him so swiftly. He had expected the rumors about the moat to prove untrue or exaggerated, as such things often did. Instead, his inquiry had failed him, suggesting the width of the water, the distance between the walls, was narrower than he now found it. Sighing, he turned to withdraw, devise new strategy, and return another day.

The movement brought Josafah face-to-face with another man. Startled, he jerked backward. His rear foot slid off the wall's edge, and he felt himself begin to fall. A wild scramble for balance and a steadying hand rescued him from Lord Karthorian's moat.

Flushed, heart pounding, Josafah studied the other man. Darkness enwrapped the imposing figure. Eyes like blackened steel peered out from beneath a deep blue hood that faded into the night, along with the cloak. A short but unkempt beard added a wild edge to a face crisscrossed with scars. The figure appeared lithe, the age indeterminate, the expression unreadable. The hand on Josafah's arm was gloved, and it disappeared as soon as his equilibrium became steady. A chill dried sweat to icy prickles.

"Nightfall," Josafah guessed.

"Josafah Rayta's son," Nightfall returned, his voice gravelly and dark.

Uncertain whether to feel surprised or pleased by the recognition, Josafah smiled nervously. "It would seem we have the same... target."

"It would appear so."

Josafah's grin widened, revealing the wide spaces between his small, brown teeth. "Neither of our hires needs to know. We can work together and both collect."

Nightfall nodded absently, attention fixed on the wall on the other side of the moat.

Josafah's green gaze followed Nightfall's, and he lapsed back into hopeful silence. Surely the most notorious assassin of every country and peninsula would find the solution he had missed. Nightfall never had to know the gap had thwarted his new companion.

Several moments passed in a quiet hush broken only by the shrill of insects and an occasional splash from the fish below them. Josafah never saw Nightfall move, but his glove suddenly cradled a small throwing knife and a string composed of braided thread. With a few deft twists, he secured the string to the knife, just above the hilt. As swiftly as it had materialized, the blade vanished back into the folds of his cloak. Nightfall shinnied back down the outer wall in a blink and faded into the gloom.

Uncertain, Josafah hunkered down on the top of the wall. The night wind ached in his ears and funneled down his back, its touch crisp and chillingly uncomfortable. He flicked his hood back into place, the cloth cold and soft against his skin. He did not know whether Nightfall would return, but it seemed worth the wait. Without the other assassin, Josafah could not proceed.

Shortly, Nightfall glided back to the rampart. Starlight revealed a hint of blue in eyes otherwise as stark as midnight. The knife in his hand still held its tie, the plaited threads trailing off behind him. Apparently, he had secured the other end.

Josafah loosed a pent-up breath and watched Nightfall study the inner wall. His talent continued to show

him nothing. Nightfall never tensed, never revealed the potential energy that preceded any movement. His every motion appeared unplanned, as fluid as liquid, yet as strong and committed as a squall.

The throwing knife flew suddenly from Nightfall's hand, spearing over the moat. It struck the wall with a barely audible clink. The thread rope followed in a perfect arc, bridging the gap.

Josafah rubbed his chin with a thumb knuckle, skin grating through stubble. Nightfall's strategy remained unclear. Even if a few dozen pieces of braided thread could bear their bulk, the knife could never have wedged into any crack tightly enough to hold its place while they crossed. Eyes widening in slow increments, he turned a questioning gaze to his unexpected companion.

Ignoring Josafah, Nightfall tugged gently on the string. Apparently satisfied by a maneuver that barely tested a songbird's weight, he pulled a vial and bolt of linen from his pocket. With swift strokes, he massaged the contents of the vial into the cloth. It grew stiffer as he worked, wrapping it in concentric loops over the string, each new section driving the previous part farther across the moat.

Josafah continued to watch, fascinated. "What is that stuff?"

Nightfall made a gesture for quiet, then continued working.

Although he also felt safer in silence, Josafah suffered a hot stab of annoyance. *Won't share?* The contents became an instant obsession, though the details of the plan to cross the moat still eluded him. *We'll see about that.*

At length, the hardened linen spanned the walls. Nightfall stepped back, motioning for Josafah to precede him.

Josafah did come forward, only long enough to place a foot inconspicuously over the nearly empty container. He peered along the cloth rope, then shook his head. It seemed miracle enough that the knife had remained wedged this long. Josafah believed the makeshift rope would sag into the water beneath his mass, the blade would surely twist free. "You first."

To Josafah's surprise, Nightfall did not protest. His tightlipped mouth revealed no emotion, but his eyes seemed to dance with a pale blue fire.

Josafah shivered, a stanza from the "Legend of Nightfall" oozing into his mind, unbidden: *Eyes darker than the midnight shade. Teeth sharper than the headsman's blade. When he smiles, a cold wind blows—Darkness comes where Nightfall goes.* Josafah consorted with the vilest men the country of Shisen offered, yet Nightfall seemed the very definition of evil. He felt himself trembling as the nightstalker seized the rope he had created. Without hesitation, he swung upside down from it, gloved hands catching easy holds, toes hooked over the cloth. It barely shifted above him, its slight, uneven sway seeming more consistent with puffs of wind than any motion of the man. *It's as if he weighs nothing at all.* The hand that had steadied him moments earlier belied the thought. If so, that touch would have proved Nightfall's downfall. They both would have plunged into the moat, a feast for its hungry fish.

Josafah turned his focus back to the moat. His natal talent continued to show masses of fish poised to lunge at anything that might pass for food. Realization slammed him. *Normal weight, then light as air. Nightfall, too, has a birth gift.* He smiled. *How much would a sorcerer pay for that knowledge?* Other thoughts chased the grin into oblivion. *What sorcerer could catch him? And how much would my own life be worth once Nightfall found out I sold his secret?* In memory, he relived the perfect toss of the knife that had grounded it into a secure crack on the first throw. That, too, seemed beyond human capability; it also could be a natal talent. *Maybe he's just incredibly skilled.* Josafah dismissed the possibility with a far more terrifying one. *Or, perhaps, he really is the demon of legend.* He stifled a

gasp. *Worse yet, a sorcerer!*

The consideration paralyzed Josafah. Sweat surged from every pore, and his thoughts scattered in savage panic. He remained motionless, devoid of action, of knowledge, of rationality. Then, gradually, his wits returned and, with them, logic. Though Nightfall had no consistent pattern to his crimes, he was known for fast, clean murder. Collecting natal gifts required tedious and brutal torture; sorcerers always left a grisly scene of butchery.

The rope made an impatient swoop. Shocked from his musings, Josafah looked toward the opposite wall. A shadowy figure gestured at him from the top. *My turn.* Josafah looked from the rope, to the moat, to the far wall. Chill wind dried the sweat, leaving an icy layer of gooseflesh. His fingers massaged the pouch of coins through the fabric of his pocket. He needed the money, and he knew of no other way across. Still, fortune and fame did him little good dead. He started toward the rope. Something shifted beneath his foot, scraping the stone. Remembering the vial, he hastily pocketed it, then caught hold of the doctored linen.

Nightfall slipped over the far wall.

Josafah sucked in a deep breath, loosed it, then seized the rope in both hands. He shifted to the upside-down position Nightfall had used, keeping his legs clenched safely on the top of the wall. Gradually, he eased more of his weight onto the rope, surprised to find it sturdy. Finally, he took that last leap of faith, edging his feet free. The rope sagged slightly but continued to bear his weight. Measuring every movement, he worked his way across, the rope bouncing with his slightest motion. His hood flopped free again; his hair and cloak dangled toward the water. He ignored the discomfort of wind leeching through the openings in his cloak that his awkward position created. The murky water beneath him seethed with passive energy, surface riffled by the breeze. Its rancid odor wrinkled his nose.

At length, Josafah reached the wall and eased himself to its top. He paused to readjust his clothing and tuck his hair back beneath his hood.

Nightfall appeared moments later, sweat glazing his scarred features, the rope cinched tightly around his waist. Only then, Josafah recognized the strategy. The wedged knife had not supported him. Nightfall had used himself as ballast, hanging over the wall to keep the rope taut. The realization caused Josafah to examine his companion more closely. At first glance, he had considered the other man enormous. Now, he saw that the illusion of size came from attitude and repute. Nightfall stood no taller than himself and was, if anything, lighter. He would have had to cling desperately to the wall to brace Josafah's weight for so long.

Still curious, Josafah pantomimed hurling a knife. "Gift?" he whispered.

Nightfall gave his head a brisk toss. "Practice." The response itself revealed little, but the tone suggested dreary hours of practice daily for many years.

"There's dogs," Josafah jabbed a hand toward the dark courtyard between the wall and the mansion.

"Taken care of," Nightfall shot back, disentangling himself from the rope.

Josafah scanned the nearby courtyard with his talent and found nothing out of place. He started down the wall, carefully placing each hand and foot in crevices formed by the stonework. A rumbling snore rose abruptly from beneath him. He glanced down to three unmoving animal forms, shifted his position, and continued to the ground. Once there, he discovered three dogs in various positions of repose, all sound asleep. Two were sturdily built, short-haired beasts with spiked collars and strong jaws, the last a leggy, half-grown animal with a cloth collar embroidered with childishly crooked designs. Quietly, Josafah slit

each throat.

Nightfall touched down beside him. "What are you doing?" he asked accusingly, despite the necessity for hushed tones.

"Assuring our safe escape," Josafah hissed back.

Nightfall crouched beside the dogs. "Sleeping drug would have lasted till midday, at least."

Josafah shrugged. "Death lasts longer. Safer."

Nightfall hefted the puppy's head. "This one was a pet."

"Pets bark, too," Josafah crept toward the mansion, thrusting his talent into the darkness. "You've killed your share of men. Are you getting dewy-eyed over a couple of mongrels?" Without waiting to see if Nightfall followed, Josafah continued forward. His hire had claimed that Lord Karthorian took brats off the street, used them, then tossed them back out when they grew too old for his purposes. It seemed likely Josafah would find scrawny and terrified urchins, in addition to guards, within the mansion.

Dodging bushes and trellises, Josafah crept through the courtyard with all senses and his gift attuned. The mansion rose three stories, the lower two windowless and solid brick. The upper story did contain windows, most shuttered or covered with a thick flap of leather. Eventually, Josafah located one that lay open. Pausing beneath it, he fitted his climbing claws.

Josafah glanced around for Nightfall but found only the dark shapes of stone benches and foliage. He cleaned the dogs' blood from his dagger, then settled it loosely in its sheath. Likely, he would need it several times before locating the master's bedroom. Without further delay, he settled the claws into irregularities in the brick and worked his way up the wall.

Josafah had barely reached the second level when a corner of bricking crumbled. His left-hand claw swung free, tossing his balance sideways. A moment later, he crashed to the ground, pain slamming through his left hip and shoulder. Breath rushed from him in a harsh grunt, and his lungs spasmed. For a moment, he found breathing impossible. The surety of death washed over him, and he felt the first fine stirrings of fear. Then air rushed back into his throat. He gasped in aching pants until his senses returned, then assessed the damage: bruises on hip and shoulder, nothing broken. Cursing beneath his breath, he re-gathered his tools and began the climb again.

This time, Josafah reached the window ledge. Re-vealing as little of himself as possible, he peered into the room. A small figure huddled on one of several straw pallets, the others empty. "... like it here. He ain't never hurt nobody I seen. Feeds them. Gives them a safe place to sleep. Trains them. Sends us out ready for an apprenticeship or job. I ain't complain-ing."

"Anyone else complaining?" The now familiar rough voice came from nearby.

Josafah craned up farther to see Nightfall sitting on the edge of the pallet.

"Not to me." By the voice, the child was a boy of nine or ten years. His face alone did not reveal gender, and the scraggly red hair hanging to his shoulders gave no further clue. "Can't see as why they would. Everyone's free to leave if they don't like it here. Weren't for the lord, most of us'd be dead by now."

"Which room is his?" Nightfall leaned closer.

The boy's tone turned flat. "You going to hurt him?"

"No," Nightfall said with eminent sincerity.

Josafah grinned. No, *little boy. Won't hurt him at all. Just kill him.*

The boy seemed no more convinced than Josafah. "How does I know you ain't going to?"

Josafah snaked into the room to answer. "How's this? Where is the master? Tell me the truth, or he kills you. Slowly." He squinted into his most frightening sneer. "Painfully."

The boy incited Josafah's talent like a coiled spring. Nightfall remained as impossible to fathom as before, though his lips twisted into a frown. Accustomed to working alone, he clearly did not appreciate Josafah's interference. Nevertheless, he took his cue, grasping the boy around the abdomen, pinning his arms, and clamping a hand over his mouth to stifle any screams.

Josafah smelled the boy's fear, an exhilarating stench that reminded him why he had chosen his profession. His first kill had made him feel omnipotent, wholly in control for the first time in his life. "You tell me where to find Lord Karthorian's room. He stays with you while I check. If you lied, he kills you both. Truth, and you both live."

The boy rolled large brown eyes to Nightfall, then swallowed hard. He nodded once to indicate compliance.

Nightfall cautiously released the boy's mouth.

A quiver entered the young voice. "Three doors down." He pointed leftward. "On the right." Tears welled in his eyes. "Please don't hurt him. Or me."

Josafah smiled, then inclined his head toward Nightfall. "Kill him."

A moment later, the boy lay limp in Nightfall's arms, without a mark on him.

Despite the need for quiet swiftness, Josafah had to know. He shook his head in awe. "You have to teach me that trick."

"Don't get too excited." Nightfall lowered the boy to the pallet then joined the other assassin. "He's out, not dead. Let's go."

"Not dead." Josafah went motionless, stunned by a pronouncement that seemed nonsensical.

Nightfall also went still, a living barrier between Josafah and the boy. "A competent assassin kills only his target."

Josafah had to disagree. "A *competent* assassin leaves no one behind who can call for help or identify him."

Nightfall said nothing more, but his expression made it clear that he would prevent Josafah from finishing the job this time.

Josafah's respect for the legendary thief and murderer dwindled, but he did not attempt to push past. "Very well. But if your mistake gets me killed, you're going with me."

In reply, Nightfall waved Josafah toward the door. "You're wasting time."

Remembering caution, Josafah placed his ear to the door, rewarded by the steady pound of footsteps and the clink of mail. "Guards," he whispered.

"Going which way?"

Josafah pointed in the same direction as the boy's previous gesture.

Nightfall pressed his ear to the door as well.

The footsteps faded.

Nightfall waited a few moments longer, then eased open the door and peered into the hall. "Go."

Josafah went, tipping up his shoes to keep the climbing claws from tapping against stone. He eased his garrote from his pocket, coiling the end in his left hand. Quickly, he counted doors and stopped at the third on the right. He pressed against it, remaining stiffly in place until Nightfall drifted up beside him.

Josafah checked the area with his talent. He could feel the guards up ahead, now well beyond them. Metal curled in the door's keyhole, tensed. "Locked," he whispered.

Nightfall made a gesture at the latch to indicate Josafah should handle it.

Josafah's natal talent had made devices his specialty. No one could find or disarm a snare with such certainty nor calculate a mechanism with more swift assurance. Using the same claws that had eased his climb, he pressured the lockwork's plate. It opened with a sharp click that made him cringe. Prepared for guards, Josafah wrenched open the door.

A simple, comfortable-appearing bed occupied most of the room, surrounded by trunks, desks, and chests of drawers against the walls. A man in sleep silks sat up, dumping a pile of blankets to his lap. A gray-and-white cat at the foot of the bed bleated a protest. A young girl in a woolen nightgown and socks scurried from the side of the bed to a corner, squealing in terror.

Swearing viciously, Josafah sprang for the girl, drawing his dagger, while Nightfall shut and relocked the door. Josafah caught the girl by an arm, spun her, and held the knife to her throat. "Not another sound." He looked up to see the man, likely Lord Karthorian, diving for a bell cord. "Pull it and she dies." It seemed a useless threat. Surely the life of one grubby orphan would not prove enough to keep the man from alerting his guards.

But, miraculously, Karthorian lowered his hand to the pallet. "It's me you want. Let her go." He looked imploringly at the girl. "Kithra, what are you doing here?"

Tears glided from the child's eyes, wetting Josafah's sleeve. She trembled in his grip. "I—I had a bad dream. I—I just wanted... to tell... someone... I didn't..." She trailed off into sobs.

The solution seemed simple enough. Nightfall could kill the lord while Josafah held the girl. Then, the child would have to die as well. Her previous commotion might bring others, but they could still escape through the window. Josafah glanced toward the door.

Nightfall was not there.

"Where—" Josafah started before pain seared his spine and he collapsed into final darkness.

Heart still hammering, Kithra clinging to him like a daughter, Lord Karthorian tossed a pouchful of silver. "Thank you."

In one smooth motion, Nightfall caught and pocketed the money, without bothering to count it. After hiring Nightfall to kill the assassin who stalked him, Karthorian would not dare to cheat him. Surely, the

lord of the manor knew how near Nightfall had come to disposing of mark and hire together. Josafah had revealed himself as a worthwhile target. Had the rumors about the lord proven true as well, Nightfall would have allowed the other assassin to complete his mission before finishing his own. Only Karthorian's decision to save the girl, and her innocent explanation for being in his bedroom at night, had spared his life. "The orphans need you."

Footsteps hammered the hallway. The door rattled.

"I'll hide you," Karthorian promised.

"No need." Nightfall covered the distance to the shuttered window with the grace and power of an ocean swell. "I'm sorry about the puppy," he told the girl with genuine remorse.

The door and shutters burst open simultaneously.

When the guards arrived, Nightfall was gone.