

NIGHTFALL'S PROMISE

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IN the western quarter of the country of Schiz , a fire danced in the hearth of the He- Ain't-Here tavern, casting scarlet and amber patterns over the diners. Nightfall sat in the corner chair of a corner table, beside King Edward Nargol of Alyndar . Guards ate and drank around the periphery, their presences ironically unnecessary. On his last visit, the eighteen-year-old monarch, then an impetuous idealistic prince, had survived with only Nightfall for protection and company despite dangerous naivete and a pursuing sorcerer hell-bent on slaughter.

Arrayed in Alyndar's purple and silver and its crest, a powerful fist clutching a hammer, they all cut dashing figures; but the young monarch put the rest of them to shame. Brilliant golden hair offset a round, handsome face. His tall, muscle-packed frame exceeded even his guards', but his friendly blue eyes gave him an air of approachability despite his imposing size. Of all the men at the table, he overshadowed Nightfall most of all. Of average height at best, slender and sinewy, the assassin-turned-king's-adviser sported short mahogany-brown hair and blue-black eyes that still held a glint of evil. Once a master of disguise living as seven different men, Nightfall had spent months adjusting to his given name, Sudian , and the one appearance he had never used: his own.

Commoners and travelers swarmed the nearby tables, keeping the help in constant motion. Nonetheless, a barmaid or busboy remained always by the royal table, prepared to wipe up any spill, to relay their least request.

When not cooking or cleaning, the pudgy proprietor stood in the doorway between kitchen and common room, wringing his hands. He was not accustomed to royalty in his simply furnished red-stone building. The upper class normally took lodging in the south-end inn that Nightfall had gotten to know well in his persona of Balshaz the merchant. As the polio-stricken odd-jobber, Frihiat , however, he had grown familiar with the He- Ain't-Here's few rooms, now booked solid. He took some guilty pleasure in the usually unflappable proprietor's discomfort.

In the best position for surveying the entire room, Nightfall noticed two men approaching, before any of the guards so much as rolled a gaze in their direction. In his mid-twenties, the younger one sported an overlarge head topped with muddy curls, a crooked nose, and broad lips. The other appeared middle-aged, tall and thin with a mop of sandy hair and a scar that ran from the outer corner of his right eye to his chin. Nightfall recognized both. The first was Brandon Magebane , a gifted man with the most dangerous career Nightfall could imagine: hunting sorcerers. The second, Gatiwan , had accompanied Brandon on some of his forays, risking his life to rid the world of its greatest evil. Sorcerers gained their magical abilities only by slaying those rare people born with a "talent," and their method required tortuous ritual slaughter and taking possession of the victim's soul.

Quick as a cat, Nightfall rose and held out his hands in greeting. "Brandon. Gatiwan. Good to see you both again."

Guards' hands went to hilts, but the exuberant greeting of the king's adviser kept them from standing or making any overt sign of threat.

Brandon bowed appreciatively to the king, then addressed Nightfall. "Sudian. How wonderful to see you again. I presume you've come to fulfill your promise?" It was a ludicrous assumption. No king would travel halfway around the continent merely to escort a servant. As fast as the thought arose, Nightfall quashed it. King Edward would.

Edward turned a beetle-browed look on his adviser. To most of the world, Sudian had sprung from nowhere, the next in line to replace the thirty-six previous stewards who had abandoned the job of protecting and educating the brash young prince. Then, bound to him by magic, Nightfall had had little choice but to keep Edward safe and his best interests always in mind; and he did that by pretending to admire the boy to the point of slavish toadyism. For these men of Schiz to know Nightfall as Sudian, they had to have become acquainted with him while he traveled with Edward; yet the king had never seen them.

In fact, Nightfall had met Gatiwan in a tavern while Edward slept, and the older man had referred him to the younger. Nightfall had met with Brandon in secret, seeking one of the magical stones the Magebane created with his natal talent, which could thwart a sorcerer's magic for a single spell. Brandon had given Nightfall the stone with the promise that, one day, Nightfall would assist the magehunters on one of their projects.

Nightfall smiled. Born with the ability to adjust his own weight across a vast spectrum, he appreciated what the Magebane and his rotation of volunteer followers did. Nightfall had also finally found a happy life, friends, and a woman he loved, and had no interest in becoming part of a suicide mission. "Not today, Brandon. But thanks for the offer."

Looking around, Nightfall found King Edward staring at him and knew what had to follow.

"Did you make this man a promise, Sudian?" In Edward's tone, Nightfall heard the same damnable nobility that had caused the king's late father to bind the boy to an assassin despised as an otherworld demon.

"Well, yes, Sire," Nightfall admitted. "But just as a general 'maybe someday' type of—"

Edward would hear none of it. "If you promised . . ."

"Ned . . ." Nightfall warned, knowing the king had no way of knowing to what dangers he was about to commit his adviser. He used the name Edward preferred from people he considered friends, also trying to remind the boy-king that his companion, at thirty-four, was nearly old enough to be his father: older, wiser, and far more experienced.

Edward ignored the unspoken advice. "A man of honor holds dear even the least of his vows."

Nightfall crooked a brow. No words were necessary. Of all the men present, Edward alone knew his previous guise as the night-stalking demon of legend, anything but a man of honor.

King Edward's blue eyes held that fiery gleam of a personal crusade, a look that brooked no compromise. For whatever reason, he believed his adviser's actions reflected on him and on the esteem of Alyndar itself.

Nightfall sighed, then turned his gaze back to a smiling Brandon Magebane. "I'd love to help you," he said, with clearly feigned enthusiasm. "What would you like me to do?"

The healer's one-room cabin smelled of myriad herbs, some as sweet and pungent as nutmeg, others as overwhelmingly bitter as onion. Nightfall glanced around the windowless space at the four dingy chinked-log walls and the thatch ceiling. An eight-year-old boy lay on piled straw, his small pale body enveloped in a patchwork of bandages. One circled his forehead, encasing his ears in salve-smear, bloodstained cloth. A fringe of fine, page-cut sandy hair surrounded a heart-shaped face, and large brown eyes peered back at Nightfall. The room's only piece of furniture, a small table, held a basin filled with medical supplies.

"Sudian," Brandon said, "I'd like you to meet Byroth."

The child continued to stare at Nightfall, managing a weak smile.

Nightfall nodded cordially, heart rate quickening. "What happened?" Though he intended the question for anyone, he continued to look at Byroth.

Apparently believing himself the target of Nightfall's inquiry, Byroth responded, "I don't remember." Looking at Nightfall's livery, he added, "Sire."

Having played many parts, Nightfall remained unrattled by the label of respect, though he did correct it. "I'm just a servant, son. No need for titles."

Byroth nodded. "I keep trying to think what happened, but I can't remember much. Someone grabbed me; I know that. Then, a lot of pain." He stiffened, then grimaced at the discomfort that small movement caused him. "Then my father hugging me, my mother screaming. Lots of blood." He shrugged. "That's it."

"Thank you." Nightfall looked askance at the Magebane and his assistant. He despised sorcerers at least as much as anyone, had spent much of his life dodging them and had nearly fallen victim to two. He particularly hated those who targeted children, though nearly all of them did. Simpler prey, they were also more likely to accidentally or innocently reveal themselves as one of the natively gifted.

Brandon avoided Nightfall's questioning gaze to address Byroth. "Would you mind if Sudian examined your wounds?"

Byroth gestured assent. "So long as you don't hurt me."

Not wishing to cause the boy further anxiety or pain, Nightfall declined the invitation. "I don't need to see them. Thank you."

Brandon Magebane glanced from man to child and back, then waved toward the door. "Why don't you try to sleep, Byroth. We'll come back in a little while."

Byroth's young face turned stricken. "You won't leave me alone, will you?"

"We'll be right outside," Gatiwan promised.

Nodding, Byroth closed his eyes as the men filed from the room.

As soon as the door clicked closed, Brandon rounded on Nightfall. "What do you think?"

Nightfall glanced around at the familiar city bathed in twilight. His alter ego, Frihiat, had often come out to earn drinks in the tavern with stories. Crickets screeched their high-pitched song while the people scurried about finishing their work before sunset. Seeing and feeling no one near enough to overhear them, Nightfall turned his attention to Brandon's question, which held many possibilities. "What do I think about what?"

"The wounds." Gatiwan took over impatiently. "Do you think a sorcerer could have inflicted them?"

Nightfall blinked, missing some of the information and the intention of his companions dragging him to visit a wounded child. "Does Byroth have a birth gift?"

"Not that he's admitted," Gatiwan said. "But we haven't pushed that hard."

"What do the wounds look like?"

Brandon's scrutiny grew more intense. "You just gave up the chance to see them."

Nightfall shrugged. "You didn't give me a reason to." Not wishing to disturb the boy any more now than then, he added, "What does the healer think they are?"

"Stab wounds." Brandon also searched the gray-lit streets. "Simple stab wounds, she thinks, from a regular old knife."

"Nothing weird and magical-looking? No burns or oddly shaped bruises?"

Brandon shook his head. "They look like stab wounds to me, too. But you never know."

"No." Nightfall admitted. "You never do know with magic." He had once faced a sorcerer who could freeze a man's head, then shatter it like the ice it had become. Another had opened an agonizing gash from his hipbone to his buttocks with only a distant motion. At a man's throat, that same spell might prove immediately fatal. The natal talents spanned skills beyond his imagination. The so-called "gifted" each harbored only one special ability, but the sorcerers could juggle an assortment, limited only by the number and type of talent-cursed souls they could obtain. They especially enjoyed hunting down one another, as the ritual slaughter of one of their own meant gaining all the harnessed souls of the loser. That last was the Magebane's salvation. It meant the sorcerers dared not reveal themselves or band together, even to destroy such an obvious and self-proclaimed threat.

Nightfall continued, "Besides, it doesn't matter what means the sorcerer uses to create panic and suffering in their victims. Any type of severe emotional distress together with excruciating pain brings the soul and its talent to the surface."

Brandon and Gatiwan stared at Nightfall, who suddenly wished he had not said anything. "What?" he demanded.

"You speak," Brandon said, barely above a whisper, "like a man with firsthand experience."

Nightfall did not like the Magebane's implications. He had spent all of his life hiding his talent, telling his secret to only one person. When Alyndar had captured him in other guise, he had, believed her his betrayer, an assumption he had later discovered was wrong. Even King Edward knew only that Nightfall had some sort of birth gift sorcerers wanted. Nightfall would not reveal himself to two men he hardly

knew. "Are you accusing me of having a natal gift? Or of being a sorcerer?"

Brandon's homely features opened questioningly. "You tell us which."

"Neither," Nightfall lied, then added, "but if either were the case, you know I'd have to give you the same answer."

"So just tell the truth," Gatiwan suggested.

Nightfall noted the serious expressions on the men's faces and mentally tracked the locations of his throwing knives. "How do you know I'm not?"

Brandon kept his voice steady and intense, though low. "Because when you came to me, you needed something to help you fight a sorcerer who had attacked you and your master."

Gatiwan took over, the somberness of his expression highlighting the scar across his face. "If King Edward the Enthusiastic had a natal talent, he'd have displayed it for the world in the excitement of righting some injustice."

Nightfall tried to divert the conversation. "He prefers King Edward the Just."

Brandon managed a smile. "When he's old enough to temper some of that zeal with wisdom, he'll probably earn the nickname he wants. Until then—" Apparently recognizing Nightfall's successful tactic, Brandon returned to the matter at hand. ". . . are you a sorcerer or gifted?"

Nightfall did not bother to deny both again. "I'm not a sorcerer."

"If you were a sorcerer, you'd say the same." Gatiwan reminded Nightfall in his own words.

"If I were a sorcerer," Nightfall corrected, "I'd kill my damned, disgusting, slimy, hideous self."

Brandon laughed. "Believe it or not, I actually met a sorcerer with the self-control to never act on his birthright. And I didn't kill him." As if to catch Nightfall unaware, he asked quickly, "So what's your talent?"

"Even if I had one, I..." Nightfall started.

They finished in unison, "... would have to deny it."

With clear reluctance, Gatiwan returned to the case. "Byroth's the fourth child in a year."

That caught Nightfall's attention. As rare as the natal gifts were, it seemed highly unlikely that Schiz could harbor four children with them. Of course, since those with the talents hid them for their own safety, no one really knew exactly how frequently they occurred. "Tell me about the others."

Brandon ran a hand through his dark curls. "First one happened a year or so ago. Playmate of Byroth's, seven years old, drowned in the creek."

Though tragic, it seemed fairly commonplace. "What makes you think a sorcerer was involved?"

"I didn't at the time." The Magebane continued to finger comb his hair, dislodging bits of bark and sand.

"In hindsight, I noted a couple of suspicious things. He had a nasty head wound. The healer thought it might have happened after, when the current drove him into a rock, but they found an awful lot of blood on the bank for it to have come from a corpse already dead. He had many bruises, but the ones around his neck seemed impossible for jutting rocks to have caused."

Nightfall was impressed. "You really delve into the details, don't you?"

Brandon's fingers stilled. "I do this for a living, remember? And these happened on my own home territory."

"And the second one?" Nightfall ran a hand through his own hair, cut short and plastered in Alyndar's style. He did not miss the wild, filthy tangles he had worn in his original Nightfall guise.

"An infant." Gatiwan cringed, and his face screwed up as if he might cry. "Stolen from its crib in the night and found mangled nearby the next day."

Brandon lowered his head.

Nightfall examined the facts critically. He had suffered and inflicted too much evil to feel anything for a baby he knew only in the abstract. "Did it have a talent?"

Brandon raised his shoulders. "We don't know for sure. Proud parents. First baby after years of trying. They took him to a lot of gatherings. They think he must have done something in front of someone—could have been anyone. An uncle believes the baby might have made him trip over nothing, and an aunt says he could have caused a flash of light." Brandon let his shoulders drop. "All after the fact, of course, so it's hard to know if they really remember these things or are just searching for some logic to a hateful act."

"Or telling us what they think we want to hear," Gatiwan added. "Wouldn't be the first time."

Brandon nodded. "They just want to help."

"Some help." Nightfall wondered how many ignorant people would prefer to believe a loved one died for the wicked desires of a sorcerer rather than without any cause at all. They had no way of knowing how the sorcerers bound the souls to their bidding, how the natively gifted suffered even after death until the sorcerer either died or the soul "burned out" and the sorcerer lost that particular talent. "And the third one?"

"Eleven-year-old girl." Gatiwan fully regained his composure. "Had a knack for getting her little brothers and sisters to sleep." He added suggestively, "An inhuman knack."

"A clear talent," Nightfall guessed.

"It's a wonder she made it to eleven." Brandon removed his hand from his hair, the curls popping back into disarray. "Though sorcerers tend to avoid coming this close to where I live."

"Except the really stupid ones." Gatiwan gave Nightfall another searching look, as if to remind him that they had not yet ascertained whether or not he might be one.

Nightfall ignored the insinuation "Was she stabbed, too?"

"Stoned, apparently." Brandon shifted from foot to foot. Found her wedged in a ravine covered with bruises and surrounded by rocks."

"Brutal," Nightfall said. In all his days as the demon, he had never murdered a child and no one in such a cruel fashion. "But there's only way to know whether these killings might be related."

When the other two men just stared, Nightfall finished.

"Find out if Byroth has a talent. If at least two of the children did, that's a pretty clear sign."

"He won't tell us," Gatiwan reminded.

"Then," Nightfall said. "We might want to start with his parents."

Though tidy and sparsely furnished, the main room of Byroth's family cottage felt dangerously closed in to Nightfall. He had let Brandon take the most secure position, a stool pressed against one wood-and-thatch wall that granted him a full view of the fireplace, both windows, and the door. Nightfall understood the Magebane's need to see any danger before it struck and did not want to seem similarly hunted. Consequently, he found himself peering out the window at his back at intervals, unable to grant the parents his full attention. Gatiwan had chosen to sit on a storage chest between one of the windows and the door, while the mother hunkered on a rickety stepladder that led to an overhead loft. In two places, the main room opened onto the children's bedrooms. Byroth's five sisters slept in one. The other still held the bloody straw pallet that had served as his bed.

Byroth's father had chosen a seat on the floor where he rocked himself like a fearful toddler. A large man with work-callused hands and strong arms, he now looked more like a lost child. His wiry hair lay wildly snarled, and he had not shaved in several days.

The mother had clearly made more effort to appear presentable in front of important company. Her black hair lay neatly pressed, braided, and twisted on top of her head; and she wore a clean, if simple, shift. Her hands twisted in her lap, never still. "What can I tell you men?" she asked hopefully. Though she had relived the terror more than once, she obviously hoped these professionals might find answers where others had failed.

Gatiwan's usually gruff manner softened. "We know this is hard for you, madam. We're just hoping you could tell us what happened three nights ago."

The woman looked at her husband, who continued to weave back and forth, eyes unfocused. "Jawar's not taking this well," she explained. "Five daughters and only one stillborn son till By-roth came."

Nightfall nodded encouragingly. To a manual laborer, having strong assistants was important, and none came cheaper than one's own male offspring.

"He doted on the boy. Best friends, they did almost everything but sleep together."

Jawar murmured to no one in particular. "Nothing, nothing on this fair earth is precisely as it seems ..."

All eyes jerked to the father.

Byroth's mother apologized. "He's been babbling since the attack."

"...the placid plow horse, the deadly mosquito growing on crystal pond ..."

Politely, the visitors ignored the father's ramblings while the mother returned to the unanswered question. "We had gone out that night, as we often do, to the docks. That's where would-be storytellers, poets, and philosophers try out their material."

It was a long-standing tradition, Nightfall knew. As Frihiat, he had gone there often, and bartenders frequently attended, hoping to discover new talent. Occasionally, they did find someone worth paying, in coin or board, to entertain their customers. Frihiat had never made the cut, though Nightfall had used the persona to tell good enough stories to earn drinks from fellow patrons.

". . . the children were all fine on our return. All peacefully asleep." The mother gestured at the two rooms leading off from the one they now occupied. "We went up to bed." She made a sweeping upward motion to indicate climbing the ladder on which she now perched. "Later that night, Jawar said he heard something outside and went to investigate. I had fallen back to sleep when I heard Byroth scream. I was scared, so I waited for Jawar to handle it. But when the screaming continued, I sneaked down to see." She swallowed hard, and tears obscured her eyes. "I saw ... I saw ... oh, Byroth —" She folded her face into her hands, the rest of her description muffled. "I heard a scuffle, a shout. By the time I dared to tear aside the doorway covering, Jawar had chased the assassin out the window and was cradling our little boy. Both covered in blood. On the walls, the straw, the floor. More on the windowledge, and I thought I saw a man's shadow disappearing into the night."

"You're sure it was a man?" Brandon interjected, their only clue thus far to the identity of the sorcerer.

"It could have been a large boy or woman. A trick of shadow." The mother heaved a heavy sigh. "I was too focused on my loved ones to pay much attention." Finally, she looked up. Moisture still blurred her eyes, but they held a deep hardness, a glint of hatred. "Whoever did this must be caught and punished." She turned her attention to her husband, and her look softened. "I believe Jawar saw the man who tried to kill our son, maybe even wrestled with him. But he's too distressed to talk."

Apparently believing himself addressed, Jawar muttered, "The bond between man and daughter is sacred; but the son, the son, is his true reflection."

"To talk coherently," she corrected.

Gatiwan directed his gaze fully upon Byroth's mother. "So he's not making sense to you either?"

She sucked in another lungful of air. "Not since the . . . incident. He just sits there, quoting the poets and philosophers from the docks." She added, clearly to provoke her husband to anger if not reason, "I had always believed him a strong man who could handle terrible things better than me."

Brandon Magebane swooped to the father's rescue. "It may not be his fault. The sorcerer might have inflicted some sort of spell on him."

The mother stiffened. "Sorcerer," she said weakly. "You think it might have been—?"

"We don't know." Gatiwan stretched his legs out in front of him. "We're here to try to figure that out."

Brandon added, "Do you know if Byroth had a talent?"

"Many." The mother gave her husband another glance. He had reason to know the boy better than she did. "But nothing magical. Not that I ever noticed." She shook her head. "No. No, I'm sorry. Byroth didn't have ... a birth gift. Nothing a sorcerer would ..." She trailed off, her head rocking harder, as if to convince the world of her certainty.

The father babbled, "... the placid plow horse, the deadly mosquito, the crystal pond." He glanced at Nightfall with vacant, hollow eyes. "The bond, the bond."

The woman waved at Byroth's bedroom. "I haven't gone in there since. Haven't touched anything. The knife's still there; he just dropped it. You're welcome to look."

"Look, look," Jawar echoed. "But why? That most obvious is hardest to see."

Liking this case less and less, doubting they could gather enough information to find the sorcerer if, in fact, one was even involved, Nightfall followed Gatiwan and Brandon to the bloody bedroom.

The scene yielded no useful clues, at least to Nightfall. The unadorned knife, well-used and sharpened many times, could belong to anyone. The only bloody footprints could have belonged to either parent as easily as the attacker, and the scattered straw revealed nothing but an understandable struggle. The frowns scoring his companions' faces told Nightfall they found nothing more significant than he had. So they had returned to the healer's cabin and dismissed its guard, needing to confront the victim one more time.

Byroth seemed stronger to Nightfall this time, a testament to children's ability to bounce back from the worst trauma. He handled nearly getting mauled to death better than either of his parents. "I knew you'd come back," he said.

Brandon sat on the edge of the bed. "Byroth, we're trying to help you, and your family, too."

"My father's gone insane," Byroth pronounced with the forthrightness only a child would dare.

"Not insane," Gatiwan corrected. "Just very distraught. We believe it will pass."

It was essential truth. Uncertain if shock, loss, or magic had unhinged the man, they could only guess whether time would cure him. The natal talents spanned such a gamut, Nightfall could only wonder if such a spell would last for days, weeks, or forever. If the sorcerer had such a power, he had not used it against Byroth. Further consideration brought an answer for that. Driven from his rational mind, Byroth might not react logically to inflicted pain; and the sorcerer might lose his soul. Nightfall shook off the thought, not yet even convinced a sorcerer had attacked Byroth.

"But to help them and you," Brandon continued, "I need the answer to a question I already asked. Don't be frightened. We're here to help you and others like you, to keep you safe."

Byroth looked from man to man. He looked longest at Nightfall. "You want to know if I have a birth gift?"

Brandon nodded. "Because, if you do, you'll need our protection. Perhaps forever."

Nightfall wondered just how many people Brandon warded and how he managed to keep them all safe.

Byroth said nothing, gaze still straying between them. Finally, he pursed his lips and nodded. "I ... can tell" He seemed to be measuring their responses as he spoke each word. ". . .if someone else . . . has ... a birth gift."

Brandon and Gatiwan exchanged looks. "You can?" Brandon pressed, laboring not to strangle his words.

Even Nightfall, the master of role-playing, could not stop his nostrils from flaring. To a sorcerer, it might prove the ultimate talent, the one he would risk everything to get.

"Like," Byroth continued. "I know you have a talent." He met Brandon's gaze. "But he doesn't." He gestured at Gatiwan, then turned his attention to Nightfall. "And you've got one, too."

Exposed, Nightfall kept his features a blank mask, ignoring the triumphant smile spreading across Gatiwan's lips.

"Do you," Brandon started, then paused to swallow hard. "Do you know what those talents are?"

"No. It just tells me you have them."

Now, Nightfall would not have given up the mission for anything. He had little choice but to commit himself fully to Byroth's safety. If a sorcerer got hold of that power, the talented, including himself, had no place to hide. One by one, the spell would expose them and the sorcerer would feast upon them.

"Thank you," Brandon said. "I know that was hard, and I'm going to tell you something ultimately important, then we will never mention this again. Do not, under any circumstances, ever tell anyone else that you, or anyone you sense, has a birth gift. Yours is a powerful talent, and there's not a sorcerer in any part of the world who wouldn't give his own . . . favorite body part to have it."

"Oh," Byroth said, dark eyes growing round as coins. Nightfall could feel his gaze on all of them as they exited. And, though he knew the boy as much a victim of his natal talent as the rest of them, he could not help feeling like prey.

For the first shift, the Magebane assigned Nightfall to stay with the boy, Gatiwan to sleep, while he patrolled the outside. That suited Nightfall well enough. He could not have slept yet, not with Byroth's revelation hanging over him. The sentry position seemed better suited to him, given his background; but he had no intention of giving away another of his deep dark secrets. So, he accepted the assignment Brandon gave him, pausing only to leave word of his whereabouts with King Edward before settling in with Byroth.

The power of Brandon's words clearly had a daunting effect on Byroth as well. As the room plunged into a darkness the window-less room only enhanced, he rolled and pitched on his pallet, sleepless.

Hunkered near the door, Nightfall understood the boy's restlessness. He fiddled with the stone in his pocket, one of Brandon's spell-breakers. It took the Magebane months to place his natal ability into an inanimate object, and it only worked once. Since he had not preplanned this particular hunt, he had only made two since his last outing and had given one to each of his companions. "Are you all right?"

Byroth's voice floated out of the pitch. "Just scared, I guess. I . . . don't want ... to suffer like that again."

You understand?"

"I understand." Nightfall sought movement, a shadow amidst the darkness, a wariness awakened by something he could not quite sense. "I understand. No one wants to suffer." Preferring quiet, he added, "Try to sleep. You need as much as you can get."

Byroth stopped talking, but he continued to flop around on the pallet. "Maybe if you sang to me?"

Nightfall rolled his eyes and shook his head, both movements the boy could not discern. His prostitute mother had never softened the night with lullabies, and the bawdy bar songs he knew did not seem appropriate. "I don't sing."

"Oh." Byroth slumped into a new position on the ticking. "Would you mind if I did it, then?"

Nightfall shrugged, still trying to make out objects through the gloom. He wanted it dark enough that any sorcerer who got past Brandon would not notice him, but he would need his own vision well adjusted. "Go ahead, if you think it'll help."

"Thanks." Byroth's thin, reedy voice floated into the cold, night air. "Hush, my darling, my sweetest babe—"

Nightfall ignored the boy, thinking of his encounter with Byroth's parents. They had seemed so broken, so utterly devastated by the near-loss of their son; they both clearly loved him fiercely. Nightfall had not lamented his own empty upbringing for many years: the mother who had alternately beaten and cried for him, the men who came and went, the father who could have been any one or none of them. The bond between man and daughter is sacred; but the son, the son, is his true reflection. Nightfall was once the true reflection of the men to whom his mother had sold her body, including the one who had battered her to death. Now, he had found a way beyond the poet/philosopher's claim. How much better have Byroth and his father fared?

It was a question that needed no answer. Nightfall found himself trapped in recollection, the world fading into a dark void around him. His watchfulness withered, replaced by a mental world where word and sound came only from within. Nothing, nothing on this fair earth is precisely as it seems. The placid plow horse, the deadly mosquito growing on crystal pond. In the world of the dreamer, nonsense can become a statement of vivid brilliance. Nothing is what it seems.

Suddenly, Nightfall understood. He closed his hand over the stone Brandon had given him. His fingers tightened with awkward slowness, seeking the laxity of sleep. He felt his head sagging, heavy as lead; and the welcoming darkness of sleep erased the significance from all but his dream-world thoughts. But those anchored him well enough. A wholly mental pursuit, he called on his talent to overcome the heavy inertia magical-fatigue forced upon him, driving down his weight to a sliver of normal. Lighter than feathers, his fingers obeyed him. He drew out the stone, which now seemed more like a boulder, and hurled it toward the boy.

The singing broke off in a high-pitched squeak, and Nightfall's senses returned in an overwhelming rush. He scuttled aside, and something sharp jabbed into his thigh instead of his privates. Restoring his mass, he kicked at his attacker, rolling as he moved. His attack also missed, and he dropped to a crouch, realigning, waiting for the other to reveal himself. It all made sense now. He knew who had attacked Byroth, and he also knew why.

A shadow lunged toward Nightfall, and a knife glinted in the slivers of light leaking through cracks in the

construction. Concentrating fully on the weapon, Nightfall sprang for his attacker. He caught the thin wrist, twisting viciously. The knife thumped to the floor. The boy screamed, pain mixed with frustration. His arms and legs lashed violently, wildly toward Nightfall. Several blows landed with bruising force, but Nightfall bullied through the pain. He dropped his mass again and hurled himself at Byroth. The instant he felt the boy beneath him, he drove his weight to its heaviest. Air hissed out of Byroth's mouth, in a crushed and muted screech.

Expertly, Nightfall sorted limbs and parts until he had Byroth fully pinned and one of his own hands free. He flipped a dagger from one of his wrist sheaths and planted it at Byroth's throat.

"Wh—" the boy started, forcing words around the tremendous burden crushing him to the ground. "What are you going ... to do to me?" The voice sounded soft, pitiful, the plea of a confused eight-year-old.

Nightfall bit his lip. Even in his most savage days, he had never enjoyed killing. He could afford to choose his victims with care, and he based it upon his own judgment of their worthiness. He had never murdered a child, yet this was no regular child. Byroth was a sorcerer, one who had already shown a cruel streak far beyond his years. The first talent he had stolen, from a seven-year-old friend, had given him the means to detect the gifted from birth. He had callously slaughtered an infant, probably for the ability to heal more quickly or to make the huge leaps he had taken to attack Nightfall. He knew some people who could kill an eight-year-old without compunction, but most could never conceive of such a thing. Brutal at eight; merciless by twenty. Nightfall took solace from Jawar's words: Nothing on this earth is precisely what it seems. Byroth is no child; he's truly the demon so many named me.

"What are you going to do with me?" Byroth whispered again, "I'm going," Nightfall said coldly, "to finish the job your father began."

By the time Brandon Magebane and Gatiwan arrived, Nightfall had completed the deed. The two men stared at the little body on the floor, the rumpled sheets, the peaceful look on the corpse's face.

"I couldn't save him," Nightfall said, crouched beside Byroth. He let grief touch his voice, not wholly feigned. Though the others would misinterpret, his words were grim truth.

Brandon crouched beside Nightfall. "Don't blame yourself. The sorcerer got by me, too. I'm not sure how."

Gatiwan grunted. "Some sort of teleportation spell, I'd warrant."

Nightfall lowered his head. Lying came easily to him, though not always for so noble a reason. No one but him ever needed to know that Jawar had tried to kill his own son. If the boy's father could eventually forgive himself, at least he would avoid the condemnation of his wife and neighbors. He had done the right thing, and Nightfall planned to tell him that.

Brandon's hand dropped to Nightfall's shoulder. "At least you managed to prevent the ritual. The talent died with Byroth, and he doesn't have to suffer the limbo of a harnessed soul."

Nightfall nodded philosophically. The ability to become a sorcerer was as innate as the gifts. That curse had destroyed Byroth's soul long before Nightfall had dispatched it to whatever afterlife it warranted. In the process, so many innocents had been saved.

Gatiwansighed heavily. "Let's go report this death to the authorities."

Nightfall and Brandon rose together. "I think," the Magebane said, "that the King of Alyndar will forgive us."