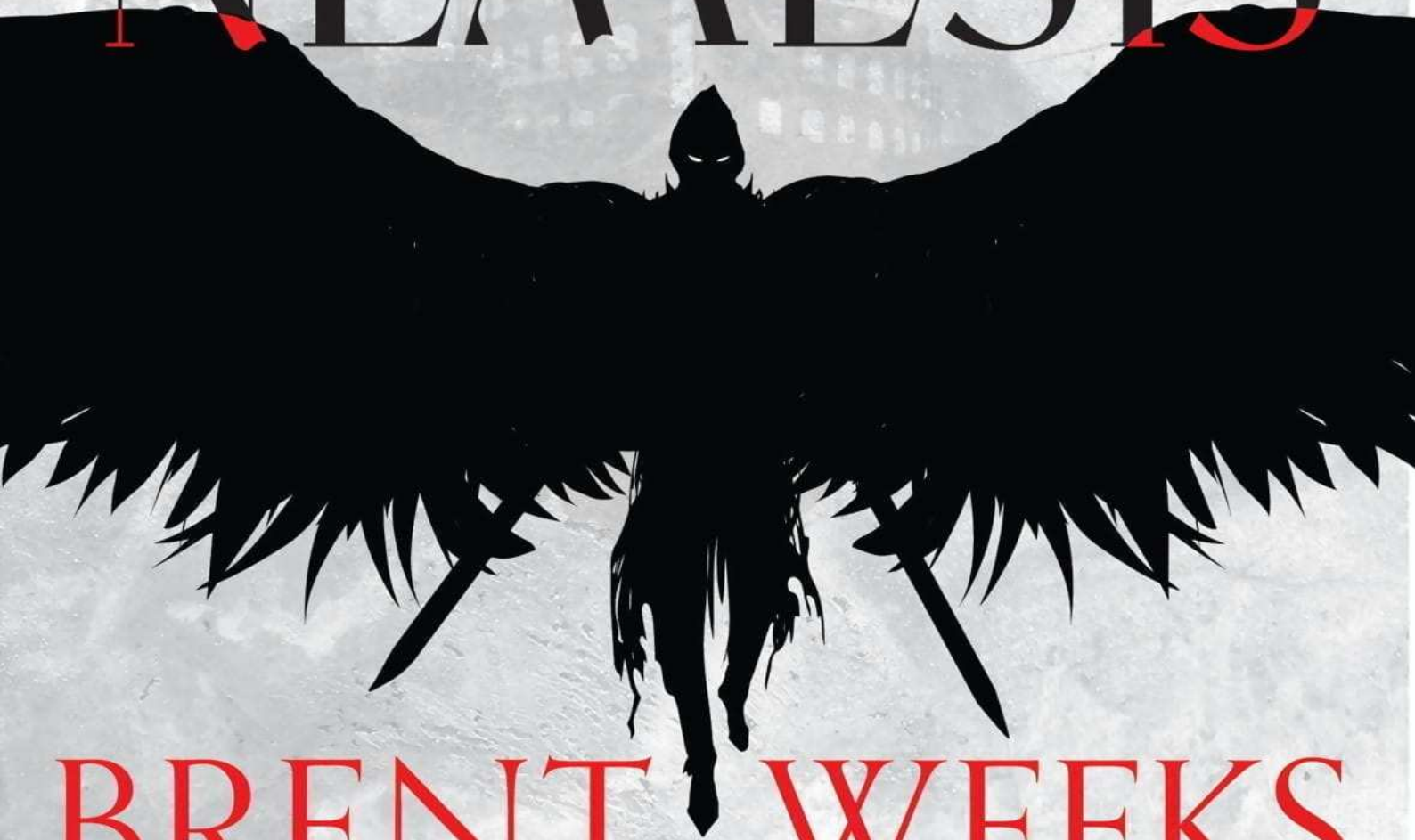


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# NIGHT ANGEL NEWMESIS



BRENT WEEKS

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BRENT WEEKS

NIGHT  
ANGEL  
NEMESIS



The Kylar Chronicles: Book One



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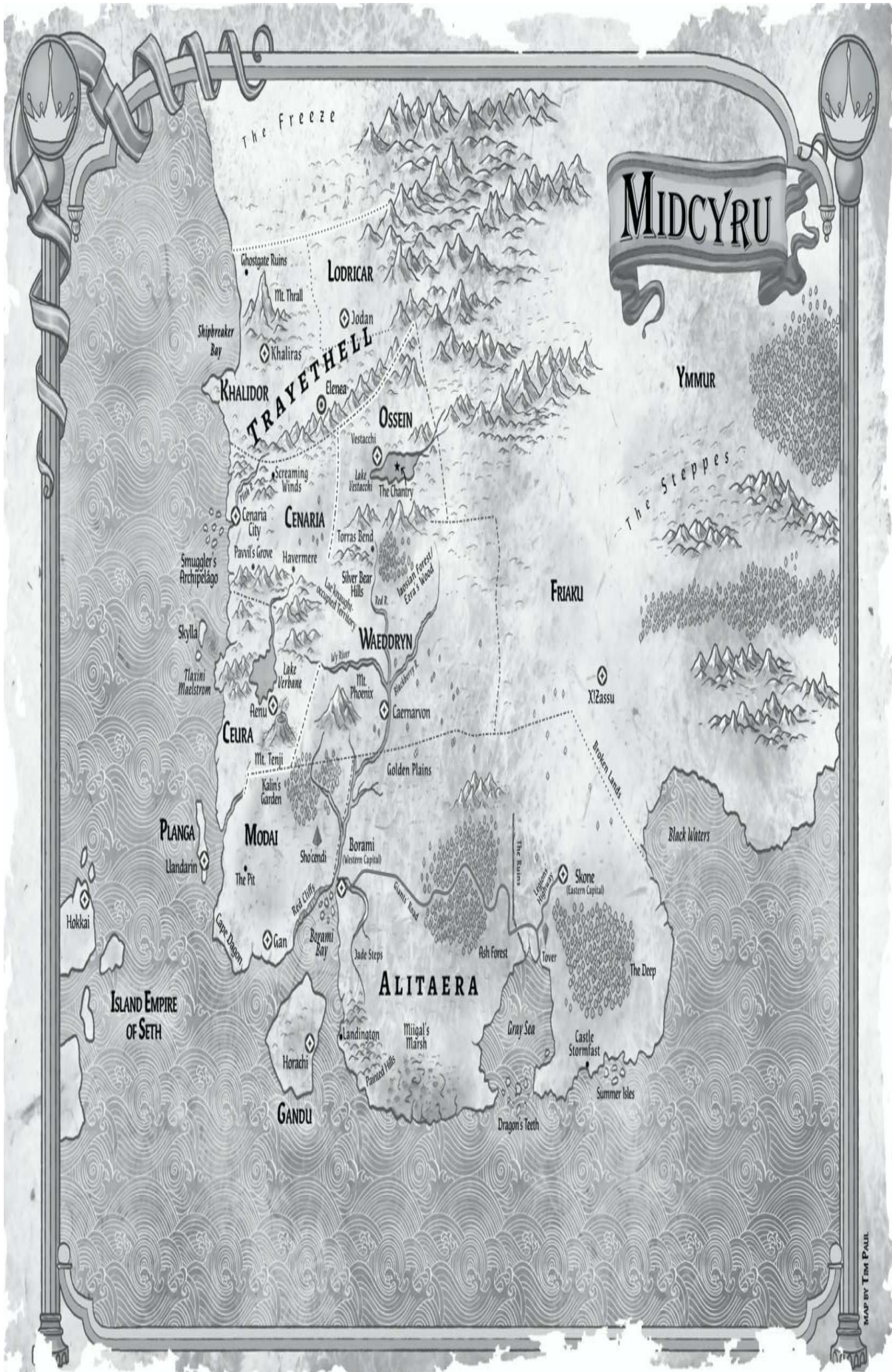
*For those who answered the call—and still pay the price.*

*&*

*For Kristi, who surprises me still with her grit and grace.*

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## Chapter One

# An Innocent Kill

*H*e's young and likely innocent and I wish it made a difference. If he doesn't move in the next three minutes, this kid has to die.

Most people don't understand my work: They think murder is the hard part.

In the beginning, maybe—when you're fourteen years old, hiding under a bed, breath loud, knuckles white on the steel, eyes hot with tomorrow's tears, footsteps approaching.

But even then the hard part wasn't the destined dead; the hard part was the living. They never follow the plan. The living always crowd forward, treading on the heels of those fated to die, as if when *they* meet Death, they'll nod a greeting and pass on by.

My first time, it was a castle maid, coming to check on her worthless lover I'd been sent to kill. He was leaving her; instead she joined him in eternity. My first murder of an innocent.

Now it's this kid.

What's a kid doing out playing ball at this hour? Why's he got to be *here*?

From my perch I feel as if he's a thousand paces away, tiny across the chasm of experience, and I alone atop a cliff—though he's merely on the ground, and I on a rooftop across the alley.

He has a few rocks set out to show the width of the goal. As I watch, he spins around an imaginary defender, bounces the ball once, then kicks it against the compound's wall.

*ka-tunk, ka-tunk, ker-chunk*

Over and over. He puts his hands up and makes a sound like a crowd roaring its approval. Young kid, twelve maybe, all stupidity and big dreams. Maybe he thinks he's found his one way out of these slums.

~Remind you of anyone?~

I ignore the ka'kari speaking in my head. If it weren't so helpful when it wants to be, I'd throw the damned thing as far away from me as I could.

Twilight is a burning fuse, and soon the sun will explode merciless on the horizon, revealing all I've done or left undone. But still I wait, hoping I'll find some third way.

*ka-tunk, ka-tunk, ker-chunk*

He's just a kid.

But he's *not* giving up his practicing.

Knowing what it may mean, am I really going to do this?

Yes, yes I am. She's worth it. They deserve justice.

All right, that's it. Morning's coming. Time's up for both of us.

I move, dropping silently from the roof into the deeper shadows of the alley.

*ka-tunk, ka-tunk, ker-*

Streaking in from nowhere, I snag the ball out of the air. Left-handed, no less. Maybe I missed my calling. I could've been a streetball great.

The kid's jaw drops and his eyes go ridiculously wide at the sight of me. It's a bit satisfying, in that I-feel-proud-that-I-can-scare-children sort of way. Is this one of those dark pleasures of power Count Drake tried to warn me about? I haven't dressed to impress. Tonight—this morning technically—I'm in my mottled black-and-grays with a hood and face mask, an unstrung bow tucked away and a black short sword in a tension-release back scabbard.

~There's something interesting about the ball.~

I look at it. It's leather over a goat-belly air bladder, stitched into nearly a perfect sphere. Kids in this neighborhood usually make do with a wad of rags and twine.

"I'm gonna ask you a favor, kid," I growl. "My business isn't with you. So I'm asking you to leave. Quietly. Please. You understand? There's a man out tonight who'd kill a child."

I pause long enough for him to wonder whether I mean myself or the dirtbag noble who lives in the compound beyond this wall.

*Lives, but maybe I'll remedy that.*

"He give you this?" I ask, spinning the ball on one finger, then another. "Lord Repha'im?"



The kid can't even nod yes, frozen, but I know I'm right. Such gifts are a cheap way for a man to buy loyalty in a slum like this.

"You're the Night Angel," the kid chokes out. "You're Kylar Stern."

The ball's spinning slows, stops, but it stays poised on my fingertip.

They know I'm back in the city. Lord Repha'im knows I'm coming. That explains the magical traps twisting in the air above his walls, keeping me from simply climbing over them. And if this kid knows about me...

"You work for him," I say, taking the ball in hand. "*That's* why you're out here at this hour. You're a lookout."

~Ah. This makes things more complicated.~

I thought by showing myself, I might scare him away, that I could give myself an excuse to spare him. But as a lookout, he's too dangerous for that, isn't he?

He gulps again, but then his eyes dart greedily back to his ball. He should be running away right now, but I have his treasure, and he can't bear to leave it behind. His life, for a stupid ball.

"Kid, what do you call an innocent who helps bad people, even if only a little? What do you call an innocent who gets other innocent people killed?"

He doesn't answer. And still doesn't run.

~I have a better question. What do *you* call that innocent, Kylar?~

*Today? Today I call him an acceptable loss.*

The lines get blurry. But that's what this work is. It's why I hate it, almost as much as I love it.

"They've given you some sort of signal," I say. "A flare or something, if you see me? I'll be straight with you. You give them that signal, you die."

He blanches, but his eyes flick to his ball again. His treasure.

If I have to kill him, the world won't be losing one of its great minds.

"Kid, I have so much power that it scares me. Power so big it needs bounds. I could become worse than the men I've killed. Maybe I already have. But I'm trying here. Trying to be good, you understand? So I've been working on some rules for myself. Trying them out, anyway. Here's one: Never let anyone see my face, or they have to die."

If I let him walk, he'll think my attention has shifted away from him and onto infiltrating the estate. Then he might come back and warn them. But if he runs away, I can draw my blade and chase. He'll have no idea how long I keep coming after him. He probably won't stop running until noon.

I pull my mask off. "What do you think?" I say.



He squeaks but doesn't break. Tough kid. Or maybe just that dumb.

"I know what it's like, kid, working for these kinds of people. I've been there. Here, actually. I grew up not far from here, in a part of the Warrens that makes this place look soft. The streets don't give most kids a chance. I know that. Hate it. So with me everyone gets a chance. One. One chance. Then my judgment is final. I offer mercy first, if I can, then I bring justice, ruthless and red."

He's not running away, not taking the out I'm trying to offer him. Which means I'm going to have to send another body bobbing white down the sour sludge-brown river.

Unless...

A glimmer of it comes to me. My third way. Maybe.

I turn and kick the ball at the goal. I narrowly miss. Dammit. I'm not my master yet. But it does bounce back to the kid, who scoops up his little treasure convulsively.

Facing the wall and the brightening sky, as I put my mask back on against the stench of the river and slums, I ask quietly, "So tell me, what do you choose?"

There's no response but the quiet scritch of fleeing feet on cobblestones. The kid is gone. *Finally*.

I draw blades, snarl, and run after him. He throws a look back as he rounds a corner, his face blanched, eyes wide, stumbling on trash spilling out of an alley. With him in full flight, I stow my weapons, pull the shadows about me, and pursue him on the silent feet of a nightmare.

I have a poison. Knocks out a grown man. I could use it on the kid, scaling the dose down for his weight. But there's a chance it'll kill him. You just can't tell.

In wet work, a mistake can mean a dead kid. If you can't deal with that, you're in the wrong line of work.

After a couple of quick turns, the kid heads down a street parallel to the estate, and I start to think he's wised up and is running home. Then he slips into a space between a dilapidated shop and the compound's pristine wall. There, amid rotting wood and crumbling mortar, he disappears.

My chest tightens.

I find the hole only by the sound of his trousers scuffing along the ground as he crawls. I follow.

The tunnel stinks of dander and cat piss. Unpleasant as it is, it's a good sign. If it were clean, I'd know adults had built and maintained it. Nonetheless, here I take it slow. Not from claustrophobia. Tight spaces only terrify if they also make you feel powerless, and when I was little,

tight spaces kept me safe from the older kids. Nor does a fear of the oppressive dark slow me. Since I bonded the black ka'kari, darkness welcomes my eyes.

No, here is where I'd set the real trap, if I were hunting me.

The big trap I'm currently avoiding by entering the estate this way is directly in and above the walls of the compound. Hanging invisible in the air is some kind of magical snare that appears to be the work of at least three different magi. Two of them were subtle. The third is a fire mage.

Fire mages don't tend to be good at *subtle*.

I don't know what the invisible hooks and bars and switches above the walls do—I'm no mage myself—but I know when you see a bear trap, you don't test it by sticking your foot in.

The *ball*, I realize.

*There was magic on the ball, wasn't there?* I ask the ka'kari. *Why didn't you tell me?*

~You're a big boy now, Kylar. I'm not going to spell everything out for you.~

*That's* what was strange about the ball, not only that it was too expensive for a street kid—the ball itself was the lookout's warning flare. He was probably supposed to throw it over the wall if he saw me.

I push through the tight tunnel as fast as I dare. Then I pause at its exit in the lee of a large rock that leans against an outbuilding, the hole itself overgrown with long grasses. The exit's too small for an adult to pass. Even the kid had barely made it through.

That's the good news. It means this isn't the manor's emergency exit. It means Lord Repha'im may not know it exists.

The bad news is that the estate's dogs aren't ignorant about this hole, and every last one of them seems to have used this corner to mark its territory and empty its bowels.

I hear a distant pounding on a door, and the kid's voice raised, shouting.

I need to hurry.

I scrape at the hard earth with my bare hands, widening the exit. The ka'kari *could* help me with this, but it doesn't, and I don't beg it to. The ka'kari's magic could also blunt the smell of the fresh dog crap the kid stepped in and smeared everywhere as he scrambled out of the tunnel—but again, it doesn't.

Why is it always sewers and bare rock walls with a thousand-pace drop in this line of work? Why don't my jobs take me on pleasure cruises with beautiful women and expensive alcohol and chamber music?

I make it out and step gingerly past all the dog excrement. It doesn't matter if your own body doesn't have any scent—as mine doesn't—if you reek of what you stepped in. My master always told me that it's the little things that'll get you killed.

He worried about the big things, too. And the medium things. And half the time, a bunch of things I'm pretty sure were imaginary.

The bitter business is hell for paranoia.

I flit from shadow to shadow, getting away from the tunnel entrance. I consider climbing to the roof of a low outbuilding but instead stay on the ground to avoid silhouetting myself, quickly pulling the unstrung bow from my pack. I brace the lower limb of the bow on the ground, set the string in its lower notch, step through, bend the bow, and set the upper string. I check my arrows by feel, then nock a swallowtail broadhead.

The boy's not a difficult target. He's twenty paces away, and he's left off pounding on the door as yelling mercenaries charge toward him with their weapons drawn. His precious ball awkwardly tucked under one elbow, he raises his hands in surrender.

The time is now, before they surround him. The reason I chose a broad-edged swallowtail head on this arrow is because if you shoot someone in the torso, the arrow itself points back toward your location.

My intended shot is more difficult by far. If I clip his scrawny neck with the fat swallowtail head, the arrow will keep flying, disappearing into the darkness. There will be the whisper of an arrow in flight, the alarming spray of arterial blood, and he'll go down, silenced before he can make my work too difficult, with little hint what direction his death came from.

I told him the price. I gave him the choice. He chose death, not me.

I draw the string to my lips. There's no wind. Frozen with fear of the approaching mercenaries, the boy's holding very still. I've got this.

I don't know if you've ever shot a recurve bow, but they're not made to be held fully drawn. Yet I hold.

He's a child.

A child protecting a monster. An acceptable loss.

I think of Count Drake. I'm recording this for him, narrating everything to the ka'kari. He'd never have asked me to do this job. He'd tell me I'm imperiling my soul. He'd ask if I was certain I'm doing this for justice.

I am.

But how can I look him in the eye and tell him I killed a child?

I can say kids die in wars, that our war's not really over yet, that it *can't* be over until justice is done.

A huge brute of a guard is moving forward. He'll obscure my shot in about two heartbeats.

One.

I slowly release the tension on the arrow. Lower the bow unshot. Cursing silently, I unstring it, tuck it away.

The door opens, and a man in fine clothes comes out. I lose sight of him as I start moving once more. I hear only snippets of the conversation, questions flying back and forth. I catch glimpses of wild gesticulations as the man in charge interrogates the others.

No, the guards hadn't seen the agreed-upon alarm, so what's the problem?

No, they don't know the kid, but they're new, they don't know plenty of people here.

Then, as I come close enough to hear his words clearly, the tenor of the leader's voice changes. With one hand, he's got the kid by the front of his tunic; the other hand is holding the ball. "Are you telling me the Night Angel *talked* to you? And you didn't give us the signal?!"

The guards exchange glances, some filled with disbelief, others with sudden fear.

As the man drops the kid, I see red sigils on the man's bare scalp lighting up.

Ah, a red mage. Probably the same one whose work I'd seen above the compound's walls.

"I didn't want to lose my ball," the kid says plaintively.

With a roar, the mage hurls the kid's ball over the wall and into the slums beyond.

As the ball flies through the weaves above the walls, a deep red light pulses over the whole of the compound. Tendrils of red light burn as if along oil trails to every window and door of the mansion, which then pulse with the same red. The *snick* of mundane locks slapping shut joins the hum of magics activating, sealing the entire estate.

"My ball!" the kid yells.

Up in the air there's a blur of blue magics and a meaty crunch. The nearest guards flinch, thinking it's an attack. Everyone turns to see a bat drop to the ground in several bloody pieces, its predawn hunt cut short.

The red mage snarls at the kid, "You didn't come over the wall. And you didn't come through the gate. How'd you get in?"

"I, I—"

"Never mind." The red mage abruptly turns to search the darkness. "You little fool, you led him right inside. The Night Angel's already here."