

Chapter Three

Under the protection of myriad lighted torches, which lined the main thoroughfare leading to The Temple, a steady stream of villagers soon began to approach from the forest depths where they made their homes, following the direction of hand delivered invitations to dine and celebrate with the Healers, Temple Guardians and The Elders. Such a summons was not to be ignored, regardless of how exceptional such a happenstance might be or the brisk temperatures of early winter, which might otherwise deter, and nearly every villager of Hwyncdarin turned out in their finest regalia, progressing with unconcealed curiosity along the brightly lighted way as the early winter sun slipped beyond the sill of the world. A crisp evening breeze swept over the vast congregation, hastening their otherwise leisurely pace, as the warmth and glimmering crystalline light of The Temple beckoned.

The immense complex was off limits to all but the most select or to those who came to the ancient halls to increase their spiritual understanding or physical health, yet most inhabitants of Hwyncdarin had never stepped within the glimmering, golden portals and many would spend their entire lifespan without ever glimpsing the sanctuary, Healing Wards or schools of learning inside the surrounding fortified walls. Now, as the extended family of The Fey of the Light drew together and filed through the massive gates in couplets and triplets, a palpable hush descended. Above them, from towering spires and parapets, a bright, clear, exuberant fanfare of horns rang out, welcoming all and echoing into the gathering darkness as if to chase it back into the forest depths by the sheer joy of its harmonious sounds.

As the crowds of curious Fey gathered into the Temple and were ushered by hovering guides upon golden wings into a vast chamber encircled by immense pillars of marble and gold, and shielded from the gales of winter by broad windows of multicolored glass, musicians who were awaiting their arrival upon a small dais in one corner of the room began playing. Large flutes intricately carved of rich-toned woods, silken-stringed lutes that sang as the sweetest birds, deep drums and handheld circles of shimmering bells accompanied two players of the magical, mystical Hwyncdarin. An instrument created by and for The Fey of the Light, the Hwyncdarin reflected in musical tones the mood and emotion of the musician, who, through a great deal of application, could learn to control the music it created and even direct its sounds.

As the festively decorated hall filled with the soft sounds of this ethereal music, neighbors and friends found seats at long tables, or milled about in small groups, or stood in doorways quietly whispering, or watched the musicians playing, or strode about the chamber marveling at the artistry and workmanship of the architecture and stone work; all awaiting the mystery of what the night held in store.

Away from the gathering crowd drawing into the Chamber of Jollity, Gairynzvl enjoyed the liberty of a hot bath and the opportunity to change his clothes. Dressing in those Veryth had left for him, which seemed to have been adapted to fit him perfectly; he stood before a mirror inspecting his unfamiliar reflection while a male attendant laced the garments round his wings. When the attendant finished this solitary task and had departed, a soft knock sounded upon the chamber door.

Starting backwards, Gairynzvl prepared to defend himself, his wings flexing mightily as he tested their strength, but no oppressor or diabolical demon burst into the room intent upon doing him harm and, after a moment, he let out a sharp hiss of breath in exasperation with himself. The soft knock came again, this time slightly more urgently, and he stepped closer to the portal, reaching hesitantly for the handle even as, inwardly, he admonished himself for fearing what he knew was impossible. He was within the halls of The Temple, what could possibly happen to harm him?

“Gairynzvl?” A soft feminine voice spoke on the opposite side of the door; a voice so unlike Ayla’s that he froze once again, his thoughts spinning frantically.

“Are you there?” The voice queried further; a voice familiar to his ears, yet muted and muffled so that he could not ascertain the speaker’s identity. Swiftly, he reached for the handle, twisting it round and jerking the door open as abruptly as he could manage without fore notice; nonetheless, only an empty corridor greeted him. Puzzled, he stepped out into the dimly lighted passageway, his lavender-ice gaze piercing the darkness; his sharp hearing acutely seeking the slightest sound of retreating footsteps or wing beats, but nothing could be seen or heard in the empty hallway other than the soft hiss and sputter of torchlight.

Twisting about, he gazed back into the brightly lit room, seeking shadows that lurked in corners, but there were none and the soft voice he had heard entirely vanished. He stood transfixed, his thoughts twisting with memories as he sought to summon the face of the speaker in his mind’s eye, but before he was successful he could hear footsteps coming towards him from the far end of the hall. Re-affixing his gaze in that direction, he broadened his stance and drew his wings back in preparation for attack; however, he soon let his stance relax as he heard the echo of Ayla’s most pleasing laughter and watched as she came down the corridor, accompanied by Nayina, both walking and fanning their wings with absent-minded contentment.

Upon seeing him, waiting for them in the middle of the passage, their youthful banter grew quiet and Nayina could not contain an astonished gasp at the sight of him, uncertain who the tall, strikingly-winged stranger might be, but Ayla smiled and exclaimed in admiration.

“O Gairynzvl!”

Not the same voice he had heard a moment ago. Not the same voice at all.

Stopping several yards away, they stared with unguarded appreciation at him, surprised not only by his remarkable physical transformation, but also that the Temple tailors would ever create an outfit such as the one he now wore, which seemed wholly suited to a Dark Fey; yet their gifts for tailoring lay not only with cloth and the finest stitchery, but with fashioning clothing to the individual, both in body and in spirit.

The ensemble was as flattering as his own had been, but was made of leather, suede and silken cloth. Black boots came up to the knee over black, leather pants, which had thin vertical stripes of silvery-white stitching, which accentuated the strong shape of his legs as well as his striking stature. A snug-fitting vest of black and deep violet suede accentuated the trimness of his waist and emphasized his

broad chest in the most complimentary manner. Wound over and about the upper portion of his right arm was a single strap of black leather, like bangles, but which concealed a small metal dagger and scabbard. Beneath the vest he wore a shirt of silken violet and jet hue and he had folded a full leather coat, trimmed with metalwork, over one arm.

“This is Gairynzvl?” Nayina asked with disbelief, utterly astonished at the alteration he had undergone, but Ayla only nodded mutely, her own thoughts spiraling in a hazy whirlwind at the sight of him. Smiling awkwardly under their joint stares, he turned aside to extinguish the candles left burning within the chamber he had utilized, then returned to the hallway where they waited expectantly for him, yet even as he stepped out into the hallway once more, Veryth’s easily distinguishable tenor rang out from the far end of the corridor and the three turned to watch his winged approach.

“Valysscopta!”

Bowing formally to him, a Temple Healer and Confidant of the Elders, they smiled and stammered the same word in reply, although only Gairynzvl understood the meaning of the Celebrae he used. He returned the greeting more warmly than he had previously done and smiled dimly as the Healer alighted near them.

“The hour has come. Jocyndrae Vite! Let us be Festive.” In spite of the fact that Veryth made this announcement cheerfully, the newly transformed Dark One beside him could not restrain a grimace at the prospect of celebrating with Fey he could have, on more than one occasion, been forced to cruelly abuse. His misgivings were easily ascertainable through his less than enthusiastic body language and Veryth gazed at him more thoughtfully.

“It *is* right to celebrate, Gairynzvl. Do you not rejoice at being set free from the captivity you endured?”

“Of course I do. You know I do.” Gairynzvl paused, a pained expression overshadowing his handsome features.

“But how can I look into the faces of those gathering below and say ‘Jocyndrae Vite’ knowing what I have done?” Veryth’s expression did not falter as he listened; instead, he merely nodded as if he already knew what Gairynzvl would say.

“And what is it that you have done?” He asked, his tone measured and calm, but the young Fey shook his head with mounting irritation.

“You know very well, Veryth! I have done what all Dark Fey do when they cross into the boundaries of Hwylndarin.” Listening to this exchange from a few feet away, Ayla and Nayina drew instinctively closer together, sensing the recently prevailed Dark One’s agitation even from their distance.

“I know what the ancient texts tell us; what cruelties we are warned The Reviled visit upon younglings and youthful Fey, but I do not know what *you* have done, Gairynzvl.” The Healer’s tone remained soothing, almost serene, but his statement also seemed intentionally obtuse. Gairynzvl considered for a moment, his eyes closing as memories engulfed him; then he shook his head and retorted brusquely.

“I will not name such vile acts as I was forced to commit.”

“Forced?” Veryth queried, his persistently even tone exasperating Gairynzvl further. Stepping closer to the fair Healer, his demeanor suddenly darkened, growing as threatening and confrontational as it had been the night when he had first appeared to Ayla, as it had been when he and Mardan had repeatedly quarreled. Hurling the coat he still carried onto the floor at their feet, he hissed at the Healer angrily.

“Yes, Veryth; I was forced. Is that so difficult to believe?” His voice shook with barely contained ire and Nayina could not restrain the gasp of fear that escaped her at witnessing his abrupt shift in temperament any more than she could keep herself from grasping onto her friend and hiding behind her in fear; yet, Veryth stood calmly and shook his head.

“And does not force create a victim?” Staring back at the Healer while horrific memories scathed through his thoughts like shards of ice, Gairynzvl began to shake with restraint. Veryth continued more insistently.

“Is this not what The Reviled do? They force; they coerce; they impose their own despicable will upon another, leaving despair and ruination behind them.” Coming to within inches of the Healer in a rush of unmanageable frustration and violent wing beats, Gairynzvl hissed furiously.

“I was a part of that ruination, Veryth! Don’t you understand? *I forced! I coerced! I imposed! I* cruelly held another down while the Legion took their pleasure! *I* opened portals so many could defile one! *I* had what was not freely offered!” His voice broke as he recounted his crimes, unable to speak further details, although the recollections of such harrowing acts visibly ravaged him. Silence stretched taut in the shifting light of the corridor while he paced like a caged animal, gasping for breath before he stammered on in a greater effort to explain himself.

“How...how can I look into the eyes of another?Someone I may have treated so *abominably* illand....and expect them to say Jocyndrae Vite?”

Piercing him with the deep jade of his gaze, Veryth placed his hand upon the young Fey’s shoulder, gently drawing him away from the shefey who were plainly distressed by the newly transformed Dark One’s appalling confessions.

“You were forced to undertake these actions?” Gairynzvl raised his hands to cover his face in a vain attempt to block the torment of his own memory and contain the powerful deluge of emotion threatening to undo him. Unable to speak further in the fear of wailing out loud, he nodded beneath the pressure of his hands and attempted to turn away, but Veryth held him by his shoulder and spoke more firmly.

“Then I say you are a victim as much as those upon whom you were forced to commit these acts. *This* is the Darkness the Reviled wield; the inescapable bleakness that claims the heart and mind and spirit. You, Gairynzvl, may have harmed others while you endured under the domination of Demons; I do not deny that you did, but you were forced, coerced and imposed upon just as cruelly as they and you suffer an equal torment.” Shaking with barely controlled emotion, Gairynzvl shook his head repeatedly, comprehending the Healer’s words while being, at the same time, wholly incapable of accepting them.

Moved by the influence of emotion she felt pouring from her friend, Ayla endeavored to escape Nayina’s grasp and offer some measure of aid to him, but even as she strove to fend off her friends restraining hands, Veryth glanced over his shoulder at her and shook his head with a resolution that warned her to come no nearer in spite of her sympathetic nature.

“Any one of us, when facing the dreadful consequences you, no doubt, were presented for disobedience, would choose survival, would choose to undertake almost any action, rather than suffering unspeakable torture and torment. I do not blame you for making such a choice. The Elders do not blame you, Gairynzvl.” Unable to contain the emotion pummeling through him, he knocked Veryth’s gentle hands away and stepped past him into the guttering torchlight at the opposite end of the hall, fully aware that the Healer followed after him, but desperate to escape the searing light of Truth he continued to speak.

“I became a Healer of the Temple to assist those who suffer, whether from illness, grief, or the very great despair caused by The Reviled and I have seen much sorrow and pain in the eyes of others. It is a powerful storm, like those that shake the forest in the breadth of summer, but all storms come to an end, Gairynzvl. Do not the ancient texts tell us: ‘*The shimmer of bejeweled Light ever returns after the storm, transforming what was dark and fearsome into beauty and serenity once again.*’?”

Lowering his hands, Gairynzvl’s lavender-ice gaze locked with immutable jade and he shook his head.

“I would not know what the ancient texts tell us.” Undeterred, Veryth continued in a more encouraging tone.

“Look round you, Gairynzvl. See where you are. Here, among friends; yet, you stand in shadows and it is your choice what you undertake next. No one here shall force you. None shall coerce you.” Gairynzvl gazed back at Veryth, who stood in the glimmering light just on the other side of the shadow that descended upon the far end of the hall where the sputtering torchlight was failing. Darkness had surrounded him, as it had before he had undergone The Prevailation, and he looked outward into the glimmer of the Light with tears wet upon his cheeks.

“You must choose: either to remain a captive to your anguish and remorse and, thereby, gain nothing for all you have risked, or to lay it aside, like a cloak you remove when you come in from a storm. Your freedom, Gairynzvl, as well as the freedom of those whom you long to help, lies in the choice you make.”