

Chapter Six

The forests of Jyndari were vast and Hwyncdarin was set nearly in the heart of the ancient woodland: with good reason. On the coast, storms and high winds could sweep in from the oceans or roll off the heights of the Trynnari Mountains and threaten both the stability of essential Light and the equally indispensable treasures of learning collected through the ages, but deep in the center of the primordial forest storms were seldom a threat or even a consideration. Hwyncdarin had been chosen millennia ago as the seat of all learning and artistry for this especial reason, for here the precious tomes from thousands of years of wisdom could be housed safely and here the artisan's treasures could be protected. Yet infrequently, a significantly powerful tempest would press back the borders of the forest and shatter the tranquility of that peaceful village.

The late November day had been extraordinarily fair, but the night brought with it gales and pouring icy rain of unparalleled fury that tore at the canopy above Hwyncdarin like a giant running its hand over a field of wheat. Boughs and branches crashed down on the village rooftops, rain pelted down like daggers in blinding torrents, and blazing bolts of jagged lightning with resounding clangors of thunder tore the sky repeatedly asunder.

Ayla was guarding the infant of a family called away in grief over the loss of a loved one and had been enjoying a peaceful evening in the quiet solitude of her home with the child. Now, as a bellow of thunder shook her small cottage and the hammering of rain pounded over their heads she held the child close in her arms. She hushed his wailing with a soft, melodic tune, but a furious gust of air blasted open the shuttered windows and shredded her voice. Instantly, her glowing home was pitched into darkness as the gale extinguished every lantern and the child's shriek of fear mimicked her own.

Her thoughts spun in a panic. A mirror stood in darkness in her boudoir, the child's cribroom lay in shadows, and the corridor along which she had to travel to reach either held no window, only darkness that could conceal The Reviled, yet, she knew she had to light at least a single candle and she had to brighten the mirror immediately. Each second it stood in blackness was an opportunity for crossing. Racing to the nearest cabinet, she fumbled with the beeswax taper she found there and whispered one of many, simple spells she used frequently in her daily life.

"Luxay," she said in a commanding tone and the wick popped into flame. The room flickered between shadow and light, yet, it was only a single candle. Should she light more or should she race to the mirror? *A mirror left in darkness cries out to be crossed.* The recitation she had repeated for years in her youth now played over and over in her mind, but she could not risk entering a room with a darkened mirror while holding a baby in her arms, ripe for the taking. She was a Guardian; her first duty was to protect the innocent.

Clutching her candle, she drew a deep breath, kissed the tot's head reassuringly and darted along the hall toward his cribroom. A small lantern stood upon his night table, she only need reach it and light it in order to keep him safe. She stopped at the darkened doorway and peered inside, her sight piercing the ebon shades and her own glimmering aura lending illumination. Stepping into the dark interior, she reached immediately for the lantern, yet even as she touched its cool, brass sheath a shadow contracted in the far corner of the room and she froze in instinctive terror.

The shadow grew darker, denser, then spread outward into the dimness of the room not brightened by Ayla's small candle. Roshwyn in her arms squealed and began to cry louder and she cradled him more tightly, protecting him with her diaphanous wings as her mind spun in alarm.

Light the lantern! Speak the words of protection! Flee!

It was too late.

A Dark One stepped out of the shadows and glared at them with ophidian eyes. The flame in her hand guttered and threatened to go out, but she had no other means of protecting it than repeating her lighting spell with a timorous tone. Shadow swirled about the Dark One like smoke curling around embers and she watched in perfect dread as he slowly reached out his hand toward them.

Light the lantern! Speak the words of protection! Flee!

Years of training screamed at her from within the spiraling depths of her mind, but fear held her transfixed. He stepped closer, his dark eyes glimmering in the fluttering light of her candle, his hand outstretched toward them, toward the child. Light the lantern! Speak the words of protection! Flee!

"Luxay!" Ayla turned toward the lantern and shouted her lighting spell, gasping in relief when the wick snapped into flame, but the Dark One flexed his immense wings and directed a current of air across the room that extinguished both flames, the one she held and the one inside the lantern, in the same moment. Roshwyn screamed and Ayla jerked backwards toward the door, but in an instant, the Dark One was upon them and she stood, paralyzed by dread, her aura shrinking to a feeble glimmer in her terror. The Dark One stared down at her with unreadable eyes, then reached for the squalling child.

"Do not take him." She pleaded; her voice a mere thread. Remarkably, the Dark One paused, regarding her with his snake-like gaze, but the wailing child could not be ignored. He raised his hand once more and uttered a single word in the vile Dalth tongue, the language of The Lost.

“Gvyndlal.” Ayla stared at the demon-fey standing before her with utter surprise. As Roshwyn’s wailing subsided and his squirming ceased, she shook her head and struggled to translate the word he had spoken. Gvyndlal? Sleep? The Dark One had said only Sleep?

“Sleep?” She gazed down at the quiet babe in her arms in amazement, then back at the Dark One still glowering over them. Her aura expanded, illuminating his dark silhouette and she beheld, for the first time, one of The Reviled.

He dwarfed her diminutive stature by at least fourteen inches and had a lithe, powerfully muscular physique. His shoulder length hair was the color of shimmering ice, both white and silver. He wore a full-length coat with burnished gold lacings and buttons, with armor-like plates embellishing his broad shoulders and with dark crimson and vibrant silver silk accentuating the deep lapels of the coat he wore open across his broad chest. The multiple belts and chokers crisscrossing his close fitted vest, his pants and boots; all were black leather with similar burnished gold fittings and, although she never would have imagined a Dark One dressing so strikingly, he wore a double flounced cravat and golden choker with an enormous ruby glimmering from its heart.

His vast dragon-like pinions were deep black and blood-red, stretching fully twice his height in length, yet with vicious spines at each joint and tip they seemed even larger and were hideously frightful to behold. His complexion was the unmistakable sallow pallor of the Reviled.

“Put the child in his crib.” He said unexpectedly, his calm baritone voice sending a violent shiver through her. She hesitated; if she released Roshwyn, he would be lost.

“Put the child in his crib.” The Dark One repeated in a more imposing tone. Ayla jolted into motion, but shook with uncontrolled fear.

“Please, do not take him.” She whined piteously. The Dark One scowled at her impatiently and stepped closer, pointing insistently at the small cot in the corner of the room. She shuddered visibly at his nearness and shrank away, wholly intimidated by him, but he did something Ayla never would have anticipated. He stepped past her towards the doorway and glanced out into the ebon darkness of the cottage.

“Light your candle, speak your protections and leave him in his cradle.” He insisted through gritted teeth, urgency marking his every word. She stared at him perplexed, but only for a moment. Turning to look down upon Roshwyn, she relit her small candle, as well as the lantern, and began her intonation of protection. The words and light made the Dark One step out into the shadows of the hall, as if they sickened him, but they did not banish him back to the realm of Uunglarda as she had always thought they would. When she finished, Ayla turned with a knife of uncertainty twisting in her stomach, but before she had time to consider her next actions, he lunged into the room, grasped her by the wrist and drew her out into the dark corridor.

She recognized her folly immediately. In striving to protect the child, she had unwittingly sacrificed herself. In the darkness of the hall as he dragged her unfalteringly toward the only room in her home containing a mirror, she recalled the dire and dreadful warnings given to all young fey as they entered youth. A mirror never stood in a sleeping chamber for a mirror could never be left in darkness. Should a Dark One cross over, he would open the portal the mirror provided and summon his legion. Then they would cross in untold numbers visiting such vile acts of upon the young fey as could never be named. They would only return into their own realm when the first light of the sun crossed the horizon, leaving ruination and despair in their wake and, oftentimes, death.

“No!” She shrieked in absolute horror, straining against his grasp, leaning away from him, scratching at his hand, beating her wings with every ounce of strength she possessed, but her resistance seemed more an inconvenience to him than a problem. Tugging her along behind him, he strode purposefully into her boudoir, her private chamber of preparation, and turned toward the mirror. Raising his free hand toward the reflecting glass, he arched his wings as if setting himself against a foe and closed his eyes, beginning an incantation that was not spoken in the Dlalthe tongue, but in a language she did not immediately recognize.

Where were all the spells of protection she had learned as a child? How could she have forgotten after repeating them, literally, thousands of times until she was weary of speaking? Her mind spun, her terror choked her, her breath came in ragged gasps, she shook like a willow in a November wind, but she could still hear him speaking in the mysterious language and, in spite of her fear, she could not prevent the shred of curiosity that made her pause and glance up at him. She realized in that brief moment of clarity that his hand around her wrist was not an iron of restriction, clamped around her like a manacle. In fact, astonishingly, he was not hurting her at all.

The mirror creaked like ice shifting on a frozen river, the sound making her tremble more fiercely. He was opening the portal. Desperation inundated her like a spring flood and she pulled against his restraining grasp more vehemently, but he did not even turn his head. Hauling her up against his side, he crossed his arm over her shoulders and pinned her against him, turning the edge of one broad wing toward her furious thrashings to threaten any further resistance with a glinting, ten-inch spine.

Suddenly, her training returned to her and words of protection filled her mind. She gasped them out in haste, but her voice was little more than a choked squeak. Regardless of the weakness in her chanting however, his reaction was instantaneous. Pausing in his invocation, he turned his head to look down at her with obvious irritation, pressed the cruel barb on his wing to the soft skin under her chin and raised his hand from her shoulder to cover her mouth. There was nothing more she could do to protect herself. She had been defeated in her first and only battle. She knew she was utterly lost.

Turning back to the mirror, he began again, the unrecognizable words ringing in her ears like chimes spinning her senses. She was falling under his spell. She was unable to struggle, unable to speak her own protection, unable to do anything other than listen as

he opened the portal and wrought her destruction. Yet even in her panic-stricken state, she could not prevent her overly inquisitive mind from lucidly noting that his hand, pressed over her mouth, was not hurting her. He did not bruise her lips under the ferocity of his contact; he did not wrench her head backward with cruel disregard; he did not restrict her breathing. He was simply thwarting her ability to speak.

Why was he being so shockingly careful about not hurting her? Why had he permitted her to protect Roshwyn with Light as well as spell? Why had he pulled the nursery door closed quietly before proceeding to drag her down the hallway toward the mirror? She could not comprehend his entirely incongruous behavior. Moreover, she had always been told The Reviled were cold-blooded, heartless creatures; that the touch of a Dark Fey was icy as death itself, yet, pressed up against him as she was his surprising warmth was undeniable.

The mirror creaked more loudly, drawing her back to the horror of her present situation and, with these calamitous musings confusing her thoughts, she strained to see around his vast pinions and broad shoulders to watch the mirror with morbid curiosity.

Tiny shards like crystalline ice were stretching across the reflective pane, each splinter a minuscule prism that reflected any spark of light in the room, even the ineffectual glimmer of her diminishing aura and his ethereal, dark crimson glow. With each word he spoke, the crystals increased, growing in number, dimension and intensity until they spread across the glass like frost on a winter window. Scraping and creaking like snow scrunching underfoot on the coldest day, the shards in the mirror began to reflect their own luminosity and as he continued to speak the luster of the mirror intensified.

Then the mirror resounded with a deafening crack and she flinched abruptly away, a sharp cry escaping her muffled mouth. Even the Dark One recoiled from the force of the sound and fell silent. Petrified, she squeezed her eyes tightly closed and held her breath. He had opened the portal; his kind would soon rush in and then she would pray for death long before it would come. In her terror, she could not breathe, blackness swirled at the edges of her mind, and her knees grew weak. Almost imperceptibly, she began to collapse, sliding down the length of his strong frame with no measure of power left within her to break her fall.

Without a sound, the Dark One turned his head to look down at her and released her. He did not drop her or throw her to the floor like a worn out plaything; he took her by the shoulder and by the hand and lowered her to the floor at his feet. Her thoughts swirled at this additional peculiarity and, before she lost herself to fear completely and was swallowed up by blackness, she opened her eyes to peer up at him wanly, utterly bewildered.

The room was bathed in Light! The mirror was intact, not lying in a multitude of shattered pieces on the floor as she had expected, and, somehow, it stood aglow with

radiant, incandescent Light that sparkled and reflected in its own shimmering! Blinking woozily in the brilliance, she gazed up at him and drew a deep breath.

What had he done?