

# HUMAN FRAILTIES

A "LOVE HAS NO BOUNDARIES" STORY



JAYE MCKENNA

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## HUMAN FRAILTIES

**By Jaye Mc Kenna**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# HUMAN FRAILTIES

By Jaye McKenna

## Photo Description

The man stands against a fog-shrouded landscape lit by a full moon shining through thin clouds, his long, black hair whipped by the wind. His stance is open but ambiguous—it could be welcoming or threatening—and one foot rests upon a glowing jack-o-lantern. Under his open robe he wears only leather pants and high boots. In one hand he holds a staff topped with a skull; above the other hand float glowing, arcane symbols.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

Darkness has been a part of my life since I can remember.

*I never understood why it was so hard for me to be part of the bright world. The Internet couldn't satisfy my need, so I went to this arcane little book shop. The old hag behind the counter gave me a book, where she said I might find the answers to my questions.*

*Supposedly, this book opened your power to summon entities to obtain knowledge. One in particular drew my attention. Its name was unpronounceable, but I could not bring it to me without saying its name aloud. Its symbols—a black dog, a pumpkin on fire, and a heart surrounded by thorns—were a potent siren song. They simply drove me crazy.*

*When I finally untied my tongue and called, it didn't come to me. Instead, it took me to a sinister realm.*

Forget my questions. All I want to do now is drop to my knees and worship him.

*Sincerely,*

*Gabbo de la Parra*

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy, other world

**Tags:** sorcerer, angels/demons/gods, magic users, soulmates or bonded, slave, prisoner, psychic ability, snarky banter

**Content warnings:** dubious consent

**Word Count:** 39,947



# HUMAN FRAILTIES

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## PROLOGUE

### *Exile*

Ashnavayarian became aware by slow degrees. At first he thought he dreamed or remembered, but as the sensory input became more and more intrusive—cold, hard ground beneath him, chill wind brushing over bare skin, pain in his head, and the distant howling of a pack of rhyx—he realized that this was not a dream or an imagining, but a reality.

A familiar enough reality; he often wore a human form when he moved through the human worlds. But this was not the reality he'd expected. He'd expected to find himself in his natural element, dancing through the leythe on its ever-shifting energy currents.

Opening his eyes didn't help much. The night sky was dark and a veil of clouds partially obscured the moon. One moon. That narrowed down the number of places he could be. He peered into the darkness. All he could make out were oddly shaped rock formations and dead trees reaching skeletal fingers toward the sky.

He forced himself to a sitting position and bit back a grunt of pain as cold, stiff muscles protested the sudden movement. Muscles...

Curious, he ran hands over bare skin. Human, definitely. And... male. Nicely put together, too, if he was any judge—and he was. The body fit in a way that was familiar. So familiar that he knew without looking that the long hair tickling his back was blue-black, and that the very human eyes that were currently struggling with the darkness were violet. It was the same body he'd been using when...

He reached for the leythe, attempting to draw the pure energy straight from the Void, only to find that he could no longer touch the Void. The energy that

came to hand was only the mere trickle he could draw from the earth around him rather than the rushing, raging torrent of the Void. The taste of it told him exactly where he was.

It also brought back the memory of Jhara's rage.

For it was Ashnavayarian who had shown the first human colonists of this world how to draw the leythe from the earth around them. And it was Ashnavayarian who had taught them how to shape it and work it, to make it serve their needs.

But it was human ingenuity that had inspired them to use it as a weapon. Human nature that had driven them to turn that weapon upon one another. Human greed that had led them to breed their brightest and most powerful for ever-greater control over the leythe.

And it was decidedly *human* hunger for power that had sparked the flames of the war that was inexorably spreading across the Westlands.

*Not* his fault.

He'd only given them that first spark of knowledge.

What they had chosen to do with it, well, that was hardly his affair, was it? He just liked to watch the flames kindled by that spark as they blazed a burning trail through the leythe.

Of course, Jhara didn't see it that way, did she?

Jhara accused him of disturbing the delicate balance of the leythe and sought to punish him for his meddling. She had exiled him to human form and crippled his ability to manipulate the leythe until he learned such abstract human concepts as mercy, compassion, and love.

Things Ashnavayarian had always counted as human frailties.

Hot and very human rage coursed through him. He lifted his face to the night sky. "Jhara, you bitch!" he screamed. "There is nothing you can teach me about your human children that I don't already know. *Nothing!*"

\*\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER ONE

*The Black Dog*

Tor MacAran set the broom back in its spot in the storage closet and let out a sigh of relief. Friday night. Work was done for the week, so he could head home to his apartment for some much-needed time alone. He shut the closet door and headed back to the sales floor where he had one last look over the bookshelves. He straightened a few volumes he'd missed earlier. Derrick was working tomorrow, and Tor knew he'd hear about it come Monday if things weren't nice and tidy for opening.

"Toryn MacAran, isn't it your birthday tomorrow?"

He'd thought he was alone, so he nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of the female voice behind him. A familiar voice, to his relief, and he vaguely remembered Derrick mentioning something about Angie coming in to work in the office tonight. She did all of the shop's accounting, because while Derrick might know old and rare books upside-down and sideways, the man couldn't do numbers to save his life.

Tor turned around and presented her with the scowl that was usually enough to drive off unwanted attention. "I'm pretty sure there's some kind of law against you poking around in the personnel files."

"I do payroll," she said with a bright smile. "It's an occupational hazard. So... birthday? On Halloween, no less. Big plans?"

Tor shook his head and turned back to the shelves, fussing over the placement of a few older volumes to cover his discomfort. He drew in a deep, calming breath, and concentrated on the smell of old books that permeated the shop. There was something magical about that smell. It never failed to conjure pictures in his head of all the different lands he'd escaped to in the course of his life. Middle Earth, Narnia, Darkover, Valdemar—

"Small plans?"

Angie hadn't gone away. In fact, she'd moved to stand next to him. He shook his head again, then looked down at the floor so his long, black hair covered his face and hid the silver-gray eyes she always commented on.

"Any plans?"

"Yeah," he said. "Absolutely. I got... I'm going..."

"Home to your apartment?" she said gently. "Like you did last year?"

He didn't answer. Didn't want to hear what she'd have to say about it.

After a brief silence, she said, "I'm going to a Halloween party tomorrow night. Would you like to come with me?"

He shook his head harder. A party... with all those people he wouldn't know. He had no desire to make the effort to get in with a new crowd, only to find out that he didn't fit in with them, either. "Angie... I appreciate the offer, I really do, but I don't think—"

"Tonight, then. Just you and me. We'll go out for a drink. We've got time, and we can't let your birthday pass without some kind of celebration."

He wanted to ask why not, but his tongue seemed to be firmly stuck to the roof of his mouth.

She lifted a hand and parted the curtain of his hair. Her pretty blue eyes softened as they searched his face. "I'm sorry, Tor. I don't mean to be pushy. I just... There's a very sweet guy buried under all that silver and black and eyeliner, and I'd like to see him smile once in a while."

He pulled away and let his hair fall over his face again. "I do smile."

"When?" When he didn't answer, she continued, "You're so alone, Tor."

"I'm fine. Really. I like my life just the way it is." He said it with such conviction that he almost believed it himself. Almost.

Angie let her breath out in a soft sigh. "Okay. Just... call me if you change your mind. I hate to think of you spending your birthday all by yourself."

"Okay," he said. But he wouldn't change his mind.

And his birthday wouldn't be any different from any other day.

\*\*\*\*

Half an hour later, Tor leaned on the worn wooden railing of the bridge and stared down into the dark, swirling water below. The wind carried the scent of burning leaves in from the fields beyond town, and the silver light of the nearly full moon danced like glitter cast upon the surface of the river.

He walked this way almost every night. On those nights that he felt the most alone, he would stop on the bridge to look down at the water and then gaze up at the stars and wonder why he hurt so much.

Deep inside, where no one could see and no one could touch, there was an emptiness that gnawed at his soul. An emptiness that had been there ever since he could remember.

As a child, he'd tried to fill the void with books and television and make-believe. As a teenager, he'd tried drugs, alcohol, and sex. All those things had passed the time and helped him forget for just a little while, but nothing he'd tried had ever come close to being able to fill that empty, aching darkness.

Every day it seemed to grow a little bit bigger and gnaw its way a little bit deeper into him. And every night as he stared up at the stars, he wondered when the void would grow big enough to consume him entirely, and what would be left when it had.

He'd searched all his life for something he had no name for. He was about ready to give up looking, because how did you fill a space that you couldn't even see the shape of?

The shadows deepened as a cloud passed over the moon. Tor looked at the dark water churning below him, and it occurred to him to wonder why he even bothered getting up in the morning. He'd been in pain for twenty-six—no, twenty-seven, tomorrow—years, and he'd never understood why.

Something nudged against his legs, something warm and furry shoving its way between him and the railing. He stumbled as it pushed him back toward the center of the bridge. When he'd caught his balance, he found himself staring into a pair of glowing violet eyes belonging to the biggest, blackest dog

he'd ever seen. It blended so well with the darkness that it was hard to make out the shape of it, but it was definitely a dog of some kind.

The dog stared back at him. Something about the animal tickled a scrap of memory buried so deep he couldn't take hold of it. *Something* that was achingly familiar. He closed his eyes, searching deep, and came up with...

A sense of comfort and safety, like an old teddy bear. The dog felt like something that had been with him all his life. Something that had always been there in the darkest corners and the deepest shadows, only ever seen out the corner of his eye, in glimpses so fleeting he doubted his senses.

A presence that was so constant he took it for granted.

But surely if he'd seen something like this in waking life, he'd have remembered it. Wouldn't he? The sheer size of the thing, and those eerie eyes, he'd remember those.

Dreams, he decided. No matter how much they felt like memories, those fleeting impressions of violet eyes glinting from the shadows could only have come from his dreams.

The dog stared back at him. Its tail thumped once on the pavement.

He reached out to touch it, but his hand met empty space. A moment later the dog coalesced out of the air some five feet away, eerie violet eyes still fixed on him.

Tor let out a shaky breath. Definitely dreaming. He must have gone home from work and fallen asleep in front of the computer again. "Easy, boy. I'm sorry. I won't try to touch you again."

The dog cocked its head, and its tail thumped again. It rose and turned toward town, then looked at him over its shoulder as if to say, *Come on, then.*

"What, you want me to follow you? I just came from there. I was heading home."

*Home to what?*

He wasn't sure where the thought came from, but it stopped him cold because really, what was there at home? His apartment held nothing but the

promise of another night of mindless internet surfing, and maybe a movie that he'd fall asleep in front of because the sound of people talking made him feel less alone.

“Yeah, all right. I guess I don't have anything better to do. And there's something really odd about you. I feel like I've seen you before, but I'm pretty sure I'd remember if I had. Those eyes of yours are enough to creep anybody out.” He frowned and shook his head. If he *wasn't* dreaming, standing in the middle of the street having a conversation with a stray dog had to be a symptom of something. Maybe Angie was right. He needed to get out more.

The dog trotted forward half a dozen paces, then turned and looked back. Tor followed after it, feeling like a fool one minute, and wondering where it was taking him the next.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Book*

He'd never seen the shop before. Of that he was certain. He walked down this street almost every day, so he'd have noticed a new bookshop, especially wedged between the soda fountain and the post office as this one was. And even if he had been oblivious enough to miss it, Derrick would surely have had something to say about it. The town of Sienna could barely support one bookshop, let alone two.

The dog sat down in front of the door. Its tail thumped the pavement twice, and those luminous violet eyes fixed on him. Tor examined the shop front, wondering how he could possibly have missed it. It looked like it belonged there, and had for some time. The wooden door was weathered, with flaked and fading red paint. The front window was glazed so he couldn't see in, but there were cobwebs lurking in the corners. Old-fashioned lettering on the window proclaimed, *Madame Jhara's Books and Antiquities: Occult, Witchcraft, Legend, Leythe*.

*Leythe*? Tor wondered what that meant. Legends and myths, ancient civilizations, and the occult, all of those things fascinated him, but in all his reading, he'd never come across that term.

There were no hours posted, but the glazed window glowed with light. He looked at the dog. It returned his gaze expectantly.

"Do your people work here?" he asked it.

Another tail thump.

"Well, it looks like somebody's working late. I guess you can't open the door by yourself, can you?"

The dog cocked its head and waited with an air of infinite patience. Tor pushed the door open. The dog trotted in ahead of him and disappeared behind the counter.



It was an old-fashioned wooden counter, scarred and warped with age. An old woman in a long black cloak stood behind it. She had long white hair and violet eyes exactly the same shade as the dog's.

Tor's eyes settled on her for a moment and he frowned. Had she been there all along? His gaze darted about the shop as he took in the bare, cracked walls and the lack of bookshelves or merchandise of any kind. He turned his attention back to the old woman. "I... sorry to disturb you. Your dog..." He gestured vaguely, looking around, but the dog was nowhere to be seen.

Her eyes met his, deep and timeless, full of secret shadows and dark knowledge. Something huge and ancient whispered into his mind, unfolding inside him, probing every corner of him. He felt naked before it. It was too big, too much, and he shivered while all his darkest thoughts and most secret longings were unearthed and laid bare to shrivel in its cold light.

He drew breath to scream, but as quick as the feeling had come, it was gone, leaving him shaken and breathless.

She smiled, a small, enigmatic smile. "Good evening, Toryn." Her voice was deep and rich, nothing like what he expected from a woman of her age. And—

"How did you...?" His own voice sounded faint and squeaky. He swallowed hard and tried again. "How did you know my name?"

One shoulder lifted in a delicate shrug. "It is written in the leythe." And in his dream, that made perfect sense. Because this had to be a dream, didn't it? People couldn't really get into your head like that, could they?

Not really wanting an answer, he shied away from the question. He turned instead to more practical matters. "How long has this place been here?"

"Since the beginning."

"I've never seen it before."

"Ah, but you didn't need to see it before, did you?"

"Where are all the books?"

Again, that smile. “You don’t need *all* the books, young Tor. You only need one.” She reached beneath the counter and drew out an old, dust-covered book.

It was about the size of a textbook, but bound in scarred black leather and held closed by a metal latch so old and tarnished it was hard to tell what metal it might actually be. Silver runes adorned the cover and spine. They slithered and twisted across the cracked leather surface as he watched, rearranging themselves to form letters and words he could read. *The Book of the Leythe*.

“What is this?” He couldn’t take his eyes off of it.

“Take it,” she said. “All the answers you seek lie within this book—and within yourself. You have only to speak the name of the entity you wish to question. It will appear and answer you.”

“Entity?” he asked faintly.

She waved a gnarled hand. “Spirit, demon, angel, god... what you call them doesn’t matter. They will do you no harm. The same cannot be said for the knowledge they impart. Be careful what questions you ask, young Tor, for the answers you receive *will* change you.”

When he didn’t make a move to touch the book, she picked it up and pushed it into his hands. “Take it,” she said again. “Within its pages you may finally learn the shape of what is missing from your life.”

“But—”

Between one blink and the next, she was gone, and he was standing on the pavement outside the shop.

Only he wasn’t outside the shop, because the shop was gone, too. There was the post office... and there was *Frankie’s Soda Fountain*... no sign that *Madame Jhara’s Books and Antiquities* had ever been there.

Except for the weight of the book in his hands.

\*\*\*\*

Tor locked the door of his apartment behind him and leaned heavily against it. He’d walked all the way home convinced that he was dreaming.

Now he wasn't so sure. Last night's dishes were still piled in the sink. Yesterday's black T-shirt was draped over the kitchen chair where he'd tossed it before his shower. This morning's coffee cup sat on the table, half full, just as he'd left it. His dreams were never this mundane. They were dark and frightening, full of shadows and things barely glimpsed.

He pushed himself away from the door and set the book on the table, then ducked into the kitchen. If he went about his normal routine, maybe it would disappear. Or maybe he would wake up. He found some leftover takeout in the fridge. It smelled all right, so he heated it up in the microwave and ate it standing up. He did the dishes, cleared off the counters, and wiped them down. When the kitchen was spotless, he took a deep breath and went back to the dining room.

The book lay where he'd left it, waiting for him.

Tor approached the table slowly and stared down at the worn cover. The book had to be at least a hundred years old, maybe more. It looked like it belonged in a museum. He wondered if he even dared open it. Derrick had a few old texts like this, their yellowed pages thin and crumbling with age. They were kept in sealed, humidity-controlled glass display cases in the back of the shop.

He reached out a tentative hand to open it, then stopped. He could just hear Derrick moaning about the acid on his fingers and what a tremendous responsibility it was, preserving the past for future generations. Maybe he should just set it aside. He could bring it in to work on Monday, and see what Derrick thought of it.

No. The minute he gave the idea serious thought, a sense of wrongness twisted deep inside him. This wasn't meant for Derrick. It was something special, meant for him alone.

Besides, Derrick would never believe him if he said where he'd gotten it. And Derrick would want to know. He was like that, especially about books.

Tor took a deep breath and sat down at the table. Something that was half dread and half anticipation curled quietly in his gut.

*Nothing will happen*, he told himself.

But...

*Within its pages you may finally learn the shape of what is missing from your life...*

She knew. A lifetime of trying to make sense of the emptiness, the not-belonging, the wrongness that was his existence, and somehow she *knew*.

He didn't believe in fate or destiny.

But maybe...

He brushed trembling fingers over the latch. It was cold and rough. The moment he touched it there was a strange sense of pressure around him. It was as if the air itself was holding its breath, waiting with the same sense of infinite patience as that damned dog. He half expected the latch to break or be stuck with age and disuse, but the catch released easily enough.

He opened the book and paged through it. There were very few words, and those were written in runes that he couldn't read. But there were pictures the like of which he'd never seen before. They looked like paintings. Given how old the book had to be, they were in amazing condition. He would have expected the colors to be faded with age, but they were clear and bright and looked almost wet, as if the artist had only just stepped away from the canvas. He turned the pages slowly, glancing at each in turn, and then stopped cold as one caught his eye.

*This one.*

The image on the page burned itself into his mind. He couldn't tear his eyes from it. The churning in his gut stopped and an absolute calm settled over him like a warm, comfortable blanket as he studied the picture. *This is the one.*

It wasn't the colors that drew him. They were dark and somber, and revealed an eerie, fog-shrouded landscape lit by a full moon as it shone through a parting in the veil of clouds.

It wasn't the images that drew him, although they were haunting and disturbingly familiar. The black dog he'd met on the bridge stared at him from

the shadows with baleful, violet eyes. And the thorn-covered vines twisted into the shape of a heart...

He didn't need to take off his shirt to know that it was identical to his own tattoo.

Tor touched his chest, rubbing the spot over his heart. He'd gotten the tattoo two years ago after the first serious relationship he'd ever risked had crashed and burned. It was supposed to be a reminder, inked into his flesh so he'd never forget how much it hurt to be betrayed by the one person you'd shared your deepest soul with.

How could a tattoo of his own design be in a book that had to be far, far older than he was?

That question, while compelling, wasn't nearly as disturbing as the thing that had captivated him in the first place.

No, the thing that really grabbed him was the man.

He was every fantasy Tor had ever had. If he could have put a face and a body to the dream lover his imagination conjured when he touched himself under the covers at night, this would be it. It was as if someone had rummaged around in his head and pulled the man right out of his deepest dreams.

The memory of something huge unfolding in his head flitted through his mind, but he pushed it away to focus on the picture instead.

The eyes that seemed to lock onto his own were an intense violet, like the eyes of the dog and the old woman who'd given Tor the book. The man's stance was open, but ambiguous. Tor couldn't decide if it was supposed to be threatening or welcoming; it seemed to shift from one to the other from moment to moment.

The black robe he wore was open at the front and pushed back over his shoulders, revealing a nicely muscled chest and sculpted abs. Under the robe, he wore only snug leather pants and high boots. Tor licked his lips and his jeans began to feel uncomfortably tight.

Long, dark hair flowed out behind the man, floating around his face in the wind. And that mouth... God, he could just imagine those full, kissable lips wrapped around his cock, those beautiful eyes half-closed in ecstasy...

With a whimper, Tor let his hand creep down to rub himself through the fabric of his jeans. He closed his eyes, letting his mind drift with the fantasy, and tried to imagine that face alive with passion. He wondered what the man would sound like, crying his pleasure to the dark sky above.

A cold thread of laughter twisted in his mind and he jerked his hand away, face flaming.

When he focused on the page again, his breath caught in his throat. The man in the picture stared back at him with an expression of wry amusement.

He tore his gaze from that compelling stare and scanned the rest of the page. His eyes settled on the runes above the picture. He couldn't read them at first. They were similar to the symbols on the front of the book, and as he studied them they began to writhe and wriggle across the page. The runes rearranged themselves into English letters forming what might be a name, but not a name Tor had ever heard of or had any idea how to pronounce.

*Ashnavayarian.*

What the hell was that? Tor had read a lot of mythology and ancient legends, but he'd never come across a name like that. He wasn't even sure what culture it belonged to.

He wondered what would happen if he spoke it.

Answers to his questions, that was what the old woman from the shop had said.

But which questions did she mean?

The ones about why there was a gaping hole in his soul, a dark void that he felt as an aching emptiness every day of his life?

The ones about who his parents were and why they'd left him on the street to be placed in a string of foster homes, none of them really bad, but none of them any damned good, either?

Or the wholly inappropriate one that he just could not get out of his head:  
*What do I have to do to get you to fuck me until I can't remember my name?*

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER THREE

*The Summoning*

For the rest of the evening, Tor tried to forget about the book, but something kept drawing him back to it. He'd start to do something else only to find himself standing by the table staring down at the man in the picture. Worse, every so often, he'd hear himself trying to twist his tongue into the shapes the letters above the picture demanded.

He couldn't decide what it was that kept drawing him back. Was it the man? Painting or not, he had to be the hottest thing Tor had ever seen. Was it the old woman's vague promise of answers? Or was it something else?

He shivered. It was Halloween tomorrow. Maybe he was just letting all the seasonal weirdness get to him. He'd spent a lot of time helping customers in the occult section of the shop over the last few weeks. Seasonal weirdness didn't explain the book, though. Or the dog from his dreams. Or the shop that suddenly appeared where one had no business being.

"Ash... Ashna... Ashanavarian..."

Shit. He was doing it again. He snapped his mouth shut, unable to decide if he was relieved or disappointed that he couldn't seem to get his brain wrapped around the pronunciation. There were no accent marks to give him a clue as to what the name was supposed to sound like. He'd even tried Googling it and come up with absolutely nothing.

Which meant what?

The... entity?... was part of a mythology so ancient that no one remembered it?

Then who had put the picture in the book?

He stared at the picture again and blinked hard. Had the man just rolled his eyes?

No.



He was seeing things. He glanced at the clock, noting that it was nearly midnight. As much as he wanted to figure out this puzzle, he knew he was too tired to spend any more time on it tonight. He needed to get to bed.

Tor rose from his seat and went about his nightly ritual. He checked the locks, setting the heavy steel bar in the track of the sliding glass door that led out to the balcony, and turned off the lights.

He brushed his teeth and re-checked the locks. Then he decided that one last look before bed wouldn't hurt. It might even inspire his dreams. He glanced down at the book, still open to the page that had captivated him, and did a double take. The man now stood with his foot resting on top of a glowing jack-o'-lantern. He stared right at Tor with one dark eyebrow raised in challenge.

Tor looked at the clock again. Two minutes past midnight.

His birthday.

Halloween.

He chewed on his lip for a moment, considering, then gave it one more try.

“Ashnavayarian.”

The air around him shimmered, and a crack of golden light tore through the space in front of him. A wave of dizziness washed over him. Tor dropped to his knees, staring at the light that spilled through the crack and swirled around him. He saw colors he had no names for, shadows and shapes that were twisted and wrong.

His kitchen grew dim as more cracks rent the air. The world splintered into fragments and Tor felt his body disintegrating, turning into light and color and shadow...

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He woke to bitter cold. The ground beneath him felt like lumpy stone, and the wind was chill. His eyes snapped open and widened as he found himself staring out at a landscape that was all too familiar.

The picture in the book.

He squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them again.

The odd rock formations. The fog-shrouded night sky. The moon. He stared up at the moon. It was subtly wrong. Bigger. The color was wrong too, more violet than it should be. And shouldn't he see dark smudges on its surface? This moon looked more like the one in the painting than the one he saw outside his window at night.

In fact, everything looked a lot like the painting, except—

A deep voice spoke behind him, a soft flow of liquid syllables that sounded too beautiful to be spoken in such a harsh tone.

Tor rolled over and froze.

The man from the book stared down at him, and he did not look pleased.

Tor's mouth fell open. He could not take his eyes off the man. God, he was even more beautiful in real life.

And not exactly like the picture, either. He wore a black cloak rather than a robe. Under it was a leather vest with what looked like a soft, long-sleeved shirt underneath. Sensible, on a chill night like this, although Tor wouldn't have minded seeing if the body underneath the clothing was as gorgeous as the picture had suggested.

He struggled to sit, but a wave of dizzy nausea pushed him back down. He groaned and closed his eyes.

Tor felt a hand take his own. His eyes flew open as the dark void inside him was suddenly filled. For the first time ever there was peace in his heart, and the pain that had always torn at him was gone. The man's brilliant violet eyes widened, then locked onto Tor's.

Captivated by that gaze, Tor could not have looked away if he'd wanted to. He felt like he was falling into those eyes, drowning in them. They held him, frozen, while words poured into his head—images, connections, structure—an explosion of information coalescing into something that almost made sense, as the pattern of a language he'd never heard before was mapped out in his brain.

The information flow stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Tor shivered and blinked, feeling strange and disoriented.

The man dropped his hand and broke that magnetic eye contact. Tor could have wept at the emptiness that swept through him. The void was back, large and ugly as ever, its dark edges cutting into his very soul.

Tor closed his eyes, body trembling with something more than fear, something deeper than longing.

Was it *his* touch that had driven away the pain and the darkness?

*Within its pages you may finally learn the shape of what is missing from your life.*

“Do you understand me now?”

Tor opened his eyes to see the man from the book kneeling beside him, dark brows knit in a frown. From the annoyed expression on his face, it wasn't the first time he'd asked the question.

“I... yes.” Tor started to sit again, and this time there was no dizziness. He forced his mind to focus on the now, not that brief, fleeting moment of peace when all had seemed right. He looked around just to make sure the world hadn't changed again. “Where the hell am I? How did I get here?” Panic started clawing its way through his belly.

“If you've the power to cross the Void, you should damn well know where you are.”

*Void?* “I don't know what that is. Who are you?” There was a hysterical note in his voice, but at that moment Tor didn't care. The man narrowed his eyes. He looked angry and dangerous. Tor scooted back, out of arm's reach.

“Calm yourself, Human. We'll not get far if you work yourself into a panic.” The man made a motion with his hand, as if he were plucking something from the air itself.

A peaceful calm settled over Tor. His heart rate slowed, the knot of fear in his belly loosened, and the muscles he'd been holding taut softened and relaxed. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“That’s better. Wouldn’t do to have you go running off into the hills only to be eaten by a pack of rhyx. Now, let’s start with a few simple questions, shall we?” He spoke slowly, enunciating each word carefully as if Tor was a small child or a half-wit.

Tor frowned at him and asked the first thing that popped into his head. “How did you learn my language so fast?”

The man rolled his eyes. “I didn’t, Human. I gave you the pattern for mine. What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know. You were supposed to come to me.”

One dark eyebrow lifted. “Oh, I was, was I? And who are you to command me?”

“I’m Toryn. Toryn MacAran. You can call me Tor.”

“Can I? How very... *familiar*.” The voice dripped sarcasm. “You don’t feel like a leythari. *Tor*.”

Tor stared at him blankly. The word meant nothing to him until something clicked in his mind and he made the connection. His newly acquired knowledge of the language gave him a sense of *wizard* or *sorcerer* for the term *leythari*. “I’m not a... leythari.”

The eyes narrowed. “Then how did you manage to cross the Void?”

“I don’t know! I don’t even know what that means. I was in my kitchen and there was a book and you were in it and I was supposed to say your name and you were supposed to come and answer my questions and—” He knew he was babbling but he couldn’t seem to make himself stop, and he wanted to, because the man’s expression was getting darker and darker by the second. “And... she didn’t say anything about me... ending up in the... picture.” The torrent of words finally slowed to a trickle. Tor snapped his mouth shut before anything else could escape.

“*She*? Tell me what happened, Human. All of it.”

So Tor told him about the dog and the old woman, the shop that shouldn’t have been there, and the book that had remained in his hands even after the

shop had disappeared. He didn't mention the part about wanting to be fucked blind. Now that he was confronted with the reality, he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to give it any ideas. It was one thing to fantasize about a man in a painting. Quite another to sit here under that same man's icy gaze.

By the time he'd finished his tale, the chill of the night had settled into his bones and he was shivering violently.

The man's expression was dark as a thundercloud. "The bitch," he muttered. "She thinks to test me? Fine. I'll play. And we'll just see who ends up testing whom."

Tor looked longingly at the campfire some twenty paces away. "Can I get warmed up?" His own questions could wait. He was almost too cold to think. All he knew for certain was that he ought to be a lot more scared, and probably would be if it wasn't for that strange sense of calm lapping at the edges of his mind.

"Humans." There was a sneer in that voice. "So fucking frail. Go. I need to think."

Tor got up carefully, mindful of the dizziness that had swept over him earlier. The man was maybe an inch or two taller than his own six feet, and if the picture in the book was accurate, he was in pretty good shape. It probably wouldn't be a good idea to antagonize him. At least, not until Tor was feeling a little steadier. "Um... what do I call you?"

The man's scowl deepened. "Whatever the hell you like, Human. I don't much care. Ash. Navaya. Varian. I've been called all of those and worse." He fixed Tor with a fierce glare. "I doubt you'll survive long enough for it to matter."

Annoyance stabbed through the calm. Tor glared back at him and forgot all about caution. "Fine. Maybe I'll just call you *ass*." And then froze, not sure how serious an insult that might be.

It earned him a narrow stare. When no lightning bolts or fireballs were forthcoming, he turned toward the fire. Best to take his leave before his mouth got him into real trouble.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

*Cold Night*

Ashnavayarian glared at the retreating form of the human and cursed Jhara under his breath. Her claws were all over this. The black dog and the old woman were two of her favored forms when she chose to walk the human worlds.

Jhara herself must have dragged the human across the Void. He'd reek of the leythe if he had the power to do it himself, and there was no hint of that kind of power in his aura. Ash sensed pain and emptiness. He sensed a darkness that ran so deep he couldn't see the source of it. But there was no sense of any kind of power. Nothing obvious, anyway.

Under other circumstances that darkness, along with the odd and shocking sense of completion he'd felt when he'd touched the human, might have drawn his interest.

Except that he was certain that was exactly what Jhara wanted.

He was tempted to leave the human here and be on his way. Only the fact that Jhara had specified *mercy* and *compassion* stopped him.

He'd already tested his ability to work the leythe to the limit. It hadn't taken him long to learn that he could only command a fraction of the power he'd need to escape back into the leythe. The thought of acquiescing to Jhara's demands made him burn, but the month he'd spent caged in human form had brought him to the bitter realization that he might not have a choice. She'd trapped him here quite neatly. Unless he could find some outside means to raise the power required to break his exile, he would need Jhara's help. He doubted that abandoning the human to die in the untamed wilds near the Iceshards would earn him her approval. It could hardly be deemed an act of compassion, after all. Not even according to Ashnavayarian's admittedly flexible moral standards.

Though it would probably be a hell of a lot less trouble.

The wind kicked up, cutting through the thick wool of his cloak. He shivered and cursed as he stomped toward the dying fire. The human was sitting as close to the glowing embers as he could without getting singed. He looked cold and miserable, huddled there on the ground in his short-sleeved black shirt and blue trousers.

Ashnavayarian bent to pick up some of the dead branches he'd gathered earlier. He threw them onto the embers, then waved a hand over them, drawing on the leythe to nudge the fire to warmth more quickly. The flames danced and leapt. That small, pathetic display of power had the human scooting back from the fire and gaping at him in awe.

"You could have built the fire up," he said, not bothering to hide his irritation.

The human—Tor—blinked up at him, then ducked his head, hiding his face behind a curtain of dark hair. "I-I didn't know how."

Ashnavayarian sank down across the fire from Tor. He was cold, tired, and hungry. And thoroughly sick of dealing with human frailties. Unlike the forms he used when he walked the human worlds by choice, this one had all the weaknesses of a true human. It needed fuel and rest. It needed to eliminate waste at annoyingly regular intervals. Worse still, it felt the cold of an autumn night in the far northern reaches of Vakarra quite keenly.

"Ash?"

Ash it was, then. In the Void, when he danced in the leythe, his name was a glimpse of his essence. It was light and shadow, sound and texture, a ripple in the leythe that held far deeper layers of meaning than a single, spoken syllable could possibly express. Blind to the leythe as most of them were, these humans lacked the senses to perceive such a thing. They needed something to wrap their tongues around. 'Ash' was as good as anything; it was short at least. He looked up to find Tor watching him from across the fire. The human looked a little more settled, so Ash slowly released the wisp of leythe energy he'd used to calm the man.

As Ash's grip on his mind eased, the human's eyes widened a little and he swallowed hard. His body tensed, but he remained sitting by the fire. Ash

breathed a sigh of relief. He'd much rather warm up by the fire than by chasing the human through the foothills.

"What did you do to me?" the human asked.

"Nothing you couldn't have done yourself, given time. I calmed your fears enough that you wouldn't go running off into the night."

The human didn't look happy with that explanation. He closed his eyes. "I went to the bar with Angie," he said firmly. "Somebody must have slipped something into my drink. Hopefully I'm lying in bed at home and not in some dark alley. I'm going to wake up soon, and all this will just be a bad dream."

Ash smirked. The human capacity for self-delusion never ceased to amaze him. He didn't argue; if believing he was caught up in a dream made it easier for the man to accept his situation, Ash was fine with that. Delusion would be far less exhausting to deal with than flat-out panic. "If you like, Human."

The man's eyes snapped open. "I like it a lot better than the idea that everyone I meet is fucking with my head."

Ash didn't respond to that. The human was silent for a time. His pale eyes searched Ash's face. Ash waited patiently for him to draw whatever conclusions he required to support his delusion.

"You're not here to give me answers, are you?" There was a sad, resigned note in his voice, and Ash sensed the disappointment behind his words.

"Answers to what?"

"She said you would answer my questions. So far, all I've done is answer yours."

Ash heaved a sigh. "Ask your questions, then, Human. If I can answer them, I will." Rather magnanimous of him, he thought, since it wasn't *his* actions that had dragged the human across the Void.

Magnanimous enough, perhaps, to be construed as an act of mercy?

Hopefully, Jhara was watching.

"If this *isn't* a dream, how do I get home?"



“It’s not, and you don’t,” Ash said bluntly. He sensed the human’s fear building again. Apparently his capacity for self-delusion only went so far.

“But... you brought me here, you can’t just—”

“I did not bring you here. *She* did. And if I had the power to send you back, I’d also have the power to not be stuck in this godsforsaken wasteland in the first place.”

“You can’t send me home?”

“No.” Much as it rankled. “You’ll have to throw yourself on her mercy if you want to go home. And pray she has some, because if she does, I’ve not seen evidence of it.”

“But you did the thing with the fire.”

Ash rolled his eyes. Humans. Frail *and* ignorant. As if lighting a candle could be compared to calling a firestorm. A cold gust of wind fanned the flames. Ash called a whisper of the leythe to warm his cloak. Tor shivered and inched closer to the fire.

“Ash?”

“Yes, Human?”

“This isn’t a dream, is it?”

“I’ve already told you it isn’t.”

“What’s wrong with me?” Tor asked in a voice that sounded small and desperate. “All my life I’ve never really belonged anywhere. It feels like... like I was born in the wrong time or maybe the wrong world, or... or like something is just... *missing*.”

Ash stared past the flames at the human’s aura, studying the shadow it cast into the leythe. Its dark, muted jewel tones rippled and shimmered, and he hadn’t imagined that hint of darkness threading through it. It permeated the depths of the man’s aura. He could sense tiny questing tendrils of darkness buried deep within the energy matrix. They floated on the currents of the leythe, as if they searched for something.

“Something *is* missing,” he said. Ash wondered how much of his explanation the human would really understand. The pattern he’d imprinted in Tor’s mind had given the human the structure and shape of the language spoken by the humans here, but not the cultural context he would need to fully understand the meanings of some of the words. “There are holes and tears in your aura, places where the colors are muted and bleeding into the leythe. There is a thread of darkness running through it all, into the depths of the matrix itself.”

Tor frowned and shook his head slowly. “I don’t—”

“I know you don’t. But you asked me what was wrong, and that is what I see.”

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. I would have to look deeper.”

“Can you?”

Ash opened his mouth to refuse, but something about Tor’s expression stopped him. The emptiness and longing in those silver-gray eyes, maybe. “Perhaps,” he said. “But not tonight.” He reached for his leather pack and rummaged around until his fingers touched the cloth-wrapped packet of travel cakes he’d picked up in the last village he’d passed through. The cakes were made of toasted grain, dried fruit, and dried meat pressed together with honey. They were hardly satisfying when one craved meat after a long day on the road, but they would fill an empty belly. Until recently he’d been unfamiliar with the sensation of hunger, but it hadn’t taken long for Ash to discover how difficult it was to fall asleep when his stomach was gnawing on his backbone. He pulled out two cakes and tossed one across the campfire to Tor.

Tor caught the offering, sniffed it, then devoured it.

Ash ate his own share more slowly, savoring the contrast between salty meat and sweet fruit. In his month of exile, the only advantages he’d found to being truly human were food and sex. Thus far he hadn’t had nearly enough of either.

When he'd finished eating, he unrolled his bedroll near the fire. Then, as an afterthought, he tossed a thin blanket to Tor. "Sleep near the fire," he told the human. "It'll be chilly tonight."

Tor gave the blanket a dubious look, but he settled it over his shoulders and lay down near the fire with his back to Ash.

Ash made a circle of the camp, some twenty paces out from the fire, setting wards against chance intruders. This far north and this close to the Iceshards, animal intruders were more likely than human ones. He'd heard the eerie howls of a pack of rhyx for the past few nights. In his natural form, he could have built an invisible shield that would disintegrate anything that got close to the camp. Now the best he could do was a line of wards that would alert him if it was crossed.

Once the wards were set to his satisfaction he drew on the leythe to warm his bedroll, stripped, and slipped inside. Tor was still huddled across the campfire, shivering and miserable. Ash could hear his teeth chattering.

He wondered how cold it would have to get for the human to freeze to death. Colder than it would be tonight, he thought. He probably didn't need to worry about it. Although if Tor got no rest they wouldn't make good time tomorrow. Ash frowned as he considered the problem. He very much wanted to reach the city of Vakar, seat of power of the realm of Vakarra, before the winter set in. There he was hoping to negotiate the means to research the possibility of breaking his exile, and circumvent Jhara's demands entirely.

Across the campsite, the human sat up and moved closer to the fire, wrapping the blanket tightly about his shoulders.

Ash sighed. "I'm not going to be able to sleep with your teeth chattering like that."

"S-sorry," came Tor's reply. "I'm c-c-cold."

"Come here."

Tor peered at him across the campfire, catching his bottom lip lightly between his teeth as he considered the invitation.

Ash lifted the edge of his bedding and patted the space beside him. "It's nice and warm in here."

Tor got slowly to his feet and moved around the fire. He stared down at Ash, eyes narrowed, then nodded slightly to himself and toed off his shoes. He made to slide into the warm bedding, but Ash shook his head. "Not in those filthy clothes."

Tor's eyes flicked to his face. "But they're the only clothes I've—"

"Take them off."

Tor swallowed hard, but made no move to comply.

"It's not getting any warmer out there." If he wasn't so damned tired, the conflicting emotions he could see flickering in the man's aura would have been amusing. He reached for a tiny tendril of the leythe and planted a whisper of suggestion in the human's mind, a wordless promise of warmth and pleasure.

It wasn't manipulation, Ash told himself. Not really. It was more of a reinforcing of what was already there. Tor *was* cold, after all. And Ash hadn't missed the attraction flaring through the human's aura every time Tor looked his way.

Tor turned his back to Ash and began to strip.

Ash's throat went dry as the shirt came off. The shifting firelight cast shadows that threw each muscle into sharp relief as Tor moved. The human was just what Ash liked in a man. Hair long enough to wrap around his fist when he held the man down, muscles, oh, yes, and lean, narrow hips, long legs, and a trim waist... strong enough in body to take what he had to give, but weak enough in mind to bend to his will.

When Tor turned around his face was in shadow, but Ash didn't need to see his expression to sense the attraction he was trying to hide. The heat of arousal blazed through him.

Tor slid into the bedding beside him. The moment Tor's bare skin touched his own, their auras brushed together in the leythe, sending harmonic ripples of pleasure through him. Ash had never experienced anything like it before. He

had no idea what that feeling was or where it came from. All he knew was that he wanted this man, wanted their bodies and their auras entwined as closely as possible.

He pulled Tor tight against him and locked his mouth to Tor's in a savage, heated kiss. Tor whimpered and pushed himself into Ash's embrace, returning the kiss with enthusiasm.

Ash's hands started to wander, sliding over heated skin and hard muscle. The sudden anger blazing through Tor's aura snapped him back to reality like a splash of cold water in the face. Tor put his hands on Ash's chest and pushed himself away. "What the fuck are you doing to me?" he demanded. "You—you're in my head again."

"Does it matter?" Ash asked, nudging the leythe to increase Tor's arousal. "You've wanted me since the moment you saw me."

Tor shuddered and closed his eyes. Ash sensed a brief inner struggle, and then the man was back in his arms, kissing him with enthusiasm. Tor's tongue stroked his, and Tor's hands skimmed down his back. Ash moaned into the kiss and let his eyes drift shut, giving himself over to the wonderful, addictive, and wholly *human* sensations coursing through him.

Gods of the leythe, it was almost worth being trapped in this form to be able to experience this. He rolled onto his back as Tor's mouth moved lower, leaving a trail of burning kisses down his neck and onto his chest.

Ash drew in a sharp breath as Tor's tongue flicked across one nipple and then the other. He buried his hands in Tor's hair and pushed him lower still.

Tor's tongue lapped at the head of his cock. Ash groaned and then cursed under his breath. He could feel his control slipping, his body shuddering with need. He called another tiny flicker of the leythe to nudge the human a little further.

Slick, wet heat engulfed his cock. His breath clogged in his lungs as Tor slowly took him all the way into his mouth. Tor's hands moved to his hips and then dragged over his skin in slow, rhythmic strokes. Ash felt the head of his

cock hit the back of the human's throat, and writhed in pleasure. The intensity of the sensations sliding through him was almost too much to bear.

No question, the human knew exactly what he was doing. He used tongue and lips with consummate skill, driving Ash right to the ragged edge. Ash's hands tightened in Tor's hair, forcing the human to hold still. He thrust hard into Tor's mouth. Tor whimpered, but whether it was in need or protest Ash couldn't tell and was too close to care. A few more thrusts and he let out a hoarse cry as the climax ripped through him.

Tor swallowed, then lapped him clean before kissing his way back up Ash's body. When his head emerged from the bedding he leaned in for a kiss. Ash pushed him away. Heat and desperate desire shivered through Tor's aura, making it glow with all the colors of need and want. He whimpered and shifted closer again, rutting against Ash's hip. "Please," he whispered, "I want you."

Ash gave him a lazy smirk, which was all the man was getting out of him, and said, "The curse of being human—wanting what you can't have. Go to sleep. We have a long way to go tomorrow."

Tor froze and his eyes widened. "But—"

Ash shoved him away again, harder this time. He rolled over, back to the human. "Sleep."

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then Tor muttered, "Fucking selfish *ass*."

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## CHAPTER FIVE

*Cold Truth*

Tor squirmed, uncomfortably aroused. Damned if he was going to do anything about it, though. There was no fucking way he was giving that asshole the satisfaction of hearing him jerk off. Tor forced himself to lie there, stiff, silent, and uncomfortable as hell.

By the time his arousal faded, the deep, even sound of Ash's breathing told him the man was probably asleep.

Damn him.

Tor lay awake for a long time, debating. Fury at Ash for messing with his head warred with the growing realization that he wasn't at home anymore. He considered taking off. He even went so far as to sit up and begin sliding out of the bedroll. But the moment his skin broke contact with Ash's, that empty darkness consumed him once more. He sank slowly back down.

Even if it hadn't been for the relief of feeling whole for once, it took only a few moments of reflection for him to decide that leaving was a stupid idea for more practical reasons than wounded pride and thwarted desire. He had no idea where he was. He didn't know how to get home. He had nothing but the clothes on his back, or rather, in a heap beside the campfire, and he had no knowledge of how to survive in the wilderness.

He shifted a little closer to Ash and stared up at the night sky. The wind had torn the clouds to shreds, leaving only a few lingering wisps to obscure the stars. His eyes sought the moon. It was still wrong; wrong color, wrong size, wrong everything. More stars than he'd ever seen before winked down at him. He studied them with a growing sense of unease as he tried to locate the constellations he knew he ought to see on an October night: Andromeda, Pegasus, Pisces. He couldn't find any of them.

Where the hell was he, that the stars and the moon were wrong?

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He didn't think he'd be able to fall asleep, but he woke to morning light and a hot, hard, male body pressed against his back. And morning wood wedged between his ass cheeks.

He jerked forward, not sure where he was or who was behind him. He was drawn back forcefully by a hand on his hip. "Where do you think you're going, Human?" Ash's voice all but growled in his ear, and it all came flooding back to him, including—*especially*—Ash's callous treatment of him last night.

Tor gritted his teeth. "My *name* is Torny," he said in a low voice, "and I'm not your whore."

"Never said you were," Ash whispered, breath hot against his ear. "Whores get paid."

"Damn it—" He tried to scramble out of the bedroll. Before he could move, Ash's arm snaked across his belly, hauling him back. Then his hand moved to take hold of Tor's cock, stroking him slowly but firmly.

Tor's eyes rolled back in his head and he thrust his hips forward, driving himself into Ash's hand. Ash shifted behind him and Tor felt hard, hot flesh pushing between his cheeks, seeking entrance.

"No, don't—" Panic shot through him and he struggled to pull away. There had been no offer of lube, no stretch, no nothing. The one time he'd ever let anybody try this it had been every bit as bad as he'd imagined it would be—

"Hush. It's all right." Strong hands gripped his hips, forced him to be still. Soft lips moved against the nape of his neck, sending little shivers down his spine as Ash slowly worked his way in. "The leythe's not just for starting fires. It can be used to heal and soothe, too. I won't hurt you."

The knot of panic in his chest slowly dissolved to be replaced by desire. He couldn't remember why he'd been struggling, or why he would even want to, when everything Ash did to him felt so good. Ash hitched Tor's leg up a bit, then stroked his cock again as he pushed himself a little deeper.

Tor bit back a moan of pleasure. He'd had no idea it could feel like this. He wanted it, wanted it with all his soul, but damned if he was going to let Ash



know it. Summoning his last shred of resistance, he struggled to form a coherent sentence. "I'm not... I didn't... you can't..."

"Relax," Ash whispered, and pushed the rest of the way into him.

And wonder of wonders, it *didn't* hurt. It didn't feel anything like that hot, tearing, burning agony he'd been expecting. It felt... oh, yes, it felt like something he wanted a whole lot more of. He pushed his hips back, needing something, but not quite sure what. Deeper or harder or moving or—

Ash flexed his hips. After a few deliciously slow strokes, his fingers tightened around Tor's cock and began stroking him in that same easy rhythm.

"Ash... *oh shit, oh shit, oh shit...*" White hot sparks of pleasure sizzled through him as Ash brushed over something inside him that no one had ever touched before.

After that he didn't give a damn what Ash thought. The man made him forget that there was anything in the world except the rhythm of their bodies moving in harmony and the pleasure of being filled so completely. The wicked heat coiled deep in his groin stretched taut as his body strained for the white hot moment that was just beyond reach. Ash pushed into him hard, and it all broke loose. Tor howled as he fell back into blind white ecstasy.

When he came back to himself he was lying in Ash's arms, his back pressed against Ash's chest.

"You were saying?" He could hear the smug smirk in Ash's voice even if he couldn't see it.

Tor didn't have the energy or the desire to come up with a retort. He closed his eyes and relaxed against Ash, feeling comfortable and complete, whole, for the first time in forever. And thoroughly satisfied for the first time in almost as long.

Until Ash pulled out of his body and continued on out of the bedroll, exposing that gaping, open wound in his soul once more.

"No! Don't go!" He scrambled to his feet and grabbed hold of Ash's hand. The darkness receded instantly, and he couldn't entirely suppress a sigh of relief. "Please..."

Ash turned and stared into his eyes. His gaze traveled down to their joined hands, and he frowned, but made no move to pull away. “Something’s wrong. Something...” Those brilliant violet eyes shifted up again to search Tor’s face. “What do you feel? When we touch?”

“It... you touch me and it doesn’t hurt anymore. All the dark places are filled with light. It feels...” Tor stopped, staring at the tattoo on Ash’s chest.

A heart shaped out of a twisted tangle of thorn-covered vines.

Like the one in the book, it was identical to his own, right down to its position over his heart. He reached out his free hand to touch it. “Where did you get that? I mean, I designed it. How could you...”

Ash looked down at his own chest and then at Tor’s. He looked more grim than surprised. “*I* didn’t. It was part of the package.”

“Meaning what?”

“*She* trapped me in the body I was using when she exiled me.” Ash placed his hand over the tattoo. “*That* was there when I awoke and found myself in exile. It is her brand. She uses it to mark her property. And to warn others off.”

“Her *property*? But I’m not...” He frowned. “What does it mean that we both have it?”

“Nothing good.”

“Is this the same *she* you were talking about last night? The one you said brought me here?”

“Yes, the same.” Ash started to pull his hand away, but Tor held on.

“Please, don’t.”

Ash shook his head, tossing his dark hair back over his shoulder. “I need to find out what she’s done. I can’t do that holding your hand. Your aura is too... too distracting.” He did pull his hand away this time, but he did it gently.

Now that he’d had a taste of what it felt like to be whole, the contrast was agonizing. The moment Ash’s fingers slid away from his own, all the color drained out of the world. Tor couldn’t help the little whimper that tore from his throat as he was consumed by that dead emptiness again.

Numb and dazed, Tor dressed slowly in the jeans and T-shirt he'd arrived in. The fire had burned out during the night, and he sank down next to the ashes in a miserable huddle. Ash rolled the bedding and strapped it to his pack, then opened one of the pockets and produced another of those pressed cakes of dried fruit and meat. He brought it to Tor, along with a waterskin and the blanket Tor had abandoned last night in favor of Ash's bedroll.

Tor noted that Ash was careful not to touch him. He tried to brush his hand against Ash's, but Ash pulled away quickly. "Not now," he said, his tone surprisingly gentle.

Tor followed Ash with his eyes as he climbed onto a huge boulder at the base of one of the odd rock formations dotting the landscape. He ached inside. Disgusted with himself, he tore his gaze away. He'd always prided himself on not needing anyone, but he craved Ash's touch, craved an end to the emptiness.

"This might take a while." Tor glanced up to see Ash looking down at him from his perch. "Jhara is skilled, and whatever she's done, it will not be easy for me to read the matrix she's built." Ash scowled then, and added, "Especially since she's seen fit to cripple me."

"How long is a while?" Tor asked.

"I won't know until I have a look. Just don't go wandering off. The wards around the camp will alert me if anything approaches, but if you break them I'll have to reset them."

Tor wondered what, exactly, was likely to approach, but he didn't ask. Ash had already settled himself into what looked like some sort of meditation pose: cross-legged, head bowed, eyes closed, hands resting lightly on his knees.

Tor took the opportunity to look about himself. At first glance, the area beyond the campsite didn't look particularly alien. The land was rocky and hilly with clusters of trees scattered here and there. To the north, he could see mountains, their sharp, white peaks scraping a sky that wasn't quite the right color. Tor stared up at it. He wondered how he'd missed that when he'd first opened his eyes that morning.

Oh, right—Ash had been intent on fucking him into oblivion when he'd first woken up. Tor still wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that. Ash seemed like kind of a jerk, but the things he had done to Tor had felt so damned good. Part of him was deeply ashamed of the way he'd let Ash take what he wanted. A bigger part of him wanted more.

He wished he knew for sure if Ash had been messing with his mind this morning. Being manipulated was somehow a lot less shameful than being pathetic. At least if he'd been manipulated he could tell himself he hadn't had a choice. He turned his attention to the sky once more, determined that he wasn't going to think about Ash and the confusing, conflicting things the man made him feel.

The sky was more blue-violet than blue. It was a subtle difference, but it made him uncomfortably aware that all was not as it should be. He shivered and tore his eyes from it to stare at the ground. After studying the stars and the moon last night, he didn't really need further confirmation that he was a long way from home.

He wondered how long it would be before anyone realized he was gone. Monday, probably, when he failed to show up for work. He tried to think who might miss him. The only people he had regular contact with were Derrick and Angie, neither of whom was a close friend. He had no family that he knew of, and no one else he could really call a friend. He'd only ever had the one boyfriend, and he was long gone.

Maybe not being able to get home wasn't such a big deal after all. It wasn't like there was anyone he would miss.

Or anyone who would miss him.

An eerie howl echoed through the foothills. Tor's thoughts scattered and his pulse quickened. Something about that sound touched his deepest, most primal fears, setting the hairs on the back of his neck to prickling. Ash didn't seem to notice, or if he did, he wasn't bothered by it. Tor remembered what he'd said about wards. He hoped they did more than just alert Ash. He had the feeling the man might be quite happy to watch some foul beast wander in and have him for breakfast.

The sun had climbed halfway to midday before Ash's head suddenly snapped up. "What. The. Fuck?" His violet eyes narrowed, and he stared at Tor with something that looked very much like hatred. "Bonded... to a *human*?"

Tor got to his feet, ready to turn and run if things got nasty. He might crave Ash's touch, but he wasn't ready to be anybody's punching bag. From the stormy look in Ash's eyes, that was the only kind of touching he was likely to get.

Ash rose to his feet and lifted his face to the sky, hands clenched into fists. "Jhara, you treacherous bitch!" he screamed. "What the hell are you doing to me?"

The sky didn't answer him, not that Tor could tell. Ash finally slid down off the boulder and stalked to his pack. He bent to pick it up, then stopped and turned to Tor with an imperious expression. "Carry that."

Tor considered refusing, and might have, if another eerie howl hadn't cut through the morning air and sent a shiver of atavistic fear straight to the depths of his soul. It only took a moment to weigh his options: alone in a strange wilderness with whatever was making that god-awful sound, or playing pack mule to an ill-tempered demon who looked like sex incarnate and could probably incinerate him with a look.

He picked up the pack.

Ash set off across the rocky landscape at a ground-eating pace, leaving Tor to trail behind struggling with the heavy pack.

The only good thing about this whole setup was the unobstructed view he had of that mouth-watering, leather-clad ass.

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## CHAPTER SIX

*Revelations*

In his fury, Ash set a grueling pace. By late afternoon the human was lagging behind. It didn't bode well for the kind of time they were going to make on this journey. They'd gotten a late start as it was, with him spending half the morning deep in the energy matrix of the leythe examining Jhara's handiwork.

And what he'd found still burned. The bitch had bonded *him*, a creature of the leythe, to a *human*.

He should have realized it the first time he'd touched the human. He shouldn't have needed to see the way their auras meshed together within the matrix of the leythe to understand what she'd done.

Leythe-bonded.

It certainly explained why just touching the man felt so damn good. It had taken every shred of will he could muster to get out of his bedroll this morning and move away from Tor. Possessing the human's body had been better than any drug he'd ever tried, human or otherwise. Hot, wild, and addictive as all hell. Even through his anger, Ash couldn't stop thinking about next time, anticipating what he would do to the human when they stopped to camp again.

Much earlier than he had originally intended, he slowed his pace and began searching for a place to spend the night. He told himself it was because he didn't want to drive the human to exhaustion. In the long run it would only slow him down. In the short... well, he supposed there was nothing wrong with admitting to himself that he wanted Tor on his knees pleasuring him tonight.

As soon as fucking possible.

His cock stirred at the thought, and he dared not turn to look at the man following along behind him. The hot waves of need shivering through Tor's aura weren't helping him focus, and with a snarl he reined in his own aura and wrapped it tightly about himself. He'd had to do it at least half a dozen times

since they'd set out. No matter how tightly he bound it, it kept slipping free, sending questing tendrils through the leythe toward Tor.

Leythe-bonded.

For the rest of his life. Or, at least, the life of this body.

And the bond would grow, connecting them through the leythe on ever deeper levels, joining them in ways that Ash didn't even want to contemplate.

*Damn* Jhara for doing this to him. And damn this human body for being weak enough that she could get away with it.

With an inarticulate snarl of rage, he jerked his errant mind back to the task. Campsite. Find a campsite. The sooner he did that, the sooner he could bury himself balls deep in the human's body.

Once he stopped raging at Jhara and turned his mind to his task, it didn't take long to find what he was looking for. A shallow cave, its entrance nearly hidden by one of the twisted rock formations scattered through the area, appeared up ahead. He had Tor wait outside while he checked the cave. When he found it to be dry and unoccupied, he beckoned Tor inside.

"Rest," he said, the first word he'd said to the man since they'd set out.

Tor dragged the pack inside and sank down near the cave entrance. He sat shivering while Ash searched the surrounding area for enough deadfall to start a fire. The trees were sparse here, though, and he didn't find nearly enough to last through the night. He abandoned his hunt for firewood and set to collecting fist-sized rocks instead. When he had enough, he arranged them in a small pile in the center of the cave.

Tor watched in silence. When Ash drew the leythe from the earth to heat the rocks and then crowned the pile with eerie violet flames, Tor scooted back to the wall of the cave, eyes wide.

"Better than a fire," Ash told him. "No smoke to worry about, and it's hot enough to cook food and heat water for tea. It will stay warm until I release the energy back into the leythe." The downside was that the leythe energy itself might attract unwanted attention. Rhyx in particular used the leythe to hunt

their prey. But given the small trickle of leythe energy it took to maintain the fire, the risk was small, and Ash was not about to spend the night shivering.

Tor moved cautiously toward the fire. His whole body seemed to sag as he got close enough to feel the warmth. He shot a surreptitious glance at Ash, as if he was trying to gauge his mood, then asked in a tentative voice, “Why are the flames purple?”

“Because I willed them so. They could be green, if you prefer.” He drew on the leythe again, making a tiny adjustment to the delicate balance of energies within the matrix, and the flames shifted color to a deep emerald green. “Nothing’s actually burning. I heated the stones themselves. I thought the illusion of flames might serve to remind you that the stones are hot.”

“Child-proofed,” Tor said softly, and his lips twisted in a sardonic smile. “How thoughtful of you.”

Ash smirked. “I wouldn’t have put it that way, but since you did...” He ignored Tor’s scowl and bent to pick up the waterskins. “I’m going hunting. I’ll set wards a little way back from the cave, so don’t go wandering off.”

“Can’t I—”

“No, you can’t. You’re too noisy, for one thing.”

Tor didn’t say anything to that, but he regarded the pile of leythe-heated stones with wary eyes.

Ash gave the leythe a subtle tug to shift the color of the flames to a warm, orange-yellow, something more familiar to human eyes, and left without another word. He set a line of wards around the cave entrance and another line farther out. When he was finished, he headed west, where he’d sensed water up ahead.

Moving away from Tor’s aura was a relief, but not as much as he’d hoped. Without that aura to distract him, he was suddenly aware of the subtle energy flow that joined them. Tor’s energies were bleeding into him, and his own were leaking into Tor, through the bond.

He cursed under his breath, not at all happy with the idea of anything bleeding off his own limited energy. It must have started the moment he’d



touched Tor, soon after the human had crossed the Void. He hadn't noticed it then because of that damned distracting aura. He would have to do something about it. The sooner the better. He had no intention of spending his exile bonded to a human. It was impossible. Ridiculous. What in all the human hells did Jhara hope to accomplish by it?

By the time he returned, it was starting to get dark. Tor was waiting just inside the cave, a worried look on his face. Ash deactivated his wards with the tiniest flicker of the leythe and reset them after crossing them. Inside the cave, he threw a couple of rabbits down at Tor's feet along with a knife. "Skin those and cut them up for stew."

Tor stared down at them and swallowed hard, then looked away. "I... wouldn't even know where to—" He stopped, then looked back down at the rabbits. "What are those?"

Ash rolled his eyes. "Rabbits."

"But... they have real tails."

"As opposed to what?"

Tor stared up at him. "Rabbits don't have tails like that where I come from."

"I thought we'd already established that you're a long way from home, Human."

Tor shivered and looked away. "Well, whatever you call them, I don't know how to... how to skin them. Or clean them. Or whatever it is you do to get them ready to eat."

Ash narrowed his eyes, then took the rabbits and dropped a couple of thick roots in their place. "Peel those, then. Surely you can manage that."

He took the rabbits outside and set to work, grumbling to himself as he prepared the meat. The human was useless. Couldn't start a fire, couldn't skin a rabbit, didn't even know what a proper rabbit *was*, apparently. How had Jhara ever expected him to survive out here on his own?

The answer rose in his mind, unbidden, unwelcome. She hadn't. She expected Ash to take care of him. Why else dump him at Ash's feet, unarmed and helpless as a newborn babe?

Why else bond them through the leythe?

Ash was just returning from burying the remains of the rabbits when Tor yelped and dropped the knife. Ash knelt down beside him and took hold of his hand. He ignored the subtle feeling of completion that shivered through his aura when their fingers touched.

"Clumsy," Ash said. "How ever did you survive to maturity?" He examined the wound, which wasn't very deep, and drew a whisper of leythe energy from the earth to close it.

Tor's eyes widened the moment their hands touched. When Ash was finished, Tor twisted his hand around to grasp Ash's wrist. "Please." His voice trembled. "Just... can you stay here... just for a little bit. I need to feel—"

"Oh, I'll make you *feel*—" Ash stopped short as he saw the naked hunger in the human's eyes, felt the wanting and the needing that flared through his aura.

Ash couldn't deny that he wanted and needed, too. Wanted to touch him, hold him, lick him, bury himself inside him. "Let me finish this," he said, his voice husky with desire. "We'll have some time while it cooks."

It took some effort to hold his own hand steady as he peeled and sliced the root. He added it to the pot with the meat, then followed that with a handful of grain and some dried herbs from his pack. He poured in enough water to cover the lot. Once the stew was bubbling away, he rose and spread his bedroll near the back wall of the cavern. He settled himself there and looked over at Tor, patting the space next to him.

Tor watched him, expression shifting between wariness and raw need. Ash loosened the bonds he'd kept on his own aura all day, letting it flare out into the leythe and bathe in the energy currents. The human was wracked with indecision. His aura vibrated with both desire and anger, a wanting that was almost beyond bearing warring with the fury he felt at not having any choice.

Ash understood exactly how he felt.

Not that there was any question as to the outcome. Desire would prevail in the end. The struggle was always worth watching, though. You couldn't fight a leythe-bond no matter how much you might want to. He ought to know. He'd forged enough of them in the past for his own amusement. He found it fascinating to watch the humans struggle with desires they couldn't control. Bonding the children of sworn enemies had always been a favorite of his. It produced such interesting results, and it rarely ended well.

Finding himself trapped in such a way was disconcerting to say the least.

*Indeed,* said a dry voice in his mind. *Your fondness for manipulating human emotions for your own amusement is what tore this land apart in the first place. There is more to this human than a simple leythe-bond. Look deeper and see. And enjoy the experience, Ashnavayarian, as I will enjoy watching your little drama unfold. It should prove amusing to watch you fight your own desires for once.*

Fury surged through him. He longed to answer her, but she'd taken that ability from him as well. She'd left him with only the pathetic powers of a human leythari, and not a particularly strong one, at that.

The bitch.

When he opened his eyes, Tor was pressed back against the wall of the cave. Ash realized that between the bond and his own aura floating free in the leythe, Tor had likely experienced the full weight of his anger.

He stared at the human. *Look deeper and see,* she'd said. "Come here."

Tor's silver-gray eyes fixed on him, wary and more than a little fearful. "Why?" he asked, his voice far steadier than his shivering aura.

"Because I command it."

"What if I don't want to?"

Ash let his lips curve in a cold smile. "You want to."

"Bastard."

But he came. Slow and reluctant his steps might be, but he did as commanded. He sat on the edge of the bedroll at first. Ash shot him a narrow stare and patted the spot beside him. Tor hesitated only a moment before he moved closer, pressing his body against Ash's side.

Ash let his breath out in a long sigh of relief as the tension that had been riding him all day melted away. The leythe energies of the human's aura blended so seamlessly with his own it was as if they were two halves of a whole.

Which they were, damn Jhara to every hell the humans had ever conceived of.

Without even thinking about what he was doing, Ash wrapped his arms around the human. He leaned back against the cave wall, pulling Tor against him and holding him close. Tor sighed and rested his head against Ash's chest. Ash ignored the heat that stirred in his groin, *damned* if he'd give her the satisfaction of watching him rut like an animal, and concentrated instead on Jhara's words.

*Look deeper.*

He closed his eyes and sank his awareness into the leythe, burying himself in Tor's aura. He read the shifting energies, sinking deeper as he traced the path of darkness at the core of the energy matrix that was Tor.

The darkness led him into the depths of the leythe, almost to the limits of his human perception. That was where he finally found it. A channel of shifting light and glittering dark that had nothing to do with the exchange of energies that bound them. No, this was something else entirely. And not at all what he'd expected.

He'd found a conduit straight to the heart of the leythe.

Tor was that rarest of humans, a living channel for the leythe. A powerful amplifier, in the hands of a knowledgeable leythari.

Ash let his exultation buoy him back to the surface. When he came back to himself, he laughed for perhaps the first time since he'd awoken caged in human flesh.

Little drama, indeed.

Jhara had just handed him the power to escape his exile.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Explanations*

Tor lay in Ash's arms and closed his eyes. The sense of peace that had settled over him the moment he'd touched Ash was almost overwhelming. Amazing that a man who irritated the crap out of him could also make him feel so damn good. Lying here against Ash's chest with those strong arms around him, he could almost forget how sore and tired he was.

Ash had set a relentless pace when they'd started out late that morning. After the first couple of hours, Tor had found himself struggling to keep up. Back home, he'd always thought he was in pretty good shape. He lifted weights and jogged a few times a week, and he was used to being on his feet all day at the bookshop. None of that had prepared him for keeping up a fast pace across rocky terrain for hours at a time.

What the hell was Ash that he didn't even seem fazed by it?

Ash might look human, but the way he said the word when he called Tor *Human*, with that derisive curl of his lip, made Tor think that he might be something else entirely.

A sudden bark of laughter jerked him out of his musings like a slap in the face. He looked up at Ash, who had an amused look on his face and a dark glint in his eye. Tor didn't like the look of that at all. The man was dangerous. Powerful. Frightening in ways that Tor couldn't even begin to articulate.

So why the hell was he curled up against him like a lost kitten?

Disgusted with himself, Tor pulled away. He sat up but didn't break contact, torn as he was between the sense of peace and the unwanted intimacy of the touch that brought it.

"What's funny?" he asked, more to cover his own confusion and embarrassment than because he really wanted to know.

Ash looked at him, his expression unreadable. "Jhara. She thinks to trap me, yet she gives me the means to escape. And she is well aware of what she does. Devious bitch. I wonder what kind of game she thinks to play."

“Who is she?” Tor asked.

“The humans in this world call her a goddess. They build shrines to her and burn incense in her name.”

“Is she? A goddess, I mean?”

Ash snorted. “That depends entirely on your definition of the term.”

“You said she brought me here. Why would she do that?”

“Why? To punish me, perhaps?”

“Punish you for what?”

Ash’s gaze slid away. “Who knows? I’ve yet to divine the workings of her mind. Perhaps she finds it amusing to watch me struggle.”

“What is she to you, then?”

“She is the oldest, and she was the first. She is my...” Ash paused for a moment as if searching for the right word. “Creator? Progenitor?”

“Mother?” Tor supplied.

The suggestion earned him a glare. “That is a *human* word, for a relationship that does not exist among my kind.”

“What *are* your kind, then? Not human, I guess.”

“Not human. We live in the Void Between Worlds, the matrix of the leythe. Your kind have called us monsters and demons, spirits and nightmares. But those are just words for what your human senses tell you when your minds try to interpret something beyond your ability to perceive or comprehend.”

Tor cocked his head, frowning slightly. “You seem perfectly human to me.”

“Practice,” Ash told him drily. “I’ve walked the human worlds in human form for many, many of your lifetimes.”

“So you’re a god.”

“Again, it depends on your definition.” He gave Tor an appraising stare. “For our purposes, close enough.”

“And you’re trapped in a human body.”

“A temporary inconvenience that will soon be rectified. If she thinks I will stay here quietly until... well, never mind what *she* wants. More important is what *I* want.” He reached for Tor.

Tor shifted back a little, but took hold of Ash’s hand so as not to break contact completely. “Wait. Explain to me what I’m feeling. Tell me why you make me feel so...”

Ash arched an eyebrow. “Used?”

Tor shook his head. “No...”

“Owned?”

“No, damn it, I want to know why I don’t feel empty when you touch me.”

“Because I fill you like no other man ever has,” Ash said with a smirk.

Tor felt his face heating. He ducked his head, not wanting to give Ash the satisfaction of knowing that was true. “That’s not what I meant,” he muttered. When he glanced up, Ash was giving him a knowing look. Tor figured he wasn’t going to get a meaningful answer, but then Ash frowned and relented.

“There is a darkness within you. I see it in the leythe, deep within the matrix that contains your life energies. The emptiness inside you stretches out far beyond you, winding through the matrix of the leythe. I followed it, to see if I could determine where it led.”

“And did you?”

“It leads to me. When we are close enough that our auras mesh within the leythe, we both feel complete. We are bonded, we two. You humans would say that I am your other half. Your missing soul, if you will. Jhara has seen fit to entwine our destinies, so instead of pursuing my own interests, I find I am compelled—against my will, I might add—to take you under my protection.”

“Why? If you don’t want to—”

“Because our energies are locked together within the leythe. If anything should happen to you...”



“What?” Tor whispered.

“I’m not sure,” Ash said softly. “When one half of a leythe-bonded human pair dies, the other usually follows. And since I am currently human in reality rather than appearance...”

Tor’s mind snagged on a question that Ash had evaded rather than answered. “Why would she do that to you? Why would she bind you to a human? And to me in particular? What does it mean that you and I have the same tattoo?”

Ash pulled Tor against him with surprising strength and grabbed a fistful of his hair. “Enough of your questions, Human.”

Tor only struggled briefly before giving in, and that more for the sake of pride than anything. Ash pushed him down on the bedding and stripped him, then let him go while he removed his own clothing. Tor whimpered at the loss of his touch, the return of the emptiness, but Ash was quick and efficient, murmuring quiet words of encouragement. Before Tor knew it, Ash was back. He moved against Tor, skin on skin, driving all sane thought from his mind with hands and lips and tongue.

Tor’s hands slid over Ash’s body, exploring every swell of muscle, every curve and plane of his flesh. The sounds Ash made were better than anything his fantasies had provided, husky little moans and whimpers that sounded like they were being torn from deep inside him. It was as if Ash couldn’t bear to show such vulnerability to anyone, not even his lover.

It was different this time, far more intense than it had been this morning. Every time he touched Ash, he could feel the echo of that touch on his own body. And from the way Ash reacted when he touched Tor, he figured Ash was feeling the same thing. Like an endless feedback loop of heat and desire, growing in strength each time it echoed between them until they were both lost in need and want and *now*.

By the time Ash flipped him onto his belly and entered his body, Tor was burning. The flames of desire were so all-consuming that he couldn’t even remember his own name.

Ash was not gentle, but he was thorough, and unlike the night before he saw to Tor's pleasure as well as his own. When Ash was finished with him, all Tor could do was collapse in a sweaty, satisfied heap.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Of Frogs and Slaves*

Ash woke to morning sunlight streaming into the cave. Tor was curled against him, head tucked under Ash's chin, one arm flung over his waist. Ash shifted a little and stared down at the human's face. In sleep, the guarded expression he wore like armor was gone, replaced with a soft, vulnerable look that did something funny to Ash's stomach.

Hunger, he told himself firmly, not—

No. The human flesh that caged him required sustenance, that was all.

Tor stirred, pretty silver eyes blinking up at him. As Ash watched, that sweet, sleepy innocence was replaced by a watchful wariness. Tor moved back, untangling his limbs from Ash's, but not quite breaking contact. As Tor moved, Ash felt a burning ache flare through him. It took him a few moments to realize that the discomfort wasn't coming from his own body. It was coming from Tor's.

It occurred to him that he might have been a bit rough with the human. Lost in Tor's sensations as well as his own, he'd found it difficult to maintain control. An uneasy feeling of regret flashed through him. Annoyance quickly followed; he would *not* feel guilty for using the man as hard as he damned well pleased. Hell, Tor had *wanted* it. Regardless of his initial reticence, he'd begged Ash in the end.

He was under no obligation, none at all, to do anything about it.

Still, if the human was in pain, it would slow them down. Perhaps it was in Ash's best interests to keep him as fit as possible.

"Sore?" he asked, not bothering to hide his smug smirk.

Tor winced and his cheeks flushed. "A little."

"Come here." Ash pulled him close again, hands moving to probe Tor's backside.

“Hair of the dog?” Tor inquired, flinching at his touch. “Thanks, but no. I won’t sit down for a week as it is.”

“Keep still, Human.” Ash drew a tendril of leythe-energy from the earth, wrapped it around his finger, and pressed it against Tor’s abused flesh.

Tor froze, then relaxed against him with a sigh as Ash manipulated the delicate energies of the leythe to ease his discomfort and heal the damage he’d done. “Thank you,” Tor said when he was finished.

“I didn’t do it for you.” Ash felt compelled to explain himself, just so nobody got the wrong idea. “I can’t have you slowing me down.” It didn’t mean anything more than that. Although now that he thought about it, healing the human after taking him hard might count for something with Jhara. Mercy, perhaps, or compassion, or one of those other human frailties she seemed so concerned about.

He hoped Jhara was watching and taking note, because if things didn’t go his way when they reached the city of Vakar, he might need to comply with her demands after all.

Beside him, he sensed Tor steel himself and then slowly pull away, breaking contact with him. He tensed, waiting for the sharp stab of loss he’d felt the last time they’d separated, but nothing changed. Tor drew in a breath and frowned, then reached out and laid his hand on Ash’s chest and slowly pulled it back again.

“What did you do?” Tor asked. “The emptiness... it’s gone... even when I’m not touching you.”

Ash let his awareness sink into the leythe. As he’d feared, their auras were meshing at ever-deeper levels. Two becoming one, the inevitable consequence of a leythe-bond. With his own ability to manipulate the energy matrix so limited, there was nothing he could do about it.

Except watch it happen.

He sank deeper still, wondering just how far down the connection went.

It was already far deeper and more vibrant than any leythe-bond he’d ever created or observed. The energy exchange had increased, their auras now

meshed so tightly that it was no longer possible to tell where one ended and the other began. They were joined so deeply within the leythe that it might prove impossible to separate them, even for one of his kind.

When he surfaced Tor was curled against him, watching his face.

“Well?” the human asked, the moment Ash opened his eyes.

“The bond deepens,” Ash said grimly. “It will not be long before every emotion each of us experiences will be felt by the other, no matter what distance separates us. And I can do nothing to stop it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m stuck with you.” For the time being, at least. Once he broke his exile and escaped into the leythe, he should be able to shed the bond along with his human form. Tor would not be so lucky. He would be left in psychic agony.

Assuming he survived the breaking of the bond in the first place.

Tor narrowed his eyes and slid out of the bedroll. “Well, it sounds like I’m stuck with you, too.”

Breakfast was a silent affair. Tor helped break camp, but when it came time to set out and Ash ordered him to carry the pack again, he raised an eyebrow and said, “Carry it yourself.”

Ash gritted his teeth. “You’re with me on sufferance, Human. You’d best refrain from angering me. You’ve already demonstrated quite admirably that you haven’t the skills to survive out here on your own. Pick up the pack. We’re leaving.” He turned away and set off toward the west, the direction of Vakar.

“What if I don’t?” Tor’s mocking voice came from behind him. “Will you turn me into a frog?”

Ash spun around and pinned him with a glare that, back when he’d actually had real power, had been known to reduce men to quaking at his feet. “Believe me, Human, the notion is not without appeal.”

Tor merely smirked, unfazed by Ash's display of temper. "Can't imagine a frog being much fun in bed."

The bark of laughter was out before Ash could stop it. And once he'd started, he couldn't stop. The human was impossible, but... hell, Ash hadn't laughed so hard in a long time. Lifetimes, maybe.

When he finally recovered himself and wiped the tears from his eyes—how long had it been since he'd done *that*?—Tor was watching him in silence, shaking his head.

"You... are infuriating, Human." He tried to make it sound like a growl, but it didn't come out the least bit threatening.

Tor's shoulder hitched in a shrug. "Probably shouldn't have told me you have to protect me, then, should you?"

"Apparently not. A tactical error on my part."

"Not a problem," Tor said, grinning. "Makes you seem more human."

More human, indeed. "I make a terrible human."

"You're telling me," Tor muttered, almost-but-not-quite under his breath.

"And *you* would make a terrible frog." Ash's annoyance didn't have the nearly the impact he'd intended, what with his lips wanting to quirk into a smile. "And I rather like you in my bed just the way you are."

"Was that a compliment?"

"No, it wasn't. Now pay attention, Human, this is important. When we reach Vakar, you'll have to pose as my slave. You might as well start practicing now, since it appears that subservience is going to be a challenge for you."

Tor frowned as he considered Ash's words, then said, "Sounds like a clever ploy to get me to carry your shit. Tell me why it's so important for me to pose as your slave and I'll think about it."

Ash opened his mouth to threaten, then snapped it shut as it occurred to him that no threat he made was going to carry much weight. Not now that Tor understood that the leythe-bond they shared made Ash's survival contingent

upon his own. And really, Tor's request wasn't unreasonable. Perhaps if the human understood the reasoning behind the demand, he'd be more willing to cooperate. "Because you lack the knowledge to pose convincingly as my associate or even my apprentice. You have no idea how to behave in polite society, and I haven't the time to teach you. Slaves are all but invisible to the nobility in this part of the world, and I'd rather nobody had reason to look at you too closely. As my slave, you will attract far less attention than as my... well. Whatever else we might call you that would explain your complete lack of manners."

The last thing Ash needed was for one of Kaldasha Valtari's leythari to get close enough to Tor to discover what he was. He hated the idea of bringing the human right into Valtari's lair, but he could see no other way. The Lord and Protector of Vakarra knew Ash in his current form. He was also the only such contact Ash had who could grant him access to a properly shielded workroom. He would need that workroom if he was going to use Tor to raise the power to break his exile.

Tor nodded at his explanation and bent to pick up the pack. "Makes sense. If you'd said that in the first place, I wouldn't have kicked up a fuss." He hoisted the pack over his shoulders and followed along.

They walked in silence. Ash kept a sharp eye out, scanning the terrain for movement and the leythe for signs of life. They were deep in the foothills of the Iceshards. The mountain range marked not only the northern border of Vakarra, but also the northern frontier. No human knew what lay north of the Iceshards; none who'd attempted the crossing had ever returned to tell the tale. Even these foothills were treacherous, riddled as they were with odd rock formations, hidden canyons, and networks of caves that wound their way deep into the earth. Such places were the favored hunting grounds of the rhyx and other creatures even more dangerous and less predictable.

After perhaps an hour of blissful silence, Tor trotted up beside him and said, "So what's in Vakar? And how long will it take to get there?"

Ash turned to look at him while he debated how much to tell the human. "Vakar is the seat of power in Vakarra, the realm through which we currently

travel. There we will find Kaldasha Valtari, Lord and Protector of Vakarra. He has something I need in order to break my exile. I will offer him my services in return for the use of it. As to how long it will take, that will depend on the terrain and the weather and what we encounter along the way. If we could take the North Trade Road, I'd say ten days or so. But with Vakarra at war—"

"War?" Tor looked alarmed. "What war?"

"Vakarra is at war with Daerne, its neighbor to the west." Ash waved a hand off in the direction they were traveling. "So, in order to avoid patrols and awkward questions, I'd prefer to stay off the road entirely. This terrain is difficult enough, and sparsely settled enough, that we should be able to reach the city of Vakar without too much trouble. Sensible people tend to stay well clear of the Iceshards." He gestured north, toward the mountains.

Tor turned to look, scanning the peaks. "Why?"

"Humans are fond of stories. There are all manner of tales regarding the horrors that come down out of the mountains when the weather turns cold."

"Are they true?"

"You do ask a lot of questions, Human."

Tor shrugged. "Not much else to talk about. We don't exactly have a lot in common, now, do we?"

"No. We don't."

"Other than agreeing that you're a pain in my ass."

Ash laughed. He couldn't help it. Some of the things that came out of the human's mouth...

"Ash?"

"Hmm?"

"What happens to me when you break your exile?"

That was enough to wipe the smile off his face. What, indeed. "Hopefully, I generate enough power to send you back where you came from."

"But you said we were bonded. How will that work?"



The truth would serve no one, and he doubted the human would take kindly to the notion that Ash's escape would likely cost him his life. If the channeling process didn't kill him outright, the shattering of the bond certainly would. As a creature of the leythe, Ash would share none of the agony of that broken bond. "It's complicated," Ash said, keeping his eyes fixed firmly ahead. "Leave working the leythe to those of us who understand it. If all goes well, you won't have to worry about a thing."

"And the darkness inside me? Will it still hurt?"

"No, Tor. It won't hurt," he said softly. "I can promise you that."

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## CHAPTER NINE

*Icefall*

Tor staggered to a stop and leaned against a tree trunk. His feet hurt, his legs burned, and he couldn't remember ever being so cold.

The temperature had been dropping steadily over the last two days. Ash had told him yesterday that a storm was moving in. He'd insisted on traveling long after dark, hoping they could reach the village of Icefall before the storm hit. This morning, after far too short a night shivering in the open, they'd woken to a heavy, gray sky.

Tiny, hard bits of ice masquerading as snowflakes stung Tor's face. The thin blanket he had clutched around his shoulders like a cloak did little to keep out the cold or the wind. Ash had used the leythe to warm it for him a few times over the last couple of days, but Tor wasn't about to ask him for help. The scathing, superior look he'd given Tor the one time Tor *had* asked had made Tor so angry that he'd decided he'd rather freeze to death than ask Ash for *anything*.

Ash walked a few steps farther on, then stopped and turned to face him.

"I can't," Tor said. "I'm done."

"Humans," Ash said with a derisive curl of his lip. He moved back to the tree Tor was leaning against and ran his hands over Tor's blanket. Tor wasn't too proud to snuggle into the blissful warmth. For one moment, he allowed himself the luxury of imagining that he was about to sink down on the ground and finally rest. "Thank you," he muttered, and hoped he didn't sound as pathetically grateful as he felt.

Ash laid an arm across his shoulders and pointed in the direction they'd been heading. "There."

Tor squinted, but he couldn't tell what it was he was supposed to be looking at. "I don't see anything. Except snowflakes."

"Icefall is just ahead. If you can keep going for a little while longer, there'll be a hot meal and a hot bath. And we can sleep in a real bed tonight."

Tor eyed him narrowly and tried to dredge up some enthusiasm from the depths of his exhaustion. “Sleep? Really? Didn’t think you knew the meaning of the word.”

Ash ignored the gibe. “Or we can stop here and camp. There might just be room for both of us under that pine tree over there.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Does it need to be?”

Tor considered his options. The thought of another night out in the open was almost more than he could take. Ash might use the leythe to warm the bedding, but he could do nothing to soften the hard ground or keep the wind off. He could keep going if it meant warmth and a soft bed out of the wind. He hoped Ash wasn’t just dangling a carrot in front of him. He wasn’t sure he’d survive another night shivering under a tree, even if he was wrapped up in Ash’s arms.

He pushed himself away from the tree. “All right, let’s do it. But I’m warning you—if we stop again, I’m done.”

“A little while longer” proved to be a good two hours. It was full dark by the time they staggered into the Icefall Inn. Even Ash looked like he was ready to drop as he stood at the ancient wooden counter and negotiated with the innkeeper for a room and a meal.

Tor looked around dully. He knew he should be curious about his first glimpse of civilization in this strange world he’d come to, but he couldn’t muster the energy to focus on anything other than staying on his feet.

Ash grabbed Tor’s arm, jerking him out of a standing doze, and guided him into the common room. A haze of smoke from the oil lamps that lit the stone and timber building hung on the air, the smell of it mingling with that of roasting meat. He was pushed down on a bench in front of a table close to a blazing fire. He sagged with relief, still shivering as his body soaked up the heat.

Tor ate what was put in front of him, noting only that it was hot and that it was a good thing it was stew, because he was almost too tired to chew. When

they'd eaten their fill, Ash hauled him to his feet and led him up the stairs. Tor stumbled along after him. When they reached the room, Ash pushed him down on the bed and left him there while he supervised the inn's staff, who were bringing in a large wooden tub and buckets full of hot water.

Tor didn't mean to doze off, but Ash woke him by shaking his shoulder. "Do you want that bath now?"

He blinked up at Ash, who slipped an arm behind his shoulders and helped him sit.

"Come. I know you're tired, but it will be worth the effort."

Ash started working at Tor's clothing. He removed it carefully, as if Tor were a child in need of help rather than a whore he couldn't wait to use. When he had Tor stripped, instead of pushing him down and taking his pleasure as he normally would, he helped him to the tub.

Tor sank down into the hot water with a sigh and closed his eyes. He could fall asleep here so easily. He started to drift off, then jerked awake as something rough and wet was dragged across his chest. Ash had a washcloth in hand and was... bathing him? He blinked up at the man, wondering why he was suddenly being so gentle and concerned.

"You looked like you were too tired to do it yourself," Ash said before he could comment. "And I don't want your filthy body in my nice clean bed tonight." The gentle hands, however, belied the harshness of his tone.

"Ah. So your reasons for helping me are entirely self-serving," Tor said, struggling to keep his words from slurring.

"Always," Ash told him. "You would do well to remember that, Human."

"Why do you always call me that?"

Ash frowned. "Human? It is what you are."

"Right, but... I don't call you Asshole. I have a name, you know. We've been traveling together for over a week, and I can probably count on one hand the number of times you've used it."

Ash's violet eyes narrowed. He pressed his lips together and continued washing Tor without further comment. When he'd gently cleaned every inch of Tor's skin, he untied the scrap of leather Tor had been using to tie his hair back. Ash ran his hands through the wind-tangled snarls, then stopped suddenly. "What is this?"

Tor twisted around in the tub to see Ash examining a long strand of jet-black hair, nose wrinkled in apparent disgust. "Is that a trick question? Because it looks a lot like my hair to me."

"Does it? Really?" Ash buried his fingers in Tor's hair again, and Tor let out a moan as they rubbed deliciously against his scalp.

Tor relaxed against the side of the tub and tilted his head back, nearly whimpering with pleasure as those strong fingers worked their way through his hair.

"There. That's better."

Tor sighed. "Thanks for that. I'm not sure how it's any better, though. You didn't even get it wet." He opened his eyes and Ash pulled the whole mass over Tor's shoulder, letting it spill down onto his chest, clean and silky, untangled and... and its natural gold color. "What did you do?"

"Restored it to its natural state. Do not contaminate yourself in such a way again, Human," Ash said, picking up a section of hair and running his fingers through it. "This is beautiful—the color of the desert sands in morning sunlight."

Tor stared at him. He'd been dyeing his hair for years, part of the Goth look that served to keep people at a distance, and he hadn't been planning to stop anytime soon. "I'll do whatever the fuck I want with my hair," he said, snatching the silken strands away. "You don't own me."

Ash's eyes narrowed for a just a moment. If Tor hadn't known better, he might have sworn the man looked almost—hurt? Then his lips curved in that arrogant smirk that Tor hated so much. "That's not what you said last night."

"Hard to say anything with your cock rammed down my throat."

Ash gave him a long, appraising look. “An excellent suggestion. Don’t bother getting dressed.” He picked up the clothing he’d removed from Tor. “In fact, I’ll deal with these. They’re hardly appropriate for the weather.”

Ash bundled Tor’s jeans and T-shirt together and left the room. Tor sank back into the tub to enjoy the silence.

When Ash woke him again the water in the tub was cold. There was a fire in the fireplace, which must have been burning for some time, as the room was now pleasantly warm. Tor stepped out of the tub and Ash wrapped a towel around him, then pointed to a pile of clothing on the chair beside the hearth. “That should be a bit warmer than what you’ve been wearing.”

Tor dried himself off and went to examine the clothing. There were two pairs of thick breeches and two shirts similar in style to the ones Ash wore, as well as a scarf, a pair of mittens, and a thick, woolen cloak. On the floor next to the chair was a pair of sturdy fur-lined leather boots.

He glanced over at Ash, who was waving his hands over the bath water, presumably to warm it. “Thank you.”

“It’s only going to get colder,” Ash said. “Can’t have you freezing to death. That wouldn’t be merciful *or* compassionate, and I’m sure she’d take offense.”

Tor got into bed. It felt like Ash had already warmed it. He pulled the covers up over his shoulders, then turned on his side so he could watch Ash strip.

Ash groaned as he sank into the tub. “There are some things about being human that almost make up for all the inconveniences of these bodies.”

Tor looked at him askance. “You’d trade god-like powers for a chance to wallow in my filth?” he asked drily.

The ghost of a smile flitted across Ash’s face. It was gone again before Tor was even certain it had been there. “Absolutely not. But since I’m stuck in this form for the time being, I might as well get as much pleasure out of it as I can.” He scrubbed himself clean, but didn’t wash his hair. That got the same treatment Tor’s had, minus the color change.

When he was finished Ash stepped out of the tub, wet skin glistening in the flickering firelight. Tor watched the play of muscle under golden skin as Ash dried himself. Even though he wanted sleep, the sight of that body started a delicious heat simmering low in his belly. All he could think of was Ash's skin, hot against his own, those strong, sculpted muscles straining against him, and that long, thick cock buried deep inside him.

When Ash turned to face Tor, the heat in his eyes said he'd been having similar thoughts. Tor threw back the covers and licked his lips. "Come on, then," he said in a husky voice. "Show me what you've got."

Ash's lips quirked in a half-smile. He sauntered over to the bed, moving like a big, powerful jungle cat stalking its prey. Tor decided that he didn't mind being prey if Ash was the hunter.

The hunter climbed onto the bed and straddled Tor's hips, then leaned forward to capture his mouth in a bruising kiss. Tor's eyes slid shut. His hands trailed over lean hips, taut abs and an impressively sculpted back as the kiss deepened. When Ash broke the kiss and moved to Tor's neck, Tor tilted his head back to bare his throat. Ash made a growling sound deep in his chest.

Ash kissed and nipped his way down Tor's body, moving lower and lower. Tor moaned and bucked his hips, wanting friction and heat. Ash gave him a wicked grin and pinned his hips to the bed. Feather light kisses and aggressive little nips followed.

"Please..." Tor whispered.

A breath of laughter ghosted across the skin of his belly, followed by the swipe of Ash's tongue. "You beg so nicely. What do you want, I wonder?"

Tor squirmed, trying to free himself, desperate to *move*. Ash's fingers dug into hips, hard enough to bruise. Ash bent his head and dragged his tongue along the length of Tor's cock. Tor bit back a moan and lifted his head, wanting to watch. Ash hadn't done anything like this to him before. It was always fast and hard, and he never got to see Ash's face.

Ash lifted thick, black lashes and fixed him with violet eyes that were dark with desire. Tor couldn't look away—those eyes held him—and as he

watched, Ash's lips curved in another wicked smile. Then he closed his lips around the head of Tor's cock and took him all the way to the back of his throat.

Tor's head fell back on the pillow, and he whimpered as his blood turned to fire. Ash pulled back slowly, then took him deep again. Tor fought to flex his hips, but Ash held him firmly down.

"Ash... *please*..."

But Ash wasn't about to relent. He continued the slow torture until Tor was reduced to incoherent moans and whimpers. Just when he thought he couldn't take any more, Ash stopped and positioned himself between Tor's legs, lined himself up, and pushed slowly into him.

Tor was used to the abrupt entry by now, and eased by Ash's use of the leythe as it was, there was little discomfort. Ash groaned, his head falling back as he buried himself inside Tor.

The sensations echoing through the bond were stronger than ever. Tor moaned as he experienced everything Ash did when he buried himself in the slick, tight heat of Tor's body. His vision blurred into a strange double image in which he saw Ash moving above him, but at the same time also looked down upon himself lying spread out on the bed. He closed his eyes and concentrated on tactile impressions instead—the heat of his own body gripping Ash tightly, the feeling of being filled so completely, the growing need flashing between them through the bond.

It was different, more intense than the last time, and instead of pounding him hard until he came, Ash set a leisurely pace. Tor could feel his own desire mixed with Ash's and reflected back at him twice as strong, until he felt like he was on fire with the need to come. Ash's gorgeous eyes locked onto Tor's, and he shivered under that gaze. Then Ash wrapped his hand around Tor's cock and stroked him firmly. Tor bucked and cried out as he came. Ash followed him, pushing in hard and then stilling and letting out a low moan.

Ash pulled out and collapsed beside him, and Tor dared to steal a kiss. Ash didn't push him away. After a few moments of watching him with half-closed



eyes, he reached for Tor and pulled him close. “One advantage to the leythe-bond that I did not anticipate,” he murmured.

Tor didn’t respond. Sleep was already dragging at the edges of his mind.

“I’m sorry I pushed you so hard today,” Ash’s voice whispered in his ear. “It was worth it, though, yes?”

Tor managed to crack one eye open and give him a sleepy smile. “A hot meal, a bath, and you in bed with me? Definitely worth it.”

Ash’s arms tightened around him. “I thought so too, Hu—Tor.”

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## CHAPTER TEN

*Human Things*

Ash retrieved the washcloth from the edge of the tub. He expended a breath of leythe energy to warm it, then used it to wipe Tor clean. By the time he'd finished and pulled the blankets up over him, Tor was fast asleep.

The human had been close to the end of his strength. Ash knew he'd pushed him hard. He'd decided it was better to push hard for a couple of days than be caught out in the storm he'd sensed coming. Tor had been miserable enough the past two nights. Ash didn't want to subject him to sheltering beneath a tree during a raging blizzard. Nor did he want to risk getting them lost and missing the village. Game would become sparse now that there was snow on the ground, and they would need the supplies he intended to buy here for the rest of the journey.

After wiping himself, he wrapped up in his cloak and sat on the end of the bed watching Tor sleep. He liked the human's natural hair color, soft gold with subtle red highlights that glinted like polished copper in the firelight, much better than that flat black. That hadn't suited him at all, what with that fair skin of his. And he liked—

The thought stopped him cold. With a muttered curse, he yanked his mind firmly away from all the things he liked about Tor. The human was nothing more than a tool that had fallen into his hands. He would do well to remember that. Given the most likely outcome of what he had planned for the human, there was no point in getting attached.

But Tor made things stir deep within him. Things Ash had no name for, human things that turned his thoughts in irrational directions.

He told himself it meant nothing that Tor had made him laugh until his belly hurt for the first time in forever. Meant nothing that he enjoyed the verbal sparring and the way Tor's silver-gray eyes flashed with wicked amusement when he stood up to Ash. It meant nothing that their bodies fit so perfectly together and that Tor's touch made his thoughts drift to things like *tomorrow* and *next time*, things that had no place in his plans.

It meant nothing that the thought of Tor not being here was like a cold wind echoing through a dark, empty place buried deep inside him.

Meant nothing that Tor seemed to trust him with his life.

“Oh, Tor...” he whispered. “You shouldn’t trust me. You should have run the other way.”

But he hadn’t.

And Tor would soon learn what a big mistake that had been.

Ash told himself fiercely that nothing mattered except finding his own way back into the leythe.

Human lives were so brief, the merest flicker of light in the vast energy matrix that was the leythe. So what if one was cut short? To a creature of the leythe, humans lived and died in the blink of an eye.

But, oh, they could shine so brightly in the short time they had!

Thinking about the shifting energies that made up Tor’s aura going dark and cold made Ash feel...

Alone. And empty.

He shivered, suddenly cold, and slipped into bed beside Tor. The human rolled over in his sleep, pressing his back against Ash’s chest. Ash draped an arm over his hip. Tor sighed contentedly and settled again, but Ash lay awake for a long time, staring into the flickering firelight while he tried not to think human thoughts.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Wild Things*

Three days out of Icefall, Tor missed that nice soft bed terribly. They'd stayed at the inn for two blissful nights while they waited out the storm. While Ash had fretted about lost time, Tor had slept late, spent the day filling his belly with hot food, and the next night being filled by Ash.

The next two nights they'd spent huddled together in the dubious shelter of a sparse pine forest. Ash's use of the leythe, and of Tor, had kept them warm enough, but the wind had been brutal. The cave Ash had found for the night looked like a palace in comparison. Tor was looking forward to sleeping out of the wind with something resembling a roof over his head.

He set to work getting the bedding organized while Ash scoured the area for stones to pile up for a makeshift fire. Game had become sparse after the storm. Ash hadn't wanted to waste time hunting so they'd stocked up on trail rations in Icefall. Ash had purchased another pack to carry it all. Now they each carried a pack, although Tor had noticed that he was still burdened with the heavier of the two.

While Tor dug through their supplies and wondered how to put them together to make a palatable meal, Ash piled up the stones he'd gathered and used the leythe to heat them. He crowned the pile with cheerful orange-yellow flames, which he'd grudgingly conceded were more for light than child-proofing.

"We've got some bread left," Tor said, rummaging in his pack. "It's getting stale, so we should probably eat it. I'll toast it and we can put cheese on it."

Ash looked up from his spot by the stones where he squatted, warming his hands. "I'll go and set the wards, then." He rose and left the cave. Tor busied himself with cutting their last loaf of bread into thick slices and sliding them onto a sharpened stick to toast.

He'd just got the bread toasted to a nice golden brown when a scream that set every hair on his body to stirring cut through the night. The sound of it froze his blood and seized his gut. It reminded him of those eerie howls he'd heard almost every night since he'd come here, and it was close. Close enough that it was not just a sound, but a feeling as well. Close enough to be right outside.

Knife in hand, he scrambled to the mouth of the cave and looked out. The moon was partially covered by clouds. He could see nothing in its dim light, but he could hear low growls and the sounds of a fight off to his right.

Shit. Shit. What to do? Ash could be in trouble, and if anything happened to Ash...

He heard another cry, this one familiar and full of pain. It was followed by a burning, stinging pain across his chest, as if something had raked his flesh. He stared down at his shirt, expecting to see blood, but there was nothing. He gripped the knife tightly and sprinted out into the darkness in the direction the sound had come from.

What he saw drained that burst of thoughtless courage right out of him. He stopped dead, fear rooting him to the ground. Ash faced a huge black creature that looked like some hellish cross between a wolf and a mountain lion. Tor glanced down at the knife he held and then back up at the beast, swallowing hard. Then Ash turned, and the moonlight revealed the tatters of his shirt, dark with blood.

His pain. It was Ash's pain Tor felt burning across his chest.

Before Tor could move to help him, lightning danced between Ash's fingers and lit his face with an eerie glow. The beast snarled and slashed at him with wicked claws. It moved more like a cat than a wolf, muscles rippling in a lethal combination of animal strength and liquid grace. Ash dodged the blow with surprising agility. A bolt of lightning flew from his hand, hitting the animal right between the eyes. The creature stopped, shuddered violently, then slumped to the ground with a dull thud.

Ash staggered back a few steps and pressed his hands to his chest. Tor slipped the knife into the sheath at his belt and hurried to help him. "Is it dead?"

"I hope so," Ash said in a tight voice. "I've nothing left."

"Are you all right?"

Ash lifted a hand and stared at the slick of blood on his fingers. "So frail..." he murmured, staring down at his hand as he swayed. He lifted his gaze to meet Tor's. "Hurts... more than I... imagined."

"You've never been wounded before?" Tor asked in disbelief.

"No. Never."

"I find that hard to believe." He tried to keep his tone light as he pulled Ash's arm across his shoulders, tried not to think about what that burning pain across his own chest meant. He wasn't sure if the fear that churned in his gut was his own or Ash's. "Arrogant ass that you are, I'd have guessed people would be lining up to run you through."

"Lining up to die, more like," Ash muttered darkly, and leaned against him. "Fuck..."

By the time they reached the cave Tor was more than half supporting him, and Ash's face was white as bleached bone. Shock, Tor thought numbly. He was going into shock. Tor tried to remember what it was he was supposed to do about that, but the only thing he could come up with was to call 9-1-1.

He helped Ash to the bedroll and laid him down on the bedding. When he pushed aside the ruined shirt, he froze, staring at the four deep gashes that ran across Ash's chest from shoulder to hip. High school health class hadn't covered anything like this. Tor fought back panic as he sliced the remains of the shirt away with his knife and mopped at the blood. Bile rose in his throat as he saw exposed ribs and torn muscle. The ragged tears in Ash's flesh weren't simple incisions that could be neatly stitched together, even if he did know what he was doing.

"Ash? This... looks bad. What do I do?"

Ash didn't say anything, just stared up at Tor, eyes glazed with pain.

"Come on, Ash, stay with me! You're supposed to be this powerful leythari." He couldn't keep the note of hysteria out of his voice. "*Do* something, damn it! Heal yourself. You healed my finger when I cut myself."

Ash's eyes focused on him and he drew in a deep, shuddering breath. Then he lifted his bloody hands and laid them over the slashes. "Move back," he whispered. "Don't know how much... control I have... I don't want to hurt you."

Tor backed a little way off and crouched near the fire. Ash closed his eyes. He was still for so long that Tor thought he'd passed out. After a while, soft blue light began to seep from beneath his hands and trickled into the wounds. The light brightened and Tor felt the echo of pain in his own flesh begin to fade.

He waited, shivering and straining his senses for more howls. Were there more of the creatures lurking outside, waiting until he fell asleep? Had Ash finished setting the wards? And in his current state, would he even notice if something tripped them? Tor decided right then that he wasn't going to sleep. Not until he was certain they wouldn't be attacked in the night.

The blue glow beneath Ash's hands finally faded. Ash's body convulsed and then went still. Tor scrambled to his side, relief flooding through him when found a strong, steady pulse. He moved Ash's hands aside and stared at the smooth, undamaged skin they had covered.

There was only dried blood to mark where those ragged tears had been. Tor covered Ash with his own cloak and set some water to heat. When it was warm, he cleaned the blood away, then finished undressing Ash and got him settled in the bedding. Through all his ministrations, Ash never stirred.

Tor prepared some bread and cheese for himself and heated more water for tea, and still Ash slept on. He sat up all night, listening for any sound that might indicate danger. He told himself he could rest in the morning, when Ash woke up.

But when dawn finally brightened the sky and Ash was still unresponsive,  
Tor started to worry.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Confessions*

It was dark, his head hurt, and Ash couldn't seem to get warm. He shivered, huddling deeper into the blankets. He thought maybe it was light out, but he had no idea what day it was, and he couldn't even dredge up enough energy to open his eyes and find out.

He drifted in and out of consciousness for a long time. No matter how far into the darkness he wandered the cold followed him, settling into the very marrow of his bones and chilling his flesh from the inside. He became aware of a voice speaking near him. He knew the voice but he couldn't make out the words. He tried to think where he was and who he was with, but nothing came to him. The cold made it hard to concentrate on anything for very long.

He reached for the leythe, intending to warm the bedding. The pain in his head intensified and the wisp leythe energy slipped away. A deeper cold than before surged up from somewhere inside him. Shivers wracked him, making him shudder so violently he thought he might come apart. There was movement behind him. Then warm skin pressed up against his back and hot breath fell on his neck. An arm went around his chest and pulled him tightly against that warm body behind him.

"Ash? Can you hear me?"

He could, but damned if he could answer. He tried, but it was too much effort. He recognized Tor's voice, though, and once he did, it all came back to him.

The rhyx should never have been able to sneak up on him like that. And it wouldn't have, if he'd been paying attention instead of thinking about where he was going to put his cock as soon as the camp chores were done. Good thing it had been alone; it had taken almost everything he had to bring down that one, and he doubted the human would have done much more than wave his arms around and make noises.

He'd overextended himself badly, drawing too heavily on the leythe. Rationing a limited amount of power wasn't something he was used to doing. He hadn't even considered it when he'd worked the leythe into a bolt of lightning and flung it at the rhyx. He certainly hadn't counted on needing more to heal himself. He'd recover, but he'd likely spend the next few days wishing he were dead.

Had he been in his natural form, it wouldn't have mattered. The leythe would have answered his call in a raging torrent, more power at his command than he'd ever had cause to use at one time. In that form, he could have flattened the rhyx and hardly noticed the energy expenditure. He'd never before had to consider that he might be using too much.

Or endure the consequences of doing so.

Leythe-burn was something *humans* had to worry about.

Yet another human weakness Jhara had stuck him with and not bothered to explain, damn her.

Of course, had he been in his natural form, the rhyx could never have surprised him in the first place, let alone touched him.

"Ash, you can't leave me." Tor's voice reached him through the cold. There was a note of fear there, and he could sense that fear rippling through Tor's aura. Fear made sense; if anything happened to Ash, Tor was stranded here.

Ash tried to respond, to reassure Tor, but he couldn't even open his eyes. He hated feeling weak and helpless. He hated even more that Tor was seeing him like this.

"Come on, Ash, you're scaring me. You feel so... far away. Like most of you is someplace else. I'm guessing that's bad. I need you to do something... anything. You healed your wounds, and you don't have a fever. I can't figure out what's wrong or what you need me to do."

Ash tried again to open his eyes, tried to speak, but his body refused to obey his commands. His limbs were too heavy, and he was so tired and so cold...

Fear flared through Tor's aura again, and it didn't feel at all like the selfish how-am-I-going-to-get-home fear that he'd expected. No, this was something deeper, more primal. Fear of loss... fear of...

"Look, I know I'm only just starting to get to know you, and I probably shouldn't even be thinking this, but... I like being with you. You do something to me. Inside. When I'm with you, it feels like I've finally come home. And... and I don't want to lose that."

There was a soft kiss on the back of his neck, and then Tor continued, "So you need to come back to me now. I need to see that you're all right." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Please be all right. I don't think I can go back to a life without you in it. It hurts too much to even think about it."

Something sharp and uncomfortable prodded at Ash as he considered Tor's words in the light of his own plans.

*If only you knew, Human. It's going to hurt a whole lot more before it's over.*

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Ash scowled as he dug through the packs and took inventory of their supplies. They'd spent four nights in the cave now, which was three nights too many. Much as he wanted to get back on the road, though, Ash knew he wasn't ready. He knew enough about leythe-burn to know that a relapse was likely if he didn't respect his body's needs.

It had been over a full day before he'd been strong enough to speak. The two days that followed, he'd been weak as a newborn kitten. Tor had to help him sit, help him drink, and even help him piss, which was almost more indignity than Ash could take.

This morning he'd been strong enough to get up and dress himself, although given the way his hands were shaking, even that may have been more activity than he was ready for.

A shadow darkened the cave entrance and he glanced up to see Tor standing there with a pot full of snow. "What are you doing up?" Tor demanded. "You're supposed to be resting."

Ash dropped his eyes, not wanting to look at him. “I’ve rested for the last three days, Human. I’ve had enough of resting. I wanted to see how much food we have left.”

“I was going to bring that up today. I didn’t want to worry you until you were stronger.”

Ash heard the warmth and concern in Tor’s voice and felt it in his aura. Uncertainty twisted in his gut. Although he’d given Tor no indication that he’d heard those words he’d spoken in the night, he found it difficult to meet Tor’s eyes, knowing what the man had confessed to feeling for him.

Tor seemed to think he was embarrassed over his weakness, and gave him his space. For now, Ash was content to let him think that. Better he thought Ash was simply proving himself to be the arrogant ass Tor already believed he was than that he knew how unsettled he made Ash feel.

Tor set the pot over the fire. “So what’s the verdict?” he asked, moving to Ash’s side and squatting down.

“We’ll need more supplies. Much as I hate to admit to such weakness, I think I need another two or three days before we can get back on the road. I don’t want to risk a relapse. It would delay us much more than waiting an extra few days now.”

“Are you sure that’s enough time?” Tor sounded doubtful. “You’ve been flat on your back since you were hurt. If you need longer...”

“Three days should be sufficient. We’ll have to make a detour to resupply, though. I didn’t intend for us to be delayed for so long.”

“I’m not in a hurry,” Tor said quietly.

The more Ash thought about it, the more he realized that he wasn’t in a hurry, either. Reaching Vakar would mean an end to their time together. Being stuck in bed for three days had given Ash plenty of time with nothing to do but think. In that time, he’d come to the rather uncomfortable realization that he was going to miss the human when he broke his exile and escaped back into the leythe.

Tor reached out and put a hand on his arm and squeezed gently. Ash glanced up at him and found himself caught in the depths of those silver-gray eyes. “You’re shaking. You don’t need to put on an act for me. And it’s not a weakness to admit that you need more time. It’s smart. What if we ran into another rhyx before you were ready? I don’t mind staying here for a while longer. If you need to.”

Annoyed with himself and with Tor for diluting his sense of purpose, Ash tore his gaze away and jerked his arm free. “What I *need* is to get to Vakar and break my exile.” The sooner he got back into leythe, the sooner he could shake off the distracting thoughts and feelings that Jhara had saddled him with. His sense of perspective would return. Once he was back in his natural form, things would start making sense again.

Tor didn’t say anything. His aura radiated hurt and disappointment.

“The village of Darkwood is a day south of here,” Ash continued. “We’ll stop there to resupply and then continue on to Vakar.”

“Fine. We’ll leave when you’re ready.” Tor got to his feet and retreated to the fire. Ash shut out the uncomfortable feelings he sensed through the bond and turned his attention to repacking the supplies.

Damned if he was going to let a *human* make him feel guilty.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Vakar*

Ash looked over the snow-covered landscape laid out before him. Ahead was the castle from which Kaldasha Valtari ruled Vakarra, an imposing stone structure that towered over the land below. It looked as if it had been carved out of the side of the mountain it stood upon.

“Is the whole city inside the mountain?” Tor asked, coming up behind him.

Ash pointed south, where the fenced pastures of some of Vakar’s outlying farms were visible. “The city of Vakar lies to the south. The castle is the home of the Valtari family, rulers of Vakarra. Though there is space enough inside to shelter most of the population of the city, should there be need.”

“You mean like if there’s a war?”

“War or a leythe-storm.”

“Leythe-storm?”

“Vakarra was built upon the mining of leythe-stones—crystals that can be used to tap into the energies of the leythe. Sometimes the miners hit an unstable vein, releasing large amounts of raw leythe into the world. Plays havoc with the weather. Not to mention what it does to human minds.”

Tor’s gaze shifted nervously from the castle to Ash and back again. “Does that happen often?”

“Not as much as it did in the past. The leythari monitor the mining operations carefully, but accidents can still happen.”

Tor didn’t look comforted by that, but he said only, “So, what next? We just walk up to the front door and introduce ourselves?”

“With Vakarra at war, I imagine we’ll be met by a patrol before we get much farther. They will escort us to the castle. *I* am known here—I need no introduction. *You* will follow along behind me, with your head down and your

mouth shut. And you will *keep* your mouth shut no matter what I say. Both our lives may depend on it.”

Tor’s eyes narrowed. “I thought you knew these people.”

“I do. But I don’t trust them. Nor do they trust me. And I won’t know how safe we are until I have a chance to find out who is here and who is not. I don’t sense Lucano in the leythe. I hope that means he’s still at the border with the army.” And hopefully he’d stay there. There was no way Ash could hide what Tor was from a leythari as powerful as Lucano.

“Who is Lucano?”

“First Consort of Vakarra as well as its most powerful leythari.”

“Consort? As in... husband?”

“As in husband.” Ash turned to see Tor giving him a funny look. “Not quite the way things are done in your world?”

“Hell, no, there are only a few places in the country I’m from where I could marry a man. And... well, in some places they’re still fighting not to be killed for it.”

“Humans,” Ash muttered. “The variety of ways you come up with to make each other suffer never ceases to amaze me. If you applied just a fraction of that creative energy to building something instead of tearing it apart, you’d be a force to be reckoned with.”

Tor was obviously still digesting Ash’s last bit of information, for he frowned, then said, “So... how do they produce an heir? That’s sort of important, isn’t it?”

“That would be the Second Consort’s responsibility. Last I heard, the Lady Malika had not yet managed to produce one.” Ash started toward the castle, then stopped and turned to face Tor. “If Lucano shows up, you will stay out of his way—*and* out of his bed.”

Tor glared back. “What, you think I’m some kind of slut? I’m not—”

“That’s not what I meant.” Gods of the leythe, the human took exception to every single thing that came out of his mouth. He was getting damned tired of

having to explain himself all the time. “Lucano is powerful. And he uses that power to get what he wants.”

Tor snorted. “Sounds like someone else I know,” he said, almost, but not quite, under his breath.

Ash gritted his teeth. He found himself doing that so often lately, it was a wonder he hadn’t ground them to powder. For the sake of avoiding yet another argument, he chose to pretend he hadn’t heard. “You are nothing to these people. I can’t guarantee your safety if he should take an interest in you, so don’t do anything to attract his attention.”

“I wasn’t planning on it. The only bed I have any interest in is yours.” Tor’s expression softened. “Ash... if things don’t work out here... I mean, if you can’t break your exile and send me back home... I’m all right with that.” He lowered his lashes and his voice dropped, almost to a whisper. “I could stay here. With you. It’s not like there’s anything much for me to go back to.”

The feeling of unease that seemed to grow stronger every time he looked at Tor, every time he touched the man, flared to life. He locked it down reflexively, smoothing the energies of his own aura. He didn’t want Tor to have access to his true feelings the way he had access to Tor’s. He wondered how much longer he’d be able to shut Tor out. As the bond that connected them ever more deeply grew stronger, it took more and more concentration to do it. Soon it would be impossible to keep his feelings to himself. Ash’s gut twisted and his chest tightened. He tore his gaze away. “Impossible,” he said, and turned toward the castle.

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“You have got to be fucking with me.” Tor’s aura radiated disbelief and disgust in equal measure. Ash turned from the dressing table in their guest suite to see him holding up a pile of finely-wrought gold chains.

“I will be, later,” Ash murmured. “Especially if you go to dinner wearing that.”

Tor’s glare could have melted ice. “Wearing *what*? I don’t see anything here to wear. When I agreed to play your slave, I thought that meant I was



going to be lugging your shit around. I didn't realize you were going to put me on display for all your friends. I think I'll skip dinner."

The level of distress coming through the bond made Ash regret his comment. A few weeks ago, he might have found Tor's reaction to the clothing the steward had provided for him amusing. Now, Ash's first thought was to reassure him. "I wasn't intending for you to be put on display. The idea is to keep a low profile, and you'll certainly attract attention if you wear *that*. Didn't they send anything suitable?"

"Not for me." Tor wrinkled his nose as he held up a few scraps of brightly colored silk. "Not unless this is your idea of suitable."

"Have a look at the things they sent for me to wear. And choose something fairly plain."

As Ash had predicted, they hadn't gotten very close to the castle before they were met by a patrol. Several of the guardsmen had recognized Ash as Navaya, the mercenary leythari who sold his services to those who could afford them. The steward had also recognized him immediately, and was well aware that Kaldasha Valtari was quite fond of the wandering leythari. Navaya and his slave had been invited in with little fuss. After a short wait, the Lord and Protector had sent instructions that they were to be seen to a guest suite to freshen up and requested that Navaya join him for an informal dinner in his private study.

The steward had been sympathetic when Ash apologized for not having appropriate attire. Ash spun a tale of losing his pack horse while crossing the Icemist River on his way into Vakarra, a treacherous crossing even under the best conditions. The steward had promised to see to it, and a maid had just delivered a pile of clothing for them to make use of until Ash could employ the services of a tailor down in the city.

"You know, if you want to keep a low profile, it might make more sense to just leave me here," Tor suggested hopefully.

"I'm not leaving you alone here. Lucano may not be present, but there are other leythari employed here, and your aura is... *different* enough that it may attract the wrong kind of attention."

Tor frowned. “Different how?”

“Different because you’re from another world.” The lie fell from his lips with ease, and Ash ignored the little stab of guilt that prodded him as he spoke it. “Kaldasha cannot touch the leythe. All he’ll see is a pretty slave, and not very much of that, if we dress you in real clothing. You’ll be far safer with me.”

“*Pretty?*” Tor snorted. “Never been called that before.”

“Then the people around you were blind.”

Tor flushed and turned his attention to the pile of clothing.

Ash moved to his side to help, and selected a pair of dark blue breeches and a plain shirt of gray linen. “These will do nicely. They’re not too fancy for a pleasure slave, and they’ll hide your... charms from Kaldasha’s wandering eyes.”

“Wandering eyes?” Tor shot him a worried look. “Not sure I like the sound of that.”

“He will certainly look at you,” Ash told him. “But that is all he will do. The bathing room is through there.” He gestured across the room. Tor scooped up the clothing and headed off to his bath while Ash considered what services he might offer to Valtari in return for the use of his workroom. He was going to have to be very careful how he played this. Crippled as he was, many of the feats Valtari would remember him performing during past visits were no longer possible.

When Tor finally emerged from the bathing room, damp and flushed from the heat, he was dressed only in shimmering gold chains that encircled his hips, neck, wrists, and ankles. Ash drew in a sharp breath at the sight of him.

Tor’s color deepened and he lowered his eyes.

It took Ash a few moments to find his voice. “Gods of the leythe,” he finally breathed. He crossed the room and circled Tor slowly. He couldn’t tear his eyes from the hard planes of the man’s exquisitely sculpted body, the smooth swell of muscle across his chest, that firm, tight ass. He stopped in front of Tor and put an arm around his waist to pull him close, then kissed him

possessively. His fingers traced the chain that encircled Tor's narrow hips and dragged along the hot skin beneath it.

Tor responded eagerly, deepening the kiss. Ash could feel the heat and the hardness of him through his own clothes, his erection a burning brand against Ash's hip. Ash broke the kiss and pulled away before he lost himself completely.

Tor leaned in to nibble on Ash's earlobe. His breath was hot against Ash's neck as he whispered, "Thought I'd wear these under my clothes. So every time you look at me, you can think about what's waiting for you when we get back here."

Ash's cock twitched at the thought. He wished there was time to take full advantage of Tor right this minute. "Oh, I will be. Every time I look down at you, kneeling obediently beside my chair."

"Kneeling beside your—" Tor choked off the words, fury and shame blazing through his aura and wiping out the arousal that been there only seconds ago.

"Like a good slave," Ash added. "Keep your head down and your eyes on the floor. You don't speak, you don't move, and you don't make eye contact with anyone. Is that clear?"

"Fucking *hell*, Ash, you damn well better make this worth my while."

Ash silenced him with a kiss. "I'm planning on it." He nuzzled Tor's neck and ran his tongue around the shell of his ear. "I'll be thinking about what's under your clothes. And you'll be thinking about what I'm going to do to you when I get you back here." He nipped Tor's earlobe lightly and pressed his palm against Tor's cock.

Tor shivered and the energies of his aura shifted again, fury receding as need and want overshadowed it.

"A long, slow fuck against the wall, maybe?" Ash suggested.

"Yes," Tor whispered. "Please."

Ash silently cursed the fact that he didn't have time to indulge in that particular fantasy right now, and pulled away with some reluctance. "Hold on to that thought, then. I know I will."

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Slave Boy*

Tor followed meekly behind Ash and the steward. He tried to memorize the route from the guest suite, but the castle was huge. There were so many twists and turns that he was soon lost.

They stopped before an ornately carved wooden door. A servant standing outside the door opened it for them, and Tor followed Ash in. He was relieved to see the thick rug that covered the marble floor of the study. The prospect of kneeling on the floor all evening was bad enough, without having to deal with the additional discomfort of a hard stone floor.

“Navaya!”

Tor glanced up through his lashes to see a handsome man in his mid-thirties moving forward to greet Ash. His thick, shoulder-length, chestnut-brown hair was tied back, and he had eyes of a vivid blue that reminded Tor of pictures he’d seen of the Caribbean Sea back home.

“Kaldasha Valtari,” Ash said, stepping forward to clasp arms with the man. “It’s good to see you again, Lord and Protector.”

“And you. It has been... what, half a year?”

“Something like.”

Valtari turned to Tor and took hold of his chin, forcing his head up and turning it this way and that. Tor had to fight to remain still. He felt as naked and exposed as if he’d worn only the golden chains. Ash’s hand settled on the small of his back, pressing firmly to prevent him from moving away.

The Lord and Protector of Vakarra looked him over like he was a piece of meat, then nodded approvingly. “Very pretty,” Valtari said with a hungry gleam in his eye, “if somewhat overdressed. Where ever did you acquire such an exquisite treasure?”

Ash inclined his head, accepting the praise. “The slave market in Akhat, when I was there at summer’s end. I wasn’t intending to make such an extravagant purchase, but he caught my eye, and I was unable to pass him up.”

“I can see why,” Valtari said, lifting a strand of Tor’s hair and turning it this way and that so it caught the light. “Truly captivating. I don’t suppose I might take the liberty of borrowing him for the night?”

Tor stared at the floor, face flaming. So much for keeping a low profile. Although, now that he thought about it, Ash *had* said that it was the First Consort he was most concerned about avoiding. A sharp spike of hot, possessive jealousy stabbed through him. It had to be coming from Ash through that damned leythe-bond. He forced himself to remain silent, trembling with a mixture of shame and fury.

Ash’s hand moved on his back in long, gentle strokes. A warning? Or a promise?

“Perhaps that is something we can negotiate later,” Ash said smoothly. Tor’s head snapped up, and he twisted slightly to stare at Ash in disbelief. If Ash thought he was going to whore him out for his own gain...

Ash’s hand moved to the back of his neck and squeezed hard enough to hurt. “Although you may not find him as compliant as you might wish,” Ash continued. “I am still in the process of breaking him in. He has yet to learn proper submission, and I fear his skills in the bedroom are woefully inadequate. He was high strung to begin with, and our difficult journey has done little to improve his temperament. I chose not to display him tonight in the hopes that it might help calm his nerves.”

Fuming, Tor dropped his head, staring down at the floor. He couldn’t see Valtari’s expression, though he could hear the suppressed desire in his voice. “Completely understandable. Though I must say, a bit of spirit can be... exciting. A nice change of pace, yes?”

“That it can, my lord,” Ash murmured.

“Very well—we shall speak of it later. After I have plied you with enough drink to weight the bargaining in my favor.”

Both men laughed. Tor bit his cheek so hard in his effort to remain silent that he tasted blood.

Once the two of them were seated at the table, Tor knelt beside Ash's chair as he'd been instructed. He struggled to keep the simmering resentment off of his face. Slaves were invisible, indeed. To hell with Ash and his long, slow fuck against the wall. They'd be having words tonight, and they would not be pleasant.

The door opened. Two servants entered with trays and began serving the first course. Tor's stomach growled, and he wondered when the slaves got to eat. Not, apparently, at the same time as their masters. Other than stepping carefully around him, the servants ignored his presence entirely.

Once the servants had left the room, Ash said, "You dine alone tonight, but for myself. Is the First Consort still at the border with the army?"

Valtari rolled his eyes. "*He* is in his element. Wild horses couldn't drag him away from a conflict."

"And the Second Consort? The pleasure of Lady Malika's company is what makes a visit to Vakar truly memorable. I trust she is well."

Tor watched through lowered lashes and saw Valtari's expression turn grim. "Lady Malika met with a terrible fate while returning from her family's estate after the harvest. Her carriage was set upon by brigands and she was killed. Along with the child she carried."

"Kaldasha, I'm sorry," Ash said, sounding genuinely distressed by the news. "I hadn't heard. I spent most of the autumn in Akhat."

"Not half as sorry as I. As you're probably aware, Malika was more of a... a means to an end than a love-match for me, and she was well aware that my passion was always for Lucano. She never made me feel guilty about that, nor did she ever pressure me for more than I could give her. We came to be great friends, Malika and I, and her absence grieves me more than I can say."

"A tragic loss. You have my deepest sympathy."

"I would have more than that, if you were willing," Valtari said quietly. "I would have your aid. But we shall save that for later, as well." His gaze drifted

to Tor and lingered for a long moment. "Let us turn to more pleasant subjects while we dine. I would hear of your travels to Akhat, and any news you might have of the south."

Ash inclined his head. "As my lord wishes."

The conversation turned to politics and trade. Tor had never had any interest in those even back home, where he might have at least recognized some of the names and places mentioned. He tuned their words out and tried not to think about how hungry he was.

The brush of a hand across his cheek startled him and he raised his eyes to see Ash looking down at him, a mocking smile on his lips as he held a bit of meat out to him as if he were a dog. He curled his lip in a silent snarl. Ash's eyes narrowed in warning. Tor gritted his teeth and reached out to take the offering, but Ash pulled it away and held it to Tor's lips, like he expected... ah, hell, Ash had to be fucking with him... didn't he?

He glanced around and saw Valtari watching them intently.

*Keep your head down and your eyes on the floor.* Ash's words came back to him. He lowered his eyes and used lips and tongue to take the meat from Ash's hand. Ash didn't move his hand, so Tor licked Ash's fingers clean slowly, taking each finger into his mouth and swirling his tongue around it, using exactly the same technique he used on Ash's cock. It certainly had the desired effect. He had Ash's full attention, and he could feel the heat of his arousal blazing through the bond.

He took advantage of the moment to send a message of his own, and bit down hard on Ash's finger. Not enough to draw blood, but enough to hurt. He felt Ash's surprise, followed by a stab of anger. Ash jerked his hand back. His eyes narrowed as he leaned over to whisper a single word in Tor's ear: "Behave." Then Ash petted him like a favored animal and turned his attention back to Valtari.

The meal dragged on, with Ash feeding him tidbits from his plate and Valtari dividing his attention between Tor and Ash. Even with his eyes lowered he could tell whenever Valtari's gaze fell upon him, because the



leythe-bond that he was now almost constantly aware of would suddenly flare to life with a hot stab of possessive anger.

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It seemed like hours passed before the servants came to clear away the remnants of the meal. Tor was still hungry, but he dared not say anything. Valtari offered Ash a drink. Tor sighed and resigned himself to more waiting.

“To our long and mutually beneficial friendship,” Valtari said, raising his glass to Ash.

“To friendship.” Ash took a sip of his drink, then inclined his head in inquiry. “You spoke earlier of needing my aid. What would you have of me?”

“You have always been a valued friend, Navaya. And yes, there is a matter I would speak of to you. A matter that Lucano refuses to address. He counsels me to let it go and move on, but... I find I cannot. The anger festers within me, and I can no longer ignore it.”

“Speak with the certainty of my silence, old friend,” Ash said, nearly purring. Tor paid close attention. Valtari had just played right into Ash’s hands. He wondered just what kind of price Ash was willing to put on the use of whatever it was he needed to break his exile. And whether or not it was going to involve Tor ending up in the Lord and Protector’s bed.

“Djehan of Daerne has overstepped the bounds of propriety for the last time. It was he who ordered the attack on Malika’s carriage.”

“You have proof?”

“Proof enough. I would have him pay, Navaya. And pay dearly.”

Ash frowned and shifted in his seat, his expression giving no hint of the unease Tor could feel through the leythe-bond. “You would have me remove Djehan?”

“No. That would be too kind. I would have you deprive him of his heir, as he has deprived me of mine.”

Tor's mouth went dry as he waited for Ash to refuse, for surely he would. Ash wasn't the sort to kill a man in order to get what he wanted, was he?

"I assume you've already attempted more... traditional methods?" Ash asked.

"I've looked into the matter. My spies tell me that Stefan of Daerne is so well guarded that an assassin would have no real chance of reaching him. Djehan, however, has little trust in the leythe. He doesn't have a single leythari in his employ—a weakness we can exploit. A powerful enough leythari could strike Stefan dead, even from here. Lucano is the most powerful leythari I have, and he tells me that such a thing is beyond his abilities. But you, Navaya—you have demonstrated time and time again that, among leythari, you have no equal. If anyone could do this thing, you could."

Ash went very still, but there was none of the panic Tor had expected to sense through the leythe-bond. In fact, he sensed only cool, calm calculation, which surprised him. If Lucano couldn't do such a thing, there was no way Ash could manage it. "Satisfying as it may be to strike Stefan down where he stands, I feel I must point out the benefits of something a bit less... direct, my lord. Something that cannot be traced back to this very castle when Djehan hires a leythari to investigate the matter."

"Would he?"

"I should think so. I suspect Djehan's need to know who was responsible for such a devastating blow would override his distrust of leythari."

Valtari leaned forward and licked his lips. "Then what would you suggest?"

A dark, wicked smile slowly spread across Ash's handsome features. "Something that will be drawn to Stefan's aura like a moth to a flame. Something that will hunt him down until it finds him. Something that cannot be tracked through the leythe because it has no aura of its own. I could create such a thing and send it out into the world, hungry for the blood of Stefan of Daerne."

“Yes.” Valtari’s smile was as fierce and grim a smile as Tor had ever seen. It sent a shiver up his spine. “Lucano has never spoken of such a possibility.”

“The creation of such a thing is a delicate, complex process. While the First Consort is powerful indeed, he lacks a certain... subtlety. I doubt he would have the patience for it. But if you can muster even a fraction of that patience, the deed will be done. Done in such a way that there will be no path through the leythe to trace back to your hand.”

“And the price?”

“Nothing too extravagant,” Ash said with a dismissive shrug. “I would request the use of one of your workrooms for some research of my own. One of the drawbacks of a life lived mainly on the road is the lack of access to a shielded workroom when one needs it.”

Valtari looked pleased. “Easily done. If you can do this for me, you shall have unlimited use of my workrooms whenever my own leythari can accommodate you. What resources will be required to set this plan in motion?”

“I’ll need two of your leythari. The more powerful they are, the faster the process will be.”

“You shall have them.”

Valtari refilled Ash’s glass and his own, and they drank to the success of their plan. Tor stared down at the floor. He was relieved that Valtari seemed to have forgotten him in his eagerness for vengeance, but deeply uneasy about Ash’s plans. Even in his ignorance of the political situation, Tor couldn’t see how assassinating the enemy’s heir could possibly be a good thing. It sounded as if it would only add fuel to an already raging fire.

And if raising the power required to send him home meant spilling the blood of innocents, Tor would damn well stay here.

Finally, Ash smothered a yawn. Valtari said, “Forgive me, Navaya, I shouldn’t keep you so late. You’ve had a difficult journey. Don’t feel you need to start on this project immediately. Take a few days to recover, if need be.”

Ash bowed his head. “I thank you, my lord. I shall retire to my bed then, so that I might be fresh in the morning. I would speak to your leythari at that time.”

“I will inform them that they are to serve you as they would serve me.” Valtari’s eyes settled upon Tor again. “However, I doubt that morning will find you refreshed if this exquisite creature accompanies you to your bed. It’s a pity Lucano isn’t here—he would very much appreciate this one. He’s simply stunning. That hair... gorgeous.”

The feeling Tor got from Ash through the bond echoed his own: it was a damned good thing that Lucano *wasn’t* here.

Tor kept his head down and his mouth shut as he trailed behind Ash to the guest wing. The subservient act only lasted until the door of their suite was closed and locked behind them. Ash leaned against the door and rubbed his face with his hands. Tor stood in front of him and pinned him there with a glare. “All right, *Navaya*, would you mind telling me what the hell just happened in there? Because it sounded to me like you just agreed to help Valtari escalate this war of his so you can use his workroom to send me home.”

Ash lowered his hands and gave him a cool look. “And if I did?”

“You think Daerne is stupid? You kill his heir, he’s going to know it was Valtari’s idea. He might not be able to prove it, but he’ll know. And he’ll retaliate. You think I want the lives of all the innocent people caught up in this on *my* head?”

“You will not have to worry about the consequences, Human. It will not be you who shoulders the blame—it will be me.”

“Because of me.”

Ash didn’t reply. His eyes slid away from Tor’s face. Tor could feel that unease bouncing between them, his own, yes, but Ash’s, too, and there was something else there, something that felt a lot like... guilt? Or maybe regret?

“What are you not telling me?”

Ash's lips curved in a condescending smile. "There are many things I'm not telling you, Human. I am not accountable to you." His eyes raked over Tor, and Tor shook his head, too annoyed to want Ash's attentions. He turned and stalked to the bedroom, wanting only to get himself out of Ash's sight.

Ash waited only a moment before following him. Tor was suddenly hit with a flood of arousal so strong it almost sent him to the floor. He turned to see Ash leaning against the bedroom door frame, watching him with a predatory look that Tor had come to associate with himself about to be thoroughly fucked. "You think I've forgotten what's under those clothes? Take them off. I would see you dressed only in the chains of a slave."

"No. I'm not in the mood for this. We need to—"

"You need to take those clothes off, Human." There was a dark, dangerous note in Ash's voice that made Tor want to drop to his knees. "Come here."

"No." Tor drew a deep, shuddering breath and fought to ignore the hot waves of lust blazing through the leythe-bond and igniting his own desire. "I'm not doing this. I don't want to do this. You need to listen to me."

"Slaves don't need to talk." Ash pushed himself away from the door. As he closed the distance between them, the flames of Ash's lust licked along Tor's limbs. Tor's own desire resonated with Ash's, reinforcing it as the bond reflected it back and forth between them. It wasn't long before he could no longer distinguish his own feelings from Ash's, or hold onto the thread of what he wanted, *needed*, to say.

"Damn it, Ash... I can't think..."

Ash took hold of his shirt, tore it down the front, and pushed it back over his shoulders. Tor tried to pull away, a last effort at resistance, but the moment Ash touched him his arousal increased until it all but consumed him. Heat swept through his body and turned his limbs to liquid. Tor whimpered, suddenly burning with a desperate need to be touched. Ash unlaced the breeches and turned him.

Tor found himself pushed forward until his chest hit the wall. His breeches were yanked down and his hair was pulled aside and wrapped around Ash's

fist. Warm lips moved against the back of his neck. “Slaves don’t need to think, either. Except about how they might please their masters.”

Ash’s fingers trailed along the chain that encircled Tor’s hips. Tor shuddered with need. He was burning up, couldn’t have answered if he’d tried. But deep inside him, a small voice protested that he *did* need to think, that something wasn’t right. If Ash would only stop touching him like that for one moment, he might be able to take hold of that feeling of wrongness and turn it into a coherent thought.

Ash didn’t stop touching him. The hand that caressed the chain around his hips moved lower. A finger slid between his buttocks and pushed into him. Tor groaned and pushed his hips back, wanting that finger deeper. He no longer cared that he was losing the battle. It was too hard to fight against something he wanted so desperately. With one last whimper, he gave himself over to the firestorm raging through him and welcomed Ash’s heat into his body.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Lucano*

Ash sat cross-legged on top of one of the tables lining the walls of the workroom. He rested his chin on his palm as he studied the creature floating in the stasis field in the center of the room. Below it, the large slab of glowing leythe-stone that powered the stasis field gave off a cold, blue light and cast harsh shadows about the room.

The creature's shape was modeled after something Ash had seen swimming in the sea years ago, a great flat fish, rippling like a cloak in the wind as it rode the invisible ocean currents. Its circular body was a matte black, as wide and as long as the average man was tall. Its long, whip-like tail was twice that length. It had a mouth on its underside with a sharp beak designed for tearing flesh. There were no visible sensory organs other than the short, slender tentacle-like appendages that covered its underside and flickered in and out of sight as they dipped into the leythe.

"Impressive, Navaya. Very impressive," said a voice behind him. Ash turned to see Kaldasha Valtari standing in the doorway of the workroom. "I can scarcely believe it has been only three days since your work commenced."

Ash shrugged. "Thank your leythari. Laine and Shae did most of the hard work. I merely supervised—gave them the patterns they needed, and showed them how to tie the thing into the matrix of the leythe in such a way that it casts no aura."

"Is it finished?"

"Nearly. It remains only for me to give it the energy pattern it will require to seek out Stefan. If you removed the stasis field now... well. Don't. It hungers for the leythe. Without a pattern of some sort to direct its hunger, it would go after me first, and then it would hunt down Laine and Shae and any other leythari it could find."

Valtari ventured into the room and circled the stasis field, examining the creature from all angles. “It looks like something that would be at home in the sea,” he said finally.

“Very like. This creature rides the energy currents of the leythe, much as the creature that inspired it floats upon the currents of the sea.”

“And it feeds upon flesh?”

“It feeds upon the leythe. What you see is only its physical manifestation, and then only as much as your own senses can interpret. Much of the creature exists only within the leythe.”

“Feeds on the leythe?” said another voice from the doorway.

Ash went cold at the sound of that voice. He turned again to see Lucano Valtari striding through the doorway, tall and imposing. Lucano wore travel-stained robes in the black and silver of Vakarra. Strands of long, black hair that had escaped his dusty war-braid were plastered to his face, and Lucano looked as if he hadn’t slept well in some time.

The First Consort’s intense jet-black eyes fixed on the creature. He circled it as Kaldasha had done, expression calculating. “Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.” He looked over at Ash. “I thought I sensed your hand disturbing the leythe, Navaya. Your timing couldn’t be better. This is exactly what we need to counter Daerne’s latest insult.”

Kaldasha cast a brief warning glance at Ash. “Which insult would that be?”

Lucano scowled. “Djehan has done the unthinkable—hired himself a company of leythari. The men I command are brave and true souls, but they cannot stand against an army that can invade their very minds and turn their own nightmares against them. I am but one man. I cannot shield them all. But an army of these?” He grinned and clapped Ash on the shoulder. “This is the answer to my prayers. You will dine with us this night, and we shall speak of the army we will build using this magnificent creature as a template.”

Kaldasha nodded, looking pleased, and added, “And bring your lovely slave, Navaya. Appropriately dressed this time. Lucano and I would appreciate



the chance to view all of his... assets. And perhaps the chance to talk you into letting us sample him.”

The cold feeling of dread in Ash’s belly uncurled a little more, and he considered fleeing right then. The bond between himself and Tor had grown so strong that once they were together, there was no way Lucano would miss it. He feared it would pique Lucano’s curiosity and compel him to look closer. Unlike Ash, who was crippled to point that he’d needed to meditate deeply to learn Tor’s true nature, Lucano was powerful enough that he would see it the moment he turned anything more than a casual eye upon Tor.

He wished there was a polite way to decline a dinner invitation from the Lord and Protector of Vakarra and his First Consort. If he took Tor and fled, leaving Kaldasha’s project incomplete and Lucano wanting further services, he would certainly be pursued. Pursuit would be a problem in his present state. He didn’t have the power to hide himself or Tor well enough to avoid Lucano.

He would have to brazen it out. Perhaps dressing Tor up in those gold chains would provide enough of a distraction that Lucano wouldn’t bother looking deeper. One could always hope.

“I would be honored to dine with you, my lords,” Ash managed to say.

Lucano nodded. “Until tonight, then.” He strode out of the room, leaving Ash and Kaldasha staring after him.

“You’ve impressed him,” Kaldasha said, voice approving.

“Not necessarily a positive development,” Ash said in a low voice.

“If you should be instrumental in our victory over Daerne, you will earn yourself high favor indeed,” Kaldasha said. “Perhaps even an offer of a permanent position here in Vakarra. A title. Land.” He gave Ash a curious look. “How can that be anything other than a positive development?”

Ash just shook his head, mind racing to come up with some way he could hide Tor’s true nature from Lucano.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Betrayal*

Tor lay on the large bed in the guest suite, eyes tracing the curving lines of painted vines and leaves that adorned the ceiling. He'd spent the last three days cooped up in here, while Ash worked his ass off doing gods only knew what for Kaldasha Valtari.

Tor had attempted to voice his concerns the morning after Ash and Valtari had made their agreement, but Ash refused to discuss it. Tor had hardly caught a glimpse of the man since. Ash left their bed in the mornings before the sun was up and didn't crawl back in until Tor had fallen asleep. The few times Tor had seen him, he'd looked exhausted and had refused to speak of anything that didn't pertain to food or sleep.

Whatever he was doing, it was sapping all of his energy. He wasn't even interested in sex.

The only good thing that Tor could see about the whole situation was that he was being left alone. Servants left food on the table in the suite's main room several times a day, but other than that, he saw no one. He'd worried at first that Valtari might take advantage of Ash's distraction to force his attentions on Tor, but so far that hadn't happened. Now, after three days, Tor had finally managed to relax a bit.

He'd taken to sleeping a lot, because really, what else was there to do? Ash had confined him to the suite. While he chafed at the restriction, he could see the sense of it. He'd tried asking the servants if there was anything he could do to entertain himself, but his status as Ash's slave apparently put him beneath the notice of the staff.

Tension suddenly prickled through him. It was so intense that he half expected to see Ash standing in the room. The constant, low-level unease he'd been feeling ever since they'd arrived had grown stronger daily. The range of emotions he could pick up through the leythe-bond was also growing. He thought Ash was doing something to block it at least some of the time, because

sometimes the bond was so still he could barely sense it while at other times it quivered with Ash's agitation.

Now the tension level ramped up until it was so high that Tor clenched his own fists and looked around for whatever danger was near. He slid off the bed and padded into the main room of the suite.

The door of the suite suddenly opened. Ash strode in and slammed it shut with far more force than necessary, then turned and leaned heavily against it. Now that they were in the same room, Tor could feel something like panic vibrating between them.

"What's wrong?" Tor asked quickly.

Ash stared at him, violet eyes wide, then clenched his jaw. The panic suddenly faded back into that prickly, low-level tension. "Lucano's back. We're summoned to dinner."

"You mean *you're* summoned—"

"No, Kaldasha specifically requested that I bring my pretty slave. He wants Lucano to see you." He pushed himself away from the door and strode across the room, disappearing into the bedroom. A moment later, he returned with a handful of gold chains. He dumped them on the table where they sat in a glittering pile. "Get dressed."

Tor's own apprehension flared as he stared at the chains. "Not a chance. I'm not some fucking ornament you can haul around with you and put on display. I'm staying right here."

Ash was in his face and grabbing a fistful of his shirt before Tor could even blink. "You *will* get ready and you *will* come with me, and you fucking well *will* keep your head down and your mouth shut."

Tor glared. "What the hell? You're the one who told me to stay out of Lucano's sight and out of his bed. And now you're doing everything you can to make sure I end up there."

"The situation has changed. And if we don't play this exactly right, you ending up in Lucano's bed will be the least of our worries."

“It might help if you trusted me enough to tell me what the hell is going on,” Tor told him.

Ash opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut and gave a little shake of his head.

“Can you at least tell me what’s changed?”

The tension vibrating through the bond kicked up a notch. Ash grabbed Tor by the throat and shoved him back a few steps until he hit the wall hard enough to rattle his teeth.

It wasn’t the threat of violence or the hand that tightened on his throat that finally convinced Tor to give in. It was the sheer, blind panic that suddenly screamed through the leythe-bond. Something was seriously wrong. Ash was holding onto his control by his fingernails. And if Ash, the most arrogant, overconfident bastard Tor had ever met, was in a panic, Tor figured maybe he’d better just go along with whatever Ash thought they should do.

“All right, all right. I’ll get dressed.”

Ash let his breath out in a long, shaking sigh. He dropped his hand from Tor’s throat. A moment later, he loosened his hold on Tor’s shirt and backed off a step, but he didn’t apologize.

Tor pushed past Ash and scooped the chains up from the table. He glared down at them in distaste. “*Undressed*, more like,” he muttered. Then he turned to face Ash and gave him what he hoped was a threatening stare. “If that bastard puts his hands on me again, I will fucking lay him flat.”

Ash’s eyes narrowed for a moment, but he said only, “You’ll do nothing of the sort. You’ll keep your head down and you’ll endure it. Like a good slave would. Do *not* draw attention to yourself.”

Tor snorted and held up the chains. “I’m pretty sure these will take care of that.”

“Not that kind of attention. Believe me, I know how distracting you are dressed in those. We can hope that Lucano will be distracted enough not to look any farther than your body.”

“*What?* Wait. I thought you didn’t *want* him paying attention to me.”

Ash didn’t answer that. “I’m going to try to shield you, but I don’t know how successful I’ll be. I’ve been working in the leythe for three days straight, and Jhara didn’t leave me much to begin with. In this form I’m no match for Lucano. Gods of the leythe, I hate that bitch.”

Tor frowned. “Shield me from what?”

“Lucano. Just... look, it’s too complicated to explain right now. Whatever happens, follow my lead. If I tell you to run, run like your life depends on it, because it probably does.”

“But where would I—”

“Enough of your questions, Human! Shut your mouth and get yourself ready.”

Only the fact that Ash’s panic had grown stronger in the time he’d been talking to Tor stopped him from badgering Ash further.

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The walk from the guest suite to Kaldasha’s study was probably the longest walk Tor had ever taken in his life. Naked but for a few scraps of gold chain, he kept his head down and followed Ash in silence. He wished a hole would open up in the cold marble beneath his bare feet.

It might have been easier if Ash wasn’t so edgy. Tor could feel guilt-laced anxiety vibrating through the bond all the time now. He could also feel the echoes of his own shame and humiliation reflected back at him. He wished Ash trusted him enough to explain what he was so afraid of; Tor hated the idea of walking blindly into what had to be a dangerous situation.

When they reached the study, Kaldasha and the First Consort were already seated, deep in conversation. Kaldasha waved Ash in. Tor slunk in behind him, sticking close and trying to make himself as small and unremarkable as possible.

It didn’t work. He was suddenly pinned by a pair of cold black eyes that studied him in the same way a hawk might examine a mouse it intended to

devour. Tor fought the urge to cover himself. He lowered his eyes, but not before he got enough of a look at Lucano Valtari to make his blood run cold.

Lucano was nothing like Tor had imagined when Ash had told him the man was a powerful leythari. He'd read too many fantasy novels, maybe, because he'd had visions of a frail, scholarly sort, or a bumbling professor type. Nothing could be further from the truth. Lucano was built like a warrior, moved like a predator, and watched Tor intently with those shrewd black eyes. Kaldasha might hold the title of Lord and Protector, but it was the First Consort who held the power in Vakarra. No question in Tor's mind about that.

Tor waited until Ash was seated, then knelt awkwardly beside his chair. The tension in Ash suddenly spiked, and Lucano said smoothly, "I can see why you would want such an exquisite creature in your bed, Navaya, but don't try to tell me it was his looks that prompted you to purchase him."

Ash gave Lucano a small, tight smile. "As always, the First Consort is extremely observant."

Lucano snorted. "Hard to miss if one knows what to look for. Perhaps we might negotiate a trade. His services in exchange for... hmm... let's see... your life?"

"Lucano!" Kaldasha sounded scandalized.

Tor's throat went dry, and he had to fight his own instincts not to get to his feet and protest. His *services*? No way in hell was Lucano going to—

"Could you repeat that, Lucano?" Ash said in a smooth tone completely at odds with the rising panic Tor sensed through the leythe-bond. "I may not have heard you correctly, because that sounded a lot like a threat."

Lucano laughed. The sound of it sent a shiver rippling down Tor's spine. "Threat? Threats are hardly necessary when I have the means to take what I want."

"Lucano, please," Kaldasha said sharply. "Navaya is our guest, and I won't have you treating our guests in such a manner."

Those cold black eyes shifted to Kaldasha for a moment and then back to Ash. "Be quiet, my pet. You have no idea what he's brought me. Beautiful as

he is, this slave is worth more than his weight in gold to those who understand what he is.”

“And what would that be?” Kaldasha asked.

“A conduit straight to the raw leythe. With him, I could create an army that would crush Djehan’s leythari.”

“I did not bring him here for you to use in your war effort, Lucano.” Ash’s voice was frosty. “I brought him here for my own purposes. You will not take him from me without a fight.”

“Oh, come, come!” Kaldasha said, his alarm clear in his voice. “Lucano! Navaya! We’re all adults here. Why can he not serve both your purposes?”

Ash and Lucano both turned to stare at him, but it was Lucano who answered. “Because, my pet, the conduit generally doesn’t survive the channeling process.”

Tor blinked up at Ash as the pieces started to fall into place. Ash had never intended to send him home. Had known all along that Tor wouldn’t survive whatever it was he was going to do to break his own exile.

The guilt that flared through the bond when Ash met his eyes told him Lucano spoke the truth. “You—” he started.

Ash looked away to glare at Lucano, but before he could speak, the door of the study crashed open. Four armed guards entered and arrayed themselves around Ash’s chair.

“I hope you don’t mind me taking the liberty of protecting such a valuable commodity,” Lucano said. He nodded to the guards. Two of them hauled Tor to his feet and started dragging him from the room.

“Ash, damn you, do something!” Tor yelled.

Ash didn’t even look at him. Tor sensed an unsettling mixture of fury, regret, and cold-blooded calculation through the leythe-bond.

The guards forced him from the room and marched him down the hall. Tor stumbled between them, numb and dazed. He couldn’t believe that Ash could make him feel the things he had and then betray him so completely. He’d

thought maybe he was even starting to fall in love with the man, even if he was an insufferable ass most of the time. Hell, he'd even thought Ash might be starting to care about him in return.

*Idiot. You're such an idiot, Tor. You'd think you'd know better than to fall for a gorgeous body and exotic eyes.* He glanced down at the tattoo on his chest. It was supposed to be reminder. Instead, he'd taken it as a sign of some kind, that he and Ash were meant to be together.

The guards marched him to a door and then up a spiral staircase of stone. A tower. Of course. He should probably be thanking his lucky stars it wasn't a dungeon.

He was shoved through a heavy wooden door and found himself in a round room, bare except for a bed, a table, and a single chair. There were no windows and only one door, which slammed behind him with an ominous thud. A moment later, he heard the sound of a key turning in the lock. No escape, then.

Tor sank down on the bed and stared at the door with fear, anger, and betrayal all churning through his mind at once.

No wonder Ash hadn't looked him in the eye since they'd arrived here. He'd been planning this all along, maybe since the moment Tor had been pulled across the Void to land at his feet.

Tears pricked at his eyes, and he dashed them away with a swipe of his hand. He'd been stupid to think that anything would change. Stupid to think that he might not be alone.

He was more alone now than he'd ever been.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*No Threat*

It took everything Ash had to lean back in his chair and survey Lucano with a calm expression. “The hospitality of this house is somewhat lacking, First Consort.”

“Dark times, Navaya, dark times. You are a guest in my house, and you cannot expect me to allow such a valuable thing to remain unguarded.”

Ash scowled. “Don’t patronize me, Lucano. We both know you have no intention of returning my property in the same condition it is in now.” He forced himself to shift his gaze to Kaldasha, who was looking both puzzled and alarmed. “I’m afraid the terms of our agreement will have to be renegotiated, Kaldasha. The slave was key to my purpose in using your workroom, and your Consort has seen fit to confiscate him for his own purposes.”

Kaldasha shot Lucano an unreadable look, then said to Ash, “I would not have you think us thieves. Name your price. Gold. Land. Another slave, to replace the one Lucano has taken... name it.”

“I have no interest in material things, my lord. I would request that you replace what Lucano has seen fit to take. If you think you can.”

“You know as well as I how rare a thing he is,” Lucano said. “His price is beyond measure. You’ll not find a replacement.”

Kaldasha turned to Ash. “I’m sure this is all a misunderstanding, Navaya,” he said in a smooth voice. “The First Consort has no desire to anger you—”

“Oh, shut it, Kaldasha,” Lucano snapped. “The Navaya who sits before us is but a shadow of the one who visited us but half a year ago. His aura has faded considerably since last I saw him. A mere candle, where once he burned like the sun. He’s no threat to me. If he was, he’d never have allowed me take his slave into custody.”

Real fear tightened his gut. Lucano had seen right through everything, as he'd feared he might. He'd never found himself in a situation like this: helpless before a man who had the power to take everything from him. He didn't know what to do. "Lucano, please..."

"Begging, Navaya?" Lucano's smile was mocking. "For what, I wonder? Your slave's life or your own?" The smile widened to become a wolfish grin. "Oh, yes, I'm well aware of the leythe-bond you share with him. And I'm aware that you will likely share his fate. Rest assured, my leythari will do all they can to see that you survive, even if he does not. I owe you that much, at least, for delivering the means to defeat Djehan into my hands."

Ash shuddered. He understood all too well the kind of agony a broken leythe-bond would condemn him to. If Tor was going to die, he didn't think he wanted to survive. "And after that?"

"Should you manage to survive the breaking of the bond, we shall discuss what knowledge you might trade in return for your continued survival. Or for a quick and merciful death, should that be your preference." Lucano nodded to the guards who stood behind Ash's chair. Ash was seized by several pairs of hands and forced to his knees. Lucano rose from his seat and strode around the table, grabbed a fistful of Ash's hair, and forced his head back. From his pocket he produced a vial and pulled the cork out with his teeth.

Ash struggled, but too many hands held him still. Behind him he heard the door open and more guards entering. Lucano pried his mouth open and forced the contents of the vial down his throat. Ash choked and tried to spit out the cold, bitter liquid. When Lucano pinched his nostrils shut, he had no choice but to swallow so he could breathe.

"There." The note of smug satisfaction in Lucano's voice infuriated Ash. "That is how one deals with a troublesome leythari. Not that this one is powerful enough to be troublesome. Put him with the slave for now."

Ash didn't try to fight. What was the point? The power Jhara had left him with was insignificant compared to that which Lucano commanded. And there were enough guards that there was no hope of fighting his way out. Even if he

could somehow free himself, he couldn't leave Tor here, although the reasons for that were a bit muddled in his mind.

Part of it was sheer fury at Lucano's audacity.

Part of it...

He didn't want to think about that part.

It was only going to make things more difficult.

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Ash stumbled as the guards shoved him into the tower room and slammed the door shut behind him. Whatever Lucano had given him, it had a bitter aftertaste that he didn't recognize. It was already making his head swim. He dropped to his knees and closed his eyes, wishing the room would stop spinning.

He was completely unprepared for the flying tackle from the side that sent him sprawling the rest of the way to the floor.

"You bastard!"

A naked Tor, still wearing the golden chains Ash had forced him to put on for dinner, straddled him as blows rained down on his body. Ash groaned and tried to throw him off, but the drug had sapped his strength and robbed him of his coordination. All he could do was squirm and flail his arms weakly.

Tor grabbed his wrists and pinned them to the floor. "Come on, damn you, fight me!"

He couldn't. He wanted to, but the drug that was inexorably working its way through his bloodstream was making that impossible. What in all the human hells had Lucano given him? More than a simple leythe-blocker, that was certain. He could feel Tor's anger through the bond, but it was dim and fading with every moment that passed as the drug shut down his ability to sense the leythe.

"Damn you, Ash, were you even going to tell me what you were planning? Or were you just going to let me walk right into it, thinking you were trying to help me? Poor, stupid human, too dumb to know you were just stringing him

along so you could use him.” Tor’s voice broke on the words, and it occurred to Ash that it wasn’t just Tor’s anger he was getting through the bond, but pain and betrayal as well.

He tried to speak, tried to tell Tor that he wasn’t sure he could have gone through with it. The drug made the words tangle on his tongue. All that came out was an inarticulate moan.

Tor got to his feet and stared down at him, venom in his eyes. “Fuck you, Ash.” He backed away, out of Ash’s sight. Ash struggled to hang onto consciousness, desperate to explain. The pain that ripped through his heart had nothing to do with the beating Tor had just given him, and everything to do with the bitter disappointment in his lover’s eyes.

Somehow during their journey to Vakar, Tor had come to mean so much more than just a way to satisfy the needs of his body. It was suddenly imperative that he tell Tor that. He might not get another chance. The idea that he might succumb to the drug and wake up to find that Tor had already been sacrificed for Lucano’s ambitions terrified him.

Damn Jhara for doing this to him.

And damn her for making him care.

“Tor... please...” was all he managed to get out before the darkness swallowed him.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Channeling the Leythe*

Ash woke alone. He was lying on the bed, a blanket covering him. His head ached and his body hurt. His heart stuttered as he remembered the look in Tor's eyes when he'd realized that Ash had intended to sacrifice him all along. He searched for the bond that tied him to Tor, but he couldn't feel it. He sat up quickly, looking around for Tor.

His chest tightened as he realized that Tor wasn't in the room. They'd already taken him. Even now, he could be...

No. He'd feel it if Tor were dead. Not even the drug would be enough to block the psychic agony he would feel from a broken leythe-bond. He focused on the bond, trying to sense something, anything to reassure himself that Tor was still alive.

There was nothing. He was completely cut off from the leythe. From Tor.

He wondered which would be worse: dying when the bond broke, or surviving it. Either way meant death. Survival meant living with the knowledge that he would never touch Tor again, never argue with him, never watch him sleep or see him smile. Never feel Tor's body straining and bucking under him as he sought release... Survival would force him to endure the loss of Tor while his own energies bled out into the leythe through a wound that would never heal.

Death would be far less painful.

Lucano could make all the promises he wanted. Ash knew very well that the breaking of the bond would likely send him into shock so deep he would never regain consciousness. If he'd been able to stick to his original plan, he would have shed the bond along with this body as he slipped back into the leythe. Tor might well have died, but Ash wouldn't have suffered for it.

He wondered if Jhara was watching, even now. Watching her errant child and laughing at the way he'd trapped himself trying to thwart her will. There

would be no help from that quarter. Jhara was all about balance. She would tell him he deserved all that was coming to him.

Would she let him die when this body did?

Stupid question. After seeing some of the things she'd allowed to happen in the name of balance, there was no doubt in his mind that she would.

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stone landing outside the door, and a moment later the door banged open and half a dozen of Lucano's guards entered the room.

They drugged him again. Chained him. And forced him down the stairs.

Down and down they went, deep into the roots of the mountains, far deeper than the workroom where Kaldasha had him building his creature for the past few days. The air grew chill as they descended. Ash shivered at the thought of the weight of all that stone over his head.

The stairs finally ended. They walked a long way through a worked stone tunnel, which eventually opened up into a workroom. The near end was brightly lit with stones that glowed with the leythe. The far end was shrouded in darkness, but the feel of the air and the way their steps echoed gave Ash the impression of a vast chamber extending far beyond the lit area.

In the center of the lit area were two slabs of clear, blue leythe-stone, the largest Ash had ever seen in the hands of a human. The leythe danced and flickered within them, writhing and twisting in on itself to form impossible shapes that turned his stomach.

Above the smaller slab floated the leythe-eater Ash had constructed for Kaldasha. The thing Lucano planned to use as a template for his army. Bound to the larger stone was Tor, still wearing only the fine gold chains Ash had made him put on the night before. Lucano stood over him, a dark glint of triumph in his eyes.

Ash moved forward, trying to reach Tor, but the guards held him back. Lucano looked up and gave him a thin, humorless smile. "Navaya, how nice of you to join us. I thought you might enjoy witnessing this. I doubt you've ever seen a leythe-working of this magnitude before."

“You’d be surprised at what I’ve seen, Valtari,” Ash growled.

“Yes, well, whatever it was, it didn’t help you protect your... *property*. Or yourself. Did it?”

Ash tried to wrench himself away from the guards, but they gripped him tightly.

On the crystalline slab, Tor moved weakly and let out a low moan. His eyes were closed. Ash sensed only a dim flicker of fear through the leythe-bond. He wondered if Lucano had drugged Tor as well.

“I don’t see your Lord and Protector,” Ash said. “Surely he would not miss your moment of victory over Daerne.”

Lucano gave him a frigid look. “Kaldasha has other matters to attend to. Defense of the realm is my responsibility. Now be quiet or I’ll have you gagged.” He looked down at Tor and closed his eyes, an expression of concentration on his face.

Something stirred in the leythe, a seething, growing sense of imminence. Ash felt it even with his drug-blunted senses. Tor’s eyes snapped open and he struggled against the leather straps that held him. “No...” he moaned. “No, no, no...”

Lucano raised his hands high in the air. His lips moved, but Ash was too far away to make out the words. Tor’s body went rigid. His back arched and he let out a scream that Ash felt as much as heard, like a white hot needle stabbing through his head. Glowing wisps of blue light appeared above Tor as the leythe began to condense out of the air itself. Across the room, the leythe-eater began to glow.

Tor’s screams echoed through the darkness beyond the work area. The light grew stronger, the wisps slowly coalescing into swaths nearly too bright to look at. Tor’s body began to glow, blue and violet light swirling in hypnotic, sinuous patterns just under his skin. The bond suddenly came alive with Tor’s pain as it finally became too strong for the drug to block. Ash groaned and sagged between the guards.

Lucano's hands moved over Tor. He drew the light from Tor's body into the space above him, where he wove the wisps of light into an intricate energy matrix. Ash could barely look at it; the matrix twisted and folded in upon itself in ways that were impossible to comprehend with human eyes.

In his true form Ash could have read the matrix easily, could have shattered that shape with his will alone, could have banished those wisps of dancing energy back into the leythe.

Could have saved Tor.

In human form, all he could do was watch in horror and fight to stay conscious as he struggled to break free of the men who held him.

The matrix Lucano was forming grew brighter and more complex, and Tor's screams became more desperate. Tears streaked his face and his struggles became weaker. Ash fought harder. Tor's only chance of survival lay in him somehow stopping this, but the guards were too strong, there were too many, and he couldn't reach Tor, couldn't save him.

Even dulled by the drugs, the pain that leaked through the bond was almost unbearable. Ash couldn't even imagine what Tor was going through. He knew now that he'd never have been able to use Tor the way he'd planned. Even if he'd started the process, he'd never have been able to complete the task. He could not have been responsible for putting Tor through this agony, even if he himself could have functioned through the pain.

As if a dam had broken, a blast of light and cold slammed through the bond, driving Ash to his knees. The pain was so intense it locked his muscles and froze the scream in his throat. Lightning flashed, briefly illuminating everything in harsh blue-violet light, and Ash caught a glimpse of rank upon rank of the rippling black leythe-eaters filling an enormous cavern that went as far back as the light could reach.

Tor screamed again, a weak, desperate sound. Ash pushed his own awareness into the now wide-open bond. If he couldn't reach Tor physically, he might be able to reach him through the leythe. If he couldn't save him, maybe he could at least make sure he didn't die alone.



And then it all exploded, and the last thing Ash remembered was the agony of the bond stretched beyond all bearing as he was swept away in the raging torrent of Tor's pain and fear.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Leythe-Burn*

Ash woke to gentle hands shaking him and a quiet feminine voice encouraging him to open his eyes. He expected agony, but there was only exhaustion. The bond...

The bond was there, but it felt wrong, stretched thin as if it were about to break.

He opened his eyes to see Lucano's leythari, Shae, standing over him. Her soft brown eyes were worried. "You've been asleep a long time, Navaya."

"Tor?" he asked, and was surprised at how harsh his own voice sounded.

Her eyes lifted and settled on the spot next to him. Ash turned his head to see Tor lying beside him. He was too pale, too still, and the glowing light of the leythe was a sullen flicker beneath his skin, moving in sluggish circles.

"Leythe-burn," she said quietly. "I've never seen the like. He'll not last the night. And even if he did..." Her eyes lowered. "I fear his reason gone. Driven from him by prolonged contact with the raw leythe."

She told him nothing he didn't already know, but hearing her give voice to Tor's fate was somehow far worse than just knowing it. Human minds couldn't survive contact with pure leythe energy. If leythe-burn didn't kill them, the shock of the conflicting realities pouring through them robbed them of their reason.

"Leave us," he told her.

Shae bowed her head and left. Two guards followed her out. He heard the sound of a key turning in the lock.

Ash sat up slowly, surprised to find himself reasonably strong, and not at all surprised to find himself back in the tower room. He wondered how much time had passed. Not that it mattered. If Shae was right, Tor didn't have much

longer. He needed to see for himself, so he sank himself into the leythe to examine Tor and the bond that connected them.

Tor was dying. Even if he hadn't felt the thin, almost painfully stretched leythe-bond, he couldn't have failed to notice the way the energies of Tor's aura were bleeding out into the leythe.

In this frail, human form, with his pitiful human skills, Ash could do nothing but watch him die. Not even Lucano could help him now.

A lump filled his throat, and his eyes burned. He gathered Tor's unresisting body into his arms and held him close. Too late, he understood what it was he felt for Tor. All of those things he'd blamed on Jhara: the way his stomach did flips when the man was near, the way Tor made him laugh, the way everything felt so right and good when he buried himself deep in Tor's willing body...

It wasn't some curse Jhara had placed on him.

No, it was that most troublesome of all human frailties: love.

Tears slipped down his cheeks. If he had it to do over... "I'm so sorry, Tor," he whispered, then sank himself back into the leythe and sent a whispered plea out into the Void. *Jhara, I beg you... if you have any love for me, any patience, any compassion... I would offer my life in return for his... please. Help me, Mother.*

Not that she would hear him. He wasn't strong enough to call her. All he could do was hope that she might be listening, might take pity on him.

A tear in the matrix of the leythe spilled golden light into the room. An old woman in a black cloak stepped through it. She pulled the rip closed behind her and then stood at the foot of the bed, hands on her hips, violet eyes narrowed slightly, as if she faced a particularly troublesome child.

"What shall I do with you, Ashnavayarian?" she said with a very human sounding sigh of exasperation. "You beg for the life of this one human, but have you even given thought to all the others your actions here have doomed?"

An image rose in his mind, the dark shapes of the leythe-eaters floating in menacing silence across the night sky. He watched as they terrorized villages, running down anyone with even the faintest connection to the leythe.

The image disappeared abruptly. Ash shook his head. "I did not call these things into being, Mother. That was Lucano Valtari's doing."

"You gave him the pattern, child. The knowledge. And you knew him well enough to guess what he would do with it."

He bowed his head. Fresh tears streamed down his face, blurring his vision. "I'm sorry, Mother. I sought only—"

"I know what you sought. You think I've not been watching your little drama unfold? Have you learned *nothing* in your exile?"

Ash raised his eyes to meet hers, unashamed of his tears or of the desperate need coursing through him. "I've learned much, but I fear I've learned it too late," he said softly. "Please, Mother. I didn't understand before. He is my life. My soul. I cannot—" He couldn't continue past the lump in his throat, the pain tearing through his heart. He looked down at Tor, lying so still in his arms. The thought of those silver-gray eyes never opening again was almost more than he could bear.

How did humans live with such pain?

How would he?

"Yes. You do begin to understand. He has pointed you in the right direction at least, even if you are reluctant to set your feet upon the path." She moved around the bed and he felt a light touch on his face as she lifted his chin, forced him to look at her. "I am not without mercy, Ashnavayarian. I will give him back to you."

The relief that coursed through him made his body tremble. "Thank you, Mother. I promise—"

"Do not," she said severely, "make promises you have no intention of keeping. And do not mistake my purpose, Ashnavayarian. I am not in the habit of bestowing gifts upon those who deserve punishment. His life comes at a price."

"Name it," he whispered, ready to do anything she asked, if only she would do what he could not.

“Your actions here have further disturbed the balance of the leythe. You will continue to walk this world as a human, though I will restore *some* of your power to you. You will need it if you are to cage this evil that you have loosed upon the world. Fail me and I *will* take him from you. I will break the bond between you and you will feel the echo of his loss tearing through the leythe for all of time. Stay true to your purpose, and when your task is complete, I will welcome you both home.”

Ash blinked at her, hardly daring to hope. To have Tor by his side through a human lifetime seemed miracle enough, but... “You would allow me to bring him into the leythe?”

“He *belongs* to the leythe,” she said quietly. “And he has been trapped in human form far longer than you. He has no conscious memory of any other existence, but he knows there’s something more, something missing, and he feels its lack every single day.”

He heard her words, but couldn’t quite process their meaning. Tor belonged to... “But... you mean he’s... one of *us*?”

“Mmm. Part of my effort to teach *you*, my headstrong child,” she said. “He’s become quite good at being human; he’s had to. You would do well to listen to his counsel, rather than just looking upon him as a means to satisfy your *human* needs.”

Ash felt his face burning as he remembered Tor’s attempts to talk to him following his agreement with Kaldasha. Attempts he’d ignored in favor of indulging his own desires.

“Prove yourselves worthy and I will see you both home in the leythe. But make no mistake, Ashnavayarian. You were the one who gave these humans the ability to touch the leythe in the first place. You must be the one to restore the balance. You will *not* be returning home until you have done so.”

He bowed his head. “Yes, Mother.”

“Remember this: you cannot possibly understand how your actions will affect the balance of the leythe if you have no understanding of the creatures

you manipulate. That is the *why* of your exile. If you understood human nature, you would never have put yourself in Lucano's power."

"Yes, Mother." There wasn't much else to say to that. His own determination to thwart Jhara's will had blinded him to all else.

"And if you *truly* understood how much damage these humans you think of as frail can do to the balance of the leythe, you would never have taught them how to touch the leythe in the first place."

"I'm sorry, Mother. I did not understand." He lifted his head and met her eyes. "It is obvious I have much to learn."

"And you would do well to remember it." She looked about herself with a frown. "Hmm. You'll need a bit of help to get out from under Lucano's thumb. A head start, perhaps. You'd do well to remove yourself from his realm as quickly as possible. He will not be pleased when he discovers you're missing."

The leythe seethed and swirled around him and Ash felt the dizzying sensation of crossing the Void as humans experienced it. The brief touch of the leythe scrambled his human senses and made him feel sick, dizzy, and disoriented.

When he opened his eyes and sought to reorient himself, he was still in bed, Tor still clutched against him, but they were in the room they'd stayed in at the Icefall Inn.

Almost afraid to breathe, he looked down at Tor. His color was back, the leythe energy was cleared from his body, and he appeared to be sleeping normally. Ash let out a whimper of relief, pressed his face against Tor's chest, and let the tears fall.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Human Feelings*

Something wet dripped onto his cheek. Tor struggled to wake. In his dream he was folded in a miserable huddle under a pine tree, shivering in the cold rain. Every so often, a strangely warm raindrop would fall from the wet branches above and splash on his cheek. He knew he should get up and find someplace warm and dry, but he was so very tired.

He forced his eyes open and found himself staring up into a pair of violet eyes swimming with tears. “Ash? What—”

Ash’s arms tightened around him. “Tor... I feared if you did ever open your eyes again, you wouldn’t know me.”

Tor shuddered as he recalled his last few hours of consciousness. Ash had meant to take his life for his own gain. The pain that came with that understanding had been far worse than any of the pain that had followed. The knowledge that none of the things Ash had made him feel had any meaning for the other man was an ache that left him feeling far more empty than the void in his soul ever had.

The depth of Ash’s betrayal had stunned him into numbness.

He hadn’t even cared when Lucano’s guards had taken hold of him and locked him in the tower.

The numbness had been burned off by his fury when Ash had been shoved into the room not long after, but he’d worked that off in a hurry. There was no satisfaction in beating a man who couldn’t fight back. Once Ash had lost consciousness, Tor had carefully put him to bed in a fit of remorse.

Lucano’s guards had come for him in the night. They’d taken him to that deep, underground workroom where he’d been bound and drugged, naked and helpless. He’d awakened to find Lucano standing over him. Cold, brilliant agony had torn through him, diamond sharp, burning places deep inside him that he’d never even known existed.

And Ash had been there watching him scream and suffer.

Been there and done nothing.

Tor swallowed hard and tried to pull free of Ash's fierce embrace. "Let me go," he choked out. "You would have killed me."

"No," Ash said quickly. "No, Tor, I wouldn't. I couldn't have. I didn't... I didn't want to admit it, not even to myself, but I could never have hurt you that way. It nearly killed me to have to watch Lucano do it."

Tor closed his eyes. "You let him." A gentle hand stroked his cheek. He flinched, turning his face away.

"I had no choice. He drugged me and forced me to watch." There was a bitter edge to Ash's voice. "And I died inside when I thought I'd lost you. Tor, please look at me."

He didn't want to, but there was something in Ash's voice, something that was echoed in the feelings of fear and vulnerability shivering through the bond that joined them. He opened his eyes and turned his head to face Ash.

"I should never have taken you to Vakar. I knew the risk. I knew what you were and I knew what Lucano would do if he found out. And I knew that in my present form, I wouldn't be able to stop him. It was a calculated risk. A risk I had no right to take, not with your life. I'm sorry, Tor."

The worst thing about the leythe-bond was that it didn't allow him the option of refusing to believe Ash. The depth of Ash's regret and sorrow came through quite clearly. Tor could sense how bewildered Ash was by the strength of the very human feelings that had him tied up in knots. He could feel the bitter echo of the anguish Ash had experienced when he'd believed Tor to be dying.

And threaded through all of that was something good and pure and fierce in its intensity. Something that felt like it fit into the empty places in Tor's soul.

"Please," Ash whispered. "I didn't understand. I didn't know. I've never... never *needed* anything. But I need you." He closed his eyes and as Tor watched, a tear slid slowly down his cheek. "I love you, Tor."



The truth of Ash's words was echoed through the bond. Tor reached up a shaking hand to wipe the tear away. "Good thing for you I love you, too, then, isn't it?"

Ash's smile lit up his face. "A very good thing," Ash whispered, and kissed him.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*A Daunting Task*

That night, Ash lay awake for a long time watching Tor sleep, watching him breathe, hardly able to believe he'd been given a second chance.

Tor's eyes fluttered open and glinted in the firelight as he stared up at Ash. "Can't sleep?"

"I can't stop thinking about how close I came to losing you."

"I'm right here, Ash. And I'm not going anywhere."

Ash met that gaze and those silver-gray eyes pulled him right in. "Good. Because I want you right here with me."

Tor stared up at him, eyes darkening with desire. "Show me."

"Gods, yes." Ash pulled Tor against him and locked his mouth to Tor's, hands sliding over the hard muscles of his back. Tor moaned into his mouth. Ash wrapped his arms around Tor and held on, still hardly able to believe that Tor was here with him, warm and alive and wanting him.

Ash took his time, worshipping Tor's body with lips and tongue. By the time he'd tasted every inch of his skin, Tor was nearly desperate with need. He was like liquid fire in Ash's arms, hot and writhing beneath him.

When Ash finally moved between Tor's legs and reached for the leythe to ease his entry, Tor put a hand on his arm. "Not so much leythe," he whispered. "I want to feel it tomorrow, know you were there. Make me yours, Ash."

Tor's words sent a surge of heat blazing through him. "You're already mine. But I'll be happy to leave you a reminder." He used only a whisper of the leythe, just enough to ease the way.

Ash groaned as he pushed into that tight, hot channel. Tor's eyes locked onto his as he welcomed Ash into his body. Ash, in turn, finally welcomed Tor into his mind. He stopped trying to fight the bond and allowed all of his human

feelings—relief, desire, and yes, love, too—to flood through the bond so Tor could feel them.

Afterward, when Tor lay in the circle of his arms, Ash stared into his lover's eyes for a long time, then said quietly, "There's something I need to ask you, Tor."

"What, I'm not 'Human' anymore?" Tor teased.

"Not to me," Ash said. No, Tor would never be "human" again. There was far more to him than that, and Ash hoped he'd get the chance to help Tor find that out. He wanted to prove them both worthy in Jhara's eyes. Wanted to bring Tor home with him into the leythe, where Tor would finally understand just where it was he belonged. But only if Tor wanted it, too.

Tor frowned. "What am I if I'm not your human anymore?"

Ash bent his head to kiss him and nuzzle his neck. "My life," he whispered. "My reason for being."

A grin spread across Tor's face. "Hell, I should almost die more often. I kind of like you all sweet and cuddly and poetic."

"Don't push your luck," Ash said, just a hint of a growl in his voice.

Tor grinned, and Ash couldn't help but kiss him again. Then he pulled back a little and met Tor's eyes, holding his gaze. "After all I've done to you, I owe you whatever you ask of me. If you want it, I'll do everything in my power to find a way to send you back to your world."

Tor's eyes widened and his body tensed. Ash sensed his confusion through the bond. "Is that what you want?" he whispered. "To send me home?"

"No," Ash hastened to reassure him, sending every bit of love and warmth he could muster through the bond. Tor's smile returned and his body relaxed against Ash as he got the message. "I want you by my side. But it must be because you want to be there—not because you have no other choice."

Tor stared up at him, silver-gray eyes serious. "There's nothing for me there, Ash. There never was. I didn't understand how empty I was until I was

filled. I want to stay with you. I need you. Like I need air. You... you put color in the world. You're my life."

Ash smiled as Tor echoed his own words to Jhara. He kissed the top of Tor's head and tightened his arms around him. "As you are mine."

Tor sighed contentedly. "Then I don't want to hear any more talk about sending me home."

"You should understand that if you choose to stay here with me, your life will be neither quiet nor peaceful. Jhara has set me a task that I must not fail."

"What kind of task?"

"Lucano used the power he channeled through you to create an army of leythe-eaters. He plans to send them to Daerne, to kill the leythari Djehan hired."

Tor shuddered in his arms. "I remember," he whispered. "That dark shadow, floating in the air... I could see it in my head. He used *me* to make an army of those things?"

"He did. But you would never have fallen into his hands if it wasn't for me," Ash said. "I gave him both the pattern and the means. It falls to me to stop him. If I can."

Tor regarded him with a serious expression. "I'm not a leythari. Or a fighter. Hell, I don't even know how to skin a rabbit. But I'll do whatever I can to help you."

"You can help keep me... human."

Tor snorted. "That'll be a full-time job."

Ash's lips twitched in the beginnings of a smile. "Dangerous, too, I expect."

"I'm starting to think that's just the way things are around you," Tor said drily. "I'm willing to take the risk."

"It will be a daunting task. And at the moment, I have no idea how we'll accomplish it."

“We’ll think of something,” Tor said with far more confidence than Ash felt. “We have to. All those lives...” He took hold of Ash’s hand, laced their fingers, and squeezed gently. “We’ll do it,” he said firmly, eyes locking onto Ash’s. “We’ll do it together.”

Ash squeezed back, and in that moment, he felt like he could do anything, even with his very human frailties, as long as Tor was by his side. “Together,” he said, and it felt like a promise.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Jaye McKenna was born a Brit and was dragged, kicking and screaming, across The Pond at an age when such vehement protest was doomed to be misinterpreted as a “paddy”. She grew up near a sumac forest in Minnesota and spent most of her teen years torturing her parents with her electric guitar and her dark poetry. She was punk before it was cool and a grown-up long before she was ready. Jaye writes fantasy and science fiction stories about hot guys who have the hots for each other. She enjoys making them work darn hard for their happy endings, which might explain why she never gets invited to their parties.*

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