

HUMAN CHOICES

A Love's Landscapes Story



JAYE MCKENNA

HUMAN CHOICES

Khy is a prisoner and a slave. His life consists of days of drudgery and nights of agony. He has no memory of anything else, yet he knows there must be more beyond the fog that shrouds his mind. When his Master is called away on urgent business and Khy is left alone, a moment of unexpected clarity has him running for freedom.

Jaedin is done running, both from war in the north and from his lover's tragic death. He's settled in the tiny village of Rosefire and has finally achieved an uneasy truce with his grief.

Jaedin's hard-won peace is shattered when he places himself between Khy and the band of brigands hunting him. During the scuffle, Khy panics and works the leythe to set loose a spell. When the dust settles, Khy has fled and Jaedin finds himself haunted by something far darker than his own past.

In order to regain his peace—and his sanity—Jaedin sets off in search of the young man who has cursed him. What he finds threatens not only his own personal equilibrium, but the balance of the leythe itself.

To protect the leythe, Khy must face his tormentor and fight to free himself from the man who considers him both pawn and prize. To protect the man he loves, he must do it alone...

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

HUMAN CHOICES

By Jaye McKenna

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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 these authors 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's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, 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 CHOICES

By Jaye McKenna

Photo Description

A young man with striking blue eyes, long hair, and a beard stares at the camera. He wears a breastplate over a simple tunic.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm in trouble and desperately need your help. It began a couple of weeks ago when I heard a fight outside my workshop. When I looked out I saw this man and a couple of others had been backed into a corner by a group of nasty-looking thugs. They were outnumbered, so I rushed down to help. In the ensuing fight, I got hit by the edge of a spell. I didn't think it had done anything, not then. I was more upset that the group I'd been helping ran off without thanking me once the fight was over. At least this man had the decency to look back at me before he disappeared.

Since then, though, I've had a name stuck in my head, a name I've never heard before. At first I just thought it now and then. Within a few days, it was slipping into my mind every time I relaxed. Now it's constant: the same name over and over again like the beat of my heart. I think I've been cursed. It's slowly driving me mad. The only way to break this curse is to find the man whose name it is. Is it him? How am I supposed to find him? Help!

Sincerely,

Amy

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: other world, magic users, apothecary, slave, prison/captivity, past abuse, first time, hurt/comfort

Content Warnings: dubious consent, attempted rape

Word Count: 51,431

Dedication

To Amy Rae Durreson, for giving me such a lovely prompt to work with.

Acknowledgments

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HUMAN CHOICES

By Jaye McKenna

Chapter One

“...Seb and Nida will spend the nights in their cottage, as usual. That means you’ll be alone at night.” Master Rikard’s bushy black eyebrows wriggled across his brow as he spoke. A mind-picture slowly swam through the haze in Khy’s head. He closed his eyes, trying to hang on to the image.

Black... fuzzy... caterpillar... crawling across the Master’s face... or had it been a leaf? He frowned and tried to put himself back in the garden. Had he been helping Seb pull up carrots? Or was it potatoes? Had that even been yesterday? Maybe it had been—

“Khy!” Master Rikard’s voice lashed through the air like a whip.

Khy looked up and blinked, his mind-picture of the caterpillar shattering into tiny pieces as he struggled to focus on the Master.

“Pay attention!”

“Yes, Master.” Khy’s own words sounded dull and slurred. He couldn’t make his sounds come out all crisp and clean the way everyone else could. His tongue just wasn’t fast enough.

“With any luck, I’ll be back in a few days. I’m not happy about leaving you alone at night, mind you, but there’s no help for it. With half the village down with the fever and the brothers run off their feet tending the sick, I can hardly send you to the monastery. Do your chores, take your medicine, and mind Seb and Nida. Do not make me regret leaving you in charge.” With that, Master Rikard strode out the door and was gone in a swirl of dark robes and darker temper.

Khy stared after him, blinking. What was it the Master had just said?

Something about charging...

He frowned and smacked the side of his head with his fist. Master Rikard sometimes did that for him when it took him too long to think about things. It was supposed to make him think faster and smarter. Khy wasn’t sure that it helped. Except for hurting, it didn’t feel any different from his normal thinking, all thick and slow, as if someone had poured honey into his head.

He stared hard at the door and tried to gather together the pieces of his thoughts. It was no use. He couldn’t remember the exact words the Master had used. He had to go all the way back to the caterpillar. He smiled as he watched

the way its little feet gripped the twig. Then Master Rikard had shouted... and all the pieces of the caterpillar picture had scattered in his head, and...

Khy's breath caught in his throat and his heart skipped a beat. The Master really had said *in charge*.

He'd never been in charge of anything before. Not that he could remember, at least, although Khy's memory was a tricky thing, full of holes and dark, twisty places where entire days could get lost.

Tonight, after supper, when he'd finished helping Nida with the dishes, and she and Seb had retired to their cottage, Khy would be in charge of the entire Tower.

Well. All except the workroom. And Master's bedroom. He wasn't allowed to go into the workroom unless Master was with him, and he must never, never go into Master's bedroom. He'd be in charge of everything else, though. It was a lot more than he was usually in charge of, which was exactly nothing, not even himself most of the time.

Khy turned a slow circle as he surveyed his domain. Being in charge was important, and he didn't want to do it wrong.

"Khy!" Nida's voice came from behind him, sharp enough that she might have already said his name more than once. He jerked around to peer at her, hoping she wasn't too angry.

The light had changed again. Morning sunlight had been pouring in the window by the door when Master Rikard had gone, and now the only sunlight he could see was coming in the window by the table. It must be nearly lunchtime. Somehow, he'd lost most of the morning.

He almost smacked himself again.

"Khy."

He blinked at Nida. She was busy tying her bonnet strings under her chin. When she was finished, she picked up a basket that had been sitting on the table. Khy tried to see what was inside, but it was covered with a cloth.

"Seb and I must go to the village. I've had word that my mother's taken ill. We'll be back by supper time. Stay in the tower. Wait here and I'll be home in time to make you something to eat. Can you do that?"

Khy frowned. Could he stay in the tower? Could he wait? "Wait right here?" he asked, pointing to the spot where he stood.

Nida's eyes lifted toward the heavens for a moment, and then she said very slowly, "Don't go outside, Khy. Seb and I will be back soon. Stay here."

He nodded slowly. *Don't go outside*, he understood. It was one of Master's rules. He could only go outside if he was with Seb, and only if they were going to work in the garden or in the stable.

With Seb and Nida gone, Khy was in charge all that afternoon. He decided when the fire needed stirring. He decided when to sweep the floor. When supper time came and there was no sign of Nida or Seb, Khy decided that supper should be bread toasted over the fire and a big hunk of cheese cut from the wheel that Nida kept in the pantry.

Khy usually ate sitting on the floor next to the hearth, but since he was in charge, he took his plate to the table. He glanced around to make sure the Master hadn't returned, and sat down in the chair opposite Master Rikard's.

No one told him that toasted bread and cheese wasn't a proper supper. No one told him he couldn't have two helpings, either, so he did. When he went back to the table, he looked around to make sure he was still alone. He was, so he sat carefully in Master Rikard's chair—just on the edge, though, so he could get up fast if the Master came in.

He frowned and scratched his nose. If there was no one to see him sitting in the Master's chair, was it still the wrong thing to do?

When no one shouted at him or boxed his ears, he became bolder, sliding all the way onto the seat and resting his arms upon the armrests. When there was still no shouting, he relaxed a bit more and leaned back so he could look over the tower's living area.

He was in charge, after all.

Being in charge made Khy feel brave and important, even if there wasn't anyone that he could be in charge of. He felt that way right up until the purple shadows of twilight crept into the room. That was when it occurred to him that Master Rikard wouldn't be coming back tonight. Khy would be all by himself in the tower. All night long.

He looked out the window, pressing his nose to the glass and squinting into the gathering darkness. Except for the small clearing where Seb grew vegetables and herbs, the trees of the Skarwood grew close to the crumbling tower where Master Rikard made his home. Khy didn't like the look of the forest at night; it seemed very thick and very dark. There were supposed to be mountains nearby, but the trees made it impossible to see them.

After he shut the curtains to hide the night, Khy glanced over at his pallet, which lay rolled up near the hearth. Being alone at night didn't usually bother him. He was used to Master Rikard disappearing every night after supper, either up to his bedroom or down to the workroom.

Tonight felt different. Even though he rarely saw the Master in the evenings, just knowing that he wasn't here made Khy's stomach feel fluttery. He wasn't sure he liked being in charge anymore. While part of him was glad that Master Rikard was gone, another part wished that the Master would come back so he wouldn't be so completely alone. The darkness outside seemed to press in on the walls of the tower. Khy shivered as he imagined it creeping in under the door.

Maybe if he got ready for bed, he'd forget about the darkness. He pulled off his rough tunic, being careful not to touch the heavy, metal collar around his neck. He hated the collar. It made slimy feelings in his head when he accidentally brushed against it.

After taking off his breeches and folding them neatly, he put on his nightshirt and unrolled his pallet, placing it in front of the hearth. Still very aware of the darkness outside, Khy left the lamp burning on the table. It made dark, flickering shadows on the walls. Shadows that reminded him of something... something deep and dark and frightening. He tried to remember what it was, but thinking about it too hard made him feel sick. He crept out from under his blanket and blew out the lamp, then hurried back to his pallet.

Every noise seemed very loud. Khy hid his head under his blanket and shivered until he finally fell asleep.

Khy woke with a start. He knew the moment he opened his eyes that something was different. For one thing, his head was clear. The colors around him were brighter, the sounds sharper, and his thoughts moved with a quickness and a clarity that he hadn't felt since...

That memory wasn't one he wanted—it made him feel sick and afraid. With a shiver, he pushed it out of his mind and sat up slowly, frowning at his surroundings. The round room he found himself in was familiar in the way a dream or a nightmare might be familiar. He recognized it... but everything about it felt hazy, as if it were only a distant memory.

Khy remembered the day he'd come here, a terrified boy, given to Master Rikard by the monks at the monastery where he'd been raised. They hadn't

wanted him once they'd realized that a frightening power grew within him. A power the monks said was a curse, and came straight from the Black.

More memories crowded into his head: strong hands taking hold of him and dragging him down the stairs to the workroom... those same hands forcing him to lie on the cold, stone table while his limbs were bound... icy fire burning through him as Master Rikard stood over him, drawing the light from his body and weaving it into patterns in the air above him.

Khy couldn't stop him. Couldn't fight him. All he could do was scream until his throat was raw.

His heart raced and his eyes darted about the room, searching for Master Rikard. He dimly remembered the Master leaving yesterday... telling him to mind Seb and Nida... telling him to take his...

Medicine.

He hadn't taken his medicine before bed.

Was that why everything was so clear and bright?

Khy leapt to his feet. There was no time to waste—he had to get away from here. This kind of mental clarity was always followed by Seb and Master Rikard dragging him down to the workroom. Khy would fight like a demon from the Black, but it never did any good; Seb would always end up smacking him senseless and he'd still end up bound to the table.

He would certainly be punished if Master Rikard returned and discovered that Khy had forgotten to take his medicine.

Gulping down the fear, he dressed quickly, pulling on breeches and boots, yanking yesterday's tunic over his head. His hand brushed against his face, and he froze.

A beard?

His fingers explored the soft hair that covered the lower part of his face.

Where had that come from? He'd been a beardless boy when he'd first come here. How long ago was that? How many years since he'd burned the stable and been sent away?

He jerked his hand back. There was no time to dwell on it now—he needed to make his escape while he could.

Khy took nothing with him when he slipped out the door. He hadn't gone more than a few steps before he stopped, stunned. There were so many shades

of green... so many smells. The morning air was cool on his skin, and carried the earthy scent of damp forest. Sunlight filtered down through the trees and Khy lifted his face to the forest canopy above. He could see each individual leaf dancing in the soft breeze.

How had he never been aware of those things before? He spent a lot of time outside, especially in the summer. He worked in the garden with Seb almost every day, and he stacked firewood by the side of the tower whenever Seb chopped it. He must have been blind and stupid to have missed all of this.

Khy gave himself a mental shake. Fascinating as it was, standing here staring at it was only going to get him caught. He had to get far away before Seb and Nida returned.

The path that led from the tower's only door wound past the gardens and on into the Skarwood. If he followed it, he would eventually reach the monastery, and beyond that, the village of Stone Creek.

That was where Seb and Nida had gone. He couldn't go that way. Deliberately, Khy turned his back on the path and darted into the trees. He didn't walk—he ran. Ran as if all the demons of the Black were after him.

The forest quickly grew dark and thick as he moved away from the tower. Khy tried not to think about the tales the monks used to tell of the dangers of the Skarwood. Some of those stories he was certain were only told to keep curious boys from wandering off into the forest. Others had a ring of truth to them that had him starting and looking over his shoulder at every unfamiliar noise.

Khy ran until his breath was ragged and his legs cramped. When his chest began to burn and a painful stitch in his side slowed his progress, still he dared not stop. All that mattered was putting as much distance as he could between himself and the tower.

Sweat trickled down his back and plastered his long hair to his face. Everything hurt, and he longed to throw himself down on the ground and rest. To spur himself on, he forced his mind back to the things that happened in the workroom. The terror those memories evoked gave him a burst of energy, and he kept moving until the ground gave way beneath him.

The bottom dropped out of his stomach. He had only a moment to realize that he was no longer running, but falling. A sharp, tearing pain in his side and another along his thigh had him drawing breath for a scream that never came. Breath and sense were both knocked out of him when he hit the ground hard.

When sense returned, the first thing Khy was aware of was pain. His side and his leg were the worst, and from the wetness of his clothing, he guessed he must be bleeding. He stared up at the canopy of leaves overhead and realized that he lay at the bottom of a large hole filled with sharpened wooden stakes.

The ones directly above him were dark and slick with blood. A cold feeling of dread gripped him. Had they gone right through him? He wriggled a bit. It hurt, and he seemed to be wedged between several of the stakes, but he wasn't pinned to the ground. If he was careful, maybe he could escape without further injury. He tried to sit up, but moving hurt so much that everything went dark again.

Khy woke to voices floating down from above.

“What in the Black—?”

“Is he even alive?”

“I'll go down and see. If he is, we'll need to look after him.”

There were scrabbling sounds and a grunt, and then someone was kneeling beside him, pulling at his torn clothing. Khy jerked away at the first probing touch. Pain flared through him, and he let out a whimper.

He heard a sharp intake of breath and then a soft curse.

“Hold still,” said a deep voice. “You're hurt and you're bleeding. Let's not make it any worse, hmm?” There was a pause, and then the voice called, “Dano, I'm going to need some bandages down here. I think we'd best bind his wounds now. Get some water boiling for blackseed tea, as well. We'll want to dose him with that before we try to move him.”

The time that followed was a lot like his memories of his time at the tower—hazy and dim, with moments of agonizing clarity. He let the strangers tend the wound on his leg and the one on his side, but when they offered him medicine he turned his face away, terrified of going back to that place where he couldn't think, couldn't fight, couldn't even remember why he should.

A hand smoothed the hair back off of his sweaty brow. “Easy, *skasha*.” The voice was low and soothing. “We've got the bleeding stopped for now, but if you thrash about, it'll start up again, and we're a long way from the nearest healer.”

Khy settled back, moaning in pain and fear.

A hand moved behind his head to lift it a little. The rim of a cup was placed against his lower lip. "Come, *skasha*, drink a little. It'll ease the pain when we move you. We can't leave you in this hole much longer. Night is falling and we need to get you to our camp so we can clean those wounds properly."

Khy drank the medicine eventually, but only when they held him down and forced him.

They left him alone for a time, though he could hear their voices coming from above. Before long, the world grew fuzzy, and the horrible, tearing pain faded until it was only a distant, stinging sensation. By the time they lifted him out of the pit, he was floating in a warm glow.

When the voices woke him again, it was night.

"Don't touch it, Dano! Don't you know what those are?"

"No, but the way they sparkle, they've got to be worth something." A hand brushed against his neck. Someone touched the heavy collar he wore, then drew back quickly. "Ah! I feel it in my head... slimy and cold..."

"Are you surprised, *dunka*? Those are leythe-stones. Magic."

"Is he a leythari, then? He don't look like one."

There was a snort. "And how is a leythari supposed to look, hmm? Most leythari don't look any different than you or me. I'll tell you this, though—if he *was* a leythari, his magic would have stopped him from blundering into our trap."

Khy's head was lifted again. More water was poured down his throat. He gulped it gratefully and tried not to fight when they made him drink more of the bitter tea. It had eased his pain the last time, and he hurt enough now that it was hard to keep quiet. The tea made him drowsy, and he soon drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next time Khy woke, there were no voices. He was lying on a hard surface, wedged in tight by bundles of pelts on either side of him. He was burning up and freezing at the same time. His head hurt and his body hurt and there was a rocking, jarring motion that just would not stop.

Khy didn't understand where he was or what was happening, but it hurt too much to move. He drifted in and out of awareness. Every time he opened his eyes, the light had changed and he'd lost more time.

Sometimes the motion would stop for a while and people would touch him and dress his wounds. That hurt even more than lying still. Hands helped him

sit and forced him to drink foul medicines. Khy had no choice but to comply. He didn't have the strength to fight them.

More dark dreams and periods of hazy brightness followed. There were more hands and more medicines until finally, a different voice, this one soft and gentle, woke him.

“That’s it. Come on. It’s time to wake up now.”

It was a woman’s voice. That was enough to make Khy pay attention. Nida was the only woman who ever talked to him, and her voice was high and scratchy and hurt his ears. This voice was low and rich, and there was something kind about it. Just hearing it calmed him. He wanted to hear it some more.

Khy opened his eyes to see a small woman with short black hair streaked with gray, and soft, dark eyes watching him.

Her lips curved in a gentle smile. “How are you feeling?”

He frowned, stretching carefully. He remembered the awful pain that had ripped through his side and up his leg. It didn't hurt now. In fact, it didn't feel as if he'd been injured at all. “It doesn't hurt...” His voice sounded rough.

Her smile widened. “It shouldn't. You're all healed now. It's a good thing Pitar and Dano got you to me when they did. The fever already had a good hold on you. If they'd brought you to me too much later, I might not have been able to save you.”

Under the covers, Khy pressed his hand against his leg. Only smooth skin met his questing fingertips. There were no bandages, no sign at all of the ugly, torn wounds he'd glimpsed during his few lucid moments.

How long had he dreamed? Long enough to heal?

She offered him a cup. Khy sat up in the bed, surprised that he had the strength to do so. He had dim memories of being too weak and sick to get out of bed.

While he drank the water, he glanced about the room. It was tiny and cramped, containing only the bed he lay in and a small table. The walls were wood rather than stone, and the room's single window looked out upon an open field. Beyond that was a dense, dark forest.

Was that the Skarwood?

“Where am I?” Khy asked.

“You’re in the village of Rosefire, on the edge of the Skarwood. I’m Mara, the healer. Pitar and Dano brought you to me yesterday. You’d been hurt, falling into one of their boar traps. They did everything they could to take care of you, but your wounds took fever.”

Khy barely heard most of what she said. He was stuck on the word *healer*. His chest tightened and his stomach fluttered as his mind worked through what she’d said. She must have used the leythe to heal him. Worked it the way Master Rikard did. His breath quickened, and he tried to sit up. He needed to run, to escape—

“Settle down. It’s all right.” Mara pressed him back against the bedding. “You’re safe. Whoever hurt you isn’t here now.”

Her voice was soft and soothing, and a blanket of calm settled over him. His thoughts quieted and his racing heart slowed. Escape suddenly seemed a lot less important. He stopped struggling and lay back against the pillows.

“How do you know...?” He couldn’t even finish the question.

Mara’s expression softened. “Fever dreams. And other things only a healer can see. I know somebody’s hurt you, and from what I gathered while you were raving, you’ve run away from him and you’re afraid to go back to him.”

Khy stared at her, mute with shock. How could he have given away so much? His escape, it seemed, was over before it had even begun. This healer knew he’d run away, and once Master Rikard came looking, she’d hand him over.

He tried to think through the calm that lay over his mind, but he couldn’t work past it, couldn’t summon the energy to care.

“It’s all right,” Mara said again. “I’m not going to give you back to him. In fact, I’ll do all I can to help you.” She gave him a smile that looked friendly and encouraging. “I need to ask you a few questions first, though.”

He was silent, waiting for her questions and wondering how much he’d given away while he was raving.

“I’ve told you my name... what’s yours?”

Khy opened his mouth to tell her, then thought the better of it. If Master Rikard came looking, he’d ask for *Khy*, wouldn’t he? “Arin,” he said at last, naming one of the other orphaned boys he’d grown up with at the monastery. “My name is Arin.”

“Well, Arin, what can you tell me about this collar you’re wearing?” Mara moved her hand as if to touch it. Khy flinched, and she drew her hand back, frowning. “Does it hurt you?”

“Only if I touch it.”

“Ah. I see. I won’t touch it, then. How long have you been wearing it?”

Khy shook his head. “I... I don’t know,” he whispered. “I can’t remember.”

“More than just a few days?”

His hand crept to the soft hair that grew on his face. “More than that.”

Mara’s expression was very serious. “Arin, who put the collar on you? And why?”

Khy pressed his lips together. He couldn’t tell her. Even if she promised to keep it a secret, what if Master Rikard came looking for him? He couldn’t risk it, so he kept his mouth shut.

Mara sighed. “Well, here’s what I can tell you, and you’ll have to decide what to do about it. I think the collar is a leythe-chain. It’s used to bind a leythari’s power—to stop him from working the leythe.”

“I’m not... not a leythari. I can’t do anything like that.”

“Collars like this are also used when a leythari has more power than he can control. Or when he can’t learn to work the leythe safely. Do you think that might be why you’re wearing it?”

Khy shook his head again. Master Rikard had never explained *why* he had to wear the collar; he’d just locked it around Khy’s neck and told him not to touch it. “I don’t know,” he whispered.

“Well, without knowing why your power’s been bound, it could be dangerous to remove it. I know someone in Andar who might be able to help you with it, though. Her name is Chavi. If I were to give you a piece of advice, it would be to seek her out and see what she can tell you about this collar. She might be able to remove it for you. If she can’t, she might know someone who can.”

The only thing Khy knew about Andar was that it was the capitol city of the Realm of Andarra. Master Rikard hated the place and frequently muttered that he’d never go back there, not even if they begged him. Going to a place Master Rikard wanted to avoid had to be safer than staying here, where he could still

see the edge of the Skarwood from the window. "I... I don't know how to get to Andar."

"You happen to be in luck," Mara said with a smile. "Pitar and Dano are on their way to Andar, and I've already told them that they owe you something for nearly killing you. They're feeling rather bad about the whole affair, and they'd like to speak with you about it later on. I think they'd be willing to take you with them if you offered to help them during the journey. And once you're there, they know the city well enough to help you find Chavi. I'll seek her in the leythe and let her know to expect you."

While it sounded like a good plan, things were happening so fast that Khy felt as if he'd been swept up in a whirlwind and was still waiting to be set down safely. "Thank you," he said, but it came out sounding more like a question than anything.

Mara seemed to understand. She gave his hand a gentle pat. "You lie here and collect your thoughts for a bit. I'll go and see about finding some clothing for you. Your boots are by the door there, but the rest of your things weren't even fit for the scrap bag. When you're ready, I'll take you to the inn to meet Pitar and Dano."

Chapter Two

Khy stared about the inn, soaking up every detail. He'd never been to an inn before. He'd lived at the monastery just south of Stone Creek for as long as he could remember, right up until the day Master Rikard had come to collect him.

The inn was built from stone and wood, and had a wooden floor that was worn smooth with use. A large fireplace dominated one end of the inn's dining room, but it was currently unlit. The day was warm enough that the front door stood open to let in the breeze. There were two older men sitting at the bar, deep in conversation with the innkeeper. Otherwise, the dining room was empty but for himself and his rescuers.

Across the table from him sat Pitar and Dano. Like the healer, they both had black hair and dark eyes. They were brothers, trappers who traded fur and meat, and it was their trap he'd fallen into. They'd already apologized profusely for not marking the trap more clearly, and had paid the healer for her services.

The remains of lunch—a thick, tasty stew that had tasted far better than anything Nida had ever given him to eat—sat on the table, along with half a loaf of bread.

Dano, the younger of the two, rubbed his hands together and leaned back in his chair. "I'm ready to talk business if you are," he said, glancing at Pitar.

"All right, then," Pitar said, giving his brother a nod. Two pairs of dark eyes fixed on Khy, and Pitar continued, "Now, I'm not one to pry into a man's business, but Mara mentioned that you were headed for Andar. That's where we're going. We'd be willing to see you safely there, in exchange for a hand with the camp chores—hauling water, seeing to the horses, that sort of thing."

"I can do that," Khy said slowly. "I helped in the stables at the monastery."

Dano grinned. "What do you say, then? Will you join us?"

Moving steadily away from Master Rikard with people who actually knew where they were going had to be smarter than blundering about in the wilderness by himself. His lack of woodcraft had already nearly killed him. Khy had no desire to experience any further disasters that might arise from his ignorance. "I'll join you," Khy said. "And I thank you for the offer."

"Good, good!" Pitar said with a warm smile. "We're keen to head out now. The wagon's over at the stable being hitched up. Dano's just going to run up to our room to fetch our things, and we'll be on our way."

When Dano came downstairs, he was carrying two backpacks and what looked like an oddly-shaped piece of metal covered with leather straps. He handed it to Khy.

“Here. It’s not much, just an old breastplate that I outgrew a few years ago. You should put it on. Ours are with the wagon, and we’ll be wearing them, too, at least until we’re a couple of days south of the Skarwood. This part of the realm is crawling with bandits.”

Khy stared helplessly at the confusing garment of leather and metal. There were straps and buckles, and it looked far more complicated than the simple tunic and leggings he was used to wearing.

While Dano helped him put the thing on, Pitar paid the innkeeper and said their farewells. Dano tightened the straps as far as they would go, but the armor was still loose on him. Pitar had a look and said that it would do, and that life on the road would pack some muscle on his frame soon enough. Khy followed the brothers out the door and hoped he was doing the right thing.

Bandits, they’d said.

He stared down at the metal plate that protected his chest and belly. Facing bandits had to be more pleasant than a session in Master Rikard’s workroom.

When Khy stepped outside, his gaze was immediately drawn to the mountains that loomed large over the village. The trees were so thick near the tower that Khy hadn’t been able to see the mountains at all, and the Fireskye itself had been only a golden-orange glow directly overhead.

While Pitar and Dano were busy speaking with the stableman, Khy took the time to drink in the view. The shimmering curtains of fiery light that rippled in the sky above the mountains were so beautiful that it almost hurt to look at them.

“Well, if it isn’t Rikard’s little catamite.”

The familiar sound of that voice rooted him to the spot and turned his blood to ice. The voice belonged to Baine, the mercenary who sometimes did jobs for Master Rikard. Khy looked up to see the man glaring down at him as if he were a bug to be squashed. He swallowed hard and took a step back.

Baine leered at him. “Your master is looking for you, boy, and he ain’t happy.”

A big hand closed around Khy’s upper arm. The thought of being dragged back to Master Rikard—and what Rikard would do to him when he was

returned—was enough to galvanize Khy. He jerked against Baine's grip to free himself. It did him no good. Baine was far stronger, and yanked him forward until he had Khy pressed up against him.

"Too bad Rikard wants you unspoiled. You'd make a fine bit of sport."

The rotting-meat stench of the hot breath that blew in his face was enough to make Khy gag. He shuddered and struggled to pull away. Baine's free hand roamed over his body, cupping his rear and squeezing. With the breastplate hampering his movements, Khy couldn't wriggle free.

He heard shouts and scuffling from behind Baine, but he was too frightened to take in anything beyond the fact that he was trapped. Baine would take him back to Master Rikard, and Khy would rather die than go back there.

Jaedin fingered the bundle of dried blackseed plants hanging from the rafters of his workshop. The leaves were dry enough to crumble between his fingers. Some of the small seedpods cracked open at the lightest touch, spilling their precious burdens into his open hand. He nodded with satisfaction and removed the bundle from its hook on the ceiling. Being careful not to shake the delicate dried plants, he carried the bundle to his worktable.

The afternoon sun shone in the window, bringing out the warm, gold tones of the wooden tabletop. Jaedin glanced up and found himself captivated once again by the sheets of coruscating orange light that gave the mountain range called the Fireskye its name. The curtain of light hung over the peaks, rippling and shimmering in all the colors of fire: oranges, pinks, and golds. In the bright sunlight it was a sight to behold; at night it was simply breathtaking.

Five years, he'd lived in this little cottage at the end of the dirt track that was the main road through Rosefire, and he was still struck by the sheer beauty of the view right outside his workshop window. Talon would have loved that view. He could almost hear his lover's voice. *Poetry in the sky*, Talon would have called it—

Jaedin froze, a lump forming in his throat.

This place was not supposed to make him think of Talon every time he turned around. That had been his reasoning for settling so far from the land of his birth. The oaks of the Skarwood looked nothing like the pine forests of the northlands, and the Fireskye had softer, gentler lines than the sharp, jagged peaks of the Iceshards.

He had served nearly ten years in the mercenary army of Rhane the Red. Rhane's Raiders, they'd been called, and he'd been happy to count himself one of them, up until the night their camp had been attacked by Vakarran regulars and Talon had taken an arrow through the heart.

Jaedin squeezed his eyes shut and willed his mind along a different path. It didn't help. This particular track was so familiar he could do nothing but follow it as that last night replayed itself over and over in his head.

The shouts and the screams, his lover shuddering in his arms, struggling to breathe... the flickering shadows cast by the fires, the acrid scent of smoke on the wind... Talon staring up at him, unable to speak... those blue eyes that had once looked upon him with love and passion going dull and dead as Talon fell into the final, long sleep...

He supposed he should be glad it had been quick. Talon's suffering had been over in minutes. Jaedin's had lasted five long years now, and there was no end in sight.

Shouting coming from the direction of the inn across the way tore his mind from the grip of the past. He shook his head hard and swiped a hand over his eyes to dash away the tears. There was a scuffle going on in the inn's stable yard, and from what Jaedin could see, it did not look like a fair fight, not by any stretch.

Five large men in armor had cornered three unarmed men, the smallest of whom was being pawed by a big, black-haired brute. The smaller man struggled against the thug, who grabbed a fistful of his hair, jerked his head back, and forced a possessive kiss upon him.

Jaedin dropped the dried plants onto the worktable and headed outside, rolling up his sleeves as he prepared to join the fight. It had been a few years since he'd involved himself in a brawl of any sort, but Jaedin hadn't forgotten his training. Thanks to his long treks into the Skarwood and up into the Fireskye to gather herbs and plants and to hunt for fresh game, his body was nearly as fit as it had been when he'd fought for a living.

He'd never been one to back down from a fight when he'd run with Rhane's Raiders, so he waded into the fray without hesitation, intent upon rescuing the terrified young man from his assailant.

Jaedin shoved one man out of the way and punched another in the face. He was just about to grab the brute when a wave of terror broke across him, washing him in icy fear and dizzy nausea.

Help me! a voice screamed in his head. Jaedin staggered back a few steps and clapped his hands over his ears. His vision swam. The whole world was washed in color and shimmering light, as if the Fireskye had come down to Rosefire and set the very air ablaze. The weird light and the feeling of disorientation faded, and when Jaedin looked up, all five of the armored men were down on the ground. The three they'd been attacking were pounding down the dirt track on their way out of town.

The smaller man was well ahead of the other two. He turned to look back briefly, locked eyes with Jaedin for one moment, then pelted off toward the Skarwood.

Jaedin stared after them, trying to make sense of what had just happened. A hand on his shoulder had him spinning around to see Gil, the old stableman, frowning at him.

Gil drew his hand away and took a step back. "You all right, Jaedin?"

"I'm fine... I think. What... what just happened?"

"Not exactly sure." Gil shook his head and pushed shaggy gray hair off of his brow. "One minute that big brute there looked like he was about to have his way with the boy, and the next I saw, all five of 'em went down and the boy took off running."

"Went down?" Jaedin knelt to check the nearest one. He was alive and apparently uninjured, but unconscious.

"Damndest thing I ever seen," Gil said. "Looked like they'd been poleaxed, every last one of 'em. Maybe the kid's one of them leythari, working his magic on anyone that gets in his way. Only thing I can think of. But if somebody that powerful lived around here, you'd think we'd have heard about it." He glanced down at the nearest thug. "They all right?"

Jaedin shrugged. "Out cold, near as I can tell. Who was the boy? Do you know?"

"Nope. Never laid eyes on him before today. The two that went after him, though, that was Pitar and Dano. They was just tellin' me 'bout him yesterday. The kid blundered into one of their boar traps out in the Skarwood." The old stableman jerked his chin in the direction of the forest. "Pitar said he got caught up in the stakes. The way he tells it, the kid's lucky to be alive. They found him at the bottom of the trap, all tore up and bleeding. Pitar patched him up best he could, and put him in the back of the wagon, but they was working pretty deep

in the woods, and by the time they got into town, the kid was raving with the fever. Pitar said he figured the kid was a goner, but Mara fixed him up right as ever. They was planning to take him with them to Andar, but..." Gil looked off in the direction the three men had gone and shrugged. "Guess they'll have to catch him first."

Jaedin followed Gil's gaze. There was no sign of any of the men now. "What should we do with these?" He nudged one of the unconscious men with the toe of his boot. The man stirred and moaned.

Gil spit on the ground, narrowly missing the man at his feet. "Don't look like nothin' I want to be messin' with. I'd just leave 'em be. This one's coming around already. Like as not, they'll pick themselves up and take themselves off. If they want the boy bad enough, they won't be hanging about bothering with the likes of us."

Jaedin returned to his workshop to continue separating the seedpods from the dried blackseed plants. He glanced out the window frequently, keeping an eye on the stable yard while he worked. Sure enough, the thugs soon picked themselves up. After a bit of disagreement amongst themselves, they loped off in the direction of the Skarwood, looking none the worse for wear.

Of the trappers and the young man who'd apparently been the source of the altercation, there was no sign.

Jaedin turned his attention back to his work, lifting the leaves and stems away from the tiny seeds that had sifted down to the surface of the table. The seeds he would make into a numbing salve. The leaves and stems would be brewed into blackseed extract, a potent pain drug.

Damned ingrates. Jaedin scraped the tiny, black seeds he'd collected into a small wooden bowl, then rubbed his bruised knuckles. They could have at least thanked him for risking his own neck. Things could have gone very badly, indeed. He'd been stupid to even think about taking on the five of them, armed with only his fists and his temper. He could almost hear Talon's voice, sharp with disapproval: *Shouldn't have got involved, Jaedin. Should've just stayed out of it. Not your business, not your problem.*

When Khy finally stopped running, he leaned against a tree trunk and strained his ears for any sound of pursuit. It was impossible to hear anything past his own ragged breathing and the pounding of his heart. Pitar and Dano had followed him when he'd bolted from the village, but he'd stopped hearing

their voices not long after he'd crashed headlong into the Skarwood. Once he'd hit the forest, he'd made so much noise pushing his way through the underbrush that he had no idea if he'd been pursued or not.

He hadn't dared stop, not even to thank them. Baine's appearance had struck too much terror into his heart for him to think of anything but escape. Master Rikard must want him back very badly. The Master only used Baine for really important jobs, and when he did, a lot of gold coins changed hands.

The first time Khy had seen Baine, he hadn't been able to tear his eyes off of the big man. Baine was ruggedly handsome and he knew it. After conducting his business with the Master, he'd come out to the stable where Khy was helping Seb feed Master Rikard's horses. Baine had ordered Seb out and cornered Khy. He'd put his hands all over Khy's body, and forced his tongue into Khy's mouth. When Khy had stumbled away and run behind the stable to throw up, Baine's cruel laughter had followed him.

After that, Baine offered to take Khy off of the Master's hands every time he came to the tower. Master Rikard always gave Baine one of those grim little smiles of his and said that Khy was not for sale. Khy was *special*, and he was needed in the tower. Baine had laughed and said, *I bet he is*.

Khy wiped the sweat from his eyes and tugged at the breastplate Dano had strapped onto him. It was heavy enough to slow him down, and even with the straps done up as tightly as they would go, it was still loose on him. He undid the straps he could reach and managed to wriggle free of the ones he couldn't. After listening for a long time and hearing no signs of pursuit, he backtracked to the last path he'd crossed and laid it there. Hopefully Dano and Pitar would find it. Khy didn't want to be accused of stealing, but he dared not return to Rosefire to give it back to them. Not if Baine was after him.

After a short rest, Khy headed deeper into the Skarwood. Even if the forest was haunted, like some of the monks had whispered, Khy thought that taking his chances with the ghosts was preferable to having to endure Baine's attentions.

The heavy canopy of leaves soon grew thick enough to hide the sun. The trees were closer together than on the forest fringes, and the underbrush became thicker and more tangled. It was dark enough that if he moved quietly, he could stay hidden. If he kept his head and didn't go running off in a blind panic at every sound, he should be able to avoid stumbling into any more traps.

Still, even after his recent experience, the prospect of being caught in another boar trap was far less frightening than the thought of what Master Rikard or Baine would do to him if they caught him.

As the light began to fade, Khy came across a small stream. He knelt beside it and scooped icy water into his mouth. When he'd drunk his fill, he splashed the cold water onto his sweaty face and scrubbed every last trace of Baine's horrible kiss from his mouth and his skin.

The stream was so cold, it must have come down out of the Fireskye. Khy decided to follow it and find out. He'd always wanted to see the mountains, and having a destination in mind made him feel a little more in control. He followed the stream for the rest of the day. When it became too dark to see, he crept into the underbrush and made himself a little hollow. There, he curled up and tried to go to sleep.

Sleep, however, did not come easily. Every unfamiliar sound was fuel for his newly-freed imagination. Always before, the tower's thick walls and solid wooden door had stood between himself and the dangers of the Skarwood. Now he was out in the forest alone with nothing to protect him.

He wondered if leaving the breastplate behind had been a good idea. Dano had said it didn't fit him anymore. Perhaps the trappers wouldn't have missed it after all.

Thinking about the trappers made him wish for some company. He was usually happier by himself than with Master Rikard, or with Seb and Nida. Pitar and Dano had seemed nice enough, though. He wouldn't mind their company. Or Mara, the healer, who had been kind to him, and far more gentle than he remembered Nida ever being. Or that man who'd come rushing into the stable yard when Baine had grabbed him. His hair had shone like spun gold in the sunlight. Khy had never seen hair like that before. He wondered where the man was from. Not from anywhere near Rosefire or Stone Creek, where everyone had black hair and dark, dark eyes.

The man was a leythari, Khy was sure of it. He'd appeared and then Baine had suddenly let him go and then crashed to the ground as if someone had clouted him on the head. The men with him had all fallen down, too. Only a leythari could do something like that. Khy had to wonder what could have moved the man to use his power to help a stranger. He wished he could go back and thank the golden-haired leythari.

A distant howl cut through the night, freezing Khy's thoughts and his blood. He curled himself up in the tightest ball he could and waited for the night to end.

Jaedin never did finish making the blackseed salve. A bleak melancholy had settled over him, fueled by both his memories of Talon and his annoyance at the less than satisfying outcome of the fight that afternoon. He wondered if the young man had made good on his escape, or if the thugs had caught up to him in the Skarwood. What had the boy done, he wondered, to bring down the wrath of such an unsavory looking collection of characters?

He'd looked innocent and bewildered enough, but Jaedin was well aware that appearances could be deceiving. Talon had presented the world with a similarly guileless expression, which had hidden both shrewd intelligence and ruthless determination. Frail and waif-like in appearance, Talon had been capable of a cold-blooded brutality that sometimes shook Jaedin to the core. The young man whose honor he'd tried to defend earlier in the day might well be a similar sort.

In which case, the village of Rosefire was probably well rid of him.

After a supper that he hardly tasted, Jaedin sat at his kitchen table and stared out the window at the Fireskye, brooding. He might have sat there in a black mood all night, had a knock not sounded at the door.

He was quite surprised to find Mara on his doorstep, her brow drawn up in a frown. The sun had set some time ago, and he couldn't imagine why she would be here this late until he recalled that he'd promised her a batch of blackseed salve.

"I'm sorry, Mara. I meant to get that salve started this afternoon, and then there was all that excitement in the stable yard... It threw me a bit, and I never did get back to work. I'll have it for you by tomorrow evening."

Mara waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "Oh, I'm not worried about the salve. I've enough to last a bit longer. It's actually the excitement at the stable yard I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?" Jaedin stood there blinking for a moment before he remembered his manners and invited the healer in.

While Jaedin lit the oil lamps to brighten the room, Mara took a seat by the fire and waited for him to join her. She declined his offer of tea, so he pulled up

a kitchen chair and sat facing her. "So... you want to talk about what happened this afternoon?"

"It's that young man Pitar and Dano brought to me. Arin, his name was. After those horrible men tried to attack him, he ran off into the Skarwood. Pitar and Dano went after him, but he was too fast for them, and he disappeared into the forest. They spent a good part of the afternoon hunting for him—Dano had loaned him a breastplate that he wanted back. They found the armor, but they didn't find Arin."

Jaedin frowned, not certain what this had to do with him. "Gil said he fell into a boar trap."

"Yes, he did, and nearly died of wound fever. I'm worried about him, Jaedin. I don't know where he came from—I've never seen him before yesterday. He was raving for hours before I got the fever down, and it sounded to me like he'd run away from someone who was hurting him. I'm afraid those men might have been sent to fetch him back."

"Mara, you and I both know that half the things men say in fever dreams are fantasies."

She raised an eyebrow. "And the other half?"

"All right," he conceded with a shrug. "There could be some truth to it. So? You want to mount a rescue? I'm not sure Rosefire could put together enough of a militia to take on even that bunch."

Mara's frown deepened. "I'm aware of that," she said softly. "No, I'm not suggesting we fight a gang of armed thugs. That could bring us far more trouble than we want. But I'd feel a lot better about the whole affair if somebody went into the Skarwood and had a look. If Arin did escape them, he's out there in the forest all alone. He seemed so lost and confused, and if he managed to blunder into a boar trap, I dread to think what other trouble he could get into. You know the Skarwood better than anyone in Rosefire, Jaedin. Could you go after him?"

Jaedin leaned back in his chair and let his breath out in a heavy sigh. "It's that important to you?"

Her dark eyes fixed on him. "I'm a healer. I can't stand by and not help when someone is hurting."

He glanced out the window at the sheets of orange light shimmering against the black of the night sky. "It'll have to wait until morning," he heard himself say. "It's too dark now—I'd never pick up his trail."

“Thank you.” Mara let out her own little sigh, the lines on her brow smoothing a little.

“Don’t thank me until I’ve found him. And don’t get your hopes up—if those thugs have any tracking skills, it’s likely they’ve already picked him up and are long gone.”

“I know. And Jaedin... that collar he’s wearing... don’t try to remove it. I think it’s a leythe-chain, and it might well be binding something that’s best left alone.”

Jaedin frowned, remembering the working that had taken down the thugs that afternoon. “He’s a leythari?”

“I don’t know. Possibly. I asked him, and he said he wasn’t, but... I couldn’t get much out of him about the collar. He seemed so confused and afraid that I’m not sure what to think.”

“All right. I’ll leave the collar for you to deal with. Assuming I can even find him.”

Mara leaned forward and patted his arm. “Thank you, Jaedin. I won’t forget this.”

Chapter Three

Jaedin woke up in a cold sweat. Visions of intricate shapes woven out of colored light lay burning in his mind. In his dream, he'd been bound to a hard, cold surface. A man stood over him and drew light from his body, using it to build a glowing pattern that hung in the air above Jaedin.

Every shred of light torn from him was agony, cold fire burning him in hidden places no one should have been able to touch. Screams echoed in his mind and slowly died away, leaving behind a whisper of sound that formed itself into a single syllable, repeating over and over in his head: *Khy... Khy... Khy...*

Jaedin sat up in bed, rubbing his face with his hands. He wasn't sure how long he'd slept, but dawn had yet to add its pale gray tones to the soft golden-orange glow of the Fireskye.

Khy...

It was a whisper in his mind, a thin thread of sound winding its way through his awareness and pulsing softly to the beat of his heart.

Khy... Khy... Khy...

Who or what in the Black was Khy?

Too much wine before bed, he told himself. The wine might help him sleep, but the bad dreams that came with it were hardly restful. He should have learned that by now.

When the sweat of his fear had dried and his heart had finally stopped pounding, Jaedin lay back down and closed his eyes. He'd just drifted off again when he was awakened by a cry that was so loud and so clear that it had to have come from just across the room.

Help me!

Jaedin leapt out of bed, fists clenched, body tensed for a fight. Enough of the Fireskye's orange glow leaked through the thin curtains at his window for him to be certain that he was alone.

He padded out to the main room of the cottage, where he stirred the fire back up, threw on a log, and set a pot of water to boil. With those disturbing dream-images lingering in his mind, he wouldn't be going back to sleep anytime soon.

He'd make some coldroot tea. That should soothe his over-active imagination. Involving himself in that fight in the stable yard had obviously been a mistake. It had unsettled him, got him thinking about the things he'd come here to forget.

Not that there had been any real choice about involving himself; once he'd seen that brute forcing his attentions on the boy, he'd known he would have to act. Gods only knew what would have happened if he *hadn't* stepped in.

As he waited for the water to boil, his thoughts drifted back to that voice. There it was, whispering through his mind again: *Khy... Khy... Khy...* Jaedin stared into the fire, trying to think where he'd heard that voice before. There was something familiar about it. It took a few moments of thought before he placed it; it was the same voice he'd heard during the fight, right before he'd—

What in the Black...?

Had someone laid a leythe-working upon him? He remembered now the wave of icy fear and the dizziness that had staggered him for long enough that he'd missed whatever it was that had taken down the thugs.

Remembered, too, those eyes that had locked onto his for the briefest of moments.

Maybe the kid's one of them leythari. Gil's words echoed in his mind.

No... Mara had said the kid had denied being a leythari... and if he was one, surely he'd never have allowed himself to be attacked in the first place. The leythari Jaedin had known in his mercenary days had all had a very clear sense of when malicious intent was focused upon them, and were thus adept at avoiding confrontation.

He shook his head. It didn't matter. Too damn much wine and too little sleep, that was his problem.

He didn't resort to the wine very often anymore. After Mara had left, however, the ghosts of the past had hovered close. Combined with his annoyance over how easily she'd talked him into going after the boy, the wine had been his only recourse, if he wanted any sleep.

In retrospect, perhaps it hadn't been the best solution. A sleeping draught would have made more sense. Mara would certainly have told him so.

He brewed himself some coldroot tea and drank it down without tasting it. When he began to feel drowsy, he took himself back to his bed. The tea did its

job. He slept, but not without dark dreams in which he lay helpless, writhing in agony while complex structures of multicolored light took shape over his body.

The voice was still there the next morning, chanting softly in the back of Jaedin's mind, echoing the rhythm of his pounding heart.

Remembering his promise to Mara, he dressed quickly and prepared to head into the Skarwood. The wine had left his stomach feeling sour, so he skipped breakfast. He took his bow and his hunting knife, but he didn't bother bringing any supplies; he expected to be home by midday.

Given the boy's apparent lack of woodcraft, Jaedin figured he was either hopelessly lost somewhere near the edge of the forest, or he'd been captured by the thugs. Both meant Jaedin would be home quickly, because he wasn't going chasing after a band of armed men all by himself to rescue a boy who was as likely to be running from justice as abuse.

Jaedin set off in the direction he'd last seen the boy running, and it wasn't long before he found tracks—three sets, it looked like, and he recalled that Mara had said that Pitar and Dano had spent the afternoon hunting for him.

He sighed. If Pitar and Dano, both experienced woodsmen, hadn't been able to find him, how did Mara expect Jaedin to do any better? His own tracking skills were somewhat rusty, and with that infernal voice chanting just at the edge of his awareness, Jaedin was finding it difficult to concentrate.

The tracks ran together and separated, and several times, Jaedin had to backtrack when he realized he was following the wrong set entirely. By midmorning, the voice was even louder. His head was pounding, his heart was racing, and when he lost the boy's trail yet again and couldn't pick it up, he decided it was time to admit defeat.

The only bright spot was that he'd seen no sign of the kind of tracks that armored men would have left. They'd been unconscious in the stable yard when the boy had run off, and they'd clearly not picked up his trail on the way out of Rosefire. Perhaps the boy had escaped them after all.

Perhaps he was hiding in the forest even now, watching Jaedin's struggles from a high perch and laughing to himself. With a scowl, Jaedin turned and headed back to the village.

Mara was waiting for him, and answered her door at his first knock. She wasn't happy that he'd come back alone, but he reassured her that he'd seen no

sign that the thugs had been following the boy's trail. She didn't seem overly comforted at that. Jaedin wasn't sure what more he could do, and wasn't feeling up to trying to explain how difficult it would be to find the boy once the trail grew cold. He took his leave before she could press him into searching farther afield.

Back in his workshop, he tried to distract himself with work. He had the blackseed salve to make for Mara, and she'd mentioned a few days ago that she was running low on the tansin leaf poultice mixture he supplied her with.

Jaedin found it just as difficult to concentrate on measuring ingredients as it had been to focus on tracking. With that name repeating itself incessantly in the back of his mind, he kept making mistakes. When he lost track of his measurements and had to throw out an entire batch, rather than start over, he put the ingredients away and slumped down at the kitchen table.

Khy... Khy... Khy...

Now that he wasn't trying to focus on anything else, the voice seemed even louder and more insistent.

At bedtime, it was still there. Jaedin was wound up so tight, he turned to the wine again. A bottle was plenty enough to send him back into dark dreams in which he screamed and screamed.

No one came.

No one helped.

No one even knew.

Khy blinked at the wall of prickly thorns in front of him and wondered how he was going to get past it. It lay across the narrow stream he'd been following, blocking his path for as far as he could see in both directions.

His stomach growled as he studied the thorny tangle. It had to be nearly lunchtime, and he'd had nothing more than a handful of blackberries since lunch at the inn yesterday.

Was it only yesterday? It felt like he'd been creeping through the Skarwood for days. His feet hurt, and his belly ached with hunger. Master Rikard might not have been kind, but at least at the tower, he'd always had enough to eat and a comfortable place to sleep.

Here there was none of that.

Khy considered his dilemma. If he tried to find a path around the thorns, he might lose the stream entirely. Then he wouldn't have any idea which way to go. He might even wander around in circles until something big and hungry found him.

If he turned back, though, he might well run into Baine. Khy shuddered at the thought. The way the man looked at him made him feel sick and dirty. If Baine caught him out here in the Skarwood, there would be no one to stop him from doing whatever he wanted. Khy closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe slowly. There was nothing to panic about yet. He hadn't seen Baine, and he hadn't heard any sounds of pursuit.

It occurred to him then that Baine might even be dead. The golden-haired leythari had done *something* to Baine and his men. Khy hoped with all his heart that the man had sent the lot of them straight to the Black, but it would be too dangerous to assume he was safe. He needed to keep moving.

Khy eyed the thorns in front of him. Some of them were as long as his little finger and sported wicked barbs. With his luck, he'd end up tangled up like a fly in a spider web, flailing about until wild animals found him.

Or until Baine heard his struggles and came to *rescue* him.

He couldn't risk that; he'd have to go around.

Uncertain of how long it would be before he found his way back to the stream, he knelt and drank his fill. When he could drink no more, he set off, following the edge of the tangle deeper into the wood. He glanced back a few times, trying to keep sight of the stream, but it was soon lost in the gloom. Khy resolved to keep the brambles in sight and on his left, so he'd be able to find his way back to the stream if he had to.

The thorny bushes never did thin out, in fact, they seemed to multiply, and Khy kept having to change direction to avoid them. Soon he wasn't so much avoiding thorns as finding the path of least resistance.

It wasn't long before Khy was hopelessly turned around. He wasn't sure in which direction the stream lay, and the canopy of leaves above him was so thick, he couldn't tell where the sun was.

He stopped to pick blackberries whenever he came across them, and when the light began to fade, he crept into a thicket to hide himself. There, he curled up in a miserable ball. He was hungry and thirsty, and he was beginning to think that he might be lost.

Maybe things would look better in the morning. He'd try to find a good climbing tree tomorrow. Then he'd be able to see where the mountains were and get his bearings again.

With that thought in mind, Khy finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

Jaedin had had enough. He was no longer certain how many days it had been since the scuffle at the inn, but whatever was wrong with him, it was getting worse. The voice in his head had been growing steadily louder and more insistent as the days went by. Wine did nothing to drown it out, and coldroot tea was becoming less and less effective. He couldn't sleep. His eyes burned with exhaustion, and his head was pounding most of the time now. He couldn't concentrate, couldn't think his own thoughts, couldn't do *anything* without that infernal voice intruding.

It was time to get some help, and the only person in Rosefire who knew anything about the leythe was Mara.

She answered her door at his first knock, and stared up at him, hands on her hips. "Well, it's about time. You said you'd have that blackseed salve for me days ago. I've nearly run out, and—" She stopped suddenly, dark eyes narrowing as she frowned up at him. "Jhara's mercy, Jaedin, whatever's wrong?"

"Mara, I... I need your help."

She pulled him inside and shut the door behind him. Instead of leading him to her workroom and making him sit on the table, she took him to the other side of the cottage, to her living quarters. There, she sat him down in one of the armchairs by the fire.

While Jaedin tried to think how he was going to explain his problem without sounding as if he'd gone mad, Mara took a jar of herbs from above the hearth and measured some into a mug. She lifted the kettle from its spot over the fire and poured hot water over the herbs. "Let that steep a few minutes before you start it," she said, handing the mug to Jaedin. "Now, tell me what's troubling you."

Jaedin stared into the fire. "It sounds crazy, but there's this voice in my head. All the time. It won't go away, no matter what I do. I can't work, I can't think clearly, I can't sleep... and when I do sleep, the dreams I'm having are..." He shuddered, hoping she wasn't going to want him to recount those dreams.

Mara frowned. "Is the voice saying anything?"

"A name, I think. The same name, over and over."

"When did it start?"

"The day that boy—Arin?—was attacked in the stable yard. You said that collar he was wearing had something to do with the leythe... and the way those thugs went down, *somebody* worked the leythe during the fight." He frowned, thinking back to the encounter. "Could he have done something to me? I think... I might have caught the edge of something. It didn't knock me out like it did the others, but I remember feeling dizzy. And everything got bright, as if the world was washed in color... like the Fireskye, only different."

"Anything else?" Mara's voice sounded sharp, and her frown had deepened.

"The voice. It screamed in my head: *help me.*"

"You said there was a name, too. What name?"

"*Khy*. Does that mean anything to you?"

Mara's finger tapped her chin as she considered his words. "In Aeia, it means *nothing*... I suppose it could be a name, though. Let me have a look at your aura. I should at least be able to tell you if there's a leythe-working of some kind affecting you. Relax and drink your tea. This will take a few minutes." Her eyes unfocused, staring through him rather than at him.

Jaedin looked away, unnerved by the vacant expression on Mara's face that meant all of her attention was focused on the leythe, on things that Jaedin could never see. He stared into the fire and sipped his tea. It was sweet, and while he found its effects somewhat soothing, it did nothing to quiet the voice. Even after he'd finished it, that whisper in his mind was still there. He closed his eyes, wishing for peace, for a few moments of silence, for a night without dreams of light and pain.

After a long time, Mara finally leaned back in her chair and rubbed her temples. "Well. That is an extremely powerful working."

"What is it?" Jaedin whispered. "What did he do to me?"

"It's a compulsion of some kind. I can see the colors of it threading through your aura, and extending out into the leythe beyond it. I can follow the threads of it a little way, and I suspect it might go down as far as the energy matrix itself, though I'm not strong enough to follow it that far. I'm afraid the roots of this working go much deeper than I can reach."

“What does that mean?”

“It means I can't do anything for you. This is far more complex than anything I've ever seen.” Her eyes lifted to meet his. “Whatever it is, it goes deep into your aura, and removing it is not going to be a simple matter. If you want to be free of it, you need to seek out the leythari who laid the working upon you in the first place.”

“Arin? The boy in the stable yard?”

Mara regarded him with a grave expression. “You really think Arin did it?”

“He must have.”

“He couldn't have. Not while he was wearing that collar, at least.”

“Why not?”

“There are only two things I know of that the collar could be. One is a leythe-chain, and I'm almost certain that's what it is. It binds a leythari's power and stops him from touching the leythe. If Arin was wearing a leythe-chain, there's no way he could have done anything like this.”

“And the other thing?”

“A focus. Something that would concentrate and amplify his power. If that's what it was, though, I certainly would have sensed it. It would light up the leythe like a bonfire. Even a lowly healer like me would see it.”

Jaedin had seen things like that before; some of the leythari who had worked for Rhane's Raiders had worn leythe-stone jewelry that helped them focus their power.

He set down the empty mug and pressed his hands to his face. Despite Mara's doubts, there was no question in his mind who had done this to him. Pitar and Dano weren't leythari. The only person who *could* have done it was the boy. Those eyes... the way they'd locked onto his... that voice... *Help me!*

“This is all I need,” he muttered.

“I'm sorry.” Mara's voice was soft. “I wish I could help you, Jaedin. I just... I don't have the knowledge or the skill. This is... something entirely out of my realm of experience. I can see enough of it to know how difficult removing it will be, but I dare not touch it. I could do more harm than good without meaning to.”

Jaedin sighed. “Then it looks like I'm headed back into the Skarwood. I just hope I can pick up his trail again.”

Mara reached across the space between them and squeezed his hand. "Good luck, then. And if you need me, you've only to ask. You know that."

"I know it," he said, and accepted a chaste kiss on the cheek in farewell.

Khy peered through the leaves above his head and reached up to grab the next branch. He could just brush it with his fingertips, but no matter how far he stretched, he couldn't catch hold of it. He glanced down at the ground. It was a fair drop, and if he tried to jump and missed, he could easily break something. Then he wouldn't be going anywhere.

The ground below him spun and tilted. Khy clung to the tree trunk until the dizziness passed. He'd managed to find a few blackberries before he'd attempted the climb, but they'd done little to relieve either his hunger or his thirst. Nausea was now his constant companion, and the dizzy spells were becoming more frequent.

He stared up toward the sky. He thought it was close to midday, but even as high up as he was, he couldn't see the sun clearly enough to tell. All he needed was one glimpse of the mountains so he'd know which way to go. It didn't look like he was going to get high enough this time, though. If he didn't find food soon, he might not have the strength to try again.

His stomach growled at the thought of food. How many days had it been since that meal at the inn? He thought of the bowl of stew he hadn't been able to finish, and the half loaf of bread they'd just left on the table.

What he wouldn't give for those leftovers now.

Khy took a deep, steadying breath and turned his thoughts away from food. He started down the tree, moving slowly and carefully. Whenever his limbs began to tremble or the world began to spin, he stopped to rest. At the bottom, with his feet firmly on the ground, he sank down, panting, and wondered what he should do next.

He wasn't long in doubt. A big hand closed around his wrist, and Khy was hauled to his feet. He found himself staring up into Baine's flat, black eyes.

"Well, look what I've found," Baine said, grinning widely. "It's Rikard's little slave boy."

Khy's heart galloped in his chest. He tried to pull away, but Baine's grip was far too strong. Before he could wriggle free, a fist caught him on the side of the head and everything went black.

He woke up choking on liquid. Thirst had him gulping it down before he recognized the bitter aftertaste of Master Rikard's medicine. He clamped his mouth shut. Several large men were holding him down, and one of them pried his clenched teeth apart and poured more of the cold, bitter stuff into his mouth.

He tried to spit it out, but two fingers pinched his nostrils shut and he was forced to either swallow or choke. Khy swallowed. The men released him and backed away. Khy tried to scramble free, only to find he was bound, feet together and hands in front of him.

They left him lying on the forest floor like that until the fog began to close in on him. His thoughts slowed, moving with all the speed of cold mud. Everything felt dull and far away. He couldn't remember why escape had seemed so important, and he lay there staring up at the dark canopy of leaves above him and tried to remember what he was doing outside.

He wasn't supposed to be outside...

He hoped Master Rikard wouldn't find out.

Rough voices brought him back to the surface. He opened his eyes to see Baine standing over him, leering down at him.

"Looks like I've got you right where I want you," he said. He held a waterskin to Khy's lips. Once Khy was certain it was just water, he drank thirstily. Baine held the skin for him until he'd had enough. When Khy finally turned his face away, Baine gave him a wide grin. "Soon as we make camp, you're gonna do for me what you do for Rikard."

Khy shook his head. "No..." he moaned, certain that Baine meant the workroom and the pain. Khy didn't want to go to the workroom. "Please..."

Baine's grin broadened. "Ah, you look so pretty when you beg, little Khy. I bet you'll look even prettier with that sweet mouth full of my cock."

Khy shuddered, a few dim memories struggling up through the mud that clogged his mind. A lifetime ago, he and one of the other boys at the monastery had touched each other that way. He'd liked doing those things with Arin... but he didn't think he could do them with Baine. Before he could open his mouth to tell the man *no*, Baine scooped him up and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

Bound as he was, Khy could do nothing to stop him. The rank odor of stale sweat and unwashed male filled his nostrils, and Khy gagged and turned his face into the breeze.

Baine pinned him in place with one big arm around his hips, while his other hand roamed over Khy's body, pinching and squeezing him through his clothing. Khy whimpered at every touch, earning himself a hard slap on the rear.

"Quit your crying," Baine growled. "Or I'll give you something to cry about, boy."

Khy squeezed his eyes shut and wished the golden-haired man was here to help him again.

It didn't take Jaedin nearly as long as he'd feared it would to pick up Arin's trail. The boy had found a stream, crossed it, and followed it in the direction of the Fireskye for a good distance. When the forest became a thick, tangled mess of brambles, tracking became a lot easier. Arin had turned north to avoid the thorny vegetation, and from there the dense underbrush made it much easier to follow his movements.

Jaedin had been tracking him for a day and a half, and he found himself questioning his own conclusions about the boy. Arin was simply forcing his way through the least dense patches of vegetation with all the woodcraft of a rhyx running down prey. Surely a leythari powerful enough to take down five armed men was powerful enough to hide his own tracks. Or disappear entirely, if that were his choice. If he was powerful enough to create a working that Mara couldn't remove, why wasn't the boy bothering to hide his tracks?

As he moved deeper into the forest, Jaedin noticed that the voice seemed to be just a bit less insistent, a shade less urgent. Was the working beginning to fade? Perhaps, given enough time, the voice would go away on its own.

The moment he turned around with the intention of heading back toward Rosefire, the voice grew louder, increasing in intensity with every step toward the village, until it was a shrill shout. Jaedin clapped his hands to his ears, turned around, and practically *ran* deeper into the Skarwood.

Once he was back on the boy's trail, the voice faded to a whisper again, as if it were aware of his every thought. Jaedin scowled, hating the feeling that he was being driven by a leythe-working rather than his own desires.

By afternoon, he had come to the conclusion that, leythari or not, the boy was hopelessly lost. There was no sense of direction to his wanderings—he appeared to be taking the clearest, easiest path.

The signs of the boy's passage were becoming fresher, perhaps only a few hours old, which lifted Jaedin's spirits. If his luck held, he might actually find the little bugger before dark, and perhaps by tomorrow, this nasty episode would be but a bad memory.

His optimism lasted right up until he reached the base of a tree and saw the boy's tracks joined by at least four other sets. Heavy tracks left by men who weren't trying to hide their presence.

They were headed north, deeper into the Skarwood.

Of the boy's tracks, there was no sign. Jaedin made a wide circle of the area, searching for a place where they might start again. He found nothing, and finally had to concede that the boy had been taken by the group—probably the very same group that had attacked him in Rosefire.

With a somewhat heavier heart, Jaedin followed the tracks north.

Baine kept his men moving all afternoon and into the evening. It was almost too dark to see when he finally called a halt. He set Khy down on the ground, and he and his men set about making camp. Khy watched them as they cleared a circle of ground right down to the dirt. Two of them went off to gather wood for a fire, while another set about skinning some rabbits.

Khy's thoughts drifted as the men went about their camp chores. It was so hard to think through the fog that blanketed his mind. He was tired and hungry, and he didn't like the way the ropes cut into his wrists every time he shifted.

It occurred to him that he didn't want to be here. He didn't think he wanted Master Rikard to find him, either. That meant he needed to get away. The way Baine kept looking at him, with that dark glint in his eyes, Khy was quite certain that whatever Baine had planned for him would hurt just as much as going to the workroom would.

He started to get up, but found that he couldn't move. It took him a few moments to remember that he'd been bound. He tried to tug his wrists free, but the rough rope only cut deeper into his skin. Khy whimpered in frustration. How could he run away if he was bound? He couldn't even free one hand so he could smack his head and make himself think better.

The smell of roasting meat soon turned his thoughts from escape. His mouth watered and his stomach growled and twisted, reminding him that it had been far too long since he'd eaten. He wondered if they would feed him. They

seemed to have forgotten him. Khy couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not. Nobody was hurting him, but they might forget he was there at all. What if they left him here alone in the Skarwood, all tied up and helpless? He wondered if he should remind them. Then he thought about the way Baine had looked at him and decided that perhaps he'd better not.

He closed his eyes, remembering the golden-haired man in the village. The one who'd worked the leythe and helped him make his escape. He wished that man was here. Wished it with all his heart. He'd work the leythe again and then he'd untie Khy and they would slip away into the forest. Khy would be safe with him. The man had looked like he was big enough to protect himself and Khy, both. He probably knew how to find food, and he would—

A hard blow to his ribs jolted Khy back to the forest. He yelped and curled himself in a ball to avoid another kick. A dark shape loomed over him. He knew it was Baine from the cruel sound of his laughter.

Baine scooped him up under his arm and carried him to the circle of men around the campfire. "Rikard's whore," he said as he draped Khy face down over a log that had been pulled up close to the fire.

"Pretty," said one of the men.

"Don't look strong enough to last the night," said another, his words almost as slurred as Khy's usually were.

"Then I'd better have him first and leave what's left for the rest of you bastards to fight over," Baine said.

"Remember Rikard's orders, Baine," said a voice that sounded clearer than the others. "The boy's useless to him if he's not still a virgin. You fuck him, we don't get paid."

A snort came from behind Khy. "Rikard's a liar. He just wants to keep this sweet little ass all to himself. You can bet Rikard's had him. We'll get paid all right, long as we don't tear him up too bad." He laughed. "Besides, Rikard's a right bastard. I like the idea of taking his boy right under his nose."

Rough hands pinned Khy to the log and hauled his breeches down, then took hold of his hips in a bruising grip. Khy wriggled and squirmed to escape. A hard body pressed against his back, holding him in place. Hot breath blew across his neck. "I've waited a long time for this," Baine's voice growled in his ear.

Khy squeezed his eyes shut and thought of the golden-haired man.

The light faded quickly once the sun began to set. Jaedin figured he didn't have much daylight left to find a place to camp for the night. He'd just found a small clearing that might be suitable when that sense of urgency returned. It had faded into the background while he followed Arin's trail, but now it flared bright in his mind. The sense of fear that accompanied it was so strong that he froze, eyes darting about as they sought the danger. When he was finally able to make himself move, he turned a slow circle, scanning the gloom for any sign of movement.

A distant flicker of light through the trees caught his eye, and he edged toward it, drawing on all his years of experience as a scout to keep his movements as quiet as possible.

The light was coming from a campfire at the center of a large clearing. Five rough-looking men surrounded a smaller figure bent over a fallen log. It didn't take much imagination to guess what was going on. The increasing intensity of the voice in his head and the terror that accompanied it told Jaedin he'd probably found his leythari. Now he just had to stop these thugs from killing the boy.

He slid the pack from his shoulder and lowered it quietly to the ground. Reaching his bow, he took careful aim. One man leaned over the captive and yanked the boy's breeches down. Another loosened his own clothing and pressed himself against the boy's back.

A third man grabbed hold of the one who was about to take the boy and hauled him to his feet. An argument broke out, and while the men were busy shouting at each other, Jaedin shot one through the throat.

If their loose, clumsy movements were anything to go by, the men had been drinking. Two were dead and Jaedin had a third in his sights before it occurred to those remaining that something was wrong. When the third man went down, the last two staggered across the clearing toward their packs. Jaedin's arrows took them both before they got anywhere near their weapons.

He waited then, straining his ears for the slightest sound that might indicate more of them, hidden in the trees. He was fairly certain he'd been tracking five men, but it was always possible that they'd been joined by others when they camped.

When he heard nothing, Jaedin made a slow circle of the camp before moving into the clearing. The boy was in no immediate danger, and he wanted to be certain there weren't any sentries posted farther out. Given the fact that

the men had been drinking, he rather doubted they'd bothered, but he hadn't worked for ten years as a scout without learning caution.

The boy lay across the log where the thugs had left him. Jaedin couldn't tell if he was conscious or not, and approached with all due caution. He'd seen too many accidents in the aftermath of battle—healers and combat medics injured or worse when they tried to help a leythari who was too wracked with pain and fear to be able to tell friend from foe.

Jaedin grabbed a dusty blanket from the ground near the fire and approached slowly, speaking in a soft, soothing voice. "Are you all right? I'm a friend—I'm here to help you. The men who tried to hurt you are all dead. I've got a blanket here to cover you with. I'm just going to put it over you, all right?"

The boy whimpered, and Jaedin very carefully spread the blanket over him.

"That's better. I'm going to touch you now, just to cut these ropes off of you and help you get to your feet. Is that all right?"

"Please..." the boy whispered.

Jaedin cut the ropes. When he helped the boy up, he noted that the boy's wrists had been chafed by the rope until they were raw and bleeding. He'd have to do something about that once they stopped for the night.

The boy stood there clutching the blanket about himself and shivering. He swayed on his feet, and Jaedin put a hand on his shoulder and guided him to the fire.

In the flickering firelight, Jaedin immediately changed his initial assessment. This was no boy. He was on the small side for a man, but he was in his early twenties, at least. He had a short, neat beard, long brown hair that was currently a mess of tangles, and a face that could break hearts.

The man looked up at him. Those intense eyes that had captured his attention before locked onto his. Jaedin could have lost himself in that gaze, but before he had the chance, something odd caught his eye. The man's pupils were constricted into tiny pinpoints, even in the dim firelight. Jaedin reached out and grasped the man's chin gently, turning his face toward the fire to get a better look. The oily sheen of swirling colors drifting over the whites of his eyes was a sure sign that he'd been drugged with leythe-bane.

Nasty stuff, that. Leythe-bane could render even the most powerful leythari utterly helpless. Jaedin knew the drug from his days with Rhane's Raiders.

He'd made the stuff himself for use on enemy leythari taken captive. Leythebane made it impossible for a leythari to even touch the leythe, let alone work it. It also had the useful side effect of dulling the mind and slowing the body, rendering even the most recalcitrant prisoner docile and compliant.

"What in the Black...?" he muttered. "Why did they give you so much?"

The man blinked up at him. "You came for me." His voice was thick, his words slurred from the drug.

"I didn't exactly have a choice, leythari." It came out sounding cold and a lot harsher than Jaedin had intended. "You made certain I would come."

Those beautiful eyes widened. The man stared up at him, clearly confused. "I'm not... I didn't..." He swayed on his feet, and Jaedin put his hands on his shoulders to steady him.

"Arin... is that your name?" Jaedin asked.

The man frowned as if Jaedin had just posed a most difficult question. "No," he said finally. "My name is Khy."

Jaedin felt his shoulders loosen a little at the sound of the name that had been bouncing around in his skull for the past few days. At least he had the right man. Although, drugged to the point of stupidity and clearly in shock, Khy was hardly in a fit state to be untangling a complex leythe-working. Jaedin would have to wait until morning to see about having the thing undone.

"Not Arin?"

The frown deepened, and the man shook his head. "I don't... no. Just Khy."

"All right, Khy. I'm afraid we're going to have to walk just a little farther before we make camp. I'd rather not be anywhere near this place when the scavengers come sniffing around later on."

Khy said nothing, only stood there blinking in the firelight.

Jaedin doused the fire and retrieved his pack. Then he helped Khy fix his breeches, adjusted the blanket around the man's shoulders, and guided him back toward Rosefire.

Chapter Four

Khy woke to the sounds of the forest. He lay very still, not daring to open his eyes quite yet. With effort, he kept his breath deep and steady, feigning sleep as he tried to remember what had happened. His head felt clear, so he must have forgotten to take his medicine again. Master Rikard would be angry if he found out—

No... he wasn't in the tower anymore. He'd left the tower...

It all came back in a rush, and Khy had to press his lips together to keep from making a sound. He remembered the words Baine had spoken all too clearly: *We'll get paid all right, long as we don't tear him up too bad.*

Khy shuddered. He'd been certain Baine would do it. If he had, Khy wouldn't have been able to stop him. Even if he hadn't been bound, the medicine made him stupid and far too clumsy to defend himself. He remembered Baine bending him over a fallen tree and tearing at his clothing... and then Baine was gone and someone else had been there.

Someone who had spoken to him in a deep, gentle voice and covered him with a blanket. Someone who had spread a soothing, numbing salve on his wrists and carefully wrapped them in clean strips of cloth. Someone who had fed him and given him water to drink, and then settled him in a bedroll...

Khy opened his eyes to see the golden-haired leythari who had helped him escape the village. The man was sitting near a small campfire, his pale green eyes fixed on Khy. The expression on his face was not pleasant. In fact, it was rather like the look the Master wore when Khy had done something particularly stupid or clumsy.

"Khy?" The voice was deep and gruff, and there was an edge to it that sent a shiver through him.

Khy bit his lip. How did the man know his name?

"It's all right." The voice gentled a little. "I'm not going to hurt you. That is your name, isn't it? Khy?"

"Yes, it's Khy." He sat up slowly and began to untangle himself from the bedding. He kept one eye on the leythari, who was sitting far too close for comfort. Close enough to lunge at him and grab him if Khy tried to bolt...

"My name is Jaedin," the leythari said. "I'm from Rosefire."

He seemed to expect a response of some sort. Khy searched his mind for something appropriate and finally said, "I remember... you helped me escape... I wanted to thank you, but... I wanted to get away, too."

Jaedin frowned. "*I helped you...?*" The big man shook his head. "No, I didn't do anything. I'd only just started bashing heads. And then you worked the leythe and those thugs all went down... That's why I came after you. Whatever you did back there, I think I caught the edge of it. Ever since then, I've been hearing your name in my head. It's driving me mad. I can't concentrate on anything, I can't sleep, and there's this... *pulling* feeling in my mind, driving me toward the Skarwood. Toward *you*, I think."

Khy stared at him, confused. Jaedin thought *he* had worked the leythe?

"I'm not angry," Jaedin continued. "You looked like you were in a panic, and... well, maybe it was an accident. I've worked with leythari before, and I'm well aware of how difficult it is to work the leythe when you're upset or frightened. I understand that you probably didn't mean to catch me up in your working. Right now, I just need you to undo whatever it is you've done to me."

Khy opened his mouth and then shut it again. "I... that wasn't me. I'm not... I'm not a leythari. I'm just—"

"You don't have to lie to me. I'm not looking for vengeance or recompense. I just want my life back. I want it quiet in my head."

"I told you, I'm not—"

"Don't. Lie." The man's voice was a low growl. His shoulders had tensed and his pale eyes had narrowed. "They wouldn't have drugged you with leythebane if they weren't afraid of what you might do. And that thing you're wearing around your neck... the only people I've ever known who wear leythe-stones like jewelry are leythari."

Khy's fingers crept to the collar, but he didn't touch it. Not quite. Touching it with his hands hurt him deep inside. He'd learned that the hard way. The very first day he'd come to the tower, the Master had locked the thing around his neck. The hours that followed had been a nightmare of fear and pain that had grown worse every time he tried to claw the thing off. That one night of agony had taught him to keep his hands well away from the thing.

Now, he stared at Jaedin and slowly shook his head. "I'm not..." he whispered.

Jaedin leaned forward, lip curling. "I said, *don't lie*. I know what you are. And I know you're the one who did this to me. What do you want? Gold?"

Khy shrank back. He didn't understand why this Jaedin thought he'd worked the leythe. He'd never been able to work the leythe. Master Rikard was the one who did that.

Had he missed something? His memories of the previous evening were fuzzy from the medicine. Maybe it hadn't been last night? Maybe he'd lost time again...

He tried to think back to the fight in Rosefire, but he couldn't remember doing anything other than trying to escape Baine. Surely he'd remember it if he could do something as big and important as working the leythe. Khy clenched his hand into a fist and smacked the side of his head. Maybe that would help him think smarter.

A big hand closed around his wrist. "Khy, stop! Don't hurt yourself."

"No, please, don't—" Khy cringed, closing his eyes and waiting for the blow that didn't come.

Jaedin let go of Khy the moment he cringed away, instantly regretting the anger that had made him speak so harshly. He hadn't meant to scare the man, but Khy's admission that he wasn't a leythari wasn't exactly comforting. Nor was his confusion over what he'd done to Jaedin.

He'd thought this was going to be straightforward and simple: find the man who'd cursed him, get him to undo whatever mischief he'd done, and head home to get on with his life.

The gods apparently had a more complex scenario in mind, and Jaedin was far from pleased about it. Still, getting angry at Khy, who seemed more frightened and confused than anything, was hardly going to help matters.

Jaedin drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's all right," he said, gentling his tone and moving back a little to give Khy some space. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Khy watched him with those liquid blue eyes. Jaedin had to tear his gaze away to avoid being drawn back into them.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," Jaedin continued. "I'm frustrated. And I'm not sure I understand. The fact that you were drugged with leythe-bane tells me that *somebody* thinks you're powerful enough to do some damage. Why would they think that if you're not a leythari?"

“I don’t... I don’t know what leythe-bane is. Do you mean the medicine they gave me yesterday?” A shudder rippled through Khy’s thin frame. “That’s the medicine I always take. Master Rikard makes me take it every morning and every night.”

Khy was forced to take leythe-bane twice a day? *Every day?* Jaedin might not be a leythari, but he knew what was in the stuff, and he doubted a constant diet of it was doing Khy any good at all. “Master Rikard?” Jaedin didn’t know the name, but then he’d kept mostly to himself since arriving in Rosefire, and didn’t pay much attention to local gossip.

“He’s... he’s a leythari.” Khy swallowed hard. “He lives in the tower. In the Skarwood. I live there with him. Or I did... until I ran away.”

Jaedin frowned and eyed the collar around Khy’s neck. It was made of metal and studded with deep blue leythe-stones. The golden flecks swirling in their crystalline depths told him the stones were active—not just decoration. Every piece of leythe-stone jewelry he’d ever seen was used to enhance a leythari’s power, but Mara thought the collar might be binding Khy’s power, instead.

Either way, he was a leythari.

Or... perhaps the collar was something else entirely? Something this Master Rikard used to influence Khy or keep Khy under his control? Put that idea together with the forced drugging and the way Khy cringed away from him, and the picture forming in Jaedin’s mind was far from pleasant. “You were his prisoner? Or his slave, maybe?” he asked gently.

Khy shivered. “I think... yes,” he whispered.

“Can you tell me where to find him?” If Khy couldn’t fix what he’d done, perhaps this Master Rikard could.

He was unprepared for Khy’s reaction. The young man was on his feet and plunging into the forest before Jaedin even realized he was moving. Jaedin jumped to his feet. “Khy! Come back! I didn’t mean—”

Khy didn’t stop. He disappeared into the trees. Jaedin took off after him, unwilling to lose his only connection to the leythe-working that was destroying his peace. Fortunately, due to the lingering effects of the leythe-bane, Khy wasn’t very fast or very agile.

It didn’t take Jaedin long to catch up to him. When the dense underbrush finally slowed Khy’s flight, Jaedin scooped him up with one big arm around his

waist. Khy fought like a demon out of the Black, kicking and punching and spitting curses. Jaedin tried to calm him with his voice. When that failed, he simply wrapped his arms around Khy and held him tight until the young man finally ran out of energy and went limp against him.

“Won’t... won’t... go back... can’t... make me,” Khy spit out between frantic gasps for breath.

“Nobody’s going to make you go back,” Jaedin said in the gentlest voice he could manage. “I’m sorry I frightened you. I didn’t realize you felt so strongly about it.” He let his hold loosen a little, testing to see if Khy would squirm away at the first opportunity. “I’m going to put you down now. Don’t go running off again. These woods are dangerous, and I’d hate to see you get hurt.”

Khy stared up at him, eyes narrowed. “I’m not going back to him.”

“I won’t ask you to.”

“Then I won’t run.”

Jaedin set him down, fully prepared to have to take off after him and fetch him back again. Khy backed away a little and watched him with wary eyes, but he didn’t run.

The expression on Khy’s face set off another alarm in Jaedin’s mind. He’d seen that look before, when he’d been fighting in the north—on the faces of prisoners of war who’d been badly abused.

“Khy, did your master hurt you?”

Khy pressed his lips together and wouldn’t say, but those eyes, those startling blue eyes that seemed to reflect everything in the man’s soul, said, *Yes. Too much, and too often.*

Jaedin sighed heavily. There was no way he could ask Khy to guide him to his master. He’d have to make inquiries in the village. Once he knew where to find this Rikard, Jaedin could always approach the leythari by himself. He didn’t have to involve Khy. “Well, then, I think we’d best seek the advice of the leythari in Rosefire. You don’t want to show me the way to Rikard’s tower, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life with your name rattling around in my head.”

A shudder rippled through Khy. “Leythari?” he whispered.

“You’ve already met her. The healer, Mara. The one who took care of you after you got caught up in Dano and Pitar’s trap.”

Khy's brow smoothed and the set of his shoulders relaxed a little. "Mara," he said with a little nod. "I liked her. She didn't hurt me."

Jaedin shook his head sadly. He hated to think what Khy's life had been like if he needed to classify people according to whether they'd hurt him or not.

Once his initial fear wore off, Khy decided that he liked Jaedin. In fact, once it had finally sunk in that Jaedin really wasn't going to try to drag him back to Master Rikard, Khy found that he couldn't stop staring at him.

Jaedin had hair the color of spun gold, woven into a complex braid that hung halfway down his back. Khy wouldn't have minded wearing his own hair that way, but he knew from experience that his fingers were far too clumsy to make even the simplest of braids.

Khy liked Jaedin's eyes, too. They were a fascinating pale green. Khy hadn't ever seen eyes that color before. Everyone he could remember meeting had black hair and dark eyes.

Besides being nice to look at, Jaedin had much more patience than Master Rikard ever had. He didn't shout at Khy, even when he was slow to respond. He made sure Khy had something to eat and drink before they set out. He'd even brewed a sweet tea that he said would neutralize any leythe-bane left in Khy's body. Jaedin promised that Khy would feel a lot better by the evening. Khy couldn't remember the last time anyone had cared about him feeling better, let alone taken the trouble to make sure he ate enough.

It was early afternoon by the time they set off. Jaedin walked fast, and Khy would have had to trot to keep up, except he didn't have the energy for that. He quickly fell behind. Jaedin noticed right away and slowed his pace.

"We won't get back to Rosefire until tomorrow at this rate," Jaedin said.

Khy stared down at his feet. "I'm sorry. I'm too slow."

"No, no, that's not what I meant," Jaedin said quickly. "I just meant that we'll have to sleep in the forest again tonight. Last night you were drugged so heavily with leythe-bane, I couldn't have kept you awake if I'd tried. Tonight though... will you be all right sleeping outside?"

Khy looked up at Jaedin. Was the man serious? Why would he care whether or not Khy was all right sleeping outside? "I slept..." he trailed off, realizing that he wasn't sure how many nights he'd spent in the forest. It all seemed like

one big blur of hunger, thirst, and fear. "I'll be all right," he said finally. He looked away then and added almost under his breath, "Long as you're with me."

Jaedin was silent for a long moment. Finally, he cleared his throat and said, "When we get to Rosefire, we'll go and see Mara. Perhaps with both of us in front of her she'll be able to tell us something helpful about this... this... *leythe-working* or whatever it is."

Khy just shook his head. Whatever it was that Jaedin needed help with, it wasn't anything he'd done. He was certain he'd remember doing something powerful and important like that.

They walked in silence for the rest of the afternoon, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Not like the silences in the tower, during which Master Rikard waited, watching like a hawk, for Khy to drop something or trip over his own feet so he could be punished.

That night, after they'd eaten and the purple shadows of twilight had melted into the night, Khy stayed close to the fire, starting at every sound. Jaedin didn't seem bothered by the nighttime noises of the Skarwood, but Khy almost wished that someone would come and give him his medicine. At least when he took the medicine, his mind didn't wander into dark, twisty corners at every sound.

Jaedin spread out his bedroll and told Khy to crawl in and go to sleep.

"What about you?" Khy asked. "Where will you sleep?"

"I'll sit up and watch for a while."

"Watch what?"

"Watch the night. Make sure nothing sneaks up on our camp."

"All night?" Khy wanted to know. "Don't you need to sleep?"

"With this voice in my head?" Jaedin waved a hand at his own head. "I'll sleep when we get to Rosefire."

So Khy snuggled down in the bedding and closed his eyes. The last few days had included far less food and far more exertion than he was used to, and his body was tired enough that it should have been easy to fall asleep. Without his medicine, though, his mind was wide awake and kept playing over the things that had happened last night.

He kept hearing the voice of one of Baine's men: *Remember what Master Rikard said. The boy's useless to him if he's not still a virgin.*

He'd been mulling over those words all afternoon. He knew what they meant. He and Arin had spied on the brothers sometimes, and he knew what men did with each other when they didn't want women. Fear of discovery and lack of privacy had prevented Khy and Arin from exploring very many of those possibilities, but Khy had no doubt that they would have eventually found a way.

Before the brothers had given him to Master Rikard, anyway.

Before he'd set fire to the—

Khy sat up in the bedroll, eyes wide.

How had he forgotten that he'd set fire to the stable?

He'd remembered it for the first time the day he'd left the tower. After Baine had drugged him, the memory had sunk back into the mud with the rest of his past, and it had only just resurfaced.

So many of his memories had been shrouded in the fog and haze in his head, but now the veil was slowly thinning and parting, and he remembered that day clearly. He and Arin had accompanied Brother Valentine to the market in Stone Creek. Their job had been to take care of the wagon and the horses while Brother Valentine haggled with the merchants. While they'd been there, Khy had caught Arin kissing a girl.

When they'd returned to the monastery, Khy had confronted Arin. They'd argued and—

—and the fire had raged in Khy's head like a brilliant wash of orange light. The next thing he'd known, there were shouts from the brothers, and the screams of frightened horses. The stable was burning. The brothers had managed to save the horses, but the building had burned to the ground.

The brothers had been angry. They'd called him evil and tainted. They'd fed him some foul medicine and locked him up in a cell until they could arrange for Master Rikard to come and fetch him. There had been talk of the Master taking him on as an apprentice. The monks had made it clear that they didn't approve of those who tampered with the leythe, but what other choice did they have? Father Ambrose had said he shuddered to think of the evil Khy could get up to if left to his own devices.

“Jaedin?” he said, his voice sounding very small in the huge darkness that surrounded them.

“Yes, Khy?” Jaedin’s voice was a warm, comforting rumble.

“What you said earlier... about me being a leythari... I think you might be right.” He swallowed hard as other memories crowded in, forming a picture that was only now starting to become clear. “I think... Master Rikard was supposed to teach me, only... only he didn’t. He made me a slave instead.” Khy frowned, trying to remember. The parts of his life from before the tower had come back into sharp focus, but the time he’d spent with Master Rikard was still foggy and mixed up. He didn’t know of any good way to ask for what he wanted, so it all tumbled out in a rush: “Last night... one of them said that Master Rikard wouldn’t have any use for me if I wasn’t a virgin. Jaedin, please. I don’t want to go back there. He’ll hurt me. Would you... would you...” He couldn’t finish, and he squeezed his eyes shut, cringing as he waited for Jaedin’s response.

The silence that followed his clumsy request lasted so long that Khy had to crack open an eye to make sure Jaedin was still there. In the shifting firelight, he couldn’t quite make out the expression on Jaedin’s face, but the big man was staring into the flames.

“Go to sleep, Khy.” Jaedin’s voice sounded heavy and rough.

Khy didn’t say anything more. He burrowed down into the bedding and covered his head so Jaedin wouldn’t see his burning cheeks.

Jaedin figured it was a good thing he’d already decided to keep watch all night. The thought of a powerful leythari creeping about the Skarwood in search of his escaped slave was quite enough to keep even the most footsore soldier awake. With the voice in his head constantly whispering Khy’s name, coupled with Khy’s blurted plea for help, sleep was the furthest thing from Jaedin’s mind. It was also the last thing he was likely to get, even if he did close his eyes.

He stared into the embers of the fire, half his mind on keeping watch, the other half...

Well. The other half was chewing over all that had happened in the last few days, and trying to sort it all out.

Khy’s request had caught him completely off guard, and he was still trying to decide how he felt about it. Part of him was repulsed at the thought of taking

anyone to his bed. Even thinking about it felt like a betrayal of the worst kind; Talon still figured large in his thoughts and his dreams, and Jaedin hadn't looked at another man since Talon had been taken from him.

Another part of him—a part that had been buried for far too long—thought that he might be able to look at Khy.

That made Khy dangerous. Khy was exactly the sort of man who caught his interest, and he was disturbingly like Talon. Not to look at, no, but there had been a sweetness and an innocence about Talon that ran counter to the fiery, independent spirit that raged within that deceptively small, slender body. Jaedin had already seen hints of that same kind of fire in Khy. It may have been drugged into submission during his years of slavery, but as the effects of the leythe-bane wore off, Jaedin could see it shining through.

It both fascinated and frightened him.

Khy's problems were hardly trivial, and Khy's presence posed a serious threat to the quiet, peaceful life Jaedin had struggled to build for himself these past five years. He couldn't afford to get tangled up with Khy.

That thought brought a rueful smile to his lips. With that voice in his head and the irresistible urge he felt to protect Khy from harm, he was already far more entangled than he was comfortable with. Untangling himself would likely be messy and complicated.

Morning found him wide awake and still as conflicted as he had been the night before. Khy slept late, and Jaedin let him. Leythe-bane was nasty stuff. If Rikard had kept Khy drugged all the time, then Khy was probably enjoying the first real sleep he'd had in years. Jaedin was loathe to wake him, so he kept himself occupied preparing another batch of the cleansing tea for when Khy awoke, and made a pot of porridge for their breakfast.

Then he settled back to wait for Khy to wake. He tried to think about something else, but his thoughts—and his gaze—kept returning to the young man curled up across the fire from him.

With his features relaxed in sleep, Khy was breathtaking. Jaedin could well imagine the disparaging comments his former comrades would have made had they been here to witness his gruff refusal of Khy's clumsy advances. If Jaedin was a less honorable man—or perhaps if the shadows of Talon's memory didn't haunt his every breath—he might have been very happy to take advantage of Khy's request.

One look at Khy's face, so innocent and vulnerable in sleep, stopped that line of thought cold. Jaedin knew he could never do such a thing. Khy had been hurt and taken advantage of quite enough in his young life. Jaedin had no desire to abuse him further.

Chapter Five

It was sort of endearing, the way Khy sat on the table in the healer's workroom and swung his feet. With a silent curse, Jaedin tore his gaze away from the young man yet again, and turned his attention to Mara.

She'd been studying Khy in silence for some time now, and every time her frown deepened, the coldness curled tight in Jaedin's belly unfurled itself a little more. Whatever she was about to tell him, he was quite sure that it wasn't anything he wanted to hear.

Finally, Mara stepped back. Her dark eyes focused on Jaedin. She gave him an apologetic smile and shook her head slightly. "The working that's tangled up in your aura hasn't changed since I saw it the other day. I know you're convinced Arin—sorry, I mean Khy—is the one who laid it upon you, but I'm almost certain he didn't."

"But who else could have done it?" Jaedin asked. "There wasn't anyone else."

"After you went off into the Skarwood the other day, I contacted my mentor, Chavi, through the leythe. She has far more skill with the leythe than I do. I described the collar to her." She gestured to the collar around Khy's neck. "She confirmed what I first thought—that this is a leythe-chain. It binds Khy's power so he can't work the leythe. With this on, he can't even *sense* the leythe. Even if Khy understood what he'd done and knew how to undo it, as long as he's wearing this collar, he wouldn't be able to."

"So he *is* a leythari," Jaedin said with a frown.

Khy shook his head. "I'm *not*," he whispered. "I can't do things like that."

"You said you set fire to the stable," Jaedin reminded him.

Khy pressed his lips together and didn't say any more.

"Trained or not, you have power, Khy," Mara said quietly. "Power that somebody wanted to keep bound."

"Why bind his power?" Jaedin asked. "If he's never been trained, what would be the point? He wouldn't know how to do anything anyway."

"Chavi said that it's sometimes done to control one who cannot control himself," Mara said softly. "Occasionally the power is too strong, or the

leythari unable to learn the discipline required to control it. To protect himself and the people around him, his power must be bound.”

Jaedin turned his attention back to the distracting young man sitting on the table. Khy was watching him from beneath half-closed eyes. “I know the leythe-bane has made it hard for you to remember, Khy, but do you have any idea why your master would have made you wear the collar?”

Khy licked his lips and looked away. “He didn’t always,” he mumbled.

“No?” Jaedin glanced at Mara, who shrugged. “When didn’t he?”

A shudder shook Khy’s thin frame and he wrapped his arms about himself. “In the workroom,” he whispered.

“What happened in the workroom, Khy?” Mara’s voice was gentle, but her expression was grim.

“I don’t... I don’t remember... Just... light... and cold... and pain.”

Mara’s frown deepened. “Khy, was your master named Rikard?”

The voice in Jaedin’s head became loud and strident, and all the color drained from Khy’s face. He raised his eyes, locking his gaze onto Mara’s. “Don’t make me go back to him. *Please...*”

“Nobody is going to make you go anywhere you don’t want to,” Mara said. “Are they, Jaedin?”

Jaedin squeezed his eyes shut, trying to concentrate through the cacophony. He took a step toward Khy and laid a hand on his shoulder. “No, they’re not.”

Khy turned wide, haunted eyes on Jaedin, and the noise in Jaedin’s head immediately quieted.

“How did you know it was Rikard, Mara?” Jaedin asked.

“Chavi warned me about him,” she said. “Told me what to look for, showed me what patterns I would see in the leythe if I encountered any of his workings. From what she told me, I think this collar is leythe-locked, keyed to Rikard. Which means Rikard can use it to track Khy through the leythe.”

Khy made a whimpering sound, and Jaedin’s hand slid from his shoulder to his back, moving in slow, lazy circles. “Shh,” Jaedin whispered. “It’ll be all right.” He looked up at Mara then. “What can you tell me about Rikard?”

“Nothing much,” she replied. “I’d never heard of him until Chavi mentioned him the other night. He lives on the far side of the Skarwood, and keeps to

himself. According to Chavi, he was banished from the court in Andar some twelve years ago. There were rumors that he was stealing power from his apprentices to use for his own workings. How one would accomplish that, I've no idea, but if that's what he was using Khy for, it would certainly explain the collar. Binding Khy's power would be a lot less trouble than teaching him to control it." Mara's gaze flicked to Khy, and her tone softened. "Khy, do you have any idea how long you were with Rikard?"

"I don't know. I was fifteen when the brothers sent me to him, but... I'm sorry. I just don't remember very much of what happened after that."

Mara patted his shoulder. "That would be the leythe-bane. I'm afraid if he kept you on it all the time, some of those memories may be lost forever."

Those beautiful eyes closed briefly. "That might be for the best," Khy muttered.

"Can you recall anything happening at the monastery around the time you were sent away?" she asked him. "Any celebrations or big storms? Any fires or sicknesses?"

Khy frowned. "I don't think... no, wait... there *was* something..." He fell silent for a time, gaze turned inward. Finally, he said slowly, "Father Ambrose was gone when I set fire to the stable. The brothers locked me in a cell until he returned and could decide what to do with me. He'd gone to Andar for Princess Lyri's handfasting."

Mara shot Jaedin an alarmed look.

"That was ten years ago," Jaedin whispered. He'd still been fighting in Vakarra, but rumors of the scandal caused by Princess Lyri, who had fled rather than be handfasted to the young prince of Daerne, had spread across the Westlands like wildfire.

Jaedin immediately regretted his thoughtless words when Khy turned even paler. Khy's eyes closed, and his body swayed. Afraid that Khy was about to pass out, Jaedin moved up against the table behind him and pulled the stricken man back against his chest. "It's all right," he said softly. "It'll be all right."

Khy leaned against him, letting Jaedin take his weight. Without thinking, Jaedin let his arms creep around Khy. When he glanced up at Mara, she was watching him, one eyebrow raised.

Jaedin ignored the knowing look she threw his way. He was just making sure Khy didn't pass out and hit his head, that was all. The man had just had a

shock, and Jaedin was doing what anyone with a heart would do. He cleared his throat. "All right, then, it looks to me like we have two problems to deal with. One is getting this collar off of Khy so that Rikard can't find him. The other is getting this voice out of my head before it drives me mad. You're the closest thing to an expert on the leythe that we have, Mara. What do you suggest?"

"The only leythari I know of who might be able to help you is Varian. Chavi trained under him years ago."

"Chavi can't help us?" Jaedin asked.

Mara shook her head. "Not with the collar, at least. If Rikard is the one who set the leythe-lock, she won't be able to break it."

"But this Varian could do it?"

"I imagine he could. According to Chavi, there isn't much he can't do. He lives somewhere in the Fireskye. I'll contact Chavi again tonight. She'll know how to find him."

"We'll stop by in the morning, then," Jaedin said, "and see what you've found out."

Khy lay in Jaedin's bed and listened to the sounds of Jaedin packing up for their journey. Despite his exhaustion, he'd tried to pay close attention to everything the healer had said that afternoon. Some of it he hadn't really understood, especially the part about leythe-chains and him having power. One thing that had been perfectly clear, though, was that it would be a lot less trouble for Jaedin to just take Khy back to Rikard.

In fact, the more Khy turned it over in his mind, the more sense it made for Jaedin to do just that. He couldn't understand why Jaedin had decided to seek out Varian when Rikard was right there in the Skarwood. Maybe Jaedin felt sorry for him. Khy wondered how long that would last if Varian proved difficult to find. He was certain that it wouldn't take much for Jaedin to decide that Khy wasn't worth risking his own neck for. Then he'd seek out Rikard, and Khy would end up back in the tower.

He shivered a little and tried to turn his thoughts away from Rikard. A noise at the bedroom door startled him and he peered through the dim glow of the Fireskye to see Jaedin creeping into the room. Jaedin moved to the foot of the bed and opened the chest there.

Khy burrowed deeper under the covers and pretended he was asleep. He liked Jaedin's bed. It was soft and much more comfortable than his pallet by the hearth had been. It smelled like Jaedin, too. He inhaled deeply, taking in as much of that scent as he could.

Eventually he drifted off to sleep, but it wasn't a peaceful sleep. Now that the medicine no longer chained his thoughts, Khy's mind was free to conjure all manner of nightmares. His dreams took him to Rikard's workroom, right into the cold and the fear and the awful, burning light...

He heard the liquid syllables falling from Rikard's lips, felt those cold hands moving over his body. The pattern of light floated above him, twisting and writhing into shapes that were so wrong it hurt to look at them. Icy, burning fire feathered its way through him with every motion of Rikard's hands...

Khy screamed and struggled, fighting against the hands that held him down until Jaedin's voice cut through the terror-soaked dreamscape.

"Khy! Wake up! You're safe."

He shuddered and opened his eyes. An oil lamp stood on the nightstand, and in its warm, yellow light he could see Jaedin leaning over him. It was Jaedin's hands—not Rikard's—that he could feel on his shoulders.

"I'm all right," he choked.

Jaedin frowned down at him and lifted his hands away. "You didn't sound all right."

"Dreams."

"Nightmares," Jaedin corrected. "You're shaking."

The bed dipped and a moment later he was scooped up and hauled onto Jaedin's lap, covers and all. The big man's arms went around him, and Khy found his head tucked under Jaedin's chin, his ear pressed against Jaedin's broad chest.

"Better?" A big hand smoothed the sweaty tangles of hair off of his face.

Khy squeezed his eyes shut and tried to calm his racing heart. He *wasn't* in the tower, Rikard *wasn't* standing over him drawing the light from his body, and Jaedin *wasn't* going to take him anywhere near the Skarwood.

As long as they were able to find Varian in the Fireskye. If they couldn't find him...

Khy trembled in Jaedin's arms. Jaedin's hold tightened, and he began rocking Khy gently back and forth. After a while, Khy heard him yawn, and Jaedin carefully shifted Khy off of his lap. The covers were pulled up over him. There were rustling sounds as Jaedin readied himself for bed, and then Jaedin lay down next to him.

It wasn't long before Jaedin's deep, even breathing told Khy he was asleep. Khy wished he could sleep, too, but there were too many thoughts running around in his head.

If this was all going to end with him back in Rikard's hands, he almost wished that Jaedin hadn't shown up to rescue him when he had. Baine and his men might not have been gentle, but at least if they'd had their way with him, he wouldn't have to worry about being useful to Rikard anymore.

Perhaps he could still convince Jaedin to help him. It might have been his clumsy way of asking that had made Jaedin refuse. Khy knew what felt good, remembered some of the things he and Arin used to do to each other. Maybe if he did some of those things to Jaedin...

He kicked the covers out of the way and wriggled out of the nightshirt Jaedin had given him. Naked, he lay back down facing Jaedin, who had stripped down to his skin before getting into bed. The pale violet light of the moon shone in the window, illuminating Jaedin's face and throwing every muscle of the big man's chest and arms into sharp relief. Khy's fingers itched with the need to touch.

He pressed his body close to Jaedin's, skin on skin, and ran a tentative hand down Jaedin's chest. Jaedin stirred in his sleep and murmured something that sounded like *talon*. An arm snaked around Khy and hauled him close, and a hand began a lazy exploration of his body. It stroked its way across his belly and his chest, pausing to tweak a nipple, then moved down to brush over his hip and cup his ass. When that hand wrapped around his cock and began stroking him, Khy let out a low moan and bucked his hips, seeking more friction.

Jaedin's mouth sought his, devouring him in a hot, hungry kiss. Khy whimpered as Jaedin's hand began to move faster. Heat and tension coiled tighter and tighter inside him, and he could feel himself moving toward something... something...

"Talon?" Jaedin's voice sounded rough and confused. "No... you're not Talon... what in the Black...?"

That sweet, firm pressure disappeared, the hands moved away, and Khy found himself alone. Jaedin stood beside the bed staring down at him with wide eyes.

"Khy, I'm sorry." Jaedin's face was a pale mask of horror in the moonlight. "I thought... I thought you were..."

"Please, Jaedin, I want—"

"No!" Jaedin rubbed his face with his hands. "No, no, no. I can't. Not... no."

"You wanted to, you were going to, please, you have to fuck me." Khy's voice sounded high and panicky. He tried to stay calm, but he could feel his salvation slipping through his fingers. Why wouldn't Jaedin just do this one thing? If only Khy could make him see—

Something shifted in Khy's head. There was a *pushing* feeling, followed by a pulse of twisting, flickering light that moved from him toward Jaedin.

Jaedin blinked and shook his head.

There was a low growl. When Khy looked up, the horror was gone from Jaedin's face, and the man's expression had turned feral. Khy hardly had time to register the change before Jaedin was on him.

Jaedin pushed Khy down on the bed and straddled him. He paused only a few moments to spit into his palm and stroke his already hard cock. His hands gripped Khy's hips, and he turned him over onto his belly, then pulled him up and set him on all fours.

Khy wasn't sure if he should be pleased or terrified. The heat of Jaedin's skin as he drew closer was all the warning he had before something nudged between his cheeks and Jaedin started pushing his way into Khy's body.

It burned, gods, it burned. Khy bit back a yelp at the sudden, painful intrusion. He squeezed his eyes shut and reminded himself that this was what he wanted. All he had to do was get through this, and then Rikard couldn't use him, wouldn't want him. Even if Rikard could use the collar to hunt him down, he couldn't use him for—

Jaedin's hands took hold of his hips in a punishing grip and he slowly pulled Khy back onto himself. Khy gritted his teeth and took it. He'd asked for it, after all. This pain wasn't nearly as bad as what Master Rikard did to him.

Jaedin pulled back and plunged in again, fucking Khy with long, hard strokes. His grip on Khy's hips tightened, and his breath soon became ragged.

All Khy could do was clutch the sheet beneath him and ride it out, hoping it would end soon. The burning pain had just started to ease when Jaedin's rhythm grew faster and more frantic. After what seemed like an endless time, Jaedin stilled behind him and let out a string of curses that ended on a low moan. When he was finished, Jaedin collapsed on top of Khy, pushing him down against the bed.

Khy lay there struggling to breathe under Jaedin's weight.

Was that it? Was he different now? He didn't *feel* any different, other than sore, but he wasn't a leythari. Maybe the difference was something only Rikard could sense.

A grunt came from above him, and Jaedin's warmth and weight were gone. With a muttered curse, Jaedin scrambled off the bed and backed away. Khy didn't move; he lay there shivering, caught somewhere between relief and regret.

"What in the Black...?" Jaedin's voice came out of the darkness, weak and shaky. "What have you done to me?"

Khy's only answer was a whimper. He shifted carefully, seeking a more comfortable position. Gods, he was going to hurt tomorrow.

"Khy? Are... are you all right? Did I...?" There was a note of fear in Jaedin's voice now.

"I'm fine," Khy whispered.

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. I just... wanted you to... to take me. So Rikard couldn't use me."

"And I wouldn't, so you forced me," Jaedin said in a strangled voice.

Khy turned his head to look at Jaedin, but he couldn't see the man's face clearly in the darkness that blanketed that side of the room. "I didn't force you. I asked you. And you said no... and then it all changed, and you... you..."

"I don't care what Mara says about leythe-chains. This would not have been any choice of mine. *You* did this somehow, just like you put that voice in my head."

"I didn't!" he protested, but a sliver of doubt had entered his mind, and it grew stronger as he recalled that odd *pushing* sensation and the flickering twist

of light he'd seen just before Jaedin had come after him. It was like the fire at the stable. He hadn't meant to do that, either.

"Damn it, Khy, using your power to force people to do what you want makes you as bad as Rikard!"

Khy's whole body went cold and then hot. He rose to his knees on the bed. "I'm *not* like him. I just... I needed... You wouldn't help me!"

"I *am* helping you. I'm taking you into the Fireskye to find this Varian character. Believe me, boy, it would be a lot easier to take you back to your master and ask him to sort this out."

"Why don't you then?" Khy demanded. "I know you don't want to be bothered with me. Why not do what you want and *leave me alone*?" He flung the words at Jaedin with all the anger and fear in his heart. Something twisted in his head, twisted and *pushed*.

He was completely unprepared for the strangled cry he heard from Jaedin.

He was even more unprepared for the thud that shook the whole cottage when Jaedin's body hit the floor.

Jaedin woke to gray morning light and a blinding headache. He frowned as he became aware of the hard floor beneath him. How in the Black had he ended up on the...?

He scrambled to his feet, stomach clenching as he remembered the events of the previous night. The bed was empty, and he cast his gaze about the room, seeking Khy.

There was no sign of the young man, though the smears of blood on the rumpled sheets told him that what he'd thought—hoped—was nightmare, was in fact memory.

He checked the cottage's main room and his workshop, but Khy was nowhere to be found. Panic flared through him for a moment before common sense took hold. Even if Khy had run off, it wouldn't be long before he got himself into trouble and the voice in Jaedin's head started screaming at him to—

Jaedin froze.

The voice was gone. There was only silence in his head.

Well. Except for the unhappy yammering of his own thoughts of loss and betrayal. Jaedin sagged against the nearest wall and rubbed his hands over his face.

He should be relieved, but his mind was seething with dark thoughts and his gut was churning. He'd betrayed Talon's memory. He'd done the one thing he'd sworn he'd never do, and it hadn't even been his choice.

Khy had done it. Khy could deny it all he wanted, but Jaedin was certain he was responsible. Jaedin would never have touched him otherwise, would certainly never have...

He moved slowly back to the bedroom, eyes fixed on the bloodstained sheets. How badly had he hurt Khy? Badly enough that he'd gone to Mara?

The thought that he might have injured the young man worried him. There was only one way to set his mind at ease on that point. Jaedin dressed quickly and headed down the dirt track toward the healer's house.

The sky was heavy and overcast, the Fireskye a dull, sullen glow hanging over the mountains. Warm lamplight spilling from the front window of Mara's cottage told him she was already up and about. She opened the door at his first knock.

"Has Khy been here?" he asked as she ushered him in.

She blinked up at him. "No, I haven't seen him since yesterday. Why?"

"He was..." Jaedin stopped, considering his words. The last thing he wanted was to have to explain to Mara just why he thought Khy might seek her out. "He was having nightmares. I thought maybe..."

Mara shook her head. "No, he didn't come here, and I was up a good part of the night. I spoke to Chavi for you. She says she hasn't been in contact with Varian in years, but the last she knew, he was living in the Fireskye, near the Fireshard. You know it?"

"I've seen it. From a distance. It's hard to miss." The Fireshard was a spire of orange-gold crystal that towered over all but the highest peaks of the mountains.

"Chavi said to warn you that the leythe lies heavy around the valley where the Fireshard stands, and the leythe-storms in that area are extremely dangerous."

Jaedin grunted. "The place will be crawling with rhyx, then."

Mara nodded gravely. "Most likely. But she also said that Varian will help you if he can. Assuming he's still there and that you can find him."

Had he still required Varian's help, Jaedin might have been concerned about having to make such a dangerous journey, but now that the voice was gone, he had no reason to seek out a leythari. Not for himself, at least. As for Khy... Well, Khy had used him and then run off without even an apology. He owed Khy nothing.

Jaedin frowned as another explanation for Khy's absence occurred to him. Mara had said Rikard could use his leythe-lock on the collar to track Khy. Maybe Khy hadn't run off at all.

Maybe he'd been taken.

The fact that the possibility troubled him at all was disturbing.

"...and if you're still... Jaedin?" Mara frowned at him. "You're awfully distracted this morning. Bad night?"

"The worst," he muttered.

She gave his hand a sympathetic pat and continued, "Chavi tells me the fastest way to the Fireshard from here is to take Crystal Pass. If you follow the trail just beyond the South Trade Road into the mountains, it will take you through the pass. The Fireshard stands in the valley on the other side."

He knew the route—he'd followed it once before, soon after he'd settled here. "South Trade Road... Crystal Pass... the Fireshard," he mumbled, only half his mind on her directions. The other half was still wondering what had happened to Khy. *Had* he left on his own? Or had he been taken?

Those eyes... Jaedin couldn't stop thinking about the depth of the need and the fear he'd seen in those eyes. Part of him wanted to tear out of the village right now and find Khy, wrap him up in his arms and keep him safe.

It was almost as bad as the damned voice.

"Mara," he said, frowning as another thought occurred to him, "can you have another look at that working that was laid upon me? Tell me if anything about it has changed?"

"Certainly. Come and have a seat," she said, and led him to her hearth again.

Jaedin sat while Mara sank her awareness into the leythe to examine his aura. When she emerged, her expression was very serious. "What happened?" she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“The working is gone. All traces of it. I can't even read an echo of it in the currents of the leythe, and that should not be. A working of that complexity and depth would leave some kind of impression within the leythe, but there's nothing.”

“That can't be. *Something* is still influencing me. The voice is gone, but... I still feel this... this urge to protect him.”

Mara shook her head. “Whatever you're feeling, it's not coming from any leythe-working. It's coming from your own heart, Jaedin.”

“Impossible,” he said, and got to his feet.

He'd reached the door before he felt her hand on his arm, pulling him back. He stopped and turned to face her, not wanting to see the knowing look in her eyes.

He saw nothing of the sort. Saw only concern. “Jaedin, be careful. Especially if you plan to take Khy into the Fireskye with you. Rhyx use the leythe to hunt their prey, and they're not the only things that hunt that way. Khy's power may be bound, but they'll still sense it, and as long as he's wearing that leythe-chain, he'll have no defense against them.”

He gave her a grim nod. “I'll be careful. I'm sorry I won't have time to restock your supplies before I leave.”

“Don't you worry about me. I was making my own medicines long before you settled in Rosefire. I'll manage. Take care of yourself, Jaedin. And take care of Khy.”

“I will,” he promised.

Outside again, Jaedin headed home to collect his pack. The clouds had grown darker while he'd been speaking with Mara, and he smelled rain in the air. That would make for a miserable—

He stopped in the middle of the track, frowning.

When, exactly, had he decided that he was going to chase after Khy?

No.

He wasn't going *anywhere*, damn it. The voice was gone, there was nothing driving him, nothing to tie him to the man. After what Khy had done last night, Jaedin was glad to see the back of him. There was absolutely no reason for Jaedin to go tearing off after him.

Except those eyes. The fear he'd seen in those blue depths when Khy had spoken of Rikard still made him want to hold Khy and protect him.

Jaedin shook his head hard to dislodge that thought. No, no, no. There was no room in his heart for anyone but Talon. He *wasn't* going after Khy. The man could damn well take care of himself.

Except...

Except he couldn't. It had been painfully obvious, just in the short time they'd traveled together through the Skarwood, that Khy was as helpless as a newborn babe in the wilderness.

He'd left Jaedin's cottage with nothing but the clothes on his back. He had no food, no bedroll... he didn't even have a cloak. Jaedin lifted his eyes to the heavy sky just as the first raindrops began to fall. Khy would need a cloak before too long.

Assuming he hadn't been taken by Rikard.

And if he has been taken by Rikard? What then, Jaedin? Will you go up against a powerful leythari for the sake of a man who used you to get what he wanted and then ran out on you?

With a long sigh, Jaedin trudged the remaining distance to his own cottage. He'd worry about Rikard if and when he had to. Right now, he couldn't get Khy out of his head.

He caught up the two packs he'd filled the night before, bade his home a fond farewell, and locked the door behind him.

Chapter Six

It was raining. Khy was cold, wet, and sore, but he couldn't bring himself to be miserable about any of it. The fact that he could feel anything was miraculous, and he'd take cold and wet over drugged into oblivion any day. Now that the drug Rikard had been feeding him had worn off, all of his senses were alive: colors were brighter, noises were sharper, and food had taste again.

His thoughts, which had only been able to move in tiny circles like fish trapped in a bowl, were suddenly free to roam. They might sometimes turn to dark and frightening things, but at least he had the ability to think and reason for himself once more.

The rain had started soon after sunrise, and it hadn't let up. Khy had been following the road south all morning, walking by the side of the dirt track to avoid the puddles forming in the ruts left by the wagon wheels. The way his legs hurt and his ass burned, he wasn't sure how much farther he could go without a rest. The clean breeches and tunic Mara had found for him yesterday were soaked through, and hung heavily on his slender frame.

Thinking of Mara—and then of Jaedin—made his stomach hurt. They'd both seemed genuinely concerned about him last night, and he'd repaid their kindness by... by doing whatever it was he'd done to Jaedin and then leaving the man lying on the floor of his cottage.

He stopped and turned to look back up the dirt track toward Rosefire. The little village had long since disappeared in the mist. He couldn't even see the smoke rising from the chimneys anymore.

He hoped Jaedin was all right. He'd checked the man before he'd left the cottage. Jaedin had been breathing, and he hadn't appeared to be hurt. Khy had guessed the big man would be furious when he woke, and hadn't wanted to face his wrath. Now he wondered if maybe he should have stayed until Jaedin woke up, or at least stopped and asked Mara to check on him.

Except then he would have had to explain to Mara what had happened.

Khy shook his head, cheeks burning even though there was no one to see. Done was done. He couldn't go back now. Rikard probably knew by now that Baine was dead. He'd send someone else, or worse, come and fetch Khy himself. It wouldn't take Rikard long to discover that Khy was no longer a virgin, and once he did...

Khy shuddered at the thought of the Master's rage. The more distance he could put between himself and Rikard, the better. Although if Mara was right, he wouldn't be safe until he got rid of the collar. If Rikard could use it to track him, it wouldn't matter how far or how fast he ran.

He turned to look up at the Fireskye. It was only a dull glow above the mountains through the gray curtain of the rain. The leythari Mara had spoken of might be able to help him, but Khy wasn't sure how he was going to manage the dangerous journey into the mountains when he could hardly make decent progress along a muddy dirt track. It would be weeks before the collar was removed, and that was assuming this Varian could—or would—help him.

It was going to take far too long.

He'd have to try to get the thing off himself before Rikard could track him. It would hurt—it always hurt when he touched the collar, and he'd never been able to find so much as a seam in the smooth, cold metal before the pain forced him to stop. Maybe now that he wasn't taking the medicine, his fingers would be nimble enough and his mind quick enough to figure out how to open the thing.

That decided, he started walking again, scanning the area ahead of him. The trees here didn't grow as thick and close as they did in the Skarwood, but there were still scattered patches of forest on either side of the road. Khy headed into the next one he saw, hoping to find a place to get out of the rain and see what he could do about the collar.

As he moved deeper into the trees, the heavy canopy of leaves overhead blocked some of the rain. Not that it mattered; he was already soaked through and shivering with cold. He thought longingly of the little campfire Jaedin had built the other night. Khy had no idea how to get a fire started even if he had been able to find some dry wood.

A short distance into the trees, Khy found a big pine with large, sheltering branches that swept the ground. He ducked underneath. The space was a little cramped, but mostly dry. A thick bed of pine needles covered the ground. He sat huddled in a miserable knot with his back against the trunk, wishing the rain would stop.

When he'd recovered a little from the morning's walk, Khy turned his attention to the collar around his neck. His fingers moved toward it, but he didn't touch it yet. Instead, he tried to think back to his last attempt to remove it.

He wished he could remember more clearly, but his memory, it seemed, was still a tricky thing. While the details of his life before he'd gone to the tower had come back, sharp and clear, his memories of his time with Rikard were still dim and confusing. Mara had said he might never get those memories back. Khy wasn't sure he wanted most of them back, but it would have been useful to remember what he'd already tried when he'd attempted to remove the collar.

He drew in a deep breath and lifted his hands to the jewel-studded metal. The catch would be at the back, the most difficult place for the wearer to reach. His hands shook, and his fingers brushed against the icy surface of one of the stones. Something slick and unpleasant twisted in his head. His whole body went cold in response.

Khy closed his eyes and steeled himself. His fingers scrabbled against the cool, smooth metal, seeking a clasp or a hook, anything that felt different. There was nothing. He couldn't even feel a seam where the thing might come apart. The collar was an unbroken band around his neck.

The cold inside him intensified until it became an icy burn that he could no longer ignore. Sweat broke out on his skin, and the cold radiated out from his core until it had reached every part of him.

He was running out of time. The pain would only get worse until he was forced to stop. His movements grew more frantic and less coordinated as he began to panic.

Khy gritted his teeth. He pulled and yanked at the collar, desperate to get it off and end the pain. Nothing worked, but he continued to struggle, his breath coming in choking sobs. The cold bit deep into him, burning him with every breath, every movement.

One last pull and the ice flared through him, hot and cold at the same time. Fire shot up his spine and exploded in his head. Khy's body went rigid. He screamed, and then he was falling and falling into icy blackness.

The rain made tracking difficult, though Jaedin could guess that Khy would probably avoid the Skarwood, which rather narrowed his options. North and east would both take him back into the forest, and the Fireskye blocked the way west, with no easy path into the mountains until one got beyond the South Trade Road. That left south, and the occasional boot print in the mud by the edge of the road encouraged him in thinking he'd guessed right.

By midmorning the rain became heavier and appeared to have set in for the day. The mist was so thick that the light of the Fireskye was only a sullen orange glow over the dark bulk of the mountains. Jaedin kept his eyes open, scanning both sides of the muddy road for any sign that Khy might have left it to head into the shelter of the trees.

He found a faint trail through the long, wet grass only moments before a hoarse cry issued from a thick stand of pine and oak just off the muddy track. Jaedin readied his bow and plunged into the trees, his only thought to reach Khy.

The tracks were easier to follow under the canopy of leaves, and they led him to a large pine tree. In the dry cavern formed by its sheltering branches, he found Khy face down on the ground.

There was no sign of any assailant, human or otherwise, and Khy didn't appear to be injured. When Jaedin turned him over, his eyes were open, but Khy stared right through him. The young man was shivering violently, and no wonder—his skin was icy cold, his clothing soaked through.

Jaedin dropped the packs and his bow. He gathered Khy up in his arms, wrapped them both in his own cloak, and leaned back against the trunk of the tree.

Some time passed before Khy jerked to awareness with a strangled cry. Jaedin tightened his arms around the man as he started to struggle, afraid that Khy's first instinct would be to run.

"Hush. It's all right. You're safe now."

Khy stared up at him, blinking.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Jaedin asked. "I couldn't see how you were hurt, but the way you screamed..."

"It was the collar," Khy whispered. "I tried to take it off."

"You can't, Khy. Mara said it was leythe-locked."

"I had to try. I don't want Rikard to find me."

"Mara also said Varian might be able to remove it."

"I... I don't know if I can find Varian by myself. The Fireskye is so big, and I... I don't know how to build a campfire or find food, or... or anything." Khy lowered his eyes, but Jaedin saw the pink blush staining his cheeks.

“Ah, but I do. I’ll teach you.”

“You... you...” Khy lifted his gaze once more and stared up at Jaedin with wide eyes, as if Jaedin’s presence was just now registering in his mind. His brow wrinkled in a frown. “What are you doing here?”

“Well,” Jaedin said in a gruff voice, “it occurs to me that you and I both need to go to the same place. You to get that collar removed, and me to get this infernal voice out of my head.” He wasn’t about to admit to Khy that the voice was no longer driving him, not when he could hardly admit it to himself. The last thing he wanted to do was give Khy the wrong idea. He was only offering his help out of a sense of duty. Not because... Well, he wasn’t, that was all.

“But—”

“And it seems to me that since we’re headed in the same direction, we might as well travel together.”

Khy stared up at him, frowning.

“Besides,” Jaedin said, pointing to the packs lying on the ground nearby, “you left so fast last night, you forgot your pack. Wouldn’t get far without any gear. Especially up in the Fireskye.”

Khy wasn’t at all sure what to make of Jaedin’s offer to travel with him. Not that he was complaining; with Jaedin along, things had suddenly become a lot more comfortable and a lot less frightening. There was something to eat besides the scant handful of berries Khy had thus far managed to find, and there was dry clothing and a bedroll of his own to spread beneath the boughs of the pine tree Jaedin found for them to shelter under.

They hadn’t gone very far after Jaedin had found him. Khy had been too shaky after his attempt to remove the collar, but Jaedin had insisted that they put a little more distance between themselves and Rosefire.

Khy couldn’t quite reconcile the two sides of Jaedin that he’d seen in the last day or so. When Khy had come around after his failed attempt to remove his collar, Jaedin had been holding him close, warming him with his own body heat. And yet, the big man had been furious last night when he’d accused Khy of working the leythe against him. Khy had been certain then that Jaedin would be just as glad to see the back of him.

He still wasn’t sure what had happened that night. The more he thought about it, though, the more it worried him. That light he’d seen right before

Jaedin had come after him had looked a lot like the light that Master Rikard pulled out of Khy's body during those sessions in the workroom.

The only difference was that the light he'd seen moving from himself and into Jaedin hadn't hurt the way the light in the workroom did. It had certainly done something to Jaedin, though, and Jaedin knew it.

Khy was sure the only reason Jaedin had followed him was because Jaedin believed Khy was responsible for the voice in his head.

And now that he thought about it, maybe he was.

He hadn't meant to put a voice in Jaedin's head... but then, he hadn't meant to set fire to the stable, either, and everyone had been convinced that he had.

Now, Khy lay snuggled down in the bedroll Jaedin had brought for him and listened to the big man breathe in the darkness. Jaedin had set his own bedroll on the other side of the tree from Khy. Whether that was because he was giving Khy his space or because he was wary of what Khy might do, Khy had yet to determine.

He hoped it was the former. He didn't want Jaedin to be afraid of him, didn't want *anyone* to be afraid of him.

"Jaedin?" he whispered into the night.

There was silence, then a soft grunt, followed by a quiet, "What is it, Khy?"

"About last night..." Khy swallowed hard. "I don't know what happened. I mean, it wasn't... it wasn't anything I *tried* to do, I was just... I was afraid. And I didn't want Rikard to be able to hurt me again. If I made you do something you didn't want... I mean, if it was somehow my fault, I'm sorry."

There was another long silence followed by a heavy sigh. "Thank you." Jaedin's voice sounded thick and husky in the darkness. "I... loved someone once. Loved him with every breath of my being. He was taken from me, and I... I swore I would never touch another man. What happened last night... felt like a betrayal of the worst kind."

Khy squeezed his eyes shut. He might not have meant to, but he'd done the worst thing possible to Jaedin. "I'm sorry. I didn't... I didn't mean to. I didn't know that I *could*. I thought... I thought Mara said the collar would stop me."

"Mara is a healer." Jaedin's voice was a low, comforting rumble. "She'll be the first to tell you she knows little of the leythe beyond its use for healing. I

spent ten years fighting in the north. I've seen more things done with the leythe than Mara can probably imagine."

"Do you think Varian would teach me?"

"I don't know, but I think you should ask him. It seems to me that if you possess that kind of power, you owe it to the people around you to learn how to control it."

Khy felt his face burning in the darkness. He knew Jaedin was right. He didn't want to hurt anyone else the way he'd hurt Jaedin last night. "Jaedin?" His voice sounded very small in the darkness.

"Yes, Khy?"

"Rikard was supposed to teach me, but he didn't. What if Varian is the same?"

Jaedin huffed out a soft breath. "Not everybody in the world is going to hurt you. Mara's teacher, Chavi, knows Varian, and I know Mara. She wouldn't knowingly send us into danger."

Khy didn't think she would either, not really. It was that *knowingly* part that worried him.

The rain continued on into the second day, and by afternoon, they came across a travelers' shelter set back in the trees a little way. Jaedin could tell from the way Khy moved that he was sore and nearing the end of his endurance.

"I know we've a few hours of light left," he said to Khy, "but I think I'd like to call it a day. Sleep dry tonight."

Khy gave him one of those suspicious, sideways looks. "You don't have to stop for me. I can keep going."

Jaedin raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure you can, but I can't. My boots are soggy, my clothes are damp, and I'm getting tired of being rained on. If we go on too much longer like this, I'll have moss growing between my toes. There won't be another travelers' shelter for quite a way. If we don't stop now, we'll be sleeping under a tree again."

Khy narrowed his eyes, clearly chewing over all the possible implications of Jaedin's words. Now that the leythe-bane was out of his system, the change in

Khy was nothing short of miraculous. Those intense blue eyes were clear and sharp, and missed nothing. The mind behind them was quick and bright, and Jaedin was quite sure Khy saw right through his attempts to make the journey a little easier on him.

“Besides,” Jaedin added before Khy could comment, “I’d like to take the time to put together a decent meal. You could do with a bit more meat on your bones.”

Khy shot him a scowl, but shifted his pack and started down the path that led to the shelter. “Well, we can’t have moss growing between your toes,” he said as Jaedin caught up to him. “That could be disastrous.” Jaedin was certain he saw a glint of humor in those expressive eyes, and the shadow of a grin on Khy’s face.

In the shelter, Jaedin busied himself with lighting a fire and heating some water so they could both wash up. Khy stripped out of his wet clothing as soon as the water was warm. Jaedin started to turn his back to give the young man some privacy, but stopped when the dark bruises on Khy’s hips caught his eye.

“Oh, Khy...” he murmured, before he could stop himself.

Khy turned to look at him, brow creased in a frown. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“It’s done,” Khy said, turning back to the fire. “At least Rikard will have no more use for me now.”

“Your first time shouldn’t have been that way.”

“A lot of things shouldn’t be, but they are,” was Khy’s reply. “Rikard shouldn’t have stolen the last ten years of my life, but he did.”

The bitterness in Khy’s voice cut Jaedin to the quick. He wondered if Khy had ever known kindness or pleasure, and part of him longed to show him those things. Another part of him was screaming for him to change the subject to something less dangerous. Just looking at Khy and thinking those thoughts was—

Was what?

Betrayal?

Of a man five years dead?

Jaedin cleared his throat. “Are you... can I... do you need something for pain? I should have asked before, I didn’t realize...”

Khy turned to face him again, completely unashamed—or perhaps unaware—of his nakedness. “It’s nothing,” he said with a shrug. “I’m used to pain. You hurt me a lot less than Rikard ever did.”

Jaedin winced at the thought, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from Khy’s body. The firelight shifted and flickered, dancing over his pale skin. Khy turned his attention to washing himself. Jaedin found himself helpless to do anything but watch the way Khy’s hands moved over his body, the way his wet skin glistened in the firelight...

The man was beautifully proportioned; slim, but not scrawny, with a narrow waist and lean hips. A bit on the small side, perhaps... Then again, Jaedin had always been attracted to men who were small enough to give him the illusion that they needed his protection, but strong enough not to break. The combination of strength and vulnerability that he saw in Khy was a heady mix, and more than enough to set Jaedin’s blood on fire.

Jaedin closed his eyes. He remembered only brief snatches of the night he’d taken Khy, but he was fairly certain there had been no pleasure for Khy that night. Part of him desperately wanted to make up for the pain he’d caused Khy. To show him that it didn’t have to be that way...

His cock twitched at the thought of laying Khy down across the bunk and showing him just how good it could be.

When he opened his eyes, Khy was watching him, an enigmatic half-smile playing across his face.

With a muttered curse, Jaedin headed for the door of the shelter. “Have to check the... the...” his mind stumbled, searching for some chore he could legitimately be going to do. “Pump,” he said finally, and walked out into the rainy evening.

Outside, Jaedin turned his face to the sky and let the rain cool his heated skin. The sun would be setting soon, and with the heavy cloud cover, the gray light of evening would slide quickly into night. It would be a dark one, with the fireskye shrouded by the rain.

He heard the shelter door bang shut behind him and turned to see Khy walking out into the rain, stark naked except for the jeweled collar around his neck. His eyes were fixed on Jaedin, his cock half-hard.

“Show me,” Khy said softly. “Show me what it should have been.”

“Gods...” Jaedin went hot all over.

Khy's pale skin was luminous in the dim light. He watched Jaedin with half-closed eyes. Jaedin couldn't look away. Was Khy manipulating him through the leythe? Making him want? Making him need?

Mara's words echoed in his head: *Whatever you're feeling, it's not coming from any leythe-working. It's coming from your own heart, Jaedin.*

Jaedin found himself moving slowly toward Khy. Those eyes burned him to the core, a dark fire in the misty half-light. Jaedin moved in closer, so close he could feel the heat pouring off of Khy's body and sinking into his own skin. The air was suddenly far too warm, and Jaedin hauled his own shirt over his head and flung it toward the shelter.

Khy stared up at him and licked his lips. That was all the invitation Jaedin needed. He bent to capture that sweet mouth in a possessive kiss. Khy pressed himself against Jaedin, moaning as he eagerly returned the kiss.

Not entirely unschooled, then. Jaedin found himself wondering who had tasted Khy before he had. His fingers threaded through Khy's hair, and he pulled the man's head back, exposing his throat so he could leave his mark there. The metal collar hampered his progress, so Jaedin skipped down to Khy's chest. He flicked his tongue over a nipple, hot blood filling his cock at the sound of Khy's husky groan. When he drew the nipple into his mouth, Khy ground himself against Jaedin's thigh.

That was all Jaedin could take. He dropped to his knees at Khy's feet so he could press a kiss to one of the dark bruises he'd left on Khy's hip. Khy stared down at him, eyes wide, body trembling.

Want or fear?

Jaedin couldn't say which, wasn't sure he wanted to know, given what he remembered of his own role in Khy's first and only experience. Well, he'd make up for that now.

Raindrops rolled across Khy's bare skin, tracing glistening paths down his body. Jaedin chased one all the way down Khy's belly with his tongue.

Khy let out a moan. His hands settled on Jaedin's shoulders. "Please..." he whispered.

It would take a stronger man than Jaedin to resist that breathless plea. Jaedin lapped at the head of Khy's cock and listened to his sharp intake of breath, felt the tremor that went through Khy's body. When he took the whole slender length into his mouth, Khy's hands tightened convulsively on his shoulders, fingers digging in hard.

Jaedin looked up to see those eyes staring down at him, hot with need. Khy's hips jerked and he thrust himself deeper into Jaedin's mouth. In response, Jaedin lifted his hands to Khy's hips, holding him still while he pulled back slowly, exploring the length of him with lips and tongue.

The moans, sighs, and incoherent words falling from Khy's lips sent lightning racing through him. Jaedin freed one of his hands to loosen his own breeches and stroke himself as he pleased Khy.

Khy was too far gone to notice. His grip on Jaedin's shoulders was hard enough to leave bruises and his hips jerked frantically as he fucked Jaedin's mouth.

When Khy finally stilled and came in Jaedin's mouth, his strangled cry of pleasure shattered the silence around them. Jaedin held him tight, half-supporting him as the force of Khy's climax sent shudders rippling through his slender frame. The tremors finally ebbed away, and Khy's body relaxed and melted against him.

Jaedin pulled him down in the wet grass beside him. He groaned as Khy pushed aside the fabric of his breeches and wrapped his hand around Jaedin's rigid, straining cock. Intense blue eyes locked onto his, and Jaedin found himself caught up in a maelstrom of heat and need such as he hadn't experienced since... since...

He came with a hoarse shout, the climax so intense the world turned white. The next thing he was aware of was cool, wet grass against his back and the warm, gentle fall of rain mixing with sweat and trickling over his skin.

A hand lazily explored the lines of his body, mapping the smooth swells of muscle across his chest. Jaedin looked down at the man beside him, expecting to see Talon's white-blond head. The reality of Khy lying beside him, exploring his body with hands that seemed to grow more certain with every stroke, sent a sharp stab of guilt through him.

Khy lay in the grass next to Jaedin. He felt sleepy and relaxed, and didn't even mind the fact that he was soaking wet again. The rain was warm, and the body next to him was fascinating. He slid a hand over the slick skin of Jaedin's chest, feeling the hard muscles flexing as Jaedin shifted.

He wasn't sure what it was that had possessed him to offer himself like he had. Maybe it was because Jaedin's mouth said one thing, but his eyes said something else entirely. Maybe it was because the way Jaedin had looked at

him in the shelter had started Khy's own blood racing, and his own need to be touched had pushed aside all sense. Or maybe it was just that Khy knew what it was to be alone in the world, and he'd wanted to comfort Jaedin, maybe ease that loneliness, even if it was just for a little while.

The smooth curves of muscle he'd been exploring suddenly tensed under his hand, and Khy looked up to see Jaedin staring at him with wide eyes. "No... gods... Talon..." The words were harsh and broken, as if they'd been torn from Jaedin's throat, and the big man rolled away from Khy and scrambled to his feet. He bolted straight for the shelter, leaving Khy naked and alone in the long, wet grass.

Khy waited a little before venturing back inside, giving Jaedin time to gather himself. When the growling of his stomach and the rapidly cooling air finally drove him in, Jaedin was busy at the hearth, preparing something for them to eat. Khy dried himself off in silence and slipped into clean clothing from his pack. The wet things he'd removed earlier were already hanging near the hearth to dry along with Jaedin's clothes.

"Thank you," Khy said.

"For what?" Jaedin's voice was gruff, and he didn't turn from the pot he was stirring.

"Giving me a good memory. So little of what I remember is good."

Jaedin twisted around to stare at him. "You're so like him in some ways, it's unreal," he muttered, then turned back to the fire.

"Your Talon?"

Jaedin grunted in reply.

"I'm sorry," Khy said quietly. "Sorry that you lost him. Sorry for your pain."

There was no response from Jaedin but for a tightening of his shoulders.

Supper was a silent affair. Several times during the meal, Khy caught Jaedin watching him, but every time their eyes met, Jaedin would look quickly away.

After they'd eaten, Jaedin rolled himself up in his bedroll and pressed himself close to the shelter wall, his back to the room. He'd left enough space on the double bunk for Khy, but Khy spread his own bedroll on the floor, not wanting to intrude or encroach.

The silence in the tiny shelter was so thick Jaedin could hear every shift of Khy's body as he settled himself on his bedroll. Jaedin felt a little bit guilty when he realized that Khy was going to sleep on the floor. He didn't feel quite guilty enough to invite him up onto the bed, though.

The last thing he wanted to do was encourage the man.

Well... the last thing his *conscience* wanted, at least. His body wanted something else entirely. Just remembering the way Khy had responded to his touch made it difficult to focus on anything other than burying himself to the balls in that tight little ass.

Jaedin shifted, uncomfortably aroused.

Damned if he was going to do anything about it, though.

Chasing after Khy had been a mistake. He should have stayed home and left well enough alone. Once the voice was gone, there had been no reason for him to pursue Khy, and he found himself wishing that he hadn't.

Except... he couldn't stop seeing Khy lying helpless under that pine tree. Couldn't stop thinking about the relief and the gratitude in those deep blue eyes when Khy had finally understood that Jaedin was serious about coming with him and helping him find Varian.

Khy needed him.

The thought of what Rikard might do to him if he fell back into the leythari's hands gave Jaedin the cold shivers. Khy would be defenseless against Rikard. Even if Khy did have some power over the leythe, he was, by his own admission, completely untrained.

Jaedin couldn't desert him now, though he wished he could. That intoxicating mixture of strength and vulnerability that he saw in Khy disturbed his hard-won equilibrium. He didn't *want* to find Khy attractive or irresistible, and it infuriated him that he did.

He shouldn't feel this way, not when he'd sworn he wouldn't. His guilt at betraying Talon's memory the way he had was almost overwhelming. The first time, back in Rosefire, it could be argued that he hadn't had a choice. But what had happened tonight, out in the rain...

That had been entirely the result of his own desires.

He could have refused Khy.

Should have.

Jaedin squeezed his eyes shut and reached for that quiet well of inner strength that had gotten him through the worst of the times after Talon had died in his arms.

This was no different. A bump in the road, that was all it was. His strength and his resolve would serve him as they always did. He could turn off that fierce urge he felt to protect Khy, ignore the need and the fire he saw in those eyes. He could cloak himself in an icy veneer of indifference, and keep his wounded heart locked away from further hurt.

He would see Khy safely to Varian, and then he would turn around and head straight home to Rosefire. He would settle back into the quiet routines of the life he'd built for himself, and find his precious balance once more.

Alone.

That decided, Jaedin finally closed his eyes and drifted off into a fitful, restless sleep.

Chapter Seven

It took them three more days to reach the South Trade Road. Half a day beyond that, they found the trail into the Fireskye that Mara had spoken of. At first, the going was easy, but by late in the second day, the gentle slope of the foothills gave way to steeper stretches. The path was still clear, but they were in the mountains now, and the constant uphill hiking was a lot more strenuous than anything Khy was used to doing. He hated the fact that every time they stopped, it was for him. Jaedin hadn't complained, not once, but Khy knew he was slowing them down.

Khy hoped they would take a break soon, but there was still plenty of light left, and he didn't want to be the reason for stopping this time. He pushed himself until his legs were burning, every muscle screaming for a respite, however brief. When the trail finally leveled out for a short stretch, Khy stumbled to a stop to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his brow. He stared up at the shimmering sheets of light that hung over the mountain peaks.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Jaedin said softly.

Khy tore his gaze away from the fiery light to scan the outline of the peaks ahead. "It is. I thought we'd see the Fireshard by now."

"It's behind Crystal Peak at the moment." Jaedin lifted a hand to point out the dark mountain that dominated the view. "It lies on the other side of Crystal Pass. You won't be able to see it until we reach the top of the pass."

The mountain loomed over them, tall and imposing, the sheer rock faces of the higher reaches clearly visible in the afternoon sun. Khy swallowed hard. "Will we have to climb all the way to the top?" he asked faintly.

The warm weight of Jaedin's hand came down on his shoulder. Khy shot a sideways glance at him. Jaedin hadn't touched him at all since that rainy evening in the travelers' shelter. Khy was sorry now that he'd gone to him the way he had. The things they'd done in the rain had upset Jaedin, and Khy had no idea how to make it right between them.

The big man met his gaze and snatched his hand away, turning his face back to the mountains. "See that gap there, between Crystal Peak and Mordin's Tooth?"

"I see it," Khy said, impressed that Jaedin knew the names of the mountains.

“That’s Crystal Pass, and that’s as high as we’ll need to go. This trail will take us right to it. It will be a long climb, but we won’t need to scale sheer rock surfaces or cling to the edges of cliffs, if that’s what you fear.”

“You’ve made the journey before?”

“I’ve hunted in these mountains before, and I’ve been as far as the top of Crystal Pass once, a few years ago.”

“How long will it take us to get there?”

Jaedin shrugged, and turned to give Khy an appraising look. “You’re getting stronger by the day. A week, perhaps?”

Khy frowned. “I’m slowing you down. You could probably be there in a few days if it wasn’t for me.”

“Perhaps, but that isn’t the point. We both need to get there in one piece.”

“Do you think Rikard could have followed us?”

“Rikard may not even know that the men he sent after you are dead yet.”

“He knows,” Khy said softly. “I’m sure of it. He knows everything that happens in the Skarwood.”

Jaedin’s pale eyes narrowed as he studied Khy. “Would he come after you himself?”

Khy considered that. Would he? He couldn’t imagine Master Rikard braving the mountains with only a backpack. The Master seemed far too fond of his comforts to undertake a difficult journey into the wilderness. When Master Rikard did leave the tower, he traveled by carriage. “I don’t know,” Khy said finally. “If he wanted me back badly enough, he might.”

Jaedin’s hand dropped to his bow, and he stroked the smooth wood, his expression hardening into something like grim determination. “Then we’ll be ready for him. The nice thing about leythari is that they bleed and die like anyone else.”

Khy was about to reply when he heard a low growl coming from behind him. He spun around to see a huge, black creature stalking across the rocky ground toward them. It had the look of a wolf, with a long, pointed muzzle, but it moved with a slow, deliberate grace that made him think of a cat. “Jaedin—”

“I see it.” Jaedin’s voice was calm.

A moment later, Khy heard the hiss of an arrow as it shot past him. The animal jerked when it hit, then let out a scream and sprang. Khy didn't even have time to think before it was upon him. He put his hands up out of instinct, but he wasn't strong enough to push the creature away. The impact knocked the breath out of him, and he found himself flat on his back with a heavy, snarling animal on top of him.

Khy had only a moment to see the wicked, curved claws slashing through the air toward him. He screamed, and the world went white and then red.

Jaedin watched in horror as the rhyx shifted to the left at the same moment he let his arrow fly. The shot went wide, the arrow burying itself in the beast's shoulder instead of its chest. The rhyx screamed in fury and charged onto the trail, leaping upon Khy with enough force to crush him.

Khy put his hands up in a futile attempt to ward off the animal. Jaedin readied another arrow, torn between taking careful aim and not looking too closely. The last thing he wanted to see was the rhyx tearing Khy apart.

The arrow buried itself in the creature's other shoulder. Jaedin pulled another arrow from his quiver, then stopped, staring, as the rhyx began to glow. It lifted its muzzle to the sky and let out a bone-chilling cry that sounded more like pain than rage or hunger. Every hair on the animal's body stood on end. It let out a final whimper, shuddered, and collapsed on top of Khy.

Under the heap of black fur, Khy lay very still.

Jaedin dropped his bow with a sob and hurried to Khy's side. It took all his strength to shove the animal's body off of Khy. Jaedin pressed his ear against Khy's chest, listening for his heart. He finally heard it, slow and steady. He patted Khy down, checking for broken bones, and when he found no sign of injury, gathered the man against him and held him.

The thought that he'd nearly lost Khy today was terrifying in a way that it shouldn't have been. Something in his chest that had been tight and painful for far too long loosened a little, and Jaedin blinked back the tears that stung his eyes.

Khy's eyes fluttered open, and he stared up at Jaedin, a small smile quirking his mouth. "This is getting to be a habit," he said in a shaky voice. "What am I going to do when you're not here to rescue me?"

Jaedin shook his head. "I didn't rescue you." His voice was rough with emotions that he couldn't even begin to sort out. "You... you saved yourself. I don't know what you did, but... the rhyx started to glow and then it just... collapsed on top of you."

"Ah," Khy said with a groan. "No wonder I feel like I've been trampled."

Jaedin took a few deep breaths and tried to pull himself together. They weren't out of danger yet. Rhyx tended to hunt in packs. The fact that their attacker had been a lone male was somewhat reassuring; given the time of year and the size of the animal, Jaedin thought it likely that he'd been roaming alone in search of a pack to join. All the same, a defensible campsite would make him feel better.

When he thought he could trust his voice again, Jaedin said, "We'd best stop for the night." The rocky area the rhyx had emerged from was bordered by sheer rock walls. Jaedin scanned the rough stone, noting a dark pool of shadow that might be a cave. "Do you think you can stand?"

With Jaedin's help, Khy struggled to his feet. He stretched and twisted, testing the integrity of bones, muscles, and joints, then said, "I think I'll live. I'll probably be bruised from head to toe tomorrow, though."

The shadow Jaedin had spied turned out to be a shallow cave, which proved to be the best campsite he could find that didn't involve making Khy walk any farther today. In the wooded area across the trail, Jaedin found enough deadfall to build a campfire. Once it was burning, he pulled a pouch from his pack and tossed a handful of herbs into the flames.

Khy wrinkled his nose at the acrid scent. "What is *that*?"

"Up north, they call it rhyx-bane," Jaedin said with a grin. "It's a mixture of dried herbs—mostly tansin leaves, blueflower and sweet-seed. They say rhyx can't stand the smell. When I was fighting in the north, we used it when we camped anywhere near the mountains. We'd set up braziers all around the camp to burn the stuff."

"Did it work?"

"Maybe," Jaedin said with a shrug. "I don't recall any of our camps being attacked by rhyx... but then, rhyx tend to avoid large groups of humans as a matter of course, so who knows? You'll get used to the smell after a while."

Jaedin didn't want to leave Khy alone for the time it would take to hunt, so he dug some of the dried trail rations from his pack while Khy spread out the

bedrolls and settled himself down on his. Jaedin noticed that he left plenty of space between them.

After they'd eaten, Jaedin sat back to watch the fire. The sun soon disappeared behind Crystal Peak, leaving only the glow of the Fireskye and their small campfire to chase away the shadows.

"I felt it this time," Khy said.

"Felt what?"

"The... the leythe, I think. I felt it moving through me, and I saw light moving out of me when that—that *thing*—landed on top of me."

Jaedin frowned. If Khy was able to feel the leythe moving through him, then either Mara had guessed wrong about the collar's function, or it wasn't working properly. If what had happened to the rhyx was any example of Khy's strength, Jaedin shuddered to think what else he might be capable of. Getting Khy to Varian suddenly seemed a lot more urgent than it had before.

"I thought a rhyx would be bigger," Khy said. "The stories the monks told made them sound huge."

"Your monks probably wanted to stop adventurous young boys from braving the mountains in search of trouble," Jaedin told him. "That was a young male, though, not yet full grown. An adult would have been half as big again."

"Why do you think it went for me instead of you?"

"Rhyx use the leythe to hunt their prey. I'm told they prefer leythari."

"Ah." Khy gave him a shy grin. "That explains it. If it wasn't for that, you'd probably make a much better meal than me."

Jaedin raised an eyebrow. "I don't know about that... even if you didn't taste of the leythe, it might have decided you looked tender and sweet."

Khy snorted. "Easy prey, more like." He shuddered, then frowned again. "These things with the leythe seem to happen whenever I'm scared. Back in Rosefire, when Baine and his men attacked. And then that night... when I... when I forced you." He ducked his head, but not before Jaedin saw the pink stain creeping across his cheeks. "I was so afraid that Rikard would find me. And then when that thing came at me this afternoon, I thought I was dead. I don't think I've ever been so scared."

“Did things like that ever happen before you went to Rikard?” Jaedin asked.

“No. Well... maybe when I set fire to the stable.”

“Were you afraid then?”

Khy's eyes became distant. “I... no. I was angry.” He ducked his head again, and Jaedin saw the pink blush on his cheeks darkening. “Arin... he kissed a girl. I thought... I thought he cared about me, thought I was special, but... I guess I was just someone to pass the time with.”

“Did you see the light then?”

“I don't remember any light, but... but someone must have seen something. That was why they sent me to Rikard in the first place.”

“But instead of teaching you to control it, he put that collar on you and drugged you into slavery.” A slow burn started in Jaedin's belly at the thought of all that Khy had endured at Rikard's hands. “If I ever get my hands on him...”

Khy looked away. “I was stupid. If I'd understood what he was doing, I'd have run. He told me the collar would prevent any accidents, and the medicine was to protect me. That was all he ever said about it. Once I started taking the medicine, it was so hard to think that I never questioned anything.”

“Khy... it wasn't your fault,” Jaedin said softly. “How could you have known what he would do?”

“I don't know. I feel like... like I should have. It seems so obvious now, but at the time everything was so shadowy and hazy. I knew something was wrong... but I couldn't hold onto my thoughts long enough to figure out what. And... it didn't seem to matter.”

“That was the leythe-bane.”

“The first time it wore off... Master Rikard was gone. Seb and Nida were supposed to watch me, but they had to leave, too. I was alone and I was supposed to take the medicine before bed, but I forgot. When I woke up, it was like everything up to that point had been a bad dream. I could think again, and I knew I had to get away. When Baine caught me in Rosefire... that's when things started happening.” He glanced up at Jaedin. “I'm sorry. About the voice in your head. When we find Varian, I... I'll ask him if he can teach me how to get rid of it for you. If he can't, then I'll just have to find someone who can. I promise I'll do whatever it takes to put it right.”

Jaedin's conscience sent a sharp twinge straight to his gut. "I... the voice is gone, Khy. I should have told you before. It's been gone since that night in Rosefire."

"It's *gone*?"

"When I woke up that morning and found you'd run off, the voice was gone, too. Mara checked. She couldn't find any trace of the leythe-working."

"Then..." Khy frowned at him. "Why come after me at all?"

In answer, Jaedin shifted closer to the bedrolls, leaned forward, and pressed a gentle kiss to Khy's lips. When he drew back, those intense blue eyes were fixed on him, hungry and full of fire.

"Show me?" Khy whispered.

That was all the invitation Jaedin needed. A slow, lazy heat rolled through his body at the thought of all the things he could show Khy. He pushed the man down on the bedroll, hauled off his own shirt, and bundled it up so he could slip it beneath Khy's head.

Khy stared up at him, a glint of amusement in those deep blue eyes. "You taking care of me?" he asked.

"After your adventure with the rhyx, I thought you might need a bit of coddling," Jaedin said, leaning over him to kiss him.

"I don't *need* it," Khy said against his mouth. "But I might like it."

Jaedin took his time undressing Khy. He unlaced the shirt and laid it open, then bent to flick his tongue over first one nipple and then the other.

Khy's eyes drifted shut, and he let his breath out in a soft moan. "Gods... Jaedin..."

The breeches were next. Jaedin pulled them down over Khy's hips, freeing his already hard cock. When he had Khy naked, he paused for a moment, drinking in the sight of his lover lying ready for him.

His lover...

Talon had been his lover for so long... but now Khy stared back at him, eyes glazed with desire, and there was no room in Jaedin's thoughts for Talon. All Jaedin could think of was how close he'd come to losing Khy today.

Jaedin stripped off the rest of his own clothing and lay down beside Khy, taking him into his arms and pulling him close. Skin on skin, heat on heat.

The moment Jaedin began exploring Khy's body with hands and mouth, Khy turned to liquid flame in his arms, hot and writhing, crying out with every touch, every stroke. Jaedin had never had such a responsive lover. Khy's moans and whimpers of pleasure quickly drove Jaedin's own need to the breaking point.

It wasn't long before he rose up on his knees and positioned himself between Khy's legs. He fumbled in his pack for a jar of salve to grease himself up with. Khy's eyes were wide and hot as he watched Jaedin slick the salve over his cock.

Those expressive eyes grew even wider when Jaedin slipped a slick finger into him. Khy moaned and squirmed, pushing against Jaedin's hand.

When Jaedin added a second finger and brushed against the spot he knew would drive Khy wild, Khy did not disappoint. He arched off the bedding and let out a keening cry that trailed off into incoherent words.

Jaedin decided that Khy was more than ready. He lined himself up and eased himself into Khy's body. Khy's hands clenched the bedding beneath him, and his head thrashed back and forth. Jaedin struggled to keep his eyes open, wanting to see every shift of expression on Khy's face.

When he'd pushed himself all the way into Khy, every instinct screamed at him to move. Jaedin forced himself to be still, to let Khy get used to him. He'd hurt Khy that night in Rosefire, and he was determined to make up for the pain he'd caused. This time, it would be slow and easy. This time, Khy would enjoy the long slide into ecstasy, and Jaedin would have the pleasure of watching him come apart.

"Please... please, Jaedin... please," Khy begged.

Jaedin trembled with the effort of keeping his movements slow and careful. With gritted teeth, he pulled back and then thrust deep. Khy pushed back to meet him, groaning as their bodies met. One hand crept down to stroke his rigid cock. Jaedin pushed Khy's hand away and replaced it with his own. Every stroke had Khy bucking against him and crying out. Jaedin's own control began to slip as he watched the man beneath him slowly come undone.

A few firm strokes and Khy came in his hand, a hoarse cry tearing from his throat as he let go. That tight heat squeezing and stroking him as Khy shuddered in the throes of orgasm set off Jaedin's own climax. Bright white stars exploded with every pulse of pleasure.

When it was over, it was all Jaedin could do not to collapse on top of Khy. He rolled to the side instead and pulled Khy into his arms to hold him.

Khy seemed to like being held. He pressed gentle kisses to Jaedin's neck and face, then snuggled himself as close to Jaedin as he could get, closed his eyes, and let out a contented sigh.

That night, after Khy drifted off to sleep, Jaedin lay staring into the flickering firelight with Khy warm and alive in his arms, and bade Talon a last good-bye.

Chapter Eight

The approach to Crystal Pass was far more beautiful than Jaedin remembered it. He'd only been this way once before, nearly five years ago, and guessed that his sense of wonder must have been dulled by grief.

As the way grew steeper, a sheer rock wall rose on their left. The dark stone was shot through with veins of brilliantly-colored crystal that glistened in the morning sunlight. Khy stopped to trace a line of sparkling emerald-green with his finger.

"It's so smooth," he said, glancing back at Jaedin. "You'd think it'd be all dirty and weathered, but it looks so clean and bright."

Jaedin raised his own hand to brush his fingertips over a dark, ruby-red band, too high for Khy to reach. "Some of these veins of crystal even glow at night."

Khy stared up at him, eyes wide. "I'd like to see that."

"We'll try to make camp close to some of the exposed veins," Jaedin said with a smile.

As the morning wore on, Jaedin noticed that Khy seemed to be having more difficulty keeping up than usual. Jaedin made no comment, but slowed his pace accordingly. Toward midday, the path leveled out for a short stretch, and Khy stopped and leaned against a boulder. He looked pale and drawn enough to worry Jaedin.

"Khy? Are you all right?"

Khy lifted his head, brow creased in a frown, eyes unfocused. "I feel funny..." he said. His words sounded slurred and dull, like they had when he'd been under the influence of leythe-bane.

"Funny how?" Illness was the first thought that came to Jaedin's mind, though it wasn't the right season for mountain fever.

"In my head," Khy said, waving a hand about his face. "It feels like... pressure. Something building up inside me. Like a storm, maybe, only..."

Jaedin glanced at the sky. It was a clear lavender-blue, though there was no guarantee it would stay that way for long. The high concentration of leythe energy in the mountains made the weather tricky and unpredictable. The fair weather they were enjoying now could change in the blink of an eye. Jaedin

bent to press his cheek to Khy's forehead. His skin felt cool and dry. "You don't feel feverish," he said.

Khy rubbed his cheek against Jaedin's and leaned into him, wrapping his arms around Jaedin's waist. In response, Jaedin drew him closer and stroked Khy's back in soothing circles. He liked having Khy in his arms as much as Khy seemed to like being there.

Since the night Jaedin had said his last good-bye to Talon and welcomed Khy into his bed and his heart, Khy had quickly worked his way under Jaedin's skin in a way that would have left him feeling angry and resentful only a week ago. Now, he couldn't deny the fact that having Khy in his life felt right. Khy filled a space in Jaedin's heart that had been empty for far too long. Talon would never be replaced or forgotten, but Jaedin had found that his heart was big enough to hold his feelings for both of them. He would always treasure his memories of Talon, but he could imagine building a life with Khy.

He thought, perhaps, that Talon would approve.

"What if it's Rikard?" Khy whispered, a tremor running through his slender frame. "Mara said he could use his leythe-lock to find me. What if he can use it to work the leythe on me, too?"

"If it is Rikard, we'll deal with him." Jaedin tried to sound confident, though he wasn't at all certain of his ability to protect Khy from Rikard. He'd seen firsthand what a powerful leythari could do on the battlefields of Vakarra, during the long civil war that had raged in the north. If Rikard's power was of that caliber, they were both in trouble.

Khy pulled back a little and stared up at him. It was clear from his expression that Khy harbored the same doubts. Instead of voicing them, he gave Jaedin a small, sad smile.

Jaedin unhooked the waterskin from his pack and offered it to Khy, who took a few sips. "That's better," Khy said, handing him back the waterskin. "We can go on now."

"We can stop for the night if you're not feeling well," Jaedin said.

"I'm fine." There was an underlying note of stubbornness in Khy's voice. "We need to keep moving. The sooner we find Varian and get this damned collar off of me, the happier I'll be. The back of my neck keeps prickling, like somebody's sneaking up behind me."

As the sun rose higher in the sky and the day dragged on, Khy found it harder and harder to hide his discomfort from Jaedin. What had started as an uncomfortable pressure flickering at the edges of his awareness was now too intense to ignore. Something was wrong, and Khy feared that Rikard might be the source of it.

The path grew steeper, and it took all of Khy's strength just to stay on his feet. He longed to stop and lie down, but he dared not suggest it. The worry he could see creasing Jaedin's brow would have Jaedin stopping for the night, and that was far too dangerous. Rikard was out there somewhere, Khy was certain of it. The thought of running into the leythari he had once called *Master* struck a chord of terror deep in his heart.

When he'd first escaped the tower, that terror would have been solely for himself. Now, he was far more concerned about what Rikard might do to Jaedin. Stopping was simply not an option. Khy's world narrowed until all his attention was focused on the next step, and then the next.

A twist of green light writhed along the trail in front of him and then winked out. Khy stopped, blinking. Was this some trick of Rikard's? He glanced back over his shoulder. There was no sign of anyone on the trail behind them, but the back of his neck was prickling again, and he couldn't help but feel vulnerable and exposed. He wanted something solid at his back, and maybe a weapon in his hand, even though he didn't know how to use one.

"Khy? Are you sure you're all right? We can stop if you need."

"I'm fine." It was all he dared say. He didn't trust his voice not to convey his distress.

Jaedin's eyes narrowed as he studied Khy's face. Under his scrutiny, Khy tried to relax his features and loosen his shoulders. Finally, Jaedin gave a little shake of his head and turned to survey the path ahead. "It's all right to say if you need to stop."

In answer, Khy started off up the trail. He kept his eyes on the ground and steadfastly ignored the sinuous wisps of light that circled around him. Jaedin made no comment about them, so Khy wasn't sure if they were a normal part of the strangeness of Crystal Pass, or if Jaedin just couldn't see them. He decided it was best to keep his mouth shut. The last thing he wanted to do was give Jaedin yet another reason to stop and make camp early.

His determination to show no weakness lasted only until the pressure in his head increased to the point of pain. Every step became a fight. Khy was about

to suggest that maybe they should take a break after all, when Jaedin suddenly stopped and pointed to a wide cleft in the rock wall running alongside the trail.

Khy took the opportunity to sag against Jaedin. The big man's arm went around him and supported him, and Khy gratefully leaned into him and let Jaedin take some of his weight. The pressure in his head was almost unbearable now, and the lights swirled around him constantly. He caught glimpses of things moving within the light, twisting forms he couldn't quite identify. He followed a bright swath of blue with his eyes, squinting as he tried to make sense of the sinuous shapes writhing within it. It almost looked like—

“Khy? Khy, what's wrong?” The urgency in Jaedin's voice shook him back to reality and the path in front of him.

“It hurts,” Khy said between shallow, panting breaths. “All the time. In my head. It feels like something inside me is breaking. And the light is everywhere, swirling around me. Don't you see it?”

“The only lights I see are the sun and the Fireskye,” Jaedin said, giving Khy a dubious look.

Khy shivered and backed away a little, frowning as he cast his gaze about. Why couldn't Jaedin see the lights? Was Rikard doing something to him through the collar? Working the leythe to make him sick or mad?

Jaedin peered into the crevice in the rock beside them. “This looks clean and dry, and it doesn't look like it goes too far back. We'll have to sleep close, but I think it'll do.” When Khy didn't say anything, Jaedin added gruffly, “Gave my ankle a bit of twist back there. I need to stop, even if you don't.”

Khy barely heard him. He was transfixed by the colors pouring off of Jaedin, rippling and shimmering in the air around him. It looked almost as if the Fireskye had come down and buried itself inside him. As Khy watched, a snake-like shape, clear as glass, glided through the air and wrapped itself around Jaedin. Khy caught glimpses of sinuous coils, wicked claws, and sharp, crystalline teeth. When the creature dove through Jaedin's body as if it wasn't even there, Khy let out a shout of warning.

“What? What's wrong?” Jaedin asked quickly.

The creature was gone, but the light inside Jaedin burned so bright Khy couldn't bear to look at it. He closed his eyes and whimpered.

Jaedin wasn't sure what to do for Khy, other than pulling him into the dubious shelter of the crevice and making him rest. There was no sign of fever or sickness, but by the time the sun began to sink, Khy was hallucinating badly. He shivered in Jaedin's arms, speaking to voices Jaedin couldn't hear, and shying away from things Jaedin couldn't see. His periods of lucidity had become shorter and less frequent even in the short time since they'd stopped.

Jaedin guessed it might have something to do with Rikard. When a cloaked, hooded figure appeared out of the twilight shadows and filled the entrance to the narrow cleft in which they'd taken shelter, he was certain of it.

"Get back, leythari," Jaedin said, edging forward to place himself between Khy and any threat the figure might pose. "You'll not have him without a fight."

He was answered by a chuckle. The man pushed back the hood of his cloak to reveal long blond hair. The rest of his features were difficult to make out in the fading light. "I'm no leythari, though if I wanted him, I could take him from you without a fight. My name is Tor, and I'm here to help you, Jaedin. Varian asked me to guide you to safety. There's a leythe-storm coming, although I see that Khy is already well aware of that. I've a shielded shelter prepared. Come. It isn't far."

Jaedin stared up at him with narrowed eyes. "How do I know you're not one of Rikard's men? Or Rikard himself?"

"Ask Khy," Tor said.

Jaedin glanced back at Khy, who had stopped shivering and was blinking up at the man with more awareness in his eyes than Jaedin had seen since they'd stopped.

"He's not Rikard," Khy whispered, edging forward until he was beside Jaedin.

"Be sure, Khy," Jaedin murmured. "It could be both of our lives if you're wrong."

"If he is Rikard, it's already both of our lives," Khy said. "I can't fight him and neither can you. He doesn't feel like Rikard, though."

Tor merely waited in silence for Jaedin to decide. Before Jaedin could make up his mind, Khy went rigid beside him, then shuddered. His body was suddenly rocked with violent convulsions, and Jaedin could do nothing but pull Khy against him and hold on tight.

When Khy finally went limp against Jaedin's chest, Tor said quietly, "We need to get him shielded before it's too late. The storm is building quickly. Soon it will break, and he will have no defense against it. Neither will you. We need to be inside before that happens. I don't have the power to protect either of you out here."

The fact that this Tor seemed to have some idea of what was wrong with Khy was what finally decided him. That, and Khy's apparent conviction that Tor had nothing to do with Rikard. He lifted Khy in his arms and followed Tor farther up the steep incline. They hadn't been going long when Tor stopped and indicated a dark hole in the rock face. Its edges were too smooth, too perfect, to be natural. Jaedin peered into the blackness, still not entirely convinced that Tor meant them no harm.

"If I'd wanted to harm you, I would not have gone to all this trouble," Tor said. "Come. Khy is in pain, and it isn't much farther. He'll be much more comfortable once we're safely in the shelter."

With a sigh, Jaedin shifted Khy's weight a little and followed Tor into the darkness. The air grew thick, and a strange, tingling sensation shivered over Jaedin's skin. It felt almost as if he were passing through a barrier of some kind.

Between one step and the next, a warm, yellow glow enveloped them. Jaedin found himself in a small, round cavern. The stone floor was unnaturally smooth and free of debris. In the center of the cavern was the strangest looking fire he'd ever seen, made of a pile of ordinary gray stones topped with a crown of golden flames.

Near the fire was a nest of cushions covered with blankets.

"Lay him here and cover him," Tor said. "He feels the cold burn of the leythe deep in his bones."

Jaedin set Khy down gently. Khy opened his eyes and gazed up at him, his expression dazed and confused. "What... where...?"

"You're safe now," Jaedin said. He eased off Khy's boots and covered him with a blanket.

"I'm so cold," Khy said in a shaky voice.

"It's the leythe-storm," Tor said. "Leythari are particularly vulnerable to its effects." He shrugged out of his cloak and Jaedin noted the long sword belted at

his hip. The man was built like a warrior, and moved with the same easy grace as the most skilled swordsmen Jaedin had known in the army.

Tor crossed to the far side of the cavern where crates, packs, and waterskins were piled against the smooth, stone wall. He returned with a wooden cup, which he handed to Jaedin. "If you can get him to drink this, it will help."

Jaedin sniffed at the stuff. The smell was familiar. He recognized it as a drug that the healers of Rhane's Raiders gave to their own leythari when they'd overextended themselves. Satisfied that Tor wasn't attempting to poison Khy, he slid an arm beneath Khy's shoulders and helped him sit and drink the stuff.

When Khy had finished the drink, he curled on his side, as close to Jaedin as he could get. He fell asleep quickly. Jaedin stayed beside him, stroking Khy's back and studying Tor through lowered lashes.

Tor set a pot on top of the stones, then settled himself across the fire from them, as if he was well aware of Jaedin's lingering uncertainty. Calm, silver-gray eyes settled upon Jaedin. "Ask your questions," Tor said. "I'll answer the ones I can."

"You said Varian sent you," Jaedin said.

"He did."

"How did he know we were coming?"

Tor shrugged. "He reads the currents of the leythe. He sensed the storm building and knew you would be in danger."

"Who are you? His... his apprentice?"

Tor's lips quirked in a wry grin. "His conscience, more like."

Jaedin frowned. "If Varian already knows we're coming... does he also know why?"

"Probably. He sees much that is hidden from human eyes."

"He's not human?" Jaedin asked, his frown deepening as he wondered just what they had gotten themselves into. If this Varian proved to be an enemy, they might have been better off taking their chances with Rikard.

"He's human. When he needs to be."

"And when he doesn't?"

Tor shrugged again. "Then he is the breath of the stones, the blood of the earth, the soul of the stars."

Jaedin snorted. "You make about as much sense as any leythari I've ever met. Half mad, the lot of you."

Tor gave him an enigmatic smile, but said nothing.

"Will he help Khy?" Jaedin asked quietly.

"He will try. But in the end it will be Khy who helps Khy." And that was all that Tor would say on the matter.

When the contents of the pot had heated to Tor's satisfaction, he served Jaedin a bowl of thick stew. After they had eaten, they roused Khy, and Jaedin fed him small bits of meat and vegetables. Khy was dazed and half-asleep, chewing and swallowing when told. As soon as he'd eaten enough to satisfy Jaedin, he drifted back to sleep.

"We might as well sleep, too," Tor said once Khy was settled. "The storm will last far into the night, but it should be safe to continue on in the morning."

"What about Khy? Will he be all right?"

"Khy will be fine once the storm has passed. He has the power to touch the leythe, which makes him sensitive to the disturbances the storm creates. The sensations are... uncomfortable, to say the least."

Jaedin gave him a dubious look. "You're sure? He was hallucinating for hours before you showed up. And those seizures..." He shuddered, not wanting to think about how helpless he'd felt with Khy convulsing in his arms.

"He was not hallucinating," Tor said. "The things he was seeing do exist, but they are things that only a leythari can see. As for the seizures... that was his body's reaction to sensory overload. The leythe-storm scrambles the senses. You taste colors, see emotions, hear textures... it's quite a frightening experience, even when you understand what's happening to you. If you had stayed out in it, eventually, you would have experienced those same sensations. And it might well have driven both of you mad. A leythe-storm is not to be trifled with." Tor passed a hand over the flames. The fire dimmed, leaving just enough light to see by. "Sleep now, Jaedin. You need rest as much as Khy does."

Jaedin settled himself in the nest of blankets, curling his body protectively around Khy. Tired as he was, sleep did not come easily. He couldn't stop thinking about the things Tor had said.

In the end, it will be Khy who helps Khy.

What, Jaedin wondered, did Tor think Khy could do against Rikard?

Chapter Nine

When Khy woke, he felt almost normal. His head no longer hurt, and those strange wisps of colored light were nowhere to be seen. He lay on his side in a soft nest of cushions and blankets, his back pressed against Jaedin's chest. Jaedin's body was curled around him, and from his slow, even breathing, Khy guessed that he was still asleep. He looked around, trying to remember where he was and how he'd come to be here. The place reminded him of a natural cavern, but the floor and walls were too smooth, and there was no way out that he could see.

There was a fire burning in the center of the round space. Beyond the fire sat a man with hair as blond as Jaedin's, and eyes like silver rain. "Good morning, Khy," he said. "I'm Tor."

Khy frowned. The man looked familiar, but Khy's most recent memories were a tangle of odd, confused sensations that he couldn't make sense of. "I'm sorry, but I don't... I don't remember... I feel like I should know you, but..."

Tor's smile was gentle. "You were not in a fit state to remember much of anything when I found you last night. Varian sensed the storm coming and sent me to guide you to safety. When you are ready, I will guide you the rest of the way to the Fireshard. Let me know if you need anything." Tor got to his feet and moved across the cavern to a pile of supplies, where he busied himself with what looked like breakfast preparations.

Jaedin shifted, his arm tightening around Khy. "Are you all right?" Jaedin's deep voice rumbled in Khy's ear, his breath warm on Khy's neck.

"I'm fine," Khy said, turning in his arms to press a kiss to Jaedin's lips. "It doesn't hurt anymore. And the lights are gone."

"Good." Jaedin pulled him close. "I was worried about you."

After a breakfast of porridge with butter and cream and honey—Khy didn't dare ask where those came from—they set off on the final leg of the journey to the Fireshard.

Khy accepted Tor's presence and his offer of help without question. He couldn't explain exactly why, but he knew right down to the marrow of his bones that Tor could be trusted. Something about the man struck a chord of recognition deep within him.

Jaedin wasn't nearly so accepting. As they toiled up the last, steep section of the trail that led to the top of Crystal Pass, Khy caught another of the suspicious looks Jaedin kept shooting Tor's way.

He nudged Jaedin with his elbow. "You don't have to keep looking at him like that," he said softly. "He's what he says he is."

Pale green eyes turned on Khy and fixed him with a narrow stare. "You trust too easily, Khy. You've been isolated and abused for so long that you mistake any show of kindness for good intention."

Stung, Khy turned his attention back to the trail and struggled to move ahead of Jaedin. A hand on his sleeve pulled him back.

"Khy—"

"Just because I was Rikard's prisoner doesn't mean I'm stupid or naive," Khy whispered fiercely. "I *feel* it inside me. Like I felt the storm coming yesterday. It's the same kind of feeling. I can't explain it to you any better than that. I don't have the words for it, but I *know* I can trust him. And believe me, I have far less reason to trust him—or anyone—than you do."

Jaedin's mouth opened and then snapped shut. "I'm sorry, Khy. I never meant to imply that you were stupid or gullible. I just... I fear for you. That makes me distrustful." He lowered his voice even further. "I also fear that if this Tor were a powerful enough leythari, he could *make* you trust him. And he could make you believe that you could. Like you do."

"If he could do that, then why wouldn't he make you trust him as well?"

Jaedin had no answer for that, and fell silent, though Khy could tell from the set of his shoulders that his tension hadn't eased at all. Khy guessed that the argument was far from over.

Tor walked a little ahead of them, giving no sign that he was aware of their whispered disagreement. When he stopped at the top of a steep rise, his expression was as bland and neutral as it had been all morning. "The top of Crystal Pass," he said gravely. "Beyond it, you can see the Fireshard in all its glory."

Khy climbed to where Tor waited. The trail dropped sharply as it headed down the other side of the pass. In the center of the wooded valley below, the Fireshard rose up into the fiery curtains of light in the sky, a spire of clear red-orange crystal. Streamers of orange and gold light flowed from the top of the spire, blending into the rippling sheets of color that gave the Fireskye its name.

The lower half of the spire still lay in the shadow of Crystal Peak, but the morning sun was high enough that the top half glowed as if it were lit from within.

“Stunning, isn’t it?” Tor murmured. “I’ve lived here for... for a long time, and I still find it so beautiful it makes my heart hurt.”

“I saw it once, five years ago,” Jaedin said softly. “It’s even more beautiful than I remember it.”

“What is it?” Khy whispered. “It looks like a piece of crystal, but it’s as tall as a mountain.”

“Pure leythe-stone,” Tor said, glancing down at him. “Stones like this are what generate the leythe-light that hangs over the mountains.”

“It’s beautiful,” Khy said. “How close will we get to it?”

“Probably a lot closer than you want,” Tor said with a grin that was decidedly wicked.

The forested floor of the valley was bright and sunny, nothing like the dense gloomy tangle of the Skarwood. In some areas, the tree cover was sparse enough that large patches of wildflowers grew. Khy dragged his feet, drinking in the sight of it. In his mind, *forest* had always meant dark and frightening, but this place was nothing of the sort. He wished there was time to explore, and hoped that once they’d seen Varian, there would be.

Tor led them right to the base of the crystalline spire. By the time they reached it, the sun was high in the sky. The Fireshard in full sunlight was glorious to behold, glowing from the inside, as if a fire raged within the confines of its crystalline walls. Light moved within it, writhing and twisting in all the colors of flame. Khy couldn’t take his eyes off of it.

“Here’s where things get strange,” Tor said with a grin. “I know this looks like a wall of solid crystal, but I’m going to ask you to trust me, and walk right into it.”

“Magic,” Khy breathed.

Tor snorted. “It certainly looks like magic. But don’t let Varian hear you call it that. I don’t think I can stand listening to another lecture about the evils of the rampant distribution of misinformation about the leythe.”

Khy started forward, but Jaedin grabbed his sleeve. “Khy—”

“What?” He turned to face Jaedin, whose eyes flicked briefly to Tor and then back to Khy.

“Are you sure...?”

Jaedin's face was pale and strained. Khy could almost feel the tension pouring off of the man, could hear it in his voice. He stretched up to press a kiss to Jaedin's lips. “It'll be all right,” he whispered, reaching for Jaedin's hand and giving it a squeeze. “If you don't want to go in, I can do this alone, but I'd rather you were with me.”

“If it makes it easier, you can close your eyes,” Tor said to Jaedin. “The path into the Fireshard is keyed to my aura, so as long as I'm with you, we'll be able to walk right through. It'll feel a little odd, like entering the shelter did last night, but I assure you, it's perfectly safe.”

Khy kept a hold of Jaedin's hand. “Come on,” he said.

Jaedin stared down at him for a long moment, pale green eyes searching Khy's face. Finally, he huffed out a little sigh and nodded his head.

They moved forward together. Khy meant to keep his eyes open, but closed them at the last minute, fully expecting to end up with his body pressed against the cold, glassy surface of the Fireshard. There was a moment of pressure in his head, not unlike the feeling he'd had when the leythe-storm had been building. Another step and the pressure eased. A tingling sensation whispered over his skin and was gone again before he could even shiver.

Khy blinked in surprise. Instead of pressed flat against a solid stone surface, he found himself standing in a hallway made of plain, gray stone. Jaedin stood next to him, frowning as he stared about. Jaedin's hand was squeezing his own so tightly, Khy could hardly wriggle his fingers.

He gave Jaedin what he hoped was a reassuring smile and turned his attention to his surroundings. Glowing chunks of crystal mounted on the walls illuminated the hallway, their hazy, golden light casting soft shadows. A brilliant blaze of orange ahead of him caught his eye. Khy squinted at it, trying to decide what it was. It looked as if the hallway ended in a wall of fire, and he wondered if Tor expected them to walk through that, as well.

A moment later, Tor stood beside them. He motioned toward the orange glow. “Come on. He's expecting us.”

Khy exchanged a nervous glance with Jaedin as they followed Tor down the hall. The glow proved to be a curtain of shimmering orange light. Up close, it looked more like the Fireskye than a wall of flames.

“You can walk right through it,” Tor said, and demonstrated.

Khy followed him without hesitation, pulling Jaedin along after him. He felt Jaedin's hand clench around his. A moment later, they were through the curtain and standing in a room that looked nothing like Khy had imagined the living quarters of a powerful leythari to look.

It reminded him of the simple, cozy visitors' room of the monastery he'd grown up in. The walls and floor were made of a light-colored wood, polished to a high sheen. Instead of wood in the hearth, there was a pile of stones like there had been in the cave, only these were crowned with emerald-green flames rather than golden-orange ones. Colorful pillows were scattered about the floor in comfortable groupings, some near the hearth and others around a low table.

All in all, it looked like a welcoming, comfortable place to entertain guests. Master Rikard, who didn't like to encourage visitors to stay any longer than was absolutely necessary, would definitely not have approved.

Khy saw two other exits, but both were blocked by shimmering curtains of blue light. He stared up at Tor. “Are we inside the Fireshard?” he whispered.

“Not the way you think of *inside*.” Tor smiled down at him. “It might be easier if you think of the Fireshard as a doorway. A portal.”

“A doorway to what?” Khy asked.

“A doorway into the leythe.” The voice came from across the room, a low, husky growl that sent shivers through Khy.

Jaedin tensed beside him, his hand tightening around Khy's again. Khy glanced at him. Jaedin's face was pale, and his lips were pressed together in a thin line. Beads of sweat glistened on the big man's brow. Khy wished he could help Jaedin feel some of his own calm.

The moment the thought had formed in his head, Jaedin's hand relaxed in his own. When Khy looked at him again, Jaedin's brow was smoother, his expression less strained. He gave Khy a smile and squeezed his hand. Khy frowned. Had he just...?

“Nicely done, Khy,” said that same voice.

Khy scanned the room, seeking the speaker, and found him sitting cross-legged on a cushion before a low table. He was the finest looking man Khy had

ever laid eyes on. Long black hair cascaded down his back like a cape. His eyes were a brilliant violet, set in a face so perfect it had probably broken more than a few hearts.

The man rose gracefully to his feet and winked at Khy, then turned his gaze upon Tor. "You found your lost sheep, then."

"I did," Tor said. He gestured to Khy. "This is Khy, and this is his protector, Jaedin. Khy, Jaedin, this is Varian."

"The breath of the stones, the blood of the earth, the soul of the stars," Jaedin murmured to Khy. "At least, that's what Tor called him last night."

"Did he, now?" Varian arched an eyebrow at Tor. "How poetic of you, Toryn."

Tor shot him a scowl. "Thought it might appeal to your overdeveloped sense of the dramatic, but if you're going to get all critical on me..."

"I would not dream of it," Varian said softly. His full lips quirked in a grin and his violet eyes sparkled with a look Khy might have called mischievous if he hadn't felt quite so intimidated. When those brilliant eyes focused on Khy, however, they narrowed dangerously. The smile faded and turned grim.

"Toryn... what have you brought me?" Varian murmured. "A leythari, yes, but..." He crossed the room to stand in front of Khy, staring down at him with the unfocused expression of a leythari concentrating all his attention on something beyond the ken of normal human senses.

Khy stared up at the man, only now realizing just how tall he was. He towered over Khy, and was easily a full handsbreadth taller than Jaedin.

"The leythe lies heavy and dark around this one," Varian said. He lifted a hand to brush his long fingers against Khy's collar. Khy flinched, but Varian's touch wasn't painful. "Leythe-locked." He glanced over at Tor. "It has the same foul flavor as the seeking that has drifted through the leythe these past days."

"Rikard," Jaedin said in a grim voice.

Varian's eyes sought Khy's. "Is Rikard the one who put that collar on you?" he asked.

Khy nodded.

"*That* one I have watched for some years," Varian said with a curl of his lip. "It is high time someone put him down."

Khy didn't like the way Varian's speculative gaze settled upon him.

"There will be time enough to discuss that later," Tor said. "We've been traveling since morning, and our guests have had a difficult journey. They need food and a chance to sit and rest before we turn our thoughts to more serious matters."

"Food and rest. Of course," Varian said with a faint smile. "Human things. Call me when you've seen to their needs, then. I shall see what the leythe can tell me."

Varian settled himself on a pile of cushions in the far corner of the room, and closed his eyes. Tor led Jaedin and Khy to the low table near the hearth. "Make yourselves comfortable," he said. "I'll bring food."

Tor brought them fresh bread and cheese, slices of cold meat, and a bowl of berries. Khy wasn't feeling very hungry, but Jaedin piled food on a plate for him and glared at him until he picked up a chunk of cheese and nibbled at it.

While Khy feigned interest in the food, he studied Tor from under his lashes. Though he was almost as tall as Varian, he didn't seem nearly so imposing.

Eyes of pale silver met his across the table. Khy felt his face heating and started to look away, but Tor only smiled. It was an easy, friendly grin, and Khy's shoulders loosened a little more. "You have questions?" Tor asked. "I can see them almost bursting from you. Ask them now. You may not get another chance; Varian has little patience with human curiosity."

"What do you do here?" Khy asked. "This place is so far away from everything."

"Distances in the human world are meaningless within the leythe," Tor told him.

Jaedin snorted. "Typical leythari answers," he muttered.

Tor turned that silver gaze upon Jaedin. "I do not have the language to make myself clearer. The concepts I would need to explain are not within the realm of human experience, and so the words to describe them do not exist." Tor's pale eyes returned to Khy. "As to what we do here, we are Guardians."

Khy frowned. "What do you guard?"

"The balance of the leythe. In this time and place, we protect the Fireshard and those who would be hurt if its power were to be misused. It would only

take one misguided leythari attempting to tap into the power of the Fireshard to do irreparable damage to this world and to the leythe itself.”

“Who... *what* are you?” Jaedin asked softly. “Not human.”

“Not quite,” Tor agreed. “Khy caught a glimpse of my true form yesterday, as you toiled toward Crystal Pass.”

Khy stared at him, remembering the sinuous, crystalline creature that had writhed and twisted through the light. “That was you? The... the dragon?”

Tor laughed. “Yes, the dragon, for lack of a better word.”

“And Varian? Is he... is he a... a dragon, too?” Khy asked.

“He is. Though *dragon* is just the interpretation that makes the most sense to your human mind. Our natural forms are so far beyond your human experience that your senses cannot perceive all of what we are.”

Khy stared down at his plate, no longer even pretending to eat. “If you’re so far beyond human, why would you help us at all?” he whispered. “We’re nothing to you.”

When he glanced up at Tor, the other man’s expression was very serious. “Don’t be too certain of that, Khy. Varian will do whatever he feels is necessary to preserve the balance of the leythe.”

They finished their meal in silence. Tor was clearing away the dishes when Varian roused himself from his corner and joined them at the low table. He settled himself across from Khy and gave him a long, appraising look. Khy met his gaze steadily, but under the table, his hand crept across the cushion he sat on, seeking the comfort of Jaedin’s firm grip.

“What did you see in the leythe?” Tor asked as he took a seat next to Varian. “Anything helpful?”

“Nothing that surprises me,” Varian said, “given what I know of human ambition and human cruelty. The leythe gathers thickly around Khy. He has the potential to be a powerful leythari. Most of that potential is bound by the leythe-chain he wears. As for the rest... Well. What the collar is not strong enough to bind, Khy seems to be making instinctive use of, as I observed when you first arrived and he calmed Jaedin’s fears.”

Jaedin turned to stare at Khy. “*You* did that?”

Khy swallowed hard and bit his lip. "I... I didn't mean... I was just... I wanted to help. I wished that I could make you feel less afraid. And... and then it happened."

Varian's brilliant eyes focused on Khy again. "Do things that you wish for often happen? Perhaps at times of extreme emotion or stress?"

Khy shot a brief glance at Jaedin. "Yes," he said in a small voice. "But... all of them... just happened. I didn't try to... I didn't *mean* any of it."

Jaedin stirred beside him. "If the collar isn't strong enough to bind his power completely, that would explain why Rikard kept him drugged with leythe-bane."

Varian wrinkled his nose. "Foul stuff. Leythe-bane would certainly prevent Khy from working the leythe. It would also dull his mind and keep him from understanding what was being done to him."

A shivery feeling rippled up Khy's spine. Jaedin's hand tightened around his. "What was being done to him?" Jaedin asked, his voice almost a whisper.

"Call it rape, for lack of a better word," Varian said. "Rikard stole Khy's power, used Khy as a power source for his own workings."

"Mara said something like that," Jaedin said. "I didn't understand what she meant. Or how she knew."

"The process is incredibly painful for the one being used. The echoes of Khy's pain are there to be read in his aura. I see the scars left behind when the raw power of the leythe was drawn through his body at the call of someone else. Khy is not Rikard's first victim. Rikard was expelled from the Lord and Protector's court in Andar some twelve years ago for doing the same thing to his apprentices."

Jaedin nodded his head slowly. "Mara told us that, too."

"That's what he was doing to me in the workroom?" Khy whispered. He swallowed hard, shivering at the strength of the fear those dark memories evoked. "When he pulled the light out of me?"

Varian's grim expression softened when he turned his gaze upon Khy. "It is."

"He won't be able to do that anymore. I made sure of it." Khy felt his face heating. "I'm not... I'm not a virgin anymore."

Varian's eyes flicked to Jaedin and then back to Khy, and he shook his head slowly. "Oh, Khy," he said softly, sadly. "Is that what he told you? That wouldn't stop him from using you as a power source."

Khy blinked at him and frowned as he tried to wrap his mind around it. "Then why would he order his men to bring me back untouched?"

"Perhaps he feared they would injure you."

"They... they tried. One of them wanted to... and another said that I'd be useless to him if they did..."

Varian rolled his eyes. "*Humans.*" He spat the word out, as if the taste of it displeased him. "Most of the dogma and superstition surrounding the manipulation of the leythe is only in place as a means of controlling an ignorant population. Your virginity—or lack thereof—has no bearing on Rikard's ability to use you."

Khy turned to look at Jaedin, eyes wide. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I thought... I really thought..."

Jaedin's hand squeezed his gently, and the big man smiled down at him, no trace of anger or regret in his expression. "You believed it would save you at the time, Khy. And I've already forgiven you. I thought you knew that."

Khy couldn't meet his eyes any longer. He stared down at the table, feeling sick and empty inside. Jaedin might have forgiven him, but the more he came to care about Jaedin, the longer he thought it would be before he could forgive himself. His fingers crept toward the collar again, but he didn't touch it. He lifted his gaze to Varian and said, "The healer in Rosefire said Rikard could track me through the collar. Please. Can you take it off of me so he can't find me?"

"I could." Varian's expression was grave. "But the shadows I see in the leythe tell me that I should not."

"But—"

Varian held up a hand and Khy fell silent. "That task is left to you, Khy. You have it within you to do what must be done. And it is vitally important that you do. Far more than your own life is at stake."

A feeling of despair washed through Khy. "But even if I do have power, like you say, I have no idea how to use it. Those times when I did things... they just *happened*. I don't... I don't know how to control it."

“Perhaps not consciously... but the things that happened all helped you in some way, did they not?”

“Maybe, but—”

“Instinct is a powerful force. It can shape the leythe as surely as all of Rikard’s years of training can. You need to trust yourself, Khy.”

Trust himself? He’d come all this way and that was all the powerful leythari could offer him? “Can’t you teach me? Show me what to do?”

“It takes years to learn to manipulate the leythe, and time is something we are very short of. Rikard has come to the Fireskye, and he awaits you.”

“He’s *here*?” Khy’s stomach clenched.

“He is.”

Khy’s fingers twitched, moving closer to the collar. “I can’t take it off,” he whispered. “I’ve tried.”

“I know,” Varian said. “I have sensed the echoes of your pain rippling through the leythe.”

Khy didn’t know what to say to that. He stared down at the table again.

“Come.” Varian reached across the table to lift Khy’s chin with a gentle finger. “I may not be able to teach you how to destroy Rikard, but I *can* show you how to keep what is yours.”

Khy turned to Jaedin, who leaned over to kiss him. “Go with him,” Jaedin whispered. “Learn what you can. Whatever happens, we’ll face Rikard together.”

Chapter Ten

Varian led Khy through one of the shimmering curtains of blue light. Khy found himself in a room furnished with only a few pale green rugs on the floor. Large windows looked out over the mountains on three sides of the room. They were high enough up that the Fireskye hung right outside, the rippling light almost close enough to touch. Khy approached a window and swallowed hard, a wave of dizziness washing over him when he realized just how far down the floor of the valley was. He took a few steps back. "Are we inside the Fireshard?" he whispered.

"In a manner of speaking," Varian said from behind him. "Does the view disturb you?"

"It's so high..."

"I find it rather peaceful. This is a good place for you to learn how to clear your mind and focus your thoughts."

Khy turned away from the window to face the leythari. "I don't see how that's going to help me against Rikard. If I have power, don't I need to learn how to work the leythe? I don't understand why you can't just take off the collar and teach me how to fight him."

"I could," Varian said simply. "I could show you exactly how to destroy Rikard. And I have no doubt that you could do it."

"Then—" Khy started, but Varian held up a hand and he fell silent.

"I have learned through bitter experience that what looks like the easy, obvious answer is not always the best answer, or even a good one. I fear that if I should do as you ask, I would be setting in motion a chain of events that may have potentially disastrous consequences. Consequences that may not even manifest until well after you have lived out your life. Would you condemn the generations to come after you to darkness because you sought the easy road?"

A shiver rippled through Khy as he recalled what Tor had said: he and Varian protected the Fireshard and preserved the balance of the leythe. What meaning would something as small and insignificant as Khy's life have for a creature like Varian, who wasn't even human?

The silence grew between them, and Varian studied him for what felt like ages. Those eerie eyes looked so deeply into him, it seemed that they searched

Khy's very soul, peeling back all his fears and hopes to reveal his most secret heart. A heart that felt very small, and very afraid.

"Let me show you something," Varian said softly, gesturing to the window Khy had drawn back from.

Outside the window, the landscape shimmered and shifted until, instead of looking out over the wooded valley to the distant peaks beyond, Khy found himself staring at a desolate forest. Black, skeletal branches rose up into a sky that was heavy with dark, lightning-laced clouds. A sickly green mist floated just above the scarred ground. Nothing grew there. Nothing moved.

Khy's stomach churned. The land itself looked as if it had been poisoned or cursed, everything dead and rotting. "What is this?"

"The Skarwood," Varian said. "As it will look if I remove your collar."

"I don't... I don't understand."

"There are certain points in time where the smallest of actions can have far-reaching effects, rippling out into the leythe and echoing through time. This particular nexus appears to be centered upon you, Khy. Your choices here will set in motion events that will affect the future of this world."

"You can't do that," Khy whispered, shaking his head in denial. "You can't make me responsible for the future. It's too big... and I have no power..."

"You have far more power than you think," Varian said gently. He moved forward. "And everything you need to use it is already within you. Here—" he brushed two fingers across Khy's forehead—"and here." Varian pressed his palm flat against Khy's chest, right over his heart.

"But... but I'm nothing. I'm nobody. I don't even know who my parents were. How can I be that important?"

"The how and the why of it do not matter. What matters is what you do with the tools and the time you have been given."

Khy's chest tightened and he shook his head. "If this is the future you see, then why won't you help me?"

Varian stared down at him, compassion softening his expression. "Believe me, Khy, if I could take this burden from you, I would. But I cannot. These are human choices—and they must be made by you. My interference will bring this about—" Varian gestured toward the dead forest and the sickened land beyond the window—"just as surely as your refusal to act. We both have a part to play in this, and unfortunately, mine is the part of non-interference."

“But you’re already interfering by showing me this, aren’t you?”

“The future is a funny thing,” Varian said, “always shifting, always in motion. The smallest things can affect the fate of an entire empire. And the biggest, most cataclysmic disaster you can imagine can have all the effect of a pebble dropped in the sea. All my showing you this will do is tip the balance slightly in favor of you doing what you must. And that is as much influence as I am allowed in this matter.”

“What if I refuse? What if I turn around and run as far and as fast as I can?”

Varian’s expression became sad. “Then Rikard will find you and you will return to being his prisoner and his slave. He will continue to abuse you and to take what is rightfully yours, and a deeper darkness than you have ever dreamed of will cover this world.”

Khy considered that. While he wasn’t entirely convinced that the fate of the world hung upon his actions, he knew that as long as he wore the collar, Rikard would be able to find him. Khy bit his lip and stared up at Varian. “All right.” He squared his shoulders. “Show me how to keep what’s mine.”

Varian sank gracefully to the floor and sat cross-legged on one of the rugs. He motioned for Khy to join him. “The first thing you must learn is to clear your mind of all outside distractions.”

The mental exercises Varian showed him were very like the meditations the monks had made him do as a child. None of them posed much of a challenge to Khy, and he couldn’t understand why Varian was so pleased that he picked the techniques up so easily. How could calming his mind possibly help him against a leythari who could call lightning down from the sky?

“You’re doing well,” Varian said after Khy had proved his mastery of yet another breathing exercise.

Khy scowled at the man sitting in front of him. “I’ve done nothing that’s going to help me against Rikard,” he said, trying to keep the bitter edge out of his voice. He found it difficult to accept the idea that Varian, who possessed the power to see the future, could arm him with nothing more than a few meditation techniques in preparation for facing Rikard.

Varian raised an eyebrow. “You think not? Focus is the key to all leythe-workings, no matter how small. You are powerful enough that if you can focus your mind, not even leythe-bane can hold you.”

“The collar can, though,” Khy muttered.

“Your acceptance of your captivity and your belief that you are helpless will fetter you as surely as the collar you wear. Sometimes it is better to let the current take you than it is to fight it—even if you think it is taking you in the wrong direction. You must trust yourself, Khy.”

“Trust myself,” Khy repeated dutifully. “I’d trust myself a lot more if you could show me how to kill him with the leythe.”

“I cannot teach you how to destroy him. We do not have that kind of time, and even if we did, the collar you wear would prevent you from drawing the power you would need.”

Khy stared down at the floor. “I know. Go on. I’m sorry.”

“I will show you all that I am permitted to show you, Khy. And I will help you as much as I am allowed. Believe me when I say I want you to succeed as much as you want to.”

The conviction in Varian’s voice was almost enough to convince him. Almost.

After a long, heavy silence, Varian continued speaking. “While the collar prevents you from accessing the leythe, it does not prevent the leythe from affecting you. What that means is that I can manipulate the leythe to show you how to protect yourself if Rikard should try to draw power from you. I can show you what to do, what to look for, and what it will feel like. But because of the collar, I will not be able to actually draw the power from you and you will not be able to practice stopping me.”

Khy wasn’t sure whether he should be relieved or worried by that explanation. “So... whatever you’re going to show me... I won’t be able to use it unless he takes the collar off of me.”

“That is correct.”

“That means... I can’t do anything unless he captures me?”

“Exactly so,” Varian said with a brief nod. “Understand, Khy, what I’m showing you is defensive. You cannot attack him this way.”

Khy nodded. “I understand.” He didn’t, not really. Rikard capturing him was exactly what he wanted to avoid. Then again, if Rikard did capture him, and Khy was able to prevent him from stealing his power...

Would he set Khy free?

Probably not. Rikard was very fond of his things.

Jaedin's words as they'd hiked toward Crystal Pass came back to him: *The nice thing about leythari is that they bleed and die like anyone else.* Perhaps if Varian wouldn't show him how to use the leythe as a weapon, Khy could use something else. A knife, perhaps?

"All right," he said in a steady voice. "I'm ready to learn."

"Lie down, then."

Khy lay down on the rug and stared up at the leythari. Varian knelt at his side and raised his hands over Khy's body. When he drew the first swath of light into the air, Khy went rigid and opened his mouth to scream.

The cry died in his throat the moment he realized that there was no accompanying pain. Whatever Varian was doing, it wasn't real.

Varian grinned down at him. "Illusion, Khy. This is the only way I can show you." His smile faded, and he added, "When it is real, it will hurt like it always does. That is where the meditations may help you. You will need to concentrate in order to hold onto your power. Now watch and learn..."

In the workroom, Khy had never been calm or coherent enough to examine the light. Now, as he watched Varian work, it became clear that the swaths of light drawn from his body were not as simple as he'd believed. They had structure... bumps and ridges, striations and holes, and places where the color changed entirely.

Varian drew a long, violet wisp into the air and held it above Khy. "See here? And here?" He pointed out the holes and ridges. "When Rikard tries to pull the light from you, these are the places to focus on, the places to grab, as it were. As long as you are holding on, he will not be able to draw your power away."

By the time Varian had finished showing him all the different ways he could take hold of the light, the sun had slipped behind the mountains. Only the soft glow of the Fireskye lit the room.

Khy got to his feet and stretched. Brilliant streamers of orange and gold poured into the night sky from somewhere above the window. He moved slowly toward it, staring up at those twisting ropes of light. "That's the leythe, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes. The part that is visible to human eyes, at least." Varian came up behind him and set a hand on his shoulder.

"This place... the Fireshard... Tor talked about leythari tapping into its power. Could someone like Rikard take its power? Like he took mine?"

"He could. It is one of the reasons Tor and I chose to settle here. The power of the Fireshard in the hands of a single leythari would be bad for the balance."

Khy frowned. "You're a single leythari."

"But I am not human," Varian said with a faint smile. "I am... how did Torny put it? *The breath of the stones, the blood of the earth, the soul of the stars*. That's really quite lovely... and far more poetic than I thought him capable of. Come, then. They'll be waiting for us, and I'm sure you're more than ready for food and rest."

Khy hesitated. "What about Jaedin?"

"What about him?"

"If Rikard finds me... Jaedin will try to fight him. I can't let that happen."

"No? I thought Jaedin was your protector."

Khy shook his head. "Jaedin can't stand against a leythari. And I can't risk Rikard using me to hurt him. I couldn't live with that." He looked up at Varian, meeting his gaze steadily. "I have to do this alone. That's a human choice, too. *My* choice. Tell me where to find Rikard."

Varian's eyes locked onto Khy's, and he nodded once. "If you head north out of the valley, you will find a trail. Follow it and it will take you to the ruins of a fortress, high on a ridge. He is camped there."

"Thank you," Khy whispered.

"Be aware, Khy, that the moment you leave the Fireshard and the safety of my shields, he will sense you through his leythe-lock. You will not be able to avoid him."

"No. As long as I wear the collar, it doesn't sound like I'll ever be able to avoid him. I have to face him," Khy said, giving Varian a grim smile. "And if I have to do that, I'd rather do it without putting Jaedin in danger."

It would have to be tonight, Khy decided. Varian could show him no more, and the longer he stayed here, the more likely it was that he would argue himself out of facing Rikard alone. The idea of confronting his tormentor without Jaedin's strong, steady presence terrified him, but as much as he wanted Jaedin with him, he wanted Jaedin alive even more.

Jaedin would not survive an encounter with Rikard, of that Khy was certain.

That night, in the guest room Tor showed them to, Jaedin took Khy in his arms the moment they were alone. "Are you all right?" he asked, holding Khy at arm's length and looking him over. "You were so quiet during supper, I was afraid maybe something had happened."

"Nothing happened," Khy said, trying to keep his unease from his face and his voice. "He showed me how to clear my mind and focus. And how to protect myself."

"That's all?"

"He said... he said I can't work the leythe with the collar on, and he can't take it off."

"More like he won't," Jaedin muttered.

Khy stared down at the floor. He didn't want to explain about the bleak future that Varian had said would surely come if Khy ran away like he wanted to. "Even if he did take the collar off, there wouldn't be enough time for me to learn what I'd need to defeat Rikard."

"So coming here was a complete waste of time," Jaedin said.

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't want to think about it right now." Nor did he want Jaedin asking too many awkward questions about what they would do next. "Can we talk about this tomorrow? I'm scared and I need you to make me forget. Please?" He pushed himself against Jaedin, rubbed a hand between Jaedin's legs.

Jaedin groaned and bucked his hips a little. "Gods, Khy..."

Khy dropped to his knees in front of Jaedin and unlaced his lover's breeches, freeing his already hard cock. He stared up at Jaedin, eyes tracing the lines of his face as he committed every detail to memory. Khy was well aware that if he carried out his plan, this might be their last night together. By this time tomorrow, he could be dead or enslaved.

If he failed in his bid for freedom, he doubted he'd remember Jaedin. Rikard would drug him again, and Khy's mind would sink back down into the murky depths he'd been trapped in for so long, chained once more by leythe-bane.

Jaedin would remember him, though. If memories were all that Khy had left to give to Jaedin, he wanted them to be good ones.

Never taking his eyes from Jaedin's face, he leaned forward and licked him from root to tip. Jaedin shivered in response, a low moan escaping his lips. His hands settled on Khy's shoulders.

Khy might be inexperienced, but he learned fast, and he had paid close attention to the things that made Jaedin moan and sigh. Using his lips and his tongue, he explored Jaedin's entire length.

Jaedin cursed under his breath, shuddering with need. When Khy took him deep into his mouth, Jaedin's hands tightened on his shoulders and his hips surged forward. Those pretty green eyes rolled back in his head, and Khy shivered at the sounds of pleasure his lover made.

Knowing that he could reduce a strong man like Jaedin to incoherent cries and whimpers gave Khy a heady rush of power. He might not be good for much else, but he could make Jaedin's body sing.

He knew the signs, knew Jaedin was getting close when his rhythm faltered and his breath became ragged and uneven.

Khy pulled back. "Don't come," he whispered. "I want to feel you inside me."

Jaedin groaned and panted. "On the bed then." He quickly stripped out of his clothing while Khy did the same.

"Lie down," Khy told him.

Jaedin did as he was told, and Khy reached for the little pot of salve that Jaedin had placed on the table beside the bed. Khy applied the salve to Jaedin's cock with light, feathery strokes that soon had Jaedin groaning with need. When Khy had Jaedin ready, he pushed a slick finger into his own body. He couldn't help the moan that tore from his throat. Jaedin watched him, clearly mesmerized by the sight.

"Khy... I've never wanted anyone so much," Jaedin murmured. "Come on. Come to me."

That was all the invitation Khy needed. He straddled Jaedin and carefully lowered himself onto his lover, eyes fixed on Jaedin's face. If this was all he could have, if this was to be their last night together, Khy wanted to remember every single moment of it. Every breath, every sigh, every touch, every kiss... He would cherish these moments for as long as he could remember them.

Strong hands gripped Khy's hips, helping to support him as he slowly lowered himself. His body stretched and burned as Jaedin entered him. Khy

groaned and moved as slowly as he could, wanting to savor this connection he might never have again.

When Jaedin was buried deep inside him, Khy paused, watching his lover's face, memorizing every detail. Jaedin began to rock his hips, gently at first, and then with more speed, more power. Every thrust brushed over that spot that made Khy see sparks. His body shuddered and burned, and when Jaedin wrapped a hand around his cock, Khy's eyes drifted shut in spite of his vow to memorize every moment.

The sensations were too intense, the bittersweet combination of love and sorrow filling his heart too hard and too real. A hot tear leaked out and slid down his cheek.

It was wiped gently away and Khy opened his eyes to see Jaedin watching him, an expression of tenderness on the big man's face. "Khy... don't cry. Please. It'll be all right. I'll be with you. I'll always be with you."

Khy's throat tightened, and he couldn't speak.

Jaedin's next thrust hit that spot just right, driving all thoughts of the future from Khy's mind. The climax built inside him, hot and bright like the Fireskye itself. Jaedin's hand moved faster, and Khy stopped thinking, and slid into a world of pure sensation. His release tore through him, leaving him shattered and limp. Jaedin cried out as he followed Khy into that blinding white light.

When Khy came back to himself, he was lying on top of Jaedin, with Jaedin's hand stroking his back in soft, lazy circles. "I love you, Khy," Jaedin whispered, his voice already slurred with sleep.

Khy's chest tightened, and he choked back a sob. "I love you, too, Jaedin," he whispered back. *With all my heart...*

When Jaedin's breath came slow and deep, and the hand that had caressed Khy so tenderly had fallen limp at his side, Khy slipped off of the bed and dressed himself in silence.

Their packs still sat by the door. Khy found Jaedin's hunting knife and slipped it into his own pack. He took one last look at Jaedin's sleeping face, then picked up his pack and walked out into the hallway and through the curtain of light that led to the main room of Varian's home.

"I thought I might meet you here," said a deep voice from across the room.

Khy started and looked up to see Varian standing by the hearth, his back to Khy. "I... I was just..."

Varian turned around to face him. "Protecting your lover, if you can, in spite of your own fears and your desire to keep him by your side?"

Khy nodded mutely.

"You have a good heart, Khy." The leythari moved forward. "Come. You will not be able to leave the Fireshard without Tor or I to help you."

Varian led him out into the stone hallway they had entered by. Had it only been that afternoon? It seemed like weeks. When they reached the end of the hallway and the fiery curtain of light that blocked the way out of the Fireshard, Varian turned to face him. He placed his hands upon Khy's shoulders and said gravely, "Remember, Khy, you already have everything you need to defeat him. Here." He bent to press a gentle kiss to Khy's forehead. "And here." He pressed his palm against Khy's chest.

Khy nodded. He swallowed hard and faced the curtain of light. Varian's words warmed him, but they didn't comfort him. He knew his chances of success were slim.

At the last moment, he turned back to look at the leythari. "Take care of Jaedin for me. He... he won't understand that I have to go alone." With that, Khy plunged through the curtain to face his destiny.

Jaedin woke early the next morning, and found himself alone. His breath caught in his throat, and his heart lightened as he recalled the words Khy had spoken to him the night before: *I love you, too, Jaedin*. With a smile on his face, Jaedin rose to face the day.

Only to discover that Khy's pack was gone from its spot by the door.

He dressed quickly and went out into the main room to find Tor setting food on the table for breakfast. There was no sign of Khy or Varian.

"Is Khy training with Varian?" he asked.

Tor shook his head and averted his eyes. "No."

"Then where in the Black is he?"

Tor bit his lip. "He left in the night."

"And you let him go? Alone?"

"I did not. Varian did. He said that Khy had made his choice."

Jaedin didn't believe that. Khy had been so frightened and he'd wanted Jaedin with him. He'd said so last night... hadn't he?

No... Jaedin had told him he'd be with him... and Khy had said nothing to contradict him, but nothing to indicate agreement, either.

"He's gone to face Rikard, hasn't he?" Jaedin said softly.

"He's gone to do what he must," Tor said.

"Alone."

"Perhaps he did not wish to drag you into danger. You are no leythari, and Khy knows that."

"Khy is no leythari, either," Jaedin spat out. "Damn it. I'm going after him."

Tor said nothing as Jaedin turned back and headed to the guest room. He took up his bow and slung his quiver of arrows over his shoulder, but he couldn't find his hunting knife. After searching through his pack twice, Jaedin finally conceded that Khy must have taken it.

It should, perhaps, have comforted him that Khy had at least thought to take a weapon. Instead, it struck an even deeper fear into his heart. The thought of Khy facing his tormentor with nothing but a hunting knife turned Jaedin's blood to ice.

When he returned to the main room, Tor hadn't moved from his spot. He merely gave Jaedin a questioning look. "Are you certain this is the right thing to do?"

"Of course I'm certain. Khy needs me."

Tor cocked his head, a slight frown creasing his brow. "You don't trust Khy to be strong enough?"

"I trust Khy just fine," Jaedin retorted. "It's Rikard I don't trust. Now are you going to show me the way out of this leythe-trap or not?"

Chapter Eleven

Khy saw the jagged, broken lines of the ruins up on the ridge long before he reached them. The trail Varian had suggested he take had climbed steadily up out of the valley where the Fireshard stood. By late morning, it had leveled off, giving him a much-needed respite.

Now, as the sun edged toward midday, the trail had begun to climb again, leading up to a high cliff that was crowned with the dark, hunched shape of the crumbling fortress. The prickling sensation on the back of Khy's neck had been growing stronger all morning. He wondered if Rikard was watching him even now. If Varian was right, Rikard was up there, waiting for Khy to finish toiling up the path.

Khy paused a moment to wonder at the wisdom of his plan. The collar he wore guaranteed that Rikard would know he was approaching. He might even know that Khy planned to attack him.

He stared up at the cliff top, scanning the area for movement. There seemed little point in hiding or creeping. He might as well just walk up to the ruins and get it over with. He pulled the knife out of his pack and wrapped his hand around the hilt.

Khy hadn't ever been taught how to handle a knife, except in the kitchen at the monastery; the brothers frowned upon weapons of all types. He thought about Jaedin's words, about how a leythari would bleed and die like anyone else, and took comfort from the thought. Jaedin would know. He'd fought for ten years in Vakarra, and had even fought against leythari.

The thought that there was even a possibility that he could kill Rikard gave him courage. He had the element of surprise on his side. Even if Rikard knew he was coming, he wouldn't have any idea how much his former slave had changed. The long days on the road had toughened Khy, made him stronger, and his growing feelings for Jaedin gave him a reason to fight for his freedom. With his mind no longer dulled by leythe-bane, Khy thought maybe he could actually pull this off.

He only hoped that Jaedin had slept late, and that by the time Jaedin figured out what Khy had done and came after him, it would all be over.

There was no doubt in Khy's mind that Jaedin *would* come; Jaedin had said he loved Khy, after all, and had promised he would be with Khy. Jaedin was the

sort who would do whatever was necessary to keep Khy safe, even if it cost him his own life.

Khy was *not* going to let Jaedin die trying to protect him. Not when it was Khy's fault that Jaedin had gotten tangled up in his problems in the first place. With that thought in mind, Khy drew in a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and continued on up the trail.

It was early afternoon by the time he reached the fortress. Khy left his pack in a thick tangle of weeds, and worked his way to the edge of the structure. He moved quietly along the perimeter of the ruin until he came to a place where the high outer wall had collapsed inward. After scanning as much of the interior as he could see for any sign of movement, he slipped through the opening, careful to keep to the shadows.

He never even saw the leythe-bolt coming until it slammed into his chest, the icy burn shocking in the warm summer air. The world was washed in light and ice, and Khy fell into darkness.

Perhaps he did not wish to drag you into danger. Tor's words echoed through Jaedin's mind during the endless trek to the ruins that lay perhaps half a day's hike from the Fireshard.

Much as he cared about Khy and admired the sentiment that had driven him to take off by himself, Jaedin couldn't help but think of all the reasons why Khy facing Rikard alone was a very bad idea.

Not the least of which was that Rikard was a trained leythari. One who'd had the power and the skill to be admitted to the court of the Lord and Protector of Andarra.

It occurred to him to wonder if Khy had any idea of what that might mean. If Khy had spent the last ten years drugged stupid with leythe-bane, it was unlikely that he'd been able to learn anything about Rikard that would help him now. It was also unlikely that Khy had any real idea of what kind of power Rikard wielded.

Back in his mercenary days, the idea of anyone going after a trained leythari armed only with a hunting knife would have been a source of vast amusement for Jaedin and his cohorts.

He didn't find the thought nearly so funny now.

As he hurried along the overgrown path, Jaedin couldn't help but wonder if he hadn't been a bit hasty in his decision to leave his pack behind. Certainly he could move faster without it, but what if he arrived at the ruins only to find Khy hurt and in pain? Without his supplies, he'd be able to do nothing. The thought of being helpless in such a situation gave Jaedin the shivers.

He'd just have to get there before Khy did anything stupid.

Setting his mouth in a grim line, Jaedin picked up his pace.

Khy woke to a pounding headache and a deep chill that had settled into his very bones. He opened his eyes to find himself in a dimly-lit stone chamber. He was lying on a hard, cold surface, his wrists and ankles held fast. When he turned his head to look, he saw that his bonds were made of blue light. He twisted and strained to free himself, but the light held him as securely as the leather straps that had bound him in Rikard's workroom.

Grit and sand dug into his bare back as he squirmed, and Khy realized with a sinking feeling that his shirt was gone. That was bad. Rikard always stripped him to the waist when he planned to tear the light from Khy's body.

A familiar, low chuckle froze him. He turned his head to see Rikard leaning against the wall, watching his struggles. A grim smile twisted the leythari's thin lips. "Really, Khy, you've a lot to learn about leythari if you thought this would do you any good." Rikard held up Jaedin's hunting knife so Khy could see it, then dropped it to the floor. The clatter of steel on stone was shocking in the still, quiet air.

"You've led me on a merry chase, Khy," Rikard continued, and though his words seemed light, his tone was not. "Imagine my surprise when I returned to the tower to find you gone, and Seb and Nida in a panic, tearing the place apart to find you."

Khy continued to struggle against the bonds of light that held him.

"You think to escape me, boy?" Rikard asked, his cruel smile broadening. "Where would you go, then? Back to your lover? He's no match for me. I'd squash him like an insect and take you back to the tower, where you belong."

"I don't belong there," Khy whispered. He hated the way his voice trembled, but he couldn't stop himself from shaking. The cold and the fear were almost overwhelming.

“Oh, yes, you do, boy. I’ll be quite happy to remind you of your place just as soon as we’re back.” Rikard moved toward him, uncapping a vial that Khy recognized immediately.

His medicine.

“No,” he moaned, redoubling his efforts.

A blow to the side of his head stunned him. He froze, ears ringing, mind clanging with shock.

Rikard took advantage of his confusion to force the vial between his lips. Icy cold liquid filled his mouth. Khy shuddered and tried to spit it out, but Rikard pinched his nose shut, forcing him to swallow what he’d been given.

When Rikard was satisfied that he’d had enough, he patted Khy’s cheek and said, “We’ll just wait for that to work, and then you’ll help me open a gate through the leythe to take us home.”

Tears burned his eyes. Khy summoned Jaedin’s image into his mind, trying to etch the man’s face into his memory before it slipped away into the fog. As soon as the leythe-bane took hold of him, the bright quickness of mind he’d enjoyed since escaping the tower would be gone. He’d forget what it felt like to be free, to be loved, to be capable of making his own decisions...

He wouldn’t remember Rosefire or Jaedin. He wouldn’t remember the rhyx or the Fireskye. He wouldn’t remember making love in the rain or Varian’s home in the Fire shard...

He would have nothing but the foggy half-life leythe-bane forced upon him.

With a whimper, Khy focused his entire being on Jaedin. “I’ll never forget you,” he whispered. “I love you, Jaedin, I’ll always love you... even if I can’t remember you...”

Eventually, inevitably, the fog closed in, muffling his senses in a heavy cloud. Khy felt the world shrinking around him. The thoughts that had darted through his mind like bright silver fishes became heavy and pondering. He couldn’t hold onto them, and they slipped through his fingers and sank down into the mud. Tears left cold tracks of wetness on his face, but he couldn’t remember why he was crying.

“This is your place, boy. If you remember nothing else, remember that.”

He opened his eyes to see Rikard looming over him. The leythari’s long fingers reached for the collar around his neck. There was a flare of green light and a moment later, the collar was lifted away.

Khy lay utterly still, waiting. He wasn't supposed to move when the Master took his collar off. He was supposed to lie there and wait for the Master to begin the important work that Khy was lucky to be helping him with.

Something whizzed over him, so close he felt its passage as a breath of cool air across his bare chest. Master Rikard held up a hand and there was a flare of light so bright Khy had to close his eyes for a moment.

"Khy!" Someone shouted his name.

Khy frowned. He didn't know that voice. It was a man's voice, but it wasn't Seb, and nobody else would dare to bother the Master when he was doing important work.

"Khy!"

He turned his head to see a tall, blond man standing in the doorway of the room. The man held a drawn bow aimed almost right at Khy.

Why would anyone need a bow in the workroom? Khy gritted his teeth and thought hard. It didn't help. He tried to hit the side of his head with his fist to make himself think better, but his hand was stuck fast. He couldn't free himself no matter how hard he pulled.

A bolt of blue light sizzled through the air. The light hit the blond man square in the chest. He let out a strangled cry and crumpled to the floor where he lay, unmoving.

An icy hand squeezed Khy's gut.

There was something he should remember...

Something important...

Khy closed his eyes. The fog drifted through his mind, making it impossible to think. Dimly, he recalled intense violet eyes burning into his, and a voice instructing him on how to relax and focus. The words rolled through his memory, the voice deep and soothing. Khy relaxed and did what the voice told him. He let the fog move over and through him, and instead of concentrating on the fog, he tried to focus on what it hid.

A face appeared against the darkness of his closed eyes. The blond man looked up him and smiled gently. *I love you*, he whispered.

Jaedin...

Something in Khy's mind shifted. The fog parted, and in a blinding flash, Khy remembered. He snapped his eyes open to find Rikard standing over him, hands poised, ready to begin his working.

The pain started deep inside him, an icy, burning cold that slowly feathered out until it engulfed his whole body.

"No... no, no, no..." Khy moaned. He had to get up, get to Jaedin.

Rikard pulled more light from him, his hands moving over Khy as he began to weave the swaths of light into a pattern.

Khy shuddered and struggled against the glowing bands that held his limbs in place. The fog pushed at the edges of his mind, trying to smother his thoughts. Icy pain burned through him until every part of him was on fire. He fought to escape, fought the light, fought the pain, fought the fog. He heard screams, and the pain got sharper and colder until it was enough to overwhelm all that he was—

—and then that voice cut through the chaos, deep and certain, barely a whisper, but Khy heard it through the fear and the pain and the screams: *Sometimes it is better to let the current take you than it is to fight it—even if you think it is taking you in the wrong direction. You must trust yourself, Khy.*

He didn't remember whose voice it was, but he knew it was a voice he could trust.

Khy let go.

He stopped fighting and let the light slide through his body.

The pain eased at once. As Khy studied the light flowing through him, he realized that it wasn't as smooth as it looked. It was jagged and rough and there were holes and ridges where it looked like he could grab on and get a hold of it.

Someone had shown him this...

Someone...

He focused on the light, imagined himself reaching out with a hand and taking hold of it.

Above him, Rikard grunted.

Khy yanked the light away from him, pulling it back into himself.

"What are you doing, boy?" Rikard demanded.

Khy was too busy to answer. He pushed the light into the fog, burning away the clouds that had smothered his thoughts. Once the fog was gone, he followed the light back to its source, back to the place Rikard had taken it from.

It came from deep inside him, deeper than pain or fear, deeper, even, than memory or dream... There at the very center of his being was a core of pure light, glowing so bright and so hot that Khy could barely look at it.

He reached into that core and pulled out a swath of the white-hot light. It didn't hurt when it was his own hands and his own will doing the pulling. Khy stretched the light, shaping it with his will. When he'd formed it into a glowing ball, he hurled it at Rikard.

There was a scream followed by the sound of shattering stone. The earth shivered and shifted with a deep, rumbling growl. Fine dust sifted down from above and then the world came crashing down around him.

When Khy opened his eyes, he was lying on the ground in the only rubble-free spot he could see. Of Rikard, there was no sign but a thin, long-fingered hand protruding from a pile of broken stone.

Light of every color imaginable surrounded him, dancing in the air. Khy followed the streamers of light with his eyes, turning his face to the sky to see where they came from, and froze.

The ceiling was gone. The force of what he'd done to Rikard had brought the roof down around him.

He hoped he hadn't hurt—

Jaedin.

He looked about frantically, and when his gaze finally came to rest upon the man who lay in the partially collapsed doorway, Khy's heart seized in his chest. The light was in Jaedin, too, but it flickered weakly, like a dying candle flame. Even as he watched, it faded, slowly growing dimmer.

"No..." Khy struggled to his feet and clambered across the rubble to where Jaedin lay.

Jaedin was too still, too pale, the light inside him fading faster now. Khy dropped to his knees beside him. There was blood on Jaedin's head, darkening his golden hair.

“No...” he sobbed. “You weren’t supposed to be here. Why did you follow me?”

Tears burned his eyes and slipped down his cheeks. He couldn’t watch the light that was Jaedin’s life fade into darkness. With a sob, he turned his face to the sky so he didn’t have to watch his lover die.

The Fireskye rippled and shimmered above him, its colors pure and strong. It was blindingly bright, burning with a cold fire so intense that Khy could feel it even on the ground.

Without the collar to bind him or the medicine to blind him, Khy saw exactly where he could grab onto that light. Could he put some of that light into Jaedin, use it to chase away the darkness that threatened to snuff out Jaedin’s life?

Khy reached for the Fireskye and pulled it down into himself.

The moment he took hold of the Fireskye, Khy knew it was too much, too strong. It burned deep inside, like what Rikard did to him, only far worse. It would burn him to ash if he held onto it for too long. Not that it mattered—saving Jaedin was all that mattered. He just needed to figure out how to get some of that light where he needed it.

He knew instinctively that the raw, burning light of the Fireskye was far too strong to push into Jaedin. The colors were too hard and too bright; they would burn and destroy, killing Jaedin as surely as doing nothing would. Khy would have to use only the colors of life and healing.

He focused all his attention on the light, peeling away the colors he wanted—the soft, gentle shades that would heal rather than hurt, caress rather than burn. When he had exactly the right mix, he *pushed* the light into Jaedin, willing it to blend with Jaedin’s own fading life, to chase away the darkness. The energy flowed from Khy into Jaedin, a gentle stream of soft, healing light, nothing like the brilliant, raging torrent that was pouring into Khy from above.

Keeping his hold on the Fireskye hurt far more than anything Rikard had forced him to endure. Khy gritted his teeth and hung on, determined not to let the source of the light go until he had taken all that Jaedin needed. He continued separating the colors, pushing the healing, life-giving light into his lover. By the time the colors inside Jaedin glowed bright and clear with life, Khy could barely think through the pain.

It was easy to stop the flow of light from himself to Jaedin, but letting go of the Fireskye was another matter entirely. With the last of his strength, he tried

to *push* the light back up toward the sky, tried to close the channel he'd opened into himself. It didn't matter how hard he pushed, he couldn't let go, couldn't stop it. The Fireskye kept pouring into him, burning him until he was certain there was nothing left of him but ash.

He barely heard the screams that rang through the air before he fell back into the blazing inferno of leythe-light he'd called.

Jaedin woke to a familiar, gentle warmth flowing through him. For a moment, he was back in the infirmary tent on campaign with Rhane's Raiders. He'd been injured, and the healer was looking after him, using the leythe to heal his wounds so he could fight another day.

When he opened his eyes, there was no tent and no healer. Instead he was surrounded by broken walls and shattered stone. The roof of the room where he'd found Rikard was now open to the sky. The light of the Fireskye above him was all wrong. Instead of gently rippling and shimmering above, the Fireskye twisted and roiled as a great swath of its light was sucked down toward the earth.

Jaedin followed the path of the light, and his eyes came to rest upon Khy, who stood in the center of the broken stones, wreathed in lightning. His head was flung back, hair whipping wildly about his head as the Fireskye poured into him. Khy's body writhed and convulsed with the force of it, as if he were a rag doll being shaken by a dog.

"Khy... stop! What are you doing?" Jaedin struggled to his feet and took a step toward Khy, then stopped dead.

Khy glowed with the light of the leythe. Jaedin had never seen such an overt display of power, not even in his soldiering days. As he watched in horror, the lightning around Khy crackled and snapped as it was drawn into his body. Khy shuddered violently, then let out a scream that sounded more animal than human. The sound cut off abruptly, and Khy collapsed in the rubble.

The moment Khy hit the ground, the glow dimmed and the light of the Fireskye lifted back up into the sky in ragged streamers.

Jaedin hurried to Khy's side, dropping to his knees and gathering Khy to him. Khy lay limp in his arms, breath coming in harsh, labored pants. Sullen flickers of light moved in sluggish circles beneath his skin. Even if he'd had his supplies, Jaedin wouldn't have known what to do for him, but he knew who

might. He rose carefully to his feet. "Hang on," he whispered. "I'm taking you to Varian."

When he turned to carry Khy out of the wreckage, Tor appeared in the doorway.

"Where were you when Rikard grabbed him?" Jaedin demanded.

"Within the Fireshard, letting Khy play the role he was meant to," Tor said mildly. "Now that he has, it matters little to the balance whether he lives or dies." Those silver-gray eyes lifted and locked onto Jaedin's. "But it matters a great deal to you."

They wrapped Khy in Tor's cloak, and Tor led the way out of the ruins and back to the path. Jaedin shook his head. "It took me hours to get here. He's fading fast... I don't think he'll last that long."

Tor raised an eyebrow and indicated a shimmering patch of light hanging in the air. "Step through. It will take us back to the Fireshard. Varian is waiting, and he will know what to do."

For the first time since he'd woken and discovered Khy was gone, hope stirred in Jaedin's heart. He held Khy close against him and stepped into the light.

Khy's dreams were dark and laced with burning pain and icy cold. When he woke, he wasn't certain at first if he was caught up in another dream. Eyes of brilliant violet set in a face so perfect it couldn't possibly be real stared down at him. The black brows were drawn up in a frown as those beautiful eyes studied him.

"What... where...?"

Varian's full lips curved in a smile. "You are in my home in the Fireshard, Khy, and you have done well." He leaned back, and Khy saw that he was sitting in a chair drawn up close to the bed. A blanket was draped over his shoulders, and the leythari looked tired and drawn. Tor stood behind Varian's chair, his hands on Varian's shoulders, his expression one of concern.

"You wouldn't believe the dreams I've had..." Khy trailed off, blinking as the events of the past few days unfolded in his mind. He felt different, lighter, and the familiar weight of the collar he'd worn for so long was gone. His hand crept up to his throat and he hesitated for a moment before brushing his fingers against his neck. They touched bare skin. "They weren't dreams... were they?"

“No, they were not.” Varian gestured toward the window, where the Fireskye shimmered in the deep purple twilight. A ragged hole had been torn in the curtain of light, a space where the lavender-blue of a clear sky showed through.

Khy frowned. He didn't remember anything happening to the Fireskye, all he remembered was—

Jaedin, lying limp and still on the ground, all the light inside him fading to darkness as his life bled out.

“Jaedin,” he whispered, tears burning his eyes. “He came for me. And Rikard...” He couldn't go on. Grief welled up inside him, constricting his throat and washing him in emptiness.

“He tried,” said a familiar voice from his other side. A voice Khy had not expected to hear again in this life.

Khy turned his head to see Jaedin perched on the edge of the bed. “I thought you were dead,” he whispered.

“You healed me.” Jaedin reached for his hand and pressed it gently between his own. “Nearly at the cost of your own life. According to Varian, you called down the power of the Fireskye itself, and used it to heal me.”

He didn't remember that part clearly at all. He remembered the emptiness that had consumed him when he'd believed Jaedin was dead, remembered looking up at the Fireskye and seeing right where he might grab onto it. He hadn't even given a thought to what would happen if he tried to use it, or whether or not he'd be able to control it.

Khy turned his gaze back to the window, to the ragged edges of the hole torn in the coruscating sheet of gold and orange light that rippled across the sky. “I did that?”

“I saw it with my own eyes,” Jaedin said softly. “You glowed, Khy. All that light, all that power...”

“And I felt it as a powerful disturbance in the leythe,” Varian said. “Right after my sense of Rikard's foul presence disappeared from the leythe. Once I knew that Rikard was gone, and could not interfere with my own workings, I constructed a gate and sent Tor out to fetch you both back here. By that time, you had already channeled the Fireskye through yourself, and there was nothing to do but bring you here and heal you as best I could.”

Khy stretched, testing his limbs. "I don't feel hurt," he said.

"You were not hurt in your body, Khy. But the channels inside you—the ones that carry the leythe energy and allow you to manipulate it—most of those are gone. Burned out by the sheer strength of the power they were forced to carry."

"What does that mean?" Khy whispered.

Jaedin's hand squeezed his. "It means you don't have that kind of power anymore, and you won't have to worry about people like Rikard trying to use you. Nobody can steal what you no longer possess."

"It also means there will be no more accidents," Varian told him. "No more uncontrolled outbursts of leythe energy when you feel threatened or afraid."

Khy sank back against the pillows, a feeling of relief settling over him. He could hardly miss something that had, for the most part, only caused him trouble, something that had never been his to control in the first place. He especially wouldn't miss something that had caused Jaedin pain, and had reduced Khy to nothing but a valuable piece of property in the eyes of Rikard. He mulled over Varian's words, then lifted his gaze to meet the leythari's. "You said *most* of the channels are gone. What does that mean?"

"The ability to heal remains yours," Varian said.

"I'm a healer?" Khy asked.

"You could be an extremely gifted healer if you take the time to learn," Varian told him.

Behind him, Tor stirred. "And now that you've seen for yourself that Khy is well, it's time for you to seek your own bed," he said to Varian in a tone that brooked no argument.

Varian gave Tor a fond look and winked at Khy. "Toryn enjoys being in charge. He does not get the opportunity very often."

Tor rolled his eyes and started to help the leythari to his feet. Varian shrugged him off with a scowl. "I am not as weak as all that, Human," he said, more than a hint of a growl in his voice.

"Right. And the passing out earlier was all for show, was it?" Tor asked drily.

Varian muttered something under his breath and allowed Tor to lead him from the room.

At the doorway, Tor paused. "I'll bring food for you both after I tie this one to his bed."

"I heard that, Toryn," Varian's voice came from beyond the doorway. "It sounded rather like a challenge."

Tor rolled his eyes again and flashed them a grin. "Rest now. You still need to regain your strength, Khy, and Jaedin has spent the last two days at your side, worrying instead of sleeping."

When Tor had closed the door behind him, leaving them alone, Khy turned to Jaedin. "You did?"

Jaedin rubbed his eyes and gave Khy a tired smile. "I feared you might slip away while I slept, and I couldn't bear the thought," he said softly.

Khy regarded him soberly. "I'm sorry I left you behind. I couldn't stand the thought of Rikard using me to hurt you."

"I admit that I was angry when I found you gone, but I was more frightened. I understand why you needed to go alone, though." Jaedin frowned at him. "Do you remember any of it? Do you remember healing me?"

Khy shook his head. "Not really. It burned like cold fire. I hope it doesn't always feel like that." He shivered at the thought.

"I don't think it does, if you do it right. I've never heard Mara complain."

"Do you think... do you think Mara would teach me the right way to do it?"

Jaedin smiled. "I imagine she would. She's been talking about taking on an apprentice ever since I first met her. She just hasn't been able to find anyone with the talent who's willing to settle in a village as small as Rosefire."

Khy's eyes sought Jaedin's. "Then... I could stay in Rosefire," he said softly.

"With me," Jaedin said.

Khy threw his arms around Jaedin, pulling the man down next to him on the bed. "I'd like that," he said against Jaedin's neck.

"So would I. Very much."

"Show me?" Khy whispered.

Jaedin's strong arms engulfed him in a warm hug. "I'll show you, all right," Jaedin whispered back. "Every moment of every day."

Khy relaxed against that strong, familiar body, and knew all the way down to the bottom of his heart that here in Jaedin's arms, he'd found a home.

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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