

i: ASKEYIA

Averalaan, the Common, 20th of Henden, 411 A.A.

Children were always the worst.

Five years spent cramping knees at the feet of Levec, the most notorious healer on the isle of *Averalaan Aramarelas*, had drilled into Askeyia a'Narin the fundamental lessons about how to be a healer in the Real World. But although she could now walk past crippled men, injured women, people in pain so great that they hid it behind enough ale to flood a river, she found it hard to bypass the children.

So she did what many of the healerborn did when they went about their errands in the city outside of their walls: She dressed like one of the poorer merchants, and she kept the medallion which proclaimed her birthright -- the talent with which she'd been born -- hidden. It meant that the needy had to actually know *who* she was before they could approach her with their tales of woe.

It was so hard to say no. It was still hard. She wondered, as she pulled the edges of her woven shawl more tightly around her shoulders, if she would ever find it easy. Levec had perfected such a look of temper that people were afraid to speak to him -- and he was the only healer who wore his medallion openly no matter where he travelled.

Of course, Levec also had a single brow that crossed his forehead in a dark unbroken line, and his temper suited the perpetual frown he wore; had she been injured, with nowhere to turn, she'd probably have to be *paid* to approach the taciturn healer.

Askeyia a'Narin had no such brow. She had no height to speak of, although she had so hoped that she would take after her father's family and grow all tall and willowy by the time she'd reached her name age. It hadn't happened; she'd slimmed out a little -- hard work and a poor harvest always had that effect -- but she'd only gained an inch on her mother, and her mother was, to put it politely, short.

She'd tried different hairstyles, something suitably severe, but they made her chin look chubby, and she had, although Mother knew it was childish, her vanity. She also had an uncanny ability to be recognized, although how or why she couldn't say, for what she was.

Heal one of them, Levec would say sternly, and they'll follow you around like rats

for the rest of your life, gnawing at your strength when you can least afford to lose it.

You think you can save the world because you're young. You can't. And if you let the pain of the world drag you in, you'll find the undertow is too strong; you'll be swept away by it, and all of the good you could have done in a long life of healing will be lost.

There are always dying men. Dying women. Dying children. They need and will always need. But you don't owe them your life, is that clear? If you were meant to live their lives, you'd have been born as them. You weren't. Those people with broken ribs or infections or illnesses -- they don't care who you are; they reach for you blindly, the same way they reach for a drink. They'll drain you as dry, if you give them half a chance. You can't afford to be swallowed by those needs. Askeyia, are you listening?

She had nodded politely, thinking that Dantallon was a healer without compare, but a gentle man, a quiet one. Most of the healer's students felt that way, but they'd long since refrained from pointing him out as a counter example. She'd tried it, once.

Of course he's gentle, had been his reply. He's the Queen's own healer. A commoner with a cold comes near him and the Kings' personal guard will make the matter of a healing entirely moot. You, on the other hand, are far too approachable. I tell you, Askeyia, you're the softest freetowner I've ever met.

Words meant to sting, and they did.

Because he was right, and she hated it.

As proof of this, as proof that his words held both sting and truth -- as if words with no truth could sting at all -- she looked up from her reverie and saw a woman standing in the cobbled streets of the Common. The bowers of the Rings -- the ancient stands of trees that were famous throughout the Empire -- caught the height of the mid-day sun and made of it shadow, short and dark, that pooled around the woman's feet. Her eyes were wide, her skin unnaturally pale, and the collar that framed her neck was worn to threads; Levec's second youngest healer thought that the shift she wore had once been a deep blue by the edge of colour near seams that were splitting with age; it was pale, now, whatever its colour had once been.

Askeyia started to lower her face again -- she found it easier to walk through the Common with her eyes cast groundward -- but she stopped as she saw that the woman's arms were rigidly curved on either side of a bundle of cloth. A still bundle.

People were always in a hurry in the Common; they glared at the woman as they shoved their way past her, flowing to either side like a sluggish river. The woman swayed as shoulders and elbow brushed her to either side, but she stayed her ground as if rooted. Raising her glance from the bundle to the woman's face, Askeyia made her first mistake: she met the eyes, dark-ringed, horrified.

You couldn't meet eyes like that and turn away. You couldn't do it; you'd have to leave shreds of soul behind just to tear yourself free.

Swallowing, she glanced over her shoulder once, but there were no other healers in sight; Jonas had run ahead, and Mercy -- Aristide, really, but everyone called him Mercy, for reasons which were clearly lost on Askeyia -- had disappeared into a stall full of people with too many elbows for Askeyia's less prepossessing size. Neither one could see her, and what they couldn't see, they couldn't report.

Besides, it wasn't as if she was going to heal the babe. She was just -- she was just going to see if the babe needed help. That was all. She was just going to take a small look; just touch the child. Nothing too dangerous. And children -- well, if they were the most compelling, they were also by far the easiest to heal all across the spectrum; their bodies helped.

Taking a deep breath, Askeyia a'Narin reached into her shirt and pulled the medallion of the healerborn out. It glittered in the sun as she laid it flat against her breast, a platinum rectangle, simple and severe, with only the golden glow of two hands, palm up, to alleviate the starkness. No one in the city could mistake the medallion itself for anything other than it was.

The flash of light cut the shadow and drew the woman's attention, and although she made no move toward Askeyia, her dark eyes lit with a hunger, a hope, that the healer had seen so often it shouldn't have been jarring. But it was.

"Healer," the woman said. "Healer, I know --"

Askeyia lifted a hand that was at once gentle and imperious. She held out her hands but the woman's arms, thin and fragile, seemed locked in a position that she herself had forgotten how to break. Shock, or worse. The woman started to speak again, and again Askeyia lifted a hand. Of all the things that she found difficult, the pleading was always the worse; it cut her, to hear a voice so devoid of pride.

"I am Askeyia a'Narin," she told the woman gently. "And I'm -- I'm about to start my day at the Mother's temple in the thirteenth holding." It was absolutely true. "If you'd -- if you'd like, you can accompany me." She held out her arms again.

This time, this time the woman seemed to break; her feet left the cobbled stones as if she'd yanked them free. "It's my boy -- he's hurt my boy -- healer, my boy --"

This close, she could see the blood that trailed out of either corner of the child's mouth. He was young; no newborn, but not yet crawling. And as she touched his face, as she concentrated, calling upon the talent that was

bane and boon both, she knew. Ribs, thin and flexible, had been crushed with enough speed and force to pierce lungs; blood filled them, even now. He was dying. Not so close to death as to threaten her should she attempt the healing, but not so far that his mother had the time it would take to walk to the Mother's temple and wait for the healer to arrive.

Not so close to death?

He's only a child, she thought. *He's only a child. And children aren't so costly to call back. Everyone knows that.*

She did not look over her shoulder again. She did not wonder where Jonas or Mercy were. She held the life in her hands, and the life was almost everything. It was why a healer couldn't freely touch the injured or the dying at her level of skill; the call was almost impossible to ignore. Not that she would have ignored it; she was, as Levec had said, the softest freetowner that he had ever met.

She brushed a stray strand of limp, dark hair from the curve of her cheek; it was shorn by fire, the candle's kiss -- one she'd been too tired to completely avoid. With care, she took the child from the arms of his mother.

He's only a babe, she thought. *It won't cost much.*

#

Babies were need defined, but their needs were simple; eating, sleeping, physical comfort. Askeyia felt the warmth leave her hands in a rush as the baby's thoughts, inarticulate pictures, smells -- the smells were *strong* -- and images of a face, smiling, joyful, tearful, tired and sometimes angry filled her vision. She could not recognize this woman in the woman who stood in such desperation, beneath the trees in the Common; *this* woman was safety. Had this child known loneliness? Not yet; not yet.

He was 'Lesso; a diminutive, Askeyia told herself, although it was a struggle to find the word. When he was hungry, he called for his mother, and she came; she was warm when he was cold, she was sound and sight and smell.

'Lesso thought that Askeyia was his mother, and when she called him, when she held out her arms, he came with ease and joy -- or rather, he wailed the louder for the sound of her voice bearing his name in the shadows of the foothills that led to Mandaros. She called him again, and again he wailed, louder; one last time, and she was there, he was there; she picked him up and held him tight against her, *within* her, bringing him back to himself.

And all about her, too strong to be memory, too visceral to evoke that

naive yearning, the things by which a young babe knows a mother. By which, in turn, a young mother knows her child. And this was her child, this 'Lesso, this babe; this was hers, to protect and heal and comfort. He fell into the cradle of her healer-strong arms and rested there as if those arms were made to do no more than hold him.

Really, as she'd told Levec a hundred times, a *thousand* times, healing babies was no risk at all.

Really.

But she couldn't explain the tears that coursed down her cheeks as the world returned to her eyes -- to her adult eyes. Couldn't explain the way her arms tightened around the swaddling cloth, the way she pressed the babe tight, too tight, to her chest.

She spoke phrases, things meant to separate the healer from the healed -- but words offered no separation.

The screaming, thin and terrible, did.

Turning, sloping groundward with the sudden disorientation of motion, she saw 'Lesso's mother -- his terrified mother, his strong, his happy, his angry mother -- chalk white, white as snow on mountain peaks.

"Healer!" She cried, pointing to a place beyond the vulnerable healer's back.

Askeyia spun again, lighter on her feet, surer now that the pounding of heart was without question *her* heart, not his. And as she gazed at a man who was moving from the centre of the Ring beneath which she stood, she remembered what 'Lesso's mother had said.

He's *hurt my boy* --

No healer had ever come out of the call with such speed, such terrible urgency. Was it 'Lesso's fear? Her own vulnerability? The weakness of a healing? She turned, handing the child to his mother, to his *other* mother, and then turned again, a single word having passed between them: *Run*.

#

He was well-dressed, but not so well-dressed that he needed guards or a palanquin; she thought him a southern noble, some minor clansmen, not the valley Voyani whose ancestors now crowded many of the hundred holdings in their attempts to make roots -- a place for themselves that their Southern compatriots neither wanted nor claimed. His hair was dark, and his skin quite pale; his shoulders were broad and his hands unblemished. His teeth -- rare enough in a man his age -- were perfect, as was his bow; he had the look of power about him.

He carried no obvious weapon, wore no obvious armour.

In the light of day, he should have looked like just another man, another foreigner.

But the light of day shunned him.

She glanced once over her shoulder, just once, to make sure her child had escaped, and then she, too, ran.

Light, as distinct as bird call, she heard his chuckle cross the Common as if nothing at all separated them.

#

Askeyia a'Narin was good at running. A life of relative luxury and indolence had not robbed her of the skill -- or the instincts that had honed it. Air crested her open lips and slid down her throat in a rush. The cobbled stones beneath her feet were hard and solid; they provided an even ground with no treacherous dips or holes, no unseen roots or branches.

As a healer, she had a value.

It was beyond money, although money was paid for it. Untrained, unknown, and unregistered, she was worth half of the naval fleet's best ships to the right man, if he could catch her and remove her from view before he could be stopped. It was, of course, completely illegal; the punishments for kidnapping and forced indenture were almost as harsh as those for murder. But murder didn't stop, either.

Askeyia knew how to keep her wits about her while she ran. It was a strength, and time and again, it had proved her salvation. And the running itself cleared her mind; the depth of the breathing, the ache of her lungs, kept her firmly in the here and the now. It was harder to panic if she was *doing* something.

And it was hard to do something with the press of bodies grown so thick at the height of day. In the summer months, the height of day was the emptiest time in the Common, but in Henden, what with the cool breeze and rains, it was the most crowded. She had no time to apologize, although she heard the curses at her back and to either side. She hoped that none of the men or women were foreign, and that none of them had tempers, because she couldn't afford to be called to task for the clumsy, horrible run. She had to find --

There. Authority guards. Armour gleaming ostentatiously in a day that was cool enough for it. Their helms were down; the metal bridges that followed the line of the nose usually made her think of sculptured birds.

Not today. Her feet slowed their stride as they responded to the giddy

relief she felt at arriving, untouched, before the men who kept the Kings' Order in the Common. Safety, here, although in her youth she'd been raised to distrust Imperial authority. A freetowner's daughter, but not a freetowner at heart. Beneath her chin, the medallion she wore caught the light, bending it, scattering it, and holding it as she caught her breath.

"Healer?" A guard who Askeyia thought wore the insignia of a Primus said, eyes widening slightly. Her medallion wasn't a common sight in the open streets.

"I -- I'm being followed," she said, drawing a harsh breath -- a series of harsh, quick breaths. "Foreigner."

The guard -- a man she vaguely recognized -- frowned as her words, and her medallion, together made clear what the threat was. He turned at once, waving his three companions forward. She huddled behind the mass of their armoured bodies, feeling the safety of their height, their obvious weight, and especially of the arms that they were even now unsheathing in a rough scrape of metal against metal.

The stranger walked into view. *Walked*. Yet he followed no more than twenty seconds behind her; less, if she were a capable judge. He was completely unruffled, as finely turned out -- in a city sort of way -- as he had been when she'd first set eyes on him.

And the shadows that the trees cast still flowed from the edge of his cloak, bleeding into the stones like a thick, rich liquid. He smiled, glancing between the guards as if he could see through them.

The safety she felt vanished then, as if she, too, could see through armour and arms and simple physical strength as the illusions they were. Had her eyes widened? Had she made a noise -- any noise other than the simple and unavoidable rhythm of drawn breath? She thought she must have, because he smiled. Winter on the mountain had been just as cold and just as deadly as that smile for a healerborn girl who didn't understand what the word storm meant.

And she was a healerborn girl, with all that that implied. All of it.

"Primus," she said, standing forward, the heart beneath her ribcage telling the tale of the fear that she forced, with so much difficulty, from the lines of her face.

"I'm a Sentrus, Healer," he said, as the stranger drew closer. There was a smile in his voice, a friendly correction offered to a woman who had seen enough of the effects of a sword, but never seemed to know enough to recognize the rank of the person who wielded it.

“I -- I think I’ve made a mistake.”

He looked back over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing.

She swallowed, pale in the fading day, the weariness replaced by the giddiness of too much fear.

“Healer -- are you certain?” He didn’t believe her, of course. Askeyia a’Narin was a terrible liar. Especially when the lie was forced out of her by an instinct that she only barely controlled: the desire to preserve, at any cost, the lives of those around her. Because she knew, without knowing why, that in seconds, these men would lie aground, dying just as surely as the babe had been, but with no one to come and rescue them all. No one to come for even one.

All healers learned to hide from the instinct; to deny it. There wasn’t enough power in the world to stop death from coming to those who heard the call; not enough power in the world to save every man, woman and child who was worth saving. But there was guilt enough to destroy a healer, and a healer’s life.

And if not guilt, there was the call itself. To guide a man back from death was the most harrowing journey that either the dying man or the living healer could make. Or so she had been taught.

But she didn’t believe it, not now. Because she saw the death in the stranger, writ across the living shadow in his face, and she could not imagine that anything could be harder than this: To swallow, to smile, to force a foolish young expression across her face instead of huddling behind swords and armour, or better, fleeing and gaining the moments each guard’s death would take.

The stranger had stopped completely; he still looked at her, through the guards, but his expression lost all smile, all edge of expensive pleasure.

“Askeyia a’Narin,” he said, and she saw that his eyes had no whites. “I am Isladar.”

She wanted to run, but the guards wouldn’t -- couldn’t it seemed -- quite leave her, and she knew that the moment she unleashed her struggling fear, the moment her feet hit the cobbled stones, they would fulfil their duty.

And wasn’t that what they’d trained all those years for? Wasn’t it what they swore their oath to do? Wasn’t it what they -- *say it, Askeyia* -- risked daily, with full knowledge? Ah, she wanted to listen; the words were the strongest they’d ever been. But she stayed. Because she was healerborn. Because she knew now that ‘Lesso’s injury had simply been the trap that had closed around her; this man had injured the babe to catch her out, and a

man who could do that could do anything.

Levec would be angry, when he learned of how she'd let herself be caught.

"Isladar," she said, turning the word around in a dry, dry mouth. "W-what do you want?"

He offered her his arm; she reached out, hesitated, and then let her hand fall limply to her side. She couldn't touch him. She could not.

He stared at her, his eyes narrow, his lips a slender line in his pale face. Then he smiled, and this smile, unlike the other, was, if not friendly, benign. "Let us," he said, withdrawing his arm, "walk. I have so little experience of the healerborn."

She swallowed, took a step forward, stood near enough that he might actually catch her in the circle of his arms. But he did not touch her; instead, he smiled more deeply. "Your fear," he whispered, "is so strong. I am almost surprised that you remember how to walk."

So was Askeyia.

#

He did not wish to injure her, but he could not quite bring himself to say this; there was no gentleness in his nature, nor could there be. He was Firstborn, he had Chosen, and he resided in a place of power among his kin: Kinlord. Demon. *Kialli*. Isladar.

Months had gone into the careful watch and study of the houses of healing on the isle. The healing houses were notable for the security of their walls, the profusion of guards that protected the students within them, and the personalities of the people who claimed to own them. He studied them, but always at a distance; he would cause an injury, pay for its correction, and then take the information from the mind of the man or woman so healed. Time-consuming.

Yet in the end, he had settled upon the house of healing owned by a man named Levec. Healer Levec. Taciturn, sharp-tongued and more possessive by half than the next man who undertook the running of a house of healing, he had caught Isladar's attention. If he had a family name -- as most of the mortals did -- it was not one that Isladar could find easily, and the various records of the Authorities were open for his inspection. In all of his dealings, he was simply Healer Levec, and he was known to any man of power who made his home on the holy isle.

That isle was no home to Isladar, and he did not cross the bridge that separated *Averalaan Aramarelas* from the rest of Averalaan happily, but he

knew what he sought when he left his Lord's side, and knew further that it was upon the isle, and nowhere else, that it could be found.

He chose Levec's House, and from there, his intense personal scrutiny began. Levec, of course, was not useful in the grand scheme -- but Isladar believed that a man of Levec's temperament was prone to foster those who were. He was not completely certain; the younger healerborn students did not have a *Kialli's* way of measuring the depth of mortal affection, and they took Levec's words, often, as words that held all of his many meanings.

His smile folded into a line; his face grew remote, as it often did when he contemplated the plans that lay, stone by carefully placed stone, ahead. Always ahead. If he was honest, and in the silence of his own thoughts, he could afford to be little else, he had chosen the House of Levec for one other reason: Levec was a man who would be ... injured by the loss of one of his students. Even one.

And so we prove ourselves, again and again, true to our nature.

There were many healers who fit the kinlord's needs in a purely emotional way, but they were more often than not young men, and for his particular plan, a young man was out of the question. Yet in the case of a house such as the house Levec ran, the young women were often more guarded -- in both senses of the word -- and it was not until he found Askeyia a'Narin that he knew, with as much certainty as it could be known, that he had found the one.

Narrowing the scope of his search had been simple, and following her had proved instructive, although what he said remained true: healers were almost beyond his ken.

"Askeyia a'Narin," he said, as he brought her to one of the standing rings. "I have waited many months for this opportunity." He reached out, caught the underside of a leaf, and followed its veins up to the thin stem that fixed it to branch. With a quiet snap he pulled it free, turning it over in his palm as if that, and nothing else, had been his purpose.

"What do you want?" She said again, the fear thickening her words less. "Why have you -- why did you --"

It was hard, not to frighten her; she was so close to the edge of hysteria he had only to speak the right words and she would fall over it. In truth, he greatly desired it, but that was the visceral, and Isladar was known for the control that he exercised over base impulse. Over any impulse. He handed her the leaf, taking care to cause no contact between her flesh and his.

Shaking, she took it, pressing it unconsciously between the palms of her hands as if it were a flattened glove. The leaves very much resembled wide,

oddly coloured hands.

“You are about to become a part of history, Askeyia. It falls to you to begin the greatest empire that the world has ever known.”

She was mute; she stared at the leaf, as if meeting his eyes was painful. He pondered a moment, wondering if she could see his true eyes. A rare self-annoyance troubled him; of course she could see them. What other reason could she have for her terror? The healers saw much that he had not expected. He reached out to touch her, and pulled away as her nostrils widened. The sun was falling; the shadow was growing.

“Askeyia,” he said, his voice soft and neutral, “I do not intend to frighten you.”

At that, her eyes flashed. “You’re lying,” she said, evenly.

“Am I?”

“Yes.” Pause. “No.”

He laughed, although he knew she would find the laughter unpleasant. “You speak truth. And it is thus with my truth: that opposites are in equal measure valid.” He frowned, fell silent. He had not intended to say as much. It annoyed him.

“What do you want from me?”

“Everything,” he said gravely, “but not for me.” Her fear was as strong as any fear he had tasted in this domain; he had, after all, been cautious and infinitely human in his interaction with other mortals. But this one, this girl -- she would see much more than a simple *Kialli* indulgence before her life ended.

“For -- for who?” She edged away, hit the bark of a tree that unexpectedly barred passage into the Common that she had traversed freely for years.

He stepped forward, coming upon her quickly, moving with all of his speed, all grace. Her eyes widened, becoming white circles around dilated pupils; the fear made her wild, and it was wildness that he craved. She threw up her hands in denial, seeking to wedge them between her body and his chest. Too late. He was upon her; his shadow ran up the sides of her face, her throat, the back of her neck; he caught her as she flailed, trapping the sound of her scream in her throat; letting enough escape for his ears, for his ears alone.

It had been millennia.

It would be millennia again.

How odd, that the one girl he found suitable was also, in her fashion, the

one he found most tempting. The temptation itself was an unexpected sweetness, a small element of risk. For he needed her, and he needed her alive. And sane. He walked the edge, carrying her as she flailed. Knowing that he could not give her the consummation of her fear, of her dread, of her certainty.

He lowered his head; his face, wreathed in the shadow that healers alone could find so corrosive no matter what its intent, rested a moment in the crook of her neck. His lips touched her ears, and into the shadows, into the sounds of her terror, into the crackling sharpness of the fantasies of death that he now let run like the wild hunt through her thoughts, he said, "For who? My Lord, dear child; the only Lord that any of the kin have willingly chosen to serve. *Allasakar*."

And although the word sank and took roots immediately, although her fear gave the name as great a weight as her imagination allowed, the speaking of it freed him.

Impulse.

Control.

"I -- apologize," he said, with some effort. "We are both creatures of our nature." His smile was a glimmer in the darkness of his shadow; it started and stopped almost at the same instant. She could not see it.

He did not release her, but only because he could not; the spell was near completion, and this particular casting of it required physical contact. He was not, after all, a lord who chose ostentation in any of his endeavours.

#

He cast a glamer upon her, something to take away the fear that she radiated; in the Shining City, there was no faster way to be noticed. No better way to call the kin, be they greater or lesser, to feed. She was not ready for that -- nor would she ever be.

The kin that had been called to these plains for the first time in millennia found the absence of Those Who Have Chosen a far more bitter thing than any, even Isladar, had suspected the would.

And Isladar, of the kin, was the wisest.

He came to the stone tower that had been built upon its own foundation. Steps, of a piece, were sheared up the tower's side; they were small enough for human feet, and they would serve until such a time as human feet no longer found it necessary to traverse them. The tower of the Lord had no such steps; his audiences were few indeed, and he chose to hold them in the basin at the foot of this, his Shining City. The kinlords, each and every one,

were capable of rising to the height of his doors without the need to touch anything as rough as hewn stone; it was a subtle test, another proof that only the powerful reigned in the hells.

In the hells.

But in this rocky, barren place, the skies were clear; the snow, when it fell, fell in a clean, white storm of ice from the heights; the rivers that ran carried with them pebbles, stones, sand -- and the air was silent, the lands were empty for as far as the eye could see.

The kin could see far indeed.

There were no demesnes here, although there were Lords; there were no souls. Mandaros did not control the only gate to this realm, and the kin were free to gaze upon the souls of those who had not yet made their Choice; who had not yet travelled the length and breadth of their many, many lives. And the souls of the undecided were both an offence and a dangerous curiosity.

He looked at the rigid form of the woman beside him, seeing beyond the fragile network of skin and vein and flesh. She was pale, pale grey; if darkness lingered, it lingered so far away from the heart that he knew she was a lifetime or two away from her last journey to the halls of Mandaros. And while Mandaros reigned, while the Kings reigned, while the world turned and changed in ways that were less conducive to the fear and the hatred, the loss and the bitter, bitter anger that consumed the spirit, such a soul as this would never be theirs. Or be his.

Ah, but the Lord had his plans, and the Lord could see far beyond the span of a single human life.

The kinlord's lips lifted in a subtle smile. Because he knew, as did the Lord, that the span of a single human life -- less -- was all that they had, if they were to succeed. What Allasakar had done, the Oathmaker could do again in a matter of decades.

If the Oathmaker and the Lord stood across a field of battle, each at the peak of their powers, there was no contest. But they would not stand at the peak of their powers; or at least the Lord would not. Now now. To exist in this world at all he had had to sever the connection between the hells and the mortal plane before he was fully prepared. He was, as the kin, required to form a body out of the substance of the plain itself -- and to build a body to house the power of a god was no simple task, no easy feat. Once, it might have been.

Before the sundering.

But the lands of man fought and pulled against the immortal; to create the avatar itself was a task not to be hurried -- when one had the luxury, and the knowledge. They knew, now. They had not known, then. Thus, with the plans of even the Lord of the hells. Crippled or no, he was strong. And crippled or no, he wore the mantle; he was the Lord of them all.

The Lord they had chosen to follow.

She stirred, as she stood beside him, drawing his attention.

"Welcome," he said, his voice once again soft, "to the Shining City."

She did not blink; did not react.

He cast again, cast swiftly, bound her tightly without ever lifting a hand.

"Askeyia a'Narin," he said, "fear is not your friend here. **You will not feel it.**"

And because it was something she desperately desired, she obeyed the command in his words.

Such a human weakness.

#

The City had been carved out of the rock of a mountain that seemed to exist for only that purpose; its face, where its face could be seen was sheer and sharp, as if the rock itself had been shorn and pulled new from the ground. It was the first thing she noticed, that the rock was new, that the city was rock. That there was, from this vantage, no life at all, no greenery, no colour, no bird on wing in the open sky.

Allasakar. She could not speak the name; it had been forbidden to all but the boldest of children for so long that she could not clearly remember the first time she had heard it.

The last time was still too clear.

As if to deny it, she turned her face to the window and the world it framed. Nothing moved; if not for the wind through the open frame, it might have been a painter's vision of isolation. But the wind was cold and sharp; it stung the skin and dried the eyes. More, it could not accomplish. Askeyia a'Narin was, after all, a healer born. She adjusted to cold, and its damage, with the same conscious effort it took to draw breath -- which was to say, none at all.

She could not banish the fear.

Lord Isladar came, frequently, his displeasure a crease at the corners of black eyes, or a tightening of the lips. She was afraid of him; she could not hide the fear, and the more she tried -- and she did try -- the more it called

him. He would come, stand by her, a statue that spoke a word, or two, or three. Then, satisfied, he would nod and speak soothing words, of a kind that were forgotten the moment he uttered them.

She would speak just so, she knew, to an injured child. Or an animal, half-mad with pain.

A dusk, heralding the northern, frozen night, had come; after it, after a night so long that she dared not close her eyes, the dawn had followed. And the dawn, in this thin, dry air, was glorious. The sun rose, framed by the stone sill; hands that barely felt like her own gripped its edge; breath stopped a moment.

For the first time since she'd arrived in this terrible place, she did two things. She accepted that this was no dream, no capricious nightmare. And she prayed.

There was, in this room, a bed; it was wide enough for two, she thought. Like the city that spread in silence far beneath the open window, the bed was grey and colourless -- and as she approached it, as the sun rays crested the window's sill, she realized that it was of a piece with the wall.

The headboard that grew out of the wall itself was tall and plain, except for a single small detail, a symbol that she did not recognize, but felt oddly comforted by, in its centre. A circle, made, she thought, of chain, with a flower at its centre. But the flower was unlike any flower that she had seen; its petals were wild, unmatching. The first was a thing that seemed to flicker and burn, a leaf of flame, the second, a lily's petal, the third a long, flat leaf -- she thought it corn-like. There was a fourth petal, but it had been pulled from the flower, as if by wind.

She reached out to touch the symbol.

"I would not, were I you."

Her hand stopped a hair's breath from the stone; she did not look up, but his shadow fell across the bed. Swallowing, she pulled that hand away and buried it in the folds of her skirt.

"I have brought food."

Silent, she turned; he set it down. And then he stared at her for a long moment, displeased. "Askeyia a'Narin," he said softly, "why do you dispel my magicks?"

She shook her head numbly, her hair tumbling into her eyes and away at the force of the movement. "I -- I don't -- I'm not --"

He shook his head. "The room," he said softly, "is warded; from without, no one should sense your presence. But this is the Shining Court." He

frowned a moment, and then added, "Askeyia, you have no friends in this Court."

She nodded.

"Neither do I. I am *Kialli*. The *Kialli* do not know friendship in any way that you would understand it. It is a mortal flaw -- an impulse that draws the weak together and binds them fast. We are, none of us, weak; we seek power, and the power that we seek overlaps in all things.

"You are a part of my plan, of my Lord's plan; my enemies may well seek you. If you do not stop this, those who seek will find." He did not touch her; did not move at all.

"I -- I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what you want me to -- to stop."

"I have cast this spell ten times. You --" and then he froze, his frown of a piece with the wall, grey and hard, but only half as cold as his narrowed eyes. "I see," he said softly. "This is most unfortunate."

What? She wanted to shout. *What is most unfortunate? What am I doing?* But she was afraid of the answer, and she said nothing, and this time he left at once, speaking no words at all, and making no gestures above her upturned face.

The bed was of the stone itself. The mattress, heavy rolls of cotton under broadsheet, was not, and the light warmed it. She sat. She sat in the silence of this terrible room, seeing the dawn give way to day.

#

It fascinated him, this unconscious rejection of his shadow. As if it were just another minor flaw, some petty injury like the scraping of skin or the breaking of a nail, his shadow, his hard won *Kialli* cloak, was cast aside. He was certain a greater spell would hold her, just as a greater injury would call her attention; he could afford neither for the mere trifle of masking her fear; not when so much lay ahead that required true power.

He stood beyond her door, listening to the rhythms of her mortal body. Hearing the breath, the passage of air into lung, the flow of blood in vessel and vein. Hearing, beneath that, other workings. He had stayed outside this door for the passage of a day and a half, gleaning the information that he required to cast this final spell. It was unlike any spell that the kinlord had cast before; a subtle spell -- a spell that the healer herself might have used.

And because of its nature, the cost was high. The shadow struggled everywhere against his command as he drew it in; fought him as if it were sentient, as if it realized the perversion of its truest purpose.

Two battles, then. The casting of the spell. And the keeping of it. By sheer force of will, he could hold the spell in place, and it was necessary; it was her life.

He chose that moment when the night was strongest, and the moon dim. He touched the door, paused, and then spoke; his sigil burned a moment in air before his hand passed through it. Let another Lord speak his name in this place, and the door would grant no passage unless they could defeat the sigil itself.

She was awake. Which was unfortunate.

The window framed her; the wind chilled.

“Askeyia,” he said. “**Come.**”

But she knew, he thought -- or some part of her did. She stood as if she were part of the mountain peak, frozen, immobile.

“Askeyia,” he said again, ill-pleased, “If you fight me, this will be ... difficult. Fight or no, you will fulfil your role. Come.” He held out a hand, but he knew, as he did, that the gesture was futile. She could not give him what he demanded; not willingly. It was not in her nature.

And that was, again, unfortunate.

He could not wait; his plan required her presence, and it required his power, and the two would slip further apart as the night waned. Without another word he crossed the room, taking a step, less than a step, so great was the shadow he cast.

She screamed, he silenced her.

Then, in the darkness of tower and pale moonlight, he surrounded her with the effort of days, submerging her. He forced her to drink, to breathe. And as he felt the shadows slide down her throat, as he felt them take root in her heart and her lungs and the vessels that carried her talentborn blood, he closed his eyes.

For she was not -- quite -- ready for the evening’s work, but he had her body now, and he brought it, quickly, to its time.

#

The screams could be heard across the breadth of the Shining City. The kin, lesser and greater, froze a moment and then shivered in this familiar wind. The fields of the hells were behind them, yes -- but they were carried within as well. They had chosen their place so long ago the lesser kin could not remember the choosing. The greater kin did, but even they, like their lesser cousins, were drawn by the sounds of terror, of pain.

Through the empty streets they came, leaving the mockery of buildings, of

manors, of dwellings that had ceased to have meaning for them. They came as if called, as if commanded, as if drawn by spell that they could not ignore.

And they came to ring the tower in which the Lord of the Hells reigned. There, in bitter silence, they accepted the crumbs from his table, for they knew that the mortal trapped within would never be thrown to them.

#

It was a rape, yes, but of more than the physical body; the demands of the Lord reached farther than the magicks of his most subtle servant could have guessed. In the darkness of tower and stone and shadow, her life was the beacon that drew him, and it had taken all of Isladar's craft to preserve her.

He did not hide from her the fact of her violation; could not -- although had it been in his power, he would have.

Had she been other than healerborn, he might have been able to force her to see the Lord as the kin saw him, and against the face of such majesty, of such power, she would have willingly offered what had instead been taken.

And had she been of weaker blood, the act itself would not have had to be repeated, over and over, until the course of the evening itself had stripped her of the use of her power. But he knew the moment that those defences flagged, and when they did, he knelt as the choked and raw noises she made died into a lull, the weakest form of applause that a soul could utter.

"My Lord," he said, speaking clearly enough to make his voice heard, but no more than that, "it is done." Waiting was as natural for the kin as drawing breath was for a mortal -- and it was infinitely more necessary if one waited upon the Lord. Impatience was rewarded, in its fashion.

"Bring her back to me," the Lord replied, "when you are finished."

Isladar nodded, still waiting, and at last the Lord bade him rise. To rise, otherwise, was also rewarded. Isladar had stood by the side of his Lord since the Hells first opened before them; he was the only one of the *Kialli* who had occupied the Lord's space so closely to remain within it. The others had perished in the charnel wind, their screams loud enough, for an instant, to quiet the whole of the Hells. The will of the Lord.

He took the healerborn girl, lifting her tightly curled body in the span of two slender arms. He did not shift her; if he had had the power, he would not have touched her at all. Perhaps it was best this way. Without power, there was no shadow to linger in her eyes, across her skin, in all the wounds and openings.

#

The visitor did not come at night, and night would have been merciful.

The darkness, with moonlight's weaker silver, would have hidden much: bruises, scrapes, tears and rents in cloth and the surface skin beneath it. It might have hidden the odd angle of the leg that had not yet set. More merciful still, it might have blinded her to the terrible emptiness of the young girl's expression -- or better, to the young girl's *familiar* face.

But the sun was high and the sky as clear as the skies in the Northern Wastes almost always were. She could see everything; every detail. Nothing at all was spared her.

I am Evayne a'Nolan and Evayne a'Neamis -- but I swear to you, father, that I will be a'Neamis no longer if -- Her hands hurt; she glanced down and saw that they were bleeding. Her own nails had pierced skin in the moment it had taken her to draw breath and think. She was, by her own reckoning, fifty Imperial years of age; her hair was a white-streaked darkness, her skin, weathered as even the rocks were weathered by the passage of time, and the scouring of sand, be it carried by wind or water.

The path of the Otherwhen took her where no one desired to go, not even she; of late, it lead her from death to death, and she was tired. For more than thirty years, she had walked it at the whim of immortal father and Time, and if it had been a hated path in her youth, it was now just a path, a part of her life.

But her life itself was dedicated to war, and in the service of that war, she was a lone soldier; she paused a moment to fight here and there at the sides of those who were allies, but she did not linger, no matter how much she might desire it. And perhaps, just perhaps, she had come to see the wisdom of that forced choice.

There had been little rest in the past few months, and she was certain, although no battle's sound reached her ears, that there would be no rest here, for either she or the girl. But the girl was not dead yet.

At least there was hope.

As if she could hear the intake of breath, the girl that lay curled upon the stone bed lifted her hands in a gesture that was half plea and half defence; her lips were thick and swollen, the side of her face, purpled by the blow -- by several blows -- of a large hand.

And yet, even this disfigured, Evayne a'Nolan recognized Askeyia a'Narin. Levec's student; a child, an almost-woman with a soft heart and a naive desire to see great deeds done. Of Levec's many students, Askeyia was one who hovered, hoping against hope to catch some snippet of dread destiny, as if it were a disease. Not even in her coldest moments would Evayne have pointed out that this, this meeting, was one such thing.

She had never seen a healer this injured unless they were dead; it was against their nature, and their instincts.

“D-don’t --” the girl said, piteously, “don’t.” But it was weak and fragile; the sound a mouse might make when it had been in play too long between the paws of a cat.

She, who had seen much, looked away.

She did not recognize this room; it was barren of any detail that might have given it light, or a sense of comfort or warmth. No; light came from the window, and the window was a thing of stone. She turned, as if the need for light was greater than any other impulse, and stared out; stared down.

When she turned back to the injured girl, she was as grey as the stone itself. Her robes were blue, always blue; she spoke a word, frowned, and spoke another, a stronger one. In the haze of the light by the window -- for she stood by the window itself -- the midnight richness seeped skyward from the magical weave of those robes, leaving her in white, all white.

Because she knew where she was. And she knew that the white would be a comfort, even if it was a lie.

“Askeyia,” she said, softly, speaking for the first time since she’d entered this tower. She did not seek the crystal ball by which she was known as seer; she did not need it. She knew the *when* and she knew the *where*; the glance outside the single tower window told her both.

The girl looked up at the sound of the voice; she was not so broken that suspicion was her first reaction. “E-evayne?”

The older woman swallowed and then smiled falsely. “Yes.”

“What are you -- what are you doing here?” Hope. “Have you come to -- have you -- did Levec send you?”

Levec doesn't know where you are. But she did not say it. Instead, she crossed the room, leaving shadows that were only the castoffs of light. She caught the girl in her arms, and held her, and after a moment of stiffness that told Evayne more than she would ever ask, the girl relaxed and began to sob, very like a child, into her robes.

Those robes caught the tears and kept them, a bitter memento. Evayne spoke a word; saw the green glow of her magelight halo Askeyia, her momentary ward. It was a spell better used in the presence of physicians, for it told her much about the condition of the body upon which it was cast. The spell came more easily than words would have.

And it gave her it a bitter, bitter answer.

Askeyia was chilled by the fevers brought on by too great a use of power

in too short a space of time. That, she expected. Her leg was broken cleanly, but poorly set; her face was bruised but whole, her vision had been hampered somehow by the strikes to the side of her face. These, and more, she catalogued in an instant.

But it was the last thing that was the most terrible, because she understood it all then.

Askeyia a'Narin was pregnant.

She must have tightened her grip, for the girl looked up, the matted darkness of her hair scudding the underside of the seer's chin.

"Evayne?"

No. No, I will not do this.

"Evayne -- what is it? What's wrong? Is he coming?"

I will not do this. The fifty year old woman, who had seen battles that were far darker and far more real than the glory of legend bit her lip until it bled. Held the girl, held Askeyia, a moment longer, as if her arms were bower or cradle -- or armor. She lowered her face, into the crook of the girl's neck; blood there, sticky but dried.

She had not been brought to rescue Askeyia.

The silver lily that hung round her throat bit into her collar bone; she did not move, thinking of what its maker would have said to her for what she was about to do.

"Askeyia," she said, in a voice so husky the word came out a rumble. "Forgive me. But I cannot take you from this place. The Lord who rules it has a grip that is far too strong."

Lies, all lies. She hated them. Because she knew, now, the *how* of Kiriel di'Ashaf, the dark, wild child that did not -- in this year, at this time -- exist. And she was glad that she had not known it sooner.

But Askeyia was gullible, even in fear.

"You are caught in a war, Askeyia. And you are healer." Swallowing hurt; the words stuck. "You're -- you're with child."

White-faced the girl drew back, covering herself, pulling the scraps of dress together as if -- as if the night just past had not past. As if it never would. Her eyes were wide and dark and round.

And Evayne raised a hand, gentle with the girl as she could not be gentle with herself. "No, child," she said, although the Askeyia that she remembered did not care to be called a child. "Remember your talent. Remember your birth. You are healerborn. If the child you carry is not to

your liking, you need not carry it to term.”

“But I --”

“No, not tonight. And not tomorrow, if I am a judge of the power that you’ve used. But the night after, if you desire it, you will have your freedom from -- from what you bear.” She saw Askeyia’s shoulders slump. Relief, of a sort.

“If you do nothing,” the seer continued, “the child will never come to term.” She stopped speaking a moment, and looked beyond the grey of wall, to whatever lay without. “Askeyia, I never told you who I was, and you asked. You always asked.” She had hoped the girl would smile, but there was about her a watchful fear that Evayne was certain would never again leave her face.

“I was raised in Callenton.”

At that, Askeyia’s brows rose. “In Callenton? That’s the town over from -- from where I was born. Evanton. I went there once, with my father, in the summer.” Her eyes clouded then, as she thought of the father who had sent her to the safety of the mighty healing houses in Averalaaan.

“My father was a blacksmith, and until his death, I was only a strange-looking child. After his death -- ah. After his death, I was a stranger, a foreigner. You know how cruel children are before they discover they aren’t children anymore.

“In Callenton, I came into the power that brings me to you.” She very gently reached into her robes -- her white robes -- and pulled out a glowing sphere that pulsed in her hand like a heart. In it, silver clouds turned in upon themselves, roiling. Waiting.

“A man came to me, to teach me of my gift. I did not know who he was, but he knew me well, and he offered me great mystery, great adventure, glory. It required a sacrifice, of course.” She shook her head, staring at the surface of the seer’s crystal. “I was not as brave as you, Askeyia. I was timid. He told me that I would have to walk a path that no other man, or woman, had ever walked before. That I would walk it alone and that it would take me across decades and centuries. That, once I had chosen, I would be bound; I could speak of nothing that had not yet happened. Offer no warning. But if -- *if* I did all these things, I might avert the crowning of the Lord of the Hells upon the mortal lands. I told you, Askeyia, that I was timid. What would you have done?”

Askeyia straightened her shoulders then, although her arms were still tightly wound across her body, covering her breasts. “I --” She looked at

her lap. Swallowed. "I would have said yes."

"I said no."

"But you --"

"And that night, that terrible night, the demons came. We had no soldiers, Askeyia, except for one man who fled the Empire to forget the Dominion Wars. We had no mages. There were no god-born children to lead us or protect us.

"And he came back to me at that moment, and he asked me again if I would follow his path.

"And I told him yes. Yes, because everyone that I loved -- precious few, but *precious* -- was there."

"W-what happened?"

"I don't know," she told the young girl softly, more honest now than she had been in decades. "I've never been allowed to go back. I cannot choose where the path takes me. But it takes me where I need to be. I did not know that it would bring me to you." She smiled, but the smile was a bitter one. "I've lost them all. If I were to go back to them now, they would never recognize me. My life has been given to the fight, and taken by it."

"And will it work?" Askeyia said softly, as if asking the end of a story.

"I don't know. But I have to try. What happened here, what happened to you -- it's not the worst thing that *will* happen if the Lord of the Hells rules all. Askeyia a'Narin, you carry his child."

"I won't for long."

Evayne swallowed. "If you do not carry this child to term, we stand no chance of winning this war."

The silence. Oh the silence.

Of the two, it was Evayne who looked away, casting her face stoneward.

"And if I do? If I do, can you tell me that we *will* win? Against a *god*?" Her voice was thin and high and strained. But it was not mad, it was not hysterical.

Evayne started to speak, and Askeyia cried out, "*Look at me!*" and the words died on the older woman's lips.

"No," she said, the lie that was so distasteful defeated. "I cannot say that with certainty. I can only say that she is hope, and she is our hope, as she is his."

"She?"

"If you have this child, this child will be a girl. And she will be all that

she was born to be.”

“How can you ask this?”

“Because, Askeyia, she will be his daughter, but she will be yours as well. It is only hope, yes. But it *is* hope.”

“And for me?”

“I promise you that you will suffer no more in the birthing than many others suffer naturally.”

“And will I go home? Will I be free?”

Evayne rose, and in rising, she took the weight of her answer with her, carrying it, burdened by it. She saw the clouds rolling in to either side.

“No,” she whispered. “Just as I will never be. I cannot force you, Askeyia, and I would not. But if a healer’s vocation is to save lives, you will be the greatest healer the world has ever had, known or not.

“And I promise you, before the end, you will be known.”

She heard Askeyia begin to cry as the path closed in about her, taking her from the desperate young woman, and leaving her with the burden of what she had asked, of what she would ask.

She was Evayne a’Nolan.

#