Destiny Does Not Send Us Heralds

by asianscaper

Summary

In an adventure gone awry, Cara and Kahlan are forced to examine their lives and priorities more closely.

Notes

Chapters 1-22 are unbeta'ed. All the awards go to Sionainn69 for all beta work on Chapter 23 onward. She has my deepest thanks. This story would not be possible without her.

I'd like to warn everyone that I haven't seen the TV show. I've read some of the books but barely remember them. Despite my lack of canon knowledge, I would love to share this story with you, hoping you'll enjoy and be entertained as much as I've been having a ball of a time writing it. Cheers!

This is also archived on FF.net.
A Child

Everything began at a Mord'Sith temple.

The air around them cackled with the after effects of magic as Cara paused mid-stride when the Mother Confessor froze beside her, disbelief painted across her expression.

The unconscious figure of Jeric, an errant practitioner recruited by Darken Rahl to help with Cara and the Mother Confessor's capture, lay motionless on the floor but what concerned both of them was a small child of six or seven who appeared in the wake of his spell.

She regarded them both, her eyes an echoing sea of blue that looked both familiar and strange. The artefact from whence she came shimmered behind her, its surface water-like as though hit by a noon-day sun.

Cara could hear the shouts for reinforcement resonate along the corridors. Soon, the room would flood with Jeric's cohorts, Mord'Sith assigned to his task. Their chances of escape were quickly waning.

"Child," Cara demanded of the aberration, knowing that Kahlan was at a loss for words. "Who are you?"

"I'm," the little one started to reply. She rubbed her eyes and squinted, fighting her disorientation. "I..." the child sobbed. She began to realise who it was before her and relief flooded her features.

To Cara's abject horror, she ran towards them on tiny legs. Instinctively, Cara stepped in front of the Mother Confessor with her Agiels drawn. In all her years travelling the world, Cara knew that if magic had a hand in it, then even a child could be a threat.

"Mother!" the girl cried.

From seemingly nowhere, leather-clad arms scooped the girl up from her path.

It became one, confusing blur from then on.

They were bewildered to distraction, their attention halved between fighting and the child, who was carried from the fray while Cara and Kahlan wrestled through a seemingly endless wall of Mord'Sith leather.

They left a slew of dead bodies in their wake but more seemed to stream from the corridors, mobs of Mord'Sith bent on killing them.

It was by pure luck that they found an exit and the harsh, dark interiors of the temple opened into a clearing bathed in light. Sparing no time adjusting to her surroundings, Cara kept running, glancing backwards to see if Kahlan was still behind her.

With what strength she had left, Cara pulled her to the tree-line, shouting for her to take cover but it took only a few more minutes to realise that they weren't being chased.

Cara stopped, gathering her wits. It was telling that the Mord'Sith did not follow but the immediate questions in Cara's mind were far more distracting.

Who was the child? Where had she come from? Why had she called Kahlan 'Mother'?
Cara collapsed beside the river, suddenly burdened with everything that had transpired. Her companion sank beside her, black hair in disarray as she stared blankly ahead in a rare display of confusion and shock.

Kahlan the Mother Confessor descended into a pensive mood. One could feel the ebb and flow of disbelief emanating from her like a tide. Cara herself struggled to keep above the figurative surge, her breathing shallow as she fought to control the rush of blood from the fight and the emotions it inflicted.

*Where had they plucked the child?* It was an assiduous question, full of repercussions that Cara did not want to contemplate.

Cara watched her companion as she recovered from the shock. "We have to go back," Kahlan told her quietly, rubbing her face as one would after waking.

"It'll be a trap. They're expecting us to come after her. For all we know, that child is dead."

"'That child'?" Kahlan laughed indignantly. "That spell was no ordinary spell, Cara. And that child is no ordinary child."

Cara scoffed. "I won't allow you to go back there, for an illusion or worse!"

"The Gates of Meleth do not lie," Kahlan whispered. "She could be a relative of yours, or a daughter."

"What do you mean mine? I was thinking she was yours!"

"I had the impression she was calling for you, not me."

The thought began to sink in. Cara shifted uncomfortably and refused to meet the Mother Confessor's gaze.

"Are you saying…?"

"She's yours, Cara. I could see it. The blonde hair, that chin."

Cara laughed. The sound rang hollow by the banks of the river and it chilled them both.

She told Kahlan in her most expressionless voice, "I had a son, and he died a long time ago. I should know if I bore a daughter, Mother Confessor." Kahlan's title was laced with poison but the other woman seemed only slightly cowed by her words.

They studied each other solemnly. "I don't see Richard in any of her features," Kahlan began, resignation and amusement in her voice. Kahlan shrugged. "I suppose she's a relative of ours, then."

"In what future or past?" Cara ground out, careful to keep her calm.

The anger was new, as though Kahlan's hypothesis was dangerous, as though it implied impossible things and threatened something much deeper than just Cara's loyalties.

"I'm sure only the wizard knows." As though giving herself time to think, Kahlan stooped over the river to rinse herself. "We have to tell Richard and Zedd."

"No!" Cara said with such force that Kahlan blinked. "No," she repeated, softer this time. She
breathed hard, broadcasting her uncertainty by grasping her Agiels. The ancient agony centred her, but only a fraction. "There's no need to involve Richard in this. It'll only delay us more."

"I suppose we now know why your sisters expect us to walk back into the jaws of the lion willingly," Kahlan ventured. "The Gates of Meleth do not lie. They were created for the sole purpose of summoning beings from a past or a present, in one world or another. I don't know why it allowed itself to be used; it hasn't been known to follow the whims of just anyone. Jeric made sure he produced something that we would come back for. This time, they'll be laying a more effective trap." Kahlan reached for her friend. "I don't know why the Gates chose that particular creature to conjure."

Cara pulled away from her touch, almost too quickly. "Kahlan…" There were undertones of fear and a thin, almost indistinguishable layer of guilt that should not have been there in the first place.

A long silence hovered between them. Cara closed her eyes. When she finally opened them, she found the Mother Confessor staring deep into her own reflection at the river, unmoving and expressionless.

Cara dared not speak again; doubt had become her shadow underneath the scathing noon-time sun.

TBC
The Temple of Anneth'lul

Chapter Summary

Cara and Kahlan rescue the child from the clutches of the wizard and the Mord'Sith.

That night, the subject of not saving the girl did not come up; whether it stemmed from a primal instinct or simply from their goodwill was something left unspoken. They half-ignored each other for the night, positioned on either side of the camp fire while they thought of strategies in their individual versions of feigned sleep.

In the morning, they sent a short message to the inn where they were to meet Zedd and Richard. The note told of the Gate in hooded terms and to meet them at the outskirts of the temple. Kahlan took the liberty of writing about their plans to rescue a child from the clutches of Darken Rahl's associates, hoping that Richard wouldn't misconstrue it as a request for help.

Cara for her part planned the assault with what knowledge she had.

The Temple of Anneth'lul had been built thousands of years before, a temple that most Mord'Sith fledglings were required to visit at least once in a career of bloodshed.

Knowledge of passageways in and out of the temple was passed on by word of a mouth. Cara knew of several, hidden passages that would be guarded and others that would not.

When at last the sun set, they found themselves at the edge of the clearing with their weapons drawn, studying the temple's bulwark of stone. They both knew that any escape from what they were walking into lay through the Gate and out its twin. Kahlan had said as much and they very nearly didn't make it out alive the last time they had tried to escape.

Under the shelter of twilight, she led Kahlan through passageways that she hoped would be empty, careful to keep their passage quiet and their senses open.

The long corridors wound through the dungeons, where it stank of death, unwashed bodies and decay.

From the dark vestibules, a voice croaked with incredulity, "A Confessor?"

Cara rolled her eyes as Kahlan approached the bars. Kahlan's propensity to speak to anyone regardless of wealth or stature would someday be the death of them.

Kahlan replied, "I didn't think anybody was down here and certainly not someone who recognizes a Confessor without her whites."

The voice chuckled, deep gurgles that seemed part of the shadows themselves. "They're keeping the child three doors from here. There are hexes to alert the wizard. They know you're coming. The way through which you came has been sealed. You should not have tried to save her, whoever she is."

"All life is worth saving," Kahlan said matter-of-factly. As though to prove her point, she addressed him firmly, "Come, can you walk?"
"No, I'll be dead in a night or two. I have wounds that not even a wizard can heal. And this place is all I have known now. Death will take me before I step outside."

A face lurched into the torchlight. Its head was bare, patches of skin eaten away by some disease. Some wounds were deep and bled outright, as though he had been picking his wounds for years. A trembling, right eye peered at them while the other was an unblinking hole, a fleshy cave trembling in the cold. His breath stank like the unmaintained sewers of the poorer parts of a city and he had only three of his teeth left, all of them blackened by neglect.

"I am the Lord of Geln, Confessor," the man wheezed, "or I used to be. There is no use rescuing this lord. My lands are gone. I have no title, not anymore."

Cara pushed Kahlan gently aside. Her voice was colder than the northern winters, "They ravaged that province years ago, old man. You can't be that Lord. I put him here myself."

The man hacked a series of coughs and Cara realised he was laughing.

"You fool girl," he spat, "you insolent witch! You will not kill me any more than you have enslaved me." He pulled himself closer; ruby veins entrenched into his remaining eye. His iris dilated as it drank the image before him. "The Creator knows justice," he cackled as realisation flooded his eye. "It was your child, wasn't it? The one they took!"

Kahan held Cara back as the Mord'Sith struck between the grills. The man staggered back.

"Come on, Cara. He's mad."

Cara stood still, her knuckles white against her Agiels. The uncomfortable sensation which she had learned to associate with uncertainty doused her from head to foot.

She glared down at what had been the Lord of the single province that had dared to oppose Darken Rahl. It had been in a time when all others bowed and cowered before him.

If indeed this was the Lord of Geln, then the Creator possessed new and mysterious ways to curse her.

"Cara," Kahlan repeated, this time putting a bold hand on her jaw and forcing Cara's gaze to meet hers. "Those are the ravings of a madman. Come on."

Cara replied quietly, "I would kill him if it wouldn't offend your sensibilities so much."

Kahlan smiled at Cara's words, urging her with a hand on her wrist.

She followed the Mother Confessor, her thoughts elsewhere. The soft, grating chortles of a once-Lord haunted her steps. He had voiced all her fears.

Indeed, she thought, if the Creator knew justice…

There she was, a shivering child, staring defiantly up at two strangers who had burst through the room to rescue her. Her lip was bleeding and an eye was shut from a blow to her head. It was obvious that the Mord'Sith had begun to train her or at the very least, had tried to extract information that the child obviously did not have.

Something heavy settled on Cara's chest and like a serpent it tightened its hold every time the child took a breath.
She had performed similar deeds on children that resulted in much worse. Just as it has developed into a pressing concern when in Richard's presence, guilt plagues Cara's thoughts. Raiding parties snatched children no older than this one from their homes and trained them to be working cogs in Darken Rahl's army.

These Mord'Sith of Anneth'lul knew where to strike. She could imagine her Sisters' contempt when they realised who this child was. They must have manhandled her, thinking that the child was a relative or her offspring and concluding, rightly, that doling out violence would be punishment enough for her betrayal.

In her hesitation, it was Kahlan who picked the girl up, gesturing for Cara to check for adversaries.

The child's wall of simulated calm crumbled the instant Kahlan touched her and she buried her head into Kahlan's neck.

She whispered all the while in a trembling, tiny voice, "Inya, inya, inya," as she clutched Kahlan's neck tighter and tighter at every utterance.

Unable to help herself, Kahlan soothed the child by caressing her hair and kissing her temple. "It's all right, little one. All will be well. We're here now."

"Don't leave," the little girl said, distracting Cara with her lilting voice. A surge of protectiveness surged from within. "Inya, please don't leave."

Kahlanto bent over the child, her shoulders curved inward in a protective yet gentle embrace.

"I won't." Kahlan gathered the child more fully to herself, sharing a look with Cara that communicated more in a few seconds than hours of casual dialogue across D'Hara.

For Cara the Mord'Sith, the perceived demands were too great. Her hands quivered around the Agiels, searching for the one constant in her life: pain. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse, "The Gate should be two levels from here. The best locks were always at the armoury."

"Cara…"

"I know. Just carry her and stay as close to me as you can at all times. I can't cover all your angles but hopefully I won't have to."

Kahlan put a hand on her shoulder and Cara frowned at the touch.

"I don't know where the Gate will take us," Kahlan said. "The Creator knows if we'll even make it back."

"Richard and Zedd will find a way, if we don't."

"The world on the other side…"

Cara refused to flinch. "We'll worry about that when we get there. First, we get the child to safety." She paused as she listened for approaching footsteps. "It won't be long now. They'll be upon us very soon."

They made their way to the armoury, alerting nearly a dozen Mord'Sith to their presence. Breaking into a run, Cara shut the heavy, oak door and placed all the locks in swift, precise movements. They stepped back as it bulged in intervals when Mord'Sith began their siege.
"It won't be long," Kahlan breathed. "They'll get through in mere minutes."

Waving for Kahlan to follow, Cara ran past the armoury and into a hall that led to the wide portico where they had found the child yesterday. Cara growled her thanks to a Creator she didn't believe in when she spotted the Gate of Meleth shimmering in a corner, a wide arch that was still open from the last spell Jeric the wizard had enacted.

"Come on!" she shouted, taking Kahlan and the child in her arms.

Gathering her courage, she guided them to the threshold of the Gate just as the Mord'Sith stormed into the hall.

"I don't know if the risk is worth it," Cara whispered to Kahlan, her eyes wide with uncertainty. She stood between them and her Mord'Sith Sisters, both Agiels drawn in a defensive stance.

Glancing at their enemies, Kahlan shook her head. "There is no other way now. We have no choice."

"Very well," Cara said. She pointed to the Gate. "Go! I'll be right behind you!"

Kahlan leaped through, leaving a bright shimmer in her wake. Breathing in deeply as though about to submerge herself into a lake, Cara followed shortly after. It felt vaguely like water, except she felt a distant prickling before the world turned into a painful tableau of pure light.

TBC
Through the Gate

Chapter Summary

Cara and Kahlan deal with the peculiarities found at the other side of the Gate.

From a throng of Mord'Sith who wanted them dead, the scenery shifted and her entire field of vision melted into the expressionistic, elongated blur of what she could only describe as a painting. The stifling air of a Mord'Sith temple dissipated and her sense of smell was jarred by a crisp and sudden breeze. Kahlan blinked in quick succession, keeping her desperate hold on the child as she fought to orient herself.

The scene coalesced soon enough, as though a shattered, mercurial mirror had picked up all its liquid pieces and mended itself. As soon as the landscape solidified, she held the child a few inches from her and said, "Are you all right?"

Her small charge merely nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Amihan."

"You were very brave." Kahlan wiped the haphazard spatter of blood and tears on Amihan's cheeks, residues of her torture at the hand of Mord'Sith Sisters. "Do you know where we are?"

Amihan timidly looked around from under Kahlan's protective shadow. "Inya, I don't remember…"

"It's all right," Kahlan reassured her, putting her gently down.

As Amihan clung to her riding dress, she approached the groaning figure of Cara who had somehow arrived on her knees and was struggling with the effects of the Gate's inimitable magic.

One Agiel had fallen beside her while the other remained firmly in her grasp. At the sight of the child, Cara seemed to regain all her faculties and she sheathed both Agiels immediately, rubbing her temple as she squinted against a bright, yellow sun.

"A short trip into the mind of our most talented artists," Kahlan quipped.

"Now, see, if the Creator was an artist," Cara began, allowing her first words in this foreign place to be tinged with uncharacteristic humour and referring to the overwhelming sense of nausea she had experienced beforehand.

They smiled at each other, Cara's grin judiciously mischievous. After a moment's pause, Cara's gaze fell on Amihan. Her mouth quirked upwards as she asked for the girl's name; it was a rare show of emotion that Kahlan indulged as she stood still and kept quiet. The golden-haired child stated it without fear then held out a hand to touch Cara's face.

Cara stiffened at the contact and her eyes widened slightly as Amihan said, "Inya."

"An ancient word." Cara's throat bobbed, as though trying to swallow massive rocks that threatened
her ability to speak. "Where did you learn it?"

At this, Amihan kept quiet and Cara did not ask any further questions. Just as Cara was about to stand from her kneeling position, Amihan pushed away from Kahlan and enfolded Cara in an embrace; they both stared at the girl, speechless. Amihan's hands were vainly gathering Cara's leathers and she buried her head in Cara's front.

"I..." Kahlan cleared her throat. "I told her she was quite brave." With a look, she urged Cara to say something similarly soothing.

When Cara remained quiet and obviously confused on how to proceed, Kahlan threw her a glare. The Mord'Sith spoke with forced gentleness, "I don't suppose you'd know where we can get some horses, Amihan?"

Kahan hid her face in her hand as she rolled her eyes.

Unfazed, Amihan replied into Cara's leathers, "Inya, you've always told me that when I am lost, I should look for any of the main roads in D'Hara. Anyone would offer you or me a horse."

"Anyone?" Cara raised her brows.

"Anyone." The emphasis told them both that Cara was starting to ask some very ludicrous questions.

Cara opened her mouth to say something before she shut it and gave Kahlan a long-suffering look. Kahlan could not suppress a grin. Still floundering from the unexpected hug she received, Cara stood and took the girl's hand in hers.

They knew that this was not the world as they had left it at the other side of the Gate. It was not obvious yet. The trees and fauna seemed unchanged, the terrain faintly familiar. The only difference was their companion, who had Kahlan's eyes and Cara's hair.

Oddly enough, Cara and she had remained adamantly taciturn about the whole situation. They had warmed to each other mostly for Richard's sake, Cara more reluctantly than she. Learning more and more from Richard's altruism, Kahlan began to see beyond Cara's history, dark and bloodied as it was. She had difficulty picking at it like sticky tar but she unveiled deep, oddly compassionate foundations beneath. At first, it had been unnerving; this was a Mord'Sith after all and indeed Cara had odd ways of showing her regard. But unflinching loyalty, an inclination to put her life before Richard's or hers, and the occasional, unenthusiastic good deed had opened up the Mord'Sith's repertoire of honour and decency.

Today, it hung around her like a light cloak, her small smile tending towards buoyancy that Kahlan had never expected.

If Richard was here now, Kahlan mused. Well, the meeting would be very awkward. Amihan was obviously related to her and that carefully constructed jaw was a stubborn reiteration of Cara's. Kahlan knew without an inkling of a doubt that the relation was not quite like a sister's or a cousin's or a niece.

Cara had been vigilant about staying quiet about it. Kahlan supposed that the implications were far too frightening. Richard was Cara's Lord and even an insinuation, like that of Amihan's origins, was a threat to her allegiance.

Kahlan watched the child as she wound her way even deeper into Cara's unwilling embrace. No,
not a threat, Kahlan thought severely.

Confessor and Mord'Sith were confronted with a stage that neither of them wanted to look at. It blinded with its lights and deafened with its music and Kahlan knew that sometime in the near future they would be forced to watch and acknowledge the play, where the single most worrisome lead was a child with her eyes and Cara's stubborn jaw.

TBC
An innkeeper and his hospitality.

They walked a good distance off before deciding that any enemies from the Gate would have to be tallied.

After hunting for a pair of conies, Cara insisted that Kahlan do the cooking. There were many instances in their adventures with Richard and Zedd that their stew had been burnt to a crisp by Cara's tending. With all of them hungry, Cara was not about to risk feeding the child something inedible.

Amihan dug in with gusto but did not finish. Halfway through her meal, she nodded off to sleep in front of them with the tired unconcern of a child who left the worrying to her elders. With Cara deftly catching her bowl and a chuckle from Kahlan, she was carefully deposited on the Mord'Sith's bedroll before the two adults spent the remaining daylight watching the Gate.

Kahlan stared silently at the horizon, the soft mountain breeze chilling her skin as she hid underneath her hood. The sky was turning a subtle shade of orange and violet, tickled by the fading sun as it set with slow, contemplative cheer. A pack of wispy clouds drifted about it like an unruffled procession and Kahlan spent the next few minutes looking for familiar images in them.

It had been a while since they had come across a clear day like this and did not spend it traveling. It was good to leave the mind wandering, if only for a moment.

Cara was as still as a rock beside her as she stared from the cliff-side they had considered a good vantage point. The object of Cara's immediate concern was a league away, twisting and shimmering as it coalesced with the fading light.

The Gate of Meleth, an artefact thousands of years old, glowered back as though to mock them.

"I don't think they would be coming through just yet. Or they probably never will." Cara glanced at the sleeping figure underneath the blankets. "If she's the key, they couldn't follow us to this world."

"I wouldn't count on it. Wizards are unpredictable at best."

Cara squinted as the sun disappeared. The approaching darkness became a thing alive as it swept across the land.

"Then we take the necessary steps. We must return her to her place before any more harm comes to her."

"We aren't from this world," Kahlan whispered. "We have to practice discretion. For all intents and purposes, we have to avoid being recognized. We don't know what we are to the people here, if we're wanted criminals or enemies of the state. If we inquired about this particular D'Hara, we may also draw attention."

Her companion gave her a shrug.
"I can get any horse I want," Cara stated as though it was an obvious answer to all of Kahlann's concerns. She added with a hint of devilish delight, "Without paying."

Kahlann afforded her a smile before the rising anxiety associated with stepping into the unknown finally subdued her to reticence. "We'll try our luck at the first inn."

Cara stood, her face hidden in the shadows that had crept through the trees and meandered between them.

"At first light, then. I'll take the first watch."

The Mord'Sith's shoulders visibly relaxed only when Kahlann stood and left her alone to her thoughts.

They chose to enter the nearest town in the cover of darkness.

"Illendir," Amihan enunciated as she read the block letters of a worn, wooden board touting the town's name, illuminated by meagre light from within several houses.

Kahlann blinked at the child, unable to keep the smile from her face. "Very good, Amihan. Children your age can't read as well as you."

"My inya insists I know how to read. Knowledge, she says, is power and all good leaders are readers. It is 'the weapon against intolerance and ignorance'," Amihan said sensibly, stumbling a bit over the last words and screwing her face. "I haven't figured out what all that means yet."

"Your inya is a very sensible person," Kahlann informed her.

"Of course she is. You are."

Cara seemed amused as she smirked. "You'd do well to listen to her," she told Kahlann. "She's more truthful than most people I've met."

"Such is the gift of a child," Kahlann mused. She studied the top of Amihan's head before kissing it instinctively.

As they followed the main road to the town square, Kahlann covered Amihan with her cloak. The child's heartbeat was soft against Kahlann's chest, a rhythm suggested to her own. She knew that in its crafty way, affection for Amihan was now endemic and that Cara, as cold as she was, was experiencing her own epiphanies.

For one, Cara seemed to smile more often, an echo of her expression when they dealt with the Night Wisps. Kahlann allotted the scene to memory because anything approaching joy on Cara was scarce. Confronted with it now, she realized that this was far better than the static image in her head.

They stood before a well-trodden lawn where an upright sign simply advertised, "The White Hart". Cara told them to wait outside while she spoke to the innkeeper. It was not long before the hefty man himself stepped from within, Cara trailing behind him in a frustrated gait.

She loped to Kahlann's side and the Mother Confessor looked to her in alarm. Cara said in a harsh whisper, "He recognized me straight away. I don't know how but I told him to be quiet about it." Cara moved to unsheathe her Agiels and perked up visibly at the prospect of a fight. "Unless you want me to threaten him?"
"Cara, no." With the stern gaze she used to placate supplicants, Kahlan turned to the innkeeper. "Not another step closer!"

The man instantly halted and to Cara's indignation, fell to his knees and began wringing his hands in front of them. "My lady!"

They were all grateful that nobody roamed the streets at this time of night. The only sounds were raucous laughter from the inn's crowded pub and the thrum of a lyre as it played a trilling country tune.

"I…I…" the innkeeper began.

"Well, he's lost his speech," Cara said sarcastically. "We won't have to worry about anyone knowing now."

The innkeeper swallowed, looking at both of them with wild eyes. "I…I…" He cleared his throat and tried again, "I am a poor host. What can I offer the Lord and Lady this fine night?" In a tiny voice he added, "I have only stew and some bread I am afraid. None of the fare at the People's Palace. If it is a bed you seek, I can talk to our good Mayor at your behest and arrange for more suitable accommodations. And more suitable…food."

Kahlan raised a brow. "You'll do no such thing, man. We wish to pass unnoticed."

"I-if that is your wish, then I shall obey." Despite the cold air sweeping down from the nearby mountain ranges, droplets of the man's sweat quivered on his forehead. "Although I must ask… How?"

Cara stared at him as though he had grown a horn and additional limbs. "Use your wits!"

"Cara, he has a point." Kahlan turned to the innkeeper and told him in a gentler voice, "Your name?"

"Logrim, m'lady."

"Well then Logrim, this is what you'll do. Do you have a room available near the back of the inn? Or the stables?" He nodded. "Good. We'll take that room, where we shall remain unseen and unbothered by your patrons or your staff. At first light, we'll purchase any horses you may have. We won't be a burden for longer than is necessary. You will not speak of this visit to anyone."

"A…a burden?" Logrim exclaimed, looking scandalised. "You are no burden, m'lady! And the horses, you can have them. Any charges on the room shall be waived. I am honoured! Beyond words!"

"Apparently," Cara muttered.

Kahlan reprimanded her with a look.

Cara tried again, louder this time so that Logrim would hear, "We're grateful for your…assistance," she spat the word, "especially if you can keep your tongue from wagging." Any sincerity there was drowned by contempt.

Kahlan sighed inwardly. Cara still possessed most of her rougher edges; it was a wonder they got along at all.

The innkeeper bowed profusely, oblivious of Cara's brusqueness.
"You can stop bowing, Logrim. It would look suspicious," Kahlan said.

"Of course, of course! My apologies, m'lady!"

The two women hid inside their cloaks as Logrim led them inside.

His effort to control his obeisance was obvious and somewhat comical. He seemed to bob at every step but he ceased as soon as they entered the common room. The smell of unwashed bodies and heady stew came over their company.

Kahlan was relieved that they were once again surrounded by people despite their attempts to keep their identities hidden. Civilization had a way of tempering her thoughts. A clean bed and a roof over one's head kneaded the outdoor-weary muscles of a traveller.

Indeed, they were very far from D'Hara's purported centre. It concerned her that a lowly innkeeper in this little town of Illendir had recognized them both despite their cloaks and copious hoods. But there would be time enough for worrying, she thought. Kahlan was sure a better plan to return Amihan would be tangible in the morning, after dinner and a good night's sleep. After all, navigating an unfamiliar world such as this could only be dangerous under moonlight.

TBC
Nightfall at the White Hart

The innkeeper gave them a king-sized bed in the biggest room at the back of the White Hart. If he recognised Amihan at all, he kept it to himself and simply brought them a sizable feast, which Amihan ate with pleasure.

The room itself boasted a terrace that could fit no more than three people, with rickety chairs and a table. In the backwater roads of D'Hara, their living arrangements were a rare extravagance.

They did not have the heart to protest for fear that it would attract suspicion.

The bed was certainly the most luxurious thing they had tried in a fortnight and though it seemed garish with its carelessly sculpted posters, Cara looked at it with approval. It was cleaner than the lice-infested cots she was used to sleeping in.

Cara felt the lurch of her Bond as she watched Amihan sleep in the middle of the sheets. This slow shift in the Bond had been the first, most worrying sign and from there, Cara's suspicions grew. After two days in this world, her bond to Richard Cypher became a distant murmur while this one seemed more solid and real.

She made her way to the bed with stealthy, Mord'Sith movements, her leathers creaking as she settled by the child's side, studying her features. Amihan opened her eyes a bit and as soon as Cara was within reach, snuggled closer, just under the crook of Cara's arm. Cara brought her nose to the child's forehead and revelled in the scent that seemed more familiar than her leathers.

It took only a few minutes for Amihan to fall asleep once more, as though Cara's presence had been soothing.

The Mord'Sith in her cackled its mockery. She had broken children like this one. What remained of Amihan's bruises was enough of a reminder. Her blackened eye had mostly healed and cuts they found beneath her clothing were barely visible. She was cared for by Cara and Kahlan's combined knowledge, which they had inherited from Richard the woodsman.

Kahlan called to her from the private hall which led to the baths. It took an act of will to get up and leave.

She found Kahlan waiting for her outside an adjoining bath, which the innkeeper had prepared for their benefit. Cara smiled as Kahlan fidgeted, obviously keen on being clean again. As soon as they were inside, steam permeating the air, the Mother Confessor got rid of her dress and stepped into the tub. She let out a languorous sigh as Cara followed suit.

They sat in the water for well over half an hour before Kahlan opened her eyes to find Cara studying her with a pensive expression.

Kahlan raised a brow in question, unable to prevent the teasing grin on her face.

Cara smiled dismissively and sank her head into the water. She sensed the impending conversation and emerged from the water before Kahlan could speak.

Kahlan followed a few minutes after. Lumbering out with their wet clothing in their arms, they ignored each other while they dressed in the simple tunics provided by the innkeeper. Through silent agreement, they made their way to the terrace, hanging their clothes to dry.
Once finished, they sank into the chairs which were wide enough to slouch on. They savoured this moment of relative peace, which was so rare in the Seeker's quest.

Wrapped in their respective cloaks, they sipped tea that had been prepared beforehand. Picked from local leaves, the beverages tasted and smelled like the land around them.

"What do you think?"

Cara felt cool blue eyes on her as she stared into the moonlit distance. Snow-peaked mountains lay tranquil underneath the ancient satellite, casting wide shadows at their feet. She saw the beginning of an expansive gust of wind as it swept over the tree tops and her cloak fluttered lightly as the breeze arrived.

She took an agitated breath. Cara grunted, "What do I think?"

"Who is she?" Kahlan said. It might have been Cara's imagination but Kahlan seemed to lose her usual lustre. Her voice sounded worn-out, nothing like the booming timbre of a Mother Confessor who could command absolute loyalty with a touch. "What is her parentage? What brought her about? What..." Kahlan sighed, an uncharacteristic sound of defeat. "I don't know where to start."

"I don't need to state the obvious, Kahlan." Pain prickled deep within Cara's chest. She beat it down and replaced it with the apathy she had learned from the chains and the Agiel.

"The obvious being what?" Kahlan blew through her lips in frustration. "She has your features and mine. She talks to us with terms of endearment. Inya, if you recall. Apparently you recognize the term but you aren't about to reveal what it means because you have some misplaced notion that this whole," Kahlan gestured widely, as though to encompass the entire inn, "situation is something to be ashamed of."

Exasperated, Kahlan pushed against the chair and stood, leaning against the wooden rails of the terrace as they creaked in protest. "You're always so reserved about your feelings."

"For good reason, Mother Confessor." Cara looked briefly into her cup and set it aside as she lost even the thirst for a warm drink. "If I wore everything on my sleeve, I could not protect you or Richard or that blasted, gluttonous wizard who calls himself his grandfather. I was built to be a weapon; anything less than cold, calculated efficacy will likely get me and thus all of you, killed. I don't need emotions. They cloud one's judgment." Cara frowned. "You all have emotions that would cloud an entire town's thinking for months on end."

It took a while for Cara to realise that Kahlan was laughing beneath her cloak. "You're not my keeper, Cara. You don't have to worry about me."

Cara's reply was non-committal, "Perhaps."

Kahan, taking a sip of her tea, spoke drolly into her cup. "Is that why you're so afraid of her? Because she makes you feel?"

Cara's immediate response was to look indignant, taken aback. Kahlan and her knack for getting to the meat of the matter were beginning to seriously chip away at her calm.

In an elevated tone, Cara growled out, "Do you know what inya means? It is High D'Haran for 'mother'. She is our daughter Kahlan, at least she is in this world. I've never thought of you as the mother of my child and now, confronted with the reality of it, what must I do? What can I do?"

"Nothing," Kahlan said evenly. "We shall see where this goes soon enough."
"Where this goes?" Cara repeated, scoffing. "I know where it goes, Kahlan. This particular world knows where it went." Cara stared at her leather-gloved palms. She knew her torrent of words came from the deep niches carved out by her Sisters and Darken Rahl, in places light had never seen. "The Lord and the Lady, did you hear? Did you see? In this world I have a family and a child who wasn't sent to the Dragon Corp."

Cara shook her head in disbelief. "I've been thrown into a universe I never even thought of in passing, I could not afford to think of even in passing." She laughed derisively. "Inya! Spirits! That's High D'Haran only a child who has studied in the People's Palace would know! Either that or the children here are very well-read!"

It was like a series of thunderclaps between them. She could see Kahlan's shock.

Cara fought to drown out her outrage, to present Kahlan with a barrier of indifference that would prevent any more of Kahlan's inquiries. Instead, Cara felt the figurative walls around her closely-guarded secrets crumble against her will. She took a physical step back, as though to avoid Kahlan's measured barrage of words.

"Do you mean Amihan has been imprisoned by a Rahl all this time?"

"I don't know but I know that the child is a Rahl. And ours. Hypothesize what you will from that and see if you aren't even a little afraid."

Kahlan stood there, uncomprehending.

Cara gritted her teeth. Before she could add any more to her outburst, Cara turned and left.

Cara woke hours before dawn, plagued by uneasy thoughts and cryptic nightmares.

To ease her mind, she readied their equipment and asked Logrim about the lay of the land.

Pushing a map into her hands with more than a few, irritating bows, the innkeeper told her that all towns would offer sanctuary and if Cara so chose, an escort could be arranged in Illendir itself.

Cara refused. She also reminded him, in a manner that she hoped was less threatening, that this visit was to be a secret. The man bowed and promised his silence.

Assured that Logrim would not speak of their visit, Cara gathered Amihan into thick blankets and woke Kahlan from her slumber.

They exited the inn through the backdoor where it faced the forest and offered cover from prying eyes.

The sun was lost in the clouds of early dawn, and the air was cold. Two sturdy bay horses stood side by side outside the stables, properly saddled with the innkeeper's best gear. Cara noted that they had also been equipped with saddle bags full of supplies. Logrim himself held the animals by the reigns and was in the process of bowing again when Cara castigated him with a look.

"My Lord." He lowered his eyes. "These are two of my best horses. It is what little I can offer as thanks for gracing me with your presence." With his hands outstretched, he offered them the reigns.

Cara promptly took them and offered Kahlan the other set. Before she could mount, Cara noticed the saddle and frowned. There were intricate patterns on the leather, silver inlays of long-haired...
hunters on their Kelton steeds running across the pelt.

A lowly innkeeper's wage, even when saved for a year, could not buy Linearian craftsmanship and she immediately looked to Kahlan whom she knew would protest.

The Mother Confessor touched the man's cheek, urging him to look her in the eye.

"We are honoured, Logrim. Thank you. This is...too much." Kahlan reached for her purse before Logrim took her hand and stopped her.

Logrim shook his head emphatically. "This is a gift, my lady. Nothing is too much for the liberators of the people. We owe you our lives. My son, a member of the Third Alkarian Regiment, could have marched to his death for a useless cause, for a tyrant, if the Red Lions did not intervene."

He swallowed, covering the Confessor's hand with his own. "A year of tyranny can be too much for an old man like me. Many of Illendir's sons and daughters died without an explanation. A gift of horses will never be enough gratitude for the Lord's courage." He stole a glance at Cara before his eyes stayed affixed on the ground.

There was no changing his mind and Kahlan knew not to press. Kahlan risked a glance at Cara who remained stoic despite the sudden unease she felt at the innkeeper's speech.

With a friendly wave from Kahlan, they left the town of Illendir and took an informal route north, avoiding major roads, people, and the towns. Though they travelled at a pace that frustrated Cara, Kahlan insisted on slowing down even further, pitying the child who valiantly put up with the hard ground and the food.

It took two weeks to traverse the cold southern-most forests and by then, they were running out of supplies. Camping in a hidden glen near a major artery, they debated on the prudence of entering a populous city like Sassen.

Kahlan rubbed her chin, unsure. "Amihan and I can stay here while you get supplies. If Logrim could recognize you, then having all three of us there..."

Cara almost agreed before they heard a small noise behind them.

They both turned to Amihan on her bedroll; the child, slightly thinner and frayed, rolled on her side, then her back, trying several times to find a comfortable position.

Cara said, "She will slow us down further, Kahlan, if this continues. A child is not fit for travelling the back roads of D'Hara."

Kahlan considers her a moment before saying, "You're right. She needs rest and a decent meal. Perhaps joining a caravan to the People's Palace will make this journey easier for her. I also don't want you to enter a city alone. We can risk a night, I suppose. We just need to do a better job of staying hidden."

Cara nodded. She gathered their things and prepared their horses.

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TBC
Sassen

Chapter Summary

Entering their first city in the the world beyond the Gate, Cara meets old friends.

The House of Ingmar sat atop a hill in the centre of Sassen, where the surrounding city was built in orderly rings. High stone walls separated Inner Sassen, which was usually the government's estate, from Outer Sassen, the merchant's district. The majority of its population lived at the outermost rings, nearest the gates. Their houses were made of wood, accented by dark, curling woodwork that framed window sills and doorways, making it appear as though the houses had sprung wooden vines from the ground.

The streets were newly lined with stone mined from nearby mountains. Some streets still remained unpaved and full of holes, evidence that heavy infantry and war machines had once laid siege to Sassen's towers.

The House of Ingmar was an outwardly imposing structure, with broken spires that were slowly being rebuilt. From a distance, an observer can see wooden frames outlining its structure while workers attached interior and exterior walls. The thin trill of hammers against stone was a constant as one walked through the city.

Inside the House, gigantic tapestries publicized its function as a seat of government while other, smaller tapestries depicted a red lion outlined in gold, covering blemishes on its walls where gigantic boulders had punched through. The main hall, stripped of its former glory, was decked in the muted colours of a residence made for a senator of D'Hara.

Sparse and rebuilt mostly for utility than luxury, it was a residence that Michael Cypher had resented entirely upon assignment.

After re-taking control of Sassen's government, he sent an order for luxurious rugs from Tamarang and woodwork from Lineari. The expense of importing from the Midlands and from the craft men's city was something Sassen's coffers would just have to withstand.

The one person who dared complain and demand for the goods' accounting was a captain of the D'Haran army, a beautiful woman named Berdine. She was persistently vocal about the rugs and eyed the Linearian furniture with distrust. If she wasn't so opposed to the entire thing, he would have invited her to his private lunches and his opulent dinners. Those functions usually tipped anybody else to his favour. But Captain Berdine of the Fifth Alkarian Regiment was no ordinary woman. If anything, the brown-haired, blue-eyed soldier was a war hero from the Midlands campaign, a good friend of the D'Haran Lord and as such, had definite ideas of how a senator of the High House should act.

She stood before him now, a hand on the hilt of her sword, her knuckles white.

He tried hard not to sound condescending but unfortunately, the woman was worth his disdain. "Are you questioning my decision, Captain?"

Berdine's frown deepened. "Of course not, Senator. I live to serve."
"Then I suggest you don't concern yourself with matters of state. You will not mention this anymore, do you understand? You're dismissed."

She stood there for a full minute as though about to give him a piece of her mind before her eyes flickered to the figure behind him. Her eyes narrowing into slits, she swiftly turned on her heel, her boots heavy on the marble floors. The heavy oak doors shut loudly behind her.

What an annoying woman, Michael thought. He needed to find a way to replace her and stop her meddling, if he could somehow convince the High House to move the entire Fifth Alkarian Regiment to a boring province up north. He did not need the High Seat's Alkarians questioning his decisions. They were, after all, the first of the Lord's regiments to change sides when the Mother Confessor marched into D'Hara.

He turned to his adviser, whose face was hidden in the fur-lined confines of a luxurious cloak. She pulled back her hood so he could see her clearly.

She was deceptively soft-looking but her intelligent, piercing eyes and the almost cruel line of her lips belied otherwise. Long blonde hair fell to a set of strong shoulders, which she shifted in a powerful way. She was known to wield daggers just as masterfully as her Han.

Today, despite the approaching heat of summer, she wore a black dress in a fashion prevalent in the Capital except that it was significantly more revealing. It wasn't just aesthetic; the design allowed complete movement, from the slit at her thighs to her uncovered shoulders.

She was incredibly pretty, with just the right amount of exotic sensuality that pulled at the side of her lips when she smiled. She had an arresting gaze that most would misread as benevolent but Michael knew that her very presence in his court had something to do with her own agenda.

"Well?" he asked.

"It's not her you should be worried about."

"Nicci," he clucked. "Stop it with the riddles."

"They haven't given up the search."

Michael rolled his eyes. "You can't expect any less from the royal couple." He began to massage his temple. This obsession with a child had long since gotten into his nerves. "I'm more concerned about your promise. I've done what you asked. It's time for you to fulfil your part of the bargain."

Her eyes blazed. "You treacherous bastard," Nicci spat. Michael started at the poison in Nicci's tone. "Amihan Amnell was spotted in the city. I wanted her dead!"

At once, Michael took two long steps towards her in an attempt to intimidate with his height. He and his brother had been gifted with imposing physiques and while Richard preferred to use his wits, Michael found his own physicality to be more than adequate at changing people's minds.

"You will not use that tone with me!" he exclaimed. "And you will not question the thoroughness with which I disposed of the heir. The Gate took her! I made sure of it!"

Oddly, Nicci's face became eerily neutral and Michael started at her lack of a reaction. He swallowed, took a breath, and reminded himself that this witch was a wielder of magic. A sword and a fist from five paces will always be slower than a spell.

Disgruntled, he sat back down and listened. He could not wait to be rid of her when all his plans
came into fruition. Soon, he told himself. It would be very soon.

He returned a cryptic smile and gestured that he was done.

"I have spies all over the city, Senator," she told him in a quiet voice. "And I have every reason to believe she is here, alive and well. I am sure the Lord's eyes and ears have caught wind of this already. Who's to say that the child won't be under heavy guard by tomorrow morning? Or that a wizard has not been dispatched from Chase's office?"

Michael cursed under his breath. Despite himself, he believed her. Nicci's network of contacts had proven themselves to be reliable, even during the early days of his rebellion and especially now, during the peace. Michael scrunched his eyes as he felt his frustration rise.

He muttered, "If the Fifth hadn't made Sassen its home…"

"There will be no excuses, Cypher!" Nicci berated as though talking to a child and he resented her for it. "It is paramount that the child disappears if we are to progress with our plans. You cannot do it while Berdine's army occupies the barracks and her allies man the House's Guard." Nicci stood, latching her cloak together as she prepared to leave. "Something must be done. Today!"

"A room for two adults and a child."

She produced a copper and placed it in front of the innkeeper. He glanced at the strange party, at the adults who stayed hidden in copious hoods and the child, who clutched Cara's leg like one would a rock in a violent river.

His eyes fell on Kahlan once more, studying her for a moment. Kahlan barely noticed his frown as he left word with a servant. Forcing a smile, he ushered all of them to a room at the back of the pub.

"What game is this you're playing with me?" he hissed.

"No game," Kahlan replied calmly.

"That is the royal heir," he indicated Amihan, who took a step further into Cara's cloak. "I've heard the rumours from the capital!" He pointed to Cara, who pulled her hood even lower over her face. "You over there! Who are you?"

Kahlan put a hand on the innkeeper's shoulder. "Please, we mean no harm."

He shook her off, reaching for the knife at his belt. "No harm, my foot! That's the royal heir! She was kidnapped a week ago and now you have her. I will not tolerate treachery under my roof!" He lunged for the child.

Cara must have anticipated it because her Agiels were flying even before Kahlan could unsheathe her sword. The innkeeper, caught between two Agiels, cried in pain as he sank to his knees.

It was too late when they realized that Brin the innkeeper had confined them in a room with only one exit. Just as Kahlan made a move to run out the door, a giant of a man filled the doorway, glaring.

Kahlan brought up her sword, her heartbeat roaring in her ears while Cara took her place beside her. Her grin was feral, anticipating the moment she could draw blood.
By now Cara had lost her hood in the fray. The man looked startled when he noticed her. He took one look at the Mord'Sith, at her clothes, and then one look at Kahlan before a range of emotions darted across his face.

It contorted into one of confusion, then realization, then barely-masked horror. To their utter confusion, he pulled the innkeeper bodily to his feet while telling him, "Out, Brin! And a round of ale for the men, on my tab. Not a word on what happened or who they are, you understand? Go!"

He pushed Brin out the door and shut it in the faces of a squad of Sassen's finest law enforcers, who had arrived shortly after he had.

Then he turned to them, his arms on his hips as though he was about to lecture a gaggle of children. "Now, explain yourself!"

His attention was mostly on Cara. "Well?" he cajoled, his hand making a come-hither motion as though he could summon the words from her. "Or should I get on my knees and ask politely, my Lord?" The way he spoke the last word gave Cara the hint she needed.

She knew this man, but only in passing and even then the memory wasn't clear. "Chase?" Cara asked, as one would a friend.

The Chase they knew was a border guard in Westland. This one was dressed in chain mail that clinked heavily against the hard wood floors. There was a battle axe strapped to his back and an ugly-looking hunting knife on his hip. Large scars, which crisscrossed his arms and the exposed portions of his chest, undulated as he relaxed.

"Spirits! You would think that living at the People's Palace addled your brain!" His earlier, more serious façade broke. It was odd to see such a frightening face move into a grin.

Without warning, he encompassed her in a bear hug. Cara winced and tried to return it with a half-hearted pat on the back.

"And you came in secret!" he roared, clearly delighted. "Good thing Brin has a keen eye. Innkeepers usually do. What are you doing in a seedy part of the city like this? And no pomp and festivities?"

Chase did not wait for an answer before he moved towards Kahlan, "Ah, and the infamous Kahlan Amnell! I can definitely say that Cara's tastes have improved over the years." He grinned. "Forgive my lack of manners," he said, bowing low. "You have to understand that your wife has always kept such crude company before her days of glory."

"I…see." Kahlan tried not to look puzzled. "So, Chase? Commander of the Sassen Guard?"

"Cara's told you about me!" He seemed pleased, winking at Cara. "As she should. You are gorgeous, and I can see how Cara can be so enamoured by you." He put a hand to his mouth, still grinning. "My apologies, m'lady. We're an unpolished sort, the common people. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"Now, to business!" He pulled a chair, urging them to join him at the unsteady table where Brin or his employees took their meals away from the prying eyes of customers.

Kahlan put Amihan on her lap while Cara leaned forward in a subtly threatening way.
Chase continued on, "The royal family in Sassen, and apparently in secret. I won't reveal your presence, of course. I'm sure you have your reasons but I must warn you, Sassen is a nest of vipers if the rumours are to be believed." He scrunched his eyes, as though recalling an earlier conversation. "Berdine, that scoundrel. If she wasn't such a decent soldier I'd believe she gossiped her way to the captaincy."

"Berdine…" Cara whispered under her breath.

"This isn't exactly the safest place for you." He gave Cara a pointed look before his gaze dropped to Amihan. "Especially not for her. You should know. The South has always been resistant to any kind of change. It is believed that an old enemy from Sassen or Acrimar had taken the heir." He scrutinized them both. "For the life of me, I can't understand how you and the Mother Confessor could have left the People's Palace to find her."

He studied Cara more closely before his eyes narrowed, as though realising something important. He brought a calloused hand to Cara's shoulder and the Mord'Sith raised her arm to fend him off.

"But lo and behold, here you are," he added gravely.

"Here we were," Cara echoed.

His eyes fell on Amihan, who seemed content leaning against Kahlan and listening to the adults talk. "And you, little one, are safe."

It was all too much. Kahlan didn't know what to do with all this new information and Cara herself seemed deep in thought.

Chase noticed the odd silence and his open expression changed from curiosity to suspicion.

"Am I missing something here, my lady? My Lord?"

"Yes, and no," Kahlan began, very slowly.

Cara interjected, "Can you take us to Berdine?"

"Of course. She lives just outside the city. I can personally escort you to her estate." He frowned at their unusual request, brought his face closer to Cara's and lowered his voice. "Cara, you know you can trust me. What's going on?"

"I can't explain just yet. Take us to Berdine. I need to know more."

Chase commissioned a wizard to accompany them. The wizard was a slight fellow with an open face and through further questioning Kahlan found out that he was a Wizard of the Second Order.

He seemed slightly confused that she did not recognize him. After all, the Wizard's Keep was a stone's throw away from the Confessor's Palace. Expertly avoiding his inquiries, Kahlan was relieved that he chose to ride at the rear.

He kept an eye out for all of them preferring to see the entire party. Perhaps it was for the sake of his spells.

"Your hair's different," Chase told Cara. He guided his chestnut horse to a walk beside hers with the ease of someone who spent most of his time riding from one district to another. He seemed too big for his mount, his bearded face and his fur cloak giving Cara the impression of a bear riding a
Cara shrugged.

"I like your outfit. It hugs all the right places."

Cara did not reply, her jaw tense, but Chase forged on.

"And I like your saddle." He winked. "Linearian?"

"Yes."

"You've moved up in the world." At that, he laughed at a joke that Cara didn't know he had made, slapping his thigh all the while.

Cara watched with an aggrieved expression. She never knew what to do with open displays of joviality and tried to ignore him instead.

He added, "Ah Cara, never change. I can't wait for the day you give me a verbal beating. Don't be so serious, really!" He punched her shoulder and she glowered at him.

Kahlan looked on with amusement as Cara shifted uncomfortably on her horse.

She turned to her charge, who watched the rolling hills of different colours, some of them covered in the verdant green and purple of grape vines.

"Why are you so quiet, little one?"

Amihan smiled up at her with forced cheer. She pulled closer into Kahlan's embrace. "I remember this place. They took me here."

"Do you know by whom?"

"No, inya." The child fell silent, her lips suddenly quivering.

Regardless of being taught compassion and forgiveness, Kahlan felt something within her churn in a pattern untried by her training. She felt a sudden and powerful need to punish Amihan's captors.

"Is there anything else?" Kahlan asked tightly.

Amihan was hesitant as she buried her face into Kahlan's riding dress. "You seem different, inya. And my other inya, too. But not too much."

Kahlan closed her eyes in resignation, squeezing Amihan's arms as though to reassure her. At the same time, it was to convince Kahlan that the child was real. "I'm sorry, Amihan. Don't worry, you'll be back with your family soon enough."

"But you are my family too, yes?"

At the child's words, Kahlan's eyes inadvertently found Cara's. The Mord'Sith quickly broke eye contact, looking guilty at having been found eavesdropping on their conversation.

Kahlan wondered at the validity of her own words, felt her cheeks grow warm and her chest tighten. She cleared her throat. "Yes, Amihan. We are."

For the first time in a long time, in a rare bout of weakness, Kahlan reached for the Mord'Sith's arm.
from across the space between their horses, expecting Cara to move away as she always did. Instead, the Mord'Sith seemed unfazed by the sudden familiarity, her intensely blue eyes meeting Kahlan's like a calm, opaque sea, unafraid amidst the scenes of D'Haran spring.

TBC
Berdine

Berdine was in the process of pouring herself some wine when she saw who entered the porch's dais. Slowly, she put the carafe down and took a tentative sip from her wine glass, savoring the particular vintage which she had grown herself.

The south had always been a capricious with its loyalties. In the early rule of the Lord of D'Hara, this age-long situation necessitated that the Alkarian Regiment be moved to the outskirts of Sassen. Whether it was a clear warning to the conspirators in the House of Ingmar or a political requirement did not matter. The Lord's enemies were in the south and it was never clearer than when the heir had been taken.

The girl herself was spotted by an Alkarian scout not far from Illendir but her captors never made the same mistake again. The girl disappeared for well over a week without a single sighting or a single word.

The People's Palace had been in an uproar. Berdine received a hand-written letter with succinct orders from the Mother Confessor, perhaps because the Lord could not stomach a courteous plea to her most competent commander. It did not help when Berdine's peers appeared at her doorstep for tea or cider and told her that the Lord of D'Hara herself would ride to Sassen if the month passed without word. Or when they all told her that they thought the child was dead.

Over the few days that she produced no results, it went unspoken in the ranks that her inability to recover the child was deplorable.

With the bitter taste of near-defeat in her mouth, she sent her scouts far and wide, going so far as to cross the Midlands border. Her scouts returned with nothing but rumors and then…

Licking her lips she approached the company of five.

Nothing in the libraries of Acrimar and Sassen or even the People's Palace had prepared her for this meeting. Regardless, Berdine loved a challenge. The taste of it was succulent as she surveyed the company.

"And what is this pleasure?"

Chase Bradstone of the Sassenian Home Guard saluted her. "Captain. I present…"

Berdine raised a hand to silence him. "Quiet, Chase." Her eyes narrowed. She spied the woman who looked like the Lord of D'Hara as she tensed, one foot slightly in front of the other in a fighting stance.

Berdine gestured to the little girl inside the brunette's cloak. "Come here child. Quickly."

Amihan only hugged the woman's leg tighter.

Berdine straightened, rolling the wine inside her glass as she positioned her arms across her chest. She leaned slightly back in boredom.

"Well?" she addressed Chase. "You seem smug to have brought the Lady Amihan and these," she made a show of studying them intently, "impostors, here."

Chase shrugged. "It was the blonde one who asked to see you. And I couldn't well take the royal
heir by force."

"Oh?"

"They seem real enough, don't you think?"

"The snakes in that pit of yours are capable of anything," Berdine told him, if not unkindly.

Chase took his place at her side and they both studied the unlikely family. The wizard himself stood at the ready, a spell already dancing around his fingers as he guarded the exit. The two female adults gaped at their captors and then their hands flew to their weapons at the sudden appearance of fifteen armed men and women in the confined space.

Chase smiled broadly at the blonde's infuriated expression. "I'm not daft, lady. I know my friend when I see her. You, on the other hand, are quite the anomaly."

"Indeed." Berdine closed the space between them, studying them both. "And I know my Lord." She stood a hand's breadth from the purported Cara. "Your name?"

The woman spoke through clenched teeth. "Cara Mason."

"Said like you truly own it."

Berdine searched the woman's face and found new lines among the old ones. It was a veritable map of a life conjoined with pain: the blue eyes were harder and in certain lights, seemed cruel, sharper than a dagger and divulging only ice. Her beauty was unchanged despite it all, a brazen rush of exquisite features known intimately by those who had met the Lord when she was still a lowly soldier in a far-flung regiment. Tellingly, the Bond was not present in her and Berdine could feel the slight tug only from where the heir stood, trembling.

Poor child. Berdine knew that she projected an imposing figure in the bright red leathers of the Alkarian Regiment.

And the woman in similar leathers? It was Cara, and yet not Cara.

Berdine had only ever met Kahlan Amnell once and did not try to see the difference. Stepping back, she said simply, "So what do you need from me?"

Still, this Cara did not speak as though any attempt to do so might end in blood. It was the brunette who offered, "We need to get Amihan back to her parents."

"Very well. I can arrange for that quite easily and I have you to thank for bringing her back safely. The Midlands and D'Hara have been searching for her for quite a while now. Now that she is safely in the hands of the Alkarian Regiment, what should I do with both of you?"

"We need to see the wizard Zedd."

Berdine wagged her finger as she gave them a piteous smile. "Ah, ah. You both actually believe you'll be making your way to the People's Palace, eh? I don't think so. Not under my watch. Not when you look so convincingly like the Lord and the Lady and haplessly appeared from a volatile Sassen. For all I know, you're some magical plot to overthrow the Lord of D'Hara." She called to a soldier behind them. "Belliv, if you would so kindly restrain them."

As Berdine reached out to finally relieve them of the heir, she jerked when Amihan screamed and Belliv roughly pulled the Kahlan copy from her. With speed that Berdine found unsettling, the
Cara-impostor moved in a riotous blur that left two of her men immobilized as soon as they came within reach. The weapons she wielded screamed against a wave of five more who tried to approach.

With the blonde guarding her back, this Kahlan's eyes swam into complete darkness, the whites of her eyes disappearing as the air became unbearably full, and then imploded in a kind of noiseless wallop that left the hairs on her arms standing on end.

Before Berdine could shout a warning, Belliv was on his knees, whispering in awe, "Mistress, command me!"

"Protect us."

"Yes, Mistress!"

Immediately, Belliv drew his sword and pointed the weapon at Berdine's neck. "Stand down," said the man. "Let her go."

Amihan began to weep openly as Berdine slowly released her arm.

There was a stillborn silence about the room as her men gave them a wider berth. Cara took the girl from her and positioned her safely behind her body, her stick-like weapon at the ready.

It was Berdine's turn to ogle up at the Mother Confessor.

"Spirits, you're real," she said dumbly, slowly getting up on her feet as her wine glass remained shattered and forgotten on the floor. With both hands outstretched in surrender, she said quietly, "We will talk. I apologize for the distress. I...I ask that you join me at my table." She presented a lopsided, apologetic grin. "If that should sound even slightly attractive to the Mother Confessor after this fiasco."

Kahlan blinked once and her eyes were once more the color of a summer sky, albeit angrier. At once, her companion grasped her arm as though to steady her.

With the quiet thunder of a woman addressing a subordinate, Kahlan Amnell replied, "Of course, Mistress Berdine. Belliv, sheathe your sword."

"Yes, Mistress."

Berdine watched her infantryman, whom she had known since his first skirmish, as he considered Berdine with a blank expression, their friendship of ten years forgotten. Berdine knew at once that the Belliv who served under her was dead and this woman, without a doubt, was the Mother Confessor of the Midlands.

They stared at each other over the roasted pig. Berdine's cook had chosen the fattest pig for slaughter in the name of their guests. Kahlan took diminutive sips of the wine, which she admitted tasted delicious while Cara herded a piece of meat on a useless circle around her plate. The Mord'Sith aimed her attention solely at the woman across them as Kahlan explained their origins and their quest.

Berdine's sudden interruption rang about the hall like a tolling bell on a silent street. "So neither of you are from here."

"Yes."
"And yet, you're the Mother Confessor of the Midlands."

"Yes. You're catching on quite quickly." The Confessor's smile was encouraging. Kahlan suspected that to a soldier like Berdine, it may even have been patronizing.

Berdine gave no indication of her dislike. "It must have been a powerful spell for the Gates of Meleth to respond the way they did."

"It was. We could not escape any other way and in truth, we just want to return her to her family." They all looked at little Amihan, who had been deposited at the fireplace where she was given a set of toys to play with. She yawned as she mowed down the wooden troops half-heartedly, looking expectantly up at Cara who stood up from her chair to pick the girl up before any of them could react.

"I'm taking her to bed. She's had a long day." With a nod from Kahlan and a careless glance at Berdine, Cara left their company with Amihan curled protectively against her chest.

Berdine's attention was once more on her. "What would possess you to bring home someone you barely know?"

Kahlan shrugged, taking another sip of the wine. "She's," Kahlan closed her eyes and let her worries out in a breath, "my daughter. Our daughter."

"And yet, you and your Cara are not lovers."

Kahlan looked up to find Berdine giving her an enigmatic smile. She felt the blood rush to her face.

"No, we aren't."

"And now it's crossed your mind," Berdine said flippantly, downing the rest of her wine. After which, she tore off a piece of pig's skin and popped it into her mouth. The crunch echoed loudly as Berdine stepped aside from the table and leaned against the part of it beside Kahlan. "You'll be surprised by this world, Kahlan Amnell."

"I trust I will," Kahlan replied gamely. "In some ways, I already am."

Berdine peered at her, as though there were answers painted on Kahlan's irises. "I served with Cara for a long time. She's a dangerous bugger, always has been. I suggest you keep her on a tight leash for your time here."

"What makes you think she's on any sort of leash?" Kahlan asked incredulously.

Berdine's face broke into a grin. "I'm a soldier first but I'm a scholar second. I know what I see, Mother Confessor. In many ways, your Cara is no different from the Lord of D'Hara."

Kahlan sat looking up at Berdine with a confused expression.

Berdine continued on as though nothing was amiss, "Your job here is done, Mother Confessor. You've returned the heir. If you need to see the wizard Zedd, there will be no way around it but to be guests at the People's Palace. But I highly doubt that Lord Rahl will be pleased to see her twin and a duplicate of her staunchest ally."

"I'm sorry. The Lord Rahl?"

Kahlan's eyes must have registered shock because Berdine put a hand on her shoulder to calm her.
"Why, Cara Rahl, of course. Not everyone calls her by that name, because the last one was a tyrant who used it all too often."

"But, a Rahl?"

Berdine tilted her head to the side, her brows knitted as though what she was saying was the most obvious thing in the world. "Cara can be nothing else but a Rahl if she is Lord of D'Hara, Mother Confessor. In fact, your child would be no one else but Amihan Amnell-Rahl, a living testament to the D'Hara-Midlands alliance."

TBC
The Grove of Olle

She felt…

What was the word?

Hm, yes. It was strange, unwanted, and bitter on the tongue.

Fear.

Cara looked balefully at her hands while a cold wind swept down from the limestone walls and through the grotto-like area they had decided to camp in for the night. Steam rose up from a warm pool of water as it glistened in the moonlight. In her world, the stonemasons would have built a Mord'Sith temple around this place.

But here…alas, here it was untouched and quiet, a watering hole for travellers who knew its secrets: the surrounding granite which broke the passage of wind and thus kept the cold at bay, the body of steaming water which originated from an upended source deep and hot within the crust.

The stone walls heard nothing but the soft susurration of sleep and weariness, experienced nothing but the thrash of leaves from solitary bushes and felt nothing but the unhurried tread of its transitory inhabitants. Quite unlike the fouled walls of a temple which seethed with the broken cries of men.

This quiet waypoint was the Grove of Olle, nested on footpaths that the Alkarian Regiment had established for itself. Berdine acknowledged it as the safest, most unassuming path to the People's Palace, where it was guarded—at least in part, by her men. The captain, a version no less judicious than the one Cara knew, made a pragmatic choice of twenty as her escort.

Glancing a few meters from the perch she had chosen, Cara's gaze panned over the cackling fire in the middle of a congregation of tents and the contemplative hunch that was Kahlan Amnell. The Mother Confessor, more subdued than normal, stared into the fire's depths while Amihan lay on her lap sleeping.

Cara's eyes fell on Amihan's face, a tableau of features she saw in reflections and also saw in the Confessor whom she had travelled reluctantly with for the Seeker's sake. Even from a few meters away, Cara felt the Bond like a gathering of taut strings, thrumming with a regularity that to Cara may have been familiar had it not been infused by something other than pain and hate or a faceless, unconditional loyalty.

This was not Darken.

This was not Richard.

This was…her daughter.

Cara grimaced at the pools of Olle, as dark and mysterious as the emotions that had laid waste to most of what she held as truth, as a fact of life, as essential to her.

There had been little to no hesitation in returning Amihan to her place, in following Kahlan to the depths of the Gate where the yawning jaws of uncertainty awaited. She refused to think of why she had done it, bartering a cold, inherent allegiance to Richard Rahl for more useless emotions that Kahlan and Richard had knowingly promoted. Those why's and wherefore's, which Cara had dared
not contemplate the moment she stepped out of the Gate of Meleth. She had honestly thought she had saved the child to avoid any more of Kahlan's pester ing.

But in these small, silent hours in Olle, she felt shock to a system that had been running on adrenaline all this time, that had been feeding on a panicked notion of exactly who Amihan was. By the warm pools where memories were of her Sisters bathing her or of torment, she was faced with the enormity of it: in Amihan's world there was no Mord'Sith, there was no loyalty but to D'Hara itself, to her self as ironic and laughable as that seemed.

The real bonds were measured in blood and in family, to Amihan the daughter and to Kahlan the wife. She would have scoffed at the mere idea if the Bond was not so apparent, so glaringly difficult even when Cara tried to distance herself.

And then there was that other thread, a flimsy Bond that was just as obvious. It was thin, a writhing shadow that crossed the distance over the Azrith Plains and past the enchantments of the People's Palace. She knew where it led. She knew who possessed it.

Cara, the Rahl.

At that, Cara slammed her eyes shut. All her notions of loyalty came apart in the seams and for the first time in a very long time, she felt hot, scornful tears at the edges of her eyes.

Kahlan could barely see her and the figure seemed crammed in shadows, until it stood in the moonlight, stripped itself of leathers and dove gracefully into the warm pools of Olle. She saw her blonde hair pan out behind her as she swam, her bare shoulders pulling powerfully against the water. Kahlan felt inclined to join her and wash the grit from hours of travel.

Before Kahlan could place Amihan in one of the tents, Berdine took a seat gingerly beside her, her armour replaced by utilitarian leathers that hugged her form. She indicated the swimming figure a few meters away.

"Does she know?"

"She knew before I did."

Berdine huffed, unsheathing her knife and sharpening it. The sound of metal against stone rang in the hollow grove. "It must be very difficult for her to have served a Rahl under the conditions she did and then to realize that it's possible to direct all her allegiance at a version of herself."

"That's very insightful of you," Kahlan whispered.

"I can sense that it bothers her. Your Rahl must have been very similar to the erstwhile tyrant of my world."

"I can tell you that he was worse."

"Oh?"

Kahlan's laugh was hardly sincere. "He broke her, used her. He beat her into the form that he wished, a weapon to do his bidding. When I met her, I hated her and I would've killed her."

Amihan shifted on her lap, still asleep, a reminder that the Cara she knew was a product of her experiences and that in this world they shared more than a mutual respect. "Now, she's a friend, something that I never imagined she would be. She's still loyal to a Rahl, the Seeker of Truth, but I think her energies have shifted to something less destructive, strange as that seems for someone
who made it her trade to torture and be tortured."

"She travelled a path no less difficult than our Lord," Berdine mused, her words a lilting mystery that Kahlan wanted to inquire about. There were other apprehensions as Berdine's disconcerting blue gaze bore into Kahlan's more precious fortifications. "Aren't you at all curious about your doppelganger here?"

"I don't know," Kahlan replied honestly. "She's the Mother Confessor, isn't she? She's married to a Rahl. It hardly seems any different from my world."

"Ah, I see. So you're in love with this Seeker of Truth?"

Again, Kahlan was taken aback by Berdine's perceptiveness. She merely shrugged to acquiesce.

"What? Not quite?" Berdine pressed.

"I do love him, very much." Kahlan visibly softened as memories of Richard flooded her; a comfortable warmth that fled to her cheeks and made her eyes vivid. "Joining him had been my role, and I suppose falling in love was a happy accident for the prophecies of my world."

"Are you always so keen on playing your role?"

"If I weren't the Midlands would find itself headless, enmeshed in its quarrels and vulnerable to its enemies," Kahlan said, feeling slighted by Berdine's words.

Berdine did not notice her rancour and simply went on as though narrating a happy memory from some listless vacation she had as a child.

"You're no different in some ways," Berdine said indulgently. "But in our history, the Mother Confessor marched to the gates of the People's Palace with fifty-thousand men, ready to destroy D'Hara with a single stroke. You ravaged the country-side and our cities as a message to the High Seat. There were no wizards, no magic, no prophecies, just your wrath at the razing of Nicobarese by the tyrant Rahl. You and your army tipped the scales with the lives you took in order to balance it with what Rahl had taken." Berdine looked up at the circle of sky cradled by the craggly edges of granite. "It was glorious. And we paid our price. A blood price."

Suddenly, Kahlan squirmed underneath that gaze. "I…couldn't have. I have been taught differently all my life." Just then, memories of the cruel fate Denee and she endured under their father, the necessities she had to carry out rose unbidden in her mind.

"But you did." Berdine smiled gently. "Our Mother Confessor did. For reasons that perhaps you can understand. Are you any different? I don't know. She was raised in the Confessor's Palace by an army of mentors, protected by the wizards at the Keep."

"Why are you telling me this?" Kahlan gave Berdine a pained expression. Amihan may have sensed her unease because she groaned as though to wake. Kahlan stroked her head to calm her.

Once again, Berdine's gaze seared past Kahlan's defences, a knowing blue expanse that spoke of a rare acumen in reading people and situations. Cara had known her as a tactician, as a scholar. Kahlan was beginning to recognize her as a veritable force who knew compassion and cruelty in the same stroke.

"I love a challenge," Berdine said simply. "You and your Cara seem reluctant to face the realities of this world, confronted as you are with what-if's and what-could-have-been's." Berdine laughed at Kahlan's expression. "You both seem preoccupied with the implications! Our history has taught
me many things, not least of which is this gap between you and her, between what you know or have been taught and what truly is, between the prejudices that have colored your version of the truth and a real understanding. Understand, Mother Confessor, that it can mean life or death for those around you."

They had not been easy to find. Even then, the initial shock of realizing that the women were not whom they seemed compelled her to be wary. They were creatures of the Gate, Nicci was sure and their auras were different in a way that made her cautious.

The Grove had been difficult to infiltrate. Even then, she had been relegated to a small niche by the granite walls as cover, observing the one that looked like the Lord Rahl as she cut through the water with an admirable grace. The woman seemed altogether distracted and Nicci smiled at the opportunity. The sorceress crept from her hiding place and slipped into pool, the warm water hiking up her robes.

To the impostor, it came as a big surprise when Nicci lashed out with a spell. Luckily, Cara had been in the act of turning for a clearer view of the night sky when she spotted the churning green mass at the corner of her eye.

The naked woman's reflexes were feline-like; she dove into the fathomless depths, the spell skimming past her and Nicci cursed as she tried to spot any movement, wading even deeper into the pool. A few meters away, the woman quietly speared through the water's surface, grabbing a stick-like object from the cluster of things she had divested herself of earlier.

Nicci threw another spell, this time gritting her teeth in frustration.

Her jaw dropped when the spell dispersed like so many gusts of wind against Cara's hands.

Already, the small party of D'Harans at the shore were alerted by the flashes of light and a distinct movement in their surroundings which indicated air being displaced unnaturally. Then, there was Cara's approximation of an alarm as it echoed about the Grove.

"Try again, wizard. Show yourself!"

Nicci gathered the strands of power pulled from deep within, feeling the roiling madness saunter forward as she prepared to release on her enemies.

And then she felt it. A counter-spell that was very unlike anything a normal wizard could muster, a blank wall of nothing that reverberated in her mind while sucking all power to itself. The act was something that not even the master of the Old World could approximate.

What in the Keeper's name...? This Cara was the impostor! Not the Lord Rahl herself!

Nicci cursed, climbing the stone walls and avoiding a ball of fire as it was thrown from the darkness, glancing off the granite and making it explode with percussive force. She had not counted on magic-wielders. Alkarian soldiers were anything but and even a measly wizard from Chase's office would have been manageable.

The Grove had been the perfect place for an ambush precisely because so few outside the Alkarian Regiment knew it existed. The child was supposed to die tonight! In her hands!

Nicci screamed her frustration, throwing smoke from her fingers as she disappeared into the night.
TBC
A D'Haran Lord

The camp was in sudden disarray as Kahlan witnessed the spells flying across the hot pools of Olle. Kahlan heard Cara's ominous challenge as it echoed against the walls of the Grove and her breath hitched as she saw another ball of green dissipate against Cara's hands. She saw the Mord'Sith grin almost maniacally.

There were urgent shouts for assistance from the bulwarks of stone and then clearer messages of a wizard escaping.

Kahlan released Amihan from her embrace just as Berdine started to yell orders in every direction. Berdine's features were suddenly strained; a lieutenant reported that two Alkarian soldiers on patrol had been killed and that the wizard had not been alone. There were other muffled words that Kahlan could not discern.

Berdine spoke sharply, "Send a message to Chase about what's happened here and alert the next garrison that we'll be collecting recruits."

"Of course, Captain."

Then everyone turned to the pools.

The air rippled with a dangerous calm as Cara stepped out from the water, her skin glistening under the moonlight as the liquid fell against her curves in tantalizing rivulets. Shadow and light emphasized the residual anger burning in her blue eyes as they fell on Berdine.

The captain met her gaze with an almost careless consideration while everyone else stood against the gale of her words, their gazes elsewhere.

"Your perimeter was breached."

Berdine answered, "I didn't know you had wizards for enemies in this world. She gestured to one of her soldiers and the petite lieutenant offered Cara her things. The leathers trembled under her hands.

Cara grabbed her leathers irately from the woman's arms, her nakedness nothing more than an afterthought. She stood, her breath uneven as she tried –and failed –to calm herself.

"On the other hand," Berdine frowned, "it may have been Amihan's kidnapper. I should have practiced more caution."

Kahlan came up from behind Berdine, in a voice that only she and Berdine could hear. "When anyone sides with the dominant party, overconfidence can be a subtle thing."

Berdine tilted her head to acquiesce. "My apologies, Mother Confessor."

"We're all alive. That's all that matters." She stopped two paces from Cara, focusing on the Mord'Sith's face.

How anyone could stand as confident in nothing more than her own skin, Kahlan did not know. Cara had the nonchalance of a woman dressed in full armor with a dragon for her steed.

Mord'Sith had always been proud of their bodies, a singular weapon that could be separated from
the softer emotions of shame or fear. Yet it filtered in darker opposites and Cara practically seethed with violence and wrath, her knuckles white against the leathers.

Kahan had seen her like this many instances before but never so closely. Tonight, Cara allowed Kahlan's presence instead of stalking off to vent elsewhere. Kahlan was almost tempted to touch her and dispel the shadows emerging.

As though realizing that it was Kahlan in front of her, Cara's shoulders relaxed and miniscule changes in the way she stood and regarded the Mother Confessor revealed relief.

"Good you're all right," she said in clipped tones.

At once, there was mischief in Cara's posture and she treated her nakedness like an oversized barb thrown into an already uneasy conversation.

Kahlan settled for an amused smile. Two could play the game.

"Berdine, a towel please."

Instantly, a towel was placed in Cara's hands, which she used to dry herself as she walked towards her tent, her blue eyes signaling that the Mother Confessor should follow.

"And Amihan?"

Cara paused at the tent flaps. She raised a brow at Berdine's direction and the captain wordlessly collected the little girl and followed Kahlan and Cara inside. Amihan quickly withdrew from Berdine and clung to Kahlan.

"Ideas?" Cara grated out.

Berdine shrugged resignedly. "If there is another wizard in these parts, they would be registered in Chase's office. Magic has been highly regulated here ever since the rebellion. Whoever did this wasn't likely to announce his arrival in Sassen. Obviously."

"Obviously."

Kahlan watched the Mord'Sith slip into her leathers, noticing scars that ran along her arms and back. There lay the crooked pathways of swords, the ancient track of lashings, the careless acquisitions that came with trekking across unforgiving terrain. Kahlan had never noticed them in the moments they had bathed in streams or hot pools, perhaps because she was too engrossed in their quest or in Richard or in the fact that Cara chose to ignore her and bathe in solace.

Even when she had joined their company, the Mord'Sith was inexplicably unique in their group of eccentrics. Zedd had been raised in the languages of magic and power, ancient lore and invisible worlds. Kahlan herself was a product of Confessor training. Richard started mapping out his wounds the moment Kahlan and the Sword of Truth became a part of his life. But for Cara...well, Cara's history had been scraped into her flesh since she was a child, long before she had met the Seeker or Kahlan or Zedd. She was honed into a pitiless spear-point that allowed her to cut through the dense sorrows of her life, had known little of play or love outside the strictures of Mord'Sith and their ways. There was a painful richness to the thought and Kahlan felt the ghost of sympathy and of something less benign (regret, perhaps?) as leather once more encased the Mord'Sith's skin. She had been so bent on convincing Cara to be more human in the way that Richard and she knew, when she could have spent time seeing the world through her eyes.

Cara's voice pulled her from her thoughts. "So the threat to Amihan didn't stop when she was taken
by the Gate. Who would want her dead?"

Kahlan felt Amihan's embrace tighten around her mid-section as she sat on a bench to accommodate them both.

Berdine followed suit in a bid to calm her nerves. "None that would be this brazen. I know very little about the games rulers play but I think they would be those who have it in their interest to break the alliance."

"They have a wizard."

"Or a sorceress. One my guards identified the magic wielder as a 'she'," Berdine supplied.

Kahlan frowned. "A Sister of the Light? Or Dark?"

"That's all the more reason to get her across the Azrith Plains and into the Palace," Cara's eyes narrowed. "Berdine?"

"The next town's garrison will provide ample reinforcements. When we left Sassen, I had also sent a message to the Lord Rahl outlining the," Berdine cleared her throat, "peculiarity of our case."

"And?" Cara's voice started to rise.

"She's outside." Berdine's grimace was almost apologetic. "The counter-spell? That was her doing."

Cara's eyes went blank, as though looking inward and then her face metamorphosed into one that was exerting as much control over mixed emotions as possible. Kahlan surmised that she had examined the Bond and found, to her horror that the other end was standing within their immediate vicinity.

Kahlan herself had quickly stood, startling Amihan who happily said, "Inya!" before running out the tent to meet her mother.

Kahlan felt it, a slight prickling on her skin, a dip in the magical plain as the invisible strains that governed nature gravitated towards a source. She felt her own Confessor magic push against the invisible field and she brought her own walls up as a precaution. She had only ever felt this in Zedd or Darken Rahl's presence and even then, it was always terrifying to think of the power that was at their disposal. A wizard with enough capacity could destroy the physical world around them, picking up the threads like so many knotted pieces and prompting them to unravel.

Kahlan found herself stepping back from the tent's entrance, seeking respite in Cara's shadow. Cara had grasped her Agiels, gritting her teeth at the pain as she tried to impose a measure of control. Berdine had stood, her eyes trained on the tent flaps.

Outside, a pregnant silence encompassed the entire camp as soldiers ceased all activity. There was only the wind against the tent canvasses, the soft clink of swords, helmets and shields as they were laid down on the ground in obeisance. The soft tread of boots and the muttered devotions to the Lord Rahl floated into the tent.

As soon as Cara Rahl surged inside, Kahlan felt rather than saw her presence. It was a literal wall that rammed against her magic, a straining mass that undulated under a tightly knit control.

Kahlan struggled to see past the tensions and into what was visible.

Rather than the red of the Rahl, her vest was a deep forest green with silver piping, its intricate
patterns lost inside her cloak. The cloak itself was a thick textile from the north. From the heavy, silver clasp, Kahlan guessed it was an import from Nicobarese and there was no indication that it was richer than something a merchant would wear. She wore the trousers of a woodsman and the boots of a scout, scuffed from D'Hara's terrain and the undergrowth.

It would have been all, frustratingly mundane if not for the face. She was Cara, definitely. The near-haughty bend to her lips, the piercing blue eyes, and the slightly longer hair tied back while wayward strands framed her face.

The gaze of the Cara she knew was uncomfortable at best but this one was downright ferocious. An angry scar ran from the left side of her temple, over her left brow, down her cheek, and just under her chin.

Strangely, it did nothing to mar her beauty.

A history far removed from everything her Cara and she knew painted all of Cara Rahl's movements. It was impressive that even when dressed in the finery of a scout, she seemed to grasp the entire room, her perceived aloofness prompting everyone to pay attention. As her presence stewed, one noticed that she did not swagger like her Cara did. Instead, her paces were measured, her posture attentive. In the blue depths of her gaze was the charismatic entreaty to remain absolutely honest for it was implied that integrity would be rewarded. There also lay a calm rigidity not unlike Cara's, which was structured around the travails that had brought her the High Seat.

Though it was hard to meet her gaze precisely because of its intensity, if one had the courage to look as Kahlan did, therein danced a profound compassion measured by pragmatism. A supplicant could not fear Cara Rahl as one would his or her own conscience. Cara Rahl's mien, confident because the person behind it was burdened with experience and years, was cleverly convincing and rightly punitive when it needed to be.

Kahlan could only wonder what experiences had brought upon those qualities. This was a leader, a subtle one, and Kahan knew that it was the most effective kind. She had met so few of them in her lifetime even when she had grown up in the presence of kings and queens at the Confessor's Palace.

It left her slightly breathless.

In one, graceful movement, Cara Rahl picked up her daughter who had been holding her cloak all the while, kissed Amihan on the forehead, and asked a few gentle questions. The girl answered haltingly and Cara Rahl smiled to encourage her. Once she was satisfied with the answers, the Lord Rahl turned her attention to them.

Berdine bowed her head. "My Lord."

"Berdine." It was a rich timbre, the same one that had haunted Cara's voice when she had saved the Night Wisp, except that Cara Rahl's voice was warmed by frequent use. It communicated the Lord's confidence in her captain and subtly enough, fondness. "You don't have to hear it from me. I'm grateful you brought her back."

"You believed otherwise, though."

"Indeed. A week, Berdine. A week! You broke the tower at Sassen in less than three days." Her gaze fell on the two. "So, creatures of the Gate?" The Lord's utter mischief littered her next words. "But no less impressive. Kahlan Amnell, you are as beautiful as always. I've always considered
myself fortunate to have a woman like you as my wife."

Kahlan felt forced to react to the playful provocation, feeling thrown completely off course. It surprised all of them that her Cara replied in a dangerous, low voice. "You will speak with more respect to the Mother Confessor or I will personally see to it that you limp to the People's Palace…on one foot."

A shocked silence before Berdine cleared her throat and struggled to pick up the conversation.

"They brought her through the Gate and returned her, my Lord, with much danger to themselves."

"I'm sure." Cara Rahl's eyes narrowed at her copy, her hideous scar etched with genuine amusement. "It's good to know I can trust myself and Kahlan in worlds other than my own. Mind you, if you wish to return to your world, the Gate must choose to do so."

"Excuse me?" Kahlan said.

"The Gate has closed, perhaps to remain silent for another hundred years or so. Whoever used it was raised on the old wives' tales of the Gate eating children. Amihan's captors must have been using it to kill her. What they didn't know is that those stories were created as deterrents. The Gate has been known to change anyone who steps into it and it's in our lore that it takes anyone it wishes. It doesn't bend to the whim of spells or even to wizards. Trust me, I tried." Cara Rahl was grim as she studied her daughter, brought her nose to the child's forehead. Her features softened and her eyes revealed an ancient fear, the long regret of someone who at one time or another had failed those around her. "The Gate returned her unscathed but it also brought you." She seemed sympathetic as she continued, "There are no accidents when the Gates of Meleth are concerned. And they do not lie. Once you have paid the price, it will open and all will be as it should be."

"A price?" Kahlan whispered. "Our books do not speak of a price."

Cara Rahl sighed as she closed her eyes against her daughter's cheeks. "A price? An inimitable change? The word can mean many things. For one, a child's fare would be proportionally smaller than that of a grown woman's. Perhaps she was a key. Whatever the price, it will be a big one, enough to convince the Creator to open her eyes, to open the Gate. Those at the other side can consider you monsters or gods or both."

Cara the Mord'Sith threw up her hands and scoffed, "Is that how it is? To step into the Creator's Eye and come back…more or less than ourselves?"

"Yes."

The silence that followed found the two Cara's staring at each other. The Mord'Sith glared as though her will could make the other Cara disappear. Cara Rahl scrutinized her twin with the quiet dominance of someone who had experienced more winters under the figurative sword which hung over her throne. They were the same and yet not. One was all edges and sharp corners and ice. The other was a superimposition of all those qualities except that they were hoisted up by the effectiveness of such airs when surrounded by a contemptuous D'Haran aristocracy rather than a deep-seated anger.

Kahlan for her part was silent. In a world that had suddenly become more and more uncertain, she began to realize that one thing had remained constant all this while. An affection for Amihan, and more recently, for her Cara.

A price, was it? Kahlan put a hand over her mouth to hide her emotions. Spirits, it was strange that
she feared the Gate more readily now than she had in the beginning.

TBC
They had all settled into benches by the camp fire, the night deeper than it had been.

While dinner was prepared, the Lord of D'Hara disappeared into the long, heaving shadows of the Grove, drawing hexes to protect the camp in timid flashes of light. When she returned, she reached into her weathered pack nearby and pulled out her eating implements.

Noticing Kahlan's curiosity, Cara Rahl offered her wooden bowl for Kahlan to examine under the firelight.

The careful etchings of a Galean deer hunt ran in and out of the scraggly rim where the bark had been retained. An intricate throng of dogs, horses and women in riding dresses galloped to the bottom. Turning the bowl over, Kahlan discovered the deer of the hunt hurtling into a carved symbol which told Kahlan everything she needed to know.

She handed it back, hiding the tremor in her hands. It was a sculpture inasmuch as a gift. The vessel was hewed from a species of black walnut tree grown only in the royal orchards of Galea.

The Lord said simply, "She had it carved before Amihan's birth. A gift to a D'Haran huntsman."

"Those are from the orchards of my mother," Kahlan said quietly. "I would never, never in a thousand years have allowed a single one to be cut."

Cara Rahl's calloused fingers traced the design as though pursuing the chisel of the sculptor.

"She also vowed that she would never marry a D'Haran pig," Cara said. The Lord lowered her head, her tone swollen with memories. "I understood. The tyrant Darken Rahl was a bastard, enough for anyone on the other side of the border to hate the entire state for centuries."

Her blue eyes glowed with the cinders of a deep and gnawing sorrow, smouldering with the fires the tyrant had lit. "He killed everyone, from the innocents at Nicobarese to the border towns."

She gave Kahlan a cursory smile and undertook the transformation many leaders performed when they sat on their throne. Like anyone schooled in intrigue and politics, Cara Rahl shoved her emotions in a box and set it aside. Her mood lightened as quickly as it had fallen.

She stood, caressing the bowl with her thumb as she partook of the stew.

Joking casually –and successfully –with anybody who doused their bread into the pot, Cara Rahl made everyone forget that this woman in scout's clothing was one of the most powerful wizards of their time.

It was confusing to see a Rahl, especially since that Rahl was also Cara, so versed in the activities of a soldier and so in tune with the habits of her men as though she had lived in the confines of a camp all her life. Again, Kahlan wondered at the differences between this Cara and the other, and then belatedly, at her own interest.

Watching Cara Rahl laugh without reservation, her face marred by a scar that only lent to an already intriguing character, Kahlan almost forgot the subject of the Galean bowl or the near-constant hum of Rahl's magic pushing incessantly against everything it touched.

Berdine and Cara Rahl did not lower their voices as they discussed the events of the past few days.
Kahlan gathered that the Lord had been traveling alone on the Alkarian paths, facilitated by complex spells that allowed her to bend the physical world and jump from one point to another without losing time. She could use the same methods to help a small group of six or seven travel to the People's Palace in less than a week but it drained her reserves.

The next half-hour was spent deliberating on how to tackle magical vulnerabilities on their journey. Impatiently, Cara the Mord'Sith interrupted the Lord while she was about to speak and pointed out that they had two additional people who were magically inclined.

Cara Rahl considered her twin, their eyes level as they both beheld the Bond which tied them. They each had an expression of hard insolence; Cara's hands were ghosting over her Agiels, ready to draw them when provoked. Rahl had a strangle-hold on her spoon.

Berdine flinched at the noiseless exchange, covering her mouth to hide her dread. Kahlan blinked at what her eyes insisted was double vision.

The silence steeped until Amihan yawned loudly from Cara Rahl's lap.

Quietly, without removing her eyes from the ill-mannered doppelganger before her, the Lord asked, "Did they take good care of you, Amihan?"

She made it clear that her daughter's answer would decide the fate of that group.

"Of course!" the six-year-old exclaimed. "They're my inya too."

"Are they, now?"

Amihan's cheeks were pink from the cold and her eyes, inherited from both her mothers, were shining with calm certainty. The Lord nodded as though she understood, chuckling.

The Mord'Sith's insolence forgotten and more certain now of her company, the Lord addressed Cara and Kahlan, "We'll leave you both to decide on whether you would like to accompany us. Zedd can probably help more than I." She gestured for Berdine to check on the watch and then she wiped the grubby sides of Amihan's lips with her thumb. "This little one needs to sleep."

Without warning, Amihan untangled her fingers from her mother's as she stood, sliding off her lap while rushing forward until she collided with Kahlan's thigh.

The Mother Confessor lowered her head.

The child gave Kahlan a sloppy peck on the cheek which Kahlan smiled against, the frigid night suddenly forgotten as she was ensconced in the small yet focused warmth of Amihan's embrace. As the girl withdrew, Kahlan fought broad and confusing feelings of regret.

"Thank you." Amihan's breath was warm against her ear, a tableau of summer, laughter and clear skies.

She watched as Amihan approached Cara. The child waited patiently for the Mord'Sith to level with her.

Rolling her eyes, Cara grudgingly allowed herself to be dragged down into a greedy, delighted squeeze. The moment Amihan's arms found purchase around Cara's shoulders; Kahlan saw her friend thaw from the inside out.

It was a sight that Kahlan was not likely to forget.
Cara's shoulders slackened as her harder edges dulled, her body language awkward as it conformed to the perplexing motions of affection. Amihan Amnell-Rahl bestowed a kiss on her forehead, a simple farewell. At once, Cara's composure wilted into one of almost naked vulnerability. She removed her gloves, rubbed her hands together for warmth and gently cradled Amihan's cheeks.

Wearing a grief-stricken smile, she studied the child like one would a map when lost, as though trying to impress all of Amihan's traits into the hostile topography of her mind.

Cara seemed surprised when the girl spoke into her ear. Amihan held her closely for several seconds as minutely, Cara's throat bobbed. The Mord'Sith nodded as though mandated by a general.

Amihan pulled away. Giving Cara a radiant smile, the girl darted back into the Lord's embrace, this time hiding under her *inya*'s cloak.

Cara Rahl put a protective hand around the restless bundle.

"You'll see her again in the morning." The Lord Rahl turned to leave. Then, in a gentler voice, "I promise."

Cara was in the process of loosening the ties of her leathers when the intruder whipped past the tent flaps and entered without permission. If not for the familiar sound of her boots and the way she noisily dropped her pack on the ground, Cara would have unsheathed her Agiels and gored the Mother Confessor.

Instead, Cara the Mord'Sith remained crouched over her things, carrying with her a strained expression, the ties of her form-fitting leather almost undone. To anyone entering, they would have been offered an unobstructed view of her bosom.

"If you want to talk about what just happened tonight, I'm all out of words," Kahlan said, averting her gaze.

Kahlan unpacked her bedroll and placed it beside Cara's with finality. "And if you should ask what I'm doing here, all I can say is I think we should stick together."

At Cara's knowing smile, Kahlan promptly collapsed into her bedroll and spun so that her back was to Cara.

"Good night."

"Hm."

Cara continued to undress, observing the Mother Confessor as she folded her arms across her chest and took in deep, agitated breaths. It was their first night without Amihan between them and even to her the arrangement seemed strange. After putting aside her leathers and donning a shirt, Cara took her place at her bedroll, pulling a blanket over herself.

Cara smirked. "The Lord Rahl's quite the character, isn't she?"

"Quite."

Kahlan turned to face her.

A hand's breadth apart, Cara raised a brow and allowed Kahlan's scrutiny. Those penetrating blue eyes roved shamelessly over Cara's exposed neck and chin, stopping momentarily at her lips then
up until she met Cara's gaze.

The Mord'Sith was smug in the face of such blatant enquiry. She had been in closer proximity to
women before but not quite in this context. The Mother Confessor was not someone to be toyed
with and Cara felt her skin prickle as she reined in an urge to say something improper.

Instead, her whining gut chastised her for her earlier gibe and warned that a discussion about
feelings was imminent.

"Who was that?" Kahlan began, indicating Cara's peculiar twin.

Cara shrugged, shying bodily away from the conversation as she directed her attention to the tent
canvass above them. She made a show of looking for answers there.

"Somebody who wasn't kidnapped at a young age and forced to kill her father."

"Fair enough." She felt Kahlan shift uncomfortably beside her. "I'm sorry if this comes out like a
pun, but you haven't been yourself."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cara ground out, closing her eyes in frustration.

All she needed was reprieve from this world where the usual points of reference were non-existent.
She was spinning out of control, grasping at unfamiliar way signs. What used to be Mord'Sith
temples in her world were untouched Groves more beautiful under moonlight. What used to be her
dogged allegiance to anyone who held the Bond was now a genuine, inquisitive regard.

She had a difficult time reconciling her former reality with the facts of this world: that it was
possible to have a well-adjusted daughter a few tents away. That she was tied to that child and to a
version of herself that she could not even pretend to despise. That beside her was a woman who
could potentially bring all her unstrung pieces together.

All these thoughts were dangerous. She would have done anything to return to her old life. Her
former responsibilities had been easier, simpler: protecting Richard and following him on his quest
to save the world. Extending her protection to the woman he loved and the wizard who was his
grandfather.

It was her duty to please the Lord Rahl. She tolerated them all because otherwise, she would have
returned to a life of pitiful regret and perpetual warmongering.

She also did not realize up until now that in this world those motives were shaky at best.

To worsen things, there was an inquisitive Mother Confessor who simply could not come to terms
with this world either.

She answered Cara's question in a rush. "I've known you to be a bit more in control, I suppose?
Snarky? Sarcastic? With something to say at every turn besides, 'I'll break your leg if you speak to
the Mother Confessor that way'?

"This is why I hate children."

Kahlan was well past reactions of shock at such statements. She remained silent, expecting more.

Cara acquiesced coldly. "Amihan's different, of course." Turning back to face Kahlan, she retorted,
"Why are you pinning this on me? And why now?"
The confidence Cara knew so well, the one that Kahlan ceaselessly drew strength from and which Cara sometimes gleefully tested, began to crack. It was an occurrence so new and so unexpected that Cara was almost tempted to revoke her questions.

Kahlan broke eye contact, biting her lip. Cara would have found the act intriguing at any other time if she was not off-kilter herself.

"Because…" Kahlan breathed in deeply, looking like she was summing up all her courage for her next words.

Cara endeavoured to remain still amidst the squall, schooling her face into one of wary interest.

Kahlan breathed out. "Because I'm confused. Because you're the only connection I have left to the world we came from. Because here, I am faced with everything I thought was impossible. I have a child, a family, and a lover who seems to have surmounted my dilemma with intimacy. And there's a possibility that I'll never be able to get back."

"Dilemma with intimacy?" Cara intoned, valiantly fighting to hide her amusement.

Even as they were the only women in the Seeker's company, this was a conversation they had only in passing. She vaguely knew that the reason Richard and Kahlan did not consummate their love was because of a Confessor's inability to control her powers in the throes of passion.

The concept was foreign to Cara, who pretty much released rage and dissoluteness in the broad strokes of her day. She possessed a healthy appetite for the flesh and took whomever she pleased, wherever and whenever she pleased. She did not quail at the idea of having her way with young, impressionable men or women, or of leaving them in their beds before dawn, never to be seen again. Armed with this surety, she did not concern herself with anybody else's sexual travails, much less the Mother Confessor's, unless it affected her directly.

But Cara was too intrigued not to continue. "And you know this how?"

"The way she looks at me! Me!" A vehement finger beat at an area on Kahlan's chest. "Like I'm the mother of her child! Like we've lived together for years as wife and wife!"

Quickly, Cara understood. If she thought Kahlan had been in possession of herself all this time, she was hugely mistaken. It was evident that Kahlan had become unfocused in the midst of this experience, just as Cara had. Being the ruler of the Midlands only lent her the skill to pretend otherwise. She had fooled everyone but herself.

Even then, Cara could not help but tease, "Well of course I guessed that her blunt casualness with you was a result of sharing a bed with her in one form or another."

The double entendre was not lost on either of them.

Kahlan looked like she did not know if she should laugh or cry. With an exasperated sigh, she settled for punching Cara playfully on the shoulder, her fist softening into a warm palm against the cloth of Cara's arm. The seriousness of the conversation dissipated, almost.

The Mord'Sith was not finished.

"But she isn't confessed."

It was a challenge of sorts, a quiet defiance. In answer, Kahlan's fingers tightened around Cara's arm. Before Cara could complain at the contact, she reclaimed her hand, her features suddenly
"Cara…"

Kahlan had never said her name in quite that way, ever.

It had the soft pitch of what-ifs, of the future which broadened endlessly, terrifyingly into a horizon. It carried with it the wordless, aching refrain of yearning and hope, much like the siren’s song as it beckoned one to the rocks. Once heard, it could not be shorn from memory and Cara had to follow it into a roiling, fathomless sea.

Kahlan could not have expressed the torturous shattering of all that she knew any more clearly.

"I know how you feel," Cara croaked, "I know precisely." The blanket rustled as Cara slowly turned away to blow out the lamp. "Good night, Kahlan."

Kahlan's reply was subdued. "Good night, Cara."

With the darkness came the silence like a thick, viscous fog.

It stretched across an hour and then two. Before long, it had stretched out into the timeless plains of sleep.

They lay with their backs to each other. Their breathing evened out, and their eyes grew heavy. Wearily, they descended into the world of dreams where desires and wants drifted unchecked along the edges.

To Cara, the implications of the evening lodged themselves deeper into the caves of her subconscious, turning everything in its path molten and formless.

TBC
Kahlan woke up from a gentle nudge and found her companion already ambling about the tent. Cara was dressed from head to foot in her leathers, the Mord'Sith uniform a metaphorical barrier. Her hair cascaded over her face as she bent over to gather her bedroll, still wet from a morning swim and haphazardly dried as evidenced by droplets interwoven into her hair like jewels. Though her stance was tense, her face revealed nothing.

Kahlan had never agonized so consciously about anyone's emotions before. Her role as Mother Confessor gave her power over the masks people wore but with Cara, she sometimes ran into a blank wall.

Richard was easier to read. Everything about Richard was easier than Cara Mason.

With Richard, mornings were greeted with a smile, with a verdict that all would be well as he hefted his Sword of Truth and prepared everyone's breakfast. He was unambiguously warmhearted and it was easy to believe that the simple woods man from Westland could overcome the dark. In their quest, Richard Cypher had spiritedly chased away her own demons and she became conscious of a world that she thought she had missed when she was a child.

He was the Seeker, with the disposition and passion for it. For a long time she had stayed in the comfort of that glow. She had walked so ably and so confidently by his side. Without his presence now, her thoughts were hanging on a dangerous precipice.

Last night was one instance. It had made her painfully aware of how things had changed between Cara and her, between her former understanding of who Cara was and the Cara she beheld now. It also made her aware that the world could not be halved into light and dark, good and bad. Somehow, Cara fell in the spaces between.

Her confusion had been compounded by last night, when Cara wore that blasted white shirt. The light from the lamp had lent it and its owner a warm, ethereal glow. Cara's cheeks were pink, her hair flaxen like the color of Galean wheat under a setting sun. Cara's proximity was charged with something she could not name.

Much to Kahlan's chagrin, Cara's lips had looked like the proverbial red fruit, luscious, dangerous and ripe for the picking; Kahlan had a hard time imagining they were anything else. When she had looked up to meet Cara's gaze, those penetrating, ice-blue eyes softened into a color that she wished she could comprehend so that she could somehow commit it to memory. Thinking back, Kahlan should have faced her demons on her own and slept in her own tent.

She would have sighed if Cara had not broken her reverie.

"Kahlan."

She felt her cheeks grow warm, as her eyesight focused and found the Mord'Sith giving her an odd, very curious look.

"Were you staring at me all this time?"

"Of course not."

Cara raised her brow as though she doubted her statement. "It's an hour before dawn. We have to get going."
Setting aside her thoughts for later, Kahlan stood up and joined in the preparation.

Cara gave no indication that last night had been an anomaly in their friendship. She went through the usual, precise motions of saddling the horses. She held the remains of dinner in one hand, taking measured bites of the stew wrapped in hard bread.

Kahlan had fond memories of Cara's approximations of breakfast, usually something she had burned to a crisp the night before.

As she gathered her packs, Kahlan noticed Cara Rahl standing beneath the eaves of a small maple tree a few feet away, perhaps scrutinizing the Mord'Sith's technique. Amihan was sitting at her feet, playing with the wooden troops Berdine had graciously lent her.

Seeing Kahlan approach, Cara Rahl gave her a smile, which overshadowed even the scar cleaving her face. It was without its fetters, something she saw in her own Cara so rarely but which seemed so commonplace for Cara Rahl. Laugh lines and the quirk of her lips, her bright eyes and slightly redder cheeks made small, meaningful articulations of mirth or receptiveness.

The Lord bent down to inform Amihan of their visitor.

Immediately, Amihan forgot the army she was commanding, the wooden squad forgotten across the Grove floor as she got to her feet and ran to Kahlan with the exuberance of a summer parade. Kahlan anticipated the running jump and caught the little girl, pulling Amihan to her like a woman drowning.

"Hey," Kahlan whispered, pressing her nose to Amihan's hair.

The scents were familiar, from a world that seemed far, far away. Her fingers threading into Amihan's cloak, Kahlan's eyes widened slightly as she studied the textures more fully in her hand. She dared a glimpse at Cara Rahl's direction. The Lord was trying to hide her smile by preparing her own horse and inspecting the saddle.

It was obvious that Amihan Amnell-Rahl had been bathed with soap imported by brave merchants from the Midlands' north. It owned a clean, subtly lavender smell with distinct traces of rare oils from Nicobarese. She wore a deep green vest, the silver inlays interleaving across her chest. The wool beneath had been woven from the vertical looms of Kelton, dyed with shellfish from their lakes. Her cloak was thick, lined with sable fur only the nobles of Galea wore. It was a texture Kahlan associated with the deep, Aydindril winters, with the warmth that was so rare during those times. Amihan's cloak was fastened by a silver broach and on that broach was the symbol Kahlan had found at the bottom of Cara Rahl's bowl.

There was no doubt as to whom Amihan's other mother was, or which nations she ruled. The child was clothed in her love.

"Inya, good morning!" Amihan kissed her, gave her a quick squeeze and then proceeded to reach into her pockets. She retrieved hard bread and cheese wrapped in cloth, the crumbs tumbling down Kahlan's front. "I saved it for you and," she glanced furtively at the Mord'Sith, "my other inya. But she's having stew from last night."

"You never find it strange that you have so many inya's present, do you?" Kahlan mused.

"No."

"If she could have six of us, she would," Cara Rahl said good-naturedly. "I wouldn't mind, either."
As though to make her point, the Lord's eyes coasted over Kahlan from head to a foot, a gentle yet intense scrutiny akin to a caress. Her enigmatic smile told of numberless memories that concerned them both, intimate and mundane. It dared her to ask questions, to doubt.

Immediately, Kahlan dropped her gaze.

From Cara the Mord'Sith's look, it seemed that she did mind if there were more copies of them and she crossly handed Kahlan the reins.

"The faster we get to the People's Palace, the faster we can return to our world."

Seven was the number the Lord Rahl chose for her party. At Amihan's insistence, Kahlan rode with the little girl in the center of a protective group composed of Berdine, two capable Alkarian soldiers, Cara and the Lord Rahl.

Taking the rear guard, Cara seemed more standoffish than ever, her eyes roaming the surrounding knolls and inspecting the shadows behind towering rocks or trees. She was perpetually observant, her hands ghosting over her weapons, her creaking leathers a stark reminder of just how dangerous she was despite her relaxed air.

Cara Rahl was just as vigilant, her power pounding against Kahlan's magical walls like an insistent drum at the eve of a siege. The power which was so obvious to the magically gifted and her rending scar were direct contrasts to her seemingly more quiet nature. Just like Cara the Mord'Sith, the quality was feline, a tiger lounging in the shade with an eye on her prey.

The Lord directed all of them wordlessly in a secret, universal language that had been notched into all her movements. It was expressive in an authoritative way, a learned skill composed of the crisp and concise movements of a general. Cara the Mord'Sith had them too but her hold of it was cruder, a more primal dialect that forced one to heel or to acquiesce

Berdine had a healthy respect for her Lord's more subtle commands, suddenly urging them to stop as the Lord Rahl rode forward and began to fashion several spells in gestures and muttered verses.

The gateway.

Kahlan knew at once that the powers the Lord Rahl was using could indemnify energy spent building cities. She could feel the invisible cords holding the world around her tighten and lurch as reality literally bent to Cara Rahl's will. In her mind's eye, the Rahl was the puppeteer, skillfully interleaving power on power to produce the effect she wanted.

This was going to take more than a few minutes.

Berdine had already dismounted, prompting all but the Lord Rahl to do so. The captain seemed appreciative that the Lord had chosen an elevated path instead of a place that would have been more easily ambush. She ordered the Alkarian soldiers to remain on their horses to scout the vicinity.

She eventually arrived at Kahlan's side, smiling as she gave Amihan another small wooden soldier, this one looking suspiciously like her. Despite their almost violent meeting, Amihan had warmed to Berdine, perhaps picking up on Cara's trust and the decorated mutual past her mother had with Berdine.

The little girl thanked her promptly, frowning as she studied the woodwork and then compared its image to the captain before her. She did not think much of it for long, sitting on a rock nearby and reaching into her pouch for the wooden warrior's other companions.
Turning to Kahlan, Berdine asked, "You wanted to ask me something?"

Once again, Kahlan emerged flummoxed at Berdine's sharpness. "How did you? I mean, I didn't..."

Berdine simply waited.

Kahlan became quiet, her gaze drawn to the woman weaving the gateway as she treated the world like her loom. Then her eyes fell on Cara the Mord'Sith, who stalked the same world with as much unmitigated grace but with seemingly less authority. During their quest, Cara's decisions with regards to her Lord were almost always impetuous and final. Lately, for someone who rarely hesitated even in the act of killing, Cara seemed...indecisive of whoever held the other end of her Bond. And this time, it was by no fault of Kahlan's or the Seeker's.

It was a peculiar change, one that Kahlan was willing to investigate.

"Tell me how Cara became the Lord Rahl."

"That's more than I expected," Berdine said sincerely, laughing. "I doubt the story would fit in the time given to us right now."

"Give me an idea. Please."

"You ought to ask her yourself. It's not my story to tell." Berdine's gaze turned to the ground, as though the courage to explain could be found there. She seemed to instantly regret having started the conversation. "We had our share of tragedies during Darken's time. Cara was braver than most, than all of us."

"I...see."

"Do you?" Cara Rahl asked, appearing suddenly beside them.

Cara Rahl had dismounted, slightly out of breath. Her features seemed drawn, her aura mute. The creation of the gateway had drained her.

She raised a questioning brow in Berdine's direction. The captain cleared her throat and looked away. Kahlan herself tried not to look apologetic, setting her attention to the gateway itself.

The magical door, if one could call it that, was a roiling mass of blues and greens, in a shape concurrent to that of a breaking ocean wave when looked at sideways. It fit one person abreast his or her horse, and like a thing alive, seemed to swallow and regurgitate the scenery surrounding it. Behind chaotic, marbled colors, one could make out a small clearing with trees hiding a majestic view of a river.

Kahlan pursed her lips derisively. She had stepped through many gates in her life. Another one could not possibly hurt.

As though forgetting that she had been the topic of the conversation, Cara Rahl opened her arms grandly, though weakly. "Well, if you could all step through the gate one-by-one and I'll close it behind us as we go. Quickly, now."

Berdine and her two soldiers went first, followed by Cara. With Amihan in Kahlan's arms, she stepped towards the gate, the magical artifact oscillating as it accepted her form. She felt Amihan's arms tighten around her as they both felt a rush of jarring frigidity similar to what one would feel jumping into a mountain lake. It was numbing and after a while, almost tranquil as light all but took her entire field of vision. It did not last for long.
There was absolute chaos at the other side.

Berdine was screaming, her sword ringing against a flurry of other weapons. She was already on her horse, slashing at masked men below her and allowing the animal to crush anyone in the way.

The crunch of bones, a few tortured wails, then, "Protect the Lord Rahl! Protect the heir!"

Still slightly shivering and almost certainly half-blind from the effects of the gateway, Cara did not have to be told twice. Her Agiels squealed from their holsters, their familiar heft lending all that she needed for her blood to start boiling in the pleasant temperatures of wrath.

She stepped forward blindly, her stance low as she stabbed the first villain in the gut, the burning pain of the Agiel doubling him over. Arcing into another offensive blow, she hit the next one in the head, splitting his lip open. Already, the air was beginning to smell like blood.

Cara grinned. This was something she never ceased to enjoy. This was a welcome reprieve from everything.

She stole a glance of the gateway just as Kahlan and Amihan stepped through.

Cara shouted, "Kahlan! The girl!" To Berdine and the two soldiers, she snapped, "Rally to the gateway!"

She proceeded to cut a circle around the magical artifact, her Agiels singing as Berdine and the two soldiers followed her lead in forming a defensive perimeter. Nearing Kahlan, who was still holding her head as she tried to orient herself, Cara kicked an oncoming assailant, sending the poor man flailing backwards into another charging group. The delay she created allowed her to scoop Amihan from Kahlan's arms and launch the girl onto the bay horse.

Amihan grabbed the saddle, her face and knuckles ashen as bit back her fear. The child watched Kahlan take her place behind Amihan shortly afterward, looking for all the world like this was all normal. Cara admired the quality and knew that it must have been partly hers. Emotions in the midst of battle was something not many could tether, much less a child.

In a few seconds, the Mother Confessor's sword was drawn, a more appropriate weapon on horseback than her knives. She held Amihan in place with one hand as she urged the nervous animal into the middle of the protective semi-circle Berdine and Cara had contrived.

The moment Cara Rahl stepped through the gateway; Cara knew that something was going to go terribly wrong.

It was a band of thirty against seven. One of Berdine's experienced veterans –the first one through the gateway –was fighting just as vigorously as the rest despite several bleeding cuts, covering an area that otherwise would have been relegated to two men. To everyone's surprise, she was immediately dispatched in a spray of blood by a strange-looking melee weapon. In the ensuing chaos Cara watched as a flash of blonde breached the defensive line.

Cara recognized her and the star-like weapon she wielded immediately.

Nicci. A Dacra.

And something else. A seamless, metal circlet.

The gateway winked out of existence as Cara Rahl leaned helplessly against her horse, the dust
beneath her feet stirring from the sudden absence of magic. Her face was in a grimace as she tried to move forward or grasp a spell from whatever remained of her reserves. Lightning sparked between her fingertips, the air rattled, and the hairs on Cara's back began to stand on end. Anyone else in Cara Rahl's domain would have given her berth.

It was too late when she recognized Nicci, her eyes widening as the sorceress approached her and snapped the Rada'han around her neck.

Cara felt the Bond waver, the immediate fear which channeled through and heard Kahlan cry out as Cara Rahl fell to the ground, unconscious or dead.

TBC
Nicci

Cara dispatched her opponents, leaving a heap of groaning, masked men in her wake.

"Berdine, cover me!"

Immediately, the captain stepped into place as Cara ran towards the motionless figure of Cara Rahl.

The sight of the woman in her merchant's cloak made Cara want to retch. The Lord of D'Hara was similar to her in almost every way except for that unexplained scar which slit her face in a manner that charmed everyone. But once Cara got past the flesh and bone, they were achingly different. Here was a version of her without her Sister's influence, the welts from Agiels, the death of her father at her hands, or her childhood, which she spent in rat-infested dungeons.

It was unthinkable. It was terrifying.

Cara the Mord'Sith was not one for regret --she had been expunged of remorse or guilt in her training --but there was no avoiding the what-could-have-been's, not when it looked at her, listened to her, or even talked to her. She could not turn a blind eye to the sheer contentment on Cara Rahl's face when she glanced at her daughter or --and this thought had occurred with less fear and more wonderment on her part --at Kahlan.

So here she was, running in a half-panic, already feeling the long, cold tendrils of fear crawl up her spine as she saw no sign of life from a body similar to hers.

If Cara could just…save a small part of herself.

"Inya! Inya!" Amihan cried. She was straining against Kahlan's arm, her face etched with grief, fear and all those nameless emotions a mother would never want to see from her child. "Inya!"

Cara never feared death; in fact, she welcomed it. But the sorrow on Amihan's face, the innumerable questions on Kahlan's… Certainly, Cara's demise could have been acceptable in the world she left behind but not here where she --Cara Rahl in particular --had so much to lose.

Cara could see Nicci's frown as the sorceress stood with her Dacra at the ready. She stared down at the Lord Rahl, baffled and hesitant as she confronted the mystery of why the Lord Rahl had collapsed when she had fastened the Rada'Han.

It was a few moments' distraction which Cara seized to her advantage.

She shifted her body weight as she moved, mustering strength from the ground and her legs. Then she lunged forward and ran into the sorceress. She slammed one Agiel between her ribs, the other Agiel hitting Nicci's thigh. In one, smooth movement she swung the woman to the ground, using her Agiels as anchoring points.

Nicci screamed as she fell and carelessly countered with her Dacra. Cara was milliseconds faster and sent the ancient, star-like weapon flying into a nearby tree. She fluidly wrestled Nicci from behind, initiating a stranglehold around her neck with one arm while the other held an Agiel to her spine.

"You!" Cara growled into Nicci's ear. She pressed the Agiel further into Nicci's gut and could not help her smile when the sorceress grunted. "Give me the key, you insolent b…"
"The key?" Nicci rasped.

"Are you daft?" Cara roared. "To the Rada'Han of course!"

Nicci's eyes flickered to her men as one by one, they fell under Berdine and Kahlan's swords. In the short seconds it took Cara to position Nicci in such a way that the woman could not move without considerable pain, Berdine was already unmasking a few of the dead, muttering under her breath as she tallied their numbers and tried to put names to their faces. The remaining Alkarian soldier, Kina, was busy prodding the rest of the bodies for someone unfortunate enough to be unconscious. Her fallen companion, the veteran Arrin who was first through the gateway, had been laid out separate from the carnage, her eyes vacant as they stared at the listless sky, her soul surrendered to forces of the underworld.

The Mother Confessor dismounted and with one arm, she set Amihan on her feet. She watched as the girl dashed to her mother's side, kneeling as Amihan fought to keep from crying.

Kahlan cleaned her bloodied sword with a cloth, sheathing and setting it aside as she bent over to study Cara Rahl. Her fingers delicately explored the metal collar around the Lord's neck and then caressed Amihan's head as the girl lay across her mother in an encompassing embrace. Hesitantly, as though afraid, Kahlan brought her hands to a pulse point just under Cara Rahl's jaw and for a few moments, Kahlan stared transfixed.

Turning to Nicci, Kahlan demanded, "What did you do to her?"

Nicci gazed disparagingly at the Lord.

"You thought you could control her with it," Kahlan said matter-of-factly, her voice colder than a wind-swept winter. "I'm also surprised you can't. There's something very different about how the Rahls use their power in this world. You must have thought she was a normal wizard. I thought she was too, until you collared her."

Kahlan had once been a captive of a Rada'Han. It had stripped her into a form of nakedness, amputated her into an agonizing normalcy that she had never hoped to experience in the presence of her enemies. To be cut off from one's magic was an unforgivable experience.

An old wrath crawled from the edges of Kahlan's eyes, oily and dark in its power. The air was suddenly harder to breathe as though the world around them had been compressed into a tiny space containing their little scene of violence.

Nicci fought to swallow, to breathe as Cara's hold constricted with each movement.

"Wait. Wait!"

Kahlan's outstretched hand stopped a few inches from Nicci's neck and Nicci was straining as far away from it as Cara's grip would let her.

At Kahlan's signal and against Cara's better judgment, Cara loosened her arms.

Immediately, Nicci's hand shot to her other wrist, revealing a seemingly normal-looking wristband Cara had not noticed before. Before any of them could react, Nicci recited a spell.

The trinket glowed and Cara immediately recognized it for what it was. A power sink that apparently had not been drained of all of its contents.

"Kahlan, watch out!"
With Nicci too close and too quick for her to counter with a barrier of her own, Cara felt a short, powerful burst of force like a fist of solid concrete hitting her abdomen. It knocked the air from her, shocked her system into letting Nicci go and sent her reeling backwards, then it wrapped itself tightly around her legs. Kahlan had also been affected, flying into a tree with a grunt. Berdine and Kina had been pushed a few meters off, groaning as they tried and failed to get to their feet.

In another burst, Nicci had retrieved the Dacra and approached the Lord Rahl with a satisfied grin. Amihan covered her mother's body with her small arms and scowled at the advancing sorceress.

Something in the girl's expression must have given Nicci pause because Cara saw that predatory smile wither as she swallowed a lump of hesitance and strangely enough, fear. Nicci cautiously knelt before the Lord's body, keeping eye contact with Amihan as though her life depended on it. In calculated and obvious movements, she reached out and unfastened the Rada'Han, slowly slipping the collar and her Dacra back into her robes as though she had planned on doing something else but now, could not.

It reminded Cara of someone avoiding quick and threatening gestures in the presence of a beast.

Cara strained to hear Nicci's words.

"I regret that I can't take you with me or kill your mother as I should have done when you were… weaker," Nicci said, studying the girl carefully as one would a poisonous snake, or an angry boar, or a nest of bees. "This thing," she regarded the trinket with contempt, "is of limited use and it's becoming apparent that I'm no match for you now. So, consider my sparing you a gift, young one, and remember me when you win the war."

She touched the unadorned bangle once more and the power within lent her enough to escape.

As soon as Nicci had gone, Cara and Kahlan were released from the spell of binding and they hurried to Amihan's side.

Cara Rahl's chest— which gave no discernable movements before— expanded greedily. She sucked in several portions of air as though she had been holding her breath and for a few, terrifying seconds, she shivered violently, choked and murmured several words that made no sense. The words subsided into a few broken phrases before a healthy, pinkish hue returned to her lips and cheeks. Sweat broke across her brow and her hands remained balled into fists. She seemed troubled, her face in a grimace, as she struggled with something unseen.

Kahlan put a hand on the Lord's forehead. "A fever. We need to get her to the nearest city." Under her breath she spat out, "What did Nicci do to her?"

"I don't think she even knew herself," Cara said. "Nicci was just as confused as we were."

Kahlan put an arm around Amihan, who relaxed against her embrace and looked relieved that Nicci had gone.

"She also seemed scared of something," Cara peered curiously at Amihan, "or someone." At that, Amihan hid from their gazes by burying deeper into Kahlan's cloak. "She could have killed Amihan or her mother if she wanted to."

"I won't let her!" Amihan cried, repeating the words into Kahlan's side as she hugged the Mother Confessor even tighter.

"Hm," Cara said, unconvinced.
Kahlan shot Cara a look and rubbed the girl's arms reassuringly. "I'm sure you won't, little one."

"Mother Confessor?" Berdine said, apologetic at having interrupted the exchange. "The Cabrallian garrison is half a day's ride away. We can take the Lord Rahl there and arrange for an envoy."

"Good. How much further to the People's Palace?"

"Two days at most. The Lord Rahl wanted to get there through two gateways and expended as much magic as she could, constructing the first." Berdine smiled at them wanly. From the way she stood, the day's events had worn her out. "I found this," she produced a quaint piece of jewelry similar to the one Nicci wore, "on Arrin. It's some sort of anchor point. Kina tells me that it was a gift from one of Arrin's admirers."

Kahlan said, "I'm sorry she died."

"She died a hero's death, in service to D'Hara and defending our Lord. A soldier of the Alkarian regiment could not ask for anything more." Berdine gave the piece to Kahlan. It was a simple, silver band with an emerald inlay. It was elegant, forged from an earlier age when wizards had the skills and the need to create such things, and yet it had almost been their demise. "Anyway, this anchor tethered to the gateway as it was woven and activated some other artifact remotely..."

"Likely that power sink Nicci had on," Cara supplied.

"Yes. Well, I suspect this sink reproduced the spell and the destination for Nicci at a more powerful rate. She sent thirty men through that second gateway. Thus the attack on the other side." Berdine rubbed her face in frustration. "Spirits. The Senate won't be too pleased to find out that the Lord Rahl is ill."

"Well I'm sure they'll be happier to have her ill than dead," Cara said.

Berdine shook her head. "You have a sordid sense of humor, Cara."

"So I'm told."

"If you told that to the Lady, you'd be skinned alive, you know."

Cara smiled grimly, knowing also that another obstacle was at hand: namely the Mother Confessor of this world, and how they would answer to her when they brought her wife and her daughter to the People's Palace.

TBC
Hi."

"Hey."

Cara acknowledged the Mother Confessor as she joined her at the walls of the garrison. They were alone, with only the sharp calls of mountain birds for companions.

The Cabrallian garrison was a veritable fort carved from the cliff it nestled on, built centuries ago to safeguard a pass leading to the Azrith Plains. It overlooked the small, self-sufficient city of Cabrallia, which took advantage of cold, soothing breezes from the Boundary and an ancient yet advanced irrigation system that brought spring water from deep within the rock into their gardens.

The city was a series of carved niches on the bedrock, windows and doors painted in bright, celebratory colors, while individual designs marked one house from the next. As the sun fell, light from their windows spilled forth like globes amidst the rock.

The town itself thrived on frequent visits from rich vacationers who sought respite in its deep springs, hidden waterfalls and well-appointed taverns. Several of the houses belonged to the D'Haran affluent, which boasted large porticoes and terraces for their children and their guests. Large vines and hanging plants gave an impression of lushness. From one level to another, the flora hung like a green cascade with blooming flowers for boats.

It gave Cabrallia an undeniable mystique.

Beyond the city was the vast quilt-like stretch of flatland leading to the People's Palace, turning several shades of orange as the sun began its slow procession to dusk.

"So…"

Cara risked a glance at the woman who was trying to strike a conversation with her.

"That was," Kahlan breathed out shakily, meeting Cara's gaze, "scary."

Cara shrugged. "She'll be alright when we get her to the People's Palace. Zedd can give us answers."

"You weren't bothered at all? Seeing yourself lying like that?" Kahlan waited for an answer, was not given one and said in afterthought, "Oh, wait. You aren't one to admit." Kahlan steepled her fingers together in a gesture of nervousness. Or maybe she was cold. "I'm actually glad that you can revive anyone if it came to that."

"To an extent."

"Well yeah, to an extent." Kahlan faced her, boring a hole into Cara as she studied her. "I was scared, Cara. For you."

Cara stiffened. This was it. Feelings, yet again.

"I can't imagine why." Cara's wry delivery did nothing to keep Kahlan from stepping closer until they stood shoulder to shoulder.

Cara watched with disapproval. The Mother Confessor was shivering and had gravitated to the
nearest source of heat.

Cara said, "You should get back inside. It's getting cold."

"When were you ever concerned about my freezing over?" Kahlan asked her playfully.

Cara's silence was enough of an answer. Without fear or reproach, Kahlan twined her arms around Cara's and placed her head on the Mord'Sith's shoulder.

Cara shifted as though to pull away but something about how Kahlan held her—a firmness and a familiarity—quieted her protest. Cara had always considered touching to be a prelude to either torture or sex and never judged it to be a sufficient form of comfort. Apparently, to Kahlan it was so Cara stood still and allowed it.

"This is nice," Kahlan whispered, mostly to herself.

Cara grunted a reluctant 'yes' to humor her.

"Thank you." Kahlan lifted her head from Cara's shoulder.

Cara turned to look at her, mostly because the Confessor's presence was unnerving and she usually faced her fear head on.

Briefly, they shared the same breath, the sun carving delicate shadows on Kahlan's face. Cara frowned, trying to make sense of the situation, of the varying shades of sentiment which passed like an artist's hesitant daub across Kahlan's face. Then, before she could curse or avoid the situation entirely, Cara floundered like a fish out of water as her brain lost all coherent thought. Kahlan suddenly leaned forward and planted a quick kiss—chaste and heart-felt—on Cara's cheek.

A steady, newfangled warmth bloomed on that patch of skin and spread across her face even as Kahlan's lips were replaced by cold air. It latched onto her chest and stayed there, a dense yet comfortable weight that Cara had never felt before much less carried.

The kisses Cara gave and had been given were fleeting, vicious approximations of lust, of power. This was…different.

"For what?" Cara said in a choked whisper.

Normally, she would have the good sense to say something witty, or invite the woman for a drink, or let her intentions be known less subtly.

Provided, of course, she knew what her own intentions were. Which she did not, because this was Kahlan. The Mother Confessor of the Midlands. The woman who almost confessed her. And Richard's…Richard's what?

Cara mentally kicked herself. There would be no intentions besides friendship, camaraderie, and the usual talk of feelings by the fire.

Kahlan continued, "Thanks for everything. I don't know where I'd be if I had done this alone."

"I highly doubt that, Kahlan. You're stronger than most. And anyway, when all this is over, you'll always have Richard." That sounded more like an epithet than a truth. Cara winced as Kahlan broke her gaze.

"Indeed, Richard."
Sadness. Confusion. Regret. The remaining sunlight revealed each hue to Cara clearly.

Cara stumbled right into the hole she dug for herself, "I apologize. I didn't mean to bring Richard into…"

"He's the idea that never really goes away," Kahlan said thoughtfully, this time facing the magnificent view and imbibing a lungful of fresh, mountain air. "I wonder how he is. How they both are. Zedd and he must be worried sick."

"I should imagine, now that their only decent cook stepped through the Gate."

They both smiled, appreciating the ebbing tension.

"Look," Cara began, licking her lips. She was anxious to get out of the cold, to be surrounded by the hubbub of people rather than this unsettling quiet. "I hear there's a decent pub down at the city. They have a tasty Cabrallian brew on tap. Maybe you'd like to," she coughed, uncertain of her words, "have a drink."

Cara tried to smirk, hiding her distress at having invited Kahlan in the first place. "I promise you'll do all the talking."

Kahlan considered her doubtfully and deadpanned, "You're asking me to go drink with you? You, the great Cara Mason, who can out-drink an entire tavern of lushes if she wished?" Kahlan's lips quirked upwards. "Spirits, the last time Richard even tried, he was face-down on the tavern floor half an hour into your 'drinking contest'."

"Well, now that you've put it that way…yes." Cara pushed against the wall and started for the nearest stairway down to the courtyard. She called out with laughter in her voice, an occurrence so rare that it gave Kahlan a start, "Come on. If this world is as good as ours, their Cabrallian brew is still the best there is."

Kina set the lamp she was carrying on the table, the device throwing yellow light at shadows that had begun their small procession towards Berdine's hunched figure.

"They've gone out. Drinking."

Berdine lifted her head from her paperwork to look Kina in the eye. "You have got to be kidding me."

"I kid you not," Kina said, unable to hide her grin. "You should have seen this coming. I mean, Cabrallian brew. No one I know has ever refused a draught."

Everything about Kina's tone told Berdine all she had to know about what Cabrallian cave-vaults really produced.

Imbibing D'Haran 'old brew' was a centuries-long tradition. The oldest, most delectable techniques originated from Cabrallian breweries. The recipes were, in Berdine's mind, unsurpassed and many aficionados not only spent their days vacationing in their rest houses but spent those days guzzling casks of the stuff.

"Same old Cara, eh?" Kina added.

"Terrifyingly so. Have someone stationed by the door of that inn and make sure they have enough horses. If I know Cara, she'll have Kahlan drunk in an hour and you'll both have to carry the
Mother Confessor up the hill this garrison is on." Berdine bent to write, dipping her quill in the inkwell. "Spirits. Those two never change. And here I thought they didn't even like each other."

Kina guffawed. "What?"

"I know. I think it's an elaborate hoax they're playing on us." Berdine smiled indulgently at her officer. "Make sure Arrin is alright. That thing Cara did to her, the Breath of Life was it? I can tell Arrin isn't quite herself yet." Berdine sighed and rubbed her temple, filling in a few more lines of official document with an ink-stained hand. "I guess meeting the Keeper has that effect."

"I can't say I'm not grateful, Captain," Kina was pensive. "Arrin's been a remarkable sister-in-arms. She still is."

"Yes, well, I'm sure the Lord Rahl will have another shiny medal for Arrin's 'devotees' to admire. And maybe this time a homestead in a town full of beauties." They grinned at each other, knowing the other woman's history and then, more grimly, of the deadly gift one of her lovers had given her.

"Now, if you will," Berdine pointed more urgently to the door, "Take good care of the Mother Confessor and the vice which calls herself Cara."

"Of course Captain."

A Cabrallian tavern was different from the usual roadside inn. For one, despite its rowdy occupants and the token bard, the city guard kept a sentry at the door. A roving patrol picked out trouble before it could holler a challenge at the nearest noble, or soldier, or merchant. The city's mayor had received enough complaints over the centuries from persons of merit –people who were either mauled by a drunk or had gotten themselves into trouble due to a lack of deterrents –to allow such overt policing.

Cabrallia was one place the aristocracy could drink the old brew in a tavern, while listening to a not-so-talented bard warbling about a hero of powerful D'Hara. For them it was a novelty. The sheer number of weapons surrounding a tavern made the entire ritual of drinking and debauchery a rather civilized affair.

In a boisterous way.

Kahlan was surprised nobody recognized her and took comfort in the fact. Cara, on the other hand, drew so much attention that they were seated nearest to the tap and given a wide berth while voices droned 'my Lord' in varying pitches. Kahlan could see that it amused and disgusted Cara to no end.

Kahlan watched Cara down her third tankard while taking a modest sip from hers.

The old brew. Powerful stuff. And really quite delicious. She needed to be careful with it.

Cara gestured at Kahlan's drink. "You don't like it?"

"No, it's not that." Kahlan smiled weakly.

Mord'Siths and Confessors did not normally coexist as well as they both did. In fact, a Mord'Sith and a Confessor sharing a drink like old friends was a badly constructed oxymoron or a terribly bad joke. In terms of magic and ideology, they were complete opposites: the Agiel and the rituals surrounding it were buried in primal warrens of hate while Confessors and their touch had their origins in love. Stripped of traditions, dress and machinations, at the very root of it, they were both harbingers of death and surrender in one form or another. But unlike Cara's Mord'Sith abilities,
Kahlan's Confessor powers never really allowed her to 'let go' without serious consequences to those she loved and who loved her.

Cara and drink was a dangerous combination because so much about just the Cara part compelled Kahlan to succumb to her rage, to everything that seemed irrepressible and untamed. The evidence had been clear when Kahlan almost confessed her over her sister's death. Add D'Haran old brew to that...well.

The Mord'Sith read her misgivings like a book.

"Ah." Cara returned her smile. "You're safe here." She eyed the door and Kahlan followed her gaze. A familiar face peeked inside and hurriedly backed out. "Berdine sent a contingent. That was Kina."

Kahlan laughed, taking another sip. "Well I suppose we're in good hands."

"So you are," Cara said, her words more meaningful than Kahlan could give her credit for.

Kahlan had found herself searching Cara's gaze more and more often now. Looking for answers, perhaps? Certainly, she had discovered more questions as something about Cara opened somewhat. It had allowed Kahlan to grasp at small articulations of affection: of how Cara would prepare her horse at first light and allow her precious minutes of sleep, or how she offered Kahlan drink before she even knew she was parched.

Instead of the usual hardwood door locked from hinge to arch, Cara's emotions were slightly ajar. They spilled in trickles now, as Cara took another drink and smiled crookedly at her. The openness in her expression —exacerbated by her fourth tankard of strong, D'Haran brew —was odd without the scar.

"Kahlan," Cara began. Despite the drink, she seemed hesitant. When she did speak, it was very deliberate, enunciating syllables with honesty that heaved against a nature once burdened with treachery, murder, hate.

"I'm quite glad that it was you I went through the Gate with. So..." She paused as though digging into some hinter part of herself with difficulty. She chuckled derisively at her own reservation, braving the torrent by meeting Kahlan's gaze and forcing the words out like heavy rocks. "Thank you. I wouldn't have had it any other way."

Despite herself, Kahlan was beginning to learn that the Mord'Sith in Cara was not all that she was.

"You had to get tipsy to say that?" Kahlan asked, incredulous.

"Yeah, well." Shrugging, Cara said, "Richard's lucky to have you. Spirits, Cara Rahl is lucky to have you. I probably am, too."

There was a long silence as they each stared into their tankards and avoided each other's gaze.

"If it's any consolation, Richard's never actually had had me. And neither have you."

Slightly appalled, Cara's eyes narrowed. To Cara's credit, the ensuing grin was awash with humor. "By the Creator, that was very random, Kahlan Amnell."

Kahlan stared up at the ceiling, her cheeks red. "I know right? Let's just finish this round and go before both of us get so drunk we start being grateful—or ungrateful—for all sorts of other things."
"Ha. We wouldn't want that."

And they clinked mugs.

They found that Amihan had already settled in, barred from sleeping beside Cara Rahl who was watched by a local wizard of the Third Order. The little girl slept facing the fire, her face illumined by the light as it revealed outlines of Cara and Kahlan's younger selves.

This was not their daughter. Not really. But here they were at the foyer of a room, unable to refrain from watching a little girl in slumber before retiring to their own beds.

"I've always known I'd have to bear a few children, if only to keep the line of Confessors intact." Kahlan turned to Cara, who leaned against the doorway with her usual aplomb. Her icy glare was mute, haunted. "Did you ever think you'd settle down, have children?"

"Never," Cara replied.

"Never? Not once?"

"I had a son. He died. As a Mord'Sith, I knew it was inevitable that our children would be fed to a fate just as terrible as ours."

It was an echo of the outcome of a Confessor birth, where children were submitted to training in order to control their power. More imperceptible forms of cruelty had their locus in Kahlan's world because they were necessary, it was for the good.

Kahlan breathed deeply before focusing her attention on Amihan once more. Cara Rahl treated the child with a nurturance that was firm yet utterly tender. Kahlan suspected the Mother Confessor of this world did, too. The hand with which they dealt with her was also keenly aware of Amihan's innocence and of the coming storm which came with being the heir to two nations. It was a balancing act that Kahlan admired for its deeply sown love and its pragmatic grasp of the circumstances.

It was never more evident than with the child. Amihan was unblinking in the face of novelty, strong even in the midst of her mother's illness and equally fierce when faced with an adversary. These implications made Kahlan anxious of her own future, of the cycles, traditions and fates that could be broken and of better ones that could be created.

Amihan.

Hers, and yet not. The connection had been strong enough for her to step into the unknown and for Cara to follow her.

She studied the other woman more carefully, noticing the softened edges to Cara's jaw and then, again, her lips. What was it about Kahlan's wandering gaze these past few days?

The Seeker awaited her on the other side of the Gate, someone who knew the language of love and kindness like he had been born to it. Cara had been compelled into that shell for the benefit of those around her.

By the Creator, she loved Richard but she was thinking of him less and less while the realities of this world occupied her more and more.

Cara looked at her enquiringly with none of her usual arrogance.
"Are you alright?" was her question, unhinging Kahlan's thoughts.

"I'm just thinking of what all this," Kahlan gestured widely, "means."

Cara nodded, as though she understood.

Kahlan prodded, "Any ideas?"

The woman frowned, looked down as she scuffed her boot on the stone floor. Then in a brooding voice, she murmured, "I've read that there is no such thing as an omen. Destiny does not send us heralds. She is too wise or too cruel for that."

Smiling sadly, Cara moved towards the bed. The color of honey coruscated as her hair fell over her face and she leaned forward to drop an affectionate kiss on Amihan's forehead. She sat by the girl's bedside, touching her hair and watching as the daughter that was hers, and yet not, smiled sweetly in her sleep and whispered, "Inya."

TBC
The sun prickled her neck, wriggled its way into the spaces of her traveling dress. She rubbed her shoulder to chase the hot, tingling fingers of exasperation.

Sweat began its ruinous path down her forehead, her temples, pooling at dark places beneath her clothing. It caused such stickiness and discomfort that she blew a frustrated breath out.

Cara thrust a jug full of refreshing spring water in her direction.

Kahlan had come to realize that Cara's gestures, however careless or uncertain, were grand. Kahlan smiled gratefully, pouring some of the water over her head to cool herself off. The drink was a minute respite. Rivulets spilled across her chest and she was suddenly impelled to watch Cara from the corner of her eye. The Mord'Sith, her eyes bluer and clearer than the sky, studied the scene deliberately before her gaze turned inward, then dark.

Something had been bothering the Mord'Sith of late. Kahlan suspected it had everything to do with the twin who seemed fully ensnared by a deep and magical sleep.

As though on cue, Cara complained, "This charade is getting old."

"You can't blame Berdine. You're a very convincing red herring."

Kahlan would have smirked if not for Cara's rising indignation.

Kahlan turned her attention Berdine. The Alkarian Captain rode beside them, escorting the carriage with Amihan and her mother inside.

It was an odd contraption, shaped more like a beetle's carapace than a wagon and enchanted in such a way that its occupants experienced mild weather even in such tortuous heat. Pulled by two handsome horses from Cabrallia's stables, it chittered as it swayed back and forth.

The child was asleep inside for most of the journey, avoiding the heat. The Lord Rahl, guarded by one of Cabrallia's wizard and several spells, slumbered fitfully.

Berdine kept their party small with Arrin and Kina covering their flanks. Berdine had recruited another Alkarian soldier along the way, a burly man named Agit who lived in the outskirts of Cabrallia. Agit's business concerned the comings and goings of nobles and spies in the city so he was rightly deferential to Kahlan and Cara—a trait prevalent among those from Berdine's regiment. Immediately, his captain entrusted him with the details of their quest.

The man rode a few kilometres ahead in order to scout, reporting back every two hours or so about any activity, passing tradesmen or rare canopies that heralded statesmen traveling to and from their provinces.

Kahlan took another drink from the jug. "We can all use some shade."

"I can use a change of clothes," Cara muttered.

Berdine interrupted, "Not until we reach the People's Palace, Cara. It's enough that Cabrallia's commander knows about the Lord Rahl's illness. I won't allow anyone to believe that D'Hara is leaderless, at least in part, especially not when we're so near the capital." Berdine looked to the heavens. "If any of her old enemies found out," Kahlan saw the mental shudder as the Alkarian
captain closed her eyes, "the knowledge could shake the viper's nest."

Cara frowned in response. She was bare-armed, shrugging inside her vest as she sought respite from the burden of playing this new-fangled role. Involuntarily, her hands wrenched feebly and often against the collar.

Cara's Mord'Sith leather which usually covered her from head to foot had been stuffed into a bag. In their world, it had been a figurative suit of armour which protected her from scathing emotions and unwanted attention. It was a symbol of prowess, power and fear. Here, the leathers meant nothing.

The Rahl vest and scout's trousers she now wore painted a different picture. The deep green and silver piping contrasted pleasantly against Cara's bronzed skin. The vest was not as form-fitting but it exposed more skin: hardened, lean arms that Kahlan never had the opportunity to study unless they bathed together.

The clothing forced a rare clarity into Cara's eyes, emphasized the obstinate sureness from her jaw, and imposed a posture that was not entirely hers but which she wrestled to possess regardless. Though her hair was shorter than her double, everyone who did not keep Berdine's counsel positively bowed and tripped over themselves paying obeisance.

Thinking back, Kahlan concluded that leaving Cabrallia was the awkward affair they had all feared it would be. Cara rode through the streets in Rahl's regalia while holding a cheerful Amihan who waved and smiled at the populace. It had been a successful foil; Rahl's Bond, which originated from Amihan, was indistinguishable from Cara's lack of one. The people gathered at the doorsteps of their homes while others dared to cross the gap and touch her.

Jubilation accompanied their party to the gates with cheers of, "Hail the Red Lion! Hail the Lord Rahl!"

One could tell that Cara would have given anything to be anywhere else. She clutched Amihan like a talisman.

Kahlan certainly remembered the tantrum which followed.

As soon as they were out of sight of the Cabrallian patrols, Cara jumped off her horse, her boots disturbing the earth. A whirlwind of dust wafted in her wake.

She walked haphazardly away from them, pushing at the cloak from Nicobarese as though struggling against a beast. She made several attempts to unclasp it, succeeding with a howl as she nearly threw the garment to the ground.

Kahlan was right behind her, putting a commanding hand on her arm, preventing her from flinging the cape outwards. They both fell to their knees as Kahlan cut Cara's momentum while the Mord'Sith tried to stem the impulse to fight the woman beside her.

Their foreheads together, Kahlan murmured, "Cara, stop."

"No! I am not Cara Rahl! I refuse to be!"

Kahlan touched her face then, cradling her jaw so that Cara may meet her eyes. "I know you aren't. This will only be for a few days. Berdine's explained this to us. It is as much for Amihan's sake as for the Lord's," Kahlan's voice softened even further, "for us and our safety. D'Hara has been unstable for so many years. It cannot afford an ailing Rahl, especially when that Rahl is Cara."
Kahlan saw her companion swallow, a trail of sweat on her forehead, her eyes tempestuous—sure indications of the effort it took to carry the Lord's burden even for just a while.

Kahlan's thumb caressed Cara's cheek and having realized the tenderness of the gesture, almost stopped. Uncaring, Cara took the hand to draw strength from her and without thought, brought it to her lips while saying, "Very well. For our safety. For Amihan."

With Cara's lips still warm against Kahlan's skin and the remembrance of it unforgivably stark against the featureless wastelands, they both stood and approached Berdine who had patiently waited for the argument to end.

The ride across the Azrith Plains was a silent one and after the last garrison town, Cara had quelled most of her grievances.

When she was not busy trying to pull it off her person, the livery allowed Cara to step into a role that she played almost seamlessly: a strong D'Haran leader, a steadfast defender of what she held dear. Why this should delight Kahlan was lost to the Mother Confessor; she tried not to dwell on its implications.

For the most part, Kahlan controlled the urge to ride closer to Cara, to lend reassurance. The last thing the Mord'Sith needed was any insinuation that this act was something she could not uphold on her own.

As the hours plodded on, the unexpected lilt of Arrin's voice floated through their small party.

Arrin had been grateful for her second life and seemed more mellow, less likely to pick out six or seven lovers in one town. She took to the habit of dining with friends instead, and discovered the lyre.

She turned out to be a nuanced singer. Her voice had the subdued yet resonant quality of a storyteller whose tales were painted with the meaningful gradations of many years in battle, travel and recently, from a chilling encounter with death.

Like a whisper, her song thrummed against the hot, afternoon air while the troubled inflections of a dirge heaved through her notes.

Ay, ay! The honour of Halin!

The Red Lion rose from the ruin

For oft she had heard them crying

Through the spring, 'twas a haunted croon!

Ah, ah! The spilled blood at Halin!

For her children she journeyed north.

'fore the Palace she stood, abiding

By the ire she had summoned forth!

Ay, ay! For the fate of Halin!

She battled when she heard our calls;
Was our voice as she went hunting
For the Beast of the sacred halls.

Ah, ah! Now avenged was Halin!

When she took the nation's High Seat,

Though grieved, she continues ruling

Even when strength, this does deplete.

Cara's gaze wavered as Kahlan watched several emotions pass through the other woman's face like a terrified passenger of an ailing boat.

"By the spirits, sing something happier," Berdine scolded.

Arrin turned to her captain in surprise. "My apologies, Captain. It seemed…appropriate."

Berdine stole a glance at Cara's direction, took in her troubled expression and ordered Arrin to sing Maidens of the Sea.

Through the dulcet tones of waves against rock and wind through the glens of the Bay of Mannon, the song soothed them very little as finally and imposingly, the tall structures and impermeable walls of the People's Palace rose over the horizon like a dark, rock-hewn fortress.

TBC
Under the Hawk's Eye

Their was a path driven into the bed rock centuries earlier, unlit and overrun by weeds. The trail had been violently carved into the Palace walls, barely discernable but for the way gnarled, oversized bushes bent over it like a cave of brambles. It repulsed with its ageless, dark mouth and exhaled a cold, dismal wind that smelled of dank stone and of places that had never seen the light.

Cara felt the large bundle she had been cradling on her saddle shiver and shy away.

Berdine bent over to whisper to the child, "None can hurt you here, my Lady, without risking a painful and instant death."

If Berdine's words were meant to comfort the daughter of the Lord Rahl, it had the opposite effect. Amihan clung to Cara even tighter and murmured her discomfort.

"It'll be alright, young one," Cara reassured, wishing suddenly for her Agiels which had been stored in her saddlebags.

She knew this path. None but the Mord'Sith and the Lord Rahl himself used it in times of dire need or when utmost secrecy was required. It was a short trip, usually fraught with mortal danger for anyone who was unfamiliar with the traps set or the deadly sentries that guarded it.

Cara felt Kahlan move closer.

"What is this?" Kahlan asked.

"It's been known by many names. The Hall of Thorns. The Bloody Strait. It's always been associated with death for any and all of Rahl's enemies. It's the infamous back door that nobody speaks of and only a Rahl can use."

"That's comforting."

Cara smiled wickedly. "Yes it is."

The wizard exited the carapace-like vehicle in which Cara Rahl lay slumbering. Torches were lit and the wizard summoned light from his staff, lifting it as a nauseating, white glow spilled forth and revealed unsteady, gravelly ground beneath.

The light wavered when the wizard stepped forward, the man straining against the forces of the Palace before finally stepping under the eaves of the cave. He bent over with an exertive huff, glancing at Berdine in apology. As he stepped forward, his legs trudged as though they were heavier and moving against mud.

The Palace's field of magical jurisdiction assaulted any power it considered foreign and alien.

To Cara the sensation was different, a warm embrace as though stepping from a snow-tortured mountain and into a cottage with a lively hearth. She took a lungful of stale air and welcomed it heartily.

Though Berdine may have felt the effects, her features were more strained, worried perhaps of the consequences of bringing an unconscious Lord Rahl home. Cara did not envy her the position or the imminent backlash from this elusive Senate that would never have been tolerated by the Rahls Cara had known.
Darken Rahl did not share power and neither did the Rahls before him.

"She's going to kill me," Berdine muttered under her breath as she rode past Cara's horse. "Oh Spirits, let the Senate hang me but I'll not last a minute in a room with her…"

Berdine no doubt spoke of the Lady Rahl, Cara thought, noticing her world's Kahlan as she cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably on her saddle. Just as it did for the wizard, the Palace was slowly limiting Kahlan's magic.

"I will never get used to this," Kahlan confided, hands chafing against her arms in a flicking motion as though warding away insects crawling against her skin.

Cara released a chuckle. "To me it feels exactly like home."

"But this isn't usually the path inya takes," Amihan whispered.

"We don't want to arouse suspicion," Cara explained. "And we want your mother to find out first. No one else. She'll be at the other end waiting for us. Kina will make sure of that."

"I miss my mama."

"I should think you do. It's been quite a while."

The moment they slipped past the traps, the vile enchantments and other unspeakable things from which the cave derived its name, Cara's senses were all on edge. She had unwittingly unsheathed one of her Agiels from her saddlebag and had a protective arm around Amihan.

Warily, she sighted the landing. The tall figures of Berdine's regiment guarded the elevated alcove, some of them moving to meet the horse-drawn carriage which had conveyed their Lord.

Others held several lamps which were jarring in their brilliance. Cara lifted a hand to shade her eyes but a looming shadow did the favor for her as it strode ahead of the soldiers and became haloed by the lamplight. Berdine, recognizing the white dress, was reduced to a nervous, blubbering wreck.

The captain's inelegant dismount would have amounted to a fall if she had not deftly negotiated her boot getting caught in the stirrup. Even then, she fell promptly and gracelessly on her knees with a loud, "My Lady!" a sound more like glass shattering than a respectful greeting.

Arrin and Agit had followed suit as promptly as their armor would allow.

Kahlan and Cara carefully dismounted, Amihan between them as this figure came even closer to greet or castigate them.

For all the torchlight's harshness, it fell softly and deftly on the woman's hair, which fluttered like a dark, subdued dervish –unbound by a braid –against the small breezes wafting from the cave. Her clothing, a dress carefully cut for elegance and –Cara noted –battle, served to deepen the color of her hair and to emphasize the porcelain quality of her skin.

The light revealed her eyes, which lanced through Cara with the clarity and intensity of a hot summer day.

Many would have considered that glance benevolent. Cara had known peasants to splutter the truth because of it and for lords to trip all over themselves to appease it. Kings and queens were indebted
to it. The Seeker himself had been captive of it.

But so unlike the blue-eyed gaze of her Kahlan, the efficacy of Kahlan Amnell-Rahl's glare came from a distinct artifice.

Underneath the smiling diplomacy was the mantle of cruelty and decisiveness often worn by a leader who declared war and did not delegate the task lightly to her generals. Instead, she carried out the sentence of death herself. Cara had experienced that mantle as one of Darken Rahl's lackeys and understood that it made its owner unhesitant and relentless in her pursuits.

For the Lady Rahl, the quality was a pitiless foundation that buttressed a beautiful, kind face. A face which had been hers by birth-right and which now served the purpose of keeping everyone unarmed for and unaware of her arsenal.

It fooled everyone but Cara.

The old songs had been right. D'Hara would have trembled before this Mother Confessor.

The grim chariots of war rode on her shoulders and she carried them not like one would a burden but like a squall that could be unleashed when the situation called for it. There was wrath there like that which fueled a Con Dar but it was not short-lived as a Con Dar would be. Rather, her fury was an undercurrent that had been meticulously tamed over the years.

It was the staple of a tyrant, Cara thought unkindly. But unlike a tyrant, Kahlan Amnell-Rahl owned a rare restraint. She knew her own strengths and understood the destruction they could yield. There would be no igniting them even when riled. It was evidence of a righteous pragmatism that may have been hers long before she declared war on D'Hara.

These informed the careful weight of her steps, the small, controlled articulations of her eyes, and the almost-sneer that was as delightful as it was deadly.

It was an unsettling difference from the Kahlan Cara knew. The Mother Confessor from her world shifted behind her as though communicating her own doubt about this twin.

Cara was inclined to give the Lady Rahl a small bow and a curt, "Mother Confessor."

The Lady Rahl's eyes narrowed slightly, taking in Cara's manner of dress, the shorter hair, the lack of a visible scar. "You brought my daughter home." Her attention flickered to Berdine whose gaze stayed affixed to the floor. "Something that the Lord Rahl's most trusted commander could barely accomplish on her own."

Cara saw Berdine visibly swallow as the silence stretched into a terrible, unknown verdict for the captain and her Alkarian regiment.

To Berdine's good luck, the tension dissipated when Amihan fled into her mother's arms. All facades melted as the Lady Rahl lifted the girl and embraced her fiercely. Her entire body arched around Amihan as though reunited with a part of her that had been missing, or that she thought had been lost forever.

Her expression softened to the bare bones of relief and delight. In the few seconds a genuine smile swooped generously across her lips, Kahlan Amnell-Rahl seemed younger, the ire gone.

"My little girl, my love," she said as she bestowed several kisses on her daughter's cheeks. "You're safe now."
"I always have been," Amihan replied, giggling.

"Have you?"

"My inya have kept me safe."

At once, there was a contemplative look on the Lady Rahl's face. "I can't say that they've done the same for your mother."

Amihan replied in stride, "But they have, inya. They did all they could, just as you would."

The Lady Rahl chose silence as she considered the two doppelgangers. In a manner reminiscent of a hawk, Cara could tell that the Lady Rahl was examining them as one would its prey. Should she cut them down outright or toy with them 'til exhaustion became their death?

The Mord'Sith wondered idly if her last deed in this world would be an attempt to escape confession by the Lady Rahl's hand or an appointment at the gallows. Both would be extremely unpleasant, less favorable than death on the battlefield.

"Please don't hurt them," Amihan requested belatedly.

"We shall see." There was a harshness to the Lady Rahl that the child maneuvered skillfully. Amihan uttered a few hushed words that floated brightly into the Lady's ears, colorful phrases only a child could churn about a certain Cara Mason and Kahlan Amnell, who had braved their world and had flown like eager warriors to this one. Before long, the Lady had sighed, bestowing Amihan with a fond kiss on the forehead. "We shall see," the Lady said in a softer tone.

Her gaze lingered on Cara the Mord'Sith, still dangerously hooded and ambiguous. "Berdine, make sure our…guests are comfortable. They are not allowed to roam the Palace or to speak to anyone."

"Yes, my Lady."

"I trust you won't botch your task this time."

Berdine's voice faltered. "O-of course not, my Lady."

"Good. Send for the Wizard Zedd as well."

Putting Amihan down, she brought the brunt of her attention on Cara who frowned as the Lady Rahl stepped forward and caressed the piping on Cara's vest. Without warning, Kahlan Amnell-Rahl clutched the vest as a hawk would with its talons and pulled Cara violently to her. Cara lifted the Agiel to ward her off and instead, found herself abreast her own weapon, the Agiel wedged between her and the Mother Confessor.

The Lady Rahl's gaze flashed briefly to the artifact between them, feeling without indicating the pain which surely whipped through her as the Agiel's magic flared through both their chests.

She whispered forcefully into Cara's ear, slightly out of breath. Cara, for her part, tried not to look as disconcerted as she felt.

"You will take this finery off, impostor. My wife paid dearly for the High Seat. I won't have that memory marred by some…look-alike." She spat the word like a curse.

Her smile was disturbingly empty as she pulled slightly away to study Cara's face from an uncomfortable lack of distance. Cara could feel her breath—as well as that dangerous wrath which
had been the Mother Confessor's most compelling introduction—as she spoke, "You won't need it here. The Senate will recognize you easily as a dupe." Her other hand went up to touch Cara's right cheek, the skin at the back of it soft even as the muscles beneath were strained with barely controlled gall. "Needless to say you don't have the mark from Halin."

The Lady Rahl released her hold and pushed away as though disgusted. "See to it, Cara Mason, or Berdine will."

Cara did not answer, staring with as blank an expression as she could until the Lady Rahl was out of earshot. It was a shocking reintroduction to another version of Kahlan she never thought to meet again.

The Kahlan from her world was immediately beside her to steady her with a hand.

"I think you've met your match," she teased.

"Hardly," Cara replied. "I've met someone like her once before, when Fyren terrorized Aydindril and you had been split in two."

'I remember that story. Richard and Zedd had such an animated telling of it." Kahlan sobered, rubbing Cara's arm to soothe her.

Cara started at the sensation, confused enough to contemplate ignoring Kahlan completely. Something stopped her.

Ever since Cabrallia and the revelations which came with assuming Cara Rahl's role, their companionship had changed its tone from wariness to a kind of fatigued surrender.

As a Mord'Sith who had commanded Darken Rahl's hosts, she knew when to withdraw and when to force the siege. A small part of her still fought the realities of this world; ceaselessly, she swam against the tide in the hopes that clinging to what she knew would serve her well when the Gates of Meleth brought them back home.

And yet, as she found Kahlan's gaze, she recognized that now was a time of parley, of a clear-mindedness that she had once instinctively yearned for but was nevertheless afraid of.

It was a clear defiance to everything she knew but she put a hand over Kahlan's in gestures that were fast becoming common in their friendship. From the tiny yet doting smile she received, Cara supposed that certain types of surrender, of knowledge, yielded more rewards than others.

Cara endeavored never to regret this peace, for all its rarity and deliberate thought.

Muster their strength, everyone remained to witness Arrin and Agit unload the Lord Rahl's cot. The tension was so palpable that Cara suspected one could have cut it with a knife. All eyes were on the Lady Rahl.

Cara Rahl was slowly exposed to the lamplight. The scar that cleaved her face seemed like an afterthought as instead, a frown marred her face as evidence of unseen nightmares haunted her sleep and sweat trickled past her brow.

The Lady Rahl's severity wavered as she reached for the Lord's forehead, brushing a strand of hair that clung vapidly to her temple. She studied her wife's profile with the diligence of someone who knew every dip and crease, who had memorized them in the privacy of quiet, unguarded moments. She leaned forward to kiss Cara Rahl on the lips, a gesture potently tender and tentative, even as her next words were covered with poison.
"She has a fever."

"Yes, my lady," the wizard supplied. "She has been like this the past few days."

Kahlan Amnell-Rahl's expression hardened into stone.

"I want an explanation for this," the Lady said. "Or I shall obtain it through whatever means necessary, be it by one's severed head or another."

TBC
The Seeds of Fate

The Mother Confessor sat by their window with an unusual stillness, rubbing her arms as the Palace drained her of her magic. Darkness had settled and the view was specked with tongues of fire, lamplight that revealed the furnished interiors of D'Haran homes. Further off, the countryside basked in the glow of a half-moon.

With her long fingers running through her hair, Kahlan welcomed the parched wind that fell like dumb heralds through their room.

Cara proceeded to check the doors once more, her muscles straining. They were still locked.

After thoroughly inspecting their quarters—the brick hearth, the wooden panels gleaming in the firelight, walls painted with scenes of the D'Haran hunt and an adjacent room with no windows that harbored a pool of steaming, warm water for bathing—Cara unclasped her traveling cloak, draping it over a nearby chair.

Peering down at her finery, she began to shed Cara Rahl's vest, wrestling it from her torso like a snake that had tightened its hold. Once it was off, she threw it at the bed and glared at it like a thing alive.

Cara muttered with derision, "Infamous D'Haran hospitality."

She sat at the low bench near the foot of the bed and pulled the boots from her feet. Her exposed shoulders were strained under the firelight, muscles and scars aggravated by her motions.

Kahlan watched her from the corner of her eye before sighing. Perhaps an audience with the Rahls could wait until tomorrow. She rose from her perch and sat perpendicular to the Mord'Sith as she began to unlace her own traveling clothes.

Kahlan said, "It's been quite a journey, south to north of D'Hara."

"One that I hope will end very soon."

"And Amihan?"

The both stopped from their ministrations as Cara said over her shoulder in a quiet voice, "Is of no concern to us anymore. She's safe here, with her parents."

"I don't know what I'd do, knowing that if I stepped through the Gate I'll probably never see her again."

"You will have children, Kahlan," Cara said carelessly, unaware that the words brought about a pang that Kahlan could not explain.

"You know that's not what I meant," she whispered, barely audible, as she stared at her hands. "She'll be lost to us."

"At this point I'm inclined to believe that anything is possible."

Cara's voice was strange, possessed with a calm that buffeted Kahlan's doubt.

She stood, fully naked, unashamed and cocksure even in her own skin. She was an exceptional specimen, honed by whips, the Agiel and discipline. As Cara sauntered to the next room, Kahlan
admired the distinct cut of muscles undulating beneath her shoulder blades; scars delineated a path that dipped to two symmetrical dimples on her lower back and down to the curved weight of her ass.

Turning to her, Cara gave her a lascivious, playful smirk as she leaned against the doorway which led to the bath, presenting Kahlan with her gloriously naked front – her breasts round and full despite her apparent fitness, her stomach flat and firm, framed with sleek lines that had been chiseled there by constant training and which led to the enigma of her sex.

She continued, "Amihan shouldn't even exist. There is a wizard's hand in it for the Lady Rahl to have conceived at all."

The Mord'Sith had managed to phrase all her words with a svelte vulgarity that chafed against Kahlan's Confessor sensibilities.

The ground beneath their friendship shifted.

Khalan felt her neck and face warm up for reasons that were, well, right in front of her.

"I've made you uncomfortable." Cara smiled as though amused.

"No doubt," Kahlan admonished, "You Mord'Sith. Honestly, you have no shame."

"What?" Cara laughed as she disappeared into the next room. "I'm entitled to have my fun. We've just rescued the heir to the throne!" Then, in a more boisterous tone, "And mind you, in this world, I'm married to the Mother Confessor and she's had my child."

"You do realize how inappropriate your jokes are." Kahlan stared at the only bed in the room. 
Berdine, you insolent clown.

"Not that that's bothered you before. There's no meaning in it now, other than what you give it!"

Kahlan could imagine Cara's smug expression and chuckled derisively, "Well said."

There were many ways for their friendship to swirl into something uncontrollable, volatile. Kahlan knew, because lately they had confided more closely and had merged so much of their personal space that it was seamless in battle, almost unified in matters of opinion. Any attempt to survive in this world required this closeness. To be able to read the other's thoughts, to glean her strategies when all it took to survive was a split-second decision and near-perfect synergy in the battlefield. They only had each other after all.

There was also the difficulty with the Lord and Lady, a marriage pushed blatantly into their attention and solidified into their psyche by Amihan. The mere idea of Cara as her wife wreaked havoc on Kahlan's imaginings and made her mindful of every reaction, every thought.

It did not help that in moments when they were truly alone together, Cara's nature came into stark relief: her bold advances to everything, her casualness, her airy, mischievous sensuality emboldened by the darkness of her traditions.

She sparred words with her, pelted on Kahlan's reserve with witticism and normal, Mord'Sith seduction.

Richard had never been so bold as to thrust himself into her affections, much less her private thoughts, while Cara mindlessly delighted in the task.
Frankly, it was wearing down on Kahlan's defenses.

After a quick bath that was spent controlling her responses to Cara's provocations she calmly stepped out of the water as Cara tracked her movements with an appreciative gaze.

Cara took a long languorous soak, toweling herself dry as she dressed and joined her at the sizeable bed.

Kahlan lay awake and unable to speak a word.

Cara's breathing was deep, a susurration both comforting and strange. Beneath the blankets, her warmth radiated into the pores of Kahlan's skin, a hearth that intensified as more minutes passed.

Cara's tone was unapologetic. "Still uncomfortable?"

"This world confuses me," Kahlan told her, choosing honesty over retreat. "I'm completely unhinged. The truth as I know it is meaningless here and I've had to deal with different facts, new paradigms. It's difficult. It's terrifying."

Cara sighed, moving towards her as she propped her head on her elbow and studied her with twinkling, blue eyes.

"It confuses me as well." Cara's voice was uncharacteristically soft with introspection. "Things may be different, irreversible even, but we have spent far too many nights side by side, far too many days in mortal danger together, to be afraid now."

"Cara, that's not..."

The Mord'Sith put a gentle finger on her lips, her hand decadently warm. Kahlan was forced to swallow her protest. Very few could silence the Mother Confessor as the Mord'Sith did now.

"We'll be facing tribulations far worse. Save your strength, Kahlan. Don't worry about us or what this all means just yet." Cara's hand withdrew.

Kahlan felt a twinge of regret but found strength in the way Cara scooted closer and relaxed into the sheets beside her with complete, unthinking trust.

It was in a few minutes, basked in a deep, unremitting exhaustion, that they finally fell asleep.

Cara woke to the sound of feet pattering loudly behind the oak doors.

It was deep in the night, hours before sunrise. She had inadvertently slept a few inches from Kahlan, sharing a part of her pillow. She peered across to her companion, wondering about the dreams that were worrying the Mother Confessor's brow and then belatedly, of how ripe for the picking her lips were, how very much like porcelain her skin was.

Catching herself, Cara shook the thought and sleep from her eyes. She noted the glowing hearth which was nearly extinguished.

Standing, she fed more wood into the tiny flames, poking them and arranging the logs until they burned enthusiastically. Sounds once more emanated from behind the oak doors, this time fierce whispering and the sudden clink of armor as soldiers were mobilized into the lower levels.

This may have been another world, yes, but she was familiar with the sounds of the People's Palace. As Darken's general, Cara always knew if something was amiss.
On stealthy feet, Cara dressed quickly and holstered her Agiels. With a backward glance towards Kahlan on the bed, she lunged out the window and began a harrowing climb along the outer walls of the Palace, where uneven footholds would give her access to a room that she had visited many times before.

Pausing by the room's window sill, Cara crouched low as she spied a figure in the shadows surrounding the large bed. Half of her white-ensconced body was bathed in firelight from the wide hearth. She was seated in vigil beside the Lord Rahl's sleeping figure, staring gravely at the drawn features of her wife.

Cara felt something in her snap slowly, inevitably as she watched Kahlan Rahl pour tenderness into the way she touched the Lord's brow, whispered reassurances into the Lord's ear, the softest and gentlest of which was, "my love," as though the contents of both their lives had been tamped into those few words.

Cara's fingers clenched painfully against the stone upon which she had perched.

She felt more than just an intruder. Tonight, she had chanced blindly, recklessly upon fate.

Years of D'Haran and Midlands history had painted this portrait for her.

There were countless, nameless instances shared in joy or sorrow, hope or despair that trailed soulful colors across Kahlan Rahl's expression. Her hands were worn, scarred heavily as though a great battle had been fought and she had been in the thick of it.

Cara Rahl, under a fur blanket while her shoulders remained bare, wore deeper scars than Cara the Mord'Sith did. They ran the expanse of her arms and over her neck where they coalesced into a single jagged line that cut the infamous route through her face.

The peace had exacted a jarring price.

From Kahlan's calm mien of acceptance and subtle longing, the truth about the fleeting quality of things hung unspoken in the air: that it was inevitable that the Lord Rahl should die—which perhaps not today but certainly in the future—and that once her body had been carried by foot soldiers to the tomb of kings, the path laden with white petals flung by the hands of her people, her Lady would roam the lands alone and drowned in sorrow.

The ache was unbearable.

Cara would have no more of it. She noiselessly negotiated the window and stepped into the room.

What happened next was completely unexpected.

Light flashed from the Lord's bedside table, from a ball no bigger than her palm. Kahlan Rahl was instantly on her feet, two knives at the ready.

Recognizing the intruder, her face collapsed into worry as she held up a hand and gave a cry.

"Don't step any closer!"

It was, of course, too late.

A jolt of pure energy emblazoned the whole room as the magical field emanating from the artifact by the Lord's bed came in contact with Cara's skin.
Cara felt her entire being burn as a white, hot mess filled her vision. As soon as her knees hit the floor, she felt her consciousness being wrenched violently from her and a sharp pain lancing through her chest.

The artifact gave a hiss as it threw Cara through the cracks between wakefulness and sleep, life and death.

Lunging forward, Kahlan Rahl cursed as Cara the Mord'Sith fell lifeless on the floor of her chambers.

TBC
She wakes up to the prickly heat of a noonday sun as she sits in repose beside a window. The cool breeze on her long, blonde tresses reminds her that it is near the end of spring.

She must have napped her way through the morning, she thinks as she moves forward to get up from the chair she has been slumbering on. A sharp pain shoots from rib, to shoulder and down to the tip of her fingers and she pushes back into the seat, breathing deeply.

Looking down, she is slightly bewildered at the tight clasp of bandages around her left arm and her torso, hidden by a crisp uniform that is blood red and crowded with insignias. She looks around the room, light and airy as fresh bouquets stand on every corner and newly turned, white sheets drape over an ornate bed before an empty hearth.

This room leads into another, where there is a chatter of voices, one of them young and silvery as the child plays a boisterous game of Dragons and Knights. Nearly as high as her waist, he skips into the room with a wooden sword, a flurry of trousers and makeshift cape as he engulfs her knees in a hug.

She grunts in pain.

"Gotcha!" he cries.

"You have me," she tells him, unable to control a deluge of tenderness as she studies his blue eyes, his cherub face, the hair that she is certain comes from her.

He looks intently up at her, then frowns and steps away, suddenly mindful of his embrace. "I'm sorry mama. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Oh, you did no such thing," she reassures him. "Come, why don't you help me up?"

He happily obliges, leaning on his sword as she in turn, leans as little as she can on him. She gets to her feet, mussing his hair in appreciation.

A thunderous voice interrupts, "Leib!"

The boy runs up to a grown man slightly taller than she as he approaches. His wide smile hides beneath a beard and his eyes are more than familiar. He heaves Leib over his head and then clutches him against his waist as the boy struggles and squeals with delight.

"Honestly, Cara, this little man knows no fear!"

"Well, he is my son," she reminds him smugly.

"Ah, but you forget. He's mine too." With Leib tucked safely against his hip he leans forward and bestows a kiss on her lips. She goads him with a flick of her tongue and he smiles against her mouth. "Mmm, not now."

"Then when?"

"After the ceremony. And after you heal." He kisses her again, this time a little more fiercely. "Spirits, woman! Have the Southern campaigns slaked your thirst for thrills and violence? They should assign you to a desk."
She smiles mischievously at him. "One can hope."

She brings her good arm up to his face, caressing the scraggly edges of his jaw. He emanates an old, tired acceptance. It was doubtful that the Empire's foremost general would be excused from the field to tend to her husband and children.

Sighing, he puts Leib down, unties the blanket that Leib has used as a cape and straightens the boy's clothes. Then he pointedly instructs him to set aside the wooden sword. Leib skips cheerfully away.

He turns to her. "I have to fetch Aginor from the sitter. He drooled his way through breakfast and the shirt you've brought him is ruined."

Cara raises a brow. "He's inherited your finer sensibilities."

"Ha, ha," the man deadpanned.

As he leaves, she thinks to call after him and comes up with a name that rolls easily, fondly from her lips.

"Leo."

"Yes, love?"

"Thank you."

He quips playfully, "I am the man behind the great general's success, what can I say. They should be giving me a medal."

Cara smiles. "Indeed."

The moment the herald makes the announcement, the throng of thousands rises in a deafening roar, an undulating wave of festive colors.

Panis Rahl, decked in the red of his House raises an arm to calm them. The ceremonies are taking place in the same sprawling portico where Rahls receive their devotions. It is festooned with the banners of Cara's regiments. Aside from the throne and the ornate chair she sits in, Cara spies six of her lieutenants in full armor on either side of the entryway, their breastplates and greaves shining in the sun. Despite the heat, they wear long, luxurious capes with her colors, the blood red of the Alkarian Division.

The crowd folds into a tense silence.

"D'Harans! Countrymen!" His proclamations boom throughout the city while his voice is carried by magic. "We are here today to honor our nation's most faithful servant." He gestures grandly to the woman seated behind him, nodding his acknowledgment. The crowd offers applause and then titters to a hush as he once again faces them gravely. "For services rendered against the Southern rebellion, for decisive, historic victories at the battlefields of Messa and Gradin and for bringing peace to our great nation, D'Hara bestows the Lion-heart upon its esteemed general, Cara Mason."

Cara takes her cue from the Lord Rahl and stands gingerly while the populace pours their adulation by throwing white, hirion petals and tumultuous shouting. Her smile is wry when Panis Rahl presents her with the medallion, careful to avoid her injuries as he hangs it over her head. It is the size of Cara's palm, set in solid gold and shaped in the head of a roaring lion.
She swallows. It is the highest honor D'Hara can give.

She nods her appreciation, raising a hand to acknowledge her people while managing a stiff, awkward smile.

But her Lord isn't quite finished. He eyes her ominously before continuing, "With the powers bestowed upon me by the people, I hereby grant General Cara Mason with the constituency of Halin, its vineyards and towns."

She stiffens and her own, panicked thoughts drown out the approval of her people. A little more softly, the Lord Rahl tells her, "Would you like to say anything?"

"No, not really except, 'no thank you'?"

Panis Rahl tuts. "Halin is a land known for its wine. You should be grateful, General."

"If I wanted wine, I could very well enter the Palace's cellars and grab whatever bottle I wished, without punishment."

"Cara," he tells her pointedly. "You have two children, aged one and five. Your husband was a constant fixture in the Palace, awaiting word. I think that after all you've done and facing imminent death several times, you'd like to spend some time with them and live your days in relative peace. Peace, may I remind you, that you helped fight for. You deserve to at least experience it."

He gives her a look that prevents her protest. Staying a few moments to wave to the crowd appreciatively, he finally leads her into the Palace and away from their eyes. Dignitaries have begun their customary assemblage before their Lord, waiting to shake Cara's hand and offer her their congratulations. She nearly flinches at the melody flowing from a nearby lyre, the voice which accompanies it singing a refrain composed solely to tout her exploits.

Panis Rahl remains clutching her arm, skillfully thwarting any attention as he waits for her answer.

She is forced to realize the veracity of his words under his inquiry. How many of Leib's years has she missed? How many more of his and Aginor's is she willing to forego? And her husband? How many more nights of ceaseless worrying was she willing to afford him? Leo had practically raised their children on his own.

It is peace-time. A general of her stature becomes a symbol, her skills in warfare wasted on the bureaucracy and her time revolving around a desk. She will not be summoned to the field to command half a million D'Haran soldiers against their enemies, provided they even had any more. Nor would she command them against a rebellion when the last one had been decisively crushed at the steps of Sassen's towers, its leaders' heads mounted on spikes outside the city.

Any incursions by adjoining nations are discouraged by the Boundaries and D'Hara's well-equipped garrisons.

Seeing that Cara is morosely silent, Panis Rahl ventures, "I can assure you that the people will vote you into the Senate if that interests you more."

Cara makes a sound of disgust. "I'll grow wine and herd sheep before I stick my hand in your nest of vipers. I'd rather die breaking my neck by falling from a horse than by a knife through my back."

"And you'll age before your time if you don't simply take the estate."

"Why are you so keen on ridding of me? I'm supposed to retire to Halin? How far south is that?"
Panis sighs. "I'm not trying to get rid of you, Cara. And it isn't quite retiring."

He quickly steers her into a study and closes the doors behind him, instructing his steward to keep the guests entertained.

Assured that they will not be disturbed, he reaches into a bookcase, removes the stopper from a bottle of old D'Haran whiskey and pours her a glass. Leaning against his wooden desk, he pushes the drink towards her, a swill that smelled of Cabrallia's cellars. "Far from it. I'll have you know that the Alkarian Division is to report to you, that the fortresses from the Kern River to Sassen and Acrimar are yours to command."

Cara takes a careful sip, hiding her scorn behind the glass. "So now I'm a babysitter. For the South."

"Well, it's a tremendous task. I'd hardly call it babysitting. But you're the one I trust the most to keep the peace. You fought for it, you'd keep it." He raises his glass in her honor, drinking and squinting as liquid fire burns his throat.

Cara laughs but there is no mirth in her eyes. "That's rich. Berdine will be pleased."

"Hardly," Panis Rahl concedes. "The countryside doesn't seem to appeal to Alkarian soldiers like yourself."

"My Lord, I just don't see the point."

"I need you there, General. From where you decide to command our army, that doesn't entirely matter, does it? You can do the job just as well in Halin as you can here but I think your presence in the South would at least deter more violence, yes? They're afraid of you, Cara."

Cara studies her Lord, the long, elderly lines which belie his years, the worries that clench around his forehead.

Her eyes roll up to the ceiling. She knows that it will be months, even years, before she returns to the People's Palace. By then, Panis Rahl would have died, replaced by someone chosen by the Senatee; one that she may not be as willing to serve but whom she will be forced to nonetheless.

"My place is beside you, my Lord."

"Even that sounds like a weak excuse to my ears." He pats her shoulder as he gets up to go. "You're needed in Halin. Think of it as a very long vacation."

Cara tries very hard not to groan.

Cara the Mord'Sith watched as the scene shifted from the grand halls of the People's Palace to the winding roads leading to the South. From the arid plains of the Azrith, to the flower-laden paths of fertile land which indicated the Kern River.

All her senses were open. She watched, heard and felt Leib as he was taught to ride a horse and wield his wooden sword under her tutelage. She felt the overflow of pride as Aginor took his first steps. She was subject to the deluge of emotions one would feel as she lay with the man she loved. She savored the fine fare offered to her by affluent families who were grateful for the end of the rebellion that had so efficiently choked their business. She tasted fruit and other offerings that peasants from just about every town within the caravan's vicinity fetched her, meat that she hunted herself. She endured the songs they sang of her exploits, rolled her eyes through enactments. She
felt a deep and heretofore unknown peace in the faith of her people, their gratitude and loyalty.

It was very much unlike anything a Mord'Sith had experienced. Constant tensions among anger, pain and fear drove the Mord'Sith persona and controlled the D'Haran populace in her world.

Inhabiting this body was a sensation she grew more and more uncomfortable with. As though her limbs were indeed hers but they were moving under the thrust of uncontrollable memories and emotions too many and too overwhelming to figure out. There was also forgetting, as though her mind was falling through a narrow sieve. She was slowly emptied, while this frighteningly different life roared continuously over her senses.

She tried to remember her ways. She always did. A Mord'Sith compartmentalized; feelings were tagged and labeled into boxes where they could be beckoned at will for moments when they were most appropriate, most useful. A Mord'Sith thrived on a rigid sense of self and duty.

She tried to fill her awareness with the fact.

The unum would not let her.

Kahlan woke up to the sound of shouting, then the heavy, repetitive bang against their bedroom door. She frowned at the empty space beside her, the absence of Cara's Agiels and the late hour. Panic rose unbidden from the pit of her stomach.

Her twin chose that moment to barge in, her eyes coldly blue and her dress pristinely white. Berdine trailed behind her in full armor, her face etched with worry.

Suddenly realizing the correlation between their presence and Cara's pressing absence, Kahlan's eyes widened and the question flew unabated through her lips.

"Where is she?" she demanded, jumping from the bed to stand before her twin. Her state of undress and the supreme confidence that was the Confessor's trademark made Berdine flinch.

The Lady Rahl stood unruffled by Kahlan's discourtesy. "She sneakied into our chambers and was caught by the unum's web."

"An unum?"

Kahlan Rahl's eyes shifted with uncertainty. "It's an artifact of Zedd's making. It was to keep Cara safe from everyone but herself and her family. It didn't kill your Cara as I expected it would; in fact it allowed her inside."

"But?" Kahlan's voice went up a notch as she drew herself to her full height.

Kahlan Rahl seemed to unstiffen in a way so subtle that only someone who knew her could discern the untangling of age-old tensions on her brow. "She's unconscious. I'm not as versed in magic as the wizards are but I can tell you that the unum is using her to heal the Lord Rahl. It seeks to make its holder whole. We don't know when she will wake."

Kahlan's hitched with sudden fear. "At what price?"

"I…" Kahlan Rahl studied her and in a rare show of frailty, sighed. "I don't know."

"I want to see her."

"Of course."
They patiently waited for her to get dressed, Berdine handing her a hooded cape that she donned hesitantly. With Kahlan Rahl in the lead, she was allowed through halls Kahlan had at first been forbidden to roam.

They were climbing a staircase when the Lady Rahl's words, verging on insulting, floated to Kahlan's ears.

"I would have had you and your Cara killed if the unum didn't prove me wrong. If I wasn't so sure you were spies."

"Spies?" Kahlan replied through clenched teeth. "We brought your daughter home."

"For that I am grateful. But you may have also brought war to our doorstep."

"What?"

Kahan stepped in Lady Rahl's way with consternation on her features. It felt strange to see this hard, almost expressionless version of herself look back at her with features she only saw in a mirror. She wondered at the heart break and toil that had been etched deeply into her eyes, sentiments so carefully hidden that only Kahlan could see; of things that could not be undone but that a Confessor had to live with.

As though knowing Kahlan's thoughts, the Lady Rahl broke her gaze and gestured to the mustering happening around them. The numerous fires burning outside the windows, sudden shouts in the night, the shuffling of boots, the loud clatter of armor, spears and swords as soldiers moved through the Palace's many levels.

Kahlan began to realize that it was the sudden commotion, which Cara would have discerned as unusual for the Palace that must have spurred the Mord'Sith to seek answers.

"A messenger came from the South with news from one of our garrisons. Apparently there is a bigger plot than the one we suspect had been crafted at Sassen and Acimar." Kahlan's twin studied her, as though measuring her response. "The Boundary was compromised and the Old World encroached on our borders. The wizard Nicci," Kahlan could hear the Lady's voice audibly sharpen like a thorned wall to keep her wrath at bay, "the one who nearly killed my wife and kidnapped my child, was a spy for an enemy that calls itself the Imperial Order."

The Lady became suddenly and completely unreadable. Darkness swam at the edges of her eyes, an old power ripping free of its reigns as it lurched forward to take control of any who stood in its path.

As with any Confessor who knew the consequences of releasing her power, she stayed it, stepping closer until their faces were inches apart and barely touching.

Her threat, threaded into the words that fell from her mouth, barely stayed hidden under a sudden desire to hope. "Can I trust you, Kahlan Amnell? Especially if what Zedd has said is true? That you are not some plot to overthrow the Lord or the Mother Confessor. That you have simply lost your way."

Kahlan studied her twin, the severe lines of her face, the blue eyes which spoke of putting a price, a weight on things that should have been invaluable, un-weighable. Its motions were older in their years and achingly tiring to look at. Her appearance was also still beautiful, still painfully young, for all the travails Kahlan Rahl must have seen.

Kahlan gathered her resolve.
"Yes."

TBC
Kahlan stared at her friend then wondered silently at the many nuances the word 'friend' had taken since they stepped through the Gate of Meleth.

Their lives had been in danger many times before. Mostly, she had feared for Richard. The life of the Seeker was fraught with peril and not a few months before, he had occupied her thoughts, filled her dreams and shaped her decisions.

Today the fear was different. She feared that before she could recognize or name what it was between Cara and herself—besides the obvious admiration and deep respect they had for each other—that Cara would disappear or—the Creator forbid—die.

Her thoughts became a dull ache. Looking across to her twin, she felt the rare and often derided sting of jealousy.

There was something very sure about Kahlan Amnell-Rahl. For her, reality was held together by a few simple truths: Cara Rahl, Amihan and duty. She wore more outward expressions of affection for the Lord: a light, tentative kiss on the lips, as though the woman could fade away at any moment; the tight, almost desperate hold she had on the Lord Rahl's arm, a gesture which took its significance from years of companionship.

Kahlan's eyes fell in embarrassment and she settled for putting a hand on Cara's—her Cara's—forehead.

It was cool to the touch. The only sign that anything odd had happened was the constant flow of emotion that eroded the stoicism on Cara's face, the small phrases that gushed from her lips and the fact that nobody could wake her.

"Leo…" Cara muttered suddenly with a wistful smile. The name echoed briefly on Cara Rahl's lips.

Kahlan felt her chest tighten. *Leo?*

There was a flurry of names repeated in varying degrees of delight, reprimand, love.

Leib. Aginor.

When Kahlan turned to her twin, she found the Lady hunched over her Lord, her eyes searching and desperate. "Spirits. No, not again. No, no, no," she repeated. She bent forward to whisper into her wife's ear, "My love, don't fret. All will be well. Weather this through. You'll be awake soon enough."

There was a light knock on the wooden doors before the tall, weathered form of Zeddicus Z'ul Zorander stepped through. He moved purposefully but slowly like a hulking tree with wizened, white hair for leaves and a wizard's staff for branches. He stood staring at them with grey, worldly eyes before he pulled back his hood and sat on a bench at the foot of both beds.

His presence was quiet and his voice, comfortably deep.

"My ladies," he began, leaning forward with his hands clasped over his knees. "Have any of you had any sleep?"

Lady Rahl quietly ignored his question but Kahlan replied, "No, Zedd."
"So we've met?"

Kahlan indulged him with a tired smile. "Many times."

"That's a comfort."

The Lady Rahl's plea was softly spoken. It brought with it a hint of brokenness spilling from the edges of her tightly knit control.

"Get her out of it, Zedd. Get them both out of it."

Zedd spread his arms palms up in a gesture of helplessness. "The unum is attempting to repair what the Rada'Han tried to break, or in this case, destroy. For those who are gifted from birth like you or me, the Rada'Han simply cuts us off from our Han. For someone who imbibed the Bond and thus, Rahl's magic, there is nothing for a Rada'Han to cut off. It will simply try to split the Rahl in half."

Kahlan interrupted, her tone rising. "What do you mean 'imbibed'?"

Zedd's bushy eyebrow rose as though this was known to all. "I mean imbibed. The Bond is given to the person chosen by the Senate and is held by her until her death whether she wishes to or not."

"Do you mean there is no bloodline?"

"A Rahl does not become a Rahl by blood. He or she is chosen by the people. That choice—or vote as we call it—is facilitated by a People's Council and then ultimately, by the Senate of the High House."

Zedd must have judged rightly that this was outside of Kahlan's experience as he studied the woman's face. The wizard continued with a heaving sigh, "But that doesn't matter right now." He cleared his throat, addressing the Lady Rahl, "Nobody knows of Cara's plight just yet. I've taken the liberty of assembling the Alkarians in secret."

The Lady Rahl turned to him sharply. "What?"

"We trust them more than the Senate, don't we?"

"Infinitely more." Regardless, the Lady frowned in contemplation. "Let Berdine oversee the preparations for defense."

Zedd chuckled softly. "Denna wouldn't..."

"They will not bicker! Not now when everything is at stake. Again!" The command was thunderous and Zedd simply squinted in the face of the Lady's anger.

"Of course, Mother Confessor. I'll make sure of it myself." He stood, adjusting the sword on his hip. He paused by the door, indicating the two unconscious women on the beds with a wave of his staff. "There's nothing either of you can do at this point except wait. The unum will do its job regardless of anyone's wants."

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The city of Acrimar lies in the cradle of Gradin, a valley covered with lush undergrowth and trees that are overburdened with fruit. The Kern River slithers from the south and through the city like a glittering, blue snake. From the city-island, it branches north, bringing with it barges that indicate commerce to and from the capital.

On foot, merchants and lords, soldiers and farmers ply their way to Acrimar through two bridges,
Cara enters through the Eastern Gate, greeted by the vigilant glares of Cypher's men who are not intimidated by her small contingent of Alkarian soldiers. She notes that their defiance is a Southern habit, the product of independence caused from being so far from the center of things.

When she stands in the House of Cypher, she is greeted not by the slimy fiend that Berdine calls The Snake but rather, the brother who is Michael's complete opposite.

She grunts when Richard Cypher engulfs her in a bear hug, his thick cape flung aside. It is a gesture full of old laughter and recent tears.

"My good friend," he greets.

"Richard."

"What brings you here?" His eyes twinkle, trying to see beneath the mask Cara wears.

"Besides making sure that your brother keeps the peace?"

Richard registers surprise. To hide it, he turns from her and leads her to a private hall which opens to a sprawling view of his city. Pouring wine that is native to these parts, he offers her a glass. "We haven't had a chance to talk since…" He tips his head to her and leaves the statement hanging for they both know what he refers to.

"Your brother has a way of inciting things without being too obvious about it, wouldn't you agree?"

He does not reply, peering at her over his glass. She knows that Richard Cypher will not speak ill of his brother or tarnish the honor of his House. She also knows that this young Senator, ever loyal to whoever sits at the High Seat, knew nothing of the rebel plot. Of all the messages she intercepted from the enemy, they always spoke of Richard, the Truth Seeker, as an obstacle.

She quits tormenting him and sets aside her glass. "You know why I'm here. Do you have any news from the Lord Rahl?"

"Of course. He sent you this." He hands her a sealed envelope. "He didn't think it would be safe with just any messenger. It's partly why I've returned home."

She tears it open and reads its contents.

"He says that he fears his time is come. He requests that I disband the Alkarian Division into regiments and march them off to different cities, as far away from each other as possible." She frowns. "He believes that Darken will have the Senate's vote."

"Yes. Mind you, the Beast won't just take the High Seat." He looks at her pointedly, his gaze pregnant with meaning, with words that at any other time or place would have been dangerous to utter.

"Then I must go to Panis."

He stops her train of thought by raising a hand. "No, Cara. In this, I am a man alone. The older Houses populate most of the Senate. I'm but a lowly Cypher caught in the crossfire. Who shall pay me any attention? I'll be your eyes and ears.

"D'Hara's long-standing aristocracy would take any opportunity to wrest power from the people
especially if the man in the helm is as influential and widely," he spits the word, "beloved as Darken. It only helps their agenda that he hails from a House more ancient than anybody else's." He gestures with an open palm to her, enjoining her to voice her opinion. "You've met him. His populist persona isn't as delightful as the one he puts on behind closed doors."

"So you thought it was time for a vacation."

Richard returns a half-hearted smile before telling her gravely, "No. My purpose isn't so simple or so fortunate."

He stands and clears his throat, moving to the open balcony where he leans against the railing and speaks in an uneasy whisper. "The Lord asks that you retire. He fears great and terrible things will come when Darken takes the Seat."

"I've been tasked with the stability of the South. I can't simply…"

Richard interrupts, "I assure you that the South will be the least of your worries. I'll be sure to keep my brother on a leash. And that's as close to an admission of Michael's sins as you'll get."

Cara studies Richard; his features are open and young like a boy's. "There's more isn't there? Tell me."

"It's been what, five years since you left the Palace? Many things have happened since the Lord's health began to decline. You can only imagine the constant scheming that happens in the High House. What was once the pathetic voice of a minority has enraptured the hearts of the many." Richard licks his lips to ease the poison off his words. "Darken possesses a dangerous rhetoric, what with his expansionist ideas of a greater D'Haran Empire and 'reclaiming what is rightfully hers'." His low laugh is hollow with dread. "You may have a penchant for war, Cara, but the wholesale killing of innocents will not suit you."

Cara straightens. "So is this what I think it means?"

Richard dislodges a scab of paint from the railing and flicks it indignantly into the wind. "The Midlanders have been sending envoys to Darken's House for months now. I fear that even if the Mother Confessor sues for peace, it will not be enough. No mistake, the Lord Panis Rahl will die within the week and the Midlands, as well as our peasantry, shall suffer for it."

Kahlan woke to a familiar smell, a spice soup she once savored during cold mornings in her mother's palace. The memories it invoked warmed her, herbs she picked from the Galean gardens strewn into the soup, her mother's delicate wrist as she dipped the ladle into the simmering pot. So many things were wrenched from a Confessor child, memories of childhood most of all. There were so few she could remember with genuine happiness.

She followed the deft movements of Kahlan Amnell-Rahl as she poured her a bowl from a large tureen. She sat up to receive the food gratefully, aware that her last meal had been hours ago.

"With the way you've stayed by her side and held her," the Lady began and not unkindly, "I'd say that she meant more to you than a simple traveling companion."

Kahlan looked up at her twin then at Cara. "She does. She's saved my life countless times. I wouldn't want to lose her."

"Both our worlds have that in common." The Lady took a seat beside her, her own bowl in hand. She sipped her broth carefully before musing, "You must have so many questions."
Kahlan offered a sardonic smile. "Oh, you have no idea."

"I think I do. I can only imagine your confusion, thrust into this world with your very own Cara Mason. I certainly remember mine with all the hate one can possibly harbor for one person."

Kahlan swallowed. The situation was an echo of hers: her absolute rage over her sister's death by Cara's hand, the eventual reckoning while Cara's neck bobbed against her grip, staring at her with Mord'Sith defiance and surprisingly, utter remorse.

Unthinkingly, Kahlan croaked, "What changed?"

"I think you know." There was sadness in the Lady's expression. "I have Confessed men and women from all walks of life. I Confessed some of D'Hara's mightiest leaders. When it was time to judge Cara Rahl, my sole obstacle to absolute victory..." The Lady swallowed with difficulty, giving her a perfunctory smile. "Did you know she knelt before me, this Lion-heart? The Red Lion of Halin. I could have taken the Empire if I wished. Instead, I signed a treaty and hated her for years. But now?" She pursed her lips, her gaze caressing Cara Rahl's face with a keen and overwhelming nostalgia.

Blinking the memories from her eyes, Kahlan Rahl turned to her twin. "For you, Kahlan of my blood, for you I hope that you give your heart a voice before fate or happenstance decides that the sacrifices Cara's made for you will finally include her life."

It was then that Kahlan felt the sting of imminent tears and a realization exploding through the tensions in her chest. "Spirits. I fear they already have. That it's already too late."

TBC
Kahlan Amnell-Rahl circled the large wooden table like a hawk, meeting the five pair of eyes with an uncompromising gaze of her own. These fierce guardians of the realm were dressed in the red leathers of their regiment, each with a distinct expression of approval or dislike. Berdine of the books, exotic-looking Raina, the glowering Triana, silent Dahlia and the one Kahlan tended to dislike most of all: Denna.

Zedd made a niche for himself in the shadows, utterly silent as he observed.

Denna, the most outspoken of them, caressed the hilt of her sword, her gestures edging on insolence.

"Where is the Lord Rahl?"

The Lady Rahl glanced furtively at the farthest wall where her twin, the woman from the Gate of Meleth, was allowed to listen through iron grills without being seen.

"She's indisposed."

Denna raised a brow, glancing at Berdine who made an effort to look everywhere but at her.

"Right. And why are you presiding over this meeting?"

Kahlan Rahl offered a chilly smile. "Don't question me any more than you have to, Denna. I am a Rahl."

They glared at each other over the table. One of the others cleared her throat. Kahlan could see Zedd heave a sigh at the corner of her eye. The wizard had leaned forward and his foot tapped an unsteady rhythm of impatience. Without Cara, the leaders of the division alienated whomever they wished and squabbled like housewives.

"As much as I would like to watch Denna play this game," Raina interjected, her delivery curdling with careful sarcasm, "my scouts haven't brought back the best of news. An army will march through the Southern borders in two, maybe three, months. I don't care if it's Cara or --excuse my rudeness, my Lady --Kahlan Rahl presiding over this meeting." Much to everybody's consternation, a knife appeared in her hand and Raina buried the tip of the blade into the table with a resounding thwack. "What I want are my marching orders."

She gestured to Berdine who unfurled a detailed map of the River Kern and its surrounding terrain.

Raina tilted her head with deference to the Mother Confessor as she took her seat to give her the floor.

"If we're to allow the Senate to decide on this matter," Kahlan began peaceably, "it'll take months for them to mobilize the army. The Alkarian Division must take the lead in Cara's stead."

Denna tittered. "You, the Mother Confessor of the Midlands, wish to move thousands of D'Haran soldiers without the approval of the Lord Rahl? Or at the very least, the Senate? Haven't you done enough damage already?"

The one named Dahlia quietly reproached, "Come, that was ages ago. Let the lions lie."
"You and your soft heart, Dahlia. It'll be the end of you. That, and your short memory."

"Regardless, I stand by the Mother Confessor. This is a new threat. If Raina's reports are true, troop movements beyond the Boundary indicate a massive and restless force. It will devour everything in its path, my short memory and your addled brain included."

Denna tapped her fingers on the oak table as though indicating that they could very well be around the hilt of her sword. A few seconds passed before a ghost of a smile touched Denna's lips. Dahlia remained expressionless.

Kahlan, seeing that some unspoken truce had been made, speared through the silence, "I've already sent a courier to Dennee in Aydindril. The Midlands can muster a hundred thousand soldiers by the Kern in a month, all of them Galeans and probably a few Kelton horsemen. More, if we had time."

Denna rolled her eyes. "Very well, if this is how the game must be played. I will have the First in Halin in a fortnight. Three of my other regiments are already in the vicinity."

Kahlan smothered her surprise. Denna poked at Kahlan's calm because she thrived in the game but her loyalties were less subtle. The First Alkarian Regiment was stationed at least three weeks from the South. She had been moving her men at Raina's behest for a week now despite her many protests.

"The Sixth will be at your disposal in about the same time," Triana offered. "The Third in a few days."

"Will the numbers be enough?" Kahlan asked.

Raina looked to Berdine, who gave her tacit approval to voice their musings. "Doubtful. They have been gathering in droves beyond the reach of my scouts for a while. It wasn't until a week ago and a few, alarming raids later that someone finally came back alive to give me the news."

A rare and electric silence fell like a pall on the room. D'Hara and the Midlands were going to war against a common enemy after more than ten years of peace.

Kahlan did not have to dig deep to remember a time when she had to put up her sword and fight.

In the shade of an oak tree by the slower waters of the River Kern, where it is almost as wide as a lake, the Lion-heart lies in repose. It is a clear day, wisps of clouds flowing in short processions across the blue sky. Cara breathes deeply, squinting past the leaves where the sunlight glistens in between like fiery gems. The wind is cool and plays languidly with her hair.

The detail has been lost to her for many years. Her months on horseback, and days spent huddled in tents as rain or snow tortured the battlefield, or nights in the dark bowels of a garrison; these left very little time for rest or quiet or the untroubled study of nature around her.

Today, after nearly a year in Halin and with the carefree insistence of her sons, she has gradually warmed to this weekly habit of visiting the River. She can hear their laughter emanating from the shores, the splash and the shifting of small stones as they run in and out of the water.

Leo's vigilant eye traces their movements as he sits beside her.

"There's been troubling news from the North."

Cara chuckles. "If you mean the Beast sitting on the throne, then that's only to be expected."
"Aren't you at all concerned?"

Cara opens an eye to peer up at him. His hair is tousled and his charming tan reminds her of all the days he has spent keeping their sons outdoors and away from the cold rooms of the castle.

"Of course I am. But I've...retired." She props herself up on her elbows and teases, "Who have you been gossiping with?"

Leo shrugs and grins at her. "I have my sources. I haven't been a senator's son for nothing." He pauses, purses his lips as though he is reluctant to speak of more. "Richard Cypher's returning from the People's Palace."

"What?" This time, Cara sits up to face him fully.

"I think you should see him; he'll arrive in Acrimar a few days from now."

"Who have you been speaking with?" Cara demands, her voice shifting from the softness that she usually bestows on her lover to the chilling hardness that she confers to her lieutenants.

Leo answers in a steady tone, "Denna."

Cara's eyes narrow. "Inasmuch as we've served together as Alkarians, I can only ever trust her insofar as I can throw her."

"Which is just about as much as you trust anyone else," he tells her pointedly. She raises an eyebrow so he adds, "Barring Richard and myself, of course."

Cara lies back down in frustration, putting an arm over her eyes. "She shares Richard's bed. What kind of news can she possibly have?"

Leo is nonchalant, rising to fetch the children with towels in hand. "That the Lord Cypher of Acrimar may resign from the Senate. The decision to invade the Midlands was approved by a resounding majority, bribery and corruption withstanding."

The moment she tops the ridge over the northern city of Nicobarese, she knows at once that she can never go back, that the comforts of Aydindril are a dream and that the years before this had been mere preparation.

The ruins of a proud Midlands city is a smoldering blemish amidst the northern ranges where snow falls pure and white even in spring. Thousands have burned in the carnage and the smell lingers in the air like a hideous perfume.

The few who have survived huddle into a single, painfully thin column leading south through the Rang'Shada, its people careful to avoid the large D'Haran encampment pressing on the borders of Galea.

Kahlan knows that they may die of the cold or of disease before they reach the walls of her mother's city.

Nicobarese, despite the fierceness of its natives, was a city her family sought for reprieve from oppressive, southern summers. Its merchants brought her the warmth of local furs during the frozen winters of Aydindril. Tapestries in honor of her house had been woven by its craftsmen. They are a sturdy people and deeply loyal. Now they are whittled to mere hundreds, their possessions stripped, their loved ones gone.
Anger, such that she had never felt before, rises from within like a black and dreadful dragon. Its overwhelming weight perches on her shoulders and she knows that it may never leave her.

"Mother Confessor…"

"Don't come any closer Jory or I will surely Confess you."

She turns to her lieutenant who appraises her fully blackened eyes. The young Jory Renfeld visibly swallows, wiping his palms against the wool beneath his armor.

"I…did not know how else to bring the news, Mother Confessor. They came in the night with no warning, through the northern passes and past Aydindril's eyes."

"You did well to bring me here. Send a message to Denee and prepare my destrier. After I crush these beasts, I'm bringing our armies to the Kern and any who stand in my path shall burn as Nicobarese has burned."

The second time Cara visits Acrimar, it is with a bitter taste in her mouth.

The streets are rife with rumors and the market is infused with an air much like the nerves in the eve of battle. Though the Gradin Valley is fertile, it is obvious that Darken's policies are a burden on its resources. The capital is culling Acrimar of produce and loading them into wide barges over the Kern. There are more beggars Cara notes bitterly, many of them children and their scraggly hands cling to her furs before she instructs her personal guard to lure them away with coin.

When she meets Richard, it is obvious that the man is deeply unsettled. His eyes are sunken, it seems that he has eaten very little and he has allowed his beard to grow wild. The broadsword leaning against his chair looks like it has been fetched from under years of dust; its scabbard is peeling at the edges and the hilt is worn.

Richard is not a violent man and unlike most nobles who carry their swords through the streets as a symbol of their wealth, Richard Cypher only ever wears his during ceremonies.

Cara suspects the worse.

"My people will not survive the winter if this continues," Richard grates.

"You said it yourself. We'll not be traitors to his rule. Darken is the Lord Rahl."

Richard grits his teeth. "You've heard about Nicobarese?"

Cara frowns. "I know that the Mother Confessor's envoys have failed but there's no way Darken can gather the army so quickly. Panis and I made sure of it."

Richard snorts. "Apparently, the Beast has been planning this for decades. He didn't need the Alkarians, just a few thousand retainers from the western Houses." Cara suddenly feels like she cannot breathe. "He burned Nicobarese just last night. I would not have known if not for Michael's counsel."

"All of it?"

Richard's silence is enough of a reply. Cara stands, her chair screeching at the force. "I have to get home."

"What?" Richard blinks rapidly. "But you just got here."
"You don't understand." Cara tries to school her face into its usual calm. "Halin sits at the border. If Darken has finally violated the peace, I need to get my family out."

Blood pours generously. It is a river than runs mad, nourishing the seeds she has sown. Now they bear fruit, grown into insidious vines that smother any compassion she once had as a child. It starts with young D'Haran soldiers who rape and pillage and blunder their way before her throne, kneeling as prisoners before her.

She releases her power unto them, pours her hate and in a wild transition they lose themselves with a love that is absolute.

"Command me, mistress," they say.

The youngest she Confesses is a boy of fourteen summers.

She coldly replies, "Die."

And they do.

Cara rides for Halin, fast and hard like a messenger of the realm. Her horse is grunting, spurred forward by her need, its black coat glistening with sweat.

The road through the southern roads can be narrow and today they are charging through the trenches of Messa, carved there by ancient rivers that have receded centuries ago and merged into the Kern. Alongside her, Constance and five other Alkarian soldiers struggle to keep up, another four fanning out over the ledges for a better view of the road ahead.

One of them shouts, "Mistress Cara! A Trimessi ahead! He is signaling that we stop!"

The Trimessi Division, soldiers of the west. What are they doing so deep in the South?

"We are not stopping for anyone!" Cara returns.

Only Constance rides closer and demands, "Mistress, are you sure?"

Cara is unable to answer. Her gaze is already drawn to the sky in front of her, where ominous black dots hover ever closer, whistling. She recognizes them immediately: arrowheads.

"Take cover!" she screams.

She kills twenty of their men, injures many more, before a net is cast over her and she is clubbed to unconsciousness as though she is a beast. Wounds and bruises crisscross her arms. A broken arrow juts from her shoulder. When she comes to, she is breathing heavily, her blonde hair covering her blood smeared face, air seething out of broken lips. Pain blossoms through every part of her body but something more pressing pervades her consciousness.

Halin. The boys. Leo.

She gives the ropes another violent tug but the pole she is tied against does not budge.

"So, Darken was right to have you killed, you traitorous bitch."

Though one eye is closed from the beating, she peers up at her captor dressed in the fine, black
leathers of the Trimessi.

"The Division is here?" Cara asks, careful to keep the hope from her voice.

"No, just the Seventh Trimessi Regiment, nothing to write home about."

Her heart sinks. "There are no reports of raiding parties over the river?"

The commander laughs. "What are you going on about? I was sent here to arrest you for crimes against the State."

"Arrest me? With a volley of arrows and an entire regiment?" Cara sneers. "I've been living peacefully in Halin! I have never spoken against the throne."

"You should be flattered, Lion-heart. You'll be kept in Messa's dungeons until the Lord Rahl sees it fit to release you. If you must know, Richard Cypher is under suspicion of treachery, a rebel after his brother. The Lord Rahl never forgets when a Senator speaks out against him in the High House. Unlike the Rahl before him, Darken Rahl shall nip the Southern problem at the bud." The commander grunts his disbelief. "You, on the other hand, were spotted exiting his palace a few days ago. Tsk, tsk. Come, Lion-heart. You were never one to settle. Everyone knows why you resigned from your post."

"You fool," Cara spits, struggling until the ropes around her wrists chafe into her skin. "I have no more need of power than I do of your idiocy. Let me go! Halin will be overrun!"

The commander stares at her. "The Lion of Halin has gone mad," he muses. "There hasn't been an army over the Kern in centuries."

The Trimessi approaches her until he can study her from mere inches away. His pockmarked skin reminds Cara of dry canyons, his breath reeks of decay. Cara wants to kill him with her own hands, flatten his face with a war hammer and pull his teeth from his skull.

She sees it coming but she is tied too tightly to do anything about it. He raises a gauntleted fist, slams it against her face and Cara immediately blacks out.

TBC
A Covered Bridge

She lifts her head groggily, the interiors of the tent sweeping in and out of view. Her throat is dry and she feels cold tendrils sweeping up her arms. Again, she is aware of days-old blood on her face, on her shoulder and of the foreign bolt lodged into muscle and probably bone.

Cara jolts forward, not because of the pain but because of the insistent thought that Halin will be overrun. She has very little strength and manages a gasp instead.

Creator, she thinks. I will be done for. My family, all that I am. Then in vicious afterthought, I will kill these dogs. All of them, if it's the last thing I do!

She tries to wriggle her wrists free but the ropes are so tight that she can barely feel her fingers. She laughs derisively. The irony is not lost on her: she trained the Trimessi, drilled them until their weaknesses were rooted out. They are thorough and would not underestimate a general of Rahl's armies.

She is in danger of losing consciousness. Darkness lurks at the edges of her vision and she fights to stay awake.

There is a commotion, shouts beyond the walls of the fortress. She can hear the attack decanting into the fortress of Messa as Trimessi scream for reinforcements. Torch fire throws shadows against the canvass and Cara's attention is drawn to the area outside her tent. She hears a gurgling sound and then a thump as her guard slumps to the ground.

She braces herself when a tall figure steals through the flaps.

"Constance?" Cara rasps.

Constance looks at her closely. "By the Creator, what happened to your face?"

"The Trimessi. He had ideas of how a general of Rahl's armies should look. It can't be that bad. I can barely feel it."

From the look on Constance's face, it is highly unlikely that the wound is anything but horrible.

Cara soldiered on, "How did you get away?"

"I didn't, but Berdine called an offensive."

"The Fifth is here?" Relief floods her features as Constance nods. "And Halin? My boys? Leo?"

Constance suddenly cannot meet her gaze.

Cara hears a keening sound, much like the sound of an animal being brought to the slaughter. She barely realizes that it is her own voice. Rage and anguish pours out, emptying her lungs, burning the edges of her vision.

Constance quickly cuts her free and gathers her in her arms. Cara vomits on the ground beside them, trembling with emotions that she cannot contain.

There are no tears but the emptiness in Cara's gaze, paired with the hideous wound that slices from temple, brow, cheek to chin, frightens Constance. The Alkarian holds her tighter.
She sits with a blank expression as the healer pulls the arrow from her shoulder and weaves a spell to close the wounds the Trimessi had inflicted. He looks disapprovingly at the scar on her face. It is an angry red and will not heal as nicely as the others.

Before he could wrap her injuries in bandages, Cara stands up, unsheathes a claymore from a nearby scabbard and limps out of the tent. She drags the claymore behind her.

Surprised, Constance stands from her post and flanks her general, afraid to do or say anything except watch.

Cara approaches the middle of the courtyard where prisoners huddle together, bloodied in the struggle for the fortress in Messa. The surrounding area is strewn with bodies and several soldiers in the Alkarian reds are clearing it in earnest.

The Fifth Alkarian Regiment pauses to witness the scene as she tilts her head to study the men. She is looking for one face in particular.

The Trimessi commander knows without a doubt that he is prey and draws attention to himself by scrambling backwards. The ropes around his wrists restrain his movements and he kicks dirt into the air. His eyes are wild and he recognizes his fate as Cara approaches.

"Mistress!" he cries. "Mercy!"

Her voice is emotionless. "Kneel, dog."

She motions two of her soldiers to hold him upright then she raises the claymore and cuts with an efficient sweep. There is the wet, blunt sound of steel meeting bone and the Trimessi's head tumbles to the stone floor. His body follows soon after.

Cara closes her eyes and feels…nothing.

She rides to Halin under the red banner of the Alkarian Division on a black destrier. Berdine and Constance ride silently behind her, watching her every move. As the Fifth Alkarian Regiment makes camp, Berdine, Constance and Cara top a nearby ridge that overlooks the border.

Below them, the Kern slips in and out of the hills, widening as it reaches the plains of Halin.

Smoke rises from different points like black pillars holding up the sky. Earlier in the day, they met roughly-clad peasants from the border towns. Soot covered them from head to toe.

From the reports, Cara knows that the hamlets by the River Kern have been destroyed and that the bridges of Halin play host to the Midlands' supply train.

"Mistress?" Constance ventures, uneasy at the general's brooding silence.

"There are too few of us. This army will move North faster than Darken can recall his troops from the Midlands. Faster, even, than we can consolidate the Division. Panis and I never counted on an invasion." Cara pinches the bridge of her nose, feels the ragged scar running down her face and closes her eyes. "I have to…" She crumples forward and Berdine is beside her, a hand on her shoulder. Cara tries hard to regain her composure but her voice trembles. "I need to bury the dead, before anything else."

"Cara," Berdine says softly. "They have used your castle as a stronghold."
"I need to bury the dead," she repeats, dumb to everything but her own thoughts. She swallows. "Ready my tent. Send for parchment, ink, and a quill."

Kahlan lifts her head from her desk. Papers are strewn haphazardly on the wide oak table. Her short swords lean on one of its legs, glinting as sunlight streams from the wide windows of Halin's library. All around her, books line the walls. It is the one room in the castle that has not been sacked and for now, it is her respite. Tomorrow, the devastation she harbours will ride North.

Jory bows and places a parchment on the table. "Mother Confessor."

She lifts the piece of paper and turns it in her hands. She frowns at the blood red circle of wax. "This is the seal of the Lion-heart."

"Yes, m'lady. Halin was her constituency."

"I wonder if this explains her absence. Or the complete lack of a defence." Jory remains silent and Kahlan narrows her eyes at him. "What do you know, Renfeld?"

He does not meet her gaze and his voice is apologetic. It is obvious that the young man has conversed with the messenger.

"It is a request for parley, I believe."

"Parley?" Kahlan tittered. "I will have no parley. Death has arrived at D'Hara's doorstep. It will not leave until the monster on D'Hara's throne has been flayed alive."

"My lady, this is of a different matter. I-I think you should read the Lion-heart's message."

Kahlan regards him icily then waves him off. Jory leaves with a bow, shutting the heavy doors behind him.

She sits down and eyes the rolled piece of skin like a beast that can strike at any moment. The material is unlike anything that is used on the battlefield. She opens it gingerly, knowing from the finish that it has been abraded with pumice and treated with a special concoction of lime or chalk. She recognizes that it is not ordinary parchment at all but rather, purple vellum, which is used to create spell codices and is reserved for royal commissions. The writing will not fade easily from humidity or heat.

Her eyes move over the text. The calligraphy is careful and deliberate, undulating with a message that somehow, amidst all the chaos of war brings clarity, silences the dragon within, and shatters the walls she has built.

She is allowed nothing but the clothes on her back. They take her sword, her dagger and even the insignia of her station.

She does not care. Her thoughts are elsewhere.

She moves like a ghost through the castle that has been her home. It is a tomb now.

She recognizes the courtesy dealt to her when she arrives at the main hall and it is empty. The only light comes from an enormous hearth that serves as a centrepiece. It frames three shrouds on separate cots, two small ones and the other, the size of a man.
She cannot approach and she falls to her knees, staring at the sum of her life that is nothing more than three empty shells.

Creator, she thinks. I will not survive this. She looks upwards at the dark ribbings of the roof, reaching for answers and finding none. Will you not let me weep, at least?

Cara manages to stand. One by one, she lifts the shrouds.

Leib, her eldest. Aginor, her youngest. Leo, her love.

Finally, it hits her and she collapses beside the cots. Her fists are white as she grabs their edges. Her mouth opens as though she is choking, straining the new skin of her scar, and she tries but fails to vomit the absolute emptiness, the shattering sorrow within. Her entire body shudders with the effort, and she weeps without sound.

Kahlan feels disjointed as noiseless sobs wrack the golden-haired woman before her. It is hard to believe that this is Cara Mason, the Lion-heart and she waits for several minutes before saying, "General."

The woman takes a moment to compose herself and the effort is impressive. When she turns to confront Kahlan, her eyes are a thick and frozen blue; her face is emotionless. The fresh scar, seething with recent magic dealt by a healer, startles her.

"Mother Confessor," Cara acknowledges. Her voice is slightly hoarse but there is mettle there that Kahlan is cautious of.

"You requested parley."

Cara drops her gaze. A vast array of emotions suddenly overtakes her expression. It is both painful and fascinating to watch.

To her surprise, the general of Rahl's armies kneels before her, takes her hands and kisses them with trembling lips.

"My lady," she begins in a splintered voice, "I beg you leave to take these bodies with me."

Kahlan hesitates. The pyres have burned since she arrived and the bodies of the dead have been committed to the flames. The letter only spoke of the general's desire to see her family. It spoke nothing of this.

"What makes you think I will allow it?"

A deep breath shudders out of Cara's lungs. "My lady, I was a mother and now I am not. I was a wife and now my love is dead." Kahlan's eyes widen. Tears of the Lion-heart stain her hands as the general continues, "I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before –I have kissed the hands of the woman who killed my sons. Please, let me lay them to rest with honour as befits a D'Haran burial."

Kahlan does not have the heart to reclaim her hands and she feels as though her next words are thawing her heart of ice.

"I shall call a truce for three days as required by your D'Haran traditions of mourning," Kahlan tells her. "No more and no less. After, if you ever step into my camp again, I shall have you killed."
Once more, Cara brings her lips to Kahlan's palms and Kahlan notices that the touch is as cold as winter.

Cara screamed through her sleep. Her voice clawed out like an animal, with rage and sorrow that froze Kahlan's heart.

She immediately knelt by her Cara's side, touched her face and said, "Cara. Cara, listen. It's just a dream."

Lady Rahl's voice was bland. "No, no it's not." She put a hand on Kahlan's shoulder, where she squeezed almost painfully. "She lost her family in Halin, two boys and her husband. The Midlands ravaged that countryside."

"What?"

"Halin was the first district from the border over the Kern, the first in my war path and it was Cara's constituency at the time. My army killed everyone on my orders."

"You would kill children?" Kahlan asked, horrified.

"An eye for an eye, my Nicobarese for D'Hara. I saw no farther than that and I got what I wanted, from Halin to the steps of the People's Palace."

"By the Creator," Kahlan said, pulling away from the Lady's grasp and eyeing her twin with contempt. "How could you?"

"I did what I had to." The Lady's calm crumbled slightly. "I reasoned that I would have Darken's heart on a platter no matter the cost. I paid for it dearly. I still do. But this is the past, hardly something Cara and I talk about."

"I would never have forgiven you," Kahlan grated.

"I know." Kahlan Amnell-Rahl's laugh was mirthless. She met her gaze. "I haven't forgiven myself either."

Kahlan could not begin to identify the emotions churning inside of her. Before she could utter a proper retort, footsteps echoing from the hall outside attracted their attention. Lady Rahl bolted upright as the oaks doors burst open and an angry-looking Alkarian stopped, breathless, at the threshold of the room. Zedd and Kina followed shortly after, yanking the woman outside to no avail.

Zedd threw them an apologetic look, which the Lady did not heed.

The Lady Rahl roared, "How dare you, Denna! These are our private chambers!"

Denna grinned devilishly. "Well, I came on the pretense that I had an important message that couldn't wait. Beyond that, your Alkarian captains are curious about the heavy guard and our Lord's absence. I decided to do something about our ignorance, especially since Berdine seemed to know something that I didn't. I hardly tolerate such privilege." Denna's eyes swept over the room and her expression shifted from angry to studiously confused. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Powerful magic," Zedd gritted out.

"Obviously, old man," Denna snapped. Her eyes fell on both Cara's, the wide-eyed Kahlan who
seemed softer than her counterpart, and then they settled accusingly on the Lady Rahl. "Can someone explain to me what in the Creator's many names is happening here?"

Kahlan looked at her twin, who gave her a nod in permission. She opened her mouth to explain.

TBC
March On and Fear Not the Thorns

Cara stared at the wooden containers as they were lowered into the ground. In the distance, black smoke blended into the noon-time sky, blotting out a portion of sunlight.

She struggled with emotions that she had never been forced to face in her time as a Mord'Sith. Her training had allowed her to sublimate anything like them under a veneer of cruelty, purpose, and it taught her to restrain them with the Agiel.

The *unum* tore the barriers away and she could *feel* the despair, the incredible guilt, and a frantic, unrepressible anger.

They felt like gaping sword wounds through her gut, raw and real. In that sense, they were very alien to her because her own feelings about her own family – their demise at the hands of her Mord'Sith mistresses and her father's death by her hand – were nebulous at best. At the time, she had no room for even the most normal, most sinister of emotions. The Mord'Sith had destroyed those spaces.

Today, however, was a wholly different story. The Cara whose body she occupied wanted revenge, *craved* it like one would water, so that she may fill a well that Cara doubted had a bottom. The *unum's* influence created niches in her heart she never knew could exist and filled them with an overwhelming grief.

It hurt much more than any physical wound Cara had endured and it terrified her; she bore this experience like a passenger with no power whatsoever over her vessel.

She watched. She felt. She had no choice but to allow this Cara to steer the boat into places she had never been.

Her entire being screamed its protest.

Cara's eyes burn. Her throat is painful and it seems she has forgotten how to swallow. Her nostrils flare at the smell of burning corpses.

The Midlanders have kept the pyres burning around Castle Halin and many doubt that the countryside will smell the same again. It stinks of death, of a Midlands tradition that also stains the sky. Those left behind will sift through the ashes of their sons, daughters, husbands and wives. The ground here will be tainted; the memories will be too painful.

And yet…the scene unfolding before her presses urgently into her senses. Members of the Fifth lower the last of the coffins. Cara presses calloused hands against her eyelids to stop from crying openly. When the officer presiding over the ceremony summons her, she steps forward, takes the shovel from his hands, and heaps newly turned soil into the graves.

The last goodbye is always the most painful. Her regiment quietly leaves while Berdine and Constance discard their cloaks to join her. They trowel earth without words and when they are finished, covered in grime, they sit on nearby rocks to watch the sun set.

Cara feels as though she is in the deep twilight of her years, that she is hobbling through the last of her breaths.

She stares at her hands.
"I kill by the sword and those I love die by it."

Berdine puts a hand on her shoulder. "This isn't your fault, Cara."

"Isn't it?" she scoffs. "If I hadn't chosen a soldier's life…"

"D'Hara would probably have been split in half by civil war," Berdine finishes for her, an edge in her voice. "You would not have met Leo or spent the last two years with your sons."

"This is a crueller fate, Berdine, to have something precious only for it to be taken away."

Berdine is silenced by her words and looks to the horizon, at the castle which sits atop an imposing hill and overlooks a part of the River Kern.

She has visited this part of the province many times before, sharing cold, Cabrallian brew with Cara at the wide porticoes of her home. They watched Leib weave in and out of the furniture, Leo as he laughed heartily, Aginor as she sat at his mother's knee and drooled all over her fingers.

Nervously, Berdine gives voice to their thoughts, "Shall we re-take Halin?"

Cara grunts and her words are stilted, as though they are not the ones she wants to say. "No. There has been enough death here already and we have overstayd our welcome. This," she gestures to the vestiges of the funeral, "was a courtesy. The Midlands army will easily defeat the Fifth if we try." She breathes deeply, summoning the last of her strength. "We ride North."

Berdine seems pleased by her reply and Cara suddenly wonders at her captain's intentions.

"We ride North with the Midlands army?"

There is something expectant in Berdine's voice. It reveals the penetrating intelligence of one of her most talented captains, her ability to predict outcomes from a limited number of facts. It also gives Cara pause, despite the overwhelming need to follow her wrath.

"Speak plainly, Berdine."

The Alkarian captain says without regret or apology, "I've been speaking with Jory Renfeld."

"Ah, the enemy," Cara snarls.

"Not quite." Berdine's squints as she looks up at the sun to discern the time. "The most pressing concern is the man in the High Seat, Darken Rahl. He's dragged D'Hara into this war and the Mother Confessor will not stop until he's dead." Berdine gestures to Castle Halin and the wide encampment which surrounds it. "For the Midlands High Council, this invasion is pre-emptive. The Midlands has never been one to expand its borders. It is concerned with governing and protecting a throng of nations, not in burdening itself with more lands." Berdine stares at her with clear, blue eyes. "You know this, Cara."

Cara pinches the bridge of her nose. "I fear you're asking too much from me, Berdine."

Berdine smiles but her eyes hold no real mirth. "Perhaps. The people would ask it of you. Take the High Seat, align yourself with the Midlands. The South will help you. Richard gives you his word."

"Align myself? They killed my family, Berdine!" Cara nearly screams, prompting Constance to step closer.
A rare ire flashes across Berdine's face. Her reply is calculating and it hits Cara squarely in the gut, "Can you honestly say that you haven't left orphans and widows in your wake? What price did we have to pay for peace in D'Hara? Do you not remember? We had to slaughter our own countrymen to save many more. Children died in the villages we razed. We're all murderers when at war, Cara, one way or the other."

Whether Berdine's manipulation is deliberate or not, Cara does not care, because her words ignite a rage that sees her sword unsheathed from her scabbard. She strikes blindly and Berdine weaves out of the way. She plunges her sword forward, but fails. Berdine allows the assault, perhaps aware that Cara's grief has incapacitated her technique.

After several, harrowing minutes, Cara drops the sword with an exasperated shout and Berdine leans against a rock, relieved. One can see that her breath has already come dangerously short.

"What are you trying to do?" Cara cries, wringing her hands.

Exhaustion draws deep lines on her face, accenting the scar which will remind everyone of Halin's demise. Suddenly, Berdine's face softens. There is pity there. They both know that for Cara, there will be no forgetting.

"I'm putting this into perspective," Berdine says, softly. "For any of us to gain any measure of sanity, for us to lay any ghosts to rest, for us to think clearly about the future of our people and to succeed in that endeavour, we must think of peace." Berdine approaches cautiously, stopping when she sees the intent in Cara's eyes. "You know this, Cara," she insists. "You and Panis have always known this. It's the reason he gave you Halin and entrusted you the South for safekeeping. It's the reason he divided the Alkarians to begin with."

Cara trembles with emotions, conveying with her body language that any more words would bring the sword down Berdine's head. Breathing heavily for several seconds, she finally sheathes her sword, turns, and walks away.

The moon is at its zenith, throwing light past the branches and into silver pools at her feet. She hears the scrunch of footsteps on dry leaves and several men emerge from the shadows like wolves, dressed in the pelts of those predators.

Cara feels her hackles rise, her hand gripping the hilt of her sword. She relaxes when they reveal themselves from their hoods, their palms empty as they reach forward to shake hands with her company.

Richard, his bearded face stretching into a grin, emerges from the pack. He grabs her shoulders and pulls her into an embrace. He keeps her in his arms for more minutes than is necessary and when he speaks into her ear, his voice is cramped with emotions.

"I'm sorry to hear about your family."

A lump forms in her throat. The memories are too fresh and she manages a low sneer, "I'll have my vengeance soon enough."

He holds her at arm's length, studying her intently. "Will you now? Do you know where to put all that wrath, General?" When she does not answer he admonishes, "No? Come, I'll tell you about my plans and then you can decide."

Cara leads them to a clearing where Richard's men set up camp. They are a few kilometres from the edges of the Fifth's camp, a rendezvous away from prying eyes. Amidst the bustle, Cara
watches as Richard prepares one of two fires. When he finishes, he sits beside her and pokes the flames with a stick until they cackle.

"Berdine requested that I come," he ventures.

"She has the uncanny talent of knowing what's best even before I do," Cara admits.

He watches her closely. "You don't like where any of this is going, do you?"

"No." She shakes her head vigorously, burying her face in her hands. "I'm no traitor."

"Even I know that."

"Richard, the Truth Seeker."

"Ha. Yes, I've heard that nickname. When they released the classified communiqués, all I could do was laugh." They smile at each other. "Now, if you're done teasing, I'd have you know that the Alkarians would follow you to whatever end. As I would."

"I'm not Panis."

"No, but you're the Rahl he would have wanted as his replacement." Cara feels a sharp pang at the mention of her former mentor and lord, and then a deeper sorrow at his words. "Unfortunately for all of us, he loved you too much to get you embroiled in politics and kept you tucked away in Halin." He squeezes her knee, as though touch will communicate his conviction. "Join me, Cara. Better yet, take up your banner and lead us. Darken Rahl will drain this country dry. If war doesn't get us, starvation will. Already, the South is suffering and you know that when the South suffers, all of D'Hara will, sooner or later."

The South –made abundant by the River Kern– is an area that supports a nation which is largely infertile. With pragmatism ingrained in its culture, the Southern populace does not take kindly to unexplained encumbrances from the Capital. Historically, war or self-aggrandizing attempts by a Rahl or any of its local power-wielders is never tolerated; the South cannot bear severe economic strains on agriculture and industry for very long without affecting the rest of commerce in D'Hara.

It is also common knowledge that the South needs D'Hara's garrisons to defend its borders. The relationship between the Capital and the Southern provinces has been co-operative for centuries and for good reason.

Which is why, when Cara quashed Michael Cypher's ambitious and ill-conceived plans for a separate, Southern state, she was hailed a hero. That Cypher rebellion was anything but necessary, for the South or for D'Hara. Richard's efforts, however…

Richard is tentative when he continues, "I must tell you that another Trimessi regiment is also in Sassen, with different orders. It has overtaken its government. Acrimar managed to avoid the same fate because Denna sneaked the First Alkarian Regiments to the outskirts before they could arrest me."

Cara stands up and stares at him hard. "No, that can't be true."

"The Trimessi have been ordered to take control of the Southern garrisons."

"He anticipated the Midlands invasion," Cara hisses, the gears inside her head turning as wave upon wave of realisation pounds at her head. "He orchestrated it, didn't he, in order to pull the Senate vote, to be given the authority to move the Divisions, my Division especially. Getting rid of
me would have been icing on the cake.

"There was a reason why western retainers instead of D'Haran soldiers carried out the massacre at Nicobarese. He wanted Halin destroyed." Cara grabs Richard's arms and the young Senator winces as she crushes them in her grip. "Damn him, Richard! Tell me it isn't true!"

He remains mute before her. She releases him with a push.

"By the Creator, I will kill him with my own hands." Her eyes blaze with a new hatred. "Mark my words, Cypher, the High Seat will be empty before this month is over."

Kahlan was given a horse, a nondescript but powerful stallion while the Lady Rahl rode beside her in a warhorse the colour of snow. As the first rays of light touched the horizon, they rode out into a crisp morning, flanked by Kina and Arrin, two of Berdine's most trusted veterans.

Kahlan was instructed to wear a hood as they rode past the front gates and into the golden landscapes of the Azrith Plains.

Just as the sun began to be unbearable, they stopped at an unlikely oasis hidden between reddish, limestone buttes.

It was a jarring sight as it emerged from between the rocks, a sprawling island lush with flora, climbing the bluffs adjacent to it. The oasis would have fit a small town but it seemed largely unoccupied except for Alkarian sentries dressed in muted greens that hid them from the eye.

They dismounted and walked several paces in, the sky covered by the elongated leaves of date palms, grass beneath Kahlan's boots. The temperature here was distinctly cooler than it was in the open desert and the air was slightly humid. Kahlan spied a waterfall past several peach trees, its path carved down the rock-face as it fell into a pool cupped by limestone and trees.

The Lady Rahl led them to a shelter made of canvas and wood. It was the size of a house, elevated on a platform of dark lumber. Its main portico was open on all sides to allow the breezes in and it branched to three other daises which supported open-spaced rooms. They could be made private by pulling at sliding doors.

Looking in from the entrance, Kahlan could see that the shelter was furnished with the finest carpets and furniture made by Linearian craftsmen. Tapestries from both D'Hara and the Midlands hung in ornate loops.

Past the shelter and deeper still into the oasis was a series of wells, irrigated to feed the plant-life. They filled several basins that shimmered as sunlight streamed past the palm branches. The spaces echoed with the sound of water.

Lady Rahl stooped over one of these pools, splashing water over her face and on her neck. She enjoined her twin with a look and Kahlan gratefully copied her ministrations.

"This is beautiful," Kahlan whispered.

Lady Rahl had a far off look, pierced by a sudden memory. "Cara took care that we had a measure of peace. She has had so little of it in her lifetime."

"Do you come here often?"

"As often as our duties would allow. Always, with our daughter."

"There was a reason why western retainers instead of D'Haran soldiers carried out the massacre at Nicobarese. He wanted Halin destroyed." Cara grabs Richard's arms and the young Senator winces as she crushes them in her grip. "Damn him, Richard! Tell me it isn't true!"
As though on cue, laughter emerged from the shelter and a bright-eyed Amihan ran to her mother, placing an enthusiastic kiss on her cheek.

"Is inya awake yet?" the child asked, breathless.

"No, not yet, my love."

A shadow fell over her face. "Oh."

"Go and play, Amihan. I'll meet you inside."

The child brightened and ran off, her worries forgotten.

"It must have been a peaceful life, after the war," Kahlan ventured, taking the towel Kina handed to her.

Lady Rahl smiled minutely before leading her inside the shelter. They lounged on soft cushions as Alkarian soldiers prepared cheeses and fruit on a low-lying table. An Alkarian lieutenant bowed as she poured two glasses of Cabrallian wine, immediately leaving their presence to stand guard a few metres away.

"It was peaceful, until Amihan was taken and you arrived." The Lady peered at her over the glass, her blue eyes unreadable.

Kahan tried to hide her displeasure. "Then why take me here at all?"

The Lady shrugged enigmatically. "A war is coming. This place reminds me of what is at stake."

"Ah." Kahlan shifted uncomfortably in her seat, suddenly aware that the Lady was trying to tell her something without words.

"Have you ridden out to war before?" the Lady asked.

"I've prevented wars. I've never led an army and I don't intend to."

The Lady took a sip of her wine and said in the most offhand way, "Good. It isn't something I'd wish on myself."

"So where do we go from here?"

"I'll ride South to meet the armies. For all their talk, the Alkarians will follow me. You must stay here and wait for both our Cara's to wake up. Also," the Lady Rahl regarded her with a twinkle in her eye, "Amihan will be in your care while I'm gone. The Alkarians will ride with me and there is no one here I trust except Zedd. Between the both of you, I believe my daughter will be safe.

"As for the Senate," the Lady sighed, her knuckles white against her cup, "it will take them a while to come to a vote. Let's hope Cara wakes up in time to send reinforcements."

Kahan held Amihan's hand when the Lady Rahl left before sunrise the next day. They watched from a balcony as the Alkarian captains bowed their obeisance, their bodies sheathed in red leather, their hair tied in orderly braids.

Denna brought the Lady her destrier and they exchanged nods, indications of a small truce. Berdine tried to hide a smile. Dahlia muttered a barely audible, "About time." Everyone else seemed nonchalant. It was a surprising gesture for a Division that was loyal only to Cara Rahl.
Amihan's lips quivered as she clutched Kahlan's clothing. One could tell that it was taking all her strength not to cry.

"She'll be back," Kahlan reassured.

"Will you take me to her when the time comes?"

Kahlan frowned. "What do you mean?"

"My inya told me that we must protect our family at all costs."

"You're only a child, little one. You aren't charged with that duty yet." Kahlan smiled indulgently at her, stroking her hair.

"But will you?" Amihan stared at her with wide eyes, which were bluer and clearer than a summer day. They were filled with so much fire that Kahlan could not help but be reminded of Cara's gaze. Her chest heaved with the memory.

In the face of such zeal, Kahlan could not bring herself to say no. "When the time comes, we'll both be there and I shall protect you, whatever the cost."

"Ank'Tahim. That's the name of this place."

"High D'Haran for 'child of the peace'," He begins to sew her flesh together and Cara grits her teeth at the pain, "and another of the Division's infamous sojourns. Honestly, the Alkarians have outrageous privileges. I may have to discuss this with the Senate someday." He gazes at the date palms that are being harvested by several of Cara's men, the basins which are populated by thirsty horses.

Cara grins. "It's my measure of respite from the intrigues of the People's Palace."

"Strategically placed, too. You can hide an army behind these buttes," Richard raises a brow, mischief bright in his eyes, "which you are."

They snap to attention as a tall figure strides purposefully to the threshold of the shelter. His armour is coloured in the muted bronze of the Midlands, still stained with blood, while his black hair fills a helmet decorated with the plumes of foreign birds. His fair skin, dark hair, and blue eyes reveal his ancestry. This one was born and raised in Aydindril.

Cara nods to him. "Captain Renfeld. A pleasure to have you in our camp."

"A ride on horseback with a piece of cloth over my eyes isn't exactly a pleasure, General." He seems miffed by the indignity of his trip but his expression reveals that he has more pressing matters to discuss.

"Congratulations are in order for a flawless victory in Sassen," he continues before spying the gaping wound on her shoulder which Richard has managed to close, at least in part. "That will leave an ugly scar."

"What's a few more to those that I already have?" Cara touches the scar on her face and suddenly, the meaning behind her words falls like a house of bricks over all their heads: the unspoken events of Halin, the sacrifices at Sassen.

Jory Renfeld drops his gaze in embarrassment and then raises it to study their surroundings.
His delivery is in jest but Cara can hear the edge to it, "While my men have never seen a desert and cook slowly in its heat, yours seem much better off."

"Yes, well," Cara grabs a jug of wine from a side table and takes a violent swig, "hundreds of mine have died to break the Towers of Sassen, hundreds more of the Trimessi to defend them, D'Harans killing D'Harans," Cara spits, "My captains or I could hardly call it flawless."

Richard stops mid-stitch at the sudden tension in the tent and he puts a hand on Cara's arm to pacify her. Jory Renfeld is quickly aware that he has dug himself a hole to fall into and to his credit, remains quiet.

Cara rolls her eyes. "It's enough that we've come this far," she finally accedes. "I won't have any more of my men or of D'Hara's citizens die. Too many have joined me in this effort and too many have died."

"The Midlands shall honour its promises, General," Jory says. "The Mother Confessor herself shall ride with the Red Lions to the gates of the People's Palace."

Cara balls her hands into fists, hissing as Richard pierces her skin with the last of his stitches. "A squad of my men will open the gates from the inside. As for Darken," Cara expression blackens, "his head is mine. Your Mother Confessor owes me this honour and no one shall say otherwise."

Jory tilts his head as though he is thinking better of something. After a moment, he reaches into his satchel. "If that's the case," he says, producing a metal circlet, "then you will need one of these."

"The Red Lions! The Red Lions! Hail the Red Lions!"

She hears the jubilation, feels it like rain on her skin after a long and difficult drought.

The moment she enters marketplace, she could hear the tumultuous shouting of a citizenry that has realised it is entitled to protest. She looks around and wonders at the sudden lack of nobles on the streets.

Unexpectedly, her people gather around the squad she has appointed to accompany her on the mission to the Garden of Life. All around her, merchants and peasants congregate in droves as they leave their businesses and homes. Above her, children on the upper levels hang over balconies and passageways, waving their arms as they cry, "The Red Lions! Hail the Red Lions!"

Her men have given up on keeping everyone at bay. They are a sea of civilians that have managed to keep Darken's soldiers at a distance. Even a man of Darken's habits would not risk angering a mob as large as the populace of the Capital.

The Rebellion has breached the Palace walls and the people, with their intent, have spoken.

Richard the Truth Seeker was right.

Her heart tightens at the sight. They look thinner than when she saw them last and their faces are sallow. But their eyes light up like thousands of torches when they see the banner she holds in her hands: that of a red lion running in the wind, outlined in gold. It is the centuries-old standard of the Alkarian Division and symbolic of Panis Rahl's promise of peace when he took the High Seat.

She continues the blistering pace she has set.

She stops at the archway leading to the inner sanctums of the Palace. The Trimessi guard the
labyrinth of rooms panelled in oak, which borders the Garden of Life. When they see her and the Alkarian standard, a Trimessi captain steps forward.

"General," he says. When she does not respond, he grinds his teeth before unbolting his sword-belt. "I won't have any more Trimessi blood in these halls."

He instructs his men to throw their weapons at her feet, knowledge of the recent events in Sassen written on their faces; so many of them had fallen under the Alkarian fist. They peer past her at the wall of unarmed and common people. They also see her promise of death should they resist, both in her demeanour and the purpose of the crowd.

"Thank you, Captain."

They step aside and Cara steps through the archway, instructing her men to keep the civilians and the Trimessi behind it.

She can see Richard's familiar form Shouldering through the crowd, followed by knowing murmurs of "Senator". He seems largely untouched because of the banner he has in his fists. Cara can see the head of a red beast not unlike her own insignia.

"Constance has opened the gates," he reports, breathless. "We've only allowed the Midlanders to the outer courtyards as a show of force. We can't afford any more bloodshed and the people are terrified as it is. If the Senate had a mind, they'd change sides right about now."

"Make them realise this is a hostile takeover of the government by my military. Anyone who does not comply will be branded a traitor and punished. Publicly."

"That's unheard of," Richard says, surprised.

"It should scare them enough."

The Senator laughs, jovial even at such a sombre time. It is one of Richard's more endearing traits. "Very well, General. It shall be done. I'm just glad I'm on your side."

Cara smiles for the first time that day. "You brought me to this side, Richard. If anyone should be credited with anything, it should be you."

"Nonsense," Richard says. "We'll speak of credit once Darken has paid the price for his madness. Do you have a plan?"

"Yes. But the Creator knows if it'll work against a wizard as powerful as Darken Rahl or in a room as difficult as the Garden of Life."

Richard grabs her arm. "I'll follow you to whatever end, Cara. I promised you that."

She nods, her lips set in a grim line. "To whatever end, my friend."

The Bond quivers its protest as she steps into the Garden of Life. Rays of sunlight decant from the leaded windows above to the Garden below, where they coalesce into an otherworldly glow. It veils the Garden in a fog of brilliance that makes it difficult to breathe or see. Motes of dust hover before her, revealing subtle pillars of dark and light.

She prowls past the flowerbeds at the outer ring of the Garden and through the winding trees that stand like sentinels armed with lush, flowering branches.
Near the centre, she finds the Lord Rahl, smiling mysteriously at her as she approaches.

She rarely comes to this place, and only at Panis' request. She remembers the slab of granite upon which Darken stands, the well which sits at its corner, and beyond it, the polished stone block set next to a fire pit. On the block is an iron bowl held up by the legs of iron beasts and the handle of its lid shaped in the form of a Shinga, a creature of the Underworld.

At the very centre of the Garden is white sorcerer's sand, criss-crossed with symbols that are more archaic than any language Cara has studied.

"You have come for me, as my advisers have always predicted. I should have had you killed long before my business with Nicobarese. Long before Halin." He grins dangerously at her. "I'm glad I didn't spare you the pain of your family's death, you insolent peasant."

Hot anger surges from Cara's chest and she unsheathes her sword. "The common people are the pillars of our civilisation, you arrogant son of a bitch. Your duty is to serve them."

Darken guffaws. "D'Hara deserves a stronger aristocracy. It deserves the homage of all other nations. My House has tolerated enough of this...democracy," the word comes out as a sneer. "An idea that Panis' forefathers have blathered about for centuries. It has weakened D'Hara. I intend to make this country strong, stronger than it ever has been by giving power to those entitled to it!"

He cackles as magic swirls around his fingertips.

"Richard! Now!" Cara screams.

Richard emerges from the vegetation at Darken's right. He sprints forward, his sword at the ready. With a growl, Darken hits him with the spell meant for Cara and Richard hurtles backwards, his weapon clattering to the ground.

Cara uses the distraction and runs the remaining distance. The Rada'Han is ready in her other hand.

She does not anticipate Darken's speed when he throws a weak and hasty fireball her way. It singes her arm and the pain forces her to let go of the artefact. It also slows her down enough that the next spell knocks her entirely off her feet.

She hits a medium-sized tree after traveling several feet in the air and coughs up blood as soon as she hits the ground. When she stands, however, Darken has manipulated invisible tendrils around her and binds her in place. They tighten until she is struggling for air.

Squinting, she checks if Richard is moving. He is facedown, seemingly unconscious.

Her mind begins to cloud with panic as darkness edges around her vision. She needs to buy them time.

"Come now, Darken," she rasps. "There must be some other way than war. I can help you."

Already, she feels a tell-tale vibration in the air as Darken draws a deadly enchantment together. From her lessons with Panis, she knows that there is no escape from Wizard's Fire.

"Cara, Cara," Darken says patronizingly. "Don't mistake me for a fool. I have always known you would never join me. And really? For you to defy a Rahl? You should have known that death would be waiting at the end of this road."

"You have no idea. It's all I've ever wanted since Halin," Cara breathed, standing in anticipation of
the hell that Darken was conjuring.

She looks to Richard, wills him to wake up, and prays for the first time in her long and harrowing life. Nothing happens so she screams instead, "Richard! Damn you! Get up!"

Darken raises his arm in preparation for the liquid fire that would tumble from his fingers like a thing alive.

Suddenly, a flurry of white emerges from behind Darken, its strides long and purposeful. Hands click the metal circlet around his neck.

Darken backhands the intruder that has sneaked up on him and it is the slender figure of Kahlan Amnell which falls from the granite step.

Cara spares her a bewildered look before Darken's spell of binding loosens. She coughs and breathes greedily.

Darken does not seem to notice Cara's newly gained freedom, preoccupied with his impending victory. He glowers at them with triumph in his eyes. "Ah, more's the pleasure! To have both the Mother Confessor and the Lion-heart at my mercy!"

He raises his hand as he mutters another incantation but his expression turns gravely attentive. "What in the Creator's name…"

Immediately, he scrunches his face in agony. He pulls at the metal circlet as though it is made of fire.

Cara does not waste a moment more. She takes a fortifying breath as she picks up her sword, lopes to the centre of the Garden and kicks the Lord Rahl behind the knees. Darken drops to the ground with a cry. She circles him like a hawk before bearing the sword swiftly across his neck.

His head drops to the stone floor like a piece of ripe fruit and his body follows shortly after. Blood sprays across the circular lawn. It stains the stone, the leaves of nearby plants, and mingles with the deep red of her leathers.

Cara steps back, feeling a tremendous weight lift. Without warning, the strength in her bones leaves her and she nearly collapses before she can steady herself. Sitting down on the back of her thighs gingerly, she shivers with the burden of all her struggles as though she is in a fever, expelling a disease. She hears the Mother Confessor limp nearer.

Kahlan's boots appear in her line of sight.

"You saved my life," Cara croaks, managing to kneel on one knee with the intention of boosting herself up to stand.

"I owe you so much more than just Darken's death."

The Mother Confessor stoops forward and wraps her hand around Cara's throat.

Cara's body slackens with understanding. Her affairs here are done, D'Hara is free. She can welcome death; Leo and the boys are waiting for her in the afterlife.

Kahlan clasps her jaw and forces her to meet her gaze. Perhaps it is the light, but the colour in Kahlan's eyes changes slightly.
Cara never thought that death could be so beautiful.

Kahlan whispers, "But I owe D'Hara so much more." Her fingers loosen and she lets her go.

Cara heaves a rattled sigh, lays her body on the cold ground as she crumples inward, and weeps the last of her tears.

TBC
Kahlan is struck by the tranquillity that follows the violence.

The decapitated body of Darken Rahl lies motionless a few feet away, sprawled on granite steps as though paying obeisance—however late—to the altar of his forbears. His blood is a haphazard gash across the greenery, staining several bushes. Behind her, she hears a pained groan as Richard Cypher comes to.

Squinting in her direction, the Senator considers her a moment as she hovers over the worn and crying figure of the Lion-heart. He chooses not to speak. He stands and sheathes his sword, surveying the results of their rebellion on unsteady legs. When Alkarians begin to enter the Garden—Cara's captains gesticulating wildly and yelling to be allowed audience—he drives them back with surly explanations, nodding to Kahlan as though putting the Lion-heart's welfare in her hands.

It is an explicit gesture of trust and one that Kahlan is unsure of how handle.

So she waits.

General Cara Mason, leader of the Red Lions, lies on her side. The only indications that she is conscious are the minute movements of her shoulders timed to faint sobs. She clutches the ground beneath desperately as though it is the only thing that anchors her to this world.

Kahlan is afraid to watch, to talk to her, to acknowledge her. In this war, the Lion-heart has quickly become the sum of all her regrets. Killing her is the ultimate act of mercy and indeed, if Kahlan values her own life, doing so will assure her complete control over the D'Haran Empire with a subservient D'Haran military.

Alas, a woman of her stature cannot simply bury her sins or pour salt into an already excruciating wound and expect no consequences. For the first time during the Midlands campaign, she feels it gnawing at her—guilt that the dragon swallowed. It was dormant at first but now, it is consuming her from within. It quietly persuades her to sit on a stone bench and watch the leader of the rebellion.

The Lion-heart grows still.

She may be lying prostrate on the ground but Cara Mason's defenceless pose strips her of nothing. The jut of Cara's chin is dignified and defiant. She stares up at Kahlan with eyes the colour of Aydindril's winters and reminds Kahlan of a wounded lion, lying in repose yet ready to slaughter any threat.

Kahlan has never known such a formidable enemy. Already, one can see that the war has etched permanent scars on Cara but the strength of her character compels her to give more to D'Hara than what she has received.

Kahlan registers surprise when Cara Mason speaks, a gravelly salutation that is tired and unbelievably firm, "Well met, Mother Confessor."

Kahlan narrows her eyes at her, wondering if this is a test. "We've met before, General."

Cara says darkly, "At a time, place and manner that—in a more peaceful age—would never have been of my choosing."
Immediately, Kahlan's expression hardens as she tries to stem her shame. Seemingly satisfied with Kahlan's inability to speak, the Lion-heart explains in a more neutral tone, "We haven't met properly, Mother Confessor. Jory Renfeld always came in your stead."

Cara sits up; her hair dishevelled as they fall in golden rivulets to her shoulders. The scar that withers over her expression sharpens her beauty to a dangerous edge. Kahlan is reminded of a predator and summons the caution one needs in its presence.

Surprisingly, Cara invites Kahlan to pull her to her feet. Kahlan stares at the proffered hand, unwilling to trust a D'Haran even as she has laid down her life so that more of Kahlan's countrymen would live. Her mother, a Galean monarch, would have chastised her for such rudeness. Yielding to her inner voice and hiding her grimace, Kahlan takes her hand and pulls.

They stand eye to eye and Kahlan bears the brunt of Cara's scrutiny—a blast of winter that makes it difficult to breathe. It hovers over her face, pauses at her lips and slides down to the hollow of her clavicle.

A Mother Confessor does not allow such blatant enquiry but she reasons that Cara Mason is an ally that the Midlands cannot afford to lose. Already, the Midlands owes her a debt of gratitude.

"So the tales have been right," Cara says, looking at her accusingly. "You're very beautiful."

Kahlan stares nonplussed. "Excuse me?" To catch an opponent unaware is a common enough tactic used by politicians to gain the upper hand. She does not expect it from a career soldier who has spent no time in office.

"You are beautiful," Cara enunciates, slowly this time as though to a child. "I've only just noticed. Beauty is a rare thing especially during war-time, but I'd be very deluded to think that beauty, especially yours, equates to goodness." The challenge is apparent.

Kahlan is convinced that Cara is deliberately pushing at her restraint, gauging her reactions. It hints at fearlessness—which so few have when in the presence of a Confessor—and alarming astuteness.

"I don't wish to bandy words with you," Kahlan replies warily.

Cara's smile is enigmatic, throwing light across a face that has been altered by her many ordeals. For an instant, the laughter reaches her eyes and the wall between them collapses.

The Lion-heart tells her, "There will be politics after this and long talks and promises that may be broken. But this," she gestures to their handiwork, "binds us."

Kahlan nods slowly. "I'm not one to forget. And I keep my promises, Cara Mason."

"You've already proven as much. However, your High Council has not. From here onward, you'd be pressed to follow their whims."

Kahlan raises a brow, incredulous. "What makes you think—"

"It's only to be expected," Cara interrupts, turning from her to stoop over Darken's body. "You've followed their orders insofar as they've suited your agenda, from Halin to an alliance with the Red Lions." She uses the dead man's robe to wipe her sword clean with more enthusiasm than is necessary. Cara continues, "Let's hope that whomever the Senate appoints will be keener than the last one or we shall all be knocking at closed doors."

As she stretches her shoulders, Cara is overcome by a fit of coughing and she rubs her chest,
looking suddenly perplexed. Kahlan surmises that she is feeling pain and exhaustion for the first time. From her spies' reports, Kahlan knows that the Lion-heart is running mostly on purpose and adrenaline, taking very little time to eat or sleep.

Kahlan surprises even herself when she offers, "I have a wizard at the wall. Maybe he should take a look at you. A soldier's of no use if she is dead."

Cara withdraws the hand over her mouth; it is lathered in her own blood.

She swallows nervously. "Perhaps he should."

It is obvious that the Lion-heart is using all her strength to keep herself upright for Kahlan's sake. Without meaning to, her knees buckle and she grabs Kahlan's arm.

"You are no monster," Cara manages as she puts a good portion of her weight against the Mother Confessor. There is no apology for the clear violation of both their personal spaces, only an airy casualness that stems from unease. "I know you aren't, even if I try –and I try very hard –to convince myself otherwise. I want to…I have to understand that about my enemies," she frowns as she whispers, "and about myself."

With those words, the air of formality dissipates. Kahlan is unsure of whether she should be reassured or more careful. "You don't need to explain anything."

"I know. But to kill a Rahl? Spirits, nobody has dared in centuries. It's a sin big enough to share and I owe you my life."

Kahlan tightens her hold on the woman. From the way her soldiers talk of the Lion-heart or how accounts of her pursuits have been woven into tales and ballads by the fireside, one is inclined to think that the Red Lion of Halin is invincible, a legend from the books, not a woman of flesh and bone who is so obviously bleeding into Kahlan's dress.

"I have more sins than I'd care to count," Kahlan breathes. "You've done what you had to do for your country, for mine. You owe me nothing."

Cara laughs. "Nothing?"

"Nothing," Kahlan insists. She peers at the woman, past the curtain of blonde hair and at a profile that is carelessly strong even when in pain. When Cara catches her gaze, Kahlan sees only sadness.

Kahlan's jaw tightens. "But my debt to you…"

"Can never be paid in full," Cara finishes.

It is the truth, Kahlan thinks, one that they both have to live with. People have been bonded for less and Kahlan knows, in her heart of hearts, that their destinies will forever be intertwined.

"You should finish your food," Kahlan said half-heartedly, knowing her appetite had fled, too.

Amihan stared morosely at her plate. "I can't eat, inya. Something terrible is happening."

Kahlan sighed, making her way to the girl's side and touching her head. "Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?"

Amihan's face scrunched up as she buried it into Kahlan's dress. All Kahlan heard was a muffled, "No."
"Alright. Come on."

She picked Amihan up and her heart ached as Amihan tucked her head into Kahlan's neck, hugging her tightly.

Amihan was sensitive to the nation's mood and it taxed her emotionally. Her pretence of courage was so uncommon for girls her age that Kahlan was sure the influence came from her mothers. The child was a Rahl, raised on a strong tradition of D'Haran leadership but unlike the Rahls before her, she possessed Galean sensibilities of compassion, openness. It left her decidedly more vulnerable than a tyrant.

Settling Amihan for her afternoon nap, Kahlan sang a soft, Galean lullaby that pacified them both. The girl nodded off to sleep on Kahlan's lap, reminding Kahlan of her own childhood.

"Not quite a Rahl of my world," Kahlan whispered softly, as tucked the child in and kissed her forehead. "And not quite an Amnell, either."

She entered the Rahl bedchamber adjacent to Amihan's room.

She roamed the spaces, throwing suspicious glances at the seething globe beside Cara Rahl. Zedd had calibrated the unum to allow only certain members near but she distrusted it—an unpredictable, roiling mass of magic that had thrown everything into disarray. Her world's Cara lay a few feet away, fists white as she clenched her sheets and battled through the unum's labyrinth of memories.

Kahlan stemmed the urge to sit beside her, to run her hands through Cara's golden hair, to soothe the creases from her brow.

She whispered instead, "Stay strong, Cara. We'll get through this together, I promise."

Her worry for Cara was constant, overpowering. There was something else, a weight in her chest so strange and new that it found her paying vigil at Cara's bedside for hours at a time. It grew heavier and heavier the longer Cara stayed asleep. Soon, she would have to give it a name.

Spirits, Kahlan needed time to think. She needed to sort out emotions that were fast becoming unrecognisable, terrifying even, when she was in Cara's presence.

She left an Alkarian named Constance in charge as she sought the privacy of the Garden of Life. Only those of Rahl's House could enter, a good enough excuse to visit the place. Perhaps it would give her some peace.

With Constance's instructions, Kahlan ducked into a copious hood and took winding passages which were hidden from view. The stone staircases were built against walls and obscured by elaborate balustrades.

She spied tall senators convening at a domed structure that could only be the High House, the meeting hall where they conducted their business. Several of them wore designated white tunics striped in gold and red while others wore dusty cloaks, as though they had only just arrived from their districts.

She continued past them and into private gardens fed by deep wells. The greenery thriving within the Palace walls was a contrast to the dusty, dry landscape outside, blooming with exotic plant-life and attended by the sound of water.

Eventually, she arrived at a series of rooms panelled with dark wood, their walls painted over with
scenes of the D'Haran hunt. It took a few instances of feeling as though she was lost, poking through rooms that looked largely similar, before walking out into an archway that led to the Garden of Life.

It was guarded by stone-faced Alkarians who merely nodded to her as she walked past.

Once inside, she pulled back her hood and breathed deeply.

At any other time, she would have been terrified that the People's Palace prevented her from using her gift. Somehow, knowing that this was the Lord Rahl's domain—albeit a different Rahl from the one she was used to—made her forget the necessities of having her Confessor powers.

She sat down at one of the stone benches, looking up at the glass ceiling. There was no breeze, only the mellow tinkling of water sliding down a fountain.

Someone cleared his throat.

She stood, unsheathing a knife.

A wide-eyed, bearded man stared at her. "Lady Rahl?"

"Richard?"

He bowed formally. "You've always addressed me by my title, never by my name." His vest and pants were slightly worn, jaggedly sewn in places where he must have walked into overgrown underbrush. His boots were scuffed from traveling. Judging from his heavy cloak, he may have travelled through various kinds of weather.

She cocked her head at him askance and he merely peered at her with cheerful, guileless eyes. His weathered face spoke of many days under the sun.

Without warning, her chest flooded with emotions and she sheathed her weapon.

"Oh, Richard," she sighed. "You have no idea how much I've missed you." The words managed to sound true despite weeks of thinking about everything but him.

Instead of the expected reply—a loving salutation, a kiss or an embrace—Richard laughed. "This is rich! I'd love to think that Cara put you up to it but I'm told the Lord Rahl is indisposed. Unless," he put up a finger to keep her from interrupting, "you're the twin Zedd spoke of."

Kahlan hurriedly crammed her emotions back into their hiding places.

He continued, "I hope I didn't startle you."

"Don't worry about me."

He raised a brow. "The last, unforgiving missive I've received from the Lady Rahl implied that I do otherwise, m'lady." His boy-like charm increased as he grinned at her. Kahlan could hardly breathe. He looked so much like the Richard she knew. "What shall I call you?"

"Kahlan."

"Just that?" When she did not respond, Richard shrugged. "The Lady Rahl was always particular with titles. It'll be odd, calling you by your name. But Kahlan it is then."

He cleared his throat, straightened his traveling clothes, and began, "I'm Richard Cypher, a former member of the Senate and a wizard's apprentice. My famous moniker is Truth Seeker but I wouldn't suggest you use
that."

Kahlan knew that this Richard was trying to put her at ease with playful self-deprecation. Instead, she stared at his outstretched hand like she would a wild animal.

She whispered, "And yet, some things never change."

He gave her an odd look. "I suppose we've met in your world."

"Yes."

He nodded and invited her to sit with him. Kahlan felt cautious, rather than comfortable. It was a strange feeling; Richard always elicited a blanket of trust.

"What are you doing here?" Kahlan asked, willing herself to look at him.

Everything about this Richard was achingly familiar but the twinkle in his eye and the near-smirk on his lips lacked their usual innuendo. Something in the way he sat with a hand on the hilt of his sword, his body facing slightly away from her told her that they were less than friends, that they had never shared anything more than words.

He existed in this world without her affections.

Kahlan felt her throat seize with panic. Were her memories of him becoming fantasies, no more real than the vast corridors one roamed in sleep? What of those times when she kissed him behind the privacy of trees? Or beneath the moon's watchful eye while heat pooled in her chest?

She balled her hands into fists, fighting the urge to touch him as she had done so many times before.

"I was summoned by the Lord Rahl from the Wizard's Palace," Richard was saying, "and then told to hasten by the Lady. I've been an apprentice of Zedd's, toiling away in Aydindril with my books. I'm glad to be back, if only to make sure that the royal family is safe. Although my mentor says that you've done a good job so far."

Kahlan laughed bitterly. "I wouldn't have to do this job if it weren't for him."

"Yes, well, Zedd has a reckless streak. Nobody can see beyond the wizard's clothes, his age, his purported wisdom. Not even himself."

Dread filled her. "So you're here to help?"

"Of course," Richard insisted, as though doing otherwise was unthinkable. "I live to serve and I obey Rahl's House. Very few can wrangle the Senate as skilfully as Cara. I'd like to think the Lady asked for me to at least try."

"Fair enough."

Richard seemed doubtful. "Does my presence bother you, my lady? If you wish, I can leave you here and we can speak of things tomorrow."

Oh Richard, Kahlan thought, years as a politician must have sharpened your powers of observation but they've done nothing to your gentler side.

"No." Kahlan smiled at him fondly. "I'm just glad that an old friend has joined me for such an enormous task."
"I trust we have a colourful history," Richard said, "one where you like me more than the Midlander Cara married. It's a good start, if we're going to make this work."

"Make what work?"

Richard smiled widely at her, as though he was divulging a secret. "Why, keep the Senate at bay and the Rahls safe while we wait for the Lord to wake up."

The murmur behind the heavy, brass doors is like the buzzing of bees, a sound which rises to a thunderous hum and occupies the high dome of the Senate Hall. The familiar bell tolls as she hears the clack of metal against marble as noblemen and Senators stand and begin to disassemble.

"Hail the Lord Rahl!" she hears.

It is the Speaker of the Assembly shouting from the terrace which juts from the Senate Hall and overlooks the entire city. The pronouncement is a strong and joyful sound.

The city below her, silent for the past few days as the People's Council and the Senate convene, is suddenly abuzz with activity.

The People's Palace shakes with a multitude of voices. "Hail the Lord Rahl!"

Music, festive and loud, begins to play. The smell of roasted meat reaches her nose.

The decision is made, Cara thinks, suddenly anxious. As she hears footsteps approach, Cara and her Captains stand, ready to bow before their new Lord, to swear allegiance to the High Seat.

When the heavy doors open, she scans the assembly for the familiar, blood-red coat, for the one who holds the Bond.

Richard approaches her first, his bearded face beaming. Before she can ask him whom the Senate has chosen, he stops at a respectable distance. Cara feels a prickle of fear and cold sweat rides down her spine as he regards her with alarming solemnity.

"My Lord Rahl," he greets, looking her straight in the eye. "I live only to serve. My life is yours."

Her eyes widen, filled with understanding and paralysing dread. When he bows before her, she wants to shout her protest, wants to grab his arms and pull him upright. The members of the Senate fall in the same manner behind him like a retreating wave, their numbers dropping to their knees as one by one the districts swear their allegiance to her, Cara Mason, Chosen of the People and the High Seat of D'Hara.

"The people have spoken," Richard whispers amidst the insistent murmurs of allegiance. The humour is gone from his voice and it is Panis' trusted Senator speaking to her, not a friend.

"Richard," she breathes. "I can't."

"My Lord, you can and you will. It is as the people wills."

Cara turns to her Captains. They are on their knees, even the most outspoken of them, even the most defiant. Their heads are bowed, their lips in sync as they recite the devotions.

The voices of the multitude fail to drown out her fear or to fill the sudden hollow in her chest.

Cara, the Lord Rahl, stands tallest and alone.
Richard walks alongside her, garbed in the robes of a Senator. They have just left a Senate meeting, where the topic has soured Cara's mood and she charges into a private chamber, seething with anger.

Politicians are insolent, yes, but Cara recognises the undercurrent of fear in their discussions when she presides over them. She has power over the D'Haran armies in ways that Darken never did. With the largest, most disciplined D'Haran division loyal to her and with the Trimessi equally submissive, the peace is enforced by a dependable military.

It helps that the South, largely represented by Richard Cypher, is more obliging than it ever has been. Dissidents are few and far between.

There is also the matter of Rahl's magic, a potent and anticipatory tool that flows in her veins. It has expanded her senses both through its innate ties with the world around her, but also through the Bond. It is at once intimate and galvanising. A D'Haran can sense her from anywhere in the kingdom. At the same time, she can gauge the people's mood, something that Darken did not fully exploit…to his ruin.

Right now, the pulse of relative contentment along the cords that tie her to her people is constant. It calms Cara's nerves; at least it will for a while.

Richard continues, "They want assurance that this peace isn't temporary."

Cara scoffs. "The Senate and the Midlands' High Council can't possibly know what they want at this time."

"Oh, but they do." The voice drifts from a spot near a window. Kahlan Amnell, swathed in an unadorned, white dress, stares out into the red-gold plains of the Azrith. Her expression is grave. "They want an heir, a symbol of the peace, a sign that it will not skip a generation. They will not risk another war with Aydindril, for themselves or for their children. Treaties can be broken, eventually. Ties of blood, however…"

Richard gestures to her as though she has made his point. "Precisely."

Feeling suddenly outnumbered, Cara's indignation swings to Richard, then Kahlan, then to the wizard at the corner of the room.

"It's possible, you know," Zedd says, trying hard to remain nonchalant. He has tucked his arms into his robes as though preparing for the storm that is obvious in Cara's eyes. "There are ways."

"I know it's possible," Cara snaps. "The question is do we want to?"

She faces Kahlan, the word "we" hanging in the air.

Their's has been a relationship of convenience, a tart back-and-forth between the Midlands camp in the outskirts of the city and Cara's office.

It has been nearly six months since Darken's death and three since Cara's appointment to the High Seat. Cara has become fairly sick of the Senate's disputes to even worry about the overwhelming Midlands presence at her doorstep.

"Solidify the alliance with something tangible," Kahlan says.

Zedd clears his throat. "Or someone."
"No."

"Cara," Richard entreats, approaching her. She steps back. "I said no!"

Kahlan does not turn her head when the Lord Rahl leaves the room. Instead, she runs her fingers through her hair, her gaze still fastened to the landscape outside.

"My army cannot stay here indefinitely," she tells Richard without facing him, "but I will not leave D'Hara without fulfilling the High Council's terms."

Richard sits with a resigned air. "D'Hara has asked too much of her already."

Kahlan shrugs. "That is none of my concern."

"You have taken so much from her already," Richard snipes in return.

Kahlan blinks as though hearing the Senator for the first time. Her voice becomes dangerously low. "I don't want this any more than she does. But I serve the Midlands just as surely as she serves D'Hara." She breathes deeply to centre herself then continues, "A political marriage will ensure the solidity of a treaty between our people. An heir," this time she pauses, the implications of a child lending her posture a hint of fear, "will bind us both to our promises."

Cara stands under a full-grown lemon tree in one of the outer courtyards made empty by her presence. Sometimes she is grateful for the culture of fear the former Rahl insinuated into the Palace as it gives her more privacy than the common aristocrat. It also assures less talking and more doing by those under her.

She is unappreciative of everything else. Darken's legacy continues to nip at her heels even after months of rule. The unprecedented elitism in the Senate, a product of bribery and careful indoctrination, continues to impede progress. The ledger on the bench beside her is a troubling account of how Darken nearly emptied the nation's coffers. In between its pages are obscure lists of Darken's allies, lackeys he sowed into the towns bordering the Midlands, delaying much-needed diplomacy between the Capital and Aydindril.

Already, Cara is too busy suing for peace across D'Hara's political factions. She has yet to come to terms with what has evolved into a wary alliance with the Mother Confessor of the Midlands, whose enormous camp sits at the threshold of the People's Palace. Cara spies Kahlan's progress as she enters the courtyard. The Confessor's eyes flicker to two horses by the pillars, attended by squires. When she sees Cara, she hesitates at the steps before joining her beneath the shade.

The deference most other people afford Cara is completely absent in the Mother Confessor. It amuses Cara more than it offends.

"First, you refuse to talk about the treaty and now I'm told that the Lord Rahl demands my
Cara shrugs, gesturing for the horses to be taken to her. "I take it you're a good enough rider?"

Kahlán raises a brow, riled by Cara's calm. "Of course. I've been riding horses since before I could walk." She grabs the reins from her hand. "If this is a game," she begins threateningly.

"No game, Amnell. Just a leisurely ride to clear both our heads."

Once they mount the horses, Cara leads them outside the city walls and into the bland, hot landscapes of the Azrith. She rides at full speed, dust billowing in her wake and she dares the Mother Confessor to keep up.

Kelton horsemen are without a doubt in the Confessors' employ because Kahlán's unique technique brings them to a stalemate a few miles away.

When they find shade, both are sweaty and covered in dust. Only Cara seems pleased.

"I wouldn't call that a leisurely ride," Kahlán says, slightly out of breath as she pulls the stopper of a jug Cara has passed to her.

She seems discomfited by the confines of her Confessor dress and loosens the clinches around her torso to allow some air in, revealing the top of her breasts.

Cara averts her gaze and ties the horses to a nearby shrub. After watering them, Cara chuckles. "Remind me to add Kelton horses to the exchange when we draw up the treaty."

"Not quite satisfied with your D'Haran breeds?"

Cara shrugs noncommittally. "Adding Kelton purebreds will certainly strengthen the stock."

"I can arrange it."

"You'd be willing to?" Cara asks a bit too quickly, bringing her strong blue gaze to bear on Kahlán.

"Of course. Kelton horses are..." Kahlán halts, watching her companion closely. "I am willing to do what is necessary for my people, Lord Rahl."

Suddenly, they both know that the talk of horses has become a thinly veiled conversation about an earlier dispute. The air around them thickens with something unspoken, possibly volatile.

Kahlán sits on a rock and becomes silent.

Cara sighs. "You do understand what the Senate and your High Council demands of me? Of us?"

"More than you can imagine," Kahlán says, rubbing her hands together as she stares far at the horizon. She imagines that none of the answers they need lie there. "I promised I would never marry a D'Haran pig, not after Nicobarese."

"I could say the same for me when it comes to the Butcher of Halin." Cara gives her a meaningful nod and Kahlán returns it with a pained look. They both know the measure of Kahlán's regret but no one can quantify Cara's grief. "I could have killed you in that hall," Cara continues. "I sometimes regretted that I didn't."

Kahlán shakes her head. "But?"
"But," Cara breathes, "I swore fealty to D'Hara. I belong to her. Killing you would have destroyed my country, the rest of everything I fought so hard to protect. I know, because what you did to Halin was only a taste of what the Midlands was capable of."

Kahlan brings herself to watch the newly appointed Lord Rahl, a woman quite different from the Rahls before her. She has heard of the General whom Panis held in high esteem, anticipated that they would meet in battle. Lately, it's been difficult to associate the persona she has in her head – that of a merciless D'Haran who obliterates all opposition –with this one.

Cara moves beside her and they sit, shoulder to shoulder, their thighs touching.

"Listen," Cara says, her voice low and husked with emotion. "I refuse to bring life into this world if she grows up in a house of hate, dislike, mere civility and nothing else."

"What are you saying, Cara?"

"I will agree to the terms of the treaty but you must give me time."

"Time?" Kahlan says. "I've already told you, I owe you so much more. If time is all you need…"

"Time, and so much more, Kahlan Amnell." Cara's gaze travels across Kahlan's face, drinks in the blueness of her eyes, the gentle curve of her jaw. It eventually settles on the sand beneath their boots.

She is gathering her strength, drawing it from all the hidden places she has never dared open, from reserves she has hedged after her family's death.

Already, Cara asks for Leo's forgiveness.

She continues, "Halin cannot be repeated. I will love you." The words are liquid ice on her tongue, numbing her throat and making her eyes water. She chokes them out from a chest fragile with heartache. "I will learn to love you before I bring a child into this world." When Cara brings her face up, her cheeks are wet with tears. "So give me time because by the Creator, I thought my husband and sons were all I had, and that they were all I would ever lose." She looks at Kahlan, her eyes pleading. "But what must I do if more is the price for peace?"

Her breath rattles with the force of her sentiments. The air in her lungs is not enough and she clutches her chest, as though to rub away the frigid rime creeping into long-empty crevices. This is all very hard to believe, she thinks. Emotion hardly plays a part in matters of state or even in soldiering, but here it is in this featureless place while she allows Kahlan Amnell to see a part of her soul shatter into little pieces.

For Kahlan, understanding dawns quickly. This is not what Cara wanted Zedd or Richard to see; these are the difficult and intimate beginnings of an alliance that must be initiated by its most important players.

It will leave them both vulnerable, open to recriminations.

Kahlan cannot help but feel a small amount of awe; Cara is the first to take the plunge, doffing the mantle of her past to offer a clean slate, regardless of how it breaks her now. The Lion-heart has been broken once before –it is obvious in the set of her shoulders, the sadness that haunts her eyes; if the treaty is to work, Kahlan cannot let it happen again.

Kahlan puts a hand on her shoulder and tells her softly, "You are brave, I must give you that, braver than anyone I've met. I will give you what I can and in instances where it is needed, even
things that I cannot."

The encroaching frost halts and suddenly, Cara's hand covers her own. Incredibly, undeniably, warmth seeps into them from that point of contact. The sensation is very much like a balm, loosening the cages of rigid preconceptions and ideals. The layer of deceit which permeates between enemies falls away from them both.

Gently, Cara brings Kahlan's hand to her lips. It is lightest of touches, a hint of moisture that dissipates in the harsh, D'Haran heat. There is gratitude there, and the first stirrings of real strength.

They recognise it for what it is: a promise of things to come, of a future that does not seem as grim as it once was.

TBC
Richard enters the room that Cara has consigned as off-limits to anyone but those she invites inside. It has been sparsely furnished with a large oak table, a comfortable chair and nowhere for Richard to sit—enough of a sign that the Lord does not entertain visitors in this room. The medallion of the Lion-heart is the only furnishing on the walls, glistening in its casing and a constant reminder of a catalyst that has brought about such tremendous change.

To her right, a sizeable window offers a view of the entire city, giving the room ample light. Stray breezes play with the Lord's long, golden hair as she hunches over a special piece of parchment. She is a coiled rope of restraint while she lays the words within to memory. Her frown deepens at every line.

"You'll have to talk to her soon enough, my Lord," Richard tells her. "It's been months since either of you have discussed this agreement."

When Cara does not answer, Richard continues, "The Senate has arranged a day to honour your and the Mother Confessor's union." He flinches when Cara stops reading, her blue eyes gleaming dangerously beneath her brows.

"How convenient of all of you, especially since there haven't been overtures from the Midlands camp. You only thought to tell me this now?"

"My Lord, the Mother Confessor insisted on giving you time." Astonishment flickers behind Cara's eyes, as though acknowledging that a difficult promise has been kept. "But I am first and foremost your friend, not her lackey. Your silence cannot continue and offending someone at this junction is just," Richard sighs, bracing himself, "unacceptable."

A small, sardonic smile tugs at Cara's lips. "Honest words, Cypher."

"You won't have any more of it come next year."

The frown returns and Cara sits back. "So you're finally leaving?"

"Not before the union," Richard reassures.

"If this is some plot by Aydindril to throw me off balance…"

Richard laughs. "Oh, Cara. I can only be of more use to you when I've studied under Zedd's tutelage. I can hardly call this a ploy by Aydindril to steal one of your most trusted advisers."

The statement stews for several minutes before Cara sighs in defeat. She pushes the treaty aside, eyeing it with derision.
"Oh, Creator, spare us," Cara draws out, sounding sarcastic, "years of study at the Wizard's Keep for a Senator of the High House. How terribly exciting."

"The peace will last," Richard reassures. "You will have eyes and ears in Aydindril, at least."

He adds in a quiet voice, "You don't need to worry about the South. To the people, you'll forever be a Southerner in their eyes. Your alliance with the Mother Confessor saved thousands of them from imminent death."

Cara's gaze hardens. "That may be the case, Richard, but when you leave, my political ties to the South will weaken, inevitably. If I ask you to come, you will come, do you understand?"

Richard brings his hand to his heart and tells her fervently, "I live to serve, Lord Rahl."

Cara nods, her lips breaking into a tiny smile. "Make it so, Cypher, or by the Creator I'll have you dragged here by the scruff of your neck." Sighing, she gestures to the door. "Now I suspect you have Jory waiting outside. Send him in."

Richard shakes his head. Very little misses the Lord's attention if at all and being unpredictable has never been Richard's strong suite. Bowing, he opens the door and summons the captain of the Midlands army into the room.

As he sweeps in, Jory acknowledges, "Lord Rahl."

Cara nods and motions him to wait as she composes a formal missive requesting the presence of the Mother Confessor.

When she finishes, Jory take the letter with him to the Midlands camp, the note sealed with the Lion-heart's emblem. When he returns, he carries a simple reply: that the Mother Confessor will arrive within the day.

Sinister emotions of suspicion and doubt have plagued Cara since the Garden of Life, suppressing the need to send well-meaning envoys to Kahlan's camp while Cara prefers to arbitrate D'Hara's affairs.

It has taken considerable will to acknowledge that Cara cannot let this hesitance continue, that she needs to bridge the events at the Garden of Life to the realities of the present. The Mother Confessor has been tremendously tolerant of D'Hara's discourtesy and sooner rather than later, Kahlan's patience will wear thin.

So before Richard can cajole her anymore and not daring to wait until Kahlan storms the Palace demanding blood or an explanation, Cara chooses a courtyard near the inner sanctums of the People's Palace, guarded from the prying eyes of D'Hara's elite. The space—airy from breezes cooled by the surrounding stone halls—provides a rare sanctuary from the duties and responsibilities expected of a nation's leaders. Under Cara's orders it has been emptied of people.

As she and the Mother Confessor walk side by side, Cara repeats it to herself—that a leader who commands a nation as powerful as the Midlands can be supremely useful as an ally, more so when the partnership is reinforced by a high degree of awareness. It will spare many lives and ensure the survival of many more.

She fights a primal need to ignore or lambast the Butcher of Halin and instead, lifts a scroll, sealed with the Senate's emblem. The parchment is thick and heavy with repercussions, encoded with decisions and compromises that will shape the future of D'Hara and the Midlands. Cara observes
the minute shift of Kahlan's mood from pensive to cautious as she eyes the parchment in Cara's hand.

"I don't want this to be about guilt," Cara says, "or anger."

Kahlan turns her attention to carefully sown roses, perhaps hoping to ignore the pressing concerns embodied by the text in Cara's hand. "You must know, Cara, that I'm still angry."

Cara blinks, surprised at the admission. And here she thought she was the only one delaying the inevitable.

"I am, too," Cara says carefully. "But this can't drag on forever. We're being watched and those who'd see the Midlands and D'Hara thrive together have grown impatient. Their impatience can lead to mistakes."

"Those are the same old men and women who turned a blind eye to Nicobarese," Kahlan picks out a bud from a nearby flowerbed, studying it intently before crushing it in her hand. Petals fall to the garden floor. "There are times I want to stay angry."

Cara's expression turns wooden. "If I let anger have its way, I would have my fill of revenge, fill my cup to brimming and drink until nothing remains." Her jaw moves as an old and excruciating rage boils to the surface. "And then, when it's all over, I'll ask myself if it was worth it and the likely answer would be 'yes'." Cara's hands turn to fists and she turns away from Kahlan, glaring at the sky. "The Creator forgive me for my thoughts."

"Then why all this pretence at civility, Lord Rahl?" Kahlan admonishes. "Why do any of this at all?"

"We both know what happens when something or someone is taken from us. Halin and the death of the High Seat were small approximations of the consequences."

Silence settles between them. They have more and more of it of late, a stillness that readily occupies the spaces they roam, undulating with emotions that they are wary to express to anyone besides each other. It is a strange bond, Cara thinks, and not entirely unpleasant. It also bothers her more than she cares to admit. They are always at a crossroads, faced with a choice to abdicate or seize control, a delicate dance on a tight-rope that can sever at any sign of strain.

Cara abhors this dance. She concedes because duty is a weight that far outbalances self-preservation, and rage cannot be the solitary voice in a delicate relationship such as theirs. Looking at the woman who was once her adversary—and still is in some ways—she knows that their obligation to their people is the common ground upon which they stand; the reins on the terrible monsters they hold at bay.

Kahlan says, "I haven't forgotten what you said at the Garden of Life. Brave words."

"Brave words are only that, words. They are nothing without action." Cara straightens her vest, suddenly hating its colour. The red looks too much like blood. "And anyway, what has bravery done except kill the young?"

"Don't think that. At this junction, I would say that bravery can be a measure of a woman's worth and you have proven yourself more than worthy." Kahlan dips her head as though instructing Cara to acknowledge her thoughts.

Involuntarily, Cara's eyes freeze into an arresting shade of dark blue, mistrust and fear crawling over her irises. Inside, she feels suddenly confined, more like a prisoner than the mistress of a
fortress she has built as her defence.

Even as Cara braces herself, Kahlan reaches out to her and places a hand on her arm. Her touch bursts with heat and Cara stares at it, horrified. It is as foreign and unwelcome as the warmth already creeping into her chest.

Kahlan grates, "I'm still so bloody angry. I have no idea how to handle it." She grasps firmly, a Confessor's grip that harbours life or death. Cara is suddenly grateful for the Palace's unique set of enchantments. "I've been taught to hold onto my anger, my rage, to use it and to never allow it to use me. I think I've failed miserably in that regard. You, on the other hand, are a study of anger in motion. You wield it like a sword."

"Spirits," Kahlan whispers, a landscape of confusion chiselled carelessly on her face. "I sometimes wonder what I've done to deserve an adversary like you but then I remember, and I'm overcome by rage—an all-encompassing rage that threatens to seep into everything." Cara watches as the Mother Confessor loses some of her vigour, reaching out for a bench that she slowly lowers herself onto. "But that's when I realise with so much dread that I'm mostly outraged by what I've become. And once that sinks in? I'm met with this deafening, agonising silence."

Cara is all too afraid to ask but she does, anyway, "What are you saying, Mother Confessor?"

"Must I really spell it out for you, Cara?"

Indeed, must she? They both know that the subject of Halin—of sins committed on both sides—is a bog neither of them is willing to navigate.

Cara frowns, searching for the proper words to say and finding none, settles for honesty, "I can't offer you redemption any more than I can ever find it in this world. I have far too many demons hounding me, day and night."

"I'm not asking for redemption." Kahlan shakes her head, as though warding away her thoughts. "Creator, what am I asking for? Something, anything? Some form of absolution so I can move?" She drops her hand, pulling her arms around herself.

Cara lets go of a breath she does not know she is holding. They are far too much alike. It frightens her that they are haunted by similar ghosts, and that she has an inkling of the answers to Kahlan's questions.

Cara goes to bed with them every night, only to enter the world where the dead warn the living. Her husband waits for her there, standing on the blurry shore of an ancient river, which is beleaguered on the other side by the wails of the departed.

When she approaches, Leo draws his sword, warning her with a hiss. He decapitates the boatman before she can pay the fee, before she can board his ferry. Always, he stares at her with certainty in his eyes, urging her to turn back, urging her to wake up.

She almost hates him when she does. Every day since Halin, she sucks in a breath of early morning air, shocked to wakefulness as she watches a hesitant dawn peels away the night sky.

His words remain clear. She only repeats them now, "None of it will matter, Mother Confessor if you can't forgive yourself."

There it is: the residual wrenching of Cara's gut. Perhaps it is too soon, she thinks. She feels like a fish forced out of the water, the cold hands of a faceless fisherman reaching into her gills to jerk
her appendages out, his cold knife slicing into her belly while her organs surge out.

Her head jerks down as she feels the cold prickle of liquid on her hands. She touches her face and finds it wet with tears.

She chuckles. "I, ah," she nearly apologises before Kahlan moves forward, the unsettling scent of spring in her wake.

Kahlan kisses both cheeks and Cara lets her, limp and altogether exhausted. Her cheek lingers against Cara—not at all forced—as she whispers, "I'm truly sorry."

"For what?" Cara asks, already stiffening.


The Confessor's hair drifts across Cara's face; they are long and dark tresses, subtly fragrant like the vast vineyards of Halin when they are in bloom. Cara closes her eyes and like a blind woman, she feels rather than sees Kahlan's distress, Cara's suddenly curious fingers tracing an unfamiliar route across Kahlan's face.

Her heart aches as it swells in a way it hasn't since the last, summer days when children's laughter drifted from the shallows and a man's soft lips dipped against hers, telling her he loved her.

It is death or this, Cara thinks. The other side of the river or this.

This terrifies her. Because Kahlan is beautiful. Because everything that draws Cara to her—her strength, her femininity, even the very nature that brought death to Halin's door—loafs through the fibres of Kahlan's being like silk waiting to be touched. Kahlan offers a foreign, irresistible texture that weaves easily with her own and Cara knows that when clothed in it, the river will be lost to her, the ghosts consigned to a kingdom beneath its waves.

Cara's hands shake with the magnitude of her thoughts.

"I don't think I have the strength to ever, truly forget," she says, her voice cracking.

She feels Kahlan nod. "Nobody has the right to ask you to."

Oh, Leo! Oh, Aginor! Oh, Leib! Cara cries out. She hears no reply, only a distant echo of the waves lapping at a river shore, and the more immediate sound of Kahlan's breathing.

It will be this then, she thinks as she presses her lips to Kahlan's cheek, because only this can help her silence the insurmountable guilt of having failed everyone she has ever loved, for a life that would finally, finally give their death and her sorrow meaning.

They meet beneath the arch that separates the inner sanctums of the People's Palace from the outer courtyards. Cara senses more than sees the throng of people waiting for them beyond the gates, Constance eyeing her surreptitiously as the Alkarian waits for her signal to proceed.

Cara nods appreciatively at Kahlan, who emerges from the spacious garden in her Confessor dress, flanked by Jory Renfeld and a sizeable contingent of her own guards. The escort is an iteration of who she is—that she is the Mother Confessor and answers to no one, as well as the tremendous influence she exerts over Cara's legitimacy.

Constance looks on disapprovingly.
"I would have brought more," Kahlan points out.

Jory Renfeld smirks. Cara notices that over the past few months, the captain has aged into his armour, the Midlands bronze looking more like an extension of him than just protection. Months in the desert –of scuttling to and from the People's Palace to meet with Richard or Berdine, or to simply be at Kahlan's side –have given him a deep tan, and the crinkles on his face are more pronounced, perhaps notched there by hot and constant winds. The thin stubble of a days-old beard covers his smiling mouth.

He hovers over the Mother Confessor with a hand on the hilt of his sword, shadowing her movements as she raises her hand for Cara to take.

For her part, Constance lingers longer than necessary beside her Lord, which is no surprise. Very few Alkarians have warmed to the Midlands presence.

"I have no doubt you would've sent over an entire regiment," Cara replies, amused by the subtle movements of their cohorts. In greeting, she kisses Kahlan's hand and Kahlan mirrors the gesture. "But we're here to insinuate that D'Harans and Midlanders can live in relative peace."

Kahlan's smile is tight-lipped yet honest, lending her even more grace as she stands confidently in her Confessor whites. The dress displays rather than hides her lithe form, lined at the hem and waist with intricate yet near-invisible embroidery. Its elegant lines give her buoyancy that one would never associate with the Mother Confessor's office.

Cara finds herself a bit breathless and more than a little aware of just how well the white dress fits as Kahlan reaches forward to straighten Cara's jacket. It's a delicate enough sign of something more than civility between them.

"Rahls have always used this colour, the colour of blood," Kahlan comments, running her hands along the golden piping and unique burgundy which denote Rahl's House.

Cara shrugs. "I think it speaks to the Senate and to my subordinates."

Kahlan pats Cara's upper arm before finally stepping away. She says noncommittally, "It suits you."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Cara gestures to two horses offered by her squires. "Shall we?"

Her stallion is a deep and midnight black, with the darkest eyes that blend into its mane. The other's coat is a flawless white. Both are numbingly beautiful as they arch their necks to sniff the outstretched hands of their masters. They are of strong, Kelton stock, given to the High Seat as gifts from the Midlands High Council.

Once mounted, they ride through the lifted gates and into a wide patio lined with soldiers in dress uniform. The crowd surges beyond them.

Cara has been to many ceremonies before, not least of which is the rite that confers the Lion-heart. This, however, pales in comparison to any she has attended. The noise is an approaching wave that rushes forward in a low rumble and quickly overarches into a dome of sound, leaching into the stone beneath her feet and capturing the air around her.

The earth seems to move with their clamour.

"Hail the Lord Rahl! Hail the Red Lion!" The sound reverberates against Cara's skin and the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.
She can hardly hear her own thoughts. The Bond shudders with the weight of thousands and it takes an act of will to gather a semblance of self.

She glances sideways at Kahlan, who seems relaxed as she smiles and lifts a hand to wave at Cara's people. D'Harans roar their approval. The sides of Cara's lips come up in a self-deprecating smile. Compared to the Mother Confessor, Cara is ill-equipped for such attention. Her audience has always been the young, the injured, and the battle-weary.

Richard appears beside her, offering an encouraging nod of his head.

"The adulation of the crowds," Richard teases. "Not quite what you expected?"

Cara shakes her head, her breathing shallow as blood drains from her face. "No."

She glances over at Kahlan, who has somehow woven her spell, skilfully garnering the crowd's attention to herself as Cara struggles with the irrepressible weight of the Bond.

It takes several minutes before Cara has enough control of her limbs. Kahlan inquires silently with her gaze and after several, fortifying breaths Cara finally takes Kahlan's hand. Lifting their joined fingers, she presents the Mother Confessor to the people of D'Hara.

Surprisingly, when Cara smiles for her audience, the upturn of her lips reflects an unexpected sliver of pleasure. She barely has time to examine her thoughts or wonder at the near imperceptible tightening of Kahlan's grasp.

All around them, the people's acknowledgment of their future queen is deafening.

The thoroughfare narrows into a cobblestone street lined with festive colours. Many houses have decorated their facades with unfurled banners depicting a golden lion amidst a red background, the Alkarian Division's emblem which was appropriated to the rebel cause and now belongs to the High Seat.

There are fewer people lining the path of the parade and though there is a thin barrier of guards, children weave in and out of the cavalcade, throwing white hirion petals into their path. Like rain, the shower persists and settles on everything: her red jacket, her hair and some have snuck beneath her clothing.

Cara shifts in her saddle, mildly annoyed that her stallion has more patience and composure than she as it plods along as though nothing is amiss. Her own cheeks have begun to ache, an accommodating smile plastered on for everyone's benefit. Beside her, the Mother Confessor does not seem the least bit tired, revelling in the attention and drawing her energy from the crowd.

In boredom, Cara's gaze finally drifts up to the rooftops, the parade falling away from her attention. She squints as her eyes drift from one tidy gable to another, cleared by her constituents of drying laundry and other knick knacks for this particular event.

She checks the position of the sun, feeling the intensifying heat as it nears noon, and instead of an unhindered flare of light, its glare is ruined by the silhouette of a hooded figure. She peers for a closer look, noticing the long object jutting from its hands.

The person is not a spectator looking for a better view.

"A bowman!" she screams.
The assassin releases an arrow in Cara's direction before reaching for his quiver.

Frantically, Cara draws Rahl's magic from deep yet sluggish reserves, throwing a panicked wall of air that only disturbs the bowman's perch and not his aim.

Cara feels a shaft whizz past her. Her attention whips sideways, catching Kahlan's gaze as they stare at each other in bewilderment. Realisation follows shortly after as their gazes fall to Kahlan's left shoulder, a bolt buried past her dress and into flesh and bone.

The crowd is in sudden disarray. Cara fights to drown out their panic, a nest of bees that have taken residence in her head.

Without thinking, Cara shoves her horse against Kahlan's, her right arm finding Kahlan's waist as she hauls the other woman from her saddle and into her own. She presents the assassin with her back, protecting Kahlan from the assassin's line of sight.

Cara shouts to Constance, "A wall! Form a wall!"

She feels Kahlan sag against her and tendrils of helplessness begin to cloud her thinking. Her heart inexplicably clenches as she imagines the worst. "Kahlan, stay awake for me. Please."

"I'm trying," Kahlan rasps. "I don't know if I can."

"Try. Until I get you a wizard," then, more angrily, "I'll make whoever is responsible for this pay."

The Alkarians move to surround their Lord while Constance pilfers a bow and arrow from a nearby foot soldier. Her quick draw and release, done in the space of a heartbeat, disturbs the bowman's aim.

The second bolt grazes Cara's arm. Warm blood stains the back of Kahlan's dress and dribbles down to Cara's thighs.

Letting instinct take over, Cara opens her hand in the bowman's direction, feeling the power she has kept at the threshold of release surge outward like water freed from a dam.

The roof on which the assassin stands bursts in a cloud of brick and clay, and the figure gives a shout. He tumbles down unto an overhang, sliding to the street and into a cluster of crates.

"Constance!" Cara calls, eyeing the empty fruit stall where the assassin has fallen.

Flanked by five other Alkarians, Constance throws down her bow, dismounts, draws her sword and approaches the unmoving figure in the hood.

"Bring him to the Palace," Cara orders. She faces Richard, who seems unhinged by the entire event. "Cypher, with me." Richard nods.

Behind him, Jory is muscling his way through her wall of mounted Alkarians. She calls after him, "Renfeld!" before he resorts to threatening. He looks to her, worry and anger plain on his face. She summons him forward and the Alkarians part to let him through.

Cara cradles the Mother Confessor's head, turning it to her to see if she is still conscious. Pushing back a curtain of dark hair, she finds the Mother Confessor smiling weakly, blood crawling from the side of her lips.

Kahlan chokes out, "Get me to a healer. I think my lung's collapsed."
Cara's voice is ripe with emotion, awash with the encroaching low from adrenaline leaving her system. "Of course."

Holding Kahlan more securely to herself, Cara urges her horse into a gallop up the cobblestone street, past the merchant's district, and into the People's Palace with Richard and Jory at her heels.

The moment Cara Rahl bursts into the guard tower's mess, everyone is on their feet, watching as their Lord carries a nearly unconscious Kahlan across the wide hall.

Zeddicus Zu'l Zolander sits at the other end in his personal nook, eating a roast chicken with half of it in his fist. He pauses mid-chew as the Lord Rahl makes her way resolutely towards him. Quickly, he stuffs the remaining food down his gullet by drinking from a nearby goblet of wine.

Jory and Richard rush slightly ahead of Cara, clearing the expansive, communal table of food and crockery with sweeping movements of their arms. Jory tilts his head apologetically as Zedd's dinner clatters to the floor before he joins Richard in telling everyone else to clear the mess hall, herding the Palace guards out.

Cara deposits her burden in front of Zedd. Even as fear seems to emanate from every pore, she is exceedingly gentle when she lays Kahlan's head on the table.

"Tell me what I have to do," she demands, her eyes alight.

Zedd signals to Jory, "Towels, warm water and some soap, Captain."

Once presented with these things, he washes his hands and forearms, drying them on a clean towel, before standing to bend over the Mother Confessor. Frowning in concentration, he breaks the arrow from its feathered edge, lifts Kahlan's shoulder and gently extricates the bolt as he weaves a spell that stabilises everything the arrow pierced into.

"Who did this to her?" he asks calmly, his palms over the Confessor's wound as he pushes magic into the opening, the spell mending blood vessels and muscles in its wake.

"I don't know yet." Cara swallows, seemingly torn between staying and something else. "But I'm sure of one thing. The bolt wasn't for me."

"I trust the assassin's alive?" When Cara does not reply, he says, "Go. You'll be of more use finding out who's behind this." She meets his gaze and something vicious scuttles over her irises. Zedd's eyes drop back to Kahlan. "Do what you have to," he says more quietly.

Instructing Jory to stay with the Mother Confessor, she leaves with Richard, her long strides leading her to the prisoner who is unfortunate enough to stay alive.

Something pulls her from a bizarre, aimless sea and sets her atop a mattress, in a room lit by an expansive hearth.

Kahlan tries to breathe deeply, coughing as the pain in her chest hits her like a carriage on full speed. Opening her eyes, she sees a blurred, blood-red figure emerging from the door to hurry to her side.

Kahlan to smiles despite herself as she bears witness to a Cara not many have seen. Her blonde hair rolls down her shoulders in unkempt waves, her fingers run through them as though helping to placate her thoughts. Her confident stance, usually stolid for the benefit of the Senate, is tainted
"Spirits, you look like you’ve been to a slaughterhouse," Kahlan says. She surveys the alarming amount of blood on Cara's clothing, searching her for wounds. All Cara has is a cut on her arm.

Cara glances down at her jacket and the trousers that are stained beyond repair. "Uh, yes," she says dumbly. She would have turned into a charming shade of pink, if she was not so thoroughly smeared with filth. "I didn't have time to clean up. Zedd told me you would be conscious anytime soon and I," her expression strains while she wrestles with the urge to admit nothing, "wanted to be here when you woke up."

Kahlan softens despite herself. "You couldn't have bathed in blood from a mere shoulder wound, Lord Rahl."

This time, Cara clears her throat and gives her a perfunctory shrug, her eyes turning into a dull haze of blue as she shunts a portion of her memory. Kahlan looks behind her. Constance fidgets under her gaze. The amount of blood makes sense all too quickly.

Trying to sound nonchalant, she asks, "So have you found out anything from your prisoner?"

Cara studies her intently. Finding the kind of detached curiosity one relegates to an event neither can change, she concedes, "Nothing I don't already suspect. The assassin doesn't know his employer, which is unfortunate, but judging from the state of things, many from the aristocracy are dissatisfied."

"You speak for the people, you fight for them," Kahlan says. "Resistance can only to be expected. I'm surprised you don't already have another coup on your hands."

"That would be highly unlikely considering the military power I wield." When Kahlan's expectations for more answers hang in the air, Cara clarifies, "They were after you."

"Well, now, wouldn't that be convenient for everyone."

"Everyone but my people and me." Cara resumes the agitated act of moving her fingers through her hair. "There will be more attempts on your life the longer we wait for this alliance to come to fruition."

Kahlan reaches for her hand. Cara allows the touch. "You're saying the union must be consummated soon."

Cara's voice is hoarse. "Yes."

"But you aren't ready."

"When will I ever be? And why should D'Hara care?" A wide brush smears pain across Cara's face.

Kahlan squeezes her hand then tells her gently, "The Midlands will wait. Our Council defers to my decisions, as they should."

"But they cannot wait forever."

Kahlan's sadness colours her words. "No, not forever."

Jory Renfeld does not protest when Kahlan begins to take all her meals at the People's Palace, nor
does he judge her every time he and his men are ordered to leave Kahlan alone with the Lord Rahl. The only indication of his concern surfaces one morning, as he accompanies her on one of several routine checks through the Midlands camp.

"What of the supply trains?" Kahlan asks.

She is reading a scroll as they ride through an alley of tents, balancing the piece of parchment atop her cast. It's been a few weeks since the incident and the Mother Confessor moves with less pain, but the bone that the arrow struck is taking time to heal.

Jory responds, "We're sourcing grain from Acrimar, my lady, and meat from the North."

Kahlan raises a brow, watching him carefully. "$\text{You mean to say that Aydindril isn't sending supplies anymore? Why haven't I heard from Dennee?}"

"Aydindril still is, my lady but since a week ago, I've altered the list of suppliers in order to undercut the costs of importing from the Midlands. The Lord Rahl," Jory clears his throat, wondering how to put any of this plainly, "$\text{she made a convincing case of it and I thought it was wise. Our men and women can use fresh vegetables and meat.}"  

"She didn't threaten you, did she?"

"Ah," Jory tries to look back and wonders if he has been bullied into acquiescing without his knowledge. "$\text{I think not, my lady.}"

"Think again."

Jory notices the tiny smile on the Mother Confessor's lips and thinks that he has missed something. He says, "$\text{I can revert to our former suppliers if it pleases you.}"

"No, Jory, that won't be needed. The Lord Rahl's getting used to the new coat she's worn, imposing her will and letting us all know the consequences of a treaty –good or otherwise –with her people."

Jory nods. Judging from Kahlan's expression, the notion does not seem unpleasant.

"She has gall," Kahlan discloses.

"I hear Alkarians are the worst of the bunch. By my measure, Cara Rahl is quite tame."

"Yes, well, I've heard you've gone head-to-head with Denna at times," Kahlan gives him a sympathetic nod, "$\text{no doubt the stereotypical Alkarian Captain with enough arrogance to swallow the world.}"  

Jory laughs. "$\text{She detests that we stand strong at the gates of the People's Palace.}"

"They all do."

"Except for the Lord Rahl," Jory surmises.

"Except for her," Kahlan agrees a bit reluctantly. "$\text{Oddly enough.}"

"I don't think it's odd at all. She's merely capitalising on the advantage she has. If anything, it was very wise of her to leverage your presence while the army stays outside the Palace walls. It's frightened her Senate into submission. No doubt the political marriage—"  

"So I see you've had time to think of that particular aspect of the treaty," Kahlan sighs.
Jory purses his lips. Ever since his connivance with Berdine and Senator Cypher to align the Midlands with the Red Lion of Halin, he has been given considerable leeway to speak his mind. He has begun to wonder when the Mother Confessor would grow sick of his honesty.

He continues, suddenly cautious, "It seems like the logical conclusion to all this. I doubt the Senate or our High Council would allow you to leave without some sort of clout."

"Indeed." There is no reprimand, only a tired intake of breath. "Remind me again to put more of the Academy's graduates in my employ." Kahlan rolls up the scroll and passes it to him. "Good work on our supply lines. It'll certainly relieve the burden on Aydindril's treasury. At least Tamarang won't complain as much about 'stupendously high taxes'." She chuckles. "Then again, they always complain."

Jory shares her sentiment with a smile. "For our part, Mother Confessor, it is an honour to serve."

"Thank you, Jory."

Kahlan closes the door behind her, leaning on the doorway as she says, "That was generous of you."

The only indication that Cara has heard is a slight pause in her writing but she does not look up from her paperwork. She is surrounded by books, parchment and three ink wells, her hands stained to the knuckles. Kahlan finds the evidence of her toil strangely appealing.

"I don't want to owe D'Hara any more favours than I can afford to pay back," Kahlan continues.

"Think of it as a gift," Cara says, "from the Lord Rahl to her wife."

Kahlan lifts a brow, a hand on her hip as she leans against the doorway. "Indeed? And what gifts do you expect in return?"

This time, Cara lifts her head. "Must I always expect something in return?"

"Of course," Kahlan pushes off the doorframe with her arm and stands opposite the Lord Rahl, "because this is a political arrangement."

"I'd hate to have disgruntled Midlanders at my doorstep," Cara explains. "And they will be our army soon enough. I'm sure D'Hara can afford to feed its allies for a few more months before your men depart."

"A few more months?" Kahlan says. "Cara, I doubt you've forgotten that other clause stating…"

"The need for an heir, yes. How can I forget when it's all Richard ever talks about? A powerful spell only Zedd knows how to weave? Frankly, I find everyone's fascination with it childish."

The Mother Confessor leans over the pile of loose-leafed military reports, financial statements and other sensitive state documents, swiftly ending Cara's ability to work. Cara would never have admitted that the distraction is a welcome turn of events, much like the meals they take together. They are becoming more familiar with each other's habits: Kahlan's propensity for invading personal spaces and Cara's reluctance to enter or share in anyone else's. Right now, Cara is sure that Kahlan is testing the malleability of their new-found respect.

Instead of flinching as she has those first months, the Lord Rahl gives Kahlan a pinched smile and
breathes deeply, gathering her words in reluctant clumps.

"I apologise. I shouldn't speak of your wizard that way." Cara does not sound the least bit contrite. She never does.

"You really shouldn't," Kahlan admonishes. "He's head of the committee drawing up policies you requested in order to regulate magic in your country."

The reproach serves to amuse Cara, who dares a mocking smile for the first time in a day of taxing bureaucracy. "What are you really here for, Kahlan?"

For a moment, Cara sees uncertainty in Kahlan's eyes. They flicker to the nearby window, before her expression solidifies with intent. Kahlan quickly ascertains that she has thrown herself into the path of an avalanche.

The Mother Confessor smiles in a strange manner, curiosity overwhelming her coyness. "For this."

Cara's eyes widen as Kahlan pulls her forward with enough force to unseat her. Papers spill to the floor and an inkwell topples over, sullying a part of her coat. Fingers thread into her hair, and before she can protest, Kahlan's lips are on hers, shockingly soft and gratifyingly warm, like a balm for the harried state of her emotions.

Cara barely knows how to respond, a part of her demanding that she protest. The insistent press of Kahlan's body and the dominating sensation of her hand curling against Cara's neck force her to sample the sensations. She closes her eyes as she drowns in something that harkens back to attachments that are achingly old, but which quickly become sweet and ripe with novelty.

It is Kahlan who finally breaks away, swallowing intently. Her blue eyes crowd with confusion and a sudden, hard realisation.

"Well?" Cara croaks, trying to anchor herself with her own voice while disbelief remains plain on her face. "Did you find what you seek?"

"I don't know," Kahlan tells her, breathless. "Perhaps I've found more than what I've bargained for."

"Right." Cara smirks, falling back into the comfort of sarcasm. "There's a whole song and dance involved in purchasing a horse; I think I understand what you're trying to do."

"It's not quite as crude as that," Kahlan chides.

"Of course it isn't," Cara tells her. She dares to squeeze Kahlan's good arm and the woman does not pull away. "Shall I expect more of this? I hate to be surprised."

Kahlan's shoots her an indignant look. "Don't you dare think, for a second, that just because I've kissed you, that I'm inspecting you like the next addition to my figurative stable…"

"Not that I mind."

"What?" Kahlan hisses, incredulous.

"I don't mind," Cara repeats, too entertained to take any of this seriously and enjoying Kahlan's flustered attempts at remaining calm. "Come and go as you please. Kiss me as you please. Bed me if you have to. We are spending the rest of our lives together. You can at least ride me over the hill and back," Cara pockets the memory of the Mother Confessor's scandalised expression, "so to
"speak."

Cara leans forward to tuck a loose strand of hair behind Kahlan's ear. "Two can play this game." Her expression hardens. "And I do hate surprises."

"This is not a game I'm playing, Cara Rahl," Kahlan says.

"Good. I'd hate for you to lose."

Kahlan is almost contemplative as though Creator forbid she is stepping aside to allow Cara to pave a path alongside hers. Something crumbles behind her expression and Kahlan, who usually has something appropriate to say in any situation, has found herself at a loss for words.

When they do come, her sentences are stilted with the effort to remain calm. "I came here for a simple thank you, not games. You've said it yourself. If we're to make this work, I won't allow our child to grow in a house built on such ill-mannered frivolity."

Suddenly aware of the spilled ink and the documents spread on the floor, Cara's gaze turns inward, inspecting the heavy walls she has so easily erected despite herself. She hadn't even noticed they were there.

Cara looks up, meeting Kahlan's gaze. "I'm... sorry. That didn't quite play out the way it should have. It must have taken courage to put yourself out there and I admit I was hesitant to do the same." Lowering her head, Cara touches her lips as though holding on to a sensation. Barely audible, she murmurs, "I won't lose you, Kahlan Amnell. I refuse to lose anyone else, not you, not my friends, and certainly no more of my countrymen."

"You won't," Kahlan assures her. Really, there is nothing else she can do.

Neither of them can help it, Kahlan thinks. Fear in all its forms has stunted their progress; they have used prejudice as an excuse and ended up circling each other like wolves.

Today is different. Cara traces the edges of the oak table, moving around it to stand next to her. She comes to Kahlan, her blue eyes clear and searching.

Needing nothing more than the shy dip of Kahlan's head –an imperceptible form of permission – Cara presses her lips against hers and pours sincerity into the act. It is neither desperate nor forced, and Cara tilts into the kiss so naturally, so unobtrusively that Kahlan wonders at the many shades Cara has shown her in such a short time.

Cara folds into her, strong arms holding her upright as her touch skims across Kahlan's back like a warm, decadent wave. She is careful to avoid her left arm, her hands tracing the curve of her hips before staying there, gripping with a nuanced possessiveness that takes Kahlan's breath away.

Nobody told her it would be like this. Not with a D'Haran Lord who is also a Rahl.

So when Cara stops exploring her lips and instead, finds it necessary to trace her jaw with her mouth, Kahlan melts and throws caution to the wind. She pulls Cara over her, permitting access to the curve of her neck. She presses her nose into Cara's hair and breathes deeply, picking up the hint of rare oils Cara must pour into her bath.

They stand like this, having their fill, Cara growing a little more impatient as she pushes Kahlan against the table, communicating her intent with her hips.

It all comes crashing down when Kahlan feels her breath hitch while heat pools between her legs.
Her magic hums a warning even as the Palace begins to prune it of any real strength. Kahlan realises what they are doing, and just how dangerous it is that she's losing control so quickly.

Gently, Kahlan presses her hand against Cara's chest, biting her lower lip as she smiles at the Lord's dwindling control. Cara sports a slightly dazed look at the sudden lack of contact and Kahlan makes up for it by touching her cheek.

"I wouldn't dare do this atop the state's most important documents," she teases. "We've already spilled an inkwell."

Cara considers her for a moment, looking as though she's at the edge of a protest. She nevertheless pulls away. "I guess we'll have more opportunities for that later."

"There is the wedding night."

Cara corrals her against the table, her rawness evident as the muscles on her bare arms tighten. Kahlan is embarrassed to feel a thrill. "Don't," she warns.

"You're too easy."

"No. Yes." Cara closes her eyes, her nostrils flaring. "Maybe. Now, before I do anything that'll embarrass us both..."

"Aren't you the least bit afraid that I'm a Confessor?" Kahlan admonishes.

Cara straightens, stepping back a stride to peruse Kahlan from head to foot. Cara's mien shifts from vulnerable and open to proud and brimming with power, every inch the Red Lion of Halin, every inch the Lord Rahl. Her magic stresses against Kahlan's own, a deliberate push.

"Don't you think we've had enough of fear, Kahlan Amnell?" she cajoles.

"Quite enough."

"Good. Then there is nothing to worry about."

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If only it was as simple as that, Cara the Mord'sith thought, aware of an ache that otherwise would have been easy to dismiss if she wasn't thoroughly immersed in Cara Rahl's world. She watched Kahlan leave and knew, with certainty, that something had changed. Was it for her or for the Rahl of the body she inhabited?

Spirits.

She could barely draw the line between the Mord'sith and the Rahl, now. The unum pushed and pulled at her consciousness, drawing an even tighter web as it put her through the paces of Cara Rahl's life and mended her Han by drawing on Cara's reserves. Whether they were emotional, magical or otherwise, the unum did not discriminate.

She had lost everything once, just as the Lord Rahl had. But Rahl found something in Kahlan Amnell that Cara was afraid to even consider.

Cara would have envied her for it, if her childhood had been anything like the Rahl of this other world's: nearly care-free, doted on by loving parents who both served in D'Hara's military. They wielded swords to protect her, employed their military-honed wit to teach her.

Quite unlike Cara the Mord'Sith's formative years, which she spent in the dark halls of Mord'Sith
temples. She grew on pillars of sorrow and loss that eventually hardened into houses of apathy, powerlessness into the den of thirsty domination.

When she finally encountered the world outside the strictures of her Mord'Sith existence, she discovered a wide chasm within, a hollow that had never been filled because of years of neglect.

So it came as a surprise that Richard and eventually Kahlan had managed to fill it bit by bit even if at times it felt like pouring water into a bucket with too many holes.

The Lord Cara Rahl had always been whole as a child and mostly, as an adult. Cara the Mord'Sith's training impressed upon her long-lasting scars, dealt emotional and psychological fractures that lay deep beneath layers of scathing words and seeming indifference.

The *unum* was bent on peeling everything back. After all, she had no voice here; no barriers to put up, not even figurative ones, and the *unum* subjected her to all of Cara Rahl's memories, emotions.

What was to happen then, once she was released from the *unum*’s snare? No doubt, her deep and aching wounds would bleed outright.

She was indescribably afraid to wake up.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Past chapters have seen our Cara fall under the *unum*'s spell, within which she experiences the Lord Cara Rahl's (aka alt!Cara) past. This includes the Fall of Halin and the loss of alt!Cara's family, Darken Rahl's death, and alt!Cara's rise to the High Seat of D'Hara (with alt!Kahlan's help).

Chapter 24 still happens in the *unum* and describes the events that finally solidify the alliance between D'Hara and the Midlands, in particular, alt!Cara and alt!Kahlan's marriage.

Chapter Notes

Never least, I credit Sionainn69 for all the beta work. Without her, this chapter would have been impossible to write. Thank you so much!

Enjoy!

Beyond the walls of the inner courtyards, the People's Palace is abuzz with activity. Its façade has been draped in white and red. Airy, lilting canticles to the House of Rahl reach past the domes of the temples, trilling through the colourful bustle of the marketplace and into individual homes. The white hirion, the desert flowers from the Plains, are interwoven into children's hair, spread across windowsills and its image embroidered into clothing. Colourful varieties from the North and South line the streets, stored in magical cages to keep them from wilting.

Everywhere the roving guards are dressed in the formal colours of their Lord, the Red Lion stylised into their tunics to indicate the current regime. Their spears shine like individual stars reflecting sunlight amidst the sand-coloured city.

The streets they patrol have become a cacophony of colour. Seen from above, the jollity threads in and out of side streets, bursting into courtyards. Decorations in every colour hang from palm trees and lamp posts, a contrast to the gold and brown of the desert.

Bards in the outrageous clothing of their trade sing of the Red Lion's deeds, filling the city with countless renditions of battles, tales and folklore.

To a woman watching the revelry from the long porticoes of the High House, they and their listeners are rainbow-coloured figures the size of ants.

She breathes deeply, her clothing heavy on her shoulders. She wears a form-fitting silk velvet tunic reminiscent of all the Rahls before her, held in place by a belt and lined at the edges with golden embroidery. Her exposed arms, which are clearly defined, lend the design athleticism and grace.

Her sword, forged from the fires of the most respected Linearian blacksmiths, hangs securely
against her hip, its sheath encrusted with jewels. Her leather boots are a rich and decadent dark brown. They are cut and tanned leather from the rare, ferocious creatures of the deep marshes, hunted only at the Lord's express command.

She wears her hair down in waves, thin strands of wheat-coloured hair braided at her temples. A simple, delicate circlet sits over the crown of her head. It gives her an almost elfin appearance, reigning in the raw strength evident in all her movements.

Tall, beautiful and altogether splendid, she is the picture of a proud D’Haran royal.

She scuffs a boot against the railing, grunting with disapproval.

"Cara," someone calls, clearing her throat.

Cara turns from the view of her city. "Berdine," she acknowledges. "I asked not to be disturbed."

Her visitor, a woman dressed in full armour with a dreadfully warm, Alkarian cape, leans against the table situated in the middle of the room. Cara thinks it is a pity that the Alkarian formal dress uniform has never been modified for the hot plains of the Azrith.

"I came looking for you." Berdine pauses to study her. "Are you all right?"

"I will be, once I find out how you got past the guard."

Berdine raises a brow. "You'd expect no less from me, my Lord. Let's not forget that I am one of the more intelligent ones."

Cara can't keep the smile from pulling at the side of her lips. Berdine is capable of surprising moments of lightness, not as ferociously grim as some of her captains. Her ability to utilise humour more effectively than others is a tactic she uses to catch others off guard.

Cara warns, "I have a feeling you're about to burst into a long tirade."

"Have I become so predictable?" Berdine asks.

She doesn't wait for a reply, tracing the edges of the table with her fingers. She breathes deeply as though gathering the strength to speak. After a while, she adopts a look of guarded curiosity as she does when she discovers something particularly useful and cannot decide on how to best exploit it.

Berdine continues, "Tell me, Cara. Have you invited her to your bed?"

They stare at each other. The proceedings of the Rahl and the Mother Confessor's 'union' will happen at the High House in an hour. To be reminded so abruptly of her responsibilities brings Cara completely out of her pensive mood.


"I know," Cara snaps. "Must you always tread on dangerous ground?"

"I always have," Berdine answers simply.

Today, Berdine avoids resorting to deceit. Her inquiry is plain and by extension, the answer must be, too.

Cara wishes that she didn't feel so confined by her clothing. She sinks into a nearby chair, massaging her temple. With a tired voice, she chastises, "Berdine, Berdine..."
Berdine scrunches her eyes closed, as though running a litany of reprimands inside her head. With her usual clarity, she says, "We Alkarians have a long tradition of taking pleasure from whomever we choose. I've known you to be obvious with your advances when it comes to those who catch your eye. And to say that Kahlan Amnell has caught your eye," Berdine dips her head, willing Cara to finish the thought. "If things had been different, she'd have shared your bed many times before."

Cara sighs. "If not knowing torments you so much, I haven't had a taste."

"I've suspected that was the case." Berdine's voice lowers, as though imparting a secret, "Perhaps it's because you can't?"

Cara buries her face in her hand to hide her irritation. Whatever boundaries she puts up are always shattered by Berdine's intellect.

Cara schools her expression to one of impassivity. "You're talking about the Mother Confessor's powers."

"Of course," Berdine replies. She extracts a thin, gold collar from her pouch, laying it atop the table. "A gift for your consideration, my Lord."

Cara stares at the artefact, the same one Kahlan snapped around Darken's neck.

Something roils within her like heavy oil.

Cara says, "She'll never allow it."

"She doesn't need to allow anything."

The implication tolls like the gongs of a funeral pyre, heavy and foreboding.

Cara's hands tighten into fists. "I've seen my share of how men turn into animals. I won't have it in these halls. Not anymore."

Cara takes five steps forward, invading Berdine's personal space until they are standing toe to toe. She takes a moment to see if there is anything there beyond defiance and vicious determination in Berdine's eyes. Failing to see even a sliver of sympathy, Cara shoves the other woman. As soon as Berdine stumbles backwards, Cara lifts her arm and backhands Berdine's cheek.

The other woman's head snaps sideways, her lip splitting open. Blood flies to the floor.

"To even insinuate such things in my presence, Berdine! Richard's presence is rubbing off on you," her Captain coughs.

"And why shouldn't it?" Cara roars, shaking her fist at Berdine. "I've had enough of brutal realism to last me an entire lifetime! It cost me everything, Berdine. Everything!" Trembling, she points to the door. "If you speak another word of this, so help me, Captain! I won't be so lenient."

Already, the sharp intellect behind Berdine's eyes dissects Cara's reasoning and for a moment, Cara fears that Berdine will defy her. After all, her captain is first and foremost a soldier, a woman who only concerns herself with the end, rarely caring for the means unless it gets her there quicker.

But Berdine is also a discerning scholar, a woman of ideas who does not discount the past and embraces the present, and one who is carefully aware of her own emotions. Cara could count on her to use reason or to agree that passion sometimes overpowers it. As one of Cara's most valued
tacticians, Berdine is known to willingly walk in another's shoes.

Berdine blinks as though forcing a veil from her eyes. Her expression softens.

"You do so well by him. You always have," Berdine says. She chuckles with self-derision. "Creator. I will never have done any better in your place."

Cara forgets her anger. "What are you talking about?"

"Panis. I'm talking about Panis Rahl." Wiping the blood from her lip, Berdine straightens. "Forget everything I said. Keep the gift. Make of it what you will."

She pushes the Rada'Han into Cara's hand. Despite the bruised lip, Berdine manages a pained smile and grasps Cara's arm.

"I live to serve, Lord Rahl, whatever it is you may believe," she says. "Know also that the last, true Rahl before you would have been proud."

She turns but Cara has already seen tears on her cheek. Cara stares at her Captain's fleeing back, the Rada'Han heavy in her hand.

The words are familiar. They spear through her heart, bringing the lurching emptiness to the surface, despite her wishes for something more.

Cara tries to concentrate but cannot. She is brought to a similar day under the eaves of petite havianian trees in an isolated orchard. It was a week before her twenty-third birthday. She had been dressed in the whites of the countryside instead of Rahl's colours, listening to a local priestess sing the ancient hymns of union as Leo –kind, handsome Leo! —looked down on her, conveying with his smile that this was the happiest of days.

But today, alas today!

A rain of hirion petals permeates the Capital, delivered by the hands of her people. Below the marble porticoes of the High House, the streets are lined in red, a trail of tapestries depicting a lion sprinting through streets and alleyways.

In the hallowed halls of the High House, light streams past the high buttresses and between thick, marble pillars. The sounds of a city's revelry drift through the hall. Hundreds in in the silk tunics of the Senate and the High House watch them as they stand on an altar while thousands more of the peasantry await the pronouncements. As her honour guard fidgets in the heat, the soft murmur of metal against metal grinds her senses.

Everything steals any privacy this moment needs.

She feels Kahlan grip her forearm tighter.

"You look beautiful," Kahlan comments, barely moving her lips. They are five paces from the Celebrant, an old, stooping Senator with a clear voice who presides over the wedding ceremony. Whispered conversation hardly carries to his ears.

Cara lifts her attention from her constant, internal sulking, feeling suddenly like a child in the face of Kahlan's calm. Cara is, after all, not the only party in this union.

Cara tilts her head.
"As are you." This prompts her to take a closer look at the Mother Confessor who, Cara acknowledges with enjoyment and equal parts tension, has somehow defined beauty in simple, Confessor whites. "More than me, anyway," Cara amends.

"Nonsense."

Kahlan bestows a smile, shy and red-cheeked. They are facing each other, arms interlaced and fastened together with a ceremonial cloth. Kahlan's grip is reassuring. For the first time, Cara's gaze is drawn to the creamy expanse of skin that Kahlan's dress affords: the delicate curve of her neck to the heaving line and swells of her collarbone and bosom.

Kahlan studies her with a curious expression. They both know that closer scrutiny will be warranted in their marriage bed.

"Your mind seems occupied," Kahlan chastises gently.

Cara smiles for her benefit, her eyes dimmed by the stubborn hues of sadness.

"I was married once," Cara admits. "I can't quite forget."

She wishes to pull away, caught up in a whirlwind of regrets but Kahlan's arms steady her, pulling her slightly forward as though reinforcing their agreement that the peace cannot be built on fragile emotions.

"I've taken so much from you already," Kahlan murmurs. "I know this. I would expect cruelty from you –violence even –but you have shown me neither. You must tell me if you want this. We can end it, today. It's not too late."

Cara blinks, absorbing her words. All of her senses become frighteningly open. She feels suddenly alert, as though anticipating an escape from the fortress of an enemy. A grief-stricken voice insists that Cara abandon Rahl's name, forsake the robes of her office, and flee. A flash of memory –Leib's smile, Aginor's laughter, Leo's bright eyes –and she knows that there will be more to lose if she acts for her own ends.

Cara hardens her resolve and holds Kahlan's gaze.

"No. I won't risk war and bestow the loss I experienced on innocents for things that I covet. My country has suffered enough."

Kahlan is tight-lipped, at a loss for what to say. At the head of the altar, the Senator approaches them.

"Blessings and happiness," he greets. "We are here today to join together the Lord Cara Rahl, esteemed High Seat of the D'Haran Empire and Kahlan Amnell, the Mother Confessor and Ruler of the Midlands. We share in their joy, and rejoice in the unification of two great nations under their rule."

To Cara, he asks, "What is your desire, my Lord?"

Her thumb caresses Kahlan's hand –to soothe herself more than anything –and she conveys as much sincerity as she can while her voice nearly cracks under the weight of her promise. Her throat tightens and she feels the tears threatening at the edge of her sight. Fear very nearly poisons her words.

She declares, "To be made one with Kahlan Amnell, my Queen."
To Kahlan, the Celebrant repeats the question, "What is your desire, my Lady?"

"To be made one with Cara Rahl, the Lord of D'Hara."

The old man smiles and tells them both, "It is an honour, my Lord and Lady, to witness such a day. My limbs have grown weary, my voice has become hoarse but at last, our children and our children's children will know real peace. The years I have left will revel in it."

Staring at the old man, Cara struggles for the right words, for the ones that were written for her in the spirit of political correctness, and also for the ones that unexpectedly take shape within.

Moistening her lips, Cara picks at the pieces and begins, "I, Cara Rahl, come here of my free will, to seek the partnership of Kahlan Amnell, the Mother Confessor of the Midlands whom I shall love and honour with all sincerity so long as we both shall live." She forces herself to look at her Queen, resplendent even in the cage that their fate has forged around them. Her throat burns from a vow that will either free her or imprison her. "Always, I will strive for your happiness and welfare whether the days are sad or joyful. I will never leave nor forsake you and will spend my days at your side."

Cara feels the burn from Kahlan's gaze, an inquiry so intense that Cara finds it difficult to hold. They both know that these are not the ritual words but they are binding nonetheless.

The implications are enough to frighten her but she forges on. Cara produces a simple gold band and with a trembling hand, slips it on Kahlan's ring finger. An old Senator from Lineari unearthed it from his city's vaults. Apparently, it is rarely bestowed, because a Rahl seldom marries.

It is an ancient ring but it is bright with the ages, a testament to the skill of a Linearian jeweller from before the great city's time.

She continues, "Henceforth, I give myself to you as your protector, your kin, and your wife."

The hall is silent. It is known in all the Empire that the Lion-heart keeps all of her promises. In the annals of the Red Lion, those made during this hand-fasting are the most painful promises yet.

Cara can hardly breathe; her shoulders move laboriously as she fights an overwhelming wave of anxiety. Kahlan reaches for her cheek and steadies her; for once Kahlan's gaze is calming; a vibrant blue, lacking in ferocity and criticism. It deliberately lends Cara strength.

They stand like this while Kahlan recites the same words, the memory of Cara's speech already seared into her memory.

The spirits flow. Rare vintages from Galea are served at the celebrant's table where Kahlan and Cara sit hand in hand. Clear, throat-burning liquors from the North and the finest meads from the South are carried by servants in large ceramic jugs, poured diligently into waiting goblets.

Despite the war that ravaged Sassen and Acrimar's food stores, Richard has convinced an outrageous import of meat from his provinces. They are roasted over open fires, lathered in spices that bind with the air. The tables overflow with colourful arrangements of vegetables, roasted fruits, juice-laden lamb, pheasant and pork.

Several Senators propose toasts to their Lord's name as they take advantage of the first opportunity for merriment in years. The hall quickly fills with laughter, the sound pouring out in loud, raucous waves as though it has gathered for so many years, long repressed by Darken's conceit.
Delegates from the Midlands sit at their own table, shunning D'Haran camaraderie as they look on at their boisterousness. They say their speeches in the concise, soft accent of the Midlands, bowing to their Mother Confessor in deference and eyeing Cara with suspicion.

"They seem very tense," Cara comments.

Kahlan smiles. "We've been handed peace that will last at least two generations, more if our line survives. You can't blame them for being suspicious. The Rahl before you did not cede to their diplomacy, he sacked Nicobarese and killed many more in the border towns. Peace never came at an easy price. They would be ready for anything."

"They expect me to break my word?"

Kahlan turns sideways to meet her gaze. "I don't. That's all that should matter."

The short orations continue; anything from grateful platitudes to careful, partisan speeches, and even brazen mentions of the wedding night. When at last, it is Richard's turn to speak, the hall gives him the respect due and everyone turns quiet.

"Friends!" he calls, raising his goblet to the Midlands representatives. They acknowledge him by raising their own goblets of mead. He turns to the rest of the guests, "Countrymen!" They roar their approval. "I'm honoured to be here, to stand amongst you to celebrate the hand-fasting of a dear friend, our Lord Rahl and Captain. Her sacrifices have brought us to where we are now."

He pauses, including everyone with his gaze, as he lets his words sink in. If one politician has endeared himself to the Midlands, it is Richard Cypher, the man who proposed an unlikely alliance. "We have lost far too many and endured far too much but today —on this happiest of days!—may it be that this peace between our nations lasts. To the Lord Rahl and the Mother Confessor! To peace! And the Creator be willing, a lifetime of happiness!" He tips his goblet to his lips, taking one, full swill that communicates his sincerity.

"Hear, hear!" the halls cries, drinking to his words.

Kahlan raises her own goblet and sips. She watches as Cara stares into the brim of her cup.

Cara's hesitance to honour Richard's words is not lost on either of them. They are at the threshold of a life that will be worlds more different than the last. The past still haunts her; fear sits in her belly like a dragon wiling its time, scratching its nails on frail and frenzied emotions. Any provocation can wrench it from its hiding place.

Kahlan purses her lips. This and the way her breath shudders do not escape Cara's attention.

"Cara…" she sighs.

"To a lifetime of happiness," Cara whispers, trying hard to subdue her scorn. "Amen to that."

She drinks.

The night becomes a haze. Laughter rings in Cara's ears and the world sways like the deck of a boat on the River Kern during a damp and frosty autumn. She braces herself against a high-backed chair, staring determinedly at the hearth. It is five men in breadth and one in height, roaring with unfermented light that spills unto fur carpets, silken sheets, and the bedposts that have been carved with images of the hunt.
When had she arrived at their bedchambers?

A hand steadies her, slender fingers that belong to her wife, rather than the husband she had hoped to spend her entire life with.

Her chest tightens and she wipes at her eyes, stemming the impending tears. She must keep it together. The night must be dedicated to new beginnings, to new alliances that are now becoming permanent. She tears her gaze away from the fire to the woman who has positioned herself behind her.

Kahlan is looking at everything but at her, studying the tapestries, looking past the window that reveals the shimmering lights of the Capital. She doesn't look nervous, only reserved, as poised as she had been when they had been married at the High House.

Kahlan faces away from Cara, her arms moving as she unties the laces of her dress. Inch by inch, the skin on Kahlan's back reveals itself to Cara's gaze. Even as Cara's mind meanders, the immediacy of this pulls her to the present.

Her mind becomes numb. The woman is perfect. Her skin is slightly tanned from days spent beneath the Azrith sun, covering firm back muscles hewn by countless days of fighting. Kahlan shrugs the dress off casually, revealing the shallow dips and smooth lines that define her shoulders. A few deep scars along her arms are results of her compulsion to wreak havoc at the front lines during the war. They are an angry pink, only slightly over a year old.

The war was Kahlan's first but it hardly seems like the only battle she has fought. Cara can infer it from the way she seems to yield, luring out so many of Cara's vulnerabilities with a look, a sigh, her mere presence. It reminds Cara of what she has heard of the Mother Confessor's forays into the Wilds; that Kahlan employs a subtle yet effective diplomacy against the tribes, rarely using cold, Galean steel.

She is the Mother Confessor of the Midlands not only in name but in stature, and brute force is nearly as much an admission of failure as it is a last resort. This has never been more apparent to Cara than it is now. Cara can see it from mere inches away as Kahlan uses her ability to transform liabilities into clout.

Kahlan walks to the far side of the bed, hidden in the half-darkness as she undresses the rest of her under-things and slips, naked, beneath the sheets.

Cara begins to unbuckle her belt but Kahlan's voice, dry and tinted with amusement, remarks, "That should be your wife's duty."

Cara nods, joining her at the bed. She lifts the circlet from her head and places it on the side-table, an accessory crafted by the Northern smithies from a combination of metals across D'Hara. Gingerly, she sits and bends forward, pulling off her boots in smooth, practised motions. The mattress dips as Kahlan moves closer, her hands on Cara's shoulders.

Even now as Cara is plagued by hesitance and guilt, the unexplainable tension that exists between them calls to her like a siren on the rocks.

If Cara is honest with herself, she knows that she has run out of excuses. They have paid a hefty price. Her own sins cannot be measured. She recognises compassion in Kahlan that is not unlike Panis' and an openness that isn't afraid to challenge deep-seated beliefs. These have guaranteed the survival of millions despite the thousands she has already killed.
The realisation is chilling. They are unwittingly alike.

So Cara waits. Like the song's victim, she waits for the inevitable end or for judgment, whatever those may be.

Cara can hear the sheets rustle as they fall from Kahlan's body. The bed dips as Kahlan edges even closer and it isn't long before her warmth presses against Cara's back, causing a sharp intake of breath.

Cara can hardly believe that this is real, or that the years of serving D'Hara at the expense of losing so much have culminated to this, the possibility of gaining some measure of life, of peace.

She cannot move. How can she? It is all she has done for months now, for years and it has only given her grief.

Kahlan's hands inch from her shoulders to the laces between Cara's breasts. Cara clutches her wrist, stopping her progress before saying, "I can do this myself, my lady."

"Cara, just let me," Kahlan murmurs against her ear.

Cara turns and studies her in the firelight. Creator, Cara thinks, she's beautiful. Her skin, glowing with warmth from the fireplace, pulls a penetrating shade of blue from her eyes. Even if Cara is still fully clothed, she feels suddenly naked; the ability of the Mother Confessor to see truth is legendary and Cara bears the brunt of that gaze.

Breaking eye contact, Cara reaches for an errant strand of dark hair across Kahlan's forehead. She rolls it along her fingertips. It is soft and when Cara brings it to her nose, it smells distinctly of jasmine from Tamarang.

"What would you know of love?" Cara murmurs.

Kahlan recognises the labyrinth in Cara's words, the subtle affront to what she is –the Mother Confessor –a woman who uses love as a weapon, as a means to enslave, to break and destroy.

Instead of wandering into the maze, Kahlan leans forward to kiss the side of her lips, drawing Cara even deeper into the present. "That it will come, if we let it."

Kahlan pulls away and Cara feels it more distinctly, an initial attraction that had been there since the Garden of Life and which is steadily growing into something else. Staring at Kahlan's heaving breasts and at the stretch of milk-white skin, Cara knows that the next kiss will not be as chaste.

With trembling fingers, Kahlan starts where she left off, unlacing the red tunic of Cara's station. Cara watches as emotions begin their dance on the Mother Confessor's face. Her brows are furrowed in concentration as she unknots the last piece of silk thread that ties Cara's tunic together, exposing a flat stomach and the gentle curves of Cara's breasts. She moves downward and with only a hint of apprehension, she undoes the belt which holds Cara's sword.

When she pushes the tunic aside to hang on either side of Cara's shoulders, revealing Cara to her, Cara feels pride at the effect her nakedness has on the Mother Confessor.

Kahlan's stare moves from her breasts, to her abdomen and then to symmetrical lines of developed side oblique muscles that meet at a V where Cara's tunic pools to hide a more intimate secret. Her physique is a testament to thousands of hours spent training and fighting with heavy weapons.

This time, the kiss that follows is hungrier, and Kahlan slides her tongue over Cara's, a bold
entreaty that reminds Cara that she doesn't know her wife quite as much as she should. Kahlan's hands wander down Cara's side to rest on her hips, feathery touches that cause a pleasant thrum of heat.

She tastes Galean wine on Kahlan's lips, imagines the vineyards fed by the wide, Callisidrin River and then shortly, of Halin. Cara gasps, breaking away but Kahlan takes her face in both her hands, steadying her as she forces Cara to look her in the eye.

"Stay with me, Cara."

Cara swallows, gathering the courage to accept Kahlan's concern. In that small interlude, Cara notices something else: the heat radiating off Kahlan's skin, her darkened eyes, and swollen lips which are the preludes to Kahlan's Confessor magic. Her magic, heavy and imposing, begins to push against Cara's own.

Cara playfully holds herself against it with the Rahl magic within her veins, magic that is just as powerful but borne of a different purpose.

Kahlan's throat bobs. She bends sideways and reaches for something underneath the pillows. For a moment, Cara stiffens, fumbling for her magical stores. She's heard enough of how the Mother Confessor's mates have all been Confessed, bound to their mistress and stripped of their will.

Cara's gaze drops to the artefact that appears in Kahlan's hand and she is suddenly distraught, uncomprehending. Her hold on her Han loosens.

Kahlan's grip tightens around the Rada'Han, her throat moving in agitation. Slowly, deliberately, Kahlan lifts it to her neck and fastens it like a collar. It clicks into place. What used to be a watercourse of Confessor magic becomes a dry plain of nothing else. The artefact cuts Kahlan off from her Han and her expression crumples into terror. This is something a Confessor will never willingly undertake.

In the minutes that follow she suffers alone, one hand pulling at the collar as though it has tightened, the other braced against the sheets.

When Cara recovers from her own disbelief, she tries to come closer.

Kahlan lifts a hand to stop her. "Don't!" she chokes out.

Cara stares with increasing dismay and remembering how it is to suffer alone, she pushes Kahlan's arm aside even as Kahlan clutches her shoulder, warning her to keep her distance. Cara touches the cold metal with her fingertips, and it grows warm against Kahlan's skin. Kahlan's grip loosens and she seems to relax.

Kahlan's gaze meets hers. There are pinpricks of agony in the blue of her irises and one can see that this is beyond the Mother Confessor's experience.

Cara breathes, "I don't like seeing you fettered like this."

"Neither do I," Kahlan whispers, her voice nearly a whimper, "but just as you do, I keep all my promises. I promised to be one with you. This is the only way."

Kahlan may as well have surrendered the entire Midlands army this very moment, forfeited everything that made D'Hara fear her; the dread in Kahlan's eyes says as much. Her quiet defiance, however, speaks of power beyond even her Confessor magic, of a woman who is not defined solely by her station. She seems intent on conveying that this is not as difficult as it actually is.
Cara can't begin to imagine the terror this must cause her and she allows Kahlan some room with
which to breathe.

"It won't be in vain," Cara whispers. "No one will touch you here without your consent."

Kahlan purses her lips. "You do not need to be gentle with me."

"I want to be." And for once, Cara's sincerity seems pleading.

Kahlan touches her cheek and her features solidify into resolve. "Show me."

The startled expressions of desire prickle up Cara's spine.

Cara moves forward, a hand still on the Rada'Han as she gently pushes Kahlan down to lay on the
sheets.

"You must tell me if there is anything you don't want me to do," she insists.

Kahlan brings another hand up to Cara's face, traces her eyebrow before touching her lower lip.
"We have come here of our free will," she says, echoing their vow. "And you are my wife. I know
you won't hurt me, Cara Rahl. If you wanted to, I'd already be dead."

Cara braces herself on arms positioned on either side of Kahlan's body. Slowly, she sinks into
Kahlan's embrace as Kahlan pulls off her belt, spreading the tunic even wider apart and exposing
her to Kahlan's touch. When Kahlan kisses her, opening her mouth, Cara takes what she can,
swiping Kahlan's lips with the tip of her tongue before accepting the invitation to explore.

They are unfamiliar with each other, and their embrace is unsure but when Kahlan pulls her even
closer, their bodies sliding against each other, the sensations are hardly foreign.

The symbols of a spell, drawn earlier by a Wizard of the First Order, begin to glow.

Kahlan knows of Berdine's earlier appearance before the actual ceremony when she offered a
Rada'Han that had been in Zedd's keeping. Kahlan arranges for Berdine to find it, and in some
ways it is a test to see if the Rahl will sacrifice what remains of her morals for a chance at
subjugating her.

Perhaps it is Cara's grief or her anxiety, or that neither of them can fully process tonight's untenable
situation but when Cara begins a cautious but determined seduction, the Lord Rahl doesn't ask how
she will survive the night.

When the Rada'Han shackles Kahlan's powers, she becomes more vulnerable than she expects.
Even then, she expects Cara to renege on her promises, to snatch the opportunity and take what has
been left without protection, but instead, the Lord Rahl stares at her, horrified.

Any unwanted advances would have been the perfect excuse to confess her mate, her final chance
to seize the D'Haran Empire and install a subservient puppet.

But it hasn't come to that. Even then, it should not have surprised her that the Lion-heart, despite
being known to be vigilant and far-thinking, did not even hint at a remedy to the Confessor's touch.

It could also be that Cara has a death wish. Again, Kahlan feels the heartrending undertones of
guilt, of grey skies over Halin and the pillars of smoke that smell of burning flesh. Just as quickly,
she rationalises that she did what needed to be done to protect the Midlands.
Her thoughts quickly wither when Cara lowers her mouth to her breast, tracing the underside with her lips before her hand cups them gently. Her tongue swipes at a nipple, coaxing it until it is sensitive and erect. Kahlan groans; the sounds of her own arousal would have surprised her months before and prompted her to flee. But the softness of Cara's lips, wrapped around her breast as she sucks gently, leaves a trail of outstanding heat that makes Kahlan sigh, forget.

The yawning emptiness of her magic should have been frightening to behold; instead, she is all too aware of Cara's attention shifting to her collarbone, flicking against her jaw and dampening the back of her ear. She feels goose bumps track up her arms. Cara's soft pants tickle the hairs on Kahlan's neck.

She is surprised that she wants this. The attraction is not new and Kahlan realises that it has grown without her knowledge. It should have been obvious to her before, from the daily visits to the People's Palace for meals at the Lord Rahl's request, to allowances concerning the treaty. Had Cara been any other Rahl, the Mother Confessor would have insisted on taking her meals at her own camp and demanded the immediate ratification of the peace.

There is also the matter of how Cara's captains look at her. Some with respectful disdain (a contradiction in itself but carried so well by the one named Denna), all of them with admiration from having fought by her side. But what truly strikes Kahlan is how a number of the Alkarian captains are willing to share Cara's bed, filling discussions with overt invitations that Cara declines with a joke, or a deft string of unoffending words that reminds them of her rank. Kahlan feels a pang of jealousy even then, wondering why she does.

Looking up at Cara, at the scar that runs down her face and the tragedy that wraps tightly around her eyes, Kahlan would never have imagined what it was that drew her to this woman, or why it drew her so strongly.

Kahlan is reluctant to admit it but Cara's qualities are what she looks for in the husband or wife that stands by the Mother Confessor's side. Unflinching bravery, the ability to abide by a difficult hard-line when her nation needs it, and implicit compassion despite a life that has sought to strip her of it. It isn't hard to feel desire for Cara Rahl, but they're burdened by their histories and what has happened before constantly affects their vision of the present.

She had once promised never to marry a D'Haran pig, not after Nicobarese and the border towns, but at every turn, Cara has proven that she is far from the animal Kahlan has imagined a Rahl to be and every bit the hero the D'Haran people adore.

That this Rahl will bend to her desires without Confession, will not slip a dagger between her ribs in her sleep despite all the crimes between them; it baffles the senses that have grown used to the games that rulers play. Presented with an expression that isn't a mask, with actions that aren't part of some constant foil Kahlan needs to outmanoeuvre; well, nothing has left her so unguarded and shamed.

She asks herself, who else would give her the iron hand during all their public dealings yet have the faith to caress her so intimately in the privacy of their bed?

Cara moves slightly away, perhaps aware of Kahlan's thoughts. She stares down at her with her clear, blue eyes, bright with renewed life much like a sky would be in spring. There is a small hint of a smile, the first in months. Kahlan feels a satisfying sense of relief and belatedly, possession – that this should be Kahlan's for years to come.

Kahlan gives the woman atop her a reassuring smile. She is suddenly gripped by an overwhelming need to return what Cara has inadvertently given. She wants to claim and be claimed, to know and
be known and to communicate all these with touch.

Kahlan opens to her; even in the midst of this figurative winter, the Mother Confessor begins to give, willing Cara to have a taste. She is laid out on immaculate sheets, nearly wanton while her dark hair fans out on the pillow, her brow touched by thin droplets of sweat. Further down, the coarse curls leading to Kahlan's sex graze lightly against Cara's thigh and the damp heat radiating from her centre prods at Cara's consciousness.

Within, Cara feels that the long, difficult thaw has begun.

Her heart must have seen it long before her mind did, an explanation to why she agrees to the union.

Cara is suddenly gripped by apprehension when Kahlan takes her hand but instead of putting it where Cara expects, she slips it under the pillow where the Rada'Han was originally placed. Cara's eyes widen. Underneath it is also a dagger and she grips the hilt, pulling it from its hiding place. Cara places the blade on the side table; this new insight tastes bitter on her tongue.

Cara whispers, "So you thought I'd forcibly collar you."

"I know of many who wouldn't pass the opportunity."

"And what did you plan to do? Kill me? Confess me?"

"Confession would have been the wiser choice," Kahlan says.

"Of course," Cara acquiesces, touching the Rada'Han once more and appreciating all the subtle meanings it has suddenly embodied. "And now?"

Kahlan does not answer; she simply traces Cara's neck, cradles the back of her head and guides her down until they are sinking into another intoxicating kiss. The Mother Confessor does not hedge with closed lips and allowing Cara's subtle invasion is a clear enough answer—that Kahlan trusts her and that the moment of danger will not be repeated. It spurs Cara's passion until she is nipping a trail down Kahlan's neck. Her fingers once more skate down to Kahlan's breasts and she marvels at their magnificence as they fill her hands. They are round and soft and tipped with rose-coloured nipples. She takes them into her mouth, sharply aware of Kahlan's moans as they fill her ears, coursing delicious heat to her own groin.

Kahlan closes her eyes when Cara moves from one nipple to another before admitting breathily, "I haven't done this before."

Cara releases her and asks, "With the Rada'Han you mean?"

"Yes."

"I'll make it worth your while," Cara says. "And anyway, you must be punished," she indicates the dagger but there is a hint that she is only half serious.

Kahlan swallows. No one has ever smiled down at her so brazenly, still fully possessed of her own will while Kahlan lies naked beneath her. All her partners before Cara were Confessed, enacting her instructions and driven by blind fervour.

But this is her wife, the ally she has chosen to share her bed and Cara is at her most beautiful now when she is dominant over her own faculties. She runs calloused, purposeful hands over Kahlan's
body and her eyes are bright with voluntary wonderment. Kahlan doesn't realise how much she wants this until she is literally beneath it, affection that is readily given, without the force of Confessor magic.

Cara, on the other hand, wishes to slow the pace in order to ease them both into the act, but the way Kahlan is slowly grinding into her thigh is fraying what remains of her nerves.

"Cara…"

The way Kahlan says her name, full of want, shatters any notion that Kahlan would like this to go any slower. Pair that with the arousal smearing Cara's thigh…

An unthinking haze edges around Cara's vision. She holds Kahlan's hip, moving under to grasp one ass cheek, urging her to grind harder.

Kahan does, letting loose a surprised groan at how thoroughly worked up she is.

Cara moves even lower and slips her middle finger into the warmth of Kahlan's desire, humming with pleasure as she spreads the copious wetness to Kahlan's clitoris. Slow, lazy circles urge it into a hardened nub. After a few minutes, when the dampness spreads to her thighs, Kahlan whimpers. Cara plies more moans from Kahlan's mouth, caressing her tongue with her own as she continues her ministrations.

The nakedness she feels isn't just physical, Cara thinks. She thought this would be difficult, that it would be a battle of wills, but what battle is there when the other has already capitulated? The Rada'Han around Kahlan's neck is evidence enough and Kahlan seems hardly intent on being the instigator, relying on Cara's prompts.

It gives Cara such an incredible, enabling sense of control, of power that she isn't about to squander any of it on a quick, insensitive fuck.

There is also the matter of Kahlan's ability to wipe all thought from her mind with a look and of the fact that Cara has become breathless, her heartbeat thrashing in her ears like the rush of oncoming water.

Kahlan's beauty doesn't just extend to what can be seen. For anyone who has spent months negotiating peace with her, who has received so many of her generous and oftentimes startling concessions, only a fool would say otherwise. Guilt, sorrow, denial—all these may colour Cara's actions during the day but she has made a promise and she is beginning to realise that it stretches into a horizon that assures all of the opposites. There is no point in resisting an inevitable tide.

"Cara…" Kahlan says, startled as she witnesses a tear crawl down Cara's cheek.

Cara blinks, feeling the moisture for the first time. She wipes it quickly away. "It's nothing, my lady."

"We are past any moments of doubt, my Lord." She wraps her hand around Cara's wrist and guides her hand even closer to her opening.

Cara kisses her forehead tenderly, her entire being poured into the act for after this there will be nothing more to give or to hang on to; this is the final purge of the vestiges of her former life before a new one emerges from the darkness and takes her for everything that she is.

Cara slides one finger in, revelling in Kahlan's heat. She doesn't move, allowing Kahlan to familiarise herself with her touch. When Kahlan's fingers thread through her hair and she utters a
strangled, "Please…" Cara pulls slightly out, covering it in Kahlan's slickness before adding a second finger. She feels Kahlan tighten around her and after a few seconds, Kahlan is in motion beneath her, urging Cara's movements with her hips. When Cara brings the heel of her hand to bear on the engorged cluster of nerves, Kahlan gasps into her ear, making Cara's heart clench.

Cara's senses drown in an onrush of pure sensation. Amidst it all, like gravity that strengthens the underlying tide, she feels fear for the life that is to come, watchful of the pain for the past that she abandons but will never forget, and immense pleasure that is indescribable in its immediacy, in its urgent delineation of the present. It overtakes everything else, filling all the crevices that had been emptied by her husband and sons' deaths, and surprisingly, even others she did not think she had – the desire to finally stay, to follow her own dictates, to damn the desires of the State for the sake of her own sanity.

She presses her lips against Kahlan's neck while her fingers continue to thrust in a steady rhythm, timed to the tiny prompts from Kahlan's reactions. Her other hand is buried in Kahlan's hair, gently cradling Kahlan's head.

When Kahlan clenches tightly around her fingers once, twice then a third time, Cara can barely control her own breathing, and Kahlan rolls her hips against her hand to hasten the inevitable fall into oblivion. Kahlan's body arches off the bed, coiling tightly. Cara soothes her by caressing her cheek.

"It's alright, love," Cara whispers. "Let go."

Kahlan stiffens momentarily then she gives a cry as she comes undone. Cara allows her to ride it out until she is spent, collapsing to the bed as she breathes in short, quick and gratifying huffs.

Aroused beyond any notion of propriety, Cara begins to rub herself against the Confessor's thigh, pushing sharply against it as she feels her own release approaching. Cara breathes the musky scent of their love-making, which serves to pull her even deeper into the tumultuous void. She hardly feels Kahlan's hands ghosting over her arms, or the embrace that comes after.

Cara isn't prepared when she herself unravels, falling faster than she thought possible. Everything shatters into pinpoints of blinding, un-forgiving light. Her past, the present, all notions of a beginning or even an end shatter with it.

Kahlan watches her, jaw slack as she realises that the Lion-heart – the Empire's fiercest warrior and a merciless vanquisher of her enemies – lies atop her, uncoiling in her arms and conveying the most exquisite of emotions as she moans through her orgasm.

A sharp and insistent possessiveness takes Kahlan by surprise and provoked by it, Kahlan reverses their positions. Cara registers astonishment at Kahlan's strength but before she can even recover, Kahlan nips at her neck, then her collarbone, spending a few moments lavishing attention on her breasts until Cara's nipples flush a darkened pink, hard as pebbles. Cara relaxes.

Kahlan sucks and kisses down to her belly, leaving a hand to squeeze gently at Cara's breasts before she traverses the dips and rises of Cara's pubic bone. Cara watches her with eyes that flicker in the firelight, questioning and impassioned and the duskiest shade of blue.

Kahlan grins as Cara spreads her legs farther apart, an invitation to uncover more. There is fear there, but there is courage too, all too bright and resplendent that Kahlan can't help but feel that it will be far too easy to fall in love with Cara Rahl.
Kahan dips her head until her lips brush past coarse curls. The smell she encounters makes her
heady with want. She dares a taste, immersing the tip of her tongue into Cara's opening, collecting
an essence that is warm and slick, and tastes of victory and defeat all at once. It reminds her of her
own unfathomable craving, and Kahlan fears it's something she will not soon forget.

Cara's hands clutch at the sheets as Kahlan flattens her tongue against the swollen protrusion of
Cara's clit. She watches as Cara presses her head against the pillow, her eyes squeezed shut.

"Ah, Spirits!" she cries, cradling Kahlan's head and threading insistent fingers through her hair.
Encouraged and far too astounded by the way Cara speaks her name, Kahlan strokes with the
length of her tongue, quick and insistent, before nipping her folds with her lips. She repeats the
pattern.

Cara's body undulates in the firelight and her hands shift to cover Kahlan's own, which are gripping
her thighs. Kahlan feels like a passenger in a restless boat with no notion of north or south, east or
west and following only the ocean's currents, fortuitous and wild.

"Kahlan," Cara whispers, her voice choked as though this plea is foreign to her.

Kahlan feels a tightening in her belly as her name slips past Cara's lips and her focus sharpens. Her
fingers ghost over Cara's opening and for a few moments, she watches as Cara's body begs for her
touch. As Kahlan's tongue plays around her fingers, she dips two fingertips in then out. She's
mesmerised when Cara rolls her hips, urging her to plunge even further. She ends up knuckle-deep,
thrusting to a steady rhythm as Cara loosens several moans.

Before long, Kahlan feels the fluttering of an impending orgasm and it takes a few impassioned
thrusts for Cara to collapse like a deck of cards. Her emotions fan out in aces and Kahlan's
blindsided by Cara's expression—blissful and raw. It seizes her heart in a quick and resolute siege.

When the shudders cease and Cara's breathing mellows, Kahlan crawls back up and collapses
beside her wife. Cara reaches for her with calloused hands that are exceedingly gentle, while
Kahlan curls her fingers around them in a silent entreaty for comfort. Cara moves, bringing them
flush against each other as she tastes the inimitable passion on Kahlan's lips.

They inadvertently fall asleep beside each other, Kahlan's arm splayed across Cara's stomach while
Cara's slumber is dreamless for the first time in months. There is no hint of the river, or of the
guardian that haunts its shores. There are echoes of a farewell which leave Cara with a feeling of
lightness.

Much too exhausted from the physical exertion and the emotions that have them reeling, neither
she nor Kahlan move from her place until the morning.

Cara wakes up to a foreign sense of satisfaction, sharply aware of where she is. A thought passes
idly by: that the separate chamber Cara has arranged for the Mother Confessor is unused and with
how things have been going, will probably be so for a while.

She sits up and is careful to keep Kahlan from waking, noticing that the sun is still cradled below
the horizon. She moves to dress and supposes that she's escaping the turmoil of a morning after
their first union, not quite ready to deal with the consequences.

It is...comforting to have an equal by her side, to be able to drop all her masks for a moment with
someone who shares her burdens. Cara can never begrudge Kahlan that, and their growing points
of similarities bring about an unexpected yet pleasant feeling.
Sparing a glance at the Mother Confessor, Cara fights the urge to return. Her bed has become more inviting than it was before. But waking to those blue eyes, to an emotion in them that Kahlan seems unaware of and which Cara is still afraid to put words to? Perhaps not yet.

She dons the cape of a scout and takes a nondescript horse from a bleary-eyed stable-girl at the southern gate.

It's a habit that's grown since she was appointed into the High Seat. She makes her rounds of the city wrapped in her cloak, trading gossip with fishmongers at the marketplace, listening for news from traders who traverse the River Kern while peeling her ears for rumours at the steps of the High House. The practise often gives her a more holistic view of the Empire and on more than one occasion, saves her from decisions that reward only a privileged few.

After hearing more than her fair share of vulgarity regarding what the Lord Rahl and the Mother Confessor's consummation might be like, she heads back.

Entering the soldier's barracks, she is surprised to see Jory pushing paperwork at one of the mess' tables, accompanied by alert and fully armed Midlander soldiers. Their presence must be succinct orders from D'Hara's Queen, if they are allowed to stay at the Palace Guard's living quarters at all.

Their faces become tellingly blank as she approaches and Kahlan's lieutenant jumps to attention as soon as Cara comes within earshot. "My Lord!"

"At ease, Jory. What are you doing here?"

"Awaiting the Mother Confessor's summons," Jory replies.

Cara raises a brow as she remembers the dagger she has left at their bedside. Sweeping a gaze at five of the occupied tables, she said, "Expected a ruckus, now did we?"

Wisely, Jory chooses not to comment.

Cara continues, "Don't worry, Renfeld. I'd sooner sell D'Hara to her enemies than harm a hair on her head."

Jory blinks. His expression is grave. "I believe you, you know."

Cara doesn't know what to think of the statement, and she eases into a smile as she realises that as of this moment, Kahlan isn't the only Midlander who doesn't want her dead.

The sun, rising in the east, pours into the courtyard, bathing the ancient stones in soft, nearly golden light.

After her foray through the city, Cara dons the red leathers of her regiment — the variety worn in central D'Hara which is conveniently without sleeves. Cara rolls her shoulders. She grips a wooden short-sword in one hand, clenching and unclenching the other as though reining in the hounds of the Keeper himself.

The recruit doesn't know what hits him. One moment, he is unsheathing his sword, the next his feet are whipped from under him and he lands on his backside, gazing wide-eyed at his opponent.

"And now you're dead," Cara tells him sensibly. "Stand up. Try again and this time, be more attentive."
Grudgingly, the boy of eighteen summers gets up, his face reddening as a growing number of Trimessi and Alkarians gather around to watch.

This time, Cara allows him to unsheathe his weapon.

A grinning Alkarian yells, "Gav, hold up your sword like you mean it, you big ninny!"

Refusing to be teased, he gives a massive yell before charging, stirring dust in his wake. Cara sidesteps and hits him with a quick and accurate thrust at a particularly sensitive trigger point. His hands fly to the sharp pain in his back and he falls to his knees.

"Don't let emotions get to you, boy."

With an agonised expression, the boy named Gavin nods, squinting up at her.

Observing that he's probably learned enough this morning and that his ego can hardly stand anymore teasing from his regiment; she offers him her hand. He takes it before bowing respectfully.

She advises, "Practice two or three hours every day with the weapon's master. In a month's time, I'll be back to see how well you've progressed."

"Yes, my Lord." He waits for her dismissal and she gives it with a wave of her hand. He limps to the gathered crowd.

Cara studies the row of seemingly entertained troops. Noticing that they regard her with increasing interest, her expression becomes decidedly feral.

"I see I've gathered an audience. Who's next?"

A hulking Trimessi steps in and though someone offers him a practice sword, he refuses. He unsheathes his blade.

Cara grins widely.

"Does she always tempt fate like this?"

Kahlann leans against the railings of the terrace, watching Cara from overhead.

"No more than she has to," Richard replies. "The Trimessi and the Alkarians have made it their mission to either kill or dismember her on the practice floor."

Kahlann stares at him in shock and a furious opinion nearly slips from her mouth, except Richard is smiling. Half his body leans eagerly over the balcony and he cajoles Cara from their perch, "You're getting old, Mason!"

Cara waves absently at him. Before either of them could blink, she dispatches the Trimessi with a few, force-filled strokes that are impressively efficient. Laughter echoes around the courtyard.

"I spoke too soon!" Richard comments loudly.

Cara growled, "Cypher, if you'd like a beating, come down here and join the rest of us!"

Richard shakes his head even as soldiers yell for him to enter in the revelry. "No thank you!" he shouts. "I'm happy to watch you make an example of everyone but me."
Turning to Kahlan, he motions to the scene and explains, "Sparring like this is a habit of hers, from before her days as a general. It helps build morale and makes her accessible to the lower rungs of the military.

"I wouldn't worry," he looks at Kahlan kindly even as she broadcasts her denial by gazing elsewhere. "Her skills far surpass anyone's in the ranks."

As though to prove his point, Cara goes through a slew of soldiers, each one more eager than the next. As they move forward to attack, she constantly traverses different paths through their defences, evolving far too quickly for any of them to truly discern a pattern.

With Kahlan's practised eye, Kahlan can see that Cara gives little to no opportunities for anyone disarm her. It takes its toll; Cara's arms begin to glisten with sweat, fluid yet strong as they weave around her opponents in clipped, economical arcs.

Studying her as she takes on two soldiers at once, Kahlan notices that Cara's technique is completely opposite hers. Kahlan embellishes with loops and ellipses as she moves from one stance to another. She uses them to confuse, intimidate and to keep a crowd from moving closer.

Kahlan can see that Cara likes to gore her opponents at close quarters, using bodies as a shield or a wall to push against as she moves from one kill to the next.

It's irresistibly primal. Kahlan bites her lower lip as she feels herself grow warm at the thought.

In half an hour, Cara has gone through nearly ten opponents, pausing to rest only when Richard summons a servant to serve her water. After dispatching an Alkarian quad, she gives them her encouragements and sends them off, dismissing the throng of spectators as she drops onto a bench.

Glancing at Kahlan and tipping her head forward in acknowledgement, she summons them with a wave then orders a servant to send for food and refreshments.

"I don't see how this raises morale," Kahlan comments as Richard leads her to where Cara sits. "They all seem rather dejected."

Richard smiles. "Failure is but a stepping stone to eventual victory."

By the time Richard and Kahlan traverse the stairway leading to the courtyard, Cara has sampled a tray of fruits, cheeses and bread.

Richard calls to her as he approaches, "She retires when she's ahead, a sure sign of her intelligence."

Cara smiles enigmatically as she looks around at the empty courtyard and at the wooden practice swords lying neatly on a table.

"Care for a spar?" she asks.

Richard sighs. "No, old friend. I have my trip to attend to. But you were ample entertainment if the cheers you were getting were any indication."

"Anything to serve D'Hara," she says lightly.

"Indeed. Now, if you'll excuse me. I have Zedd to deal with." Richard claps her forearm just as she does with his—an old D'Haran hand-shake—and they clap each other's backs. "Sister-in-arms."
"Brother," Cara acknowledges before letting go.

Richard leaves Cara and Kahlan standing alone in the morning heat. Reaching for a towel, Cara wipes her face, the back of her neck and then her arms, sitting down once more to take a bite out of an apple. She offers Kahlan a goblet of water.

They drink and Kahlan feels the tension rise. She joins Cara at the bench, her fingers tightening around the goblet's neck.

A sliver of mischief bends the sides of Cara's mouth. "How do you feel?"

"I would ask you the same question," Kahlan deflects. "You left our bed much earlier than I would have…wanted."

"I apologise, my lady. You," Cara sighs, "Creator…you're more than I imagined."

Kahlan reaches out to her, amazed that Cara allows it. Months ago, the same attempt would have been met with horror, a cold shoulder, or even a retort. She brushes the back of her fingers against Cara's face. The contact is surprisingly intimate and Cara leans into the touch.

Kahlan watches as Cara's exposed arms, tanned and neatly cut with honed muscle, shifts to support her. Cara leans into her space and she kisses the back of Kahlan's ear, her breath tickling the hair on Kahlan's neck. The smell of sweat and the sensation of heat radiating from Cara's damp clothing are enough to remind Kahlan of her desire and of just how brightly it burned last night.

Kahlan hears Cara swallow before she withdraws; their faces are inches apart. Cara's gaze flickers down to Kahlan's lips. Her flushed cheeks, her slightly erratic breathing tells Kahlan that given the chance, what happened last night would be repeated.

Clearing her throat, Kahlan shakes her head as though willing away the vestiges of a dream. There is something dangerous yet appealing about the way Cara pushes and prods at her control.

Kahlan anchors herself with a challenge, "Come Cara, spar with me."

Kahlan stares at the rare upturn of Cara's lips. With it, Cara Rahl becomes even more beautiful, as though a veil has been thrown aside. Sunlight reveals the subtle blush of a foregone youth, lips that have ripened beneath the D'Haran sun. The scar that runs from temple to cheek seems less a badge of her past than a wandering line which crafts a dignified brow, strong cheekbones and the defiant jut of her chin.

All the novelty a smile brings, Kahlan thinks, never least of which is infectious joy. Kahlan finds herself smiling in return.

"So my wife would test the strength of D'Hara's stock," Cara says. "At last!"

"You're insufferable. I'd like it if you refrained from referring to either of us as members of a stable. I've had enough of your poorly-chosen metaphors, thank you very much."

Cara throws her a wooden sword. "Fair enough." Before she can even acquire a fighting stance, Cara hesitates, as though reminded of something. Her gaze drops to Kahlan's abdomen. "I, ah… perhaps it isn't such a good idea. I wouldn't want you to get," Cara looks as though she swallowed a lemon, "hurt."
Kahlan fights the urge to laugh. "Nonsense, Lord Rahl. It won't be for another few weeks until we know and even then it won't be for sure."

"Oh, I'll make sure that it will be in a few weeks," Cara recovers, settling for shamelessness. "Now, show me what you've got and I'll give you the same." Cara whacks her wooden sword against Kahlan's.

Kahlan lunges forward. Cara parries and throws a daring counter-blow. Kahlan knows it's a foil and spins out of the way, defending with two well-placed slices that afford nothing. The edge of one flicks Cara's wrist as she moves past.

Cara rubs the sore spot, looking up in surprise. "Who trained you?"

"Only the best, Lord Rahl." Kahlan smiles while she enjoys Cara's bewilderment. She cannot help her taunt, "Now, wouldn't you want to know how the best fight? You've been spoiled by such easy pickings."

Cara raises her brow. "My Alkarians are hardly easy."

"Really, now? Then show me how you train them."

Cara's laugh echoes about the courtyard, showing her surprise at Kahlan's boldness. She scoffs at the challenge, "You may regret that you've asked."

Kahlan lifts her sword and tilts her head. "Never."

Cara enacts a few tentative strikes, testing Kahlan's reactions but the Mother Confessor does not react. Instead, she acts and every blow is followed by another. The fight progresses and neither of them give the other ground. Cara becomes increasingly wary, fatigue edging into her forearms as her muscles burn past the point of pleasantness and into agony. They have grown silent, their taunts sinking into grim concentration.

It's a tiny stumble, indiscernible to anyone but a woman trained by a Kelton weapons master and Kahlan sees it, a slight give in Cara's defence to compensate for her dwindling strength.

Kahlan's ensuing attack is unforgiving as she wields the wooden sword with both her hands. Cara's grunts punctuate the silence.

It's too late when Cara realises that her opponent has backed her into a corner. She feints then weaves up to strike at Kahlan's neck. Not a moment too soon, Kahlan has executed a similar yet quicker manoeuvre and they stand with their swords within inches of the other's face.

Cara's carefully neutral expression only serves to reveal that she hasn't experienced a stalemate in a long time. Cara should have felt guilty for having enjoyed any of this, but then she realises that her misgivings have crumbled last night in Kahlan's arms. There is now an empty cup to fill.

Cara lowers the wooden weapon. "A good match," she concedes.

"Indeed," Kahlan replies, before falling silent.

The servants prepare a table for them under the shade, laden with fruits, cheeses and bread. They sit and break their fast, eyeing each other with amusement.

Kahlan remembers the events preceding this one, before discovering Cara's session in the courtyard.
She wakes to an empty bed, trying to fight an unexpected feeling of hurt. She is not Cara's keeper; they may have shared a night together but it may mean nothing more than a performance of duty for the Lord Rahl. After her morning ablutions, she finally can't hold her curiosity any longer and asks for the whereabouts of the Lord Rahl.

Constance rounds the corner just as the steward is about to reply. The Alkarian dismisses the smaller man with a look and Constance overtakes the conversation, smooth as silk.

"She wakes before dawn, my lady, a habit that hasn't changed since she joined D'Hara's army. You'll find her at the biggest courtyard near the Guards' barracks, overseeing their training."

"Thank you, Constance," she says, turning to leave.

Constance starts, "I apologise, my lady, if I seem forward—"

"Don't worry, you already are," Kahlan says, her voice hard.

Constance eyes narrow but she forges on. Careless bravery is a distinct trait of the Alkarian soldier. "But she does not take the duty of wife lightly, or considers it merely her duty. For her to choose you at all is—"

"What D'Hara and the Midlands need," Kahlan finishes.

But Constance clearly isn't done. "No, my lady. You must understand, even if it takes all her will, even if it will drain all life from her, she will honour her place at your side, every nuance of what an ally, a wife and a lover means. She doesn't make promises lightly and just how well she tries to keep them is a testament to her integrity; it's who she is, it's why the people chose her, it's why the Lord Panis Rahl hid her away in Halin. She will give you everything and more. Her voice is soft, despite the impatience in it, filled with the memory of just how well Cara was loved as a general, a wife and mother once before.

Kahlan feels suddenly cold. She remembers a similar speech at the Garden of Life, and another one in the plains of the Azrith. "I don't need to be reminded of just who it is I married, lieutenant."

"Once again, I apologise Mother Confessor." This time, Constance bows, her hand to her chest. "I know you do not need reminding but please, as her wife you have nothing to fear but your own thoughts. Her trust is hard to gain but when you do, she is loyal and none can question her love."

Kahlan bites back a scathing reply about just how mercurial loyalties truly are and how self-interest and clever words can be misconstrued as love. She looks for deceit in Constance's expression and to her surprise, she finds none. The lieutenant believes everything she has said and Kahlan suspects that the quiet conviction stems from experience.

Kahlan nods, a clear dismissal, and Constance leaves without a backward glance. Her words however, stamp an indelible mark.

A mark that becomes even more prominent as their conversation continues.

After a few bites of a pear, Kahlan speaks, "I'm glad it's you."

"It's me that what?"

"That you're the one I had to marry."

Cara lowers her half-eaten loaf of bread, quiet for a long moment before she replies, "Thank you."
"No, thank you. You have been more gracious than most, than what has been expected." Kahlan gazes at her plate and sips at her water. "Others would have wasted what the Midlands had to offer."

"You're a person, not a thing and inasmuch as the Senate would like to believe otherwise, my decrees matter the most." Cara's gaze is kind. "Only a fool will throw away what you offer."

Kahlan points out, "I hardly deserve this treatment, after all the things that I've done. As a young Confessor, I would never have imagined my hand in all this."

Cara's eyes harden. "We won't have any more of that here, my wife. You are mine as I am yours. Either our sins are forgotten or we share in them. I won't spend a lifetime blaming you for such things when others have all the right to blame me for taking away their husbands, wives and children. Who am I to speak when I stand here just as blemished as you?"

"I..."

Cara stands abruptly. "I said I'll have no more of it." She rounds the table and kneels by her side, gazing up with fervour that she hopes Kahlan sees. "Please, no more of that talk. I need us to be strong; I need you to believe, truly believe that all this will work."

Kahlan smiles sadly, knowing that Constance's words have been secretly vindicated.

She touches Cara's cheek. "Of course, Cara. Of course."

TBC
Chapter Summary

Chapter 25 is about the issues Cara and Kahlan have to navigate as they realise that with different factions involved, the alliance is not as simple as it seems. The chapter also allows us a look into alt!Cara and alt!Kahlan's burgeoning feelings.

Chapter Notes

I'd like to thank my intrepid beta, Sionainn69 for the exceptional beta work. She has been beyond wonderful.

Part I.

She's a striking figure moving past carts, horses and soldiers, her loose blonde hair tamed only by a metal circlet over the crown of her head. She wears a thick, sable coat, black trousers and a pair of riding boots. The Red Lion's emblem sits at her right breast, a rearing beast lined in gold. Flecks of frost streak her clothing, mud and snow climbing up from the bottom of a dark, fur-lined cape.

Soldiers in the heavy bronze of the Midlands give her a wide berth, eyeing her beneath their winter hoods, their breath seething out in thick puffs of steam.

Cara acknowledges them with a tilt of her head. Their uneasy bows tell her that they are unused to the attentions of a noblewoman. Others grin at her from beneath frosty eyebrows, memories of her morning training sessions with the Aydindril Home Guard still fresh in their minds.

A young man runs up to her, dragging a chestnut mare behind him. He is dressed warmly and draped in the colours of Aydindril's House.

"My Lord," he greets.

"What is it?"

"The Mother Confessor requests your presence." He hands her the reigns.

It is a four-mile walk from this part of the camp to the large hall where Cara knows Kahlan performs her duties. This is either an urgent request or a subtle display of Kahlan's sway over her wife.

Cara bites the inside of her cheek as she mounts the Kelton steed, not knowing whether to be amused or annoyed. "What of her appointments this morning?"

The servant merely bows, perhaps ignorant of the answer or choosing not to reply. Intrigued, Cara dismisses him.
She urges her mount towards a building in the distance, only slightly larger than the Confessor's Palace itself, which looms over Aydindril. The Palace's spires reach up towards the sky, its outline lost in low clouds blowing in from the western mountain ranges, the sun indistinct amidst a swirl of whites.

She rides past the more congested parts of Aydindril's wintry city, avoiding the eaves of several low houses and careful to slow her horse to a walk when she passes a congregation of homes. Several children reach up for her feet, shouting excitedly, "My Lord, my Lord!" while their mothers or fathers look on. The children squeal their delight when she grins down at them, and sometimes she pats one or two on the head.

Hostility from her first days in Aydindril hasn't entirely faded, and the adults' weathered expressions are replaced by wariness and curiosity, as though unsure of what to make of her.

When she approaches the tall poles notched with markings which denote the marketplace within the city walls, she is one of a few allowed on horse-back. Merchants with their carts and a number of the citizenry—their arms laden with fruit and meat—part to the sides of the wide cobbled road.

D'Haran officers, the few who have been allowed within the walls to sample Midlander culture, are distinct with their blonde hair and blue eyes. They say loudly, "My Lord Rahl!" while bowing to their waists. The greeting, laced in the hard, D'Haran accent, grates through the hubbub and many turn their heads to watch as the Lord Rahl of the D'Haran Empire picks her way through the marketplace without a proper escort.

She is relieved when her horse begins its climb leading up to the wide courtyard which surrounds the Confessor's Palace. As yet, she hasn't gotten used to all the attention her rank affords her.

The noise of the market dwindles while the strikes of her horse's hooves are loud against the walls, alerting the Aydindril Home Guard to her presence.

They do not reprimand her even when all others, including the highest ranking nobles, are required to deposit their mounts at the stables. They seem familiar with this Rahl's proclivity for startling entrances and they bow as is customary towards the Mother Confessor's consort.

Cara enters the Palace through a large archway which is guarded on either side by tall, marble statues of Kahlan's ancestors. Further in, smaller, oak doors are opened for her, the guards bowing in greeting rather than obeisance; after all, many of the Palace's guards hail from the ruined city of Nicobarese. Loyalty isn't something they grant simply by her association to the Mother Confessor.

The interiors of the Confessor's Palace are noticeably warmer, heated by a clever system of ducts and magical artefacts. Representatives from the Central Council, usually in groups of two or three, leave an unoccupied, wide circle around her as though she is plagued by a disease.

She is familiar with this treatment. She is a foreigner, and her forbearer was a mindless conqueror who had no respect for their borders. In their eyes, she hardly deserves a second glance.

She unfastens her cloak, which fall into the arms of a waiting servant. She also undoes the first few clasps of her coat, leaving a fair amount of cleavage on display.

The servant informs her of Kahlan's whereabouts. Cara's quick strides bring her deeper into the Confessor's Palace. She walks past a fountain that branches out into a maze of corridors and encounters Zedd just as she enters a wide entryway which leads to a part of Aydindril's library. He is hurrying towards the stables, carrying several books, and stuffing them into a rucksack as he
goes. Three scrolls stick out from a pocket in his robes.

He smiles widely when he sees her. The wizard seems to be one of only a few who are genuinely pleased by her presence in Aydindril.

"Lord Cara Rahl," he greets.

"Wizard Zedd." Cara quickly thinks of a topic to ease them into a conversation. "How is Richard?"

"He had headaches but those have subsided, thank the Creator." He tilts his head, taking in her presence and how it seems as though she has just arrived from the ramparts beyond the gates. Then, just as boorishly as he treats a majority of things, he adds, "I've drawn the hexes in the Mother Confessor's chambers, just like every other day I've been here."

Cara frowns. Inasmuch as she values Zedd's guidance, he finds great amusement in riddles, jokes and general impropriety, very much like a mischievous child.

"You don't have to remind me," Cara replies, miffed.

"Don't I?" Zedd looks at her from beneath his thick, bushy eyebrows and waggles them suggestively. "Make sure you put my fertility spells to good use, every day as recommended or you won't hear the end of it."

Cara blushes, indignant. "Have you no respect, wizard?"

"Respect?" Zedd prattles, throwing up his arms and dropping his books along with them. "What need do I have for respect! We need an heir! Bah!" He glares at her before realising that his haul of precious research is on the floor. He barks, "What are you standing there for? Help an old man, I have a bad back."

Sighing, Cara checks for any witnesses before bending over to pick up Zedd's things. She places them in the sack he leaves open for her.

"It's criminal, what you get away with," she mutters.

He closes the sack, dust wafting up from the dirty container and lugs it over his shoulder, telling her pointedly, "I'll see you. Tomorrow." Cara rolls her eyes at the emphasis. Zedd continues, "Don't you dare waste my spells, Lord Rahl. All that work!"

"I never do," Cara retorts.

She only realises what she has said as soon as the words are out of her mouth. By then, Zedd is grinning. Cara glares; he is far cleverer than he lets on.

"Good!" Zedd says.

He leaves before she can compose a scathing reply, chortling his way past the entryway and around a corner to the stables. For all Cara knows, he is laughing all the way back to the Wizard's Keep.

Cara shakes her head and begins climbing a series of stone staircases built around the outside of the Confessor's Palace. Several windows provide a view of the surrounding land. Even as she feels the cold bite past her clothing, the scene never ceases to amaze her.

The capital city of Aydindril rests against an outcropping of rock, its edges sprawling towards the River Kern, which splits to either side of the city. Beyond the river are forested plains that stretch
to the darkened Boundary in the east, south to a more temperate Galea and west to the tall, snowy peaks of the Rang'Shada mountain ranges.

From the rooms in the west wing, one can see a forest of evergreens meander at the entrance of the Jara Pass, dwindling up the mountain faces on either side. It is a blanket of muted green, lost beneath the morning's snow. The Pass itself is a break in Rang'Shada that provides a week-long journey to the ruins of Nicobarese.

The snows have begun to melt elsewhere but Aydindril, situated far north, is experiencing the last, desperate snowfalls of winter's clutches.

As a D'Haran who grew up in warmer climates, Cara should have hated the weather. Except that she doesn't for reasons that are slowly revealing themselves to her.

She enters the private sitting room, gravitating towards the hearth burning brightly in the centre. She lounges on the furs and rearranges cushions on the floor, finding a comfortable spot three paces from the fire. A servant brings her a steaming mug of cider and a tray of bread, cheese and warm stew.

She begins to wolf down the meal, only aware of Kahlani's presence when a lithe figure in a white dress rises from a nearby desk. She was hidden behind a bookcase. Cara tracks Kahlani's movements as she joins her.

"Forgive me, my lady," Cara mumbles with her mouth full as Kahlani sits beside her. "I didn't realise you were here."

"Oh please. As though we both didn't already know that you lack the manners of a noble."

Cara raises a brow. "What?" she exclaims with a hand on her chest, taking mock offense. "Why, I'm the Lord of D'Hara! Manners are beneath me."

That has the intended effect. The worry creasing Kahlani's brow smoothens as she gives Cara a small, grateful smile. She pilfers a grape from Cara's plate and slips it into her mouth. Cara finds herself staring at Kahlani's moistened lips.

"The Central Council has been jittery; I'm growing tired of their constant whingeing. 'An entire regiment of Alkarians at their doorstep,' Kahlani mimics in the honeyed tones of a Council member, "whatever shall we do? What if they decide to take over Aydindril in one fell sweep? With only two thousand men?""

Her voice hardens, "Spirits! You would think some of them never marched against each other. They would rather bicker about the Alkarian Regiment than realise that Darken's retainers have hindered the reconstruction of Nicobarese!"

"Is this why you've called me here?" Cara asks. "To report on the preparations? You could have sent for Jory instead. Or Raina."

"Raina? Really? She'd rather hunt for non-existent boar in this weather than spend a minute indoors." Kahlani eyes glint with amusement. "Jory avoids its intrigues as much as he can. I can't say the same of you, my Lord."

Cara shrugs. "Indeed, and the stew tastes better indoors. But that can't be the only reason why you've asked for me, can it?"

Kahlani rolls her eyes and concedes, "I do prefer your presence to the Council's." Cara can't help a
triumphant smirk but it is quickly tempered by Kahlan's, "On occasion, mind you."

They consider each other with bemused smiles. It's only been a few months since their wedding but Cara regards Kahlan with brazen curiosity –her gaze takes in Kahlan's guileless blue eyes, cheeks that are rosy from the cold, the dark locks which fall against the sides of her face in fascinating rivulets. Without thinking, Cara's hand tucks an errant strand behind Kahlan's ear. The touch is still unfamiliar, still somewhat reserved but Kahlan does not pull away and neither of them stiffens into an uncomfortable silence.

Instead, Cara feels her heart beat a little bit faster. She clears her throat. "Now that the horsemen from Kelton have arrived, the First will be ready to march through the Pass and finally begin the campaign."

"We could have handled it ourselves," Kahlan chides. "I can't believe you've only requested thirty men from Jory's regiment."

Cara caresses Kahlan's chin with the pad of her thumb, a gesture that is more affectionate than she intends. "The D'Haran Empire will right its wrongs," Cara says. "If the rogues in the Jara Pass swear fealty to the D'Haran High Seat, which has been asked of them time and time again, then we will avoid needless bloodshed. If they wish to stay adamant about their so-called loyalties to Darken Rahl and continue their sacking of Jaran towns by the morrow, then they shall meet the sharp end of my sword."

Cara's expression becomes drawn. Deeds enacted by the Rahl before her weigh heavily on her shoulders despite Kahlan's willingness to exonerate D'Hara's crimes in the privacy of their bedchambers. "Darken Rahl gave those western retainers too much freedom by letting them loose on Nicobarese. They've grown drunk with it. Women and men who are addicted to that brand of power can be unreasonable, reckless and sometimes mindless things." Cara becomes grim. "Hopefully the prospect of death at the Red Lion's hand will cure them of it."

"You don't like loose ends," Kahlan says, putting a hand on Cara's thigh.

Kahlan's tendency to communicate through touch is one of many things Cara has learned to accept. It's also something that the Mother Confessor displays to no one but her.

They are friends, yes.

Cara finds herself visiting the Confessor's Palace not for the stew but for the company. On the rare occasions that she hunts in the surrounding forests, she surrenders the kill to the Palace's kitchens, gutting the animals herself before letting the cooks handle the meat. Kahlan would sometimes find her rushing to get to a bath, covered in blood and reeking of entrails.

"I have men and women who can do this for me," Kahlan says on one such incident.

Cara shrugs, unable to explain why she takes an interest in the contents of her wife's meals.

Kahlan's features soften. "I enjoyed the pheasant last time. Thank you."

Then and there, when Kahlan smiles and tells her with a look that her gestures have been noticed, Cara realises her reasons and she braves the forests once more with renewed purpose.

They share their meals, they swap stories. More often than not, Cara sends for D'Haran wine aged in the cellars of Acrimar, bringing expensive vintages to their table for Kahlan to enjoy. She secretly takes pride in Kahlan's praise of a particular year, as though Cara has grown the vines herself.
Cara learns of Kahlan's sheltered childhood, the discipline instilled upon young Confessors and the responsibility that was set on Kahlan's shoulders even before she could reason. She learns that Kahlan's mother was a powerful Queen and that her father was Confessed by choice, opting for a life of service to the Mother Confessor. It was a partnership that brought two nations together to form what is now Galea.

"I'm no stranger to such unions. They bear their own fruit," Kahlan tells her, referring to their own situation.

Cara is saddened, but she is also proud. One can tell that Kahlan tries to deny all notions of a life that could have been different. It would be too painful—and much too foolish—to think that perhaps she could have grown up as a normal, carefree girl instead of an heir to a throne and the next Mother Confessor. It would be too far from the truth.

In conversations that are punctuated with laughter, Cara also learns of Kahlan's training with the wizards of the Keep and of her close friendship with Zedd, who guides her through much of her travails after her mother's death.

As she fills an empty cup with stories of Kahlan's life, Cara is compelled to fill it too. She begins with only the surface—her life as a young Alkarian recruit, the early deeds that brought her to Panis Rahl's attention. But because Kahlan listens so well and because she wheedles so much more convincingly (and subtly) than Zedd, Cara dredges up memories that are more painful: the sacrifices that gained her the ranking of General at such a young age, the campaign against Michael Cypher's rebellion.

They both know that the subject of Cara's family will be reserved for a much later date, when time has allowed her wounds to scab over. Not healed, no—Cara doubts the wounds will ever close, but she is determined to lay them out for Kahlan to see and for Cara to take apart until they become that dull ache which never goes away.

Cara never knew that she would take Kahlan's companionship so willingly or be soothed by her compassion. There are many things about Kahlan Amnell that do not manifest in a Central Council meeting or the battlefield or even in the hearing of supplicants. Cara finds that she enjoys them, and revels in being one of only a few who sees this side to her.

Her heart, which sometimes can hardly be stilled, tells Cara that they are not just friends. As though to fling its point in her direction, Cara's mind grabs a memory from a few nights ago: Kahlan's firm body writhing beneath her, those lips whispering her name, the Rada'Han shining around a delicate, tanned neck.

Cara tucks the memory away, trying to keep her expression from revealing her thoughts.

"Loose ends have a way of biting your behind when you least expect it." Cara raises a goblet of mead, a salute to past mistakes that have taught her better, and then sips. In a more serious tone, she continues, "Anyway, I will have the people of the Midlands accept the Mother Confessor's consort."

Kahlan blue eyes widen; a small articulation of surprise. She insists, "The Midlands abides by the Mother Confessor's decisions. And you're hardly a consort. You're the Lord Rahl."

"Abiding is very different from loyalty. We cannot rule a reluctant populace. This is my chance to clear Rahl's name."

"You take too much upon yourself."
"So do you," Cara scolds. She takes the hand on her thigh, turning it over and kissing Kahlan's palm. She watches as Kahlan licks her lips as warmth touches warmth and it strikes Cara that this beautiful woman is her lover.

She once thought their love-making would become mechanical, that their imperative to produce a child would make it a cold attempt. Instead, Cara finds great solace in knowing that the nights are moments spent with her. Kahlan waits for her and as soon as they lie together, Cara lets her guard down. If the day has been particularly gruelling, they would spend the night lying side by side simply talking, chipping away at each other's barriers and slipping into the dream world, aided by the soft, whispered notes of each other's voices.

Ah, but there are times–and indeed there are too many for Cara to readily admit–when Cara can't help but acquiesce to Kahlan's touch, to be drawn in by the desire burning in her eyes. Cara revels in being the object of Kahlan's attentiveness, of shyness punctuated by surprising boldness in bed. She allows Cara's unyielding exploration of what brings her pleasure, and this form of surrender only entices Cara to have more.

It is rare to find a lover with Kahlan's bold sensuality, one who knows what she wants and expresses them without fear. Cara supposes that the Mother Confessor has known no other way. The kings and queens of the Midlands bow to the ruler of Aydindril and they rely on her clear-mindedness. So every time Kahlan whispers for Cara to take her, her voice hoarse with arousal and certainty, Cara's skin is lit with flame and her heart bursts with a thousand, nameless emotions.

She complies. Always–if only to try and extinguish the heat but it only burns warmer and warmer until pleasure crests in a wave and washes her away with it.

It is with these recollections that she looks at Kahlan now.

"I'm going to kiss you," she informs her without preamble, sweeping all other topics aside. This rarely happens, if at all. Cara is usually so engrossed with her tasks as Commander and Lord.

Kahlan fumbles for a reply but Cara's lips are already on hers, a soft, wet tongue tracing her lower lip.

Cara bides her time, savouring Kahlan's taste—the tang of mead, the warmth of her breath, the sweetness which reminds Cara of honey. When Kahlan's tongue slips against hers—it's shape wet and soft and coiling around Cara's with its own, lustful patois—the jolt shoots straight to her gut and further down. The fists which have gathered Cara's tight-fitting coat pull her even closer and before Cara has the sense to escalate their tryst, Kahlan's hand inches its way to the buttons of Cara's coat, slipping underneath to feel her warm skin.

Cara smiles against Kahlan's mouth, pulling away to press her lips against her chin as she watches Kahlan's other hand work on the remaining buttons.

"There are no spells in this room, Mother Confessor," she whispers.

Kahlan momentarily clutches her collar, her thumb caressing the soft fur which lines it. "When are you going to call me by my name? I think we're past titles, don't you?"

Cara purses her lips, her eyes twinkling as she catches Kahlan's eye. "I don't know," she ponders aloud. Cara wraps an arm around Kahlan's waist and drags her bodily across the remaining distance between them, positioning Kahlan's body between her thighs.

And just as her emotions are bound to ambush her at the most inopportune times, she feels a lump
in her throat. Apprehension pushes against her chest as she locks gazes with her wife but she forces the sound out by saying, "Kahlan."

Cara swallows. The name slips like silk from her tongue.

She has always been afraid to utter it because so much is attached to the name: the fate of Nicobarese, the demise of Halin, the travails that have brought her the High Seat of D'Hara. Surprisingly, Cara's voice paints it differently. There is tenderness there and hints of a smile. Kahlan kisses her then, as though to taste her name on Cara's lips, to sample the emotions it brings.

"You must promise me that you will come back in one piece," Kahlan says. "Don't make me march out there with a regiment of my own."

"Of course, I have an impeccable record."

"So I'm told." Mischief gleams in Kahlan's blue eyes and she pushes Cara down into the furs, straddling her as she splays eager hands across Cara's chest. She hums with satisfaction as Cara's hands reach for her calves and skim up her legs beneath her clothing, causing Kahlan's dress to ride up her thighs. "I expect you to receive a hero's welcome, my Lord Rahl."

"I'll take nothing less, my lady."

Cara's heart pounds in her ears when Kahlan lowers her lips to hers.

The morning passes and neither of them leaves the room for a long, long time.

"That's a shit-eating grin," Raina comments.

Cara ignores her, rounding the captain to study the map laid out on a large table behind her.

"I was told not to disturb her the whole morning," Constance pipes in. Lounging lazily on a large chair swathed in warm furs, she tries and fails to hide her own grin behind a meat-stuffed pastry she is chewing. "She had an urgent appointment with the Mother Confessor."

"Ah," Raina says conspiratorially. "No wonder she's late."

"Do any of you mind?" Cara growls, gesturing at the battle plans arranged before her. There is no real anger in her tone, only urgency.

"No we don't," Raina sasses, joining her at the table and rearranging a few of the red, wooden carvings that denote their troops. They are littered around a palm-sized wooden carving of Aydindril, depicted as a castle with a single, towering spire. "And we'd be absolutely thrilled to serve a little, bouncing Rahl sometime in the future."

"Near future," Constance corrects, chuckling.

Raina nods in agreement and then seeing that Cara is well on her way to losing her patience, Raina says, "Loosen up, Cara."

"I'll loosen up once these western pests are removed from the Midlands' map."

"As you wish, my Lord."

Harnessing humour is Berdine's habit but Cara can see that ever since Berdine and Raina started sharing a bed, Raina has somehow unearthed her own cheekiness. It isn't unpleasant and Cara
encourages familiarity in the war room. Her subordinates are likely to be more honest with her that way but it also means that they are unafraid to get all up in her business, to form their own opinions when it concerns Cara's well-being.

Not quite as outspoken as Denna or Berdine, Raina understands when to stop her inquiry. She is serious now, leaning over the map with a contemplative expression. Her almond-shaped eyes peer past long, dark brown hair, features that are quite unlike the rest of her Alkarian sisters, who are usually blonde and blue-eyed.

Raina begins, "The snows have started to melt, despite the weather. A safe journey through the Pass should be possible in a fortnight."

"I don't want to meet them head-on," Cara says. "We cannot fight them as one would in a battlefield. They have used the terrain to their advantage and D'Harans have never fought dissidents in snow. This will require a more delicate hand."

"Do you wish to capture their leader?" Constance asks, leaning forward on her chair with her forearms on her knees, suddenly intrigued.

Cara nods. "I'd like to cut off the monster's head and pick off its pieces."

"That is if we can find the head," Raina muses. "There are three commanders from Darken's personal guard and a captain from D'Hara's own army, each with their own cell assigned to four different places on the map."

"Jory and I will lead a smaller force for this task, around thirty men to avoid detection and so that we move quickly. I want you and Constance to keep them occupied with a show of force. We'll slip into their camps at night."

"Assassinations in the snow? You'll need an elite squad of only the best." Raina looks suddenly sceptical and Cara anticipates an argument as Raina poses the obvious question, "So you're taking the Midlands Northerners with you?"

"Yes."

Constance covers her face with her hands and groans her disapproval while Raina stares at her, mouth agape. "Cara, no. Jarans would sooner slip a knife in your back than call you their Lord."

"I'll test that theory later," Cara says grimly. "There is no way I'm allowing the bulk of our troops deep into the forest. We'll be slaughtered. Our experience in guerrilla warfare is limited to Cypher's rebels striking from terrain that a lot of us grew up in. This is unfamiliar territory and even if the Third has been stationed in snow before, fighting in it is a different matter entirely."

"So you'd use us as distraction?" Raina is already half-disgusted with the idea.

"Yes. I believe the Jarans themselves should have a hand in retaking control of their Pass."

"Oh, what's to stop them from resenting you for it?" Raina's tone quivers as she tried to control it from rising and her knuckles are white with restrained anger.

"Nothing," Cara replies mildly. "We have a few more weeks to train with them. If all goes well, the force will be half-and-half, Alkarians and Midlanders working together."

"Let me ride with you at least," Constance pleads, standing up.
Cara sighs. She is more concerned about Raina, whose arms have stiffened as she leans heavily against the map, trying very hard to ignore Cara. A scowl mars her face. Though Constance is usually Cara's second in command, it wouldn't do for Raina to worry during a campaign.

"Constance will ride with me."

"Good," Raina sneers but the fire is gone from her eyes, "I don't want you to have to pass Rahl's torch to someone else so early in the game. If this is some political stunt to get the Northerners on your side…"

"Then it's settled," Cara cuts in; she doesn't like where the conversation is going. The cooperation of the local populace would greatly increase their chances for a victory and it is the only outcome Cara will accept. Reclaiming the Jaran Pass can only bring goodwill towards her Empire and assures that the peace curries favour in even the most remote of provinces.

Raina grits her teeth, communicating her disapproval as she glowers at the map. The great D'Haran Empire has never pandered to another nation, and never to the smaller tribes of a distant land. With Raina's reluctance to entrust her safety to Jarans, Cara is reminded that this alliance is a reality that even its staunchest supporters are only beginning to adjust to.

Cara straightens and clips her cloak around her as she prepares to go outside. Her tone is firm and brooks no argument. "Ready fifteen of your best men and women. I'll have them at the training grounds tomorrow afternoon."

"Of course, my Lord," Raina replies tightly. "We live to serve."

Cara rouses early the next day.

She dresses in exquisitely woven wool, eyeing a half-naked Confessor as she continues to sleep beneath thick blankets. They warmed their bed the night before, trailing sweat on each other's bodies as their lovemaking became insistent and vigorous. Cara decides that she likes it: the bursts of pleasure they wring from each other's bodies; the silent burning kisses which say more than mere words ever could.

There are times when she regrets this habit of waking before dawn. That in itself is a troubling thought; Cara isn't one to indulge such impulses but somehow, waking up beside Kahlan has whittled her control.

Sighing, she grabs her boots, made in a style that is more commonplace in colder climates. A thick coat from Kelton hangs by their bed. A grateful smile --rare but heartfelt --tugs at Cara's mouth. The coat is a gift from Kahlan, given to her during the first week of her stay after she found Cara shivering in front of a fire more times than was healthy. It fits her snugly, hugging her curves, as though the many moments Kahlan has spent holding her at night educated the Mother Confessor on what size fits Cara best. Lined with gold, sable fur only found in the district of Nicobarese, it is warmer than anything that can be conjured by a D'Haran seamstress.

Kahlan may not show it but Cara's insistence on wearing it at every instance pleases her.

Cara pokes the dying hearth, urging it to liven up by throwing in a few more logs. Once satisfied that the remaining burn will keep Kahlan warm for the rest of her slumber, Cara buckles her swordbelt and as silently as she could, leaves the room.

She finds the Aydindril Home Guard training with the fifteen men she has chosen from Jory's regiment. Jory himself seems to be absent, perhaps already at the ramparts with Raina to choose
the Alkarian half of their force.

Amidst the sound of steel against steel, she calls out to them in a strong, clear voice. They stop their training to turn to her. She grins and picks up a practice sword from a nearby table.

Risson and Martel – armed with large axes passed on from their forefathers and strengthened by their hatred for the D’Haran retainers who had laid siege on their land – very nearly hack her to pieces at her prompting. She instantly regrets cajoling a pair of Midlands Northerners, reminded that these are not Alkarians or even Trimessi, that they have been wronged by a Rahl before.

Kahlarn, who has taken a well-timed rest from hearing her morning supplicants to watch Cara's progress, screams from the courtyard entrance, "Both of you! Stop! Immediately!"

They don't, perhaps because they can't hear or see her over their own rage. Wielding their axes with both their hands, they batter Cara's defence, breaking three practice swords Cara picks up in quick succession and then pounding against her short sword, which she has hurriedly unsheathed.

Northerners wield their axes not against men but against the wide trunks of ancient trees, which feed their fires. Brute strength and raw anger are behind their blows; her ears ring at the sound and sparks fly from where their blades meet. Her arms quaver at the shock. Instead of countering them strength-for-strength, she absorbs the power behind them, letting the blows slide along her blade. She keeps her centre of gravity as low as possible.

The Guard who has gathered from the sidelines do not dare join in the fray. From the corner of her eye, Cara watches as Kahlarn begins to reel in her Confessor magic, her robes flowing around her as she runs the remaining distance to aid her ailing wife.

No Kahlarn, not yet, she wants to say, except she can't; she is too preoccupied with her attackers.

It takes several graceless moves – too risky in that she garners a long gash across her abdomen and another on her arm – to whack both their heads with the heel of her sword.

They fall in front of her in a motionless heap. She doesn't have time to recover. A second later, she discards her weapon and grabs Kahlarn by the waist just as she runs past, holding her back.

Hoarsely, she pleads, "No, Kahlarn. It isn't worth it."

"The price of disobedience is death," Kahlarn tells her in that frighteningly blank voice Cara associates with her power. Confessor magic fizzles against Rahl's barrier put there almost immediately by Cara's subconscious and the frisson it creates suddenly reminds Cara of how dangerous this situation is.

"No," Cara insists. Blood from her open wounds begin to seep into her thick, winter clothing and the wind becomes colder than it was. Already, she feels her head lighten and she tries to strengthen her hold.

Kahlarn is still straining against her embrace, her hands outstretched towards Cara's attackers. Cara tells her, "A Rahl must pay for what happened in Nicobarese. I understand their pain. Spare them for my sake. It's all I ask."

In front of the entire Aydindril Home Guard, she collapses in Kahlarn's arms, her arms still tightly clasped around the Mother Confessor. The events linger at the edge of memory and Cara recalls Kahlarn's suddenly terrified expression as she realises something horribly important.
She wakes up later that night, her throat dry. Kahlan is nowhere to be seen but Cara spies a set of brown eyes belonging to a familiar pair and Zedd himself, who glares at her disapprovingly for a long moment, his hands glowing as he weaves a healing spell over her arm.

"What made you think of taking on two Northern weapons masters all at once?"

"Weapons masters?" she croaks, her gaze swinging to Risson and Martel.

"These two are the foremost axe-wielding experts in these parts. You should be more careful."

After eyeing her with displeasure, he shifts his attention to his guests. "Well?" Zedd bellows at the two. "What do you have to say for yourselves? And bring her water, you insolent oafs. Can't you see she's thirsty?"

Risson and Martel jump at the wizard's tone. Martel brings a cup of water to her lips. She sips, grateful for the coolness that soothes her throat.

Both men have matching beards, parts of it braided along their jaw. They sport the long hair of the Jaran tribes, tied in knots over their heads. They look like brothers and it is easy to mistake one for the other when they are seated. Risson, however, is taller when upright and a scar runs down a brow and over his left eye. They both appear fearsome, tattoos curl from beneath their collars and up their necks. Today, however they seem noticeably tamed by Zedd's wrath.

"Who sent you to kill me?" she asks.

They exchange looks, caught off guard. The wizard's eyes narrow to slits, prompting them to answer.

Risson swallows. "The dead." He gazes at the window to avoid her gaze. He whispers, "And the living."

The Northern tribes are closed orders and those outside are deemed strangers, even enemies. The tribal code dictates whom they marry, what they eat, the education they must undergo in Aydindril, their loyalty to the Mother Confessor, and even the weapons they wield. Those who live in the Jara Pass are willing to die and kill to preserve their way of life or to defend sacred land.

In the eyes of a tribal member, vengeance would have been the justice required of their code for the defilement of Nicobarese and killing Cara would have been an acceptable purification rite.

Kahlan has mentioned all this in passing on the road to Aydindril, one of many lectures about the different cultures in the Midlands. Cara was sceptical at first, because such ritual acts of murder are mostly unheard of in D'Hara.

"What stops you from killing me now?" Cara presses, sitting up to address them both.

Risson looks at his feet. "We honour the Mother Confessor as our own, and now she claims you as hers," as though this should explain everything.

It does in its own way, Cara thinks, because it says more than it should –that Cara Rahl will not be considered an outsider, at least not by these men.

Their remorse isn't vocal but they accompany her for the rest of the night, following all of Zedd's orders while the wizard bombards them with reprimands and difficult requests. They don't complain –perhaps it's what honour requires of them –one riding out into the deep forests for herbs, the other bringing up fruits that aren't in season.
They seem haunted by the morning's events. Their eyes say it all—they are aware that they were nearly confessed by the Mother Confessor herself and that they could very well have been given a fate worse than death for disobeying her. In the eyes of the tribe, their families’ lives would have been forfeit.

With Zedd by her side, Cara falls into a dreamless sleep. Morning comes and when Cara wakes before the sun, the Northerners have both positioned themselves beside the hearth, their bearded faces made fierce by shadows cast in the firelight.

When Cara makes a move to sit up from her bed, they stand from their chairs.

Cara asks, "You have duties this morning?"

"Of course," Risson replies.

"I have a favour to ask of you."

Risson and Martel exchange looks. Martel, his voice rife with doubt and his tone lower than his fellow tribesman, replies, "We owe you more than a favour."

Cara's smile is small and knowing. "It won't matter. All debts will be paid in time and you'll be serving with me. I have fifteen Alkarian soldiers who you need your expertise to survive the snows of the Pass. Train them."

Their eyes widen. It is an unusual request but they nod. The perils of the North are known even by children in the Midlands' southernmost tip and D'Harans, who have so little of these perils in their own land, are ill-equipped for them.

They acknowledge her by saying her name as one would an equal, "Cara."

"Risson, Martel," she responds.

Zedd seems familiar with the immense reserve which is typical of the Midlands' Northerners. Satisfied by their gestures, he remains quiet, waving them away.

"Patch me up, Zedd. These are shallow wounds and I have duties to attend to."

The wizard raises a brow at her. "Not as shallow as I'd like, Lord Rahl. They ruined your coat." He points at the coat hanging on a chair, hanging open where a large gash has split it, blood staining its edges.

Kahlan will not be pleased.

"How is she?"

Zedd instantly knows whom she's talking about. "Shaken. But you can imagine she went through all her duties this morning without batting an eyelash." Zedd's disapproval gives way to defeat as he reminds himself that stubbornness is a trait neither of these two will likely change. "Cara, promise me you'll both live for another decade at least. You can't keep taking risks like this. It may be that after all you've been through your life means a little bit less to you but you have to understand that it isn't just the Empire or the Midlands that need you. There is a purpose beyond duty or honour or any of those high ideals you hold yourself to."

Cara purses her lips. "Duty and honour are all I need."
Zedd studies her for a long moment before finally dressing her wounds with silent, practised motions. Before Cara can get up to change, he puts a gentle hand on her thigh, clears his throat and speaks, "Neither of you may know it yet and maybe you'll realise it soon, but for the task ahead of you, duty and honour are not enough."

His words ring in her ears as he gathers his things and leaves with a bow. She is surprised that they continue to haunt well into the day.

Kahlán has words for her after when she finds Cara practicing in a private garden, hefting a Northern axe in one hand and a short sword in another.

Cara's tightly bandaged torso and arm as well as the coat which hangs on a shoulder causes a pang of worry. Zedd reported on the injuries earlier, telling Kahlán that rest will likely cure the remaining damage. Unfortunately, Cara is not one to sit idle for long.

Trying not to sound too admonishing, Kahlán says, "So the Northerners have endeared themselves to you."

Cara enacts detailed patterns of movement for her new weapons, her forms fluidly moving from one to another. Kahlán recognises them as several, different cores that are unique to the Northern way of fighting. Cara displays a rare acumen in quickly and intuitively learning technique as she moves from mere repetition to actual power in minutes.

After a few, well-placed hacks, the practice dummy falls to the ground, both arms severed. Kahlán hums her approval.

Cara tells her, "Risson and Martel and their tribes are shadows of what I once was, of the vengeance I represented."

"You were never them, Cara," Kahlán scolds gently. "All the opportunities the Creator gave you, and you never laid a hand on a Midlander. After this, you understand that they'll follow you to the ends of the earth."

Cara shrugs. "Perhaps that's what we need for this campaign. Maybe it's what I deserve."

Kahlán becomes pensive as she studies her wife. Cara is becoming more and more familiar with the warmth in Kahlán's gaze and Cara doesn't squirm beneath them this time. Instead, she continues to return the weapons on a nearby rack, allowing herself to feel the increasing amount of affection Kahlán gives her. For the past few days, Cara's trust is a warm balm and so much of it was bestowed yesterday.

Suddenly reminded of what happened, Kahlán becomes increasingly aware of just how dangerous yesterday's events truly were. If Cara touched Kahlán a second later than she did, the Lord of the D'Haran Empire would be Kahlán's thrall for the rest of her life. The thought is unthinkable and nearly painful; Kahlán can hardly bear to think of the Lion-heart as anything other than a woman of her own devices.

Kahlán says evenly, "I could have Confessed you."

Cara stares at her for a long while before lifting her gaze to stare at the sky. "But you didn't."

"You," Kahlán begins. She swallows. "How can you be so blasé about this? I could have Confessed you! Do you know what that means?"
"You had plans for it before," Cara tells her. There is no poison in her words, only a grim acceptance of what they mean to each other.

Of what she thinks we mean to each other, Kahlan amends bitterly, giving voice to emotions that began an insistent march during their wedding night and are now slowly trampling over her doubts.

Cara lowers her head and she can't see the hurt in Kahlan's expression.

Kahlan's voice is barely above a whisper, "Cara, things have changed."

Cara stares blankly at a far wall, her scowl hidden behind a curtain of blonde hair. "Confessed or no, I'll crush our enemies. I will have no one question our alliance, the legitimacy of the High Seat, your place as my wife or my place as yours. They are the foundations of the peace and whatever sacrifices that may entail, that is the life I want our daughter to be born to."

Kahlan's heart begins to ache. "You must come back," she murmurs, ignoring the pinpricks against her heart.

These feelings of hurt and concern are beginning to occupy most of her waking thoughts. She doesn't know what to do with them; they aren't like anger that can be loosed through sparring, or contempt which she can easily express. They can be soothed by words or touch but she is still hesitant to lay her concern out. Instead of choosing more tender words, she says, "Your Empire cannot afford to lose another Rahl, especially a Rahl like you."

"Of course, Mother Confessor. I won't leave you a widow. I know far too much how that is like."

The following silence is a wall that solidifies between them and Kahlan can feel the conversation slipping beyond her grasp. Ice overtakes Cara's gaze. When Kahlan offers no words, alarmed by how quickly Cara seems to shut her out and too afraid to chip at what little progress they've made in the past few weeks, Cara gives her a stiff salute and moves to leave.

Kahlan stares at her retreating back, not daring to move. She already almost lost Cara to rage that Kahlan failed to control. She isn't about to tie a noose around Cara's neck by calling her out. She knows that even the Lion-heart, a beast tamed by grief, will struggle against such bonds.

Cara forces her strides to be even and sure as she leaves the courtyard. What Kahlan does not see is her face crumpling into a grimace.

She rounds the corner away from sight, eager to flee when she hears Kahlan's breath hitch with apparent hurt. When she is sure that she is far enough away to not be caught, Cara stumbles against a pillar, covering her face.

She can't help the wave of sorrow or the tears that start to flow.

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Part II.

The bleak landscapes of the Jara Pass tower over her. Large, scraggily mountains of the Rang'Shada rear up to the sky on both sides of the Pass. Thirty men and women, camouflaged by furs skinned from the Northern fox, trudge behind her, covered to their shins in fresh snowfall.

They travel light, short swords strung behind their backs and axes against their hips. Many possess spears, using them as walking sticks to find purchase in the snow. Their leather belts and hilts are covered in patterns of evergreens and snow-related wildlife, evidence that even the Alkarians have
chosen to bring Northern weapons rather than their heavy D'Haran broadswords.

Cara falters behind Jory but she keeps her eyes trained on his back. He wears a large, fur cloak from a white-coloured bear he felled himself during his younger years, its soiled edges dragging over the ground. Just like everyone else in their squad, he wears lighter, leather armour over layers of clothing.

"How much farther to Nidia's camp?" Constance growls at Jory, stumbling as a strong gust of wind pushes her sideways.

The trek has taken its toll on the D'Harans and many of them trail behind stout, long-haired Northerners. The wind howls incessantly and the wind chill makes the already frosty conditions far from bearable.

The captain of Kahlkan's armies turns to confront Cara's lieutenant. He seems tireless, seemingly oblivious to the cold if not for the frost lining his brows and week-old beard.

"About a league away," he replies. "We must wait for nightfall to ambush Nidia's camp. Best that the Lord Rahl is well-rested for the attack. We're outnumbered three to one."

"No survivors," Cara reminds them, catching her breath during the short interval. "If even one gets away with word of our intentions, it will be harder to sneak into the rest. Surprise is the only advantage we have at this point."

Jory nods while Constance grunts her acquiescence.

He leads them further up the incline, hidden from view of anyone looking up at the cliff-face. Past a path that forces them into a single line, they gather at an outcropping which leads to the entrance of a cave. It is barely a man in height but inside, it is spacious enough to accommodate more than thirty people.

It has its signs of use and seems to be a waypoint for Midlands's soldiers. Tent canvas covers its entrance, water-proofed textile that is similar to the colour of the surrounding rock. There is a hearth where gathered wood sits dry and ready for kindling. Further inside is a collection of paraphernalia: more chopped wood, pots and pans that don't seem to have been used in a year if cobwebs are any indication, and little tin cans filled with spices or dried meat.

Jory gestures for Cara and Constance to follow him, holding a torch in his hand while the Northerners prepare their camp. They leave their men while Jory leads them through the darkness, winding their way into the mountain. It eventually opens to the other side.

Before he rounds the corner which leads to the opening, Jory snuffs out the torch and gestures at the view.

They crouch low and approach. As soon as they are outside, they have a bird's eye view of a camp of a hundred men, the smoke of their campfires seething up into the sky.

"These ones should find out about our troop movements later tonight," Jory provides. "They'll be vulnerable in the early morning, before preparations."

Cara nods. She points at a tent that is larger than all the others. "Nidia should be in that tent in the middle of camp. I can provide the necessary distraction."

Constance clears her throat as though begging to disagree. When she speaks, she avoids Cara's gaze, already cautious of Cara's reaction. "My Lord, you have to let our squad do their work. You
can't go out there alone again. You'll likely be killed this time."

"Using my powers will ensure that we don't lose any more men than is necessary."

The tick that appears at the corner of Constance's brow is an indication that she is beginning to be angry. "My Lord, at this rate, you'll lose your life."

The memory of their last battle flashes before Cara's eyes. Nearly fifty D'Harans loyal to Darken Rahl were killed in a flurry of fire that sprung from her fingertips. She was untrained and undisciplined, something that she wished she had remedied with Zedd. She drained her magical stores quickly and inefficiently. By the time she realised that it would take much less of her ability to dispose of so few, half the camp and most of their tents were blackened marks, their ashes drifting in the snow.

She barely had enough focus to deal with the remaining fifteen, who rushed her from mere terror, afraid she'd raise her hands again. She fought back with axe and sword, bewildered and distraught by what she had done, until Constance hastened to assist her.

_I am the Lion-heart, the Red Lion of Halin_, Cara thinks, _red for blood, for death_. Death is her mandate and it follows her wherever she goes.

She stares at her hands. She's surprised they haven't taken on a more reddish hue.

"Very well," Cara replies, looking up once more. "I'll start the fires from there," she points to a snow-covered foothill adjacent to the camp, bare but for a few evergreens closer to its base as it crawls up the sides of a nearby mountain, "and I can route anyone coming my way. That should draw Nidia out. Jory?"

"I doubt Raina's cavalry will arrive as scheduled with our Kelton mounts," Jory says, rubbing his jaw as he contemplates their options. "The horses will be an advantage, certainly, but we must anticipate a late arrival if the snows continue through the evening. Either way, this will not be an easy fight."

"We attack without the horses," Cara decides. "Any more delay can alert Nidia to our presence and they may flee to another location. Flank them on either side and do not draw them into open ground. Our advantage lies in close-quarter combat, nearer the hill. I can hold them off until the cavalry arrives."

They edge off the opening back into the cave. The men are unpacking their rolls, while a few are hunched over a cauldron under which a fire was built. The presence of so many bodies in an enclosed space provides ample heat. Cara and Constance sit against the rock walls, their cots laid out side by side while Jory organises a watch.

A Northerner offers them stew and hard bread, a change from dried rations. It is the first opportunity for any kind of relaxation, the first chance for a fire and a warm meal; they have been avoiding detection as they trekked deeper and deeper into the Pass.

"Cara…" Constance starts.

"What is it?" Cara replies warningly.

"Rahl's powers. You must be careful."

Cara grits her teeth. Her anger isn't new; she has been controlling it since the massacre of the first rebel camp. She knows it's her mind's defence against the idea of her own foolishness. She was too
confident in her ability to control her magic. If not for the sheer destruction that resulted from using Rahl's power, she would have left her squad defenceless. Nearly all of Darken's men and a large portion of the forest dissolved into ashes when fire shot from her fingertips. There were no prisoners as she had first hoped.

Her informal title, the Red Lion of Halin, seems more accurate now than it ever was.

"I know I need to be more careful," Cara whispers hoarsely.

She opens her right palm and channels droplets of her power, which translates to a sizeable flame in the middle of her hand. It still takes all of Cara's concentration to control the trickle of magic and the flame is unsteady, growing and lessening in size. Controlling her power is very much like controlling the output of a dam.

"And you can't beat yourself up for what happened at the Dirksbridge camp," Constance continues. She gestures at Cara's hand, "or practice so much that you barely get enough sleep."

Cara's hand clenches into a fist. The flame disappears. "There is no room for error, Constance."

"There is room, Cara." Constance puts a hand on her shoulder. "You forget that you have friends. We will make room for you. Please, rest. You need your strength in the morning."

Constance is watching the retainers' advance as decoys back up against the foothills, luring Nidia's men nearer into the forest where the Northerners await.

It is when Cara releases the first wave of lightning and fire that Constance turns to see a river of snow and rock far up the sheer mountain face collapsing along the mountain-side. The percussive effect of Cara's magic must have loosened it and as it travels even further down, it grows in size until the rumbling catches all their attention.

"Cara!" Constance screams, catching Jory's eye to communicate that he is in charge. She sprints to her captain and Lord. "Cara!"

Cara turns to her voice and Constance points to the top of the tall mountain behind her. It is an onrush unlike anything a D'Haran has seen, an enormous wave of blinding white hundreds of yards uphill that devours everything in its path.

For a moment Cara is motionless, overwhelmed. They cannot outrun this; the snow's momentum is too great and the area it has affected so big that Constance knows it will reach the foothills in minutes. When Cara raises her hands towards the coming death, Constance instantly knows that their plan has gone to hell.

Constance runs back to meet the arrival of Nidia's men, only to find awestruck soldiers staring at the mountain-side, metres away from the tree-line with their feet planted to the ground as they gape. Many of Nidia's men are on their knees, misconstruing the phenomenon for something Cara has done. Some of them seem like they are praying, laying down their weapons as the rumbling becomes even louder.

Constance has little time to think of how Berdine would manipulate the situation, knowing that both sides are nearing imminent death. Within the forest and surrounded by trembling evergreens, The Alkarians and Northerners are gathered around her in abject horror, waiting for orders.

A Northerner whispers half-reverently, in an attempt to vocalise their terror, "Avalanche, the open palm of Aguta."
"We cannot escape this," Constance says grimly, looking her men in the eye. They do not flinch. All of them are aware that following in Cara's footsteps has always meant an honourable death in the battle field. Perhaps today is that day.

"Alas!" the bearded Northerner laments. "We must sleep with Aguta in his underworld for a year. Only a god can stop what is coming."

At the corner of her eye, Constance spots the familiar red cape of a D'Haran captain.

"Nidia," Constance growls under her breath, unsheathing her knife but she pauses when she notices that Darken's captain is waving a white flag and riding on a stallion with no weapons on her person. She has gotten far on horseback, more than halfway up the hill. Her men have not followed her.

"Constance! I know you're in here!" the captain screams, her horse fidgeting back and forth as Alkarians hidden in the brush grab the reins of her horse to prevent her from getting any further.

Nidia, tall and blonde with piercing blue eyes, glares at her captors but she does not raise a hand to strike and instead, screams again, "Constance!"

"Ho, D'Haran!" Constance acknowledges from her hiding place.

Nidia scans the forest for her. She licks her lips and shouts, "We surrender! Stop this madness!"

Constance turns her attention once more at Cara Rahl who stands before the avalanche, her back to them as her hair whips back and forth from the sudden gusts she is summoning.

Cara's arms are outstretched, her gloves torn off by an unseen force, their tattered pieces of leather hanging in mid-air. Her arm braces are unravelling, and the clothing around her arms disintegrates as Rahl's magic channels from the ground, to her chest and manifests out to her arms. Its blue-tinged power embraces her wrists, cackling as it travels through her fingertips and out to a magical wall that blocks the onslaught.

Her eyes have taken on a sickeningly bluish glow. Much to Constance's dismay, she is screaming in agony.

It is said that when Death stares you in the face and whispers his name in your ear...all that is dear, all that can be lost flashes before one's eyes.

When she draws upon the entire wellspring of Rahl's power, her only thoughts are of Kahlan.

Kahlan on silent days when they work side by side in a warm room in one of Aydindril's towers, attended only by the cackle of a fire and sound of quill on parchment.

She thinks of Kahlan when her laughter floats to Cara's ears as they race across a meadow on a sunny day atop their mounts. In D'Hara, Cara has always been relegated to the front of a procession, or a column of soldiers, or a patrol; her rank ensures that when followed by an escort, not a single horse rides past hers. But on those days beneath the Aydindril sun, Kahlan always rides ahead, her un-braided hair flying behind her like an ebony pennant. It is one of many things Cara allows because Kahlan is her wife, because she is Kahlan's protector and she prefers to see the Mother Confessor and ensure her safety. Because she is too busy examining the warmth in her own chest to notice that surrender in all its subtle forms has insinuated itself into everything.
Cara remembers their long conversations about nothing, and everything. How Kahlan's eyes twinkle with curiosity and something brighter, the same light that accompanies her gaze when she kisses Cara, the one that brightens to an unbearable warmth when they make love, so bright that Cara has to look away, never daring to give it a name. She knows of something like it once before. She is so scared to lose it again.

But when Death smiles, there is very little room for fear and even less for unnamed regrets.

Zedd was right. There is more to life than duty and honour. Today, she needs something more to survive this.

So she thinks of Kahlan, raises her arms and she gives herself over to the Rahl in her veins. Months before, she would have welcomed this chance to join her family across the river, to finally pay the fee. In her dreams, Leo always stood in her path. She knows now that he would have wanted more than just her survival. What could that possibly entail?

She receives her answer shortly after.

Rahl's power purges everything and draws upon the incredible brightness, the searing pain and incredible joy that stems from love, adoration, and loyalty.

"The Bond," Cara breathes as tears form beneath her eyes.

Her Bond to her people and the Bond that ties Kahlan to her.

She screams when the wind ratchets up to an awful howl. She screams until her throat is raw. She screams until there is no pain or joy, until all that is left is complete and utter surrender.

She wakes with a cough and to the uncomfortable sensation of nausea, which settles into the gentle swaying of a carriage. The vehicle is covered in canvas but light seeps through tiny holes and slits. A breeze rushes in when the carriage sways a bit hard, opening the canvas and bathing her face with icy air that smells faintly of pine. Outside, she hears the faint sounds of leather on mud and of steel against steel. A march, she thinks.

She runs her hands against her cot. She is lying on a comfortable mat made of fur and quilts, covered in the same material.

"You gave us all a scare," Jory says, bringing Cara's attention to the far end of the carriage where he sits, staring at her with his brown eyes. He seems torn between awe and acting as normal as possible for her sake.

Cara brings a hand up to her chest, patting her torso tentatively as she stammers, "I…I'm alive. You're alive. What-" Her throat feels suddenly very dry.

Jory hands her a jug and she drinks greedily as she continues to take in her surroundings.

"Nidia surrendered," he says. "Darken's retainers have surrendered. You have been acknowledged as the one, true Rahl." Jory looks older than his twenty-something years as he rubs his beard and sighs. He parts the canvas and she tilts her head to looks outside. Behind their convoy, Northerners with their heavy axes and Alkarians string along prisoners dressed in D'Haran military garb.

Jory continues, "Saving lives has brought you far, my Lord Rahl. We have peace at last. I never thought it possible."
"How long have I been out?" Cara rasps.

He seems breathless with disbelief as he says, "A week or so. You were put into a magic-induced sleep to help you recover your powers." He opens the canvas wider and the column of men and women in Alkarian reds stretches for miles. It is Raina's regiment, the Red Lion flying on banners and spears, the men's long, crimson capes a stark contrast to the returning green of spring.

"We're going home," he adds.

"Does Kahlan know…?"

"Oh, she does," Jory admonishes, "We're in for quite the scolding."

"Not if I can help it," Cara retorts. She drinks from the jug once more and wipes the dribble of water from her lips.

Jory still seems unnerved and he frets on his seat as he runs long fingers through his hair.

"What's gotten you and your underclothes in a knot?" Cara demands.

"Oh, my Lord," Jory chuckles, "I should be so lucky that I find myself on the right side of history. Otherwise, I'd be dead."

Cara stares at him askance, tilting her head.

He becomes very grim. "You don't know?" Her silence is enough of an answer. He continues, "You called in the cold, north-eastern trade winds to stop Aguta's hand."

"The trade winds?"

"The Amihan as they are called, the prevailing winds from the east. You called upon it, created a wall that stopped the avalanche –Aguta's hand –from gathering us all."

Cara swallows. "I…see."

Jory purses his lips. "It would have destroyed everything, including a village a few kilometres downhill. Your people, Midlanders and D'Harans alike, are grateful."

"My people?" Cara scoffs.

"Your people," Jory emphasizes, glaring at her as though to convince her of the fact. "The Northerners have made you their own. To have shaken Aguta's hand is no mean feat; they will honour you as the wife of their Queen and a leader in your own right. The word will spread. You will have the Midlands' loyalty, and their love. There is nothing more to prove, Cara Rahl. The Midlands is yours, just as you are theirs."

TBC
Awakening

Chapter Notes

Since it's been such a long time since I last updated, here's a short summary of what's happened so far…

Intent on returning a child to her parents, Cara and Kahlan are transported to a world similar yet very different from theirs. They meet an alternate Cara, who is also the Rahl of that world but as they make their way back to the People's Palace, Nicci attacks and leaves her unconscious. After their arrival at the People's Palace, Cara the Mord'Sith falls under the unum's spell. Within, she experiences the Cara Rahl's past as the unum tries to repair the consequences of Nicci's treachery.

Within the unum, alt!Cara loses her family, Darken dies by her hand and alt!Cara rises to power as the High Seat of the D'Haran Empire. She marries alt!Kahlan to strengthen the alliance between her Empire and the Midlands, and eventually leads a campaign to defeat Darken's remaining followers in the Jaran Pass.

This chapter follows the events after an attack on Darken's followers and also the events after Cara Rahl stops an avalanche from killing them all.

I credit Sionainn69 for the exceptional beta work. Without her, this story would have been impossible to write. To her I offer my supreme gratitude for being absolutely awesome.

Now, onto the story and I hope you enjoy!

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Part I.

The herald is Constance, cloaked in the fur of the white fox and pulling down her hood as she enters with something less than her Alkarian aplomb. Within the confines of the Confessor's Palace, the snow on her clothing has mostly melted, making her look like an anxious, wet hound while her brows darken and her blonde hair sticks to the sides of her finely chiselled face.

She has arrived three days ahead of the Regiment, tasked with bringing Kahlan news of Cara's campaign.

After Constance narrates the events leading up to the avalanche, Kahlan looks as though she is controlling the urge to throttle her. When she speaks of Aguta's hand and the events that come after the avalanche: the magically induced sleep, the wounds that have not yet healed –Kahlan's frown deepens, her fingers playing with the hilt of a dagger at her hip.

After a long silence, Constance mutters, "My Lady, if there is a message you would like the Lord Rahl to receive?"

"A message? Is that all she expects?" Kahlan growls. Something in the room shifts and the air within cracks with lightning without sound.
Constance straightens, suddenly alert and trying to remember the swiftest way out. She fears that kneeling before the Mother Confessor has prevented her from taking a step back. Her palm inches towards the sheath of her sword while her thumb rests on the guard, the metal doing little to put her at ease. She has fought many enemies and put down many more but she has never faced a Confessor.

"Of all the reckless things!" Kahlan exclaims, seated at the edge of her throne and at the cusp of physically making her point known, "Not waiting for reinforcements! Raina and the horsemen from Kelton were mere hours away; she could have waited!"

Constance licks her lips, aware that anything she says could decide if she leaves this room with little or most of her dignity.

"My Lady Rahl," Constance says, using a more personal title. "It was a tactical decision on our Lord's part. We would have lost our window of opportunity if we waited any longer."

"And what now? She comes home battered and burned? How is a Rahl supposed to keep her promises, to rule not one nation but two when she can barely stand?" Kahlan finally stands from her throne, white-knuckled and tense as she distracts herself with a view of Aydindril from beyond the pillars of the Judgment Room.

Watching Kahlan as she takes several deep breaths to regain a semblance of calm, Constance suddenly realises that this has nothing to do with Cara's tactics and everything to do with something else. Kahlan is stringing several, frayed emotions between them –the after-effects of knowing that Cara Rahl could have died in the Pass.

Constance has known Cara since the woman's first days in the Regiment, bright-eyed, confident and far more versed in weaponry and horse-riding because of her parents. Constance has seen her rise through the ranks and served under her when she was finally summoned to the People's Palace. Her work against the Southern rebellion garnered her tremendous favor with the Lord Panis Rahl and as general of his armies she was granted the authority to crush Rahl's enemies with impunity.

An officer only ever reaches that position through incredible sacrifice, a strict adherence to duty and unswerving loyalty that has seen Cara carry out what others were too weak-willed to do. From being the daughter of two D'Haran soldiers to ruling as Lord of the Empire; it is mind-boggling to even contemplate what this has entailed of her friend.

But if Constance has learned anything as Cara's lieutenant, it is that one gets used to Cara's doggedness and the inevitable, worrying consequences. Constance and her sisters-in-arms have saved her more times than they can count, nursed her through wounds and sickness that have killed lesser men. Sometimes, she wonders when Cara's luck will run out, or when her extraordinary willpower will finally be felled. Both are bound to but Constance is vigilant for that day and expectant. Enough, she hopes, to prevent it.

She reminds herself that Cara's new wife is not, has not learned to be as yet.

Constance has seen it before, a reaction to a painful 'what if' that she has seen all too often on the faces of lovers when they go to war. She has seen it in Leo just as she sees it now in Kahlan. Sleepless nights have made their mark beneath Kahlan's eyes, stretches of skin that seem weary and apprehensive.

Constance's concession is gentle despite the fear she can't keep from blossoming at the pit of her stomach, "I only come with tidings, my Lady."
Kahlan takes another fortifying breath. "Bring her to me and this time around, \textit{in one piece}.

Constance beats her fist against her breast, eager to take the dismissal. "I live to serve, my Lady Rahl." She doesn't realise that she's been holding her breath until after she exits the room.

The red streaks are stark reminders of the week Cara has had. She lifts her hands against the light, the afternoon sun seeping past the flaps of the carriage and illuminating her injuries. The skin of her palm has opened in several places –long, deep cuts that reveal red flesh and bone beneath. Her fingers are speckled by small yet many slits. After a gentle dabbing, blood still runs past her wrists.

These wounds are a new conundrum and the Wizard of the Second Order tending to her is already shaking her head. Quickly, the woman binds Cara's hands but the bandages themselves blossom with lines of red.

"I apologise, Lord Rahl. My magic has no effect." She grits her teeth at her failure. "Hopefully the salve staves off infection."

"It's no fault of yours," Cara sighs, pulling her hands to her chest as she relaxes into her pillow. The groan of wood beneath her and the swaying that comes with the uneven terrain lulls her into a contemplative silence. Already, Cara can feel new wounds opening beneath the bandages. \textit{Will these ever heal,} she thinks, \textit{will they ever stop hurting?}

The wizard consults her satchel and she produces two potions. "For the pain," she informs Cara.

Cara drinks it gratefully and before long, her hands are tingling instead of feeling as though they are being run repeatedly through a mill. She nods in gratitude and the wizard bows.

"By your leave, my Lord."

"Go. And send for Constance."

She clambers out of the moving carriage, a flow of wizard's robes and dark hair. Minutes later, Constance herself mounts the steps and takes the wizard's place by her side.

"Any news from Aydindril?" Cara inquires.

"Besides your wife's terrifying wrath…"

Cara chuckles. "Well, she's known for that. It's gotten us this far, anyhow."

"That's not funny," Constance accuses. "It was the closest thing to being Confessed I've ever been in my life."

"Well, it wouldn't do for my lieutenant to grovel at the Mother Confessor's feet all her life," Cara acquiesces. "But I'm trying to forget that I may never hold a sword again." She indicates her hands, mangled and far too raw beneath the bandages.

Constance softens and her tone is sympathetic. "She's worried about you."

"Ah." Cara feels pathetic for the rapid rise in her heartbeat. "And how is she? Is she holding up well?"

"As well as one can expect of someone whose wife barely avoided killing herself in an avalanche."

Cara grunts. "Sarcasm doesn't suit you."
"Death doesn't suit you," Constance throws back. They glare at each other before Constance continues, "We'll all be relieved once you're back at the Confessor's Palace. At least then, you'll be kept on a leash until you're well enough."

"A leash!"

Constance shrugs then says, "She's the only one you seem to care about enough to listen to these days."

The silence that follows is enough of an admission. Cara wants to feel indignant because as an Alkarian, even an underhanded accusation of weakness is enough reason to call for a challenge. Instead, Cara closes her eyes in resignation, feeling Constance's inquiring gaze like hot coals on her skin.

"Did she have a message for me?"

"Not in the obvious sense," Constance admits drawing out her words as though to tease her. Cara glares. "Only that she expressed in no uncertain terms that she'd like to see you alive."

Cara nearly breaks into a satisfied grin. Constance couldn't hide the sly triumph in her own eyes, as though something she has suspected is finally affirmed.

Cara thinks that her eagerness to hear news of her wife has something to do with the growing closeness between Kahlann and herself. After what happened at the Pass, the Rahl in her is already certain of what Kahlann means to her, of the place she takes in the grand scheme of things. The Bond between Cara and Kahlann is solid in its certainty, an anchor into this reality.

For once in a year of doubt and grief, the path seems clear.

"Good," Cara whispers. Weakness be damned, she thought. If this is what it means to finally know her way after having lost every motivation to move forward, then she knows in her heart that Kahlann has saved her.

When the Regiment brings Cara in the dead of night, slumbering in a stretcher and flanked by a wizard and a healer, Kahlann fights the urge to run across the hall to meet her. Her reaction is surprisingly visceral, as though the earth beneath her is pushing her forward.

A full squad marches behind their Lord, their expressions hidden beneath the shadows of their helmets.

Raina strides forward, firelight dancing against her armour, and she brings a fist to her breast. Members of the Regiment have been greeting her in a similar fashion, with gestures that were once reserved for Cara. It can only mean a reluctant recognition of Kahlann's place in Cara's life, that her orders are now becoming just as valid as those from their own Lord.

"How is she?"

"Wizard Ayna has put her into another sleep," Raina informs her with just enough concern in her voice to worry Kahlann that little bit more. She leads the Mother Confessor to Cara's side and gestures to hands that are covered in bandages. "Deep wounds in her hands appeared a few days ago. The pain has exhausted her, my Lady and she sleeps with the aid of a potion."

"I'll summon my own healers."
Raina stiffens but she manages to say, "Of course. I live to serve."

Kahlan recognises the hostility in Raina's mannerisms. It is much too late to argue with an Alkarian captain so she sighs, "Bring her to my chambers. See to it that we have a Wizard of the Second Order at hand, anyone whom you deem fit."

It isn't obvious because Raina is already gesturing to her men but there is approval when she says, "Yes, my Lady."

It takes several minutes for them to situate Cara in Kahlan's bedchambers.

Raina stations two Alkarian guards by the door and in a few short sentences summarily dismisses Aydindril's Home Guard. The Midlanders' faces register offence, looking to their Mother Confessor for approval; for a man or woman of the guard, leaving or sharing their posts is inconceivable. Kahlan very nearly snaps at Raina for her irreverence.

But Raina's expression stops her; there is something frantically protective there. She wants her Lord to be surrounded by D'Harans, cared and watched by them. Kahlan understands the sentiment. So many of this month's more dangerous events have happened in the presence of Midlanders.

"Your men can stay," Kahlan says, "on the condition that the Home Guard does not leave its post by my door."

Raina grits her teeth but nods. "As you wish, Lady Rahl." How her title rolls off her tongue comes off more as a reprimand than a legitimate title. In many ways, Raina can be as unthinking as Denna in the mockery she doles out.

Kahlan feels the beginning of a headache throbbing in her right temple and just as her mother taught her, she counts to ten before saying, "You're dismissed, Captain. Please bring the rest of your regiment and leave."

Raina straightens and gives a barely perceptible nod. "Of course."

Everyone files out of the room and Raina spares a last, backward glance before closing large oak doors behind her.

Cara has been laid out in Kahlan's bed, covered in thick furs and propped up in large pillows. Surprisingly, she doesn't look like she battled an avalanche a week before. Her sleep seems deep and undisturbed and her expression is peaceful as though the flighty joys of the dream world have assuaged all her worries. Kahlan can't help a pained, jealous smile.

She knows that Cara can't hear her but she is nonetheless comforted by her own voice, "I don't know how you manage to spend weeks with such abrasive captains."

She allows herself the first tentative touch against Cara's forehead. She expected a different homecoming, celebrations that fill the halls with the sound of trumpets and more than anyone's fill of food and drink. Instead, she discovers that more than anything, she prefers the homecoming that will bring Cara to her, safe and sound whether or not victory follows in her footsteps.

She does not try to dwell on what that means just yet, or how her stomach drops at the thought of ruling on her own. Instead, she sidles up to her wife, suddenly feeling like the night has finally drawn to a close and that she will have her sleep, at last.

"Well?"
Constance huffs, "She won't talk and it will take too long to break her."

Their gaze shifts to the prisoner hanging by her wrists and chained to the ceiling. "Once an Alkarian always an Alkarian," Kahlan ponders aloud.

Nidia is already stripped of her armour and her hair is in disarray. There is no outward evidence of torture but she grimaces when Constance touches her. The most skilled of whip-wielders do not leave welts only pain that lasts for weeks and is hidden beneath one's skin. Constance is already coiling the whip into a tight loop, obviously frustrated.

Nidia's lips are a thin line of derision. "That we are."

Constance scoffs. "You ceased to be Alkarian when you accepted silver in place of your loyalty to the regiment. You disgust me." She bows to Kahlan. "My Lady, by your leave."

Kahlan waves her away and the door of the dungeon shuts with a muted thud.

Kahlan circles her for several minutes then steps forward, a hand's breadth away from her prisoner. She asks, "Why Darken?"

Nidia chuckles as she grins lopsidedly at her. "The answer would soothe your conscience, wouldn't it, Kahlan Amnell?" Nidia licks the blood from her lip as though thinking of whether she should reply. As Kahlan suspects, vanity gets the better of her. "I believe in a greater D'Hara, one where our nation has no equal. Destruction or control is the only outcome for her inferiors."

"Darken's ideas," Kahlan says darkly.

"As opposed to Cara's? The weakling who took the High Seat and is now the Midlands' whore?"

The slap resounds in the chambers and Nidia's head whips sideways at the impact. Kahlan grates, "You dare mock her sacrifices!"

Nidia lets out a full-bellied laugh, studying her with a knowing glint in her eye. "If I had known earlier," Nidia muses. "If I had known that it was you all along," Nidia holds Kahlan's gaze. There is something terrifyingly certain about the way she says her next words as though she has discovered a most important secret. "I could have broken Cara Rahl for our cause. Irreversibly."

Kahlan breathes deeply, soaking up the woman's words, hearing Nidia's conviction for what it is: that if she is allowed to live, she will enact her plans regardless of her surrender and this time Cara Rahl will not be the only target.

Kahlan is resolute about what she needs to do. "You won't ever be given the chance."

The room cackles, the stone beneath Kahlan's feet becomes warm and grim realisation slides across Nidia's features. With Kahlan's hand wrapped around Nidia's neck, Nidia's gaze shifts from defiance to aching tenderness. The shift is palpable. Nidia's wintry gaze softens into a pitiful, blurred blue as Kahlan feels her power overtake what remains of Nidia's personality.

"Command me, Mistress!" Nidia begs, slack against the chains.

"Not today, Nidia." Kahlan cups her face. "We've done enough to last us your lifetime."

Kahlan hears the soft murmuring of voices when she opens the door. She does not mean to overhear but her hushed entrance allows Zedd's careful baritone to drift past the pillars of her
bedchambers to the wide receiving area by the doors.

"These should help with the pain," he says.

Kahan edges closer and she leans against the divider—a tall carving of wood twenty paces wide that permits a patchy view of the room beyond.

She hears a groan, then light cursing. Cara appears to try to sit up, sweat on her brow as she cringes in pain.

Zedd continues, watching Cara with a look that sits between curiosity and pity, "Rahls are not known for over-reaching; there has never really been a need. You will train with me when you have the time." Zedd rubs his neck, the creases along his forehead notched deep with worry. He purses his lips with regret. They both know he has committed a grave mistake and does not know how to correct it. He allowed the greatest magic-wielder of their time to gallivant about the Midlands without preparation. "You should be dead, after what you did. Aguta's hand isn't for a mortal to shake."

Cara frowns, looking as though she cannot stand a Wizard of the First Order voicing his regret by her bedside. She hedges, "You told me to live for something beyond honour and duty."

Zedd nods, humming in approval. "And you've found it?"

Cara swallows and suddenly cannot meet his gaze. "I've found her."

In her hiding place, Kahlan thinks, who is this woman that Cara has found? She reprimands herself for the surge of anger and confusion caused by Cara's reply. Cara may indeed be her wife but it isn't uncommon for rulers to find their inspiration elsewhere, especially if the marriage is political by nature.

Zedd brightens perceptively and he pats Cara's blanket-covered thigh. "I'm glad."

"I didn't expect it."

"We never expect such things," Zedd says sagely. He stands, grasping his staff which leans against a bed post. He manages to look fond without instigating one of Cara's more irritated eye rolls. "Shall I draw up the spells for you and your wife?"

"You should teach them to me," Cara accuses.

"I will, once you are years into your training. Once you can control such tremendous power."

Cara looks like she wants to protest but sighs instead. "I'm tired, Zedd."

"As you should be. Don't exert yourself. I'll have one of the healers boil more of these leaves for you."

Kahlan does not step away fast enough when Zedd appears on her side of the divider.

"Ah, Mother Confessor," he greets. He looks at the pouch he is holding and promptly hands it to her. "For the Lord Rahl. Boil for ten minutes, soak a clean cloth in the broth and wrap it around her hands. It should help with the healing. As for the pain, I've given her a potion for that."

He turns to leave before raising a hand as he remembers something else. He waggles his eyebrows. "And no vigorous activities for the next week or so."
Warmth creeps up Kahlan's cheeks as she says, "Of course, Zedd. We'll see you tomorrow."

By the time she's walked past the divider and into a fuller view of her bed, Cara has pushed herself up against her pillows, examining a sword on her lap.

"No rest for the wicked," Cara comments, as she stares glumly at the weapon, her bandaged hands poised wanly over it.

"For either of us." Kahlan sits by her bed, watching what seems to be a private dialogue between Cara and her sword. After a few moments of letting Cara glare at a weapon she won't be able to use for weeks, she asks, "May I see your hands?"

Cara is frowning but she obeys, holding out bandaged limbs for Kahlan to inspect. Kahlan carefully peels the covering away, examining a portion of Cara's injury.

"They seem to be healing well," Kahlan says, "Do you know how you got the cuts? They're impervious to magic and even Zedd is relying heavily on our healers' skills."

Cara catches Kahlan's gaze with her own and there is something sad and fearful in the deep expanse of blue.

"Rahl's power. Zedd suspects I summoned too much of it all at once that it broke through my skin."

"They'll scar."

"Of course they will." Cara's laugh comes out more like a snort, short and insincere as though she has expected such an unfortunate turn of events. "I am forever reminded that the High Seat will exact the highest price, that Rahl's power isn't something to be bandied with."

"If someone needs to pay a price, I shall pay it with you."

Cara grunts. "Haven't you paid enough?"

Kahlan purses her lips into a thin line, recovering a fresh set of bandages from the side table. She unravels the soiled ones around Cara's hands. The angry red lines cut across her palms and over her fingers. A few have been stitched, driving scraggly zigzags across Cara's skin, attempts by a healer to seal the wounds from infection. The sight causes a familiar ache.

She sighs, "Not nearly enough apparently."

Cara looks at her kindly but says nothing. Words have always been sparse between them when it comes to matters besides politics. The subtle movements of hands, the telling glint in one's eye, even the upturn of the other's lips are a language they like better than the aggressive spoken word. In many ways, Cara is more expressive in her many, brooding silences. The fire in her eyes reveals motivations that are deep and layered, something that can only come from a life that has treated her so unfairly, so terribly.

Something that Kahlan has contributed to. Something that she will never escape.

Sighing, Kahlan finishes wrapping Cara's hands in clean bandages. She caresses the covering lightly, reminded that the Lion-heart is nearly immortal in the eyes of the people and yet is anything but that in hers. Perhaps that is punishment enough, she thinks, knowing that a loss is inevitable.

Cara clears her throat and Kahlan looks up to meet her gaze. "What happened to Nidia?"
"Confessed. She's revealed where the other camps are. Raina is rounding them up. I think we'll skip the public execution. There's been too much blood spilled already."

Cara pushes back into the pillows, closing her eyes. She breathes deeply. "It's a new age, Kahlan. We have peace."

"Indeed. We can raise our children in this world, just as you wanted."

A long silence follows before Cara opens an eye to regard her with a mysterious expression. "Children?"

Kahan chuckles. "Well, we'll have to start with the one."

"Whenever you're ready, Mother Confessor."

Kahan pauses to study the other woman's open expression. Cara's eyes seem clearer, brighter as though the murkier parts of her have passed through a sieve. They must have; change comes with what transpired at the Jara Pass. Cara seems less reserved and her emotions are so blatant, a mix of tenderness and something vastly more profound that Kahlan wants to shy away from it.

She doesn't though even if it's hard to shake away sadness when it has become one's companion for so long. Warmth blossoms in Kahlan's chest. She feels unequipped for the novelty of seeing Cara like this, the constant fog of guilt and regret that hangs over her dissipating by the day. Kahlan doesn't know quite how to respond.

"I've always been ready, Cara," she says matter-of-factly, slowing the conversation with something non-committal. "The Mother Confessor must always make sure that her line continues."

Cara's smile is tight-lipped and her long history as a D'Haran hero paints it as something more than just an expression of mirth. It is the same patronizing smile she gives to the unproven soldiers of her regiment when she is hopeful of their potential but wary of how dangerous their lack of knowledge is. She tilts her head to side, as though wanting to study Kahlan from a slightly different angle.

Kahan can already tell that Cara has seen past Kahlan's evasion and is deciding on whether to partake of such tomfoolery or continue on the thread of honesty she has started.

"I used to think that my line would continue with my sons," Cara says. Her tone is gentle, willing Kahlan to listen past the agony which must surely crush the heart behind it. "There are times I wished that things were different, that I was spending the twilight of my years with Leib and Aginor and Leo in the quiet valleys of Halin. I wished to hear their laughter, watch my boys grow, and run my fingers along Leo's scraggly beard, witness as it turned white with age, as my boys learned to hunt or ride or wield the sword." Cara's voice falters while her hopes for a future bleed through the cracks. After Cara swallows what must surely be the bitter taste of what-could-have-been's, her voice becomes firm. Kahlan can hardly stop her own throat from closing up. "I wanted so many things, Kahlan. So many, many things. Those aren't possible now and I suppose it's normal that I've been ruled by fear."

Kahan turns away but Cara's bandaged hand and her insistence stop her. "Don't," Cara murmurs. "I am not finished."

Kahan doubts she can stand under the weight of her own regret, of hoping for what is most certainly lost and such terrible pain that has been thrown into this room so abruptly.

"What are you trying to tell me, Cara?" Kahlan finally chokes out.
Cara lifts Kahlan's hand and to the Mother Confessor's surprise, she kisses it, closing her eyes tightly as though a different wish is being made. Hot tears sear Kahlan's palm.

"I want to live, I want a life beyond scheming or politics, beyond leadership and..." This time Cara breathes deeply, worrying her lower lip with her teeth, reluctant because it is always so difficult when she acknowledges the history between them, "and beyond my grief."

Her grip on Kahlan's wrist loosens.

Cara begins to pull away like a ship untying its tethers from a dock and she grows distant, her blue eyes shifting to the window, thinking of a different time and a far-away place. Kahlan is familiar with the sudden detachment. It is Cara's way of telling her that she can leave if she wishes and as heavy as the air suddenly is, the offer is tempting.

Before Kahlan can lose her nerve, she confides, "Oh, I wish for the same things."

Cara gazes up, bewildered. It's obvious she isn't expecting this response. It saddens Kahlan; life has been too cruel to the Lord of D'Hara. So it surprises her when a smile plays at the edge of Cara's lips. The sides of her eyes crinkle and suddenly, her mirth becomes free, alive, colorful, and with many hues—very much unlike the monotonous, stone-like composure of a Confessed man.

Kahan suddenly understands who it is that helped Cara Rahl survive Aguta's hand. Cara wasn't regaling Zedd about some other maiden; she had been talking about her.

"You are very beautiful," Cara blurts. It is entirely unbecoming of a Rahl but she blushes the deep shade of young lovers and at that moment, they both know her words mean something entirely more.

Fittingly, Aydindril shakes off winter's clutches with Cara's arrival. Many-coloured birds begin to arrive from the south, signalling the returning abundance of food. They perch by Kahlan's window and are seen roaming the Palace grounds, lending colour and music to Aydindril's gardens.

Cara groans inwardly and leans even further out the sill, noticing her hands that grip the stone. Zedd has removed the bandages but the scars criss-cross her palms and fingers in a slapdash pattern of pink. The wizard has visited every day, forcing a mixture of bitter-tasting herbs down her throat, convincing her that this indignity will lead to a grip fit for sword-fighting in less than a month.

Clenching and unclenching her fists to test their mobility, she looks out the window to a land bathed in sunlight.

The Kern River winds its way past the city's walls, a little more vigorous now that the snows are melting. The large bridges that pass over it convey the few who return from Galea, Kelton or Tamarang now that winter is drawing to a close; usually they are nobility with their thick, sable coats and horse-drawn carriages.

The cobblestone roads wind through the market, its paths overrun by children. Not a fortnight ago, vendors were huddled within their stalls shivering before their meagre fires but they seem more cheerful now that the sun is out, shouting their wares with wide, noticeable gestures.

Cara mutters to herself, "About time we sent builders through to the northern towns."

"You'd think we had the time and resources to fix every brick and stone in the Pass," Kahlan muses behind her, pulling a shawl over her night dress as she gets out of bed to join Cara at the window.
"I've made it my own personal concern."

Kahlan manages to look surprised. "Aren't we leaving for D'Hara when summer comes?"

"Richard and Jory can take care of it while we're gone."

"The labour this would require—," Kahlan begins.

"The western retainers can have their due of punishment. We'll put them under the yoke and make them rebuild what they destroyed."

"They should serve their sentences in D'Hara," Kahlan admonishes.

"You have one too many concerns, Mother Confessor." Cara narrows her eyes at her. "Think of it as a gift. From a D'Haran huntswoman to her wife."

They watch each other for a long moment before Kahlan relaxes and finally closes the distance between them. She puts her entire length against Cara, the heat of her body a welcome reprieve from Cara's thoughts.

She waits for the soft push of Kahlan's lips on her own, except Kahlan brushes past her cheek and whispers into Cara's ear instead. It is a conversation they've had before, one that coils Cara's stomach into a tight, warm ball.

"What gifts do you expect in return?" Kahlan whispers cheekily, her fingers trailing along Cara's shirt and languidly touching the skin beneath its hems.

Cara swallows. Her hands move of their own accord along Kahlan's neck, touching the Rada'Han briefly before moving upwards to cradle the back of her head. At that urging, Kahlan slips even closer, trapping Cara between her and the window, warm thighs between Cara's legs.

Kahlan's scent washes over her as Cara buries her nose in her hair, the previous night's lovemaking a light perfume on Kahlan's skin. Strong, shapely legs chafe against hers and for a moment, she feels a hint of moistness as Kahlan settles herself against Cara's thigh. The heat radiating between Kahlan's legs is distracting.

Her blood heating, Cara captures Kahlan's lips, soft and wet. Kahlan opens her mouth and Cara tastes her even more completely.

"I expect nothing in return, my lady," Cara whispers when she pulls back to study her, "And this is more than any gift."

Her words are loaded with sentiments that have remained unspoken through the many nights they have lain together. Always, she feels the urge to voice them when Kahlan comes undone around her fingers but always, she is pulled back by her own fears —of knowing that once something is acknowledged, it can always be taken away.

Kahlan's fingers tighten against Cara's shoulders and she seems determined, staring with irises that have darkened to a twilit blue. Kahlan's smile comes with a sliver of mischief and she bites a lower lip while moving her hips in slow, circular motions. Groaning, Cara puts a scarred hand on Kahlan's hip, squeezing tightly and trying to convey that she will lose all control if Kahlan continues rubbing against her that way.

As it happens, Kahlan likes it when the Lord Rahl throws her restraint to the wind.
"Bed," Kahlan whispers urgently.

Cara smirks even as her eyes shift from Kahlan's lips to her breasts, occupied by the beauty before her. "No."

Kahlan's eyes widen as Cara clutches her waist and switches their positions, this time pushing Kahlan against the sill. With an urgency that surprises even her, Cara bunches Kahlan's nightdress over her hips, seeking purchase on skin that is flushed and heated.

Cara hums her approval, her heartbeat loud yet steady in her ears.

"Creator, you're beautiful," she says, her fingers trailing past Kahlan's under-things, threading in and out of her wife's clothing. Kahlan hisses, white-knuckled as she grips the sill, biting her lower lip while she squeezes her eyes shut.

Cara can imagine the sensations are overpowering. She's already lost most coherent thought. Her gut wrenches with a profound hunger; she slips gentle yet insistent fingers where Kahlan wants them most.

Kahlan moans aloud when Cara finds her quarry. Liquid heat smears her middle finger as she caresses the length of Kahlan's slit, spreading the wetness forward to her clit.

"Cara," Kahlan begs, pushing her hips against Cara's hand, her forehead on Cara's shoulder. "Cara…"

The way Kahlan says her name, heavy and breathless with desire – Cara struggles through the stupor that falls over them. It sinks her senses away from the weight of her worries and as she revels in Kahlan's moans which increase in volume as Cara presses down gently against a hard nub of nerves, Cara finds her own pressure building, a drive to release all the pent up emotion from this coupling. She can hardly pull herself together – the searing affection in her chest, the desire smearing her own thighs, the painful urge to give everything Kahlan wants at this moment – they spin a web that traps her thoughts.

Instinct takes over.

Kahlan's fingernails are digging into her shoulders, pain that grounds her as she pushes one, then two fingers into Kahlan's heat.

Kahlan rides her fingers in earnest and once she finds her rhythm, Cara pushes her own weight against her thrusts, taking control. Nothing matters but the feel of Kahlan around her, tight and inviting and oh so, incredibly wet as she slides in and out.

Something thunders through the air, the ghost of Zedd's hexes rushing inward to her from their symbols on the walls. Cara has become more and more familiar with how they infuse the room now that she is more aware of her Han. The hexes weave into the Bond until Rahl's magic lights up in Cara's veins, absorbing the power, studying it, and eventually accepting it as an extension of its desires. After, there is only the mad rush of pleasure amplified by a magic older than Zedd himself.

With the Rada'Han around her neck and the Bond straining with an unbearable fullness, Kahlan lets go easily. The floodgates open and for a brief moment, all Cara can see are pinpoints of intense light. She becomes aware of nothing else until Kahlan begins to shudder around Cara's fingers, coming undone with a cry.

Cara murmurs her appreciation, dipping her head forward to kiss her neck and catching beads of sweat as Kahlan shakes through her orgasm. They stay like this for a long moment before Kahlan
shifts slightly away and clears her throat.

"If that doesn't get you pregnant, I don't know what will," Cara jokes, letting her settle against the sill.

Kahlans swats her shoulder. "You're a crude, D'Haran soldier."

"One that shares your bed, Mother Confessor. And I think you like my baser sensibilities."

"You're incorrigible."

"Only when I'm with you," Cara says, her gaze shifting to take in Kahlans dishevelled look. She smirks with satisfaction as Kahlans smooths out her nightdress. Cara delights in knowing that she causes that deep blush on Kahlans cheeks, the sweat on her brow, the unique glow of satisfaction and exhaustion which makes Kahlan even more attractive.

Cara's blood thickens with need yet again.

Kahlans tilts her head with a lascivious smile. "I know that look, Cara Rahl. You're insatiable."

"Only with you, my love."

Kahlan studies her a moment. "Love?" Her eyes darken with the force of her query.

Cara isnt one for words. The Bond shifts between them as it conveys a complexity of thought and feeling. It is a thick, corded wire that ties them together, thrumming with Caras conviction that if nothing else, she wishes for a life that will bring them a measure of calm and perhaps, even happiness.

To Cara the Lion-heart, what more can "love" possibly be? She shares the same fervour for her countrymen -the willingness to suffer, to die, to fight for an ideal except that this time, her motives are strangely self-serving in that watching Kahlan smile makes her heart soar.

Kahlan hooks a finger underneath Caras shirt and pulls her forward as she strides slowly and with determination to the bath. She accentuates the sway of her hips and Cara is all but hypnotised by their movement.

"You'll explain that last bit to me," Kahlan says.

"Only with my hands and lips."

"Then show me, my Lord."

Cara smiles, knowing that this show of submissiveness will end as soon as they step into the water.

When she says, "Of course, my Lady; as you command, so do I obey," in that mocking tone she knows only amuses her wife, she feels it in her bones that she is free, untied by hatred and regret, thinking only that peace has come at last.

Vellis Rock is carved into a mountain adjacent to the northern passes. Its houses of stone hang from the cliff-face and are interconnected by a series of covered stairs and walkways. The habitations spread to its foot like mushrooms on a tree, then outward into the main roads, the houses turning subtly into wood as they meander into the woods that blanket the Jara Pass.

It is a crossroads for traffic from the Pass and the wide highways which lead north and south of
Nicobarese. For that alone, it has become the hub that moves people, timber, stone and earth into the ruins that the Rahls wish to rebuild.

The fires of the caravans and those of their escorts are visible three levels down. In the dead of night, during an early spring where the mountain winds are still frosty enough to warrant a thick coat, the lights of the camp, which seem more like an extension of the town, are quilts of flickering stars spread across a part of the Vellis Wood.

Cara is huddled in a cloak, reviewing ledgers in the quiet that follows a sleeping populace.

A shadow shifts to her right and she finds Kahlan watching her from a distance, her gaze preoccupied by Cara's movements. Cara feels the familiar warmth somewhere in the vicinity of her stomach, the effect of knowing that Kahlan takes pleasure in watching her.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to be quite cold," Kahlan admits with a chuckle.

Cara shakes her head but her expression is playful. She stands and approaches her, inviting Kahlan into her cloak and then pulling her towards the hearth burning in the centre of the room. It casts their shadows against the rough stone walls which have been cut from the mountain-face, the marble pillars mined from the nearby Rang'Shada.

They stand together, staring at the flames, relishing each other's presence.

They are interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come!" Cara says, wondering what could be so important at such a late hour.

A woman pulls through, her eyes a shocking blue and her hair golden as it weaves into a braid. Instead of the usual acquiescence to the Lord of D'Hara, she falls to her knees in front of Kahlan, her gaze so full of adoration that she is empty of any character.

Cara grimaces. The results of Confession are never pretty. Nidia was proud, ambitious and a talented commander already poised for a promotion that would bring her even closer to a posting in the People's Palace. But Darken knew how to fan the fires of fanaticism and Nidia always struck Cara as someone who saw things in black and white, excessive in her zeal to bring D'Hara glory. What had attracted her to Nidia in the first place—as someone Cara could count on to put D'Hara's welfare first—eventually became her doom.

This empty version of her is chilling and Cara slowly takes a seat at her desk, dipping her quill into the inkwell as she returns to her task. From the corner of her eye, she can see Nidia produce a tightly packaged container glowing with a purple barrier that disappears as soon as Kahlan touches it.

"What is that?" Cara asks darkly.

Kahlan dismisses Nidia with a curt nod. The woman ducks out with a whispered, "I live to serve, Mistress."

Kahlan takes a seat beside her and says, "Something from the orchards of my mother."

"Those trees have never been touched."

"Old promises can be broken for new ones." Kahlan un-wraps the package with delicate fingers,
revealing the dark wood beneath. The bowl emerges, nothing like Cara has ever seen and as Kahlan lifts it up to the light, it is much denser than any wood known to her.

The art is exquisite, hewn by a master of the pick and chisel. Huntswomen, dogs and horses dash from the brim, still scraggly as it has retained its bark. But the bowl's sides smoothen as the images lope around, chasing their prey to the bottom where they encounter a deer emblazoned with Amnell's coat-of-arms.

"The hunters of my realm can be gone for days, even weeks when they are chasing a stag or a bull. They bring with them a remnant of home for luck; but mostly, it's to remind them that should the creatures of the wood entice them to stay, those who love them are waiting. So this is...a gift to a D'Haran huntswoman from her wife," Kahlan says quietly, handing it over. "A reminder of me for when you are far from our hearth."

Cara tests the heft of the bowl, squinting in concentration as she studies its structure. It is incredibly light for wood, perfect for travel yet much too intricate in its design for just that purpose. Cara says, "I hope never to be far from you, my Lady."

"Our stations will require that we're separated sometimes. Keep it for your travels. It won't easily break."

"You had an entire tree from Galea's orchards cut for this?" Cara asks, disbelieving.

"Even the strongest saplings can be cut down and rebuilt again to serve a purpose." Kahlan touches Cara's face, her thumb caressing her chin. "The black walnut tree is known to last thousands of years when alive, nearly forever when it has been repurposed. It is a fitting gift, one that I hope you pass on to our daughter."

"Our daughter?" Cara muses, turning the bowl over and over in the light. With each turn, the huntswomen are shown in varying iterations. In one, they nock their arrows, in another, their bows are drawn. Eventually, the arrows are sailing through the air to the bottom of the bowl where the stag awaits, its antlers nearly as huge as its body as it prances over Kahlan's coat-of-arms.

Cara continues, "That may not be for a long time yet."

"Oh no, I suspect it will be very soon," Kahlan says shrewdly, pursing her lips.

Cara's head whips up, her heart in her throat. "What do you mean?"

"Precisely what it means, Lord Rahl." Kahlan is suddenly very smug in the face of Cara's shock. The Lord Rahl is gaping at her, much like a fish out of water. "Don't be surprised. We've been at it nearly every day for two months."

This causes both of them to blush. If a Rahl can ever be at a loss for words then Cara cannot form any sentences for an entire minute. She is struggling to decide if she should respond to Kahlan's snark or go ahead and celebrate the news.

Again, Kahlan takes Cara's face in her hands, kissing her firmly.

Cara's mind steadies and her body visibly relaxes. "I...ah, I," Cara's throat bobs. Already, Kahlan is wiping away tears that Cara has not expected to fall. A small voice tells her that it is entirely too embarrassing but Cara does not care, not anymore. "This is wonderful news," she says. Just as quickly, her expression crumples in terror. "Creator, I don't know if I can do this."

"Cara," Kahlan whispers, peppering her cheeks with kisses. "You will make a great mother."
"Will I?" Cara chokes out, clutching Kahan's forearms with a tightness that hurts. The shadow of her family's death hangs over them like a shroud.

Kahan is resolute. She forces Cara to look at her while her voice lowers, grim and intense. "Yes. Leo knew it; your captains have always reminded me of it. With the eyes of an outsider, I've seen it for myself. You love fiercely and you will do what is necessary to protect what is dear to you. These are enough for a child born into the intrigues of our courts."

With those words, Cara is once again reminded that because of the trials she has shared with Kahan –never least the ones they've caused each other –the Mother Confessor sees her. She finds her reflection in Kahan's eyes, a woman needing comfort, a ruler who yearns to shrug off the yoke in the arms of someone who must, for their own sanity, do the same.

When she feels Kahan's hand on her head, her fingers threading into her hair as she caresses her, Cara's worries melt into the comfort she offers. Cara brings her forehead against Kahan's and the relief that washes over her is instantaneous.

"Oh, my Lion-heart. I am here," Kahan whispers. "I am here."

Kissing her desperately, tasting the salt of their tears, Cara manages a choked, "I know. By all that is good and merciful, in spite of what I most certainly don't deserve, I know."

She sweats beneath her armour, gazing up past palm leaves at a sun that remained hidden in the Midlands. The breeze is a strange reprieve, a humid gust that brings sand and dirt which clings to her skin. Beyond the trees are small waterfalls channelled to fill cisterns of water where men lounge to drink.

Cara breathes deeply.

Around her are the busy movements of thirty Alkarians –unsaddling horses, setting up tents, and others creating a perimeter to guard the large, orange buttes which surround the oasis of Ank'Tahim.

A young soldier bows deeply and offers her a tray of figs. As she balances three in her hand, she chews into one and makes her way to the abode that was once her centre of operations during her campaign against Darken Rahl.

The house sits a metre above the ground, wooden slats polished to perfection. The light fabric of the shelter's curtains fly in a breeze unhindered by solid walls.

Kahan stands at the edge of one of the platforms, observing a larger waterfall which towers twenty metres from the ground, feeding water into a pool so clear that one can see the bottom. She notices Cara's approach and offers her a wide smile, guile and warmth a thrilling mixture.

Cara's breath catches. Kahan has many smiles. The terrifying smirk she gives to her Council members, the small upturn of approval she allows her commanders, and the thin sneer of dire consequence to any who oppose her.

The ones she bestows on Cara are rare and layered. Her eyes twinkle and her cheeks quiver with mirth. She never shares them with anyone else and this particular one causes Cara's stomach to turn with anticipation.

"I could never figure out where you were during your rebellion," Kahan tells her. "Jory always told me that he was forced to come alone during your meetings with him and that he endured two
hours of horse-riding while blind-folded."

"He was braver than most," Cara admitted. "I always admired the courage it took to be led to a secret meeting-place full of his enemies."

Kahlans chuckles, "He was always willing to sacrifice just as much as we did and to his benefit, has always been one of the more determined graduates of the Academy."

"Which is why I don't regret assigning him the remaining work for Nicobarese." She breathes deeply, taking in the damp smell of the oasis which hints at a large and relentless desert beyond it. "It's good to be back in D'Hara. There's quite a bit of catching up to do with the Senate when I arrive at the Palace."

Kahan nods, taking Cara's hand and squeezing it. "How long will we stay here in Ank'Tahim?"

"For as long as you like," Cara indulges.

"I'd stay an entire year if I could," Kahlans admits. "Ank'Tahim is beautiful. It's no wonder you prefer this place to the People's Palace."

"Anyone in their right mind would prefer this to the intrigues of the Palace. I can arrange for us to come here once a month, more often if you like."

Kahlans puts her head on Cara's shoulder, kissing it with affection, enough that it makes Cara's heart clench. It's these small gestures that touch her, that remind her of the persistence of Kahlans' tenderness and her untiring effort to give just as much as Cara does. Kahlans sighs into her clothing and the warmth of her breath is a balm against Cara's skin. "I'll need the peace."

Cara's eyes quickly lower to Kahlans' abdomen, a small bump beneath her clothing. She holds Kahlans closer to her, her hand on Kahlans' stomach. "I will promise you nine months of tranquillity if it's the last thing I do."

Kahlans' laugh lightens Cara's heart. She has never felt more alive since those summer days by the River Kern when her boys' laughter lined the wide river. Surprisingly, the memory is a fond reminder--still as painful as it should be; it beats constantly with her heart, widening its crevices as though making space for something more. It keeps her conscious of all of pain's opposites, gives her a deeper appreciation of joy and other pleasures.

The loss of her family isn't the unendurable tangle of grief that immobilises her. Instead, it has become the driving force of her effort to rebuild, a memory to remind her of what must never be repeated, not for herself and the family she has now; and certainly not for anyone else in the kingdom.

She winds her arms around Kahlans' waist and slowly cradles her from behind, kissing the neck Kahlans offers. She sighs contentedly, aware of the sudden frisson between them. When Kahlans' hands come up to bury fingers into her hair, Cara is already drawing Kahlans further into the shelter. She caresses the underside of Kahlans' breasts over her clothing and Kahlans leans further into her, her bottom pressed suggestively against Cara's crotch. A bed awaits and Cara's retinue of silent bodyguards begin to close the sliding doors to give them privacy.

"Cara," Kahlans scolds.

"Let them see," Cara snarls, pulling at the fabric on Kahlans' shoulders and tasting the skin there. "Let them hear." She can feel Kahlans' pulse jump under her fingers as she traces the line of Kahlans' neck. She buries her nose into her nape, her chest full to bursting as she smells a hint of
jasmine and the unique tones of Kahlan's sweat.

She slips the dress off of Kahlan's shoulders and the material pools at her waist. Kahlan's breasts have ripened, fuller and heavier in her hands. Cara is careful; she knows how sensitive Kahlan's nipples can be now that she is with child. She licks her lips as she watches them over Kahlan's shoulder, already peaking under her ministrations.

Kahlan breathes, "If this is how you'll be every time I'm pregnant, I might consider having a child every year."

Cara grins. "Oh we both know that I am always like this."

"Take off your armour," Kahlan commands, turning to face her. She pushes Cara backwards until the back of her knees touch the bed.

Cara takes a moment to study Kahlan's feral expression, eagerness that the Mother Confessor wears when she is in battle. Kahlan is a goddess in the white dress, her exposed breasts round and flawless.

"I want you," Cara says intently, standing very still. The admission isn't as difficult as it once has been and it fills the room with heavy purpose.

Kahlan nods, her eyes darkening as she reaches into a satchel by the bedside. The Rada'Han clicks into place as Kahlan places it around her neck.

"Your armour," Kahlan demands again. Her smirk holds a challenge. "And all your clothes."

There is no winning this, Cara thinks, so she loosens her leather arm bracers, pulling them off and placing them on a side table. Her pauldron follows shortly after and then her greaves, both pairs clattering to the floor. She sits to remove her boots and as soon as the last leg is free, Kahlan is upon her, pushing them both into the sheets, her knees on either side of Cara's hips.

Cara tests if Kahlan will concede once Cara's hands are beneath her dress, caressing over the curve of her ass. Today, Kahlan won't allow anything of the sort. She grabs Cara's wrists and lifts them over her head, unbuttoning Cara's shirt which eventually joins the pile of armour on the floor.

Cara raises a brow in question but Kahlan only grins, the contours of her smile suddenly against Cara's own lips. Her kisses stray along Cara's jaw, then down her neck, meandering along her collarbone as though fascinated by its structure.

She reaches Cara's breasts, Kahlan's lips ghosting over their shape and her breath is hot against Cara's nipples. When Kahlan takes one into her mouth, Cara strains even closer to her, demanding to be touched.

Vaguely, Cara can feel the subtle rocking of Kahlan's hips against hers, Kahlan's other hand sliding from her wrists as she glides over Cara's arms, admiring their firmness with an appreciative squeeze. Cara groans when Kahlan's inner thigh rubs against her pelvis; Kahlan's desire is hot, wet and insistent, glistening on the skin of Cara's abdomen.

She can take no more of this; the plea slips past her lips, "Kahlan, please."

Kahlan pauses to look at her fervently, as an explorer would at a vista she has finally set eyes upon after searching for many, many years.

Nobody knows who concedes after that. The Bond brings all their emotions to the surface,
entwining the various threads into a single tapestry. Cara cannot tell if the joy she feels is Kahlan's or hers, or if the sharp rays of pleasure that radiate from every part of her is from her side of the Bond or from Kahlan's.

It doesn't matter. It probably never will.

What does register is Kahlan moving against her, whispering into her ear and telling her about how she would like to spend herself on Cara's fingers, how hard it is she would like to be fucked.

Cara puts a hand between them, two fingers sliding into Kahlan as she coaxes her clit. Kahlan begins to drive against her desperately, rolling her hips in between thrusts, her mouth hanging open while her blue eyes roil with desire and capture all of Cara's attention.

The hand that isn't clinging to her snakes its way from Cara's shoulders and down her hips. They make their way past Cara's under-things. Cara stops her ministrations, her breath hitching, as Kahlan delves into her own wetness, entering with the wilfulness of one who knows that Cara is hers.

They pleasure each other, lost in an eddy of skin and sweat, of lustful moans and the trill of each other's breathing.

Cara feels the walls around her own fingers constricting, the impending rush of moisture at her fingertips. Her body responds and Kahlan bites her neck gently as Cara feels the quiver of an oncoming upsurge deep in her own depths.

"My love," Kahlan chokes out, embracing her tightly with her one arm while the other is lost between them, her fingers sliding in and out of Cara in motions that are becoming frantic.

There is a lump in Cara's throat. She is rendered speechless by this woman she is embracing, already changed in subtle ways from the child growing in her. She glows from the inside out, full of life and vigour. Cara wants her fill of Kahlan, wants to make Kahlan her own.

Kahlan gives. With her lips, needy mewls and tender whispers, she offers what is immeasurable. She asks Cara to hold her even tighter, to go even deeper and when Cara obliges, slipping a third finger inside, Kahlan bursts at the seams, blooms with incredible beauty.

Cara follows shortly after, pulsing around Kahlan as her appreciative moans become an abiding note across both their release.

The Bond pours every emotion from the flooded basins of Kahlan's heart into hers. She can imagine that it is doing the same for her wife. Cara revels at the shared sensations, runs her hand over Kahlan's back, her waist, her legs, letting Kahlan lean against her in a boneless heap as Cara finally draws them both down into the sheets.

"I have you," Cara whispers. "I will always have you."

Kahlan kisses her shoulder, weak and content. She replies, "And I, you."

Cara smiles into Kahlan's hair. The reassurance is all Cara needs, now. It is all the strength she is willing to accept. And miraculously, between all the tasks that drain her and the ghosts that seek to maim her, she is certain it is more than enough.

Their arrival at the People's Palace brings with it a myriad of responsibilities. Cara handles her Senate while Kahlan heads the Central Council with Jory Renfeld as her figurehead. She
communicates with him by journey book, her blood strewn across its pages as it mirrors her handwriting in the counterpart owned by Jory.

Cara seems mildly amused by this method.

"My regiment can use that contrivance," she tells Kahlan one night. She sits by the bed as Kahlan writes in a neat script, the inkwell by the bedside barely full.

Kahlan smiles at her kindly. "If you can convince Zedd to give the Empire that advantage."

"I don't suppose he will," Cara says. She watches as Jory's responses appear on the journey book's pages. Cara tries to remember that Renfeld is an entire country away, toiling on a similar journey book while Kahlan receives it all in real time.

"He's asking about the baby," Kahlan reads. She chuckles. "He's complaining that Raina and Richard will not leave him alone if we don't give him a proper reply."

Cara leans forward to kiss Kahlan on the forehead before dipping lower to fully capture Kahlan's lips. There is a rustle of sheets, a thrum of laughter. Kahlan's response will not arrive for a few hours, not until the morning when Cara isn't a distraction.

The days are light with ease, punctuated by glorious visits from chieftains, lords and ladies who lay gifts at their feet, and throw banquets at their own lands' expense. They soothe Kahlan's worries with promises of fealty not only to the royal couple, but to the child who will sit on two thrones.

Cara labours endlessly to restore honour to the High Seat, writing endless missives to the far reaches of the Empire, restoring roads that lead into every province and safeguarding the provision of taxes. She insists on visits to Aydindril and Nicobarese during the winter, the harshest of times when the people needs their leaders the most.

She only calms down in Kahlan's presence, only laughs when she is near. Sooner rather than later, it is the talk at court that any who would like their cause to be heard should see the Mother Confessor first.

They soon realise it's a misconception. Kahlan, for all her tenderness in Cara's presence, is more of a lioness than Cara is. She is relentless in her pursuit of a world that will welcome her daughter and nurture her, a shadow of the Butcher of Halin –firm in her judgment and merciless when provoked –her purpose honed to a sharp edge.

Yet, sometimes duty is a weight that needs to be unburdened. When the toils of the People's Palace test Cara's patience and grind at her calm, she whisks Kahlan away to the silent sanctuary they have made their own.

On one particular day, they do not bring the usual retinue of thirty. Any guards on the buttresses surrounding the oasis have been told to keep out of sight.

"Tell me about your childhood, my Lord."

Cara smiles gently at the lady in her arms. They are seated beneath an arrund tree, rare in the Plains because it only thrives near water. They are content beneath the arrund's shade as its purple leaves sway above them, shattering sunlight into a hundred rays, murmuring against the breezes of the oasis.

Kahlan leans back against Cara's chest as Cara's knees are bent on either side her. Cara breathes deeply, a hand on Kahlan's belly as she holds it protectively over their unborn child.
Zedd tells them that the baby will come in a few short weeks. This may be their last trip to Ank'Tahim before the People's Palace sequesters them from the rest of the world.

"Tell me about yours, my Lady," Cara counters gently, her chin on Kahlan's hair. "Tell me about the gardens of Galea and the fertile banks of the Callisidrin.

Kahlan turns her head to her, kissing the side of her mouth before moving her lips to Cara's jaw. "We'll make a poet out of you yet."

Cara laughs. She has been so generous with those lately and it must be because it has a profound effect on the woman before her.

"Tell me," Cara insists. They both know what Cara is asking. The experiences from their youth will tie off something more important.

Kahlan clears her throat, her soft words carried by the wind to Cara's ears as she utters them, "She'll be raised there, our daughter. She will find joy in the orchards of Galea's queens, laughter by the river waters. She will discover kindness in the unforgiving snows of Nicobarese, balance on the horses of Kelton." Kahlan takes Cara's arms and weaves them around her. "Now, you tell me."

Cara's voice is low with emotion, her hopes for the children lost cleaving to the one that will come. "She will find bravery and fortitude in the Plains, loyalty and heart in the halls of the People's Palace. She will know beauty and rest in the stony cliffs of Cabrallia, and will learn to reserve judgment from the huntsmen of the infertile North. She will have everything, including all my love and she will have yours, which has sustained me to this day."

They are silent a moment before Kahlan squeezes her arm. "As I said, a poet."

"I'm hardly a woman of words," Cara says. "Berdine must be rubbing off on me."

Kahlan teases, "You do try."

"Only for you, my Lady."

Kahlan smiles, admiring Cara's openness. So many of Cara's walls have fallen away; she has shed them like layers of sable and fur in the midst of a warm spring. Kahlan's own thoughts are not as murky. She knows that a new age has come—for Cara and her, for the D'Haran Empire and the Midlands—and though she thought surrender was once a show of weakness, she now knows that a version of it is also strength.

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**Part II.**

Outside the *unum*, Kahlan watched as events unfolded in the High House.

Hearing this Richard speak reminded her of why she had followed him to the ends of the earth in her world. He gripped the High House with his logic, enticed it with his fervour. His Senator's tunic seemed like an old part of him, wrapped over his left shoulder in the kind of careless drape one adopted after many years of putting it on daily.

Richard the Truth Seeker held himself far straighter than her Richard, polished in a way that a simple woodsman can never be. This man had been borne into the House of Cypher, raised and groomed to be a Steward of the South, a noble from Acrimar.

Kahlan could tell that he hardly carried the sword and preferred the rhetoric which embodied
discourse in the Senate.

It suited him, she supposed. He always seemed like someone who would have settled down in the woods he loved rather than take up the ways of the warrior.

As he spoke -loud, eloquent and mesmerizing -his speech was interrupted by a loud guffaw.

"A wizard's apprentice --come to lecture us on the wisdom of moving entire divisions? Ha!" old Mica laughed, shaking in her seat. She was a thin figure buried in the folds of her Senator's tunic, her bony hands gripping her seat. Nearly three times Richard's age, she had thinning white hair covered by a shawl that had surely been made in the colder north. Her rheumy eyes considered him grimly. "You are no longer a Senator, Richard. You have no say in these things."

The Senate fell back into silence. Seeing that the Senate was sinking faster into unconcern, Richard gnashed out, "There is war on our doorstep!"

Another voice piped up from the back of the hall, "Precisely the kind of thing Darken claimed all those years ago. Look where that got him, and us, the South. Stand down, brother. All this warmongering will only condemn you."

Richard glared at Michael Cypher. He was slighter build than his brother with dark eyes that were full of cunning. The man of Sassen raised a brow in challenge.

Richard declared, "The Red Lion will not stand for this."

Michael Cypher frowned, standing from his seat. He strode halfway down the steps to the centre of the hall, spreading his arms as he spoke. His tone was soft but oily with tension, stalked by an old anger. "Pray tell, brother, where is the Lion-heart? Our Red Lion of Halin? Why has she sent a lackey in her place when she wishes to move entire divisions in her name?"

The High House murmured their puzzlement and a few began to assent.

The man had spun his web, Kahlan thought. She watched as Richard clamped his mouth shut. Kahlan recognised the tautness in his jaw, the same anger which made him such a formidable Seeker. But Richard the former Senator had restraint nurtured by a lifetime of diplomacy; the rare pragmatism that spared his life and those of his people.

"The Lord Rahl's business is her own," Richard said. He shot his brother a reproachful look. It was hard for Kahlan to imagine that they shared the same blood. One possessed the cruel grin of someone enjoying his brother's suffering far too much while the other seemed to be even more careful with his words.

Richard continued, 'I can hardly believe that hundreds of thousands of men approaching our border is of no concern to you because our cities' garrisons will be the first to be affected. The Old World is encroaching on our own and even the Wizard will attest to this."

Michael rolled his eyes. "Another wizard and his rumours?" he scoffed.

Zedd cleared his throat, drawing attention to his stooped figure hidden in a cranny by the gigantic oak doors. "The Wizard of the First Order, Senator. I deserve more than a passing introduction, especially by you."

Michael Cypher's eyes whipped to the Wizard by the door; he seemed surprised by the interruption, suddenly wary that this mover of the worlds' affairs had chosen Richard's side. He took a few steps back to his seat, clutching his tunic. If anybody possessed authority in matters which concerned
both D'Hara and the Midlands, it was a Wizard of the First Order.

"Wizard Zedd," he muttered.

"Senator Cypher," Zedd acknowledged.

His lips were drawn into a thin line of disapproval. He grabbed his staff and pulled himself upright, towering over all of them. He seemed bigger, more imposing; it was perhaps an effect of the authority he chose to carry, or the thin sheen of magic he maintained. The change was slightly jarring because to the Rahls, he was a jolly old man who teased and cossetted the most unwilling victims.

Richard seemed relieved that the wizard had finally chosen to intervene.

Kahlan snickered in her hiding place. She had a bird's eye view of the Senate from the staircase winding up and around the dome of the High House, something Constance had arranged even as she sniffed at Kahlan like a dog who couldn't decide if this particular iteration of Kahlan was also its master.

Zedd's deep baritone filled the High House. "As Richard has said, my dear Senators, there is an army at D'Hara's doorstep, poised to strike in a few weeks. If I may," he says as he faces away from them, gesturing to the oak doors.

Michael swallowed as he surveyed the Senate. Seeing their approval, he nodded. "Of course, Wizard Zedd."

Two D'Harans entered the High House. The first was Constance, the Lord Rahl's right hand. The other was someone below Constance's rank. From the colours of her clothes, she was a scout but one could not have judged it from her stature. Her leathers hung loosely around her; her skin was sallow, clinging to her bones. She was clearly fresh from the fronts, and seemed skittish and ill at ease. She also walked with a slight stoop, as though she had left her soul lurking in the Southern forests.

"Please introduce yourself," Zedd urged.

The Senate was intent on her but she didn't seem cowed by their attention. Her eyes twitched from images that seemed burned behind them, experiences haunting her from the front.

"M-my lords and l-ladies," she said in a scratchy voice. She seemed surprised at her own intonation, a sound that she probably wasn't used to hearing as a scout who lived in the wilderness for months at a time. She recovered with a shake of her head. "I am Scout Farya from the Southern garrison of Kalith'al. I was tasked to protect the border and I fear that I have failed."

Michael opened his mouth, "What is this farce? Some plot to—"

Old Mica glared at Michael as she limped past him. "Quiet, Senator. This is a Scout of Kalith'al, unmoved by any particular division except her own. Her oath is to the Empire and her work in the forests of our borders is unsullied by men." She smiled kindly at the Scout, putting a gentle hand on the woman's shoulder in a tentative gesture of goodwill. "Tell us what you've seen, young one."

The woman's lips trembled. "An old magic, my lady and an ocean of marauders as far as the eye can see."

"I swear it by the honour of my station," Farya insisted, her fingers on her insignia. It was a silver torch, its flame embedded with sapphire. The token was rewarded to the very few who spoke only of that which they saw as they saw it, who thrived in the isolation of the wood and whose eye-sight rivalled all but the chosen elite.

"Either those are ravings of a Scout whose flame was dowsed," Mica glanced at the silver torch on Farya's breast, "or it is the truth."

Farya's eyes hardened and they fixed upon old Mica with ferocity. The wilderness flared from her like a canopy of trees engulfing them. It unsettled them all. "I have seen this horror on the border. It devours everything in its path. I would not have walked the miles to the People's Palace to give you word of this if I could have spent my days in the forests of Kalith'al 'unsullied' by the affairs of men."

Old Mica breathed deeply, the loose skin of her jowls shivering. She stole a glance at Zedd who shrugged, signalling that she needed to form her opinions without his help.

After a long silence, Mica pulled back her shoulders. "You've heard the girl," Mica told the Senate. The High House began to fill with the buzz of conversation, only to subside when she addressed Richard. "We shall vote on this, Truth Seeker. We will not risk war without deliberation. We must discern if there is a leader we can speak to, if we can sue for peace. If this information can be brought to us, then we may arrive at a decision quicker."

"We may already be too late," Richard said. "The Alkarians have sent envoys. None have returned."

"Nonsense," old Mica clucked and this time, Kahlan's eyes flicked to the back of the room. It was then that she caught the slithering smile of triumph on Michael Cypher's face. The heavy rock of realisation and then horror settled in her gut. She glanced frantically at Richard who, it seemed, had also been intent on his brother.

Mica continued, "The Trimessi will try as well. And so will the divisions from the East and the West."

Richard blinked. "That will take weeks, months even!" He took two steps forward and old Mica registered this as a threat.

She pointed a stern finger at him. "Not another word, young man. Having you speak here was a privilege and now we have revoked it. Leave at once, before we make you."

Zedd came up from behind Richard just as he had opened his mouth to protest. "Hush," Zedd said, patting the younger man on the shoulder and using his body to shepherd Richard towards the doors. "They have thrown the dice. They cannot take back what fate will deal them."

"We cannot defend the border with a single division," Richard hissed. "We'll be overrun in a few weeks!"

"Not if I can help it." Zedd turned to the Senate, eyeing each of them with furrowed brow. "Deliberate on it if you must but do not take too long. The fate of the known world hangs in the balance."

They filed into the room, the air heavy with consternation.

Constance riled, "The Senate would deliberate for weeks? Months?" She closed the heavy doors
behind her, pounding a fist against them. "The blathering fools will discuss this to our deaths. Literally, our deaths!"

Richard wasn't listening. His mind was preoccupied by the subtle gears that had turned beneath their feet at the High House. "It was him," Richard said, burying his face in his hands, his eyes glazed with disbelief. "It was him, that lying, scheming traitor."

"Your brother," Kahlan affirmed.

Zedd sighed. "He hasn't changed."

"His thirst for power hasn't waned," Richard said. "I don't know the whole picture and there isn't any proof but the scheme against Amihan was his, I'm sure of it. It must have been a plot to destabilise the High Seat. And he succeeded! Cara hasn't woken up!"

Constance shrugged. "I'm not surprised. Michael and treason have always come hand-in-hand. He nearly instigated that civil war with the South –the one Cara was tasked by Panis to prevent." She raised a brow at Richard who seemed poised to protest. "Brotherly love either blinded you or forced you to look the other way."

Richard looked down. "Both," Richard admitted, his shoulders sagging. "I couldn't believe a man of Cypher's House could be so..."

"Dishonourable," Constance finished for him. "The Empire deserves his head if any of this could be proven." She looked pityingly at him but there was a spark of glee in her eyes. "If the Lady Rahl even suspects he was involved in Amihan's kidnapping, she will not hesitate to gut him." Her eyes flickered to Kahlan, before they softened as she remembered that this woman was not the Lady Rahl. She added, "And Cara won't stop her. She might even encourage it."

Kahlman had no doubts about her assessment. Richard groaned as he slumped into a chair.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Zedd said in a soothing voice. "We must continue to hope that the Lord Rahl will wake up and stop this nonsense. All we can do now is wait."

Constance crows, "But what of the Snake?"

Zedd grunts, his expression darkening. "Keep a close watch on him. Record his comings and goings. There is a deeper plot that we must uncover and once we have, the Lord Rahl will dole judgment."

When the child arrived –noisy, bloody and pink– Cara the Mord'Sith was rooted to her place in terror. The end of the road had come and the unum gathered its tendrils strewn across the landscape of her emotions. Beyond her, the invisible wounds caused by the Rada'Han were sewn shut by threads the unum had stolen from her.

Cara Rahl was whole, nearly seamless, but what was she?

Less or more? Certainly not the same.

Kahlman had been a difficult puzzle before the unum, an enemy she had sworn to protect for the sake of the Lord Richard Rahl. They had waded through a bog of friendship, each step more measured than the next. This trip into an alternate world had certainly brought them together; after all, she had to be intimately familiar with her traveling companion to ensure their survival. But this?
She had no idea how well she could withstand Kahlan's presence now. Not after Cara Rahl. Not after…

If Cara had corporeal eyes in this interior world the unum had created, she would have squeezed them shut. There was no escape from the images, no escape from the tightness in her chest, the fluttering hollow in her belly that they caused—such beautiful thighs, alluring hips, delicious breasts, and a beatific face that was indescribable during the throes of passion! If Cara had been confused by what she felt for Kahlan before, now she was certain that those feelings included wanting her in Cara's bed.

There was nothing more complicated than coveting what was Rahl's. Nothing more complicated than yearning for something that went beyond the physical aspects of a joining, beyond the encompassing need to hold Kahlan. As a Mord'Sith, she knew that the consequences were dire; every time a Mord'Sith wanted something more than what was allotted to her, she was dissuaded by whips, chains and blood. It meant putting an Agiel in her hand to torture the object of her affections, to sterilise a barren landscape that had grown a single glade of grass.

To put it mildly, death was a merciful punishment for high treason.

So why was it that when Amihan was presented to Cara Rahl by a beaming midwife, her training fell away and the landscape of her heart bloomed with persistent, irrepressible life?

Within the unum, Cara Rahl feels the coming change. Her eyes glaze over. The Bond shudders violently as pain travels along the cords that bind her to Kahlan in short, debilitating surges. She breaks into a sweat and stands, the wooden chair screeching in protest.

"My Lord Rahl, are you all right?"

"Hold the meeting, Bale. I…"

Constance bursts through the doors of the meeting hall. "My Lord!" she cries. Immediately, Cara knows what the Bond is telling her.

"Amihan," Cara breathes, abandoning the hall, her robes flowing behind her as she follows Constance to the birth room.

Her daughter will be named after the north-eastern trade winds, the strong breezes which swayed Aguta's hand and breathed life into Cara. Though there are other long-winded appellations which will be attached to the D'Haran Empire and the Midlands' heir, this is the name Cara and Kahlan wish to call her; it is a reminder of what it means to be saved from the cold slopes of despair. To the Rahls, the name will mean that strength can be found in even the most unexpected of places.

When she enters, Kahlan is situated on a bed, grunting with effort as a midwife tells her to breathe. Cara has never been queasy around blood—spilling it is her trade, after all—but the amount that hits her senses and knowing that it is Kahlan's cause her legs to weaken.

She rushes to her wife's side and Kahlan looks up at her, grabbing her hand and squeezing with so much force that Cara winces.

"Cara," she pleads.

Cara is suddenly awash with terror because she knows she can do nothing except be there.

"It will be all right," she says, eyeing everyone in the room and feeling suddenly like a child, lost
and frightened.

The midwife between Kahlan's legs smiles and reassures, "There is no need to worry, Mother Confessor, my Lord Rahl. Everything is going accordingly."

The hours are long and demanding but Cara is there for all of it. The Bond screeches in protest and Kahlan does, too. The headache Cara develops pounds incessantly, soothed only by water and fortifying herbs mixed by a flustered, nagging Constance who, despite staying by their side the entire time, looks about as panicked as Cara feels.

It finally comes to the last push and the air is thick with tension. Kahlan keens and Cara cannot feel the hand Kahlan clutches, suspecting that perhaps it is already broken. The other is on Kahlan's forehead, stroking wet strands of hair from her forehead. She whispers encouragement and is nearly in tears herself. She has gone through the pain of child-birth, knows that she has the strength to withstand it, but watching her wife undergo this agony is a different anxiety altogether.

She decides that nothing has terrified her as much as this. But that changes quickly, because the room falters into relief when a high pitched cry breaks through the clamour.

The midwife is beaming, holding the child precariously in both hands as she squirms. She gives the baby a quick check before cleaning her and swaddling her in clothing.

When Amihan is placed in her arms, Cara has never felt more whole, or more complete. All the pieces that had been shattered since Halin fall into place. All the colours brighten and her entire being swells with gratification.

She lifts her head to look at Kahlan, her eyesight blurry as she witnesses the tired smile on her wife's face. Kahlan leans back into her pillows, exhausted by the long hours of labour and content to have Cara fawn over their daughter as she regains some of her strength.

Midwives fuss over the Mother Confessor, wiping her forehead with damp towels while others fixed her a mixture of healthy herbs. Servants are cleaning up warm vessels of water and bloodied sheets.

Everyone gives Cara and the bundle in her arms a wide breadth by moving around her. Indeed, Cara is ensnared by the intensity of her emotions. She cannot begin to tell Kahlan about how protected this child will be how, how loved. Tears streak her cheeks but now they are a badge of joy instead of the weakness she has always thought them to be.

"I love you, Kahlan," she breathes to her wife as she finally finds the strength to move and sit beside her. She places the baby on Kahlan's chest, noticing that Amihan has quieted down from the initial screaming, watching her parents as they gaze at her lovingly. "And you, little one, I love you too."

From the corner of her eye, she can see Kahlan smile at her. These are admissions that would never have been heard since the events at Halin. To hear them now reminds them of just how far they have travelled, and just how difficult the journey has been.

Just when Cara's heart fills to the point that her chest must surely burst at any moment, the memory shuddered in its glass.

Cara Rahl gaped as the world mirrored her own heart; it flooded with warmth and incandescent light, lifting her to a surface she had not known was there. The unum's façade broke and Cara Rahl breathed the acerbic scents of a sick-room.
Cara Rahl jerked awake. Much too weak to move and seeing that neither her child nor her wife were within reach, she began to scream for them.

"Kahlan! Amihan!"

In a nearby bed, Cara the Mord'Sith whimpered.

TBC
Unravelling

Chapter Summary

Cara wakes from the unum's spell and comes to face to face with her realizations about Kahlan.

Chapter Notes

It's been a year since the last update for which I apologize. This was a difficult chapter to write, because RL was all-consuming and because this took a lot of emotion to get on paper. I'm glad I finished it! Thank you so much for the support over the years. This has been a labour of love and I'm so grateful that you've stuck with it for so long despite the rare updates.

I credit Sionnain69 with the amazing beta work, her incredible patience over the years and her unwavering support. This story would not have been possible without her. All remaining mistakes are mine.

She woke up to a world heavy with too much colour and meaning. She blinked quickly, the threads of heavy sleep falling from her eyes. The ceiling above flared with shadows as a fire cackled nearby. She breathed a lungful of air as she pulled herself up and tried to ground herself with her feet on the cold floor, her muscles protesting.

The hairs on her arms rose as panic skittered across the Bond and she wasn't sure if the fear was hers, or Rahl's, or a combination of both.

She stared at her reflection on the marble. She was clothed in sweat-ridden cotton instead of her leathers, her hair mopped across her face and her blue eyes wide with panic.

She couldn't recognise herself. She touched her chest and the cavity beneath felt abnormally full. Surely, a stone mason had cut a huge slab of hot rock and forced it into her chest. It throbbed as it expanded with the breadth of new emotion.

For a blessed moment, the Bond calmed and Cara looked up to meet Rahl's gaze, grimacing as she realized that because of the events in the unum, this felt more like looking at a mirror.

Rahl's eyes narrowed. "You..." Her voice was raspy with misuse.

"Saved your life," Cara supplied in an impatient tone, grabbing the tumbler of water from her bedside. "Stop it with your bleating. You're giving me a headache."

"You saw everything, didn't you?"

Cara glanced at the unum, the light of its magic fading as it withdrew its tendrils and became nothing more than a bedside statue. "There was no avoiding it," she accused. She felt anxiety
shudder in her chest before her Mord'Sith training slammed it back into a box.

"To have to live through that again would have driven me mad," Rahl said. "It would drive anyone mad."

"It didn't." Cara glared. "Look at you, as good as the first day I met you."

"In no small part because of you."

Cara clenched her hand against her chest. "I can already tell that the price was more than what I was willing to pay."

"I'm sor-"

"There will be no apologies," Cara interrupted. She let out a huff of air, trying to unburden the heavy weight which pushed at the seams of her calm. "There will be no apologies for who you are inasmuch as I will never, ever apologize for being Mord'Sith. The unum has done its piece."

She tried to get up but faltered. Her legs had weakened in the weeks she had been unconscious. Rahl attempted to do the same, her arms straining against the bed's headboard. They stared at each other; their identical expressions of complete frustration causing Rahl's lips to twitch in amusement.

"Shall I bring in the reinforcements?"

Cara could not fathom Rahl's humour. "And have them see us like this?"

They both jumped as Constance chose that time to barge in.

"My Lord!" she exclaimed.

A child pushed away from Constance's side, running to her mother. "Inya!"

Rahl's face broke into a grin and the strain of weeks in a harrowing past melted from her. She collapsed on the bed, opening her arms as Amihan climbed on her lap. For a moment, Cara felt a stab of jealousy. She knew the calm Amihan gave her mother and wished she could feel it too.

"My love," Rahl whispered, her eyes closing as she buried her nose in her daughter's hair. "Have you been well?"

"I missed you!"

Constance cut in, "Her mothers have been away. She's thrilled you're awake."

"Away? Where is Kahlan?"

"The Lady Rahl left for the border of the Old World. We're at war, my Lord. And the Senate would have us wait under the guise of propriety."

"As they should," Rahl gritted, careful to hold Amihan to her chest as she soothed her. "Tell me about this," Rahl's scar curled into a taught grapevine as she snarled, "war."

"When you've had your rest, my Lord. Your sleep was no ordinary sleep."
Rahl cut her off coldly, "I won't rest until my family is safe." She waved at Cara's direction. "See to it that this twin is given the same attention as I am. The Mother Confessor of their world will be afforded the same respect."

Constance was tight-lipped. "This is something the Regiment already knows. As for the Lady Rahl's twin," her statement tapered to a shrug.

Cara straightened. "Is she alright?" she demanded.

Constance frowned. "Of course, Mason. What else could she be when she has been under the care of the Lord's Regiment? She has also been Cypher's ward for many weeks now. I was going to say that she has been overseeing a part of the Palace's affairs with Richard and the Wizard Zedd."

"Richard," Cara whispered, her chest inexplicably tightening. She felt the unfamiliar burn of possessiveness and a sudden urge to see her. She felt helpless against her emotions; her Mord'Sith training was straining under the weight of what had happened in the unum.

"Yuhin!" Amihan said, her eyes shining as Richard's name was mentioned.

"Yes, your uncle," Cara echoed absently.

Cara Rahl watched the exchange and said cryptically, "We'll share a meal. A war cannot be fought on an empty stomach."

"I shall arrange it," Constance said, bowing as she exited the room.

"This journey has made me hungry," Rahl said. She kissed Amihan on the forehead. "Have you been eating well, little one?"

"Inya makes sure I do!"

"Surely you've had enough of having two of each of us."

Amihan shook her head, leaning against Rahl's chest as she studied Cara. "No. Two is better."

"I suppose it is. Especially if we're at war." Rahl sighed, tightening her embrace.

"War," Amihan mouthed, her lips trying the words for the first time.

"We haven't had one since you were born," Rahl said. "Your mother and I made sure of it. And now, this."

"Is that why inya and Berdine are gone?"

"Yes. There are many swords and spears between them and peace."

Amihan grew very serious. "We should help."

"In time, little one. We'll have to gather our strength first."

"Okay!"

A fond smile tugged at Cara's lips and Amihan caught the expression. "You look tired," the little girl said.

"I am," Cara said. It was easy to be honest with Rahl's daughter, easy for her to let the brimming
warmed in her heart. As she studied the little girl, noticing how much like Kahlan's her smile was, how like Cara's her eyes were; the haunting clarity of her memories forced a smile.

"And hungry," Amihan said as she saw Cara's face soften. "We should eat."

"Indeed we should."

Kahlan was with Richard when she received the news. Constance's eyes were charged and discerning as Kahlan fought a rush of emotion she could hardly understand. There were so many things she wanted to tell Cara, so many things that had brewed in the time she had been asleep.

"The Lord Rahl requests that we meet her at the dining hall for a meal."

"How fitting," Richard said, very fondly. "Not even fed, and she'd like to discuss tactics."

Constance rolled her eyes. "The Lady Rahl is in danger. She'd rather act than dilly dally."

Kahlan glanced at Richard, who seemed thrilled by the entire prospect. Again, Kahlan wondered at the differences between the Richard of this world and the one in hers. Here, Richard was totally at ease with Cara Rahl, cracking jokes with her, and poking at her calm.

He tiptoed around Kahlan's presence, gauging her reactions, offering reasonable moments of silence with which to contemplate his responses. It was a jarring change. Richard had always been more forthcoming with her.

She nearly reached for his hand to seek comfort but then remembered that this Richard Cypher would not appreciate the gesture. He had been Denna's lover for a long time.

For a moment, she felt a foreboding sense of loss. She was certain she would emerge from the Gate of Meleth different from how she had entered and it frightened her that the Richard from her world would not understand.

She cleared her throat. "Let's go then."

Constance nodded, leading them through the Palace.

The Rahls' dining hall was a building separate from the Palace and overlooked the Azrith Plains. It was surrounded by well-manicured grass, fed by a stream that flowed beneath the roots of a large, *arun* tree.

The tree itself was five men in width. It grew into the building's side, its large roots intertwining with stone as it rode up, bursting out like an awning of purple leaves several feet up. It provided ample shade as it reclined over half the roof. Because of its age, some of the *arun*'s leaves and branches hung low like a weeping willow, a curtain across the room's entrance.

The building was held up by marble pillars that had been hewn with pictures of a battlefield. From the carvings, Kahlan could see two long-haired women, one with a circlet on her head, another in a flowing dress much like hers. They rode out with their horses, followed by their soldiers as they marched across the Azrith Plains. Another pillar depicted a battle for control in the People's Palace, two women holding a Rada'Han each and a Rahl beheaded in the Garden of Life.

In the west, the room was flanked by a wide balcony as its stone foundations slipped over the edge of the Palace and hung above the Plains. The setting sun shone through the pillars, bathing the occupants in a gentle, orange light.
As she climbed the steps to the entry way, Kahlan could see two silhouettes, one with a child beside her, the other sitting across from her twin.

Servants were lined on one side, taking turns as they served bread, cheeses, fruits and a variety of roasts.

She could hear Cara's laugh, bright and open, before she realized that its owner was Cara Rahl instead. Kahlan grew sombre, glancing at the woman across from Rahl.

Cara the Mord'Sith stared at Rahl and her daughter like a woman lost. Her eyes flickered to Kahlan and recognition became relief. "Kahlan," she said.

Kahlan crossed the space between them. She took Cara's features in as though thirsty, drank the blueness of her eyes, the tired angles of her face, the small smile which held only a hint of cheer.

Alas, looking was not enough.

"I am so glad you're well," Kahlan began. She did not think. She took Cara's weakened frame fully into her arms, squeezing tightly. "Creator," she whispered, her nose buried in golden hair that smelled faintly of spring in a garden of flowering trees and also boldly of earth, sweat and sun-drenched soil. She became heady with the scent, given urgent confirmation that Cara was indeed present and alive.

She muttered into Cara's neck, "I thought that the unum had pulled you into Oblivion."

Suddenly remembering their audience, Kahlan held Cara at arm's length. She knew that unwarranted physical contact stifled her.

She was startled when she found Cara smiling at her, her face softening in the way it had in a grove of Night Wisps.

Cara moved forward like a gust of wind, both arms pulling Kahlan in for yet another embrace as she pressed her lips against Kahlan's cheeks. The touch burned with novelty but it was pleasant and Cara braced herself against Kahlan as words tumbled out of her mouth, "You ground me, Kahlan. You anchor me to our world. I…" She seemed overwhelmed and for a moment, Kahlan felt hot tears against her temple.

Kahlan brought a hand up to cradle Cara's face. "I'm here now. I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke up."

Cara swallowed, her throat bobbing. She looked too thin. Although she was dressed in her leathers, they were ill-fitting and sagged around her hips. She held herself with the same easy arrogance but the long sleep had devoured so much of her that she seemed less somehow.

Kahlan felt her anger like a thorny seed deep in her chest. She wanted to take Cara home -home to their world where artefacts, men and monsters could be neutralized by the Sword of Truth and the Agiels.

Cara Rahl had been watching their exchange. "I'm trying to get half the pantry into her," she said, trying for humor. "The unum was cruel."

"More than cruel," Cara said roughly.

"More than cruel," Rahl affirmed, sobering. "And we have much to discuss." She turned to the servants and dismissed them.
Constance was hunched over her plate, picking at her food and watching the room while her wine lay untouched. Rahl nodded to Zedd, who had been tucking in an entire chicken. Zedd remembered something, putting down his food and wiping his hands on his robes. He rummaged through one of several bags that had been hanging against his chair and produced a book.

"A gift from the Midlands," he said, handing Rahl the journey book. "Use it wisely, my Lord."

Rahl was solemn. "Of course, Zedd." She turned to the rest of the table, smiling weakly at Amihan who looked intently up at her as she swung her legs against her chair.

Her gaze paused on Kahlan, blue eyes darkening as they filled with renewed strength. She breathed deeply and Kahlan wondered how a mere glance in her direction could galvanize the Lord of D'Hara.

Rahl opened her mouth to speak but paused, her expression crumpling.

"I'm sorry. You look so much like her," she admitted.

Cara fidgeted in her seat and Kahlan gave her a reassuring pat on the arm.

Kahlan said, "I am not Kahlan Rahl. Circumstance gave us different paths, different lives." Something in the way Rahl saddened made her ease her tone, "But I understand the parts of her which I believe are important. The ones which care for her family and will protect them at any cost."

Rahl blinked then straightened in her seat. "Then you understand the Lady Rahl better than anyone. Which is why I would ask that both of you travel to the South. You cannot stay here; we've churned enough intrigue to destabilize the High Seat. There is also the matter of the Gates of Meleth."

Zedd cleared his throat. "I shall be travelling with you. The Lord Rahl believes you have both suffered enough and I've been tasked with bringing you home."

"And what about you?" Kahlan asked Rahl.

"I am the Lord of this Empire. I cannot fight at the fronts or travel just yet. But I can guarantee my wife the resources for victory, or at least a semblance of a stand." Her arms gripped the table. "The Imperial Order have come in droves and they are capable of wiping out all of the South's defenses. Being at the border is a death sentence."

They heard a rustle as Amihan abandoned her own seat to clamber up her mother's.

"Inya, inya," she whispered.

Cara Rahl cradled her daughter's head, caressing her until the child relaxed. There was silence in the room, pregnant with disquiet as the sun set and torches were lit.

Richard stared into a slowly dimming land, striking a fork against vegetables as they slipped around his plate. Zedd seemed greyer as he continued to finish his food. Constance's brows were knit, her knuckles white as she gripped the cutlery.

The shadow of Death had somehow taken his place at the table.

After a long while, a voice broke, "Let us help you."
Everyone turned to Cara. Kahlan held her wrist, feeling Cara's quickened pulse. "You owe these people nothing," Kahlan said.

"No I don't," Cara agreed. Her eyes were on Amihan, who stared at her from under Rahl's chin. The deep blue eyes of her mothers shifted as she buried her face in Rahl's chest. "But I came here for a reason and that reason persists. We can't leave Amihan to die." She met Kahlan's gaze and smiled sadly. "As much as I'd like to believe that the unum left me unchanged, it has made me realize a few things. I won't let any version of you or this girl suffer like this. Not until I've done all that I could."

Constance wore a confused frown, her eyes darting from the two of them as though she had seen this scene once before and did not know what to make of it. Cara gave her one, blistering look and the Alkarian dropped her gaze. She continued to play with her food.

Kahlan caught the exchange. Cara's shared experiences with Rahl pervaded her interactions with the room's occupants. This sudden familiarity with Rahl's cohorts was terrifying to watch, heartbreaking as it sank into Cara's character from the sheer density of the unum's knowledge and experience.

Rubbing a thumb against Cara's pulse point, Kahlan said, "I can't leave you here to do this on your own."

Zedd had a chicken bone in his hand when he cleared his throat. With it, he pointed at an indistinct direction somewhere across the Plains and said, "The Lady Rahl's camp is only a few miles away from the Gate of Meleth. You have until your arrival to choose your next move. Whatever action you take, however, you should be as far away from these lands as possible when the Imperial Order decides to attack the border."

He waved the chicken bone at Cara Rahl as though to make a point before dropping it on his empty plate with grim finality. "There is no easy cure for zealotry but I refuse to believe that total annihilation is the only outcome."

Again, Rahl summoned her servants, allowing them to clear the table. It hadn't been noticeable before but as they took away the plates and cutlery and eventually wiped the table's surface, a carved piece sheathed in thick glass lay within the table itself. In it were the rolling mountains of the Rang'Shada, the Azrith Plains and the thick forests of the South.

It was a map of the D'Haran Empire, flanked on its left by an even larger map of the Midlands. A deep groove depicted the Kern River as it tapered to several smaller tributaries, eventually joining the wide Callisidrin on the other side of the Midlands border.

Constance stooped over a heavy chest situated nearby and extracted several figurines. She placed the seal of Galea on top of the Old World border. She added several red lions to depict the D'Haran regiments already in place, moving from Messa to Gradin, Acrimar to Sassen.

Two lions were positioned outside of the People's Palace gates while another was placed behind the cliffs of Cabrallia. Seven more were scattered around the map.

She placed more than a dozen different figurines in Galea, Aydindril, Kelton, Tamarang and then across the Wilds to represent the Midlands' forces.

Cara Rahl faced her twin, "You," she held a white lion by its head to convey that it represented Cara and Kahlan, "will ride with Raina and three more Alkarian regiments. The Tenth will be here in less than a fortnight; you will have enough time to prepare for your journey."
Rahl herded two wooden horses -Kahlan recognised their Kelton saddles and surmised that they were mounted cavalry -then pushed them across the Wilds and into D'Hara. Rahl continued, "You will meet the Midlands' reinforcements near the D'Hara/Midlands border then make your way to the Lady Rahl's camp. From there, Zedd will escort you to the Gate and you will be free of this land." She took the white lion a few inches from the border to an unmarked place in the map.

Without looking at either of them, Rahl said, "Ank'Tahim is open to you. My family and the People's Palace is open to you. This journey will be fraught with danger so have your rest.

"Cara," Rahl addressed her twin, her voice rough, "I know that the life the unum put you through wasn't for you to see. Twice the pain or joy in one's lifetime would leave anyone untethered. Order the Regiment as you wish, you know more about me now than anyone else. Anything you ask, I shall give."

Cara managed a cruel smile. "I will hold you to that promise."

Rahl nodded in understanding and said, "It's all I could expect."

As they waited for the Tenth Alkarian Regiment to arrive at the People's Palace, Cara gathered her strength. She did not stray far from Kahlan, always keeping her within view even as she wielded practice swords and swung them into flowing martial forms.

For her part, Kahlan had no desire to leave her side. She was aware that this new, deeper attachment had stemmed from almost losing her.

They took their meals together, sharing light banter and avoiding the subject of the unum -mostly because they both knew it was what Cara needed. They gossiped about this world's Richard, especially his dalliances with Denna, and laughed when he shot them suspicious looks. When Kahlan spoke with her usual tenderness, because the subject of Richard evoked affection, she noticed hints of jealousy that Cara carefully hid away.

Sometimes Kahlan joined her for her training. Their sessions ended in a spar that left Cara depleted but smiling. There was anxious intent in her eyes; her mood seemed mercurial, subject to quick changes when triggered by a memory, or a thought. It made Kahlan wary.

Cara seemed at the edge of a precipice, ready to speak words that they had been dancing around for a while. It would concern what the unum had taken from her and what it had given her: Discovery. Shifts in her paradigm. A new set of eyes with which to view the world.

And how Cara's gaze had changed. Kahlan felt warm beneath it, the kind of fluttering turmoil she associated with midnight trysts or kisses stolen in the moonlight. Though bold and irreverent, Cara managed a rare and honest gentleness as she recovered with Kahlan by her side.

Sometimes, Kahlan would find her staring into space, her expression listless as a memory played behind her eyes. Objects, a situation, even smells compounded it.

Contemplation and silence marked her behaviour every time she was pulled from her reverie.

Kahlan was convinced that something in Cara had loosened. Her brooding had the weighted calm of somebody who was grudgingly coming to terms with certain truths. She smiled more readily, the light in her eyes illuminating spaces in her character that had been veiled by offensive snark and sarcasm.

To Kahlan, it was frustratingly attractive.
Rain in the Azrith Plains was a rare occasion. Kahlan smelled the moisture long before it began. The air was heavy and distinct, just as it was in parts of the Midlands that had been wetter.

Grey clouds rolled in, seen for miles away like a roiling blanket. Below in the courtyard, Cara was out of her leathers and in a thin white shirt, sweating profusely from the humidity as she sparred with one of Rahl's Alkarian soldiers. A daily regimen of good food, Zedd's herbs, healing magic, and exercise had her standing and prowling the practice halls a few days after she had woken.

She was dangerously intent, working with two practice swords as the Alkarian grunted with effort. The unum had made her weak - one could see it in a stumble here, a grimace there, and the hands on her hips after ten minutes of rigorous sparring.

Thunder reverberated and fell in slanted sheets. Cara went through a series of blurred strikes, beating her sparring partner into submission. Nodding politely to her partner, she gestured to a servant nearby who offered her a towel as she went indoors. She disappeared from view before Kahlan heard her footsteps, climbing the stairs to the balcony where Kahlan waited.

She was grinning ear to ear as she neared Kahlan, her body language uncharacteristically open as she presented how wet she was.

"It never rained in the Azrith," she explained, "not when I had been there." She shook her arms, thrilled as droplets fell away. Her breathlessness, her levity as she spread her arms at the scene, and a rare, open grin were infectious.

Kahan found herself laughing. "Honestly, Cara. You look like a child on her birthday."

Still smiling, Cara surprised them both when she stepped forward and held Kahlan's face with both hands, as though attempting to touch the joy there. Again, Kahlan laughed. For a blissful moment, Cara's hands warmed Kahlan's cheeks before she realized that perhaps - oh, perhaps! - her actions stemmed from memories of another world, a past that had partially meshed with her present. Not daring to take her hands away, Cara frowned and seemed unable to move.

Kahan took that moment to study her. Cara's wheat-coloured hair curled towards her face, her reddened cheeks livening the hollowness that had plagued her during the unum's sleep. Involuntarily, Kahlan's gaze fell to Cara's lips, which were red and moistened by the rain. She swallowed before gazing back up into Cara's eyes, which had grown luxuriously dark.

Kahan recognized it below her chest: a small, piercing burn that radiated out to all her appendages. It intensified as Cara's thumb caressed her chin, touching her lower lip questingly.

Kahan held Cara's hand against her face, relaxing into it as she sighed.

Cara seemed pained when Kahlan kissed her palm.

"I missed you," Kahlan admitted. "It was painful not knowing if you'd wake up or not."

It hung over them, the thought that this was the Gate's boon and its curse. They could choose to ignore this, to never speak of it again once they crossed the Gate to the other side.

Again, Kahlan found herself wondering. Was this one, mesmerizing dream to be plucked only in passing, to be forgotten when they had crossed over to their world?

Kahan held Cara's gaze, fighting the fear which threatened to erode her courage. "I'm glad you're awake and with me, here. Now."
Cara swallowed, reclaiming her hands and shaking her head as she tried to regain control. Her words, though, were jarring. "We need to talk."

Kahan teased, "You aren't one for talking."

Cara raised a brow at her, her lips turning upwards. "Would you rather I showed you with actions then?"

Kahan blushed. Cara drank her discomfort like a balm, and it made her brave. Her words were tight, like unoiled cogs which had never been used, "I've had time to think in the unum," she began, "I was Rahl. I was your wife."

Kahan nodded, edging towards a seat and pulling Cara with her. Sodden and weary, Cara sat with her willingly.

"You are my friend, have been my friend," Cara said, rolling her shoulder as she began to shed the hardened coil of her Mord'Sith life -the life that had trained her to maim and kill Confessors, the life that had silenced her in so many ways.

"And I am your friend as well," Kahlan reassured.

Cara grimaced, as though the words had never been said to her, had never meant anything more to her than an epithet. She continued, "I have to deal with the possibility that I could be more to the Empire than its servant, its headless lackey." Cara's eyes shot to the ceiling, watery and seeking strength. "And more," she swallowed, "to you."

There it was, Kahlan thought.

Tenderness rushed through her.

There was no loathing or disgust, none of the feelings one would expect from being age-old enemies. She could not even muster a sinking feeling of apprehension. Kahlan had watched Cara sleep for days, tended to her as she murmured in distress or groaned with emotion Mord'Sith would never allow. Having Cara here, now -speaking, discomfited and achingly real -made Kahlan grateful.

She could not imagine what it would have been like if Cara had never woken up.

"You have been more," Kahlan said.

Cara shook her head. "You misunderstand. I mean, not simply as a friend but," she wrung her hands and growled beneath her breath. She seemed to rethink her next statement before saying, sullenly, "Perhaps this isn't wise. You love Richard."

Kahan took Cara's hands, squeezing them gently. "I've loved Richard for a while." Cara visibly deflated and she forced disinterest. Kahlan sympathized; Mord'Sith did not lay their hearts out so easily for anyone to see. "But I also know what ties you and I together, especially now that you've chosen to stay for Amihan's sake and for her mothers'."

"You will do this with me?" Cara studied her intensely, cheeks rosy from the effort of her exposition. She was beautiful and open, renewed with a foregone youth she had gained while examining the possibilities of the unum.

In that moment Kahlan knew she would have given Cara anything.
Kahlan said, "Of course," as she held Cara forearms, reveling in the warmth that sprung from her fingers as she threaded them along Cara's sleeves.

Cara stared at her for a long moment before whispering, "Kahlan, that's distracting."

Kahlan offered a tiny smile. "I'm sorry." She did not pull her hands away. She was too engrossed in Cara's vulnerability, with how utterly here Cara was.

Kahlan had no doubt about the reasons for Cara's decision to stay and assist the Rahls. In not so many words and with innumerable deeds, Kahlan knew it had everything to do with the way Cara looked at her now -a confusing, thrilling mix of tenderness, protectiveness and subtle yearning.

Kahlan would not shy from the truth but she needed her own time to grow into her realizations. She leaned in to press a kiss against Cara's cheek, idling for a moment against the heat of Cara's skin, hearing Cara's breath become heavier with the weight of a revelation.

Against Cara's skin, she said, "You probably don't know this but I'd follow you to any end."

Kahlan's tingling lips and the immediate sense of loss as she pulled away were confirmation enough that they had taken a step into a direction that they weren't familiar with. Cara's smell lingered, a hint of faint oils from Nicobarese, and the unexpected image of Cara in one of her irreverent baths, stepping out with the uncanny confidence, caused her cheeks to brighten.

Thankfully, Cara was too preoccupied to notice.

"I am bursting, Kahlan," Cara said. "Bursting with things that have no name and others which do but I've never spoken them aloud."

"You don't have to say anything. I know how you feel. About me and this world. About Rahl's daughter," she smiled softly, "and especially her wife. There would be no helping it. There would be no secrets between you and Cara Rahl."

Cara seemed to let go of a complicated tangle of thoughts as she breathed out in the way people do when a great burden has been lifted.

"Tell me about the unum," Kahlan urged. "I'd like to know more."

"I'd tell you," Cara said. She dealt with her vulnerability by pushing her fists against her thighs. "If I only knew how. If there was time but we leave in a week and…"

"Then it's best we stick together until we leave," Kahlan told her patiently. "You still have to gather your strength and I'm not about to leave your side now that you're awake."

Cara stared at Kahlan, frowning at her as she tried to find a hint of dishonesty. Kahlan felt a tug of tenderness. In some ways, her Mord'Sith had not changed at all.

Kahlan smiled to reassure her. Cara seemed to shed her suspicions easily. It reminded Kahlan of how much the Mord'Sith had not changed at all.

Kahlan felt the weight of this new-found freedom; it filled the corners of her heart with dread and happiness. After all, Confessors could kill a Mord'Sith with a touch. Surely it would be against her nature to feel more than friendship for one, too.

Cara stared at Rahl's back, studying the long, golden hair, which she knew was braided at Rahl's
temples. The red vest of her station contrasted heavily with the greenery in the Garden of Life. Her strong, tanned arms held a little girl. Amihan was giggling in her mother's embrace and her laughter rang through the canopy of trees and into the rose bushes, warm and full of life.

It served to remind Cara of how different her Mord'Sith upbringing had been.

Cara found herself sighing despite herself and Cara Rahl started, turning to face her.

"I didn't hear you," Rahl accused.

Cara narrowed her eyes at her twin. "A great many things were unsolicited these past few weeks," she said. "Including my stay in the unum."

Rahl pursed her lips as she set Amihan down. Their daughter...no, Cara Rahl's daughter grinned at them breezily, running into the hidden paths of the garden as Rahl told her to take care.

Cara grunted. "She probably won't if she takes after you."

"Indeed." Rahl sat on a nearby bench, motioning for Cara to sit with her. Cara followed and they were still for a while, Cara fidgeting in her leathers. Rahl interrupted the silence, "Out with it, Mason. I can hear you think."

"I hate you," Cara spat in a morose, resigned tone. She didn't dare look at Rahl before she added, "But know also that I care beyond anything I can measure or comprehend."

Rahl blinked, surprised.

"Don't look at me like that. It should follow that after the unum, our secrets are not our own anymore." Cara waited for Rahl to school her expression into a neutral one before saying, "The unum and you have given me a terrible, terrible gift." She felt tears forming and made a disgusted sound. "How do I even deal with this?" She wrung her hands and gave Rahl an accusatory look. "What pill can I take or magic can you weave that will take this from me?"

"Take what from you?" Rahl asked.

Cara groaned and half gestured to the living quarters she shared with Kahlan.

Rahl took a moment, as though she was gathering the history between them, the life that the unum had etched into Cara's memory. She said, "When the time came, it became easy for me to love her."

"That's not the answer I'm looking for."

"The answers were never the ones I was looking for," Rahl reminded her. "But they had been the ones I needed."

Cara Rahl was not helping, Cara thought. It had been twelve, long, and excruciating days of navigating through Cara Rahl's memories. Cara's dreams were filled with them: moments of indescribable loss that were eventually replaced by the starkest, most perennial joy.

Now that she had been freed from the unum's grasp, she woke up in the mornings with a gaping hole in her chest, as though her heart had expanded beyond its borders and carved a hollow that would not shrink as it left her.

She dreamed of Kahlan Rahl, and sometimes of Amihan's birth. She would wake, sweaty and
heady with emotions, left to stare at Kahlan's back as the other woman slept through the early hours of the morning while Cara lay awake. Kahlan was blissfully oblivious to the hideous mix of wanting and elation that Cara could barely hold in.

It felt obscene to be sharing a room with a woman she felt so much for.

Cara was losing the last of her sanity. Anyone in her situation would be.

But madness was also the Mord'Sith's friend. They had been trained as very young children to keep it as their constant companion, tamed by their unique ability to compartmentalize, to channel emotion into the Agiels and release it by inflicting suffering on others.

It had been a good way to be. Until now.

Her eyes flickered to Amihan. In her heart, Cara knew that any daughter born from her deserved more than what a Mord'Sith could do or give. Any daughter of Kahlan's should be protected from it.

"You can tell Kahlan how you feel," Rahl told her knowingly, her eyes tracking the bobbing head of a child who was attempting to hide from them both and was not succeeding.

"I think I managed. Somewhat."

"And?"

"She needs time."

Cara Rahl smiled. "Time isn't on our side, my friend."

"You are not helping," Cara gritted. "Zedd's unum has already robbed me of all opportunity to discover how I feel for Kahlan myself."

"Robbed you?" Rahl guffawed. "Trust me. You had given her more than just your loyalty and your sword before you had entered the unum."

Cara glared. Rahl arched an eyebrow, daring her to say different.

She should have known better than to think that a conversation with Cara Rahl would ground her. If anything, it exposed every lie and half-lie she had been telling herself the past few days. Surely her feelings for Kahlan were traces of Cara Rahl's own feelings, ghosts of what she had experienced in the unum.

Rahl's smile was deferential and her tone was quiet, matter-of-fact. They bit into Cara's bones, forcing her to stand.

As she turned her back, Rahl's words chased her out of the Garden of Life, "None of this would be happening if a seed had not been planted, growing furiously within you, in the first place!"

The Tenth Alkarian Regiment arrived on a clear evening, the torches of three other regiments trailing behind it.

In the large courtyard Rahl reserved for her Alkarians, a congregation of six captains were seated beneath large, arun trees, their laughter ringing up and around the halls which surrounded them. The smell of roast and the warm aroma of freshly cooked bread wafted past.
Regiments from the North usually lived on rations; many were pulling chunks from loaves of bread like this was their first decent meal. Captains were ravenously digging into their stews and barely chewing.

Just like the Mord'Sith, they were all women, dressed in various types of armour and leather which were coloured in the deep red of Rahl's house. Their unique assignment shone on their left breast, a red lion roaring on its hind legs.

As Cara listened, they spoke of their families, their friends, and the travails of soldiering, all the while looking utterly at ease as Cara Rahl watched them from the head of the table. It was jarring. Not once had Cara heard a Mord'Sith speak of these things, or act with something less than total respect in front of a Rahl.

Cara Rahl looked at them with the kind of fondness one would of family who had sacrificed a fair amount of time and effort to protect what was theirs. Seeing the expression on her made Cara wonder about the possibility of an easy sense of belonging for herself.

Cara scolded herself. It was chinks like these that compromised the rest of her armour to begin with.

In the middle of their meal, the Captains were introduced to the Lord and Lady's twins. It prompted silence from everyone at the table.

Cara and Kahlan were flanked by Constance, Raina, and Richard as though the presence of senior commanders would reinforce the truth that they were allies of the Alkari.

There was no need to worry. The captains took the news with surprising calm, which seemed typical of women who dealt with magic on a daily basis, although Cara suspected it was partly due to how readily Captains gossiped with each other.

Their unquestioning loyalty to the High Seat proved Rahl in good stead and it wasn't long before they were back to their raucous story-telling.

Standing, Rahl led Cara and Kahlan to a private room beyond the courtyard. Constance, Raina, and Richard followed behind her.

"Constance and Raina will be riding with you," she said as she closed the doors, gesturing for them to sit. A roaring hearth was invitation enough and they gathered around it. "Richard and I will need to mobilize the Trimessi and our other Divisions."

"Won't that need the Senate's approval?" Kahlan asked.

"It won't matter if they do at this point. I've already contacted our Generals. They have all agreed to cooperate but I do need the Senate's approval as a token."

Kahlan frowned. "You have dissenters in your ranks."

Rahl flashed Richard a look before saying, "I'm aware and he's being watched. I'll deal with Michael Cypher and his plans. I suspect he may be consorting with the enemy. If the allegations are true, he's been trying to destabilize the High Seat for a while now and nearly succeeded when he kidnapped Amihan." Rahl sighed. "For that alone, he deserves death. Richard..."

"I'd prefer he rots in a jail cell," Richard gritted. "He is my brother."

"And I'll afford him as much, if the Senate doesn't lynch him first."
"My Lord…"

"The Senate isn't your arena any more, my friend. It's been known that Michael Cypher churned discord in the South, sowed the idea of a separate Southern State, but this has been an idea that the South have toyed with for a while. There is a reason he still sits in the Senate. We cannot remove him if the people have chosen him."

"What then?" Richard asked, huffing in frustration.

"What then indeed," Rahl said. She gestured to two of the guards who disappeared beyond the doors. The sound was incoherent at first, but finally two voices could be heard arguing behind the pillars. The first was Zedd's bellowing tenor while the other was the familiar, nauseating knell that had caused Rahl and her allies a fair amount of grief.

The guards returned with Zedd and Michael Cypher between them.

Richard moved between his brother and Rahl. "My Lord, I'm not sure it's a good idea for him to be here."

Michael Cypher stopped in his tracks, glancing from Cara to Rahl, and then at Kahlan. "What treachery is this?" he cried, reaching for his sword.

The two guards were immediately on him, hands on his arms. He struggled and said, "You have no right! I am a member of the Senate, appointed by the people! Unhand me!"

Constance was clearly enjoying Michael's discomfort. "As soon as you do not pose a threat to the Lord of D'Hara."

Michael glared at Rahl. "Explain yourself, my Lord."

"I'd throw the question back at you, sir," Rahl replied. Michael looked at her quizzically before Rahl gestured for Zedd to begin.

Zedd tutted before muttering a spell. Michael immediately stilled, his eyes unblinking as he stared ahead. Then he began to shake uncontrollably and Rahl's guards struggled to keep him upright.

Zedd's forehead knitted into a tight frown, his mutterings becoming more distinct, more booming and forced.

"What's happening, Zedd?" Rahl asked.

"Dream walker!" he cried, opening his eyes and glaring at Michael.

The shivering stopped and he stood very still. Michael's was bereft of any emotion but he spoke with dangerous intent, a mouthpiece for an entity they could not see. "The First Wizard lives!" he guffawed, expressionless. "Zeddicus Z'ul Zorander, the wind of death, whom war and tragedy had driven to the Westlands. And now you are here, in D'Hara."

"You…" Zedd spat, seemingly getting taller as magic gathered around him.

Rahl herself had stepped forward and Cara could feel Rahl's Han around her, the kind of oppressive humidity before a storm. She gripped her Agiels and the pain she felt steadied and focused her mind.

There was hysterical laughter before silence. Michael heaved as the presence retreated, collapsing
against his guards.

"Restrain him," Zedd snapped. "He cannot be allowed to wander freely."


Zedd grabbed his collar and shook him. "A dream walker, Cypher! Only a man with no devotion to Rahl, bereft of the Bond, can sink into the dream walker's influence. You've been a traitor before this creature from the Great War wedged itself into your consciousness! You are a breathing, walking liability in this war!" Zedd's let him go with a forceful push. He growled, "You should be hanged."

"My Lord," Richard protested, a hand on Rahl's arm.

"Restrain him," Rahl repeated, wiping a hand over her face before pulling away from Richard's touch and looking determinedly at him. "He's a risk to our nation and to my family. Don't make me regret this. I am your Lord first, and he is your brother, second."

Richard swallowed. "I...I understand, my Lord. But should a knife be put into him, I'd prefer to do it myself."

"Very well. See to it that a choice is made. If any more harm comes to my family because of him, I will not be so lenient."

Dawn found them in the stables. Zedd was already mounted, stuffing bread and cheese into his mouth despite his pensive, worried expression. Constance held the reins of two other horses meant for Cara and Kahlan.

The Lord Rahl let go of her daughter as Amihan pulled away and ran into Cara's arms.

Amihan asked the Mord'Sith, "Do you really have to go?"

"Yes, little one, I do. Promise me you'll remember me?"

"I'll always remember," the little girl said.

She hugged her tighter. "I wish I'd gotten to know you better. You'll take care of the Lord and Lady for me, hey?"

In a very adult tone perhaps similar to how Alkarians spoke to their Lord and Lady, she said, "With my life."

Cara's eyes widened as she pulled slightly away to look at Amihan. Rahl's daughter wore a serious, fiery expression, her blue eyes harder than it should have been for a child her age. Her regard for her mothers spoke of her lineage: her fierce protectiveness was Cara's, the open honesty was Kahlan's. Her bravery on the other hand seemed all her own as her lower lip trembled as she stopped herself from crying.

Cara's eyes watered. She kissed Amihan's forehead and remembered the sheer joy she had felt in the unum when Amihan had been born. It had been the vast and endless river which broke the dam, which woke Rahl and her from their sleep.

Alas, she knew Rahl's pain. One should never have to say farewell to her child.

"Inya," Amihan whispered.
"Always and forever, little one."

"Always and forever," Amihan echoed as though she knew what it meant.

Hearing Amihan's words were enough to strengthen her. She stepped away, ready to face a rising sun which heralded danger and the promise of home.
Recovery

Chapter Summary

Travelling with the Tenth Alkarian Regiment to the Border where the Lady Rahl waits for their arrival, Cara and Kahlan find time together to recover from Cara’s experiences in the unum.

Chapter Notes

All my love to Sionainn69, who continues her stellar beta work and who makes this fic so much better than I ever can alone. The support she gives me is priceless. All remaining mistakes are mine.

The sand was constant as a small storm continued its fury, filling every space with coarse grains as it eroded the landscape and Cara’s patience. Her leathers were cloying as she shifted on her horse, visibility so low that she could barely see the swishing tail of Kahlan’s horse ahead of her. For an undisciplined, weak moment, she longed for the loose shirts she had worn while recovering at the People’s Palace. She missed the cool stone that regulated the harsh temperatures in the Azrith and the easy company of Alkarians who treated her with a brand of cool nonchalance one reserved for unimportant guests.

The Tenth Regiment had been travelling mostly under the shelter of night time, though the flames on their torches were now struggling to stay lit in the storm. To help, wizards from the Keep hovered balls of light above the column, imitating the glow of full moons. One could hear the echoing shouts of commanders as they steered the group, the sound of hooves dampened by the storm’s emphatic howling while riders galloped up and down the column to issue orders and messages, the pennants on their poles whipping in all directions.

“Constance,” Cara rasped out, pulling the scarf from over her mouth as she urged her horse forward.

Rahl’s captain slowed her canter, allowing Cara to catch up to her.

Constance began without preamble, “I know it does not seem wise to travel like this but to stop now will prolong our journey another day. We’re a few minutes from Cabrallia. You should see the lights of the town shortly.” As though by her bidding, pins of light flickered into view, dotting the darkness above the horizon.

A thunderous voice at the front of the line shouted, “Ho Cabrallia!” an exclamation that descended down the column.

Constance seemed to smile behind her mask. “We’ve arranged lodging for you and the Mother Confessor. This may be one of a few times you won’t be sleeping in a tent. Enjoy it, Mason.”
Cara grunted, pulling away to ride aside Kahlan. The Mother Confessor seemed intent on the light ahead.

“I take it that's our stop,” she said. A headscarf muffled her voice, heavy material adorned with intricate lines common in the clothing of Tamarang nobles.

Cara tried not to think about its giver--a twin who smiled more easily despite the scar.

“Yes.”

“Is it really wise to camp at a town known for its breweries?” Cara could hear her mirth. One could count on Kahlan’s cheery morale despite long hours on horseback as they crawled through a sandstorm; Confessors were known to flourish in impossible situations.

“I’d question Raina and Constance’s wisdom in this,” Cara snorted. “We’re at the threshold of a war and that makes everyone thirsty.” Her lightened tone faltered, “The garrison here is well equipped and its central location is desirable for any sort of travel to the South.”

One could hear Kahlan’s smile through the howling silence. “You’re relieved we’re stopping.”

Cara’s jaw tightened. Even now, covered from head to toe in protective clothing, Kahlan could hear every inflection, her eyes interpreting the tension in Cara’s shoulders as anxiety for the times ahead.

The events in the unum stripped Cara of her defences. She was left to question every truth that had been beaten into muscle and bone by her Mord’Sith mistresses. Even days after waking up, her Mord’Sith training came to her in fragments, unable to build a barrier. Kahlan could still read her like the supplicants who came to her for justice and advice.

Lately, the jaws of death beckoned from the long dark of the desert. Foreboding crooned in the wind and pulled from the sand beneath their feet. Perhaps these were making her honest, receptive.

Cara sighed as she acquiesced, “This is no ordinary war we’re walking into. We may all be dead before this month is over.”

Kahlan’s hand reached for Cara’s arm, both to take comfort and offer it. Cara allowed the touch and forgot to berate herself as she calmed.

Kahlan said, “No war is ever ordinary, Cara. But as long as we’re both alive, there is hope.”

Cara wanted to scoff but was stopped by the honesty in Kahlan’s eyes--visible even at night--and also by the insidious hope it brought. Mord’Sith did not deal in wishful thinking as Confessors did; they worked in gloom and terror, relished in their own suffering and others’. Death became a calling rather than punishment, leveraged to further their master’s cause. But without a master to serve--or one she never would have imagined for herself--and the unum putting so many things into question, her frayed emotions clung to Kahlan’s words.

The only reply she could give was soft and yielding, “As you wish.”

Their arrival in Cabrallia caused a stir. Harsh, blaring horns directed the army around the
Cabrallian cliffs and to the quickly changing scenery behind the rocks that bordered the desert. Cara could feel the material beneath her boots shift from slippery sand to the solidity of earth and undergrowth. Thin shrubbery and large, leafless trees marked the end of the desert, the wind cut off by stone and flora. The tall rock face of other, adjacent cliffs reflected yellow torchlight, illuminating the slow march of the regiment as they set up camp.

Constance wasted little time in bringing Cara and Kahlan to the barracks at the outskirts of town, familiar to them from their first visit.

“The captain’s quarters,” Constance said as she opened large, beaten doors to an open vestibule exposed to the wind of the Cabrallian cliffs. It led to a larger expanse with a hearth and a bed draped in clean, white sheets. The room, furnished more for a noble than a garrison captain, stretched into a balcony that offered a view of the town blanketed in darkness but for a few torches, the populace still restless after the army’s arrival.

Constance continued, “A bath has been prepared down the hall. I have more preparations to make before we leave at first light.” She tilted her head. “By your leave.”

“Thank you, Constance,” Kahlan said.

Without waiting for a dismissal from Cara, Constance exited and closed the doors behind her.

Kahlan sighed as she removed the scarf around her head, draping it over the bench situated at the foot of the bed. Her light armour followed and she took a seat, pulling her boots off.

Cara began to shed her leathers; sand fled from their clothing and filled small depressions in the stone floor. She hung her leathers on a chair, eyeing the bed with suspicion. “Funny how they never seem to give us separate rooms anymore.”

Kahlan chuckled as she stripped to only her under things, shrugging into one of two robes hanging by a dresser. “Funny how Alkarians sometimes can’t remember if you’re their lord or not. ‘The captain’s quarters’,” she mimicked then sighed, “We can’t kick every commanding officer out of their room when we visit.”

Cara frowned, grabbing her own robe. “By the end of this, I’d have grown a heart and cried at every sad thing.”

“Oh come on,” Kahlan tutted, “Cara Rahl isn’t the simpering fool you’d paint her to be. In fact, I think you quite like her.”

Cara gave Kahlan a pointed look. “No, Kahlan, I think you like her.”

The resulting blush was unexpected and Cara blinked. She was not one for jealousy and was surprised by the ugly burn which flared in the pit of her stomach, etching a sharp picture of what she wanted --to be the centre of Kahlan’s attention, to be the one who made her smile, and who tinted her cheeks with this colour.

She experienced a quick whirlwind of confusing thoughts and did not notice Kahlan taking her hand. Or the gentle squeeze of reassurance.

“I do,” Kahlan admitted before she could make sense of her thoughts. “She’s easy to like as you are, even when you’re both being difficult.” Her tone was suddenly pensive, “But even ‘like’ is too tame a word for how I feel these days.” The quirk of her lips would have been a smile if not for the tension around her eyes.
Kahnlen inhaled deeply as though taking in their exhaustion, the bone-deep tiredness they felt as they dealt with emotions that gouged raw, uncharted paths within themselves.

Cara wanted to question her further, half-paralysed by apprehension but Kahlman kept the moment short, pulling her to the baths then letting go as she entered the water.

They sat on opposite sides of the small bathing pool, which was fed by deep springs from the Cabrallian hills and heated by the garrison’s forges; the same water which gave Cabrallian brews their distinctive quality. Steam clouded Cara’s vision, rising from the surface of the water and blurring her vision; it mirrored the state of her own feelings --shapeless, elusive yet ever-present. The heavy air replaced the grit in her lungs and she sank deeper into the water, submerging her head to savour the silence.

Capping a night in a sand storm with a hot bath was a luxury and she felt no regret knowing that the garrison’s captain had to sleep in a cot for a night.

After scrubbing the dirt from her body, she continued to sit with Kahlan for several minutes, her thoughts gratifyingly blank. Eventually, the water cooled and it was time to dress.

Cara was the first to step out, offering Kahlan a hand that the Confessor took, her gaze averted to allow some privacy.

The touch burned. Cara nearly dropped Kahlan’s hand except Kahlan’s grip tightened as she pulled to get herself out of the water. Distracted, Cara forgot all propriety and her eyes progressed from staring at the empty space of the nearest wall to taking in the Confessor’s naked beauty.

Water danced over Kahnlen’s skin and in the steam, her skin nearly glowed, only slightly scarred in places where a sword had nicked her there, or a spear had managed to pierce through her defences here. A delicate neck bobbed over her collarbone, where water sluiced over and between the swell of her breasts. Droplets meandered along a flat stomach which heaved with every breath, the smooth plank of muscles belying hours with her daggers and supported by hips that dipped to the patch of dark hair covering her sex.

Cara’s breath stuck in her throat and she felt her neck turn molten, spreading the warmth to her face and further down. They had seen each other naked many times before but in the wake of a deepening relationship, this lack of barriers held far more meaning.

Kahlan seemed to enjoy her attention as she gave Cara a coy smile. She stepped closer while Cara endeavoured not to stare.

An inner voice berated, Spirits! Have you never been with a woman?

As Rahl in the unum, Cara experienced similar scenes many times before, the bath effused with tenderness, wonder, and the growing prickles of desire. The unum held memories of languorous sighs that thickened with the evening, coaxed by lips and hands and tongue. Skin burned to the touch, soothed only by sweat that traced the longing in their bodies.

She swallowed roughly, pulled from remembering by Kahlman’s gaze. Kahlman seemed curious as though she knew that Cara was once again lost in her memories. Cara’s stomach fluttered in a familiar way when Kahlman’s thumb rubbed the back of her hand in a calming manner that nearly silenced her thoughts.

“Hey,” Kahlan soothed.

With another brush from Kahlman’s finger, Cara shoved the unum’s influence away, attending
instead to what was present and resolute, so tangible that she stood before her. Cara could not prefer anything else even as the shadows of a new war hounded their remaining days together.

“I need to tell you something,” Cara blurted, the air suddenly thick with expectation.

Kahlan sobered. “What is it?”

Because her throat had tightened --more often now, words seemed to escape her in Kahlan’s presence --she could only repeat Kahlan’s words, “‘Like’ is also a tame word for how I feel. I don’t know what this is but it scares me; I see this in Cara Rahl every day, in how she looked at you.”

_In how I know I look at you._

Rahl would have laughed at her face. Cara was brave in most things but not in this, not after a slew of experiences that taught her that this type of attachment only brought unimaginable suffering to those she loved.

She struggled with a compulsion to stay quiet instead of exposing herself, her hands tightening into fists.

Kahlan seemed to be picking up on her omission and put a hand on her cheek. Cara leaned into the touch and it revealed enough of what had been left unsaid.

“We’ll figure it out,” Kahlan said as she gazed at Cara intently. Her forehead formed small wrinkles of concern. “Do this with me. Wait for me.” Kahlan pursed her lips, perhaps wondering if she had asked for too much or far too little.

Cara’s eyes snapped up to meet Kahlan’s and suddenly, Cara wished that she knew enough about both their troubles to reassure her. “I can’t do anything else. I set this path even before the _unum_,”

again she bowed her head, “perhaps even before we stepped through the Gate.”

Kahlan’s expression softened. “Would that change once we leave for our world?”

“No.”

“Good.” She leaned in to place a kiss on Cara’s forehead. It conveyed what her words could not: warmth, comfort, and trust. Cara’s skin cooled as Kahlan withdrew and Cara sighed at the loss. “I do this with you and we step through the Gate together. The Creator knows if we will be more or less than who we were when we stepped in.”

“If the Gate of Meleth lets us.”

“Well, we still have to think about the business of keeping the Rahls safe.” Kahlan nudged her playfully. “Really, did you have to commit all our resources to something so taxing?”

They smiled at each other. Cara felt free knowing that an understanding existed between them, that if nothing else then they were definitely _more_. More trusting. More at ease with each other. Willing to share and to protect more, and also to be protected.

They were keen to do all this together rather than fumble on their own paths through the un-navigable tangles of memory and emotion that the Gate of Meleth had brought to their lives.
The Alkarian captains treated them as they would their Lord and Lady, but Constance had advised on discretion even in the ranks. An entire regiment could hardly keep its business within its camps despite the Alkarian brand of loyalty. Senators were suspicious enough of her regiments’ movements; rumours of twins would invite more discord and divide a watchful Senate.

When the desert tapered to thick shrubbery and finally, to the thin forests bordering the South, the column of soldiers slowed their march, watered by a widening Kern River. They occupied the breadth of the main road which carried commerce from the capital, alarming officials and citizens alike.

Their presence was a burst of horns and hooves, a noisy arrival. Light infantry clamoured through in their leather armour. They were flanked by elite cavalry festooned in the blood red of Rahl’s House and seated on war horses large enough to trample men underfoot.

The army set up camp a league from Sassen.

Cara and Kahlan’s tent was the first to be pitched, the regiment’s banners pushed into the ground around it, light furniture carried from carts that accompanied their supply train. Kahlan found it odd yet strangely fitting --given the events in the unum --that Cara seemed unperturbed when Constance and Raina also appointed it as a centre of operations. The large area which had ballooned in the middle was quickly decked in maps, lamplight, and large, comfortable chairs draped with furs.

Cara seemed content to leave Kahlan with Rahl’s commanders, excusing herself to prowl the camp’s outskirts as though memory had weighed suddenly and inexplicably on her actions yet again. Raina stared worriedly at her back before she exited the tent to follow Cara outside while shouting orders, coordinating the camp’s efforts.

Kahlan could hear soldiers pitching their tents, the sounds moving outward as tents emerged from the centre like rocks from the ocean as a tide withdrew.

Kahlan and Constance remained seated on opposite sides of the war table, silent as they studied the troop movements represented by wooden pieces. By agreement, they were to stay at Sassen until the Midland’s cavalry arrived nearer to the Old World-D’Haran border, intercepting their army while Berdine portioned their men to increase the defences for garrisons in Sassen, Gradin, and Acrimar.

Cara and Kahlan would then join the route south to the border with any remaining Alkarians and all of the Kelton war horses, meeting Kahlan Rahl’s envoy at the hills of High Kalith.

Constance held a dagger to keep her hands busy, turning it on its tip on the wooden table as she examined the maps. The other woman rarely spoke to Kahlan if at all but when she did, her words lodged barbs into her certainties, relentless and questing. Constance was Cara’s shadow and had been Kahlan’s when both Cara’s had been asleep, ever-present and uncomfortable like a suspicion that would not go away.

Kahlan jumped when Constance spoke and filled the silence, “She’s an odd one, your Cara. Less open and weighed down by some horrible past. She only smiles when she’s with you.”

“She’s not mine.”

Constance laughed, “Out of everything I said, that’s what stood out for you?”

Kahlan frowned, blushing fiercely.
Constance continued, her grin wide and teasing, “A woman is yours when she decides that the world is worth moving for you. I can tell that she would prefer to do nothing else.”

“Constance.” There was a warning in Kahlan’s tone and the other woman put the knife down, holding up her hand in surrender.

“As you wish, my lady, so do I obey.”

“Don’t use your loyalty as an excuse to force my hand.”

“What is there to force,” Constance said dryly, “You already look at him like you’ve lost him. Or maybe that he’s lost you.”

Kahlans head whipped up and she glared. “What in the Creator’s name are you talking about?”

“You were in my stead the entire time in the Palace,” Constance pointed out. “Your meetings with Richard Cypher were no secret.”

Her triumphant smirk told Kahlan that she used to have conversations like this with Kahlan Rahl before, a battle of wills and truths that tipped in her favour when she leveraged secrets gathered from private spaces.

What would she know of her Cara though? Of Kahlan? And why in the Creator’s name were Alkarians such meddlers?

“I think you’re mistaken.”

“Deny it all you want. Your Cara may not sit on the High Seat but she is just as vulnerable and Richard has always been a man of honour. In any world, he would never allow you to forfeit your heart for his sake.” Constance stood, sheathing her dagger. Her fingers picked up the figurine that represented the Imperial Order, an obsidian block that cast shadows in both directions. “A war is coming, Mother Confessor. It would not do for either of you to be distracted.”

When Kahlan showed no sign of breaking the silence, Constance smiled gently, exiting the tent.

Sassen was a different reception altogether, met with the age-old simmer of Southern dissent by its inhabitants. News of their Senator had reached the Southern city and rumours were in circulation. Cara could hear suspicion in their voices as they haggled in the markets, gossiped and complained about the army at their doorstep.

The last time the Red Lion’s army had been camped outside its walls, Sassen had fallen in three days and its leaders’ heads displayed on pikes.

Constance had been careful to keep the army’s camp under lockdown. Sentries were told to keep anyone from entering or exiting the camp without the express permission of her commanders.

Alkarians had free reign in Cabrallia; the cities of the South were markedly different.

A carriage with the pennant of the senate had stopped at the side of the road and a senator watched from within, his brows furrowed.
“These are four regiments, Captain,” the Senator said.

“The Lord Rahl’s orders, my lord,” Constance replied, pulling the scarf from her face as she stopped her horse. She leaned her elbows against the carriage’s window.

“We are not at war.”

“I won’t dissuade you of the notion, my lord. These are merely military exercises done at the Lord’s behest.”

The Senator eyed her darkly. “We’ll see about that. Old Mica had assured us that there would be no troop movements until we had come to a vote.”

Constance only smiled and bowed slightly. “Safe travels, Senator.”

The Senator peered past her at the mounted figure in her party, his eyes narrowing as though wondering if he knew the woman behind the mask. Her blue eyes were familiar.

“Even safer travels to you and our men,” the Senator replied, his sincerity lost in his frown.

When the Senator was out of earshot, Cara said, “That one’s trouble.”

Constance clucked. “Southerners have always been trouble. One would question why he’s even here.”

Despite Constance’s many protests, Cara accompanied her for the commander’s required visit to the city’s ruling district, a courtesy to the city’s officials. A group of mounted soldiers with the insignia of Sassen’s guard waited by the archway to the House of Ingmar, led by a man on a large, black horse with the pommel of a battle axe jutting from between his shoulders.

The man took off his helmet as his horse approached Constance’s. With outstretched hands, Constance and the Captain of the Sassen Guard clasped each other’s forearms in greeting.

“Ho, Alkarian!” he exclaimed, smiling.

“Chase,” Constance acknowledged. “I trust Berdine chose this time to stay away from this fiasco.”

“She trusts your silver tongue with the council more than her own. They’ve grown rather numb to her rhetoric after years of hearing her speak,” Chase chuckled, “and of having her in such close proximity.”

“I’m surprised your nest of vipers hasn’t poisoned all of her good intentions.” Constance sounded like she was only half-jesting.

Chase shrugged, suggesting that he had heard this accusation many times before. “There’s a reason why she stays away. Come, they’re waiting for you.”

Constance glanced at Cara’s covered head and said, “Don’t wander far, or outside this district, or reveal yourself. There are moles and rats in this city and for all of Berdine’s efforts, the South has always been fiercely independent.”

“Your friend shouldn’t worry,” Chase said, squinting at the stranger with the hidden face.

“I always worry in Sassen.” Constance eyes fell on the House of Ingmar atop the hill, its towers still under repair from the time the Red Lion’s war machines laid siege to the structure, bringing its council to heel.
The white walls which separated the ruling district from the merchant’s district loomed fifty feet above them. Members of the Sassen guard looked outwards from the ramparts to the banks of the River Kern.

Led by Chase, Constance disappeared through the gates of Inner Sassen to exchange niceties with its Council.

Cara tied her horse to a post and began to survey the markets. Large, colourful canvases provided shade from several feet above. The spaces between allowed long sheafs of sunlight to settle on wares of several jewellers. She examined expensive gold work from Lineari and was surprised at the availability of different oils and furs from the Midlands. Apparently, trade agreements forged by the Rahls’ union brought barges of foreign goods from the Callisidrin to the Kern, supplementing an economy that should have declined years after Michael Cypher’s rebellion.

Food stalls provided grilled pieces of meat spiced with flavours from the People’s Palace, yellow and fragrant from marinades of cumin, cinnamon, and coriander seeds. She found delicacies from Tamarang and Aydindril, confections that coated her fingers with sugar, and she delicately pocketed a few for Kahlan.

She spent a good hour walking around, comfortable in her disguise as there were many visitors from across the Azrith who preferred to wear the protective scarves of the desert.

The sun rose to its zenith and she sampled fruit sold by farmers from outlying farms by the River. She approached an elderly merchant, studying the array of produce and lifting a watermelon to test its weight. Not a few hours ago, she heard Kahlan mention that she preferred the fruit when the weather was warm. A traveling army’s rations rarely included such luxuries. Cara reached into her pouch for coin, offering silver.

The older woman’s smile was too knowing as she declined and said, “A gift, my good lady.”

Cara frowned. She was inclined to accept such offers, demand them even, but when citizenry did it of their own accord and without the Agiel’s persuasion, she was bound to be suspicious.

“Take the silver,” she said, conscious of what Kahlan would say if she found out Cara had simply accepted a merchant’s wares without payment.

The woman shook her head. “I insist.”

They stared at each other. When the woman remained unmoved by Cara’s glare, Cara huffed, shoving the silver back into her pouch. “Have it your way then.”

“The Red Lion has always paved D’Hara’s way.” Another smile, before the woman spotted someone behind Cara and bowed. “Mistress Constance.”

Constance’s voice floated to them, cool and scolding. “You may wish to remain anonymous but the Red Lion of Halin is infamous in these parts.”

Cara bristled.

The Alkarian nodded to the vendor and opened her palm. A gold coin shone in the sun. “I trust this will buy you and your cohorts’ silence?”

The woman’s eyes moved from Cara to Constance. “Child,” she admonished, “The Merchants’ Guild owes the Red Lion more than silence, especially now that she needs it most.” She pushed Constance’s hand away. “Don’t insult me by thinking that our gratitude can be bought by mere
trinkets. We flourish under the Lord’s hand.”

Constance seemed satisfied by this explanation, returning the coin to her satchel as the woman turned from them to sell her wares to other buyers, effectively dismissing them from her presence.

Constance turned to Cara, her lips a thin line. “You’ll experience much of the same in these parts. I suggest you stay away from the shops or insist on accompanying me on such banal errands. Your companion was wise to stay in camp.”

Before Cara could formulate a protest, Constance took the fruit from her, including it in a bag that she had brought for Kahlan's errands.

Constance walked with her to collect her horse. They rode to camp, silent for many minutes. When they arrived and rode past the sentries, two officers took the reins of their horses as they dismounted. Constance’s slow, shuffling footsteps alerted Cara to the other’s woman’s intention to speak.

Cara waited until they passed the more populous entrances to camp before saying, “Ask what you need to ask, Constance. Your silences are annoying.”

Constance cleared her throat. “I’ve always assumed that the unum showed you everything.”

Cara stopped to look the woman in the eye. “What is it to you?” she demanded.

“I was there when Cara Rahl lost everything. I was also there when the people chose her and eventually, when Kahlan did, too. That experience would weigh heavily on you. Living it as you had in the unum can hardly be carried.”

“You’re wondering why I haven’t lost my mind.”

Constance shrugged.

“I am Mord’Sith,” Cara said plainly. “My training...helps.”

Constance hummed as she contemplated, her attention on Cara's Agiels. Though Berdine was by far the more observant of the two, Constance was also commander for her talent at drawing conclusions. She was discreet and less cruel, circumspect of the setting, time, and players involved when she shared her observations.

Cara's experience in the unum had shown her Alkarian loyalty which held Rahl up in times of desperate need; Constance was the silent, constant rock on which Rahl leaned on, speaking when Berdine was absent, offering quiet judgment when Berdine would not.

Constance shifted her gaze to a congregation of tents, tall canvasses casting long shadows from a central area where people huddled around a cook-fire. Soldiers gave a figure in a white dress a wide berth. Her gaze held as she said, “They aren’t so different, the Lady and your Kahlan.”

“Decisions have shaped them differently,” Cara said, her tone carefully neutral.

Constance carried on as though she had not heard. “Her love for you hasn’t.” Second in the field, and second only to Berdine in throwing her off-guard.

“Don’t.”

Constance faced her, raising a brow in question. “It’s obvious she feels for you.”
“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” Cara gritted, willing Constance to avoid the subject.

“What is it? Does she have a lover at the other side of the Gate?” Constance snorted dismissively at Cara’s sharp intake of breath. “Surely she would choose you.”

“She must not,” Cara snapped, “her lover is the Lord Rahl and that Rahl is not me.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, ‘oh’,” Cara mocked, her hands reaching for her Agiels and tightening around their hilts. The hum of pain shot from her palm and into her arms, radiating into her chest as it suppressed a lethal bouquet of emotions. “My loyalties are already in question. It would be worse if I took her to my bed.”

“Ah,” Constance repeated, this time more quietly. “‘Complicated’ does not quite describe it then.”

After a beat, they continued to walk, their gazes on the Mother Confessor as Kahlan approached a group of Alkarian soldiers. She was offered a bowl of stew and then smiled at something one of the soldiers had said.

Constance continued, “If she’d chosen him once then he must be a good man. He would understand.”

Cara’s face crumpled in annoyance. She put a hand on Constance’s chest to stop her from walking. “It would be a betrayal of his trust. How can you even suggest this? If the Lady had chosen you instead of Cara Rahl, what then?”

“I would not allow the betrayal but to our Lord, and perhaps to your Lord Rahl, love and maintaining the peace are stronger sentiments than jealousy.”

“A Mord’Sith would rather die than take what is Rahl’s.”

Constance rolled her eyes and Cara knew it was her way of begging patience from the Creator. “There is no one to take, Cara. People are not possessions to be claimed. If there is anything I have learned about the Mother Confessor, she is of her own mind and will do what she pleases.”

She then very promptly closed her mouth and cleared her throat as she bowed. Kahlan had noticed them and was now within ear-shot, a steaming bowl in her hand.

“By your leave, my lady,” Constance muttered before pulling away and depositing the fruit with one of her lieutenants.

“Constance,” Kahlan acknowledged, amused as she watched Constance move even farther away, already barking orders that the fruit be sliced and presented to their guests. Kahlan turned to Cara, offering her the bowl. “What were you talking about?”

Cara grunted noncommittally, “Your independent nature.”

Kahlan laughed, her eyes sparkling. “That’s ironic. She shadowed me the entire time I was at the Palace.”

Knowing that Kahlan had been in Constance’s care was a comfort despite the Alkarian habit of sticking their noses into things they should not. Cara spent too many days trapped in the unum, wondering about Kahlan; if anything, she was grateful for Constance’s vigilance.
Cara was matter-of-fact. “She was doing it for your protection.”

“T’m sure,” Kahlan said, not at all convinced.

“She’s less forthcoming with her concern. Berdine would explain such torture and every outcome in painful detail.”

They walked into their tent, pulling at the tent flaps which Cara secured to prevent any intrusions. Inside, the wide table had been cleared, maps rolled and stacked neatly on one side. There were additional chairs with which to entertain the camp’s commanders and a small fire surrounded by wooden seats. The main meeting area, previously crowded with Constance and Raina during the morning’s briefing, was separated from their sleeping cots by a partition made of intricate, Lineari woodwork.

Cara removed the veil around the lower part of her face, sighing as the air cooled her skin. They settled by the small fire to eat.

“I had the opposite impression about Constance,” Kahlan said. “She always seemed suspicious of me.”

Cara shrugged. “You can’t take that fear away from a D’Haran. She’s seen Kahlan Rahl at her worst.”

“Her ‘worst’,” Kahlan echoed, pensive as she stared at the fire. “I’ve always wondered about the path Kahlan Rahl had to take, if I somehow could have become her.”

“We could have been anyone,” Cara chuckled derisively. “This world, the unum --they remind me that the possibilities are endless, that given certain circumstances, I may have chosen differently. The choices are there. If only we have the clarity, the past to see them.” She breathed deeply, noticing that honesty did not seem like the elusive gem she desperately wanted to exhume. Instead, it surfaced easily.

Kahlan’s lips thinned. “Carrying Rahl’s memories with you doesn’t get easier.”

“No it doesn’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

Cara frowned. “None of this is your fault.”

Kahlan raised a brow. “Surely, you remember the time we stepped through the Gate? Together?”

“Amihan made that choice easy.” Cara sighed, “She still does.” Cara picked at the last of her food, setting the bowl aside. She remained bent over her knees, staring at the fire to avoid looking at Kahlan. “Are we going to talk about your choice to stay? What if the Gate allows us to travel?”

Kahlan reached out to squeeze Cara’s arm. “I won’t watch you suffer regret if we decide to go home without fulfilling the promises you’ve so obviously made to yourself, to Amihan, to her parents.”

Cara tried to hide her smile. “You know, I would have easily made those promises to you too.”

Kahlan seemed to know what she was trying to say and Cara watched as a blush crawled from Kahlan’s neck to her cheeks. Perhaps it was too soon, Cara thought as she wet her lips, her eyes darting from the speckled green of Kahlan’s eyes to her mouth.
This urge had been pulling at her since they had left the People’s Palace. It made her wary; she was
afraid that any overtures would scare Kahlan or cause her to avoid Cara entirely. Their friendship
could burn or it could flourish, all in the name of a careless proposition.

So she stayed rigid, waiting.

“I don’t suppose Constance made you uncomfortable with any of her suggestions?”

Cara blinked. Not for the first time that day, she wondered where their conversation would go.
“More times than I can count. I’d stick an Agiel in her if I could.”

“She isn’t afraid to suggest that the Lord Rahl would prefer I was happy than pine hopelessly
behind his back.” Kahlan cleared her throat. “She meant Richard Rahl, of course. Our Richard, the
woodsman.”

Cara gripped her chair tightly, her knuckles white. “She’d do well not to speak against the Lord
Rahl like that.”

Kahlan studied her intently before sighing in disappointment. “She also suggested that your
loyalties are not what they seem.”

Cara narrowed her eyes at her. “Are you trying to get a rise out of me?”

“No, only the truth.”

They both knew that admitting the tension between them would only make it excruciatingly real,
solid enough for them to face and then maybe -- eventually -- it would be
something she destroyed. Just as she had any vestige of her human life when she became
Mord’Sith and Rahl’s tool.

A little, rebellious voice admonished her. There was more to her than her training and her
subservience to a tyrant. After all, she had abandoned the temples and a Rahl, and then swore fealty
to the wielder of the Sword of Truth, a folly she could not bring herself to regret.

Cara blustered, “Are you ready for the truth?”

Her traitorous heart beat wildly in her chest, filling with warmth, bursting at the seams with a
confession that she had no idea how to vocalize. Her mind was terrified beyond words and her
tongue suddenly felt very thick, filling her mouth with cotton.

“I’m afraid, Cara.”

Cara could hardly believe the Mother Confessor of the Midlands needed reassurance from her, a
Mord’Sith who had once been Rahl’s favourite weapon and who cared little to none of others’
feelings.

But alas, the words came easily, “We can do this together.”

Kahlan reached for her. Their joined hands warmed Cara even more. She swallowed her impulse to
move, allowing Kahlan to set the pace for whatever it was that she seemed intent on doing.
Mord’Sith never conceded so easily but looking at Kahlan now, wracked by her thoughts, Cara
realized that Kahlan was the source of her life’s exceptions.

She would allow her a number of things, even this when she felt so vulnerable.
She looked at Kahlan expectantly.

“I feel slightly off-balance,” Kahlan began. “You have all these memories, experiences that you share with Rahl and with my counterpart. I-I know nothing.” Her stumble made Cara’s chest tighten. “You have this breadth of feeling, of knowledge and I feel like I’m moving in this world without that benefit.”

Cara swallowed. “I can tell you all of it.” Her fear reared its head, the fear that after Kahlan knew everything she would shy away from this, overwhelmed.

As always, Kahlan focused on the crux of the matter. “But do you trust me?”

Cara squeezed Kahlan’s hands both to reassure herself and to let Kahlan know that she was trying.

“There are many things I can’t control, least of which is how any of this will pan out, but I want to give you what you need to decide and move forward. You may not react well,” Cara winced at the possibility, “but I’d rather you knew this world as I do—the history that affects me now, that drives Rahl’s actions—I’d like you to know all that and like me less rather than have you favour me, knowing so little of how and why.”

Kahlan beamed at her and Cara decided that all the discomfort leading up to this was slightly worth it.

Kahlan said, “Thank you. That was very sweet.”

“Sweet,” Cara scoffed.

“Sweet,” Kahlan affirmed and leaned forward to kiss her cheek. “I already ‘favour’ you enough that I’m confident anything you say won’t change our friendship.”

Cara’s skin was warm where Kahlan had kissed her. “You can decide that after you’ve heard everything I know from the unum.”

Kahlan raised a brow. “Ever the pessimist.”

“Ever the realist.”

Kahlan laughed, an encouraging sound that caused Cara to smile back. “We may not have all the time,” Kahlan said, “but I’m sure we’ll have enough on horseback.”

As it turned out, Cara rarely spoke on horseback. She picked quiet moments after the day’s opening war council, her expression strained with the sudden crush of memories. Other times, she rasped a story during the rising hubbub of a camp as it woke, watching Kahlan work with the kindling to encourage their fire and warm the tent. At midnight, her soft intonations filled the spaces within the canvas, a lullaby that carried Kahlan into the dream world as they were both set adrift.

Cara drew the outlines of the world she had experienced in hesitant spurts, unpractised in the art of divulging. She stumbled over sentences, frowned and blushed furiously when forced to express situations that otherwise would have been outside of a Mord’Sith’s experience.
“...and Rahl would,” Cara wrung her hands, pleading with her eyes.

Kahlani tilted her head, hiding her smirk. “Go on.”

“I don’t know!” Cara huffed. “They were happy, it was disgusting! The end!”

Kahlani laughed but when Cara finally calmed, and she had closed her eyes to gather patience that she had so little of for herself, her words punched through any pretence, “Cara Rahl would summon the guard and tell Jory, ‘Protect her, always. She has kept me whole.’” Cara’s voice lowered to a whisper. “I knew that of all of Rahl’s weaknesses, if she had any at all, the one thing that could break her again, and this time permanently, was losing her family.”

Cara tried very hard to impart everything. Kahlani would watch her, fascinated, when she pursed her lips as she searched for the right words, rolled her eyes at particular instances of Rahl’s vulnerability, or concentrated twice as hard when narrating moments about Kahlani Rahl.

Kahlani knew then that despite the stories, Cara was still the Cara of her world --Mord’Sith yet so much more, the textures of her personality surfacing in stark contrast to her twin.

Kahlani was certain that nothing could stop the rolling tide of feelings that toppled one on top of the other in her, not the stories of the Lord and Lady who seemed to shape so much of Cara’s waking world. Instead she was drawn to the light which the narrative caused in Cara’s eyes, the outpouring of a soul that seemed full to the brim of a love she had yet to experience for herself, of a deep and inexplicable affection for Amihan and Kahlani that she was only beginning to discover, of hope for something better.

Kahlani cherished the warmth of their conversations, the tenderness that churned into thoughts of speculating what Cara’s lips tasted like, what her hands could do in an embrace.

“You’re staring again,” Cara said, exasperated.

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“I know that expression.”

“Oh, you do?” Kahlani said. “Do you want me to stop?”

Cara narrowed her eyes at her. “You ask too many questions, Mother Confessor.” They stared at each for a long moment but it did not take long for Kahlani to break into a grin and for Cara to sigh in resignation, “And no. Don’t stop. I know all too well what that look means.”

“Tell me more,” Kahlani said, her cheeks burning.

As with everything, Cara obeyed. The light came back into her eyes and Kahlani listened, feeling more and more for the woman before her and not because of her stories, but of how she told them.

Kahlani stared at Raina’s back, ten paces ahead of them, and whispered conspiratorially, “Her hair is down today,” she paused as Raina turned halfway to laugh at something Constance had said, “and she’s put on some kohl.”

Cara said, somewhat amused, “Wait and see.”
Cara’s eyes tracked to the large house overlooking the vineyard. A figure dressed in leather armour, draped with the red tunic of her station met them at the steps. Her long, blonde hair had been braided meticulously, pushed to one side.

Instead of greeting either Cara or Kahlan she approached Raina with a huge grin, an excited blush colouring her pale cheeks.

Kahlan raised an eyebrow as Berdine, the owner of the house and one of Rahl’s foremost commanders, helped Raina off her horse, kissing the other soldier softly despite their audience. There was muffled giggling --entirely out of character for both of them --before they shared another kiss, longer this time and deepening by the second.

After a peek of pink tongue and some pleased groaning, Cara and Kahlan averted their eyes.

“Oh,” Kahlan muttered.

“You can tell when the exact time was that Berdine mellowed in this world,” Cara told her.

“She’s already mellowed at this rate?”

They shared a laugh. Their small party straggled to the eastern side of the house in order to give Raina and Berdine privacy. Cara could see Constance roll her eyes and dismount with the rest, giving the reins to subordinates who would bring the horses to the stables.

She stalked to their side. “They’ll be at it for a while,” Constance said, cringing as Berdine ran her fingers through Raina’s dark hair while they talked, their bodies flush against each other. “I suggest we get you both inside before we’re privy to more intimate activities.” Constance ran a palm over her face. “Creator. Berdine is as bad as any of you when she’s mooning over a girl.”

Constance turned from them, walking up the steps to the wide portico above, unaware or unwilling to acknowledge their embarrassment.

“Come along,” she called. “I’m sure you’re both hungry; Berdine will want to discuss the defence of the garrisons sometime this afternoon when they’re done making all of us uncomfortable.”

Berdine’s house overlooked acres of vineyards, fed by the River Kern, and flanked by a view of Sassen. Their first visit had been hurried, tainted by worry. Though the looming war kept them sombre, Kahlan had known far too much of death to allow its inevitability to hinder her enjoyment of Berdine’s estate.

Constance had deposited Cara and Kahlan in one of the house’s wide porticoes to soak in the hilly outskirts of Sassen and breathe in the mild winds winding through the vineyards from the River. Sassen’s circular districts glinted in the sun as the River Kern snaked its way around it.

Constance brought them warm mead, bread, and cheese, then excused herself to attend to battle plans. The meal was eventually left half-eaten, forgotten on the table where Kahlan sat with her nose deep in a book from Berdine’s library and her legs propped up on a foot rest.

Cara sat on the stone balcony within her line of sight, the Mord’Sith’s hair long enough now to be tied behind her head, her chin resting on one knee while her other leg dangled.
Kahlan supposed she looked younger, tranquil and almost-tame as her hair snuck from her hair tie to fall over her face. Cara wet her lips with her tongue as she reached for the goblet beside her, taking a sip. She caught Kahlan’s eye with the movement, smiling reassuringly.

A stab of attraction caused Kahlan to avert her eyes and swallow the sudden dryness in her throat.

These were common now. She had shied away at first but Cara’s sureness --the kind which encouraged with coy yet mirthful approval --was enough to help her accept.

She had to accept that Cara had taken on the *unum*’s memories like a warrior saddling a wild horse. Disgruntled at every turn, yes, but nevertheless gathering the people and places she had experienced with thick reins, pulling and manipulating them to spur a result.

It was never more apparent than in the ways Raina and Constance had warmed to her and followed her cues, in how Cara wandered into the wilderness and into crowded cities without a guide despite the differences between this world and theirs. Merchants spoke to her as though drawn to a flame, matter-of-fact and discreet, even if Cara’s words were caustic and rude. From Constance’s knowing looks, Kahlan suspected it was a conspiracy.

Cara came back from her trips brimming with news, the subtleties of politics and diplomacy apparent to her as she explained recent events in a rising tone that brimmed with anger. She was not as patient as Kahlan imagined Rahl to be and certainly not as forgiving. Cara eased her temper by seeking the hilts of her Agiels, her brutality by sparring with anyone who dared, stopping short of humiliation else she run out of sparring partners.

Kahlan had to accept that this was captivating to watch, infuriating to experience in such close quarters as she struggled to make sense of the mess of feelings this caused.

She was sure that one day she would simply crumble under its weight. She had an idea what that would look like, a prelude brewing every time Cara narrated events from the *unum*. Her stories gave Kahlan so much clarity and context that she often found herself reaching out for her --staring intently at her eyes, considering her lips with alarming hunger, her fingers hovering near Cara’s thighs, almost touching.

Someday, she would not be able to stop herself. Perhaps today was that day.

Breathing deeply, Kahlan looked up to meet Cara’s gaze and smiled back.

“The twins!”

They both jumped and turned.

An old man stood in grey robes at the archway leading to the terrace, his beard grown to his chest, grinning widely. Zeddicus Z’ul Zorander picked past Kahlan and sat by the table opposite to her, eating the leftover food as he pulled them one by one into his mouth. He chewed once, twice, then swallowed.

“Oh!” he guffawed, rubbing his belly. “What a pleasure to finally have a roof over my head and the promise of a bed instead of hard ground for tonight!”

Sensing that news was forthcoming only after a meal was set, Cara came down from her perch to sit at the table beside Kahlan, watching as Zedd asked a passing servant to bring him more food.

“How were your travels, Wizard?” she asked.
“Short and hard, Mason,” Zedd’s bushy eyebrows met in a ‘V’ as he frowned, “and not very fruitful I’m afraid. The Gates remain closed. The price has not been paid.” He twirled a portion of his beard, tugging. “What that price is has yet to be revealed and it’ll be a steep one for movers and shakers like yourselves. The Creator’s Eye only opens for those she deems worthy.”

“Jeric was not worthy,” Cara mocked.

“The Gate did not open for Jeric,” Zedd gave her a pointed look as a master would a student who refused to learn a lesson. “A child needed saving, the Gate opened, and now that child is back; safe for the moment but protected at the People’s Palace. But you,” he gestured to both of them, “How much more or less do you think you need to be to entice the Creator to open her eye?”

Cara gripped the edge of the table until her knuckles were white. “Riddles will teach me nothing. Tell us how to get back.”

Zedd studied her for a moment. He was quickly distracted when servants entered to lay out fresh bread, cheese, and pieces of cold meats. He made a grateful sound as he waved them away, and then explained through mouthfuls, “There is a price. It will be paid. What it is, I do not know. The Creator’s eye opens when she wills it. The Gate will take what it takes and if it is enough then you can go back.”

“That doesn’t sound like good news,” Kahlan said. “That could be today, tomorrow, or years from now. Or never.”

“True. This world may end in shambles but make the best of it I suppose, as we all will.” He lifted a cold cut from a platter. “As I shall,” he muttered as he put it in his mouth, washing it down with wine.

Cara sagged against her seat and Kahlan put a hand on her knee, squeezing. Kahlan said, “Everything still stands. We fight this war and keep Amihan safe. What comes after can be planned if we’re still alive by the end of this.”

With a bit of morbid delight, Cara said, “I’m beginning to wonder if the Seeker of Truth and the Wizard will wait forever at that inn.” Her grunt was an aborted attempt to laugh.

Kahlan rubbed her knee in sympathy. “Me too.”

Already engrossed in his meal, Zedd added, “There is small comfort in all of this.”

“Tell us,” Cara demanded.

“I’ve set a hex to tell us if the Gate of Meleth opens. It is tied to this ring which should glow when it opens.” Zedd shuffled to reach his pouch and produced a metal band, giving it to Cara.

“This is your silver lining?”

“It’s better than nothing. Wear it. You will know when the Gate opens.”

Cara narrowed her eyes at Zedd but put it on her forefinger, her thumb moving against it and testing its heft. She said wonderingly, “There’s no point in making the journey ourselves then.”

“No, not yet.”

“So we continue to the border.”
Zedd hummed, paused from his eating. “The Lady Rahl will be waiting. I’ve sent messengers ahead. But first, eat and rest. Enjoy the countryside. The Creator knows if any of this will exist after the Imperial Order begins its assault.”

“Enjoy the countryside,” Cara muttered, pulling grass where she sat while unwrapping the scarf from around her face. She squinted up at the large oak tree she was under, light decanting down and causing her to blink.

One of several small brooks that irrigated the vineyards wound through the forest behind them and into the clearing where the first of Berdine’s vines started, bordered by large oaks that swelled towards the sky. Leaves fluttered in the wind, whispering a forgotten song owned by the people of the wood.

Kahlan had a studious expression, a slice of watermelon in her hand, which was one of many gifts nearby inhabitants had given to her when they spied her wandering the fringes of Berdine’s property.

Cara could still remember her wide-eyed expression as a woman accosted them on their way back.

“My Lady,” the stranger greeted, handing her a basket of fruits as Cara looked on with something other than her usual wariness. Only Cara’s eyes were visible around the scarf, deep blue with pleasure. “I had noticed you riding into the captain’s estate. My family picked these themselves. No less than the season’s finest for the Red Lion’s wife.”

“No, I can’t possibly.”

“Please. Do us this honour. If her guard allows.” The woman caught Cara’s gaze.

“The Lady does as she wishes,” Cara announced.

“That she does,” Kahlan said.

“Of course she does. One would expect nothing less from the Butcher of Halin.”

Cara stepped closer now, her hands on her Agiels. “That is a sore subject,” Cara gritted.

The woman breathed sharply as though realizing her blunder but her eyes twinkled with something indecipherable; Cara’s hackles rose. “The Lord has forgiven, and so must we,” she said slowly. “Forgive me, my Lady. I did not mean to offend. Such things are hard to forget.”

Kahlan settled for suspicion as well, eyeing the gift. “I’ve allowed the title many times before. One cannot forget the mistakes of the past if we mean to build a better future.”

The woman bowed low. “Still, I did not mean to open old wounds.”

“Of course you did,” Kahlan said tightly, accepting the basket. “Only the South knows that war is brewing. It is only right to test its generals for loyalty, vision, and if nothing else, motivation. How else can you expect to follow into certain death?”

The woman laughed. “The Guild is impressed, Lady Rahl.”
Kahlan sighed, looking tired at this forced pretence even if for all intents and purposes, she was still the Mother Confessor of the Midlands. “I’ve sat through roomfuls of your kind since I was child. Thank you for paying me a visit.”

“Take the fruit as a gift. I know for a fact that the Butcher likes her watermelons.” She tilted her head at Cara before leaving.

“The Merchant’s Guild,” Cara provided when the woman was out of earshot.

“I see. What allies have you been gathering, Cara Mason?”

“None that can wield weapons, unfortunately.”

“Oh trust me, they wield something infinitely more dangerous.” Kahlan laughed, not unkindly, taking Cara’s arm as Cara pondered on what Kahlan had said.

Not for the first time in their adventures, Cara was reminded that Kahlan was not a master of just the sword and knife but of the courts and the stages of public office she was trained to perform in. She possessed grace and unforgiving potency unrivalled by many other rulers Cara had met.

Their worlds --Confessor and Mord’Sith --were full of half-lies and too many truths to easily navigate. Life had been simpler with the Seeker of Truth. The Seeker dispensed justice in a way that was linear and transparent, dictated by perceptions which were amplified by an artifact of the Wizards’ War, the Sword of Truth. Judgment by the edge of the Sword was absolute. Either the Seeker was certain or in doubt; there was no in between.

It was easy to miss their old life. Easy to miss Richard. Easy to miss the simplicity of choice and feeling during those times.

When they had found the clearing after their brief encounter, they decided to rest under the oak tree before joining the preparations for departure to the border. They were both silent; Cara was lost in her own, riotous thoughts and Kahlan --well, with Kahlan she could not judge.

Cara felt her chest tighten as she stole a glance at her friend.

“I know you want to go back,” Cara ventured. To Richard, the broad future he represents, the calm and sensibility of who he is.

“Only because I know I have more power there to keep you safe than I do here.”

“I’m perfectly capable of protecting myself,” Cara scoffed. “Really it’s Richard and that gluttonous wizard who concern me the most.”

Kahlan chuckled and set aside her food, staring at her with the kind of pitying expression one would give to someone who could not yet understand. “You can stop mentioning him when we’re talking about us.”

“I can’t. He was, is , my Lord Rahl. And what he means to you isn’t something I can ignore.”

“But what about what you mean to me?”

Cara gave a start. This was it then, the source of her worries, the one thing she could not stop Kahlan from expressing despite the many ropes duty restrained Cara with. It was contention she could not reconcile because Richard was her Lord while Kahlan began coups in parts of her that previously had no master but Cara herself.
Cara’s gaze intensified. “I shouldn’t mean much to you,” she insisted, recalling her training, the
tireless propaganda required to hate one’s prey.

Quickly, as though chasing away an emerging shadow, Kahlan moved forward to sit on her
haunches in front of her, taking Cara’s face in both her hands, lifting.

“Hush,” Kahlan said. “You mean everything to me. I wouldn’t know what to do without you, not in
this world or the one we've left behind.” Kahlan swallowed as though an ocean threatened to spill
over, her eyes watery. Her thumbs caressed Cara’s cheeks and even more softly, she continued,
“It's taken me a long time to get to this place, but so do most things that change one's life.”

Cara felt the world fall away then, fractured by Kahlan’s words, muffled to a point that all she
could hear was her own breathing and the fast beating of her heart. Just like it had been when she
chose to take Amihan through the Gate, the path to a future wound terrifyingly out of sight.

In contrast, the decision she needed to make was dauntingly clear.

She moved until she was inches from Kahlan’s face, searching, waiting. Kahlan’s breath tickled
her lips. For a moment she felt that she was at the edge of a precipice with nothing beneath and the
hope of a future just out of reach, taunting.

Kahlan seized the courage to close the space between them and relief flooded her limbs.

She felt light-headed as Kahlan’s lips moved against hers. Cara’s ears roared as though a wave was
breaking over her head, an ocean set free and the tide roiling. She reached to cradle Kahlan’s head
to steady herself, tangling her fingers into Kahlan’s hair, savouring the low sound she caused in the
other woman and committing everything to memory.

Being with Kahlan like this was all-consuming. The unum ’s certainties were poor echoes to what
she was feeling now. There was such tremendous warmth from its newness that she knew
realisations had woken within her, terrifying and full of purpose.

They kissed for long seconds; it felt more like minutes, hours, days. Her breadth of feeling seemed
boundless, immeasurable, and at once contained in this single moment, tamped by the feel of lips,
and teeth, and tongue.

It had been a long, long time since she had felt this warmth; it was a hearth in a home far, far away.
It was stolen from her, twisted into something she could not recognize. Being made fully
Mord’Sith left a broken father, a dead mother, and a murdering child in its wake. At the hand of the
whips, she was shackled in loyalty and service to the Lord Rahl. Her mistresses were poor
replacements for the gaping chasm left by her family’s loss, a loss that set the stage for the rest of
her training. All other nourishments were provided by her Mord’Sith sisters, the pain of the Agiels
and manipulative camaraderie hollowing her out without her knowing.

How could it be that this love was here again, whole and un tarnished? Full to overflowing, free,
and in her arms?

Cara felt overwhelmed, unable to move even as her body shed the proverbial shackles of a past.
She felt tears --hot and fresh --long before she finally realized she was shedding them, long before
she could admonish herself that Mord’Sith did not weep.
Kahlan knew that the world had shifted when she felt Cara’s lips on her own. They moved against her with tentative passion, soft and trembling as though something mountainous and consequential had roused within her and she was trying to hide it.

Her fingertips brushed against Cara’s jaw, etching its line into the suddenly exposed bones of her memory.

She sighed into Cara’s mouth, her lips pressing harder against her, her tongue grazing Cara’s lips as she grew more bold. The other woman moaned as she opened her mouth to allow Kahlan’s exploration, a sound that quivered into Kahlan’s lungs and reverberated through her limbs.

Kahlan felt parched and was only now beginning to feel the delight of being quenched. She reached for the oasis Cara represented. She was hours of comfort and steadfastness when this world threatened their sanity. She was carefully concealed affection that became more and more obvious as Kahlan deciphered Cara’s many masks. She was watchful protectiveness at threats real and unseen, a solid mass against steel and even words when others sought to weaken her, laying down her life for Kahlan’s sake even if in the end, she brushed this off as mere duty to her Lord Rahl.

She was restraint; graceless but willing, never pushing beyond what Kahlan wanted despite the burning desire in her eyes. Kahlan knew its toll and the hidden place it came from. A Mord’Sith always took what she wanted, by force if needed. It was their way.

Cara the Mord’Sith did not.

Kahlan ached with desire.

She reached for Cara’s hips to hold her even closer, using her weight to push Cara into the grass as strong arms wound around her, clinging as one would to floating timber in a tumultuous sea.

They lay there in the shade, Kahlan pressed bodily against her. She dared a nip at Cara’s lower lip, her tongue darting to soothe it, only to be punished by Cara pulling away, kissing her jaw before suckling behind her ear.

Kahlan felt her limbs turn to putty as she felt Cara’s arms tighten around her, pressing her even closer. Cara’s breath left a hot trail from her pulse point to her ear. She felt the soft kiss Cara left there before Cara’s teeth grazed the band of muscle where her neck met her shoulder. Kahlan trembled, overcome with urgency, filled with the enormity of what this was and the circumstances that threatened to take it away.

Cara’s fingers bunched at the cloth around Kahlan’s hips as Kahlan pushed against an offered thigh, the clothing between them providing ample friction.

“Kahlan,” Cara breathed, already feeling the moist heat between Kahlan’s legs, the heave of creamy thighs straddling her leathers.

Her name. The way Cara said it, filled with wonder and shattering need.

Their foreheads together and breathing deeply, Kahlan took Cara’s hand and guided it underneath her dress.

“Touch me.”

“Are you sure?”
Kahan soothed the skin against Cara’s throat, leaving a wet trail along the artery that ran by the side of her neck.

Creator, Kahlan thought as her senses exploded with Cara’s taste. With urgency, her fingers fumbled over the ties of Cara’s leathers.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

They did not notice her approach but Constance cleared her throat loudly, already facing away from them.

There was a knowing lilt in her tone when she said. “My Ladies. If it pleases you, Berdine would like to discuss the garrisons’ defence.”

They broke apart quickly. Cara pulled her hands from where they were hidden under Kahlan’s dress while Kahlan helped her to a sitting position, still pressed against her side and hesitant to let go.

“Farya the Scout has arrived from her forays in the east,” Constance continued as they dealt with their clothing, “and the River Kern on the border to the Old World should only be a few days’ ride. The Lady Rahl will meet us there.”

Constance risked a glance and seeing that Cara was still tying her leathers, she said, “I shall...inform Berdine that you will be there shortly. You can take your time.” She left but one could infer the grin she wore as she walked towards the vineyards.

“I’m...sorry,” Kahlan heard Cara say.

“Whatever for?”

Cara made a wide gesture. “I didn’t mean for us to, uh…”

“Get carried away?” Kahlan could not resist the sudden flush on Cara’s cheeks and her smile became teasing.

“We won’t hear the end of this,” Cara said, watching Constance’s retreating back with an irritated expression.

“I wouldn’t want to, not yet.”

Cara’s brows lifted.

Instead of laughing like Kahlan wanted to --because what else but joy could she possibly feel now? --Kahan let out a sigh. “I want this Cara; don’t look so surprised.”

“I am surprised,” Cara admitted. “I’m waiting for you to come to your senses.”

“I’m being sensible. I care about you so I’ve kissed you, and I want us to do so much more.” Kahlan touched Cara’s chin, wandering to the pouting line of her lips. “I want this,” she repeated as she tried to read Cara’s expression.
The deep, icy blue of Cara’s eyes seemed to shudder over an upwell of hot, new emotion that threatened to break through.

“But I need you to want it too,” Kahlan breathed, running her fingers along Cara’s cheek, waiting to discover the emotions that caused the muscles of her jaw to bunch and move.

Cara’s breath trembled out of her, the signs of a long thaw that felt similar to Rahl’s but had everything to do with this woman before her -- the ways Kahlan subverted her training and refined Cara’s notions of who she was.

Cara allowed herself a small smile but it was a larger concession than either of them could see and Kahlan seemed to acknowledge this as her green eyes widened, hesitant to force any answers. As she looked at Kahlan, Cara felt her universe expand again without her permission; she took a breath of its new air, finally admitting that yes, it was good.

Yes. She may just deserve it.

The warmth of this thought pervaded her chest, crept into her belly, made her rib-cage ache as though the spaces in her were widening but this time they were filled. She leaned forward to reply with a kiss and she knew she was right as soon as Kahlan smiled back, pulling her closer as though she did not want to ever let go.

TBC

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