### The Ties That Bind

by LordofKavaka

**Summary**

Richard and Kahlan can finally be together, but will duty pull them apart? Will Richard become the Lord Rahl? And how will the Council of the Midlands respond to Kahlan choosing Richard as her mate? (Includes material from the books)

**Notes**

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Chapter 1 - Camp

How long had he known, truly known, that it was possible? If he was forced to say, it was probably sometime between his time spent in the Valley of Perdition and their night in that cave just before they found the Stone of Tears with the First Ones. He had known then, but she had been reluctant. And talk of children had not helped. Though, he knew it was possible. He just wished that she'd believe him.

Richard had not needed Kahlan to be in the Con Dar to try and confess him to know that he was immune. His love for her was already all consuming.

If it was true, what Zedd and Kahlan had told him, about how a confessor's magic worked, then he knew that it would have no effect on him. How could he love her anymore than he already did? And it was not just lust... sure he loved the way her hips swayed as she walked, and how her breast pushed together when she wore her corset. But it was more than his physical attraction to her.

Every time he looked into her eyes, Richard felt a longing and love for her. Not just for her body, but for her spirit and soul. And it was the little things, like how her brow furrowed when she worried, or how her lips curled when she smiled. Or the way she'd look at him when she thought he wasn't paying attention.

When he looked into her eyes, Richard saw the same depth of love and longing he felt within himself reflecting back. But always, mixed in, was fear. Fear that she would harm him. When they had thought they were trapped in the valley of the First Ones, and were told that their children would become the next race of humans, Richard had thought that then Kahlan would give in, and accept that her powers would not harm him. "Even the Creator believes we should be together," he had pleaded with her. Yet she still held on to that fear.

Now, everything was different. In the midst of the Con Dar, spurred on by having been confessed by Nicci—something he still did not fully understand—the truth and full depth of his love for her had been tested. And it had passed. With flying colors... well, blood, but that was beside the point.

It warmed his heart so much to know that when he had called her name and professed his love for her with his dying breaths her soul had stirred back from the brink and returned, bringing her back to herself, away from the all consuming rage of the Con Dar... the blood rage. It brought him even further joy to learn that her love for him, though filled with grief over what she had done, had caused her tears to form a new Stone of Tears.

It was their love that had saved the world. Their love. Nothing else. If that was not enough to sway anyone that they were destined to be together, Richard did not know what would.

As he mused over these things and more, Richard watched as Kahlan hunched over the campfire, attempting to cook supper while Zedd kept pestering her for a taste. Her sparkling blue eyes occasionally looked up at him and her special smile, the one she gave only to him, would spread across her lips.

Cara, the ever-faithful Mord'Sith, was patrolling their camp's perimeter, always on the look out for any danger that might harm her Lord Rahl.
"No! No! No! Kahlan, my dear," Zedd's voice carried over the crackling of the fire. "You're putting in way too many spices."

Richard looked up and smiled, chuckling softly at how distraught his grandfather looked over a potentially ruined supper. The man loved food so much that Richard was amazed the wizard was so thin. If Richard ate half as much as his grandfather did, he'd have a tough time trying to pull on his trousers.

Kahlan only shook her head at Zedd and tutted. "Stay away, Zedd," she said, slapping his long fingers as the wizard reached for the stirring spoon.

"My dear, I am a Wizard of the First Order, and I can tell you, with the full weight of that authority and experience," Zedd pontificated. "That you are putting too much spice in that soup of yours."

"Zedd," Richard called out, saving Kahlan. "Just let her cook."

Zedd looked down at Richard and raised his bushy eyebrows. "So now the Seeker thinks he knows a thing or two about how to make the perfect spice soup?"

Richard raised his own eyebrow and gave his grandfather a good glare. "Just wait, Zedd, you'll see. It's great!" he declared flashing a smile and winking at his Confessor.

Kahlan gave him a smile of thanks, and then went back to stirring the soup. She had insisted that she make him her special spice soup. It had been the first thing she had ever made for him.

He knew why she wanted to do it. Partly out of guilt. She still held some guilt over having killed him. Richard would always brush that aside, as if it was nothing, declaring that the knowledge that her love for him was so profound it created the one object that only the Creator herself had created before.

She'd pout and play with the flaps of his shirt, before he'd reassure her of his feelings by pulling her towards him and capturing her lips in a warm embrace. Since then, they've stolen as much kisses as possible, and were more open about their feelings for one another. Their kisses had turned more passionate, longer, and much warmer.

Zedd huffed in feigned indignation and plopped down, grabbing an apple from his pack and took a big bite, the snapping noise resounding with clarity throughout the small clearing. "At least we found that grove of apple trees… I'm starving!"

Cara, who had quietly made her way back to camp, rolled her eyes. "You're always starving, Wizard!" she huffed and sat down next to him, her red leathering creaking.

It had been three days since that fateful day. They had made excellent time crossing the desert in their return from the Pillars of Creation. As far as Richard was concerned, they couldn't get to Aydindril fast enough. After discovering her power could not harm him, Kahlan had promised Richard a night to remember in her big bed back at the Confessor's Palace. Since that wonderful kiss they had shared at the Pillars, they'd had precious little time to be alone. So Richard was eagerly awaiting their return to Aydindril. Passionate kisses stolen while the others were not watching was only going to hold him for so long.

"Are you sure we shouldn't be going to the People's Palace?" Cara inquired, looking at him, pulling him away form his pleasant reverie.

Richard cocked his head. The Mord'Sith had been on him since they had completed their quest to go back to D'Hara and claim the throne. He wanted nothing of it. Darken Rahl had to be dwelt
with, to be sure, but first they had to get Kahlan back to Aydindril… and her big bed. A lazy smile spread across his lips.

"Richard!" Cara snapped, throwing a small stone at him. "You need to stop thinking of bedding the Mother Confessor long enough to think straight!"

Zedd chuckled and munched on his apple, his old eyes gleaming with amusement. Richard raised an eyebrow and smiled to himself, remembering that it was his idea to help Cara reassert her humanity. Though, he had to admit, they needed to work on her a bit more. She was far to blunt. He noticed that Kahlan was blushing by the campfire, her cheeks turning pink.

"Cara," he turned his attention to the her. "I have no intention on claiming the throne of D'Hara, and you know that."

"But you are the true Lord Rahl!" the Mord'Sith objected, throwing her hands up in frustration.

Richard looked to Zedd for help. The old wizard gave a shrug and obliged. "Cara, my dear, that scoundrel Darken Rahl is alive and the Mord'Sith are with him," he stated, bowing his head.

Cara narrowed her eyes at the wizard, before turning back to Richard.

"Rahl may be alive again, but he is not the true Lord Rahl," she contended, punctuating her remark with a flick of her head. "The wizard may be wise and all, but he's no D'Haran." She glanced at Zedd. "No offense."

"None taken," Zedd laughed.

"Richard," Cara leaned forward, becoming deadly serious. "You have to understand, it is not just your parentage that matters, but your blood."

"My blood?" Richard furrowed his brow, confused. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Kahlan look up from the soup, worry creasing her own brow at the mention of Richard's blood.

Cara withdrew one of her agiels in a flash and smirked as it hummed. "The bond between the Lord Rahl and the D'Haran people is strong."

"Bond?" Richard queried, becoming nervous.

"The Rahls have special blood," Cara declared. "And now that Darken Rahl's mind is in that imposter's body, he does not have that blood. My former Sisters of the Agiel are fools to follow him. He does not have the bond."

"And I do?" Richard asked, looking dubious.

"You have the Rahl blood, you have the bond," Cara said, rotating her agiel around in her fingers. "One day, you'll see that. One day, all of D'Hara will see that."

Richard narrowed his eyes. "Does this have something to do with how you always seem to know where I am?"

Before Cara could answer, there was a sudden commotion from the bushes off to their side. Richard sprang up—the ringing of steel filling the air as he pulled the Sword of Truth from its scabbard—ready to cut down any threat that came at them; anything that threatened Kahlan!

Cara was by his side in the blink of an eye, her agiels held at the ready.
"Stand behind me, Lord Rahl," she ordered.

Richard gave her a tight grin. "We're a team, Cara, remember?"

"Maybe, but the Mother Confessor would be beside herself in grief if anything were to happen to you," Cara responded. "And believe me, I do not want to deal with a weeping confessor." And then added, half to herself, "Again."

Before Richard could say anything else, two men stumbled out of the brush. They were big with strong shoulders and chiseled jaws. Short-cropped straw colored hair covered their heads and blue eyes gleamed in the light cast by the fire.

The two men scanned the clearing before stepping up to Richard. Instinctively Cara stepped in front of him, ready to defend her charge. But as she did, Richard noticed a change come over his friend. It was almost as if she knew these two. Immediately, before anyone could react, the two men dropped to their knees before Richard and they spoke in unison.

"Master Rahl guide us. Master Rahl teach us. Master Rahl protect us. In your light we thrive. In your mercy we are sheltered. In your wisdom we are humbled. We live only to serve. Our lives are yours."


Richard looked at them in utter disbelief and horror.

"Get up!" he snapped, a little too heatedly for his liking. He was not really angry at them, but at himself for having Rahl blood.

The two hulking men obliged. He was surprised to see nervous looks flash in their eyes. They were so large, taller than him, nearly dwarfing Zedd. And as muscular as an ox. However, they kept casting glances at Cara and her raised agiels.

"Egan? Ulic?" Cara's voice was filled with confusion, as was her face. Too stunned to do anything else, she just stared at the new arrivals.

The one closest to them bowed his head. "Mistress Cara," he said. "It is good to see you again."

"Somehow, you look different," the other said, before looking away, nervously. "Not that that's a bad thing, Mistress Cara."

"Cara?" it was Kahlan's voice. The Mother Confessor stepped out in front of Richard and towards their friend. She laid one of her delicate hands on the Mord'Sith's arm. "Do you know these two?"

Cara lowered her agiels, but she kept her eyes locked on the two large men. "Yes," she said. "They are members of the First File, protectors of the Lord Rahl."

"The steel against steel!" the two men declared slamming their fists to their chests in pride.

"What do you want?" Cara curtly asked, ignoring her companion's questioningly looks.

"We've come to serve the Lord Rahl."

Richard shook his head, and kept his sword raised. "Darken Rahl's at the People Palace."

"Begging your pardons, m' lord, but he is not."

Richard exchanged a perplexed look with Kahlan, before they returned their attention to the two men. Did he just m' lord me? "Well, no matter. If you want to the serve the Lord Rahl, then go to him," he spat, not really knowing why he was willingly sending two more soldiers to Rahl's cause.

The two giants vigorously shook their heads.

"He is not the Lord Rahl," one said.

The other gave a nod. "We serve the true Lord Rahl."

And then together they said, "We serve Lord Richard Rahl."

Richard shuddered. He wanted to scream at them and decry what they were saying. He was not a
Richard shuddered. He wanted to scream at them and decry what they were saying. He was not a Rahl. He was a Cypher. He was Richard Cypher. Not Richard Rahl. But for some reason he remained mute, and could not find the words he so desperately wanted to yell at them.

Zedd stepped forward. "What do you think, Kahlan?" the wizard asked, putting an arm on Richard’s shoulder to calm him down. No doubt his grandfather could sense his unease. It was after all, Zedd's own daughter, Richard's mother, who had been seduced by Panis Rahl. Suddenly Richard felt very alone. He wished Jennsen was with them; if only so that he could have the comfort of his sister.

Kahlan, putting on her confessor's face, regarded the two hulking giants for a minute before turning around. "They're telling the truth," she declared.

It was not until Kahlan had stepped back to stand beside him that he lowered the Sword of Truth. But, just the same, he did not return it to its scabbard.

Abruptly, Cara spun on her heels and glared at Richard. "See!" she snapped, wagging an agiel at him. "I told you. You are the true Lord Rahl!"

Baffled, Richard shook his head. "No, Cara. I'm not. I don't want the throne."

"Having the throne does not make you the Lord Rahl," she boldly declared, holstering her agiels. "The bond is strong. Egan and Ulic are pure blood D'Harans, like me. We can sense the bond better than most."

Egan and Ulic nodded. "She speaks the truth, Lord Rahl. We have sensed your presence sense Darken Rahl was defeated."

Richard turned to Zedd for help, but he found none in his grandfather's grey eyes. "Zedd, what is it?"

"I was afraid of this," the wizard stepped back. "I had thought that once your Han had been taken by Nicci, you would no longer have the bond, but... but... oh bags! It appears I was mistaken."

Cara smirked. "I thought I'd never live to see the day."

Zedd shot her a glare. "I'm may be old, but at least I can admit to my failures."

"Are you insinuating that I have failures?" retorted the Mord'Sith, a playful look in her eye.

Zedd huffed. Richard rolled his eyes. Once these two got started in their little repartee there was no stopping them. So, before they could go any further, he interjected.

"Zedd! What are you talking about?" he asked, running his fingers through his hair, not at all caring at how obvious the concern on his face was.

Kahlan stepped closer and he felt her hand trickle down his back, trying to comfort him with her touch.

His grandfather lowered his eyebrows and sighed. "All of it is true," he said, slumping down on a fallen tree, grunting as he did so. "The bond will allow all D'Harans to sense your location. Pure blood D'Harans, like Cara and these two, can sense you from any distance."

"Zedd," Kahlan spoke softly, her voice filled with worry. "Do you think Darken Rahl will use this to track Richard?"

The wizard shrugged. "Could be, I don't know for sure." He turned and looked at the two giants.
"Egan, Ulic, was it?"

"Yes, wizard," the two men nodded in unison.

Zedd raised an eyebrow. "Which one is which?" he asked, jokingly. Then turned serious. "How many D'Harans are with Darken Rahl?"

The two shared a look. "Just the Mord'Sith," they answered.

Cara grumbled, obviously displeased that her Sisters of the Agiel were alone in their support for the false Lord Rahl.

"I don't understand," Kahlan spoke up, her long hair shifting around her exquisite face as she shook her head. "If the bond is as strong as you say, then why haven't all of D'Hara… or even the Dragon Corp., for that matter, declared loyalty to Richard?"

What was she saying? Richard started at her in open disbelief. He could not believe she was asking this. She knew how he felt. Out of all people, Kahlan knew how much he did not want the throne of D'Hara.

"Not all D'Harans can feel the bond," Egan admitted, glancing at Cara.

Cara turned to Zedd. "You know the tale, Zedd," she spoke sharply. "Since, apparently, you've known all along, you tell them."

Zedd looked up and gulped. "I suppose your right, Cara," he gave a reluctant nod then turned to Richard and Kahlan. "Long ago, there was only a handful of D'Harans. A powerful wizard by the name of Rahl cast a spell over them, linking them to him. Using that bond, he became their master. However, his lust for power was insatiable and he sought to increase his dominion and control."

He took a deep breath then continued. "Eventually he conquered all of what is now D'Hara. Then overtime, the pure blood D'Harans intermarried and had offspring with those they had conquered. The bond remained, but not as strong. Only those of pure blood can still feel it to the same extent that their ancestors did."

"And there are plenty few of us," grumbled Ulic, with Egan nodding.

Richard shook his head in disbelief and horror. "Zedd, I cannot force people to bow down to me. To do my bidding. I am not Darken Rahl!"

"No, your not," it was Kahlan who spoke. She gripped his hand tightly and smiled at him. "Your Richard. My Richard. You are the Seeker of Truth and the most honorable and bravest man I have ever known."

"Kahlan?" he began to object, but she put a finger on his lips to silence him.

"D'Hara needs a ruler," she said, looking over at Egan and Ulic. "And if Darken Rahl only has the Mord'Sith, then now is the time to strike." Her eyes became hardened with resolve and he knew that he would be hard pressed to break those walls down. "You need to go to the People's Palace, Richard. You need to become the Lord Rahl!"

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It was delicious, watching her squirm. All the more so because she knew she deserved it. He smirked to himself as he watched them pull her up. Her arms and legs were bound behind her back, and the rope was still tied tightly. The chains she hung from clinked together as the winch
hoisted her up.

Licking his lips with lustful hunger from the sight of her naked flesh, he pondered what else he could do to this gorgeous creature. Though, the Rada'Han around her neck was an unfortunate blemish, it did not diminish her beauty.

Her blue eyes glared at him, filled with nothing but loathing and hate, as he spun her around to look upon her face.

"Did you enjoy your hot bath?" he asked.

Nicci gritted her teeth, yet deigned to respond.

Rahl chuckled softly, running his fingertips along her slender jaw line. "You could have had everything, Nicci... if only you had been more reasonable." Stepping away, he glanced over at his faithful Mord'Sith. He gave a nod, and the woman pulled the lever.

The chains holding the former Sister of the Dark rattled as they let loose. Narrowing his eyes, he watched Nicci plunge towards the pool again. He held up his hand, giving a signal seconds before his prize hit the scolding waters. The lever was pulled and Nicci came to a stop.

She finally relented with growl as the winch pulled her back up. "What do you want, Rahl?"

Darken Rahl stepped around the hot pool, fully enjoying himself. He wetted his fingers with his tongue and smoothed out his eyebrows, a habit he had come to pick up again after his time in the Underworld with the Keeper. It had been a nervous tick he had as a youth, one he had thought he had gotten rid of.

Spinning Nicci around so that she faced him once more, he gave her an innocent look. "Isn't that obvious, Nicci?" he asked. "I want what I've always wanted."

Nicci rolled her eyes in disgust. "Men," she spat. "You're all alike. All you want is power and women."

Rahl's lips formed in a faux pout. "Oh, you wound me, Nicci. Really... you do," he smoothed his hands down his crimson robes. "You see, while my dear brother makes his way back to Aydindril, not doubt to bask in the triumph of his most recent accomplishment, I've been in contact with an old friend of yours."

Nicci glared at him, a moment of confusion flashing in her brilliant eyes. He almost thought he glimpsed terror. Yes, he thought winningly, she knows of whom I speak.

"Yes, Nicci, that's right," he grinned at her, his eyes lowering to her exposed chest... maybe he would indulge himself, spirits knows his latest alley was chomping at the bit for her. "The Emperor sends his regards."
Chapter 3 - Duty

"No!" Richard vehemently declared, pulling Kahlan away from the others. He had to speak with her privately.

Zedd stood to say something, but he cast him a glare that told the wizard that now was not the time. Reluctantly, Zedd backed off and went over to their new friends. Cara seemed visibly more cheerful. She finally had some fellow D'Harans that had not showed up to kill them.

Holding her arm, Richard led Kahlan away from the camp, seeking solace in the trees and woods he loved. If there was ever a time he needed to feel the comfort of familiar surroundings, it was now.

"Richard…," Kahlan began.

"No, Kahlan," Richard cut her off, feeling guilty for the tone her was using with her. But this was not a time to think of feelings. Richard knew that if he made any grab for the D'Haran throne it was going to involve a fight. And he was not about to allow them to be sucked into a civil war. No doubt, Darken Rahl was already scheming over how he could recapture D'Hara.

When he felt they were at a goodly distance from camp, so that the others would not over hear their argument, Richard stopped and huffed, trying to calm himself. He did not want to yell at Kahlan. He loved her, but… Spirits, did she have to be so adamant?

"Kahlan, I don't want to go to the People's Palace," he said, after a time. "I want to go to Aydindril, with you. Don't you want me to be with you?"

Kahlan looked hurt, she reached out and grabbed a hold of his hands, pulling them to her heart. "Of course I want you, Richard. But we must think of duty before our own needs."

"Duty!" he spat it out like it was a curse. "We've done our duty, Kahlan. We defeated Rahl with the Boxes of Orden, fulfilling prophecy. And now we've closed the rift. What more can be asked of us?"

"Richard," Kahlan lowered her eyebrows, looking very much the Mother Confessor and not at all the woman who loved him. "We cannot be selfish when others are in greater need than we."

"Kahlan," Richard growled, not wanting to hear a word of it.

"Shh," she chided. "You accepted the title of the Seeker, Richard. You did it fully knowing the consequences and responsibilities."

No, he had not. Zedd had lied to him. Spirits, even Kahlan had lied to him! When he had taken the Sword of Truth and accepted the title of Seeker, he had been unaware that he was signing over his own happiness for the rest of his life. That was how it felt at this very moment. As if his life was only duty to the sword and title he bore. All he wanted was to be with Kahlan. He no longer cared what others thought. Not anymore. He had suffered enough. Waited long enough.

Spirits, it was his turn now! Why couldn't someone else take up the sword and defend the Midlands? Why did it have to be him?

"You know I'm right," Kahlan spoke softly, rubbing his shoulders, trying to calm him, sensing the
smoldering conflict within. "Just hear them out, Richard. Listen to what they have to say."

"Spirits, Kahlan," he breathed. "I just want to be with you. Why can't that be enough? Why do I always have to save the day?"

He lowered his head, feeling ashamed for being so selfish. But wasn't he entitled to be selfish? Didn't he deserve a respite from his toils?

"I want to be with you, too," she said, lifting his head up, her fingers under his chin. She gave him a soft smile. "All because we both have duties does not mean we can't still be together."

Richard shook his head. "I know I'm being self-centered," he confessed. "But," he looked up at her, seeing the love reflecting back in her beautiful blue eyes. "I can't help it. We've waited so long… I just want to hold you in my arms and make passionate love to you for the rest of my life."

Before she could say anything else, he pulled her to him and kissed her. He moved his lips over hers, almost in a frantic dance, never wanting to be apart. She willing reciprocated, no longer afraid of her powers harming him. Her hands ran up his face and pulled him closer. Opening her mouth, ever so slightly, she deepened their kiss. He felt her wet tongue beg entrance and he readily complied.

Breathing heavily they parted and he pulled her to his chest, hugging her fiercely. "Please, Kahlan?" he pleaded. "Can't we just go to Aydindril? Please. Let's just get you there safe and sound, then… then we can talk about D'Hara."

Seeing that he would not budge, Kahlan reluctantly nodded. "All right, Richard," she said, looking up at him, running her fingers through the growth on his jaw. "We'll go to Aydindril."

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Zedd's bushy eyebrows knitted together in worry as he watched the Seeker and Mother Confessor trudge off into the woods. He was worried about those two. Though he knew their love was stronger than any he had ever seen, he worried that duty would pull them apart.

"Should we eat, or should we wait for them?" Cara asked, oblivious to his mood.

Zedd gave a shake of his head. "You know, Cara, I'm actually not hungry anymore."

Cara's eyebrows shot up. "That's a new one."

He gave her a weak smile. "Temporary, I assure you."

The Mord'Sith inclined her head and let him be. As he sat there, he was vaguely aware that the two men were staring at him. He looked up at them and the two ox-like men looked away timidly, which Zedd found amusing considering their immeasurable bulk and size.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Are you truly a Wizard of the First Order?" Egan broached, his eyes looking nervous.

"Yes," Cara interjected before he could reply. "He is. And usually a hungry one."

The Mord'Sith hunched over the pot and began dishing out bowls. She filled them in sort order and handed one to Zedd despite his early assertion that he was not hungry. Though, now that he had the warm bowl in his hands, and the aroma was touching his nostrils, he was reconsidering. Richard had, after all, declared Kahlan's spice soup was the best he had ever had.
"You are the Lord Rahl's grandfather?" Ulic asked, pulling Zedd out of his thoughts.

"Yes," he gave a nod.

"Then you are the magic against magic like Lord Rahl," Egan said, as he gave a nod to his friend.

Zedd gave a shrug. "I suppose I am," he looked down at the appetizing bowl of spice soup. Richard should be here. Kahlan had made this for him, not for Zedd and the others. Now they had two new mouths to feed. He suddenly found himself worrying about finding enough food.

After an awkward period of silence, the noise of Richard and Kahlan approaching broke the tension that had been slowly building up. Zedd glanced over and smiled, pleased to see the two lovers coming back to camp hand in hand. He had worried that Richard would be too stubborn to listen to the wisdom that the Mother Confessor had to offer.

"So?" Cara asked, not needing to say anymore than that.

"We go to Aydindril," Kahlan said, stepping over to the pot and filling two bowls for Richard and herself.

Cara frowned, but said nothing. She went back to her meal. Egan and Ulic looked worried. Zedd only smiled to himself, knowing that Kahlan had not yet finished with Richard. He allowed himself an inward chuckle, knowing that once they reached Aydindril Kahlan would be on him again about D'Hara.

While Kahlan attended to preparing his bowl, Richard stepped over to the two D'Harans. "Do you still wish to serve me?" he asked them.

"It is not a question of whether we want to or not," Egan replied. "You are the Lord Rahl. It is our duty to serve."

Richard shook his head and crouched before them. "I don't want to hear about duty," he said with a wave of his hand. "I have enough problems of my own with duty." He paused and looked at them. "What do you want?"

Egan and Ulic looked baffled. Zedd chuckled softly. Clearly neither of these men had ever been asked that question before. Ulic gulped down the contents of his spoon and allowed his companion to answer.

"We have never had the honor of serving an honorable man before," Egan stammered, obviously worried about expressing his own feelings. It was probably the first time in his whole life that he had been told he could. "We wish to serve you, Lord Rahl."

"Yes," Ulic finally piped up. "That is what we want."

"All right," Richard sighed. "If I can't talk you out of it... will you come with us to Aydindril."

Egan and Ulic both gave a nod, smiles touching their faces, no doubt pleased that their Lord Rahl was not sending them away. Richard gave them a smile and slapped them on the shoulders in thanks before he returned to Kahlan. It always amazed Zedd how Richard could see the good in people when others could not.

He watched as his grandson and the woman he loved sat down by the fire together, whispering quietly to each other. Zedd could only wonder at what the two were talking about. He never doubted Richard's heart or compassion and sense of duty, but he knew that it pained his grandson that he could not simply be a man who loved a woman. Tears began to well up in his eyes as he
felt guilt over being the cause of such heartache. He was, after all, the one who had named Richard the Seeker.

"Are you serious?" sniped Cara. "Please, Wizard, I don't need to deal with a crying wizard. It's barely been three days since I had to deal with a weeping confessor."

Laughing at her jest, Zedd smiled at the Mord'Sith, finding it ironic that he took such joy in the companionship of a woman who had been trained to torture men much like himself.

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Berdine stood there staring at the door. It had been her assignment to watch the prisoner, and she had been diligent in her task. She had stood by as Lord Rahl had repeatedly had the blonde submerged in boiling water, bringing her to the brink of death before having them pull her back up and revive her. Only to do it all over again.

Now, the Lord Rahl was performing his own "special" kind of torture. Berdine had experienced it numerous times. All Mord'Sith had. He'd smile and say it was one of their many duties, one which he relished above all else. Though sleeping with the Lord Rahl was hardly anything that she found pleasure in.

She did not enjoy it. Rahl was not the kind of lover she wanted. When a Mord'Sith was with the Lord Rahl, their duty was to please him. He cared little if they found any pleasure in their duty, so long as he was pleased.

If Berdine could have her way, she would never be separated from her lover, Raina. However, Lord Rahl had been displeased with how close the two had gotten and he had sent Raina to another temple. At least Nyda was with her. Though she enjoyed the other's companionship, she was not Raina.

Berdine blinked when she heard the cries of the woman from within the Lord Rahl's bedchambers, amazed she had lasted this long without screaming. Mord'Sith would never scream from the pain he caused them while he took them, yet they'd screamed just the same. It was their duty to please him, and he found pleasure in their screams.

Rahl had been reluctant to indulge himself in this one, a great feat for Lord Rahl, but ultimately he could not resist the beauty of the sorceress. For a Mord'Sith, Berdine was supposed to feel nothing for this woman, but she could not help herself but feel pity. Her training had been brutal, but she had managed to keep a part of herself sheltered from the touch of the agiels.

From the sounds the poor woman made, Berdine knew what Lord Rahl must have been doing to her, it was the same thing he had done to Berdine the previous night. It had been extremely painful, more so than Berdine would care to admit, but her training had given her the power to suppress the pain and not dwell on it. Whenever Lord Rahl would take her to his bed, she would think of Raina, and imagine making love to her and not her lord and master.

Suddenly the door banged opened and Lord Rahl emerged pulling on his trousers. He looked up at Berdine with a thin smirk, and then pulled his robe over his shoulders.

"She may need some tending to, Berdine," he said, grinning, pleased with himself. "See to it that she's properly mended. It would not do for my new alley to think he is getting spoiled goods."

Berdine gave a nod. She watched with cool detachment as the Lord Rahl sauntered down the hall with Constance and Rikka as his shadows.

Slowly, she stepped through the threshold and closed the door. The woman was lying on the bed,
blood soaking around her thighs. Berdine closed the gap between them in quick strides. She was shorter than most Mord'Sith, but still just as deadly. Dipping a cloth in the water basin, she sat on the edge of the bed, and slowly cleaned the blood from the poor woman.

She closed her eyes as she realized she had been correct. He'd taken the sorceress from behind, and had his way with her the other way. Berdine did not know how a man could find that so pleasurable when compared to the wonders offered by the flesh that lay between a woman's thighs.

Slowly removing her leather gloves, the Mord'Sith tried to soothe the woman. The blonde woman, whose eyes had been so defiant before, had turned dull and detached. Lord Rahl had been correct. Berdine could see the sorceress would, indeed, need to be healed.

She grimaced to herself. She would do her duty for Lord Rahl. But only that. Nothing more, nothing less.
Chapter 4 - Home

Kahlan could not help but smile. She was returning home. It was not just that she would be reunited with Dennee, but that this time she was arriving in Aydindril with the Seeker at her side. Kahlan still shuddered from the images of what Richard had told her had happened when she had been torn in two by the amulet. She had never been happier not to remember something. Though, smiling to herself, she admitted there was one part she wished she did.

The city greeted her with cheers and shouts of joy. Men bent on bended knee with deep respect and awe. Women threw flowers from upper stories and little children ran and giggled in the street. Before they arrived, Kahlan had changed into her white confessor's dress. And ever since she had put it on she felt so vulnerable and exposed.

There was no reason for her to feel that way, but she did. Kahlan thought that it might have something to do with the fact she had not worn it for so long. She had worn her violet black dress for most of their return trip; partly because of the way Richard's eyes would light up and openly roam her body. She loved it how he was so unafraid to love a confessor, especially her. She lived and died with those rare moments when they could share a passionate kiss or two before the others would grow concern over their absence.

Zedd was the worse of all. He'd always stumble in on them when he should not have and boldly ask if he had interrupted something. Of course you have, Kahlan wanted to snap at him, but she didn't. He just had unfortunate timing.

The best they could manage with their present company was snuggling close at night. Richard would wake early, though, and while the others stirred from their slumber, he would slowly caress her exposed thighs and whisper sweet promises into her ear, stealing a kiss or two, before Zedd would wake with a snort proclaiming his dire need for sustenance.

Now, in Aydindril, Kahlan was aching to feel his arms around her, yet knowing that such an intimate act would only cause confused stares from the city folk. Despite that, the undying love in his eyes never wavered and he openly gazed at her, not caring if he got those stares. She'd reward him with her special smile, the smile she would only ever give him.

Dennee was waiting on the steps of the Confessor's Palace, the D'Haran soldier Kahlan had confessed still guarding her. Kahlan was a little anxious with how the man would react to seeing his mistress again, and was thankful when all he did was stare at her with the all consuming love that all confessed have.

She hugged her sister tightly, still a little disorientated by the new face her sister wore. Dennee and Cara exchanged a cool glance, and Kahlan was a little worried that her sister would try and confess Cara on the spot. However, her fears were alleviated when Dennee gave the Mord'Sith a forced smile and thanked her for returning her sister, the Mother Confessor, back to Aydindril.

Dennee looked past Cara and squinted. "Who are they?"

Kahlan glanced over her shoulder and saw the two hulking D'Harans walking up the steps behind Richard and Zedd. She turned back to Dennee. "D'Harans of the First File," she answered, raising her eyebrows, waiting for the questions to start pouring out.

"Encountered a quad on your way back?" Dennee asked.
"No," Kahlan shook her heads. "These two came willingly."

"Why?" Dennee furrowed her brow.

"To serve the Lord Rahl, of course," Cara almost snapped. The Mord'Sith had been annoyed with all the looks she and her two fellow D'Harans had been given while they walked through the city.

Richard finally made his way up the steps and greeted Dennee, giving her a hug like she was a sister. Kahlan smiled to herself, she couldn't help thinking that someday she would be.

"Shall we go inside, the council is eager to speak with you," Dennee said to Kahlan.

Richard made a move to follow, but then Dennee placed a hand on his chest. "Sorry, Richard. Just the Mother Confessor."

"What?" Kahlan asked, wrinkling her nose in confusion. "Why would the council bar the Seeker from the chambers?"

Dennee glanced from her to Richard and looked like she was afraid to answer.

"Dennee?"

"I'm sorry, Kahlan," her sister finally gave in. "But news has spread quicker than you. The council has heard that Richard is the heir to the throne of D'Hara and, though he is the Seeker, they will not have a Lord Rahl in their chambers."

"They can't do that," Kahlan lowered her brow, becoming angry. How could they presume to bar her Richard from the council chambers? She was the Mother Confessor. Her word was law!

"Kahlan, it's okay," Richard said, tenderly brushing his hand against her arm. If only he knew how much such a tender touch ignited her passion for him. "I'll wait out here with Egan and Ulic." The two D'Harans behind him gave a nod.

"I suppose I'm bared, too," Cara grumbled, and—not waiting for an answer—continued. "I'll stay with the Seeker, Mother Confessor. He'll not get into any trouble while I have my eye on him."

Kahlan gave a tight grin. "Thank you, Cara." She turned to Zedd. "Are you coming, Zedd?"

"Yes, dear one," the wizard gave a warm smile. "Lead on."

She did not like leaving Richard, but duty compelled her to go to the council chambers without him. As they walked through the large doors, the confessed soldier following at a distance, Kahlan noticed Dennee looking back over her shoulder.

"Why do you keep that woman around?" she asked, incredulously.

"Cara?" Kahlan asked, furrowing her brow. "She's a friend. She helps me protect Richard."

"But… but she's Mord'Sith," Dennee objected.

Kahlan inclined her head. "Yes, she is."

"She killed me… and my family," her sister shuddered.

Kahlan closed her eyes, feeling guilty. "I know."

"How can stand being around her… let alone call her a friend!" Dennee's voice was filled with
anger and the sounds of betrayal.

"Dennee, I know it's hard," Kahlan said, touching her sister's arm. "I struggle with it everyday. But I've come to know her. She's changed. She is no longer the same woman who led that attack."

She paused and smiled knowingly to herself. "Richard changed her."

"Well," Dennee said, taking a deep breath to calm herself. "I can tell the Mord'Sith is not the only one the Seeker's changed." She looked sideways at Kahlan. "You look different, Kahlan. You have a glow about you." She narrowed her eyes. "What's happened?"

Before Kahlan could answer her the doors behind them closed. Zedd looked up, his grey eyes looking concerned. In front of them a group of soldiers, dressed in the Kelton colors, stepped out and formed up around a tall man.

Kahlan held back her gasp. Prince Fyren had been killed, right? She still had nightmares over the idea of being with another man other than Richard. It left her confused and worried. Both of her torn selves had thought they were with child. Yet, when checked, neither were. Zedd had declared that neither one was a whole being, thus incapable of conceiving.

What worried Kahlan most was that something special had been stolen from her. A rare moment that only came once in a woman's life. A moment she had always hoped and dreamt would have been with Richard. Tormented by things she could not remember, she had run from the council chambers and sought out a midwife. She had to know. Much to her relief, the midwife informed her that she still had her maidenhood intact. Whatever had happened with both Richard and Prince Fyren had been erased when Zedd had brought her two halves back into one.

Now, standing before her, was an exact duplicate of the man she never wanted to see ever again. The only difference was this man had a thin goatee around his lips.

"Who are these men?" Kahlan demanded, trying to put on her confessor's face.

"Welcome home, Mother Confessor," came a regal voice. "I am Prince Hyron," he said raising an eyebrow. "I believe you knew my brother quite well."

"What do you want?" Kahlan snapped.

Prince Hyron raised his eyebrows in a feigned pout. "I am merely escorting the Mother Confessor to the council chambers," he said. "I am not my brother. I have no lust for power. I serve the Midlands. Just as you do, Mother Confessor."

"Then take us to the council," Kahlan ordered.

Hyron gave a nod of his head, and immediately his men formed up around Kahlan and her party. Zedd looked around.

"Curious?" she heard him mumble.

"This way," Hyron said directing them down the halls. "The council is most eager to speak with you, Mother Confessor."

Reluctantly, Kahlan followed behind the brother of the man who had been the mate to her other half. She gained control of her confessor's face, not wanting Zedd or Dennee to know how painful it was for her to see Hyron; minus the goatee, he looked so much like his brother. Silently, she again thanked the good spirits that she could not remember anything her other half had done. It was all so horrific to even think of.
Tall double doors with the seal of Aydindril carved into the wood were pulled open and Kahlan stepped into the chambers of the Council of the Midlands.

"The Mother Confessor returns!" Hyron called out.

Murmurs and applause broke out. Kahlan strode out into the center of the chamber, standing before the raised dais that held the ruling council. Each chair, saved two, were occupied. One had the Kelton emblem on it, Prince Hyron's seat. While the other… tall and regal with the seal of Aydindril rising high above, was reserved for the Mother Confessor.

Since her time after being torn, Dennee had sat in that chair. But now, it was Kahlan's turn. Her duty.

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Richard paced on the steps of the Confessor's Palace. Cara stood off to the side watching him with intense blue eyes.

"You know," she smirked, fiddling with an agiel in her hand. "You're going to wear the stone down if you keeping pacing like that."

Richard turned and looked at her. He heaved a deep sigh and gave a nod. However, he could not help but worry. He loved Kahlan so much and could not bear to be parted from her, even if it was only for a short time.

Cara narrowed her eyes and slipped her agiel back into its holster. "Don't worry, Lord Rahl. The wizard is with her."

Egan and Ulic stood like statues, their blue D'Haran eyes watching everyone that walked past as if danger lurked amongst ever shadow and step.

"Yes, I know," Richard replied at last. "I… I… I just—"

Cara gave him an understanding nod. "I know, Richard," she spoke softly.

He gave her a nod of thanks. Still feeling anxious with bottled up apprehension, he walked down the steps, practically hopping. All his energy was focused on his worry for Kahlan. He did not know why he was so worried. Kahlan was the Mother Confessor. She was the leader of the Midlands. And she was with Dennee and Zedd, the First Wizard. So why was he so worried?

"I'm sure the Mother Confessor won't be long," Cara was saying. "And as soon as their done, she will no doubt send for you and take you to that big bed of hers."

Richard gawked at her, too stunned to even respond.

"What!" Cara snapped. "What else are we going to talk about? All she ever talks about is you," she added with a grumble, rolling her eyes. "All day—non-stop—gabbing away about Richard this and Richard that. To be honest, it's a little annoying."

All he could do was laugh. Cara looked at him like had lost his mind. Richard shook his head at her and laughed all the harder, having to hold his side. If he did not let this laugh out he was sure his sides would burst.

He could not thank Cara enough for what she had just done. All the tension and consternation he had been feeling seemed to lift. And all she had done was be herself. That alone, made Richard happy to have her as a friend.
Darken Rahl stepped across the chamber and opened the door. "Ah, Berdine," he grinned, licking his lips. "Has our prisoner been healed?"

"Yes, Lord Rahl," Berdine answered. "To the untrained eye, she will appear to be unspoiled."

"Excellent," Rahl's grin widened, he stepped back and gestured for the Mord'Sith to enter.

Berdine did as she was commanded. Running his fingertips against his tongue, he relished the sight of the tight leather stretching around his Mord'Sith rear. When his fingers were properly wet, he ran them across his eyebrows.

He closed the door and bolted it shut, already thinking of twisted things he could do with this woman.

Rahl narrowed his eyes at her, taking in her voluptuous form. Out of all his Mord'Sith, Berdine was the most buxom. When he took her, he loved the feel of her large breast in his hands. He smiled to himself, maybe when they were through with business, he'd indulge himself in the pleasures to be had with such a woman.

He stepped across the chamber, resting his hands behind his back. "Before Garren's untimely demise," Rahl spoke as he eyed his Mord'Sith. "She told me you were quite skilled in languages."

"Yes, Lord Rahl."

Darken Rahl turned and smiled at her, holding up an old tome covered in dark red leather. "Do you know High D'Haran?"
Chapter 5 - Nightmare

Kahlan narrowed her eyes as Prince Hyron took his seat with the rest of the council.

"I was told you desired to speak with me," Kahlan addressed the council. "I am here now, so speak."

"Mother Confessor," an elderly man from Jara spoke up, leaning forward. "This is a sensitive matter, perhaps you would prefer it if the First Wizard was not present."

Kahlan raised her head and stared at the councilor. She gave him a cool glare before answering. "Zedd is like family. What you have to say can be said before him."

"As you will, Mother Confessor," the man said with a nod.

The councilor from Galea, dressed in green, knitted his eyebrows together and took over. "Now that the rift has been sealed, and you are free to take up your position on this council once again, we feel that it is time you take a mate."

"A mate?" Kahlan was startled by their request, but she kept that hidden under the mask of her confessor's face.

"Yes," the Jara man spoke again. "You are the Mother Confessor, the most powerful confessor…"

"Out of the two that we have," Prince Hyron interjected, giving Dennee a hard glare.

"Yes, yes," the Jara man said, nodding, waving a hand in the air to dismiss the matter. He turned back to Kahlan. "We must ensure that the line of confessors continues and remains strong."

Kahlan gazed over at Dennee and saw the truth of it. Her sister had known what the council's business was. Then why did she bar Richard from the council? Surely Dennee knew whom Kahlan would choose.

"What do you say, Mother Confessor?" the Galea councilor asked. "Will you take a mate?"

Kahlan took a quick breath. "If that is the will of the council…," she waited to see if it was. All the members bowed their heads. "Then, yes. I will take a mate."

"Good," Hyron smiled. "We have…"

"No," Kahlan shook her head, knowing what they wanted to say. "I will choose my own mate. As confessors have always done."

"But Mother Confessor," objected the Jara man. "These are troubled times. Different than most. We need to ensure that the father of the next confessor is strong."

"The man I have in mind is strong," Kahlan declared, smiling to herself. He is brave, handsome, and oh so wonderful. He was everything she had been taught she could never have. But now, all that was different. Kahlan Amnell, the Mother Confessor, who should have been doomed to a loveless marriage to a man who only loved her because he was confessed, had found true love and would marry for love. Not duty.
However, the looks that returned to her were looks of sorrow and pity. Prince Hyron wore a sympathetic frown. Kahlan furrowed her brow in confusion. Why were they looking at her like that?

"What?" she asked, nearly snapping at them. Quickly regaining her composure, she reasserted her mask. "I have the right to choose my mate. And I choose Richard."

The Jara and Galea councilors gave knowing nods. "We thought as much, but there is more to consider than your feelings for the Seeker."

"What is the meaning of this?" Zedd spoke up, stepping in front of Kahlan to face the council, clearly angered.

Kahlan knew that years before she had been born, the council had heeded the First Wizard's word. During the first D'Haran War, Zedd had practically led the Midlands. When he had fled for Westland with the infant Richard, people had forgotten his name. Yet townsfolk still whispered tales about the "Old Wise One," and how he had warned the council of the troubles to come.

Those trouble times Zedd had tried to warn the council about was the second D'Haran War, Darken Rahl's brutal grab for the Midlands. However, no one had listened. They were all too seduced by the false promises that oozed from Darken Rahl's lips. If the council had heeded Zedd's warning then, the Midlands would not be in the current fractured state it was now.

"You know me, all of you," he said. "I am Zeddicus Zu'il Zorander, Wizard of the First Order. I will be heard."

"Speak, First Wizard," the man from Jara said. "The council will hear you."

Zedd gave the old man a nod and stepped into the center of the chamber. He spread his arms wide and gestured with his hands as he spoke. "I now what you all must be thinking. How can the Mother Confessor choose the Seeker as a mate? She'd confess him on their wedding night and we'd all lose a valuable leader and symbol of hope," Zedd spoke with all the authority he had as First Wizard. It warmed Kahlan's heart to her him speak of Richard as a symbol of hope. He truly was. He was her hope. "On my word as First Wizard, the Seeker cannot be confessed by the Mother Confessor. He is my grandson, so if I feared he would, I would not bless such a union."

"You would bless a union between the Mother Confessor and the Lord Rahl?" it was the councilor from Sanderia that had spoken. The man's frizzled hair stood up from his head like he had been struck by lightning.

Zedd gapped at the man. Kahlan had never seen the wizard at a loss for words and the sight truly frightened her.

"We've all heard the rumors," the man from Galea said.

"Aye," Jara's wizened old councilor gave a nod. "And with the sight of a Mord'Sith and two soldiers of the First File accompanying him, the rumors must be true."

"The Seeker has declared himself the Master of D'Hara," the Sanderian man growled.

Hyron stood up and spoke to the nods and affirmations of the entire chamber. "This council will never accept a marriage between the Mother Confessor and the Lord Rahl of D'Hara!"

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Verna Sauventreen pulled her traveling cloak around her, shivering in the cold. Out of all the
twenty years she had spent in the Midlands in search of Richard Rahl she had never gotten used to the cold. The New World was so much colder than the Old.

As she walked the streets to Aydindril, she listened and watched. Her Sisters may have given up their Han, following the foolish beliefs of the Prelate, but she had not. The prophecy that was about to come to pass was far worse than anything the world of the living had yet to encounter.

While the Seeker and Mother Confessor, along with their wizard and Mord'Sith, had traipsed across the Midlands in search of the Stone of Tears, a new threat had been slowly building in the background, waiting and watching. Verna, herself, had been unaware of it, having been in the Midlands for a good twenty years. But once she had returned to Tanimura and the Palace of the Prophets, she had learned the awful truth.

Her lover, Jedidiah, had barely looked her way when she had returned. She knew she had aged physically, but Verna still felt young at heart. It angered her how he had spurned her. Then she learned that Jedidiah had turned to the dark side and embraced the Keeper. She had no idea how many of the other young wizards the Sisters of the Light taught had been corrupted by their dark counterparts, but she feared it was many. She had found so many young boys missing.

The Prelate would wave aside her concerns as if they were of no consequence. It was not until the fanatical Prelate had tried to create a human Creator that Verna had had it. She fled the Palace of the Prophets, seeking to find Richard and help him. If prophecy was to be believed, he was going to need it.

As she mingled amongst the common folk of Aydindril, she heard whispers that the Mother Confessor had returned, and that the Lord Rahl had accompanied her.

Her brow furrowed in concern. She had heard the news that Darken Rahl had risen from the grave and turned his back on the Keeper, but how could he have taken Kahlan Amnell away from the Seeker. Verna knew how much Richard loved the confessor. It was plain, even to her.

"Verna, over here," a young man hissed at her.

Verna made her way through the crush of people and found him standing next to Sister Thea. It was Thea that had found her and told her about the prophecy concerning the Keeper in the guise of a child. Not long after, Warren had shown up.

Warren's curly blond hair and brilliant blue eyes had caused people to stare at him with concerned looks. Neither of them understood until they learned that most pure blood D'Harans had much the same fair complexion as him. And though he looked young, he was in fact over one hundred and fifty years old.

"Warren, what is it?" she whispered, casting nervous glances at the surrounding city folk. She did not like being amongst strangers.

When he saw her frown at him, a smile spread across his handsome face. Truth be told, Warren was the same age as Verna, though she had age more physically due to the fact she had been gone from the Palace of the Prophets. Yet every time Warren smiled at her, she felt herself blush like a young novice.

"Sister Thea found him, Verna," he grinned. He shifted his violet colored robes and pulled the old book from his inner pockets. He ran his fingers across the cover, caressing it like a long loved pet. "We have to tell him, Verna."

Verna nodded. When Warren had arrived, he had brought with him some of the books of
prophecy. Within them were countless prophecies, but the ones Warren had brought all centered around an individual referred to as Fuer Grissa Ost Drauka, or simply the Bringer of Death. The appellation sounded malevolent, but Warren assured her that it was the title of the one prophecy said would be their salvation. Furthermore, Warren believed that Richard Rahl was this savior.

"Where?" Verna asked, desperation lacing her voice. She'd been searching for so long for Richard and his companions. She had to find him and warn him.

"He's standing outside the Confessor's Palace with two D'Harans and a Mord'Sith," Sister Thea replied.

Verna's eyes grew wide. Was Richard the Lord Rahl the people had spoken of?

"Shall we go?" Warren questioned, his eyes showing apprehension and high-strung nerves.

"Yes," Verna gripped his arm. "Take me to him. Now."

As Warren led her through the marketplace, Verna's heart pounded with great force. She just prayed they were not too late to stop the oncoming nightmare.

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Kahlan could not believe what she was hearing. It was her worse nightmare. How could they deny her the right to choose her own mate? Her own husband? She turned to Dennee for support, but found none. The only one who seemed to be looking at her with any love was the confessed soldier, and that was not helping.

"Zedd!" she voiced meekly. "Say something."

The old wizard merely stammered and looked nothing like the First Wizard he had moments before. Prince Hyron was looking upon her sadly.

"We are sorry, Mother Confessor," he said, his voice sounding sympathetic. "But the council's decision is final. If you will not choose another mate within a week, the council will make the decision for you."
Choices

Chapter 6 - Choices

Richard sighed as he sat down on the steps, pulling his knees to his chest. Behind him, Egan and Ulic stood still and watchful. Cara was growing more concerned with his mood, and was fretting softly to herself.

Suddenly there was a commotion from the throng of people and Richard thought he saw a familiar face. Before he could stand, a middle-aged woman with ringlets of brown hair was strangling him in a fierce hug. Cara jumped down the steps to defend her Lord Rahl, but Richard waved her off with his hand.

"Verna!" he gasped. "I can't breath."


"So do you, Verna," he replied, catching his breath. "But... what are you doing in Aydindril?"

"Richard, I'd like you to met someone," Verna stepped aside, ignoring his question, and Richard came face to face with a young man with curly blond hair dressed in a violet robe with silver cuffs. "This is Warren. He was one of our students at the Palace of the Prophets."

"How many students did the Sisters have?" Richard suddenly asked, remembering he had seen little of anyone else except for the Sisters of the Light.

"Quite a few," Warren smiled. "But, truth be told, not as many as there once were. Many joined the Keeper."

Richard looked at Verna, sensing something, but did not press it. He turned back to the young man. "So you became a wizard?"

Warren narrowed his eyes a bit. "Well, not exactly," he said. "You see, most of us wear Rada'Hans to suppress our power until such time that we can control them ourselves. I've already learned as much as I am able, so Verna helped to remove mine."

Richard turned to Verna. "So there was no need for you to take me away from Kahlan like you did. If all I needed was a Rada'Han to suppress my Han, then why didn't you give me one?" he asked, incredulously.

"I'm sorry, Richard," Verna lowered her eyes, looking ashamed. "The Prelate wanted you back at the Palace of the Prophets."

He sighed and gave an understanding nod. "So she could turn me into one of her disciples," he stated it as fact, not as a question.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," the other woman with them spoke. Richard looked at her confused.

"This is Sister Thea," Verna introduced her. "She warned me about the Keeper disguising himself as a child. I tried my best to warn you. I sent the monks from the Order of Ulrich out, but I guess none reached you."

Richard lowered his brow, ashamed he had allowed himself to be manipulated by the Keeper in
such a way. He shook it off and smiled at Verna.

"It does me good to see you, Verna," he said. "But, once again, why are you here?"


Warren stepped up and removed an old book from his robes. He held it up to Richard with a
reverent look in his eye. "This is a book of prophecy from the Palace of the Prophets. I believe it
names you…," the young man opened the book to show him the lines. "You are Fuer Grissa Ost
Drauka."

Cara stepped forward and raised an agiel to Warren throat. She sneered at him. "Why did you just
call the Lord Rahl the Bringer of Death?"

"The appellation is not what it seems, I assure you," Warren quickly answered casting nervous
glances at the humming red rod before him.

"Cara, put those away," Richard said.

She bit her lip and complied, but she did not look happy about it. Richard turned back to Warren.

"So what does it mean?" he asked. "This title?"

"The Bringer of Death is the one prophecy has named to be the champion of the free people,"
Warren answered. "A dark cloud is rising from the south, coming up to met here in the Midlands."

"Only you can save us, Richard," Verna interjected. "Prophecy has named you. And you must
answer."

Richard took a deep breath. Not this again. First it was Darken Rahl. Then it was the Keeper.
Now something else was coming to try and take him away from Kahlan. He was not going to
have it.

"Find someone else to save you," he said, nearly snapping. He was not necessarily mad at Verna.
She cared about him and was just trying to help.

"But you are the Seeker of Truth!" Verna protested. "You stand for what is right and good. For
those who are weak and cannot defend themselves. Surely you would not let the world plunge
into darkness."

"I highly doubt that will happen," Richard said, then added, "unless there has been another tear in
the veil? No? Then leave me be." He stepped forward and laid a hand on Verna's shoulder.
"Verna, I've finally just discovered I can be with the woman I love. Can't I have some time to
enjoy life without having to worry about saving the world?"

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All he could do was stand there. He felt ashamed as he did. He just stood there and watched as the
Kelton guards escorted the Mother Confessor out of the chambers. His attention should have been
on her, and helping her, but instead he found his eyes locked on the confessed soldier. The man
did not even budge when Kahlan was escorted out. It had clearly been against her will and yet the
confessed man had done nothing.

That's where he noticed the blood. Slowly dripping down from the man's lips was a small trail of
blood.
"Stay right there, Wizard!" Prince Hyron growled, standing up. "We have words for you."

"Me?" Zedd asked innocently, but he was beginning to become concerned. Dennee looked different as well. He squinted and shook his head. No, that cannot be right.

Suddenly, like he was waking from a dream, Zedd's vision cleared and he saw a tall gaunt man standing where once there had been Dennee. The man had shaggy black hair that ran down past his ears.

"What…?" Zedd began to stammer.

"Oh, this has been great!" the man guffawed in a nasally high pitch laugh. "I fooled both the Mother Confessor and a Wizard of the First Order."

"You're not Dennee!" Zedd shouted, suddenly coming to his senses.

"Brilliant deduction," the man chuckled, and walked up to the raised dais. "Let me introduce myself. Neville Ranson. I am a representative, as it were, of a greater power. Far greater than this insignificant insect of a council."

Zedd noticed that all the councilors looked humbled and subservient to this man. Only Prince Hyron still looked to hold any authority. How much like his twin brother, Hyron was. Zedd squinted, wondering…

"What do you want, and what have you done with Dennee?" Zedd demanded, raising his hands, ready to cast wizard's fire if necessary.

The man laughed his nasally laugh again. "You have no powers here, old man."

Zedd narrowed his eyes and focused his Han. Only when he reached out to touch for his Han he did not feel anything. He looked up at the man with a stunned face.


Neville gave him a feigned look of sorrow and stepped down. Walking around Zedd the man narrowed his eyes. "So, Wizard, you want to know what I have done with the confessor Dennee?" he inquired. "All right. I'll show you."

The man looked up at Prince Hyron and gave a nod. The Kelton prince snapped his fingers and the Kelton guards rushed forward and grabbed Zedd. "Take him to the dungeons. Let him reunite with the confessor."

As they dragged him from the council chambers, Zedd looked back over his shoulder to see Prince Hyron and the tall gaunt man, this Neville Ranson, speak in hushed voices before they erupted into laughter. The rest of the council all nodded and smirked, yet looked as if they were forcing it.

This was supposed to have been a quick trip. A brief stop, as it were, on their way to the People's Palace in D'Hara. Kahlan and Richard had just discovered they could be together and now this was happening. The council had clearly been commanded to say what they had to Kahlan by this Neville Ranson. He wished he had been more observant. If he had, maybe he could have… no, it did not do to dwell on the problem. What he needed to do now was think of a solution.

* * *

Bags! Zedd thought to himself as the Kelton guards pulled him through the halls. *Nothing is ever easy.*
Nicci stirred, and opened her eyes. She tried to smile, seeing that she was finally alone. But how her thighs ached. She closed her eyes, suppressing the tears that formed there. She was supposed to be strong! How could she allow him to get to her like this? How!

Darken Rahl had visited her so many times over the last few weeks that she could hardly sit anymore, let alone stand. All she could manage was to lie in bed and accept it. She felt so powerless with the Rada'Han around her next, like she was that young novice all over again, being repeatedly violated by that prisoner again and again and again.

She hoped the Prelate would die a most horrific death when the Emperor reached the Palace of the Prophets. When Darken Rahl had mentioned him, Nicci knew that the invasion was going to come. Soon all of the Midlands would quake and tremble before the might of the Old World.

Part of her was happy to see that. She had long since given up on the living, seeking the cold embrace of the Keeper. But even he had lied to her, much like Annalina Aldurren. The stupid woman. She actually had the temerity to believe she could pass off a girl as the Creator!

Now the Old World was stirring, and the Prelate and the rest of the Sisters of the Light would be no more. Brother Narev had always been interested in Tanimura and the Palace of the Prophets. No doubt, he had passed on that interest to his disciple, the Emperor. It was the aging spell, Nicci knew, which was the true focus of their interest. They cared little for silly women spouting devotions to the Creator.

Nicci had only met the Emperor once. It had been at Brother Narev's insistence. She had disliked the man the moment she'd met him. He was a brute, yet he served his purpose. Brother Narev's vision would thrive under his leadership. All of the Old World had been united in less than twenty years, a struggle to be sure, considering the Old World was much larger than the New World.

She allowed herself to laugh. How small these fools were. Darken Rahl and his Mord'Sith. All the princes and kings of the New World, all of them were insignificant compared to the full might and size of the Old World. Even Richard… no not Richard. Richard was different.

The thought of him drove her wild. Nicci was amazed at how frequently her thoughts went to Richard. Thinking about him seemed to be one of the few things that gave her any solace in this place. And there was something about him. Something special.

She'd seen it in his eyes when she had taken him from his confessor. Now, more than ever, Nicci wanted to know him. Understand him. Love him. Be loved by him. But she could never have that. He loved the Mother Confessor, and from what she'd overheard, Kahlan Amnell had been unable to confess him whilst she had been in the confessed induced Con Dar that had been spurred by the Mord'Sith's attack on Nicci.

A small part of her felt happy for the Seeker and Confessor. Their love was an extraordinary thing. But mostly, Nicci was jealous. She had never known such love, and she envied it.

Yet Richard had been kind to her, when she had placed a spell on his beloved. He had not killed her; he'd even risked his own life to save hers. These past weeks stuck as Darken Rahl's pleasure toy had given Nicci time to think.

She no longer believed as she once had. Richard had been right all along. Even when she had followed the Keeper, she had not been following her true self. Brother Narev had been her teacher in her childhood, but even he was wrong. His Emperor was wrong. Only Richard was right.
She saw it now. It was all so clear. All to plan. She nearly weep at all the injustices she’d done. All the pain she’d caused. All because she was too blind to see. Richard had opened her eyes.

Oh, how she loved Richard. He was a man worthy of love. He was strong, noble, and courageous. He never once focused on the evil of someone. Always, he would try to see the good. How Nicci wanted to tell him she understood now! She wanted to seek his forgiveness for everything she had done.

The sound of the door opening caused her to shudder, pulling her from her pleasant thoughts of Richard. Half-amazed, she actually found herself praying to the good spirits that it was not Rahl come for another one of his sessions. Her legs still hurt from his previous visit. When the door closed, she heard the creak of leather and relaxed. *It must be that Mord'Sith,* she thought.

When a candle was lit, her suspicions were confirmed. It was Berdine, the sweet buxom Mord'Sith who, so unlike her sisters, showed Nicci compassion.

"How are you tonight?" the Mord'Sith asked, kneeling beside the bed.

Nicci blinked. "Better," she answered. For some reason, she actually felt close to this Mord'Sith, as if she were her only friend. Nicci had never had a friend before.

Berdine shifted the blankets to check on Nicci’s injuries. Nicci winced when Berdine removed the bandages and began to clean the wounds. The first time Rahl had taken her, he had caused her to bleed down there for three nights. "I have never seen Lord Rahl do such horrible things a to a woman before," the Mord'Sith confessed.

"He must like my screams," Nicci tried her stab at morose humor.

The Mord'Sith gave her a look and shook her heard. "Here, let me help you sit up."

"Oh, no," Nicci shook her head. "I don't think I could." Tears welled up in her eyes as she remembered what Rahl had done to her. "I'm still too sore down there."

Berdine gave a sympathetic nod. "I'll get you some food." She stood to leave.

"Berdine, wait!" Nicci called, reaching out for the Mord'Sith.

Berdine returned, her blue D'Haran eyes showing concern. "Yes, what is it?"

"You are a pure blood D'Haran, yes?" she asked.

The Mord'Sith inclined her head in the affirmative, looking apprehensive.

"Then you can feel the bond to the Lord Rahl," Nicci attested.

She had learned about the bond from Rahl. He talked in his sleep and he kept muttering about it as he tossed and turned, having nightmares. From what little he said while dreaming, Nicci gathered that he was angry that the body he possessed did not have Rahl blood; frustrated that he could not use the magic of the blood to assert the bond and sway over the rest of D'Hara to his will. Richard was a Rahl, so Nicci speculated that he too must have the bond.

Berdine's mouth dropped and her eyes grew wide, but she gave hesitant nod, confirming that felt the bond.

Nicci blanched. "Then why do you stay and serve Darken Rahl?" she inquired. "You know he is not the true Lord Rahl."
"My Sisters of the Agiel believe in him," Berdine said. "How can I leave my sisters?"

Nicci shook her head, feeling pity for the Mord'Sith. "They are not your family. They were your abductors and torturers. You were once a free woman, Berdine. Why do you stay? Speak truthfully now."

"Raina," the Mord'Sith answered without hesitation.

"Your lover?" Nicci asked.

Berdine nodded. "If I leave, Darken Rahl would be furious. He would punish her to punish me."

Nicci blinked, thinking. She might have a way to save them all, a way to pay Richard back for all the horrible things she had done. To seek his forgiveness and help him if he would have her help. But it all relied on trusting this woman. This Mord'Sith.

"Berdine?" Nicci tentatively broached. "Can I ask you question?"
Chapter 7 - Powerless

Zedd huffed and groaned as they tossed him into the cell. He hit his head against the stone wall and must have blacked out, because the next thing he remembered was Dennee staring down at him, her eyes laced with concern.

He sat up, cautiously. This could be a trick. That tall gaunt man had been a wizard, and a powerful one at that. Only someone with immensely powerful magic could have fooled a Wizard of the First Order! Or was he just getting too old?

Zedd quickly reached out to feel for his Han. He could not find it within and he slumped. There was no way he could be sure that the woman in front of him was in fact Kahan's sister Dennee or that wizard.

"Zedd?" Dennee asked, sitting down next to him, her hand feeling his forehead.

He refused to answer. Even if this was the real Dennee, he could not risk the possibility that it wasn't. So, he just laid there and thought of Richard and Kahan, and hoped that they were all right.

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"Richard, repeatedly banging your fist against the door is not going to solve anything," Cara said rolling her eyes. "If anyone should bang the door it should Egan and Ulric."

"We smash it down for you, Lord Rahl," the two giant D'Harans smiled hopefully.

Richard suppressed a worried sigh, and racked his hands through his hair. Kahan and Zedd had been inside for a long time, and he was beginning to become worried. What was taking so long? It was nearly dusk.

Verna hovered over his left shoulder, looking anxious. "Richard, please. You must hear us out."

Richard shook his head, losing his cool. "They want me to be Lord Rahl!" he pointed at Cara, Egan, and Ulric. "And you want me to be this Bringer of Death. And Kahan… Spirits, Kahan wants me to be the Seeker!"

"They are all one and the same," Warren spoke up. "The Lord Rahl, the Bringer of Death, and the Seeker. All of them. Without the other, they are nothing. But together, they are you."

Richard shook his head, becoming tired of this. "I don't want to be any of those things anymore." He turned back to the Confessor's Palace and rammed his fist against the strong oak doors. "I just want to be with Kahan!"

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The door opened and Nicci was pleased it was the Mord'Sith. Berdine shuffled in, her leather creaking as she knelt down by the bed.

"Do you have it?" Nicci asked. She had thought more of her plan whilst the Mord'Sith had left to retrieve what she had asked for. Now, having thought it over more, she felt more confident, surer. She was positive. It was not only the right thing to do to make up for her past transgressions, but it
was the right thing to do for everyone.

Nicci had not lived so long at the Palace of the Prophets and had never once ready from the books of prophecy held in the vaults. Only fools like the Prelate relied on the prophecies that the Creator sent to the walls. All the important serious prophecies had been given by the wizards of old, and all of those were kept deep down in the vaults where no one could see them, least they start doubting the words of the Prelate.

She hoped that what she was going to do, in a small way, helped. And that made Nicci feel pride for the first time in her life.

Berdine held out a gloved fist. "I don't know… should I really do this?"

"Yes, please,” Nicci pleaded. "If not for me, then for Raina. The storm that is coming is far greater than anything Darken Rahl will ever do."

The Mord'Sith bit her lower lip in thought. Her blue eyes glanced around. Finding purchase, she returned her gaze to Nicci. "All right."

Opening her fist, Berdine held out the key. Taking it in her trembling hands, Nicci forced it into the hole. She turned it once and heard the euphoric sounds of the latch clicking. Tossing the key aside, Nicci reached up with her hands and pried the collar from her neck.

Immediately she felt a flood of power rush into her body. Her eyes glowed as her Han came back to her. Berdine stood up and backed away, her eyes filled with fear and worried.

Slowly, she stood from the bed and faced the Mord'Sith.

"You have done the right thing, Berdine," Nicci said. Feeling liberated and free for the first time in her life, she flung the Rada'Han to the floor, relishing the sound of the cold metal bouncing off the stone.

Suddenly the door flew open and Darken Rahl came rushing into the room, Mord'Sith trailing in after him. He glared at Berdine. He licked his fingers and ran them across his eyebrows.

"Berdine, my sweet," he drawled in a voice thick with rage. "I am very disappointed in you."

Berdine visibly shuddered under his gaze. Nicci lowered her eyebrows, angered at the vile man for tormenting the woman. She stepped in front of the Mord'Sith and glared at Rahl.

"You have harmed me for the last time, Darken Rahl," she said. "I am free, and my Han is as strong as ever."

Rahl narrowed his eyes at her. "You're forgetting where you are, Sister Nicci," he cooed. "My Mord'Sith will capture your magic before you can so much as make a move."

Nicci raised an eyebrow. "Believe that is you must."

Spinning around, she grabbed a hold of Berdine, and summoned her Han. As they began to disappear, she heard Rahl scream in rage.

"Stop her!" he seethed. "Stop her!"

Laughing at his impotent attempts to prevent his prize from slipping through his grasp, Nicci felt her and the Mord'Sith Berdine slip away.
They had taken her immediately to her chambers, and had locked the door. She had been too stunned to respond, and Zedd had been of little help. He had just stood there as they took her away. Spirits, Dennee had just watched! What was going on? Something was wrong? Something had happened since last she was in Aydindril. Something awful!

Kahlan rushed to her balcony and threw open the doors. She pressed against the railing and looked for Richard. The sun was still up, but she could tell that it was beginning to wan. It was fast approaching twilight and would soon be night. She had to squint to make out the figures on the steps below.

Egan and Ulic stood out with their large size, and Cara was like a sore thumb in her red leather. She knew that the figure next to Cara must be Richard. By the way he carried himself, his hand resting on his hip not far from the Sword of Truth, it had to be Richard.

She narrowed her eyes even more, trying to focus. He was talking with someone… three other people were there. Who could they be? What were they talking about? She say him heated turn away from them and began to bound on the door to the palace with his first. Her heart warmed at seeing him trying to get to her. She wanted so desperately to be in his arms, to have him kiss her and tell her that everything was going to be all right.

Kahlan opened her mouth to shout his name, but she was silenced by the sound of the door to her bedchambers opening. Spinning around she had hoped to see Zedd or Dennee, but instead a tall gaunt man with black shaggy hair that ran past his ears greeted her. His robes were as black as night, yet stained with mud and wine.

"Who are you?" she demanded, raising a hand.

He laughed. It was a nasally high laugh that grated her ears. His dark eyes gleamed with mirth as he stepped down to face her. "I do not fear your touch, Confessor," he spoke, his voice much lower than his laugh.

"Who are you?" Kahlan repeated, not believing his assertion, keeping her arm raised, ready to confess him in a second.

"Neville Ranson," he answered with a smile. "Wizard Neville Ranson."

"What do you want?" she asked, her eyes darting around, trying to remember if he was one of the wizards in Aydindril the last time she was here. Most of that visit had been lost due to the fact she was split in two at the time.

Neville eyed her with his dark eyes, open lust gleaming there. His eyes dropped to her breasts and a sick twisted smile that reminded her of Darken Rahl spread across his thin lips.

"I come with a message from an old powerful force, one which could bring order to this land of yours," he said. "With us, you could bring those troubling councilors to their knees."

"I will never surrender the Midlands. Never."

"How honorable of you," he said, stepping forward, looking a bit disgusted. "So willing to defend a people who would deny you the right to marry the man you love."

Kahlan backed away from him. "Stay away."

"Why?" he asked. "We're both young… and you are so very beautiful."
"Get away from me!" Kahlan screamed. She lunged forward and grasped his neck.

Time stood still. He was hers. She focused all her power into the thought of claiming his soul; consuming it with undying love for her and her alone. He'd be hers and he would do her bidding. There was nothing he could do to stop her. He was hers!

But the power she should have felt surging within her was not there. Nothing. She was empty. Hollow.

The nasally laugh drifted across her ears. "I told you, Confessor," he leered at her. "You cannot harm me."

"What did you do to me?" Kahlan demanded backing up, afraid and uncertain. She had never felt so powerless in her life.

"I've given you what you've always wanted," Neville answered stepping back from her, tracing his fingers along the edge of her big bed. "I've made you as normal as any other woman. That is what you wanted, is it not?"

Kahlan did not know. Maybe… If she did not have her powers, then the council could not object to her marrying Richard. She could marry the man she loved. But then Dennee would be the last confessor, and it would be up to her to continue the line. Could Kahlan really do that to her sister, force her into that position, especially after all the heartache and tragedy Dennee had been through.

Neville smiled at her knowingly. "See, I told you. You wanted this."

Seeing how his eyes roamed her body, Kahlan suddenly felt very vulnerable. Having her powers taken may have fixed the problem with the council, but now she had a new problem. Without her powers and her daggers—Spirits, why had she left her daggers behind!—she was defenseless. Seeing the look on her face, Neville laughed again.

He grabbed her and pulled her to the bed, he made to climb over her, so Kahlan kicked with all her might, connecting with her intended target. He groaned and howled in pain. Stumbling back, clutching himself, he hopped up and down a bit, before glaring at her with seething rage.

"Just for that," he snarled. "You're going to suffer even more!"

He grabbed her and flung her to the floor. Kahlan's eye grew wide as she saw him take out a knife. He was going to slit her throat. He was going to kill her!

Then he grabbed her hair and pulled it up. "Since this beautiful silky hair is the symbol of your authority," he seethed. "I'm going to get rid of it. Then you'll look exactly like what you are… a common street whore!"

Kahlan cried as he cut her hair. Spirits, how Richard loved her hair! She watched in detached terror as clumps of her hair fell around her like a shower. Neville laughed and cut, flinging her beautiful hair about like it was confetti.

When he was done, and he pulled her up by the scruff of her neck and pushed her face into the mirror.

"Look at the Mother Confessor now!" he howled with delight. "Nothing more than a whore! Are you ready to spread you legs now?"
Kahan looked up at herself and cried. Nothing of her once beautiful lush hair was left. It lay upon her head in a ragged mess, all lopsided and wrong. Spirits, it was even shorter than Richard’s. She looked nothing like the Mother Confessor. Would Richard even recognize her without her hair?

"Come whore!" growled Neville.

He pulled her out of her bedchambers. Men she did not recognize waited. Prince Hyron was among them. His face so eerily like his brother, Prince Fyren. How much she hated seeing that face.

Suddenly the prince reached out and grabbed her breast, a smile flickering across his lips as he pulled her to him, capturing her lips in a savage kiss.

Kahan felt like gagging. She spat in his face when he withdrew. His brow lowered in anger and he backhanded her across the face, leaving a stinging feeling on her cheek.

"You really don't remember, do you?" he asked.

"What?" she managed, fear gripping her as the men crowded around her.

Neville stood to the side, watching with cool detachment as Hyron stepped forward and ripped her white confessor's dress off. He flung it to the floor, laughing, as he pulled off all her clothes into she was left in nothing but her underthings. Then his hand snapped out like a snake and grabbed her between the legs.

"This was mine!" he leered at her. "I've had the pleasure of being inside you many times, Mother Confessor."

"Fyren?" she choked.

He grinned. "Yes," he raised his neck and pulled down his collar. Beneath it was a savage looking scar that had cut deep. "Here's the mark your lover's blade left on my throat."

Neville stepped in. "You thought he was dead. But not so," the evil man winked at Kahan. "It was easy enough disposing of his twin brother. Then all Fyren had to do was grow that goatee. No one was ever the wiser."

"And with my help, Aydindril will open their arms to a great power," Fyren sneered at her, taking the opportunity to grope her again.

Kahan closed her eyes and tried to suppress a cry of terror, but it escaped her lips just the same. Then the soldiers began carrying her. She was dragged down the halls of her own palace, screaming and crying for help, but no one came.

"You can save your screams and cries for the murders and rapers in the pit," Neville drawled.

Kahan's eyes grew wide with horror. Where was Zedd? Where was Dennee? Dear spirits, why wasn't Richard here to save her?

"Do not fear, Mother Confessor," Fyren cooed mockingly into her ear, fondling her as the Kelton soldiers pulled her along. "Your mate is here."

Neville snarled. He gripped her arm so tightly it hurt. As they turned the corner and began their descent into the bowels of the Confessor's Palace, the evil wizard turned to her and sneered. "I would rape you myself, but I find your sense of honor disgusting."
Chapter 8 - Fury

Richard thought he heard screams. And they sound so much like his Kahlan. His chest heaved. Here he was, trapped outside, powerless to defend her. He turned away from Verna and her companions, marching straight over to Egan and Ulic.

"Get that door open!" he commanded them, pointing at the stupid door that stood in his way from protecting his beloved.

They slammed their fists to their chests. "As you command, Lord Rahl."

The two giants rushed for the door, lowering their shoulders, charging it like bulls. Suddenly a bright blue light flared across the steps. Richard squinted in the glare and raised his hand to protect his eyes.

When the light subsided he saw Nicci standing before him with two bewildered looking Mord'Sith by her side.

"Berdine? Raina?" Cara stepped forward, her face as befuddled as the others.

"Nicci!" Verna hissed and immediately pulled a dacra from her cloak.

Richard followed suit and released the Sword of Truth from its scabbard, holding it towards his foe. Feeling the righteous rage from the sword flow through his veins, Richard focused all his attention on Nicci.

"What do you want, Nicci?" he demanded through clenched teeth, his chest heaving with unrestrained fury.

Nicci simply stared at him and smiled. "I come to repay a debt."

And with that, she reached out and grabbed his wrist.

Pain. Excruciating unrelenting pain seared through his veins. He cried out as it tore at him, as if his skin was being ripped off his bones. Then, in a sudden blinding bite of agony it ceased.

Richard blinked and stumbled back. He felt a leather covered hand reach out to steady him. Lowering the Sword of Truth, he rubbed the fog from his vision. When it returned he shook at what he saw.

Nicci had tumbled to the ground. The shorter of the two Mord'Sith was cradling her in her leather-clad arms. The other was crouched beside the first, a hand reassuringly caressing the former's back.

"What… what just happened?"

"Richard?" the voice was weak but recognizable.

He stepped forward and knelt beside the Mord'Sith. Nicci's face was pale and her lips cracked. Spirits, she looked like the dead.

"Oh, Richard," she murmured. "I'm so sorry, for everything."
"Nicci," Richard reached out with a hand to comfort her. "What have you done?"

She gave him a weak smile, closing her eyes at his touch. He knew she loved him, he could tell by the way she looked at him. It was the same look Kahlan gave him.

"Nicci?" he encouraged, noticing that she was coming close to falling into unconsciousness.

Nicci shook her head and opened her eyes. The blues were brilliant, but nothing could compare with the sapphire like blue he saw when he gazed into Kahlan's eyes; the feeling of falling into helpless devotion and love that only came when he gazed deep into the eyes of the woman he loved. Her blue eyes were something that he'd willing drown in if he could.

"What did you do to me, Nicci?" Richard pleaded with her.

"I've returned that which was taken," she said, breathing shallowly. "I've restored your Han to you."

Richard blinked, too stunned for words. Zedd had said that he had thought losing his Han would have meant Richard would not have the bond. But his grandfather had been wrong about that. What did mean, then, to have both the bond and his Han?


"What?" Richard soothed her, running a hand down her cheek. "What about the council?"

"Deception," Nicci spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. "They are not who they appear to be. Traitors… traitors…"

Confused and overwhelmed, Richard backed away as Nicci fell into unconsciousness. The two Mord'Sith were staring at him with open awe in their eyes. As he stood, they lowered their heads.

"*Master Rahl guide us. Master Rahl teach us. Master Rahl protect us. In your light we thrive. In your mercy we are sheltered. In your wisdom we are humbled. We live only to serve. Our lives are yours.*"

He blinked, vaguely aware that they had just pledged their lives to him. Cara was standing beside him, worry etched on her face. She reached out to steady him when he lost his footing.

Verna was by his side as well. She supported him with her arm and directed him to a sitting position. "It looks like your lucky, Seeker," she mumbled under her breath. "Now that your Han is restored, I am here to help teach you how to use it."

Richard shook his head, not wanting to feel those headaches again. They had been so painful… but not as painful as having his Han restored. Spirits, even Denna's agiels had not hurt that much.

Warren was fussing over the book, flipping through the pages. "Yes, yes!" he declared, grinning wildly. "His Han being restored was foretold. Richard Rahl is—without a doubt—*Fuer Grissa Ost Drauka*!"

Richard ignored him. All he had heard was that his Han was restored and that the council were traitors. Suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, realization struck. He had his Han back. He had power. What was it the Prelate had said? He was the most powerful wizard born in three thousand years.

Standing, Richard gripped the Sword of Truth tightly in his hand, feeling the power of the blade soar through him. Channeling the rage into finding Kahlan and punishing those who had deceived her, Richard pushed off from his friends and charged the door. Jumping back in surprise, Egan
and Ulic toppled over and collided with Cara.

Shoving herself up, Cara raced after him, shouting his name. The two other Mord'Sith were right behind her, followed shortly by Egan and Ulic, shaking their heads from their tumble.

Verna, Warren, and the other Sister of the Light, whose name Richard had never taken the time to learn, stood back and watched over Nicci.

As he raised his sword, seeing the blade glow white, Richard finally thought he understood. He was the Bringer of Death. Because death was what he was going to bring to anyone who had laid a hand on his Kahlan.

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Zedd thought he heard a rumble from above. It sounded like an invading army was crashing against the walls. Slowly, with help from the possibly real Dennee, he was still not sure, he stood.

Dennee's brow furrowed. "What do you think is happening?" she asked.

The wizard took a deep breath and shook his head. "I don't know, child. I don't know."

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Kahlan cried out as they flung her into the pit. She had no idea such a place had existed in the Confessor's Palace. It was so awful. So horrible. As they tossed her in, Prince Fyren had watched and hooted down at the rapers and murders within, inciting the men to do as they pleased with the powerless confessor.

"She used me!" he called. "Though, can't say I didn't enjoy it." Then he added, and it felt like a dagger to her heart. "And I know she enjoyed it. Such a lovely sight, too, when she told the Seeker how many times she was with me. She wanted him to know how much she had been pleased with me."

Laughing at her misery, Fyren left with Neville.

In the dark of the pit, Kahlan felt cornered and trapped. Powerless to protect herself from criminals she had been locked up with. She closed her eyes, willing for this all to be a dream, a terrible awful dream. Yet when she opened her eyes, she was still there.

It came suddenly, and without warning. A hand grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away from the wall. Thousands of hands assaulted her and she cried and screamed. All the dead confessors were laughing at her. Powerless and without any dignity, Kahlan Amnell was going to be raped by monsters.

How had Neville taken her powers? No wizard, not even Zedd, knew how to do that. If Zedd had known, surely he would have offered at some point, knowing how much Kahlan wanted to be with Richard. But he had never offered such a thing.

Maybe, just maybe, she had allowed herself to fall for the Wizard's First Rule: *People are stupid, they will believe a lie because they want it to be true; or they're afraid it's true.* She remembered Zedd explaining it to Richard and her back when their quest had first begun, all that time ago back in Westland.

Had she fallen for the first rule? Blinking in fright at the possibility, Kahlan resolved to tempt fate and discover whether or not she was being fooled. Reaching out, she grabbed the first man she could and let loose with her powers.
There was thunder without sound and a soft grunt.

"Mistress," came a gruff voice. "Command me."

"Save me," she commanded.

Immediately, heedless to his own peril, the confessed man began attacking the others. She heard necks snap and bones break. The hands let go and she fell to the hard ground. Quickly, she scurried into the corner, waiting and listening to the sounds of the men fighting.

Kahlan hoped that help would arrive soon, because she did not know if she had the strength to confess another man.

XXX

All were guilty. They were his prey. And he was their judge and executioner.

Egan and Ulic had pulled the double doors to the council chamber from their hinges and Richard's fury was unleashed on those inside.

He plowed through the Kelton soldiers as if they were water. Blood sprayed everywhere, soaking his hair and clothes. But he paid it no mind. He was the Bringer of Death!

"Dance with me," he sung to the Sword of Truth, the blade glowing a vibrant white. "Dance the dance of death."

Slashing and hacking, he plunged into each knew challenge that stood in his way. He was vaguely away of the old men and women sitting at their seats on the raised dais. They were guilty as well. They would meet the Bringer of Death.

He rushed through the chairs despising justice as quick and fast as a wasp. A man with frizzled hair screamed for mercy, but he gave him none, taking his head of in one powerful swing. As he turned to meet the next traitor, he saw him.

His anger grew and his chest seethed with fury. He looked different, with a thin goatee around his lips, but it must be him. Richard thought he had killed him when the half of Kahlan that was a confessor ordered her army of confessed followers to kill him. How cruelly she had declared to him that she had been intimate with him… many times!

Through the crush of battle, their eyes met, and Richard's suspicions were confirmed when the man gave him a cruel knowing smirk.

Spirits, how he hated this man. His blood boiled with the intensity of that hatred, fueled on by the magic of the Sword of Truth. He was going to make this man pay for trying to take Kahlan away.

Fyren pulled his sword out and met him in the heat of battle. The sick crook's eyes grew wide with terror as Richard knocked his sword from his hands and gripped him by the neck. In the trance of his rage, Richard was hardly aware of what he was doing. Though, he saw the face of the man that had lain with Kahlan… spirits, why did she have to declare it had been many times… he was oblivious to the fact that he was strangling the life from him.

He jerked his wrist and with a sick crack the prince went limp. Richard threw him to the floor and without thinking, raised his hand towards the lifeless body. A bolt of black lightning shot out of his hand and incinerated the vile prince's body, leaving nothing but ashes in its wake.

Richard closed his eyes basking in the righteous justice he felt at what he had just done. When he
opened his eyes, he saw Cara staring at him, looking unnerved and speechless.

"Richard?"

Richard blinked. Dear spirits? What had he done? He had just killed someone in cold-blooded murder. Granted it was a worm like Prince Fyren, but still. He was Richard Cypher, the Seeker of Truth.

He raised the Sword of Truth above him and saw the white glow of the blade begin to diminish as he came back to his senses. Shaking his head in disbelief, he lowered it from his sight. He thought he had learned to control the fury after the Minders. Now... now, it had unleashed itself again.

Richard stumbled and Cara caught him.

"What have I done!" he wailed looking around at the carnage surround him. Bodies were splayed open, entrails and viscera littered the floor. The councilors, many without heads, still sitting where they had been when he had stormed into the chamber.

No, he shook his head. He wasn't the Bringer of Death. He was death.

XXX

Nicci felt dizzy and cold. She opened her eyes and saw a familiar face looking down at her. It was blurry, yet she thought she recognized it.

"Richard?" she called hopefully, though she knew it was not him.

"No, sorry," came a kind voice.

She blinked and her vision began to focus. Above her was a young man with a handsome face framed by curly blond hair.

"Warren?" she questioned.

"You remember me," he grinned. "I did not know that the Mole would have caught your eye."

Nicci chuckled and winced.

"Easy," Warren soothed.

She remembered the young wizard. The others had called him the Mole because he spent most of his time deep down in the vaults of the Palace of the Prophets studying the prophecies. If only the others had known how valuable that was? The Mole was the one who would survive, while the others perished in the fury of the Emperor and his rage.

"She's awake?" Nicci recognized the cold stern voice.

"Sister Verna, so nice to see you, too," Nicci said groggily, trying to sit up.

"All that power and what do you do with?" Verna snapped. "You give it up."

Nicci looked at Verna. The woman had aged since her time away from the Palace of the Prophets, but even for a middle-aged woman, she was still quite comely. Nicci could tell that Warren thought so, the way the young wizard kept glancing at Verna was telling enough. She wondered if Verna even noticed.

"The Han was Richard's," Nicci replied, rubbing her forehead. "I have merely returned it to its
"So you've returned to the Light?" hearing the new voice, Nicci looked over and saw Sister Thea.

"No," Nicci said, shaking her head. "Nor am I a Sister of the Dark. I am just Nicci. Plain Nicci."

"There's nothing plain about you," Warren said, helping her stand.

Nicci blinked, still feeling light headed. She looked around; they were all alone on the steps of the Confessor's Palace. "Where's Richard?"

"The Seeker and the Mord'Sith went inside to retrieve the Mother Confessor," Verna responded.

Nicci took a deep breath and allowed herself time to think. "Where is the First Wizard?"

"He was inside before we got here," Warren informed her.

Thanking the young wizard for his supporting hand, Nicci turned towards the smashed doors of the Confessor's Palace. She may no longer have Richard's Han, but she still had all the other Hans she had taken, as well as the subtractive magic granted to her by the Keeper of the Underworld.

Nicci closed her eyes and reached out with her Han. While Richard dealt with the traitors inside, she would help. She would help him find his beloved.
The Search

Chapter 9 – The Search

Zedd blinked. He was unsure if he had really felt it. It was almost as if someone had reached out with their Han to touch him. Slowly he looked down at his own hands. Could he have been foolish enough to fall for one of his own rules?

Dennee looked at him with big concerned eyes.

"Step back," he said.

She did not hesitate. Raising his hands, Zedd focused all his concentration on casting Wizard's Fire. With a burst, a plume of liquid hot flames sprang from his hands and melted the iron latch sealing them in their cell.

"Bags! I let that boy fool me!" Zedd turned to Dennee and reached out with his Han. He smiled when he felt the swirling tempest of a confessor bottled up inside her soul. She was the real Dennee.

Placing a hand on her shoulder, he grinned.

"Kahlann needs us, Dennee," he said. " Spirits knows what that vile little man is doing to her."

XXX

Richard hurtled through the halls of the Confessor's Palace. He had to find Kahlan. She had not been in the council chambers and he had been so blinded by his fury that he had killed them all. No one had been left alive for them to question. Behind him the three Mord'Sith, Cara, Berdine, and Raina, were rushing to keep up. Egan and Ulic, the two big men, were huffing and puffing, yet somehow managed to stay abreast of him, flanking his sides.

He still hurt inside from what he had done in the council chambers. Cara had told him he was in the right, but it did not make him feel any better. He never liked killing people. It was an unfortunate necessity, but never one to relish in. That was how a Rahl acted. And he was no Rahl!

They turned down a hall and he stopped short. Lying on the stone floor was Kahlan's white dress. He cried out as he skidded to stop, sliding to his knees. He pulled it to him and wailed. Tears of fear and worry streamed down his face.

Cara stood beside him, her agiels held high at the ready. The other Mord'Sith raced down the hall to scout ahead. Egan and Ulic stood silently behind him, tears of their own welling up at the sight of their Lord Rahl is such grief.

He could not lose her. Kahlan was everything to him. His whole reason for being. Without her, he was nothing. All he wanted was to be with her, to love and care for her for the rest of his life. Why did life have to be so cruel?

"Lord Rahl!"

He looked up. Berdine, the shorter of the two Mord'Sith, was calling for him.

He stood up, clenching the Sword of Truth in his fist, and raced down the hall in her direction. He know longer cared that they were calling him Lord Rahl. It was nothing more than a title. It did
not make him a Rahl. He was vaguely aware that Egan had stooped down and retrieved Kahlan's
dress before following after him. Cara rushed off ahead and skidded to stop before him.

Richard stopped and stared at the tall gaunt man sprawled on the floor before him, Berdine's boot
shoved into his back.

"Call me small, do you?" she sneered at him.

Raina stood by, a prideful smile on her face. Cara stepped forward, flicking her agiels excitedly.
"Let me question him, Lord Rahl," she pleaded.

Richard gave her a look. He did not like her calling him Lord Rahl. She was his friend, not his
servant. He would have preferred it that she call him Richard, but he said nothing. He knew that
once he accepted the title, she was never going to call him Richard again. He turned his attention
to the other two Mord'Sith.

"Stand him up," he commanded.

Berdine reached down, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and pulled him up. The man's
shaggy black hair was drenched in sweat. He looked at Berdine with terror in his eyes as she
toyed with her humming agiel before his face.

"Where's the Mother Confessor?" Cara asked, stepping forward, adding her own agiel to the mix.
The man shook his head. Raina stepped in and pressed her agiel to the back of the man's leg. He
threw his head back and screamed.

"Answer the question!" Raina snarled, and stepped back.

He looked up with defiant eyes at Richard. "The Lord Rahl, I take it?"

Richard stepped forward, and surprised him with a smirk. "Yes, I suppose I am. I'd answer their
questions if I were you."

"Never! The Order will sweep through the lands and crush all of you like the insects you are!" he
snarled and spat at Richard.

Just for that, Cara rammed her agiel into the man's side. He cried out, hurling curses at her. He
would have collapsed if it had not been for Berdine holding him up.

"Where's Kahlan?" Richard demanded, glaring at the man.

"Your kind are nothing," the man seethed. "When the Creator's holy truth comes to the New
World, all will tremble and beg forgiveness for their sins!"

"I've had enough of this!" Cara snapped, rolling her eyes, and rammed her agiel into the man's
chest.

"Cara, no!" Richard cried, reaching out to stop her.

Before he could pull her away, the man was dead. Richard racked his fingers through his hair and
turned on Cara.

"Why did you do that!" he roared. "We needed him to talk."

"Relax, Richard," Cara spoke calmly, using his name. She gestured for him to turn around. "He
will talk, Lord Rahl. Just give us time."
Richard took a deep breath, regaining control of his anger, and turned around. Raina was bent over the man giving him the Breath of Life. He shook his head. How could he have forgotten about the Breath of Life? As he watched the man gasp and wail at seeing that he was not dead, Richard began to question the morals involved with what he was doing. However, those thoughts were quickly shoved aside when Kahlan's life was the price for not doing all that was necessary.

"As you can see," Richard said, glaring at the man. "Death is not a release."

"Who are these women!" the man cried.

"We are Mord'Sith," Cara said, pride filling her voice. "We are the Lord Rahl's protectors." She stepped forward and wagged her agiel in his face. "Now tell the Lord Rahl what he wants to know, or we'll try this all over again."

XXX

Nicci was rushing through the halls. Verna, Warren, and Thea had been caught off guard when she took off. She knew that Verna could use her Han to track her movements, so she did no bother slowing or checking for the others' progress.

She had never been to the Confessor's Palace, yet Nicci knew where she was going. Her Han was directing her. She turned a corner and ran head long into an old man with long silver hair and grey eyes.

"Nicci!" the old man cried as they both recovered themselves.

"Zeddicus Zu'l Zorander," Nicci nodded her head.

Zedd stopped short. "What are you doing here!"

"I have come to help Richard," Nicci boldly declared.

Zedd huffed. "Dennee," he spoke to the woman next to him. "Confess her!"

The brown haired woman stepped forward and reached a hand out for her. Nicci stepped back and shook her head at Zedd. "We are on the same side."

"Last time I checked you had confessed Kahlan using your dark sorcery and were planning on using her to confess Richard so that you could make him your love slave!"

"Actions I regret greatly," Nicci said, feeling truly sorrowful for her past actions. "My past actions were wrong and I have sought forgiveness from Richard."

"And?"

"He has yet to grant it," Nicci admitted. "But... I have returned his Han to him."

"Lies!" Zedd spat out. "Dennee. Confess her and get it over with."

"Zedd," the confessor spoke up. "She's telling the truth."

The wizard huffed. "Bags! Damn confessors and their powers." He eyed Nicci. "So, you have had a change of heart?"

"Yes," Nicci said. "An awakening more like it. Thanks to the work of Darken Rahl."
Zedd's eyes grew sorrowful. He knew what she meant. She could sense it in his eyes. Taking a deep breath, Nicci prepared herself for what she was about to do. She had never done this before, and it felt awkward.

"First Wizard," she spoke slowly, letting the words form. "I confess I am at a loss for where I am. Stumbling into you… I have lost my bearings." She took a deep breath. "I need your help."

Zedd grinned. "So the all powerful Sister Nicci needs my help?" he gloated, pleased with himself.

"It is serious, Zeddicus," she said. "I am looking for Kahlan. I sensed her with my Han. She is in grave danger. If there is anything I can do to seek forgiveness for the pain and suffering I have caused, then it is finding Kahlan and returning her safely to Richard."

Zedd's merry face vanished in the blink of an eye. He leaned down and placed a hand on her shoulder, pulling her close. "Tell me everything, my dear. Everything."

XXX

Cara brought her agiel down and connected it with the base of the man's skull. He threw his head back and screamed. Wailing in agony, his eyes closed and Richard saw tears stream down his face. The Mord'Sith pulled her instrument of torture away with a twist and smirked.

"Next time you better mind your tongue," she declared. "You will show respect for the Mother Confessor!"

Richard was inclined to agree with Cara. What had caused her sudden outburst was when the dark wizard had called Kahlan a whore. As the man recovered, taking deep breaths, he glared up at Richard.

Slowly, a high nasally laugh filled the hall. Richard was amazed at how the man could laugh with the business end of an agiel threatening close by. The man's dark robes was matted and soaked with his sweat and blood was dripping from his mouth.

"You want to know about the Mother Confessor, Lord Rahl?" he asked mockingly. "Then I'll tell you."

Cara turned and looked back at Richard. "I told you we'd break him."

"Shh, Cara," Richard said, stepping forward and crossing his arms. "Let him talk." There was a part of Richard that did not want to hear what the man said, afraid of what he might say. "Speak."

"You heard him," snapped Cara, threatening the man with her agiel. "Speak!"

Their prisoner looked up at Richard and smiled a cruel smile. "Well, after I sapped her of her powers, I took her maidenhood." From behind, Berdine slammed her agiel into his spine.

Richard waved a hand to stop her. She obeyed. He did not believe what the man said for one second. Or was that just hopeful thinking? He looked over his shoulder at Egan and Ulic, the former still holding Kahlan's white confessor's dress. They had obviously taken it off. His heart began to pound with anguish. What if the man was telling the truth? What if Kahlan had had her powers taken away? What if she'd been brutally raped and killed?

He closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, sighing at the heartache of it all. He should not have let her leave his side. He should not have bowed so quickly to the council's insistence that he not be allowed in the council chambers. Richard gritted his teeth. It did not do any good to focus on what ifs.
In front of him, the man took a deep breath, laughed slightly and gave a shake of his head. "After I had my way with her, Prince Fryen came in and reacquainted himself with the wetness between her legs."

Cara stepped forward and slammed her agiel into the man’s side. He howled in pain, yet his smirk remained. His eyes were gleaming with delight. Richard shook his head. He could not believe this. The man was actually enjoying himself. Richard heard a snap and knew that one of the man’s ribs had been broken. After a time, Cara stepped back and the man continued.

"Then we passed her around the men!"

Raina took her agiel and spun it around to smack him across the face. The hit produced a dark bruise on his cheek. The man only laughed in return.

"Don't worry, Lord Rahl," the man said, snickering. "The Mother Confessor was a good little whore. Her moans of ecstasy were deafening as each man had his turn."

Now it was Richard who stepped forward. He grabbed the man by the collar and lifted him off the floor. "You lie!" he screamed. "You lie!"

The man laughed all the harder at Richard’s outburst. "Save you tears, Lord Rahl, your little whore is dead. The amount of pleasure we gave her was so much that it stopped her heart."

Heaving with rage, Richard flung the man against the wall and proceeded to beat him. All the while, the man just laughed his grating annoying nasally laugh.

XXX

It was getting serious. The man she had confessed was getting tired. He had managed to eliminate most of the other criminals, yet a few remained. Though she could not see them, she could hear them. They were backed against the other wall, breathing heavily, biding their time.

Presently, Kahlan was resting her strength, hoping to regain enough that, if needed, she could confess another to protect her. Suddenly the others lashed out in a formulated attack. They took her confessed man by surprised and pinned him to the wall. She heard a sick crack and her protector went limp.

Laughing, thrilled with their success, the vile murders and rapers turned on her. Kahlan raised her hand and glared at them.

"Stay away!" she commanded. "You know what I am. What I can do. If you value your souls, you'll stay away!"
Chapter 10 - Truth

"Stay away!" she commanded. "You know what I am. What I can do. If you value your souls, you'll stay away!"

The men paid no heed to her warnings. They continued to advance, their faces filled with vile lust, their voices carrying across foul promises of lurid and depraved things.

Kahlan began to shake with fear. She did not know if she had the strength to confess another. She had not had enough time of fully recover.

"She's mine!" one roared and rammed into the others.

Soon they began fighting amongst themselves in a free for all; to the victor would go the spoils. Kahlan lowered her arm and sighed, knowing that this would only buy her a few extra minutes, at most, to recover more energy.

She closed her eyes and thought of Richard, praying that he was all right. If this was to be her fate, she wanted her last thoughts to be of him. Her only regret was that she had been unable to fully express her love for him. To give herself to him, to feel their naked flesh touch and spark in pure ecstasy as they made love to one another.

It was over quicker than she had been hoping. The victor was already coming for her. Kahlan raised her hand, determined to go down fighting, when suddenly a shaft of bright light pierced the darkness. The man looked up, shielding his eyes with a hand. He gave a shrug and turned on her grinning.

"Looks like I get to see you as I take you, sweetling," the brute winked.

"Zedd!" Kahlan thought she recognized the woman's voice. It had a quality that resounded around the pit.

Within moments, Wizard's Fire burst down from the heavens and the criminal was turned to charred remains. A flash of light temporarily blinded her, but when she regained her sight, Kahlan nearly threw herself back against the wall in fright.

Nicci stood before her in all her glory. Kahlan could feel the fear grip her throat, remembering how the last time she'd encountered the sorceress, she had been confessed and had ended up stabbing her Richard.

"No," Nicci held out a hand. "Do not be afraid. I am here to help."

Kahlan shook her head, though her power kept telling it that Nicci was speaking truly. She told them to be quiet; she knew what she was doing. Nicci was an enemy, a foe. Someone to fear and run away from.

"Kahlan, dear one," it was Zedd's voice. "It's all right. If you can't trust Nicci, trust me."

"Zedd!" she called out, ashamed at how timid and afraid her voice sounded.

"Yes, dear one, it is me," Zedd called down in all his grandfatherly wonderfulness. "Trust in me. Nicci is here to help."
Reluctantly, Kahlan accepted the hand that Nicci had offered her. In the blink of an eye, they vanished. When she opened her eyes, they were standing above the pit and Zedd was pulling her into a warm hug.

Stunned Kahlan turned around and looked at Nicci. Now she saw how pale she was. And how her clothes were ragged and bloodied.

"Why?" was all she could ask.

"Because I love Richard," Nicci responded. "And he loves you."

XXX

"Kahlan!" Richard cried out as he saw her.

She was bruised and pale, yet alive! The sight of her hair cut so ragged and lopsided was horrifying. It made him tremble thinking that some of what the wizard had said was true.

He rushed across the hall, leaving his prisoner in the capable hands of Egan and Ulic, and pulled her into a fierce hug. Backing out, he rammed his lips against hers, kissing her with the intensity of a man who had believed he'd lost his beloved.

"Oh, Richard," she murmured. "It was him... Prince Fyren. He was alive. He... Oh, Richard!"

"Shh," he soothed, running his hands down her face. "It's all right. He's gone. He's gone."

"How can you be sure?" she questioned. "We thought he was dead last time."

"Believe me...," Richard said firmly, remembering what he had done. "He's gone."

After making sure she was all right, Richard looked over his shoulder to see Nicci standing beside his grandfather. Zedd was using his magic to heal the old wounds the sorceress had suffered at the hands of Darken Rahl.

"Thank you, Nicci," he said. "I... I don't know if I can ever forgive you for what you've done in the past... but... I'm willing to give you a second chance."

Nicci smiled and tears formed in her eyes. "That is more than I could have ever hoped for Richard, thank you."

Kahlan nuzzled closer to Richard, her lips slightly pressing against his neck as she latched on to him.

"Come on, let's get you out of here," Richard said, putting and arm around her waist. "We'll stay in the Wizard's Keep tonight."

XXX

The Mord'Sith had locked Neville Ranson in one of the many windowless chambers in the Wizard's Keep and Cara was itching for a crack at "training him," as she called it. Kahlan could only grin at the ferocity of their friend's obsessive need to protect Richard.

Nicci and Zedd were busy with Verna and the other Sister of the Light, Thea, discussing the Old World and a threat that Nicci claimed was on the rise and approaching.

Kahlan had to admit it was going to take some time to get used to seeing Nicci around. Her about
face had been, at least Kahlan thought, rather quick. But her confessor powers saw no lies in Nicci’s words. But words were tricky things, and her powers had been fooled before. All she had to do was remember when her friend Connor had been killed and the town’s constable used a magical device to make her think Connor’s wife, Nella, had been the murderer.

However, Richard seemed to trust Nicci, and for now she would trust in Richard. If she could not trust him, then who could she trust?

Speaking of Richard, she’d had precious little time with him alone. Almost immediately after her rescue, they had to go about rebuilding the shattered remnants of the Midlands Alliance. From what Cara had gleaned from Neville, there was this organization that called itself the Order, and they were attempting to assert their control over the Midlands.

Zedd took some time to see her and used his additive magic to speed up the growth of her hair until it was back to its original length. It felt odd, at first, when she ran her fingers through it and combed it. But she was pleased to have it back.

When they were not seeing to the restoration of the council, Kahlan would spend her time overseeing the repairs to the Confessor’s Palace. The first thing she’d done was order the pit to be buried. She never wanted to see that place again. Then she returned to her bedchambers, and ordered that the mattress and sheets be burned. Kahlan would not have her first time with Richard tainted by the memory of what Prince Fyren had said he had done with her. She would have a new mattress and new sheets, ones that were virgin, just like her.

At least she could say that. It had gotten dangerously close to happening, but luck seemed to be on her side. It was almost like the Creator herself was saving Kahlan, keeping her pure. No matter what happened, Kahlan always escaped.

When Fyren had spoke of his time with her, Kahlan had been terrified and actually thought it had happened to her. Then she remembered her trip to the midwife. But, now, after so many close calls, Kahlan had to check again. After seeing to some affairs of state, Kahlan sought out the same midwife and had her check. Kahlan was as relieved as she was the first time to hear that she was, indeed, still a virgin.

As the days went by, and Richard had yet to come to her bed, Kahlan began to despond that he no longer desired her in that way. That seeing her with her hair cut short and looking all bruised and beaten had sapped him of his desire for her. He was spending more and more of his time with the Mord'Sith Berdine and Warren in the Wizard's Keep going through the libraries. She'd only seen him at breakfast or supper and when she'd ask him what he was looking for, he'd shrug and say something about a red moon.

Kahlans did not no what he meant by that, but the sound of such a thing frightened her to her very core.

Three days after she had her bed replaced, Kahlan woke to the sounds of chanting coming from the large public square outside the palace. When she managed to crawl herself out of bed, she saw Richard standing on a makeshift platform on the steps of the Confessor's Palace with legions of D'Haran soldiers bowing down to him reciting the devotion to the Lord Rahl. Beside him, standing proud in her red leather was Cara. And the two giants, Egan and Ulic, were dressed in full military garb.

"Master Rahl guide us. Master Rahl teach us. Master Rahl protect us. In your light we thrive. In your mercy we are sheltered. In your wisdom we are humbled. We live only to serve. Our lives are yours."
The devotion lasted for a full three hours, which Berdine informed her was the standard practice only in the People's Palace, and the Lord Rahl thought it would do good as an example of his authority, in view of all Aydindril, if they did it for the full duration.

Worried over his change and aloofness, Kahlan confronted him one evening, cornering him in one of the side offices to the council chamber.

"Richard, what's going on?" she asked. "I've missed you." Kahlan put her hands on his chest, delighting in the feel of his strong muscles beneath her.

"I've missed you, too," he responded, running his hands through her long hair. She could tell he was pleased it had been restored by the small smile the spread across his lips as his fingers ran down its length. "Spirits, how I've missed you." His hands slowly came to rest on her hips.

Kahlan looked at him with big eyes. "Richard," she fiddled with the loose straps of his tunic. "I've had my big bed prepared… we could go there if you like."

Richard took a heavy breath and she saw his eyes glaze over with desire. But he did not move. He laid his hands on her shoulders and rubbed them tenderly.

"Someday, Kahlan," he said. "But first, we have a wedding to plan."

"A wedding?" Kahlan asked, confused.

"Yes," he smiled. "Our wedding."

She narrowed her eyes at him and smirked. "I don't remember you consulting me on this… what if I don't want to get married?"

"Oh, I think I can convince you," Richard pulled her close. Kahlan closed her eyes and savored the feeling of his strong arms wrapped around him, his musky scent, and his warm breath against her brow.

"But my bed's ready now," Kahlan pouted. She wanted him so bad that she was aching with the anticipation. But he was being the noble one, holding off until he could wed her. And life had again thrown them off course and turned them down another path.

"I know, Kahlan," he said, sympathetically. "And I'm sorry, I really am. Spirits know I'm dying here, but I have duties. You have duties." He gave her a look. "You're the one who told me that."

"Curse his memory," Kahlan thought. And curse me for putting the idea in his head.

"I'm the Lord Rahl now," Richard said, stepping back allowing her to fully look upon him. "How do I look in red?"

"It's not your color," she said. "Maybe black and gold would fit you better."

Richard shrugged. "Whatever you say, future wife."

"Wife. Oh that sounded so sweet to her ears. Kahlan Cypher… no… Kahlan Rahl. He was a Rahl now. The thought still took some getting used to.

"No, just Kahlan Amnell," Richard said aloud, as if sensing her thoughts.

"What?" Kahlan looked up.

Richard smiled at her and winked, taking her hand in his. "I know what you were thinking,
Mother Confessor."

"Oh?" she stepped closer and smiled at him teasingly.

"Yes. And you'll always be Kahlán Amnell," he said. "I won't have you taking my name because of silly tradition. I never want you to have to submit to any man in such a way. Even me. You will always be the Mother Confessor and I will always be your Seeker."

"I thought it was the other way around?" Kahlán said. "I'm supposed to always be your Confessor."

Richard pulled her flush against his hard body. "Either way, its perfect." His fingers ran down her back and his hand came to rest on the small of her back. "Now kiss me, and help stay my growing desire before I besmirch the Mother Confessor's good name."

As they kissed Kahlán ran her hands down his back and gripped his rear, enjoying the response it elicited from him as his lips parted slightly in a throaty moan.

"Spirits Kahlán," he groaned, longingly. "If you keep doing that I might just take you right here."

She batted her eyelashes at him playfully. "Then why don't you, Seeker?"

Richard gave her a mischievous grin and winked. "What sort of man would I be if I bedded you before I made you my wife."

Kahlán gave him a pout. "But, Richard, we've waited so long... do we really have to wait?" she leaned into him and pressed her body against his trying to get what she wanted. She knew he was excited, she could feel him pushing up against her thigh.

Richard took a deep breath. "Kahlán," he laid his hands on her face, pulling her up to him. "When we finally make love we will have already become one. I want to share my life with you forever. And to show you that I want to be with you for who you are, and not just that I'm after what is under your skirts, I will marry you first." He paused and kissed her. "If there is anything we've learned over the past two years, it is how to wait."

"Richard, you do not have to prove anything to me," she said, leaning into his embrace. "I know you love me. You loved me even when you thought I could confess you. And your love for me protected you for confession. Oh, Richard, you never need to prove your love. I see it whenever I look into your eyes."

He smiled at her warmly and pulled her forward. She closed her eyes, feeling the rapture of his hands on her hips as they kissed with such a passion that Kahlán felt that even the Creator would weep at seeing such love.

"Oh!" came Zedd's voice. They both looked up, startled. They had been so engrossed in each other that neither had noticed Zedd entering the room.

Zedd raised his bushy eyebrows. "There you two are."

Richard groaned and looked sideways at his grandfather. "What do you want, Zedd?"

Zedd lowered his eyebrows and gave them a feigned scowl. "Business of state, my boy," he said holding up a scroll with a wax seal. "The Lord Rahl's job is never done." And then he looked at Kahlán and raised another scroll. "Neither is the Mother Confessor's."

Kahlán looked back between the man she loved and the man who was like a grandfather to her. "I
guess duty calls us apart again," she murmured softly.

Richard held her chin in strong fingers, and pulled her up to look into his warm brown eyes. "I wise woman told me once that all because we have duties, does not mean we can't still be together."

"She sounds like a really wise and intelligent woman," Kahlan teased, knowing it had been her who had told him that. "You should heed her advice and make love to her before she starts looking elsewhere."

Richard gave her a smirk. And kissed her brow. "Just wait a little longer, my love," he whispered. "When we finally have the time… I promise you, it will be well worth the wait."

XXX

Darken Rahl licked his fingers nervously. Slowly, he smoothed out his eyebrows, hating how he had fallen so quickly into such a bad habit. But things were not looking good. He'd lost Nicci and had received word that the coup in Aydindril had failed. And worse of all, the People's Palace had declared his brother the true Lord Rahl.

His Mord'Sith had abandoned him, saved a few. The most loyal of them had remained, but they would not heed his commands as they once had. Constance was the only one who would come to his bed, and even she would not allow him to indulge in the pleasures she had permitted before.

Power was such a fickle thing. It had slipped through his fingers so easily. However, he had to admit, he had not taken into consideration the ties that bind. The bond with the D'Haran people. The love and undying will of his dear brother to see to the safety of his beloved Kahlan, the same reflected back by the Mother Confessor. The loyalty of the Mord'Sith, so quickly did they leave him when it became clear his power was lost.

All of these were bonds in a way. And he had lost them all.

"Darken Rahl," the voice was booming and frightening. For a moment, he feared he had died and had returned into the cold embrace of the Keeper.

Hesitantly, he looked up and was met by black eyes that swirled like dark clouds. A bull of a man stood before him, shaved head gleaming in the candlelight. Thin braided hairs hung from above his lips and down his chin. A goat skinned vest barely covering his rippling barrel chest.

"Emperor," he inclined his head.

The Emperor sneered at him. "You failed me, Darken Rahl. And now, you will learn why the wizards of old feared my kind."

THE END… or is it?
Epilogue

Berdine stared in awe at the number of books that stretched before her. The Wizard's Keep had more libraries than she had ever seen, even more than the People’s Palace. Her new Lord Rahl, after hearing she had a penchant for High D’Haran, asked if she’d help the young wizard with searching through the libraries for anything that made reference to the *Fuer Grissa Ost Drauka*.

"Berdine, over here!" yelled Warren excitedly. "I need you to check something for me."

Berdine stepped over to the excitable wizard and looked down at the book he had opened before him. It did not appear to have anything relating to the Bringer of Death, but the title on the cover was certainly odd.

She leaned back and looked at Warren. "What's the Temple of the Winds?" she asked.

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RICHARD and KAHLAN

will return

in

IN THE WINDS

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