One year after the defeat of Corypheus, the Inquisition mounts an expedition to the Frostback Basin. With the ever increasing demands of the Inquisition affording them little time to be together, Kai asks Cullen to come along on what is anticipated to be a straightforward mission, to close some rifts, aid with research into the last Inquisitor and build an alliance with the Avvar. It is a chance to spend time with each other before Cullen is away for a few months.

As events unfold, secrets come to light, and repercussions of the past threaten not only the Inquisition, but Kai and Cullen's relationship as well.
Notes

Follows on from 'Touched by Fate'

This instalment uses the major events, timeline and some dialogue from the Jaws of Hakkon DLC, but otherwise diverges from the canon.

As always, heartfelt gratitude to Eravalefantasy for their invaluable guidance, patience and good humour.

See the end of the work for more notes
The Last Year

Leliana is now Divine Victoria. Because the Chantry remained rudderless and riven with infighting for many months the task of setting it back onto its feet is a substantial one, delaying her plans for reform. Her attention has been concentrated on rebuilding first and foremost. Using charm and a great deal of intelligence gathered she has stabilised the warring body for now.

The Divine’s relationship with the Inquisitor continues to be a warm one, both on a professional and personal level. The Inquisitor has begun to shape the way for some of the reforms she and the Divine have planned for while the Divine attempts to rebuild the Chantry. The mages have set up a College of Enchanters whilst still with the Inquisition. It is as yet embryonic and they have no new home.

Cassandra serves as the Right Hand of the Divine as well as rebuilding the Seeker Order. The numbers are small and growing only gradually, so control remains in the hands of the Order. Cassandra is mindful that once the Seekers reach a significant number its future and relationship to the Chantry will need to be addressed.

No Left Hand has been appointed and Leliana relies on her network of spies, some of whom she has taken with her from the Inquisition, with the Inquisitor’s agreement. Charter now serves as Inquisition Spymaster and often provides additional intelligence to Leliana.

Most of the Inquisitor’s inner circle have returned to their former lives, except for Bull, Cole and Dorian. Staying with the Inquisition as long as he could, Dorian will be returning to Tevinter to take up an ambassadorship. Bull and the Chargers are formally allied with the Inquisition and Cole stays to maintain his pledge to always protect the Inquisitor. Bull, Dorian and Cole are now her personal team when undertaking missions.

Blackwall’s joining was successful, and he now works with those Wardens left in Southern Thedas after Adamant. Their work with the Inquisition has gone some way to recovering their standing after the ill conceived plans of Clarel. Not possessing a permanent base of their own, the Inquisitor has permitted them to use the Keeps as temporary bases when travelling.

Varric has returned to Kirkwall and is endeavouing to help reconstruct the City and eradicate the red lyrium with aid from the Inquisition.

Sera returned to the Red Jennies. More focused after her time in the Inquisition, she is developing it into an impressive underground network. She has offered her services to both Leliana and the Inquisitor whenever they require her.

Vivienne and the loyalist mages have not joined the College. She is secretly building a power base of her own, but has not yet restored the Circle as was her expressed ambition.

For the last few months careful negotiations have taken place to secure land in South Reach to establish a Templar Sanctuary, involving Josephine, Cullen, the Divine, King Alistair, and Arl Bryland. Now agreed, the resources of the Inquisition will fund construction.

Cullen’s attention has been devoted to negotiations for the Sanctuary, and organising the dismantling of Inquisition camps across Orlais and Ferelden, leaving solely the Keeps in the hands of the Inquisition. Following the successful intervention of the Inquisition on the Orlais-Ferelden border, further appeals have been received asking for peacekeeping intervention in disputes, with the Inquisition acting a neutral force. Troops brought back to Skyhold from the camps with their valuable experience are often reassigned to these tasks.
Lysette runs the Templar Rehabilitation programme. Her insight and experience as one of the first to follow Cullen, and her organisational skills and pastoral support ensure that many are successful in managing their withdrawal from lyrium. Those unable to undertake the programme, whose minds have started to deteriorate, are cared for.

The Ambassador has been much in demand for her political acumen, with the Inquisition sought as arbitrator in political disputes alongside military peacekeeping where called for. Ryla Helmi, although not formally part of the Inquisition has become a de facto roaming mediator, travelling to areas where help is requested. She and Josephine work collectively in these matters.

The Inquisitor is regularly away from Skyhold either travelling across Thedas to close rifts that the Inquisition could not deal with before with the focus on Corypheus, or territories that were closed to them. She also undertakes high profile visits at the behest of her Ambassador. The trust in her and the Inquisition is significant, with many nations welcoming their assistance.

But enemies remain, the Venatori are yet to be vanquished, withdrawing to Tevinter and quietly pursuing their intention to take over Thedas. There have been two additional assassination attempts on the Inquisitor’s life, one during a visit to Orlais and another in Nevarra when visiting King Markus. In Skyhold she is protected at all times by Cullen’s soldiers if she isn’t in the company of her husband.

The Inquisitor, with Cullen, travelled to Ostwick to recruit her brother Alex for the Divine. The archives in the Grand Cathedral were in a deplorable state and needed an able archivist to organise the collections. Initially Alex did not wish to leave the familiarity of the Chantry in Ostwick but was induced by an assurance of resources not merely to reconstruct, but to improve upon the collections.

Whilst in Ostwick the Inquisitor visited her brother, the Head of House Trevelyan, to present her husband and to inform him of Lyssa’s planned marriage to Fergus Cousland, a match securing even more influence for the Trevelyans. Still bearing animosity towards his daughter even though his health was declining, her father refused to meet with her.
Arrival

Chapter Summary

The team arrive at the Frostback Basin to be greeted by a rift before they reach camp. While tackling it they pick up the first sign something is different in the Basin.

Chapter Notes

Some NSFW

Eventually they arrived at the entrance to the Frostback Basin, sharp cliffs on one side and a lake stretching as far as the eye could see on the other. It wasn’t the longest of journeys travelling through the mountain pass, but doubtless the coldest since they left Haven for Skyhold. The five of them wanted nothing more than a warm fire, and a hot meal inside them.

“I can see the stockade from here,” Bull informed them, pointing ahead. “Not far now.”

Approaching closer, Kai could see something else, a fade rift. After the Breach was finally closed rifts remained, stable now, no longer producing demons until she opened them. They had spent some of the last months mopping them up, some in places unknown of before word reached the Inquisition. Places such as the Frostback Basin, where rifts were unreported until Harding and Kenric arrived to investigate the last known whereabouts of Inquisitor Ameridan, her predecessor from centuries ago.

The expedition was aided by her brother, Alex, when he took over as Chief Archivist at the Grand Cathedral. An acquaintance of Kenric from his brief time in Starkhaven, Alex offered him access to the archives. It was that access that turned up old documents buried there, and provided Kenric a defined starting point to search for evidence of the last Inquisitor.

After they encountered the Titan in the Deep Roads, Kai felt there must be other things yet undiscovered. As she investigated, more questions than answers were thrown up by her digging, like a book long fallen apart, the pages scattered, small glimpses into some larger story. Kai loved mysteries, puzzles waiting to be solved. But with so few clues the overall picture was hard to see and making misguided assumptions could draw her down the wrong path. She needed more information, more clues, more than that she needed scholarly assistance.

But her immediate problem was the rift hanging in the air before them.

“Uhh,” she sighed tiredly. “We should really sort this rift out while we’re here. Although it’s stable I don’t like having it so near the main camp.”
“I agree,” Cullen confirmed as the others nodded. “We should deal with it.”

They dismounted tying up the horses, and it was then Kai noticed the gleam of the Anchor seeping through her glove. She peered at it, wondering why it was glowing more than normal.

“The Veil,” Cole began, coming up to her. “It’s...thinner, and a battle and...” he trailed off.

“And...?” Kai asked, catching him glance around.

He sounded distracted. “So many...”

Dorian interrupted. “Well, come on. Rifts wait for no man, woman, or Inquisitor.” He pointed at the stockade. “And no doubt there is a plate of hot schlop in there waiting for me, Maker help me.” He gave a deep sigh. “You do realise, when I return I’ll have to take lessons in how to be civilised before I’m allowed back into Tevinter society.”

There were sniggers from Kai and Bull as they shot knowing glances at one another.

Bull bent forward to Dorian, grinning at his dejected expression. “You’re not the only one looking forward to some ‘hot schlop’, Kadan.”

Cullen came over to Kai. “What’s schlop?” he inquired, puzzled.

She chuckled. “Gunky, amorphous stew. It makes a kind of squelchy, plopping noise as it falls off the ladle. Dorian nicknamed it schlop. He thought the word described the sound and the goo itself perfectly.”

Cullen smiled broadly. “Sounds like a Ferelden inn.”

Kai chuckled again. “It was,” she winked. “He drank two tankards of ale before he picked up his fork.”

“Nowhere near enough,” Dorian retorted, shuddering at the thought. “I never wish to see another turnip as long as I live.”

Cole looked around. “I don’t think they were turnips...they looked more like...”

Dorian raised his hand, halting him. “No Cole, I don’t wish to know. Your helpful information about snails was quite sufficient, thank you.”

“Is it always like this?” Cullen queried, smiling at the scene playing out.

“Pretty much,” Kai nodded, still grinning.

Although she missed Cassandra’s dry humour, Cole brought out a different dynamic with his direct, innocent remarks. Surprisingly it didn’t take long for the four of them to gel as a team, but the three of them had to adapt from a heavyweight sword and shield warrior to a lightweight dagger wielding rogue. There were a few hiccups until the four of them settled into a cohesive unit, helped when Kai returned to the backs ranks. With her left-handed bow and lots and lots of practice, she was virtually as good as before.

Cole’s honest and candid nature even assuaged Bull’s misgivings about him being a spirit. He now recognised the distinction between a spirit and demon, in Cole’s case at least. Cole was Kid, and because he pulled his weight, Bull accepted him.

It was noticeable how much Cole pulled his weight, swift and lethal from behind as Bull taunted
their opponents from the front. They never saw him coming. For a spirit of compassion he was as deadly as any assassin. Perverse as it sounded, it was his way of helping people.

Cullen was in the field with her again, persuaded to come along before he headed to South Reach to start work on the Templar Sanctuary. It was a project dear to his heart and she accepted his need to be there. Rylen was brought back from the Western Approach to take over temporarily in Cullen’s absence. The Commander’s role was more maintenance of resources and logistical co-ordination than planning for war, a task such a pragmatic man like Rylen could handle easily.

Kai whistled to grab their attention. “Gentlemen! Time to repair some tears in the air?” Kai gestured ahead.

“Blending in with the locals are we?” Dorian suggested, donning his headgear.

“When in the Frostback Basin and all that, Dorian,” she advised him with a grin.

That was what Skywatcher called them. He’d travelled ahead after they received the initial report from Harding concerning the Avvar. Kai and Josephine thought his presence would facilitate an alliance with Stone-Bear Hold along with the artefacts they sent with him as gifts. Finding favour with one Hold may lead to agreements with others and Cullen hoped that earning good favour with the Avvar may help them with patrols of the Frostbacks. Avvar knew the territory better than any Inquisition soldier.

Stone-Bear Hold, she thought, I hope they don’t have any actual bears there. Kai and bears weren’t the most amiable combination.

They’d barely reached the rift when it tore apart, demons spewing out. This shouldn’t have happened; they never opened up before she used the Anchor, at least not now and not like this.

“What the...?” Kai exclaimed, momentarily pausing.

“It’s not supposed to do that, I take it?” Cullen shouted, seeing her astonished face.

“No, it’s not,” she yelled back as they scrambled to handle the first wave, several wraiths and two hunger demons appeared from the green tendrils stretching out of the central tear. They hadn’t come across a hunger demon in months.

All were promptly dispatched and they prepared for the second wave. Kai readied herself to stealth and draw on the rift. The second wave appeared. Three despair demons and three fear demons. This rift was clearly more dangerous than any they had encountered in a long while. Her usual tactic was not going to work here, at least not yet.

“You’ve got to be shitting me!” Bull groaned, shifting to take on a despair demon.

“It’s different here,” Cole added as he stealthed, disappearing from view. He was off to attack from behind working with Bull in front.

“You don’t say!” Cullen remarked with a grimace, shield bashing one of the fear demons as it re-appeared beside him.

Kai loosed off a volley of arrows at the fear demon as Cullen carved away, and before long it was gone. She scanned around, Bull and Cole had finished with their target and were chasing down the other two fear demons, Cullen running to join them; Dorian was attacking another despair demon with a Wall of Fire, but the third one was nowhere to be seen. Kai joined Dorian standing closer to the rift, and lifted her Anchor hand hoping to weaken the rift along with the remaining demons.
That was when she and Dorian found the missing despair demon, or more accurately it found them with a bitter burst of numbing cold slowing the two of them, a film of ice crystals layering their armour. Now trapped between the two despair demons, another icy blast struck them from the one Dorian was attacking, then another from the second one bringing both of them virtually to a standstill.

“I swear if I move I’ll snap something off,” he grunted, shivering.

“Don’t move,” Kai ordered through chattering teeth. She had a plan.

“Not sure I even can,” he claimed. “Why?”

It was an effort, but she dragged out a vial of Antivan fire. “You’ve some fire resistance in that armour, haven’t you?” she inquired, twisting her lower arm to loosen it.

“Yes...wait...you’re not going to...?”

“Close your eyes!” she shouted and flipped the flask a few feet away smashing it. Fire spread out from the impact point; far enough away not to burn them but the heat blast scalded them slightly as it instantaneously defrosted the ice coating their armour.

Dorian carried on firing at the initial despair demon as Kai grabbed another flask and threw at the other one, following on with explosive arrows. It was sufficient to deter the attacks until Cullen, Bull and Cole joined them to finish off both demons. Kai closed the rift hearing the crack as it imploded.

She stared at Dorian, rosy faced, frowning, his moustache singed around the corners. Her own face was no doubt the same tinge of shiny red. She noticed his fingers reach up, testing his moustache.

“It worked didn’t it, and we’re warmer too,” she remarked, straight faced, seeing the eye roll.

“You...” he complained, jabbing a finger at her. “You have injured my moustache. Ugh, do you have any idea how much work you’ve ruined and how long it will take me to rectify the damage?”

Kai shrugged her shoulders. “At least your bits didn’t snap off. Now that would have placed a cramp on fun-time.”

“She does have a point, Kadan,” Bull offered with a wink.

“Always an answer,” Dorian sighed resignedly.

Cullen coughed. “I’m certain some elfroot ointment will clear up the...sunburn,” he suggested with a feeble attempt at curbing the smile.

Dorian’s upper lip twitched contemptuously. “Cole, would you like to tell them what I’m thinking now?”

“I...would it...fit there?” Cole puzzled.

Kai walked up to Dorian and gave him a hug. “You know I love you really,” she laughed.

His complaints were mostly bluster and it was easy to allay him with a little kindness. She would miss him when he left, and she guessed Cullen would too. If she was busy on diplomatic business, Cullen would occasionally spend time with Dorian and Bull. He enjoyed their company, giving him another outlet besides her.
A smile broke on Dorian’s face. “I know you do darling, but you can fuck off.”

“Dorian,” she tutted, shaking her head. “Kindly fuck off would have been more civilised. You should get some practice in before you go home.” Dorian couldn’t hold back the laugh.

Cullen cleared his throat. “Inquisitor, at your leave,” he smiled.

“Oh, yes of course,” Kai acknowledged. “The Commander’s right, perhaps we should head to camp now. We may even be fortunate enough to have ‘hot schlop’.”

Groans and laughs greeted her words as they headed back to their mounts. There was just one thing...Kai stepped closer to Cullen.

“A moment, Commander.” She settled her hand on his arm.

He sighed in recognition. “Alright, go ahead.”

She inhaled deeply. It was faint, but she could smell it. A long satisfied sigh escaped her lips. That same scent she noticed after her shiny reward. She finally worked out what it was; he had changed his soap but weeks previously. Somehow the new soap and the perspiration from combat combined to produce the scent she found incredibly enticing. Kai made him promise he would never ever change his soap again. Fighting wasn’t always guaranteed but training was. Cullen thought she was barmy, but indulged her quirk nevertheless.

“Enough?” he inquired with a chuckle.

“Until later,” she whispered cheekily, glancing around before sweeping her hand over his bottom. She sighed again as he smirked at her. Kai walked to her horse with a wiggle in her step, sensing Cullen’s eyes on her as she moved away. Cullen. She rolled his name silently off her tongue, a wicked thought forming in her head.

They mounted up and rode the remaining distance to camp.

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Cullen watched as Kai greeted Harding warmly; a bond had formed between the two woman further strengthened since Kai’s mission to the Deep Roads. Kai couldn’t resist recounting the story about how Harding won a substantial wager with several members of the Legion of the Dead. The dwarves were convinced Kai would be forever lost, so deep did they venture, but return she did with incredible tales.

‘I told them you always come back’ Harding grinned. Kai’s ability to survive the most perilous of missions was legendary, she was legendary.

Cullen smiled. Not if you saw her first thing in the morning, he thought.

He was all too conscious how human she was, as were her friends and those who knew her well. They recognised it was hard work, support, and more than a little luck which got her through. Others felt she was divinely touched and divinely protected. Something she vehemently disliked but said nothing, scared her absence of belief would become known if she protested. Thus the rumours flourished.

That mission was likewise the beginning of Kai’s increasing obsession with early Theodosian history, human, elven and dwarven. Cullen shouldn’t have been surprised, once Kai was focused on a task or in this case a specific topic, she would drive it on to its conclusion. This was why they
were now in the Frostback Basin, to explore the findings of some of that research, and hopefully

to form yet another alliance.

When she asked him to accompany her, he was glad to. It afforded him a chance to get out in the
field again, and spend rare time with his wife. They had less time together these days than when
they were battling Corypheus.

He also had to admit being away from Skyhold without the endless paperwork and mundane
issues was liberating. With only routine operations to watch over, Cullen sometimes missed the
challenges they faced before. These days the Inquisition had more than ample manpower and
resources to cover the operations they had ongoing, and he doubted whether they actually needed
to keep recruiting more soldiers. Their army was probably larger than Orlais’ now.

He had raised the point with her on several occasions, but as always she was loath to turn anyone
away if they wished to help. Cullen wondered if providing people a chance to begin again was the
actual driver behind her reluctance to say no. If they continued in this vein the Inquisition would
need a new home again.

“Commander!” Cullen’s attention was brought back by the Inquisitor calling him.

“Yes, Inquisitor?” he inquired, pretending to show he’d actually been taking notice.

“So...bogfisher poo, what do you think?” she challenged, smiling.

“What?” he exclaimed, not sure if he wished to learn details of the conversation he missed.

“What do you think of Harding’s idea that it would be perfect for sieges? You know because of
the smell.” She made a throwing motion with her arm.

Cullen stared at her, unbelieving. “You’re not serious?” he scorned.

Her sharp gaze showed she

was. “You’re serious? Maker’ breath!”

Eyes wide, Cullen scratched his head. “I’m sorry, Inquisitor, I have to object. This is...” His
sentence remained unfinished as the two women snickered, and he caught Harding slip something
into the Inquisitor’s palm.

Cullen frowned. “Did you just...?”

The Inquisitor nodded in apology. “I’m sorry Cullen. We had a wager on you. We knew you
would be too dignified to entertain such a notion.”

He rolled his eyes. “Then what was the wager for?”

“Whether I could make you believe I was serious,” she laughed.

Two could play at this game,
he thought.

He’d picked up a few tricks from her, things Leliana had taught her. If used infrequently, it
allowed him the opportunity to prank her in return.

The frown turned into a glower. “Harding, would you mind?” he insisted sharply.

“Of course,” she responded, her smile vanishing. Cullen caught the whisper to the Inquisitor as
she wandered away. “You’re in trouble now.”

Kai smiled apologetically as he strode to her. “I’m sorry. I thought you’d see the funny side of it.”
He folded his arms and glared. “Did you now?”

“Cullen?” she inquired tentatively, peering into his eyes. “Are you actually mad at me?”

Cullen held her gaze and his stern expression for several seconds before he winked, his face softening into a grin. Leaning forward, he murmured. “So...easily.”

She laughed. “You,” she prodded his chestplate, “are becoming awfully good at this. I’m impressed.”

“Why, thank you, Inquisitor,” he acknowledged, getting the coy smile.

Experience told him what would come next, and they needed to take this conversation out of public view. Cullen gestured to a cabin ahead. Seeing it was empty, they went inside and she closed the door behind her.

She beamed and leaned against him, arms hugging his waist. “Perhaps I ‘require’...”

“No,” he stated adamantly, receiving the disappointed expression.

“Punishment is not getting what you ‘require’;” he murmured, tapping her nose. “Besides, you’re far too vocal, and I don’t need my troops smirking at me because they’ve heard you moaning.”

“Trust me, I will be as quiet as a mouse,” she promised, pressing her hips flush with his.

Sometimes he wondered if he gave way to her too easily. But her playful moods were rarer, so when the artifice of the Inquisitor fell away and his wife watched him with a beguiling smile and a gleam in her eye, he found it difficult to deny her.

“Well?” she urged, waggling her eyebrows, making him chuckle.

“You’re not going to give up are you?” he groaned, hearing her laugh.

“I’ll make it worth your while, husband,” she proposed invitingly, drawing her tongue along his jaw line to his mouth to kiss him as she pushed him backward against a desk.

Any intention he may have had to check her vanished when her hand slid downward stroking him over his breeches, first gently then firmly as his erection built. He leant on the desk behind him to steady himself.

She loosened the laces on his breeches. “It won’t be just my hand Cullen...my mouth, my tongue...” she purred, her breath warm on his lips.

*As if I needed convincing, he thought.*

He glanced at the door, concerned what the cabin’s occupant may think if they walked in on them.

“Locked,” she grinned and knelt before him, dragging down his breeches and smalls in one tug, taking hold of his cock in her hand, stroking him as her tongue licked lazily over the tip.

He couldn’t stop her now if he wanted to, and he didn’t want to. He wanted to see his wife’s mouth full with his cock. He wanted to feel her mouth hot and wet and her lips tight around him, the same feeling as when he was inside her. The thought, the image, the anticipation, caused him to jerk involuntarily.

The tiny sliver of sense left in his head told him it couldn’t be what they normally did. She would
draw him out, delaying the climax so when he finally came he would be exhausted, and could manage nothing else but fall asleep. This had to be quicker.

“Kai...”

“Yes Cullen?” she smirked, licking her lips and continuing to stroke him as she stared up.

His head began to cloud. “Quicker,” he grunted.

“Yes Cullen,” she winked, angling her head, allowing him to see as she took the entire span of him into her mouth.

“Maker,” he cried, his eyes briefly closing.

This time she moved faster and her hand gripped tighter, a brief pause as she licked the head, and then the sensation of her teeth lightly grazing him as she drew him back into her mouth. Needing to touch her, he dragged off a glove with his mouth and curled his fingers into her hair.

Seeing her, hearing the muffled moans as she coaxed him to a climax intensified the sensations, not just because he enjoyed what she did, but because it was her. She knew precisely what effect it had on him as he watched her, the desire and pleasure he felt mirrored in her face.

As his groin tightened even more his eyes rolled shut, the blood pounding a heavy pulse in his skull, his breathing now short staccato pants. Beads of sweat dribbled down his face, but he didn’t dare remove his other hand from the desk, it was the only thing holding him upright as his legs wobbled.

He knew was he close and so did she; her grip became tighter, her pace quicker now as he grasped her head. It was all he could do to stop himself from plunging deeper into her mouth. Suddenly she altered her angle, and the change in friction was enough to drive him over the threshold. The sheer bliss of release as he came surged through him, and he could no longer hold back the thrusts or the hushed grunt that tumbled from his lips.

Legs softening, he let go of her and seized the desk with both hands. She held him in her mouth until the jerks ceased and only then let go. He opened his eyes in time to see her swallow. She caringly dressed him and stood up. He smiled wearily, wiping his forehead as she hugged him, supporting him until his legs steadied.

“So?” she inquired breathlessly, expression hopeful.

He relented, and of course she knew he would. “Alright...providing you can stay quiet.”

Staying quiet would be even harder for her when he returned the favour afterward. Much as he loved hearing her moan and cry out his name, this time they had to keep it quiet.

“So...easily,” she drawled, laughing.

Even they sometimes disagreed, and she could slip into doubt and uncertainty, her ‘dark days’ as they named them, moments like these reminded him of the woman he fell in love with.

He rested his forehead to hers, tracing his finger over her lips. “You are...” Cullen began.

Kai smiled and finished the sentence. “...yours, always and only yours.”

Cullen smiled back, brought her face to his and kissed her.
Kai made just two requests for their life together. The first one was that for every day when they were actually in the same place, he provided the prompt so she could reaffirm her promise to be his; the second that they would never go to sleep on a quarrel. There was no doubt his wife was a romantic. He had only one request, the same one as he sought from her before the battle with Corypheus, and the same one he asked for on every occasion she went away, that she should always come home to him.

Even though Corypheus was long gone, the dangers she faced were not. Every time she left Skyhold he couldn’t help wondering if there would be yet another assassination attempt, or that some other threat would claim her life. ‘Perhaps I’m a reincarnated cat,’ she would joke. He didn’t have the heart to reply if she was she’d easily used up her nine lives. Some jokes were too close to the truth.

Being with her on this trip he had no need to ask her, he would be there with her.

“Maybe we should get back,” he suggested.

“Might be an idea, Bram should be returning soon and I suppose he might wish his cabin back,” she chuckled.

“How do you know...?” Cullen paused and glanced around seeing books stacked up and strewn here and there. “Ah, I believe you might be correct.”

“I am, I’ve seen academic quarters before,” she advised him. “Trust me; this is actually quite tidy in comparison.”

Kai stepped back letting go and made her way to the door. His legs now recovered, he closed the distance between them, delivering a smack as she went to unlock it. There was an “ooh” as he caught her unawares, accompanied by a happy hum as she peered back at him, rubbing her buttock.

She winked. “I shall look forward to later, husband.”

“As will I, wife,” he smirked, catching the sigh.

When they left the cabin, Harding was standing at the bottom of the steps. “Ah there you, I was searching for you. Food’s ready if you’re interested.”

“Maker, yes please, I’m ravenous,” Kai enthused. “What is it?”

Harding smiled. “What it virtually always is...stew.”

Laughter from the two of them met her words and for a moment she puzzled, then shrugged her shoulders and walked away.


“So it would seem,” he smiled in response.

Watching her smile, he hoped some things might change on this trip. He knew her duty was important to her, but he didn’t wish for it to become her life. Cullen didn’t want to see the role to take his wife over completely, and hoped being away from Skyhold in less of a hothouse atmosphere would allow him an opportunity to broach the subject again.

He saw the ever increasing demands made on her, demands which she didn’t always delegate. Having to watch her spread herself thinly to accommodate everyone’s expectations, claiming it
was her responsibility to know what occurred in the organisation she was ultimately accountable for, was difficult and sometimes frustrating. It seemed the bigger the Inquisition became the less she relinquished, and he didn’t wish to see his wife become so invested in the Inquisition she was unable to let go when the time came to disband it.

Kai once told him ‘there’s too much of this and not enough of you’. He sought to remind her how she persuaded him to delegate, hoping it would convince her to do the same. It worked at first; she listened to him and to Josephine. But after their visit to Ostwick she became more reluctant, continuing as she did before and digging her heels in when he tried to discuss it. Realising his direct approach wasn’t working, he tried to shift her focus by talking about their future beyond the Inquisition.

Cullen recognised the Inquisition would have to end at some stage. Their original purpose had been achieved. The Inquisition’s political influence and military power lasted only as long as there was a need for them, or until they were seen as a threat. Allowing it to keep growing would invite the latter, and he would rather see it end than become the very thing it was called into being to fight.

Only when it ended could they have the future they had planned, and establishing a home for them in South Reach was part of that future. They discussed it after the visit to his family. Unsurprisingly Kai had got on well with his siblings, trading jokes with Branson, regaling Rosalie with tales of her adventures, but it was Mia she truly connected with. Cullen recalled the chess games, the rest of them watching Kai and Mia go head to head, neither giving an inch. He had often wondered if Mia still played, she did and cannier now than when they were youngsters.

He hoped they could be the normal family she hadn’t known growing up. From what he gleaned, she had only been close to her mother and sister, and of the two brothers he met he certainly didn’t like Wilhelm. He was arrogant and self-righteous. Alex, although a pleasanter person, was evidently more at home with books than people. Most of Kai’s life had been duty and responsibility, first to her family and now the Inquisition. Cullen wanted to give her a future with something more than what others expected of her.

“Cullen?” Kai called to him, peering at him quizzically.

“Sorry,” he smiled. “Just thinking.”

“About?” she asked, expecting an answer.

He wasn’t ready to talk to her, not yet. He simply smirked and leant forward watching her smile. “Another time perhaps,” he teased. “We have food waiting for us, and you have given me an appetite.”

Seeing her grin cheekily told him the distraction worked.

“Come on,” he waved her forward. “I want to see Dorian’s face when he spots what’s on the menu.”

Cullen and Kai followed Harding.
As Kai and her team respond to a request for help from their soldiers, she and Cole make discovery about one of them, leading her to a controversial decision.

Kai watched Cullen sleep, the odd snore escaping as he breathed. Seldom was she awake before him; normally he was the one rousing her. She hummed to herself contentedly. Whenever they were together, he would head to the kitchens and fetch her tea before he woke her, always with a smile.

Cullen reassured her in her ‘dark days’, and supported her after Leliana left. She missed Leliana’s presence, and it was only when her friend was gone Kai truly appreciated how Leliana bolstered her. It was as if her foundation became rockier, less secure and consequently she leaned on Cullen more. He was always there for her when she needed him, and she didn’t know what she would do without him.

She just wished he wouldn’t lecture her so about the Inquisition. Sometimes he seemed to regard her with same exasperation as her father had, and she found it hard not to be awkward when he did. But lately the lectures had stopped and she was grateful.

It was important to Kai not to lose touch with the people she was responsible for. Those people had pledged themselves to help the Inquisition, and she had a duty to ensure their trust in it, and her, wasn’t abused. She was determined not to become dictatorial, someone who only saw people as objects, pawns to be strategically moved around like pieces on a chess board. The power she wielded had to be tempered with restraint, and only by knowing what took place in the Inquisition could she ensure she maintained that essential link to the individuals within it.

Her nagging fear was becoming the very thing she had fought so hard against and Kai wasn’t sure if he appreciated how she felt. That was partly her fault, some things she kept from everyone around her, including Cullen. He was her husband and in a normal situation she would have shared everything with him, but their situation was far from normal. She was his superior as well as his wife. Should the situation arise where she needed to make a choice between him and her duty, her decision had to be based on logic and not emotion.

Kai tried her best to maintain a distance between her two roles, but perhaps on this particular count she was wrong. Maybe if she explained to him how important it was to her not to lose touch, he would understand. Maybe a different environment, away from Skyhold and the constant demands on both of them would allow an opportunity to talk about the matter without ending up annoyed with each other.

Cullen stirred with a slight moan then settled again. The urge to be close to him came over her and she snuck into his bedroll, careful not to wake him. Resting her head onto his chest, she listened to his familiar slow heartbeat, an even soothing rhythm, and let her mind drift. Lately, he talked more of their future life together, an ordinary home and an ordinary life, close to his family. She smiled to herself, it was their family he said correcting her. She was a Rutherford now.
When he went to South Reach to oversee construction of the Sanctuary, he would also oversee the building of their new home, ready for the time when the Inquisition would end. The Inquisition would finance the construction of the Sanctuary, but their home was paid for from money both had set aside.

Distracted by her reflections, Kai’s finger rubbed a line back and forth across his chest unaware Cullen was now awake.

“I’m positive that spot is clean by now,” he joked, dragging her from her thoughts.

Kai leant onto her elbow, smiling. “Have to be certain,” she told him, tracing his lips. “Morning, husband.”

“Good morning, wife.” He embraced her, smiling back, his hand holding her head, drawing her mouth to his.

Their first kiss in the morning invariably sent a warm tickle to her belly, comfortable and secure in its certainty.

There was always purpose in her life; purpose based on duty and obligation, first to her family and after that the Inquisition; the next task, the next job, the next mission, and over and above those things, the future of Thedas and the peace and security she hoped to bring working with the Divine. It was Cullen who gave her a different future, a future where they were beholden to no-one but each other. One day they would have that ordinary life he would tell her.

Cullen drew back, smiling warmly at her. “You’re awake early. Did you...have a dream?” A tinge of concern accompanied the question.

Her palm caressed his cheek reassuringly as she smiled back. “No, I just woke up.”

“Good,” he blinked, his fingers playing with a lock of her hair. The smile turned into a smirk. “So...where’s my breakfast then?”

“Ah.” Kai puffed out a breath.

“You know the arrangement, whoever is awake first...” he reminded her.

Kai rolled her eye at him. “I know, I know...I just...hadn’t got around to it,” she conceded with a sigh. Mainly because she was daydreaming, and warm next to him.

Getting up also meant getting cold even though she could smell cooking. The Logistics Corps always had breakfast started early, so both morning and night watches could eat before and after watch change.

Cullen placed his hands behind his head, looking smug now. “You never hear me come out with a feeble excuse like that, do you?”

“You never hear me ordering you to do it,” she huffed.

“What can I say, perhaps I enjoy ordering you around,” he asserted, arching an eyebrow, challenging her to answer him.

“Make the most of it, husband. You’re on my team,” she cautioned, prodding him. “You’ll have to do what I say.”

“If you say so, wife. We’ll see,” he fired back.
Kai squinted at him with mock disapproval. As she did she spotted the opening. She sat up, but instead of getting up she launched her attack, tickling his sides as she snickered.

“What the...?!” shot out as she caught him by surprise. He took hold of her wrists.

Cullen was stronger and would win out, but at this angle she could hold him back for a little while. Kai bent her elbows and pressed down using her body weight as he pushed back, both breathing heavily, eyes locked on each other as neither backed down. All those months of fighting and training ensured her upper body strength was ample to hold him for some minutes at least.

It took him less time than she assumed before he managed to sit up, holding onto her wrists as he forced her backward. By this point Kai was laughing while he was trying to look stern. She knew it was a front to make her laugh and it always worked on her. With some things he knew her so well.

Cullen flipped her onto her back, holding her arms down, legs astride her. “This is not fetching my breakfast,” he admonished, knitting his brows.

“Well, Cullen, I can hardly do that when you have me pinned down, can I?” she tutted, still laughing.

“Promise no more tickling and I’ll let go,” he urged, watching her.

“I give you my word,” she agreed with a wink.

He mulled this over, temporarily relaxing his grip, before clutching her wrists again, a smirk playing on his face. It wasn’t hard to gauge what was on his mind now, likely not breakfast. She smiled, licking her lips, his gaze tracking her.

“Maybe I can wait,” he hinted suggestively, leaning down to kiss her.

As his tongue met hers in slow, heated kiss, the warm tickle was overtaken by a burning tingle skimming over her spine. She sensed him move his legs and opened hers to grant him access. Kai wriggled in his grasp, wanting him to let go, wanting to thread her fingers into his hair, curly and tousled from sleep. Yet he continued to hold onto her.

Cullen drew away, resting his lips by her ear. “Behave,” he growled.

She froze hearing the timbre of his voice. She adored it when he used that voice, and he knew what effect it had on her. “Yes,” she acquiesced quietly. Kai saw him hesitate.

“Ah,” he groaned.

She peered down and chuckled. He was wearing his warm underclothes; even Cullen found it too cold to be totally naked in a tent here at night. And she had her night shirt and smalls on. They were both clothed, and his hands were occupied holding her down. She couldn’t resist teasing him.

“Always a plan, Commander?” she snickered.

“Yes, well. It was a spur of the moment thing,” he conceded a little sheepishly. “Shall we start again?”

Kai nodded, smirking. As he released his grip, they heard Harding.

“Inquisitor, Commander. Are you awake?”
They looked resignedly at each other before responding ‘yes’ in weary unison.

“Oh good, you did request I wake you for an early start,” she continued, a hint of amusement in her voice. “Breakfast in ten minutes?” she proposed.

“Thank you, Harding,” Kai called back.

Cullen groaned and raised his hands from her wrists, bracing himself on his elbows. Kai took the chance and curled her fingers into his hair.

“Shall we pick this up later tonight?” she suggested, her fingertips massaging his scalp.

Cullen closed his eyes, a tranquil expression on his face. He still had the occasional bad headache when working for too long, but not the severe migraines anymore. It was the sensation he enjoyed, it relaxed him.

“As long you continue doing that as well,” he smiled, opening his eyes.

Kai laughed. “Always, husband. Now...do I get a kiss before we get changed?”

“Maybe,” he teased, but didn’t resist when she drew his face to hers.

They were finishing breakfast when Bram Kenric appeared, dressed but still a little bleary eyed. Having finally met him she could appreciate why he and Alex got on so well, both were preoccupied by their work, real life an unnecessary interruption to be negotiated when forced to. But the man did have a brilliant mind, sharp and focused where his research was concerned. Kai made a point of reading his work before they arrived.

She called him over. “Morning, Bram. Come and have some breakfast.”

“Breakfast?” He looked confused. “Oh yes, of course.” He scratched his cheek absentmindedly.

Harding handed him a plate of food as he sat with them. In addition to sending messages to Skyhold, directing the scouts who worked with Bram, she was likewise his minder, ensuring he ate and didn’t come to harm. Kai cleared her throat to hide the giggle as she recalled Harding’s report about him nearly walking off a ledge whilst reading a book.

He thanked Harding and continued talking, gripping the plate in his hand. “Did you say you planned to visit the Thane today?”

“Yes, Bram,” she confirmed. For the second time.

“Brilliant. I’d really appreciate finding out what is on that island. But we couldn’t obtain permission to travel there. Well, not without you meeting her, Thane to Thane, so to speak.” He gave a little laugh. “Though I daresay your ‘hold’ is perhaps a little bigger.”

A little bigger, she thought. That was an understatement. Skyhold was nearly a city state in terms of population, numbering into many thousands, all under her direction. A mind numbing thought if one concentrated on it overly, which she sought not to, choosing to see it in terms of individuals she knew. Otherwise it could become too impersonal, and down that road lay tyranny.

Bram was smiling at her. “Oh, and could you find out how Colette is getting on? The fishing camp kindly allowed her to stay with them while she investigated some ruins nearby.”
“Of course,” Kai assured him and turned to Harding. “Do you have...?” was all she got out before a map was thrust into her hand.

“The area we managed to access is mapped out there, but the Hakkonites have made it difficult to reach further north. I don’t think they like having us here,” Harding reported, a wry smile crossing her face.

Bull laughed. “Don’t worry, it’s an occupational hazard with us. We’re used to pissing people off.” He winked, seeing Bram’s dismayed expression. “Only the bad guys, Professor.”

It was Dorian who sighted the scout racing into camp, searching around frantically until he saw them. “Somehow I think that may be for us,” he remarked, pointing at the man.

“Commander, Inquisitor! The Hakkonites are attacking the forward camp by the river,” the scout shouted as he rushed to them. He panted hard, forcing out the words. “A scout and soldier were up on the hillside where they appeared from. We don’t know if they’re still alive.”

“Bull, sometimes I loathe it when you’re right,” Dorian sighed.

Kai looked to her team, including her husband. “Grab your gear, folks, they’re playing our tune.” She spun back to the scout. “Catch your breath while we get our weapons. You’re our guide now. Harding will get you some water.” She nodded to Harding and saw her run to retrieve some for him.

By the time they were prepared, the scout was ready and the six of them dashed off to rescue their people.

Nearing the camp, they could hear fighting. On the way Kai outlined a plan to her squad. If the attacking force wasn’t large, she would divide the team. Bull, Cullen and Dorian would support their troops, and she and Cole would seek to locate the others, alive she hoped. Cullen was initially sceptical about the two of them going alone, but Kai insisted they would be careful. Both could stealth and move silently. If their people were seriously injured, reaching them in time was essential.

According to Harding this was the first assault the Hakkonites had carried out, previous encounters with them no more than skirmishes, as if the Hakkonites were warning them off.

Something had clearly altered, and Kai couldn’t help thinking their arrival yesterday was the catalyst. What she didn’t understand was why; the Inquisition had been here a few weeks now with only trivial issues with this group. Another puzzle and another problem to be solved or dealt with, or more than likely both.

As they reached the camp, she turned to Cullen. “Well?” she asked hurriedly.

He scanned the camp, working out what they faced. Kai still marvelled at how fast Cullen could assess a situation. A lot came from years of training, but the ease and speed with which he did it was innate.

“We can handle this,” he informed her, dashing forward. “Go, find them,” he called back as Dorian and Bull followed him.

“Right Cole, it’s you and me to the rescue,” she announced.

“Yes, Hope and Compassion to the rescue,” he acknowledged with a smile. “Let’s go.”

Hope, that’s what he called her, a ‘beacon of hope’. It was on one bad day when he discovered
her on the battlements staring despondently at the mountains, Izzy trailing behind him. Cullen was away, and she was feeling low, hiding in the part of the battlements nobody visited. He rambled on as Izzy sat and listened. He even joked, leading Kai to remark that perhaps she should rename him a ‘Spirit of Humour’.

Kai shook her head as he charged off, catching him as they raced up the hill to the last known position of the two men, Turbot and Grandin. What they discovered when they arrived at the spot was less than comforting. One dead scout stabbed repeatedly, and a trail of blood leading away. Kai searched the pockets of the scout and found a letter addressed to ‘Jace’ from his mother.

“I guess we’ve found one of them, but where’s the other one?” she questioned. “There’s too much blood here, Grandin couldn’t have simply walked away.”


“Cole?” she asked worriedly.

He pointed upwards. “Up there.”

They pushed on, weaving their way higher. Further up they encountered bodies, smouldering and twisted exactly like the ones in the Temple of Scared Ashes after the explosion. There was a shack nearby with an Inquisition dagger driven into the frame. She could hear hushed murmurings like a wind carrying voices but the words were indistinct. The sound was eerily familiar.

“What...happened...here?” she questioned, her voice betraying worry.

“We have to find him,” Cole insisted, staring at the scene before them. “You have to talk with him.”

“Grandin?”

“Yes.” He swung to face her and the look in his eyes told her it was imperative.

“Alright,” she acknowledged.

Cole was seldom so emphatic, and judging by what they encountered, whatever transpired wasn’t good. Kai had her suspicions but until they found Grandin she couldn’t be certain. Moving on, they discovered a second set of bodies and then a third, this time with a message. Kai really didn’t like what this was pointing to.

At the top of the ridge their progress came to an abrupt stop as Kai ran slap bang into someone coming out of a hut, knocking both of them down.

“Lady! Is there not enough space for you?” shouted an annoyed female voice.

“What?!” Kai exclaimed before sense kicked in.

“You heard,” was the terse response.

“I’m sorry,” Kai apologised, seeking to soothe the situation as she rose and stepped over to the woman. “I’m Kai Rutherford, th...”

An annoyed groan interrupted her. “The Inquisitor.”

“How did you know?” Kai queried, apprehensive the woman may a Hakkonite, although she was dressed differently, wearing a coat with a hood. They were painted with kaddis. Kai was ready to
snag her blades if need be.

The woman stared up at her, but didn’t answer her question. The hood had obscured her face; she was no more than a girl, late teens by the look of her. Her expression signified irritation rather than menace.

“And you are...?” Kai asked, offering her hand which the girl accepted and Kai helped her up.

“They place as if it’s any of your business,” she huffed.

Kai glanced around, the hut was modest with a few sticks of furniture, lit with veilfire, and there were fish smoking over a fire. She could see no-one else around. *Veilfire, only mages could light veilfire,* she recalled.

“Are you here...on your own?” Kai asked lightly.

Sigrid scoffed. “If you are offering aid, I have no need. I am an Augur’s apprentice...well ex-apprentice. I can handle myself.”

*Well, that was telling her,* Kai thought. *She probably could, she was feisty enough.* Kai wondered if Sigrid had seen Grandin.

“Have you noticed a man pass through, he’s...” Kai realised she had absolutely no idea what Grandin looked like. “On second thoughts, have you seen or heard anything unusual?”

Sigrid gave Kai a defiant glare. “Apart from you charging up here, you mean. No, I have not.”

“I see, thank you,” Kai nodded respectfully. “And I apologise again for knocking you over.”

“Are we done now?” Sigrid answered brusquely, span smartly on her heel and strode back into the hut without waiting for an answer.

One thing puzzled Kai still, how did the girl know who she was? Kai thought she’d been careful to keep her palm facing away. Curiosity got the better of her and Kai wandered to the door of the hut. “How did you know who I was?” she inquired.

Sigrid went to speak and suddenly seemed to change her mind. “Your...hand,” she stated instead.

Kai flashed her palm, still brighter than normal, radiating through her glove. Sigrid’s reaction was to stare at it as people did when they saw the Anchor for the first time. She realised the girl was lying, but why?

“Of course,” Kai smiled reassuringly and rolled her eye. “It’s a bit of a giveaway, isn’t it?”

“Aye, it is.” The response was pithy, but with less irritation.

Kai had more questions, but aware they had Grandin to track down. Also, Cole was silent; ordinarily he read anyone they came into contact with, presenting some nugget which invariably made recipients nervous. Kai bid a goodbye and moved them on.

“She’s carrying a spirit,” he informed her when they were out of earshot. “She was scared, didn’t know if you could see because of the Anchor. She hoped if she sounded angry you’d be distracted and leave her alone.”

Kai came to a standstill. “What? Why was she scared if I saw? Not that I can see.”

“You’re a lowlander. She didn’t know you, only the tales about what happens to abominations
“You’re a lowlander. She didn’t know you, only the tales about what happens to abominations there.”

“Maker!” Kai rubbed her face.

Chantry teachings about magic and spirits, she grumbled to herself. She appreciated it wasn’t necessarily like that, not everyone carrying a spirit became an abomination, although that wasn’t a popular opinion. Wynne had demonstrated that...

“Wynne?” Cole repeated aloud, a hint of curiosity in his tone. “You know about...oh...because of Aedan.”

Kai peered at him. “You knew Wynne?”

“She was Rhys’s mother,” he declared.

Kai gaze widened. “Cole, we have to find Grandin first and then you and I need to have a talk.”

“Yes, we do,” he accepted.

She went on ahead, Cole following. Why did one thing always lead to a host more with her? Why were there always more questions than answers? Why was practically everyone she came across connected to someone she knew or to her?

A memory popped into her head. So many questions, too many questions. He never liked her asking...

Cole broke into her recollection. “Katarina, why must you always ask so many questions? I’m done with this interrogation. Just accept what I tell you for once!”

She glanced back at Cole, smiling. It was Cole’s voice, but her father’s exasperated words when he informed her she was to be betrothed to Aedan Cousland. She did accept it, she merely wished to know specific details about him, and the arrangements her parents had made. Plus asking questions displeased him, and once she’d noticed that, she couldn’t resist being awkward even though it was childish.

Papa considered her wilful and much too curious for her good. The more he attempted to mould her into an obedient quiet child, the more she played up to his perception of her. In the end he gave up and left Ama to ‘handle’ her, which suited Kai just fine.

She was wilful and curious but no more than any child. Kai worked out much later it was simply the case her father didn’t like her, for whatever reason. She and Lyssa could commit the same mistake, but she would receive a stern scolding, while Lyssa received a mild reprimand.

Kai puffed out a breath, she was becoming distracted again.

They arrived at the base of the next slope, finding a flat area ahead with more bodies.


“...he will turn into an abomination, an actual one.” Kai finished.

Cole nodded. “He’s changing the spirit inside him. It only wished to save him, to help. Now it wants what he wants...to kill.”

Kai thought for a minute. “It wants what he wants, you say?”
Cole nodded again.

That gave her an idea. Kai rolled her shoulders, straightened her stance and strode towards the cave. *Right,* she thought, *all I have to do is talk down an Inquisition soldier carrying a spirit inside him, on the cusp of developing into an abomination. Oh Maker...*

“He’s a mage,” Cole added.

*A powerful abomination, wonderful,* she thought, a tired groan escaping. She looked at Cole. “Anything else?”

“No.” He shook his head.

Kai walked on, focusing, readying herself. She could reveal no fear; this had to be a convincing performance. When she entered the cave, she was prepared. Grandin stood up from where he was huddled and faced her.

“Inquisitor,” he acknowledged her hesitantly.

“Grandin, do you have a report for me?” she questioned, her tone even and matter of fact, as if he was an ordinary soldier asked to brief her. She hoped the normality of it would be sufficient distraction.

“I...yes, Inquisitor.” He paused, straightening to attention, the sword he grasped now pointing downwards. “Jace and I were a forward patrol, checking ahead before the rest followed to establish an encampment. The Hakkonites, they... they appeared from nowhere, suddenly on us...”

Kai calmly waited for him to continue.

“He...we didn’t have time to react they were so fast. They left us for dead. Jace...” Grandin’s voice wavered. “...was my...friend. He was going to take me to Val Royeaux...” The way he talked about Jace indicated there was something more between them.

Kai prompted him gently. “What happened then?”

Grandin composed himself. “The spirit, it found me as I bled out, saved me.” He grimaced. “I killed them, so many of them...” his voice was altering, bitter as he spoke.

Kai knew Cole was right behind her, but the two of them had no chance alone if Grandin turned.

She could hear the telltale tone, the tight echo as Grandin and the spirit spoke as one. “The Hakkonites will not kill more people, not like Jace. I swear I will protect them, Inquisitor.”

Kai chose the words for her request with care. “Do you give me your solemn word that you will allow no harm to come to our people and those who ally with us? That you will protect from them from the Hakkonites only until the task is completed?”

He regarded her for a moment. It was the longest moment in Kai’s life, but she showed no alarm.

He nodded his agreement. “I swear, Inquisitor.”

She accepted his promise. “Then serve as you are, Grandin.”

“Thank you, Inquisitor. I *will* serve your cause.” The words were spoken with absolute commitment.
Kai watched as he left. It wasn’t until Cole informed her he was gone she let go exhaling heavily. Relief flooded in, along with nausea. Kai had confronted death on numerous occasions, but this time she felt physically sick. It wasn’t long before her helm was off and she was vomiting. She’d felt the same the first time she killed someone, a mage back at the crossroads in the Hinterlands.

After it passed, Kai drank some water from her canteen as Cole watched her, silent once more.

“Do you think he’ll keep his promise?” she inquired, her voice hoarse from the sore throat.

He spoke dispassionately. “He gave his word. It will do as he wishes.”

She recognised that meant a yes. Kai scratched her head and put her helm back on. There was one more thing to do. Grandin was one of Cullen’s soldiers; she would have to inform him. Kai could imagine his reaction when he found out she allowed one of his men to wander off possessed. Unhappy would be an understatement.

“I know one thing,” she groaned as she went to leave. “Cullen’s going to kill me when he finds out.”
Cullen was exasperated, what in the Maker’s name was she thinking letting Grandin wander off possessed? He understood it wasn’t safe to confront him, but she could have brought him to them so they could deal with him. Now he was Maker knew where doing Maker knew what. He gave another frustrated grunt, catching her glance at him before turning back.

It was her call she told him, and her responsibility. He had no doubt she would accept the blame and consequences if something happened, but that wasn’t the point. Cullen blamed Solas for this. Their conversations encouraged her to be sympathetic to spirits, ignoring the threat they posed.

Not all spirits were like Cole, and Cullen wasn’t confident she recognised that. His distrust of Cole had faded. Cole had plenty of opportunity to become dangerous but didn’t. Plus his commitment to protecting Kai was beyond doubt. He was afraid her faith in Cole persuaded her to consider other spirits as akin to people, a perception he had contested with her until she refused to debate it any further with him.

The Basin was hazardous enough without her releasing more problems into the mix. His mental grumbling came to an abrupt stop as he heard her.

“Oh!” she uttered, shuddering to a halt.

Cullen rushed forward to where she stood, and stared. Ahead, there were burning bodies just like the ones in the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

Dorian came up beside him. “Well, I can’t decide whether that’s impressive or disconcerting.”

“I’d say disconcerting,” Bull chimed in, joining them. “At least they’re Hakkonites, not ours. See the weapons.” He pointed at a large maul lying next to one of the bodies.

“Grandin,” she murmured. “This is the same as Cole and I found.”

Cole spoke faintly. “So angry, he wants to kill all of them.”

“Well, he’s certainly made inroads with this lot. I’d be amazed if we found any of the group that retreated alive,” Bull remarked.

Cullen rounded on her. “Now do you understand? Imagine if these were Inquisition troops,” he challenged, scowling.

“He gave me his word and he will keep it,” she insisted. “He’s Inquisition.”
“No, he’s an abomination!” Cullen shot back in exasperation. “And you seem unable to
distinguish between the two.”

The Inquisitor frowned momentarily before an even expression settled on her face. He could see
she was annoyed and hiding it.

“Your objection is noted, Commander. Perhaps we can move on,” she declared and continued
walking.

Leliana was correct; she could be strong willed, but not always for the right reason. This was not
simply a difference of view; lives could be affected by her judgment.

Cullen exhaled in frustration. ‘You’re overreacting’ was what she actually meant. She felt his
history clouded his judgement, and he thought her naïve. If the conversation shifted to spirits, it
was the immovable object meeting the irresistible force. The discussions had ceased when she
refused to argue the point with him anymore, shutting him down whenever he tried to raise the
subject.

Cullen resisted the urge to force the issue, for the moment at least. Much as he wished to press her
on the matter, when she was like this she would refuse to engage with him. In the past his
frustration with her intransigent manner had sometimes boiled over into anger and he had ended
up yelling at her. At that point she walked away from him. Cullen now knew he had to bite his
tongue and bide his time until they were both calmer.

Maker, the woman could be so damn awkward sometimes.

He watched her, rubbing the back of his neck before he followed on.

Further on, they discovered more bodies killed the same way, enough to account for the
Hakkonites they saw retreat from the river camp. They’d seen this force on the other side of the
river watching the skirmish, but not intervening, choosing to withdraw when the attacking group
was practically done. Fierce they may be, but evidently tactical too. Cullen’s training told him
there was more going on than a reaction to territorial encroachment. They were strategically
holding back their forces, sacrificing some to determine the strength of their enemy. For what end
was the crucial question.

He didn’t like any of this. His gut instinct told him they had stumbled into something unplanned
for. Their immediate problem was absence of intelligence; they needed to identify what they were
dealing with. He wondered if the Avvar in Stone-Bear Hold may have better information, they
were familiar with the Basin after all, and perhaps the Jaws of Hakkon.

Cullen saw the Inquisitor examining the map Harding supplied, orientating herself to match the
map.

He sighed, why couldn’t she simply turn the map around?

Cullen shook his head. This was no good, he had to temper himself otherwise his irritation with
her would escalate, and he needed to maintain a clear head. Sometimes it was hard to separate the
two sides of their relationship, especially when she was being so stubborn.

“Come with me,” she suggested when she told him about the Frostback Basin. “A few rifts, a
little excavation and a dash of diplomacy,” she claimed. “The rest of the time will be ours.”

A chance to spend valuable time with his wife away from the bustle of the Inquisition, of course
he said yes. He envisioned an easy mission giving them a chance to talk. This trip was not turning
out to be the straightforward venture they assumed.

The Inquisitor pointed to a cutting in the rock, the river trickling through. “They didn’t manage to map it all, but this channel should lead us to the other section of the river. We can pick up the trail heading to the Avvar fishing camp where Colette should be.”

Halfway down the cutting a huge downed tree blocked their way forcing them to clamber around it. They’d scarcely reached the other side when they heard the sound before seeing it, a rift opening up ahead of them.

Out tumbled a wraith and two despair demons. Dorian laid down a Wall of Fire catching the wraith and one of the despair demons as the Inquisitor threw an Antivan fire at the other. It was sufficient to weaken and hold them while she drew on the rift, and he, Bull and Cole moved in to finish them off.

They waited for the next wave and as it came, a host of curses greeted what the rift disgorged, astonishment reflected on every face bar Cole’s. He merely expressed a surprised “oh”.

*Four pride demons...four huge, cackling pride demons with lightning whips. This was...*

“Move back!” Kai screamed. “Incoming bees! Dorian, Horror and fry what you can!”

Cullen watched the flasks, arrows and magic fly as they fell back. As the bees dissipated, she stealthed and drew on the rift weakening it, allowing them to injure the slowed demons before she pulled them back again. She and Dorian unleashed more bees, arrows and magic. This was pure attrition, wearing the lumbering beasts down.

Eventually only two remained. As Cullen, Bull and Cole moved in again, one of them headed straight for the Inquisitor and Dorian, knocking Cullen down as he attempted to block it. They were too lightly armoured to handle it head on. If the Inquisitor stealthed, she could get away, but it would leave Dorian exposed.

Unable to evade the advancing demon, Cullen watched dismayed as the Inquisitor opened another rift to ward off the attack. The whirlwind sucked at the demon threatening to drag it in, but suddenly, with a snap of his whip, he caught her leg dragging her towards it, and the rift. This one seemingly had more fight left in him than the others. Dorian dropped his staff and hung onto her, both of them swathed in lightning, the pain evident on their faces. All three were in danger of disappearing into the Fade.

Bull and Cole raced to him, having dispatched the other one. They couldn’t directly attack the demon so near the rift, so there was only one option, keep the two of them from being drawn in and weaken the demon so it would let go. Cullen hoped it would also be incapable of resisting the drag of the rift. He knew Bull was the strongest.

“Bull, keep them here!” he yelled.

“I got it!” Bull shouted back, shouldering his axe and sprinting to grab Dorian as he held onto the Inquisitor in turn. Feet planted firmly Bull hung on, a tug of war now between the three of them and the pride demon.

Lucky Cullen and Cole had some of her flasks between them. The Inquisitor had a tendency to overstock, distributing the extra among the team. It was up to the two of them to attack while the others sought to stay away from the vortex. For the first time Cullen hoped Cole was reading his thoughts.

“Cole!” Cullen turned.
“Yes, together!” Cole shouted back.

The two of them threw everything they had at the remaining pride demon, hearing the guttural screeches as it finally let go, vanishing into the bubbling rift. The Inquisitor stood shakily, but managed to close both rifts before collapsing back down. All five of them recovered their breath, strained more by the danger than the effort.

“Well, that was fucked up,” she complained yet smiling. “I don’t fancy my bits being tingled like that again, thank you very much.”

Tired, tense laughter met her remarks. Only she would joke after almost being dragged into the Fade...again. As exasperated as he had been, he felt only relief now.

“Boss,” Bull grinned, a little breathless. “There’s never a dull moment, is there?”

She laughed. “And you said hunting for buckles would be boring.”

“Technically, the Professor is doing that,” Dorian noted, picking up his downed staff. “We’re here to...what are we here for besides being targets yet again?”

“Dorian, you make such a sartorially elegant target, we’re just here to carry your wardrobe,” she ribbed.

Dorian arched an eyebrow at her, a half grin settling in. “Perhaps you would be allowed to if I was permitted to bring one. One has to do the best with the tools one has.”

“There’s barely any room with all the flasks we have to carry for you, Inquisitor.” Cullen remarked with a modest grin.

Dorian clapped his approval. “Hear, hear, Cullen. Well said. The woman should set up her own apiary, the amount of bees she lugs about, and has us lugging around for her.”

“Mock as you will, those bees, the little darlings, saved our hides.” Kai stood up brushing off the loose dirt, still grinning.

She was bouncing everyone back after a near miss. Whereas someone else may linger on the danger they were in, she fought back pulling everyone together to carry on. He caught her eye and she beamed just for him.

Cullen smiled back, hearing the familiar words in his head, ‘you knew what you were getting’. Her determination was both admirable and maddening, and wearisome as she could be at times, he loved his wife greatly.

But her resolve aside, she’d taken a tremendous risk in opening the rift, a risk that so readily could have gone wrong. He recognised she was bound to encounter danger, what bothered him was how much of it was her doing. Cullen wondered if this incident would have made it into a report. He long suspected some events were withheld or glossed over, made less than they were. This time he was on the ground with her, and would see for himself.

The five of them resumed their trek. All they had to do now was to locate the Professor’s assistant and attempt to avoid trouble on the way.

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“Boss!” Bull yelled laughing, taking down one of the despair demons and then rushing to help
Cole with another. “Remember what I said about being careful of the wildlife. That included not hitting a bogfisher in the arse while we’re trying to kill demons.”

“You try firing at a damn flying demon!” the Inquisitor screamed as she ran from the advancing bogfisher.

Cullen chased after the remaining despair demon, glancing to see the Inquisitor stealth, and the bogfisher come a confused halt. She re-appeared, daggers drawn, and hacked away at the back of its neck. As he carved into his quarry, he heard the thud as the bogfisher fell.

“Dorian, some help here!” Cullen shouted.

A roar of fire shot past him striking the despair demon, accompanied by noise of the Inquisitor drawing on the fade rift. The demon was both injured and slowed. Cullen shield bashed it and with two more swings of his sword, it was gone. He searched around, all the demons were dealt with and she was closing the rift.

Two more rifts; two more since the encounter with the pride demons, fortunately neither of which was as dangerous. But she was correct; the rifts here produced stronger demons. Something here was different.

“Well, Cullen, I’d say you’re getting a baptism of fire here,” Bull chuckled. “How’s it feel to be doing rather than ordering your troops around?”

“I...” he was momentarily diverted by the Inquisitor whispering to Dorian as he pulled out a vial from his bag. Dorian turned away before draining the contents. The colour told him what it was. Although he no longer felt the craving for lyrium, she was careful nevertheless. Cullen wasn’t conscious how worried she was for him at the Shrine of Dumat until afterwards.

“I have to say I like it, Bull,” he continued, watching Dorian and the Inquisitor walk up to them.

“What does my Commander like?” she smiled, tightening her eye patch.

“She’s fishing for a compliment,” Dorian taunted, nudging her.

“Not everyone needs to have their egos preened,” she grinned and nudged him back.

“Not everyone ‘requires’ a reprimand,” he fired back smirking, with a stress on ‘requires’.

Cullen let out a strangled cough. His gaze shot to Kai to catch her staring wide eyed at him, the blush in his face echoed in hers, not sure which of them was the brighter shade of crimson.

*How did Dorian know what the term meant?* Cullen’s hand reached for the back of his neck.

“What, no answer?” Dorian inquired smugly.

Fortunately it was Cole who rescued the two of them from further embarrassment.

“If he hits low while I go in high, I wonder if we could get them to flip? Always wanted to get someone to flip.”

Stunned, puzzled faces swung to look at Cole, all except Bull’s.

Bull grunted. “Kid, you in my head again?”

“You thought it when you saw Cullen hit the demon,” Cole responded. “Meant to ask the Seeker...”
“Yes, yes,” Bull interrupted impatiently, “and I forgot. Cullen reminded me, and now because Dorian’s embarrassed them,” he scowled at Dorian, “and you’ve told everyone, I can’t ask him. Good timing, Cole.”

As far as Cullen was concerned the intervention was welcome, anything to change the subject. “If you like, we could...try,” he suggested, facing Bull. “Though I...”

“Really? Nice one, Cullen!” Bull chuckled. “Ok, next group of Hakkonites we find, let’s give it a go.” He slapped Cole on the back, the force shooting Cole forward. “I take it back, Kid. You timed it right after all.”

Cole righted his footing. “I did? Oh.”

Dorian shook his head. “Amatus, you are such a child, you know.”

“I know,” Bull grinned. “All the best spies are. You need that instinctive curiosity, helps you recognise things others overlook.”

Someone else he knew resembled Bull’s description. He peered back at Kai, the shock now gone replaced by a resigned look. She’d often teased Dorian; it was only a matter of time before he landed a blow back. Cullen would rather not have been there when it happened though. She took this in her stride more comfortably than he did.

A woman’s scream cut into the exchange. They saw an elven woman running and three Hakkonites chasing her.

“Colette!” the Inquisitor exclaimed. “They’ll kill her.” She hurried forward, the rest of them rushing after her.

“You have to draw their attention,” Cullen shouted as they chased them. “Get them away from her.”

She stopped and let out a piecing whistle, accompanied by a loud and cheerful “Yoo-hoo.”

The Hakkonites turned to see her waving at them as if hailing a friend. “Hello! I’m the Inquisitor. I suspect you’re looking for me,” she yelled calmly, her hand glowing brighter as she continued waving.

Their pursuit of Colette ended when the Hakkonites swung around, heading their way. Cullen saw Colette continue on towards to what he surmised was the fishing camp by the lake.

“OK here they come.” The Inquisitor readied her bow. “Dorian perhaps some...”

Bull dived in eagerly. “Wait! Save one for the flip. This is perfect!”


Bull scanned the group. “I think...that one on the right. Sword, but no shield. He’ll do nicely...wait, where did the middle one go?”

The Inquisitor shouldered her bow and tugged out her blades. “She’s stealthed, coming for me I assume,” she advised them. “Change of plan, gentlemen. Cole, Dorian take out the archer. Bull, Cullen...do your...flip thing. You’re the distraction.” She winked. “The other one is mine.”
“Inquisit...” was all Cullen got out before she disappeared. “Dammit!” he groaned.

“Cullen, she knows what she’s doing, let her do it,” Bull advised.

“I know she does,” he shot back. “It doesn’t mean she has to take chances.”

“She isn’t,” Bull answered adamantly. “We’re the distraction, remember. Boss stealths while we attack, they can’t find her, so they try to flush her out by attacking us...”

“...and she takes them out. We’re the bait,” Cullen finished.

Tactics, forcing your adversary down the path you want them to take. Why didn’t he realise? Had he become so mired in planning to avoid conflicts he’d begun to think like a peacekeeper rather than a fighter?

Bull grinned. “You got it. Here he comes, you low, me high.”

As the warrior hurtled towards them sword lifted, he couldn’t help thinking, *who on earth trained this man to leave himself open like that?* Cullen sliced his sword low, hooking the man’s legs as Bull stepped and swung from behind. The force of their blows spun him, but not head over heels, more a sideways twist before he landed on his back.

Bull swept downwards with his axe, ending the encounter. Cullen sensed movement behind him, and whirled around, weapon ready, only to see the Hakkonite gurgle and crumple to the floor as the Inquisitor stood there with bloodied daggers. She crouched, wiping them on the grass before sheathing them.

“Too bad about the flip,” she sympathised.

“Ach, it was worth a try,” Bull waved his hand dismissively. He strode closer and studied the assassin. “Nice and neat, Boss, like cutting the strings of a puppet.”

Cullen could understand what he meant, the crossways cut through the back of neck was unusual, but effective. Guaranteed to immobilize an opponent instantly unlike a strike anywhere else which could still leave the assailant at risk if the victim survived.

Cullen smiled. “Heir?”

She nodded. “Partly, yes.” She modified her voice, mimicking her trainer’s. “Our way is the sudden strike that overwhelms,” she recited. Returning to her own voice, she grinned. “Don’t tell her I did that. She still makes me nervous.”

“Partly?” he questioned.

“I...sort of found it by accident,” she disclosed, scratching her head. “But not as cleanly as she showed me.”

Cullen furrowed his eyebrows, mystified. How does someone discover such a move by accident? More accurately how does someone who spent most of her adult life with diplomacy as her profession become so proficient with weapons as if that was her calling instead.

She clapped, calling them together. “Well, experiment over, we should check on Colette, don’t you think?”

As the others went on, Kai held him back, staring intently into his eyes. “Cullen, are we good?”
Cullen realised what she meant, he disapproved of her decision about Grandin, and she recognised he would. But neither of them were angry anymore and perhaps now they could discuss what happened, if not the wider issue that came between them.

“I disagree with your decision about Grandin, but you knew I would, Kai,” he told her.

“I know,” she acknowledged, resting her hand on his breastplate as she stepped closer. “I just...it was the best I could do in the circumstances, Cullen.”

Cullen sighed. “I appreciate you did what you thought was best. What concerns me is what could happen if he’s as angry as you say. If the spirit within him turns into a demon, it will be pure rage, and a Rage demon won’t be fussy about what it attacks. Look how powerful he is already, and how he mowed down those Hakkonites.”

“I know how dangerous mage abominations can be, we’ve fought enough of them,” she replied, her tone seeking to reassure him. “But I don’t think he will turn. He has a purpose and he swore an oath.”

Cullen shook his head. “That’s just your gut feeling Kai, you’re not basing it on evidence. If you turn out to be wrong and he kills some of our people or other Avvar here, how will you feel then?”

Her nervous tick showed as Kai scratched her head. “Guilty,” she answered sadly, looking down.

Placing his fingers under her chin, he lifted her head to face him. “If we find him again, allow me to make a decision based on what we find. Promise me this.” He was calmly insistent, hoping it was enough to sway her.

She frowned, scanning his face for a moment before nodding. “Alright.”

He hadn’t expected her to agree so readily, but was grateful she did. It was possible they wouldn’t find him. If they did though, at least he wouldn’t have to argue the point with her during a dangerous situation.

“Thank you,” he acknowledged, smiling at her. “And in answer to your question, yes, we are.”

“Good, I’m glad,” she exhaled with a reassured smile.

The smile became a smirk as she cocked her head, and before he knew it she’d draped her arms around his neck and was kissing him. Taken aback, he hesitated before instinct took over and he pulled her against him, kissing her. The sound of applause and whistles drew them apart.

Cullen coughed. “We should...”

“Yes, that would be...” she agreed.

They walked on.

“What was that for?” he asked. “Not that I’m complaining, but you realise there will be comments.”

Kai stopped and sighed. “In Skyhold, we’re under scrutiny, most places we go we’re under scrutiny, always careful what we do, how we behave. Look around, there’s no-one here, only our friends, and yes, there will be comments, but...I...I just wanted to kiss my husband.” She gave a little laugh. “It’s not as if I dragged you to the floor and leapt on you in front of your soldiers...”
Cullen cleared his throat. “Yes, quite. I suppose a little leeway won’t hurt.”

“A little leeway sounds great to me,” she smiled cheekily.

He shook his head with a laugh and gestured for them to continue. “After you, Inquisitor.”

“Of course, Commander,” she nodded.

Walking ahead of him he couldn’t help watching her, bow strapped to her back, blades by her sides and a pack of flasks. Most rogues specialised in either bows or daggers. She wasn’t as skilful as Cole with his daggers, or as Sera with her bow, but she could more easily shift between the two than either of them. As easily as she could switch from chatting with a head of state, to their workmen or his soldiers. Kai adapted to situations intuitively, making it look effortless.

She wasn’t always as flexible in other areas though. However, maybe her willingness in agreeing to his request about Grandin was an indicator she might hear him out on the issue of her role. Perhaps a change in scenery was all it took. If they got a chance to talk during their investigation of the Jaws of Hakkon, he’d take it, however slight it was.

Cullen quickened his pace catching up with her, and they reached the others, to knowing grins. All five continued to the fishing camp.
Chapter Summary

After checking on Colette, Kai, Cullen and her team make their way to Stone-Bear Hold. Repercussions of the past haunt Kai and Cullen once more, threatening both them and the Inquisition.

When they reached the Avvar fishing camp, there was no sign of Colette. They found a man sitting on a bench in front of the cabins, gutting fish, and fisherman by the jetty sorting a catch. The picture of normality was in sharp contrast to their journey through the Basin. Kai wandered up the man, seeing him pause and look up as she approached. The glance at her hand was swift, likely to establish who she was.

“We saw what took place with the Jaws of Hakkon. Well done. Those fools will not bother us again.” He spat contemptuously. “Hah, demanding to ‘share our meals’. The fish will be sharing them instead,” he chuckled. “If you seek your skald’s apprentice, she is inside.” He gestured to one of the cabins.

Kai assumed he meant Colette. “Thank you,” she acknowledged. “Are you Arvid Rolfsen?” Harding had informed her he was the one who offered Colette a place to stay.

“I am,” Arvid replied, returning to his work. “And we all know who you are, Inquisitor. Amund’s tales of your adventures precede your arrival. From what we saw he did not embroider the stories as I thought. You may dress strangely, but for lowlanders you fight well.” He glanced up. “I will not keep you.”

Kai nodded her thanks and headed to the cabin. Inside they found Colette seated at a table and not as distressed as they imagined. She was seemingly made of sterner stuff. A short sword was propped up against a table covered in parchments, and what looked like a journal and a map. She rose on seeing them enter.

“Thank you,” she acknowledged gratefully. “Are you Arvid Rolfsen?” Harding had informed her he was the one who offered Colette a place to stay.

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“Thank you,” she acknowledged gratefully. “I was planning to visit the ruin to gather more samples. The attack was unexpected.”

“Yes, it’s possible our arrival might have prompted the attacks,” Kai replied. By now she was convinced it was, and they needed to find out why their presence had altered the situation.

Colette’s face registered surprise. “Attacks?”

“Some of the Hakkonites launched an assault on our forward camp earlier,” Kai informed her.

“But why now?” Colette questioned puzzled, echoing Kai’s thoughts.

Kai wished she knew. She sighed. “I have no idea, but I would advise not visiting the ruin until we can work out what’s going on. It might be safer if you return to the main camp.”

“Yes, of course. I have to apprise the Professor about the site anyway, and present my findings.”
Colette smiled excitedly. “He will need to evaluate it himself...but I think I’ve discovered a tribute to two of Inquisitor Ameridan’s inner circle.” She picked up her journal. “I copied the inscription on a monument placed there. See,” she pointed at a page in her notebook handing it to Kai.

Kai read the copied inscription and the notes Colette had made. “You think this refers to Haron and Orinna?” she investigated. “What about Ameridan?”

“He was a leader. I expect they would have mentioned him out of respect. ‘A breath in the hunt’ signifies the hunt is still ongoing,” she explained. “We have yet to discover what happened to him.”

“It’s a good start though,” Kai smiled encouragingly.

“Yes, but further research is needed before we can be confident. And I require more samples. Here,” she opened a pack, picking out a couple of clay chippings containing glass stained with a blue vein. “These are some of what I’ve uncovered so far. Templar artefacts,” she announced smiling, presenting the fragments.

“Templars?” Cullen queried, stepping forward and peering at the pieces she held in her palm.

Of course that would get his attention, Kai thought. Many of his formative years were spent in the Order, and even though he left the life behind, he remained shaped by it.

“Yes,” Colette nodded eagerly, looking at Cullen. “The Order was new at the time and finding these so far away in uncharted territory is unusual. I suspect these might be from lyrium phials such as Ser Haron would have carried. Like the site, they need to be verified before we can be completely certain.”

Kai took one from her, studying it. The blue was undoubtedly the same colour as lyrium. She held out her hand to Cullen. “These could be from the beginnings of the Order,” she proposed. “Actual physical history, Cullen. Isn’t that incredible? The start of it all, and now...”

“...the end of it all,” he remarked thoughtfully, finishing her sentence.

Kai handed back the sample to Colette. What the Chantry set in motion all those centuries ago, Cullen, through his own actions and the Sanctuary he would establish, was helping to overturn. Haron was noted amongst scholars who researched the last Inquisition, yet Cullen would be widely remembered, not merely for being Commander of the Inquisition, but for closing the chapter on what remained of the Templar Order.

The former Templar who would finally sever the lyrium leash, the leash which had bound men and women to the Chantry for centuries, the leash which took the lives and minds of those who pledged themselves.

Colette spoke thoughtfully. “As academics we’re trained to identify patterns, recurrences, and not regard them as mere coincidence. History does have a tendency to repeat itself.” She paused, her expression serious. “Both Inquisitions called at moments of extreme peril, and as you say a beginning during one, an end during the other. And here you are with your inner circle as was Inquisitor Ameridan. Had the present Inquisition not been declared and all the subsequent events not taken place, we may never have had this opportunity to search for him.”

At least she didn’t mention fate, Kai thought, and smiled at Colette. “Let’s just hope we don’t end up going missing as did my predecessor,” she joked.

Colette giggled. “I suspect they might come looking for you sooner should that happen.”
“Yes, well. As one of your inner circle, Inquisitor, may I propose we not tempt fate, hmm?” Dorian pointed out, eyebrow lifted.

“Point noted,” Kai nodded with a chuckle. “Harding would never forgive us; probably drag half of the Commander’s army down here to conduct a search.”

Bull laughed. “Harding? She’d drag them all down here to find you.”

When Kai said Commander, she saw Colette look to Cullen again, and then took a small book from underneath the map on the table. As Kai saw the cover, she knew what it was. ‘Checkmate’, Varric’s fanciful account of their relationship or as Cullen chose to name it, utter hogwash. If it wasn’t for the fact a portion of the profits financed the Sanctuary, Cullen would be inclined to inform Varric where he could stick his account, if not volunteer to show him.

One unforeseen side effect of the work was Cullen’s growing legion of admirers. Varric’s portrait of Cullen as the battered soul now redeemed struck a chord with many, and much to his astonishment and chagrin he became a symbol of redemption. He could have coped if it was simply that, but the lustful longing which occasionally accompanied it Cullen regarded with dismay.

Being shadowed as they strolled through Ostwick was uncomfortable enough, but when two of her cousins turned up at her brother’s house to catch a glimpse of him, it felt unseemly. All afternoon they simply sat, stared and sighed while Cullen’s hand was permanently connected to the back of his neck. Although she sometimes teased him about the attention, seeing that from her own family was too much.

It wasn’t hard to guess what would come next. Colette offered the volume and a pen to the two of them.

“Commander, Inquisitor, could I... trouble you for...an autograph?” she solicited with nervous expectation.

Kai pre-empted Cullen’s grunt. ‘If something in the story connected with people, allow them this,’ she had told him, ‘you never know when we might need all the help we can get’. She and the Divine planned much, and Kai knew if people felt an affinity with someone they were more likely to listen first before objecting.

“The Commander and I would be delighted,” she effused, taking the items and signing her name with a message. She passed them to Cullen, ignoring his ‘do I have to’ face.

Cullen duly, if grudgingly, signed and returned the book and pen to a thrilled Colette. There were quiet sniggers from behind, and Cullen scowled. No doubt he’d face more teasing from Dorian and Bull about ‘the Commander’s luscious lips’. Of all the descriptions Varric used, he hated that one with a vengeance. Kai thought it wise to make a swift exit now, and head to Stone-Bear Hold. He’d calmed down, but Cullen had a habit of brooding and she had no desire to see him irritated again.

However, the problem of getting Colette safely back to their main camp remained. The best option was to take Colette with them to Stone-Bear Hold and then all return together later. It wasn’t ideal; if they were targeted on the way back, she could become caught up in a fight.

“Colette, we have to travel to Stone-Bear Hold to meet with the Thane, and arrange access to the island. It might be better if you came with...”

Colette smiled as she interrupted Kai. “No need, Inquisitor. Arvid has reassured me I’ll be fine as
long as I don’t go ‘wandering off again’. The Jaws of Hakkon have sworn a peace-oath with Stone-Bear Hold, so if they attacked whilst I’m here under protection in the fishing camp, they are breaking that oath. Please don’t worry about me, I am perfectly safe here.”

“Oh, I see. Are you positive?” Kai inquired, seeing Colette nod.

“Besides, I have further research to do here,” she told Kai and smiled. “And I think Arvid likes my ‘stories’ as he calls them. They prefer oral history passed down to the written word here.”

“Alright then, we’ll come and collect you when we’re finished.” Kai turned to her team. “Shall we push on?” She saw the nods.

Before they left the fishing camp, she spoke to Arvid to thank him. “We appreciate you looking after Colette.”

“No call to praise me, her stories are thanks enough. Something different to listen to and her voice is pleasant.” He coughed looking a little embarrassed as if he had been too enthusiastic. “She is safe here,” he added gruffly, returning to his work.

They exchanged goodbyes and left, making their way to Stone-Bear Hold.

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Introductions made and formalities over, the three of them sat uncomfortably on skins covering the floor of Sun-Hair’s cave as Kai spoke with her. Cole was standing to one side, seemingly distracted and uncharacteristically silent.

Cullen stared into the cup of whatever it was he was given, some form of liquor that tasted almost as vicious as the ghastly stuff Bull handed out the night he and Kai came together. He’d stayed clear of Bull’s offerings after that. But now, he was striving to be polite by drinking the horrible concoction. He caught the same unenthusiastic expression on Dorian’s face as was doubtless on his. Bull drained his cup, peering at theirs as he finished.

“This stuff is pretty good, don’t you think,” Bull grinned, nudging Dorian. “Has a bit of a kick to it.”

“So does a mule, but I wouldn’t wish to be on the receiving end of that either,” Dorian threw back.

Cullen couldn’t contain the chuckle. “It is a little...potent, Bull,” he added smiling.

“Well, Boss likes it. See,” he gestured to the Inquisitor drinking hers as Sun-Hair spoke.

Dorian scoffed. “Where alcohol’s involved, you two have undeniably bad taste. The more revolting the better it seems.”

“Tell you what, I’ll do you both a favour, dump your drinks into my cup. I’ll drink it, nobody’s insulted and everyone’s happy.” Bull glanced over to Sun-Hair and the Inquisitor, and then leant in front of him and Dorian. “Quick, they’re busy, do it now.”

Dorian managed to empty his, but as Cullen tipped his in, he heard “Commander!” The surprise caused him to jerk his hand, the rest of the drink spilling over Bull.

“Ugh, great. Now I’m going to stink like some drunk,” Bull muttered, sitting back.

Dorian pursed his lips, holding back a laugh.
“Yes, Inquisitor?” Cullen replied, attempting to sound normal. Fortunately their surreptitious act went unnoticed.

The Inquisitor looked at him, smiling. “Good news is we know where the Hakkonites are based. An old fortress further north...” she advised him.

He recognised the smile she wore; that particular smile signified bad news or something he wouldn’t like. Cullen could almost hear the ‘but’ without her even speaking the word. It was akin to waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“But...” she began, pausing.

There it was. “Yes Inquisitor?” he inquired, sounding more suspicious than intended.

“...there’s a fade rift nearby. If I go, the Anchor will set it off, undoing the whole purpose of a stealthy investigation.” She looked apologetically to Cole. “Cole I’m sorry, this one’s yours.”

“Investigate and report,” he recited, watching the Inquisitor. “I can do that.”

“Thank you,” she acknowledged.

Her ‘it’ll be fine’ face as she gave him a reassuring smile, did not convince Cullen. The Inquisitor was precise when she investigated, quickly identifying threats and reporting back essential intelligence. Cole was...well, Cole. Cullen hoped if he gave clear instructions to him, he may hold his attention long enough to gain information about the Hakkonites’ resources rather than the thoughts in their heads.

“However, it allows us an opportunity to do two things at once,” the Inquisitor continued. “While you investigate the fortress, I’ll go the island,” she glanced at Sun-Hair, “which the Thane has kindly permitted us to visit.”

Sun-Hair nodded in response. “It is not a place we would go, we leave be the Lady’s Rest. But giving peace to the dead is a worthy quest; any help we can give is yours. And anyone who can put Gurd Harofsen in his place deserves thanks.” She scowled. “The man vexes me, offering to shield us as if we were babes unable to fight for ourselves. Pah!”

Cullen recalled the threat Gurd Harofsen made to the Inquisitor when they arrived. Had they not known of the peace-oath, finding him in the Hold might have led to a tricky situation.

“You and your Inquisition will face the full might of the Jaws of Hakkon soon enough,” he snarled, staring her down, expecting fear.

She looked undeterred. The Inquisitor’s response was to step right up to him, practically eyeball to eyeball, smiling. Cullen knew she occasionally used the combination of her single eye and a smile to throw people off kilter. ‘Badass diplomacy’ she termed it.

“Thane Harofsen,” she intoned deliberately, using his title. “Wise men do not make such boasts before seeing the strength of their foes.”

Cullen’s hand rested ready on the pommel of his sword as he observed the exchange. Gurd Harofsen’s face was a picture of rage as he glared menacingly at a still smiling Inquisitor, before pushing past her and storming away.

It was impressive to see, yet disquieting too. Cullen worried that one day she’d raise the stakes, her bluff would be called and this time she wouldn’t get away with it. She refused to believe in fate or destiny, attributing events to accident or plain luck, but surviving the encounter with
Corypheus had emboldened her. What could be worse than facing down a darkspawn magister and living to tell the tale?

Gurd Harofsen may have thrown down the gauntlet, but she’d picked up and waved it in his face. Now it was up to Cullen to determine the strength of their enemy if they weren’t to be caught out. Then plan how to deal with them.

Cullen had to admit it was a welcome and refreshing change from the routine day to day organisation of the last year. With no war to fight, and only peacekeeping missions to handle, he felt more akin to a bureaucrat than the Commander of an army. Admittedly the work was less arduous, if time consuming. It was also less interesting.

Although his time in the early days was made harder by lyrium withdrawal, he often missed the feeling of being hands on, personally involved with his troops day to day, not to mention the odd skirmish. He sought to keep in touch by helping to train the new recruits, but even that became progressively difficult to find time for. Now he had the opportunity to do what he was good at, strategy and planning for battle, because he had no doubt that would come. Cullen stood and strode over to the Inquisitor and Sun-Hair.

“If I could interrupt?” he asked, seeing the Inquisitor affirm her consent.

He faced Sun-Hair. “Do you have any idea of their numbers or what weaponry they possess?” Cullen inquired. Information on enemy numbers was essential. What forces they sent along with the expedition was minimal, arranged for safety not a battle. He had to know what they were dealing with and plan accordingly.

“Many more than when they came here a few years back,” she announced, with clear irritation. “But I cannot say how many there may be. They move only in small groups, we never see them in greater numbers.”

“He’s not from here originally?” the Inquisitor questioned before taking another sip of her drink.

Sun-Hair shook her head. “No, Gurd Harofsen came from further north when the Blight took much of his Hold there. The place was Red...” she scratched her chin absentmindedly, endeavouring to remember. “Ugh, I forget...”

There was a momentary pause before the Inquisitor spoke again. “Redcliffe?” she offered.

“Yes, that was it,” Sun-Hair confirmed, glancing at the Inquisitor before shifting her attention back to him.

Cullen noticed the Inquisitor become pensive as Sun-Hair continued.

“They were few then, and there was land enough for both, so we granted their request. They did not call themselves the Jaws of Hakkon then, they were Red-Lion Hold. Jaws of Hakkon came later. It is an old name taken by many over the years, all have been foolish and all have finally died out. One thing I can tell you, he has no love for lowlanders, and what he plans I cannot say.” She swung from Cullen to the Inquisitor. “For us they are tiresome, but they will make you pay in blood, Inquisitor.”

“They invariably do,” she answered, almost to herself.

For a brief instant, the confident mask dropped away as her gaze darted to him. Cullen knew then something else was at play here. Redcliffe and the Blight, he could hazard a guess who this meant...yet again. It felt like everything came back to the Hero of Ferelden.
Her focus swiftly returned, and the Inquisitor spoke. “Sun-Hair, you mentioned it was an old name, adopted many times? How old?”

Sun-Hair shifted in her chair, leaning back slightly. “The stories say that many ages ago a group calling themselves the Jaws of Hakkon attacked the lowlanders, your people fought back and destroyed them. Others have taken the name, each one the same, thinking only of battle and war. They swell their numbers with the young and foolish drawn by promises of slaughter-glory and battle-names.”

Suddenly she stared past them, a grin breaking out. “There you are, I thought you had fallen into the lake,” she joked.

Cullen twisted around to see Skywatcher enter the cave. He was smiling at Sun-Hair, an intimate smile Cullen recognised well. Ohh, he thought, were they...? Kai’s words came to him, ‘diplomacy can take many forms’. Evidently it could.

The Inquisitor stood as Skywatcher approached, and the two of them bowed to each other. “Amund,” she addressed him. “It’s good to see you. I hope you are well.”

“It is good to see you, Herald,” he acknowledged, the smile changing to one of friendship.

Skywatcher always called her Herald, never Inquisitor. Cullen once asked him why. The look and reply he gave Cullen was one of an adult explaining to a child. “Because she is one,” he proclaimed. Cullen couldn’t work out if it was a statement of the obvious or held some deeper meaning. Truthfully he found Avvar mysticism baffling.

Skywatcher exchanged greetings with Cullen before turning back to her.

“Thank you, I am. I should also thank you for granting me this visit.” He glanced at Sun-Hair. “The welcome here has been a warm one.”

Knowing laughter from Sun-Hair met Skywatcher’s words. “Perhaps I should thank the Inquisitor too, Amund is a man of...many talents.”

The Inquisitor glanced at each in turn with a perceptive smile. “Then I am honoured to have been of ‘assistance’.”

Sun-Hair laughed again. “You said she was a woman of words. For the ‘assistance’ and the generous gifts you provided, Inquisitor, we would be honoured if you stay and feast with us tonight as our guests. We have heard tales of your adventures and would hear more. The Hold is eager to meet with the woman who has done much to heal the holes in the Lady’s sky.”

The Inquisitor acknowledged the invitation. “We would be honoured to stay. But Colette expects us back at the fishing camp, and Scout Harding will worry if we don’t return tonight.”

“We will send word to your camp.” Sun-Hair waved at one of the Avvar standing at the entrance. “And fetch the young elf. She can join us for the feast. We will set aside quarters for you all. I doubt you will wish to face the Basin at night unprepared.”

Unprepared was correct, all they had were their clothes, armour and weapons. Sleeping under the stars may be regarded as romantic, but not when most of the wildlife would happily eat you if the Hakkonites didn’t kill you first.

“Thank you, Thane,” the Inquisitor smiled, as instructions were issued. “May we look around the Hold in the meantime?”
“You may,” Sun-Hair affirmed. “Though you may find the Hold more interested in all of you, than you in us. Especially your warrior here.” She turned to Bull. “Amund has told us you are...Qunari? We have heard of your people from our trader, Helsdim, but never met one before.”

“Did the horns give it away?” Bull grinned.

Normally Bull would answer he no longer was, but Cullen guessed it was easier not to go into details about the distinction between the people and the way of life.

She chuckled. “Perhaps. Do all your people have them?” she questioned, curious.

Bull nodded. “Mostly, in assorted shapes and sizes. Those born without horns; they say those are destined for greatness.”

“Greater than a man who has helped to save the world?” she offered respectfully.

“I couldn’t say,” he beamed, bowing. “But thank you, Ma’am.”

Sun-Hair leaned forward. “Some of our warriors fancy testing those tales of your strength,” she remarked with a smirk.

Bull laughed loudly. “I’m always up for a challenge, Ma’am.”

“Then you may wish to find our training ground,” she hinted sitting back in her seat.

Cullen watched as Skywatcher approached Sun-Hair with the same smile as before, his voice betraying familiarity. “I would speak with the Herald if you allow, and then return for further ‘discussions’.”

“I will allow you,” she smirked.

They left the cave, following Skywatcher past the training circle and on to the cliff edge. He took a pouch from his pack and handed it to the Inquisitor.

“I offer these to you, Herald, items found by the shoreline. Finding who they belong to may assist someone and I know how you enjoy helping people,” he explained.

“Yes, that,” Cole added enigmatically.

She looked baffled, peering into the bag. “What are they?”

He whispered in her ear, and the baffled expression shifted to realisation. “Oh,” she uttered.

“Now, I must return before she drags me back in,” he laughed. “But we will meet later at the feast.” They bowed to each other, and he returned to the cave.

As the two Avvar standing guard withdrew, a wooden fence was pulled over the entrance. Cullen could imagine what their ‘discussions’ would involve. When he turned back, he caught a knowing grin on Kai’s face before Dorian’s query drew her attention.

“What’s in the pouch?” Dorian inquired.

She tucked the pouch into her pack. “I’ll explain when I’ve worked out what to do,” she told them. Her light-hearted expression gave way to a more serious one. “Right now, we may have a problem, actually no...we do have a problem.”

She exhaled noisily, scratching her head. Like his habit of rubbing his neck, the head scratching
was her involuntary nervous reaction. It signified concentration or worry, and in this instance it was worry.

“Another one?” Dorian sighed. “You, my dear, are far too greedy. You collect them more readily than I do outfits.”

Cullen could guess the answer, but had to ask the question. “This is to do with Redcliffe, isn’t it?”

She nodded unhappily.

“Maker’s breath!” he grumbled, rolling his eyes in irritation.

Sometimes he loathed being right, more especially where it concerned Aedan Cousland. *When didn’t it concern Aedan bloody Cousland?* Cullen rubbed his forehead, and took a deep breath. *He shouldn’t blame her. It wasn’t her fault she kept bumping into the consequences of his actions.*

Kai sighed heavily. “Had I known...I would have restrained my reply to Gurd Harofsen, I wouldn’t have...”

“Goaded him?” Bull offered, watching her. “Boss, you were right in his face.”

“I know,” she groaned, scratching her head distractedly. “Ugh, this is...this is a mess...”

“Boss!” Bull called to her. “An explanation might be helpful, you know, so the rest of us know what we’re dealing with. I thought the guy had it in for you because you were the Inquisitor, but there’s more...?”

“Yes,” she admitted, pausing as she glanced at Cullen before continuing.

She was checking for his reaction, aware he resented how the Hero’s influence persisted. The man was over ten years dead, yet his shadow still hung over them.

“It’s connected to Aedan Cousland and the Blight in Ferelden,” she explained, giving him an apologetic look as his jaw clenched on hearing the man’s name. “Well, you all know about him and me. But how much do you know about the events then?”

She wasn’t addressing him. Cullen knew most of what occurred, even though he had other matters on his mind back then, like struggling not to slip into an abyss of madness.

Dorian folded his arms. “I think the whole of Thedas knew after the fact, but as is the way of things, memories fade.”

“The Ben-Hassrath kept an eye on it, as they always do,” Bull remarked. “It wasn’t my area, but I know some of it.”

She turned to Cole. “You see it don’t you?”

He moved closer to her and spoke softly. “It was nobody’s fault, but it doesn’t make sense if it isn’t anybody’s fault, he *needs* someone to blame.”

She sighed sadly. “Problem is, Cole, the person he really wants is long gone and I’m likely the next best thing.”

“I’ll tell you what I know.” She closed her eye and opened it, drawing a deep breath as she glanced around.

“Before the final battle with the archdemon and after Regent Loghain was slain, they all returned
to Redcliffe. Part of the darkspawn horde had reached Redcliffe. They managed to get the villagers to safety in the castle, but some darkspawn got inside. That was when Aedan and his companions arrived. They helped drive the darkspawn back and pulled up the drawbridge, deciding to wait it out until the group moved on. Riordan, Aedan and Alistair knew they would, the archdemon was calling them. That’s the official account.”

Kai looked aside, swallowed and turned back, watching them as she spoke.

“What the official account doesn’t mention was what else took place that night. Everyone was moved into the castle itself, the last line of defence should the darkspawn manage to get in. So nobody...”

She hesitated, taking a deep breath.

“...nobody realised there were people outside calling for help. It wasn’t until the next morning when they discovered them, human bodies outside the castle, most dead, but a few still alive and sickened by the taint.”

Bull exhaled. “Oh crap, that’s...”

“...something you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemy.” Dorian looked pained, and Cullen could guess why. He lost his friend to the taint.

Her voice wavered as she went on. “The worst thing though, they were mostly woman and children with only a handful of men, likely sent to help them reach the castle and safety. They had no chance. The local people recognised who they were. Leliana said they were dressed differently too.”

Cullen recognised what was coming, as did the others, silent now with dismayed expressions on all their faces.

“They were Avvar, from Red-Lion Hold. Gurd Harofsen’s people, as we now know. Leliana said they tried to help...but then the men from the Hold came and saw what happened. Well, you can guess their reaction. They demanded to know who was responsible for not helping their people. Aedan didn’t want anyone else to have to take the responsibility on themselves, particularly Alistair, so he stepped forward, accepting the blame. All sorts of curses and threats of vengeance were hurled at him, but with a castle full of troops behind them the Avvar could see a few dozen men stood no chance if they attacked.”

Cullen spoke gently. “What took place in the past does not condone their actions now. They’ve made their intention perfectly obvious, they want to kill us. We have to treat them like any other enemy we’ve come across. People have a choice, Kai.”

“Cullen’s right, Kai,” Dorian added quietly, as Bull nodded.

Cullen could sense her frustration; she would blame herself for whatever consequences arose from her actions, unknowingly made as they were.

She shook her head. “That’s not the point...what if my arrival caused this reaction? We know they only attacked after we showed up here. What if I’ve now made it worse? The former fiancée of the man who allowed their Hold to be destroyed brazenly insults their leader. It’s not just me in danger is it? It’s all of you and more...it’s my ‘Hold’ too, the Inquisition and Skyhold. You don’t threaten an organisation as large as the Inquisition without something up your sleeve.”

Cullen sighed, he couldn’t fault her logic and there was a chance she was correct, but they didn’t know for certain. What he had to do was stop her accepting the liability for someone else.
Cullen put his hand on her shoulder. “Whatever he imagines, it’s not your fault. Maker, you weren’t even there. You’re making assumptions, Kai. None of this is certain. Even if it was, it doesn’t detract from the fact we have to deal with them, here and now.”

“It’s not simply assumptions, Cullen,” she insisted, frowning.

“Look, let’s just think this through, maybe...” Dorian was cut short by Bull.

“Cole, you see into people’s heads. What did you see? What’s he planning?” he questioned.

Cole stared ahead, sounding puzzled and uncertain when he spoke. “I couldn’t see...he’s...hidden. I thought it was me, or something here, so I tried others. Everyone else I could see, but not him.”

Dorian looked puzzled. “So, what you said about needing to blame...?”

Cole inclined his head as he looked at Dorian. “You don’t always have to see into their heads to understand how people feel. I saw what she knew, and...guessed. I have been doing this a long time.”

“Well, that told me,” Dorian observed, thoughtful. “Still, it’s worrying you can’t see. Worrying because he’s obviously using magic to hide behind. And the only type that powerful is blood magic.”

Cullen’s involuntary groan was echoed by Bull. Blood magic and vengeance made for a nasty combination and in the middle of it all was his wife. Once again they didn’t have a clear idea of what was happening, and who was involved. They needed more information. Plus he needed her concentrating on what was happening now, rather than what took place back then.

“Well, whatever he’s hiding, we have to find out,” Cullen announced, glancing at the others. “We need a co-ordinated approach to this. Intelligence first and foremost, so Cole, Dorian and I will take a careful look at this fortress.” He turned to Kai. “Bull can go with you to the island. Let them think we’re pursuing our original objective of finding Ameridan. Don’t let them know we’re aware of the threat. Right now forcing their hand any further would not be a good idea. We have to be ready for whatever it is they’re planning.”

“Agreed,” Kai acknowledged, her focus returning.

“And one more thing,” Cullen added, continuing his instructions. “Perhaps speed up the diplomacy, we will need allies. I’m sure you can charm them at this feast tonight.”

“I can do that,” she smiled, turning to Bull. “And I know someone who can impress them with his prowess.”

Bull peered at her with a grin. “Training ground, Boss?”

“Training ground, Bull,” she echoed. “A two pronged charm offensive.” She looked back at Cullen with a slow blink to thank him. “My Commander always has a plan.”

She smiled easily. “Now, while you three go ahead, I’ll just run a quick errand. It won’t take long.”

“An errand?” Cullen asked. The nonchalant manner in which she brushed them aside aroused his suspicions.

“Yes, Cole can come with me. Don’t worry, we’ll catch up with you,” she replied casually,
wandering away before he could inquire further. Cole walked on behind her.

The way she underplayed it, and left avoiding an explanation, Cullen guessed whatever it was he wouldn’t like it. She was invariably vague when she knew he would object. He furrowed his brows, exhaling in frustration. In the past he had indulged her, but this time he wasn’t going to let it go. Whatever this errand was, if in any way it impacted their situation, he needed to know about it.

Dorian stared after her. “I wonder what that’s all about.”

“I intend to find out,” Cullen declared adamantly. “Now isn’t the time for this secretive nonsense.”

As Cullen strode after Kai and Cole, Dorian shook his head. “When they’re like this it’s always trouble.”

“Tell me about it,” Bull responded wearily. “A silver says it’s something to do with that pouch.”
He gestured towards the retreating figure of Cullen. “Come on, we’d better go after them. You know what happens when they get mulish.”

“All too well,” Dorian sighed. “I think I prefer it when they’re insufferably sweet. Even some middle ground would be fine with me.”

The two of them followed on.
Secrets

Chapter Summary

A visit to the Augur brings the latent tension over spirits between Kai and Cullen to the surface. Kai agrees to aid a reconciliation to help them win favour with the Hold and gain the allies they need.

Kai caught the familiar sound of his footsteps and the clicks and clinks of his amour before she heard him call to her.

“Inquisitor! Wait!” Cullen’s voice was insistent.

She came to a standstill, scrunching up her face in disappointment. This was what she hoped to avoid, she hoped to discover the information quietly without him being there. Evidently she miscalculated, either she was overly casual or he was better at reading her than she realised. Sometimes she wished she hadn’t shown him some of the tricks Leliana taught her.

She wanted to discover more before she informed them all, present it as a fait accompli and then deal with the repercussions. Potentially this could be a third prong in their charm offensive. But now, because he came after her, he would expect an answer. The problem was he really wouldn’t like the answer.

Kai turned around, her face now relaxed and smiling. “Yes, Commander?”

Cullen’s determined expression met her smiling one. “This errand, perhaps you would care to inform...” he paused, glancing back as he heard Bull and Dorian arrive behind him. “...us what it is.” He folded his arms, waiting.

Kai held back the sigh. With Bull there were two of them who wouldn’t be happy; Dorian would be wary but offer less resistance. Cole was silent beside her, doubtless for the best.

“Alright, I’ll tell you. I ask only one thing. Please allow me to do what I need to without interference,” she requested, flashing a look at each of them.

Cullen watched her sceptically. “That depends on what you intend to do.”

There was little chance of negotiation if he was in this frame of mind. His reaction to Grandin’s possession had convinced her to keep quiet about Sigrid, but now Kai would need to tell him about her, another ‘abomination’ in his eyes.

>Don’t forget, you can take the man from the Templars, but you can’t take the Templar from the man, she reminded herself.

She loved her husband dearly, but sometimes he couldn’t see past the training or the experiences he lived through. She couldn’t blame him; everyone was marked in some way by the significant events in their life, whether for good or ill. And if she experienced what he had, she probably would view it as he did. But she hadn’t and she didn’t, and Kai understood her willingness to
accept concepts that were considered anathema didn’t help.

She often wondered if it would be different if she wasn’t a lapsed Andrastian, if she held some other belief. ‘You should know better,’ he flung back at her once. ‘You killed one of the people who began the Blights.’ As if that being true made everything the Chant of Light taught truer somehow. Truer than the Elven gods, revering ancestors, the cold practicality of the Qun, or even calling spirits gods.

His faith had sustained him through the dark times in his life. Her faith had betrayed her in the dark time of her life.

Kai took a calm breath, still smiling. “Earlier on, when Cole and I searched for our people, we ran into a young girl...”

“She ran into, knocked them both down,” Cole elaborated.

Kai glanced at him to say please, not now. It would be an amusing joke in normal circumstances, but she didn’t feel humour would help in this instance.

“Sorry,” he apologised.

“...a young girl, a mage living on her own in the woods. She told us she had been an Augur’s apprentice,” Kai continued as plainly as she could. “She...bore a spirit inside her...”

Cullen’s indignant exclamation cut her off. “When did you propose to tell us about this?” He pressed his forefinger and thumb against his forehead, groaning. “Maker, Kai! What were you thinking?”

She stared back at him, her voice adamant. “Not to act before I learned what the situation was, Cullen. That was what I was thinking. I found out she’s from Stone-Bear Hold. Can you imagine what they would say if we imprisoned one of theirs? How would that look if we asked them to ally with us? You know we can’t win this fight alone.”

“Maker’s breath!” he groaned again.

She saw how torn Cullen felt, his repulsion for abominations versus the practicality of an alliance with Stone-Bear Hold, an alliance they sorely needed to meet a still unidentified threat. He would be unhappy with both her and the situation, but she figured his pragmatic side would win out.

Kai took the pouch from her pack, holding it in her palm as she presented it to them. “What’s in here belongs to her, but how it fits in, I don’t know yet. That’s why I plan to talk to the Augur.”

“What did Skywatcher tell you?” Bull inquired; his face almost as uncomfortable as Cullen’s. His dread of demons was an intimately personal one, fear of loss of self.

She tucked the pouch back into her pack. “He said they were ritual offerings that belonged to the Augur’s apprentice. She’d exiled herself, and that finding her and persuading her to return would sit well with the Hold. He didn’t realise we already found her.” Kai sighed. “And after what else we discovered today, I don’t want her out there on her own. She should be with her people. I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror if a young girl died because I taunted someone, spirit or no.”

“Quite,” Dorian nodded, rubbing his chin as he thought. “What arouses my curiosity is why they allow her to remain possessed. You’d think they would do something about it themselves, not let her wander off on her own. Very odd.”

“Thank you, Dorian,” Cullen remarked. “At least someone recognises the problem.” A sharp glare
at her emphasised his strict tone.

Kai rolled her eye at him. It was that reprimanding manner he used when he considered she was being ‘naïve’, how she didn’t appreciate the risks posed by spirits. Their discussions had deteriorated into circular arguments, ones that never reached a resolution. In the end she decided carrying in this vein was no good for either of them, and refused to continue. That only angered him, and at times he would shout at her. She had no wish for it to deteriorate into a full scale row, so her only option was to walk away. Kai didn’t want to risk losing her temper or saying things she would regret later. They’d been down that road once before and she had no desire to revisit the pain of almost losing her husband.

But Dorian did have a legitimate point. A young girl left on her own, carrying a spirit inside her. It was curious to say the least. She hoped if she spoke with the Augur, she may discover how it occurred. What she learnt about the Avvar suggested they viewed spirits quite differently to most of Thedas.

“Yes Cullen, Dorian does have a point,” she agreed, seeing Cullen’s eyebrows lift in astonishment, “which is why I’m going to see the Augur. I want to find out more information...carefully.” She fixed Cullen with a deliberate stare as she emphasised the last word.

His surprise morphed into a scowl, but before he could argue, Bull stepped in.

“Tell you what, why don’t we all go?” he suggested smoothly.

It was Kai’s turn to raise her eyebrows at that. The question shot out before her mind weighed the result. “Why?” she challenged.

He smiled reassuringly. “Look Boss, we all need to get a handle on these people if we’re going to work with them. The better we understand them, the fewer bumps there’ll be. Trust me on this.”

“Bull has an excellent point there,” Dorian concurred. “Plus I’ve never met one before and I’m rather intrigued to know what an Avvar Augur does.”

Cullen was waiting for her reaction, arms still folded, the scowl replaced by an expectant expression. Expectant as in realising they’d left her no recourse but to agree. Refusing would be counterproductive to what they all wished to bring about, an alliance.

Bull was one sneaky sod, she thought. She hadn’t spotted that manoeuvre, too preoccupied with Cullen’s reactions. Much as she preferred it to be just her and Cole, she had to agree to his suggestion.

“Alright then. But let me discuss Sigrid...please,” she appealed.

“Sure, Boss.”

“Fine by me.”

Kai looked at Cullen.

“Agreed, but I reserve the right to ask other questions should I choose to,” he declared.

She sighed faintly. “If that’s what you want...then fine,” she conceded, watching his defensive posture relax.

Kai span on her heel and continued to the Augur's hut, knocking before she opened the door. Clouds of incense pervaded the inside swirling in the green veillfire light filling the hut. The Augur
stood before a smoking, circular pit, arms raised and eyes closed. She paused in the doorway unsure whether to interrupt him when he opened his eyes and motioned her inside. Kai walked closer, the others waiting near the door.

“Behold, worthy ones!” he announced dramatically, spirits appearing around her, causing her to start. “The woman who blazes like fire and mends the air.” He looked at her. “I greet you, as do our gods and the gods of our ancestors.”

No, no, no, she groaned to herself desperately. This was...not good.

The reactions were immediate. A dispirited ‘oh crap’ from Bull, an incredulous ‘well,’ from Dorian and an alarmed ‘what in the Maker’s name?!” from Cullen as she heard him begin to draw his sword. But they all stopped and turned to Cole on hearing him.

“Hello there!” he called out cheerfully, waving as if he was greeting long-lost friends.

*Did spirits have friends amongst themselves* leapt into her head before she gathered her wits, looking to Cullen and urgently signalling for him to sheathe his sword, now part way out of the scabbard.

“Inquisitor?” he challenged with a frown so deep his eyebrows almost met.

“Cullen, please,” she appealed.

Somewhat reluctantly he sheathed his sword, his disquiet plain to see. What use a sword was against ethereal beings she couldn’t imagine, but she wasn’t a soldier by nature. The scene became even more bizarre as she heard the Augur again, addressing the spirits as if they were boisterous children.

“Don’t throng!” he instructed wearily, and they moved back, forming a wider circle around her.

Kai turned to the Augur, uncertain what to say. A dozen questions raced through her mind, but not a single one wondering if she was in danger.

“They think you’re shiny too,” Cole offered with a chuckle.

“I’m not sure if this is a dream or I’ve wandered into some ridiculous Orlesian play,” Dorian remarked, bemused.

“I’d take anything else right now,” Bull muttered, stepping backward.

Cullen’s voice was more forceful. “Inquisitor! This is not safe, we...” He was cut off by the Augur.

“Enough,” he announced to the spirits with a flourish of his arms and they vanished. He sighed, slipping into a less formal manner. “That should stop them hounding me. Ever since you arrived they have been clamouring to meet you and as their Augur I must make their wishes known. Or in this case, introduce them to you.”

“Oh,” Kai voiced incredulously. “They wanted to meet...me?”

“You are the Herald,” he proclaimed as if this was sufficient explanation.

“Oh...I see,” she responded, scratching her head. Actually she didn’t see. *What did being the Herald have anything to do with it? It was simply a misleading title hung on me many months ago.* Kai sought to concentrate instead on what she was really here for, Sigrid.
“Augur,” she bowed graciously. “We met a young girl; a mage who I believe might be from your Hold. Is it prudent for her to be on her own out there?”

“Sigrid,” he confirmed, smiling. “Headstrong that one, but fear not, the gods watch her. We would not leave one of our own alone. Especially as her teacher remains with her.”

“Her teacher?” Kai questioned. Did he...did he mean the spirit?

“Yes, all mages are made one with the gods until they master their powers, then their teacher departs, duty ended,” he informed her.

Cullen, who quietened after the spirits disappeared, was unable to contain his revulsion. “You allow this? You deliberately turn your mages into abominations?”

“We have trained mages this way for hundreds of years,” the Augur answered unequivocally, staring back at Cullen. “Abomination is a lowlander notion. The gods teach, they do not dominate as you would believe. Some of our gods have patiently guided generations of mages.”

Dorian interrupted before Cullen could answer. He was troubled yet curious too. “But you must realise the potential risks, if the spirit turns along with its host, the resulting abomination is twice as dangerous as a mere demon. And I should know, we’ve killed enough of them.”

The Augur nodded. “This is true. If a mage is weak, their teacher remains with them and the other gods watch them both to ensure neither soul sickens. Our gods help protect the Hold and everyone in it, and keep away the spirits who have gone bad with rage or gloom.”

“What about mages who’ve gone ‘bad’?” Dorian questioned.

“Those who sicken, or threaten the Hold...” he exhaled heavily, “…one day they do not wake in their beds. It is regrettable, but it must be done.”

“You kill them?” Dorian exclaimed.

The Augur frowned. “You kill mages too, do you not? I know of your Harrowings and how you pit young mages against demons. Young ones forced to confront something they are scarcely ready for, then killed when they fail. For us, death is a last resort; these are people we know well, family, friends or neighbours.”

Dorian closed his mouth, drawing back at the Augur’s forceful remarks. His next question remained unasked as Cullen spoke instead, his tone criticising.

“You speak of spirits as benevolent, as teachers guiding your mages. Even if they don’t become demons they can still be dangerous. I have seen what a spirit inside a mage is capable of, the forces they can unleash. Scores left dead and dying in the aftermath of the destruction they wreaked. You are courting disaster.”

Kai had to intervene, afraid they could lose the allies they badly needed if he continued, but before she could the Augur walked up to Cullen. Cullen was tall, but the Augur towered over him, his build accentuated by the bear pelt he wore on his back. She couldn’t help noticing their stances were identical as they confronted one another.

The Augur’s voice was strong and steady, but Kai could sense regret and sadness too.

“I understand well the cost when a soul sickens. Sigrid was not my first apprentice.” He paused, leaving the implication hanging in the air. “Not every mage can become an Augur; we are better attuned to spirits than most mages. Sometimes that can be a weakness if the mage gives in to fear.”
He drew a deep breath. “The gods reflect us as water does the sky, what we are, what we wish to be... or what we fear to be. We respect the gods, but do not imagine for one moment we lose sight of what may arise.”

Kai knew of at least one Harrowing where Cullen had to carry out the killing blow. The two men before her had something in common after all. The Augur’s admission seemed to strike a chord in Cullen as his expression altered to dismay and confusion.

Cullen shook his head. “I don’t understand. If you know this why even allow it at all?” he questioned.

“Magic is a gift, not one to be toyed with or abused,” the Augur answered, his voice dropping in volume. “Suddenly discovering you can reign down fire or freeze everything around you is frightening for a young child. Our gods patiently teach us to accept what we are, and use what we have to support and defend our people. The wisdom they bring makes us stronger, they teach us not to be swayed by the deceptive promises of bad spirits, and not to seek power through blood magic.”

As Cullen watched the Augur, Kai thought of Cassie, hoping Cullen would recall how positively she responded though gentle persuasion, appealing for guidance to manage her magic so she could aid others with her gift. The result was the same.

Cullen played an enormous part in comforting her the night she came into her magic, and encouraging her after that. Cassie would visit him from time to time to show him her progress and her increasing discipline, and for the sweets she knew he kept in his desk drawer. Kai imagined there weren’t many mages he’d allow to freeze his ink bottles. A permanent black stain remained on the floor in the far corner of his office where her early attempts cracked the glass, the frozen ink eventually melting into a puddle on the floor. He left the stain there, so when she improved he could show her how far she’d come.

Then she recognised the thought of Cassie carrying a spirit would horrify him. Maybe letting him equate the two was not a good idea. Best to step in before this exchange ended badly. She walked over to Cullen and the Augur.

“Commander, perhaps we could pursue this on another occasion. My immediate concern rests with a young girl alone out there,” she directed, pointing towards the Basin.

“Yes, Inquisitor.” Cullen curtly acknowledged her words, looking unhappy.

Kai decided honesty was best in the circumstances and faced the Augur. “I strongly believe my arrival in the Basin may have provoked the Jaws of Hakkon. I have a link to someone they hold great bitterness toward, and I don’t know how this will end. Even though your Hold has a peace-oath with them I would rather Sigrid was secure here with her own people than out there in the woods. Forgive me for being direct...but why did she leave, with her teacher?”

“The gods said you were a protector,” the Augur smiled knowingly. “Sigrid was ready for her teacher to depart, and built an altar by the shore for her rite of thanksgiving to release him. She told me her offerings were spurned by the gods, but I believe there is more to it. Perhaps you may succeed where I failed, Herald. Perhaps you may discover what she did not tell me.”

The last time she saw Sigrid, the girl could scarcely be civil with Kai due to her uneasiness. Now Kai had to assuage Sigrid to determine the truth and reconcile her with the Hold. The smile she flashed at the Augur belied the heavy sigh inside.

“I will do my utmost to bring her home,” she promised him, praying her utmost would be enough.
“I know you will,” the Augur replied with a slow blink.

“Thank you for your time, Augur,” she smiled. “We should be on our way. My friend has an appointment at the training ground I believe.” Kai glanced at Bull, who looked relieved at the prospect of escape.

“We do, Boss,” he confirmed making a beeline for the door, accompanied by a pensive Dorian and frowning Cullen.

Cole hadn’t moved, so Kai wandered over and nudged him gently. “Time to go, Cole.”

He cocked his head, peering in the distance. “So much time, so little time,” he murmured.

“Cole?” she inquired, wondering what he meant.

“The spirits here are...unusual, used to people, learning, remembering. Some are old, heavy with knowledge, some newer, bright, curious.” He faced her. “But...none like me.”

Kai smiled. “That’s because you’re different, unique. You’re Cole.”

“Sometimes it’s hard being different,” he observed wistfully.

Kai sighed, he wasn’t wrong there. “Yes it is, Cole.” She nodded to the door. “Come on, we have plenty to do.”

If she imagined telling Cullen of Sigrid would press his patience, what they discovered had likely driven it out of the door slamming it securely shut. And she had forced aside his concerns for an alliance he would recognise they needed, but find distasteful.

On top of everything else, she would have to rebuild relations with her husband. She sighed, would it never end?

As Kai and Cole walked out, the Augur watched them leave, closing the door behind them. A spirit appeared beside him, shimmering silver rather than radiating red.

“Did you...discover what you wished to?” the Augur inquired respectfully.

“Yes,” she answered. “Hers has been a hard path, and will continue to be. It is the way of things.”

Her voice always reminded the Augur of bright sunlit mornings as a child when the day stretched ahead with promised adventure. She seldom communicated with the Hold, but he learned from the previous Augur her rare visits were not without significance. He couldn’t help but wonder about the Herald; she was important, what she had accomplished was considerable; what intrigued him was how it connected to them. And why was she...

He heard the bright laughter, like gentle ripples of waves on the shoreline. “Your thoughts give you away, Olaf. You wish to learn why she interests me.”

“Yes,” he admitted, knowing he probably wouldn’t receive the answer he hoped for.

“Did you know she chose the name she goes by? Kai, in the ancient tongue, means the one who brings light in the dawn. Light illuminates, but it also reveals.” There was a pause. “It is not only her hand that blazes, Olaf.”

His curiosity was more than piqued. “Is she...human?” he inquired hesitantly.
The question prompted another laugh. “She is very human. It is not who she is, but what she is; the promise of what she can do that matters.” Her final words hung in the air as she disappeared.

Evidently his audience was over, but he discovered more than he thought he...the Augur looked around. What was he about do to? He sought to remember.

Ah yes, those lurker sausages. They had cooked some especially for the feast and he was confident they wouldn’t miss a few. He smiled thinking of how he and his brother loved them as children, tucking into them as a treat after a day exploring by the lakeshore and swimming in the lake. He wandered off to the Hall where preparations were in progress, oblivious to the faint ‘forget’ fading into nothingness.
Confrontation

Chapter Summary

Cullen's distaste of the Avvar practice of spirits guiding mages, and his annoyance with Kai's apparent acceptance of it, leads to a heated confrontation between the two of them.

Cullen, Bull and Dorian had almost reached the training ground when Cullen heard someone running behind them. Somehow he knew it was her even though the footsteps were heavier than hers usually were. He grimaced and carried on walking, knowing what would come. A lecture, on how they were in someone else’s home, how they should accommodate their customs, how the threat they may face outweighed personal prejudices, and how they should set aside whatever objections they had if they wanted this alliance.

Of course he understood what was expected, and how important this alliance was. He was fully cognisant they would need Stone-Bear’s aid and he wouldn’t threaten that. But he couldn’t remain silent. From what Cullen saw she was more concerned about his frank exchange with the Augur than the man himself was.

He simply couldn’t countenance was putting spirits into children, and no amount of her persuasion would convince him this was acceptable. She knew full well how he felt, and what he’d faced in the past. Quite honestly he’d willingly accept the boorish behaviour at the Winter Palace again rather than have to stomach what they did here.

She called out to him. “Cullen, please wait!”

Cullen groaned, grudgingly coming to a stop, seeing Bull and Dorian walk on further and then pause, likely to allow them space. He turned around, deliberately crossing his arms as he waited for her.

‘His blocking posture’ she called it, advising him to avoid it when involved in the negotiations for the Templar Sanctuary. ‘You must show engagement, allow the discussions to flow’ she said showing him ‘open postures’. Why she thought he needed to when Josephine and the Divine did most of the negotiating anyway he couldn’t imagine. His main responsibility was to formally take charge of the project on behalf of the Inquisition and the Divine.

All that instruction wasn’t wasted though. It gave him an insight into the techniques he hadn’t always spotted before. The Inquisitor faced him, but he had no desire to have the official line touted at him. Cullen wanted to speak with his wife.

He raised his hand to stop her before she could begin, unable to keep the disdain from his voice. “Kai, you insisted I stand down, which I did. I’m certain your diplomacy can smooth any feathers I may have ruffled.”

“Thank you, Cullen. I’m grateful you did. I understand how distasteful this is for you and I wouldn’t ask you to bear with it if we didn’t need this alliance.”
There it was, the conciliatory tone, the composed expression and the damn ‘open posture’. All to distract from her actual words, informing him what was needed rather than asking if he would accept it.

Cullen shook his head, snorting mockingly. “I’m well aware of what we need, believe me. I’m rather surprised you bother to ask. No wait, you weren’t asking, you were telling me.”

“Cullen, there’s no call to be sarcastic.”

He caught the slightly raised eyebrow and the hint of reproach. Rather childishly he was pleased to have rattled her, even if it was only a little. He wanted her to appreciate his position and if that meant pushing her, he would push her.

“Really?” he sneered. “My sarcasm bothers you, but forcing spirits inside of children doesn’t?”

She sighed. “Cullen, it’s not...”

Cullen moved closer, cutting off her words. “What else are you willing to accept? Tell me. I’d be interested to discover where it ends with you, when is something too much? When does my wife say no, she can’t stomach this?”

She narrowed her gaze and her body stiffened some, yet her voice remained steady. “You know exactly where I draw the line, Cullen.”

“Do I?” he snarled.

The need to keep her composure only served to provoke him because he knew what came next; she would end the discussion by refusing to engage further. Well, not this time, he thought. This time he wouldn’t let her dismiss what he had to say. This was no longer some concept she could twist around in her head, this affected real people.

Cullen leant forward, his face barely inches from hers; she didn’t flinch, standing her ground. He had to marvel at her tenacity even as he sought to break through it. “Would you be as accommodating if they put a spirit inside Cassie?” he demanded angrily.

His persistence paid off as her composed demeanour crumbled and Cullen recognised he’d finally broken through. He pressed harder, unable to stem the flow of frustration that poured out.

“Or perhaps it’s other people’s children that don’t matter,” he accused contemptuously “As long as your family are fine, why would you care about anyone else.”

Her response was not what he expected. A flash of raw fury crossed her face before her palm caught his cheek with a resounding slap, the force of the blow knocking his head to the side.

Did she just...?

Anger gave way to stunned disbelief as he looked at her, his cheek smarting; the shock mirrored in her expression as she stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed at him, clearly aghast at what she’d done. The sheer intensity of rage in her face, he’d never seen anything remotely like it with her.

Sweet Maker, she hit hard.

He rubbed his cheek, seeing her face flood with colour and hearing the sharp intake of breath as her hand flew to her mouth.

“Maker! What have I...” rushed out breathlessly before Bull intervened.
“Alright you two, time out!” Bull dragged her away towards rows of benches behind them, sitting her down, and then perching next to her.

Cullen felt a hand on his shoulder.

Dorian stood there, an equally astonished look on his face. “What in the Maker’s name happened?”

Cullen stared at him. “She slapped me, Dorian.”

“Yes, quite, that much we saw. The Inquisitor laying one on her Commander,” he tutted, “definitely not the done thing. Luckily for us, no-one else witnessed that spectacle.” Dorian sighed. “What were you two talking about? On second thoughts, let me re-phrase it. What were you quarrelling about?”

Cullen looked back to see Bull talking to Kai, her face turned aside. He knew she would be upset and worried about what he would say, not to mention deeply mortified by her behaviour.

“Cullen, please.” Dorian was insistent.

Cullen faced him, still taken aback, his hand rubbing his neck. “I...only wanted her to see...to admit what they do here is wrong.” He exhaled. “Dorian, they put spirits into children. Children for pity’s sake!”

Dorian rubbed his chin. “Yes, I know, Cullen. But they also remove them, imagine that. And they’ve been doing it for hundreds of years. One wonders what else has been hidden among these people.”

Cullen glared at him despairingly. “Dorian!”

_Am I the only one who grasps what they do here?_ Cullen thought.

“Sorry, academic curiosity.” Dorian cleared his throat. “If it’s any consolation, it makes me uncomfortable too. But the immediate issue here is not what they do; it’s the two of you.” He gestured from Cullen to Kai. “We can’t have you two falling out, especially not when we have no idea what hornet’s nest was stirred up with these lunatic Hakkonites. So, care to elaborate?”

Cullen lowered his voice. “I...may have...pushed harder than I realised. But, even so, she’s never...this isn’t like her.”

Dorian was reassuring in his reply. “I know, Cullen, imagine our surprise. First time I’ve seen Bull’s jaw drop. What on earth did you two say to each other?”

Cullen recalled the exchange as best he could seeing Dorian look perplexed.

“Admittedly you were tough with her, but she’s taken much worse. I don’t understand.”

Cole reached out to Cullen as spoke animatedly. “You found the old hurt, drawing it with words she fears. The words mattered more because it was you.”

Cullen and Dorian exchanged glances trying to interpret Cole’s words, but then Dorian seemed to work it out. Not surprising since he’d spent more time with him. Cullen still found some of Cole’s pronouncements baffling.

“Well, assuming that means what I think it does, Bull always said you got through to her like no-one else could,” Dorian reflected. He looked to Cole. “Cole, she’s not...losing it...is she?”
“She’s ashamed, remorseful, embarrassed, but not ‘losing it’.”

Dorian heaved a thankful sigh. “Well, that’s something at least.”

“Dorian, she’s only...human,” Cole reminded him. “The hopes, fears, expectations, she carries them all.”

Cole was right, she was only human, and Cullen found it sad that he of all people should have to point it out. Had he misjudged it and pushed too hard, or did she tolerate him less than she did others?

“You’re right, Cole,” Dorian agreed. “No-one asked her if she wanted all of this, the decisions, the responsibility, the abuse and the adulation. I wouldn’t. I’d probably have been a gibbering wreck long ago or battered someone to death, or become a drunk.” He coughed. “But I digress.”

Dorian rested his hand on Cullen’s shoulder. “The point is Cullen, it’s always ‘Inquisitor, do this, do that’. ‘Inquisitor, be a darling and whip all those countries into line so we can save the world, and while you’re at it, be an icon, face the constant threat of death, and ensure the tavern doesn’t run out of ale...again’. It’s a thankless position to be in.”

“Dorian, she doesn’t do it alone, no-one could do it alone,” Cullen pointed out. “We all support her.”

“Yes, of course we do.” Dorian nodded to where she sat with Bull. “But it all ends at her door, doesn’t it Cullen. Whatever goes awry, it’s her head on the block.” Pausing briefly, his voice was thoughtful when he continued. “Perhaps...that’s why she puts so few heads on the block.”

Her judgements certainly leaned towards merciful rather than harsh. If Cullen had been in her position, he wouldn’t have been as lenient. But he wasn’t, and he didn’t have to face what she did. For every decision or choice or mistake she made, or any of them made, as Inquisitor the consequences fell to her and her alone.

Was that why she wanted to be involved in every little detail, determined to be hands on? Was that why she stubbornly refused every time I tried to convince her ease back, allow us to take some more weight off her shoulders, pushing me away when I suggested it. Should I have stood back? I couldn’t watch her continue to walk away, afraid she would stop listening to me completely. Maker, Kai, why didn’t you talk to me?

Cole burst into his thoughts, his expression sympathetic. “It’s not your fault. It’s hard to explain to someone else when you don’t understand it all, and she doesn’t. She’s knows she’s afraid of losing her humanity, of seeing people as pieces on a board, of not caring enough.”

Until now, he never saw how afraid she was of losing touch. Whatever her flaws, in all the time he’d known her she held on to her humanity. And he, in exasperation with her, had accused his wife of the one thing she plainly wasn’t, someone who lost their humanity. Something she evidently dreaded more than she would admit to anyone.

The charge was truer in his case than hers, at least in the past. He’d even declared ‘mages cannot be treated like people’, Maker forgive him. The person he once was would not have seen Cassie as he saw her, as much his niece as Kai’s. Imagining what would happen if she was a child here troubled him. He couldn’t bear to think of Cassie as an abomination. Kai and Cassie were so alike in temperament; if she didn’t resemble Lyssa in appearance he would swear she was Kai’s child. Cassie even scratched her head in the same way as Kai did sometimes when she was thinking.

If he was truly honest with himself, it wasn’t just the thought of Cassie being possessed that
disturbed him. It was where that train of thought led him. Watching Kai surrounded by spirits, aware of how interested they were in her, what if one of them had decided to...Cullen’s stomach turned over. This was something he couldn’t...wouldn’t consider. He pushed back on the rising nausea, shoving it down.

He noticed Dorian peering over his shoulder. “Come on, Cullen. I believe someone wishes to make an apology.”

Cullen swung around to see Bull coming forward with Kai. She anxiously scanned his face, no doubt afraid what he would say. His anger had passed, he felt only regret now. He walked with Dorian to meet them, and Bull stood her in front of him.

“Right, you two, sort this out. Dorian and I will try and find the guy who runs this and get a bout set up.” Bull called out to Cole. “Kid, if they kick off again, you come and fetch me.”

“I will,” Cole nodded.

Cullen groaned. “Bull, we’re hardly children.”

“Could have fooled me, Cullen,” he chided, glancing scornfully at them both. “Try reining in the tempers, and then I’ll be convinced. You spat all you like in private; what you don’t do is show division in front of potential allies, weakens your bargaining hand. Understood?”


Cullen looked at his wife, seeing how apprehensive she was. “Kai, I...”

“May I go first...please?” she pleaded, chewing her lip nervously.

Cullen nodded. “Alright.”

Kai took a deep breath, her voice tremulous. “I am sorry, desperately sorry for striking you. It was unforgiveable and inexcusable. You would never dream of laying a finger on me and I should do no less, not just as your wife, but as Inquisitor. I...lost control and I shouldn’t have.” She stepped closer, shoulders hunched and hands clutched together. “Maker, if I could take it back I would, Cullen. You don’t deserve to be treated that way.”

“Thank you,” he acknowledged.

Cullen offered her his hand and she took it gratefully. “I should never have accused you of not caring, Kai. I’m sorry too. I was...furious with you and went too far.” His thumb rubbed her hand as he held it. “I may not always agree with your choices, but I recognise you care and try to do the best you can for everyone.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She looked so vulnerable his heart went out to her. Cullen pulled Kai to him, hearing the long exhale and feeling her body loosen up as he hugged her. She wrapped her arms tightly around him, burying her head into his mane, her white blond hair stark against the brown bear fur.

One thing troubled him and he had to ask. “You should have talked to me. Why didn’t you, Kai?”

The pause before she answered was so long he wondered if she was even going to reply. She drew her head from his shoulder and peered up at him, her expression contemplative.

“I wanted to...I was going to...it’s just...” she sighed heavily. “Cullen, I’m your wife but also the
Inquisitor and your superior. I try to keep some distance in case I’m forced to make a choice which places those roles into conflict.”

She took a deep breath. “Not losing touch is very important to me, and I should have explained. Then perhaps we wouldn’t have ended in a situation where I behaved like a...fishwife.” She rolled her eye in self-disapproval.

The image of Kai, hands deep in brine gutting fish popped into his head, and a chuckle bubbled up before Cullen could stop it. “Well,” he coughed in an attempt to curb it. “You do hit remarkably hard.”

She stared at his cheek anxiously. “I’m so sorry. Does it...hurt?”

“It does sting some,” he admitted hearing the plaintive groan.

She wrinkled her brows, thoughtful. “We shouldn’t have got to this point.”

“No, we shouldn’t have,” Cullen agreed.

Evidently there was more to be thrashed out between them than either imagined. It was only a year ago on the day of their wedding he felt such optimism and hope. Corypheus was defeated, Thedas was saved, the Inquisition proved its worth in the eyes of the world, he atoned for his actions and was married to the woman he loved. The future looked so bright and promising.

One year later here they were in an Avvar hold with lost tempers, him yelling at her and her slapping him. They shouldn’t have got to this point and they couldn’t continue like this. Both should have handled themselves better.

With the threat they faced here, there was no time for the discussion they needed to have, and when they returned, he was due to leave for South Reach. It always came down to a lack of time, their responsibilities to the Inquisition forcing aside their responsibilities to each other. Apart from nights spent together when they were actually both in Skyhold their diaries were filled with commitments to the Inquisition, and during a lot of those nights both were too exhausted to do anything but sleep.

“Cullen?” Kai called hesitantly. She was staring at him worriedly.

He sensed the frown on his face and softened his expression, seeing her relax in response. “We can’t continue lurching along as we have, Kai. At some point we have to make time for each other and discuss what’s happening between us. But...it has to wait until we’ve dealt with the situation here. Afterwards, I’ll see if I can figure something out, alright?”

Kai smiled, nodding as he spoke.

Her smile saddened as she became thoughtful. “When we defeated Corypheus, we both assumed the Inquisition would wind down, but it didn’t. It became even bigger, more powerful, and I’ve allowed it to...” She scratched her head. “When I last spoke with Leliana...”

Even though Cullen thought of her as Leliana, he always referred to her by her title ‘Most Holy’ when talking in private or public. Kai always called the Divine Leliana in private. When he asked her why, she said Leliana was her friend before she was Left Hand, Spymaster or Divine.

“...she said she had to represent all the peoples of Thedas. That’s how I feel about the Inquisition,” Kai explained. “But...I suspect she handles it better because she’s had more practice.”

She tugged her arm from his hold and rested her hand on his breastplate, staring into his eyes.
“Cullen, I know you want me to step back more, but now you understand why I don’t want to lose the link with the people I’m responsible for...”

“Kai...” he interrupted.

“Just hear me out...please?”

“Alright,” he conceded.

“I only wanted to make you a promise that I’d think about how to balance myself better. Then when we get a chance to talk, at least one thing will be planned out.” She watched him expectantly.

Cullen smiled. “The fact you’re considering is welcome. I’m grateful you are.”

Kai’s index finger absentmindedly drew circles on his chestplate, as she became pensive again. He knew there was something else coming now.

“I know what happens here is beyond the pale for you...

“Abhorrent might be an apter description,” he offered.

“...but these people aren’t malicious,” she continued. “They only take the ultimate step when all else fails. Even though the action may be abhorrent, there is a level of care not seen...elsewhere in Thedas. Mages are just another member of their community.”

She paused and stared into his eyes. “I agree with Vivienne on very little. But she’s right about one thing, people fear magic, and mages. And it’s because they’re taught to fear it, to see mages as other, not like them. How many mage children do you imagine were killed by fearful people before Templars reached them? Not bad people, just scared, terrified by what they didn’t understand.”

He hadn’t seen that happen, but knew it did. Two older Templars at Kinloch, who perished when Uldred took control, had spoken of finding a child, no older than seven or eight, brutally stabbed and decapitated. The prevailing, if erroneous and ignorant belief among the villagers seemed to be that mages came back to life unless you took the head off. The village closed ranks so the actual perpetrators were never caught and the crime never punished. Maker, until she asked, he’d forgotten about it. How did he forget about something as brutal as that?

“I have heard of such things, but fortunately never seen it myself,” he told her. “But Kai, it’s the exception, not the rule.”

She shook her head sadly. “Cullen, it shouldn’t even be an exception; it shouldn’t be at all. You know Minaeve, don’t you?”

“Only in passing,” he told her. But he didn’t wander around talking to everyone, finding out who they were, what they did, and then checking in to find out how they were. The Herald did in Haven, at least when the numbers were small and she could remember who everyone was. That level of personal contact was impossible now, but she did what she could.

Kai continued. “She’s Dalish, but you wouldn’t know because she has no valleslin. Dalish can’t have too many mages in a clan, you know that.”

“Yes,” he nodded. Too many mages invited too much attention; past a certain number the children were cut loose from the clan. Likely the Dalish expected these children to be picked up by Templars and taken to a Circle, but who knew how many didn’t make it.
“She was seven when her clan gave her a pack and sent her on her way. Seven years old, Cullen. One year younger than Cassie was, imagine that. Out in the forest on her own desperately trying to avoid wild animals and running through what little food she has in her small pack.”

Kai’s hand stilled, her gaze fixed firmly on him. “She finds a farm, and they chase her away because of what she is; and she can’t hide her magic because she can’t control it. She keeps going, cold and starving, until she finds a village. This time they don’t chase her away, they actually want to kill her. But one of the villagers takes pity on this child, takes her in potentially risking his family for that small kindness. The Circle Tower is less than couple of hours ride away. If the family can keep her safe until the Templars arrive, they will protect her. The man and his wife feed her while the son fetches the Templars. They arrive and take her to the Circle, away from the mob who wants to end this terrified child’s life, a child who had done nothing to them, except make the mistake of walking into their village. When she arrives at the Circle, she’s barely able to control her fear, let alone her magic. Imagine that, a child brought up with arravels and fresh air faced with a forbidding, musty old building, and told this is her home for the rest of her life. This on top of everything else she’s gone through.”

She continued, still watching, her expression softening with the hint of a smile.

“But...” Kai paused, deliberately tapping her index finger on his chestplate, as if to emphasise the point. “...she recalled this one Templar, who, when he saw how scared she was, spoke kindly to her.”

Kai gave him a warm smile. “Minaeve will never forget him and his kind words, or how for the first time in many days she felt safe...but not every mage child is lucky enough to have a Cullen to make them feel better.”

Cullen’s mouth opened and closed before he managed to answer. “Me? But I don’t...” He honestly didn’t remember her.

“She knows you don’t remember, and wasn’t inclined to bring it up. Minaeve was one of the younglings who Wynne rescued when the Tower was taken over. Poor child barely got there when all hell broke loose.” Kai’s hands rubbed his breastplate comfortingly. “Her memories of Kinloch aren’t that fond either.”

He sighed. “There’s a lot around that time I don’t recall. Or I recall too well. But I am sorry I don’t remember her. She’s done much to help us, and a lot of my men are still alive thanks to her research. Maker, I should talk to Minaeve when we return, thank her properly.”

“She’d like that I suspect,” Kai nodded encouragingly. “Cullen, I wanted you to hear her story for a reason. Could you imagine a child being chased and killed out of fear or ignorance in the Hold?”

The idea of spirits inside of children was wrong, yet he couldn’t deny the concern shown. The anguish he saw in the Augur’s eyes when he spoke about his previous apprentice was plain to see. Cullen felt regret for those who died in Harrowings, but not deep pain as he saw in the man’s eyes. If someone turns, you try to convince yourself you’re killing a ‘what’ rather than a ‘who’. It doesn’t prevent you remembering when they were a ‘who’; a person who probably dreamed of their future, the same as anyone else.

Cullen shook his head. “No, I can’t. But we didn’t invite spirits to possess the mages, Kai.”

“That’s true,” she agreed with a slow blink, “but the Harrowings laid open young mages to demons. You know that.”

He furrowed his brows, not in anger, but in resignation. His belief and her lack of it would always
result in differing viewpoints. “Kai, you know I can’t see things as you do. You look from the outside, because you don’t...”

“...believe anymore?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

Cullen watched as Kai tentatively lifted her hand wanting to touch his cheek, hopeful for him to let her. The same cheek she slapped not long before. He nodded a yes, and this time she caressed it gently, the coldness of her glove contrasting with the residual warmth left there.

Her voice was soft. “I’m not asking you to disbelieve, Cullen. You faith is important to you; it’s given you strength and hope, and kept you going through everything you experienced. All I’m saying is...people can be fallible. Faith and the comfort derived from faith aren’t dependent on every word being absolute.” She splayed her palm over his heart. “You can see with better eyes, see what really matters. Trust yourself, Cullen.”

There she was again, the other Kai, the one who seemed much older and wiser than her years. He took her hand and kissed it, smiling at her as he echoed the words from before.

“Who are you, and what have you done with my wife?”

She smiled knowingly, repeating the reply. “She saw something shiny and well, you know what she’s like.”

“That does sound like her,” he chuckled.

Kai reached for his face again, her palm gently brushing his cheek, as if touching him would heal the hurt she caused. “We both know our lives aren’t normal, and won’t be until this is all over. But one day it will end, and we will walk away to South Reach and our family.”

She remembered to say our family. Cullen gave her an affectionate smile. “I look forward to that day.”

“Me too,” she enthused, biting her lower lip. “Then we can be ordinary and boring.”

Cullen shook his head, chuckling again. “You, boring? Now that I would like to see, just for the novelty of it,” he teased.

Her smile broadened, her eye twinkled and he saw her playfulness emerge. So many times in a couple of days, he thought, happy to see the lightness in her return.

“I can do boring. I’ll be good at it, you’ll see,” she insisted, grinning. “Trust me; given the choice between taking on a pride demon and baking an apple and cinnamon pie, I know which I’d choose.”

“I may agree with you there,” he mused, arching an eyebrow. “Your apple and cinnamon pie wasn’t bad.”

Her mouth opened in an O. “Wasn’t bad?” she huffed trying to pull away, but he held onto her, his smile widening. “You claimed it was wonderful!”

“Perhaps I simply didn’t want the supply to dry up. I know from experience how good you can get, given enough practice,” he declared, watching a cheeky smile form on her face.

“One day, when this is all over, I’ll make so many damn pies you’ll be sick of the sight of them,”
she shot back, laughing and prodding him to punctuate her words.

“Never,” he insisted. “I’ll just get fat, from all these pies and the jam.”

“What jam?” she puzzled, drawing her head back.

He laughed at her confused face. “The jam Mia will teach you to make, Bramble jam. I loved it as a child, and our mother showed her how to make it. Blackberries grow wild and abundant in South Reach as they did where I grew up. You’ll have all the time and fruit to practice.”

Kai rolled her eye, causing him to laugh again. This was what he loved, the lightness, the banter, and teasing her to make her do the single eye roll. It somehow made her funnier.

She squinted at him. “Do you have any other plans for me I should know about, Cullen?”

“They’re hardly plans, merely...suggested avenues of pursuit,” he winked.

“Uh-uh, really?” she doubted with a drawl. “Suggested evidently has a different connotation here.”

A loud whistle made them both look, seeing Bull waving them over.

Cullen exhaled. “Pies and jam are on hold for now. But the thought was good while it lasted.”

Kai added her own sigh, nestling her head against his coat. “It was.”

Cullen stroked her hair, leaning forward to kiss the top of her head as she hummed contentedly. The moment was interrupted by Bull’s impatient shout; evidently they were required elsewhere, and now.

She pulled away and gestured over his shoulder. “We’d better go before Bull actually scolds us.”

“He...wasn’t scolding before?” Cullen asked, arching a puzzled eyebrow.

She snorted a snigger. “You’ve obviously never seen Bull angry.”

Cullen let go of Kai and they wandered over to the others.

*One day,* he thought to himself, *one day there will be pies and jam, and perhaps even some boring and ordinary.* However, based on their lives to date, he didn’t know how much there would be of the latter.
Confession

Chapter Summary

During the feast held in their honour, Kai thinks she discovers the basis of Gurd Harofson's threat, and in her plea for allies is tasked with yet another quest. After the feast, Kai and Cullen are alone together for the first time after their argument.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“...Chose her child to stand as chieftain, after all last wrongs were righted,
Gifted goods of worldly want, left her tribe no more benighted.
Skyward, one last trek she made,
To her lover, dream-delivered,
Raven-feathered, reunited,
Hearts both whole, now neither aching.”

Loud cheers, whistles and applause greeted Fulna Hethsdotten as she completed the final stanza of the Saga of Tyrdda Bright-Ax, Kai and her party joining in with the ovation. The tale was told in their honour as thanks for the relics the Inquisition had sent on ahead with Skywatcher.

Kai had never heard an Avvar saga spoken before. It evoked fireside tales she heard as a child, filled with tension and expectation, the style somewhere between speaking and singing. Quite appropriate with the fire pits in the heart of the hall that Fulna circled as she paced the room, pausing to deliver lines to individual people sitting at the long tables in the Hall.

The hubbub rose again following silence during her telling, people feasting once more as they did before she started. Kai overheard a child on a nearby table.

“Ama, what does love-sweat mean?”

When she heard the expression as Fulna recited the saga, Kai thought it a little adult to be speaking before the youngsters there. But Avvar appeared to be less inhibited about their sexuality. She peered across to see a young girl about ten observing her mother, who was plainly loath to explain the meaning. Perhaps even being uninhibited had its limits.

A man sitting nearby cackled. “Good luck with that one, Freyja!”

The mother glared at the man before looking back to her daughter. “Ama will tell you when you are older.”

The child’s shoulders sagged in exasperation. “Ugh, you always say that. How old is older?”

Kai had to stifle a snicker. The exchange was eerily reminiscent of similar conversations with her mother.

The mother groaned. “When I say so, child. Now hush, enough questions or no cream pudding.”
The child pouted, and sensing defeat gave in reluctantly. “Oh...alright.”

Kai watched as the mother smiled, and placed a bowl in front of her daughter. The pout morphed into a beam of delight as the child picked up a spoon and devoured the cream pudding eagerly.

Only then did it occur to Kai, the child called her ‘Ama’. Kai always assumed Ama was unique to her family; all other children she knew when younger called their mothers Mama or Ma. She turned to Sun-Hair.

“Sun-Hair, among the Avvar, what do children call their mothers?” she inquired.

Sun-Hair put down her mug, her face rosy from the alcohol. “Ama,” she explained.

“Has it always been that way?” Kai queried, mystified how an Avvar word ended up in the Trevelyan household.

“Yes, always passing from mother to daughter. Although,” Sun-Hair chuckled, “as a child I called my Ama something else if there were chores to be done when I would sooner play with my friends. But never to her face unless I wished a thrashing. My mother was a strict woman.” She leaned forward and whispered. “It was goat-kisser. If you have ever milked a goat, you will understand.”

Kai grinned at her response, reminding herself to watch if she saw someone milking a goat. From the furtive way Sun-hair told her she presumed it wasn’t respectful.

She murmured back equally conspiratorially. “With me it’s my father. My sister and I used to call him ramrod arse as he invariably seemed to have a stick up it.”

Loud guffaws from Sun-Hair met her remarks, Kai laughing along.

“My father was a kind man,” Sun-Hair continued when the amusement died down. “Thoughtful and wise. But they both formed me, Ama for strength and Da for patience. What about you?”

Kai thought for a moment. “My father for the stubbornness, and my mother for the humour. My mother...was funny and witty, and kind.”

Ama had more influence on Kai than her father, but she couldn’t deny she’d picked up her father’s obstinacy. *But her Ama, where did she get the word from?* That was the puzzle. In all her years Kai never thought to ask her mother, and now she was gone. There were questions which only occurred to Kai when it was too late, like this one which would be added to the mental shelf the others remained on, unanswered.

A wave of longing washed over Kai; she missed Ama and her affection, and still felt sad she never managed to say goodbye.

“Your mother no longer lives?” Sun-Hair’s tone was gentle.

Kai realised her feelings must be bleeding through. Since the quarrel with Cullen, her emotions ran closer to the surface. She needed to recover her focus. “No,” she replied giving a small sad smile before she changed the subject. “Your father?”

Sun-Hair shook her head. “We lost him two winters ago; the cold-chill took him.” She shifted to face Kai, so no-one could see her and confided. “I miss him also.”

Kai responded with a nod to acknowledge she understood. Nothing further was added and nothing needed to be. Both were leaders, both had lost some dear to them, and neither could
afford to display that sense of loss in front of their people, but could to each other. The same would not be true if it involved their communities.

Sun-Hair turned back, her attention attracted by Arrken, the Trainer, who had earlier been exchanging techniques and opinions about fighting moves with Cullen and Bull. He was impressed by Cullen’s shield technique, asking him to demonstrate it to their shield warriors. Specifically one move Bull had pointed out to her back in Haven, how Templars used their shields when fighting mages, angling it slightly downward. Likely the Avvar didn’t devote as much time to fighting mages as Templars did.

Dorian was deep in discussion with Amund, about what she couldn’t hear as sat he sat further down and Bull was being particularly loud. What she did notice was how Dorian took to Avvar ale; it must have been his third tankard. Kai knew he was partial to Ferelden ale, and the Avvar one did taste similar, except a little heavier.

Kai sighed to herself and took yet another lurker sausage. Avvar food was not as plain as she imagined, the sausages containing some wonderful mix of spices. In fact everything piled high on the table tasted incredible, and she wasn’t the only one who’d ploughed her way through the delights before them. Cullen, Bull and Dorian had all tucked in heartily, probably because this was their first proper meal since breakfast earlier in the day.

Only Cole sat with an empty plate at the end of the table and for once they could reveal why he didn’t eat or drink. The Augur seemed fascinated at the concept of a human/spirit; a being who spanned two worlds. Cole responded to his questions as only Cole could, and then reeled off comments based on what he saw in the Augur’s head, to considerable amusement from the Augur.

Her attention settled on Cullen again. He was more like his usual self, talking combat was home ground for him. She guessed joining in with the contest against the Avvar fighters had likely drained some of the residual tension from the argument. Thinking about it again brought back the knot of guilt at her behaviour. Whatever was said, nothing excused striking him. He would never have lost it with her in the same way. One thing for sure, it could never happen again.

Cullen was right, they were lurching along. Drawn in all direction by their responsibilities, it left little time for each other. Did it really have to take a fight to make her appreciate he might have a valid point when he asked her to ease back and not attempt to take on everything she possibly could. Evidently yes. Somehow she had to find a solution, she promised him she would. And he promised they would find time talk through what was happening.

She wanted to do the best she could for her people, yet in her fervour, she’d forgotten Cullen was one of them. She heard Ama’s voice in her head, ‘if you break something, fix it or put it right’. She desperately hoped they could put this right and find their way again.

Maintaining that crucial connection, not being a distant leader was important, but after the events earlier, she also realised how draining it could be. Some days it was so hard to be what people expected of her, assuming she could fix every little problem, as if she knew all the secrets and all the answers because she was the Inquisitor and the Herald of Andraste. Some people trained years for this type of responsibility, she had it all because she moved left through mazes.

Maker, if you did exist, I’d have more than a few things to say to you, she reflected cynically. And now I’m distracted and talking to myself.

She forced her mind back to discover she was still staring at Cullen, but now he was staring back at her, smiling. Kai smiled back, to see him flick a glance at Sun-Hair. Kai looked at Sun-Hair and then back at him, unsure of what she was missing. There was another eye flick. Then it dawned on her, ‘ask for help’.
I should add dim to distracted, wondering why on earth her mind was in such a foggy state. It couldn’t be the ale; she moderated her drinking to keep her head clear. This may be a celebration, but she nevertheless had to work.

Kai broached the question she’d waited most of the evening to ask, counting on the festivities and the drink to ease any hesitation.

“Sun-Hair,” she called.

“Yes, Inquisitor,” she replied turning to face Kai with a happy ale-smile.

“Your peace-oath with the Jaws of Hakkon...” she began, seeing the smile shift into a frown. Kai hoped the frown wasn’t meant for her.

“What of it?” she asked.

“Well...” Kai had prepared a speech with her usual diplomacy, but watching the plain speaking woman before her she shoved it aside, and as with the Augur earlier plumped for honesty. She drew a deep breath. “I have a connection with a person they blame for the destruction of their Hold, the Hero of Ferelden, and I am reasonably certain Gurd Harofsen plans to attack the Inquisition as retribution...”

Sun-Hair snorted. “That would not surprise me. He is a fool and his people are bigger fools for following him. If he did attack your Inquisition, and you fought back, it would affect all the Holds. It is not only ours that hold a peace-oath with their Hold. An outsider army marching in would be regarded as a worse menace than the Jaws of Hakkon are, joining all the Holds in defence of them. We would all pay the price for his vengeance.”

This was something Kai had not foreseen, viewing their fight as against the Hakkonites alone. Was this what Gurd Harofsen meant when he threatened her? An all-out war between the Avvar and the Inquisition? Maker, this could not be allowed to happen. She would not allow this to happen.

“Sun-Hair, we have to stop him. I don’t wish to bring my army here and I certainly don’t wish war with the Holds. But my people can’t do this alone; our numbers here are modest.” Kai paused, her next words spoken respectfully. “On behalf of my Hold and its people, would you join forces with us to avert this?”

Sun-Hair’s frown gave way to a sombre expression as she took a sharp breath and let it out gradually. “Inquisitor, nothing would give us greater joy than to bathe our blades in their blood, but... this is poor weather to ask this of my Hold.” She glanced around the Hall, gesturing with her head. “You see how happy they appear tonight, it is but a lull.”

Kai saw her face the Augur, and only then realised the conversation on their table had ceased, and all were watching the two of them. The Augur nodded yes in response to Sun-Hair’s unspoken query.

Sun-Hair turned again to Kai. “How much has Amund told you of our ways? Do you know of our hold-beasts?”

Kai scanned her memory, sifting out what she recalled of her discussions with Amund. “I know your hold-beast is as kin to you,” she repeated, seeing Sun-Hair nod. “They...tie you to the gods.”

“Our hold-beast, Storvacker, has not been seen for days and the hold is fearful for her. Without her, well, it is as...” Sun-Hair paused, knitting her brows, seemingly searching for the right words.
“...your Maker has turned from you has he not, it is for us as that.”

“Perhaps she’s simply off doing...whatever she would normally do, but for longer?” Dorian suggested.

“It has been too long for that,” Sun-Hair answered. “Too many days have passed with no sign of her.”

“Have you searched for her?” Bull inquired.

There was an uneasy hesitation in Sun-Hair’s tone. “We...cannot. A hunt for her...would show weakness to the Hakkonites...”

It surprised Kai she was informing them. Their standing with the Hold was greater than she imagined if Sun-Hair was prepared to admit this. Kai also recognised they were being asked to find her.

“We know she is alive, the gods would see if she was not,” the Augur added. “It is...as if she had vanished.”

“And she never misses her honey cakes, she...” Arrken stopped as Sun-Hair turned to glare at him.

“Is Fulna still feeding her those? Lady! No wonder she was waddling last I saw her.”

_Honey cakes? What sort of creature eats honey cakes?_ Kai raised her hand. “May I inquire, what is Storvacker? I mean what sort of animal is she?”

“She’s a bear,” Sun-Hair answered matter-of-factly. “We are Stone-Bear Hold.”

Kai puffed out a breath, while Bull choked on his ale, coughing furiously. Dorian’s lips were tightly held together to restrain the chuckle and Cullen coughed, no doubt seeking to conceal a grin.

“A bear,” Kai repeated sighing. “She’s...a bear.” Why did it have to be a bear?

As if her day wasn’t bad enough. Kai had never faced a bear who didn’t want to kill her. The stockpile of pelts Dagna and Harrit had for armour was testament to that. Sun-Hair, the Augur and Arrken all glanced at each other before looking back at Kai. However, it was Cole who spoke.

“She once cleared a whole area of bears.”

Kai’s heart sank. After that remark, now they would imagine her killing their hold-beast. A hold-beast treasured by the Hold...who ate honey cakes. _Cole_, she thought sharply, seeing him shoot a glance at her. Sun-Hair’s response was not what Kai expected.

She chuckled. “You’ve fought bears and lived! Good for you!”

The sinking feeling abated, and Kai took her chance. “We could...search for your hold-beast...if you wish,” she suggested, getting a grateful nod as Sun-Hair acknowledged her offer.

“Should you find her, the Hold would be thankful, Inquisitor. And we never forget our friends.”

Find the bear and hope she was not predisposed to attack for all their sakes. If they brought her home safely they had allies, if not, well Kai could add another adversary to the lengthy list she was amassing. She hoped an alliance would be sufficient to handle the Jaws of Hakkon, but their
numbers remained the unknown element. Maybe tomorrow Cullen would obtain more information when they investigated this fortress.

Strangely enough all these tasks reminded her of the early days in the Hinterlands, when they were called upon to solve smaller problems just to garner goodwill and recruit agents. Not knowing what they faced, working to aid whoever they could mattered more back then. One small kindness could potentially reap rewards later. Back then there was less reverence too, and people thought of her more as a person than an icon. The fact that Avvar looked upon her as just another Thane was also welcome.

There was one further issue.

“If we locate and return Storvacker, and we take on the Hakkonites together,” she watched Sun-Hair carefully, “what about the other Holds?”

Sun-Hair sighed. “The Jaws of Hakkon have few friends, but we will have to pay the price of oath-breaking. They will understand and the storm will pass.” Her tone was not as confident as her words.

Kai responded frankly. “We are grateful, and we remember our friends as well.”

Sun-Hair’s words were equally forthright. “We do not do this lightly, Inquisitor.”

“I understand,” Kai acknowledged.

Kai realised then Sun-Hair was going out on limb to help them, something she and her people knew all too well. In the early days the Inquisition were regarded as heretics, denounced by the Chantry and alienated from those in power. Not until the true menace was realised, and they demonstrated their worth, did attitudes change.

The Inquisition had been viewed as the enemy, and Kai feared the same for Stone-Bear Hold. Whatever transpired, however this played out, Kai would not let them suffer for coming to their aid. It was all academic, however, unless they found this bear.

Negotiations over, the conversations began once more. Kai took a long, hard drink from her mug.

**********

The cabin given to her and Cullen was modest, but cosy, warmth and light provided from the open fire and candles burning around the one room. The bed was narrower than they both had, covered with a heavy woven blanket, and fur rugs strewn around it. She and Cullen would be more squashed than in their own beds, but being on the road and living in tents afforded little in the way of comfort, so this was luxury in comparison.

They could still hear Dorian singing as he and Bull walked on to their quarters. Kai had scarcely seen Colette, except for her slipping out earlier with Arvid; she guessed likely returning to the fishing camp. What she did observe was how attentively he watched her, even holding open the door for her as they left. Cole had ambled off with the Augur and Kai couldn’t help wondering if he was planning to talk with the Hold’s spirits.

Kai sat down and started to unbuckle her boots, Cullen sitting on a chair, doing the same. This was the first time they were alone since the fight earlier. Even though they had talked afterwards, she still felt edgy about her loss of control. It was easier to ignore with other things occurring but now they were alone.

She watched as he finished unbuckling his other boot and took it off. He stood, turning around,
and that was when she saw it, a hole in the heel of his sock. Kai couldn’t help but grin.

“Cullen,” she called. “Your sock has a hole in the heel.”

He peered back lifting his foot to see. “Dammit, it’s these new boots.”

Kai held out her hand, smiling. “Give it to me and I’ll darn it for you.”

His eyebrows shot up as he lowered his foot, taking off the sock. “Where did you learn to darn socks?” he asked, incredulous.

“From Bull,” she grinned, receiving the sock from him. She picked up her pack looking for her sewing kit. “We have to do this stuff ourselves out on the road, you know.”

Cullen sat down, chuckling as he shook his head. “Should I even ask where he learnt to do it? I wouldn’t imagine it’s something an ex Ben-Hassrath is taught.”

Kai pulled out her kit and opened it, taking out the needle and wool. “From Krem, he’s really good at needlework. He makes these little stuffed nugs for the children.” She threaded the needle. “He learnt it from his father. Krem’s father used to be a tailor before he sold himself into slavery.”

Cullen’s smile was replaced by a shocked frown. “Why would he do that?”

“He lost his business,” Kai sighed, starting to mend Cullen’s sock. “One of the Magisters decided to employ slave labour to produce cheap clothes for the poor. Krem’s father couldn’t compete with the prices. So it was either become a state slave or starve.”

“Maker,” she heard him exclaim, before falling silent for a few minutes.

Kai glanced up to catch him regarding her avidly. “What?”

“All this information you have, about people, their families, their history...” he wondered.

“I talk to them,” she explained, continuing her work. It was trickier with one eye and she had to concentrate harder in the dimmer light. “It’s my...” she made the mistake of glancing up as she spoke and ended up poking the needle into her finger. “Oww fuck...” she cursed.

Now she was bleeding onto his sock. Kai groaned and sucked her finger to stem the flow.

Cullen perched next to her. “Sorry, did I distract you?” he smiled.

“ust a it,” she grumbled, her mouth full, before removing her finger to see if it was still bleeding. “Let me see?” he suggested, holding out his hand.

Kai gave him her hand, waiting as he scrutinised her finger.

“You know, you should really be kept away from sharp objects,” he teased.

Kai scoffed and sought to pull her hand away, but he hung onto it, drawing her closer.

“What are you...?” she began, but he shushed her and placed her finger into his mouth, sucking on it as she had. The sensation was unusual, but nice.

He withdrew it and checked again. “There, it’s stopped now. You may continue,” he grinned. “My sock is safe.”
Kai rolled her eye, and tugged out of his grasp, catching the laugh as she returned to her task.

“You were saying...it’s your...?” Cullen asked.

“My way of keeping in touch,” she replied, pointedly not glancing up this time. There was only a small section left now.

“I hadn’t appreciated how important it was to you,” he remarked expectantly.

“I need to finish this,” she answered quietly.

Kai continued darning his sock, needing to focus on it. She felt uneasy again, the guilty feeling resurfacing.

What worried her was how she’d totally lost control when she struck him. One moment she was annoyed, but no more than before when he shouted at her. The next moment she was lashing out at Cullen, fear and anger overtaking any form of sense. She had lost her temper before, but never felt the primal emotions as intensely as they surged through her body in that moment. But even more frightening was the animalistic want to hurt him for hurting her.

Cullen said nothing more, and the two of them remained silent until the final stitches were done. The repetitive action allowed her to focus and regain some calm. Kai busied herself putting her sewing kit away and then offered the sock to Cullen.

“There you go, practically as good as new.”

He stretched the heel and grinned. “I know where to come next time I need a sock darning. You do it better than I can.”

“What?” Kai exclaimed, knitting her brows. “You let me do it, knowing you could?”

“You sounded so keen how could I refuse?” The smiled faded to a look of concern as he rested his hand on her cheek. “Kai, you don’t have to keep making it up to me,” his voice became a whisper, “I’ve let it go, you should too.”

Kai looked down; the sting of guilty tears pricking at her as his hand tenderly caressed her cheek. “It’s unforgivable, Cullen,” she croaked, her voice betraying her.

“Yet I forgive you,” he responded gently. “Do you forgive me?”

“Of course I do,” shot out unequivocally as she looked up at him. *How could he imagine I wouldn’t?*

He gazed at her intently. “Then tell me what troubles you.”

“I...” She swallowed hard and looked away. *Maker, how can I tell him?*

He drew her back to face him. “You do realise your hands are turning white.”

Kai saw her hands, clasped together in her lap, held tight in a vice-like grip. As she let go, the blood flowed back turning them to a normal colour again. She heard Cullen.

“Whatever it is, Kai, I think you need to tell me,” he advised.

Kai continued to stare at her hands, her heart picking up in pace. “I...can’t,” she stumbled. *How can I tell him that in that terrifying moment I wanted to hurt him?*
Cullen groaned wearily. “Enough with these secrets, Kai,” he asserted. “Wasn’t what occurred earlier proof enough of where it can end up?”

A stifled gasp flew out as fear bubbled up; fear of what he would think if he knew. A sinking feeling opened up in the pit of her stomach. She could visualise his frowning face, waiting for her to confess.

“Tell me,” he insisted, articulating each word deliberately.

His tone told her he wouldn’t let this go until he got an answer. She was reluctant to face him, knowing she would see his disapproval.

“You really want to know?” came out sharper than she intended.

“Yes,” was the resolute response.

Kai felt the heat rising as the tears she held back forced their way out. Her breathing became erratic and her hands trembled. Anger blended with the fear and guilt inside her. She swung round to face Cullen. His brows shot up seeing her fierce expression and tears rolling down her cheeks. The words came out in a stream of terse emotion.

“I was frightened and furious with you, and I couldn’t control it, couldn’t hold it back.” She gave a bitter laugh. “Hardly the composed person I’m meant to be, don’t you think.”

“Kai...” he began, now looking worried. He tried to reach out for her hand.

“No, I haven’t finished,” she snapped, pulling away. “You haven’t heard the best bit yet, Cullen. Don’t be so quick to offer comfort.”

She fixed him with a stare. “In that split second when the anger and fear boiled over inside me...I...” Her anger wavered seeing the deep concern in his eyes, and the harshness of her voice eased as she finally confessed “...I wanted to make you feel the same pain you made me feel.”

Kai wiped her face, sniffing. “Not the sort of thing a person is supposed do to someone they love, is it?” she finished quietly.

Cullen’s expression was unchanged as he watched her. “No, it isn’t,” he sighed. “But it’s exactly the sort of thing a person does when they bottle up anger, fear or both for too long. Sooner or later, they will emerge and...” he paused, “...it’s more likely to come out with someone they’re close to.”

“It doesn’t make it excusable though, Cullen,” she answered quietly. The outpouring of emotion on top of the events of the day left her numb and exhausted.

“I’m not saying it does, Kai,” he told her, his voice gentle. “What I’m trying to tell you that although it’s hard for me to hear, I understand why. I’ve walked the road you’re on now.”

Kai closed her eye and took a deep breath letting it out. When opened her eye he was still watching her. Saying sorry seemed paltry, but it was all she had to offer.

“Even though it seems inadequate in the circumstances, I really am sorry, Cullen,” she apologised. “You deserve better.”

The corners of his mouth turned up, not quite a smile. “It’s enough.” Cullen inclined his head. “Would you have told me if I hadn’t pressed you?”
“No,” she admitted.

The two them sat there silently for few moments. She knew he was thinking over her admission, and waited for him. Kai felt drained, her heart sitting heavy in her chest. When he finally spoke, it was not what she expected to hear.

“I believe it was you who made me promise we wouldn’t go to bed on an unresolved argument?” he suggested.

Kai was puzzled. “Yes...” she replied, uncertain.

Cullen moved his face closer to hers. “And why did you ask me to promise?”

“So you wouldn’t brood on things, so we could clear the air,” she replied, suddenly realising where he was going with this line of logic.

A gentle smile and arched eyebrow met her gaze. “Perhaps the boot was on the other foot this time?”

Kai couldn’t prevent a smile responding to his. “Perhaps.”

He held his arm out for her, allowing her to shuffle nearer and then wrapping it around her.

“One more thing.” The smile was replaced by an earnest expression

“What’s that?” she asked.

“No more bottling up fear inside you. I think you understand where that ends...as do I. I’ve no desire to lose you to fear, fear that haunted me and made me angry for so many years,” he professed.

Kai could see from Cullen’s face this was no gentle guidance, it was a cautionary warning from someone who had walked this road.

He stroked her cheek softly. “I told you when you lost your eye that I don’t walk away when things become difficult. We will work through all of this, together.”

She gaped at him open-mouthed, with a lump in her throat and a swell in her chest. He smiled softly at her awed face before leaning forward to kiss her. The tears which had receded now returned, sliding silently down her cheeks and onto his as she smiled into the kiss.

Back in Haven, she tried to keep her distance from Cullen because he wasn’t a man get involved with lightly and she didn’t believe she was in love with him. But now, now there were no words powerful enough to express how deeply she loved her husband.

Chapter End Notes

The Saga of Tyrdda Bright-Ax belongs to Bioware.
Re-Connection

Chapter Summary

Kai's nightmare wakes Cullen. From his attempt to distract her, they find themselves rediscovering the sense of fun and affection that brought them together.

Some NSFW.

Cullen was shaken from his slumber, and blearily opened his eyes assuming Kai was trying to rouse him. As his surroundings came into focus he realised she was the one shaking him, but he also saw she was curled up in front of him and clearly not awake. The distressed whimpers revealed she was suffering another nightmare, and on top of that he heard the noise of the Anchor crackling away. Even though it was livelier since their arrival in the Basin, this was a level louder than it had become. However drowsy he had been, this jolted him awake.

Maker, no, he thought, not again, not now.

This was a bad sign. Kai hadn’t activated the Anchor in her sleep for months now. When they went to bed he wondered if her anxiety would trigger a dream, but he didn’t envisage she’d have a full-blown nightmare setting off the Anchor.

He had to take care not to startle her before he had a steady grip on her left arm, and thankfully it was draped over her hip, her hand resting on the bed. At least she hadn’t injured herself this time. Cullen counted to three, and took a firm grip of her forearm, at the same sliding his other arm underneath her torso, hugging her securely.

When she started to struggle, he soothed her. “Kai, it’s safe,” he kept repeating until she calmed. He held on until she said the words, “I’m here.”

Only then did Cullen relax his hold. ‘I’m here’ was the signal she was awake and the Anchor powered down. He had hoped against hope he’d never have to listen out for those words anymore. Cullen recognised what would come next, conscious he needed to distract her.

Kai’s voice was full of worry. “Cullen, I’m so sorry, did I...?”

Cullen stopped her. “Ssh, I’m fine.”

“Thank the Maker,” she answered, the relief evident in her reply.

Kai raised herself up, checking her thigh for damage. It was habitually the same, making certain he was safe first before determining any harm she might have done to herself.

“Not this time,” he reassured her, hearing another sigh of relief.

He was as thankful as she was not to see another injury; there were already two burn-like patches
on her left thigh. Her body bore enough scars and marks from what she had to face and what she had to deal with. And that was only what you could see on the outside, the damage done inside was not immediately visible.

This was the reality for her. This was what people didn’t see. What they saw was the icon, the leader, not the fallible woman carrying physical and mental scars. Few were permitted to see the full extent of the damage. Apart from him and Leliana, the only other person was Cole and that was only because he could read her. Bull and Dorian were familiar with some of it, but Cullen knew she hid enough from them.

After what he’d discovered yesterday, he now wondered how much she was withholding from everyone. The warm and open woman he recalled could still be warm, but certainly not as open as she once was.

Kai turned around, looking at him gratefully as he took her into his arms, rubbing her back to comfort her. She hung onto him as she always did. Cullen knew this routine well.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “What would I do without you?”

He kissed her nose. “Letting you loose without me to hold you back, I dread to think,” he teased, smiling. “Who knows what kind of trouble you’d get into?”

The groan was promptly followed by a laugh, a laugh signifying her change in mood. What she did for others worked equally well for Kai, and he was well versed in how to distract her after a nightmare or a dream.

She observed him for minute or two. “So,” she smiled, “my husband thinks I need holding back, does he?”

“He does,” Cullen smirked seeing her gaze dart to his mouth.

As he watched her, he couldn’t help but think without her eye patch her face looked softer, she looked softer, even vulnerable. The eye patch gave her an air of toughness, which she played up to if the occasion demanded.

“I...see,” she drawled lazily, eyebrow lifted as she stared into his eyes. She pulled out of his embrace and pushed him onto his back, leaning over him. “Hold me back anytime you want,” she winked.

Cullen watched as she shuffled down the bed, kneeling by his stomach, and wondered what she was up to. Catching his gaze as she glanced back, she grinned cheekily and then puckered her lips, leaning down. He groaned and sat up swiftly, seizing hold of Kai before her lips reached his skin, just in time to prevent her blowing a raspberry against his navel. Cullen had no idea how she created such a strong vibration, but it caused his extremities to tingle. He had no intention of experiencing it yet again.

“Why you sneaky...” he accused, yanking her up as she laughed loudly.

“Almost...got...you...” broke out through the hilarity.

“Katarina,” he groaned frowning, which simply caused her to laugh even more.

Both knew this was a game, he was stern and she laughed. He loved it when she was playful, he loved having her face light up as he mock scolded her, and he loved the impish smile and the rich, melodious laughter. They had become less and less over time, so he would seize any and every opportunity when it appeared.
Yet on this trip, these moments were more frequent, along with her shifts in mood in the other direction. He had seen the signs of stress in her, but until she exploded he wasn’t conscious of how unsteady she’d become. She had grown more adept at hiding, even from him. Last night he promised they would work through their difficulties and seeing how she looked at him right now, how could he not want the person she should be back with him.

Cullen smirked as a distraction, so she offered no resistance when he swiftly moved to sit behind her. He took hold of her upper body hugging his arms around her, keeping her arms by her sides.

“Consider this being held back,” he declared, his cheek resting against the side of her head.

The laughter died down, but he could see she was grinning. “Hmm, it seems you have me at a disadvantage here,” she mused. “I’ll have to rethink my...”

It was then Cullen realised she was distracting him, when her fingers found his sides and started to tickle him.

“Hey!” he protested.

The surprise caused him to loosen his grip and Kai slipped out of his grasp, and was off the bed snickering and pointing as she spun to face him.

“Use your opponent’s weaknesses against them, isn’t that what you taught me?” she taunted.

“To my disadvantage it seems,” he conceded, getting off the bed and striding over to her as she backed away smiling.

Seeing what was behind her he followed Kai, forcing her further back. It was a few steps more until she bumped up against the cabin wall. He grabbed her wrists, keeping her arms away from him and held her body against the wall with his.

“However, forcing one’s opponent into a path of your choosing works equally effectively,” he insisted, his expression daring her to respond. “So, if your opponent has you pinned down, what should you do?” he questioned.

She glanced down and back up at him, her body relaxing as she drew in a deep breath. He couldn’t help glancing at her breasts swelling and falling underneath her shirt, her nipples pushing against the fabric. As he looked back up she was smiling.

“Is my position...” she breathed suggestively, moving her face closer to his, “...hopeless?”

Unsure whether this was another ploy or whether they had strayed into altogether different territory, Cullen mulled it over, watching her. There was one way of finding out. He tilted his head downward, causing Kai to bend her head backward slightly and look up at him.

“Utterly...hopeless,” he smirked, his breath flowing over her mouth.

There was a gasp and a swallow, and then a grin broke out. “I’d hoped feigning weakness would work...”

Cullen chuckled. “You hoped to manoeuvre me into complacency?”

“It was an option,” she revealed, gazing into his eyes. “But now...perhaps I should inquire...what would be the terms of my surrender?”

He recognised it had been a ploy, but seeing her expression now, it seemed his response was
nudging her somewhere entirely different. “Well, let’s see...” he began, grinning as he weakened his grip and moved back a little, allowing her some space.

Suddenly Kai tugged away from him laughing. He managed to hang onto one of her wrists, dragging her back to him. Before she could try again, he hoisted her over his shoulder.

“What if I reject your terms?” she wondered slyly. “What happens to me?”

“Disobedience necessitates punishment. I...” Realising what he said, Cullen groaned to himself.

He was so caught up in their game, it was only when the word came out he thought perhaps he shouldn’t have used that particular one. Of course Kai latched onto it immediately.

She fidgeted on his shoulder, snickering. “Punishment is it? Hmm. In that case, I reject all and any terms you dictate.”

All was not lost yet, Cullen had another card to play. “You refuse to acquiesce to my terms?” he inquired, smiling, knowing she couldn’t see his face.

“Absolutely, every single last one of them,” she affirmed resolutely, her finger tapping out each word on his back.

This was easier than he imagined. Cullen sighed. “Well, that is a pity.”

“Why?” she asked a little too eagerly. From the tone, her curiosity was definitely aroused.

“My terms may have been...” he paused for effect, seeking to keep the smile from his voice. He sensed her move, likely trying to see his face. He glanced away.

“Cullen?”

“...more to your ‘requirements’, ” he concluded.

“Oh...shit,” she groaned frustratedly, and then he heard, “can I change my mind?”

For such a smart woman, at times she was so easy to bait. He faced her with a broad grin, seeing realisation dawn. Her gaze narrowed, and she started squirming, forcing him to hold onto her.

“Cullen Rutherford,” she growled. “Put me down right now.”

“No,” he refused, chuckling at her frustration.

He marched them over to the bed, planning to throw her onto it only to realise there was no mattress. She loved it when he flung her onto the bed making her bounce. Cullen stood there trying to work out what to do and heard her snicker. Evidently she worked out what was happening, or rather what wasn’t happening. He could almost hear her thinking the words, ‘always a plan?’.
“Don’t say it,” he groaned.

“Would I?” she insisted innocently.

“Yes, you would,” he alleged wearily.

“Put me down and I promise to not to,” she replied, her hand caressing his back.

Cullen stood Kai onto her feet. She smiled and lifted her palm, caressing his cheek. “Truce?”

He smiled back. “Truce,” he agreed.

Cullen watched as she stepped back, lifting up her shirt and taking it off to stand naked before him. She gave him a coy smile as she stepped forward settling her hand on his chest. “Now, are you planning to carry on teasing me with words, or...”

Cullen smirked raising an eyebrow and put his hands on her hips, dragging them flush with his. “Or?”

Kai draped her arms around his neck. “…are you going to take the most utterly disgraceful advantage of my utterly hopeless position,” she suggested temptingly.

It wasn’t hard to guess what was on her mind now. His wife watching him; inviting, willing, wanting, needing, trusting...him. Maker, she was beautiful, but when she looked at him like she did in that moment, she seemed to shine.

Cullen kissed his wife; her hands now in his hair pulling him deeper into the kiss, as he pulled her tightly against his growing erection, his underclothes the only barrier between them. He felt Kai moan and writhe against him. Cullen broke the kiss, but kept his lips resting lightly on hers.

He dropped the pitch of his voice. “On the bed, now,” he ordered.

There was an exclamation and then she smiled, stepping back and climbing onto the bed. He took off his underclothes, and watched as she opened her legs to grant him access. He knelt between them, resting onto his elbows as he nuzzled her neck, biting her softly. She wriggled a little beneath him, moaning, her fingers threading into his hair once more. He drew back to catch her staring at him, the pulse racing in her neck.

“I love you, Cullen,” she smiled softly.

He smiled back. “I love you too, Kai.”

As he kissed her again, he reached down between her legs, feeling the sharp intake of breath as he touched her, feeling how aroused she was.

She pulled away and her hand found his. “You don’t need to,” she murmured.

“You’re sure?” he asked, seeing her nod.

She stared into his eyes. “I want to feel you.”

“Alright,” he agreed withdrawing his hand, and guided his cock into her, pushing a little way in at first as he met resistance. She let out a whimper, eyes closed, and he momentarily paused.

It was usual for her, but any discomfort would be less than when they spent time apart, so he could be more forceful. She knew he enjoyed it when she was tight, but she also knew he would never be rough without her consent. He thrust into her with one heavy stroke feeling her body pull
him deeper as her muscles clenched around him, an intense cry from her merging with the grunt that tumbled from his mouth. He paused again allowing her to adjust.

Mahon, she felt so...good; soft and warm and wet, and deliciously tight. This was home; being inside her intensely intimate, as if they were part of each other. Here with her, there were no conflicts, no problems, no Inquisitor, no Commander, no Inquisition, just the two of them.

He continued slow and measured at first, feeling her stretch to accommodate him, no longer as tight, but with enough friction to catch him as he moved. He couldn’t help gazing at her; her face, neck and chest flushed, her hands above her head involuntarily opening and closing, her nipples hardened from arousal, whimpers and moans falling from her lips.

She opened her eye to catch him watching her. “You’re staring,” she smirked.

He paused and leant over her. “If you didn’t want me to stare, you shouldn’t look like you do,” he rumbled in a deep tone, smirking as he felt the involuntary clench.

“Cullen...”

“Yes?”

“Less talking...more...”

He thrust into her, dragging out a moan.

“....that,” she urged weakly.

“As my wife wishes,” he growled deliberately, feeling another clench.

He learned how simply dropping the tenor of his voice and making it rougher aroused her. She sighed, her eye closing as he continued, thrusting into her slow and hard, then quickening his pace, settling into a rhythm, drawing louder gasps and moans from her. Seeing how turned on she was, sensing as she adjusted her position to allow him to push in deeper, spurred him in turn and before long both were lost in desire.

Until he realised he was dangerously close to losing control, and needed to ease back else he came before her. But then, he felt her body arching, her pulse beating heavy and rapid inside as her body became taut, gripping him. Recognising she was close he didn’t stop, instead forcing her through, feeling her muscles tighten and relax repeatedly as she came with a long, low scream, him swelling and pushing harder, his own climax flowing through him as his cock pulsed emptying into her.

That final moment when the heat from inside him blended with the heat inside her, it was as if he was giving her everything he was, everything he felt for her. Nothing in the world was as good as that feeling, and there was no one else in the world he would rather feel it with.

“Maker,” he grunted, catching his breath as he leant onto his elbows, sheathing her body with his, feeling her arms holding him.

They lay together for a few minutes, breath and heartbeats settling. He kissed her neck as she kissed his shoulder, small connections recognising the need to not let go, just yet.

Cullen heard a contented chuckle, and then a quiet voice. “Thank you.”

He pulled out and lifted himself up to see Kai smiling. “Anytime...Katarina,” he acknowledged grinning, catching the eye roll.
She lifted her arms away, and he pressed them down, his hands on her wrists.

“I may not be done holding you back,” he teased, watching her gaze widen.

A hammering on the door interrupted them, drawing them back into reality. Only one person banged that loudly.

“Are you two awake yet?” Bull shouted through the door.

“No,” Kai muttered.

“Yes,” Cullen shouted back.

“Good. Because thanks to Boss we’ve got more to do than hours of daylight. And I’ve got a grouchy, hung-over Dorian on my hands because she wanted another early start. So get yourselves sorted and we can spread the complaints.”

“We’ll be there,” Cullen called out.

“Main hall, they’re doing some food for us,” Bull called back before his footsteps strode away.

Cullen watched Kai, both now smiling. She looked so much brighter and lighter now.

“Work calls us, no more frolicking,” he joked, letting go of her wrists.

Kai giggled and traced her fingers over his lips. “Maybe so, but I got to fuck my husband on furs. I think...I’d definitely like to do that again.” The impish smile was back.

“Another time, perhaps,” he grinned.

She laughed. “Another time, then.”

Kai drew him to her and kissed him one last time before they got out of bed. As she got dressed, Cullen saw the lightness give way to determination, the persona of the Inquisitor layering bit by bit with each item of clothing and armour. Finally she put on the eye patch, and there stood the Inquisitor.

“Ready, Inquisitor?” he inquired.

“Ready, Commander,” she confirmed.

Their focus now was on what lay ahead of them, and how to deal with yet another threat.

When she accepted the role of Inquisitor his wife made a promise, and she saw it as her duty to fulfil that promise. There was one thing Cullen could be sure about, whatever she suffered privately, his wife never walked away from her duty. Cullen hoped she would keep her word to find a better balance, because if she didn’t he feared the eventual cost of that promise would be to destroy her.
Discoveries

Chapter Summary

Discoveries made at the fortress by Cullen, Dorian and Cole, and at the island by Kai and Bull lead to disturbing conclusions. The necessity to rescue Storvacker, recruit the Avvar and prevent the Jaws of Hakkon carrying out their plans becomes even more urgent.

Cullen adjusted his position on the earthen bank they were concealed behind, waiting for Cole to return. What they glimpsed of the imposing fortress showed it was closed off by a vast wall of ice. To remain so solidly frozen Dorian was convinced it must be magical in nature. Cole went to investigate if there was any conceivable way through, a door or some passageway. The Hakkonites must have some method of entry; it was simply a question of finding it. They had to get inside to ascertain the strength of the Hakkonite forces.

Dorian lifted himself up to peer over the top of the bank before settling back with yet another groan. “How long has he been, and much longer do we have to wait here hiding?” he complained tetchily.

“Hopefully not much longer if Cole can remain focused on his instructions,” Cullen answered, unable to keep the impatience from his voice.

“I was only asking,” Dorian tutted. “My, someone’s grumpy this morning.”

Cullen scoffed. “Someone’s only grumpy because he’s had to listen to you moaning about the state of your head all the way here, and then for however long we’ve been waiting.”

It had been some time since Cole left them, and Cullen was beginning to wonder what he was actually doing. They’d heard no alarm, so at least he’d not been caught or alerted anyone to their presence.

“I’ll have you know I’m suffering,” Dorian sniffed. “And it was your wife wanting us up and out at some ghastly hour, once more may I add.”

Cullen rolled his eyes. “Believe me, I’m fully aware of that.” He looked around, studying the Avvar fur hat sitting on Dorian’s head. “And please tell me why in the Maker’s name you’re wearing that on your head. Isn’t it a little...unstylish?”

“It’s no more ridiculous than wearing a metal lion’s head decorated with bear fur,” Dorian shot back, wrinkling his nose. “Besides my head is cold. Not to mention my feet...and come to think of it every single part of my anatomy is suffering in this miserable frozen wasteland. I’ll never complain about Skyhold again after this.” Dorian sighed despairingly.

“Yes you will, Dorian,” Cullen smiled, the mirth evident in his voice.

Dorian looked at him and returned the smile. “You’re right. Funny isn’t it, back in Tevinter the climate will be agreeable, perfect for me, but the reception will be considerably frosty. Yet where
the weather is cold and intolerable at times is where it’s warmest, where my friends are.” His smile took of a tinge of melancholy.

Cullen furrowed his brows. “You are coming back though. I thought this visit was only for the formalities?”

“I am,” Dorian confirmed, “but not straightaway. I have some business to take care of while I’m there.” Dorian laughed. “Never fear Cullen, I will return to rescue you all from the complacency you’ll invariably slip into in my absence. Someone needs to keep you all on your toes.”

Cullen chuckled. “And for Bull.”

“And for that silly sod too,” Dorian shook his head, his smile broader. “Who’d have imagined it? If being a member of the Inquisition that destroyed an ancient darkspawn Tevinter magister wasn’t enough scandal, I have to end up with a Qunari, a male Qunari to boot. I tell you, my father would shit his smallclothes from shock if he knew.”

Out of all of them, Dorian and Bull risked the most to be with the Inquisition; Dorian who risked estrangement from his people, and Bull who was ostracised as a Tal-Vashoth from his. What started as a fleeting fling had developed into a deep bond between the two men, the affection obvious to those close to them.

“Quite, I assume it wouldn’t go down well,” Cullen acknowledged, chuckling.

Dorian joined in. “You could say that.”

Cole suddenly appeared, crouching behind them, and causing them both to flinch. “We should go, now,” Cole announced, his countenance more animated than normal.

“Maker’s breath!” Cullen exclaimed.

“Vishante Kaffas!” Dorian cursed, startled. “You’re even worse than she is. Some notification would be nice.”

Cole repeated his warning. “Go now. They’ll find the body soon.” He backed away down the slope as he spoke.

“Cole, what happened? What body?” Cullen inquired, wondering what on earth was going on as they edged off the earthen bank, and headed back to the path leading to Stone-Bear Hold.

“I had to kill one of them, he came too close,” Cole replied his tone more strident, rushing ahead as they tried to keep up with him. “We have to save her.”

“Save who?” Dorian questioned. “Cole, some detail if you please.”

Cole’s voice took on an anxious note. “The bear. Starving her to make her eat the demonweed. She hasn’t...yet.” He stopped and pointed downward. “There, she’s in there, hidden like he was hidden.”

Cullen and Dorian looked down into the swamp they passed by on the trail to the Hakkonite stronghold. It was dark, murky and overgrown and Cullen wondered how they’d find anything in that morass. And if she was hidden like Gurd Harofsen, it implied more blood magic. Stone-Bear Hold may frown on blood magic, but the Jaws of Hakkon evidently didn’t. Rescuing the bear was crucial to securing allies, and the bear was clearly in danger based on Cole’s marked uneasiness.

“Do you know where in there?” Cullen demanded.
“She’s caged, a place of pain, follow the water,” Cole told them.

Dorian pressed him. “Cole, why do they want to do this?”

“A sacrifice; put Hakkon inside her. He’s trapped in a dragon, trapped in the fortress.” He turned to face Cullen and Dorian. “We have to stop them.”

The groan from Dorian was despairing. “Ugh, another dragon. Bull’s going to love this.”

Cullen’s first thought wasn’t only for the dragon; it was also for the spirit inside it. Hakkon Wintersbreath was the Avvar ‘god’ of war; that much he’d discovered from their time here. These people had ‘gods’ for essentially everything, including making babies. How they lived cheek by jowl with spirits was disquieting enough, but placing them inside people and now a dragon?

Admittedly the latter wasn’t Stone-Bear’s doing, yet this was what could happen as a consequence of these practices. However benevolent she imagined the intentions, this was what it could lead to, and this was why such actions were prohibited by the Chantry. If only she could understand that.

A horn sounded in the distance.

“Well, I think they’d just discovered the body,” Dorian observed dryly.

“Yes,” Cole agreed. “But they don’t know we know.”

“Right, let’s get out of here,” Cullen instructed. “We need to get back and inform the Inquisitor.”

As the three of them continued along the trail to Stone-Bear Hold, Cole provided one more piece of information. “She was right. They want to destroy her and her Hold, but they won’t stop there.”

Cullen should have known, nothing was ever straightforward with the Inquisitor.

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Filing past the guards on their way into the Hold, Cullen saw Bull ahead, talking with a group of fighters. There was no sign of the Inquisitor. When Bull spotted them, he motioned for them to follow him. It wasn’t until they reached Bull and Dorian’s quarters, Cullen realised Bull wasn’t wearing his eye patch. Cullen had never seen him without it, and for the first time saw the scars left from the blow which cost him his eye. Unlike Kai, the eyelid was missing too.

No Inquisitor and Bull taking them aside, away from members of the Hold, only reinforced his certainty that whatever she was doing, he wouldn’t approve.

“Where is she?” Cullen questioned, folding his arms.

Bull grunted. “She’s gone to pick up the girl. You try stopping her when she’s set on something. Besides, her plan was sound.”

“She needs to help her,” Cole offered.

Cullen frowned. “Why didn’t you go with her?”

Bull stared back. “Because I would have been a liability.”

“What?” Cullen exclaimed, now confused. She was on her own because Bull would have been a liability?
As much as Cullen was uneasy with Kai out there alone, he realised Bull would have weighed up the practicalities of whatever she planned, and prevented it if he considered the risk outweighed any advantage.

“Alright,” Cullen gave in a little reluctantly. “Tell us about this...plan.”

Bull glanced around. “Well, you all know Boss was anxious to bring this girl back as quickly as we could. Now, I don’t much believe in this fate crap either, but what we ran into when we arrived back at the fishing camp was a little spooky. Stone-Bear’s trader was there, and it turned out he’d literally just returned from his trading trip to South Reach, and had stopped off for a gossip before he headed on to the Hold.”

“He came back from South Reach?” Cullen asked, his eyebrows shooting up.

“Coincidence eh? That’s not the best part,” Bull grinned. “Boss stares at the horse pulling his cart. Bit of beast, larger than our horses and tough looking. Had to be to drag the amount of stuff he was hauling. She stares at the crowd talking, and then whispers to me, ‘Bull, do you think that horse could carry two people?’ I tell her yes and she beams.”


“Hey Kid, who’s telling this story?” Bull reproached, throwing Cole a disapproving glance.

“Sorry, the Iron Bull,” Cole apologised, but still looking amused.

“Now I realise what she’s thinking, use the horse to fetch the girl. But she needs him to agree to her borrowing it. Boss walks up, politely interrupts and I can see she’s geared up to charm him. Before she can, the guy’s jaw drops seeing her hand. ‘You’re the Herald of Andraste’ he says and starts rootling around in his knapsack. He tugs out a book and glances at her excitedly. ‘I’ve read everything else Varric Tethras has written, but I only managed to pick up a copy of this one on this trip. I read some of it on the journey back.’”

Bull paused. Cullen had a nagging suspicion about this ‘book’, a book available where his family lived. Cullen groaned inside, he hadn’t associated the two until now. Thankfully their visit occurred before it was published. Bran was never going to let him live this down...

“Can you guess what the book was?” Bull chuckled.

“Would it be Checkmate, by any chance?” Dorian inquired, barely able to keep a straight face.

“Maybe,” Bull teased, seeing Cullen frowning. “She glances at him, at the book, and says sweetly, ‘I’d be delighted to sign it if you wished.’ ‘Oh yes please’ he answers eagerly. He fishes out a pen and a bottle of ink and she signs it, handing it back to him and he thanks her, grinning like a fool. ‘I wonder if I could ask a favour in exchange,’ she suggests. Two minutes later she has a horse and an Avvar coat, boots and extra gloves off his wagon. One minute after that she has my eye patch.” Bull pointed to his left eye.

“A disguise,” Cullen remarked, nodding in recognition. “Anyone would assume she was from Stone-Bear Hold.”

“Exactly,” Bull confirmed, making the point with a finger wave.

“And if you went with her, they would know who she was,” Cullen added.

Bull nodded. “Until I saw her in the Avvar get-up, I never noticed how she even looks like the Avvar here. Blond, tall and sturdy, same as most of them, so she’d easily pass off as one of them.
She thought her eye patch was too fancy though, mine would work better.” Bull took out her silverite eye patch from his pocket. “We swopped, but hers is too small for me.”

Cullen exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. It wasn’t the first time she’d done this sort of thing to help somebody. Last time he was furious when he found out. This time it was a resigned impatience knowing if she was determined, there was little anybody could do to talk her out of it.

“It’s still risky,” Cullen insisted. “But...you’re right. When she’s that determined no-one can stop her, and she did take precautions.”

“Glad you see it that way, Cullen,” Bull acknowledged. “Because...” he grinned, “...as part of the deal she promised you’d sign the book too.”

“Oh, for Andraste’s sake!” Cullen groaned, hearing Bull and Dorian laugh. “Is there no escape from that damn book?”

“You never know when we might need all the help we can get,” parroted Cole, reminding Cullen of Kai’s remark.

“Yes, thank you, Cole,” Cullen frowned, his irritation evident. This book was like a spectre dogging them wherever they travelled. “I’m well aware of the potential advantages. It doesn’t mean I have to enjoy the attention, which I do not.”

Dorian gave a wry chuckle. “Yes, we heard about the little gathering at her brother’s house.”

Cullen groaned. “Don’t remind me. It was bad enough holding my tongue with her wretched brother, but her cousins...” The memory was distasteful. “I’d sooner take on a host of the enemies we’ve faced than have to deal with them again.”

He caught sight of the smirks on Bull and Dorian’s faces and decided it was time to change the subject. They may have thought the whole affair was highly amusing, but they weren’t the ones on the receiving end of this ‘attention’. Then again, knowing Dorian, he would have more than likely played up to it.

Cullen cleared his throat noisily. “If we can all drag our focus back to why we are here?” He turned to Bull. “Bull, perhaps you can inform us about the island you and the Inquisitor visited.”

This time it was Bull’s turn to look uneasy. “If she suggests going to that place again, one of you can go with her. The damn place was swarming with demons,” he grumbled.

“How do you know this was real?” Dorian queried. He glanced at Cole. “Sorry Cole, but some spirits can be unreliable.”

They all listened as Bull went on to describe what they discovered on the island. A spirit caught in a rift, an ancient rift, one professing to hold the memories of Telana, one of Inquisitor Ameridan’s companions. This spirit had been waiting for centuries to pass on the story behind Ameridan’s visit, a fragmented tale claiming Ameridan and his team had come to the Basin to fight a powerful, magical Avvar dragon which had attacked Orlais along with an army of Avvar. Hundreds had died as it razed whole towns to the ground. They had been tasked to hunt it down by Emperor Drakon himself.

“How do you know this was real?” Dorian queried. He glanced at Cole. “Sorry Cole, but some spirits can be unreliable.”
“There were items with the remains. Here, see for yourself.” Bull offered Cullen a scroll case.

Cullen removed the parchment inside, which was in surprisingly remarkable condition for something 800 years old. It was an order from Emperor Kordillus Drakon to afford all support to Inquisitor Ameridan on his quest to help Orlais. Cullen handed the scroll to Dorian, who read it in turn.

“How did this become lost? How did history forget something like this?” Cullen pondered, his discomfort now subsiding.

Dorian handed the scroll back. “The Second Blight I imagine and secrecy. Orlais has never been inclined to expose its vulnerability to the wider world. Amusing really considering they spend so much time creating that vulnerability by fighting amongst themselves.” Dorian chuckled to himself. “I bet you didn’t know Kordillus’ father was from Tevinter, conveniently removed to be married to Kordillus’s mother. Non-mage children in noble mage families...a bit of an embarrassment.”

“It’s the same dragon,” Cole told them plainly.

“The same dragon?” Bull puzzled staring at Cole.

Dorian explained. “It appears they have a dragon in that fortress of theirs, a dragon which contains one of these Avvar spirits and they want to stick it into Stone-Bear’s...bear.” He waved his hand blithely. “Oh, and we sort of know where the bear is. We only have to rescue it from a quagmire.”

“Alright then, save the bear and we have Stone-Bear Hold to help us take down the Jaws of Hakkon,” Bull smiled optimistically. “And the dragon,” he added with relish, greeted by a groan from Dorian.

“We still need to remove the ice wall, not to mention gaining entry into that fortress,” Cullen insisted. “And preferably have a better idea of the numbers they have in there. Cole was sketchy on that score.” Cullen glanced pointedly in Cole’s direction.

“It’s hard to count with so many voices,” Cole responded.

“So you said, Cole,” Cullen sighed wearily. She would have arrived at an estimate, but he recognised she wouldn’t have discovered what else Cole had. Seeing into people’s heads had been useful after all.

“Cullen,” Bull laid his hand on Cullen’s shoulder. “We might have a clue to getting in. The spirit mentioned something about metal spires leading to somewhere up river, a way to stop the dragon. Based on what you’ve found out I think that’s what they did. Stopped it, trapped it.”

Cullen frowned. “For 800 years? Do dragons even live that long?”

“This one carries a spirit inside it, who knows how long it might live,” Dorian mused.

Bull glanced around. “Point is guys, these spires could be a means through...maybe reverse what they did. We just have to find out if that’s the case, and how.”

“Yes,” Cole intervened. “We have to stop them now...”

His voice was quiet yet there was an urgency to it which attracted their attention. Cole was gazing down, but looked up, his expression determined.

“...they want to kill her, destroy the Inquisition, destroy the place their people died, and kill the
other man...the King.”

Cullen eyes widened as realised what Cole was alluding to. *He meant Redcliffe, and the other man, the King, it could only mean one person... “King Alistair?”* he questioned.

Cole nodded, his expression unaltered. “Yes, he remembers he was there, his Hold has to pay too.”

“Andraste preserve me!” Cullen exclaimed. “If they’re intending to march from Redcliffe to Denerim...” his words faded, his blood suddenly running cold as he recognised what route they would take to reach Denerim.

Not merely was Gurd Harofsen threatening his wife, but now there was the probability of Cullen’s family paying the price for this man’s reprisals, and they’d only just reconnected after years apart. His siblings had survived the Blight, only to be threatened by the consequences of events from that very time. The peril to his family somehow bought the entire matter into sharper focus.

“Cullen?” The concern was apparent in Dorian’s voice.

Cullen’s thoughts sped through the possibilities, what could ensue if these people weren’t stopped.

*Even if they rescued the bear the dragon remained, the dragon with a powerful spirit inside it. It may be confined now, but what if they released it?*

The Inquisition forces at Skyhold were well fortified against an army, but a dragon was something else. If a dragon attacked, and the Avvar army blockaded the mountain path, it wouldn’t be a battle; it would be a siege with slaughter as the inevitable consequence. Cullen had weighed up this risk when they faced Corypheus, but fortunately the threat never materialised. With the dragon gone along with its master, he concentrated on guarding against conventional attacks.

Even though many of their troops were out on peacekeeping missions, a considerable proportion was in residence at Skyhold. At the very worst it could be Haven all over again, and he gave her his word he would never allow that to happen.

*How had he become so complacent?*

His mind raced on taking the reasoning to its worst outcome. If the Inquisition suffered grave casualties any support for his homeland would be uncertain. Ferelden was even now suffering the consequences of the Blight, the rifts and Corypheus’ forces. They would never be capable of withstanding an assault without the Inquisition. It could only result in carnage.

If they didn’t destroy the Jaws of Hakkon now, everything, his wife and his family, not to mention the Inquisition and his homeland, all of it could be wiped out.

*None of this could be allowed to happen, none of it.*

“Cullen?” Dorian repeated anxiously.

Cullen gathered his thoughts, glancing around as he went on. “If they intend to advance on Denerim after Redcliffe, they will probably pass through South Reach.”

“Oh crap,” Bull groaned, grimacing, “Cullen, your family.”

“Not just mine, Bull, but yes, I’d be lying if they weren’t my first thought,” Cullen admitted. “Even if we rescue the bear, they nevertheless have this dragon and if they sent it and their army against Skyhold...well, you can picture how this could all end up. I, for one, have no intention of
allowing this to happen.”

Bull puffed out a breath. “I can tell you one thing; Boss is going to be pissed when she finds out.”

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Kai had stood listening as Cullen and Bull detailed what they’d pieced together from their discoveries, her initial astonishment giving way to a darkening mood, echoed in her expression. It seemed like ages ago now since she’d arrived back with Sigrid, feeling relief and optimism at returning her to the Hold. At least Sigrid was safe if anyone could be safe in this continually growing nightmare.

She sought to restrain her anger at this insanity. *How could someone become so vengeful to regard people as objects to be crushed, destroyed on a whim?* Kai never understood it with Corypheus, but attributed some of it to him being blighted and the red lyrium embedded in his body, no longer human. Gurd Harofsen on the other hand was completely human, and utterly mad, consumed by his hatred.

“We cannot allow this to happen,” she asserted. “We all appreciate what’s at stake now.”

“Our sentiments precisely, Inquisitor,” Cullen concurred, his expression resolute. “What he intends is unacceptable.”

Kai scratched her head, thinking. “Right, first things first,” she began. “We save Storvacker, and we have the Avvar with us. Then we concentrate on their stronghold.” Her armour sat on the bed in their quarters as she was still wearing the borrowed Avvar clothes. “But before anything else, I need to change.”

“Boss!” Bull called, holding up her eye patch by the strap. “I’d like mine back, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Kai couldn’t help a small smile breaking out. “Sorry, Bull. Yours is so comfortable I forgot I wasn’t wearing my own.”

Bull raised an eyebrow. “Uh uh. Well, trust me I didn’t. Been feeling naked without it.”

Dorian chuckled. “This from the man who strolls around with his torso bared all the time.”

Bull gave a slow, teasing laugh. “Admit it Kadan, you love the view.”

Kai smiled, she loved her people. Here they were, confronting another dark threat, and yet there was still room for light and humour. She took off Bull’s eye patch and they swapped for their own, putting them back on.

“There,” Kai noted, “now we’re both properly dressed.”

“Ahh, much better,” Bull sighed approvingly.

Kai took off the Avvar clothes and set about putting on her own armour, noticing Cullen watch her with a curious expression.

“Something on your mind?” she asked.

“Bull was right. In those clothes, you did look uncannily like the Avvar here. Now you’re back in your own armour it’s less apparent,” he revealed.
Kai rolled her eye. “Put them on anyone and they could pass off as Avvar.”

Cullen gestured to Bull, now chatting with Dorian.

“Well, perhaps not everyone,” Kai conceded. “The horns would be a giveaway.”

“That’s why you went on your own,” Cullen remarked, as much a question as a statement.

“Yes, and it was a good plan, Cullen,” she stated, finishing buckling her boot before standing up. “We passed by a group of Hakkonites and they didn’t even realise who I was. All they saw were two Avvar women on a horse.”

Cullen did not appear entirely happy, but neither did he seem annoyed. “It was nevertheless a risk, you know that.”

Kai sheathed her blades and picked up her bow. “Cullen, the minute I fell out of the Fade in Haven I’ve been in danger. Every mission, indeed during visits to other nations, someone or something wants to kill me.” She walked to him, lowering her voice so he alone could hear. “My sleep is...disturbed often enough, Cullen. I can’t allow my waking hours to be paralyzed by vacillation over every action, every idea, and every tactic.”

“But your caution is not weakness, Kai,” he whispered back. “This time you made a rational decision in the circumstances.” He fixed her with an unwavering stare. “Tell me though, how many times have you only just got away with it?”

Kai couldn’t answer him without either confirming his suspicions, or lying to him, and the one thing she didn’t wish to do was lie to her husband. Not after all they’d gone through. Her intention hadn’t been to hide it from him. She knew how he worried for her when she was away and she didn’t want to add to his burden.

But her silence gave her away.

Cullen briefly closed his eyes, shaking his head. His expression was a resigned sadness. “I knew it, I just knew it,” he added quietly.

Kai took a deep breath. “Cullen, when we get our chance to talk, I promise I’ll tell you everything,” she offered respectfully. “Right now though, we have a bear to recover and people to save.”

He reflected briefly before acknowledging her. “Alright. Well, we’d best get to it then, hadn’t we?” he agreed.

Kai called everyone together, and all five headed off to track down and bring home another member of the Hold.
Storvacker

Chapter Summary

Kai, Cullen, Dorian, Bull and Cole head into the swamp to search for Storvacker. They find her, but the rescue does not quite go to plan.

Chapter Notes

Some brief descriptions of violence.

When they came upon the first bloodied rat skull in a tiny wooden cage, it indicated they were on the right track to finding Storvacker. Dorian’s hunch about the Hakonites using blood magic and casting wards to conceal things proved accurate. Cole helpfully informed her she was hidden too because she carried the skulls in her bag, less squeamish than the others to handle them. Since the first one they’d found more, and now another hung on a wormwood branch before her. They appeared to make up an arc around the area ahead. Kai took it down and added it to the others in her pack, wondering how many more there were.

‘Follow the water’, Cole said, and they did, bringing them to the wards. The entire place was damp, overgrown and gloomy, the stream being the only way they didn’t become disoriented in this labyrinth of vegetation and gnarled trees.

“I can feel her now, she’s ahead,” Cole told them. “Cold and wet, cramped and caged. It smells bad, doesn’t want to eat it, but so hungry. We have to help her.” His last words were emphatic.

They moved on, coming to a halt behind some trees when they sighted an entrance to a building hidden within the swamp, and scanned the space ahead.

“We’ll need to watch our backs,” Bull warned. “That looks like a perfect place for an ambush.”

Kai couldn’t resist a retort. “You do realise it’s impossible to watch your own back, Bull,” she kidded.

“Great, now I’m going to be thinking about that,” Bull grumbled.

“Can we concentrate on the task at hand?” Cullen added with a sigh. “I can’t see any guards, and considering how valuable this bear is, that troubles me. See the entrance, and the tunnel leading inside.” He pointed to the lit opening. “Bull is right, we go in there and we’re potentially caught between anyone coming in this end and wherever that tunnel leads to. Someone needs to remain behind and stand guard.”

Kai smiled listening to Cullen mapping out a strategy for this rescue. Normally it would her and
the team doing this, but right now he was in his element and she was content to let him continue. This wasn’t the Shrine of Dumat and his judgment was clear and precise, her Commander at his best.

Cullen turned to Cole. “Cole, would you stay, preferably stealthed. You can warn us if anyone approaches from this side.”

“Yes,” Cole nodded. “Should I also warn you there are people inside?” he suggested innocently. A few chuckles met his words.

Cullen smiled. “Yes, thank you Cole. That is helpful to know.”

“I’m glad,” Cole replied.

Cullen swung to face Kai. “Inquisitor, could you scout out the tunnel and determine what we should expect to encounter inside?”

“Of course, Commander,” she agreed, her smile acknowledging his.

“Good,” he confirmed. “The rest of us will wait for your return and then plan our attack once we have a sense of their numbers.”

They all moved nearer, vigilant for any movement, but the space seemed clear. What they came across were a cage on a cart in the bushes and three dead Hakkonites nearby, mauled and clawed.

Bull chuckled. “Looks like this bear didn’t give up without a fight. Good for her.”

“Let’s hope she sees us as rescuers and not more targets then,” Dorian remarked, peering at the bodies. “It wouldn’t go down well if we ended up killing her because she attacked us.”

“I’ll second that,” Kai concurred. Encountering the bear was the part she was dreading, hoping the bear would see them as friendly. This entire rescue was meaningless if they couldn’t bring her back safe and sound.

Cullen stepped in firmly. “One thing at a time. Let’s deal with the immediate problem first, taking care of the Hakkonites inside.” He motioned to Kai. “Inquisitor, if you please.”

Seeing Cullen, Kai had a thought. She stepped up to Cullen and whispered in his ear, citing his own words. “You were right, Commander. I don’t keep you around just to look pretty.”

The smirk in reply said it all. “Point noted, Inquisitor.”

She smiled radiantly at him, pleased he took in the spirit it was meant, and then headed inside. The tunnel led to a closed area at the far end housing five cells, suggesting this place was formerly a prison. Storvacker was straight ahead locked in one of the cells. The opposition was surprisingly minimal, an archer, a mage, and a huge bruiser, likely the only one who would be a problem. Cullen was correct; this place was lightly guarded for such an important captive. Kai carefully made her way back and reported what she saw.

“Is that all there is?” Cullen questioned, a perplexed frown settling on his face.

“Sounds like a trap to me,” Bull added, looking equally concerned.

“If it is a trap, some of them must be nearby, waiting for us.” Cullen surmised. “Cole do you sense anyone?”
“No,” Cole responded.

“Maybe they considered the wards were sufficient to hide the bear,” Dorian remarked. “I mean, this place is out of the way, you wouldn’t easily stumble on it.”

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck, still suspicious. “You may be right. Our objective is to recover this bear, but we need to be wary about what that could trigger.” He thought for a moment and then outlined a course of action. “Right, Inquisitor if you can slip in stealthed and take out the archer, Bull and I will take on the bruiser. Dorian, could you concentrate on the mage, and the Inquisitor could assist you after she removes the archer. We then release the bear and return her to the Hold.”

“Works for me,” Bull agreed, equipping his axe. “I like a big target, plenty to hit.”

“Fine,” Dorian confirmed.

“Agreed,” Kai concurred.

Cullen gestured forward. “After you, Inquisitor.”

Leaving Cole on watch, the four of them made their way up the tunnel to the cells. Somehow having Cullen in the squad reminded Kai of the missions with Cassandra. Cullen’s fighting style was not dissimilar to hers, the major distinction being Cassandra’s little touches of individuality, possibly born of the fact Seekers did not always work together whereas Templars were more accustomed to working in concert.

When they approached the end Kai stealthed and slipped in as Bull and Cullen headed for the bruiser. She quickly dispatched the archer, a young woman, not much older than Sigrid.

*How many of these Hakkonites were attracted by the promise of glory and how many were truly prepared for what they would face?*

She spotted the bruiser caught between her two warriors in a pincer action, and headed to help Dorian. He was standing, staring around him. It was then she realised what he was searching for...the mage, the mage who had vanished.

“Where’s he gone?” she hissed, daggers poised.

Dorian shrugged. “Don’t look at me, he just disappeared. I got one shot in and then poof! I assumed he’d fade stepped, but...”

A torrent of ice hit them both, spilling over Kai’s blind side before scattering off Dorian.

“Maker, not this again,” Dorian yelled, pushing Kai out of the way as he swung his staff to unleash fire at the mage, following on swiftly with a Horror.

The mage came to a shuddering halt, eyes filled with terror. Apparently they had never come across magic like Dorian’s, and fortunately for her team, were unprepared to counter it. The worst of the chill had passed, but she was slowed.

“Shall I hold him for you, darling?” Dorian offered with a chuckle.

“If you would,” she answered, seeing the mage rooted to the spot by a chilling blast from Dorian. Kai dropped her blades and drew her bow, placing an arrow clean through his eye, but it wasn’t until he thawed that he crumpled to the floor. A thud told her Cullen and Bull had dispatched their opponent too. She shouldered her bow and picked up her daggers, sheathing them.
Dorian marched over to the dead mage. “I want to know how he did that, I’ve never seen a mage employ stealth.” He squatted on his haunches and set to work searching the body.

They walked over, and watched him rummaging through pockets before examining a ring on the man’s finger.

Cullen sounded bemused. “Dorian, you’re surely not looting a corpse?”

“No, I’m conducting an investigation,” Dorian huffed. He tugged the ring off. “Now, this definitely doesn’t belong to him, unless he’s travelled here from Tevinter...” Dorian scrutinised the ring closely. “...and possibly through time, because this looks old to me.”

“No more time travel, please,” Kai objected, shuffling her feet. “Once was enough, thank you.” Memories of future Redcliffe brought back the image of Cullen tortured, a vision she did not wish to be reminded of.

“Don’t worry, I suspect he found this. I wonder...” Dorian slipped the ring on and muttered a word, abruptly vanishing from view, to exclamations from Cullen and Bull, who hadn’t seen what she and Dorian had.

As suddenly as he disappeared, a blast of fire darted out and Dorian reappeared.

“What is that?” Bull quizzed, sounding astounded.

Dorian grinned. “A myth, a legend.” He removed the ring holding it up. “This is a Ring of Doubt, a ring enchanted with the power of invisibility allowing a mage to stealth indefinitely when you utter the word ‘doubt’ in Tevene. Well, until you start casting magic; that appears to disrupt the spell.”

He smirked at Kai. “For all those times you gave me a little surprise, I shall enjoy returning the favour.”

“So you find a mythical, magical ring,” Bull observed, eyebrow raised, “and all you can think about it is using it for pranks?”

Dorian looked smug. “One has take one’s pleasure where one can find it,” he intoned cheekily.

Bull laughed, shaking his head. “And you called me a child?”

Dorian merely shrugged his shoulders, leading to chuckles all round.

Cullen cleared his throat, smiling. “Perhaps now we can turn to the task in hand? Could we free this bear and make our way back to the Hold before darkness sets in.” He looked at Kai.

Kai glanced at the lock on the cell door, and drew out her picks, stepping carefully forward. The bars were spaced widely enough for Storvacker to reach a paw through if she chose to. She made eye contact seeing the bear staring at her; for something so solid and potentially lethal, the poor thing looked dishevelled and in a miserable state. But there was no mistaking the hostility in her eyes.

“Um, hello Storvacker,” she began nervously. “We’ve come to release you...” A growl met her words, causing Kai to take a step back. “...err...” She racked her brains for something comforting or distracting and suddenly remembered. “...and to take you home...for honey cakes.”

This time there was a grunt lifting in pitch almost like an intrigued reply. Kai pressed the advantage.
“Yes, yummy honey cakes. You like those don’t you, they’re really, really delicious,” she nodded, adopting the same tone as she used to sway her nieces and nephews when they were young, hoping to distract Storvacker with the promise of a tasty treat. “We just need to open the door, and then we can all go back and have some. Is that alright?”

The bear nodded with another grunt. Kai went up to the bars, knelt in front of the lock and began working on it.

“Did she just charm that bear?” Dorian questioned incredulously. “Well, I never.”

“With the promise of honey cakes, it seems,” Cullen remarked, amazed.

Bull sounded less convinced. “Don’t call it until she’s out of the cage and not attacking.”

Kai heard the lock click open and took a long deep breath. Now they’d find out if her ploy worked. She cautiously opened the cell door. Storvacker glanced at the door, then the opening ahead and trotted out slowly on all fours, coming to a standstill outside the cell and sniffing around. Silence fell as all four collectively held their breath, ready to react if need be.

It was Storvacker’s subsequent action that caught them all out. She ambled up to Cullen, sniffing harder. Kai’s fingers twitched over her daggers, as Bull’s hand gripped his axe and Dorian lifted his staff ready. Cullen’s shield was shouldered, but he kept his arm across his body poised to draw his sword if it came to it. Kai prayed it wouldn’t come to it.

Instead of attacking, they heard a sound from the bear strangely akin to purring, a rhythmic low and gentle growling, as she raised herself up a little and began licking Cullen’s mane. The whole situation was so weird, nervous giggles burst out from all of them, all except Cullen whose eyes opened wide underneath his helm.

“What in the Maker’s name is she doing?” he muttered anxiously.

“I’m not certain but...” Kai replied quietly, not wanting to upset Storvacker’s apparent caring attitude, “...I think she might be cleaning you as she would a cub.”

“Well, well, Cullen has succeeded in soothing the beast,” Dorian quipped with a snigger. “Now there’s a reversal of roles.”

“Hey Cullen,” Bull called

Cullen’s reply was short. “What?”

“Tell us if her ‘attention’ becomes...unbearable,” Bull teased, straight faced.

Cullen scoffed, and Kai snorted a snicker while Dorian simply chuckled.

Bull grinned. “Seriously though...”

“Oh, I can see how seriously you’re taking this,” Cullen complained. They could only see his eyes, but Kai could picture the frown under his helm.

“...she’s obviously taken to you. See if you can lead her out of here, the sooner we get back the less chance we have of...” Cole’s entrance cut off Bull words.

“They’re...oh,” Cole stalled seeing Storvacker, now nuzzling Cullen’s coat, “she likes you.”

Cullen sighed. “So I’ve noticed.” He shuffled slightly backward as Storvacker stuck her nose right
under his coat. “Maker, even Izzy isn’t this bad.”

“Oh,” Cole repeated. “And they’re coming.”

Cullen glanced hurriedly at Cole before refocusing his attention on the bear. “Who’s coming?”

“Hakkonites,” Cole explained. “They saw the skulls are gone.”

“Crap, how many?” Bull questioned.

Cole glanced back down the tunnel. “There’s a few of them.”

“Cole, much as the warning is welcome, we really need to work on your difficulties with detail.” Dorian replied with a gently reproving frown.

“More than ten?” Cole suggested.

Cullen stepped back from Storvacker. She gave a short grunt but didn’t keep up with him this time.

Kai could detect the Commander’s voice as he outlined tactics. “They’ll have to come down the tunnel to investigate, so we take out as many as we can before they reach us. Inquisitor, Dorian, pick off who you can. We won’t be able to deal with all of them, but we can thin the numbers somewhat. Whoever succeeds in reaching us, we tackle here. The confined space isn’t ideal, but reducing their numbers gives us a greater chance.”

“Funnel them down the tunnel,” Bull chortled. “I like it.”

Kai realised there was just one issue, a bear they had to protect, a bear who could be injured in the melee. “What about Storvacker?” They all turned around to look at Storvacker, calmly standing near Cullen.

Bull grunted. “Damn. Can’t we lock her up again; keep her out of the way?”

“She won’t go back in,” Cole warned. “She didn’t like it in there.”

Voices echoed in the tunnel as the Hakkonites made their way in. Kai stepped forward. “Too late now, we just have to protect her best we can,” she commanded. “Dorian, you’re with me.”

“What does the Lady Inquisitor suggest?” he smiled knowingly.

“What does my Lord Dorian fancy?” she grinned back, seeing him priming the spell as they strode to the edge of the tunnel.

“Oh, he rather enjoys a little incendiary display.” Dorian peered down the tunnel. “They do appear to be taking their sweet time, could you chivvy them up a bit. Some bunching would help immensely.”

Kai reared her bow, then stuck her fingers in her mouth and gave a raucous whistle. “You lot are slower than drunk nugs,” she yelled, her words echoing down the tunnel.

“Maker’s breath!” Cullen groaned, as Bull laughed loudly.

There was a short silence and then, “It’s the Inquisitor, they’ve found the sacrifice! Death to her and her Hold for Hakkon’s glory!” Heavy and light footsteps ran towards them. An arrow whizzed past between the two of them.
As the Hakkonites reached the halfway point, Dorian unleashed a Wall of Fire shooting down the tunnel. The screams were ear piercing as it collided with the front line. Kai unleashed arrow after arrow taking down what she could make out through the flames.

“How’s it looking Cole?” Bull shouted behind them.

“Half left...I think,” he replied uncertainly.

The Wall faded, and the rest continued running towards them. Kai could hear Dorian priming another spell and guessed this would be a defensive one; Fire Mines were his favourite. But before he could cast it, she felt a heavy thump, spinning them both to the sides. As she recovered her balance, she heard Bull.

“And you were worried about the bear getting hurt? Look at her.”

Kai peered down the tunnel to see Storvacker launching herself against a warrior, pinning him down and clamping her jaws around his neck. The crunch as she broke it was audible. Hakkonites were not as well protected as they were.

“Well,” Cullen coughed. “Perhaps a lick wasn’t so bad after all.”

“Get ready, the rest of them are coming,” Bull yelled.

Kai and Dorian pulled back joining her team, watching as the remaining Hakkonites bore down on them pursued by a growling Storvacker. A huge bruiser was at the head of the pack along with three warriors, followed on by an archer and a mage.

“She’s very angry,” Cole commented.

“Glad it’s with them and not us,” Bull observed dryly.

As the group reached them, Storvacker brought down the mage. Kai was no stranger to gruesome sights after all this time, but the visceral nature with which Storvacker killed her targets made Kai shudder.

Now her team and the Hakkonites were in a brutal melee struggle, confined within the walls of the prison. At least there were only five left, Cullen’s tactics had worked. And in amongst all the clashing of swords, shields, mauls, magic and arrows was Storvacker, bellowing loudly and violently. The tumult was nearly deafening as the six of them fought against their enemies, sounds echoing off the walls. Everyone was packed together, so all attacks had to precise, focused, she couldn’t use what remaining bees she had for fear of catching one of her own or Storvacker.

Dorian and Cole working together quickly bought down one of the warriors and she took out the archer with arrows. Bull, as usual, took on the biggest target, the bruiser, as Cullen was locked shield to shield with another of the warriors, the remaining one attempting to fend off Storvacker.

Kai’s thoughts flew at headlong speed, Cole could weaken the bruiser with Bull, Dorian could freeze the warrior allowing Cullen purchase, and she could shoot the other warrior, helping Storvacker. She hollered out orders.

“Dorian, hold him for Cullen. Cole....”

Kai watched as Cole glanced at her, his expression confused. “...help Bull,” she shouted, puzzled as to why he hesitated. He was typically off before she even got the words out.

As they moved off, she drew her bow carefully readying a heavy shot. The last thing she wanted
to do was hit Storvacker by mistake, so she paused, waiting for a clean shot.

That was when she felt the blow from behind, winding her and pitching her forward onto all fours, her bow skittering away from her. As she landed she instantly understood they’d missed one of the Hakkonites and this time she had fallen for their distractions. She was apart from the others, now prostrate and vulnerable, with an assassin behind her eager to finish her off. No one but an assassin moved that silently and stealthily.

Time seemed to slow down as she frantically sought to work out how to stay alive. Cole would hear her, all she had to do was hold off the assassin long enough.

*No time to draw daggers, roll over, face them, use the Anchor, hold them until Cole comes.*

Kai dropped to the floor and rolled away, lifting up her hand and activating the Anchor as the assassin followed her, blades raised ready to plunge downwards to finish her off. The spirit damage Kai forced out from the Anchor slowed the assassin, but didn’t stop her.

*Cole where are you? You always hear me.*

Then it hit her, she carried the wards, she was hidden, she was on her own. Kai glanced around, she’d ended up next to a cell, even further from the others. Realising there was only one course of action left, Kai grabbed hold of the metal bars of the cell door and opened a rift next the assassin, watching the panicked face of the girl, her attack halted as the rift sucked at her, desperately trying to anchor her feet but to no avail. The rift pulled in the young girl, her face filled with horror as her arms clawed at thin air struggling to stay in the world of the living.

Kai quickly closed the rift after the girl disappeared, and let go of the bars, falling onto her back, her breath coming in hard gasps. She turned her face to see the others had dealt with their foes also. The threat now passed, tiredness came over her; she just needed to rest a minute or two. She heard Cullen call her, his tone anxious, and his footsteps hurrying to her.

“I’m ok, I just need a moment,” she answered, hearing her voice sound shaky.

Kai looked up see to his face and the faces of her friends staring down at her, looking troubled.

“I don’t think you are,” Cullen replied, kneeling beside to her. “You’re bleeding.”

“I am?” Kai sat up, and suddenly her head began to spin. She clutched onto Cullen’s arm. “I feel a little woozy, can you help me up?”

Bull’s voice was steady. “Boss, it might be better if you stay as you are, let us take a look first.”

“All right,” she conceded, feeling them remove her pack, dagger belt, and hold up her coat to examine her.

She didn’t see them glance and mouth silently at each other; she didn’t catch the intakes of breath.

All she heard was Cole, sounding more distressed than she’d ever heard him. “No, no, no!” he panicked. “I couldn’t hear her. She’s...”

Dorian cut him off. “Cole!” he cautioned.

“...we have to...” Cole cried out.

“Enough!” Cullen barked. “We have to get her back to the Hold. Bull, can you carry her?”
“No problem, Cullen. But we need to take off the armour; the lighter she is, the faster I can go.”

Kai saw Bull stripping off her armour, her mind becoming hazier, dreamlike, detached from her surroundings. Almost like when she and Lyssa used to stay up all night and ended up so exhausted, but sleep wouldn’t come.

The urgency with which Bull moved to take off her armour and Dorian wrapped bandages around her, seemed so fast compared to how slow she felt. Cole was now utterly still, standing and staring. As Cullen held onto her, she noticed his strained face, attempting to concentrate and not give anything away.

It was then she understood; her husband never was good at suppressing his emotions under pressure.

“No, Kai,” she called, her voice feeble.

His response was gentle, but his gaze concerned when he faced her. “Yes, Kai?”

She searched his face. “Am I dying?”

An involuntary flash of fear flickered in his eyes before he steadied himself. Bull and Dorian paused watching them both.

“No, Kai,” he replied, his gaze darting briefly away when he did.

For the first time ever...he lied to her.

More than likely he was afraid of how she’d react if she knew. Strangely she didn’t feel scared, a gradual acceptance of the inevitability of her death descending on her. But if it comforted him, she’d play along with the lie.

Alright,” she smiled weakly, seeing the corners of his mouth lift, not quite managing to smile back.

Bull’s voice was measured. “We’re done Cullen, give her to me.” Bull took over from Cullen, smiling at her. “You focus on me now Boss, right?”

Kai nodded, and he picked her up. The others picked up her belongings.

As she and Bull moved away, she caught a glimpse of Dorian resting his hand on Cullen’s shoulder. Cullen’s hand rubbed hard at the back of his neck. She felt sad for him, but he was strong now, he would carry on and do all those things he planned to do.

Kai looked away and up at Bull. “I know he lied to me,” she confided with a whisper.

Bull’s expression remained impassive. “You got that then?” he murmured back.

“I didn’t get away with it this time, Bull.” Her voice exuded peaceful acquiescence.

Bull continued walking, now thoughtful. He didn’t look at her when he spoke, holding his attention on the path ahead. “I’ll make you an offer, Kai. You focus on staying alive...and I promise not to tell Cullen the entire story about Grim and the spider rescue.”

Kai gasped, his words jolting her. “You wouldn’t.”

Bull darted a quick look at her. “I would,” he threatened, then shifted his gaze forwards. “So you’d better concentrate, hadn’t you? Why don’t you count the ridges on my horns, and out loud
if you please. That should keep you occupied and out of mischief.”

Kai opened her mouth to argue then thought better of it. Even in her diminished and dying state she recognised he wouldn’t back down. It was blackmail, but done because he cared.

Kai stared up, struggling to make out the detail on Bull’s horns. Her vision was reduced and concentration was difficult. She squinted hard and haltingly began to count out the ridges.
When they reach Stone-Bear Hold, the severity of Kai’s condition is confirmed. Kai is made an offer, an offer to help her, an offer which re-awakens Cullen's worst memory.

Cullen saw Skywatcher at the approach to the Hold, waiting for them.

Once they left the swamp, Cole was sent on ahead to find help for Kai. His agitation was such, Cullen feared even in her disconnected state she would realise the severity of her condition. Cullen observed how people, realising they were dying, would give in to the inevitability, and he didn’t intend to allow her do that, not if there was any prospect of saving her.

She had two deep stab wounds to the back, and judging by the blood loss it looked serious. It was the potential damage inside that troubled them most. Cullen knew what risks she was capable of taking, and he should have been more vigilant. It was his duty, his responsibility to protect her, to ensure her safety. A task he conspicuously failed in; a failure she might pay for with her life.

All the times I made her promise and she came back. The one time I didn’t...

Skywatcher came to meet them as they approached and strode up to Bull. “Here, give her to me. You have done the harder task; allow me to carry her now.”

Bull was stronger than most, but Kai wasn’t diminutive and he was struggling, driving himself on with what remained of his endurance. As Bull passed her over, she whimpered again. Each time Cullen heard her cry out in pain it reinforced the guilt and anxiety nagging at him. But now was not the time to allow his emotions to overtake him; his focus had to be on her.


They followed him through the Hold, through the heated shouts, and looks of concern. Passing by the Thane’s cave Cullen saw Storvacker standing in the doorway, surrounded by members of the Hold, one of them carefully inspecting her.

Right now, he didn’t care a damn about the bear, right now the only person he cared about was his wife.

Reaching the Augur’s cabin, Cullen saw the Augur and a young girl who he presumed was Sigrid. The air was still thick with burning incense, and the blue-green veilfire made the atmosphere other worldly. Kai moaned as Skywatcher carefully put her down onto the narrow, pelt-clad, wooden bunk. She was pale from blood loss, and the ethereal light accentuated her ashen pallor.

“What have you given her?” Sigrid asked abruptly.

“Just some healing draughts,” Dorian replied. “We...didn’t have anything else.”
Sigrid shot over to a bench, hastily grabbed a flask with green fluid and returned to Kai. “For the pain,” she offered comfortingly, aiding her to sit and drink the contents.

Kai grimaced as she drank, but swallowed it all. Sigrid and Skywatcher set to work removing her clothes to evaluate the extent of her injury. As they came to her shirt, for some unfathomable reason he felt the need to warn them before they tugged it off.

“She... doesn’t wear a...” he made a sweeping motion over his chest, blushing slightly as his embarrassment for her being exposed seeped in.

The Avvar stopped and stared at him.

Bull sighed. “What Cullen means to say is she lets it all hang out up top.”

The Augur gave a slight smile. “So do our women warriors, they claim it is less confining in battle.”

Rather than remove her shirt, they merely pulled it out of the way, turning her onto her front. The pained whimpers had reduced but not gone. From the way Sigrid focused on, and gently examined Kai, he realised she was a mage with healing abilities. Her method was akin to what he’d seen Solas do.

Sigrid looked...normal, no different to any of the young girls in the Hold, but he had to remember she was possessed. Yet she was helping his wife, and if it hadn’t been for Kai’s insistence, Sigrid wouldn’t be here doing exactly that.

When she completed the examination, it was the expression on Sigrid’s face that made Cullen’s heart plummet. He recognised that particular look; it was one he saw on many occasions over the years. It confirmed what they feared. They suspected her injuries were substantial, but he had thought...hoped...prayed there might be a chance.

Sigrid took the Augur and Skywatcher aside, the three of them speaking in hushed tones.

All the things she’d survived; the Temple; Haven, the Nightmare; Corypheus; a Titan; assassination attempts. All of those she’d come through, only to die rescuing a fucking bear.

Anger welled inside him, mingling with the fear.

This wasn’t right, it wasn’t fair. Not this, not now, not after all they lived through. Maker, please, don’t take her from me.

Thane Sun-Hair crashing through the door wrenched him back into the present moment.

“How is she?” she questioned, concerned. The downcast faces were sufficient answer. “Lady!” she exclaimed. “She cannot die here, the consequences...” She inhaled sharply. “Is there truly nothing to be done?”

The Augur went to her. “It is a matter of time...” He paused, glancing back at Skywatcher and Sigrid, then at Kai. “There is a way...to allow us more time to help her. It is not a thing I suggest lightly.”

Sun-Hair inclined her head, puzzled at first, before her eyes opened wide. “Yes,” she acknowledged. “If both are willing...do it. I must go and settle the Hold before some of the more hot-headed rush to avenge them both.”

Her departure was as hurried as her entrance. They heard the commotion outside, Sun-Hair’s
steady and persuasive tone, and the furious and heated comments from other members of the Hold. Cullen watched the Augur nod to Skywatcher.

As Skywatcher knelt beside Kai, Cullen barely had a chance to register what was going on when he heard Cole.

“Yes...please help her,” he urged.

Cullen turned to look at him, but Skywatcher’s comforting voice drew him back. Kai observed him with a glazed stare, weakening now.

“Herald, you have lost much blood and your time is short. But...there is a way to provide us the time to aid you. One of the gods would join with you...” he hesitated, “...if you are willing.”

For a second Cullen thought he misheard before he realised what they were suggesting. His stomach turned over, the same sick feeling surging up as the full impact hit him

They wanted to put a spirit inside her?

“What? You can’t be serious!” he protested forcefully.

Cullen stared at Kai, catching her glance at him with a remorseful expression before she faced Skywatcher. “Yes,” she blinked.

Just like that? No questions, no discussion, no seeking their views, she simply agreed? Did she not fathom what she was allowing to happen?

He felt as if he’d strayed into one of his nightmares.

“No, no, absolutely not, I forbid it!” Cullen objected, his voice increasing in volume.

“Cullen...please,” she implored. “You realise...what’s at stake. I have to...make this right.”

Cullen moved to her, Skywatcher stepping away allowing him to kneel beside her. He brushed her cheek tenderly, seeing the sorrow in her face as she gazed into his eyes. He understood how her sense of duty and the desire to protect people drove her, not to mention the responsibility she felt at being part of the problem. ‘Whatever it takes’ she had told him before, but this was beyond what anyone should have to do to fulfil a promise.

“I haven’t lost sight of what’s at stake, but this? Kai... don’t do this. Maker, please don’t do this,” he whispered frantically. “What if you...?” he glanced down unable to utter the words. “I couldn’t endure it...to see you become...” Cullen’s voice faltered with the horror of what might befall the woman he loved.

Not again, I can’t go through this again...not with her...Maker, please not with her...

Kai rested her hand on his, her words punctuated by shallow reedy intakes of breath. “I’m not afraid...it won’t be the same...it’ll be alright...”

The pain of her words struck deep. He grasped what she alluded to, but couldn’t believe how she could imagine it was any sort of sensible reasoning.

“Alright?” he questioned incredulously, appalled at her ready acceptance. “Are you out of your mind?”

She tried to sigh, but with her laboured breathing it sounded more like a huff. He heard the strain
to sound tougher than she truly felt. “Cullen...it’s a chance...to live.”

“Is that what you call it?” he demanded sarcastically. *How could she be so stupid and naive?*

She furrowed her brows, peering at him. “Would you...rather...I died?”

“I can’t watch my wife turn into an abomination...” he admitted angrily.

The distress in her face revealed his words profoundly wounded her. He prayed she would understand it was madness to even consider this. He should have known better. Hurt gave way to resolve as she drew her hand from his and he sensed her close off, her response an emotionless whisper.

“I’m doing this....”

“I will not allow you...”

“Commander...stand down.” This was no longer his wife, the Inquisitor was speaking. Dying she may be, but there was no disputing the authority in her manner.

Bull stepped forward. “Listen, Cullen. I don’t like the idea of this any more than you. But picture the consequences if we let her die...and I don’t mean just with this dragon...which is bad enough.” Bull sighed. “There’ll be reprisals however we paint this.”

“Bull’s right,” Dorian chimed in. “It’s not only what these Hakkonite lunatics would unleash if we can’t stop them. How do you imagine people will react if they discover she was killed here? I doubt they would distinguish one Hold from another in their crusade to avenge her death.”

“She’s their beacon of hope,” Cole murmured.

Cullen swallowed hard, his mind racing from their words. His gaze alighted on her palm, the Anchor glowing. They may have considered the repercussions of her death, but there was a more substantial and immediate danger if the spirit transformed into a demon within her. He studied her, watching how she was striving to hold steady under growing weakness.

Cullen faced them, his tone fierce when he spoke. “You wish to place a spirit inside someone who can create rifts, who can break into the Fade?” Cullen saw the exchanged glances. “What if it changes; becomes a demon? Have any of you considered the power such a creature could wield or the consequences of what it could unleash?”

It was Kai who answered him. “If it...comes to...that...” she began “...Cole will kill me...won’t you?”

Everybody turned to Cole, his face concealed by his hat as he gazed at the floor. He looked up, his voice firm as he directed his reply to Kai. “Yes...I won’t fail you again.”

It was clear from their faces they consented to this, even Bull. Cullen couldn’t believe it.

*No one else was prepared to stand up to her and say no? Had everyone gone utterly mad? They used to tell her when she was wrong. When had this changed?*

Cullen scowled at Kai. “Then, what’s the point of doing this? Either way you’re dead!” he demanded sternly.

“Enough!” she commanded, a coughing fit accompanying her effort to be forceful. “I’m ready,” she whispered, ignoring him and facing the Augur with a determined expression.
Cullen shook his head, his jaw clenched tight in frustration; she made her decision and wouldn’t listen whatever he said now.

And she made it knowing full well what the effect on me would be. She knew what happened before...

“Very well,” the Augur acknowledged, shutting his eyes and lifting his arms.

A deep breath filled the cabin as the spirit manifested, shimmering silver in the light of the veilfire. The spirit floated to where Kai lay. Cullen stood, his hand grasping the hilt of his sword, ready to...

The spirit spoke, her voice caressing the air like a soft summer breeze. “Hello, little ptarmigan.”

Cullen’s resolve ebbed away, his grip on his sword loosening.

An old memory awakened. It was the day he arrived to begin his Templar training, the sense of promise, optimism and excitement he felt, the heartfelt desire to do his utmost to help and protect people. He was filled with such...

“Ama?” Kai murmured.

A kind laugh tinkled. “No, child, but I am here to help,” the spirit soothed. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Kai whispered with an innocent smile.

A tiny piece of him cried out to stop this insanity, yet the greater part felt serene, believing this was to protect his wife and all those people who would die if she did, including his family. He stared transfixed and silent, along with the others in the hut as the spirit hung above her, then enveloped and flowed into her, an audible gasp coming from Kai as her body jerked. She calmly sat up, her body glowing, the silvery sheen in her left eye resembling the colour of her eye patch.

As the glow faded, she gave a little hesitant chuckle. “I’m alright,” she lilted, her voice firmer.

This broke the stillness, and with it the hold he felt. Cullen guessed the spirit had subdued them, preventing any resistance. The worst nightmare he could imagine was now reality. The scent of the incense, the other-worldly light, the murmurs; all of it became cloying, smothering. He could taste the nausea rising.

He had to get out of there.

Cullen turned on his heel and strode out of the hut and away, down the incline, needing to put distance between him and the abomination that was once his wife. He couldn’t bear to look at her, knowing what she could become. Reaching the bridge, he could no longer hold down the desire to throw up. He leant against a post and heaved repeatedly from the build up of resentment and despair inside him.

He didn’t hear footsteps behind him. It was only when it was over and he wiped his mouth that a hand thrust a canteen in front of him.

“Here,” Bull offered. “Drink some water.”

Cullen gratefully took it and drank long and hard. The overwhelming tension had passed, replaced by resigned despair.

“Come on, let’s go over there.” Bull gestured to a spot out of the way by the cliff edge, and Cullen followed him there.
“Wanna talk?” Bull asked.

“What is there to say? My wife is an abomination. The worst thing I could ever conceive of happening, just happened.” Cullen declared bitterly. He shut his eyes, drawing a deep breath to steady himself before opening them. “And I’m expected to accept it for the greater good and pray we don’t have to end up fighting her if she changes and Cole can’t...kill her.”

“I know, I know,” Bull nodded with a reassuring tone. “But you tend to underrate Boss, Cullen. She’s tough, she can hold her own.”

Cullen gave a dismissive snort. “Perhaps she was once. But you don’t know everything, Bull. She’s even hidden things from me. She’s more damaged than any of us realised, and now...now she has a powerful spirit possessing her. Forgive me if I’m not altogether optimistic about the situation.”

“Hmm, yes, it had an impact on everybody, even Cole,” Bull pondered. “That’s some energy she’s kicking out.”

“Not she, it,” Cullen corrected. “And why aren’t you more upset about this? I know how you detest the thought of possession.”

Bull stared at him intently. “That’s true, I don’t like it, and I don’t like the thought of Boss taking this risk, but the alternative is far worse. We all get that, so...tell me, why does it bother you so much you’d rather let her die?”

Cullen rubbed that back of his neck. “I...I...” he stammered.

This was straying onto what was delicate territory, made worse by the events they just experienced.

Bull sighed. “Cullen, I’ve always known there’s something more with you,” he disclosed. “You’re looking at a man who was driven beyond what anyone should have to take, so it’s not hard for me to recognise it in someone else. And I suspect whatever you went through is feeding in to what’s going on now.”

Cullen glanced aside, aware Bull had seen through him.

“See that, that’s a tell, Cullen.” Bull scratched his horn, grumbling. “Crap, this cold isn’t doing my horns any good, first they start itching, then they’ll be peeling. I need little mittens to keep them warm.”

Such a bizarre comment in the midst of a serious conversation threw Cullen, and he couldn’t prevent the spontaneous smile. “Little wouldn’t be the adjective I’d use.”

Bull smirked. “They are impressive, aren’t they? Cole reckons they look like dragon horns, says I should have called myself the Iron Dragon. That would have been an awesome name, but it’s too late to change it, and the Dragon’s Chargers doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

Bull tilted his head. “Point is Cullen, what’s done is done, just like with the Boss. Now, I guess Cole knows your story because he sees what’s in all of our heads. I’m not asking him about you because half of it won’t make sense. But for what we’re going to face, Dorian and I need to gauge any potential bumps ahead.” He pointed at Cullen. “She’s your blind spot and you’re hers, so if this goes tits up, we have to be prepared. That means we need to know what happened to you.”

Cullen recognised Bull was right; he’d want to know too if their positions were reversed. It didn’t make the task any easier though.
“It’s a fair point. If I was in your position, I’d want all the information too.” Cullen rubbed his forehead anxiously. “Alright, I’ll tell you,” he conceded.

Cullen detailed the events during the Blight at Kinloch Hold, how the Circle was taken over by demons, abominations and blood mages, how the Tower was sealed locking those who remained in with them. He explained how the Templars attempted to reach Uldred, how some had been possessed but many others killed. The handful remaining, caged by magic and tortured until he was the only one left.

He described how he was rescued by Aedan Cousland, the Hero of Ferelden and Kai’s fiancé at the time, Alistair, Leliana and Wynne, one of the Circle mages. Cullen sought to express how the fear and then the rage changed who he had been. He skimped over the events in Kirkwall, merely to fill in how Kinloch fed into his time there.

Kai already learned what occurred from Aedan’s journal, but Cullen wanted her to hear the whole story so she would understand what he felt and how it formed him. When she was expected to be in Skyhold for a longer time than usual, he cleared their diaries and took her to the lake outside Honnleath. There he told her everything, including something he had not told another living soul.

It was this memory that haunted his dreams more than the visions they planted in his head when he was tortured, and it was this memory he feared reliving.

Cullen paused, glancing back at Bull, who waited as patiently as he had listened to Cullen telling his story. What he already recounted was easy compared to having to repeat the most salient part. Cullen’s hand found the back of his neck, and he took a long deep breath.

“What I’m about to tell you, I trust will remain between us?”

“You have my word, Cullen.”

“Back in Kinloch, there was a mage. She was beautiful, smart and funny.” He saw Bull’s eyebrow lift. Cullen sighed. “Yes, I’m well aware of the resemblance. And before you ask, no, she wasn’t blonde or had green eyes. She had dark hair and blue eyes.”

“Sorry...go on,” Bull encouraged.

“I admit there was an infatuation on my part, but she was one of my charges and it wouldn’t have been appropriate to act on it. She sensed it though and would tease me, not maliciously you understand. Gentle ribbing I suppose you’d call it.” He paused, frowning. “When the Circle fell, everything was chaos, and I had no idea what happened to her. Not until I was captured in the cage, the only one left. Through all the visions they forced into my head I held on, I don’t know how, but I did. Until they sent her...”

Cullen hesitated, his hand over his mouth afraid to allow the words out as if it would make it real again. The images came surging back, but not as powerful as they once were.

_The demon deliberately held Solona’s human form standing before him, slowly undressing, taunting him with her naked body as it stroked her hands over her breasts and downwards._

_“Did the little Templar want a taste of what he couldn’t have before? She would have let you, you know. She fantasised about it in her bunk at night, imagining you and her together.”_

_His lust betrayed him as it slipped her hand between her legs. His shame at his reaction did nothing to quell the tightness in his breeches as he watched._
It licked her lips. “Surrender and you can have what you always desired...Cullen.”

Cullen caught his breath as he tried to settle himself. “Can you give me a moment?”

“Sure,” Bull agreed.

Cullen closed his eyes, remembering Kai’s words when he told her. ‘Things always seem scarier in the dark. You have to drag them into the light. Bad things don’t like the light, it takes their oomph away.’ It was typical Kai, such a mix of adult and childlike terms it caused him to laugh at the time.

Taking another deep breath, he continued. “The torture didn’t break me, so she was sent to...tempt me.” He saw Bull nod showing he understood what Cullen meant. He was grateful not have to go into details. “And...it very nearly worked,” he confessed. “I was so tired, so worn down by fighting off the pain and the visions, and I knew it wasn’t her, that it was a desire demon. But after so much horror...”

“It’s a classic torture technique, Cullen,” Bull explained. “Give you the hard stuff, so when the softer option comes along, it doesn’t seem so bad. What you’d normally refuse becomes acceptable.”

“It almost could have been.” Cullen shook his head. “You know what saved me, the sound of fighting. I watched it transform, and head off to where the noise was coming from. A little while afterward the Hero’s party appeared, but I wasn’t certain if they were real at first. I was convinced it was another trick. To be honest, not until it was all over did I allow myself to believe it actually was.”

Bull stroked his chin, thinking. “Does Boss know...about this mage I mean?”

“Yes,” Cullen confirmed.

Talking to Bull, even about Solona, helped Cullen to reassemble his scattered thoughts. It wasn’t only the dread of what Kai could become, or his anger at her for agreeing to possession. When it came to Kai, he was understandably vulnerable. How could he not be? She was his wife, the woman he loved.

Bull called it a blind spot. But he could no longer afford to be blind where she was concerned, she was now an abomination with all the possible dangers that could lead to. To be capable of dealing with what she was, he could no longer see her as his wife.

Cullen fell back his Templar training. It was essential he maintain a distance from her. He had to focus on doing his job, planning for what might be ahead of them. He also had to insist she step down; she couldn’t remain in command as she was.

“Cullen?” Bull called.

“Hmm?”

“I have a suggestion...for you mainly, maybe put some distance...”

“...between her and myself...yes,”

Bull smiled knowingly. “Already planning then?”

Cullen nodded. “It’s what I’m good at Bull, and it gives me something to focus on. I have put aside that she’s my wife; I have see her only as the Inquisitor. She came to her decision based on
the needs of the Inquisition and so must I. Our primary objective though must be countering this Hakkonite threat before these madmen unleash their insane attack.”

Bull rested his hand on Cullen’s shoulder. “Good,” he declared approvingly. “Just one question...would you kill her if it came to it?”

“I...don’t know...” he admitted. "I haven’t thought that far...yet.”

“Planning is good, but that’s the problem you really have to come to grips with. Not saying it will happen, but it might.”

“I know,” Cullen exhaled. He knew they could be confronted with that possibility.

“If it was Dorian in her place, and the worst happened, I’d kill him in a heartbeat,” Bull told him matter-of-factly.

Cullen’s eyes widened. “You’ve thought about that?”

Bull sighed. “We’ve talked about it, and I know it’s what Dorian wants. If Boss was a mage, it might’ve come up as well, but it didn’t because she isn’t. So you’re facing it after the fact. You have to think about what she would want, not how you would feel.”

“But you two are close, how do you..?”

“Live with it?” Bull offered. “Well, I wouldn’t be killing the man I love. I’d be taking down a monster.”

“I don’t know if I could do that,” Cullen answered.

“You were never trained to,” Bull answered. “It all boils down to a difference in how you see the world.”

“Perhaps,” Cullen sighed.

That was always the issue between him and Kai, how they could see the same thing so differently. She accepted the Avvar offer viewing it as a lifeline. He saw it as his worst nightmare. He sighed to himself. If she imagined her confession about how she felt when she struck him was hurtful, it was nothing compared to the sense of betrayal he felt now.

But what was done was done. They couldn’t turn back time.

Cullen had to put his duty to the Inquisition first, just as she had. He was no longer that naïve Templar back in Ferelden; he was the Commander of the Inquisition. And he had his own choice to make.

“So, are you ready to go back?” Bull gestured in the direction of the Augur’s cabin.

“Ready,” Cullen declared.
Chapter Summary

Kai faces both the actual and potential consequences of her decision.

Kai watched as Cullen left, conscious of what she had done and the effect it had on him. Her decision forced him to revisit one of the worst moments of his life, the look on his face revealing the horror he felt.

But however bad she felt for hurting him, however guilty she felt for making him go through it again, she had no choice. Had they continued as they did, she would have run out of time and there would be nothing save a corpse to argue over. Back in the swamp Kai was ready to give up, but Bull blackmailed her to fight, to stay alive. And she had fought so hard all the way back, what strength she possessed almost drained away.

She knew what she had to do, what she always had to do, her duty. Her obligation to all the people she had sworn to protect came first. She would not see the Inquisition or Ferelden fall to a madman.

Bull followed Cullen out of the hut. Kai knew if anyone could talk to him and help him after her actions, it was Bull.

Cullen most likely feared seeing her become like Solona or Anders, but she knew Wynne had lived with her Spirit of Faith for years. She found out how Wynne gave up the spirit to save Evangeline, finally embracing the death delayed for so long. Cullen knew Wynne, and she would have been a prime example of how it didn’t have to be a bad thing, if she could have told Cullen. Instead she stayed silent for fear he might find out about Evangeline. She and Rhys were still part of Cullen’s forces.

Cassandra had once said to her ‘if there are consequences, I will pay them’. Kai had no doubt there would be consequences for them, and she would pay them. This time Cullen would not forgive her. This time she had crossed a line with him and there was no going back, no putting this one right. But she also knew he would not walk away from his duty as Commander.

Kai closed her eye, shutting out the world around her and focusing inside. She could sense the fluttering energy of the spirit. Now it was tiny bursts, easier than when the spirit first entered her. Then it was overwhelming, like being hit with lightning magic but without the intense pain, every nerve and fibre jangling.

She heard the Augur’s voice beside her. “Herald, you should know we can stop the bleeding and you will live, but there is damage inside we cannot heal,” he informed her plainly.

Kai opened her eye and looked at him with a slight, resigned smile. “Wouldn’t be the first time...” she murmured.

Time. It invariably came down to a question of time. Time she was running out of before and now limited time to deal with the Jaws of Hakkon. Once they discovered Storvacker was gone, who
knew what they might attempt. Desperate people took desperate measures. Herself included.

“Permit me a moment first?” Kai saw him agree.

She had instructions to pass on first; planning had to continue whatever her situation. She called over Dorian, and he took the Augur’s place beside her.

Dorian stared at her anxiously. “What do you need?”

“The Augur and Sun-Hair need to know everything we’ve discovered.” She pointed to the backpack. “Including the wards in the swamp.”

He nodded. “Right.”

“And...since I’m compromised,” she went on, “I need you ask Cullen to take over command and devise a plan to deal with these people. I’ll abide by whatever he decides to do.”

Dorian’s eyebrows rose in shocked dismay. “After what you just did to him? Maker Kai, you can’t be...”

Kai interrupted. “I know Cullen. His duty and the mission will come first.”

“Did you see his face when he left?” Dorian exclaimed, frowning. “You are aware Cullen made a valid point, and we disregarded him. We chose to support you, aware how severe the consequences would be if you died. Not to mention you ordered him to stand down.”

“Because he was thinking about it, he won’t trust me not to be influenced.” she countered.

His immediate reaction was naturally visceral, anger, disapproval, disgust. He would never accept or agree, she knew that. But even in the midst of the distress she caused, she saw how Cullen was already thinking ahead and visualising possible outcomes.

Kai sighed. “He will never forgive me for what I’ve done. But if I died and you all failed to prevent the Hakkonites going through with their insane plan, he’d never forgive himself. Cullen and I make each other vulnerable, and right now neither of us can afford to be. Not while we’re fighting this threat and I have this spirit sitting inside me. I need my Commander.”

“That’s why you...” Dorian shook his head and exhaled. “Maker, we always knew you had a tough streak, but you truly can be a hard bitch underneath all that fluff.”

“I know,” she admitted quietly. Her ‘steel’ Leliana had termed it. ‘Hard bitch’ was equally apt in the circumstances.

Dorian took her hand. “For all our sakes, I hope you know what you’re doing. Maker forgive us all if this goes wrong because Cullen won’t, and I dread to imagine what the Divine would do to us.”

“I understand, and I am sorry,” she acknowledged apologetically. Kai gestured in Cole’s direction. “Cole will watch me. He’ll sense any changes, and...take care of me if necessary.”

Dorian stood, staring at her. “If it comes to that, Cole won’t be alone. It shouldn’t be left entirely on his shoulders,” he cautioned before stepping away. The rebuke was implicit in Dorian’s words.

A heavy frown settled on her face. The decision she made to submit to the spirit was risky, but she had to do whatever it took, even at the cost of alienating those around her. She could not waver in her conviction or have regret. This was her choice and she had to survive it.
Sigrid appeared with more flasks. “A sleeping draft and another healing potion. For what is needed, it is best if you sleep. I will help you feel as little pain as I can.” Her tone was gentle.

“Thank you,” Kai smiled gratefully, drinking the offered potions. She settled down, feeling the magic flow when Sigrid placed her palms against Kai’s skin. It didn’t take long for the combined effects to render her unconscious.

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Kai leaned against the wall, staring out at Skyhold’s garden. It was beautiful; colours, textures, shapes and best of all, the scent from the plants and herbs mixing in a heady blend. Kai closed her eyes and took a deep breath. How the trees and plants flourished inside the Keep while outside there was ice and snow always gave her a sense of awe.

Early mornings like this were the most tranquil; when she actually managed to wake in time to catch them. The night-time chill slowly dwindling as the sun’s warmth increased, the odd distant sound of boots scraping along the battlements as the watch made their patrol, and the dawn birdsong. They were rare occasions, precious moments when she could truly have time to herself.

“Katarina!” Ama’s voice called to her, rich and reassuring.

Kai smiled and opened her eyes to see Ama sitting at the chess table in the garden. Her expression was as warm and welcoming as ever, a picture of kindness even when she scolded. Except Kai knew it wasn’t really Ama. Ama didn’t have a silvery glow surrounding her. This was the spirit residing within her, a powerful Spirit of Hope. It was obviously a dream. But the garden was still beautiful and the sense of tranquillity welcome.

She motioned to Kai. “Come, sit with me.”

Hope’s gaze followed Kai as she took the vacant seat opposite, the chess board between the two of them. “Shall we?” she suggested, gesturing to the board.

“You...want to play chess?” Kai queried, curious as to why.

Hope moved a piece. “Do you recall why she taught you to play?”

Kai gave a short sharp laugh, and played a piece. “Focus. She thought it would teach me to focus. It would help concentrate my ‘undisciplined mind’.”

“Your father’s words I believe?” Hope offered with a wry smile as she continued to play.

Kai rolled her eyes. “Papa has always been big on order and discipline. According to him, I was found lacking in both,” she replied cynically.

Her tone became more forthright. “But you already know they were. You see what’s inside my head; every scrap of it I would imagine. Am I to assume this game is another lesson?” Her attention fell on the board as she played a piece before shifting it back to Hope.

“Such a smart mouth,” Hope laughed, sounding so like Ama when she said it to Kai all those years ago. “But yes.”

Ama’s jovial expression vanished as Lyssa’s sombre face now stared at her. The change in appearance threw Kai. The comfortable posture she habitually adopted with her mother dropped away. Lyssa was harder to mislead, to sail past. Lyssa knew more.

Her mother’s rich voice gave way to Lyssa’s lighter one, higher in register. “Kiki, you must
recognise this is fraught with danger for both of us. The magic you wield with the Anchor and the power I possess. Cullen was correct in identifying we could become a threat.”

Kai blinked in acknowledgement. “I know, and I understand the lesson. Keep my focus on the task before us.” She tilted her head, eyes narrowing in curiosity. “What makes me wonder...if it’s so dangerous, why you came to help? Unless...

“...there is more to this than merely saving your life? Yes, there is,” Hope explained with the same involuntary nose twitch Lyssa would make when being serious. “You will require my energy to destroy Hakkon. Together we can force him to return to where he belongs.”

Kai had to marvel at the way Hope precisely imitated mannerisms, as well as the form of people close to her.

Hope continued, her tone earnest. “You do not have time to recover from your injuries, you must deal with the threat he poses now. And that means we must remain joined until the task is done. Already Gurd Harofsen is planning another way to free Hakkon, and we must prevent him from doing so. I can sustain you and grant you the power required when the moment arrives. I can also provide knowledge you would not have otherwise.”

Hope became pensive and sighed heavily. “It was not meant to be this way.”

“What was meant to happen?” Kai asked suspiciously.

“A brief joining. The danger would have been less,” Hope answered firmly. “Being with the Avvar, knowing what they can do...you would understand joining did not imply loss of control, or that it was permanent. Your friendship with Compassion already made you more sympathetic to spirits.”

Kai’s eyebrows shot up, eyes opening wide. “You...you softened me up for this.”

“For this, no,” Hope replied shaking her head. “Only for you to be prepared for us to join forces when the time came. She eyed Kai carefully. “Last time my aid was sufficient only to trap Hakkon and prevent further bloodshed. Fortunately for all of you it has been enough, until now. But for them...” she hesitated, glancing down, sadness seeping into her words, “...they have been trapped together for too long.”

When Hope looked back up at her, Kai could have sworn she briefly saw the hint of a smirk.

“Then you came. Now together, we have the opportunity to put an end to this once and for all. You could say...the Inquisitor offers me a second chance too.”

Second chances, Kai thought, always second chances. A memory of a conversation with Dorian came to her.

“Second chances, it’s practically a clarion call now,” he groaned. “They should put up a sign at Skyhold’s gates - waifs, strays and lost causes welcome. Get your second chances here.”


Kai couldn’t help but smile, seeing it reflected in her sister’s face.

“For all the teasing, he is right,” Hope nodded. “People flock to your banner because you made the Inquisition a force for good, gave them hope for something better.”
The smile faded as Hope’s attention shifted to Kai’s left hand. “Such chances should not be lost,” she murmured.

Kai’s gaze followed hers, seeing the Anchor glowing softly, quieter than it had been since they arrived in the Basin.

“The Anchor has more possibilities than you know,” Hope continued. “It can close or open rifts, but it can also manipulate the Veil in other ways. You can draw strands of the Fade and surround yourself with them for protection. Some mages have this ability, to temporarily cease to exist in the waking world shrouding themselves from harm. You may need to use this before we are through. Further damage threatens to stretch my energy and my will, something neither of us can risk.”

“You think you...we...will become a demon?” Kai questioned. It was what Cullen feared.

A patient smile spread on Lyssa’s face. “A demon? No. Even with all the suffering you carry your soul remains bright. You would not corrupt me to become Despair.” Hope paused.

“If our wills merged...we would be much worse,” she went on, the smile gone. “My power to influence, your determination to do what is right, both wishing to provide hope. Who could resist what we offer? Rulers would submit to us freely, trusting the assurance of our beneficence in exchange for their authority. It may begin with the best intentions, but the power we could amass would be...” she frowned as if she was mulling over her words. “Tyranny through benevolence is still tyranny, Kiki.”

Tyranny, Kai repeated silently. A tyrant. Her worst fear and something she had struggled against becoming. However, she never linked it to benevolence; in her mind it signified oppression through malevolence. Cassandra’s words came back to her again, ‘at some point power becomes its own master’. Except in this case there would be no need for bloodshed, minds could be easily be convinced for the ‘greater good’. With all this obedience, this servitude, this power, how long would it take for them to begin viewing themselves as a god?

The road to hell is paved with good intentions, Kai reminded herself.

“Well then.” Kai drew in a breath, letting it out. “We’d better stop them, hadn’t we? The quicker the better.”

“Yes, Kai,” Hope agreed, altering her appearance once more.

This time Leliana sat across the table from her. Kai raised an eyebrow questioningly.

Leliana’s lilting Orlesian accent flowed through the words, a quiet smile playing on her lips. “A metaphor if you like. She would suggest we are equals now. We rely on each other’s assistance to bring about the objective we both seek.”
“I suppose we do,” Kai pondered, picking up another piece on the board. There was one thing puzzling her, in all the emotional frenzy she’d not thought of it, until now.

She watched Hope intently. “From what I know, possess...joining is not always as straightforward as it was with me?” Hope’s quiet smile did not waver.

“You are...” she paused, “…Fade-touched. It made the task...easier,” she finished enigmatically.

Kai fingered the chess piece in her hand. “Because of the Anchor?”

Another pause before Hope answered. “The Anchor is a key to the Fade...” Again there was no change in her expression.

Kai sensed something was being withheld from her and scowled. “Can I be possessed unwillingly, because of the magic of the Anchor?”

Hope’s expression relaxed and she gave a chuckle. “Most, but not all, are susceptible in some way or another. Mages are more so, but you, less so...”

“Why is that? What makes...”

Kai’s questioning was cut off by another change as Hope morphed back into Ama’s form, her full throaty laughter accompanying the shift.

“Little ptarmigan, always so curious...” The words grew fainter as Skyhold’s garden faded away along with the reassuring scent.

“Wait!” Kai called out. But it was too late, everything went dark.

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The heavy aroma of incense hit her nostrils as Kai’s eye flickered open to see the Augur’s cabin, and the green-blue glow of veilfire dancing across the ceiling. Hope’s energy fluttered inside, but she herself was mute. As Kai came to, she became conscious of a painful spasm on the right side of her back, and reflexively moved to touch it. A hand caught her wrist.

“Best not to touch it, Inquisitor. You have stitches,” Cullen told her, his voice sounding steady, stronger than she last heard it.

Kai was grateful for that. Cullen was always strong, even if at times he hadn’t felt it. He wouldn’t have survived all the trials he went through if he wasn’t. Using her title told her where she stood with him, and although it was the right thing to do, a wave of sadness washed over her.

You forced this remember, she reminded herself, glancing aside.

Kai turned to face him and he let go of her wrist. “Thank you,” she replied.

Cullen simply nodded, his attention close on her, likely gauging any change in her behaviour. She searched his face. He looked better than when she last saw him, a little tired, but otherwise clear-eyed and focused. Kai was unsure what to say to him, how to begin. Whether he saw her hesitancy she didn’t know, but he stepped in offering information on her condition.

“They managed to curb the bleeding,” Cullen told her. “But the angle of the blade was unfortunate hitting one of your kidneys. They were unable to do any more than seal the entry wound, the damage was too severe to repair fully. Obviously your body is weakened from the loss of blood, and you will require time and rest to recover.”
Time we don’t have, Kai thought. Hope would provide her with the strength she was missing. The mission was all that mattered now, any concerns about her condition could wait.

“Dorian...did he...?”

“He found me and passed on your request,” Cullen explained before she finished. “I would have insisted anyway, bearing in mind your present condition. My duty is to the Inquisition as well as to you, Inquisitor. I am reassured you gave consideration to the problem of continuing in command, and came to the correct decision.” His tone was matter-of-fact, as if he had been delivering a report to her at the War Table.

Cullen’s face and voice softened. “Had I been incapable of performing my duties, I would have stood down.”

Her face crumpled in sorrow at his words, and she looked away. From that one sentence, Kai knew. The Inquisitor had her Commander and he would carry out his duty, but what she had done to him was an altogether different matter. She swallowed hard forcing down the lump in her throat, and turned back.

“I’m grateful to you for assuming command. Thank you,” she responded appreciatively. Kai glanced over his shoulder, out of the window. Outside was a half-light, like dusk or dawn. “How long have I been unconscious?”

His gaze was watchful once more. “Most of the evening, and night. We took it in turns to grab some rest.” Cullen darted a glance towards the doorway. “Except for Cole who’s been here all the time.”

“Thank you Cole,” she acknowledged, seeing him nod.

Kai sat up gingerly, and took a deep breath, sensing pain and tightness on the right side of her back, the stitches tugging sharply. They seemed to cover more than the span of a dagger. She pulled away the blanket and swung her legs over the side of the small wooden bed, seeing Cullen’s eyes grow larger. Kai tried to stand up, but he stopped her.

“I don’t think you should be ...” he began.

Kai shrugged. “Normally probably not, but I...we...have limited time.”

Cole repeated the words he said before. “So much time, so little time.”

Then it was another of his little vagaries, now it described the situation they found themselves in. Eight hundred years Hakkon had been trapped. They had to take him down quickly so she and Hope could separate, and not exchange one danger for another.

Cole gazed at her questioningly. “Did I say that before?”

“You might have,” she smiled. How he sensed these things was unusual, but that was a riddle for another time. There were more pressing matters now.

Cullen cleared his throat. “Cole, would you be kind enough to wake the others while I speak with the Inquisitor? I assume she is safe for the moment?”

Kai’s gaze darted to Cole, and then to Cullen. He was waiting for Cole’s confirmation.

“Yes, she is,” Cole announced.
She heard the door shut as he walked out.

Kai’s stomach turned over, anxiously wondering what Cullen wanted to say, and how she was going to tell him. Yesterday, her outlook was bleak and her choice stark, the danger they faced obvious and imminent. Now the very same choice provided both their solution and yet another problem, her.

Cullen faced her, his expression even. She swallowed nervously glancing away, her hands clasped together in her lap.

He took a long breath, releasing it slowly before he spoke, his tone measured. “I have no intention of pouring over what occurred yesterday, not presently at least. If we survive this, there will be time for discussions afterward. I’m here because we have a mission to carry out. The rest of us discussed everything with Sun-Hair, and together we’ve formulated a plan. She has sent word to a nearby Hold for assistance…”

Kai’s gaze widened.

“Yes, they likewise have allies they can call upon. Friend-sworn holds I believe was the term. It appears the incident with Storvacker broke one of their most sacrosanct laws. Other things may be mutable, but stealing a Hold-Beast goes beyond the pale, let alone the purpose they had for her.”

Cullen fixed her with an expectant look. “But I need any and all information in order to bring us through this. So…is there anything you need to tell me?”

She knew this face. He would not tolerate any reluctance to tell him what she knew. His hand shot to the back of his neck before he drew it away, resting it on the pommel of his sword. She couldn’t help but track his movement, aware of how quick he could be, how strong he was. Kai tore her gaze away, alarmed at where this train of thought could end up.

What bothered her was not the information she possessed, it was the prospect of what she…they could turn into. How would Cullen see it? Would he believe her? She was compromised after all.

“Inquisitor!” he called.

Her anxious gaze found his intent one. Kai bit her lip and nodded. “Yes.”

There would be fallout no matter what, and he…they… had a right to know. She took a breath, settling herself, and began. “We have to act quickly, the Hakkonites are even now making alternative plans, and they will try something else to free Hakkon. Hope…told me in a dream.” She paused for a reaction.

“And?” he challenged.

Kai’s brows wrinkled, perplexed. He was taking this so normally. “And…this isn’t the first time Hope has sought to stop Hakkon. He’s trapped due to her previous attempt, but that was all she succeeded in doing. However, with the two of us… her power and the magic of the Anchor, she believes it will be sufficient to kill him.”

“I see,” he replied. “So it requires both of you?”

“That’s what she told me,” Kai confirmed, scrutinising Cullen’s face for any reaction. His expression was unchanged not giving her a read on what he was thinking. “Because of my injuries she will need to stay with me until we destroy Hakkon. No longer than that though.”

Kai took a deep breath. “You were right. Not for the reason you gave though. It's...not safe...for
either of us, because if she stays too long, the consequences...”

The change in Cullen’s expression brought her words to a sudden stop. It wasn’t anger or sternness, she was used to both. This was cold, immovable determination. Kai had never been scared of Cullen, but right then, the way he stared at her and with his hand on his sword, she felt afraid. When he leaned forward she pulled back defensively.

“...will not be permitted to happen,” he insisted. His tone was harsh, and his body taut, ready to react.

An involuntary, startled gasp slipped from Kai’s lips. ‘We will kill you before you endanger anyone’ was what she picked up in those words. Her mouth gaped and closed as she stared at him. She never thought to hear those words from him. Fear gave way to acceptance realising this was a warning. Kai nodded to indicate she understood and Cullen’s hand released its hold on the pommel, moving away from his sword.

“Good,” he remarked adamantly, his fierce tone gone. “It is as much for your protection as ours.” He sat back, his posture less rigid. “We already learned what took place whilst you were unconscious. I needed to hear it from you.”

“You knew?” Kai exclaimed, eyebrows shooting up. She realised how. “Cole...” she murmured. He must have heard.

“Did you imagine his sense of duty to you only lay with rescuing you from snowdrifts or assassins?” Cullen questioned pointedly, with a reproving shake of the head. “He promised to protect you, even if that meant from yourself. Cole came to us. He was...upset after what he heard. He felt he failed to save you and wished you to live, but didn’t foresee that wish having a potentially worse outcome.”

Kai hung her head, her cheeks burning. “Oh Maker...” She was so fixated on what she had done to Cullen, she hadn’t even considered Cole.

He rubbed his forehead, sighing. “All I’m saying is in your desire to drive things through you can take other people’s assistance for granted.”

Cullen continued, his voice softening. “It is not our intent to accuse or lay blame, only to let you know how we all feel. We’re aware how precarious things are, and to be honest, more than a little wary around you...considering. The outcome may not be what it could have been, but the situation is serious nonetheless.”

Kai closed her eye, conscious of how he used ‘we’ when speaking. All of them had discussed this. The course of action they agreed obviously included what could happen to her...and them. She was a threat if this went wrong.

Not since she fell out of the Fade when the Conclave exploded had she been under suspicion like this. Back then she wasn’t the danger some assumed she was, but this time she could be. And like then she had the same possible outcome hanging over head. Her death. There were only so many times she could outrun it.

Maker, one of these days, it would catch up with her.

Whatever the eventual outcome, she had to remain focused on her objective, stay safe and kill Hakkon. Safe included ‘not a threat to anyone around her’.

When Kai faced Cullen, it was not as the Inquisitor. Even though she carried the title, he was in command and she was in his party.
“Thank you for the honesty, Commander,” she replied respectfully, looking him straight in the eye to show she was serious. “I would be grateful if could you explain what we need to do, and what you require of me in terms of your plan.”

Cullen watched her, his expression curious, before blinking in acknowledgement. “Alright.”

Kai sat and listened attentively as Cullen outlined the plan to her. The plan to put down the Jaws of Hakkon and destroy Hakkon Wintersbreath. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d banished a god to the Fade, but Maker, she hoped it would be the last. Not to mention, not becoming the next enemy on the list.
Chapter Summary

Having organised a plan to defeat the Hakkonites, Cullen puts into play the first stage, along with help from their new allies.

The Shrine

Cullen’s party arrived at the entrance to the ancient drains below the cliffs, to see the Inquisitor’s group waiting for them. Bull caught sight of Cullen and gave a thumbs up, indicating they’d got there with little trouble. Fortunately, their journey from the stockade was equally straightforward, experiencing only minor brushes with local wildlife and passing one rift on the way. According to the Inquisitor, the means to remove the ice wall lay inside the Shrine above, the spires providing a relay back to the fortress.

Ragnar Kalevsen came up to him. “Right then, I’ll send the lads off to find out what awaits us.”

“Thank you,” Cullen acknowledged.

Ragnar stared over to where the Inquisitor sat on a rock near the entrance.

“Is that her?” he asked, scratching the fur pelt draped over his shoulders.

“Yes,” Cullen answered, hearing the thoughtful ‘hmm’ as Ragnar pursued his lips.

“I thought she would be shorter,” he remarked, peering ahead. “She looks more like one of our women than a Lowlander.”

The Inquisitor was dressed in clothes from Stone-Bear again, and Cullen couldn’t deny the resemblance to the Avvar was uncanny. Her own armour was blooded, signalling the severity of her injuries. The fact she was up and walking after such damage wouldn’t go unnoticed.

“Maybe she carries our blood?” Ragnar mused. “Aye, that would explain much, and she is the Herald.”

There it was again, Cullen thought.

Her title, spoken with the same tone as Skywatcher used. The only difference was the Avvar did not to ascribe it to Andraste. The Advisors first caught wind of the title in Haven after she closed the rift in the Temple. They let the rumour spread because it was politically useful to the Inquisition at the time. But even Leliana never managed to pin down where it started.

“Ach, I can’t stand here jabbering with you,” Ragnar chortled. “We have vermin to rid ourselves of.”

Cullen glanced back as Ragnar strode away, issuing instructions to his scouts who promptly raced off into the drains. As they left, Skywatcher walked over to meet the warriors from Black-Wolf
Hold, acknowledging Cullen as he strode past. Although Stone-Bear knew them, this Hold didn’t. As a link to the Inquisition, Skywatcher’s presence would help smooth over any problems. They would also need his aid for the fights to come.

Cullen needn’t have worried. Other than some astonished faces on the Inquisition side when Black-Wolf fighters turned up at the stockade, there didn’t appear to be any issues. It wasn’t everyday a group of fighters arrived with wolves in tow. Ash Warriors and Mabari were known to Fereldens, but using wolves to fight alongside was yet another revelation from the Avvar.

Inquisition forces were left at the stockade under Lieutenant Farris’ command, along with the Professor and Colette. He was under strict orders to ensure their safety in case the Hakkonites attacked their base. On top of everything else Cullen had no wish to explain the loss of a Professor and his research student to Josephine, or to Alex Trevelyan and the Divine for that matter.

More importantly he didn’t want knowledge of the Inquisitor’s condition to leak out. What was considered acceptable amongst the Avvar certainly would not be seen as such outside of the Basin. If word got out she was possessed, the political earthquake would be shattering for the Inquisition, and all the things they’d achieved could be undone.

Cullen sensed someone beside him, and turned to see Harding staring at the Inquisitor with a hesitant curiosity. She was the only Inquisition member he informed, principally because they needed an archer on the team. Even if they hadn’t told her, Cullen knew she would have found out somehow, and he would rather she heard the news from him. Harding had a keen nose for ferreting out information, and Charter relied as heavily on her as Leliana did before.

The shock she showed when Cullen told her about the Inquisitor gave way to grim determination when he explained about the Hakkonites’ plan. She’d persuaded her parents to move to Denerim, hoping they’d be safer there. And now they were right in the path of the proposed invasion. Like him, she did not want to see these people threaten their homeland.

“She still looks like her,” Harding whispered in an aside. “I thought she...well, doesn’t matter.” She looked to Cullen with a slight knitting of the brows.

“Go ahead,” Cullen nodded.

He watched as she walked to where the Inquisitor sat silently on her own. She seemed smaller, as if she had shrunk into herself, and looked a little lost. A twinge of pity for her arose, but he pushed it aside. He had to remember what she was, not who she was. It would do none of them any good if he indulged his feelings; he had to keep a clear head to bring them all through this situation, her included.

Harding sat beside the Inquisitor, greeted by a small smile. Dorian and Bull left them together, walking over to him. Only Cole remained. His job was to guard her, and alert them if she looked like becoming a danger. Although active participation in combat was off limits, he allowed her to bring along her weapons for defence. No protection, however good, was absolutely guaranteed.

She willingly consented to his instructions, seeming to appreciate the seriousness of the situation as they did. Her condition was delicate enough without exacerbating it needlessly. All Black-Wolf had been told was she sustained an injury inhibiting her ability to fight.

When they reached him, Cullen nodded in her direction. “How has she been?”

“Heputically subdued on the way,” Dorian observed.

He gave a wry chuckle. “She made this fumbling little speech before we set out, wanted to make
amends and thank us for helping. Not her usual polished style and not a joke to be seen. It was so bizarre I had to check with Cole if she was alright.”

Cullen recalled how muted she was when he presented their plan, no interruptions, no opinions, just quiet acceptance. Her only suggestion was to pass on useful information given to her by the spirit. Uncomfortable as he remained, where their objective was concerned he didn’t doubt her intentions. It was as much in her interest as theirs to defeat the Hakkonites quickly and get this spirit out of her.

Bull chortled. “Except when we ran into the spider, Dorian.”

“You’re right. She was somewhat animated then.” Dorian grinned, gesturing with his finger to emphasise the point.

“A spider?” Cullen wondered, glancing between them, both smirking now.

Bull laughed. “Massive thing it was, nearly as big as a hut. She takes one look at it and comes to a stop, saucer-eyed. ‘Oh no, a fucking spider,’ she groans. It was throwing out webs like you wouldn’t believe. Took all four of us to take it down.” He sighed appreciatively. “That was a good fight.”

Cullen couldn’t prevent a slight smile escaping. The Inquisitor rarely used the word ‘spider’ without adding ‘fucking’ before it. Everyone knew how she loathed spiders with a vengeance.

“Oh...and she has a new party piece. It appears she can fade-cloak or something like it,” Dorian added, eyebrow raised. “A helpful trick from the spirit to minimise damage apparently. The spider shot a web at her, she did her little disappearing act, and it sailed right through where she stood.” He stroked his chin. “Hmm, I need to get her to teach me that one.”

“It’s probably instinctive, Dorian,” Cullen told him. “Just like when she closes rifts.” The Inquisitor confessed she hadn’t an inkling of how she did it. It simply happened.

“You’re right,” Dorian conceded with a sigh. “Still, it would have been a nice addition to my arsenal of tricks.”

Bull shook his head. “Kadan, you have enough tricks for several arsenals.”

“What can I say,” Dorian smirked. “I’m a man of many talents.”

Cullen’s amused groan added to their laughter. Even with everything going on, it didn’t seem to affect their banter. Or perhaps it was in spite of it. As he glanced aside, he caught sight of the Inquisitor motioning him over.

“Give me a moment,” he excused himself and went to her.

“Inquisitor?” he inquired.

The Inquisitor stood and gestured to Harding. “Lace has what’s left of my bees in addition to what she brought along.” She patted her pack. “I’ve kept the potions, obviously. I...wanted you to know.”

“Thank you, Inquisitor,” Cullen responded, seeing Harding show him her pack, stuffed full now.

“I’ve always wanted to have a go with these,” Harding effused with a childlike grin, before giving an embarrassed cough. She peered around him. “The scouts are back. I’ll see what they found out.”
Harding nodded to both of them, and when she wandered away Cullen could have sworn there was a spring in her step.

“It’s the bees,” the Inquisitor explained. “Brings out the child in you.”

“So it would seem,” Cullen agreed, facing her.

She watched after Harding wistfully and it wasn’t difficult to guess why. Even understanding combat was unsafe she nevertheless wished to be in the thick of it.

Cullen drew her attention to him. “How are you...?”

“...feeling?” she concluded, turning to him. “I...” she hesitated, darting a glance away as she absentmindedly fingered her braid.

When she faced back, she tucked her hands behind her.

“I can carry on whenever you’re ready, Commander. Bull and Dorian can confirm I’ve kept to your directions.” She offered a slight smile as if to demonstrate she’d behaved properly.

For a second Cullen wondered if she was teasing, then realised the smile was intended to reassure him. When they talked earlier she was equally compliant, except when he issued the warning. Whatever he thought of her, it gave him no pleasure to see how frightened she was, especially of him. But protecting everyone from her, and her from the possible outcome, meant she had to understand what they would do should it become necessary.

What Cole overheard of her discussion with the spirit worried them all. He dreaded her becoming a demon. What he never imagined, what none of them ever imagined, including her, was the real danger she could pose.

“And I trust that will continue, Inquisitor,” he stressed.

Her expression became sober. “I promised I would, and I will...Cullen.”

It was the first time since she woke she used his name and not his title. Typically she used them interchangeably with no distinction between the two. Now, it was as if she was speaking to him and not his rank, anxious to convince him she would keep her promise. Cullen saw how she scanned his face, waiting for a response.

“I believe you,” he accepted.

She gave a relieved sigh. “Thank you.”

Cullen heard Harding call him. “I should go. But remember, hang back until the Hakkonites are dealt with and the area is clear,” he warned. “The rest of it is then yours.”

She nodded. “I will.”

Cullen turned and walked back to speak with Harding.

Dorian was right, her behaviour was unusual. To totally hand over authority and remain quietly in the background was unlike her. She was subdued, uncomplaining, accepting even to the point of timidity. Although in stark contrast to her normal behaviour, it wasn’t completely unfamiliar. It simply never lasted quite so long before.

Cullen guessed some of her reticence was due to remorse, and some hoping to allay their
Cullen swung his shield upward, connecting hard with the warrior before him and forcing him to stagger back, providing Cullen with an opening. A swift lunge with his sword and the man was down. A second strike ensured he was taken care of.

He spun round to see the remainder of the Hakkonites defeated, falling under the combined blades, magic, arrows and jaws of their alliance. The Hakkonites in the Shrine were greater in number than their force, but Cullen was astonished at how poorly trained some of them were. He expected better from an army intending to take on the Inquisition and Ferelden. Perhaps the stronger force was holed up in the fortress, or the Hakkonites assumed their spirit/dragon would most of the work. It was obviously more powerful than any normal dragon, having laid waste to whole towns in the past.

A frustrated bellow from Bull drew Cullen’s attention. A Bruiser lay on the ground between Bull and one of the wolves. The wolf’s jaws were clamped around the man’s throat and Bull’s axe was poised to heft a blow.

“This is my kill, mutt. Back off!” Bull roared.

The wolf growled menacingly in reply, the two now in an impasse. Cullen spotted the Bruiser scrabbling for his weapon.

“Bull, look out!” he yelled.

He saw Bull dart a glance and recognise what was happening. When Bull’s axe fell, Cullen heard the heavy squelching thump cleaving through leather and flesh, and bones crunching as the wolf closed its jaws. Bull pulled out his axe from the Bruiser.

“I got him,” he snarled at the wolf. It let go, glared and then trotted away.

Cullen shook his head. Bull never liked someone stealing his targeted kill. He recalled the complaints about Sera taking down a Red Templar he was attacking In Emprise de Lion. Cullen scanned around, rapidly assessing for casualties. From what he could make out all survived, albeit some appeared to have minor injuries. Ragnar came up to him, grinning.

“We have waited a long time to teach those goat-lovers a lesson. By Korth’s stony arse, that was a good fight.” he declared with a satisfied sigh. “You Lowlanders should come and stir things up more often,” he guffawed, slapping Cullen on the back.

Although a head shorter, Ragnar was heavily built like Bull, and Cullen had to dig his heels in to avoid rocking forward.

“We are honoured to have fought alongside you,” Cullen offered respectfully, smiling.

Black-Wolf had come in response to Stone-Bear’s request for aid, but he thought showing the Inquisition’s gratitude wouldn’t go amiss.

“So you should be,” Ragnar laughed. “Right, we’ll get rid of them before their stench infests the place. Korth might send his own to feast on their bodies, but I doubt the Lady will want this filth.”
Cullen recalled Sun-Hair’s threat to ‘scatter their bones so the Lady never finds them’. Although their beliefs were different, proper funeral rites appeared equally important to the Avvar. Obviously the Hakkonites were not even worth that honour.

Ragnar acknowledged Cullen with a nod and strolled back to his people, issuing orders. They started to drag the corpses away. Black-Wolf would remain and hold the Shrine in case the Hakkonites tried to take it back. Cullen didn’t need them reclaiming it and reinstating the ice wall before their main offensive on the fortress tonight.

Their small party would travel through the Basin alone, having a greater chance of reaching the fortress without drawing attention. Stone-Bear fighters were there to help with the next phase of the plan. Cullen knew when they neared the fortress the proximity of the Anchor would open the rift there, alerting the Hakkonites to their arrival before they could pull the last switch. They intended to use that to their advantage.

Even though the Shrine appeared empty, Cullen checked ahead before giving Harding the signal to bring the Inquisitor in. As he waited Bull wandered over, and Dorian joined the two of them.

“I like these people,” Bull grinned.

“Of course you do,” Dorian groaned. “Appalling drinks and lots of fighting, just like home isn’t it.”

Bull nudged him. “Ahh Kadan, you know me so well. I’m an easy man to keep happy. I don’t ask for much.”

Dorian gave an amused snort. “Well, I wouldn’t go that far. You’re still far too fond of going after dragons.”

Bull let out a low exclamation. “Fuck! Would you look at that!”

Cullen followed Bull’s wide eyed stare. There was the Inquisitor standing near the entrance to the courtyard, head down, encircled by wolves. He should have been alarmed, but the placid way in which they sat around her suggested she was in no danger. They appeared to be waiting for...something.

Dorian puffed out a breath. “Just when you imagine you’ve seen it all...”

Cullen glanced around. Everyone had stopped, staring at the scene before them.

A movement caught his eye, and he saw the Inquisitor bob down into the ring of fur around her. She murmured for a moment then stood up. The wolves howled in concert before standing and loping off. He caught the glint of silver in her left eye dying away as she smiled. Cullen looked at Cole, but he gave no indication of danger. In fact, he was smiling too. Of all the directions Cullen gave, he placed no constraints on allowing the spirit out because they understood its assistance would be needed. Much as he didn’t wish to see this, she was doing everything asked of her.

Everybody went back to their tasks, the distraction over. It looked like the only people still staring were the three of them and Harding.

Cullen overheard one of the Black-Wolf fighters. “Is she god-touched?” Another remarked, “She is the Herald.”

So much for secrecy, he groaned to himself. At least it wasn’t in front of my men.

The Inquisitor walked over to them, Cole and a still surprised Harding following.
“Inquisitor?” Cullen questioned suspiciously.

“Ohhh, sorry,” she apologised nervously, glancing around at their astonished faces. “She just wanted to thank them.”

“As you do,” Dorian murmured incredulously.

“They were grateful,” Cole explained brightly. “Wolves are very clever, more than dogs.” He shot a hurried glance at Cullen. “Oh...except for Izzy. She’s a very clever mabari.”

His remarks were met with snorts of uneasy amusement. Somehow it broke the surreal atmosphere. Nevertheless, she had to take more care, and now he had the job of trying to persuade Ragnar to keep this quiet.

“Yes, well,” Cullen coughed. “Although I’m sure Izzy would be pleased to hear that, Cole, perhaps the Inquisitor could show more discretion?” He flashed a strict glance at her.

“Of course. Sorry, Commander,” the Inquisitor replied contritely, looking sheepish.

She pointed to the steps leading further in. “We should...” She scratched her head. “The mechanism for lighting the spires is in there.”

They watched as she walked up the stairs and into the next area.

“Cole, I know I asked before, but I simply have to again. Are you absolutely, positively certain that...” Dorian pointed in her direction, “...is the Inquisitor?”

“No” he responded, thoughtful and looking fixedly ahead. “She’s not the Inquisitor.”

“What?!”

Cullen’s dismayed exclamation was echoed by three other voices, four wide-eyed worried faces now focused on Cole. It was his job to warn them, he was their only barometer if the worst case scenario was about to occur. Cullen felt his adrenaline spike as his body immediately responded to the threat. Within a matter of seconds, all four had drawn their weapons ready.

*How did this go wrong?*

“When did you plan to tell us?” Cullen demanded urgently.

Cole turned to them, seeing their weapons poised. His eyes grew large.

“Ohhh...no,” he exclaimed, holding up his hands in a stop gesture, “she’s still her. I meant she’s not being the Inquisitor.”

Four heavy, relieved groans met his words and weapons were put away.

“For the love of the Maker!” Dorian protested. “Cole, you’ve taken five years off my life.”

“And mine,” Harding grumbled.

“Kid!” Bull growled and muttered under his breath.

Cullen knew had to talk to Cole. This couldn’t happen again; the risks were too great with everyone on tenterhooks already. Cole couldn’t simply utter comments without some forethought of how they might sound. He strode up to him, scowling as he cleared his throat.
“Cole, perhaps your usual....” he began stiffly, searching for a word that wasn’t ‘gibberish’, but came up with nothing.

As Cole stared worriedly at him, Cullen realised he was in danger of overreacting. They had placed the most important responsibility onto his shoulders; Cole had to keep a constant watch on the Inquisitor. He had no respite. Cullen began again, and softened his manner.

“Perhaps a little more clarity, Cole? A false alarm can be equally dangerous in the circumstances. I believe this incident illustrates the problem?”

“Yes, sorry,” Cole acknowledged apologetically. His expression saddened. “She’s quiet, small, cautious. She knows we’re all afraid, she doesn’t want to make us more afraid.”

“Well, I feel so much better now,” Dorian shot back, exhaling wearily. “Not only is my friend a potential threat, but now I feel guilty about feeling she is.”

“She wouldn’t want you to feel that way, Dorian,” Cullen claimed, seeking to support him. “What she would want is for us to stop her if it came to it.”

“You’re right, Cullen,” Dorian agreed, voice firmer. “She would hate becoming all that she fought against.”

The Inquisitor’s call broke into their discussion. “Dorian!” She was standing in the doorway. “I need some veilfire, please,” she appealed.

“On my way,” he waved, moving forward.

As the others headed after him, Bull held Cullen back.

“So...you came to a decision then?” Bull inquired casually, but observing him keenly.

Cullen understood when Bull was being casual like this, it often meant the reverse. And in this instance, the question was profoundly important. After Cole spoke to them, the uncertainty Cullen felt vanished.

“Yes,” Cullen confirmed. “Knowing what she could become, and knowing how she would dread it...I would kill her.”

“That’s what I thought,” Bull declared with a slow blink.

Seemingly satisfied with Cullen’s reply, Bull looked around. “Tell you one thing though. Vints for all their boasting don’t build anywhere near as well as the dwarves. You should have seen those tombs in the Hissing Wastes, rock solid they were, even after centuries in the desert.”

Cullen shook his head. “Bull, you can change tack so easily in a conversation. One moment we’re discussing killing someone, the next you’re going on about buildings.”

Bull shrugged his shoulders. “Ach, it’s easy enough to distract people. The trick is, not to be distracted yourself.”

“I assume there’s a point to this?” Cullen asked rhetorically.

He appreciated Bull was guiding the conversation again, and had no doubt it was connected to the Inquisitor.

“Yep, there is,” Bull confirmed. “The only person I know who can distract herself without trying
is Kai. And that’s also why she’s not her normal self. She’s doing her damndest to stay focused.”

Cullen nodded knowingly. “Bull, I believe I got there before you this time.”

“Thought you might, Cullen,” Bull observed. “You stopped seeing Kai as your wife, didn’t you?”

“It’s the only way,” Cullen replied honestly. “If I’m to get us all through in one piece, I cannot allow my judgement to be clouded by either what occurred, or my feelings for her. There’s too much at stake here.”

“That’s for sure,” Bull agreed.

Cullen noticed how Bull wasn’t calling her Boss. He always called her that. In fact, the only occasion Cullen was aware he hadn’t was after their return from the Shrine of Mythal.

“You’re not calling her Boss,” he stated with a questioning tone.

“If we survive this and it all works out, she’ll be Boss again.” Bull exhaled. “But right now, my way of dealing with it is to remember who she is. Don’t get me wrong, if this goes tits up, my axe will be there along with your sword. But I’ll be saving my friend. I’m not so sure about Dorian though.”

“How’s he doing now?” Cullen asked.

He recalled Dorian’s distress when Cole recounted what he overheard of her dream. Like Cole he felt guilty, but unlike Cole Dorian was angry too, both at her and himself.

“Ach, he’s still veering between feeling bad for her and being upset with her. As much as they wind each other up, Dorian thinks the world of Kai. She came through for him when it mattered. If anyone is going to struggle if we have to kill her, it’s him.”

“So that leaves the rest of us,” Cullen remarked. If Harding could do it, he thought. He hadn’t broached the issue directly with her yet.

“Pretty much,” Bull confirmed.

“Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Cullen answered, seeing Bull nod in agreement. “But right now we need get these spires lit and move on. So, shall we?” He gestured to the stairs.

Bull smirked. “Cullen, you were born to plan.”

“Just as well, isn’t it?” Cullen replied wryly and moved on, hearing Bull chuckle.

They met up with the rest of the group, clustered together in a chamber further in. Only when Cullen drew nearer did he spot what they held their attention. Two small statues set up in a portable shrine, similar to the ones they used in the Arbor Wilds. One was undoubtedly a figure of Andraste, the other an eleven Halla figure.

“...it’s a process of elimination really,” Dorian was explaining. “Look, we know Haron was a Templar, so human. Orinna was a dwarf. Ameridan was reputedly from some aristocratic family, so human. Therefore...”

“...Telana was the elf,” Harding finished. “That must be her shrine. Professor Kenric said there were tales about Ameridan and his mage lover, but the early Chantry suppressed them. Maybe because she was an elf?”
“Not surprising considering the history between the Elves and Orlais. The Second Blight, the Elves refusal to side with them, not to mention the Exalted March,” Dorian added.

“You won’t be able to move Professor Kenric from here when he sees this,” Harding observed with a chuckle.

A crackling, humming noise behind him drew Cullen’s attention. A tall apparatus, situated in an alcove one side of the entrance was arching with charged magical energy. As the Inquisitor walked away from it clutching a veilfire torch, Cullen followed her. She wandered over to the opposite side, coming to a twin of the first. Except for the vegetation growing through the onyx base, and up the marble stand, it looked in immaculate condition. She touched the veilfire torch to a metal panel on the front, and it sprang into life.

Instead of walking away, she stood gazing at it. When he moved nearer, she noticed him.

“Ameridan carved messages on both sides. In case it was needed again,” the Inquisitor explained. “Passages from the Chant.” She pointed to the first device. “That one says Shartan 10.7 and this one, Transfigurations 10.1.”

She rested her fingers on the rune carved into the marble stand. “The light shall lead her safely through the paths of this world, and into the next,” she recited.

Cullen had never heard her speak the Chant of Light before. The emotion in her voice and the way she recalled the passage so readily, surprised him.

“You remembered?” he wondered, watching a small smile flash across her face.

“Just because I don’t recite the Chant anymore, doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten it,” she told him with a light-hearted rebuke, sounding more like...her.

She grew contemplative, her fingers running over the carving. “This one was...”

She stopped, lifted her fingers away, and tucked the torch into a holder on the wall. When she looked at him, the restrained demeanour was back.

“I...should finish here. We’ve still got markers to light, and a wall to bring down.”

Cullen stared after her as she left. There was something meaningful about that particular verse, a memory she recalled as she spoke the words. A memory powerful enough to deflect her concentration.

He breathed out. Why was there always something more with her? Every time he thought he understood her something new cropped up. Cullen rubbed his forehead. None of this would make what he had to say to her any easier. Watching her as she slept, he’d thought about a lot of things, not merely where their future lay. Had she not taken that decision, he likely would have ignored the creeping doubts he felt about his role as Commander. He would have done his duty, staying to support his wife. But everything was different now.

Cullen shook his head, now was not the time to become sidetracked. There was still much to do. The others were filing out, so Cullen joined them.

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The Fortress

Harding stood above them waiting by the penultimate switch. Once they lit this, the emerging
energy blast would prime the final one. A magical current of lightning arcing from one spire to the next wouldn’t be hard to miss. At the same time they would trigger the rift between them and the last tower.

Their passage through the Basin was cautious, stealthy. Now the opposite was required. They wanted to catch the attention of the Hakkonite presence by the fortress and draw the defenders away from their stronghold, out of reach of the archers on the walls protecting them. The tactic was to dangle enough bait.

Cullen bargained on the combination of the lit spire threatening their ice wall, and the sound of the rift opening revealing the Inquisitor was there, to create enough alarm forcing them to react impulsively. It was a gamble, but the alternatives were less promising. Although using the Inquisitor as bait formed an element of it, Cullen had no intention of putting her in harm’s way.

Once the Hakkonites were close enough, Stone-Bear would emerge from behind the ruined bridge and flank them, preventing any escape. The part of the plan that troubled him most was getting the rift closed quickly. The Inquisitor explained she could dispel the secondary wave of demons before they emerged, and then close the rift. But it would involve drawing on the spirit. It was either that, or battle demons and Hakkonites at the same time.

Cullen saw Harding waiting. “Ready?” he mouthed, catching the thumbs up.

“Right Inquisitor, ready?” Cullen asked.

“Ready, Commander,” she confirmed.

Cullen, Bull and Skywatcher moved off first with Dorian behind, and lastly Cole with the Inquisitor. As they approached the ancient guard-post, the rift above it tore open. From what they could see it produced four Greater Shades. Cullen heard the crack of lightning behind them as Harding pulled the switch, and knew she would race to join them. They heard the Hakkonite horn blasting a warning.

“Don’t let them touch you!” Bull shouted, racing up to the steps to tackle one of the Shades.

Skywatcher followed, taking on another. Cullen went after them, targeting a third. Shades were not difficult to defeat, as long as they didn’t touch you. They could drain living things extraordinarily quickly, and Greater Shades were even faster. Keeping it back with his shield, Cullen slashed away at it. A burst of ice whizzed past him freezing another and Harding’s arrows took it down. It wasn’t long before this wave was gone.

The Inquisitor and Cole ran up the stairs to them. Cullen looked back, seeing Parve’s signal to indicate the Hakkonites were moving away from the fortress. They had taken the bait faster than he anticipated, but the plan was working.

He heard the Inquisitor.

“Where’s the next wave?”

“Maker, is the damn thing stuck?” Dorian yelled anxiously.

“No, there’s another demon down below,” Bull shouted back, peering into the courtyard beneath.

They had to kill the remaining demon, close this rift swiftly, and get the Inquisitor out of sight. Cullen’s mind ran through their choices. Loath as he was to send him, Cole would the fastest one to reach the demon, but he couldn’t do this alone.
Cullen turned to Bull. “Can you carry Harding on your shoulders?” he questioned.

Bull’s stare widened, then he grinned. “Cullen, I once caught a Vint on each horn and carried on fighting.”

“Good,” Cullen replied. “Cole, get down there and deal with the demon,” he ordered. “I’ll protect the Inquisitor.”

As Cole sped down the stairs, dropping into stealth, Cullen called Harding up. Bull knelt down, ready.

“Harding, you need to help Cole by targeting the demon below,” he directed. “Bull will be your mobile firing platform. Get on his shoulders.”

She looked astonished, but quickly clambered onto Bull’s shoulders. He stood and walked them to the edge of the walkway. Harding began shooting down into the courtyard below.

“Inquisitor, get ready. We won’t have much time,” Cullen instructed.

Her voice was firm. “Ready, Commander.”

Suddenly the rift widened, the familiar green tendrils raking outward. He watched as she radiated with a silver glow, the Anchor on her outstretched hand creating a connection with the rift and pouring energy into it, the usual green colour of the link taking on a silver hue. The tendrils disappeared.

Cullen scanned behind to see the Hakkonites arrive and Stone-Bear emerge and engage them. Cole appeared, speeding back up the stairs.

Cullen issued orders to his team. “Go and help Stone-Bear, I’ll stay here with Cole until she’s closed it.”

The problem with the rift meant she was in full view, more than a tempting target for the Hakkonites. Stone-Bear’s scouts had spotted rogues in the group near the fortress, and Cullen was now worried one of them would attempt to kill her. He had no wish to have the previous day’s events reoccur. Their job was to keep her safe until she closed it.

“Cole, close ranks,” Cullen ordered, standing ready on one side of her, as Cole positioned himself on the other.

“How long?” he yelled, glancing at her before directing his attention back to the stairs.

Cullen could hear the layered sound of two voices blended. “Nearly....” the rift snapped out of existence with a booming crack, “...done.”

“Come on,” he urged, “we need to get you...”

Cullen didn’t get a chance to finish. The Inquisitor span round and stepped forward, hand outstretched once more, the Anchor crackling. Cullen watched as the magic flushed a figure out of stealth. The assassin was hunched low, daggers drawn, and rooted to the spot.

“Maker’s breath!” Cullen murmured.

“She heard him,” Cole added in amazement, rushing forward, daggers poised.

The man remained motionless and Cole dispatched him quickly. As Cullen stared at the Inquisitor,
she lowered her hand powering down the Anchor. The silver glow faded, a residual glint in her eye vanishing as she turned to him.

“Are you...?” he started hesitantly.

She caught her breath and nodded. “I’ll...be fine.” Her voice was slightly breathless, but normal, human. There was no trace of the layered sound.

“You’re sure?” he challenged, seeing her nod. “You should get out of view.”

The Inquisitor ducked behind the outer wall, and sat back, leaning against it. Although hidden, the Hakkonites knew she was there. Cullen rapidly assessed the battle scene ahead. It looked like the bulk of the Hakkonites were down, with some few remaining. He wanted to help, but was reluctant to leave her with just Cole in case of another attempt.

“I can protect her,” Cole insisted. “She can sense them before they reach us.”

His remark was somehow reassuring and disturbing at the same time. Cullen frowned. He was well aware how her acute her senses normally were, but what else did this heightening of her ability foreshadow.

“She’s still safe,” Cole reassured him.

“Alright,” Cullen conceded, running down the stairs to join the fight.

He arrived in time to take on a warrior making a beeline for Dorian. The Hakkonite’s sword clanged against Cullen’s shield as he raised it to defend his friend. Cullen felt the cold as Dorian’s magic froze the man solid. He dropped his shield and lunged, the strike hitting deep. As Cullen withdrew his blade the man unfroze and crumpled to the ground.

“Saved by the dashing Commander,” Dorian snickered. “Be still my heart.”

Cullen rolled his eyes. “Thank you would have sufficed.”

Dorian readied his staff with a smirk. “Cullen, you have no sense of the theatrical.”

They turned back to the fight to see Skywatcher’s maul connect with the last of the Hakkonites.

So far, the plan had worked. There was one remaining part, the most important. They had to reach the last spire and take down the ice wall. With the defending group defeated, this portion of the plan should be easier, if still dangerous.

Parve came over to him. He would be the one taking the risk. While they provided another diversion, he would climb up the steep rocky bank the spire sat on, and wait ready to pull the switch. The rest of them would be out of the archers’ range, but his position was more perilous. The angle of the spire put it closer to the fortress.

“Right, Commander, let us get in place. The rest we leave to you.”

“Understood,” Cullen nodded.

When Parve and Hask made their way around, Cullen headed back up the guard-post stairs. The Inquisitor was where he left her, drinking potions. The colours revealed the contents, one for healing and one for pain. Seeing her move around normally hid the truth that she remained seriously injured. Only the spirit’s energy enabled her to keep going.
She peered up at him and tilted her head. “My turn?”

“Your turn,” he confirmed. “We just need to give Parve enough time. You’ll be out of range, so there’s no danger.”

The Inquisitor nodded, but when she tried to raise herself up, Cullen saw her jerk and let out a plaintive whimper.

His voice betrayed his alarm. “Inquisitor?”

“It’s alright...just a spasm,” she groaned, sounding strained. “The potion is still kicking in. They take a little longer than Elan’s, and I was too slow. Sorry.”

Even aware of the risk she could pose, he couldn’t see her struggle. Cullen offered her his hand. “Here, it’ll be easier to push yourself up.”

She gazed up at him with an appreciative smile and settled her palm on his. “Thank you.”

With his help, she managed to stand, letting go of his hand. “We’d better get this wall down, hadn’t we?” she proposed glancing aside, and headed down the stairs with Cole.

Cullen watched her. Throughout the day, she’d carried out every instruction she’d been given, without question and without complaint. Apart from the distraction at the Shrine, her focus on their mission had been frighteningly resolute.

But in that split second before she let go of his hand, she squeezed it. It was such a little thing, and he wasn’t sure if she even realised she’d done it. Another distraction, but he guessed what this memory was. Likely the same one he recalled helping her up. An icy lake back in Haven. It felt as if they had come full circle.

Cullen focused his attention back on the task in hand, following her and Cole down the steps to join the others. Members of the Inquisition and Stone-Bear Hold marched side by side to the fortress, stopping near the spire. The Inquisitor took two steps forward.

The subdued woman was gone. In her place stood the Inquisitor, shoulders straight and stance uncompromising, the Anchor glowing brightly on her hand. When she spoke it was with authority.

“You know who I am.”

“We know who you are,” a voice came back. “The murderer’s whore.”

Cullen bristled at the crude insult, but if the barb struck her, it didn’t show in her stance or her voice.

“Then you understand what I’m capable of.”

The voice cackled. “Hah! You and these weak-willed fools? Empty threats will not spare you or the Lowlands from the power of Hakkon.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Cullen saw Parve clamber over the top and sneak up to the spire. It was just wide enough for him to kneel behind unseen. No shots issued from the fortress. They were ready.

“He’s ready,” Cullen murmured.

“I’ve killed one so-called god already...” she declared, pausing.
Cullen watched the Inquisitor’s other hand held behind her.

“...I think I can manage another.”

Cullen saw her signal and drew his sword, the rest of the group drawing their weapons. At the same time, Parve pulled the switch, the last current of magic hitting the ice wall, rapidly melting it. He dropped back over the side sliding down to where Hask caught him.

The ice wall gone, they could better see the impregnable stone wall that lay behind, along with tall, heavy iron doors. It was as formidable as they suspected.

The voice from the fortress laughed again. “Lowland fools. Can your magic melt stone as well as ice?”

Cullen heard Parve. “All done, Commander.”

“Inquisitor, all done,” Cullen relayed.

As she took a step back, the rest of the group sheathed and shouldered their weapons. Together they turned and walked away hearing exultant cheers from the fortress, the Hakkonites apparently believing they’d been forced to retreat.

A different voice called out after them. “Your mother was a nug and your father smelled of elfroot!”

Dorian tutted disparagingly. “Really? That’s the best insult they could come up with? Mindlessly drunk, I could do better.”

Parve and Hask fell into step beside Cullen.

“Well, how does it look? Can you get up there?” Cullen inquired.

Parve gave a chortle. “Piece of piss, we’ve climbed worse.”

“And half drunk,” Hask added laughing.

Cullen couldn’t help but grin.

Typically, there was little love lost between Fereldens and Avvar, the history between the two tainted by past conflicts. This was probably the first time in centuries the two worked together against a common enemy, one that threatened all of them.

After the Blight, Cullen was grateful to leave Ferelden. Now, with the opportunity to establish the Sanctuary and be with his family again, he looked forward to going home. No matter that he’d decided to leave the Inquisition, he would not allow it, his homeland, his family or his future to be destroyed by the Jaws of Hakkon.

He looked around to see Cole and the Inquisitor ahead of the others, talking together as they made their way back to Stone-Bear Hold. Now out of sight, the imposing Inquisitor who faced the Jaws of Hakkon gave way to the subdued woman once more. He noticed Cole lightly touch her arm as a gesture of reassurance as she appeared to nod in reply.

Even though he could no longer offer her such comfort, he was grateful someone else could. However dangerous she could end up being, she was still human...for now at least.
Stone-Bear Hold

Kai sat at the edge of the cliff watching the sunset, hearing the sound of the waves breaking on the rocks beneath. The blue green hue of the water mirrored the sky above it, while the scarlet sun sat halfway in the lake, vivid against the cyan coloured sky. Its reflection bobbed and swirled with the swell, like a pool of warm blood coursing onto the cold waters of the lake.

If it was to be her last day alive, this wasn’t the sunset she would have wished for. This wasn’t sleepy sunsets she treasured as a child on the beach in Ostwick at their summer home. Sitting with Lyssa on the dunes, fingers and toes curled in the warm sand, a soft sea breeze gently cooling the heat of the day, the two of them enthusiastically planning more adventures until Ama called them in. Because Papa never came with them, they had a whole month of summer days filled with fun and freedom from their obligations, and nights filled with stories and laughter. Those sunsets were happier times.

This sunset felt foreboding rather than optimistic. But it was the only one she had, and if this was her last one, she would watch every minute of it. Like a sunset, she was inbetween what she once was and what she could become. The symbol of transition seemed more than apt in the circumstances.

It wasn’t simply Kai’s senses which were sharpened. She could feel emotions, glimpses into the minds of people around her as they prepared for the assault on the fortress. Most of all she felt Cole, a watchful presence tied to her, prepared to warn the others should she reach the final stage of the transition.

Kai looked over her shoulder and smiled at Cole.

“I’d welcome your company,” she offered, her hand settling on the rock.

Cole perched beside her, both thoughtful as they stared out. The air grew chillier as the sun slipped into the lake, the black of the night closing in, tempered only by the full silver brilliance of one of the two moons.

Kai felt Cole more powerfully than others around her, and could discern a little of his thoughts. Sadness for what took place, yet curiosity as well. Why wouldn’t one of them take over the other, why the merging? She wondered the same herself. Kai suspected Hope knew something and didn’t want to reveal it.
She prayed she could at least fulfil her duty to kill this god before she and Hope merged completely. Hope was correct. Neither would subsume the other, yet they were already seeping into one another, like pools of liquid gradually but inexorably flowing into each other, blending to create something... different.

Cole spoke softly. “You sense more.”

“Yes,” she confirmed equally quietly, idly fiddling with a tooth toggle on her coat. “Emotions are stronger, like puffs of wind. I sense them without touch now, but I can’t hear thoughts like you do. Well, except a little of yours.”

“We’re bound,” he voiced calmly. “The rest will come.”

“I know,” she sighed resignedly.

It was only a matter of time before her abilities advanced to hearing thoughts as Cole did. Another milestone on the path to an outcome she could not be permitted to reach.

_Sometimes, trying to do the right thing wasn’t necessarily the right thing to do, _she thought sadly. _However, sometimes it was the only option left._

The sound of Cullen’s voice finalising preparations broke into her reflections. Just like his capacity to evaluate a situation and map out a plan, his leadership skills were instinctive. He’d taken charge of the whole operation without any qualms from either Hold. Sun-Hair would lead her people as Ragnar led his, but overall strategy was deferred to Cullen.

Kai recalled Leliana’s words ‘why do you imagine we chose him as Commander?’ They saw what he was capable of doing. Who else could have dealt with the problems Meredith left behind, rallying Kirkwall’s remaining Templars? How many could have fashioned the Inquisition army into a tight-knit, disciplined fighting force whilst undergoing the effects of lyrium withdrawal? Whatever the challenge, Cullen invariably rose to it.

Except now she’d given him a challenge he couldn’t bring himself to meet. Her. Kai sensed it in him when she held his hand. There was certainty and finality, but also a fleeting moment when he softened. Then, as suddenly as the affectionate feeling arose, it was gone again. She guessed he remembered Haven too. It was ironic how that one small gesture triggered their beginning, and now signified their end.

“You knew what you were getting,” she’d often tease him.

“That’ll teach me to help impossible women off icy lakes,” he’d throw back at her with a smirk.

Memories of the life they shared were all that remained. Whatever happened tonight, she’d already lost him.

Cole touched her arm consolingly. “You shouldn’t think about it.”

Cole was right. Indulging in remorse wouldn’t alter his decision, and it only served to distract her. Her concentration held fast while she was occupied. Sitting here with nothing to do but wait, her mind wandered. A gentle touch from unseen fingers brushed her cheek, with a soft caress from invisible lips on her brow.

‘Remember what you can be, little ptarmigan,’ she heard Hope tell her. It was exactly what Ama would do.
“She’s telling you need to concentrate too,” Cole told her kindly.

“I know,” Kai sighed.

She understood what Hope meant. She was reminding Kai of when her distractible twelve-year-old self first realised she could be more...

“Ama, there are too many pieces. How can I remember what they all do?” Kai complained plaintively, staring desolately at the chess board.

“Katarina, each piece has its own steps, and you have to learn those first, like when Eva teaches you a new dance. You memorise each stage and then put them together,” Ama instructed patiently. “When you understand the steps, you will see it is no different. We’ll try a few now, and then more tomorrow after your lessons.”

Kai saw her mother smile expectantly at her. “Alright,” she relented.

After the first instruction it was even more confusing, and Kai sat at dinner wondering how she could keep track of her own pieces, let alone her opponent’s. She was so quiet, it prompted Papa to comment.

“Katarina, are you unwell?” Papa questioned, peering at her with a frown.

“Why do you ask?” she shot back.

“Must you answer a question with another?” he groaned irritably. “A simple yes or no would be sufficient.”

Kai felt Lyssa’s foot nudge her leg. ‘Don’t set him off’ was the message. Kai had a habit of escalating the conversation when he was impatient or exasperated with her.

“No, Papa,” she responded defiantly. “I was thinking about the chess game Ama is teaching me.”

He snorted in disbelief. “I would be most surprised if you could muster enough concentration for more than a few minutes to actually learn it.”

He had to be snide, she thought, scowling.

The table fell silent as Kai stared down at her dinner, annoyance building inside. All were waiting for her to react angrily as she invariably would, to be followed by the usual sending off to bed. It was such a well worn pattern. But in that moment, something stirred inside her. Tonight would be different; this time she’d show him. This time she wouldn’t give in to his taunts.

Kai looked back up and smiled at her father. “Actually, Papa, this game is very interesting,” she declared, without the usual recalcitrance in her voice, “and Ama teaches it so well. I think I shall enjoy studying it.”

She could see Ama’s slightly raised eyebrow, apparently recalling how Kai bemoaned her way through the lesson. But Ama said nothing. Lyssa’s eyes worriedly flicked between her sister and her father. This was new and she was unsure where it would end.

“Well, we’ll see if you can retain your focus long enough,” he scoffed, taking another mouthful of his meal.
Kai smiled broadly. "Who knows, Papa, perhaps I may even beat you at it one day."

The shocked cough caused Papa to choke on the food he was eating. Ama rushed to him, frantically slapping Papa on the back. Lyssa turned her head slightly so he couldn’t see, and winked at Kai. Papa recovered, and after several gulps of water he was fine. Dinner then resumed. Nothing further was mentioned that night, but they all recognised her father never backed down from a challenge, however veiled.

The following day after lessons Ama and Kai returned to the chess table. Ama rested her hand on Kai’s cheek with a concerned smile, and gently kissed her forehead.

“Little ptarmigan, I hope your concentration matches your determination. You know Papa won’t let this go.”

“I know, and it will, Ama,” she promised bullishly. She beamed. “Teach me.”

“Alright,” Ama agreed then tilted her head with a knowing chuckle. “Perhaps it just took the proper incentive.”

Cole was watching her. “You beat him,” he observed.

“Yes,” Kai nodded.

She was so jubilant at the time, but the triumph over her father seemed trivial when viewed through the prism of what she experienced in her life. Hope was endeavouring to show Kai what she could accomplish when she set her mind to it. The victory over Papa was secondary to what she achieved for herself. Proof there was more than a dizzy and unfocused child, proof she had the strength of will required when called upon.

Kai closed her eye and took a deep breath, refocusing. A few minutes later, she was ready. Opening her eye, she found Cole watching her with a knowing smile.

“Yes,” he approved, with a nod.

Tonight mattered, tonight the onus was on her to destroy the peril they faced and she had to be ready. She and Hope were the surprise package Hakkon would not foresee, and Cullen had arranged everything to ensure the package arrived safely.

As if on cue she heard footsteps, familiar ones, and sensed the conviction in him.

“Inquisitor,” Cullen called.

“Is it time?” she asked, turning around to face him.

He was impressive, every inch the Inquisition’s Commander as he stood there, his hand resting lightly on the pommel of his sword.

“It’s time,” he confirmed. “Ready, Inquisitor?”

Kai got up, brushed down her coat, and nodded at Cullen. “Ready, Commander.”

He started to walk away, but she couldn’t let him leave without offering her gratitude. Kai was aware they wouldn’t have been able to do this without Cullen.
“Commander!” she called out.

He paused and swung back. “Yes, Inquisitor?”

She smiled softly. “Thank you, for everything...Cullen.”

For a few seconds Cullen’s eyes softened, the corners of his mouth turned up a little, and he acknowledged her with a slow blink. Then his resolve returned and Cullen strode away.

*In the circumstances, it was more than enough*, Kai thought, as she and Cole walked after him.

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**The Fortress**

Stone-Bear fighters and the Inquisition team were lying low out of reach of the sentries, waiting for the fortress gates to be opened. As Stone-Bear climbers reached the top of the facade and engaged the defenders, they heard Hask.

“Lady take you, goat lovers!”

“What is it with the goat insults?” Dorian puzzled.

“I think it means they might...you know.” Bull made a circle with his forefinger and thumb, then moved his other forefinger in and out of it with a smack of the lips.

“Ooh...urghh,” Dorian shuddered, grimacing. “That’s an image I really didn’t need, Bull.”

Groans of disgust came from their group, along with uncomfortable snorts of laughter.

Bull shrugged with a chortle. “Well, you did ask.”

“That is indeed what it means,” Amund smiled.

“I’ll never be able to look at a goat again,” Dorian groaned.

“And I was so looking forward to my mother’s goat and turnip stew,” Harding remarked, her face wrinkled in distaste.

“As long as you know where your goat’s been, Harding, what’s the problem,” Bull winked.

“You’re a scout after all. Shouldn’t be too hard.”

Harding simply rolled her eyes and groaned.

Sun-Hair brought their attention back to what they were here for.

“The gates are unlocked,” she told them, smiling as she stood up. “This battle has been a long time coming. Now they will pay the blood-price for what they have done.”

Watching Sun-Hair head to the gates, her fighters and Storvacker in tow, Kai had to admit she looked formidable with her sword and shield in hand, her strawberry blond braid swaying across the hood of her coat with each step. Most of the Stone-Bear women favoured the same style. Kai fingered her own, recalling Cullen’s observation as they walked after them to the gates.

Cullen greeted Parve and Hask when they arrived.

“The way ahead is clear,” Parve told him.
“I’d not tarry, Commander, best get going. They’ll come soon enough when we blow the horn,” Hask added.

“Right,” Cullen nodded, “and thank you.” He turned to Kai. “Your turn, Inquisitor. Lead the way.”

She knew the route from information Hope fed her, images and memories from before. There was a spot ahead they could hide in to avoid tangling with the Hakkonites when Stone-Bear sounded the alert. Stone-Bear fighters would keep them occupied while Cullen’s team entered the stronghold, all to protect Kai from danger.

She heard Bull. “Nice work, Stone-Bear climbers.”

Parve’s reaction caused her to smile a little. “Don’t forget you owe us coin, Bull. We all got up there without a shot coming from them.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bull conceded.

As they rushed to get to the narrow alcove, she heard Dorian.

“Really?” Dorian exclaimed. “You had a wager with them?”

“Got them up there quick, didn’t it,” Bull chuckled.

The sound of the horn blasting and yells in return forced them to pick up the pace. Their party reached the alcove and hid, backs up against the rock and shrouded in darkness, waiting until the sizable group of Hakkonites piled past. Kai sensed this was the bulk of the force stationed outside the Ritual Site, a mere handful remaining by the entrance. As the Hakkonites reached the fortress gates, the sounds of battle issued forth, mixed with loud roars from Storvacker. She was enjoying her revenge against the people who imprisoned her.

The seven of them moved from their hiding place and resumed the path down to the Ritual Site. Arriving at the bottom of the incline, they spotted Winter Shards guarding the arches under the viaduct.

“Wards,” Cullen remarked resignedly. “Well, when we take these out they’re going to realise we’re here.”

Kai had avoided signalling her growing abilities, anxious not to worry her friends any further. Cullen knew she was changing, but Cole had convinced him she wasn’t a threat yet. What she saw ahead could assist them, and it seemed absurd not to use the intelligence she could provide, even if she had to endure increased suspicion.

“Commander,” Kai called.

“Yes, Inquisitor?” he answered, still staring ahead.

“There are two bruisers and two warriors left on guard,” she volunteered.

Cullen turned abruptly as did the others, all of them observing her keenly, eyes large. Kai shuffled awkwardly on the spot.

“How did you...?”

“She sees them,” Cole interrupted. Watching Cullen frown, Cole attempted to reassure him. “She’s still alright.”
Cullen glanced at Cole then stared hard at Kai, seemingly pondering Cole’s statement. “Very well,” he conceded warily.

Cullen faced the team issuing commands. “When the wards are down, Bull, Skywatcher, you two take on the heavy targets. I’ll deal with one of the warriors, Dorian and Harding, you take on the other. Cole, you remain with the Inquisitor. Agreed?”

A chorus of affirmation met his instructions.

Cullen looked deliberately at Kai. “The sooner we dispatch them and get going, the better.”

She understood that remark was levelled at her. Now Cullen would be even more uncomfortable with what she and Cole needed to do. To ensure they weren’t detected by Hakkon on entering the Ritual Site, she and Cole would carry two of the Hakkonite wards they discovered in the swamp.

Not knowing how far Gurd Harofsen had reached with his alternative plan, they didn’t want to alert Hakkon to the fact Hope was with them. And even though Cole was more human, he remained a spirit and they didn’t want his presence to raise suspicion. It was enough that Kai and the Anchor would be identified.

“Everyone ready?” Cullen inquired, seeing the nods. “Dorian, Harding, the wards are yours.”

Dorian and Harding took out the wards in the arches nearest to the group, their actions answered by a shout from the entrance. The Hakkonites knew they were here. The party of five headed through the arches while she and Cole held back, seeing them engage the opposition. Kai felt her fingers flutter instinctively as she observed the skirmish.

Shields crashing together pulled her attention to Cullen, reactively linking to his mind. Watching him and touching his emotions as he fought, Kai became absorbed and very nearly missed the mind of someone behind her. A mind hell bent on killing her. Her response was immediate. She instinctively phased, and the assassin struck at empty air. In a instant she was behind him, and re-emerged daggers drawn, slashing through the back of the man’s neck. He was dead before he had an opportunity to react to her disappearance.

Cole stared down at the man and then up at her. “You’re faster than I am now,” he voiced in astonishment, as Kai wiped and sheathed her daggers.

My senses, my speed...even my strength are heightened, she thought as she peered at the body. The cut on the man’s neck was heavier than she’d ever made before.

‘Did you help?’ she thought to Hope.

‘No. Your enhanced abilities stem from the synthesis which has already taken place. It is...a little faster than I anticipated,’ came the reply.

‘Why is that?’ Kai questioned.

There was a pause before Hope answered. ‘We must maintain our vigilance, Kai. And that includes not being drawn by your attachment to Cullen.’

Evasion again, but Hope was right. Feeling what he felt was her sole emotional tie to him now, and holding back from the fight had permitted her mind to stray to his. But this incident proved she was exposing herself to risk by being drawn to him. She had to focus on grappling with the unfolding situation, and that meant re-assessing her link to Cole.
“Cole, give me the other ward, please.”

She stuck out her hand, catching the nod from Cole. He removed the ward from his pack and gave it to her. Kai held the tiny cage, extending her other hand for Cole to take.

“Can you still see?” she queried, concerned.

“Yes,” he confirmed, as relieved as she was.

Kai puffed out a breath, thank the Maker. At least Cole could reassure Cullen. They checked it before, but now her condition had accelerated.

The fighting stopped and the team returned to where she and Cole stood. Cullen registered shock when he caught sight of the fallen Hakkonite assassin. He looked to Cole.

“She felt him, and killed him before I could move,” Cole explained.

He pre-empted Cullen’s challenge. “We checked again. I can still sense her if I touch her,” Cole added, seeking to assure him.

Kai perceived Cullen’s doubt, yet also his trust in Cole. It had taken a while to develop, but she was thankful for it. Cole was her sole means of proving she was safe, she relied on him absolutely for her life. And right now she was glad he couldn’t hear her thinking that. There was enough weight on his shoulders already as a consequence of her choice, and everyone’s expectations.

“All right, we’d best get inside,” Cullen announced, striding to the doorway, the other four following behind.

Kai breathed a deep sigh of relief, tucking the ward into her pack. She and Cole joined them. Hakkon’s presence was obvious from the ice encrusting the frame of the great metal door. Hope forewarned Kai about the numbing cold that Hakkon exuded. The solid stone walls of the Ritual Site helped limit its spread.

“Remember, it’ll be even colder inside,” Kai warned them. “Hakkon’s power is enhanced by the Ritual Site.”

“Ritual Site...blood magic,” Bull growled, shaking his head.

“And this place is drenched in blood,” Kai stressed.

They all shifted to face her. It was Hope’s knowledge, but her who voiced the dreadful history of this place.

“Towards the end, when Razikale stopped speaking to their dreamers, and they lost communication with Tevinter, they became...desperate to reach out to her. When the slaves were gone, they turned on each other...”

Dorian groaned. “So even in this far flung outpost, the actions of Corypheus and his cronies led others to madness.”

“What about you?” Cullen demanded. “How will it affect you now?” His tone was firm, but she sensed uneasiness.

She listened for Hope inside, and realised the answer wouldn’t assuage his anxiety. “It intensified the magic before...but now...she doesn’t know how it will affect the two of us with the Anchor.”
Cullen rubbed his neck, looking stern. When he spoke, he was unwavering in his instruction. “Cole, you will remain close to the Inquisitor, and check her every few minutes until she removes the ward.”

Everybody was staring at her, and Kai dropped her head not wishing to meet the suspicion in their eyes. It was bad enough feeling the mistrust and worry of her companions, without seeing how they looked at her. Even Amund was guarded. Cole worried like the others, but nevertheless he still saw her for who she was, not what she was.

To the rest of them she was a dangerous burden, something they were required to keep safe...until she became unsafe.

Sensing the misgivings from people she loved and cared about accentuated her feeling of isolation. As the others walked through the door, Kai wandered silently after them with Cole by her side.

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The Ritual Site

Progress along the corridor leading to the Inner Sanctum consisted of a frantic dash from brazier to brazier, the withering cold relentless, and their passage further hampered by having to remove wards on the way. The entire place had deteriorated over centuries even before Hakkon was confined within it, and continued to do so for the remaining 800 years since then.

Kai sensed Hakkon as soon as they entered, thwarted and furious inside the dragon, desperate to be free of it and aching to continue attacking and killing. Cole felt him too, prompting a comment ‘tied together, racked and raging’. But their wards were working; Hakkon didn’t perceive her or Cole.

Finally they arrived at the entrance to the Inner Sanctum.

As the others walked through the door, Cole took her hand once more. A grateful smile flashed across her face as she turned to him. It was good to feel the connection with him; it mitigated the sense of loneliness.

‘I’m always here,’ he promised her.

His lips hadn’t moved. Kai quickly glanced around to catch sight of the others ahead.

‘I heard you,’ she admitted without speaking.

‘We’re both louder here.’ He cocked his head. ‘You can’t hear the others?’

‘No, not yet,’ she answered. ‘But I’m happy to hear you.’

He simply squeezed her hand with a small smile and let go. The two of them walked in. Even from this distance, they could make out the dragon ahead, suspended in flight and shrouded in a magical mist. But from this perspective the altar itself was obscured.

“Well,” Cullen exhaled. “There it is, or should I say there they are.”

Inside the door were two larger braziers offering more heat. On the sides of the platform they stood on were tables loaded with stores, equipment, and scraps of parchment darkened with age. Crates of flasks lay underneath. Kai recognised what they held, potions for combating the cold. Unlike their spirit dragon, the Jaws of Hakkon were mortal, and taking these enabled them to move around more easily if only for a limited period.
Just how many were they using to be able to remain here?

“Here,” Kai pointed out, picking up one of the flasks. “Cold resistance potions. These can help stave off the worst of the chill.”

She passed them around, ensuring everyone had sufficient to help their passage through, and for when they faced Hakkon. Dorian started flicking through the parchments on the table as the others searched for anything else that might help them.

“Tevinter bureaucracy is second to none,” he commented. “Records of equipment, some magical. I would imagine this is where they found the ring.” Suddenly he paused, picking up a parchment. “Hello, what’s this?”

He studied it then called Cullen over, passing the parchment to him. Cullen read it and stared pointedly at Kai. But before she could discover what held their interest so, Gurd Harofsen’s voice resounded from the altar. Every stopped to listen, yet it was only when he came the conclusion, they understood he was reciting an incantation.

“...Gurd Harofsen, called the Cutter, Wyvern-Slayer. Lowland-Bane, Begs of Hakkon, bring his body bloody blessings, cold and pain!”

“Is he...is he actually summoning Hakkon into his own body?” Dorian questioned incredulously.

Bull grunted. “Who does...?” he began, his sentence remaining unfinished as he darted a look at Kai.

Who does that, she suspected were his intended words until he recalled what was sitting inside her. Kai didn’t need to see into his mind to understand what he was thinking.


She sensed Hope rousing. ‘Did you know?’ Kai asked her.

‘No, but I presume there was no other possibility left to him. You forced his hand. Gurd Harofsen will be too weak a vessel to carry a powerful spirit such as Hakkon. He will consume the soul and use the body to fulfil his misguided purpose.’

Hope hesitated. ‘There is another thing you must know...Ameridan did not die when trapping Hakkon. He and the dragon carrying Hakkon remain bound together, locked in time...’

They have been trapped together for too long, Kai recalled Hope saying before. She thought it meant Hakkon and the dragon, but it was Ameridan and the dragon Hope referred to. Kai could sense Hope’s remorse, her sadness for leaving Ameridan in limbo for centuries.

“Commander, may I?” She held out her hand for the parchment.

He gave it to her. “Apparently, it hasn’t been as forthcoming as you believed,” Cullen told her sharply, motioning to Cole.

Cole took hold of her other hand as she went through the parchment. It was written by Ameridan, detailing the plan to defeat Hakkon. Haron and Orinna were the diversion, enabling him and Telana to reach Hakkon. But Telana was injured, and Ameridan sent her away to restore the ice wall, giving her the chance to escape. He hoped she could join up with her companions at the rendezvous and bring assistance. The spell to keep Hakkon and Ameridan sealed away was expected to be temporary, giving his companions the time required to fetch help.
And there was Hope’s support writ large on the page.

...our spirit companion believes together she and I can do this. With her energy and my magic, we can suspend time with this spell. The power of this god-dragon rivals that of the Archdemon Dumar, and if the rumours from the Anderfels are true, Orlais cannot endure two god-dragons at once. Perhaps there will be time to defeat this one before we face another Blight. But if not, the spell will hold us both until there is. I pray to Andraste and Ghilan’nain for the strength and courage to see this through.

Hope’s memories filled her mind, and Kai breathed deeply to stay the panic. She heard Cole reassuring the others as she clung onto his hand, her body trembling slightly as she processed the visions. It had all gone wrong, but it was nothing they could foresee, merely a tragic combination of chance events.

Kai opened her eye to catch them all watching her, ready to respond if need be. They wouldn’t unless Cole told them to, and he recognised she wasn’t a threat.

“After the battle with Hakkon, after he was confined, Hope was weakened, and could only return to the Fade to maintain her vigil.” Kai sighed. “Hope did her utmost, Cullen. She helped seal Hakkon away. I realise she didn’t tell me Ameridan was still alive, but...”

“Even Hope can feel remorse,” Cole added gently.

Cullen was frowning, distrustful. Information had been suppressed, and he was likely wondering what else was being withheld. After all, Hope had kept it from her, and Kai couldn’t assure him there wouldn’t be more.

‘Concerning this, you now know everything,’ Hope told her.

‘He won’t believe it,’ Kai replied.

It was Dorian who spoke though, his curiosity piqued by what they discovered. “So the last Inquisitor is a mage?”


Dorian exhaled heavily. “Oh, doesn’t that screw with history. The previous Inquisitor, leader of the original Seekers, is an elven mage who accepted the aid of one spirit to subdue another, using time magic. Well, I can only imagine what Cassandra would say if she knew.”

“Well, at least he was trying to save people,” Bull grunted. “Unlike her last leader who went nuts wanting to destroy everything.”

“So,” Cullen began, his voice tight, “as it stands now, your predecessor remains alive down there. His magic is keeping the spirit-dragon trapped along with him, and the Hakkonites are attempting to draw out the spirit from the dragon into Gurd Harofsen.”

“Yes,” Kai confirmed, nodding. “But Gurd Harofsen won’t be strong enough to bear him. Hakkon will kill him if he takes over his body.”

Cullen pondered this for a moment before walking over to Kai, fixing her with a reproachful gaze. “I don’t like how this is going, and I daresay you are aware of that...”

Sensing his displeasure and disapproval, Kai glanced down. She couldn’t blame him, but it nevertheless hurt.
“...but,” he resumed, “since you are now able to...see things...what are we likely to face reaching them?”

Grateful to be of use, Kai felt ahead. “I can’t see anyone nearby. Most are with Gurd Harofsen, but I can sense three mages and two warriors guarding the way to them.”

Cullen sought Cole’s confirmation.

“She’s telling the truth,” Cole affirmed.

“Fine,” Cullen stated bluntly, glancing in her direction before switching his attention to the rest of the party.

Cole let go of her hand, and Kai was on her own once more. As Cullen and the rest of them worked out their approach, she reflected on the knowledge she discovered from Hope. If Hope was weakened aiding Ameridan before, what would happen this time. Hope was already using some of her energy to sustain Kai. Granted, the power of the Anchor would boost Hope’s own, but how much would be required to defeat Hakkon, and where would it leave them when it came time to separate. The fact they were blending indicated the energy needed for Hope to leave would be greater now.

Would there be enough power left, or would they be doomed to become the threat her companions feared?

Kai couldn’t continue to rely solely on her friends. If she and Hope were in danger of becoming a threat, she had to be prepared too.

“This is no longer merely a case of holding our focus, is it?” Kai questioned.

“No, it isn’t,” Hope stated plainly. ‘But if we reach that point, there may another way...should you wish to consider it.’

As Hope showed her, Kai remembered what was still in her pack. It could be of use.

‘You need to hide this so Cole can’t see,’ Kai insisted. ‘They mustn’t know.’

Hope’s response was unexpected. ‘You can do that now.’

Realising she had the ability to hide things from Cole was worrying; it served to highlight the pace at which she and Hope were merging. But this was not the time to brood on it. Only a few minutes remained before he checked on her again so she had to do this quickly. Kai secreted the information deep in her mind, layering on top memories of happier times that wouldn’t attract his attention.

It was a truly desperate and dangerous last resort. But if she had to use it, she would. No matter the consequences for her, it would save the man she loved and her friends from being compelled to kill her.

Chapter End Notes

Gurd Harofsen’s chant and the wording of the parchment belong to Bioware.
Hakkon

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition team face their final battle to take down the Hakkonites and destroy Hakkon, before Kai becomes the next threat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They paused, crouching, concealed behind the ruined pillars framing the rocky path to the altar, a small brazier nearby providing enough warmth to stave off the cold. This part of the inner shrine was practically dilapidated, crumbling from the effects of time and the original battle with Hakkon. Sections of the stone roof lay where they fell, bright silver moonlight shining through the gaping hole left. The only part untouched was the altar where Ameridan waited, bound alongside the dragon.

The ruin, the decay, was only surface deep. Below all the dust and debris of the collapse was magic, dark and powerful thrumming magic. This place was steeped in blood, lives lost from desperation and lives sacrificed in fear. It had weakened over time, but the stone would never be free of it.

Kai could sense the magic that made this place its own. It felt like the shadow you spot out of the corner of your eye. When you face it, you see nothing, but you instinctively know something is there. Hidden and waiting in the darkness, an intangible undercurrent of danger.

The first Jaws of Hakkon drew on the power here, this incarnation were using it too. It boosted the strength of Ameridan’s own magic all those years ago, and it would augment their combined power now. History was repeating itself on so many levels. Two Inquisitors, two Jaws of Hakkon, and events centuries apart linked by two spirits, one of Hope and one of War.

As Gurd Harofsen’s chant continued, Kai could hear Hakkon loosening inside the dragon, slipping from the magical tether that contained her. Inevitable now, it wouldn’t be long before he was free of her, housed in his new vessel. Evidently the summoning began earlier than they suspected.

From what they saw on the way down, Gurd Harofsen was surrounded by his mages, some working to free Hakkon, others maintaining a barrier to protect Harofsen. Fighters formed a defensive ring around them. More braziers dotted the altar, and another crate of what appeared to be cold resistance portions sat nearby. Without both, Hakkon’s human helpers would not survive the bitter cold.

They all appreciated the odds were not in their favour.

“There are too many of them to take head on,” Cullen warned, voice low. “We need to thin them out, or at least keep some of them occupied.”

He glanced at Dorian and Harding in turn. “You can both stealth, can’t you?”
“Yes,” they answered, darting looks at each other.

“If you can move in unseen, and hit some of them with those bees and Horror, that should be sufficient distraction, upping the odds in our favour.”

_Bees and Horror, good choice, Kai thought. Wait...bees...can we do this?_

She sensed agreement from Hope. It would require a small draw of energy, and a minimal link between her and Hope. The ward would provide adequate cover to hide their actions. Kai grabbed Cole’s hand, needing him to assure Cullen her plan was not dangerous. He saw her idea, and nodded in approval.

“Commander,” Kai whispered.

“Yes, Inquisitor?”

Again with the slight questioning frown when she spoke. He still remained suspicious, but now endeavoured to keep it out of their interactions, mindful of how everyone looked to him. Although her companions were independent fighters in their own right, for their mission to succeed they appreciated the need for a cohesive unit with one leader. If Cullen was steady, it naturally reduced their tension.

He was no less concerned about her abilities, but like the able Commander he was, he understood using her assistance could give them an edge. Kai was relying on this as she made her offer.

_Here goes,_ she thought. “The bees, we can help with them,” she proposed.

As the group darted puzzled looks at each other, Cullen’s expression remained circumspect. “How?”

“I can concentrate their attack on the Hakkonites, so you can take on the fighters without fear of being caught up in the wave.”

Kai sensed astonishment and incredulity, but it was preferable to the current of uneasiness which followed her. Only Amund exhibited some curiosity. Much as she succeeded in curbing the swell of emotions, some slipped through. Her friends, who she laughed and joked with a couple of days ago, now viewed her as an potential threat, and rightly so. Yet whatever they thought of her, they were endangering themselves, and if she could lend support in any limited way, she would.

Cullen’s expression registered surprise. “You can do that?”

Kai nodded. “You saw the wolves. Bees are simpler. The power required is minimal and the ward will keep us hidden.”

Cole pre-empted Cullen’s query. “Yes,” he confirmed. “She wants to help.”

Cullen exhaled, thoughtful. “Very well,” he agreed.

Her instinct was correct. In a situation such as they faced, he understood any advantage was useful.

“How will the Hakkonites react when we engage them?” Cullen inquired.

The question was unexpected yet welcome. He was genuinely seeking her aid, and it felt so good to be useful rather than merely mistrusted.
“I’ll look,” she willingly volunteered.

Kai closed her eye, probing through the minds of the Hakkonites. Thoughts were still unattainable, but she felt a responsibility to protect in the mages and a duty to defend in the warriors. This last line of defence consisted of their veterans, devoted to the cause with a religious fervour. It was going to be a hard fought battle to take this final group down. Kai opened her eye to see Cullen waiting expectantly.

“The mages won’t leave Gurd Harofsen until Hakkon is out,” she reported. “The fighters will respond forcefully against any threat. These are their strongest and most loyal, sworn to defend him to their last breath.”

Considering the strength of the enemy, Kai wondered if she should offer her fighting skills. But no sooner had the thought occurred, she heard Cole.

‘No,’ he warned. ‘For his sake. Will she get hurt, what will happen if she does?’

‘You’re right,’ she conceded.

‘He knows he will need my help, leaving you alone. It worries him,’ Cole added, letting go of her hand.

“Right then,” Cullen began, issuing instructions. “We’ll use the bees first. With luck it should generate enough confusion to allow you two,” he motioned to Dorian and Harding, “to use whatever you think is appropriate. Remain at a distance and go for the lighter targets. Bull, Skywatcher, Cole and I will do the best we can with the heavier ones. And Inquisitor...” he gave her a resolute stare, “…I trust you will remain here until you’re required.”

Kai nodded. “Yes, of course, Commander.”

Still watching her, Cullen gestured to Harding waiting ready with a flask of bees in one hand, the other sat on the ground. “All yours, Inquisitor.”

“Two jars should be adequate. I’ll send them on ahead, and the rest of you can...” she paused, sensing Cullen watching her, “…have a better chance.”

She’d nearly slipped back into her role. Today, you are not the Inquisitor, she reminded herself.

Moving a little way from her companions, she drew a small amount of energy from Hope, feeling the tingling sensation as a barely perceptible silver shimmer coated her body. She held out her hands as if holding a large bowl, and closed her eye.

“ Release the stoppers, one at a time,” she instructed, hearing the pop as the first one went.

Their combined will reached out enveloping the swarm, quietening the angry buzz and calling it to Kai. Tiny gusts of wind from numerous sets of wings brushed her palms as she held them in place. The bees settled, and they were ready for the next container.

“Next one, please, Lace.”

Another pop, and this time the bees automatically headed for the initial group. Again they settled them. Then, the two of them manipulated an innate instinct in the bees, convincing them she was their queen and needed to be defended from the enemy assaulting the hive. To guarantee they only targeted Hakkonites, they implanted the scent of their kaddis as the trigger to attack.

Kai opened her eye to observe the ball of bees cupped between her outstretched hands, the
subdued humming becoming an angry drone they hovered there. Everyone else was captivated by
the swarm, staring as she released it, and following the wave as it flew to where the Hakkonites
were. The shimmer covering Kai dissipated along with the tingle as Hope drew back.

“Well...I’m glad I’m not a bee,” Dorian remarked dryly. “That display was a little too explicit.”

*Of the power we could wield*, Kai thought, sensing fear and awe in equal measure. All eyes
shifted to her and Kai stared down to avoid their gaze.

“I’ve never known the like,” Amund murmured in wonder.

Seconds later cries of panic and pain filled the place as her bee horde sought to drive off its
perceived adversary. The Hakkonites had little luck countering the attack. It was hard to cut down
an enemy which could out fly your blows.

Cullen cleared his throat, eyeing her guardedly when she looked up. “We need to press our
advantage. Come on,” he directed.

Taking another cold resistance potion each, they all headed for the altar. Before leaving, Cole
briefly touched her arm to offer comfort. Even with the pressure resting on his shoulders, his need
to help was strong. For her, the reassurance was more than welcome.

Kai quickly removed three potions from her pack, for pain, healing and the cold, and then took out
the ward from the front pocket, spotting the small pouch there. A brief resigned smile passed
across her face as she closed the buckle on the pocket.

*My insurance...should the worst occur.*

Shouts and the clash of weapons broke into her thoughts. Her friends were engaging the enemy,
but her task was to wait here until she was needed. She drank two of the potions, and was about to
take the third when suddenly Hakkon’s power surged and a burst of dazzling light filled the
surroundings. He’d escaped the dragon and was inside Gurd Harofsen, his craving for battle
cravings palpable. Kai’s heartbeat hastened as she stood. Now she was needed.

*This was it,* she thought, drinking the last potion and throwing the flask aside.

‘He will want prove himself against the most powerful opponent, you,’ Hope told her.

‘Won’t he have a surprise coming then,’ Kai threw back.

She could have sworn she caught a chuckle from Hope, but it was drowned out by Hakkon’s
thundering bellow.

“Face me Inquisitor! Your predecessor could not defeat me and you will fare no better.”

Kai took a sharp breath. ‘Are you ready?’

‘I am,’ Hope confirmed.

Kai dashed ahead and dropped down into the altar area, taking in the scene before her. Some
Hakkonites already lay lifeless on the ground and her people were focused on those remaining.
But now Hakkon was out, they’d have the mages to grapple with on top of the fighters.

Instinctively she wanted to help them, but realised the only way she could was take on Hakkon.
Draw his attention to her and hope her friends could manage the Hakkonites. Harding still had
bees left, and she and Dorian could deal with multiple targets and wear them down for their
frontline squad to...

‘Stop strategising, this is Cullen’s responsibility, not yours,’ Hope urged.

‘I’ve been doing this for a while now. It’s not always easy to switch off,’ Kai sighed.

Hope’s response was direct. ‘He’s been doing it for longer than you. Let him. Hakkon is our responsibility.’

Now I’m being scolded by a spirit, Kai thought, aware Hope could hear her.

Hakkon stood on an elevated dais to the side of the area, too near her friends for Kai’s liking. He had to be drawn away, to allow them to battle it out without endangering the others. It was obvious Gurd Harofsen was finished. All that prevailed was Hakkon, violently possessing the corpse. The body looked more Revenant than human, and the intensity of his power was already breaking it down. It wouldn’t be capable of holding him for long.

In that instant, Kai couldn’t help wondering why the selfsame thing wasn't happening to her. Hope was powerful too, yet he was destroying his vessel and there was no physical damage to her.

Did the Anchor make such a difference?

‘We must damage the body farther and force him out,’ Hope insisted, cutting in. ‘But will you permit me to guide us?’

‘Yes,’ Kai agreed.

She understood this was necessary, but aware the overall risk would be greater. This time Kai wasn’t simply drawing on Hope’s energy or forming a temporary bond with her. They were joining. Both were mindful of the danger involved, yet knew if they didn’t defeat Hakkon, a worse consequence lay ahead for thousands of innocents.

“Looking for me, Hakkon Wintersbreath?” Kai taunted, clutching the ward in her hand.

Hakkon spotted her. In a split second, his corrupted form had travelled from its position and now towered menacingly before her. The movement was so rapid it momentarily threw Kai, forcing her to step back. Swiftly recovering her composure she stared straight into the darkened corpse-like face. The only visible sign of life there were his eyes, burning with an ice blue fire. The chill he emitted was intensely numbing this close up, and a veneer of frost covered her body, slowing her movements.

‘I can break through the cold, but we must not allow him to touch us,’ Hope warned. ‘Only as close as we dare.’

Kai waited for Hakkon to make his move. She’d fought enough sword and shield warriors to recognise how they briefly opened themselves up as they reached to attack, exposing the sword arm side of their body. That was the moment she was waiting for.

“Foolish human, your mark of magic will not avail you here. I am the breath of winter, the bitter wind of war. You cannot stand against me,” he gloated, laying open the body as he raised his sword, and shifted aside his shield to strike at her.

Sheer arrogance.

As fast as he was, together they were more than a match for his speed. Before Hakkon’s sword
lowered, Hope’s power manifested, suffusing Kai’s body when they connected, a radiating silver glow surrounding them, instantly dissolving the frosted casing. Abandoning the ward, they activated the Anchor, driving the stream of intensified sprit magic directly into the side of the corpse.

“And I am the thaw of spring, Hakkon,” they shot back, hearing him cry out in frustration as the magic found its mark. “The end of winter has been too long coming.”

“You!” he roared, struggling to free himself from the Anchor’s hold.

“Your place is not here. Do you not remember what they did to you?” they persuaded, seeking to distract Hakkon by recalling the summoning that drew him from the Fade.

An offering and an appeal for aid brought him forth, only to be trapped by the Augur of the original Jaws of Hakkon, then bound to the dragon. Deceit hidden by blood magic. Once in mortal form, he was driven to fight and kill. All for the sake of a leader’s greed for power and plunder.

Hakkon hesitated, momentarily confused. “I was...” he faltered. “No...I am war and my battle is not yet over.”

They pressed harder, continuing to pour energy into the body, sensing it fragmenting further.

“This is not your battle, the one before was not your battle. Mindless slaughter is not your purpose, Hakkon. You are harsh like the winter, but you are not without mercy,” they appealed. “You were tricked...”

“NO!” he thundered, his anger surging once more. “It was you who tricked me, imprisoned me. Now you seek to trick me again to destroy me.”

After so long, all that survived was the desire for war, and his misguided purpose to wreak devastation. The spirit he once was cruelly corrupted, first by the original binding, and then by the merciless vengeance inside Gurd Harofsen. He was more demon than spirit now.

“We will destroy you to prevent more slaughter,” they declared emphatically. “Your vessel is weak and easily dealt with.”

“Unlike yours I see,” he snarled menacingly. “Perhaps I should drive you out and take it for myself?”

Hope pushed her way to the fore, her resolve forcing Kai back as she assumed control.

“No!” she countered defiantly. “She is not for you!”

“We will see,” he growled.

Hakkon released his sword, driving it into the ground and reached out for them, biting cold emanating from his fingertips. As powerful as they were joined, his touch would freeze even them. Hope surrendered their grasp cutting off the magic, and as they cloaked edging away from Hakkon, Cole sped towards them, moving up behind him.

“No, you will not take her!” Cole cried out, hacking his daggers repeatedly across the cadaver’s back.

Unable to deal with this fresh offensive, Hakkon howled in fury as the body began to rip asunder.
Hope relinquished her control, and the two of them renewed their attack pouring more spirit energy into him. It was scarcely a moment before another brilliant flash of light burst out. Temporarily blinding them, it gave Hakkon the opportunity to elude them and escape from the disintegrating body, his ghostly blue form heading back into the dragon. What remained of the corpse shattered into frozen pieces on the ground.

*Arrogant he may be, but he wasn’t stupid.*

Hakkon knew returning to the dragon meant he was beyond their grasp until the bindings were removed.

The silver hue faded as they broke the connection and Hope’s energy drew back into Kai. Cole nodded, rushing off to take on a mage threatening Harding. Kai rapidly scanned around; her friends were still fighting to take down the remaining Hakkonites. In amongst the chatter, Cullen’s voice became the loudest. Kai saw him, locked shield to shield with one of the warriors while a mage sought to immobilise him. Cullen was going to try and use a Cleanse against the mage.

‘*Dammit! It’ll be weak without lyrium, if it works at all....*’

His Templar abilities were greatly reduced without lyrium, and the Cleanse would be insufficient to counter the magic. Everyone else was engaged fighting, there was no-one to support him. No-one but her. Cullen was in danger, and she wouldn’t stand idly by whatever his instructions.

*He can scold me afterwards, but you’re not taking my husband.*

Kai readied her bow, aimed and let off two shots, placing one after another through the mage’s exposed neck. He buckled and crumpled, like a puppet whose strings were severed. Cullen saw the mage fall, and quickly shook off the icy coating, continuing the assault against his remaining adversary.

‘*Thank you, Harding,*’ she caught from him as he fought on.

Kai smiled. *No scolding then.*

Only then did it dawn on her. She was picking up his thoughts. Distracted by her confrontation with Hakkon, and absorbed with the threat to Cullen, she didn’t recognise what she heard was not speech, but thoughts. Hope and she were more intertwined, and she didn’t even notice. Evidently their connection did not break cleanly.

Kai quickly blocked out the noise. Too many voices talking in her head would be distracting when the time came. How Cole coped with this, she couldn’t imagine.

Turning her attention back to the battle, it was clear the Hakkonites would be soon dealt with, so she shouldered her bow before Cullen spotted her. Then, Kai carefully partitioned off a part of her mind, wary not to alert Cole, and spoke to Hope.

‘*Can we do this and still...?*’

‘*I don’t know anymore. I’m no longer able to...you’re bleeding into me more than I can hold back.*’ Kai sensed a shrug. ‘*We could be screwed.*’

‘*What?! Of all the things you could pick up from me, it’s making jokes?*’

‘*It is your strongest characteristic.*’

Kai let out a weary sigh. This wasn’t going well, and time was against them. The element of
surprise was lost, and Hakkon was yet to be defeated.

But he had been hurt, and the numbing cold invading the shrine was consequently lessened due to his diminished power. Moreover, the dragon remained injured from the battle centuries ago. Held in stasis, she had no opportunity to recover. Hakkon’s instinct would be to head for more favourable ground, and Hope knew exactly where. Although he would be weaker away from the shrine, so would they. They had to take him on here with what power remained to them. It would be sufficient to destroy him at least.

‘Do whatever it takes,’ Leliana had made Kai promise in future Redcliffe.

Never was fulfilling that promise more important than now. They had to destroy Hakkon whatever the cost to them, and only when the dragon was free would they have the opportunity to finally eradicate his menace.

Kai sensed Hakkon agitating the dragon, and in turn she strained against the bindings. Ameridan held fast, his magic holding them for the moment. There was just enough time to make plans, and for Hope to have the chance to talk with Ameridan.

The battle against the Jaws of Hakkon was finally over, but not without cost to her companions, even if the injuries weren’t disabling. They clustered around the braziers to warm up, swigging healing remedies and cold resistance ones to reduce the chill. Although lessened, it still persisted. Kai no longer required the latter; the cold was bearable for her now.

Their next fight would be no less dangerous. Weakened as he was, Hakkon would not surrender; he would fight to the bitter end.

“Inquisitor!” she heard Cullen call.

Kai went to him, while he waited within the heated area around the brazier.

“It didn’t work, there wasn’t enough time,” she explained frankly. “But a second chance could be enough.”

The irony of her assertion slipped past him.

“Could be, or will be?” he challenged, wiping a warm trickle of blood from the side of his face where a blade tip caught him.

*That one will scar,* she mused.

He glanced around, calling Cole to them, and Kai waited before continuing. Cullen wanted reassurance as to her condition, but this time Cole couldn’t tell him she was ‘alright’. At least he could say she was not currently a threat to her friends.

Apart from the one section of her mind she kept concealed, she was open to Cole, enabling him to see the extent of their merging. There was little benefit in concealing it even though she could have. Being honest was crucial because she had a strategy which required Cullen’s approval, and she also had a fear to ease.

Kai was encouraging in her words. “We have sufficient power to destroy Hakkon.”

Cullen stared at Cole who gazed wistfully at Kai.

“Yes,” Cole declared, inclining his head. “But becoming shinier and shinier inside...so little time...”
“Are you saying there is a strong likelihood the spirit will be bound to her...permanently?” Cullen solicited, casting a glance at her.

“He is,” Kai insisted, interrupting before Cole could answer. She felt Cole’s puzzlement, but ignored it and stepped up to Cullen.

There was the one thing about Cullen she could wager her life on, his desire to protect. Knowing the worst outcome was inevitable would strengthen his conviction, allowing him to concentrate on the task ahead. She removed the continual insecurity of whether it might happen, and the consequent fear of a mistake, killing her unnecessarily.

As they stood there together, she saw his uncertainty over her fate fade, replaced by resolve to stop her, yet sadness too.

Kai looked straight into his eyes, her voice soft. “And when it comes to it, I know you have a plan...Commander.”

“I do...Inquisitor,” he answered gently, holding her gaze.

“You always do,” she smiled slightly, seeing him respond in kind.

Using their titles gave the exchange a veneer of distance, but below the surface was the last conversation they would have as husband and wife, and both knew it.

Cullen’s decision to leave her, and the Inquisition, no longer mattered. What mattered was that he still loved her. Because he did, he would kill her to save her from becoming the thing she dreaded. And because she loved him, she wouldn’t let him. Cullen had a chance to discover who he could be without having another burden thrust upon him, especially from her. He’d already faced more in his life than anyone should have to, and deserved better.

Kai chose her next words deliberately, her tone now formal.

“But we have work to do first, Commander. Considering the circumstances, dispatching Hakkon swiftly is preferable, and, if you would allow me, I have a proposal to help us do that.”

“Which is?” he asked, curious, one eyebrow lifting as he spoke.

“We confront him right here,” she suggested. “Hakkon is weakened, but if he escapes he will head to the shore to prolong the fight. If we can trap him here by damaging one of the wings, we have a better chance of ending this quickly. I appreciate the cold isn’t conducive, but...it’s a question of time. I’d rather see this settled before...”

Kai left the outcome hanging in the air, seeing Cullen nod his understanding.

“It makes sense in the circumstances,” he agreed.

“Thank you,” Kai acknowledged gratefully. “Now, we should see to Ameridan. He has held steady, but the bindings won’t hold much longer.”

Cullen gestured to the platform Ameridan knelt on. “Go ahead, we’ll be right there.”

Kai turned towards the outcrop of rock hearing Cullen gather their companions, well aware that in amongst his instructions for the battle, what else he would say to them.

She heard Cole. ‘You lied to him. The certainty isn’t certain yet.’
‘I know,’ Kai replied. ‘But it’s likely, and if it helps them, we all have a better chance.’

Kai sensed a mental sigh. ‘You take too many chances.’

‘You wouldn’t be the first person to tell me that, Cole,’ she conceded.

A noise caught her attention. Ameridan was lifting rocks to create steps up to the platform he was on. Kai walked over and climbed up to the top, finally coming face to face with her predecessor. Quietly kneeling, as he looked up at her she couldn’t help but notice for all their differences in race, gender and build, they shared an identical eye colour, the same shade of green. It was such a bizarre coincidence.

She could feel the effort within him, striving to restrain the dragon.

Kai smiled and gave a slight bow. “Inquisitor.”

It felt a little odd to address someone else as Inquisitor. Yet there was consolation in not being alone; another person who understood the benefits and burdens of the role.

“Inquisitor,” Ameridan acknowledged. “It appears you are not alone.”

She understood he was referring to Hope. She shrugged. “It must be something about Inquisitors,” she offered lightly.

“Perhaps,” he remarked with a slight chuckle. “Yet I did not carry her or have the magic you bear. But I pray both will enable you to finally destroy this god dragon.”

“That’s the hope,” Kai responded.

She knew her people were approaching, and saw Ameridan glance down, sensing his question before he asked it.

“Tell me though, how fare my companions?”

It was Hope’s turn to talk with him. When Kai relinquished control, her companions had to know it was by choice, so it was essential they hear her. She saw them reach the bottom of the steps.

Kai faced Ameridan again. “Inquisitor, she wishes to speak with you.”

A puzzled look crossed Ameridan’s face. “Very well,” he agreed.

Kai felt her consciousness drift back as Hope took over, her voice coming from Kai’s lips. Hearing it out loud was different to hearing it inside her. Like before, it reminded Kai of the delicate tinkling of the silver wind chime in their flower garden back in Ostwick, although the recollection it evoked was of childhood summers at the seashore, with the family she cherished most around her.

“Ameridan, I am sorry…it has taken longer than we anticipated to return with help,” Hope admitted sorrowfully.

He glanced down, understanding the news would be bad. “How long?”

A faint sigh arose. “Eight centuries.”

“Did they…” he hesitated, “…what became of them?”

“Haron and Orinna fought courageously, but were overpowered and never made it to the island…”
“Telana?” Ameridan asked. His voice trembled a little saying her name.

Hope shook her head. “She waited for them, but they never came, and with her injuries she could not make the journey back alone. Knowing her situation was grave, Telana attempted to reach you through dreams, to say farewell before…”

Her words trailed off, seeing his head lower.

He sighed sadly. “I see.”

Hope’s reply was comforting. “She was not alone, Ameridan. We would not leave her so. We stayed with her, protecting her to the end.”

“Thank you,” he acknowledged quietly, looking up. “I will soon join her then, at Andraste’s side.” A brief sad smile passed across his face. “She will probably scold me again for being late.”

His words were so poignantly personal, a stark reminder of how even in the midst of world shaping events, the little things were not forgotten.

Hope pulled back, and Kai emerged. “I give you my word, we will finish what you began,” she promised. “The world will know what you did, Inquisitor. It will not be forgotten again.”

“Take this then, memories of an old hunter. Perhaps they will be useful, and some may even be familiar.” He lifted his palm, releasing a bright orb of light.

Kai drew it to her with the Anchor, enveloping it carefully before absorbing it whole. These precious memories had to be protected, and passed on if she fell.

Ameridan took a deep breath, his eyes meeting her gaze. “My time is over, this last task I leave to you. May Andraste guide your hand, Inquisitor.”

Even though she no longer believed, his friends had given their lives, and so would he, to protect others. It was only right to offer something in return.

Kai bowed her head respectfully. “May the Maker’s light guide you, and the gods protect you, Inquisitor.”

Ameridan acknowledged her words, his hand flexing on his staff. Kai realised he was about to break the spell, and with it the leash. She braced herself. They would have only seconds to react. She had to seize hold of the dragon and restrain her, stop her from flying away with her passenger.

“Fight well, Inquisitor. Perhaps we will meet again one day…”

Ameridan’s last words faded with him, releasing the bindings. A blast of light and wind knocked them all back, and slammed the dragon onto the ground. It shook under the impact. She couldn’t stand in time, so Kai rolled over confronting the Hakkon dragon and casting a Mark of the Rift to immobilise it.

“Now!” she shouted, knowing Cullen had mapped out a strategy with their friends.

They were up on their feet, fire and arrows raining down mercilessly on the wing as she held firm, crushing any prospect of evasion. The dragon’s wing finally shredded and burnt from the barrage, she was grounded. Kai released her hold, enabling the fighters to move in for their attack. The strain left her breathing hard, and she pushed herself up onto her feet slowly.
“Let’s get loud,” Bull yelled with glee, dodging with the others as the dragon spewed out a freezing stream of frosty breath.

The wash caught them slightly, but they quickly shook off the effects.

“Like we planned!” Cullen ordered. “We need to take this damn thing down quickly!”

Kai watched as her friends headed into battle once more. Even though they were tired and injured, they didn’t falter knowing what was at stake.

Dorian targeted fire against the torso to both damage it, and decrease the worst of the cold emanating from the dragon’s body. Harding focused on the head, attempting to distract the dragon from unleashing freezing breath.

Bull ploughed his axe hard into one of the hind legs and Cullen joined him, his sword thrusting and hacking at the muscles. On the opposite rear leg were Cole and Amund, his heavy maul slamming onto the heel, shattering bones. Cole’s daggers danced as they slashed through the hardened skin, drawing streams of blood.

“You fight well, a worthy battle. But you will not find this vessel so easily destroyed,” Hakkon challenged.

Even weakened and wounded, Hakkon would not go down readily. He fought back, swiping and snapping at them, but only managing short blasts of his freezing breath as Harding continued to target the head. Watching her companions, feeling them fight so bravely, Kai could no longer hold back. Against Cullen’s instructions, she joined the fray, adding her arrows to Harding’s.

“Finally you fight. I thought your mortal form rendered you a coward,” Hakkon boomed, mocking her.

His defiance was a sham though; Kai sensed his power and that of the dragon failing under their onslaught. Finally the damaged body gave way and the dragon crashed to the ground.

‘We must strike now,’ Hope urged.

“This ends here, Hakkon!” Kai shouted.

Shouts followed her as she leapt onto the dragon’s tail, dashing up the spine to the head, drawing her daggers. She found the weakest spot and fell to her knees, sinking the weapons deep into the head. The verdant green of spirit magic and the brilliant silver of spirit essence flowed from her through the blades, binding Hakkon and the dragon together. When the dragon died Hakkon would likewise perish.
She didn’t stop, pouring out her power until the dragon’s last breath slipped from its body, and Hakkon’s remaining energy was cast out. The ghostly pale blue haze scattered into tiny fragments like grains of sand on the wind. He was finally dead, his energy returned to the void. Only then did she tug out her daggers and sheath them, still coated in the dragon’s blood.

With Hakkon destroyed, she was now the enemy.

Her energy was depleted, but she was not whole...yet. While remnants of the two she once was hung on inside her, a sliver of hope remained for redemption. The items in her pack provided the means to try, and the means to stop her if she failed. The desperate and dangerous last resort was now her only chance.

*I don’t know if I can make this right, but I have to try.*

Whatever happened, Gurd Harofsen was dead, the Jaws of Hakkon were broken and Hakkon himself would rise again someday, this time as he should be. And all those people were now safe. Should she fail, at least she’d fulfilled her purpose and the mission; the sacrifice of this life would not be in vain.

She rose to her feet, shining silver and green as she stood tall on the dragon’s head, the gleaming moonlight pouring in, further accentuating the glow. Looking down at her companions, she sensed them preparing to kill her, adrenaline coursing through their bodies as they sought to move on her before she could prevent them. Cullen, Bull and Cole, their resolve was firm, whereas Dorian, Harding and Amund were hesitant.

But it was already too late to stop her.

She raised her left hand in a calming gesture and spoke to them. The voice that fell from her lips was reminiscent of the two she once was, and at the same time a harbinger of what would be.

“Wait,” she instructed comfortingly, bathing the minds of her companions with tranquil acceptance. “You don’t have to do this.”

They stopped in their tracks, thoughts of harming her vanishing as they stared upwards. All were under her charm, ready to be persuaded...or controlled if she wished to do so.

*So easily,* she mused.

Even though she was not complete, even with this lesser level of power she could bring hope, replacing war and struggle with peace and contentment. But in her determination to do what was right, the temptation to misuse it would be ever present. If minds were swayed and hearts slaved to her way of thinking, who would be left to tell her when she was wrong? Who would save people from her?

The answer was clear, she would. The time had come to leave, to take the path she prepared. But where her end lay she could not see.

“I will not endanger the world I have fought to protect,” she promised her companions reassuringly. She paused, looking at each of them in turn, her gaze lingering the longest on Cullen. “One way or another, this ends today.”

One last task remained before she left. She drew out the orb of Ameridan’s memories from inside her, and guided it to Cole. He would be its guardian now. He would ensure the past was not forgotten again.

Her final duty done, she carefully opened a small rift, shaping the energy so it floated gently in the
air beside her. It led in one direction only.

The words which came to her as she faced the unknown once belonged to Kal. This part of the Chant held great meaning, more apt now than all those years ago.

‘The light shall lead her safely through the paths of this world and into the next.’

Again, she thought with a slight sigh as she stepped through, into the Fade.

The rift closed behind her with an audible snap.

Chapter End Notes

The Chant of Light belongs to Bioware.
Chapter Summary

Following the Inquisitor's departure, Cullen and his companions attempt to work out what to do. Even though she is gone, the effects of her actions and presence linger on.

Chapter Notes

**Possible trigger warning for towards the end of the chapter**

The Altar

The sound of the rift snapping shut wrenched Cullen from his trance. His mind was hazy, befuddled, as if waking from a dream. Seeing his companions staring blankly around, they seemed to be as confused as he was. All of them were struggling to orientate themselves with where they were, endeavouring to process what happened to them.

Dragging his thoughts into some semblance of order, Cullen recognised they were in the altar. The numbing cold had disappeared with the death of Hakkon, and the dragon lay lifeless on the ground along with the dead Hakkonites. The Inquisitor was gone, her fate uncertain.

Fatigue and twinges of pain from the injuries he picked up now returned. Cullen tugged out and drank another healing remedy to allay the discomfort. He would require aid for his injuries, but the draft would be sufficient to get him through for the time being. His companions evidently had the same reaction, rummaging in their backpacks for potions, and swigging them down.

The ground around them was littered with empty potion bottles, the Inquisitor’s bow sitting nearby, still lying where she dropped it.

“Did she just...?” Dorian wavered, scratching his chin distractedly.

Bull whistled out a breath. “Well, now we know what the bees felt like.”

Weary and resigned murmurs greeted his comment.

No longer held by the captivating thrall of...whatever she was, Cullen’s mind was his own once again. Whatever she was, she was unquestionably powerful, and the speed and ease with which she subdued them, disturbing. With the wave of her hand and a few words they fell effortlessly under her enchantment, breaking off their intended attack. Unlike previously when the spirit held them in its sway, this time Cullen felt no doubt, only faith and trust in her. How could he destroy
the guardian who would protect him like a parent shielding their child from harm?

For some strange reason he trusted the promise she made not to be a threat. Whether it was her influence persisting he couldn’t say, and maybe he shouldn’t believe her, but he did, because the Inquisitor would do precisely that. The voice he heard placating them wasn’t her voice. Yet Cullen was convinced he could hear her.

“She meant it,” Cole advised, as if confirming Cullen’s thoughts. “She won’t come back if she’s not safe.” He stretched his arm out, drawing the orb of light hanging in the air to him.

“Cole, wait,” Cullen cautioned, raising his hand to stop him. “You don’t know if...”

Cole ignored Cullen’s warning, absorbing the light. “It’s only Ameridan’s memories. She wouldn’t want them lost...in case she...” His words petered out.

“...didn’t come back,” Bull finished for him. He shook his head with a knowing ‘hah’. “She had this all planned out. One last surprise.”

Cole nodded. “Yes, and she hid it, even from me. Already stronger, so shiny, before they became one...”

Cole had lost his connection to her, alerting them when she headed for the dragon, but they could do nothing until she destroyed Hakkon. Even though she was dangerous, they assumed there was a chance they could take her on. Only now did they appreciate it was already too late.

“Cole, did you see anything of her intentions before she...left?” Cullen couldn’t think of a more appropriate word to describe her departure, dramatic as it was. Not dissimilar to her entrance, he thought.

Cole shook his head. “No...but...words from before...words from the past...her past...”

“Her? As in...?” Dorian questioned.

“Kai,” Cole explained, concentrating as he tried to repeat what he heard. “The light shall lead...”

Anyone who knew Transfigurations would know the words. Cullen completed the verse, hearing Dorian and Harding join in.

“...her safely through the paths of this world and into the next.” Hushed exclamations of ‘Maker’ from the three of them followed the recitation, as Cole nodded.

“What is it? What does it mean?” Bull questioned, brows furrowed as he glanced between them.

Harding answered him. “It’s from the Chant of Light...” her tone softened and expression saddened, “...normally delivered at funerals.”

Bull’s voice grew quieter “Oh.”

Everyone fell silent. Although they were prepared to kill her, this turn of events changed everything. They had no inkling of whether she would or could come back, or indeed the consequences of her action. Not since the Tevinter Magisters had deliberately broken into the Fade had anyone else done so until Haven and Adamant. Then, she was human. Now, she was joined with a powerful spirit and in the Fade.

And what meaning did that passage hold for her? Her distraction back at the Shrine revealed it was important somehow.
“Come, we can do no more here,” Skywatcher abruptly announced, standing up his maul. “We must return to the Hold, and ask the Augur to speak with the gods. They may already know of her presence. A god-touched human physically in the land of dreams could be a bright light indeed...”

“Oh... Kaffas,” Dorian groaned. “Are we imagining a nice shiny target for any passing spirit or demon that fancies its chances?”

Skywatcher nodded in response. “It is possible. Yet I cannot be certain. I have never heard of such a thing as her before.”

“Not easily.”

Cole’s murmur drew their attention. Curious and perplexed looks flashed between them as Cole stood there, his alarmed expression revealing he let something significant slip.

Bull walked up to Cole. “Kid, what do you know?”

Cole stared down; his unwillingness to reveal what he knew plain to see. Cullen joined Bull, and the others soon clustered around an increasingly nervous Cole. Conscious not to excite him further, Cullen spoke calmly.

“Cole, if you know something...”

Cole’s voice was plaintive, his faltering words matching the worry in his eyes as they darted around. “I...she...it slipped out.”

“What did?” Cullen questioned, pressing him a little more.

Cole’s hands began to twitch as his anxiety grew. His head dropped again. “No...I didn’t mean...I can’t...”

Whatever Cole knew, he had blurted it out unintentionally. Cullen still wished to find out what it was, but recognised Cole was becoming distressed. If they continued to push him it would only make him fearful, and whatever he said would make little sense. Cullen looked to the others and shook his head, hearing the sighs. Harding gestured she would go to him. As Cullen moved back, Harding stepped forward to console Cole.

“It’s alright, Cole,” she soothed, taking his hand.

Cole whispered, almost to himself. “Just like her, wanting to help.”

“We just want to know, will it help her?” she asked gently.

Cullen recognised Harding meant the Inquisitor, and not the powerful being that she became. Whatever she was though, the desire to protect people from her was equally strong, enough to make her risk entering the Fade.

Cole’s anxiety abated, and he lifted his head with a small smile. “Yes...” He watched Harding as he voiced her thoughts. “She always comes back...you didn’t want to kill her.”

“No I didn’t,” she admitted, casting a glance at Cullen. “But I would have...to save her. She stepped in between me and a Hurlock on the way down to the Deep Roads...”

‘Hey ugly! Pick on someone your own size!’ ” Cole voiced, evidently repeating the Inquisitor’s words.
An outburst of involuntary snorts and sniggers answered him. It was typical of her to say something like that.

Harding nodded, smiling. “Yep, that’s what she said. After it was all over, I told her she shouldn’t have taken the risk. She waved her hand, ‘Pah, any old Inquisitor can get plucked at random...’ then she smiled, looked me in the eye and added, ‘...but scouts like you are priceless’.”

Harding faced the group, her voice clear and steady. “You ask anyone though; she makes them all feel they matter. She doesn’t turn anyone away, and she protects them.”

*It always comes down to her duty, and the need to do whatever it takes to defend people.*

Cullen always believed there was a limit to her ‘whatever it took’ ethos. The events here proved there was no limit, not as long as she saw herself as a guardian. She would risk her life, even her soul. Once she determined on a goal, no one could deflect her from it, not even him, and some circumstances, especially not him. Inasmuch as he loved his wife, he couldn’t condone let alone accept how far she was willing to go. His decision to leave would have hurt them both, but he couldn’t remain after everything that took place.

Yet, if she was lost, would there continue to be an Inquisition?

Much of the cohesion was down to her character, and devotion to her prevented the Inquisition from splintering into diverging factions. Some believed in her because they thought she was the Herald of Andraste, others because she granted them a second chance, an opportunity for redemption, and some because they simply saw her as a fair leader, willing to do what was right rather than what was best for herself. Any successor would find it hard to fill her boots if one was appointed at all, and the Inquisition not disbanded instead. After all, their original purpose had been achieved. Their principal work these days was acting as arbiters or peacekeepers.

Cullen heard Harding’s lament. “For what it’s worth, I want Kai to come back. I don’t want to be the one sending the report that she’s....”

Skywatcher knelt down beside her. “You may not need to. The Herald may return.”

“I hope so,” she acknowledged with a weak smile.

He patted her shoulder, and then stood. “Come, let us leave. This place holds too much darkness. Makes my skin crawl.”

Skywatcher headed for the path, making his way out. Cullen saw Cole retrieve Kai’s bow and hand it to Harding, the two of them wandering after him.

*Skywatcher wasn’t wrong there, Cullen thought. This place is dark, poisoned to its core.*

He was about to follow them when a hand on his shoulder held him back. Dorian and Bull came up beside him, waiting until the others moved out of earshot.

“Dorian?” Bull prompted.

“Yes, I had a thought. Didn’t want to say in front of the others, well not yet anyway, and this is purely conjecture. Maker knows there’s nothing like it I’m aware of. What if...” Dorian paused, stroking his chin, “…what if she’s entered the Fade in an attempt to separate the two of them? And, for argument’s sake, let’s say she succeeds. We know Kai would try to return, and we know she’ll be frail without the spirit.”

Even though the others were now out of view, Dorian lowered his voice. “What if Cole is wrong?
What if she succumbs through weakness, either physical or mental, and comes back with a
different passenger? One that’s less predisposed to sacrifice itself and more inclined to use the
power it can wield for its own ends.”

Bull offered a terse grunt. “You mean a demon.”

“Well, yes,” Dorian confirmed.

Cullen frowned, his hand absentmindedly holding the hilt of his sword. “Are you suggesting we
kill her if she comes back?”

“We were prepared to do precisely that, Cullen. And if I recall, it was your idea,” Dorian
responded, eyebrow raised. “But no, it’s not what I’m suggesting. Although, if it all goes south, it
may absolutely be that.”

“What then?” Bull questioned.

Dorian took a breath. “The issue we had was with Kai and Hope, with their power combined,
correct?”

Cullen thought he could detect where Dorian’s line of reasoning was heading. “You’re thinking
the influence she possessed wouldn’t be the same with something else, like a demon.”

Dorian waved his finger in an affirmative gesture. “Precisely.”

“That’s a big if,” Bull pointed out, seemingly unconvinced.

“Not really,” Dorian disagreed, smiling. “My hunch is, that there was something unique about
their particular combination, and the ease with which the spirit slipped into her struck me
as...unusual...”

The thought appeared to distract him, but then he shrugged as if to dispel it.

“Where were we? Ah yes, demons. Demons are different. They’re powerful and deceptive, but
they’re arrogant too. Always anxious to show off their superiority. Well, either that or they
attack.”

Bull folded his arms. “So, what do we do?”

Dorian stared at the two of them. “We threaten her. Demons always respond to threats. If she is
carrying something, we force it to reveal itself. If nothing happens, all well and good. If we get a
response, we kill her, no different from what we already agreed on.”

“I don’t think bad language will cut it somehow,” Bull mocked.

Dorian rolled his eyes, tutting. “Magical attacks, tempered, sufficient to cause pain but not injure.”
He glanced at Cullen. “And maybe a little of those southern Templar tricks, if they work with
demons. I wouldn’t know as Imperial Templars don’t have them.”

Cullen rubbed his neck. “Honestly, I don’t know how effective my abilities would be without
lyrium.” He shrugged with a sigh. “I can try.”

Dorian inclined his head. “Well, dear boy, as long as you don’t cancel our magic, do what you
can.”

“Our magic?” Cullen asked, curious as to who else Dorian planned involving.
“Yes, I was thinking of Sigrid. She carries her own passenger already. Might pump up her power if the demon gets feisty.” Dorian smiled. “And of course, you two strapping chaps will be there to defend me, should it assume I’m a more delicious morsel than our dear Kai.”

Bull turned to Cullen. “So, what do you reckon?”

Cullen though for a moment. He’d done something similar back in Kirkwall with one of the Templars he suspected, simply wanting the man to talk, and hadn’t expected a demon to pop up. He had to admit he owed Hawke for his help with that one. On his own the outcome would have been quite different. But the principle was the same, even if this situation was somewhat unique.

“It could work, with enough people,” Cullen agreed. “If she carries a demon, we’ll have to prevent it from using the Anchor on us.”

“Quite right, Cullen,” Dorian concurred. “So, if she’s dangerous, we carry out what we planned before, and if she’s harmless, at least Sigrid will be on hand to tend to her.”

There was one thing Dorian was assuming, and apparently so was he by considering this scenario. That she would be able to return on her own.

They had no idea how weak she would be without the spirit. Would she even have enough physical strength to return? Cullen wasn’t certain, and it had begun to trouble him greatly. He couldn’t be sure how much she learned of his intention to leave her, and his decision wouldn’t change should she return. Here, in the real world, she would have friends to support her. What he feared most of all was that she would be stuck in the Fade, hurt and lost. And that she would die there, alone.

However much it bothered him, they had to consider it as a possibility.

“Dorian, she may not be able to make it back on her own,” Cullen warned, looking concerned. “Her injuries were severe.”

Dorian laughed. “Cullen, this is your wife and our friend we’re talking about. If she was safe, she’d crawl her way through, just to get back to you. We all know her promise...”

Cullen looked down guiltily, hearing Dorian’s words trail off. He knew what Dorian referred to. The routine was as locked in as the good luck one had been before.

*Standing together by her horse as Cullen saw her off, Kai would turn to her companions.*

“*Now remember, I promised my husband I’d always come back, so I have to. He didn’t mention anything about injuries though,*” she would wink.

*Cullen would roll his eyes, then kiss her goodbye.*

This time there was no promise, and this time, no certainty of her return.

“Vishante Kaffas!” Dorian shot out angrily. “You’re actually leaving her? I thought...”

Cullen’s eyes widened, startled by Dorian’s passionate outburst.

Dorian stepped closer to Cullen, narrowing his eyes. “Does she know this?”

“Dorian,” Bull cautioned gently, moving closer, seeking to calm him. “This is their business, not ours.”
Dorian waved Bull away. “Oh don’t give me that crap. You and I both know, when they have a
d fight she becomes withdrawn and he gets grumpy. We then have to deal with the backwash until
they make it up. Imagine the fallout from this!”

Bull cleared his throat, his expression set. “Well, you’ll be in Tevinter, so I don’t see why you’re
carping on.”

Dorian stared at Bull, his breathing slowing as the anger eased. “You’re, right, Amatus, and I
apologise.” He gave a heavy sigh, turning back to Cullen. “Cullen, I’m sorry. Both of you are
dear to me and I simply don’t wish to see my friends lose what good they have even with their
problems.”

Bull rested his arm consolingly around Dorian’s shoulders, and Dorian leaned onto him. “Kadan,
sometimes, what someone wants and what they need aren’t always the same thing,” he comforted.

Bull gestured to Cullen to move on ahead. Cullen hastily took the opportunity to catch up with the
others.

He had no notion their personal life impacted their friends so, and the fact neither had recognised it
was disquieting. Dorian was right about one thing; Cullen would be leaving them to look after her
if she came back. But if he stayed, the resentment that would build between them would only sour
whatever good there was, making the situation worse for everyone.

If she came back...

The Fortress Gates

The six of them arrived at the fortress gates to see members of Stone-Bear Hold piling up the
corpse of the Hakkonites. Their fight looked over too. Cullen searched around for Sun-Hair,
intending to find out the extent of their casualties. This battle was as much Stone-Bear’s as the
Inquisition’s, but he still felt a sense of responsibility if they’d taken losses.

Cullen glimpsed her, crouched with Parve and Hask in front of someone, but it was only when
they approached he spotted the bloodied and battered Inquisition uniform. It was a young man,
elven, barely alive, his skin with a mottled, ashen hue. All of the Inquisition soldiers were back at
the stockade. The only one who wasn’t was...


“Alright,” Cullen agreed.

Sun-Hair and the others moved away allowing Cole to kneel beside him. He spoke soothingly to
Grandin.

Cullen recalled the quarrel he had with Kai about Grandin; his concern the man would become
dangerous and kill innocent people; her insistence he would keep his oath. Had she been right
about him?

“Commander,” Sun-Hair greeted him. “He said he was one of yours, said he promised the
Inquisitor he would kill only Hakkonites. Lady, I’ve never seen someone god-touched with so
much fire inside them.”

“He helped?”Cullen asked.
Sun-Hair nodded. “Took out their mages, saved Parve and Hask and others from them. If not for his aid, we would have lost folk.”

Parve pointed over his shoulder to the gates. “We were out front fighting, next thing I saw he was there. Asked who we fought with, Hask said the Inquisitor and he piled in…”

“Cullen!” Cole called, beckoning him.

Even though he felt some unwillingness, Cullen walked over to them. Crouching next to Cole, he saw him mouth, “he can’t see.”

“Commander?” croaked a layered voice.

“Oh... Grandin,” Cullen forced out, attempting to sound steady.

Grandin tried clumsily to raise his hand in a salute as he looked up, his eyes a milky colour. Cullen’s gaze widened in surprise. *Maker, he was already dead. Only the spirit was keeping whatever remnant there was alive.*

“Ser... the task?” Grandin requested, his voice failing.

Much as Cullen disliked abominations, the sheer poignancy of the man’s plight touched him. Grandin evidently needed confirmation he’d fulfilled his promise before he could let go. Cole drew his attention and mouthed a response. Cullen acknowledged he understood, and faced the frail corpse of what was once one of his men.

He repeated Cole’s words, and added his own. “Yes, Grandin, the task is complete, and thank you for saving our allies.”

Grandin managed a thin smile. “Thank...you...Ser...” With his final word, the head lolled back and a hazy wisp of smoke escaped the mortal remains.

Cole closed Grandin’s eyes and brought his head forward. “That was kind, Cullen. It made both happy to know they served and helped.”

Sun-Hair spoke softly behind them. “Lady, guide them both.”

Cullen sensed someone crouch beside him, and saw Hask. “We know your people burn their dead, Commander. We don’t know the prayers you offer, but we can build him a pyre and see him off.”

“Thank you,” Cullen nodded appreciatively. “We would be grateful, and I can say a few words for him.”

“Right you are,” Hask acknowledged, beckoning Parve.

As the two of them lifted Grandin gently and took him away, Cullen couldn’t help notice the young man’s hair was barely a shade darker than his wife’s. Suddenly Cullen felt heavy, as if the effort of the last few days had finally caught up with him, and when he stood up, his shoulders seemed to stoop. He sought to straighten up, seeing Sun-Hair watching him curiously.

“Hakkon is dead?” She exhaled with a smile when Cullen nodded.

“And yet you...” She stopped, the smile vanishing as she scanned his team, then shifted her gaze back to him. “The Inquisitor?”
The question was tentative, but her face showed Sun-Hair assumed the Inquisitor was dead. Dead would have been easier to explain, Sun-Hair was conscious of the inherent threat the Inquisitor posed. There was only one word he could answer with.

“Missing,” Cullen replied, watching her eyes grow larger.

“Missing?” she repeated, incredulous.

Fortunately for Cullen Skywatcher stepped in, saving him from having to account for the circumstances.

“Thane, if you would permit me,” he suggested calmly, directing her away. “Perhaps we could talk back at the Hold. We need to speak with the Augur.”

Sharp as always, she followed his lead. “Yes, we will see the boy off, then gather our people and leave.” Darting one last look at Cullen, she wandered away with Skywatcher.

"Missing, Cullen repeated to himself. To not know someone’s fate, or to feel someone’s absence. Funny how the same word could describe both.

++++++

Cullen watched the members of Stone-Bear finishing the makeshift pyre for Grandin, laying his body on top. He heard Dorian beside him.

“Would you like me to...?” He pointed to the funeral pyre.

Cullen nodded. “Please.”

Dorian set the pyre alight, and Cullen began to recite the full verse from Transfigurations 10. His voice rang clear, until he reached the part of the verse that Kai had spoken.

“The Light shall lead h...her....” Cullen’s voice stumbled when he said her. *No-one could see Kai off like this if she died beyond the Veil.*

Dorian immediately picked up the verse. “...safely... “

Cullen quickly cleared his throat, steadying his voice and continued with him, “...through the paths of this world and into the next...”

The two of them went on to complete the passage from the Chant together.

It was only when he turned back Cullen noticed not only were his companions watching, the members of Stone-Bear had stopped to watch as well, most probably to show respect to Grandin for saving some of their people. Fighting together against a common enemy could sometimes be a more powerful bond than the canniest negotiation. The Inquisition army was proof of that.

Realising the funeral was over; a hubbub arose as Stone-Bear started to make their way back to the Hold.

Cullen turned to Dorian. “Thank you for...” he began, seeing Dorian wave his hand.

“What are friends for?” Dorian smiled. “Besides,” he whispered, nudging Cullen, “can’t have you Southerners thinking we Northerners are a bunch of heathens and don’t know the Chant. I’ve heard the rumours.”

Cullen shook his head with a small smile. “Fair enough.”
When the other Inquisition members walked over, Cullen motioned to the departing Stone-Bear group. “Come on, let’s go.”

Following on, Cullen reflected on their temporary alliance with Stone-Bear. If it became a fixed one, and if they could connect with other Holds through Stone-Bear, the Inquisition would have some stalwart allies indeed.

*Kai would be proud of that achievement*, he thought.

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**Stone-Bear Hold**

It was almost dawn when Cullen returned to the cabin, flopping into the chair, drained. The tiredness he felt was akin to what he experienced when he stopped taking lyrium. Organising, planning, the frantic activity and fighting of the last days had occupied and driven him on. Until now. This lull allowed exhaustion to set in and the soporific effect of healing magic likely added to it.

The ideas Dorian had laid out to him and Bull at the Fortress now formed their new strategy. Cullen was somewhat surprised how swiftly everyone took it on board, until he realised it provided the possibility Kai could return. Ready as they were to kill her, and still had to be should Dorian’s worst scenario pan out, Cullen could see what his team and even Sun-Hair, Sigrid and the Augur really wanted, was for her to come back safe. Just that thin thread of hope was enough to spark optimism.

Only he and Bull were more circumspect, understanding her not being able to return was equally likely. Both of them could see how Dorian, Harding and Cole in particular were rallied by the plan. They decided to keep their doubts to themselves, and be ready to pick up the pieces if she couldn’t return.

He told Cullen, ‘Remember what I said about torture? Dorian’s plan is the softer option. If she carries a demon, easy, she’s just another target, and if she’s fine, everyone’s happy. The hard option is if she doesn’t come back.’

At some point they would have to return to the Inquisition stockade, but for now they could afford a little time to wait. The Augur would speak with Hold’s spirits and find out what, if anything, they knew. All of them headed off to rest, with Sun-Hair’s promise to wake them if they heard anything. He certainly hadn’t imagined they’d be relying on spirits as agents when they first arrived. How quickly things had changed in a few days.

Cullen glanced at the pelt covered bed. It would provide a more suitable place to sleep than the chair he was slumped in, yet the thought of lying on the very bed they’d spent their last night together held no appeal. As it was, her scent lingered in the small hut. Sandalwood. It was warm and rich, and always reminded him of her laughter.

He’d come to terms with having to kill the woman he loved to save her, but the image of her lost and alone in the Fade weighed heavily on him. More so now after the funeral service for Grandin. Cullen understood it was her choice, her decision, but he likewise recognised it was her desire to save them from having to kill her. *Save me from killing her.*

Cullen sighed, rubbing his eyes.

*You have to stop this,* he chided himself. *She’d tell you this was brooding.*
Exhausted as he was, before he could rest there was one thing remaining. Cullen hauled himself out of the chair, knelt on one knee, bowed his head and clasped his hands together. It didn’t matter Kai wouldn’t hear him; he just needed to talk to his wife, and pray for her.

“Forgive me, Kai. This time I can’t be there to pick you up off your arse. I know you don’t believe in the Maker, but I do, and I will pray to him on your behalf. Whether his light brings you back as you should be, or guides you to Andraste’s side, all I ask is that he keeps you safe.”

Cullen took a deep breath and shut his eyes. The verse was more than familiar, and more than relevant in the circumstances. But this time he felt the emotion flowing through him as he spoke the words.

“Though all before me is shadow, 
Yet shall the Maker be my guide.
I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond.
For there is no darkness in the Maker’s light
And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost.”

He didn’t know why this next passage was meaningful for Kai, but Cullen repeated it nevertheless. This time his voice didn’t falter.

“The light shall lead her safely though the paths of this world and into the next.”

His task complete, Cullen attempted to stand up, suddenly feeling dizzy. As his vision dimmed, he realised he was passing out, and braced himself by turning to take the fall on his shoulder. Before unconsciousness claimed him, he thought he heard a woman’s voice calling his name.

South Reach

Walking into the kitchen, Cullen saw his wife leaning against the door frame staring into the garden. She showed no indication of hearing him come in. Cullen grinned and quietly snuck up behind her, getting ready to slide his hands onto her hips when he heard...

“Call that stealthy, Cullen Rutherford,” she tutted, laughing. “I could do better on a rickety wooden floor.”

Cullen held her instead, placing his hands gently over the bump in her belly, feeling her hands rest on his. Although small at present, this bump would grow into their second child. He angled his head to kiss her cheek, picking up the scent of sandalwood that she always wore.

Cullen chuckled. “You’re an assassin, Katarina. I would except no less. I am but a clod hopping warrior.”

Kai cleared her throat, a smile in her voice when she spoke. “My husband never clod hops. He’s rather light on his feet, just not sufficiently so to sneak up on his wife. Perhaps...” she tapped his hand lightly, “...he requires more instruction?”

Cullen span her around to face him, smiling as a stray lock of white blonde hair fell onto her beaming face, hanging over her eye patch. She blew it away, only for it to descend once more. Tucking it behind her ear, he smirked and heard the sigh. Even after all these years together, he could still charm her by simply smirking.
“I think not,” he declared. “Standing with one foot off the ground for several minutes, to improve my balance and stance? Once was quite enough.”

He leant forward kissing the crook of her neck, and felt her expectant gasp. Cullen smiled and lightly nipped at her skin. Kai tilted her head back, another sigh falling from her lips.

“I can think of a much better way of practicing balance,” he implied, hearing her snicker.

“Would it, perhaps, involve both of my feet off the ground?” she inquired saucily.

“It might,” he murmured, his voice deeper and his bite a little firmer.

A moan of pleasure from his wife answered him. “Was that a yes?” he grinned, knowing full well it was.

“Mmhm,” she hummed.

Cullen trailed his tongue her across her jaw line to her mouth, catching her breathing quicken, and seeing her eye close in expectation. His lips rested above hers ready to kiss her, when a chuckling voice shouted...

“Izzy!”

Cullen drew back to look at Kai, seeing her eye open. Their weary expressions were matched by two weary sighs. Hearing the pounding paws of a dog bounding to the door, Cullen pulled Kai to one side. Izzy ran in, skittering on the stone tiles as she hurried through the kitchen to their daughter’s room.

Cullen sighed again. “Wait for it...”

For a moment all they could make out was Ella giggling and murmuring, and Izzy giving barks and whines as answers. Then...

“Da! Race!”

Kai gave him a wide silly grin. “Guess what we have today,” she lilted.

Cullen leant his forehead against Kai’s and groaned. “Sweet Maker, why did I ever imagine that was a sensible idea. Over and over again. Tell me, why are children so repetitive?”

Kai snickered. “Asks the former Commander of the Inquisition, who was notorious for drilling his troops over and over again. Yes, do tell me why.”

Cullen raised a mock stern eyebrow, sneakily moving one hand behind his wife and smartly smacked her buttock. Kai’s mouth gaped in an O.

“That’s playing dirty, Cullen,” she pretended to scold as the flush crept up her neck.

“Katarina,” he intoned, holding her stare.

“Yes, Cullen.”

“If I can exhaust her before she exhausts me, and get her back off to sleep...”

“Yes, Cullen.”

“I’ll show you what dirty truly is,” he promised with a wink.
Cullen heard the whimper as Kai’s gaze widened.

“Well, what are you waiting for then? Hop to it,” she insisted, pushing him away.

*So easily,* he thought, seeing her beguiling smile appear as he stepped back. That was incentive enough to get back to her.

Cullen walked to his daughter’s room, arriving in time to see her tumble onto her bottom, chuckling. Ella may have his amber eyes and wheat coloured hair, but all other respects she was her mother’s child, even down to landing on her backside like Kai did.

Cullen smiled, gathering her up into his arms, Ella giggling as she tugged at his beard. Their precious and deeply loved child, the one thing they never dreamed they could have. No one could explain how it happened, but it had. All the way through her pregnancy Kai fretted, fearing something would go wrong, yet Ella arrived healthy and strong. Only with this second child did she allow herself to be more relaxed.

“So pumpkin, where to today?”

“Garden,” she laughed.

“Right,” he nodded, hoping the repeated circuit around the trees wouldn’t make him dizzy again. Last time he fell down and Ella toppled off still chuckling. She thought it was part of the game.

Suddenly he heard Kai’s voice. “Cullen,” she called.

He bobbed his head out of the door, seeing Kai on all fours on the kitchen floor. It was what else he saw that truly scared him, what looked like darkened liquid pooling around her.

Was that...blood?

With Ella in his arms Cullen had to remain calm, so he took her back inside, chatting to her as normally as he could. For an eighteen-month-old child, she was extraordinarily sharp for her age, constantly picking up on the smallest signal.

“Can you wait a little longer, pumpkin?” he asked, holding his expression steady. “Ama needs Da’s help to finish something first.”

Ella nodded, still smiling.

“That’s my girl.” He kissed her and sat her on the carpet.

Cullen called Izzy over, fussing her as he whispered in her ear. “Keep her busy for me, Izzy.”

She cocked her head and gave two small barks to indicate she understood. Cullen blinked a ‘thank you’ as he stood and carefully stepped out, closing the door behind him. Out of Ella’s view, he dashed to the kitchen.

Maker, no, not the baby. She’ll blame herself for not being vigilant enough.

When he arrived, his wife was still on all fours, but it wasn’t blood on the floor. It was dark water, tinged emerald green by the bright glow of the Anchor from her hands immersed in it. The dress she had been wearing was gone, replaced by a hide coat with a fur trimmed hood, her lightly tanned face turned pale and grimy, framed by unkempt wisps of hair. The only thing linking the smiling woman he left behind in the kitchen, with the frowning woman he now encountered there, was her silver green eye patch.
“Kai?” Cullen asked apprehensively, unsure what was happening.

“You can see me?”

“Yes,” he replied, confused, rubbing the back of his neck. “Wha...”

“Thank the Maker!” she exclaimed, relief flooding her face. “I don’t have much time, and I need to hold back some energy to open a rift, so this has to be quick...”

Cullen couldn’t believe what he was hearing. His concern over the strangeness of the situation was pushed aside as his protective parental instinct kicked in forcefully.

“Maker’s breath! Kai, have you lost your mind?” he hissed angrily. “Our child is back there, and you want to open a rift? Not to mention...”

She spoke over him, her gaze widening. “Our...child?”

Cullen rolled his eyes and groaned. “Yes, our child. Ella. What is wrong with you?”

She mumbled something, but before he could say anything more she spoke again, this time loudly.

“Cullen, I don’t have time for this and I need you to listen...”

“Kai, what the Maker’s name is going...”

“Commander! I am the Inquisitor and I am giving you a direct order, so shut up and listen...”

Cullen’s mouth snapped shut. He remembered that particular tone and he never argued with her when she used it, because she only used it when the situation was desperate.

“This is your dream. I am in your dream, and I am in the Fade. Literally here. You’re not, well, your mind is. I need you to come and fetch me. Go to the island, and bring help with you. I’ll open the rift when you arrive. We have to be quick because...”

Something was obviously terribly wrong, but Cullen didn’t understand what she was talking about. “Kai...?”

She sighed seeing his worried expression. Her gaze and tone became imploring. “Please, husband. Help me off my arse one last time.”

She quickly glanced behind her. “Fuck! Out of time...”

Kai looked back apologetically at Cullen, and then screamed loudly. “WAKE UP!”

Cullen’s eyes snapped open, and he sat bolt upright on the floor of the cabin, staring ahead, momentarily confused.

*This wasn’t their home in South Reach,* he thought, glancing around. *This was,* Cullen struggled to remember, *this was...Stone-Bear Hold.*

His thoughts began to coalesce. *The house isn’t built, and we can’t have children. Their daughter, their home...they weren’t real. It was a dream. Kai...the only thing that was real was Kai.*

His mind came back to the present. *Kai. The island. Bring help.*
Cullen leapt to his feet, all the fatigue from before immediately gone as adrenaline coursed through him. Buckling his sword and shouldering his shield, he rushed off to round up his companions. He didn’t know what danger they would encounter when they reached the island and her, but only one thing mattered. Saving his wife. Whatever that entailed.

Chapter End Notes

The Chant of Light belongs to Bioware.
**Resolution**

Chapter Summary

Following the appearance of Kai in his dream, Cullen and his companions head for the island, hoping it's a rescue they face and not something darker.

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**Stone Bear Hold**

Cullen waited for the remainder of his team at the bridge leading out of the Hold. Cole and Sigrid were already with him. He’d rushed round hunting them down, hammering on doors to wake them. Sleepy, confused voices met his persistent knocking until he spoke two words ‘the Inquisitor’ accompanied by an instruction to meet him at the bridge. He didn’t need to search for Cole, Cole found him.

Not knowing where Sigrid would be, Cullen made for the Augur’s hut, finding her there with him. Of concern was the absence of communication from the spirits of the Hold, or more accurately, they had not returned since the Augur spoke with them. Recounting what he saw in his dream sounded far-fetched when said out loud, but neither the Augur nor Sigrid seemed to regard it as unusual. They merely cautioned it may be a ruse, something Cullen had considered.

Yet somehow he was convinced it was her. *Why would she be seeking help if she was possessed by a demon?* She could quite easily open a rift and escape without them being any the wiser.

A rummaging noise attracted his attention. Sigrid tugged out a staff blade from her pack and fastened it to the bottom of her staff, winding a leather strap around to hold it in place. Cullen couldn’t help thinking again how she appeared the antithesis of most abominations he’d encountered. To all intents and purposes she was like any other Avvar girl in the Hold.

Kai hadn’t resembled an abomination either. Unless she blazed, she looked exactly the same as she had before taking the spirit into her. And that was the difficulty in recognising them. Cullen knew spirits and demons could remain dormant until compelled to appear, or they chose to manifest.

Sigrid looked up, catching him staring, and shouldered her staff. She watched him with equal curiosity. “Fancy Pants called you a Templar.”

Cullen coughed to hold back the involuntary amused snort at hearing Dorian called Fancy Pants. “I was a Templar, not any longer.”

She fixed him with demanding glare. “They say Templars kill mages in the lowlands if they carry a god.”

“If they carry a *demon*,” he corrected. “But spirits can be equally dangerous.” He matched her stare and her accusatory tone. “So do you here, if a mage becomes dangerous.”

She jutted out her jaw. “*We* don’t kill children,” she countered, daring him to disagree.
Sigrid certainly had fire in her and wasn’t averse to provoking an argument. Cullen exhaled. This was the same reasoning the Augur put forward and no doubt the account they believed here. Logic told him this wasn’t an exchange where either would agree, but he couldn’t permit the misinformation to stand. Whatever corruption had begun to claim the Order even before it was turned red by Samson and Corypheus, their purpose to protect people from magic and to protect mages was a noble one.

“When apprentices are put forward for the Harrowing, they have devoted years studying, they are no longer children. Most are at least eighteen. Hardly a child. And...” he continued emphatically, “...they are only put forward when considered ready.”

“What about those not ready?” she challenged.

“Those who are considered unable to undertake the Harrowing, who cannot master their magic...they are made Tranquil. Their connection to the Fade is severed removing their magic.” Cullen saw her eyes grow wide. “It is for their protection as well as for the individuals around them,” he maintained. “Otherwise, they would be vulnerable to possession by demons.”

“Why do you not allow more time? Perhaps they would be ready with more time?”

“It is not simply a question of time. Only those deemed too weak or too dangerous are made Tranquil. Contrary to what you believe we prefer *not* to kill mages. Both their safety and that of those around them is paramount.”

“Hmph,” she sniffed. “If they had a god, they would not be weak. A god would teach them and protect them.”

Cullen recalled the Augur’s words about his previous apprentice, the one before Sigrid. “Would a god protect them from their own fear?” he inquired specifically.

Cullen saw her feisty expression slip into one of gloom. He assumed she guessed who he referred to.

“Not...always.” She pulled down her hood, and Cullen spotted a scar running along her jaw line. She appeared younger as the defiance faded. “But a god can bring calm and comfort when the magic comes, teaching with patience and kindness...” Her tone dropped as she peered down. “...and when you have no kin left, they take care of you, like a parent guides their child.”

Cole, silent until now, went to her, his tone soothing. “She would stay if you wanted, she loves you too.”

*Was that why she didn’t give up the spirit?* Cullen wondered. *Had she lost her family? Did loneliness prompt her unwillingness to surrender it, and consequently exile herself?*

“I know,” she murmured. “But I am no longer a child. The Augur was right, it is time. After we rescue the Herald, I will prepare a fresh offering for the gods.”

Cullen was puzzled. “I thought the Inquisitor returned your offering?”

“No,” Sigrid replied, shaking her head, reddening a little. “I did not take it from her. I was embarrassed that a stranger saw my foolishness. In any case, I would need to prepare a new one, offering one previously used would show disrespect.” She sighed as if reproving herself. “But I will require the lyrium. It is costly to trade for, and I should not have left it behind. The Augur will scold me if I ask for more.”

“Lyrium?” Cullen questioned, brows knitting.
“Yes,” Sigrid nodded. “Releasing a god takes more power than I have for the spell. We cannot do it without lyrium.”

Cullen’s thoughts flew through the significance of Sigrid’s comments. *Lyrium. Kai had lyrium with her. The Avvar used it for their spell to detach the spirit. But Kai was no mage. Even if she used the lyrium, how could she have managed it with no mana and no magical training?*

He naturally assumed she was free from the spirit when she appeared, and hadn’t considered how, automatically responding to her appeal.

She had been forceful though. He thought due to urgency, but lyrium consumption was likewise possible. Cullen recalled the sense of boldness it provided, and how empowered he felt, chiefly at the outset after he took his vows. The effects were less pronounced later on. Not dissimilar to alcohol, but with senses sharpened rather than blunted.

If she had taken lyrium, it was only one dose, and would be insufficient to create complications. What concerned him was her propensity to take risks. Lyrium would reinforce that, spurring her on considerably. He remembered how she glanced over her shoulder, as if searching for someone or something. *What was it she was hiding from? Or running from?* Cullen sorely hoped it wouldn’t be the less optimistic part of Dorian’s soft option they would meet on the island.

Voices approaching signalled his party was coming. When they arrived, Cullen described the situation to them. Stunned and inquiring faces from everyone bar Skywatcher answered him. Skywatcher simply looked pensive.

“Cullen, are you certain? I mean, couldn’t it be spirits responding to what was in your thoughts,” Dorian asked, rubbing his jaw. “Dreaming triggered by a desire for her to return, safe and sound.” He glanced around, motioning to the assembled group. “As we all would prefer.”

Cullen shook his head. “It wasn’t...,” he stopped himself from adding ‘that sort of dream’. “…her presence was out of place in the dream and her instructions explicit.” He breathed out. “Dorian, you know I am not one for being dramatic...”

Dorian pursed his lips with a ‘hmm’. “Quite,” he accepted.

Cullen’s response was resolute. “Believe me, this was my wife.”

Seconds passed as they peered at each other once more while Cullen waited. He understood this was not the occasion for orders, he was asking them to trust his instincts.

“Ach, what the hell are we waiting for,” Bull declared. “We all know what weird shit she gets herself into.”

The nods of recognition and affirmation showed Bull was not alone. Cullen smiled appreciatively. “Thank you.”

“I know the way,” Sigrid announced, marching off.

“Well, let’s go,” Bull added, striding after her.

The rest of them followed on.

**The Lady’s Rest**
As they alighted from the boats stepping onto the narrow jetty, Cullen could understand what Bull meant about the island. Spirits flitted freely around, meandering with no apparent purpose or regard for anything in their way.

Cullen sensed something metallic in the air, along with the acrid stink of burnt flesh, and mouldy decaying vegetation. The last time he smelled this combination was...he shut his eyes and groaned in recognition...Kinloch Hold. It was the stench of blood, burning bodies, and the odour of demons that encircled him when confined in the blood mages’ cage.

The stench pervaded the Tower, lingering for days after it was freed from Uldred’s insanity, even after the bodies were removed and the blood washed away. When he finally returned from Greenfell, even though the stench was long gone, sometimes he could still smell it as he walked through the Tower.

Cullen pushed the memory aside; he couldn’t allow the feeling of desperation to re-emerge with the smell. Not now. They had no idea whether they would face a rescue or...


“It’s this place,” Dorian explained, his appearance as disturbed as Bull’s. “The spirits here draw on our memories of sorrow like you’d draw water from a well.”

“That doesn’t help,” Bull retorted.

From Dorian’s explanation and the looks on his companions’ faces, Cullen knew he was not alone in evoking a memory sooner forgotten.

“Lost, confused, they don’t remember anymore, they don’t know how to go back.” Cole’s mournful voice reflected the atmosphere exuded by the spirits.

“So many. I’ve never seen do many,” Sigrid murmured.

“Something other than the gods resides here,” Amund added. “Death has walked this place.”

Harding sounded nervous. “Erm, Commander, do you have any idea where we’re supposed to be? I don’t know about everybody else, but I’d like to get this done and leave, if that’s alright.”

“I’m with Harding on this,” Bull grunted.

Cullen’s hand found the back of his neck. He had absolutely no notion; there was no reference where to go in his dream, only her direction about the island. Failing a location, he took for granted she would find them.

“I’m not certain. Perhaps we should proceed further in and keep a lookout. I presumed the Inquisitor plans to find us.” At least, I hope that’s the case, he thought, skirting the wreckage strewing the narrow pathway as he walked ahead.

Broken and rotting planks were spread around, and a small lean-to tucked slightly off the track. A pair of chests sat inside close to a bench covered with browned pieces of parchment, and a tattered bedroll sat nearby. Whoever left these behind did so some time ago. Cullen turned his gaze back ahead, seeing a ramshackle hut above on a hill with dilapidated wooden platforms leading up to it.

“That’s where we found the scroll and the spirit,” Bull stated behind him.

Cullen turned around, to discover him indicating to the hut “Up there?” he asked, catching the nod.
Bull’s finger traced an arc following the contour of the hillside. “We went the long way round; didn’t want to chance falling through the boards.”

“The Veil is weaker there,” Cole offered “Easier to break through.”

Cullen glanced at his companions. “Well, it sounds a good place to start. Shall we?” Murmurs of approval answered him.

The six of them wandered up the hill, sidestepping the spirits roaming there. They seemed to have no awareness of anything around them. A few days ago, when they arrived in the Frostback Basin, this was one of the last things he envisaged doing. On an island inhabited by spirits waiting for the Inquisitor to break out of the Fade, praying it was a rescue and they wouldn’t be required to kill her. But then, little of what happened since they arrived could be considered anywhere near normal.

_Bull was correct; she did indeed get herself into weird shit._

Cullen could appreciate her desire to protect people. He’d joined the Templars precisely with that very intention. He likewise understood that protecting people involved putting oneself in harm’s way. With Kai it extended further, it became a compulsion. She repeatedly endangered herself by pushing beyond the bounds of what rational people would do. Cullen knew now there would never be a limit, or an end, to what she’d undertake fulfilling her duty.

How she survived was the extraordinary feat. It was clear to see why she was regarded as legendary by those who didn’t know her. They merely heard the tales; they didn’t know the real woman behind them.

Approaching the hut, he grew conscious of a sound, a low hum at first, gradually growing louder into a crackling buzz. Everyone stopped dead, flashing looks at each other, quickly realising what it was. The noise of a rift, but there was no rift to be seen. Then, the air before them took on hazy shifting shimmer like a breeze playing on the waters of a lake.

“She’s coming!” Cole warned. “But some...”

His words were drowned out by the deafening crack as the air ripped apart in an emerald green tear. Cullen’s ears rang from the force, sounds around temporarily becoming reduced and distorted, and he wasn’t alone. All were affected by the shockwave.

“Get ready,” Cullen shouted, hearing his own voice echo in his head.

Dorian and Sigrid pulled out their staves, Skywatcher and Cole swiftly took up protective postures to defend them, and Cullen and Bull moved in to take the initial blows should it be needed. No sooner had they readied themselves, the Inquisitor toppled out of the rift, dropping onto all fours and attempted to crawl away.

“No!” Dorian yelled to Sigrid.

Dorian fired a Horror while Sigrid launched an ice attack to constrain the Inquisitor. The spells weren’t full force, the combination was intended to prevent movement and insult anything potentially residing inside.

“No!” the Inquisitor panicked. “You don’t...”

A Hakkonite female stepped out of the rift behind her, daggers drawn, face cold and menacing. Her skin appeared to bubble in pulses, the kaddis swirling as she stood glaring at them.
“What the fuck...?” Bull exclaimed.

A gust of wind swept over Cullen’s face, bringing with it the familiar stench of decaying vegetation. His reaction was instinctive and immediate, shouting a command.

“Demon. Freeze it now!” Was it both, or just the Hakkonite? He couldn’t tell.

Sigrid and Dorian threw out torrents of ice, striking the demon and rooting it in place. A deep rumbling growl answered their assault, its eyes burning in rage. As they watched, Cullen saw the frost on the Inquisitor melting. It was simply intended to hinder her, and Cullen needed to know if both were demons. If so, another strike was called for, and if not, they had to get her away from the demon.

“Cole, is it the Inquisitor? Quickly!” Cullen demanded, hoping the response was yes.

“She’s....yes... it’s her!” he shouted back.

“Cullen, move her!” Dorian yelled, “We can’t deal with it properly until she’s out of the way.”

Cullen dropped his sword and shield and lunged forward, seizing a now shivering Inquisitor, and hauled her bodily out of harm’s way. He knelt down propping her up against him, and wrapped his arms around her to try to warm her as her teeth chattered from the chill.

“You lied!” the demon growled as it manifested, shaking off the ice coating.

“I negotiated!” the Inquisitor threw back in a feeble attempt to yell, sitting forward before slumping back against him, clutching his arm.

With the Inquisitor out of the way, Cullen watched as the rest of them went in to take on the hunger demon. It endeavoured to defend itself from the onslaught, but with five against one, it stood little chance. Within a minute it was destroyed, lying hacked to pieces on the ground.

Bull called out to the Inquisitor. “Boss, maybe we can close the rift now? In case any more in there get ideas.”

Her voice was shaky. “I have one last thing to do, and then I’ll close it.”

Cullen’s reply was resolute. “Inquisitor, bearing in mind our previous experience; we’d like an explanation before you do anything.”

She turned to face the inner island. “See the spirits here...”

“She wants to help them return...” Cole told them. “Others waiting, welcoming...it’s alright.”

“It is a kind thing, they do not belong here,” Skywatcher added.

Cullen relented. “Very well.”

The Inquisitor faced him. “Commander, I many require some assistance getting to the rift, if you...”

“Of course.” Cullen helped her stand, noticing how she shifted to his left.

Holding her by the waist as she rested her right arm over his shoulder, they walked to the rift. She kept him behind her when she reached in with her left hand, the Anchor glowing.

“It’s safe now,” she announced reassuringly and then pulled back her hand.
A spirit emerged, and as soon as he caught sight of it Cullen instinctively knew who it was. The misty silver shape was thinner and dimmer than he recalled, but it was Hope. She stopped just outside the rift and called out ‘Come’. Her voice, though gentle, seemed to carry. This time he felt nothing and supposed her summons was intended for the spirits.

Cole’s voice contained a smile. “She’s calling them home. They remember now.”

The Inquisitor backed up, and he followed her lead, keeping hold of her. She stared into the island, the rest of their companions following her gaze. The spirits’ aimless wandering had broken off and all were heading in their direction. One by one the spirits entered the rift, returning to the Fade.

With the last one through, Hope approached the Inquisitor. “Be well, little ptarmigan.”

The Inquisitor smiled as she acknowledged Hope’s farewell. “I’ll try. Goodbye.”

Once Hope was gone, she reached out drawing on the rift. Cullen could sense her trembling, weakening as she worked to close it. He tightened his grip on her, recognising what would come after. Finally the rift shut with a bang, but not as intense as the boom accompanying its opening. When she faced him he saw her vision glazing, and her head tilt backward, then her body sagged.

“I don’t think...” was all she managed to say before fainting.

“...it’ll pass,” Cole finished for her. “She remembered.”

So did Cullen, only this time her face wasn’t battered like it was after Haven. It was grimy and scratched, framed by unkempt hair, just as he saw in his dream. Adjusting his hold he discovered something else. Closer to her now, he caught the faintest trace of an ozone metallic smell on her breath. He recognised it. Lyrium. He’d been right.

“Cullen, do you want me to...?” Bull offered with his arm outstretched.

“Thank you,” Cullen acknowledged, “but I can manage. We should get her back to the mainland. She’ll need a warm fire to stop her catching a chill.”

Sigrid came up to him. “I will come on your boat, Commander. I can aid her on the way.” She touched Kai’s coat. “And get her out of these damp things when we return.”

“She would be grateful,” Cullen acknowledged, and manoeuvred Kai so he could pick her up.

Taking her down the slope to the dock, another memory came to him. The last time he carried Kai like this was after Haven. Both had only just realised they were in love with one another, but neither were aware how the other felt. Any thought of a future together was as yet unconsidered.

‘Help me off my arse one last time,’ she’d pleaded in his dream. One last time, Cullen repeated to himself. Those words confirmed Kai already guessed he would leave her. This time both understood what the future held.

**The Fishing Camp**

Cullen came to, recognising he’d fallen asleep in the chair. He looked over seeing Kai in bed, lying on her side, arm tucked underneath the pillow. She was awake and watching him, her intent gaze softening when he caught her eye.
On the boat ride back she remained unconscious, her pallor pale as Sigrid tended to her. Now there was colour in her cheeks, and she seemed alert. Sigrid and one of the women from the fishing camp washed and dressed her in clean dry clothes before putting her to bed. They’d even brushed her hair, draped loose and long over her shoulders. He seldom saw it down these days except in bed. She nearly always wore it braided.

Cullen rubbed his eyes. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long. I didn’t want to wake you,” Kai replied with an almost smile.

“Well, this time at least,” tumbled out wearily before reason could check him.

She offered an apologetic sigh. “Sorry, I didn’t have much time, and you were...reluctant. Understandable really, randomly turning up in your dream.”

“How did you turn up in my...?” he began, quickly realising he’d not asked how she was. “Forgive me, I should have...how are you feeling?”

Out came the eye roll with a brief chuckle. “Like a mule kicked me in the back and scoured my skin raw as it did.”

Cullen watched as she pushed herself up gradually and tentatively with shorts intakes of breath, trying to sit herself up.

“Do you need a hand?” he volunteered.

She smiled. “Thank you, but it’s better if I do it.” Finally sitting up, she blew out a relieved breath. “There, done.”

Kai glanced down. Looking back up at him, she spoke hesitantly. “You asked about your dream...well, the Hold spirits found you and I...used the Anchor drawing on Fade energy to create a connection. I had to be quick in case the demon worked out what we were up to.”

“I see,” he exhaled.

Cullen ran his hand over his hair distractedly, catching her wary gaze track him. Her actions had dragged them through events no one could have predicted or believed possible when they arrived. Now, when she referred to the assistance of spirits, it scarcely seemed strange after everything else that took place. The softer option, he thought to himself.

He had to remind himself it had only been a few days. Their time here felt stretched, longer.

But contemplation could wait, right now Cullen needed information. When they returned to Skyhold, her other Advisors would expect a report. They needed to know everything that happened in the Basin, in order to make preparations to deal with the consequences if this ever leaked out. Also, with Cullen’s departure, Rylen would become Commander, and Cullen wasn’t entirely sure of his reaction. Rylen was a down to earth pragmatic man who admired the Inquisitor’s determination and practicality. But like himself, he was an ex-Templar, and this situation ran counter to their traditional instincts.

“The demon claimed you lied to it. Kai...did you make a deal with it?” Cullen questioned.

“I negotiated, Cullen,” Kai explained. “Fortunately it didn’t understand the concept of vague speak. I had to bargain with it to protect all of us, the Hold spirits, Hope, and myself. What I said was enough to have the demon believe there was better fare on the island, and I would call up a few extra treats. It learned from the girl I could open rifts. I had sent her through one after all.”
Cullen frowned. “That was the assassin?” He saw Kai nod.

She sighed. “What was left of her. Alone and stuck in the Fade, I imagine her fear drew it and she didn’t have the strength or will to fight it off. Not everyone can.”

Cullen watched her attentively, mindful of her talent to obfuscate when trying to conceal things from him. “Which begs the most salient question, how did the two of you separate? How you left us, what you were...we all felt it Kai, the sheer power to manipulate minds. How are you sitting here now?”

Kai didn’t respond straightaway, nor did she look aside. Intense blinking and a heavy swallow was the only prelude to her reply.

“She used everything she could, whatever it entailed.”

“She?” Cullen queried, cocking his head, unclear what she meant.

Kai nodded. “Yes, she. She was what we became, but not what she would become.”

Cullen’s eyes narrowed and he leaned forward in the chair. “Wait, what?”

Neither her gaze nor her voice wavered when she responded. “What you saw wasn’t the ultimate stage, and honestly, I don’t know what that would be.”

His incredulous expression prompted her to sigh. “Look, I don’t completely grasp it. All I know is...she formed from us and our motivations were sufficient to make her to bring it to end. Without us, she would not have existed, and without her, we would have ceased to exist.”

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck, striving to think of an answer, but all he had were questions buzzing in his brain. One at a time, he thought.

“What did everything entail?”

She took a long deep breath. “Lyrium, spirit infused dragon blood, and Fade energy, a large amount of Fade energy. Hope and I worked it out earlier, in case we couldn’t prevent the transformation.”

“You’re talking about blood magic...” Cullen scowled.

“No more than dragon blood is used to create demon slaying runes, Cullen,” she explained without flinching at his remark. “Only a few drops were required, like a marker. It helped focus the lyrium and the Fade energy to the spirit in her, providing enough to break up the bond. The point she reached, it needed a lot of power...”

“Maker’s breath, Kai!” he exclaimed. “The things you’re prepared to do...” Cullen shook his head wearily. “And what if this insane plan hadn’t worked? What then?”

Her expression became contrite. “Then she would have done what I promised you and Leliana I would never do again...” Kai paused letting the implication sink in.

Cullen’s eyes opened wide, realising what she confessed.

“Tears of the Dead,” she informed him. “Ironic title, don’t you think? I always keep a small vial in my bag in case we run into something really tough. Quite potent if ingested, and quick, if not painless. It would have killed me and released Hope, or killed us both. To be honest, neither of us
was certain.” Her matter of fact manner describing her death was stark.

Shock, dismay and an awareness of how thoroughly she arranged an exit merged inside him. Cullen opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

“She told you the truth when she said ‘one way or another, this ends today’. Hope and I planned for the possible outcome, remember? Everything she was came from the two of us.”

Cullen’s whirling thoughts latched onto one word as she spoke, ‘possible’. It wasn’t the impression she gave him in the Altar. “Wait, you told me this was inevitable...”

“I lied, Cullen,” she admitted.

“Why would you do such a thing?” he challenged. “If you hadn’t changed, we would have killed you unnecessarily!” What was she thinking?

Her answer was unequivocal, her gaze fixed firmly on him. “I told you what you needed to hear, so you could concentrate on the mission rather than on what might happen. Thinking it was certain took away the worry of making a mistake. Just as you lied to me to convince me I wasn’t dying. Like you, I wanted to provide comfort.”

“Kai, it’s hardly the same thing,” he exhaled. The image of her face gazing up at him as she lay mortally wounded bled in, tempering the frustration he felt.

“Well, the outcome was inevitable after all, and you couldn’t have killed me. So, does it actually matter now?” she asked, scratching her head. “We can’t alter the past, Cullen, only prepare for what’s to come.” She paused. “I’m quite conscious of all the consequences of my decision.”

Cullen saw as her steady gaze softened, replaced by a sad, knowing, accepting expression. Two words confirmed she was aware he was leaving her.

“I knew,” she said gently.

Not ‘I know’, but ‘I knew’. Cullen understood. He closed his eyes, gathering together the threads of what he wanted to say to her, the reason for leaving her. He wanted to explain his decision, he owed that to her.

“Kai, I...”

“It’s alright, Cullen,” she consoled, interrupting him. “My decision led to yours. And you’re right. If you stayed, it would only end in bitterness and resentment between us.”

His voice was low, the question rhetorical. “You saw?”

Kai nodded. “Everything. I saw and felt what was inside you, even before Hope and I joined.”

“With that degree of power, you... she could have changed my mind if...” her look was gently reproofing as she sighed. “But you wouldn’t,” he conceded.

“No, never,” she vowed, shaking her head.

Kai glanced down, her fingers finding a lock of hair and fidgeting with it. Cullen knew she could never keep her hands still when she was restless. He likewise recognised how she clasped them together when her guard was up. There was no mask, and no guard, her emotions were open for him to see.
She faced him again. “Trust me, none of this is easy for me. Nor for you I imagine. But I’d rather you walk away while we still love each other, than see you leave with resentment and hostility for me in your heart. That, I couldn’t endure.”

“You told me that the night we admitted our feelings for each other.” Cullen saw her nod.

“Yes, I meant it then, and I still mean it now.”

Kai gave him the opportunity to walk away that night, concerned he would wish to have a family, and scared her inability to have children could create friction between them later on. Cullen understood completely what he was choosing. A life with the woman he loved was more valuable to him than the prospect of children, and he had never regretted his decision.

The decision to leave her was significantly harder, even though he knew in his heart it was the right one. He was walking away from the woman he loved, the woman who provided a foundation for him to rediscover who he was. Even with the difficulties in their marriage he owed her for that second chance, letting him move on from the past. But he couldn’t, in all conscience remain, because in time he would regret it. Cullen had no wish become the angry man he once was again.

Kai’s heavy sigh drew his mind back.

“Even though I probably wouldn’t do this again, you know that as long as I’m the Inquisitor, my duty would come first. I’ll always seek to protect people, whatever the cost to me.”

“You know I cannot watch you continue to do that, Kai, knowing what you are prepared to risk.”

“I know,” she blinked. “Your path lies elsewhere now. You need to discover who you can be.”

Cullen’s brow furrowed in sadness as he looked at Kai’s accepting face. She was repeating his words to her the night he asked her to marry him, the night she came back after defeating Corypheus. Whatever she felt about his decision, she was letting him go. He’d anticipated a strained and difficult discussion, but in two words, she turned everything on its head.

She smiled sadly seeing his face and stretched out her hand to him. Cullen went to her, perching on the small wooden bed, facing her. She rested her hands on his cheeks, her thumbs brushing his skin.

“Promise me one thing,” she requested, scanning his eyes.

“Anything,” he accepted, placing his hand on hers.

“Build the house. Consider my half a parting gift to you.”

“If that’s what you wish, I will,” he agreed, squeezing her hand.

Her smile widened as she sighed. “Thank you.”

Cullen let go of her hand as she lifted hers away. A pang of loss struck him as the gentle touch of her thumbs faded. Her smile wasn’t radiant, but it was no longer sad, and he was glad of it. None of this was easy for either of them. Both had lived through enough hurt. If they could part without recrimination, it was more than welcome.

For the last days he sought to maintain a distance from his wife, chiefly from necessity. He needed it to be able to focus, to plan a strategy and guide them through a precarious situation. His initial anger with her had helped fuel his determination. Later, he steeled himself to tell her of his
decision, and to weather her response.

But now, being with her, with everything over, all he wanted was to feel close to her once more. He was the one leaving and although he recognised it was presumptuous, he wanted to kiss his wife one last time. Recalling another of her remarks from long ago, he took a chance.

Cullen held her face into his hands and asked, “Are we strangers?”

Kai’s brows briefly wrinkled in puzzlement, and then the smile grew as she understood. “Never.”

Cullen leant forward as he drew her toward him and kissed his wife. He felt her hands settle on his waist. The kiss was familiar, comfortable and yet also new; a strangely honest kiss, as though there was nothing left to hide, nothing left to lose, nothing left to fear. Finally he moved away and rested their foreheads together.

They couldn’t leave until she was well enough, and back at Skyhold arrangements would have to be made for his departure. But right now as they gazed at each other, he sensed she too understood this was their farewell. But in that moment, he couldn’t bring himself to say the word. His reluctance was cut short by a wince and yelp from Kai.

“Are you in pain?” he asked concerned.

She nodded. “Could you get a flask from my pack? A green one.”

Cullen let go and fetched a potion, seeing her eagerly drain it. He took the empty bottle from her, and placed out it out of the way before sitting near her once more.

“You should rest,” he told her.

Kai ran her thumb over the top of his cheek, beneath his eye. “So should you,” she smiled.

Cullen smiled back. “You first. Come on.” He held the blanket, enabling her to settle, and tucked her up when she was ready.

“Will you stay until I’m asleep?” she asked, taking his hand.

“Oh course I will,” he promised her, squeezing it tenderly before letting go.

Cullen sat in the chair and watched Kai until he heard her breathing slow and deepen. He knew well the sounds she made when she was fast asleep, and as always her hair hung over her face. After a few minutes longer, he decided it was time to leave and got up. He was still the Commander for now and had work to do.

Even though Cullen knew nothing would rouse Kai, he walked quietly to the door and closed it gently as he left.

The Fade

Eyes closed, a soft sea breeze flowed over her face, her fingers dug into the sand as she sat on the dunes. Kai loved sunsets like these, hearing the waves breaking gently as the tide came in. It wouldn’t be long before it reached the sandcastle she and Lyssa spent the afternoon building, first filling the moat, and then washing the sandcastle away as the waves crept closer. There was just one thing missing.
“Hello Kiki,” came Lyssa’s musical voice as she sat next to Kai.

“I wondered where you’d got to, Estre,” Kai smiled, opening her eyes to see her sister. She studied Estre for a moment, seeing transparent patches in the form. “You’re a little patchy in places,” she remarked.

Hope/Estre rolled her eyes. “It’s the best I can do, my energy is somewhat depleted as you may recall. It will take time before I return to my former power.”

Kai nodded. “We’ll both need time to recover. And I need time to...think.”

Estre laid her hand on Kai’s arm. “I have enough energy to allow you to forget. There is a reason you are not supposed to know, remember?”

Kai took Estre’s hand in hers. “I understand, but I also believe what happened with Hakkon, and us, perhaps all that took place was for a reason too. Even finding out I’m not who I thought I was, even if I don’t know who that is.”

Estre sighed. “Kai, that is why reincarnated souls are not supposed to find out,” she explained. “The shock and confusion can be too damaging. Most human minds are more delicate than you realise.”

Kai raised an eyebrow. “I may be human again, but I’d barely found out what I was when I stopped being fully human. She took the impact as you know.”

“Always with an answer,” Estre shrugged.

Kai drew her other hand from the sand, and shifted to face Estre. “We both know neither of us came away cleanly from her, tiny pieces of each other remain in both of us. Without that, perhaps I would be much less sanguine about it all.”

“And now I’m the only Spirit of Hope with a human sense of humour,” Estre sighed.

Kai couldn’t contain the smile or the joke. “That’s what you get asking for help from humans.” Another eye roll answered her.

Estre’s amused expression became a thoughtful one. “And I know the cost to you for accepting the aid of spirits. I am sorry, Kai.”

Kai felt the pang of loss just as keenly in her dream as she had with Cullen when they talked. But there was no other way. He was right that she could have altered his mind, and also that she would never do it. She would take losing her actual husband over keeping a manipulated shadow of him any day. And better loss than hatred. At least the memories would kind rather than bitter. Whatever the pain, it was better for him this way because who knew what else awaited her. When souls were bought back, it was always for a purpose. She’d already dispatched Corypheus and Hakkon to the Fade. What more could there be for her to do? How much longer would she need to be a guardian?

Kai had no idea what more destiny had in store for her. She heard Estre chortle.


Kai chuckled knowingly. “Well, what else should I do? Knowing what I am now, either I embrace destiny or I let it overwhelm me. And I don’t give up easily.”
“You never have, Kai. You never will,” Estre smiled.

The two of them looked out to see the tide slowly washing away the sandcastle.
Chapter Summary

After their return to Skyhold, Kai meets with her Advisors to report on the events in the Frostback Basin, and faces up to Cullen leaving for South Reach the following day.

Chapter Notes

Huge thanks to Eravalefantasy for allowing me to borrow from their story 'A Templar's Savage Secret' for the passage from 'Knight takes Queen'. It's a hysterical bad smut parody as you may guess. The section presented here is only the beginning, if you wish to read more, please visit the author's page.

Kai stood facing Josephine, Rylen and Charter across the War Table, finally reaching the end of her report on the events in the Frostback Basin. Judging by their faces if she stood there stark naked with a flower between her teeth she would have shocked them less.

Josephine was an astute player of the Game, but her face had given up the many contortions, now set in dazed disbelief. Charter, someone else who could effortlessly bluff her way through Wicked Grace, her mouth gaped, breaking her usual dispassionate gaze. Rylen bore the befuddled look of a man who wasn’t sure if he was dreaming or awake.

Kai waited some seconds before her last words. “So you can appreciate why we felt a verbal account would be best in the circumstances.

The delay and her conclusion seemed to drag them back to reality, and the present moment.

“That’s an understatement,” Rylen retorted.

Rylen was nothing if not candid, often to the point of bluntness. Even before Kai’s influence on Cullen, he was invariably more diplomatic than his second in command.

Josephine swiftly recovered her composure. “Yes, we appreciate the necessity for...discretion, Inquisitor.”

“And maintaining it,” Charter emphasised, her expression back to its usual calm. “I take it your written report...”

“...will merely contain a construction of events excluding the pertinent details presented here,” Kai confirmed.
Josephine’s pen tapped a quiet rhythm on her board. “I think that is wise, Inquisitor. The impact, should this... well, Charter and I will do our utmost to tend to any potential issues should they arise.

“What about the Avvar? Can they be counted on to keep quiet?” Rylen questioned, frowning as he straightened his stance.

Kai sought to reassure him. “As the Commander and I are now part of Stone-Bear Hold, they won’t speak of this to outsiders. Cullen also persuaded Ragnar from Black-Wolf of the need for secrecy. By ridding the Basin of the Jaws of Hakkon, the Inquisition’s stock with those two Holds stands high. And, as I was indisposed, the Commander skilfully negotiated the framework of an alliance between the Inquisition and both Holds...”

“He did?” Josephine questioned, with only the slightest trace of surprise.

“Yes,” Kai confirmed. “The Avvar appreciated his straightforward approach. As it was his doing, I will allow him fill you in the details. Suffice to say, the arrangements benefit both sides.”

She paused; the next part was the one she dreaded most. The second bombshell. Cullen allowed her to announce his decision because Kai wanted to give her Advisors the choice of following suit should they wish to. If they disagreed with her actions and felt unable to continue in their roles, it benefited neither party to carry on. In her heart she hoped they would stay, particularly Josephine, who was the last of her original Advisory Council. Although not close as Kai was to Leliana and Cullen, she counted Josephine as a friend and trusted her implicitly.

Kai rested her hands behind her back to allay the twitch she felt building. “Cullen has allowed me to inform you that he intends to step down as Commander of the Inquisition. He will speak to his reasons for doing so.”

Thoughtful faces transformed into surprise again, all except Rylen whose frown intensified.

“In light of his decision, and recent events, should any of you wish to consider your positions, I would completely understand. I would also understand if there were any requirements you wished to seek from me.”

Kai unclasped her hands. “Thank you for hearing me out. Would you like me to send Cullen and Harding in?”

Rylen was about to speak, but Josephine stepped in. “Yes, thank you, Inquisitor.”

Kai turned and walked to the great wooden door, swallowing the lump sitting in her throat. When she stepped out closing the door behind her, she leant against and took a long deep breath, releasing it gradually. This was the first time she’d spoken of all the events. After her conversation with Cullen, she’d described some to her friends, trying her best to answer their questions.

A discussion began in the room behind her, but the heavy doors blocked out what they were saying. Kai swiftly walked on, not wanting to linger. If this was difficult for her, she couldn’t imagine how they must feel. She made her way along the passage to Josephine’s office. Cullen and Harding looked around from the seats by the hearth as she opened the door.

“Done already?” Cullen inquired, likely expecting it to have taken longer.

Her response was casual, but Kai couldn’t bring herself to smile. “I suspect I might have shocked them...perhaps a little.” She fidgeted with the end of her braid. “They’re ready for the two of you.”

“Right,” Cullen replied, exchanging glances with Harding as they rose and made their way to the
Kai hung on until they went into the War Room before heading to her quarters. There seemed little point in waiting; she had to allow the aftermath of her actions run its course. Once the dust cleared, then she could see what survived, and where she and the Inquisition went from there.

When her Advisors spoke with Cullen and Harding, she guessed their main concern would be her state of mind. Was the Inquisitor fit to hold her office or was there undue influence remaining? There never was undue influence. Such a concept supposed you existed to be influenced, not that you and a spirit blended to create some entirely novel being with the power to control people around them.

The one fact she didn’t divulge to her Advisors, nor had she to anyone, was what she discovered about herself. Only Cole knew, and she had sworn him to secrecy. He admitted that in his agitation over her safety and wishing to assure the others, he accidentally alluded to part of it. Luckily, they largely forgot his mishap when she returned. Only Dorian raised the matter again, and Cole sidestepped it with another vague utterance.

What knowledge Estre possessed Kai now had. But the information raised more questions than it provided answers, and Kai wasn’t sure how to track down the answers on her own. There was one person who knew more of the Fade than most, who might have the answers Kai sought. Solas. After Corypheus was defeated he left unexpectedly, and although the Inquisition still searched for him, he had simply vanished.

Reaching her quarters, she spied the paperwork on her desk. Last night, arriving back late had afforded her the perfect excuse to avoid it. This morning, visiting Cassie and preparing to meet with her Advisors had occupied her thoughts. Now, she had no reasons or excuses left to avoid confronting what awaited her.

‘The demons of paperwork’, she once quipped to Varric; ‘no one walks away from that fight unclean’. Nor, it seemed, had they from this mission. A mission which promised to be straightforward instead marked a turning point.

Kai took off her tunic and boots, put on her slippers and took a seat at her desk, staring at the pile before her. Much as the last thing she wanted to do was sift her way through the mundane, it would be a distraction for her current malaise.

On top of handling whatever her Advisors decided, tomorrow Cullen was leaving for South Reach. Even separated, they’d nevertheless been together during her recuperation and on the journey back. From tomorrow he would be gone. She accepted his decision, painfully aware it was better in the circumstances for both, but the thought he would no longer be there scared her. He had always been there for her, allowing her lean on him. She’d taken his support for granted. To her shame, she’d taken him for granted.

The true value of something was only recognised with its loss.

Kai closed her eye and sat quietly for some moments, stilling her thoughts and the emotions welling up. When she was calmer, she set about working.

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A few hours on, the door to her room opened and light, brisk footsteps moving up the stairs revealed it was Josephine. As she came alone, Kai assumed she was sent as spokesman for whatever decision they’d arrived at.
“Hey Josie,” she offered as brightly as she could muster, facing away.

“Inquisitor,” Josie greeted her. “I see some of Leliana’s skills remain with you. The tone in your voice was perhaps a little wanting. Quite understandable in the circumstances.”

Kai pulled up a chair facing her, and Josephine sat, resting her board on her lap. No doubt it was bought as a prop to show she was visiting for usual Inquisition matters and not a judgement on Kai.

“So,” Kai exhaled. “I take it you’ve jointly come to a decision?”

“Yes, Inquisitor.” Josephine gave a small nod. “Charter, Rylen and I will continue as your Advisors. As was pointed out in our deliberations, had you drunk from the Well of Sorrows, you would remain under the influence of Mythal. Although your situation was of some concern, Cullen and Harding have assured us you are yourself once more.” She sighed. “Something to be thankful for.”

The astute scrutiny was apparent as Josephine went on. “Nevertheless, our agreement to continue does have conditions.”

“Of course,” Kai acknowledged. “I quite understand, and I am prepared to agree to them.”

“Good,” Josephine responded with an approving smile. “We hoped you would, bearing in mind the circumstances. Firstly, Scout Harding will accompany you on any future journeys, and will be on hand whilst you are in residence. We shall present this as a promotion for her, a new role as your assistant. It is common knowledge the two of you are friends, and it should surprise no one you would choose her to support you.”

“Your eyes and ears?” Kai suggested, aware her movements would be observed and reported on.

“Inquisitor, we would not conceal that fact from you, but we also genuinely think you need someone to help you. All of us have assistants except for you. I know you and I have spoken of this before, and you have been...”

“Reluctant?” Kai offered. Refusing was closer to the truth.

“Quite,” Josephine confirmed.

Out of all the people they could have picked, Lace was by far the best. What concerned Kai was whether she consented voluntarily, or had she been ‘persuaded’. Kai inclined her head. “Lace is agreeable to this?”

Josephine nodded. “She is. Her usual work has decreased, and besides,” she exhaled wearily, “you find ample excitement even in the most staid trips. Should you encounter trouble, Harding can handle herself whereas someone less experienced may not.”

“She can indeed,” Kai agreed with a smile. Very little fazed her. “Lace will be an invaluable assistant. I couldn’t have chosen better myself.”

Josephine’s keen gaze indicated there was more to come, but she invariably did begin with the easier news. The subsequent condition was the one they’d repeatedly disagreed on.

“Cullen and I have previously discussed this with you; relinquishing more decision making to your Advisory Council. There are matters we can comfortably handle without having to bring every issue to you. You were unwilling before, and I can appreciate your motivations. After all, you are answerable for whatever the Inquisition does. But the effect has been to slow down our
operations. You have to delegate.”

Kai suspected this would be one of things required of her. Josephine, doubtless expecting Kai’s usual instinctive opposition continued, deterring any protest.

“With the size of the Inquisition now, you can no longer carry on as if it were a smaller organisation. We would keep you fully briefed on any decisions or actions we take. Inquisitor, your focus should be on the future and your work with the Divine, not on minutiae.” Josephine straightened up as if to drive the point home. “This requirement is non-negotiable.”

There it was, take it and keep us, or say no and lose us. This time Kai already understood Josephine was right as Cullen had been right. She promised him she’d find a way to ease back. It appeared the way had found her instead.

“Very well,” Kai accepted easily. “But you will keep me informed?”

Josephine’s eyes momentarily widened in amazement before her normal poise returned. “We will, Inquisitor.”

She then placed her clipboard on the desk. The gesture indicated whatever came next was no longer purely professional. “This condition involves both yourself and Cullen. Partly to do with his role and partly with...” Josephine offered a sympathetic smile.

Kai recognised Josephine would have grasped the additional significance of Cullen’s departure.

“...our separation,” Kai finished for her, keeping her face calm.

“I am so sorry, Kai. We will all miss him, but I know you will feel his absence greatly.”

“Thank you, Josie.” Kai’s response was brief. Sympathy, although kindly offered, did not seem appropriate when the cause of his departure was her decision.

Josephine sighed. “I must admit working with Rylen will not be the same, admirable as he is. With Leliana gone and now Cullen, so has the camaraderie we four had. The friendships shared were special, sustaining us through the ordeals we faced.”

Kai understood relationships formed in adversity had a singular way of binding individuals together. Standing side by side in the worst of times established a degree of trust and confidence in one another, not as readily achieved when times were easier. The rapport between her Advisors would never be the same.

Kai smiled sadly. “Things change, not always how we may want. But there was something you wished to...”

“Yes,” Josephine nodded, catching Kai’s prompt to move the conversation on. “We discussed this with Cullen, and he understands the need to provide distance between his departure and events in the Basin. Also, Rylen wishes to have a period of unofficial adjustment to his new role. He only expected to be acting Commander for the short period Cullen was away. Our solution has the advantage of addressing both issues.”

“If Cullen has consented to this, then whatever you propose is fine by me.” Cullen was more likely to raise objections than she was, so if he found the solution acceptable Kai had no qualms in saying yes.

Josephine looked reassured. “It will require some forbearance from both of you and some subterfuge, but Charter and I believe it’s the best way to safeguard the Inquisition.”
“Whatever you need, Josie.”

Kai listened as Josephine detailed the course of action, marvelling how she could deftly untangle the jumbled threads of a situation to present a neat and coherent package.

“For now we continue as usual. Cullen will leave to begin construction on the Sanctuary as arranged, and hand over acting command to Rylen. He will be available for consultation and direction as agreed. It will involve some pretence from you and Cullen until he leaves tomorrow, but that is scarcely one day.”

Kai nodded her agreement, and Josephine continued.

“At the end of the planned absence, Cullen will return and formally tender his resignation, citing his wish to devote himself fully to the Sanctuary. We all know how important this project is to him, so the change of focus would not seem so unusual. However in itself, it would not be sufficient to allay questions. So, while he is away, we will spread subtle rumours regarding your marriage. There is already talk of...difficulties between...”

Kai sensed how Josephine wanted to frame the issue delicately. Until recently, neither she nor Cullen were mindful of how much others knew. It showed they had become insular where their marriage was concerned.

“It’s ok Josie. We both recognise it’s become common knowledge.”

Seeing she could speak plainly, Josephine’s expression relaxed. “Well, under so much pressure, such as the two of you have experienced, even the strongest of relationships can falter or wither. We would merely embellish the truth. Time spent together on the mission widening existing cracks, time apart leading to a re-evaluation of your marriage. This sort of thing is not unusual and presented in the right fashion, easily believed. Therefore, when Cullen returns, along with his reasons for resigning you both ‘agree’ to a separation. With the two things combined, people would be less disposed to question his departure. Later on, the two of you can come to whatever arrangement you choose to.”

Kai had to admit it was carefully thought out. Anyone who knew them could envisage their marriage falling apart like this, rather than how it really ended. Kai drew consolation from the end being amicable; there was too much between them to allow their friendship to fade away.

*They would never be strangers,* she thought, a smile breaking out.

“Inquisitor?” Josephine worried, watching her unexpected reaction.

“It’s fine, Josie,” Kai reassured her. “Just thinking of something Cullen told me. As to your plan, it is a sensible one in the circumstances. I’ll do as you wish.”

Josephine gave a satisfied sigh. “Excellent.

Kai could see her ticking off another item on her mental inventory of tasks. Josephine was nothing if not meticulous in her work, even if that required sorting out the emotional tangle of her friends’ lives. Instead of concluding their meeting, Josephine pulled out what looked to be a pamphlet from underneath the paperwork on her board. The furtive way she handled it prompted Kai’s curiosity.

She cleared her throat. “There is one further matter. Varric brought it to my attention while you were away in the Basin. In his new position as Viscount of Kirkwall...”

“I’m sorry...he’s what?” Kai exclaimed, stunned. *How in the Maker’s name did that come about?*
“Viscount of Kirkwall,” Josephine repeated. “A position I understand given to him for the reconstruction work he’s done. It appears his complaint about the vacant post was regarded as volunteering.” She fixed Kai with a look to say ‘may I go on’. Whatever this was, it was more significant than the news about Varric.

“Sorry, please go on.”

Josephine’s fingers covered the title of the work, and Kai inclined her head slightly trying to get a better look at it. She could make out a drawing underneath the words, but it was hard to see properly upside down.

“There will invariably be those who want to undermine Varric’s position or profit on the back of it. In this situation, it seems to be a clumsy attempt to sour relations between the Inquisitor and a former member of her inner circle.”

Kai was intrigued. “It’s bad I take it?”

“I would say salacious, but that implies a degree of titillation. Both Charter and I have read it...,” she gave a weary look as Kai smiled, “...for research purposes.”

Kai’s smile grew into a smirk. “Of course.”

Josephine groaned faintly. “Suffice to say it takes lewdness to a level so bizarre I wasn’t even certain what I was reading. We assume they saw Checkmate and determined to smear Varric’s name using it as a reference.” She handed the pamphlet to Kai. “See for yourself.”

Kai studied the cover. It was certainly cheaply produced and looked hurriedly thrown together. The title read:

Knight takes Queen, Part 1, as told by Varric Tethras. The true story behind Checkmate revealing the burning desires of the Inquisitor and her Commander, and their lustful union. Not included previously owing to Inquisition censorship, but now available separately for the discerning reader.

The picture below was obviously meant to be her and Cullen, him naked from the waist up, and her dress torn and pulled down over her shoulders barely covering her breasts. The suggestive pose didn’t need much in the way of discerning.

Kai gave Josephine an amused glance. “Well, the implication is unmistakable.”

“Trust me, the cover is staid in comparison to the contents,” Josephine replied, rolling her eyes. Kai snickered. “Right then, let’s see what awaits the discerning reader.”

She opened it up and started to read. At first the smile remained, along with a somewhat lifted eyebrow. Anyone familiar with Varric’s work could instantly identify this did not originate from his pen.

Katarina Alana Isabella Trevelyan pines for her Commander. Little does she know, he battles with desires of his own - a prisoner of his own needs. Commander Cullen Stanton Rutherford hides a secret desire that only his true love can discover.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------

The night was moist despite the swirling snow and harshly blowing wind. The humidity was low outside the tent, but inside, sweat pooled from Cullen’s heaving chest following a steamy trail
down to his navel. He gripped his steaming rod and pumped his sweaty flesh as he muttered loudly in a soft voice.

“Argh!” He grunted, “use that light swing arm – ahh, yes, like that.” Cullen pulled faster. “Oh yes, minimum friction about the fulcrum, do it, do it.” He felt his sack tighten and picked up speed ramming his hardness into both hands, lifting himself on his tippy-toes. “The mass of the counterweight is far greater,” he felt his wad building, “than the mass,” his hot love burst out over his hands, “of the projectile. Ungf. So good.”

Her amusement lasted until she came to the last line of the second paragraph.

“How did this person know? Did they know? Or was it mere coincidence? Maker, if Cullen saw this, well, not pleased wouldn’t even begin to cover his reaction.

Luckily Josephine mistook her shocked exclamation for stunned surprise at the work itself. “Yes, the beginning is quite...”

“Just a bit...” Kai coughed.

She resumed reading, realising whoever penned this didn’t know either her or Cullen. The reference was clearly coincidental. The characters they were described as bore no resemblance to them, or how they were in Haven at the beginning of the Inquisition. Back then, his only desire concerning her was doubtless a respite from the jokes.

She ploughed on, eventually reaching the end.

“It’s...” Kai desperately struggled for an adjective to describe it, failing miserably, “...full of...words.”

Josephine sighed. “It seems a description fails you also. As did one for both Charter and myself.”

“Has...anyone else seen...this?” Kai questioned, praying the answer was no.

“All other copies found on sale in Lowtown were purchased and destroyed by Varric’s people. The vendor, it seems, acquired them from ‘a man in a tavern’. They were in amongst a job lot with other items of a similar nature. Varric has his network investigating possible leads as we speak. There is no publishing house marked, and it is rather cheaply constructed, so we believe it was made privately. As yet, no further copies have surfaced, nor a part 2.”

Kai puffed out a relieved breath. “Thank the Maker!”

“Indeed,” Josephine exhaled. “Varric will keep a watch in case more turn up.”

“Please thank him,” Kai requested. “And tell him I owe him one for this. In the present situation, I don’t think Cullen seeing this would be...helpful.”
“My thoughts too, Inquisitor.” She picked up her clipboard and held out her hand for the pamphlet. As Kai handed it to her, Josephine tucked it under the sheaf of paperwork, and placed the clipboard back onto the desk. She rested her hands in her lap, seemingly thoughtful. A moment passed.

“Was there something else, Josie?” Kai eventually asked.

Josephine’s eyebrows creased in concentration. “I am curious about something, but not sure how to phrase the question.”

“Just say what you’re thinking,” Kai told her.

She reflected a little longer. “When you merged with the spirit...and being aware of the power you possessed, how did you walk away from it? Others have zealously pursued such power, and yet you obtained it and gave it up.”

Kai’s face softened as she undertook to explain. “I didn’t walk away, because other than a remnant there was no me as such. The entity we became, she saw the danger of her existence and gave it up.”

She saw Josephine’s confused response. “She formed from the two of us, combining our feelings, motivations, all the elements that shaped what we were. The desire to safeguard others from that power was strong, and made her take the decision to destroy herself.”

It was the first time Kai openly used that term to describe what occurred. Realising the threat she could pose, she’d sacrificed herself to separate Kai and Estre.

A pensive expression replaced Josephine’s perplexed one as she spoke. “It’s a shame others didn’t have the same sense of self-awareness, or a conscience as she had. Creatures like Corypheus and this Gurd Harofsen fellow.”

Kai was glad somebody else saw past what she could have been, to what she was. A newly born being, prepared to give up her life to protect others. She wished to offer hope, yet recognised she could pose a greater problem than what she sought to alleviate.

The door to Kai’s quarters opened again, and both looked over to the stairs. Kai recognised the steady footsteps, Cullen. His blonde hair appeared over the half-wall as he approached the top. That familiar sight wouldn’t be for much longer, she reflected wistfully.

He strode over to them. “Ambassador, Eloise asked me to let you know Charter would like a word when you have time.”

“Ah yes, she must have news.” Josephine stood, picking up her clipboard. As she did, the pamphlet slid free, the bottom poking from beneath her papers as it sought to drop out.

Kai kept the panic from her voice. “I think you might have a loose parchment there, Josie,” she pointed, with an eye flick.

Josephine spotted it and deftly tucked the pamphlet underneath with a convincing resigned glance. “I am rather fond of this old board, but perhaps it has reached the end of its days. Leaving a trail of paperwork behind me would be a little embarrassing.”

Kai suppressed a smile. Particularly that piece of paperwork.

“Thank you, Josie.”
“Inquisitor,” she acknowledged, making her way out.

Cullen took her seat on the vacant chair. “I take it Josephine told you?”

“She did,” Kai confirmed. “She explained you’d agreed, so I was happy to say yes.”

Cullen nodded as she spoke. “It sounds eminently practical, and if it protects the Inquisition and you…”

“Me?” Kai asked, puzzled.

“Yes, you,” Cullen emphasised. Kai could see the unease in his eyes. “Dorian rightly pointed out another possibility if it was made public. Some in Tevinter would be more than interested, aspiring to duplicate the feat if it offered an opportunity to achieve the degree of power you…she had. Not to mention using the Anchor. ‘Kidnapped and whisked away to be examined’ I believe was the phrase he used.”

Her jaw dropped. “Oh.”

“Oh, indeed,” Cullen remarked, pausing to allow the implication to sink in.

That eventuality hadn’t occurred to Kai, chiefly because it couldn’t come about unless they were like her. And neither did she think about being used that way. Estre spoke truthfully when she told Kai it was difficult for her to be possessed unwillingly. But it didn’t mean it was impossible. On the other hand, willing possession was much easier because her soul was fade-touched, and it was that ease which made it dangerous for a spirit to reside within her for too long. With a fade-touched soul and a spirit from the Fade, the two were inescapably attracted to merge with one another.

Cullen continued, still serious. “Just as Josephine and Charter have made their preparations, Rylen and I have made provision should word leak out somehow. You will require protection, from individuals both within and outside the Inquisition. There are those here who may not take kindly to the idea someone favoured by Andraste was possessed by a spirit. They may choose to save you from yourself.”

The idea worried her. Kai faced death on numerous occasions, willingly placing herself in peril. But this was different, this wasn’t only an outside threat as she often faced. The consequences of her decision could conceivably put her life in jeopardy from the very people she endeavoured to protect.

Her alarm showed. “Cullen…”

He dragged the chair closer and took her hands into his. “Look, I appreciate it’s uncomfortable to think about, but you have to be prepared. Maker willing, this is merely a precaution, and nothing else.” He held her hands firmly. “Kai, I won’t be here, and I need to know you’ll listen to what Rylen tells you to do, should the worst occur. Promise me this.”

Kai readily consented. “I promise I will. I just hadn’t considered it in those terms.”

Cullen stared at her pointedly from underneath his lashes. “That is why you have Advisors, and that is what they are here for. To support and guide you.” He paused. “When you let them.”

Kai exhaled. “Point taken. But you didn’t have to scare me to do it.”

“No, I did have to,” he insisted. The resolute expression eased into a knowing smile. “It’s the only
way to make you pay attention.”

Her relieved smile answered his. “Not...always,” she ventured.

“Mostly,” he countered, letting go of her hands and sitting back in the chair. “Shall we settle on that?”

“Alright, you may have a point,” she conceded. “I’ve not been...the easiest person to advise.”

Cullen’s smile widened into a grin as he folded his arms. “Inquisitor, far be it from me to contradict your assessment.”

Kai narrowed her gaze, but the smile remained. “Commander, apart from coming here to be scary and snarky, is there some other purpose to your visit?”

“As it happens, yes.” The grin faded, replaced by a measured expression. “I went to see Cassie. She wanted to know specifically how long I’d be away, so she could plan perfecting the spell to show me when I returned.”

“Oh no,” Kai murmured, scrunching her face. “You didn’t say...”

Cullen shook his head. “No I didn’t mention what we agreed. Only that I’d be away for three months, long enough to get the principal structure complete. With Lyssa and Eri now in Highever, we’re the closest thing she has to a family here. Kai, at some point she’ll need to know.”

“I realise that, Cullen,” Kai replied, scratching her head. “I’ll try to explain what I can in the circumstances. This sort of situation isn’t altogether new to her and at least we’re not ending on the same note as Lyssa and Anton did. As long as she knows you’ll keep in touch and see her from time to time, I imagine she’ll come to terms with the situation.”

“Yes, of course I’ll keep in touch and see her.” He exhaled wearily. “Just...break it to her gently and don’t assume she’ll naturally come to terms with it.”

“Cullen, she’s not entirely alone. She has her friends and Connor, as well as Fiona. Children can be more resilient than we credit them for. But I’ll do my best to be careful,” Kai assured him.

“Alright,” he agreed.

Cullen sat forward in the chair, clearing his throat. “About tonight...if we’re supposed to continue as normal, we should...”

Although on rare occasions they spent nights apart, it was never before one of them was expected to be away. To do so now would seem strange.

“Yes,” Kai acknowledged. “I thought here would be...”

“I did too...there’s...the sofa and the bed...”

“Yes... just come back...whenever you’re done...”

“Right,” Cullen exhaled in relief, the decision made. “I just wanted to get it settled.”

Neither had to voice why there was a need for caution. One’s mind may accept the separation, but emotions and desires don’t neatly switch off when two people still love each other.

During their last night in the Basin, there was a feast laid on when she and Cullen were ceremoniously welcomed into the Hold, becoming kin of Stone-Bear. Too much drink and too
little inhibition led to them sharing the bed, rather than Cullen sleeping on the cot as he had done when she was recovering. What started off as a hug turned into an embrace, and before they knew it, there was a lot more kissing, and touching, and they almost ended up sleeping with each other. Luckily Cullen recovered enough sense to prevent it going too far because by that point Kai couldn’t have.

Commander Avvar-Friend and Inquisitor First-Thaw nearly experienced a far too friendly thaw in relations.

On the journey back, Kai bunked with Harding and Cullen used a spare tent. Both agreed it was best, neither wanted to risk complicating the situation.

“I should go,” he announced, standing up. “I’ll see you later on.”

“OK.” Kai glanced at the paperwork on her desk and groaned. “I should try to finish as much of this as I can. No doubt there will be more.”

“Isn’t there always?” Cullen laughed. “However, this time there was very little for me, Rylen is remarkably organised.”

His comment about Rylen prompted a worry to re-emerge. “Cullen, about Rylen...how did he feel about it? I realise he’s agreed to remain, but...”

Cullen sounded unconcerned as he answered. “I have to confess he surprised me on that score. Once reassured you were no longer influenced and yourself again, his concern was more with taking over as Commander. I already had experience of command after picking up the pieces in Kirkwall, plus the Inquisition army and I grew together. Rylen hasn’t had that experience in the same way. He’s always had a superior officer to go to. But I have no doubts he will rise to the role. You’ll find him steadfast, if sometimes a little blunt.”

He let out a short chuckle. “I don’t imagine Josephine will involve him in diplomatic affairs in quite the same way as she did me.”

Kai grinned. “Not everybody possesses your remarkable range of qualities, Commander.”

Cullen offered a slight bow as he smiled back. “Why thank you, Inquisitor. On that complimentary note, I’ll return to my duties.”

She watched as he made his way to the stairs, listening to his footsteps until she heard the door close behind him.

Maker, I will miss him so much.

It was natural she would feel loss, worry and fear, and she knew these feelings would remain with her. Yet she couldn’t let them overcome her, she had to carry on.

There was one more person to talk to, to confess to. Fortunately their meeting was scheduled weeks ago, so a visit would not be out of the ordinary. A few more days and she would set out for the Grand Cathedral. Kai had to notify Leliana of the events in the Basin. But it was no longer one friend telling another a secret. The Inquisitor would be informing the Divine. Both had come a long way since Leliana arrived in Ostwick all those years ago, saving a naive young girl from herself.

Sometimes, on her dark days when things felt hopeless, Kai had wished she’d turned right instead of left when she took a walk through the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Discovering what she actually was, she recognised that wish was pointless. One way or another she would probably have ended
up in the room where Corypheus held Justinia.

No matter what path Destiny had set out for her, or what Fate threw at her on the way, Kai realised she always had a choice on how she reacted to events. And whatever was lost, what remained was no different from before. She may not know who she was, but she did know what she was. She was the Inquisitor, and she had a purpose and a duty to perform.

Kai stared out of the open balcony doors. The sun would be setting in another hour or so, and the air had already taken on a chill. She got up and closed the doors, then added more logs to the fire before sitting back at her desk. If she concentrated she might even get the remainder of her work completed before Cullen returned. Kai had no intention of wasting the time they had left together.

She took another report from the stack and started to read.
**Departure**

Chapter Summary

After three months away in South Reach, Cullen returns to Skyhold to formally tender his resignation and take up his new post as Director of the Templar Sanctuary.

Cullen spied Skyhold’s towers ahead as he neared the final stretch, and drew his mount to a halt to take a few moments to reflect.

The drawbridge was down and the gates open as always, a warm reception for whoever approached even though gate guards monitored access. It had remained that way ever since Kai was made Inquisitor. Anyone who sought refuge or wished to help was taken in. The result was an army which easily outstripped city states, and an influence which extended throughout Thedas. Depending on which lens it was viewed through; it made the Inquisition either a strong ally or a powerful enemy.

This fortress had been his home. It had been their home. Now he was leaving it all behind.

The past three months in South Reach were busy, yet peaceful. Life ran at slower pace there, but even then they’d progressed faster than he anticipated in the brief time away. Cullen took a number of the craftsmen from Skyhold with him, and some of the Templars more advanced in their lyrium withdrawal as labourers. The physical activity and purpose proved beneficial for them, and for him.

The less hectic pace initially felt odd as if he wasn’t doing enough. However, once settled, Cullen found he worked, ate and slept better without the constant demands he experienced in Skyhold. That and Tamsin coming along to coordinate logistics and provision of resources, while he directed construction.

Before returning, Cullen spoke with Tamsin and explained his decision to continue with the Sanctuary. She requested to join him. He could sympathize with her reasons; her brother was a Templar, one of those who arrived later. His withdrawal was proving difficult, and Tamsin told Cullen she had hoped to stay with her brother than continue with the Inquisition. Along with submitting his resignation, Cullen would also request a transfer for her. Rylen had his own assistant, Fuller, who was more than capable to take on Tamsin’s duties permanently.

Once in South Reach, Mia declared she expected frequent visits while he was there. He owed them several years’ worth, she claimed. It was also Mia who saw through what he considered were sufficient references to issues between Kai and himself. During one visit, when it was only the two of them, she patiently coaxed the truth from him.

Knowing how she could keep things secret, Cullen told her everything. He was grateful to have someone he trusted to talk with, someone outside who didn’t regard it principally as an Inquisition matter. Mia expressed some dismay when he described the events, and understood his reasons for leaving, mindful of what took place before. But she didn’t judge either him or Kai for the decisions they took. All she asked was, ‘would it change anything if she was no longer the Inquisitor?’ He told her it wasn’t something he’d considered, and she left it at that.
Now he would see Kai again, and though they’d kept in touch, it was mostly about day-to-day matters. Cullen was a little nervous, not sure how either would feel meeting up again. It was one thing being apart and coming to terms with separation, but seeing one other would undoubtedly rake up emotions for both. Whatever he believed about her decisions, he nevertheless still loved her.

Cullen rode on to the gates, dropping his hood to permit the gate guards to identify him.

“Welcome back, Commander,” one of the guards greeted him as both saluted, standing to attention.

“At ease,” Cullen instructed, dismounting, and grabbing his pack.

The guard relaxed and took Cullen’s horse. “If you’re wanting to see Knight-Captain Rylen, he’s in his...sorry ser...in your office.”

“Thank you,” Cullen acknowledged, catching the man nod.

Looking around, nothing appeared to have changed. Skyhold was as lively as always, and it felt strange to be returning to the hustle and bustle. The pace, which before was perfectly normal, felt faster than he’d grown accustomed to. He realised he actually preferred the slower tempo. After all the years of one world-altering event after another, some relative peace was welcome.

Even though he was standing down as Commander, his new position as Director of the Sanctuary would still be linked to the Inquisition. Once construction was completed, the Inquisition would continue to manage funding for the upkeep, an arrangement agreed between the Inquisitor and the Divine. Josephine was his contact responsible for the finances, but final authority over Sanctuary affairs rested in his hands.

Cullen headed to the battlements and walked to his former office, finding Rylen in an all too familiar place behind the desk, with the even more familiar sight of reports piled up on it. One of the messengers was on his way out as Cullen walked in, and exchanged greetings as she passed.

“Commander,” Rylen addressed him energetically, with a smile. “Welcome back.”

“Commander,” Cullen smiled in return. “You survived the initiation I see.”

Rylen chuckled. “Not without assistance, but you could say that. There’s more bureaucracy than I’m normally used to, but it keeps me out of trouble.” He hesitated. “There’s just one thing...”

“What’s that?” Cullen asked.

“The other Advisors and the Inquisitor, most of the time I have no idea what they’re talking about. They’re clear when it concerns my responsibilities, but the rest of the time...” Rylen shook his head.

Cullen laughed. “I’ll give you a tip, map of the War Table.” He saw Rylen’s puzzled stare. “Start with Lake Calenhad, stare at it long enough and you’ll see a shape emerge, and then continue with other landmarks. I discovered just switching off and allowing the talk to seep in helped some. Eventually you might understand half of it, but I never mastered much more, even with help from the Inquisitor.” Cullen shrugged. “If it doesn’t work, at least it gives you something to do.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Rylen grinned.
Cullen added another piece of advice. “Oh, and should the Ambassador start talking about coats from Val Royeaux...run. We’ve seen those monstrosities.”

“Quite,” Rylen coughed. “Though I will follow your example and change to my own armour.” His grin eased. “So...this is it then?”

Cullen nodded. “Yes, I have the letter right here.” He patted his pocket. “Hand in my resignation as Commander and sign on as Director. I must confess to a few second thoughts at first, but once we began construction, it truly felt like a fresh start. The Inquisition retains financial oversight, but otherwise I have complete autonomy to develop the Sanctuary and run it as I see fit.”

“You were always good at putting the pieces together, and making something function as it should,” Rylen observed. “Until I took over, I hadn’t appreciated just how much responsibility there was. I may not do things in the same way...”

Cullen held up his hand. “Rylen, I wouldn’t expect you to. The structures are there, the way you run the army is up to you now. I have no doubt you will be an excellent Commander. The Inquisitor is fortunate to have you at her back.”

Rylen nodded and smiled appreciatively. Cullen knew he wasn’t much for overblown compliments, but would accept some recognition of his capabilities. As predicted, Rylen veered the conversation elsewhere.

“Speaking of the Inquisitor, she not here. She’s gone to Kirkwall. We received an urgent request for aid from the Viscount.”

Realising he wouldn’t see her; the residual nervousness became a twinge of sadness, mixed with curiosity.

“Kirkwall?” Cullen exclaimed, and then exhaled. “What’s happened there now?”

“Rifts, demons and glowing rocks falling out of the Fade,” Rylen explained. “Fortunately it’s restricted to the Gallows area and the harbour, but it’s creating havoc with the port and trade.

“I swear that place is cursed,” Cullen muttered, shaking his head.

“She’s taken Cole, Harding, Bull and a few of the Chargers with her.” Rylen grinned knowingly. “Including...the dwarf.”

“Maker, not Rocky,” Cullen groaned. “It was enough dealing with the ‘concerned representation’ from local farmers in South Reach, thanks to him bringing down half a hill. I dread to imagine what he’ll get up to in a city.”

Rylen smiled. “Thankfully it won’t be something you have to worry about, and neither will I. This mission falls under the Ambassador’s remit. Whatever problems arise from this, it’ll be her fending off complaints. We’ll simply clear it up, which is what we invariably do.”

“That you will,” Cullen agreed, with a patient smile. “Well, I’ll go and complete the paperwork with the Ambassador so we can arrange the formal handover. I have a number of visits to make, and then I’ll collect my belongings from...”

“Oh, about that,” Rylen interrupted. “They’re in the Inquisitor’s quarters. She...had them taken out when they repaired the loft so I could use it. I hope you don’t...”

Cullen waved away Rylen’s concern with a smile. “Of course not, it’s yours now. I never did get around to getting it fixed and she gave up asking. Right then, I’ll...”
A rap at the door cut into their conversation.

“Come,” Rylen shouted.

The door opened and a young head peeped around, a broad grin growing on her face as she spotted Cullen.

“Uncle Cullen!” Cassie cried out excitedly, her strawberry blonde braid bobbing on her cloak as she rushed to him

Cullen knelt down and drew her into a hug as she flung her arms around him. “Hello Cassie,” he smiled when she moved back, her green eyes shining merrily. “And how did you learn I was here?” he inquired with a lifted eyebrow, catching her giggle.

“Mistress Penterghast has her personal network of informers,” Rylen chuckled. “She charmed all the gate guards, so when you showed up she’d be told, no matter who was on duty.”

“I see,” Cullen remarked. “And where did you learn that little trick, as if I couldn’t guess.”

“Auntie Kai,” Cassie chuckled. “But she said I was a natural already.”

“She’s not wrong there,” Rylen acknowledged. “Even the Ambassador says this one could charm the birds from the trees.” He nodded, seeing Cullen glance at him. “I’ll let you two catch up.”

Rylen left leaving him with Cassie. They strolled over to the chairs and both sat down.

“So, young lady, tell me how you are, and how your studies are progressing. Did you perfect your spell?”

“I’m fine, thank you, Uncle Cullen. Enchanter Fiona says I’m doing well, and should be ready to take my initial theory tests soon. And...” she paused, beaming, “...I’m almost there with the spell, the last time the bottle cracked only a little. No ink ran out.” She scrunched her eyes, thinking as she recalled the words. “I’m...focusing the incantation appropriately. That’s what she said.” Another giggle broke out.


Cassie beamed again, swinging her legs. “Thank you.”

Cullen could never get over how thrilled she was being a mage, or how she could see things so positively. The innocence of youth; at ten years old he too had aspirations to help people as Cassie did. Only back then his chosen vocation was more acceptable than her inborn talent.

Following the mages’ support with the battle against Corypheus, they were accepted more readily than before. The ex-Templar in him occasionally worried about where their new freedom might lead, but as Cassie’s uncle he was glad to see her ambitions flourish, and not be crushed in the oppressive confinement of a Circle such as Kirkwall’s had been.

Cassie glanced down and when she faced him again, her brows furrowed, her mouth curved downward and the leg swinging stopped. “Uncle Cullen, are you really going away?”

Cullen swallowed, clearing the lump that rose in his throat seeing her sad expression. “Yes I am, Cassie,” he affirmed gently.

“Oh,” she murmured.
“Did Auntie Kai explain why?” he asked, watching her nod.

“Yes, she said that the Sanctuary was important to you and you could help other Templars. She said you always wanted to help people.”

“I’ve always tried to,” Cullen told her.

She scratched her head. “Auntie Kai said the two of you would be apart, but we would still be friends.”

“Cassie,” he called reassuringly, reaching out to her. She approached and took his hand. “We will always be friends, and you and I will always keep in touch. When the house is finished, there’ll be somewhere for you to stay when you visit. Alright?”

Cassie nodded, a little smile breaking through. “Alright,” she echoed with a tone identical to his. She tilted her head, watching him. “She misses you, do you miss her?”

The question was unexpected and direct, and it threw him. Cullen attempted to focus his thoughts. “I...err...” he stalled, clearing his throat, “…how do you know she does?”

The response was equally straightforward. “She wears more make-up sometimes.”

He jerked his head back in surprise. “How does..?”

Cassie looked at him as if her statement was obvious. “Mama used to do the same when Papa upset her, to hide it made her cry. Eri said they didn’t love each other because both were angry. You and Auntie Kai aren’t angry. She smiles when she says your name, but her eye is sad. She loves you, Uncle Cullen.”

There it was, a ten-year-old’s summation of their situation as she viewed it. Never mind long explanations, a few sentences captured the details for her. Cullen’s hand found the back of his neck as he sought give an answer. He’d always been honest with Cassie, and from her reaction to their break up, she was more sensible than he supposed she would be. Kai did maintain their position was different to how acrimonious Cassie and Eri’s parents’ separation had been.

Cullen smiled resignedly. “I love her too,” he confessed.

Saying he loved Kai was somehow easier than admitting he missed her. But he had, in the quiet moments when his thoughts were unoccupied by work. Cullen missed the little things, her laughter, her teasing and the jokes, bizarrely all the elements that initially irritated him. The weirdest thing of all was missing waking her up in the morning with tea; watching her gradually come to, and seeing the smile as she finally saw him, and then the tea. Her role robbed much from her, but that first smile of the morning came from her innermost core and never changed.

Cassie looked happier, believing she’d been proved right. It appeared his limited confession was sufficient.

“But,” he continued thoughtfully, “sometimes it’s not enough. Sometimes, other things occur that come between people whatever they feel for each other.”

“That’s what Auntie Kai said too,” she sighed. Cassie peered sympathetically at him. “Adults always make things more...complicated.”

Cullen couldn’t explain the reasons for his departure fully, and for what she knew, presumably this simplistic concept made sense to Cassie. His answer had at least assuaged her curiosity, hopefully allowing him to bring an uneasy conversation to a close.
“Perhaps we do,” he conceded with a slight smile. “And now, maybe we can give Rylen his office back and catch up more at dinner? If Mistress Penterghast would consider joining me.” Cullen bowed his head in an exaggerated fashion, making her giggle.

Cassie nodded. “Yes, Uncle Cullen, she would.” A cheeky grin burst out. “They’ve got schlop tonight.”

Cullen snorted a laugh. “Where did you hear that expression?”

“Dorian. We had it for dinner before he left. He pulled a funny face...” she made a yuck face to show him, “...and said ‘it better not have turnips in it’. It made Auntie Kai and Bull laugh.”

Cullen shook his head, of course it would. “Right, so schlop later?” he asked.

“Later,” Cassie agreed, hugging him once more before she left.

Cullen called back Rylen before heading off over the walkway to Josephine’s office. He didn’t regret his decision, in the circumstances it was the right one. But living with the aftereffects was never going to be easy for either him or Kai.

As he walked into the Great Hall, some heads turned accompanied by furtive whispering. Cullen guessed Josephine’s seeding of rumours was at play and maintained his usual pace, even though he wanted to pass through quickly to avoid the gossip. Entering Josephine’s office, he found Charter with her, the two of them poring over a report. They looked up; Charter as unruffled as ever, and Josephine seemingly anxious.

“Ambassador, Charter,” he addressed them in turn.

“Welcome back, Commander,” Josephine greeted him, while Charter nodded, “Commander”.

She gestured to the chairs by the fireplace. “Please take a seat; I will be with you shortly. Charter and I just need to finish up.”

Cullen dropped his pack and parked in one of the armchairs by the hearth, soaking up the comforting heat as he stretched out. He listened as they continued their discussion.

“Two deaths now,” Josephine groaned. “And still no sign of the girl?”

“Nothing as yet,” Charter confirmed. “Our hope now is they may go to Suledin Keep. The Wardens have been using it for new recruits. If they wind up there, we have a prospect of returning her to her father.”

“Sadly too late to prevent an incident,” Josephine maintained. “But if we do find her, we can at least mitigate the damage on that problem. I will write to Teryn Cousland to assure him we are still doing all we can.”

Cullen’s ears pricked up at the mention of Fergus, and glanced around to see Charter leaving. Josephine set the report to one side, picked up one of her many boards and smiled as she came over to sit with him.

“Problems?” Cullen asked with some interest.

“Wardens, the Mayor of Crestwood’s daughter, her dead fiancé and a one dead Warden. And add in the Inquisitor’s brother-in-law, Teryn Cousland,” came the strained answer.

“What happened?” Cullen questioned, concerned.
With Lyssa now married to Fergus, whatever this was could affect Kai personally as well as professionally. Judging by how the Trevelyans intermarried with so many other aristocratic families, there were few noble houses in Thedas she wasn’t connected to in some way, however distant. She was even related to Dorian. And so was he, by marriage at least.

Josephine rested her clipboard in her lap as she began to explain. “A couple of months ago, just after the Wardens quelled a small darkspawn outbreak in Crestwood, the Mayor’s daughter ran off with them, leaving behind a note stating she planned to join the Wardens. As you can imagine, the Mayor was not thrilled. Firstly losing his daughter, and secondly losing her advantageous match to the son of a wealthy local farmer. Her fiancé was obviously not happy either. Naturally, as the Wardens in the South are allied with the Inquisition, they complained to us first. Try as we might, we have been unable to track her down. Unhappy with our progress, and with the position of Bann of West Hill vacant owing to a family feud, they appealed directly to Teryn Cousland.”

She paused taking a breath. “Had that been the end of the matter, we could have handled it. But today we received further bad news; another group of Wardens arrived in Crestwood on their way to Caer Bronach, unconnected to the initial group. The girl’s fiancé and a crowd of his fellows determined to take issue with the new arrivals. Long story short, a scuffle escalated into a fight, leaving the boy dead along with one of the Wardens.”

“Maker!” Cullen exclaimed.

“Quite, both parties have grievances this time.” She exhaled wearily. “Even with the Teryn’s brother being the Hero, once the news reaches his ears, and it will, he cannot overlook this development. The Wardens too have lost a ‘brother’ who was innocent of any crime. Both are dead, the girl is still missing, and the Inquisition is caught in the middle.”

Cullen surmised one other complication. “You realise when he finds out, Arl Teagan will not let this matter rest.”

“I appreciate that,” Josephine answered, her fingers clutching the board a little tighter. “I will do what I can for now, but I suspect this will end up with King Alistair. Charter will send word to Jader to update the Inquisitor before she sails for Kirkwall. Perhaps her friendship with the King may enable her to ease the situation should it escalate.”

Cullen was less optimistic. “Do you really think so?”

“I would not presume to predict the outcome at this stage,” she responded cautiously. Cullen knew Josephine well enough to understand her ambiguous statement was not hopeful either. This situation would play right into Teagan’s growing disquiet about Inquisition forces, and his complaints about them remaining in Ferelden. Just how far he would take his opposition was the real issue.

Josephine gave an encouraging smile. “From today, this will no longer be your concern, although you might find yourself indirectly affected. Even with your resignation and formal separation from the Inquisitor, you remain her husband. In some quarters this might be sufficient to seek your position on the matter.”

“Believe me, this is one subject I will steer well clear of,” Cullen insisted. “My focus will be exclusively on the Sanctuary. I leave the field of politics to those who excel at it.” He nodded respectfully at Josephine.

“Let us both hope your faith is borne out in this particular circumstance,” she declared, with the faintest lift of her brows.
“But right now you and I have other business to take care of.” Josephine pulled out what Cullen suspected was his new contract. “As arranged, you have complete say as Director over Sanctuary matters, and the Inquisition will meet all construction and operating costs. If the Inquisition comes to an end financial oversight will pass to the Chantry. There is one additional clause requested by Divine Victoria. Should this happen, she asks that a comprehensive audit is done before any transfer takes place.”

“That seems reasonable. I’d have asked for the same,” Cullen agreed.

“If you wish to peruse the contract before you sign...”

Cullen smiled. “Josephine, I believe we know each other well enough for me to not to worry. I’m positive you have every eventuality covered. There was just one additional matter. Captain Tamsin would like to remain as my assistant. I thought a transfer might be possible?”

“Yes, we can arrange that,” she confirmed, making a note. “I am aware of her brother’s situation, and it would be good for her to remain with you.”

Cullen handed over his letter of resignation, taking both copies of the new contract from Josephine. Two short signatures later, Cullen was no longer Commander of the Inquisition. He was now Director of the Templar Sanctuary. He handed back her copy and put away his.

There was no sense of loss as he thought there might be when it came to it. Instead, he now had the opportunity to aid those who had given so much of their lives to help others. It was his turn to offer a second chance, free of lyrium, to those able to take it, and allow some dignity for those whose minds had gone and could no longer care for themselves.

“I must confess I will miss your presence, Cullen,” Josephine reflected. “Commander Rylen is remarkably efficient, but he is a little...”

Cullen knew what she was trying to avoid saying. “Blunter?” he suggested.

Josephine sighed. “Indeed, though perhaps in time we will smooth his rough edges.”

Cullen didn’t have the heart to discourage her. Rylen was too firmly set in his ways to be anything other than he was. He was a pragmatic man, able to rise to most any challenge except one of being diplomatic. Her mention of Rylen reminded him of the Inquisitor’s mission.

“Rylen explained the Inquisitor was summoned to Kirkwall,” Cullen mentioned.

“Oh, good,” she noted. “The Inquisitor was disappointed not to be here when you arrived, and has left some items for you in her quarters. She thought you could use her room during your stay.”

“I see,” he responded.

“Oh, I hope that is suitable,” Josephine added worriedly. “We are very short on space, but I could...”

“It’s fine,” Cullen assured her. “It’s only for a few days.”

“Excellent,” she approved, standing up. “Shall we?”

Cullen was curious as to her haste to take him to the Kai’s quarters, but followed her lead, picking up his pack and stood up. “Of course.”
Curiosity became suspicion when they reached the door to Kai’s room. He spotted two locks instead of the usual one. When Josephine placed an intricate key in the second lock, he heard it automatically open without her turning the key. He’d only ever seen this type of lock in an altogether different environment, in doors to Circle storerooms to safeguard more dangerous or expensive magical equipment.

“She’s got an enchanted lock?” Cullen exclaimed.

“Let’s go inside,” was Josephine’s brief answer.

After entering, she closed the door and placed the key in the lock, securing the door behind them. Suspicion turned to concern as he followed Josephine up the stairs. Inside, Cullen saw there was now a second desk, placed by the balcony doors and stacked with books, some which appeared to...luminesce slightly. They were evidently books on magic.

What was Kai doing with them?

He noticed her usual desk had only had a handful of reports, likely put there since she went away, and a large box. The rest of the room was its regular semi-disorganised state when she was suddenly called elsewhere.

Cullen turned to Josephine. “Why the lock?”

“There were a couple of crude efforts to break into her quarters. Rylen stationed a watch at the entrance in the Hall after that, but they’re only present when she’s in residence. The Inquisitor didn’t see the point in someone standing around unnecessarily when she was away, so we settled on Dagna fitting the lock instead. We Advisors, Harding, and the Inquisitor have a key. No one else has access.”

He pointed to the new desk. “She has books on magic. What’s going on, Josephine?”

“Most are books Solas left behind,” Josephine explained. “Many concerning the Fade, as well as other tomes on magic. Nothing unusual or novel in themselves, he had them openly in his rotunda during the time he was with us.” She lowered her voice even though only the two of them were there. “She’s requested other books referred to in those volumes. With all the mages here, no one would think twice if we ordered rare or obscure books on the Fade.”

Cullen frowned. “How rare or obscure?”

“The kind where we have to arrange favours, or pay considerable sums to obtain them. Sometimes only a single copy remains in a private collection,” she confided. “She has Charter investigating where they’re located and then charges me to procure them. Nothing illegal, all perfectly above board, and she pays with her own money.”

Josephine furrowed her brows. “She’d never shown such an interest before your excursion to the Basin and now...” She sighed. “She doesn’t hide this from us, and she doesn’t let it hamper her duties. Anyone who didn’t know her would assume there was nothing to it. People do collect stranger things or have stranger obsessions.”

“She’s searching for something,” Cullen stated candidly. “She only focuses this intently when she already has an objective in mind, or an unanswered question.”

“She admits to that freely, her...encounter with the spirit,” Josephine acknowledged. “But something feels...”

So much openness with Kai pointed to one thing, a distraction from she was actually up to.
“Hiding in plain sight,” he voiced aloud.

Josephine nodded, folding her arms. “But what is she hiding? That is what worries Charter, Harding and myself. None of us can work it out. It may be nothing serious, and we may be concerned unnecessarily. We hoped by showing you, you might have a look through and lend us your thoughts.”

Cullen rubbed his neck. What little he learned of magic was simply in connection to his duties as a Templar, and what he’d heard on patrol. “I could have a look, but I’m no mage and neither is she. Most would probably be formulas or schematics, meaningless to anyone not trained in the technical aspects of magic. There’s only one mage I’d trust to look at this.”

“Yes, and he’s returned to Tevinter,” she conceded. “We were cautious about involving Dorian without talking to you first. Besides, he would have had scant opportunity as she’s been here since you all came back from the Basin.”

She faced Cullen with a slight smile. “If you do have some time to look, we’d be grateful, and we’ll speak with Dorian when he returns. Unfortunately he is expected to be away for three or four months at least.”

“I believe you’d have a better chance with him than with me,” Cullen advised.

“I understand.” She unfolded her arms and walked over to Kai’s usual desk. “This box is for you. I believe it contains gifts, and a letter she left knowing she would be away when you came.”

Cullen dropped his pack and cloak on the bed, and joined her. “Thank you, I’ll take a look, and I’m grateful you told me.”

“You know her better than anyone, Cullen. Regardless of your personal circumstances, we understood you’d have her best interests at heart, as do we.” She hesitated, thoughtful and hopeful. “I realise this isn’t my place to say, but...she feels your loss more than she will admit to.”

Cullen understood her meaning. “The mission took its toll on both of us, and we salvaged what we could in the circumstances. This is best for all involved.”

“Yes, perhaps it is,” she accepted, taking the keys from her pocket. “I’ll open the door and then leave these with you.” She pointed to the right side alcove. “She packed your belongings in the chest, and your armour is on a stand under the dust sheet.”

Josephine unlocked the door and handed the keys to him before leaving. Cullen stared at the books. Maybe her research was innocuous as Josephine suggested, but Cullen knew Kai. With her, nothing was ever so straightforward.

Cullen sighed, rubbing his neck. Kai, what are you up to?

His planned stay was short and he had much to do before he left; he decided to leave the books for now, and investigate the contents of the box instead.

As Cullen pulled up a chair, his foot caught something. A bottle rested on the floor, the stopper loose. Perfume oil had puddled, and soaked into the carpet. Another mark of her hurried departure. As he picked it up, the fragrance of sandalwood became more potent. He tightened the stopper and stowed the bottle in one of the draws.

The strength of her scent brought back recollections of their last night here, how both left work aside to spend time together and talk; something they were lamentably bad at during their marriage. They shared one last chess game and one last picnic basket. Kai insisted he have the bed
as he was travelling and needed to rest. The following morning he awoke to discover she brought him tea and breakfast.

*She couldn’t have given him an easier departure.*

Cullen opened up the box. Inside, on top of the wrappings, was a letter addressed to him in Kai’s handwriting. He unfolded it. It was much neater than her usual rushed notes, showing she’d taken her time composing it. He sat down and started to read.

*Dear Cullen*

*I am sorry I couldn’t be here to see you.*

*We received an urgent summons about Fade rifts appearing in the Gallows from Varric, insisting we come and get rid of the ‘cursed things’. Sadly, being on call for this sort of thing is the price of being the woman with the ‘glowing hand’.*

*Varric mentioned that Hawke should have returned from Weissaupt by the time we reach Kirkwall. At least now we may have a sense of what’s going on there. I only hope Varric’s joke about Hawke walking away when the fortress explodes is a joke and not a reference to actual events. Explaining that outcome to the Wardens in the South could be problematic.*

Cullen hoped the same, but knowing Hawke’s affinity for disaster, he could easily visualise something like that taking place. No sooner had the thought come, another equally worrying one joined it. Kai likewise was no stranger to inviting trouble, and the two of them together...the chance of catastrophe in Kirkwall increased exponentially. Throw Rocky into the mix, and the prospect of half the Free Marches disappearing through an explosion became a possibility.

*Cullen quickly stopped thinking about it before he envisaged worse, and carried on reading.*

*There are gifts for you in the box from Stone-Bear and Black-Wolf. Helsdim brought them when he passed through on his way to Val Royeaux. He promised to bring us some of those ‘frilly little cakes’ from Madame Lucien’s on his way back. That is, if he doesn’t scoff them first. I think his sweet tooth is very nearly as bad as yours. And yes, maybe mine too.*

*Thank you for your letters. I always look forward to them, and catching up on your news.*

*It was marvellous to hear how quickly work has proceeded on the Sanctuary’s construction, with the main building complete and the dormitories started. I know you will make the Sanctuary an excellent home for all the former Templars. Because you’ve already walked the road they’re on, you understand what they’re going through. Leliana and I recognised there was no-one else who could make this work as you could. We are both keen to offer you as much support as we can, to allow you to plan ahead as you see fit.*

*I’m really happy to hear your family are doing well, and curious to discover more on how Evan’s chess studies are progressing. It sounds like Mia is training up another chess rival after you beat her. Perhaps a possible threat to your burgeoning chess superiority?*

*“Very funny,” Cullen muttered, a grin breaking out.*

*Knowing you and knowing Mia, I would imagine by now she’s cajoled an explanation from you as to our separation. Even though you’re stubborn, she’s remarkably tenacious. Anyone who can repeatedly hunt down your elusive whereabouts has a determination even you couldn’t stand up to. I’m pleased if you have spoken, she is exactly the sort of person you can confide in, and who*
It wasn’t a surprise she guessed he talked to Mia. His sister was good at pushing through his reluctance since they were children, and Kai knew it. Cullen had intended to tell her, but it seemed he didn’t need to.

I wanted to be here when you arrived, wanted to see you again, but maybe not being able to was for a reason, and perhaps for the best. Seeing each other might have been difficult and awkward after time apart.

Cullen stopped and re-read the first sentence to ensure he read it correctly; she had really written ‘was for a reason’. Since when did Kai ascribe to such things? He puzzled over it for a moment, then shrugged and continued, assuming he misunderstood her meaning.

We parted on more favourable terms than either of us probably imagined considering the circumstances, and I, for one, wouldn’t want to see that jeopardised. The friendship we rediscovered with our exchange of letters has been a comfort and I don’t want to lose that.

Me neither, Cullen thought.

The last night we were together, we agreed we would be honest with each other from then on and how there was little point pretending anymore.

“We did indeed,” he agreed aloud. Odd how such an understanding came more freely after separation.

We talked about many things, but the one subject we didn’t broach before you left was where our separation might lead. All I wished to say was, whatever you want, I am ready to go along with. All I would ask is that we remain friends. Whatever else happens, I don’t want to lose you entirely.

She was obviously alluding to an annulment. He hadn’t thought that far ahead, but she was already agreeing should he want one, and the thought bothered him. Since their actual separation in the Basin, the whole process was amicable, and he was grateful not to lose everything they had. But the ease with which she accepted whatever he wished niggled at him, and for the life of him he didn’t know why.

You’re overthinking this, he told himself. Cullen decided to stop brooding on it, and shifted his concentration back to her letter.

When I return I’ll write with all the news from Kirkwall.

Work on removing your former Knight-Commander from the Gallows came to a sudden halt with the rifts. So, there’ll be an opportunity to see ‘Meredith welded to the flagstones, glaring’ as Varric puts it, before they finally take her away.

Don’t worry, I’ll make certain I’m at safe distance when I tell her how her former Knight-Captain not only fixed her mess, but proved to be an incredibly talented Commander, building one of the most capable and disciplined armies Thedas has likely ever seen.

I doubt she’ll listen, but then again, she never did.

“Maker’s breath, Kai!” Cullen couldn’t help but laugh at the mental image of Kai lecturing the red lyrium statue. He knew she would have no qualms about taking Meredith on, if she were still alive. Personally he wouldn’t have rated Meredith’s chances going up against Kai. His wife was always fiercely protective of those she loved.
As ever, I wish you well, and look forward to more news from South Reach.

All my love

Kai

Cullen smiled setting her letter aside, and stood to see inside the box sitting on the desk. Under the wrapping, he caught sight of a sheathed dagger and what looked to be a leather dog collar, both with small notes attached, again in Kai’s hand. He took them out and realised the notes explained who the gifts were from, along with a message. Underneath them was a man’s hide and fur jerkin in the Stone-Bear style.

The dog collar was from Ragnar, a present for Izzy. The message read: ‘for your hound, to remind her what she could be if she were a proper companion fighter’. Cullen smiled remembering Ragnar’s jibe ‘A hound? Well, what else would you expect from Fereldens’. The collar was softened dark tan leather with a silverite emblem of a wolf and a fastening made from the same metal.

Cullen pulled the dagger from its leather sheath, seeing it was silverite too. Not unusual since the ore was abundant in the Basin. He spotted the lion’s head engraving on the handle. The message from Sun-Hair read: ‘A lion’s head is no good without teeth’. His helm had caused some amusement amongst the Avvar for having only decorative teeth. Evidently this was Stone-Bear’s remedy for that oversight.

Cullen knew Avvar prized humour and making fun of one another, and the messages clearly showed that. No-one was permitted to get ‘too big for their boots’. Their way of life could be tough in lean years so a sense of humour and the need for the Hold to pull together was crucial.

Underneath the jerkin was a pair of breeches, and a pair of boots under those. There was no note to indicate who this was from, but Cullen could venture a pretty good guess. During the feast on their last night in Stone-Bear, Cullen saw Kai staring at these exact outfits on the men, and said to him, ‘if you’re member of the Hold now, you should have one of those’. Cullen scoffed at the notion, seeing a cheeky grin appear. She added nothing further, but he should have realised that was sufficient motive to get hold of one, just to poke at him.

Cullen shook his head, smiling. He returned the gifts to the box, and lifted it onto the floor.

The smile slipped as he recalled what else nearly happened that night in the Hold. Neither had the sense to see where a hug would lead with too much drink inside them. His beautiful naked wife gazing at him as if he was the only thing that mattered, and him wanting to lose himself inside her. And he almost did. Only her words allowed him to claw back control, ‘everything I am will always be yours, Cullen’ she whispered. In that moment he understood whatever brief comfort there would have been, would be vastly overshadowed by regret. It could have wrecked the friendship they hoped to save. He stopped them there and then.

Maybe Kai had a point after all. Seeing each other again might have proved awkward, especially now after they’d found a sort of equilibrium.

As he sat in the chair again, Cullen caught sight of a carved wooden snowdrop sitting on the desk. This was new, and he supposed it was her gift from Stone-Bear. A snowdrop was their symbol of spring, signifying rebirth or resurgence of life. It was an apt present for Inquisitor ‘First-Thaw’. Dorian had teased her about her legend-mark saying it sounded damp, but Kai was proud of it. ‘It fits perfectly with second chances’ she claimed. ‘What is a second chance if not an opportunity to
begin anew?’

The memory of her words made Cullen smile again. Irrespective of all that took place, he owed Kai for showing him he could break through the cold and gloom of his past, allowing the person he was to re-emerge. Now it was up to him to do the rest. He had achieved all he could with the Inquisition, and the Sanctuary was his new beginning. Rylen was right; he did enjoy putting the pieces together. And he was good at it.

*Maybe some things did happen for a reason.*

Cullen owed Kai something else too, a response to her letter. She would have something to read when she came back, and the Ferelden sweets he brought along would doubtless make her smile. Cullen found blank parchment in the draw and set about drafting a letter to Kai.

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**End Notes**

If you've made it to the end thanks for bearing with what has been a somewhat darker story than the previous one. However, I'm not done with the two of them yet.

Kai and Cullen's journey will continue in 'Marked by Destiny'.

Comments always welcome and appreciated. Let me know what you think. :)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!