

## 5 THE BRIDE

“FOUND YOU!”

“Ahhhhh!” The little girl darted away from the large vase sitting in a building’s courtyard, her two, long ponytails swishing behind her, barely escaping.

They ran through the center of their village during the third evening of the Autumn Festival. They weaved around plain clay-brick buildings adorned with bright, fluttery streamers made from cut cloth and paper. They ran under forged golden bells of delicate size and weight, which the villagers had strung across the streets and even above doorways. Paper lanterns illuminated their way with clear, yellow lights, as they heard musicians, well-rehearsed in traditional instruments, entertain the crowds that were enjoying the expansive public feasts of drink, meat, fruit, and bread.

The two ignored all of that as they continued their chase: the girl who was discovered from her hiding spot, the boy who was pursuing her.

“Dammit,” the boy said, trying not to wheeze, “this isn’t a game!”

She didn’t reply, her little legs a blur as she ducked and weaved around the surprised festival goers, trying to gain enough distance to find another hiding spot.

“Dammit, Cor – sorry! Excuse me!” he said, as he bumped against people, causing more than one person to spill their food and drink, who all looked at the two retreating figures in surprised recognition.

At one point, the girl looked behind her, to see how far away her pursuer was.

“Cora! WATCH OUT!”

Too late, she looked forward, only to run headfirst into the robed legs of a standing figure, who swayed more than a little. She bounced backwards, hard onto the ground, and looked up, stunned.

The fanfare of traditional drum, pipes, and voice abruptly stopped on the raised stage. The standing figure glared downward at Cora. It was the emissary from the farthest village-state of the region, taller than any person, male or female, that Cora had ever seen. His luminous skin was so pale that it seemed only two shades darker than the white, iridescent robes that he wore. Standing next to the emissary was a large man whose eyes were dark with anger. He looked past Cora, seeing the boy quickly catch up with the girl, pull her up onto her feet at a discrete distance from the two men, and bow low.

“My apologies, Lord Agem,” the boy said to the emissary. He continued to bow. “My apologies, Father.” He straightened up, standing at attention before his elders.

“Are you all right, sir?” the emissary’s bodyguard asked, caught off guard by the sudden intrusion of a little girl.

The emissary waved his hand dismissively as he recovered his decorum. He regarded the boy and then girl.

He asked, “Are not these your children, Lord Machus?”

“Yes.” The man with the angry eyes gave a curt nod of his head. “My son Prospero and daughter Sycorax – who know not to run through the streets.”

Shamefaced, Cora stuttered, “F-Father --”

“Prospero, bring your sister back to the manor house,” Lord Machus interrupted.

“Yes, sir.” The boy grabbed his sister’s hand and pulled her aside, letting the emissary, his father, and their entourage continue with the tour of the festival. As they passed by, he heard the emissary murmur, “So young.”

The musicians resumed their performance before the crowd, who again moved about and murmured amongst themselves, as if released from a spell. The villagers warily gave a wide berth to Lord Machus’ children, whom they rarely saw outside of formal ceremonies, on the secured grounds of the manor house. Once everyone behind them was at a far enough distance, the boy hissed, “I TOLD YOU it wasn’t a game. Sneaking out of the house like that. What if you insulted Lord Agem enough that Father loses this alliance?” He angrily walked forward, pulling his sister behind him. “And, of course, you get me in trouble, too.”

“I’m sorry!” Cora said.

“You’re not a baby anymore, Cora. Use your brain for once.”

Cora, who was only six years old, looked despairingly at her sixteen year old brother. “I know that I’m stupid, Peri.” She started to cry.

“Oh, Gods, Cora,” he sighed. He looked up and around, noticing how dark the sky had gotten and how far away from the festival they had walked. “You’re not stupid. You just need to think before you do things.” He glanced at his sister, whose face was now a mess with tears and snot. He stopped, crouched down, and wiped her face with a napkin from his coat pocket. “I’m sorry I made you cry.”

“I just – I just wanted to see,” Cora said. “We never get to go.”

“I know.” Peri continued wiping his sister’s face clean, on that road between the active, working-class life of the village center and the walled, high-born solitude of the manor house. “But Father’s hosting the emissary at the house – we’ll have festivities there.”

“It’s not the same,” she said, “because --”

“Because there are no kids there your age. And you’re lonely.”

Cora hiccupped, trying not to cry again.

Hearing running from the direction of the manor house, he saw two of the house guards, one of them saying, “Master Prospero! Is Mistress Sycorax all right?”

“Where was she?” the other asked. “Is she hurt?”

“She’s fine,” Peri answered. “She just wanted to see the festival.”

“All by herself? But that isn’t safe!”

Cora looked down, shamefaced again.

Peri regarded his sister. “Return back to the manor house. We’ll be there shortly.”

“But Master Prospero --”

He waved them away, impatient. “We’re almost there, and I don’t think an assassin will attack us right now, what with you two being so loud.” He saw both house guards reluctantly assent and march back to the manor house. “It’s probably really late for you. Do you want me to carry you home?”

In reply, Cora put her arms up. Still crouching, Peri turned around, and Cora climbed on his back, holding onto her brother as he stood up, his arms supporting her little brown legs.

As Cora was lulled by the swaying motion of being carried, she suddenly realized that her brother was more and more like their father every day, less child and more grown-up – the future heir. She felt the determined walking of Peri. All that time, when he was looking for her at the festival, he never slowed down, never stopped to enjoy the festivities around them. Even now, he was bringing her straight home, focused with obeying their father’s command.

“Peri, stop,” she said.

“What?”

She wriggled free and dropped down. “I’ll walk.”

“Cora?” He looked at her, puzzled.

She looked up at her brother. “I’m not a baby anymore.” She started walking away, mimicking the determined pace of her brother. Then she slowed, stopped, and looked back, where her brother was still standing. “But... can we hold hands, Peri?”

He walked over to his sister. Without a word, he gently grasped her hand, and they continued their way to the manor house.

Cora looked up at her brother as they walked, and she noticed that he was frowning. She was used to their father being abrupt and dismissive of her, a distant, cold man, busy with his work. But if a grown-up Peri ever became so similar to their father that he became emotionally distant to her as well, Cora didn’t know if she would ever be able to bear that pain. “Peri?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“Are you mad at me?”

“What?” he looked at her as they continued walking. “Why are you asking that?”

“You’re frowning. You look mad.”

“Ah.” He opened his mouth, about to say something, but he stopped, reconsidered, and then grinned. “I’m just tired, too, Cora. You tired me out with chasing you all over the place today.”

She looked at him, unconvinced. “You’re lying.”

“Cora --”

“Stop lying!” She yanked her hand away and stopped walking. “No one tells me anything! How can I stop being a baby if nobody tells me anything?”

Peri stared at his sister, still so young but getting older every day. “I’m sorry, Cora,” he said. “And you’re

right. I'm angry, but not at you.”

“Then who?” Cora asked.

He sighed, looking around. They were essentially alone, with the celebratory sound of the festival far behind them, the outer wall of the manor house compound just before them. The night watchman would be the only one there to greet them when they would finally arrive at the front gate. In a low voice, he answered, “Father.”

“Why?”

He shook his head. “I can't tell you now.”

“Why?”

“I just can't. Not now.”

“When, then?”

“Later.”

“When later? Like tomorrow later?”

“Like, when you're a little older later.”

She frowned at that. “You promise you'll tell me later?”

He smiled at that the innocence of Cora's question. “I promise.”

Hand-in-hand, they started walking again.

“Well, Cora,” her brother said, “you saw the Autumn Festival. What do you think?”

“It was fun,” she replied, “until we ran into Father.”

“Hmmm.”

“And the emissary – he was kind of scary, too, right?”

Cora felt Peri's hand tighten a little, but not painfully so.

“Yes,” he said, in a small voice. “Yes, he is.”

#

When Cora was a little older, she slipped away from her teacher when she wasn't looking and searched for her brother. Ever since the last day of Cora's first and only Autumn Festival, Peri was often away from home, accompanying their father's envoys in forging ties with the surrounding village-states, but especially Kaldach, the village-state of Lord Agem, whose alliance their father especially favored. It was part of Peri's education, of becoming the lord and leader of Ilaeon, their village, someday. Even though she knew such trips were good for him, their home, and their people, she still wished for the earlier days, when Peri was her main teacher and companion. He had returned late last night from one of those trips, a weeklong sojourn, but she hadn't seen him all morning.

But today, she needed Peri. Today, of all days, she needed Peri to finally give her that answer that he promised to give, over a year ago.

“Where is that useless girl?” she heard her teacher say.

Cora ducked down and waited for her teacher, a strict woman who had been instructing her in the mores

and manners of being an educated high-born lady, to walk past her hidden spot and go farther down the corridor. While the manor house was small, with only a small staff of a handful of people, Cora was an expert hider, so much so that only Peri would be able to find her. After looking around in the usual public spaces where Peri would be at that time of day, she made her way to the other wing of the second story, where Peri's room was located. Even though she was not allowed to visit her brother's room without his permission, fear drove her. Making sure that no one saw her, she lightly knocked on Peri's door and then entered his room.

He wasn't there.

In spite of herself, Cora started to cry, which made her angry. “Stop it, Cora!” she whispered at herself. “Don't be a baby!” She rubbed her eyes with her sleeve and looked around, noticing that the clothes that Peri wore when he came home were still strewn on his bed, as was his travelling bag. Did Peri even sleep in his bed last night? Or did he, like Cora, slip away from the house without anybody knowing?

Where could he be?

Then she remembered what day it was.

Even though she was still a young girl, she knew more about the layout of the manor house and its surrounding land than the manor staff. The only ones who knew more were her father and brother, and thanks to her brother, she knew of one place that her brother could get to without calling attention to himself. After feeling for a specific spot on the room wall, she felt a raised area, pressed, and then pushed open a hidden door panel. She slipped into the space between the façade wall of the room and the actual wall of the manor house, a dead zone that encapsulated the entire house like a thin bubble. From there, she made her way from the second floor, to the first floor, and then the cellar level, emerging from a stone-brick panel.

From there was another door, this one recessed on the floor, hidden under sacks of root vegetables. Just moving enough carrots and turnips to open it, she pried open the narrow trapdoor, dropped down into a claustrophobic earthen tunnel, and closed the trapdoor above her. It was an escape route, dug out decades, perhaps centuries, ago, when a much rougher dwelling sat upon this land. Keeping her eyes closed because she wouldn't be able to see anything anyways, she scurried down the tunnel, emerging from a hole on the bottom of a hillside that overlooked a meadow filled with springtime white flowers and grave markers.

Sitting down before one of the larger markers was Cora's brother.

Blinking before the sky still bright with the midafternoon sun, Cora slowly made her way from the hill, which the villagers called Pumpkin Hill because of its shape, and across the springtime graveyard. Without a word, she sat down next to Peri before the simple grave marker of their mother, Lady Kirka, who had died, along with over half the village, in the great sickness that struck six years ago when Peri was twelve and Cora only two.

Peri had already set down a small, hand-made bouquet of flowers that only grew in that lonely meadow. His head down in a slight bow, his eyes were closed and bright with quiet, streaming tears – the only time he allowed himself to cry.

“Happy birthday, Mother,” Cora said, and she immediately felt guilty, as she could not share the same grief as her brother. She always had conflicted feelings towards her mother, a woman she didn’t remember, even though Cora resembled her mother with every passing year. When Peri finally opened his eyes and looked at her, she didn’t know if who he was seeing was his little sister or the ghost of his dead mother.

“I’m glad you’re here, Cora,” he said.

“Peri.” She swallowed hard, trying not to cry, as her brother’s voice broke her heart.

“Father wanted me to stay one more week at Kaldach,” he said.

Cora frowned, remembering the strange, unnerving presence that had been Lord Agem in the manor house two years ago. She chose her words carefully. “Why did Father want you to stay longer?”

“Lord Agem saw me as... useful.” Peri shook his head. “He asked Father that I stay longer, and Father agreed. But I said I needed to come home – against Father’s wishes.” He paused. “Father whipped me for that.”

“WHAT?”

“I’m not missing Mother’s birthday.”

“But – but Peri!” Cora stared, aghast. “Aren’t you afraid?”

“No.” He placed a hand on their mother’s grave marker, on the still-wet spots where some of his tears landed. “After all, I’m his heir.” He grimaced at that. “Anyways, Father got what he wanted. Our alliance is secured.”

Cora frown deepened, her hands clenching against her will.

He noticed her hands. “Tell me what happened.”

She breathed deeply, trying to calm down. “I lost my temper with my teacher today. She was being so MEAN. She said nothing I did, nothing I said, nothing about me was right. I – I yelled at her, and she said I was going to learn to be a proper lady, or else I would bring shame to my family and -- and -- my husband. That my – my husband’s family would have every right to beat me.” She trembled with fear and anger. “She sent me to my room, saying that she would fetch me once I calmed down. I left the house instead.” She began to breathe shallow and fast.

“Cora --”

“Remember that promise, Peri – when we walked home from the Autumn Festival? Is that why you were so mad at Father? Is that why the emissary was so scary? Is so scary? Is that why – is that – is --”

Peri reached out and held his sister, his much larger arms encircling her small, trembling form. After a short space of time, he said, “I wish... I wish I was powerful enough to stop this. You know now what I mean.”

“My marriage.”

Peri flinched.

“Please tell me,” she said. “You promised you’d tell me.”

He gave a pained sigh and released Cora from his arms. Looking at their mother’s grave as if seeking words, he said, his voice flat and unemotional, “Your betrothal began two years ago, at the Autumn Festival. Now they

want you in Kaldach. To prepare you for your life as a Kaldachi.”

“They want me in Kaldach – wait, I’m supposed to LEAVE?” Cora sat up alarmed. “When?”

“Tomorrow. The transport that brought me home is to bring you to Kaldach.”

“No.” She stood up. “No!”

“I tried to convince Father before I left for Kaldach. I tried to persuade the Kaldachi court when I was there. To let you stay here until your wedding day – to give you more time...” Peri trailed off. “I’ve failed you, Cora.”

Cora closed her eyes, as a sharp but familiar pain shot from the base of her skull, to the top of her head. It began only a few months ago and was such that Cora kept it to herself, not wanting to add to her brother’s worries. It used to scare her, but now it served as a welcome distraction from the sadness. Just as quickly it arrived, the pain dissipated, leaving Cora angry. She opened her eyes. “No,” she said. “You didn’t fail me – Father did.”

“Cora.”

“You know I’m right, Peri!” The rage that she felt against her teacher suddenly welled up, and she found herself hitting her brother, to rouse him from his stoic sadness. “I’m right!” She swung her arm to hit him again.

Peri reached up and grabbed her wrist. “Don’t hit me.”

Cora yelped in pain.

“SHIT.” He stood up and inspected her wrist. “I’m sorry, Cora --”

“That hurt, Peri.”

“I know,” he said, massaging the sore spot. He shook his head. “Gods, we shouldn’t fight. Not today. Not in front of Mother’s grave.”

“I’m sorry.”

After one final touch, Peri let go of his sister’s wrist. “Better?”

“Yeah.” She rubbed her wrist, more out of nerves than anything else. “When am I supposed to be married? I mean – officially?”

Peri answered, his face pained, “In one year.”

Cora stared at him. “One year.... But I’ll only be nine. How old is the Lord of Kaldach?”

Peri looked away, unable to meet his sister’s eyes. “Thirty-seven years older than I am.”

“Oh.” Cora shifted her gaze at Pumpkin Hill. “Everyone’s probably looking for me by now – and they’re probably wondering where you are, too. But I don’t want to go back to the house.”

“I know.”

“Why – why is Father allowing this? Why can’t I stay home?” She shook her head. “Why can’t I be a child, just a little longer?” Cora tried not to cry because she was so tired of crying all the time. “I’m only eight years old! And Father wants me to leave to live with strangers, to – to be – a WIFE – it’s not fair!”

Peri gritted his teeth, and the anger that he kept inside the whole week he was at Kaldach exploded. “Of course it’s not fair! Because Father is a damn coward!”

Cora looked at her brother, alarmed. “Peri--”

“You’re right – Father did fail you. And he failed me, too. He failed Mother.” His body trembled, enraged. “I wanted answers, and Father refused to tell me. Secrets, secrets, all these damn secrets. I needed to know – I desperately needed to know – and Lord Agem said he had the answers, but only at a price.” He closed his eyes again, his face a constellation of pain.

“A price?” She saw her brother grimace, shamefaced. “Peri?”

“The price -- was me.” Peri paused. “Lord Agem wanted me to be his – to do --” he choked back the bitter words. “In exchange for his knowledge, I agreed to be his lover.” He started to laugh, hysterically, and he threw his arms around his body, as if the harsh facts of the universe were flogging him. “And Lord Agem is not a gentle man!” He opened his eyes, wide with panic, expecting his sister to shun him with disgust.

In response, Cora wrapped her arms underneath her brother’s arms and held him tight. Together, brother and sister sought strength from each other, to heal a brokenness caused by those who held power over them.

His chin resting on the top of Cora’s head, Peri declared, “I wish I could’ve stayed a child longer, too, Cora. I was only sixteen years old when Lord Agem approached me.”

“When?”

“The first time Father hosted him – during the Autumn Festival. I was frightened, and I rebuffed him. But once your betrothal became finalized and Father started sending me to Kaldach as part of his liaison, I couldn’t escape. And when Lord Agem offered information about Father and the true status of our village, in exchange for my – attention, I couldn’t refuse that offer.” He trembled a little, remembering. “That was a year ago.”

“Does Father know? What Lord Agem is doing?”

“Cora, how could he NOT know?”

“DOES HE KNOW?”

Peri paused, then answered. “I don’t know, Cora. It would kill me if he did.”

She pressed her face into her brother’s chest, feeling his fast heartbeat against her cheek. “Oh Gods, Peri. Why do we even know such things?”

“Because, Cora,” he said sadly, “we’re no longer innocent children anymore.”

“Yeah.” Cora slipped out of her brother’s arms and sat back down. She regarded their mother’s grave, feeling very tired, very old. She was going to be a foreign lord’s wife, so it was time she acted like one. “So,” she said, “Lord Agem’s answers --”

“What were they?”

“Yes. Did they answer everything you wanted to know?”

Peri sat down next to her. “I’ll go backwards in time – it’s easier that way.”

“Okay,” she said.

He breathed in and then began. “The world has gotten dangerous, with strange forces overpowering lesser villages. I myself have seen the fear of these invading powers from many village lords on my envoy trips, but that fear had been building up for years. Ilaeon, our village, is weak, so Father offered your hand in marriage to the lord of the local strongest village – and that was the Lord of Kaldach. Doing so ensured the survival of our village, by having a powerful protector, and the sooner the marriage, then the sooner the protection.”

“I already know that, Peri.”

“Yes. But what you and I didn’t know was that Father’s arrangement with Kaldach happened as soon as you were born – that any daughter of Lord Machus is promised to Kaldach.”

“What? WHY?”

“Because our mother – Lady Kirka – was half Kaldachi.”

“WHAT?”

“Yeah. You don’t remember her, but Mother’s skin was lighter in color than Father’s and everyone else’s in Ilaeon, with the exception of you and me. As it turns out, our family has a long history with the Kaldachi ruling family. While our grandparents on Father’s side were married, with Father being the heir, our grandparents on Mother’s side were not. Mother’s father was Lord Helio, the then-emissary from Kaldach.”

“WHAT.”

“Funny how history repeats itself, eh?” Peri shook his head. “When our great-grandfather was the ruling Lord of Ilaeon, he had a son and a daughter. The son married and had a son of his own: Machus, our father. As for the daughter, Lady Perse, the visiting Kaldachi emissary had an illicit affair with her. When our great-grandfather found out that she was with child, he fell into a rage and murdered the emissary and banished his pregnant daughter from Ilaeon. There nearly was a war between Kaldach and our village, but our paternal grandfather stepped in, promising that Ilaeon would be a vassal to Kaldach, with the gifting of a daughter from the ruling lord’s family to the Kaldachi court.”

“But that gifting wasn’t Mother – why?”

“Remember -- Mother’s own mother was banished and disgraced, and Mother herself was an illegitimate child. Hardly worthy of being a ‘gift’ in her grandfather’s eyes.”

“Then how did Mother become the wife of Father?”

“Even though he despised his own daughter, our great-grandfather still felt possessive of her child Kirka. So he forced Father’s mother to raise Kirka in the manor house.”

“Wait – so Mother and Father were raised together? Like brother and sister?”

“No. When she was alive, Mother used to tell me about how she was raised. They treated her like an outsider, even though she and Father were first cousins, raised in the manor house. Everyone in the manor house never made her forget that she was half Kaldachi and, therefore, not a true-blood Ilaeoni. But because of the scandal and near-war between Kaldach and Ilaeon, no foreign lord would agree to have his daughter marry into our village. So to preserve the Ilaeoni ruling family line, Mother was given to Father as a matter of duty.”

Cora placed her hand on their mother’s grave marker. “Just like I was given to the Lord of Kaldach.” She felt the midday sun on her skin and the sounds of springtime birdsong. “Peri, had Mother felt love – ever?”

“I hope – no, I know – that she knew that I loved her. And you loved her too, even as young as you were before she died. It was difficult for Mother to have children, Cora. In this graveyard are the tiny burial spots of four babies who died in childbirth.”

“What? REALLY?” She looked around, alarmed. “Did you know beforehand?”

Peri nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“Cora – you were still a little child earlier.”

“But not anymore?”

“But not anymore.” Peri sighed. “That’s why Father restricted us so much. We’re the two who survived, out of six children -- the future Lord of Ilaeon and the future wife of the Lord of Kaldach. Our fate was determined once Mother died.”

The grief that Cora could not feel for a mother she barely remembered suddenly broke open, as the pain in her head bloomed, and she found herself beating her clenched fists at their mother’s grave marker.

“Cora --” Peri reached out to stop her hands.

“If she loved us so much, if she cared, why did she die? Why did she leave us? No one loves us, nobody in the whole world – it’s just you and me! Once I leave here, I’ll be all alone, Peri -- all alone --”

“Cora--” He struggled to hold her hands still, as she twisted and writhed.

She screamed, “I hate her! I hate her for leaving us! I hate Father! I hate this whole world!”

“Cora, please --”

“I--” Suddenly she stared at Peri. “I--”

“Cora, what --” Peri started to ask, but then he felt her twisting body turn jerky and stiff. “Cora – CORA!” He let go.

She fell backwards, her spine arching, her clenched fists clamped to her side, the bloodshot whites of her eyes horrifying to see.

“Cora!” He started to reach for her, to hold her still.

“LEAVE HER BE!” commanded a voice behind them.

Peri turned back and saw his father, large and terrifying to behold, marching down from Pumpkin Hill to his mother’s grave site. Once there, Lord Machus sat down, beckoned Peri to come to him, and then motioned Peri to sit down next to him.

It felt like forever, as Peri watched helpless his sister’s unconscious body shake with uncontrolled convulsions. But after a minute, Cora’s body grew limp, her breathing became calm, and she fell into a quiet sleep.

“Move her so that she’s laying on her side,” Lord Machus said. He took off his cloak, folding it quickly into

a type of bolster. “And put this under her head and neck.”

Without a word, Peri quickly complied. “What now?”

“We wait until your sister wakes up on her own. Fifteen, perhaps thirty minutes.”

Peri nodded, and he sat down next to Cora, like a protective animal. “What was that?”

“A seizure. Your sister was highly emotional beforehand. Such things happen.”

“Will she be all right?”

“She should be.”

“That’s good.” Looking down at Cora, Peri avoided his father’s gaze.

Lord Machus regarded his two children in thoughtful silence, waiting.

After an uncomfortable silence, Peri asked, “How much did you hear, Father?”

“Enough.”

“Oh Gods.” He buried his face in his hands.

“Peri,” Lord Machus said, “look at me.”

Peri looked up, surprised that his father called him by his mother’s pet name for him. For all of his eighteen years of life, he had only heard his father call him Prospero.

“Do you see a monster?”

Peri stared, dumbfounded. What question was this?

“Because if you do,” his father said, “I don’t blame you.”

“I--” he started, but then stopped, his mind clamoring with unsaid words.

Lord Machus shook his head, as memories rose from a long ago past. “All my life, my father taught me to hate the Kaldachi, just like his father did with him. Their power, their pride, their arrogance. That emissary did not woo my father’s sister. He took her, as if he were entitled to her body. And while that Kaldachi paid with his life, my grandfather’s hate was not quenched with that death, and it extended to my father’s sister and the Kaldachi bastard that she carried in her womb.”

“HOW DARE YOU CALL MOTHER--”

Lord Machus held up his hand. “Silence, Peri. You desired the truth, so I am giving it to you. And the truth is harsh and cruel.”

Peri clenched his teeth, but he became silent.

“When my grandfather took Kirka away from her mother, it was to punish Kirka for existing and Lady Perse for loving her. I already learned to hate Kirka before she came to the manor house, that to do otherwise but hate her would be an act of betrayal and treason in the eyes of my grandfather and everyone else in the house. But when she arrived, she was just this tiny, frightened girl, and I – I wasn’t much older than she was. And I couldn’t hate her.” He paused.

Peri said nothing.

Lord Machus continued. “I kept those thoughts to myself. I was ashamed that I wasn’t thinking the right

way, believing the right way – according to my family. Then my grandfather died, and my father became Lord of Ilaeon, but he continued his father’s decree of holding Kaldach responsible for Ilaeon’s troubles. Since my father had no daughter, then it was my duty to produce a daughter as part of the peace accord between Kaldach and Ilaeon. But in a twisted sense of justice, he believed that forcing Kirka to produce that daughter would be an atonement for his sister being forced to bear Kirka, and that giving a part-Kaldachi girl to the Lord of Kaldach would be less offensive in my family’s eyes than giving a full-blood Ilaeoni.”

Peri glared, indignant. “Did Mother know all this?”

“Yes,” Lord Machus replied. “My parents made certain that this knowledge would be part of Kirka’s education.”

“WHAT?” Peri started to rise up.

Lord Machus motioned for him to sit down, waiting until Peri did so.

“So,” Lord Machus continued, “Lord Agem was incorrect, when he stated that I married Kirka because my father could find no foreign high-born women to marry. In fact, my father never looked beyond the walls of the manor house. It was always going to be Kirka. And as both Kirka and I were under the control of my father, we obeyed and married each other. Yet, the miracle of it, Peri, the miracle – was that your mother loved me.”

“I know,” Peri said. “I know, and that has never EVER made any sense to me.”

“Your mother,” Lord Machus began. He stopped. He stood up, walked the short distance to his wife’s grave, and knelt down on one knee before it. “Do you think I don’t come here as well, Peri?”

“What?”

Lord Machus ran a rough, calloused hand along Kirka’s grave marker. “I could pretend to hate Kirka, in my public actions, as expected of me. But in private, I couldn’t, even though I felt I was betraying my father, my mother, my entire Ilaeoni family line. It hurt both Kirka and me when we lost those babies, Peri, but it brought us together. And when both you and Cora lived, I knew that at least two human beings in this cruel, merciless world would have the freedom to love Kirka as much as I wish I could have. For even in the privacy of our bed chamber, I was still conflicted in my love for your mother – but she accepted me, as broken and cowardly as I was. So when she died --” Lord Machus suddenly broke off.

“Father.”

“I became the monster my father wanted me to be and became the Lord of Ilaeon. For I see that I am a monster, in seeing what has happened to our children. With Cora hating, like I was taught to hate, with you having to turn to Lord Agem --”

“Stop it, Father,” Peri interrupted. “If you’re looking for sympathy or forgiveness from me, I can’t – because all of this you should have told me years ago.”

Lord Machus nodded. “I deserved that.”

Cora’s breathing changed as she started to move.

“Cora?” Peri asked, alarmed.

“Don’t worry,” Lord Machus said. “She’s just waking up.”

Peri crouched down, face-to-face with his sister. “Cora? Can you hear me? Are you okay?”

Cora’s eyes opened, seeing out of focus. “Hmm-y-yesssss....”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Brrotherrr....”

“Do you know where you are?”

“Hmm-n-noooo....”

“She’ll be somewhat confused at first,” Lord Machus said, seeing the fear in his son’s face. “But she’ll recover in a little bit.”

“Isss that... Fffatherrrrr?”

“Yes, Cora,” Peri answered.

Even in her post-seizure state, Cora flinched. “Are... weeee in... troubbbbble...?”

Lord Machus winced, seeing his daughter’s reaction.

“No, Cora,” Peri said.

Cora closed her eyes, her small exertions tiring. “Gooood....” she murmured, and she seemed to doze off again.

Peri asked, “How do you know that she’ll be okay?”

“Because your mother, when she was younger, sometimes had seizures when she was sick. She outgrew them, but it terrified me the first time as well.”

“Hah. So you are human, after all.”

Lord Machus’ head jerked up, his eyes flashing with anger at the disrespectful tone. But then his face softened, seeing the pain in his son’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Peri.”

“For what?”

He waited until Peri looked at him, eye to eye, before answering. “For being a damn coward.”

At that, Peri began to cry. “Shit,” he swore.

“I didn’t know. About what Lord Agem was doing to you. It’s like Kirka’s mother and that Kaldachi emissary, all over again. The same cruel cycle. All of it. The same damn cycle.” Lord Machus touched his wife’s grave marker again, tracing her name lightly. He breathed in and exhaled. “No more.” He waited for his son to regain his composure. “Peri,” he said.

“What.”

“I came to the graveyard, looking for you and Cora, because I knew you both would likely be here since no one could find you in the manor house nor village center.”

“So?”

“Lord Agem will arrive at the manor house tomorrow, to accompany Cora back to Kaldach.”

Peri’s fists clenched. “You want me to witness Cora leaving.”

“I wanted to, yes, when I found you both. But not anymore.” He shook his head. “I want you to take your sister, as far away as possible, and leave Ilaeon forever.”

“WHAT?”

“I am the Lord of Ilaeon. And I will be the last one. This cycle of pain, between Ilaeon and Kaldach that my grandfather started, ends now. You’re right. As a husband, I had failed your mother. As a father, I failed you and your sister. You and Cora deserve better than this.”

“But – the peace accord! If we leave, Kaldach will declare us in breach of the accord and attack Ilaeon!”

“I know. I will alert the village sentries, to evacuate the villagers – to flee as fast and far away as possible.”

“But what will stop the Kaldachi from pursuing our people? From pursuing Cora and me?”

“I will remain here – in the court hall of the manor house.”

“Father!” Peri exclaimed. “You’ll die!”

“And that, my son, will end the cycle.”

Peri stared. “Father --”

“Prepare your travel bag – pack lightly. Go west. Your grandmother, Lady Perse, was banished west of here. I’m sorry that I don’t know how far nor how long the distance, as your mother was too young to remember her journey, when she was taken to Ilaeon. And the people who would know – my grandfather, my father, my mother – are dead. I don’t even know if Lady Perse is even alive. But you’ll know you’ve arrived when you see these flowers.”

“What?”

“The flowers in this meadow. Hazel herb. They only grow here because your mother brought some dried ones from her mother’s garden, when she first arrived in Ilaeon. They’re your mother’s favorite flowers. I planted them here – when she died.”

Peri shook his head. “So this – THIS is the man Mother loved.”

“Yes,” Lord Machus said, softly.

“I hate you, Father,” Peri said, “for keeping this part of you secret.”

Lord Machus sighed. “Go now to the manor house. Take the Pumpkin Hill passage. I’ll stay here with Cora until you come back.”

Peri paused, as if to speak. He smoothed Cora’s hair from her eyes, stood up without a word to Lord Machus, and ran across the meadow, to Pumpkin Hill and its hidden tunnel back to the manor house.

Lord Machus sat down, looking like a man many years older than he was. He kept his hands in his lap, as if he were afraid that he would break Cora if he were even to adjust the bolster under her head. Gazing at the graves between the hazel herb, he thought of the generations of the ruling family of Ilaeon, of whom only he, his son, and his daughter were the only ones remaining. Suddenly, his face twisted in revulsion and self-disgust. “She’s still a child. What was I thinking? Giving away our child to be violated by a grown man.” He buried his face in his hands. “Has the world become so corrupt that even the innocent ones like her aren’t spared? And

our son – if we all live long enough, will even the innocent ones do evil? How can anyone live like that? With no hope anymore?” He lifted his gaze towards the graves again. “Oh Gods, Kirka -- I’ve done evil, allowed evil to enter our children. Why did you have to die? Why am I even alive?”

Cora opened her eyes. She watched her father, wracked with guilt and anguish. She had never seen her father this vulnerable, this uncertain, and she felt her sense of reality come unmoored. “Father,” she said, lifting her hand and placing it on his hands, “it’s okay to cry.” Cora’s dark eyes – looking so much like her mother’s – bore into him.

Lord Machus took his daughter’s hand, raised it up to his lips, and kissed it. His eyes shone with small, silent tears. They traveled down his worn, brown cheeks, leaving small damp spots on his and Cora’s hands.

She asked, “What’s a seizure?”

“Ah,” Lord Machus said, realizing that his daughter had been awake and listening. “It’s having a – a headache so painful that you faint and your body shakes. But it doesn’t last long. How do you feel?”

“I’m okay,” Cora replied. She was tired -- too tired to feel terrified, too tired to feel angry and sad. “Peri and me – we really have to leave?”

“Yes.”

“Then come with us, Father.”

“Cora, you know I can’t.”

So tired. And her head still ached. But she pulled back her hand. “What I said before. I don’t hate Mother. I don’t hate you, Father. But – I hate this.” She tried to sit up, but her body wavered.

Lord Machus reached out, steadying her. “Cora, lie down for now.”

“It’s not fair --”

“I know.” He carefully set his daughter back down onto the grass, the bolster that was his cloak underneath her head again. “Just rest for now.”

This time, Cora did drift to sleep, under a warm, midafternoon sun, a cool breeze, and the surprising, gentle caregiving of her father.

“Cora! Wake up!”

“Huh?” She sat up.

The sun was closer to the horizon, and her father was gone. Cora looked up, seeing her brother with his travel bag and a heavy walking staff.

“We need to go -- NOW. Are you ready?”

*Father didn’t stay to say goodbye*, Cora thought. As she stood up, her body sore but at least rested, she noticed her father’s cloak, still folded in a square next to the bouquet of hazel herb flowers on her mother’s grave marker. She picked up her father’s cloak and her mother’s flowers and held them tightly against her chest, like a shield. “Yes,” she said.