

## 6 THE LAST LADY OF ILAEON

For the first three days and nights of their westward travels, every strange, random noise in the forest and then the grasslands would set Peri and Cora off into a panicked run, their jittery eyes scanning for signs of the Kaldachi pursuing them. By the fourth day, they had reached the boundary of familiar ground. After crossing a range of rocky hills, they arrived at a desert on the other side.

As far as Peri knew, they were the only persons out there, so he allowed themselves to walk in a less manic pace in the unfamiliar terrain. During the day, the world was a bright, searing sea of tan and sage, with the tan reflecting the sun. During the night, the world was a dark, cold stillness. Peri and Cora spent two days and nights in that desert. They would rest within the shade of the occasional thorny shrubs and tall, prickly succulent plants in the daytime when the heat overwhelmed them, and they would sleep under makeshift lean-to's made with their father's expansive cloak, the walking staff, and low-lying skeletal trees when they were too exhausted to walk any further.

Always they were on alert for any signs of the Kaldachi, even as far away as they were from Ilaeon and every village-state they had ever known, but not once did Cora and Peri talk about what they had left behind: a village thrown into chaos, an invading army wanting vengeance, and a lone ruler paying with his life.

On the third evening of their desert travels, after they had already settled down for the night, it began to rain. At first, Cora and Peri saw the gentle rain as a boon, since their water supply was running dangerously low, and what water resources found near those skeletal trees were few in volume and plenty in distasteful grittiness. However, the gentle rain increased its intensity in seconds, and they scrambled to break camp.

“We need to find higher ground, Cora!” Peri yelled, his voice nearly drowned out by the sudden power of wind and rain, and they began running through desert ground that had become sucking mud and rivulets of fast-moving water. As they ran, Peri realized that they were in a wide stream bed, the sides of which he couldn't see. Then he heard the sound of crashing water too close behind him. Cora heard it, too, and she screamed in fear. He threw off his cloak, travel bag, and walking staff, stripped his sister of their father's cloak, and picked her up. He cried out, “Don't let go!”

Out of the darkness, the flash flood swept them up. It spun and buffeted them, as the rushing waters swept them downstream. Peri struggled to keep both of their heads above water, even as the downpour was drowning them from above. Then he heard in the near distance the sound of the waters falling off a cliff edge, and he realized to his horror that they were about to go over a waterfall.

*Ob Gods, PLEASE,* Peri prayed in desperation, and then he saw the outlines of a rickety, narrow rope bridge before them. With his sister clinging to him, he reached out and grabbed as they were about to go over. His hands and arm sockets exploded in pain, but he and Cora remained, hanging above the cliff, and he scrambled

to gain footing. Once both fully on the bridge, he yelled, “Cora, you need to hold onto the ropes and follow me!”

“NO!” she screamed, her eyes shut, terrified.

“DAMMIT, CORA -- JUST DO IT!”

At his enraged, hysterical voice, Cora released her death grip from her brother, crying as she grabbed at the bridge’s slippery side ropes and then set one now-bare foot and the other on the lone rope underneath them that served as the floor of the bridge. With the rain and wind threatening to strip them off the swaying bridge, they began to make their way across the unseen span, one tentative side-step at a time, the bridge curving frighteningly downward. Only when Peri felt the bridge’s curve rising on the other side did he realize that they were past the midpoint.

“Almost there, Cora!” he said, and then a sudden gust shook his footing, and he slipped off.

“PERI!” Cora screamed, feeling her brother fall as he cried out, his hands grabbing at empty space. “PERI!” she screamed again, her head exploding in pain, threatening another seizure, but all she heard was the rain, the wind, and the roar of water below them. Alone in the stormy darkness, she sobbed. And then she let go and fell into the deadly waters below. The water slammed into her tiny body, and she remembered nothing until she woke up, her head filled with hazy images and a barely-recalled conversation with a beautiful man in a warm, safe place.

When Cora woke up, seeing an unfamiliar yet kind older woman who said she was her grandmother, she wept.

#

Her name was Perse, but Cora called her grandmother “Ina.”

Even ten years on, Cora remembered when she first saw her, when she woke up in Ina’s home, after losing her big brother when they fled their doomed homeland. She remembered that Ina shared in her weeping, as Ina hadn’t known that she had grandchildren, hadn’t known that her daughter had died long ago, hadn’t known that her granddaughter would be the only one to survive.

While that first night and subsequent days and nights would be hard for Ina and Cora, they worked through their loss and grief. After ten years, Cora could barely remember a time when she didn’t live with her grandmother, in a home eked out in the western wilds. Even though she was eight years old at the time, and therefore old enough to remember, Cora had no memory of the two strangers whom Ina said rescued her from the desert flood and brought her to Ina’s home.

“What did they look like?” Cora used to ask.

“Oh, Cora – I don’t remember. It’s too long ago.”

“How did they find you?”

Her grandmother would only shake her head. “I don’t remember, my dearest girl. But I will always be grateful that they did.” And she would hug her tight, in her small, brown arms.

It was springtime, and perhaps that was why Cora was thinking about that long ago past, for it was during the spring when she had arrived at Ina’s home. Even now, ten years on and an old woman, Ina secured with rough-hewn hands and lithe, muscular arms the fallen stones and loose posts of the fence, which kept out the wild animals from their homestead.

“Do you need any help, Ina?” Cora called out, pausing from her locking down the outbuilding that housed a small herd of goats and a little coop of chickens.

“No, my dear. I’m good.”

Cora regarded her grandmother, a woman who, once upon a time, was the young Lady Perse, the sister of the heir of Ilaeon and the daughter of the Lord of Ilaeon. Like Cora, she was raised high-born, sheltered in their ancestral manor house. Lord Agem, the Kaldachi emissary, told Peri that Ina was courted by that long-ago Kaldachi. Her father contradicted that belief, saying that the Kaldachi had “taken” Ina. But when Cora asked bluntly what happened, when she was old enough not to be embarrassed to ask, Ina replied, “Neither.”

“Ina?”

“I pursued him.”

“INA!”

She gave a small, sad smile. “We fell in love, Cora. As simple as that. But Kaldachi emissaries are celibate – did you know that?”

“No.”

“They are either younger brothers or younger cousins of whomever is the current Lord of Kaldach. To prevent conflicts in succession, they cannot marry nor bear children. So when your grandfather Helio and I fell in love...” Ina trailed off, shaking her head. “He denied it. He tried to do his duty to his Lord and village. But I was lonely, in that cold manor house, Cora. And, as it turned out, so was Helio.” She closed her eyes, as she remembered painful events. “Helio never blamed me. For what happened to him. You see, your grandfather was sent to fetch me – to be his brother’s bride.”

“WHAT? But Lord Agem nor Father never said any of that!”

“Because they didn’t know – in order to preserve the honor of the Lords of Kaldach and Ilaeon. Once my father and Helio’s brother, Lord Reus, found out about our love – especially when they found out I was with child – Lord Reus ordered to have my father execute Helio for treason and to have me banished for breach of my betrothal. While that order was kept secret, Helio knew it was his brother’s doing. Then, in public, Lord Reus demanded reparations, on threat of war, saying that it was because my father killed Helio. However, the real reason for the reparations was to replace a tainted bride. So when my brother took Kirka away from me – even though she was only four years old — I thought that meant her.”

“But... it was me,” Cora said.

Ina sighed. “Ilaeoni. Kaldachi. It doesn’t matter. Cowardly, vicious men are all the same, Cora.”

“Is that why you live here – so far away from everyone?”

“Yes, my sweet girl. When they took Kirka away from me, I realized then that I was no longer of any use to them. I was useless --” she paused, “which meant I was FREE.” She then smiled, bittersweet. “I left that house of banishment, which was on the far edge of Ilaeoni known lands. In my mourning, I wandered, a poor vagabond, far and wide. And after I had learned from many people – some friendly, many not – I settled and built a home here. I used to wonder why I decided to place roots. Now I know why.”

“Why, Ina?”

“To make a home for you, my dearest Cora.”

Remembering everything she told her that day, Cora looked across their little homestead, over the vegetable garden, seeing her grandmother, whistling in the spring sunshine, and she marveled.

Here was a woman who witnessed her lover paraded in front of the whole of Ilaeon before his execution, the villagers shaking their fists above him, lobbing rotten fruits and vegetables – and much worse – against his body. Here was a woman who witnessed her people speckle her lover with their spittle, pendulous and still warm from their heat even as it flew through the short space between their lips to his erect, still-proud head, his eyes forward, back straight, and stride steady, to demonstrate his integrity. Here was a woman who saw her lover stripped of the clothes and vestments of his position and wear the rags of a condemned man, even though he still walked with his inborn nobility intact. Here was a woman who wanted desperately to cry out, but whose lover made her promise to keep silent so that he could at least protect his beloved from her own people’s scorn and hate, even though he could not prevent her own brother, father, and grandfather from hating her in private. Here was a woman who saw her lover swing from the gallows and dumped in a criminal’s grave.

After witnessing all that, how was Ina able to let that go – to let the past be, move on, and be happy?

Cora looked at her grandmother, working sweetly in the sunshine, and the word that came to her mind was *miracle*.

“Did you say something, my dear?” her grandmother asked.

“No – no, Ina,” she said.

“Well,” she said, wiping her hands on her long work skirt, “we’ve done enough.” She pointed east, to the distant horizon, where a dark gray line was moving quickly over the plain. “The storm will be here soon.”

“Okay.” Cora looked down and swallowed hard.

Her grandmother quickly crossed the span separating them, reached out, and hugged Cora in those strong arms. “It’ll be all right, my dear.”

When the spring storm arrived, Cora was huddled in heavy blankets, nervously sipping weak hazel herb tea as her grandmother read to her from one of the few books she had, acquired during her days of wandering the land, about people who flew with gossamer wings. Even after ten years, with her memories fractured of that night when she first came to Ina’s house as a little girl, the torrential rain of springtime storms still terrified Cora. She sat, her eyes tightly shut, as she focused on the soothing, sing-song voice of her grandmother reading, instead of the banshee howl of the wind whipping their little house from without. She didn’t know that she had

drifted to sleep until she woke up, the storm long past and the house silent and gray with early dusk.

“Ina?” Cora called out. She looked around, feeling disoriented. “INA?”

“I’m here, Cora,” her grandmother responded, walking in from outside. She was already dressed in her work clothes. “The goats got out.”

“Oh no – I’m sorry, Ina! I must’ve not closed up the outbuilding right --”

“What? No, no, my dear,” her grandmother interrupted. “It’s not your fault. A piece of the wall actually gave way from debris thrown by the wind. It’s an old building, Cora. We’ll have to repair it – probably have to build a new one. But for now, I have to fetch the goats.”

“Do you need help?”

“Ah, Cora. No, stay here. It’s still drizzling a little, and there likely will be some flooding. I know where those fool goats have probably run off to – the forest.”

“But, Ina, the wild animals --”

“Don’t worry, my dear. I have my walking staff. And remember – I’ve chased after runaway goats far longer than you’ve been alive.”

“If you say so, Ina.” Cora saw her grandmother grab her walking staff from just inside the doorway, wave goodbye, and close the door as she left.

In the silence of the gray house, Cora dozed off, but she slept fitfully. When she awoke again, the light shining through the small windows were the bright, golden light of midmorning, yet she didn’t hear Ina either inside or outside the house. Trying not to worry, she quickly refreshed herself, readying for a long day of hard work. Once changed in her own work clothes, she stepped outside, seeing the chaotic disarray of their homestead touched from last night’s storm.

*Ina’s not back!* Cora thought, as panic began to rise up in a sick sensation from her stomach. Looking around, she saw Ina’s muddy footprints, still clearly defined in spite of the early morning drizzle. She followed them out of the homestead, past the fence, and into the edge of the forest that lay only a short walk away. She wasn’t too far into the forest when she saw the first goat carcass.

She stifled a scream. Remembering Ina’s teachings, she inspected the goat’s body without touching it, noticing several bitten and ripped away chunks missing from the carcass.

*Wolves.*

Following the disturbed forest floor, she found either more goat carcasses or the bodies of dying goats, which made Cora wince as she quickly rushed past them. When she finally came to a clearing, she saw the half-eaten body of the remaining goat, the hulking mass of a giant boar laying in its side, and –

“INA!” Cora screamed, rushing to her grandmother’s side.

Her grandmother was in a barely conscious crumpled heap, her breath labored, her side torn open with a deep puncture wound, the size of which fit one of the tusks of the boar. A pool of blood spread in a wide, dark circle underneath her.

“DAMMIT, INA!” Cora cried out. She took off her outer jacket, ripped it into strips, and used one strip to pack the wound. She tied two strips together and then, flinching, she carefully lifted up Ina, who gave a sharp, pained cry. Cora wound the long strip as an impromptu bandage, tying the ends together with shaky, bloodied hands.

“Stupid!” Cora said, angry and frightened. “So stupid!” Seeing her grandmother’s walking staff broken in half near the boar’s bloodied head and punctured eye, Cora guessed that Ina had arrived at the clearing, where the boar was scavenging the goat remains of the wolves’ hunt. Likely startled from its meal, it attacked Ina, and she defended herself the best way she could, but not before the boar impaled her.

Suddenly, the boar moved.

“OH GODS!” Cora gasped, too late to move out of the way as its massive head bore down on her, one of its tusks piercing her arm. She felt muscles tear and bones snap as she managed to dodge as it crashed down, finally lying motionless again.

*No no no no no*, Cora’s mind screamed. *No no no no no!*

In that instant of sharp, white-hot pain, she remembered.

A beautiful person with sad, silver gray eyes. His fingertips smoothing her hair and then resting on her forehead. His voice that said, “Have hope. Live long. Be well. That’s my blessing for you.”

And his name.

Cora cried out in pain again, but the pain was different this time. She glanced down at her arm and then stared, dumbstruck. Her shattered radius and ulna shifted back in place and reknit themselves, as did her torn nerves, blood vessels, muscles, and skin. Within the space of thirty seconds, Cora’s arm was healed, not even a bruise remaining.

*What? HOW?*

“When I realized how sick you truly were, I had to save you from that, too,” he had said to her, ten years ago in that strange, safe place.

“Setebos,” Cora exclaimed, naming this stranger at last, “what did you DO?”

“Cora,” Ina gasped. Her voice, usually sonorous and flowing, was ragged, labored.

“INA! I need to get you back home somehow – I need to make a – a sled or something --”

“My dear --” Ina coughed suddenly and winced in pain. “I die --”

“NO – just hold on, we can --”

“-- burn me -- to ash --”

Cora began to weep.

“-- bury me --” Ina gasped again, but continued, “in Ilaeon.”

“Ina...”

“Where – my beloved lies.”

Cora bowed her head, her tears dropping on Ina’s blood-soaked bandages. “Where in Ilaeon, Ina?”

“Crim’nals’ graveyard -- belajoun seed -- I planted --” Ina’s breathing became fast and shallow, yet she continued, “Tree grown now. PLEASE.”

Cora held her grandmother tight, sobbing. “Yes, Ina, yes, I will.” She prayed that the miracle that was in her would heal her grandmother as well, but somehow she knew that wasn’t possible. She felt Ina struggle to breathe as her heart fibrillated like a crazed bird, trying to break free from its cage of bones, as her blood pressure plummeted from her blood lost to the forest floor. Cora held her until she lost consciousness again, held her until she stopped breathing, held her until her body grew still and cool.

The Cora who had fled Ilaeon would’ve stayed in the forest, wanting to die. She would’ve waited for the wolves or the wild boars to take her, as they had taken her grandmother. She would’ve succumbed to weeping and despair, letting the loneliness overtake her soul.

She was not that Cora.

She touched her forehead to her grandmother’s one last time, set her grandmother down on the forest floor, and stood up, facing a long, hard day of work. By day’s end, the chickens were set free to range where they will, the outbuilding was a cooling char of a pyre, and her grandmother’s ashes were in an urn originally made for pressed oil. By the next day’s sunrise, Cora was ready to leave her second childhood home behind – to let the past be -- with the urn strapped to her back, a travel bag at her side, and her own walking staff gripped by strong, lithe fingers.

Far away, to the east, lay Ilaeon.

“Let’s go home, Ina.”

#

On the fourteenth day, Cora arrived at Ilaeon.

“OH GODS.”

Cora knew that she and her brother had been fleeing a doomed village. In the days and miles of her long walk across grassland, desert, mountain, forest, and plain, she avoided any human dwelling as she prepared herself, to face the ruins that once was Ilaeon. She envisioned abandoned, derelict, even burned out buildings.

Instead, she saw every standing building completely gone – razed to the ground -- as if Ilaeon never existed. Where the perimeter wall of the village-state should be, she saw formerly churned up soil, long ago overrun with the surrounding grassland. She could see clear across to what would have been the other side of Ilaeon’s perimeter wall and far beyond that. Since nothing interrupted her line of sight, she knew that even the manor house, with its security wall, was gone. However, as she looked on the ground, Cora saw that the streets and roads, while overrun with weeds and crumbling, still marked where the people of Ilaeon once walked.

*Oh Gods, what happened to the people?*

Cora took a deep breath, clearing her head, and crossed what would have been the western gate of the perimeter wall of Ilaeon. Getting her bearings, she made for the criminals’ graveyard, which lay on the other side of the farthest north of what once was the boundary wall. Even while still on the pathway she saw her

grandfather’s tree, its branches spreading outward like a dome. Before the center of its wide trunk, Cora dug Ina’s grave, finally using the hand shovel she had stored in the travel bag. Once large enough, she interred the burial urn, filled in the grave, and gave a final pat to Ina’s gravesite, like a mother would do with a sleeping child.

“As I promised, Ina,” she said. “Sleep well.”

Tired, Cora was tempted to rest underneath the cool shade of her grandfather’s tree. But she stretched tall, repacked the digging tools into her travel bag, grabbed her walking staff, and stood up. She started for the pathway, this time to Pumpkin Hill, for the graveyard that was within Ilaeon’s perimeter wall. There, she saw the meadow’s hazel herb were in full bloom, which gave Cora a pang of bittersweet, as hazel herb was Ina’s favorite flower – as was her mother Kirka’s. Walking through the meadow graveyard, Cora was relieved that the gravesite markers were undisturbed, as if the dead were the only ones to survive the erasure of Ilaeon. But when she reached her mother’s grave site, Cora stopped, startled.

On her mother’s grave marker was another bouquet, albeit dried out after many years. And on either side of her mother’s grave were two other graves, much newer than Kirka’s, each one with rough grave markers made of wood. On the right was the grave marker with Cora’s father’s name, his birth year, and his death year of ten years ago, roughly hand carved into the wood. On the left was another grave marker, carved in a different handwriting. On that marker was Cora’s brother’s name, his birth year, and his death year of five years ago. On both markers were also a bouquet of hazel herb flowers, dried out with age.

Cora stared at the three graves. Her knees buckled under her, and she sat down heavily, stunned. Only her brother Peri made little bouquets like that, intertwining the stems like living ribbons, and his unmistakable hand had made and written their father’s grave marker, that – it became clear to Cora – her brother had buried their father.

“Peri – you – you were ALIVE?”

Anger replaced Cora’s sadness, as she realized that she had believed that Peri had died ten years ago, when he fell on that awful stormy night from that damnable bridge. She had grieved heavily for her brother. And yet, he not only survived the fall, but he recovered enough to return to Ilaeon and bury their father. He had lived, but he chose not to find her, instead to leave her to fate, whether that be to live or die. He had lived for another five years without her, and when he died, it was not she but someone else who watched over him and buried him.

“WHY, PERI,” she cried out, her heart beating angrily against her ribcage at his betrayal, at yet another Ilaeoni secret. “WHY?”

Her eyes burning, she looked around, at the peaceful spring meadow of the Ilaeoni dead, and she looked down at her parents’ graves. Kirka and Machus, the Lady and Lord of Ilaeon. She looked down at her brother’s grave – the heir of Ilaeon. But now Cora, as the only surviving daughter, would be the last Lady and heir of Ilaeon – if Ilaeon had still existed.



Cora knew where she would find her answer.

“Oh Gods, give me strength,” Cora said. She rose up, her anger driving her to move forward.

For Kaldach waited for her.