

7 THE SAVIOR OF KALDACH

When Cora was very young and her brother Peri was her primary teacher in the manor house, he once unrolled a map of the known world. In Cora’s memory, the map was huge and regal, with careful calligraphic script and bright, illuminated images illustrating the terrain, the natural landmarks, and the known village-states. Peri pointed out the location of their village-state Ilaeon and its surrounding neighbors, but the largest of them all was Kaldach, the farthest east of the village-states on the map, and encompassing so much land that it seemed more a town or a city than a village.

With the manor house and everything else in Ilaeon gone, Cora’s memory of that map guided her towards Kaldach. Even though she had been betrothed to the Lord of Kaldach since she was six years old, she had never been there, for she and Peri had fled Ilaeon the night before her official move to join her would-be husband. After four days traversing a thick forest, she arrived at the outskirts of Kaldach’s domain, with fields tended by stoic, silent workers. *So*, Cora thought, *I’ve come to Kaldach at last*. She started to walk forward.

Then she hesitated.

Even when she was Mistress Sycorax, daughter of Lord Machus and Lady Kirka, Cora had never left Ilaeon in all of her eight years of life. As the granddaughter of Ina, she hadn’t come in contact with another human being other than her homesteader and hermit grandmother for another ten years. She suddenly realized she had no idea what others thought when they saw her. Even from that distance, she could see a perimeter wall of stone rising high around a wide hill bristling with close, many-storied buildings, with its massive main, west-facing gates open but guarded by sentries patrolling the parapet on top of the wall. Even with her limited knowledge, Cora sensed the sentries seemed excessive in number for just being guardsmen of a walled village state, especially a reputedly formidable one such as Kaldach.

Cautious yet curious, Cora turned left, making a wide semicircle around Kaldach’s outer farmland. On the other side were the orchards, as well as a smaller east-facing gate, which was even more heavily guarded than the west. It was there, among the apple trees, that she felt a dagger edge at her back and heard a man’s voice question, “Who are you? What business do you have in Kaldach?”

Cora was suddenly brought back to her childhood, when the watchmen of the manor compound would approach suspicious individuals. She was a stranger on the grounds of Kaldach, and she couldn’t believe how stupid she was in forgetting basic protocol when arriving at a foreign village state. Her mind raced, the extinct village state that was Ilaeon in her mind’s eye, as well as the memory of her father’s grim face, who expected death for breaking the alliance between Ilaeon and Kaldach. Kaldach killed her father and destroyed her ancestral home. Kaldach drove her grandmother to live and die, far in the western wilds. What was she doing in the land of her enemy? Why did she even believe that she could gain knowledge of Peri’s fate here? These

thoughts flittered through her mind, yet Cora couldn't think of anything to say except the truth.

“I --” she began.

“Lower your dagger,” an older voice commanded.

“Sir?”

An older guardsman walked toward them from the south. His steady gaze took in Cora's face with such scrutiny that it caused Cora to clench her teeth so as not to drop her eyes. “I'll take over now.”

“But – sir! She was spying here from the east --”

“I was not spying!” Cora exclaimed, angrily turning her head. She felt the dagger cut a little into her cloak.

“LOWER THE DAGGER,” the older guardsmen repeated.

“... Yes, sir.”

Cora saw the younger guardsman – who looked not much older than she was – sheathe his dagger and step back, but he was scowling.

“Continue your patrol.”

“Yes, sir.”

The older guardsman waited until the younger guardsman left. Then he said in a low voice, “My apologies, Lady Cora.”

“Y-you know me?”

He gave a small bow. “While you have grown, how could I forget the face of the girl who ran into my Lord Agem's legs in the streets of Ilaeon? You were too fast for me.”

Cora stared stunned. “Who are you?”

“For the Autumn Festival, I was assigned as Lord Agem's bodyguard.” He gave a soft, sad smile. “Now I am the Captain of the Guards. My name is Cryn. Lord Agem had entrusted me to care for your welfare when you would arrive someday, although you have arrived much later than he had wished.”

Frowning, Cora took in this information. She asked, “Am I the last one to know all this, then?”

“I'm sorry, my lady.” Cryn looked around. “It's not wise to be outside the wall, especially in these treacherous times. Please follow me.”

With Cryn leading, Cora walked through the fortified arches of the western gate, aware that every guard glanced at her before looking away. She couldn't even guess what they were thinking, as their captain walked with her, a foreign woman who wore the rough-hewn clothes of the western wilds, unwashed and unbathed for several days. *I wonder if they know I'm Ilaeoni?*, Cora thought. She tugged on her hood, covering her head even more.

They crossed the short span between the outer wall to the inner wall, crossing an interior gate. As Cora followed Cryn, she looked down, seeing narrow cobblestone streets with white stone walls edging close on either side. Looking up, she saw the walls reach up multiple stories high. Dotted here and there, from the second story and up, small windows were open with metal shutters that opened out, but she saw no flowers or

ribbons or any adornment whatsoever. At the roof-top, sturdy wood-carved arches bridged buildings together. Squinting, Cora saw movement, of persons walking across the bridges from one roof-top to another.

Just like its people, Kaldach was tall and luminous, a beautiful wonder to behold. And it angered Cora that it remained, alive and active, while the powerful Lord of Kaldach caused small and humble Ilaeon to be a land of death and silence.

She gripped her walking staff so tightly that her fingers ached. Its sonorous *tokb* against the cobblestone street echoed all around them as Cryn led her through the warren of empty streets, always going upward. When they reached the center, where the palatial manor house sat with its own security wall around it, Cryn gave a curt nod of acknowledgement as the sentries let him and Cora through the main gateway.

It was a short walk from the gate to the Kaldachi manor house, and inside, even as Cora was aware of the stares of the manor staff, Cryn led her further until they arrived at a private sitting room on the fourth floor.

“Lady Cora,” Cryn said, gesturing to a wide settee.

Cora set her walking staff aside, removed her travel bag and cloak, and carefully set them down next to her staff. With a sigh, she sat down. At a side table, she saw him pour a glass of water and hand it to her. “Thank you, Cryn.” She raised the glass to her lips.

Cryn sat down on an opposite chair. “You have traveled far, my lady.”

Cora paused, then took a deep drink. “Yes. From the western wilds.”

His eyes widened. “All the way from there? What was there?”

“My grandmother. Lady Perse.”

“Lady Perse?” Cryn exclaimed. “She’s alive?”

“She was.” Cora took another drink. “She wanted me to bury her in Ilaeon. So I did.”

“Oh Gods,” Cryn said. He shook his head. “So, you saw --”

“Everything.” She rested the empty glass on her lap. “Cryn, where is Lord Agem?”

“My lady,” Cryn said, “Lord Agem has been away just beyond our eastern border. He should be back today, but --” He shook his head. “If only you had arrived here years earlier. These days are difficult times.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have been in the western wilds all this time, nowhere else?”

“Yes.”

“Then you wouldn’t know.” Cryn paused. “Not many of our own Kaldachi know these state matters -- but you are the Lady of Ilaeon; you need to know.” He paused again. “We are at war, my lady.”

“What?” Cora frowned. “With whom?”

“Strangers from the east. They are an invading army. Kaldach had consolidated its power for decades with the village-states to the west, so Ilaeon, Gebayu, Laedyas, and the other smaller village-states have been under Kaldachi rule. But when we began a year ago to expand outward to the east, we encountered a, well, an invisible wall.”

“An invisible... wall?”

Cryn shook his head, incredulous. “There’s no other way to describe it. We try to move beyond Kaldach’s easternmost boundary, and we are stopped, as if a physical stone wall is in our path. We investigated north and south for several miles, but that wall extends, unending, on either direction. However, our archives show that such a wall had not existed before, so it was placed there by some unknown enemy – with a power much stronger than us or any other village-state that we know.”

“A power much stronger...” Cora trailed off.

“We established a garrison along that boundary. A month ago, an invading force crossed the wall as if it did not exist. We engaged the invaders, but they overpowered us – easily.” Cryn winced. “We prepared for a full-on onslaught, but for reasons of their own, they pulled back after destroying the garrison and sent word that they wished to engage in talks. So Lord Agem has been at the boundary for one week, speaking on our behalf. He is to return today.”

“Are... are these invaders human?”

“Pardon?”

Cora shook her head. “Never mind.” She closed her eyes, frowning. “I’ll wait for him, then.”

Cryn looked at Cora, seeing a woman exhausted, overwhelmed, and filthy. “My lady, there’s a private bedchamber adjoining this room, with a private bath. Please refresh yourself, as well as some sleep. I’ll have a change of clothes and food sent up for you, so that you can wait here in peace.”

Cora opened her eyes and, for the first time since she entered Kaldach, gave a small smile. “Thank you, Cryn.”

Cryn stood up and bowed. “Then I take my leave, Lady Cora.” He paused, taking one last look at Cora, and then left, closing the door behind him.

“Ah,” Cora sighed. She felt old, much older than her eighteen years. *I can sleep right here*, she thought. With an audible grunt, she gathered her bag, cloak, and staff, stood up, and made for the adjoining bedchamber.

What have I got myself into?

#

“No one loves us, nobody in the whole world – it’s just you and me! And once I leave here – I’ll be all alone, Peri, all alone -”

Knock.

Knock knock.

Knock knock knock.

Cora woke to a polite but insistent knocking on her chamber door. “Yes?” she called out, agitated from waking in a strange room from a deep sleep filled with half-remembered nightmares.

“Lady Cora,” a young woman’s voice said on the other side, “I have your change of clothes. May I come in?”

Cora sat up, keeping the blanket up around her neck. “Oh. Yes. Come in.”

The chamber door opened a little, and a young maid walked in, carrying clothes draped over one arm. She bowed upon seeing Cora and walked over to a vanity table and chair. She carefully draped the longer pieces over the chair and set the smaller pieces on the table. “Will you need assistance, my lady?”

“What?” Cora asked, at first dumbfounded. Then she remembered her long-ago manor house protocol. “Oh. Oh – no, thank you. That will be all.”

“As you wish, my lady. Your refreshments are in the sitting room.”

“Thank you.”

The maid bowed again and then left, closing the door behind her.

Cora sighed and then let the blanket drop. She stared down her naked form – scrubbed and scented in a fashion that she hadn’t experienced in a decade. The last time she was pampered like this, she was a little girl. But she was a young woman now, and she didn’t quite know how to interact with anyone, other than Ina, with a body that still felt alien to her simple sensibilities. Still feeling drowsy, she rose from bed and got dressed in clothes much more refined than what Ina or Ilaeon had ever given her. Her dark hair still damp, she combed it as best she could, putting it up in a no-nonsense bun, and then left the bedchamber to get something to eat.

She stopped, halfway through the door, upon seeing Lord Agem sitting on the chair, sipping a glass of water.

“Ah,” she said, as if someone had punched her in her chest.

Lord Agem’s blue eyes widened. “Lady Sycorax.” He set the glass on the nearby end table, stood up, and bowed.

Right, Cora thought. *Protocol*. She stepped across the threshold and bowed.

“I imagine,” Lord Agem said, “you have many questions for me.”

“Yes. But after I eat, unless you want to see me faint with hunger.”

“Oh – my apologies --”

“And please sit down. I’m nervous as it is without me having to literally look up to you.”

“You are... much more strong-willed than how I remember you.”

“And YOU,” Cora replied, “are EXACTLY how I remember you.”

To her surprise, Lord Agem’s face twisted in pain, and he sat down. “My lady, I hope not.”

Cora stared at him. “Look,” she said, “I’ve seen my grandmother gored to death by a wild boar, walked hundreds of miles to a home that doesn’t exist, and buried her, only to find out my brother had been alive five years after what I thought was his tragic death. I don’t want to pepper you with questions, just to pull information out of you. I’m not a child who needs to be protected from harsh truths, and having spent ten years in the western wilds, I am no lady. My name is CORA. Just Cora. So if you are not the man of that Autumn Festival, then drop the emissary bullshit and tell me what the hell happened, Agem.”

Lord Agem exhaled as if he had been holding his breath. “All right, then.” He watched Cora stand over the side table, picking various pieces of food, and eating them quickly but neatly. “Are you going to sit down?”

“JUST TALK, Agem. Ten years ago...”

“... Ten years ago,” Lord Agem said, “I arrived at Ilaeon, at Lord Reus’ bidding, to escort you back to Kaldach. What I found was a village in chaos, people fleeing in fear and guardsmen viewing me and my entourage as hostile agents. It was – madness.” Lord Agem frowned, remembering awful images in his mind’s eye. “I found your father, Lord Machus, alone in the court hall. He told me that he allowed you and your brother to flee and he would bear the consequences. The head of my guardsmen tried to secure your father there, to bring him back to Kaldach. But your father refused to leave, declaring that he would rather die in Ilaeon than leave. So he fought back.” Agem paused.

“And died,” Cora said, her voice cold and calm.

Lord Agem grimaced. “I wasn’t there. Cryn took me outside when he realized your father was resisting. Once Ilaeon was... secured, I sent word to Lord Reus of the death of your father and your and your brother’s flight. In all that chaos, I asked Cryn to bring your father’s body to Ilaeon’s graveyard and bury him next to Lady Kirka.”

“You DID?” Cora looked at Agem, surprised. “WHY?”

“Because the Lord of Ilaeon does not deserve to be struck down in his own manor house like a common criminal.” He paused. “Your father, Lady Cora, was a noble man, in contrast to many high-born lords that I’ve known.”

“Does that include you?” Cora asked, bluntly. She picked up a grape.

Lord Agem answered firmly, “Yes.”

Cora set down the grape. “Go on.”

“I knew that Lord Reus would want to send out a search party to find you and your brother.”

Cora said, “My father thought that the Lord of Kaldach would be satisfied with his death, to end his interest in Ilaeon.”

“Your father was wrong. Lord Reus has been obsessed with Ilaeon, ever since your grandmother chose Lord Helio over him. Lord Reus —”

“Your father.”

“What?”

“Your father. Isn’t Lord Reus your father?”

Lord Agem stared at Cora. “So. Peri told you.”

She stared right back at him. “Why won’t you acknowledge Lord Reus as your father?”

Lord Agem swallowed hard. He reached for his water glass and took a sip. “Because he won’t acknowledge me as his son.”

“But – you’re his only son. Aren’t you the heir of Kaldach?”

“HAH.” Lord Agem lowered the glass in his lap, his eyes cast down. “No. No, I’m not. Do you know why?”

“Why?”

Lord Agem stared at his water glass. He was silent for so long that Cora was about to ask again, but then he replied, “Because my power-mad tyrant of a father refuses to share his rule with anyone, least of all the bastard son born of a concubine.” His shoulders started to tremble as he continued, “Especially when the son may or may not prefer m-men over women.” He forced himself to look up, prepared to receive a volley of insults from Cora. He was startled to see that Cora had walked over from the side table and was sitting on the edge of the settee, leaning towards him, peering into his face. “What?” he cried out, alarmed.

“On the afternoon before we fled Ilaeon,” Cora said, “Peri told me how you pursued him – and why he finally accepted your proposal. He was ashamed to tell me. You reminded me of Peri just now.” She removed Lord Agem’s glass from his hands and set it on the shared table.

Lord Agem dropped his face in his hands, which reminded Cora even more of Peri. “Cora,” he said, dropping the honorifics, “I was not a good man to your brother. I was... I was a MONSTER.”

“So. What changed?”

He uncovered his face, inhaled, and regained a little of his composure. “When I saw the consequences of Lord Reus’ obsession, what it forced your family to do. There would be a search party, but I was afraid of what orders they would obey once they found you and Peri. So once Cryn buried your father, he and I left in search of you – without anyone else knowing.”

“You abandoned your duty.”

“Yes,” Lord Agem confirmed. “We went west, for days. We never found you, but we found your brother, half-drowned, his body broken, on the side of a river bank. Thank the Gods for Cryn, because I was useless. He tended to your brother’s wounds. It took several days to get back to Ilaeon, with many stopovers with the village-state vassals of Kaldach. As emissary, I could request aid from the village doctors. In time, your brother’s body healed enough to bear the travel – but he would never fully be healthy, never be free of pain. When we finally arrived at Ilaeon, we saw the full brunt of my father’s obsession, which had turned to revenge. Ilaeon was gone.” Lord Agem paused. “That – that was hard, on your brother. We went to the graveyard. Your brother made a grave marker for your father and placed flowers on both of your parents’ grave markers. Those flowers – that entire graveyard of flowers --”

“Hazel herb,” Cora interrupted.

“Hazel herb. Your brother said Lord Machus planted all of them, in honor of your mother.”

“Yes. Our father did.”

Lord Agem shook his head, still amazed ten years later. “Another example of your father’s nobility.”

“And yet,” Cora reminded him, “he’s dead, while your father is alive.” She tapped the top of the end table, as if breaking a spell. “What happened NEXT, Agem?”

“The only place left to go was Kaldach itself. Your brother demanded that Lord Reus know that he was in Kaldach. He would either be able to live there in peace or be put to death immediately. Whichever way it went, Peri didn’t care as long as he got a definitive answer. No more hiding. No more running. And the reason he

didn't care, whether Lord Reus killed him or not was that your brother was sure you were dead. As Peri told me, that storm and that bridge were so dangerous, that once he couldn't protect you, he despaired, certain that you didn't survive. I was hesitant to do that – announce to Lord Reus of Peri's presence at Kaldach – but Lord Reus allowed it.”

“For what reason?”

“He would never give an answer. But we all knew why. A broken, homeless Lord of Ilaeon, living in complete dependence under his roof, finally satisfied some sense of justice, in my father's mind.”

Cora noticed that Lord Agem's hands started to clench in tight, angry fists.

“Peri tried to live, to hang on. I tried to foster hope, that you were still alive and would someday come to Kaldach, to find him. But he never believed that. He would get angry with me – saying that I was being cruel. Because what was reality to him was his broken body, his constant pain, his fitful sleep. And hazel herb. Cups upon cups of hazel herb tea. Your brother brought armfuls of those flowers when we arrived at Kaldach ten years ago, and he even directed one of our farmers to plant a small plot of them. Hazel herb is not local; it's not even Ilaeoni, so I had no idea what was happening...” He trailed off and forced himself to unclench his hands.

Cora, who knew of the properties of hazel herb thanks to Ina, started to shake. “Oh Gods, Peri,” she said.

“It's a sedative, isn't it – and addictive, yes?” Lord Agem didn't need to hear Cora's response since he already knew. “Your brother died in his sleep, five years ago. Tired of living, tired of finding a reason to live. That was – that was the worst day of my life.”

“You buried him in Ilaeon,” Cora stated.

He nodded. “Lord Reus may have possessed your brother in life, but I'd be damned if he still had him in death. This time, I dug that grave. And made those little flower bouquets, as your brother had taught me. I knew they were Lady Kirka's favorites, even though I hated your brother for using them – that way.”

Cora considered everything he told her. “You loved Peri,” she said.

“I – I returned to my celibacy when Peri was rescued ten years ago.”

“You know what I mean.”

Lord Agem inhaled and exhaled a long, deep sigh. “Yes – yes, I loved him.” He paused. “I still do.” He looked up, as if searching for something far away.

“Did Peri love you?”

Lord Agem shook his head. “No. But he forgave me – and that was enough.”

“Well, then.” Cora reached out and took Lord Agem's hands in hers. “I forgive you, too. Because you're not the same man that I remember from the Autumn Festival.”

Lord Agem's sad blue eyes met Cora's dark ones.

“You're family,” she said.

“Hah.” He shook his head, incredulous. “Thank you, Cora.”

“What? No ‘my lady?’” She smiled.

He returned a smile that was unused to smiling. “Not if we’re family.”

“Well then,” Cora said, again. She paused and then declared, “About those strangers on Kaldach’s eastern boundary.”

“What about them?” Lord Agem asked, confused.

“I think,” she began, “I met two of them before.”

Lord Agem stared, startled. He listened to Cora, his face unreadable, as she recounted her long-ago memories and her miraculous recovery in the western wilds. When she finished, he said, “That is... extraordinary.”

“Do you believe me?”

Lord Agem nodded. He looked down, noticing that his and her hands were still clasped together. Then he declared, “Lord Reus is in the court hall right now, waiting to receive that army’s Lord General. A man named Malech. I’m supposed to be there, as part of Lord Reus’ counsel.”

“What does that --” she started.

“If such beings are with that man’s company,” Lord Agem interrupted, “then Lord Reus needs to know. I want you to come with me.”

Cora cringed. “Does Lord Reus know I’m here?”

“No. Only Cryn and my private staff know.”

“I don’t want to see him, Agem.”

Lord Agem gave Cora’s hands a reassuring squeeze. “I know, Cora – and I’m sorry. But he’ll want to know how I received this knowledge.”

So, Cora thought, I’ve come to the Lord of Kaldach at last. She sighed. “No more running away, then.” She let go of Lord Agem’s hands and straightened her blouse and skirt. “Let’s go before I change my mind.”

#

Lord Reus sat on the ceremonial chair of the Lord of Kaldach, having listened yet again to one of his advisors review the report of the destruction of the garrison forces on the border and the week-long negotiations in which Lord Agem had participated on behalf of Kaldach. He still couldn’t believe what he heard, as he awaited the arrival of the enemy troops’ leader, Lord General Malech. He surveyed the spare yet stately court hall, which its high vaulted ceiling, its grand entrance, the court attendants, and the handful of respectable nobles who served as his advisors.

Where the hell is Agem?, he thought, annoyed. For as much as he hated waiting for a foreign enemy to appear, he hated having to wait for his own emissary: a man whose very sight made Lord Reus enraged, as his own bastard son was the very image of his hated brother Helio. He drummed his fingers on the chair’s armrests as his impatience started to become unbearable. He was about to order a court attendant to find Lord Agem when the hall’s massive entrance doors swung open.

“Lord Agem,” Lord Reus said, seeing his emissary stride through the grand entrance.

“Sire,” Lord Agem said. He stopped before the ceremonial chair and bowed. “I am sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“What is the reason for your lateness?” Lord Reus demanded.

“I have received a visitor who may have some familiarity with Lord General Malech’s capabilities. I have brought her here, if you will, my lord.”

Her? Lord Reus thought. “Bring her forth,” he said, his voice echoing against the cold stones of the court hall walls.

With steps as determined as Lord Agem’s, Cora entered through the grand entrance.

“WHAT --” Lord Reus jumped up from the ceremonial chair. “WHAT IS THIS?”

“My lord, what is the matter --” one the advisors began.

Lord Reus bolted from the dais and confronted the young woman before him. Before Cora had a chance to react, he snatched up her wrist. “PERSE,” he hissed.

“Lord Reus,” Cora replied, at first frightened but then angry, “I am not my grandmother.” She twisted, trying to break free, but the old man’s grip was surprisingly strong.

“Sire!” Lord Agem exclaimed.

Lord Reus twisted towards Lord Agem, but all he saw was Helio, the man who stole his rightful bride away. “YOU CANNOT HAVE HER.”

“My lord --” one advisor said.

“Lord Reus, you are unwell --” another said.

“Sire, please calm down --” said the other.

“What will the lord general think if --” the fourth fretted.

“DAMMIT, LET ME GO!” Cora cried out. With a painful wrenching motion she broke free, hitting him, and pushed him off, only to have the crazed old man raise his arm to strike her.

Lord Agem stepped in between, grabbing Lord Reus’ arm. “STOP IT, FATHER.” But then he glanced up and saw who stood before the court hall’s doors.

There stood a young man, still in battle dress. In spite of his youthful appearance, he was as grizzled and muscular as one would expect from the commanding officer of an army that had been in the theater of war for months and perhaps even years. Like the Kaldachi, he was tall with unusually pale skin. But unlike the Kaldachi, his hair was an iridescent black, like an Ilaeoni. Lord Agem had no idea how long Lord General Malech had witnessed the absurd tableaux of the supposed ruler of Kaldach acting like a crazed, jealous lover. But when Lord Reus moved to strike again, the Lord General crossed the hall at incredible speed, pulled Lord Reus away from both Lord Agem and Cora, and placed him in a hold that instantly rendered him unconscious.

“Lord Agem,” the Lord General declared, “this man is in no state to lead your people.”

“Lord General --” Lord Agem began, protesting.

“NO.” He set the unconscious man on the cold, hard stones of the floor. Regarding the Kaldachi ruler’s supine body, the Lord General said, “His mental state is too disturbed. As his son, you must lead in his stead.”

Lord Reus’ advisors erupted in indignant protests.

“Who are you to say --”

“How dare you --”

“Lord Reus only needs to --”

“Lord Agem has no right --”

Cora cried out, her left hand holding her right wrist, “Agem has every right!”

The advisors stopped, staring at her in shocked outrage.

“Lord Reus eradicated my village, which had been a vassal under Kaldachi rule for three generations. And he did it out of sheer spite and revenge.” She winced. “As the only surviving member of both the Ilaeoni ruling line and Ilaeon itself, I can attest to Lord Reus’ cruelty and incapacity to rule.”

“Cora --” Lord Agem started, trying to placate her.

“And you,” she said to Lord Agem. “I know you’re not a perfect man. In the past, I thought of you as the villain. But that was the belief of a child. In just a short time, I’ve finally seen the real you, and I’m convinced you have made amends – to me and my brother.”

“Oh Gods, Cora,” Lord Agem said. “I don’t deserve --”

“NO,” Cora interrupted. “You are Lord Reus’ only SON, Agem. The fact that he has denied your birthright as his heir also confirms Lord Reus’ cruelty. What did your father expect? That he would live forever?”

The Lord General looked at Cora and then at Lord Agem. “I’ve heard enough,” he declared. “I arrived to finalize the terms of the peace – that Kaldach and all of its vassals would be under the domain of my rule. But I am a peripatetic ruler, not a sedentary governor, so those whom I entrust to rule in my stead I have complete confidence in their abilities and their allegiance. That ruler for Kaldach is you, Lord Agem.”

“But what of Lord Reus – my father?”

“He’ll be under my care,” the Lord General replied. “We have treatment for such mental sicknesses as his. He’ll recover – but he is the Lord of Kaldach no more.”

“What say you, Council of Kaldach?” Lord Agem asked.

The four noblemen who were Lord Reus’ advisors acquiesced, saying, “Aye.”

Lord Agem nodded. Then he looked at the court attendants, who had become unwitting and nervous witnesses of a bloodless coup d’état. “Bring Lord Reus to his bedchamber for now.”

“Yes, sire.” Two of the strongest of them lifted the now former Lord of Kaldach from the floor and carried him out.

“Everyone except Lady Cora and Lord General Malech – please leave us for now.” Lord Agem watched as the court hall emptied of every Kaldachi. Then he shook his head and suddenly sat down, hard, on the dais.

“Agem!” Cora said, alarmed, kneeling down on one knee. She winced again and let go of her wrist, her left

hand lightly touching his arm.

“I’m all right,” Lord Agem said. “It’s – the unexpected turn of events – it just hit me right now.” He looked up at Lord General Malech. “And Malech,” he said, dropping the honorific title, “do you know Cora?”

The Lord General’s violet eyes met Cora’s. “Do I?” He stared at her, and then his eyes widened in recognition. “You’re... the little girl. But how could you remember?”

“I just do.”

The Lord General looked as if he was considering something. Then he reached down and lightly patted Lord Agem’s shoulder. At that, Lord Agem closed his eyes, slumped forward against Cora, and went to sleep.

Cora carefully positioned Lord Agem so that he lay down on his side. She removed her outer wrap, folded it into a bolster, and slid it underneath his head so that it wasn’t lying against cold stone. Then she asked quietly, “Is that what you and Setebos did to me and my grandmother, Miranda?”

The Lord General flinched a little. “When I’m in this form, please call me Malech.” He sighed. “And yes – it’s healthier for humans not to know that we beings exist. After we rescued and cured you, Setebos and I softened your memories of us. We did the same to your grandmother when we brought you to her. It’s called a Lethe sleep – not so much totally forgetting what happened but making it more within human possibility. But I’m still trying to figure out how you were able to break through the Lethe sleep. The effect should be permanent.”

“I think both of you did something more than just cure me.” Cora pulled up her sleeve, showing her right wrist. “When I pulled away from Lord Reus, I could feel my wrist getting injured– maybe even broken.”

“All I see is a bruise.”

“That’s all that’s left so far. But watch.” Cora held up her wrist, and the angry purplish-blue bruise became lighter in color, then greenish, and then fading away entirely.

“WHAT.”

“The wild boar that killed my grandmother also impaled my arm, breaking bones and tearing muscle. But I saw it heal before my very eyes, even though it hurt like anything. Whatever you and Setebos did to save me from drowning and curing the illness that caused my seizures hasn’t stopped. Any hurts I get, my body heals itself, within minutes if not seconds. And I just realize right now that in the last ten years, I’ve never been sick. Not even a cold.” Cora frowned. “My memories of that night started coming back when my arm got broken that badly – I had never had an injury that massive before.”

“So the same healing that restored your arm restored your brain’s neural connections?” the Lord General asked.

“Yes.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

“I’m not Lord Reus. I don’t want to live forever, Malech.” Cora shifted her weight and sat down next to Agem, She moved his hair out of his sleeping eyes. “Because, before reconciling with Agem, everyone I had

ever cared about had died – and being totally alone as the last survivor was hell. Malech, can you --”

“I know what you’re asking, Cora, but I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“WHY?”

He sighed. “I was just following Setebos’ instructions. He actually has the expertise in medical training – not me. Curing your cancer was high-level medical knowledge, more than I know how to do. I’m okay with the basic stuff, but what you’re asking me to do... I literally can’t because I don’t know how.”

“But Setebos could?”

“Probably. But what’s happening to you I’ve never seen before, so Setebos likely has never encountered this as well. But between him and me, he’s the adept one.”

“Can you take me to him?”

He frowned. “Ah. No. We parted ways.”

“Is there a way to find him, then?”

“Well...” He crouched down in front of Cora, raised his palm towards Cora’s heart, and did a quick assessment. “Wow. Yeah – you have the vestiges of Setebos’ angelic energy in every cell of your body.”

She stared. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” the Lord General said, “with some training, you can use it as a built-in compass, to lead you to Setebos.”

“How long would the training be?”

“It depends on how fast you can learn.”

Cora looked at her wrist, which looked perfectly undamaged. “I can learn fast.” She looked at Lord Agem. “He won’t forget me, right?”

“He won’t forget you,” the Lord General assured.

“Good.” Cora leaned over and kissed Lord Agem’s forehead, as a mother would do for her child. “Farewell, my lord.”