

THE YEAR 1833

A shimmering wave of energy flowed between Oana's hands over Annalisa's stomach. She smiled at Annalisa. Any time now, child. There is no time to waste. Brushing the residual energy from her hands, Oana positioned herself between Lucy and Annalisa. "As with all bonds between parent and children, that first touch is a binder. True love is the most powerful force, nearly unbreakable, except there is a hint of doubt. And for these babies, they are pure as they are, there will be none."

She continued, "A binding ritual cannot compete with pure love, so we must act fast. Your babies will arrive in four cycles, and I will return in one. You need to be comfortable with the central binder I've secured. With your approval, I've selected Robert, as he is their father and has a longer life cycle than you."

"Longer?" Annalisa asked, intrigued. "How can that be?"

Oana smiled mysteriously. "It simply is." She glanced over at Lucy. "I've also selected the four binding supports. With your approval, since they are the oldest and more resilient, I want to use Mama Ester, Ben, Bell, and you, Lucy."

Lucy nodded solemnly. "And my role?"

"Your role is to oversee the spiritual realm," Oana answered. "Mama Ester, Ben, and Bell will protect the physical. Their spirits are strong and their bodies can endure the years this spell requires. Annalisa, you must find a way to get Mama Ester, Ben, and Bell here. I'll leave that to you."

Annalisa nodded. "That will not be a problem Oana. Leave that up to me. They will not refuse."

Oana leaned closer. "For you to know, about approximately two years after your children are born, they will be separated for their safety. The female child will stay with you and Robert, but the male child must be raised elsewhere. Lucy, you have two years to find a suitable family for him. Preferably not in the 'now,'" She added with a suggestive nod.

Lucy visually confirmed her with a small smile. "Understood. We all know the threat, so there is no need to elaborate. Any harm done to either of these children until the binder is removed, no matter where they are, is punishable by the spirits."

In Annalisa's private room, Oana called out from the doorway, "Sisters. This needs to be done quickly. Annalisa's time is near, and the binding must be in place before her first contraction. If not, well, let's take advantage of this window. As I have said, no binder is known to be more powerful than a mother's love. Remember, I'll return in one cycle." Oana smiled at Annalisa. "Robert's love for you will be put to the test. He must be here willingly." The air in the basement thickened as a soft flash appeared at the top of the stairs. In an instant, Oana was gone.

Hand in hand, Lucy and Annalisa faced each other. "Sister," Lucy said, placing her hands on Annalisa's stomach, "you must weigh responsibly. You carry a duty that cannot be compared to

anything else. I will find the boy a safe home.” Lucy’s voice softened. “Sister, you understand Oana’s meaning of ‘not now,’ don’t you?”

Annalisa nodded, a flash of worry in her eyes, “Yes, Lucy, I do.”

“Sister, then do whatever it takes to convince Robert to agree. Without this binding spell...” Lucy’s voice trailed off as she walked towards the nearest candle. “If not, there is no doubt your son will die. Beatrice won’t stand by and watch her husband support two bastards born of a...” Lucy paused, her voice hardening. “I should have killed her when I had the chance,” she muttered, disappearing into the candle’s smoke.

Annalisa turned to the window, admiring the sunset. She knew that at the moment light met darkness, her spiritual power was strongest. Before Lucy’s death, Oana had taught them both to draw massive energy at dusk, avoiding the vulnerability that daylight brought.

Annalisa hears something familiar, two quick kisses, followed by a soft ‘Giddyup now!’ this is the sound of Robert’s arrival. She knew Robert was near and would enter her room shortly after securing his horse. She knew what she had to do. She settled into her favorite chair between two freshly carved bassinets, wondering, Will he sacrifice everything for our children? A person is not held in place by love. The catalyst is convenience, she mumbled. Within a short time, she will know Robert’s position between the two families. Was it convenience, or is it love?

Robert entered the room as usual, the scent of his orange flower oil cologne mixed with cigar smoke filling the air. He hung his hat on the peg next to the door. Annalisa had prepared a basin for him to wash his face and hands. “Have you eaten?” he asked, his voice muffled by the towel.

“Yes, love,” Annalisa replied joyfully. “Bell retrieved the plate shortly before you arrived. Was it a good day for you?”

“My day doesn’t need explaining,” Robert replied, drying his hands. “I made it back to you, and that’s all that matters.” Annalisa’s heart warmed at his words. Not convenience, she whispered, relieved.

“What was that?” “Oh, nothing,” she responded. “I only expressed my gratitude to the Lord for your safe return.” Pleasing Robert may be easier than Oana expected. Annalise did not alter her daily routine to avoid raising suspicion.

“Robert,” she began, “I need to tell you something that may seem..... unbelievable. But I’m relying on your trust, complete attention, and, more importantly, understanding tonight.”

Robert abruptly turned to face her. “Is everything alright with you and the children?”

Annalisa smiled softly, smoothing the wrinkles on his shirt with assuring gestures. “Yes, we are doing well. However, the unbelievable parts may make you question my sanity.”

“How so, my love?”

She shrugged and returned to stand before the window.

“Well, Okay, I’m listening,” Robert said.

She began by naming everyone involved. “Yelp, this is going to be good.” Robert scuffed. “Is she not dead?”

“Which one?”

Lucy, your sister. Wasn’t she killed a few years back?” He did not wait for an answer before shifting his focus to Oana. I assumed she was dead as well.

“Maybe I should have put a little more emphasis on attention. What do you think, Robert?” Her expression supported her remark. She was not looking for questions, she needed him to listen and follow. Not talk.

“Okay, my love. Please continue,” he said. Annalisa explained the requirements, the outcome if Robert agreed, and the result if he did not. His physical demeanor reflected the weight of Annalisa’s explanation. “Are you sure someone will kill our son or them?”

“No,” Annalisa said. “Not them, him.”

“You are sure they....” Robert exhaled, accepting the truth. “Let’s call it what it is. Beatrice is going to have my son killed? What you are telling me is concerning and disturbing. Annalisa, I believe this is real, given your level of certainty if the people you named are involved. I would do whatever it takes to protect our children and you.”

“Robert, this pleases me,” she said. “It is such a relief to hear that from you.”

With a gaze like molten glass, Annalisa approached him. “To protect my family, we would have killed your entire family if you had refused.”

He was dumbfounded. Annalisa spoke with the authority of a woman in power. “So, those are words you would follow through with?”

When he saw Annalisa’s expressionless face, his words froze. “Are you serious,” he managed to ask.

“Unfortunately, yes. We can never allow anyone to harm our children, neither in life nor in glory. Especially when you know the person responsible.”

Annalisa pulled Robert closer, making him feel a sense of servitude as she asked, “With our abilities, what would you do?”

Without an answer, Robert conceded. “Will there be a time when you would like me to be here?”

Annalisa said, “Lucy and Oana are expected to return tomorrow around this time. It would be helpful if you arrived earlier. We should meet in my private room.”

“Have you talked to Mama Ester, Ben, and Bell yet?” Robert asked.

She nodded. “The first thing I wanted to do was to speak with you about it. Your response would determine whether I would have a meaningful conversation with them.”

“Please have Bell come to my room before you have supper,” she said.

“I will send Bell to you before I sit down,” he added. At the door, he paused for a moment. “There is something you need to say, my love,” she asked.

“Well, I had been chewing over what you said. What would you have done if I had refused? Would you have killed my entire family if I had said no?”

“Since you agreed to participate, we will never find out.”

A few moments later, Bell knocked softly three times on Annalisa’s door, “It’s me, Bell.”

“Come in Bell.”

“Mr. Roberts said you needed to see me, My Lady.”

“Bell, please, I need your help getting Ben and Mama Ester here tomorrow. You as well. Can I count on you?”

“Oh yes, lady Annalisa. May I ask a question?”

“Bell, you can ask me anything that comes to mind.” Bell fiddled with the ruffles of her apron before closing the door behind her.

“Lady Annalisa, is there something we should be concerned about?”

“No,” Annalisa answered without hesitation. “There is nothing you should be concerned about. Oana and Lucy want to set up a village to help raise my babies. Bell, you know the actions a white woman takes against a Black woman’s illegitimate child—especially a boy.”

“Yes,” Bell acknowledged.

Annalisa held out her hands, inviting Bell to hold them. “Bell, I need your discretion with this. Only Mr. Edgefield, and as of now, you know of this meeting. Please extend the same discretion to Ben and Mama Ester. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, ma’am, I sure can. I will have them here on time.”

Annalisa quickly glances at her chair between the two bassinets. “Will this chair be comfortable for Mama?”

Bell swiftly wiggled herself into the chair. “Mighty fine chair, lady Annalisa. Yes, it will suffice.”

Everyone arrived on time the following day.

“Is everything okay with you?” She says it was important, but why? Why we are standing here, Ben asked.”

Oana, materialized as usual in the middle of the room. Mama Ester’s reaction was less dramatic than Ben’s and Bell’s. However, Robert tried to maintain his dignity, only to lose it like a child. “What in tarnation is going on here?”

“Robert, I do not have time to explain, so please listen to Oana.”

“Lucy will take the son to a suitable family in the future.”

“Hold up now,” Robert interjected. “Who are these people, and how do we know he will be safe with them?”

Ignoring Roberts’s question, Oana moved gracefully in the room. “Lucy is a great judge of character. She will find a distant relative. There is no doubt the boy will be okay. For the girl, it will be up to us to ensure she reaches adulthood.” Seemingly at ease with her task, Oana ascended two steps toward the exit and turned to admire a pattern only she could see.

“Robert, please stand there,” she instructed, pointing to the center of the room.

“Ben,” Oana pointed to her left, “please stand there.”

“Bell,” she pointed below Ben, “please stand there.”

“Mama Ester,” Oana pointed to her right, “please stand there.”

“Lucy, please take your place to the left of Mama Ester.”

“Annalisa,” Oana gestured to a spot between Ben and Mama Ester, “please stand there.”

“Right here?” Annalisa asked, moving into position.

“Not quite,” Oana replied. “Please step back a little more.”

“Okay, what about now,” Annalisa asked.

“No,” Oana said. “You will know when you are in the proper location. Continue to move back near the table behind you.” Following Oana’s guidance, Annalisa took a few more steps back, finally reaching the unseen mark where she was locked in place.

A bright red light raced below the floor surface, tracing the pattern Oana had walked out before moving to the stairs. The lines extended outwards from the center of Annalisa’s feet, passing the outer edges of Robert’s feet.

The deep red light connected beneath Bell and Mama Ester’s feet simultaneously, jolting their bodies. Their arms extended outward at the same pace as the red light. Bell’s right arm reached toward Mama Ester, while her left extended toward Ben. Mama Ester’s left arm reached for Bell, and her right arm stretched toward Lucy. Exiting from beneath Bell’s feet, the red light illuminated

the pattern Oana had walked, crossing the pattern from Mama Ester. Once the lines connected with Ben and Lucy's feet, they were compelled to extend their arms toward Bell and Mama Ester.

The red line left their feet and intertwined in the center, completing a star. Robert's arms jolted up as the end of the traveling red line connected. A red circle quickly formed around the five outstretched arms, enclosing Robert in the center of the star. The red light reversed its path between the arms, creating an oscillating circle. After three elevated revolutions, the circle swiftly dropped and disappeared on the floor.

The oscillating red light that connected their arms reappeared from the floor as a solid red shield, extending to the ceiling and enclosing everyone within it. Unrecognizable symbols flowed from within Annalisa, traveling in opposite directions. Inside the enclosure, the symbols pulsated from solid to translucent red. The first symbol found its mark in front of Ben, followed sequentially by those aimed at Bell, Annalisa, Robert, and Mama Ester, before penetrating their chest, exiting their backs, and into the shield. The symbols quickly spiraled around the shield's circumference before the five symbols slammed into Robert's back.

As mysteriously as the star in the circle appeared, it vanished. Everyone remained in place, exchanging glances before staring up at Oana.

"The bond is completed," Oana said.

Ben raised a hand. "Am I the only one confused here?"

"This you should be," Oana replied. "Now, let me explain the bond. You three, Mama Ester, Bell, and Ben, are linked to Robert."

"Robert," Oana demanded his attention, "you are connected to them. If either of these three are killed, the bond is broken. So, it is in your best interest to keep them safe. Your life force is shared between you four to protect the children soon to be born. Once they are born, their life force will strengthen yours."

Ben hesitated. "Not to be the heel here, but are we...."

Oana raised her hand to silence him. "With a clause," she answered, "you are immortal. Robert, you are the only one who can die from natural causes or be killed, but not until your children are adults. Neither of you three can die from natural causes. No death will come from violence, nor can take your life."

"One damn minute here." Robert moved closer to Annalisa. "You just told me I needed to keep them safe, and in your next breath, you said no death would come to them. I'm assuming Annalisa shares the same faith as me? Which is it? Am I the protector or what?"

"No!" Oana said, still ignoring his question. "Now, with that being known, neither of you can take the other's life. Your responsibility with this immortality is to protect these children. Beatrice will do everything in her power to harm the son once he's here. Lucy, Annalisa, and I plan to send him

to the future, while the daughter will remain here. Oana glanced down at Robert, her gaze steady. “Is this clear?” she asked. Robert nodded, reassurance flickering in his eyes. “With that said, two travelers will come for Abigail. The first will arrive unintentionally, but he will be the one who discovers the portal for the second to come. Ben, please bring a chair for Mama Ester.”

Ben, true to his nature, began to object, but a force rendered him silent. “You may have immortality on your side, but I am your caretaker. There will be no defiance while I am here. Do I make myself clear?”

Unable to voice a response, Ben quickly fetched the nearest chair to help Mama Ester. “Annalisa,” Oana continued, “I recommend changing her name to Elena once she ages. This way, she would not be forever attached to the Edgefield plantation as Abigail Edgefield.”

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